

Kashif Kakvi on the reality of MP's 'Sandipan Vidyalaya' initiative even as thousands of government school students wait to be 'adjusted'

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The Himalaya serves another warning

Pankaj Chaturvedi

Nepal’s latest disaster is a grim warning. A sudden, deadly flood along the Nepal-Tibet border that claimed hundreds of lives is not just another act of nature. It’s a sign of a warming, destabilised and overbuilt Himalayan region.

From Kashmir to Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand, glaciers are retreating, glacial lakes are multiplying, slopes are being carved up for construction and fragile ecosystems are being pushed beyond their capacity.

And yet we continue to behave as though the mountains will endlessly absorb our mistakes. They will not.

The Himalayan crisis has three interconnected aspects: melting glaciers and unstable glacial lakes, pollution and sewage degrading lakes like the Dal lake and extreme seismic vulnerability.

Treating them as separate problems is a luxury we cannot afford.

A cloudburst can trigger a landslide. An earthquake can destabilise a glacial lake. A lake outburst can send water and debris into valleys already crowded with roads, bridges, hydropower projects and human settlements.

Climate change may intensify natural hazards. But policy decisions determine how destructive those hazards become.

That is why India needs an integrated Himalayan risk-management strategy. Every major glacial lake must have a scientifically assessed risk profile and a dedicated management plan. Climate, hydrology, biodiversity, water quality, glacier movement and seismic indicators must be monitored continuously—not after disaster strikes.

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Research and data from the Department of Earth Sciences at the University of Kashmir and other institutions show that glaciers—particularly the Kolahoi Glacier, which has lost more than 22 per cent of its area—are shrinking at an alarming rate.

As temperatures rise, glacial lakes form and expand. Their threat



Gone in a flash The devastation caused by the flash floods at Trishuli Bazar in Nepal’s Nuwakot district

Photo: Getty Images

is amplified by human activity. Indiscriminate construction, deforestation and other interventions in the Panjshir and Pir Panjal ranges have weakened ecological systems that once provided a natural buffer against extreme events.

If lake levels are not monitored in time, a glacial lake outburst flood (GLOF) could send enormous quantities of water and debris into the Jhelum Basin, threatening densely populated areas downstream.

And the crisis extends beyond glacial lakes. Kashmir’s high-altitude alpine lakes—Gangabal, Vishansar, Krishansar, Gadsar, Tarsar, Marsar, Kausarnag, Sheshnag, Satsar, Nundkol and Alpather—are vital components of the valley’s water security. Above the tree line, they collect snowmelt and rainwater and release it gradually towards rivers, wetlands and groundwater. This natural water-security system still lacks dedicated management. Monitoring of water quality, biodiversity and climate indicators remains sporadic. Effectively, we wait for a lake to burst before realising it needed monitoring.

Climate vulnerability is only half the story. Kashmir sits on a seismic fault line.

The 2025 national seismic zoning map issued by the Bureau of Indian Standards places the Himalayan arc, including Jammu and Kashmir, in the most dangerous category, Zone VI. As Indian and Eurasian plates continue to collide, major earthquakes along the Main Himalayan Thrust are a persistent threat.

The 2005 Muzaffarabad earthquake, that measured 7.6 on the Richter Scale and killed more than 80,000 people, should have been warning enough. Instead, unregulated construction on vulnerable slopes continues. Critical infrastructure, including schools and hospitals, does not always receive the seismic scrutiny such terrain demands.

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Uttarakhand has already endured enough to expose the folly of treating every catastrophe as an isolated event. Kedarnath. Joshimath. Rishiganga—each revealed a different vulnerability, with the same underlying lesson: development ignores geology at a

very high price.

According to the Wadia Institute of Himalayan Geology and other scientific organisations, more than 1,000 glacial lakes have formed in Uttarakhand’s high Himalayan regions. Many are capable of triggering flash floods. Studies cited by Doon University and environmentalists indicate temperatures have risen by as much as 1.5 to 2 degrees Celsius over the past three decades. Every year, major glaciers like Gangotri and Gomukh retreat by 20-30 metres.

As ice melts, unstable mixtures of rock, debris and water accumulate below glaciers. A cloudburst or even modest seismic disturbance can set this material hurtling downhill, devastating hydropower projects and settlements built along riverbanks.

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Himachal Pradesh faces the same convergence of factors. Hydropower projects, road expansion and unplanned mountain cutting heighten the consequences of extreme weather events.

Data from the State Centre on Climate Change indicate that

extreme rainfall, cloudbursts and flash floods have increased by more than 40 per cent in recent years.

The Sutlej, Beas and Chenab valleys are seeing accelerated snowmelt. In Lahaul-Spiti and Kinnaur, many of the new lakes created by rapidly retreating glaciers are held back by weak natural dams.

A recent study by the Himachal Pradesh Council for Science, Technology and Environment identified 2,292 glacial lakes in the Sutlej Basin alone: 1,335 in Tibet, 470 in Spiti and 487 in the Himachal section below Khab in Kinnaur. Forty-nine lakes cover more than 10 hectares.

If a lake in Tibet bursts, its water can travel down the Sutlej into Himachal, eventually affecting the plains of Punjab. The Chenab and Ravi basins contain another 373 glacial lakes.

The International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD) has identified hundreds of lakes in the Hindu Kush Himalayan that pose significant risks. Science has tools to reduce those risks. Controlled drainage, siphoning and other engineering interventions can lower water levels in particularly dangerous lakes. But engineering alone will

not save the Himalayas. Governance must change too.

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Originating in the Tibetan Plateau, the Brahmaputra sustains India’s northeastern states and is the economic, social and cultural backbone of the region. China’s hydropower ambitions on the Yarlung Tsangpo—their name for the river—are a growing concern for India.

The formal completion of the 510-megawatt, 116-metre Zangmu project in Tibet has implications far beyond power generation, given the river’s vital importance to Arunachal Pradesh and Assam. Tibet’s seismic vulnerability compounds the risk: an earthquake or landslide could damage the dam and unleash devastating floods downstream. In a conflict, a sudden release of water could turn the dam into a man-made ‘water bomb’ for Arunachal Pradesh. Resulting flash floods could race through the Northeast within hours.

Rivers do not recognise political boundaries; neither do floods, landslides or glaciers. Real-time data sharing and basin-level monitoring with neighbouring countries are essential. The Himalayas demand cooperation across borders, which is easier said than done.

The Himalayas have been warning us for years. We have responded with committees, compensation packages and reconstruction drives—and then gone back to business as usual.

India must rethink what it calls development in the mountains. We must stop pretending that every road, dam, tunnel, hotel and township represents progress. In an ecologically fragile mountain region, the first question must be: Can this ecosystem bear it?

If the answer is no, it is not development. It is a disaster, deferred.

The next catastrophe may begin with a melting glacier, a bursting lake, a cloudburst, a landslide or an earthquake. When it comes, we may once again call it ‘unprecedented’. But no, we have been warned. Will we have the wisdom to heed the warning before the mountains jolt us out of our indifference? ■

If the ecosystem cannot bear the ‘development’ we propose, it’s a build-up to a catastrophe

“Education can only be transformed collectively”

The recent Gen Z and Gen Alpha protests have put the spotlight on India’s broken education system. Just two bits of data give a sense. Education in India is a booming industry (est. market size: 11–14 lakh crore rupees or \$115–152 billion) and yet, as educationist and former Delhi University faculty dean Anita Rampal tells Nandlal Sharma, only 22 per cent of Indian children complete Class 12. That market size tells you that education is a great business to be in, money is being made hand over fist, and yet 7,000 schools in India’s most populous state Uttar Pradesh have one teacher! The ongoing protests over basic amenities in government schools have refocused public attention but are we asking the right questions?

Gen Alpha seems to have no fears. What do you make of this?

It’s very encouraging. For years, students have been made to feel that if they fail, the deficiency lies in them. We rarely ask what role the system has played.

When girls tell journalists, “The board exams are four months away. If there is no teacher, what are we supposed to do?” that’s a perfectly legitimate question. In Delhi, Class 10 students who had no Maths teacher and failed, said: give us a teacher and test us after three months; don’t fail us now, because failing Class 10 can mean being pushed out of school.

Government data suggests that, on average, only about 22 per cent of children complete Class 12.

Have the central and state governments failed to fulfil their responsibilities?

Yes. Our Constitution places education in the Concurrent List precisely because states have a responsibility. That space is increasingly being constrained.

There are more protests in north India partly because some southern states have demonstrated that things can be done differently. Tamil Nadu, for instance, has repeatedly questioned centralisation as seen in the National Education Policy and [National Testing Agency (NTA)-administered] common admission tests like NEET and CUET. It has argued that

introducing vocational education as early as Class 6 could deepen inequality because such courses are seen as ‘low status’.

According to UDISE+ data, Uttar Pradesh has over 7,000 single-teacher schools. Nationwide there are more than a lakh. How can we talk about quality education when millions of children are effectively being taught by one teacher?

The Right to Education Act came into force in 2010. What happened to that promise?

The Right to Education came after a very long struggle. It promised a neighbourhood school, qualified teachers, right assessment. Much of that has been turned upside down.

Governments have repeatedly tried to cut corners. At the village and panchayat level, teachers are paid a pittance. Stop-gap arrangements like ‘Shiksha Mitras’ are common. We also have enormous inequality among government schools. In Delhi, there are Kendriya Vidyalayas, Sarvodaya Vidyalayas, Pratibha Vikas Vidyalayas... the poorest child often gets the weakest school. Why shouldn’t every child have access to the same quality?

There’s also a problem with the way we teach. In many classrooms, the teacher stands at the blackboard and children copy what is written. That’s not education. Children need to work with their hands, investigate, experiment. Knowledge is

created when we talk and think together; it’s not simply information that goes in and comes out. Our textbooks are not interesting; they do not stir curiosity. Why can’t we write books that children want to read?

We have reduced education to ticking the right box. But if you want to become a doctor, teacher, journalist or filmmaker, you need to develop your own way of thinking. You cannot acquire that through an answer key.

What needs to happen now?

I don’t expect much. Committees will be formed, surveillance will increase and people will talk about preventing the use of unfair means.

We need to ask: What are we testing? What kind of knowledge do we value? It’s great that students are demanding teachers, but we must also ask how prepared those teachers are. Are they teaching children to memorise because the exams are designed that way?

The understanding of ‘learning outcomes’ needs to change. If your performance reveals that you are poor, from a remote area or from a particular socio-economic background, then the system has failed to create equitable learning.

What do you think about the increasing centralisation of education?

It should not happen. Education has to grow from the grassroots, from knowledge that exists among local people, from what children see, observe, know. Whether in Manipur, Delhi or Kerala, education should emerge from the local context. Curriculum cannot be imposed from above.

Does the idea of a Gen Z or Gen Alpha obscure the huge differences in children’s individual circumstances?

Absolutely. Only around 20 per cent of students who finish school go on to higher education, and roughly 80-85 per cent of those students are first-generation learners whose parents never attended university. We cannot ignore their circumstances.

In some places, children don’t even have



Photo: Nandlal Sharma

a school building. A little girl in Uttar Pradesh made a heartbreaking video saying, “Look at us studying in the rain and the heat, at least give us a building.”

We say, ‘Take examinations online.’ But how many families have computers? Online examinations may exclude the most needy and disadvantaged. If we want children to enter higher education, we must create a system that enables them to get there.

Do you see the current school protests as an expression of civic consciousness?

Yes. When you demand something not merely for yourself but for everyone, you are demonstrating empathy and collective thinking. That is where citizenship begins.

What is striking about the current protests is that caste and religion seem irrelevant. Everyone wants teachers. In Rajasthan, when Muslim teachers were wrongly suspended, students, particularly girls, protested and demanded their reinstatement.

Education is, in itself, a secular question. It is everyone’s need, and it can only be transformed collectively.

What are the immediate priorities?

The Right to Education provides a framework: there must be a school near the child’s home, qualified and trained teachers, learning materials, a library and an appropriate environment for learning. A building is not enough.

Teachers also need orientation, to create an environment where children learn

rather than memorise.

What can we learn from Kerala?

About two decades ago, Kerala recognised that even with teachers and facilities, the children weren’t learning. And so, it changed its curriculum and examination system.

The language of instruction became the Malayalam children spoke. The curriculum became activity-based. Parents started saying marks weren’t everything; what mattered was whether children understood and could express themselves. Children started writing creatively, regardless of background.

Teacher orientation made a big difference, and districts where reforms were implemented showed better learning. If this can happen in one state, why not in others?

We now hear ‘online, online’ everywhere, including proposals to train teachers online. But teacher education, like education itself, requires interaction, discussion, reflection and experience. We cannot transform education simply by putting everything on a screen.

Do the protests give you hope?

Absolutely. When I hear the voices of these young girls, it gives me courage.

But we need many more voices. A school building may be built, facilities may improve, roads may get repaired, but we need a level playing field for all children to learn. ■

Bangladesh and the Makkah Pact

In its current shape, the alliance is more a political signal than a military commitment on all sides. The partners do not face the same threats

Faisal Mahmud

Bangladesh has not yet taken a firm decision to join the Makkah Joint Defence Agreement, but its government is publicly advertising its interest nevertheless.

"If there is a security arrangement among Islamic nations in [West Asia], it is not unusual for us to consider participating. It is being viewed positively," said Humayun Kabir, Bangladesh's state minister for foreign affairs. The pact's members, Kabir added, were keen on Bangladesh's participation. A foreign ministry source subsequently confirmed that Saudi Arabia had invited Prime Minister Tarique Rehman to Riyadh.

The agreement, signed in Makkah on 7 August by Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Pakistan, treats an armed attack against one member as an attack against all. Its architects see it as consistent with the UN Charter. Yet any arrangement combining Saudi financial influence, Turkey's military-industrial capacity and Pakistan's armed and nuclear status is more than an exercise in Muslim solidarity.

Dhaka's apparent enthusiasm is best understood as the product of three overlapping calculations: domestic politics, deteriorating confidence in its regional security environment and a desire to extract greater value from the Muslim world.

The domestic attraction is straightforward. Bangladesh is one of the world's largest Muslim-majority countries. Association with an alliance formed in Makkah and led by three influential Muslim states is politically marketable, particularly for a government whose support base is more receptive than its predecessors to closer relations with Pakistan and the Gulf.

The Rahman government can also present an invitation as evidence that Bangladesh has acquired international standing. Kabir's emphasis on foreign leaders seeking the prime minister's participation is revealing. Membership is being discussed not only as a security instrument but as recognition: Bangladesh would be entering the room as a substantial Muslim power rather than waiting

at the door as a recipient of aid or exporter of labour.

This need not amount to ideological foreign policy. Saudi Arabia was Bangladesh's largest source of remittances in the 2025-26 fiscal year—about \$5.85 billion, according to Bangladesh Bank.

Millions of Bangladeshis work across the Gulf. Riyadh is important to Dhaka's energy security, overseas employment and investment ambitions. Turkey has become an increasingly valuable source of defence equipment and political support. Pakistan offers military links and, under the present government, a relationship that Dhaka appears determined to normalise.

The second calculation concerns India. Relations between Dhaka and New Delhi remain strained thanks to India sheltering former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, Bangladesh's unanswered extradition request and allegations of forcible push-ins across the border. Hasina's political intervention from Indian soil disrupted Prime Minister Rahman's planned visit, despite attempts by both governments to prevent the situation from spiralling.

Joining an alliance that includes Pakistan would send New Delhi a message that Bangladesh has strategic alternatives. That is part of the appeal. For decades, Bangladeshi governments have attempted to manage the asymmetry created by geography: India surrounds most of the country, influences its river systems and sits astride many of its cheapest transport routes.

Dhaka cannot eliminate this imbalance. It can, however, build relationships elsewhere. The Makkah Pact would provide greater symbolic leverage than material protection. Neither Saudi Arabia nor Turkey are likely to confront India over a Bangladeshi dispute. Pakistan's involvement is more politically charged and therefore less serviceable. Even so, the perception of external backing can increase Dhaka's diplomatic elbow room.

There are other practical attractions. Turkey has developed competitive drone, missile, naval and electronic-warfare industries. Pakistan offers training, operational experience and access to weapons systems developed with

China. Saudi Arabia supplies capital and purchasing power. Bangladesh could use the association to obtain technology transfers, joint production, intelligence cooperation, cyber capabilities and improved maritime surveillance in the Bay of Bengal.

That opportunity matters because Dhaka is trying to modernise its military while avoiding dependence on a single supplier. It is already moving towards negotiations with China for J-10CE fighter aircraft and attack helicopters, in what could become one of its largest defence purchases in years. Yet the pact would give Bangladesh additional procurement channels without having to abandon Beijing.

But diversification does not require a mutual-defence treaty. This distinction is where Dhaka's calculation becomes dangerous.

The Makkah pact's public provisions leave unanswered the questions that would determine its usefulness. It has no known integrated command comparable with NATO, no established multinational force structure and no history of joint contingency planning.

Its members have different adversaries. Pakistan's overriding concern is India; Saudi Arabia the Gulf; Turkey's ranges from Syria and Israel to Russia and the eastern Mediterranean.

Bangladesh could therefore acquire obligations in conflicts



(L-R) Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and Pakistan Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif after signing the Makkah pact; (Inset) Tarique Rahman, Prime Minister of Bangladesh



unrelated to its security. Would the treaty apply to another India-Pakistan war, including clashes over Kashmir? Would an Iranian attack on Saudi territory require a Bangladeshi military response? What would Dhaka be expected to do in a Turkish confrontation involving Syria or Israel? Conversely, would the three founders actually intervene if Bangladesh faced military coercion on its Myanmar border?

Until those questions are answered, the agreement offers Bangladesh the appearance of protection while carrying the possibility of entrapment.

The economic risks are less dramatic but more immediate. Bangladesh earned roughly \$48 billion from merchandise exports in 2025-26. Its garment industry remains heavily dependent on western consumers: the EU is its largest trading partner; US imports from Bangladesh reached \$9.5 billion in 2025.

The country needs investment

A big attraction for Dhaka of the Makkah pact may be the diplomatic heft it will afford

A pariah in its own neighbourhood?

Ashok Swain on India's dangerous isolation and its diplomatic encirclement by China

National Security Advisor Ajit Doval's visit to Beijing to hold 'boundary talks' with Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi is diplomatic groundwork ahead of the upcoming BRICS summit in Delhi on 12-13 September. The summit will be a damp squib without President Xi Jinping and India doesn't yet have a confirmation that he will attend.

Six years after China made coordinated incursions into Indian territory to reshape dynamics along the disputed Himalayan border, India has been trying to normalise relations while skirting the border issue, which makes a sorry international spectacle and exposes the failure of the Modi government's China policy.

While the brag at home has been about Modi's muscular leadership, India has been remarkably timid vis-à-vis China. After the Galwan clash in 2020—during which China made new incursions in Gogra-Hot Springs in eastern Ladakh—Modi declared that nobody had entered Indian territory. The denial, a barefaced lie, weakened India's case and gave Beijing political and diplomatic cover for its hostile action. China continues to pressure the frontier.

The rhetoric of self-reliance also stands exposed. India depends heavily on Chinese machinery, electronics and industrial inputs. The bilateral trade deficit was \$112.16 billion in FY2025-26, and it is widening (\$67.1 billion in the first half of calendar 2026).

India's Operation Sindoor strikes in Pakistan in May 2025, after the Pahalgam terror attack on 22 April, revealed an even more dangerous reality—the operational character of the China-Pakistan partnership. Pakistan used Chinese aircraft, missiles and air defence systems. India's deputy army chief later said that China had provided Pakistan with live inputs on important Indian positions. Beijing was quite openly supporting Pakistan even while officially maintaining diplomatic distance.

The two-front threat that India's foreign policy was supposed to prevent has become vividly real. While Pakistan has gained better weapons, intelligence and diplomatic protection from China,

the Indian government has been busy managing media headlines.

The danger of Chinese encirclement extends beyond Pakistan. China is now the largest trading partner of Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and the Maldives, while Nepal increasingly seeks Chinese investment and connectivity. Countries in India's neighbourhood are increasingly

counting on China for capital, infrastructure, markets and diplomatic leverage. Their predilection for China is also a verdict on India's management of its neighbourhood.

Modi announced a 'Neighbourhood First' policy with great fanfare upon assuming office in 2014. Twelve years later, the neighbourhood seems to have slipped to the rock bottom of his government's priorities. The current SOP seems to be to pressure less friendly governments and offer assistance when relations worsen. Smaller neighbours desire respect, sovereign space and a predictable policy framework; they do not like to be treated as dependents or punished when their choices displease India.

Bangladesh is the clearest example. Modi tied the relationship almost entirely to Sheikh Hasina, overlooking—if not appreciating—her authoritarian tendencies

because she protected Indian security interests. When the 2024 uprising forced her to flee the country, India gave her refuge. Delhi mistrusted the interim government that replaced her. Newly elected Prime Minister Tarique Rahman initially sought better relations, but his India visit has stalled.

Dhaka was angered when Hasina addressed a press conference in New Delhi even as India was sitting on requests for her extradition. Border-fencing, forced deportations and anti-Bangladesh rhetoric from BJP leaders have deepened resentment. Rahman now insists on sovereign equality. Bangladesh is showing a new openness towards Pakistan even as it explores an expansion of ties with China, a corollary of which is India's diminishing influence.

Nepal's new prime minister, Balen Shah, is also resetting his country's default settings. Shah has not visited India yet, and he avoided standalone meetings with foreign envoys for more than 100 days after taking office. Nepal is also seeking Chinese investments in agriculture, health, tourism and technology. Memories of the 2015 border blockade and Modi's paternalism linger, and the current Indian government cannot expect history and geography to guarantee loyalty.

On 10 Sri Lanka, Prime Minister Harini Amarasingu visited China and India within days of each other. In Beijing, she praised Chinese support for Port City Colombo, a multi-services special economic zone in Colombo, Hambantota Port and other infrastructure. In Delhi, she spoke of India as a partner in education, technology and institutional reform. Sri Lanka's 'dual diplomacy' is aimed at balancing strategic and economic ties between China and India, but China's economic weight is increasingly shaping its choices.

The Mohamed Maizzu government in the Maldives, which came to power on the back of an 'India-out' campaign, has improved

ties with China and its Parliament has approved the plan to join the Saudi-led Multinational Maritime Defence Alliance alongside Pakistan and Bangladesh. India is absent from this emerging security framework, another sign that Malé is building strategic options beyond Delhi.

China has acquired significant structural advantages in the last decade. Its economy is far larger and its financial resources and military power much greater. It can deliver large projects and sustain engagement with countries even as they go through political changes. Its foreign policy appears in sync with the reality of many smaller states in the region—Beijing speaks the language of sovereignty and non-interference. On the other hand, the moves of the Modi government at home and its foreign policy choices have made China's sales pitch more attractive to India's neighbours.

The majoritarian agenda of the Modi government, its attacks on minorities, the attempts to forcibly deport alleged illegal immigrants in Bengal and Assam are watched closely in Bangladesh, the Maldives and elsewhere. The divisive rhetoric targeting Indian Muslims and the trope of framing Pakistan and Bangladesh as their havens has tarnished India's image and narrowed diplomatic space. [950]

The Doval delegation returned from Beijing on 25 August with some assurances on border management, but there is no confirmation yet that President Xi will grace the BRICS summit. Even if Xi turns up with a large delegation, it will still not alter the underlying balance of diplomatic power. China has learnt that it can pressure India in the Himalayas, profit from the Indian market, strengthen Pakistan's military and deepen ties across South Asia at the same time. Modi's foreign policy has helped China surround India strategically. ■



Summit courtship? The official agenda of Ajit Doval's meeting with Wang Yi was the border question but its timing suggested otherwise

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SAFEGUARDING FAITH, STRENGTHENING TRUST: KARNATAKA'S NEW VISION FOR TEMPLE ADMINISTRATION

How a comprehensive security overhaul is helping the state's temples become safer, more transparent, and more welcoming than ever before



Across Karnataka, the sound of temple bells each morning marks the beginning of a devotional rhythm that has continued for centuries. Millions of devotees pass through temple gates every year, carrying with them not just prayers but small acts of generosity—a coin dropped into a hundi, a note offered in gratitude, a ring or a bangle set aside as a token of faith.

That age-old rhythm of devotion is now being matched by a quieter but equally significant transformation happening behind the scenes—one aimed at ensuring that every rupee, gold, silver, and other valuable offering placed in a hundi is protected, accounted for, and channelled back into the service of the very institutions devotees hold dear.

Prompted by nationwide concerns following reports of temple donation-box thefts, including a widely discussed incident at the Ayodhya Ram Temple that Chief Minister D.K. Shivakumar said had deeply hurt the religious sentiments of the Hindu community, the Karnataka government has introduced a comprehensive Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) to modernise hundi security across the temples administered by the Muzrai Department.

The Department oversees a vast network of religious institutions, notified across three administrative categories based on gross annual income: 205 Category A temples earning more than Rs 25 lakh a year, 193 Category B temples, and 34,168 Category C institutions earning less than Rs 5 lakh—together comprising 34,566 notified temples and religious entities now brought under the enhanced security framework.

The initiative bears the personal stamp of the Chief Minister, who directed that the safeguards be implemented statewide and mandated round-the-clock CCTV surveillance across all Muzrai temples—a decision that has since become the cornerstone of the reform, and one he has linked directly to restoring devotees' faith in the safety of their offerings.

Far from being a purely defensive measure, the SOP reflects a vision the Chief Minister has articulated for temple administration more broadly: growing devotee confidence, rising temple revenues, and an increasingly ambitious push to make Karnataka a leading destination for religious and cultural tourism.

A new standard of trust and transparency

At the centre of the reform is a simple but powerful idea that Chief Minister

The initiative bears the personal stamp of the Chief Minister, who directed that the safeguards be implemented statewide and mandated round-the-clock CCTV surveillance across all Muzrai temples—a decision that has since become the cornerstone of the reform, and one he has linked directly to restoring devotees' faith in the safety of their offerings.

Shivakumar has repeatedly emphasised—when devotees can see that their offerings are handled with complete transparency, their trust in the institution deepens. It was on his directive that donation boxes are now placed in prominent, well-lit locations visible to all visitors, and that every hundi is monitored by advanced four-way web cameras that eliminate the blind spots which had previously allowed older CCTV systems to be compromised by smoke and camphor residue during worship.

Footage is streamed to district-level Muzrai offices and a central server at headquarters, with live monitoring dashboards shared among Deputy Commissioners, Superintendents of Police, and local police stations.

This is complemented by a major push toward cashless giving. Temples are increasingly offering UPI, BHIM, and QR-code payment options alongside traditional hundis, complete with verified bank details and integration into temple accounting systems—making it easier than ever for devotees, including the growing number of younger visitors and those donating from outside the state, to contribute safely and conveniently. Regular checks against fraudulent QR codes ensure that this convenience never comes at the cost of security.

Perhaps most reassuring for devotees is the discipline now built into the counting process itself. Revenue officials, working under local Tahsildars, follow a fixed weekly or fortnightly schedule for opening and counting donations, replacing what was once a more variable routine.

Valuables are deposited into treasuries the same day, facial recognition verifies everyone present, and the entire process—now restricted to Home Guards, bank staff, and government employees—is recorded on video from start to finish.

Every individual entering the counting room must declare any cash on their person before stepping inside, closing off one of the more obvious

avenues through which discrepancies could previously arise.

The result is a system in which accountability is a built-in feature, giving both devotees and temple administrators confidence that offerings are handled with integrity at every step.

Temple administrators, too, stand to benefit from this new discipline: a clear, well-documented counting process reduces disputes, simplifies audits, and gives trustees a straight-forward record to point to when questions arise.

Early results: A model rollout at Banashankari temple

The new protocol received its first major test at Bengaluru's much-loved Banashankari Temple, one of the city's most visited shrines, offering an early demonstration of the system the Chief Minister had directed into being.

Under the revised procedure, five of its fifteen donation boxes were opened and counted under strict official supervision, yielding more than 80 lakh rupees in cash and over 100 grams of gold—an encouraging early indication of the scale of devotion the temple commands.

The remaining boxes were counted in the days following the Varamahalakshmi festival and the concluding Shravan Saturdays, a period that drew large crowds of devotees to the temple.

Officials have pointed to the smooth execution of this first count as a promising sign that the new system can be scaled up statewide without disrupting the devotional experience for visitors, with worship and darshan continuing uninterrupted even as officials worked quietly through the boxes under camera supervision.

Rising footfall, rising revenues

The timing of these reforms coincides with a genuinely encouraging trend in temple revenues across Karnataka.

According to recent Muzrai Department data, combined revenue at fifteen of the state's major temples rose from approximately Rs 613.5 crore to Rs 666.2 crore in the 2025–26 financial year, an increase of 8.6 percent, with prominent temples such as Banashankari and Ghati Subrahmanya recording notably higher collections over the past year.

Officials attribute part of this growth to broader state initiatives that have made travel more accessible for families, particularly women, who often travel together with relatives to visit temples during festivals and weekends.

Improved public transport access has contributed to a wider revival of pilgrimage travel across the region, with additional buses now deployed on routes connecting major temple towns during festival seasons and school holidays.

This synergy between transport policy and temple administration illustrates how the benefits of good governance can ripple outward, turning a single welfare initiative into a broader engine of religious tourism and local economic activity.

Importantly, the income generated by temples continues to be reinvested primarily in the development and maintenance of those very institutions, ensuring that rising devotion translates directly into better facilities, improved upkeep, and enhanced experiences for the pilgrims who sustain these sacred spaces.

Investing in the future of Karnataka's temples

The security overhaul is only one part of a much larger vision for the state's temple network. Ambitious infrastructure projects are already underway at some of Karnataka's most significant pilgrimage sites. Under the "Daiva Sankalpa" initiative, the government has outlined plans worth roughly Rs 1,140 crore to develop twenty-five Category A temples with heritage-style architecture, modern lodging, underground drainage, solid

waste management, multi-level parking, and water treatment plants—improvements designed to elevate the pilgrim experience while honouring each temple's traditional character.

A parallel effort will support ten Category C temples in every district with the help of philanthropic donors, extending modernisation well beyond the state's largest shrines.

At Renuka Yallamma Temple in Belagavi district, one of the state's most visited pilgrimage sites with more than 1.25 crore devotees annually, the state cabinet has approved twenty-five development projects worth over Rs 215 crore, covering everything from infrastructure to visitor amenities, with work expected to be completed by the end of 2026.

Similar development authorities are being planned for other major temples, including sites in Mysuru and Koppal district, reflecting a district-by-district commitment to ensuring that growth in devotee numbers is matched by growth in facilities and services.

These efforts are unfolding against the backdrop of a broader state tourism strategy. Under Karnataka's Tourism Policy 2024–29, the government has set out ambitious goals to position the state among the world's most attractive destinations, with officials expressing a clear ambition to rank among the top five states in India for international tourist arrivals by 2029.

Religious and heritage tourism—anchored by the state's temples, monuments, and cultural landmarks—sits at the heart of this vision, with the government describing tourism not merely as an economic pursuit but as a means of sharing Karnataka's culture and hospitality with the world.

This synergy between transport policy and temple administration illustrates how the benefits of good governance can ripple outward, turning a single welfare initiative into a broader engine of religious tourism and local economic activity.

A layered system of care

None of this progress would be possible without the quiet, consistent work of oversight that underpins the reform. Local Station House Officers regularly review surveillance feeds and on-site security, while district-level monitoring committees headed by Deputy Commissioners meet monthly to review donation security, fire safety, and disaster preparedness.

Joint inspections bringing together revenue, police, and endowment officials take place fortnightly, with additional quarterly reviews for the state's largest temples, and consolidated monthly reports flow upward to the State Government, the Home Department, and senior police leadership.

Preserving sanctity in the digital age

As Karnataka's temples grow more popular, they have also become popular backdrops for photography and social media content. In response, the Muzrai Department has introduced sensible new rules governing filming within temple premises, requiring prior approval and a nominal shooting fee for movies, serials, and documentaries, and confining casual video recording to designated areas.

Rather than discouraging visitors, the intent behind these measures is protective: ensuring that the serenity and sanctity devotees seek when they visit a temple is preserved even as public interest and digital engagement continue to grow.

Putting the devotee first

Underlying every element of this reform is a simple institutional philosophy: that good administration should be felt by devotees as ease, not inconvenience. The move toward digital payments means a family visiting from another state need not worry about carrying large sums of cash, while the visibility of donation boxes and cameras reassures first-time visitors that their offering will reach its intended purpose.

Taken together, these changes suggest a Department that is thinking not only about protecting revenue, but about protecting the quality of the pilgrimage experience itself.

A story of confidence and continuity

Taken together, these initiatives paint a picture of a Chief Minister and state government treating temples not merely as administrative responsibilities but as living cultural institutions deserving of world-class care.

The introduction of advanced surveillance, disciplined counting, and multi-layered oversight—set in motion at the Chief Minister's own direction—gives devotees renewed confidence that their offerings are safe and properly accounted for.

For the millions of devotees who visit these sacred sites each year—whether for a quiet morning prayer or the joyous crowds of a major festival—the message emerging from this reform is a reassuring one: that faith and good governance can walk hand in hand, and that the institutions at the heart of Karnataka's spiritual life are being equipped to serve the next generation of devotees with greater safety, transparency, and pride.

With the Varamahalakshmi festival and Shravan Saturdays now behind it, and as infrastructure projects at temples from Belagavi to Koppal steadily take shape, Karnataka's temple network appears poised to enter a new chapter—one defined not by the anxieties that first prompted these reforms, but by the confidence, transparency, and shared sense of purpose they have since inspired.

“Indians may be poor but they can’t be bought”

A.J. Philip puts the former Solicitor General of India in the dock

Dear Shri Harish Salve Ji,

I usually do not watch television interviews. What prompted me to watch the interview you gave Arnab Goswami of Republic TV was a video clip from it that a friend sent me. I was shocked by some of your observations and decided to watch the full interview on YouTube. I was testing my own patience.

As I watched, I could not help remembering the interview I did with your father, N.K.P. Salve, for Jain TV in the 1990s. Goswami, I presume, was then still “studying for some time in a Jesuit-run school”, as he said in an apparent disclaimer about his educational background.

Goswami seemed particularly keen to impress viewers by showing the size and luxury of the five-star hotel suite in which your interview took place. I know four lawyers in Delhi and have observed their lives from reasonably close quarters. Two of them support 20-25 NGOs with contributions running into crores. Both earn mainly through international arbitration. One has instituted a chair in memory of his father, himself a distinguished lawyer, at a law university to promote the study of arbitration.

When floods devastated Kerala in 2018, one of them gave an organisation I headed Rs 35 lakh to spend two government schools. We completed the work in about a month and a half, spending Rs 27 lakh. When I offered to return the rest, he asked me to spend it. We used it to provide heavily subsidised winter uniforms to our students.

This brings me to your statement that you cannot understand the concept of ‘donation’. Perhaps that is because you have not experienced the satisfaction of giving.

For 23 years, I headed an NGO founded in 1979 by seven members of a church in Delhi. Over the years, more than four lakh poor students have received quality education through its programmes. Initially, 90 per cent of our money came

from abroad. Today, less than five per cent does. Nobody ever asked us to use those resources to convert anyone.

I can bet that not even one of those students became a Christian because of our work. I would be happy if they remain good citizens. You may never understand this because it appears you do not want to understand it.

Goswami called you the most prominent Christian in India. You said your Christian background did not prevent Narendra Modi from appointing you Solicitor General. A person’s religion should never determine his suitability for public office. But please find out how many Muslims and Christians occupy ministerial or gubernatorial positions in the country. If the numbers are negligible, is it because there are no capable Muslims and Christians?

Your appointment cannot by itself prove that discrimination does not exist.

When there was a case against me in the Punjab and Haryana High Court, the lawyer who appeared for me was Justice Rajinder Sachar, a former Chief Justice. Another lawyer we consulted was the late Pali S. Nariman. Neither was a Christian.

Over the years many doctors have treated me. The doctor I admired most was the late Dr Narayana Pai, principal of Trivandrum Medical College. The doctor I remember with the greatest bitterness was a professor of surgery at Kottayam Medical College who kept my father waiting with a fractured leg for an operation for three days until we paid him a bribe of Rs 1,000. He happened to be a Syrian Christian, like me. Neither excellence nor corruption has a religion.

Goswami wanted you to certify that everything was hunky-dory with the new FCRA Bill. I give you credit for mentioning that Christians received only about 10 per cent of the total FCRA collections in India of about Rs 23,000 crore. Who receives the other 90 per cent? Mostly Hindu organisations.

The Modi government has cancelled the FCRA registrations of thousands of NGOs depriving thousands of jobs.

Organisations with names that include words like ‘Christian’, ‘Fellowship’ and ‘Church’ were among those that faced particular scrutiny. The rules have since been tightened considerably.

I have no objection to transparency or accountability. What I object to is the apparent double standard. Consider the PM CARES Fund. If the figures cited in public records are correct, it had a closing balance of Rs 8,452 crore in 2024-25, while its expenditure that year was only around Rs 87.85 lakh.

If an NGO is required to utilise its foreign contribution within a prescribed time limit and can lose its FCRA registration for failing to do so, should institutions holding thousands of shares not be subjected to comparable standards of accountability? A foreign company operating in India had earmarked money to



Harish Salve was Solicitor General of India from 1 November 1999 to 3 November 2002

help us construct a school building in a backward area of Haryana. Under pressure, it diverted the money to PM CARES where it earns Modi interest!

Calamity after calamity has struck India. If an emergency fund accumulates thousands of crores but spends only a tiny fraction of its corpus, questions are legitimate. You either do not know these things or pretend not to know them.

You also insinuated that Christians convert poor people. I have a simple challenge: show me one person who was converted with money. Indians may be poor but don’t think they can be bought.

Goswami claimed that his report, during a sting operation, was asked to convert and marry a local person. If that happened, why was a criminal complaint not filed against the person who allegedly made the offer? Journalism does not become more credible because it is dramatic.

Goswami also mentioned that you had appeared for him in a case. There are poor Christians in Indian jails accused falsely of trying to convert people. If you really want to demonstrate your concern for Christians, take up the case of at least one such poor accused without charging a fee.

You waxed eloquent about freedom of religion. In the constituency your father once represented, Christians cannot have a prayer meeting in their homes. A small gang with saffron shawls can enter any church and harass the worshippers with impunity.

Show the courage to speak up against

the harassment of Christians and Muslims. You will immediately stop getting briefs from the government and Arnab Goswami will say you have shown your true colours.

When William Carey, the Christian missionary, arrived in India in the early nineteenth century, one of the first things he did was to set up a school where every child was welcome. Whatever one’s view of missionary activity, education remains the best antidote to poverty. Today, tens of thousands of government schools have been closed in parts of northern India. Perhaps that tells us something about priorities.

And that is what disturbed me most about your interview. I have no problem with your wealth, your hotel suite, your watches, your international legal practice or your clients. You have every right to enjoy the fruits of your labour.

But success imposes a responsibility. When a person of your stature speaks about Christians, NGOs, foreign funding and poverty, millions listen. Your words can either challenge prejudice or reinforce it.

You may dismiss this letter as the ramblings of an old journalist, two years your senior. That is your privilege. I have seen wealth, power, poverty, generosity and hypocrisy at close quarters. I have learnt one little lesson: a person’s religion tells me little about his character; his actions tell me everything.

Yours etc.

A longer version of this open letter first appeared in Indian Currents

“
When a person of your stature speaks, millions listen. Your words can either challenge prejudice or reinforce it.”

How big is religious conversion?

Aakar Patel on how freedom of religion is both a fundamental right and a criminal offence in India

Here’s a headline from last week: ‘Pune Police withdraws conversion law provisions from 2 cases after officials find Act not in force yet’ (CNBCTV18, 19 August).

The law referred to has since come into effect—the Maharashtra Freedom of Religion Act, 2026—and is one of the gifts the BJP has given India since 2018, when the first such law came into force in Uttarakhand.

The freedom to propagate religion is both a fundamental right in India (Article 25) and a criminal offence. This might puzzle some people, but the ‘mother of democracy’ is wise and knows how to keep her children in line.

I have written in this column before about the specific problems these laws pose, and I will not repeat them. What we should take a look at is this: what’s the problem that these laws are attempting to solve? How big an issue is religious conversion in India?

Historically, conversions in India have happened through communities. It is difficult for an individual to change his/her religion in India because ties to community and family are strong. For this social reason, as well as the restrictions placed on freedom of religion, the number of conversions in India is quite low.

In its issue dated 15 September 1981, India Today reported that ‘figures painstakingly tabulated by the Home Ministry showed that in the past fourteen months the number of conversions recorded—mostly of Harijans to Islam—numbered no more than 5,000’. It added that though some conversions had been reported from north India, they were occurring primarily in Tamil Nadu, where around 2,000 people (which include 1,100 in Meenakshipuram) had switched religions during the previous eight months, against fewer than 1,500 between 1944 and 1980.

On 7 March 2017, Malayala Manorama reported research by the Media Development and Research Foundation, a non-profit organisation in Kozhikode, which



A march against the Anti-Conversion Bill, deceptively named the Protection of Right to Freedom of Religion Bill

showed that 60 per cent of those who had converted in Kerala between January 2011 and December 2016 chose to become Hindu.

Gazette records of changed names showed that of the 8,334 people who had converted over the seven-year period, 4,968 chose to become Hindu (2,244 women and 2,724 men). Of these, the majority—4,756—were Christian and 1,864 Muslim.

Of the 1,864 who converted to Islam, 78 per cent were previously Hindu, with the number of men and women converts nearly equal. Of the 1,496 who converted to Christianity, 95 per cent were Hindu, with 720 women and 776 men. Six individuals (two women and four men) chose to become Buddhist, of whom five were previously Hindu and one Christian.

There is no official data from the state on this. However, a 2016 report

in the Times of India (‘Nearly 6,000 converted to Islam in Kerala in 5 years: Report’, 15 July) quoted an ‘intelligence report’ filed by the police showing that 5,793 people had converted between 2011 and 2015, with a fifty-fifty split between men and women. Hindus converting stood at 4,719, of whom 1,074 were previously Christians.

These numbers over the years, whether from Tamil Nadu, Gujarat or Kerala, pale before the conversions claimed by the VHP. On 26 October 2019, PTI reported the VHP as saying it had converted 25,000 Muslims and Christians, mostly Adivasis, to Hinduism in 2018.

Rewinding reveals more exaggerations. On 8 January 2016, PTI reported VHP leader Pravin Togadia’s claims at a rally: “In the last ten years, we did ghar wapsi (homecoming) of more than five lakh Christians and 2.5 lakh Muslims. Our rate of ghar wapsi

used to be around 15,000 each year. But last year, we crossed the mark of 40,000, which is excluding the figures of RSS... If Hindus need to be in [the] majority in India and [we want] to save our religion, we have to engage in many more ghar wapsi drives to bring crores of others into our religion.”

To this end, Togadia added, “the VHP wants a Bill which will make it difficult to convert people to other religions.”

In 2015, Rediff interviewed the man who would go on to become chief minister of Uttar Pradesh (‘Yogi Adityanath proposes anti-conversion law, without ban on “reconversion”’, 13 December).

Referring to the activities of his organisation, the Hindu Yuva Vahini, Adityanath claimed, “We have reconverted several lakh Muslims and Christians over the past ten years. ... What I am doing is simply taking such people back to their old home from where they were weaned away through inducement or coercion.”

Adityanath explained why he wanted an exemption from the law for conversions into Hinduism: “So what if someone’s ancestors were converted to Islam or Christianity several hundred years ago? Time is of no consequence. Therefore, all those Hindus who were compelled to switch over to Islam during Mughal emperor Aurangzeb’s rule—when the maximum mass conversions took place—should get exemption under the new law that the BJP wants to legislate.”

And sure enough, the post-2018 BJP laws specifically exempt those who convert ‘to their ancestral religion’. This is the background to the laws we are passing today.

Having comprehensively solved all our problems of unemployment, poverty, education, justice and so on, the mother of democracy is now passing laws—which are being enforced by our ever-vigilant police—on the pressing matter of personal faith and which god/s one should and should not believe in. ■

Views are personal



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Dam nuisance

A lifeline for Tamil Nadu is now life threatening in Kerala. **K.A. Shaji** explores the arguments for and against a new Mullaperiyar dam

Ever heard of Colonel John Pennycuik? You'll find a statue of him in faraway Surrey—donated by Tamil Nadu. It was the then M.K. Stalin government that reached out with an offer to commemorate a man revered to commemo-rate the southern state but forgotten in his own hometown of Camberley. Spending Rs 92 lakh on the statue was a gesture of appreciation for the British engineer who built the Mullaperiyar dam.

Completed in 1895 with the aim of diverting the waters of the Periyar eastwards into an arid region that now comprises Theni, Dindigul, Madurai, Sivaganga and Ramanathapuram districts, the project and its interconnected irrigation system transformed agriculture and living conditions across large parts of southern Tamil Nadu. Pennycuik acquired almost legendary status. In districts that have benefitted over the decades, his memory is kept alive through memorials, bus stands, statues, school buildings, even a temple.

Yet in Kerala's Idukki district, where the dam stands, Pennycuik remains controversial. For many locals, he represents the beginning of an interstate arrangement that has produced a long-running conflict over water, safety and rights.

That contradiction lies at the heart of the Mullaperiyar dispute. Tamil Nadu owns and operates the dam even though it is situated in Kerala's western ghats. For Tamil Nadu's farmers, it's a lifeline across five districts. For Kerala, it is an ageing dam, whose failure could be catastrophic to communities in Idukki and the densely populated urban conglomeration of Ernakulam.

Since 1979, Kerala has sought its decommissioning, and repeatedly demanded a new dam. Tamil Nadu has maintained that the existing structure is safe, well maintained and needs no replacement. The Supreme Court's 2014 judgment

permitted the reservoir level to be raised from 136 feet to 142 feet, while Tamil Nadu has continued to seek higher storage at 152 feet.

The latest chapter in this saga began with a renewed confrontation. On 20 August 2026, at the Southern Zonal Council meeting in Mahabalipuram, Kerala Chief Minister V.D. Satheesan offered to bear the entire cost of a new Mullaperiyar dam. Tamil Nadu could decide its design and location and oversee construction, while Kerala would guarantee that Tamil Nadu received its full quota of water from the new reservoir.

The proposal sought to remove, at one shot, Tamil Nadu's two primary objections to a new dam: the possibility of losing its water rights and having to bear the cost of addressing Kerala's safety concerns. Here was a win-win for both sides—water security for Tamil Nadu, structural safety for Kerala.

Tamil Nadu Chief Minister Joseph Vijay, however, rejected the proposal, maintaining that the existing dam is safe and that there is no compelling reason to replace it.

The positions remain entrenched. Kerala points to the dam's age, its location, changing

rainfall patterns in Idukki and the potentially devastating consequences of failure. Tamil Nadu points to expert committees and Supreme Court decisions. The Union government has also previously stated that an Empowered Committee found the dam hydrologically, structurally and seismically safe.

But safety cannot be argued



thus. With climate change causing extreme rainfall and a downstream population that has grown exponentially since the nineteenth century, risk needs to be assessed afresh.

While there is broad political support in Kerala for a new dam, environmentalists oppose constructing one inside the Periyar Tiger Reserve, one of India's most important protected landscapes.

"Both states have real concerns. But a new dam cannot be treated as an environmentally neutral replacement for an old one simply because its engineering specifications may be more modern," says Sridhar Radhakrishnan, a Thiruvananthapuram-based environmental expert.

Earlier project documents envisaged a new dam roughly 366 metres downstream of the existing structure, requiring about 50 hectares of forest land, with around 22.23 hectares submerged. The project was classified as a Category A proposal because of its location in

a protected landscape and its proximity to the interstate boundary.

Construction requires access roads, excavation, transportation of materials, heavy machinery, workers' camps and other infrastructure. It means years of human activity and disturbance in a landscape whose primary purpose is conservation.

"The existence of an old dam inside the reserve cannot become an argument for intensifying infrastructure there. A historical intrusion cannot become an ecological precedent," observes wildlife biologist P.O. Nameer.

The case against another large dam becomes stronger when climate change and the geological setting are considered together. Experts have raised concerns about Mullaperiyar's location in seismic Zone III and significant changes in rainfall patterns in Idukki since 2018.

Tamil Nadu-based water specialist S. Janakarajan questions

Photos: K.A. Shaji



The ageing Mullaperiyar dam; (left) the site inside the Periyar Tiger Reserve proposed for a new dam

the wisdom of constructing another major dam in the same seismic landscape, particularly within a tiger reserve. His alternative deserves serious consideration: instead of concentrating huge quantities of water in a single 19th century lime-concrete structure, Tamil Nadu could create smaller storage facilities in the five districts dependent on Mullaperiyar and divert excess water into them.

Environmental scientist V.S. Vijayan has similarly argued that modest storage facilities and barrages could help Tamil Nadu secure its share without continually increasing pressure on the Mullaperiyar reservoir. Both proposals deserve independent examination. They could change the logic of the dispute: instead of asking how much more water Mullaperiyar can hold, ask how efficiently Tamil Nadu can receive, store and use the water to which it is entitled.

The safety of the existing dam deserves more rigorous scientific attention. C.P. Rajendran, adjunct professor at the National Institute of Advanced Studies, has pointed to inadequate monitoring of deformation and called for an independent expert group to examine existing technical reports, collect fresh data and determine the future stability of the structure. This is particularly important because its unusual 19th century construction makes sim-

plistic comparisons with modern dams difficult.

Meanwhile, anti-dam activists have alleged that sections of the bureaucracy and a construction lobby are pushing for a new project because of the massive monies involved. Prof. Kusumam Joseph of the National Alliance of Movements has described it as a 'greedy dam lobby'. While allegations must be backed by evidence, the concern cannot be dismissed.

Earlier environmental clearance proceedings recognised the sensitivity of the location. The Union environment ministry's terms of reference for the new dam required a prior agreement between Kerala and Tamil Nadu.

Any fresh proposal must go further, to include an independent cumulative assessment of seismic risk, climate change, forest loss, wildlife movement, construction disturbance, hydrology and downstream safety, while giving equal weightage to alternatives outside the tiger reserve.

The burden of proof must be on the project, not on the Periyar Tiger Reserve.

Tamil Nadu's farmers have a legitimate claim to water. Kerala's people have an equally legitimate claim to safety. Water security, human safety and wildlife conservation must be pursued together. The new dam must clear a high ecological threshold. ■

Instead of one massive reservoir, are smaller storage facilities the solution?



Artist Mahtab Hussain's bronze sculpture honours soldiers of multiple faiths who were part of British India's war effort



LONDON DIARY
HASAN SUROOR



Lucy Powell (in blue), deputy leader of the Labour Party, with Prime Minister Andy Burnham

A glimpse of communal harmony in colonial times

It's a first. The Royal British Legion, Britain's largest armed forces charity, has organised a touring exhibition highlighting the contribution of soldiers and other professionals from South Asia who fought in WWII.

An estimated 2.5 million soldiers—among them Sikhs, Hindus, Muslims, Christians and Gurkhas—took part in British India's war effort; thousands died. But their role has largely been forgotten, and they barely merit a mention on Remembrance Day, the annual event that commemorates the sacrifices of veterans.

Organised in partnership with artist Mahtab Hussain, 'The Forgotten Army: A Creative Response' seeks to plug this gap. What emerges from the personal stories featured is the profile of an extraordinarily diverse and secular force.

Take, for example, the remarkable story of a Hindu soldier Vallabhdas Suchak who religiously observed the Ramzan fast to honour a promise he made to his dying Muslim brother-in-arms.

Vallabhdas's granddaughter Nima Suchak shares what she discovered from the documents he left behind.

"My grandad went to offer him some water. The soldier would not take it. He said, 'No, I'm fasting. It's Ramadan. I don't want to break my fast.' My grandad said, 'Take the water, ease your pain.' But the dying man wouldn't. So Vallabhdas said: 'Let me fast for you.'"

The soldier took the water. For the rest of his life, Suchak observed the fast during Ramzan. He died when Nima was 12. Despite growing up in the same house, she had only the haziest knowledge of her grandfather's war service.

"Remembrance Day would come and go, VE Day would come and go. It didn't occur to us. My grandad never talked about it," she told *The Times*.

The exhibition is full of such inspiring stories that offer an insight into community relations at the time.

UK scores a self-goal

One financially ruinous self-goal by the British government is its attempt to appease the anti-immigrant lobby by making it increasingly difficult for fee-paying international students to study in Britain.

The barriers, including restrictions on bringing in family members, have resulted in a sharp decline in the number of these proverbial 'cash cows', provoking backlash from perpetually cash-strapped universities.

Foreign students—a significantly large number from India—typically pay up to three times more than their British counterparts, contributing over £40.4 billion to the economy over the course of their studies.

Fees paid by them account for at least 40 per cent of the total income of ten universities. A *Sunday Times* investigation revealed that 55 universities collected £557 million less from international students in

2024-25 than two years earlier. Nearly 50 per cent of the universities have recorded a fall in income over the past year.

The number of international students peaked in 2022-23 at 758,865 after the introduction of a foreign student visa that allowed graduates to bring their families with them. After curbs on immigration, this figure dropped to 685,565 in 2024-25. The number of students from India has declined by 25 per cent and from China by 9 per cent.

To make up for the losses, many universities are compromising on admission standards to accommodate

domestic students. The more desperate universities are for money, the worse the courses are getting. Several have cut staff, citing financial hardship.

All symbolic of a Britain going inexorably downhill.

Something for Indian MPs to chew on

Here's something for the Indian Parliament to chew on as the British House of Commons—the model for our *sansad*—sets out to modernise the language used by MPs, on the ground that

it is out of date, and alienates the public.

Among the terms proposed to be scrapped are 'bill' (used for a piece of legislation), 'division' (meaning a vote of MPs) and 'early day motions' where MPs can demonstrate their support to a particular cause.

"I'm all for traditions, customs and pageantry. But we have to ask ourselves: which traditions serve a purpose in the modern age. People don't even understand the term 'bill', let alone all the myriad different versions of that bill," said Lucy Powell, deputy leader of the ruling Labour Party. Also set for the chop is the practice of members having to seek permission to speak by popping up from their seats to 'catch the Speaker's eye'. Disabled MPs find this particularly hard to do.

"Simple things like having more certainty about when you're going to speak in a debate is really a no-brainer for a more inclusive House of Commons," Powell said. Most of these terms and practices are also followed by the Indian Parliament. Will it take a cue from Britain and follow suit, especially now that everything is being 'Indianised'?

And, lastly, what do Britons do when the conversation at work or a dinner party turns to the latest high-profile documentary or historical biopic they have not seen? A nationwide study reveals: most simply say they have. They lie, most likely, to avoid looking like the odd one out. Would be interesting to know how Indians react in similar situations. ■



Photo: Getty Images

Immigration curbs have led to a 25 per cent drop in the number of Indian students in the UK



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ECOLOGY

A WARNING FROM NEPAL
The devastating floods in the Himalayan state are a stark and urgent reminder



► P3

Q&A

“EDUCATION IS ALWAYS A SECULAR QUESTION”
Educationist Anita Rampal on the ongoing student protests and the road ahead



► P3

NEIGHBOURHOOD

THE ENCIRCLEMENT
Ashok Swain and Faisal Mahmud on India’s neighbourhood dilemmas



► P4

India has a new sugar riddle

...and it’s not all down to diverting sugar and equivalents to ethanol production. **Jaideep Hardikar** on the contradictions in India’s sugar economy

Sugar has suddenly become an unlikely inflation story. Retail sugar prices, which averaged Rs 48 a kilo on 20 July, had climbed to Rs 56 on 20 August. In some markets, prices went up to Rs 60 a kilo. Wholesale prices in Maharashtra, one of India’s principal sugar-producing states, have also climbed sharply. The Centre’s initial response was to impose stockholding restrictions on dealers and wholesalers. Later, for the first time in a decade, it allowed zero-duty imports of one million tonnes of raw sugar till 31 October. The timing is crucial. The long festival season is about to start. That’s when sugar demand surges and high sugar prices can cost politically.

The current spike in sugar prices does not fully reveal the profound contradictions in India’s fast-restructuring sugar economy. There are political, environmental and agriculture policy variables in play. It’s an industry shaped by guaranteed cane prices for farmers, politically influential sugar mills, water-intensive cultivation, climate volatility, ethanol policy and the government’s perennial dilemma of balancing the interests of farmers and consumers.

India consumes 28-29 million tonnes of sugar a year. In previous decades, production often exceeded consumption, leaving sugar mills grappling with large inventories and low prices. Governments responded with export incentives, buffer-stock measures, soft loans and then a BIG push to divert sugarcane into ethanol production. With the surplus now narrowing, any sign that sugar production might drop leads to panic, as we see this year.

The immediate problem is supply. India’s sugar production in the 2025-26 season is now estimated to be 306 lakh tonnes, way below the initial projection of 343 lakh tonnes. That’s a 12 per cent drop. The latest official assessment suggests that opening stocks for the next season could fall to 33-34 lakh tonnes, compared with 50 lakh tonnes a year earlier.

For the second year running, the country’s sugar production has been below par.

A big reason for this drop is last year’s extreme rain events in the sugarcane growing regions of Maharashtra, Karnataka and Uttar Pradesh—three key sugar states. Sugarcane is a long-duration crop. Its yield and sugar recovery are highly sensitive to weather conditions in different stages of growth. More sugarcane does not automatically mean more sugar.

Maharashtra, for instance, recorded an increase in sugarcane production in 2025-26—from 1,099.7 lakh tonnes to 1,316.5 lakh tonnes, according to the agriculture ministry’s third advance estimate. But sugar production can fall even when cane availability rises if the recovery rate (the amount of sugar extracted from cane)



Photo: Getty Images

Despite the considerable challenges of growing sugarcane, the farmer has a sound reason to persist with its cultivation—assured prices for his crop

deteriorates.

The state, in fact, crushed more cane than in the previous season, but crushing season was much shorter—barely 100-105 days in the 2025-26 season compared with a normal of 150-160 days. By mid-March, a large majority of the state’s 210 sugar mills had already shut for want of mature cane. Unseasonal rain in November and December 2025 damaged standing cane, while weather-related stress affected yields, recovery and the availability of mature cane. The mills could not operate for the normal duration or fully utilise their installed capacity.

Demand is another stress factor, which picks up during the long festival season—Ganesh Chaturthi through Dussehra and Diwali, stretching about two months. Sugar consumption rises during this period, not only in households but also in the large informal and formal food-processing economy. Expectations of tighter supply also accelerate buying and stockpiling.

The Centre says there is enough sugar in the country to meet domestic requirements and has warned traders and other market participants against profiteering. It has imposed inventory limits on dealers and, from September, on bulk consumers.

Sugarcane farmers are protected through a government-administered pricing system. The Centre fixes a ‘fair and remunerative price’, and some states have historically

It is simplistic to link higher sugar prices to diversion of cane for ethanol production

announced higher state-advised prices. The system gives farmers price assurance.

But assured cane prices have downstream consequences. Sugar mills must buy cane at politically determined prices even when the market price of sugar does not adequately compensate them. This is one reason why India’s sugar industry has repeatedly swung between surplus production, mill losses, large cane arrears and government intervention.

Sugarcane is not an ordinary crop.

It is among the most water-intensive crops grown in India. Its expansion has been particularly significant in regions such as western Maharashtra or Marathwada where massive investments in irrigation have made cultivation possible on a large scale. The economics of cane are attractive to farmers precisely because the crop has an assured market and established mill infrastructure. But climate change complicates that model. A crop dependent on large quantities of water becomes increasingly vulnerable when rainfall is erratic—and too much rain at the wrong stage of the crop is also damaging.

This brings us to ethanol—a big recent factor affecting the fortunes of the sugar economy.

The correlation between higher sugar prices and the diversion of sugar into ethanol production is simplistic. The proportion of sugar diverted for ethanol has actually declined — from around 12 per cent in 2022-23 to about 9 per cent in 2025-26. Nearly 75 per cent of India’s ethanol now comes from grains, particularly maize.

But the ethanol programme and increasing private sector participation in the sector has certainly altered the economics of the sugar industry. For years, India’s sugar problem was one of surpluses: too much cane being converted into too much sugar. Ethanol offered sugar mills an alternative source of revenue. For the Centre, ethanol is

tied to energy security, domestic petrol-blending objectives and global climate commitments.

When the sugar market tightens, as it has this year, the inherent contradictions of policy come to the fore. About three million tonnes of sugar equivalent is estimated to have been diverted so far to ethanol this year. But the government is planning to restrict the use of sugarcane and other cane-based feedstock for ethanol in the coming season, while maintaining the 20 per cent ethanol-blending target by relying more heavily on grain-based ethanol.

Even though the current sugar shortage and the resultant price increase is not attributable to diversions of sugar for ethanol production, it does focus attention on a policy conundrum: when sugar is scarce, how should the same agricultural resource be divided between food and fuel? The question acquires a bleeding edge when you consider that climate volatility is making sugar production less predictable.

There is another policy paradox, which affects distillers.

Over the past ten or so years, the Modi government encouraged investments in building ethanol capacity to deal with surplus sugar. Distillers are now sitting on idle capacities even as climate volatility wreaks havoc on cane and sugar production. India has been forced to import sugar because domestic availability has tightened.

Are the duty-free imports a short-term price-control measure? The government says the imports, combined with stock controls and early commencement of the new crushing season, will prevent a serious shortage. Even if these measures do successfully avert a serious crisis in the short term, a larger structural problem will persist.

India’s sugar economy serves competing interests: farmers want remunerative cane prices, sugar mills need financial viability, consumers want cheap sugar, the government wants low food inflation, the energy establishment wants ethanol and the environment is serving warnings to limit water-intensive agriculture.

The present sugar-price spike is not simply an inflation episode; it’s a warning about the inherent contradictions of India’s sugar economy.

Dealing with a price-spike episode is easier than tackling the more fundamental questions that roil this economy. Can India continue to guarantee remunerative prices for a water-guzzling crop when climate change is impacting production and recovery? Can it afford the price of keeping a politically powerful sugar-mill economy aside? Can it do this even while diverting a part of that crop towards fuel? And is it even possible to also simultaneously maintain supplies and keep retail prices in check?

The answer can’t be one import order or more stockholding curbs. India may need to rethink the political economy of sugar. ■

Not exactly a hero’s welcome



Photo: Getty Images

‘Universal Oneness’ is not an idea anyone associates with his outfit, not even RSS diehards

Ashis Ray

On 25 August, RSS supremo Mohan Bhagwat landed in New York City. Later that week, he was scheduled to deliver the keynote address at a Madison Square Garden event marketed as ‘Universal Oneness Celebrations’. Not many bought that pitch.

On 20 August, the US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) sought sanctions against the RSS and urged the US administration to deny its leaders diplomatic courtesies or high-level meetings. The timing of its call was no coincidence.

Addressing the media in Delhi, a spokesperson for the Indian ministry of external affairs dismissed the USCIRF as ‘a biased institution’. “We should ignore such institutions as they have their own agendas and lack credibility.”

The USCIRF is an independent, bipartisan federal agency that monitors religious freedom globally. It makes policy recommendations to the US president, secretary of state and the US Congress.

In its annual report published in March 2026, the USCIRF recommended to the US government that it ‘impose targeted sanctions on individuals and entities, such as India’s Research and Analysis Wing (R&AW, the country’s external espionage agency) and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, for their

responsibility and tolerance of severe violations of religious freedom by freezing those individuals’ or entities’ assets and/or barring their entry into the United States.’

The reference to R&AW stemmed from the alleged involvement of one of its employees, Vikas Yadav, in a failed assassination attempt in New York on Gurbatwint Singh Pannun, an anti-India Sikh extremist.

The report also recommended to the Trump administration that it ‘designate India as a ‘country of particular concern’ for engaging in and tolerating systematic, ongoing, and egregious religious freedom violations, as defined by the International

Religious Freedom Act (IRFA).’ The USCIRF also counts Pakistan, China, North Korea and Iran in this bracket.

So, the RSS has been on the USCIRF radar for some time, and the most recent statement was an iteration coinciding with the Bhagwat visit. In fact, it has also advised enforcement of ‘Section 6 of the Arms Export Control Act [a US federal law] to halt weapons sales to India based on continued acts of intimidation and harassment against US citizens and minorities.’

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In its early days, the RSS, set up in 1925, did not make much headway among Hindus in India. It made forays abroad to try its luck with Indians settled in East Africa.

Edward Anderson writes in *Hindu Nationalism in the Indian Diaspora*: ‘One year before (Indian) Independence and two years before the RSS’s ban following Mahatma Gandhi’s assassination by a Hindu extremist, (Jagdish) Shastri (a teacher at an Arya Samaj school in Amritsar) set sail from Bombay to Mombasa to take up his new post. Standing on the deck of the SS Vasma, one tempestuous evening in the middle of the Indian Ocean, he had a serendipitous encounter with another passenger, a Gujarati called Maneklal Rughani.

Bhagwat’s outreach is not likely to repair India’s reputation for religious intolerance in the US and beyond

► Continued on page 2

Kashif Kakvi on the reality of MP's 'Sandipan Vidyalaya' initiative even as thousands of government school students wait to be 'adjusted'

The Himalaya serves another warning

Pankaj Chaturvedi

Nepal’s latest disaster is a grim warning. A sudden, deadly flood along the Nepal-Tibet border that claimed hundreds of lives is not just another act of nature. It’s a sign of a warming, destabilised and overbuilt Himalayan region.

From Kashmir to Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand, glaciers are retreating, glacial lakes are multiplying, slopes are being carved up for construction and fragile ecosystems are being pushed beyond their capacity.

And yet we continue to behave as though the mountains will endlessly absorb our mistakes. They will not.

The Himalayan crisis has three interconnected aspects: melting glaciers and unstable glacial lakes, pollution and sewage degrading lakes like the Dal lake and extreme seismic vulnerability.

Treating them as separate problems is a luxury we cannot afford.

A cloudburst can trigger a landslide. An earthquake can destabilise a glacial lake. A lake outburst can send water and debris into valleys already crowded with roads, bridges, hydropower projects and human settlements.

Climate change may intensify natural hazards. But policy decisions determine how destructive those hazards become.

That is why India needs an integrated Himalayan risk-management strategy. Every major glacial lake must have a scientifically assessed risk profile and a dedicated management plan. Climate, hydrology, biodiversity, water quality, glacier movement and seismic indicators must be monitored continuously—not after disaster strikes.

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Research and data from the Department of Earth Sciences at the University of Kashmir and other institutions show that glaciers—particularly the Kolahoi Glacier, which has lost more than 22 per cent of its area—are shrinking at an alarming rate.

As temperatures rise, glacial lakes form and expand. Their threat



Gone in a flash The devastation caused by the flash floods at Trishuli Bazar in Nepal’s Nuwakot district

Photo: Getty Images

is amplified by human activity. Indiscriminate construction, deforestation and other interventions in the Panjshir and Pir Panjal ranges have weakened ecological systems that once provided a natural buffer against extreme events.

If lake levels are not monitored in time, a glacial lake outburst flood (GLOF) could send enormous quantities of water and debris into the Jhelum Basin, threatening densely populated areas downstream.

And the crisis extends beyond glacial lakes. Kashmir’s high-altitude alpine lakes—Gangabal, Vishansar, Krishansar, Gadsar, Tarsar, Marsar, Kausarnag, Sheshnag, Satsar, Nundkol and Alpather—are vital components of the valley’s water security. Above the tree line, they collect snowmelt and rainwater and release it gradually towards rivers, wetlands and groundwater. This natural water-security system still lacks dedicated management. Monitoring of water quality, biodiversity and climate indicators remains sporadic. Effectively, we wait for a lake to burst before realising it needed monitoring.

Climate vulnerability is only half the story. Kashmir sits on a seismic fault line.

The 2025 national seismic zoning map issued by the Bureau of Indian Standards places the Himalayan arc, including Jammu and Kashmir, in the most dangerous category, Zone VI. As Indian and Eurasian plates continue to collide, major earthquakes along the Main Himalayan Thrust are a persistent threat.

The 2005 Muzaffarabad earthquake, that measured 7.6 on the Richter Scale and killed more than 80,000 people, should have been warning enough. Instead, unregulated construction on vulnerable slopes continues. Critical infrastructure, including schools and hospitals, does not always receive the seismic scrutiny such terrain demands.

*

Uttarakhand has already endured enough to expose the folly of treating every catastrophe as an isolated event. Kedarnath. Joshimath. Rishiganga—each revealed a different vulnerability, with the same underlying lesson: development ignores geology at a

very high price.

According to the Wadia Institute of Himalayan Geology and other scientific organisations, more than 1,000 glacial lakes have formed in Uttarakhand’s high Himalayan regions. Many are capable of triggering flash floods. Studies cited by Doon University and environmentalists indicate temperatures have risen by as much as 1.5 to 2 degrees Celsius over the past three decades. Every year, major glaciers like Gangotri and Gomukh retreat by 20-30 metres.

As ice melts, unstable mixtures of rock, debris and water accumulate below glaciers. A cloudburst or even modest seismic disturbance can set this material hurtling downhill, devastating hydropower projects and settlements built along riverbanks.

*

Himachal Pradesh faces the same convergence of factors. Hydropower projects, road expansion and unplanned mountain cutting heighten the consequences of extreme weather events.

Data from the State Centre on Climate Change indicate that

extreme rainfall, cloudbursts and flash floods have increased by more than 40 per cent in recent years.

The Sutlej, Beas and Chenab valleys are seeing accelerated snowmelt. In Lahaul-Spiti and Kinnaur, many of the new lakes created by rapidly retreating glaciers are held back by weak natural dams.

A recent study by the Himachal Pradesh Council for Science, Technology and Environment identified 2,292 glacial lakes in the Sutlej Basin alone: 1,335 in Tibet, 470 in Spiti and 487 in the Himachal section below Khab in Kinnaur. Forty-nine lakes cover more than 10 hectares.

If a lake in Tibet bursts, its water can travel down the Sutlej into Himachal, eventually affecting the plains of Punjab. The Chenab and Ravi basins contain another 373 glacial lakes.

The International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD) has identified hundreds of lakes in the Hindu Kush Himalayan that pose significant risks. Science has tools to reduce those risks. Controlled drainage, siphoning and other engineering interventions can lower water levels in particularly dangerous lakes. But engineering alone will

not save the Himalayas. Governance must change too.

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Originating in the Tibetan Plateau, the Brahmaputra sustains India’s northeastern states and is the economic, social and cultural backbone of the region. China’s hydropower ambitions on the Yarlung Tsangpo—their name for the river—are a growing concern for India.

The formal completion of the 510-megawatt, 116-metre Zangmu project in Tibet has implications far beyond power generation, given the river’s vital importance to Arunachal Pradesh and Assam. Tibet’s seismic vulnerability compounds the risk: an earthquake or landslide could damage the dam and unleash devastating floods downstream. In a conflict, a sudden release of water could turn the dam into a man-made ‘water bomb’ for Arunachal Pradesh. Resulting flash floods could race through the Northeast within hours.

Rivers do not recognise political boundaries; neither do floods, landslides or glaciers. Real-time data sharing and basin-level monitoring with neighbouring countries are essential. The Himalayas demand cooperation across borders, which is easier said than done.

The Himalayas have been warning us for years. We have responded with committees, compensation packages and reconstruction drives—and then gone back to business as usual.

India must rethink what it calls development in the mountains. We must stop pretending that every road, dam, tunnel, hotel and township represents progress. In an ecologically fragile mountain region, the first question must be: Can this ecosystem bear it?

If the answer is no, it is not development. It is a disaster, deferred.

The next catastrophe may begin with a melting glacier, a bursting lake, a cloudburst, a landslide or an earthquake. When it comes, we may once again call it ‘unprecedented’. But no, we have been warned. Will we have the wisdom to heed the warning before the mountains jolt us out of our indifference? ■

If the ecosystem cannot bear the ‘development’ we propose, it’s a build-up to a catastrophe

“Education can only be transformed collectively”

The recent Gen Z and Gen Alpha protests have put the spotlight on India’s broken education system. Just two bits of data give a sense. Education in India is a booming industry (est. market size: 11–14 lakh crore rupees or \$115–152 billion) and yet, as educationist and former Delhi University faculty dean Anita Rampal tells Nandlal Sharma, only 22 per cent of Indian children complete Class 12. That market size tells you that education is a great business to be in, money is being made hand over fist, and yet 7,000 schools in India’s most populous state Uttar Pradesh have one teacher! The ongoing protests over basic amenities in government schools have refocused public attention but are we asking the right questions?

Gen Alpha seems to have no fears. What do you make of this?

It’s very encouraging. For years, students have been made to feel that if they fail, the deficiency lies in them. We rarely ask what role the system has played.

When girls tell journalists, “The board exams are four months away. If there is no teacher, what are we supposed to do?” that’s a perfectly legitimate question. In Delhi, Class 10 students who had no Maths teacher and failed, said: give us a teacher and test us after three months; don’t fail us now, because failing Class 10 can mean being pushed out of school.

Government data suggests that, on average, only about 22 per cent of children complete Class 12.

Have the central and state governments failed to fulfil their responsibilities?

Yes. Our Constitution places education in the Concurrent List precisely because states have a responsibility. That space is increasingly being constrained.

There are more protests in north India partly because some southern states have demonstrated that things can be done differently. Tamil Nadu, for instance, has repeatedly questioned centralisation as seen in the National Education Policy and [National Testing Agency (NTA)-administered] common admission tests like NEET and CUET. It has argued that

introducing vocational education as early as Class 6 could deepen inequality because such courses are seen as ‘low status’.

According to UDISE+ data, Uttar Pradesh has over 7,000 single-teacher schools. Nationwide there are more than a lakh. How can we talk about quality education when millions of children are effectively being taught by one teacher?

The Right to Education Act came into force in 2010. What happened to that promise?

The Right to Education came after a very long struggle. It promised a neighbourhood school, qualified teachers, right assessment. Much of that has been turned upside down.

Governments have repeatedly tried to cut corners. At the village and panchayat level, teachers are paid a pittance. Stop-gap arrangements like ‘Shiksha Mitras’ are common. We also have enormous inequality among government schools. In Delhi, there are Kendriya Vidyalayas, Sarvodaya Vidyalayas, Pratibha Vikas Vidyalayas... the poorest child often gets the weakest school. Why shouldn’t every child have access to the same quality?

There’s also a problem with the way we teach. In many classrooms, the teacher stands at the blackboard and children copy what is written. That’s not education. Children need to work with their hands, investigate, experiment. Knowledge is

created when we talk and think together; it’s not simply information that goes in and comes out. Our textbooks are not interesting; they do not stir curiosity. Why can’t we write books that children want to read?

We have reduced education to ticking the right box. But if you want to become a doctor, teacher, journalist or filmmaker, you need to develop your own way of thinking. You cannot acquire that through an answer key.

What needs to happen now?

I don’t expect much. Committees will be formed, surveillance will increase and people will talk about preventing the use of unfair means.

We need to ask: What are we testing? What kind of knowledge do we value? It’s great that students are demanding teachers, but we must also ask how prepared those teachers are. Are they teaching children to memorise because the exams are designed that way?

The understanding of ‘learning outcomes’ needs to change. If your performance reveals that you are poor, from a remote area or from a particular socio-economic background, then the system has failed to create equitable learning.

What do you think about the increasing centralisation of education?

It should not happen. Education has to grow from the grassroots, from knowledge that exists among local people, from what children see, observe, know. Whether in Manipur, Delhi or Kerala, education should emerge from the local context. Curriculum cannot be imposed from above.

Does the idea of a Gen Z or Gen Alpha obscure the huge differences in children’s individual circumstances?

Absolutely. Only around 20 per cent of students who finish school go on to higher education, and roughly 80-85 per cent of those students are first-generation learners whose parents never attended university. We cannot ignore their circumstances.

In some places, children don’t even have



Photo: Nandlal Sharma

a school building. A little girl in Uttar Pradesh made a heartbreaking video saying, “Look at us studying in the rain and the heat, at least give us a building.”

We say, “Take examinations online.’ But how many families have computers? Online examinations may exclude the most needy and disadvantaged. If we want children to enter higher education, we must create a system that enables them to get there.

Do you see the current school protests as an expression of civic consciousness?

Yes. When you demand something not merely for yourself but for everyone, you are demonstrating empathy and collective thinking. That is where citizenship begins.

What is striking about the current protests is that caste and religion seem irrelevant. Everyone wants teachers. In Rajasthan, when Muslim teachers were wrongly suspended, students, particularly girls, protested and demanded their reinstatement.

Education is, in itself, a secular question. It is everyone’s need, and it can only be transformed collectively.

What are the immediate priorities?

The Right to Education provides a framework: there must be a school near the child’s home, qualified and trained teachers, learning materials, a library and an appropriate environment for learning. A building is not enough.

Teachers also need orientation, to create an environment where children learn

rather than memorise.

What can we learn from Kerala?

About two decades ago, Kerala recognised that even with teachers and facilities, the children weren’t learning. And so, it changed its curriculum and examination system.

The language of instruction became the Malayalam children spoke. The curriculum became activity-based. Parents started saying marks weren’t everything; what mattered was whether children understood and could express themselves. Children started writing creatively, regardless of background.

Teacher orientation made a big difference, and districts where reforms were implemented showed better learning. If this can happen in one state, why not in others?

We now hear ‘online, online’ everywhere, including proposals to train teachers online. But teacher education, like education itself, requires interaction, discussion, reflection and experience. We cannot transform education simply by putting everything on a screen.

Do the protests give you hope?

Absolutely. When I hear the voices of these young girls, it gives me courage.

But we need many more voices. A school building may be built, facilities may improve, roads may get repaired, but we need a level playing field for all children to learn. ■

Bangladesh and the Makkah Pact

In its current shape, the alliance is more a political signal than a military commitment on all sides. The partners do not face the same threats

Faisal Mahmud

Bangladesh has not yet taken a firm decision to join the Makkah Joint Defence Agreement, but its government is publicly advertising its interest nevertheless.

"If there is a security arrangement among Islamic nations in [West Asia], it is not unusual for us to consider participating. It is being viewed positively," said Humayun Kabir, Bangladesh's state minister for foreign affairs. The pact's members, Kabir added, were keen on Bangladesh's participation. A foreign ministry source subsequently confirmed that Saudi Arabia had invited Prime Minister Tarique Rehman to Riyadh.

The agreement, signed in Makkah on 7 August by Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Pakistan, treats an armed attack against one member as an attack against all. Its architects see it as consistent with the UN Charter. Yet an arrangement combining Saudi financial influence, Turkey's military-industrial capacity and Pakistan's armed and nuclear status is more than an exercise in Muslim solidarity.

Dhaka's apparent enthusiasm is best understood as the product of three overlapping calculations: domestic politics, deteriorating confidence in its regional security environment and a desire to extract greater value from the Muslim world.

The domestic attraction is straightforward. Bangladesh is one of the world's largest Muslim-majority countries. Association with an alliance formed in Makkah and led by three influential Muslim states is politically marketable, particularly for a government whose support base is more receptive than its predecessors to closer relations with Pakistan and the Gulf.

The Rahman government can also present an invitation as evidence that Bangladesh has acquired international standing. Kabir's emphasis on foreign leaders seeking the prime minister's participation is revealing.

Membership is being discussed not only as a security instrument but as recognition: Bangladesh would be entering the room as a substantial Muslim power rather than waiting

at the door as a recipient of aid or exporter of labour.

This need not amount to ideological foreign policy. Saudi Arabia was Bangladesh's largest source of remittances in the 2025-26 fiscal year—about \$5.85 billion, according to Bangladesh Bank.

Millions of Bangladeshis work across the Gulf. Riyadh is important to Dhaka's energy security, overseas employment and investment ambitions. Turkey has become an increasingly valuable source of defence equipment and political support. Pakistan offers military links and, under the present government, a relationship that Dhaka appears determined to normalise.

The second calculation concerns India. Relations between Dhaka and New Delhi remain strained thanks to India sheltering former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, Bangladesh's unanswered extradition request and allegations of forcible push-ins across the border. Hasina's political intervention from Indian soil disrupted Prime Minister Rahman's planned visit, despite attempts by both governments to prevent the situation from spiralling.

Joining an alliance that includes Pakistan would send New Delhi a message that Bangladesh has strategic alternatives. That is part of the appeal. For decades, Bangladeshi governments have attempted to manage the asymmetry created by geography: India surrounds most of the country, influences its river systems and sits astride many of its cheapest transport routes.

Dhaka cannot eliminate this imbalance. It can, however, build relationships elsewhere. The Makkah Pact would provide greater symbolic leverage than material protection. Neither Saudi Arabia nor Turkey are likely to confront India over a Bangladeshi dispute. Pakistan's involvement is more politically charged and therefore less serviceable. Even so, the perception of external backing can increase Dhaka's diplomatic elbow room.

There are other practical attractions. Turkey has developed competitive drone, missile, naval and electronic-warfare industries. Pakistan offers training, operational experience and access to weapons systems developed with

China. Saudi Arabia supplies capital and purchasing power.

Bangladesh could use the association to obtain technology transfers, joint production, intelligence cooperation, cyber capabilities and improved maritime surveillance in the Bay of Bengal.

That opportunity matters because Dhaka is trying to modernise its military while avoiding dependence on a single supplier. It is already moving towards negotiations with China for J-10CE fighter aircraft and attack helicopters, in what could become one of its largest defence purchases in years. Yet the pact would give Bangladesh additional procurement channels without having to abandon Beijing.

But diversification does not require a mutual-defence treaty. This distinction is where Dhaka's calculation becomes dangerous.

The Makkah pact's public provisions leave unanswered the questions that would determine its usefulness. It has no known integrated command comparable with NATO, no established multinational force structure and no history of joint contingency planning.

Its members have different adversaries. Pakistan's overriding concern is India; Saudi Arabia the Gulf; Turkey's ranges from Syria and Israel to Russia and the eastern Mediterranean.

Bangladesh could therefore acquire obligations in conflicts



(L-R) Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and Pakistan Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif after signing the Makkah pact; (Inset) Tarique Rahman, Prime Minister of Bangladesh



unrelated to its security. Would the treaty apply to another India-Pakistan war, including clashes over Kashmir? Would an Iranian attack on Saudi territory require a Bangladeshi military response? What would Dhaka be expected to do in a Turkish confrontation involving Syria or Israel? Conversely, would the three founders actually intervene if Bangladesh faced military coercion on its Myanmar border?

Until those questions are answered, the agreement offers Bangladesh the appearance of protection while carrying the possibility of entrapment.

The economic risks are less dramatic but more immediate. Bangladesh earned roughly \$48 billion from merchandise exports in 2025-26. Its garment industry remains heavily dependent on western consumers: the EU is its largest trading partner; US imports from Bangladesh reached \$9.5 billion in 2025.

The country needs investment

A big attraction for Dhaka of the Makkah pact may be the diplomatic heft it will afford

A pariah in its own neighbourhood?

Ashok Swain on India's dangerous isolation and its diplomatic encirclement by China

National Security Advisor Ajit Doval's visit to Beijing to hold 'boundary talks' with Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi is diplomatic groundwork ahead of the upcoming BRICS summit in Delhi on 12-13 September. The summit will be a damp squib without President Xi Jinping and India doesn't yet have a confirmation that he will attend.

Six years after China made coordinated incursions into Indian territory to reshape dynamics along the disputed Himalayan border, India has been trying to normalise relations while skirting the border issue, which makes a sorry international spectacle and exposes the failure of the Modi government's China policy.

While the brag at home has been about Modi's muscular leadership, India has been remarkably timid vis-à-vis China. After the Galwan clash in 2020—during which China made new incursions in Gogra-Hot Springs in eastern Ladakh—Modi declared that nobody had entered Indian territory. The denial, a barefaced lie, weakened India's case and gave Beijing political and diplomatic cover for its hostile action. China continues to pressure the frontier.

The rhetoric of self-reliance also stands exposed. India depends heavily on Chinese machinery, electronics and industrial inputs. The bilateral trade deficit was \$112.16 billion in FY2025-26, and it is widening (\$67.1 billion in the first half of calendar 2026).

India's Operation Sindoor strikes in Pakistan in May 2025, after the Pahalgam terror attack on 22 April, revealed an even more dangerous reality—the operational character of the China-Pakistan partnership. Pakistan used Chinese aircraft, missiles and air defence systems. India's deputy army chief later said that China had provided Pakistan with live inputs on important Indian positions. Beijing was quite openly supporting Pakistan even while officially maintaining diplomatic distance.

The two-front threat that India's foreign policy was supposed to prevent has become vividly real. While Pakistan has gained better weapons, intelligence and diplomatic protection from China,

the Indian government has been busy managing media headlines.

The danger of Chinese encirclement extends beyond Pakistan. China is now the largest trading partner of Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and the Maldives, while Nepal increasingly seeks Chinese investment and connectivity. Countries in India's neighbourhood are increasingly

counting on China for capital, infrastructure, markets and diplomatic leverage. Their predilection for China is also a verdict on India's management of its neighbourhood.

Modi announced a 'Neighbourhood First' policy with great fanfare upon assuming office in 2014. Twelve years later, the neighbourhood seems to have slipped to the rock bottom of his government's priorities. The current SOP seems to be to pressure less friendly governments and offer assistance when relations worsen. Smaller neighbours desire respect, sovereign space and a predictable policy framework; they do not like to be treated as dependents or punished when their choices displease India.

Bangladesh is the clearest example. Modi tied the relationship almost entirely to Sheikh Hasina, overlooking—if not appreciating—her authoritarian tendencies

because she protected Indian security interests. When the 2024 uprising forced her to flee the country, India gave her refuge. Delhi mistrusted the interim government that replaced her. Newly elected Prime Minister Tarique Rahman initially sought better relations, but his India visit has stalled.

Dhaka was angered when Hasina addressed a press conference in New Delhi even as India was sitting on requests for her extradition. Border-fencing, forced deportations and anti-Bangladesh rhetoric from BJP leaders have deepened resentment. Rahman now insists on sovereign equality. Bangladesh is showing a new openness towards Pakistan even as it explores an expansion of ties with China, a corollary of which is India's diminishing influence.

Nepal's new prime minister, Balen Shah, is also resetting his country's default settings. Shah has not visited India yet, and he avoided standalone meetings with foreign envoys for more than 100 days after taking office. Nepal is also seeking Chinese investments in agriculture, health, tourism and technology. Memories of the 2015 border blockade and Modi's paternalism linger, and the current Indian government cannot expect history and geography to guarantee loyalty.

On 10 Sri Lanka, Prime Minister Harini Amarasingu visited China and India within days of each other. In Beijing, she praised Chinese support for Port City Colombo, a multi-services special economic zone in Colombo, Hambantota Port and other infrastructure. In Delhi, she spoke of India as a partner in education, technology and institutional reform. Sri Lanka's 'dual diplomacy' is aimed at balancing strategic and economic ties between China and India, but China's economic weight is increasingly shaping its choices.

The Mohamed Maizzu government in the Maldives, which came to power on the back of an 'India-out' campaign, has improved

ties with China and its Parliament has approved the plan to join the Saudi-led Multinational Maritime Defence Alliance alongside Pakistan and Bangladesh. India is absent from this emerging security framework, another sign that Malé is building strategic options beyond Delhi.

China has acquired significant structural advantages in the last decade. Its economy is far larger and its financial resources and military power much greater. It can deliver large projects and sustain engagement with countries even as they go through political changes. Its foreign policy appears in sync with the reality of many smaller states in the region—Beijing speaks the language of sovereignty and non-interference. On the other hand, the moves of the Modi government at home and its foreign policy choices have made China's sales pitch more attractive to India's neighbours.

The majoritarian agenda of the Modi government, its attacks on minorities, the attempts to forcibly deport alleged illegal immigrants in Bengal and Assam are watched closely in Bangladesh, the Maldives and elsewhere. The divisive rhetoric targeting Indian Muslims and the trope of framing Pakistan and Bangladesh as their havens has tarnished India's image and narrowed diplomatic space. [950]

The Doval delegation returned from Beijing on 25 August with some assurances on border management, but there is no confirmation yet that President Xi will grace the BRICS summit. Even if Xi turns up with a large delegation, it will still not alter the underlying balance of diplomatic power. China has learnt that it can pressure India in the Himalayas, profit from the Indian market, strengthen Pakistan's military and deepen ties across South Asia at the same time. Modi's foreign policy has helped China surround India strategically. ■



Summit courtship? The official agenda of Ajit Doval's meeting with Wang Yi was the border question but its timing suggested otherwise

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

SAFEGUARDING FAITH, STRENGTHENING TRUST: KARNATAKA'S NEW VISION FOR TEMPLE ADMINISTRATION

How a comprehensive security overhaul is helping the state's temples become safer, more transparent, and more welcoming than ever before



Across Karnataka, the sound of temple bells each morning marks the beginning of a devotional rhythm that has continued for centuries. Millions of devotees pass through temple gates every year, carrying with them not just prayers but small acts of generosity—a coin dropped into a hundi, a note offered in gratitude, a ring or a bangle set aside as a token of faith.

That age-old rhythm of devotion is now being matched by a quieter but equally significant transformation happening behind the scenes—one aimed at ensuring that every rupee, gold, silver, and other valuable offering placed in a hundi is protected, accounted for, and channelled back into the service of the very institutions devotees hold dear.

Prompted by nationwide concerns following reports of temple donation-box thefts, including a widely discussed incident at the Ayodhya Ram Temple that Chief Minister D.K. Shivakumar said had deeply hurt the religious sentiments of the Hindu community, the Karnataka government has introduced a comprehensive Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) to modernise hundi security across the temples administered by the Muzrai Department.

The Department oversees a vast network of religious institutions, notified across three administrative categories based on gross annual income: 205 Category A temples earning more than Rs 25 lakh a year, 193 Category B temples, and 34,168 Category C institutions earning less than Rs 5 lakh—together comprising 34,566 notified temples and religious entities now brought under the enhanced security framework.

The initiative bears the personal stamp of the Chief Minister, who directed that the safeguards be implemented statewide and mandated round-the-clock CCTV surveillance across all Muzrai temples—a decision that has since become the cornerstone of the reform, and one he has linked directly to restoring devotees' faith in the safety of their offerings.

Far from being a purely defensive measure, the SOP reflects a vision the Chief Minister has articulated for temple administration more broadly: growing devotee confidence, rising temple revenues, and an increasingly ambitious push to make Karnataka a leading destination for religious and cultural tourism.

A new standard of trust and transparency

At the centre of the reform is a simple but powerful idea that Chief Minister

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Shivakumar has repeatedly emphasised—when devotees can see that their offerings are handled with complete transparency, their trust in the institution deepens. It was on his directive that donation boxes are now placed in prominent, well-lit locations visible to all visitors, and that every hundi is monitored by advanced four-way web cameras that eliminate the blind spots which had previously allowed older CCTV systems to be compromised by smoke and camphor residue during worship.

Footage is streamed to district-level Muzrai offices and a central server at headquarters, with live monitoring dashboards shared among Deputy Commissioners, Superintendents of Police, and local police stations.

This is complemented by a major push toward cashless giving. Temples are increasingly offering UPI, BHIM, and QR-code payment options alongside traditional hundis, complete with verified bank details and integration into temple accounting systems—making it easier than ever for devotees, including the growing number of younger visitors and those donating from outside the state, to contribute safely and conveniently. Regular checks against fraudulent QR codes ensure that this convenience never comes at the cost of security.

Perhaps most reassuring for devotees is the discipline now built into the counting process itself. Revenue officials, working under local Tahsildars, follow a fixed weekly or fortnightly schedule for opening and counting donations, replacing what was once a more variable routine.

Valuables are deposited into treasuries the same day, facial recognition verifies everyone present, and the entire process—now restricted to Home Guards, bank staff, and government employees—is recorded on video from start to finish.

Every individual entering the counting room must declare any cash on their person before stepping inside, closing off one of the more obvious

avenues through which discrepancies could previously arise.

The result is a system in which accountability is a built-in feature, giving both devotees and temple administrators confidence that offerings are handled with integrity at every step.

Temple administrators, too, stand to benefit from this new discipline: a clear, well-documented counting process reduces disputes, simplifies audits, and gives trustees a straight-forward record to point to when questions arise.

Early results: A model rollout at Banashankari temple

The new protocol received its first major test at Bengaluru's much-loved Banashankari Temple, one of the city's most visited shrines, offering an early demonstration of the system the Chief Minister had directed into being.

Under the revised procedure, five of its fifteen donation boxes were opened and counted under strict official supervision, yielding more than 80 lakh rupees in cash and over 100 grams of gold—an encouraging early indication of the scale of devotion the temple commands.

The remaining boxes were counted in the days following the Varamahalakshmi festival and the concluding Shravan Saturdays, a period that drew large crowds of devotees to the temple.

Officials have pointed to the smooth execution of this first count as a promising sign that the new system can be scaled up statewide without disrupting the devotional experience for visitors, with worship and darshan continuing uninterrupted even as officials worked quietly through the boxes under camera supervision.

Rising footfall, rising revenues

The timing of these reforms coincides with a genuinely encouraging trend in temple revenues across Karnataka.

According to recent Muzrai Department data, combined revenue at fifteen of the state's major temples rose from approximately Rs 613.5 crore to Rs 666.2 crore in the 2025–26 financial year, an increase of 8.6 percent, with prominent temples such as Banashankari and Ghati Subrahmanya recording notably higher collections over the past year.

Officials attribute part of this growth to broader state initiatives that have made travel more accessible for families, particularly women, who often travel together with relatives to visit temples during festivals and weekends.

Improved public transport access has contributed to a wider revival of pilgrimage travel across the region, with additional buses now deployed on routes connecting major temple towns during festival seasons and school holidays.

This synergy between transport policy and temple administration illustrates how the benefits of good governance can ripple outward, turning a single welfare initiative into a broader engine of religious tourism and local economic activity.

Importantly, the income generated by temples continues to be reinvested primarily in the development and maintenance of those very institutions, ensuring that rising devotion translates directly into better facilities, improved upkeep, and enhanced experiences for the pilgrims who sustain these sacred spaces.

Investing in the future of Karnataka's temples

The security overhaul is only one part of a much larger vision for the state's temple network. Ambitious infrastructure projects are already underway at some of Karnataka's most significant pilgrimage sites. Under the "Daiva Sankalpa" initiative, the government has outlined plans worth roughly Rs 1,140 crore to develop twenty-five Category A temples with heritage-style architecture, modern lodging, underground drainage, solid

waste management, multi-level parking, and water treatment plants—improvements designed to elevate the pilgrim experience while honouring each temple's traditional character.

A parallel effort will support ten Category C temples in every district with the help of philanthropic donors, extending modernisation well beyond the state's largest shrines.

At Renuka Yallamma Temple in Belagavi district, one of the state's most visited pilgrimage sites with more than 1.25 crore devotees annually, the state cabinet has approved twenty-five development projects worth over Rs 215 crore, covering everything from infrastructure to visitor amenities, with work expected to be completed by the end of 2026.

Similar development authorities are being planned for other major temples, including sites in Mysuru and Koppal district, reflecting a district-by-district commitment to ensuring that growth in devotee numbers is matched by growth in facilities and services.

These efforts are unfolding against the backdrop of a broader state tourism strategy. Under Karnataka's Tourism Policy 2024–29, the government has set out ambitious goals to position the state among the world's most attractive destinations, with officials expressing a clear ambition to rank among the top five states in India for international tourist arrivals by 2029.

Religious and heritage tourism—anchored by the state's temples, monuments, and cultural landmarks—sits at the heart of this vision, with the government describing tourism not merely as an economic pursuit but as a means of sharing Karnataka's culture and hospitality with the world.

This synergy between transport policy and temple administration illustrates how the benefits of good governance can ripple outward, turning a single welfare initiative into a broader engine of religious tourism and local economic activity.

A layered system of care

None of this progress would be possible without the quiet, consistent work of oversight that underpins the reform. Local Station House Officers regularly review surveillance feeds and on-site security, while district-level monitoring committees headed by Deputy Commissioners meet monthly to review donation security, fire safety, and disaster preparedness.

Joint inspections bringing together revenue, police, and endowment officials take place fortnightly, with additional quarterly reviews for the state's largest temples, and consolidated monthly reports flow upward to the State Government, the Home Department, and senior police leadership.

Preserving sanctity in the digital age

As Karnataka's temples grow more popular, they have also become popular backdrops for photography and social media content. In response, the Muzrai Department has introduced sensible new rules governing filming within temple premises, requiring prior approval and a nominal shooting fee for movies, serials, and documentaries, and confining casual video recording to designated areas.

Rather than discouraging visitors, the intent behind these measures is protective: ensuring that the serenity and sanctity devotees seek when they visit a temple is preserved even as public interest and digital engagement continue to grow.

Putting the devotee first

Underlying every element of this reform is a simple institutional philosophy: that good administration should be felt by devotees as ease, not inconvenience. The move toward digital payments means a family visiting from another state need not worry about carrying large sums of cash, while the visibility of donation boxes and cameras reassures first-time visitors that their offering will reach its intended purpose.

Taken together, these changes suggest a Department that is thinking not only about protecting revenue, but about protecting the quality of the pilgrimage experience itself.

A story of confidence and continuity

Taken together, these initiatives paint a picture of a Chief Minister and state government treating temples not merely as administrative responsibilities but as living cultural institutions deserving of world-class care.

The introduction of advanced surveillance, disciplined counting, and multi-layered oversight—set in motion at the Chief Minister's own direction—gives devotees renewed confidence that their offerings are safe and properly accounted for.

For the millions of devotees who visit these sacred sites each year—whether for a quiet morning prayer or the joyous crowds of a major festival—the message emerging from this reform is a reassuring one: that faith and good governance can walk hand in hand, and that the institutions at the heart of Karnataka's spiritual life are being equipped to serve the next generation of devotees with greater safety, transparency, and pride.

With the Varamahalakshmi festival and Shravan Saturdays now behind it, and as infrastructure projects at temples from Belagavi to Koppal steadily take shape, Karnataka's temple network appears poised to enter a new chapter—one defined not by the anxieties that first prompted these reforms, but by the confidence, transparency, and shared sense of purpose they have since inspired.

“Indians may be poor but they can’t be bought”

A.J. Philip puts the former Solicitor General of India in the dock

Dear Shri Harish Salve Ji,

I usually do not watch television interviews. What prompted me to watch the interview you gave Arnab Goswami of Republic TV was a video clip from it that a friend sent me. I was shocked by some of your observations and decided to watch the full interview on YouTube. I was testing my own patience.

As I watched, I could not help remembering the interview I did with your father, N.K.P. Salve, for Jain TV in the 1990s. Goswami, I presume, was then still “studying for some time in a Jesuit-run school”, as he said in an apparent disclaimer about his educational background.

Goswami seemed particularly keen to impress viewers by showing the size and luxury of the five-star hotel suite in which your interview took place. I know four lawyers in Delhi and have observed their lives from reasonably close quarters. Two of them support 20-25 NGOs with contributions running into crores. Both earn mainly through international arbitration. One has instituted a chair in memory of his father, himself a distinguished lawyer, at a law university to promote the study of arbitration.

When floods devastated Kerala in 2018, one of them gave an organisation I headed Rs 35 lakh to spend two government schools. We completed the work in about a month and a half, spending Rs 27 lakh. When I offered to return the rest, he asked me to spend it. We used it to provide heavily subsidised winter uniforms to our students.

This brings me to your statement that you cannot understand the concept of ‘donation’. Perhaps that is because you have not experienced the satisfaction of giving.

For 23 years, I headed an NGO founded in 1979 by seven members of a church in Delhi. Over the years, more than four lakh poor students have received quality education through its programmes. Initially, 90 per cent of our money came

from abroad. Today, less than five per cent does. Nobody ever asked us to use those resources to convert anyone.

I can bet that not even one of those students became a Christian because of our work. I would be happy if they remain good citizens. You may never understand this because it appears you do not want to understand it.

Goswami called you the most prominent Christian in India. You said your Christian background did not prevent Narendra Modi from appointing you Solicitor General. A person’s religion should never determine his suitability for public office. But please find out how many Muslims and Christians occupy ministerial or gubernatorial positions in the country. If the numbers are negligible, is it because there are no capable Muslims and Christians?

Your appointment cannot by itself prove that discrimination does not exist.

When there was a case against me in the Punjab and Haryana High Court, the lawyer who appeared for me was Justice Rajinder Sachar, a former Chief Justice. Another lawyer we consulted was the late Fali S. Nariman. Neither was a Christian.

Over the years many doctors have treated me. The doctor I admired most was the late Dr Narayana Pai, principal of Trivandrum Medical College. The doctor I remember with the greatest bitterness was a professor of surgery at Kottayam Medical College who kept my father waiting with a fractured leg for an operation for three days until we paid him a bribe of Rs 1,000. He happened to be a Syrian Christian, like me. Neither excellence nor corruption has a religion.

Goswami wanted you to certify that everything was hunky-dory with the new FCRA Bill. I give you credit for mentioning that Christians received only about 10 per cent of the total FCRA collections in India of about Rs 23,000 crore. Who receives the other 90 per cent? Mostly Hindu organisations.

The Modi government has cancelled the FCRA registrations of thousands of NGOs depriving thousands of jobs.

Organisations with names that include words like ‘Christian’, ‘Fellowship’ and ‘Church’ were among those that faced particular scrutiny. The rules have since been tightened considerably.

I have no objection to transparency or accountability. What I object to is the apparent double standard. Consider the PM CARES Fund. If the figures cited in public records are correct, it had a closing balance of Rs 8,452 crore in 2024-25, while its expenditure that year was only around Rs 87.85 lakh.

If an NGO is required to utilise its foreign contribution within a prescribed time limit and can lose its FCRA registration for failing to do so, should institutions holding thousands of shares not be subjected to comparable standards of accountability? A foreign company operating in India had earmarked money to



Harish Salve was Solicitor General of India from 1 November 1999 to 3 November 2002

help us construct a school building in a backward area of Haryana. Under pressure, it diverted the money to PM CARES where it earns Modi interest!

Calamity after calamity has struck India. If an emergency fund accumulates thousands of crores but spends only a tiny fraction of its corpus, questions are legitimate. You either do not know these things or pretend not to know them.

You also insinuated that Christians convert poor people. I have a simple challenge: show me one person who was converted with money. Indians may be poor but don’t think they can be bought.

Goswami claimed that his report, during a sting operation, was asked to convert and marry a local person. If that happened, why was a criminal complaint not filed against the person who allegedly made the offer? Journalism does not become more credible because it is dramatic.

Goswami also mentioned that you had appeared for him in a case. There are poor Christians in Indian jails accused falsely of trying to convert people. If you really want to demonstrate your concern for Christians, take up the case of at least one such poor accused without charging a fee.

You waxed eloquent about freedom of religion. In the constituency your father once represented, Christians cannot have a prayer meeting in their homes. A small gang with saffron shawls can enter any church and harass the worshippers with impunity.

Show the courage to speak up against

the harassment of Christians and Muslims. You will immediately stop getting briefs from the government and Arnab Goswami will say you have shown your true colours.

When William Carey, the Christian missionary, arrived in India in the early nineteenth century, one of the first things he did was to set up a school where every child was welcome. Whatever one’s view of missionary activity, education remains the best antidote to poverty. Today, tens of thousands of government schools have been closed in parts of northern India. Perhaps that tells us something about priorities.

And that is what disturbed me most about your interview. I have no problem with your wealth, your hotel suite, your watches, your international legal practice or your clients. You have every right to enjoy the fruits of your labour.

But success imposes a responsibility. When a person of your stature speaks about Christians, NGOs, foreign funding and poverty, millions listen. Your words can either challenge prejudice or reinforce it.

You may dismiss this letter as the ramblings of an old journalist, two years your senior. That is your privilege. I have seen wealth, power, poverty, generosity and hypocrisy at close quarters. I have learnt one little lesson: a person’s religion tells me little about his character; his actions tell me everything.

Yours etc.

A longer version of this open letter first appeared in Indian Currents

“
When a person of your stature speaks, millions listen. Your words can either challenge prejudice or reinforce it.”

How big is religious conversion?

Aakar Patel on how freedom of religion is both a fundamental right and a criminal offence in India

Here’s a headline from last week: ‘Pune Police withdraws conversion law provisions from 2 cases after officials find Act not in force yet’ (CNBCTV18, 19 August).

The law referred to has since come into effect—the Maharashtra Freedom of Religion Act, 2026—and is one of the gifts the BJP has given India since 2018, when the first such law came into force in Uttarakhand.

The freedom to propagate religion is both a fundamental right in India (Article 25) and a criminal offence. This might puzzle some people, but the ‘mother of democracy’ is wise and knows how to keep her children in line.

I have written in this column before about the specific problems these laws pose, and I will not repeat them. What we should take a look at is this: what’s the problem that these laws are attempting to solve? How big an issue is religious conversion in India?

Historically, conversions in India have happened through communities. It is difficult for an individual to change his/her religion in India because ties to community and family are strong. For this social reason, as well as the restrictions placed on freedom of religion, the number of conversions in India is quite low.

In its issue dated 15 September 1981, India Today reported that ‘figures painstakingly tabulated by the Home Ministry showed that in the past fourteen months the number of conversions recorded—mostly of Harijans to Islam—numbered no more than 5,000’. It added that though some conversions had been reported from north India, they were occurring primarily in Tamil Nadu, where around 2,000 people (which include 1,100 in Meenakshipuram) had switched religions during the previous eight months, against fewer than 1,500 between 1944 and 1980.

On 7 March 2017, Malayala Manorama reported research by the Media Development and Research Foundation, a non-profit organisation in Kozhikode, which



A march against the Anti-Conversion Bill, deceptively named the Protection of Right to Freedom of Religion Bill

showed that 60 per cent of those who had converted in Kerala between January 2011 and December 2016 chose to become Hindu.

Gazette records of changed names showed that of the 8,334 people who had converted over the seven-year period, 4,968 chose to become Hindu (2,244 women and 2,724 men). Of these, the majority—4,756—were Christian and 1,864 Muslim.

Of the 1,864 who converted to Islam, 78 per cent were previously Hindu, with the number of men and women converts nearly equal. Of the 1,496 who converted to Christianity, 95 per cent were Hindu, with 720 women and 776 men. Six individuals (two women and four men) chose to become Buddhist, of whom five were previously Hindu and one Christian.

There is no official data from the state on this. However, a 2016 report

in the Times of India (‘Nearly 6,000 converted to Islam in Kerala in 5 years: Report’, 15 July) quoted an ‘intelligence report’ filed by the police showing that 5,793 people had converted between 2011 and 2015, with a fifty-fifty split between men and women. Hindus converting stood at 4,719, of whom 1,074 were previously Christians.

These numbers over the years, whether from Tamil Nadu, Gujarat or Kerala, pale before the conversions claimed by the VHP. On 26 October 2019, PTI reported the VHP as saying it had converted 25,000 Muslims and Christians, mostly Adivasis, to Hinduism in 2018.

Rewinding reveals more exaggerations. On 8 January 2016, PTI reported VHP leader Pravin Togadia’s claims at a rally: “In the last ten years, we did ghar wapsi (homecoming) of more than five lakh Christians and 2.5 lakh Muslims. Our rate of ghar wapsi

used to be around 15,000 each year. But last year, we crossed the mark of 40,000, which is excluding the figures of RSS... If Hindus need to be in [the] majority in India and [we want] to save our religion, we have to engage in many more ghar wapsi drives to bring crores of others into our religion.”

To this end, Togadia added, “the VHP wants a Bill which will make it difficult to convert people to other religions.”

In 2015, Rediff interviewed the man who would go on to become chief minister of Uttar Pradesh (‘Yogi Adityanath proposes anti-conversion law, without ban on “reconversion”’, 13 December).

Referring to the activities of his organisation, the Hindu Yuva Vahini, Adityanath claimed, “We have reconverted several lakh Muslims and Christians over the past ten years. ... What I am doing is simply taking such people back to their old home from where they were weaned away through inducement or coercion.”

Adityanath explained why he wanted an exemption from the law for conversions into Hinduism: “So what if someone’s ancestors were converted to Islam or Christianity several hundred years ago? Time is of no consequence. Therefore, all those Hindus who were compelled to switch over to Islam during Mughal emperor Aurangzeb’s rule—when the maximum mass conversions took place—should get exemption under the new law that the BJP wants to legislate.”

And sure enough, the post-2018 BJP laws specifically exempt those who convert ‘to their ancestral religion’. This is the background to the laws we are passing today.

Having comprehensively solved all our problems of unemployment, poverty, education, justice and so on, the mother of democracy is now passing laws—which are being enforced by our ever-vigilant police—on the pressing matter of personal faith and which god/s one should and should not believe in. ■

Views are personal



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Dam nuisance

A lifeline for Tamil Nadu is now life threatening in Kerala. **K.A. Shaji** explores the arguments for and against a new Mullaperiyar dam

Ever heard of Colonel John Pennycuik? You'll find a statue of him in faraway Surrey—donated by Tamil Nadu. It was the then M.K. Stalin government that reached out with an offer to commemorate a man revered to commemo-rate the southern state but forgotten in his own hometown of Camberley. Spending Rs 92 lakh on the statue was a gesture of appreciation for the British engineer who built the Mullaperiyar dam.

Completed in 1895 with the aim of diverting the waters of the Periyar eastwards into an arid region that now comprises Theni, Dindigul, Madurai, Sivaganga and Ramanathapuram districts, the project and its interconnected irrigation system transformed agriculture and living conditions across large parts of southern Tamil Nadu. Pennycuik acquired almost legendary status. In districts that have benefitted over the decades, his memory is kept alive through memorials, bus stands, statues, school buildings, even a temple.

Yet in Kerala's Idukki district, where the dam stands, Pennycuik remains controversial. For many locals, he represents the beginning of an interstate arrangement that has produced a long-running conflict over water, safety and rights.

That contradiction lies at the heart of the Mullaperiyar dispute. Tamil Nadu owns and operates the dam even though it is situated in Kerala's western ghats. For Tamil Nadu's farmers, it's a lifeline across five districts. For Kerala, it is an ageing dam, whose failure could be catastrophic to communities in Idukki and the densely populated urban conglomeration of Ernakulam.

Since 1979, Kerala has sought its decommissioning, and repeatedly demanded a new dam. Tamil Nadu has maintained that the existing structure is safe, well maintained and needs no replacement. The Supreme Court's 2014 judgment

permitted the reservoir level to be raised from 136 feet to 142 feet, while Tamil Nadu has continued to seek higher storage at 152 feet. The latest chapter in this saga began with a renewed confrontation. On 20 August 2026, at the Southern Zonal Council meeting in Mahabalipuram, Kerala Chief Minister V.D. Satheesan offered to bear the entire cost of a new Mullaperiyar dam. Tamil Nadu could decide its design and location and oversee construction, while Kerala would guarantee that Tamil Nadu received its full quota of water from the new reservoir.

The proposal sought to remove, at one shot, Tamil Nadu's two primary objections to a new dam: the possibility of losing its water rights and having to bear the cost of addressing Kerala's safety concerns. Here was a win-win for both sides—water security for Tamil Nadu, structural safety for Kerala.

Tamil Nadu Chief Minister Joseph Vijay, however, rejected the proposal, maintaining that the existing dam is safe and that there is no compelling reason to replace it.

The positions remain entrenched. Kerala points to the dam's age, its location, changing

rainfall patterns in Idukki and the potentially devastating consequences of failure. Tamil Nadu points to expert committees and Supreme Court decisions. The Union government has also previously stated that an Empowered Committee found the dam hydrologically, structurally and seismically safe.

But safety cannot be argued



thus. With climate change causing extreme rainfall and a downstream population that has grown exponentially since the nineteenth century, risk needs to be assessed afresh.

While there is broad political support in Kerala for a new dam, environmentalists oppose constructing one inside the Periyar Tiger Reserve, one of India's most important protected landscapes.

"Both states have real concerns. But a new dam cannot be treated as an environmentally neutral replacement for an old one simply because its engineering specifications may be more modern," says Sridhar Radhakrishnan, a Thiruvananthapuram-based environmental expert.

Earlier project documents envisaged a new dam roughly 366 metres downstream of the existing structure, requiring about 50 hectares of forest land, with around 22.23 hectares submerged. The project was classified as a Category A proposal because of its location in

a protected landscape and its proximity to the interstate boundary.

Construction requires access roads, excavation, transportation of materials, heavy machinery, workers' camps and other infrastructure. It means years of human activity and disturbance in a landscape whose primary purpose is conservation.

"The existence of an old dam inside the reserve cannot become an argument for intensifying infrastructure there. A historical intrusion cannot become an ecological precedent," observes wildlife biologist P.O. Nameer.

The case against another large dam becomes stronger when climate change and the geological setting are considered together. Experts have raised concerns about Mullaperiyar's location in seismic Zone III and significant changes in rainfall patterns in Idukki since 2018.

Tamil Nadu-based water specialist S. Janakarajan questions

Photos: K.A. Shaji



The ageing Mullaperiyar dam; (left) the site inside the Periyar Tiger Reserve proposed for a new dam

the wisdom of constructing another major dam in the same seismic landscape, particularly within a tiger reserve. His alternative deserves serious consideration: instead of concentrating huge quantities of water in a single 19th century lime-concrete structure, Tamil Nadu could create smaller storage facilities in the five districts dependent on Mullaperiyar and divert excess water into them.

Environmental scientist V.S. Vijayan has similarly argued that modest storage facilities and barrages could help Tamil Nadu secure its share without continually increasing pressure on the Mullaperiyar reservoir. Both proposals deserve independent examination. They could change the logic of the dispute: instead of asking how much more water Mullaperiyar can hold, ask how efficiently Tamil Nadu can receive, store and use the water to which it is entitled.

The safety of the existing dam deserves more rigorous scientific attention. C.P. Rajendran, adjunct professor at the National Institute of Advanced Studies, has pointed to inadequate monitoring of deformation and called for an independent expert group to examine existing technical reports, collect fresh data and determine the future stability of the structure. This is particularly important because its unusual 19th century construction makes sim-

plistic comparisons with modern dams difficult.

Meanwhile, anti-dam activists have alleged that sections of the bureaucracy and a construction lobby are pushing for a new project because of the massive monies involved. Prof. Kusumam Joseph of the National Alliance of Movements has described it as a 'greedy dam lobby'. While allegations must be backed by evidence, the concern cannot be dismissed.

Earlier environmental clearance proceedings recognised the sensitivity of the location. The Union environment ministry's terms of reference for the new dam required a prior agreement between Kerala and Tamil Nadu.

Any fresh proposal must go further, to include an independent cumulative assessment of seismic risk, climate change, forest loss, wildlife movement, construction disturbance, hydrology and downstream safety, while giving equal weightage to alternatives outside the tiger reserve.

The burden of proof must be on the project, not on the Periyar Tiger Reserve.

Tamil Nadu's farmers have a legitimate claim to water. Kerala's people have an equally legitimate claim to safety. Water security, human safety and wildlife conservation must be pursued together. The new dam must clear a high ecological threshold. ■

Instead of one massive reservoir, are smaller storage facilities the solution?



Artist Mahtab Hussain's bronze sculpture honours soldiers of multiple faiths who were part of British India's war effort



LONDON DIARY
HASAN SUROOR



Lucy Powell (in blue), deputy leader of the Labour Party, with Prime Minister Andy Burnham

A glimpse of communal harmony in colonial times

It's a first. The Royal British Legion, Britain's largest armed forces charity, has organised a touring exhibition highlighting the contribution of soldiers and other professionals from South Asia who fought in WWII.

An estimated 2.5 million soldiers—among them Sikhs, Hindus, Muslims, Christians and Gurkhas—took part in British India's war effort; thousands died. But their role has largely been forgotten, and they barely merit a mention on Remembrance Day, the annual event that commemorates the sacrifices of veterans.

Organised in partnership with artist Mahtab Hussain, 'The Forgotten Army: A Creative Response' seeks to plug this gap. What emerges from the personal stories featured is the profile of an extraordinarily diverse and secular force.

Take, for example, the remarkable story of a Hindu soldier Vallabhdas Suchak who religiously observed the Ramzan fast to honour a promise he made to his dying Muslim brother-in-arms.

Vallabhdas's granddaughter Nima Suchak shares what she discovered from the documents he left behind.

"My grandad went to offer him some water. The soldier would not take it. He said, 'No, I'm fasting. It's Ramadan. I don't want to break my fast.' My grandad said, 'Take the water, ease your pain.' But the dying man wouldn't. So Vallabhdas said: 'Let me fast for you.'"

The soldier took the water. For the rest of his life, Suchak observed the fast during Ramzan. He died when Nima was 12. Despite growing up in the same house, she had only the haziest knowledge of her grandfather's war service.

"Remembrance Day would come and go, VE Day would come and go. It didn't occur to us. My grandad never talked about it," she told *The Times*.

The exhibition is full of such inspiring stories that offer an insight into community relations at the time.

UK scores a self-goal

One financially ruinous self-goal by the British government is its attempt to appease the anti-immigrant lobby by making it increasingly difficult for fee-paying international students to study in Britain.

The barriers, including restrictions on bringing in family members, have resulted in a sharp decline in the number of these proverbial 'cash cows', provoking backlash from perpetually cash-strapped universities.

Foreign students—a significantly large number from India—typically pay up to three times more than their British counterparts, contributing over £40.4 billion to the economy over the course of their studies.

Fees paid by them account for at least 40 per cent of the total income of ten universities. A *Sunday Times* investigation revealed that 55 universities collected £557 million less from international students in

2024-25 than two years earlier. Nearly 50 per cent of the universities have recorded a fall in income over the past year.

The number of international students peaked in 2022-23 at 758,865 after the introduction of a foreign student visa that allowed graduates to bring their families with them. After curbs on immigration, this figure dropped to 685,565 in 2024-25. The number of students from India has declined by 25 per cent and from China by 9 per cent.

To make up for the losses, many universities are compromising on admission standards to accommodate

domestic students. The more desperate universities are for money, the worse the courses are getting. Several have cut staff, citing financial hardship.

All symbolic of a Britain going inexorably downhill.

Something for Indian MPs to chew on

Here's something for the Indian Parliament to chew on as the British House of Commons—the model for our *sansad*—sets out to modernise the language used by MPs, on the ground that

it is out of date, and alienates the public.

Among the terms proposed to be scrapped are 'bill' (used for a piece of legislation), 'division' (meaning a vote of MPs) and 'early day motions' where MPs can demonstrate their support to a particular cause.

"I'm all for traditions, customs and pageantry. But we have to ask ourselves: which traditions serve a purpose in the modern age. People don't even understand the term 'bill', let alone all the myriad different versions of that bill," said Lucy Powell, deputy leader of the ruling Labour Party. Also set for the chop is the practice of members having to seek permission to speak by popping up from their seats to 'catch the Speaker's eye'. Disabled MPs find this particularly hard to do.

"Simple things like having more certainty about when you're going to speak in a debate is really a no-brainer for a more inclusive House of Commons," Powell said. Most of these terms and practices are also followed by the Indian Parliament. Will it take a cue from Britain and follow suit, especially now that everything is being 'Indianised'?

And, lastly, what do Britons do when the conversation at work or a dinner party turns to the latest high-profile documentary or historical biopic they have not seen? A nationwide study reveals: most simply say they have. They lie, most likely, to avoid looking like the odd one out. Would be interesting to know how Indians react in similar situations. ■



Photo: Getty Images

Immigration curbs have led to a 25 per cent drop in the number of Indian students in the UK



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