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India's Fund Growth in Geopolitically Turbulent Times

By Prof. Anand Limaye and Harshada Deshpande

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India's mutual fund industry has exhibited remarkable resilience and growth despite various geopolitical challenges over the past decade. From trade wars and global financial crises to the COVID-19 pandemic and conflicts affecting energy prices, the mutual fund sector has continued to expand, driven by strong domestic investment trends, regulatory support, and the rise of digital platforms.

The Impact of Geopolitical Turmoil on Global Markets

Geopolitical tensions have historically led to market volatility, currency fluctuations, and disruptions in global trade. Events such as:

- U.S.-China Trade War (2018–2019): Created uncertainty in global markets, impacting foreign investment flows.
- COVID-19 Pandemic (2020–2021): Led to a market crash but also triggered a surge in retail investment.
- Russia-Ukraine Conflict (2022–Present): Caused spikes in crude oil prices, leading to inflationary pressure in India.
- Israel-Gaza Conflict & Red Sea Tensions (2023–2024): Disruptions in global supply chains affected inflation and trade balances.

Despite these challenges, India's mutual fund industry has grown from ₹10 trillion in 2014 to over ₹68 trillion in 2024, highlighting the sector's strength amid global uncertainties.

India's Growth and the Mutual Fund Sector

India has experienced significant economic growth since 2014, driven by progressive reforms, a rising middle class, and increased domestic and foreign investments. The country's GDP has grown at an average annual rate of around 6% despite challenges such as the COVID-19 pandemic. A major contributor to this economic expansion has been the financial sector, particularly the mutual fund industry, which has witnessed an extraordinary rise in assets under management (AUM), investor participation, and systematic investment plans (SIPs). The mutual fund industry in India has transformed into a preferred investment avenue for retail and institutional investors, offering a variety of schemes that cater to different risk appetites and financial goals.

In 2014, the total AUM of the Indian mutual fund industry stood at around ₹10 trillion. As of 2024, this figure has surged beyond ₹68 trillion, reflecting a more than fourfold increase. This growth can be attributed to various factors, including regulatory initiatives by the Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI), increasing financial literacy, tax benefits under Section 80C, and the emergence of digital investment platforms that have made mutual funds accessible to the masses. The introduction of Direct Plans, the growing popularity of SIPs, and investor-friendly policies have further fuelled this growth.

SIPs have played a crucial role in attracting retail investors. In 2016, monthly SIP contributions were around ₹3,000 crore, whereas, by 2024, this number has exceeded ₹26,459 crore. The number of SIP accounts has also expanded significantly, crossing 7 crores in 2024.

This indicates a shift in investment behaviour, with more Indians moving away from traditional investment options like fixed deposits and gold toward equity and debt mutual funds.

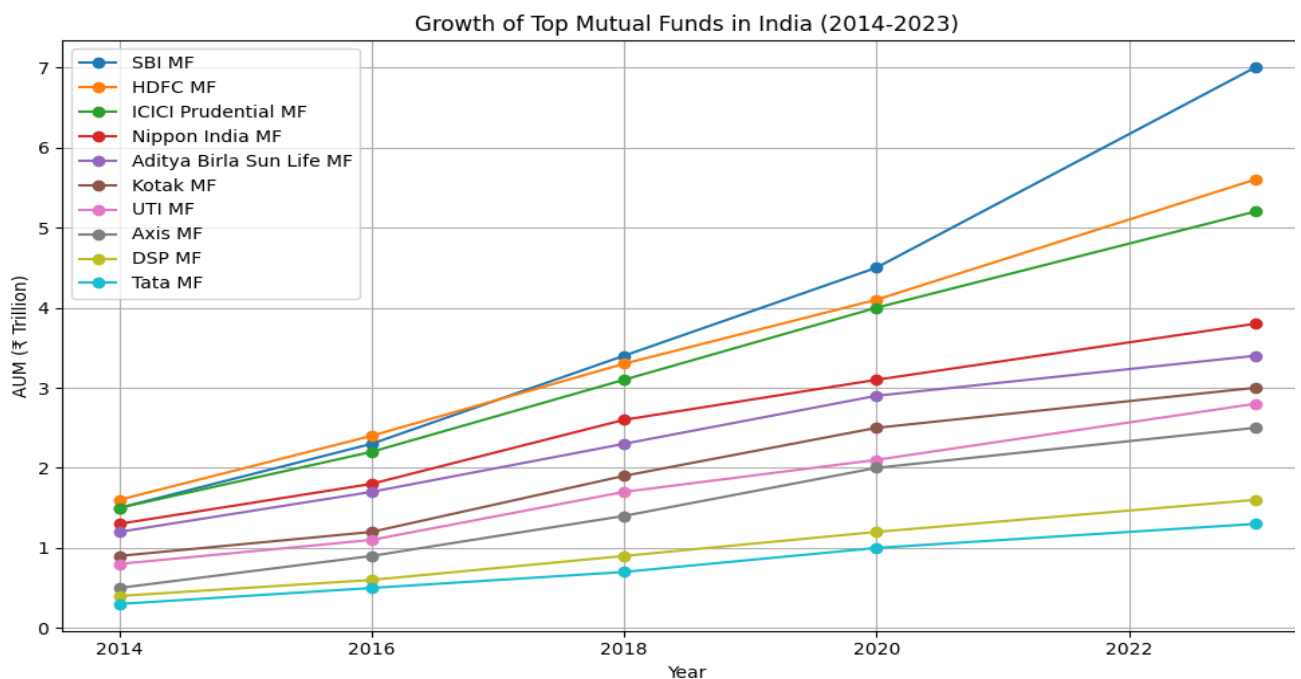
The Indian mutual fund sector has also benefited from increasing foreign investments and government-backed initiatives such as Jan Dhan Yojana, which has led to a surge in bank account openings and digital transactions. The penetration of mutual funds in Tier 2 and Tier 3 cities has increased, reducing the reliance on metropolitan areas for industry growth. With SEBI’s push for transparency and investor protection, mutual funds have become one of the most trusted investment avenues.

Among the top-performing mutual funds in India, several have consistently delivered superior returns to investors. The top 10 mutual funds based on AUM and performance include SBI Mutual Fund, HDFC Mutual Fund, ICICI Prudential Mutual Fund, Nippon India Mutual Fund, Aditya Birla Sun Life Mutual Fund, Kotak Mutual Fund, UTI Mutual Fund, Axis Mutual Fund, DSP Mutual Fund, and Tata Mutual Fund. These funds offer diverse schemes, including equity, debt, hybrid, and sectoral funds, catering to different investment objectives.

Data: Mutual Fund AUM Growth vs. Global Events (2014–2023)

Mutual Fund Growth (₹ Trillion)

Year	AUM (₹ Trillion)	Key Global Events
2014	10.0	Oil price crash, Russia-Ukraine tensions
2016	16.5	Brexit, Demonetization, U.S. elections
2018	24.0	U.S.-China trade war, Fed rate hikes
2020	28.0	COVID-19 pandemic, Market crash & recovery
2022	39.0	Russia-Ukraine war, Inflation crisis
2023	46.0	Banking crisis, Israel-Gaza conflict



Future Outlook

While geopolitical uncertainties will continue, India’s mutual fund industry is expected to cross ₹100 trillion in AUM by 2030. With increasing financial literacy, government-backed investment incentives, and robust digital infrastructure, the sector is well-positioned to weather future global challenges.

The Runway to a Billion Opportunities: Aero India 2025

By Uday Kumar Varma

Author is a former Secretary, Information and Broadcasting, GOI

For five days, from February 10 to 14, the Bengaluru skies roared with supersonic booms and dazzling aerial acrobatics. The world's most advanced warplanes sliced through the atmosphere, cutting contrails across the deep blue canvas. The city, known for its gardens and technology, became the epicentre of aviation brilliance, as over a million eyes remained skyward, mesmerized by the symphony of power, speed, and precision.

Yes, this was Aero India 2025—the 15th edition of Asia's premier aerospace and defence exhibition, bigger and more spectacular than ever before. Themed "The Runway to a Billion Opportunities," the event featured over 900 exhibitors, including 150 foreign companies, alongside a distinguished assembly of defence ministers, military chiefs, and industry leaders. From cutting-edge indigenous aircraft to futuristic stealth fighters, the showcase reflected India's growing might in the global aerospace industry.

Evolution Over the Years

Since its inception in 1996, Aero India has grown from a modest airshow into a pivotal platform for technological innovation, defence collaboration, and industrial growth. Held biennially at Yelahanka Air Force Station, it has transformed into a launchpad for India's indigenous aerospace capabilities while attracting global aerospace giants, eager to forge strategic partnerships. With every edition, the event has solidified India's role as a formidable force in aerospace and defence.

Highlights of Aero India 2025

The 15th edition of Aero India showcased India's growing aviation capabilities, cutting-edge technology, and strategic collaborations. From the indigenous Tejas Light Combat Aircraft (LCA) to the latest trainer jets, upgraded helicopters, and advanced UAVs, the event underscored the nation's self-reliance in aerospace manufacturing.

Beyond the breathtaking aerial displays—where fighter jets roared through the sky and aerobatic teams performed precision manoeuvres—the spotlight was on next-generation defence technologies. Bharat Electronics Limited (BEL) unveiled cutting-edge communication systems, including Software Defined Radios, AI-powered warfare technologies, and high-capacity relay networks, enhancing secure battlefield communication. Advances in electro-optics, night vision devices, and digital flight control systems reinforced India's progress toward superior combat readiness.

The Defence Research and Development Organization (DRDO) exhibited groundbreaking AI-powered swarm drone systems, quantum cryptography solutions, and 5G defence applications—offering a glimpse into the future of network-centric warfare. Meanwhile, the much-anticipated rollout of Tejas LCAs, along with indigenous missile technology such as the Pralay and Long-Range Land Attack Cruise Missile, further strengthened India's defence arsenal.

On the global front, strategic dialogues gained momentum. Russia proposed manufacturing its advanced Su-57 stealth fighters in India, marking a potential milestone in Indo-Russian defence cooperation. Meanwhile, Boeing's discussions on establishing an assembly line in India reflected the country's growing prominence in aerospace manufacturing.

However, two-star attractions stole the show—the American F-35 Lightning II and the Russian Su-57 Felon—a breathtaking spectacle that aviation enthusiasts could only dream of witnessing.

The Showstoppers: Titans of the Sky

Aero India 2025 made history as the world's two most advanced fifth-generation stealth fighters, the F-35 and Su-57, shared the same stage for the first time.

The Su-57, Russia's pinnacle of air dominance, was the first to take to the skies. With a thunderous roar, its Saturn AL-41F1 engines catapulted the aircraft into a near-vertical climb, its silhouette slicing through the air with breathtaking agility. Designed for super cruise, thrust vectoring, and stealth, the Su-57 executed jaw-dropping manoeuvres, including the legendary Pugachev's Cobra, leaving the audience in stunned admiration.

Just as the Su-57 completed its electrifying performance, the F-35 Lightning II made its grand entrance. Unlike the raw power and agility of its Russian counterpart, the F-35 exuded silent confidence. Its advanced stealth, sensor fusion, and unparalleled situational awareness demonstrated the epitome of 21st-century aerial warfare. With remarkable precision, it executed high-speed, high-G manoeuvres, showcasing its dominance in the modern combat arena.

But just as spectators were processing the brilliance of these technological marvels, the unthinkable happened—the Su-57 returned for an unprecedented second sortie. Piloted by Sergey Bogdan, Sukhoi's chief test pilot, the aircraft pushed its limits further, executing a Kulbit manoeuvre, a full-circle somersault that defied physics and left even seasoned pilots in awe.

For those who witnessed this aerial showdown, it was more than an airshow—it was a historic moment, a rare duel of aeronautical philosophies between two superpowers.

The Surya Kiran Spectacle: Painting the Sky

If the F-35 and Su-57 showcased the future of air combat, the Surya Kiran Aerobatic Team reminded the world that aviation is also an art form. With a legacy dating back to 1996, the Indian Air Force's pride soared through the skies in their BAE Hawk 132 jets, delivering a breathtaking display of precision and synchronization.

The sky became their canvas as nine jets carved intricate formations—loops, barrel rolls, and mirror manoeuvres—all executed with clockwork precision. The 'Bomb Burst' manoeuvre saw them explode outward in a dazzling spectacle, saffron and white smoke trailing in perfect symmetry. Then came the 'Heart in the Sky,' a symbol of passion and pride, drawing gasps of wonder from the crowd.

Each move tested the limits of physics, each twist and turn a testament to the skill and discipline of the Indian Air Force. As the final crescendo unfolded, with the jets soaring into a synchronized vertical split, the audience erupted into thunderous applause, their hearts still racing from the sheer magic of it all.

The Future Beckons

Aero India 2025 was more than just a five-day spectacle; it was a glimpse into the future of aerospace innovation, defence collaboration, and India's growing prowess on the world stage. The event not only reinforced India's position as a global aerospace hub but also laid the groundwork for future advancements, partnerships, and self-reliance in defence technology.

As the smoke trails faded and the last aircraft touched down, one thing was clear—this was not just an airshow; it was a defining moment in India's journey towards aerospace excellence. Aero India 2025 had indeed lived up to its theme, serving as "The Runway to a Billion Opportunities."

Aero India 2025 was not merely a showcase of air power; it was a declaration of intent—an assertion of India’s capability to innovate, manufacture, and lead in the aerospace domain. With every jet that soared, and every groundbreaking technology unveiled, the event reaffirmed that India is no longer just a consumer of defence technology but an emerging leader shaping the future of global aviation and security. The runway to a billion opportunities is well and truly open, and India is ready for take-off.

Mann Ki Baat: India's Soft Power Symphony in South Asia

By Dr. Santhosh Mathew

The author is Associate Professor at Centre for South Asian Studies, School of International Studies & Social Sciences, Pondicherry Central University

Radio is not just a medium; it is a lifeline that transcends borders, connects people, and amplifies voices. On World Radio Day, as the world celebrates the power of this enduring platform, India stands at the forefront of a remarkable communication revolution. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's monthly broadcast, Mann Ki Baat, which recently aired its 118th episode, exemplifies how radio is experiencing a renaissance in the digital age, proving to be one of the most effective tools of governance, inspiration, and soft power diplomacy. When UNESCO designated February 13 as World Radio Day in 2011, the objective was clear: to recognize the influence of radio in fostering dialogue, spreading awareness, and bridging communities across the world. In India, Mann Ki Baat is a testimony to the enduring power of radio. Launched in 2014, this monthly program has transformed into one of the largest and most effective communication experiments in the world, reaching millions of listeners not just in India but globally. With an unparalleled ability to engage audiences through storytelling, Modi's initiative underscores the relevance of radio in an era dominated by digital noise.

At a time when many predicted the decline of traditional radio, Mann Ki Baat has revived and redefined its significance. The program's strength lies in its simplicity and relatability. Every episode delivers not just policy discussions but also inspirational stories of common citizens, grassroots innovations, cultural heritage, and national achievements. The 118th episode was no different, weaving narratives that resonated with the spirit of nation-building, environmental consciousness, and collective responsibility. Beyond its national appeal, Mann Ki Baat has become an instrument of India's soft power diplomacy. The global Indian diaspora tunes in eagerly, fostering a sense of connection with the homeland. The broadcast's reach extends beyond national boundaries, often being translated into multiple languages, including regional South Asian tongues, strengthening India's diplomatic and cultural ties with neighbouring nations. As India emerges as a global leader, leveraging radio as a tool for soft power projection enhances its image as a nation that values dialogue, shared heritage, and cooperation.

South Asia, a region bound by deep historical, cultural, and linguistic ties, finds an unexpected bridge in Mann Ki Baat. The program's themes—self-reliance, community-driven initiatives, environmental sustainability, and youth empowerment—are not just relevant to India but also resonate with India's neighbours. In an era where integration efforts in South Asia often face political roadblocks, the revival of radio as a medium of cultural and ideological exchange holds immense potential. India's radio diplomacy, through Mann Ki Baat, can become a catalyst for fostering deeper South Asian engagement, promoting shared developmental narratives, and creating common aspirations among regional populations. The 118th episode once again demonstrated how radio can be used as a participatory medium. Modi's interactions with citizens, his references to letters and messages from listeners, and his emphasis on people-centric governance make Mann Ki Baat an inclusive space for dialogue. Unlike social media platforms that are often fragmented and dominated by echo chambers, radio, through this program, emerges as a unifying force that connects the masses in an uninterrupted and intimate manner.

From the fishermen in Tamil Nadu to the farmers in Punjab, from students in Meghalaya to entrepreneurs in Gujarat, Mann Ki Baat speaks to every Indian, transcending linguistic, geographic, and socio-economic barriers. It harnesses the power of storytelling to amplify the voices of unsung heroes, small businesses, and cultural custodians. The program is not just a monologue but an interactive medium that encourages citizen participation, thereby reinforcing democracy in its most organic form. Radio has always been a tool of influence, but Mann Ki Baat takes it a step further by combining traditional broadcasting with modern digital integration. The program is simultaneously aired on multiple platforms, including community radio stations, AIR (All India Radio), podcasts, and social media channels. This hybrid model ensures that the message reaches every demographic, from the rural farmer with a transistor radio to the urban professional tuning in via a smartphone app.

On World Radio Day, as global discussions revolve around the revival and impact of radio, Mann Ki Baat stands as a shining example of how the medium can be harnessed for nation-building and diplomacy. Countries across the world can draw lessons from India's use of radio as a tool for constructive engagement, leadership communication, and global outreach. In an era where polarization is rampant, radio's ability to create a sense of collective consciousness is more valuable than ever. India, with its vast diversity, has found in Mann Ki Baat a unifying voice that reflects the aspirations of its people. The power of voice, the magic of words, and the intimacy of audio storytelling are elements that make this program not just a political initiative but a cultural phenomenon. As the world looks for ways to reinvigorate traditional communication platforms, India's example showcases that radio is not just surviving but thriving in the digital age.

As we celebrate World Radio Day, Mann Ki Baat reminds us that while technology evolves, the essence of communication remains the same—connecting, inspiring, and bringing people together. With its ability to cut across social, political, and geographical divides, radio remains one of the most powerful tools of engagement, and Mann Ki Baat is leading this revival, proving that in the cacophony of digital noise, the human voice still holds the power to unite and inspire.

US-Russia Talks on Ukraine Vindicate India's stance on conflict - 'Today's Time Not of War'

By Dr. Seshadri Chari

The author is Former Seshadri Chari is the former editor of 'Organiser'. He is General Secretary of FINS.

The success of NATO, the military arm of US sponsored Atlanticism, is as much a pipe dream as is Putin's revival of Moscow-centric Eurocentrism in the era of multilateralism advocated by New Delhi.

American President Donald Trump's lengthy phone call with Russian President Vladimir Putin, and the hurriedly convened European leaders' summit in Paris, are beginning to vindicate the stand India took vis-à-vis the Russia-Ukraine War – of ending the conflict through negotiations. "I know that war cannot solve problems, solutions and peace talks can't succeed among bombs, guns and bullets. And we need to find a way to peace through dialogue," Prime Minister Narendra Modi had told Putin in his televised remarks at the Kremlin in July 2024.

In fact, as far back as September 2022, in a meeting on the sidelines of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) summit in the Uzbek city of Samarkand, Modi had told Putin that "today's time is not a time for war", emphasising the significance of "diplomacy and dialogue." Assuring the Indian PM, Putin said: "I know your position on the conflict in Ukraine, your concerns...We will do our best to end this as soon as possible."

In 2024, as the Russia-Ukraine War entered its third year, former US President Joe Biden hosted world leaders in Washington for NATO's 75th summit, reaffirming the alliance's commitment to support Ukraine. Around the same time, in July 2024, Modi headed to Moscow to meet Putin and convey that "the solution to the Russia-Ukraine conflict cannot be found on the battleground and needs to have both parties for the resolution of the conflict through dialogue and diplomacy." In March 2024, Ukrainian foreign minister Dmytro Kuleba visited India and met with External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar for a comprehensive discussion on the peace formula, with an assurance of continuing bilateral cooperation and efforts to end the conflict.

Growing apprehensions

Both the US and European capitals were trying to dissuade New Delhi from taking a pro-Russia stand and openly align with their view to condemn Moscow as an aggressor. The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) failed to adopt a resolution condemning Russia and compelling it to implement a ceasefire. The draft resolution, submitted by Albania and the United States in February 2022, garnered support from 11 members but was vetoed by the Russian Federation as India, China and the UAE abstained. India's stand, of course, was that the conflict needs to end not by force but by dialogue and diplomacy.

Three years later, and nearly a month after Trump 2.0's reign began, on 18 February 2025, the US Secretary of State Marco Rubio and his Russian counterpart Sergey Lavrov held talks to end the war diplomatically, just as New Delhi had emphasised repeatedly.

As was expected, there were no representatives from either Ukraine or the European Union present in the meeting, confirming one of the two worst fears of the EU leadership, which had huddled into a hurriedly called meeting after the infamous Munich Security Conference. The first apprehension, that the Trump administration will go ahead with its agenda of a US-Russia deal to end the war in Ukraine, came true. With Washington leaving both Ukraine and the EU out of any negotiations and charting an independent and unilateral plan for post-ceasefire security architecture and reconstruction, the second apprehension has also come true.

New Delhi's assessment of the Russia-Ukraine War was probably based on certain historical facts and geopolitical realities. It has been evident from the statements of the former KGB chief and Russia's strong ruler for over two decades, as well as many of his associates, that Russia doesn't consider Ukraine as a separate country with its own national identity. Putin frankly admitted his bitterness at the Soviet Union's disintegration in 1991, terming it "the greatest geopolitical disaster of the 20th century". His uncompromising determination to bring Ukraine back into the Russian fold is part of his strategy to redraw the post-Cold War security architecture of Europe with Russian characters, even as Xi Jinping's China is engaged in constructing a new world order with Chinese characters.

Both Europe and the US should know that the eastward expansion of NATO and the induction of Ukraine as a member is the biggest threat to Putin's objectives of reclaiming Russia's strategic footprints in Europe, Central Asia and the Middle East. With another 11 years of power to realise his uncompromising geopolitical ambitions, Putin wants NATO's door to be permanently shut for Ukraine.

The success of NATO, the military arm of US-sponsored Atlanticism, is as much a pipe dream as Putin's revival of Moscow-centric Eurocentrism in the era of multilateralism advocated by New Delhi. Negotiated settlement of conflicts, not unilateral sanctions, will be the way forward in the present juncture for a guaranteed peaceful future, which Donald Trump appears to have realised. India stands vindicated in its approach to the Russia-Ukraine War.

[Read complete article on website theprint.in](#)

Why Modi-Trump Statement Has Raised Pakistan's Hackles

By Vappala Balachandran

The author is Former Special Secretary, Cabinet Secretariat.

Islamabad might have feared that the Trump administration is now blaming Pakistan for allegedly enabling the 2021 Kabul airport bombing.

The joint statement of PM Modi and President Donald Trump on February 14, 2025, is the strongest Indo-US declaration against terrorism in recent years. It mentions strengthening Indo-US cooperation on terrorism “against threats from groups, including Al-Qaeda, ISIS, Jaish-e-Mohammad and Lashkar-e-Tayyiba, to prevent heinous acts like the attacks in Mumbai on 26/11 and the Abbey Gate bombing in Afghanistan on August 26, 2021.”

It highlights the US government’s approval of Tahawwur Rana’s extradition to India as an example of the commitment of both governments to bring the perpetrators to justice. It then puts Pakistan squarely on the mat with this key sentence: “The leaders further called on Pakistan to expeditiously bring to justice the perpetrators of the 26/11 Mumbai and Pathankot attacks and ensure that its territory is not used to carry out cross-border terrorist attacks.”

In the past, the only joint statement between US President Joe Biden and Prime Minister Narendra Modi which mentioned terrorism emanating from Pakistan was on June 22, 2023. Their meetings on September 8, 2023, and September 22, 2024, did not refer to terrorism at all.

On June 22, 2023, both leaders “strongly condemned cross-border terrorism, the use of terrorist proxies and called on Pakistan to take immediate action to ensure that no territory under its control is used for launching terrorist attacks”. They “reiterated the call for concerted action against all UN-listed terrorist groups including Al-Qaeda, ISIS/Daesh, LeT, JeM and Hizb-ul-Mujahideen.”

Pakistan reacted sharply to the Modi-Trump declaration and called it “one-sided, misleading and contrary to diplomatic norms” since it ignored “Pakistan’s counterterrorism cooperation with the US.” It added that this statement cannot “cover up India’s sponsorship of terrorism, subversion and extra-judicial assassinations in the region and beyond.” It gave a further punch in labelling “India as a safe haven of the perpetrators of hate crimes against Muslims and other minorities.”

Why did Pakistan react so aggressively? My assessment is that Islamabad might have feared that a global impression might arise that the Trump administration is now blaming Pakistan for allegedly enabling the 2021 Kabul airport bombing too, which had killed 13 US service members and 170 Afghan civilians.

The reason for this unprecedented vitriol against India and anger against the US for “violating diplomatic norms” by ignoring Pakistan’s cooperation with the US on terrorism might have been the reason for challenging the Trump-Modi statement.

This, in turn, leads to a question: Why the 2021 Abbey Gate bombing (Afghan airport), which was in no way related to India, was included in this bilateral joint statement?

Two explanations are possible: one, the White House also wanted to convey its deep anguish, like how India had felt at the 26/11 attack. Second, more possible, was to blame the Biden administration for not taking adequate care of US troops during the hurried evacuation on August 28, 2021.

The second impression arises as Trump himself answered a loaded question, originally put to our PM at the White House press meet, on the so-called “inefficient” Biden administration.

Also, the 118th US Congress (previous) was very agitated at the Abbey Gate bombing, which was the largest single loss of lives of US military personnel since 2011. They were particularly upset that this had occurred despite advance intelligence warnings on August 16 on the strong possibility of an ISIS suicide bombing. Despite this, Abdul Rahman Al-Logari, an ISIS-K member who was known to the CIA and kept in coalition custody, could become the suicide bomber wearing a 25-pound suicide vest.

The New York Times (January 1, 2022) said that the CIA had located Al-Logari in India in 2017, planning suicide attacks, and had taken him into custody at the Bagram base near Kabul after secretly liaising with the Indian agencies. However, he, along with thousands, was released by the Taliban when it took over Kabul on August 15, 2021. This was originally reported by the ISIS mouthpiece, Amaq, on September 19, 2021.

The reason why the Modi-Trump statement included the 2021 Abbey Gate bombing might have been on the initiative of Mike Waltz, US National Security Adviser, as he had challenged the Pentagon conclusions on August 5, 2024, on the attack, while he was a member of the House Foreign Affairs Committee in the previous Congress.

In a letter to the then US Secretary of Defence, Loyd Austin, the committee had pointed out the apparent discrepancies between the newly reported footage of the Abbey Gate attack, as shown on CNN, and the conclusions of two US Central Command (CENTCOM) investigations into the bombing, which the latter had presented to the committee in April 2024. However, the US Army Central Command defended their stand, saying that a review investigation since September 2023 had found that “the attack could not have been preventable at the tactical level.”

In this scenario, the Trump administration’s permission on Tahawwur Rana’s extradition after the US Supreme Court verdict assumes only symbolic importance when compared to the general spectre of terrorism facing us.

As regards Rana, we faced initial judicial setback in our pursuit since 2009 after his arrest in Chicago as the court did not accept our evidence on his involvement in the 26/11 case although he was convicted for aiding the Lashkar's activities, specifically for plotting an attack in Denmark.

Since then, our agencies have been pursuing the case vigorously in US courts. The latest information is that this extradition might be delayed as Rana has appealed and filed a “mercy” petition.

At the same time, no US government could help us by putting pressure on Pakistan to extradite the other known 26/11 plotters and current perpetrators given sanctuary there.

We have other problems on the terrorism front which we alone must tackle. The change of government in Bangladesh and the reported visit of a Pakistani ISI delegation to Dhaka on January 21 adds a new dimension, with terrorism emanating from our east, which is already under strain due to the Manipur turbulence.

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India is Proud of: Dr Kiran Prasad

Unsung Hero Dedicates 30 Years to Free & Rehabilitate 7000 Bonded Labourer's



When Dr Kiran Prasad was being heckled by the influential people of Karnataka's Handenahalli village, he was smiling instead of being scared. What had invited their ire was his work towards eradicating bonded labour in the village, which housed a thousand people, of which 300 were dalits.

For Dr Prasad, the realisation that powerful people were now scared that the less privileged would get their fundamental rights, was a giant step towards victory.

This was in 1986, when a 20-something Prasad, newly graduated from college, had started his initiative against bonded labour.

Some three and half decades later, Dr Prasad has given a life of dignity to more than 7,000 people through rescue and rehabilitation. Additionally, around 30,000 have been identified by the government as bonded labourer's and are in the process of rehabilitation.

"The threats of 1986 was a sign that the society was ready to change, and more importantly, that the exploited were ready to drive this change," Dr Prasad tells The Better India.

The PhD holder in anthropology took the legal route to rehabilitate bonded labourer's, educated them about their rights, and even fought against the mighty to deliver justice.

"I come from a family of farmers, and we had labourers working for us in our farms in Udupi district. I was aware of each one's personal and financial problems. I knew education could be a way to end poverty. So I studied anthropology to understand the issues better and even got teaching offers from prominent universities. But by then, my views had changed. Education can happen only when every strata is aware of its importance, and more importantly, they need to be decision makers instead of passive followers," Dr Prasad says.

He saw families being enslaved for generations due to debts and even came across instances where people were subject to this purely due to their caste.

In a survey conducted by Dr Prasad and other activists working in Karnataka, close to 700 bonded labourers were identified. They formed Jeevika NGO to help these workers in 1990. Five years later, the number grew to 20,000 across 48 talukas.

Merely educating the masses was not enough to bring a change, so Dr Prasad spent weeks to understand every clause mentioned in the Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act of 1976.

As per one feature of the act, the judicial powers lay with the district or sub-district magistrate (DM or SDM), which meant that the complainant did not have to go to courts anymore to get justice.

“Usually, court cases last for long and justice is delayed. It can take years to reach a judgment and in case of insufficient evidence, the whole purpose is defeated. Plus, the person has to pay legal fees of filing and to the lawyer. Missing even a day of work to attend court proceedings can affect livelihoods. However, according to the decentralised provision, the DM has to investigate within 24 hours,” says Prasad.

All a person has to do is file a complaint stating the details of loans, employer, working conditions and appeal for a Rescue Certificate (RC) for rehabilitation measures. The best part, says Prasad, is that the proceedings don’t require much evidence, as the DM’s office will investigate and find proof.

He helped the labourers file the applications and took workshops with district level officers to implement the act in an effective manner.

“Many officials were unaware of what all entailed in the act. Keeping someone against their will irrespective of the time and working conditions amounts to slavery. For instance, bitti chakri, or unpaid labour, requires a Dalit to provide free service of cleaning a cow shed as part of a custom. They may have no debt, but they still do it,” adds Dr Prasad.

Once the complainant is categorised under the act by the DM, the rehabilitation process begins. Under this process, the state is obliged to give Rs 20,000 and an RC which states that the person does not owe any loan to anyone.

There is also a summary trial that the district and complainant can choose after rehabilitation. This trial focuses on penalising the employer. However, due to societal pressures and time-consuming processes, this feature often remains unused.

“For someone who has worked without pay for years, Rs 20,000 is a huge amount. Most of our complainants are farm labourers so they buy cattle or start a small shop from the rehabilitation money,” says Dr Prasad.

Gopal, who received the RC in 2001, now runs his own shop, “I spent most of my youth in oppression, but Jeevika’s intervention saved me and my family from the clutches of bonded labour,” he says.

One of the major changes that Dr Prasad has seen over the years is closure of their operations in several talukas.

The Federation of Konkani Catholic Associations of Bangalore (FKCA) on its Silver Jubilee on June 25th, 2023, in Bengaluru has conferred Dr. Kiran Prasad with prestigious Lifetime Achievement Award.

Yes, one with knowledge coupled with temerity, can do wonders, Dr Prasad is one such example.
