

India Cementing Its Position to Become a Formidable Player in Defense Landscape

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India is rapidly cementing its position as a formidable player in the global defence landscape. With the fourth largest defence budget in the world, India allocated USD 72.6 billion for the fiscal year 2023-24.

According to Invest India data, this investment supports the world's second-largest armed force, comprising 1.45 million active personnel.

In 2022-23, USD 19.7 billion was earmarked for capital expenditure, underscoring India's commitment to modernizing its military infrastructure.

The nation has set an export target of USD 5 billion by 2025, already achieving USD 1.9 billion in exports for 2023, marking a tenfold increase since 2016.

Currently, India exports defence equipment to 85 countries and contributes 3.7 per cent to the total global military expenditure.

The distribution of the defence budget reflects India's strategic priorities, 51 per cent is allocated to the Army, 23 per cent to the Air Force, 19 per cent to the Navy, 6 per cent to the Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO), and 1 per cent to the Ordnance Factory Board (OFB).

Over the next 5-7 years, the Indian government plans to invest USD 130 billion in fleet modernization across all armed services. This includes the acquisition of advanced technologies and systems to enhance the capabilities of the Indian military.

To foster innovation and self-reliance, the government has sanctioned USD 30 million to indigenize 164 technologies. This initiative involves 2002 experts and 5399 companies, ensuring that India remains at the cutting edge of defence technology.

The fifth Positive Indigenization list has been released, comprising highly complex systems, sensors, weapons, and ammunition. In total, 509 items across all five lists are earmarked for indigenization, promoting domestic manufacturing and reducing dependency on imports.

Under the Make in India initiative, there is a requirement for 114 multi-role fighter aircraft. This acquisition aims to bolster the Indian Air Force's operational readiness and enhance its aerial combat capabilities.

The Indian Army plans to procure 1,580 towed artillery guns, 814 mounted gun systems, and 100 tracked artillery guns. This acquisition will modernize the Army's artillery capabilities and ensure readiness for diverse combat scenarios.

The Indian Navy has issued a Request for Information (RFI) to procure 12 state-of-the-art Mine Counter measure vessels (MCMVs). These vessels are essential for ensuring maritime safety and protecting naval assets.

The Indian Army has a requirement for 1700 FRCVs to be fulfilled under the Strategic Partnership Model. This initiative will enhance the Army's ground combat capabilities and ensure operational superiority.

India has liberalized its Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) policy, allowing up to 74 per cent through the automatic route and up to 100 per cent through the government route for most aero-components. This policy aims to attract global investors and foster technology transfer.

This policy facilitates long-term strategic partnerships between the Indian private sector and global Original Equipment Manufacturers (OEMs). It seeks to establish domestic manufacturing infrastructure and supply chains through a transparent and competitive process.

DAP 2020 encourages FDI to establish manufacturing hubs for import substitution and exports while protecting domestic industry interests. The Offset policy under DAP 2020 has been revised to give OEMs more flexibility.

India is developing two defence industrial corridors in Tamil Nadu and Uttar Pradesh. These corridors are dedicated to defence manufacturing and aim to attract investment and foster innovation.

The government has reduced entry barriers for new entrants by scrapping the requirement for Industrial Licensing for most defence components. By October 2022, 595 industrial licenses were issued to 366 companies, of which 113 companies have commenced production.

iDEX aims to establish Defence Innovation Hubs across the country, fostering innovation and technology development in the aerospace and defence sectors. It supports startups, MSMEs, individual innovators, and academia with a budget of approximately USD 65 million.

Created to address investment queries, the Defence Investor Cell provides guidance on investment opportunities and regulatory requirements.

A web-based single window interface facilitates the issuance of export authorizations in a transparent and time-bound manner.

The Make in India Defence portal provides comprehensive information on policies, procedures, and promotional measures related to defence production.

Defence Production & Export Promotion Policy (DPEPP) 2020 aims to achieve a turnover of USD 25 billion, including USD 5 billion in aerospace and defence exports by 2025. The policy focuses on areas such as aero engines, MRO industry, and critical technologies.

The Ministry of Defence, led by the defence minister, is responsible for national defence and security. The Department of Defence Production (DDP), established in November 1962, develops infrastructure to produce weapons, systems, platforms, and equipment required for defence.

Prominent players in India's defence manufacturing sector include Hindustan Aeronautics Ltd., Bharat Electronics Limited, BEML Ltd., Mishra Dhatu Nigam Ltd. (MIDHANI), Mazagon Dock Shipbuilders Ltd., Goa Shipyard Ltd., Hindustan Shipyard Ltd., Bharat Dynamics Ltd., Garden Reach Shipbuilders and Engineers Ltd., and the Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO).

India's defence manufacturing sector is poised for unprecedented growth, driven by substantial budget allocations, robust policy support, and strategic initiatives aimed at fostering self-reliance and innovation.

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How India's Bet on Chabahar can Counter China's Gwadar Gambit

By N C Bipindra

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The Gwadar project was never meant to be a connectivity project. China's intent all along was to build a naval base

The ongoing conflict in the Black Sea and the Houthi actions in the Red Sea resulted in the blockade of grains from Ukraine and the rerouting of vital marine traffic from the Red Sea.

Momentary panic in the trade circles caused steep fluctuations in essential commodities such as rice prices. This emphasises the need for alternative forms of trade and transport connectivity routes.

Non-state actors can hold trade to ransom using simple drones and rockets. There is a need to reimagine connectivity, especially since colonial powers established the current trade routes over the sea and land.

It served the purpose of carting goods from Asia to fuel the Western economy. However, large parts of Asia remained out of this transport network and consequently underdeveloped. The current network is a legacy of the colonial era, which benefits developed nations more.

India, guided by the principle of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam, is strategically planning new routes to connect Asia to Europe along the Arabian Peninsula and Central Asian nations through Iran.

These routes are not just about trade but about reshaping the geopolitical landscape. Central Asian countries, rich in natural resources such as oil, natural gas, minerals, and arable land, are key players in this new paradigm.

Countries like Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, with substantial oil and gas reserves, and Uzbekistan, one of the world's leading cotton producers, are set to benefit.

India's connectivity plans are a bold challenge to the norms established by the erstwhile powers in the region.

So, what does India want, and how do these corridors help? Let's explore these in a few words without delving into too many details.

The name 'Chabahar,' meaning 'Four Springs' in Persian, has a rich history dating back to ancient times. It was part of the Achaemenid Empire, one of the largest empires in ancient history, which ruled significant parts of the Middle East and Central Asia.

With its strategic location, the port was a vital trading hub during this period. Today, it holds the potential to be the gateway for India to access landlocked Central Asian countries like Afghanistan and beyond.

The port's development gained momentum with the signing of the Chabahar agreement in 2016 between India, Iran, and Afghanistan. This agreement aims to enhance regional connectivity and reduce Afghan dependency on Pakistan.

This agreement, a significant step towards establishing a transport and trade corridor through the Chabahar port, was marked by the first visit of an Indian Prime Minister to Iran in 15 years. During this event, PM Narendra Modi announced India's commitment to investing \$500 million, a testament to the port's historical and future significance.

India recently finalised a 10-year contract to develop the strategically significant Chabahar port in Iran. India Ports Global Ltd (IPGL), a government-supported entity, plans to invest around \$120 million in equipment and operations at the port for the duration of the contract, with potential for extended cooperation beyond this period.

India's Foreign Minister, S Jaishankar, emphasised the importance of communication and persuasion in helping people see the broader benefits of this decision. Responding to US criticism, he said, "I think we need to explain to everyone and convince them that this benefits all. Taking a narrow view isn't helpful."

The port is a critical node in the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), which aims to connect India, Iran, Russia, and other Central Asian countries through maritime and land routes.

Chabahar Port is significantly close to Gujarat on India's west coast and is only 768 nautical miles from Mumbai. India depends heavily on the Strait of Hormuz for its trade with Central Asia and Afghanistan.

The frequent tensions in the region are caused by extra-regional forces that could disrupt this route. Chabahar Port offers India an alternative trade pathway, ensuring that, even if issues arise in the Strait of Hormuz, India can continue its trade activities safely.

India can extend the corridor to northern Europe via Saint Petersburg in Russia. According to industry estimates, shipping via the INSTC route could reduce transit time by 15 days compared to the traditional Suez Canal route.

The second connectivity project that can potentially improve connectivity between Asia and Europe is the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC).

A deal establishing the IMEC was signed by Saudi Arabia, the US, the EU, India, the UAE, France, Germany, and Italy and announced by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman on the sidelines of the G20 Summit in New Delhi in September 2023.

The new 4,800-kilometre trade route is intended to stimulate economic development and integration. It comprises two separate routes: an east corridor linking India to the Arabian Gulf and a northern corridor connecting Gulf states to Europe.

The rail and sea route will enable the transit of goods and services, electric and digital connectivity, and pipelines to export clean hydrogen. The IMEC signifies a deepening relationship with the convergence of the Middle East and South Asia into West Asia.

Why now?

To understand this, it is essential to know that India's trade ties with Saudi Arabia and the UAE are already substantial, and this corridor could further strengthen their economic integration.

The IMEC goes back to the natural connectivity of eras past. Historic trading links between the Indian subcontinent, the Middle East, and Eurasia show that long distances are no barrier to shared interests.

Why Chabahar and not Gwadar

India's vision counters the much-hyped but yet-to-deliver Belt and Road Initiative. China was to develop the Gwadar port to connect with Kashgar, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) jewel.

However, the Gwadar project was never meant to be a connectivity project. China's intent all along was to build a naval base. Pakistan played along because it benefited their naval strategy of reducing dependency on Karachi.

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Bangladesh Awami League Marks 75 Years: A Legacy of Leadership and Struggle

By Farabi Bin Zahir

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The oldest political party in Bangladesh, the Bangladesh Awami League celebrated its 75th anniversary on the 23rd of June. This party played a pivotal role in the country's independence. The party led the great Liberation War of Bangladesh and many of the post-independence achievements of the country have come through the efforts of the Awami League. Therefore, naturally, the expectations of the people from the Awami League are very high. The Awami League is a party of the masses, and there is a lot of trust placed in it by the people. In the same vein, thousands of supporters and well-wishers, beyond just the leaders and activists, have great expectations from the Awami League. Any shortcomings and limitations of the Awami League cause significant distress among these thousands of supporters and activists. It remains a question as to how much the higher-level leaders and activists perceive this distress and agony.

Over the past more than 15 years, due to the Awami League being in power, there has been a noticeable increase in the number of people aspiring to become leaders within the party. The veteran and dedicated leaders of the Awami League often complain that amidst these new entrants to the party, it is becoming increasingly difficult to find genuine Awami League supporters. This complaint is not entirely baseless. The nation has witnessed through media the entry of many leaders from the Jamaat-e-Islami into the Awami League, sometimes even with flowers in hand. The leniency shown towards allowing the children of war criminals into the party has been heavily criticized. How much can these new entrants truly understand the Awami League? How much do they comprehend the political philosophy of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and his political life?

Today, on this day, let us look back at history. On the 23rd of June 1949, in the Rose Garden Palace on K.M. Das Lane, Tikatuli, Dhaka, the 'East Pakistan Awami Muslim League' was founded. Its president was Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani and its general secretary was Shamsul Haque from Tangail. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, who later became the beloved leader of the people known as 'Bangabandhu,' was one of the joint general secretaries of that party. Through various sacrifices, struggles, and movements, he became the heartbeat of the Bengali people. He had the power to speak to the entire Bengali nation as if they were an inseparable part of his soul. He would often begin his speeches with "My brothers and sisters" or "My country." Only someone who loves others more than themselves can say "my" so meaningfully. Only someone who can make others part of themselves can use "my" appropriately.

And what a twist of fate! The first president continued to lead the party, despite it being on the brink of collapse, while the general secretary faded away from the limelight of history. History bears witness to the rise of Bangabandhu from an ordinary worker, not from a founding presidency or family lineage.

If we look at the political life of the current most successful Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina, we see that she is a leader deeply connected with grassroots politics. She was elected vice-president of the Eden College student council from the student wing of the Awami League in 1966-67 and served as the general secretary of the Rokeya Hall unit at Dhaka University while being a student there. Despite being the daughter of Bangabandhu and the then-president of the Awami League, Sheikh Hasina did not choose to start her political career as an MP, minister, or in any prominent position within the Awami League. Instead, she started her political journey from the grassroots level, embodying her father's political ideals.

Notably, when Sheikh Hasina was elected as the party leader, she was not present in the country. Thus, she had no opportunity to exert any influence on her selection. It was the party workers and supporters who elected her as the party leader, which was possible only due to her remarkable popularity at the grassroots level. As a result, even after leading the party for 42 years and overcoming various conspiracies, her popularity has not diminished but has only increased. Today, when she speaks of new leadership within the Awami League, her supporters unanimously reject the notion. Leaders and activists at all levels of the Awami League believe that their ultimate hope is "Sheikh Hasina." This is all possible due to her worker-friendly nature.

Therefore, those who aspire to become leaders or seek refuge under the flag of the Awami League, the political party that led the Liberation War, are urged not to take pride in titles or be moved by any particular reason, but to first establish themselves as dedicated workers of the Awami League and learn to value their comrades. Otherwise, one must remember that just as the Awami League has the example of Bangabandhu, it also has the history of the fading away of its founding president and general secretary. One must keep in mind that the Awami League is not a party born in military barracks or the lap of a military ruler. It was not born on the throne of power but through struggle, in defiance of the oppressive Pakistani military regime, to establish the rights of the common people. Since its inception, the Awami League has garnered immense support from the masses. It is this popular support that has enabled the Awami League to continue leading Bangladesh despite numerous conspiracies. Wearing colorful Mujib coats, hanging banners and festoons, taking selfies, or speaking in a theatrical manner does not make one a leader of the Awami League. The prerequisite for being a leader is to be worker-friendly, not to point fingers at the workers. Don't forget, "Raising a finger suit only one person, saying 'My' also befits only one person, the rest who try to do so look like jesters."

Biden – Trump Debate: History & Importance

By Vappala Balachandran

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Since the 19th century, such debates were part of the election process even for Congressional seats. The most famous was in 1858 between Abraham Lincoln and Stephen A Douglass who debated seven times for the Illinois Senate seat. These exchanges are still considered as the most famed political debates in American history. Their main point of contention was on slavery of the black people. Douglass accused Lincoln of being a 'radical'.

Although Douglass won the Senate election, Lincoln earned national popularity. In 1860 both were nominated for presidentship, and their earlier debates helped the public to understand and anticipate their policies. Lincoln won with an overwhelming majority as President relegating Douglass to the 4th place.

During the first debate between Joe Biden and Donald Trump, both were described as 'presumptive' presidential candidates for the November 2024 elections as the national conventions of both parties have not yet met and confirmed their official candidature. While the Republican National Convention will meet from July 15 to 18 at Milwaukee, the Democratic Party convention is scheduled to take place at Chicago from August 19 to 22.

The Biden-trump debate was held at CNN studio without live audience on June 27, 2024. The next, as mutually decided, will be on September 10. The present debate is very much like the September 26, 1960, John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon exchange without live listeners which was the first televised debate in US history. This and their successive debates, called "The Great Debates" were watched live on TV by about 60 to 70 million people.

According to 'History Channel', during the third debate on October 13, 1960, Kennedy- Nixon did not stand face to face: although both appeared on the screen behind podiums in similar-looking television studios, Kennedy was in New York City while Nixon was in Hollywood, California. The moderator and three panellists sat in a third television studio!

However, this practice of presidential debates was discontinued till 1976 as Presidents Lydon Johnson and Richard Nixon refused to debate with their challengers. Both had valid reasons. Johnson who succeeded John F. Kennedy as President on November 22, 1963, following his assassination, was very confident of his success in the 1964 Presidential election against Barry Goldwater through an imaginative advertisement called "Daisy ad" which pictured a little girl picking up petals from a daisy, and a nuclear explosion follows. The underlying message was that US public risked a nuclear war if they elected Goldwater.

Similarly, in 1968 Richard Nixon felt very confident against Hubert Humphry, who was nominated by the Democrat National Convention which saw violent protests against Vietnam War for seven days. Nixon promised an end to the Vietnam War. The presidential exchanges were resumed in 1976 when the sitting President Gerald Ford debated with candidate Jimmy Carter. However, Russia was suspended in 2014 when President Vladimir Putin annexed Crimea. In later years members wanted Russia to join but Putin chose to declare that it would leave G-8 which came into effect in 2018. During the Trump's presidency an effort was made to get Russia back into the group with the backing of Italian president.

The utility of such debates for 'perception' battle could be gauged by the number of audiences: according to Nielsen Media Research, 84 million Americans watched the first debate between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump on September 26, 2016. In this Nielsen did not include those who watched the debate on the internet, mobile phones or on C-Span channel.

The earlier record of 80.6 million was in 1980 when President Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan debated only once. The third-most watched presidential debate was on September 29, 2020, between Joe Biden and Donald Trump with 73 million viewers. According to Nielsen the present Biden-Trump debate on June 27 was watched only by 51.27 million.

Following sharp reaction by US media, especially by New York Times, there is a feeling that Joe Biden has already lost the election. However, ABC News, quoting Professor Mitchell McKinney of University of Akron (Ohio) says that this debate may not count much in actual polling as the voters are "not tuned in as they would be in early fall, when the debates are usually held". McKinney is a noted political communication scholar.

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The Petrodollar System and Saudi Arabia's Strategic Shift

By Dr. Santhosh Mathew

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In the realm of global finance and geopolitics, the recent announcement by Saudi Arabia to move away from exclusive oil sales in US dollars has sparked profound discussions about the future of international monetary systems. This strategic pivot by Saudi Arabia, a linchpin in the petrodollar system since its inception in the 1970s, signals a potential shift towards a more diversified currency landscape, with significant implications for both the dollar and the yuan (Renminbi).

The petrodollar system, established through a pact between the United States and Saudi Arabia, solidified the dollar's dominance by stipulating that oil transactions would primarily be conducted in US dollars. This arrangement ensured continuous demand for the dollar globally, bolstering its status as the world's primary reserve currency. It also facilitated the recycling of petrodollars back into the US economy through investments in Treasury bonds and other financial assets, reinforcing American economic influence worldwide.

Saudi Arabia's recent decision marks a departure from this decades-long arrangement, driven by ambitions to diversify its economy away from oil dependency and enhance economic ties with other global powers, particularly China. By signalling an openness to accept currencies other than the dollar for oil sales, including the yuan, Saudi Arabia aims to strengthen economic relations with China, potentially leading to increased yuan-denominated transactions in global trade.

The implications of Saudi Arabia's pivot are multifaceted:

1. **Impact on Dollar Hegemony:** Analysts speculate that reduced demand for the dollar in oil transactions could weaken its global hegemony over time. This shift might lead to a gradual depreciation of the dollar and could impact US inflation rates and economic policies.

2. **Promotion of the Yuan:** Saudi Arabia's move could accelerate the internationalization of the yuan. Increased yuan-denominated oil transactions could bolster China's efforts to establish the yuan as a viable alternative to the dollar in global trade settlements, thereby enhancing China's economic influence.

3. **Geopolitical Realignment:** The strategic alignment between Saudi Arabia and China could reshape geopolitical dynamics, particularly in the Middle East and Asia. It might lead to new alliances, economic partnerships, and strategic initiatives that could challenge traditional US dominance in the region.

4. **Currency Diversification:** A shift towards yuan-denominated transactions for oil could encourage other countries to diversify their currency reserves, reducing reliance on a single dominant currency and promoting stability in global financial markets.

5. **Economic and Market Dynamics:** The introduction of the yuan into global oil transactions could introduce new dynamics in currency exchange rates, commodity prices, and inflationary pressures globally. It may necessitate adjustments in monetary policies and financial regulations to accommodate a more diversified currency landscape.

In conclusion, Saudi Arabia's strategic pivot away from exclusive dollar-denominated oil sales signifies a significant evolution in global financial systems. While the immediate impact on the petrodollar system may be limited, the long-term implications are profound. This transition towards a more multipolar economic order, where multiple currencies play pivotal roles in global trade and finance, is anticipated to unfold gradually, shaping international relations and economic strategies worldwide in the coming years.

What India Gained from Astana SCO Summit

By Srikanth Kondapalli

Author is Dean of School of International Studies and Professor in Chinese studies at Jawaharlal Nehru University.

What India gained from Astana SCO summit for the first time since 2017, Prime Minister Narendra Modi did not attend the SCO summit meeting, held July 3-4 in Kazakhstan, ostensibly due to the ongoing parliamentary session. However, External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar was there to articulate India's position and interests.

By focusing on multipolarity, counter-terrorism, energy security and regional security issues at the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation summit meeting at Astana last week, India is preparing to counter such challenges at the multilateral levels but also shielding itself from the uncertainty in the global and regional orders.

For the first time since 2017, Prime Minister Narendra Modi did not attend the SCO summit meeting, held July 3-4 in Kazakhstan, ostensibly due to the ongoing parliamentary session. However, External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar was there to articulate India's position and interests. He also met his Chinese counterpart Wang Yi in what appears to be yet another attempt to resolve the armed stalemate on the borders since June 2020.

While it is hard to pinpoint tangible benefits for India from the SCO summit, it is necessary to constantly remind adversaries, and friends, of the country's red lines, and articulate and pursue concerns in several domains at a multilateral forum. More so in the SCO, given its regional heft and consensus approach.

First, of the three main issues PM Modi flagged on geo-politics, geo-economics and geo-technology, invariably the China equation became crystal clear, though such signals have to be packaged in broad terms given the nature of multilateralism. Modi, for instance, raised "cross-border terrorism", which was evidently aimed at Pakistan, also a member of the SCO. Over the past decade, China has been shielding its "all-weather friend" at the 1267 (the Al-Qaeda) committee of the UN Security Council on flimsy grounds, despite promising to weed out "all forms of terrorism".

By raising yet again the terrorism issue, indirectly, India is castigating countries for adopting double standards on a prime national security issue that most SCO states are facing. The recent episodes of Almaty riots of January 2022, Crocus city hall blasts at Moscow in March, and attacks at Reasi, Doda and Kathua areas in Jammu in June this year, make amply clear the seriousness of the issue.

The SCO established a Regional Anti-Terrorism Structure at its Tashkent summit. Coordination among different law enforcement agencies exist among the SCO States. They also conduct annual "Peace Mission" exercises with the participation of military forces.

Yet, after securing its interests among SCO States, specifically Kazakhstan and Pakistan, against Uighur insurgency, China has been suggesting to the rest of the SCO States to fend for themselves on the counter-terrorism issue.

Modi also pitched the SCO States to develop "multiple, reliable and resilient" supply chain mechanisms, given the disruptions caused during the Covid pandemic, as well as brace for technological disruptions in AI and cyber domains. While the Eurasian region is one of the least integrated and globalised regions in the world with under-developed market mechanisms, India is offering an alternative to the centralised planning systems of the region and alerting them to the dangers of monopolies and depending exclusively on a declining China market. India was also able to wade through the current regional security issues of the Russia-Ukraine conflict and the situation in West Asia. Specifically on the energy front, discounted oil imports from Russia were able to cushion the domestic market in India, though making progress on the International North-South Transport Corridor with Iran, Russia and other Eurasian countries could have further assured India on the energy front. Even on the transport corridors, China's approach has been exclusive rather than inclusive, and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor intrudes on Indian sovereignty.

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India is Proud of:

Prof Monamma Kokkad

The courage of one woman stubbed out smoking in an entire nation!



Not many know that Kerala was the first state to ban smoking in public places way back in 1999. And this had come about by the mantle taken up by a single woman retired Professor of English, Monamma Kokkad who lives in Vytila, Kochi, she had the courage to stand against tobacco giants and smokers' ire and file a petition for the smoking ban. The historic verdict of the Kerala High Court on July 12, 1999, is the backdrop for the current smoking ban implemented all over India on Gandhi Jayanti in 1999.

Monamma looks like an unlikely person to be spearheading an anti-tobacco campaign, but this retired English professor from Kottayam had enough reasons to. She had been exposed to a lot of "insensitive" smokers during her regular work commutes. On one such occasion, one of her colleagues who was an asthma patient, fainted in the train. Even this did not move the smokers, and Monamma decided to take on the challenge of fighting for the right of the passive smoker

But what led this affable teacher to take up the cudgels? It was while commuting by train between Kochi and Kottayam that she was exposed to "insensitive" smokers. Recalls Monamma: "The up and down journeys used to be a torture. Men would puff away as if it was their birthright. Some of them couldn't care less and swirled the smoke at us. There would be just me and three other ladies in the mixed coach. Working women were themselves rare in the '70s, let alone their trying to take on smokers."

But what really made her determined to take up the fight later was an incident involving her colleague, an asthma patient, who fainted in the train unable to suffer the smoke. "The people smoking would not stub their cigarettes even after I requested them. That's when I raised my voice.... Don't non-smokers have a right to inhale pure air?" she asks.

Monamma had to overcome a lot of barriers in terms of lack of information and support, but she stood her ground and won her cause. In fact, the Kerala ban was so effective that the police claim that only one percent of smokers light up in public places, a number which further went down with the national ban.

Not only Prof Monamma breathes easy these days, but nonsmoker common citizens across India are breathing easily in public places, transport modes and so on.

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