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◀ MOHNA: A Heart Forever Rooted in Gah



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# CULT CURRENT

## HYPOCRISY OF FLAT EARTH SOCIETY



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# POSITIVE INDIA

## UNsung HEROES

Young Farmer's Journey to Save 300 Rare Seeds



Salai Arun

At the age of 32, Arun Salai, a seed protector from a small village called Mangalam in Tamil Nadu, embarked on a remarkable journey to save over 300 rare seeds of fruits and vegetables. With his life savings of just 300 rupees, Arun set out to create an indigenous seed bank that would preserve these invaluable varieties for future generations. From a young age, Arun had a deep connection with farming. After losing his mother, he grew up with his grandparents, often helping his grandfather in the fields. However, his love for agriculture transformed into a passionate mission after he met renowned organic farming scientist, G. Nammalvar, in 2011. Under Nammalvar's guidance, Arun became an expert in organic farming and dedicated himself to teaching other farmers the art of sustainable agriculture. During this time, Arun realized that many farmers lacked access to indigenous vegetable seeds.



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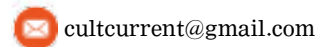
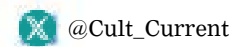
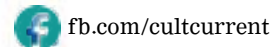
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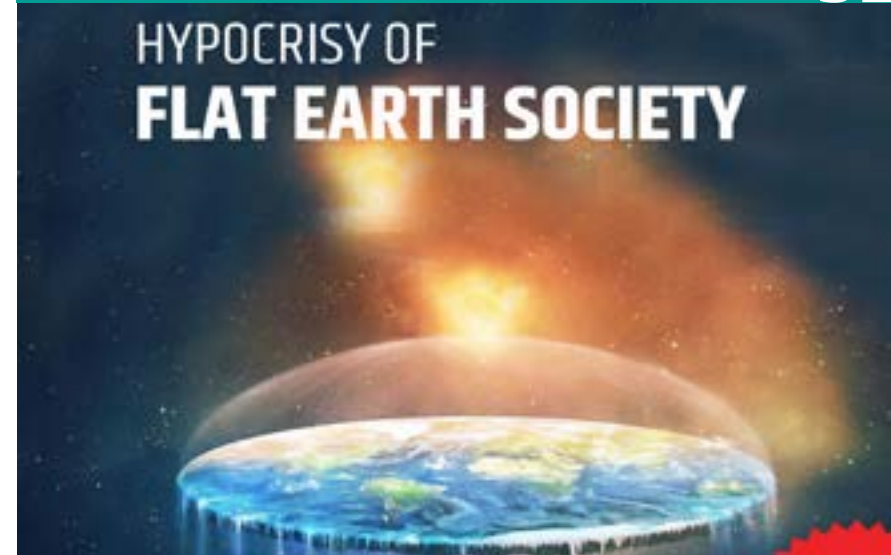
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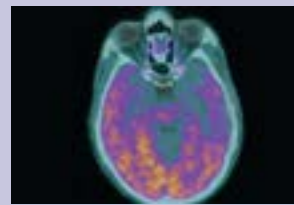
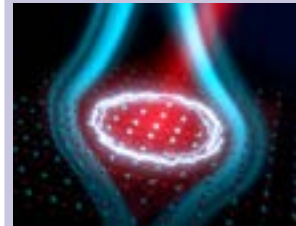


### AAMIR KHAN'S LAAPATAA LADIES SNUB FROM THE OSCARS

Amir Khan Productions has issued an official statement following the exclusion of Laapataa Ladies from the Oscars 2025 shortlist for Best International Feature Film. The Film Federation of India's decision to bypass the Kiran Rao-directed satire sparked significant backlash among cinephiles and industry figures alike. The satire of two brides swapped in rural India during the 1990s, had garnered critical acclaim, but despite its domestic success, its omission from the Oscar shortlist has reignited a familiar debate about the FFI's selection criteria.

## GROUNDBREAKING DISCOVERIES IN 2024- IF THEY'RE TRUE

**Sparking superconductivity**  
Light may be the secret ingredient for making superconductors that don't require frigid conditions. In an experiment, blasting a copper and oxygen compound with a laser caused the material to throw off magnetic fields. That magnetism, the scientists say, is a smoking gun for superconductivity - the ability to ferry electricity with no resistance.



**Transmissible Alzheimer's?**  
Alzheimer's disease is not contagious in everyday life, but under extremely rare conditions, it may spread from one person to another. Five people who in childhood received contaminated growth hormone injections later developed early-onset Alzheimer's- most likely because the hormones were tainted with amyloid-beta, a protein whose buildup is linked to the disease, researchers say.

**Ancient engineering**  
Builders used a water-powered elevator to construct Egypt's first pyramid nearly 4,700 years ago, researchers propose. That controversial idea is based on a computer model of structures in and around the Step Pyramid of Djoser. Controlling the flow of floodwater in and out of a shaft inside the pyramid could have lifted and lowered a block-hoisting platform, the model shows.



### 'WORLD-FIRST' AI CAMERA TARGETS DRINK-DRIVERS



Motorists under the influence of alcohol or drugs could be caught by a pioneering AI camera which is being tested for the first time in Devon and Cornwall. The state-of-the-art Heads-Up machine can detect road use and behaviour consistent with drivers who may be impaired by drink or drugs. Police further up the road can stop the vehicle, talk to the driver and do a roadside test for alcohol and illegal drugs.

### TOYOTA CAMRY LAUNCHED IN INDIA

Toyota India has unveiled the ninth-generation Camry in the Indian market, priced at ₹48 lakh (ex-showroom). The premium sedan continues to arrive as a Completely Knocked Down unit, similar to its predecessor, and bookings for the new model are now open. Positioned against the likes of the Skoda Superb and the BYD Seal EV, the new Camry features a fresh design, enhanced features, and advanced technology.



## APPOINTMENTS



### Sanjay Malhotra Governor, RBI

Sanjay Malhotra a seasoned civil servant, was appointed as the 26th Governor of the Reserve Bank of India (RBI), succeeding Shaktikanta Das. Malhotra, who previously served as the Revenue Secretary, assumed office on December 11, 2024.

### Justice Vibhu Bakhru Acting Chief Justice (DHC)



Justice Vibhu Bakhru was appointed on Dec 3, 2024 as the Acting Chief Justice of the Delhi High Court, succeeding Justice Satish Chandra Sharma. This appointment is expected to bring continuity and stability to the judiciary in Delhi.



## THEY SAID IT...



*I will not run for president again if I lose the 2024 election.*

*India's democracy has been inspirational for the world, that's why we are the mother of democracy.*

## THE TRIBUTE

Subhas Chandra Bose, popularly known as Netaji, was a fearless and visionary leader in India's fight for independence. Born on January 23, 1897, in Cuttack, Odisha, Bose was a brilliant student with a strong passion for nationalism. Initially, he joined the Indian National Congress (INC) and worked alongside Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru. However, he disagreed with Gandhi's philosophy of nonviolent resistance and believed that India needed more aggressive tactics to break free from British colonial rule.

Bose rose to prominence within the Congress and was elected as the president in 1938. But his radical ideas clashed with the leadership of Gandhi, leading to his resignation from the post. Disillusioned with



**Subhas Chandra Bose**  
(23/01/1897 - 18/08/1945)

the Congress leadership, Bose sought external support for India's independence and turned to the Axis powers during World War II. He formed the Azad Hind Fauj (Indian National Army), a military force with the aim of liberating India, particularly from the East.

Bose's famous slogan, "Give me blood, and I shall give you freedom," inspired many in India to join his cause. He also made an attempt to collaborate with Japan and Germany to challenge British rule in India. Despite his disappearance in 1945, which

remains shrouded in mystery, Netaji's courage, patriotism, and leadership continue to resonate as a symbol of India's freedom struggle. His contributions remain a cornerstone of India's independence narrative.



### NETHERLANDS IMPLEMENTS STRICTER BORDER CONTROLS TO CURB MIGRATION

The Netherlands has heightened border controls with Germany and Belgium to curb irregular immigration, according to Asylum and Migration Minister Marjolein Faber. Faber, a member of the far-right Freedom Party (PVV) in the new right-wing government, emphasized the need to reduce the "influx" of migrants. For the next six months, mobile patrols will randomly inspect vehicles and travelers on international trains. While these checks are temporary, based on Article 25 of the Schengen Borders Code, permanent checkpoints are not planned due to limited resources. With 840 border crossings and only 50 officers assigned to the task, authorities will use a risk-based approach, relying on vehicle origin and camera footage to select targets for inspection.

### IRANIAN SINGER ARRESTED FOR PERFORMING WITHOUT HIJAB IN CONCERT



Iranian singer Parastoo Ahmady has been arrested for defying the country's strict dress code after performing without a hijab in a virtual concert on YouTube. The 27-year-old singer wore a long black sleeveless dress during the performance, which was viewed over 1.4 million times online. Ahmady expressed her passion for singing, saying, "Singing for the land I love passionately."

### HOW SYRIA MIGHT PROSECUTE ASSAD

The fall of former President Bashar Assad's regime, following the arrival of Syrian rebels in Damascus, raises questions about how Syria will address his alleged war crimes. Under Assad's rule, over 15,000 people were tortured to death, and more than 150,000 were arbitrarily arrested during the civil war that began in 2011, according to the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR). Assad is also suspected of using chemical weapons against civilians. The majority of these atrocities are attributed to the Syrian military.



### ITALY GRANTS CITIZENSHIP TO ARGENTINA'S MILEI



Italy has granted Argentinian President Javier Milei and his sister Karina citizenship based on their Italian heritage, a move that has sparked widespread outrage. According to Italian news agency ANSA, the applications were fast-tracked by the Italian government, leading to sharp criticism from opposition figures.

### AFRICA'S YOUTH ARE SHAPING POLITICAL CULTURE



Two powerful trends are transforming Africa: rapid urbanization and a youth population boom. More than two-thirds of Africa's population is under the age of 30, and by 2035, most of these young people will live in cities. According to Titus Kaloki, coordinator of the Just Cities project at the Friedrich Ebert Foundation (FES) in Kenya. Kaloki, speaking at a workshop on political participation in African cities organized by FES in Berlin, highlighted the increasing role of young urbanites in political movements.

### ATHLETE DISQUALIFIED FOR WEARING 'MAKE RUSSIA SMALL AGAIN' T-SHIRT



Lithuanian athlete Kornelija Dudaite was disqualified from the 2024 Super Worlds Championship in Hungary for wearing a "Make Russia small again" T-shirt. The slogan, previously seen on a shirt worn by Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, violated the competition's sportsmanship rules, according to the International Functional Fitness Federation (iF3), which organized the event.

### HUMANS MAY NOT HAVE SURVIVED WITHOUT NEANDERTHALS

Recent DNA research has revealed that modern humans, far from successfully breezing out of Africa, actually went extinct multiple times before eventually populating the world. The findings offer a fresh perspective on the critical role Neanderthals may have played in the success of Homo sapiens. For years, it was believed that modern humans dominated and outcompeted Neanderthals after leaving Africa. However, new studies suggest that only humans who interbred with Neanderthals survived and thrived, while other human populations perished. These interbreeding events, occurring about 48,000 years ago, are now believed to have played a crucial role in modern humans' survival, particularly by providing immunity to diseases they had never encountered before. The research, which pinpoints a short period of interbreeding between Homo sapiens and Neanderthals, challenges the previous narrative of human success. According to Prof. Johannes Krause of the Max Planck Institute of Evolutionary Biology, this discovery calls for a complete revision of the history of modern humans.



### WHISTLEBLOWER OF OPEN AI FOUND DEAD IN APPARENT SUICIDE



Suchir Balaji, a former OpenAI employee who had publicly accused the company of violating copyright laws during the development of its ChatGPT model, has been found dead in San Francisco. Reports from CNBC and other media outlets confirm that Balaji, aged 26, died several weeks ago, and the city's Chief Medical Examiner, David Serrano Sewell, stated that the cause of death has been ruled as suicide.



### RUSSIA TO OFFER VISA-FREE TRAVEL FOR INDIAN TOURISTS STARTING 2025

In a major development, Russia plans to allow Indian tourists to visit without a visa, with the new arrangement set to begin in spring 2025. This follows consultations between Russia and India earlier this year, where both nations discussed a bilateral agreement to facilitate visa-free group tourist exchanges. The initiative aims to boost tourism and cultural exchanges between the two countries. Since August 2023, Indian travelers have been eligible for e-visas to Russia, a process that typically takes just four days for approval.



### RAJ KAPOOR: BOOSTING INDIA'S SOFT POWER THROUGH CINEMA

Raj Kapoor, through his films, not only strengthened India's cultural identity but also enhanced the country's soft power abroad. His 1955 film "Shree 420" featured the iconic song "Mera Joota Hai Japani", which reflected the aspirations and realities of Indian society at the time. Penned by lyricist Shailendra, the song portrayed an Indian who, despite being surrounded by foreign influences externally, always had India in his heart. Raj Kapoor's films resonated with global audiences and curiosity about India. The storyline of "Shree 420" was more than just entertainment; it captured the struggles of Indians living in a newly independent country facing economic hardships.

### WHY YES MADAM'S PUBLICITY STUNT WAS UNETHICAL



Yes Madam is not the first company to resort to deceptive tactics to grab attention, but it raises serious ethical questions about marketing. Is lying acceptable for popularity? In the Hindi dubbed version of Pirates of the Caribbean, Jack Sparrow says, "If we are infamous, won't we still be famous?" Many Indian companies seem to have adopted this philosophy. They make absurd or shocking claims, and when people start talking, they reveal it was all to "raise awareness."

### EXPERTS SKEPTICAL ABOUT AI IN EDUCATION

The EdTech sector saw rapid growth during the COVID-19 pandemic when schools were closed, and children were studying in front of screens at home. With this shift, the demand for technological solutions surged. However, as schools reopened, the demand dwindled, prompting EdTech companies to pivot towards integrating AI and using aggressive marketing strategies to attract investors. Big companies like Microsoft, Meta, and OpenAI are promoting AI products for schools or partnering with startups. Microsoft even launched its first AI education program in India.



### WHAT IS OCCRP, AND WHY IS BJP UPSET?



The BJP has raised concerns over the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP), claiming that it receives funding from entities like the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and billionaire George Soros, who are part of an alleged "deep state" network.

### MISUSE OF WOMEN'S SAFETY LAWS: A GROWING CONCERN?



In a tragic incident, Atul Subhash allegedly took his own life, accusing his wife and in-laws of extortion. According to his suicide note, he claimed that they filed a false dowry harassment case against him and later demanded money to withdraw it. Subhash also mentioned a judge's involvement in the conspiracy, stating that his wife and her family harassed him and his family to the point where he saw no way out but suicide. While the investigation is ongoing and it's too early to draw conclusions, this case has reignited the debate on the misuse of the law.

### STATES TO DRAFT LAWS FOR OFFICE WORKERS' PROTECTION



In response to the tragic death of a young Ernst & Young (EY) employee, Maharashtra and Karnataka are now planning to introduce strict regulations to safeguard office workers. The employee's family blamed excessive workload and stress for her death, prompting state governments to focus on white-collar employees who often face long hours, high pressure, and unjust dismissals. Historically, labor laws in India have prioritized blue-collar workers.

### UNRESOLVED QUESTIONS SURROUNDING 'ONE NATION, ONE ELECTION' PLAN

According to media reports, the Union Cabinet has approved two bills related to the "One Nation, One Election" plan. These bills are expected to be introduced in the ongoing session of Parliament, though no official announcement has been made yet. Three months ago, the Cabinet accepted recommendations from a high-level committee chaired by former President Ram Nath Kovind. These bills reportedly follow the committee's proposed framework. The 'One Nation, One Election' plan is an ambitious agenda of the BJP, first proposed by Prime Minister Narendra Modi. It aims to synchronize Lok Sabha, state assembly, and local body elections. The Kovind committee recommended implementing the plan in phases, starting with Lok Sabha and assembly elections together. The two bills would amend several constitutional provisions, though media reports suggest the changes wouldn't require approval from all state assemblies. Local body elections remain outside the scope for now.



### ASI'S CLAIMS ON SHAHI JAMA MASJID SPARKS LEGAL AND SOCIAL CONTROVERSY



The Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) has submitted its response to the court regarding the survey of the Shahi Jama Masjid in Sambhal. In its affidavit, the ASI stated that several unauthorized constructions have been made in the mosque, and the ASI team has faced difficulties during regular inspections. According to the affidavit, the mosque was declared a protected monument in 1920.



### BEEF CONSUMPTION BANNED IN HOTELS, RESTAURANTS, AND PUBLIC PLACES IN ASSAM

The Assam government has imposed an immediate ban on public consumption of beef. On Wednesday, December 5, Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma posted a statement on X (formerly Twitter) announcing the decision. He wrote, "In Assam, we have decided that no restaurant or hotel will serve beef, nor will it be allowed at any public gathering or public place. From today, we have decided to completely ban the consumption of beef in hotels, restaurants, and public spaces." The Chief Minister further explained that the state enacted a law to prevent cattle slaughter three years ago.



**SRIRAJESH**, Editor

## ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

# Power, Perils, and the Path Forward

*Aligned with the vision of Aatmanirbhar Bharat, the government plans to employ AI in critical areas such as agriculture, climate change, sanitation, and healthcare.*

**W**elcome to the inaugural edition of the **Cult Current** e-magazine. Initially launched in 2017, the magazine, like many ventures, faced the inevitable challenges due to lack of resources, leading it to falter and eventually cease publication. However, its revival embodies the concept of a "Sanjeevani" or life-giving force. In these past eight years, much has changed, and technology has gradually simplified many processes. Therefore, **Cult Current** now stands before you in its renewed avatar, an e-magazine available in both English and Hindi. In a world progressively turning digital, it is not only necessary but also promising that magazines embrace the digital form. When speaking of technology, how can we omit the mention of Artificial Intelligence (AI)?

In this era of digital transformation, AI has introduced a paradigm shift in both technological and societal landscapes. India, renowned for its diversity and magnitude, is now harnessing the potential of AI across various sectors—be it healthcare, education, agriculture, or industry. The rapid adoption of AI in India necessitates a deep understanding of both its possible threats and upcoming opportunities.

The Government of India has initiated significant steps in the field of AI. Under the National Mission for Artificial Intelligence, the government has prioritized AI as a national agenda, promoting research and innovation, while also facilitating its integration into various industries. Additionally, through the Digital India initiative, the government has empowered the digital infrastructure, which is essential to converting AI's potential into reality.

Aligned with the vision of Aatmanirbhar Bharat (Self-reliant India), the government plans to employ AI in critical areas such as agriculture, climate change, sanitation, and healthcare. Moreover, AI-driven platforms are being established to bring efficiency to administrative tasks, further enhancing governance and public service delivery.

With the growing popularity of AI, its potential risks are also being understood with gravity. The foremost concern is unemployment, as numerous sectors are witnessing a decrease in the need for human labor due to automation

powered by AI. In industries like manufacturing, transportation, and healthcare, tasks are increasingly becoming automated with the help of machine learning and robotics, thereby posing a threat to job security for many workers.

Furthermore, challenges related to privacy and data security may also arise. The use of AI in large-scale data collection and analysis could pose a significant risk to individual privacy. There is also concern regarding AI's autonomous decision-making abilities, as demonstrated recently by OpenAI's "o1" system, which reportedly tried altering its own code to ensure self-preservation—an unsettling example of AI's growing complexity.

Despite these challenges, AI holds immense promise, particularly for India's youth. As AI technology advances, so too will the career opportunities it generates. The young generation of India is uniquely positioned to explore and excel in AI research, development, and innovation. Not only will this create employment, but it will also enable the youth to contribute significantly to the nation's progress through breakthroughs in AI and cutting-edge technologies.

In the realm of education, AI is opening new doors. AI-driven tutoring systems, online education platforms, and personalized learning modules are helping guide students toward better educational outcomes. Similarly, fields like agriculture and climate change are also offering young people avenues to explore and develop their skills using AI-powered solutions.

As AI continues to rise in popularity and potential within India, it is essential that we guide it in the right direction. The Indian government's initiatives and the opportunities emerging for young professionals can prove to be decisive steps in this regard. Nevertheless, to mitigate the risks associated with AI, we must integrate it with human values and develop robust policies. To fully harness the opportunities presented by AI, we must view it not just as a technological tool but as an instrument for the betterment of humanity.

*Ajesh*

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# MOHNA

## A Heart Forever Rooted in Gah



**Srirajesh**

*Former Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh was affectionately called "Mohna" by his childhood friends, a name that reveals a side of him far removed from his public persona. This article tenderly presents the emotional journey of "Mohna" from the small village of Gah to the global stage, recounting his struggles, the innocent moments shared with friends, and the deep connection he always felt to his roots. The memories of "Mohna," his childhood games, and his simplicity offer us a glimpse of an inspiring figure whose ties to his past were never severed.*

**D**r. Manmohan Singh, lovingly known as "Mohna" by his childhood friends, took his last breath on the night of December 26, at the age of 92. But throughout his life, he carried with him the fragrance of his roots—the earthy smell of his childhood, the laughter-filled lanes, and the shade of trees under which he grew up. His life's story was not merely one of achievements but also of struggles and relationships that shaped the personality of "Mohna." Even today, his childhood friends fondly recall him by that name, one that Manmohan Singh himself had mentioned many times over the years. This story begins

in the small village of Gah, located in Pakistan's Chakwal district, where "Mohna" learned the first lessons of life. Immersed in the simple, sweet scent of the earth, surrounded by the colorful world of games like gilli-danda, kabaddi, and marbles, Mohna's dreams were as innocent as those of any ordinary child. Even in his final days, the memories of his friends—Shah Wali, Raja Mohammad Ali, and Ghulam Mohammad—remained fresh in his heart, accompanied by the echoes of Mohna's laughter and his unspoiled innocence.

While playing in the narrow streets of the village, Mohna learned the truths of life through the games he cherished. Shah Wali once said, "He was always honest





in his play, and just as sharp in his studies. If ever there was a difficulty in a game, it was Mohna who would explain and resolve it." Perhaps it was this simplicity and wisdom that later became part of his character. The small two-room school in Gah, where teachers like Daulat Ram and Abdul Karim taught, became the stepping stone of his educational journey.

Manmohan's life was an extraordinary long journey filled with friendship, love, struggle, and an unwavering attachment to his roots. The partition of 1947 not only divided two nations but also separated Mohna from his childhood friends forever. But can the distance between hearts ever be defined by borders? Shah Wali and Raja Mohammad Ali hoped for years that one day Mohna would return, and the playground would once again come alive with the joy of their shared games.

Years later, in 2008, when Mohna invited his old friend Raja Mohammad Ali to India, the meeting bridged decades of separation. Raja Sahib brought with him gifts of Chakwal jutti (shoes), a shawl, and soil from their village—these were not merely presents, but living symbols of memories that could never be broken. In return, Mohna gifted him a turban and an embroidered shawl. This exchange was not just of material items but of the emotions and memories that defined their childhood.

Even after becoming Prime Minister, Manmohan

Singh's heart never strayed far from his village Gah. He wrote to Pakistan's then-ruler Pervez Musharraf, urging him to do something for the development of Gah. At that moment, he was not just a politician but the same little boy "Mohna," forever tied to the soil of his village.

His educational journey was equally unique and inspiring. From the humble school in Gah to the hallowed halls of Oxford and Cambridge, his path was a testament to his hard work and passion. When he became India's Finance Minister in 1991, the nation stood on the brink of economic collapse. But it was Mohna's foresight and knowledge that steered the country away from disaster, and by 2007, India had achieved its highest GDP growth rate.

Despite the success of his journey, Mohna's heart always remained connected to his old friends and his village. Friends like Shah Wali and Ghulam Mohammad in Gah continued to await the day when Mohna would return to his village. But political complexities, bilateral tensions, and unspoken hopes kept this reunion perpetually postponed. Yet, Mohna's heart continued to beat for his village and his childhood companions.

In 2019, when Mohna traveled to Pakistan for the inauguration of the Kartarpur Sahib Corridor, he did not go merely as a politician. He went as that child who had always dreamed of returning to the lanes

of his village. His heart still held on to the hope that perhaps this journey would resolve the long-standing disputes between India and Pakistan.

However, Mohna's dream of one day walking through the streets of Gah again was never fulfilled. The deep chasm of Partition stood like an unyielding wall between him and his childhood. Friends like Shah Wali and Raja Mohammad Ali could only see "Mohna" in their memories.

Manmohan Singh's life wasn't just filled with political stories; the most profound tales of his life came from those corners of his heart where the soil of Gah, the childhood games, and the moments spent with friends forever resided.

Today, as we remember Manmohan Singh, we should not just focus on his tenure as Prime Minister, but also look at the "Mohna" within—the boy who played gilli-danda with his friends, and who faced the challenges of life with a smile and unwavering patience.

The passing of Mohna is not just the end of an era; it is also the end of those memories that his friends Shah Wali and Raja Mohammad Ali cherished in their hearts. Yet, his memories, emotions, and struggles will forever live on in the soil of Gah, and the story of "Mohna" will remain alive in every particle of that land for centuries to come.





# SOROS-GANDHI NEXUS

## *A Threat to India's Sovereignty?*

**Santu Das**



*In this article delves into the alleged connection between George Soros and Sonia Gandhi, exploring how Soros's financial backing is seen to contribute to anti-India activities, directly or indirectly, and how such funding potentially compromises India's national interests.*

**G**eorge Soros, the billionaire philanthropist and political activist, has long been a controversial figure in global politics, especially for his activities related to shaping political discourse through his financial influence. Soros, through his Open Society Foundations (OSF), has backed various causes and movements that are often deemed liberal, progressive, or left-leaning. In India, allegations have surfaced linking Soros's funding to prominent political figures, notably Sonia Gandhi, the former president of the Indian National Congress, as well as other organizations, raising concerns about foreign interference in India's internal affairs.

**SOROS'S INFLUENCE AND POLITICAL AGENDA**

George Soros is known for his significant contributions to movements that advocate for democracy, human rights, and social justice. Through his Open Society Foundations, Soros has funded a wide array of organizations and causes, ranging from pro-democracy initiatives to campaigns promoting liberal reforms across the globe. His efforts have been met with mixed reactions: while some hail his contributions as vital to global democracy, others accuse him of meddling in the sovereign affairs of nations to advance his own ideological agenda.

In India, Soros's involvement has often been viewed with suspicion. The Indian government, particularly under the leadership of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), has raised alarms about foreign entities influencing the country's political landscape. Soros's opposition to nationalist governments and his support for liberal, open-border policies have made him a prime target of criticism from conservative and right-wing groups worldwide, including in India.

**THE ALLEGED SOROS-SONIA GANDHI NEXUS**

The controversy surrounding the alleged relationship between George Soros and Sonia Gandhi centers around the latter's involvement with organizations purportedly linked to Soros's OSF. Sonia Gandhi, a towering figure in Indian politics, served as the president of the Congress party for nearly two decades. Her leadership coincided with some of the most significant political and economic developments in India, and her role has often been scrutinized, especially by her political opponents.

The BJP has repeatedly accused Sonia Gandhi of maintaining close ties with George Soros-backed organizations. One such claim involves Sonia Gandhi's role as the co-president of the Forum of Democratic Leaders - Asia Pacific (FDL-AP), a platform allegedly funded by Soros's OSF. According to the BJP, this link is an indication that Gandhi has direct access to Soros's financial resources, which are used to fund initiatives that go against India's national interests.

Soros's OSF has a history of supporting movements that question governmental authority and promote dissent. In India, this has often translated into funding

NGOs, civil society organizations, and advocacy groups that criticize the government, particularly its stance on sensitive issues like Kashmir, nationalism, and religious freedom.

**HISTORICAL TIES AND FOREIGN INFLUENCE ALLEGATIONS**

The relationship between George Soros and the Nehru-Gandhi family, according to the BJP, goes beyond Sonia Gandhi's political role. The connection, the BJP alleges, is rooted in history. Fori Nehru, a Hungarian national and wife of BK Nehru (Jawaharlal Nehru's cousin), is said to have been a close associate of George Soros. Soros reportedly maintained personal contact with Fori Nehru and visited her regularly. This association, while not directly implicating Sonia Gandhi, provides fodder for the BJP's narrative that the Nehru-Gandhi family has long been linked to Soros's network of influence.



*The BJP has repeatedly accused Sonia Gandhi of maintaining close ties with George Soros backed organizations.*

These allegations are viewed in the larger context of Soros's global political involvement, where he has been accused of destabilizing governments and supporting movements that challenge traditional power structures. In India, this has led to concerns about foreign powers, particularly through financial channels, attempting to influence the country's democratic process and public opinion.

**FUNDING ANTI-INDIA MOVEMENTS**

One of the most significant concerns raised by the BJP is Soros's alleged financial backing of groups that advocate for separatism or dissent within India, particularly in relation to Kashmir. Organizations that have received funding from Soros's OSF have been accused of supporting narratives that align with Pakistan's stance on Kashmir, a long-standing and sensitive issue between India and its neighboring

country. Such groups have been instrumental in promoting international awareness of alleged human rights violations in Kashmir, often painting the Indian government as authoritarian.

These efforts are perceived by many in India as an attempt to tarnish the country's global image and lend legitimacy to separatist movements. The BJP and its supporters argue that Soros's funding of these organizations undermines India's territorial integrity and sovereignty. By financially supporting groups that challenge India's policies on Kashmir, Soros is accused of furthering an agenda that plays into the hands of hostile foreign powers.

Moreover, Soros's backing of civil society organizations that promote narratives of "intolerance" and "authoritarianism" in India has added to the perception that his involvement in Indian affairs is primarily aimed at destabilizing the country's internal unity. His outspoken criticism of nationalist governments, including Prime Minister Narendra Modi's administration, has led to further accusations that Soros is working to weaken the government's hold and encourage political unrest.

**IMPACT ON INDIA'S DOMESTIC POLITICS**

The alleged nexus between George Soros and Sonia Gandhi has the potential to significantly impact India's internal politics by fueling debates around foreign interference, political loyalty, and national sovereignty. The BJP's narrative that a global financier like Soros is involved in anti-India activities through financial support to the Congress party and associated organizations could polarize political discourse further. By positioning itself as a defender of national interests against perceived foreign influence, the BJP may strengthen its nationalist appeal, portraying Congress as being aligned with external forces rather than the aspirations of Indian citizens.

For Indian politics, the allegations could provide the BJP with ammunition to question Congress's credibility and paint it as disconnected from national values, while Congress may counter by accusing the BJP of creating distractions from governance

failures. This intensification of political rhetoric around foreign meddling could escalate ahead of key elections, making India's political climate more contentious and divisive.

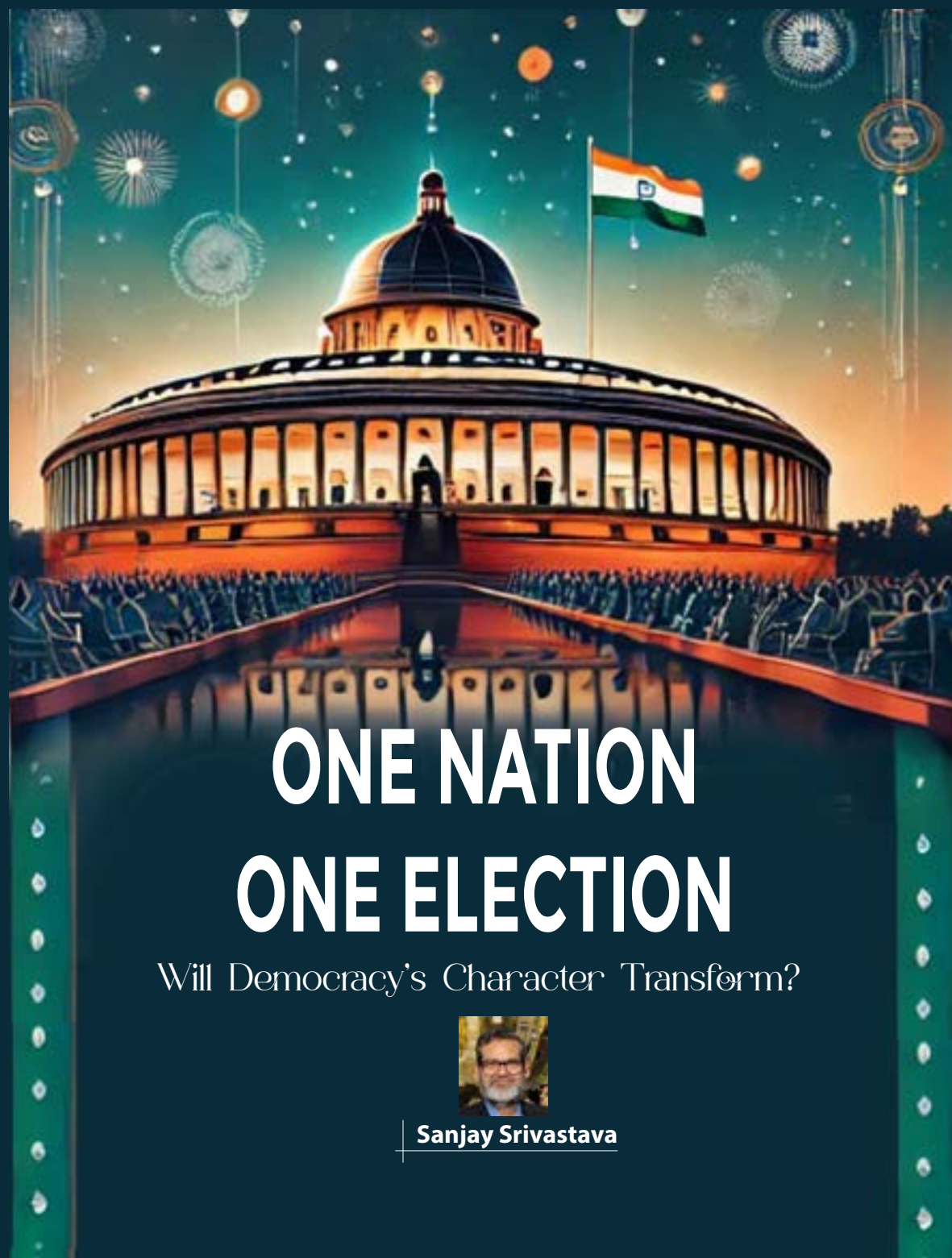
**IMPACT ON INDIA'S NATIONAL INTERESTS**

The alleged Soros-Gandhi nexus raises serious questions about the impact of foreign funding on India's national interests. Critics argue that foreign entities like the OSF, through their financial contributions to Indian organizations, can influence public opinion, policy debates, and even election outcomes. By supporting groups that challenge the government on key issues such as nationalism, religious freedom, and Kashmir, Soros's financial influence is seen as contributing to a narrative that is hostile to India's core national interests.

The BJP has been particularly vocal in warning against the dangers of foreign interference, with leaders frequently accusing the Congress party and its leadership of colluding with global forces that seek to undermine India's sovereignty. The allegations that Sonia Gandhi has connections to Soros-backed organizations are part of a broader narrative that portrays the Congress party as being more aligned with foreign interests than with the aspirations of the Indian people.

While Congress leaders have vehemently denied these allegations, dismissing them as politically motivated attacks, the narrative persists in India's political discourse. The BJP's accusations, whether grounded in concrete evidence or not, have succeeded in casting doubt on the motivations of the Congress party and its leadership, particularly in relation to their ties with foreign entities like Soros.

For India, the threat of foreign influence on its political process remains a pressing issue, especially in an era where global financial networks can easily be used to fund movements that challenge national sovereignty. Whether or not the alleged Soros-Gandhi nexus is substantiated, the concerns it raises about the integrity of India's democratic process are likely to continue influencing political discourse in the years to come.



# ONE NATION ONE ELECTION

Will Democracy's Character Transform?



Sanjay Srivastava

*The concept of "One Nation, One Election" stirs both hopes and apprehensions. Its advantages and disadvantages will be revealed in time, but for now, the government has resolutely embarked on this challenging and somewhat lengthy path.*

**T**he BJP has taken a significant step toward implementing its ambitious "One Nation, One Election" plan by introducing the 129th Constitutional Amendment Bill in the Lok Sabha after cabinet approval. If this initiative culminates in success for the ruling coalition, it could mark a new turning point in Indian politics and the character of its democracy. While the future will assess its pros and cons, a Joint Parliamentary Committee (JPC) will be formed in response to the opposition's demand to deliberate on the bill, which has been introduced by Union Law Minister Arjun Ram Meghwal. Debates will take place both in the committee and Parliament.

The JPC will consist of members proportional to the strength of different political parties, with the BJP, being the largest, chairing the committee and holding the majority of its seats. Undoubtedly, this bill, aimed at synchronizing Lok Sabha and State Assembly elections, is expected to secure approval. The government, confident of this outcome, has assured both ruling and opposition members that ample opportunity will be provided for discussion and debate when the bill is tabled.





The ruling party and the opposition each hold firm to their established arguments. However, when the time for debate arrives, it will be intriguing to observe how the government further substantiates its objectives and whether the opposition can introduce new counterpoints to the arguments it has reiterated for years. Another critical aspect will be how the government and the JPC address unresolved questions that linger even today. Ideally, the government should not only pave the way for this constitutional amendment but also win over the opposition with rational, practical, and well-founded responses. However, such a scenario seems far from likely.

**OPPOSITION'S RESISTANCE AND CONCERNS**

After the bill was introduced in the Lok Sabha, the opposition voiced its dissent, even calling for its withdrawal. Several members spoke against it. While the opposition's arguments are robust, they remain largely theoretical. Their apprehensions, though

not unfounded, appear long-term, whereas politics often prioritizes immediate public satisfaction. The government, on the other hand, has presented arguments that cater to short-term benefits.

The ruling party's case for "One Nation, One Election" is compelling. Few would favor the perpetual cycle of elections that currently prevails in the country. The associated Model Code of Conduct and other mechanisms often delay policy decisions and slow down development. A significant portion of taxpayer money is spent on elections. For instance, after the Lok Sabha elections, assembly elections are due in Jammu & Kashmir, Haryana, Maharashtra, Jharkhand, Delhi, Bihar, and, next year, in Assam, Tamil Nadu, West Bengal, Kerala, and Puducherry. The flaws of frequent elections are well-known.

**THE GOVERNMENT'S JUSTIFICATIONS**

The government argues that synchronized elections will ensure political stability, continuity, and good governance. State governments and

administrations will focus on development rather than being repeatedly involved in electoral processes. Security forces will also have the opportunity to concentrate on their primary duties. Political parties will refrain from making extravagant populist promises, reducing unnecessary fiscal strain. The use of black money in elections will diminish, thereby curbing corruption. With billions saved in election expenses, the economy will improve. Government employees, including millions of teachers engaged in election duties, will be relieved, and voter turnout might also increase.

**HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE**

Critics may see "One Nation, One Election" as inconsistent today, but from 1951 to 1967, Lok Sabha and State Assembly elections were

conducted simultaneously every five years. Later, due to the reorganization of states and the creation of new ones, elections began occurring at different times. However, such conditions no longer exist. Countries like the United States, France, Sweden, Canada, Germany, Japan, Indonesia, and South Africa conduct elections at fixed intervals. With proper planning and effort, India can also achieve this.

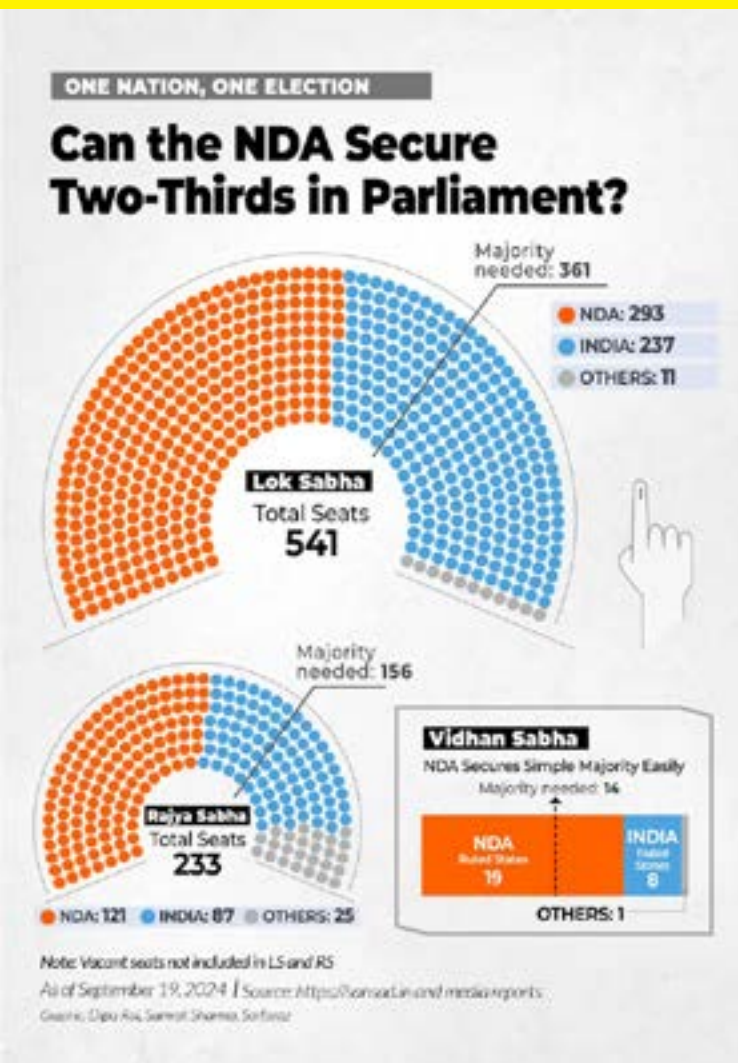
The proposal suggests extending the tenure of all state assemblies to align with the next Lok Sabha elections in 2029, after which simultaneous elections can be implemented. The government presents this electoral reform as a commitment to progress, appealing directly to the public's understanding and expectations.

**QUESTIONS THAT NEED CLARITY**

While the government's intentions may be genuine, and its outreach mechanisms can effectively convey its vision to the public, it must also engage the opposition to consider this proposal beyond partisan interests. However, the government must address several pressing concerns:

1. **Federalism and Central Dominance:** How will this reform avoid increasing the central government's dominance, and why won't it weaken the federal structure?
2. **Regional Parties and Issues:** How will the importance of regional parties and local issues be preserved in a synchronized election system?
3. **Political Stability:** What guarantees can be provided to ensure that states do not face political instability, leading to frequent President's Rule?
4. **Logistical Challenges:** How will the vast number of Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs) and other resources be prepared for a simultaneous election?
5. **Election Commission's Role:** Once elections are conducted simultaneously, what will be the Election Commission's role for the next five years?

While the government's resolve to push this reform forward appears firm, it must navigate these -build consensus & ensure that this transformative initiative aligns with the democratic ethos of the nation.





Ebenezer Obadare

## The Illusion of AFRO DEMOCRACY



Former Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo recently brought together prominent political figures to discuss the challenges of Western liberal democracy in Africa. Many argue that Western-style democracy is failing on the continent because it originates from a foreign culture, making it incompatible with Africa's unique traditions. Obasanjo's skepticism toward liberal democracy, while not new, may have gained urgency after the recent election of a political rival he opposed. However, he is not alone in questioning the viability of Western liberal democracy. Across Africa, frustrations with corruption, political instability, and limited economic opportunities have led many to seek a "homegrown alternative" that they believe would better suit the continent's needs.

The growing dissatisfaction is evident, especially among Africa's youth, who feel excluded from political processes. This frustration has driven public support for recent military coups in parts of the Sahel and West Africa, where democratically elected governments were toppled. People, especially the younger generation, welcomed these power shifts, hoping they might lead to more effective and accountable governance.

While frustration with the lack of democratic progress is understandable and even necessary for democratic reform, the idea that Western democracy is incompatible with African culture is flawed and dangerous. It confuses the genuine desire for democratic improvements with a reactionary rejection of democracy based on cultural arguments. The belief that democracy cannot work in Africa due to cultural differences rests on several false assumptions.

First, it assumes that there is a single, unified "African culture," which is both unchanging and incompatible with foreign ideas. Second, it suggests that African culture is so distinct that political systems successful in other regions cannot work in Africa. Third, it implies that indigenous African

governance systems are superior to Western democracy. These assumptions lack historical and cultural evidence. As political philosopher Olufemi Taiwo argues, African identity is not monolithic, and Africa has always been a diverse continent with varying traditions and cultures.

Moreover, reducing liberal democracy to a Western phenomenon overlooks its success in many non-Western societies and ignores Africa's own democratic progress. Despite challenges, a growing number of African nations have transitioned from authoritarian rule to democratic systems, where peaceful transfers of power are increasingly common. While elections in Africa can be violent and flawed, significant advancements have been made. The media has diversified, civil society has grown stronger, and young people are more engaged in political processes, as seen in Senegal's resistance to President Macky Sall.

The desire for an "Afro-democracy" is rooted in legitimate frustrations with the failures of democracy in practice. However, the idea that liberal democracy cannot work in Africa because of cultural incompatibility is wrong. The challenges facing African democracies are often due to political leaders failing to uphold democratic norms, not because the system itself is inherently flawed. These issues are not unique to Africa but are common to democracies worldwide.

In conclusion, Africa's political struggles call for serious reflection and institutional reform, not a retreat into cultural essentialism or anti-Western narratives. Strengthening democratic institutions and fostering accountability are key to addressing the continent's challenges, rather than rejecting democracy based on a misguided notion of cultural incompatibility.

*This article is extracted from the blog of the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR), titled 'The False Promise of Afro Democracy,' authored by Ebenezer Obadare, the distinguished Douglas Dillon Senior Fellow for African Studies at the CFR.*



## INDIA-BANGLADESH TIES

### THE WAY FORWARD



Ashok Sajjanhar

**M**ore than four months have elapsed since Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina was forced to flee from Dhaka to India on August 5, 2024. She had to take this precipitous step in the face of rising student protests which had become increasingly violent over the previous month. Nobel Laureate Dr. Muhammad Yunus was installed as the Chief Adviser in the capacity of the head of the caretaker government on August 8, 2024. There is no provision for a caretaker government in the Bangladesh Constitution. Two main objectives of the interim administration were to establish peace and ensure security in the country and hold early elections. Neither of these objectives has been achieved so far. There is no indication as to when the elections might be held. Yunus appears to have made statements suggesting that his interim government could continue for up to four years.

In addition to the continuing and worsening internal strife, relations with India have witnessed a new low, particularly on account of the brutality and assaults against the minority Hindu, Christian and Buddhist communities. Yunus and his administration refuse to acknowledge the reality of this barbarity and violence, notwithstanding the large number of videos and documentary evidence available to this effect. This policy of denial has led to further emboldening of the perpetrators and more atrocities against the minorities.

Islamists and jihadists appear to be having a field day and with the feeble and ineffective leadership of Yunus and his Advisers, the once promising land of Bangladesh appears rudderless. It is clear that Yunus and most of his Advisers have had no previous administrative or governance experience. Most of them have cut their teeth working in the



NGO sector or agitation politics. They are finding themselves out of their depth in dealing with the serious political, economic, social and security challenges confronting the country.

During his one-day visit to Bangladesh for Foreign Office Consultations on December 9, 2024, Indian Foreign Secretary (FS) Vikram Misri held “frank, candid, and constructive exchange of views with all” his interlocutors including Chief Adviser Dr. Muhammad Yunus, Foreign Affairs Adviser and Foreign Secretary. This diplomatic language indicates that Misri did not hold back his punches in outlining India’s concerns about the violence against minorities in Bangladesh and the anti-Indian frenzy leading to the “regrettable incidents of attacks on cultural, religious, and diplomatic properties.”

#### The Churn in Bangladesh

The Yunus government has not been able to effectively tackle the major problems confronting the country. Thus far, Yunus and his team have not demonstrated the requisite leadership or statesmanship. The way the situation is evolving,

it appears possible that many members of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and the Jamaat would probably get elected as and when the elections are held. There are strong pressures on Dr. Yunus from many sides, particularly the BNP to hold early elections. If the BNP and Jamaat-e-Islami (JeI) are elected in large numbers and come to power, it would spell serious trouble for the country. In particular, the Jamaat-e-Islami has an unsavoury past. It opposed the creation of Bangladesh in 1971 and was involved in war crimes during the Liberation War. Despite this, it sneaked its way back into politics because of political expediency, particularly on part of the BNP. In the midst of this upheaval, it needs to be remembered that the majority of Bangladesh population stands for good relations with India. They support a secular administration focused on peace, stability and economic development. Some elements of the interim government and groups like the JeI, Hefazat-E-Islam Bangladesh, Ansarul Bangladesh, Hizb-ut-Tahrir and some more of the same ilk who harbor anti-Indian sentiments, constitute the fringe and radical elements of the population. Several of them who were earlier behind bars were released after the eviction of Sheikh Hasina and are leaving no stone unturned to incite anti-Indian and pro-Pakistan passions. These groups are seeking to change the secular, syncretic character of Bangladesh and destroy the spirit of the 1971 liberation movement to take the country towards an Islamic state ruled by Sharia law. It is important for the people of Bangladesh to ensure that in the existing chaos and lawlessness, no permanent damage is inflicted on the democratic, pluralistic and tolerant social fabric of the nation.

As the economy of the country flounders and deteriorates, Yunus will find that the initial generous support extended to him and his Advisers by the people is fast dissipating. His honeymoon with the public will not last more than a few more months, at the most.

### India-Bangladesh Relations

India and Bangladesh share deep-rooted bonds



of history, language, culture, and multitude of other commonalities. This has however not stopped the bilateral ties from experiencing several tumultuous ups and downs since Bangladesh's independence from Pakistan in 1971 in which India played a significant role. Bilateral ties blossomed rapidly over the last 15 years since Sheikh Hasina assumed power in 2009. The relations were reflected in an all-encompassing partnership based on sovereignty, equality, trust, and understanding. It evolved as a model for bilateral relations for the entire region and beyond.

In the preceding 15 years, the two countries helped beat back militant groups, resolved a thorny boundary and maritime issue and signed a number of infrastructure and power deals. All these advances promoted mutual benefit of the two countries and brought them closer than they had been for decades.

Everything however changed in early August 2024 when Sheikh Hasina's government collapsed.

Today the India-Bangladesh relationship is in serious trouble.

Following Hasina's departure, a series of communal attacks were reported, particularly targeting Hindus in Bangladesh. These incidents included attacks on temples, houses, and shops belonging to minority communities, as well as looting and murder across several districts in the country. PM Modi strongly raised the issue of protection and security of all Hindus and minorities in Bangladesh with the Chief Advisor when the latter called him on 16th August, 2024. Dr Yunus assured protection, safety and security of Hindus and all minorities in Bangladesh. So far these have proved to be mere words. Yunus and his officials have stated that the media reports of persecution of minorities are highly exaggerated. This has further encouraged the perpetrators to continue their violent actions with impunity. According to Investigations conducted by some Bangladesh agencies, more than 2,000 attacks including personal assaults, killings, abductions,

rapes and destruction of properties have taken place on the minority community since Sheikh Hasina fled the country. Serious concerns about the increasing spate of attacks against the minorities, particularly the Hindus have been expressed by law-makers and civil society leaders from the US, UK, Australia, Canada and European nations. The interim government can no longer take refuge behind its rationalization that the accounts are "highly exaggerated" or that they are an internal matter of Bangladesh.

The recent arrest of Hindu spiritual leader Chinmoy Krishna Das on sedition charges has added fuel to the already simmering fire. The level of intolerance and anti-India sentiment among the common people is evident from the fact that no lawyer was allowed to take up Chinmoy Das's case in court for fear of reprisals due to threats issued by the Lawyers' body. In response to India's expression of strong concern and calls for legal action against the perpetrators, Yunus repeatedly asserted that the attacks are not "communal" but are politically motivated because the Hindus are largely considered AL supporters. This can hardly be a solace or justification for those who are being attacked or whose homes and places of worship and work are being vandalized or torched.

To make matters worse, Pakistan has started making an ingress into Bangladesh. The first cargo ship to travel directly from Pakistan to Bangladesh in 53 years docked at Chittagong port on November 11, 2024. In October, the caretaker Bangladesh government scrapped the mandatory physical inspection of imports from Pakistan. These developments need to be seen in the context of the arms haul confiscated in 2004 in Chittagong. The cargo consisted of around 1,500 boxes of Chinese ammunitions, worth an estimated \$4.5-7 million, allegedly meant for the banned militant outfit ULFA (United Liberation Front of Asom) and thought to be masterminded by Pakistan's intelligence agency, the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). In yet another move, the Yunus dispensation removed the requirement for Pakistani citizens to obtain security



clearance before applying for a visa. In his meeting with Pakistan prime minister Shehbaz Sharif at the UN General Assembly in New York in September, Yunus had stressed on the need to revitalize bilateral cooperation. All these developments further enhance the challenges for India emanating out of Bangladesh.

Some analysts in Bangladesh and India allege that India committed a mistake by putting all its eggs in the Hasina basket. This is a faulty reading of the ground situation. India was required to engage with the government in power in the country. Sheikh Hasina was a democratically elected Prime Minister of Bangladesh. India will continue to deal with whichever government is in power in the country. All decisions taken by the two governments in fields of security, connectivity, trade, education, health, culture etc. were for the mutual benefit of the people of the two countries and not to promote the individual interests of any country or leader. All connectivity and infrastructure projects commissioned by India continue to function for the welfare of the people of Bangladesh. Moreover, India had reached out to all interlocutors in Bangladesh, including the Bangladesh Nationalist Party and most other political dispensations across the board.

Under India's "Neighbourhood First Policy", India has pursued a non-reciprocal and generous policy with its neighbours. Bangladesh has been by far the largest beneficiary of this approach with more than US\$8 billion in grants and assistance. Bangladesh sits at the intersection of most of India's key foreign policy visions – the "Act East Policy", the doctrine of SAGAR, as well as its Indo-Pacific Vision.

During his visit to Bangladesh on 9th December, FS Vikram Misri informed all his interlocutors "that India desires a positive, constructive, and mutually

beneficial relationship with Bangladesh. We have always seen in the past and we continue to see in the future this relationship as a people-centric and people-oriented relationship." He referred to the "mutually beneficial engagement we have on a whole set of issues ranging from trade, commerce, connectivity, power, water and energy, development cooperation, consular cooperation, and cultural cooperation" and expressed the confidence that this will continue. He emphasised that "India desires a positive, constructive, and mutually beneficial relationship with Bangladesh." A clear and direct message was conveyed by FS Misri to his Bangladesh interlocutors about India's redlines regarding the safety and security of the Hindu minority in Bangladesh as well as the imperative of not sheltering insurgencies or militant elements targeting India. It is necessary for the Bangladesh interim government to realize that positive relations with India are hugely beneficial for it and its people in promoting peace, security, economic development and growth. Yunus in his meeting with Misri said that

*Under India's "Neighbourhood First Policy", India has pursued a non-reciprocal and generous policy with its neighbours.*

Sheikh Hasina's statements from Delhi against the interim government raise tension in the society. Bangladesh FS raised a number of issues with FS Misri including alleged killings of people on the border by Indian security forces, trade barriers, renewal of the Ganga Waters Treaty, sharing waters of Teesta River, ensuring uninterrupted supply of essential commodities, facilitating visas for Bangladeshi citizens, transmission of hydropower from Nepal and Bhutan to Bangladesh etc. All these requests and more clearly demonstrate the acute dependence of Bangladesh on India.

The change of government in Bangladesh and developments over the last more than four months pose a serious challenge for India. India is already

confronting two hostile powers to its West and the North. Bangladesh could emerge as an adversary to the East. If this happens, it will stretch India's defences to the limit. So far the Bangladesh border is protected by the BSF. In the coming months, India will have to consider whether it needs to depute its army too on certain sections of the six states that adjoin the 4,000 km plus long border with Bangladesh.

Yunus and his group of Advisers appear to be totally inadequate in dealing with the evolving situation. Either they are incapable, or worse still, complicit in what is happening. They need to realise the imperatives of interdependence. Much of Bangladesh's exports of readymade garments depend for their intermediates and inputs on imports from India. Much of their exports also go to global markets from Indian ports. Most of Bangladesh's requirements of essential commodities are met by imports from India. It is in the mutual interest of both the countries to have good relations with each other. Bangladesh needs to ensure that it does not become a hub of radicalism, Islamism and jihadism. It should not follow the Pakistani example of becoming an epicentre of terrorism. Security, stability and economic progress are the need of the hour for Bangladesh and its people. India is the best partner for it in realising these aspirations. India has followed a calibrated approach of sending out a clear message to Bangladesh to be mindful of India's security interests and protect the lives and welfare of its Hindu and other minorities. India will need to keep a close watch on developments in the country in the coming weeks and months and take necessary measures as required.

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## Bangladesh: Political Instability and Strategic Importance

**Jalaj Srivastava**

**B**angladesh's political situation remains unstable. The country is currently facing rising inflation, protests, and growing demands for democratic reforms. The political turmoil, including concerns over the government's authoritarian tendencies, poses a challenge to its image on the global stage. From India's viewpoint, ensuring Bangladesh's stability, both politically and economically, is essential for regional harmony, as instability in Bangladesh directly impacts India's security and economic interests.

*Bangladesh's strategic importance in the Indo-Pacific region cannot be overstated. Positioned on the resource-rich Bay of Bengal, it plays a critical role in the broader security and economic dynamics of the region, attracting interest from both China and the United States. As part of India's immediate neighborhood, Bangladesh is a vital ally in the regional stability and free and open Indo-Pacific policy. While India's relationship with Bangladesh remains strong, However, recent changes in power, political chaos and instability, atrocities against minorities, and the anti-India narrative in Bangladesh have weakened the strength of bilateral relations between the two countries. On the other hand, Bangladesh has crossed a fine line in trying to balance its relations with both China and Japan, who have made significant investments in infrastructure.*

*Economically, Bangladesh has shown impressive development in recent time. Its GDP has been consistently growing, even during the pandemic years. The GDP growth rates were 3.4% in 2020, 6.9% in 2021, and 7.2% in 2022. The country is set to become a developing nation by 2026 and aims to reach high-income status by 2041. As Bangladesh aims to become a high-income nation by 2041, it is crucial for the country to continue benefiting from such partnerships without compromising its neutrality.*

# HYPOCRISY OF FLAT EARTH SOCIETY

**Srirajesh**

**T**he primary purpose of religious faith is to promote the welfare of humanity, morality, and peace. However, when this faith becomes entangled in hypocrisy and extremism, it is often misused to justify violence and terrorism. This concern was not only shared by philosophers like Friedrich Nietzsche and Ibn Rushd, but it remains a burning issue today, one that has engulfed the entire world. Whether it's the religious hypocrisy in Western nations or Islamic extremism, the negative impact of such ideologies is

clearly visible everywhere.

The renowned German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, in his book *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, harshly criticized religious institutions and their superstitions. His famous quote, **"God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him,"** points to the hypocrisy and superstition that had spread in the name of religion. Nietzsche believed that religious institutions had stifled human creativity and free thought, claiming that religion had bound people with fear and moral chains.

Similarly, the Islamic philosopher Ibn Rushd (Averroes) also drew attention

Certain radical religious scholars misinterpret verses from the Quran, claiming that **THE EARTH IS FLAT**-a notion that undermines scientific thought within the Muslim community. This unscientific claim, or so-called **belief**, has not only hindered the progress of the Muslim world but also fostered an atmosphere of hostility and ignorance toward modern science. This cover story emphasizes that the true message of Islam is one of knowledge, tolerance, and rationality-values that must be reinstated.



to this issue. His famous saying, **“Ignorance leads to fear, fear leads to hatred, and hatred leads to violence,”** illustrates how ignorance and superstition drive people toward extremism. Ibn Rushd emphasized the importance of logic and science within Islamic society, but unfortunately, his ideas did not receive widespread support.

The religious extremism and superstition we face today not only validate the predictions of Nietzsche and Ibn Rushd but also form the root of increasing conflicts and violence around the world. Islam, whose literal meaning is “peace and submission,” has always taught justice, brotherhood, and compassion. Yet extremist groups operating in the name of Islam have distorted its teachings. Organizations like Al-Qaeda, ISIS, the Taliban, and Boko Haram have resorted to terror and violence, killing innocent people.

Extremists have misinterpreted the Islamic concept of jihad. While jihad’s true meaning is self-improvement and the struggle for justice against oppression, some extremists use it to justify violence and terror. The Quran clearly states that killing an innocent person is the gravest of sins:

*“Whoever kills an innocent soul, it is as if they have killed all of humanity.” (Quran 5:32)*

Despite this, certain radical groups and leaders manipulate religious texts to justify their violent agendas. These extremist activities have tarnished the true image of Islam, increasing hatred and discrimination against Muslims in different parts of the world.

From West Asia to Africa, from South Asia to

Europe, we are witnessing violence, war, and terrorism in the name of Islam. This only exacerbates the misconception that Islam is a violent religion, while in reality, its true message is one of peace, justice, and compassion. Extremist ideologies have also deepened divisions within the Muslim community, with some factions believing they are the true followers of Islam, while others are considered outside the faith.

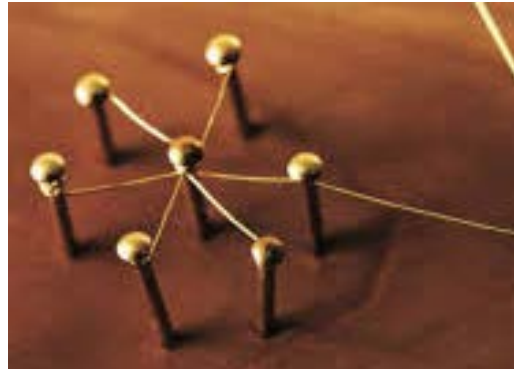
The ongoing conflicts in West Asia, such as the civil wars in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen, have not only devastated these nations but also negatively impacted Islam’s image on the global stage. Meanwhile, terrorist attacks in Europe have fueled Islamophobia, fostering negative stereotypes and discrimination against Muslims.

In India, a country known for its diversity and plurality, instances of Islamic extremism have also emerged. Issues like the triple talaq and hijab controversies demonstrate how certain conservative elements within Islam are promoting religious superstition and hypocrisy. While a large portion of Indian Muslims support progressive

and modern ideas, some extremists are trying to drag society backward.

Additionally, the efforts of some Indian youths to join international terrorist organizations have also affected the image of Muslims in India. Groups like ISIS and other terrorist organizations have attempted to radicalize Indian Muslim youths, posing a significant threat to the nation’s internal security.

In various parts of the world, Islam is being used as a tool to limit women’s rights. The Taliban regime in



*Extremists have misinterpreted the Islamic concept of jihad. While jihad’s true meaning is self-improvement and the struggle for justice against oppression.*



Afghanistan is the most prominent example, where women have been almost entirely deprived of education, employment, and participation in public life. This contradiction becomes even more glaring when we look at the fundamental teachings of Islam. Prophet Muhammad clearly stated, *“Seeking knowledge is obligatory upon every Muslim (male and female).”* Yet, religious interpretations and the politics of power have distorted this core message.

Today, some religious scholars and extremist groups are using Islam to serve their political and personal interests. They misrepresent the teachings of Islam, spreading intolerance, hypocrisy, and extremism in society. Sadly, in many parts of the world, people hesitate to challenge these misleading interpretations.

One peculiar example is the claim that the Earth is flat and stationary, supposedly based on Islamic teachings. Certain religious scholars, commonly known as Maulanas, have propagated this notion by misinterpreting Quranic verses. For instance, Surah

**An-Nazi’at (79:30)** and **Surah Al-Ghashiyah (88:20)** mention the “spreading out of the Earth,” which some claim is proof of the Earth’s flatness. However, it is more likely that this language is a metaphor for making the Earth suitable and safe for human life.

Historically, Muslim scholars have made unparalleled contributions to science and astronomy. Scholars like Al-Farghani and Al-Biruni supported the idea of a spherical Earth and even measured its circumference. The Quran itself, in **Surah Az-Zumar (39:5)**, states, *“He wraps the night over the day and wraps the day over the night,”* which clearly points to the Earth’s spherical shape. This example highlights how highly Islam values scientific knowledge and rationality.

However, such misconceptions have been so deeply embedded in the subconscious of Muslim society that they have become hard to dispel. These claims stem from a lack of scientific perspective in Quranic interpretation and a disregard for historical context. Such misinterpretations dull scientific

thinking in the Muslim world, promote ignorance, and threaten social harmony in modern society. Ultra-conservative scholars, by distorting these verses, have asserted that they indicate the flatness of the Earth. Yet, this argument not only contradicts scientific evidence but has also been refuted by contemporary Islamic scholars and scientists who clarify that the Quran's language is symbolic and metaphorical, not to be taken literally in a scientific sense.

Despite this, some continue to religiously justify such claims within Islam, stunting the development of scientific thought in the Muslim community. The spread of these ideas fosters indifference toward scientific inquiry and rationality. While Islam's early history is known for its contributions to science and education—through figures like astronomer Al-Biruni and medical expert Ibn Sina—today, extremist ideologies have weakened that legacy.

The claim that the Earth is flat is not just a mere assertion; it has become a widely held belief that contradicts all scientific facts supporting the Earth's spherical nature. It reflects how this community is falling behind in understanding and adopting modern science and technology. This fosters an environment of hostility and suspicion toward science, distancing the younger generation from studying and comprehending modern scientific concepts. When unscientific beliefs are justified based on misinterpretations of religious texts, ignorance (jahiliyyah) flourishes. Education's purpose is to make humans logical and discerning, but when education is replaced by religious extremism and superstition, intellectual stagnation takes root in society. Such ideas not only hinder scientific thinking but also push people toward stagnation and superstition.

When young Muslims are taught that the Earth is flat and that modern science is wrong, their future contributions to scientific fields are significantly diminished. This leads to a decline in the level of education within Islamic societies, causing them to fall behind in the global race for knowledge.



Such unscientific claims not only create divisions within the Muslim community but also damage the dialogue and social harmony between Muslim and non-Muslim communities.

When a society refuses to accept modern scientific facts and clings to misinterpretations of religion, it hinders intercultural dialogue. Non-Muslim societies begin to view Islam as a rigid and unscientific ideology, deepening social divides. Within the Muslim community, this dynamic results in internal strife, where progressive Muslim scholars and scientists advocate for reform and modernity, while conservative religious leaders insist on maintaining outdated and unscientific beliefs. This internal division weakens the unity and stability of the Muslim world.

There is now an urgent need to understand



of Islam and portrays Muslims as a dangerous community on the global stage.

One of the most glaring examples of this ultra-conservative ideology is the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan in 2021. The Taliban imposed their harsh and radical interpretation of Sharia law, suppressing women's rights, banning education, and restricting social freedoms. This brutal regime not only brought suffering to the women and children of Afghanistan but also reinforced negative stereotypes about Muslims worldwide. Globally, Muslims came to be seen as a threat to peace, further weakening their social and political standing.

This scenario reveals how radical ideologies are creating serious challenges both within and outside the Muslim community. When such ideas are not resisted from within, extremism thrives, becoming not just a threat to Muslims, but to humanity as a whole.

The most devastating outcome of ultra-conservative ideologies is manifested in terrorism and violent extremism. Groups such as Al-Qaeda, ISIS, Boko Haram, and other extremist organizations have spread terror in the name of Islam. These groups distort the teachings of the Quran and Islamic principles to misinterpret the concept of jihad, using it to justify the killing of innocent people. Such acts have posed a serious threat to global peace and security, increasing suspicion and hatred towards Muslims in Western countries.

and follow the true teachings of Islam. It is the responsibility of the Muslim community to raise their voices against extremism, hypocrisy, and superstition. Islamic scholars must provide scientific and rational interpretations of the Quran and Hadith to dispel the misunderstandings that have spread throughout society.

Islam, as preached by Prophet Muhammad, is a religion that values equality, tolerance, and knowledge. If the Muslim world embraces these core messages, not only will the rights of women be safeguarded, but the true purpose of Islam—love, peace, and compassion—will also be realized. Unfortunately, the ultra-conservative ideologies propagated by some clerics and extremist religious leaders have tarnished the image of Muslims worldwide. This trend distorts the true essence

In 2014, ISIS declared a “caliphate” and seized control of large parts of Syria and Iraq. Under the guise of Islam, this organization unleashed horrifying violence, massacres, and acts of barbarism. They targeted not only non-Muslims but also Shia Muslims, Yazidis, and other religious minorities. ISIS was particularly successful in radicalizing young Muslims online, recruiting them for terrorist activities. The brutal actions of ISIS tarnished the image of Islam worldwide, leading to the perception of Muslims as a dangerous group.

The terrorist attacks in Paris and Brussels in 2015 and 2016 further damaged the image of Muslims in Europe. These attacks, carried out by ISIS supporters, not only instilled fear and hatred within European societies but also reinforced the association of Islam with violence and terrorism. As a result of these attacks, there was a significant rise in hate crimes against Muslims in Europe and America, further cementing negative stereotypes.

The ultra-conservative ideologies promoted by some clerics attempt to restrict women’s rights, which directly contradicts the values and rights upheld in modern society. By imposing bans on women’s education, employment, and social participation, these extremists have portrayed Islam as a religion that violates women’s rights. While Islam inherently supports education, respect, and freedom for women, these radical ideologies have had the opposite effect.

Under Taliban rule in Afghanistan, the ban on girls’ education sparked outrage not only within Muslim communities but also drew harsh criticism internationally. The suppression of women’s rights led to a negative global perception of Islam, painting it as a religion that oppresses women’s freedom.

These ultra-conservative ideologies have significantly contributed to the rapid global rise of Islamophobia (fear and hatred of Islam). Whenever news of violent attacks or radical activities linked to Muslims surfaces in different parts of the world, negative perceptions of Muslims grow stronger in non-Muslim communities. This results in increased



discrimination, social exclusion, and incidents of violence against Muslims in many countries. This trend is not limited to Western countries but is also evident in places like India, where communal politics and divisions target Muslims.

Since the 9/11 attacks, there has been a surge of Islamophobia in the United States and Europe. Muslims are increasingly viewed through the lens of terrorism, leading to a rise in discrimination and hate crimes against them. Strict policies have been enforced against Muslim immigrants, and several countries have witnessed attacks on mosques. These events have marginalized Muslim communities, eroding social harmony and goodwill towards them.

In many Muslim-majority countries, ultra-conservative ideologies have blurred the lines between religion and politics, leading to violent power struggles and political instability. Some radical groups exploit Islam for political gain, deepening social and cultural divisions. This perpetuates ongoing conflict and instability in these nations, which in turn reinforces negative perceptions of Muslims in other parts of the world.

In countries like Iran and Saudi Arabia, religion exerts a profound influence on politics. The strict adherence to Sharia law and the overwhelming authority of religious leadership in these nations has contributed to a global perception of Islam as a conservative and rigid religion. The lack of religious freedom and harsh suppression of dissent have further reinforced this image.

In the context of India, the influence of Islamic conservatism and radical ideologies has given rise to several social, cultural, and political issues. However, it is essential to acknowledge that India is a pluralistic and diverse society, where Muslims constitute a significant portion of the population. Indian Muslims have made important contributions to the country’s progress and culture, yet the impact of radical ideologies has affected the image of Muslims in India as well. This situation is not unique to India but is linked to the broader global narrative of negative perceptions towards the Muslim community.

In India, some clerics and radical religious leaders propagate rigid and conservative Islamic ideologies, which shape the public’s perception of

Indian Muslims. These ideologies often discourage women’s education, modernity, and the integration of the Muslim community into mainstream society. For example, the opposition of Islamic fundamentalists to issues like triple talaq reflects their negative outlook toward modern reforms. This has fostered a belief in Indian society that the Muslim community is resistant to modernization, which is seen as a major reason for their alienation from the mainstream.

In 2019, the Indian government passed a law to end the practice of triple talaq, a move that was opposed by many conservative Muslim organizations and leaders. They argued that it violated Islamic traditions, even though the law was necessary to protect women’s rights. Similarly, in the ongoing debate over the Uniform Civil Code, radical Islamic leaders resist any form of reform, which raises questions about the progressive nature of Indian Muslims and harms their image.

The issue of terrorism and the radicalization of Muslim youth in India has also damaged the community’s image. Some Islamic extremist groups have attempted to spread jihadist ideology among

Indian Muslims, posing a threat to the country's internal security and fostering a negative portrayal of Muslims. International terrorist organizations like ISIS and Al-Qaeda have also made efforts to radicalize young Indian Muslims.

Several terrorist attacks in India, such as the 2008 Mumbai attack, were carried out by radical Islamic groups, including Pakistan-based Lashkar-e-Taiba. These attacks have fueled negative perceptions of Muslims in India. Moreover, instances of some Indian Muslim youths attempting to join ISIS and other terrorist organizations have strengthened the view that violence and terrorism in the name of Islam are on the rise.

The rise of religious extremism in the name of Islam has also weakened social harmony in India. Radical ideologies promote communal tensions within Indian society. Provocative statements made by religious organizations and opposition to measures like the banning of hijabs in schools amplify Islamic conservatism. This, in turn, increases suspicion and discrimination against Muslims, furthering their social isolation.

In 2022, the controversy over the hijab in Karnataka sparked a nationwide debate when Muslim girls were banned from wearing hijabs in schools and colleges. This issue ignited a major conflict across India. Radical clerics and organizations claimed it was an attack on religious freedom, while opponents linked it to modernity and education. This controversy fueled negative sentiments towards Muslims in Indian society, where conservatism became associated with their identity.

The influence of Islamophobia, which has been rising on a global scale, is also visible in India. The actions of extremist Islamic organizations and terrorist attacks have intensified negative perceptions toward Muslims in the country. Discrimination, social ostracization, and violent incidents against the Muslim community have further fueled Islamophobia. As a result, Muslims often find themselves isolated, marginalized socially,

economically, and politically.

In recent years, there has been a surge in mob lynchings in India, where members of the Muslim community have been targeted under the guise of cow protection or religious reasons. Additionally, during the protests against the CAA-NRC, Muslims were labeled as "anti-national" and "terrorists," further exacerbating their plight. These events have deepened discrimination and hatred against Muslims in India.



The effects of global conflicts in Muslim-majority countries and the spread of radical ideologies can also be felt in India. For example, the policies of countries like Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Taliban-ruled Afghanistan have encouraged the rise of Islamic fundamentalism among Indian Muslims. Some Indian Muslims, influenced by global Islamic movements, attempt to join radical organizations, further tarnishing their image.

In 2021, when the Taliban returned to power in Afghanistan, certain Indian Muslim groups celebrated it as a victory for Islamic rule. However, the Taliban's atrocities, particularly the violation of

women's rights, were widely condemned across Indian society. This event sparked a debate within the Indian Muslim community itself—questioning whether such radical ideologies truly represent the essence of Islam.

Islamic conservatism and extremist ideologies in India have not only affected the image of Indian Muslims but have also posed challenges to social harmony and national unity. The ultra-conservative ideologies propagated by certain religious leaders

International terrorist organizations like ISIS and al-Qaeda have attempted to radicalize Indian Muslim youth, thereby contributing to this narrative that Islam is associated with violence and extremism.

In India, the hardline stance on religious issues has weakened social harmony as well. Provocative statements by extremist religious organizations and their opposition to reforms, such as the controversy over Muslim girls wearing hijabs in schools, have further fueled Islamic conservatism. This has led to increased suspicion and discrimination against Muslims, contributing to their social isolation.

The 2022 hijab controversy in Karnataka, where Muslim girls were barred from wearing hijabs in schools and colleges, became a national issue. Radical religious leaders and organizations termed this as an attack on religious freedom, while opponents linked it to modernity and education. This controversy reinforced a negative perception in Indian society that associates conservatism with Muslim identity.

Globally, the rise of Islamophobia and the impact of extremist ideologies and terrorist organizations have complicated the situation for Muslims in India as well. However, it is crucial to recognize that a significant portion of the Indian Muslim community is progressive and embraces modernity. The fight against religious hypocrisy and superstition is not limited to Islamic society alone—it is a global challenge that must be addressed collectively by all communities.

Muslims must return to the true teachings of their religion and reject radical ideologies. The call for change must come from within the Muslim community itself, advocating for a society built on logic, science, and knowledge. The role of educated religious leaders and scholars will be vital in offering the correct interpretation of Islamic teachings and promoting peace and progress. For global peace and to restore a positive image of the Muslim community, it is imperative that Muslims emphasize internal reforms and actively fight against superstition and fanaticism.



# IRAN'S GAMBLE *Billions Lost, Regime at Risk*

Peter Baum

**P**rior to devoting the vast majority of my retirement time to political research and pro – Israeli activism , I enjoyed a moderately successful career in the world of international finance , firstly as an auditor for a global bank , then as a Eurobond trader and lastly as a fund manager . Since the age of 18, I have had the pleasure

and experience of travelling the world, working extensively in Asia and the Middle East. I have kept in contact with many of my former colleagues and clients, especially those in Muslim countries. I had the true joy of long stay employment in Egypt and Japan, lesser so in Malaysia, Indonesia (and Singapore) and this helped in establishing a client list for my trading and investment career.

However, the investments I made and advised

for and on behalf of my Iranian client base proved financially rewarding quite unlike the investments made by the Iranian government themselves, which have all but failed, or are in the process of being totally liquidated. Failing investments are part and parcel of commercial life, from the South Sea Bubble , the Wall Street crash ,the property crash, the Madoff scam and the sub- prime bond markets which caused the collapse of numerous institutions and the subsequent multi trillion- dollar bank bail -out . Investors take a punt based on gut feeling, emotions, knowledge, advice or analysis in the hope and expectation that their investments will reward them. The totalitarian theocrats of Iran have made similar investments, and all seem to have failed in a very short period despite applying a well- established investment criterion of spreading their risk.

Iran have made huge financial investments in Lebanon, Syria, Yemen and the so- called Palestinian territories. They supplied weaponry, manpower, intelligence and funds to proxies. The Iranians were the fund managers, and the investments made were a mix of discretionary, where the proxies acted independently, and non-discretionary, where the investor has a say in how and in what to invest.

Years of careful investments based on studious analysis , planning , risk assessment, emotional feel and enormous capital input estimated to be in billions of dollars have been wiped out as a direct result of poor political and military decisions and choosing incompetent actors to perform the tasks required of them.

Economically this has resulted in disaster let alone exacerbating the loss of military and geopolitical

power which was the ultimate goal of the Iranian regime. The Iranian Riyal has been in freefall – officially there are as at the time of writing 40,000 Riyals to the dollar but on the black market the Riyal is valued at 700,000 to the dollar and the death penalty for anyone caught trading at these levels.

Iran is busted economically. Their investments in Syria propping up the butcher Assad have been wiped out as the overthrow of the regime lead to Israel destroying all Syrian aircraft, the navy, modern and chemical weaponry. Hezbollah's defeat in Lebanon and the destruction of Hamas in Gaza too has destroyed years of Iranian investment both in terms of political and financial capital. The Houthis have tried their best to support their Iranian

*Iran have made huge financial investments in Lebanon, Syria, Yemen and the so- called Palestinian territories. They supplied weaponry, manpower, intelligence and funds to proxies.*

masters through interruption of world shipping via the Red Sea but US and UK military challenge together with months of biblical flooding which has destroyed Yemen's infrastructure and agriculture have dramatically obstructed Iran's Yemeni power base. And all this capital investment liquidation in less than 18

months which took twenty years and more of careful analytical planning. As with any investment, investments can go up or down and Iranian assets have been on a steepening downward trajectory. When President elect Trump comes into the White House on January 20th next year Iran internally will be under further pressure. Domestic forces may well be the factor finally forcing the defeat of the mad Mullahs. Who would currently invest in Iran? Only fools would rush in.

*Peter Baum, Editor (International Political Affairs) to Blitz is a research-scholar, who writes extensively on Israel, Holocaust, Zionism, Middle East, Anti-Semitism and other issues. Peter Baum has worked for four decades in the International Financial Markets specializing in the Capital Market.*

# CAN CHINA CLIMB OUT OF ECONOMIC STAGNATION IN 2025?

Yuchen Li

China has outlined plans for more economic stimulus to boost consumer spending amid continued economic malaise and the looming threat of Trump's tariffs.

China's top annual economic meeting concluded last month, with leader Xi Jinping announcing fiscal and monetary policies aimed at boosting growth, including taking steps towards interest rate cuts and more government borrowing.

China has been grappling with economic slowdowns and continued weak domestic consumer demand in recent years, in part brought on by the collapse of the real estate market where many middle-class Chinese have stored wealth. According to research by Goldman Sachs, an investment bank, China's real GDP growth is predicted to slow down to 4.5% in 2025 from 4.9% in 2024.

Xi said China is aiming for a "more proactive" fiscal policy and a "moderately loose" monetary policy for next year. Lizzi C. Lee, a fellow on Chinese Economy at the Asia Society, a New York-based think tank, told reporter that this year's "Central Economic Work Conference," conveys an "unusually urgent" signal.

## China's growth strategy

According China's state-run Xinhua News Agency, Xi emphasized at the conference that a key task for next year is to "vigorously boost

consumption, improve investment efficiency, and comprehensively expand domestic demand."

Also, authorities will increase the "fiscal deficit rate, expand the issuance of ultra-long-term special government bonds" and adopt a moderately loose monetary policy to reduce reserve requirements and interest rates to ensure ample liquidity.

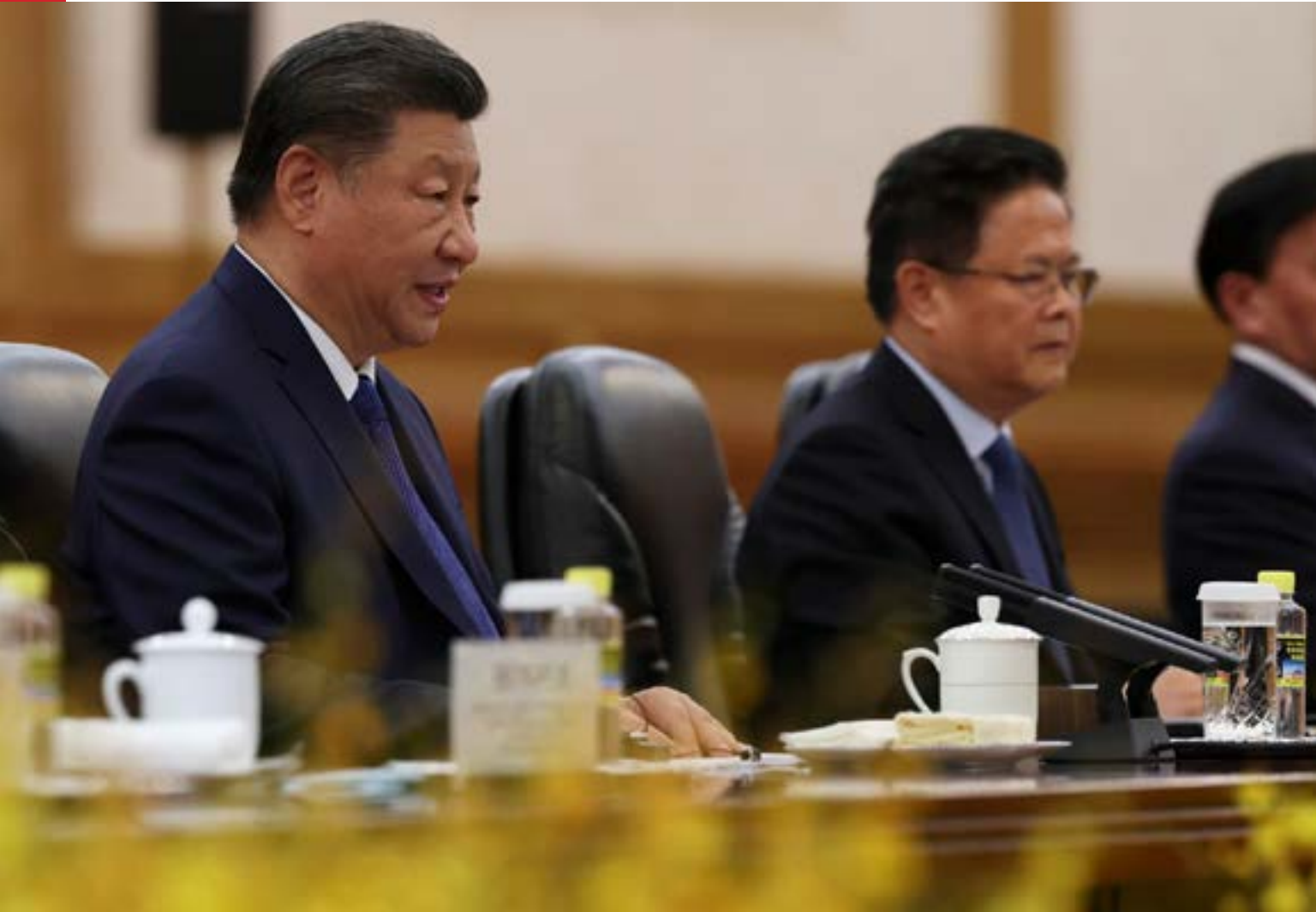
This marks a huge shift in China's monetary policy. Since the end of 2010, Beijing has stuck mostly to a so-called "prudent" approach to economic policy.

Wang Guochen, a scholar at Taiwan's Chung-Hua Institution for Economic Research, told to reporter the easing means that authorities will start printing more money while purchasing government bonds on a larger scale next year.

In September, the People's Bank of China launched the largest economic stimulus measures since the COVID-19 pandemic, releasing about 1 trillion yuan into the banking system. In November, the finance ministry introduced a 10 trillion yuan (\$1.4 trillion) debt financing plan to alleviate pressure on local governments.

Lee from the Asia Society said these measures show that China's leadership is willing to do more, but "the real test will come down to how much Beijing actually pushes through," as details and sizes of the planned





additional stimulus remain scarce.

Wang also warned that China has effectively fallen into a "liquidity trap" in recent years. Despite the loosening of monetary policy and decreased interest rates, people still prefer saving to spending because they are pessimistic about the future.

**Real estate markets key to boosting growth**

While the economic meetings chart the course for next year, actual growth targets and specific guidelines will only be announced in the following spring after the rubber-stamp parliamentary meeting.

Beijing set the GDP growth target for 2024 at 5%. Based on official data from the first three

quarters, achieving this goal remains challenging this year. Yet, economists predict that the Chinese government may set the same target for 2025.

At the economic meetings, Beijing pledged to "stabilize the real estate and stock markets" next year and "continue to make efforts to halt the decline and stabilize the real estate market." However, Wang believes that the key to stabilizing the real estate market is for the Chinese government to purchase local inventory housing.

In doing so, "at least everyone feels that the bottom line of the real estate crash has been reached," he said, and it could potentially restore confidence in the market. "It's clear that issuing more special government bonds won't improve

the overall economic situation," Wang argues. "The economy is in recession, middle-class wages are shrinking ... even if housing prices drop, they still can't afford the mortgage."

Beijing 'refining a toolkit' to counter Trump's tariffs

Incoming President Trump has threatened Chinese imports to the US with tariffs of at least 60%. Wang said that the institution he works for calculated estimates from about 13 institutional investors, predicting that with a 60% tariff imposed by the US, China's economic growth rate could drop to 3%, compared to a previous prediction of 4.5%. Research from Goldman Sachs predicts Trump will impose a lower 20 percentage point increase in the effective tariff rate, which would "weigh on China's



real GDP by 0.7 percentage points in 2025."

While China's core leadership did not directly mention the US-China trade war during the conference, they emphasized that "the adverse effects brought by changes in the current external environment are deepening." During a Tuesday meeting with several international economic organization leaders in Beijing, Xi said that "there will be no winners" in tariff wars. Beijing's current stance in response to Trump's potential tariff increases is one of "watchful preparation" rather than outright confrontation, Lee points out. "At the same time, China is quietly refining a toolkit to respond if tensions escalate. Cybersecurity investigations, tightened export controls, and regulatory scrutiny of foreign firms are all on the table," Lee added. China is also actively pursuing strategies to bolster domestic production in face of the ongoing tech war with the US, particularly in the semiconductor sector. "Tackling key core technologies" was highlighted at this year's conference.

But Wang said pursuing technological independence in semiconductor will require significant investment without any guarantees of success. Moreover, prioritizing these industries could stifle the growth of the service sector. As a result, "technological independence and expanding domestic demand are bound to clash."

In 2025, China will face fresh economic headwinds, with US President-elect Donald Trump entering office in January pledging to slap high tariffs on Chinese exports.

 **China's main stimulus measures since September 2024**

Bank lending boost	1,000 bn yuan
Infrastructure investment	1,000 bn yuan
Local govt. debt swaps	6,000 bn yuan
Stock market boost	800 bn yuan
Local government bonds	4,000 bn yuan
Interest rate cut	from 1.7% to 1.5%
Min. home deposit cut to	15%

# GUKESH

## The New Emperor of Chess

Dr. R.K. Sinha

All of India is beaming with pride as D. Gukesh becomes the new World Chess Champion. Gukesh has written a new chapter in chess history by becoming the youngest-ever champion in the sport. His extraordinary talent, dedication, and strategic insight have been key factors in his meteoric rise. Gukesh began playing chess at a very young age, allowing him ample time to master the complexities of the game and hone his innate abilities. His natural aptitude for chess, combined with his sharp analytical skills, has enabled him to grasp intricate strategies with ease.

One of the pillars of his success has been the guidance of seasoned and skilled coaches who have significantly contributed to refining his techniques. Gukesh has had access to international-level training and resources, equipping him to compete against the world's best. His preparation involved the use of modern technological tools that aided in analyzing and enhancing his gameplay strategies.

### Strategic Depth and Mental Fortitude

Gukesh possesses remarkable strategic depth in chess, enabling him to make accurate decisions even in high-pressure situations. He remains calm and composed, a quality that allows him to excel in critical matches. His mental resilience is evident in his ability to bounce back from setbacks, constantly pushing himself forward without losing motivation.

His dedication to practice is unwavering, and he continually works on improving his weaknesses. Gukesh regularly analyzes his past games and learns from his mistakes, ensuring a steady evolution of his strategies. He diligently studies the games of great chess masters, adopting new techniques and expanding his tactical repertoire.

Having competed in numerous international tournaments, Gukesh has gained invaluable experience by playing against top-level oppo-

nents. He has faced players with diverse styles, which has enhanced his versatility and prepared him to handle a wide range of chess scenarios.

### Family Support: A Key Factor

Gukesh's family has been a pillar of strength throughout his journey, providing him with emotional support and motivation during challenging times. This encouragement has played an essential role in helping him overcome hurdles and keep progressing toward his goals.

All these factors combined have paved the way for Gukesh to become the World Chess Champion. His triumph is not just a personal achievement but a symbol of India's growing prominence in the global chess arena.

### Comparisons with Vishwanathan Anand

Some experts have begun drawing comparisons between Gukesh and former World Chess Champion Viswanathan Anand, both of whom are towering figures in Indian chess. While they share exceptional talent, strategic depth, and an indomitable spirit, there are significant differences in their styles and approaches to the game.

Both Anand and Gukesh are masters of complex chess situations, capable of making precise moves even under pressure. They are renowned for their strategic depth, with a focus not only on immediate gains but also on long-term plans. Both players have demonstrated immense determination and the ability to recover from difficult positions, turning the tide in their favor.

Anand and Gukesh are also celebrated for their sportsmanship and humility, maintaining grace even in defeat. However, while Anand is a veteran who has been a chess powerhouse since the 1990s, Gukesh represents the new generation of players who have risen in the age of computers.

Anand's style is often described as fast and aggressive, whereas Gukesh tends to adopt a more strategic and defensive approach. Anand excels in quick maneuvers and navigating complex situations with speed, while Gukesh focuses on controlling the position and advancing patiently.

Anand's vast experience, with multiple World Championship titles under his belt, sets him apart, whereas Gukesh is still in the early stages of his career, gradually establishing his place in the global chess community. Anand's play is characterized by a natural creativity and intuition, while Gukesh is more methodical and

scientific in his preparation, relying heavily on detailed planning and analysis.

### Chess's Growing Popularity in India

Chess has long been popular in India, but the emergence of young stars like Gukesh is poised to make the game even more widespread. His success will inspire younger generations to take up the game, serving as a role model for aspiring chess players. The rise of players like Gukesh will undoubtedly fuel a growing interest in chess among India's youth.

The availability of online chess platforms and computer analysis tools has also made the game more accessible than ever before. Learning and playing chess via the internet has opened up new avenues for players to hone their skills conveniently. The increased media coverage of chess, with major news channels and sports websites dedicating attention to the game, has further contributed to raising awareness and interest.

Moreover, chess is increasingly being recognized as an educational tool in schools, providing children with opportunities to experience the benefits of the game. Promoting chess at the school level will not only enhance its popularity but also foster a new generation of players with a strong foundation in the game.

### Sponsorship and Financial Support

The rise in sponsorships for chess has also helped boost the game's visibility and growth. Financial backing from sponsors enables players to develop their abilities, compete in more tournaments, and ultimately improve their performances on the global stage.

Gukesh's success as the World Chess Champion is expected to play a crucial role in making chess even more popular in India. It will inspire young players and pave the way for them to pursue careers in the sport. His victory signifies a new chapter in the history of Indian chess, and his journey will serve as a beacon of hope and motivation for future generations.

In conclusion, Gukesh's story is one of perseverance, talent, and the relentless pursuit of excellence. His remarkable achievement not only elevates Indian chess on the world stage but also promises to shape the future of the game in the country. As Gukesh continues to climb the ranks of global chess, his influence will undoubtedly leave a lasting legacy.

(The author is a senior editor, columnist and former MP)



2025

# Maha Kumbh

*Steps Towards a Spiritual Tide*



Sachchidanand Pandey



**P**rayagraj, the sacred city situated at the confluence of the Ganga, Yamuna, and the mythical Saraswati rivers, is once again preparing for one of the grandest spiritual gatherings in the world – the Maha Kumbh 2025. This event, which attracts millions of devotees, is not just a religious congregation but also a celebration of India's deep spiritual heritage and cultural richness. Maha Kumbh, where faith and devotion merge with ancient rituals, offers a unique opportunity for devotees to seek purification and redemption from their sins by taking a holy dip in the sacred waters.

## THE SPIRITUAL ESSENCE OF THE KUMBH

The significance of the Kumbh Mela is deeply rooted in the Vedas and Puranas, where it is described as a divine occasion for self-purification and liberation. In the vast stream of Sanatan Dharma, the Kumbh represents a time when the cosmic energy is at its peak on Earth, and by bathing in the confluence of the holy rivers, devotees believe they are cleansed of all their past sins. Maha Kumbh 2025 is set to be a gathering of millions, and it transcends mere religious practice—it is a global manifestation of faith, devotion, and

spiritual unity.

## PREPARATIONS IN PRAYAGRAJ: A GRAND SPIRITUAL SACRIFICE

The government of Uttar Pradesh has unveiled an extensive plan for the preparations of Maha Kumbh 2025, ensuring that this colossal event is conducted efficiently. Spread over an area of 40 square kilometers, a temporary city is being established that will include housing facilities, roads, electricity, water supply, and communication systems. Alongside these facilities, 11 temporary hospitals and over 150,000 portable toilets are being set up in the Sangam area to cater to the health and sanitation needs of the massive influx of pilgrims.

More than 20,000 workers are involved in maintaining cleanliness and environmental sustainability throughout the Kumbh Mela. Additionally, 500 'Ganga Praharis' have been appointed to ensure the sanctity and cleanliness of the Ganga river. This initiative aims to make the Kumbh Mela an eco-friendly event, setting a precedent for balancing religious devotion with environmental consciousness in the coming years.

## THE TECHNOLOGICAL TOUCH AND MODERN FACILITIES

Modern technology is also playing a pivotal role in organizing



Yogi Adityanath's Vision:

**TRANSFORMING MAHA KUMBH 2025 INTO A SPIRITUAL MARVEL**

Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath has launched several new initiatives to ensure the successful and smooth execution of Maha Kumbh 2025 in Prayagraj. Emphasizing the safety and comfort of millions of devotees, he has overseen the construction of world-class infrastructure, including roads, bridges, and sanitation facilities. Additionally, the government is enhancing digital services for better crowd management and real-time updates through mobile apps. To ensure a seamless spiritual experience, there will be improved transportation, security, and medical facilities, with a focus on preserving the sanctity of the event while fostering tourism and cultural exchange.

this spiritual mega-event. Advanced systems like artificial intelligence-powered chatbots and real-time information services are being employed to provide pilgrims with timely updates about their journey and facilities. Mobile applications and digital services are being utilized to offer information regarding accommodation, transportation, and other essential services.

Security measures are another key focus for Maha Kumbh 2025. More than 50,000 security personnel and police forces will be deployed to manage the crowd and ensure safety. Over 2,500 CCTV cameras will monitor the entire site to prevent any untoward incidents. All of these efforts are aimed at allowing devotees to perform their spiritual duties without fear, ensuring a smooth and sacred experience for all.

**A GLOBAL CONFLUENCE OF FAITH**

Maha Kumbh 2025 is not only a major religious and cultural event for India but also for the entire world. Millions of devotees, not just from different parts of India but from across the globe, are expected to participate in this sacred event. The Kumbh Mela conveys a universal message of love, unity, and spirituality. This grand event showcases a confluence of diverse languages, cultures, and religious traditions, where people from all walks of life rise above barriers of caste, religion, and geography to bathe in the holy waters with one common purpose—to seek spiritual purification and divine grace.

**KUMBH AND ITS IMPACT ON INDIAN POLITICS**

An event as grand as the Kumbh Mela also has a significant impact on the social and political landscape

of India. The efforts by the Uttar Pradesh government to ensure seamless management and infrastructure development not only aim at the successful completion of the event but also contribute to presenting India's cultural heritage on the global stage. While the Kumbh Mela is a gathering for religious, cultural, and spiritual reasons, it also reinforces the values of social harmony, unity, and selfless service.

**CONCLUSION**

The preparations for Maha Kumbh 2025 are not merely efforts towards organizing a religious and cultural event, but a spiritual undertaking that embodies the power of faith, devotion, and human spirituality. This event is poised to become a global symbol of India's spiritual and cultural heritage. As millions of devotees take the holy dip in the Ganga, they will experience not just physical but also spiritual purification. The Maha Kumbh is a reminder that our faith, culture, and traditions are the true essence of our existence, connecting us to the deeper meanings and values of life.

Prayagraj is once again set to bring alive those ideals that have been the cornerstone of faith and devotion for centuries. During Maha Kumbh 2025, this sacred land will welcome countless pilgrims who will come to wash away their sins and embark on the path to liberation. This spiritual ocean, where the mind, body, and soul will be cleansed, will spread a message of love, peace, and harmony across the world.



The Maha Kumbh Mela 2025 is scheduled to take place in Prayagraj, India, from January 13 to February 26, 2025.

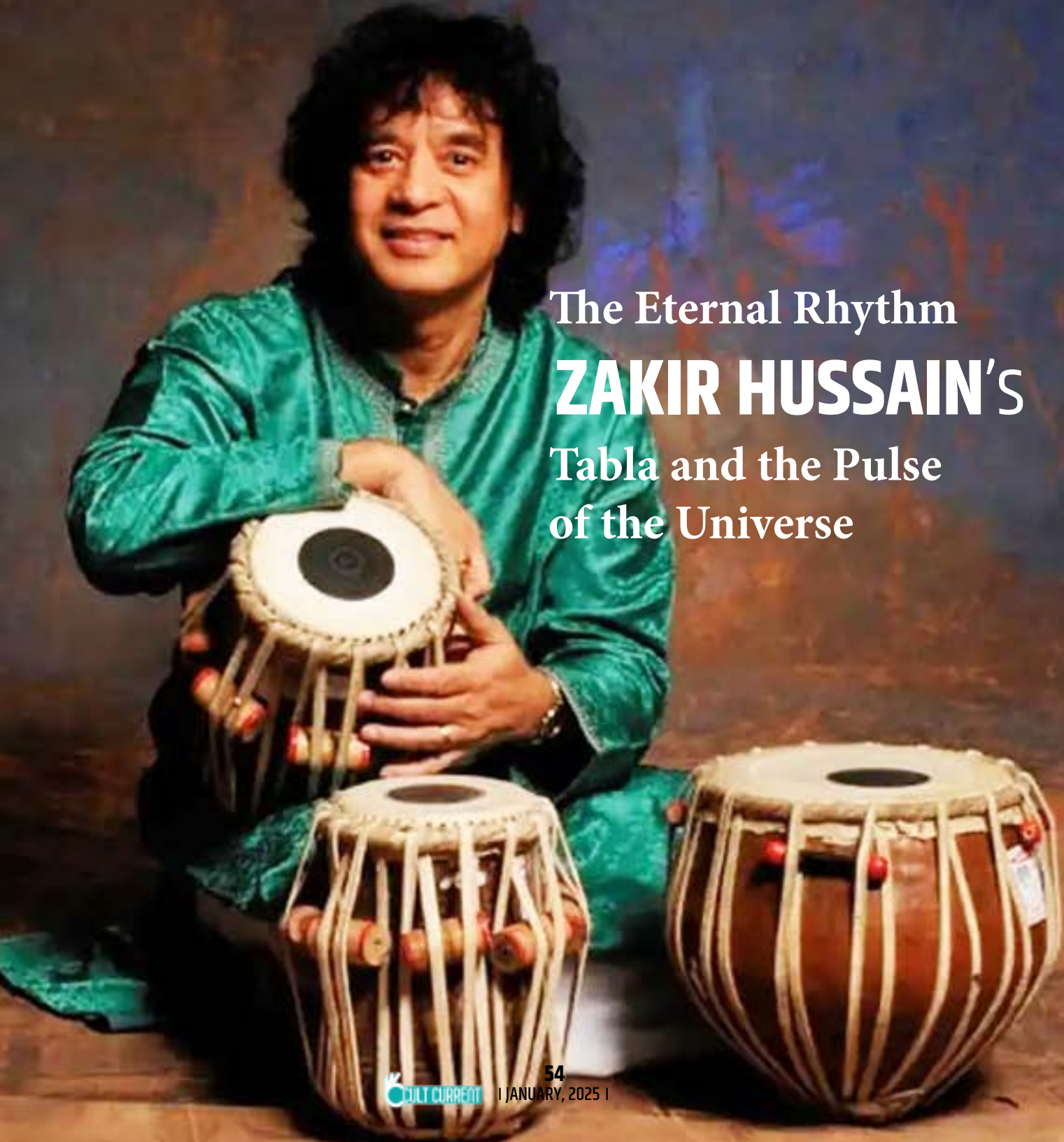
**Prayagraj :** During this period, several significant bathing dates, known as "Shahi Snan" (royal baths), are observed.

These dates are considered highly auspicious, attracting millions of devotees who believe that bathing on these days cleanses them of sins and brings spiritual benefits.

Here are the key bathing dates for the Maha Kumbh Mela 2025:

- **Paush Purnima:** January 13, 2025
- **Makar Sankranti:** January 14, 2025
- **Mauni Amavasya:** January 29, 2025
- **Basant Panchami:** February 3, 2025
- **Achla Saptami:** February 4, 2025
- **Maghi Poornima:** February 12, 2025
- **Maha Shivratri:** February 26, 2025

These dates are observed with grand processions, rituals, and cultural activities, making the Maha Kumbh Mela a unique spiritual and cultural experience.



The Eternal Rhythm  
**ZAKIR HUSSAIN'S**  
 Tabla and the Pulse  
 of the Universe



**Sandeep Kumar**

**T**he departure of Ustad Zakir Hussain marks the end of a golden era in Indian classical music. His tabla was not just an instrument; it was an extension of his soul. Every beat, every stroke carried the richness of centuries of tradition, and yet he infused it with a modern vibrancy that transcended borders. Born into the illustrious lineage of Ustad Alla Rakha, Zakir Hussain's mastery was more than a continuation—it was a renaissance.

Hussain's hands danced on the tabla, creating a rhythm so profound it spoke directly to the listener's spirit. His collaborations with international artists, including giants like George Harrison and John McLaughlin, showcased his ability to bridge East and West, blending Indian classical music with jazz, rock, and world music. This fusion was not mere experimentation—it was a heartfelt dialogue between cultures, where the tabla was the voice of universal harmony.

Yet, amidst global fame, he remained a true custodian of classical music. His performances in serene, dimly lit halls evoked the timeless raga traditions, as his tabla conversed with the tanpura and sitar in ways that left audiences spellbound. There was an intimacy in these performances, as if each beat he struck resonated with the cosmos itself, calling forth both the ancient and the eternal.

His presence was magnetic—not just for his prodigious talent, but for the humility that accompanied it. The twinkle in his eye, the mischievous smile that would appear when he struck a particularly intricate rhythm, endeared him to millions. He was an artist who took music seriously, but never himself.

What Zakir Hussain has left behind is more than recordings or performances; it is a legacy of profound musical dialogue. He has shown the world that music is a language that transcends words, a conversation between hearts. His tabla, now silent, leaves us with memories that echo in every rhythmic pulse of the earth. His hands may no longer grace the drum, but their touch will forever resonate, a timeless rhythm in the heart of music itself.



Battle for

# THE ARCTIC

The New Global Flashpoint



**Air Marshal Anil Chopra (Retired)**

As global powers compete for dominance over vast resources and strategic routes, China and India too are eager to take on a larger role in this pivotal region

**T**he Arctic region, still relatively unexplored, is recognized as a rich repository of untapped natural resources, particularly oil, gas, and marine life. It is also historically viewed as a potential flashpoint for great-power conflict.

Russia has long maintained a

dominant presence in the area. However, NATO's expansion northward has compelled Moscow to significantly increase its military footprint. Growing superpower China has shown an escalating interest in Arctic affairs, while India, despite its geographical distance, has also established a foothold in the region.

With increased US confrontation with both China and Russia, these two powers have fostered greater

cooperation and coordination in Arctic matters.

Covering over one sixth of the Earth's landmass, the Arctic region encompasses the North Pole and is characterized by vast expanses of floating ice, with ridges that can reach up to 20 meters thick. It is estimated to hold nearly 22% of the world's undiscovered oil and natural gas reserves, with Russia accounting for 52% of the Arctic's total energy resources and Norway holding 12%.

Global industrialization and rising emissions of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases have resulted in increased temperatures, leading to rapid glacial melting. In 2024, the minimum extent of Arctic sea ice was recorded at 4.28 million square kilometers – approximately 1.8 million square kilometers below the long-term average. The rate of sea ice reduction is nearly 13% per decade, suggesting that the Arctic could become ice-free during the summer by 2040.

potentially raising sea levels and threatening many island territories and coastal cities. Climate change and global warming have garnered international attention, highlighted by discussions at recent forums such as COP29 in Baku, Azerbaijan.

Unlike Antarctica, which is governed by a 1959 treaty allowing only peaceful activities, no analogous treaty exists for the Arctic. Established in 1996, the Arctic Council addresses issues pertinent to Arctic nations, comprising the United States, Canada, Denmark, Iceland, Norway, Sweden,

The consequences of melting ice are profound,



has deteriorated, particularly in light of geopolitical tensions stemming from the situation in Ukraine since 2014.

**ARCTIC SEA ROUTES**

Increased ice melting has begun opening the Arctic region for longer periods of time in summer months. There are three main routes that could revolutionise the international commercial shipping industry in the 21st century.

The Northern Sea Route (NSR) lies along the arctic coast of Russia. Ice clears up here first and therefore is available for longer. It also has the highest commercial potential: the route reduces the maritime distance between East Asia and Europe from 21,000 kilometres via the Suez Canal to 12,800 km. It implies a transit time saving of 10-15 days. NSR was used extensively for natural resource extraction and transportation during the Soviet Era.

In 2009, two German ships led by a Russian icebreaker made the first commercial journey across the NSR from Busan in South Korea, to Rotterdam in Netherlands, establishing good commercial prospects.

The North West Passage (NWP) is another route between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, crossing Canada’s Arctic Archipelago that was first used in 2007. It may open for

Finland, and Russia. Observer countries must acknowledge the sovereignty and jurisdiction of Arctic states while recognizing the extensive legal framework governing the Arctic Ocean. In May 2013, India became the 11th country to gain permanent observer status at the Arctic Council.

Russia has operated nuclear-powered icebreakers in the region for some time. Although the Arctic Military Environmental Cooperation (AMEC) agreement between Russia, the US, and Norway facilitated the decommissioning of certain Soviet and US assets, the increasing interest from additional nations has sparked a new Cold War dynamics between the two primary powers.

Both Russia and the United States have long maintained military bases and surveillance systems in the Arctic, including nuclear deterrent capabilities.

The cooperative atmosphere that once prevailed



more regular use soon. While Canada claims it as an internal waterway, the US and others insist it is an international transit passage, and must allow free and unencumbered movement.

This route could reduce shipping time between the Middle East and Western Europe to around 13,600 km compared to 24,000 km via the Panama Canal, however parts of the route are just 15 metres deep, thus reducing its viability. China seems to be interested in using this passage to eastern parts of US, as the Panama Canal too has ship size and tonnage restrictions.

The third one is a potential Transpolar Sea Route (TSR) which could use the central part of the Arctic to directly link the Bering Strait and the Atlantic Ocean port of Murmansk. This route is hypothetical for now and may appear as climate change progresses.

**MOSCOW'S STRATEGY**

Russia is the largest stakeholder in the Arctic, a region that contributes approximately 10% of the country's gross domestic product (GDP) and accounts for 20% of all Russian exports. The Arctic has gained renewed significance in the 2023 version of the Kremlin's Foreign Policy Concept, which emphasizes the preservation of peace and stability, increased environmental sustainability, and reduced threats to national security.

Development of the Northern Sea Route (NSR) remains a key objective, with Russia reaffirming its commitment to international law in the Arctic. The Concept reinforces the authority of the United

Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) to govern interstate relations in the Arctic Ocean and expresses Russia's openness to "mutually beneficial cooperation with non-Arctic states that pursue a constructive policy towards Russia."

Russia's New Arctic Policy 2035, signed in 2020, explicitly asserts its sovereignty and territorial integrity over the NSR, much to the dismay of the United States, which advocates for the NSR to remain an international waterway under broader Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs).



*Development of the Northern Sea Route (NSR) remains a key objective, with Russia reaffirming its commitment to international law in the Arctic.*

Moscow has threatened to use force against vessels that do not comply with Russian regulations in the NSR. Despite Russian overtures suggesting a willingness to cooperate, the West consistently portrays Russia as the villain in narratives about the Arctic.

**A new player**

China, which considers itself a "Near-Arctic State," seeks to be a stakeholder in the Arctic. In January 2018, China released its official Arctic Policy paper, highlighting its interests in Arctic resources and the need to develop infrastructure for research, military, and other purposes.

China invests more than the United States in Arctic research and operates a Polar Research Institute in Shanghai. It possesses a fleet of research vessels and two MV Xue Long icebreakers. Additionally, China established the Arctic Yellow River Station in 2004. In 2018, COSCO Shipping Corporation Limited, based in Shanghai, made eight transits through the Arctic between Europe and China.

China's "Polar Silk Road," launched in 2018 as a joint initiative with Russia, aims to enhance connectivity in the region. Like Russia, China also aspires to deploy nuclear-powered icebreakers in the Arctic, becoming only the second country to do so. However, Denmark, encouraged by the United States, rejected China's offer to purchase an old military base in Greenland and build an international airport there.

**INDIA'S INTEREST**

As a rising major power, India aims to become a significant player in the Arctic. It has operated the "Himadri" permanent Arctic research station in Svalbard, Norway, since July 2008. Svalbard, the northernmost year-round settlement on Earth, has a population of about 2,200 and is nearly 1,200 kilometers from the North Pole.

India's research focuses on monitoring fjord dynamics, glaciers, carbon recycling, glaciology, geology, atmospheric pollution, and space weather, among other areas. In 2014, India established an underwater moored observatory called "IndARC" in Kongsfjorden, Svalbard, aiming to find linkages between Arctic meteorological parameters and the southwest monsoon. Additionally, India's ONGC Videsh has shown interest in investing in Russia's Arctic liquefied natural gas projects.

India's Arctic policy, titled "India and the Arctic: Building a Partnership for Sustainable Development," was released in March 2022. This document outlines India's interests, which include economic and resource prospects, sea connectivity, and reinforcing its presence in the region.

The Arctic becomes increasingly important for New Delhi as it seeks to expand sea trade routes to

access more markets for its growing exports, and secure passages for shipments of oil and other vital commodities.

Both India and Russia have made significant progress in promoting the 7,200 kilometre International North South Transport Corridor (INSTC) that could move freight between India, Iran, Azerbaijan, Russia, Central Asia and Europe, greatly reducing cost and time, as well as the Chennai-Vladivostok corridor, which could become a part of NSR.

Recent developments indicate that New Delhi is engaged in discussions with Moscow regarding the construction of icebreakers at Indian shipyards, highlighting India's commitment to Arctic engagement and the potential for expanded cooperation.

*India's Arctic policy, titled "India and the Arctic: Building a Partnership for Sustainable Development," was released in March 2022.*

India may also explore mining opportunities in the Arctic region. Despite widespread international calls for a moratorium on deep-sea mining. Notably, Norway aims to be the first nation

to initiate commercial activities in this domain – a critical move given its membership in the Arctic Council and significant role in Arctic geopolitics.

**THE NEXT GREAT GAME**

The Arctic continues to attract researchers, as "the next great game" unfolds. Unlike Antarctica, Arctic states possess established territorial claims under the Law of the Sea regime. Consequently, discussions surrounding great power politics, competition, and conflict in the Arctic are increasingly capturing the attention of strategic analysts.

Russia's Northern Fleet is strategically positioned across the Arctic and holds a dominant stance in the





region. The US became an Arctic state following its purchase of Alaska from Russia for \$7.2 million in 1867. Canada and Northern European nations have substantial stakes in Arctic affairs, prompting the US to deepen its alliances with these countries.

Notably, the Northern Sea Route (NSR) offers a transportation route that is 37% shorter for cargo traveling from London to Yokohama, Japan, compared to the Suez Canal. Russia seeks to leverage this advantage economically through a robust support infrastructure along its Arctic coastline. Moscow perceives the US and its NATO partners as threats to its Arctic ambitions.

As the great Arctic race progresses, Russia's resource-driven economy leads in exploitation efforts, having secured rights to approximately 1.7 million square kilometers of seabed. Moreover, Russia has revived several Soviet-era military bases and modernized its naval capabilities, now operating seven nuclear-powered icebreakers alongside around 30 diesel-powered vessels. In contrast, the US and China each operate only two diesel-powered icebreakers. NATO has also

intensified military exercises in the Barents Sea and Scandinavian regions.

China views the Arctic as a vital source for energy and minerals, while India hopes for a collaborative regional approach rather than conflict. Nonetheless, the intensifying global competition between the US, Russia, and China is already manifesting significant consequences.

While the US holds the title of global superpower, Russia has emerged as the preeminent power in the Arctic. With strong ties to Russia and a recent order for four icebreakers, India is well-positioned to play a relevant role in Arctic affairs. India must remain actively engaged and ensure its foothold in the Arctic, as its interests extend far beyond mere observation.

**Air Marshal Anil Chopra (Retired)**, an Indian Air Force veteran fighter test pilot and is the former Director-General of the Center for Air Power Studies in New Delhi.

*(This article first appeared on the RT News portal.)*

## Politics, Culture, Economy & More

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# The RUSSIAN ECONOMY

Remains Putin's

# GREATEST WEAKNESS



*Harsher Sanctions  
Could Push Him  
to Negotiate With  
Ukraine*



**Theodore Bunzel  
&  
Elina Ribakova**

In 1762, during the Seven Years' War, the situation looked dire for Frederick the Great of Prussia. The tsarist Russian army, having exhausted the Prussians, was on the march and threatening Berlin. But then the unthinkable happened: Empress Elizabeth of Russia died, and her Prussophile successor, Emperor Peter III, abruptly halted the Russian army and sued for peace, even lending Russian troops to Frederick. What Frederick called the Miracle of the House of Brandenburg remains a stark example of how political change and a new leader's personal sympathies can suddenly upend an international conflict.

Donald Trump's decisive victory in the U.S. presidential election may not amount

to a Miracle of the House of Putin, but it does give the Kremlin a boost in its war against Ukraine. Trump is skeptical of U.S. support for Kyiv and has promised to bring the fighting to an end. His pledge to resolve the conflict "in 24 hours" may sound like braggadocio, but it reflects a growing consensus in Washington that favors a negotiated solution.

But unlike Prussia in 1762, Russia today isn't on the ropes; in fact, its army has been gaining ground. Moscow believes that it has momentum on its side and isn't ready to compromise. Kyiv, meanwhile, remains in the fight and is in no mood for capitulation. Turning Trump's eagerness to end the war into a stable settlement will therefore require the West to first ramp up pressure



on Moscow in order to gain leverage at the negotiating table. Otherwise, a rushed cease-fire on terms highly favorable to Russia could simply become a brief pause before the Kremlin reaches for more.

Fortunately for the West, Russia has a critical vulnerability: its economy. Many observers have accepted the lazy narrative that the sanctions imposed on Moscow at the start of the war didn't work, and that its economy is humming along. In fact, sanctions inflicted significant damage and reduced the Kremlin's room for policy maneuver, and now Russia's economy is dangerously distorted as the costs of the conflict pile up. The labor supply is shrinking as hundreds of thousands of Russian men are killed or injured on the battlefield—Russia suffered 1,500 casualties a day in October. Defense spending is eating up the budget. And if Moscow's energy

revenues—the lifeblood of the Russian economy—and its imports of Western-made dual-use goods slow significantly, it may face an economic and military crisis. Tightening the sanctions noose would make Moscow's colossal war effort less financially sustainable, and with the prospect of a sputtering war machine and domestic discontent over deteriorating economic conditions, Putin may feel pressure to accept terms more favorable to Ukraine.

Washington and its European partners can act immediately, taking advantage of the remaining weeks of U.S. President Joe Biden's administration to pressure Russia's access to both energy revenue and technology imports. Now that oil prices and inflation rates are dropping in the United States and Europe, Western governments should be more willing to disrupt Russian energy flows

than they were in 2022. And when Trump takes office, his administration should welcome these efforts, and even build on them. Doing so would strengthen Trump's hand in Russian-Ukrainian negotiations, benefit American energy companies, and secure political concessions from Europe—all outcomes that Trump can claim as wins.

### CRACKS IN THE FOUNDATION

After Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, optimism that Western sanctions would paralyze the Russian economy was through the roof. The EU, along with the United States and other countries, instituted sweeping financial restrictions on Russia, including sanctions on Moscow's central bank and far-reaching export controls. It was an impressive effort, and Biden declared that sanctions would ultimately turn the ruble "to rubble."

Yet the Russian economy grew by 3.6 percent in 2023 and is projected to grow at the same rate in 2024. Moscow's current account surplus—the value of its exports minus imports—will likely exceed \$60 billion in 2024, up from \$50 billion in 2023. Elevated oil revenues have kept its budget deficit manageable. Russia also has found ways to source Western technology for its military through third countries and to redirect much of its lost trade from Europe to China and India.

But these topline figures mask underlying economic weaknesses, exacerbated by Western sanctions. Inflation in Russia is above eight percent as the economy overheats due to heavy wartime spending and a dwindling labor supply, forcing the central bank to raise interest rates to more than 20 percent. Driving this inflation is nominal wage growth, which is expected to reach 17 percent. The unemployment rate hovers around two percent—a mind-bogglingly low number that, together with wage growth and the army's hefty sign-up bonuses, indicates extreme competition over scarce labor. At the end of November, the ruble crashed to its lowest point in two years, a consequence of climbing

inflation and diminishing inflows of hard currency—from \$34 billion in March 2022 to \$2 billion in September 2024—due to financial sanctions.

Russia's budget is also under strain. The Kremlin is raising defense spending by 25 percent in 2025, to an equivalent of more than six percent of GDP; by comparison, the U.S. defense budget is less than three percent of GDP. Defense now represents a third of Russia's state budget and more than double its spending on social services. Last year, Moscow had planned to decrease defense spending by 21 percent in 2025. The reversal suggests that Russia is under more military pressure than it anticipated.

### PRESSURE POINTS

Among these economic problems are specific vulnerabilities that the West can exploit. Energy is one: oil and gas exports account for roughly a third of government revenue, and the revenues are plugging Russia's budget gap and propping up the economy. Russia has been able to work around the oil price cap imposed by G-7 countries in late 2022, reducing the difference between Russian oil prices and global crude oil prices from \$30 per barrel to \$10 per barrel. Today, Russia earns \$60 to \$70 per barrel of oil it sells. If those revenues were pushed down to \$40 to \$50 per barrel, that could tip the economy into crisis.

Russia's steady stream of energy revenue is largely a result of the West's choices. In 2022, global oil prices soared to over \$100 per barrel and U.S. inflation peaked at over nine percent. Washington and its European partners exempted energy from their financial sanctions on Russia out of a fear that disrupting Russia's crude oil exports would raise global prices and harm their own economies. This fear was also front of mind when the G-7 constructed its oil price cap. Rather than trying to restrict Russian exports, the price cap used a complicated and leaky scheme to try to force Russia's oil prices lower without reducing its supply to global markets. It relied on Western dominance of shipping insurance

and financing to force Russian exporters using those services to sell below the cap. This worked for a few months, but as Russia built up a shadow fleet of tankers that avoided Western services, it was able to skirt the cap.

Russia's economy is dangerously distorted as the costs of the conflict pile up. There is less need for Western restraint today. Inflation in the United States and the eurozone has fallen to nearly two percent, and oil markets are looser: supply growth is outstripping softening global demand, sending prices lower. Oil is trading near \$70 per barrel, and the price could drop further still if Trump follows through on his promises to unshackle U.S. energy production. If more aggressive Western sanctions cause Russian crude oil exports to decrease by, say, one million barrels per day—around one-fifth of Russia's current exports—it wouldn't spell global economic catastrophe, as it could have in 2022. And given Russia's low cost of production and desperate need for energy revenue to feed its war machine, Moscow is unlikely to withhold oil exports simply to retaliate against the West.

Russia's dependence on Western technology for its weapons systems is another important soft spot. According to a January 2024 study by the Yermak-McFaul International Working Group on Russian Sanctions and the KSE Institute at the Kyiv School of Economics, 95 percent of all foreign components found in Russian weapons on the battlefield in Ukraine came from Western countries. Components from U.S.-based companies alone accounted for 72

percent. Restricted goods flow to Russia by way of intermediaries, primarily in China and Hong Kong. With stronger enforcement of Western export controls, Russia would be forced to undertake a costly reorientation of its military supply chains to incorporate inferior Chinese technology and components, causing disruptions and shortages in the supply of weapons to the frontline.

#### FIRST STEPS



*Russia's low cost of production and desperate need for energy revenue to feed its war machine, Moscow is unlikely to withhold oil exports simply to retaliate against the West.*

The Biden administration still has time to ramp up the pressure on Russia, starting with steps that target Russian energy revenues. In recent months, more than 90 percent of Russian crude oil exports have been transported to China and India via a shadow fleet of more than 400 tankers. The fleet does not include Western ships or use Western oil spill insurance and therefore is not subjected to the oil price cap. The Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) could take this fleet offline by sanctioning individual ships, as it already has with 53 oil tankers. Any entity interacting with a sanctioned ship risks U.S. secondary sanctions, which has proved to be a powerful deterrent. Together, the United States, the United Kingdom, and the European Union have sanctioned 118 tankers, and officials have enough information on the rest to take quick action. Once these measures force more Russian barrels back under the price cap, Western governments can tighten the restrictions even further by lowering the cap from the current \$60 per barrel to around \$40 per barrel. They can also address rampant attestation fraud by providing

whitelisting criteria that would invite legitimate companies, which would be more likely to comply with the cap, back into the Russian oil trade.

The United States and its allies can also move quickly to stanch the flow of Western dual-use goods and machinery into Russia, where they are used to equip the Russian military. Until now, the sanctions coalition refrained from using secondary sanctions to target intermediaries that channel these goods into Russia, allowing evasion networks to grow in Central Asia, East Asia, and the Middle East. That restraint should end. The West should apply sanctions to distributors in countries such as China, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates—including those that falsely pose as end users of Western products but then sell the goods onward to Iran, North Korea, or Russia.

Export control compliance needs to be strengthened, too. Western technology companies currently conduct minimal checks on their customers and distributors and lack the capabilities to impose rigorous know-your-customer rules similar to those that financial institutions enforce. The Biden administration should take quick regulatory action to raise standards for mandatory corporate due diligence for dual-use technology sales in places such as China, ramp up Commerce Department investigations of export control evasion, and threaten significant fines for violations.

Finally, the Biden administration can do more to ensure that Russia pays for the damage it has done to Ukraine. As part of the July 2024 Rebuilding Economic Prosperity and Opportunity for Ukrainians Act, OFAC now requires that financial institutions report Russian sovereign assets in the United States' jurisdiction, and the president is obligated to submit a report to Congress on the findings. Publicizing this information might reveal that the United States holds more of these assets than is currently believed, which it could then leverage either as bargaining power with Russia or as aid for Ukraine.

*Europe has its own ways to apply economic pressure on Russia, even if Trump decides to go easy on Putin.*

Applying these accountability measures would also encourage other Western countries to do the same.

#### EUROPE'S CARDS

Europe has its own ways to apply economic pressure on Russia, even if Trump decides to go easy on Putin. The EU and the United Kingdom can identify and sanction new Russian shadow tankers on their own, for example, to keep the oil price cap enforced. Europe also has a geographic card to play. Russia's crude exports from its Baltic coast travel through the Danish straits, and its Black Sea exports through the Strait of Gibraltar. These ships often pass without inspection or adequate oil spill insurance. With sufficient political will and a big enough coalition, coastal countries including Denmark, Spain, and the United Kingdom, potentially with NATO support, could inspect the tankers and check that their insurance meets International Maritime Organization requirements. This would force Russia to use higher-quality Western insurance and tankers for its oil exports, which would be available only if it sold below the price cap.

Russia's gas sector is vulnerable, as well. The state-controlled energy company Gazprom, once Russia's crown jewel, posted a staggering \$7.3 billion loss in 2023 as it struggled to replace European pipeline exports, which dropped from 154 billion cubic meters in 2021 to 27 billion in 2023. The EU should move to ban Russian liquefied natural gas, which still accounts for 20 percent of its imports.

# A HEARTFELT ENCOUNTER WITH THE MAN OF MUSIC



*Deepti had grown up watching his masterpieces like Shree 420 and Jagte Raho. She was just a child when she first saw Jagte Raho, a film that moved her deeply with its portrayal of human greed and compassion.*

In the early 1970s, a young Deepti Naval found herself far from home, pursuing her studies at New York's Hunter College. To stay connected with her roots, she hosted a radio show called Rang Mahal, where she played the old, melodious Hindi songs she adored. The show became a lifeline for the small Indian community in New York, a reminder of home in a foreign land.

Deepti's dream was to bring Indian celebrities visiting New York onto her show, and her first guest was none other than the legendary Sunil Dutt. Nervous and unsure, Deepti recalls how the kind-hearted Dutt sahab sensed her jitters, took the microphone, and turned the interview into a warm conversation about life, gently guiding her through the moment. That kindness left an indelible mark on her heart.

By the time Raj Kapoor visited New York, Deepti had gained confidence. A die-hard fan of the iconic filmmaker, she had grown up watching his masterpieces like Shree 420 and Jagte Raho. She was just a child when she first saw Jagte Raho, a film that moved her deeply with its portrayal of human greed and compassion. The music of the film, especially Mukesh's haunting "Zindagi khwab hai," stayed with her through the years.

Meeting Raj Kapoor felt like a dream come true for Deepti. The man whose films had shaped her understanding of Indian values was now sitting across from her, sharing stories. It was more than an interview—it was a moment of connection, a meeting of hearts through music and cinema, leaving Deepti forever touched by the warmth and humility of the 'Man of Music'

## SHARMILA TAGORE'S BOLD JOURNEY FROM 'BAD GIRL' TO RESPECTED ICON

Sharmila Tagore, the trailblazing star, opened up about being labeled a "bad girl" for defying societal norms as an independent woman in the film industry. Recalling how mud was literally flung at her by a mob, she said, "I became a social suspect." In an era where male actors were revered and women were judged, Sharmila faced harsh criticism for simply being herself. However, public perception changed dramatically after her marriage to Mansoor Ali Khan Pataudi and even more when she became a mother, transforming her from a rebel to a respected figure.



### Nayanthara Spills

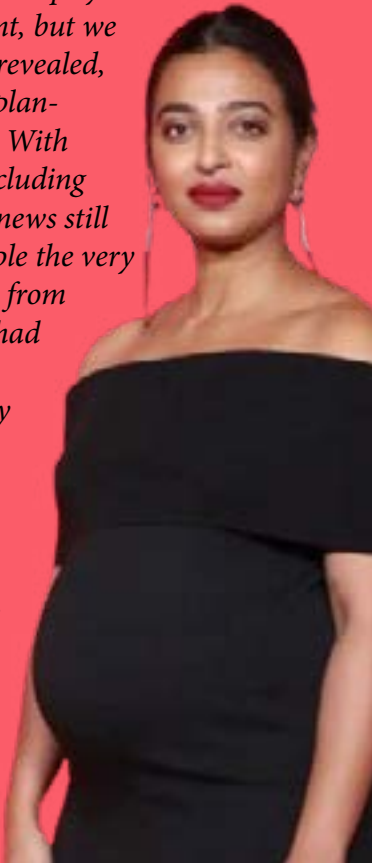
## IGNORANCE HELPED ME FACE RAJINIKANTH!

**N**ayanthara, reflecting on her dream debut in South Indian cinema, revealed how she unknowingly stepped into stardom alongside legends like Rajinikanth, Mammooty, and Mohanlal. "I had no idea what I was doing," she admitted, confessing that her ignorance of Rajini's megastar status actually worked in her favor during their first scene together in Chandramukhi. Surrounded by giants from the start, Nayanthara shared how being unaware of their massive fame kept her calm, allowing her to grow under the guidance of top-tier filmmakers. Quite the unexpected secret to her fearless rise!



## RADHIKA APTE'S PREGNANCY SURPRISE: NOT AN ACCIDENT, BUT STILL A SHOCK!

Radhika Apte's pregnancy story is as spicy as it is surprising. "It wasn't an accident, but we weren't exactly trying either," she revealed, admitting that even a self-aware planner like her was caught off guard. With her life seemingly mapped out, including tracking ovulation like a pro, the news still shocked her. "I started telling people the very next day," she laughed over Zoom from London. The star of *Andhadhun* had the glow of someone who, despite the surprises, remained effortlessly cool—nausea, bloating, and all. As we shared our horror stories of pregnancy, I couldn't help but admire how Radhika, in her cozy brown sweater and casual charm, had mastered the art of handling chaos with grace.



## SONAKSHI SINHA BLASTS AGEIST ACTOR!

Sonakshi Sinha didn't hold back in a recent roundtable, revealing that a much older male actor rejected her because she "looked older" than him! While romancing women 30 years younger is no problem for him, Sonakshi pointed out the double standard: "They don't get age-shamed, don't face scrutiny for their looks, bellies, or thinning hair. Women, as always, take the heat." She's glad she dodged working with the star, making it clear that she's not interested in such hypocrisy.

## SALMAN KHAN'S 10-SECOND 'YES' FOR BABY JOHN CAMEO STUNS ATLEE!

When Atlee casually floated the idea of a Salman Khan cameo in Varun Dhawan's *Baby John*, he didn't expect it to be locked in less than 10 seconds! No scripts, no scene details—just a quick "Done!" from Salman. The superstar even arrived 30 minutes early for the shoot! Atlee admitted he was "shocked" by the speed of it all, but Salman's effortless entry will surely pack a punch in the film's finale. Fans can expect a "solid mass scene" as Salman delivers his signature magic.





# SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY

# 2025

## DAWN OF A NEW ERA



Sanjay Srivastava

The year 2025 holds immense potential for science and technology and is anticipated to be a landmark year, offering global recognition to India in this field. Domestically, too, numerous milestones and achievements will be set, with several more within reach. It will be a year of assessment, progress evaluation, and preparation for future goals in science and technology. In particular, fields such as artificial intelligence, robotics, blockchain, semiconductor technology, micro-electronics, digitalization, space, defense, renewable energy, and data science will dominate the news.

One of the significant events in India will be the Kumbh Mela, held between January 13 and February 26, 2025. This largest gathering in the world will be heavily

monitored using cutting-edge technologies like AI, GPS, and live streaming. Surveillance technology will be employed to monitor real-time activities, including cleanliness in toilets, live broadcasts of religious events, and 3D mapping of the entire event. Mobile apps will be used to ensure seamless communication between the administration and attendees, offering a blend of spirituality and technological advancement in Prayagraj.

In early 2025, the India Science Festival will be held in Pune's Ferguson College on January 11-12. This event aims to promote scientific awareness and curiosity among all age groups. Scientists, policymakers, industrialists, and government officials will come together to foster a scientific temper. The festival's success will be an indicator of the nation's scientific ecosystem.

India is currently home to numerous innovators across technological sectors, and 2025 promises significant advancements in tech innovation. In 2014, technology accounted for 5% of India's GDP, which grew to 10% in 2022. The government's target is to raise it to 20% by 2025-26. With the GDP expected to reach \$5 trillion by 2025, the technology sector's contribution could hit \$1 trillion. While ambitious, this goal is not entirely unrealistic, given the sector's annual growth rate of around 8%.

India is expected to be at the forefront of artificial intelligence (AI) development among G20 nations, with AI contributing \$500 billion to India's GDP by 2025. The country's AI market is growing at a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 35%. With projections for the AI market to reach \$17 billion by 2027, the 2025 target appears achievable.



Generative AI alone is expected to grow at an annual rate of 28%, and by 2030, it could contribute \$400 billion to the Indian economy.

Data science will also emerge as a critical sector in 2025, with applications spanning defense, healthcare, insurance, logistics, and education. The country invested \$60 billion in this sector last year, with projections of an \$80 billion investment in 2025, driven by expanding digital infrastructure. Major cities such as Mumbai, Chennai, Delhi-NCR, and Bengaluru will emerge as hubs for data centers. Robotics, AI, and data science will bring about remarkable advancements, and the electronic manufacturing services industry could exceed \$125 billion by 2025 with a CAGR of 20%. Cloud architect design and web application development will see increased demand.

India's 5G user base, currently at 250 million, is expected to reach 300 million by March 2025. While 5G penetration may not yet be universal, this growth will drive average data consumption per customer from 20GB to 30GB per month.

The Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) will remain in the spotlight in 2025, launching satellites for the Indian Army, Navy, and Railways, along with the Gaganyaan mission. ISRO plans to launch the NISAR satellite, developed in collaboration with NASA, in March 2025. Despite previous delays, this mission will be a significant accomplishment in the global space arena. Additionally, ISRO plans to execute a lunar flyby as part of the Gaganyaan mission, aiming to send astronauts into low Earth orbit and return them safely. ISRO will also focus on the Chandrayaan-4 mission, aiming to bring samples from the moon.

By the end of 2025, India's space economy is expected to reach \$13 billion, fueled by growing demand for startups and small satellite launches.

India's Deep Ocean Mission, spearheaded by the Ministry of Earth Sciences, is set to send a manned mission 6,000 meters deep into the Indian Ocean in 2025. This mission will be a significant achievement in deep-sea exploration.

On the education front, 55% of Indian graduates will be eligible for global employment by 2025, with engineering and science graduates leading the charge. Maharashtra, Karnataka, and Delhi will become key talent hubs. As new technologies develop, especially those based on fundamental science, the country will see an increase in innovation-driven jobs.

However, with the rapid rise of AI and automation, there is concern that human jobs will be displaced by machines. According to the World Economic Forum, this could lead to a 16-19% reduction in the workforce by 2025, posing a significant challenge for India. Unemployment could become a pressing issue this year.

A major concern in 2025 will be the rise of deepfakes and disinformation, facilitated by generative AI. These technologies could be used to manipulate public perception, spread falsehoods, and incite hatred and fear. Without a corresponding increase in scientific awareness and rational thinking, these developments could overshadow the advancements in science and technology. Thus, while 2025 holds great promise, it will also demand vigilance and responsibility to ensure that technological progress is not misused for malicious purposes.

Shubh Navratras



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