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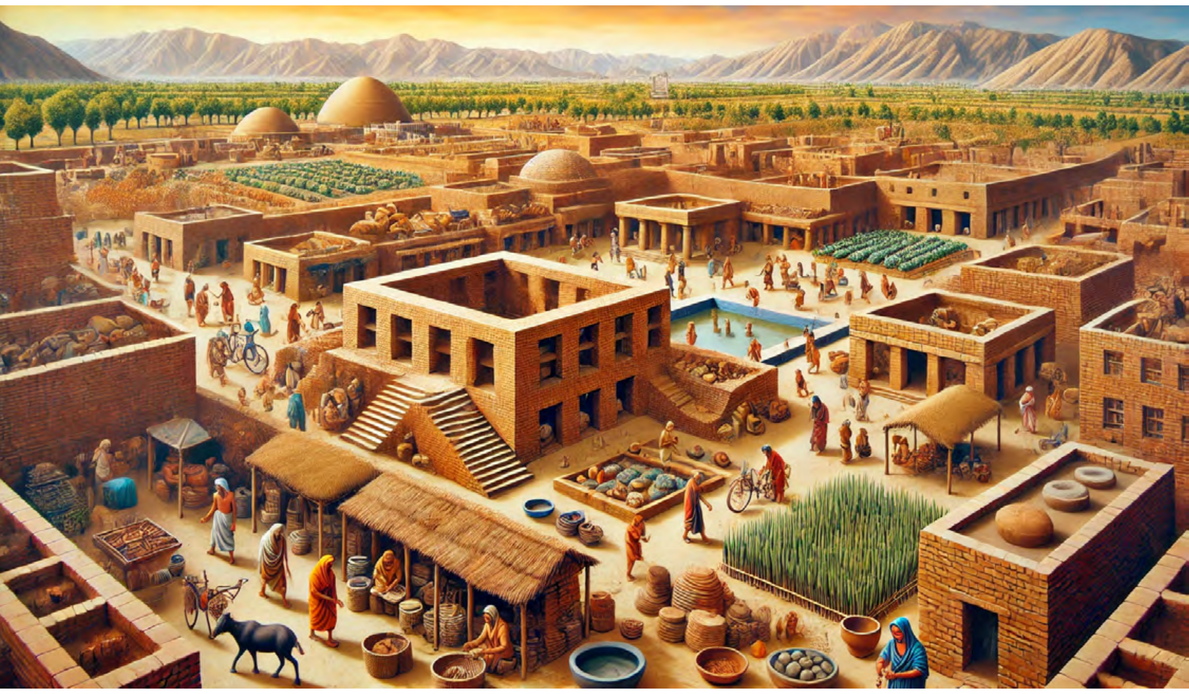
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COVER STORY

How the British first encountered Indus sites and why it became a national project after 1947

– Adrija Roychowdhury



Sometime in the early 1830s, the British East India Company officials in India came to know of the presence of a red-haired, grey-eyed man travelling around in Kabul, with a few maps, a compass and an astrolabe. He wore no stockings or shoes, strung a dervish drinking cup around his shoulder, and identified himself as Charles Masson, an American. It was only in 1835 that the gentleman's true identity was revealed as James Lewis, an Englishman who had deserted from the East India Company's Bengal Artillery Regiment in 1827.

Lewis or Masson had spent five months travelling around some of the lands adjoining the northwestern corner of the Indian subcontinent, which was beyond British control. He did this in return for a royal pardon, when the EIC forced him to become an intelligence agent for them in Kabul. It was during his travels, as he journeyed across Punjab on a horseback, that he stumbled upon a small, unremarkable town, 'Haripah' — the first time that a European had encountered the great Indus Civilisation site, though nothing about its significance was imagined at the time.

It was almost a hundred years later that Sir John Marshall, the English archaeologist and director-general of the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), announced the discovery of the Indus Civilisation. "Not often has it been to archaeologists…to light upon the remains of a long forgotten civilisation," he wrote in *The Illustrated London* News on September 20, 1924. "It looks, however, at this moment, as if we were on the threshold of such a discovery in the plains of Indus," he noted.

The first encounter

In the late 1820s though, when Masson first encountered 'Haripah', he thought it to be ruins of the ancient city of Sangala, the capital of King Porus, who was defeated by Alexander the Great, when he invaded the Indian subcontinent in the fourth century BCE. As noted by anthropologist Rita P Wright, in her book 'The Ancient Indus',

Masson was well conversant in classical Greek literature, and Alexander's campaigns was what had prompted him to explore parts of modern-day Afghanistan, Pakistan and across the Punjab, where the Macedonian ruler is known to have marched in 326 BCE.



The archaeological site of Harappa. (Wikimedia Commons)

Masson was highly impressed by what he saw at Harappa. Describing the ruins in and around the site he wrote his travelogue later about a 'large circular mound', a 'ruinous brick castle', the remains of a building on a rocky height, and several old Peepul trees, which he thought, spoke of great antiquity. He also noted the possibility of a city, some 13 coss (about 45 kilometres) in extent, which was "destroyed by the lust and crimes of the sovereign".

Five years after Masson's visit, in 1831, Lieutenant Alexander Burns travelled to Harappa during his journey up the river Indus. Subsequently, he

was followed by Alexander Cunningham, who, in 1861, had established the ASI, and became its first director-general. Cunningham visited Harappa thrice — in 1853, 1856, and then again between 1872-73.

As noted by archaeologist Nayanjot Lahiri in an email interview with indianexpress.com, Cunningham was the first to excavate Harappa. "He gave a fairly precise description of the mounds, also a site plan which graphically illustrates their alignments and visual details of objects that we recognise as Harappan artefacts including archetypal objects such as inscribed stone seal and flint implements," she said. Cunningham's plate showing artefacts at Harappa were unlike anything he had encountered in the sites he had been surveying for decades. But as Lahiri noted, when it came to identifying the site, he once again fell back upon textual sources. He believed Harappa to be the place where the Chinese traveller Xuanzang stayed for a few months.

Cunningham's archaeology was driven by the search for Buddhist sites. He followed closely the travels of Xuanzang and Fa Hien, both Chinese pilgrims, believed to be following Buddha's footsteps.

Cunningham in fact located a seal that is today regarded as the typical artefact of the urban phase of the Indus Civilisation. "He pronounced the artefact to be 'foreign to India', since it

depicted a hump-less bull and not the humped Indian zebu; and an inscription, which he was certain contained no ‘Indian letters’,” wrote archaeologist Sudeshna Guha in her 2007 article, ‘The Indus Civilisation’ published in the journal ‘History Today’.



Cunningham located a seal that is today regarded as the typical artefact of the urban phase of the Indus Civilisation. (Wikimedia Commons)

There were several reasons why the first European explorers were falling back on Greek and Chinese sources in their misinterpretation of the Harappan ruins. “From the very beginning, the Westerners saw India through the foreign accounts of India,” explained Guha in an interview with indianexpress.com. “Foreign accounts, they believed, provided a better understanding of India than the ancient texts of India which were considered bereft of a historical chronicle,” said Guha, who specialises in the Indus Civilisation.

While the British explorers were already acquainted with classical Greek, in the case of the ancient Chinese accounts of Xuanzang and Fa Hien that Cunningham followed closely,

they were made accessible to the western world precisely in the mid-1800s when they were first translated into French and then to English.

Lahiri contended that these early explorers worked within textual grids alone. “Harappa, after all, had flourished in an age which was beyond such textual traditions and obviously, its antiquity was unlikely to be discovered by explorers and archaeologists who were always in the company of Chinese pilgrims or that of Macedonians who had accompanied Alexander to northwest India,” she said.

Yet another reason why Harappa’s significance as an ancient civilisation was not understood at this time was because the study of prehistory had hardly begun in the 19th century. “The existence of a ‘prehistory’ was widely acknowledged only when the Royal Society, in 1859, validated that humankind had a prehistoric past,” explained Guha, adding that prior to it, “European scholars were guided by the Christian faith of the world beginning only in 4004 BCE.”

John Marshall’s discovery

John Marshall arrived in India in 1902 to take charge as director-general of ASI. Unlike his predecessors, Marshall was not particularly engrossed with Alexander or Buddhism in India. Rather, his interest lay in the Mediterranean region, and Minoan civilisation of Crete was his initial point of reference. “But he soon dedicated

himself wholly to furthering the cause of Indian archaeology, despite his department's thinly stretched financial resources," wrote Andrew Robinson in his book, The Indus (2015).

In the decades preceding Marshall's announcement in The Illustrated London News, several Indus sites apart from Harappa had already been explored. In 1911, for instance, Devadutta Ramakrishna Bhandarkar had visited Mohenjodaro in the hope of finding an ancient Buddhist site. Bhandarkar, however, concluded that the ruins in the site were not more than 200 years old. Pottery and other objects from other sites located as far apart as Sutkagen-dor in Makran and Kalibangan in Rajasthan were also dug before 1924. "But no scholar was in a position to connect up these disparate discoveries, because the age of the objects was unknown and they lacked any historical context," wrote Robinson.

It was only in 1912 that a publication by the British Museum carrying the three seals discovered till then caught Marshall's attention. Later, when one of his assistants purchased more objects from Harappa, including two seals, Marshall was convinced of the site's value. "The excavation of Harappa, when it can be arranged, will be productive of most valuable results and open up quite a new chapter in Indian history," Marshall noted, as cited by Lahiri in her book, Finding Forgotten Cities: How the Indus Civilisation was Discovered (2006).

Consequently, in 1921-22, Harappa came to be excavated by Daya Ram Sahni, while daro was dug up by Rakhal Das Banerji in 1922-23. Both Sahni and Banerji discovered seals of the kind found by Cunningham decades earlier. But given that they were excavating two very different looking places far away from each other, they were both unaware of the other's find. "Banerji, for instance, in his first view of an Indus seal saw it as something he was familiar with, namely a sandesh (a Bengali sweet) mould," says Guha. However, he wrote to Marshall circumspectly, and with foresight saying, "They are exactly similar to Cunningham's Harappa seals" (as cited in Robinson's book). Consequent excavations revealed seven more such seals from Mohenjodaro.

In June 1924, Marshall called for a special conference at the headquarters of the ASI in Simla, where the archaeologists of Harappa and Mohenjodaro assembled all the artefacts found by them in these two places. It was soon evident that both these sites belonged to the same culture



A view of Mohenjodaro ruins. (Wikimedia Commons)

and civilisation, and Marshall announced his dramatic discovery to the world.

"Remember this was the time when British archaeologists had discovered the tomb of Tutankhamun, and Sir Leonard Woolley (also a British archaeologist) was excavating Mesopotamia and had found several ancient Sumerian sites such as Ur, Kish, Lagash, and Susa," said Guha. "Basically a massive old world civilisation was being discovered there, and Marshall wanted his international colleagues, and particularly those in Britain, to see the spectacular discoveries of an old world civilisation he and his team were making in India."

Marshall, from the very beginning, was clear on the fact that this was an indigenous civilisation. "He knew that this first announcement would become a seminal starting point for a new kind of archaeological past, one that was more in tune with the ancientness that was ascribed to India. More than anything else, he hoped that his pen would succeed in appropriately projecting the work that had birthed, as it were, a new beginning for India's ancient past," said Lahiri. She pointed out that in subsequent newspaper articles, "he emphasised the indigenous character of the civilisation and how it had 'undergone a development reaching back incalculable centuries on Indian soil'."

Post-Independence nationalist project

The Partition of India in 1947 ushered in a whole new phase in the history of discovering Indus sites. The new international border between India and Pakistan passed through the eastern part of the Indus Civilisation and consequently all but two (by then unknown) Indus sites went to Pakistan. "With India's most ancient and sophisticated urban past taken away from it, the new government started digging on their side with hope of finding vestiges of the Indus Civilisation on Indian soil," explained Guha.

The decision to take up the search for Harappan sites was proactively pushed by Indian leaders, in stark contrast to what was happening under the British. Lahiri pointed out that as early as March 1948, K M Panikkar, a scholar administrator who had just finished serving as the 'Diwan' of the princely state of Bikaner, had written to Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru about the necessity of a survey of Bikaner and Jaisalmer. It was based on what had been conveyed to him by archaeologist Aurel Stein:

With the separation of the Pakistan Provinces, the main sites of what was known as the Indus Valley Civilisation has gone to Pakistan. It is clearly of the utmost importance that archaeological work in connection with this early period of Indian history must be continued in India. A preliminary examination has shown that the

centre of the early civilization was not Sind or the Indus valley but the desert area in Bikaner and Jaisalmer through which the ancient river Saraswati flowed into the Gulf of Kutch at one time.

Nehru agreed promptly and soon after began the exploration of Bikaner by the ASI under Amalananda Ghosh. Within a couple of months as many as 70 sites were found, 25 among them carrying the same kind of artefacts as found in Harappa and Mohenjodaro.

"Soon enough, the ASI made the search for Harappan sites within the national borders of India a national project – to be carried forward by Indian archaeologists," explained Lahiri. Ropar in Punjab was excavated in 1953 and 1955, Lothal in Gujarat between 1953 and 1963, Kalibangan in Rajasthan from 1961-69, and Rakhigarhi which continues to be excavated till date.

"In Saurashtra itself, some 40 Harappan sites were discovered," said Lahiri. "The discovery of Indus sites in India is very much a post-Independence success story."



LONG READS

A girl called Anna: ‘She gave her all to this career, even her life’

– Narayanan S, Kochi



Anna during a pottery session. (Special Arrangement)

Across the St George Jacobite Church in Kangarappady, a quiet suburb in Kochi, stands a two-storey house. A beautiful lawn leads to the porch, where the main entrance is flanked by a swing on the left and a kennel for Scotch, the labrador, on the right.

Of late, the house has been teeming with visitors — among others, a team from British multinational Ernst & Young (EY) India — seeking to offer their condolences to Sibi Joseph and his wife Anita Augustine, both 60.

Over two months ago, late on July 20, their daughter, Anna Sebastian Perayil, 26, a chartered accountant (CA) at S R Batliboi, a member firm under EY Global, passed away due to a cardiac arrest in Pune.

A letter dated September 8 by Anna's mother to EY India chairperson Rajiv Memani went viral on social media on September 17, triggering discussions on "toxic" workplaces that "glorify overwork". Besides stating that no one from EY had turned up for her daughter's funeral in Kochi on July 23, Anita's letter alleged that Anna had died to "backbreaking workload".

Back at the house, on a table in the drawing room is a portrait of Anna — wearing a radiant smile — surrounded by candles, flowers and a painting of hers by a friend. In her room, accountancy books stacked on a bookshelf are a daily reminder of her death. "She gave her all to this career, even her life," says Sibi, a retired additional director in the state agriculture department, his voice trembling.

Though Anita, a retired State Bank of India manager, says she wrote to Memani "just to bring out the truth regarding the work culture

(at companies)", Sibi reiterated that they have no plans to take "legal action" against EY.

Sibi says Anna was a "topper" both at school (Rajagiri Public School) and college (Sacred Heart College). "She passed her CA exam in November 2023 and joined EY in March. She wanted to work at a Big 4 company (Deloitte, EY, KPMG and PricewaterhouseCoopers). She got an offer from Deloitte in IT audit but wanted to do statutory audit — something that EY offered," says the father.



Anna with her father Sibi Joseph Perayil and mother Anita Augustine during her CA convocation in Pune on July 7. (Special Arrangement)

Pune was Anna's first stint away from home. Before Anna, Sibi's son went to study in Thiruvananthapuram, around 200 km away.

Anna's "relentless" work schedule forced her

to choose Pune as the venue for her July 7 CA convocation, he says, adding that Anita and he travelled to Pune for the ceremony. During their visit, Anna told them about her "chest feeling constricted" and was promptly taken to a hospital. Sibi says, "The cardiologist said it was acid reflux due to improper diet and sleep."

Sibi says Anna collapsed on the stairs on July 20 while walking up her second-floor room with her takeaway food around 10 pm. She was taken to a hospital when her condition worsened, but she died of a cardiac arrest en route, he says.

The 30 hours that followed were "painful", says Anna's Pune-based cousin Mithun James, who took her body to Kochi. It was Mithun who helped Anna find a PG accommodation at Wadgaon Sheri after she moved to the city. In a LinkedIn post after Anna's death, Mithun says he had told his cousin to "learn to say no", but she was afraid that a short work stint would be considered a "black mark on her career".

Talking about Anna's "large heart", her cousin Ritu Maria Johny, a UK-based digital communication professional who moved to the UK last year, says, "Each time we did some mischief, I would convince her to lie to our parents. But she was too innocent to even fake innocence. She was very dedicated to her studies and skipped family events to focus on her CA exams. She was my sounding board during a stressful time while I was in Chennai years ago."

In a WhatsApp message to The Indian Express, Ritu says she once protested over Anna taking "weeks" to reply to her texts. "She explained that she gets home around 1.30 am, wakes up early and starts work again. Once, she said she had just five minutes for dinner, before rushing off to work. She never replied to my last text (sent on July 17)."



A shrine for Anna Sebastian Perayil at her home in Kochi. (Photo: Narayanan S/ Indian Express)

Anna's best friend Ann Mary says they last met in Mumbai, around 150 km from Pune, in May. "We were supposed to meet in Mumbai on Friday (May 3) but she could not leave the office early. She reached Mumbai late on Friday and returned on Sunday," Ann says.

The best friends spoke on the phone just before Anna's death on July 20. "We spoke at night. Anna said she had to attend an online meeting. She had plans to come home by July end and was considering quitting her job."

Ann says Anna loved trying new things. “We took pottery classes and neon painting together. Each time we saw others’ (travel) pictures, we would plan a trip to Manali and Bali,” she says.

She recalls how Anna once turned down a marriage proposal because the man did not like dogs. “She had recently met someone through a matrimonial portal and the families were about to make things official. She was the bridesmaid at my wedding, but I will never return the favour,” she says.

Stating that Anna liked to play badminton, kayak and paint, Sibi says around 1,000 people attended her funeral. “She clearly made an impact on many lives,” he says.

He says many people learnt about Anna’s death after her mother’s letter went viral. Among those who have visited the couple over the last few days are commerce students from Kochi-based Don Bosco orphanage. “Anna used to teach them. They said it was Chechi’s (elder sister) lessons that helped them pass an exam or get jobs,” says a proud Sibi.

Lavasa's downhill journey: What led to the decline of India's first private hill station

– Parthasarathi Biswas, Pune



The lack of tourists has proved to be a death knell for businesses in Lavasa. (File Photo/Parthasarathi Biswas)

Try as she might, Asha Rajput cannot forget the night of July 27. Fast asleep in her ground-floor flat at Ashiana Utsav, a senior living space in Lavasa, a private hill station located around two hours from Pune, Asha says a "strange feeling" woke her up.

Before the horror-struck senior had fully registered the water inside her bedroom, there was a loud crash from the adjoining bathroom. "A portion of the hill behind the three-floor building had come down. A huge tree wedged horizontally between the embankment and the building came down with the mud. The force of the landslide broke my bathroom's glass

window, filling it up with mud and water," says Asha, recalling that she panicked and pressed the alarm bell to call for help.

The staff responded to her cries, and even cleaned up the mud and barricaded the broken window. But Asha has been sleeping in her drawing room since then. Despite months since the incident, her flat is still in a state of disarray — the antique furniture has been being "arranged" to keep it out of harm's way, she says. "A full night's sleep has become impossible for me. I shifted here seven years ago, but this is the first time I felt unsafe," says Asha, who owns houses in Jaipur and Chandigarh.

When Pune was battered by torrential rains in the last week of July, Lavasa, located in the hills of Mulshi taluka in Pune district, failed to escape nature's wrath. A portion of a hill came sliding down on Lavasa's Hill Road, trapping two people, who were later declared dead. Besides this, numerous areas of the hill station

A full night's sleep has become impossible for me. I shifted here seven years ago, but this is the first time I felt unsafe.

have witnessed minor landslides. On July 25, the India Meteorological Department's (IMD) automatic weather station had noted 453.5 mm of rainfall, the highest since the station became

operational in 2022. The area usually receives over 100 mm rainfall in June and July.

Today, the once-thriving tourist hotspot has been declared out of bounds for visitors without confirmed bookings at one of its three hotels or non-residents. The rule is enforced strictly by the security at the hill station's entrance ever since Lavasa, among other spots, was earmarked by the Pune District Collector for a geological safety survey by the Geological Survey of India (GIS) to assess its risk element.

To add to Lavasa's woes, the National Company Law Tribunal (NCLT) recently rejected an application by Darwin Platform Infrastructure Ltd (DPIL), seeking assistance in acquiring the controversial project. DPIL had made a winning bid for the cash-strapped consortium in 2023.

From a world class hill station to a struggling entity

While the recent landslides have brought Lavasa into the limelight again, the downhill journey of this erstwhile sojourn of the rich and the famous started quite some years ago. In 1996, the Maharashtra government issued a hill station policy with the aim to develop hill stations as tourist destinations. As per the policy, only 30 per cent of the land to be developed was to have construction, while the rest was to be left free. Environmental clearances were a must and many stringent rules were framed around them.
Some time in the early 2000s, the Maharashtra

government modified its hill station policy to allow for construction of private hill stations. Lavasa, was conceived by construction magnate Ajit Gulabchand, whose company, Hindustan Construction Company, was a majority shareholder in the Lavasa Corporation. The idea to develop a hill station in the remote valley of Mulshi was inspired by European cities, which share similar geography. After the hill station policy, which allowed private players to develop such towns, was approved, Lavasa was the first such city to be granted permission and be developed. NCP (SP) national chief Sharad Pawar had once talked about development of 23 such cities in Maharashtra to push tourism and infrastructure. However, the policy did not find any other takers.

The policy literally cleared the way for Lavasa,



ITC Fortune Hotel in Lavasa city. (Express archive photo)

with thousands of people reportedly displaced from multiple villages. Branded as India's 'first planned private hill station', Lavasa was nearly entirely privately managed. Instead of state officials, it was run like a corporate by a city manager, who was appointed by a board of private individuals. Save for the post office

and the police, Lavasa was really as private as advertised.

However, it suffered a dizzying reversal of fortunes within a decade of its existence. In 2010, in response to charges that the Lavasa Corporation had not applied for or acquired necessary environmental clearance for the project, the Union Environment Ministry issued a 'stop work' notice. Thereafter, the hill station got mired in multiple controversies and legal wrangles, including scrutiny by the National Green Tribunal, the statutory body for cases related to environmental protection.

Before 2010, Lavasa was marketed as the perfect world away from the hustle and bustle of the mundane and the largely imperfect. Developed upstream on the Mutha river in Mulshi taluka, it was designed by a team of internationally renowned designers. Simply acquiring a house in Lavasa was not enough. Homebuyers were bound by strict rules in case they wanted to



ITC fortune Hotel in Lavasa city. (Express archive photo)

repaint or redecorate their homes from outside.

Today, Lavasa's uncertain future is reflected in its diminished crowds, empty spaces and the distinct lack of din. The once impressive promenade, designed to resemble the ones in European cities, and its state-of-the-art convention centre are now a former shadow of their glorious selves. Incomplete buildings play hide-and-seek behind overgrown vegetation, as current establishments struggle to break even. Across the lake stands an unfinished luxury hotel. Next to it lies a padlocked world-class convention centre. Even the road to the convention centre has been closed.

"Back then, Lavasa was teeming with activity. We had film, advertisement and TV shoots here nearly every day. Thanks to the functional helipad, people would fly in and out of the hill station all the time," says Mukesh Kumar, the general manager of the nearly deserted restaurant, Waterfront Shaw, and the luxury 43-room Waterfront Shaw Apartments.

Back then, all resorts and hotels would remain booked. On weekends, Mumbaikars who had invested in houses here would flock to Lavasa, a gated community in the hills without much disturbance.

"All of that seems like ancient history now," says Kumar, as an old Billy Joel track hums in the background on a dull afternoon.

Sighing over the lack of customers, Kumar, who

has been associated with the luxury establishment since the last many years, says their occupancy has nosedived. The Waterfront Shaw once had eight restaurants, offering cuisines ranging from oriental to Indian. While it still has an envious view of the promenade — the European-style construction overlooks a body of water in Lavasa — the marble tables, brought in especially from Jaipur, are covered with cloth due to the dismal footfall.

"Only the American Diner is operational at present. From 122 employees, we are down to just 28. At one time, guests had to make hotel booking months in advance. Now, even during peak tourist season, our occupancy is not more than 20-35 per cent," he says.

Though the decline set in before 2019, Kumar says the situation escalated rapidly during the pandemic. "The last two years were nearly without any footfall. Just when we thought things were improving, the landslides happened. Frequent power cuts have compelled us to invest in our own generator. At times, even the water supply is not regular," he says, admitting that it has become rather tough to manage the show.

He is not wrong. Celebrations, another hotel in Lavasa, has morphed into a girls' hostel for students of Christ University, while Fortune hotel has shut down.

Present tense for the ones still there

Following his retirement from a pharmaceutical company, V K Mittal and his wife decided to make Ashiana their home five years ago. The 200 residents of Ashiana and students of Christ University — sources at the college say it has around 2,000 students — now constitute the bulk of Lavasa's residents. However, Christ University has announced online classes till the end of August due to the recent landslides, besides the shortage of water and electricity.

Last month's landslide, which dislodged a bungalow, has put nearly four others at threat of further damage. Residents who stay near Hill Road say urgent work is necessary to prevent more landslides. The landslide, waterlogging and other issues, claims Mittal, are the result of neglect by the Lavasa Corporation, which is responsible for the hill station's upkeep. More Lavasa residents share his views.

> ***"The lake needs desilting… The roads and street lights need refurbishing too. We often end up pooling our resources for the purpose."***

Captain Minoo Wadia claims he has been waging a lonely battle since the last 13 years to keep the township afloat. "The lake needs desilting, something the residents have already paid for. The roads and street lights need refurbishing

too. We often end up pooling our resources for the purpose," he says.



Asha Rajput's ground-floor flat at Ashiana Utsav, a senior living space in Lavasa, got damaged in the July 27 landslide. (Parthasarathi Biswas)

The Indian Express reached out to Suresh Pendharkar, CEO, Lavasa Corporation, but he refused to comment. When The Indian Express contacted Shailesh Verma, the erstwhile Resolution Professional of the Lavasa Corporation, he said, "The matter is being reported to Hon'ble National Company Law Tribunal, Mumbai. No further comments."

Maharashtra Legislative Assembly Deputy Chairperson and Shiv Sena (Eknath Shinde) leader Neelam Gorhe, who has been raising issues with regard to the rights of villagers whose land was acquired for the hill station, says she had fought to ensure that nearby villages were allowed to hold their gram panchayat elections after Lavasa was given the status of a planning authority, something that is mostly reserved for the government.

She told The Indian Express that she had raised the matter of compensation and damage in Lavasa when Chief Minister Eknath Shinde visited Pune after the recent floods.

“Since the officers present were unable to answer his questions, the Chief Minister directed his questions to the Collector. Yogesh Mhashe, the head of the Pune Metropolitan Regional Development Authority (PMRDA), said they would survey the damage done to Lavasa,” she said.



Wayanad's missing list: How forensic teams are using DNA clues to join the dots

– Shaju Philip, Wayanad



As many as 231 bodies were recovered and 118 people were declared missing in the July 30 landslide. (File)

In the days after the Wayanad landslide, forensic experts at the Regional Forensic Science Laboratory in Kannur had the difficult job of putting names to the body parts recovered during the tragedy – a severed limb, a dismembered body.

While rescuers pulled out several bodies from the debris at the landslide site, the Punnapuzha river carried with it several severed limbs and other body parts that were recovered kilometres away, at Nilambur in neighbouring Malappuram district.

At the end of the week-long rescue operations, 231 bodies were recovered and 118 persons were declared missing. The missing were feared dead

and as their families waited for closure, forensic teams in the state got down to identifying them through DNA tests.

The unidentified bodies and body parts, each with a specific number for future identification, were buried at the mass burial ground at Puthumala, barely 5 km away from Chooralmala, one of the worst-hit villages. Before the bodies and body parts were lowered into the pit, samples from these were taken for DNA tests. As many as 421 samples were dispatched to the lab in Kannur.

According to State Forensic Science Laboratory Director Dr Pradeep Saji K, testing such a huge number of samples in a short period was a major task for the team at the regional lab in Kannur, which has one of the best DNA testing facilities in India.

"We mobilised our people from other districts and they worked day and night for several days. The samples (kept in preservatives) were put in the cold room at the lab where we ensured that there is no cross contamination. Now, we have almost completed the testing process," he said.

Explaining the DNA testing process, Bushra Beegum, joint director at the lab in Kannur, said, "Most of the samples for DNA testing were taken from bones of unidentified bodies. In some cases, the samples were taken from teeth and body tissue. DNA extraction in the case of bones is the most time consuming – the bone has to be cleaned to take out the bone marrow. It is a skilled, delicate, manual job which can take up to four hours."

On the many challenges the team encountered, Beegum said, “We need at least .1 nanogram of DNA to create a profile (a pattern of DNA sequences that identifies an individual). Many tissue samples collected from the river were putrefied and did not have that minimum quantity of DNA that we needed for sequencing,” she said.

After the DNA samples are sequenced, the next step is comparison, where samples with similar DNAs (since several body parts are tested) are put into different groups.

“Thus, we got around 60 groups, with each group finally coming together as different body parts of an individual. Then, we compare these grouped samples with the DNA profile of the blood samples collected from relatives of the missing persons. When a new sample from a newly recovered body part reaches our lab for testing, we do their DNA profiling and see if it matches any of the existing groups,” said the joint director.

Talking of the other challenges they faced, an official said that several families had perished in the tragedy, police teams were sent out to look for extended relatives. In some cases, family trees of the victims were drawn and shared with the team engaged in collecting blood samples.

Forensic experts also said that since all the victims were from a particular region (Mundakkai and Chooralmala), there is a high possibility that inbreeding might have taken place over generations. “Normally, of the 46 chromosomes

of a person, four chromosomes are unique to that person. But in many samples tested from this particular region, a decrease in the differences between their chromosomes were noticed. This is mainly due to inbreeding, which happens when distant relatives marry,'' said an expert familiar with the work at the Kannur forensic lab.

Kilometres away, in Wayanad, among those awaiting closure is Safad Kunnath, 24. He has just registered three missing complaints at the Meppadi police station – the bodies of his father Hamsa K, a plantation worker, mother Jumaila and younger brother Hasin Muhamed, have been untraceable since the tragedy.

"Two rounds of DNA results are out, but my family is still missing. I was told to wait a while for the entire process to be completed, after which the death certificates will be issued,'' said Safad, who works at a coaching institute in Thrissur.

"All I have done is wait. First at hospitals, waiting for bodies of my father, mother and brother. Then at the make-shift morgue in Meppadi. And now, for the DNA results. If they were identified among those buried at the common burial ground at Puthumala, it would be a relief for us. Otherwise, the thought that my parents and brother are still buried somewhere under the boulders is painful,'' he says.

How India came to dominate the chessboard

– Amit Kamath, Mumbai



The Indian team poses on the podium at the Chess Olympiad in Budapest. (Michal Walusza/FIDE)

At the felicitation function for the Indian chess contingent, back from the Budapest Olympiad with four individual golds and the team golds, grandmaster Abhijit Kunte had an anecdote to share from his first Olympiad. The year was 1998, and the scene was set in Elista, a city in Russia's Kalmykia republic.

"Garry Kasparov was playing in the Elista Olympiad. We used to go before the games started to take his autograph. Kasparov would give autographs only on chess books written by him," recounts Kunte. "This time, when I went to the Olympiad in Budapest, I saw children running for autographs of our Indian players. We are no more seeking autographs, we are giving

them," said Kunte, captain of the women's team. Over the course of a heady fortnight in Budapest, the axis of the world of chess had tilted decisively — towards India.

At this year's Chess Olympiad in the Hungarian capital, the Indian chess contingent swept the three team gold medals on offer — the 'Hamilton-Russell Cup' for the open section, the 'Vera Menchik Cup' for the women's section and the 'Nona Gaprindashvili Trophy' for the overall title. To add to those three team golds, there were also four individual golds won by Gukesh, Arjun Erigaisi, Divya Deshmukh and Vantika Agrawal.

The Indian team in the open section of the Olympiad — a biennial team event where over 180 nations participated — was so dominant that it finished four points ahead of five other teams who ended second, the United States of America, Uzbekistan, China, Serbia and Armenia. At the last Olympiad in Chennai in 2022, the Indian chess contingent came close to winning two gold medals, but stumbled at the final hurdle. But this time, there was no stopping the Indians.

"If this success had come in the Chennai Olympiad two years ago, it would have had the sense of a slight accident. A pleasant surprise. At the Budapest Olympiad, very quickly, by the fourth round itself, I had the feeling, 'which team is going to stop them?' And we know the answer. They won by a four-point gap," five-time world champion Viswanathan Anand said at an event in Mumbai.

On the live world rankings, which are updated in real-time, there are currently three Indians in the top 10 — Gukesh, Arjun and Anand — with Praggnanandhaa just outside. Three Indian men and two women also qualified for the Candidates tournament in April. Held in Toronto this year, the tournament – which accommodates only eight players in each category and is held to find a challenger to the world champion — saw 17-year-old Gukesh becoming the youngest player to qualify for the World Championship.

After Gukesh won the Candidates, the legendary Garry Kasparov had remarked: "The Indian earthquake in Toronto is the culmination of the shifting tectonic plates in the chess world… The children of Vishy Anand are on the loose."

"You can have a lot of trophies but the Olympiad gold is special. It establishes your dominance as a team and as a country," Indian team captain Srinath Narayanan told The Indian Express.

With Budapest under its belt, India had cemented its place as a bona fide chess superpower.

Grandmasters showed the way

India's chess story has an arc that begins with Viswanathan Anand, the country's first GM, and leapfrogs to the present generation of prodigies. But between Anand and the current generation is a lesser-told story: of an in-between generation of grandmasters — R B Ramesh, Srinath Narayanan, Vishnu Prasanna, Abhijit Kunte, Surya Shekhar Ganguly and Sandipan Chandan, to name a

few — who turned to coaching early on in their careers and sculpted this young bunch of Indian world-beaters. They did that by catching them early and giving them a blueprint to aim for the top.

Vishnu Prasanna became a GM in 2013, the same year as Vidit Gujrathi, but just four years later, went on to become one of Gukesh's earliest coaches. Srinath Narayanan became a GM four years after Vishnu and Vidit, but was one of the strongest influences in shaping the careers of Arjun and Nihal Sarin. Among the many players R B Ramesh has worked on in their early days are Pragg and Vaishali.

"Some of the things I taught these players was what I learnt through trial and error after several years. We were able to save many years for the next generation of players… For instance, one of the old dogmas was that you shouldn't play too much blitz (the fastest format of the sport) because it's harmful for your chess. But look at Arjun and Nihal. They grew up playing blitz online. In today's times, it has become one of the most effective ways of improving chess for any player, not just super talents. If you play blitz against players stronger than you, you stretch yourself. In the process of stretching yourself, you improve," Srinath Narayanan, who was in Budapest as India's captain, told The Indian Express.

In Gukesh's case, it was Vishnu who gave him a key advice that would prove to be a gamechanger. Vishnu told him to not use chess engines till he

crossed a certain rating barrier. It was a counter-intuitive gambit given engines have altered the way players now prepare for games. But the plan worked and Gukesh nearly became the youngest grandmaster in history.

R B Ramesh jumped full-time into coaching at 32, after being a part-time coach for nearly 10 years. “When we were players, we did not know if some of the decisions we were taking were good or bad. There was no one to seek guidance from. You just had to trust your instincts. For these youngsters, it helps to have someone who has gone through these things themselves.”

Of course, for India’s prodigies, the last mile in the knowledge gap was bridged by the nation’s first grandmaster, Anand.

At the height of the pandemic, Anand launched the Westbridge Anand Chess Academy (WACA), an online platform modelled on the legendary Botvinnik School of Chess in the erstwhile Soviet Union.

As part of WACA, Anand handpicked the country’s prodigies — Gukesh, Pragg, Vaishali and Arjun — and helped them get coaching from trainers he himself had worked with during his playing days. At WACA, Polish GM Grzegorz Gajewski taught opening theories, Sandipan Chanda helped them touch up their mid-game prep, Russian GM Artur Yusupov taught endgames and Boris Gelfand hosted mentoring sessions.

Anand also ensured the players had the best

personal attention. His input was essential for Gukesh hiring Polish GM Grzegorz Gajewski as his trainer because Anand thought the teenager needed to sharpen his openings. Anand also nudged Vaishali to hire Sandipan Chanda as her trainer. While Gukesh is now going to contend for the World Championship, Vaishali became India's third woman grandmaster.

Big moves, big money

At the Chess Olympiad, backed by the government, India took a big contingent to Budapest with their 10 players supported by a six-member backroom staff of grandmasters. The delegation included captains Srinath Narayanan and Abhijit Kunte and assistant coaches Vaibhav Suri, Sankalp Gupta, Swayams Mishra and Arjun Kalyan. India's second grandmaster Dibyendu Barua was also sent as the head of the delegation.



India's men's chess team after winning the 2024 Chess Olympiad. (Michal Walusza/FIDE)

The size of the delegation drew admiring looks from other grandmasters around the world.

“Here at the Olympiad, the Indian team is here with more coaches than players. And then there are other teams who are by themselves, preparing. They have to pay for their own flights to get here,” Hungarian grandmaster Richard Rapport told The Indian Express.

India’s winning run in chess has coincided with government support and financial viability of the sport – key factors behind the sport’s rising popularity among youngsters who see the sport as a career option.

There’s big money to be made in the sport, whether from playing for a league like the Global Chess League or by playing in individual events. Gukesh won €48,000 (approximately Rs 45 lakh) for winning the Candidates this year. Besides the prize money at these big-ticket events, there are open tournaments and online events where there is more money to be made.

“There was a time when incomes depended on the top tournaments that we played. But now, the current crop of Indian youngsters have massive sponsorships. They no longer care about the money they make from tournaments. So they sometimes play for very little money at open tournaments,” says Dutch grandmaster Anish Giri.

Giri is pointing at the jaw-dropping sponsorship deals that India’s top players have signed in

recent years. Pragg is backed by the Adani Group for an unspecified amount while Arjun signed a Rs 12.4 crore ($1.5 million) deal for five years in 2022.

Chess mates, all

While the world feverishly watched the Indians bulldoze their way past opponents in Budapest, away from the cameras, the Indian players bonded over more than just the game.

Srinath, the team captain, reveals how Arjun would order food for Vidit whenever his games stretched on for late because the latter ate only vegan fare and the buffet usually had limited vegan options.

“We used to have team walks together. And extremely long dinners where we would just crack jokes and roast each other. It’s mostly Hari anna (Harikrishna) and Vidit who pulled our legs. We had decided before the tournament that we wouldn’t talk about negative things because we didn’t want that to spread in the team,” says Arjun.

After the team won gold, all the players gathered in a hotel room and sat around a bed singing, with Vidit on the
guitar.

These group sessions are a rare privilege that only the Olympiad offers considering chess players usually live very isolated lives while on the tour.

"Indian prodigies like Arjun and Gukesh have risen together. They have just accepted the fact that they have to focus on their game…They are just so successful on their own that I don't think they compete with each other. They compete with themselves," says Anish Giri.

The closing ceremony of the Olympiad in Budapest offered a window into that camaraderie and mutual respect that India's best players shared in a sport that's otherwise a largely individualistic pursuit.

That day, as Praggnanandhaa stood on the stage with the winner's trophy, about to pose for a photograph, Vidit Gujrathi, one of the elder statesmen of the side, slipped in from behind, draped a tricolour over the young Pragg's shoulders and slipped out of the frame.

And then, there was Gukesh. For most of the year, he has worn his game face, but after the Olympiad win, coaxed by seniors Tania Sachdev and Vidit, he danced and did the Rohit Sharma-Messi slow-mo walk to the podium. After Anand handed the team the winners' trophy, Gukesh, Arjun and Vidit engaged in a conspiratorial whisper before handing the trophy to Anand and nudging the India legend to hold it aloft.

That was the day chess borrowed a bit of cricket's flamboyance – after the 2011 World Cup, the Indian cricket team had hoisted Sachin Tendulkar on their shoulders as they did a victory lap at the Wankhede Stadium. Anand later said, "That moment felt nice."

Meet India's individual gold winners at the Chess Olympiad

The Chess Olympiad saw some impressive solo performances from the Indian contingent with four players — Gukesh (board 1 in open section), Arjun Erigaisi (board 3 in open section), Divya Deshmukh (board 3 in women's section) and Vantika Agrawal (board 4 in women's section) — winning individual golds as well.

Gukesh: With eight wins in 10 games, he is now World No. 5 in real-time live rankings. His ratings rose by 30 points to 2,794 in just 10 games.

Arjun Erigaisi: Started the Olympiad with a rating of 2,778, but is now three points away from breaking into the exclusive 2,800 club. He added 19 points to his tally at Budapest and is now World No. 3 in the live rankings.

Divya Deshmukh: Was one of India's stars in the women's section at the Olympiad. She added 17 points to her tally and is now the World No. 11.

Vantika Agrawal: The surprise package for India at the Olympiad, she played nine games, winning six and drawing three. Her big wins were against Georgian grandmaster Bella Khotenashvili and American GM Irina Krush, both coming with black pieces.

The lime mortar wonders:
The forgotten Paigah tombs of Hyderabad

– Rahul V Pisharody, Hyderabad



Maqhbara Shams al-Umra, also known as the Paigah tombs.
(Photo: Rahul V Pisharody)

Hidden in the heart of Hyderabad's old city, tucked among the narrow lanes of Santoshnagar, lies a forgotten architectural marvel: Maqhbara Shams al-Umra, also known as the Paigah tombs. This 200-year-old necropolis, located just three kilometres south of Charminar, has long been neglected. However, there's hope on the horizon as restoration efforts are now underway, offering a chance to revive this historical site.

The ongoing project to revive the necropolis of one of the most powerful noble families of Hyderabad has been taken up by the Department of Heritage Telangana and the Aga Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC). The conservation of six of the 14 monuments is supported by the US Ambassadors Fund for Cultural Preservation.

The architecture

The magnificent stone and lime mortar structures are a reflection of the aesthetic tastes of the Paigah family, who displayed their wealth and grandeur even in death. The tombs have a variety of trellises (jaalis or screens), ornamented pillars, roundels on the facades, carved wooden doors and panels, and pineapple motifs, a symbol of hospitality, notes Dr J Kedareswari in his book The Paigah Tombs. “With the stucco work and geometrical patterns, they create a harmony that is consistent with the Islamic belief that all creation is harmoniously interrelated. Islamic art depicted in the Paigah tombs explores geometric systems that depend upon the regular division of the circle,” she says.

A board outside the tombs reads: the complex is a unique ensemble with no comparative site anywhere in the world, boasting of the incredible craftsmanship employed by the Hyderabadi craftsmen.

Prof. Salma Ahmed Farooqui, Director, H K Sherwani Centre for Deccan Studies at the Maulana Azad National Urdu University (MANUU) says that in history, whether it is a noble or a king, they always wanted to leave their imprints behind. “The best imprints you leave behind for posterity is through architecture. Architecture is something they indulged in, the more the grandeur meant that everyone remembered them for a long long time till the structure perishes,” she says, adding that today the Paigah tombs could be the only thing visible

but their significance needs to be seen in totality. “We should not see Paigahs only in relation to the tombs. They played a much larger role of importance in Nizam’s Hyderabad, which needs to be reconstructed. They were a very important component of nobility.”

Who were the Paigahs?

The Paigahs were a noble family of Hyderabad, only second to the Nizams. Their wealth, power and influence continued from the inception of the Asaf Jahi rule of the Nizams in 1724 till the princely state’s accession into the Indian Union in 1948. “They were known for their loyalty to the Nizams and were related to the ruling family through matrimony,” says Sibghat Ullah Khan, architectural designer and co-founder of the Deccan Archive, a non-profit entity documenting the heritage of Hyderabad.



The tombs are being restored by the Aga Khan Trust for Culture and Department of Heritage Telangana. (Rahul V Pisharody/Indian Express)

One of their most famous palaces is now the iconic Taj Falaknuma Palace. Originally built on a hilltop by Nawab Sir Viqar-ul-Umra who was the prime minister of Hyderabad state,

the palace was eventually gifted to the sixth Nizam, Nawab Mir Mahboob Ali Khan, after he expressed admiration for its grandeur.

Prof Farooqui says that the Paigahs were given extensive tracts of land, sometimes bigger than that available with Jagirdars, where they maintained their private army that would assist the Nizams in times of any incursions or adversities. "In these estates, which comprised thousands of villages, the Paigahs got the revenue and judicial powers and started participating in education, health, public works, revenue settlements etc. But their primary responsibility was undoubtedly to maintain private forces for the Nizam," she adds.

Pineapple motifs and ostrich eggs

At the tomb complex in Phisalbanda, the first tomb on the left is that of Abul Fateh Khan or Nawab Taig Jung Bahadur. He was the family patriarch who was first bestowed the honorary title of 'Paigah' by the first Nizam. The word 'Paigah' means a 'footstool' because they were the military commanders of the Nizam and staunch loyalists of the house of Asaf Jahs.

A striking feature of the tombs is the ostrich egg that hangs above the grave of Fakruddin Khan, Abul Fateh Khan's son and the first to marry into the Nizam's family, which cemented their relationship further. The Nizam was dependent on the Paigahs and the latter had repeatedly demonstrated their loyalty. "In Hyderabad, it was common for the Nawabs to hold Ostrich races at their palaces. An Ostrich egg was considered

exotic. This is the reason why it was hung above the grave of Fakruddin Khan and it is the last surviving one," says Sibghat.

A pineapple is another important motif that is extensively used at the tombs complex. It was introduced to the Deccan by the Portuguese and thereafter symbolised royalty.



A striking feature of the tombs is the ostrich egg that hangs above the grave of Fakruddin Khan. (Photo: Rahul V Pisharody/Indian Express)

"These are not great buildings but just pure works of art. Restoring Paigah tombs is like restoring a painting," says Ratish Nanda, conservation architect and CEO of the AKTC. According to him, the ongoing project is similar to an art conservation project with time-taking and painstaking work of craftsmanship.

Nanda notes that the tombs are adorned with intricate stucco work and even the jaalis are made of lime mortar, which is unique to these monuments. The complex has open-to-sky enclosures that boast incredible carving work on lime mortar, wood and marble surfaces. It was only during the restoration that many new facts emerged. "For instance, we now know that all the minarets are made of terracotta. They have

an iron core, covered in terracotta to give the shape and then plastered in lime mortar and had copper finials on top. Four or five materials are used in minarets alone," Nanda says, adding that it took them a lot of time to figure out how the jaali was made. "These are made of terracotta tiles. It is almost like creating a house of cards by stacking terracotta tiles on top of each other. And then they are covered in lime plaster. Such jaalis are not seen anywhere in the country."

The Paigahs adopted various styles of architecture to include them in their buildings and structures. "It is because the Paigah patriarchs would travel across the world and adopt elements that inspire them. Besides Mughalai and Rajputana influence, later tombs had Moroccan and Spanish elements. Because of the wealth they had, they could employ the best of craftsmen for the job," says Sibghat.

One of the finest examples of their international exposure could be seen in the Spanish mosque in Begumpet, which was also an estate of Paigahs. The building campus that housed the US consulate general in Hyderabad for over a decade, before they moved to their new campus in the IT corridor, is another example of a Paigah palace. Asman Garh Palace in Malakpet is one of the few remaining Paigah palaces that still stand in Hyderabad.

Ring Road Masterplan:
Decongesting Mumbai by 2029

– Sweety Adimulam, Mumbai



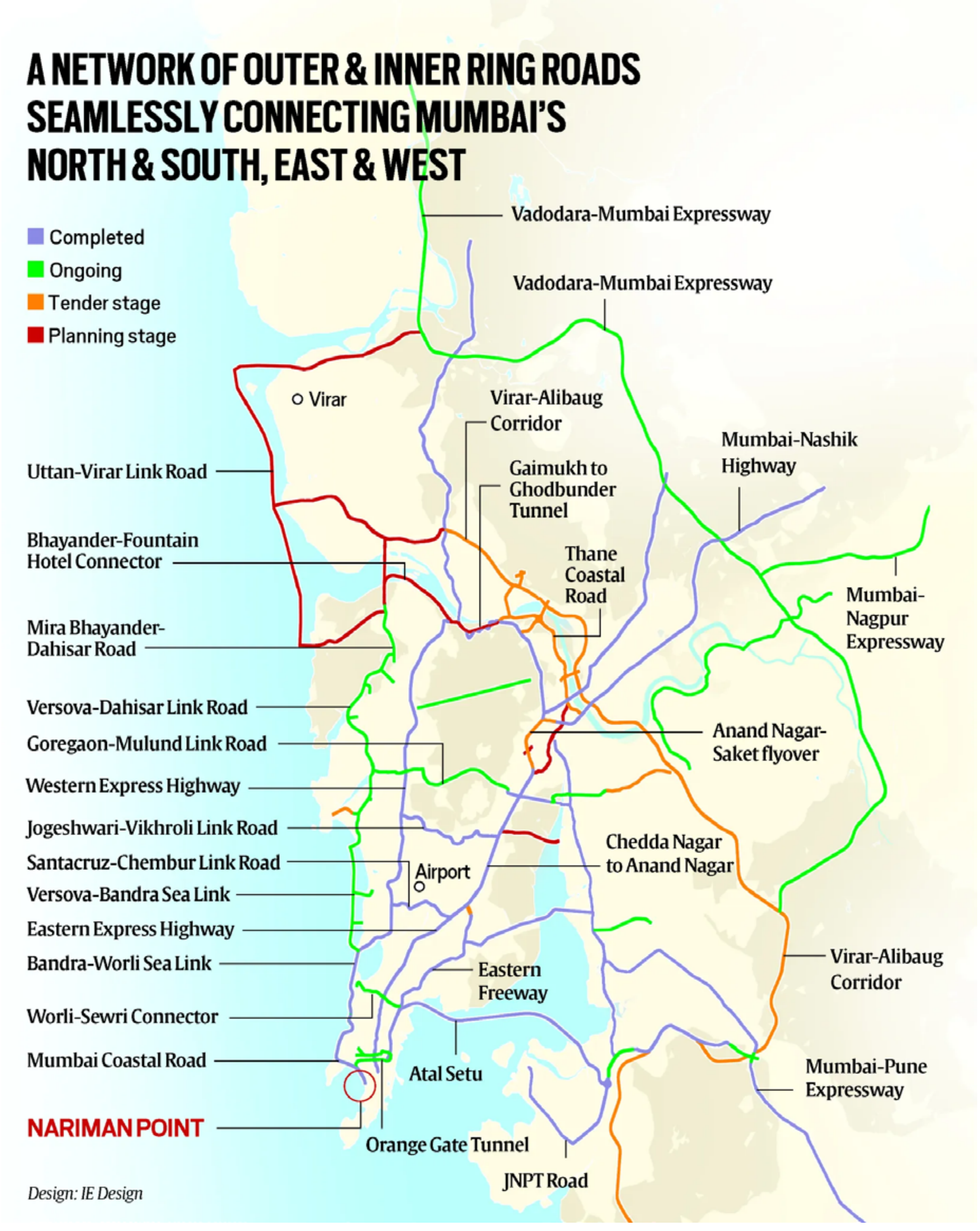
Once complete, Mumbai Ring Road Masterplan will have a huge impact on the island city and the adjoining mainland.

Mumbai's Coastal Road is only a glimpse of what is set to come up over the next five years. The Indian Express has exclusively accessed Mumbai's Ring Road masterplan prepared by MMRDA that showcases the mega road connectivity across the length and breadth of the Mumbai Metropolitan Region (MMR) — from Vadodara, Gujarat border up North to Alibaug in the Konkan belt of Maharashtra down South and towards Navi Mumbai/Thane. This vast, intricate and complex network of roads, flyovers, reclaimed coastal roads, bridges and underwater tunnels aim to free Mumbai of all its infamous bottlenecks by 2029. Once complete, this planned infrastructure will have a huge impact on the island city and the adjoining mainland. Not only will it declutter and decongest the MMR, but will also make public transport much more convenient.

Here's how this is all likely to happen:

The Mumbai Metropolitan Region Development Authority (MMRDA), the planning authority of the metropolitan region, has approved building an additional 90.18 kilometres of road network at an estimated cost of Rs 58,517 crore. Outer Ring Roads will be connected to inner Ring Roads, thereby providing unhindered travel between North and South Mumbai and also a seamless East-West connectivity.

The inner Ring Roads will cater to the rapid urbanisation of Mumbai and Thane — two of Maharashtra's most economically and culturally



vibrant cities. However, it is not limited to roads only, the total project cost of all infrastructure projects including metro, new roads, bridges, flyovers, slum development etc in the MMR is estimated at Rs 3 lakh crore.

The Ring Roads and connecting roads that currently are in various stages of tendering and development will see various development authorities such as MMRDA, Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) and the Maharashtra State Road Development Corporation (MSRDC) come together to give shape to this mega plan to establish a Ring Road network that will ensure signal-free, or minimal-interruption travel from one end of the city to the other.

What makes these Ring Roads significant is their focus on improving East-West connectivity — a long-overlooked aspect of Mumbai's infrastructure. Once complete, they will also boost economic activity in the region. Currently, Mumbai accounts for around 4 per cent of India's GDP and a recent report prepared by Niti Aayog has projected the GDP of MMR region to double by 2030 from $140 billion now to $300 billion.

Here's a look at the plan of the network of Ring Roads and how they are going to seamlessly connect various corners of Mumbai:

First Ring Road

Nariman Point-Coastal Road-Worli Sewri Connector-Eastern Freeway-Orange Gate Tunnel-Nariman Point



The first Ring Road begins at Nariman Point on the Mumbai Coastal Road, extending toward the Bandra-Worli Sea Link at the Worli Junction. From there, a right turn leads to the Sewri-Worli Connector, which links to the southern end of the Atal Setu. The route continues up to the proposed Orange Gate Tunnel, eventually looping back to Nariman Point via the Coastal Road, creating a seamless, connected path around the city.

Existing and upcoming roads

Mumbai Coastal Road (open to traffic)

- 6.7 km, undertaken by BMC at a cost of Rs 9,500 crore

Sewri-Worli Connector

- 4.5 km, undertaken by MMRDA (under-construction)
- Expected to be ready by December 2025
- Contractor JKumar Infra

Eastern Freeway (open to traffic), developed by MMRDA

Orange Gate Tunnel (tender awarded, work to begin soon)

- 9.5 km, undertaken by MMRDA at a projected cost of Rs 7,765 crore
- Contractor: L&T

Second Ring Road

Nariman Point-Bandra Worli Sea Link-WEH-Santacruz Chembur Link Road-EEH-Eastern Freeway-Orange Gate Tunnel-Nariman Point



Starting at Nariman Point on the Mumbai Coastal Road and then to Bandra-Worli Sea Link, it will link to Western Express Highway (WEH) extending up to the Santacruz Junction. It then follows the Santacruz-Chembur Link Road (SCLR), merging with the Eastern Express Highway and continuing through Eastern Freeway to the upcoming Orange Gate Tunnel, before reconnecting with the Mumbai Coastal Road to complete the Ring Road.

Existing and upcoming roads

Mumbai Coastal Road at Nariman Point to Bandra-Worli Sea Link

Bandra-Worli Sea Link (open to traffic)

- 5.6 km, undertaken by MSRDC at a cost of Rs 1,306 crore

Bandra Junction Kalanagar, WEH up to Santacruz

- 3.5 km, open to traffic, looked after by BMC

SCLR connecting Eastern Express Highway

- 6.4 km, open to traffic

Eastern Freeway (open to traffic)
Orange Gate Tunnel to Mumbai Coastal Road to Nariman Point

Third Ring Road

Nariman Point-Bandra Worli Sea Link-WEH-JVLR-Kanjurmarg Junction-Eastern Freeway Extension-Eastern Freeway-Orange Gate Tunnel-Nariman Point

The third Ring Road begins at Nariman Point on the Mumbai Coastal Road, connecting to the Bandra-Worli Sea Link, further Bandra-Versova link and then Jogeshwari-Vikhroli Link Road. It then extends to the Powai-Kanjurmarg Junction, following the Eastern



Freeway Extension to the Chheda Nagar Junction, where it merges with the Eastern Express Freeway. The route continues along the Eastern Express Freeway up to the upcoming Orange Gate Tunnel, finally linking back to the Mumbai Coastal Road, completing the circuit.

Mumbai Coastal Road at Nariman Point to Bandra-Worli Sea Link (open to traffic)
Bandra-Versova link (under construction by MSRDC)

Powai-Kanjurmarg Junction through JVLR (open to traffic)

Chheda Nagar Junction to Anand Nagar Eastern Freeway Extension (tender awarded, work to begin soon)

- 12.96 km, undertaken by MMRDA at a cost Rs 2,790 crore
- Orange Gate Tunnel to Mumbai Coastal Road to Nariman Point

Fourth Ring Road

Nariman Point-Bandra Worli Sea Link-Versova Bandra Sea Link-Versova Dahisar Link Road-Goregaon Mulund Link Road-Eastern Freeway Extension-Eastern Freeway-Orange Gate Tunnel-Nariman Point

The fourth Ring Road project aims to enhance connectivity across the city's bustling thoroughfares. Starting at Nariman Point on the Mumbai Coastal Road, connecting to the Bandra-Worli Sea Link, it will transition to Versova-Bandra Sea Link. Travellers can then navigate



the Versova-Dahisar Link Road, taking a right turn to access the Goregaon-Mulund Link Road (GMLR), which leads to Airoli Junction. This route will touch Eastern Freeway proposed extension, eventually connecting to the existing Eastern Freeway, providing a smooth passage to the upcoming Orange Gate Tunnel and back to Nariman Point.

Existing and upcoming roads

Mumbai Coastal Road at Nariman Point to Bandra-Worli Sea Link (open to traffic)
Versova-Bandra Sea Link (construction stage)
Project undertaken by MSRDC; contractor is Apco Infra
Versova-Dahisar-Bhayander Link Road

- 18.50 km, undertaken by BMC (projected cost Rs 19,000 crore, tender awarded)

Goregaon-Mulund Link Road (GMLR)

- 12.20-km long road; Rs 14,000 crore project undertaken by BMC
- Foundation stone laid in July 2024 by PM Narendra Modi

Chheda Nagar Junction to Anand Nagar, extension of Eastern Freeway

- Tender awarded, work to begin soon
- 12.96 km undertaken by MMRDA at a cost

of Rs 2,790 crore

Eastern Freeway (operational)
Orange Gate Tunnel to Mumbai Coastal Road to Nariman Point

Fifth Ring Road

Nariman Point-Bandra Worli Sea Link-Versova Dahisar Link Road-Bhayander-Fountain Hotel Connector-Gaimukh-Ghodbunder Tunnel-Thane Coastal Road-Anand Nagar-Saket Flyover-Eastern Freeway Extension-Orange Gate Tunnel-Nariman Point



The fifth Ring Road project aims to enhance Mumbai's connectivity through an extensive and well-planned route. It begins at Nariman Point along the Coastal Road, extending to the Bandra-Worli Sea Link and then the Versova-Bandra Sea Link. From there, the route follows the Versova-Dahisar Link Road, continuing to the Mira-Bhayander and then Bhayander Fountain Hotel Connector on Ghodbunder Road in Thane. The journey progresses to Gaimukh through Ghodbunder-Gaimukh Tunnel; Thane Coastal Road. This thoroughfare provides access to the Anand Nagar-Saket flyover, which directs traffic towards

Chheda Nagar through extension of the Eastern Freeway. Ultimately, the route culminates at the Orange Gate Tunnel, completing the ring and returning to the Mumbai Coastal Road. This ambitious outer Ring Road project not only promises to streamline travel across the city but also significantly improve accessibility for residents and commuters alike.

Existing and upcoming roads

Mumbai Coastal Road at Nariman Point to Bandra-Worli Sea Link to Versova-Bandra Sea Link to Versova-Dahisar-Bhayander Link Road

Gaimukh to Fountain Hotel Junction

- This stretch, currently under the jurisdiction of the Public Works Department (PWD), is 5.5-km long with a 2+2 lane configuration. Given the expected increase in traffic following the completion of the Thane Coastal Road, a 3+3 lane tunnel is being considered to ease congestion and provide a faster route through the hilly terrain.

Fountain Hotel Junction to Bhayander

- An elevated road running parallel to the Thane Creek from Ghodbunder Road to Bhayander Jetty is proposed. This 10-km route will provide a direct connection to BMC's Versova-Bhayander Road, completing the Ring Road system and enabling seamless movement between the cities.

Anand Nagar to Saket

- Tender awarded work to begin soon
- 8.24 km, undertaken by MMRDA at a cost

of Rs 1,854 crore

Chheda Nagar Junction to Anand Nagar, extension of Eastern Freeway to Orange Gate Tunnel to Nariman Point

Sixth Outer Ring Road

Nariman Point-Versova Bandra Sea Link-Mira Bhayander Link Road-Alibaug Virar Corridor-Thane Coastal Road-Anand Nagar Saket Flyover-Eastern Express Highway-Eastern Freeway-Orange Gate Tunnel-Nariman Point



The sixth and extreme Outer Ring Road project is poised to transform Mumbai's transportation network with a comprehensive route designed for enhanced connectivity. It begins at Nariman Point along the Coastal Road, extending to the Bandra-Worli Sea Link and further on to the Versova-Bandra Sea Link. From there, the route connects to the Versova-Dahisar Link Road, leading to the Mira-Bhayander Link Road and the Uttan Link Road. This thoroughfare links to the Alibaug-Virar Corridor and continues towards Phase 1 of the Thane Coastal Road, ultimately reaching the Anand Nagar-Saket

flyover. Travellers will then access Chheda Nagar and the Anand Nagar extension of the Eastern Freeway, culminating at the Orange Gate Tunnel. This well-planned Ring Road completes the loop, returning to the Mumbai Coastal Road. With its strategic design, the project promises to significantly improve traffic flow and accessibility across the region, benefiting commuters and residents alike.

Existing and upcoming roads

Mumbai Coastal Road at Nariman Point to Versova Dahisar Bhayander Link Road Uttan Link Road, which is extension of Versova-Bhayander Link Road

- At proposal stage

Alibaug-Virar Multi Modal Corridor

- Undertaken by MSRDC, at land acquisition stage
- Nearly 100 km long costing Rs 60,000 crore

Thane Coastal Road Phase 1 (Kharegaon to Gaimukh)

- 13.45 km long, undertaken by MMRDA, costing Rs 2,799 crore (tender awarded)

Anand Saket Flyover to Chheda Nagar Junction to Anand Nagar, extension of Eastern Express Highway to Orange Gate Tunnel to Nariman Point

Seventh Outer Ring Road

Nariman Point-Versova Dahisar Bhayander Link Road-Uttan Link Road-Vadodara Mumbai Expressway-Alibaug Virar Multi Modal Corridor-Atal Setu via JNPT-Orange Gate Tunnel-Nariman Point



The seventh Outer Ring Road project is set to significantly enhance Mumbai's connectivity and ease of transportation. It begins at Nariman Point along the Coastal Road and extends to the Bandra-Worli Sea Link, before continuing to the Versova-Bandra Sea Link. The route then connects with the Versova-Dahisar Link Road and the Mira-Bhayander Link Road, progressing to the Uttan Link Road and the Vadodara-Mumbai Expressway.

This thoroughfare touches the Virar-Alibaug Multi-Modal Corridor and links to the MTHL Atal Setu at JNPT Road (NH-348). As it approaches the southern end of Atal Setu, the road leads into the Orange Gate Tunnel on the Eastern Freeway, ultimately returning to Nariman Point along the Coastal Road.

This strategically designed link is expected to

greatly benefit commercial vehicles, particularly as freight traffic is projected to rise with the development of Vadhwan Port in Palghar, facilitating smoother logistics and transportation across the region.

Existing and upcoming roads

Mumbai Coastal Road at Nariman Point to Versova-Dahisar-Bhayander Link Road
Uttan Link Road, an extension of VBLR (tendering stage)
Vadodara-Mumbai Expressway (under-construction stage)

- 379-km-long expressway, a NHAI project

Alibaug-Virar Multi Modal Corridor

- Undertaken by MSRDC (at land acquisition stage)
- Nearly 100-km long to be developed at a cost of Rs 60,000 crore

Atal Setu via JNPT Road (opened for traffic in January 2024)

- 21.8 km undertaken by MMRDA

From Atal Setu to Orange Gate Tunnel to Nariman Point

'Future of transportation looks promising'

MMRDA Commissioner Sanjay Mukherjee emphasised that these projects aim to reduce travel time across the city to under an hour. "When we say Mumbai in minutes, it should not take more than 59 minutes to travel from

one end of the city to the other," he said.

Mukherjee said the projects are not just about traffic alleviation — they are pivotal to transforming Mumbai and Thane's transport landscape. Once completed, the Ring Road system will not only reduce congestion but also stimulate economic growth by improving access to key areas. "With MMRDA, MSRDC, and BMC working together, the future of transportation in Mumbai and Thane looks promising," Mukherjee said.



Dabba Calling: Why police are grappling with a new extortion technique

– Mahender Singh Manral, New Delhi



Called 'Dabba Calling', the method is suspected to be used by foreign-based gangsters to escape detection. (Illustration by Suvajit Dey)

First, a henchman would allegedly place an extortion call to his intended victim using the Internet. Next, he would place a second call using another phone to his boss sitting in a different country, keep the two phones side-by-side, turn on their speakers, and allegedly let his boss do the talking.

For over six months, the police in states such as Punjab, Haryana, Rajasthan and Delhi have been poring over a new puzzle – how to track down gangsters allegedly making extortion calls using this method to hoodwink intelligence agencies. Called 'Dabba Calling' – a name presumably given because it involves threats being made through a second phone (dabba) – the method is suspected to be used by foreign-based gangsters such as Goldy Brar, the alleged mastermind behind the killing of Punjabi singer Sidhu Moose

Wala; Rohit Godara; and Anmol Bishnoi to escape detection.

According to police sources, the method was flagged by the police in these states at a recent meeting at the Delhi Police headquarters. Officials representing the National Investigation Agency (NIA) also attended the meeting.

In most of these cases, the henchman and the gang leader are allegedly in two different locations, even different countries, and make Voice over Internet Protocol (VOIP) — or simply Internet — calls.

Most of those targeted are "builders, contractors, high-profile businessmen, bookies, cable operators, high-end car dealers, club/hotel owners, illegal call centre owners, foreign exchange and hawala operators, and some local politicians," one source said.

The calls are typically made using a virtual private network, or VPN — an encrypted connection over the Internet between a device and a remote server that's aimed at masking one's online identity.

According to investigators, this "simple method" makes it challenging to trace the source of the call.

"So, when the call forensics are done, the trail ends with the location of the aide, who's miles away from the main extortionist," one officer told The Indian Express.

One such example, according to this officer, is a call that 21-year-old gangster Himanshu Bhau,

a fugitive whose last known location is believed to be Portugal, made to a known cable operator in India last year.

"First, Bhau's aide (Gangster B) made a VOIP call from a different location to the cable operator in Outer Delhi's Ranhola and another call from a different phone set to Bhau. He then put both on speaker and Bhau threatened to kill the victim if he didn't pay. When the demands were not met, Bhau sent his shooters to fire at the victim's office, killing his son Hitesh," the officer said.

The discovery was made on the back of an FIR registered at Delhi's Ranhola Police Station on February 27 last year. On that day, the Delhi Police had arrested two sharpshooters from Jhajjar, Haryana, following an alleged encounter.

According to the officer quoted earlier, these gangs are using apps that offer end-to-end encryption — a security method that keeps data private by converting it into a code — "for secure communication".

"There are several instances when some of these apps cited jurisdictional issues because the gangsters are in foreign locations, and refused to share details," the officer said.

According to the sources in the Delhi Police, several service providers also have refused to share IP addresses citing such jurisdictional issues. And in cases where such details are provided, the IP is found to be a foreign country because of VPNs.

"This legal process takes several months and by

the time it's done, the gangster has moved to a different place," the officer quoted earlier said. "If the IP is in India, then details are procured about the user. In most cases, it turns out that the SIM card and dongle used are found procured through fake documents".

In cases where such calls don't go through and the intended victim doesn't answer the phone, voice messages are sent, also using VPNs.

According to sources, several police officers claimed at the six-hour long meeting that it was difficult to trace the money trail of these gangsters.

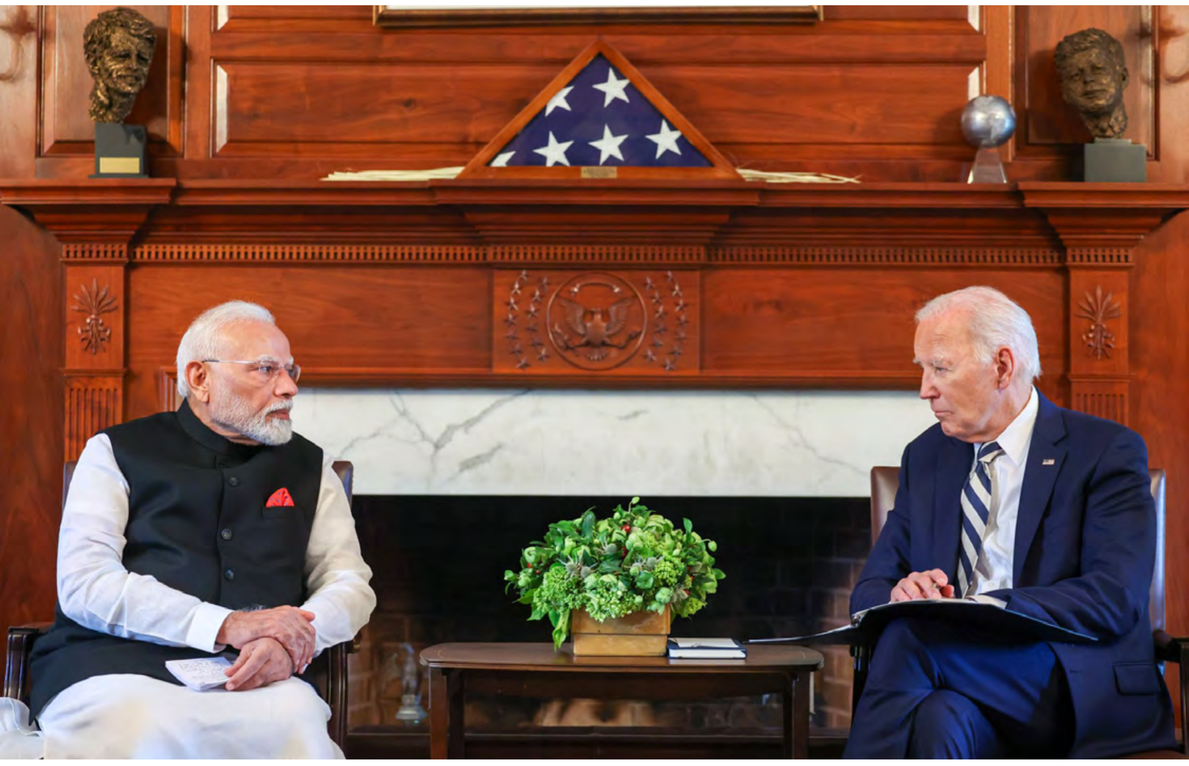
The Haryana Police also said at the meeting that it had issued 26 Look Out Circulars against different criminals — including three blue notices and eight red notices — against gangsters such as Brar, Godara, and Anmol Bishnoi.

While an Interpol blue notice is an international alert used to help locate, identify, or obtain information about a person of interest in a criminal investigation, a red notice is a request to law enforcement agencies worldwide to locate and provisionally arrest a person.

Besides these, they have also issued four notices for passport revocation. "They also said at the meeting that they have registered around 13 cases against the gangsters and their associates for making fake passports," the officer said.

How India-US ties progressed under the Joe Biden presidency

– Shubhajit Roy



Prime Minister Narendra Modi and US President Joe Biden hold bilateral talks in Delaware. (Photo: @PMOIndia/X)

On the sidelines of the Quad leaders' summit, Prime Minister Narendra Modi held a meeting with United States President Joe Biden on September 21. This might well have been the final tête-à-tête between the two world leaders before Biden leaves the White House in January 2025.

The Biden presidency has been enormously consequential for India-US ties. After the hour-long meeting with PM Modi last week, the President remarked that his country's partnership with India "is stronger, closer, and more dynamic than any time in history".

Biden: An old friend of India

President Biden's advocacy of stronger ties between the two countries far predates his entry into the Oval Office.
In 2006, three years before he became Vice President to President Barack Obama, Biden articulated his vision for the future of India-US relations. "My dream is that in 2020, the two closest nations in the world will be India and the United States," he said.

In 2008, then Senator Biden worked with both Democrats and Republicans to get the landmark India-US nuclear deal approved in the US Congress. This was despite the initial reservations of soon-to-be President Obama on the matter.

As Vice President, Biden continued working towards furthering India-US ties. He visited India with his wife Jill in 2013, and met, among others, then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Vice President Hamid Ansari.

In August 2020, as the Democratic Presidential nominee, Biden said that he would stand with India in confronting various threats along its borders.

His personal affinity to India aside, President Biden inherited a strong India-US relationship from his predecessor Donald Trump. The former president had, for the very first time, framed China as a strategic rival and adversary to the US, and thus aligned Washington and New Delhi's

positions. In this regard, Biden carried Trump's legacy forward.

Trump revived the Quad grouping comprising India, the US, Australia, and Japan in 2017. In 2021, Biden elevated the Quad to the leaders' level, the highest in international diplomacy. He hosted the first Quad leaders' summit in March that year, less than two months after he became president.

Since then, Biden and PM Modi have met six times at the leaders' level, including four times in person. On the bilateral front, the two have interacted at least 10 times, including twice virtually.

US-India technology cooperation

New Delhi and Washington realised in the post-pandemic world that they needed to frame their ties in durable terms. Both countries wanted to de-risk themselves from future China-related disruptions, and become a part of a resilient global supply chain.

India also wished to be part of the US-led tech ecosystem. No major country in the post-World War II era has succeeded without technogical support from Washington — from Japan and Germany in the War's immediate aftermath to Singapore and Taiwan more recently. Even the rise of China, to some extent, was aided by support from the US.

Biden saw the opportunity in including India into the US tech ecosystem. Washington and New Delhi began working to this end in 2022. On January 31, 2023, the two National Security Advisers launched the Initiative for Critical and Emerging Technology (iCET) in Washington to facilitate strategic technology collaborations in critical and emerging technologies, and enable co-development and co-production in the tech sphere. iCET also looked to connect the two countries' respective innovation ecosystems, especially in AI, quantum, telecom, space, biotech, semiconductors, and emerging defence technologies.

After three NSA-level meetings — the most recent one taking place between NSA Ajit Doval and his US counterpart Jake Sullivan in June 2024 — the outcomes of iCET are now visible.

PM Modi's recent visit saw him sign an agreement for setting up a semiconductor fabrication plant in India, which would make chips for use in "national security, next generation telecommunications and green energy applications". Both Biden and Modi hailed the "watershed arrangement" in which the US military has agreed to a partnership with India on highly valued technology.

The fab, focused on "advanced sensing, communication and power electronics", will be enabled by support from the India Semiconductor Mission as well as a strategic technology partnership between Bharat Semi, 3rdiTech, and the US Space Force, the joint statement said. "It will be established with the objective

of manufacturing infrared, gallium nitride and silicon carbide semiconductors," it said.

Drawing a parallel with the Indo-US civil nuclear deal, sources said the fab titled Shakti (or 'power') would not only be the first technology partnership between Indian businesses and the US Space Force, but also a first in the Quad. Officials have said that this marks a "glass-ceiling broken" in tech diplomacy, by "raising the game and going into true chip fabrication, the holy grail of semiconductors", not just testing and assembly, as was the case in previous India-US arrangements.

Beyond the fab, India and the US are working on a broad range technology partnerships, from joint research conducted by NASA and ISRO on the International Space Station, to a pact for critical minerals supply chains and emerging digital technologies in Asia and Africa. There has also been progress regarding a deal for 31 remotely piloted aircraft which India would acquire from the US.

Some headwinds in ties

That said, the headwinds in India-US ties cannot be ignored. Most notably, in recent months, the alleged assassination plot against US-based pro-Khalistan separatist Gurpatwant Singh Pannun has been a thorny issue.

Two important developments took place days before PM Modi's visit to the US.

- Last week, a US court issued summons to NSA Doval, among others, after Pannun filed a civil suit seeking damages for the alleged assassination plot. India has described the allegations "completely unwarranted and unsubstantiated imputations". However, Doval was nonetheless absent from India's official delegation this time around. Sources said the Jammu & Kashmir elections and domestic commitments had kept the NSA from travelling to the US.

- The fact that a group of Sikh activists and pro-Khalistan separatists visited the White House on the eve of PM Modi's US visit was also a signal to New Delhi. Local media in Delaware reported that pro-Khalistan protesters could be seen along the route of the Prime Minister's motorcade.

India has to address this issue to remove any misgivings in Washington about New Delhi's democratic credentials. But South Block believes that in the larger scheme of things, the two countries' strategic alignment vis-à-vis China means that such challenges are only minor wrinkles to be ironed out.

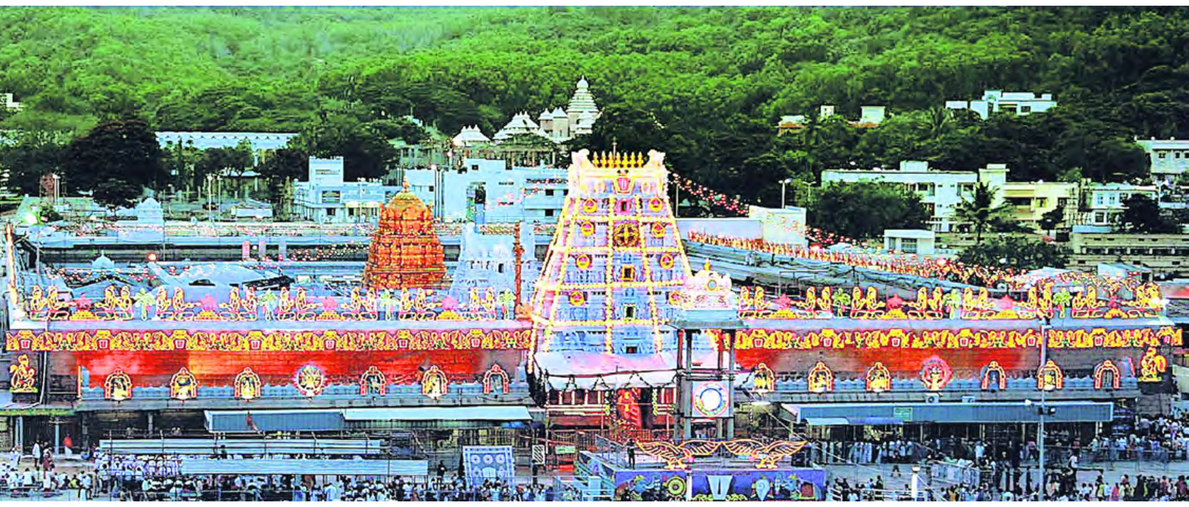
With Biden leaving office early next year, New Delhi will be keenly watching the US elections in November to see who carries forward his legacy — his Vice President and current Democratic nominee Kamala Harris, or his predecessor and Republican nominee Donald Trump.



EXPRESS EXPLAINED

How India's temples are run

– Deeptiman Tiwary



The head of the Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanams, which runs the Venkateswara Temple in Tirupati, is appointed by the Andhra Pradesh government. Express Archive

As the Supreme Court hears petitions seeking a court-monitored probe into the alleged adulteration of the ghee in Lord Venkateswara's laddu prasadam, Hindu organisations have revived their demand to free temples from government control.

The Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) has announced a nationwide campaign, and Andhra Pradesh Deputy Chief Minister Pawan Kalyan has called for a "Sanatana Dharma Rakshana Board" to look into all issues relating to temples.

How are religious places run in India?

Muslims and Christians manage their places of worship and religious institutions through boards or trusts run by the community. In the case of many Hindu, Sikh, Jain, and Buddhist

places of worship, however, the government exercises considerable control. Hindu temples form the majority of the around 30 lakh places of worship in India (2011 census).

Temples in Tamil Nadu are managed by the state's Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments (HR&CE) department. The AP government controls and appoints the head of the Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanams (TTD), which runs the Tirupati Temple.

States use a part of the income from offerings and donations at large temples for the administration and upkeep of those and smaller temples, and for welfare activities that may or may not be connected to the temple — such as running hospitals, orphanages, or schools/ colleges that provide secular education.

Several states — including Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Kerala, Maharashtra, Odisha, Himachal Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, and Rajasthan — have enacted laws that give the government the power to administer temples, their incomes and expenditures.

The erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir enacted The Jammu and Kashmir Shri Mata Vaishno Devi Shrine Act, 1988, to manage, specifically, the Vaishno Devi Mata Shrine in Katra, Jammu.

States draw their power to enact such legislation from Article 25(2) of the Constitution, under

which a government can make laws "regulating or restricting any economic, financial, political or other secular activity which may be associated with religious practice", and "providing for social welfare and reform or the throwing open of Hindu religious institutions of a public character to all classes and sections of Hindus".

Religious endowments and institutions are in List III (Concurrent List) of the Seventh Schedule, which means both the Centre and states can legislate on the subject.

How did Hindu temples come under government control?

The historical evidence for the construction of monumental temples dates back to the Mauryan period (321-185 BCE). Throughout Indian history, kings and nobles have donated land and riches to temples, which emerged as centres of culture and economy. The larger temples often promoted agriculture and irrigation, and were significant economic drivers.

In the medieval period, invaders repeatedly attacked and pillaged India's fabulously wealthy temples. The colonial rulers sought to control them — and between 1810 and 1817, the East India Company enacted a series of laws in the presidencies of Bengal, Madras, and Bombay, giving themselves the right to interfere in the administration of temples, purportedly to prevent the misappropriation of their income and endowments.

In 1863, the British enacted the Religious Endowments Act, which handed over control of temples to committees set up under the Act. However, the government retained considerable influence through judicial jurisdiction, the extension of the Civil Procedure Code and Official Trustees Act to temples, and the Charitable and Religious Trusts Act, 1920. In 1925, the Madras Hindu Religious Endowments Act empowered provincial governments to legislate on matters of endowments — over the years, this law gave enormous powers of oversight to a board of commissioners, which could even take over the management of a temple.

After Independence, the 1925 Act became the blueprint for various states to enact their own laws to administer temples. The first such Act was the Madras Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments Act, passed by the State of Madras in 1951, which paved the way for the supervision of temples by the HR&CE department, and provided for the appointment of an Executive Officer.

Around the same time, a similar law was passed in Bihar. The Madras law was struck down in court, but a new one was enacted in 1959 with a few modifications.

Today, most states in South India follow similar legal structures to control temples. It has been argued that government intervention is necessary to ensure that all castes are allowed entry into Hindu places of worship.

How old is the demand for freeing temples from government control?

- The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) passed the first resolution in 1959.

The Akhil Bharatiya Pratinidhi Sabha (ABPS), the top decision-making meeting of the RSS, urged the Uttar Pradesh government "to take steps to return this (Kashi Vishwanath) temple to the Hindus". The resolution noted that the "tendency of the government to establish its control and monopoly, directly or indirectly, over the various spheres of life is becoming more and more pronounced over the last few years".

- In 1988, the Akhil Bharatiya Karyakari Mandal (ABKM) of the RSS called upon the "various state governments to respond to the legitimate demand of the Hindu society and hand over the temples to the right representatives of Hindu devotees". The ABKM resolution said government control over temples was "unfair, unjust and discriminatory", and alleged that "governments are taking over temples with an eye on their enormous funds".

- Religious leaders in South India have from time to time sought control over temples. The VHP, which has been raising the issue since the early 1970s, passed a resolution at its meeting in Faridabad in 2021 demanding a central law to free temples from government control.

- Over the past 10 years, the BJP has often echoed the RSS. At an election rally in

Telangana last year, Prime Minister Narendra Modi accused the Tamil Nadu government of taking over Hindu temples, an allegation that TN Chief Minister M K Stalin refuted strongly.

- Former BJP MP Satyapal Singh introduced private member's bills to free temples from government control in Parliament in 2017 and 2019.

- In December 2019, Trivendra Singh Rawat's government in Uttarakhand enacted the Uttarakhand Char Dham Devasthanam Management Act to establish a board to manage the Char Dham temples and 49 other temples. After protests by priests, local residents, and politicians, the Pushkar Singh Dhami government withdrew the Act in 2021 and abolished the board.

- In 2023, Shivraj Singh Chouhan's BJP government in Madhya Pradesh loosened state control over temples in the state. Similar steps were announced by Basavaraj Bommai's government in Karnataka, but they could not be implemented before the chief minister demitted office.

What is the legal position on this issue?

There have been arguments in favour of freeing temples from government control, but courts have been mostly reluctant to interfere.

- In the 1954 Shirur Mutt case, the Supreme Court held that a law that takes away the right to administration of the religious denomination and

vests it in another authority would be violative of the right guaranteed under Article 26(d) ("… Every religious denomination or any section thereof shall have the right…to administer… property in accordance with law."). However, the state has a general right to regulate the right to administration of a religious or charitable institution or endowment, it held.

- In Ratilal Panachand Gandhi vs. The State of Bombay (1954), the Supreme Court said that in matters of religion, the right of management given to a religious body is a fundamental right that no law can take away; however, the state can regulate the administration of trust properties by means of valid laws.

- In Pannalal Bansilal Pitti vs State Of Andhra Pradesh (1996), the SC upheld the validity of a law that abolished the hereditary right over chairmanship of a trust administering a Hindu religious institution or endowment, and also rejected the contention that the law must uniformly apply to all religions.

- In 2022, lawyer Ashwini Upadhyay filed a writ petition in the SC to free temples from government control. The SC, however, said that under the present arrangement, temples have "catered to the larger needs of society and not only their temple", and reversing this would "turn the clock back" to the days when "all these temples…these centres of religion, had become places of wealth". Upadhyay withdrew his petition.

Through many Mahatma statues, a study of India's experiments with truth

– Adrija Roychowdhury



New Delhi's Gandhi Vatika comprises multiple statues of Mahatma Gandhi. (Express photos by Adrija Roychowdhury)

In 1939, at the height of the freedom struggle, a group in Bombay sought to put up a statue of Mahatma Gandhi. On learning about it, Gandhi is reported to have been livid and later wrote in the Harijan, "It will be a waste of good money to spend ₹25,000 on erecting a clay or metallic statue of the figure of a man who is himself made of clay…"

That this was one matter where Gandhi didn't have his way is evident from the Mahatma statues that are everywhere, all these years later – from government buildings, maidans, street corners and neighbourhoods in India to those in cities abroad.

Ram Sutar, 98, the sculptor most famous for

creating Gandhi's statues, proudly claims that his recreation of Gandhi is "present in 450 cities". Ahead of the recent G20 Summit, President Droupadi Murmu inaugurated a 12-foot statue of the Mahatma right across Raj Ghat in New Delhi. Surrounded by about five other Gandhi statues, the statue is skirted by big bold letters proclaiming "I (heart) Gandhi Darshan G20". The Gandhi Vatika, as the small complex of statues is called, is perhaps the most recent in the long history of both national and international commemoration of Gandhi in stone.

More often than not, in many of these statues, the Mahatma is imagined in two iconic postures: seated in a meditative pose or standing with a staff in hand.

Recreating the Mahatma in India

It was after the Mahatma's death, though, that the practice of making his statues picked up.

Sutar narrates how he made a sculpture of Gandhi for the first time in 1948, soon after the news of his death broke. Sutar, then studying in Dhule, Maharashtra, was asked by one of his teachers, a devout follower of Gandhi, to make a sculpture of the Mahatma. Himself a Gandhi devotee since the 1930s, when he participated in the Swadeshi campaign in Dhule, Sutar was overjoyed. He immediately sculpted a 4-foot bust of Gandhi, copying from one of his photographs. The bust was kept at his school and he gifted two copies of the same to schools in nearby villages.

Through the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s, statues of colonial officials commissioned by the British, created in studios and foundries in England, had started being replaced by statues of local freedom fighters being made by the first group of Indian sculptors.

Historian Tapati Guha-Thakurta has, in her article "Why Statues Matter", pointed to the unique challenges the early local sculptors found themselves in as they replaced those who had been trained in sophisticated European fine arts.

Guha-Thakurta notes how in the 1930s and 1940s, Debi Prosad Roy Chowdhury "can be seen to step in and take over, here, a practice that was still largely a monopoly of Western sculptors", as he created bronze sculptures of Sir Ashutosh Mukherjee and Surendranath Banerjee in Calcutta.

It was Roy Chowdhury's bronze sculpture of Gandhi on his Dandi March in Calcutta that really shot him to fame.

Interestingly, Roy Chowdhury managed to complete the statue in 1958, only after taking recourse to melting a bronze bust he had made of his own father — to meet an acute shortage of metal in Calcutta that year — to replace the leg of his Gandhi statue that had been damaged while being lifted to the pedestal.

"We are invited to think here of an affective flow of molten bronze from the figure of Debiprosad's own father to that of the 'father of the nation',"

writes Guha-Thakurta. The statue stood at the Park Street-Chowringhee junction in Calcutta till the 1980s, when it was removed to the Red Road junction.

The placement of Gandhi in the National capital was, of course, of monumental concern to the Central government. Sutar narrates how he was commissioned to create a sculpture of Bapu to replace the one of George V that stood under a canopy at India Gate sometime in the 1960s. "I first thought of creating Gandhi on the lines of his philosophy of asprushyata nivaran (eradication of untouchability)," says Sutar.



Sculptor Ram Sutar's (left) statues of Gandhi are "present in 450 cities". A statue of Gandhi by Ram Sutar (right). (Express photos by Adrija Roychowdhury.)

Accordingly, his idea was to sculpt Gandhi with his hands placed on the heads of two children surrounding him. Sutar also created another model of a seated Gandhi in a meditative pose. It was the latter that came to be selected for the canopy.

However, the statue never made its way under the canopy. In response to huge opposition from

parliamentarians and Gandhians against the idea of placing the Mahatma under a canopy meant for the King of Britain, it was decided to place it at Parliament in 1993. In the years to come, the 16-foot Gandhi statue became an iconic space of protests by parliamentarians.

“It remains one of my most favourite sculptures of Gandhi because it truly is a message to the country about his importance as the father of the nation,” says art critic and curator Gayatri Sinha. More recently, the statue was removed once again and is, at present, placed in the right corner of the new Parliament, facing the old building.



The statue of the Mahatma at Gandhi Ashram in Sabarmati, Gujarat. (Express Photo by Nandagopal Rajan)

Sutar’s other statue of Gandhi with the children made its way to Patna’s Gandhi Maidan, where it was inaugurated in 2013 by Chief Minister Nitish Kumar. Made at a cost of Rs 35 crore, the 72-foot statue is believed to be the tallest Gandhi statue in the world.

Sinha says, “In most statues of Gandhi, the attitudes are of silence, meditativeness and a certain inner energy. The other comparable figure is that of the Buddha, which has a similar image.”

These large state-sponsored statues of Gandhi aside, in the villages and smaller towns of India, statues of Gandhi tend to take on a whole new avatar. As historian and author of Gandhi in the Gallery: The Art of Disobedience Sumathi Ramaswamy explains, many of them are rather crude or humble with variations in iconography that one will not find in large public statues present in the big cities.

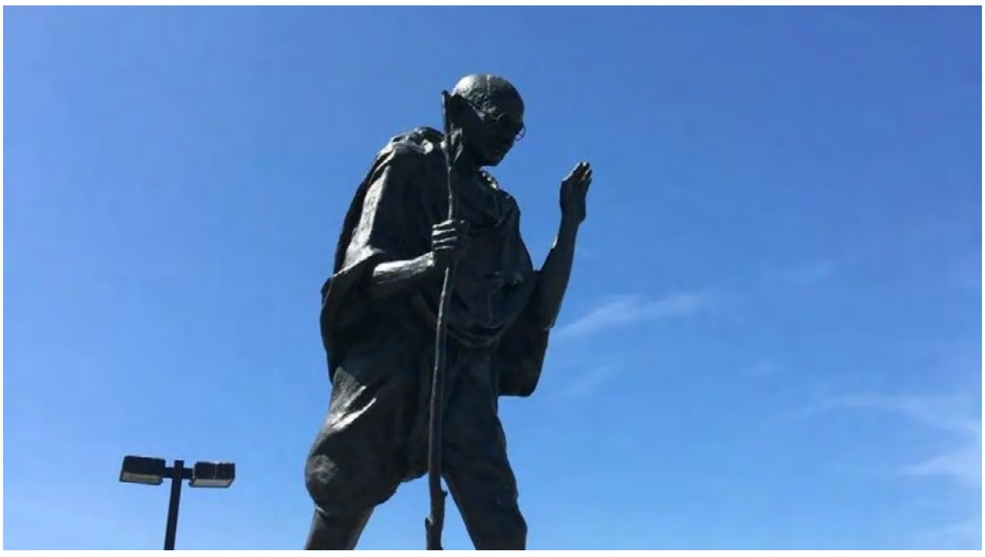
“One of my favourite examples is a photograph of a Gandhi statue located in Rajahmundry in Andhra Pradesh that I came across in (photographer) Raghu Rai’s book. It depicts Gandhi being protected by a cobra over his head, which is a typical Vaishnav iconographic depiction,” Ramaswamy says.

Very often, these humble Gandhi statues in the countryside do not even carry the names of their sculptors. “But they do tell us a lot about the nature of Indian democracy, where so many different communities assert their identities through Gandhi,” Ramaswamy adds.

Gifting the Mahatma

Apart from being a local and national symbol, Gandhi is just as much a global icon. The evidence of his global appeal perhaps lies in his statues dotting hundreds of cities across the world.

In early 1950, Hindu monk Paramahansa Yogananda created the vGandhi World Peace Memorial at Lake Shrine, California, where a portion of the Mahatma's ashes are kept. Although not a statue, it marked the beginning of the long list of monuments dedicated to Gandhi that came up globally in the following years.



The statue of Gandhi in San Francisco. (Express Photo by Nandagopal Rajan)

In 1968, the British Prime Minister unveiled a bronze statue of Gandhi, created by Polish sculptor Fredda Brilliant, at Tavistock Square in London to mark the centenary celebrations of the Mahatma's birth. In 1993, a statue of Gandhi was unveiled at Pietermaritzburg, a province of KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa, to mark the centenary since Bapu was thrown off a train at Pietermaritzburg railway station.

In 2015, the British government installed another statue of Gandhi at Parliament Square in Westminster, London. It is indeed ironic that while announcing the installation of this statue, the UK High Commissioner to India had said that "it will mark the recognition by Britain that Gandhi was an honoured part of our history too, as well as India's."

It is worthwhile to note that despite the large pantheon of nationalist leaders that India boasts of, it is only the statue of Gandhi that has, time and again, been the object of state gifts to nations including Finland, the United States, Malawi, Argentina and Australia.

"Gandhi is the most recognised Indian in the world. He is also identified with values such as peace and tolerance that India would like to project regardless of political realities on the ground," explains Ramaswamy.

A comparison can be drawn with the statues of Bhagat Singh, that one is most likely to come across in Punjab. Historian Chris Moffat, who has written a book on the commemorative politics of Bhagat Singh, says that many of the large-scale statues dedicated to the revolutionary freedom fighter in Punjab were sponsored by the Congress in the 1980s "to appeal to Punjabi regional identities as part of a broader national project". However, Moffat says, one hardly comes across a statue of Bhagat Singh in countries like Canada and the UK, which have a significant Punjabi diaspora population.

Political scientist Simona Vittorini has argued that the act of gifting Gandhi statues is part of India's "soft power strategy". In a 2021 article, Vittorini takes the case of a Gandhi statue gifted by former President Pranab Mukherjee to the University of Ghana in Legon, Accra, in 2016. She notes that even though historically India's presence in Ghana goes back a long way, "it was the friendship between India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and Ghana's first post-independence leader Kwame Nkrumah that cemented the relations between the two countries".

"So why gift a statue of Gandhi and not one of Nehru?" she asks.

However, the statue had to be removed from the campus on account of severe opposition from a section of lecturers and students, who pointed to "racist remarks" made by Gandhi on Black South Africans and called the gift a "slap in the face that undermined Ghana's struggle for autonomy, recognition and respect".

Ramaswamy points out that apart from the Indian state, its diaspora too has found value in gifting Gandhi statues to assert their identity abroad. One of her favourite Mahatma statues is located at Gandhi Square in Johannesburg, she says. Sculpted by Tinka Christopher, it was created with funds raised locally. Unlike other statues of Gandhi, it depicts him as a young man wearing a barrister's gown over his suit and holding a book in hand.

Vandalising the Mahatma

In recent years though, Gandhi has also come to be seen through a more critical lens. It has resulted in recent cases of vandalism of his statues in many parts of the world. Every time an act of vandalism of a statue of Gandhi comes into public knowledge, the Indian government is forced to put out a statement condemning the same.

In some of these cases, the attack on his statue reveals aspects of Gandhi's life and past views that were largely ignored until recently.. "In the US, the UK and Europe, the language of the attack is on Gandhi's racism, casteism and increasingly on his sexual behaviour," says Ramaswamy.

In case of the petition for the removal of the statue in the University of Ghana though, the language of critique would appear to be a pushback against the Indian state. "It is better to stand up for our dignity than to kowtow to the wishes of a burgeoning Eurasian super-power," said the petition.

The Separatist movements in the diaspora and protests within India too have found echoes in acts of vandalism against the statues of Gandhi abroad. In 2020, for instance, a peaceful protest in front of the Indian Embassy in Washington DC against farm laws was disrupted by supporters of the Khalistan movement, who ended up vandalising the statue of Gandhi located there. Slogans in support of Khalistan have been smeared across

statues in Toronto and Milan, among others.

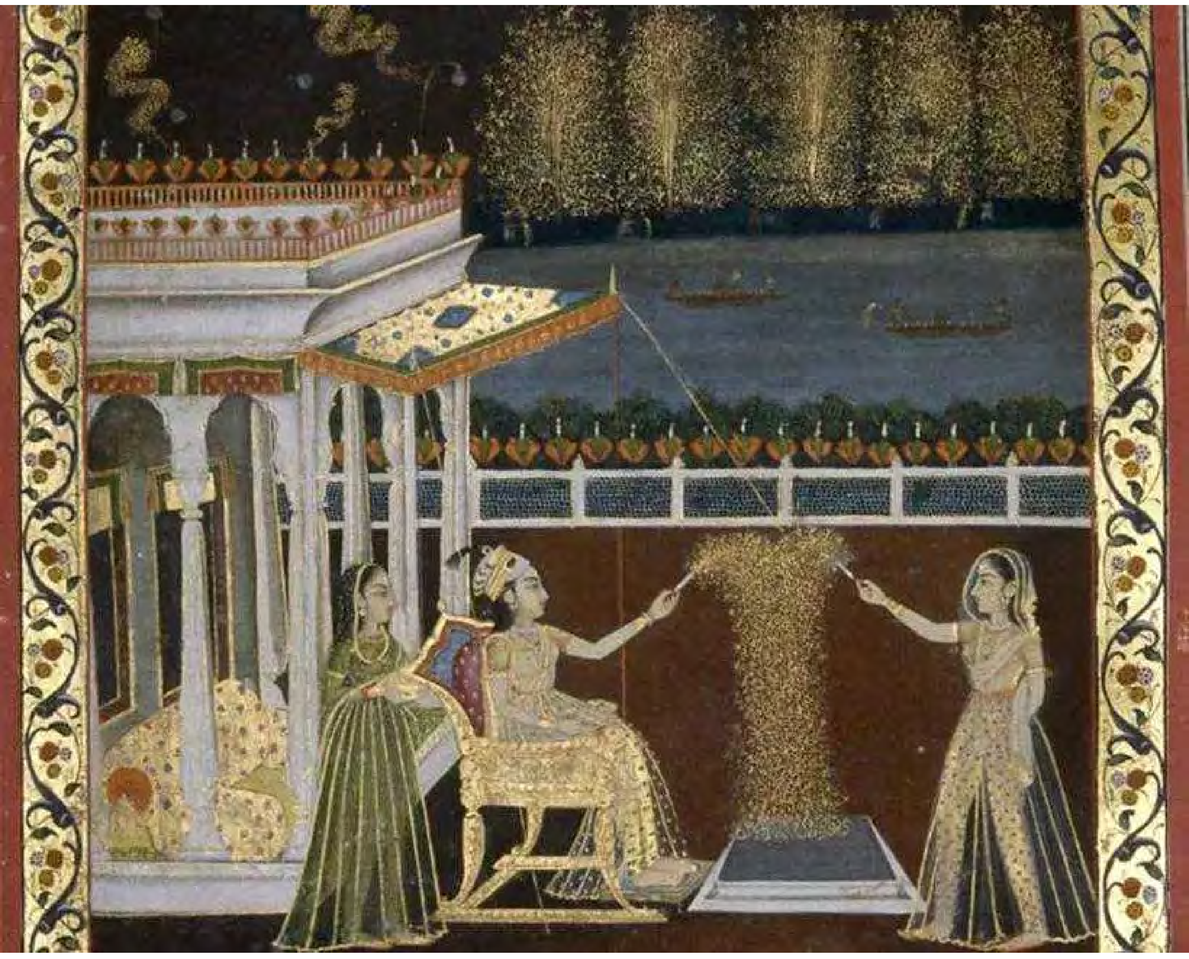
“Given that the Khalistan movement did not even exist during Gandhi’s lifetime, it is quite fascinating that the Khalistan leaders abroad have turned to the Gandhi statue to push back against India,” says Ramaswamy.

Meanwhile, within India, the statues of Gandhi are beginning to find new companions. The statues of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel and Subhas Chandra Bose have, of course, made huge headlines. Statues of BR Ambedkar too have been in proliferation across the country. At Sutar’s studio in Noida, where his workmen are busy sculpting hundreds of statues, the 98-year-old says he is not working on any statue of Gandhi at present. Prominent among the statues being made in his studio currently are those of Chhatrapati Sambhaji Maharaj, Ambedkar, Nadaprabhu Kempegowda as well as Lord Shiva.

(This article was first published on October 2, 2023)

A brief and crackling history of fireworks in India

– Nandini Rathi



Mughal style of painting depicting Diwali with firecrackers. (British Museum)

Fire, in author and historian Jack Kelly's words, "ignites our dreams and anxieties" and speaks to humans "in a language more basic than thought". Not only sacred and formidable, fire is also enduringly entertaining in its pyrotechnical avatars. It is little wonder thus that a festival of lights (flames) and a night of fireworks is continually enchanting across the world. The contribution of firecrackers to air pollution, at a time when they are fairly affordable and readily available in India for all to use, raises the question as to how far do firecrackers and fireworks really go in Indian history and how their availability and consumption has changed over time.

"The use of fireworks in the celebration of Diwali, which is so common in India now, must have come into existence after about 1400 AD, when gunpowder came to be used in Indian warfare," stated late historian P K Gode in his account, "History of Fireworks in India between 1400 and 1900," published in 1950.

Fireworks, like its primary ingredient Gunpowder, have a long history in India. Gunpowder — the accidental tenth or eleventh century invention of medieval Chinese alchemists — was early on dubbed as "devil's distillate," as it terrified and fascinated onlookers with its flash and bang. As its military use evolved in China, so did its show and gimmick value — right from the white, magical appearing smoke left in the wake of its open combustion. One historical conjecture is that the gunpowder technology, along with the first pyrotechnical mixtures for entertainment, was brought to India and Europe from China by the Arabs.

Fireworks in medieval Indian celebrations

One of the earliest notes of pyrotechnical shows in India is made by Abdur Razzaq, the ambassador of the Timurid Sultan Shahrukh to the court of the Vijayanagar king Devaraya II in 1443. Describing the events of the Mahanavami festival, Razzaq wrote, "One cannot without entering into great detail mention all the various kinds of pyrotechny and squibs and various other arrangements which were exhibited". Italian traveler Ludovico di Varthema who visited India in this period, made a similar observation

while describing the city of Vijaynagar and its elephants: “But if at any time they (elephants) are bent on flight it is impossible to restrain them; for this race of people are great masters of making fireworks and these animals have a great dread of fire…”

Fireworks and pyrotechnic shows existed as a form of royal entertainment in many medieval Indian kingdoms during festivals, events and special occasions like weddings. Manufacturing formulas for fireworks describing pyrotechnic mixtures are found within Kautukachintamani, a Sanskrit volume by Gajapati Prataparudradeva (1497-1539), a reputed royal author from Orissa. Gode mused on the possibility that Chinese pyrotechnic formulas were brought to India around 1400 AD and then modified with the use of Indian substitutes for the Chinese ones not available in India.

It is notable that Ibrahim Adil Shah, the Sultan of Bijapur, circa 1609 AD gave a lavish dowry in the wedding of his courtier’s daughter to the son to Nizam Shahi general Malik Ambar, “with Rs. 80,000 being spent on fireworks alone,” states late historian Satish Chandra in his well-known volume Medieval India: From the Sultanate to the Mughals. While rulers were primarily the organising sponsors of these shows, it is clear that other citizens also had access to fireworks. Duarte Barbosa, a writer and officer of Portuguese India who wrote some of the earliest pieces of travel literature, described a Brahmin wedding in Gujarat from his travels (circa 1518) where the bride and bridegroom “are entertained by the people with dancing and songs, firing of bombs

and rockets in plenty, for their pleasure." His description, according to Gode, also suggested that the fireworks had been manufactured in India and were available in plenty in Gujarat at the time.

Elaborate description of fireworks in mythological works from this period also bring in imaginations of pyrotechnic exuberance, familiar to the writers of this period, around these epic events. For example, a popular sixteenth century Marathi poem by the saint Eknath called "Rukmini Swayamvara," describing Rukmini's wedding with Krishna, mentions a range of fireworks, from rockets to the equivalent of the modern phooljhadi.

By the eighteenth century, fireworks began to become de rigueur in grand scale Diwali entertainments organised by rulers. Peshwayanchi Bakhar, a Maratha chronicle text, mentions a recounted account of Diwali celebration in the Kotah (modern Kota, Rajasthan). Mahadji Scindia in it describes to Peshwa Savai Madhavarao: "The Divali festival is celebrated for 4 days at Kota, when lacs of lamps are lighted. The Raja of Kota during these 4 days gives a display of fire-works outside the premises of his capital. It is called … "Lanka of fire-works". Mahadji then went on to describe an image of Ravana at the center, surrounded by rakshasas, moneys and a big image of Hanuman prepared in Gunpowder, which upon being lit actually illustrated the scene of Lanka dahan via Hanuman's tail via pyrotechnics. After hearing this, the Peshwa gave orders for a similar display of fireworks for his entertainment. The resultant grand performance,

as per the chronicle, was “witnessed by the people of Poona in large numbers”.

A historical account in Marathi by Rai Bahadur D.B. Parasnis translating to English fireworks in India mentions the arrival of a skilled English pyrotechnician in India circa 1790 AD, who first impressed the British in Calcutta with his performance and was then sent by them to Asaf-ud-Daullah, the Nawab of Oudh, whom he regaled with a spectacular, continuous display in the sky of colorful fireflowers, fishes, serpents and stars. In one display, a mosque arose in the sky.



Various schools of painting: Mughal, Pahari and Rajasthani from the 18th century depict people playing with firecrackers. (British Museum and San Diego Museum of Art)

Thus, by the late Peshwa period, when the Mughal empire was breathing its last and the British East India Company was afoot realising its designs in India, not only was the knowledge of different fireworks common, but also many references to Diwali along with accompanying description of fireworks or atishbazi began surfacing in various publications. Often these makers of fireworks were also the manufacturers of gunpowder, the raw materials for which were always readily available in India and which was used in bulk

in warfare. By the end of the eighteenth century, however, its military use was phased out in favour of newer explosives like Dynamite. Since then, the medieval technology's principal use remained in the fabrication of fireworks.

Fireworks in modern India

What generally seems apparent from the sparing descriptions of crackers and fireworks in medieval India is not only their grand nature, but also that they were probably quite expensive and hence commissioned mainly by the rulers for personal and citizen entertainment or by the economically well-to-do of the community. In the colonial era, it is likely that like most indigenous industries, India's fireworks production and development also took a setback, with imports from Europe and China appearing in the Indian market.

The first fireworks factory in India was set up in Kolkata in the nineteenth century. After Independence, Sivakasi in Tamil Nadu emerged as India's Firecracker hub, benefitting from the restrictions of imports of firecrackers. It is plausible to theorise that, unlike in the colonial and medieval eras, with increase in the population and economic prosperity of the Indian middle class — especially in the last three decades — and with ready supply coming in from the flourishing domestic industry, bursting of firecrackers only grew and never looked back.

(This article was first published on October 15, 2017)

Loneliness, the beginning of a mental health issue across age groups: How help is at hand

– Rinku Ghosh



Loneliness, the subterranean emotional pandemic, that was once considered an affliction of the elderly, is now affecting youngsters, too. (Illustration by Komal)

About three months ago, Rosellyn Naik, 25, woke up with a start at 2 am as her cell phone buzzed. The 66-year-old woman at the other end, a new client at her counselling service, was having a meltdown. In tears, she requested Naik to listen to her thoughts that she couldn't trust sharing with anybody else, the kind she

would have shared with her friend and husband, whom she lost to Covid in 2020. Missing him, she had bottled up her emotions through the day and just needed to be heard. Realising she was hypertensive and lived alone, Naik first made sure that the resident in Delhi's Vasant Kunj area was physically okay and then proceeded to listen to her. "My children keep telling me I will get over their father's loss with time, every partner goes through this and I should make the effort. What if I cannot make it?" she asked.

Naik, a psychologist and a loneliness counsellor, then simply listened to her talk about what she missed from her past life. "Forty-five minutes later, she had calmed down after her volcanic rush of emotions. Then my work began," adds Naik, who has since been tasked with getting her out of the trough. "Dependent on her husband, she had lost her sounding board. Her children, who were used to seeing her in a certain way, overlooked that she had changed and needed a different lens to be understood. She didn't want her private emotions left to their judgment and analysis. With an outsider, she found a safe space. It was first sympathy, then empathy and friendship. She never left her bed for over three years, refusing to even step out into the verandah. Today, we go for a walk in the park, read books and even shop for groceries," says Naik, who works for Emoha, an elder service care provider. She is among India's growing troop of loneliness counsellors who are alleviating what is quickly becoming an "emotional pandemic."

Broadly defined, loneliness embodies a feeling of disconnection, becoming untethered from our surrounds and recoiling into ourselves. The

World Health Organization (WHO) says that approximately 10 per cent of adolescents and 25 per cent of older people are lonely. A 2023 Gallup and Meta survey ranked India 36th among 142 countries on the loneliness index. However, it is difficult to put numbers on what is mostly perception-based and underestimates the severity of the problem across all age groups.

Now, several studies have found that long-term loneliness can not only lead to mental health problems like anxiety and depression but also to physical conditions like diabetes, high cholesterol and heart disease that flow from the effects of immobility and an inmate-like cellular existence. Little wonder then that countries like the UK and Japan have set up ministries of loneliness that have public policies to ensure every citizen isn't left out of relevance and feels worthy of contributing to society. However, there is hope here too as hospitals, institutions and psychologists themselves are taking up the challenge of reaching out to the community, hoping to address the first red flag of our disease burden: loneliness.

Gen Z On An Island

Dr Mehezabin Dordi, clinical psychologist at Mumbai's Sir HN Reliance Foundation Hospital, specially takes up cases of adolescent loneliness. "The other day I was with a 13-year-old girl who said that she was most comfortable talking to her many friends on her device but was unable to talk to her father sitting on the couch opposite. The over-indulgence in superficial relationships online had given her a confidence and surety among peers, one that had obliterated the need

for face-to-face interactions in the physical world. We put her through physical interactive sessions with her peers first before she could reconnect with any other member of her family. The moment you create a felt experience, the one-dimensionality of a digital world seems less attractive," says Dordi.

Digital "alcoholism" is at the root of Gen Z isolation, according to Sachin Chitambaram, founder and lead trainer of The Connect Hut, who has been counselling college students in Mumbai. Also working with The Samaritans, Mumbai, as a gatekeeping consultant against self-harm, he feels we haven't even scratched the surface of loneliness among the youth. "Students in Mumbai colleges have to wait two months for an appointment with counsellors, who themselves are burning out after having multiple sessions. What we must realise is that the level-playing field, rules of engagement and tools have changed in a digital world. So we cannot read youngsters from a traditional prism. Relationships online are conditional, transactional and about networking. Kids are anxious because growing up today is a demanding process. They fear missing out on what their online status requires and take drugs not for pleasure but to stay awake and score well in exams. Childhood is about learning skill sets like coding and performance pressures; they have a busier schedule than adults, all coming at the price of socialisation," he says.

In fact, NIMHANS, Bengaluru has flagged digital addiction as the most isolating mental health issue that will be felt over the next five years. That's because socio-emotional learning, or knowing how to transact with other people, has been replaced by learning with digital prompts.

The emotional vacuum is so normalised that children believe distancing is the right thing to do. Chitambaram starts from scratch to wean youngsters from tech-friendliness to people-friendliness and forge basic connections. “We ask them simple things they did in the week — how many home-cooked meals they had, how many bottles of water they had drunk, how many hours they slept, how much time they spent in the sun, how much physical exercise did they get, how many meaningful conversations they had with anybody and how honest they had been to themselves in self-talk,” he says. Anybody scoring low indicates lack of self-worth, from which point he trains them to listen to sounds in the real world, be self-aware, sympathise, then empathise and build a bond.

Digital detoxification is a major part of this exercise. “The non-stop digital world gives the pace of a dopamine rush. Even the so-called child-friendly YouTube videos in bright colours, tunes and fantastic themes, without which they cannot eat, are giving them a dopamine rush. Apps build addictive behaviour that its makers, perhaps, wouldn’t sign up for. Instant gratification means the brain is stimulated at all times and seeks that high. Hence, it is important to delay gratification in screen time. So in our programmes, we recommend no screen time for children under two years, limit exposure for teens to three hours for brain and emotional regulation,” says Chitambaram. He’s mapped adult use of devices and conservatively found most to be device-bound 10 to 12 hours a day. If it’s not work on a laptop, it’s surfing entertainment apps. Currently, he’s training psychology students in digital detox so that they can go into student communities and hand-hold them.

That's how Mehwish Sultan, 22, a psychology student, battled her own loneliness with a self-devised coping strategy. "I was locked away in a tower with only an 'Instagram window' to watch others' lives, which were rosier and more successful than mine. Even when I talked with them, beneath the surface, I felt a bitter jealousy, resentment even, as they had never felt what it was to be left behind. I did. Loneliness sat on my chest as I struggled to breathe," says she. To Mehwish, loneliness isn't something that can be quickly dispelled with new connections and friends; it's a "rotten seed" that plants deep doubts about her self-worth. That's why she has taken up creative pursuits involving natural elements like pottery. That has got her to enjoy outdoor life and make use of her idle time.

Loneliness in the IT hub

Satish Kumar CR, clinical psychologist at Manipal Hospital, Bengaluru, sees loneliness as a social avoidance disorder that is the tipping point of depression, particularly among IT professionals. "As remote jobs make them lonely, often in atomised bubbles far away from family, they seek diversion. They may go on multiple dates because they can swipe easily on a dating app but because there are options, there is no commitment of a lasting relationship," he says. In a world where a 14-hour work day is rewarded and credibilized, basic human needs drop off at the bottom of the value chain.

He counselled one such work-from-home 28-year-old software consultant who somehow got tongue-tied about vocalising emotions. "Since he expressed himself best on text, we encouraged

him to use that as his first communication tool and then gradually moved him away to real-time conversations and inter-personal exchanges," Kumar says.

The other thing that he helps with is managing expectations, be it of women between 45 and 65, who suddenly realise that they were delusional to think they would be the pivot of everybody's lives, or of elders, who think their children should be near them since they had invested so much of their lives in them. In fact, Manipal Hospitals is contemplating support services with its post-graduate psychology student volunteers, who are being mentored to be good listeners.

Born Again: Elderly Care

The hospital recently did a survey in neighbouring condominiums and found that most seniors were happy with somebody just talking to them. So it's now organising get-togethers for them with Spelling Bee contests, a short hike at Cubbon Park, poetry readings and even retro nights. "Spelling Bees are an enjoyable way of improving memory. Mental stimulation and social and physical interactions are a way of keeping dementia at bay for an ageing population," says Kumar.

At Emoha, Naik manages 33 elders, all of whom live alone. The platform itself runs a 24-hour channel on YouTube with interactive programming that teaches users to own their lives, be it managing health emergencies and online banking. "In fact, some of the seniors are experienced themselves and become instructors on the channel," says Naik, who even plans offline sessions with like-minded seniors for

book clubs, golfing and weekend getaways.

Seventy-three-year old psychologist Rashmi Gautam signed up for an app-based care service after she fell ill in the middle of the night and was in a momentary trough while tiding over difficulties of a grey divorce. But now she does pro-bono counselling for those living alone. “A lot of loneliness happens because of financial dependence and insecurity. Many do not know how to manage their existing bank deposits and plan their investments based on returns. You then don’t depend on children’s handouts. I also counsel them on laws that protect them against mistreatment by children and cyber fraud,” she says. Gautam is currently working with corporates on work-life balance.

Meanwhile, hope floats with the likes of 22-year-old Hari Krishnan, who once felt “like a living ghost, denying close connections for fear they would inevitably end.” He actually healed himself by connecting with others on the same boat, channelising his experience into supporting those who might be struggling. He now has formed a football club of such youngsters who have taken their love of the game to build a team spirit, a bond they carry into watching movies and dining out together. “Overcoming loneliness is like a caterpillar’s transformation into a butterfly. It symbolises personal growth and the emergence of a stronger, more resilient self,” says he.

(With inputs by Gayatri Thomas)

OPINION

Religion and the illusion of equality

– Devdutt Pattanaik



Society creates scales to enable measurement and comparison. (Express photo by Amit Chakravarty)

That God treats all humans equally is an Islamic and Christian belief, not a Hindu, Buddhist or Jain one. Certainly not a Chinese or Japanese one. This idea of equality shaped the Enlightenment discourse and gave rise to ideas like nation-state and individualism. French revolutionaries spoke of equality and freedom in the same breath. It spread to all corners of the world through colonial forces and is now considered a global discourse. Equality sounds good — in theory.

Hinduism has been accused of amplifying inequality using caste. Even in urban ecosystems, where caste is not prioritised, we see amplification of class divides in Hindu temples and festivals.

The rich, the powerful, the popular, the connected get easier access to the deity enshrined in a temple or a pandal. This has been amply evident in the Ganesh celebrations in Mumbai in recent years. If you point this out, you become a liberal person, one who frowns upon inequality. Never mind the fact that the opinion makers often use their own wealth, power, celebrity status and networks to get easy access to crowded shrines. The VIP line. The VIP pavilion.

There is generally no segregation of women in Hindu temples. Nothing on the scale that is visible in Muslim communities. In the mosques and on the streets, during Friday prayers, and during Eid, we see images of hundreds of men. Women, when seen, are hidden behind masks. In recent times, the masks are becoming more and more homogenous across Islamic nations that wish to stamp out local differences. Thus all women appear equally masked.

Buddhism is believed to be egalitarian. But then, as many neo-converts have noticed, it privileges the male monk over the nun. There is no equality between the many Buddhist sects.

In Bhutan, the happiest nation in the world, only the king is allowed to wear a yellow stole, and the people are told what clothes they must wear in public. So they all appear as belonging to a single group — and distinguish themselves from the non-Bhutanese.

At celebrity weddings of the rich and famous where parties go on for months, segregation is

clearly established by who is invited to which party. Bands on wrists tell guests which areas they can access. The more famous you are, the richer you are, the closer you get to the host. You get access to private lounges, where special food is prepared for the special people. But since this is a private function, not a religious one, this is acceptable. Like service lifts and staff toilets in building societies. We can rationalise inequality by using words like efficiency.

The idea of equality has played a key role in shaping societies since the World Wars. People have challenged oppression based on race, caste and gender. Women know they deserve the same opportunities as men. LGBTQIA+ people seek the same rights as their heterosexual counterparts. Black men and women demand the same opportunities as White folks in America.

Positive discrimination is aimed at reducing inequality in society. Increasingly, however, the equality discourse is being challenged — we now have movements that reject the idea of merit, that challenge common understandings of gender. People are wondering why pride parades are being blocked in Muslim neighbourhoods in Europe and America, why tribal communities are expected to follow the practices of dominant communities around the world. Not every tribe believes in Judgement Day.

Human beings are competitive. And competition implies inequality. There is always someone higher and lower than us. Society creates scales to enable measurement and comparison. And

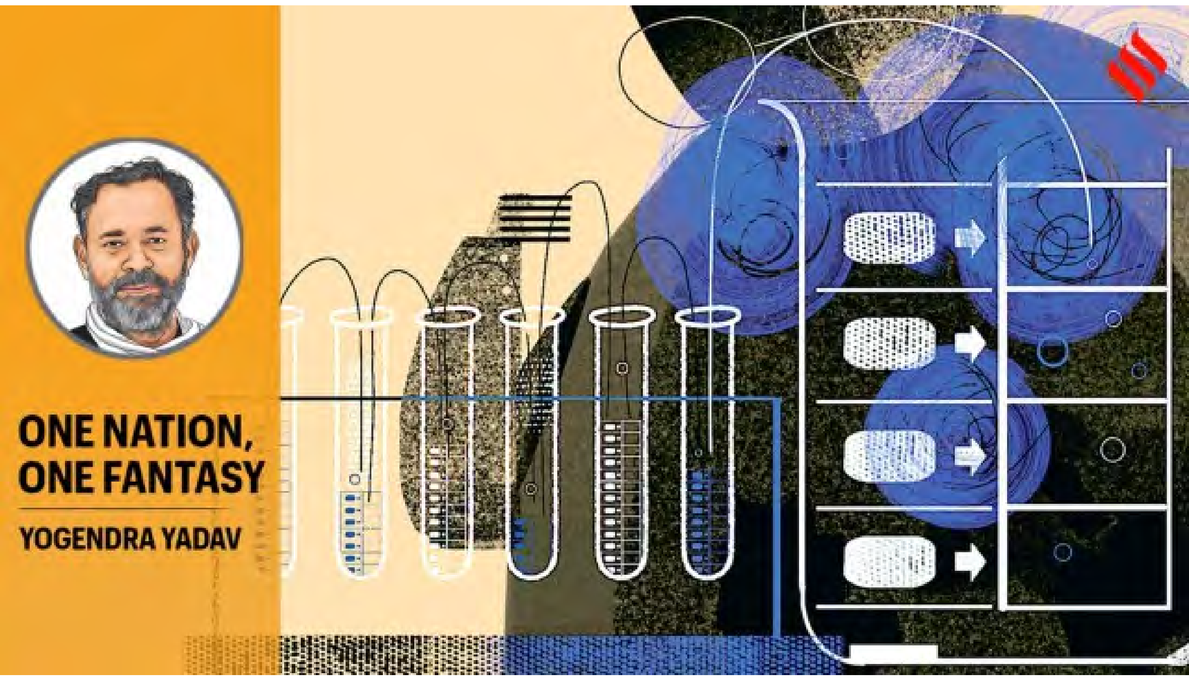
we would rather be up than down. We want our children to go to better schools. We want to live in better neighbourhoods. We want our Instagram posts to get more likes. The rich want to feel rich, the powerful want to feel powerful, the famous want to feel powerful, and the only way to do that is to get a spot ahead in the queue. This applies to work, life and religious spaces. We can rationalise this using politics and economics, or spiritual ideas like karma. The point is — it feels great to be treated as special in crowded spaces. That is why even myths of heaven and hell have levels.

Devdutt Pattanaik is a writer and mythologist



One Nation One Election is a desire to cut down clutter of democratic politics

– Yogendra Yadav



The Election Commission has the powers to club all the assembly elections falling within six months of one another (which it chose not to exercise in the case of Maharashtra and Jharkhand); this can be extended to 12 months. (Illustration by C R Sasikumar)

The world is full of clever answers in search of a genuine question. When talk of One Nation One Election (ONOE) began, it looked like a grand policy solution in search of a real problem. Either a remedy in search of a disease, or a medicine worse than the disease. It looked like a sequel to demonetisation, another brainchild of a modern-day Tughlaq's penchant for something grand sans a vision or a blueprint.

Noting the alacrity with which the present regime has gone about pushing this scheme and reading the Report on Simultaneous Elections in India of the High Level Committee (HLC), I am now convinced that One Nation One Election is not

just a quixotic yet harmless fantasy. It fits into a larger political design that has been in the works for long. Originating in the middle-class fantasy to save the republic from the public and the bureaucratic quest to evacuate democracy of its popular content, this design has now fused with the rulers' desire to tame and defang democracy.

The 281-page report (18,345 pages with annexures) is a made-to-order document whose conclusions were written into its terms of reference. Just as the RBI was asked to invent virtues of demonetisation, the HLC was designed to discover the rationale for ONOE. Packed with pro-regime cheer-leaders of ONOE, the HLC has obediently filled in the details of the legal-constitutional formalities and administrative logistics required to roll it out.

The compulsion to discover a rationale makes for strange reading. The report claims that constant elections account for a loss of "about 300 days in an average year" in some states like Maharashtra (p.167). The ONOE would offer "equitable opportunity to political workers" (p.155) since the same leader won't contest for MLA and MP. Not just that, ONOE would lead to "reduction in instances of hate speeches" (p.156). It would solve the problem of "voter fatigue" (pp.153-4) — a problem I never heard about in two decades of doing research on Indian elections.

Here is a nugget of constitutional wisdom coming from the "Constitutional Expert" member of the HLC: India is "a combination of Presidential

and Parliamentary forms of government" (p.109)! Consider this piece of reasoning: "The synchronised conduct of elections fosters a sense of civic cohesion and national unity, as citizens across the country participate in the festival of democracy collectively, reinforcing the bonds of citizenship and fraternity." (P.145) This reminded me of school children expounding on the countless benefits of their latest "invention" for a science project.

Shorn of such verbiage, or a dubious polling exercise, the core argument is that simultaneous elections would improve the quality of governance: Cutting down on the diversion of government machinery, saving in state expenditure and reduction in the time window of policy freeze due to the operation of the Model Code of Conduct. These are valid arguments whose weight needs to be assessed carefully. How disruptive is the diversion of government machinery (typically three disruptions in five years that ONOE would reduce to two, not one) for elections? How does this compare to other disruptions caused by visits by big leaders or large religious congregations, for example? What proportion of the government's budget is spent on elections? How does it compare with the money spent by candidates and parties? As for the much touted argument about "policy paralysis", for each state government this amounts to a period of just four months in five years. The idea that the central government is hamstrung by state assembly elections is belied by the big-ticket announcements on health and agriculture (not to mention the cabinet approval of ONOE

itself) made by the Modi government in the last fortnight when the MCC is in operation.

Besides, this rationale for ONOE must contend with an alternative solution. The Election Commission has the powers to club all the assembly elections falling within six months of one another (which it chose not to exercise in the case of Maharashtra, Jharkhand and Delhi); this can be extended to 12 months. The EC that is willing to club all the Lok Sabha and assembly elections in one go can surely be asked to reduce the duration of the election to a fortnight and no more than three phases. And the Model Code of Conduct can be amended to provide for continuity of regular governance during the election period. When ordinary pills can do, why go for a surgery?

Even if you grant all the benefits of ONOE, these need to be weighed against the serious damage this scheme would do to our constitutional democratic structure. As many as 15 recognised political parties, mostly from the INDIA bloc, have opposed ONOE. The undeniable fact is that ONOE is not the simple administrative change in the electoral calendar that it is made out to be. It would upset the basic principle of accountability of the executive to the legislature inherent in our parliamentary system of governance. The HLC suggests a solution to this problem by creating another problem of holding elections for the remaining part of the tenure even if it is for just one year. The proposal to align the tenure of state assemblies as well as municipal and panchayat bodies with Lok Sabha is a violation

of the federal principle of governance. In this sense, ONOE seems to be in violation of the "basic structure" of our Constitution.

More than the administrative, legal and constitutional issues, the deepest problem with the ONOE is the political design inherent in it. Clearly, holding the national and state elections together would give an edge, a small to moderate vote swing, in favour of a national party and against regional parties. My hunch is that the BJP may not have won a clear majority in the Odisha assembly but for simultaneous elections in 2024. The political vision underlying ONOE assumes that nation-wide political players are the only trustworthy custodians of national interest.

At the deepest level, ONOE is a desire to cut down the clutter of democratic politics. It is no coincidence that the HLC Report devotes maximum attention and space to discussing the political economy of simultaneous elections. Through an elaborate econometric modeling — elegant in its math but dubious in its assumptions and conclusions — it argues that ONOE would lead to political stability, faster economic growth, predictable policy environment and lower populist pressures. This is very much in line with a long strand in our public life that I had once identified as "middle class fantasies" of electoral reforms.

Those who dominate the social and economic life of this country are increasingly impatient with its messy politics and have been coming up with one solution after another to "clean"

the world of politics — reduction in the number of candidates, minimum threshold of votes for regional parties, law against "freebies" and so on. Certain sections of the political class — led by, but not confined to, the BJP — are in sympathy with this reasoning and would like to cut down on the headache of elections, of constantly being on tenterhooks, of the sword of accountability.

They can't do away with elections altogether, but the next best thing is to limit this mess to just once in five years. So that the business of governance can be carried out undisturbed by the people for four years and nine months. In its essence, ONOE is antithetical to democracy.

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