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FRANCE IN TURMOIL

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The Indian EXPRESS

THIS ISSUE

- COVER : FRANCE IN TURMOIL

Dear Reader,

France's streets have been simmering with anger for weeks. More than half a million people have joined marches across the country, while violent groups have clashed with police, looted shops and set public buildings on fire. The unrest has put President Emmanuel Macron's government under renewed pressure ahead of the 2027 presidential election.

Our cover story examines the economic discontent at the heart of the protests and places the current unrest in the context of France's long history of street demonstrations. Why have the streets so often become a site of political contest in the country?

History also offers insights into how identities and influence take shape. In this issue, we also explore how Shiva became associated with Dravidian identity, and how the Cholas built maritime networks connecting South India to markets across Asia, carrying goods, ideas and religious traditions across the seas.

Closer to the present, the shooting involving actor Tiger Shroff offers a window into the changing recruitment and operations of Mumbai's underworld.

Also in this issue, our graphic novel tells the story of Gerardus Mercator, the man who mapped the world.

We hope you enjoy reading this issue.

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France protests, and the economic mess at the heart of it

Udit Misra

France, Europe's second largest economy and one of the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, is burning after violent protesters unleashed some of the worst episodes of vandalism in French history.

President Emmanuel Macron, who seemed to have been taken by surprise, condemned the violence, and urged calm and order. Official figures suggest that more than 5,00,000 mostly young demonstrators took to streets —

unofficially estimates go up to 8,00,000 — with thousands arrested.

The protests that started more than a month ago with students demanding better conditions in schools have morphed into bigger calls for better living conditions.

To be sure, street protests, often violent, happen regularly enough to be viewed more as a feature of the French Republic than a bug. It is noteworthy that this is the case even though France has one of the most centralised governments anywhere in the world, with the national government holding much of the power.

The scale of the violence, however, has left both policymakers and observers around the world stunned. What's more, with the next presidential elections just six months away, and a country that looks deeply divided between far-right and far-left political views, the apprehension is that these protests and violence may happen again.

There are two ways to look at this crisis in France.

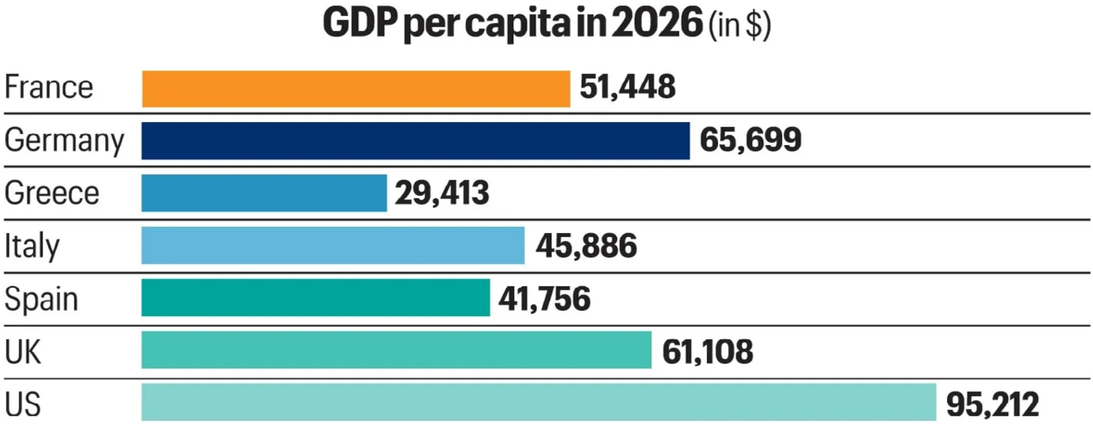
The people's concerns

From the perspective of the protestors, there are concerns about the high cost of living, which is, in turn, a shorthand for the combined effect of high and persistent inflation, high unemployment, inadequate wage increase, and insufficient support from the government for the welfare state.

Data from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) show that while inflation hasn't been as high in France as it has been among its peers — Germany, Spain, the UK, Italy, Greece and the US — it is the weak economic growth and high unemployment that have been the real causes of worry.

The IMF just revised downwards the growth rates for 2026 and 2027 to as low as 0.4% and 0.7% respectively.

More broadly, France's growth rate has completely faltered since the Global Financial Crisis of 2008, and this has had an impact on per capita incomes. In 2008, for instance, France's per capita GDP was $45,754. In 2026, it is $51,448 (see chart below). That's an average annual increase in incomes of less than 1% each year over the last 18 years. It is unsurprising that the public will grow restless and demand more state support.

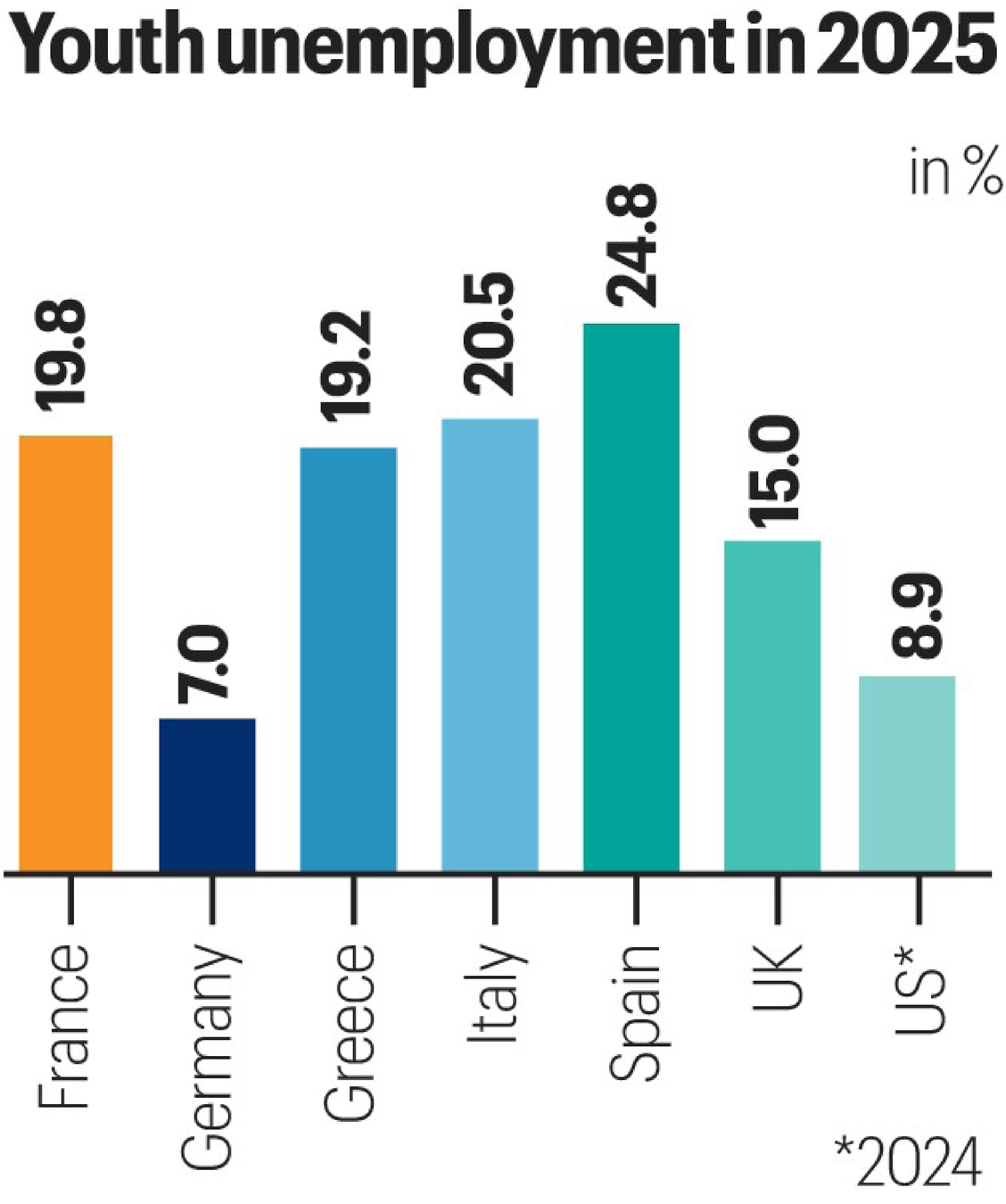


GDP per capita: France vs its peers.

The other side of weak growth is high unemployment. Overall unemployment is around 8%, but among the youth it shoots up to almost 20% (see chart below).

The picture is even more bleak among migrants coming from Africa. Data on wages also paints a similar picture, with

France lagging behind its peers.

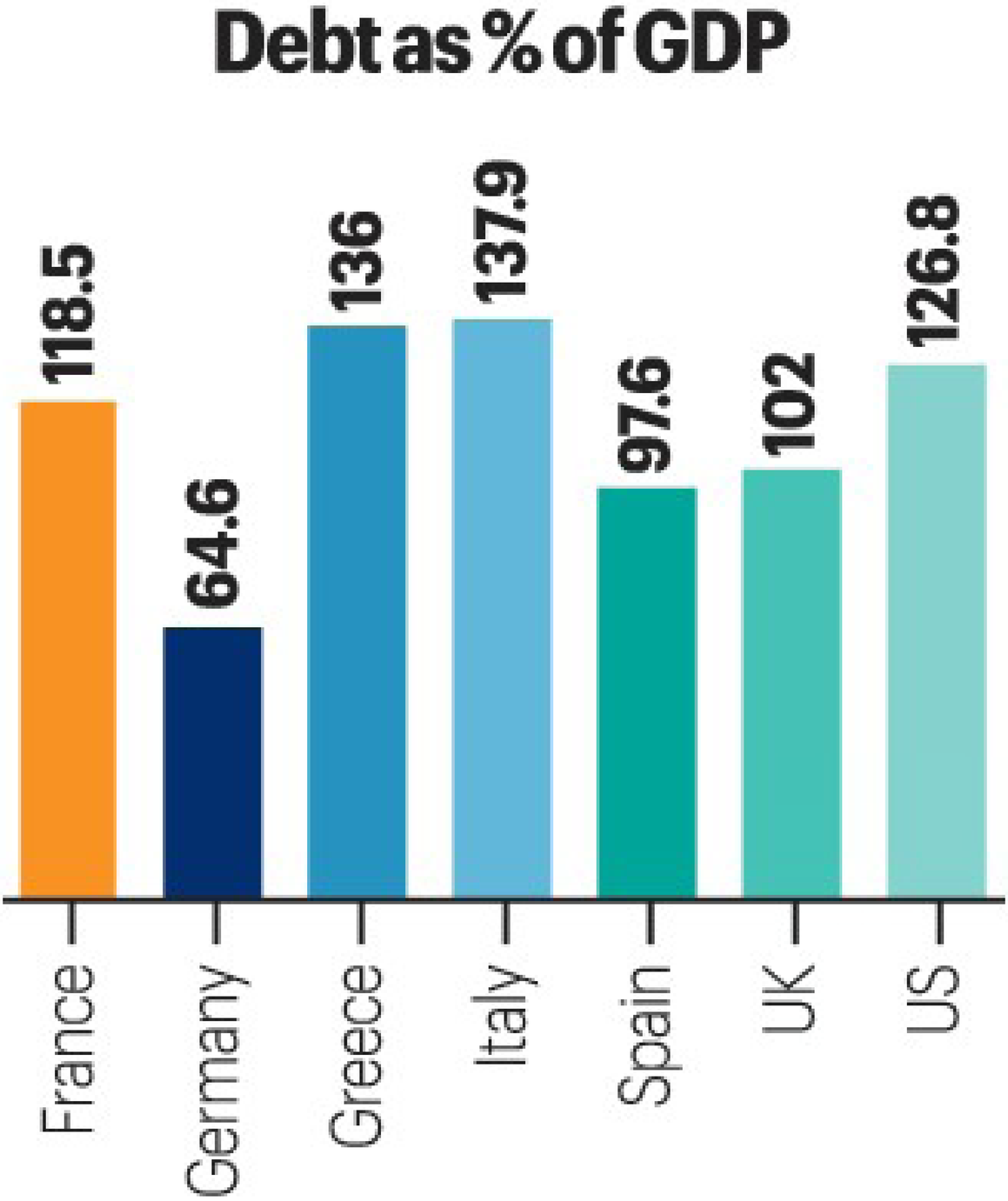


Youth unemployment: France vs its peers.

The government's concerns

From the perspective of the government, the picture is equally dire, but the variables are different. The French government has been borrowing more

and more each passing year — the fiscal deficit this year is pegged at 5.4% of GDP — thus adding to a growing mountain of debt. Total debt as a percentage of GDP is now more than 118% (see chart below).



Debt as a percentage of GDP: France vs its peers.

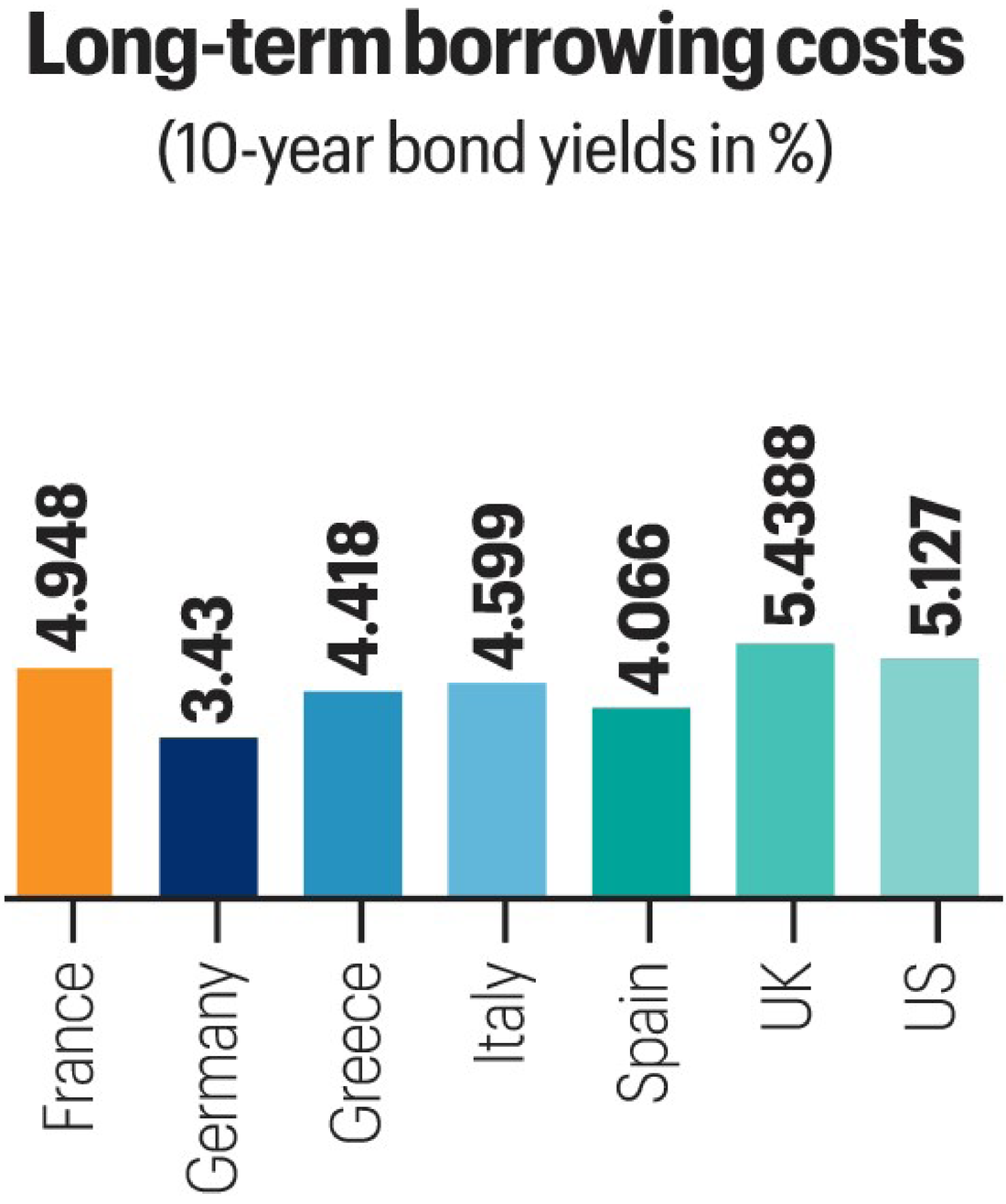
Making matters worse is a stagnant economy. Thanks to a lack of growth,

the French government does not have enough tax revenues to support the welfare demands of the public. That, in turn, forces it to borrow more. As things stand, the French government is already the overwhelming player in the French economy, accounting for about 57% of the GDP.

Unsurprisingly, investors are demanding a higher rate of return for lending money to the French government. The yields on 10-year bonds by the French government are now close to the 5% mark. Not only is this much higher than the recent past, it is also higher than many European peers such as Greece and Italy that were until a decade ago, the real problem economies.

Now France, instead of being a large, stable economy in Europe, is fast heading towards a possible debt crisis of its own. That's because its borrowing costs are spiking just as its overall debt has reached uncomfortable levels. As a result, the government has to now shell out more and more money each year

from its budget just to pay the interest on past loans (see chart below).



Long-term borrowing costs: France vs its peers.

It is also noteworthy that investors are taking into account the political instability in France (reflected in the rising bond yields). President Macron is becoming increasingly ineffective, and most future presidential candidates are deeply polarising figures. Political

instability is a tell-tale sign that the reforms needed to course-correct may not happen in a hurry.

A difficult solution

The charred remains of town halls, looted high-street shops and images of police cracking down may suggest an economy performing far worse than what the data shows. As things stand, France is still not where Greece or Italy were during the Eurozone sovereign debt crisis in the early 2010s. However, it will be there if it doesn't take corrective action.

The central problem is this: Over the decades, the French have gotten used to an expansive welfare state, but since the Global Financial Crisis of 2008, France's growth has not kept pace with its ambitions of welfare.

Given its inability to grow fast, France needs a two-pronged approach. One, reform its economy to unleash a new wave of growth. A government-

dominated economy is not delivering growth at the moment.

Two, cut down on excessive expenditure. For instance, thanks to the welfare guarantees on health and pensions as well as the demographic change (read ageing), France is looking at a scenario where a growing number of old people will be dependent on the taxes levied on a relatively smaller number of young workers. Efforts to raise the retirement age — thus saving the outgo on pensions — have been thwarted.

In short, France has to figure out a way to grow fast to avoid a debt crisis, and while it tries to do that, it must control welfare expenses. Otherwise, it is set to receive more rude shocks.



Understanding the economics of social unrest

Udit Misra

France is not the only country witnessing an outpouring of discontent on the streets. Be it Albania, Belgium, Italy or Portugal, a wave of social unrest appears to be sweeping across the European Union.

Like in France, where the protests started with student dissatisfaction with school facilities, most of these protests are eventually turning into a broader cry about the cost of living crisis.

In other words, while the timing is often political — several countries such

as France and Italy are set for national elections in 2027— the issues are in fact economic in nature.

It is often argued that growing economic inequalities in an economy lead to such social unrest. This applies to arguments that are often advanced by those who oppose immigrants as well; that is, it is argued that more immigrants rob a country's citizens of economic benefits.

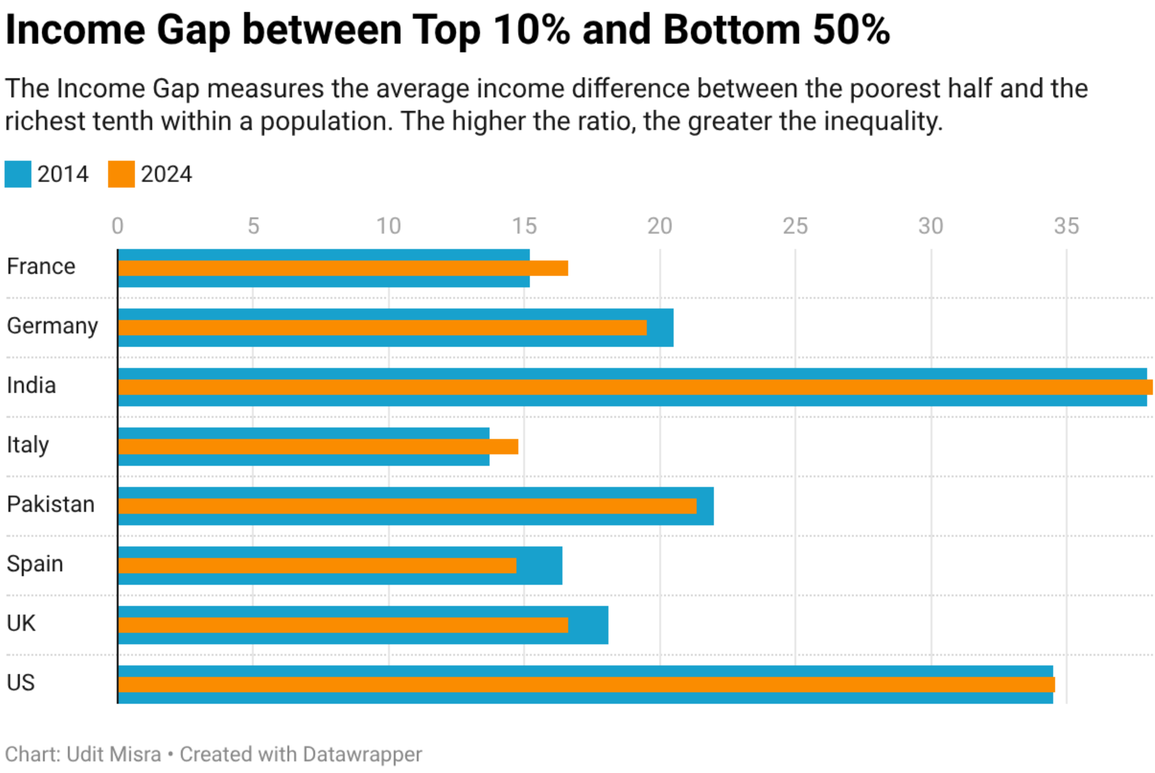
So, have economic inequalities risen in France?

The most established data in this regard is from The World Inequality Report of 2026, which, in turn, provides data until 2024. The table below maps the broad measure of inequality called Income Gap. The WIR 2026 defines it as follows: "The top 10% to bottom 50% average income gap is the ratio between the income share of the top 10% and the bottom 50%."

In other words, the income gap is a ratio and it measures the average income difference between the poorest half and the richest tenth within a population.

The higher the ratio, the greater the inequality.

For France, the income gap has increased between 2014 and 2024, as indeed it has for Italy. But in many other peer countries, it has fallen as well. For instance in the UK, Germany and Spain.



Income inequality.

It is also relevant to note that while the income gap has increased in France, by itself it is among the lowest among peers such as Germany. In India, for instance, the income gap is 38 and in South Africa it is 118.

What are the other predictors of unrest?

Economic inequality alone cannot explain social unrest. As Philip Barrett and Sophia Chen wrote for the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in 2021: “Although inequality has crept up slowly in recent decades, it has not significantly worsened over the past decade in a way that would explain the recent surge of discontent.”

So what else could one look at? IMF economists Sandile Hlatshwayo and Chris Redl have used machine learning techniques to assess the ability of more than 340 economic and social indicators to predict unrest. “A central finding is that past turmoil — both domestically and in neighboring countries — is by far the most important variable for predicting future strife. It is about 10 times as informative as the most revealing economic or social factors,” they wrote.

Barrett and Chen explain: “This idea has much in common with a bank run, when people rush to withdraw deposits because they see others in line. As a

result, factors signaling that others are more willing to protest — such as past protests or protest in culturally similar neighboring countries — can act as coordinating signals."

Other factors that the IMF researchers identified as predictive of unrest are digital access and social media penetration, suggesting that the ability to communicate and coordinate on a large scale might be essential to protest activity.

Can social unrest have economic consequences?

So while economic factors are not irrelevant — "prices particularly of food and fuel, seem to be particularly important" — they are not necessarily the biggest predictor of social unrest. But IMF's researchers have found that economic factors play a much more prominent role when it comes to the consequences of unrest.

IMF economist Metodij Hadzi-Vaskov and colleagues have found a close link between unrest and subsequent economic performance.

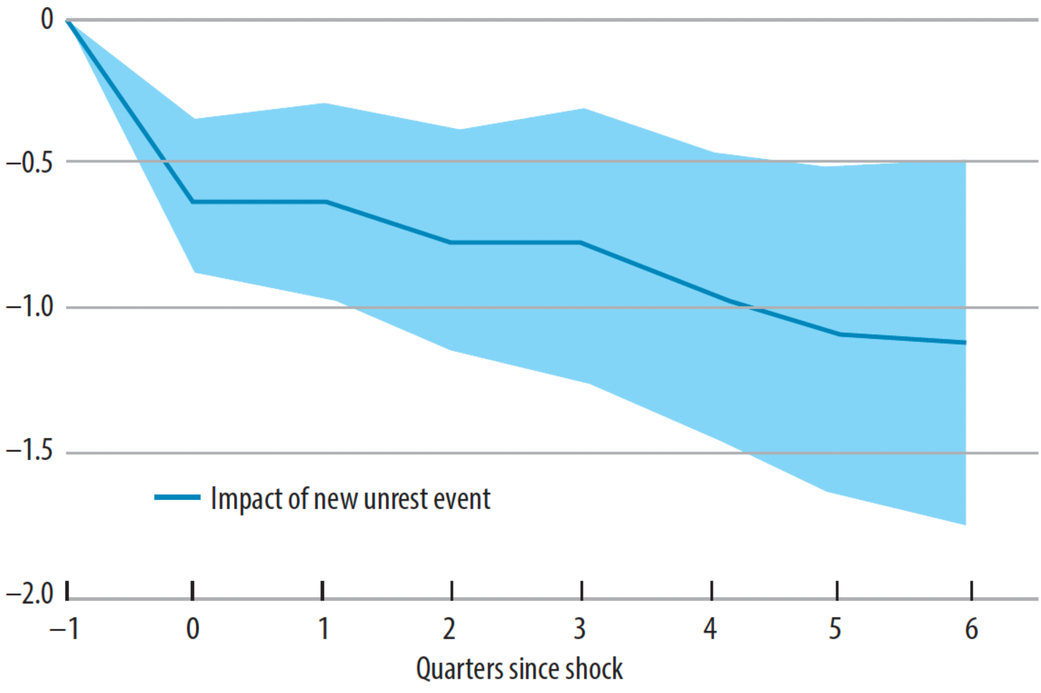
On an average, major unrest events are followed by a one percentage point reduction in GDP, six quarters after the event (see the chart below).

Chart 2

Economic damage from social unrest can be long-lasting

On average, GDP remains about 1 percentage point below its pre-shock level a year and a half after a major protest.

(change in GDP relative to baseline, in percentage points)



Source: Hadzi-Vaskov, Pienknagura and Ricci (2021).
Note: A "new unrest event" is defined as an unrest event that follows eight quarters of no unrest events. The shaded area represents a 90 percent confidence interval.

"Unrest motivated by socioeconomic factors is associated with sharper GDP contractions than unrest associated with political motives. Yet events triggered by a combination of both factors correspond to the sharpest GDP contractions," they point out.



5 times French students took to the streets since 1968, and what happened

Anagha Jayakumar

After weeks of protests in France against poor school conditions and the high cost of living, Prime Minister Sébastien Lecornu called for “partial curfews” in some major cities on October 19.

Around 2,400 people were arrested countrywide over the weekend, while 1,000 police officers and gendarmes were injured, the French interior ministry said.

Protesters have also invoked the

transformative protests of ‘Mai 1968’ (May 1968), which similarly began as protests against poor university conditions and government repression, and snowballed into a general strike by millions of workers. The 1968 protests very nearly brought down the government of President Charles de Gaulle, led by conservative Prime Minister Georges Pompidou.



Sorbonne occupied by students, May 1968. (Wikimedia Commons)

In the decades that followed, successive generations in France mobilised against university reforms, unequal access to education, and policies feared to worsen employment insecurity. Some

movements forced governments to withdraw proposed laws; others exposed grievances that remained unresolved.

1. May 1968: University overcrowding, inequality and a nationwide revolt

Two decades after World War II, France's higher education system was struggling to accommodate a rapidly growing student population. According to historian John Merriman, university enrolment expanded faster than institutional capacity — from 192,000 in 1958-59 to 478,000 in 1967-68 — squeezing access to already overstretched facilities and resources.

Access to higher education also remained deeply unequal: Merriman noted that only 2% of university students in 1964 were children of workers and peasants. Compounding the problem was institutional rigidity, characterised by outdated rules and convoluted bureaucracy, while a university degree did not guarantee steady employment for new graduates, especially those studying the humanities.

Student demonstrations began at the University of Nanterre, west of Paris, before spreading to the Sorbonne and the Latin Quarter, where clashes with police intensified the unrest. The Sorbonne was closed on May 2, and police entered the campus the following day to evacuate students, escalating tensions.

On the night of May 10-11, dubbed the “Night of the Barricades”, thousands of high school and university students took to the streets of Paris and erected makeshift barricades of cobblestones, overturned cars, iron grates and construction materials. The riot police responded with batons and tear gas. The clashes left hundreds injured and led to hundreds of arrests.

The police response helped generate public sympathy for the students and prompted trade unions to call a general strike in solidarity, even as workers mobilised over their own grievances. Workers occupied factories across France, demanding greater control over

working conditions and stronger trade union rights.

By May 20, an estimated 10 million workers had joined the strikes, bringing much of France to a standstill. Negotiations between the government, employers and trade unions produced the Grenelle agreements, which provided for substantial wage increases and stronger trade union rights, although they were not formally signed.

However, the political upheaval did not immediately dislodge Charles de Gaulle. His party won a commanding majority in the June 1968 parliamentary elections, and he remained in office until April 1969, when he resigned following the defeat of a referendum on constitutional reforms.

The protests nevertheless brought changes to university administration and expanded opportunities for student participation. But as Merriman observed, greater access to higher education did not resolve the underlying problems

of inadequate funding, institutional inequality and uncertain employment prospects for graduates.

2. 1986: University reforms, student protests and a government retreat

In 1986, Alain Devaquet, the junior minister for universities, mooted a higher education reform Bill that sought to increase competition and provide greater autonomy to individual universities. Among other things, the Bill would allow universities to set their own entrance examinations instead of admitting all students who cleared the baccalauréat, the school-leaving examination.



A slogan against the Devaquet bill, which reads: 'Universities: 1 dead: the selection process begins', November 1986. (Wikimedia Commons)

It would also allow universities to increase registration and tuition fees. The proposal would also allow universities to issue local or specialised degrees, instead of adhering to the national diploma standard that ensured uniformity.

However, the proposal faced strong pushback from students, who organised mass rallies and strikes. The death of Malik Oussekine, a 22-year-old student who was beaten by police officers in Paris on December 6, also prompted a massive outpouring of anger. The bill was withdrawn on December 8 by Prime Minister Jacques Chirac, while Devaquet resigned amid the crisis.

3. 1995: Education funding cuts and a nationwide wave of strikes

In 1995, French students took to the streets against cuts to education funding and deteriorating university conditions, alongside growing opposition to the conservative government of President Jacques Chirac.

In November, conservative Prime Minister Alain Juppé introduced the Juppé Plan, an extensive programme of social security reforms aimed at containing public spending and bringing France closer to the deficit limits required under the Maastricht Treaty, which established the European Union.



A procession during the strikes against the Juppe Plan, autumn 1995. (Wikimedia Commons)

In a bid to reduce the budget deficit from 5% to 3% of GDP, as mandated by the treaty, the Juppé Plan proposed an overhaul of the state healthcare system to reduce soaring deficits, the creation of a new social security levy, the CRDS (Social Debt Repayment Contribution),

and changes to public-sector pensions.

The proposals triggered widespread strikes by public-sector workers, particularly railway and transport employees. In December, student protesters joined the broader mobilisation, bringing together grievances over university funding, working conditions and welfare reforms.

The government eventually withdrew the proposed changes to special pension regimes, but went ahead with significant parts of its social security reforms.

4. 2006: Youth employment insecurity and the withdrawal of a controversial labour law

Unlike 1995, the 2006 protests were driven largely by university and secondary-school students, with support from trade unions. The trigger this time was the Equal Opportunity Bill, which introduced a new labour contract, the Contrat première embauche (CPE), or First Employment Contract.'

It would allow employers with more than 20 employees to dismiss workers under 26 without having to provide a reason during the first two years of employment. Opponents feared this would worsen job insecurity and discourage young workers from challenging workplace abuse, including sexual harassment, for fear of losing their jobs.



A demonstration against the proposed CPE labour contract, March 2006. (Wikimedia Commons)

Following weeks of demonstrations, university occupations and strikes, Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin announced the withdrawal of the CPE on April 10.

5. 2018: University admissions reforms and fears of greater inequality

In 2018, students protested against President Emmanuel Macron's overhaul of university admissions, particularly the introduction of Parcoursup, a new online application system.



Thousands of yellow vests (Gilets Jaunes) protesters march in Paris, February 2019.

The reforms allowed universities to assess applicants against course-specific criteria, prompting concerns that the changes would undermine open access to higher education and disadvantage students from poorer backgrounds.

Protesters occupied campuses and

disrupted classes and examinations across several universities. However, unlike in 1986 and 2006, the government did not withdraw the reforms. The protests eventually subsided, and Parcoursup remains in place.

Later that year, the Yellow Vest movement, initially sparked by rising fuel costs, brought wider discontent over living costs and economic inequality to the streets. Secondary-school students also mobilised against education reforms, with some drawing inspiration from the movement.



The inherited politics of protest in France

Saptarshi Basak

Do people in France just like to protest?

That is a shorthand way of asking how deeply rebellion is embedded in the country's character. But the question is worth exploring as dramatic images emerge from Paris and other parts of France of protesters being detained at the Place de la Bastille and storming Marseille's city hall, and placards bearing defiant messages such as *Si nous brûlons, vous brûlerez avec nous* — "If we burn, you will burn with us". What began

as student protests demanding better schooling conditions has broadened into a wider expression of public discontent fuelled by the rising cost of living, inflation and austerity measures by a centralised state.

From the storming of the Bastille on July 14, 1789, to May 68 and the more recent Yellow Vests movement (*mouvement des gilets jaunes*), France has acquired a reputation as a land of protest. The French Revolution — a legacy tarnished by the Reign of Terror that followed — transformed the meaning of protest, elevating it from an expression of local grievance (prior to it, the most common riots were related to grain and its prices) to a means of asserting political rights. The Revolution's defining document, the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, identifies "liberty, property, security, and resistance to oppression" as the "natural and imprescriptible rights of man". The fourth right enshrines a principle that has been preserved for more than two centuries: Authority is not beyond question, and the people could claim a legitimate role in resisting its abuse.

By their very nature, governments do not readily welcome an open challenge to their power. In the decades following the French Revolution, successive regimes — the Napoleonic Empire and the Bourbon Restoration — sought to reverse or contain some of its gains. An attempt at course correction came with the July Revolution of 1830, often described as the Second French Revolution, which overthrew Charles X after he issued ordinances restricting the press and dissolving the elected Chamber. Still, the workers who had fought on the barricades during les Trois Glorieuses (the “Three Glorious Days” of July 1830) gained little from the July Monarchy that followed.

Economic hardship and curtailed political rights, even under a regime that shifted the basis of its legitimacy from divine right to constitutional monarchy, culminated in another revolution less than two decades later. Public anger exploded in 1848, when King Louis-Philippe’s government banned the “banquets” that reformers had used to get around restrictions on public meetings. Within days,

the king had abdicated. Émile Zola's open letter *J'accuse…!* during the Dreyfus Affair (1894-1906) and the upheavals of May 1968, which brought students and workers into a collective movement, further revealed a recurring belief in French political life: Political authority can, and sometimes must, be challenged by its citizens. The legacy of 1789 provided later movements with a language of resistance, even as each generation reinterpreted its principles in response to its own grievances.

This is not to suggest that protest is the exclusive preserve of the Left, even if the history of socialist movements and trade unions may create that impression. The French Right, too, has repeatedly mobilised large crowds around its political and social causes. In May 2013, for instance, hundreds of thousands took to the streets in demonstrations organised by La Manif pour tous to oppose the legalisation of same-sex marriage. The street, therefore, is also where competing visions of French society seek to assert themselves.

Nor is protest unique to France.

To suggest otherwise would be to perpetuate a stereotype that does a disservice not only to France but also to other countries, particularly India, where mass mobilisation has long been a feature of political life and continues to be so today. Across Europe, too, protests have erupted in Spain, Portugal, Albania, Italy and Belgium, driven by grievances similar to those seen in France. Part of what sets the latter apart is that it is one of Europe's most centralised states: Pensions, schools, labour law and taxes are largely decided in Paris, so a grievance anywhere becomes a national question. Add to this a system in which governments can push reforms through with narrow majorities, like the 2023 pension reform. Talks between the state and the people are often thin, and so the street becomes a place to protest and bargain. It is this phenomenon that is worth examining — and appreciating.

The writer is copy editor at The Indian Express





Tiger Shroff shooting reveals a shift in Mumbai's underworld gunmen

Zeeshan Shaikh

Mumbai's underworld once had its own roster of gunmen. Men such as Maya Dolas and Firoz Konkani grew out of the city's criminal networks, their names becoming synonymous with gang rivalries and targeted killings. Today, investigations into a string of high-profile shootings in the city are leading police to young men from Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Haryana, allegedly recruited to carry out individual hits.

The firing at actor Tiger Shroff's car in Juhu on October 18 is the latest case to

raise these questions. Police arrested three men from Kota, Rajasthan. Media reports have identified two as being from Haryana and the third as a native of Bihar living in Mumbai, though details of their backgrounds have varied.

Police are yet to establish how they were recruited, who arranged the attack, and whether it was linked to an established gang.

The city's own gunmen

Mumbai's underworld grew around smuggling, illicit liquor, protection rackets and extortion. By the 1980s, rivalries between gangs were increasingly being settled through shootings. Gunmen often emerged from the same neighbourhoods and criminal networks as the gang leaders they served.

Maya Dolas began his criminal career with Ashok Joshi's gang in the eastern suburbs before becoming associated with the Dawood Ibrahim network. He was killed in the 1991 Lokhandwala shootout. Dilip Buwa, another shooter

linked to Joshi before switching sides, was part of the same world of shifting gang loyalties.

On September 6, 1983, David Pardesi, then 20 and from Tilak Nagar in Chembur, shot Pathan gang member Amirzada Nawab Khan inside the Mumbai Sessions Court. An account published later by India Today said Dawood had asked Bada Rajan to arrange the killing and that Pardesi was paid Rs 50,000. Pardesi was wounded and arrested at the scene.

Former Mumbai Police Commissioner Rakesh Maria, in his book When It All Began: The Untold Stories of the Underworld, recounts how Munna Bhanwarlal Gupta alias Manoj Gupta gained access to Pathan gang member Abdul Majid before killing him in 1986.

Firoz Konkani and the local network

Firoz Abdullah Sarguroh, known as Firoz Konkani, grew up in Dongri and entered crime as a teenager. Police accounts linked his early criminal associations

and jail contacts to the Dawood network. He was accused in the 1994 killing of BJP MLA Ramdas Nayak and was believed to have been killed in Karachi in 2003.

Tanya Koli, a known shooter associated with Arun Gawli, was killed on September 17, 1993, while being taken by train to Amravati Jail after a court hearing. The killing was attributed to the rivalry involving the Naik brothers. Ashwin Naik was shot outside the sessions court in 1995 and left paralysed.

Yusuf Kadri alias Yusuf Bachkana, who grew up in a chawl near Falkland Road, and Umed Sheikh alias Umed Ur Rehman were among the shooters associated with the Chhota Rajan network.

These men were part of the city's underworld and its local rivalries.

JJ Hospital: Outsiders in a gang war

On September 12, 1992, armed men entered J J Hospital and opened fire on Shailesh Haldankar, an associate of rival

Arun Gawli, who was under arrest and being guarded by police. Haldankar was suspected by Dawood's gang of helping identify Dawood's brother-in-law, Ibrahim Parkar, who had been killed in July that year.

The attackers killed Haldankar and two police personnel, Head Constable Gajanan Javsen and Constable Kawalsingh Bhanawat, and injured six others.



Subhash Singh Thakur, one of the accused in the 1992 JJ Hospital shooting case. (Express photos)

Among the main accused was Subhash Singh Thakur, from Varanasi in Uttar Pradesh. Thakur later said Dawood associate Sunil Sawant had summoned him to Mumbai and arranged accommodation in Juhu. The attack

involved reconnaissance before the shooting.

This was the first major case that showed gangs were bringing in men from other states for specific operations.

Abu Salem's recruits from Azamgarh

Abu Salem, who came from Sarai Meer in Uttar Pradesh's Azamgarh district, was also reported to have recruited young men from his home region for contract killings.

Contemporary media accounts reported that Salem recruited men with clean records, brought them to Mumbai, gave them money, weapons and photographs of targets, and sent them home after the job. The model allowed the people carrying out a hit to remain at a distance from those allegedly directing it.

Kala Ghoda: The role of intermediaries

The October 16, 2006, Kala Ghoda shootout, one of the most infamous

killings in which police informer Amjad Khan and Himanshu Chowdhary were killed while returning from a court hearing, was investigated in the context of underworld rivalry and links to Chhota Rajan.

Osama Khan and Zafar Khan were accused of involvement in the killings and were reported to be from Uttar Pradesh. The killing was particularly shocking because of the location right outside the city court and the intended target, Amjad Khan, a close associate and informer of a well-known encounter specialist.

The Lawrence Bishnoi modus

In recent cases allegedly linked to the Lawrence Bishnoi network, the bulk of the accused persons are drawn from different states.

In the April 2024 firing outside actor Salman Khan's residence, Vicky Gupta and Sagar Pal, reportedly from Bihar's Champaran region, were arrested in Gujarat. Police alleged that they acted on the instructions of Anmol Bishnoi.

In the October 2024 murder of NCP leader Baba Siddique, suspected shooters Shivkumar Gautam and Dharmaraj Kashyap were from Bahraich in Uttar Pradesh, while Gurmail Singh was from Kaithal in Haryana. Police also named Mohammad Zeeshan Akhtar from Punjab and Shubham Lonkar from Maharashtra as alleged links in the network.

The February 2026 firing at filmmaker Rohit Shetty's residence led to arrests in Pune, Haryana and Uttar Pradesh. Police alleged that the operation involved people performing different roles, including shooting and logistical support. A subsequent chargesheet named 17 accused, including two who were wanted.

A February 2026 report by The Indian Express said young men with little or no criminal record were allegedly being mobilised through social media and local intermediaries. Some were said to have been drawn by the gang's online image. Investigators have also faced difficulties tracing digital communications and social media posts

that are later deleted.

In the Tiger Shroff case, investigators still have to establish who recruited the suspects, who arranged the motorcycle and weapons, whether reconnaissance was conducted, and whether any social media claim of responsibility can be linked to the accused or a wider criminal network.



Why Shiva is associated with Dravidian identity: A historian explains

Adrija Roychowdhury

Telangana Chief Minister Revanth Reddy recently drew a distinction between the religious traditions of North and South India, claiming that Dravidians worship Lord Shiva while Aryans worship Lord Ram.

Reddy also drew a class-based distinction between the two deities, saying, “Shiva is the God of the poor, Ram is the God of the rich, and the BJP is the party of the rich.”

His remarks drew criticism from the BJP leaders, who accused him of deepening regional and religious divisions. The comments also brought renewed attention to the historical prominence of Shaivism in South India, particularly in the Tamil region.

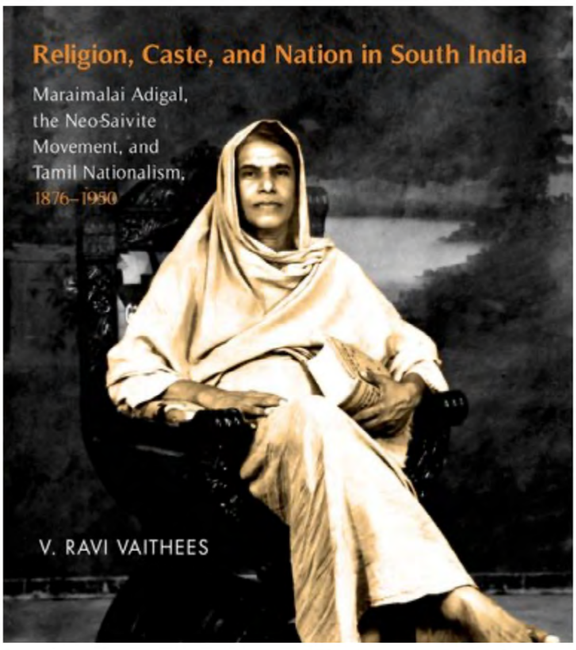
The Tamil Shaiva bhakti movement, associated with the Nayanmar poet-saints between the sixth and ninth centuries CE, played a significant role in shaping the region's religious and literary traditions. Under the Chola kings, from the ninth to the 13th centuries, Shaivism received substantial royal patronage, with temples emerging as important centres of religious, social and economic life.

The tradition was further systematised through Shaiva Siddhanta, a theological and philosophical school that worshipped Lord Shiva as the supreme reality. During the medieval period, it also established powerful monastic institutions in the Tamil region and a distinct Tamil scriptural tradition.

Yet the religious history of southern India, like that of the rest of the subcontinent, was far more complex. The Tamil-speaking region was home to Buddhism and Jainism, as well as a strong Vaishnava tradition that flourished alongside Shaivism.

Historian V Ravi Vaithees argues that the near-exclusive association of Shaivism with Tamil/Dravidian identity is relatively recent, tracing its origins to the 19th-century Tamil-Saiva revivalist (also known as the neo-Saiva movement).





Historian V Ravi Vaithees is author of the book, 'Religion, Caste, and Nation in South India'

The Neo-Shaivite movement, or what he calls "*Naveenar* (modern) Shaivism", he

says, began the process of ethnicisation of religion in this case, associating Shaivism exclusively with Tamil/ Dravidian identity and nationalism. In the process, it forged a political theology that was anti-Aryan, anti-Brahmin, anti-Sanskrit, and non-Brahmin Tamil nationalist in its character. It laid the groundwork for the non-Brahman Tamil/Dravidian movement of the 20th century.

In an interview with indianexpress.com, Vaithees discusses the history of the neo-Shaivite and the Tamil/Dravidian movement and its continuing relevance to contemporary contests over religion, regional identity politics and power.

Edited excerpts:

What is the Neo-Shaivite movement that emerged in the Tamil-speaking region in the 19th century?

The Neo-Shaivite movement sought to construct a distinct regional, religious

and ethno-national identity — in this case, a Tamil Shaivite identity — in contrast to the ascendant neo-Hindu revival of the time. Its emergence can be traced to the fiery debates and pamphlet wars between Vedantist, Vaishnavite and Shaivite leaders and activists in the Madras Presidency in the latter part of the 19th century.

The leader of the Shaivite camp was Somasundara Nayakar, a Telugu- and Tamil-speaking pioneering figure. Nayakar formulated a powerful counter to the prevailing Neo-Vedantic and Vaishnavite revivalist currents, which sought to present a Vedantic and Vaishnavite interpretation of Tamil and Indian literary past.

A former Vaishnavite and Vedantist, Nayakar was a fiery polemicist in this battle against what he called the false “Mayavadists and Vaishnavites” and gave primacy to Shaivism as the only ‘true religion’.

While Nayakar was the founder, his

closest disciple, Maraimalai Adigal, took on the task of fleshing out Nayakar's counter to Neo-Vedanta and Vaishnavism and constructing a neo-Shaivite reading of the Tamil religious and literary history and thus, in the process, ethnicise Shaivism as a Tamil and Dravidian religion.



Maraimalai Adigal (Wikimedia Commons)

A central element of this project was to displace the Vedic and Sanskritic traditions and their impact on Tamil religious and literary history and construct a distinctly non-Brahmin Tamil/Dravidian reading of Tamil Shaivism. Adigal went so far as to claim the existence of separate Tamil Vedas

that were equivalent, if not superior, to the Sanskrit Vedas, but had been lost in ancient tsunamis.

This was a period of fierce contestations among competing religious theological camps over how to define the religio-cultural history of the Tamils. While in the latter part of the 19th century, these debates were between the neo-Vedantists and Vaishnavites, earlier in the century, Pandit Ayodhya Dasar, a Dalit Tamil intellectual, was constructing a neo-Buddhist reading of Tamil literary and religious history, though it was not as successful in gaining wider popularity as the work of the neo-Shaivites.

Why was it so important for Tamil nationalists to distinguish themselves from the pan-Indian Vedantic Hindu tradition?

The pan-Indian neo-Hindu religious current, with its Vedic and Sanskritic roots, was prevailing, if not ascendant,

in Madras by the 19th century. It was gaining even more ground thanks to the rising Indian nationalism. Tamil nationalists needed to counter this to reassert a regional religio-cultural identity that privileged their own tradition. It is worth remembering that Nayakar himself, despite being a Vaishnavite and Vedantist, was largely unaware of Shaivism before he accidentally came across Shaiva Siddhanta.

This predominant view of the early Vedic and Sanskritic source of Indian civilisation had also been enhanced by the work of early 18th-century English Orientalist Sir William Jones.

Jones greatly admired Sanskrit and came up with the theory of the Indo-Aryan family of languages, with Sanskrit as its root language. Soon, Sanskrit began to be regarded as the root language of all Indian languages, including Tamil, while Aryan came to be regarded not only as a linguistic designation but as a racial type. Aryans were now being considered

as the progenitors of Hinduism and Indian civilisation.

Explained

The cast that tied Shiva to Tamil identity

Eight figures behind the rise of neo-Shaivism and the Dravidian movement it helped shape

Starring
The movement



Somasundara Nayakar
as The Founder
A former Vaishnavite and Vedantist who stumbled on Shaiva Siddhanta and hailed Shaivism as the only true religion.



Maraimalai Adigal
as The Disciple
Recast Shaivism as the religion of Tamils and Dravidians, and led the Pure Tamil movement against Sanskrit.



Periyar E.V. Ramasamy
as The Rationalist
Led the Self-Respect movement and went further than the neo-Shaivites, declaring rationalism and atheism.



C.N. Annadurai
as The Heir
The Dravidian movement's political successor, whose anti-Brahmanism and glorification of Tamil echo the neo-Shaivites.

Featuring
Scholars, missionaries and a rival voice



Sir William Jones
as The Orientalist
An admirer of Sanskrit who proposed the Indo-Aryan family of languages, with Sanskrit at its root.



Robert Caldwell
as The Philologist
Scottish missionary whose 1856 grammar named a separate Dravidian family, with Tamil at its root.



G.U. Pope
as The Missionary
English missionary who called Shaivism a unique product of the Tamil genius, more rational than Vedanta.

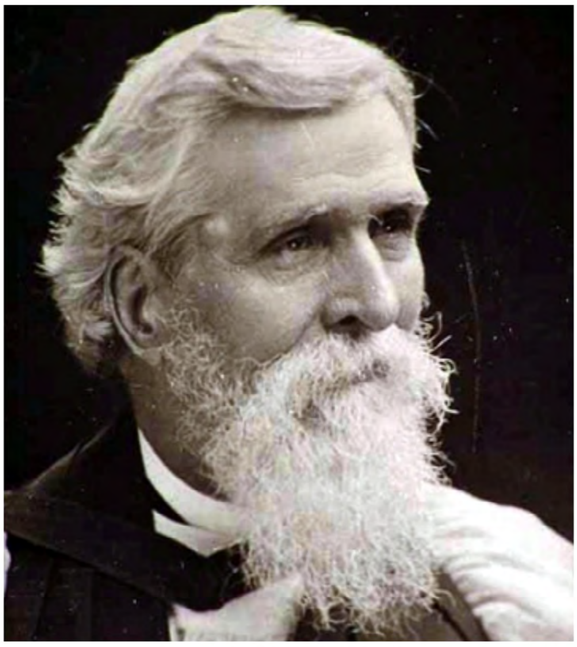


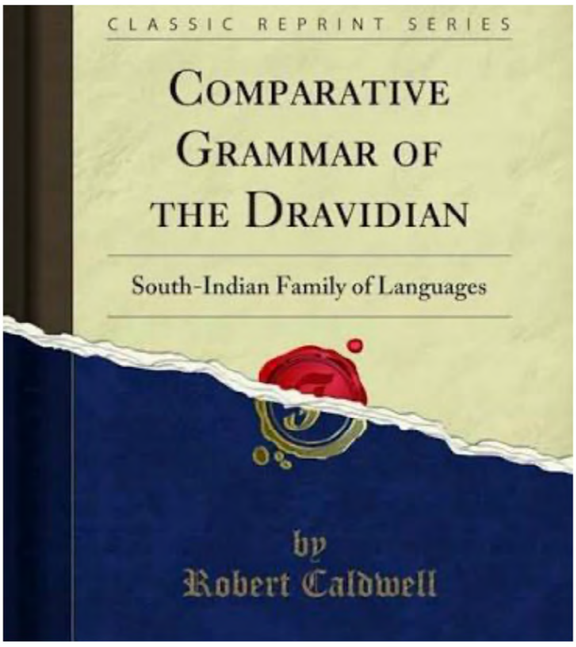
Pandit Ayodhya Dasar
as The Rival Voice
Dalit Tamil intellectual whose neo-Buddhist reading of Tamil history won less popular support.

Based on The Indian Express' interview with historian V Ravi Vaithees

Against this context, Scottish missionary Robert Caldwell published a Philological

work in 1856 titled *Comparative Grammar of South Indian or Dravidian Family of Languages*, challenging the Aryan- and Sanskrit-centric view of Indian civilisation.





Robert Caldwell published a Philological work in 1856 titled Comparative Grammar of South Indian or Dravidian Family of Languages, challenging the Aryan- and Sanskrit-centric view of Indian civilisation.

Caldwell argued that South Indian languages belonged to an entirely different family of languages, which he termed Dravidian, and asserted that Tamil was the root language of South Indian languages. He further argued that Aryan-Sanskrit influence and its impact on Tamil and South Indian languages and religious culture had only been detrimental. He encouraged Tamils and South Indians to eschew Sanskrit and the Aryan Brahmins who had allegedly

brought this language and influence to the South.

There is not much evidence for Nayakar being aware of Caldwell's work. But Adigal utilised Caldwell's work to a great effect to decry the role of Sanskrit and 'Aryan Hinduism' in Tamil religious culture and language and considered it his life's mission to cleanse Tamil religion, language and culture from this alleged pernicious influence.

He was also the founder-leader of the Pure Tamil Movement, aimed at eliminating Sanskrit from Tamil. Much of the impetus for the neo-Shaivite and Tamil/Dravidian movement came from this attempt to displace the preeminent role of Sanskrit and Vedic influence on Tamil society and culture.

How did Neo-Shaivism help in framing this fight?

It was the attempt to counter the ascendant role of the Vedantists and Vaishnavites in the Tamil region by the

Tamil Neo-Shaivites that both framed and informed the ideological pillars of the Neo-Shaivite movement.

Again, the Christian missionaries were hugely helpful in this project. English Christian missionary G.U. Pope declared that Shaivism is a unique product of the Tamils and the Tamilian genius, arguing it is much more rational and even closer to Christianity than the alleged mystifying obscurantism of Vedanta and Sanskrit culture.

The emerging English-educated dominant caste non-Brahmins used this argument to construct a history and genealogy for Tamil that depicted Shaivism as the embodiment and fulfillment of Tamil/Dravidian culture that was now shorn of the evils of caste and other ritual practices and 'obscurantist superstitions.'

In doing so, they crafted a neo-Shaivite movement that formed the ideological foundation for the non-Brahmin Tamil/Dravidian movement.

Earlier anthropologists of religion have referred to the ethnicisation of religion as a form of Protestantization, using terms such as Protestant Buddhism or Hinduism. Sikh Studies scholar Arvind Mandair, exploring the construction of Sikh ethno-religious identity during the colonial period, has called this process a ‘religion making’ exercise where local tradition is selectively drawn upon to construct a ‘religion’ that contested both the Christian missionary threat and, in this case, the neo-Hindu revival sweeping Punjab at the time.

He examined the process of ‘religion making’ that resulted in the construction of a Sikh ethno-religious identity that prioritised its martial Khalsa tradition at the expense of a plurality of other influences that had equally shaped Sikhism. The yoking of Sikhism with the Punjabi linguistic identity was also part of this process that Mandair calls ‘Monotheolingualism’. He also adds that in this process of ‘religion making’, the spiritual content of its theology is

often lost and, in its stead, replaced by political theology and ethnic identity politics.

Was there a historical basis to the successful construction of the Tamil-Shaiva identity?

Before the 6th century, Buddhism and Jainism dominated the Tamil region and produced some of its greatest classical literary works in Tamil. During the Sangam era, there is little evidence of the existence of Shaivism or Vaishnavism, but minor deities were connected to various ecological landscapes. A strong Shaivite tradition emerged in the form of the Tamil Shaivite Bhakti tradition from around the sixth century to the medieval period. However, it coexisted with a prolific Vaishnavite Bhakti tradition.

This was followed by the Vijayanagara and Nayakar period, where Vaishnavism, Veera Shaivism, and more Advaitic forms of Shaivism came to prominence. Scholars believe Shaivism was an all-

India phenomenon and had at least five major schools, including Kashmiri Shaivism, which is theologically highly esteemed. Major ancient Shaivite monastic centres have also been found in Madhya Pradesh, Kashi (Varanasi), etc.

Given this multiplicity and complex 'religious' history of the subcontinent, one could say that Neo-Shaivism collapsed this complex history into 'Monotheolingualism', associating a particular theology exclusively with a particular people and language.

The Dravidian movement was anti-religious or anti-Brahmanical, as you say. And yet it was rooted in the religious philosophy of Shaivism. How do you explain this dichotomy?

In the extant scholarly narrative, Neo-Shaivism is seen as the early phase of the Dravidian movement and succeeded, if not overtaken, by the atheistic and

rationalist Self-Respect Movement led by Periyar E.V. Ramasamy and subsequent leaders of the Dravidian movement.

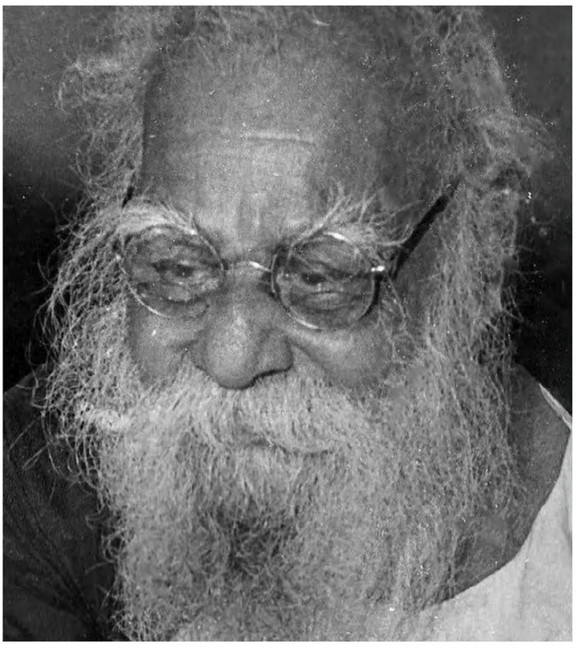
What is left out is that the Neo-Shaivite movement had already started this process of rationalising and secularising by constructing a new Shaivite religion that, in its critique of Aryanism, Brahmanism, and Sanskrit, already contained many of the ideological pillars of the non-Brahmin Dravidian movement like anti-Brahmanism, anti-Aryanism, and anti-caste.

Periyar went further by declaring rationalism and atheism as his religion. But C.N. Annadurai, who was the real successor of the Dravidian movement, in his writings and speeches, remarkably resembles the ideology of the neo-Shaivites in its anti-Brahmanism and anti-Aryanism, the soft peddling of religion along with glorification of Tamil. To this day, one can see elements of this ideology in Dravidian politics that has its real roots in the Neo-

Shaivite movement.

When the Telangana CM invoked Shiva as a symbol of Tamil/Dravidian identity, was he drawing on an older religious tradition, a modern political construction, or both?

His comment seems surprising, even ironic, since he is a Telugu speaker from Telangana.





Periyar (left) and C N Annadurai (right) (Wikimedia Commons)

There is a general scholarly consensus that despite the influence of Dravidian ideology in the Tamil region, it had little appeal outside the region and was not embraced by fellow Dravidian language

speakers in their respective linguistic states after state reorganisation began in the early fifties.

But this does not detract from the fact that the neo-Shaivite and Tamil Dravidian movement was a multi-ethnic effort that began in the Madras Presidency with its multi-ethnic population... and had significant contributions from Telugu, Malayali, and Kannada language speakers.

Recent research on the Dravidian movement by historian J.B. More suggests that Telugu language speakers in the Tamil region played an inordinately prominent role in the early Justice Party, later known as the Dravidian Party, and continue to play a significant role in the Tamil-Dravidian political parties to this day... If anything, it is revealing that non-Brahmin Tamil nationalism and the tremendous cultural production it spawned, including the role played by Tamil cinema in sustaining such an ideological hegemony, was the handiwork of a

multi-ethnic coalition and not, as assumed, the work of so-called pure ethnic Tamils.

A sobering fact perhaps for the non-Brahmin Tamil/Dravidian nationalists.

Is there any truth to the geographical distinction between the south being driven by Shiva worship and the north driven by Ram worship?

There may be some historical truth in that. For example, as the Bhakti movement started in the South and gradually moved north by the medieval period, Islamic and Sufi influences became consolidated. Popular Bhakti saints in the North such as Tulsidas, Kabir, and Mirabai produced powerful devotional hymns appealing more to Vaishnavite gods such as Krishna and Ram. There may be complex reasons for these developments, including the Islamic and Sufi impact on Hinduism, which is now reduced and oversimplified in this North-South geographical

distinction.

Such differences exist within the South itself, with Andhra Pradesh and Kerala having more Vaishnavite temples and patronage than Tamil Nadu or Karnataka. One cannot also discount the work of the nationalist and ethno-nationalist ideological narratives in giving rise to such simplistic divides.

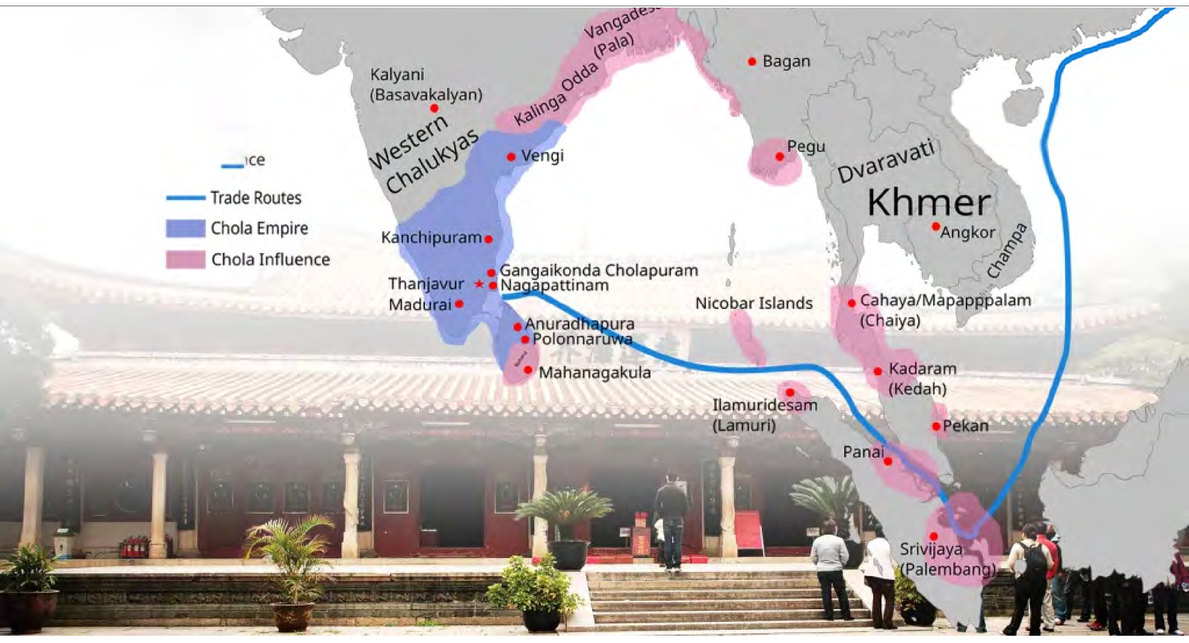
Both the Neo-Shaivites and the Dravidian ideologues made such vitriolic attacks on Vaishnavite and Vedantic currents and texts from as early as the 1900s, including the Ramanayanam, which Periyar, borrowing from Missionary Orientalism, reduced to the story of the Aryans invasion of the South, depicting the Dravidians as monkeys…

However, things are not so simple.

Take, for example, Sri Lanka, where a similar ‘religion-making’ exercise had yoked Buddhism inextricably with the Sinhala ethnicity during the nationalist

period, just as it did Shaivism with the Tamil north. There, you will find, perhaps in imitation of Aryanism of the north, Lord Vishnu being regarded as Sri Lanka's guardian deity.

Such simplistic territorial divisions are less historical than modern inventions which are the result of 'religion-making' during the colonial and nationalist period.



How the Cholas built a powerful maritime trade network across Asia

Nikita Mohta

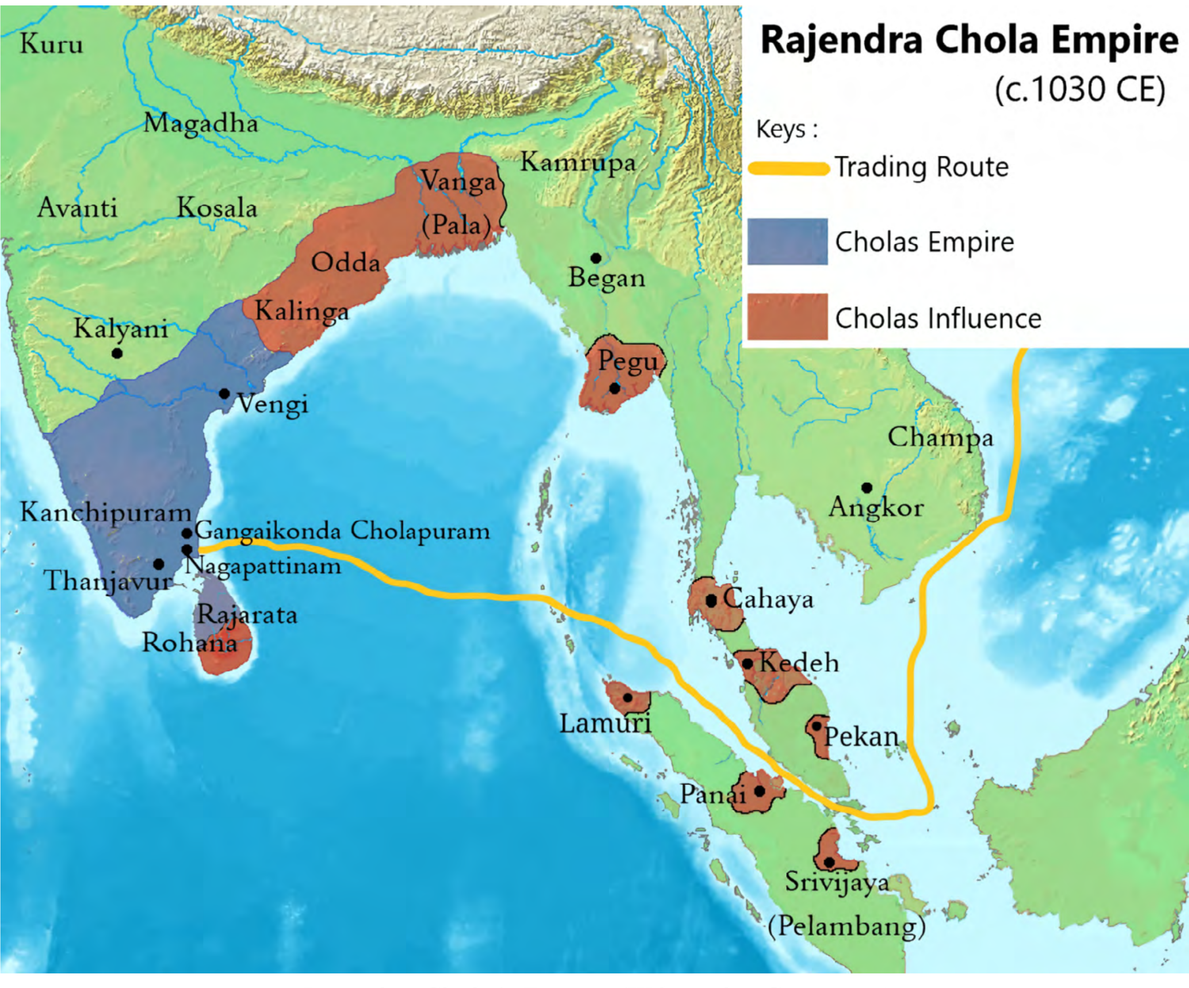
An 18-day excavation in Poompuhar, Tamil Nadu, has uncovered further evidence of the Cholas' overseas trade. Among the key discoveries are a West Asian "torpedo jar", four terracotta ring wells, and more than 250 ceramic fragments. A torpedo jar was historically used to transport liquid cargo such as wine and olive oil across oceanic trade routes; this is perhaps the clearest evidence of Poompuhar's maritime connections with West Asia and the Mediterranean world.

One of the most powerful dynasties in South India, the Cholas ruled over parts of present-day Tamil Nadu, including the regions around Thanjavur and Tiruchirappalli. While the early Cholas flourished between the first and fourth centuries CE, the later Cholas rose to prominence in the ninth century. Military expeditions, naval power, and overseas trade were among the defining features of their rule.

Southeast Asia was among the most important regions in the Cholas' trading network. In *Reflections on the Chola Naval Expeditions to Southeast Asia* (2009), author Hema Devare writes, "In bringing India and Southeast Asia closer, an important part was played by the sea link. This connection was used most effectively by the Cholas who combined maritime and mercantile expertise." How did the Chola state set up such an expansive trading network? What goods were traded, and how did diplomacy shape these commercial relationships?

The rise of Chola sea power

Building on political and economic structures established under earlier dynasties, including the Rashtrakutas and Pallavas, the Cholas emerged as a dominant power in peninsular India between the tenth and thirteenth centuries. Under rulers such as Rājarāja I (r. 985-1014), Rājēndra I (r. 1014-1044) and Rājadhirāja I (r. 1044-1052), they invaded Sri Lanka, launched campaigns in the Bay of Bengal and raided ports in Southeast Asia.



Rajendra Chola's Empire (Wikimedia Commons)

In *Buddhism, Diplomacy, and Trade* (2015), academic Tansen Sen notes, “The reign of these three rulers, and indeed almost the entire four centuries of Chola administration, is marked by internal stability, flourishing Brahmanical institutions and art, increased occupational specialization, and the expansion of domestic and international trade.”

Control over the fertile Kaveri delta brought the Cholas considerable agricultural and economic wealth, which helped sustain towns, religious institutions, and commercial activity. “At the core of Chola economic organization were the commercial towns known as nagaram,” notes Sen. Spread across the Chola territory, these towns developed strategic relationships with merchant communities as well as religious institutions, especially Brahmanical temples. Temples, in turn, generated demand for ritual and precious goods procured through regional and overseas trade. “The term ‘temple urbanization’ is sometimes used to denote the

contribution of religious institutions to urban and economic growth during the Chola period," Sen writes.

In an email exchange with *indianexpress.com*, historian Himanshu Prabha Ray says, "Their wealth is borne out by the setting up of the royal centre at Thanjavur including the stupendous Brihadesvara temple which was three times the size of any contemporary shrine." She adds that it was also a major consumer of many of the commodities involved in trade networks, such as pearls, sandalwood, cloth, and jewels.



Brihadisvara Temple, built in 1010 by Rajaraja I (Wikipedia)

In *Reflections on the Chola Naval Expeditions to Southeast Asia*, academic A. Meenakshisundararajan thus describes the Cholas, alongside the Khmer Empire in present-day Cambodia, the Champa kingdom in present-day Vietnam, and China under the Song dynasty, as examples of corporate empires. Their rise, he argues, reshaped the structure of Asian maritime trade. Meenakshisundararajan explains that the earlier pattern of pre-emporia trade, in which goods were shipped directly from their place of origin to the place of consumption, changed into a new pattern of emporia trade. This introduced practices of re-export, such as breaking bulk or assorting shipments according to the demands of different ports of call.

Another significant development was the emergence of an alternative maritime silk route. The global silk route — from the Mediterranean via the Middle East to China overland — became less serviceable due to regional conflicts in the Middle East. The

alternative sea route that encircled the Indian Ocean and crossed the Southeast Asian waters to China was found to be both convenient and economical. In this context, South Indian ports, including Muziris, Nagapattinam, and Kavirippoompattinam, became important centres of trade, strengthening commercial ties between South India, Southeast Asia and China.

Merchant guilds and maritime expeditions

Tamil merchant guilds had been active since the pre-Chola period, but the Cholas were quick to integrate themselves into this system and expand it. This close relationship between the state and merchant communities became a defining feature of Chola trade.

According to Ray, “From the 9th to the mid-14th centuries, several merchant associations dominated economic transactions in south India, such as the Ainurruvar (Ayyavole), Manigramam,

Nanadesi, and the Anjuvannam." These guilds worked alongside weavers, basket-makers, potters, and leather workers. Ray adds, "Not only did these merchant associations develop powerful economic networks, but they also employed private armies..."

The relationship was mutually beneficial. "The kings provided safety and security for the movement of merchant guilds and did not tax them heavily; while members of the merchant guilds served in administering temple properties, and ritual processions. Donations to royalty and the temples were a part of their regular activities," Ray says.

Sen concurs, "Indeed, the Chola court wooed merchants by providing them protection, favorable terms of trade, and sometimes even entered into marital relationships with the mercantile community. Merchant communities, in turn, supported the Chola kings in times of war and in managing newly conquered lands."

The Cholas also engaged with established trading centres such as Palembang, the capital of the Srivijaya kingdom in present-day Indonesia, which flourished between the seventh and fourteenth centuries. Despite competing interests, the Cholas maintained trade ties with Srivijaya.



Coins of emperor Rajaraja I (Wikipedia)

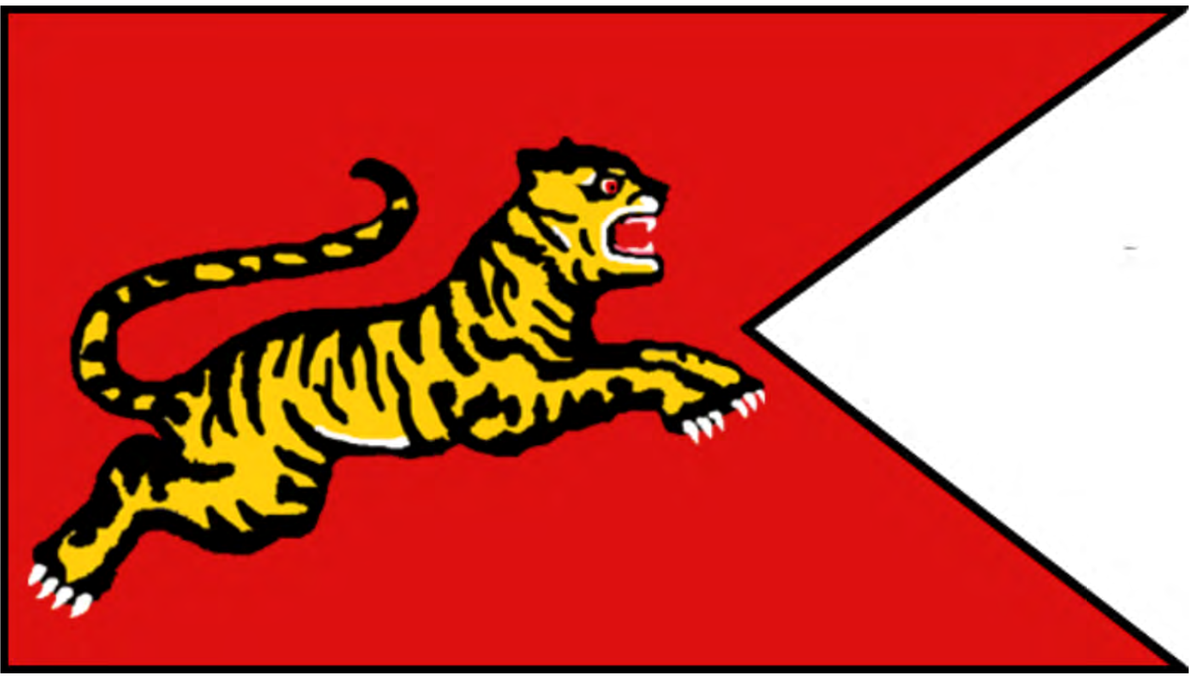
Rājarāja I sent a trade mission to China in 1015 CE, reflecting the growing importance of East and Southeast Asian markets. Devare writes, “Beginning with this, a series of trade missions were sent to China during the Chola dynasty. Up until then, the focus of these trade associations was the Middle East…”

Historian K. A. Nilakanta Sastri discusses these missions in *The Colas*

(1955): “How eager the Colas were to take advantage of the extended opportunities thus opened to them is evident from the missions sent to China by Rajaraja and Rajendra.”

From Arabian horses to West Asian Frankincense

The Cholas traded in a wide range of goods, from textiles, spices, rice, and grains to sandalwood, camphor, pearls, ivory, and precious stones. Horses were another important import, particularly from Arabia. Sastri links the popularity of the Arab horse trade to the expansion of Chola power in South India, as horses were vital to the Chola cavalry.



Flag of Chola Kingdom (Wikimedia Commons)

Indian cotton textiles were also in demand in China. Devare writes, “China was one of the earliest eastern markets for Indian cotton.” Chinese demand for cotton cloth grew partly because it was used for soldiers’ uniforms and as payment to officials and troops. Indian traders carried textiles through Southeast Asia to China, while Southeast Asian merchants re-exported them alongside other goods.

Not all the goods passing through Chola ports originated in India. “Frankincense, which was used to make incense, came from West Asia and was in high demand in China. It travelled through the Coromandel Coast and Southeast Asia, with both the Cholas and Srivijaya benefiting from this trade,” Sen explains.

Chinese porcelain was also becoming an important commodity, finding markets in West Asia, while Indian pepper gained prominence in trading networks between the 11th and 13th centuries.

Trade also generated significant

revenue through customs duties. Meenakshisundararajan notes, “Customs duties played a major role in the budgets of these corporate empires.” Although some scholars such as Sastri argue that high taxes discouraged trade in the Chola kingdom, evidence of thriving port towns and foreign merchant settlements suggests that overseas commerce remained strong.

The cultural legacy of the Cholas

Trade also facilitated the spread of Indian religion, art, architecture, languages, and customs across Southeast Asia, a process some historians have described as the emergence of “Greater India”.

In her work, Devare explains, “Ships carrying cargo between India and China stopped at ports on the west coast of Southeast Asia to barter and exchange. This intense activity not only enhanced trade and commerce, but was also a conduit for the spread of religions,

especially Buddhism and Brahmanism."

"The third pillar of Chola trade was religion," says Sen. "The worship of Vishnu and Shiva spread into Southeast Asia, where Tamil traders not only settled but also established temples, leaving behind Tamil inscriptions and images of Hindu gods and goddesses."

Sen adds, "We find two Tamil inscriptions in China, along with evidence of a Hindu temple — the only archaeological evidence we have of Tamil temples in China."

This reciprocity between commercial towns, merchant guilds and religious institutions under the Cholas facilitated both maritime and cultural exchange across the Indian Ocean. Sen argues that these networks contributed to the emergence of a "world economy" by linking the major markets of the maritime world.



Why is Gandhi still hated? Ramachandra Guha on the Mahatma's contested legacy

Aishwarya Khosla

Mahatma Gandhi is revered the world over, but why do many still love to hate him back home? The question ran through the launch of Ramachandra Guha's *Arguments with Gandhi* at the India International Centre.

The book reads Gandhi through those who engaged with him, from B R Ambedkar, Lenin and Albert Einstein to Martin Luther King Jr, Nelson Mandela, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay and V D Savarkar, among many others. The

arguments, he explained, are “against Gandhi, combating Gandhi, disputing Gandhi, disparaging Gandhi, but also arguments taking Gandhi’s ideas forward, adapting them, reviewing them, reinventing them.”

Guha, IIC President Shyam Saran, and Bushra Ahmed of HarperCollins launched the book on October 8 at the IIC’s C D Deshmukh Auditorium, along with DU professor Apoorvanand, who then joined Guha in conversation.

Is Gandhi still hated?

Midway through the discussion, Apoorvanand read from the French feminist Hélène Cixous, who wrote that Gandhi, far from being adored, “is hated and still hated today in India”, and asked for Guha’s response to this assessment.

“Gandhi,” he agreed, “was hated particularly by the Hindu right and still is hated by the Hindu right.” Nehru may be the name invoked more often, he said, but it is Gandhi who strikes at

the core of that politics, because of his commitment to Hindu–Muslim harmony and his practice of non-violence.

The Right's beef with Gandhi: An argument from 1909

That quarrel is older than the Republic. On July 1, 1909, a former colonial official in India, Sir Curzon Wyllie, was shot dead in London by a young Punjabi student, Madan Lal Dhingra. Among Dhingra's "energetic cheerleaders", Guha writes, was a young man named V D Savarkar, then studying to be a barrister. Savarkar and his circle believed non-violence to be "ineffective as well as effeminate".

Gandhi, who arrived in London soon after, was "horrified". "India can gain nothing from the rule of murderers," he wrote, "no matter whether they are black or white." On the voyage back to South Africa he drafted Hind Swaraj, carrying forward the debates he had begun with Indian students in London who were enchanted by armed struggle.

Gandhi kept making the case at home. Less than two months after returning to India in 1915, he was in Calcutta, then the epicentre of what was called the "terrorist movement". He told students there that if they had a programme for the country, they should "place it openly before the public" rather than "indulge in acts of indiscriminate violence".

Why the left dislikes Gandhi

Nor has the hostility come only from the right. As a doctoral student in Calcutta in the 1980s, Guha said, "the most visceral dislike of Gandhi came from the Marxists and particularly from the Naxalites", many of them his own teachers. To them Gandhi was a bourgeois stooge "who deliberately conned and fooled the masses with his philosophy of non-violence to win them away from the revolutionary path."

One of what Guha called his "joyous discoveries" while researching the book was a January 1970 report by the West Bengal Police. It documented 140

attacks on Gandhi statues and portraits by Naxalite students the previous year, the year of Gandhi's birth centenary.

Hindus' grievance with Gandhi

The hatred with the longest reach, though, may be that of upper-caste Hindus. In the 1930s, Guha argued, Gandhi was the only upper-caste leader in the Congress to campaign against untouchability. He called it a sin, and said the Hindus who practised it were "the General Dyers of Hinduism".

Guha conceded that Gandhi could be "uncharacteristically arrogant" on the subject, once telling Ambedkar in a debate that "if there was a poll among Harijans, I would top the poll". The campaign nearly cost Gandhi his life, as there was an attempt to kill him in Pune in 1934.

Guha drew on the Kannada thinker D R Nagaraj's *The Flaming Feet* (1993), which set Gandhi's politics of self-purification beside Ambedkar's politics of self-

respect, and argued that the two should be seen as complementary rather than as adversaries.

One of the most heartening signs of late, he added, was Abhijeet Dipke, founder of the Cockroach Janta Party, "the Ambedkarite Mahar from Maharashtra who recognises that Ambedkar and Gandhi have to be brought together."

Apoorvanand recalled Dipke's latest statement: "Gandhi is the soul of India, Ambedkar spine and Nehru mind of India." Guha quoted an unnamed teacher at Mysore University, when he said, "Gandhiji was telling the upper caste, rid yourself of your superiority complex. Ambedkar was telling the Dalits, rid yourself of your inferiority complex."

Did the Poona Pact fail?

Apoorvanand reminded the audience that after the Poona Pact of 1932, Gandhi said the onus was now on upper castes to prove Ambedkar was right to

agree. Have they failed?

“They have failed in Gandhi’s time, and they have failed after Gandhi’s time,” Guha said. He was scathing about the revival of what is called “neo-Brahminism” over the last 10 or 15 years. That included claims from his own Tamil Brahmin community that “Tamil Brahmins are like Jews, a persecuted minority”. “Give me a break,” he said.

Was the pact a good compromise or a rotten one? Apoorvanand framed the question in the terms of the philosopher Avishai Margalit, but Guha would not commit. “The jury is still out,” he said.

Ambedkar signed the pact under the pressure of Gandhi’s fast, worried that if Gandhi died, the blame would be laid at his door. By 1935 he had called it a rotten compromise, yet as chairman of the Constitution’s drafting committee he later accepted joint electorates with reserved seats. Kanshi Ram dismissed reserved-seat MPs as “chamchas”.

But because Dalits make up a sizable share of voters across most of India's constituencies, Guha argued, "every single party and leader in India praises Dr Ambedkar without fail."

'Not revisionism … but parricide'

"The unthinking adoration of Gandhi in the early years of Indian independence may have been extreme," he read from the book's final pages.

The paragraphs he read centre on Gopal Krishna Gandhi, the Mahatma's grandson.

In December 1992, after the Babri Masjid was demolished, Gopal Gandhi told Guha that Hindus had extinguished the Buddha's influence in the land of his birth, and feared they might do the same to Gandhi. A decade later, as India's ambassador to Norway, he attended a panel on Gandhi in Oslo and wrote to Guha: "Every sixth person on earth is an Indian. But not one of the seven

panellists on Gandhi in Oslo that day was an Indian." Gandhi's globalisation, he added, was "total and irreversible". It was "also India's most important disinvestment."

What India has now, Guha argued, "is not revisionism or iconoclasm, but parricide, the outright repudiation of the person who perhaps did more than anyone else to nurture this nation into being." India still needs Gandhi's ideas, he said, to check the Republic's slide "into a Hindu Pakistan". "Gandhi still speaks to the world, but perhaps he must speak once more to his homeland as well."

But Guha added a postscript that the manuscript, he said, had gone to the publisher early this year. "Had it been sent to the publisher now, neither Gopal Gandhi nor I would have been so despondent about Gandhi's place in his own homeland."





In Arunachal Pradesh, a traditional spice is helping villagers earn from their forests

Himakshi Panwar

For generations, khagi has found its way into the kitchens of Arunachal Pradesh's Indigenous communities. Its sharp citrus aroma and tongue-tingling flavour lend character to meat curries, chutneys and other local dishes. But for villagers in West Kameng district, the spice is also becoming a source of income from a resource they have known and used for generations.

From a traditional spice to a source of income

Khagi has a long history in the

Mandala–Phudung–Khellong landscape. Valued for its distinctive aroma and place in local cuisine, it also holds economic and cultural significance among the Monpa communities. Historical accounts document its use as a form of tax or tribute to Tawang Monastery.

Despite this legacy and the region's reputation for producing good-quality khagi, its sale remained largely informal. "Individual households dealt with traders from different parts of Arunachal Pradesh and Assam, often negotiating prices on their own," a local told indianexpress.com.

This arrangement had its limitations. Families had to find buyers, travel to markets in some cases and bear transportation costs. Although selling independently sometimes fetched a higher price, it also required considerable time and effort.

Villagers in the Mandala–Phudung–Khellong Community Conserved Area (MPKCCA) have since come together to

organise the collection and sale of khagi, a local name for Zanthoxylum species. With support from the World Wide Fund for Nature-India (WWF-India) and its partners, they have established a collective system to collect, sort, grade, package and sell the spice.

Over the last two harvest seasons, the initiative has sold more than 10 tonnes of khagi, generating approximately Rs 39 lakh in turnover and benefiting over 200 households.

What has changed?

For Wangdi, gaon burah (traditional leader) of Phudung village, one of the biggest benefits is knowing that the harvest can be sold without the family having to find buyers or store the produce for extended periods.

“The collective approach has reduced our anxiety because we can sell our produce without worrying about storing it for long periods. Earlier, we had to travel to different markets to sell our produce. While this sometimes allowed

us to secure a higher price, it also involved additional transportation costs and considerable time and effort," he said.

According to WWF-India, around 95 per cent of the total sale proceeds go directly to households, while approximately 5 per cent is retained by the Community Conserved Area management committee to cover collection, storage, sorting, packaging and transportation costs.

Protecting a traditional resource

For villagers, khagi is more than a spice to be sold. Its continued availability also depends on how villagers manage and harvest the trees.

"Khagi is good for nature because it gives people a reason to save the trees. When families earn money from picking khagi safely, they protect the forest. This keeps the homes of wild animals, like red pandas, safe and healthy," says environmentalist Jasmit Singh Arora,

popularly known as the “Gutliman of India”.



All about Khagi from Arunachal Pradesh (Photo: PR handout)

Many households have Zanthoxylum trees in their front and backyards, along field bunds, boundaries and fences. Some older trees are estimated to be around 18–20 years old. According to local accounts, villagers traditionally collected the fruits from surrounding

forests before increasingly planting or retaining the trees near agricultural fields.

Villagers also follow harvesting practices intended to prevent damage to the trees. Pem Choijam, head gaon burah of Mandala Phudung, said, “We usually harvest the ripe seeds between August and September, and there is a village rule prohibiting anyone from damaging khagi trees.”

Rather than climbing the trees, harvesters use makeshift elevated platforms to reach the branches. This lets them collect ripe fruit while reducing the risk of branches breaking under their weight, Choijam explained.

How khagi earnings benefit the village

The collective earnings have also contributed to a community facility. A concrete platform and wash basin were constructed at the village monastery using a portion of the previous year’s earnings.

The facility is used during village festivals and religious ceremonies, when volunteers cook, clean, and do other tasks. It helps ease some of the physical work involved, particularly for women who take on these responsibilities.

Phurpa Tsering said the villagers now value their traditional resource even more. “The communities in our villages have realised the importance of khagi. We now sell our harvest at our doorstep, and every household receives the same price without discrimination.”

The challenges ahead

Despite the benefits of collective marketing, villagers continue to negotiate prices with buyers each season. As the head gaon burah of Mandala Phudung Khellong explained, the process also involves persuading households to sell through the collective arrangement.

“We have to negotiate the price every season and then spend additional time convincing the community to continue

with collective marketing at the agreed price. Some middlemen offer a higher price to individual collectors, but they are not large buyers and cannot procure the entire quantity," he said.

He added that a long-term commitment from buyers, along with an agreed price range, would make it easier to bring more households into the collective system.

There is also the question of whether rising demand could put pressure on the resource. Arora cautioned that excessive harvesting could damage plants and affect their ability to regenerate.

"If too many people want to buy khagi, pickers might take too much. This can hurt the plants and stop them from growing back. If we are not careful, the forest can get empty. We must pick only a little to keep nature safe," he said.

Assessing whether harvesting remains sustainable would require monitoring khagi populations, new seedlings and the quantity collected each season.

Changes in forest cover and wildlife populations, including red pandas, could also help researchers assess the initiative's wider ecological impact.

Arora suggested community-led harvesting limits, promoting cultivation to reduce pressure on wild populations, seasonal restrictions where necessary and continued scientific monitoring. Fairer and more predictable market arrangements could also help ensure that growing demand does not encourage excessive collection.



Koffee with Karan's Salman Khan episode reminded me why I turned my back on Bollywood

Anupama Yadav

The new and final season of *Koffee with Karan* kicked off with Salman Khan as its first guest, and what began as a trip down memory lane soon got me thinking about my own relationship with Bollywood.

As Karan Johar and Salman revisited their first meeting and their film together, *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai*, the conversation turned to how much the industry has changed. From films and actors to sets and the overall experience

of making cinema, the sentiment was clear that they simply do not make them like they used to.

And honestly, I could see where they were coming from.

As they reminisced about films such as *Hum Dil De Chuke Sanam*, *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* and *Dulhan Hum Le Jayenge*, I found myself asking a question I had not consciously thought about in a long time.

When was the last time I genuinely enjoyed a Bollywood film?

Somewhere along the way, I stopped looking forward to Bollywood. It was not a conscious decision or a dramatic boycott. I simply lost interest. The repetitive storylines, familiar faces, increasingly similar-looking actors, and forgettable music made it harder to find something that genuinely excited me. With every passing year, mainstream Hindi cinema seemed to be getting more predictable, and its music was often the biggest disappointment.

Today, when I open YouTube looking for a song, I almost always find myself going back to the 1990s and early 2000s. Not because everything made back then was brilliant, but because there was variety. Films could make you laugh, break your heart, challenge you, or simply entertain you. They had flaws, but they didn't all feel like variations of the same story.

The films we still remember, and the stars we still miss

Think of *Dil Se, Sarfarosh, Roja, Andaz Apna Apna, Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge, Damini, Baazigar, Satya, Kaho Naa... Pyaar Hai* and *Vaastav*. And that is just the 1990s. The 2000s gave us *Lagaan, Rang De Basanti, Guru, Jodhaa Akbar, Rockstar*, and *Zindagi Na Milegi Dobara*, among many others.

Different genres, different sensibilities, different stories. These films gave us memorable characters and music we still listen to.

Watching Salman on *Koffee with Karan*

brought back another memory. Karisma Kapoor joined the episode for the rapid-fire segment, and the conversation touched on *Dulhan Hum Le Jayenge*, its songs, and its costumes. It reminded us how films from that era could leave a mark on popular culture well beyond their theatrical run.

And then there is Salman himself. Watch him in the song *Pehli Pehli Baar Jab* from *Jab Pyaar Kisi Se Hota Hai*, and you simply cannot miss the effortless charm he brought to the screen. I would challenge today's actors to recreate that particular combination of looks and charisma, just as I would challenge anyone to recreate Shah Rukh Khan's magic in *Chaiyya Chaiyya*. But I also do not necessarily want them to. I want today's stars to create their own moments, the kind that audiences will remember decades later.

We seem to have traded stars for carefully managed images. Public relations teams, media training, brand associations, and carefully constructed

personas have become an increasingly visible part of celebrity culture. Everyone has an image to maintain and a narrative to sell.

There is nothing wrong with publicity, but when everything feels curated, where does the spontaneity or the authenticity go?

Where is the individuality?

The problem isn't that today's stars cannot be charismatic. It is that the machinery around them can make it harder for their individuality to shine through. When every appearance, interview, and brand association seems carefully planned, the line between a celebrity and the image being sold to us begins to blur.

Whatever happened to independent music?

And while we are at it, whatever happened to independent music? There was a time when you did not need

a film to give you a hit song. Indian pop music had its own stars, albums, and identity. Shaan and Sonu Nigam were familiar voices, while Falguni Pathak became the queen of dandiya and festive pop with songs such as *Maine Payal Hai Chhankai* (1999) and *Meri Chunar Udd Udd Jaye* (2000).

Alisha Chinai's *Made in India* (1995) became a defining pop hit. Lucky Ali gave us *O Sanam* and *Dekha Hai Aise Bhi*, songs with a sound and soul unmistakably their own. Euphoria, led by Palash Sen, brought Indian pop-rock into the mainstream with *Maaeri* and *Dhoom Pichuck*. Silk Route's *Dooba Dooba* became an anthem, while the Aryans gave us *Aankhon Mein Tera Hi Chehra*, featuring a young Shahid Kapoor in its music video.

And who can forget *Leja Leja Re*, the 2006 song featuring Shreya Ghoshal and Ustad Sultan Khan, or *Tera Mera Pyar* by Kumar Sanu?

These songs did not need a blockbuster

to find an audience. They had lives of their own. You could play them on repeat, associate them with a phase of your life, and return to them years later. Independent music had room to breathe, and artists could build identities outside the film industry. Today, it feels as though film soundtracks dominate the conversation, while standalone music struggles to command the same mainstream attention.

Perhaps what I miss is not just the music itself, but the idea that a song could become popular on its own merits, without being attached to a film, a star or a promotional campaign. Independent music gave listeners a different set of voices to discover and artists a chance to build an identity beyond the movies. That space still exists, but it feels much harder for it to occupy the centre of popular culture.

From film songs to advertisements, where did the fun go?

The nostalgia extends to advertising,

too. Pepsi and Coca-Cola once gave us commercials that felt like events. I remember the excitement of waiting for a new ad. From the Liril girl to the little boy chasing a jalebi in the Dhara cooking oil advertisement, and Cadbury's memorable campaigns, advertising could be funny, inventive, and genuinely entertaining.

Now, I struggle to sit through many commercials. Too often, they rely on familiar celebrity faces and predictable formulas.

Where are the ideas that make you stop and pay attention? Why does everything have to look so similar?

That sameness is what bothers me about mainstream Bollywood, too. The perfectly sculpted bodies, familiar styling, predictable romances, and songs that struggle to stay with you beyond a few listens. It is not that every contemporary film is bad or that the past was perfect. The 1990s and 2000s had their share of forgettable films,

formulaic scripts, and manufactured stars. But the films and songs that worked gave us something to hold on to.

Perhaps that is also why older films returning to cinema halls feel so significant. Audiences are willing to revisit stories they already know, not just for nostalgia but for the pleasure of experiencing them on the big screen again. Maybe the question is not why people keep returning to the past, but what made those films worth returning to in the first place.

Pankaj Udhas's *Aur Ahista Kijiye Baatein* is a reminder of how music can endure without a trend, a promotional campaign, or a film release to keep it alive. There is an intimacy to the song that makes you slow down and listen. It asks for nothing more than your attention.

And perhaps that is what I have been missing all along.

I do not want Bollywood to recreate

the 1990s or bring back the past. Every generation deserves its own stories, sounds, and cultural moments. I want today's films to surprise me, today's music to stay with me. I want to look forward to a film without having to convince myself to watch it.

Until then, I will probably keep returning to my old favourites that I have known for years and wondering when Bollywood stopped feeling like a place I wanted to visit.

Watching Salman Khan and Karan Johar reminisce about the films they made together did not make me want to return to Bollywood. It made me realise how far I had drifted away from it.



Why Casio is betting on analogue G-Shock watches in India

Anuj Bhatia

Young Indian consumers are increasingly looking at watches as expressions of personal style rather than just timekeeping devices, according to Takuto Kimura, Managing Director, Casio India.

The shift, Kimura says, is creating an opportunity for traditional analogue watches and screenless timepieces such as G-Shock, which combine distinctive designs with functionality without the distractions of constant connectivity.

Casio is looking to tap into this changing consumer preference with its new G-Shock 2500 series, an all-analogue G-Shock collection that retains the brand's signature toughness while dispensing with digital displays and Bluetooth connectivity.

"The trend is moving very quickly in India, driven by the country's large young population. Young consumers are shaping trends, looking to global markets for inspiration and then adapting those trends to local preferences," Kimura told indianexpress.com in an interview on the sidelines of the launch of the new Casio G-Shock 2500 series in India.

"However, one important factor is that consumers are not just looking for affordability; they also place value on the brand and the product itself. They are more connected to culture, music, sports and art. G-Shock watches fit well with these trends among young consumers," Kimura added.

‘A new design language’

Casio’s 2500 series, has been one of the worst-kept secrets in affordable watches for months. Casio briefly leaked the watch in Japan, prompting G-Shock enthusiasts to nickname it the “CasioNaut.”



Takuto Kimura, Managing Director, Casio India can be seen wearing the new Casio G-Shock 2500 Series watch. (Image credit: Anuj Bhatia/Indian Express)

It is a fully analogue G-Shock range featuring no screens, digital readouts or Bluetooth connectivity. Instead, it has a two-handed central time display, a small seconds subdial and a date display.

Prices range from Rs 9,995 to Rs 26,995 in India.

The series takes inspiration from the original G-Shock's octagonal case and protective button guards but replaces the familiar digital display with a minimalist analogue dial. It resembles the hugely popular GA-2100, better known as the CasiOak.

The 2500 introduces Casio's new quartz module, the 5757, which lets the date display serve a dual purpose: showing the date in standard mode and elapsed time in stopwatch mode, activated with the pusher at 8 o'clock.

The big change is the newly developed Multi-Mission Date, a fan-shaped display at the 3 o'clock position that can show various information, including the date, elapsed stopwatch minutes, and calendar settings. The new movement also features a magnetic shock-release minute hand that stays in place using magnets.

The new collection comprises nine watches, predominantly featuring monochrome resin and metal-clad

finishes. As expected from Casio, they are tough, shock-resistant and functional, offering date, stopwatch and calendar information at the press of a button.

“The DNA remains the same when it comes to toughness, which the 2500 series retains. However, we have introduced a new design language and a more compact profile to the G-Shock,” Kimura said.

“This new analogue format will appeal to customers who prefer analogue watches. Its compact size also makes it suitable for both casual and semi-formal styles. We believe the 2500 series will be a much-loved addition to the collection,” he added.

In India, as Kimura noted, G-shock watches, priced between Rs 8000 to Rs 20,000, perform well.

Gerardus Mercator



GERARDUS MERCATOR
MAPPED THE WORLD.

AND MADE IT EASIER
TO NAVIGATE.

BUT HE BARELY
TRAVELLED IT...

Scheldt

BORN IN RUPELMONDE IN PRESENT-DAY BELGIUM.

HE SPENT MOST OF HIS ADULT LIFE IN DUISBURG, GERMANY, LESS THAN 200 KM AWAY.

Rhine

N
W
E

OTHERS TRAVELLED... HE GATHERED WHAT THEY BROUGHT BACK...

THE WORLD'S COME TO ME.

LOGBOOKS.

JOURNALS.

LETTERS.

SURVEYS.

FRAGMENT BY FRAGMENT...

Travels of

... HE ASSEMBLED THE WORLD.

BUT A MAPPED WORLD WAS NOT YET A NAVIGABLE ONE.

SAILORS FELT IT FIRST.

WE'RE HEADED THE WRONG WAY!

BUT I NEVER CHANGED DIRECTION...

A CONSTANT COURSE... THEN WHY DOES OUR PATH KEEP BENDING?

BECAUSE THE EARTH IS ROUND...

A NAVIGATOR ON A CONSTANT COURSE...

... SAILS AN ENDLESS CURVE.

TAKE THE MAP OFF...

FLATTEN IT.

THE PATH STILL CURVES...

THERE HAS TO BE A SIMPLER WAY...

WHAT IF I STRAIGHTEN THE PARALLELS AND PULL THEM APART?

STRETCH THE MAP... INTO A GRID.

FINALLY...

THE PATH WILL NOW RUN STRAIGHT...

... AS LONG AS THE DIRECTION IS STEADY.

IN 1569, MERCATOR ENGRAVED HIS SOLUTION ON 18 COPPER PLATES.

DRAW A LINE, SET THE ANGLE, AND SAIL.

FINALLY! A NAVIGATOR'S MAP!

WE STRETCHED THE GRID...
THE LAND STRETCHED, TOO.

AFRICA COULD SWALLOW GREENLAND 14 TIMES...

BUT ON THE MAP, THEY NOW LOOK NEARLY THE SAME...

TO PRESERVE DIRECTION, SCALE MUST BE SACRIFICED.

WHY AREN'T NORTH AMERICA, SOUTH AMERICA, AND EUROPE THE RIGHT SIZE ON MERCATOR'S MAP?

MERCATOR

ATLANTIC OCEAN

HIS MAP WAS NOT CREATED TO COMPARE THEIR SIZE.

IT WAS MEANT TO HELP US TRAVEL. FURTHER THAN WE EVER HAD.

MERCATOR

PACIFIC OCEAN

AND THE MAP TRAVELLED, TOO... EVERYWHERE...

... FURTHER THAN
MERCATOR EVER DID.



MORE THAN FOUR CENTURIES LATER, HIS GEOMETRY REMAINS BENEATH MANY DIGITAL MAPS.

YOU HAVE ARRIVED AT YOUR DESTINATION.

Marine Drive

A GLOBE TELLS THE TRUTH OF SHAPE.

A MAP MUST CHOOSE WHAT TO PRESERVE.

GREENLAND

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