

Editorial



Settled semantics

Nothing of worth will be gained by removing two words from the Preamble

The call for the removal of the words "secular" and "socialist" from the Preamble to the Constitution of India is no longer a fringe fantasy. With someone as senior and influential as the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) General Secretary Dattatreya Hosabale making a public statement in support of the idea, it has now acquired a new urgency and prominence in national politics. The words "secular" and "socialist" were introduced through the 42nd Amendment to the Constitution, during the Emergency under Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in 1976. And the Janata Party government, which included RSS-affiliated leaders, that replaced Indira Gandhi reversed a lot of the changes made in the Constitution during the Emergency let these words stay. These concepts were so central to the Constitution of the new Republic that its original authors did not think it was even necessary to use these words in the Preamble. When a conflict over India's national identity began to emerge during the 1970s, Indira Gandhi thought it would be appropriate and also politically rewarding to make these amendments. The Hindutva camp never really opposed these concepts historically. Gandhian Socialism was a part of the core tenets of the Jan Sangh, the earlier avatar of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Hindutva proponents accused their rivals of following 'pseudo secularism,' and by implication, claimed to be genuine secularists.

The words "secular" and "socialist" have attained meanings specific to the Indian context over the years. Secularism is not a rejection of Indian civilisational heritage or any religion, but a commitment to equal treatment of all faiths by the state. Indira Gandhi had been viewed as someone pandering to Hindu sentiments. Socialism is not about hostility to private property or enterprise, but a pragmatic appreciation of the fact that the state must take proactive measures to tackle poverty and expand opportunities for the deprived sections of society. The words 'secularism' and 'socialism' reflect a broad consensus in Indian politics that has held for decades. There is nothing to be achieved by raking up a meaningless debate on these words. Perhaps the debate itself is the objective: to push a divisive agenda without providing any ideological, legal or practical reasoning for this demand. India's challenge is not about these two words, but its continuing struggle to tackle discrimination, poverty and underdevelopment, which are often influenced by the caste and religious origins of its citizens. The Sangh Parivar, and the BJP, could serve the country better by focussing on these challenges rather than wasting energy on divisive debates on settled semantics.

Cease the cess

Low GST collections speak to the need for structural reforms

The eighth anniversary of the Goods and Services Tax (GST) in India, on July 1, coincided with the poorest tax collections on the indirect tax system has seen in some time, highlighting the need for structural changes in the system. The latest GST collections stood at ₹1.85 lakh crore in June 2025, the lowest in four months. This amount was just 6.2% higher than the collections in June 2024, the slowest growth rate in four years. Looking past the gross collections, the data show that once refunds are accounted for, the growth in the government's actual collections was just 3.3%. Further, the revenue from domestic transactions, excluding imports, was an anemic 4.6% higher than in June last year – barely faster than the average rate of inflation since then. Being a consumption tax, a dip in GST collections reflects a dip in economic activity. But it also reflects inefficiencies in the system, which must now suitably be addressed eight years on. A common demand is for fuel to be included in GST. There is, however, strong resistance to this from State governments, since fuel and alcohol are the few sources of revenue States have with them that are independent of the Centre. However, this cannot be reason enough to perpetually keep these items excluded. It is 'one nation, one tax' after all, and it is high time that the goal was achieved in full. As for the revenue hit to States, the Centre must accede to their request for a higher share in central taxes. The Centre must also stop increasingly relying on non-shareable cesses for its revenue. For their part, States must resist the temptation to use this higher amount on election-oriented untargeted freebies. Trust goes two ways.

The other polar reform is a reduction in the number of GST rates. This, too, is overdue, and the GST Council's fitment and rate-setting committees are examining the issue. Connected to this is the question of what is to be done with the GST Compensation Cess, which is levied over and above the 28% slab. It was originally intended to compensate States for any losses arising out of GST implementation for a period of five years. It was then extended until March 2026 to repay the loan taken by the Centre to pay this compensation since the COVID-19 pandemic had disrupted revenues. The Centre should avoid the temptation to subsume this cess into the broader GST rates. Instead, with its job done, the cess must be removed. Taxation is not just a covenant between the Centre and the States. It is also one with the people. Removing a cess that is no longer needed will not only garner public praise but could also spur some sorely needed urban consumption.

Yesterday, on July 4, the United States observed its Independence Day. A quarter of a millennium ago, the American people declared their resolve to live not under kings but under laws. They fought to build a government accountable to the people, not one that claimed to rule in their name. In their Declaration of Independence, the Founders wrote that "when a long train of abuses and usurpations" reveals a design to reduce the people "under absolute Despotism," it is not only their right but also their duty to resist. In that tradition, a conservative Federal judge, Judge J. Michael Luttig marks the occasion with a solemn warning: the ideals of 1776 are not self-perpetuating. Judge Luttig's modern "27 truths" remind Americans that self-government is not guaranteed by parchment or precedent. It must be defended daily, especially against those who seek to crown themselves in defiance of the Constitution. Tyranny, once foreign, now threatens from within.

India's democratic backsliding Luttig's warning is not hyperbole. It is a reflection of global experience, including India's democratic backsliding 50 years ago. India's Emergency under Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, on June 25, 1975, suspended civil liberties, censored the press, imprisoned over 1,00,000 citizens, and reduced Parliament and the courts to shadows of themselves. It did not come through violence or revolution. It came through law. Indira Gandhi claimed she was saving democracy. In fact, she was suffocating it.

In his book, *Emergency Chronicles: Indira Gandhi and Democracy's Turning Point*, historian Gyan Prakash exposed how democratic institutions can die not with a bang, but with a nod. There was no coup. No tanks.

The Army Chief, General T.N. Raina, a fellow Kashmiri, was asked for his support, but he refused to get into the politics of the day – rightly so. Indira Gandhi did not openly defy the Constitution but exploited its weaknesses. After a court found her guilty of electoral fraud and barred her from office, she declared an "internal disturbance" and triggered Article 352 of the Indian Constitution. Overnight, dissent became treason. Rights became privileges. And power became personal.

The real tragedy was not just what Indira Gandhi did. It was how effortlessly she did it. Judges, Ministers, civil servants, even journalists – people entrusted with guarding democracy – chose loyalty over law. The Supreme Court ruled that during the Emergency, even the right to life could be suspended. Only one judge, Justice H.R. Khanna, dissented. He was never appointed Chief Justice, punishment for his integrity.

H.V. Kamath saw it coming. The former civil



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The same dynamics that enabled the Emergency in India now threaten the U.S.; the lesson is that tyranny thrives when institutions become hollow

servant-turned-freedom fighter and member of India's Constituent Assembly, he had almost pleaded that the Emergency's provisions being embedded in the Constitution were too dangerous. In 1949, he compared India's draft provisions to Germany's Weimar Constitution, which Hitler had exploited to build his dictatorship. H.V. Kamath said, "First, the grand affirmation... and surmounting that edifice is the arch of the great negation." He begged for checks and balances. He begged for the Constitution to protect future generations, but was ignored.

When Indira Gandhi declared internal Emergency 26 years later, the mechanism H.V. Kamath had feared came to life. Dissenters were detained under the Maintenance of Internal Security Act (MISA), a preventive detention law. Police abducted students in broad daylight. Sanjay Gandhi, who was unelected and unaccountable, operated a parallel state, pushing brutal sterilisation campaigns and slum demolitions. Entire neighbourhoods in Delhi were razed. Protesters were shot. Families were displaced. Inmates were tortured. All of it was "legal". None of it was democratic.

When the Emergency ended in 1977, India voted Indira Gandhi out in a landslide. The Janata government passed the 44th Amendment to prevent such abuses from recurring. But the deeper damage to political culture, to institutions, to the idea that constitutionalism alone can protect democracy remains. India moved on, but never fully reckoned with how close it came to authoritarian collapse.

Similar dynamics in the U.S.

Which brings us back to the United States. The parallels are unmistakable. U.S. President Donald Trump has not declared an Emergency. He does not need to. He has a majority in both Houses of Congress and a 6-3 conservative majority in the Supreme Court, which legalises all his actions. He can weaponise the Justice Department to prosecute his opponents, threaten to strip immigrants of their citizenship and residency status, and even threaten to "terminate" parts of the Constitution. He seeks not to hold power, but to own it. As Judge Luttig notes, this is not reform. It is monarchy by another name.

And just like in India, the institutions meant to stop him have mostly failed. Congress hesitated. Republicans enabled. Courts delayed. Media rationalised. Many shrugged, waited, and hoped someone else would act. In this way, guardrails do not just erode under outside pressure. They rot from within.

Americans must confront a hard truth: the same dynamics that enabled the Emergency in India now threaten the American republic. As H.V. Kamath warned, Constitutions do not protect liberty on their own. They must be

guarded by people with the courage to say no. If Congress (Parliament) refuses to assert its role; if courts bend under partisan pressure; if the press becomes passive; if law enforcement serves power instead of the public – then the law ceases to be king. And we begin the slow coronation of another.

There is a historical irony here too deep to ignore. Years after Indira Gandhi imprisoned her opponents and suffocated the Constitution, her grandson, Rahul Gandhi, now brandishes that very Constitution as a talisman against rising authoritarianism in India. At protest rallies, he holds up Ambedkar's book, invoking the very document Indira Gandhi once bent to her will. Where once the Constitution was used to silence dissent, it is now Rahul Gandhi's weapon to preserve it.

A call to be vigilant

There is a lesson here that transcends families and nations: every generation must reclaim democracy for itself. The battles our forebears fought – against monarchy, against colonialism, against Emergency – are not relics. They are warnings. They are calls to vigilance. The Constitution is not an heirloom. It is a mandate. It must be re-defended, reinterpreted, and reaffirmed by each generation.

It is easy to celebrate Independence Day with fireworks and fanfare. But the revolution was not a party. It was an act of resistance against arbitrary rule. Thomas Paine wrote, "Let the law be king". Not presidents. Not parties. Not mobs. But the law. And only when the people demand it. We must resist the normalisation of revenge politics, the erosion of checks and balances, and the authoritarian cult of personality. Democracy is not just a system of rules. It is a culture of restraint. Of limits. Of humility before power. The Emergency in India failed because the people ultimately remembered what had been stolen from them. History never repeats exactly as it happened. But it does echo. The Emergency's lesson is not that tyranny is foreign. It is that tyranny is familiar, legal and welcomed when institutions go hollow.

Today, both India and America are democracies by form. But their futures depend on substance. On how citizens, courts, journalists, legislators and civil servants act when faced with leaders who believe they are above the law. The difference between a republic and a monarchy is not just procedure. It is accountability. When a king breaks the law, it becomes policy. When a President or Prime Minister does, it becomes a test.

India failed that test in 1975. We cannot afford to fail it again. We must defend the law as if it were our crown. Because if we do not, someone else will wear it. And they will not take it off.

A deliberate strategy to usher in a communal order

On the eve of the 75th anniversary of the Indian Constitution, the Supreme Court of India reaffirmed the foundational character of the Indian Republic by upholding the inclusion of the words "secular" and "socialist" in the Constitution's Preamble. These words, introduced through the Constitution (42nd Amendment) Act, 1976, by the Indira Gandhi-led government during the Emergency, have been the target of repeated political and legal attacks by right-wing forces. Dismissing a batch of petitions challenging these additions, a Bench of the Supreme Court recently upheld the addition of these words, arguing that the mere absence of these terms in the original Preamble adopted on November 26, 1949, cannot invalidate their inclusion.

This legal reaffirmation was a powerful signal from the judiciary. But the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the ideological backbone of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), chose to launch a fresh offensive on the very idea of India as enshrined in the Constitution. RSS General Secretary Dattatreya Hosabale made a brazen demand: the removal of "secular" and "socialist" from the Preamble, which, according to him, were alien to Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's constitutional vision.

The Vice-President of India, Jagdeep Dhankhar, went a step further, terming the insertion of these words as "sacrilege to the spirit of Sanatan". It is no coincidence that these statements are being made from some of the highest offices of the land. This is not an intellectual debate. This is a deliberate political strategy to delegitimise the modern, plural, democratic republic of India and to usher in a communal and hierarchical order.

An agenda, from fringe to mainstream When the Constitution was being framed, the Constituent Assembly emphatically and unanimously supported the idea of a secular state. Not a single member argued for a theocratic state. The idea of India was built on the foundations of unity in diversity – a rejection of colonial divide-and-rule, of communal politics, and of caste and religious supremacy. Today, the RSS-BJP establishment is working relentlessly to dismantle that consensus and impose the idea of



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The attack by right-wing forces on the Constitution must be resisted through public awareness, legal challenge, political mobilisation, and democratic struggle

a Hindu Rashtra. This agenda has moved from fringe rhetoric to the political mainstream. On the day of the consecration of the Ram temple in Ayodhya, Prime Minister Narendra Modi made a provocative statement equating 'Ram with Rashtra and Dev with Desh'. This kind of fusion of religion and state is exactly what the framers of the Constitution warned against. It is also directly in contradiction to the Supreme Court's ruling that secularism is a part of the basic structure of the Constitution – something that cannot be amended or erased, even by Parliament.

Leaders and their warnings

The warnings of our national leaders resonate even more forcefully today. In 1931, Mahatma Gandhi, in his resolution on Fundamental Rights, insisted that the state must remain neutral in religious matters. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar too reflected this in the line, "The State shall not recognise any religion as State religion." What is particularly instructive and ironic, is that the Hindu Mahasabha, which boycotted the freedom movement and opposed secular nationalism, included a similar provision in its 1944 Hindustan Free State Act.

The Constituent Assembly Debates further highlight the intent of India's founding generation. On August 27, 1947, Govind Ballabh Pant posed a direct question: "Do you want a real national secular State or a theocratic State?" He warned that if India became a theocracy, it could only be a Hindu state, raising questions about the status and security of those who would be excluded from such a polity. Jaspat Roy Kapoor, on November 21, 1949, noted that Gandhi had made it clear: religion should be a personal matter. On November 22, 1949, Begum Aizaz Rasul called secularism "the most outstanding feature" of the Constitution and expressed hope that it would remain "guarded and unsullied". On October 14, 1949, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel reassured the nation that the Constitution of free India would not be "disfigured by any provision on a communal basis." And on November 23, T.J.M. Wilson warned that the clouds threatening India's secular character were already forming. These warnings were not alarmist but were deeply perceptive, and speak with urgency to our times.

The present RSS-led campaign is also aimed at discrediting and eliminating the socialist orientation of the Constitution. Dr. Ambedkar, in the Constituent Assembly, clearly noted that the Directive Principles of State Policy enshrined in Part IV of the Constitution were rooted in socialist ideals.

The Supreme Court's recent decision, rightly interpreted the term "socialist" in the Preamble as synonymous with a welfare state. This vision resonates with B.R. Ambedkar's own emphasis on the social and economic transformation of India – an end to caste exploitation, landlessness, poverty, and discrimination. Socialism means creating conditions for equality and justice – not the importation of any foreign ideology, but the realisation of the promises of the freedom struggle. In this regard, B.R. Ambedkar issued perhaps the most unambiguous warning ever – in *Pakistan or the Partition of India*, he wrote: "If Hindu Raj does become a fact, it will, no doubt, be the greatest calamity for this country... Hindu Raj must be prevented at any cost."

That cost is now upon us. The RSS's demand to remove the terms "secular" and "socialist" from the Constitution is part of a long-term project to dismantle the very edifice of the modern Indian Republic and to institutionalise a new order built on religious supremacy, caste hierarchy, market fundamentalism, and political authoritarianism.

The need for resistance

This must be resisted – through public awareness, legal challenge, political mobilisation, and mass democratic struggle. The Constitution is not just a legal document. It is a political, social, and moral covenant forged in the crucible of our freedom struggle. It embodies the dreams of countless martyrs, revolutionaries, and constitutionalists who envisioned an India that belonged to all its people. To defend secularism and socialism today is to defend democracy itself. It is to defend the right of every citizen – regardless of faith, caste, class, or gender – to live with dignity, equality, and freedom. The Republic must be protected, nourished, and, if necessary, defended against those who seek to destroy it from within. Let us rise to that responsibility, with courage, with clarity, and with collective resolve.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

About ethics too

The credibility of a reporter rests on a delicate dance between earning access to powerful sources and preserving the trust behind the byline (Opinion page –

'Notebook', July 4). True credibility lies in reporting facts without fear or favour, even if it means losing 'privileged' access. The reporter must resist pressures to trade integrity

for influence, knowing that credibility, once lost, is hard to regain. Ethical clarity becomes the most valuable compass. **Narayanan Kizhumbudayur**, Thiruvallur, Kerala

Examination dates

The Tamil Nadu government is to conduct the TPSC Group 4 Examination on July 12, 2025. This is also the day when Indian Overseas Bank,

through the IBPS, is to conduct its written examination for the post of local bank officers. Thousands of aspirants have applied for both the examinations. It would be

ideal if the date of the bank examination is changed. **S.Panneerselvam**, Tiruchirappalli, Tamil Nadu
Letters emailed to letters@thehindu.co.in must carry the postal address.

GROUND ZERO

Pilgrims' PROGRESS

With India-China ties improving, the Kailash Manasarovar Yatra has resumed after a nearly six-year hiatus. Of about 5,000 applicants, the Ministry of External Affairs chose 750 pilgrims this year. While both pilgrims and workers in Tibet are happy about the resumption of the yatra, they are concerned about rising temperatures. **Suhasini Haider** and **Rahul Karmakar** report on what it takes to make the arduous trek to a site considered sacred by followers of many religions

Damini Pandya, 68, had taken a vow of silence for eight days before she reached the clear, ice blue waters of the Manasarovar Lake in Tibet. There, the retired government officer from Ahmedabad in Gujarat gazed at the majestic snow-capped Kailash mountain in the distance. It had taken her 17 days to get there, walking for three days with low oxygen at an average altitude of about 15,000 feet above sea level. Breaking into a wide smile, she splashed cold water over her head – a ritual that Hindu pilgrims believe purifies the body and soul.

Eight days after she began her *maun vrat* (vow of silence), Pandya crossed into India at the Nathu La Pass in Sikkim. Breaking her vow, she said that the silence had helped her absorb the spiritual significance of the yatra. "I did not utter a word for days because I wanted to be with god. I broke my vow after I entered India, but I don't have words to describe the cosmic energy I felt there," she said.

Pandya and more than 30 other yatrias spent a week in Tibet's Ngari prefecture, where they trekked the 52-km circumference of Mount Kailash, called the *parikrama* or the *kora*.

This was Pandya's second solo trip after 2019. She entered Tibet through the Lipulekh pass in Uttarakhand, which, she said, was a shorter route compared to the journey through Nathu La pass. It may well be her last visit to Mount Kailash, as the Chinese government has restricted the yatra to those under the age of 70, given the high altitude and concerns about illnesses.

The youngest member of the group, Arpit Rai, 19, from Varanasi in Uttar Pradesh, who travelled with his father Shashikant Rai, 55, said he is keen to return to Mount Kailash. "Between Kashi (another name for Varanasi) and Kailash, Shivi (Lord Shiva) is the common factor. Perhaps Shivi wanted us to visit together for the first time. It was an unforgettable journey despite the long travel time in altitudes we are not used to," he said. The yatrias travelled for 14 days by bus covering nearly 3,000 km and took three days to do the *parikrama* by foot, covering around 50 km.

Geopolitical considerations

Damini Pandya and the Rais were part of the first batch of Indian pilgrims since 2019 who were allowed to cross into Tibet as part of the Kailash-Manasarovar Yatra, organised by the Indian Ministry of External Affairs and the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

In 2020, the COVID-19 lockdown; the violent clashes between the Indian Army and the People's Liberation Army at Galwan Valley along the Line of Actual Control; and stand-offs at other points such as Demchok, about 250 km from Kailash Manasarovar, ensured the yatra was suspended. Four years later, after talks between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping, Delhi and Beijing began discussions on normalising relations and restoring a number of different mechanisms between them. The yatra, held between June and August each year due to weather conditions, was prioritised, even as other mechanisms, such as direct flights between India and China, are set to restart.

Suman Lata, who recently retired as a school teacher in Delhi, said that while crossing over, the group did not feel any of the tensions between the neighbours that have dominated bilat-

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DAMINI PANDYA
Pilgrim



Damini Pandya, one of the yatrias, at the Manasarovar Lake in Tibet. SUHASINI HAIDER

eral ties over the past few years. "We have no link with politics, so we don't think about such things. I can only say that the Indian government sent us off very well and the Chinese government has received us extremely well too," she said. Lata was among the 13 women in the group. Like her, six more had come alone on the yatra.

For officials on both sides, the final go-ahead in February 2025 presented a daunting task. They had to build facilities along the way in a short period of time. These included reviving immigration posts at various entry points for the yatrias, providing rest stops, oxygen banks, and medical facilities. At the hostel in Zhunzhui Pu, near Taklakot, where the pilgrims stopped for a night before beginning the Kailash *parikrama*, extra tents were set up inside the atrium to accommodate more people.

This is a part of Tibet where people live off subsistence farming. Tourism is the only means of making a living, local workers said, adding that the resumption of the yatra has come as a relief for them. According to the Kailash Manasarovar Yatra website, yatrias who pay about ₹3 lakh for arrangements need to budget about 990 Renminbi or RMB (₹12,000) to pay the local porters and 2,370 RMB (about ₹29,000) for pony handlers. In addition, many of the porters sometimes do odd jobs for the yatrias and make some extra cash, just enough to get by during the brutal winters.

During the years when the yatra stood suspended, pilgrims came in via Nepali tour

groups. They included many people of Indian origin from the U.S. and the U.K. But the yatra, and Indian pilgrims in particular, have been a mainstay for the local workers in Tibet.

Preparing for the journey

According to an External Affairs Ministry response in Parliament, the number of pilgrims allowed to join the yatra each year, which is negotiated between the foreign ministries of India and China, has fluctuated every year since the route was reopened in 1981. In 2015, there were 999 pilgrims. By 2019, there were 1,364.

Each of the 15 batches of yatrias (10 via Nathu La pass and five via Lipulekh pass) of about 50 pilgrims this time includes two liaison officers – government officials who apply to join the yatra; 2-4 cooks; and a medical officer from the Indo-Tibetan Border Police. Each of the pilgrims is chosen by a computerised lottery. Of about 5,000 applicants, 750 were chosen this year. They then had to undergo strenuous medical tests to be proclaimed fit to undertake the journey.

"Despite the acclimatisation for two days each at two centres in Sikkim – one at 11,000 feet and the other at 13,500 feet – some 30 out of the 33 pilgrims in my batch experienced high-altitude sickness and breathlessness at times," said the medical officer, who did not want to be named. "My job was to monitor the health of the pilgrims and ensure that those with hypertension and diabetes take their medicines regularly. A few experienced cramps, but they were too excited by the experience to let these affect them," he said.

One of the cooks, who also did not wish to be named, said it was a challenge to prepare vegetarian food for people from so many different parts of India. But previous experience with the armed forces helped. "When one caters to soldiers with different acquired tastes from all over the country, one finds the formula to make something that appeals to everyone. We focused on pulse-based items and vegetables provided by the Chinese authorities," he said.

While many pilgrims praised the arrangements, some expressed discomfort with the sanitation facilities along the way. According to retired Wing Commander of the Indian Air Force Sadanand Jakhare, they were "comparable to public toilets in India".

He said, "The Chinese officials were hospitable, although restrictive and not very expressive. They declined to let us explore the countryside, even a little beyond the designated places. We were under constant watch." However, he added that he was "impressed" by the roads and the use of solar power that he saw along the way.

Some people were also unhappy about the restrictions on worship. Pilgrims are not allowed to take a full dip in Manasarovar Lake. Officials said the practice was discontinued in 2016 after Indian pilgrims were found using soap to wash themselves in the lake, and leaving items of clothing and jewellery there.

"The yatra is not for comfort," said Devi Prasad Ketkar, a retired manager from Mumbai, who was on the pilgrimage with his wife Pradnya.

Ketkar also served on the organising committee for the group. "There is no place for negative energy or negative comments during our visit here. Visiting Mount Kailash and doing the *parikrama* gives us all the answers we need," he said, as others in the group nodded.

As the pilgrims stepped into the waters of Manasarovar Lake, the air was filled with chants of 'Om Namah Shivaya', 'Om Parvati Pataye Namah', and 'Har Har Mahadev'.

A melange of faiths

In Hindu scriptures, Mount Kailash is believed to be the home of Lord Shiva and his consort Parvati, who live there with their sons Kartikeya (Muruga) and the elephant-headed god, Ganesha. Lake Manasarovar, where the gods and goddesses are believed to descend for a bath every day, was created, according to the scriptures, by Lord Brahma from a part of his brain (*manas* means mind and *sarovar* means lake in Sanskrit).

With its peak at 21,778 feet, Mount Kailash has not been submitted in modern memory. After 2001, the Chinese government banned attempts to climb it due to the religious sensitivities of different faiths. Mount Kailash has four rock faces (north, south, east, west), with characteristic snow ridges on one side. The features of the mountain are believed to resemble the 'three eyes' of Lord Shiva, specifically the *tripundra* (three lines of ash worn on the forehead), and his spine. This makes it a marvel for pilgrims as they circumambulate the mountain.

Along the route, there are devotees of other religions as well. Buddhists believe that Gautama Buddha's (Siddhartha's) mother Maya visited Lake Manasarovar. They also say that Mount Kailash, or Mount Meru as it is called, is the source of spiritual energy in the world.

For Jains, the founder of the faith Rishabhdeva, known as the first Tirthankara, is believed to have achieved salvation at the mountain.

For followers of the Bon tradition, the shamanistic religion that Tibetans adhered to until the 6th century King Songtsen Gampo introduced Buddhism, bringing texts from India, the mountain and the lake hold a special significance.

And for nature-worshippers, Mount Kailash and Manasarovar Lake represent the most mysterious of the Himalayan "mountain of mountains" and "source of all rivers", with the Ganga, Brahmaputra, Indus, and other major rivers emanating from these sites.

It is this melange of faiths that keeps travellers going on the rocky and rugged paths towards the sacred sites. With oxygen levels on the high plateau a significant 30% lower than in the plains, the area is tough for human habitation. Pilgrims often need dozens of high-altitude medicine – both allopathic and traditional Tibetan and Chinese potions made from extracts of the herb Rhodiola – as well as portable oxygen canisters to keep going on the arduous trek.



There is something that keeps drawing me to Kailash Manasarovar. I intend to go again in August via Nepal, two months before I become ineligible

RAJ YADAV
Pilgrim

Changing temperatures

While the weather is cold, dry, and harsh the year around, local tour guides and shopkeepers admitted that rising temperatures have become a concern as well. In the past few years, environmental agencies, including China's meteorological authority, have warned about climate change and global warming in the Tibetan plateau. They have said that there is a possibility of higher temperatures, glacial lakes overflowing, and a thinning of the permafrost, especially as the Chinese government undertakes major rail, road, and tunnelling infrastructure across the plateau.

In 2019, the Indian Ministry of Culture submitted an application to UNESCO for 'Sacred Mountain Landscape and Heritage Routes'. It requested world heritage status for Kailash Manasarovar-linked areas on the Indian side, to protect the ecosystem around the holy sites better. The Ministry also suggested that a similar exercise could be carried out on the Chinese side. But given security considerations, and the fact that the Pulan airport close to Kailash Manasarovar also serves as a major military and air force base, the area is unlikely to be opened up for the kind of scrutiny that international agencies would require.

For the yatrias, however, what counts is the exhilaration of coming close to what they believe is the doorway to heaven. Raj and Vinod Yadav, former bankers in their late 60s, said that they have been on the yatra multiple times. Raj said that this was his 25th visit to Kailash Manasarovar, while her husband Vinod had travelled for the fifth time.

The Yadavs went on their first trip together in 2001 and then again the next year. "The pilgrimage became an addiction," Raj said. "I kept going every year, sometimes twice a year, through all the routes in India and Nepal, including via choppers and flights from Kathmandu to Lhasa."

She is disappointed that China has restricted the age of pilgrims. "There is something that keeps drawing me to Kailash Manasarovar," she said. "I intend to go again in August via Nepal, two months before I become ineligible." She has already started making plans for her next and possibly last visit with the sacred mountain and lake that remains a dream for many.

Suhasini Haider was part of a delegation of journalists invited by the Embassy of China in India to cover the first Kailash Manasarovar Yatra since 2019, while Rahul Karmakar reported from Sikkim



Pilgrims share their experiences after returning from the Kailash Manasarovar Yatra, in Gangtok. RITU RAJ KONWAR

MAHARASHTRA



Artisans making Kolhapuri chappals inside an Inga Leathers workshop in Kolhapur. EMMANUEL YOGINI

Ground beneath their feet

The 800-year-old, ₹1400 crore Kolhapuri chappal industry employs close to 1 lakh artisans, and is spread across four districts each of Maharashtra and Karnataka. Vinaya Deshpande Pandit explores the trade and the tradition of this all-leather, nature-derived, hand-stitched footwear, which has been GI tagged. The craft lacks policy impetus, often leading to its misappropriation, the exploitation of its already-marginalised *kaarigars*, and an erasure of culture

For Shantaram Narayan Sonavane, 50, from the Dhor community, the day begins early. By 7.30 a.m., he is at his tannery in Dhor gali (lane) in Ichalkaranji city, around 30 kilometres from Kolhapur in Maharashtra. It is at this time that he receives the animal hide from a government-approved slaughterhouse. The buffalo hide is steeped in a limestone slurry, called *chunadi*, for 10 days.

Every day, he takes the hide out from the tank, works on it, and puts it back in the slurry. He can identify the freshest leather of just-culled cattle, distinguishing it from older, salt-dipped hide that loses its strength. "The fresher the hide, the better the chappal," he says. Shantaram is a hide supplier to the Kolhapuri chappal artisans.

On the 11th day, the loosened hair on the hide is removed with a 'ship', an instrument shaped like a boat, and put into teakwood drums. The drums contain a liquid with *hirada* (myrobalan fruits) and babul tree bark. Both tanners and artisans believe these natural ingredients have properties to both preserve the leather and offer wearers of finished chappals health benefits.

After three days of being transferred into different teakwood drums, the leather is brought out, stitched into a round bag and hung. It is filled with the *hirada-babul* liquid again for eight days. "This helps give it a good colour, fill up the pores, and make it immune to fungus. This has to be done in a teakwood drum only. There should be no iron, no cement anywhere close to the tannery. The leather does not take kindly to those, and immediately loses its quality," he says. This process, using only vegetable dye, called *bagtan*, is exclusive to this region, and is key to the making of the Kolhapuri chappal. The end result is always a camel-coloured leather. Anything else would mean that the leather has been exposed to lab-made chemicals.

On June 23, at the Spring/Summer 2026 Men's Fashion Week in Milan, the 112-year-old Italian luxury brand Prada presented what it referred to in its catalogue as "leather sandals." They looked like Kolhapuri chappals in design and material. Social media, alive to cultural appropriation, especially by erstwhile colonial powers, called out the exclusion of any cultural citation. In the days after, Prada, itself a heritage label, acknowledged the traditions and practices that go into the making of the chappal, expressing its willingness to work with the artisans and craftspeople, in an e-mail to the Maharashtra Chamber of Commerce, Industry and Agriculture (MACCIA).

The Kolhapuri chappal has had a geographical indication (GI) tag since 2018, for the product made in eight districts, four each in Maharashtra and Karnataka. For a chappal to be called a Kolhapuri, it must be made in these districts, be wholly nature-derived, vegetable-dyed, and hand-stitched with leather thread. Nylon thread or nails mean it is not a Kolhapuri chappal.

Artisans lament that Kolhapuri chappals are losing their market, with people's lack of knowledge on what the original product is. "This started happening 60-70 years ago, when the demand for Kolhapuri chappals went up, but the production was steady. That is when traders from other States started copying the design and selling it as Kolhapuri," says Shivajirao Powar, president of Kolhapur District Footwear Association.

The decline of demand and knowledge

Traditionally-made chappals require care, with oil rubbed on them to preserve their sheen and prolong their life. Many do not want to invest that kind of time anymore. In addition, designers across India did their own spin on the chappal,

mimicking the original, but adding colour, embellishment, and sometimes a heel.

The leather processing for a Kolhapuri chappal takes 21 days. Shantaram explains that each part of the Kolhapuri chappal is made with this leather, but from different parts of the animal: the soles from the buttocks, the braids on the T-upper from the tail or legs, or from sheep skin.

His family has been doing this for generations, but he laments that Dhol gali, which used to have tanneries within each home, has only two units now. His son, an engineer, is preparing to write an entrance exam for a government job, and is not interested in carrying on the family business.

"What's the point? There is no dignity of labour. It is a lot of hard work. You need strength to lift and hang the heavy leather pieces, process them. The body smells because of the work. The money is not great. Most importantly, there is a shortage of the babul tree bark, which is the most important component in vegetable tanning," says Akshay Shantaram Sonavane, 26, Shantaram's son. His mother, aunt, and uncle have all been a part of the family business, handling the equipment, processing the hide. None of his generation wants to be a part of it. They prefer desk jobs. The sub-text is that tanners are Dalits, often looked down upon in Hinduism's religious and social hierarchy.

"This is a work of art and skill," Shantaram says, adding that the Maharashtra government sometimes calls him to understand the original process of vegetable tanning. "But the sad part is, our role is never acknowledged. We don't get land for setting up our tanneries. We don't get bank loans or government funds," he says.

In a month, Shantaram, his wife Rajashree, brother Tukaram and his wife Madhavi, process 300 kg of animal hide. Each kilogram earns them ₹240, he says. "Alcoholism is very common in our community. After the stretch of the hide and the hard work of lifting these bags, people drink to ease the pain and the smell," says Akshay. His family though, has been able to save up and build a four-storey house.

Vegetable tanning has become expensive and rarer now, making artisans turn to tanning with lab-made chemicals. Besides the shortage of over 20-year-old babul trees and skilled leather processors, people from the community now turning adults don't want to be ostracised: black nails

are characteristic of dyers. The residue of the plants used in vegetable dyeing used to be burnt along with cow dung as fuel – this market has disappeared with gas fires taking over.

When chemicals are used in the hide, the properties of the chappal change immediately; they wear out faster, say artisans. "Till 10 years ago, there were 50 vegetable tanning units in Kolhapur; 10 in Ichalkaranji. Now, there are no units in Kolhapur; Ichalkaranji is left with two. Earlier, Nipani had 70 units; it now has only 10. There is no help from the government," says Tukaram.

Many artisans travel great distances to get the hide to make Kolhapuri chappals the original way. One of them is Ashok Laxman Mane, 52, from Shirol. The artisan, who works from his village, is from the Chambhar community, a Scheduled Caste, in a system that believes he is almost at the lowest social level. He has loyal customers, who reach out to him directly to place their orders. His YouTube videos are his marketing outlet. "I don't supply to middlemen or to shops," he says. Most artisans don't have Mane's social-media skills, and are forced to make chappals as per designer specifications, adding a creative-industry hierarchy, one more layer of discrimination that a Kolhapuri chappal artisan faces in life.

Gender blender

Sagar Sanjay Jadhav, 36, from Peth Wadgaon in Hatkanangle taluk in Kolhapur, has been making chappals for five generations. "We buy the leather based on weight from the Dhors. We then dip it in water and clean it with a brush. There are several types of Kolhapuri chappals: Kapshi, Kurundwadi, Majje Kapshi, Maharaja. We have separate stencils ready for each design. Once the leather is washed, we cut it as per the stencil. Then we soak it in water again," he says.

Thereafter, the leather is beaten (*ghatne* in Marathi) and smoothened (*khurapi*). It is beaten again to toughen it. The stencil is used again and different parts of the chappals moulded. The upper and lower parts of the sole are cut separately. After elaborate work on them, they are stuck together with the help of local soil near the riverbed. These processes are performed by men.

The upper and lower soles are then stitched by leather thread by the women. The men craft a design with iron instruments and hammer the chappal yet again. Specialised iron tools are used

for this. "Women do 80% of the work; men do 20%," says Powar.

The prices of chappals are decided on the basis of the design. The more intricate the hand work, the more expensive the chappal.

Bharti Sunil Gadekar, 49, from Kolhapur, has made the *detha veni* (braid for the chappals), stitching it to the soles for the last 20 years. This has meant a constant pain in her neck, back, fingers, hands, and legs, as she sits hunched over her work all day. "I hail from Mangur in Karnataka. My father used to make leather chappals, but I never made anything till I got married. Here, my mother-in-law and my sister-in-law used to make chappals. I learnt from them," she says, adding that she lost her husband at a very young age. "I began to do this to run the household," she says, noting that both her sons, who are in class 11 do not want to learn the art. She stitches five or six pairs of chappals daily, and makes ₹25 per pair. Prada's pair was slated to cost over ₹1 lakh.

She is one of the few in Kolhapur's Subhash Nagar, who works on the chappal. "If you walked around some decades ago, you would hear the constant sound of the iron instruments as chappals being made. Now, the whole area has grown silent," says Shubham Satpute, 28, of Inga Leather, a boutique that sells different designs, ranging from ₹1,599 to 76,599.

Now and beyond

"These days, the leather comes from Chennai, as slaughterhouses and tanneries have been shut down here. That leather is chemically tanned. The people who used to earlier run tanneries, have now become distributors," Powar says.

Artisans too use machines to cut the leather and glue to stick the layers of the soles, says Satpute, who runs a leather studio and was recently a part of a programme held to honour the Vishwakarma community, traditionally artisans of different types. Flaunting his photograph with Prime Minister Narendra Modi, he says the art needs a lot of love to flourish. He runs a boutique to sell "authentic Kolhapuri chappals" of different types, and understands that e-commerce helps take a business from local to global.

After the Prada controversy, his reels on Instagram explaining the nuances of Kolhapuri chappals went viral, garnering lakhs of views and new followers for his studio's Instagram page. The publicity is not enough for him to sustain his business, he says. "There should be some international collaboration, so the artisans benefit. At present, only the middlemen and shopowners make money from margins and commissions. The artisans are still exploited and underpaid," he says.

Lalit Gandhi, president of MACCIA, calls for the Kolhapuri chappal to be patented. "A patent will help the artisans, who have been the most exploited in the chain. There is not even a cluster for the Kolhapuri chappals in Kolhapur at present," he says, adding that the Chamber has begun the process. He hopes the artisans will come together to form a collective. With Prada showing an interest in engaging with the artisans, most in Kolhapur feel this will be an example for ethical fashion practices. "Prada has offered to hold a meeting with the local artisans and with our industry representatives. We have suggested a joint task force which could focus on developing co-branded limited-edition collections rooted in traditional Kolhapuri designs," he adds.

Maharashtra Social Justice Minister Sanjay Shirsat says that he has called for a meeting next week "to take measures to address the issue".

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There should be some international collaboration, so the artisans benefit. At present, only the middlemen and shopowners make money from margins and commissions. The artisans are still exploited and underpaid

SHUBHAM SATPUTE

Runs Inga Leathers, a studio in Kolhapur



A market in Kolhapur selling chappals. EMMANUEL YOGINI



Grief-stricken family members of Ganta Tejeshwar, who was killed in a cold-blooded conspiracy allegedly plotted by his wife and her lover, sit in the hall of the two-storey house he built (below) in 2022. SIDDHANT THAKUR

Bride, betrayal and bloodshed

A chilling case from Telangana has laid bare a disturbing pattern unfolding across the country — of newlywed couples being murdered in cold blood, often by their wives in collusion with their paramours. In Gadwal, a 30-year-old youth vanished weeks after his wedding, while his bride wept and prayed for his return. But behind the tears was a calculated plot. **Lavpreet Kaur** tracks the tragedy

The jasmine garlands on the gate had barely withered when the mourning began. Just weeks after a grand wedding in Gadwal, about 190 kilometres from Hyderabad, Ganta Tejeshwar vanished without a trace, and his bride wept the loudest.

She held her mother-in-law's hand, filed a missing person's report and prayed fervently, pleading for the safe return of her 30-year-old husband. But the truth, as it would soon unravel, was far darker than anyone could imagine.

Today, the dirt road that snakes past Gadwal Fort into Ganjipet lies heavy with silence. It's late June — hot, humid, and unnervingly quiet. Not long ago, the same lane rang with wedding songs, laughter and the clink of bangles. Now, only hushed murmurs and the occasional sob of the youth's grieving parents punctuate the air.

At the edge of a dusty, unpaved lane, Tejeshwar's bungalow — once the centre of celebration — stands shrouded in sorrow. Neighbours and villagers arrive in trickles, whispering the same question: How could a newlywed bride plot something so brutal?

Inside, his parents — 63-year-old Jayaramulu, a retired land surveyor, and 56-year-old Shakuntala — sit side by side on a single bed in their spacious living room, their backs against a wall that gleamed with wedding silks just weeks ago. Between them, they clutch a framed photo of Tejeshwar, their fingers trembling, the glass misted with tears.

"We waited so long to see him married," Shakuntala whispers, her voice cracked and eyes downcast. "And now, this is all we have left."

Beside them sits his twin, Tejvardhan, face lit only by the glow of his phone screen. He scrolls through old Instagram reels, of Tejeshwar dancing to a Telugu song in a park. In another, he is seen leading a group of children. "Dancing was his passion," Tejvardhan says, his voice low. "It never worked out as a career, but he never stopped. He danced for the love of it."

Tejeshwar was more than a brother, more than a son. He was the family's pride: a private land surveyor waiting on a long-anticipated government posting, and a self-taught dance instructor loved by local children.

From cold feet to a cold plot

The match had come through mutual acquaintances. Ishwarya, from Kurnool in neighbouring Andhra Pradesh, was poised, well-spoken and a seemingly perfect fit, matching Tejeshwar in height. The engagement was celebrated on December 26, 2024, and the wedding was finalised for February 13 this year.

The family spared no expense — 1,000 invitations printed with intricate gold detailing, maroon accents on beige paper and a gleaming Lord Ganesha motif at the centre. The K.S. Function Hall on Kurnool Road was booked, the caterers finalised, the menu planned down to the last sweet.

But just a week before the wedding, Ishwarya disappeared.

"She stopped answering calls. Her phone was switched off. Tejeshwar waited and then finally called her mother," recalls Boya Srinivas, his brother-in-law. The news that followed shocked everyone — Ishwarya had fled to Chennai. No ex-

I told him she was already in a relationship. I had done a background check and warned him. But he wouldn't listen.

TEJAVARDHAN, Brother of the victim

planation, no warning.

The wedding was called off. The family lost thousands to vendors, priests and decorators. More than the money, it was the embarrassment and heartbreak that stung.

And then, just as suddenly, she returned. "She told Tejeshwar that her mother had pressured her to back out because they couldn't handle the financial strain," Srinivas says. "She cried, begged him to take her back."

Against the advice of his family and the pleas of his twin, Tejeshwar forgave her.

Tejvardhan, unable to accept his brother's decision, moved out of the family home and rented a house nearby. "I told him she was already in a relationship. I had done a background check and warned him," he says, shaking his head, disbelief still fresh in his voice. "But he wouldn't listen."

"He said she loved him, and that was enough," his father Jayaramulu adds, now bedridden after a recent accident. He recalls how Tejeshwar went from one relative to another, asking them to help convince the family. He was determined to make it work.

The wedding eventually took place on May 18 this year, at the Beechupally Temple on the banks of the Krishna River, just 15 kilometres from their house. Though unconvinced, the family attended, choosing Tejeshwar's happiness over their doubts and suspicion. They welcomed Ishwarya into their home.

But things never felt right.

"She didn't behave like a new bride," says Tejeshwar's sister, Susheela. "She barely interacted with us. She never helped with chores, always stayed locked in the room, always on the phone. She only waited for him to return from work to take her out."

There were brief moments — she made tea once for everyone — but for the most part, Ishwarya remained aloof. She avoided meals cooked by her mother-in-law, ordered junk food instead, and rarely sat with the family.

Still, Tejeshwar didn't complain. He continued working, teaching dance, trying to bridge the gap between his family and his wife. But unease hung in the air.

Then came June 17. That afternoon, Tejeshwar



Ganta Tejeshwar and Ishwarya on their wedding day.

had called home. He was just 15 minutes away, he said, and asked Ishwarya to have lunch ready. But he never returned.

As night fell, panic set in. His phone was unreachable. Calls went unanswered.

The next morning, the family rushed to the police station, and Ishwarya went with them. She wept, she prayed, she held her mother-in-law close and stroked her hair.

But all along, she knew. Ishwarya had helped plan the murder.

The murder plot

As suspicion mounted, police turned to call records, and what they uncovered shattered the facade. Over 2,000 calls and messages had been exchanged between Ishwarya and 35-year-old Tirumala Rao, a bank manager with Canfin Homes, totalling more than 20,000 seconds of conversation. The digital trail revealed not just intimacy, but coordination.

The affair had begun months earlier in Kurnool. Ishwarya's mother, Sujatha, who worked as a sweeper at Rao's bank, introduced them. Rao, a married man, had helped both mother and

daughter secure home loans and slowly tightened his grip. But when Ishwarya's wedding threatened the affair, a chilling decision was made.

Rao enlisted a former driver, Kummari Nagesh, and a friend, Parashuramulu. Masquerading as

land buyers, they spent time with Tejeshwar, gaining his trust and mapping his movements. As the wedding approached, Rao escalated the plan — a GPS tracker was secretly installed beneath Tejeshwar's bike, says Jogulamba Gadwal Superintendent of Police T. Srinivasa Rao.

On June 15, the trio tried to locate him near Gadwal Fort and Sangala Cheruvu but failed.

They returned two days later, this time with a rented SUV, black-tinted windows and weapons — two sickles and a knife — stashed under the seat.

At 8.30 a.m. on June 17, they called Tejeshwar again. He agreed to meet them near Kistareddy bungalow. He had no idea what awaited him.

He climbed into the front seat, and the group drove toward Mogali Ravula Cheruvu, pretending to scout land. After a stop for breakfast, they steered the car towards Kurnool. Around 20 kilometres out, they abruptly turned back.

It was just past 11 a.m., as they passed a temple, Parashuramulu moved to the back seat, feigning fatigue and then attacked. A blow to the head with a sickle. Tejeshwar screamed. The car stopped.

What followed was brutal: slashing, stabbing and finally, strangulation. His body was shifted to the middle row and covered. The men crossed the Krishna River to Panchalingala, disposing of his phone and bag in the water. Then they met Rao and handed them ₹1 lakh and instructed them to disappear.

Later that night, they moved the body again — this time dumping it near the newly-constructed Galeru Nagari Sujala Savanthi canal. The killers returned to Kurnool and celebrated with drinks. Two days later, another ₹2 lakh was paid through an intermediary.

Back in Gadwal, Ishwarya kept up her act, playing the grieving bride.

But the police were closing in. CCTV camera footage, mobile data and relentless sleuthing led them to the getaway vehicle. On June 20, at a checkpoint in Pulluru, the car was intercepted and the conspirators were finally arrested.

The murder of Tejeshwar is not an isolated tragedy, it is part of a grim and growing pattern. Across India this year, newly-wed men have been killed in eerily similar plots involving married women and their lovers, leaving families shattered and the public rattled.

In May, Indore resident Raja Raghuvanshi, just 11 days into marriage, was allegedly murdered by contract killers hired by his wife Sonam and her partner, while honeymooning in Meghalaya.

In Uttar Pradesh's Meerut, Saurabh Rajput, a former merchant navy officer, was drugged, chopped into pieces and stuffed into a cement drum by his wife Muskan and her lover, Sahil Shukla, in March.

The same month, in Auraiya (U.P.), 25-year-old Dilip Yadav was stabbed to death two weeks after his wedding — another victim of a conspiracy led by his wife Pragati and her lover.

Background checks the new norm

These chilling cases have triggered a surge in pre-marital background checks across the country.

"We have seen a 30-40% rise in background verification requests over the past five years — and a clear 10-15% spike just in 2025," says Kumar from Scout Detective Agency in Hyderabad. "Most marriages today are arranged through online platforms where families barely know each other. Now, background checks have become routine. Families want to know everything — character, job conduct, financials and even romantic history. If the person's behaviour or body language seems off, they ask us to dig deeper."

Captain D.K. Giri, who founded Sharp Detectives in Secunderabad in 1978, confirms the trend. "Back then, these checks were rare. Today, I get five to seven requests a day — both pre- and post-marital," he says.

Even within his own home, the shift is stark. "Three of my five sons, aged 44, 32 and 30, have decided not to marry at all. They say it's not worth the risk," Giri says. He believes societal pressure is partly to blame. "Children are pushed into marriage without emotional alignment. The heart is elsewhere, but they go through with it to please the family. That dishonesty often leads to devastating outcomes."

Diana Monteiro, a counselling psychologist in Hyderabad, sees this pressure play out often in her practice. "Arranged marriages aren't inherently the problem. Forced ones are," she says.

"Once a match is approved by elders, the emotional or logical concerns of the bride or groom are dismissed. Emotional blackmail and abuse are commonly used to pressure them into agreeing. But when problems arise after marriage, the same families ask, 'Why did you marry if you didn't want to?' or they blame the child for not fighting hard enough," she adds.

She notes growing fear among young people. "I find people more cautious, more sceptical. I have heard half-anxious, half-joking remarks like, 'Hope they don't kill me'," she shares.

She highlights the pressure around past relationships. "Many young men expect their wives to have no history, no baggage. That creates secrecy. If the truth comes out and the man reacts violently, it can lead to unimaginable consequences."

But even as men are increasingly at risk in such headline-grabbing cases, the larger picture still reveals a society where women continue to suffer in silence. This is just one layer of a much deeper issue, says Purnima Nagaraja, therapist and consultant mental health expert, pointing to widespread dowry deaths and crimes against women in the country.

"Our society continues to expect women to be submissive, tolerant and silently endure suffering. The idea that women themselves could be behind such violent acts is a bitter pill to swallow," she says.

According to her, the root problem lies in how marriages are still arranged — more as alliances between caste, class, and income brackets than between compatible individuals: "Elders often hold the belief that love can happen after marriage. But today's generation lives in a world shaped by social media, dating culture and conversations around choice and intimacy."

Back in Ganjipet, the wedding album gathers dust on the shelves. In the flickering light of a corner room, Tejeshwar's father stares at his son's photograph — the last one taken before the ceremony. His hands tremble as he touches the frame, his voice barely a whisper. "Why him?" he asks. It is a question no one can answer.





THE EDITORIAL PAGE

WORDLY WISE
SILENCE IS THE LANGUAGE OF GOD,
ALL ELSE IS POOR TRANSLATION.
— RUMI

The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY
RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

LIKE SALT TO WOUND

US pressure on GM crops underlines Indian farmers' predicament — denied technology that helps them compete

THE DONALD TRUMP administration is exerting pressure on India to open up its market to American soybean and maize, which are both almost entirely genetically modified (GM) produce. These are crops where the US has huge stakes, with its exports of raw soybean alone valued at \$24.5 billion and of maize at \$13.7 billion in 2024. It would be more — around \$52 billion — if exports of soybean meal (\$6.3 billion) and maize-derived ethanol (\$4.3 billion) and dried distillers grains (\$3.1 billion) are added. The economic imperative to find new markets is reinforced by Trump's political compulsion to cater to voters in the "corn belt" states of the Midwestern US. Some of them, growing the bulk of the country's soybean, maize and wheat — Illinois, Indiana, and Ohio — are also part of the "rust belt" that constituted its industrial heartland. With Trump having swept both belts in the presidential elections, he has to evidently return that favour.

For India, this presents a dilemma that has less to do with economics. Average soybean yields in the US are more than 3.5 times that of India. That makes American growers much more cost competitive. Moreover, India imports close to 5 million tonnes (mt) of soybean oil annually. From a domestic value addition standpoint, it makes sense to import soybean itself, which can then be processed to yield both oil and the residual protein-rich cake or meal. The yield difference may be somewhat less for maize, where many Bihar farmers harvest almost the same per-hectare tonnage as their counterparts in Iowa or Illinois. But India's maize consumption is growing on the back of both feed and ethanol biofuel demand. Imports are going to be a practical necessity in both maize and soybean meal, as rising incomes lead Indians to consume more dairy and other animal products that require these as key feed ingredients.

The problem is more political. Maize and soybean are grown on areas of 12 million hectares and 13 million hectares respectively in the country. Given the sheer number of farmers involved, the government cannot be oblivious to their interests. But that's where policy own-goals have not helped either. GM technology has allowed US farmers to plant soybean and maize varieties that can tolerate application of herbicides and resist deadly insect attacks. They are, therefore, able to harvest higher yields through better weed and pest control. Unfortunately, the same technology has been denied to Indian farmers, who are now expected to compete against imports from countries whose governments have not succumbed to Luddite instincts. Blocking technology in the name of Swadeshi has led to India turning from a net exporter to importer of cotton. The Trump pressure is like adding salt to the wound.

NOT EVEN BAND-AID

Centre's curbs on end-of-life vehicles, Delhi government's pushback point to broader failing — lack of anti-pollution plan

THE DELHI GOVERNMENT has asked the Centre's Commission for Air Quality Management (CAQM) to pause the fuel ban on end-of-life vehicles. The order to stop fuel supply to 10-year-old diesel-run vehicles and 15-year-old petrol vehicles, which came into effect on July 1, was justified as an anti-pollution measure. Delhi's Environment Minister, Manjinder Singh Sirsa, however, said that the move could be "counter-productive". He is right, to an extent. The restrictions could push owners of ageing vehicles to source diesel or petrol from Delhi's neighbouring states and create conditions for an illicit inter-state fuel market. Delhi CM Rekha Gupta's argument that the ban will jeopardise the livelihoods of a large section of the city's population that depends on two-wheelers is also valid. However, both the restrictions and the pushback against them are symptomatic of a longstanding failing of both the Centre and its agencies, including the CAQM, as well as successive Delhi governments. The Capital has longed for a well-thought-out plan to clean its air for at least a decade-and-a-half. All it has got are blunt measures and piecemeal solutions.

The CAQM had put the onus on petrol pump dealers to enforce the ban. Failure to do so would attract penalties under Section 192 of the Motor Vehicles Act, 1988. As a Petrol Dealers Association petition to the Delhi High Court pointed out, the move burdened "petrol pump owners and their attendants... without them being necessarily equipped or authorised under any law to carry out such a responsibility". On paper, the end-of-life vehicles are flagged by the Automatic Number Plate Recognition (ANPR) system installed at fuel stations and match the data against the government's Vahan portal. The trial run for these systems began at the end of last year, and last month the CAQM reportedly claimed that the ANPR scanners were ready to implement the ban on end-of-life vehicles. But, as Sirsa admitted, at several places in the city, ANPRs are riddled with technical glitches, including faulty sensors and incorrect placement of cameras. That the system is not integrated across the NCR shows that very little planning went into making the restrictions effective.

Stemming vehicular pollution requires sustained engagement with the complex reasons behind motorisation — lifestyle choices, livelihood imperatives and urban sprawl that increases travel time and distances. Successive governments in Delhi haven't addressed this imperative adequately. Even the relatively easier task of nudging people to invest in the fitness of their vehicles has never received the policy attention it required. In the months it has been in office, Delhi's BJP government has given little indication of learning from the failures of its predecessors. It must course correct.

CAPTAIN'S KNOCK

Shubman Gill's record-breaking 269 seals the passing of baton, speaks of happy times

A TEENAGER, Shubman Gill would meticulously check the past scores of Virat Kohli in the age-group tournaments, and compare them with his own. Now, as India's Test captain, he has hit a double hundred, more than Kohli's highest score. But in a poetic coincidence, his 269 in the second Test against England is, as social media has caught on to, the same as Kohli's Test cap number.

Beyond the coincidences, the importance of this knock, as the new captain takes over the team after the retirement of Kohli and Rohit Sharma, can't be overstated. His ascension to the throne wasn't exactly a shock due to the lack of contenders, but he did have his share of detractors. Even Rohit himself, when asked a few months back about potential leaders, had said that "the boys aren't ready yet". When Gill unveiled a new cricket bat for this series, it had the tagline "prince", a reference to the moniker attached to him, and there were sniggers about arrogance. When India lost the first Test in England, criticism over his captaincy came from eminent cricketers such as Mike Atherton and Nasser Hussain, who talked about a "lack of aura" and "captaincy by committee".

More critics found their voice after India started the second Test defensively without Jasprit Bumrah and Kuldeep Yadav, two bowlers who could win games. And on a flat-batting track, India floundered to find themselves on 211 for 5, and starting at a possibility of being shot out for less than 300 at a huge loss potentially. It was in this vulnerable moment that Gill unfurled a flawless knock with a series-reviving potential. In Australia, India's last Test series earlier this year, there were big moments in which Gill floundered under pressure. In the two Tests in England as the new captain, he has shown that he can cultivate the restraint needed in his batting. Now, it will be other teenagers around the country who will be tracking his scores, comparing themselves with him, and trying to emulate him. The prince is the new king.



GIRISH KUBER

IT ALL BEGAN in February 1956 when the States Reorganisation Commission led by Justice Fazal Ali, with K M Panikkar and H N Kunzru as members, recommended a bilingual Bombay State, including Maharashtra and Gujarat, with Bombay as its capital, thereby denying Maharashtra's exclusive claim over the city. Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and Home Minister Vallabhbhai Patel were against the restructuring of states on a linguistic basis, but the death of Potti Sreeramulu, the Telugu activist who went on a fast to press for the demand to create Andhra Pradesh, compelled them to alter their stand. But they were unwilling to concede Maharashtra's right over the city of Mumbai. The apparently adamant stand of Nehru and Patel triggered independent India's first all-party coalition against the mighty Congress party, which was accused, rightly so, of being anti-federal.

It necessitated the formation of the Samyukta Maharashtra Samiti, which came into being in February 1956, the first all-party anti-Congress front of independent India that had the likes of communist Sripad Amrut Dange, aka Bhai Dange, socialist S M Joshi and activists such as Keshav Sitaram "Prabodhankar" Thackeray and other well-known Maharashtrians. With the 70th anniversary of the formation of the Samiti, which successfully led the agitation demanding an independent state for Marathi-speaking people with Mumbai as its capital, a few months away, Maharashtra is witnessing another all-party mobilisation against the allegedly anti-federal Centre. The difference between now and then, however, is that the once-strong omnipresent Congress at the Centre has been replaced by the BJP.

There are two striking similarities between the situations then and now. Madhav Sadashiv Golwalkar, or Gurji, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) chief then, had extended open support to Nehru and Patel in their initial stand that was against states' reorganisation on the basis of language. The RSS and Nehru-Patel, strange as it may sound, were on the same page — both believed that linguistic divisions could lead to

Maharashtra deja vu

Opposition mobilisation on the language issue today recalls a political moment 70 years ago

fragmentation and instability and become a threat to the integration of the newly independent nation. This explains the BJP's insistence on Hindi.

Spoken predominantly in the north Indian states, Hindi remains central to the saffron camp's grand design of "nation building", which envisages Oneness — one nation, one religion and one language (and one political party, one leader, BJP critics might add). It also explains Maharashtra Chief Minister Devendra Fadnis's recent political experiment to bring in Hindi as the third language in school education from the primary level. The move backfired but, the way it galvanised the Opposition, which wasted no time in forming an all-party front, à la 1956, to oppose the BJP.

Maharashtra is crucial as the only state south of the Vindhyas for the RSS's long-envisioned plan of Hindi-isolation of India. Had Fadnis, a true swayamsevak, succeeded in making Hindi mandatory from school level, Maharashtra would have been the first big state outside the cow belt to embrace the northern Indian language. Unlikely in bearing his efforts were the Thackeray brothers Uddhav and Raj, who buried their hatchet, if only for the time being, to challenge the ever-strong Centre, taking a cue perhaps from their grandfather Prabodhankar, who had played a significant role in spoiling the Nehru-Patel design 70 years ago. So, like in 1956, there is a Thackeray involved in the current politics of language as well.

The 70-year gap between then and now illustrates how Maharashtra politics has let down the Marathi-speaking people. Following the formation of the state of Maharashtra, with Nehru later conceding the state's demand for Mumbai as its capital, the Samiti that spearheaded the agitation against Nehru-Patel was dissolved, and then the Shiv Sena rose. Led by maverick Bal Thackeray, the son of Prabodhankar, it espoused the cause of the Marathi 'manos', but it didn't go much further than ensuring lowly jobs for locals in state-run PSUs. Unlike the DMK in Tamil Nadu, the Trinamool Congress in West Bengal or even the Assam Gana Parishad in the Northeast, the Shiv Sena was far from be-

ing a pan-Maharashtra party. It was, till a few years ago, confined to Mumbai and the Konkan. It lost its mojo after aggressive Hindutva became the mainstay of politics.

The Thackerays, having strayed from the Marathi cause, jumped onto the Hindutva bandwagon. It didn't take much effort for the BJP to first overshadow the Sena and then split it into two. Meanwhile, Raj Thackeray, the Shiv Sena founder's successor in charisma, tried his hand at exploiting Marathi sentiments. Like Thackeray Sr, he, too, lost steam on the way and settled for playing second fiddle to the BJP. Led now by Narendra Modi and Amit Shah, it was much easier for the BJP to neutralise the younger Thackeray and make his political outfit, the Maharashtra Navnirman Sena, redundant. In its zeal to run the state on its own, the BJP's aggressive leadership tried to politically weaken the two Thackerays.

The Fadnis government's ill-timed decision — now rolled back — to introduce (read: impose) Hindi at school level came in this fraught context. It was nothing short of bowling a full toss in the death overs for a team battling to stay afloat. The BJP government's move not only rejuvenated the two Thackerays and their two Senas, in the bargain it also sullied the saffron party's anti-federal image further. The BJP now is being compared with the old Delhi-centric, all-powerful Congress. It is certainly not a comparison the BJP would be happy about. Now, like in the Sixties, the issue of Hindi has crossed political boundaries and has taken a Maharashtra vs. Mumbai turn. In the Sixties, the fall-out of the Samyukta Maharashtra movement was the Congress's defeat in subsequent elections. Will history repeat itself with the BJP, which has replaced Congress now?

Only time will answer this question. But meanwhile, like the play *Six Characters in Search of an Author* by Italian dramatist Luigi Pirandello, Maharashtra's search for a genuine and honest regional political party that can go beyond hoodlumism and thuggery in the name of Marathi manos continues.

The writer is editor, LokSatta



NASEERUDDIN SHAH

MY CHILDHOOD — AND upbringing — was divided between an orthodox Muslim home, a Roman Catholic, and then a Jesuit Christian school. Each ethos gave me what it could, but I was never sold on any of them and I knew what I liked or disliked about each, my own included. For example, I thought it grossly unfair that everyone "except us" was doomed to perdition and I have never been able to get my head around that. As children, we went to Puskhar, to the magnificent Jain temple and, of course, the darbar where dreadlocked sadhus in saffron shared a chillum with green-robed Sufis; Sikh and Hindu pilgrims abounded. Namaaz in the Adhai Din Ka Jhonpra surrounded by Hindu sculptures I thought was the coolest idea. The great Shankar Shambhus sang the praises of "Khwaja ji" accompanied by qawwals from all over the sub-continent, and even by a Baul singer. I never thought of myself as a Muslim (ergo different) and nothing in my surroundings made me feel I didn't belong, no matter where I was. This was my country and I miss it.

The rising tide of jingoism, hatred and, of late, war fever here, cannot but have encouraged all "right" minded citizens to no longer bother disguising the bigotry that has been latent in them all along. At the same time, it has been cause for concern for those who worry about the direction in which our country seems to be headed. The touchiness of the offence-taking brigade has begun bordering on the absurd. Criticising the quality

THE COUNTRY I MISS

I feel no need to wear patriotism on my sleeve. An earlier India allowed that

of Hindi movies makes you "ungrateful", a plea for sanity and brotherhood makes you "a traitor", a grouse that Indians don't obey traffic lights makes you get advised on where you should go, speaking up for a fellow artist is "speaking against the country". Anything that is remotely critical gets twisted to sound "anti-national". The actor who plays the lead in the beloved TV serial *Anupamaa* tartly enquires whether Pakistan "allows Indian artists to perform there?" without knowing that not only do they allow us, they welcome us and honour us. And there is everyone who listens to Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan or Mehdi Hasan or Farida Khanum in India a traitor? Obviously, it's only the Prime Minister who can go across the border to embrace his counterpart. For us ordinary mortals to do that is a sin. It is in any way beneficial to us to hate every Pakistani citizen for what their government (read, army) does? Or, does it simply satisfy some feral urge?

In George Orwell's book 1984, there exists a daily ritual where everyone drops whatever they are doing and abuses an Opposition leader. It is compulsory to participate in this "two minutes of hate". Despite it having now become 24 hours of hate, no longer confined to the leader of the Opposition, the palpable poison in the air does not cause me despair or fear. It saddens me. Hatred is self-destructive but evidently it can be sustained indefinitely if one is to go by the continuing actions of some "cow vigilantes". Besides, new hatreds can

easily be created. I am an easy target for "nationalists" and paid trolls (who really could do with some help in spelling and grammar) because I feel no need to wear my love for anything, including my country, on my sleeve. I know what I feel, I trust my feelings and they are no one else's business. I was born in India into the fifth generation of a Muslim family, my wife into an even older Hindu one and we hope our children can be a combination of the best of both. My father refused to go to Pakistan when his brothers left, he was certain India had a future for us, just as I feel it does for my offspring. This is a dream that cannot be abandoned.

If it is taken to be a justification of my Facebook post (which has been taken down, not deleted by me) in support of Diljit Dosanjh, so be it. But the fact is I need to justify nothing. I said whatever I said and I stand by it. Nor am I discouraged by the lack of support from the film industry. I wasn't expecting any — they all either have too much to lose or they disagree. And to the trolls, particularly the one who said to me "Pakistan nahin ab kabristaan!", I can only quote Jigar Moradabadi: "Mujhe de na ghaz mein dhamkiyaan, giren khar baar ye bijliyan, / Meri dhamkiyan yehi aashiyana, meri miliyat yehi char par" (Don't threaten me in anger, let lightning strike a million times, / My nest is my domain, these four feathers all I own!)

The writer is an actor and author

JULY 5, 1985, FORTY YEARS AGO

JET WRECKAGE LOCATED

A ROBOT SUBMERSIBLE has "almost certainly" located the wreckage of the lost Air India Jumbo jet 1830 metres deep in the Atlantic Ocean off the Irish coast, the Cable and Wireless Telecommunications Company said. "Weak signals which could be from the crashed plane's black box flight recorder are now being picked up some 3.2 km from the wreckage," the statement said.

INDO-PAK AGREEMENT

THE THREE-DAY ministerial meeting of the Indo-Pakistan Joint Commission ended in

New Delhi after the signing of an agreement on cooperation in the field of agricultural research and development. The agreement was signed by the Minister for Agriculture and Rural Development, Bata Singh, and Pakistan's Foreign Minister, Shahbaz Qayyum Khan on behalf of their countries.

'DISMISS BHAJAN LAL'

LEADERS OF NATIONAL opposition parties and Haryana opposition leaders have demanded the dismissal of the Haryana Chief Minister, Bhajan Lal. They have also demanded the appointment of an inquiry against him under the Commission Enquiries

Act of 1952 on charges of corruption, favouritism and nepotism. The opposition leaders alleged that Lal, after becoming CM, had cast aside all democratic norms and decency in public life.

RESIGNATION DECLINED

THE CONGRESS (I) high command is in no mood to accept the resignation of Pranab Mukherjee as West Bengal Pradesh Congress Committee (I) chief following the party's defeat in the Calcutta Corporation election. The AICC (I) general secretaries said that Mukherjee had done well and there was no reason why he should feel disappointed.



KERALA

Lives paused by a rail line

Lives of over 5,000 families in Ernakulam, Idukki and Kottayam districts went off the track a quarter century ago as all transactions related to their holdings were frozen for the Sabari rail project, which never took off. As discussions have been initiated for restarting the project, **Hiran Unnikrishnan** meets some of the landowners whose lives were stalled by it

Except for the gentle gush of rainwater cascading through a crystal-clear rivulet outside her window, Daisy's home at Ainkombu, a few metres from the Pala-Thodupuzha road, sits in total silence.

Flanked by rolling green hills on one side and a patchwork of farmland on the other, the view could easily grace a postcard. But for Daisy, 60, living alone in the house she once built with her late husband Kariyachan, this silence is far from peaceful.

Her children now live far away. Days slip by quietly, broken only by the occasional chirping of birds and rustling of leaves in the breeze. But now, what breaks the silence are the memories that keep popping up from two decades ago.

A marker of unkept promises

In her backyard, half-buried in the thick undergrowth, lies a moss-covered boundary stone planted by railway surveyors a few years ago. To Daisy, it's a marker of promises unkept.

Since the day it appeared, her life has taken a turn. Her life got stuck abruptly. She is unable to sell the holding or use it as collateral. Her home, like her life, remains trapped in the shadow of a railway line that never came. That project is the Sabari rail line, a long-envisioned route meant to connect Angamaly to the pilgrimage town of Sabarimala through the rubber-growing areas of central Travancore.

Daisy's land was once earmarked for Ramapuram railway station, which was expected to serve six panchayats in Meenachil taluk. Nearly 80% of her property, including farmland and polders, was marked for acquisition. "This land was the hub of the protests," she says, her gaze fixed on the stillness beyond her doorstep.

"Now it's all gone and quiet. People are tired. We just want clarity. Are we staying? Or are we leaving?" she asks. The protests started after they marked the rail line through the area. Her husband, Kariyachan, was at the forefront of the agitation. "But that was so long ago. Nobody is opposing it now. We just want to know what comes next," says Daisy in a disillusioned tone.

Agonising uncertainty

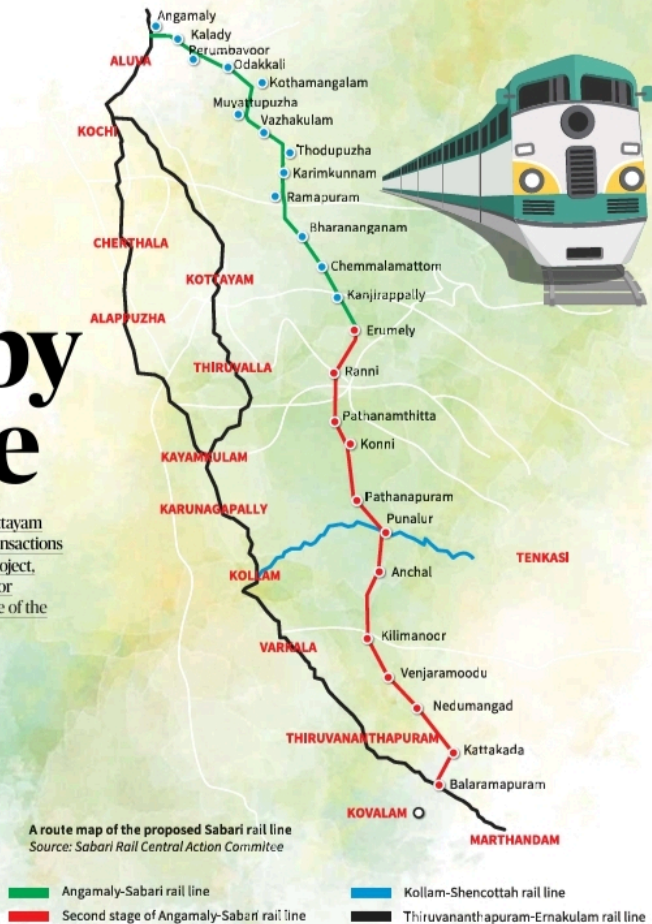
Just a few metres away, another life remains suspended in uncertainty. Jose Joseph, 75, tends to rows of rubber saplings at Kavalathil Rubber Nursery, which he has nurtured for over four decades. Unlike Daisy, he is less concerned about losing the land but troubled by the agonising uncertainty the proposed project has forced on their lives. "My house is on the alignment of the rail line. So are my children's," he says. "We built our lives here. If the railway is coming, let them say it. Should we stay or move?"

For more than a quarter century, that question has loomed over nearly 5,000 families across the 70-km stretch of the rail project (from Kalady to Ramapuram) whose properties have been surveyed and marked. Some properties were surveyed on foot, others from air, but all remain in limbo. No one can build, sell or mortgage as all transactions related to the property have been stalled. Life is paused, awaiting a future that never arrives.

At the other end of the line, things are no better. Near the Cochin international airport, Kalady railway station, the only station built under the project in its initial phase, stands deserted. Weeds have overgrown the platform. Even local people seem to have forgotten about the existence of the station.

Across the Periyar river at Okkal, M.P. Vishwanathan Nair's house stands as another casualty of an ambitious project that never materialised. A former non-resident Keralite, he had hoped to expand his modest 900 sq ft home. But the dream collapsed before it could take off.

"By the time I got back, revenue officials had marked the land for the project. The railway line was to cut right through my holding," he recalls. "They said I wouldn't get compensation for any new work. So, I left the house unaltered. It's been more than 20 years," he says.



More than 5,000 families were affected. The notifications are gone, but the consequences remain.

JJO PANACHINANI
secretary, Sabari
Railway Central
Action Council

Though he tried to sell off the holding, potential buyers walked away on learning about the land's status. A few years later, he approached the Revenue department seeking compensation. Officials returned his application without offering any explanation.

Unable to endure the uncertainty, he joined a hunger strike outside the same office. It lasted 21 days before being halted by pandemic restrictions. Now, there's a flicker of hope.

Land acquisition to resume

Recently, Union Railway Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw and Kerala Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan agreed to resume land acquisition for the project.

V. Abdurahiman, Kerala Minister in charge of Railways, says a few issues related to the cost-sharing formula between the Centre and the State government and administrative matters are yet to be resolved. "The project is finally moving. We are awaiting a final intimation from the Railways by the first week of July," he says.

"Since the alignment was fixed years ago,

there's no need to change it and trouble people again. If all goes well, land acquisition will be completed within a year," he says.

But the numbers tell a story of massive delay. Of the 111-km-long route (including land where physical survey has not been done), just seven kilometres of tracks has been laid. Besides, the station near Kalady, a lone bridge over the Periyar river stands as the project's only completed structure. Sanctioned in the 1997-1998 Union Budget, the project has seen only 24 ha acquired out of the required 303 ha. The original estimate of ₹550 crore has now escalated to nearly ₹4,000 crore.

"The vision was always clear," says former Union Minister P. C. Thomas, who first proposed the project. He believes it could transform regional economies from plywood and rice mills in Perumbavoor and Kalady to pineapple farming in Vazhakulam and tourism in the high ranges.

"It would open export routes for crops such as pineapple, cardamom, pepper, and rubber," he says. "But we've lost time, resources, and trust."

Along the route, ISI Sabari railway action coun-

cils were formed, which eventually merged to form the Sabari Railway Central Action Council. Towns such as Thodupuzha, Muvattupuzha, Kothamangalam, and Perumbavoor became protest sites, where people, disheartened by years of uncertainty over displacement and financial crisis caused by the freezing of land transactions, took to the streets. The matter even reached the Kerala High Court, which expressed dissatisfaction over the prolonged delay. Yet, the project failed to take off.

Jjo Panachinani, secretary of the action council, says the damage caused by expired acquisition notices has been deep and personal. "More than 5,000 families were affected. The notifications are gone, but the consequences remain," he says.

"People couldn't mortgage or sell their holdings. Some families broke up over partition disputes. Many were forced to turn to private lenders when banks refused their land as collateral."

Much of the delay stemmed from the disagreements between the Union and the State governments over funding. In 2015, the Congress-led United Democratic Front government agreed to share the cost of the project and signed an MoU with the Railways.

The Communist Party of India (Marxist)-led Left Democratic Front government, after withdrawing from the MoU in 2016, agreed to rejoin it in 2021. However, it insisted that the State's share of the project cost be excluded from its borrowing limit. It remains unclear whether this issue has been resolved.

Objections to alignment

For R. Manoj, a lawyer from Pala, the plight of the affected families became a personal mission. In 2007, he visited every local body along the alignment, urging them to pass resolutions in support of the project.

"But then puny political tussles began," he says. "Suddenly, there were objections to the alignment through Pala and Poonjar. What began as a people's movement got entangled in politics and lost its steam."

Tomy Thengumpillikkunnel, a 69-year-old activist from Chondacherry, near Pala, led a hunger strike that lasted nearly four years from 2011. Like many others, it too faded into silence. "Our protest was against the line cutting through our land," he says. "Now, even with talk of the revival of the project, no one cares about it."

Rail connectivity to improve

Dijo Kappen, chairperson of the action committee, believes the line could revolutionise rail connectivity in Kottayam, Idukki and Ernakulam districts. With 14 new stations proposed, it could bring pilgrims to Sabarimala and provide rail connectivity to the proposed Sabarimala airport, while linking remote areas to the wider economy.

"In any case, this project offers a far more feasible alternative to the Chengannur-Pampa rail route, which is significantly more expensive and destined solely to serve Sabarimala pilgrims," he asserts.

Kappen also points out that extending the line up to Balaramapuram in Thiruvananthapuram will create an alternate rail corridor to the State capital. Kerala has also submitted a proposal to connect the Sabari line with Thiruvananthapuram and the Vizhinjam seaport, he notes.

The government has asked the Collectors of Ernakulam, Idukki, and Kottayam to resume land acquisition for the project. The government order for acquiring land is expected soon.

Back in Kochi, Vishwanathan Nair now lives with his daughter Sharika. "My house at Okkal became uninhabitable. I had to shut my shop, my only source of income, and move here," he says softly. "Someday, the project will move ahead and I will get justice." His voice falters, but hope shines in his eyes.

And the wait continues for thousands of others like him, caught in the same silence, carrying the same unanswered questions.



Daisy, native of Ainkombu, points to a marker stone laid in the backyard of her property for the proposed Ramapuram railway station in Kottayam. VISHNU PRATHAP

THE IDEAS PAGE

The nation on canvas

As a witness to history and a leading figure of Indian modernism, Krishen Khanna, who turns 100, has told India's story through his paintings



YASHODHARA DALMIA

WHEN AN ARTIST turns 100, it marks a turn in history, for he has been witness to all the page-turning episodes of his country and brought them to life on his canvases.

For the well-known artist Krishen Khanna, who turns 100 today, the most haunting memories are of Partition, Khanna was working at a printing press in Lahore when the rumblings of Partition, and of Independence, began. He depicts this vividly in his work, *Refugee Train Late 16 hrs (1947)*, where a group of men and women can be seen tightly packed together while waiting for the train that can take them across the border. A couple can be seen embracing each other fervently, for they do not know if they will meet again. The artist's memories of Partition are as if it has just happened: "It was during the crucial months...we trooped out in two cars and came straight to Shimla where the education department [his father was deputy director of education with the government] was then going to be founded. All the records had to be garnered and brought. The ones that didn't come, they had to be made up again through memory... But anyway, I was there, and I was looking out for a job. I couldn't go back...The evenings in Lahore would be penetrated by howling cries, as area after area would be set afire and it still haunts me and holds me immobile."

Khanna's memories of Lahore remain vivid, even today. About a work like *MacLagan Road (1990)*, for instance, he states, "I spent several years of my childhood on MacLagan Road which was like a microcosm of Lahore. On this modest road lived professors and teachers of considerable distinction as well as my father who taught at the Government College. There was Dr Gurbax Rai, a homeopath who healed even the passerby. He actively participated in the freedom struggle and went to jail several times. During those difficult days, his wife would sell fruit pre-emptively. As a refugee in Delhi he continued to live with the same dignity and simplicity. It was fantastic how this small stretch of road had people of every faith and profession, and belonging to different strata of society, all living in peace and amity."

The artist's family shifted to India, and to earn a living, Khanna arrived in Bombay in 1948 where he joined Girdhar Bank. It was then that he came across the artists who formed the famed Progressive Artists' Group and were at the forefront of modernism. He met like-minded artists like MF Husain and SH Raza, and then he exhibited a painting which they all liked at the Bombay Art Society. The painting was called *News of Gandhi's Death (1948)* and featured people reading newspapers under a light. The artist says, "I was in Delhi when Gandhi ji was assassinated and I was going to Connaught Place and [there were] all these little islands with lights and people were gathered under



CR Sasikumar

the lights reading newspapers. That left an image in my mind. So I worked on that and did this painting." Artists in the Progressive Group met frequently, had fervent discussions late into the night and supported and analysed each other's works.

There came a time when Khanna wanted to leave his banking job and paint full time. Supported by his wife, he was to give it up entirely in 1961. There was no looking back after that. His vast artistic resources drove him to make works which threw the spotlight on the marginalised and the ignored during the heady early years of Independence. In paintings like *Rear View (1991)*, the plight of migrant workers huddled in trucks — like bundles of objects and painted in monotones — drew attention to their unchanging situation despite Independence.

Khanna's depiction of the bandwallas over the years expressed contradictions in the social situation in a vivid manner. The bandwallas in their bright but ill-fitting costumes and their straggly appearance bring light to the lives of others while remaining in a situation of constant deprivation themselves. Over the years, Khanna's bandwallas sensuously depicted the bodily stances and postures of those on the fringes of society, as well as their immense and heroic struggle to overcome their situation.

The retelling of the lives of many came together in his murals, the most well-known of which is the magnificent work, *The Great Procession*, made in the dome at the ITC Maurya, New Delhi in the 1970s. Presented with sardonic wit, the mural offers glimpses of India with all its contradictions and ironies: A woman scratches her ear in a tem-

There came a time when Khanna wanted to leave his banking job and paint full time. Supported by his wife, he was to give it up entirely in 1961. There was no looking back after that. His vast artistic resources drove him to make works which threw the spotlight on the marginalised and the ignored during the heady early years of Independence. In paintings like *Rear View (1991)*, the plight of migrant workers huddled in trucks like bundles of objects and painted in monotones drew attention to their unchanging situation despite Independence.

ple, amid devotees; a man picks pockets outside a mosque; a tiger hides in a mountain cave to pounce on grazing goats; the merry bandwallas play in a corner while barbers and street performers ply their trade. There are humorous quotations as well, and author Khushwant Singh serves tea in a dhoti where the customers include Mulk Raj Anand and the artist himself. These vignettes of a life lived to its fullest are revealed like a procession in this mural of epic proportions.

Khanna's moving work, *The Last Bite (2005)*, speaks for itself. It stands out for its reflection of the camaraderie and debates he shared with other artists, as well as the times that they foresaw. In this painting, Husain is central as a prominent member of the Progressive Artists' Group. He is flanked on the left by Tyeb Mehta, FN Souza and Bhanu Athaiya — the only woman member, who later became important as the costume designer for Richard Attenborough's *Gandhi (1982)*. The painting has other members of the artist fraternity, like Akbar Padamsee who seems to be addressing Bhupen Khakhar, who in turn appears to be looking out of the frame as if engaging with the common man. On Khanna's right is the famed V S Gaitonde addressing Jeram Patel, as the painter Jogen Chowdhury looks out of the frame. Manjit Bawa, Raza and Swaminathan complete the group. As the last man standing, Khanna feels bereft of his friends and contemporaries, but his work and life provide sustenance, not just to himself, but to what he cherishes the most: The ordinary man on the street.

The writer is an art historian and independent curator based in New Delhi

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"You do not need to sympathise with Palestine Action's aims to believe that its proscription sets a chilling precedent and undermines democracy."

— THE GUARDIAN

His spiritual home

In the 66 years the Dalai Lama has lived in India, his bond with the country, its ideas and its people has deepened



BY RAM MADHAV

HIS HOLINESS The Dalai Lama will turn 90 this week. He entered India aged 23 and has spent the last 66 years in Dharamshala in Himachal Pradesh, where the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA) was established a few days after his arrival. It continues to regulate the activities of the Tibetan exiles in India.

On the fateful afternoon of March 31, 1959, the Dalai Lama's party arrived at the Indian border village of Khamzamani, near Tangang in the North-East Frontier Agency, which became the state of Arunachal Pradesh in 1978. His Holiness was seriously ill, and physically exhausted due to two weeks of hard travel from Lhasa through the Tibetan countryside to the Indian border. His 80 companions were received by the Indian Army officials guarding the border. PN Menon, a foreign service official who had previously served in Lhasa, was there, carrying a message from Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru.

"My colleagues and I welcome you", Nehru wrote, adding that India would be happy to "afford the necessary facilities" for the foreign guests to stay in its territory. Less a political meaning was read by China into this gesture. Nehru contended that "the people of India, who hold you in great veneration, will no doubt accord their traditional respect to your personage". Three years earlier, when the Dalai Lama visited India for the first time in November 1956 to participate in the 2,500th Buddha Jayanti celebrations at Bodhi Gaya, Nehru was not that generous. Altered by the rumours that the Dalai Lama may not return to Tibet, and influenced by his friend, Chinese premier Zhou Enlai, he categorically told the Tibetan leader that India could not support him and hence, he should go back to his country and try to work things out with the Chinese.

In 1959, Nehru not only allowed the Dalai Lama to enter India as a refugee but also provided asylum for him and thousands of his followers. Thousands of Tibetans continued to enter India. They were settled across the country at several places including Dharamshala, Dehradun, Darjeeling and Kalimpong in West Bengal, Mainpuri in Chhattisgarh, and Bhalukappa and Mundgod in Karnataka. The number of Tibetan refugees swelled substantially, crossing 1,00,00 at one point. However, over the years, the numbers decreased as many Tibetan youth opted to migrate to other countries, including the US and Europe. According to the census conducted by the Central Tibetan Administration in 2022, an estimated 66,000 Tibetans live in various settlements in India.

Respecting the commitment given to the Indian government, the Dalai Lama and his followers conducted their lives in the host country with the utmost dignity and peace. They made sure that Indian soil was not used for activity against any other

country. As a renowned guru of the Mahayana tradition of Tibetan Buddhism, the Dalai Lama became famous and soon started attracting followers and supporters from across the world. The people of India, including successive Indian governments, always held him in high esteem as a religious and spiritual master.

Through decades of living in exile in India, the Dalai Lama developed a special bond with the country and its people. I have had the fortune of interacting with him on several occasions and his genuine and emotional bond with his spiritual motherland was evident each time. He is a man of not only great wisdom but also of subtle humour. "I may be a Tibetan, but my blood is Indian," he once told me, playfully adding, "Now, I know, I ate the rice and dal of this country for four years and began to be formed out of that." On a more serious note, he once reminisced about his meeting with Morarji Desai. The former PM apparently told the Dalai Lama that Hinduism and Buddhism were two branches of the same tree. "But I respectfully corrected Morarji Desai and told him, 'You are the tree and we are a branch,'" he confided.

This humility and deep respect for Indian culture have remained the hallmarks of the Dalai Lama. "I describe myself as a son of India. My mind has been nourished by India's rich philosophical tradition, while my body has been fed by Indian rice and dal. I am a messenger of two great gifts of India to humanity — religious pluralism and the teachings of ahimsa, the principle of nonviolence," he wrote in his book *Voice for the Voiceless*.

Engagement between the Dalai Lama and the Chinese government began at the end of 1979 when Deng Xiaoping invited his brother, Gyalo Thondup, for a meeting. He came back with a message from Deng that "except for independence", everything could be discussed. Several rounds of negotiations continued between the two sides for years. In his speech to the European Parliament in Strasbourg in 1988, the Dalai Lama publicly indicated that he was willing to "remain a part of the People's Republic of China but only with a guarantee of genuine autonomy". That appears to be the position of Tibetan exiles to this day, although the engagement became erratic due to a lack of trust on both sides.

India has always maintained that the Tibetan political question is a matter to be resolved bilaterally by the Dalai Lama and the Chinese leadership.

As the Dalai Lama's age advances, questions about his succession dominate the discourse. He issued a statement recently, citing a decision of the heads of Tibetan traditions in September 2011, affirming that the institution would continue. He added that the Gaden Phodrang Trust, the Office of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, will be exclusively responsible for recognising the future Dalai Lama. Not unexpectedly, the Chinese government rejected this decision and insisted that the process would take place under its gaze.

While the reincarnation issue may remain a major conflict between China and the Tibetans, what could become a bigger contention is His Holiness' assertion that "the new Dalai Lama will be born in the free world".

The writer, president, India Foundation, is with the BJP. Views are personal



AMITABH KANT

CITIES ARE THE engines of India's future growth, innovation and job creation. Just 15 urban hubs contribute 30 per cent of India's GDP. These 15 cities — Mumbai, New Delhi, Bengaluru, Chennai, Hyderabad, Kolkata, Ahmedabad, Pune, Surat, Coimbatore, Noida/Greater Noida, Kochi, Gurugram, Vishakhapatnam, and Nagpur — will drive India's ability to become a \$30+ trillion economy by 2047, facilitating an extra 1.5 per cent growth. Yet they do not get their due. These cities face numerous issues like extreme air pollution, urban flooding, water scarcity, lack of reliable internet connectivity, garbage, and slums. These are a direct reflection of how these cities expanded without proper planning or strong urban governance. Additionally, they also remain unprepared for the climate crisis.

While cities like Bangkok, London, Dubai, and Singapore attract millions worldwide, Indian cities rarely feature as global destinations. How can we unlock their full potential?

We must clean our cities' air. Approximately 42 of the 50 most polluted cities are in India. Vehicular emissions, construction dust and biomass burning are primary culprits. Public transport must be electrified at the earliest opportunity. Construction dust norms need to be implemented strictly. Budget 2025-26 announced the creation of a Rs 1 lakh crore Urban Challenge Fund — this can include a city-level grand challenge. Cities should be ranked and financial incentives disbursed based on performance.

It will take a city

If their potential is unlocked, 15 urban hubs can propel India's economy

Solid waste management must be transformed. According to the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs (MoHUA), our cities produce upwards of 1.50,000 tonnes of solid waste daily, yet only a quarter is processed scientifically and sustainably. At the national level, India is estimated to generate about 62 million tonnes of municipal solid waste yearly, of which about 70 per cent is collected but only 30 per cent is processed. This is a failure of municipal governance. To fix it, state governments must build strong infrastructure — including purchasing vehicles for waste collection and transport — and train staff to handle these tasks effectively. Clear policies and regulations that promote performance-based accountability are key. Ultimately, better regulation, community involvement, and capacity-building is the only way to transform waste management into a sustainable, circular system — one that experts say could unlock as much as \$73.5 trillion annually by 2030.

India's model has shown immense promise. Door-to-door segregated waste is transported in specialised vehicles to world-class waste processing plants. Wet waste is processed into bio-CNG.

Water stress is an urgent challenge. Nearly half of our rivers are polluted. In 2018, NITI Aayog predicted that 40 per cent of India's population would face water scarcity by 2030. Cities lose 40-50 per cent of piped water in transmission, and poor water quality worsens health issues. In India, sewage leakages into water bodies were plugged, leveraging GIS technology, Rainwater harvesting and

reuse of treated water have turned India into India's first water-plus city.

The Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) and Knight Frank estimate a shortfall of 10 million affordable homes, expected to triple to 31 million by 2030. Informal settlements have proliferated, resulting in illegal colonies with inadequate infrastructure support, including water and sanitation. Increasing floor space index (FSI) and floor area ratio (FAR) growth will promote vertical growth. Density-related incentives are a potential solution too, as highlighted by the G20 India and OECD report on "Financing Cities of Tomorrow".

India's urban potential remains trapped behind congested and overburdened city environments. According to the Boston Consulting Group, the average Indian city dweller spends 1.5-2 hours daily stuck in traffic. Congestion also boosts emissions and pollution. To address this, we must prioritise investing in public transport. Implementing congestion-based pricing and harnessing AI and IoT for smart traffic management can also optimise flows. And roads will only be free of traffic if citizens follow rules and drive responsibly.

While cities like Seoul, Singapore and Hong Kong offer internet speeds exceeding 1 Gbps, India's average mobile internet speed is just around 100 Mbps. To attract top global companies, multinational corporations setting up innovation centres, global capability centres (GCCs), and R&D hubs, India needs to dramatically upgrade its digital infrastructure.

To do this, we need to expand high-speed broadband, 4G, and 5G across cities and rural areas. This requires cutting spectrum prices to attract investment, building extensive fibre-optic networks, and deploying 5G nationally.

Effective urban reform depends on decentralised planning, governance, and financing. NITI Aayog reports that India has just one planner for every 1,00,000 people, while developed nations have one for every 5,000-10,000. Most Indian cities lack proper master plans. Full implementation of the 74th Constitutional Amendment must happen — along with increasing property tax collection, which is less than 0.2 per cent of GDP. Digitising land records, using tech for surveillance and tax collection, and exploring land value capture (LVC) can help cities generate revenue. Once cities can raise their own revenues, they can tap into municipal bond markets — though only after completing planning and governance reforms.

Our cities carry centuries of history and should be world-class economic and cultural magnets. The steps outlined will make our cities cleaner, safer, more productive, and accessible. This must be paired with investments in walkable heritage zones and seamless urban experiences — which the government enables, and the private sector creates.

The next decade is beyond a doubt an "urban decade", and these 15 cities must drive India's urban renaissance.

The writer is India's G20 sherpa and CEO of NITI Aayog

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

LANGUAGE POLITICS

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, "Slap in Mumbai's Face" (IE, July 4). The long-standing debate over Hindi imposition, a pre-Independence flashpoint, consistently serves as a political tool to incite division rather than foster unity. The 1937 "Tamil Nadu for Tamilians" agitation set a dangerous precedent. Today, beyond the mandatory Hindi debate, the same divisive rhetoric manifests in physical assaults — a bank employee slapped for not speaking Hindi — a pollution keeper for not speaking Marathi — all under the banner of "pride".

Prishman Kumar Chug, Delhi

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, "Slap in Mumbai's Face" (IE, July 4). The Mira Road slapping points to the MNS desperation to regain lost ground in Maharashtra's politics. The attackers record the violence, as they were sure that they would face no action. They believed that it would ensure their promotion in the party hierarchy and also bring cheers from their supporters. The MNS's fierce opposition to Hindi imposition and its Marathi imposition on migrants at the same time expose its double standards. Its anti-Hindi stand is an example of its performative politics. If the party, or any other group that bullies

migrants to speak Marathi, really wishes to promote the language, it must hold free Marathi classes for migrants.

SH Quadri, Bikaner

FUEL BAN PAUSE

THIS REFERS TO the report, "Delhi Govt says pause fuel ban on end-of-life vehicles, cities tech issues, public outcry" (IE, July 4). I am against vehicular pollution. But a more effective way to curb it would be to check the road-worthiness of a vehicle. Based on that, a pollution-free certificate mechanism can be pursued for both the city and inter-state vehicles. The vehicles not approved road-worthy can be withdrawn.

AI Agarwal, Delhi

FLASHPOINT TIBET

THIS REFERS TO the article, "Draw a moral line" (IE, July 4). The celebration of the life of the spiritual leader of Tibetan Buddhists of the Nalanda tradition who turns 90 this weekend has had a dose of geopolitics injected into it as the succession issue of the Dalai Lama has cropped up. However, India is firm that the Dalai Lama and the Gaden Phodrang Trust, which has set up to handle the succession as it wishes. This is a welcome step.

Kholkan Das, Kolkata

THE ASIAN AGE

5 JULY 2025

Trump's 'Big, Beautiful Bill' not so good for poor in US

The US President signed the "big, beautiful bill" into law on Independence Day. This "MAGA" written all over it. In a country in which the distinction between truth and falsehood, and fact and fiction, is fast fading, it might seem a little little that Trump is doing the opposite of Robin Hood — robbing the poor of their medical and food aid, with plans to cut them and save \$1 trillion in 10 years while giving much more to the rich in "big, beautiful" tax breaks.

There will be a lot more money not only for national defence, which must be a priority in these uncertain times when national territorial boundaries are seen to draw the least respect, but also plenty of money for guarding the US border and effecting mass deportations of illegal aliens and possibly everyone else who are not the rulers' liking.

Assuming defence and deportations are national concerns for the US even as the effects of the loss of Medicaid and cuts in food stamps may take time to trickle down, it is the US's runaway debt that others in the world might be worried about, especially China.

All economic theories and the fiscal practices based on them that have shaped global financial norms over decades have been thrown out of the window. The bill envisages the US would run up a deficit of \$3.4 trillion over the next 10 years to add to its existing national debt of \$36.22 tn, which means the country may have to print more notes to compensate.

China, which used to hold about \$1.3 tn of US debt paper but reduced it to about \$700 bn by reinvesting in gold and other assets, is worried about the US reneging on its debt in the future. While this may be in line with Mr Xi Jinping's great assertion that the East is rising while the West is declining, China might stand to lose much if the dollar is devalued and dragged down the US assets his country holds.

At home, Trump's acolytes who faced great resistance, even among fellow Republicans, in having the bill passed, used every political artifice to get it through, with the vice-president J.D. Vance breaking the tie in the Senate and four Republican members of the House were ultimately convinced to change their stand and vote with the party in a 218-214 verdict.

It should surprise no one that Elon Musk, once Trump's right hand until the election and just after, dubbed the bill "insane" and a Democrat who spoke for a record eight-and-a-half hours on the floor of the House deemed it a "disgusting abomination." But all that criticism is so much water off a duck's or, for that matter, Donald's back.

Among the \$4.5 tn in tax cuts would be a provision for deductions on top, over-time and auto loans. The wealthiest households may benefit by \$13,000 per year while the poorest would be hit by up to \$1,800 a year. It has been computed that the federal spending cuts could leave 11.8 million more people without health insurance by 2024. It is in reducing the money for the social safety net that the Republicans are giving away their pro-rich, anti-poor attitude. So too the fact that a \$200 tax will disappear from purchase of gun silencers, short-barrel rifles and shotguns.

The Democrats are betting on making capital of all this in the 2026 polls when they can hope to swing the narrow Senate and House majority the Republicans enjoy now. This might all seem a bundle of American problems, but in an interconnected world they mean a lot more, including possible effects on American economic dominance.

Row erupts over Prada's Kolhapuris

Luxury fashion label Prada recently launched a footwear design, which is startlingly reminiscent of the humble Kolhapuri chappal, an artisanal leather sandal indigenous to the town of Kolhapur in Maharashtra.

While the adaptation of designs is considered normal, though not legal, this incident has triggered a furor and set off a debate on cultural appropriation versus appreciation.

The Kolhapuri chappal is not just footwear. It is a slice of living heritage, which was painstakingly crafted by skilled artisans using age-old methods. It embodies India's rich legacy of indigenous design.

It is inappropriate on part of a global brand like Prada to steal the design and sell it at a price which is 120 times more than the original product without any visible acknowledgment to its roots.

Though the Kolhapuri chappal was granted GI status in 2019, it could not stop international brands from capitalising on its form while ignoring its name, origin and socio-economic ecosystem.

This incident raises important questions: If Prada could sell a pair of sandals, which is available at less than \$10 (₹640) in India, for \$1,200 (over ₹1 lakh), why do its makers still languish in poverty? Why can't the government, which gives various incentives to foreign companies to create jobs in India, take India's legacy products to the international markets in partnership with global fashion majors?

Globally, people aspire for new designs and fashion at an affordable cost. India with its multiple cultures has a treasure trove of handicrafts and fabrics which are not exploited commercially for the benefit of artisans, who continue to lead miserable lives in poverty. While imitation is the best flattery, Prada has in fact given a wake-up call for Indians to realise the worth of their heritage.

THE ASIAN AGE

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Farrukh Dhorndy Cabbages & Kings



"Oh Bachchoo! What made you a voice in the wilderness? Why did you constantly resort to digress? From the opinions of the sages of your time? Because I was determined to believe no superstition. I was led to see the poverty around and use my intuition To relate the fact that one led to the other That bulkish and poverty were sister and brother?" — From Thoughts During Palang Polo, by Bachchoo

Targeting Israel at Glastonbury, Kumbh of Music, raises a storm

Every year — not twelve — there is a sort of Kumbh Mela in Britain. It has no religious connotations, unlike one regards pop music as a religion which, with faithful followers and hedonistic overtones, it can be.

This, gentle reader, is the annual music festival at Glastonbury in Somerset where 200,000 fans gather for five days to camp out and listen to, follow, away and wave to an estimated 3,000 performers on a hundred different stages.

Okay, so not quite the Kumbh Mela, but then just think of the relative proportions of the populations of India and Britain.

The BBC records and transmits the performances and this year run into censure from Prime Minister Keir Starmer, from MPs across the board and from

the regular BBC-basher commentator. Was the censure justified?

Among the performers were two bands which came in for this kind of censure. The first is a new note, the Irish trio called Kneecap, named after the Irish Republican Army's method of punishing informants and renegades by shooting them in the kneecaps with low-velocity pistols. This punishment would mangle the knee caps and, of course, render the victims partially lame or, in some known cases, lead to amputations of the leg. Not very nice — but this was the practice the IRA adopted when they perpetrated what they claimed was a war for the liberation of Northern Ireland from the UK, fighting Protestant militant organisations — years of murder and conflict which are now euphemistically labelled "The Troubles".

Kneecap took the stage at Glastonbury, having acquired a reputation for wild and supposedly incendiary statements over the last year. They made and then retracted incendiary statements. The rag group has been known to urge from the stage, in a frivolous sounding statement, the murder of Tory MPs.

The leader of the group has been charged by the British police with waving the Palestinian flag. No trial has yet taken place for this supposed offence.

Kneecap's incendiary statements have led to Sir Keir Starmer saying they should not be or not have been in (I'm unsure of the timing of this statement) invited onto a Glastonbury stage. Kneecap's appearances,

and the criticism they harvested as a result, has led to them denying that they meant any harm to anyone.

They play distinguishingly innocent: "Me??? Big bad wolf? Blow the house down? No, no, I was merely hiccupping and was misinterpreted as blowing the poor piggy's house, etc. I love the piggy's m'lud. All misrepresentation and deliberate distortion..." So spake the retracting Kneecap — a real disgrace to the lupine race?

On this occasion, their appearance at Glastonbury, they are again accused of pro-Palestinian propaganda. One of them was wearing a T-shirt with the words of PALESTINE ACTION on it. This is the name of a group that evaded Britain's Royal Air Force security, rode scooters into the RAF base at Brize Norton and sprayed red paint over two military aircraft. This was, of course, deemed by the Air Force and by the government as a "terrorist act" and Palestine Action was designated as a "terrorist" group.

Please note, gentle reader, that the Israel Defence Force, the IDF, which, according to objective and neutral reports, would murder Palestinian civilians every day, shoot men, women and children as they try and avoid starvation by collecting food from international aid agencies, bomb and kill Palestinian civilians by the hundreds or thousands each week, is of course not granted this condemnatory label.

Red paint on two military aircraft — symbolic of the military aid the UK lends to the genocidal actions

of the Benjamin Netanyahu regime of Israel — is labelled "terrorism".

Genocide is, ... acceptable as it assists the

And so to the structures on Bob Dylan. These are two Brit lads with Rastafarian dreadlocks who appeared on the Glastonbury stage in tubby half nakedness wearing flimsy white cotton shorts and got their thousands of followers and fans to join them in chants of "Death to the IDF". The fans sounded enthusiastic and, yes, there were Palestinian flags waved in the midst of the adoring, approving crowds. Nevertheless, it's extremely improbable that the fans of Glastonbury will form armies or in any way find means to defeat the genocidal IDF.

I think it goes without saying that Bob Dylan (is an intended double pun on Dylan and Villain?) does not expect their stage-stated urging at Glastonbury to result in the defeat of Israel's armies.

Even so, Jewish organisations and the UK government have reacted to their attack on the IDF as "anti-Semitism". Yes, the Netanyahu government and the conscripted IDF ranks are Jewish, but attacking their genocidal actions is in no way an attack on the faith or race of the Jews. It's anti-genocide, not anti-Semitism, and who better than Jews to realise that?

The distinction is crucial and a lawyer like Sir Keir Starmer knows it is ... but ... hey, arms deals ... trade deals ...!

Subhani



India, China, West: How to trade with 'foreign devils'



Sanjeev Ahluwalia

During the late 19th century in China under the Qing dynasty, foreign traders, missionaries, and soldiers were referred to as "foreign devils", who had no place in the right imperial order. In comparison, India's relationship with foreign traders and cultural influences had been far more syncretic, rather than exclusionary — a source of strength and resilience but also a challenge, while learning to march to a common drumbeat.

Today, China, the world's largest exporter, is an omnipresent "foreign devil" and an emerging global hegemon. India lags in comparison. Experts as a share of current GDP were 22 per cent in 2023 versus about 30 per cent in East Asia and 29 per cent for all countries (World Bank). India's size and beneficent traditions, encourage protection, insular growth. Till 1982, this was the only option, as regulatory spaghetti trapped both private enterprise and foreign trade.

Over the last three decades, the easing of foreign investment norms and relaxed foreign exchange controls have opened Indian business to overseas opportunities and competition. But practically, the bellwether of competitiveness, still lags.

Among the developing regions, firm level productivity in South Asia, where India dominates economically, is four-fifths that of East Asia (World Bank 2021). Total factor productivity, or the value of output derived per unit of land, labour, capital, and innovation — a productivity metric, is the second lowest after Sub-Saharan Africa. No wonder South Asian firms export a lower percentage of their output versus any other region.

Of those firms that do export, those which export 75 per cent or more of their production dominate, unlike

other regions. In East Asia, the share of firms which export between 50 to 75 per cent and supply the domestic market is the highest. This illustrates the "dual economy" structure in India.

Product demand in the domestic market is quite different from export demand. This should change once South Asia catches up with East Asian per capita incomes, which are more than three times higher.

Trade agreements thrive when there is complementarity in market demand across countries. India does not conform to the cookie-cutter profile of a lower middle-income economy. Services export — normally a rich country's strength — is 45 per cent of our exports, of which IT and telecom services account for about one-half. Business process outsourcing and consulting is growing rapidly. India is the seventh largest exporter of services, up from being twenty-first two decades ago. In manufacturing exports, India improved from being a midsize supplier to amongst the top fifteen exporters over the last two decades by diversifying from textiles, gems and basic manufacturing to electronics, pharma, machinery, and automobiles.

Year 2025 will be a hectic year for Indian trade negotiators. The challenges as bilateral trade deals proliferate. Traditionally scarce resources in the ministry of commerce should be ramped up. Sufficiently diversified expertise is necessary to avoid unforeseen errors due to insufficient impact analysis or inadequate brainstorming within the government.

Before adopting a negotiating stance, the unfortunate mistake has been made (see Cotnam) on genetically modified crops, being removed from public view, in the face of trenchant political accusations of a "sellout" to

Achieving sustainable GDP growth with stability is the highest priority. Suppressing imports, via trade constraints, except in emergencies, is an inferior option to enhancing domestic competitiveness via an active industrial policy.

America, serves as a cautionary tale.

Each bilateral deal sets the expectations for succeeding deals. Bilateral trade deals with Israel and the UAE exist, and another with the UK is to follow. Discussions with the European Union will start in 2025. Donald Trump expects to "open up" India. He must not be disappointed, if he is willing to factor in the vastly different fiscal capacity of the two governments to support adverse fallout on domestic manufacturing and agriculture. The deadline for a deal is July 8, after which the 10 per cent basic import duty for Indian exports to the US will increase to 26 per cent.

An "early harvest" framework for a large defence or cutting-edge technology manufacturing partnership plus limited import access for GM foods for consumption, not production, might bring a reprieve. India's trade negotiators should actively protect access to agricultural products other than edible oils and rubber, which are in deficit. Dairy products are another no-go area, relevant for the EU and New Zealand. Applying minimum price constraints on imports could distinguish between domestic supply of daily needs items and import for the dining, import competition in meat — processed or raw — is a new area for trade, if domestic livestock rearing for slaughter is no longer culturally acceptable.

Import in high-growth areas like EVs — initially for local assembly and eventual manufacturing — along with demonstrated liabilities for firm supply of batteries and semiconductors can accelerate sustainable growth.

Foreign access to large government contracts, on a reciprocal basis, can be a win-win to protect the interests of small and medium domes-

tic industry whilst improving benchmarks for competitiveness in government. Improvement in the governance arrangements for bidding are prerequisites for avoiding and seamless settlement of disputes. India is committed to becoming carbon neutral by 2070. Per capita carbon emissions continue to be lower than the global average. This distinguishes us from the EU. On other environmental measures — forests, water and air quality — expectations should align with national targets.

On labour standards, best-efforts national guidelines are the appropriate option to retain our comparative advantage. The EU-proposed Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism violates the principle of "differentiated responsibilities" enshrined in the Kyoto Protocol. This is duplicitous. Carve-outs should protect the Indian metals industry till 2024, via declining export quotas, based on evidenced plans for Green Hydrogen supply lines.

Trade agreements must not be evaluated by the additional exports they generate or the imports they suppress. Boosting GDP growth is key. A trade concession which directly enhances GDP — say by infusion of an associated large foreign investment or technology — but leaves the trade deficit as earlier, is better than one which simply leaves the deficit unchanged or another formulation which reduces the trade deficit but does nothing to grow the economy.

Put simply, achieving sustainable GDP growth with stability is the highest priority for trade negotiations. Next comes export growth — a validation of global competitiveness. Suppressing imports, via trade constraints, except in emergencies, is an inferior option to enhancing domestic competitiveness via an active industrial policy. Finally, while dealing with "Foreign Devils", never seek to replicate them. They know themselves well, but not us. Therein lies our advantage.

The writer is Distinguished Fellow, Chintan Research Foundation, and was earlier with the IAS and the World Bank

LETTERS THE EXPENDABLES

Custodial deaths are a blot on the entire law and order machinery. It is no secret that third degree torture is routinely used to extract confessions out of the accused in almost every police station. Recently there were appointments given to successful candidates appearing for selection to the police department. How many have been trained in using modern techniques to solve crimes? The public also suffers extra-judicial killings because the court cases drag for too long. But it is always the most powerless who are the worst sufferers. The real culprits are treated with kid gloves as they know how to get around the system.

Anthony Henriques Mumbai

NIRMALA NEXT CHIEF?

THE BJP is undergoing a major organisational rejig. After the appointment of party chiefs for local units in six states and UTs, the party is now shifting focus on appointing its national president. BJP leader Nirmala Sitharaman has been holding the finance minister's position since 2019, after the BJP was elected for a second term. She is being seen as one of the frontrunners for the BJP president's post, being one of the more influential women in the party. Her roots in Tamil Nadu can also be an advantage to the BJP, given the party's push down south.

Sankar Paul Chakdaha, West Bengal

OTP PLEASE!

INDIA'S DIGITAL GROWTH has created a new kind of workforce in the form of "gig work" that operates differently from traditional jobs but plays a major role in the growth of the country's economy. However, since gig workers are not officially recognised under existing labour laws, they continue to face lack of protection and employment security. It creates a class of workers who bear the responsibilities of employment without its corresponding rights. A more thoughtful legal approach is needed by India that addresses the needs of the gig and platform workers.

R. Sivakumar Chennai

Absurd fare

Strange move to tinker with cab aggregator pricing

The advent of ride taxis over the last decade has led, globally, to a lot of debate and discussion on how fares and charges should be regulated. On one side are the consumers and on the other the operators. Both sides have valid and invalid arguments but most countries refrain from regulating the fares while regulating other non-price aspects like safety.

But the Indian bureaucracy is nothing if not ambitious. So the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways has come out with highly detailed and, therefore, largely unimplementable guidelines on how taxi aggregators like Uber and Ola should be regulated. For consumers, an important component of this is something called 'surge' pricing wherein the aggregator is allowed to hike fares when the demand for taxis outstrips their supply. Until now the mark-up was 1.5 times the base fare. Now it is recommended that it can be two times. In short the government has now legalised price gouging. No logic for this generosity has been provided. One must therefore ask: why stop at two times, why not two-and-a-half or more? Or why could this surge pricing not be reduced?

The answer is straightforward: it's not the multiple that's applied but the base fare that's important. No one knows what it is or should be: cost plus and inflation indexed or simply x times the bus or metro fare. In theory fares are a smooth continuum calculated by an algorithm that takes into account demand and supply. But that algorithm is a well guarded secret, which suggests a large element of arbitrariness in setting the initial conditions or, in this case, the base fare. The guidelines are silent on this aspect. Be that as it may, in India the subject lies in the jurisdiction of States and municipalities. So what these price guidelines will achieve, other than a sharp increase in peak hour prices, remains to be seen.

In transport pricing, regulators often either forget or ignore or are not aware of the most important element, namely, the nature of the transport supply arrangements and the nature of the contract between the buyers and sellers of transport services. Where the former are concerned the key element is whether the supply is part of a network like buses or airlines or is it a randomised point to point one like a tax service. In a nutshell, the former follows a revenue maximisation objective with a high degree of cross subsidisation between routes, while the latter follows a pure profit maximisation model. This difference is crucial in determining the nature of the contract. While in both cases it is essentially bilateral between the consumer and the supplier of the service, in the latter case regulation is well-nigh impossible because it boils down to need and ability to pay as also the degree of locally available alternatives, that is, competition. Finally, the old habit of the bureaucracy of tinkering with markets in a clumsy and meaningless way is once again playing itself out. Urban transport policies should look at holistic solutions.

OTHER VOICES.

CHINA DAILY

China and the EU seek to further deepen relations

Although China and the European Union have some differences on certain issues, such as the Ukraine crisis and trade, the friendly and pragmatic exchanges between EU senior officials and visiting Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi on Wednesday clearly indicate both sides are still dedicated to resolving their differences and deepening their cooperation through dialogue and negotiation. The differences between China and the EU have never hindered their relationship from developing into one of the most influential ties in the world. So their differences should not be a cause for estrangement today. It is their broad common interests, great cooperation potential and shared stance on multilateralism and a rules-based world order with the United Nations at its centre that have provided the foundation on which they have always been able to stabilise their relations. (JINGJI, JULY 5)

The Japan Times

As trade deadline approaches, Japan must draw lines

According to conventional wisdom, a strong national leader will force a weak one, or one with less popular support, to buckle in tough negotiations. By that logic, US President Donald Trump has the whip hand in trade talks with Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba. Yet, Ishiba has held out, resisting US pressure to sign a quick deal, a position that is strengthened, ironically, by Ishiba's weakness. The prime minister cannot afford to make concessions as the July 20 Upper House election approaches. His spine is stiffened by the failure of the US to make clear its demands and the US president's record of flipping up deals that even he negotiated. Clarity and trust are the essential prerequisites of successful negotiations. Neither exists today. (TOKYO, JULY 4)

Why potential growth rate is 6.5%

GROWTH PATH. Taking an ICOR of 5.3, we can consider a potential real GDP growth rate close to 6.5 per cent as feasible

C. RANGARAJAN
DK SRIVASTAVA

In deciding India's potential growth, investment rate along with incremental capital-output ratio plays an important role. An important feature of India's investment rate profile is the difference between nominal and real investment rates. Chart 1 shows that between nominal and real investment rates, a crossover happened in 2011-12. Prior to this year, the real investment rate was lower than the nominal investment rate. After this year, real investment rate became not only higher than nominal investment rate but the gap between the two has also increased. In 2024-25, this difference accounts for 3.4 per cent points of GDP when we look at the magnitudes on trend basis.

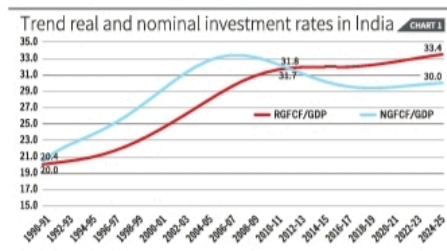
Thus, the falling saving rate in India has been accompanied by: (i) an increased level of net inflow of foreign capital; (ii) fall in valuations, *et al.*; and (iii) a lower deflator-based inflation of investment goods *vis-à-vis* GDP as a whole.

The Table highlights that on trend basis, the ratio of GFCF (gross fixed capital formation) deflator to GDP deflator, which was at its peak 1.2 in 2001-02, fell below 1 in 2012-13. This ratio appears to have stabilised at a level of 0.9 in recent years.

ESTIMATING ICOR

GFCF is related to growth rate through a technological ratio which is referred to as the incremental capital output ratio (ICOR). This is defined as investment rate divided by percentage change in real GDP. Since this is a technological relationship, this should be measured in physical terms. It should fall as technology progresses and increase as

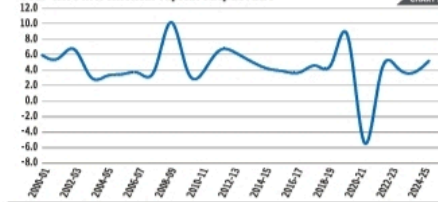
production processes become more capital intensive. However, a direct measure of the ICOR is not available. Instead, it is estimated empirically using data pertaining to GFCF and GDP growth rate. This ratio, however, appears to be quite volatile as shown in



Deflators of GDP and GFCF on trend basis

FY	GDP deflator	GDP deflator-based inflation	GFCF deflator	GFCF deflator-based inflation	Ratio of GFCF to GDP deflators	FY	GDP deflator	GDP deflator-based inflation	GFCF deflator	GFCF deflator-based inflation	Ratio of GFCF to GDP deflators
2001	46.5	5.5	55.4	6.1	1.19	2013	104.5	6.1	102.1	3.9	0.96
2002	49.2	5.8	58.8	6.1	1.20	2014	118.4	5.7	105.9	3.8	0.96
2003	52.3	6.2	62.5	6.2	1.19	2015	116.2	5.3	109.8	3.7	0.95
2004	55.8	6.7	66.3	6.1	1.19	2016	121.9	4.9	113.8	3.6	0.93
2005	59.8	7.2	70.3	6.0	1.17	2017	127.6	4.7	118.0	3.7	0.92
2006	64.3	7.5	74.3	5.7	1.16	2018	133.3	4.5	122.4	3.7	0.92
2007	69.2	7.7	78.3	5.4	1.13	2019	139.1	4.4	127.0	3.8	0.91
2008	74.6	7.7	82.4	5.1	1.10	2020	145.0	4.2	131.7	3.8	0.91
2009	80.3	7.6	86.4	4.9	1.08	2021	150.9	4.0	136.6	3.7	0.91
2010	86.2	7.4	90.3	4.6	1.05	2022	162.1	3.5	146.0	3.2	0.90
2011	92.3	7.0	94.3	4.4	1.02	2023	167.2	3.1	150.2	2.9	0.90
2012	98.4	6.6	98.2	4.1	1.00	2024	171.9	2.8	154.0	2.5	0.90

Year-wise incremental capital output ratio



Source (basic data): MoSPI

Chart 2. This ratio is not a purely technological one. If the growth rate is lower for other reasons it will show up in higher ICOR.

Further, the Covid year was a significant outlier and makes estimation of any trend values quite difficult. In

order to formulate a view on India's current ICOR, it may be useful to just take an average value of pre- and post-Covid years, ignoring the values of Covid year and the next year which contains a strong base effect. This ratio during 2018-19 to 2019-20 and from 2022-23 to 2024-25 averaged 5.3.

POTENTIAL GROWTH RATE
Combining the ICOR of 5.3 with the 2024-25 actual real GFCF/GDP ratio of 33.7 per cent gives a potential growth of 6.4 per cent. We might consider a potential real GDP growth rate close to 6.5 per cent as feasible in India's current context. Going forward, the situation will be comfortable if India's real GFCF rate rises to about 35 per cent. A growth rate of 6.5 per cent may look like lower than the performance in recent years. But India's growth over a much longer period is not above 6.5 per cent.

In estimating potential growth, we need to look at the performance in the past over an extended period. India's growth rate from 2011-12 to 2023-24 is 6.1 per cent, both on average basis and on the basis of CAGR.

However, this period contains the exceptional year of 2020-21 affected by Covid. Some of the influences that may affect the long-term potential growth on the positive side would include the impact of changing technology including AI and Gen AI. On the negative side, there would be the impact of growing share of capital consumption as the capital stock becomes older and new technologies call for replacement of old capital at a faster rate. These forces may balance themselves out leaving India's long term potential growth close to 6.5 per cent. In the world of today, this is a reasonably high growth rate. India has to reckon with also an unfavourable external environment. Against the background of such a potential, India must draw up its plans to achieve other objectives like employment and social justice.

(Concluded)
Part 1 of this article, 'Potential growth stays at 6.5%', appeared in these columns on July 4

C. Rangarajan is Chairman, Madras School of Economics, former Chairman, Prime Minister's Economic Advisory Council, and former Governor, Reserve Bank of India. Srivastava is Honorary Professor, MSE, and Member, Advisory Council to the Sixteenth Finance Commission. Views expressed are personal

Don't compromise on industrial safety

In some cases, regulations allow firms to self-certify safety and ban surprise inspections, thus compromising rigorous oversight

Sirish Kumar Gouda

In recent weeks, we have witnessed deadly disasters that highlight flagrant safety lapses. The Air India Dreamliner crash and the Chennai metro rail girder collapse highlight a critical issue: a systemic erosion of industrial safety standards and a diminishing "factor of safety". In just the first half of 2025, India has witnessed a series of fatal industrial accidents: a fireworks warehouse explosion in Gujarat, a fire accident at a cracker factory in Andhra Pradesh, a blast at an ordinance factory in Nagpur, and a chemical factory explosion in Mumbai, to name a few.

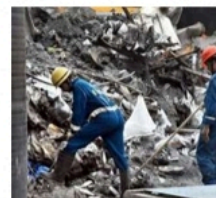
These are some of the prominent ones in major manufacturing setups reported in the press, while there will be many more in the hinterlands which go unreported. According to IndustriALL, which represents workers in a wide range of sectors, over 400 workers lost their lives in workplace accidents in 2024 alone. Per the Directorate General of Factory Advice Service and Labour Institutes (DGFASLI) reports, on average, three people working in factories died every day between 2012 and 2022. Such recurring incidents highlight the serious repercussions when engineering margins erode and

oversight falters, and the fact that proactive safety must be a fundamental business imperative. Organisations should move away from a culture of learning only through tragedy and focus on systemic resilience.

Over the last few years, the government has pushed for several initiatives such as the Make in India programme and Production Linked Incentive (PLI) schemes, promotion and development of industrial corridors to attract investments in the manufacturing sector. While these initiatives contribute to the larger development narrative, safety becomes of paramount importance. On the other hand, driven by intense competition, businesses often prioritise efficiency over protective measures, thus operating with razor-thin safety margins.

DILUTION IN WORKER SAFETY
Experts warn that cost-cutting has reduced the traditional "factor of safety" in design and operations. In some instances, regulations also allow firms to self-certify safety and ban surprise inspections, effectively prioritising ease of doing business over rigorous oversight. Evidently, accidents that occur as a result of negligence of safety rules are becoming routine.

Academic research and anecdotal



SAFETY CULTURE. A must for keeping risks in check KUNAL KAPOOR

evidence have clearly showcased that companies that cut corners on worker safeguards may save money in the short term but risk far higher costs from disasters, both human and financial. Investing in worker health and safety is a strategic business decision. A strong safety culture not only keeps the risks in check it also enhances employee productivity, morale, and performance. It preserves credibility, attracts clients, and secures investor confidence, with favourable ESG (Environmental, Social, Governance) ratings bolstering brand value.

Safety and security of workers is part of the corporate ESG ratings, with a majority of the ESG frameworks

recording occupational health and safety under the 'Social' category. With millions of dollars of funds flowing based on impact investing models, poor safety performance can lead to lower ESG scores, thus leading to lasting reputation damage. In India, SEBI-driven Business Responsibility and Sustainability Reporting (BRSR) standards also mandate top-listed firms to disclose information related to workplace incident data, further linking safety to shareholder value. ESG ratings, thus, offer an impactful, market-driven mechanism to drive safety improvements, especially where direct regulatory monitoring and enforcement are inconsistent.

In an emerging economy, systems and market conditions may push the limits of organisations to achieve the best performance at breakneck speeds and at a low cost. But the cost of growth should not be paid in people's lives. The recent tragedies are a grim reminder that engineering margins and corporate goodwill are not infinite. Only a sustained, system-wide focus on occupational health and safety, well-integrated with ESG accountability, can prevent the next disaster and keep industry truly sustainable.

The writer is Faculty - Operations Management and Decision Sciences Area, IIM Trichurapalli

LETTERS TO EDITOR Send your letters by email to bleditor@thehindu.co.in or by post to "Letters to the Editor", The Hindu Business Line, Kasturi Buildings, 859-860, Anna Salai, Chennai 600002.

VRRR operations

This pertains to RBI's decision to conduct a Variable Rate Reverse Repo (VRRR) auction to absorb surplus liquidity. The current liquidity surplus appears to be driven largely by the record transfer of surplus dividend from the RBI to the government, followed by increased government expenditure. Bank deposits, another typical source of liquidity, have not shown a commensurate rise.

From a banking perspective, this sudden influx of liquidity is not necessarily beneficial. Since it is temporary in nature, it does not offer banks a stable basis for profitable credit deployment, which is essential for supporting long-term economic growth. As such it is a supply-side challenge rooted in the

fiscal side of the economy.

Additionally, frequent VRRR operations may incidentally bolster the RBI's income through higher returns on liquidity absorption, potentially leading to higher future dividend transfers to the government. This creates a cycle where fiscal and monetary actions reinforce each other, but not always in the most productive way.

Srinivasan Velamuri

Chennai

Coops can lift MSMEs

This refers to how cooperatives can boost MSME potential (July 4). MSMEs and cooperatives are two important pillars of the Indian economy, especially in rural and semi-urban areas, having huge potential for inclusive and sustainable

development. Cooperatives provide access to credit and financial services to MSMEs. They can establish direct connections with buyers bypassing intermediaries and improving profit margins. Also there are ample opportunities for cooperatives to take benefits under PM Vishwakarma scheme of the MSME Ministry.

P Victor Selvaraj

Pavankrishna, TN

Careless use of drugs

The editorial 'Weighty issues' (July 4) rightly highlights the issue of casual use of diabetes and weight-loss drugs. With India having a high prevalence of diabetes and pre-diabetes and the fast rising problem of obesity for the last couple decades, many are resorting

On businessline.in

The next steps for Democrats

The passage of the Big Beautiful Bill gives the Democrats a rare chance to win big in next year's mid-term polls, says

Sridhar Krishnaswami

<https://link.in/AA06>

QCOs: Sridhar toy market

Implementing Quality Control Orders without addressing domestic inefficiencies have created supply disruptions, fuelled inflation, and undermined the competitiveness of local manufacturers, argue

Nancy Gupta and Prerna Prabhakar

<https://link.in/W0H6>

Delhi's fuel ban for old vehicles: What does the law say?

SOPHIA MATHEW
NEW DELHI, JULY 4

TWO DAYS after fuel pumps in Delhi began refusing petrol and diesel to vehicles older than their mandated lives, the state Environment Minister urged the air quality watchdog for the National Capital Region (NCR) to pause the implementation of the policy, citing "operational and infrastructural challenges".

The directive from the Commission for Air Quality Management (CAQM), intended to force end-of-life vehicles (ELVs), a major source of vehicular pollution, off the roads, is grounded in long-standing court orders and strong environmental concerns.

What is Delhi's 'fuel ban' for old vehicles?

As of July 1, diesel vehicles older than 10 years and petrol vehicles older than 15 years cannot legally get fuel in Delhi's fuel stations.

In April, the CAQM directed a phased denial of fuel to ELVs at fuel stations in the NCR — in Delhi from July 1, in high-density NCR districts from November 1, and in the rest of the NCR from April 1, 2026.

Delhi has installed Automatic Number Plate Recognition (ANPR) cameras at 498 fuel stations — 382 petrol/diesel and 116 CNG filling stations — and three inter-state bus terminals (SSBs) to scan vehicle number plates and check them against the Vahan database, India's national vehicle registry, in real time.

An audio alert plays when the scan detects an ELV at the fuel pump. The overage vehicle is denied fuel, and may be impounded and sent for scrapping unless valid exemptions or required documents are presented.

Teams comprising personnel from the Delhi government's Transport Department, Delhi Traffic Police, and civic bodies have been put together to enforce the CAQM directive. However, enforcement has been slack. On July 1, 80 vehicles were seized, but this number fell to seven on July 2. No vehicles were impounded on Thursday and Friday.

What is the reason for the Delhi government's lack of enthusiasm?

In a letter written to the CAQM on Thursday, Delhi Environment Minister Manjinder Singh Sirsa said "immediate implementation" of the directive "may be pre-

mature and potentially counterproductive".

There were problems with the ANPR-based enforcement system, including "technological glitches, camera placement, sensors not working, [and] speakers not functioning", Sirsa said. Also, "the system is unable to identify EOL (end-of-life) vehicles where there are issues related to HSRPs (the new high-security registration plates)".

The lack of integration with the vehicle data of NCR states may encourage "vehicle owners procuring fuel from adjacent districts... thereby circumventing the ban", Sirsa said. These "technological inconsistencies" were leading to "public discontent and outcry", the Minister said.

How many vehicles are affected by the watchdog's directive?

According to the Vahan database, there are nearly 62 lakh ELVs in Delhi — 41 lakh two-wheelers, 18 lakh four-wheelers, and the rest comprising goods carriers and commercial vehicles. The NCR districts in Haryana account for 27.5 lakh ELVs, those in

Uttar Pradesh for 12.4 lakh, and those in Rajasthan for 6.1 lakh.

What is the problem with older vehicles, if owners keep them in good condition?

Authorities argue that pre-B5-VI (Bharat Stage VI) vehicles are disproportionately responsible for vehicular emissions. BS-IV vehicles, for instance, emit 4.5 to 5.5 times more particulate matter than BS-VI vehicles. BS-VI emission norms were mandated from April 1, 2020 onward.

Transport emissions account for 28% of PM_{2.5}, 41% of sulphur dioxide (SO₂), and 78% of nitrogen oxide (NO_x) emissions in the NCR, according to official estimates.

According to the CAQM, the transport sector's contribution to air pollution in Delhi "needs no emphasis".

Although legal mandates have existed since 2015, officials say enforcement was delayed due to the absence of necessary technical infrastructure.

The liquidation of such (average) vehicles can only be done by adopting strict steps

like denying fuel. These measures will help improve air quality," Dr Virender Sharma, Member-Technical at CAQM, has said.

What is the legal mandate for the CAQM's fuel ban?

In 2015, the National Green Tribunal (NGT) directed: "All diesel vehicles (heavy or light) which are more than 10 years old will not be permitted on the roads of Delhi NCR".

Also, "Petrol vehicles which are more than 15 years old and diesel vehicles that are more than 10 years old shall not be registered in the NCR, Delhi," the NGT said.

The NGT's directive was upheld and reinforced by the Supreme Court in 2018. It said that vehicles violating the order should be impounded.

Last year, Delhi framed guidelines under the Motor Vehicles Act and the Registered Vehicle Scrapping Facilities (RVSF) Rules. Most recently, the Environment Protection (End-of-Life Vehicles) Rules, 2025, effective April 1, made scrapping mandatory within 180 days of the expiry of the vehicle's registration.

Age caps are not a new idea. The Motor Vehicles Act, 1988, says the registration cer-

tificate for any motor vehicle other than a transport vehicle "shall... be valid only for a period of fifteen years from the date of issue and shall be renewable".

The Central Motor Vehicles Rules, 1999, say after the "period of validity entered in the certificate of registration" expires, the vehicle "shall not be deemed to be validly registered".

Can measures such as these resolve Delhi's bad air problem?

No single strategy is sufficient, experts have said. The solution lies in coordinated planning and action on multiple fronts, involving a wide range of stakeholders.

On Thursday, the prominent environmental policy think tank Centre for Science and Environment (CSE) laid placing an age cap is "not a scalable strategy for the entire country". It pointed out that "grossly polluting vehicles can also fall under either of newer age brackets due to inherent technical problems and lack of maintenance".

CSE has pushed for the "improvement of fuel and emission standards", a "stringent Pollution-under-Control regime", and a "massive augmentation of public transport".

EXPLAINED ENVIRONMENT

EXPLAINED SCIENCE

How astronauts feast on ISS

While having a meal in space is not a piece of cake, astronauts enjoy fairly appetising and nutritious packaged food. With missions becoming longer, scientists are now trying to grow food in space itself

ANJALI MARAR
BENGALURU, JULY 4

INDIAN ASTRONAUT Shubhanshu Shukla, currently aboard the International Space Station (ISS), interacted with students using a ham radio on Friday. The event was organised by U R Rao Satellite Centre (URSC), which is the Indian Space Research Organisation's (ISRO's) centre in Bangalore for the design, development, and construction of Indian satellites.



Amateur radio equipment, Seattle, 1957. Wikimedia Commons

What is a ham radio?

Ham radio, also known as amateur radio, is a licensed radio service that relies on radio waves for personal, recreational, and emergency communication. Using a dedicated frequency, a transceiver and an antenna, the ham can be set up between two licensed ham radios by trained ham operators.

The communication can be hyper-local, global, and in space. In India, any individual above the age of 12 is permitted to operate a ham radio. The Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology issues licences for ham radio.

The term "ham" was initially used as a pejorative by landline telegraphers in the early 20th Century to describe an operator "who lacks ability" or who had poor or "ham-fisted" skills. With the advent of radio, professional radio operators began to use the term to describe amateur radio operators who would jam operations in an area.

Subsequently, the amateur radio community began to call itself ham, with the term losing its pejorative connotations by the mid-20th Century.

How is ham radio used in space?

Crew members on NASA's space shuttle Columbia first used an amateur radio to communicate with Earth in 1983.

In October 2000, amateur radio equipment was launched to the ISS along

with its first crew members. Known as the Amateur Radio on the International Space Station (ARISS), the space station's ham radio is used by astronauts to not only make calls around the world but also to interact with students.

"It [the interaction] provides the opportunity for educators and ham operators to encourage and inspire their students with STEM topics culminating in a real-time conversation with astronauts living and working on the space station," NASA astronaut Kjell Lindgren had said in 2023.

Typically, there is a nine-minute window to make contact with the ISS while it revolves around the planet.

Why use ham radio?

Even though technology to establish communications has advanced, the radio service remains one of the most reliable and stable modes of communication. It has often come to the rescue when traditional communication lines have broken down, either due to man-made scenarios (like wars) or natural disasters such as earthquakes, cyclones, and floods.

In India, ham radio was used for making emergency communications during the Bhuj earthquake (2001), the Indian Ocean tsunami (2004), the floods of Uttarakhand (2013), and other such calamities.

AMITABH SINHA
NEW DELHI, JULY 4

INDIAN ASTRONAUT Shubhanshu Shukla has been in space for more than a week, and would have had several meals during this period. On Friday, Shukla said he had shared the food he carried to the International Space Station (ISS) — *gajar ka halwa*, *moong dal ka halwa* and *aamras* — with other astronauts onboard.

Having a meal in space is not a piece of cake. It requires planning and organisation. But this does not mean that astronauts eat frugally or depend only on liquid diets. The food is also far from being bland or unappetising.

In fact, on the ISS, the permanent space laboratory where Shukla is currently staying, astronauts often enjoy elaborate meals. It is just that they eat packaged food, which is stored and prepared a little differently.

How astronauts eat in space

Due to zero-gravity conditions, food items, like everything else in space, tend to float around. This necessitates a level of organisation not required on Earth.

The spacecraft's safety could be compromised if small crumbs or loose pieces get stuck in some of its critical parts. As they also enter the mouths or nostrils of astronauts, leading to choking or creating breathing problems. As a result, food items are carefully chosen and properly packaged.

The act of eating itself, that is, food travelling inside the body's digestive tract, is not a problem. While gravity might help this process on Earth, it is not a necessity. Put simply, only management of food is an issue in space.

Astronauts consume packaged and processed food items, which are usually in dehydrated form. They inject hot water through a needle into the packages before eating the dishes. Shukla's *gajar ka halwa* and *moong dal ka halwa* — prepared and packed by the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) and the Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) — would also have been in this form.

Beverages such as tea, coffee or juices, and Shukla's *aamras*, are usually in powder form, which can be mixed with water before consumption. There is provision for heating the food on the ISS.

Astronauts on the space station usually have their breakfast and dinner together.



(Left to right) Astronauts Tibor Kapu, Shubhanshu Shukla and Peggy Whitson enjoying a meal aboard the ISS. Instagram/@astro_peggy

DEALING WITH BODY WASTE IN SPACE

While eating on the ISS is relatively easy, urinating and defecating is not. The lack of gravity becomes a big hurdle here.

In space, astronauts urinate into a specially-designed hose with a suction system. This hose, suited both for male and female astronauts, pulls the urine away from the astronaut's body and deposits it into specialised vessels. The stored urine is then purified and recycled aboard the ISS to create drinking water for astronauts. This is a must because liquids both consume space and take up weight — as such it is not viable to send enormous amounts of water required to sustain astronauts in space. Water must be used judiciously, and recycled wherever possible.

Before eating, they secure themselves with footholds to restrict movement. Every astronaut has a food tray with some utensils, including spoons and forks. The cutlery and food packets are fastened to the tray with velcro. Astronauts are advised to sip only a small part of the package, and dip their spoons inside to pick the food out.

Seasonings such as salt and pepper are available, but they are typically dissolved in water which can be added to the food

to defecate, astronauts sit on specialised toilets which too are equipped with suction systems. These systems begin working the moment the toilet seat is lifted — this helps eliminate odour. Astronauts need to strap themselves firmly to the toilet seat to ensure they do not drift away while defecating.

Faecal matter is directed to waste containers. All solid waste, including toilet paper, wipes and gloves, are loaded onto cargo spacecraft returning to Earth. Most of it is released when the spacecraft is entering the Earth's atmosphere: here it gets burnt due to friction. Occasionally, some samples are sent to laboratories on Earth to check on the health of the astronauts.

After their meals, waste such as food packets is deposited in waste chambers, while cutlery is cleaned with wipes. Utensils cannot be washed with water.

A variety of food choices are available, and astronauts can select their menu or favourite cuisine months ahead of their travel. Once they have made their selection, nutritionists also weigh in with their recommendations to ensure astronauts meet the dietary re-

quirements in space. For instance, astronauts need more calcium, and less sodium and vitamin D to keep their bones healthy.

Such food arrangements for astronauts are relatively new. Early space travellers had to make do mostly with food paste, packaged in toothpaste-like tubes or bite-sized cubes. When confined to a spacecraft, like during the journey to the ISS, these forms of food are still useful due to space and storage constraints.

Why grow food in space

Despite technical advancements in packaging, storing, and preparing food items, scientists are now actively working on ideas for growing food in space. This is because, in recent years, astronauts have begun spending a lot more time in space.

For example, those going to the ISS typically spend a few months at a time. Due to this, all their food requirements are not transported on the same spacecraft that carries them. Cargo missions to the ISS fly at regular intervals, carrying food, apart from other requirements such as maintenance gear and scientific equipment.

Also, various space agencies and private companies are now planning even longer stays in space, including the possibility of creating a permanent settlement on the Moon. There are also plans to travel much further distances than ever before in space — on such missions, it might not be economical to supply food from Earth.

Space-grown plants, for example, can provide a sustainable food source for such missions. Scientists are currently studying different aspects of growing food in space, and exploring various methods to do so. For instance, they are examining the effects of microgravity on the growth of plants.

They are also making attempts to use LED lights to induce photosynthesis. Researchers are developing soilless systems in which plants can be grown in space, and selecting crops most suited to grow in these conditions.

Potatoes, soybean, wheat, spinach, tomatoes, and carrots are some crops that have shown promise for space cultivation. ISRO is carrying out multiple experiments related to this subject during Shukla's stay at the ISS. At least six different varieties of crop seeds will be grown and studied. There is a separate experiment on the growth of microalgae as well. Besides food, these microalgae can be used as potential fuel or even used in life support systems.

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How Ramleela is an enduring representation of 'Indianness' in Trinidad

ARJUN SENGUPTA
NEW DELHI, JULY 4

"OUR BONDS go well beyond geography and generations." Prime Minister Narendra Modi said on Thursday at a community event in Trinidad, calling Lord Ram "the divine link beyond oceans".

Trinidad and Tobago, a tiny island country in the Caribbean, has a population of around 13 lakh. Almost half of this population traces its roots to India.

Thousands of Indians came to the islands as bonded labour in the 19th and early 20th centuries, and brought with them Lord Ram, most notably, the tradition of Ramleela, the episodic dramatisation of Tulsi Das's *Ramcharitmanas* popular in northern India.

EXPLAINED CULTURE

While seen by the British public and lawmakers as more humane than slavery, indentured servitude was brutal for labourers. 'Agents' in India would lure unsuspecting Indians — especially those driven to poverty by oppressive colonial land and taxation laws — with the promise of riches and opportunity in foreign shores.

In reality, the work paid very little and the conditions on the fields were back-breaking. But *gimnityas* (a corruption of the



Modi with Kamla Persad-Bissessar, PM of Trinidad and Tobago. X/@narendramodi

word "agreement") could not return to their homeland because of a large chunk of their wages were held back till the end of the contract. Although they were not slaves, the contracts effectively kept them in bondage. Indians arrived as indentured labourers

in Trinidad till about 1917, mostly from present-day eastern Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. Almost all such arrivals never returned to their homeland.

Carrying Ram across seas

Indentured labourers came to faraway lands with very few belongings. What they did bring with them, however, was their culture. This was — and remains — an enduring link to their homeland.

"Although Indian Hindus carried only a few belongings to Trinidad, they are said to have brought the *Manas* [*Ramcharitmanas*], either in memory or book form," Paula Richman wrote in her paper *Ramleela in Trinidad* (2010). Most, she wrote, grew up hearing the text recited and watching it enacted.

This is how Ramleela arrived in Trinidad. In villages in the countryside, thronged by Indians speaking Bhojpuri and eating *chaptis*, Ramleela saw widespread participation of the community.

"Elders who used to play particular roles coach new players. Experts supervise ritual preparation... Someone with a large sword or garage like the stage crew use it to construct the effigy. Teams of women cook mouth-watering culinary specialties roasted over open fires and served hot each night of the performance," Richman wrote.

Decline and rejuvenation

By the second half of the 19th century, however, the popularity of Ramleela had started to wane. As formal education spread, Bhojpuri was slowly replaced by English among the Indian population. Younger generations were simply not as familiar with the *Manas*, and Ramleela was not as "cool" as the latest Western fads.

Urbanisation also played a part. As Indians steadily migrated to urban spaces and erstwhile rural spaces became steadily more urban, many left behind their former social life that revolved around Hindu festivals. But as audiences dwindled, innovation

thrived. Today, gender and caste restrictions on participation have been loosened, new dramatic techniques embraced, and dialogue simplified — a bulk of the performance is usually in English — to appeal to younger audiences.

And with Indian-origin Trinidadians becoming richer and more powerful in the country — Trinidad and Tobago Prime Minister Kamla Persad-Bissessar's family came from modern-day Bihar — Ramleela has enjoyed renewed patronage.

Despite changes, however, the essence of the story and performance remain the same. "The fundamental anchor of Ramleela in Trinidad remains the *Ramcharitmanas*... Audiences continue to absorb the teachings of the *Manas* at Ramleela, whether they realise it or not, and whether they understand Hindi or not," Richman wrote.

In Trinidad, Ramleela remains the foremost representation of one's Indianness, an anchor to one's roots which has evolved over time to become quintessentially Trinidadian.

17 BIG PICTURE

AFINE drizzle has hung over the Dhauladhar foothills all day, coating the deodar trees in mist and leaving the paved mountain roads slick and gleaming. As the rain taps softly on the tin roofs of McLeodganj, the scent of wet earth rises through the winding lanes that lead to an often-overlooked building.

Here, Tek Chand, 37, moves through two small rooms with a broom in his hand. The air is damp, the wood slightly musty. But the rooms remain unchanged — sheltering an overlooked chapter in the modern history of Tibet and its people. "These rooms have stayed untouched," he says.

Once known as Swarg Ashram, the modest structure is perched just beyond the town's edge, at the end of a quiet road veiled in fog.

In 1960, when the 14th Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso, and his entourage of family members, senior Lamas and others arrived in India after a perilous journey from Tibet, he travelled through Tawang (Arunachal Pradesh), Tezpur (Assam) and Mussoorie, before finally reaching Dharamshala and then, the ashram in McLeodganj. For eight pivotal years, the ashram served as the residence of the Tibetan spiritual leader as he began rebuilding a displaced nation in exile.

Over 2 km and a world away from this hushed hillside is the vibrant heart of McLeodganj, often called Mini-Lhasa. Today, it hums with reverence and celebration in anticipation of the Dalai Lama's 90th birthday on July 6. An expected public address at his current residence and monastery complex, Tsuglagkhang, is the big draw.

Restaurants dish out Tibetan cuisine to throngs of visitors and pilgrims from around the world stroll alongside crimson-robed monks, many hoping to catch a glimpse of the Dalai Lama himself. The compound, which includes his private quarters and a grand Tibetan temple, is now the heart of the Tibetan community in exile.

But beyond the festivities, the air is thick with significance. On July 2, in a statement that resonated across the Tibetan world and beyond, the Dalai Lama declared that the centuries-old institution of the Dalai Lama would continue, and that his 'reincarnation' would be managed solely by his Gaden Phodrang Trust in accordance with Tibetan traditions — not Beijing's directives. The idea of reincarnation is rooted in a Buddhist belief system that all living beings are bound by a cycle of birth and death.

The pronouncement by the Dalai Lama followed a three-day Tibetan religious conference in Dharamshala. Spiritual leaders from all four major schools of Tibetan Buddhism — Gelug, Nyingma, Sakya, and Kagyu — had convened to discuss the sensitive and politically charged question of succession.

With Chinese authorities signalling their intentions to control the next reincarnation, the Dalai Lama's announcement reassured the Tibetan community's spiritual independence — a message of both defiance and continuity.

India, China and Tibet

The Dalai Lama is central to the economy and spiritual identity of McLeodganj. His presence has transformed this once-quiet Himalayan hamlet into an internationally recognised hub of Tibetan Buddhism, fuelling tourism, business growth and cultural vibrancy. Events such as the 90th birthday bring new cycles of economic opportunity paired with growing concerns over infrastructure and sustainability.

According to local tourism officials, foreign arrivals to McLeodganj surged from around 2,700 in 2021 to over 51,000 in 2023. The momentum has continued into 2025. In the first six months of the year, officials say, over 10 lakh tourists, both domestic as well as international, have arrived in Kangra district.

Despite the festive integration of cultures and communities, the Tibetan issue has always been a sensitive one for India, Tibet and China since the early 1950s. While then Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru welcomed waves of embattled Tibetans and granted the Dalai Lama asylum in 1959, even in the face of immense criticism and fears of 'anti-Chinese China', after the India-China war in 1962, Delhi has been cautious about its public pronouncements on the Dalai Lama.

Since then, the Indian government has adopted a more nuanced position. While maintaining that the Dalai Lama is a 'revered religious leader and is deeply respected by the people of India' and that he has 'all the freedom to carry out his religious activities in India', Delhi doesn't officially support the Tibetan community's political activism in India.

More so now, when India and China are working towards normalising the bilateral relationship after a tense border standoff



The Dalai Lama's Line

As the Dalai Lama turns 90 on July 6, VARINDER BHATIA travels to McLeodganj, headquarters of the Tibetan government-in-exile, where the celebrations are tinged with anxieties — over their future, the 'reincarnation' process, and the looming shadow of China. Photographs by KAMLESHWAR SINGH

since 2020. On July 4, the Ministry of External Affairs released a carefully worded statement saying the government 'does not take any position or speak on matters concerning beliefs and practices of faith and religion. The Government has always upheld freedom of religion for all in India and will continue to do so.'

Beijing, which views the Dalai Lama as a 'separatist', prohibits any public show of devotion towards the Tibetan spiritual leader. For China, a say in the selection process of the Dalai Lama, a deeply revered figure in Tibet, is seen as a way to exert its authority over the Tibetan people.

China has rejected the Nobel Peace laureate's succession plan, insisting that any future heir must receive its seal of approval. Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Mao Ning said that the reincarnation 'must be chosen by drawing lots from a Golden Urn, and approved by the central government (of China)'. A day later, Minority Affairs Minister Kijun Rijju — who, along with Union Minister Rajan Singh, is representing the Indian government at the Dalai Lama's 90th birthday event in Dharamshala on July 6 — said the decision (on the incarnation of the Dalai Lama) would be taken by the established institution and the Dalai Lama himself, no one else.

Rijju's statement ties in with New Delhi's position that the Dalai Lama is a religious leader.

Inside Tsuglagkhang Complex

Tucked against the forested slopes of the Dhauladhar mountains, just above the noisy cafes and narrow alleyways of McLeodganj, stands Tsuglagkhang, a place at once sacred and deeply political. This Tibetan Buddhist temple, also known as the Tsuglagkhang Complex, is not just a religious site — it is the emotional and spiritual centre of the Tibetan community in exile.

Constructed in the 1960s after the 14th Dalai Lama settled in India, it was built to provide a new seat for the Gaden Phodrang (the institution that governs the reincarnation



(Top) Monks outside the main entrance of the Tsuglagkhang temple; at the temple, preparations have begun for Sunday's event. Kamleshwar Singh

process of the Dalai Lama), the Tibetan government-in-exile and a place of worship for thousands of Tibetan refugees. Over the decades, it has grown from a modest structure into a sprawling complex that includes the main temple, the Namgyal Monastery, the Dalai Lama's private residence, and his office.

The temple itself is simple but serene. Its architecture draws from traditional Tibetan monastic design — bold red and gold beams, intricately carved woodwork, and prayer flags fluttering in the crisp mountain breeze. Inside, the walls are painted with ancient thangka murals, their colours glowing dimly beneath soft natural light. At the temple's heart sits a towering gilded statue of Shakyamuni Buddha, flanked by figures of Avalokiteshvara and Padmasambhava, two deeply revered Bodhisattvas in the Tibetan pantheon.

Every morning, the scent of juniper and butter lamps fills the air as monks and devotees begin their prostrations and circumambulations, sending their prayers into the world with every turn of the prayer wheels.

This week, the quiet rituals are tinged with anticipation ahead of the celebrations on July 6. Thousands of Tibetans living in exile are expected to gather at Tsuglagkhang to hear the Dalai Lama speak. For months, across exile settlements in India and beyond, Tibetans have been offering prayers, holding

ceremonies, and lighting lamps in the hope of extending the life of their spiritual leader.

Yet, there is a sadness beneath the surface.

Karma Yeshe is the Chairperson of the Public Service Commission in the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA) and has in the past been minister of finance and a member of the Tibetan Parliament-in-Exile. "My father Penpa and mother Namdol came from Tibet through Sikkim in the early 1960s. I was born in Gangtok. We moved to Dharamshala in the mid 1960s. My parents and hundreds of Tibetan refugees who followed His Holiness the Dalai Lama from Tibet to India were the ones who built this Tsuglagkhang temple complex. Indian masons and Tibetan refugees worked day and night to complete its construction in 1968," he says.

But now, he says, "It is painful."

"On one hand, we pray for his long life with all our heart. On the other, we are forced to discuss his reincarnation because of what the Chinese government might do," he says. It's a widely shared concern.

On ordinary days, the Tsuglagkhang temple is peaceful. Monks chant in low, steady tones. Children walk hand-in-hand with elders. Foreign tourists sit cross-legged in silent meditation beside Tibetan grandmothers.

But these are not ordinary days. Amid celebrations, prayers, and security protocols, hangs a quiet urgency — to listen, to remember, and to hold on.

The question of reincarnation

Explaining the reincarnation practice, Dr Lobsang Sangay, former CTA president, who is currently teaching a course on 'reincarnation' at the Harvard Law School, says, "From the first to the fifth Dalai Lamas, their relationship was very close and one could say they recognised each other by virtue of being teacher and disciple. However, the relationship changes after the fifth Dalai Lama takes over the rulership of Tibet and forms the Gaden Phodrang government. The tradi-

tion/practice was that after the Dalai Lama dies, a regent is appointed who presides over the Gaden Phodrang government. The primary role of the regent was to find the reincarnation of the Dalai Lamas. The regent appoints a team or teams of search committees which travel around and find candidates. Then the candidate is found/identified, recognised and enthroned."

On China's role and objections, he says, "Nobody is asking the Chinese government to find the Dalai Lama. Who asked them? Not even a single follower of the 14th Dalai Lama has asked the Chinese to find his reincarnation. They have no role whatsoever."

"What His Holiness reiterated today is that the institution of the Dalai Lama shall continue as per the traditions and practices of Tibetan Buddhism. There will be a 15th Dalai Lama, 16th Dalai Lama and soon," says Professor Samdhong Rinpoche, former Kalon Tripa (head of the Tibetan government-in-exile) who now manages the affairs of the Gaden Phodrang Trust.

Where it all began

Far removed from the high-level declarations and international intrigue, the rooms at the Swarg Ashram remain silent.

By the time the Dalai Lama arrived in the hills of Himachal Pradesh, the ashram — once a colonial-era retreat — had been quietly repurposed as a sanctuary.

Today, its interiors remain largely untouched. A narrow 20x15-foot hall, where the Dalai Lama received visitors, leads to a spartan 10x10-foot bedroom overlooking a small garden, where he once greeted followers and addressed the Tibetan diaspora.

Now, the building is under the stewardship of the Atal Bihari Vajpayee Institute of Mountaineering, though the rooms of the Dalai Lama have been preserved. "They stay locked most days," says Tek Chand. "A few chairs have been left in case someone from the Central Tibetan Administration or the private office of His Holiness visits. But that happens rarely."

"It's peaceful here," he says, as the rain picks up again outside. "You can still feel something in the walls."

While crowds gather below in bustling McLeodganj, where prayer flags flutter above soaked streets and the aroma of incense mingles with monsoon rain, the legacy of the Dalai Lama's early years in exile endures quietly — tucked into the hills, remembered by few, but foundational to all that followed.

Says Dr Lobsang Sangay, former CTA president, "Nobody is asking the Chinese government to find the Dalai Lama."

'If there's one thing that China cannot handle, it's unpredictability'

VARINDER BHATIA

PENPA TSERING, 58, Silkyong (president) of the Central Tibetan Administration, is the politically elected head of the Tibetan government-in-exile. Excerpts from the interview:

After the Dalai Lama's pronouncement on July 2, how will the reincarnation process proceed?

His Holiness has always said that he is going to live for two decades or more. So it's going to be a long way. We Tibetans think it is too early to talk about reincarnation. But the world wants to know. So, His Holiness came out with this statement... Whenever the time comes... there may be some more clarifications. I know the media had been expecting that he may appoint somebody by way of emanation, but if you read his statement, it

makes it clear that it is not going to be 'emanation', rather it will be 'reincarnation'.

But the speculation started because the Dalai Lama had on his 80th birthday said that he would announce the reincarnation plans when he turns 90.

There has been a lot of speculation. When he is asked whether the next Dalai Lama could be a woman, he answers, "Why not?" When he is asked whether the next Dalai Lama could be by way of emanation, he answers, "Why not?" Reincarnation is the most natural thing.

...Some of us there in China, here in India and the rest of the world believe that the decision that His Holiness has taken is very smart. Because, if there's one thing that China cannot handle, it's unpredictability. If His Holiness decides everything now, then China will use its political, military and economic



Penpa Tsering

power to coerce other governments because many countries are economically dependent on China. That's the reason people say that His Holiness' decision is very wise. His

Holiness has committed to the continuation of the Gaden Phodrang (the institution that governs the reincarnation process) and also indicated at his rebirth. If you want to look at the reincarnation process, you can look at how the 13th and 14th Dalai Lamas were reincarnated. There was no Golden Urn, nothing [Golden Urn is a method introduced by the Qing dynasty of China in 1793 for selecting Tibetan reincarnations by drawing lots or tally sticks from a golden urn]. We will follow traditional Buddhist practices.

Is the 'unpredictability' you spoke about enough to counter the Chinese?

They are saying three things. One, that they will look for His Holiness' reincarnation within the periphery of China. His response is that his reincarnation will be born in the free world. (But) There is no freedom in China of Tibet. Two, they talk about the Golden Urn,

introduced in 1793, when there was little influence of the Qing dynasty over the Tibetans. There were eight Dalai Lamas before 1793. Even after that, the Golden Urn was used only on two occasions... Three, [China has been saying] that their government should approve the reincarnation. But, government that does not believe in religion or in the concept of life after death, how can they be responsible for approval of the Lamas?

What has been the international response to the Dalai Lama's recent statement?

The US already amended the 2002 Tibet Policy Act into the Tibet Support and Policy Act of 2020 during President Trump's first term. Now, we have to work with other democratic governments... We can not reach out to authoritarian regimes and economically weak countries because they are under the

influence of China.

What has been India's response?

India is like a parent. If children have problems, they have nowhere to go but to their parents. Without India, we do not exist. We have to understand that. Without their support, our administration does not exist...

How is the Dalai Lama's health?

Except for his knee, His Holiness always says he is feeling good. If children have problems, they have nowhere to go but to their parents. Without India, we do not exist. We have to understand that. Without their support, our administration does not exist...

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The Apprentice: Fed Chair Edition



KENNETH ROGOFF

US President Donald Trump is reportedly preparing to name the next chair of the Federal Reserve earlier than expected in an effort to undermine incumbent Jerome Powell, who has frustrated him by refusing to cut interest rates.

Mr Trump has made no secret of his disdain for Mr Powell, recently describing him as "an average mentally person" with

a "low IQ for what he does." But Mr Powell's term does not end until May 2026, and the Supreme Court has ruled that the Fed is one independent agency whose chair the president cannot fire.

Typically, a US president announces a new Fed chair a few months before the incumbent's term ends — just enough time for Senate confirmation hearings and a smooth transition. Naming a successor too early would be highly unusual. So why do it? Mr Trump is apparently planning to fire the Fed chair in order to establish a "shadow" Federal Open Market Committee (FOMC) that would publicly pressure the real FOMC to lower interest rates more aggressively.

The idea of a shadow FOMC dates back to economists Karl Brunner and Allan Meltzer, who introduced it in 1973 during the early years of the Great Inflation, when

Fed policy was widely criticised for being too expansionary. Brunner and Meltzer were influential academics, but they had no direct influence over policy decisions. By contrast, Mr Trump's plan — first floated by Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent during the 2024 campaign — would place his nominee at the centre of a very public effort to undermine Mr Powell's authority.

But analysts who see this as a serious attempt to bully Mr Powell may be missing the point. Monetary policymakers are unlikely to pay too much attention to Trump-picked shadow chair than they do to Mr Trump himself. If anything, the move could prompt the Fed to assert its independence by doubling down on current policies. The real goal appears to be weakening the next chair before they even begin their term by forcing them into a kind of public apprenticeship, giving Mr Trump a preview of their

approach to monetary policy and testing their ideological loyalty to his agenda.

Moreover, the shadow Fed chair will know that any sign of independent thinking could cause Mr Trump to reprise his famous "you're fired" show catchphrase. "You're fired," the Supreme Court may have ruled that the President cannot fire the sitting Fed chair, but nothing prevents him from withdrawing a nomination. That threat alone could pressure the nominee to toe the line.

The leading contenders to replace Mr Powell reportedly include former Fed Governor Kevin Warsh, who was a finalist when Mr Trump appointed Mr Powell in 2017, National Economic Council Director Kevin Hassett, and Mr Bessent. Current Fed Governor Christopher Waller, a former academic known for his work on central-bank independence, is also in the mix. Appointed by Mr Trump in 2020, Mr Waller is generally

viewed favourably by Republicans.

This shortlist includes capable and experienced contenders who could rise to the challenge of sustaining economic growth while curbing inflation. But Fed chairs are not monetary dictators; they must win over the rest of the FOMC or risk being outvoted and heavily scrutinised. Even a strong and independent nominee could be weakened by a prolonged stint as shadow chair. Seen as Mr Trump's lackey, their credibility would be severely damaged, limiting their influence over both the FOMC and financial markets.

Let's give credit where credit is due: Mr Trump has devised a fiendishly clever way to rein in the next Fed chair, whom he cannot control — at least in theory. But in doing so, Mr Trump risks shooting both himself and the US economy in the foot.

Contrary to popular belief, the Fed does not control all interest rates. It sets only the very short-term policy rate, while longer-term interest rates are largely determined by markets. Those rates reflect expecta-

tions about future Fed decisions, and those expectations are based on the assumption that policymakers want to keep inflation under control.

If Mr Trump succeeds in pressuring the Fed to cut interest rates too aggressively, inflation expectations will rise, and so will longer-term interest rates. Given that these rates affect everything from mortgages to car loans, ordinary Americans would feel significant pain.

The purpose of an independent central bank focused on price stability — an idea I first proposed 40 years ago — is to maintain low long-term interest rates. That may help explain why reports that Mr Trump is planning to announce the next Fed chair ahead of time caused the dollar to fall sharply. Still, *The Apprentice: Fed Chair Edition* is sure to make for great television, which may be what Mr Trump cares about most.

The author is professor of economics and public policy at Harvard University. ©Project Syndicate, 2025



ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINGHA

No success in succession

PLAIN POLITICS
ADDITI PHADNIS

It is always a good idea to announce your retirement in advance? Maybe in challenging politics it is. It is possible that Karnataka Chief Minister Siddaramaiah's gambit to snag the chief ministership of Karnataka in 2023 — this is the last election he will be fighting — paid off at the time. But looking at the state of the government in Karnataka today, despite winning 135 seats in the 224-member Assembly (137 now after by-election victories), which is a kind of a landmark for the ruling Congress after 1980, you wouldn't think so.

It is hard to recall an instance in Indian political history when a deputy chief minister has publicly told his supporters that he has no option but to let the chief minister continue, as D K Shivakumar did earlier this week. Not governance initiatives, not infrastructure creation but succession has been the primary concern of the government and party.

There are so many elements in the mix, including cross-party linkages. The relationship between former chief minister B S Yediyurappa and Mr Siddaramaiah is a complex, many-layered one. Publicly, the two fight, which is to be expected. But at Mr Yediyurappa's 78th birthday celebrations, recalling his role in bringing the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to power in the state,

Mr Siddaramaiah said: "Very few leaders know the pulse of the state and Yediyurappa is one among them." There have been many instances in the past where he has helped each other out against rivals in their own parties.

Currently, Mr Siddaramaiah's biggest challenger is not Mr Yediyurappa (who is facing problems of his own in the BJP) but Mr Shivakumar or DKSH. He is called in local parlance. Unlike Mr Siddaramaiah who came to the Congress from socialist stock, Mr Shivakumar has always been in the Congress — since he joined the Youth Congress when he was in college. He was general secretary to the Youth Congress in the state between 1983 and 1985.

His first electoral victory was to become a member of the zilla panchayat in 1987. He is from the powerful Vokkaliga caste and his first Assembly contest was against caste titan H D Deve Gowda in the Sathanur in 1985. He was in his 20s.

Not unexpectedly, he lost, though by a narrow margin. That, in itself, was not a small feat because Mr Deve Gowda was then a senior minister in the Ramakrishna Mission government. But Mr Deve Gowda, who had contested from two constituencies, quit Sathanur, which Mr Shivakumar contested and won in the by-election. Then began a battle with the Deve Gowda family, which has changed its look and shape over the years. In essence, exactly what it was a battle.

Mr Shivakumar contested the 1989 Lok Sabha election from Kanakapura against Mr Deve Gowda and, not unexpectedly, again lost. Those were the years when Deve Gowda was at the height of his power. However, he contested the Assembly elections too and won. (In 1989 elections to the Lok Sabha and Assembly were held together in the state.) But despite his defeats Mr Shivakumar began building his influence in the

rural areas adjoining Bengaluru. At around this time, land prices began rising. He also invested in mining and allied businesses.

He became the youngest minister in the state just two years later at 31, where he served as minister of state under Chief Minister S Siddaramaiah from 1991 to 1992. By now he had formidable resources at his command — money (recollections reveal his assets amounted to ₹1,400 crore in 2023), and patronage. Both grew as time went by. Mr Shivakumar has used personal wealth to earn political capital. These stories are well known.

The 2002 episode, when the Mahatirah chief minister and Congress leader, the late Yashwantrao Chavan, had all but lost the government in a no-confidence motion, it was Mr Shivakumar, urban development minister in Karnataka at the time, who correlated members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) and lodged them at a resort, and led them to Mumbai on the day of the vote.

The late Ahmad Patel won his Rajya Sabha seat from Gujarat (2017) and publicly acknowledged his debt to Mr Shivakumar, who kept 44 MLAs from Karnataka. "I don't know how much money he has, but while money can buy a lot of things, it doesn't always buy leadership. Observers of Karnataka politics say that while Mr Shivakumar has political influence, Mr Siddaramaiah wields power among the MLAs. The difference was the long delays in government formation in 2023, testifying to the tug of war between the two leaders from the get-go.

Going by political tradition, another formation will likely come in the next Assembly election, due 2028. And if that happens, Mr Shivakumar will have to sit it out 2023.

Hence all these shenanigans midway through the term of the Congress government. Expect more restlessness.

Kutch key to Sino-Indian sequel

Kutch is our most forgotten war with Pakistan. I learn from it and draw up a plan for the next six months, two years and five years

While it is only India that still formally calls Operation Sindoor an unfinished business, both countries are seeing it as something of a trailer. Or a prelude to the next round. Not an issue fought to any conclusion.

The subcontinent's record tells us this is not the best place to be in. We have had the longest short Kutch conflict of April 9, 1965. Both sides called a truce, but the first full-scale India-Pakistan war followed five months later.

Pakistan launched the war having learned the wrong lessons from Kutch. We might hope for better sense six decades later. But hope isn't a plan or strategy.

It takes a lot for Pakistan to accept defeat, liberation of Bangladesh in 1971, or a clear capitulation in Kargil, for example. Anything less than inarguably decisive, you can count on them to call it a victory. And once they psych themselves into a "see we won that little war" state of mind, you can expect them to come back, sooner rather than later.

At this point, each side is drawing its own lessons. Just hours before I sat down to write this column, Lt Gen Rahul Singh, one of the three deputy chiefs of Army staff, had reflected on some lessons learnt and pointers for the future. This is good thinking. At least one side (the good side, us), isn't mindlessly celebrating victory, but thinking ahead. This too has parallels with Kutch.

India drew its lessons, too, more sensibly and realistically, and the result was a strategic victory in the subsequent war. A strategic victory for India because Pakistan was the only side with an objective (grabbing Kashmir) and started the war. The objective was denied, and it was forced back on the defensive across the entire frontier. A stalemate, with the aggressor and first-mover Pakistan on the defensive, was victory for India. In the end, the difference was the less the two sides drew from Kutch.

India was now preparing for a counter-offensive towards Lahore and Sialkot, in case Pakistani pressure on Kashmir mounted. It's a recorded fact that it was sometime in the summer following the Kutch ceasefire that then defence minister P V Narsimha Reddy visited the Indian Nanda along with top Army commanders met at the IX Corps headquarters in Jalandhar, and conferred on plans to open new fronts into Pakistani Punjab if needed. This plan, Operation Riddle, was months in the making.

This was a post-Kutch learning and preparation for India. The most succinct and uncompli-

cated reading I would recommend is *War Dispatches* by Lt Gen Harbaksh Singh, then Western Army commander. Western Command then included J&K too. Kutch is our most forgotten war, though it lasted much longer (April 9 to July 1) than the 87 hours of Op Sindoor. There's parallels in the two wars.

The "lesson" Pakistan learnt became its establishment's grandest miscalculation. It concluded that Lal Bahadur Shastri accepted defeat in agreeing to a ceasefire and international mediation. That was just the impetus it needed to launch Operation Gibraltar (first massive armed infiltration in the next Fed chair, whom he cannot control — at least in theory. But in doing so, Mr Trump risks shooting both himself and the US economy in the foot.

Contrary to popular belief, the Fed does not control all interest rates. It sets only the very short-term policy rate, while longer-term interest rates are largely determined by markets. Those rates reflect expecta-

As we had noted in the National Interest on March 3, 2025, the Muni has limited time. While Pakistan's army will continue to own the country, his own leave over his army isn't permanent. In time, probably over the next few months, he will see challenges to his unconstitutional and un-Islamic rule from his uniformed peers and the politicians.

What's the meaning of un-institutional? In the past, Pakistan's military dictators have had their army take over power formally as an institution. In this indirect takeover, not only has Muni collected that additional star, he has also grabbed political power as an individual. This is too costly for the state to keep. Let's hope that's why you can count on his impatience leading to a new adventure. He'd think, learning erroneously from Sindoor as his military ancestors did from Kutch, that another skirmish will be good. That India's stakes in stability, its economic growth are too high for it to risk a longer period of chaos. He'd think that another skirmish like these will keep India off-balance, destabilise the Kashmir Valley but most importantly, protect his own public support.

He'd think he has India gained. A terror attack in Kashmir, the inevitable military response from India, and then a few days of dust-up. It will also

keep the region "internationalised". His first move with Pahalagam, he'd think, succeeded in shifting the world's understanding of the issue in the subcontinent from terrorism to nuclear conflict. So he's got something to work on. We've already told you where in their bodies do their brains rest.

We can't time when this miscalculation will come, but it's nearly inevitable. India, therefore, needs a graded plan — for six months, two years, which takes us closer to the next general election, and five years, respectively. Five years should be enough time to build defence to a level where this Muni, or another, won't have the same temptations.

For the six months India has to fill in all the critical gaps in missiles, ammunition, sensors and stockpile in the fastest possible manner, focusing on the critical instruments that worked this time. And SCALP missiles, long-range "smart" artillery shells (Excalibur category), and multi-layered air defences much denser. Naval platforms should also have their vectors topped up and war wastage reserves built. Most of this can be done domestically and on a war footing. Not the usual Acceptance of Necessity (AON) today and trials in 18 months hence. Remember, you said Op Sindoor isn't over yet.

Over two years, India must have at least two more (more than that isn't impossible) of Beyond Visual Range (BVR) capable fighters. Long-range artillery should be improved and increased to a level that it becomes a pulverising deterrent in itself. You can have most of it made here and some smart ammunition bought from overseas. This will be quality with quantity.

And over five years, begin with upping your defence spending from 1.9 to 2.5 per cent of GDP over the next three years, and then keep it there for the following two. It will be a stretch, but India can afford it. Our national resolution has to be to defend the next five years, thereafter never be an occasion when India will be outgunned, out-gunned or out-watched in a conflict with Pakistan even for a few hours. Despite the Chinese.

Focus on economic growth, diplomacy and alliances alongside. All of that goes without saying. But you cannot do this without guaranteed your own security. I'd borrow the advice of the Indian philosopher Kautilya Azar at a conclusive earlier this week: Strengthen your defence and liberalise your economy. Because, he elaborated, for investors to come in, they have to have the confidence that your defence is strong.

To think that this is a strategic leave-back period will be an unforgivable historic blunder. This is a lean-forward, all-hands-on-deck moment. The success of Op Sindoor is a success to savour, but more importantly, it's impetus for the future.

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Of exile and enlightenment

EYE CULTURE
CHINTAN GRISH MOJJI

Tenzin Gyatso, the fourteenth Dalai Lama, celebrates his 90th birthday this week. This is a moment of joy for the Indian history of solidarity with the Tibetan people, and the fact that the Dalai Lama chose India to be his home when he fled Tibet in 1959. Reducing the event to a matter of political expediency alone keeps us from appreciating the cultural links, memory, and symbolism in his life. In his autobiography, *Freedom in Exile* (1990), the Dalai Lama shares that the decision to leave Tibet was made at the insistence of Nechung, the state oracle. He realised that his life was in danger, and that he would be able to help his people better in exile. "The original Tibetan Buddhist monks see him as an emanation of Chenrezig, a Bodhisattva who takes rebirth to benefit sentient beings.

"For centuries, the Dalai Lamas have conferred with the Nechung Oracle — human mediums who become periodically possessed by Pehar (a protector deity) and his emanations — over matters of governance," writes Christopher Bell, associate professor of religious studies at Stetson University in Florida, in his book *The Dalai Lama and the Nechung Oracle* (2021).

The original Nechung Monastery, which is the seat of the oracle, is on the outskirts of Lhasa. A new Nechung Monastery was built in Dharamsala close to the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, and the offices of the Tibetan government in exile. This is

just one example of how being in India has enabled Tibetans to preserve their religion, culture and language.

Vicki Mackenzie's book *The Revolutionary Life of Freda Bedi: British Feminist, Indian Nationalist, Buddhist* (2024) tells the story of how a woman, Jawaharlal Nehru, for giving the Dalai Lama "a warm welcome on the grounds that India and Tibet shared cultural and spiritual bonds that had existed for centuries". Ms Bedi was appointed to the Ministry of External Affairs as an advisor on the welfare of Tibetan refugees. She provided assistance at refugee camps in Missamari, Buxa, Sikkim and Kalimpong, raised funds, and also involved her children as volunteers.

Dr Tethong, a Tibetan student of medicine in Darjeeling, was asked to be ordained Tibetan Buddhist monk in England when the Dalai Lama crossed into India. In Ms Mackenzie's book, Tethong recalls, "Having just escaped from a deteriorating and desperate situation in Tibet, I thought His Holiness would discuss the political scenario and that could be done to help along those lines. But the Dalai Lama's priorities were resettlement and education for his people." This interpreter became the Dalai Lama's private secretary in later years. Ms Bedi turned out to be the first Western woman to become a fully ordained Tibetan Buddhist nun. She was convinced of the need to pay special attention to the young refugees who were known to be reincarnations of highly advanced spiritual masters. With funds from the Indian government, she set up the Young

Lamas Home School in Delhi where they were taught English, Hindi, current affairs, geography, how to conduct themselves in a cultural environment that was new to them, and how to present themselves before a Western audience. She wanted them to "plant the seeds of the Buddha's teachings into American, European and Australian soil". The school was later moved from Delhi to Dalhousie.

Ms Mackenzie points out that many of these students — Lama Zopa Rinpoche, Gendun Chopel Rinpoche, Trunpa Rinpoche, Akong Rinpoche, "Tarhanga Tulku" — became "the founding fathers of Western Buddhism". Another crucial development has taken place within Tibetan Buddhism in exile. The feudal and aristocratic hierarchy of the society, which prevented nuns from having access to the same opportunities as their male counterparts, is gradually changing thanks to Ms Bedi and other women who have spoken about their struggles.

The Dalai Lama has expressed his gratitude for India's hospitality on multiple occasions, and has been vocal about his admiration for the Gandhian approach to nonviolence. It remains to be seen whether the campaign to award him a Bharat Ratna will yield results anytime soon. It is surprising, however, for the Dalai Lama lowers all over the world to know that the institution of the Dalai Lama will continue in exile.

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Kolhapuri chappals, Prada style

YES, BUT...
SANDEEP GOYAL

Italian luxury fashion house Prada has acknowledged that its recent Spring/Summer 2026 menswear collection, showcased at the Milan Fashion Week, featured sandals inspired by traditional Indian footwear — the Kolhapuri chappals. But the controversy over "cultural appropriation" had already been stirred by then, with Indian fashion czars crying foul across media and social media. Thankfully, the Pharrell Williams x Louis Vuitton show, "Paris to India", at Milan that followed Prada, had made by Ar Rahman and a carpet with a snake-and-ladder motif designed by Bijoy Jain — which led to much appreciation and applause.

Kolhapuri, GI (Geographical Indication) tagged since 2019, were worn as early as the 13th century — also known as Kaphali, Paytan, Kachkadi, Kakkani, and Pukri, so named by village of origin.

Appropriation, or inspiration, or even imitation in fashion is not

new. Japanese brand Pucob, for example, has been retailing common jute shopping bags of "Ramess Special Nankem" from Anita Confectionery Works, Bagar Chowk, Jodhpur (Raj) since 2012. The brand has also been "Chetak Sweet" emblazoned big and bold on it, for ₹2,200 as Indian souvenir bags for years! One can be quite sure that Anita Confectionery gets no revenue or royalty from the sale of these bags.

Fashion rental company, Rityr, recently posted a video describing a dupatta as a "very European" or "Scandinavian" scarf. This sparked a wave of reactions on social media, with many South Asian individuals calling out the blatant cultural appropriation. The Indian dupatta is a versatile garment with deep roots in South Asian culture, worn by women in various ways for religious ceremonies, celebrations, and everyday wear. It's not merely a scarf; it's a symbol of heritage and identity. The use of the term "Scandinavian scarf" to describe a dupatta minimises its cultural importance and presents it as a new, trendy item originating from the West.

Reformation, the brand the dupatta belonged to, however, counter-argued, saying that the question was inspired by a 1990s John Galliano gown and scarf set worn by model Devon Lee Carlson, who collaborated with the brand on the collection back then. Similarly, brand Oh Polly, has

been on the receiving end for promoting the regal sharara as its own invention, despite it being an Indian ladies' garment for centuries. This is a common pattern in the fashion industry. Elements of other cultures are adopted and rebranded without acknowledging their origins. And, therein lie, the triggers for controversy.

There have been other aberrations too in the past. Delhi-based brand The People's Tree had accused fashion giant Christian Dior of knock-off of a bold and black printed dress of theirs, but Dior barely took notice. A more serious controversy involved the indignation over Zara and the *lungi* in 2018. The fashion retailer faced criticism for selling a "Sindoor lungi" with a dupatta in the "Sindoor" that strongly resembled the traditional Indian *lungi*. The skirt was priced at ₹69,900 (approximately ₹6,200 back then), while a *lungi* in India typically costs around ₹200-300, and this is to be usual of the use of cultural appropriation and online mockery.

There is also the interesting case of Japanese designer Aoyama Yaguchi, who has prominently incorporated kantha embroidery into her clothing brand, TETTE. Kantha, a traditional Bengali embroidery, especially uses Indian kantha quilts quite liberally and sells at astronomical prices in Tokyo, that *desi* artists cannot even dream of. Another Japanese brand, Calico, too has been

known to have utilised kantha embroidery for their easy, breathable dresses — but Calico has deflected criticism by conveying that Japanese textile traditions like Boro share similarities in their focus on layering and repurposing of fabric. So, there is nothing really amiss.

Similarly, there is the famous case of Urban Outfitters where the Navajo Nation, where the company used the Native American tribe's indigenous patterns on their clothing, was sued for cultural appropriation. This conflict of cultural appropriation is difficult to tackle when it comes to fashion. It reminds one of the controversies around the use of indigenous motifs in haute couture collection and Yves Saint Laurent's Opium collection. These designers borrowed heavily from Chinese culture, especially the fabrics and silhouettes. Was that a homage or a blatant robbery? To some of us, it was a powerful moment of understanding how culture and fashion go hand in hand: A source of inspiration that is taken and applied to a garment. That is all. One can't, and shouldn't, really see it past that. Or perhaps, it was a powerful moment of trying to comprehend the full extent of the hoops on culture and its appropriation. What?

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