

EDITORIAL HIGHLIGHTS

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GS 2: INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS THE HINDU PAGE: 01

Ensure peace, freedom of navigation, PM urges Iran

Modi meets Iran President on sidelines of SCO summit, calls for stability in West Asia; Pezeshkian requests India to use its 'extensive contacts' to help with the dialogue process, blames U.S. for war

Kallol Bhattacharjee
NEW DELHI

In the first top-level meeting between Iran and India since the beginning of the war on Iran in February, Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Monday met Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian in Kyrgyzstan's Bishkek and urged him to ensure peace and stability in West Asia and freedom of navigation in the Strait of Hormuz.

Mr. Pezeshkian blamed Israel and the U.S. for the conflict and requested Mr. Modi to "use India's extensive contacts with various parties" and help the dialogue process.

After the meeting that took place on the sidelines of the SCO summit, Mr. Modi said on X, "Reiterated our commitment to strengthening India's long-standing friendship with Iran across diverse sectors. We want to expand and diversify our trade basket in the times to come. We had



Strategic meet: Prime Minister Narendra Modi with Iran President Masoud Pezeshkian in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan on Monday. PTI

a discussion on the prevailing situation in the region. India will continue to support all efforts aimed at ensuring lasting peace." The Ministry of External Affairs said Mr. Modi called for freedom of navigation and commerce.

"Civilians and civilian infrastructure, including commercial shipping and seafarers must not be harmed under any circumstances," he said.

Mr. Modi said he looked

forward to welcoming Mr. Pezeshkian to India for the upcoming BRICS summit.

President Pezeshkian said his country had a "responsibility" to defend the Iranian people "from danger and insecurity and to create conditions necessary for them to achieve peace, tranquillity and security". He said Iran was "focused on ensuring peace and security and resolving issues through dialogue and negotiations."

Mr. Pezeshkian blamed Israel and the U.S. for creating "restrictions and obstacles" before Iran and said that "Despite the pressures and restrictions being imposed in an attempt to obstruct Iran's relations with other countries, Tehran is ready to expand its cooperation with India."

He referred to the talks with the U.S. on a ceasefire and said, "The Islamic Republic of Iran has remained committed to the obligations it has undertaken within the framework of the agreements, but unfortunately, the American side has failed to fulfil its commitments."

In June, Mr. Pezeshkian had invited Mr. Modi to the funeral of the slain Supreme Leader Ali Khomeini that was held in July. India was represented by a team that included the Governor of Bihar Lt. Gen. Syed Ata Hasnain (retd.).

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GS 2: INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS THE HINDU PAGE: 05

PM calls for 'end of war' at meeting with Putin

The two leaders discuss conflicts in West Asia and Black Sea region, impact on maritime trade and safety of Indian seafarers; Putin highlights positive trends in Moscow-New Delhi economic ties

Kallol Bhattacharjee
NEW DELHI

Prim Minister Narendra Modi on Monday met Russian President Vladimir Putin on the sidelines of the SCO summit in Bishkek and said the world "must move from endless war to end of war for the benefit of humanity".

The External Affairs Ministry said the two leaders discussed conflicts in West Asia and in the Black Sea region, where, in recent months, Indian seafarers have been attacked by both Russian and Ukrainian forces.

"Had extensive discussions with President Putin. Discussed the full range of the India-Russia Special and Privileged Strategic Partnership. It is gladdening to see significant progress across various sectors in recent years. Focus areas for India-Russia friendship remain energy, innovation, space, fertilizers, and people-to-people linkages," said Prime Minister Modi.

In a statement, the External Affairs Ministry said,



Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Russian President Vladimir Putin during a meeting in Bishkek on Monday. ANI

Number of Indian students in Russia increased almost seven-fold in a decade, says Putin

"They also shared perspectives on key regional and global issues of mutual interest, including the conflicts in West Asia and the Black Sea region which have impacted maritime trade and the safety and security of Indian seafarers. Prime Minister reiterated that dialogue and diplomacy was the way forward in

resolving conflicts." The upcoming BRICS summit featured prominently in the discussion, and Mr. Modi said he "looks forward to welcoming President Putin in India for the 18th BRICS summit on 12-13 September".

80th anniversary of ties

The Bishkek meeting between Mr. Modi and Mr. Putin featured in talks during External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar's visit to the Kremlin on August 24, when Mr. Putin had indicated that he would meet Prime Minister Modi in

Kyrgyzstan and also at the BRICS summit in Delhi.

"This time, our meeting is taking place on the eve of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation Summit - an organisation that works to deepen contacts among the countries of the Global South and East, promotes the region's socioeconomic and cultural development, and contributes to building a just multipolar world," said President Putin in his remarks, reminding that next year will mark the 80th anniversary of establishment of diplomatic relations between New Delhi and Moscow.

Mr. Putin noted that the number of Indian students in Russia has increased almost seven-fold in a decade, and currently 40,000 Indians are studying in Russia.

President Putin said trade and economic cooperation between Russia and India is showing positive trends, with trade turnover increasing by more than 2%. He noted the growth in tourist exchanges between the two countries, with a 16% increase in 2025.

GS 2: POLITY THE HINDU PAGE: 08

Political demography, the future of democracy

What is common between Elon Musk, M.K. Stalin, a Catholic bishop in Kerala, N. Chandrababu Naidu, C. Joseph Vijay and Mohan Bhagwat? All of them are asking 'their' people to have more children.

The political consequences of changing patterns of birth, death and the movement of people are being felt the world over. The ongoing Census 2027 operations in India have brought a sense of urgency to this question of uneven population trends across regions and communities. The impending question of delimitation of Lok Sabha constituencies, which is to follow the first Census after 2026, adds another layer of urgency.

Natalism, or pronatalism, is a belief system or policy stance that encourages human reproduction and high birth rates, and there are vocal advocates of this these days in communities around the world. Elections and political debates increasingly involve questions of fertility, migration, ageing, identity and belonging. Mr. Musk speaks of falling birth rates as a major threat to civilisation, particularly western. In India, Mr. Naidu, president of the Telugu Desam Party (TDP) and Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh, has urged Telugu families to have more children. Mr. Stalin, president of the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam and former Tamil Nadu Chief Minister, invoked the idea of having "16 children", rhetorically, for Tamils. Mr. Bhagwat, Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) chief, has explicitly called for Indian, rather Hindu, families to have three children. The Catholic church asks its members to have bigger families. In the most recent development, the Tamil Nadu government, led by Mr. Vijay, Chief Minister and founder and president of the Tamilaga Vettri Kazhagam (TVK), has extended one-year maternity leave to women government employees having a third child in Tamil Nadu. In 2024, West Bengal and Trinamool Congress (TMC) Minister Firhad Hakim's remark that Muslims could soon become a majority in the State drew criticism, with the TMC distancing itself from the comment and condemning it.

Take the subject seriously

All this makes political demography – the study of how population changes, such as births, deaths, ageing, and migration, affect government policies, political power, and international security – more salient. Sadly, while there is abundant politics around demography, true scholarship is being stifled by conspiracy theorists seeking political capital and by demographic sceptics who view any discussion of the subject as nativism or xenophobia.

While the global population will continue to grow for some time, that growth is uneven across political boundaries and social groups. India itself is moving rapidly through a fertility transition. India's total fertility rate has fallen below replacement level, to 2.0 children per woman



Varghese K.
George

according to the National Family Health Survey (NFHS)-5. Fertility has declined across every major religious community; though the pace of decline has been uneven across regions and communities, the gap is narrowing. Pew Research, using NFHS data, found that Muslim fertility declined from 4.4 children per woman in 1992 to 2.4 in 2019-21, fertility declined among every major religious group and fertility gaps between religious communities have narrowed.

Demographic factors will challenge the existing electoral process. The 'One person, one vote, one value' principle in India is not applied blindly, but in consonance with group rights of representation. Social federalism and political federalism are both part of India's democratic design. Rich and poor people both move, though for different reasons. In recent years, around two lakh Indians have been giving up their Indian citizenship on average, each year. The poor also move – from places with fewer opportunities to places with greater opportunities. According to the 2011 Census, India had about 45 crore internal migrants. Some regions are ageing, while others will remain younger for longer. Kerala has the highest median age in India, estimated at 37 years in 2026, and this is projected to reach 47 years by 2051. The median age in Uttar Pradesh is approximately 26.9 years, making it one of the youngest States in India. India's projected median age is about 29.2 years in 2026. Even by 2036, the median age of Uttar Pradesh is projected to reach only 31.7 years, according to some estimates.

What is in focus

Natalism is simplistic rhetoric in response to complex realities. No country or society has easily or consistently reversed a sustained decline in fertility. Countries such as Japan, South Korea, China, and Italy have introduced financial incentives, childcare support, parental leave, and other pronatalist measures, but none has succeeded in restoring fertility to the levels seen in earlier decades. South Korea, despite extensive family policies, continues to have extraordinarily low fertility. Italy, too, has continued to experience declining births despite financial incentives and family-support measures. This suggests that fertility is not simply a question of money. It is tied to housing, employment, education, gender relations, the cost of raising children, and people's expectations about the future.

The reason for continued population growth in many societies is increasingly expanding lifespan and population momentum rather than increasing births. The spread of that growth is uneven across political boundaries and social groups. Similarly, wealth creation and distribution remain uneven and will remain so. Fewer people are being born, people are living longer, moving faster and farther; these factors in combination with demands of democracy and federalism raise challenges that require cool thinking and new imaginative capacity.

Politics must move from profiting from demographic change to sensitively managing and navigating its consequences

Studying the interlinkage between politics and demography is a marginal field within political science and demography, but it should not remain so. In many countries, such as the United States and India, the question of federalism is also in play alongside demography and the economy. A balance will have to be achieved both across social groups nationally and across States in terms of development outcomes, growth, opportunities, and political power. India's southern States, for instance, achieved fertility decline earlier and now face the possibility of ageing faster than States with relatively younger populations.

The political question is not simply who has more people, but who has invested in development, who has fewer young people entering the workforce, who needs resources, and how representation should respond to these differences. In a utopian world, if all of humanity were one, no consideration other than individual identity should come into play. But these questions are, for better or worse, framed in terms of group identities. Recognition of group identities is not alien to democratic practice; it can be an integral and essential part of it. The political problem, therefore, is not that groups exist. It is how democratic institutions and development planning can accommodate changing group identities without turning demographic differences into permanent political antagonism.

Impact on planning and politics

The changes in demographic patterns affect both planning and politics. Groups with larger populations will claim greater political power, while groups that are shrinking will feel increasingly insecure. As the number of older and retired people grows relative to the working-age population, their care will require higher commitment of national resources. When these demographic differences vary across regions, they can create friction between States as resources and people move across borders – from regions where there is more to regions where there is less. Regional demographic differences can also cause disputes over taxation, fiscal transfers, development, and political representation.

World over, conversations about demographic shifts have become a source of diatribe. While one group talks about replacement theory and fears that its race is being wiped out, another dismisses such concerns as conspiracy theories. Demographic change is neither a conspiracy to replace any community nor an imagined phenomenon. It is real, natural, and likely to be difficult to reverse. Politics needs to shift from trying to profit from demographic change to sensitively managing and navigating it. The question, then, is whether there can be a more expansive idea of "The People."

GS 2 & 4: INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS AND ETHICS THE HINDU PAGE: 08

The Baltic Way — Gandhi's imprint on Baltic freedom

August 23, 2026, marked the 37th anniversary of the Baltic Way, the historic 1989 human chain that became a watershed moment in the Gandhian-inspired Singing Revolution in Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, culminating in the restoration of Baltic independence in 1990-91. Conversations across the Baltic states revealed powerful personal reflections on the Baltic Way and Gandhian non-violence: "We studied India's freedom struggle and chose Gandhian non-violent resistance to reclaim our national freedom from Soviet rule." "We watched the film *Gandhi* on Lithuanian national television, telecast for 24 hours." "It was thrilling to join a non-violent protest against the Soviet army at Vilnius Cathedral Square; even as a bullet passed near my ear, I stood firm." "Baltic Way matters a lot for us today."

A turning point

The Singing Revolution (1986-91), shaped by songs and non-violence during Mikhail Gorbachev's perestroika and glasnost, reached a turning point with the Baltic Way, when two million people formed a 675-kilometre human chain from Tallinn through Riga to Vilnius, demanding freedom from Soviet rule. It remains a powerful symbol of unity, solidarity, and freedom. The Baltic Way was organised on the 50th anniversary of the 1939 Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact to expose its secret protocol, which divided Eastern Europe into German and Soviet spheres of influence, and paved the way for the Soviet annexation of the Baltic states in 1940. Having gained independence in 1918, the Baltics lost it after 22 years. The Baltic Way exposed Soviet-era repression, leading to the Soviet Union's acknowledgement of the secret protocol's existence and the Baltic states' re-independence in 1991. Its global media coverage drew international attention, while its inscription in



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The Mahatma's principles of non-violence have forged enduring bonds between the Baltics and India

UNESCO's Memory of the World Register and Guinness World Records recognition reinforced its international legacy.

An enduring influence

Gandhi's ideas travelled globally, inspiring movements from the American civil rights struggle to South Africa and beyond. Today, the Baltic Way reflects the enduring relevance of his principles of non-violence, truth, and human dignity, while echoing the non-cooperation and civil disobedience of his 1930 Dandi March.

Gandhi showed that moral authority could outweigh military power through ahimsa, satyagraha, civil resistance, mass mobilisation, and the principle that a nation's rule depends on people's consent and cooperation. The Baltic Way and the Singing Revolution stand as a testimony to the success of people's power and civilian-based defence drawn from the Gandhi-led Indian freedom movement.

The Singing Revolution's leaders drew on global traditions of non-violent resistance. Latvian scholar Maija Küle noted that, lacking local theorists, they turned to Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr.; Latvia's earlier cultural links with India may also have encouraged this attraction to Gandhian ideas. Lithuania, too, played a key role in developing non-violent civilian-based defence inspired by Gandhi.

In a 2012 conversation with this writer, the late Prof. Gražina Miniutaitė, a leading ideologue of Lithuania's Singing Revolution, recalled that non-violence was widely understood from the outset as essential. The December 1990 "Republic in Danger" declaration urged adherence to "non-violence and non-cooperation with the occupational authorities".

Unlike other thinkers of non-violence, Miniutaitė regarded Gandhi as the most successful in both theory and practice, demonstrating that non-violent struggle could

effectively resist foreign rule. Richard Attenborough's 1982 film *Gandhi* was broadcast on Lithuanian national television to educate citizens about non-violent resistance. Confronting Soviet troops, people repeated: "We won't fight," "We follow Gandhi," and "We are peaceful people."

Building closer ties

Since 1992, the Baltic states have drawn on Gandhian and cultural ties to deepen relations with India, expanding cooperation in technology, sustainability, the blue economy, and culture. The Government of India's Ministry of Commerce and Industry estimates show that India's total bilateral trade with Lithuania reached \$490.61 million; with Latvia, \$475.66 million, and with Estonia, \$219.69 million in 2025-26.

Baltic political discourse reflects Gandhian influence through Gandhi's Lithuanian-born Litvak "soulmate" Hermann Kallenbach; Vydušas's engagement with Gandhian thought; Antanas Poška's meetings with Gandhi; Sonja Schlesin's secretaryship; and Estonian translations of Gandhi by Linnart Hall. These ties continue through annual commemorations of the 2015 Gandhi-Kallenbach monument in Kallenbach's birthplace, Rusnė, most recently in July 2026; the Kallenbach Memorial Lectures; and the India-Lithuania Friendship Award (this year, it honoured the people of Goa during the 400th anniversary of missionary Andrius Rudamina). India has also gifted Gandhi memorials to the Baltics, including a bust unveiled in Latvia in 2019 and a statue installed in Estonia in 2025.

The Baltic Way endures as a chain of freedom and ideas, linking courage with conscience. Its contemporary significance is multifaceted: a model of non-violent resistance, a site of contested memory, a narrative in Russia-West tensions, and ultimately, a tribute to Gandhi and India.

GS 3: ECONOMY THE HINDU PAGE: 08

10 years of UPI: How can it expand new frontiers for digital payments?

Faster penetration of affordable smartphones and Internet, Aadhaar-based identity framework, and the government's push to digital payments created a perfect environment for the exponential growth of UPI, making it a volume giant. However, it is not yet a value giant.

NEWS ANALYSIS

Santosh V. Perumal

The Unified Payments Interface (UPI), celebrating its tenth anniversary in August this year, is unique in many ways as it democratised technology, altered consumers spending behaviour and elevated India's position from a consumer of global payment technologies to an exporter of digital public infrastructure.

Launched in 2016 with 21 banks, UPI is an open-access platform built by National Payments Corporation of India (NPCI). It now has over 700 lenders, daily processing about 66 crore transactions – a milestone recognised by the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

An ACI Worldwide report said India accounted for 129.3 billion real-time payment transactions or 49% of global volume, followed by Brazil with 37.4 billion transactions (14%), Thailand with 20.4 billion (8%), China with 17.2 billion (6%) and South Korea with 9.1 billion (3%).

Volume giant

Faster penetration of affordable smartphones and Internet, Aadhaar-based identity framework, and the government's push to digital payments created a perfect environment for



Road ahead: Next decade should focus on globalisation and financial innovation. GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCK

the exponential growth of UPI, making it a volume giant. However, it is not yet a value giant. Officials, directly and indirectly, view that a platform handling trillions of rupees annually cannot depend indefinitely on a zero-cost model.

Annual UPI transactions scaled from just 1.78 crore in FY17 to more than 24.162 crore in FY26 – nearly a 13,000-fold jump. Value expanded from ₹0.07 lakh crore to around ₹314 lakh crore during the same period.

Retail payments accounted for about 81% UPI's transactions by volume in FY25, but constituted mere 9-10% of total value, while systems like RTGS dominate large-value transfers.

Displaying financial in-



An ACI Worldwide report said India accounted for 129.3 bn real-time payment transactions or 49% of global volume, followed by Brazil with 37.4 bn transactions (14%)

clusion, anybody from a street hawker or a small merchant to auto drivers with a QR code can now accept digital payments without investing in expensive point-of-sale infrastructure.

Simultaneously, the reduced transaction costs and expanded customer engagement also forced banks to rethink their traditional payment revenue

models.

UPI's main competitors
Brazil's Pix is the closest comparison to UPI. Meanwhile, China's digital payment revolution was driven mainly by private technology platforms – Ant Group's Alipay and Tencent's WeChat Pay.

The U.S. payments remain dominated by card networks such as Visa and Mastercard, along with bank-based systems like ACH. The U.K. has Faster Payments, while Singapore has PayNow. Although UPI leads in transaction volume, global acceptance and merchant integration are the areas where global networks have an advantage.

The payment infrastructure is fast becoming a key

component of economic diplomacy. UPI is now operational globally, with adoption and acceptance expanding across almost a dozen countries. The objective is to facilitate payments for Indian travellers and create cross-border payment connectivity that can reduce dependence on traditional correspondent banking channels. For decades, global payment systems were dominated by card networks and closed-loop platforms.

India – which demonstrated that a low-cost, interoperable, real-time payment system could operate at massive scale – has attracted global interests. New Delhi has signed digital public infrastructure cooperation agreements with as many as 23 countries, covering areas such as digital identity, payments and data exchange. Namibia, Peru, South Africa, Kenya, Rwanda and other African countries have had discussions on adopting India's digital payment infrastructure approach.

Next frontiers

The UPI's first decade marked building scale, adoption and trust, which have been achieved diligently. The next decade should ideally focus on sustainability, globalisation, and financial innovation. The time has come for the UPI to move beyond its

role as payment gateway and evolve into a new generation of embedded finance, spanning digital lending, insurance products, investments, wealth management and cross-border remittances.

Key challenges ahead

The key challenges include raising transaction limits and building confidence among corporates, regulators, and tax authorities. UPI is now largely used for low-value person-to-person and merchant payments, with normal transactions having ₹1 lakh per transaction limit. Select categories such as IPO applications, capital markets, and tax payments have higher limits, including up to ₹5 lakh in some cases. To attract large-value flows, UPI needs higher merchant transaction ceilings for verified businesses, tiered limits based on risk profiles, instead of uniform cap, corporate UPI accounts with maker-checker authentication similar to corporate internet banking, and bulk payment capability for salaries, vendor payments, GST payments and government transactions.

Monetisation issues

Monetisation is unresolved. The zero-MDR (Merchant Discount Rate) model helped adoption but raises queries on long-term sustainability for banks and payment providers.

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Next employment challenge is better jobs



GOURAV
VALLABH

INDIA ENTERS its next employment decade with notable achievements. The government has expanded the foundations of work through infrastructure development, formalisation, financial inclusion, skilling and encouragement to entrepreneurship. The Reserve Bank of India's KLEMS productivity database provisionally estimates that employment rose from 47.15 crore in 2014-15 to 64.33 crore in 2023-24. The question is how this base can now produce more formal jobs, higher productivity, better wages and career progression.

NTI Aayog's report, Reimagining Skilling for Viksit Bharat@2047, released on August 18, places the challenge within a blueprint for demand-led, industry-linked and outcome-oriented skilling. It estimates that 9 crore young Indians were neither in education, employment nor training, excluding those seeking jobs, and that about 88 per cent were engaged in domestic duties. It is inaccurate to describe all of them as unemployed. But it's also true that millions of young women remain outside paid work because unpaid care, safety, mobility, social norms and limited local opportunities restrict choice.

Care is also needed when monthly, weekly and annual labour data are discussed together. The monthly Periodic Labour Force Survey bulletin provides a current pulse, but its Current Weekly Status classifies activity over the preceding seven days; the annual survey's usual status captures the durable yearly pattern. Monthly and weekly-status figures should track short-term movement, while annual usual-status figures assess structural progress. They are not interchangeable.

The aspiration of 2 crore jobs a year also needs clarity. It cannot mean 2 crore salaried government posts annually. The provisional KLEMS series records 17.18 crore additional workers over nine years through 2023-24, averaging about 1.9 crore a year. That is meaningful expansion, but aggregate numbers cannot settle the debate. India should publish an employment dashboard covering formalisation, real wage growth, social security, hours worked, sectoral productivity and movement from low-income work into stable careers.

This brings us to every family's concern: Where is the opportunity after graduation? Educated unemployment among first-time entrants is real. Yet saying graduates form a large share of unemployed youth is not the same as saying most graduates are unemployed. **Important building blocks are in place. More than 1.64 crore candidates have been trained or oriented under the Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana, while over 56.08 lakh apprentices have been engaged since 2016.**

The start-up sector offers evidence of progress. By April 2026, start-ups had reported more than 23 lakh direct jobs. India moved from four unicorns in 2014 to over 120 firms valued above \$1 billion, with a combined valuation exceeding \$350 billion. Around half of recognised start-ups emerge from Tier II and Tier III cities, and over 45 per cent had at least one woman director or partner by December 2025.

Public employment remains important. Sanctioned vacancies should be filled transparently; examination integrity and timely results must be non-negotiable. But the government cannot be the sole employer for a country adding millions of workers. The next step is helping viable micro-enterprises scale, formalise and hire.

Women will be the decisive measure of the next employment transformation. Female labour force participation in usual status rose from 23.3 per cent in 2017-18 to 41.7 per cent in 2023-24. Women hold 56 per cent of Jan Dhan accounts, receive about two-thirds of MUDRA loans and number over 10 crore in self-help groups. Tap water, clean cooking fuel and sanitation reduce drudgery, while housing ownership strengthens assets. This must be matched by affordable childcare, safe transport, working women's hostels, flexible formal work, digital access and quality jobs closer to home.

India's employment record gives the government a credible platform for the next leap. A compact among government, industry and education can convert scale into quality.

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Sanctioned vacancies should be filled transparently; examination integrity and timely results must be non-negotiable. But the government cannot be the sole employer for a country adding millions of workers

GS 2: POLITY INDIAN EXPRESS PAGE: 12

In 21st century, we need to be saved from 20th-century ideas meant to save us



DESHKAAL
BY YOGENDRA YADAV

WE LIVE in a *bhuta-kaala*. Forget the jazzy self-images of the 21st century. We actually live in a tired century that belongs to *bhuta* in both senses of the word — past age and time of ghosts. We are living inside the haunted ruins of a building meant for a different age and another part of the world that we still mistake for our house. Every day, a manmade disaster appears on our timeline — destruction in Nepal, genocide in Gaza or the tantrums of Donald Trump — and reminds us that the grand designs that continue to rule us have mutated into *bhutas*, grotesque inversions of what they were meant to achieve. We need to be saved from the ideas that were meant to save us.

About two centuries ago, Alexis de Tocqueville described his predicament thus: "I find no parallel to what is occurring before my eyes; since the past has ceased to throw its light upon the future, the mind of man wanders in obscurity." We are in a similar spot, in between two worlds — one that is dead and another yet to be born. Except that we insist on carrying the cursed old furniture to the new world. Europe's past and America's present have ceased to throw light upon our future. Western modernity is stale. It stinks. Yet we dress it up daily to serve to our children.

Take democracy, that charming ideal of realising every human being's quest for self-rule. The revolutionary idea of the last century has by now turned into a standardised global template called liberal democracy. The idea of popular sovereignty has been translated into representative government based on majority rule through competitive elections. In our collective struggle to protect this minimalist version, we shy away from facing the harsh truth that the regimes we call democracy have achieved self-rule only for a few, in select places and that too for a

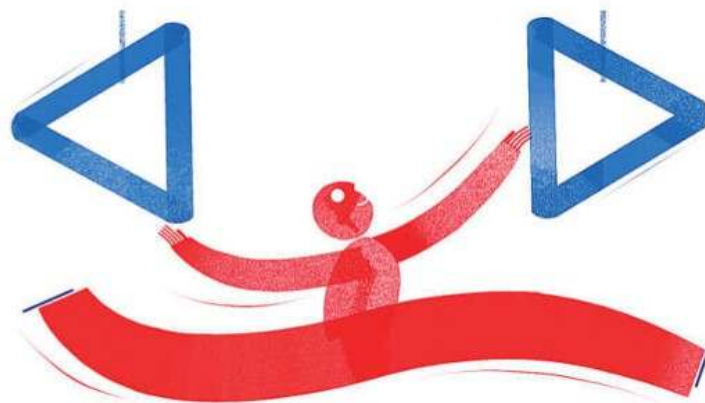


ILLUSTRATION: C.R. SASIKUMAR

short period of time. More often than not, modern democracy or its clones have produced disempowerment of the people in the face of an omnipotent state, unaccountable party oligarchy, corporate-controlled media and money power. Populism, majoritarianism or elected autocracies are not maladies of modern democracy. These are the natural consequence of the mechanism that we have accepted and celebrated as democracy.

Turn to the next grand template — **the nation-state** — that we now treat as the natural political home for citizens. This arises from human beings' innate need to belong, their desire to be free from solitude. In modern times, we realise it by carving the world into political communities called "nations". These imagined communities serve as the loci of state power, solicit our affection and demand our undivided loyalty. **Again, any unwavering history of nation-states would tell us that these political communities have produced more othering than belonging.** Except for anti-colonial nationalism like ours, the sense of we-ness has usually been produced by inventing an enemy within or at the cost of hatred for neighbours. In this century, nationalism has become synonymous with chauvinism and jingoism, if not blood-thirsty supremacism.

Europe's past and America's present have ceased to throw light upon our future. Western modernity is stale. Yet we dress it up daily to serve to our children

The third dream sought to achieve freedom from wants and realise our basic search for material well-being. We still call that dream by its 20th-century name — **development**. This was translated into continuous economic growth, driven by mechanisation, industrialisation and urbanisation. By the beginning of this century, capitalism was the only engine available for this kind of growth, based on private property, free markets and the global movement of capital. By now the consequences of the pursuit of this dream are for everyone to see. The promised land of prosperity has arrived for a tiny slice of humans at the cost of the rest of humanity. The standard of living for a vast majority may have gone up, but so has the minimum bar of human needs. **By now there is no doubt that even this partial success of the dream of development has caused ecological destruction whose cost is to be borne by our future generations, non-humans and nature.** Crony capitalism and destructive development are not the deformities of the model of development that we have inherited; these may well be its features.

The fourth quest is about freedom from ignorance and falsehood. The modern regime of science responds to this need by laying down a specific protocol that

all knowledge must follow. This format insists that any claim to knowledge must be objective, value-free, replicable and validated. Technological success serves as the proof of truth. This regime of science, the new religion of our age, has bifurcated human knowledge into domains that have registered hitherto unknown advances and domains where existing knowledges have been erased or downgraded. **The narrowing of the human mind, its fragmentation into technical domains of expertise and Western intellectual hegemony are the inevitable consequences of this knowledge regime.**

And finally, we must mention the **human quest for happiness, for inner peace.** Institutionalised religion is not a modern invention. But the "secular age" inaugurated and universalised by Western modernity has transformed the nature of all religions. For most parts of the world, it has not meant the decline of religion but a more conscious enumeration and demarcation of religious communities and their mutual competition. **This has also resulted in the rise of commodified and fundamentalist expressions of religion. You can argue that modern humans are materially better off and more knowledgeable than before but it would be hard to claim that they are happier than their predecessors.**

The word *bhuta* has a third meaning that refers to the basic elements of the universe. Hindu religious texts identify five such *maha-bhutas*: Earth, air, water, fire and sky. **The 21st century invites us to identify five such basic elements of human nature: Self-rule, belonging, well-being, truth and happiness.** And it offers us an opportunity to redesign fresh institutional templates to respond to these five elementary quests. Such a redesigning need not begin in thin air. Temples of Western modernity that have dominated for long now face an atrophy, thus offering us an opening. Many older forms in the rest of the world have survived and can still germinate. And we have seen the rise of innovative hybrids across the world. **If we have the confidence to think beyond Western modernity, we could turn the 21st century into a *bhuta-kaala* in the best sense of the term.**

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