An analysis of three systemic afflictions and what it says about the country

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Deepanshu Mohan

<u>Independence Day</u>

What three systemic afflictions say about India at 75

Instead of Amrit Kaal, the era of nectar, India is witnessing is the bulldozing of the rule of law andpolitical action aimed at solely winning elections.

Youth Congress workers protest in Bengaluru on April 22. | PTI

The Preamble to the Indian Constitution begins with the assertion that the principles contained in the landmark document are being endorsed by "we, the people of India". It suggested an idea of a people who were innocent, trustworthy, self-conscious and respectful in collectivity – in contrast to the corrupt, interest-oriented ruling oligarchy.

But since Independence, the idea of "the people" has changed, academicians Hilal Ahmed and Subir Sinha note in an article in the August edition of *Seminar*. "Success in [Indian] politics is described as 'the people's' decision; while political debacles are seen as a tactical failure to attract them," they observe.

Contemporary politics has invoked the "will of the majority" to justify communal projects, even as widespread protests have resulted in a pushback from citizens, they note.

The authors explain how under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, "New India" makes a distinction between state and society: politics is not about fighting for or securing social reforms anymore.

What has changed over the past 75 years?

Here is an analysis of three systemic ills afflicting the landscape of state-society relations in contemporary India.

Bulldozing the rule of law

The Nehruvian state introduced a series of radical social reforms in the 1950s through constitutional means and gave the state and the ruling elite a pedagogical function. The people, in this framework, were to be educated and reformed by the state to make them adequately modern and fully democratic.

The Indira Gandhi government intensified this process. She reinterpreted the Directive Principles of State Policy to legitimise her authoritarian rule. Indira Gandhi even went on to justify the Emergency (1975-'77) in the name of people's welfare.

But now, rights-based people-focused movements that led to some degree of transparency and accountability from the government are increasingly met with disdain and the iron fist of the Indian state. In the past, such movements had led to the enactment of laws such as the Right to Information Act.

Farmers celebrate at the Ghazipur border after the farm laws were withdrawn, in December 2021. Credit: PTI.

Satyagraha, in fact, is now being treated with harsh punishments and jail, much like the manner in which the colonial British rulers responded to India's freedom struggle. Modi's "governmentality" is reimagining the imperial British Raj's project of centralising power to codify laws and enforcing coercive measures on dehumanised labourers with a weakened bargaining position.

Instead of "Amrit Kaal", the era of nectar that the Modi government has promised, what India is witnessing is the bulldozing of the rule of law combined with political action solely aimed at winning elections at all costs. If, for some reason, the party does lose an election, its Big-Capital-backed deep pockets, financed by opaque electoral bonds, ensures the breakdown of Opposition regimes – as seen in Maharashtra and other states.

Crisis in Ambedkarism

Another element of the crisis has manifested itself while trying to apply the ideological and socio-legal philosophy of BR Ambedkar, the writer of the Indian Constitution, to affirmative action programmes and the realisation of basic rights for marginalised communities (such as Dalits, Adivasis, Women and LGBTQ+).

Ambedkarites have been involved in disseminating Ambedkar's ideas and teachings, while seeking to apply these to the fight for the rights, lives and livelihoods of marginalised communities. The last few decades have also seen a greater emphasis on Ambedkar's ideas in the reimagining of critical social and economic policies across India.

Nevertheless, as scholar Anand Teltumbde argued at an Ambedkar Memorial Lectures in 2011: "Every Ambedkarite whether (s)he is conscious of it or not, experiences some crisis" – which he lists as a crisis of identity, crisis of ideology, crisis of leadership, crisis of politics, crisis of morality, crisis of living and an organisational crisis. Teltumbde's concerns merit further reflection.

The foremost challenge before those following Ambedkar's visions is to construct Ambedkarism as a guiding philosophy for the struggle of those in marginalised spaces while recognising the reasons for the structural crises outlined by Teltumbde.

"Much of the Ambedkarite discourse is rooted in the past," contends Teltumbde. To project a vision for a better future, the present conditions of the marginalised must be considered more carefully.

Widening inequality

The third systemic issue is that of the widening inequality of access afflicting state-society relations. A report of the Centre for New Economics Studies, OP Jindal Global University, released in 2001,outlines the state of access inequality in Indian states. It ranks the performance of Indian states in five areas: healthcare, education, amenities, socio-economic security and a fair legal recourse system.

India has made significant progress over the past seven decades in tackling poverty, malnutrition, maternal and infant mortality, family planning and other challenges. But the rural-urban, north-south, rich-poor, have-have nots divide continues to rise even 75 years of independence.

The path of neoliberal growth-anchored development championed by an urban-biased model has left the marginalised with even fewer resources.

A mob vandalises trains and railway properties at the Secunderabad railway station on June 17 during a protest agains the short-term armed forces recruitment scheme Agnipath. Credit: PTI.

India has one of the highest youth unemployment rates and one of the worst female labour-force participation rates. It is worth asking whether the neoliberal economic reforms of the last three decades have actually yielded better economic outcomes and opportunities for all. Evidence on job creation gives a mixed picture while access equality across Indian states is dismal.

Despite this bleak outlook, there is a ray of hope. People-based movements are still striving for social reform. Environmental activism is peaking. Ambredkar's teachings and push for a social democracy remains the guiding light for many people.

On access equality, states such as Goa and Sikkim, Kerala and Tamil Nadu, are doing well to provide residents have equal access to basic socio-economic opportunities and public goods.

We, the people of India, must see the paradoxical realities of India and strive together to expand possibilities of realising progressive action for all. At the same time, we must bring politics back to the track of fighting for social reform and justice while hoping for an

egalitarian order. Or else, the looming darkness of an Anishchit Kaal – the era of uncertainty – may soon be upon us.

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The Indian American community in the United States is gaining significant momentum as one of the fastest-growing and influential demographics. According to the Pew Research Center, the current population of Indian Americans exceeds 4.5 million, with projections suggesting it will reach over 9 million by 2050. This population presents an attractive target audience for brands due to their potential purchasing power and receptivity to advertising.

A Trusted Platform: Scroll.in

Scroll.in, a prominent news and opinion website tailored for Indian Americans, commands a substantial readership of over 500,000 in the United States. It serves as a reliable source of news and information for this community, making it a potential advertising platform to consider.

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The Indian American Community: Key Statistics

- Average age: 36.6 years old (as of 2020)
- Education: 48% of Indian Americans have a bachelor's degree or higher, compared to 33% of the overall U.S. population.
- Income: The median household income for Indian Americans is $122,149, compared to $67,521 for the overall U.S. population.
- Where they live: The states with the highest Indian American populations are California (35%), New Jersey (12%), Texas (10%), New York (9%), and Illinois (8%).
- Home ownership: The homeownership rate for Indian Americans is 77%, compared to 65% for the overall U.S. population.
- Business ownership: Indian Americans are more likely to be business owners than the overall U.S. population. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 17% of Indian Americans are self-employed, compared to 10% of the overall population.

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Consider Advertising on Scroll.in

For brands looking to connect with the Indian American audience in the United States, advertising on Scroll.in offers a potential avenue to explore. With its significant readership and trusted reputation, Scroll.in can be a platform to reach and engage with this growing and influential community.

Interested in advertising on Scroll.in? Reach out today to learn more about this opportunity to connect with the Indian American audience.

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BOOK EXCERPT

Fiction: What do you cook when your son invites an American friend home for lunch?

An excerpt from 'The Best Possible Experience', a collection of short stories by Nishanth Injam.

Author Nishanth Injam. | Divesh Raheja

Padmanabham clasped his hands to his chest when he found out what happened. Vikas, his 12-year-old son, had invited a white boy to their house for lunch.

"He's coming tomorrow, not today," Vikas said, but the shock remained. Paddy took off his work bag and plunged into the sofa. He turned to Latha. "When did you find out about this?" he asked his wife. "He told me an hour ago," Latha said. "An hour ago!" Paddy said. He hadn't expected this one bit. It had been a month since they'd exchanged their small town in India for a small town in the States, as he joked in the office. The move had been rough on the kids; they moped around the house and cried a fair bit, and so he'd advised them to make friends in school. The advice was no more than a day old; he had assumed Vikas and Niharika would befriend desi kids first and then slowly branch out. None of them knew how to survive more than five minutes of conversation in English, let alone an entire meal. And now Vikas had signed them up for this test. ...

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BOOK EXCERPT

For young readers: Dhara runs the first elections at her school. Will things go according to plan?

An excerpt from 'Dhara's Revolution', by Varsha Seshan. Illustrated by Tanvi Bhat.

An illustration from the book. | Puffin India.

On Monday morning, Dhara felt butterflies fluttering in her stomach.

"Who's ready to do something re-vuh-looshinary?" asked Chandra Ma'am. Dhara swallowed hard and raised her hand amidst the enthusiastic shouts of the rest of the class. "Dhara, yes! Did you work on your idea?" Chandra Ma'am inquired.

"Yes, ma'am!" Dhara exclaimed.

"Since the others don't know anything, let's start with the usual question. Tell the class what makes you angry!" Chandra Ma'am said.

Dhara turned to face her classmates. "The fact that we can't make decisions about things that concern *us* makes me angry."

"And what are you going to do about it?" Chandra Ma'am asked, her eyes sparkling behind her spectacles.

Carol promptly stood up. "Vote for a representative!"

Dhara scowled. It was her idea, not Carol's!

"Mm!" Chandra Ma'am looked impressed. "Tell me more. Why can't the prefects be your representatives?"

"We didn't choose them! So how do we know if they want the same things we want?" asked Dhara. "Besides, they will be leaving the school next year, so why would they care about the future of the school? They won't be affected by what happens to the old hall! *We* should have the right to decide."...

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Effective public-private partnerships could transform India's post-pandemic healthcare system

Private players, through their extensive network and investments, bridge the gap in healthcare infrastructure, particularly in underserved areas.

Medical staff at ward for Covid-19 patients at Delhi's Lok Nayak Jai Prakash Hospital in July 2020. | Reuters

The Covid-19 pandemic exposed the vulnerabilities of India's healthcare system and necessitated a thorough evaluation of its strengths and weaknesses. As the country looks towards the future, public-private partnerships have emerged as a potential solution to enhance the diagnosis, treatment and overall resilience of the healthcare system. By leveraging the collaborative strengths of the public and private sectors, India can create an ecosystem that addresses the challenges of all diseases and ensures the well-being of its citizens.

What are the lessons from the pandemic?

The Covid-19 crisis overwhelmed India's healthcare system, revealing enormous gaps and vulnerabilities. Challenges included limited testing capacity, inadequate healthcare infrastructure, scarcity of medical resources, personnel and overwhelming socioeconomic disparities.

Addressing these issues required a robust and comprehensive response that encompassed timely and accurate diagnosis, effective treatment, and equitable access to healthcare services.This was only possible when the public sector worked with the private

sector. ...

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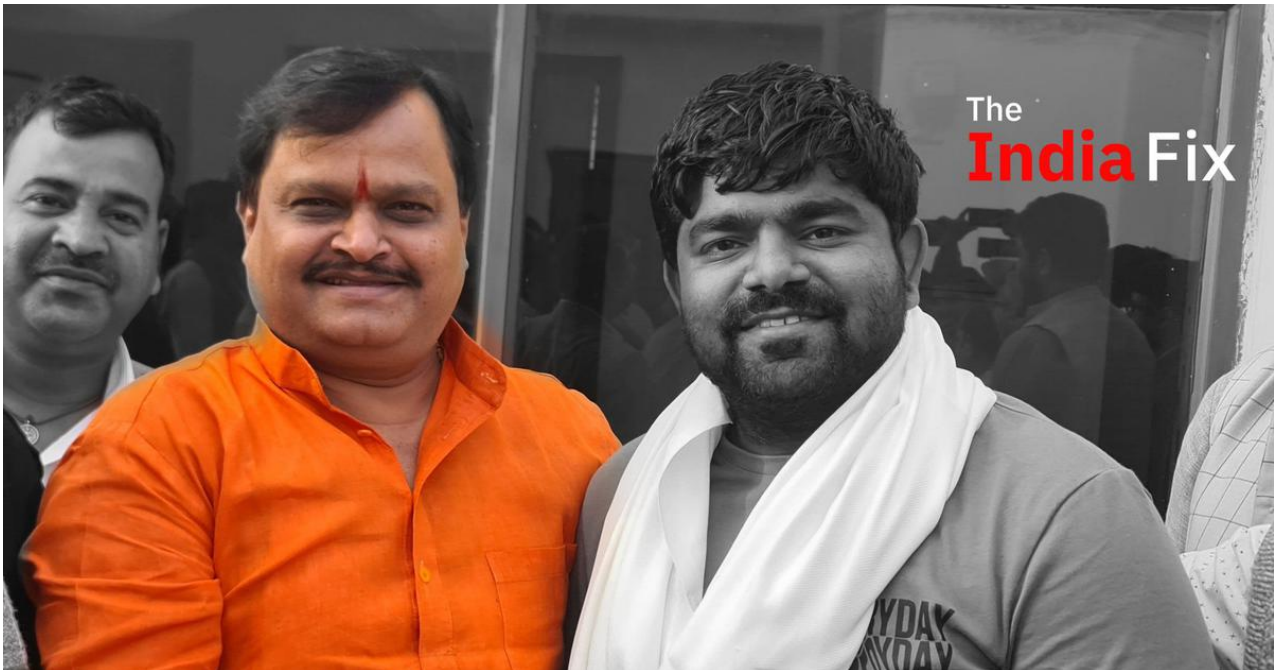
The chief editor of Sudarshan news, Suresh Chavhanke, with Monu Manesar, accused of lynching several Muslim men in Haryana. | Monu Manesar/ Twitter

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In one of India's most chilling hate crimes, a Railway Protection Force jawan named Chetansinh Chaudhary shot four train passengers dead on July 31. Three of those people were Muslim. Chaudhary had roamed through the train he had been entrusted to protect, hunting for people who looked Muslim, asked for their names and then pumped bullets into them. In the middle of this terror rampage, Chaudhary also [accosted](#) a Muslim woman in a burqa and forced her to chant "Jai mata di", a popular invocation to the Hindu goddess Durga.

What drove this mass killing? The answer was provided by Chaudhary himself. As a Muslim man lay writhing on the floor, having just been shot, Chaudhary delivered a speech – which he forced other passengers to record. In his rant, Chaudhary spoke of a shadowy theory of people operating from Pakistan. "Inke aqa hai wahan," he said. Their leaders are there in Pakistan....

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How UPI, DigiMelas, and other fintech schemes became the Modi Government's trump card

An excerpt from 'India's Techade: Digital Revolution and Change in the World's Largest Democracy', by Nalin Mehta.

Punit Paranjpe/ AFP

We were standing in a queue at an amusement park in Noida when the cashier asked a group of young men standing directly in front: would they pay in cash or by card? They were all Hindi-speaking teenagers from nearby villages. Not the kind you would expect to possess bank cards. Suddenly one of them piped up with a smile, "Modiji has said no, go digital. So, we will pay by UPI." They broke into loud guffaws and good-natured backslapping. But I noticed they all took out their phones and paid for their tickets digitally.

When I asked the young men about the Modi comment, they responded with slightly self-conscious but proud smiles. Not all of them were BJP supporters, I realised later in conversation. Some of them voted for the Samajwadi Party, BJP's great rival in UP. But the conversation was a useful reminder of how intertwined UPI's success is with politics.

The quantum growth of UPI may seem a fait accompli now. But no one could have predicted it when the system was launched in 2016.

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NGO crackdown

FCRA licence crackdown has plunged India's non-profit sector into a crisis

Over 100 organisations have lost their licences in seven months with no clarity on what this means for their workers, the economy and the crucial work they do.

A homeless woman with her child wait in line for food in Kolkata, during a nationwide lockdown to contain Covid-19 spread. | Rupak De Chowdhuri/Reuters

When 70 Indian start-ups laid off 17,000 employees (including 2,500 people at EdTech firm Byju's) in the first six months of 2023, much newsprint and digital ink was devoted to analysing what it meant for the companies, their employees, the start-up ecosystem and the economy.

Compare this to the more than 100 non-profits that have lost their Foreign Contribution Regulation Act licence in a seven-month period (as per data available as of March 23). Approximately 4,000 people at CARE, one of the larger global nonprofits operating in India, were reportedly rendered unemployed versus the 2,500 people at Byju's.

Yet, there is no conversation on what this means for the economy – nonprofits contribute to 2% of the country's gross domestic product, or GDP; on the viability of the nonprofits themselves; on the debilitating impact on their staff, most of whom are employed in the smaller towns and villages; and, above all, on the millions of vulnerable families that are now deprived of the critical services these organisations provide them....

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The saying goes that money can't buy you love. But can it buy you time? This is what US billionaire Bryan Johnson is hoping to find out.

The 45-year-old reportedly spends millions each year in an attempt to reverse ageing and regain his 18-year-old body (presumably sans acne). To achieve this, Johnson sticks to a rigid diet and exercise regime, takes multiple supplements, and has frequent tests to analyse the function of his organs. He's also tried some novel procedures to rejuvenate his body, such as injecting himself with his 17-year-old son's blood plasma.

Not only has Johnson's quest garnered a lot of attention online, it has also left many wondering to what extent his ultimate goal is achievable – can your body really be younger than your calendar age?

There are two interconnected ways of measuring your age. The first is chronological age, which is the easiest to understand. It's really nothing more than how long you've been alive. The most accurate estimate of that is the date and time on your birth certificate....

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An idol of Shiva partially submerged in the swollen Ganga river, at Parmarth Niketan Ghat in Rishikesh on August 14. | PTI

The famous pilgrimage site of Kedarnath, located in the central Himalayas, is believed to be a sacred land. It has been referred to as "deva bhumi," or the "land of the gods," for centuries.

Millions of people visit this region each year in search of divine blessings and other religious benefits as part of what is known as the Char Dham Yatra, or the pilgrimage to four sacred mountainous abodes devoted to different gods and goddesses. Situated at the base of 20,000-foot snowy peaks, Kedarnath is one of these four major destinations.

The mighty god Shiva is believed to have manifested in the middle of a meadow in Kedarnath as a conical rock formation that has long been worshiped as a lingam, an embodied form of the deity. A stone temple has stood over the lingam for at least a thousand years, at an altitude of about 12,000 feet.

I visited this area in 2000, 2014 and 2019 as part of research I've been conducting for decades on religion, nature and ecology; I have spent numerous summers in the Himalayas. Many in the vast crowds of people on the Char Dham Yatra told me that they believe it is important to undertake this pilgrimage at least once in their lifetime, often identifying it as the most significant journey they will ever perform....

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This year, there has been some controversy about the rewriting of passages from authors such as Roald Dahl, Enid Blyton, Ian Fleming, and Agatha Christie with the aim of removing potentially offensive material. Some publishers have also adopted the precautionary measure of adding content warnings and disclaimers to books by Ernest Hemingway, Virginia Woolf, Raymond Chandler, and PG Wodehouse.

Critics of these bowdlerisations and disclaimers have come from across the political spectrum and seem to vastly outnumber those defending the practice. It is some time since I have noticed a literary topic come up as frequently as this one in conversation with those outside the literary culture. And while, as an academic, it is heartening to see people worked up about books and their value, it is disheartening to see books recruited as culture-war fodder.

Conservative publications have tended to frame these developments as evidence of "wokeness" (a word, in this context, vacant of meaning). Others have offered more nuanced, less loaded critiques, arguing that such measures fail to account for our obligation to attend to and preserve history, rather than ignore or erase it. In the case of children's books, the argument has been made for the role of adults as responsible literary guides....

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