



DECCAN HERALD

ESTABLISHED 1948

## EC’s credibility hinges on action

The Election Commission (EC)’s combative dismissal of Congress leader Rahul Gandhi’s allegations of electoral malpractices or “vote *chori*”, rather than addressing them with transparency, has only fuelled public scepticism. When Rahul aired serious concerns about over one lakh fraudulent votes in Mahadevapura, including duplicate registrations, dubious addresses, and bulk voters in single-room dwellings, the EC’s response was telling. Instead of initiating a thorough investigation into its electoral rolls, the very documents that Rahul referenced, the Commission demanded he swear an affidavit under Rule 20 (3)(b) of the Registration of Electors Rules, 1960. This knee-jerk reaction misreads the law. Rule 14 explicitly allows complaints to be filed either in person or through registered post. Rule 20 comes into play much later, during evidentiary proceedings, after a preliminary inquiry. By skipping due process and prematurely insisting on oath, the EC appeared more keen to shield itself through procedural technicalities rather than probe into concerns rooted in its databases.

Subsequent media fact-checks have corroborated some of Rahul’s specific claims, notably bulk registrations from a small dwelling. Despite this, the EC offered only general rebuttals and did not address the allegations directly or provide concrete data refuting them. The second notice to Rahul demanding proof that a voter cast two ballots further exposes the Commission’s flawed approach. While the EC has claimed that the voter has denied this allegation, it has not clarified if it examined booth logs or CCTV footage to conclusively rule out impersonation. By shifting the burden of proof and the onus of investigation entirely onto the complainant, the EC is abdicating its role as a custodian of electoral integrity. Meanwhile, in the process of defending the EC, Karnataka BJP leaders have pointed out similar discrepancies in constituencies won by the Congress. The commission did not send them notices, nor did it issue veiled threats of legal action for false claims, as it did with Rahul. This uneven scrutiny and selective outrage could undermine EC’s claims of impartiality.

Beyond legalities, the EC’s reputation hinges on visible accountability and public perception of its fairness and responsiveness. The Commission should adopt a more proactive approach by swiftly conducting a systemic audit of suspect constituencies and issuing a point-to-point clarification where possible. To restore faith in its credibility, the Commission should adopt a transparent approach instead of defensive opacity and institutional stonewalling. As the democracy’s cornerstone, the EC must remember: Caesar’s wife must be above suspicion.

## State and the silencing of ideas

The ban on 25 books by the Jammu and Kashmir Home Department, on the orders of Lieutenant Governor Manoj Sinha, goes against the administration’s claims about the situation in the Union Territory and exposes its insecurities. The banned books include *The Kashmir Dispute* by AG Noorani, *Kashmir in Conflict: India, Pakistan and the Unending War* by Victoria Schofield, *Azadi* by Arundhati Roy, and *Contested Lands* by Sumantra Bose. The notification says that the books propagate a “false narrative and secessionism”, increase radicalisation and recruitment into terrorism, and “would deeply impact the psyche of youth by promoting a culture of grievance, victimhood and terrorist heroism”. The messaging contradicts the government’s claims, especially after the scrapping of Article 370 in 2019, that normalcy has returned to Kashmir and that there is no disaffection or discontent. There are also reports about the decline in militant recruitment.

Many of the banned books are about Kashmir’s history, State overreach, and people’s experience with the government, and offer critical perspectives and narratives that the government may not agree with. But a responsible admin-

The ban on 25 books in Kashmir undermines free speech and goes against official claims of normalcy in the UT

istration should not ban ideas it does not approve of. Some of these books are products of many years of research, and they have been in circulation for a long time. Till now, there has been no criticism that they have radicalised people or incited them against the State. Raids have been held across the Union Territory to seize the books. As it happens when books are banned, they will go underground and will be read more.

Banning books, plays, and films is a familiar tactic employed by authoritarian governments to counter inconvenient narratives. When democratic governments do that, it only exposes their authoritarian tendencies or their wish to please some sections of society. A ban is a violation of the right to free speech and expression, and the right to know. The objectives cited by the Kashmir administration are unconvincing. The popular government in the Union Territory has not supported the administration’s actions. Chief Minister Omar Abdullah has distanced himself from the ban. The question to ask is – aren’t these books harmful in other parts of the country? Bans on works of art and literature have never addressed the issues they discuss. If the books offer “wrong” narratives, the administration should counter them with its narratives and actions, not with a ban. There should be free play and exchange of ideas. If the administration thought the ban would curb disaffection, it is wrong. Unilateral actions and excessive control can only intensify it.

The steady deterioration of universities can have a severe impact on India’s development goals

DEEPAK NAYYAR

There is a quiet crisis in higher education in India that runs deep. The educational opportunities for school-leavers are simply not enough, and those that exist are not good enough. The pockets of excellence are outcomes of the enormous reservoir of talent and Darwinian selection processes. It does little for those with average abilities or without social opportunities. The challenges confronting higher education in India are clear. It needs a massive expansion to educate much larger numbers, but without diluting academic standards.

It is just as important to raise the average quality. What is more, in terms of access, higher education in India needs to be far more inclusive. And, it needs some institutions, each with a certain critical mass, that are exemplars of excellence at par with the best in the world. Such excellence is largely missing in India, while it is diminishing rapidly in the few pockets where it existed. Indeed, in terms of world university rankings, which have become the fashion in recent years, our performance is poor. For those who set high standards, it borders on the dismal.

QS University Rankings 2025 reveal the geographical country-composition of the top 100 universities in the world: the United States (26), Western Europe (18), the United Kingdom (16), Australia (8), Hong Kong (6), South Korea (5), Japan (4), China (4), Singapore (2), Malaysia (1), and Taiwan (1). Thus, 72 were in the Western world, including Australia, but there were as many as 23 in Asia. India had none.

Of course, it must be said that these rankings have all the limitations of composite index numbers, since it is difficult to measure qualitative attributes while weights assigned to different components shape results. Even so, it is obvious that our universities have miles to go before reaching world standards. Islands of excellence – IITs, IIMs, or the IISc – are no consolation. Successive governments have sought to multiply the number of IITs and IIMs, but the inevitable outcome is highly uneven

quality and a dilution of the brand equity of existing institutions that have already attained academic excellence. More importantly, the lifeblood of higher education is not small elite institutes but large universities providing educational opportunities for young people.

The comparative advantage that India had, at least in a few of its universities, has been slowly, yet surely, squandered over time. And, sadly, even the little that remains is being progressively undermined by the growing intrusion of politics in universities. But that is not all. Systematic and mindless under-resourcing of public higher education is also a reason for the steady regression in the quality of universities.



The situation is much worse than it was just one decade ago. Universities have deteriorated rapidly in India, while universities elsewhere in the developing world, particularly in Asia and even more so in China, have made significant progress. There is an obvious danger. Unless we introduce correctives, the situation might worsen further to transform us from erstwhile leaders into laggards, or worse.

### Student outflow

There is intense competition among students for admissions to public universities with a semblance of standards and reputations, despite the divergence in quality. The fortunate few, who do well enough in the Class 12 examinations, take up these limited places, while most, the less fortunate, make do with institutions in the private sector, where fees are always higher and, apart from a few exceptions, quality is mostly poor. Of course, quality is uneven both in public institutions and the private

sector. But exceptions to these generalisations simply prove the rule. Only the privileged few have parents rich enough to send them abroad instead.

During the past 25 years, the number of students from India going abroad for higher education increased rapidly from roughly 50,000 in 2000 to 200,000 in 2010 and 350,000 in 2015. This number climbed to 600,000 in 2019, which was the last year before the Coronavirus pandemic that shut down universities across the world. It rose further to 900,000 in 2023. It is estimated that in 2023, of the students going abroad to study, 30% went to the US, 25% went to Canada, 20% went to the UK, while 10% went to Australia and New Zealand.

If we assume that their average expenditure on fees and maintenance is \$30,000 per student per annum, in 2023, Indian students overseas spent \$27 billion, which is about the same as India’s foreign exchange earnings from tourism in 2023. However, annual expenses on fees and maintenance in rich countries are likely to be much higher, so the costs would be proportionately higher.

These sums, if made available for higher education in India, could help transform at least some universities. But that is not all. A large proportion of students – around 75% – who go abroad for higher education do not return to India. The number of foreign students at universities in India, even from South Asian countries, is also much diminished, as compared with the past.

Our higher education is caught in a pincer movement. For one, there is a belief that markets can solve the problem through private players, which is leading to education as business, shutting the door on large numbers who cannot finance themselves, without regulation that would ensure quality. This is no solution.

For another, governments that believe in the magic of markets are virtual control freaks with respect to public universities. This is motivated by the desire to exercise political influence in higher education for patronage, ideology, rents, or vested interests. This is a big problem. Unless we introduce correctives here and now, we will mortgage the future of young India and stifle our aspirations for a developed India.

(The writer, an economist, is Professor Emeritus at Jawaharlal Nehru University and former vice chancellor, University of Delhi)

### RIGHT IN THE MIDDLE

## A walk on the wild side

The bloodcurdling experiences taught me never to follow shortcuts in an unfamiliar area

H NARAYANAN

That day I left my Air Force unit in a remote northern region earlier than usual to collect my scooter from a garage after a routine servicing. Learning that the vehicle would be ready only the next day and that for about two hours there would be no bus bound for Krishna Nagar, our residential area some two kilometres away. I took recourse to walking home, the risk of crossing a sprawling paddy field flanking the road aside notwithstanding.

Setting out on one of the banks of the paddy fields on foot, I had walked scarcely half a kilometre when I noticed a big snake, a cobra by all odds from its appearance, lying coiled up snugly across

the bank, maybe after a heavy swallow. Standing afar, I thumped my feet heavily on the ground for the creature to move away; soon it slid down the bank and melted into the field.

Plucking up courage, I resumed my walk, recollecting an all but analogous incident I had experienced in the past. By then the jaws of darkness began devouring the brightness of the day. Walking ahead with heavy steps along the bank in that gloaming hour, I reached another bank aside where a broad well almost full of water – may be for the purpose of irrigation of the fields – and entirely devoid of a parapet around it espied me smack bang in the dim moonlight. It was by sheer providence that I stopped short of taking even a step ahead. Had I advanced by a step or two, I would have been in the well. This was my second brush in a row with disaster at the same crepuscular hour on that ill-fated day.

Standing dazed for a while, I collected myself from the series of shocks and

continued stirring up my stumps, invoking our clan deity. As I was steadily loping and hopping further on the bank, a dim view of Krishna Nagar unfolded before my eyes, invigorating me to move fast ahead. Hoping that I was out of the woods, I quickly got to a vast plain ground where a pack of stray dogs came running to me baying.

A heap of scree, pebbles and loose stones lying around me came to my rescue, prompting me to pick them up double quick and pelt them at those canines, forcing them to run a mile, curling up their caudal appendage between the hind legs; there was a bamboo stick lying amidst the scree as if for my use as an additional weapon to boot, if needed. Crossing the succession of hurdles, I, however, got back home, life and limb, breathing not a word to my wife about the hazardous incidents that befell me that gloomy twilight hour.

The bloodcurdling experiences taught me never to follow shortcuts in an unfamiliar area.

### LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

## PM must avoid optics, opt for virtual inaugurations

Apropos ‘Disruptions, diversions put many a travel plan off track’ (Aug 11), PM Narendra Modi’s events in Bengaluru to inaugurate a new metro line and three Vande Bharat trains, as predicted, caused misery for commuters and other road users. The rains and waterlogging exacerbated the situation on routes already notorious for chronic and annoying traffic bottlenecks. Effectively, the launch of projects intended for people’s convenience left them extremely frustrated. Even the finest traffic control methods can fail in such situations. Considering

these issues, VVIP political leaders must restrict their unnecessary movements. There is no need for the Prime Minister to personally open every new metro line or Vande Bharat train in the country when he could do it virtually, and when there are more pressing problems for him to focus on. Moreover, projects like these, which are otherwise ready for public use, are often put on hold until a VVIP is available to formally inaugurate them. Such senseless optics cost the public exchequer dearly. **Kamal Laddha**, Bengaluru

panding influence, industrial growth, and technological advancements are reshaping the global economic order – yet, for some, these achievements are more a cause for unease than celebration, as they signal a shift in the balance of power towards emerging economies like India. **N Sadhasiva Reddy**, Bengaluru

### Misrepresentation

Apropos ‘SEP proposals evoke mixed reactions from stakeholders’ (Aug 10), it appears that the article highlights individual opinions as collective sentiment. D Shashi Ku-

mar’s individual opinion is presented as representative of all parents and stakeholders. While his views as an association representative are valid, portraying them as universal consensus is misleading. Notably, despite the sub-headline claiming the language policy “finds no takers,” not a single parent has been quoted expressing opposition to the two-language policy. **Rohit R**, Bengaluru

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### SPEAK OUT

I am speaking to you as a former minister. But there is a huge conspiracy behind my dismissal, I know who is behind this conspiracy and what they have done...I will share the details of this conspiracy in the coming days...



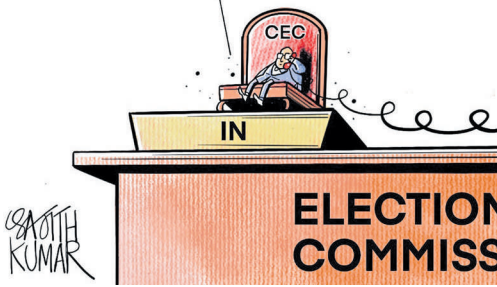
K N Rajanna, Congress leader

Apparently, ‘conspiracy stuff’ is now shorthand for unspeakable truth.

Gore Vidal

### TO BE PRECISE

ALL UNDER CONTROL, SIR!



### IN PERSPECTIVE

## Nuclear restraint for a new world

A fraying international system poses unique challenges, necessitating a stronger non-proliferation regime

ROHAN QURASHI

The albatross of controlling the energy contained within an atom – capable of annihilating human civilisation in mere moments – was seared in history when J. Robert Oppenheimer said, “Now I am become death, the destroyer of worlds.” In 1945, the detonation at Alamogordo marked the beginning of the nuclear age, a new epoch in which humanity crossed the threshold of both technological possibility and unprecedented responsibility.

The terror unleashed by Fat Man and Little Boy, which claimed around 200,000 lives and left generations scarred by radiation, made it clear that weapons of mass destruction could not be left unchecked. In 1968, seeking to avert a nuclear Armageddon, the international community came up with the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), which formally acknowledged five nuclear-weapon states while committing all others to refrain from developing such arsenals.

Surprisingly, the world has so far maintained a degree of nuclear stability. While nuclear technology has reached numerous countries, only a few have chosen to weaponise it. John F. Kennedy, the 35th President of the United States, predicted in the 1960s that there would be around 25 countries with nuclear weapons by the 1970s. Yet today, there are only nine of them – largely because of concerted global action to curb proliferation.

Almost six decades have passed, and the world has benefited from an effective non-proliferation regime – one with an established set of rules, institutions, and norms that have, to a large extent, discouraged nuclear armament. Yet, in an era of rapid geopolitical shifts, where Fiona Hill, the policy analyst and adviser to the UK government on its imminent strategic review, argues that “the third world war has already started”, will this global non-proliferation framework survive, or will we witness greater proliferation instead?

Following World War II, Japan and Germany, along with many NATO and East Asian allies, relinquished their pursuit of nuclear weapons under the protection of America’s nuclear umbrella. This extended deterrence was deemed sufficient for decades. However, the increasing unpredictability during Donald Trump’s second presidency has shaken confidence in US commitments. As a result, analysts now warn that several allies, equipped with the requisite technology and capital, could potentially develop nuclear weapons within a relatively short time

frame, and hence consider them as *de facto* nuclear states, though significant legal, technical, and political barriers remain.

The memories of the 1994 Budapest Memorandum remain fresh in their minds, where Ukraine received only non-binding political assurances from the US, the UK, and Russia, and surrendered a massive Soviet-era nuclear arsenal. Those assurances, however, failed to prevent the invasion, triggering a re-evaluation of nuclear disarmament decisions. Today, countries such as Japan, South Korea, Germany, and Poland are reassessing their strategic options, in part out of fear that relying on political guarantees could leave them vulnerable.

### Flawed but indispensable

According to some analysts, nuclear proliferation could paradoxically benefit global politics. Just as nuclear weapons sustained a fragile prudence between the US and the Soviet Union during the Cold War, similar arsenals today could, in theory, help stabilise regional power balances. But this approach of “more nuclear weapons equals more stability” depends on crucial conditions, like having leaders who are patient, risk-averse, and uninterested in expansionist ambitions. Unfortunately, the current international climate is marked by territorial disputes, revisionist agendas, and unpredictable leadership, making such stability far less likely than in the bipolar era.

The war in Ukraine, the conflict in Gaza, escalating tensions in the Middle East, and persistent hostility between India and Pakistan all point to the fact that the post-Cold War order is fraying, with geopolitical rivalries multiplying rapidly. These developments are testing the resilience of treaties such as the NPT and arms-control agreements originally crafted for a bipolar US-Soviet rivalry. Such frameworks are ill-suited to the realities of a multipolar world marked by shifting alliances, emerging nuclear-capable states, and the blurring of conventional and unconventional warfare.

Yet, even with their flaws, these treaties remain indispensable pillars of global stability. The acquisition of nuclear weapons doesn’t always elevate a state’s political stature, and decades of non-proliferation efforts have shown that the spread of nuclear technology remains a persistent challenge. These realities highlight the urgency of strengthening, rather than abandoning, the non-proliferation regime, modernising it to meet the threats of the 21st century. In an international system defined by anarchy, as realists argue, adherence to such treaties is not optional but essential because once their foundations begin to crumble, restoring trust and strategic stability could become exceedingly arduous.

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