



THE CHEETAH
QUESTIONS

**DIVIDED
TRUMP HOUSE**
SHARP RIFT IN US
ADMINISTRATION
OVER INDIA



DHAKA'S MANY
MASTERS

VOL. 01, NO. 2 AUGUST 2025, NEW DELHI ₹50

NEW DELHI POST



THE NEW HAWALA

Cryptocurrency boom in India morphs into a borderless engine for laundering

FEARLESS

AUTHENTIC

UNCOMPROMISED

NEW DELHI
POST

Many congratulations on this purposeful and bold new beginning. *New Delhi Post* sets out to reclaim journalistic integrity in an increasingly noisy (and often compromised) media space. I was particularly struck by K. Ashish's investigative depth in the Dream11 story, which signals a strong commitment to the core values of journalism.

A few reflections: the publication stands out for its sharp analysis, credible contributor base, and distinctly pan-South Asian outlook. With voices like G Parthasarathy, C Uday Bhaskar, Vinod Sharma, Paranjy Guha Thakurta and others, *New Delhi Post* brings both gravitas and editorial clarity. It distinguishes itself from more partisan platforms such as *The Wire* or *Swarajya*, and even from commentary-led outlets like *The Print* or *Scroll*. The geopolitical and security coverage, in particular, is grounded, relevant, and refreshingly unsensational. I look forward to many more impactful editions ahead with bold, independent voice.

Rakesh K. Chitkara

Public policy professional, Dubai

Heartiest congratulations on the launch of *New Delhi Post*. The inaugural issue is a refreshing reminder of what fearless, responsible journalism looks like—sharp, uncompromising, and deeply relevant. The investigative stories on Dream11 and the questions around offshore funding, as well as the incisive piece on Adani's legal pursuits, show remarkable courage and clarity. At a time when much of the media landscape appears either muted or compromised, *New Delhi Post* stands out for its integrity and commitment to holding power accountable. This is exactly the kind of journalism



NEW DELHI POST has begun its journey with a resounding buzz—thanks to you. Our readers have flooded us with congratulatory messages and warm wishes, and we are truly grateful for your unflinching support.

India needs—bold, evidence-based, and unafraid to dig deeper. The tone, presentation, and editorial sharpness reflect the credibility and experience you bring to the table. I am certain *New Delhi Post* will become a vital voice in India's journalistic ecosystem.

Deepak Sharma

Journalist, New Delhi

Heartiest congratulations. Kudos to the excellent team of *New Delhi Post* for initiating a magazine with a difference—and the difference is obvious from the outset: the political cartoon, thought to have become extinct in this country. The articles are top-notch and well-researched, especially the cover story on Dream11.

Jas Kohli

Author and doctor, Ludhiana

The magazine is rich in both content and design. You have an excellent team of contributors. The major challenge for such serious publications is to develop a self-sustaining revenue model. I hope you have addressed that. Excellent initiative. My best wishes.

Prof Subhash Dhuliya

Academician, New Delhi

Congratulations. The magazine is quite good. The cover story was comprehensive and well-documented. As an inaugural edition, it stands out. Keep up the momentum and sustain it. *New Delhi Post* has the potential to give *India Today* a run for its money. The contributors are experienced domain veterans. The political pieces by Vinod Sharma and Gautam Lahiri are excellent. A little more regional news—both political and apolitical—would be appreciated.

Key Benedict

Journalist, Bangalore

The editorial was the very definition of what a robust, independent publication should be. It was so well written—it was rousing. After a very long time, one felt optimistic about journalism! I hope the magazine can live up to the promise in the editorial. Deepam Chatterjee's piece 'Immortality Inc.' was a pleasant surprise—an author reporting from the frontiers of science! A good, informative read. Though on immortality, I personally believe that every *pravritti* will have its *nivritti*.

Yogesh Sharma

Publisher, Zen Publishing House

The magazine has come out really well. My observation: there are two articles on Bangladesh, two on Nepal, and one on the US. Too many things are happening, and the issue could have covered other developments. For example, there is nothing on China.

Prof Chintamani Mahapatra

Academician, New Delhi

I have gone through it from the first page to the last. One can clearly see a new look in news, and impartiality is boldly visible. Headlines and presentation have a fresh flavour. Once again, congratulations.

Prof T. V. Kattimani

Academician, Andhra Pradesh

My first impression is that it is of a very high standard. The articles are also very interesting and easy to read.

Shradhanand Sital,

Rights activist, The Netherlands

Reminds me of 1975 or so when *India Today* was launched. Set some space aside for NRIs / India's diaspora, if you can.

Siddhartha Mukherjee

USA

Excellent magazine. I liked it, but try to make it wholesome too: book reviews, movie notes, film stars or underdogs... just 100 words or so with a photo.

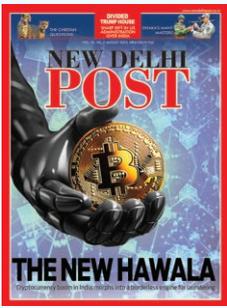
Ganapathi Reddy

Journalist and academician, Sweden

Read the story on Dream11. Explosive stuff. To the point—and it makes one think: where are we headed with the sport that is worshipped in our nation?

Anil Thomas

Journalist, New Delhi



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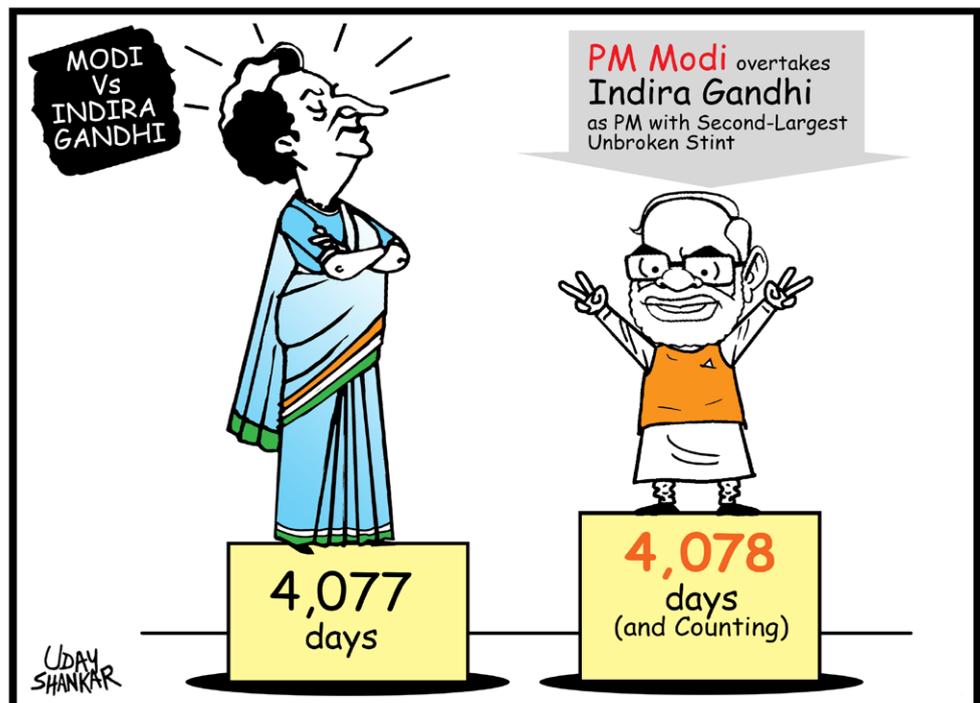
FLAGSHIP STORY



THE NEW HAWALA **08**

POLITICALLY (IN)CORRECT

By Udayshankar



NEW DELHI POST

Because the Truth Must Be Told

India's Other Partition

Seventy-eight years after the wounds of 1947, India faces a quieter partition—not of land, but of the mind. If Independence split territory, the division of 2025 cleaves through consciousness. Two nations exist within one border: one virtual, upwardly mobile, wired to global markets; the other tethered to broken institutions, chronic scarcity, and everyday indignity.

This is no metaphor. One India binge-buys on Zomato and speculates in crypto; the other queues for subsidised grain, excluded from algorithms. One tweets policy opinions and decodes stock trends; the other fears bulldozers, caste slurs, and vanishing jobs. Both share a country, but not the future.

The digital revolution was meant to flatten divides; instead, it deepened them. A child in Bengaluru codes AI while a student in Bihar lacks a toilet in school. State's grand narratives—Viksit Bharat, Make in India—ring hollow to those barely making ends meet. We are a \$4 trillion economy with a medieval hunger index. We launch lunar missions while manual scavengers die in sewage pits. This is not progress—it is schizophrenia.

The tragedy is not disparity alone, but our numbness to it. We no longer see or believe in the other's reality. Where empathy dies, democracy decays. Elite India treats the rest as electoral fodder or statistical residue. Rural, informal India is growing restive, cynical, and disillusioned.

This cognitive partition corrodes more than any border. It undermines democracy. India cannot be both a start-up hub and a starvation zone without consequence. We must confront our internal apartheid: craft policies for dignity; ensure growth is inclusive, not illusory; and listen to the silences and margins we ignore.

No republic thrives when half its soul is missing. This is the only partition we can still undo. ■

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SAID UNSAID

“
Some 'boss' is
jealous, unable
to accept India's
growth; trying to
disrupt the country's
economy
”

Rajnath Singh
Defence Minister of India

(in a veiled attack on the US
President Donald Trump for
unleashing a tariff war)





RETIREMENT RUMBLES

September promises to be a month of political candles and cryptic whispers. RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat turns 75 on the 11th, pipping Narendra Modi to the milestone by six days. The PM had long enshrined 75 as the BJP's unofficial retirement age. But will he bow out? Don't bet your shirts on it. Party insiders murmur: the "rule" was never meant for Pradhan Sewak himself. Still, Bhagwat stirred the saffron pot with a subtle dig: leaders over 75 should make way for the young. A gentle nudge? A tactical teaser? Delhi's buzzing. Some suggest Bhagwat may be preparing his own exit—others say it's a pressure play to reinstate RSS favourite Sanjay Joshi as BJP chief—a move that would rattle many a camp in Lutyens' Delhi. Whatever the intent, one thing's certain: September won't be quiet. As one elder hints at departure, the other tightens his grip. Retirement, it seems, is a rule for everyone else. Watch this space.

FROM CRITIC TO COURTER

From fire to fondness—what a turnaround! Rahul Gandhi, the perpetually aggrieved Leader of the Opposition, has long accused TV channels of giving the Opposition short shrift. At a recent OBC Cell event at Delhi's Talkatora Stadium, he lashed out at media again, decrying what he calls the Fourth Estate's cosy bias towards the ruling party. Yet, just hours later, nearly 20 journalists covering Parliament received a surprise call from his office: would they join him for an informal evening chat? Curiosity won. Most turned up—only to be greeted by a beaming Rahul and Priyanka Gandhi Vadra. The warmth was palpable; the chat strictly off the record. With Bihar elections looming, the Gandhis appear to have discovered the charm of the very cameras they love to berate. Insiders say such informal huddles could soon become a habit. For the media, it's a rare invitation they are unlikely to decline.



MANGOES AND MOTIVES

West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee is serving diplomacy with a twist of sweetness—and this time, it’s not for Sheikh Hasina. The Chief Adviser of Bangladesh’s interim government, Muhammad Yunus, recently sent mangoes across the border—not to Delhi, but Kolkata. A juicy overture? Maybe. But here’s the real pulp: Mamata had already sent mangoes—both to Yunus and his rival, BNP leader Begum Khaleda Zia. Hasina, once a regular recipient of Bengal’s finest Alphonsons, got nothing—not even a lychee. With the Bengal Assembly elections on the horizon, Mamata’s mango diplomacy may be more than just seasonal sweetness. A tilt towards Dhaka’s new power brokers? A nudge to Delhi? Or a clever way to remind voters that she’s got her foreign policy, and fruits in order? Whatever the reason, Mamata’s mangoes are making more than mouths water.



RAJE’S POWER IN BLOOM?

When former Rajasthan Chief Minister Vasundhara Raje Scindia turned up in Parliament with a bright yellow bouquet for Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the power corridors of Lutyens’ Delhi lit up like a switchboard. The two met after months of political radio silence, setting off a flurry of speculation: Is something brewing? Raje, a BJP vice-president, Jat heavyweight,

and erstwhile royal, dropped in on the PM mid-Parliament session. Not exactly a casual pop-in, especially given the timing. The Vice-President’s chair is currently vacant following Jagdeep Dhankhar’s resignation, and the Constitution doesn’t fancy an empty seat for too long. The

Election Commission has already cranked the gears for the VP poll, returning officers and all. So, is the yellow bouquet just a floral courtesy or a harbinger of a saffron re-ascendancy? The PM greeted her with a smile; she expressed gratitude. Make of that what you will—Delhi certainly is.



SOHRAI GOES TO RAISINA

Forget champagne flutes and gallery snobs—Rashtrapati Bhavan just hosted a mud-splashed, pigment-soaked affair,

and it was glorious. President Droupadi Murmu, with her trademark quiet rebellion, has ushered in a new kind of pageantry: tribal women artists from Jharkhand, Odisha, and Bengal turning the palace into a living canvas. The Kala Utsav 2025 ‘Artists in Residence’ spotlighted Sohrai art—an Adivasi harvest tradition with cows, peacocks, and hypnotic patterns daubed in earth pigments and memory. These women swapped their mud walls for marble, their bamboo brushes for a brush with history. “We never thought we’d sleep in the Rashtrapati Bhavan,” said one artist, awe-struck beneath chandeliers. Madam Murmu, no stranger to such roots, looked utterly in her element. No museum glass, no staged speeches—just raw, rooted art shaking the corridors of power.



Gautam Lahiri is a Delhi-based veteran journalist. Currently he is the president, Press Club of India

Cartoon: Udayshankar



FLAGSHIP STORY

THE NEW HAWWALA

As billions flow unchecked through shadowy exchanges and offshore wallets, cryptocurrency in India is now fuelling terror, corruption, and a new age of untraceable laundering

In the glittering corridors of digital finance, where blockchain ambition collides with regulatory apathy, cryptocurrency has given birth to a monster. What was once hailed as the harbinger of financial inclusion has mutated into the financial underworld's most potent weapon — an unregulated, borderless engine for laundering black money, financing terrorism, and fuelling a sprawling shadow economy.

In India, the dream of a decentralised currency has become a nightmare of decentralised crime. From Chinese loan apps to Dubai-based hawala syndicates, from terror operatives in Kashmir to politicians in Delhi, India's crypto story has become the world's newest laundromat — coded in anonymity, shielded by regulatory gaps, and driven by governmental indifference.

With estimates suggesting over 2 crore crypto users, India has quietly emerged as one of the largest global hubs for illicit crypto activity. According to the Financial Intelligence Unit (FIU), a significant portion of these dealings — estimated at over ₹20,000 crore annually — bypasses formal regulation.

Blockchain analytics firm Chainalysis ranked India among the top five nations for suspicious crypto flows, estimating more than \$3.8 billion in tainted transactions between 2021 and 2023.

This staggering growth has unfolded alongside a vacuum in oversight. The regulatory mechanisms meant to govern digital assets have been so inadequate that criminals, syndicates, and even foreign state proxies now exploit the system with impunity.

At the heart of India's crypto crisis lies a complex choreography of laundering that begins with the injection of illicit cash from betting rackets, cyber fraud, hawala networks, or terror funding cells. The money enters the ecosystem via loosely regulated exchanges, shadowy brokers, or anonymous peer-to-peer platforms. From there, it is swiftly obfuscated — run through mixing services, split across dozens of wallets, swapped between coins, and converted into untraceable assets like Monero or Zcash.

In under a minute, a single transaction can bounce through five countries and vanish behind decentralised curtains. By the time enforcement agencies respond, the trail is already cold.



CRYPTO LAUNDERING: HOW IT WORKS

1 PLACEMENT

- ▶ Dirty cash from scams, drugs, betting, extortion comes into system
- ▶ Pumped into shell firms via mule accounts

2 OBFUSCATION

- ▶ Dirty cash converted to crypto (USDT, BTC, ETH)
- ▶ Via unregulated P2P or non-KYC exchanges
- ▶ Washed through mixers and layered wallets

3 CONVERSION AND INTEGRATION

- ▶ Moved to Dubai, Hong Kong, Singapore, Nigeria
- ▶ Withdrawn as cash, or funnelled into real estate, gold, fake invoices
- ▶ Re-entered India via hawala or shady trade deals



EMERGING TRENDS

DEFI LOOPHOLES

- Flash loans, liquidity pools being used for fast-track laundering
- ₹500 cr DeFi scam busted in January 2024

GAMING AND NFTs

- Overpriced NFTs, in-game tokens hide dirty money
- India's booming online gaming new laundering playground

NBFCs & REAL ESTATE

- Shell NBFCs, shady builders absorbing "cleaned" crypto
- India's weak NBFC oversight fuelling the boom

wallets.

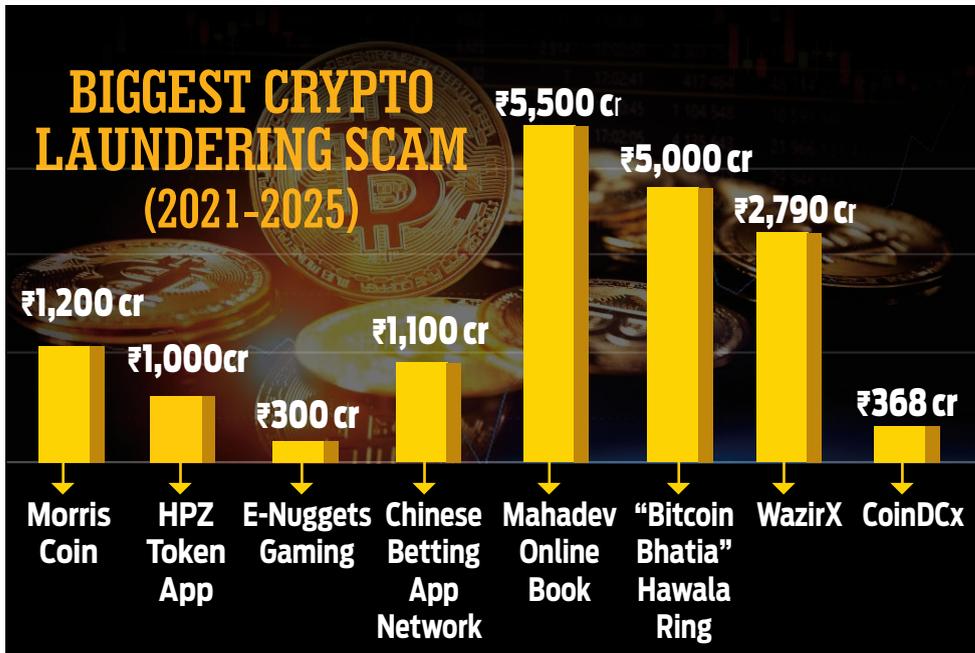
Bhatia, a former Delhi hawala operator, collects cash in Delhi, Mumbai, Ahmedabad, Surat and other cities, converts it into the crypto stablecoin USDT, routes it through decentralised platforms, and integrates it into Dubai's property and gold markets. Enforcement Directorate (ED) officials confirmed that several of these channels were later linked to organisations and individuals under surveillance for separatist financing. "Dubai is no longer just a tax haven — it's a digital crime sanctuary," an ED official noted.

But if Dubai is the vault, China is the backroom architect. Chinese-owned loan apps, operating under Indian guises, have played a central role in crypto-based laundering. Apps such as CashBean, KreditBee, and RupeeGo offered small loans to vulnerable Indians, only to extort repayments through blackmail and threats. Sources revealed that in just six months of 2023, over ₹1,200 crore was laundered through these fronts and routed into Chinese-controlled wallets on exchanges like Binance and OKX.

ED investigations found that a portion of these funds passed through Hong Kong and Shenzhen in China, then on to Kathmandu and Dubai,

Dubai has become India's shadow crypto gateway, and the preferred offshore channel for parking unaccounted wealth. With its financial opacity, tax leniency, and weak regulatory scrutiny, it serves as the destination of choice for black money outflows. The emirate is home to some of the most notorious Indian money laundering syndicates. The most infamous among them, the Rajesh "Bitcoin" Bhatia network, operates out of Jumeirah Lakes Towers in Dubai and is believed to have moved over ₹5,000 crore through an intricate web of shell firms, stablecoins, and offshore

Dubai has become India's shadow crypto gateway, and the preferred offshore channel for parking unaccounted wealth. With its financial opacity, tax leniency, and weak regulatory scrutiny, it serves as the destination of choice for black money outflows



through Dubai, and end in Pakistan—all without the knowledge of a bank.”

India’s crypto exchanges—once seen as beacons of the digital revolution—now face serious allegations of complicity. In 2022, ED froze ₹370 crore in assets linked to WazirX, accusing the exchange of facilitating hawala-like operations. Binance, which previously claimed ownership of WazirX, publicly disavowed it after the scandal broke. A similar episode occurred in 2024, when CoinDCX reported a breach involving ₹368 crore. Though dubbed a ‘hack’, blockchain analysts noted that the siphoned funds were routed via Monero and ZCash — privacy coins favoured by launderers — and that the pattern suggested deliberate internal coordination rather than external intrusion.

eventually reaching conflict zones in Kashmir and the North-east. The China–Kathmandu–Dubai corridor, once infamous for smuggling, is now considered India’s most dangerous crypto route, a source stated.

Crypto has now become the currency of conflict. In July this year, a chilling investigation by the State Investigation Agency (SIA) in Jammu and Kashmir uncovered a terror financing ring using teenagers as digital mules. These youths unknowingly facilitated cross-border terror by transferring money through crypto wallets to handlers across the Line of Control, earning small commissions in return.

In Balrampur, Uttar Pradesh, a similar network was dismantled after ₹8.15 crore was moved to 30 Pakistani bank accounts via Binance using BNB tokens. The money was first received through UPI, converted into crypto, and then sent abroad — a full laundering cycle completed in minutes. The trail led to online propaganda and infiltration logistics linked to extremist groups.

According to a National Investigation Agency (NIA) official: “Crypto wallets don’t carry passports. A transaction can start in Kerala, pass

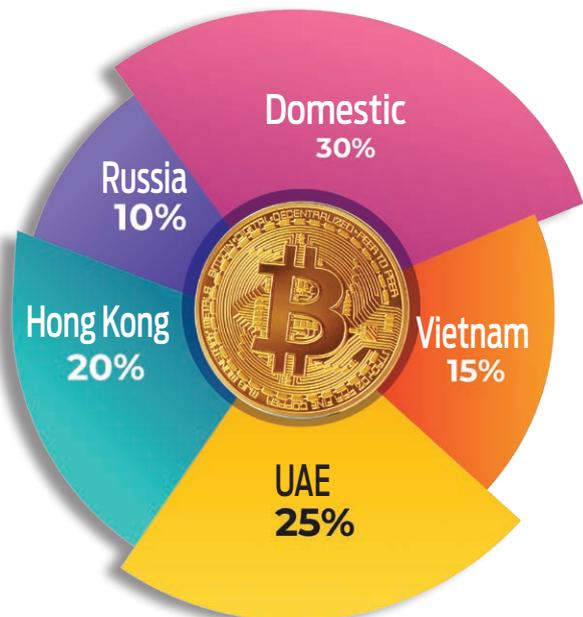
than external intrusion.

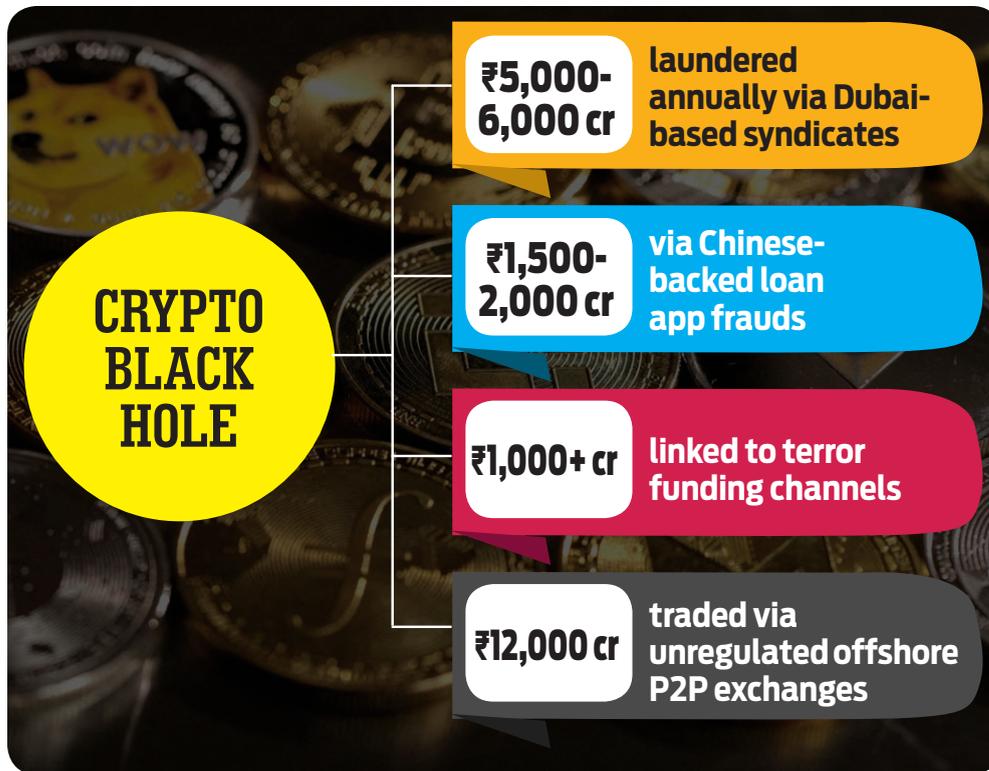
The blame cannot rest with major platforms alone; the broader ecosystem is too deeply complicit. Smaller Indian platforms often act as fiat-to-crypto desks for syndicates. Some operators maintain hundreds of fake KYC accounts — often in the names of rural labourers or deceased individuals — enabling vast, unmonitored laundering networks. As criminals adapt to enforcement efforts, they are venturing into newer, more complex arenas — from decentralised finance (DeFi) protocols

CRYPTO has now become the currency of conflict. In July this year, a chilling investigation by the State Investigation Agency (SIA) in Jammu and Kashmir uncovered a terror financing ring using teenagers as digital mules



CRYPTO LAUNDERING DESTINATION





offering flash loans to gaming tokens and NFTs, which now serve as conduits for layered, anonymous transactions.

Even more alarming is the apparent political cover shielding this criminal ecosystem, sources told *New Delhi Post*. In 2023, a ₹1,000 crore laundering operation in Gujarat was linked to a former MLA's aide. Allegations have also surfaced that political parties are accepting anonymous overseas donations via crypto, evading even the electoral bond framework. Widespread corruption within enforcement agencies continues to cripple institutional accountability. In Punjab, a senior officer was caught accepting bribes to suppress a ₹200 crore crypto probe. Even when large-scale scams such as Morris Coin and Bitconnect come to light, legal proceedings stall, allowing perpetrators, especially those with influence, to slip through the cracks.

This is no longer merely a financial or technological concern, it is a national security emergency. Cryptocurrency is being weaponised to move illicit wealth, fund radicalisation, and bypass the formal economy. India's adversaries understand the power of decentralised finance far better than its regulators. A confidential FIU memo from late 2023 warned that hostile foreign actors are actively exploring

THE blame cannot rest with major platforms alone; the broader ecosystem is too deeply complicit. Smaller Indian platforms often act as fiat-to-crypto desks for syndicates



order, and every political compromise deepens the crisis. ■

cryptocurrency as a tool for economic sabotage, using it to destabilise currency flows, fund insurgency, and launder the proceeds of espionage.

What we are witnessing is not just a technological revolution, but a criminal one. In India, cryptocurrency has become the ultimate equaliser of illegal ambition, Chinese fintech, Dubai's shell corporations, Nepalese smuggling routes, and Pakistani terror cells form an interconnected network of illicit finance. Interpol and the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) have flagged India for falling short of full compliance with global rules on virtual assets.

Despite these warnings, India's regulatory response has been sluggish. It was not until 2023 that virtual assets were formally brought under the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA). Even now, enforcement is inconsistent, with no dedicated legislation governing exchanges, tokens, or wallets. The absence of a unified legal framework — such as the European Union's MiCA law — has left India with fragmented oversight split between the RBI, the finance ministry, and SEBI, none of whom has assumed full authority over digital assets.

This regulatory vacuum is exactly what money launderers exploit. In a rare admission, in 2023, former RBI Governor Shaktikanta Das warned: "Crypto can be a major channel for illegal money flows if not regulated tightly. India is not yet prepared for its full-scale adoption."

Yet amid this alarming reality, crypto continues to flourish. Exchanges process over ₹2,000 crore in daily volume at their peak, with virtually no centralised monitoring. P2P marketplaces operate with minimal oversight. New scams surface every month, while old ones languish unresolved in court. Every delay in legislation, every weak enforcement



Bikash C Paul
is a Delhi-based senior journalist. He is the executive editor, *New Delhi Post*



The author is a former finance secretary of India, and also a writer and thinker

CRYPTO IS NOT EVIL: ADOPT, BEFORE IT IS TOO LATE

THE RBI DID NOT WANT CRYPTOCURRENCIES IN INDIA AS IT FELT THAT CRYPTOCURRENCIES WOULD QUEER THE PITCH FOR ITS CURRENCY AND MONETARY MANAGEMENT

I had my first policy encounter with cryptocurrencies in 2017 when I joined the Ministry of Finance as secretary, Department of Economic Affairs (DEA). A committee led by the special secretary, DEA, had made a villain out of the cryptocurrencies. The RBI was, in any case, issuing press releases for three consecutive years, warning of the dangers of cryptocurrencies.

The committee had suggested a virtual outlawing of cryptocurrencies in India. The innovation of blockchain technology, on the other hand, was the subject of policy and technology discussions the world over. Banning cryptocurrencies outright seemed like throwing the baby of blockchain technology out with the bathwater of cryptocurrencies. I wanted some time to study the matter further. I requested the then Finance Minister, Arun Jaitley, not to accept the committee's recommendations and to constitute another group under my chairmanship to examine

the whole matter afresh and in depth. The finance minister agreed.

The new group, with the participation of the deputy governor, RBI; chairman, SEBI; chairman, CBDT; secretary, MEITY; and a few others, and ably assisted by a technical team of think tank NIPFP, finally resulted in a comprehensive report on the subject and a draft bill. The RBI did not want cryptocurrencies in India as it felt that cryptocurrencies would queer the pitch for its currency and monetary management. While SEBI was not averse to letting in trading in crypto assets, its preference was not to be their regulator. The morphing of Bitcoin from a cryptocurrency to a formidable crypto asset had made the RBI believe that anything crypto is evil. With great difficulty, we came up with the Bill 'Banning of Cryptocurrency and Regulation of Official Digital Currency Bill, 2019'. The Bill's central proposal was for the Government of India and RBI to come up with an official digital rupee to obviate the need for any private cryptocurrencies, which could be banned.

The Bill was neither conceptually sound nor a very well-drafted one. It proposed a complete ban on cryptocurrencies and other associated processes like mining etc. The Bill did not suggest any law or framework for the regulation of trading in crypto assets. The call for an official digital currency showed good intent, but the path was not well thought out. The Bill was placed in the public domain. It met with fierce criticism



In 2023, a meeting of G-20 delegates discussed crypto regulation in New Delhi

THE RBI ACT WAS AMENDED IN 2022 TO ALLOW IT TO ISSUE CENTRAL BANK DIGITAL CURRENCY (CBDC). THE RBI CAME UP WITH A HIGHLY FLAWED CBDC DESIGN WITH TWO DIGITAL RUPEE CLASSES—RETAIL AND WHOLESALE

from the crypto community of tech-savvy youth, mesmerised by the promise of mining Bitcoins and trading in crypto assets.

The government gave notice twice in 2020 to introduce the Bill in Parliament, substantially in the same form recommended by the committee, but could not do so. Later, it junked the Bill and started talking about bringing a paper on the subject. The paper never came out. In between, while presiding over the G-20 Presidency in 2022, India tried to rope in the IMF and others to produce an internationally acceptable regulatory framework for cryptocurrencies. That did not yield much either. The Indian government remains at a crossroads in 2025, as it was in 2020.

The Government of India effectively refused to regulate the cryptocurrency trade. The RBI asked the regulated financial system not to have any truck with cryptocurrency traders and exchanges. As there was no law in the country banning such businesses, the Supreme Court rightly declared that the RBI's dictates were unlawful. The banks began maintaining a passive distance from the cryptocurrency players.

Quite a few cryptocurrency enthusiasts established private cryptocurrency exchanges. Operating in an environment of no regulations and trading in cryptocurrencies launched out-

side India, these exchanges could only build weak security, settlement, and consumer protection protocols and systems. India's second-largest cryptocurrency exchange, WazirX, suffered a hack of about \$230 million, wiping out 45% of the total cryptocurrencies in its custody. Recently, the largest cryptocurrency exchange, CoinDCX, suffered another hack with \$45 million drained out from its liquidity pool assets. Indian cryptocurrency exchanges are functioning with their backs to the wall, in an environment of the highest level of risk.

While the government did not legislate to define crypto assets and regulate them, it did bring virtual digital assets (VDAs)—both blockchain-based cryptocurrencies and centralised database-type digital tokens—within the purview of income tax. A 1% tax deducted at source (TDS) was imposed on the gross value of cryptocurrency traded. In addition, profits from any cryptocurrency trade were taxed at the highest capital gains taxation rate of 30%, without allowing any set-off, including for the loss suffered on another cryptocurrency trade. This harsh treatment forced some cryptocurrency exchanges to move abroad. Most investors also shifted their crypto assets and trading to foreign crypto exchanges. Turnover in Indian cryptocurrency exchanges collapsed. Whatever cryptocurrency assets remained in the exchanges witnessed low trade, susceptible to security risks and hacks.

The RBI Act was amended in 2022 to allow it to issue Central Bank Digital Currency (CBDC). The RBI came up with a highly flawed CBDC design with two digital rupee classes—retail and wholesale. The wholesale CBDC, after being used for the settlement of some sample types of trades in government securities on the RBI's own bond trading platform, has been quietly shut down. No single-rupee-equivalent wholesale CBDC was issued and outstanding as of March 31, 2025. The retail CBDC is also quite moribund. The



RBI's CBDC project is an utter failure

IT IS QUITE LIKELY THAT THE BUSINESS OF STABLECOINS WILL BECOME QUITE MAINSTREAM SOON. INTERNATIONAL TRADE, PAYMENT, AND SETTLEMENT WILL INCREASINGLY SHIFT TO US\$ STABLECOINS, SUBSTITUTING US\$ AND OTHER INTERNATIONAL CURRENCIES

experiment to introduce the digital rupee as CBDC in India has been botched.

With negligible trading in exchanges and no digital CBDC in operation, cryptocurrencies in India stand effectively (though not legally) banned.

Many private entrepreneurs, especially in the US, brought out stablecoins pegged one-to-one with the US dollar—USDT (Tether), Ethena USDe, DAI, and so on. These stablecoins promised efficient international payments at a fraction of normal costs, using blockchain cryptocurrency networks. With different degrees of assurance, the stablecoins also sought to assure the safety of US dollars invested in buying the stablecoins, with US dollar-backed reserves. These stablecoins could establish themselves as a kind of true international currency. The use of these unregulated private stablecoins remained small, though.

The US has now passed the GENIUS Act to legitimise and regulate privately issued stablecoins. The law also sets broad rules to protect dollars invested in regulated stablecoins by requiring regulators to ensure those funds are invested in approved assets. It is quite likely that the business of stablecoins will become quite mainstream soon. International trade, payment, and settlement will increasingly shift to US\$ stablecoins, substituting US\$ and other international currencies. Realising the potential of this new monetary force, China has also initiated the issuance of 'renminbi' stablecoins from Hong Kong. Many countries are following suit, with some adopting trading and payments in US\$-based stablecoins.

The Indian government and RBI have not taken any cognizance of stablecoin development. There does not appear to be any move on their part to allow the issuance of rupee stablecoins. This passivity is unlikely to last very long. Sooner or later, the RBI will be forced to accept the reality of US\$ stablecoins.



US President Donald Trump signed the "GENIUS Act" in Washington, D.C., in July this year

Bitcoin has become a highly valued virtual asset. A Bitcoin trades at more than \$1,00,000 these days. Bitcoin is also increasingly becoming a part of mutual funds and institutional asset bases, including monetary authorities and financial institutions. Many other crypto businesses with a native cryptocurrency—e.g. Ethereum—also exist. These have acquired, and are continuing to acquire, the status of valuable crypto assets.

The US Congress has passed a law, the CLARITY Act, declaring cryptocurrencies as investment commodities. The CFTC has been designated as the regulator. The regulatory system for crypto assets is on the anvil.

The stablecoins are here to stay. Increasingly, more and more international trade, settlement and payments will shift to stablecoins.

Crypto business and assets are also a reality. These assets are now valued at over \$4 trillion, nearly matching the market capitalisation of India's stock market.

Let India shun the fear of the unknown and the new. Creating a legislative framework for recognising the crypto assets and their trading, and also for establishing a regulated ecosystem for the issuance of stablecoins as India's international digital currency needs to be taken up as a priority.

Otherwise, we will fall behind in this emerging world of cryptos. ■

EXCLUSIVE



THE CHEETAH QUESTIONS

PM MODI'S MARQUEE CONSERVATION EFFORT RISKS RUNNING OFF COURSE

It was hailed as a landmark in conservation history—India reintroducing the cheetah, the world's fastest land animal, to the subcontinent after more than 70 years. On September 17, 2022, amid much fanfare and spectacle, Prime Minister Narendra Modi released eight cheetahs from Namibia into specially constructed enclosures—or *bomas*—within Kuno National Park in Madhya Pradesh. Another 12 followed from South Africa in February 2023.

Since then, much water has flowed through the Kuno—the river that gave the park its name. The mood at the park is now markedly less celebratory. “Project Cheetah”, which was meant to showcase India’s conservation prowess, is under scrutiny for poor planning, mounting cheetah deaths, ecological unfitness, growing human–animal

tension, and local resistance. Of the original cohort and subsequent arrivals, nine cheetahs have died. Others have wandered beyond park boundaries, preying on livestock and stoking fear and resentment in surrounding villages. Although some cubs have been born, a pertinent question remains: Is the much-touted “Project Cheetah” a success, or is it veering off track?

Of the 20 cheetahs imported from Africa, nine have died, including cubs born in captivity. Some perished from infections; others from stress, heat, or injuries. In July 2023, three adult cheetahs died of septicaemia caused by maggot-infested wounds hidden beneath dense winter coats—coats they would normally shed in Namibia’s winter but not in India’s blistering summer.

After much confusion among top officials of the Un-



Release of wild African cheetah by PM Narendra Modi into the wild

ion Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC) and African cheetah experts, all the cheetahs were brought back from the open forest to the enclosures on August 13, 2023.

“This was a significant failure,” admitted one senior bureaucrat. “The project overlooked a basic biological fact: July is winter in Namibia but hot and humid in India. The cheetahs were not acclimatised. They weren’t prepared for Indian conditions,” he added. “They were placed in an unfamiliar ecosystem—thick forests, villages, and roads—instead of the open savannahs they evolved in.”

The relocation of African cheetahs into Kuno National Park has been a bone of contention from the very beginning. Kuno had long been prepared as a future home for Asiatic lions, not for African cheetahs. At just 748 sq km, it is simply too small for a predator that evolved to roam Africa’s open savannahs. The park was originally designated for Asiatic lions but was hastily repurposed for cheetahs—a move driven more by politics than science, ecologists say. “The creation of such an environment for African cheetahs is unscientific.”

Still, there has been some success. After the release of Gamini, a South African cheetah, and her four cubs in March 2025, there are now 17 cheetahs—including 11 Indian-born cubs—in Kuno’s open forest. All are reportedly healthy, according to Uttam Kumar Sharma, Additional Principal Chief Conservator of Forest and Director of Kuno National Park.

But ecologists have raised questions, as cubs born in captivity have grown up in semi-captive enclosures, shielded from predators and real-world survival challenges. True rewilding requires natural selection. Without exposure to danger and competition, can these cheetahs ever become truly wild?

A larger “Greater Cheetah Landscape”—spanning 17,000 sq km across parts of Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Uttar Pradesh—was proposed in 2024. However, it remains largely conceptual, with corridors fragmented by villages, highways, and agriculture. Worse still, this landscape planning came after the cheetahs had already landed in India—an example of “putting the cart before the horse”, as one expert puts it.

The revival effort has not been without collateral damage. Coalitions of cheetahs have killed livestock in full public view, fuelling local anger. “We feel helpless,” said Birju, a villager in Vijaypur tehsil. “When a cheetah is nearby, we’re told to stay indoors. Even if compensation is promised, it hurts when an animal we rear and care for is killed.”

One major incident occurred in March this year, near Behardha village, when Jwala, a Namibian cheetah, and her

Spotting the Numbers

New Addition

20 RELOCATED CHEETAHS

September 2022

8

from Namibia

February 2023

12

from South Africa

26

CUBS BORN IN INDIA

DEAD **9**
ALIVE **17**

DEAD **9**
ALIVE **11**

TOTAL CHEETAH

28

Of **28**, two have been translocated to Gandhi Sagar Sanctuary, Madhya Pradesh

cubs attempted to hunt a calf just outside the park. Villagers intervened—shouting, throwing stones, and waving sticks. The cheetahs fled, abandoning the prey. Such encounters have raised serious concerns about the future of the animals and the potential for human–wildlife conflict.

An advisory issued on December 23, 2024 attempted to address these tensions. It urged villagers not to panic: “Cheetahs are not dangerous to humans. Maintain distance, and keep children and cattle indoors if one is sighted.”

Still, villagers remain unconvinced. “Cheetahs move through forest and revenue areas, including grazing land,” noted Sharma. “Yet Sheopur, the district where Kuno National Park is situated, has one of the highest cattle densi-

ties in the country—and villagers don’t seem too concerned.” But data on the exact number of cattle killed remains elusive. “We’re compiling the figures,” said Sharma adding, “it should be around 50 to 60 cattle since their release.”

Beyond reintroducing the cheetahs, “Project Cheetah” aimed to restore India’s neglected grasslands—long misclassified as mere “wastelands”. “These habitats are home to the Indian wolf, black-buck, and the critically endangered Great Indian Bustard. But in practice, grassland restoration has been slow, scattered, and secondary to the cheetah spectacle. India still lacks a National Grassland Policy, and most grasslands are classified under outdated forest regimes.

Meanwhile, conservationists argue that funding for cheetahs has been diverted from more urgent priorities such as saving the Great Indian Bustard, whose numbers have fallen to fewer than 150, or strengthening tiger conservation efforts. “Every rupee for cheetahs is a rupee less for species already here and in crisis,” said a senior wildlife official.

Not Yet a Triumph: So, is “Project Cheetah” a failure? Not entirely. Some cheetahs have survived, cubs have been born, and India has sparked global interest in large-scale rewilding. But by any objective measure, the project is not yet a success either. However, the official version has a different take, as claimed by Sharma: “All is well. The project is moving in the right direction. Cheetahs released in Kuno are hunting and surviving with cubs in the presence of predators like leopards.”

In reality, the project suffers from inadequate planning, reactive management, lack of transparency, and ecological mismatch. What began as a high-octane conservation dream risks becoming a political vanity project, losing momentum. “Project Cheetah” must evolve from symbolism to substance. This is no longer just about saving one species—it is about whether India can walk the tightrope between ambition and ecology, and whether its conservation model can learn from missteps before it is too late. If not, the cheetah may return to extinction in India—not for lack of trying, but for lack of planning. ■



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Operation Mahadev in Jammu and Kashmir

POST-OPERATION SINDOOR NEW TERROR PLAYBOOK

Pakistan's mini camps, urban sleeper cells, and digital jihad mark the next phase of India's security battle

Following Operation Sindoor, India's security landscape is undergoing a paradigm shift. With Pakistan-based terror groups regrouping and internal sleeper cells reactivating, anti-India forces are once again gaining momentum. In response, India has begun re-moulding its internal security policy with the highest degree of caution.

In July, Jammu and Kashmir recorded its lowest monthly tally of incidents this year, with eight attacks and the neutralisation of six terrorists. The month also saw Operation Mahadev, which eliminated three terrorists, including the perpetrator of the Pahalgam killings. This marks a relative improvement compared to the heightened tensions earlier, when the Union Territory witnessed 98 terror incidents.

Yet senior intelligence officials warn against complacency. They note that terror groups are repositioning—shifting from traditional border infiltrations to urban-centric operations, lone-wolf strikes, grenade attacks, and intensified online radicalisation campaigns. While India has not yet experienced a full-fledged lone-wolf attack, the Islamic State's digital propaganda remains aggressive and persistent, targeting impressionable youth with a steady stream of radical content.

Although Op Sindoor dealt a severe blow to Pakistan's terror infrastructure, intelligence reports suggest that reconstruction began almost immediately. In Pakistan-occupied Kashmir, training is now being conducted in smaller, decentralised camps accommodating no more than 20–30 cadres each. These facilities are deliberately hidden in dense forest belts such as Jankote, Chamankot, Lipa, Kotli, Athmuqam, and Kahuta to evade detection. They are equipped with advanced radar camouflage, thermal masking, and satellite signature-reduction

technologies. Officials are also monitoring China's suspected role in supplying surveillance tools and providing logistical expertise for these sites.

Meanwhile, old outfits have undergone cosmetic rebranding. Lashkar-e-Taiba now operates as "The Resistance Front", while Jaish-e-Mohammad uses aliases such as "PAFF" or "Kashmir Tigers". Indian agencies believe these changes are intended to create international deniability and mislead oversight bodies such as the Financial Action Task Force (FATF). More such rebrandings are expected as Pakistan seeks to avoid sanctions and maintain plausible deniability over its continued sponsorship of terrorism.

One lesser-publicised outcome of Op Sindoor has been a noticeable rise in ISI-led espionage activity in Punjab. Between March and June 2025, security agencies arrested multiple operatives linked to Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). Their assignments included tracking Army units, monitoring ammunition convoys, and co-opting digital influencers to spread "soft propaganda". In Panipat, a man named Naumen Elahi, from Kairana, was caught filming sensitive military installations and sending the footage to handlers in Pakistan. Investigations uncovered an encrypted, multi-layered network operating via WhatsApp, Telegram, and Signal, with digital payments disguised as freelance journalism fees. Earlier, two YouTubers, Jyoti Malhotra and Jasbir Singh, were also arrested for espionage. Security experts see this as a strategic shift, with the ISI cultivating urban sleeper cells and digital foot soldiers well beyond border zones.

Border forces are also reporting a resurgence in narcotics smuggling by drones into Punjab's hinterlands. After a temporary lull post-Op Sindoor, drug-laden drones are again breaching Indian

PAKISTAN'S GAMEPLAN

Rebuild Strategy

- Smaller, decentralised infrastructure
- New camps in dense forest areas
- Use of stealth tech
- Chinese assistance for surveillance tech
- Rebranding of terror outfits

Espionage Threat in Punjab

- Spike in ISI-led espionage
- Arrests of agents spying on military sites
- ISI tactic: use of digital influencers, encrypted apps, and payments masked as journalism fees

Narco-Terror via Drones

- Resurgence of drone-based drug smuggling from Pakistan
- Extended range: drones now flying 2–2.5 km
- Tactics: higher altitude, zigzag flight to evade radar
- Seen as part of hybrid warfare to destabilise youth and finance insurgency

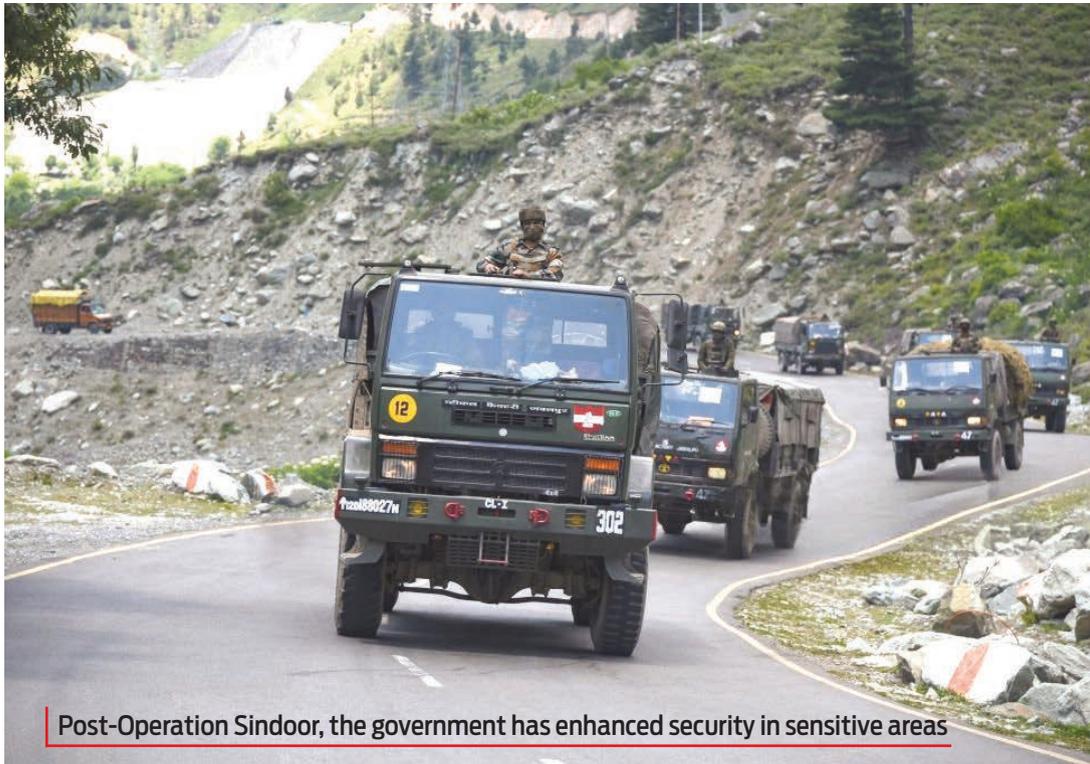
Expanding Threat Theatre

- Rising infiltration risk via Bangladesh, Nepal, Myanmar
- Radical elements gaining ground in Bangladesh
- New tactics: cyber radicalisation, hybrid warfare, urban espionage

airspace, flying two to two-and-a-half kilometres inside—some capable of penetrating seven to eight kilometres. To evade radar, operators launch drones at high altitudes before descending to low levels once inside Indian territory, using zigzag flight paths to confuse detection systems. Officials warn that this is not purely a criminal enterprise, but

part of a broader hybrid warfare strategy aimed at destabilising the youth, funding insurgency, and overstressing law enforcement agencies.

While Punjab and Kashmir remain high-profile theatres, India's eastern flank is emerging as a new frontier for infiltration. Since the ouster of Sheikh Hasina in Bangladesh, radical elements



Post-Operation Sindoor, the government has enhanced security in sensitive areas

have tightened their grip, triggering political unrest and weakening border control. Indian intelligence agencies are increasingly concerned about infiltration routes through Bangladesh, Nepal, and Myanmar. The porous terrain, limited militarisation, and complex political dynamics make these corridors attractive for illegal immigration, counterfeit currency operations, cattle smuggling, and insurgent movement. A senior Research and Analysis Wing (R&AW) officer described the eastern frontier as a “multi-actor security puzzle” where vulnerabilities are as much political and economic as they are geographic.

Although banned in 2022 under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA), the Popular Front of India (PFI) continues to operate underground, particularly in Kerala, Karnataka, and Tamil Nadu. The group uses encrypted communications, community influence, and overseas funding channelled through fake charitable trusts. In the South, security agencies are tracking a wider threat spectrum. Al-Qaeda,

Op Sindoor's primary battlefield success underscored a deeper strategic lesson: adversaries adapt quickly. India's approach is now shifting from reaction to anticipation

through Pakistan-based Farhatullah Ghorī, has announced the revival of Al-Ummah—the organisation behind the Coimbatore blasts targeting L K Advani. Intercepts point to plans for new attacks in southern India, according to informed sources. Meanwhile, the Islamic State continues to circulate radical content online, aiming to recruit and motivate young Indians toward lone-wolf strikes.

Op Sindoor's primary battlefield success underscored a deeper strategic

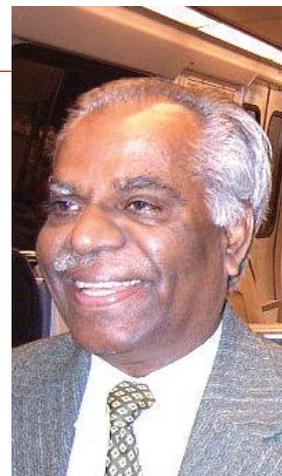
lesson: adversaries adapt quickly. India's approach is now shifting from reaction to anticipation, focusing on intelligence-led prevention, cyber vigilance, psychological operations to counter ideological subversion, and hybrid warfare countermeasures that integrate border defence with digital monitoring. The operational emphasis has moved from intercepting rifles to intercepting narcotics, from blocking infiltration to blocking radicalisation pipelines. National Security Adviser Ajit Doval summed up the doctrine: “You don't win wars just on borders. You win them in the minds of the people.”

The post-Op Sindoor security environment reveals a stark reality—India's adversaries are recalibrating. Key threat vectors include Pakistan's miniaturised terror camps, ISI-driven recruitment of digital influencers, drone-borne narcotics operations in Punjab, jihadist infiltration via eastern borders, and underground radical networks in the South. Internal security experts cautioned that countering them will require agility—not just retaliatory strikes, but pre-emptive disruption.

This means securing forests in PoK, alleys in Dhaka, drone flight paths over Punjab, and encrypted chat rooms in southern India. Op Sindoor was the first overt demonstration of domination through impact. The challenge now is to sustain that impact—across battlefields, information spaces, and ideological arenas. ■



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PURIFYING VOTER LISTS OR PURGING THE POOR? EC MUST PAUSE AND REFLECT

“ *The will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government; this will shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret vote or by equivalent free voting procedures.*” — The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948.

It is this universal suffrage that grants voting rights to all adult citizens, irrespective of their caste, creed or community. In India, it came into existence along with its Constitution in January 1950. Thus, when it is about the “right to vote”, India, the world’s largest democracy, is a pioneer.

This “right to vote” of citizens is the cornerstone of our parliamentary democracy—a system built upon the principle of popular sovereignty. The framework governing this right is not a singular decree but a complex and layered architecture of constitutional mandates, statutory laws and administrative

regulations. This structure defines who is an elector, establishes the machinery for their registration, and delineates the powers of the institutions responsible for safeguarding the integrity of the electoral process. Understanding this architecture and adhering to it is fundamental to creating, validating and accessing the electoral rolls, which form the core of every election. These duties and responsibilities are vested in the Election Commission (EC) under Article 324 of the Constitution of India.

From the way the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls is being carried out in Bihar, it appears as if the EC has not understood this architecture. What has been launched is an assault on this framework, with a purported attempt to “purify” and sanitise the electoral rolls. This is likely to end up disenfranchising a large segment of the voting population—particularly the poor and the marginalised—who possess little or no official documentation as proof of their

THE PUBLICATION OF “DRAFT SIR ELECTORAL ROLLS” HAS ONLY CONFIRMED THE WORST FEARS ABOUT DISENFRANCHISEMENT. IN THE CIRCUMSTANCES, THE EC SHOULD HALT THE PROCESS FORTHWITH AND INITIATE A SERIES OF LEGISLATIVE, PROCEDURAL AND ADMINISTRATIVE MEASURES TO STREAMLINE THE SYSTEM BEFORE VENTURING FURTHER IN BIHAR AND THE REST OF INDIA



THIS IS LIKELY TO END UP DISENFRANCHISING A LARGE SEGMENT OF THE VOTING POPULATION—PARTICULARLY THE POOR AND THE MARGINALISED—WHO POSSESS LITTLE OR NO OFFICIAL DOCUMENTATION AS PROOF OF THEIR CITIZENSHIP

citizenship.

Since the first general election in 1952, the vast majority of the poor and disadvantaged have held the “right to vote” as their most fundamental stake in Indian democracy. Throughout, the principle followed has been that unless anyone disputes their status, they are presumed to be citizens and, therefore, efforts should be made to ensure that everyone is included as a voter.

The Bihar SIR, which is planned to be carried out across the country in due course, is claimed to be an exercise in pursuit of the responsibility entrusted to the EC under the Constitution. Yet what it is effectively doing is to invert precept and practice to:

- pass the burden of proving citizenship to the voter;
- arrogate to itself the authority to effectively confer or revoke citizenship rights without any mandate to do so;
- creep in the ‘communal’ idea of the National Register of Citizens through the back door;
- effectively negate and nullify the electoral rolls currently in use;
- disenfranchise millions of those who have been registered voters in all elections held since 2003 under the pretext of cleaning and purifying voter lists;
- give extraordinary discretionary powers to bureaucrats at various levels to indulge in rent-seeking to remove or add voters;
- muddy the waters sufficiently to make the entire process mystifying, difficult and opaque.

Added to these is the tearing hurry with which the exercise is being implemented just before the impending Assembly election, the impossible timelines given to election officials, and the grossly inadequate infrastructure available to digitise the data. Therefore, despite tall claims, the electoral rolls emerging from the Bihar SIR would have neither inclusion nor integrity — the twin goals set by the EC for this enormous exercise.

The publication of “draft SIR electoral rolls” has only confirmed the worst fears

about disenfranchisement. In the circumstances, the EC should halt the process forthwith and initiate a series of legislative, procedural and administrative measures to streamline the system before venturing further in Bihar and the rest of India:

- Define “Intensive Revision”: The Registration of Electors Rules, 1960, should be amended to provide a clear, statutory definition of an ‘intensive revision’ and specify the conditions under which such a revision can be initiated, its precise scope, the minimum timeline for its completion, and the principles of natural justice that must be followed—thereby preventing its arbitrary or rushed application.
- Standardise documentation for citizenship verification: Through an amendment of the relevant Act/Rules, a clear, limited and realistic set of documents that can be used for verifying citizenship for electoral purposes should be specified in consultation with all stakeholders.
- Leverage technology for de-duplication and deletion: The EC should accelerate the integration of the electoral roll database with official, digitised civil registration databases, particularly the Registrar General of India’s death registers.
- Create special provisions for vulnerable groups: The EC should adopt a more flexible definition of “ordinarily resident” for migrant workers, allowing them to choose their place of registration, and establish simplified verification protocols for homeless citizens, nomadic communities, and transgender persons who may lack conventional address documentation.

What is more, voters — being the primary stakeholders in the election process — should have oversight of the electoral rolls. This can be done by conducting a “social audit” through ward sabha and gram sabha platforms so that corrections can be made based on ground realities.

Citizens’ “right to vote” is precious, and the EC should handle it with care — instead of adopting a “bull in a China shop” approach. ■

PARTITION'S

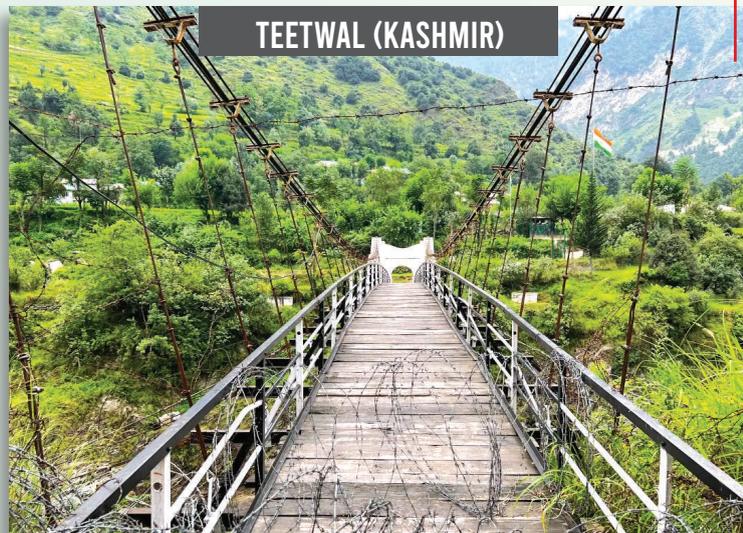
The Partition of India in 1947 was not merely a political act—it was a cartographic catastrophe. Conceived in haste, executed in ignorance, and etched in blood, it remains one of the most brutal and bewildering ruptures in modern history. With the stroke of a British pen, people were uprooted, lost their lives. And a subcontinent was sliced apart along a line drawn by Cyril Radcliffe—a lawyer who had never before set foot in India, knew little of its cultures, and was given just five weeks to divide it.

What followed was a border born of bureaucracy, not understanding. It cut through wheat fields, rivers, schools, and even homes. In Punjab, entire villages were split in two. A courtyard could fall in India while the bedroom remained in Pakistan. Families awoke to find themselves foreigners in their own homes—one brother on one side of the border, another on the other. Farmlands, graveyards, and water wells became contested territory. In Bengal, the situation bordered on the surreal: enclaves within enclaves, where Indian land lay trapped inside Pakistani land, and vice versa.

This photo feature traces the absurdities of hurried lines: the doors it divided, the lives it distorted, and the grief it institutionalised. These are not just borders—they are scars. Not just lines on a map, but lines that ran through bedrooms, dinner tables, and generations.

BRIDGE OF BROKEN HISTORY

Split since 1947, Teetwal in Kashmir straddles the India – Pakistan border. Its other half, now in Pakistan, is called Chilhana. The Kishanganga River—known as the Neelum across the LoC—slices through the village, the only dividing line. Families wave across the water, bound by memory but separated by conflict. The bridge here is more than a crossing; it's a symbol of longing, loss, and a village fractured by history.



WHERE A TREE DIVIDES A NATION

Suchetgarh, on the India – Pakistan border in Jammu, hosts a smaller ceremonial post, reminiscent of Wagah. Uniquely, a tree—not a concrete pillar—marks the border here. Designated as Pillar No. 918, one side of the tree stands in Pakistan, the other in India.

ABSURD GEOGRAPHY

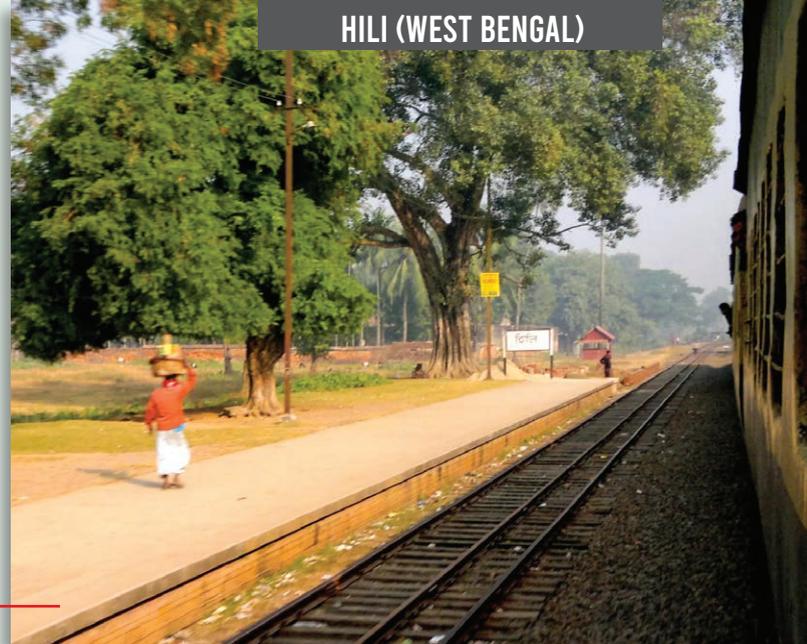
KHEM KARAN (PUNJAB)



THE FORGOTTEN FRONTIER

The 1947 Partition carved a deep scar through Khem Karan – Bhikhiwind region in Punjab, splitting farms, homes, and families along the Radcliffe Line. Many in this border belt lost ancestral lands to Pakistan, especially around nearby Kasur—once intimately connected, now tragically out of reach. Here is an old abandoned building at Khem Karan—the partition’s silent witness.

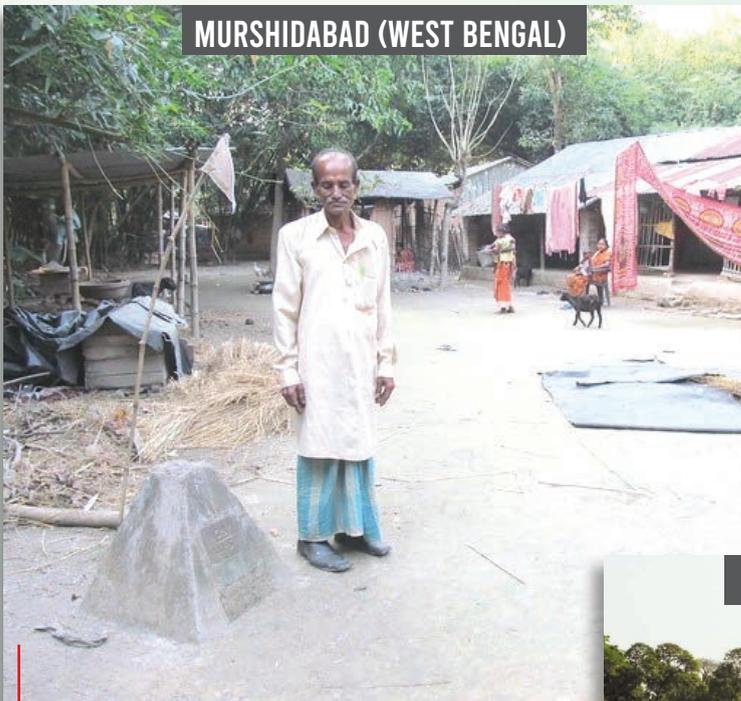
HILI (WEST BENGAL)



WHERE TRAINS AND FAITH CROSS BORDERS

Hili village, located on the India – Bangladesh border, where the Radcliffe Line split its railway station and even local mosques, leaving platforms in India and tracks running into what was then East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). Though the rail link was cut off during the 1971 war, the cultural and spiritual ties have endured. In nearby Haripukur, Indian and Bangladeshi devotees still gather to worship side by side, a quiet testament to a shared past that refuses to be erased by borders.

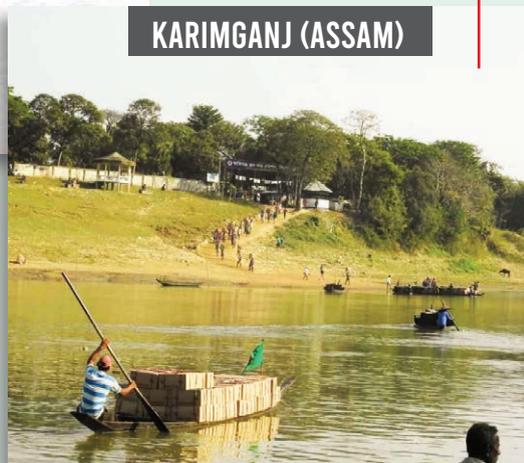
MURSHIDABAD (WEST BENGAL)



KITCHEN IN INDIA, BEDROOM IN BANGLADESH

In North Boyra village, Murshidabad district in West Bengal, Rejaul Mondal’s house is situated on the India-Bangladesh border—his kitchen in India and bedroom in Bangladesh. He pays land taxes to both countries, and used to farm across the fence. A pillar marks the division through his home.

KARIMGANJ (ASSAM)



THE DIVIDED LIFE

In 1947, a referendum led Sylhet to join East Pakistan, but Karimganj remained with India. Rivers like the Kushiara split villages—homes in one country, fields in another. Border fencing later carved a “no man’s land”, displacing families from ancestral lands, graves, and pathways they once freely shared across Sylhet.



D K Shivakumar at a rally

What was meant to be a celebration of the Karnataka government's achievements last month in Mysuru turned into a revealing display of political powerplay within the Congress. As the Chief Minister Siddaramaiah delivered a fiery speech before a crowd of over a lakh, the Deputy Chief Minister D K Shivakumar quietly exited the venue—before the CM even took the mic. The gesture did not go unnoticed. In fact, it marked the clearest sign yet of a deepening rift within the Congress's top leadership in the state.

The rally, dubbed “Sadhana Samavesh”, was officially organised to highlight the government's welfare schemes and development record. But for political observers, it served as a stage for Siddaramaiah to assert his authority, and for Shivakumar's growing frustration to spill into the open. The two leaders' differences came to the fore just two days after the Karnataka in-charge and AICC General Secretary Randeep Singh Surjewala hosted a “white flag” meeting at a Bengaluru star hotel. The Mysuru incident made it clear that the patch-up bid had failed, forcing the AICC to take stock afresh.

Shivakumar, once seen as the natural successor under an informal power-sharing pact, now finds himself cornered, frus-

DK'S DILEMMA

Wait, Rebel or Crossover?

**FIGHT FOR KARNATAKA'S
CHIEF MINISTERSHIP
REACHES A TIPPING POINT**

trated, and increasingly isolated. In 2023, when the Congress swept back to power in Karnataka, a delicate power-sharing deal was struck: Siddaramaiah would be the CM for 2.5 years, then Shivakumar would take over. That halfway mark, November

20 precisely, is now looming. But Siddaramaiah, buoyed by the support of a large majority of the Congress MLAs — reportedly 119 of 136 — has repeatedly made it clear that he will complete the full five-year term. The Congress high command's tacit support for the CM has only deepened Shivakumar's predicament.

Despite holding two powerful posts — deputy CM and state Congress President — Shivakumar now faces a growing dilemma. Should he continue to wait and hope for the high command to honour the earlier arrangement? Should he mount pressure internally and risk being labelled a destabiliser? Or should he take the ultimate gamble: crossover to the BJP?

It is a delicate situation for a politician who has spent his entire career in Congress. Known for his organising skills, grassroots connections, and financial heft, Shivakumar has long been one of the party's most influential leaders in Karnataka. But his ambition to lead the state now runs headlong into the party equations that appear to favour the status quo over transition.

Administrative clashes between his camp and Siddaramaiah's have become increasingly frequent. Shivakumar's portfolios — water resources and Bengaluru development — have reportedly faced scrutiny from the Chief Minister's Office, souring relations further. One recent spat between the CM's staff and Shivakumar's officer escalated dramatically, with reports of a physical altercation at the Karnataka Bhavan in Delhi, making national headlines.

Even so, Shivakumar has remained largely restrained in public. The firebrand image that once defined him has given way to a more



For both Siddaramaiah and his deputy Shivakumar meeting of minds seems to be a pipedream

Shivakumar, once seen as the natural successor under an informal power-sharing pact, now finds himself cornered, frustrated, and increasingly isolated. In 2023, when the Congress swept back to power in Karnataka, a delicate power-sharing deal was struck: Siddaramaiah would be the CM for 2.5 years, then Shivakumar would take over

measured persona, even as his supporters grow louder in their calls for clarity. Some within his camp feel the delay in transition is a betrayal. Political observers warn that keeping Shivakumar out of the top post for much longer could fatally weaken his political standing.

Amid this backdrop, rumours of a

possible shift to the BJP have gained traction. Shivakumar's increased religious outreach over the past year — temple visits, public spiritual events, and even appearing on stage with the Union Home Minister Amit Shah — has antagonised the high command, especially Rahul Gandhi. Some party insiders see these moves as a signalling of readiness to jump ship if pushed too far.

The BJP, on its part, is grappling with internal leadership challenges of its own in Karnataka. With the Lingayat vote bank firmly in the hands of the father-son duo — Yediyurappa and Vijayendra — the party has struggled to make inroads among the influential Vokkaliga community. Shivakumar, a dominant Vokkaliga leader with a strong regional base, could offer the BJP a crucial breakthrough in South Karnataka. Currently, the Vokkaliga vote bank is split between three parties — the JD(S), the Congress and the BJP.

But the path ahead is not smooth. Central agency investigations — from the Enforcement Directorate to the Income Tax Department — still loom large over Shivakumar. A shift to the BJP could invite charges of rank opportunism, alienate his core voter base, and erode his credibility as a lifelong Congressman. There is also no assurance the BJP would hand him the chief minister's chair — a central demand for any potential crossover.

Also, Shivakumar's political identity and base are intrinsically linked to the Congress, and he may not be easily accepted in the BJP ranks. But, many political analysts believe the BJP leadership, especially Amit Shah, could still see value in bringing him on board to revive the party's flagging fortunes in Karnataka. On the ground, the BJP has toned down its attacks on Shivakumar of late.

For now, Shivakumar continues to wait. Recent trips by both leaders to Delhi yielded no resolution. Rahul Gandhi, who many hoped

It is a delicate situation for a politician who has spent his entire career in Congress. Known for his organising skills, grassroots connections, and financial heft, Shivakumar has long been one of the party's most influential leaders in Karnataka



Congress high command often puts up a brave face of unity in public, while the reality is just opposite

would step in, met neither of them privately, leaving both camps in limbo. One option being floated is a national role for Siddaramaiah, potentially freeing up the CM seat. But the Congress high command has not signalled any movement in that direction. In fact, party sources suggest that Delhi sees Siddaramaiah as the more electorally valuable face, with no appetite for mid-term changes that could unsettle the government ahead of the 2026 Lok Sabha polls.

This leaves Shivakumar with dwindling options. Waiting risks political irrelevance. Rebelling could split the party. Switching sides may cost him his legacy. His loyalists are growing restless, and administrative friction within the government is

becoming harder to ignore.

With the Congress facing critical bypolls and a possible reshuffle ahead of the 2026 general elections, the leadership question in Karnataka is no longer just about personalities — it is about the party's ability to manage ambition, honour commitments, and retain unity.

For now, Shivakumar remains in place — caught in a political waiting game, balancing loyalty, ambition, and uncertainty. But if the deadlock continues, the waiting may not last much longer. ■



Vijay Grover
is a Bangalore-based journalist and political analyst



DIVIDED TRUMP HOUSE

**SHARP RIFT IN THE US ADMINISTRATION OVER
THE PRESIDENT'S TARIFF WAR WITH INDIA**

President Donald Trump's decision to impose sweeping tariffs of up to 50% on Indian imports has exposed a deep rift within his administration, laying bare a fierce internal debate between economic hardliners and strategic heavyweights. Trump's team is increasingly divided on how best to manage the delicate balance between protecting US economic interests and sustaining a critical strategic partnership with India.

The tariffs, initially announced in early August 2025 at 25% and swiftly doubled, were justified by the White House as a necessary response to India's continued purchases of Russian oil—described as a violation of US sanctions and a threat to global security. Trump de-

clared, "India has been unwilling to open its markets fairly to American goods and continues to undermine our sanctions regime by dealing with Russia. These tariffs are necessary to protect American workers and enforce our foreign policy."

But the move triggered immediate turmoil inside the White House, revealing starkly opposing views on how to navigate US-India relations amid escalating geopolitical tensions with China. The administration's economic team—including Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent, Commerce Secretary Howard Lutnick, and US Trade Representative Jamieson Greer—have been vocal supporters of the tariff escalation and are strongly behind the president.

Bessent told CNBC, "India remains

one of the most protectionist large economies in the world. Our industries face significant barriers—high tariffs, market restrictions. These tariffs aim to level the playing field and compel structural reforms." Echoing this, Greer added, "We've been patient, but India's refusal to comply with international trade norms and its ongoing support for Russia's energy sector leaves us no choice."

On the other side, a coalition of State Department officials, National Security Council (NSC) members, and Pentagon leaders warn that such punitive economic measures risk damaging a vital strategic partnership.

Secretary of State Marco Rubio emphasised on Fox Radio, "India is a cornerstone of our Indo-Pacific strategy. While disagreements exist, preserving this partnership is crucial to counterbalancing China's expanding influence." US Ambassador to the UN Mike Waltz told the Hudson Institute, "India is not just a partner—it is a pillar for regional stability and democracy. Economic disputes should never jeopardise that long-term alliance."

Sources close to the White House report that tensions between the economic and strategic camps have intensified, with NSC officials warning that harsh tariffs could drive India closer to China and Russia—an outcome that would undercut US national security goals. A senior NSC official, speaking anonymously, stated, "We fear that aggressive economic tactics may push India away at a time when it's critical to keep it aligned with US interests."

Conversely, trade advisers argue that economic leverage is indispensable: "Strategic cooperation should hinge on India aligning with US trade and sanction policies."

This divide has led to mixed messaging on the global stage. While Rubio stresses dialogue and partnership,

FRACTURED RANKS

HAWKS



Scott Bessent
Secretary of Treasury

- Supports “Trump Tariff” as a tool to “stand up for Americans”
- Targets any country deemed to be exploiting the US trade deficit



Howard Lutnick
Secretary of Commerce

- Backs Trump’s sweeping tariff revenue strategies
- Wants strong protections for American industry



Jamieson Greer
US Trade Representative

- Actively advocates balanced, reciprocal trade
- Perceives India as a barrier to fair trade, and there is “a lack of reciprocity” in US-India trade deals

DOVES



Marco Rubio
Secretary of State

- Strong track record of supporting India
- Champions strong US India defence cooperation
- Favours a tough approach toward China while treating India alongside allies like Japan, Israel



Mike Waltz
US Ambassador to the UN

- Co-chair of India Caucus in Congress
- Advocates US-India strategic ties
- Staunch China hawk



Kash Patel
Director, FBI

- Indian-American; publicly demonstrates solidarity with India
- Believes in strong strategic ties with India



Tulsi Gabbard
Director of National Intelligence

- Long-standing advocate of a strong, respectful US-India relationship
- Believes in deepening strategic, defence, economic ties with India

Kurt Campbell cautioned, “The complexity of US-India relations demands nuance. Heavy-handed sanctions may yield short-term gains but damage decades of trust.” Former Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin highlighted ongoing military cooperation, including a recent \$3.2 billion fighter jet deal.

India has remained firm, with Prime Minister Narendra Modi affirming New Delhi’s sovereign right to pursue independent energy and foreign policies. Indian officials stress that their energy security needs and geopolitical realities require a multi-aligned approach.

The internal White House divide reflects deeper questions about America’s global strategy in a multipolar world: should economic policy be wielded as a blunt instrument to enforce compliance, or should it be balanced with diplomatic and strategic partnership goals? Once a coherent US strategy towards India—rooted in shared democratic values and mutual security interests—now stands fractured, with strategic embrace uncomfortably entangled with punitive economics. For now, Washington resembles two hemispheres. The administration remains caught between tariffs and trust, sanctions and strategy, protectionism and partnership—a fissure whose resolution will

shape not only US-India relations but the broader geopolitical order. ■



Clarisel Gonzalez
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Trump’s social media posts have taken a combative tone. A recent message on Truth Social labelled India’s economy “dead” and warned of “additional penalties” linked to its Russia ties, rattling diplomatic efforts.

The discord extends beyond the White House. Bipartisan congressional

leaders and business groups have urged a more nuanced approach. Former Vice-President Mike Pence wrote in an op-ed, “Tariffs risk alienating one of our most important democratic partners. Diplomacy must be prioritised alongside economic policy.”

Former National Security Adviser



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STRADDLING THE DRAGON

INDIA'S TIGHTROPE BETWEEN RESISTANCE AND ENGAGEMENT

INDIA ALSO HAS TO CONTINUE ENGAGING CHINA BECAUSE IT IS NOW THE BIGGEST MANUFACTURING POWER, THE BIGGEST EXPORTER, AND THE SECOND-LARGEST ECONOMY. IT HAS MADE IMPRESSIVE STRIDES IN ADVANCED TECHNOLOGY

India's dilemmas in dealing with China are increasing. We have to both resist and engage China. Resist, because China continues to lay claims to Indian territory provocatively. To assert its historical claim to Arunachal Pradesh, for example, China is periodically giving Chinese names to sites and locations there, unbothered by India's sensitivities. It continues to protest whenever an Indian leader visits Arunachal Pradesh. However, this has not deterred our leaders from making such visits and announcing development projects in the state.

China has now officially announced the construction of the gargantuan dam project on the bend of the Brahmaputra before it enters India. This project has been initiated without any regard for the rights of

the lower riparian states, not to mention the potential damage to the fragile ecosystem of Tibet, from where many of the great rivers of Asia originate, and the concomitant impact on international climate change concerns.

India has not protested to China about undertaking a project without keeping it informed about its dimensions so that its impact downstream could be properly assessed. Any international environmentalist lobby has not raised concerns either, which we should encourage them to do.

In Ladakh, some progress in reaching understandings on respective patrolling rights in contested areas has been made after a score of rounds of military and diplomatic talks. But patrolling has not been resumed in the so-called buffer zones, as was the understanding. De-escalation has not been achieved, much less a return to the status quo ante on the ground before the eruption of the clash in Galwan in 2020. India is reconciled to this reality and is organising its force structure accordingly.

China is expanding and strengthening its military presence in Tibet. In return, India continues to rapidly improve its military infrastructure in the Himalayas so that we can respond more quickly to any Chinese effort to change the status quo on the ground.



PM Narendra Modi with Chinese President Xi Jinping and the First Lady of China Peng Liyuan in Ahmedabad in 2014

CHINA IS EXPANDING AND STRENGTHENING ITS MILITARY PRESENCE IN TIBET. IN RETURN, INDIA CONTINUES TO RAPIDLY IMPROVE ITS MILITARY INFRASTRUCTURE IN THE HIMALAYAS SO THAT WE CAN RESPOND MORE QUICKLY TO ANY CHINESE EFFORT TO CHANGE THE STATUS QUO ON THE GROUND

That a large number of Indian forces continue to be deployed at the Great Himalayan heights since 2020 sends a powerful deterrent message to China that its ‘salami-slicing tactics’ will be resisted.

Our concerns about China’s relations with Pakistan have become sharper after Operation Sindoor because of the active ISR (Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance) support China provided, as publicly divulged by a senior Indian military officer. Indian planners have always had concerns about being faced potentially with a two-front situation, given the very close strategic ties between China and Pakistan. This requires us to strengthen our defence capabilities, both in terms of indigenisation of defence manufacturing as well as reforms in higher defence management and new military doctrines that take into account the latest developments in warfare that have surfaced during the Ukraine conflict in particular.

Most of Pakistan’s military equipment is of Chinese origin. Beijing is promoting the Pakistani propaganda about the downing of our aircraft, especially the Rafale aircraft, by a Chinese-supplied air-to-air missile fired from its combat aircraft in Pakistan’s inventory. This is both commercial and psychological warfare. India has to keep a

close watch on Chinese military supplies to Pakistan.

China continues to be active in our region. With the developments in Bangladesh and the overtures the Islamists there are making to Pakistan, China is encouraging this by politically chaperoning a resumption of Bangladesh–Pakistan ties. In the Maldives and Sri Lanka, India has recovered from the setbacks it received at the hands of the Chinese. We need to continue working in Nepal to protect our interests.

India also has to continue engaging China because it is now the biggest manufacturing power, the biggest exporter, and the second-largest economy. It has made impressive strides in advanced technology. It dominates the production of rare earths, lithium batteries for electric vehicles, and solar panels. China cannot be bypassed in these sectors as well as others such as APIs for the pharmaceutical industry, including India’s.

India is dependent on many intermediate goods for its own export products, which explains why India–China trade is expanding. It is now at over \$130 billion, with the deficit close to \$100 billion. Reducing our import dependence on China will be a slow process, but it must happen if we are to have more space to resist China. Despite our repeatedly raising the issue of our unsustainable deficits with it, China has been unresponsive.

China, in some ways, is hardening its posture on the economic side by delaying the supply of specific equipment to India and quietly imposing some technology restrictions. China will resist the shifting of international supply chains to India as much as it can, as it sees India as a threatening rival.

At the same time, lobbies in India are arguing in favour of easing restrictions on Chinese investments in India and, generally speaking, leveraging China’s progress in technology and innovation to accelerate



PM Narendra Modi with External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar and NSA Ajit Doval

INDIA ALSO HAS TO CONTINUE ENGAGING CHINA BECAUSE IT IS NOW THE BIGGEST MANUFACTURING POWER, THE BIGGEST EXPORTER, AND THE SECOND-LARGEST ECONOMY. IT HAS MADE IMPRESSIVE STRIDES IN ADVANCED TECHNOLOGY

our own growth. This suits China's strategy of de-linking the border issue from opening up the Indian market more to Chinese goods.

External Affairs Minister Jaishankar has met his counterpart Wang Yi several times, with no substantive breakthrough so far. Both sides repeat their standard positions after each meeting. Our emphasis is on mutual sensitivity, mutual respect and mutual benefit, and the repeated message that relations cannot be normal if the border situation is not normal. The Chinese use standard phrases that are platitudinous and give no real clue to their thinking.

India is a vocal supporter of the Quad and the Indo-Pacific concept, seeing both as building deterrence against China, although this is not specifically stated. India wants to broaden cooperation within the Quad to serve the additional purpose of harnessing the economic and technological strength of its partners for its own economic growth. The Malabar exercises give naval muscle to the cooperation between the US, Japan, Australia and India.

The US recognises the role of India in containing China's expansionist tendencies, especially in the Indian Ocean. It is making equipment and technologies available to India to counter China's maritime threat. The

US has, of course, no plans to get involved actively in India's border issue with China, though it would be ready to make available intelligence and some equipment to bolster our defensive capabilities.

While the US treats China as its principal adversary and seeks to build alliances and partnerships to curb its ambitions, it also seeks to engage with China, which is its biggest trade partner, and US corporations have invested there massively. The US does not want a military conflict with China.

With US President Donald Trump, the uncertainties have increased about how much the US wants to reach a modus vivendi with China without a conflict and what could be the nature of the deal. India, therefore, has to be cautious in aligning itself completely with the US on China, knowing that the US would singularly pursue its national interest. India has to, therefore, delicately balance its ties with the US while keeping some doors open to China through bilateral trade, the BRICS and the SCO.

With Trump now targeting India on the trade front, imposing 25% tariffs on its exports to the US, threatening more tariffs because of India's oil and defence ties with Russia, while also courting Pakistan to put pressure on India, the India-US ties are getting frayed.

This weakens India vis-à-vis China in the power game. China has always expressed concern about strengthening India-US ties, seeing them as being directed at China. With those ties under stress, China may calculate that it has a freer hand to keep India under pressure. China's attitude could well harden—if not immediately, then in due course—as it would want to see how things develop.

India's policy of both resisting and engaging China will be put to the test in the coming period. ■



S Jaishankar in a meeting with Chinese Vice President Han Zheng in China in July this year



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A COLD LESSON FOR INDIA

WHY AMERICA STILL BANKS ON ROGUE PAKISTAN

THE UNITED STATES HAS NEVER BASED ITS FOREIGN POLICY PURELY ON SHARED VALUES OR DEMOCRATIC IDEALS. INSTEAD, ITS RECORD REFLECTS A PATTERN OF COLD, CALCULATED STRATEGIC CONVENIENCE

Let's pose a difficult—perhaps even dangerous—question: why does America, the self-styled beacon of democracy and liberty, continue to align with a nation like Pakistan—one that has harboured terrorists, trampled on minorities, and shown open hostility to India, the world's largest democracy?

This is not merely about geopolitics. It is about power. And unless we confront that truth, we will keep confusing lofty rhetoric with hard reality.

Powerful nations are often mythologised. America is seen as the land of the free, the global policeman, and the champion of democratic ideals. But strip away the slogans, and history reveals something very different. The United States has never based its foreign policy purely on shared values or democratic ideals. Instead, its record reflects a pattern of cold, calculated strategic convenience—a preference for regimes that

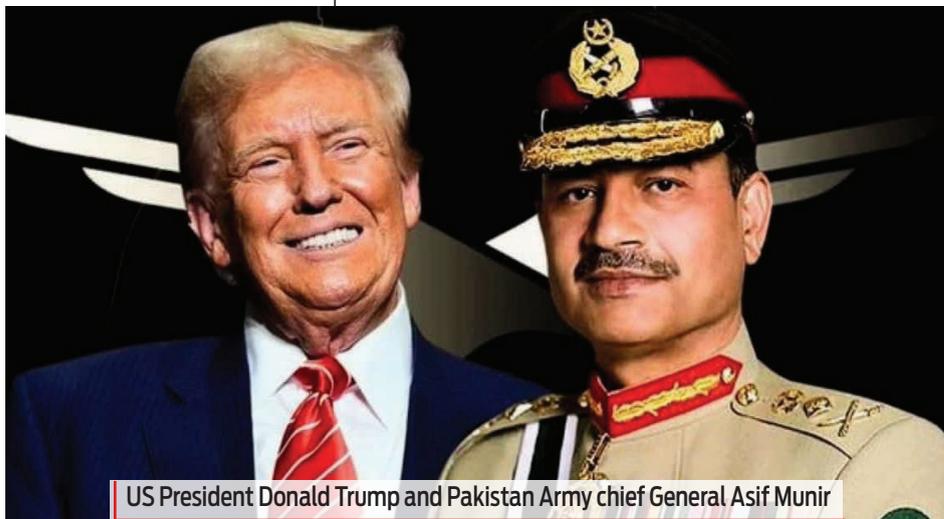
serve immediate tactical purposes, even if they are undemocratic, oppressive, or violent. Alliances are forged not on virtue, but on utility. And that is not conjecture nor a conspiracy—it is a historical fact.

Now apply the same lens to South Asia. Why did the US pour billions into Pakistan during the Cold War, despite its slide into authoritarianism and extremism? The answer is simple: Pakistan was useful. It bordered offered geographic proximity to the Soviet Union and China, and provided access to Afghanistan.

That strategic value consistently trumped concerns about democracy or terrorism. In fact, during the 1980s Afghan War, the US armed and trained militants via Pakistan—fighters who later evolved into the Taliban. When that decision backfired, the policy did not change; it merely adapted. Access and leverage remained paramount.

This is the uncomfortable reality. While the West speaks of liberty and human rights, it acts in the interests of access, alliances, and influence. If a regime—however flawed—offers something valuable, it will be supported. That is not a conspiracy; that is geopolitics.

For India, this realisation is deeply frustrating. As a nation that has preserved democracy through chaos, protected pluralism, and built resilient institutions, India expects recognition—perhaps even partnership. Instead, it receives lectures. It is held to idealistic standards, while its



US President Donald Trump and Pakistan Army chief General Asif Munir

THE TRUTH IS, INDIA IS BECOMING INDISPENSABLE. WITH ITS MARKET SIZE, STRATEGIC GEOGRAPHY, AND GLOBAL AMBITIONS, INDIA IS CENTRAL TO ANY CREDIBLE PLAN TO COUNTERBALANCE CHINA. BUT INDISPENSABILITY IS NOT A BIRTHRIGHT—IT MUST BE EARNED AND ASSERTED

destabilising neighbour is rewarded with aid, weapons, and diplomatic indulgence.

Why? Because Pakistan, in America's eyes, remains pliable. It plays the role of regional fixer—often dangerous, always erratic, but reliably manipulable. India, by contrast, is independent—and independence is often viewed with suspicion, not admiration.

This leads to a sense of emotional disillusionment. India has done the hard work—conducting free elections, protecting dissent, respecting diversity—yet finds itself criticised. Meanwhile, a country that undermines those very principles enjoys Western backing. It feels less like oversight and more like an insult.

But this is not accidental. Superpowers do not reward virtue. They reward leverage. Moral consistency requires sacrifice—and empires do not sacrifice, they calculate. Today, if India votes independently at the UN or refuses to toe the Western line on energy policy or trade, it is seen as disruptive. Autonomy is only celebrated when it does not challenge dominance.

This is the great disillusionment of modern diplomacy: support is extended not to the honest or the democratic, but to the convenient. Pakistan continues to play the "client state"—offering chaos in exchange for attention, instability for investment. In return, it secures what it wants: funds, arms, and relevance. India—standing firm—gets questioned.

So when we ask why America continues to support Pakistan over India, we must abandon moral frameworks. The real questions are strategic: Who provides a backdoor into Afghanistan? Who acts as a buffer near China? Who is easier to pressure, and who refuses to be controlled? The answers are not comfortable. But they are true. In this game, morality does not guarantee support. Leverage does.

This does not mean India should abandon its principles. It means India must pair principle with power. Being the world's largest democracy is admirable—but in geopolitics, admiration is soft currency.

Influence is the hard one.

The truth is, India is becoming indispensable. With its market size, strategic geography and global ambitions, India is central to any credible plan to counterbalance China. But indispensability is not a birthright—it must be earned and asserted.

What America fears—what any superpower fears—is a partner it cannot fully control. India is precisely that. A country that votes independently at the UN. That buys oil from wherever it deems fit. That refuses to be dictated to. And most of all, a country that calls out Western double standards without apology. That is hard for old powers to digest. Their comfort lies in allies who obey, not those who disagree.

Yet that discomfort is necessary. For India to rise, it must stop seeking validation and start commanding respect—not through emotional appeals, but through results. Not through virtue alone, but through leverage. Because America does not choose allies based on idealism; it chooses them based on interest. That is not betrayal—that is how empires function.

Pakistan understands this and plays the game well, offering volatility for visibility, chaos for currency. India, on the other hand, has long assumed that being right was enough. That its democratic record, pluralist identity and economic potential would naturally earn trust.

But geopolitics rewards the prepared, not the pure. It respects strength, not sentiment. So the question is not "why does America support Pakistan more than India?" The real question is: "What is India doing to make itself unignorable?"

The 21st century will not be handed to India out of goodwill. It will have to be seized—through strategy, strength and self-definition. Because in the end, the world does not bend towards justice. It bends towards those who know how to move it. India must not wait for a seat at the table. It must build its own—and compel others to join it. ■

EXCLUSIVE



DHAKA'S MANY

Bangladesh Army chief visits China as Dhaka juggles military ties with US, Turkey, Pakistan

After cancelling a planned visit to China in late June, Bangladesh's Army chief, General Waker-uz-Zaman, is now set for a three-day official trip to Beijing from August 22 to 25. The visit, to be closely monitored by the US State Department and the Ameri-

can security establishment, comes at a time when the Bangladesh Army is expected to receive significant logistical supplies that will, according to military sources, be quietly passed to the Arakan Army in Myanmar's Rakhine State.

US agencies have said almost nothing that would suggest that

preparations are underway to extend this clandestine help to the Arakan Army, which seeks to launch a military offensive on the three remaining townships—Sittwe, Kyaukphyu and Manaung—still held by Myanmar military junta troops. However, Bangladesh military sources say that, despite the silence on the secretive



Bangladesh Army personnel during a joint exercise with the US military

MASTERS

American involvement, the impending operations—along the 270-km Bangladesh-Myanmar border—are likely to begin once the monsoon subsides in the mountainous terrain.

Earlier, the controversial idea of a “humanitarian corridor”, supposedly proposed by the United Nations and swiftly embraced by Bangladesh’s interim government and National Security Adviser (NSA) Khalilur Rahman, triggered opposition from the main political party, the Bangladesh Na-

tionalist Party (BNP), as well as from Gen Zaman. So controversial was the issue that when Gen Zaman publicly opposed the plan in the third week of May, declaring there would be no “bloody corridor”, it was then quietly buried. Also dropped was an Armed Forces Division (AFD) suggestion under the Chief Adviser’s Office, to declare the stretch between Bandarban and Cox’s Bazar a “military operations zone”.

Bangladesh Military sources said

Gen Zaman is “wary of tags and names” that could directly affect Bangladesh’s sovereignty and “have grave political and security implications”. Still, the Army’s top brass is “not opposed to US plans” for operations in Rakhine State.

Relations between Gen Zaman and NSA Rahman are strained. Rahman’s appointment in April — just days after meeting his Indian counterpart, Ajit Doval, in Bangkok — was



General Waker-Uz-Zaman

met with disapproval from the Army chief, who has long exercised substantial control over both internal and external security affairs. Rahman's push for a humanitarian corridor was firmly rejected by Gen Zaman, who might back a cross-border operation only if it remains entirely covert.

The US deep state, particularly security officials based in Doha, Qatar, is now exploring a sea-based supply route. This would involve securing a navigation channel in the Bay of Bengal suitable for motherships to offload supplies onto smaller vessels, which would then transport them closer to Rakhine's coast for transfer to the Arakan Army.

There have also been preliminary discussions between US and Bangladeshi officials about using Bang-

Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA) and the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA). The AFD argues these "fundamental defence frameworks" could enhance Bangladesh's logistical and technological capabilities without undermining its neutrality. But Gen Zaman has delayed signing, wary of antagonising China, historically Bangladesh's main arms supplier.

In May, representatives from the Army's Infantry, Aviation, Artillery,



Bangladesh-Myanmar border tension and refugee influx are major geopolitical issues in the region

ladesh's only submarine base at Maheshkhali in Cox's Bazar. Bangladesh operates two ageing Chinese-made Type 035G (Ming-class) diesel-electric submarines, acquired in 2016 and stationed at Pekua, near Maheshkhali.

Gen Zaman's China visit—initiated by the People's Liberation Army and arranged by the Bangladesh Army's Directorate of Weaponry and Systems (DWE&S)—comes at a time when US officials are pressing Dhaka to sign two defence pacts: the Acquisition and

Signals, Ordnance, Engineers, Armoured, Military Operations, Military Intelligence and Military Training directorates met at the DWE&S conference room to chalk out the details of Gen Zaman's China visit.

Meanwhile, Bangladesh is also deepening ties with Turkey, with discussions underway on the purchase of Turkish weapons and the establishment of assembly and manufacturing units at two potential sites near the capital city of Dhaka.

In late July, the Bangladesh Navy signed an agreement with Turkish defence manufacturer Canik (SYS Group) to procure Venom LR 30mm remote-controlled weapons systems

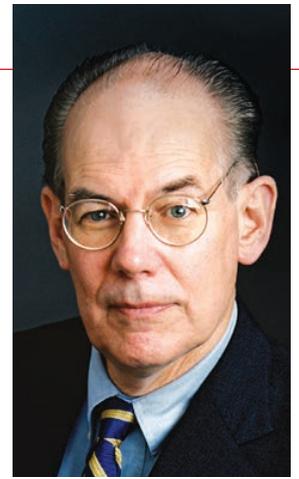
and M2 QCB 12.7mm heavy machine guns. The Navy also recently received a consignment of US-made RQ-21A Blackjack small tactical unmanned aerial systems, capable of operating over land and sea without a runway.

Amid this, the Muhammad Yunus-led interim regime — and the Army establishment in particular — must contend with an Indian security bureaucracy that has maintained a stoic silence over the Bangladesh military's growing independence and assertiveness. Since the fall of Sheikh Hasina's government in August 2024, India's security and military establishments have stood by, largely helpless, as Bangladesh's defence forces have moved swiftly into the embrace of new partners in Turkey, Pakistan and the United States.

Bangladesh has several suitors at present, but questions remain over the intended use and targets of its armed forces' newly acquired hardware and assets. These developments will undoubtedly make India's defence and security establishments distinctly uneasy. Yet, so long as the US deep state continues to wield influence in Dhaka, New Delhi has little room to act. It is a predicament of its own making, born of allowing Washington to execute its regime change plan in Bangladesh — and one whose consequences it must now endure. ■



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THE UKRAINE WAR IS ENDING, BUT NOT HOW THE WEST IMAGINED

THE MORALE OF THE UKRAINIAN ARMY HAS CRATERED. WITH US SUPPORT WANING AND NO SERIOUS EUROPEAN PLAN TO FILL THE VOID, UKRAINIAN FIGHTERS ARE ASKING THEMSELVES THE INEVITABLE QUESTION: “WHY DIE FOR A LOST CAUSE?”

As the war in Ukraine grinds on, a grim reality is emerging from the front lines—Ukraine is not just losing the battle, it is disintegrating militarily, politically, and psychologically. In sharp contrast, Russia, far from the caricature of chaotic incompetence painted by the West, has steadily rationalised its war effort. The asymmetry is now impossible to ignore.

Recent reports from even the pro-Ukrainian Kyiv Independent convey a sombre tone. One article on the embattled city of Pokrovsk (referred to in the West as “Picos”) openly admitted it would likely be the last visit there by one of their correspondents. That, in diplomatic speak, is tantamount to waving the white flag. The city’s collapse is now a matter of when, not if.

A year or two ago, Pokrovsk might have been defended bitterly. Today, its defences are tenuous at best. Similar scenes are playing out across the Eastern Front. Ukraine’s

most defensible positions—those in the Donbas—are being systematically dismantled. As these fall, the defensive line to the west is significantly weaker, offering little hope for sustained resistance.

Material shortages are crippling the Ukrainian army. Ammunition is scarce. Drones and armoured vehicles are few. The Russians, meanwhile, deploy glide bombs en masse and enjoy overwhelming advantages in infantry and artillery. On every measure that matters in war, the Ukrainians are being outmatched.

Yet perhaps more decisive than the material disparity is the psychological collapse. The morale of the Ukrainian army has cratered. With US support waning and no serious European plan to fill the void, Ukrainian fighters are asking themselves the inevitable question: “Why die for a lost cause?”

The Trump administration’s foreign policy, if one could call it that, is doing further damage. Trump has not abruptly cut off aid but has steadily withdrawn American leadership from the Ukraine coalition. He has made it abundantly clear that there will be no new pipeline of support under his watch. Even if he were willing in theory, in practice, the United States no longer has the military reserves to deliver. As for the Europeans stepping up, that remains a fantasy. They neither possess the required military hardware nor the political will.

In stark contrast, the Russians have evolved. From their stumbling start in Feb-



UKRAINE WILL NOT CEASE TO EXIST BUT WILL SHRINK INTO A 'RUMP STATE' IN THE WEST. THE WEST WILL LIKELY MAINTAIN STRONG TIES TO THIS REMNANT—PROVOKING FURTHER HOSTILITY AND POTENTIALLY PROLONGING INSTABILITY

ruary 2022, they have refined their military machine impressively. They have mobilised, trained, and deployed troops methodically. Their industrial base has been retooled for war. Their tactics have evolved to minimise casualties—despite Western myths of ‘human wave’ assaults.

Russian casualties are serious, of course, but not catastrophic.

The greater strategic failing lies not with Ukraine, but with the West. The United States—under Joe Biden—once held the reins of the Western coalition. The Ramstein Group was the high point of this leadership, enabling Ukraine to hold the line for a time. But with Trump in charge, the United States is rudderless. Leadership has been replaced with drift, coherence with chaos. The Europeans are left exposed, lacking both direction and deterrence.

Russia, meanwhile, views the conflict through an existential lens. The presence of NATO on its borders—especially in Ukraine—is unacceptable from Moscow’s perspective. Putin’s demands, laid out clearly in June last year, are not mere bargaining positions. They are non-negotiable. Yet Western discourse continues to revolve around vague notions of a “ceasefire”, ignoring the political terms that Moscow insists on. It is an exercise in futility. Without engaging those terms seriously, there will be no peace—only a prolonged, possibly frozen conflict.

Western pundits often claim that a Russian victory would be an existential threat to Europe. That argument has always lacked credibility. But if we assume that Russia does win, the psychological damage to the West will be immense. Billions invested, massive diplomatic capital spent, and moral posturing engaged—only to end up with Ukraine partitioned and defeated. That will haunt Western policymakers.

What comes next is equally worrying. Ukraine will not cease to exist but will shrink into a “rump state” in the West. The West will likely maintain strong ties to this remnant—provoking further hostility and po-

tentially prolonging instability. Simultaneously, Western posturing in the Baltics, such as threats to encircle Kaliningrad, reflects a dangerous ignorance. It is strategic brinkmanship masquerading as deterrence.

Further cracks in the transatlantic alliance are becoming apparent. German officials are openly questioning the viability of the American nuclear umbrella. Discussions with France about European nuclear deterrence are intensifying. Some in Berlin are even floating the idea of an independent German nuclear arsenal—once an unthinkable proposition. If NATO’s security guarantees erode further, the alliance may persist in name only.

It is worth recalling that during the Cold War, France withdrew from NATO’s military command over concerns about US dominance of its nuclear deterrent. Today, such disagreements are likely to be more severe, especially as the existential Soviet threat no longer unifies the alliance.

Beyond Europe, Trump’s chaotic foreign policy is playing out disastrously. He has dragged the United States into a war with Iran, backed a brutal Israeli campaign in Gaza, and abandoned the strategic caution that Biden (for all his faults) exercised. US foreign policy is no longer driven by doctrine but by improvisation and impulse.

Meanwhile, Trump’s domestic standing is faltering. Even within MAGA circles, disillusionment is rising. In short, Trump is flailing abroad and bleeding support at home. His foreign policy team lacks depth, experience, and credibility. He relies on ideologues and loyalists rather than experts. The result is a drift towards geopolitical irrelevance for the United States and growing disorder within the West.

Ukraine’s defeat, then, is not just a battlefield loss—it is the collapse of a Western illusion. An illusion that the post-Cold War world could be shaped unilaterally. An illusion that the West could wage proxy wars indefinitely. And an illusion that Russia, if pushed far enough, would fold. None of those illusions has survived contact with reality. ■



Kalanithi Maran



M K Stalin



Dayanidhi Maran

Inside the Maran Truce

BLOOD, BUSINESS & BALLOTS

Why Tamil Nadu CM Stalin Moved Swiftly to Contain a Family Feud

When DMK MP and former Union Telecom Minister Dayanidhi Maran delivered a blistering legal notice to his elder brother, media mogul Kalanithi Maran, in June this year, the charges read like a script from a corporate thriller. Dayanidhi's notice alleged that in 2003, while their father Murasoli Maran was gravely ill, Kalanithi fraudulently seized control of 12 lakh shares in Sun TV, securing majority control of the ₹24,000-crore company, sidelining other family members. Over the following two decades, Kalanithi allegedly pocketed more than ₹6,000 crore in dividends. Additionally, Kalanithi's wife, Kaveri, enjoyed an annual salary of ₹87.5 crore, amassing huge wealth at the cost of others in the family.

On the surface, it was yet another tale of a business family imploding under the weight of money and legacy. In reality, it was a political emer-

gency — one that shook the ruling DMK to its core, forcing the Chief Minister, M K Stalin, into an unusual role: crisis manager to a family feud.

Within days of the legal notice going public, Stalin decided to pitch in. His mediation team was deliberately small and loyal: his son and Deputy Chief Minister Udhayanidhi Stalin; veteran journalist N Ram; Dravidar Kazhagam President K Veeramani; and the brothers' sister Anbukarasi. Over three discreet rounds — two in person, one by video link —

Stalin pushed for a truce that would keep the feud out of public and legal arenas.

Behind closed doors, political heavyweights and trusted mediators facilitated a complex negotiation featuring high-value cash and real estate. According to sources, Dayanidhi had initially demanded ₹1,500 crore; Kalanithi offered ₹500 crore. The final terms were reportedly more generous — approximately ₹800 crore in cash, plus nearly an acre of prime real estate in Chennai's elite Boat Club area, cumulatively valued at several hundred crores. The deal followed a pattern: Anbukarasi's earlier dispute had reportedly ended with a ₹500-crore payout.

Critically, the agreement did not involve reversing the contested 2003 share transfer, and no admission of wrongdoing was made. The legal notice was withdrawn, and the feud was effectively buried — out of court, out of the headlines, and away from

WHY STALIN STEPS IN

- Protect DMK's Media Megaphone**
 Sun TV's credibility crucial for 2026 elections
- Project Strong Leadership**
 Family unity = political authority
- Retain Dayanidhi's Political Capital**
 Avoid alienating a heavy-weight
- Avoid Regulatory Exposure**
 Prevent SEBI, SFIO, CBI probes

CHARGES AGAINST KALANITHI



Illegal Share Transfer 12 lakh shares to self @ ₹10 each

Massive Under valuation Worth ₹3,500 cr, bought for ₹1.2 cr

Dividend Gains ₹5,926 cr (2003–2023) + ₹455 cr (2024)

Questionable Transfers 2005 deal with Mallika Maran; alleged misuse of funds

High Executive Pay Wife's salary ₹87.5 cr/year

Threats of Escalation SFIO, SEBI, ED, licence cancellations

Family Stake Dilution From 50% each to 20% each

THE SETTLEMENT



WHAT DAYANIDHI GETS

₹800 cr in cash

4 plots near Chennai's Boat Club Road

Assurance on shareholding concerns from 2003 restructuring

WHAT DAYANIDHI GIVES

Withdraws June 10 legal notice

Keeps terms confidential

Agrees not to approach SFIO, SEBI, ED

regulators. Why did the CM of a state, in an unusual manner, become brazenly desperate to resolve a seemingly family dispute? The Marans are not just media barons. They are integral to Tamil Nadu's most powerful political dynasty — nephews of the late DMK patriarch M Karunanidhi, cousins to the CM himself. Kalanithi runs the state's most influential broadcaster, whose editorial reach rivals the party machinery. Moreover, Dayanidhi's political value is not negligible. A three-time MP and a recognisable face in both Parliament and the media, he retained considerable influence in Delhi and Mumbai's corporate corridors. Alienating him entirely could have created

a new power centre or even a source of dissent within the DMK's senior ranks.

For Stalin, the timing of the feud could not have been worse. The 2026 state elections were less than two years away. The BJP–AIADMK axis is stirring again. The DMK's relationship with Sun TV is not merely historical—it is strategic. For decades, the channel has amplified the party's message, countered criticism, and shaped voter perceptions. A regulatory crackdown by enforcement agencies, as demanded by Dayanidhi, on its operations could destabilise the party's propaganda machinery just as it heads into a high-stakes electoral cycle.

A prolonged public fight in the Maran

family risked more than embarrassment. It could erode investor confidence in Sun TV, invite regulatory scrutiny into its books, and hand political opponents a potent line of attack about dynastic greed. “This was a crisis that could not be left to run its course,” a senior DMK functionary said. “If the fight reached the courts, it would have snowballed into a media and political disaster.” For the CM, allowing the case to play out in public would have been political self-harm.

So, resolving the crisis was a high-stakes masterstroke. The truce preserved party unity, restored investor calm (Sun TV's shares had dropped nearly 4% amid the turmoil) and avoided a freefall into regulatory probes.

And yet, insiders caution that the peace is fragile. A person close to the family said: “The grievances haven't gone away — they've only been buried under cash and compromise.” V.C. Barathi, a Tamil television industry analyst warned that while Stalin's mediation halted a public spectacle, it may not have addressed deep-rooted fractures within the Karunanidhi-Marani dynasty.

What remains unresolved is how enduring this truce will be once the election dust settles. The compensation cleared the air, but the trust fractures remain. As one observer put it, the peace may hold only until “the ATMs are switched back on” — a tongue-in-cheek yet sobering nod to the “ATM brothers” moniker that the Marans sometimes attract in political discourse. But long-term, the question lingers: can a dynasty so deeply defined by legacy, loyalty, and latent strife truly be reconciled with a cheque and a handshake — or will deeper fissures re-emerge when pressure returns? ■



B. Srikumar is a journalist and political analyst based in Chennai

The Fantastic Four: FIRST STEPS



Marvel's **The Fantastic Four: First Steps** strides in with a retro-slick swagger and a blast of cinematic verve. This alternate-universe reboot is a full-on visual feast—sleek in design, brimming with mind-bending effects, and soaked in a high-voltage sci-fi aesthetic. It sets a bold new tone for the franchise, and frankly, it's about time.

But what truly tickles the soul is the emotional weight tucked beneath all that spectacle. Amidst the multiversal mayhem, there's a mother stepping up for her son—and that simple, tender thread becomes the film's beating heart.

Vanessa Kirby is sensational as Sue Storm—poised, powerful, and quietly devastating. She brings just the right touch of grace and grit. Joseph Quinn's Human Torch is a delightful mix of cocky charm and bruised vulnerability, making

Johnny Storm more than just hot-headed flash.

Pedro Pascal's Reed Richards is refreshingly grounded, while Ebon Moss-Bachrach adds real pathos to Ben Grimm. The onscreen chemistry

among the foursome feels organic—snappy, warm, and never overdone—anchoring the cosmic chaos in character-led storytelling.

Then there's Galactus, who arrives with the kind of cosmic swagger you'd expect, reshaping the scale of threat entirely. Julia Garner's take on the Silver Surfer is a welcome twist—haunted, elegant, and convincingly torn. And let's not forget little Franklin, whose pint-sized powers pack a universe-sized punch.

Director Matt Shakman doesn't just serve up another Marvel instalment—he reinvents the recipe with style, substance, and a surprising amount of heart. *First Steps* is cheeky, charged, and just what the Marvel universe needed. Fans will be chuffed—and rightly so. ■



LOOK AHEAD

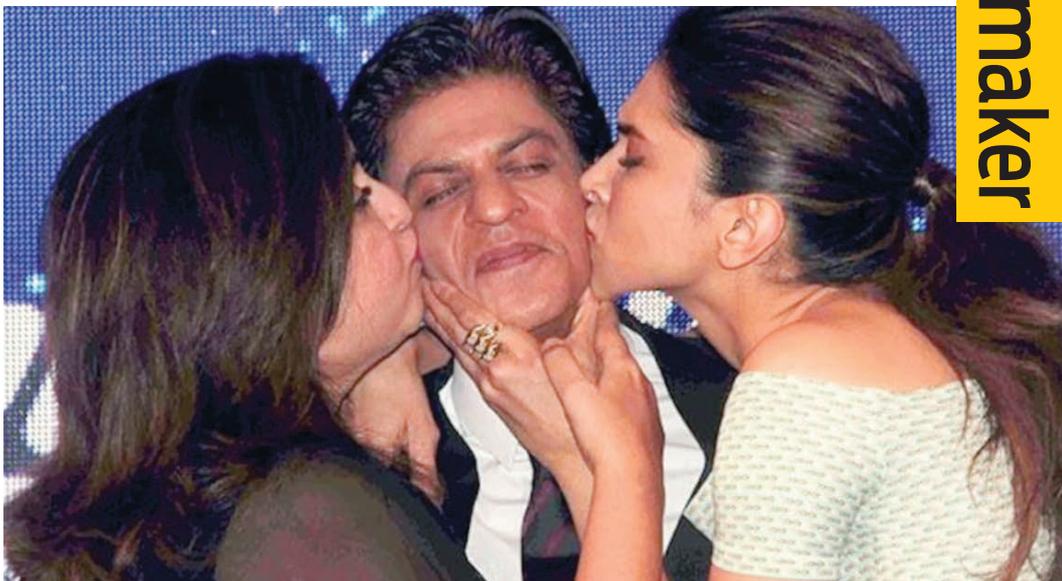
The movie buffs, this September will have many reasons to cheer with the upcoming chillers and thrillers apart from the newer franchise films, as it brings a packed slate of Hollywood releases in India. **The Conjuring: Last Rites** will bring back its horror saga, and **The Long Walk**, based on Stephen King's novel, will explore a dystopian world of future America. **Downton**

Abbey: The Grand Finale, as the third and final installment of this series, and the intense crime drama **One Battle After Another** are also on the cards. Besides, a psychological thriller, **HIM**, and the whimsically adventurous **A big Bold Beautiful Journey** are also slated for release next month. **The Strangers: Chapter 2** will make you fear

intruders wearing masks, exhibiting a fresh round of brutality. You are bound to experience supernatural scares, experience the dystopian games, and present emotional farewells this September. ■



Praveen Nagda
(Festival Director, KidzCIN-EMA and Culture Cinema Film Festivals)



Brown, Bold and unfiltered

There she was—Charithra Chandran, glowing unapologetically brown under the London sun at Wimbledon—and the world couldn't look away. The *Bridgerton* star, British-Indian and effortlessly radiant, had stolen the spotlight from Centre Court with nothing but her presence. No filters. No gimmicks. It was just her.

As global social media buzzed with awe, one thing was clear: brown beauty had arrived. But back in India, where fairness creams still fly off the shelves and porcelain perfection is imported from

Seoul, Charithra's skin remains a quiet rebellion. While the billion-dollar industry profits from self-doubt, girls like her are redefining the glow-up. "I'm a brown girl too," someone tweeted, "roasted daily by the South Indian sun. And I wear it like armour."

Here's to Charithra—and every brown girl rewriting the beauty code with melanin, confidence, and unfiltered grace. ■



India to SRK

'SORRY FOR THE DELAY'

It took three decades, a global fanbase, and a few broken records, but Shah Rukh Khan has finally been handed what the nation owed him—a National Award—for *Jawan*. Wife Gauri and the Khan clan beamed with pride, fans wept, and the internet screamed with joy. Deepika, Kajol, Farah, Rahman—the entire glitterati lit up their feeds. In a sling but still stealing hearts, SRK accepted the honour with his trademark charm—calling the moment “mass” and “humbling”, and promising popcorn and more magic soon—with a half-hug and a wink. Moral of the story? Legends may be late to the party, but when they arrive, they bring the whole damn crown with them. ■

Lababu: Not Cute, Not Perfect



Labubu, the snaggle-toothed misfit by Hong Kong—Belgian artist Kasing Lung, has become a phenomenon in India. Born in a 2015 fairytale and popularised by Pop Mart's blind-box collectibles, it's no mere toy. Unlike syrupy characters, Labubu is flawed, chaotic, and endearingly odd—perfect for meme-raised Gen Z

seeking both rebellion and comfort. Each figure is a mood, a story, resonating with a generation embracing imperfection. From Ananya Panday's airport looks to Delhi street stalls, authentic or bootleg, Labubu is everywhere. In a land of countless tales, it's a plushy parable of imperfection—and for many, more of a coping mechanism than collectible. ■

System Down, Morals Up



When Japan's electronic toll system hit the snooze button for 38 hours, over 900,000 drivers got a free ride—literally. The barriers lifted, fees vanished, and 'Big Brother' wasn't watching. Perfect time to bolt, right? Not in Japan. Instead of flooring it and forgetting it, over 24,000 drivers voluntarily paid their tolls online after their free ride. No threats, no fines, just an appeal to conscience. And the people responded like samurai on a sacred mission. The Japanese turned a system glitch into a national virtue signal. It wasn't just about paying tolls—it was about honour, trust, and that old-school belief that doing the right thing doesn't need surveillance. Who knew road etiquette could double as a moral compass? Japan did. And it just raised the global bar—again. ■



Mind the Tech

Imagine scrolling Instagram or scribbling your name—all with a mere thought. Elon Musk's Neuralink has cooked up something wild. NeuraChip, a brain-implanted gizmo the size of a coin, links one's neurons to his laptop. No wires. No hands. Just pure telepathic vibes. Here's how it works: a chip is nestled neatly into your brain, with 128 ultra-fine threads poking into your motor cortex like tiny tech tentacles. These pick up brain signals and—voilà!—you're mentally moving cursors and clicking buttons like a Jedi with Wi-Fi. The real kicker? In July 2025, a paralysed woman named Audrey Crews, out of action for two decades, got the chip. Days later, she was drawing hearts, writing her name, and ordering digital pizza—with her mind. Who knew the future would be so... brainy? Elon's gone full sci-fi—and this time, it just might stick. ■

Devotion Denied

In Kolhapur, they didn't protest for roads, water, or jobs. They protested for 'her'—Mahadevi, the 36-year-old elephant who, for decades, wasn't just a temple fixture but family, faith and folklore all rolled into one. When news broke that she was being carted off to Gujarat's posh Vantara sanctuary, the locals erupted. Thousands took to the streets, pelting stones, blocking roads, and even boycotting Jio SIMs—because Mukesh Ambani's wildlife facility was where she was headed. For them, Mahadevi wasn't just an animal; she was a deity on four legs, a part of every festival, every procession, every prayer. But for the courts, emotions didn't trump ethics. The Bombay High Court—and later, the Supreme Court—ruled that the ailing elephant deserved dignity, medical care, and socialisation, not chains and solitary confinement. And so, under tight security and heavier hearts, Mahadevi left. Kolhapur grieved, Gujarat gained a goddess. ■





The author is an assistant professor of English at South Asian University. She is also a poet and writer

In a dimly lit subway corner in Hangzhou, a young woman clutches a stranger tightly. They do not speak. A timer ticks away five minutes. When it ends, they gently part ways. She hands him 30 yuan—about ₹350—and walks off. In China's bustling cities, this is no longer an oddity.

It's a growing phenomenon known as 'Man Mum', and it's quietly reshaping how we understand emotional survival. Here, women are paying men—not for dates or flirtation, but for maternal-style hugs. These are emotionally neutral, physically comforting embraces—offered on street corners, in malls, or discreet public spaces. It's intimate, but not romantic. Gentle, but strictly platonic. A stranger's arms become a substitute for something far more intimate—motherly affection. And increasingly, it's becoming a lifeline for women coping with an emotionally desolate landscape: long working hours, distant families, and a society still unsure how to address vulnerability without shame.

A 'Man Mum' is usually a soft-spoken man—perhaps a student, a fitness trainer, or someone with the right blend of warmth, patience, and emotional safety. Booked through apps like WeChat or Xiaohongshu, he represents motherly affection that many women say they lacked growing up, or can no longer access in adult life. What they offer isn't a romantic connection—it's a refuge.

While the concept may provoke discomfort, its roots stretch deep into China's social fabric. Rapid urbanisation has drawn millions into cities, isolating them from family networks. Emotional repression, a cultural legacy shaped by both Confucian ideals and decades of political restraint, means many grow up starved of healthy hugs. Parents often refrain from hugging their children; physical affection is minimal. And then there's the legacy of the One-Child Policy—a generation raised as 'little emperors', burdened with pressure but deprived of emotional expression.

A paid hug, hence, becomes far more than it appears. It's a quiet rebellion against stoicism. A reclaiming of emotional agency. Particularly for women, it marks a shift: no longer waiting for affection from partners or family, they are choosing to seek comfort on their own terms—even if it must be purchased.

The 'Man Mum' isn't just a service—it's a symptom. A symptom of deeper emotional deprivation and the desperate, dignified ways people seek comfort. What started as a quiet online request—'Can someone hug me for five minutes?'—has become a mirror held up to the world. A world where technology connects, but hugs elude us.

And yet, this is not solely a Chinese story. In Japan, 'hug cafés' offer similar solace. In the United States, professional cuddlers provide non-sexual, therapeutic touch by the hour. South Korea has 'rent-a-listener' services where people pay only to be heard. It's the rise of the emotional gig economy—where presence, warmth, and connection are sold to those who need them most.

India, too, is emotionally stretched—young, urbanised, overworked, and lonelier than it cares to admit. But here, hugs remain cloaked in suspicion. An embrace is either romantic, parental, or patronising, never neutral. Women seeking physical comfort risk being judged or misunderstood, with physical affection often moralised or sexualised. Public intimacy is policed, pla-

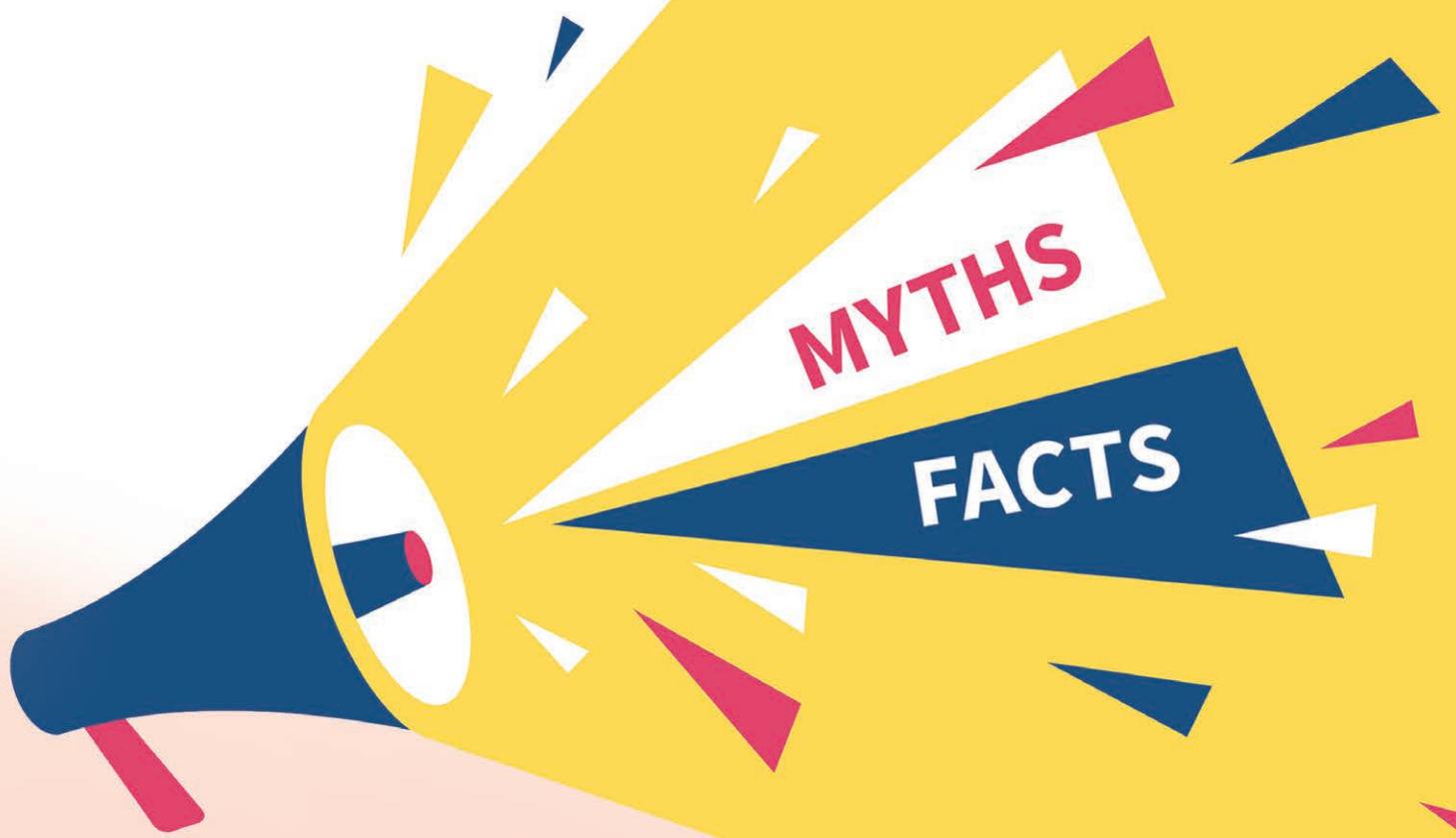
tonic hugs are rare, and emotional support still comes dressed in spiritual language or filtered through therapy apps. But the hunger remains. Often, even married couples, and especially women, are left craving a normal hug that is not a part of an irregular, mechanical sexual gesture. A hug is both emotional comfort and a reminder that we exist, yet it's rarely seen as a part of our daily, mechanical lives.

Sociologists warn that we are entering an age of 'emotional outsourcing'—where care, warmth, and listening are becoming transactions. While some fear this reduces intimacy to a commodity, others argue it's a form of survival in societies where traditional care networks are collapsing. As China's 'Man Mum' trend spreads, it raises uncomfortable questions about modern emotional emptiness, cultural restraint, and a readiness for marketing 'affection'. But, in the end, what's more human than the need to be held—without judgement, without words, without fear? Let's hug our vulnerable selves, tightly! ■

FIVE MINUTES OF LOVE

When a Hug Becomes a Lifeline





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