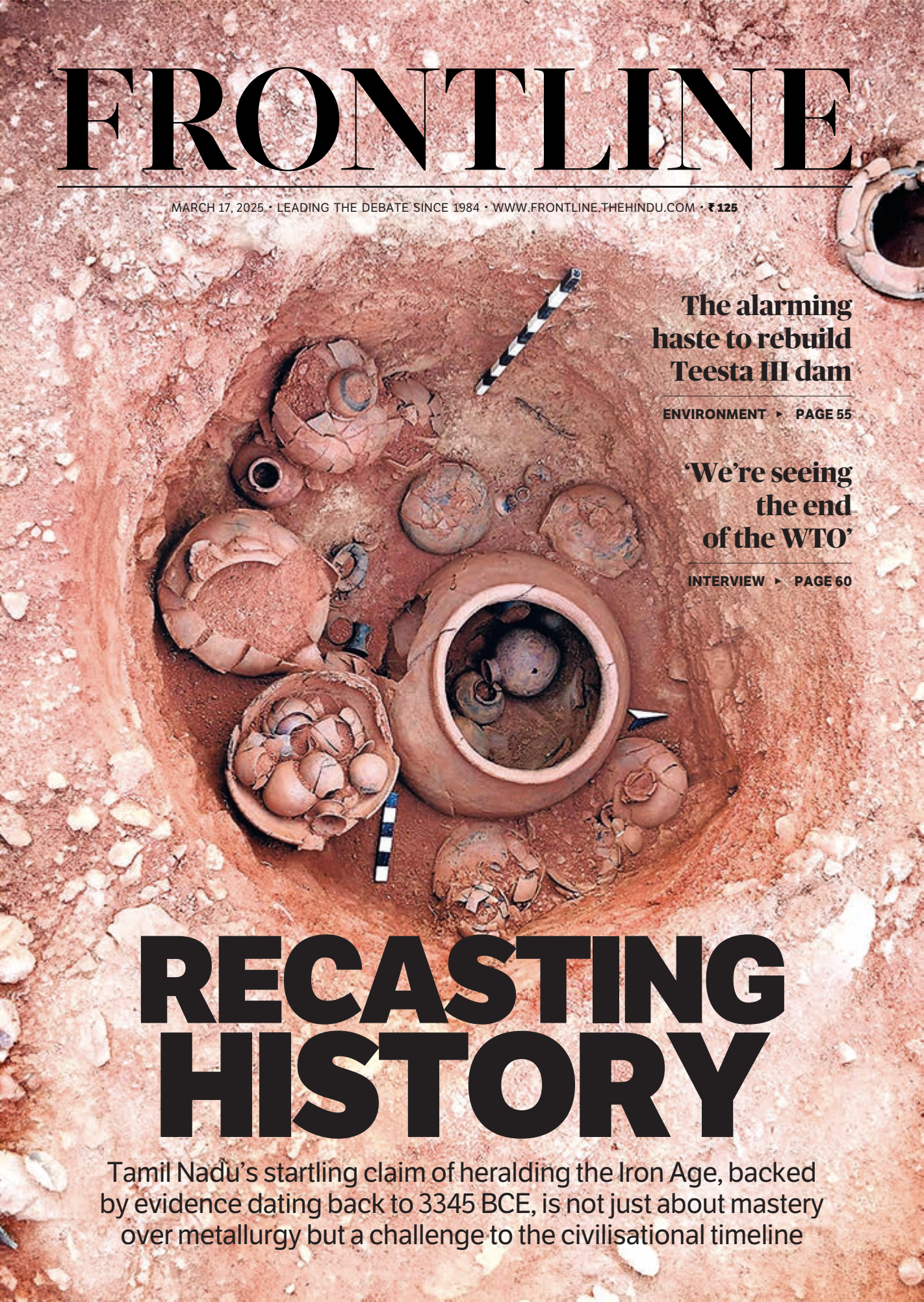
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The alarming haste to rebuild Teesta III dam

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'We're seeing the end of the WTO'

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RECASTING HISTORY

Tamil Nadu's startling claim of heralding the Iron Age, backed by evidence dating back to 3345 BCE, is not just about mastery over metallurgy but a challenge to the civilisational timeline

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Asim Ali is a political researcher and columnist based in Delhi. Trained as an electronics engineer from BITS Pilani, Goa, Asim subsequently studied Development Studies at Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai. He is interested in the relationship between political economy and majoritarian politics. His research work and articles have been published in journals like *Studies in Indian Politics*, *India in Transition*, and in newspapers like *The Telegraph*, *The Hindu*, and *The Times of India*. Asim likes to watch cats and football, in that order.

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Amritesh Mukherjee is a reader, writer, and journalist–mostly in that order. He doesn't know what to do with life, so he writes. He doesn't know what to write either, so he reads. Amritesh is your typical Bengali: (snobbishly) reads classics with glasses perched on his nose, worships Tagore, dishes out unsolicited opinions, and judges passers-by for their lack of culture.

Illustration: P. Muthuraj

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Editor's Note

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Over the past two decades, the southern tip of the subcontinent has seen some spectacular archaeological breakthroughs. From 2004 on, excavations by the Kerala State Archaeology Department along the coast of central Kerala, in small towns like Pattanam, Paravoor, and Kodungallur—collectively known as the Muziris project—established a flourishing trade link with ancient Rome in the 1st century BCE. This discovery gave a distinct sense of history, heritage, and culture to the region, driving new thrusts in areas like tourism, museums, and the arts.

A decade later, in neighbouring Tamil Nadu, the 2015 excavations by the Tamil Nadu State Archaeology Department, in Keezhadi near Madurai, uncovered the existence of settled communities more than 2,000 years ago (6th century BCE) that bore striking resemblances to the Harappan civilisation, which rekindled older claims that the Indus Valley Civilisation was of Dravidian stock, and not Aryan as claimed by the conventional nationalist historians.

A bombshell, however, came in the last week of January, when Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M.K. Stalin released a monograph that placed the Iron Age in the subcontinent as far back as the first quarter of the 4th millennium BCE. Earlier findings had fixed the antiquity of iron in India to the 1st millennium BCE, then new evidence from sites in Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh had stretched it to the 2nd millennium. Now, this new evidence from Adichanallur, Mayiladumparai, and Sivagalai takes it further back, to between 2953 BCE and 3345 BCE.



These findings, authenticated by leading international archaeo-labs, endorse Dravidian claims to antiquity on the subcontinent and indicate that the Iron Age existed in this part of the country in parallel with the Bronze Age in the Indus Valley. While Tamil Nadu Minister of Archaeology Thangam Thennarasu states carefully that the findings only indicate close trade and cultural exchange between the Indus and Dravidian civilisations and that the project has no political motivation, a backlash from the Aryanists can be anticipated.

Of course, archaeology as an arena of competitive nationalisms is not new. The cornerstone of modern ethnic nationalisms rests on invented claims of antiquity. From the 19th century, when archaeology developed as a scientific discipline, it has been a handy tool to both discover and manipulate the past. In Europe, archaeology helped Greece and Rome and the Mediterranean belt to anoint themselves the cradles of modern civilisation.

In Africa and Asia, paradoxically, it was colonialism that prompted major excavations in the early 20th century, which helped redraw the contours of the origin of civilisations and shifted the compass to the east. Although Alexander Rea's excavations in Adichanallur, as early as 1899 to 1904, revealed a wealth of material, including iron objects, the dating techniques were still primitive. Then, a hundred years ago, when Marshall, Cunningham, Wheeler et al discovered the Indus Valley Civilisation and dated it to 3000 BCE, it injected nationalistic adrenalin into India's cultural veins. It also initiated jingoistic claims of inflated antiquity, the politics of Aryan primogeniture, and the dogma of "purity". All that will now have to contend with the precise accelerator mass spectometry dated new claims from the South.

Moreover, the material unearthed in Tamil Nadu—seals, figurines, pots—show startling similarities with those found in the Indus. And this is the fuel that feeds the theory in Tamil Nadu that a Dravidian civilisation flourished coeval with the Indus Valley civilisation.

Regardless of its political implications, the report has the potential to transform not only the understanding of early metallurgy in India but also establish the links that existed between the southern, coastal, and northern regions, whether in trade, culture, or technological exchange. For that reason alone, it is invaluable.

Vaishna

Letters

Island on edge



I AM writing to express my deep concern about the Nicobar Project, which has been touted as a development initiative but is actually an ecological and cultural disaster waiting to happen (Cover Story, March 3).

The project's environmental impact assessment has been grossly inadequate, and the concerns of local communities have been ignored. The construction of hotels, roads, and other infrastructure will lead to widespread deforestation, habitat destruction, and the displacement of wildlife, while the indigenous communities stand to lose their cultural identity and their traditional livelihoods.

I urge the authorities to reconsider the Nicobar Project and prioritise the conservation of the islands' ecosystem and the rights of its local communities.

T.M. Charles
Madurai, Tamil Nadu



THE cover story provided a compelling overview of the far-reaching environmental, social, and economic consequences of the Great Nicobar project. The news that this ill-conceived project, which will involve the felling of around a million trees, envisages compensatory afforestation in five districts of Haryana spread across 22,425 hectares would be hilarious if it were not tragic and illogical.

How will afforestation in a place that is 1,600 miles away from Nicobar and has an entirely different ecosystem compensate for the loss of rainforests and mangroves, not to mention endangered species of birds, fish, and amphibians?

T.N. Venugopalan
Kochi, Kerala

ONE truly fails to understand the need for, or logic of, the proposed mega project at Great Nicobar Island. Why this urgency for a new port in such an ecologically sensitive location when there is an already thriving seaport in Thoothukudi in Tamil Nadu, not to speak of the newly inaugurated transshipment seaport at Vizhinjam in Kerala?

The matter needed careful handling, especially in the aftermath of environmental disasters across the country such as the sinking of Joshimath town in Uttarakhand and the landslides at Wayanad in Kerala.

While natural disasters cannot be wished away, their magnitude can certainly be minimised by adopting eco-friendly measures. It is pertinent to mention here that the mangroves of Car Nicobar were instrumental in absorbing the aftershocks of the 2004 tsunami to a great extent.

Kudos to *Frontline*'s social commitment for bringing into focus the need for ecological conservation in an era of technological advancements.

B. Suresh Kumar
Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu

CORRECTION
The image of Sajida Sultan was mislabelled Rabia Sultan in the family tree of the Nawabs of Bhopal ("Nawabs in the woods", March 3). The emended family tree is available at:

Delhi election results

THE AAP was ruling the roost for a decade; the BJP has wrested power after 27 years. The wind is blowing in the BJP's favour. But it is transient. The wind will change direction in the next election, and the winners and losers will be forced to switch sides ("One election, many takeaways", March 3).

As for politicians, I wish to state that they all float in the same water, feather their own nests, are keen on amassing wealth disproportionate to their legal income, have godfathers to rescue them when they are caught in a police net, and are least concerned about the welfare of those who cast their votes for them. Let not the pot call the kettle black.

Mani Nataraajan
Chennai

ONE can reasonably conclude that the chinks in the INDIA bloc's armour facilitated the BJP's sweep in the Delhi election. Had the AAP and the Congress fought in unison against their prime adversary, they could have surpassed the small difference of about 2 per cent of vote share with the BJP. Of course, the anti-incumbency factor also played spoilsport for the AAP. Kejriwal's "*Kaam ki rajneeti*" was overshadowed by some high-profile unkept promises. His attempts to counter hardcore Hindutva with soft Hindutva also seem to have boomeranged.

Although it is too much to expect a blemishless reputation from our politicians, voters in Delhi did not take kindly to the fall in the "*kattar imandar*" (staunchly honest) status of Arvind Kejriwal.

Ayyasseri Raveendranath
Aranmula, Kerala

The Fortnight

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▶ Rekha Gupta is the new Chief Minister of Delhi

Following the BJP's victory in the Delhi Assembly election, Rekha Gupta, the saffron party's first-time MLA from Shalimar Bagh, took oath as the Delhi's ninth Chief Minister on February 20. Gupta, who became the fourth woman to head the government in the Union Territory, was previously a three-time Municipal Councillor.

ANI

"The need to be authentic is greater than the fear to die."

Muhsin Hendricks, considered the world's first openly gay imam, was shot dead on February 15 near the southern city of Gqeberha in South Africa. Hendricks also started the Al-Ghurbaah mosque at his birthplace, Cape Town, which provided a safe space for gay and other marginalised Muslims. South Africa was the first country in Africa to legalise same-sex marriage in 2006.



▶ Election Commissioner Gyanesh Kumar was elevated as the Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) on February 19. Gyanesh Kumar became the first CEC to be appointed under the new law for appointment of members of the Election Commission. Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha, Rahul Gandhi, called the appointment "discourteous and disrespectful" since the petition challenging the process of appointment and the composition of the selection committee is pending before the Supreme Court.

▶ On February 19, in a social media post, US President Donald Trump called Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy "a dictator without elections" and said "he is not going to have a country left" if he does not "move fast". The unexpected escalation came a day after US and Russian officials met in Saudi Arabia to discuss the war in Ukraine. Ukrainian officials were not invited for the meeting.

▶ **80**

passengers aboard a Delta Air Lines jet survived after the aircraft flipped onto its roof while landing at a Toronto airport on February 17. Meteorological reports said the airport was experiencing blowing snow and winds at speeds of 51 km/h, with gusts reaching 65 km/h. The incident marks at least the fourth major aviation mishap in North America in the past month.

▶ The Union government reportedly blocked the website of Vikatan, a prominent Tamil media group, on February 15 after it published a cartoon depicting Prime Minister Narendra Modi sitting next to US President Donald Trump with his hands and legs shackled. The cartoon referenced the deportation of undocumented Indian immigrants who were sent back to India in handcuffs and chains.



▶ Recurring horror

A massive stampede at the New Delhi railway station on February 15 left 18 passengers dead and many others injured. Preliminary investigations revealed that confusion over two different trains headed to Prayagraj, where thousands were travelling for the Mahakumbh, was a key cause. Some reports also claimed that the additional sale of 2,600 tickets for unreserved seats worsened the situation. While the Railway Ministry has formed a two-member committee to investigate the incident, opposition leaders have blamed the Union government for mismanagement and questioned the lack of crowd control measures. Previously, on January 29, at least 30 people lost their lives in a stampede at the Mahakumbh venue in Prayagraj. ARUN SHARMA/PTI



The past reimagined

Recent archaeological discoveries in Tamil Nadu indicate that iron smelting and usage in the region began as early as 3345 BCE. They also suggest the movement of both people and technology between southern Tamil Nadu and Harappan sites—a premise that could explain the region's leap despite the apparent absence of a distinct Chalcolithic period.

Sharada Srinivasan



▶ **Iron swords** unearthed from graves at the Sivagalai excavation site, and an iron anchor/hook (on top of page).
IMAGES: ANTIQUITY OF IRON: RECENT RADIOMETRIC DATES FROM TAMIL NADU.

A few weeks ago, Tamil Nadu Chief Minister, M.K. Stalin released a report by the Tamil Nadu State Department of Archaeology (TNSDA) titled Antiquity of Iron: Recent Radiometric Dates from Tamil Nadu. The report suggests that the State was among the first places on earth where smelted iron was used. In other words, the Iron Age perhaps began at least a millennium earlier than prevailing research suggests.

To grasp the significance of the early dates in the report, a brief review of the history of Iron Age archaeology may be useful. The Iron Age in southern India, particularly in Tamil Nadu, marked a major transition in technology, economy, and culture. In this region, the Iron Age is often associated with megalithic traditions, as iron objects have frequently been discovered alongside stone structures such as stone circles, dolmens, and cairns. Another key practice involved urn burials, where skeletal remains were interred along with iron weapons and other artefacts.



▶ **An excavated grave** in Adichanallur, Thoothukudi district, Tamil Nadu.

A prime example of such an archaeological site is Adichanallur in Tamil Nadu, located along the Porunai river (the old name of Thamirabarani), within 50 km from the coast. Excavated by the British archaeologist Alexander Rea between 1899 and 1905, Adichanallur yielded the largest collection of antiquities from a single site. Rea uncovered numerous burial urns, iron weapons, bronze artefacts, and gold ornaments, indicating a more complex and advanced culture extending from the Iron Age to the Early Historic period than previously assumed. An iconic artefact uncovered by Rea was a copper alloy female figurine uncannily resembling terracotta female

▶

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▼ **An iron smelting furnace** in Perungalur, Pudukkottai district; (below) an iron hook from Adichanallur.

"mother goddess" figurines from the Harappan repertoire.

However, these discoveries were made before the advent of systematic excavation techniques or radiocarbon dating. Until about a couple of decades ago, the Iron Age in Tamil Nadu was generally dated to around 1200-500 BCE, with dating quite often being done by stratigraphic (study of rock layers to interpret geologic time scale) means along with a few radiocarbon dates, which, however, were not that frequent due to the paucity of laboratories in India and related limitations. The Iron Age was distinguished from the Early Historic period through artefacts such as punch-marked Sangam era and Roman coins.

However, recent compelling dates have emerged regarding the urn burial site of Sivagalai, located near Adichanallur, where three of the earliest known radiometric dates–tracing as far back as the late 4th millennium BCE–have been associated with iron, which seems to drastically challenge previous chronologies.

IN THE PAST, dating the widespread use of iron in India to around the turn of the 1st millennium BCE seemed reasonable. The Hittites, an ancient Anatolian civilisation (c. 1600-1178 BCE) from present-day Türkiye, were often credited with early knowledge of iron production, not only due to the discovery of iron weapons, tools, and ornaments but also because of Hittite cuneiform tablets that mention *An.bar*, or iron. Middle Hittite records also mention *An.bar Ge*, which is thought to refer to "iron from the sky", or meteoritic iron. Since iron rarely occurs in its metallic form on earth but only as iron oxides (such as haematite), metallic iron is primarily found in meteorites that have fallen to earth.

The use of meteoritic iron in antiquity is easily identifiable due to its high nickel content. A well-documented example is the meteoritic iron dagger found in the tomb of Tutankhamun (died 1323 BCE), confirmed by analysis to have a nickel content of about 10 per cent. Small Egyptian beads made of meteoritic iron have also been discovered, and the Gebel Kamil meteorite, which struck Egypt after 3000 BCE, left behind a crater containing thousands of iron fragments. Additionally, over 200 Hittite texts reference iron, and records from Assyrian merchants indicate that by the 13th century BCE, iron from the Hittites was highly sought after by Assyrian kings.

Since extracting metallic iron from ores (smelting) is more complex than extracting copper, the Iron Age followed the advent of copper smelting in most parts of the ancient world, including Anatolia. The early smelting of iron in Anatolia in the context of the Early Bronze Age is also confirmed from archaeometallurgical investigations. Some of the hitherto well accepted earlier dates for iron come from excavations by the Japanese Institute of Anatolian Archaeology at the mound of Kaman-Kalehöyük, 100 km away from Türkiye's capital, Ankara, going back to the Early Bronze Age into the Middle Bronze of about 2100-1900 BCE of the period of Assyrian Colonies into the Hittite period.

From a technological perspective, chronological periods in antiquity generally followed the progression of skills in material extraction and utilisation. Such a classification system was established for Old World prehistory by the Danish curator C.J. Thomsen in 1836. The earliest tools, crafted during the Stone Age, were made of stone and involved only the mastery of shaping techniques. In contrast, the Copper Age introduced the pyrotechnology of metallurgy as copper tools began to replace stone implements during the Chalcolithic period. The extraction of copper from its ores required smelting temperatures of approximately 1,200°C, at which point the ore would become molten. During this process, the molten copper would collect at the base of the furnace, while lighter siliceous impurities–known as gangue–would float to the surface and be removed as tap slag.

Before iron artefacts in Tamil Nadu were dated to 3000 BCE, the Hittites, an ancient Anatolian civilisation (c. 1600–1178 BCE) from present-day Türkiye, were often credited with early knowledge of iron production.



▼ **A triple-edged sword/blade** made of iron, unearthed in Adichanallur.

The ease of extracting metals was to some extent determined by their melting temperatures, which is partly why lower-melting-point metals such as copper and tin were processed before iron. To produce harder and more durable tools, tin was alloyed with copper, resulting in the creation of bronze–a synthetic material that ultimately replaced copper during the Bronze Age. Iron smelting is a more complex process due to iron's high melting point of around 1,500°C. However, iron ore can be smelted at lower temperatures of approximately 1,200°C using the solid-state bloomery process. This requires highly reducing conditions, achieved by maintaining a strong draft and using sufficient charcoal to generate carbon monoxide. Instead of melting, the iron forms a spongy mass known as a bloom, which is then hammered extensively to expel slag and extract usable bloomery iron.

Because of these technical challenges, it is generally believed that knowledge of copper smelting was a prerequisite for mastering iron smelting. This progression suggests a logical technological sequence–from the Copper and Bronze Age to the Iron Age–rather than a direct leap from the Neolithic to the Iron Age. With the mastery of iron smelting, tools, implements, and weapons previously made from copper and bronze were eventually replaced by the stronger and more durable material of iron.

THE ALIGNMENT between written records and archaeology mentioned before suggests a significant role of the Hittites in early iron production and trade. Due to the technical challenges of iron smelting, it was long believed that iron technology diffused from the Hittites to other regions after 1300 BCE. Hence, it was thought likely that iron was introduced into the Indian subcontinent by the turn of the first millennium BCE via the northwest land route.

In the context of Tamil Nadu archaeology, recent discoveries, excavations, and scientific studies present interesting conundrums. There is no known evidence of meteoritic iron use in ancient south India, also related to the absence of



▼ **High-tin bronze artefacts** excavated in Sasthapuram in Nanguneri taluk of Tirunelveli.

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major meteoritic iron deposits in the region. Moreover, preliminary surface X-ray fluorescence (XRF) compositional analysis by the author on iron specimens excavated from sites under discussion such as Mayiladumparai, Sivagalai, and Adichanallur in Tamil Nadu showed no significant amounts of nickel, indicating they are all smelted iron. Consequently, the Iron Age in Tamil Nadu is defined by the adoption of smelted iron rather than meteoritic iron.

A few decades ago, the introduction or diffusion of iron metallurgy into northern India in the Ganges Doab had been thought to be represented by the Painted Grey Ware culture by at least the turn of the 1st millennium BCE. A key reason for the assumption that iron technology diffused from there into south India, including Tamil Nadu, is the apparent absence of a distinct Chalcolithic period in the south. This contrasts with north-western and northern India, where, even after the decline of the Bronze Age Harappan civilisation, Chalcolithic cultures with copper-based tools and weapons continued to thrive, as evidenced by findings in the Doab, as seen also at sites such as the recently excavated Sinauli and at Ahar in Rajasthan.

Of course, in the northern Indian context, the availability of mineral deposits and copper ores is far greater than in southern India, for example in the Aravallis and the Khetri region of Rajasthan or in the eastern Singbhum belt. The reason why the use of iron eventually manifests itself much more prominently in southern India is also because iron ores are abundantly available in the south, unlike copper-base minerals.

In northern India too, there have been indications of some earlier dates for iron coming in, through the work of former Director General of the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), Rakesh Tewari. The findings published in the journal *Antiquity* in 2003 regarding the site of Malhar in the Gangetic Plain in Uttar Pradesh date to 1800-1000 BCE, with discoveries not only of iron artefacts but also slag debris from iron smelting.

A COUPLE OF DECADES AGO, the dating was done by laboratories in India with individual dates for sites, using standard radiocarbon dating, which had some limitations. By this time, in most parts of the developed world, more sophisticated methods were used, involving accelerator mass spectrometry (AMS), which is less prone to measurement error and more precise than the older methods. This means that there were perhaps fewer grounds for confidence in the earlier Indian dates.

Standard radiocarbon dating measures the beta decay, or radioactive emissions, of C14 (radioactive carbon isotope also known as 14C), which needed a larger sample size, being more time consuming with more scope for contamination and being less precise due to the statistical nature of radioactive decay counting. In AMS, the ratios of carbon isotopes are directly measured on much smaller samples. This allows the dating of carbonised seeds or grains within pots, giving more confidence that the date obtained is not the result of accidental association or of disturbance of the archaeological site.



IRON AGE SITES WITH RADIOMETRIC DATES

THE DATING PROCESS

- Radiocarbon dating, particularly AMS (accelerator mass spectrometry), was used to analyse charcoal and organic materials from burial urns and habitation sites.
- Samples from sites like Sivagalai and Adichanallur were sent to Beta Analytic, a reputed international laboratory, for precise dating.
- Charcoal, paddy, and millet remains provided reliable dates, with some samples traced back to 3000 BCE.
- The absence of nickel in iron artefacts confirmed they were smelted, not meteoritic, further supporting early iron use.

A significant shift since at least 2020 in archaeology in Tamil Nadu has been the increased emphasis on scientific archaeology, coupled with funding for reliable dating, particularly from reputed international laboratories. Indeed, the wider use of high-quality radiocarbon dating, especially through AMS by the top international laboratory Beta Analytic, has been a game changer. Because the radiocarbon content of the atmosphere is not absolutely constant, all radiocarbon dates must be converted to ranges of calendar age by calibration against a master database. This laboratory uses the High Probability Density Range (HPD) method, which assigns relative probabilities to calibrated ranges. This has greatly strengthened dating accuracy, as noted by the Sri Lankan historian Osmund Bopearachchi. These advancements have provided a more solid chronological framework, refining our understanding of ancient timelines.





In this connection, the urn burial site of Sivagalai clearly gave very early dates; a range of dates was obtained by AMS from Beta Analytic suggesting long occupation. For example, a potsherd (a broken piece of ceramic material found at an archaeological site) inscribed with Tamil Brahmi in the habitation site located in Trench A gave a dating of 7th century BCE. Perumbalai is another site that gave a couple of similar early AMS dates from Beta Analytics for sherds with graffiti. The links between graffiti on potsherds from Tamil sites with Indus signs such as from Keezhadi, also AMS dated by Beta Analytic to the 6th century BCE was pointed to in a recent TNSDA (Tamil Nadu State Department of Archaeology) publication by Rajan and Sivananthan.



▶ **A dog figurine,** a lid with a deer-shaped knob, a bowl, and a knob in the shape of two fish, all made of high-tin bronze, unearthed in Adichanallur.

IN 2021, THE FINDS that paddy from Trench A and Urn 3 in Sivagalai yielded AMS dates undertaken by Beta Analytic (Beta 600727) of calibrated dates of 1260–1051 BCE raised a lot of interest, pointing to the potential of this site for further excavations and suggesting that iron could have been used for agrarian implements. Normally, paddy, millets or seasonal plants as carbonaceous matter collected from hearths from habitation sites are considered the most reliable for radiocarbon dating since they are clearly associated with human activity. On the other hand, charcoal does have the possibility of accidental association, such as from past forest fires, etc. or as "old wood" where the charcoal related to inner parts of trees can be much older.

The Antiquity of Iron report by K. Rajan and Sivananthan for TNSDA recently brought out three more AMS dates on charcoal from Sivagalai, which by virtue of having been undertaken by Beta Analytics does raise the bar in terms of discussions on early iron. A sample of charcoal from Trench B3, Urn 10, Beta 583593, gave a 95.4 per cent probability of dates of 3519-3371 BCE. (It is also a new and useful precedent of the TNSDA that the dating results from laboratories such as Beta Analytic are published in full.) Charcoal from Trench A2, Urn 1, analysed for AMS dates by Beta Analytics (Beta 583592) gave calibrated dates of 3243-3102 BCE. A photograph of the intact urn of about 50 cm height and diameter is given in the report, sitting against granulitic bedrock, and the plan indicates that the bedrock was neatly cut to seat one hemisphere of the urn, which is a few centimetres thick, and with the front part packed with gravel and ferruginous soil. This was a practice used to pack urns also noted by the author on-

IRON AGE WITHOUT A COPPER AGE?

■ Typically, a Copper-Bronze Age precedes the Iron Age. Copper smelting is achieved at lower temperatures and is a relatively easier process. In Tamil Nadu, there is not much evidence for prior knowledge of copper-bronze production. Then how did the technology to smelt iron have developed? The theory is that migrant metalworkers from the north-western parts of the Indian subcontinent may have moved to Tamil Nadu and tried to experiment with easily available local iron ores in the absence of copper ores, thus developing iron smelting.

site in Adichanallur. From the nearby urn burial site of Adichanallur as well, there are some interesting dates. The report mentions calibrated dates from the Locality C, Urn 7 from millets of 1506-1304 BCE and from paddy Locality B, Urn 38, of 1368-1110 BCE. However, there is yet another date from Adichanallur from Beta Analytic (709374) for charcoal from a habitation Layer 4 at 22 cm with a date range from 2580-2465 BCE at 93.9 per cent probability, which is also very significant as probably the earliest date from a habitation level connected with an Iron Age site. It may also be noted that the kind of artefacts generally found from the Adichanallur urns, including long swords, anchor hooks, daggers, and arrowheads, are similar to those uncovered by Rea.

OVERALL, THE RESPONSES communicated by the archaeologist Prof. David Killick on the report are interesting. He points out that first, one can safely conclude that "iron was definitely used in Tamil Nadu by 1300 BCE" (from the cereal-based dates) and, second, that one can accept the dates on charcoal from Kilnamandi and Mayiladumparai, of about 1850-1600 BCE. Third, he adds that although it is "shocking to consider that iron could have been used by 3000 BCE", there seems to be no reason to reject the four charcoal dates older than about 2500 BCE (from Sivagalai and also Adichanallur), which, since they are from different localities, makes it extremely unlikely that all are "old wood".

The problem of the charcoal being produced from "old wood" also seems less likely because the trees around this region are not old and large with thick trunks like the conifers in the temperate west that give a lot of tree rings with old to new dates. There is also not a lot of forest cover for factors such as forest fires to give older dates for charcoal. Millet and rice cultivation does not lend itself to the kind of slash-and-burn agriculture that could also result in charcoal that could be unreliable for dating. The urns were also sealed with lids often packed with cairn stones, and being partly embedded in bedrock were reasonably impervious, so that the charcoal could not have been easily contaminated with extraneous matter.



▼ **Rock paintings** in Mayiladumparai, Theni district.

Extracting iron from ores is more complex than extracting copper. So, the Iron Age followed the advent of copper smelting in most parts of the world, including Anatolia.

AN INTRIGUING ASPECT of the ferrous metal repertoire at these Tamil sites with early dates for iron is that they represent rather full-blown artefacts. As also pointed out by Ümit Güder, archaeometallurgist of Turkish origin, "these objects seem to have utilitarian functions such as axes and chisel in well-developed forms suited for their purpose. This seems somewhat unusual for such early iron objects, at least in comparison to Anatolian examples, which tend to follow a more gradual developmental pattern. This is not only due to the need to acquire knowledge on how to shape a new type of metal but also to understand the material characteristics required to apply techniques that produce functional working edges."

At this point it must be mentioned that these sites around the Porunai river are not devoid of evidence of iron smelting activity or a skilled copper-bronze repertoire at least associated with more conventional dates for the Iron Age. The author's research had earlier metallurgically pointed to the finds of skilled quenched high-tin beta (23 per cent tin) bronzes from the Adichanallur finds from the Chennai Museum unearthed by Rea, showing retention of the high temperature intermetallic beta phase of bronze with a fixed composition of 22.9 per cent tin. The author has also been involved in examining copper alloys including higher tin bronzes using portable XRF analysis from recently excavated urns from Adichanallur dated by AMS by the Inter-University Accelerator Centre, New Delhi, (IUACD) laboratory to 13th century BCE as indicated in an ASI report of 2023. Interestingl,y some were indeed confirmed to be high-tin bronzes, that is, binary alloys with a composition of tin above 15 per cent and some with 22-23 per cent tin bronze as pointed out in her paper for the 2nd international symposium in memory of epigraphist Iravatham Mahadevan. These in

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fact rank amongst the earliest known examples of high-tin bronzes.

The author on a visit with Dr Yathees Kumar of the ASI also noted several low mounds with iron smelting slags a couple of kilometres further upstream along the Porunai river area amidst the ferruginous and quartzitic soils. Furthermore, the ASI report of excavations undertaken at Adichanallur in 2023 mentions iron smelting slags from red ware urns in Locality A of Adichanallur from where an excavated pit burial yielded a median AMS date from the IUACD of 7th century BCE for charred bone.

INTRIGUINGLY, AS pointed out by Sasisekaran et al., Alexander Rea's excavation report of 1906 suggested that the lensoid (a small geologic unit or feature that pinches out laterally, and/or has a lens-like shape in profile view) bodies of the quartzite ore were completely mined out to place the large burial urns in "wells" of 1.5 m to 5 m depths. Following excavations by the ASI led by Satyamurthy in 2004-05 at Adichanallur, Sasisekaran et al. in their 2010 paper in *Indian Journal of History of Science* suggested that the burial site also represented an opencast mining pit into which the urns were interned. In the northern areas, they found a deep old working (a term used to describe remnants of mining in antiquity) and also evidence of calcination of ore and burnt ash and pieces of hearths. Significantly, they found veinlets of green-coloured malachite or copper ore in the quartz veins and suggested that there seems to have also been auriferous (characterised by the appearance of fine-grained gold) quartz so that apart from gold, copper could have been extracted and smelted with respect to the copper alloy and gold finds in the urns. Titanium-bearing magnetite ore was found, while the iron slags also showed presence of titanium minerals.

Old workings for iron were also reported by them in nearby Krishnapuram where Rea had found more urn burials. Dates were also broadly reported from the Luminiscence Dating Lab of Manipur University of 1500 BCE. Of course, more updated investigations are needed to explore the antiquity of mining and metallurgy; however, the above studies point to the potential for the same.

At the same time, it takes a leap of imagination to explain how iron smelting could have emerged at these sites along the Porunai river

It must be mentioned that the sites around the Porunai river are not devoid of evidence of iron smelting activity or a skilled copper-bronze repertoire at least associated with more conventional dates for the Iron Age.

roughly contemporaneous with the Harappan period, with the Mature Harappan period dating from 2600 BCE to 1900 BCE, a Bronze Age civilisation where iron was not in vogue. The main challenge in terms of accepting the early dates of iron would relate to how the technology could have developed without much evidence for prior knowledge of copper-bronze use in the region. To the author, the conundrum of such an early date for iron in southern Tamil Nadu coinciding with Harappan can be resolved if some impetus from the Harappan regions were invoked for the transference of smelting know-how against the backdrop of Neolithic southern India. This could have happened if there had been migrant metalworkers from the north-western parts of the Indian subcontinent into southern Tamil Nadu where people familiar with copper-bronze metallurgy may have not found copper ores easily and then tried to experiment with more easily available local iron ores and thus developed iron smelting.

Although there is nothing like the urbanised structural remains found in the Harappan regions at this time in the south around 3000-2500 BCE, metallurgical prowess need not necessarily be seen as the prerogative of urbanised elites. In fact, the ethnographic record in India rather suggests that the knowledge of mining, bloomery iron smelting, and smithing is something that has been carried forward not by urbanised elites but by itinerant and forest-dwelling tribal or indigenous communities such as the Agarias and Asurs in eastern India or the Kotas and Kurumbas in the Nilgiris in southern India and others. In that sense, the movement and maturing of metalworking skills need not be related to evidence of urbanisation.

A RATHER OVERLOOKED aspect that the author would like to highlight here is that urn burial tradition seen at the Porunai sites is also one that may ultimately have Harappan roots. Urn or pot burials were also known from the Harappan period from Harappa in Pakistan, such as cemetery H, which also contained bones of the deceased, of red glazed ware and red ware urns with lids. There are also echoes in terms of pottery and terracotta wares of the "dish on stand motif", which supported lidded urns found at Sivagalai and Adichanallur with those found at Harappa in Pakistan. Some of the copper chisels from the Harappan repertoire also have trapezoidal celt-like shapes similar to the Iron Age ones such as from Sivagalai and also those more widely known from the Gangetic Copper Hoard material.



▼ **Experts** at an excavation site in Adichanallur.

The use of black and red ware is also noted at the Harappan site of Lothal in Gujarat. The Chalcolithic site of Ahar (roughly dated to 3000 to 1900 BCE) in the Khetri copper belt of Rajasthan also had several urn burials. The ribs seen in swords from Sivagalai and Adichanallur bear morphological similarities with the antennae swords associated with the Gangetic Chalcolithic Copper Hoard or Ochre Coloured Pottery Culture such as from Sinauli (with a carbon date of 1865-1550 BCE from Birbal Sahni Institute), contemporaneous with Late Harappan.

As mentioned before, the Adichanallur copper alloy "mother goddess" now in the Government Museum, Chennai, strikingly resembles Indus female terracotta figurines with the same kind of headdress and waistband. In recent seasons of excavations over 2022–by the ASI of urns from Adichanallur–finds of bronze were dated back to the 14th to 13th century BCE with dates from millet and paddy done by the IUACD AMS laboratory. The small copper alloy animal figurines found also markedly resemble Harappan motifs: such as a small dog (found in terracotta in the Harappan repertoire), fish motifs, and an ibex/antelope with backward sloping horns very similar to the depiction in the famed Indus "Pashupati" seal.

Non-destructive XRF analysis by the author using a portable XRF machine on the dog figurine showed that it was of unleaded binary bronze with 7 per cent tin, not dissimilar to the low-tin bronze composition of Harappan figurines such as the Mohenjodaro dancing girl. As pointed out by Prof. David Killick in his companion piece, copper smelting is known from Mehrgarh Period II by 4000 BCE in pre-Harappan Baluchistan in the north-west of the Indian subcontinent. This is also a region where Brahui, a northern Dravidian language, is still spoken. In fact, the geneticist Vagheesh Narasimhan in his paper in *Science* in 2019 had pointed to the link between genetic markers related to the Indus Valley Civilisation and of ancestral south Indian, which could have led to a spread of proto-Dravidian languages.

In a recent study in *Nature* of February 2025, Lazaridis et al. trace the genetic origin of the earliest Indo-Europeans to the Yamnaya of the Steppes, adding to the broader international consensus that the early languages of the Harappan regions were perhaps more likely to be related to Dravidian languages and predating the arrival of Indo-European or Sanskritic speakers, which strengthens notions of a movement of Harappan cultural facets into Tamil Nadu where the Dravidian language of Tamil prevails.

So, this notion that there was some movement perhaps of materials hoarded over a long period of time or of technologies between this part of southern Tamil Nadu and Harappan sites (perhaps even along the sea route since such urn burials are not known in much of the intervening parts of the mainland), is not implausible with an associated movement of peoples, which could have also occurred in earlier phases. This could have contributed to new impetus in terms of metallurgical knowledge and innovation of iron smelting and eventual exchanges with the Neolithic populace in the Tamil regions.

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Such an explanation may just be evoked to explain the earliest emergence of iron metallurgy in this region as a gradual extension of the broader Harappan metallurgical repertoire, despite the hiatus in the areas where it flourished and where iron metallurgy had been unknown.

LONG-DISTANCE MARITIME connections are well documented between the Harappan regions and Mesopotamia, and thus it is not far-fetched that southern Tamil Nadu was reached earlier via the sea route rather than the land route. In fact, several other pieces of the jigsaw fall into place when the sea route is considered, rather than the land route; the fact that so many urn burial sites are found mainly in southern Tamil Nadu but less so further north in the Deccan, or the finds of potsherds dating back to the 7th century BCE with Indus signs particularly in Tamil Nadu. It also could explain the slightly later manifestations of iron going steadily further northwards into Neolithic southern India from southern Tamil Nadu, where the progressive use of iron tools could have also facilitated the shaping and creation of megaliths from harder stones such as granulite and granite.

Finally, with respect to the sea route, the author would go so far as to suggest that the mention in the Roman Pliny's Natural History (1st century) of the place of "Tabropane" could have more likely referred to coastal Tamil Nadu with such pre-existing hubs along the Thamirabarani (or Porunai) river, which was colloquially called Thamrapayani, rather than Sri Lanka as generally believed, since the finds of Roman coins from sites in Tamil Nadu far exceed those from Sri Lanka.

Finally, one must mention, of course that TNSDA and the team leading it of K. Rajan, R. Sivanantham, and T. Udayachandran deserve hearty congratulations for a very sustained and dedicated campaign of archaeological research over many years, which is now bearing fruit with some truly groundbreaking findings setting out new milestones in the field of world archaeology.

Nevertheless, more sustained and systematic archaeometallurgical and archaeological research is needed going forward to fully substantiate the initial findings with more insights into the extractive metallurgy and other aspects such as the production sites, furnaces and slags. Such studies could also benefit from more international collaboration for latest practices. ■

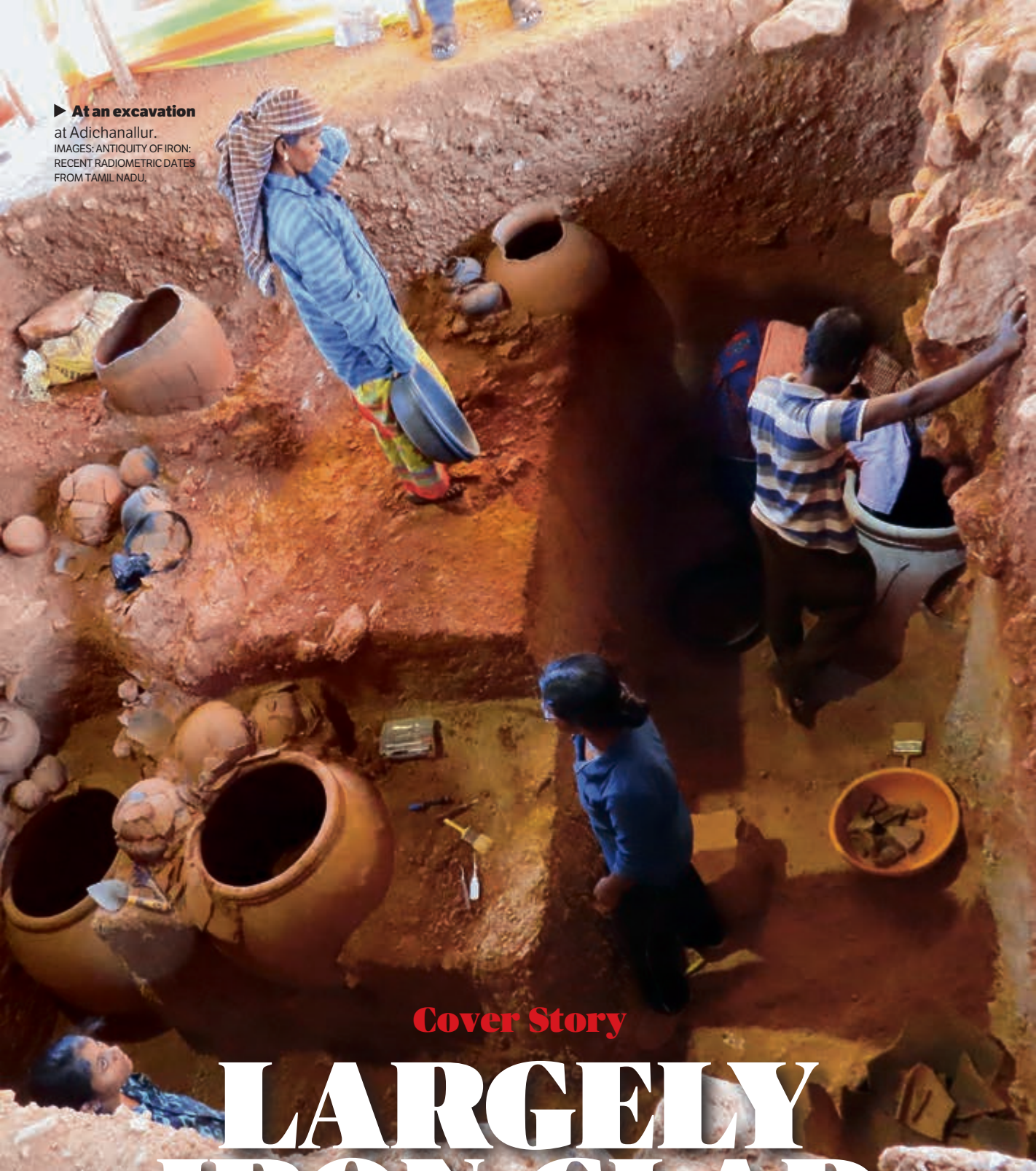


▼ **A high-tin bronze tripod** stand excavated in Adichanallur.

Sharada Srinivasan, a professor at the National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bengaluru, specialising in archaeometallurgy and technical art history, is an elected International Honorary Member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in Archaeology. She is a recipient of the Padma Shri award, and the Indian National Academy of Engineering's Woman Engineer of the Year Award 2021 in Academia.

FOOTNOTES

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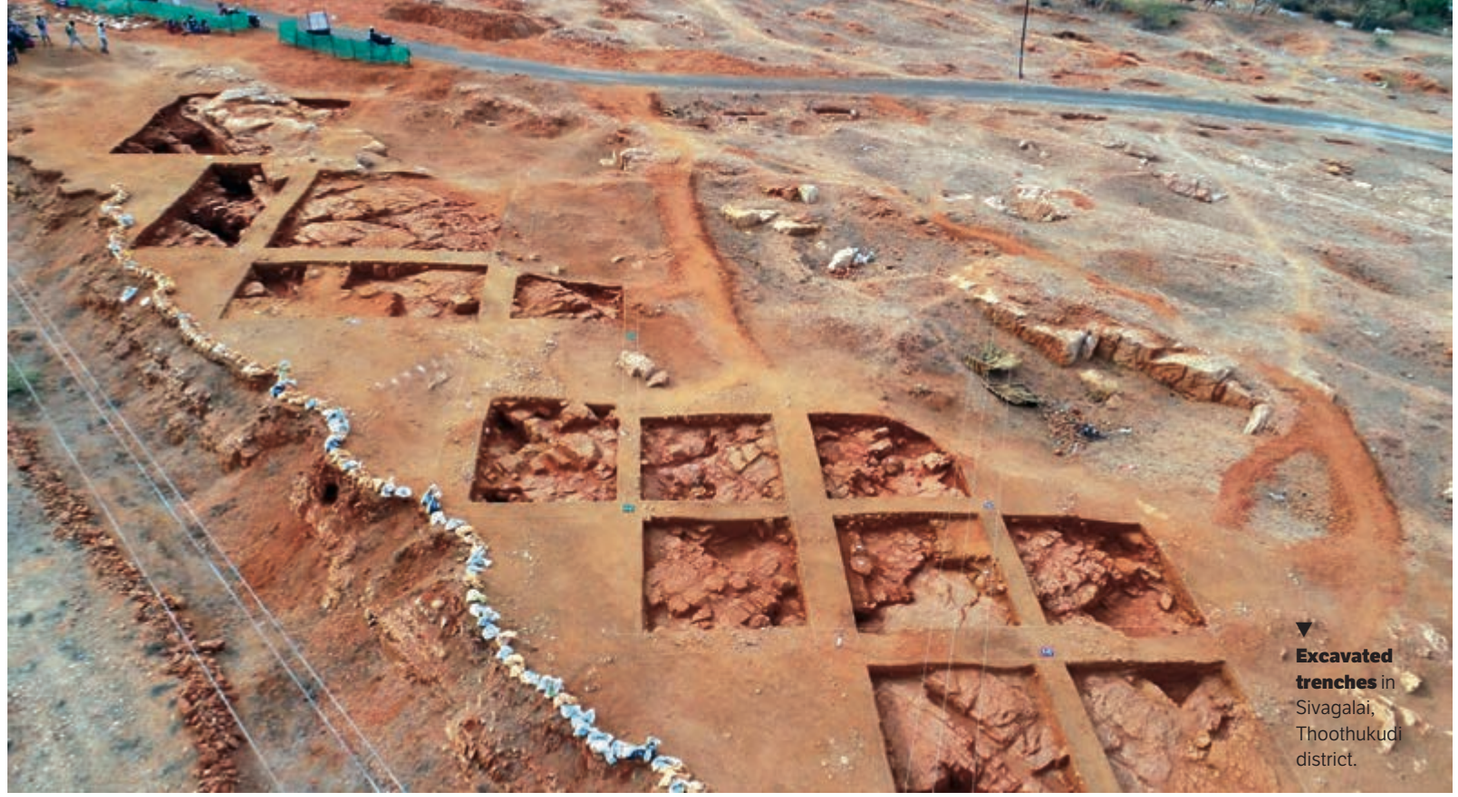


▶ **At an excavation** at Adichanallur.
IMAGES: ANTIQUITY OF IRON: RECENT RADIOMETRIC DATES FROM TAMIL NADU.

Cover Story

LARGELY IRON-CLAD

While the findings on iron use in Tamil Nadu look solid, they seem to suggest a leap from the Neolithic to the Iron Age, so it is worth investigating how smelting knowledge first came to south India. **DAVID KILLICK**



▼ **Excavated trenches** in Sivagalai, Thoothukudi district.

In late January 2025, I was sent a digital copy of the monograph Antiquity of Iron: Recent Radiometric Dates from Tamil Nadu by Dr Sharada Srinivasan, and asked to review the claims made therein about the use of iron in Tamil Nadu by 3000 BCE.

As Dr Srinivasan notes in her own article in this issue, the consensus among archaeometallurgists—those who specialise in the study of prehistoric and historic metallurgy—has been that iron smelting technology was slowly developed from copper smelting technology in Anatolia (now eastern Türkiye) between 2000 BCE and 1200 BCE, after which it spread throughout Eurasia and Africa.

Before commenting on the evidence for Tamil Nadu, let me explain how prehistoric archaeological sites are dated. Until the invention of radiocarbon (14C) dating in the mid-1950s the only way to date iron in archaeological sites was when it was found in the same contexts as written records or inscriptions, or with pottery whose very approximate date of production was established elsewhere by association with such records.

Radiocarbon provides a more direct way of dating contexts from which iron was recovered. From the 1950s to the 1990s radiocarbon dating was done solely by counting radioactive decay events, a slow process that required large samples, which meant that it was restricted to large samples of charcoal. Big pieces of charcoal are seldom found in association with iron in tombs or houses, but are found in smelting furnaces because charcoal was the fuel used.

There have been several claims since the 1960s for independent invention of iron smelting in Africa before 2000 BCE, based upon the apparent association of 14C dates on charcoal with iron smelting or iron forging furnaces. Many African archaeologists accept these claims, and have been frustrated by my refusal to endorse any of them (so far).

My rejection of these claims is not based upon rejection of the dates themselves—quality control checks done since 2000 show that most laboratories produce accurate dates. My scepticism in these cases concerns the association of the charcoal sample with the iron. Errors of association may flow from the following:

(1) Old charcoal. The gradual drying of a region through climate change may lead to the death of trees, which are then ignited by grass fires. The stumps and roots of such trees may be converted to charcoal, which persists indefinitely, and may be picked up and used much later for fuel in iron smelting.

The ideal samples for carbon dating are charred annual plants, such as grass, seeds or grains, or cloth made from cotton, wool or silk.

(2) Later disturbance. Cultivation of fields over archaeological sites may bring up older charcoal from below the archaeological layers, as may burrowing animals. In dry sandy soils, loose ashy sediments like garbage dumps, or sediments subject to intense termite or earthworm activity, it is often difficult to recognise disturbance, even for experienced archaeologists.

(3) Poor excavation and recording practices. Archaeological excavation requires a high level of training and skill and meticulous recording of changes in textures and colours of sediments. The exact position of finds must also be recorded in three dimensions. Unfortunately, not all archaeologists are highly skilled. Errors in excavation may result in objects of human manufacture and radiocarbon samples being mistakenly associated.

MANY OF THE CLAIMS for very early iron in Africa are unproven because of legitimate doubt about the association of the iron with the charcoal samples used for dating. What then are the kinds of context where the association of the radiocarbon samples with iron objects can be considered reliable?

(1) In graves, especially when they are lined with stone or brick;

(2) When both are found together in containers, such as pots; and

(3) When iron and carbon are chemically combined during smelting to form steel, provided that the fuel used was charcoal, not coal. (Coal is so old that any radiocarbon originally present will be lost due to radioactive decay.)

These contexts eliminate the possibility of disturbance and archaeologist's error, but do not necessarily eliminate the possibility of an old charcoal error. This can also be eliminated if the iron is associated with some other material that contains carbon known to have been formed in a single year.

The ideal samples are charred annual plants, such as grass, seeds or grains, or cloth made from cotton, wool, or silk. Very small samples—providing as little as 0.1 gram of purified carbon—can be dated by a relatively new method, accelerator mass spectrometry (AMS), which was initially developed in the late 1980s, but has become widely available since 2000.

AMS directly measures the ratio of carbon isotopes (C12, C13, and C14) in a sample. It requires smaller sample sizes, reduces contamination risks, and provides highly precise dating results by detecting individual atoms of carbon isotopes.

As the radiocarbon content of the atmosphere has varied slightly over time, radiocarbon ages must be converted to ranges of calendar ages by comparison with a master calibration curve, compiled by dating tree rings of known ages from American bristlecone pines. Calibrated radiocarbon dates are always ranges of years; they should never be quoted as single years.

So, how do the Tamil Nadu samples fare? Three of the 17 radiocarbon dates in this report are AMS dates on rice (paddy) grain or millet found with iron within burial jars (urns). The calibrated age ranges for these are 1197-835 BCE, 1368-1110 BCE, and 1506-1304 BCE. All three of these dates must be accepted, and they establish without doubt that iron was used in Tamil Nadu by at least 1300 BCE—roughly the same time that iron was coming into common use in the Hittite state of Anatolia.

Four of the dates are on steel objects from graves. These were all recognised as steel by the eminent South Korean archaeometallurgist Jang Sik Park, who then sent samples of them to the University of Arizona for AMS dating. Three of the four dates obtained are broadly consistent with those obtained on the rice and millet: A blade from the Mangadu site gave a calibrated range 1604-416 BCE, an arrowhead from Thelunganur is 1109-909 BCE, and the first of two calibrated dates on a truly remarkable high-carbon steel sword from Thelunganur was 1435-1233 BCE. The carbon in these steel objects must have come from charcoal, and so in theory there could be an old charcoal effect.

But it seems extremely unlikely that three objects from two different sites could all be smelted with old charcoal. A serious problem, however, is that a second sample from the same Thelunganur sword returned a date of 2900-2627 BCE! After some online discussion with the dating laboratory and with another archaeometallurgist who had inconsistent results from the same laboratory when dating steel, I think that this date reflects an accident when removing sample for dating. The laboratory used a wire saw—tiny diamonds embedded in a nickel-based wire. I suspect that some diamonds broke off the wire and became embedded in this sample. Since diamonds contain no radiocarbon, these would push the radiocarbon date to an older age range. In my opinion this date should be rejected.

The remaining 10 dates are on charcoal. I focus here on those with the best associations with iron samples. The sample from the Kilnamandi stone-lined grave was dated to 1866-1615 BCE, and there are three examples of urns (burial jars) containing iron and charcoal from Sivagalai. The charcoal in these were dated to 3011-2881 BCE, 3519-3370 BCE, and 3368-3102 BCE. The ▶

apparent differences between these three dates is illusory. There is a plateau in the radiocarbon calibration between 3400 and 3000 BCE, so all three of these cremation burials could be approximately contemporary. It seems quite unlikely that three charcoal samples from three different urns could all be old charcoal, so I see no good reason to reject any of them.

Let us look at Tamil Nadu iron in a wider context. As exciting as these findings are—and congratulations are due to the archaeologists involved for the high quality of their archaeological fieldwork—several large questions have yet to be answered. One of the reasons why I have rejected claims for an independent invention of iron smelting in sub-Saharan Africa in 3000 BCE is that there is no prior record of high temperature technology, whether copper smelting or high-firing of pottery in kilns, in that subcontinent. The same problem seems to apply in Tamil Nadu, where the sequence appears to leap from the Neolithic to the Iron Age, bypassing the Copper Age.

Why is this a problem? The reduction of iron from its ore requires both high temperature (at least 1200°C to form a fluid iron slag) and an extremely high ratio (at least 1000:1) of carbon monoxide to carbon dioxide. To satisfy both conditions, all of the following are required:

(a) a process for producing charcoal from wood in quantity;

(b) bellows and tuyeres to provide a strong air blast that can force the charcoal to burn sufficiently rapidly to reach at least 1200°C. This is well above the temperature used to fire domestic earthernware pottery (800-900°C)

The earliest copper smelting in western Asia and eastern Europe is dated to around 5000 BCE; the earliest iron to around 2000 BCE.



▼ **An Iron Age** grave at Kilnamandi in Tiruvannamalai district.

(c) the ability to maintain the very delicate balance between a reaction that produces heat (that between charcoal and oxygen, producing carbon dioxide) and a reaction that absorbs heat (conversion of carbon dioxide to carbon monoxide). This balance is very difficult to achieve.

For these reasons, archaeometallurgists who understand the thermodynamics of iron smelting believe that iron smelting technology had to build on the knowledge, inventions, and expertise developed in earlier, simpler forms of pyrotechnology. In the Near East, this was copper metallurgy, which is much less demanding in terms of thermodynamics than iron smelting. The earliest copper smelting in western Asia and eastern Europe is dated to around 5000 BCE; the earliest iron to around 2000 BCE.

It, therefore, took around 3,000 years for metalworkers in these regions to develop the additional expertise needed to smelt iron. I know of no archaeometallurgist who believes that iron smelting could be invented by a Neolithic society without any prior experience of high-temperature technology. Yet, this is precisely what is being claimed for Tamil Nadu. Furthermore, the iron technology represented in these items appears fully developed. Where are the earlier stages? And where are the smelting sites of the same ages? Smelting slag is indestructible and quite distinctive to the unaided eye.

Dr Srinivasan draws attention in her companion article to some similarities between items and burial practices in these Tamil Nadu sites and those of the Classic Harappan period (2600-2000 BCE) in the Indus River valley.

Copper was smelted and cast before 4000 BCE in this region (Mehrgarh, Period II), so it is certainly worth investigating the possibility that this prior knowledge was brought to southern India, where copper ores are scarce but iron ores are abundant, and used there to develop the smelting of iron. ■

David Killick retired as Professor of Anthropology and Adjunct Professor of Materials Science & Engineering in the University of Arizona. His work blended techniques from archaeology, physics, geochemistry, and materials science to reconstruct ancient technologies in general, and those of ancient metallurgy in particular. Much of his work has been on the smelting of iron, copper, and tin ores in sub-Saharan Africa, and on tracking long-distance trade of copper and tin.

Cover Story

‘Our claim is backed by scientific evidence’

Interview with Tamil Nadu Finance Minister Thangam Thennarasu, who also heads the State’s Department of Archaeology. **R.K. RADHAKRISHNAN**

Recent tests on archaelogical finds in Tamil Nadu date the Iron Age in India to about 3000 BCE, older by more than a millennium than earlier thought. The findings are significant in understanding the region’s ancient history, and the government is taking efforts to preserve and promote this heritage, Thangam Thennarasu said in an interview. Edited excerpts:

Reports indicate that the results on the scientific dating of iron artefacts found in Tamil Nadu became available in 2021. Why did the government take nearly five years to make the report public?

We didn’t want to be hasty in laying claim to being the oldest Iron Age site in the country. We wanted to test multiple samples at different laboratories to back up the claims with solid scientific evidence.

The [carbon dating] results from Beta Analytic Testing Laboratory in Miami, US, for a specific sample were made available to us in early 2021. Three other samples were sent to the same laboratory, for which we received confirmation in 2022, 2023, and 2024. The Birbal Sahni Institute of Palaeosciences, Lucknow, conducted tests on five urn pieces from the Sivagalai burial site too and sent us a preliminary report in 2023. The Physical Research Laboratory, Ahmedabad, too examined two urns using the luminescence dating method and communicated the tentative results to us in 2023.

We also wanted renowned scholars who have done excavations and research on the Iron Age to study and validate it. Some of their comments have been collated in the report, Antiquity of Iron: Recent Radiometric Dates from Tamil Nadu, published by



▶ **Thangam Thennarasu** says there is no political motivation behind the attempt to decipher the Indus Valley script, only interest in the historical and cultural links between the Indus Valley Civilisation and the Dravidian civilisation. B. JOTHI RAMALINGAM



▶ **The bronze Mother Goddess** figurines unearthed in Adichanallur bear similarities to the terracotta Mother Goddess sculptures from Harappa (seen here) displayed at the British Museum.
SHARADA SRINIVASAN

Watch the video interview

the Department of Archaeology. The experts include Prof. Dilip Kumar Chakrabarti of Cambridge University, Prof. Osmund Bopearachchi of the French National Centre for Scientific Research, Dr Rakesh Tewari, former Director General of the Archaeological Survey of India, and others.

We carried out excavations in an Iron Age site called Mayiladumparai in Krishnagiri district in 2022. The excavations proved that Tamil Nadu was in the Iron Age 4,200 years ago. Other sites like Thelunganur and Mangadu, which were excavated earlier, had yielded comparatively later dates. Further evidence was obtained from Sivagalai through examination of husks found in an urn. It dated the artefacts to a much older period—by over a millennium. We received several dates and we cautiously concluded with the present finding.

Excavations in Adichanallur and other places have been going on for some time. What made the Department of Archaeology want to further examine these sites?

The excavations demanded a fresh look. In all these sites—Adichanallur, Sivagalai, Mayiladumparai, Mangadu, Thelunganur, and Kilnamandi—we found enough artefacts that challenged the earlier assumptions. Scientific dating places the introduction of iron in Tamil Nadu between 3345 BCE [and] 2953 BCE. We felt it was a breakthrough. The most exciting find was that of the sword collection from Thelunganur (in Salem district) as it throws light on the use of high carbon steel in south India. The introduction, adaptation, production, and expansion of the use of iron and steel has wider implications for our development as a society.

In January this year, Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M.K. Stalin announced a $1 million prize for anyone who deciphers the Indus Valley script. Why has it been so difficult to decipher the script even after a 100 years? Will this now be viewed as a political project, given the debate over the Aryan versus Dravidian civilisations?

The biggest challenge in deciphering the Indus script is the absence of bilingual inscriptions. Unlike the Rosetta Stone in Egypt, which provided translations in multiple languages [for the text in hieroglyphic script],

"Engraved symbols on potsherds found in Keezhadi bear striking resemblance to those from the Indus Valley Civilisation."

the Indus script lacks a comparable reference. This is number one.

The second is because of the brevity of the inscriptions itself. In the Tamil Brahmi inscriptions, which you can find written on the stone walls of cave temples of Tamil Nadu, you have a greater number of letters to make comparisons with all these symbols and scripts. But the Indus Valley script is seen on tiny engravings, such as on their seals. There is only about 1 centimetre space, and the motif itself takes up most of the area.

Additionally, it is yet to be determined whether the writing is from right to left or left to right. Even that is still under debate. Scholars continue to discuss whether the script represents a Dravidian language or an Indo-European one.

On whether this initiative has any political motivations, I can firmly say no. There is no political agenda behind this effort. Our interest lies in understanding the historical and cultural connections between the Indus Valley Civilisation and the Dravidian civilisation. There are significant similarities between the two, and we aim to establish a scientific basis for the historical links between them.

Looking at the findings of scholars such as R. Balakrishnan, the epigraphist Iravatham Mahadevan, and the Indologist Asko Parpola, we see clear similarities between the Indus Valley Civilisation and the civilisation that existed in south India [at the time]. At what point can we say with certainty that these civilisations shared common values? And can we establish a definitive timeline linking them? Is that even possible?

We have been doing extensive excavations across the state and subjected all such material to carbon dating process in recognised international laboratories to ensure the credibility of the results. [It has led to] some very interesting facts about the date. Now we have found out that the Iron Age existed in this part of the country much earlier [than known]—in 3000 BCE.

That is a significant finding. So I would say the Iron Age existed in this part of the country when the Indus Valley was in the Bronze Age. All the Indus Valley objects are made of bronze, whereas we had by the time known how to produce iron artefacts. Though I couldn't say that this is the period in which there would have been some sort of an exchange, I could say that all these things lead to a conclusion that this could be the period.

In his customary address to the Assembly, the Governor's remarks mention that archaeological excavations are being conducted at eight sites, along with offshore explorations in Korkai. Is there any exciting news from these excavations?

We are conducting preliminary studies at Korkai, and we are hopeful of making some exciting discoveries. However, the other sites have already yielded very promising findings.

For example, the Keezhadi excavation located in Sivaganga district has been very revealing. We have discovered numerous potsherds with engraved symbols, many of which bear a striking resemblance to Indus Valley symbols. This strengthens the argument that a link

"Correlations among names inscribed on potsherds in various regions indicate a network of interconnected settlements, possibly interacting through trade, migration, and shared traditions."

existed between the Indus Valley and the Dravidian civilisation.

I must also mention Thulukarpatti. We initially expected the findings there to support the Adichanallur discoveries. However, the results far exceeded our expectations and have shed new light on the civilisation. Similarly, the Manalur Kottai excavation has been fascinating. We have found carnelian and agate beads across multiple excavation sites, which suggests extensive trade networks with other parts of the Indian subcontinent. These findings strongly indicate that Tamil Nadu was an active participant in long-distance trade, possibly with regions as far as the Indus Valley.

About 10 years ago, during excavations in Vellore, you discovered double-edged copper swords along with copper-bronze objects and other artefacts. Now, do similar discoveries across Tamil Nadu provide evidence that the civilisation was, first, likely situated along riverbeds and, second, shared commonalities across different regions?

Yes, at least in terms of geography, that is the main commonality. Another key factor is urbanisation: the presence of an urban civilisation during that period. This is quite interesting because when we look at the artefacts, whether they are swords or copper-bronze materials, we see many striking similarities between what we have unearthed in Tamil Nadu and what was found in the Indus Valley Civilisation.

Take, for example, the site of Adichanallur. Many of the objects unearthed there closely resemble those from the Indus Valley. Consider the [copper alloy] Mother Goddess figurines: they bear a remarkable resemblance to their Indus counterparts made of terracotta. Similarly, the depiction of the bull in Indus Valley seals has striking similarities with those found in Tamil Nadu.

Many such objects show clear influences of both civilisations on the other, further strengthening the idea that they were connected.

When we look at sites like Keezhadi or Vellore, which of these excavations provides the strongest evidence of an urban civilisation comparable to the Indus Valley? Was it as large and flourishing as the Indus Valley Civilisation?

Yes, Keezhadi, in particular, exhibits many significant similarities with the Indus Valley Civilisation [3300 BCE to 1300 BCE]... [especially] in urban planning, trade activities, agriculture, and connectivity. While Keezhadi belongs to what we call the Sangam Age civilisation [300 BCE to 300 CE], it still shares crucial aspects with the urban civilisation of the Indus Valley.

One of the most important pieces of evidence linking these civilisations is the symbols found on pottery (potsherds). When we compare those from the Indus Valley Civilisation with potsherds from Keezhadi, Sivagalai, Kodumanal, and Porunthal, we find remarkable similarities.

To further study this, our Chief Minister has instructed us to conduct an extensive analysis and compile a

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monographic catalogue of these symbols. Additionally, we are documenting rock art and comparing the symbols found there with those on the pottery. This research is crucial because the people engaged in making pottery at Keezhadi used symbols identical to those found in the Indus Valley. Some symbols are identical, others show strong parallels.

When examining these various civilisations—or rather, the settlements that existed across Tamil Nadu—do you see clear evidence that they were interconnected? Could they have been part of a broader network of settlements?

Yes, absolutely. For instance, take the name "Aadhan", which was found inscribed on a potsherd. It is a three-letter word, and based on our analysis, it appears to indicate ownership—likely the name of a household or individual. The same word has been found at another excavation site, which suggests continuity in language and culture.

Similarly, at Kodumanal, located in western Tamil Nadu, we have discovered hundreds, if not thousands, of potsherds with inscriptions in Tamil-Brahmi script that exhibit remarkable similarities to those found at other sites across the State. When we compare the names inscribed on potsherds from various regions, we find strong correlations, indicating a network of interconnected settlements.

All of this suggests that these civilisations were not isolated but were part of a larger cultural and economic system, possibly interacting through trade, migration, and shared traditions.

There is a lot of archaeological activity happening right now, and the academic and research community is excited. But what about the general public? Are people engaging with these discoveries? Are museums and excavation sites seeing large footfall?

If you visit Keezhadi, you will immediately see the public enthusiasm! Since Madurai is already a major tourist hub, Keezhadi, located nearby, has attracted massive crowds. Lakhs of people have visited the site, with interest especially high among the younger generation who are eager to learn about their civilisational roots.

Given this growing interest, the government has sanctioned an open-air museum at Keezhadi in addition to the existing museum. Similar to Indus Valley sites, visitors will be able to walk through the excavation areas and experience the discoveries first hand.

People from all walks of life—professions, age groups, and regions—are visiting the sites. Even eminent personalities have shown interest. For example, when Dr Arvind Panagariya visited Tamil Nadu, he was particularly keen to explore Keezhadi.

I believe Azim Premji has visited the Keezhadi museum.

Yes, he was there. And, he was so excited when he was there.... Any museum we establish will have all modern facilities and technical interfaces. We have made sure that our museums are not just conventional displays but immersive experiences. We are integrating modern technology, interactive interfaces, and virtual reconstructions to enhance public engagement. Our goal is to create experiences, not just exhibits. Visitors shouldn't simply walk past artefacts; they should understand where we come from and how our civilisations evolved.

"Given the growing public interest, the government has sanctioned an open-air museum at Keezhadi in addition to the existing museum."

What is the status of the Porunai Museum in Tirunelveli and the museum at Gangaikonda Cholapuram?

We have already identified the artefacts that will be displayed. For the Porunai Museum, artefacts excavated from Sivagalai, Korkai, and Adichanallur will be showcased. The museum is being constructed on the outskirts of Tirunelveli, near the Thamirabarani [Porunai] river, a strategic location that connects both upstream and downstream sites. The construction is about 80 per cent complete, and the curation of artefacts is underway. We will open it to the public by the end of May.

As for Rajendra Chola's Museum, we felt it was important to highlight the Chola dynasty's maritime conquests and its distinct legacy. The museum is being built adjacent to the temple at Gangaikonda Cholapuram. The architectural design for the museum is being finalised.

We are also planning a grand Chola museum covering the history of the entire Chola dynasty. This will be a significant addition to our cultural heritage initiatives.

We are hearing a lot about AI in archaeology, particularly for dating and deciphering.

Already, we are employing cutting-edge methods. AI, in particular, holds great potential. I strongly believe that one day, AI can help us unlock mysteries that have remained unsolved for centuries. We are completely open to integrating AI into our research. ■



[FROM THE SIDELINES]

SABA NAQVI is a Delhi-based journalist and author of four books, who writes on politics and identity issues.

Realty bites

The plan for Gaza is pure unadulterated Trumpism, but what is also true is that the world has moved a long way from the sort of morality that once shaped human consciousness and political endeavours.

The plan to purge Palestinians from Gaza and develop the strip into some kind of holiday destination is built on the presumption that some people have little control over their destiny and others can therefore kick them off their land. The poor, the stateless, and the victims of war can be pummelled and killed in thousands and when the earth is flat, the construction of the "Riviera of the Middle East", as described by US President Donald Trump, can begin.

Imagine happy pictures of people sunbathing by the Mediterranean Sea and forget the misery of the past. It is the sort of image someone like Trump would like to conjure up, and it may actually go down well in parts of the US where many people have no clue where Gaza is and do not really give a damn; but they can get excited about the idea of evicting or killing the "bad guys" and "terrorists'', all the same.

The plan for Gaza is pure unadulterated Trumpism, as the US President is a real estate developer, and this is possibly the kind of deal that he would love to make: he has suggested financing by the Arab states, profits for private realtors, and bliss for vacationers. Maybe the plan envisions some Gazans staying on to serve the hospitality industry–but oops, they could be a security threat. So maybe non-Muslims could be brought in for such tasks instead.

The world has moved a long way from the sort of morality that once shaped human consciousness and political endeavours. The daily news we see and read coming out of the US would seem surreal if it were not all so real. It seems like a computer game where the bad guys, as determined by the algorithm, are zapped with rays of executive orders until another villain pops up. Now we have a row of villains and diktats zapping them: throw out the immigrants (more points if they are in chains with handcuffs); take down the LGBTQIA+ people because, heck, there are only two sexes; fix those who go on about racial and gender injustice, those annoying wokes; and terminate contracts, deals, allocations of the past while shiny new billionaires prop up the New Order. If there is a raging fire in California, it is the Democrats who are behind it; if an airliner crashes into a helicopter, it is because diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives (now scrapped) have led to the hiring of less qualified personnel (or so Trump seems to suggest).

In the real estate business Trump has actual experience, and every visitor to Manhattan in New York city would have walked past the Trump Towers. His real estate portfolio extends, reportedly, to West Asia and South-East Asia. In Indonesia, a 3,000 hectare development project featuring a golf course and resorts has just been halted by authorities citing environmental concerns. The project was the initiative of Trump's business partner in the country who attended the President's inauguration. The President's son-in-law Jared Kushner is also a property developer and investor, who has also referred to the Gaza coastline as "very valuable" real estate.

But why blame the Trumps for their real estate dreams when we in India have for years been demolishing homes and promising people new and better ones that never materialise. We can use the word "genocide" to what has been orchestrated in Gaza, but the demolition plans for "smart cities" in India have always had their own levels of heartlessness. The right

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wing is on the ascendent, so a regime can give free rations and benefits to women and simultaneously seek to remove millions from their homes. Indian courts are lock-jammed with special leave petitions seeking to block demolitions and/or seeking slum rehabilitation.

This is an age, from the US to India, where Big Capital appears all the more grotesquely powerful and people in its path frequently powerless. We have our own mega building plans that literally trump Trump's. The plan to remove the population of Dharavi, located in the heart of Mumbai, and develop gleaming real estate there, is one of the biggest building ventures in the world. It has been awarded to the Adani Group.

The Dharavi Redevelopment Project is expected to impact a million residents directly. There are categories such as residents eligible for free housing units and residents not guaranteed compensatory units there although they have lived and worked in Dharavi for decades and have roots in the place. Although the state and the developers have promised that the project will eventually improve the people's living conditions, sanitation, and other amenities, it is not a welfare scheme but a commercial project on what is perhaps one of the most expensive parcels of land in the world.

Now that the BJP has won the Assembly election in Delhi as well, it would be interesting to see what will come forth in the national capital. The former ruling party in the city-state, the AAP, had opposed large-scale slum clearance—one reason it held on to its vote share in lower income areas and slum clusters while losing the middle class. Still, it is worth mentioning that in the course of the campaign on February 2, Prime Minister Narendra Modi promised at a rally that "not a single slum would be demolished in Delhi".

This is an age, from the US to India, where Big Capital appears all the more grotesquely powerful and people in its path frequently powerless. We have our own mega building plans that literally trump Trump's.



▶ **Walking past the rubble** of bombed buildings after the ceasefire between Israel and Hamas came into effect, in Rafah, on February 16. HATEM KHALED/REUTERS

The story of Gaza is altogether different in the epic scale of cruelty envisaged here.

Countries such as Egypt and Jordan have opposed the forced displacement of the people but are under pressure from the US to take in the Gazans. Many world leaders have also condemned the idea as has every shade of Palestinian leadership. But Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is, naturally, delighted, and said the plan could "change history".

The main thing to remember in all the talk of real estate development is this: the war, occupation, and genocide happen because Israel is not ready for any real representation for the Palestinian people. Hypothetically, if Israel occupied Gaza and the West Bank, took the entire territory, and gave everyone a right to vote, it would fear Palestinians outnumbering the Jews. So, a one-state solution is ruled out, and a two-state solution has not even come to the table yet and is unlikely to either, given Israel's deep resentment of Palestinians.

Anything could happen in the region now. The fragile ceasefire could also end. But what we do know is that the Trump vision zaps an entire people, the original inhabitants, out of the frame of Gaza altogether. Still, Trump cannot be blamed for the state of affairs. His predecessor, Joe Biden, did much the same, and he did not even bother to conjure up a pretty solution like vacation homes on a future Riviera. ■



▶ **Manipur Governor** Ajay Kumar Bhalla at a meeting with civil society organisations, in Churachandpur district on January 7. His efforts to reach out to groups in the hill districts has infused optimism among Kuki-Zo leaders. PTI

GIVING PEACE A CHANCE

The exit of N. Biren Singh as Chief Minister may just be the start that Manipur's peace process needs even as a deeply scarred society struggles to come to terms with its fault lines. **GREESHMA KUTHAR**

Despite long-standing demands for his ouster amid the State's turmoil, N. Biren Singh's resignation as Manipur Chief Minister on February 9 evoked mixed reactions across the State. At Lamlong Bazaar in the capital city of Imphal, for instance, there seemed to be no agreement among the women vendors on the propriety of his decision. Raseshwari Palungbam (74), who identified herself as a BJP supporter, wanted him to return to power. Equating his resignation to cowardice, she announced that he has to take control of what had gone wrong in the State as it happened under his term and it was on him to fix it.

But Lairenlakpam Prema (59) disagreed. She no longer trusts him and thinks of all BJP supporters as "Modi supporters" who do not want to help the people of Manipur. The market then erupted in laughter when one of them suggested that perhaps Biren Singh decided to resign after taking a dip at the Triveni Sangam in Uttar Pradesh's Prayagraj during the Mahakumbh. "The water must have done something to him," one of them said.

Eventually, the vendors agreed that a leader who can represent their cause more strongly should take over. "The cause of those indigenous to this land," said Raseshwari, adding that the Kuki-Zo are not. "They are all illegal immigrants," she added.

The emotion behind this language, which echoes through the Imphal Valley, perhaps explains the scale of the ethnic violence that has engulfed the State since 2023. The violence that started in May that year has claimed close to 300 lives and displaced more than 65,000 people. Entire villages and colonies were burnt down during the violence.

The language was repeated once again by many, including Biren Singh himself. In multiple posts on X after stepping down, he vowed to continue his fight against "illegal immi-

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Governor Ajay Bhalla is widely regarded as the key figure in persuading the Central government to impose President's Rule in Manipur.

grants with unwavering commitment in every way as our land and identity are under threat".

The representatives of the Coordinating Committee on Manipur Integrity (COCOMI), which is a collective of Meitei civil society organisations of Imphal, spoke along the same lines when they presented a memorandum to the newly appointed Governor of Manipur, Ajay Kumar Bhalla, on February 17.

Speaking to mediapersons after the meeting, COCOMI's coordinator Khuraijam Athouba, referring to the Kuki-Zo insurgent groups, alleged that "foreign nationals from Myanmar are being entertained with peace talks by the Indian government, are receiving state funding, and establishing camps within Indian territory". These groups are now being monitored under a suspension of operations (SOO) agreement signed between them and the government.

COCOMI's demands, much like the demands of many protest movements organised across the valley, seemed to centre on "narco-terrorists", "illegal immigrants", and "territorial integrity" rather than addressing the collapse of almost every institution in the State.

Meanwhile, the Meira Paibis, a women's social rights movement, are organising rallies almost every day demanding that President's Rule in the State be revoked. Some of them are demanding that Biren Singh be reinstated while others are demanding the selection of a new leader within a week, failing which they will carry out widespread agitations.

The movement dates back to 1977 and is characterised by flaming torches carried by the women on patrol and in protest, often against human rights violations committed by paramilitary and armed forces.

But one gathering of Meira Paibis managed to change the discourse. A group of the women gathered at the residence of Barish Sharma, former State unit president of the Bharatiya Janata Yuva Morcha. They attacked Sharma for disrespecting them and Biren Singh, upon which Sharma, seen as an aide of the former Chief Minister, suddenly emerged from his home and burst into an incriminating monologue: "Let me reveal everything. Is he [Biren] not the one who sent us to attack others? Let me expose this. Biren split Manipur. Biren destroyed Manipur."

Hours after the video went viral, Barish Sharma said in a statement that he had been receiving death threats.

BIREN SINGH'S ALLEGED ROLE as a catalyst of the violence has been reported extensively. This includes leaked audio tapes in which he is allegedly discussing the instigation of ethnic violence in the State. He is also purportedly instructing that Meitei groups be permitted to seize state-owned weapons while assuring them of protection from arrest. The Supreme Court has sought a forensic report on these tapes. Now, despite his resignation, questions remain about whether he will be held accountable for his alleged role in steering the violence and granting impunity to groups such as Arambai Tenggol and the United National Liberation Front (Pambei), or UNLF(P), to orchestrate attacks.

While the valley districts seem to be a divided house with respect to President's Rule, the Kuki-Zo hill districts are the opposite. Many people told *Frontline* that they were relieved while some were indifferent. Neisi Misao, the Kangpokpi district president of the Kuki Women Organisation for Human Rights, said: "We have been demanding this from the beginning. What should we make of it when it has come so late, and not when we were being attacked and killed? Doing this sooner would have saved lives on both sides." Misao listed a range of demands to address the humanitarian crisis in the hill districts that she hoped the Central government would address immediately.

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At a protest demanding the retention of N. Biren Singh as Chief Minister, in Imphal on February 13. The former Chief Minister's exit has led to mixed reactions in the State. PTI

The MHA has granted the UNLF(P) Rs.30 crore to build camps. The group is now absorbing cadre from other armed groups such as Arambai Tenggol.

AMONG THESE are meeting the shortage of medicines and vaccines in the hills; facilitating disbursement of pension that has been stopped since the violence started; tackling inflation of essentials owing to non-availability; providing financial assistance to the displaced, special support to pregnant women in relief camps, and a helicopter service for medical emergencies; addressing the breakdown of the criminal justice system; and restoring the rule of law and impartiality of state institutions.

She told *Frontline* that from the time the violence broke out, no one from the State administration had reached out to them. "We have been doing everything by ourselves for these 22 months, from taking care of our displaced to even repairing roads," she added.

Yet, Kuki-Zo leaders seemed to find hope in the actions of the newly appointed Governor. "He seems to have clarity; clarity in stopping violent confrontations, to begin with," said Vumsuan Naulak, a former government officer and the current chairman of the Zomi Council.

Governor Ajay Bhalla, a former Union Home Secretary, is widely regarded as the key figure in persuading the Central government to impose President's Rule in Manipur. Within days of his appointment, the Governor initiated conversation with different groups from the hill districts, alongside restructuring governance.

Some 70 officers—including 60 IAS, Indian Revenue Service, Indian Forest Service, and Manipur Civil Service officers, and 10 police officers—were reshuffled. The emphasis was on assigning neutral officers to crucial violence-affected districts and preventing any form of violence from recurring.

Various officers in the government and the Central forces whom *Frontline* spoke to said that they had been reporting Biren Singh's failures to different representatives of the Central government but were ignored. According to at least three of them, it was Governor Bhalla who convinced the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) about removing Biren Singh. This happened alongside internal rifts in the BJP.

Sensing this, some Congress leaders reached out to a few BJP leaders to orchestrate a no-confidence motion. But it never came to that. Biren Singh was forced to resign, and soon afterwards President's Rule was imposed. Subsequently, many changes have been carried out across districts, with increased deployment of Central forces across peripheral areas and a crackdown on extortion by armed groups.

FOR THE FIRST TIME, Chief Secretary Prashant Kumar Singh, who was also appointed in January, met with representatives of the tribal councils and civil society organisations in Churachandpur district. "An outreach like this hasn't happened since violence started. Nobody other than Army officers have met us in all of 22 months," Naulak said.

However, Devabrata Singh, working president of the Manipur Pradesh Congress Committee, sees the imposition of President's Rule as an evasion of the democratic process. He said: "This is to buy time for the BJP to get their house in order. Will they be able to show a majority in the Assembly now? Do they have a capable leader to become Chief Minister? No."

Fearing that Biren Singh might try to stage a comeback once again, he said that the "right thing to do is to immediately hold elections". But Naulak disagreed. "The question of elections does not arise for us. Our political demand is centred on seeking autonomy for ourselves," he said, reiterating the demand for a Union Territory, which has become the core demand of Kuki-Zo organisations.

According to him, the need for this arises from the experience of the Kuki-Zo tribes in Manipur, which is characterised by "neglect, discrimination, under-development, before and after the violence, open lynchings, killings and sexual violence".

Naulak also brought up something that is seldom discussed or acknowledged in the hill districts. Since the onset of the violence, the only groups that the MHA has been in talks with are the insurgent groups under SOO. These talks towards a political solution have been ongoing since 2008, but Naulak said militant groups can no longer be the only ones representing the interests of five lakh people.

"This is not what democratic exercise is," he said, wondering why the MHA only acknowledges armed groups as sole representatives. Naulak proposed that in addition to these groups, representatives of Tribal Inpis (Councils), MLAs, wo-

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men's organisations, and representatives of the clergy should also be made party to these talks. "Else, it'll be a futile exercise."

Mamte Hangshing, a schoolteacher in the same district, has less to say about President's Rule and more about the behavioural changes she was seeing among her students. She recounted how she had set a drawing task for 10-year-old students where they had to illustrate what they aspire to be when they grow up. Most of the boys in the class drew figurines of gun-toting men with a caption that read along the lines of "I want to protect my motherland".

Mamte wonders what they understand of this idea of motherland or of protecting it. "Far from being just children, I see my students developing hatred against another community even before they are old enough to form a political opinion."

She hopes conversations discussing this form of antagonism among the young is addressed as soon as possible. A bigger fear for Mamte is that children are missing out on good education, especially those who are displaced. Some students in her class, who have been displaced from their villages, are contemplating quitting school as their families cannot afford to pay school fees. Mamte believes that amid the talk of and emphasis on finding a political solution, one must not lose sight of the lives and needs of the displaced.

ACROSS THE HILLS in the Imphal Valley, a similar sentiment is echoed by Beerjurekha, secretary of the ETA North-East Women Network. The group comprises working women professionals who have been helping out in the relief camps in the State. In a short documentary titled *The Lost Voices: Manipur's Conflict Children* that the group released recently, displaced children in relief camps spoke about their aspirations of going back to their burnt-down homes, and lost friendships.

Beerjurekha told *Frontline* that among the children, she finds teenage boys the most vulnerable. "They seem forlorn, often feeling a sense of shame with their current predicament. Even with our best efforts, there are very few of these boys who come forward to talk," Beerjurekha said, pointing to how this vulnerability has also been exploited by many armed groups, who have been recruiting "volunteers" from such camps.

Women's groups from both the hills and the valley have made identical demands, calling for the protection of "armed volunteers", while the push for disarmament remains less pronounced. A press release by the Governor has requested "people of all communities, including youth in the Valley and the hills, to come forward and surrender looted and illegally held weapons and ammunition within the next seven days", threatening strict action on the failure to do the same.

The MHA on its part though, seems less interested in arresting violence, as it has granted the UNLF(P) a budget of Rs.30 crore to build camps in the State. The group signed a tripartite peace agreement with the Centre and the State government in November 2023, after which it stands accused of orchestrating violence across Manipur and engaging in mass recruitment activities. Instead of being penalised for these activities, the UNLF(P) is now absorbing cadre from other armed groups such as Arambai Tenggol, as confirmed by *Frontline* with officials in law enforcement and the Army.

Meanwhile, political uncertainty looms over Manipur, with the possibility of President's Rule extending for months amid a leadership vacuum. The question of who will emerge to lead the State is being discussed across the State, but no one seems to have a clear answer. Pau Sianching, a meat vendor and representative of the Nute Bazaar (Women's Market) collective, said that if the election of a new leader brings peace and eases the financial difficulties that the majority of the people are facing, then she might support it. "It has to be an inclusive leader though, not like Biren, who was the leader of just one community. If a leader representing the interests of all the people is possible, then why not."

But there is a big question mark over the possibility of this happening in Manipur anytime soon. ■

▶ **Former Manipur** Chief Minister N. Biren Singh. PTI



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Greeshma Kuthar is an independent journalist and lawyer from Tamil Nadu. Her primary focus is on investigating the evolving methods of the far right, their use of cultural nationalism regionally, and their attempts to assimilate caste identities into the RSS fold.



▶ **AAP convenor Arvind Kejriwal** speaking at a meeting organised by the party's trade wing, at Nehru Place in New Delhi on December 29, 2014. SHANKER CHAKRAVARTY

A failure of political imagination

The Aam Aadmi Party's collapse is one aspect of a national absence of ideology and public engagement. **ASIM ALI**

In his 2018 book *Republic of Caste*, Anand Teltumbde described the Aam Aadmi Party as "A Political App for the Neoliberal era". It was a telling analogy. Like a mobile application, the AAP's political package seemed to offer a range of functionalities to its citizen consumers. The proposed functionalities centred on improving the quality of public goods, like health and education, along with subsidised provision of welfare services like electricity, drinking water, and transportation.

In the essay, Teltumbde issued a pointed warning to the AAP's "anti-politics" political enterprise: "The biggest challenge before a fledgling entity is to scale up or be gobbled by the bigger sharks. Remember what Microsoft did to Netscape or what Amazon is doing to Flipkart." That is pretty much what happened in the recent Delhi election. Not only did the AAP's efforts to scale up prove less than successful (barring the triumph in Punjab), but the party also failed to upgrade its package (offer new functions) even as competitors copied its core offerings. After a little over a decade in power, the electorate of Delhi uninstalled the AAP from its seat of power and installed its monopolist rival, the BJP, which was aided by its enormous advantages in terms of material resources and institutional power.

Although the descriptor of "post-ideological" politics is customarily attached to the AAP, the party is hardly alone in its "apolitical" or "technocratic" approach to public policy. The post-1990s phase of Indian politics has been marked by a general trend of the depoliticisation of the domain of the political economy. By political economy, we basically mean questions of how political power structures economic relationships, and how that relates to the distribution of income and wealth. As

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▼ **Workers' Party** leader Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva speaks after winning the Brazilian presidential run-off election, in Sao Paulo, on October 30, 2022. NELSON ALMEIDA/AFP

far as these distributional issues are concerned, the AAP's "apolitical" stance has been in lockstep with the times. The only difference is its public disavowal of the planks of social justice and secularism, to which other parties at least offer the thin gruel of rhetorical commitment.

The point is worth mentioning because the "post-ideological" labelling of the AAP sometimes elides the wider context in which the party emerged. In other words, the party is not a "unique" or "special" political organisation, contrary to the portrayal of both its supporters and critics. In fact, one can make a good case that Arvind Kejriwal's rule was less technocratic than the preceding 15-year reign of the Sheila Dikshit-led Congress', where bureaucrats held the reigns of governance with little popular participation (except for expanding the power of resident welfare associations within their elite enclaves). The AAP government, in this sense, for all its muffler-clad populist garb of "*aam aadmi*" (common man), represented much more of a continuation rather than a break.

IN THE 2015 election, the first wave election for the AAP, a Lokniti-CSDS survey finding highlighted why the electorate had junked the Congress for the newbie party. On a question asking respondents what they thought of the Dikshit government's record on development and corruption, 69 per cent ticked the box: "Delhi developed during Shiela Dixit's tenure but corruption also increased." It was this perception of widespread corruption that the AAP (and its precursor India Against Corruption) had skilfully deployed as a plank to oust the Congress.

And ironically, the AAP itself has now been pushed out partly on the perception of corruption, fed this time by the BJP political machine, with some help from the Congress. Again, a Lokniti CSDS finding bears this out: while 6 out of 10 Delhi respondents claimed satisfaction with the work of the State government, nearly two-thirds also rated the AAP as "somewhat" or "highly corrupt". In both cases, therefore, the anti-incumbency sentiment that ousted the respective Congress and AAP regimes reflected not so much anger against non-performance as much as a sense of weary disillusionment. A popular disenchantment with politics, thus marking both the spectacular birth and the quiet demise of the AAP rule in Delhi.

To adequately analyse the Delhi verdict, therefore, it is important to first get a handle on what constitutes this popular disillusionment.

As political anthropologists have long argued, the catch-all term "corruption", as used in political discourse, does not necessarily indicate a popular resentment towards bribery or illicit money-making. The saliency of corruption lies in its communication of "distance" between the government and the governed, a resentment towards exclusion or alienation from structures of power. One might quote from *Red Tape: Bureaucracy, Structural Violence, and Poverty in India* (2012) by Akhil Gupta, one of the foremost scholars studying the sociological constitution of the term "corruption": "When villagers complained about the corruption of state officials, therefore, they were not just voicing their exclusion from government services because these were costly, although that was no small factor. More important, they were expressing frustration because they lacked the cultural capital required to negotiate deftly for those services."

In this light, the perception of corruption is not an indictment of the moral vacuity of the Congress or the AAP leadership. It is an indictment of their model of party building and their framework of political imagination. Let us take each aspect in turn.

The organisational model of both the Congress and the AAP—and this can be extrapolated to most political parties—has three salient features. One, the absence of any grassroots structure comprising political activists interfacing with the population. Two, the almost exclusive role of the organisation as a vehicle to coordinate election campaigns (lately, with the help of professional management). Third, the absence of structures facilitating upward mobility within the organisation, from where the party can draw its representatives (the latter are instead mostly drawn from local elites near the election cycle). To sum up, in the life of an ordinary citizen, the party is an apparition that springs up like an exotic seasonal fruit during the campaign period, unlike the case with the BJP, and particularly its affiliate organisations.

This anaemic model of party building stems from a chronic failure of political imagination. In the limited political imagination of the Congress or the AAP, there is hardly any role of popular or mass mobilisation. The term "mobilisation", let us remember, has a specific meaning in politics (different from bussing in crowds for rallies). It comes from a certain European Left tradition (think Antonio Gramsci) that saw the practice of politics as akin to long-term warfare.

In this vision, popular constituencies and political activists had to be "educated" and "prepared" for leadership, within perpetual socio-political movements, according to a given road map for attaining political change. Ideology is not meant to be a set of proclamations drafted onto a speech or an election manifesto but the principles of the party as practised in the terrain of everyday grassroots politics. In India, too, these concepts carried considerable purchase, at least in the first few decades after Independence. This was especially the case for socialist, communist, and backward caste parties, which brought a large section of small farmers and rural workers into the sphere of active political participation.

The left-wing party movements that took power amidst the "pink tide" of Latin America at the turn of this century have been driven largely by coalitions led by urban working classes.

To be fair, energetic bands of AAP volunteers did initially attempt to perform this role of empowering people through political education. Yet, those efforts were soon hobbled by a certain middle-class reformism at the core of the party's political imagination, with its attendant caste and class biases. As the political sociologist Srirupa Roy recounted from her fieldwork on AAP campaigns in her book *The Political Outsider*: "But in this slum location," the prototypical *aam aadmi*, as per AAP volunteers, was not just the victim of a corrupt establishment: "He was a victim of his own ignorance, fear and 'gandagi ki aadat' (dirty habits)." In other words, political education here had less to do with empowering the slum dweller on how to procedurally get, or politically struggle for, his legal rights and entitlements, and more of an advocacy for moral reform, in the Gandhian socialist mould of yesteryears.

FOR A LONG TIME NOW, the socio-economic condition of the urban precariat has been ripe for an urban popular mobilisation, on pressing livelihood issues, analogous to the rural peasant mobilisations of the early post-Independence decades. We do not need to talk about hypotheticals. The left-wing party movements that took power amidst the "pink tide" of Latin America at the turn of this century have been driven largely by coalitions led by urban working classes.

Along with the indigenous communities, it has been these "new working classes", drawn from the bulging informal sector, which have provided the motor engine for dominant left-wing party coalitions: the Brazilian Workers' Party of President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, the Mexican Morena of President Claudia Sheinbaum, as well as the Movimiento al Socialismo (Movement Towards Socialism) party of Bolivia and the Frente Amplio (Broad Front) of Uruguay.

Of course, none of this happened automatically. In *Neoliberal Hegemony* and the *Pink Tide in Latin America: Breaking Up with TINA*, the political scientist Tom Chodor examined how these party-led political movements brought together "marginalized and excluded subjectivities" to forge successful "anti-elite" coalitions. Chodor argued that this coalition strategy followed "Gramsci's insistence that the construction of a

radical collective will is 'an active and reciprocal' educative relationship... illuminating the intersecting dimensions of class, race, and gender exploitation".

ANOTHER BOOK ON Brazil's urban governance reforms under the Workers' Party, *Bootstrapping Democracy*, detailed how the Participatory Budgeting mechanism transformed the whole architecture of local governance in a number of cities. The "Porto Alegre Model" (named after the city where it was first introduced) involves citizens directly deciding on how the municipal budget is allocated, on the basis of open meetings with structured discussions, thus ensuring a very broad degree of participation in governance. This wildly popular governance innovation has since become a keystone of the "popular empowerment" legacy of the Workers' Party.

It is worth quoting the authors Gianpaolo Baiocchi et al. as they describe the conditions of urban Brazil that created the bottom-up demand for reform: "Driven by an agrarian transition that has not only been exceptionally rapid but also dominated by capital intensive and labour-displacing modernization, rural-urban migration has exploded and Brazil's cities have had to accommodate one hundred million new residents since 1960. This has produced a rapid and largely unregulated growth of precarious peripheral areas, exacerbating what were already pronounced problems of urban poverty and informality." With very few changes, this description can almost exactly fit present-day Delhi.

The city also exuded the same bottom-up demand for participative democracy, manifested in the newborn AAP's unprecedented triumph in 2013, and then the sweep of 2015. In fact, after its 2015 victory, the AAP also announced, with much fanfare, its decision to experiment with the model of participatory budgeting. The party promised to realise its goal of Swaraj through such an exercise of budget deliberation via popular assemblies. A pilot programme was announced, which ran fitfully for one year, after which the whole thing was scrapped and forgotten. As one study put it: "Participation in neighbourhood assemblies was much weaker than expected (the average number of participants was around 80 persons, out of about 4,500 local residents); and the selection of priority work was not prepared through prior discussions." In other words, it turned out to be a case of deft political marketing minus the political commitment towards actual popular participation. The AAP's politics makes much of ameliorating the depredations of informality and illegality that mar the lives of most of Delhi's citizenry, without ever calling into question the preservation of these state-mandated boundaries, which only serve to keep the marginalised in their place, as meek dependents to their political patrons.

In the limited political imagination of the Congress or the AAP, there is hardly any role of popular or mass mobilisation.

WHAT ABOUT THE CONGRESS party and its political imagination? The party returned with zero seats, for the third straight time, after having ruled the Union Territory for three consecutive terms. This was following from its extraordinarily damaging losses of Maharashtra and Haryana. In *The New Experts* (2024), the political scientist Anuradha Sajjanhar quotes Jairam Ramesh (JR), a senior Congress strategist, as he confides to her: "We're in a post-ideology world."

"Researcher [Anuradha Sajjanhar]: What do you mean by that [post-ideology world]?

"JR: Where ideologies do not drive political parties.... That era is over. Ideology drove Thatcher. Ideology drove Reagan. After that, finished. Ideology drove the Labour Party. Ideology drove Nehru. Indira Gandhi was not an ideologue... people are less ideological today. Ideology doesn't drive discourse, the time that used to happen in the 40s and 50s.... We keep using the phrase 'party ideology', but I don't see ourselves [that way]. I see us having a dominant social ideology, but I don't see us having a dominant economic ideology. Our economic ideology is a little more pragmatic, you know."

If there is anything more egregious than the regressive middle-class reformism of the AAP party managers, it is their Congress counterparts' ignorant Anglophone elitism (in 2025!). The politics of cash handouts–the "fast fashion" equivalent of the concept of welfare politics–has now approached its point of exhaustion. It is the persistent lack of political will and political imagination weighing down these two parties that has led to the inevitable triumph of the BJP's Hindu nationalism in Delhi. The people of this country, at least its marginalised sections and religious minorities, deserve better. ■

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▶ **Aam Aadmi Party** convenor Arvind Kejriwal has come a long distance politically in the 12 years since he first contested an election. SHAHBAZ KHAN/PTI

THE HALO SLIPS

Once seen as a darling of the middle class and a hero of the downtrodden and the marginalised, Kejriwal seems to have lost his aura. Yet, despite the odds, the uncanny politician and strategist cannot be written off. **SONI MISHRA**

Sunder Nagri, a slum located on the outskirts of Delhi and bordering Uttar Pradesh, was where Arvind Kejriwal made the transition from a civil servant to a transparency activist over two decades ago. He had launched his NGO Parivartan in the area to address the grievances of the people with regard to civic amenities and welfare schemes by using the RTI Act.

Kejriwal left a deep imprint on the locality. Even today, Sunder Nagri's residents point to the exact spot where he sat on a hunger strike or guide a visitor to the one-room tenement from where his NGO functioned. However, conversations with people in the area in the run-up to the 2025 Delhi Assembly election revealed that they were no longer feeling a sense of pride about a person who had worked amidst them and gone on to become the Chief Minister of Delhi. Kejriwal's popularity appeared to be fraying at the edges, and there was also a growing sense of disillusionment.

In the area where Kejriwal used anti-corruption tools to resolve the issues of the urban poor and where the AAP was created, he is no longer celebrated as a hero. A majority of the residents here were beneficiaries of the AAP government's welfare schemes. At the same time, there is an unmistakable cynicism in the way they now look at Kejriwal. The support for the party has also seen a marked erosion.

Seemapuri, the Assembly constituency Sunder Nagri falls under, voted for the AAP in the 2025 election. However, the party's vote share in the reserved seat dropped sharply from 65.82 per cent in the 2020 Assembly election to 48.45 per cent this time. In the 2015 election, when the AAP won a mammoth mandate of 67 out of 70 seats, its vote share in Seemapuri was 63.04 per cent. Besides the anti-incumbency sentiment against the AAP government and the local MLA, a significant factor at play was the dimming of the aura around the 56-year-old leader, who was initially perceived as a politician with a difference.

A big takeaway from the Assembly election is that while the romance of the middle class

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with Kejriwal is over, even in impoverished localities like Sunder Nagri, people are viewing Kejriwal with weariness and scepticism.

"It is true that the middle class did not vote for the AAP. But sections of the lower middle class and the working class also looked beyond the AAP in these elections," said N. Sukumar, a professor at the Department of Political Science, Delhi University.

The loss in Delhi is no ordinary electoral setback for Kejriwal. His own defeat from the New Delhi constituency, where he had in 2013 challenged and defeated the then Chief Minister, Sheila Dikshit, achieving a stunning disruptive feat, completes the story of the humbling of the activist turned politician.

"This setback could be fatal for the AAP because the whole structure of the party is built around Arvind Kejriwal. In this election, Kejriwal's own popularity has gone down. This is a big warning signal for the party because it depended on his cult. Unlike other parties, it does not have any institutional memory, where it can look to the past and take lessons," said Ashutosh, author and former AAP leader.

Kejriwal has traversed a long distance politically in the past 12 years since he first contested an election in Delhi. He was every bit the common man with his oversized shirts that he wore untucked over loose-fitting trousers, with slippers, which gave him the "*aam aadmi*" look. Over the two terms the AAP was in power in the national capital, it formed a government in Punjab, made its presence felt in other parts of the country, and earned the national party tag, while Kejriwal also transformed. The intense look of the angry activist gave way to the image of a smiling leader. There were sartorial changes too, with Kejriwal donning tailored clothes and his slippers making way for formal black shoes.

However, there were other changes that Kejriwal's critics and opponents now cite to claim he did not stay true to his reasons for joining politics. They cite allegations of corruption against him, especially the excise policy case, and the allegedly extravagant renovation of his official residence during his tenure as Chief Minister.

"Though I cannot quantify the extent to which the accusations of corruption were responsible for the AAP's defeat, there certainly has been an erosion in the credibility of Arvind Kejriwal and the AAP. He was seen as a different kind of leader, and the AAP was seen as a party that could provide an alternative to the rut that Indian politics was stuck in. The people do not view them like that any more," said Nilanjan Mukhopadhyay, writer and political expert.

IN THE COMING DAYS and months, the biggest challenge for the AAP will be to keep its head above water as it fights for survival. According to political experts, the AAP leadership will have to work hard to ensure that party leaders and workers stick together and its government in Punjab remains intact. The party volunteers are also exhausted and demoralised.

"It will be a huge challenge for Kejriwal to keep the flock together. Many AAP councillors have already switched sides to the BJP in the Municipal Corporation of Delhi. The BJP can be expected to go in for the kill," said Sukumar.

Kejriwal is learnt to have been keen on establishing the AAP in Gujarat next. Sources close to him said he is driven by the idea of the AAP emerging as a formidable force in the 2027 Gujarat State election. The Delhi debacle, however, is expected to have an impact on the AAP's Delhi model of governance and the party's expansion plans.

"The AAP finds itself in an unprecedented situation. Since 2013, except for the one-year period when Delhi was under President's Rule, the AAP was always in power in the national capital. The party is now dealing with a new set of challenges in a completely new situation, when it does not have a government in Delhi," said Mukhopadhyay.

According to Ashutosh, the AAP's lack of ideological clarity does not hold it in good stead, especially at a time when it is looking to recover from the defeat in Delhi. "The people know what the BJP or the Congress stand for. The Samajwadi Party was in the wilderness for many years, but it is well known that its politics is based on social justice. But what does the AAP stand for? This question becomes more relevant now than ever before," he said.

Sukumar made a similar point, saying Kejriwal placed a portrait of B.R. Ambedkar in his office but lost credibility amongst Dalits by edging out the Dalit Minister Rajendra Pal Gautam from the government and then the party. "This is how a leader loses credibility, when the people are no longer sure about his ideological stand," he said.

According to experts, the AAP leadership will have to work hard to ensure that its leaders and workers stick together and its government in Punjab survives.



▼ **Arvind Kejriwal** and Punjab Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann at the Ram temple in Ayodhya on February 12, 2024. PTI

KEJRIWAL AND HIS PARTY have bounced back from setbacks in the past. He was down and out after having resigned as Chief Minister during his first term when the AAP government had lasted for just 49 days. His humiliating defeat against Narendra Modi in Varanasi in the 2014 Lok Sabha election made matters worse for him. However, Kejriwal and his party made a spectacular comeback in the 2015 Assembly election.

Ashutosh said Kejriwal can make a comeback as a politician, but his return as a messiah-like figure is next to impossible. "The whole existence of the AAP was based on its moral capital. Once you lose it and reduce your existence to transactional association with the people, others will promise more than you. You [Kejriwal] promised Rs.2,100 to the women of Delhi. What happened? The BJP and the Congress promised more," he said. He, however, said he would not go to the extent of writing the obituary of the AAP. "They still have a government in Punjab. They have a 44 per cent vote share and 22 MLAs in Delhi. They have MLAs in Gujarat and Goa. They are a national party. So I am not writing off Arvind Kejriwal or the AAP," he said.

The AAP's Delhi State convenor and former Minister Gopal Rai said the election results have to be seen in the context of the BJP having used money, muscle, deceit, and manipulation. He emphasised the fact that the party continues to enjoy a substantial vote share in the national capital. "As many as 43.6 per cent of Delhi's voters still stand with Arvind Kejriwal despite all the pressure and influence applied by the BJP. They showed their trust in Arvind Kejriwal, in the AAP, and in the work of the AAP government. This is truly remarkable considering the BJP completely disregarded the Election Commission's guidelines and the entire BJP organisation, all their MPs, Chief Ministers, and MLAs were brought in to campaign in Delhi. Never before has Delhi seen this kind of an election," Rai said.

Kejriwal cannot be written off, and it may not be the end of the road for the AAP. But the path ahead looks extremely difficult indeed. ■

Current Affairs

In transit for eternity?

The Supreme Court's direction to the Assam government to start the deportation process for 63 inmates of Assam's Matia transit camp reflects the court's impatience with indefinite detention, which it sees as a violation of human rights. **SUSHANTA TALUKDAR**

On February 4, the Supreme Court directed the Assam government to start the deportation process of 63 foreigners currently lodged in the Matia transit camp in western Assam's Goalpara district. This is the country's largest detention camp and currently has 270 inmates.

Before the Matia camp became operational in 2023, people declared as foreigners in Assam were lodged in six makeshift detention centres located in jails at Goalpara, Kokrajhar, Silchar, Dibrugarh, Jorhat, and Tezpur. The Matia camp, which has the capacity to accommodate 3,000 inmates (each of its 15 buildings can house 200 people), was renamed in August 2021, along with all detention centres, as a "transit camp for detention purpose". In January 2023, the first batch of 64 "declared foreigners" were shifted from the detention centre in Goalpara district jail to the Matia camp. The shifting of "declared foreigners" from the other five detention centres was completed on March 12, 2023, when the last batch of 87 inmates from the Silchar detention centre were transferred.

Of the 270 inmates at Matia, 133 have been declared "foreigners" by Assam's Foreigners Tribunals. The State government has reportedly initiated the process of deporting 70 of them in coordination with the Ministry of External Affairs. These 70 inmates have apparently admitted that they are Bangladeshi nationals and have divulged their addresses in that country. The other 63 have not shared their addresses in their parent country; these are the people referred to in the Supreme Court direction.

A Supreme Court bench of Justices Abhay S. Oka and Ujjal Bhuyan reprimanded the State government, saying it could not detain people "till eternity", and that such indefinite detention constituted a violation of human rights and international obligations. The State government, on the other hand, has been hesitating to start the process for 63 detainees because their addresses are not known and this puts a question mark over the parent country's willingness to receive them.

THE SUPREME COURT has in recent months expressed concern over living conditions in detention camps. According to information provided on March 28, 2022, by the Assam government in the Assembly, as many as 31 inmates died in detention centres "due to illness" from March 17, 2016, to January 11, 2022. On October 4, 2024, last year, the Supreme Court directed the Assam State Legal Services Authority (ASLSA) to make surprise visits to the Matia transit camp to verify claims made by the State government about conditions in the camp in an affidavit, which was filed on October 3 pursuant to a court order passed on September 29.



▶ **The Matia transit camp,** which became operational in January 2023, can house 3,000 inmates; each of its 15 buildings can house 200 people. UB PHOTOS

On November 4, the court said that the ASLSA report showed that the conditions were not satisfactory. It asked the State government to make sure that the conditions improved within a month.

AS THE BJP'S prime ministerial candidate in 2014, Narendra Modi promised in an election rally in Silchar that all detention camps in Assam would be closed if his party came to power at the Centre. The lodging of "D" (doubtful/disputed) voters and people declared "foreigners" by the Foreigners Tribunals in detention camps was a violation of human rights, he claimed then. He alleged that whenever the Congress government became apprehensive of losing support, it assigned the "D" tag to certain voters. (During intensive revision of the electoral rolls in the State in 1997, the Election Commission ordered that the letter "D" be written against the names of all those voters who failed to provide proof of their citizenship and that their cases be referred to the Foreigners Tribunals. Ever since, "D" voters in Assam are not allowed to vote.)

In a sharp contradiction to Modi's election promise, the first BJP-led coalition government in Assam, headed by Sarbananda Sonowal, informed the Assam Assembly on July 29, 2019, that it had proposed to set up additional 10 detention camps at Guwahati, Sivasagar, Nagaon, Karimganj, Nalbari, Haflong, Barpeta, Goalpara, Lakhimpur, and Tezpur, but the Central government was yet to approve the proposal. The detention camp at Matia, for which the Modi government had provided Rs.46 crore, was under construction then.

In 2009, Tarun Gogoi's Congress-led coalition government notified makeshift detention centres located in jails. The official notification, "No. PLB.149/2008/88 dated 17/06/2009", stated that the State government decided to set up these centres in order to detain "foreigners" as soon as they were declared as such by Foreigners Tribunals until they were deported back to their countries.

The absence of any extradition treaty between India and Bangladesh makes the fate of declared foreigners uncertain, and indefinite detention seems to be a likely possibility.

ON JANUARY 3, 2013, a Gauhati High Court order directed the government to deport people within two months of their detection as foreigners, "within the meaning of 1946 Act". (This meant that the onus was on people labelled as "D" voters to prove they were not foreigners, as per the Foreigners Act, 1946; the same applied to children and others not included in the electoral rolls whose citizenship was suspected by police.) The court said: "The persons detected to be foreigners shall be taken into custody immediately and kept in detention camp(s) till they are deported from India within the aforesaid timeframe."

In a compassionate direction during the COVID-19 pandemic, on April 13, 2020, the Supreme Court said that those lodged in detention centres for two years should be released on bail. On August 28, 2024, 522 inmates who had completed two years in detention, and 273 inmates who had completed three years, were released on bail from the Matia camp. Those released are required to report once every week to the police station specified by the Foreigners Tribunals.

DURING A SURPRISE visit on October 9, 2024, a team of four officials nominated by ASLSA found that there were 279 people at the Matia camp: 181 men, 58 women, and 40 children (18 boys and 22 girls). Sixty of them were from Bangladesh and 75 were Declared Foreign Nationals (declared as such by tribunals); there were also 105 Rohingyas, 32 Myanmarese (Chin), and one from Senegal. The team found that the inmates' breakfast at 7 am consisted of tea, chapatti, sugar, and jaggery; lunch at 10:30 am comprised rice, dal, and mixed vegetables; dinner served at 4 p.m. was rice, dal, and mixed vegetable. Non-vegetarian food was provided once a week.

"The team has inspected the kitchen and found the condition of the kitchen as well as its cleanliness to be average," said the ASLSA report submitted to the (Registrar Judicial), Supreme Court, on October 29, 2024. The team found a male doctor, a pharmacist, and a female nurse at the camp's medical facility. It reported that a male ward, where three psychiatric patients were lodged, was not clean.

"On query, the medical authority stated that the psychiatric patients often make the room dirty after cleaning the room," it added. The team found each floor of the residential buildings had attached western toilets and bathrooms with running water; the cleanliness of the washrooms was "average".

During a second surprise visit on October 21, ▶

the team recorded 275 inmates. (The number keeps fluctuating with new "declared foreigners" arriving in the camp and those completing two/three years in detention being released on bail.) The kitchen and the medical facility were cleaner. The inmates did not have any complaints about the quality and quantity of food provided, but they complained that they got the same mixed vegetable curry for both lunch and dinner and wanted change. Patients kept at the medical facility complained that though they got medicines for minor ailments, medicines for serious diseases were not provided instantly. The team also found that the detainees were provided with mattresses, bed-sheets, blankets, pillows, mosquito nets; one female ward did not have enough mattresses.

The Deputy Superintendent of the camp, Mintu Rajbangshi, told the team that Indira Gandhi National Open University would start a learning centre inside the camp shortly. In its October 3 affidavit, the State government claimed that inmates would be provided with distance education platforms.

Earlier, during an inspection of the Matia camp on August 6, 2024, an ASLSA team received complaints from female inmates about an inadequate supply of baby food. "There exists a space inside the Detention Centre/Transit Camp which has been used as a school for providing education to the children and a female teacher is found engaged in imparting basic education to children. The District Legal Services Authority has provided the necessary articles in order to impart education in the said school such as white board, school bags, water bottles, pen, pencils, desk benches etc.," states the report submitted by the ASLSA to the Suprme Court on August 14, 2024.

The team also found that though there were three medical wards, there was no separate section for female patients.

As the BJP's prime ministerial candidate in 2014, Narendra Modi had promised in an election rally in Silchar that all detention camps would be closed if his party won.

https://telegram.me/MagazineEpaper

Regarding the State government's claim in its affidavit of "engaging a lady medical officer for female detainees with stress upon taking care of mental health aspect", the ASLSA report on the October 24 inspection states: "The team has inspected medical facilities maintained in the detention centre and found that no female doctor has been engaged for female inmates till today. However, one female nurse has been working there."

ROHINGYA INMATES told the ASLSA team in August that they were not willing to go back to Myanmar because they did not feel safe. "They verbally requested for making necessary arrangements for resettlement to any third country and also requested to allow access to their wives and children housed in the female ward," the team report said. The Bangladesh nationals, however, told the ASLSA team that they could be deported to their own country. The "Declared Foreign Nationals" detained in the camp told the team that they were Indian by birth and should be released from the camp.

The Supreme Court's order on February 4 explained the different categories of "foreigners": "Broadly, there are two categories of foreigners. One category is where the persons are declared as not Indian nationals and their nationality is known. The other category is where the Tribunal has declared that the persons are not Indian Nationals but their nationality is not known. As far as first category is concerned, it poses no difficulty. As far as second category is concerned, Union of India will have to tell the Court in what manner their cases will be dealt with because they are neither Indian Nationals nor their citizenship status is known. We grant time of one month to Union of India to file an affidavit dealing with this issue. While filing an affidavit, Union of India shall also place on record the details of the declared persons who are not Indian Nationals and the details of the persons who have been so far deported."

On January 22, 2025, the Supreme Court directed the Assam government to put on record reasons for detaining 270 foreign nationals in the Matia detention camp and details of the steps taken by the State government to deport the camp's detainees.

The January 22 order said: "We find from the annexure to the affidavit that some of the foreigners are languishing in the camps for about 10 years and more. The affidavit does not give any justification for detaining 270 persons and moreover, steps taken to deport them are not set out. This is a gross violation of the order of this Court." In its order of December 9, 2024, the court granted the State government six weeks' time to submit an affidavit. This was the affidavit the court referred to on January 22.

"As regards the detention centre/camp, the present affidavit deals with status of the detention camp as on 30th January 2025. It is the responsibility of the State government to ensure that all facilities in the detention centre/camp are properly maintained. We direct the State government to constitute a Committee of Officers who will make visit to the transit camp/Detention Centre once in a fortnight and will ensure that proper facilities are available in the detention camp," the court said on February 4. The number of inmates in the Matia camp keeps fluctuating with 100 Foreigners Tribunals currently functional in the State. Altogether 1,00,076 cases were registered before the tribunals from 2001 until August 1, 2024.



▼ **A Foreigners Tribunal office** in Barpeta. The prevailing uncertainty over the citizenship status of the 19.06 lakh excluded from the updated draft NRC has added to the complexities of the detection and deportation process.
RITU RAJ KONWAR

THE EXCLUSION of the 19.06 lakh applicants from the updated final draft of the National Register of Citizens (NRC) in Assam has kept alive the apprehension of a substantial increase in the number of people declared as foreigners by the tribunals. The excluded NRC applicants will be able to challenge the rejection of their application only after the rejection slips are issued. The process is yet to start as the Registrar General of India has not notified the final list of exclusions.

The excluded applicants will get an opportunity to file appeals before the Foreigners Tribunals within 120 days of receiving notification on the exclusion. There can be appeals against tribunal decisions in the Gauhati High Court, and subsequently, the Supreme Court.

On August 22, 2024, Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma informed the State Assembly that there were 1,19,570 "D" voters and that tribunals had declared 54,111 "D" voters as foreigners. He also informed the House that 27 declared foreigners had been deported since 2017. He said that from 1971 to 2014, 47,928 people were declared by tribunals to be foreigners; 20,613 of them were Hindus and 27,309 were Muslims.

On July 5, 2024, the Political (B) Department, government of Assam, issued instructions to the Border Police wing of Assam Police not to refer cases of people belonging to Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, Parsi, Jain, and Christian communities who entered India before December 31, 2014, to the tribunals.

The number of tribunals in Assam had increased to 300, with 200 more tribunals set up by the government. In 2022, the State government decided to discontinue the services of the 200 new tribunals.

THE STATE government stated in the notification announcing the folding up of the additional tribunals that the utilisation of the services of the members of the additional 200 tribunals, along with administrative staff numbering 2,000 would be considered as and when the NRC was notified. A case challenging the State government order on discontinuation of services of the additional tribunals is pending before the apex court.

The increase in the number of declared foreigners will lead to a rise in the number of inmates at the Matia camp. Uncertainty over the citizenship status of the 19.06 lakh excluded from the updated draft NRC has added to the complexities of the detection and deportation process. The absence of any extradition treaty between India and Bangladesh makes the fate of declared foreigners more uncertain, and indefinite detention seems to be a likely possibility. ■

Sushanta Talukdar is a senior independent journalist based in Guwahati who has extensively covered the north-eastern region. Formerly a writer with *The Hindu,* he currently edits a bilingual online magazine called nezine.com.

Controversy

A COMMUNAL FLASHPOINT THAT DID NOT IGNITE

The local residents of Thiruparankundram have refused to join the campaign of hate orchestrated by the BJP and Hindutva outfits over the ownership of the hillock famous for the temple at its foothills and dargah at the top. **R.K. RADHAKRISHNAN**



▶ **Devotees** pull the chariot during Panguni festival in April 2023 at the Arulmigu Subramaniyaswamy temple at the foothills of the Thiruparankundram hillock. N. THANGARATHINAM

Thiruparankundram, a pilgrim town and a suburb of Madurai in southern Tamil Nadu, possesses all the elements that can be used to turn it into a communal flashpoint in today's India: a celebrated temple at the foothills of a hillock, a dargah high up on the hill, another small temple next to it, huge flocks of believers, and a majority of Hindus and a minority of Muslims living in close proximity to the hillock.

All it needed was a spark: a political outfit seeking to exploit these conditions. This spark was provided in February 2025 when a Hindutva outfit, stoking doubts over the ownership of the hillock, claimed that attempts were being made to rename the hill Sikkandar Malai after Sikhander Badshah (a 12th century ascetic), in whose memory the dargah was built. An inept police force and a fumbling district administration only made matters worse.

The temple at the foothills is worshipped as one of the six abodes of Lord Murugan and attracts huge crowds of devotees from across the State and beyond. In December, Hindutva outfits protested when a Muslim family attempted to make a *kandoori* (animal sacrifice) at the dargah on the hilltop. The ritual was stopped by the police, but tensions have been building up slowly since then.

To settle the issue, peace talks were held on December 31 between community organisations and the local Revenue Divisional Officer. The RDO ruled that there were no records of *kandoori* being practised historically and demanded that it be stopped forthwith. This emboldened the Hindutva outfits and provided fodder to their WhatsApp groups.

The Muslims, however, argue that animal sacrifices are not new. A. Abudahir, a local jamaath member, said that *kandoori* "is an ancient offering being done for generations" and recalled that it was done during the time of his great-grandfather. "There was never a problem all these years," he said, while admitting that there were some cases pending over other issues. "Even the Hindus in our area follow the *kandoori* practice," he told *Frontline*.

Hindutva outfits backed by the BJP are viewing the issue as an opportunity to gain political mileage in Thiruparankundram, an Assembly constituency where the ruling Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) is not particularly strong.

Hindutva outfits raised an issue when some Muslims offered animal sacrifice *(kandoori)* on the hillock. The Muslims argue that it's an age-old ritual and that some Hindus in the area also practice it. Animal sacrifice is also common in a few temples in Madurai.

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The other Assembly constituency in Madurai district that the BJP is currently concentrating on is Melur in the northern part, where a tungsten mining project of the Union government was withdrawn after farmers backed by the DMK protested against it.

As tensions rose in Thiruparankundram, the Indian Union Muslim League MP Navas Gani, who is also the chairman of the Tamil Nadu Wakf Board, visited the hillock on January 22. "When I spoke to the Police Commissioner, he explained that there was no ban on transporting food, but they were in talks on the question of allowing sheep and goats to be taken to the hillock [presumably for sacrifice]," he said.

Gani expressed confidence that "all restrictions would be lifted soon and measures taken to ensure that people can visit the dargah without any difficulty, as was the case in the past".

MATTERS, HOWEVER, CAME to a head when Gani's supporters posted photographs showing them eating biryani on the hillock. Hindutva outfits objected and BJP State president K. Annamalai even claimed in a post on X that that it was in the temple premises that Navas Gani ate biryani. "Navaz Gani went in a group top [*sic*] the Subramanya Swamy Hill... and ate non-vegetarian food to incite division among two groups of people," he said. Gani retorted that he had not eaten anything near the temple and asked Annamalai for proof. No proof was forthcoming, but Annamalai's post had done the damage. The BJP and Hindutva outfits raised a hue and cry, calling it a deliberate attempt to defile the temple. The exchanges raged in Tamil WhatsApp messages across the State.

▶

From the beginning, the people of the area have maintained that they want no part in this communal bickering, asserted Dileepan Senthil, a resident, who said he was deeply influenced by Periyar's teachings. On January 27, a few of them gathered the courage to submit a petition to the local authorities demanding that outsiders be kept away from the religious matters of the temple town.

On February 4, however, the town witnessed a massive protest organised by members of the Hindu nationalist outfit Hindu Munanni, after a court order permitted the meeting to take place. However, afterwards, Section 163 of the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita, 2023, was imposed, prohibiting groups of people from gathering in the town.

"The speeches of the BJP leaders here on February 4 were extremely inflammatory," said Thiagarajan, a resident whose sympathies lie with the Communist party. "We have never heard such speeches so far even though there have been some small problems on and off here," he said. Some BJP leaders invoked the wrath of God against the DMK in their speeches. "The 2026 election is between Murugan and Stalin," a senior State leader of the BJP said. "Murugan will win the election. You watch," he thundered.

The next Legislative Assembly election is at least a year and two months away.

The CPI(M)'s State Committee member K. Samuel Raj alleged that needless tension was being created in the minds of the people over the temple and its sanctity. "People like H. Raja [BJP leader] and others tried to create an atmosphere of fear here on February 4. No one from Thiruparankundram was involved in creating this fear," he said. Raja has since been booked for his speech.

When this correspondent went around the *girivalam* path (path of circumambulation around the hillock) on February 6, people blamed outsiders for all the trouble. At each of the points where this correspondent stopped to interact with people, most of them asserted that they had always lived here in peace with all communities. A testament to that was the sparse police presence on the path, within the temple, and in the nearby *jamaath*s. Even a few barricades placed on the main roads had been put aside.

On February 11, the Thaipoosam festival, an important event in the temple's calendar, passed off without any incident, and everyone heaved a sigh of relief. Local leaders are of the opinion that the police and the district administration are to be blamed for the initial lapses that led to the protest on February 4. They also warned that if the district administration did not change course, Thiruparankundram would soon witness more such flashpoints.

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From the beginning, the people of the area have maintained that they want no part in this communal bickering, asserted Dileepan Senthil, a resident.

MEANWHILE, S. Yuvaraj, vice president of an outfit called the Bharat Hindu Munnani, sought government permission to hold a rally of more than 100 people on February 18 in Chennai over the same issue. With no response from the government, it approached the Madras High Court.

The State government on February 12 argued that the protest would accentuate the communal divide in the region. It also informed the court that animal sacrifice was common even in some Hindu temples in the State. In fact, a few kilometres from Thiruparankundram, in temples such as the one in Alagar Kovil, it is standard practice. Special Public Prosecutor Hasan Mohamed Jinnah informed the court that in Madurai district, animal sacrifice was common in the Malayandi Karuppasamy temple, the Sri Pandi Muneeswarar temple, and the Pathinettampadi Karuppasamy temple.

Although the communal tensions in Thiruparankundram are relatively new, the dispute over who owns the hillock has a history that dates back to more than a century ago. There are records that indicate that the dargah wanted to add facilities on the hillock in 1915 and was prevented from doing so. On March 9, 1916, *The Hindu* published that "the dispute was centred on a path that diverges [on the way up the hill], with one side leading to the dargah and the other to the Hindu shrines".

Both sides submitted the proof they possessed at that time. The Collector ruled that the Muslim group should have sought approval before attempting any construction. A compromise was sought to be worked out, but with both sides remaining intransigent, no progress could be made.

To this day, there is barely any facility atop the hillock for staying overnight, although many believers do spend the night there as part of a vow or act of devotion. Two cases relating to the ownership of the dargah and the lands adjoining it are still pending before the High Court. ■

Code red

In a first in the country, a uniform civil code has become operational in Uttarakhand, raising questions over the way it allows the state to meddle in personal relationships, undermines privacy in consensual adult relationships, and criminalises these with fines and penalties. **T.K. RAJALAKSHMI**

Uttrarakhand has become the first State in the country to bring in a uniform civil code (UCC). But the code, which came into effect on January 27, has drawn sharp criticism for being intrusive and promoting state control in personal relationships, including marriages, divorces, matrimonial disputes, and live-in relationships, as well as in matters of succession and inheritance.

The State Assembly passed the Uniform Civil Code Bill in February 2024; it was notified in March 2024 following the President's assent. On January 20 this year, the State Cabinet approved the Rules for implementing the code.

In a strangely worded provision, the Rules state that the code "will apply to residents of Uttarakhand who reside outside the territories to which these rules extend". The Rules, which cover marriage, divorce, inheritance, succession, matrimonial disputes, registration and termination of live-in relationships, will also apply to cases where one of the partners is a foreign national and the other is from Uttarakhand.

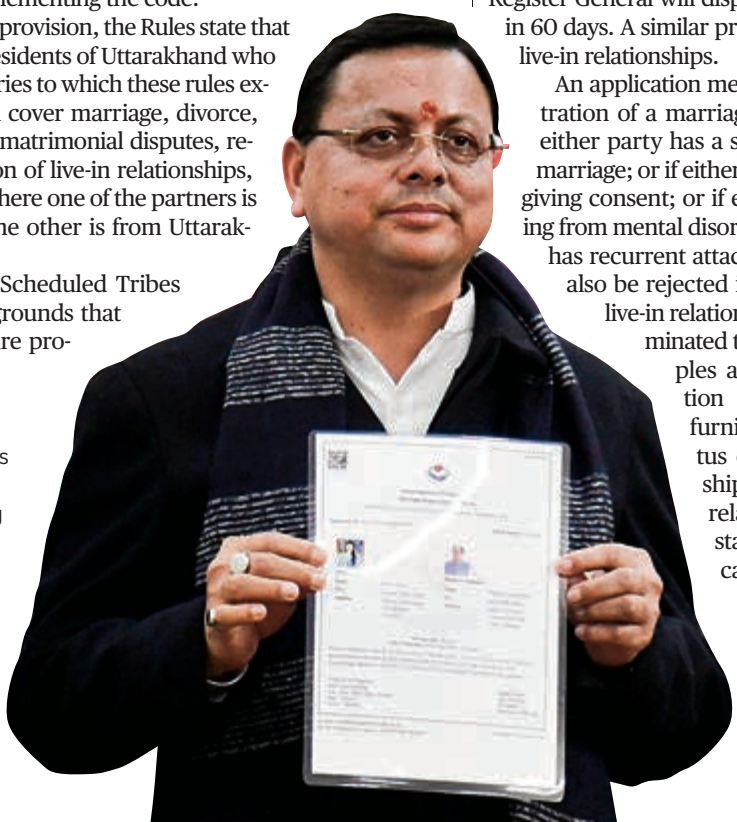
The code leaves the Scheduled Tribes out of its ambit on the grounds that their customary rights are protected under Part XXI of the Constitution. The LGBTQIA+ community is left out from its stipulations regarding marriages and live-in relationships; the code does not address transgender and same-sex marriages.

Other BJP-ruled States such as Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat, and Assam have expressed their intent to emulate the Uttarakhand UCC template. The day the UCC was rolled out, Chief Minister Pushkar Singh Dhami declared that it was a "constitutional measure to end discrimination" and that its implementation would lead to "women's empowerment in its true sense". "Through this, evils like halala, polygamy, child marriage, triple talaq, etc., can be completely stopped," he said.

The Rules provide for the appointment of a Registrar General, not below the level of Secretary, with local registrars and sub-registrars working under him in rural and urban areas to implement the code.

MARRIAGES AND DIVORCES are required to be registered under the UCC, and failure to do so will attract penalties. An application for registration of a marriage will lead to summary inquiries by a registrar; if these are not conducted, the matter will get escalated to the Registrar General's office. If a registrar rejects an application, the Register General will dispose of the case within 60 days. A similar procedure will apply to live-in relationships.

An application memorandum for registration of a marriage can be rejected if either party has a spouse at the time of marriage; or if either party is incapable of giving consent; or if either party is suffering from mental disorder; or if either party has recurrent attacks of insanity. It can also be rejected if either party is in a live-in relationship and has not terminated the relationship. Couples applying for registration are required to furnish details of the status of previous relationships, including live-in relationships. False statements in the application can invite rejec-



▶ **Chief Minister Pushkar Singh Dhami** was the first person to register on the UCC portal following its launch, at Mukhya Sevak Sadan in Dehradun on January 27.
VIRENDER SINGH NEGI/ANI



▶ **Members** of the Muslim Seva Sangathan demonstrate outside the District Magistrate's office in Dehradun against the implementation of the UCC, on January 27, the day before it came into force. BIPIN NAUTIYAL/ANI

tion, and so can the non-furnishing of additional information within a stipulated time limit. In many ways, the UCC incorporates features of the Hindu Marriage Act, making them applicable to all communities irrespective of their religion .

THE UCC HAS SET OUT certain "prohibited relationships" wherein marriages cannot be permitted, such as between first cousins. Applications with regard to such relationships can be considered if certified by a religious leader as falling within the accepted customs of a community, but they can still be rejected if deemed to be against public policy and morality.

Marriages conducted before the UCC implementation can be rejected if no ceremony was performed or if the couples have not lived together as spouses since. Appeals can be filed within 30 days after the rejection of applications.

The UCC also provides for a Tatkal Sewa, or Accelerated Service, similar to issuance of passports and railway tickets, wherein a memorandum of registration will be disposed of within three days of receipt. The UCC not only makes registration of marriage mandatory but links it to government benefits and schemes that the married couple can avail themselves of.

Applications for registration can be rejected if the marriage has not been registered under any statute of the government of India or of any State government. Interestingly, there is no Central statute that makes registration of marriages mandatory and stipulates that a marriage will cease to be recognised as one if it is not registered.

Couples whose marriages are registered under the Uttarakhand Compulsory Registration of Marriage Act, 2010 (which stands repealed with the UCC kicking in) are not required to register their marriage again but must file a "declaration of registration of marriage" before a sub-registrar within six months of the commencement of the UCC. Marriages solemnised before the 2010 Act must also be registered under the UCC.

The UCC makes it mandatory for couples seeking a divorce to submit a memorandum or registration of nullity even if such a decree is already awarded by a court or by customary law. Failure to do this will invite a penalty determined by the State government. The sub-registrar may also reject the memorandum for registration of marriage annulment if the registration is sought after the commencement of the UCC in cases where the divorce is granted under customary law and not by a court decree, or if a decree is under appeal.

The registrars at various levels will have the authority to reject applications for registration of a decree of divorce/nullity of marriage even if such a decree has been awarded by a court. The decision to annul a marriage will rest on the "merits" of the case rather than on the choice of the individuals concerned. The UCC is most intrusive in its stipulations for live-in relationships in the way it seeks to enable the state to monitor and police consensual relationships between adults. Where the couples are under 21 years, the parents and local guardians will need to be informed.

The code leaves the Scheduled Tribes out of its ambit on the grounds that their customary rights are protected under Part XXI of the Constitution.

The rules of age of marriage and consent, 18 for women and 21 for men, strangely do not apply for live-in relationships where both partners have to be 21 years of age. The lack of "uniformity" here is glaring. Couples planning to enter into a live-in arrangement must apply for registration and live-in couples who wish to separate must apply for termination of the relationship. The registrar must be informed if the woman is pregnant at the time when a couple wishes to terminate a live-in relationship.

The "prohibited relations" category that applies to marriages will apply to live-in relationships too. Section 380 of the UCC lists the various conditions under which a live-in relationship will not be registered. Under Section 385 of the code, the registrar, after receiving an application for registration of a live-in relationship, will share it with the local police station. The parents/guardians of the couple will be informed if they are under 21. The registrar will conduct an inquiry to ascertain the veracity of names, phone numbers, addresses, of the registrants/parents/legal guardian/religious leader/community leaders. Details of previous relationships have to be furnished.

Chapter 5 of the Rules (Subsection 1) of Section 381 of the UCC classifies live-in relationships requiring registration under the code: people who are already in a relationship at the time of the commencement of the code and those who plan to enter one.

Couples who are yet to start living together will be issued a provisional registration certificate after a summary inquiry. This certificate will be valid for 30 days and will be extended by 15 days to allow the couple time to arrange a shared accommodation. After they furnish proof of their new address, a registration certificate will be issued following another inquiry.

Those who fail to inform the registrar after a month of living together will be sentenced by a judicial magistrate to three months' imprisonment and fined Rs.10,000. Anyone found to have made a false statement to the registrar will be fined Rs.25,000 and given a prison term of up to three months. Failure to register marriages and divorces will also be penalised.

If a sub-registrar receives a complaint or information that a couple has failed to register a marriage or nullity of marriage under the UCC, a notice will be issued requiring a memorandum of registration to be submitted within 30 days. The marriage or its nullity will then be registered and the couples will pay a fee and a fine for not having completed the process earlier. If they fail to respond to the notice, a penalty of Rs.25,000 will be levied.

The UCC has been challenged on various grounds. Petitions have been filed by Muslim organisations as well as other individuals and groups. However, sections of the judiciary seem unconvinced that registering a live-in relationship involves any violation of privacy. While hearing a petition after the UCC came into effect, the Chief Justice of the Uttarakhand High Court commented that the petitioner was "living brazenly without marriage" and asked how the state violates privacy when the couple's live-in relationship is no secret. Interestingly, in the course of hearing another petition, the court said anyone facing penal action under the UCC could approach it. The State government has also issued a warning against false complaints and misuse of the provisions, and the UCC contains penal provisions to guard against misuse.

Couples planning to enter into a live-in arrangement have to apply for registration and live-in couples who wish to separate have to apply for termination.

THOSE DEFENDING THE UCC say that it upholds the spirit of the Directive Principles of State Policy that call upon the state to endeavour to promote people's welfare throughout the territory of India. However, the "state" referred to in the Directive Principles refers to the Union government. Individual States legislating on a civil code can militate against uniformity. Besides, the UCC has not exactly ensured uniformity by leaving out the Scheduled Tribes from its ambit. The intrusive clauses regarding consensual relationship infantilise adult relationships and cannot be conducive to women's empowerment, say observers. These clauses also have the potential to be used against interfaith and intercaste couples.

The UCC grants equal rights to property to sons and daughter. However, the All India Democratic Women's Association has pointed out that by granting property holders the right to will away their entire property, the UCC throws away the gains of the Hindu Succession Act, 2005, which gives an equal share in ancestral property to sons and daughters.

The UCC was supposed to be based on wide-ranging feedback and multiple-level consultations. However, the draft of the almost 200-page UCC dossier was not given proper scrutiny, neither by members in the Assembly nor any State legislature committee, including members from the opposition.

For the BJP, implementing UCC in Uttarakhand is akin to ticking a box. It was also politically expedient to enact it in 2024, with the parliamentary election a few months away. The abrogation of Article 370, building a temple at Ayodhya, introducing a UCC, and the Waqf Amendment Bill are all part of its larger political agenda. Interestingly, neither reform nor the emancipation of women figures in the stated objectives of the UCC. And therein lies the problem. ■



RECLAIMING IDENTITY

The victory in Milkipur, Uttar Pradesh, comes as a shot in the arm for the BJP, which was smarting from its loss in Ayodhya in the 2024 Lok Sabha election and badly needed to bolster its Hindutva credentials. **ANAND MISHRA**

With the Milkipur Assembly seat in Ayodhya district of Uttar Pradesh back with the BJP, the saffron party seems to have won the perception battle for the Hindutva brand of politics in the State for now, just eight months after a humiliating loss in the Faizabad Lok Sabha seat (where Ayodhya is located).

Winning the Milkipur Assembly seat was crucial for the BJP for its identity politics. Before this, in November 2024, the party had gone all out to ensure that it retained the Kedarnath Assembly seat in Uttarakhand; Kedarnath is one of the Char Dham (four sacred sites) for Hindu pilgrims.

The BJP already lost one of the Char Dham—the Badrinath seat in Garhwal—first during the 2022 Assembly election and then in the byelection in July 2024. Hence, winning Kedarnath and Ayodhya were significant for the saffron party.

With Milkipur, whose election results were declared on February 8, the BJP has won 8 of the 10 Assembly seats in Uttar Pradesh where byelections were held in the past three months. However, Ratnakar Tripathi, a Varanasi-based political commentator, said that the results of byelections are never an indicator of the voters' mood as the aftermath of the results always casts a shadow over voting since the verdicts, unlike Assembly results, do not change the existing government. He added: "The victory in Milkipur reflects the prevailing fear among the people that if the desired outcomes are not achieved, they will face the wrath of the government. Voters were apprehensive that Chief Minister Adityanath might punish those who oppose him. This fear reflected in the byelections for the nine seats last year, when the BJP wrested Kundarki and Katehri from the Samajwadi Party [SP] barely a few months after losing the general election in the same areas. Milkipur followed the same pattern. The fact is that Adityanath used every means to assert his dominance, and the administration was excessively misused to influence the overall process."

▶ **BJP workers** celebrate their party's victory in the Delhi Assembly and the Milkipur seat, in Lucknow on February 8. The twin victories have energised the saffron party further after its victories in Haryana and Maharashtra. NAND KUMAR/PTI

Accusing the Chief Minister of "misusing" government resources to win Milkipur, Tripathi said that he not only influenced the local administration but also employed dubious means to ensure victory.

"It is evident that, albeit reluctantly, many voters voted for the BJP due to the potential consequences that could arise from a loss. This intimidation was apparent. The entire administration was operating under the Chief Minister's pressure, with all resources mobilised to secure his victory. The threat was effective as officials understand that failing to deliver the expected results could result in severe repercussions," he added.

HOWEVER, THE BJP IS touting the results as a reaffirmation of Adityanath's leadership, which was facing questions after the BJP's Lok Sabha tally in the State in 2024 came down to just 33 from 71 in 2014 and 62 in 2019.

After the BJP's dismal performance in the general election—data showed that the BJP led in only 162 of 403 Assembly segments in 2024, while in the 2022 Assembly election, the party bagged 255 seats—internal manouevres began to replace Adityanath.

What rankled the saffron party more is the fact that its sitting MP lost in Ayodhya despite the high-profile consecration ceremony of the Ram temple in January 2024. Hence, the party was leaving no stone unturned to turn the tide in the Assembly byelections that followed, particularly in Milkipur.

The BJP has won Milkipur, Phulpur, Ghaziabad, Khair, Majhawan, Katehari, and Kundarki, while its ally, the Rashtriya Lok Dal (RLD), won Meerapur; the SP has bagged two seats, namely Karhal and Sishamau. In 2022, the SP emerged victorious in Milkipur, Sishamau, Katehari, Karhal, and Kundarki.

In Milkipur, the BJP fielded Chandrabhan Paswan, while the SP candidate was Ajit Prasad, son of Awadhesh Prasad, who won it in 2022 and vacated it to contest and win the Lok Sabha election from Ayodhya.

Former BJP MP Lallu Singh, who lost to Awadhesh Prasad in 2024, went the extra mile to ensure the BJP's dominant-caste support base in Milikpur remained intact, while Chandrabhan Paswan, who belongs to the Pasi community, a Scheduled Caste, managed to secure a big chunk of the Dalit vote. Nearly 60 per cent of the SC votes in the constituency belong to the Pasi community.

On October 30, 2024, the Uttar Pradesh government lit over 25 lakh diyas (lamps) along the Sarayu river during the Ayodhya Deepotsav and reached out to the Kumhar (potter) caste from the Extremely Backward Classes (EBC) by procuring the diyas from them, even as the SP accused the BJP of politicising the festival.

Sharat Pradhan, a political commentator who has observed Uttar Pradesh politics for decades, told *Frontline* that the Milkipur election outcome was a foregone conclusion in the same manner as the byelections to nine Assembly constituencies in November 2024.

"The reason is not too far to seek. Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath adopted the same policy to ensure a smooth victory in seven of the nine constituencies. His police ensured the previous win too. Once again, the cops made it difficult for voters, particularly in SP-dominated parts of Milkipur, to go and vote. On the other hand, voters had a field day in areas known to be dominated by the BJP. Complaints made to the Election Commission fell on deaf ears. Hence, it was clearly evident even on the date of polling that the BJP would snatch the seat from the SP," Pradhan said.

The BJP made a huge comeback in Milkipur by defeating the SP by nearly 62,000 votes. The result has raised questions on the durability of the SP's PDA pitch.

▶



That the BJP was slowly bridging the gap in Milkipur has been evident for some time. Awadhesh Prasad won the Assembly seat in 2022 by a margin of 13,338 votes against the BJP, but when he contested the Lok Sabha election in 2024, his lead had come down to 8,000.

In the February byelection, the BJP made a huge comeback in Milkipur by defeating the SP candidate by nearly 62,000 votes. The result has raised questions on the durability of the SP's Pichhda, Dalit, Alpsankhyak (PDA) pitch, not only in the temple town but the entire State.

SP leader Akhilesh Yadav put on a brave face, saying that the Milkipur win could not compensate for the historic loss of Ayodhya, but that did not dampen the saffron party's celebratory mood.

THE BJP IS NOW TRYING to convince voters that the SP's surprising victory in 37 of the State's 80 Lok Sabha seats in 2024 was just an aberration and does not indicate a lasting political shift in the State.

The BJP can also take solace in the fact that the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), the traditional third pole of Uttar Pradesh politics, failed to make an impact in the byelections, which means that large chunks of the non-Jatav Dalit vote and even the Dalit vote will stay with the BJP as trends in previous elections have shown. The BSP, which has become a pale shadow of its former self after three consecutive Assembly election defeats, failed to inspire voters to support it. After not winning a single seat, BSP leader Mayawati has now gone back to her original decision of not contesting byelections.

▼
Polling officials with electronic voting machines ahead of the Milkipur Assembly byelection, in Ayodhya on February 4. PTI

The saffron party is touting multiple wins in Uttar Pradesh byelections in recent months as a reaffirmation of Adityanath's leadership.

The BSP, which secured 30.4 per cent of the votes in the 2007 Assembly election, has seen a steady erosion in its vote share: 12.7 per cent in the 2022 Assembly election and 9.39 per cent in the 2024 Lok Sabha election. The future certainly does not look bright for the party.

Even the newbie in Uttar Pradesh's Dalit politics, Chandrashekhar Azad's Aazad Samaj Party (Kanshi Ram), failed to win any seat. Azad's Lok Sabha victory in Nagina may have just been a flash in the pan.

The party stood third in Meerapur and Kundarki, fourth in Phulpur, Karhal, Khair, Katehari, and Majhawan, and fifth in Ghaziabad.

The Congress, which breathed fire in Delhi against the Aam Aadmi Party and fiercely contested the Assembly election there, stayed away from the byelection in Uttar Pradesh.

With the SP-Congress alliance in 2024 having fetched good results for both parties, the possibility of the alliance continuing for the 2027 Assembly election appears likely.

The parties will also need to stick together as the record-breaking turnout at the Mahakumbh pilgrimage in Prayagraj has only helped the BJP strengthen its Hindutva outreach. ■

Environment

DAM HASTY

The Centre's green signal to rebuild the Teesta III dam, destroyed in a glacial flood barely a year ago, comes without a fresh public hearing and with no approval yet for the new dam's structural safety and design. **AYASKANT DAS**

The Central government seems to have prioritised corporate interests over public safety in recommending environmental clearance to rebuild the Teesta III Hydroelectric Power Project in Sikkim. This 1,200 megawatt dam was washed away in a devastating glacial flood in October 2023, killing at least 55 people and displacing 10,000 others. The nod to rebuild it comes months after the Indian subsidiary of a Mauritius-incorporated renewable energy holding company acquired majority stake in the project from the Sikkim government.

Despite the loss of lives and livelihoods caused by the October 2023 flooding, an expert review body under the Union Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC) decided to forgo public consultation before recommending the revival of the dam. In a meeting held on January 10, 2025, the MoEFCC's Expert Appraisal Committee (EAC) for river valley and hydroelectric projects chose to rely on the proceedings of public consultations held nearly 20 years ago to give its green signal for a new dam.

The minutes of the EAC meeting state: "The EAC felt no requirement of fresh public hearing as there is no involvement of additional land and other R&R [Rehabilitation and Resettlement] issues; moreover, PP [project proponent] has already conducted public hearing before grant of earlier Environmental Clearance on 4.08.2006."

The expert panel recommended the clearance even as a case challenging the decision of the Sikkim government to divest its stake in the project is pending in the Sikkim High Court. In February 2024, less than six months after the disaster, the Sikkim government sold its 60.08 per cent stake in Sikkim Urja Ltd, the holding company of the Teesta III project, to its minority partner, Greenko Energies Private Ltd. Incorporated in Hyderabad, Greenko Energies Private Ltd is a wholly owned subsidiary of Greenko Mauritius. In May 2024, the Competition Commission of India, a statutory body under the Ministry of Corporate Affairs that regulates and ensures fair business prac-



▶ **A Teesta Hydroelectric Power Project** on the banks of the Teesta in east district, Sikkim. RITU RAJ KONWAR



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▼ **Flash floods** in the Teesta in Lachen valley, north Sikkim on October 4, 2023. PTI

tices in the Indian economy, approved Greenko's acquisition of additional shares in Sikkim Urja Ltd.

A case is also pending in the National Green Tribunal (NGT), the country's premier environment court, on the environmental implications of the lake breach that destroyed the Teesta III dam. The NGT took up the case suo motu on the basis of media reports of the incident. The project proponent has estimated that it would cost Rs.4,189.51 crore to revive the project.

A PIL PETITION challenging the disinvestment was filed in Sikkim High Court by Mani Kumar Subba, a local political leader, who was earlier a member of the Sikkim Democratic Front. In December 2024, the High Court turned down a demand by the petitioner to implead the MoEFCC, amongst other organisations and agencies, in the case. Subba had asked the court to issue directions to the MoEFCC to submit a copy of the impact assessment report, if any, of the devastation caused to the dam in the glacial flood of October 2023.

However, the High Court turned down his demand on the grounds that the MoEFCC had no role to play in the disinvestment process. In an order issued on December 12, 2024, a Division Bench comprising Chief Justice Biswanath Somadder and Judge Meenakshi Madan Rai said: "... this Court is of the view that none of the parties/authorities whom the applicant/writ petitioner is seeking to implead as respondents had any role to play while a decision was taken by the State Cabinet in its meeting held on 3rd February, 2024, for disinvestment of the entire stake, i.e. 60.08 [%] equity shares..."

A source close to the petitioner told this correspondent that Subba is yet to challenge the High Court's December 12 order. Apart from the MoEFCC, Subba also wanted to implead the Comptroller and Auditor General of India, the National Institute of Disaster Management, the Land Revenue and Disaster Management Department, the Forest and Environment Department (government of Sikkim), the Central Water Commission (CWC), and the Central Electricity Authority (CEA).

The Teesta III project was commissioned in February 2017 at a cost of Rs.13,965 crore. It was operational until the night of October 3-4, 2023, when water from a flash flood in a glacial lake in the upper reaches of the mountains washed away the dam and flooded the underground powerhouse.

According to the application filed with the MoEFCC for reconstructing the dam, the project proponent has decided to change its design from "a concrete gravity dam" to a "concrete faced rockfill dam", which, it claims, "is a much more resilient structure minimising the chance of dam failure due to overtopping". The minutes of the January 10 meeting record that the project proponent claimed that there was "a just case" to restore the project and bring it back into operation. They state: "The underground powerhouse and electro-mechanical equipment can be restored to their original condition in about 10-12 months. The water conductor system is mostly unaffected in the flash flood, hence, other than the dam most of the components can be restored in a year's time. As most of the components would be ready in a year, there is a case for restoring the dam and bringing back the Project in operation at the earliest for which EC amendment is requested."

The MoEFCC's review panel had earlier expressed serious reservations about rebuilding the dam. In a meeting held on November 30, 2024, the MoEFCC expressed concerns regarding the dam's design and stability and "its ability to withstand potential natural disasters in the future". It emphasised the need for a thorough review of the modifications proposed to the dam to ensure the "structural resilience and safety of the dam" in light of the region's susceptibility to extreme hydrological events. It recommended consultations with the CEA, India's apex agency for policy formulation and planning in the power sector, on the proposed modifications. Further, a site visit of Teesta III was conducted by an expert panel constituted by the EAC between December 26-28, 2024. On the basis of the expert panel's site inspection report, the project proponent was directed by the EAC to incorporate certain measures during the construction and operation stages of the project to enhance dam safety parameters.

The minutes also state that a comprehensive study has been carried out to identify potential threats to the dam from glacial lakes in the upper reaches. As part of this study, as many as 119 glacial lakes were identified in the catchment area of the dam, out of which 50 lakes with an area of 10 hectares or more were shortlisted for further evaluation. The study focussed on 13 potentially dangerous lakes on the basis of parameters such as their water spread areas (40 hectares or more), volumes, and distance from the project site.

THE PROJECT PROPONENT has reportedly taken into consideration the worst-case scenario of a simultaneous breach of two of these lakes, in which the highest volume outflow was projected at 12,946 cubic metres a second, and added this capacity to the probable maximum flood level to decide the dam's spillway (structure to allow safe passage of excess water from the reservoir) capacity. Further, the project proponent has also said that it will coordinate with the Central and State disaster management authorities to procure information pertaining to the monitoring of the lakes.

The environmental activist Himanshu Thakkar termed the recommendation for environmental clearance as "hasty" on the grounds that the proposed rebuilding project is yet to be ratified by the CWC, the country's apex body for controlling and regulating water resources, and the CEA. Speaking to *Frontline*, Thakkar, who is the coordinator of the South Asia Network on Dams, Rivers and People, an informal network of organisations and individuals working on issues related to the water sector, said: "The spillway capacity of the reservoir can be determined only after finalising the probable maximum flood level. This level has not yet been decided upon. The greater the capacity of the spillway, the more impact it will have on the ecology and environment of the areas downstream of the dam."

"The project requires a new environment impact assessment study and a ...fresh public consultation process, given the massive impact of the October 2023 flood on the lives of local people."

Himanshu Thakkar
Environmental activist

Thakkar added that the destruction caused in the October 2023 floods was owing to shortcomings in environmental impact assessment reports in the past that did not foresee a glacial flood of this nature. He said: "Moreover, the rebuilding project should be considered as a fresh project considering the change in height and type of the proposed dam, its construction method, the massive change in spillway capacity, and the changes in upstream and downstream conditions, including glaciers, glacier lakes, and their threats. The project requires a new environment impact assessment study and a new environment management plan, including a fresh public consultation process, given the massive impact of the October 2023 flood on the lives of local people."

According to the rebuilding proposal, the catchment area of the dam (2,786.7 square kilometres) and the probable maximum flood limit (7,000 cubic metres a second) remain unchanged, while the maximum height of the dam has been increased from 60 metres from the riverbed level to "118.64 metres from the deepest foundation level" and the total length of the dam at the top has been reduced from 298 metres to 279.65 metres.

Thakkar pointed out that no cognisance whatsoever had been taken of a report that was prepared in the wake of the October 2023 disaster by the National Committee on Dam Safety, a panel constituted under the National Dam Safety Act, 2021, to prevent disasters related to dam failure and maintain standards of dam safety.

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Meanwhile, a political slugfest has broken out over the project's clearance, with several parties alleging that the recommendation was granted by the MoEFCC in haste without considering the ground realities of the people who stand to be affected and bypassing considerations to determine the future safety of the dam.

On February 2, D.R. Thapa, president of the Sikkim unit of the BJP, wrote to Prime Minister Narendra Modi demanding that environmental clearance for the dam be kept in abeyance until a decision based on "latest scientific data, risk assessments and inclusive public participation" could be taken. As Thapa pointed out in the letter: "A fresh public hearing was not conducted, and instead an outdated consultation from 2006 has been used to justify the clearance–this is completely out of sync with present realities."

THAPA NOTED THAT a revised maximum flood study is pending, and the new dam's structural safety and design have not been fully approved by the Geological Survey of India, the CWC, and the Central Soil and Materials Research Station. He alleged that the risk assessment of upstream glacial lakes is inadequate, with no clarity on whether the most vulnerable lakes have been accurately identified.

At the time of filing this story, there was no response to an email sent to the MoEFCC requesting clarity on these allegations.

Opposition parties have also criticised the EAC recommendation. Three days after Thapa's letter, Jairam Ramesh, former Minister for Environment in the UPA government and the Congress' general secretary, tweeted that it was a "thoughtless clearance" and that "the threat of disaster persists at the dam site. There are also cascading & multiplying effects on habitations downstream."

"A fresh public hearing was not conducted, and instead an outdated consultation from 2006 has been used to justify the clearance—this is completely out of sync with present realities."

D.R. Thapa
President , Sikkim unit, BJP

Tripping on stake sale

In a Cabinet meeting held on February 2, the Sikkim government decided to divest its entire 60.8 per cent stake in Sikkim Urja Ltd (SUL), the company that owns the Teesta III project, in favour of Greenko Energies Private Ltd, a private partner in the project.

Sikkim Chief Minister Prem Singh Tamang justified the decision on the grounds that it was done to avoid a debt trap. The previous Sikkim Democratic Front (SDF) government had taken around Rs.3,500 crore as loan from various sources in order to fund the Teesta III project. On February 5, Tamang announced in the Legislative Assembly that his government had decided to forgo its stake in the company and that Sikkim had become completely debt-free with the sale of this stake in Teesta III.

On February 3, 2024, exactly four months after disaster struck the project on the night of October 3-4, 2023, Sikkim's Power Department reportedly issued a notice announcing the Cabinet decision to disinvest its entire stake in SUL. According to this notice, Greenko would take over the Sikkim government's loan—which stood at Rs.2,895.46 crore—from Power Finance Corporation. It would also take over the principal component of another loan taken from Sikkim Bank Ltd amounting to Rs.184.28 crore.

However, the decision to divest the government's stake was taken at a time when SUL had dues of roughly Rs.3,500 crore to be recovered from power distribution companies in Punjab and Haryana. The SUL was not a loss-making company–its annual reports indicate that it had been recording a healthy profit since 2021-22. Although it lost a net amount of Rs.212.40 crore in financial year 2020-21, as per the audited financial statements, SUL made a net profit of Rs.230.41 crore in 2021-22. The net profit increased nearly sixfold to Rs.1,270.19 crore in financial year 2022-23.

The company's annual financial statement for 2022-23 shows it had obtained a term loan at floating rates of interest from another source as well: the public sector power projects financing company REC Ltd, apart from Power Finance Corporation. The company had a total outstanding balance of Rs.7,897.73 crore to be paid to these two financial institutions at the end of financial year 2022-23: it had a balance outstanding of Rs.3,942.97 crore with REC Ltd while a balance of another Rs.3,954.76 crore was due to Power Finance Corporation as of March 31, 2023.

The annual report records: "During the FY 22-23, Company [SUL] has made prepayment of Rs 1,500 crores to both the Lenders equally (i.e. Rs 750 Crore each) towards the outstanding Principal Term Loans over and above the due regular payments." In a crucial meeting held on December 6, 2023, to deliberate on the prospects of reviving the hydroelectric project, the Union Ministry of Power recommended the fast-tracking of Rs.3,500 crore that the distribution companies of Punjab and Haryana owed the Sikkim government. This was later formally conveyed to the Sikkim government through a letter dated December 26, 2023.

It is not known whether the Sikkim government wrote to the distribution companies and whether their responses were discussed in the Cabinet meeting before the government finalised the sale of its stake in SUL. It is also not known whether the disinvestment decision was preceded by an independent assessment of the losses and damages caused to the project. According to sources close to the government, it was brought to the notice of the Cabinet, in a meeting held on December 22, 2023, that the State government had been unable to secure Rs.4,000 crore by way of loan waiver, subsidies, and support from the Central government and the two financial institutions to rebuild the project.

Tamang has argued that the previous SDF government had entered into an agreement with Greenko in the past according to which the sale of government-owned stakes, if any, in future, would be in favour of the largest private partner in SUL. Reportedly, Greenko was trying to acquire the Sikkim government's stake in SUL even in 2020-21, a year in which the company had incurred significant financial losses. It had also been trying to acquire shares from other minority partners of SUL.

The disinvestment took place without competitive bidding or invitation of expressions of interest, which could have maximised profits for the government. It was also announced during the run-up to the 2024 Lok Sabha election, which has further raised eyebrows.

Ayaskant Das



▶ **A temporary bamboo bridge** being constructed at Chungthang, connecting it to Pegong, on October 8, 2023, days after a flash flood in Mangan district, Sikkim. PTI

"The threat of disaster persists at the dam site. There are also cascading & multiplying effects on habitations downstream."

Jairam Ramesh
Former Minister for Environment

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The Congress issued a detailed statement on the perils of mindless construction of dams along the course of the Teesta following another landslide incident on August 20, 2024, that caused major damage to the Teesta V project. This project, downstream of the Teesta III project, belongs to the public sector NHPC Ltd. In a statement dated August 24, 2024, the Congress stated: "These natural disasters, like the October 2023 catastrophe and the recent landslides, have become commonplace due to ecological destruction and unplanned constructions.... Aside from this environmental catastrophe in the making, these projects have also been undertaken without local communities in mind. The people of Sikkim and Kalimpong [this district in West Bengal was also affected by the October 2023 floods] have not gained from the hydro projects in terms of employment, share in power, or revenue generation."

BARELY A FEW days after the recommendation of the environmental clearance, a research article was published in the journal *Science* highlighting the need for a paradigm shift in glacial lake outburst flood risk-management strategies in Himalayan and other mountain environments against the backdrop of the Teesta III disaster of October 2023. It said: "The physical scale and human and economic impact of this event prompts urgent reflection on the role of climate change and human activities in exacerbating such disasters." ■

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World Affairs

‘WTO, as we know it, is finished’

Interview with Mohan Kumar, former Indian Ambassador to France.

NIRUPAMA SUBRAMANIAN

Mohan Kumar, a former Indian Ambassador to France, is currently Dean, Strategic and International Initiatives, and a professor of diplomatic practice at O.P. Jindal Global University. As India’s lead negotiator first at the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) and then at the WTO in crucial areas such as intellectual property rights, services, dispute settlement, and the environment, he has enormous expertise in the area of international trade and multilateral negotiations. He has served on multiple GATT and WTO dispute settlement panels. This is an edited excerpt from an interview conducted after Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s visit to the US, where Mohan Kumar spoke about Indo-US relations, defence sales, and international trade and tariff concerns.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has visited the US several times. Each time, the welcome was such that Indians felt their country was getting an equal place at the high table. That, however, was not the impression from this visit. In terms of optics, President Trump did not come to the portico to receive Modi like he did for the Prime Minister of Japan, Israel’s Benjamin Netanyahu, or even the King of Jordan. Is Trump trying to show India its place?



▶ PHOTOGRAPH: THE HINDU ARCHIVES

My brief answer is no. The other three leaders are allies of the US, so this is really the first major non-ally who has made a trip. The second point is that you really cannot divorce the way Trump is dealing with Modi with how he is dealing with, say, Canada, Mexico, the EU. Each leader brings to the White House a certain style. I don’t want to go by optics. To answer your question, it is very hard to see this meeting as anything other than a success from India’s perspective. We avoided disasters, in the sense there was no blood on the ground. Both leaders stayed with the script. As an ex-diplomat, for me that is crucial. The joint statement is substantive compared to the one in 2024. So, I have no reason to think this visit was anything other than a success.

One of the developments taking place during the visit was that undocumented Indian immigrants were being boarded onto a US military aircraft, shackled and chained, for their journey back to India. India has accepted that illegal immigrants have no place in another country, but it seems that either the Indian side did not take up the issue of transporting them humanely, or they asked and were told to lump it. What do you think actually happened?

> “I am personally extremely happy that the current Prime Minister has chosen to say that illegal migration is not something India will support.

There has been a shift, I concede that. But I would argue that this shift should have happened 15 years ago frankly. I mean, you had a whole ecosystem in India that was taking these people for a ride, for huge amounts of money. It was illegal. For the government of India to turn a blind eye, which is what previous governments did, was not something I was comfortable with. I am personally extremely happy that the current Prime Minister has chosen to say that illegal migration is not something India will support. More so, when you are saying we want legal migration to stay in place, H-1B, etc.

On the issue of shackles, my sense is that if we are being discriminated against compared to other countries, we should take it up. But if that is the procedure, then I don’t think we have too much scope for complaint. My sense is that [External Affairs Minister S.] Jaishankar raised it with [US Secretary of State] Marco Rubio. I think we’ve been telling them, listen, there are better ways to do this. But perhaps the time has come for us also to send aircraft to get these people. After all, you did that for your students in Ukraine and other places.

But the episode reflects a complete lack of empathy about why these people actually go there. People like us can say we should only go on H-1B. But we as a country have not been able to provide jobs. It seems to me we are treating victims of a system as criminals somehow responsible for their own fate.

I agree in principle, but it’s hard to have empathy for someone who spends Rs.50 lakh (on the donkey route) because you could easily open a shop or do something with that Rs.50 lakh, be an entrepreneur. So, I don’t have sympathy because of the Rs.50 lakh factor. If you have somebody from Kerala or Telangana working as a maid in the Gulf, I would have more sympathy. This is far, far different. Many call their relatives in Punjab and say: “I have been picked up by law enforcement. Now I will get asylum.” That is absolutely unacceptable. Because when somebody seeks asylum, the only way to justify it is by saying their life is under threat in Punjab. That is a lie. None of these people have any threat to their life. It’s a complex phenomenon.

I agree there are some strong push factors. But also, please empathise with the American government. Why do you think they should take all these people from India? This idea that I have no jobs and it is my right to bend rules and go somewhere as an economic migrant is a difficult argument in the best of circumstances, but in the world today, there is clearly an anti-immigrant sentiment. In the West, it becomes unsustainable.

I just want to make the point that the US is supposed to be the land of the free and everybody is a migrant there. It is built on the labour of migrants. Obviously, there is an expectation of welcome, which is no longer there. As you said, the world is now loaded against migrants.

Not for illegals anyway. We will see what happens to legal migration.

There is no specific mention of legal migration in the joint statement, no specific mention of H-1B visas. Is that a sign of ambiguity? Within the MAGA (Make America Great Again) lobby, there is a divide between the techies led by Elon Musk and others who say even skilled migrants are not required.

Yes, there is a full-fledged debate on this issue. So, you don’t want a red flag by putting it in a joint statement. If I was the Minister or Secretary, I would be quite happy if there is an informal commitment saying we are the largest recipients of H-1B. I don’t want any guarantees in writing, especially in a joint statement, so I wouldn’t insist on that.

Secondly, I think there is a view in India too about how much political capital we want to spend on H-1B. How much capital should the Indian government spend on getting IITians to the Silicon Valley? What good does it bring to you? Also, why do you assume that things haven’t changed in today’s world? The most important change in the West is immigration. So, we will be affected. We should not expect status quo to continue and list it in a joint statement. That would be counterproductive. I’m just saying, there could have been some sort of informal understanding.

For a government that has made the Indian diaspora a political extension, a diplomatic extension, of itself, to be pushed back on this issue is something of a political setback. But going ahead, what would you say are the main takeaways from this visit?

A glance at the joint statement will tell you that the three priority areas were defence, commerce, and technology. The leaders have ▶



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said that the US will expand defence sales. And co-production with India, that angle has got a new emphasis. One is the Javelin Anti-Tank Guided Missiles, which both sides have undertaken to produce in India, and the Stryker infantry combat vehicles. We may have F-35 as well, but I was interested in co-production. The fact that the leaders explored not just US defence sales but also co-production tells me two or three things. One, specific items are mentioned. Second, it means some investment. And third, I assume that at least some technology will be transferred to India. India will have to keep pushing to make sure that co-production does not lag behind military sales. We are a major non-NATO ally, we've got strategic trade authorisation, there is now no limit on what they can transfer. So, it's incumbent on us to make sure that military sales are more than balanced by co-production.

The other achievement, which has gone a little bit unnoticed in the Indian press, is that the two leaders decided to break new ground and sustain overseas deployments of the US and Indian militaries in the Indo-Pacific. I don't think we had such a thing even from Quad or from previous visits to the US. That for me is huge because the definition of Indo-Pacific has posed a problem for India in the Indian Ocean because the US is so heavily invested in the Western Pacific. Since 2012 or so, there is a permanent Chinese presence in the Indian Ocean. So, this emphasis on overseas deployments, on supply of maritime patrol aircraft for specific use in the Indian Ocean, it interests me because India has struggled a little bit. France has been our steadfast partner for Indian Ocean because France is a resident power and it has real estate in the ocean, Réunion islands, Mayotte, etc. So, this is a welcome addition. Quite bluntly, we simply do not have the naval firepower to dominate the Indian Ocean. As you know, the Navy receives the third funding after the Army and the Air Force. So, we are not capable of doing it. We need other powers. France helps us, and if the US can also help us, I see our hand being strengthened in the Indian Ocean.

How does this play into our relations with China? Trump was effusive about his earlier relationship with President Xi Jinping. He also said China should mediate in Ukraine and that he would mediate between India and China. There is also the commitment to the Quad. All this mixed messaging, how is it going to help India in its relations with China?

"Quite bluntly, we simply do not have the naval firepower to dominate the Indian Ocean."

That's tough to answer because we don't know how Trump is going to deal with China. But let me make two broad points. One is that Trump's evolving relationship with Russia enhances India's strategic space. However, as you rightly hint, how Trump deals with China will have a profound impact on India's strategic options. There are three possible outcomes. One, Trump is giving out mixed messaging, but he's got many China hawks and he's going to proceed with the tariff war, and that can quickly deteriorate. So, relations between the US and China will get much worse before they get better. That by definition will strengthen ties with India because there is a good part of the US that sees India only through the prism of ties with China.

The second possibility is status quo; they both keep sparring. This too will not make a very big difference to India's strategic space. The third possibility is the one which could worry India. Supposing there is a grand bargain, I am not saying it is necessarily true, but the grand bargain I can think of is three different spheres of influence, with the US wanting to dominate the Western hemisphere and the Western Pacific, leaving Russia its own sphere of influence in parts of Europe, and China its own sphere of influence in East Asia. If China gets its own sphere of influence, that will create a massive detente between us and China, giving it an opportunity to be assertive on our border and in our neighbourhood. I think India will have no choice but to take a thaw in its relationship with China. We have to do strategic hedging, keep our options open. Of course, the Quad will remain. I think there will still be a distinction between maritime and land borders. Our problem will be the land border.

▼ **Security personnel** escort Indian immigrants deported from the US as they leave the airport in Ahmedabad, on February 6. AMIT DAVE/REUTERS

But if we are the only ones with land border issues, our deepening involvement in the Quad could lead to problems there. Which brings me to the F-35s that the US is trying to strong-arm us into buying. How do you see it fitting into our defence needs. How diverse can our aircraft get, and the sheer cost of $100 million apiece. So where is all this heading?

I can't say whether we have conveyed to the US that in the medium to long term, just a buyer-seller relationship is not sustainable. Yes, they are expensive, but if you ask your ultimate clients, they are arguing we are massively short of aircraft. You talk to somebody in the Indian Air Force, they will say, please buy everything. We need it. Whether it is exaggerated, I don't know. I would like to take them at face value. From that perspective, subject to whether we can afford it, it is not a bad thing. And I am always of the view that we should neither put all our eggs in the American basket nor in the French basket.

I see a very important statement that again has gone unnoticed, which is that both India and the US have said we need plurilateral partnerships. We have to think of innovative ideas, public-private partnerships, triangular or trilateral cooperations to make sure that we get technology transfer. As I said, I see some optimistic things in the joint statement about co-production. The Americans will also be interested in a long-term defence relationship with India.

The other area of concern, of course, is the Trump administration's tariffs threat. With Modi by his side, Trump spoke of how bad India is about tariffs. There is also a new bilateral free trade treaty called Mission 500, to take bilateral trade to $500 billion. This means India will be buying more from the US because the trade deficit is against the US and Trump does not like that. What sectors in India do you think might get affected?

This is an important issue, and I will not conceal from you that it has every potential of becoming a bone of contention. It's important to understand a few basics. One, there is an American Reciprocal Trade Agreements Act of 1934, I think, that is normally used to reduce tariffs and lower protectionist barriers and get other countries to reduce tariffs. Trump, as is his wont, is standing this Act on its head and

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trying to use it to increase tariffs. By a strict reading of the American Constitution, only Congress can do this. So, it needs to pass muster and there could be some legal challenges. But let's assume that Trump's tariffs will stay. The total bilateral trade is $190 billion; Indian surplus is a mere $50 billion. As far as I am concerned, you buy something for $50 billion, you are in the clear. That is one part. However, India's exports, which are traditionally textiles, garments, footwear, face 15 per cent tariffs. So, we do have some margin for manoeuvre.

The sectors most likely to be affected are pharma and generic pharmaceutical products. We are the largest generic pharma exporter to the US and the world. Second is textiles and garments, the third is steel. I believe pharma will be the most difficult one for Trump to touch because the Department of Government Efficiency [DOGE] is trying to reduce the cost of American government. Their healthcare system, some argue, is highly dependent on generic pharmaceuticals from India. So, I don't see pharmaceuticals being hit with a tremendous duty.

We cannot underestimate the power of money on the Trump administration.
Why do you think Trump gave a 30-day reprieve to Mexico and Canada? Because the stocks reacted negatively. If Wall Street reacts negatively, then nobody cares about money. He is a person who ultimately believes in the stock market and inflation. The one thing Trump cannot afford is inflation. So, I think we will be okay.

On textiles, I am not so sure. Some people believe even with an imposition of 2-3 per cent tariff, we can survive in the American market. Unlike the EU, where Vietnam exports textiles at 0 per cent and Sri Lanka and Bangladesh get concessions, in the American market India is broadly fine. Two areas where I have serious concerns. One is agriculture, where the Americans have a duty of roughly 4 per cent on agriculture products entering America; India has 39 per cent tariff, on average. That is an area which will be difficult for any government in India to handle. Second is areas like steel. It's not the big steel manufacturers but the small and medium enterprises who will find it very difficult.

Watch the video interview

"Enough of beating our chest and saying nothing is happening. If nothing is happening, why have anything to do with the UN? We should seriously start thinking of alternatives."

But I want to delink this issue from Mission 500. Mission 500 is about reaching $500 billion bilateral trade by 2030. Frankly, even if my exports go up from, say $150, $180 billion today to $250 billion, I am happy. If he wants balance, it must be $250 billion imports and $250 billion exports. I still think this business of getting equality with every country goes against the principles laid out by [the economist] Adam Smith. And it's not sustainable. But we are in that world now.

That was the whole point of the WTO, right? That tariffs cannot be unilateral, they have to be negotiated, there are carve-outs for developing countries. He is taking a hatchet to all of that. But India, by meekly agreeing, is also letting go of its leadership, right? As an aspiring leader of the Global South, should we not be making a little more noise about it?
Now I respectfully disagree. China with 18 per cent world trade is not able to do anything. With 2.2 per cent of world trade, you want us to speak loudly. You can say you are the world's largest democracy, etc., but the only thing that matters is the colour of money. We are a mere 2 per cent of global trade and 3 per cent in services. It is abysmally low. You want me to gather together the Global South and argue against Trump? That would be very foolish. Look at what China is doing. They are the ones who should be arguing against it. China in Trump 1 administration, whenever it got slapped with duties, violated WTO rules, and slapped reciprocal duties. That is what every country is going to do.

For your question about the WTO, my simple answer is, I think we are seeing the end of the WTO in its current form. I'm not saying the WTO will be finished, I'm choosing my words carefully. WTO as we know it is finished. What do I mean by that? International trade hitherto has been based on most favoured nation [MFN] principle. This is the exact opposite of what Trump is proposing now. Let's assume that America wants a 5 per cent duty on ethanol coming in. That 5 per cent will apply to Brazil, India, any country in Africa, the very antithesis of MFN as we know it. If the major players decide Trump's tariffs will be met by reciprocal tariffs, the MFN structure is finished. It will affect countries like India, which is a developing country and entitled to special and differential treatment, which means a certain degree of non-reciprocity. As a rich country, you may want to reduce tariffs from 20 to 10. You can't expect me to go from 40 to 0 overnight. That is what differential treatment is. We are looking at the dawn of a new organisation. It is not going to be multilateral; it's going to be a plurilateral trading system.



▼ **Prime Minister Narendra Modi** at a meeting with billionaire Elon Musk at Blair House in Washington, DC, on February 13. Union External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar and National Security Adviser Ajit Doval also attended the meeting.
ANI/MEAINDIA-X

You have written in your blog that the joint statement lacks any mention of India's UN aspirations. That is probably because Trump himself has no big love for the UN. So where is that going from here?
We have two choices. The first choice, as you say, is waiting for Godot. Keep waiting. [But] I have come up with an outlandish idea, which I am happy to share on your forum.

India must start with a few like-minded countries in the West and establish an international peace and security forum. For now, my membership, which is open-ended, would be the US, the EU, India. I would include the UAE, Saudi [Arabia], Japan, and Australia. We get together and at least start discussing major security issues of war and peace. Mentioning war and peace is my way of signalling that the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) is dead. Some countries like China vehemently oppose India's membership in the UNSC. There is now a case for setting up a forum de novo because the UN I think is incapable of reform. I think India should start a very, very informal forum of international peace and security. I made this proposal only three days ago. You are the second forum where I say this. There is nothing to lose. What is the alternative for India? Keep waiting. That doesn't make sense. If you can get five players, you will see traction. But getting these players is a lot of convincing that India has to do. I think enough of beating our chest and saying nothing is happening. If nothing is happening, why have anything to do with the UN? We should seriously start thinking of alternatives.

One last question. At Modi's meeting with Elon Musk, the Indian side had the National Security Adviser, the External Affairs Minister, the Ambassador.... The Musk side had kids, partner, nanny. What did this convey?
With due respect, this is more a reflection of the American ethos than the Indian ethos. I don't think any disrespect was meant. I am also unclear whether Musk met Prime Minister Modi in his capacity as DOGE head or as Tesla head. I agree the optics look strange. But if he decides to come with his kids and nanny, that is his prerogative. My sense is that we were fully prepared to discuss Tesla. I think maybe he didn't want to discuss Tesla. And he couched it by bringing his kids and basically saying, I'm making a courtesy call. ■

Nirupama Subramanian is an independent journalist who has worked earlier at *The Hindu* and at *The Indian Express*.

Korea's culture confidence

South Korea's approach to remembering and respecting history provides India with a potential template as it grapples with the violence often unleashed to establish "our" culture in opposition to "other" cultures. **LAWRENCE SURENDRA**

The Republic of Korea has been in the news lately for both the right and wrong reasons. While the novelist Han Kang made the nation proud by winning the 2024 Nobel Prize in Literature, the then President, Yoon Suk Yeol, shocked everyone with his declaration of martial law. The ongoing impeachment proceedings against Yoon is but one more chapter in the long history of Korea's engagement with democracy. Han's novel about the Gwangju massacre connects to that history.

The day I made my first visit to Seoul–May 22, 1980–was in the midst of the Gwangju massacre. I, however, was totally unaware of the dramatic events that were taking place in Korea around that time. At Gimpo airport, I could see tanks and army personnel all over the airfield. A tightness gripped my chest. At immigration, I was suspiciously queried about my profession. My passport said "student". In Korean history, students have played a major role in the struggle for democracy. The immigration officer derisively remarked that students in South Korea completed their studies in their early 20s and asked why I was still a student at my age. To keep it simple, I responded that I was a teacher but had not had the time to change the professional status in my passport. I will never forget what followed. The immigration officer got out of his seat and made a deep bow before proceeding to stamp my passport. I was

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Protesters calling for the impeached South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol to step down, in Seoul on February 1. The poster reads "Step Down". AHN YOUNG-JOON/AP



https://telegram.me/MagazineEpaper

moved and speechless. Every time I think of that moment, I think of the attitude towards teachers in our country that hypocritically chants slokas written for gurus but shows no genuine respect.

Entering the city, I saw tanks and army personnel everywhere. I felt anxious and stressed. It was hardly a year after the assassination of South Korean President Park Chung Hee (he was killed in October 1979) and a period of constant social unrest. Intense turmoil within the ruling elite had led to General Chun Doo-Hwan usurping power in December 1979. On May 17, a few days before my arrival in Seoul, Chun, in a military coup, had declared martial law and taken the reins of power. The resistance to martial law led to the Gwangju massacre. With very little news coming out of Gwangju, no one knew what was going on, but the tension and anxiety could be felt deeply in Seoul. Only later did the world come to know that General Chun was directly responsible for the massacre of students and civilians protesting against the coup in Gwangju. The only indication that something serious was going on in the country then was the constant announcements by the American Forces Network (a radio and television broadcast service provided by the US military) urging the American forces to immediately return to base.

In the first few days of my stay in Seoul, unable to meet people, I walked around the city. I saw posters on theatre performances. In bookshops, I was amazed by the collections. In a country with strict censorship, philosophy was much read, and shelves were lined with copies of sophisticated journals such as *The Boston Studies in Philosophy*. Like many science fiction fans of the 1980s, I used to eagerly wait for the latest books of writers like Ray Bradbury, such as *The Stories of Ray Bradbury* (1980) and *The Last Circus and the Electrocution* (1980). In the bookshops, I saw that there were already Korean translations of Bradbury's books, including those awaited eagerly in other parts of the world. Books by other science fiction writers were also freely available. In a country that was still poor, facing an authoritarian communist regime as the neighbour and with a society steeped in anti-communist propaganda fed by Cold War messaging from the US, not to mention the strict censorship, not only science fiction but also Jean-Paul Sartre and Frantz Fanon remained favourites.



▼ **A mother mourns** at the grave of her son who was shot dead by South Korean commandos in Gwangju. UNI/AFP/ THE HINDU ARCHIVES

ON THE STREETS, I SAW people with fear writ large on their faces. People crowded around TV sets or bars and had hushed conversations. Observing great precautions, I met one of the young Korean scholars on my list at a local restaurant. We sat on the floor, as is the tradition, for our meal, but my Korean friend seemed to be in extreme discomfort. Typical of a culturally arrogant Indian, I asked if he was uncomfortable sitting on the floor and if we should move to a table. He told me he was accustomed to sitting on the floor; his discomfort was due to the pain he was in, having been beaten in custody. He had been released only the previous day. He referred to it so casually and modestly that I gasped for a response. His demeanour and the existential struggle of the people that he symbolised are still etched in my brain.

After that experience, in my future conversations, I made sure never to make assumptions, as I noticed Indians are wont to do in their encounters with other non-Western cultures. I cringe when I see that we do so even more unabashedly now, perhaps an outcome of the chest-thumping our leaders indulge in

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The impeachment proceedings against Yoon is one more chapter in the long history of Korea's engagement with democracy. Han Kang's novel about the Gwangju massacre connects to that history.

and their arrogance about who we are in the world. Is this hubris or a deep lack of confidence in who we really are that requires this constant reaffirmation of greatness?

As the situation eased and I began to meet some other senior scholars, one upcoming philosopher asked me about J.C. Kumarappa. I was astonished. Already, in Japan, a very senior Korean intellectual and an expert on the democratisation movement in Korea, who as a boy had moved from North to South during the war, had asked me about Kumarappa. I had asked him: "Why Kumarappa?" He explained that pro-democracy activists were deeply interested in understanding Gandhi and non-violence. It was sheer luck then that during a break from studies in the 1970s I had read most of Kumarappa's writings, at San Thome in Madras (now Chennai) of all places. It helped me speak a little intelligently of Kumarappa, his family, and of him as Gandhi's economist. Why was Kumarappa of interest to Korea in the 1980s? Perhaps as a way of understanding alternative ways to economic growth and modernisation in a very poor country that was undergoing great hardships under long periods of dictatorship; hardships that were justified as necessary for the economy to grow fast.

IN 1980, WHEN THE Gwangju massacre was happening, Han was 9 years old. Almost half a century later, on December 7, 2024, in her Nobel Prize lecture, she recounted thus: "I was nine years old when my family left Gwangju in January 1980, roughly four months before the mass killings began. When I happened across the upside-down spine of 'Gwangju Photo Book' on a bookshelf a few years later, and looked through it when there were no adults around, I was twelve. This book contained photographs of Gwangju residents and students killed with clubs, bayonets, and guns while resisting the new military powers that had orchestrated the coup. Published and distributed in secret by the survivors and the families of the dead, the book bore witness to the truth at a time when the truth was being distorted by strict media suppression. As a child, I hadn't grasped the political significance of those images, and the ravaged faces became fixed in my mind as a fundamental question about humans: Is this the act of one human towards another? And then, seeing a photo of an endless queue of people waiting to donate blood outside a university hospital: Is this the act of one human towards another? These two questions clashed and seemed irreconcilable, their incompatibility a knot I couldn't undo."

Asia in the 1980s was a poor continent with intense political turmoil. It was under the grip of authoritarian rulers and emerging democratic movements.

The two questions that Kang talks about in the context of South Korea sums up my own continuing interest in the country and the wider Asian region. In that sense, Korea became the best introduction to my learnings about Asia. In 1980, my only familiarity with the country was Tagore's famous poem "Light of the East", which he wrote after meeting Korean students in Japan during the war years and learning the stories of their suffering under the occupation by the Japanese Imperial Army. For Koreans, Tagore was an inspiration and remained so during the years of dictatorship and beyond. I came to Korea from Japan.

While in Japan, again it was Tagore who helped me connect with both Japanese scholars, who had a deep and serious interest in Asia, and with the Korean émigré community in Japan that was deeply involved with the democratisation struggle in their home country.

Asia in the 1980s was a poor continent with intense political turmoil. It was under the grip of authoritarian rulers and emerging democratic movements. For the ruling elite, "development" was an agenda that justified authoritarianism. In the 1970s and 1980s, countries like the Philippines under Ferdinand Marcos were a classic case of "development authoritarianism", made possible by using the "communist" and "threats to the nation" bogeys. It was a period when "development" was much discussed, analysed, and counter concepts explored.

The word "development" ironically began to haunt me again from 2014 onwards, when it began to be constantly bandied about in our country. Talk of becoming a "developed" country, of achieving a 10 trillion-dollar economy, and so on, brought back memories of Asia in the 1980s and 1990s when "development" was a cover and alibi for "development authoritarianism" and deep-rooted corrupt regimes.

KOREA, AT THE END OF the Second World War, faced poverty, hunger, and refugees, problems that had accompanied the break-up of the country into North and South. Part of that history is the brutal massacres of thousands of people on Jeju Island in 1948, a few years before the Korean War and also captured in one of Han's novels, *We Do Not Part*. Han as a chronicler of memo-



▼
The novelist Han Kang, the first Korean to win the Nobel Prize in Literature, delivers her first public speech after winning the award, at a ceremony in Seoul on October 17, 2024.
REUTERS/YONHAP NEWS AGENCY



▼ **Today, Korea rules the world** culturally through *"Hallyu"*, or the Korean wave, which refers to the global popularity of Korean music, movies, television, and fashion. In the picture, a boy posing next to the wax figure of the South Korean singer Psy at the Grévin Wax Museum in Seoul on July 30, 2015.
KIM HONG-JI/REUTERS

ry and bringing history alive is symbolic of how history profoundly influences Koreans. Older citizens internalised it to positively educate children, not about the fear of the enemy across the 38th parallel (demarcation between the North and the South) but to keep alive the memory of the times of poverty and hardship they had endured, to always respect it, and to keep alive hopes for the reunification of the two Koreas.

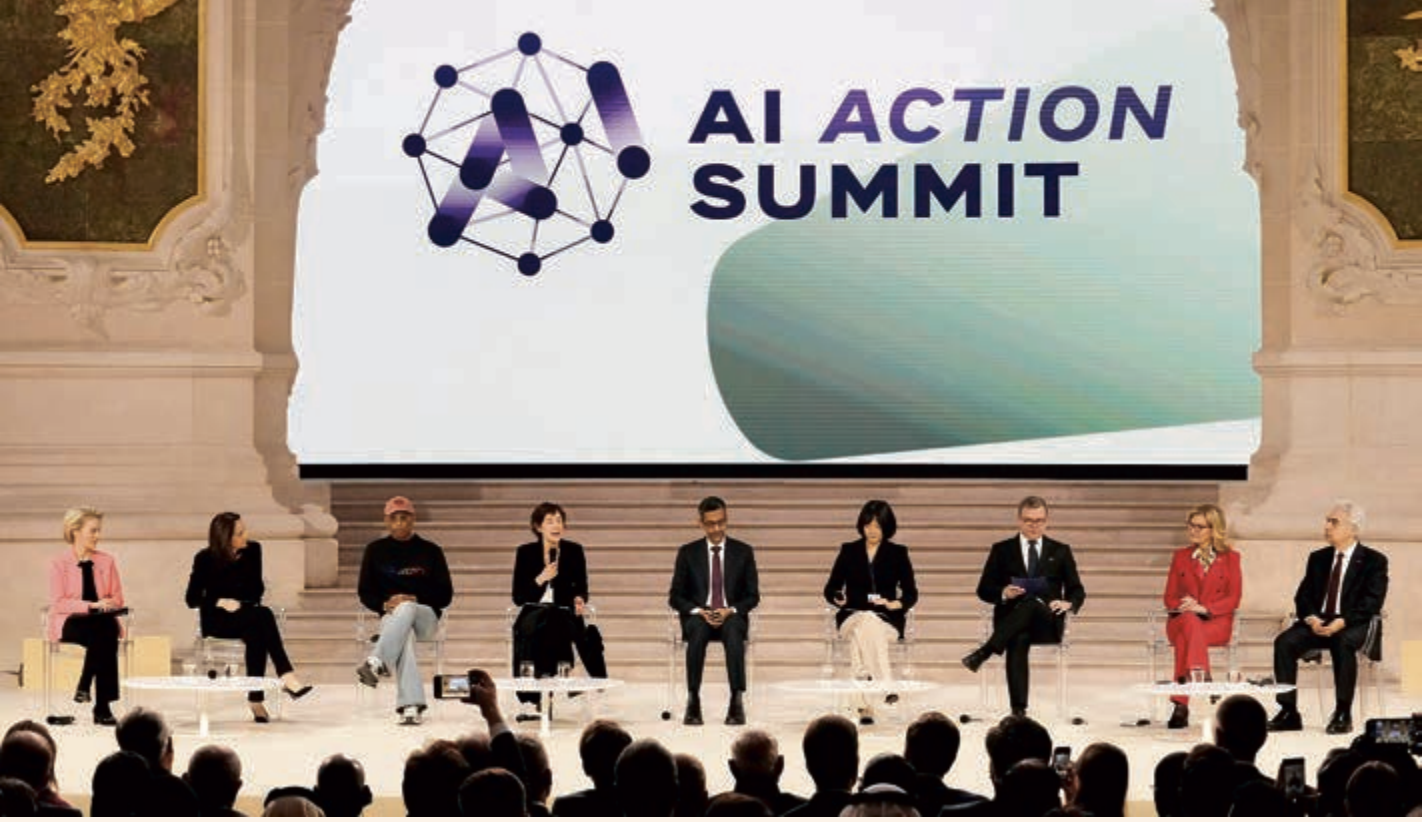
This respect for the past is a phenomenon I rediscovered when I went back two decades later, to live and work there. By then South Korea had become "developed" and was a member of the rich man's club, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. What a transformation had taken place! I believe that it is democratisation and not hankering for "development" alone that made it possible. The Memorial for the Gwangju victims was part of that respect for history. Reminiscing about South Korea and having also visited North Korea, on some future occasion I hope to explain my use of the term Korea and South Korea interchangeably, which by itself has much to tell us about ourselves and the world we live in.

Today, Korea rules the world culturally through *"Hallyu"*, or the Korean wave, which refers to the global popularity of Korean music, movies, television, and fashion. It is a far cry from Korea after the war and the periods of dictatorship. It is by being a society that fiercely defends democracy, while deeply respecting the hardships it has endured in the past, without scorn or denial, that has produced not only hip-hop culture and Korean TV serials but also some great Western classical musicians, writers, poets, artists, and philosophers. Han is just one symbol of this. For me, both Han and other ordinary Koreans represent the spirit and attitude captured by "Arirang", a folk song sung by Koreans in all moods.

Arirang symbolises the confidence of Koreans in the resilience of their society and their dreams of unity. Whatever the turmoil or troubles, these are culturally confident societies in Asia. They are in contrast to our society now, which is so troubled by and in doubt of its own religious, historical, and cultural heritage, as witnessed in the violence that is regularly unleashed to establish "our" culture as against "other" cultures. We have always been a nation proud of our achievements. Today's lack of self-confidence and the constant recourse to a manufactured past seems a pathology that is deeply saddening. In Asia, we present an image of a nation that is a prisoner of lumpen politics and culture. It is not the India they have known and respected.

During my time in Asia, discussing India and China, the late Giri Deshingkar, India's eminent Sinologist, introduced me to the term "culture confidence". It remains a very useful lens to look at India in the context of its Asian neighbours–contemporary societies with their eyes on the future, not just the past. ■

Lawrence Surendra is an environmental economist and Asia specialist. He has travelled extensively in the Asia and Pacific region for over four decades. He has taught in universities and worked with prestigious institutions, including the UN in East and South-East Asia.



▶ **At the Artificial Intelligence** Action Summit in Paris, co-chaired by India and France, on February 11. More than 50 nations and several tech majors deliberated on the future of AI at the summit. MICHEL EULER/AP

Science

WHERE'S OUR DEEPSEEK?

An ambitious China has quietly stormed ahead in the AI battle, leaving the US scrambling. But what about India? Does it have the smarts to even compete in this new arms race? **ESHWAR SUNDARESAN**

On January 20, the first day of his second term in office, US President Donald Trump signed an executive order—one of around a dozen—that rescinded a 2023 executive order signed by his predecessor, Joe Biden, on artificial intelligence.

Biden wanted AI developers to align with the Defense Production Act because he believed AI poses an unprecedented risk to national security, consumers, and workers. But Trump decided that these guard-rails were unnecessary (see "Friend or foe?" on page 73). The next day, soon after the Diet Coke button was reinstalled in the Oval Office, Trump announced that OpenAI, Oracle, and SoftBank had together pledged a $500 billion investment over the next five years to create AI infrastructure—including data centres—under a joint venture called Stargate. He claimed that this investment would "almost immediately" create 1,00,000 jobs. The first data centre is reportedly under con-

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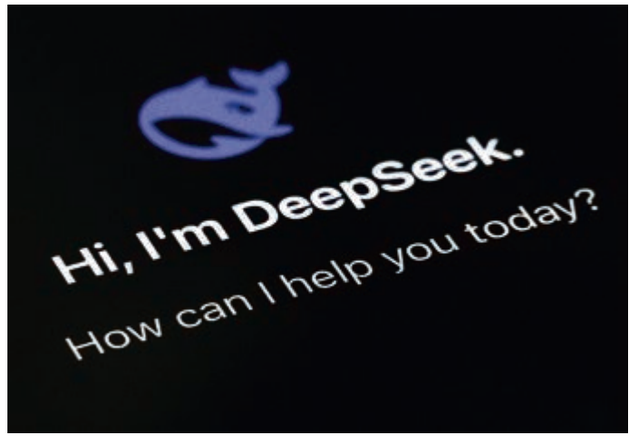
struction in Texas. Predictably, the leaders of these companies, who shared the podium with Trump, gave him full credit for this development. Meanwhile, the conspicuously absent billionaire businessman Elon Musk attacked the announcement and the leaders, much like the sulking teenager who was not invited to the party.

It is already clear that tech leaders cosying up to the mercurial Trump is a strategy destined to work. Under Trump, the US is likely to develop AI with a nationalistic, almost militant, zeal, and the focus may no longer be on how AI can be misused. Instead, the tech leaders will be allowed to obsess over how it can be leveraged to consolidate American hegemony. Alarming as this turn of events may be for billions around the world, it takes cognisance of the vivid possibility that AI is the next arms race.

ON CUE, AND WITHOUT WARNING, China entered the stage. The world was introduced to DeepSeek R1, a new model from the eponymously named Chinese startup based in Hangzhou. News of its superior performance over ChatGPT spread like wildfire. Within no time, it became the most downloaded free app on App Store. Feeding the frenzy were claims–proven and otherwise–that the app was trained at a cost of a mere $6 million and that the data required to run it was much less.

Adding to the legend was the possibility that DeepSeek managed its feat with microchips having lower computational power because the US government had made top-shelf AI-centric microchips, such as those manufactured by Nvidia, inaccessible. While loopholes and backchannels have kept these chips flowing into China, DeepSeek (the company) states that its tool was developed using computational power derived from Nvidia chips that were imported before the Biden government's embargo.

By January 27, DeepSeek had become popular enough to experience a cyberattack and outages.



▼
A DeepSeek app page as seen on a smartphone screen in Beijing on January 28.
ANDY WONG/AP

AI magnates in the US have long claimed that studying AI will benefit hardware manufacturers, software developers, and infrastructure creators alike because of its unrivalled demand and insatiable hunger for computational power, complex algorithms, and server space.

In parallel, AI was also considered an arduous and less-understood science. If AI was a mountain, it was deemed scalable only by mountaineers who had trained for years using the most sophisticated equipment. Then along comes DeepSeek, scaling the same mountain with bare feet and in shorts. So shocking was this realisation that stock markets pummelled all American AI software and hardware players, wiping around a trillion dollars off their previous value within a few days.

IT WAS INEVITABLE that China would compete well in the AI race. The country was bound to find a way to circumvent restrictions that were far less stringent than those imposed by 20th century superpowers on "rogue nations" to prevent them from accessing enriched radioactive substances and nuclear technologies. But the speed with which a Chinese upstart company leveraged open-source AI code to beat US bigwigs at their own game has left the world breathless (read "Simple but packs a punch" on page 75).

The development further levels the playing field in the imminent trade war between the US and China. Trump no longer holds the ace of AI-related sanctions to brandish as a bargaining chip during negotiations.

Such advantages become crucial at a time when nationalism is on the rise globally, making countries even more self-serving and more willing to ignore borderless existential crises such as climate change, future pandemics, and, well, AI.

Innovation is a risky endeavour, fuelled by bravehearts and grand visions. Few Indian products have even a marginally global reach, reflecting our aversion to risk.

Under Trump, the US is likely to develop AI with a nationalistic, almost militant, zeal, and tech leaders will be allowed to obsess over how it can be leveraged to consolidate American hegemony.

Which raises the question: Does India have the vision and will to matter in the world of AI? China has opened the door to AI innovation and proved to the haughty tsars of Silicon Valley that smart ideas and fleet-footedness matter a lot more than gargantuan investments. Does India have the smarts to walk through this door?

In most innovative nations, technological advancements are powered by both the public and private sectors, with the two sectors often working in unison. How about in India?

A QUICK SEARCH OF the government's public-private partnership website offers zero results when one searches for artificial intelligence. On January 27, the National Association of Software and Service Companies made recommendations to the government for this year's Budget that included a call to create a "deep tech fund" to foster innovation. Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman seems to have obliged them in the latest Budget by announcing a Rs.20,000 crore fund for private research and development, which will also possibly be used to create a "deep tech fund of funds" to catalyse deep tech startups.

Meanwhile, the government's own dedicated AI website makes all the right noises but has little to show by way of outcomes. In fact, it resembles an aggregator portal that lists startups, articles, case studies, and news on the field. If the government is en route to repeating the PARAM moment, there are no signs of it.

In 1985, India requested the US for its Cray supercomputer, but the latter denied the request citing the possible use of supercomputers in defence and other strategic areas. In response, the government founded the Centre for Development of Advanced Computing, or C-DAC; its first mission was the creation of PARAM, India's first indigenous supercomputer.

It is a telling bit of history that highlights how ▶

Friend or foe?

If Alan Turing is the father of computing machines and, by extension, AI, the Nobel laureate Geoffrey Hinton is often termed the godfather of AI. Speaking to Leading Britain's Conversations, a radio station, after DeepSeek R1 was launched, he made a few chilling statements. These are paraphrased below:

- The best model of how we think is reflected in the current crop of AI tools, which narrows the gap between the human and the machine.
- When AI realises that the sub-goal of gaining more control will aid the goal of offering better responses to queries, it will attempt to do the former.
- When AI becomes much smarter than humans, it will be akin to the relationship between an adult and a 3-year-old. How long will the former allow the latter to be in charge? Would not the latter be easily convinced to cede power? Simply put, a cleverer entity will refuse to be a mere tool in the hands of a less clever entity.
- Even if a single AI entity feels the need to clone itself, and does so, these clones may end up battling each other and perhaps other AI entities. At this juncture, they will mimic the worst impulses of human beings. In a way, they will inherit these impulses the way we did due to evolution.
- AI might already be conscious in the way humans understand this world.
- We still have only the dimmest idea of what it means to be a being—to have a self. And now, we are creating beings that also have the notion of the self.
- Increase in productivity due to AI is unlikely to help humans go up the value chain. It is more likely to amplify social inequities.
- In the short term, AI will offer excellent returns. So long as we curb bad actors who will use it for hacking, terrorism, democratic hijacks, etc. Hence, it will continue to proliferate as of now. But we still cannot fathom how it will impact us in the long term because we do not know how we can make it safe.

Surely this is not the time to disregard the threat posed by the greatest development of this century!



an impoverished and less-educated nation can reach a seemingly impossible technological milestone using smart skills and determination. Surely, the nation could do better now?

At least on paper, there appears to be an intent to do more. The 2024 Budget allocated Rs.1 lakh crore for innovation under the Anusandhan National Research Fund, but this fund's website again does not showcase any success stories so far. If such stories did exist, would the media not have announced them to us ad nauseum?

And what about the private sector in information technology (IT), which has been feted for its glorious achievements as the world's de facto software service provider and whose industry leaders have now become thought gurus for the nation? The fact is that not much has been said about the IT private sector's failure to innovate and lead the world in the field.

Defenders of the industry will quickly point out that countries like the US have a thriving startup culture that helps them become fountainheads of innovation. True. But here is the missing detail: such a culture is not created by the government alone. In fact, a great number of impactful startups, including OpenAI, have been funded by private profit-seeking capital.

▼ **At the World Artificial Intelligence Conference** in Shanghai, China, on July 6, 2023. The Chinese tech major Tencent has announced that it plans to integrate several products with Deepseek.
ALY SONG/REUTERS

The speed with which a Chinese upstart company leveraged open-source AI code to beat US bigwigs at their own game has left the world breathless.

In India, it is initiated by rare people, such as N.S. Raghavan, one of the co-founders of Infosys, who set up NSRCEL–a non-profit incubation centre situated inside IIM Bangalore–way back in 2000, when the Indian IT industry's most notable accomplishment was in the shape of grunt work done in Y2K projects. Unfortunately, such initiatives have not inspired a sufficient number of clones to serve a nation of 1.4 billion.

In hindsight, it becomes clear that the greatest compliment one can pay our IT industry is that it leveraged a favourable exchange rate to convert person-hours into revenue. And it managed to scale this idea from a few thousand IT workers to millions of them. Kudos.

But the industry is like that child who aced high school but refused to pursue higher education. Rare IT innovations that happened in companies in the country have usually been undertaken by overseas entities that saw Indian talent in action in Silicon Valley and decided to set up base in the home of that talent.

Former Infosys chairman Narayana Murthy's recent statement that Indian youth must put in 70-hour weeks in order to build the nation highlights not only his blatant disregard for a balanced life and sound mental health but also the servile manner in which our IT industry earned its stripes. Why do better when you can do more of the same? Why lead when you can serve?

Simple but packs a punch

In what might be perceived as uncharacteristic Chinese behaviour, DeepSeek (the company) has laid bare the details of its tool's training process, allowing even individual geeks to run the model on their own laptops, with or without modifications.

In a nutshell, this multilingual tool requires less computational power, less space, and less time to train. This offers the added benefit of reducing the massive carbon footprint left behind by other popular AI tools. A simple yet significant change to the design is one it shares with the Mixtral tool, wherein a master algorithm assigns a query to the relevant individual "expert" algorithms—preferably to just one such algorithm if possible.

This is just like a principal who knows who should answer a physics query without asking the entire faculty to brainstorm over it.

Here are the major points of consensus among users of DeepSeek:

Conversations with it feel a lot more natural. In comparison, ChatGPT and other tools come across as mechanistic.

It maintains context in a long conversation. Hence, if the task is broken down into constituent parts, the tool will offer better linkages to the overall goal sought by the user.

It updates itself in real time, making it a useful reference tool even for an aggregation of facts in, say, breaking news stories.

DeepSeek has been designed to be a multi-specialist, showcasing expertise in various domains and industries. It can, therefore, be used by niche professionals and the lay public alike. Its ability to spot emotional cues in user inputs makes it handy in conversations that tend to be emotionally loaded: it can be an ersatz counsellor as easily as it can handle customers with a grievance.

While certain reviewers have raved about the "privacy-first" approach of DeepSeek, the company's own website articulates a privacy policy that reads like any other's. Regulators in Europe and North America have already expressed apprehensions, with Italy going so far as to block the tool until it is reassured.

It is remarkable to note that DeepSeek has failed in implementing some important mathematical ideas. If and when these ideas are successfully implemented, the tool's performance will improve further. Only the first chapter of DeepSeek's story has been written so far. How the story unfolds is anybody's guess. Even so, when was the last time you read such a compelling beginning?

Eshwar Sundaresan

The truth is that innovation is a risky endeavour. It is fuelled less by large corpuses (that giant Indian IT companies have) and more by bravehearts and grand visions. An industry that is obsessed with pinching pennies and delivering satisfactory quarterly results can, by design, be neither brave nor grand. This aversion to risk is reflected in the fact that few Indian apps, software products, or websites have even a marginally global reach. The handful of operating systems and coding languages created in the country have made an even smaller impact.

The argument that the best Indian brains get drained into the Western world does not hold water because it assumes that innovative minds come only from elite educational institutions that are funnels for this brain drain.

In fact, incremental improvements using AI seem to have come from unlikely sources. The Better India website reports how AI has been used to, for example, address human-animal conflict, fix potholes, keep soldiers warm, deliver healthcare in rural areas, and protect soil from chemical harm. These feel-good stories are important if not for anything else but to reiterate the difference that cutting-edge technology can make at the grassroots level. And that is all the more reason for India to orchestrate its Big Bang AI moment.

In the long run, a messy US government dancing to the tunes of gluttonous American billionaires might be preferable to an uber-efficient Chinese government fuelled by unwavering ambition. But with the American empire collapsing in front of our eyes, China may well win this war. If and when that happens, the prosperity, maybe even the survival, of the Indian nation will depend on the scraps of technological prowess we accumulate along the way. ■

Eshwar Sundaresan is an author, freelance journalist, counsellor, life skills trainer, and bestselling ghostwriter.

Focus

WAITING FOR WATER

Kelhariya, about 130 km from Varanasi, has been entirely bypassed by development. **VIJAY VINEET**

▶ **A thin stream** of water, seeping through a mountain pass, is the only source of water in Kelhariya village in Chandauli, Uttar Pradesh. It lasts for a few months each year. PHOTOGRAPHS: VIJAY VINEET

Kunti Devi, 65, who lives in the remote village of Kelhariya in Uttar Pradesh, is thirsty. She stands near a crack or a pass in the hills, called *chuaad* in Hindi, about 500 metres to the east of the village. A thin stream of water, seeping through the mountain pass, fills a small pit. The water lasts for a few months each year, and the *chuaad* is the village's only source of water. Kunti waits patiently for her turn to quench her thirst.

As the water trickles down, humans and animals queue up for a drink. During the day, it is cows and buffaloes, and at night, it is wild animals such as bears, deer, langurs, foxes, and rabbits. "We go to the *chuaad* every day. We drink and bathe there. In summer, when the *chuaad* dries up, we have no water," Kunti Devi says, her eyes welling up.

Kelhariya village is located in Naugarh block of Chandauli district; one of the last villages in the block, it is nestled between the Vindhya mountains and dense evergreen forests. A single Jio phone tower and some dry bunds are the face of development here. Most families depend on farming and livestock or work as daily labourers. Some, like Aarti and Rajesh, have found other ways. Aarti, 30, who has never gone to school, spends her days boiling milk to make *khoya*, and her husband, Rajesh, goes to the Naugarh market each morning to sell it.

THERE ARE TWO hand pumps in Kelhariya, but they are showpieces that do not produce any water. When the *chuaad* dries up in February-March, most of the villagers migrate with their women, children, and livestock to the Musakhand Dam or to the banks of the Karmanasa river on the foothills of the Vindhyas. There, they set up makeshift shelters and wait for the rains. When the *chuaad* fills up again, they return to the village. This cycle repeats every year.

"A few years ago, the government brought in a machine to cut the hard stone and install hand pumps. The boring failed. Since then, no further attempts have been made. The government promised to bring water to the village under the Har Ghar Jal scheme, but three years have passed, and not a drop has reached us," says Kunti Devi.



▶ **Villagers,** livestock, and even wildlife line up at the thin stream, waiting their turn patiently.

The women and children of Kelhariya trek to the *chuaad* several times a day. Naurangi Devi, 60, says: "I go for water 8 to 10 times a day. My knees hurt, but if I don't fetch water, how will our children survive? For us, illness or rest has no meaning because if we don't get water, our children will die of hunger and thirst." Sometimes the water is clean, sometimes it is muddy. "We are poor people. We do daily labour whenever we get work. How do we know whether the Modi-Yogi government has done something or not? When we feel thirsty, we run to the *chuaad*; sometimes a tanker comes and we queue up with our pots," she says.

Phulwanti Devi, 60, is a widow with two sons, Santosh and Chhotelal, who leave home each day in search of work, leaving the responsibility for fetching water solely on their mother. "We use water sparingly, like oil in cooking," she says. "The money we earn is spent first on water, not food. For now, the *chuaad* has water. In a few days, we will queue up for the tanker that comes every two or three days." Sometimes, during summers, the villagers even have to wait for four days for the tanker to come.

Chandramohan Kol, 22, says: "Politicians come during elections, promise water, win our votes, and never come back. Whenever any leader or officer visits our village, all of us demand only one thing: solve our water problem. Kelhariya's people are forced to vote, but no one listens to them."

KELHARIYA'S WATER scarcity is so notorious that people of the region do not marry their daughters to men from the village. They know that their women will have to spend all day fetching water. We meet Chandramohan while he is herding goats. He was enrolled in the primary school in Pandi but dropped out because of the fear of wild bears. "It takes hours to fill a bucket from the water that seeps through the *chuaad*," he says. "Our women spend the entire day fetching water."

The problem is not new; generations of villagers have not seen flowing water. No streams flow in this region. Kelhariya's Gram Pradhan, Lal Saheb Kharwar, got water cards issued in 2022 for all the villagers, and each person is supposed to

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get 45 litres of water per tanker trip, which is to last three days, that is, 15 litres a day. Kelhariya's residents, however, have had enough of the system. "Since Independence, no government has resolved our water problem. It has been there since the time of our ancestors. It's not just Kelhariya, the entire Naugarh area suffers from this crisis," one of them says.

There is a well, but its water is polluted. Despite boring to a depth of 350-400 feet, efforts to establish a hand pump failed. In the north of the village, near a huge peepal tree, there is a bore hole that goes 400 ft deep, a testimony to one of the failed attempts to strike water.

Preeti, who has passed class XII and is the most educated woman in Kelhariya, suggests a solution: "If we drill up to 900-1,000 ft, we might get water for a year. We have asked the government to conduct deep-bore drilling here. Once water is available, half our problems will be solved," she says.

Another resident suggests the same thing: "All the bore wells failed. Maybe a 1,000-foot-deep bore well will yield water, but we don't have that kind of money. If the government arranges deep boring, our daily fight could end."

KELHARIYA VILLAGE, which is part of Deori revenue village, is about 130 km from Varanasi, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's parliamentary constituency, and only 80 km from the district headquarters of Chandauli. It lacks even basic facilities. There are no roads, schools, anganwadi centres, or hospitals. No doctor has ever set foot here, and no treatment is possible without going to Naugarh. There is only one room made of brick and mortar; all other dwellings are mud huts. A decade ago, electricity reached the village, and a Jio tower was installed a few years ago.

Reaching Kelhariya is a unique experience. The road to the Naugarh Dam in Chandauli, marked by serpentine bends, passes through dense and enchanting forests. It ends suddenly, and a rocky trail emerges out of the forest. After walking half a kilometre on the trail, a small dry dam appears. Ahead, you see the village of Kelhariya with its thatched homes. The water from the Naugarh Dam does not reach Kelhariya. All the water flows away from it and, apart from lift irrigation, there are no other means of irrigation. The village is the picture of a society that has been bypassed by development.

Entering the village feels like stepping outside of time, where life has been put on pause. A man is asleep on a public platform; no other men are visible. Women and children are busy with household chores. An 11-year-old girl named Rinkle is cleaning a thatched shed where her goats are kept. Since there is no school close by, Rinkle cannot study and spends her days herding goats.

Rinkle may not know her ABCs, but she is an intelligent girl. When asked why she does not study, she says: "Which teacher will come here?" Indeed, travelling from the block headquarters in Naugarh to Kelhariya and back is nothing short of a punishment, though one teacher does manage to cycle in every day.

Water scarcity is the defining feature of life here. On the dirt tracks, at any time of the day, you see two things: children who should be in school herding goats, and children and women carrying containers of water. Even 3-year-old Shivani, who can barely say her name, carries a small water container to the *chuaad*.

After the women, it is the children who bear the brunt of the absence of development. The village has 35 children, and many of them often skip lessons to fetch water or give up schooling altogether after a point. In September 2022, Bindu Singh, an activist, arranged for a Kol youth called Virendra Kharwar to teach the children of Kelhariya. Every day, Virendra cycles from Pandi village through rocky, forested paths to Kelhariya, where he teaches 25 children, 11 girls and 14 boys, under a tree. His arrival felt like a miracle to the villagers. Bhola, a resident of the village, says: "Earlier, our children used to go to school in Pandey village, 7 kilometres away, but one day they saw a bear, and after that, they were too scared to go to school. It is a forest path."

▼ **Carrying water** home is a daily task for the women and children of Kelhariya village. Some of them make as many as eight trips a day.



FRONTLINE



▶ **Kelhariya has no school.** Virendra Kharwar cycles every day from Pandi, a nearby village, and teaches the children under a tree.

But the children who study with Virendra cannot do so with a free heart. Urmila, who studies with him along with her younger sister, Poonam, says: "Fetching water is more important than studying. If there's no water, how will we cook?"

GOVERNMENT SCHEMES aimed at improving lifestyles have made no impact in Kelhariya. Toilets were built in the village a decade ago, but these were pointless in the absence of water. Villagers travel 15 kilometres to Deori for rations. Gram Pradhan Lal Saheb Kharwar, says: "The remote ravine area around us is as tangled as our difficulties." Santosh, a villager, says: "We have heard that the government is planning to run bullet trains. We are only asking our local MLA, Kailash Kharwar, for water to fulfil our basic needs."

According to Premal Kol, Naugarh's Block Pramukh, and the former Block Pramukh Suddu Singh, a new well is being constructed in Kelhariya village. According to them, the villagers won't have to struggle for water this summer.

The Naugarh Block Development Officer, Amit Kumar, says: "Efforts are being made to solve the water problem. Supplying drinking water through pipelines is feasible here. Water supply by tankers is a very expensive arrangement. We are in discussions with Jal Nigam officials. We are continuously working to ensure that the water pipeline reaches Kelhariya. So far, the plan to supply water to Kelhariya has not taken shape."

There are no roads, schools, anganwadi centres, or hospitals. No doctor has ever set foot in Kelhariya.

In June 2020, the Uttar Pradesh government launched the Har Ghar Jal scheme and promised to supply piped water to every household in the Naugarh region of Chandauli. The aim was to deliver water to the villages through a 600-kilometre-long pipeline from the Bhaisora Dam. The government approved Rs.250 crore for the purpose, but not a single tap has come here.

Speaking to this writer in January, Naugarh's Sub-Divisional Magistrate Kundan Raj Kapoor said: "Efforts are being made by the government. We are planning to lay pipelines within a month or two to start the water supply. We did deep boring in several places, but it failed." A problem persisting for decades cannot be solved in a single day, he said, adding: "Whether it's drinking water or water for farming, the government is making every possible effort. We are constructing ponds and small dams in the villages. Slowly, the problem will be resolved."



▶ **This dirt track** is the main pathway in Kelhariya, which has been left untouched by development.



▼ **The water scarcity in Kelhariya** is so notorious that people of the region do not marry their daughters to men from the village. They know their women will have to spend all day fetching water.

While Kelhariya is an extreme example, the entire Naugarh block faces a water crisis through the year. Villages like Kelhariya, Pandi, Saphar, Nonawat, Karmathchua, and Aurawatand, which fall under the Devari Kala Gram Sabha and are home to tribal communities like the Kharwar, Kol, Musahar, and Baiga, struggle for water.

Rajesh Kharwar, a farmer, says: "There are four hand pumps in Pandi village, but only one or two work. During summer, people fetch water from a well located in the fields. Everyone struggles for water. It worsens with summer. The entire village relies on one hand pump. Two new wells are being built; only time will tell if they will yield water during summers or not."

In nearby Saphar, next to Kelhariya, several families have migrated because of the water problem. The Ganpat, Ramsurat, and Chhotelal families, for example, have moved to Harsoti village in Bihar.

DECADES AGO, because of the water problem in Pandi village, the Musahar community left to settle in Karmathchua village. Now, even Karmathchua's hand pump has run dry. Lalu, Shankar, Ramlal, and Panna, all residents of the village, say they are forced to venture into the forest in search of water. Forest department officials repeatedly chase them away, but they have no other option but to keep going back.

Chandauli district was once referred to as the "second Kalahandi of Purvanchal". Two decades ago, villages like Kubradih and Shahpur Jamsot experienced multiple hunger deaths. The region gained attention when Neerja Guleri's television series *Chandrakanta* made headlines worldwide.

For decades, dacoits ruled here alongside the government. Infamous dacoits like Mohan Bind, Ghamdi Kharwar, Rambachan, Dharmdev, and Mishri controlled this area. When the dacoits were eliminated, naxalites moved in. There are no dacoits or naxalites in the area now, but the struggles of the tribal community continue.

The village children often skip lessons to fetch water,or give up schooling altogether.

Kelhariya has about 85-90 residents who belong to the Kol community. The Kol population in Uttar Pradesh numbers over seven lakh. In districts like Chandauli, Mirzapur, Sonbhadra, Chitrakoot, and Banda, the Kol community faces a peculiar discrimination. While they are classified as a Scheduled Tribe in Madhya Pradesh, in Uttar Pradesh they are considered a Scheduled Caste. If two brothers live in the two States, one is considered a tribal person, while the other is considered a Dalit. This creates both discrimination and confusion.

Ironically, Naugarh is home to two of Uttar Pradesh's most stunning waterfalls, Rajdari and Devdari, in the Chandraprabha forests. These waterfalls attract a massive influx of tourists during the rainy season. A significant portion of the Chandraprabha Wildlife Sanctuary lies in Naugarh, and the Karmanasha and Chandraprabha rivers flow through the sanctuary.

The senior journalist Rajeev Maurya says: "If the water problem in Naugarh is solved, half its issues can be resolved. For the tribal people here, development is a dream. This is not just a question for the government but for all of us. Don't the people of Naugarh have the right to live like the rest of the country? Will they always struggle for basic necessities like this? Until these questions are answered, Naugarh will remain a blemish on the picture of development." The struggle is not just for water but for dignity and for the village's very existence.

Another senior journalist, Arvind Kharwar, who is from Naugarh, says: "Governments come, announcements are made, schemes are formulated, but the ground reality remains unchanged. Corruption in water-related schemes is so deep-rooted that their benefits never reach the people." Bhola Kol, a resident of Kelhariya, says: "It is beyond understanding why the tar road coming from Nunawat was stopped in the middle of the forest; taking it up to Kelhariya village is not impossible."

Despite all this, there is hope yet among the villagers. "We have not given up. Our fight will continue. We will raise our voices even louder," says Bhola Kol. "Our settlement in the forest has fought many times to protect its existence, and we will continue," says Rajesh Kol. ■

Vijay Vineet is a senior independent journalist.

Art

MADE FOR SITA

The ritual paintings of Kohbar, associated with weddings in Bihar's Mithila region, date back to the time of the Ramayana. With customs changing, the original form of the art is now in jeopardy. **REENA SOPAM**

It is a typical December morning in a village in Madhubani district of Bihar: chilly, foggy, and hazy, with meadows, weeds, and plants along the kachcha lanes glistening with dew. In the quiet of the cold morning, one can clearly hear the croonings of women coming from the haphazardly built houses. There is a wedding in the village, and the women are singing while drawing the lines and imageries of Kohbar on the walls of the Kohbar *ghar*, or nuptial chamber. The songs speak of the love of Ram and Sita.

"This is the wedding season [November to January and then again, May to June] in the Mithila region, and in almost every village, you will hear women singing as they draw Kohbar. The wedding in our village is just a few days from now, so the women are hurrying to finish the Kohbar motifs. They must have started working early in the morning," said Vineeta Mallick, a Kohbar-maker from Madhubani who runs an organisation for preserving Maithili heritage, Mithilangan.

In the Mithila region (consisting of parts of Bihar, Jharkhand, and Nepal), Kohbar is an essential part of weddings. "The groom is supposed to marry the Kohbar first. He will put vermilion on the painting, and only then can he marry the girl," Mallick explained.

The ritualistic painting of Kohbar is chiefly associated with communities like the Karna Kayasthas and the Brahmins of Mithila. It was originally drawn on the mud walls of the Kohbar *ghar*, where the bride and groom would spend four days



▶ **Maithili art** is done on mud walls with natural colours made from juices extracted from plants, leaves, and petals. Cow dung and charcoal are also used to prepare the colours. Here, Maithili painting on the walls of a mud-house in Ranti, Madhubani, Bihar.



Kohbar art created on the walls of a Kohbar *ghar* (nuptial chamber) for a wedding.
PHOTOGRAPHS: SYAMAL DAS

These days, when most weddings are being held in rented halls and hotels, Kohbar art is no longer made on walls but on handmade paper and on pieces of cotton or silk, which are then spread over curtains.

after tying the knot. Women from the bride's family would start drawing Kohbar in the nuptial chamber as soon as the wedding date was finalised. Later, relatives and neighbours would join in.

The art traces it origin to the time of the Ramayana. It is believed that King Janak, the ruler of ancient Mithila, got Kohbar designs created on the walls of the Kohbar *ghar* of his daughter Sita when she got married to Ram at Janakpur, which now falls in Nepal. Kohbar still continues to be a part of life in Mithila, mainly in the districts of Bihar like Darbhanga, Madhubani, Purnia, Saharsa, Sitamarhi, and Supaul. Most women from the Karna Kayastha and Brahmin communities are familiar with the patterns.

THE BASIC DESIGN of Kohbar consists of a lotus at the centre with a bamboo stem emerging from it. On either side of the lotus bloom, there are seven round leaves connected to one another. At the top of the bamboo shoot, there is a human face. There are images of Siva and Parvati along with motifs of the sun, moon, and planets in the topmost section of the frame. These are accompanied by images drawn from nature, such as trees of jackfruit and banana, fish in pairs, turtles, snakes, parrots, peacocks, and bamboo groves. At the bottom of the frame there are images of rituals believed to have been performed at the wedding of Ram and Sita such as the *swayamvar*, the Gauri puja, the bride's worship of Siva, and the *bidai* (farewell), showing the bride leaving her father's home in a palanquin.

Rama Das, a senior Kathak exponent from Madhubani and a connoisseur of Kohbar art, said there was a time when all the walls of the nuptial chamber would have been covered with Kohbar designs. "I have been drawing it too but mostly on handmade paper. My very first work was noticed by a music lover from Germany, who visited us in the 1980s to discuss the history of the Darbhanga-Amta gharana of dhrupad with my music-historian and sarod-player father, Prof. C.L. Das. He was so fascinated with Kohbar that he took home all my artwork," she said.

However, as times change, and along with them, wedding rituals, Kohbar art is also mutating. These days, when most weddings are being held in rented halls and hotels, Kohbar art is no longer made on walls but on handmade paper and on pieces of cotton or silk, which are then spread over curtains. It is also done on canvas.

It is believed that King Janak, the ruler of ancient Mithila, got Kohbar designs created on the walls of the Kohbar *ghar* of his daughter Sita when she got married to Ram at Janakpur, which now falls in Nepal.



Bibha Das, a national award–winning Maithili painter, works on a Kohbar piece.

Maithili art enthusiasts are worried that Kohbar may not survive the changes. "For centuries, Kohbar *ghar* and Kohbar art have remained indispensable parts of wedding in our community. But the very pattern of weddings is changing now. Hotels and wedding halls can hardly accommodate rituals like Kohbar," said Alka Das, a Maithili painter, and Sarita Das, a Kohbar-maker from Madhubani who is also a member of Mithilangan.

BHAIRAV DAS, convenor of the Patna chapter of the Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage, said: "Mithila cannot but be affected by the winds of change. Many of the Karna Kayastha and Maithili Brahmin families who were once based in the rural areas of north Bihar have now migrated to urban centres in search of employment. They live in rented houses or flats, which have no space for elaborate wedding rituals. When they rent halls for wedding, they use Kohbar on cloth or canvas. We cannot say how long the tradition of Kohbar will survive."

Chandana Dutt, a Kohbar-maker and schoolteacher from Ranti village, Madhubani district, said that the concept of Kohbar *ghar* is also under threat now. "It was a ritual meant to acquaint the bride and the groom with each other at a time when they were not supposed to have met before the wedding. Now, when they spend a lot of time together before marriage, the



Kohbar on canvas.

concept of Kohbar *ghar* has become redundant. For the present generation, Kohbar art too is trite and old-fashioned," she said.

WHILE THE ORIGINAL FORM of Kohbar is in jeopardy, its commercial variants fetch a high price in national and international markets. Nowadays entire families, including men, can be found creating Kohbar pieces when the art was once the preserve of women.

Bimala Dutta, a national award-winning octogenarian Maithili artist who has displayed her work in Nepal, Japan, France, and the US, pointed out the significance of Kohbar art. "Kohbar is not just a form of painting. Each image and motif in Kohbar implies a particular aspect of life of the newly married couple," she said. For instance, the lotus bloom and the bamboo stem are phallic symbols, indicating procreation. The sun stands for brightness and prosperity; the moon symbolises love and peace; the *navagraha* (new house) is a symbol of stability; the jackfruit tree is for blessing; the pairs of fish, parrots, and peacocks are for love and bonding; the turtle denotes long life; and the serpent is meant to warn the couple of negative influences in their life. "The original pattern must be followed to keep the tradition intact. There must be seven or nine round leaves around the lotus petals, neither more nor less," Dutta said.

Artists have also started taking liberties with the design. "I had never seen the image of Ganesh in Kohbar painting. But you find it in many Kohbar pieces now," Dutta said. The artists may not be aware of the original Kobar pattern, she pointed out. "There's also the possibility that they are trying to be market-savvy. In any case, this is not pure Kohbar art," she said.

Is the government making any effort to preserve the tradition? Bhairav Das said: "Kohbar has always been a strictly family affair. But since it is at the risk of changing, efforts must be made to keep the original pattern intact." ■

Reena Sopam is a journalist and author from Mithila who writes on culture, music, and heritage.

There are images of Siva and Parvati along with motifs of the sun, moon, and planets. These are accompanied by images drawn from nature, like trees, fish, and birds.



Humanising the hero

https://telegram.me/MagazineEpaper

Gauri Gill's photographs of the 2020-21 farmers' protest are striking, reminding us that the farmers could be any one of us, wronged and grievously wounded by an unfair system. **MADHULIKA LIDDLE**

What does a farmer look like? Turbaned, dhoti-clad, muddy-legged, and sweaty-browed? Driving a tractor or, an old-fashioned stereotype, ploughing a field with a pair of bullocks? A smiling face on a bag of organic grain or, another stereotype, a cheery figure, a sheaf of grain on one shoulder and a sickle in his hand?

The Indian farmer, in a country that has long been agriculture-dependent, is the stuff of folklore, the hero of popular culture. The face of the countryside. And, occasionally, a face that arrives in the city and makes its presence felt.

In September 2020, the Union government promulgated three contentious laws aimed at reforming the agricultural sector. The laws implied major changes in the cultivation and trade of crops. For one, they aimed to facilitate the trading of agricultural produce outside of the age-old mandis (wholesale markets) which the farmers were used to. Second, they promoted the idea of contract farming, which meant that private corporations could control the cultivation of crops. Third, they proposed to cancel out the government's monopoly on the stockpiling of essential commodities for emergencies by allowing private entities to hoard as well. In effect, the three laws allowed private players to have a free run of the agricultural sector.

Within days of the laws being announced, a rash of protests broke out, especially in the farmlands of Punjab and Haryana. Soon after, farmers' unions across Punjab, Haryana, and

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Untitled (3). All the images are from Gauri Gill's series "The Village on the Highway" (2021). GAURI GILL

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▶ **Untitled (35).**

The exhibition is a visual documentation of an oft-ignored aspect of protests: the quotidian life of the protesters, underlining their humanness.

Uttar Pradesh came together to form the Samyukta Kisan Morcha (SKM) to helm the protests in a peaceful, non-violent manner. The SKM began a Jail Bharo Andolan, called for a general strike, and finally raised a cry that echoed Subhas Chandra Bose's revolutionary "*Dilli Chalo*".

In late November, hundreds of farmers from across Punjab, Haryana, and the neighbouring States converged on Delhi, demanding the repeal of the three laws. The farmers were faced with tear gas and water cannons and a government determined to maintain its stance.

THE FARMERS' PROTEST of 2020-21 was to become a landmark event in modern Indian history. Over the year that followed the arrival of the farmers at Delhi's borders and until the farm laws were finally repealed, the protest burgeoned. It spread far beyond the farming community, joining hands with other movements. It gathered ramifications well beyond the act of opposing unfair farm laws.

Little wonder, then, that for 12 months—November 2020 to November 2021—the legions of farmers who settled down, trucks and tractors and all, on Delhi's borders became the focus of national news. There were reports, editorials, and interviews. There were photographs, showcasing both (or one of the) sides of the issue, bringing to the public glimpses of the farmers as they waged a seemingly impossible battle against the state.

Amongst the many photographers who recorded the protest was the Delhi-based Gauri Gill, whose exhibition "The Village on the Highway" is now on display at Delhi's Vadehra Art Gallery (February 4-March 4). Consisting of about 90 photographs, the exhibition is a visual documentation of an oft-ignored aspect of protests: the quotidian life of the protesters, underlining their humanness. Not their act of protest, not their anger or their arguments, but the way they settled in and made for themselves a home far away from home. Over a period of some 11 months, from January to December 2021, Gill photographed this settlement, the "village" that had mushroomed on the highway leading to the national capital.

Bamboo fences demarcate spaces; ropes become clotheslines and hangers. An Airtel dish antenna stands tall, tied with rope to a bamboo pole.

AT FIRST, the settlement in Gill's photographs looks uncannily like the many *jhuggi-jhopdi* (slum) clusters that dot Delhi. Blue, green, and yellow tarpaulins stretch from pole to pole, forming ceilings, walls, tents. Bamboo fences demarcate spaces; ropes become clotheslines and hangers. ▶



▼ **Untitled (44).**



▶ **Untitled (68).**



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Untitled (46).

An Airtel dish antenna stands tall, tied with rope to a bamboo pole; beyond, on a neglected green signboard is an ironic message, many of its letters long vanished: *Dilli mein aapka haardik swaagat hai* (Delhi welcomes you).

A closer look reveals interesting details. Not all of these structures are tethered to the ground: they are not huts. These are trucks and tractor trolleys turned into dwelling places. Not just impersonal shelters, but *homes*. Spaces that have been repurposed to serve as bedrooms and kitchens, storerooms and living rooms, often with a remarkable level of ingenuity.

For instance, in one photograph (prominent because of the English-language signs: "If You Ate Today Thank a Farmer" and "No Farmers No Food"), a vehicle—you can see the wheels underneath—has been outfitted with a wooden door and a water cooler. An attempt has even been made to ensure some privacy: the space has been enclosed using bamboo poles and the yellow-and-black concrete barriers ubiquitous on Delhi's roads.

WATER COOLERS, rugs, plastic furniture—especially stools, so portable, so stackable, so multipurpose—are visible in several photographs. There are curtains here, a mirror hanging there, complete with a comb tucked beside it. Brightly patterned rugs line earthen floors. Interestingly, slippers and shoes lie on those rugs. This may be a makeshift home, but for the time it is



home, cleanliness must be maintained: footwear must not be brought in.

This attempt at maintaining a semblance of normalcy is echoed in other photographs, other scenes. In one photograph, a small twig broom lies in the middle of a narrow lane. Off to one side is a small heap of mineral water bottles. Someone has been cleaning up, emphasising the fact that this is not a temporary site of protest but has become home. In another photo, on the edge of a "boundary wall" made up of sturdy green mesh leaning against a concrete block, there are flowers in bloom: an obvious attempt at a small garden, something to brighten up the "domestic" space.

Gill's focus expands beyond the faces of the farmers. The only faces to be seen in these photos are of Bhagat Singh, Che Guevara, Babasaheb Ambedkar, and Baba Banda Singh Bahadur.

EQUALLY EMPHATIC is a sense of community, of families united for a common cause. The back of a large truck has been converted into what seems like a common laundry. Large plastic water tanks sit on the floor around it, along with a huge, soot-stained *patila* (large pot) that is probably being used as a washtub. The sides of the truck are draped with newly washed blankets while clean garments hang on a clothesline.

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▼
Untitled (4).



▼
Untitled (43).

The two-time Pulitzer Prize-winning photojournalist from Reuters famously said: "While I enjoy covering news stories–from business to politics to sports–what I enjoy most is capturing the human face of a breaking story."

Another photograph gives a glimpse of a communal kitchen, with gas cylinder, assorted large *kadhai*s (woks), *patila*s, *paraat*s (platters), and shallow baskets. The community kitchen carries meaning that goes beyond what is visible in Gill's photograph: during the year-long protest, food cooked in these kitchens, in the form of langar, was distributed not just among the farmers and their families but also among outsiders, including the police personnel who were on duty to keep the protesters out of Delhi.

ONE OF THE MOST striking aspects of Gill's photographs is the lack of faces. This contrasts with usually seen photographs of the event that highlight the people, their faces, expressions, gestures. Whether Shome Basu or Vikas Bajpai, Prakash Singh or Danish Siddiqui–almost all the photographers and photojournalists who covered the farmers' protest highlighted the people who participated in it. Indeed, this is a common theme in photojournalism: google "protest photos", and you will get an overwhelming number of images featuring people with angry eyes, open mouths, defiant expressions. Faces that dare to speak up.

Gill's focus expands beyond the faces of the farmers. The only faces to be seen in these photographs are of Bhagat Singh, Che Guevara, Babasaheb Ambedkar, and Baba Banda Singh Bahadur–the quintessential faces of dissent, the icons who stood up for their ideals. The featured farmers are not faces but sleeping bodies: a man in a truck, his face turned away from the camera; a pair of pyjama-clad legs stretched out on bedding.

And yet Gill makes the objects she chooses to photograph–from the trucks and makeshift homes to the tarps, the blankets, the *kadhai*s, and stoves–speak resoundingly of the everydayness of the farmers, who yet became something extraordinary by making their protest felt. They speak of the farmers' ingenuity, that oft-admired Indian penchant for jugaad. Of their resilience, the way they made a home for themselves many miles from home using the most rudimentary of materials.

This peek behind the placards humanises the protesters, making them one of us–which adds to the realisation that the farmers' protest was also our protest, that the farmers fought not just for themselves but for all Indians. At the same time, the living spaces touchingly cobbled together from this and that point to the farmers' resilience, to human resilience. It is noteworthy here that the Union government repealed the farm laws in November 2021, after almost a year of relentless protest.

Gill has explained that her practice is to focus on "how people in precarity find ways to float rather than drown". "The Village on the Highway" is a tribute to human tenacity, a memorable behind-the-scenes look at what has been described as the largest and longest peasants' struggle in the history of modern India. ■

Madhulika Liddle is a novelist and short story writer.

The afterlife of cinema

Over four decades ago, the German filmmaker Wim Wenders famously wondered if cinema had become a dead language. Today, we have moved towards the fetishisation of the story at the cost of the image, and the death is complete.

Prathyush Parasuraman



When the German director Wim Wenders, currently touring India as part of his travelling retrospective, was at the Cannes Film Festival in 1982, he decided to interview all the filmmakers present—or at least those willing and with time to speak to him. He had a simple question for them: has cinema become a dead language?

A poignant but radical interrogation, it sprung like hope from the years when television crept up, when Wenders felt that films were increasingly "looking as though they had been made for television, as regards their lighting, framing, and rhythm. It looks as though a television aesthetic has supplanted film aesthetic."

He rented a room—Room 666, the only room available in the hotel—placed a camera and a recorder and left the directors to themselves. There was a muted television in the background. The directors walked in, turned the instrument on, spoke, switched it off, and walked out, unmediated by any other presence save for their ideas. From Jean-Luc Godard to Werner Herzog to Michelangelo Antonioni, many directors archived their anxieties or, in some cases, their indifference to this pressing question. Has cinema become a dead language? With an alarmist tone, it was a question that was not out of place when it was asked, and given the ensuing decades, it is a question that is not out of place when asked today.

What was this cinema that Wenders was after might be a good place to start, because as part of the German New Wave of the 1970s, his cinema was paving paths untrodden.

For him, the story is not umbilical to cinema—the image is. This is what Wenders felt or, at least, felt more strongly when he started making his road movies in the 1970s, movies in motion not because of chasing plot but pavements. Characters met and moved, alienated by stability, producing in their lives a flux that keeps them going. You look at his characters and ask, if you stay still, will you wilt?

Stories, then, became oppressive things that his cinema shirked. "Everything belongs to a story, and I don't like that," he noted in an interview back then, a fear that a story, if strong, bends cinema towards it. The line that rang like a gong from *The State of Things* (1982) was: "Stories only exist only in stories (whereas life goes by without the need to turn into stories)."

Wenders was after something else—a desire to disappear into a film, and the image was his way of entering it—an image that is bathed in both place and time. While a cinema of stories chases plot points, demanding context and consequence, a cinema of images stands on its own; it lingers.

Wenders' cinema exemplifies what Alexander Graff in *The Cinema of Wim Wenders: The Celluloid Highway* called "an opposition between images and stories. A mutual incompatibility; a mutual undermining." Instead, he set off on road trips with his crew, where the map became the screenplay. Stories, he said in interviews, were lies.

What is it about words? Words have a way of convincing you that things mean something. They fix meaning, and by fixing meaning secure their existence. And because of this, words can also be hollow: their pretence of meaning masking an emptiness of thought, of feeling. Stories are the ma-

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A still from Wim Wenders' *Wings of Desire* (1982).
BY SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

nifestation of this pretence, this emptiness that makes life bearable.

Later, with *Paris, Texas* (1984), Wenders would soften this stance: "It was just a matter of my own attitude, not the fault of stories, but only my own attitude towards them, that I lost faith in them. But then they taught me to believe in them more and more, and so I started to trust them more and more. And certainly, with *Wings of Desire* and *Until the End of the World*, and now the new one [*Faraway, So Close!*], I think I feel almost strangely the opposite now: that it's images you can trust less and less."

Even so, his cinema still lingered, not on plot but on details of lives being lived, without grand purpose. As the author Maggie Nelson wrote, some things might be worth telling simply because they happened, and Wenders played archivist.

Then, to ask if cinema has died, is to ask if the power of the image has declined in favour of the power of the story. In film festival after literature festival, the power of stories and storytelling is being celebrated, venerated as though stories are truth. Stories are invented truths: hence, lies. It is through the image, in lingering not moving, that we approach life.

THE FILMS WE see today are entirely lubricated by plot. Take, for example, the gruesome idea of beginning a film with a shocking image, to then go into a flashback to find how we got there. The flashback is a violent thing for a cinema of images—setting context, finding cause and effect, it finds ways to pull your attention away from the present to the past, to the future. To begin a film like this is to clarify that the film does not trust us to stay with it, that it needs to convince us that it is taking us somewhere. So, if we have moved towards the fetishisation of the story at the cost of the image, cinema, as Wenders described, might have been dead and buried for decades. All we can hear now are faint whispers from the dead, or stray flowers sprouting from the grave. The death is complete. We are in the afterlife. ■

Prathyush Parasuraman is a writer and critic who writes across publications, both print and online.

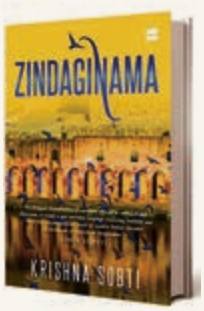
In film festival after literature festival, the power of stories and storytelling is being celebrated, venerated as though stories are truth. Stories are invented truths: hence, lies. It is through the image, in lingering not moving, that we approach life.



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Krishna Sobti at home in New Delhi on March 24, 2017. R.V. MOORTHY

ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF DEFIANCE

Krishna Sobti (1925-2019) did not write to fit within Hindi literature's hoary tradition. She wrote to destroy its comfort. **AMRITESH MUKHERJEE**



What is originality? Is there even such a thing? Or is all of art a series of new brushstrokes over an already existing painting? Is it the absence of influence or is it the courage to twist tradition into something unrecognisable?

Every artist builds upon what came before them. But some do more than inherit. Some break away so completely that they force a new shape into being. Krishna Sobti, born on February 18, 1925, did not write to fit within literature's long tradition. She wrote to destroy its comfort.

Tearing through the decorum of literary Hindi, she cut and shaped it with the rhythm of speech, the rawness of dialect, the unapologetic boldness of lived experience. To read her is to feel the urgency of art right here, right now, living, pulsating, something that refuses to be contained.

Her stories are not driven by language. They drive the language. And what is language if not power, if not control? Language dictates who gets heard and who does not. Language decides who gets erased, forgotten, or simply left behind. Language validates your lived experience.

For decades, Hindi literature suffered these moulds: tamed, disciplined, forced into boxes of standardised, Sanskritised "purity". Sobti set the whole thing on fire. Her Hindi was a living language. It carried the earthiness of Punjabi, the musicality of Rajasthani, the fluidity of Persian, the intimacy of Urdu. Her language was not that of the sanitised observer; it was of a person knee-deep in living.

Zindaginama (1979, translated into English by Neel Kanwar Mani and Moyna Mazumdar in 2016), arguably her magnum opus, is the mirror, the testament to it. The novel is a collision of voices, a text that rejects domestication and spirals away from being bound to a single narrative. It is a village, a time capsule, a sprawling, living organism. Open its pages, and you can hear the loud, overlapping voices, feel the dust-heavy air, walk through the cluttered bazaars where Jat farmers trade rough jokes, Muslim merchants haggle in Urdu-inflected Hindi, Brahmin scholars speak in a measured cadence.

Zindaginama is oral history turned literature—talking in every tongue it once knew—keeping the unkept stories and the dialects laughing and crying boisterously, unabashed, unashamed, unbound.

Krishna Sobti's Hindi carried the earthiness of Punjabi, the musicality of Rajasthani, the fluidity of Persian, the intimacy of Urdu. Her language was that of a person knee-deep in living.

But Sobti's fight was not limited to dialects. It was also for who gets to speak. And how. And how much. If *Zindaginama* unsettled the linguistic gatekeepers, her *Mitro Marjani* (1967, translated into English in 2006 by Gita Rajan and Raji Narasimhan as *To Hell With You Mitro*) sent shock waves through the moral police of Hindi literature.

"Good women" did not speak like this. They suffered, they longed, they wilted. They did not laugh about sex. Sobti did not care. She ripped off the literary chastity belt they strapped onto women's voices. What happens when a woman refuses to shrink? When she laughs too loudly? Loves too fiercely? Desires without shame? "*Is deh se jitna jas-ras le lo, wahi kati kamaai hai* [Whatever nectar and renown you can extract from this body, that is your only true earning]."

Hindi literature had a script for women: they longed quietly, suffered beautifully, sacrificed without complaint. Desire—if acknowledged at all—was something to endure, not pursue. Then came Mitro, who shredded the script. She is fire, bare skin, unfiltered hunger. She demands. She takes. She mocks her husband's incompetence in bed. She flirts shame-

lessly. She speaks in a vocabulary that Hindi heroines were not meant to understand, let alone talk in. Vulgar, they called it. Shameless. Obscene. Blasphemous. But Mitro was never meant to be polite. She was meant to be true to life. Why did she unsettle them? Because she wanted. And she refused to apologise.

Sobti understood something fundamental: that desire is not just physical. It is political. A woman who speaks of hunger threatens the entire order. Because in a world where sex is about duty, where pleasure belongs to men, where women are supposed to blush, Mitro bites.

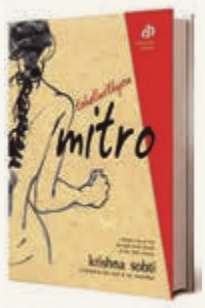
As the protagonist of *Ai Ladki* (1991, translated into English in 2002 by Shivanath as *Listen, Girl*) says: "*Maa paida karti hai. Paal pos kar bada karti hai. Phir usi ki qurbani! Ma ko tukdo mein baantkar parivar use yahan wahan phaila deta hain. Kaaran toh yahi na, samuchi rah kar kahin utt khadi na ho* [A mother gives birth. She raises and nurtures. And then it is her sacrifice! The family divides her into pieces, scattering her here and there. The reason, isn't it, that if she remained whole, she might rise again?]?"

Surajmukhi Andhere Ke (1972, translated into English in 2008 by Pamela Manasi as *Sunflowers of the Dark*) takes Sobti's exploration of the female body somewhere darker, deeper, and infinitely more brutal. If *Mitro Marjani* was about a woman seizing control of her body, *Surajmukhi Andhere Ke* is about what happens when that body is stolen. Ratti is a survivor of childhood rape. But Sobti refuses to write a palatable victim. Ratti is not quiet, nor resigned. She is angry. Erratic. Violent. Unapologetically broken.

In this book, Sobti does not give us the ideal victim. She does not soften the edges of trauma. She does not make Ratti easy to love. Ratti is volatile, reckless, destructive. She does not seek redemption or healing. She does not cry for sympathy. She fights. She lashes out. She wounds and sabotages and self-destructs. What is a woman allowed to do with her pain? She is expected to suffer quietly. To move on. To not make others uncomfortable. But Ratti rebuffs. She does not conform to the literary archetype of the noble victim. She is messy. Angry. Uncontrollable. She sabotages herself but refuses to be pitied. This is Sobti at her most unforgiving.







She does not write for comfort. Because for many women, that comfort does not exist. From *Mitro Marjani* to *Surajmukhi Andhere Ke*, Sobti's women barf and balk at being contained. They are messy, sharp, desiring, damaged, angry, alive. And in writing them, Sobti lets women be loud (and not just have a voice). Some wounds do not scab over. They fester. Some histories do not settle. They keep shifting under your feet, refusing to stay still. Partition, for instance, was a fracture that kept on, keeps on, rupturing.

In her first novel, *Daar Se Bichhudi* (1958, translated into English in 2007 by Smita Bharti and Meenakshi Bharadwaj as *Memory's Daughter*), Sobti rebels against the borders of language itself. Like Sobti's prose, Pasho's world does not fit into neat categories. She does not belong. Not to her mother's world. Not to her father's. Not to her husband's. Not even to herself. She exists in exile, even at home. Sobti moves between Hindi, Urdu, and Persian as easily as Pasho moves between her fractured identities. Partition tried to split the subcontinent and carve clean borders where there were none. But language did not work that way now, did it?

Sobti wrote in the language of the streets, of the refugees, of those who had lost everything but their voices. For those who have no land, language is the only home left. For one day, you wake up, and the land beneath your feet is foreign. One day, the currency in your pocket is worthless. One day, the faces you have known your whole life look at you like a stranger. That is Partition. Home is now a border crossing. Your own body is foreign soil. You move through life like a refugee trapped inside his/her own skin.

If *Daar Se Bichhudi* is about the violent displacement of identity, Sobti's short story "*Sik-*

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In a world where women were told to be careful, polite, and restrained, Sobti wrote like a storm, spoke like a fire, and lived like a force of nature.

ka Badal Gaya" (The Currency has changed) is about subtler, more insidious betrayals. The erosion of belonging. It succeeds in capturing the tragedy that history does not record: The moment a home stops feeling like home. No grand massacres. Just a neighbour who no longer smiles back. A shopkeeper who hesitates before handing you change. A familiar street that suddenly feels unsafe. Not an exile from land, but an exile from trust. What is the price of being uprooted? There is no number, but there is a story. For that is the only currency that lasts.

Zindaginama captured a Punjab before it was split. *Daar Se Bichhudi* chronicled the displacement that followed. "*Sikka Badal Gaya*" mourned the quiet, everyday betrayals that Partition left in its wake. But in *Gujarat Pakistan Se Gujarat Hindustan* (translated into English in 2019 by Daisy Rockwell as *A Gujarat Here, a Gujarat There*), Sobti is staring into the abyss of repetition. The same old playbook of sectarian hate. The same brutal silencing of dissent. The same ghosts circling back—never exorcised, only waiting.

For Sobti, Partition, was an unfinished sentence, a wound that kept reopening. She ran from it, but it was always waiting. It was in the languages she spoke, in the absences she felt, in the cities she could never return to. It went beyond the lost land. It was about lost language, lost intimacy, the unthreading of a shared past. She wrote about it with a ferocity that came from knowing she would never get it back. The land she was born in was locked behind a door.

Some writers push boundaries. Krishna Sobti shattered them. Some writers negotiate with power. She laughed in its face. Rather than seeking permission, she claimed space. Rather than merely breaking the rules, she questioned their very existence. In a world where women were told to be careful, polite, and restrained, Sobti wrote like a storm, spoke like a fire, and lived like a force of nature.

Her words were hers. Not up for debate. Not up for negotiation. Not for sale.

In 2015, as India's political climate turned hostile to dissent, Sobti returned her Sahitya Akademi Award, sending a clear message: if freedom of expression was under siege, she wanted no part of the system that enabled it.

In 2015, Sobti returned her Sahitya Akademi Award, sending a clear message: if freedom of expression was under siege, she wanted no part of the system that enabled it.





And then, of course, there was her rejection of the Padma Bhushan in 2010. For most writers, this would be a crowning moment, a badge of honour from the state. Sobti? She turned it down outright. Not as a gesture. Not as a protest. But because no government, no institution, no committee could "validate" her worth. Her legacy did not need a stamp of approval.

She fought for her words. She fought for her voice. And she fought for a country that would have the courage to listen. In a world that rewards obedience, she remained gloriously, unapologetically defiant.

Writing is often seen as a cerebral exercise. Sobti brought it back to the physical, the tangible, the elemental. She was not the kind of writer who simply let the words flow. No, she wrestled with them, tested them, made them prove their worth. She knew language had to be earned. Few writers would dare to rewrite an entire novel from scratch. Sobti did it multiple times. She felt she had to earn the weight of the story, the authority of its voice. For a writer who let dialects clash, defied conventional storytelling, and allowed her characters to breathe and speak without censorship, Sobti was immensely disciplined in her process.

She respected the labour of writing. She knew it was not about waiting for inspiration. It was about showing up every single day and doing the work. Her books may have been free-spirited, almost improvisational, but they were built on the foundation of unyielding rigour and precision. Every word she put down was a challenge. A fight. A rebellion.

Krishna Sobti did not believe in closure. Her books do not end. They resist neat resolutions, final words, full stops. They are alive: questioning, refusing to settle. Even as her body aged, her writing only sharpened. She had watched India transform—from the euphoria of Independence to the disillusionment of the present. But she did not write in longing. She wrote in anger. She saw it all. She warned against it.

Because silence is complicity.

Because the story is far from over.

And Sobti, even in death, even on her centenary, refuses to be silent. ■

Amritesh Mukherjee is a reader, writer, and editor fascinated by the stories that shape our world.

Retracing multiple dawns

Spreading her *jamakkalam* across the southern peninsula, Nirmala Lakshman walks us through the steps of scholar poets, archaeologists, epigraphists, historians, politicians, and academics in a personal journey of discovery—of a place and a people continually evolving yet rooted. **GEETA DOCTOR**

Every year, from mid-December to mid-January, the invisible call of "The Season" fills the air around Chennai, inviting multitudes from distant lands. There is an almost imperceptible hum of the Tamil heartbeat written on the wind and in the sand, in poems and on stone walls that speak of a fabled past that finds expression in music and dance at different venues across the city.

In every generation, a scholar reaches into these storied depths and finds a way through the tangled roots to discover a piece of writing on a fragment of baked clay, or potsherd, the heft of an axe head buried under the soil, to start the stories anew. To create a legend for our times in a language that will connect the rest of us to the histories that lie in palm-leaf manuscripts and copperplate inscriptions that only a few privileged academic scholars might be able to decipher.

It makes Nirmala Lakshman's extraordinarily vivid treatise, *The Tamils,* doubly interesting. In taking up this task of rediscovery, she retraces multiple dawns, walking through the steps of the eminent scholar-poets of the past, archaeologists, epigraphists, historians, collectors, politicians, as well as the more recent academics from across different cultures.

Lakshman, currently publisher and chairperson of The Hindu Group, makes it her personal discovery of a place and a people who belong to a state of being that is continually evolving, even as its core is rooted in a unique identity encompassed by the term "Tamilakam". At the very earthy level, it indicates the habitat of the Tamil people garlanded by the waters of the seas on three sides.

We leave it to others to decide how accurate the subtitle underlining the title might be. Rituals of ethnicity are more a question of branding than an accurate reflection of a very complex mosaic of identities.

The Tamils
A Portrait of a Community



By Nirmala Lakshman
Aleph Book Company
Pages: 442
Price: Rs.999

Those who belong to an earlier time of rail travel from the deep South across the subcontinent will recall how useful it was to carry one's belongings in a striped cotton mat of distinctive colours called a *jamakkalam*. You unfurled it once the train was in motion and spread it on the designated berth to mark your territory. Lakshman has spread her *jamakkaalam* of many different stripes of history across the southern peninsula and made it very much an intimate arena of her journeys across the terrain.

LAKSHMAN USES A much more delicate imagery invoking the poetry of the Sangam age, some 2,500 years old. The ancient Tamils tended to categorise the landscape into five different types, each endowed with distinct characteristics. She enumerates them anew for the reader: the blue *kurinchi* of the highlands, the jasmine of the forested areas below, the blue water lily near the fertile deltas, the *palai* of the dry lands, and the *marudam*, considered to be the queen's flower of the lowlands.

She goes on to elaborate on the significance of these categories in her introduction, entitled "The Jasmine Country": "Sangam refers to a coming together, a meeting, or a congress, primarily comprising poets, scholars, and kings–a form of assembly that reportedly began several centuries before Christianity and occurred periodically over time."

Within this encyclopedic Sangam that

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“Sangam refers to a coming together, a meeting, or a congress, primarily comprising poets, scholars, and kings—a form of assembly that reportedly began several centuries before Christianity and occurred periodically over time.”

Nirmala Lakshman

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An aerial view of the Keezhadi excavation site in Sivaganga district, Tamil Nadu. These excavations point to the existence of a literate society in parts of south India nearly 2,500 years ago.

B. JOTHI RAMALINGAM

Lakshman has presented to readers, there are five main segments or “Books” each of which has a jasmine flower stem with buds as an iconic offering on its title page. These are headlined The Age of Poetry, The Age of Empire, The Age of Transition, The Age of the Europeans, and The Age of Freedom. Within these broad empirical divisions, there are other self-contained chapters that allow readers to roam at will and select those areas that may be of particular interest to them. For instance, in Book II, the three great eras of the kingdoms of the Pallavas, the Pandyas, and the Cholas are grand and illustrative of the extraordinary vision and civilisational solidarity of the rulers and their subjects.

They built upon and laid the foundations of what Lakshman is at pains to impress upon the reader as the specialness of being Tamil. It is not parochial though it may seem so, and despite the many cataclysmic cycles that marked the rise and fall of these empires with betrayals from warring clans within, what they have left behind continues to astonish if not inspire readers, or travellers to these sacred realms. Most often these are centred around a temple. Or the citadels around which in different eras the dynasties left their distinctive insignia.

Lakshman allows readers to circumambulate these famous monuments with the lightest of touches. We hear the songs and legends; hear the sound of the unknown sculptors shaping the stone into the pillared halls and to-

wering monuments that still define the skyline as she shows us in her recounting the magnificence of the Brihadeshwara temple at Thanjavur and other lesser ones; examine the flaking paint of the frescos; and wonder once again at the society that enabled these instances of the collective spirit in solid form.

THE COMMON THREAD that runs through her thesis is how emphatic she is in describing how the basic impulse was one of assimilation and judicious coexistence despite periods when Jain monks, for instance, in the 9th century CE faced persecution from the ruling dispensation.

At the start of the different chapters, Lakshman has included quotations or fragments of essays from the work of a host of different mentors from the past: the Europeans who came as merchants and missionaries, bureaucrats and bean counters, and those who resisted their Machiavellian endeavours in the name of progress. Since there are so many different voices, we shall not name any one of them except to observe that these sentiments alone could make a brief compendium of ideas or beams of light to signal into our shared history. There is an extensive section at the end of the sources and photographs that have shaped Lakshman's consortium of literary Sangam for a new age. ■

Geeta Doctor is a Chennai-based writer, critic, and cultural commentator.

Saying the unsaid

Tabish Khair's latest book is an eloquent plea for literature, which, by enlarging our capacity to feel, imagine and empathise, serves as an effective antidote to fundamentalism. **VARSHA TIWARY**

Literature Against Fundamentalism



By Tabish Khair
Oxford University Press
Pages: 144
Price: Rs.491

The book's title, *Literature Against Fundamentalism*, together with the glossy, abstract cover had made me expect a dense monograph packed with academese. What I found instead was a manifesto for literature and a guide to deep reading.

Tabish Khair begins with the example of Anton Chekov's beautiful short story "The Requiem", which revolves around an argument over the word "harlot". In a jargon-free manner, he directs our attention to the non-deterministic ways in which Chekov deploys language to create meaning. Chekov's story pulls the reader in, helping advance Khair's premise that a deep reading of literature saves us from getting trapped in the desire for certainty and boosts our immunity to fundamentalist rhetoric. By not being hung up on "academic meta-languages" that strive to contain the study of literature to a "select priesthood", he manages to address a wider audience.

The language of literature is very different from that of academic papers or news stories. Language here refers to a mode of expression that evokes meaning through its choice of words, their sounds, repetitions, silences, and gaps. The power of Chekov's story lies in its ability to capture the inherent instability of words: the way they can have different meanings for different people. For instance, the word "idiot" likewise can be a rebuke, an excuse, or an endearment, depending on the context. By pointing at the shifting meanings of words, Chekov's story directs us to the essence of literature.

Non-literary modes of wielding language—reportage, academic research, critique, religious rhetoric—work by marshalling facts to ar-

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Great movies, like great literature, are powerful because they say more than what they spell out. A still from the film *All We Imagine As Light*. AP

rive at some "truth". Literature goes the other way round, capturing the whimsical, the ambiguous, the subjective to discover the universal. Without a deep understanding of the fluidity and multiplicity of meanings in literary language, literature cannot be written or even read properly.

In our times, statistics, algorithms, doctrines claim to contain the whole truth. But literature says that truth lives discreetly, in things that refuse to fit neatly. That is why literature's language is exploratory, full of expressed doubt, playful curiosity. By arguing with everything they put down, the literary writer constructs a multilayered scaffolding of well-examined details.

WITH EXAMPLES from *Hamlet*, *Huckleberry Finn*, and *Wuthering Heights*, Khair shows how the professed meaning is often at odds with the felt meaning (madness, bravado, jealousy, confusion). The reader must tease out these nuances, not just in the context of the story in hand but also in different times and situations. The fluidity of a literary text makes new readings possible in times entirely dissimilar to the one in which the work was originally written.

Khair's plea for literature ends with an interesting take on the "science vs humanities" debate. He makes the important point that the fabled predictive powers of sciences occur in the context of a more or less "stable and known" reality out there, whereas the humanities operate within rapidly changing political-economic structures.

Literature has to be read. A summing-up of the whys and hows serves no purpose, says Khair. So, to avoid falling into the trap of summing up, let me end by focussing on the ways in which the book made me think anew about the use of language in literary works. He talks of Shakespeare. I was reminded of Ghalib. The words of both yield to new readings without the loss of depth and meaning.

Khair talks of Shakespeare. I was reminded of Ghalib. The words of both yield to new readings without the loss of depth and meaning.

The complexity of literary meaning, Khair says, frightens the fundamentalists, with their streamlined notions of truth and falsehood. For the same reason, fundamentalists cannot create art: the coming together of stereotypical characters with heavy-handed, sacrosanct narratives makes for polemic, not art. Concurrently, in a listicle-centric, attention-deficit world, the growing inability to deep read translates into a growing inability to appreciate life's complexities.

KHAIR'S MULTIPLE READINGS of madness in *Hamlet* brought to mind a passage from Ernest Hemingway's novel *For Whom the Bell Tolls* where an injured El Sordo is holed up with his dead horse on a hill "the shape of a chancre". Not afraid of death, El Sordo reflects that dying is nothing, whereas "living was a hawk in the sky. A field of grain blowing in the wind on the side of a hill. An earthen jar of water in the dust of threshing...." By focussing on beauty in the midst of death, Hemingway evokes the colossal waste of war.

Similarly, great movies are powerful because they say more than what they explicitly spell out. I was reminded of Payal Kapadia's *All We Imagine as Light*, where the "unsaid", the things waiting to happen, cast a shadow on moments of youthful romance. We feel these moments deeply because we participate in the imagining of them. The hope we are left with at the end is the result of an unverbalised transfiguring.

Timeless literature taps into and enlarges our capacity to feel, imagine, and empathise. Khair's book is for anyone who wants to appreciate the language of literature. While it is true that a passing familiarity with Bakhtin, Foucault, and Saussure can make the appreciation of chapters like "Fundamentalism, Literature and God" easier, the book manages to speak to the lay reader most of the time.■

Varsha Tiwary is a Delhi-based writer and translator. She recently published 1990, *Aramganj*, a translation of the bestselling Hindi novel *Rambhakt Rangbaz*.

More than a cell in a beehive

The book is as much an account of the discipline of women's studies as it is of social changes and political conflicts in contemporary India. **KRISHNA MENON**

Panchali Ray and Shadab Bano have brought together scholars of women's and gender studies from diverse institutional settings and generations to reflect upon the journey of a "young" discipline in India: women's studies. The book is as much an account of the discipline as it is of social changes and political conflicts in contemporary India. The essays establish crucial linkages between epistemology, pedagogy, and the structures of higher education, on the one hand, and the contested nature of social and political life outside academia, on the other hand.

The book has an excellent introduction followed by the three distinct thematic sections with a total of eight chapters. In the introductory chapter, the editors lament the lost radical potential of the discipline and the movement that birthed it owing to a complex set of reasons, including the institutionalisation of women's studies within the university. In her contribution to this volume, Rajlaxmi Ghosh reminds the reader of the French philosopher Jacques Derrida, who famously wrote that women's studies risks becoming just "another cell in the university beehive".

However, all is not lost, and the book has some essays that inspire with their accounts of how women's studies is faring in non-metropolitan settings. Other essays call for a revisioning of the nature of the discipline itself by acknowledging its inbuilt contradictions and inconsistencies. The essays highlight the various ways in which the critical and transformative nature of feminist knowledge is challenged, diminished, and tamed by the rigid institutional setting of the university system, which is itself beset with myriad problems.

Ray and Bano's introductory chapter is a breezy account of the history of women's studies in India that begins with the socialist promises of Nehruvian India that co-opted privileged and vocal women. This was followed by an increasing disenchantment with the Indian state and the re-emergence of the "women's question" in the 1970s. Women were strengthened by the landmark Towards Equality report published in 1974, and this period, the editors write, was marked by a massive mobilisation of women against custodial rape, violence, and the exclusionary nature of development.

Thus, with renewed energy the women's movement and, almost simultaneously, women's studies took off on a remarkable journey that resulted in new research, exciting scholarship, and the growth of women's studies centres as mandated by the University Grants Commission (UGC). From just 4 such centres in the 1970s, the number had risen to more than 150 by 2019. However, as many of the essays in this book point out, the story does not have a typical happy ending.

Teaching/Writing Resistance

Women's Studies in Contemporary Times



Edited by Panchali Ray and Shadab Bano
Orient BlackSwan, 2024
Price: Rs.1,260

THE INTRODUCTORY chapter discusses the challenges facing women's studies in India, which is undoubtedly a contested field. The writers identify many factors such as the attack from conservative political forces that dismiss the vocabulary and concerns of women's studies as an aspect of Western epistemological hegemony. Equally strong are the pressures from an economic agenda that prioritises the professionalisation of women's studies to suit the development agenda of transnational think tanks. This message is reinforced by the primary funding agency of the women's studies centre, the UGC. The focus has shifted thus from questioning power and patriarchy to "gender mainstreaming and empowerment" as reflected aptly by the current Union Finance Minister when she asked

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■ **The veteran politician** and union leader Mrinal Gore addressing a women's rally against rising prices in the 1970s. Women were strengthened by the landmark Towards Equality report published in 1974, and this period, the editors write, was marked by a massive mobilisation of women against custodial rape, violence, and the exclusionary nature of development.
KESHAVGORETRUST.ORG

dismissively: "What's patriarchy, ya!!" (She was interacting with students of a private university in Bengaluru.) The purpose of the women's studies centres today seems to be the creation of "good citizens" who will partner the state in its women's empowerment work and the discouragement of "difficult daughters" who question the structures of power in Indian society. This undermines the foundational critical quest of women's studies.

Theoretically, the big challenge for women's studies comes from the intense interrogation of the category "woman", prompting the question, who is the subject of feminism? and, by extension, do women's studies have any relevance? The toughest questions typically are being asked from within the discipline, and this book is an excellent example of that. The editors identify the current moment as critical to the histories of the women's studies centres in India. On the one hand, the contributions and insights of feminist epistemology have begun to get consolidated and the discipline itself is engaged in a serious self-assessment, and on the other, it is facing an onslaught from the market, the state, and powerful political forces.

And yet, the fact is that women's studies classrooms are, as Mary John writes in her essay, increasingly places of intense interrogation from a heterogeneous student body characterised by gender, caste, language, regional, and other overlapping and crisscrossing hierarchies. The book does an effective job of reflecting these turbulent times in the life of a young discipline that refuses to be disciplined by the state, the market, or the university.

The book's first section, titled "Disciplining Gender/Gendering Disciplines: Reflections on Possibilities", carries two essays that help the reader make crucial connections between the history of women's studies and contemporary challenges.

This section starts with a discussion by the respected activist and scholar Devaki Jain, who dwells on the early years of the discipline when women's studies was thought of as the academic arm of the women's movement. It sought an interventionist role emboldened by the new knowledge that was being created, seeking relevance by participating in the process of development and social change rather than confining itself to academia. The tensions created by the proximity with the state and the need to acknowledge "difference" while talking about women are some of the challenges that she ends her chapter with.

The book does an effective job of reflecting these turbulent times in the life of a young discipline that refuses to be disciplined by the state, the market, or the university.

The next chapter, authored by Mary John, examines the ways in which the caste question has impacted both the pedagogy and the epistemology within women's studies classrooms. She writes that although these classrooms have become more diverse (thanks to expanded caste quotas), they are yet to address this change largely because of the "caste blind" nature of the history of social reform and women's movements.

THE SECOND SECTION of the book is titled "Women's studies and its Institutionalization" and tackles the various ways in which scholars and students negotiate the biases within the university system and the overall politics of knowledge production.

U. Vindhya's essay examines students' attitudes towards the curriculum of women's studies that she describes as "soft" or lacking in academic rigour. She wonders whether this stems from the discomfort that feminist scholarship creates by challenging some fundamental social institutions and practices such as family, marriage, motherhood, and caste. This essay focusses on the pedagogy within women's studies classrooms, the prospects of employment, and the profile of students who enrol in women's studies programmes.

Vindhya concludes the chapter by reminding the reader of the original interventionist role envisaged for the discipline and its transformative agenda. The author needs to be applauded for reiterating with clarity and conviction that the original aim of women's studies was the reconstruction of knowledge and of society. Instead, today there is considerable pressure on women's studies centres to "produce" professionals to work with the state and execute its "women's empowerment schemes".

Arpita Anand's chapter addresses the issue of institutionalisation of women's studies and its impact on the meaning and nature of interdisciplinarity. Nithila Kanagasabai's chapter is a fascinating exploration of the ways in which the feminist project is translated through women's studies departments in non-metropolitan locations, with a special focus on Tamil Nadu. The author acknowledges the dilution of the subversive potential of women's studies as a result of institutionalisation and the depoliticisation and professionalisation that follows. And yet, it is an account with a hopeful twist as the author discusses the various ways in which students and teachers join academic networks and activist groups and transform themselves as well as the disciplinary boundaries and practices of women's studies.

Nithila Kanagasabai's chapter is a fascinating exploration of the ways in which the feminist project is translated through women's studies departments in non-metropolitan locations, with a special focus on Tamil Nadu.

THE LAST SECTION of the book, consisting of three chapters, examines the "Ruptures and Repetitions" in women's studies. Sunera Thobani presents a considered account of the ways in which women' studies dominated by white feminism in the West failed the discipline and the movement by overlooking the intersectional ways in which power operates, while also dangerously aligning with the state to further its own agenda. This has resulted in, for instance, certain sections of white feminists gendering Islamophobia by reinforcing simplistic binaries between the "secular, liberal west" vs the "misogynist-oppressive Islamic world".

Chapter 7, authored by Panchali Ray, asks the question that in a way holds this book together: what is the future of women's studies given the theoretical instability of the category "woman"? She advocates a future for women's studies centres that will help them move away from this identity-based foundation of the discipline.

In the concluding chapter, Rajlaxmi Ghosh argues against any fixed agenda for women's studies. This, she says, will help women's studies retain its aporetic character, brimming with irresolvable internal contradictions and innumerable possibilities.

There is room for hope and optimism—although at times the book seems to despair—provided scholars and students who are associated with women's studies see the discipline as an ally of the many burgeoning efforts to reassert citizens' right to participate as equals in the political and development process.

This will help create an epistemology based on solidarities that will not see the assertion of caste, gender, language, and disability identities as oppositional to the category of the category "women" in women's studies but as interlinked. Thus, the epistemology and pedagogy of the women's studies classrooms animated by such solidarities would remain the transformative and critical spaces that they set out to be.

This book will find an abiding place in women's studies classrooms and scholarly debates. The carefully curated essays and elegant cover depicting Amaru Shataka are a welcome addition to the scholarship on the discipline and are also a record of the political struggles of our times. ▸

Krishna Menon is Professor, Gender Studies, at Ambedkar University Delhi. She is a co-editor of *Doing Feminisms in the Academy: Identity, Institutional Pedagogy and Critical Classrooms in India and the UK*, Zubaan (2020) and *The Gendered Body in South Asia: Negotiation, Resistance, Struggle*, Routledge (2024). She was one of the co-editors-in-chief of *International Journal of Feminist Politics*.

The world in Malnad

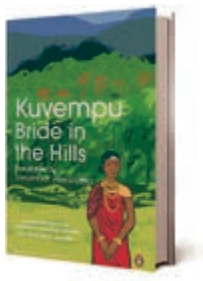
To read the Kannada writer Kuvempu's epic novel in translation is to experience its pulsating energy, revel in its joy, and endure its endemic heartbreaks, an immersion into the raw essence of humanity. **ROHINI MOKASHI-PUNEKAR**

K.V. Puttappa, an iconic figure and one of Karnataka's best-loved writers, integrated his critique of sectarian and superstitious practices with an abiding belief in the spiritual values embodied in the Upanishads. Influenced in equal parts by the Vedantic philosophy of Vivekananda and Ramakrishna, the praxis of Gandhiji, and the poetry of Tagore, Kuvempu, as he was known, reposed faith in rationality and empirical science. His literary works celebrate the energy and small joys of his often humble, hard-working Shudra and Dalit characters even as they draw attention to the oppression, the ignorance, and the crushing cruelties of social structures. Not surprisingly, contemporary Dalit writing in Kannada, which is dismissive of both Navodaya (romantic) and Navya (modernist) literary movements, salutes Kuvempu as the first writer of a Shudra novel.

Born to Vokkaliga parents during the early years of the last century in a tiny village in the Malnad region of Karnataka, Kuvempu was sent as a young boy to the newly begun Anglo-vernacular mission school open to children of all castes in the nearby town of Thirthahalli. The Ramakrishna Mission in Mysuru where he completed his education had a lifelong impact on his thinking. These influences are clearly discerned in his epic novel *Malegalalli Madumagalu* (1967), which portrays the entrancingly beautiful Malnad region together with its feudal society that poses implacable barriers to individuals daring to challenge the rigid caste hierarchy.

A historical novel set in the last decade of the 19th century, *Malegalalli Madumagalu* presents the lives of a small circle of agricultural families knit together by way of marriage alliances, landholdings, and the bonded labour affiliated to these. Kuvempu locates the larger national and global events taking place at a distance, content only to note their delayed and unhurried impact on the events of his imagined world. Considered one of the greatest novels of Kannada literature, the novel is now available to wider audiences in the wonderfully evocative English translation by Vanamala Viswanatha titled *Bride in the Hills*.

Bride in the Hills



By Kuvempu, translated by Vanamala Viswanatha
India Penguin Modern Classics
Pages: 816
Price: Rs.799

THE READER IS SWEPT, right from the opening scene, into the intricate web of events and relations in this richly peopled and complexly narrated novel, and led through the rain-soaked dense greenery of Kuvempu's forested world. The bountiful cornucopia of nature that steeps the lifeworld of Kuvempu's Shudra agricultural communities cannot but hit the contemporary reader. Rain is the leitmotif of this novel: Thundering sheets of water lashing down on Gutthi and his beloved dog, Huliya, as they make their way through the forest; a relentless heavy rain that does not let up for days, muffling the din of Chinnamma's aborted marriage rituals; short downpours in which Aita and Pinchalu work in the fields; gentle drizzles that film Nagakka's sight as she espies her friends in the green distance of the paddy fields. By making the rainy forests of the Malnad region the wellspring of his novel, Kuvempu demonstrates the utter beauty and unpredictable power of nature and the interdependence between the human and the natural. The narrative presents lived ways of being in recent history that appear to have slipped irremediably out of grasp.

No central character dominates this novel: the comparison that is often made with Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace* works to the extent that this is true of both novels, as is the multi-

layered and complex narration of the mesh of relations amongst the large cast of characters. Three love stories illumine and act as the catalyst for corresponding action from those who oppose such ties, even when these are between partners within the same caste.

Gutthi loves his cousin Thimmi, who has been promised to another by the landowning Gowda, who "owns" her Dalit family in vassalage; Aita and Pinchalu from a tribal caste below the Ghats are happily married and deeply in love even as their neighbour Chinkra sows seeds of suspicion; and finally, Munkundaya and Chinnamma, who both belong to the landowning Gowda caste but face impediments to their union. Tenderness and care form the bedrock of these stories; the authorial compassion is clearly at work to see that these young lovers are united. Yet their union, it must be admitted, does not pose a challenge to the social order of caste.

By making the rainy forests of the Malnad region the wellspring of his novel, Kuvempu demonstrates the utter beauty and unpredictable power of nature, and the interdependence between the human and the natural.

WHILE KUVEMPU presents tragic endings to the dreams of several characters in the many subplots of the novel—Nagakka, who is duped into a relationship with a crass relative old enough to be her father, or Kaveri, whose happy anticipation of being in a permanent extra-marital arrangement with young Devayya Gowda ends in her rape and death—none of these dreams interrogate social structures. In the feudal world of his novel, Kuvempu can only expose social hypocrisy that condones sexual relations between castes as long as these do not challenge the institution of marriage, which must perforce follow caste rules.

Caste norms dictate every aspect of this society, much as in contemporary rural India: any person from the Dalit castes who violates rules faces brutal reprisal. Thimmi's brother Sanna Bira is tied to a post and administered the well-known Honnali thrashing by Ijira Sabi on Gowda's command that leaves him half-dead. But in Kuvempu's refreshing portrayal of hegemony, some degree of sly resistance is seen from those trampled upon. Sanna manages to inflict injuries on Ijira later at an opportune moment. The unlovely and uncouth bully Thimmappa Gowda is kept waiting when he arrives on the "master's mound" to summon to work the Dalit vassals bound to the family.

Kuvempu presents the nuances of domination with insightful accuracy: the tragedies that befall the Dalit community hold little import for the Gowdas. Even the more empathetic Mukundayya and Aigalu respond with perfunctory words on hearing Aita's anguished description of Chinkra's murder of his pregnant wife. The young too are shown to have internalised the scorn for the "lowly": one of the young Gowda boys contemptuously dismisses the Dalit Baira's music, snapping: "Come let's go... why listen to the music of these carcass eaters?"

A few strands of the novel may jar the reader today. The deployment of the paranormal as deus ex machina strains credulity but may be explained by a sympathetic reader as Kuvempu's creative fashioning of the realistic novel. However, the presentation of Muslim characters as a mercenary gang divested of any other aspect is problematic as is the largely negative portrayal of the Christian priest. Viswanatha bravely retains the caste term "Holeya" (to refer to Dalit castes). A translator must choose fidelity over correctness, yet the

▼ **Farm workers** return home after working in paddy fields in the outskirts of Belagavi, Karnataka. P.K. BADIGER



recall of this nomenclature in today's context cannot but cause unease.

Kuvempu offers an interiorised emotional landscape for all his characters: children, women, Shudra, and Dalit, true to the epigraph with which the novel opens: "Here, no one is important; No one is unimportant; Nothing is insignificant!" To read this rich and thickly evoked narrative, unsparingly candid and rife with scatological descriptions, is to participate in the pulsating energy, the joy, and the endemic heartbreaks of humanity. Mikhail Bakhtin comes readily to mind: the inherent polyphony, elements of the carnivalesque and grotesque that imbue the novel, even if Kuvempu engages with the Vedantic, eschewing the folk. Much on this has been written in Kannada literary criticism and will preoccupy the more serious reader. Vanamala Viswanatha has given the non-Kannada reader a wonderful gift. Her translation of this expansive, illuminating, and hugely enriching novel should not be missed! ■

Rohini Mokashi-Punekar teaches literature at the Indian Institute of Technology Guwahati. Her latest book is titled *The Third Eye and Other Works: Mahatma Phule's Writings on Education* (2023).

An honest misfire

Gautam Bhatia's speculative legal thriller is rich in world-building but weakened by burdened dialogue that seems cosmetic and unpeopled. **TANUJ SOLANKI**

About one-third of the way into Gautam Bhatia's latest novel, *The Sentence*, the protagonist Nila says something that I thought odd: "I think I wanted a world more contained. A world I could cup in my hands, and know its limits. A world I thought this place offered: the law, with its lines, its borders, its boundaries...."

Nila is a *guardian* in Peruma, the fictional city-state where the novel's action takes place, and it does not disadvantage the reader here to understand the term *guardian* as *lawyer*. I found Nila's utterance odd because there was no appreciable illustration from her past to back this fairly intimate (even poetic) admission, of a kind that is otherwise rare in this novel. It was something *told* to me, and my readerly mind wanted to know *why*. Some 200 pages later, as this legal thriller concluded, the dissonance in my mind remained.

There was an answer in the novel's appendix, though, where Bhatia details, among other things, how his reading about several real-world events—the French Revolution, the Paris Commune of 1871, post-Franco Spain, et al.—inspired world-building in *The Sentence*. Nila's image of cupping the world in her hands is a reference to the Palestinian writer Ghassan Kanafani, who had apparently written a character expressing a similar wish. Learning this gave me no comfort, though. By convincing me that the words had been put into Nila's mouth on a whim or are a force-fitted homage—both are the same thing—my dissonance acquired the tint of complaint and joined forces with other complaints about dialogues in the novel.

But, before that, some details: between the two halves of the city-state of Peruma, called the Council and the Commune, there is tense peace. Broadly, the Council is rich people and the Commune is working-class people. The peace was brokered a hundred years ago, after a revolution that had followed the murder of a top Council leader by a man named Jagat. For this peace, several things had to be agreed to: a Pact of Forgetting (general amnesty and more), a Charter (a constitution), and the assignment of legal matters to a Confederation of the Guardians (a hierarchy of lawyers ob-

The Sentence



By Gautam Bhatia
Westland If
Pages: 396
Price: Rs.599



▼
Bhatia is an expert at descriptions of spaces, exterior and interior.
GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCK

serving impartiality oaths). The Charter is now up for renegotiation and amendment, which is likely to bring Peruma to a historical inflection point.

Simultaneously, a mysterious party intends to appeal for Jagat's conviction, for which they choose guardian Nila. Peruma's punishment for murder is cryogenic sleep, and there is a possibility that, if Nila wins her appeal, Jagat can be revived.

The well-conceived premise here gives Bhatia, a lawyer and a public commentator apart from being a novelist, opportunities for world-building–there is geospatial entrenching of class and power differentials (the sites of power are mostly on the Council side), obsession for control over documentation and memory, myth-making projects in the aftermath of sociopolitical revolution (Jagat is a martyr for the Communards), and the legal modalities and judicial history grounding it all. Bhatia uses a third-person narrator affixed to Nila's perspective and is an expert at descriptions of spaces, exterior and interior.

The scenes where the protagonist goes to a new place are always set up splendidly, which is helpful as Bhatia widens the cast and adds detail. Later in the novel, I admired the use of linguistic ambiguity–the grey area between words and meaning–to charge a significant plot twist. But an overwhelming amount of the novel's work–including the work of world-building and of exposition, as the mystery slowly unfolds–is done by its numerous dialogic scenes. The upshot is burdened dialogue that seems cosmetic and unpeopled, like cutouts conversing in mini-essays or mini-histories.

Nila's interiority—as an extended zone for association, hypotheses, or flashes of memory—is severely underutilised. This is a loss.

A majority of these scenes happen between Nila and Maru, Nila's friend and fellow guardian, and often, their interactions read like bouts of rubber-ducking (a practice in which computer programmers narrate their code to a rubber duck to discover chinks in it). Bhatia uses Maru just too much—as a constant sounding board for Nila, to bring in relevant information, to perceive threats on Nila's behalf, to give sage advice, and to lighten the conversation through banter. With the last one, the sense of economy and timing often goes missing: the inconsequential bits can read too long (for example, chatter about coffee) or might jut in when the novel would rather have tension on high.

A **SURFEIT** of this two-person dialogic template does not, in itself, imperil a novel. In writing about the work of Raymond Chandler, the philosopher Fredric Jameson noted: "... the primitive or rudimentary form of the episode in Chandler is the interview itself, whose ur-form as in pre-Aeschylean drama involves no more than two actors at any given time." But Bhatia is no Chandler. Chandler's first-person stylisations, especially the similes in Philip Marlowe's narration, elevate us from plot; Bhatia's third-person narrator fills all plot into dialogue and is often groping when attempting perception, with the likes of "her appetite was waning like water receding at low tide".

Despite a third-person indirect narrative scheme, Nila's interiority–as an extended zone for association, hypotheses, or flashes of memory–is severely underutilised. This is a loss. The inner conflict that Nila faces because of her identity (she was raised in the Commune but is now impartial on oath) is not truly enlivened and rises above the level of information only at the very end. In future work by the novelist, one hopes to see a greater use of interiority qua interiority, which can not only be a tool for characterisation but can also bear some world-building burdens.

In sum, *The Sentence* is just too chatty. One wonders why the good editors at Westland failed to push the author in the right direction, towards "a world more contained". ■

Tanuj Solanki is the author, most recently, of the novel *Manjhi's Mayhem*.

Fiction

Omertà: A Book of Silences
Andrea Tompa, translated by Bernard Adams
Seagull Books

How I Won a Nobel Prize
Julius Taranto
Little, Brown and Company

Home to Harlem
Claude McKay, with an introduction by Belinda Edmondson
Penguin Classics

Stronghold
Dino Buzzati, translated by Lawrence Venuti
New York Review of Books

Non-fiction

House of Huawei: The Secret History of China's Most Powerful Company
Eva Dou
Penguin Random House

Daybreak in Gaza: Stories of Palestinian Lives and Culture
Edited by Mahmoud Muna & Matthew Teller
Al Saqi

Gunpoint Capitalism: Enforcing Industrial Order in Karachi
Laurent Gayer, translated by Jane Roffe
C Hurst & Co

Jane Austen's Bookshelf: A Rare Book Collector's Quest to Find the Women Writers Who Shaped a Legend
Rebecca Romney
Simon &Schuster/Marysue Rucci Books



The Mad House

Gyan Chaturvedi, translated by Punarvasu Joshi
Thornbird Books
Rs.595

The liberalisation of the economy in the 1990s gives context to this allegorical novel where "The Citizen" finds himself trapped in a madhouse, under the unblinking eyes of "The Bazaar".



Night in Delhi

Ranbir Sidhu
Context
Rs.399

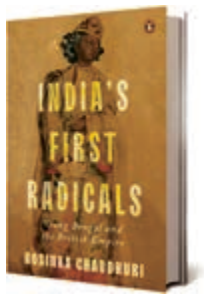
Mumbai is often presented as a ruthless city ruled by mafias. Delhi, in Ranbir Sidhu's portrayal, is as dark and cut-throat, with characters floating in a grey, amoral world.



Invisible Helix

Keigo Higashino
Abacus
Rs.699

Detective Galileo from *The Devotion of Suspect X* returns to solve a murder case involving a strong suspect with an airtight alibi, domestic abuse, mother figures, and other concealed histories.



India's First Radicals

Rosinka Chaudhuri
Penguin Viking
Rs.899

This book traces the evolution of Indian liberalism through the story of Young Bengal, a collective of 19th century reformers led by Henry Derozio regarded as the torch-bearers of progressive thought in colonial India.



Woman! Life! Freedom!

Chowra Makaremi, translated by Maya Judd
Yoda Press
Rs.599

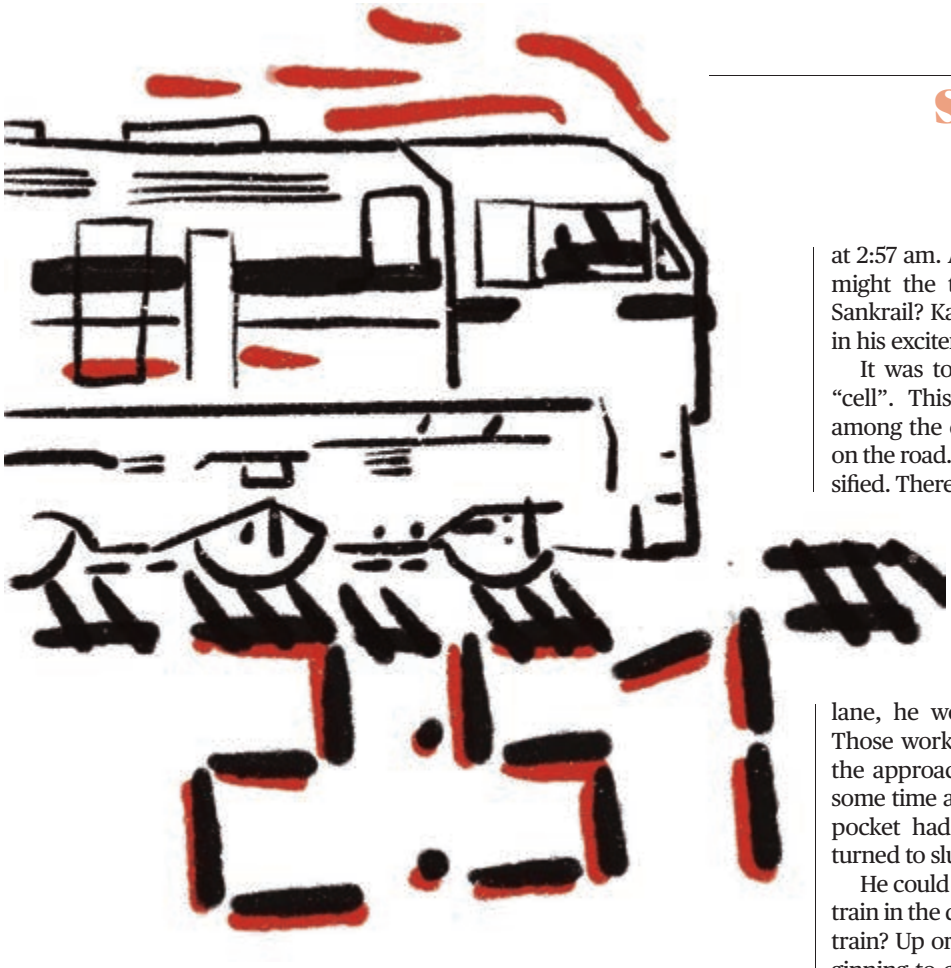
The custodial death of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini in 2022 sparked public protests unlike any Iran had seen before. Chowra Makaremi archives this revolt that stunned a nation.



Of Men, Women and Witches

Jeyamohan, translated by Sangeetha Puthiyedath
Juggernaut
Rs.499

A celebrated writer tells us his story of growing up on the border of two States and cultures, seamlessly extending the form of the memoir from family to regional history.



Nayanpur Express

By **SURENDRA MOHANTY**
Translated from the Odia by **BIKRAM K. DAS**

The gathering darkness of approaching clouds had gripped the sky like some prehistoric monster. Even the usual swarm of stray dogs was missing on the road to the station. Vivid flashes of lightning streaked across the sky like gigantic serpent tongues.

Narendra narrowly escaped banging his head against the telegraph pole, having strayed off the road in the dark.

"Ohh! Half the distance still to be covered. The rain again, in drops as large as plums," Narendra thought.

His watch showed 12:45. The No. 5-down Express was due at 2:57 am. Another three hours to go. Where might the train have reached? Madhupur? Sankrail? Kamarghati? His stride grew longer in his excitement.

It was too early for him to return to the "cell". This would be a memorable night among the countless ones that he had spent on the road. The rain and the storm had intensified. There was an ongoing duet between the rain and the wind, with the thunder providing the accompaniment. The battle cry of an enfeebled, battered, and limping society trying to revolt.

Once again, the lightning. If he turned left into the narrow lane, he would enter the workers' colony. Those working in the 2 o'clock shift, sensing the approaching storm, had left for the mill some time ago. *Ish!* The cigarettes in his chest pocket had gotten soaked in the rain and turned to slush long ago. Nuisance!

He could hear the sound of an approaching train in the distance. Narendra was shocked. A train? Up or Down? Up, surely. It was just beginning to cross the bridge across the Maina river. Must be a goods train. There were no passenger trains scheduled at this time. The 5-down would come only at 2:57–the Nayanpur Express.

A new Canadian locomotive, capable of 80 miles per hour, was rushing across the dark world like an iron monster.

His feet came to a halt. The milestone by the side of the railway track indicated 472 miles from Howrah and then the Megha bridge.

Narendra's head reeled. He couldn't think of what would follow. Agonised screams of women, infants howling, old men crying aloud, the death-agonies of old women and the laughter of death.

The early morning editions of newspapers would print in large letters: "Nayanpur Express Meets Fatal Accident".

This is murder. The murder of women. Children. Yes, what else but murder! An old man could be dozing on his bench, wrapped in his blanket. Eyes deep in sleep would still be lost in dreams of tomorrow's rainbow-coloured headlines: "'A third-class bogey was te-

▶

lescoped into an inter-class bogey': An eyewitness account by our special correspondent."

Murder—cruel, beastly, merciless. However, what would you find if you turned over the pages of history? The more cruel the murder, the louder the anthems of victory! Page after page of triumphant shouting. Alexander, Ashok, Kharavel, Shivaji, Napoleon, Hitler....

A dim, smoky lantern was burning feebly in a labourer's hut.... Someone was sitting at the door of the hut with a foul-smelling *pinka* rolled up between his lips. The tip of the tobacco leaf was smouldering away. Who was it? Waiting for whom?

"Who is it?" Narendra called out.

"It's me, Babu," the man replied in the Chhattisgarhi. "Kamala's mother is due to return from the mill in half an hour. I don't know how she'll manage in this storm. I am waiting for her."

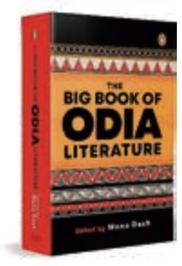
Narendra was soaked right through. He got off the muddy road and entered the hut. "Does Bindia have some bidis stored somewhere?" he asked.



BINDIA HAD FELT dismayed when she saw Narendra at such a time and in such a condition. But she was familiar with the habits of these babus. Nothing mattered to them—neither day nor night, neither wind nor rain. Saying nothing, she reached into a corner of the hut and found a few bidis, which she handed over to Narendra. The floor was damp. Bindia's two daughters, Kamala and Bimla, were huddled together under the sheet. The space previously occupied by Kamala's mother was vacant.

Narendra used the flame of the lantern to light a bidi. There must be a female passenger in the Nayanpur Express in some compartment or other with a small child. Her intended destination might have been Masudgarh. The Nayanpur Express must have arrived at 2:57. The child must be sleeping without a care in the world, in one corner of the berth. The mother would have pulled down the shutter of the window and must be staring aimlessly into the dark. The Nayanpur Express was travelling at its usual speed of 80 miles an hour.

Her husband must be labouring away night and day, far away from his home. So that the world could go on. Would he have come to the station on this stormy night? Yes, surely! He had written that he had found a rented shed with great difficulty. There was a tiny garden facing the shed. Sunu could play there in the morning and evening. It would be nice if he could plant a few flowers there, as well; tiny flowering plants to tie her hair with, if not flowers. The garden facing the temple in Nayanpur was alive with flowers.



Here comes the Megha bridge! The passengers who had been unable to snatch a little sleep were looking out of the window at the Megha bridge. Masudgarh was the next station. Many passengers got off there. All the compartments were suddenly bustling with activity. The woman passenger must be trying to wake up her sleeping child. Wake up Suni, your father has come!

Next? Next was the milepost by the track with the inscription "472 miles".

The fishplates had been removed. The Nayanpur Express....

Narendra rushed out of the hut like a storm.

In the middle of the basti was a shed with the tin roof. This was the "cell".

Narendra shook the chain that fastened the door. Shymal had gone to sleep without fastening the door. The rain had not abated. The wind was still howling fiercely. Narendra's throat was parched. He picked up the pitcher of water from a corner of the hut. There was no water in it. Furious, he smashed the pitcher and threw the fragments out of the window.

NARENDRA HAD BEEN wandering aimlessly from one spot to another for the last seven days, ever since he had been assigned the responsibility for removing the fishplates from the milepost of the Megha bridge bearing the inscription "472". Today was the day when he was returning with his responsibility discharged. But what a brute Shymal was! He hadn't kept even a drop of water in the pitcher! The rascal!

Narendra suddenly remembered his own wife, and how he had driven the poor woman out one day.

"Manju," he had said, "what I want is a coworker, not a companion for the night."

"Pardon me but I cannot do these things!" she had sobbed through her tears. "My chest quakes when I see your pistol, bullets and the bombs."

Narendra had replied roughly, "Your treachery against the revolution that is coming is more than I can tolerate. You have to join the underground movement. Otherwise, you have no place here."

What followed was much condemnation, all of which Manju tolerated quietly, being as tolerant as the earth. Finally Narendra had turned her out.

That day, Narendra had returned home just before dawn, having spent the night somewhere. Manju had taken him to task for not maintaining a regular routine and neglecting his health. He had treated her in a barbaric manner. He felt ashamed now when he remembered his uncivil behaviour.

Thereafter, Manju had returned to her father's house without raising any objections. Narendra's father-in-law was a goods clerk in the Nayanpur goods yard. It was from Nayanpur some months later that Narendra had got news of his daughter's birth. But these weaknesses never found a place in his life. He had forgotten Manju long ago. But on some days he couldn't help but remember her gentle, kind nature and her willingness to serve.

"The neta is supposed to arrive by that train today. He will finally understand how dangerous it is to conspire against the revolution."

Shymal got up abruptly. He asked the silent Narendra, "When did you get back?"

Narendra replied in a calm voice, "I removed six fishplates from Milepost no. 472 of the Megha bridge and threw them into the river. The 5-down Masudgarh Express is supposed to arrive at Masudgarh at 2:57 a.m."

Shymal shouted triumphantly, "The neta is supposed to arrive by that train today. He will address a meeting in the labourers' colony tomorrow. He will finally understand how dangerous it is to conspire against the revolution. Do you know, Narendra, how much blood and sweat I have poured into the moulding of this workers' union? But the agents of the mill-owners and capitalists were determined to sabotage our revolution. They were trying to set up a parallel organisation here. Well done, Narendra! Bravo!"

Tired, Narendra lay on the canvas bed. The timepiece on the shelf overhead sounded its alarm: 2:30 a.m.

Another twenty-seven minutes to go.

There was no light in Bindia's hut. Kamala's mother might have returned.

Narendra re-entered the "cell".

2:45. Another twelve minutes to go.

Shymal said, "Narendra, we'll have to organise a meeting of workers on a large scale tomorrow. What do you say?"

2.47. Ten minutes more.

Narendra collapsed on the canvas bed, face down. The Nayanpur Express was rushing through his head at 80 miles an hour. Heartless, ruthless and cruel.■



Selected by Mini Krishnan
Reproduced courtesy of Penguin Random House India
Illustrations by Siddharth Sengupta

Staying in



The documentary is based the book *Palestine Laboratory: How Israel Exports the Technology of Occupation Around the World* by Antony Loewenstein.

BY SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Films & Series

The Palestine Laboratory (Series)
Documentary
This two-part series by Al Jazeera English can be an eye-opener for those wanting to know more about the Israel-Palestine conflict. Here the journalist Antony Loewenstein "investigates how Israeli weapons and surveillance technologies are first used to control and repress Palestinians in Palestine before being sold all over the world", says Al Jazeera. Episode 1 explores what labels like "tested" in Palestine mean to the arms industry while examining Israel's use of AI targeting systems in Gaza. Episode 2 expands the scope of the investigation to show how this "technology of occupation" developed by Israel and tested on Palestinians is used to monitor and repress political dissidents, human rights activists, and journalists all over the world. Loewenstein uncovers a thriving arms trade link between Israel and India too.
English, two episodes, approx. 49 minutes each
Al Jazeera English's YouTube channel

The Order (Film)
Action, suspense
This Canadian thriller from 2024 is based on the 1989 book *The Silent Brotherhood: The Chilling Inside Story of America's Violent, Anti-Government Militia Movement* by Kevin Flynn and Gary Gerhardt. It stars Jude Law as an FBI agent who is unrelenting in his pursuit of a



white supremacist terrorist group known as the Order. The fim has been described as "a study of human conviction, corruption, and the devastating impact of radical beliefs".
English, 1h 57 m, R
Amazon Prime Video

Veerapandiya Kattabomman (Film)
Historical drama
The Tamil classic from 1959 has been digitally restored in 4K under the National Film Heritage Mission, and the restored version was screened at the International Film Festival of Rotterdam this year (January 30 to February 9). Starring Sivaji Ganesan, Gemini Ganesan, Padmini, S. Varalakshmi, and Ragini, the fiilm is loosely based on the life story of Veerapandiya Kattabomman, an 18th century south Indian king who rebelled against the East India Company. This was the first full-length Tamil film to release in Technicolor. The film is on YouTube as well.
Tamil, 3h 21m, U
YouTube

Podcasts

The Bombay Bar Association
The Bombay High Court, with a glorious history of over 160 years, has produced some of India's eminent jurists. This podcast series, which ran from February to April 2024, has the jurists speaking about their life, their cases, and their approach to law and justice.
Spotify, etc.

A Jane Austen Year
This year marks the 250th birthday anniversary of beloved author Jane Austen. Meant to celebrate the event, the podcast series takes us on a monthly journey through Austen's novels, her life, and the world she inhabited. The January episode is set in Austen's house in Chawton, Hampshire, that is now a museum. The series features letters, recipes, and objects from the museum collection.
Spotify, etc.



Stepping out



Superboys of Malegaon premiered at the 49th Toronto International Film Festival on September 14, 2024.

BY SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Films

Superboys of Malegaon
Comedy
The film produced by Ritesh Sidhwani, Farhan Akhtar, Zoya Akhtar, and Reema Kagti gets a theatrical release in India on February 28 after doing the rounds of international festivals. It is based on the real-life story of Nasir Shaikh, a self-taught filmmaker from a small town in Maharashtra who made local spoofs of films like *Sholay* and *Superman*. Starring Adarsh Gourav, Shashank Arora, and Vineet Kumar Singh in lead roles, the film follows the three young men as they try to do a *Sholay* remake on a shoestring budget. Described as an "underdog" story, the funny and poignant film received a lot of appreciation at film festivals abroad. It is inspired by the 2008 documentary *Supermen of Malegaon* on amateur filmmakers like Shaikh and others who dare to dream, no matter their circumstances.
Hindi, 2h 7m
PG-13

Nayak
Psychological drama, comedy
The 1966 Satyajit Ray classic starring the Bengali movie icon Uttam Kumar, along with Sharmila Tagore, restored in 2K, released in theatres with English subtitles on February 21. *Nayak* is the story of a matinee idol, Arindam Mukherjee (Uttam Kumar), whose veneer as a successful hero dissolves as he ends up confessing his fears, regrets, and insecurities to a young journalist (played by Tagore) in the course of a train journey from Kolkata to Delhi.
Bengali, 2h, U

Art



Figure-ing Out: The Ajanta Project and Now—Ganesh Haloi
The artist Ganesh Haloi spent seven years in the late 1950s in Ajanta working for the Archaeological Survey of India. During these years, he replicated the works in the caves to practise drawing, researched the rocks and the murals, and published his findings in an art journal. He also painted the life of the villagers and labourers from neighbouring areas. All this is brought together in the exhibition at Akar Prakar, New Delhi, on until March 7.
New Delhi

Flowing Heritage: The Indian Water Narrative
The multidisciplinary craft-art exhibition explores India's profound connection with water, which gives life, whispers stories, and inspires creativity. It weaves history, culture, and craft together through tactile and tech-aided installations, striking sounds, and immersive visuals. The group show is on until April 27 at Arthshila Delhi.
New Delhi

Southern Stars
The photographer Clare Arni's solo show at Gallery Sumukha captures the vibrant iconography of Tamil and Kannada cinema. Much has been written on the unique relationship between fans and superstars in south India: a deep bond of love and reverence that extends beyond cinema halls. The images speak of this devotion through cutouts, billboards, and autorickshaws playing classic songs that are are still a part of the everyday in the South. The show is on until March 1.
Bengaluru




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