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# Manu Bhaker gets the govt.'s nod for the Dhyan Chand Khel Ratna

Gukesh, Harmanpreet Singh, and Praveen Kumar also chosen for the honour; 32 athletes, including 16 Paralympians, get the nod for Arjuna Award

## SPORTS AWARDS

Sports Bureau  
NEW DELHI

Double Olympic medallist Manu Bhaker has been chosen for the Major Dhyan Chand Khel Ratna award along with World chess champion D. Gukesh, men's hockey captain Harmanpreet Singh and Paralympic gold medallist Praveen Kumar, as per an announcement made by the Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports on Thursday. President Droupadi Murmu will present the sports awards at the Rashtrapati Bhavan at 11 a.m. on January 17.

There was a furore when Manu's name was deemed to be missing from the list chosen by the panel that met to finalise the names. The apparent reason was that there was no application from the shooter, as the government had simplified the process by



Elite list: Manu, Gukesh, Harmanpreet and Praveen have been recognised for their feats in 2024. PTI, M. VEDHAN, K. MURALI KUMAR, GETTY IMAGES

advocating self-application, instead of being recommended by the national federation or other persons.

With the Union Sports Minister having the final say, it was not a surprise to find Manu's name being added to the list. In the past, the Union Sports Ministry had proposed Saina Nehwal's name and granted her the Khel Ratna award even without any application or recommendation.

Two other shooters, Swapnil Kusale who won

the rifle 3-position bronze, and Sarabjot Singh who had won the mixed air pistol bronze with Manu in the Paris Olympics, have been chosen for Arjuna Award. The wrestling bronze medallist from the Paris Games, Aman Sehrawat, has also been picked for Arjuna Award.

### Petkar recognised

Murlikant Petkar, the 50m freestyle swimming gold medallist from the 1972 Paralympics in Heidelberg, Germany, was chosen for Arjuna Award in the life-

time category, after he had won wide acclaim from the film *Chandu Champion* based on his real life story.

The government has listed 32 athletes for the Arjuna Award, with 16 of them being Paralympians. Understandably so, as India had the best haul in the Paralympics in Paris.

Four hockey players get the Arjuna Award, along with two athletes, two boxers, apart from one each in wrestling (Aman Sehrawat), swimming (Sajan Prakash), squash (Abhay Singh), and chess (Vantika

Agrawal). Shooting coach Deepali Deshpande has been chosen for Dronacharya Award, along with hockey coach Sandeep Sangwan and para-shooting coach Subhash Rana.

Chandigarh University beat Lovely Professional University and Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar, to win the Maulana Abul Kalam Azad Trophy for the Best University.

### The list of awardees:

Major Dhyan Chand Khel Ratna: D. Gukesh, Harmanpreet Singh, Praveen Kumar, Manu

Bhaker.

Arjuna Award: Jyothi Yarraji, Annu Rani (athletics); Nitu Ghanghas, Saweety Boora (boxing); Vantika Agrawal (chess); Salima Tete, Abhishek Nain, Sanjay Rana, Harmanpreet Singh, Sukhjeet Singh (hockey); Rakesh Kumar (para-archery); Preeti Pal, Jeevanji Deepthi, Ajeet Singh, Sachin Khilari, Dharambir Nain, Pranav Soorma, Hokato Sema, Simran Sharma, Navdeep Singh (all para-athletics); Nitesh Kumar, Thulasimathi Murugesan, Nithya Sivan, Manisha Ramadass (all para-badminton); Kapil Parmar (para-judo); Mona Agarwal, Rubina Francis (para-shooting); Swapnil Kusale, Sarabjot Singh (shooting); Abhay Singh (squash); Sajan Prakash (swimming); Aman Sehrawat (wrestling).

Arjuna Awards (lifetime): Sucha Singh (athletics), Murlikant Petkar (para swimming).

Dronacharya Award: Subhash Rana (para shooting), Deepali Deshpande (shooting), Sandeep Sangwan (hockey).

Dronacharya (lifetime): S Muralidharan (badminton), Armando Coloco (football).

Rashtriya Khel Protsahan Puraskar: Physical Education Foundation of India.

Maulana Abul Kalam Azad Trophy: Chandigarh University.



# Sivagiri row: what is the outrage about?

Why did Kerala Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan's comments at the inaugural event of the 92nd Sivagiri pilgrimage cause controversy? Who are the Sivagiri seers and why do they command such influence in Kerala? Has the BJP been making overtures within the Ezhava community?

## EXPLAINER

S.R.Praveen

### The story so far:

Kerala Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan used the inaugural event of the 92nd Sivagiri pilgrimage at Varkala on December 31, 2024, to slam what he saw as attempts to appropriate social reformer Sree Narayana Guru into the Sanatana Dharma fold. The CM also seconded Sivagiri Madhom president Swamy Sachithananda's opinion that the regressive practice of making men remove their shirts before entering temples should be abandoned.

### What happened?

Mr. Vijayan sought to equate Sanatana Dharma to the principles of Varnashrama Dharma which forms the bedrock of caste divisions in society. In his opinion, the attempt to portray Sree Narayana Guru as a champion of Sanatana Dharma ran counter to the renaissance leader's humanist message and his work to eradicate casteist oppression. He said that the patronage of the powers that be, has resulted in the continuing oppression of Dalits, backward classes and minorities in rural areas of north India. The Bharatiya Janata Party was quick to react with former Union Minister V. Muraleedharan accusing the CM of insulting Sanatana Dharma in a manner similar to Tamil Nadu Deputy CM Udhayanidhi Stalin.

Kerala Pradesh Congress Committee (KPCC) President K.Sudhakaran in a way echoed the CM's words when he spoke at Sivagiri. He said that attempts to tie down the Guru to Varnashrama Dharma have to be resisted. However, Opposition Leader V.D.Satheesan struck a discordant note, objecting to the CM's equating of Sanatana Dharma to Varnashrama Dharma. He accused the CM of attempting to give the patent of Sanatana Dharma, which is the collective tradition



**Need for reform:** Kerala Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan at an event as part of the 92nd Sivagiri pilgrimage season, at Varkala on December 31, 2024.

of all Indians, to the Sangh Parivar.

### Why is Sivagiri Madhom important?

Sree Narayana Guru, who founded the Sivagiri Madhom over a century ago, is regarded as one of the foremost social reformers of Kerala, who played a key role in transforming a society steeped in casteism and untouchability into a progressive one with at least some levels of equality. In 1888, decades before temple entry movements and proclamations which allowed the oppressed castes entry into temples, Narayana Guru consecrated a Siva idol by the Aruvippuram river, in an effort to allow all castes to worship. When the consecration by a non-Brahmin led to opposition from various quarters, he explained that the idol was that of "Ezhava Siva, not a Brahmin Siva", referring to the Ezhavas, an oppressed

caste. Despite this statement which was meant as a counter to specific circumstances, Sree Narayana Guru propounded the wider and inclusive 'One Caste, One God, One Religion for mankind' philosophy. He established the Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogan (SNDP Yogam) in 1903 for the educational and social upliftment of oppressed castes. A decade later, he would disassociate from the SNDP Yogam, disappointed that the organisation was being reduced for the representation of just the Ezhavas. Sivagiri, established by the Guru, is now a major pilgrimage centre for Ezhavas.

### Why are political parties eager to court the Sivagiri seers?

The Ezhava community, classified as an Other Backward Caste constituting 23% of Kerala's population, are considered as traditional voters of the Communist Party

of India (Marxist)-led LDF, with part of the votes going to the UDF. However, with the BJP's ascendancy in 2014, the Sangh Parivar has been making overtures to the community, and by extension to Sivagiri, as part of its larger strategy to make inroads into Kerala, which has remained electorally almost impenetrable to the BJP until recently. This has led to the Left as well as the Congress launching a counter-strategy to what they see as attempts to appropriate Narayana Guru and the Ezhava community into the larger Hindutva fold.

After the recent Lok Sabha elections, in which the LDF suffered a major defeat and the BJP made gains in left strongholds, the CPI(M) attributed the rightward drift in the backward-class Ezhava votes to the BJP as one of the major factors in its defeat. SNDP Yogam general secretary Vellappally Natesan stated that the Ezhava community had abandoned the LDF in the Lok Sabha elections in protest against the appeasement of minorities.

### What is Sivagiri Madhom's stance?

The Sivagiri Madhom has always tried to maintain a considered, equidistant stance from all parties. At the annual Sivagiri pilgrimage, leaders of parties from across the political spectrum are accorded an opportunity to address the pilgrims. In recent years, Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Home Minister Amit Shah, Congress leaders Sonia Gandhi and Rahul Gandhi have addressed the pilgrims. Even as the SNDP Yogam hailed the consecration of the Ram temple, Swamy Sachithananda decided to stay away from the Ayodhya consecration ceremony. The Madhom leadership has used its influence to raise its voice against the "Brahmanical dominance" in priesthood in major temples, criticising the limiting of the post of priests in major temples to the Brahmin community. Aware of the political heft of the community, the Madhom has held its cards close to its chest. This stand is not expected to change anytime soon.

## THE GIST

The Kerala CM sought to equate Sanatana Dharma to the principles of Varnashrama Dharma which form the bedrock of caste divisions in society. In his opinion, the attempt to portray Sree Narayana Guru as a champion of Sanatana Dharma ran counter to the renaissance leader's humanist message.

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# Nobel laureate Mohammadi remains defiant despite imprisonment in Iran

Agence France-Presse  
PARIS

Narges Mohammadi, the Iranian 2023 Nobel Peace Prize laureate, says her body may be weakened from her long imprisonment but she still has a mind of "steel", according to an interview published on Thursday.

The 52-year-old has been jailed repeatedly over the past 25 years, most recently since November 2021, for convictions relating to her advocacy against the obligatory *hijab* for women and capital punishment in Iran.

Released from prison on December 4 for three

weeks on medical grounds after undergoing bone surgery, Ms. Mohammadi spoke with the French magazine *Elle* about the conditions at the Evin prison in Tehran, where she is incarcerated.

### 'Mind of steel'

"My body is weakened, it is true, after three years of intermittent detention... and repeated refusals of care that have seriously tested me, but my mind is of steel," Ms. Mohammadi said, responding in Parsi to *Elle's* questions via voice messages and written text.

She said she intended to publish her autobiography, which she has completed,

and was working on a second book "on the sexual assaults and harassment committed against women detained in Iran".

Ms. Mohammadi said there were 70 prisoners in the women's ward at Evin "from all walks of life, of all ages, and of all political persuasions", including journalists, writers, women's rights activists, and people persecuted for their religion.

One of the most commonly used "instruments of torture" is isolation, said Ms. Mohammadi, who shares a cell with 13 other prisoners.

"It is a place where political prisoners die. I have



**Face of resistance:** Narges Mohammadi has been jailed repeatedly over the past 25 years, most recently since November 2021. AFP

personally documented cases of torture and serious sexual violence against my fellow prisoners."

Despite the harsh conse-

quences, there are still acts of resistance by prisoners.

"Recently, 45 out of 70 prisoners gathered to protest in the prison yard against the death sentence

of Pakshian Azizi and Varisbeh Moradi," two Kurdish women's rights activists who are in prison, she said.

### Possible reprisals

Small acts of defiance – like organising sit-ins – can get them reprisals like being barred from visiting hours or telephone access.

She also said that speaking to presspersons would likely get her "new accusations", and that she was the target of additional prosecutions and convictions "approximately every month".

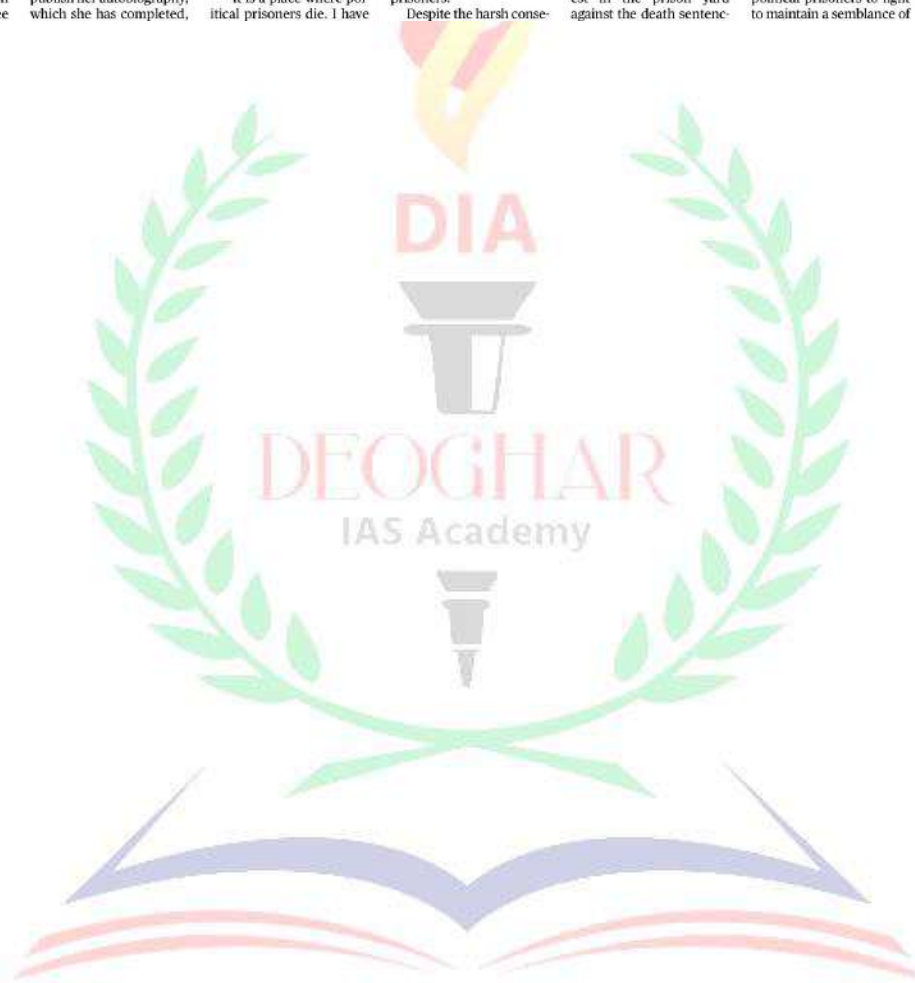
"It is a challenge for us political prisoners to fight to maintain a semblance of

normality, because it is about showing our torturers that they will not be able to reach us, to break us," Ms. Mohammadi said.

After Ms. Mohammadi was awarded last year's Nobel Peace Prize, her two children collected the award on her behalf.

The U.S. State Department last month called Ms. Mohammadi's situation "deeply troubling".

"Her deteriorating health is a direct result of the abuses that she's endured at the hands of the Iranian regime," State Department spokesperson Vedant Patel said, calling for her "immediate and unconditional" release.



# Government constitutes panel to rejig the Wholesale Price Index

**The Hindu Bureau**  
NEW DELHI

The Centre on Thursday announced the formation of an expert panel to revise the constituents of the country's Wholesale Price Index (WPI) in light of the structural changes in the economy that have occurred between 2011-12, the current base year for the critical price gauge, and 2022-23 that would be the new base year.

The working group, to be steered by NITI Aayog member Ramesh Chand, would also examine the composition of, and the methodology for compilation of a new Producers' Price Index or PPI, approved by a technical advi-



sory panel on Statistics of Prices and Cost of Living.

For the PPI, the panel has been asked to suggest further improvements in the compilation and presentation formats that are under consideration, and, more importantly, recommend a roadmap for India to switch over from using WPI to the PPI. At a broad-

er level, it may also suggest any other improvements for enhancing the reliability of the two indices.

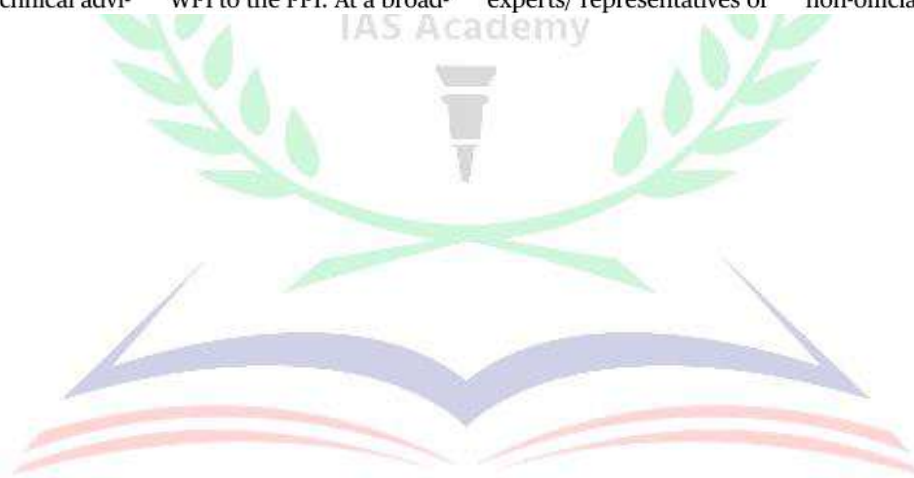
The group has been asked to submit its final report to the Office of the Economic Adviser in the Commerce and Industry Ministry within 18 months, effectively giving it a June 30, 2026 deadline.

As per the terms of reference of the 18-member panel that also includes some private sector economists, the group is expected to review price collection system and suggest changes for improvement and decide on WPI and PPI computation methodology.

"The Chairman of the Working Group may co-opt experts/ representatives of

other agencies, as may be considered necessary," the Ministry said. Apart from Mr. Chand, the panel includes eight officials from the Ministries of Statistics, Finance, Petroleum and Natural Gas, Agriculture, and Consumer Affairs. A RBI representative and the CEO of the GST Network have also been roped in.

From the private sector, Crisil chief economist Dharmakirti Joshi, Bank of America Merrill Lynch economist Indranil Sengupta, and Kotak Mahindra Asset Management MD Nilesh Shah have been named as members of the working group. PM's EAC member Shamika Ravi and economist Surjit Bhalla are the non-official members.



# Why has Trump called the Panama treaty 'foolish'?

Has transit fees to cross the Panama canal increased? What are the treaties under which the canal was transferred to Panama by the U.S.? How has China responded?

## Vaneeta

### The story so far:

**I**n December 22, 2024, Donald Trump threatened to take back the Panama canal, calling the transfer treaty "foolish". He said, "Our Navy and Commerce have been treated in a very unfair and injudicious way....we will demand that the Panama canal be returned to us, in full, and without question." Panama's President José Raúl Mulino rejected Trump's threat, and said, "I want to express precisely that every square metre of the Panama canal and its adjacent area belong to Panama, and will continue to belong to Panama."

**Why is Trump upset with Panama?**  
The first and major reason for the U.S. President-elect's upset is the high transit fees applied on U.S. vessels by the ACP

(Panama Canal Authority). In 2023, Lakes Gatun and Alhajuela experienced severe drought affecting the shipping and navigation of the canal as it relies on these reservoirs to operate its locks. Therefore, the ACP reduced the number of slots for crossing ships by 36%. This led to the increase in transit fees. The second cause of worry has been the increased Chinese presence in the Panama canal. In 2017, Panama became the first Latin American country to sign a Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) agreement, and ever since then, Chinese investment has increased significantly. Hutchison Ports PPC, a subsidiary of a Hong Kong based company, operates two ports near the canal's entrances, igniting concerns over Chinese influence on logistical operations and surveillance over the U.S. Navy.

**What is the U.S.-Panama treaty?**  
The Panama canal is an artificial

80-kilometre canal connecting the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, reducing cost, time and distance for international shipping. The canal is crucial for the global supply chain, and 6% of maritime world trade goes through it. The canal also symbolises U.S.'s technological prowess and economic power. It opened in 1914 after the U.S. finished construction, and was controlled by the U.S. until December 31, 1999.

The canal was handed over to Panama in 1999 under the Torrijos-Carter Treaties. The first, called the Panama Canal Treaty, cancelled the Panama Canal Zone and turned the canal over to the Panamanians on December 31, 1999. Under the second, the Permanent Neutrality Treaty, the canal was declared neutral and open to vessels of all nations. Under this treaty, the U.S. has the right to defend the neutrality of the canal and have priority passage in military emergencies.

### What has been Panama's response?

Panama's President José Raúl Mulino has rejected Mr. Trump's accusations. He addressed the accusations by defending the transit rates and clarifying the concerns about external influence over canal operations. He stated that the transit rates are set according to international standards and decided by a procedure. He denied any involvement of external powers such as China or the European community while emphasising the importance of sovereignty for Panamanians. He responded to Mr. Trump's accusation of Chinese soldiers operating the canal, saying, "There is not a single Chinese soldier in the canal, and on the other hand, there will not be".

### What next?

The concerns over fee hikes and operations logistics will likely be discussed diplomatically, despite Mr. Trump's threats. While the U.S. might attempt to influence Panama and pressure the latter with renegotiations, Panama will look for international support to reaffirm its sovereignty. China has also responded to the accusations. Foreign Ministry spokesperson Mao Ning said that the Panama canal was a great creation for the Panamanian people and a neutral passageway. He added that China respects Panama's sovereignty.

*Vaneeta is a postgraduate student at Pondicherry University.*

### THE GIST

▼ The first and major reason for the U.S. President-elect's upset is the high transit fees applied on U.S. vessels by the ACP (Panama Canal Authority).

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# Should voter ID be linked with Aadhaar to combat voter fraud?



**S.Y. Quraishi**  
former  
Chief Election  
Commissioner  
of India



**R.S. Sharma**  
former  
Chairman of  
the Telecom  
Regulatory  
Authority of  
India and the  
first Director  
General of the  
Unique  
Identification  
Authority of  
India

## PARLEY

**I**n December 29, 2024, the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) accused each other of manipulating the Delhi electoral rolls in an attempt to win the Delhi Assembly elections, scheduled to be held in February. While the AAP has accused the BJP of submitting applications to the Election Commission of India (ECI) to get the names of voters removed from the list in its strongholds, the BJP has claimed that the AAP government is aiding Rohingya immigrants to settle in the capital so that it can secure their votes. Earlier, the Congress had accused the ECI of arbitrarily deleting or adding voters' names in electoral rolls before the Maharashtra Assembly elections. Should voter IDs be linked to Aadhaar to ensure transparency and put all these political claims and counterclaims to rest? S.Y. Quraishi and R.S. Sharma discuss this question in a conversation moderated by **Sreeparna Chakrabarty**. Edited excerpts:

**If we link Aadhaar with voter IDs, would that help ensure that only one voter ID is issued for every citizen of the country?**

**S.Y. Quraishi:** Yes, that was the original intention. In fact, when we were struggling with locating those with duplicate voter IDs and nearly every district in the country was using some kind of a de-duplication software (which can help identify and remove duplicate data from files or across multiple files), some of which were successful and some not so successful, that was when UIDAI (Unique Identification Authority of India) was created. Nandan Nilekani came to meet me to find out where we stand [on this]. That was when we had started experimenting with collecting biometrics in Goa. We decided that we would stop that exercise because the Aadhaar authority was going to do it anyway. We thought that we would merge the two once they completed the job. So, that was the beginning of the whole debate.

**R.S. Sharma:** Before I answer your question, let me explain that Aadhaar does two things. First, it assigns a unique identity number to every individual, which means that an individual cannot have more than one identity. Second, it provides a service of online real-time authentication of the person. Every database on every system does not need to have the kind of back-end technology that Aadhaar has because that would be too expensive. Aadhaar has been used to clean up a number of databases, such as the PAN (Permanent Account Number) database.



A voter in Amritsar, Punjab, PI

Similarly, linking Aadhaar with voter IDs will ensure that one person is able to have only one voter ID.

Aadhaar is not a proof of citizenship (even non-residents who have lawfully entered India can get Aadhaar cards). Therefore, every person who has got an Aadhaar number is not necessarily a voter. That is a job for the ECI [to figure]. The authentication services of Aadhaar can also be used to ensure that there is no proxy voting taking place.

**As you said, Aadhaar is not a proof of citizenship. So, will the ECI tackle this?**

**SVQ:** Everyone knows that Aadhaar is not a proof of citizenship. Our idea was to only identify duplicates. If someone has a voter ID, citizenship has already been established through that. Through the linking of voter ID and Aadhaar, we will get to know that they are registered in different places, which can happen because of domestic migration or if you change your house within the same city.

**What about security issues?**

**SVQ:** We need Mr. Sharma's help to understand this. The voter ID card has only five details: your name, your father's name or spouse's name, your address, your age, and house number. All this is in the public domain anyway, so this is not private data which will get compromised because of the voter ID being linked with Aadhaar.

**RSS:** Well, Aadhaar does not contain any secret or sensitive information except biometrics, which are kept offline and which are never used



Linking voter ID with Aadhaar can solve one problem – it can eliminate duplication of votes. But Aadhaar cannot solve other issues because there are many which are beyond [the scope of] technology. Those are issues to do with human integrity, impartiality, and objectivity.

**R.S. SHARMA**

except for authentication. Aadhaar also has only four pieces of information: name, age, gender, and communication address. It has the mobile number and email address only if you want to share those. Aadhaar does not know which database it has been seeded with. Therefore, there is no question of any kind of compromise [of security] in any situation.

**Activists had earlier flagged the issue of right to privacy. Your comments?**

**RSS:** I don't think there is any connection between privacy and the linking of Aadhaar with voter IDs. How does the right to privacy, which is a fundamental right, get affected when we link Aadhaar with voter IDs? It is beyond my comprehension.

**SVQ:** I have a question in this regard Mr. Sharma. You had said that one detail that Aadhaar has and an electoral card doesn't is a person's telephone number. Now, if that number goes into the hands of a politician, he can approach me. If it goes to a marketer, he will start sending me unsolicited messages. To that extent, is it invasion of privacy?

**RSS:** No, Sir. Because Aadhaar may have the telephone number. But [providing the] telephone number is optional. It is there to help the individual. It doesn't get embedded in the voter ID card. When you link the two, you link the Aadhaar number, not the email address or the mobile number.

**Let's talk about the National Electoral Roll Purification and Authentication Programme. It was started in 2015 but after that, issues of missing voters' started surfacing in 2018.**

**SVQ:** The problem of missing voters has been a perpetual one for the ECI. Voters can be missing for different reasons. The first is that they have chosen not to register even though we go door to door asking them to do so. Second, their name can get deleted by a computer error. It can

be deleted by a clerical mistake. It can also be deleted because of mischief by the administration. Whatever be the reason, a missing voter from the list is disenfranchised. That is the biggest issue.

Though the ECI has controlled all kinds of issues, the electoral roll is our soft underbelly which means that it is vulnerable to attacks and mistakes and that it is something we should focus on now. That is why checking the electoral rolls regularly (to ensure that one's name is on the list) is a good idea.

**So, can we say that in the current fraught political situation over electoral rolls, linking Aadhaar with voter IDs can ensure transparency?**

**SVQ:** I would not entirely agree with what you just now said because deletion can still happen due to various reasons, as I said: human error, dishonesty, and deliberately too, because the officer has been given instructions by the top bosses to delete names because those are potentially hostile voters. This is happening and should be dealt with by the ECI. I can't advise them, but I can as a senior say that silence is not an option. If there is any doubt in the people's minds, they have to clear it. The people want to hear the ECI. Mr. Sharma is defending Aadhaar and I am defending voter IDs, but this has limited value because we are retired officers. Comments have to come from the people who are currently occupying top positions.

In the context of the Aadhaar discussion, to say that voter rolls cannot be manipulated is not true at all. There are serious allegations of voter fraud. If officers are dishonest, even booth capturing can happen. Earlier, it used to be the ballot paper; now, it could be the machine. There are allegations that (during an election), people closed the polls at 4:00 p.m. and then sat in the polling booth and pressed the button. The human element has become weaker and that is what needs to be handled.

**RSS:** Aadhaar cannot solve every problem under the sun. It can solve one problem – it can eliminate duplication of votes. But it cannot solve other issues because there are many which are beyond [the scope of] technology. Those are issues to do with human integrity, impartiality, and objectivity.



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IAS Academy



# Reflections as the world grows more 'polarised'

**D**onald Trump's victory in the 2016 U.S. presidential election prompted contemplation of a "divided" United States in terms of politics and society, bolstered by waves of fake news amid a post-truth era. In his book *Polarization: What Everyone Needs to Know* (2019), academic Nolan McCarty explores the social, economic, and geographic factors that contribute to polarisation in America, walking readers through both what is known and unknown about the causes, evolution, and ramifications of the nation's growing political conflicts.

America has recently appeared to be defined by profound political, cultural, and societal divides as Mr. Trump won a second term in 2024. And along with nine other words, "polarization" was chosen as the 2024 word of the year by Merriam-Webster, the U.S.'s premier dictionary.

The term "polarization" – defined as "division into two sharply distinct opposites; especially, a state in which the opinions, beliefs, or interests of a group or society no longer range along a continuum but become concentrated at opposing extremes" – has become widely used in the media and in public discourse, and has become a significant aspect of modern life. While MSNBC perceived the 2024 presidential election as having left America "more polarized than ever", and Fox News reports that "[Vice-President-elect J.D.] Vance's debate answer on immigration crisis shows voter polarization", Forbes has cautioned that "cultural polarization is becoming a pressing challenge" in workplaces. Indeed, in October, Merriam-Webster stated that new terms such as "far left" and "far right," as well as "MAGA" – the abbreviation for Mr. Trump's divisive "Make America Great Again" movement – would be included in its dictionary in 2024. Vice-President Kamala Harris warned of fascism under Mr. Trump during the heated election, while Mr. Trump used derogatory language and said his



**Atanu Biswas**

Professor of Statistics,  
Indian Statistical  
Institute, Kolkata

As the 2024 'word of the year', the term has become a significant aspect of the modern world

opponent was running on "destruction". The election was so divisive that many Americans believed that the other candidate posed an existential threat to the U.S. when they cast their ballots.

About eight out of 10 Harris supporters were very or somewhat concerned that Mr. Trump's beliefs, but not Harris', were too radical, while roughly seven out of 10 Trump supporters felt the same way about Ms. Harris, but not Mr. Trump, according to AP VoteCast, a poll of over 1,20,000 people.

The usage of the word is one aspect that is not polarised. According to Peter Sokolowski, editor at large for Merriam-Webster, "it's something that actually everyone agrees on," to put it in a slightly sardonic way. However, "polarization" has more than only political meanings. The controversy over Taylor Swift's use of a private jet and the Drake-Kendrick Lamar feud (they are rappers) are perceived to be polarising.

"Polarization" refers to beyond America also. Globally, centrist policies are being destroyed. Maybe Emmanuel Macron, the centrist French leader, or Olaf Scholz, the centre-left German leader, can better attest as to what it means if society is increasingly polarised. The insanity of the "other side" – in our politics, at work, or at home – confounds us. Even the "us vs. them" rift may frequently be trembling a political society such as ours.

## A germination that began much earlier

However, to believe that polarisation is as recent as Mr. Trump's presidency or that Trump or Trump-like individuals are to blame for today's polarised world would be a grave mistake. The seeds were sown a long time ago. Although it is evident from the current political environment that extreme viewpoints are growing in popularity, McCarty contended that these divisions have been developing for several

decades and are firmly anchored in the way politics and society are structured.

For instance, American culture has seen significant transformation in recent decades, from changing social group relationships and language and behavioural standards to the rising importance of a college degree. In fact, the 1950s-60s civil rights struggles influenced the partisan culture conflicts of today. And decades before the parties' split on these issues, opinions regarding civil rights were already associated with a variety of other culture war beliefs – much earlier than previous scholarship realised. However, since the 1970s, income and wealth disparities have increased dramatically, which has exacerbated existing polarisation.

## In the modern context

In recent years, there has been a notable technological revolution. Thus, "polarization" in the modern world can also be viewed through the prism of the shifting global order brought about by social media, the Internet, and artificial intelligence. Yes, Professor Chris Bail critically investigated the underlying causes of political tribalism on social media in his book, *Breaking the Social Media Prism* (2021). It raises an interesting question: do our social media networks impact people's political views? Or do people's political views shape our networks?

Prof. Bail's research highlights how today's political polarisation is exacerbated by the widening gap between social media and in-person encounters. His analogy of social media as a prism refracting, rather than mirroring, perfectly captures how it can skew how people see themselves and other people.

And the AI genie also continues to transform social media and our way of life. The "us vs. them" drift grows as society, politics, and culture descend further into the rabbit hole, rendering the world more and more polarised.





# Remembering the impactful legacy of wise leadership

The passing of Manmohan Singh should be an occasion for evaluating the lasting legacy of the work initiated in the 1991 economic reforms, by him as the Finance Minister, and his team of high-calibre economists, Ministers and professionals (Montek Singh Ahluwalia, C. Rangarajan, P. Chidambaram, Shankar Acharya, and many others), and continued during his term as Prime Minister. Much has already been written on the animal spirits released by the 1991 economic reforms. But the period 2004-14, and the decade that followed, stand in such contrast that it is worth investigating them using verifiable government data – not views that reflect the observer's ideological predilections.

Five outcomes stand out, affecting citizens' lives, and which laid the foundations of a hastened pace of structural change that could have led India to become a high-income/high-human development index country by the 2040s.

## Appropriate macroeconomic policies

First, the savings rate had begun to rise ever since the demographic dividend set in in the early 1980s. The rise in savings/GDP ratio – and corresponding growth in the investment to GDP rate – was the basis for the ensuing rise in the GDP growth rate. Thus, by 2003-04, the savings rate had risen to 23% of GDP and investment to 24% of GDP. However, appropriate macroeconomic policies enabled this to be translated into raising the investment to GDP from 24% to 38% over the next six years. This was the highest ever that India had achieved – nearing, though still below, Chinese investment rates. The resulting growth averaged 8.5% per annum over 2004-05 to 2008-09 (under the United Progressive Alliance I). Although helped by a booming international economy, export growth (15%-18% per annum) could not have been maintained without real effective exchange rates being maintained at stable levels.

Despite the global economic crisis of 2008-09, GDP growth dipped for a few quarters before recovering quickly, because of a well-designed fiscal/monetary policy stimulus so that the 2009-14 period also saw 7.5% p.a. Thus, the overall growth rate over 2004-14 averaged 7.8% p.a., which was unprecedented in India's history.

Second, the growth encompassed all sectors – the unorganised and organised. Not surprisingly, aggregate demand was sustained, as all growth engines were firing (public and private investment, final consumption, exports, and government). Hence, non-farm jobs grew at a rate of 7.5 million p.a., which itself was unprecedented. Except agriculture (where workers fell, a good thing), all sectors generated jobs. Construction jobs grew from 26 million in 2004 to 51 million in 2012 (or nearly doubled); manufacturing jobs increased by 8 million, especially, but not only in the labour-intensive sectors (that account for half of all manufacturing



**Santosh Mehrotra**

led divisions in the Planning Commission (2006-14), authored the 11th and 12th Plans, and was professor of economics at the Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi

After 2015, not one of the life-changing transformations in the lives of ordinary Indians was sustained

employment) from 52 million to 60 million; as did jobs in modern services (telecom, sale/distribution of cars, financial intermediation/banking, insurance and pensions, airlines, railways, and health and education). Structural change in the economy, slow for half a century, really gathered momentum.

Third, until 2004-05, non-farm jobs had grown so slowly that although migration from farm to non-farm occurred, never did the absolute number of workers in agriculture fall. But, for the first time in India's post-independence history, the absolute number of workers on farms actually fell after 2004, as non-farm job growth was high. This had the effect of tightening the labour market in rural areas over the entire period till 2014, helped by the government emerging as employer of last resort through the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act in 2005.

Fourth, the combined effect of new non-farm jobs and tightening rural labour market was to raise real wages, which rose all the way till 2015. This was true for casual wage work as well as regular/salaried work.

Finally, as real wages rose, private final consumption expenditure continued to rise, especially of simple consumer goods. For the first time in India's history, the absolute number of poor fell – which had never occurred from 1950. The incidence of poverty fell from 1973-74, but the absolute number of poor remained very sticky (due to population growth) till 2004-05. Between 2004-05 and 2011-12, the number of people who rose above the poverty line was 138 million – an achievement of staggering, almost Chinese, proportions.

## Policy-induced shocks

Not one of these life-changing transformations in the lives of ordinary people was sustained after 2015. First, the growth rate averaged 5.8% p.a. over the last 10 years. This is hardly surprising, given three policy-induced shocks. The demonetisation damaged the unorganised sector and agriculture leading to Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) closing on a vast scale (as demonstrated by the delayed NSS Annual Survey of Unorganized Sector Enterprises 2023).

The poorly designed and badly implemented Goods and Services Tax was another shock that MSMEs and the unorganised sector were unprepared for. For the next nine quarters, GDP growth rates fell. Finally, the unnecessary national, very strict lockdown led to the Indian economy contracting by 5.8% in FY21 when the global economy only contracted during COVID-19 by 3.1%.

Second, overall unemployment jumped from 2.2% in 2011-12 to a 45-year high of 6.1% in 2017-18 (NSSO). The number of those jobless tripled from one crore in 2011-12 to three crore in 2017-18. It rose again by at least 70 lakh by 2022. Jobs had grown by 75 lakh per year in industry and

services between 2004 and 2013, and only 29 lakh per year between 2013 and 2019. This is a 61% drop in jobs as the population of India grew by 10%. Youth unemployment is still double, from 6% in 2011-12 to 11% in 2022-23. The unemployment rate for graduates and postgraduates is about 33% – one in three looking unsuccessfully for a job. This is why engineers are becoming coolies and doctoral degree holders are applying for railway peon jobs.

Third, the process of structural change that had gathered momentum has been reversed, forcing India's youth back into farming. For 15 years (2004-19), the number of agricultural workers declined by 6.7 crore between 2004-05 and 2017-18. This entire progress has been fully reversed between 2020 and 2024 – with eight crore workers added to agriculture. Never in world history, perhaps, has such a retrogressive reverse migration occurred.

This is happening because manufacturing (especially unorganised) took the brunt of job losses. 'Make in India' failed. The share of manufacturing in the economy fell since 2015, falling from a consistent 17% of GVA for the previous 25 years, and hitting an all-time low of 13% in 2022. Assembling expensive iPhones using imported parts from China hardly generates jobs. Reviving labour intensive industries such as garments, textiles, furniture, leather goods and processed food does. These are precisely the industries that lost jobs – and also exports. The number of workers in manufacturing was 600 lakh in 2012; it fell to 567 lakh by 2019, the last year before COVID-19. By 2022, it had barely gone up to 629 lakh, in 2022, despite all the talk about 'Make in India'.

## Distress and unpaid work

The Modi government has neglected exports. Merchandise exports grew four times, from \$77 billion in 2004 to \$323 billion in 2014. Between 2014 and 2022 they grew only one-and-a-half times to \$454 billion. With less production for global markets, there were fewer jobs.

Fourth, wage growth has also suffered. The share of regular salaried workers in total employment, which was 23.8% in 2019 before COVID-19, fell to 20.9%. Unpaid family workers, whose numbers had fallen from 11.1 crore in 2004 to 8.5 crore in 2012, and then by 2017 to 6.2 crore, have risen sharply to 10.4 crore by 2023. This showed that distress has driven these family members (mostly children and women) into work to support the family. But they are unpaid. This makes the unemployment rate look better than before, clearly misleading. Gold-based loans, and defaults on them, are rising daily today.

These reversals have put the earlier achievements under grave threat, and now give legitimate rise to concerns whether India will realise its demographic dividend before 2040. The growing inequality and constrained aggregate demand now may be putting paid to the prospects of India becoming 'Viksit Bharat'.

# Indian researchers develop injectable hydrogel for targeted cancer treatment

**The Hindu Bureau**

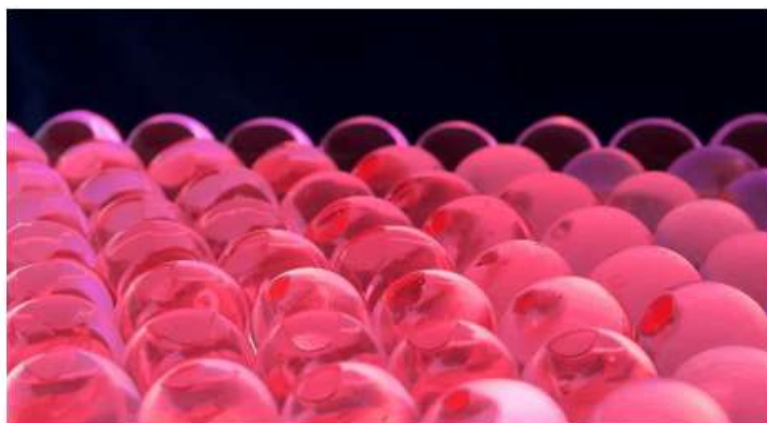
GUWAHATI

Researchers from the Indian Institute of Technology-Guwahati (IIT-G) and the Bose Institute, Kolkata have developed an advanced injectable hydrogel for localised cancer treatment. A statement issued by the IIT-G said this hydrogel serves as a stable reservoir for anti-cancer drugs, releasing it in a controlled manner while sparing healthy cells from harm.

The findings of the research, expected to be revolutionary for breast cancer therapy, have been published in *Materials Horizons*, a journal of the Royal Society of Chemistry.

The paper is co-authored by Debapratim Das, along with his research scholars Tanushree Das and Ritvika Kushwaha from IIT-G's Department of Chemistry, and Kuldip Jana, Satyajit Halder, and Anup Kumar Misra from Bose Institute, Kolkata.

"Current treatments,



The hydrogel triggers a controlled drug release directly into the tumour, thus reducing systemic side effects. GETTY IMAGES

such as chemotherapy and surgical interventions, often have severe limitations. Chemotherapy's systemic delivery often results in harmful side effects by affecting both cancerous and healthy cells," the researchers said in the statement.

## **Localised treatment**

The team addressed these challenges by designing a hydrogel that delivers drugs precisely to the tumour site, ensuring localised action. Hydrogels are water-based, polymer networks capable of absorbing and retaining fluids. Their unique structure

mimics living tissues, making them suitable for biomedical applications.

The hydrogel, composed of ultra-short peptides is designed to remain insoluble in biological fluids, ensuring it stays localised at the injection site. It responds to elevated levels of glutathione (GSH), a molecule abundant in tumour cells.

"This work exemplifies how scientific innovation can address the pressing needs of cancer treatment. The hydrogel's properties allow it to work harmoniously with the biological environment, offering precision," Prof. Das said.



## Arif Mohammed Khan sworn in as Governor of Bihar

Arif Mohammed Khan was sworn in as the 42<sup>nd</sup> Governor of Bihar on Thursday, succeeding Rajendra Vishwanath Arlekar who has been appointed Kerala Governor in his place. Patna High Court Chief Justice K. Vinod Chandran administered the oath at the Raj Bhawan in the presence of Chief Minister Nitish Kumar and his deputies, and Leader of the Opposition in the State Assembly Tejashwi Yadav, among others. “Bihar has immense potential and I have come to serve the State,” Mr. Khan said. Earlier, he told journalists, “I know the glorious history of Bihar. I will try to discharge my duty in accordance with the heritage and tradition of the State.”



# Experts on GM crop panels to declare conflict of interest

Ministry of Environment amends rules governing selection of experts to the Genetic Engineering Appraisal Committee; it calls for details of professional affiliations in past 10 years to be declared

**Jacob Koshy**  
NEW DELHI

**T**he Union Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change has amended the rules governing the selection of experts to the Genetic Engineering Appraisal Committee (GEAC), the apex technical body regulating genetically modified (GM) seeds in India.

Under the new rules, an “expert member” ought to disclose their “interest” that could conflict with their duties. The expert is also expected to take all steps necessary to ensure that any conflict of interest does not affect any decision of the GEAC.

An expert member with any direct or indirect association with a matter being discussed in a meeting of the committee is obliged to disclose this prior to the meeting. Unless specifically requested by the com-



Two judges had ruled differently on whether the Centre was right in according approval to genetically modified mustard. AFP

mittee, the expert is expected to recuse themselves from the meeting. All selected members would also have to fill out a form detailing their professional affiliations to a decade prior to joining the committee.

## Split verdict

These rules come on the back of a Supreme Court

order in July 2023 requiring that the Centre form a national policy on GM crops.

In that order of July 2023, the SC delivered a split verdict on the validity of the Centre’s 2022 decision granting conditional approval for environmental release of GM mustard crops, thus leaving a final resolution on the release of

the crop to a future Bench.

Two judges ruled differently on whether the Centre was right in according approval to GM mustard.

Among the directives that they concurred on was establishing a process for resolving issues around conflict of interest.

As far as the GM case is concerned, the question of such conflict arose following an allegation by an activist group, the Coalition for GM-Free India, in 2013, that one of the members of a Technical Expert Committee appointed by the court, ran an organisation that was funded by Monsanto, a multinational biotech and agricultural pesticides company, and affiliated Indian organisations.

Monsanto has since been bought over by Bayer CropScience Limited, a company with similar interests.



# PSLV C-60 mission: space start-up firm gets desired results

**The Hindu Bureau**  
BENGALURU

Bellatrix Aerospace has announced that it has achieved the desired results from the Rudra High-Performance Green Propulsion System, which was onboard the POEM-4 in the recently launched PSLV C-60 mission.

The Bengaluru-based space start-up said the Rudra High-Performance Green Propulsion System has fired flawlessly aboard POEM-4 in PSLV C-60.

“We replicated the same hardware from January

2024’s space qualification, reaffirming its dependable and repeatable performance. This is a proud milestone as propulsion systems are complex engines owing to challenging sub-systems. All sub-systems are 100% made at Bellatrix,” it said.

“Disturbance imparted on POEM body in Yaw axis was 1.4 deg/s for a 60 second firing. 80 degrees angular rotation of the POEM platform was observed. This sets a new benchmark. We have planned more firings during the coming days,” it added.



# Rajendra Arlekar sworn in as 23rd Kerala Governor

## **The Hindu Bureau**

THIRUVANANTHAPURAM

Rajendra Vishwanath Arlekar was sworn in as the 23rd Governor of Kerala on Thursday.

Kerala High Court Chief Justice Nitin Madhukar Jamdar administered the oath of office at Raj Bhavan in Thiruvananthapuram. Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan, Leader of the Opposition V.D. Satheesan, senior political leaders, government functionaries and Mr. Arlekar's family members were among those present.

Until recently Governor of Bihar, he replaces Arif Mohammed Khan. Mr. Arlekar's stint will be watched with immense interest given the tumultuous relationship his prede-



Pinarayi Vijayan greets Rajendra Arlekar after swearing-in ceremony.

cessor had with the Left government in the State. Mr. Khan replaces Mr. Arlekar in Bihar after a five-year stint in Kerala.

A member of the RSS from a young age and later the BJP, Mr. Arlekar is a former Minister and Speaker of the Goa Assembly.