DE/CYPHER ASIA

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Lowy Asia Power Index 2024

Advanced Study Institute of Asia

ABOUT ASIA

The Advanced Study Institute of Asia (ASIA), established in 2023 and affiliated with Shree Guru Gobind Singh Tricentenary University in Gurugram, India, serves as an Interdisciplinary research center dedicated to enhancing the understanding of Asia.

It aims to navigate the complexities of various fields, including International Relations, health, law, and societal issues, by leveraging the expertise of leading scholars and practitioners through a multidisciplinary lens.

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AT ASIA WE DO THE FOLLOWING:

01 Understanding the Complexities of Asia

Asia is marked by complex dynamics in fields like international relations, health, law, and society. There is a pressing need for nuanced, interdisciplinary research to decode these complexities and provide informed insights.

02 Bridging the Knowledge Gap

There's a significant gap in comprehensive, multidisciplinary research focusing on Asia. ASIA aims to fill this gap by bringing together experts across various fields to contribute to a deeper understanding of the region.

03 Facilitating Diverse Perspective

The need for a platform that supports diverse perspectives on Asia's historical, political, and health-related issues is crucial. ASIA is working towards becoming such a platform through its various initiatives, including publications, conversations, and media content.

OUR VISION

ASIA aims to be a crucial platform for exploring Asia's social, political, and health-related issues by producing research that is introspective and reproducible, supporting diverse perspectives through various initiatives and media content.

De/Cypher is a product of the Advanced Study Institute of Asia.

Contents

Editor-in-Chief Writes

We are pleased to bring to you the inaugural edition of the De/Cypher Journal. De/Cypher was started keeping in mind, the critical role that informed discourse plays in shaping our understanding of Asia's evolving landscape. Our Journal is conceived as a bridge, linking local insights from Asia with a global audience keen on nuanced perspectives.
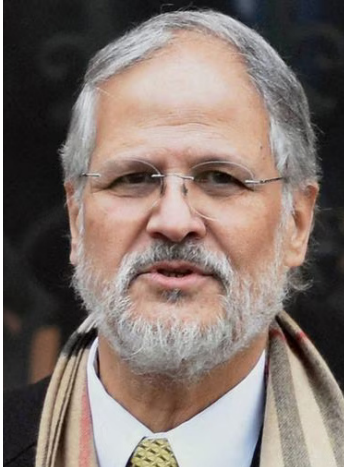
We begin with Dr. Rajesh Thadani's insightful piece on forest fires, an ever-growing challenge in the mid-elevational Himalayas. Dr. Thadani's work highlights the pressing need for sustainable solutions in forest management. The hottest summer on record is chronicled by climate expert Dr. Shuang-Ye Wu, followed by Dr. Ishtiaq Ahmed's analysis of the exclusionary politics haunting Pakistan. Ms. Chahak Mittal takes us into the struggles of Tibetan refugees, offering a humanistic take on this geopolitical crisis.

Bangladesh features prominently in this issue, with stories ranging from Jyoti Rahman's reflections on the recovery efforts of the new government post the July revolution. Shadique Mahbub Islam, who covered the July revolutions writes about the Gen-Z revolution that overturned a 15-year regime. Kambaiz Rafi draws our attention to Afghanistan's post-conflict economy and the use and abuse of vice and virtue laws by the ruling dispensation.

The ghastly action in the last few weeks in the Middle East, culminating in the assassination of Hezbollah leader Hasan Hassan Nasrallah, is captured in Priyanka Garodia's profile of the former leader. Our SenseMaker interview with Prof. Yasheng Huang, conducted by ASIA's Research Director Amogh Dev Rai, sheds light on China's rise and fall, offering future-forward insights into its economic and political landscape. Shivani Singh reviews Copyright's Broken Promise by John Willinsky, sparking a crucial discussion on intellectual property in the digital age. Khushi Kesari's exploration of the Chamba Rumal, a traditional Indian art form, adds a unique cultural perspective to this issue, celebrating heritage in times of change.

We also include insights from Tortoise Media and the Lowy Institute's 2024 AI and Power Indexes respectively, by special arrangements with both the organisation's which provide a quantitative understanding of Asia's growing AI prowess and the region's power dynamics.

We hope this blend of curation and original scholarship, aimed at enriching your understanding, serves as a valuable resource, not just for staying informed, but for engaging critically with the issues that matter most across Asia.

Najeeb H Jung

Najeeb H. Jung
Editor-in-Chief, De/Cypher

Editor's Note

The De/Cypher newsletter, which began in August 2023, has provided insights and ideas for better understanding South and Southeast Asia. Over the course of a year and 150 newsletters, we've realised that the truth continues to evolve; it's in the eye of the beholder.

We all have biases, and we recognise that the pursuit of knowledge can only be enhanced through collaboration. To that end, we have invited diverse and distinct voices from around the world to write about issues close to their hearts.

We hope this issue that you hold in your hands reflects an Asia-first perspective for our readers to help them better understand the world's largest and populous continent. The widespread dissemination of misinformation, which is deeply embedded in our digital lives, has strengthened our belief in the importance of taking an objective and methodical approach to our work. Our journal merges academic rigor with journalistic foresight, dedicated to fostering the conversations that are often marginalised by daily news cycles. We are committed to maintaining this approach while continually expanding the scope of our inclusivity.

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Prof. Ishtiaq Ahmed, Dr. Rajesh Thadani, Jyoti Rahman, Shadique Mambub Islam, and Chahak Mittal for their invaluable contributions and collaboration with the journal. My heartfelt thanks also go to the members of the ASIA team for their significant input, and to the De/Cypher team for their tireless efforts in bringing this journal to fruition.

We welcome you to get in touch with the De/Cypher team to share your feedback at editor.decypher@advancedstudy.asia.

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Aurko Chakrabarti
Editor, De/Cypher

Contributors

Rajesh Thadani

Up in Smoke: Forest Fires in the Himalayas

(Founder and Executive Director of the Centre for Ecology Development and Research (CEDAR))

Dr Rajesh Thadani is a forest ecologist, development sector professional, and entrepreneur. He holds a PhD in forestry from the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies. His research focuses on the mid-elevational Himalayas. He is the Founder and Executive Director of the Centre for Ecology Development and Research (CEDAR), a research and advocacy organisation, and serves as Director of the Carbon Disclosure Project (CDP-India).

Ishtiaq Ahmed

The Politics of Exclusion Haunts Pakistan

(Professor Emeritus of Political Science-Stockholm University)

Dr Ishtiaq Ahmed is a Swedish political scientist and author of Pakistani descent. He holds a PhD in Political Science from Stockholm University, where he is Professor Emeritus, having retired in 2010. Dr Ahmed is Editor-in-Chief of the Liberal Arts & Social Sciences International Journal (LASSIJ) and serves on the editorial advisory boards of Asian Ethnicity, Journal of Punjab Studies, IPRI Journal (Islamabad), and PIPS Research Journal of Conflict and Peace Studies (Islamabad).

Shuang-Ye Wu

What the Jet Stream and Climate Change had to do with the Hottest Summer on Record – Remember all those Heat Domes?

(Professor of Geology and Environmental Geosciences, University of Dayton)

Dr Shuang-Ye Wu received her PhD from Cambridge University in 2000, specialising in environmental geography. She teaches courses in environmental geography, including physical and human geography, Geographical Information Systems, and the Dynamic Earth. Her research primarily focuses on the impacts of climate change, especially coastal and inland flooding.

Chahak Mittal

The Resolve Tibet Act 2024: A Step Forward?

(Independent Journalist)

Chahak Mittal is a journalist and public policy professional. She has covered human interest stories and written on policy matters for publications like The Economic Times, The Pioneer, and The New Indian Express. An alumna of the Asian College of Journalism (ACJ), Chennai, Chahak holds a graduate degree in Public Policy Management from IIM Kozhikode. She is currently Assistant Director of Transport & Urban Infrastructure at FICCI.

Jyoti Rahman
Post Protirodh : Bangladesh's Recovery after the July Revolution

(Director – International at Sydney Policy Analysis Centre)

Jyoti Rahman is an applied macroeconomist with nearly a quarter century of experience. He has worked for the Australian government for over 20 years, and with the International Monetary Fund in Africa, Central Asia, and the Pacific. He regularly writes on Bangladeshi economy, politics and culture, which are archived at https://jrahman.substack.com/

Kambaiz Rafi
The Taliban's Harsh New 'Vice And Virtue' Laws Are A Throwback To The Oppression Of The 1990s – Especially For The Women Of Afghanistan

(Teaching Fellow in the School of Government and International Affairs, Durham University)

Kambaiz Rafi is a teaching fellow in comparative politics of development at Durham University. His research focuses on the political economy of development and institutions in conflict-affected or post-conflict contexts. Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's theories, his doctoral work explored institutions and practical knowledge within secondary sector investments in conflict-affected economies.

Shadique Mambub Islam
Gen-Z Revolution in Bangladesh: How the Youth Have Ended a 15-Year Authoritarian Rule

(Staff Feature Writer, The Business Standard)

Shadique Mahbub Islam is a journalist based in Dhaka. He is currently working in The Business Standard as a reporter. He is also the Executive Editor of Muktipotro, a liberal magazine based in Bangladesh. Previously, he has worked as an investigative journalist in the Netra News and contributing journalist in the Al-Jazeera I-Unit.

The SenseMaker Interview with Prof. Yasheng Huang on The Rise & Fall of The East, and Future of China.

Professor Yasheng Huang is Epoch Foundation professor of global economics and management at MIT's Sloan School of Management. From 2013 to 2017, he served as an associate dean in charge of MIT Sloan's global partnership programs and its action learning initiatives. His previous appointments include faculty positions at the University of Michigan and at Harvard Business School. Professor Huang is the author of 11 books in both English and Chinese and of many academic papers and news commentaries.

Amogh Dev Rai

Between Tigers & Dragons: Anura Kumara Dissanayake, The New Sri Lankan President

(Researcher Director-ASIA)

Amogh Dev Rai is the Founding Research Director at Advanced Study Institute of Asia (ASIA), SGT University. Managing Editor of Decypher and an economist interested in China, and health outcomes.

Shivani Singh

Copyright's Broken Promise by Prof. John Willinsky

(Program Coordinator for Law & Critical Emerging Technologies)

Shivani Singh is the Program Coordinator for Law & Critical Emerging Technologies at the Advanced Study Institute of Asia, SGT University. Her areas of expertise include project management, legal research, and intellectual property (IP) law. Shivani has authored numerous articles on copyright law, geographical indications, innovation, and emerging technologies, and has presented papers on the impact of patents on publics health and challenges in intellectual property law.

Priyanka Garodia

Levant After Nasrallah

(Geopolitical Research Analyst)

Priyanka Garodia specialises in security, international affairs, gender politics, and feminist international relations. She currently works as a research analyst at the Advanced Study Institute of Asia (ASIA), SGT University, India.

Khushi Kesari

Rumals of Chamba: Embroidering History, One Thread at a Time

(Program Officer-History Lab: Community, Heritage, & Material Culture)

Khushi Kesari is the Program Officer at the History Lab of the Advanced Study Institute of Asia (ASIA), SGT University. She is a Post-Graduate Member of the Royal Historical Society. Her key research areas include History, Heritage, Culture and GI. She has worked on various projects and has authored and presented various research papers and articles on themes of Cultural protection, GI and Heritage.

What Happened in Asia : September

September 3, 2024

- Russia hosts economic forum
- Pope in Asia

September 4, 2024

- China–Africa Forum

September 5, 2024

- Japan and Australia hold 2-plus-2 meeting

September 9, 2024

- Alibaba takes trading to mainland China
- Apple's new iPhone release and Huawei event

September 10, 2024

- Global AI summit in Riyadh

September 11, 2024

- Semicon exhibition in India

September 16, 2024

- ASEAN Economic Ministers Meeting

September 18, 2024

- Jammu and Kashmir holds local elections

September 21, 2024

- Sri Lanka holds its first presidential vote since an economic crisis tipped the government into turmoil two years ago

September 23, 2024

- Asia leaders at U.N. General Assembly
- Vietnam leader's first U.S. visit

September 25, 2024

- EU vote on China EV tariffs

September 27, 2024

- Ex-defense minister Shigeru Ishiba becomes Japan's Prime Minister

Up in Smoke: Forest Fires in the Himalayas

RAJESH THADANI

Each summer, tourists escape the scorching heat of the plains for the cool heights of the Himalayas. But instead of pristine skies and clean air, they often encounter a smoky haze and flames flickering across the hillsides. While these fiery scenes make for gripping Instagram reels, they tell only part of the story. Forest fires in the Himalayas have become an annual crisis, influenced by human activity, climate change, and inadequate management. To address this growing problem, it is essential to understand its roots and explore effective solutions.

The Global Picture

As the world grapples with climate change, forest fires have come in the spotlight as a major cause of carbon emissions. In 2022, an estimated 5.3 billion tonnes of carbon dioxide were emitted by forest fires – which is more than the total annual fossil fuel emissions of the USA! A quarter of tree cover loss in the past twenty years is on account of forest fires. As climate change accelerates, forest fires are expected to grow more severe. This has worrying implications for the Himalayas.

Understanding Himalayan Forest Fires

Forest fires in the Himalayas differ from other parts of the world. For one, almost all Himalayan fires are caused by humans. Two-thirds of Himalayan fires are estimated to be intentional, while most of the remaining third are accidental. Natural causes such as lightning strikes, which are common ignition sources in many regions, are rare in the Himalayas. Secondly, Himalayan fires are small, often only a few hectares and rarely exceeding a few square km. This is miniscule compared to the massive wildfires that make headlines in Australia, Canada or the US which can cover areas hundreds of times larger. Thirdly, most fires in the Himalaya are low intensity ground fires which spread along the surface of the ground burning grasses, shrubs and low vegetation. While the leaves of trees may get scorched, recovery occurs quickly. Within months the scars of these fires are healed by the monsoon rains. These surface fires contrast with the intense crown fires that devastate large tracts of forests in the US and Canada burning through tree canopies. Crown fires are uncommon in the Himalaya and only occur during severe fire years. Forest recovery after a crown fire is slow as standing trees are killed, and the landscape takes decades to recover.

The Role of Climate Change

While the above may suggest that Himalayan fires are less of a concern than social media would suggest, there are worrying trends. The Himalayas are warming faster than the global average and climate change is exacerbating forest fires. Rainfall patterns are recorded as being more erratic with an increase in the number of continuous dry days in the pre-monsoon season. These lengthening dry periods, along with warming temperatures and reduced humidity, create ideal conditions for fires to spread more rapidly and with greater intensity. The fire season is also growing longer, and fires occur much earlier in the spring than in the past.

Additionally, as mountain communities become more affluent, they rely less on forests for biomass products like fuelwood and fodder. While this shift has been celebrated for reducing forest degradation, it also leads to a buildup of combustible materials like dry leaves and fallen wood, increasing the risk of intense fires. Anecdotal evidence suggests that destructive crown fires are becoming more common, and this is cause for worry. Forest fires and biomass burning also lead to the production of fine particulate matter or 'black carbon', which absorbs heat and exacerbates atmospheric warming. Black carbon also gets deposited on Himalayan glaciers, decreasing their reflectivity and causing them to absorb heat. Glaciers with this carbon deposition melt faster. In addition, fires release large amounts of carbon dioxide

into the atmosphere which also enhances warming. Forest fires thus enhance climate warming, which in turn leads to more forest fires, forming a feedback loop. This is particularly concerning given India's commitments to reducing carbon emissions under international agreements like the Paris Agreement. If forest fires continue to increase in frequency and intensity, they could undermine national efforts to meet these climate targets.

Ecological and Economic Impacts

The expansion of Chir pine (Pinus roxburghii) forests is important when discussing fire management. Chir is a native species well-adapted to fire. It dominates many Himalayan forests especially in Uttarakhand. While resilient to surface fires, Chir forests have low biodiversity, and its needles are highly flammable. As fire-resistant oak forests are degraded or replaced by pine, fire risks worsen. Revisiting forest policies to better manage pine stands could reduce fire vulnerability and promote resilient ecosystems.

The ecological impacts of forest fires in the Himalayas are far-reaching. While low-intensity surface fires may promote biodiversity and fodder availability, repeated fires can have devastating long-term effects on ecosystem health. Young plantations and regenerating forests are particularly vulnerable, and their destruction can compromise future sources of income for communities that rely on forest products. In addition, forest fires can degrade water supplies by damaging watersheds that feed rivers and streams in the region.

Managing Forest Fires

Technological advancements have played a role in fire management. India has made significant progress in early fire detection through satellite-based systems and real-time alerts. The Forest Survey of India (FSI) and the Indian Institute of Remote Sensing (IIRS) have developed tools that allow state forest departments to monitor fire-prone areas and respond more quickly to outbreaks.

However, technology alone cannot solve the problem. Given that almost all Himalayan fires are of human origin, the ultimate solution lies in understanding how they are caused and finding solutions to prevent or at least greatly reduce fire occurrence. The importance of spreading awareness both among tourists and local communities cannot be overstated.

> "Technological advancements have played a role in fire management. India has made significant progress in early fire detection through satellite-based systems and real-time alerts."

Traditional methods to restrict fires, such as creating fire lines, clearing of dry vegetation, and controlled burning were effective but have declined over the years. The blanket ban on green felling, while intended to protect forests, hampered efforts to treat fire-prone areas. As rules have recently been rationalised, it is hoped that these techniques will be

enhanced and reimplemented. Without proper maintenance of firebreaks and fuel reduction strategies, forests become vulnerable to devastating fires.

When fires occur, quick response to contain them is the best solution. Given the isolation and difficult terrain of the region, it is local communities that offer the best hope of combating Himalayan fires. Historically, local communities have played a central role in fire management. However, as rural livelihoods become increasingly disconnected from forests, this link has weakened. To address this, it is essential to rekindle community involvement through incentives and support. A promising solution discussed during a 2022 workshop organised by the Centre for Ecology Development and Research (CEDAR) involves training and incentivising local youth and developing a cadre of 'Agni Rakshaks'. These community-based firefighters would serve as the first line of defence against fires and be equipped with modern fire safety gear and specialised training. Quick response can prevent small fires from escalating into large-scale disasters.

Additionally, registering village forests in carbon markets could provide financial incentives for communities to protect their forests. By earning carbon credits for preventing fires, local communities would have a tangible stake in forest conservation efforts.

Moving Forward: Policy and Action

To mitigate forest fires in the Himalayas, policymakers must adopt a comprehensive approach. This includes developing long-term fire management plans, launching public awareness campaigns to promote fire-safe behaviour, improving local firefighting capacity, and encouraging community involvement. Continued research into the ecological impacts of fires and the effectiveness of different fire management strategies is crucial. With climate change expected to make fire seasons longer and more intense, it is more important than ever to invest in fire prevention, detection, and response. Doing so can help mitigate some of the impacts of climate change and protect the unique Himalayan ecosystems for future generations. ■

De/Cypher Data Dive

Visualisations on Temperature and Forest Fires

Annual Temperature Anomalies (°C):1940-2023

Baseline: Average Mean Surface Temperature from the 1991-2000

DE/CYPHER ASIA
Created by Data Team
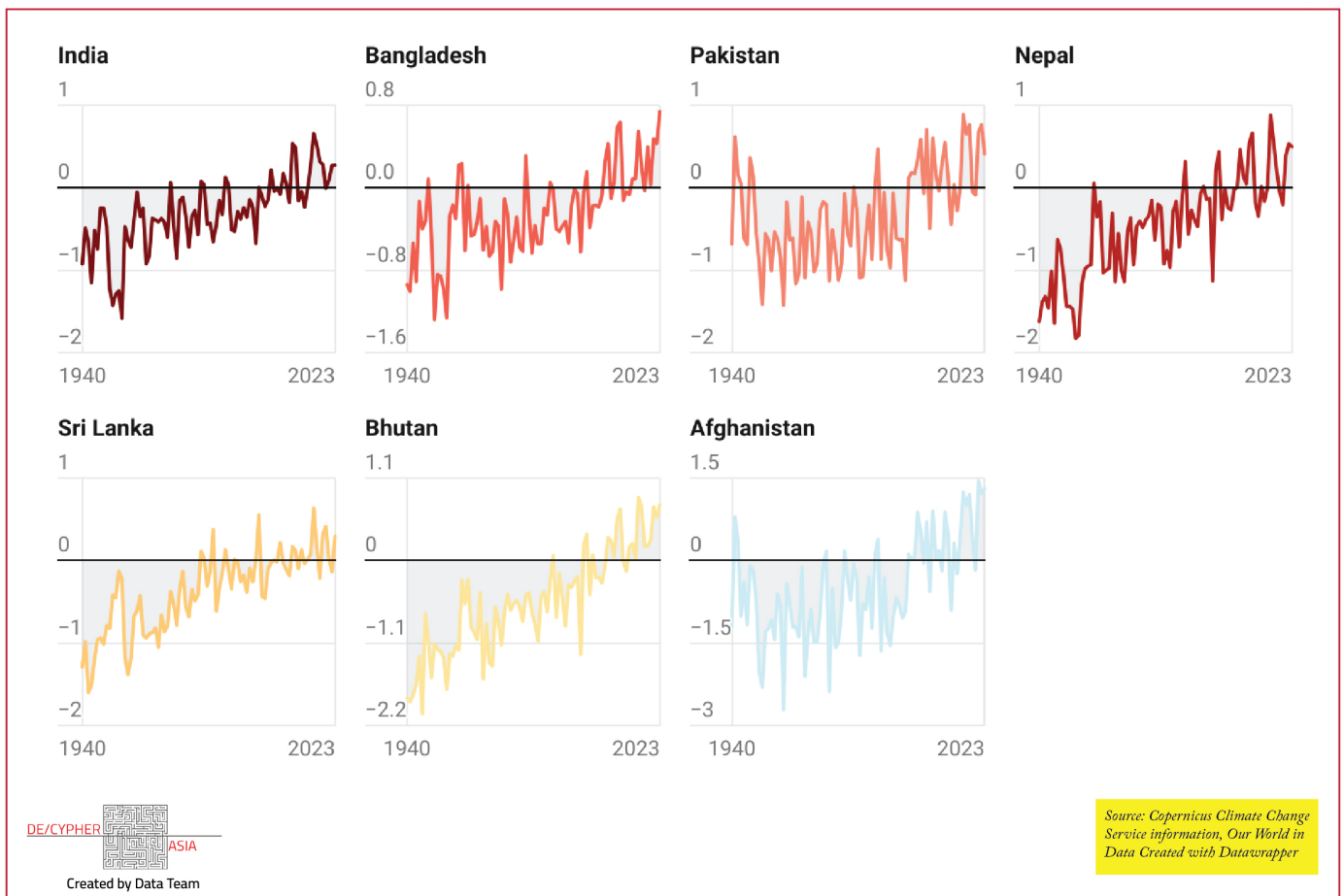
Any deviation in temperature from a base or reference value, whether positive or negative, is referred to as a temperature anomaly. A positive anomaly indicates temperatures are warmer than the baseline, whereas a negative anomaly shows cooler conditions. According to the World Bank, South Asia is highly vulnerable to climate change and average temperatures have been rising throughout the region.

Forest Fire Hotspots in Indian Subcontinent

Forest Fires in 2024
Note: The red spots depict more intense fire

Over 36% of India's forest cover is prone to frequent fires, with 4% extremely prone and 6% highly prone. Mizoram, Tripura, Meghalaya, and Manipur have the highest likelihood of forest fires based on event frequency (Forest Survey of India report 2021).

PAKISTAN

BANGLADESH

INDIA

A fire broke out in Bangladesh's Sundarbans in the first week of May.

Rising risk of burning in the world's biggest mangrove forest.

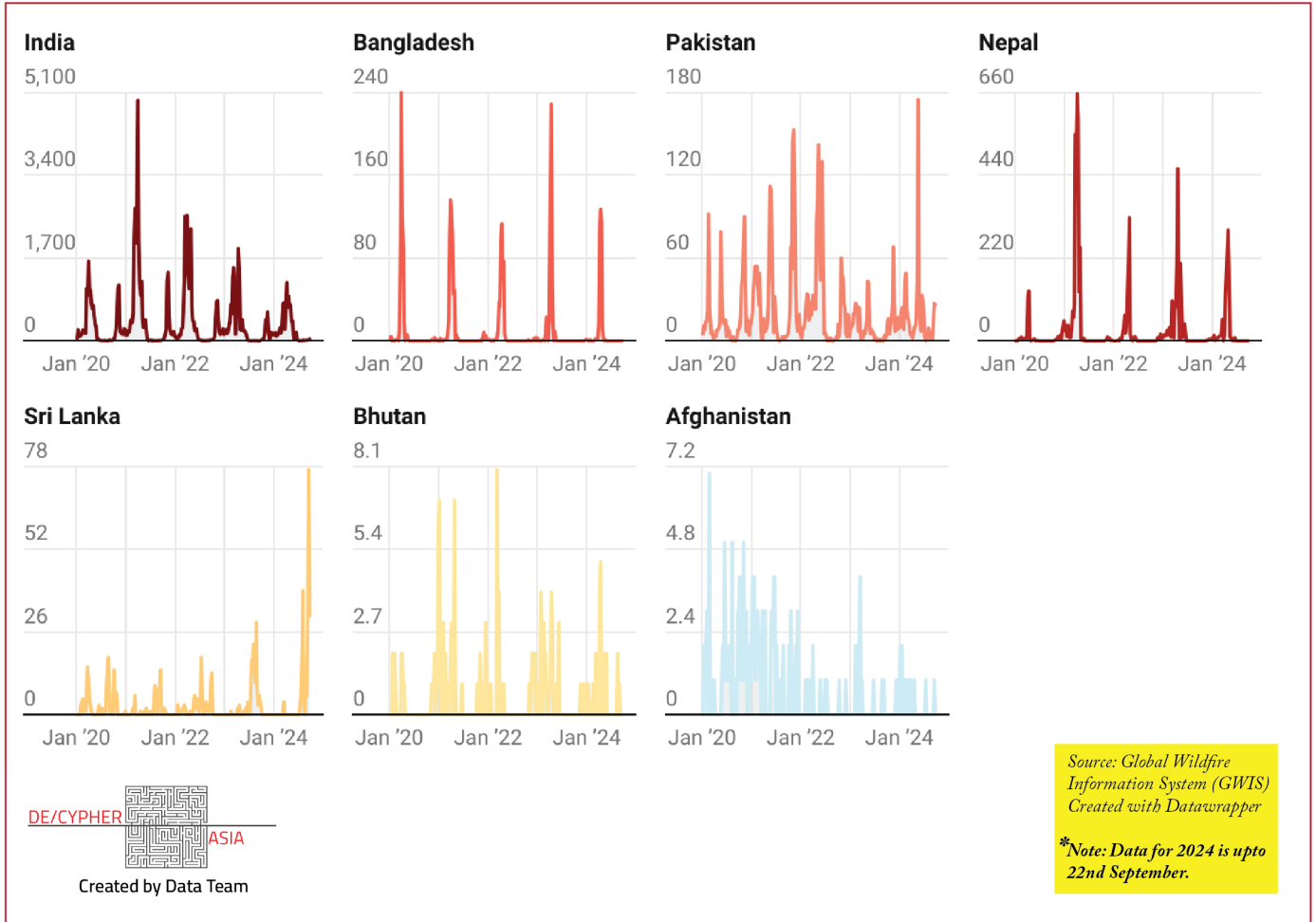Physical relief map for illustrative purposes. This is not a political map.

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Created by Data Team

Source: FIRMS VIIRS Data

FIRMS: Fire Information for Resource Management System
VIIRS: Visible Infrared Imaging Radiometer Suite

Number of Forest Fires in South Asia: 2020-2024*

Number of Weekly Fires (2020 - 22 Sep 2024)

India

5,100 / 3,400 / 1,700 / 0 — Jan '20, Jan '22, Jan '24

Bangladesh

240 / 160 / 80 / 0 — Jan '20, Jan '22, Jan '24

Pakistan

180 / 120 / 60 / 0 — Jan '20, Jan '22, Jan '24

Nepal

660 / 440 / 220 / 0 — Jan '20, Jan '22, Jan '24

Sri Lanka

78 / 52 / 26 / 0 — Jan '20, Jan '22, Jan '24

Bhutan

8.1 / 5.4 / 2.7 / 0 — Jan '20, Jan '22, Jan '24

Afghanistan

7.2 / 4.8 / 2.4 / 0 — Jan '20, Jan '22, Jan '24

DE/CYPHER ASIA

Created by Data Team

Globally, fires claimed 138 million hectares (Mha) of tree cover between 2001 and 2023. The year 2023 had the greatest loss of tree cover due to fires, with 11.9 Mha or 42% of the total tree cover loss. About 38.1 thousand hectares (kha) of tree cover was lost in India between 2001 to 2023 (Global Forest Watch).

Forest Fire Hotspots in Indian Subcontinent

Forest Fires in 2023
Note: The red spots depict more intense fire
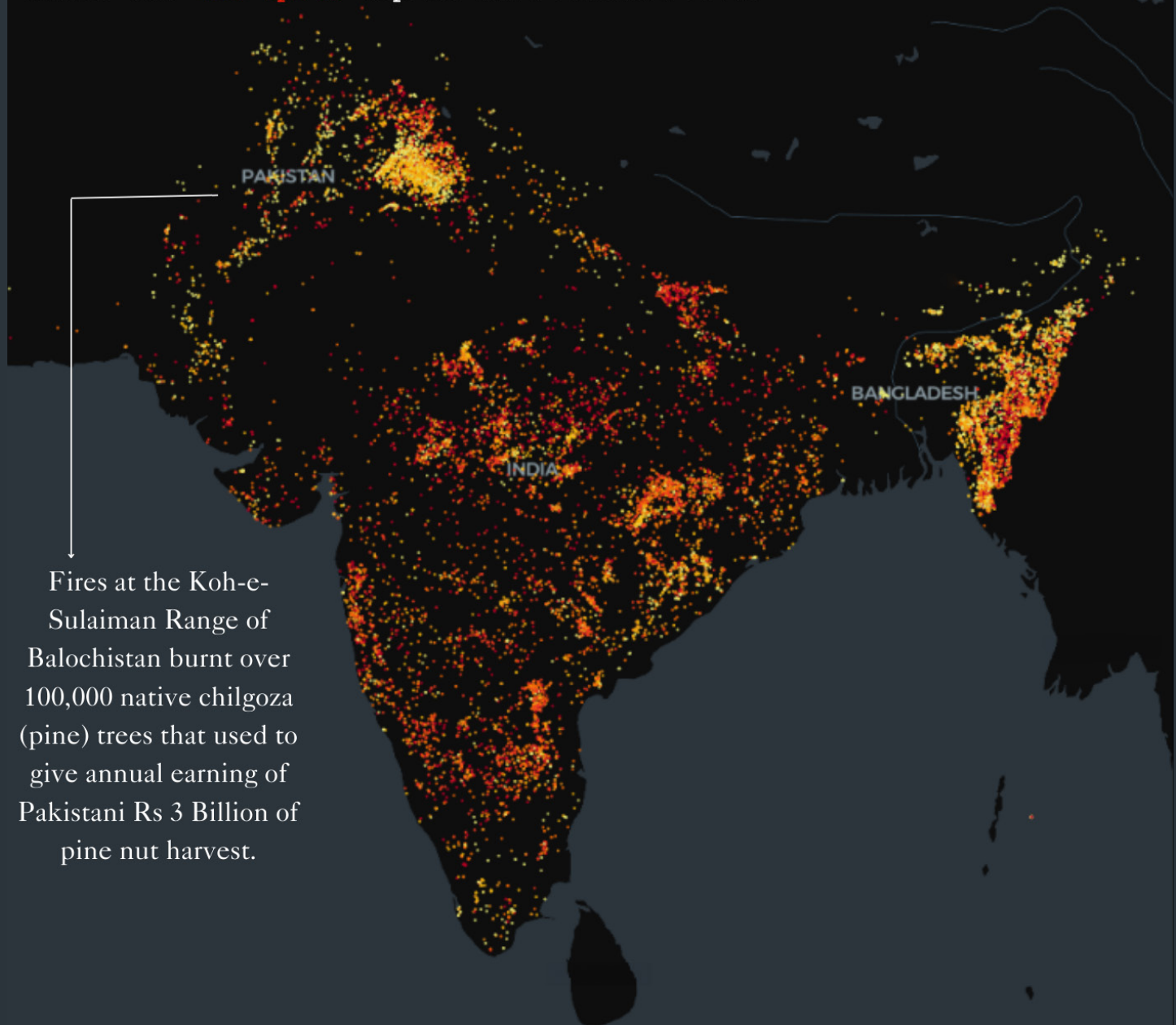
Fires at the Koh-e-Sulaiman Range of Balochistan burnt over 100,000 native chilgoza (pine) trees that used to give annual earning of Pakistani Rs 3 Billion of pine nut harvest.

Physical relief map for illustrative purposes. This is not a political map.

DE/CYPHER ASIA

Created by Data Team

What the Jet Stream and Climate Change Had to Do With the Hottest Summer on Record – Remember All Those Heat Domes?

SHUANG-YE WU

Summer 2024 was officially the Northern Hemisphere's hottest on record. In the United States, fierce heat waves seemed to hit somewhere almost every day.

Phoenix reached 100 degrees for more than 100 days straight. The 2024 Olympic Games started in the midst of a long-running heat wave in Europe that included the three hottest days on record globally, July 21-23. August was Earth's hottest month in the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's 175-year record.

Overall, the global average temperature was 2.74 degrees Fahrenheit (1.52 degrees Celsius) above the 20th-century average.

That might seem small, but temperature increases associated with human-induced climate change do not manifest as small, even increases everywhere on the planet. Rather, they result in more frequent and severe episodes of heat waves, as the world saw in 2024.

The most severe and persistent heat waves are often associated with an atmospheric pattern called a heat dome. As an atmospheric scientist, I study weather patterns and the changing climate. Here's how heat domes, the jet stream and climate change influence summer heat waves and the record-hot summer of 2024.

What the Jet Stream Has to Do With Heat Domes

If you listened to weather forecasts during the summer of 2024, you probably heard the term "heat dome" a lot.

A heat dome is a persistent high-pressure system over a large area. A high-pressure system is created by sinking air. As air sinks, it warms up, decreasing relative humidity and leaving sunny weather. The high pressure also serves as a lid that keeps hot air on the surface from rising and dissipating. The resulting heat dome can persist for days or even weeks.

The longer a heat dome lingers, the more heat will build up, creating sweltering conditions for the people on the ground.

High pressure in the middle layers of the atmosphere acts as a dome or cap, allowing heat to build up at the Earth's surface. NOAA

How long these heat domes stick around has a lot to do with the jet stream.

The jet stream is a narrow band of strong winds in the upper atmosphere, about 30,000 feet above sea level. It moves from west to east due to the Earth's rotation. The strong winds are a result of the sharp temperature difference where the warm tropical air meets the cold polar air from the north in the mid-latitudes.

The jet stream does not flow along a straight path. Rather, it meanders to the north and south in a wavy pattern. These giant meanders are known as the Rossby waves, and they have a major influence on weather.

Ridges and troughs created as the jet stream meanders through the mid-latitudes create high (H) and low (L) pressure systems. Reds indicate the fastest winds. NASA/Goddard Space Flight Center Scientific Visualisation Studio

Where the jet stream arcs northward, forming a ridge, it creates a high-pressure system south of the wave. Where the jet stream dips southward, forming a trough, it creates a low-pressure system north of the jet stream. A low-pressure system contains rising air in the center, which cools and tends to generate precipitation and storms.

Most of our weather is modulated by the position and characteristics of the jet stream.

How Climate Change Affects the Jet Stream

The jet stream, or any wind, is the result of differences in surface temperature.

In simple terms, warm air rises, creating low pressure, and cold air sinks, creating high pressure. Wind is the movement of the air from high to low pressure. Greater differences in temperature produce stronger winds.

For the Earth as a whole, warm air rises near the equator, and cold air sinks near the poles. The temperature difference between the equator and the pole determines the strength of the jet stream in each hemisphere.

However, that temperature difference has been changing, particularly in the Northern Hemisphere. The Arctic region has been warming about three times faster than the global average. This phenomenon, known as Arctic amplification, is largely caused by the melting of Arctic sea ice, which allows the exposed dark water to absorb more of the Sun's radiation and heat up faster.

Because the Arctic is warming faster than the tropics, the temperature difference between the two regions is lessened. And that slows the jet stream.

As the jet stream slows, it tends to meander more, causing bigger waves. The bigger waves create larger high-pressure systems. These can often be blocked by the deep low-pressure systems on both sides,

causing the high-pressure system to sit over a large area for a long period of time.

Typically, waves in the jet stream pass through the continental United States in around three to five days. When blocking occurs, however, the high-pressure system could stagnate for days to weeks. This allows the heat to build up underneath, leading to blistering heat waves.

Since the jet stream circles around the globe, stagnating waves could occur in multiple places, leading to simultaneous heat waves at the mid-latitude around the world. That happened in 2024, with long-lasting heat waves in Europe, North America, Central Asia and China.

Jet Stream Behavior Affects Winter, too

The same meandering behavior of the jet stream also plays a role in extreme winter weather. That includes the southward intrusion of frigid polar air from the polar vortex and conditions for severe winter storms.

Many of these atmospheric changes, driven by human-caused global warming, have significant impacts on people's health, property and ecosystems around the world. ∎

Md. Ali Jinnah

General Zia Ul-Haq

(By Invitation)

The Politics of Exclusion Haunts Pakistan

ISHTIAQ AHMED

The current dismal situation in Pakistan has roots in an ideology, which was premised on the assumption that Muslims were a nation apart from all other religious communities of India. Such confessional ideology dichotomised Hindus (about 70 per cent) and Muslims (25 per cent) as two antagonistic and hostile nations whose worldview and social practices clashed at all levels of life.

The Two-Nation Theory advanced on 22 March 1940 by Mohammad Ali Jinnah on behalf of the All-India Muslim League demanded that India be partitioned to create separate states for Indian Muslims in areas in which they constituted majorities. Such a radical demand for the partitioning of India was directed against the Indian National Congress' One-Nation Theory which at least from the late 1920s onwards had been spearheading territorial nationalism which argued that all Indians belonged to one, indivisible nation with equal rights of men and women and preferential rights for historically disadvantaged groups in society. On such a basis they demanded freedom in a united India from British rule.

During World War II, while the Congress Party refused to help the war effort and demanded the end of colonial rule through the transfer of power to elected representatives of the Indian people, the Muslim League offered to help the British and demanded that at the end of the war the Muslim nation should be granted the right of self-determination. Under the circumstances, the British started patronising the Muslim League and especially promoted Jinnah as a great leader.

In such favourable circumstances, Jinnah and his supporters could launch a concerted campaign othering and demonising Hindus and warning Muslims that in a united India Islam will be annihilated and Muslims obliterated. Therefore, the creation of Pakistan was an existential question for both Islam and Muslims. Such a campaign resulted in a polarised election result in 1946: Hindus voted for the Congress Party (wanting to keep India united), Muslims for the Muslim League (demanding partition to create Pakistan) and Sikhs for the Panthic parties (determined not to let Pakistan get the whole of Punjab and to have the Hindu-Sikh areas of Punjab kept out of Pakistan). It can be noted that only 11 per cent of the Indian population had the right to vote at that time.

Although the British were on the victorious side of the war, their capacity to hold on to India was greatly weakened by Nazi onslaught which left the British economy in shambles. Moreover, the United States pressured Britain to grant freedom to India. The cumulative pressure of the 1942 Quit India movement, the establishment of the INA by the Japanese, the uprising of the naval ratings in early 1946 and the outbreak of communal violence in Calcutta during 16-20 August 1946 on a large scale after Jinnah's call to direct action, which became endemic to Indian politics and spread to other parts

of India hastened the end of British rule. However, before exiting, they decided to create Pakistan as Jinnah had demanded. Such a decision was arrived at after the British military signalled its acceptance of Pakistan as a frontline state to contain Soviet Communism.

The transfer of power in mid-August 1947 proved to be an unprecedented human calamity as communal riots claimed the lives of at least 1 million Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs and caused the 12-15 million to cross the border drawn between India and Pakistan. It bequeathed a legacy of territorial disputes and over sharing of the assets of colonial India. India–Pakistan relations have since then been marred by such a legacy and have resulted in several wars.

Notwithstanding a relentlessly rabid communal campaign, which had won him Pakistan, Jinnah on 11 August made an apparent about-turn on the two-nation theory by declaring that in Pakistan, Hindus, Muslims, and other non-Muslims will enjoy equal rights. However, on 14 August when the Pakistan Constituent Assembly was formally inaugurated, he returned to the organic connection between Islam and Pakistan by telling Mountbatten that Prophet Muhammad was the role model for Pakistan. Thereafter followed several other moves underlining the Islamic identity of Pakistan and Islamic law, the Sharia, as the source of constitution and law in Pakistan.

Irrespective of what Jinnah wanted the ideology on which Pakistan was based severely circumscribed his ability to delink himself and Pakistan from the Islamic antecedents of that ideology or the implications and ramifications of such ideology within Pakistan. While Hinduism was proverbially afflicted by the ubiquity of the fissiparous nature of the caste system the myth of Muslim homogeneity exploded soon after Pakistan came into being because sectarian and sub-sectarian divisions were as deeply rooted among Muslims.

Nevertheless, as long as Jinnah lived, the divisions among Muslims over belief and doctrines remained dormant. His early death on 11 September 1948 opened the Pandora box of sectarian, sub-sectarian and linguistic differences and disputes which existed among Muslims. It started with the 7 March 1949 Objectives Resolution which called for Pakistan to be an ideal Muslim democracy upholding the sovereignty of God. How that would translate into a coherent, tangible constitutional formula and define the laws of Pakistan remained unclear. Already in 1953, the fissures within the presumed homogeneous Muslim nation took a violent form when Punjab was rocked by anti-Ahmadiyya riots. The constitutions of 1956, 1962 and 1973 not only retained the Islamic character of Pakistan but the 1973 constitution added more Islamic features. In 1974 the Pakistan Parliament unanimously declared the Ahmadis as non-Muslims.

Under General Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq, Deobandi ideas received state patronage, and many controversial outdated laws were imposed on Pakistan. Moreover, the Hudood and blasphemy laws and several misogynist measures rendered Pakistan intolerant and encouraged a mob mentality preying on those suspected of deviating from pure and true Islam. The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan publishes reports on violent mob attacks on religious minorities and free-thinking Muslims.

The introduction of zakat (tax) by Zia was rejected by the Shia minority which agitated for exemption from it. In the 1990s a proxy war was fought on Pakistani soil between Shia Iran and Sunni Saudi Arabia through their sectarian affiliates in the form of armed militias. The terrorism which followed claimed hundreds of lives, but the upper hand belonged to the Sunni extremists who not only formed

a majority of 85 per cent but were supported by state agencies. Such a tendency even resulted in angry polemics and terrorism between different sub-sects of Sunnis.

Also, because of Pakistan's involved in the so-called Afghan Jihad sponsored by the United States and Saudi Arabia and assisted by many other states extremism, militancy and violence had become endemic to Pakistani state and society. After the Afghan Jihad so-called non-state actors carried out terrorist attacks in the Indian Kashmir as well as in several Indian cities.

Communalism which before 1947 had been directed against Hindus had also concealed another deep division among Muslims: that deriving from linguistic and centre-periphery tensions and disputes. Rather soon after Pakistan came into being, the West Pakistani rulers began to treat the Bengalis as lesser citizens even when they formed a 55 per cent majority of the Pakistan population. Ultimately the former East Pakistan broke away after a civil war which claimed thousands of lives and became Bangladesh in December 1971.

In Sindh, the native population too developed many grievances against the Urdu-speaking migrants from mainly North India. The latter settled in large numbers in Karachi as well as in major Sindhi cities and towns and in the early years dominated the federal government. In the 1980s and 1990s ethnic conflict between the Urdu-speakers resulted in shocking cases of terrorism. Currently, separatist tendencies in Balochistan and in the tribal areas of Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa against the Punjabi-dominated Pakistan state have caused violence and terrorism on a large scale.

Considered in the light of the historical record, one can conclude that the logic of exclusion based on religion which underpinned the Two-Nation Theory and became the ideology upon which the partition of India took place turned inside and assumed a virulent form. If Pakistan was created for the Muslim nation of India, then inevitably the question, intellectual, theological and ideological, which followed from some reasoning was: who a Muslim is. Given the deep-rooted sectarian and sub-sectarian divisions as well as the existence of linguistic nationalities within Pakistani Muslims, the quest to find a pure Muslim identity has for all practical purposes resulted in the exclusion and alienation of non-dominant sects and linguistic nationalities from what in 1947 was projected as a homogenous Muslim nation. One can add that non-Muslim Pakistanis have always been marginalised and over the years their position has become increasingly vulnerable to majoritarian tyranny.

In theoretical terms one can argue that once the politics of othering, demonising and dehumanising gets entrenched in politics its divisive nature comes to haunt society in a profound manner and therefore communalism transforming into sectarianism and sub-sectarianism is built into the logic of such politics. 77 years of Pakistan experience is ample corroboration of the egregious nature of such politics. ■

Credit: XKCD

(By Special Arrangement with Tortoise Media)

Who is Leading the AI Race? : Insights from The Tortoise Global AI Index 2024

Over the last year, the growth of artificial intelligence (AI) has been at the forefront of technological advancements, fueled by crucial global developments that have transformed the AI ecosystem. On September 19, 2024, Tortoise Media released its fifth edition of the Global AI Index, which evaluates 83 countries' AI capacities through an extensive array of indicators. This year's edition uses 122 indicators derived from 24 different public and commercial data sources, as well as insights from 83 governments. These indicators are divided into seven sub-pillars: talent, infrastructure, operating environment, research and development, government strategy, and commercial ecosystem, which are then combined into three overarching pillars: implementation, innovation, and investment.

The selected indicators utilise the most recent data available, reflecting ongoing developments and challenges in the global AI field. The Global AI Index adhere to strict standards, guaranteeing that no data included is older than 2019. The index uses a 2019 cutoff date to evaluate startup ecosystems, guaranteeing a current assessment of the rapid expansion of AI startups.

The US and China: Dominating AI on a Global Scale

As seen in the previous years, the United States and China continue to dominate the AI scene, holding the top places in all three pillars of the index: implementation, innovation, and investment. With a flawless score of 100, the United States continues to beat China, which has a score of 53. Both nations excel in terms of absolute AI capability, as defined by the 'Scale' of their AI production on the world stage. This leadership has been attributed to the massive resources, talent, and infrastructure that have been allocated to AI, with both countries continually at the forefront of research, development, and commercialisation.

The United States has maintained its dominant position through a complex ecosystem of AI research and development, strong government funding, and a robust commercial sector. In contrast, China has spent extensively in AI infrastructure and talent development, establishing itself as a serious participant in AI innovation, notably in the creation of new AI models and patents.

The Global AI Index
2024

Implementation

Implementation measures a nation's ability to apply AI technologies in real-world scenarios, focusing on indicators such as talent availability, AI infrastructure quality, and the operating environment. This includes metrics on the number of AI professionals, the availability of high-performance computing resources, and the overall regulatory framework supporting AI development.

Talent

Talent focuses on the availability of skilled practitioners in artificial intelligence solutions.

15%

- 5% Developers
- 6% Scientists
- 4% Professionals

Operating Environment

Operating Environment focuses on the regulatory context of and public opinion on artificial intelligence.

4%

- 0.50% Labour
- 1% Diversity
- 2% Legislation
- 0.50% Trust

Infrastructure

Infrastructure assesses the scale of advanced computing infrastructure and semiconductor manufacturing.

11%

- 1% GPU access
- 5% Computing
- 3% Semi-Conductors
- 2% Connectivity

Innovation

Innovation is essential for maintaining long-term competitiveness in AI. This pillar emphasizes research output, academic collaboration, and the generation of new technologies. Key indicators include the volume and impact of AI-related publications, cross-sector research collaborations, and the number of AI patents filed. It also explores the integration of AI across industries, such as healthcare and finance.

Investment

Investment evaluates financial commitments to AI development from public and private sectors. This includes government strategy metrics that track national AI plans, spending, and the strategic direction of state-led initiatives, as well as private investment in AI startups and venture capital activity.

Government Strategy

Talent focuses on the availability of skilled practitioners in artificial intelligence solutions.

8%

Commercial

Operating Environment focuses on the regulatory context of and public opinion on artificial intelligence.

22%

Research

Research looks at the quantity and quality of specialist academic and industry research.

22%

Development

Development focuses on the development of new AI models and the application of AI technology in patents across other fields.

18%

4%	AI strategy
4%	Government Spends

8%	Companies
10%	Funding
4%	Acquisitions

1%	STEM
8%	Model Research
6%	Foundational AI research
5%	Applied AI research
2%	Educational Institutions

9%	Open-source models
9%	Patents

The index utilises 122 indicators, grouped into seven sub-pillars: talent, infrastructure, operating environment, research and development, government strategy, and commercial ecosystem. These sub-pillars are organised under three main pillars: implementation, innovation, and investment. Each sub-pillar and its categories carry a specific percentage weight, indicating their relative importance in the overall evaluation.

The Global AI Index 2024: Overall and Sub - Pillars Rank Top 10 Countries

Overall Rank			Talent	Operating Environment	Infrastructure	Government Strategy	Commercial	Research	Development
1	USA		1	2	1	2	1	1	1
2	China		9	21	2	5	2	2	2
3	Singapore		6	48	3	9	4	3	5
4	UK		4	4	17	6	5	4	16
5	France		10	19	14	8	8	6	4
6	South Korea		13	35	6	4	12	13	3
7	Germany		3	8	13	7	9	8	11
8	Canada		8	16	18	3	6	9	10
9	Israel		7	65	26	31	3	7	6
10	India		2	3	68	10	13	14	13

DE/CYPHER ASIA
Created by Data Team

Source: The Global AI Index 2024, Tortoise

A Competitive Field: The Top 10 Nations

While the United States and China maintain their dominant positions, the following eight nations in the rankings are significantly closer in terms of AI capability, with scores ranging from 33 to 23. Singapore maintains its third-place ranking, owing partly to its strategic emphasis on AI intensity, AI capability compared to size where it beats several larger countries. Despite fierce competition, the UK remains in fourth place, showing its excellent AI talent pool and regulatory environment.

One significant change in this year's score is France's stunning ascent to fifth position. The country has emerged as a prominent participant in the AI scene, thanks to a robust generative AI ecosystem that fueled its rapid growth. Germany (7), too, has shown consistent development since 2021, climbing the ranks as it improves its AI infrastructure and research skills. However, not every country has seen favorable trends. Israel (8) and Canada (9), historically strong achievers in AI innovation, have seen their ranks drop.

The Future of AI Leadership

The 2024 Global AI Index emphasises how governments all over the globe are beginning to view AI as a strategic priority. With strong AI ecosystems and government backing, other nations are making tremendous progress even if the US and China still hold a dominant position. The potential for nations to improve their AI capacity via focused investments in personnel, research, and infrastructure is demonstrated by the astonishing ascent of France and the consistent growth of Germany.

However, the global AI competition is far from over. The rankings are probably going to change as nations improve their AI policies and integrate new technology. Smaller countries with robust AI ecosystems will continue to be vital in determining the direction of AI progress since both scale and intensity are emphasised.

Emerging Hubs: Singapore, France, and India

Singapore retains its third-place rating, retaining its role as Asia's dynamic AI powerhouse. Its relatively small size belies its importance in AI research and application, especially in terms of talent density and infrastructure development. Singapore leads in relative indicators, such as AI talent per capita, and has made outstanding progress in absolute measurements, challenging global leaders in infrastructure and AI research output.

The United Kingdom is fourth, with France close behind in an increasingly close battle. France's recent AI breakthroughs, particularly in open-source large language model (LLM) research and public sector support, have elevated it to fifth position. Mistral, France's national AI champion, competes against huge models from the United States and China to show off the country's AI ability in non-English language learning tasks.

India has risen into the top 10, thanks to its large and highly skilled AI workforce. However, India's AI ecosystem is struggling to retain talent, since many of its best AI experts have moved abroad. While India's academic institutions are strong, the country has yet to translate its AI expertise into significant commercial investment or computer power, a shortcoming that may limit future progress.

The Role of Talent and Infrastructure

AI capacity is extremely dependent on the two key areas where the United States is already a world leader: people and infrastructure. The United States hosts 27% of the world's sophisticated AI experts, and most come from abroad. Such a large talent pool has greatly contributed to the United States' dominance in fundamental and applied AI research. This is further supported by the best computer infrastructure in place, along with AI processors supplied from both sources like Nvidia, which keeps it at par with international benchmarks of the world. India comes in second simply on account of having an enormous population and high academic institutions, but as far as specialisation at the researcher level in AI goes, it is left way behind smaller high-performing ones. In fact, both Israel and Singapore are left on the list regarding AI talent density.

Infrastructure continues to grow in importance in the AI system, particularly in the use of high-performance computing, which complements deep learning and deployment of AI. US has a competitor's lead in AI hardware through its firm that has the largest market share in AI chip manufacturing. All these notwithstanding, China's best efforts at avoiding export bans, the United States is a country mile ahead in its access to cutting-edge AI hardware.

Other important countries in the supply chain of semiconductor products include Singapore, Japan, Taiwan, and South Korea - all of whom play a vital role in providing semiconductor products needed for AI computing power. However, this strength in infrastructure does not necessarily translate into AI success more broadly. An excellent example can be seen with Japan and Taiwan's inability to succeed more widely outside of their semiconductor infrastructure.

Investment and Government Strategies: Saudi Arabia's Surprise Lead

A notable finding in the 2024 index is the growing significance of government funding in AI. Saudi Arabia has emerged as a pioneer in this field, with public AI investment plans that exceed those of the United States and China. The Kingdom has actively attracted outstanding AI experts from across the world, establishing itself as a new AI development powerhouse.

Although Saudi Arabia's private sector AI research is still in its early stages, the country's aggressive governmental investments and strategic focus on AI have the potential to transform the Middle Eastern AI landscape. The country's AI expansion is consistent with its wider Vision 2030 aims, which seek to minimise dependency on oil and diversify its economy through technological innovation.

The United States has lately made moves to counter increased competition from countries like as Saudi Arabia, most notably with a $280 billion investment in semiconductor manufacturing and research projects targeted at boosting public-private partnership in AI. China, too, has responded to these changes by increasing government funding for AI infrastructure, talent development, and AI-specific research initiatives.

A Critical Perspective on the Future of AI Leadership

While the 2024 Global AI Index showcases advancements in AI capabilities across countries, it also raises serious concerns regarding the long-term viability of this development. The overwhelming dominance of the United States and China presents a barrier for other countries looking to build strong AI ecosystems. This disparity emphasises the potential risks of a divided global AI environment, in which a few countries control the majority of the resources and infrastructure required for AI growth.

Furthermore, when nations such as Saudi Arabia make ambitious investments in artificial intelligence, the global balance of power may alter, resulting in new dynamics in international relations. This might result in increasing competition and conflicts over technical superiority. Smaller nations, although exhibiting extraordinary intensity in their AI initiatives, may struggle to maintain long-term viability in the absence of the essential infrastructure and funding.

Additionally, it is critical to consider the ethical consequences of AI breakthroughs. As governments

compete to use AI for economic gain, issues about privacy, data security, and the possibility of bias in AI systems must be addressed. The fast advancement of AI raises concerns about legal frameworks and the need for international collaboration to promote responsible AI governance.

Finally, while the 2024 Global AI Index provides an overview of current AI capabilities and trends, it is critical to be attentive about the underlying problems and ethical concerns that come with AI's revolutionary capacity. The future of global AI leadership will be determined not just by technology developments, but also by collaborative efforts to establish an inclusive and responsible AI ecosystem that benefits all nations. ■

The Global AI Index 2024 Rank : Asia

Country	Rank
China	2
Singapore	3
South Korea	6
Israel	9
India	10
Japan	11
Saudi Arabia	14
Hong Kong	16
UAE	20
Taiwan	21
Russia	31
Turkey	34
Malaysia	39
Thailand	43
Indonesia	49
Qatar	54
Vietnam	58
Iran	60
Bahrain	62
Jordan	63
Oman	64
Armenia	65
Philippines	67
Bangladesh	75
Pakistan	76
Azerbaijan	78
Sri Lanka	82

DE/CYPHER ASIA
Created by Data Team

Source: The Global AI Index 2024, Tortoise

With inputs from Shivani Singh

The Resolve Tibet Act 2024: A Step Forward?

CHAHAK MITTAL

Historical Relations: Tibet and China

For about the last 1,500 years, Tibet has sought complete autonomy from China with many generations of resistance, culminating in a series of independence movements and unrest over the years. Since the invasion of Tibet by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 1950, Tibetans continually resisted the occupation. Starting from 1987, the movement gained immense worldwide attention, with words such as 'Free Tibet' being hailed largely in parts of Europe and in the US. Until the Tibet 2008 unrest or "uprising," as coined by Tibetan media, the messages of each protest have varied with some demands remaining consistent. Tibetans have repeatedly demanded the protection of Tibetan identity, history, self-determination, human rights, and the return of the Dalai Lama to Tibet.

Today, the Tibetan struggle and acts of resistance are not as audacious. Even the daily and mundane actions mark certain subtle acts of protest. They have evolved from armed resistance to a more diplomatic and advocacy-based approach, seeking international support and aiming for cultural preservation and genuine autonomy. The movement continues to face significant challenges, but it is also receiving substantial support from the global community.

Resolve Tibet Act 2024

The US Congress has recently passed the Tibet Bill S-138, with an urge from China to resolve the Tibet dispute. It all began after a meeting regarding the Bill with the Tibetan spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama in Dharamshala with US Congressman Michael McCaul and former House Speaker, Nancy Pelosi. This Bill, known as the Resolve Tibet Act, refutes Beijing's claims about Tibet and urges it to stop the dissemination of disinformation about Tibet's history and people. The Bill had been earlier described as 'groundless' and 'futile' by the Chinese government.

The Chinese government has time and again vehemently rejected the view that Tibetan culture or ways of life are under threat. However, as per many claims, Chinese authorities strictly control several communications, causing total blackouts during sensitive times, political protests or debates. There have been several cases of imprisonment for those who surmounted the risk of sharing any information outside of Tibet.

After years of resistance, it can be said that the passage of the Resolve Tibet Act signifies increased international attention and support for Tibet, reinforcing the US' stance on Tibetan self-determination

and cultural rights. This move may be able to invigorate the Tibetan independence movement by providing it with a significant political backing and encouraging other countries to adopt similar stances. By gaining the status of "unresolved Tibet" under a US policy, the Act certainly applies pressure on Beijing to resume negotiations with the Tibetan representatives, which have been stalled since 2010. The Act can challenge China's false claims and narrative on Tibet, supporting the preservation of Tibetan cultural and religious identity. Even though the Act itself does not guarantee direct or necessary political changes in Tibet, it aims to create a conducive environment for dialogue and understanding. Its effectiveness will certainly depend on its implementation and the international community's willingness to support and enforce its provisions.

Can the US Resolve Tibet Act make a Difference?

One might argue that since 1989, there have been several instances of global support, or acts provisioned in favour of Tibet, but can the US Resolve Tibet Act make a difference? A few instances to name:

- Tibetan Policy Act 2002, that emphasised on the preservation of Tibet's unique religious, cultural, and linguistic heritage, called for sustainable development projects in Tibetan areas, and supported Tibetan refugees in South Asia;

- Reciprocal Access to Tibet Act of 2018, that aimed at promoting more transparency and freedom of movement within Tibet, by granting access to Tibetan areas for US diplomats, journalists, and tourists, which the Chinese government often restricted;

- Tibetan Policy and Support Act of 2020, that reaffirmed the US support for the Dalai Lama's Middle Way Approach and opposed any Chinese interference in the process of selecting Tibetan Buddhist leaders, including the future Dalai Lama.

While these Acts and provisions have, over the years, demonstrated a consistent pattern of US legislative support for the Tibetan cause, it can be said that it's for the first time that one of the major claims under the Tibetan independence movement has been reinforced via this Act – An explicit rejection of Chinese claims. As per Phayul under the Central Tibet Administration (CTA), the Resolve Tibet Act explicitly rejects China's historical claims over Tibet and makes it official under the US policy stating the status of Tibet as "unresolved." Previous Acts, while supportive of Tibetan autonomy and rights, did not go as far in challenging the Chinese narrative about Tibetan history and territorial claims. As per The Diplomat, the Act takes a landmark step in challenging the CCP's historical revisionism.

The Act also calls for unconditional negotiations between the Chinese government and Tibetan representatives. As far as the previous legislations had been concerned, while they were in support of the dialogue, the new Act's demand for unconditional dialogue without any preconditions comes as a more robust strategy for engagement.

As per CTA, the new Act also brings into the picture one of the biggest demands by the Tibetan independence leaders – the demarcation of the territory of Tibet. The Act makes it clear that Tibet refers not only to the 'Tibet Autonomous Region' (TAR) but also includes Tibetan areas of the Chinese provinces of Qinghai, Gansu, Yunnan, and Sichuan. This broader definition has been able to underscore the Act's comprehensive approach to the Tibetan issue, beyond just the Autonomous Region and has

put across the stance on the expanded definition of Tibet.

Repression and control exercised by China over the years have been major causes of the failure of the Tibetan independence movement. China exercises tight control over Tibet through extensive security measures, surveillance, and restrictions on religious and cultural practices. This repression has made it difficult for any organised resistance or independence movement to gain momentum within Tibet. However, with the Act's more comprehensive approach than incremental as compared to previous legislations, it can provide significant impetus to Tibetan independence movement in terms of bringing larger territorial issues to the fore than just specific issues like specific/reciprocal access or the appointing of a special coordinator for Tibetan issues.

Impact on Tibetan Independence Movement

While the Act has been designed to support Tibetan autonomy and counter Chinese disinformation, it does carry potential risks and disadvantages for the Tibetan independence movement.

One of the major ones is that it could cause internal divisions and provoke harsher Chinese repression. Given that the Act supports the idea of genuine autonomy, for many movement leaders, it disturbs or dilutes the idea of 'complete independence.' This could lead to a split within the Tibetan movement between those advocating for full independence and those willing to accept autonomy. Many arguments indicate that the Act impacts the movement's objective severely, inadvertently shifting the people's ideology towards "settling for autonomy" while they were eyeing independence. In response to the Act and the division of Tibetan people, it can also intensify China's repressive measures in Tibet to prevent any rise in independence sentiment. Increased surveillance, tighter control over religious and cultural practices, and harsher crackdowns on protests could result in maintaining control and weaken the overall movement.

The Act could also strain international diplomatic efforts, in turn reducing international support for the Tibetan independence movement. After the Act, China has called out US Congress for a "highly interfering" move, which is believed to potentially further strain US-China relations. The straining, in turn, can largely affect broader geopolitical dynamics. If China perceives increased support for Tibetan autonomy as a threat to its sovereignty, there are chances that it will leverage its economic and political influence to isolate the US and discourage other countries from supporting Tibetan causes. This could significantly reduce the global support base for the Tibetan independence movement.

International Support and Advocacy

Each independence movement is shaped by its unique historical, cultural, and political contexts. The Resolve Tibet Act of 2024 significantly impacts the Tibetan independence movement, providing both momentum and challenges in their pursuit of autonomy and independence. While it provides crucial support and legitimacy to the Tibetan independence movement by increasing international awareness and applying diplomatic pressure on China, it also poses challenges. This includes the potential for increased Chinese repression and internal divisions within the movement. The Act's impact will largely depend on how effectively the Tibetan advocates and their international supporters navigate these complexities to push for genuine autonomy or complete independence. ■

Gen-Z Revolution in Bangladesh: How the Youth Have Ended a 15-Year Authoritarian Rule

SHADIQUE MAHBUB ISLAM

Young children shouting, 'We want justice!', 'Why did you kill my brother?', or 'Step down Hasina!' is perhaps the most electrifying moment of the history of South Asia in the 21st century. Never before have we seen a youth-led protest brave through the forces of an authoritarian state and persevere, defying death.

The Generation Z, or the Gen-Z youth, have become the catalyst for the recent revolution that toppled Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's 15-year authoritarian rule. This movement, which began with protests against an inequitable job quota system, grew into a full-scale political uprising.

The role of the youth in this revolution has not only altered the nation's immediate political situation but has also paved the way for long-term political reform and socio-economic change. The youth, galvanised by a desire for democracy, transparency, and social justice, have become a dominant force in shaping Bangladesh's future.

The Rise of the Youth Movement in Bangladesh

Over the past decade, the socio-political climate in Bangladesh has grown increasingly oppressive, marked by authoritarian governance, corruption, and curtailed civil liberties. The 15-year period of Sheikh Hasina's rule, although associated with notable economic growth and infrastructure development, was equally characterised by increasing political repression.

The ruling Awami League consolidated power through flawed elections, political suppression, and the curtailment of free speech. Dissent was systematically silenced, and political violence, censorship, and human rights violations became commonplace. Even in this recent uprising, the government forces and the ruling party cadres have killed at least 757 people[1], among which at least 70 are children[2]. This political environment stifled democratic processes

1 Hassan, A. (2024, August 24). Student-mass movement: Death toll keeps rising, 757 till date. Prothom Alo.
2 Akhtar, N. (2024, August 18). Among the deceased, there are 70 children and teenagers. Prothom Alo. (Bengali Edition)

and bred widespread frustration, particularly among the younger generation.

It was within this repressive environment that Generation Z, a group born into a world of global digital connectivity and social awareness, began to emerge as a potent political force. These young people, raised with access to the internet and social media, were keenly aware of both the opportunities and injustices around them. With increasing global exposure, they became more sensitive to issues of social justice, democracy, and freedom. As digital natives, they leveraged online platforms to mobilise, organise, and amplify their grievances.

The spark for the youth-led movement can be traced to a specific grievance: the job quota system, which allocated 56% of public sector jobs to the children and grandchildren of freedom fighters from the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War. What began as protests against this quota system quickly evolved into a broader critique of the government's corruption, mismanagement, and authoritarianism. Sheikh Hasina's brutal suppression and the excessive use of force have resulted in an explosive outburst.

The young protesters demanded an end to the discriminatory system, but the movement soon became an uprising to put an end to the autocratic rule of Sheikh Hasina.

The Fall of Sheikh Hasina and the Emergence of a New Political Era

The revolution reached its peak on August 5, 2024, when a youth-led movement forced Sheikh Hasina to resign from office after 15 years of authoritarian rule. This momentous event was the culmination of weeks of protests, spearheaded by students and youth activists, who demonstrated in the streets of Dhaka and other major cities. Their persistent protests, despite violent crackdowns, internet shutdowns, and police brutality, signalled the end of an era of political oppression.

Hasina's fall marked a significant turning point for Bangladesh's political landscape. The transition of power was swift, with Nobel laureate and microcredit pioneer Muhammad Yunus appointed as the head of an interim government. Yunus' leadership, seen as a move toward establishing democratic governance and addressing the institutional abuses of the previous regime, signalled hope for a more transparent and accountable political system.

However, the challenges facing the interim government are significant. Reforming entrenched political institutions, rehabilitating a polarised political culture, sporadic attacks on the minorities, and addressing the economic needs of the country will require careful, sustained efforts.

The Impact of the Youth on Political Change

Unlike previous movements, which were largely local and fragmented, this youth-led revolution transcended geographic boundaries and was amplified by digital platforms. Facebook, Messenger, YouTube and other social media tools allowed protesters to organise rapidly, share information, and inspire others to join their cause. Even amid government-imposed internet blackouts, the youth used text messaging and phone calls to keep the momentum going.

Moreover, the youth-led movement was not just about reclaiming political power; it was also about

demanding social justice and accountability. One of the key demands of the protesters was to hold the government accountable for human rights abuses, including extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances, and political violence. These demands for justice resonated deeply with the young generation, who had grown up witnessing the erosion of democratic values and the increasing centralisation of power. Their calls for transparency, accountability, and the rule of law were a direct response to the corruption and abuses of the Hasina regime.

Active Participation of Women in the Uprising

Another significant aspect of the youth movement was its inclusivity. Women played a prominent role in the protests, often leading from the front lines and defying the repressive forces of the state. The

image of female protesters, such as the young woman trying to stop a police van with her bare hands, became iconic symbols of the revolution.

Women not only participated in the street protests but also used digital platforms to spread information, provide medical support, and rally others to the cause. This feminist dimension of the revolution is

significant, as it highlights the intersectionality of the youth movement and the broader social changes it seeks to bring about.

There were many female students, even housewives, who provided food and water to the protesters. In university campuses, some female students would cook meals for the protesters at their halls. Then, the meals were distributed across the campus. The female teachers, too, joined this movement, supporting the students with their words and actions.

Challenges Ahead: The Need for Sustained Political Reform

Looking ahead, the revolution has not yet achieved all of its goals. While the ousting of Hasina was a significant achievement, the structural issues that allowed her to consolidate power—such as the politicisation of state institutions and the absence of checks and balances—still need to be addressed. The interim government, led by Yunus, must focus on rehabilitating these institutions, promoting dialogue and compromise among political stakeholders, and ensuring that the upcoming elections are free, fair, and inclusive.

The economic challenges facing Bangladesh also remain significant. Hasina's government left an economy entrenched in debts, inflation, high unemployment, corruption, inequality, and poor labour protections. The new government must address these economic issues, while also navigating the country's complex geopolitical relationships with regional powers such as India and China, who have vested interests in Bangladesh's stability.

The youth of Bangladesh, particularly Generation Z, have emerged as powerful agents of change in the country's political landscape. Their tech- savvy, global awareness, and progressive ideals have enabled them to mobilise quickly and effectively, leading to the downfall of an authoritarian regime and opening the door to political reform. However, the revolution is far from complete. The challenges facing the interim government are immense, and the path to democracy and transparency will require sustained efforts and careful navigation of the political landscape.

Nonetheless, the youth-led revolution has demonstrated that the younger generation is not content to sit on the sidelines of political life. As Bangladesh moves forward, the role of its youth will remain crucial in ensuring that the promises of the revolution are fulfilled and that the country emerges as a more democratic, just, and prosperous nation. ∎

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Post Protirodh : Bangladesh's Recovery After The July Revolution

JYOTI RAHMAN

Monsoon plays an important role in the Bangladeshi psyche. It is the time of days, often weeks, of drizzling and pouring rains, meals of khichuri and maachh-bhaja, women embroidering the traditional nakshi-kantha —all of which are evoked in the classical poetry and modern pop culture alike. It is, however, not a time of traditional festivals, owing to the rain and humidity. Nor has it been a time for politics —elections, street agitation, or military manoeuvres, most political milestones in Bangladesh had been in the dry season between October and May.

Until 2024, that is.

The Monsoon Revolution that toppled the despotic regime of Sheikh Hasina on 5 August presents many firsts for the country —the first time there has been a popular uprising during the rainy season, the first time the ousted leader fled the country, and the first time the fall of a government has been associated with a general breakdown in the state machinery and civil administration.

Consider the case of the police. Around half of the country's 240,000 member police force were hired under Hasina. These recruitments were usually based on political affiliation, and the individuals were often in cahoots with local leaders of Hasina's Awami League in running various criminal enterprises. The police were the main tool of the regime's attempt to violently suppress the Monsoon Revolution, the official death toll from which is nearing four figures[1] . Consequently, the police also bore the brunt of revolutionary violence, with several members being killed and dozens of police stations burnt in reenactments of the Chauri Chaura incidence from over a century ago.

After Hasina fled, so did the police across the country. For several days, Dhaka was a city without cops. Some smaller towns and much of the rural hinterland still are. While Bangladesh, as an independent country as well as during its association with Pakistan, have seen many governments toppled, never has there been such a breakdown in law enforcement. The army has been deployed to maintain law and order until the civilian police force is reorganised. In the meantime, the country's law and order situation remains shaky, with significant implications for commerce and industry.

The Bangladesh Bank, the country's central bank, presents another stark case. Even in the morning of 17 December 1971, Dhaka officials of the erstwhile State Bank of Pakistan reported for duty to the Indian generals who had assumed control of the newly liberated city the previous evening. In contrast, the Bangladesh Bank Governor and several of his senior staff who were appointed by Hasina had also fled after 5 August.

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1   *The official death toll from the revolution now stands at 1581.*

These officials had reasons to flee. The country's banking sector was systematically plundered by the fallen regime, with the complicity of former officials. Large loans were made to a few families with strong political connections, and much of the money has been siphoned overseas. The result is that 11 of the 60 or so banks in Bangladesh are practically insolvent, and several others are reeling with bad debt.

Stabilising the banking sector is the first task facing the trio in charge managing the country's economic recovery: Ahsan Mansur, the new central bank governor and a former IMF official; Salahuddin Ahmed, a former central bank governor and now the de facto Minister of Finance and Commerce; and Wahiduddin Mahmood, a respected economist and the de facto Planning Minister.

The authorities have moved to reconstitute the boards of the banks facing the most problems. This is already restoring a semblance of confidence, with liquidity returning to these banks. The next step will be a thorough audit to understand the extent of the 'hole'. Then will come solutions in the form of consolidation and recapitalisation. In the meantime, assistance is being sought from multilateral agencies to recover the funds that have been siphoned off overseas. For example, the Governor has mentioned that there are formal requests with the British authorities about up to £13bn that might have been laundered there.

After the banks, inflation and external sector stability are the two immediate economic priorities.

Inflation peaked at 11.7 percent in July, reflecting the economic shutdown caused by the Revolution, after running at near double-digit pace for over two years prior to Hasina's fall. Over that time, the Bangladesh taka had depreciated by around 40 percent and the central bank had lost over $20b worth of reserves. The economic turbulence since 2022 reflected unorthodox policies pursued by the Hasina regime. Lending rate was capped well below inflation, making money cheaper than free for those who could get a loan —usually the regime cronies —while import controls wreaked havoc in the supply chain and an esoteric system of parallel exchange rates sowed confusion.

Economic orthodoxy was gradually returning to policymaking even before the Revolution. The new authorities are pushing for monetary and fiscal policy restraints to rein in inflation. Policy rates have risen, fiscal settings are being tightened, and import controls are being lifted.

The taka has remained stable since the fall of Hasina, buoyed by very strong remittance flows —one significant bright spot in the economy.

Remittances had been sluggish since 2022, even though record number of jobseekers had been leaving Bangladesh for work, and the recipient countries' job markets had been red hot. The remitters were expecting taka to depreciate further and relied on informal networks which were buoyed by the money laundered out by the fallen regime's cronies.

This entire dynamic has now reversed. The informal market has dried up significantly. Remittances have also been boosted by the strong support for the Revolution among the diaspora communities. The Hasina regime had alienated these communities by shutting down the internet in July. In response, calls for remittance boycott saw daily remittance decline by nearly $30m during the Revolution. Remittances have been flowing in at record numbers in recent weeks, boosting not just the balance of payments, but also buoying domestic household incomes and consumption.

The readymade garments sector, the other major foreign currency earner, presents a murkier picture. The general weakness in the law-and-order situation is particularly acutely felt in the country's industrial areas. The garments industry had witnessed significant labour unrest in 2023 as wages failed to keep pace with inflation. These demands have flared up again, exacerbated by politically motivated sabotage by remnants of the Hasina regime, or simple criminal rascality. While order has returned since the deployment of army, it is too early to rule out further disturbances.

Looking further ahead into 2025 and beyond, the authorities will need to grapple with two interrelated imbalances. Bangladesh has been experiencing a current account deficit since the late 2010s, which was expected to continue to the late 2020s. This was driven by significant public expenditure on infrastructure and energy projects which ultimately relied on foreign financing. The rates of return on these investments, or the terms on which they were financed, were often opaque. The comically one-sided coal-fuelled power plant deal with the Adani Group is just one example of such projects driving the country's twin deficits.

The authorities have established several commissions and task forces to examine these deals, while international agencies have promised assistance. For example, at the time of writing, an IMF mission is visiting Dhaka to discuss the government's request for increasing and frontloading the country's current program with the Fund. Thus far, the indications are positive, with as much as $10 billion possibly in the pipeline from various multilateral agencies over several years.

External imbalances, bad banks, and authoritarian politics — that's what made the noxious Monsoon cocktail of the Asian Financial Crisis of 1997-98. Bangladesh has gotten rid of the authoritarian politics, but it will need to grapple with the banks immediately, and the current account deficit in the medium term, for the post-Monsoon recovery to be durable.

Bangladeshis are, of course, used to post-monsoon recoveries. That is the time to sow a new crop after monsoon flood has brought new, more fertile silt —as the Assamese singer Bhupen Hazarika sang in a 1970s classic 'notun maati-te ashe foshol-er kaal'. Similarly, considerable political difficulties notwithstanding, the post-Revolution political order presents a fertile ground for tough reforms needed for a durable recovery. Reform is the buzzword in Dhaka after the Revolution, and there is an acceptance among the country's political and economic establishment that hard choices need to be made to stabilise the economy first, and then return it to sustainable and durable growth eventually. ∎

Between Tigers & Dragons: Anura Kumara Dissanayake, The New Sri Lankan President
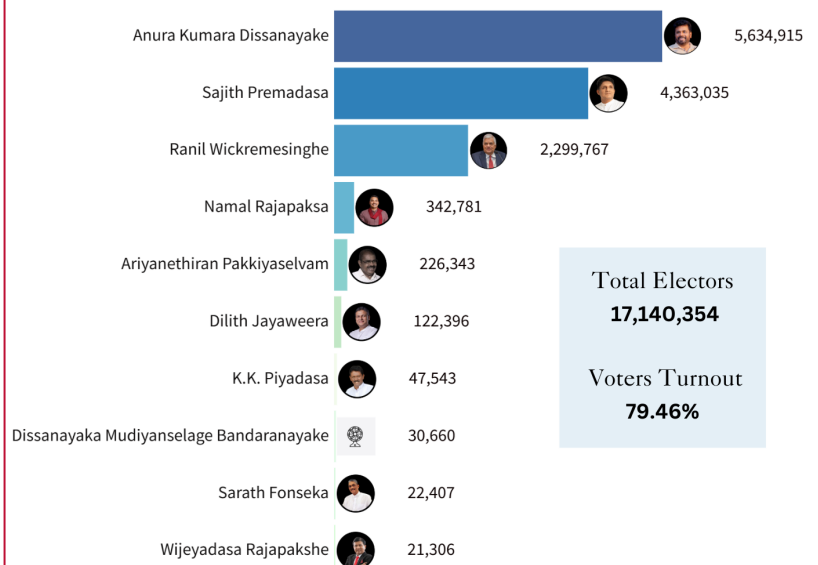
AMOGH DEV RAI

In a surprising turn of events that has captured the attention of South Asia watchers, Sri Lanka has elected Anura Kumara Dissanayake as its new president. Leading the National People's Power (NPP) coalition to victory in September 2024, Dissanayake's ascension marks a significant shift in Sri Lankan politics. However, as new information emerges, it becomes clear that this change represents less a leftward ideological move and more a profound rejection of the political establishment.
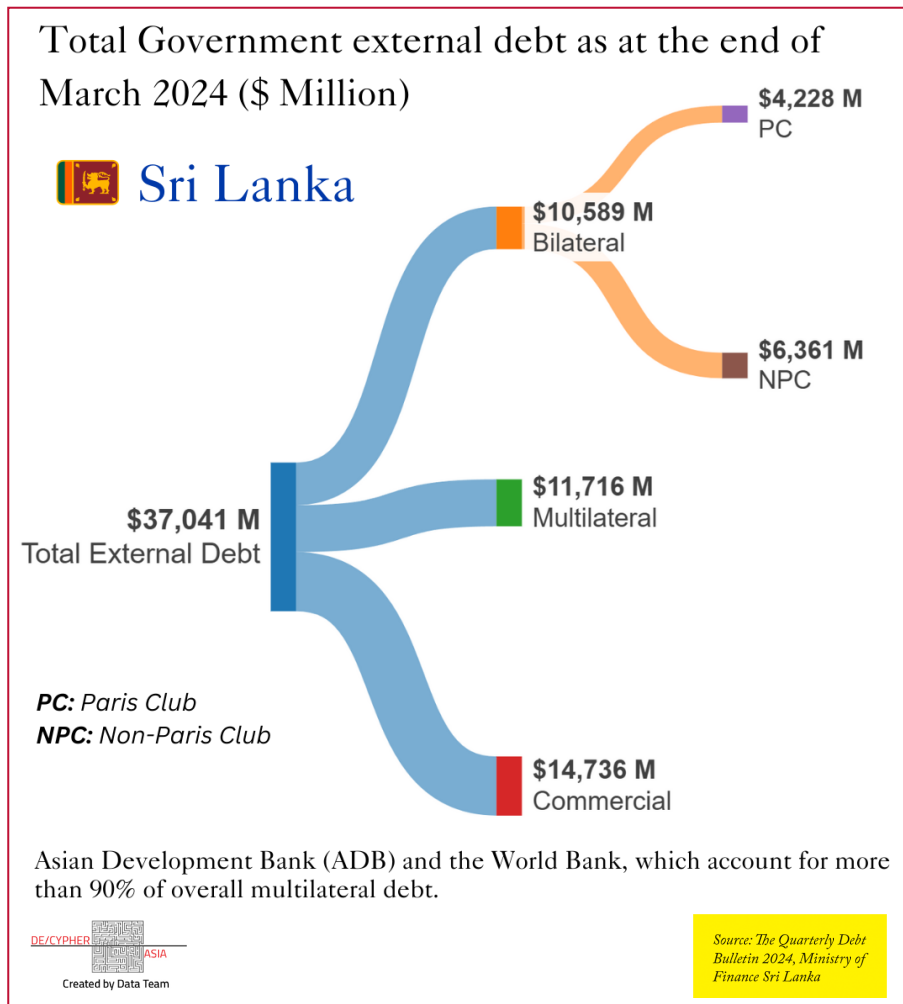
The Rise of the NPP: Disgust with the Status Quo

The NPP's victory, spearheaded by Dissanayake's Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) party, is best understood not as a triumph of leftist ideology, but as an expression of deep-seated frustration with Sri Lanka's political elite. As pollster Ravi Rannan-Eliya noted in remarks to The Wire, "This isn't about the IMF – it's about people's rejection of the establishment. People have finally lost patience with an establishment that doesn't hear them. I think disgust is the correct word."

This sentiment reflects a broader trend of disillusionment with traditional political parties in the wake of the 2022 economic crisis and subsequent Aragalaya protests. The electorate's choice of the NPP appears to be less about embracing socialism and more about taking a gamble on change. As our source puts it, "A lot of people just gambled on the NPP. Who knows how it'll turn out?"

Sri Lanka Presidential Election Results, 2024
Top 10 Candidates- First Preference Votes

Candidate	First Preference Votes
Anura Kumara Dissanayake	5,634,915
Sajith Premadasa	4,363,035
Ranil Wickremesinghe	2,299,767
Namal Rajapaksa	342,781
Ariyanethiran Pakkiyaselvam	226,343
Dilith Jayaweera	122,396
K.K. Piyadasa	47,543
Dissanayaka Mudiyanselage Bandaranayake	30,660
Sarath Fonseka	22,407
Wijeyadasa Rajapakshe	21,306

Total Electors **17,140,354**

Voters Turnout **79.46%**

DE/CYPHER ASIA
Created by Data Team

Source: Election Commission of Sri Lanka

Total Government external debt as at the end of March 2024 ($ Million)

Sri Lanka

$37,041 M
Total External Debt

$10,589 M
Bilateral

$4,228 M
PC

$6,361 M
NPC

$11,716 M
Multilateral

$14,736 M
Commercial

PC: *Paris Club*
NPC: *Non-Paris Club*

Asian Development Bank (ADB) and the World Bank, which account for more than 90% of overall multilateral debt.

DE/CYPHER ASIA
Created by Data Team

Source: The Quarterly Debt Bulletin 2024, Ministry of Finance Sri Lanka

A New Kind of Coalition: Beyond Traditional Left-Right Divides

Contrary to initial perceptions, the NPP's support base defies simple categorization. While rooted in the leftist JVP, the coalition has attracted a diverse group of voters, many of whom do not identify as Marxists or even leftists. Pollsters reveal that a significant portion of NPP voters are "urban, upper-middle-class people" including "lots of young doctors."

This composition suggests that the NPP might be better understood as analogous to modern Western center-left parties like the Democrats in the US, Labour in the UK, or the Social Democratic Party in Germany. Polling data supports this view, showing that the NPP performed best among "middle-income, upper-middle-income, educated, often professional, urban Sinhalese" voters.

Intriguingly, it was Sajith Premadasa, Dissanayake's opponent, who performed better among lower-income groups - a reversal of traditional leftist voting patterns. This unexpected demographic support underscores the complexity of Sri Lanka's current political landscape.

A Fragile Mandate: The Challenge of Non-Loyalist Voters

Perhaps the most striking aspect of the NPP's victory is the fluidity of its support base. Our sources indicate that an astonishing 99% of NPP voters in this election had not supported the party previously. This statistic highlights the volatile nature of the electorate's choice - these voters "are not loyalists. They could easily vote for someone else next time."

This lack of a committed base presents both an opportunity and a challenge for Dissanayake's administration. While it reflects a broad mandate for change, it also means that the NPP will need to deliver tangible results quickly to maintain its support.

Balancing Act: Rural Roots and Urban Appeal

While Dissanayake (often referred to as AKD) performed best among urban, middle-income Sinhalese voters, he also maintained crucial rural support. This dual appeal was essential for his victory and will be critical for governing effectively. The challenge for AKD will be to balance the interests and expectations of these diverse constituencies.

Geopolitical Implications: A Pragmatic Approach?

The NPP's diverse support base and apparent ideological flexibility could have significant implications for Sri Lanka's foreign policy. Rather than a hard shift to the left, we might expect a more pragmatic approach to international relations. This could potentially ease concerns about dramatic changes in Sri Lanka's stance towards key partners like India and China.

Looking Ahead: Governance Beyond Ideology

As Sri Lanka embarks on this new political journey, the international community must recalibrate its understanding of the country's political dynamics. The NPP's victory represents not so much a leftist resurgence as a wholesale rejection of the political status quo.

For policymakers and diplomats engaged with the region, this nuanced reality presents both challenges and opportunities. It underscores the need for adaptive strategies that recognize the complexity of Sri Lankan politics beyond traditional left-right divides.
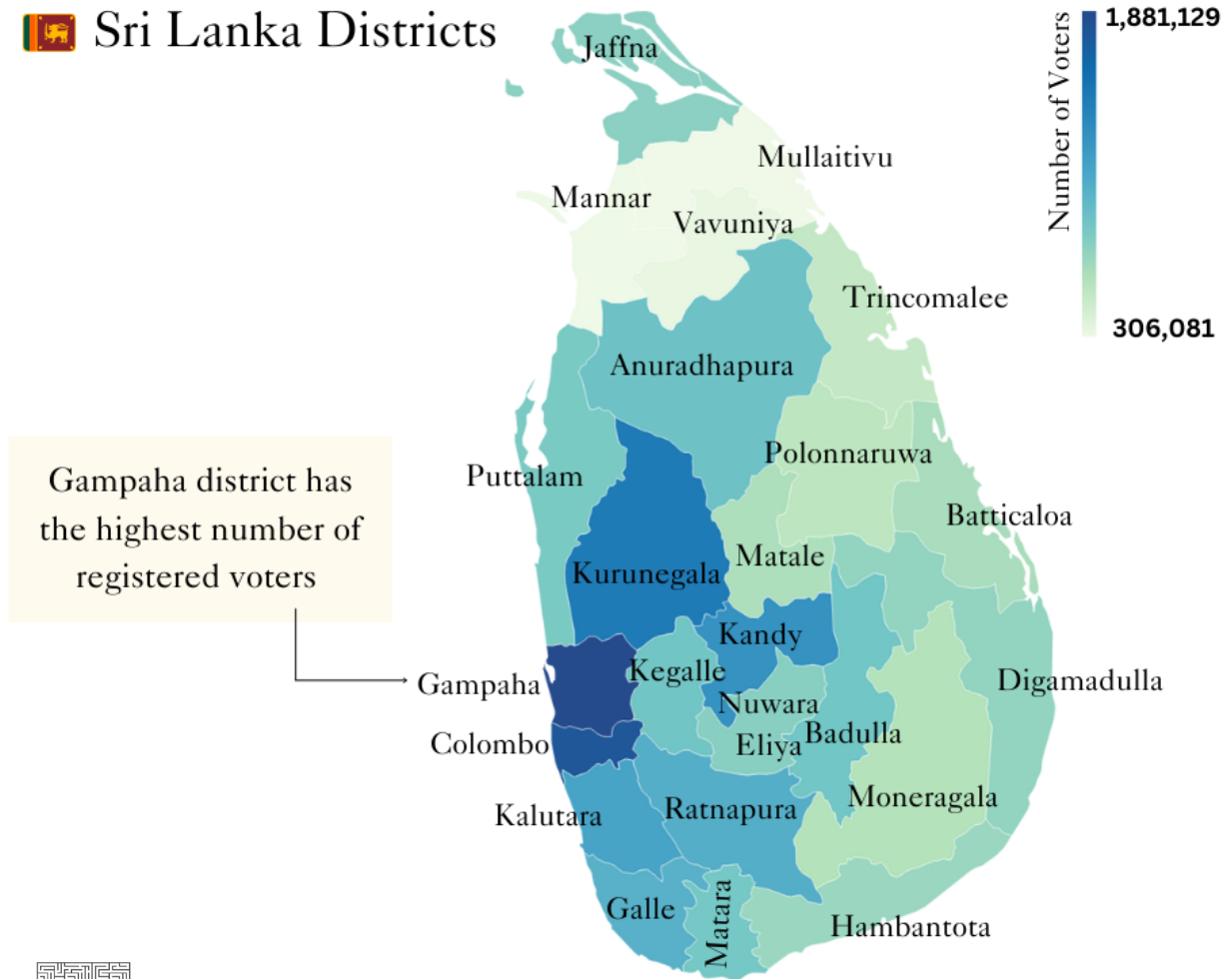
The success of Dissanayake's administration will depend on its ability to translate the electorate's desire for change into effective governance. If successful, this model of politics - transcending traditional ideological boundaries while addressing deep-seated public frustrations - could have far-reaching implications for political movements across South Asia and beyond.

As this new chapter unfolds, Sri Lanka once again finds itself at the center of regional attention, its political experiment likely to resonate far beyond its shores. The world watches to see if this gamble for change will pay off, not just for Sri Lanka, but as a potential blueprint for political renewal in other nations grappling with public disillusionment and entrenched elites. ■

Number of Registered Voters, 2024
🇱🇰 Sri Lanka Districts

Gampaha district has the highest number of registered voters

Number of Voters

1,881,129

306,081

Jaffna

Mullaitivu

Mannar

Vavuniya

Trincomalee

Anuradhapura

Polonnaruwa

Puttalam

Batticaloa

Matale

Kurunegala

Kandy

Kegalle

Digamadulla

Gampaha

Nuwara

Colombo

Eliya

Badulla

Kalutara

Ratnapura

Moneragala

Galle

Matara

Hambantota

DE/CYPHER ASIA

Created by Data Team

Source: Election Commission of Sri Lanka

The Sri Lankan elections conducted a historic second round of voting to elect Anura Kumara Dissanayake as its next president. The election held on 21st September 2024 was the island nations first election since an unprecedented financial crisis hit the nation two years ago.

The Taliban's Harsh New 'Vice And Virtue' Laws Are A Throwback To The Oppression Of The 1990s – Especially For The Women Of Afghanistan

KAMBAIZ RAFI

Until the collapse of Afghanistan's US-backed government in August 2021, few knew clearly what the Taliban wanted once they had returned to power. Some western officials and observers hoped for a big change from the regime, which had governed the Taliban's Islamic Emirate in the 1990s.

This time, they hoped, a more sophisticated and pragmatic vision might have replaced the Taliban's previously extremist approach.

Some also argued that the rest of the world had a moral responsibility to approach Afghanistan's new rulers with cautious optimism. Engagement should be the key. Anything else risked condemning the country and its population to isolation and economic hardship.

Others weren't convinced.

During the negotiations that led to the February 2020 Doha agreement, the Taliban's position on post-settlement Afghanistan's politics remained ambiguous. The group continued this vague posture during the subsequent intra-Afghan dialogues with the former Afghan government.

Then, appearing in a press conference three days after Taliban forces took control of Kabul, its spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid, appeared to give reassurances the new regime would respect women's rights "within the norms of Islamic law".

In the ensuing three years, the Taliban's fundamentalist regime has continued to suffer from weak legitimacy, despite taking pains initially to cultivate a conciliatory image compared to its harsh rule in the 1990s.

However, what had appeared to some to be Taliban 2.0 has increasingly looked like the old, harsh and fundamentalist Taliban as the regime has grown more confident in its hold on power.

Since 2021, Hibatullah Akhundzada, the leader of Afghanistan's Islamic Emirate, has gradually issued more than 50 decrees that affect most areas of society.

Many hard-won achievements under the former republic, such as freedom of expression and the press, have been suppressed. The regime has forced into disappearance, imprisoned or murdered many former

government members, despite announcing a general amnesty.

In their treatment of women, including forbidding education after the age of 12, restrictions have become so harsh that the resulting subjugation has been labelled "gender apartheid" by many journalists, academics and activists.

Many female students have had to flee the country. Most recently a group of women medical students made the news after they were granted scholarships to go to UK to complete their studies.

The regime has also revived public executions and flogging reminiscent of their 1990s practices. An edict issued in March 2024 stated the regime will also resume public stoning.

The regime has now introduced a series of new "vice and virtue" laws, to be enforced by the Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice (PVPV).

Until now, government has been mainly by decrees from the Taliban leadership. But these, while giving an indication of the regime's increasingly extremist and authoritarian nature, have not been accompanied with details of how they should be enforced. This uncertainty could, at times, allow local authorities a degree of leeway, including the ability in some cases to ignore decrees when it suits.

But the recent law change removes these ambiguities, empowers the Taliban's morality police and is enforceable on everyone residing in Afghanistan.

Blueprint for Oppression

The new laws are particularly harsh on women. They enforce the wearing of the hijab and stipulate this garment must be made of thick enough material to fully cover a woman's face and body and avoid offering temptation to men.

Women's voices are also deemed to be a source of temptation, so women are now not allowed to speak outside the family home. If a woman can be heard singing, even from within her own home, this is considered a violation of the law and can be punished. Women are even forbidden from looking directly at a man who is not their husband or blood relative.

Enforcement can be undertaken by anyone in society "who is capable". Reports by two "trustworthy" individuals is enough to bring a prosecution. This is a worrying prospect, as it could lead to arbitrary accusations based on personal or political vendettas.

Officially enforcement will be carried out by the ministry's appointees, the morality police or mohtaseb. "Fairness and kindness" are stipulated as guiding principles for how the new rules should be enforced, although these terms are not defined and the law is replete with subjective terminologies open to interpretation by those enforcing them.

Takiban spokesman Zabiullah Mujahid addresses journalists at a press conference in Doha, Qatar, June 2024.

Defiant: Taliban spokesman Zabiullah Mujahid says western concerns over the regime's treatment of women are due to 'cultural differences'. EPA-EFE/Samiullah Popal

New media laws introduced as part of the package prohibit "un-Islamic content" and empower the morality police to compel media officials to prevent the publication of content deemed contrary to Sharia and images of living beings. This last measure will effectively throw into doubt the future of TV broadcasting in Afghanistan.

The laws also forbid music in public and "un-Islamic" hairstyles. Men must grow beards at least as long as a fist. As a worrying sign for continued humanitarian engagement involving non-Muslim foreign workers, the law prohibits befriending, helping or imitating "nonbelievers".

Violations will be met with on the spot fines issued by the mohtaseb or imprisonment for one-to-three days and prosecution in the regime's courts for repeat offenders. The morality police also has the power to compel attendance at the mosque, with prosecution for those who do not obey, regardless of whether they pray at home.

As recently as June, Taliban representatives attended UN-sponsored talks in Doha at which spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid called for funds frozen by the west to be released and for the relaxation of sanctions on the regime. He dismissed western concerns over the regime's treatment of women as "cultural differences".

But these new laws have effectively removed any remaining differences between the current regime and its 1990s predecessor, a fundamentalist pariah that turned Afghanistan into an isolated outcast. ■

Prof. Yasheng Huang is Epoch Foundation professor of global economics and management at MIT's Sloan School of Management. From 2013 to 2017, he served as an associate dean in charge of MIT Sloan's global partnership programs and its action learning initiatives. His previous appointments include faculty positions at the University of Michigan and at Harvard Business School. Professor Huang is the author of 11 books in both English and Chinese and of many academic papers and news commentaries.

THE RISE AND FALL OF THE EAST

科举

HOW **E**XAMS, **A**UTOCRACY, **S**TABILITY, AND **T**ECHNOLOGY BROUGHT CHINA SUCCESS, AND WHY THEY MIGHT LEAD TO ITS DECLINE

YASHENG HUANG

The De/Cypher SenseMaker Interview with Prof. Yasheng Huang on The Rise & Fall of The East, and Future of China

INTERVIEW WITH AMOGH DEV RAI

Amogh Rai: Congratulations on writing a fantastic book which goes deep but also goes wide. There are many things that the book covers, and I'll be unpacking the East, that is exam, autocracy, stability and technology. But before we begin, I would like to ask a question that in the Eon piece that you had written, a lot of Indian comments were about asking you to compare between the Gaokao, the KJU, and the Indian Administrative Services exams in the IIT and the JEE.

I'm not going to ask you to do that, that would not be the right question. But I have another question. Since 2021, President Xi Jinping has been going after education technology companies in China.

And one of the most important things, the largest scope of the book, is examination in the Chinese system. If exams have been able to create for the CCP a country or a citizenry which is so easy to control, why would a president who is insistent on creating a legacy for himself as perhaps the great henchman, as Mao Zedong was called, why would he go after the cramming factories?

Yasheng Huang: Thank you so much. First of all, I'm very happy and honored to be invited to this panel, to this discussion. That was an excellent question and observation, very sharp observation. Let me put it this way. I'll be happy to come back to the Indian civil service exam, by the way, but we can see it together later. There's a very important piece about the Chinese civil service exam that was established in the 6th century, and that has to do with meritocracy and equality of opportunity. And the imperial system funded the preparation schools, and you can think about it as a 6th century version of universal basic education. So, not only did they establish the exam, they also made sure that the exam was open to all the members of the society.

When I say all the members, I should be careful. It was only open to the male segment of the population, but they wanted to draw from the rich families as well as from the poor families. So in that sense, there's no inconsistency between this tradition of meritocracy and what Xi Jinping did in 2021.

The primary concern, at least the official primary concern expressed by his government, was that the private education industry play into the advantage of the rich and privileged families. I disagree with that view, but at least that was the official rationale why they went after the private education system. So, notice in doing that, they didn't get rid of the exam system.

So, they preserved the exam system, but they wanted to minimise the levels of preparation, the discrepancy in terms of the levels of preparation between the rich and the poor families. So that's sort of observation number one. Observation number two is, in the communist period, the exam system was the equivalent of the exam system, is much more than college exam.

It is the way that the Communist Party evaluates local officials, promotes officials, and uses kind of systematic metrics to promote, demote these local officials. So, it is not just narrowly the college exam. And the traditional civil service exam system that was established in the 6th century was also not about getting into college.

There was no college in 6th century China. It is all about recruiting human capital into the bureaucracy. So, in that sense, Xi Jinping did something about the preparations for the college exam, but he hasn't done anything to undermine the communist bureaucracy itself.

Amogh Rai: Right. We are going to get back to Kiju, because I think the amount of information that I've been able to get about it has been fascinating from the book. But now let's get to the East. (Exams, Autocracy, Stability, and Technology). And I think one of the most important features of the book has been the paradigm that you've used to get the book into a narrative structure, but definite critical way that you look at it. Because you're talking about exam, autocracy, stability, and technology. And these are the sort of the four frames. But what is the general narrative unity that you want to present when you talk about this?

Yasheng Huang: Thank you. Very good question again. The general narrative is about a country. I'm actually working on a new book on this theme. The Needham question for sure, but then there's something else I'm working on. A company or even an individual. So essentially what I think about how an economy, a society can succeed, they succeed by balancing two opposing forces in the right way. What I call in the book, scale and scope.

And we can sort of use that to look at India and China. Scale basically means homogeneity, right? Scale economy. You produce the same products at a very high level.

Scope means heterogeneity. Different products, different ideas, and different ideologies, and different political parties. And my argument is that a society, an economy succeeds by having an optimal combination of both of these factors, rather than going extreme on one.

And so that's the kind of the general narrative that binds these four forces. And what I argue in the book is that the exam is a very successful scaling instrument. It excels at scale by eliminating alternative ideas, alternative ideologies, by preventing new ideas from coming forward.

And that scaling was incredibly successful in terms of creating political stability. So that's the S component of the East, and preserving the autocracy of the system, a component of the East. But then it was terribly bad at technology.

So, the T, right? So, because technology requires both scale and scope, and the exam system basically got rid of the scope, all of it. So what we show in the book is that when China had heterogeneities before 6th century, before the exam system, it was very inventive, very creative. And then our data showed that once the ideology space began to shrink, the inventiveness declined substantially. So that's the kind of

the framework behind these four forces of history, and also the four forces today.

Amogh Rai: That's a sort of a fascinating intro to this. I'm not going to be quoting from the book. It's a slightly large passage. So please bear with me. Kiju penalised collective actions, and its norms impede apart toward Chinese democracy. A paradox is that democratisation is often advocated on individual values, but is actuated through collective actions. Protestant reformation, women's suffrage and civil rights movement, church, political parties, even bowling leagues. Voting is a tool to coordinate preferences and aggregate collaborative acts.

"By contrast, Keju celebrated hyper-individualism, not individual agency. Candidates were pitched against each other in a fierce zero-sum tournament, where collaboration was severely punished. They were locked in a small, isolated cells, waging competition that is lonely, atomistic, brutal, and on terms entirely dictated by a remote and mythical state.

A society so individualised ceases to be a society. You could be talking about China and many other countries, especially the Keju nations, as you call them, at any point of time in history. But this is the context in the book where you are talking about how an educated state like China did not let go of its autocracy and how this education was largely responsible for the autocracy that we now see in the Chinese state.

From there to the CCP now, from 1949 to 2024, and possibly beyond, how has CCP been able to use this characteristic of history, considering that for the longest period of time, the first man to lead it for the longest time was a person who prided himself on a very revisionist reading of Chinese history. But as you show chapter after chapter, passage after passage, going towards the end of the book, that this system of scaling and scope has survived thousands of years of Chinese history. How and why?

Yasheng Huang: Yeah. So, the communist China also should be characterised by substantial stability. Not that the duration is long, but we don't know that yet, because in the past, the Chinese dynasties could last hundreds of years. The Chinese system is about 74 years old. The Chinese communist system is 74 years old. It has already surpassed Soviet Union, the first communist country in the world. I say stable, especially relative to its performance. And the performance here is defined in two ways. One is bad performance, greatly forward, cultural revolution. The great Indian philosopher, economist Amartya Sen, argues very convincingly that, yes, India didn't achieve poverty alleviation at a fast rate, and China did but India would never have committed the kind of calamities such as the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, because it is a democracy. So, in my book, I define democracy as a political system that has more scope. So, it survived that. Great Leap Forward happened in 1957. Cultural Revolution happened in 1966 to 1976. It also survived good performance.

So, I think many people would be familiar with a theory called modernisation theory. The idea of modernisation theory is, as a country grows its economy, as the living standard improves, as the size of the middle class gets bigger, then the country transitions from autocracy to democracy. That happened in Taiwan. That happened in Korea. It didn't happen in China. It may have happened, but at least so far, it didn't happen. So, it is a very interesting system. It survived both the bad performance and it survives the good performance. So, the way I explain it is, so let me first say that most people explain a piece of this puzzle. So, they will say, oh, the Communist Party survived the Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution, because it's a very oppressive regime. And then they will say they survived

the good performance because the good performance gave the Communist Party legitimacy. But if you put all these explanations together, they don't make any sense. So yes, the good performance gave them the good legitimacy, but the bad performance should give them bad legitimacy. So, it doesn't really make any sense when you put the entire history of the Communist Party together. So, I use, again, the exam system as an explanation. And that exam system effectively prevented collective action. Collective action means horizontal coordination between people without going through a top-down process. Maybe we organised a protest, I send you a WhatsApp message, and so that happened in the Arabic countries. I remember very vividly, many years ago, an Indian academic, a conversation with an Indian academic about 1989 when China had the Tiananmen protest. He went to China, he looked at the protest, and then he said to me, well, I mean, why do you Chinese make a big deal of this? This kind of protest happened in India almost on a daily basis. He was probably exaggerating, but maybe there was some truth to that. So, protests happen in India all the time. Those protests require some sort of organisation, require some sort of coordination. You cannot possibly have so many people coming out to the streets simultaneously without any organisation.

What the curfew system did is that it eliminated any possibility for that type of organisation and coordination. So, it is incredibly effective because it is not because the Chinese people are not unhappy about the situation, the COVID controls in 2022, the lockdown affected hundreds of millions of people, but everybody knows if I come out and protest, I'll be the only one. So, what I said in the book is that even if you have a high degree of anxiety and anger, if you act alone, by definition, you are the weaker party relative to the state.

So, suppose 25 million came out, suppose 30 million came out, then the situation would have been very, very different. So, a lot of it is actually psychological, is cognitive. So, you kind of get stuck in this cognitive situation.

And you can actually say that it is a cognitive coordination among the people that prevented them from organizing a collective protest.

Amogh Rai: Right. So, there's a lot there that I mean, to answer your comment about the protests in India, perhaps we have protests in India on the same scope, but not the same scale. Yes, protests definitely keep on happening. And I'm going to stick to the scale and scope, because one of the things that you sort of a thesis that you developed, which comes from two other economists, and I found it very interesting in how the bureaucratic control is exerted in scale and scope, you talk about the M form economy, and the Horseshoe or the U form economy. For a lot of people who are not aware about this, because I think the argument in the book is that the M form and the U form economy, they are better at distributing the conflicts much better. So, I think USSR, is an example of the U form. And China is the example of the M form, which kind of takes away a lot of pressure. How has this organisational inventiveness or innovation helped perpetuate the CCP rule, while maintaining sort of a disproportionate control over the minds and ideas of its citizenry?

Yasheng Huang: Yeah. So now we are talking about sort of this M vis-a-vis U forms of organisation. And thinking back, what I should have said probably is the following. China has a M form economy, but a U form political system.

Amogh Rai: So, can I stop you there for a minute? Are you saying this, like it's an M form economy

and U form political system now? Or would you say that it has existed since the founding of the CCP?

Yasheng Huang: I think today, say 2024, the economy is much less of a M form under Xi Jinping. The politics is much more of a U form than before. So, I should always stipulate that when I discuss the reform era, I kind of don't include the current period as reform era. And we can come back to that later. I think Xi Jinping has reversed many economic reforms, including the system that the reformers came up with in terms of economy and in terms of politics. Whether or not China had an M form economy before the reform.

And for the readers, the Communist China PRC was founded in 1949. And usually, we divide the period into before reform, which is 1949 to 1978. And then after reform in my book, 1978 to 2018, 2018 to now, basically kind of reversal of reform. So, these are kind of a three time periods. The M form economy began in China before reform, and partially as a result of the Great Leap Forward. Great Leap Forward created such an economic disaster, and then destroyed the economy. And Mao and his other leaders wanted to restore the economy, and they instituted economic decentralisation. But then the Cultural Revolution happened, so that also kind of destroyed the economic normalcy. The systematic form of the M form economy began to take shape after 1978.

So, in that type of system, so going back to kind of basic idea of central planning, in a centrally planned economy, the central government is responsible for allocating products, both to the companies as well as to the consumers. China had a planning system. But the difference between China and Soviet Union is that the planning level in the Soviet Union was much higher at the federal level, whereas in China, the planning level is at a much lower level.

The local governments, the provincial governments, that is the fundamental difference. So, there's one planning agency in Soviet Union, whereas there are multiple planning agencies kind of parallel with each other in the Chinese economy. What I argue in the book is that the reason why these kind of decentralised planning system can work economically is because of the incentives and information.

So, the local officials have stronger incentives for performance. They also have better and more accurate information as compared with the planning officials in Beijing. So, on the economic side, that's how the system operates.

But there's a precondition for that because if you just have decentralisation, economic decentralisation, fiscal decentralisation, then different provinces are going to go in all sorts of different directions and the country may destabilise and they do their own things. So, there's also a centralising mechanism, and that centralising mechanism is the meritocracy. The central government has never decentralised personnel control.

So, even if you're a local official, your performance is reviewed by an agency in the central government. But that still is not the end of the story because a local official does so many things. How do you evaluate the local official? And this is where the reform era really, really is different from the previous era, as well as from the era under Xi Jinping. From 1978 to 2018, the only thing that mattered was GDP. Nothing else mattered. So, now you have one metric that you can compare an official from one province with another official from a different province.

So, that became very systematic. That system only works when you have one centralising metric. It

didn't work before the reform era because they had multiple objectives. It is not working now because Xi Jinping has downgraded the GDP. He has elevated other political objectives. In a system like this, as soon as you introduce different objectives, the system doesn't work very well. And this is common sense. This is why companies have to pursue one objective, profitability, shareholder value. Once you introduce different goals and different objectives, typically the system is not going to work as well. So, I use that to analyse why the system performed between 1978 and 2018, and why the system today is struggling.

Amogh Rai: Thank you. I think in the book, for those who are going to read it, it's a recommendation that they should get the book and read it. You lay down the table. You also talk about the table with the points where GDP has a higher percentage, but incidentally, environmental conservation has been there for some time, but clearly, it's not really paying off that well. You also mentioned, I mean, that's an interesting fact, that for the last, the average time spent in the provinces has come down by half a year. I found that a very interesting statistic because it used to be almost, it could be as much as a decade at the start. Then it came down to three years, now it's two and a half years. And the president of China has no limit anymore. So, that's an interesting correlation. Professor, I'm going to go back to Keju, because one of the interesting scaling points in the book, and it comes right at the start of it, not exactly at the start, but start-ish, is you talk about the three sort of counterintuitive emperors or three, call them rebels, if you will, who helped scale up this examination and made it a perfect tool for autocracy. And this is where we move away from the E part to the A part. Of course, Wu Zhetian, the first and the only female emperor of China is there. Sui Wendi, the founder of the very short-lived, but perhaps one of the most important dynasties in China, the Sui dynasty, and the founder of the Ming dynasty. A, and this is a sort of a longer question, but would Xi Jinping be the fourth one who adds to the innovativeness of examination and autocracy?

Yasheng Huang: I don't think so. I think those three emperors were path-breaking creators and perpetuators of this system that has shaped Chinese ideas, ideology. For, you know, 1,600 years, didn't it? Xi is more of a, I don't think of him as a systematiser. Those three were systematisers. They created systems, long-lasting systems. Xi's rule is far more personalistic than his predecessors. Now, I would put him maybe at some level together with Mao in that sense. Mao was very personalistic, and Mao destroyed bureaucracy, right, the cultural revolution, the Great Leap Forward. Also, he abandoned economic bureaucracy. He created PRC. He founded PRC, but he actually also destroyed much of the system that came with PRC. Xi has not gone that far. I mean, he hasn't launched a cultural revolution type of campaign, but the thing that we need to keep in mind is the Chinese economy now is the second largest in the world.

It is a technologically complex economy, very globalised. A lot of the Chinese are studying abroad, residing in other countries, going back and forth between China and other countries, trade with India, trade with Japan, with Korea, and with the U.S. China is no longer as isolated as it was during the Mao era. For Xi to reverse that complex economy, he hasn't completely done it, so let me be very, very clear about that, but he has done quite a bit of a reversal.

That takes a lot of energy and power, and I think you can argue that he has that, but the net result of all of that is that he has weakened the system. Look at what he has done recently. The foreign minister just disappeared, the defense minister. It's just not imaginable. In any other normal country, you can have a foreign minister, and a defense minister disappear just like that. The large-scale purge of the officials,

look at the stock market, the chaos and the psychological lack of confidence, and the COVID controls decimated the Chinese economy. There's a lot of the damage that has been inflicted on the Chinese economy, but more importantly, on the system that has come to to characterise China after 1978 that has delivered the success. When I talk about the system, I also include globalisation, collaborations with Western countries. Huawei, the 5G company, the Chinese 5G company, before 2018, Huawei collaborated with hundreds of foreign companies, with American companies, Japanese companies.

Huawei tried to get into India. It has constructed this very complex web of global connections and networks. All of that is gone. China today is in a very very precarious situation. After this intricate web of connections, after the system that has been established, after all these things have been damaged this far, it's a good question. I don't think I have the answer to how it is going to do next. What is going to happen next? So, there's a lot of uncertainty, and this is where I ended my book. There's a lot of uncertainty going into the future.

Amogh Rai: Thank you. The reason I asked that question is because reading this book, and I have read other pieces that you've written, a piece that I recently re-read is something that you'd written almost 11, 12 years ago. It came out as the response to the venture capitalist Eric Lee's argument about the party in 2011 to 2012. You conclude, and this is how you conclude the book as well, it is now time to give democracy a try. As the scholars David Lake and Matthew Baum have shown, democracies simply do a better job than authoritarian governments of providing public services. And countries that make the transition to democracy experience an immediate improvement. I'm going to be connecting this statement, because then you talk about Nancy Kean's work that she was doing at that point of time about some amount of village elections. All of that now is no longer as fair and transparent, let's put it like that, when you were writing about it. But there's something very interesting you write in this book. Responding to the Global Times editor, no longer, but at that point of time, he was the Global Times editor. You made a comment that, based on his comment, that had the COVID-19 number of deaths that happened in the US under President Donald J. Trump, had they happened in China, there would have been civil unrest and so on and so forth. And you make a point about what he thought was a bad thing, was actually one of the sustainable features of democracies. The people of China have made amazing strides in the last fifty – sixty years. The academicians, the innovators, the technology people, and anybody who argues that the Chinese innovation will be stifled because it is an autocracy, as President Joseph R. Biden argued in 2012, when he was vice president. I don't think he argues that anymore, looking at all the restrictions he's putting on China. But this idea of putting and questioning the state, considering the number of non-resident Chinese who are in positions in United Nations, institutional bodies, where they constantly talk about democracy, but you can't make the needle go anywhere in democracy. Is this the contradiction of the long history of Keju, or is it CCP's amazing marshalling of resources at its command?

Yasheng Huang: So, there's definitely, we should credit the CCP with resource mobilisation, marshalling ability. You know, when you launch a big project, satellite and infrastructure, you need scaling. And India, as a democracy, has struggled with that, and China doesn't struggle as much. So, I gave ample credit to this marshalling power. But here's the critical issue. You can use that marshalling power to do good things. You can also use that marshalling power to do bad things. And then it becomes a random tool, whether or not that marshalling power delivers in the end, in the long run. So, here's the problem that we have to think about. Yes, China has produced this kind of amazing economic growth in the last

30 years and 40 years. They have built highways and all of that. By the way, India is beginning to do that. So, there's evidence that a democracy can do, maybe not at the level that autocracy does, but if you get certain things right, you can still do it. Okay, so for sure, China can do these things. But going back to what I said before, and when I quoted Amartya Sen, China can also scale to such a level as to produce the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution.

So, as a neutral analyst, you kind of have to pick and choose, right? Do you choose a system that has the capacity to do incredibly good and also incredibly bad? Or you choose a system that struggles to do good and bad? I think this is a fundamental question that all of us have to think about. I'm not saying one is necessarily better than the other. But what I'm saying is that a lot of people don't think about that issue that way.

A lot of people think, oh, India cannot build highway, therefore India is bad. China can build highway, China is good, right? If you put it that way, well, yeah, that sounds reasonable. But if you put it in the way that I put it, which is, yeah, India cannot build the highway the way, by the way, I should say China has built too much highway.

They have overinvested. Look at the debt to GDP ratio. Look at the empty city. But putting that issue aside, if you put it the way I put it, yes, China can produce highway, but it can also produce Great Leap Forward. Yes, India cannot produce that many highways, but it also cannot produce Great Leap Forward. Then the choices become a little bit trickier. You may still choose the Chinese system. That's up to you. You may choose the Indian system. It's also up to you. But what is not right is not to think about this issue in the way that I described it. A lot of people say I'm a basher of China. That's just not right. I'm just framing the choices more logically and more clearly. It is up to you. It's up to everybody to say, okay, which system is better. What I want to do is to provide the full information for people to think about their choices. I can put myself in that situation. I would choose a system that minimises really, really bad things, even though that system also cannot perform on some—that's my personal choice, but that's just me.

Amogh Rai: I'm going to come to a very interesting—there are a few funny anecdotes throughout the book, but this one has stayed with me. In fact, I've made multiple notes. This is the one that I wrote down, Fan Jin, and Fan Jin is a novel, if you can put it like that, and the creator Wu Xingjie, 1701 to 1754. It's a very interesting thing. This person goes through a level of academic success after a long, long time, and then when he finally makes it, he goes mad, and this is a great sort of a comparative to A, the ability to control that was given to the state, because if you wanted to be a candidate—one of my favorite novels growing up was the Tang Dynasty detective, Judge Dee, and in Judge Dee the minute there is a candidate who comes up, so the candidate is treated much better by Judge Di's lieutenants, Tao Gan, and I'm forgetting the other name, but so this was the thing. If you were a candidate, you got an automatic respect. So, in this novel, the father-in-law beats the candidate, but then the minute he becomes an officer, a minor official, and others tell him to beat him, to get him back to his senses, he refuses to do that because he's now a minor bureaucrat. Would you say that this comparative tool that the CCP has used in using GDP as a benchmark has kept all the possibly intelligent people who could have misbehaved against the system? Is it a tool for keeping them in check? And now that GDP has outlived its usefulness because you just said, where do you build the next city? Where do you build the next bridge? What do we do? Because you can't clean the air as a competition. So, what happens after

this? And I would also want your perspective on this from the technology point of view, the much-vaunted Needham question.

Yasheng Huang: So, when we say GDP, we're talking about a very specific way to perform. And in the Chinese context, it is really about pursuing that number. And you can sort of perform in a very antisocial way by polluting the air, by over-investments, by doing all these things. So, I don't think it's the end of economic development, per se, for China. China is still a middle-income country. There's a long way to go from the Chinese level per capita GDP to Japanese level, to the US level. So, there's a lot of room for China to catch up with the most developed countries in the world. So, I'm not going to say that's the end of the economics. What I do believe is to go next, China needs to invest in its people, education, public health, retirement, pensions, old age, things like that. And China needs to take care of or reallocate resources more in the direction of the rural area, rather than concentrate its resources in Shanghai and Beijing, the big cities. I'm a professor at MIT, so I'm a fan of technology.

But on the other hand, does it really make sense for China at its current per capita GDP level to invest more than 2% of its GDP in technology? And especially, does it make any sense for China to try to recreate the semiconductor global supply chain that can cost trillions of dollars? You can just buy it on the international market, provided that you get along with the Western countries. So, if I'm an economically rational leader of China, I look at the country as a middle income country, still trying to catch up with the developed countries. I'm resource constrained. There are a lot of issues in the rural area that I need to take care of. My first priority is not going to be, oh, let me take over Taiwan tomorrow. Let me take care of the South China Sea. Let me challenge the United States. But that's not going to be my priority. My priority is going to be economic development. And my priority is going to participate in the global order, international global order, so that I can buy the chips rather than spending money to produce those chips, so I can save the money to do these other things. So as an economic thinker, that will be my approach. I would lower the geopolitical tensions. China has geopolitical tensions not only with the United States, with Japan, with the Philippines, with India. I mean, why with India? I just don't get it. And this is what China did in the 1990s. China pursued rapprochement with Soviet Union in the 1980s, with Russia, with India, with everybody, because economic development was the priority. So, I'm going to still keep emphasising economic development, but do it in a different way. The problem is that the current leadership has a different set of priorities. And there's some evidence now that they are rethinking about their priorities. So, I have some cautious hope that they may return to the economic development imperatives before 2018, although that's going to take time.

Amogh Rai: I'm also racing through time. I wanted to ask you just one question, but I'm going to be slightly greedy, if you allow me, and ask you two questions. I actually have a lot of questions that have already come in. Do I have your permission to ask two questions? So, one of the things that keeps on coming up in the book, when you think about China, Deng Xiaoping comes across as a transformative leader. But in your book, he comes across slightly not that great. I mean, okay, he did economic transformation, but there was a lot there. Specifically, around the 1980s time, your book sets the tone that it was very pluralistic between 78 and 89. And to a lot of the things that we are seeing now, the answer is that Tiananmen Square Massacre, or Tiananmen Square protest, changed the course of Chinese history in a big way. The scale and the scope model, how far does it help us explain the transformation of China post 1989, especially post 1992, when you come in with a leader who does not really have that pedigree that Mao and Deng had?

Yasheng Huang: Yeah. So, if we sort of use the scale and scope language. So, by the way, on Deng Xiaoping, I do have some reservations about him. You're right about that. But I think, he was instrumental and historical in terms of what he did for China. A lot of people sort of remember him on the economic side. I think his political legacy is mixed rather than, as some people would argue, his political legacy was all bad. I think his legacy politically is mixed. Mixed in the sense that he introduced, sometimes not intentionally, political scope in the 1980s. Even though he came with almost the solid credential as Mao, he was one of the founding fathers of the PRC. He downplayed personal rule, personal leadership. He actually forbid personal power, leadership power. He was very concerned about cultural revolution from coming back because he suffered. Deng's son was pushed out of the window, became crippled, and lost both legs. He suffered terribly. His generation suffered terribly in the hands of Mao.

So, they devised a political system in the late 1970s that would distribute power among several positions. All the positions still belonged to the Communist Party, for sure. There's no multi-party system. He was fiercely opposed to a multi-party system. But within the Communist Party, he did democratise decision-making and the leadership structure. So, I have to say, before I wrote this book, I wasn't paying a lot of attention to that particular historical fact.

But more and more, I thought that was incredibly important, in part because we learned from Xi Jinping how the one-person rule could damage the economy. So that triggered my thinking. What was it that the China system was like before? So, I gave him a lot of credit, not just introducing economic reforms, but also a limited degree of political reforms.

I do have reservations about him in the way that he handled the Tiananmen. And also, his probably historical limitation of not being willing to go beyond intraparty pluralism. He didn't go far enough, in my view. So, I just want to be clear on what I think about him. And also, the famous statement he made, no matter the color of the cat, as long as the cat catches the mouse, it is a good cat. For us, we say, what's the big deal? Of course, that's true. But put yourself in the position of an autocrat. You say, I'm not going to tell you whether a white cat or black cat is a good cat. Wait till you see the result. That is a profound statement coming from an autocrat. That would not come from Stalin. That would not come from Hitler. That would not come from Lenin. That would not come from Xi Jinping. For an autocrat to be able to say, let's wait for the evidence and do what evidence tells us to do, that's a remarkable, profound idea.

So, I didn't think about him that way before, but now I do. So, the basic difference between pre-Tiananmen and post-Tiananmen is that China had more political scope before Tiananmen and less political scope after Tiananmen. But on the economic side, you could argue that China had more economic scope after Tiananmen and less political scope before Tiananmen. And simply as time passes on, Chinese leadership introduced more reform, such as globalisation, which is a very key piece of reforms. When you globalise, you instantaneously introduce the country to multiple channels of information, multiple ideas in a way that a pure domestic reform cannot do. So that's the way I differentiate between pre-Tiananmen and post-Tiananmen.

And as I said before, now you have less political scope and you have less economic scope today. So, I would argue today is the least open era in the last 40 years of Chinese history. It is not quite yet cultural evolution, but as I said in my book, the Chinese economy is like the South Korean economy, but Chinese politics is like North Korean politics. That's not going to be a durable situation.

Amogh Rai: Right. A very quick comment, and then we can close it. One of the most important things that you've argued in the book is about East and examination. I'm going to come back to it. Technology plays a part, but the demography. There are estimates the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences posits that the Chinese authorities might have been overcounting people for some time. The women are no longer holding half the skyky (A reference to an old Mao emphasising the role of women in China). So, in all of this, if the country gets old, the grey economy sets in. How does the Chinese Communist Party continue to exercise its hold over the country by using one of the most important things in its arsenal: examination? Because at the median age of 37, perhaps for the next 20 years, but after that, not a lot of people will be taking exams. So, what happens then? Is it sunset of, or to quote Gabriel Garcia Marquez, the autumn of the patriarch?

Yasheng Huang: So, let's also remember the history of this. Many people, many international observers and economists praised China for its ability to control population. Trashed India for its inability to control population. It turns out that, so going back to the Amartya Sen's observation, I'm not against population control per se, but the degree that China did it, forced abortion, one child policy for so long, and there were a lot of criticisms of that policy before.

Chinese economists have been arguing for years that this was damaging the Chinese economy, damaging the prospects of Chinese economy for years and years. But because of the autocratic nature of the system, they never listened. So, one piece of interesting history here is, in the late 1950s, a Chinese economist proposed moderate control of population. And Mao, who believed in big population, fired him from a Peking University professor. He ignored his advice. Just imagine if China put in moderate population control in the 1950s, 1960s.

They would have avoided this draconian population control they put in in the late 1970s. They would have avoided this incredible length of control. The reason why it was so draconian, it was so lengthy, was because they believed that they made a mistake of overpopulation before. So, you have to kind of correctly pass mistake. This goes back to the point that I was making earlier. Yes, an autocracy can do things very effectively in both directions. Population control is an example of that. So, on your point about what to do next, I honestly don't know. This is an unprecedented situation for a country to have this level of demographic decline at this low level of per capita GDP. Japan, Germany, South Korea, they all have demographic challenges, but they are much richer than China. So, India now has a higher population growth rate, which is sort of what you expect for a country, the level of Indian per capita GDP. So, China should be producing more children than it does now, given its level of per capita GDP.

The only hopeful thing I want to say is that this demographic decline is happening in the era of robotic technology and AI. So that may cushion the blow in a way that it wouldn't if this demographic decline happened 10, 20 years ago. So that's issue number one. Issue number two is that compared with India, I think China still has an edge, although that edge is shrinking in terms of education, of its labor force. One thing I have consistently criticised India for is its failure to invest in basic education. And I think, correct me if I'm wrong, I think Prime Minister Modi has stepped up on this issue maybe more than the previous prime ministers. I think India Gandhi did the worst in terms of this particular issue. And she over-invested in tertiary education, under-invested in basic education.

Amogh Rai: I think it started with the first prime minister, her father Jawaharlal Nehru, our first prime minister, and I think it continued to her regime.

Yasheng Huang: I see. So, I have always pointed out the right China model was investing in basic education rather than looking at the roads, looking at the highways, looking at the airports. And unfortunately, that argument has fallen on dead ears, both on the Chinese and also, to some extent, maybe on the Indians, because they always look at China as an example of infrastructure success. But for a poor country, the more you invest in infrastructure, the less money you have in basic education. India, to its credit, has stepped up. In part because of the push by the Indian people, Indian NGOs, and maybe international researchers.

So, I gave credit for India for doing that. That's the right economic development model. But the gap between India and China was so big before. Even though it's closing, there's still a gap. So, if you look at women's labor participation, China still does better than India. If you look at the basic education level, China is still better than India.

So even if India has a population edge, it doesn't necessarily have a human capital edge. So, I worry about the demographic situation in China, but I don't worry about it to the extent that a lot of other people worry about it. Right.

Amogh Rai: And on that note, Professor, this has been one of the most informative conversations on development pathway of China, India, and thoughtful reflection on the role bureaucracy plays in statecraft.

Yasheng Huang: Thank you so much. ■

Levant After Nasrallah

PRIYANKA GARODIA

Hassan Nasrallah, the second Secretary general of the militant organisation Hezbollah since 1992 was assassinated by the IDF, like his predecessor was assassinated by the IDF date. Born in Beirut, Nasrallah rose to a leadership position in the militant organisation which was founded after Israel's invasion of Lebanon in 1982. A Shi'ite militant force, Hezbollah transformed itself from a regional rebel group to a formidable force in the Middle East, under his leadership. The group has been a proxy for Iran in Middle Eastern conflicts, including involvement in the Syrian Civil War and has helped fight the ISIS in Iraq. Nasrallah was the mastermind behind several military campaigns against Israel, including the Israel-Lebanon War in 2006 and crafted a political framework in Southern Lebanon, following the disastrous civil war in the country.

Rise in Rank and File

As leader of the Hezbollah, Nasrallah had displayed political pragmatism and shrewd military strategy. Following Abbas al-Musawi's assassination in 1992 by the IDF, Nasrallah adopted a two-fold approach. Firstly, he engaged in extremely calculated provocations against the Israelis given Hezbollah's limited resources and manpower. Secondly, Nasrallah carved a space for the Hezbollah in Lebanese politics, transforming it into one of the most powerful Non-State Armed Group (NSAG) in the region with exceptional military capabilities in conventional and non-conventional warfare.

Hezbollah's military wing, the Islamic Resistance, played a strategic role in the conflicts with Israel in 2000 and 2006. His actions led to Israeli forces withdrawing from Southern Lebanon, granting him favour with Hezbollah's masters in Iran. Various armed factions in Syria and other parts of the Middle East found in him a leader. Besides pragmatic decisions in engagement with Israel, Nasrallah also cemented financial and technical relations with Iran. Under his command Hezbollah to create political and armed networks that were integrated into Lebanon's social fabric. Hezbollah is perhaps one of the most important proxies to Iran in its axis of resistance against Israel and by extension, the West.

The Ideas Behind the Man

An uncompromised opposition to Israel was the cornerstone of Nasrallah's ideology. Nasrallah understood the importance of political participation along with military interventions. He was able to commandeer an important position within the Lebanese state. Hezbollah's primacy within Lebanon

came at the cost of unification and healing of wounds after the disastrous civil war and Lebanon has not been able to recover its footing in the middle eastern geopolitics. He built close ties with the supreme leader of Iran, sharing ideological similarities with its regime including a strong anti-Israel stance and a vision for a Shi'ite regional order. Iran used the Hezbollah as an important force to intervene in Iraq, Syria and Yemen, to great opposition.

After-Nasrallah's Assassination by Israel and Its Implications

Israel conducted a series of attacks on Lebanon, late evening on the 28th of September. F-15i fighter jets of the Israeli Air Force's 69th Squadron taking off from the Hatzerim Airbase carried out the assassination of Hezbollah terror chief Hassan Nasrallah in Beirut on Friday. Israel used bunker busting bombs to target underground bunkers of the Hezbollah leadership. In the attack Secretary-General Hasan Nasrallah was assassinated. This led to build-up of tension in a region already on pins and needles. The attacks have caused widespread panic in Lebanon, including the displacement of nearly 50,000 individuals, as reported by the Lebanese Health Ministry.

A possible military confrontation between Israel and Hezbollah could be expected since the assassination, given that peace between Israel and Lebanon was already on thin ice since the 2006 war. As of writing, the IDF has carried out limited ground intervention in Southern Lebanon. The fallout has been a sustained missile attack from Iran.

Nasrallah's killing could have significant implications for the balance of power in the region. While his death could lead to a vacuum in the Hezbollah rank and file, the military structure of the organisation remains largely in place, not dismissing the possibility of an armed escalation in revenge. Saudi Arabia has publicly distanced itself from the happenings in the region, keepings its economic prospects as priority. All these factors cumulatively will play a critical role in what happens next in the Middle East.

Conclusion

Hassan Nasrallah led Hezbollah for nearly three decades. In the three decades of his leadership, Hezbollah emerged from the shadows to become an organised quasi-political and overtly militant organisation. However, the expansion of Hezbollah's operational territory from Lebanon to Syria and Iraq, also meant that it became hard for them to maintain operational secrecy and exist like they did in Lebanon. In Syria, the Hezbollah had to work with the Russian Wagner group and other NSAGs and was much more easier for the intelligence agencies of Israel and the US to gather intel on them.

With the assassination of Hasan Nasrallah, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has sent a strong message about his intentions and only time can tell whether it will be the winning gambit. ∎

Lowy Asia Power Index

The annual Asia Power Index — launched by the Lowy Institute in 2018 — measures resources and influence to rank the relative power of states in Asia. The project maps out the existing distribution of power as it stands today, and tracks shifts in the balance of power over time. The Index ranks 27 countries and territories in terms of their capacity to shape their external environment — its scope reaching as far west as Pakistan, as far north as Russia, and as far into the Pacific as Australia, New Zealand, and the United States. The 2024 edition is the most comprehensive assessment of the changing distribution of power in Asia to date. It includes Timor-Leste for the first time, reflecting its growing importance as a result of likely accession to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in future years. The project evaluates international power in Asia through 131 indicators across eight thematic measures: Military Capability and Defence Networks, Economic Capability and Relationships, Diplomatic and Cultural Influence, as well as Resilience and Future Resources. More than half the data points involve original Lowy Institute research, while the rest are aggregated from hundreds of publicly available national and international sources. ■

Measure	Weightings
Economic capability	17.5%
Military capability	17.5%
Resilience	10.0%
Future resources	10.0%
Economic relationships	15.0%
Defence networks	10.0%
Diplomatic influence	10.0%
Cultural influence	10.0%

Source: Asia Power Index 2024, Lowy Institute

Lowy Asia Power Index 2024

Country		Overall Rank 2024	Change From Last Year	Score
USA		1		81.7
China		2		72.7
India		3	▲ +1	39.1
Japan		4	▼ -1	38.9
Australia		5	▲ +1	31.9
Russia		6	▼ -1	31.1
South Korea		7		31.0
Singapore		8		26.4
Indonesia		9		22.3
Thailand		10		19.8
Malaysia		11		19.6
Vietnam		12		18.7
New Zealand		13		16.3
Taiwan		14		16.0
Philippines		15	▲ +1	14.7
Pakistan		16	▼ -1	14.6
North Korea		17		11.3
Brunei		18		10.2
Cambodia		19	▲ +1	9.5
Bangladesh		20	▼ -1	9.4
Sri Lanka		21		7.7
Laos		22	▲ +1	7.0
Myanmar		23	▼ -1	6.7
Mongolia		24		5.2
Nepal		25		4.8
Timor-Leste		26		4.3
Papua New Guinea		27	▼ -1	4.2

Source: Asia Power Index 2024, Lowy Institute

Key findings in 2024

- China's plateauing power: China's power is neither surging nor collapsing. It is plateauing at a level below that of the United States, but still well above any Asian competitors.

- Resilient US power: The United States has buttressed its standing in Asia — though it is losing ground to China on Military Capability.

- India rising slowly: India has overtaken Japan to become the third-ranked power in Asia, but its clout remains below the potential promised by its resources.

- Japan is hardening up: Japan is changing from an economic and cultural powerhouse to one much more active in defence and security cooperation.

- Southeast Asian powers on the rise: Southeast Asia's heavyweights are getting heavier: Indonesia's power has grown more than any other Index country since 2018.

- Australia is holding its own: Australia continues to rise up the Asia Power Index, making it into the top five as others falter, but its own power is just holding steady.

- Russia's dwindling relevance: Russia has slipped down the power rankings to sixth place. Its relevance to Asia is declining as its war on Ukraine saps resources and focus.

- Tripolar diplomacy: While Asia remains a "bipolar" game dominated by two superpowers, when it comes to Diplomatic Influence, power is more widely distributed, and Japan is a leading player.

Indian Ocean

Chagos Archipelago

(Unnamed Bank)

Speakers Bank

Scale
0   50 Km

Peros Banhos Atoll

Benares Shoals

Blenhei

Dry Land

Salomon Islands

Reef Awash (0 - 2 m)

Submerged Reef (2 - 20 m)

Victory Bank

Nelsons Island

Three Brothers

Great
Chagos
Bank

Eagle Islands

Danger Island

Egmont Islands

Owen Bank

Cauvin Ban

Pitt Bank

Ganges Bank

Diego Garcia

Wight Bank

Centurion Bank

End of an Era: UK Cuts the Colonial Cord with Chagos Transfer

The sun has finally set on the British colonial empire. An empire which started with the arrival of the English merchant William Hawkins on the ship Hector to the court of the Mughal emperor Jahangir in the first decade of the 1600s. In the first week of October 2024, the United Kingdom decided to give up sovereignty of a group of islands in the Indian Ocean known as Chagos to Mauritius in return for retaining the military base in Diego Garcia for a period of 99 years.

The Diego Garcia base is a very important strategic base for both the UK, and the United States. This was the base which was used to launch long-range bomber aircrafts in the US lead military interventions in Afghanistan, and Iraq in early 2000's.

The base has been leased by the UK government to the US since 1966 in a deal which has been extended till 2036. The UK government has been under pressure to restore the island's sovereignty to Mauritius. In 2019 the International Court of Justice and a vote in the United Nations General Assembly sealed the fate of the British control of these islands.

The deal will come into force the moment a treaty has been signed confirming various facets of the transfer. The treaty will be swiftly agreed to. It will also "address wrongs of the past and demonstrate the commitment of both parties to support the welfare of Chagossians", according to a statement issued jointly by the UK & Mauritius Prime Minister's.

The sun rises on Chagos archipelago before it sets on Pitcairn islands, under British control on the other side of the international dateline, with the control of the island back where it belongs the metaphorical sun will have set on the British empire and about time it did.

Prof. John Willinsky offers a compelling examination of the current landscape of academic publishing and its connection to open access (OA) principles in his book "Copyright's Broken Promise". He advocates for a significant change in how open access is perceived, particularly suggesting a legislative requirement that mandates all publicly funded research to be published in open access. Additionally, Prof. Willinsky proposes the establishment of a statutory licensing system to ensure that authors receive appropriate compensation. Through its six chapters, the book delves into the complexities of copyright law, the evolving scholarly publishing market, and the economic dynamics involved. Prof. Willinsky's work serves as both a call to action and a framework for reshaping the accessibility and financing of academic research, questioning current approaches and proposing creative alternatives for achieving greater equality in society.

Copyright's Broken Promise

HOW TO RESTORE THE LAW'S ABILITY
TO PROMOTE THE PROGRESS OF SCIENCE

John Willinsky

Copyright's Broken Promise by Prof. John Willinsky

SHIVANI SINGH

John Willinsky's Copyright's Broken Promise takes a bold look at the world of academic publishing, arguing for a major shift towards open access. In the book, he makes a strong case for legislation that would mandate all publicly funded research to be published openly. Willinsky envisions a future where academic work is more accessible, proposing a statutory licensing system to ensure authors are compensated fairly. The book, through its six chapters, delves into the intricacies of copyright law, the academic publishing market, and the economics that shape them. Ultimately, it is both a critique of the status quo and a roadmap for reshaping how we think about scholarly publishing.

Historical Context and Critique

Willinsky begins by tracing the roots of copyright law, which originally sought to reward creativity while benefiting the public domain. He argues that, over time, this purpose has been warped by extended copyright terms and the growing power of commercial publishers. Instead of enhancing public access, copyright now often acts as a barrier, particularly in academic research, where high subscription fees limit availability. Willinsky critiques how copyright's evolving protections have allowed publishers to gain disproportionate control, charging excessive fees and stifling the very public benefit that copyright was meant to safeguard. By exploring the history and development of copyright law, Willinsky highlights how commercial interests have undermined its original intentions.

Systemic Issues in Scholarly Publishing

Willinsky doesn't just stop at critiquing copyright. He also digs into the academic publishing industry, pointing to systemic issues like the soaring costs of accessing research. He highlights the opaque pricing models of major publishers like Elsevier, where subscription fees can cripple libraries' ability to offer essential research materials. The financial burden doesn't just affect institutions—it impacts authors too, especially when it comes to open access, where article processing charges (APCs) can be prohibitively expensive. This leaves many authors, particularly in lower-income countries, struggling to afford the fees required to make their work widely accessible, creating a significant barrier to entry.

Proposals for Reform

To tackle these issues, Willinsky offers a range of innovative reforms. He calls for a statutory licensing system that would allow libraries and institutions to pay standardised fees, ensuring that authors and publishers are compensated fairly based on the actual use of their work. He draws parallels with the music industry, where similar licensing systems have struck a balance between creators' rights and public access. Willinsky also proposes creating a new legal category for research publications, recognising the unique nature of academic work, which is often publicly funded and designed for wide dissemination. Additionally, he advocates for a Licensing Collective, which would distribute funds more fairly among publishers of all sizes, fostering innovation and competition in the industry.

These reforms would address the current challenges, including the exorbitant fees for access and APCs, by extending accessibility to a broader range of researchers and institutions. By establishing a model similar to statutory licensing in music, Willinsky hopes to lower the financial barriers that currently restrict the flow of academic knowledge.

Challenges to Implementation

While Willinsky's ideas are groundbreaking, he acknowledges the implementation challenges. Transitioning to a new system would require integrating existing infrastructure like CrossRef and COUNTER, which track publications and citations. Managing a statutory licensing system would involve complex logistical and financial adjustments. Moreover, given the sheer scale of the academic publishing industry, such a shift would require extensive co-operation among stakeholders, including publishers, policymakers, and institutions.

Vision for the Future

Despite these hurdles, Willinsky's vision for the future of academic publishing is inspiring. He imagines a world where open access is the norm, allowing all research to be freely available, empowering researchers to share their work without financial barriers. This shift could greatly enhance academic freedom and foster a more equitable research environment, where knowledge is accessible to all, regardless of economic standing.

Willinsky's proposed reforms offer practical solutions to the pressing challenges highlighted by recent events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, which underscored the need for open research in times of global crisis. By tackling the financial barriers that limit access to essential research, his vision could transform the landscape of scholarly publishing for the better.

Conclusion

Copyright's Broken Promise is a timely and important book for anyone interested in copyright law, academic publishing, or the future of research. Willinsky offers both a critique of the current system and a compelling vision for reform. His proposals for statutory licensing, a new legal category for research, and the creation of a Licensing Collective are practical steps towards a more fair and accessible academic landscape. The book's insights are not just theoretical; they have real-world implications that could reshape how knowledge is shared and valued. As academic publishing continues to evolve, Willinsky's work stands as a crucial guide for creating a more balanced and transparent system that benefits both creators and the public. ■

Rumals of Chamba: Embroidering History, One Thread at a Time

KHUSHI KESARI

Chamba Rumal, a distinctive form of embroidery, originated and thrived in the 17th-18th centuries in Himachal Pradesh's Chamba Valley. The term "Rumal" derives from Persian, referring to a handkerchief. This craft involves intricate embroidery on square-shaped hand-spun khaddar or fine muslin cloth. These embroidered pieces range in size from small handkerchiefs to towels and even large bed sheets.

These Rumals primarily used khaddar fabric due to its affordability, availability, and durability. The base fabric is typically hand-spun cotton (khaddar) or fine off-white muslin (mal-mal). This neutral background accentuates the vivid silken thread designs.

It was officially designated as "Chamba Rumal" on January 22, 2007, under India's GI Act of 1999. This registration falls under Class 24 for Textile and Textile Goods, confirmed by the Controller General of Patents, Designs, and Trademarks through application number 79.

One of the most striking features of the Chamba Rumal is its depiction of environmental elements, particularly forest landscapes and the relationship between nature and human rituals. The rumals often feature detailed representations of trees, animals, and rivers, embodying a deep connection to the natural world. These forest motifs are not merely decorative; they serve as symbolic representations of life, fertility, and the sacredness of nature. The stitches used in these designs—primarily the double satin stitch—enable artisans to depict complex and flowing natural forms, with vibrant threads that mirror the lushness of forests and the serenity of natural landscapes.

The environmental motifs on the Chamba Rumal frequently integrate visuals of sacred groves and forested spaces, which were central to the spiritual and cultural life of the communities that produced them. Ritual scenes, such as those depicting episodes from the Mahabharata and Ramayana, are often set within forested backdrops, reflecting the significance of the wilderness in Hindu mythology. The forest is not just a passive background but an active participant in the rituals—trees symbolise divine protection, rivers mark sacred boundaries, and animals represent cosmic forces. The artisans of the Chamba region skillfully incorporate these elements into the fabric, using fine stitching techniques to create textures that evoke the dense canopies of trees, the flowing rivers, and the dynamic movement of forest creatures. This visual dialogue between the natural and the sacred is central to the storytelling function of the rumal, as it creates a narrative space where environmental and spiritual elements coexist.

The use of fine silk or cotton threads in multiple hues helps to create a vibrant depiction of forestry, where the stitches simulate the movement and texture of natural elements. Each stitch is imbued with meaning—whether outlining the branches of a tree or the fur of an animal, the craftsmanship brings the forest to life on cloth. The ritualistic aspect is also emphasised through the depiction of religious ceremonies or festivals, often occurring in forest settings, thus emphasising the interconnection between the spiritual and natural realms. The Chamba Rumal's embroidery serves as a tactile and visual document of ecological and cultural history, reflecting how forests were not only habitats but also sacred spaces integral to the spiritual practices and environmental consciousness of the community.

Story Of Chamba Rumal

In the heart of the northwestern Himalayas, nestled within the princely hill state of Chamba, a remarkable craft known as Chamba Kasidakari flourished, captivating the world with its intricate beauty. This artistry, famously embodied in the Chamba Rumals, traced its origins back to the town of Chamba itself, a place whose name bore a story as charming as the craft it created.

Legend whispered that the town's very foundation was inspired by the loving gesture of a father towards his daughter. Raja Sahil Verman, the founder of Chamba, christened the town in honour of his beloved

daughter, Champavati. It was her gentle touch, it was said, that pointed to the spot where the town would rise. Little did they know that this town would one day become the cradle of an enchanting art form.

The roots of Chamba Rumal found their nourishment in the fertile soil of the Chamba school of Pahari painting, a tradition that had already capture d the essence of the hills' beauty on canvas. Yet, it was the reign of Raja Prithvi Singh of Chamba, a ruler adorned with administrative prowess and an unquenchable love for art, that paved the way for the evolution of this handicraft.

Raja Prithvi Singh, a frequent visitor to the opulent courts of the Mughal Emperor Shahjahan, found himself enamoured by the textile art and splendid brocades that adorned the Mughal court. The emperors' appreciation for textile arts, particularly brocades adorned with intricate figures, led to the commissioning of masterpieces for their nobles and the valorous Rajput chiefs. Among these treasures,

Raja Prithvi Singh received royal standards, insignias, and khilats crafted in resplendent brocade.

As he returned to Chamba from these vibrant encounters, the ruler brought with him a handful of skilled artisans from Delhi, their expertise and nimble hands ready to cultivate the arts in the lush valleys of Chamba. These craftsmen, adept in the art of embroidery, embarked on the creation of royal insignias, flags, standards, and textiles that graced the elegant interiors of the royal household. And thus, from the seeds planted by these skilled hands, the Chamba Rumals were born, a testament to the ingenuity of those early artisans.

In the 17th century, the Chamba Rumal embroidery was done by the queens and royal ladies of Chamba for wedding dowries, important gifts and ceremonial coverings.

The spirit of the Pahari miniature paintings, deeply influenced by Mughal miniatures, danced upon the fabric of the rumals that bloomed in the 18th and 19th centuries. It was as if these textiles had captured the essence of a miniature painting and woven it into threads. The renowned art historian Dr Stella Kramrisch marvelled at the Chamba Rumals, noting how they seemed to have translated paintings into exquisite embroidery.

The true flowering of this craft found its zenith during the rule of Raja Umed Singh of Chamba, a patron whose heart beat in rhythm with the miniature artists fleeing the turbulent courts of the Mughal rulers. Under his guiding patronage, this craft flourished and spread its wings, unfurling its splendour for generations to come. The legacy continued to thrive through the reigns of Raj Singh and Chatar Singh, each ruler nurturing the art with their own unique touch. The very inspiration for these remarkable embroideries stemmed not only from the work of the Pahari artists but also from the captivating paintings adorning the walls of the Rang Mahal during Raja Umed Singh's reign.

The tradition gradually made its way out of the palace walls and began to be practiced by local craft clusters. The Rumals came to be an integral part of weddings, exchanged by the bride and groom's families as a sign of goodwill. ∎

CULTURE *in Asia*

The Asian Conference on Education (Tokyo, Japan) March 24-29 2025

This leading annual conference gathers global educators to discuss evolving pedagogies, technological advancements, and cross-cultural learning in the Asian context. It also serves as a key platform for fostering academic partnerships.

The Singapore International Film Festival (Singapore) 28 November to 8 December 2024

Showcasing thought-provoking films from around the world, this festival is a hub for aspiring filmmakers and cinephiles, highlighting diverse stories and experimental storytelling techniques in Asian cinema.

CULTURE *in Asia*

Bangkok Art Biennale (Thailand)

A celebration of contemporary art, the Bangkok Art Biennale transforms the city into an open gallery, featuring installations and performances from both emerging and renowned artists.

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The Editor's Pick

BLACK MYTH: WUKONG

Featuring Sun Wukong, the Monkey King from Journey to the West, the game is praised as a cultural export, showcasing Chinese storytelling at a time when international perceptions of China are complex.

CULTURE *in Asia*

All We Imagine as Light (2024)
A deeply emotional drama that follows intertwined lives seeking purpose and connection in a fragmented world, tackling themes of love, loss, and redemption.

The Glassworker (2024)
An animated feature blending artistry with human emotions, where a glassblower's son learns the intricate balance between following one's dreams and familial responsibility.

CULTURE
in Asia

Shambhala (2024)

This powerful drama presents an epic tale of human endurance set against the backdrop of a turbulent Tibetan landscape, combining spirituality with raw survival.

Twilight of the Warriors: Walled In (2024)

A high-octane action thriller set in a dystopian future where vigilantes must fight to reclaim their city from corrupt forces, blending suspense with intense combat.

CULTURE *in Asia*

The Reading Corner

The Reading Corner is a curated selection of newly released titles featuring diverse voices from Asia.
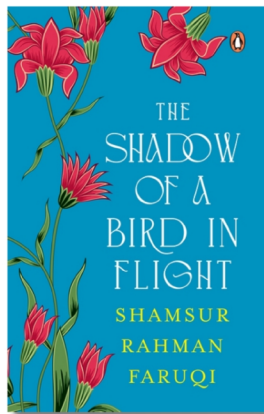
Publisher : *Penguin*
Release: *October, 2024*

Publisher : *Simon & Schuster*
Release: *August, 2024*

Publisher : *Random House*
Release: *September, 2024*

Publisher : *Penguin Random House*
Release: *August, 2024*

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