

# India's Hindutva Menace

Abhish K. Bose interviews Achin Vanaik

Sunday 7 July 2024, by [BOSE Abhish K.](#), [VANAIK Achin](#) (Date first published: 1 July 2024).

*Here are edited excerpts from an exclusive interview after Achin Vanaik's speech at the Jindal Global University on India's foreign policy and its impact on education. The interview makes frequent references to the Bharatiya Janta Party [BJP], a right-wing political party which has been in power since 2014 under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi.*

The BJP promotes "Hindutva," Hindu nationalism and has organizational ties to the paramilitary Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh [RSS]. Party leaders encourage discrimination and violence against religious minorities, seeking to make India a homeland for Hindus. In the interview, "Sangh Parivar" refers to the group of Hindutva organizations affiliated with the RSS, including the BJP, Vishva Hindu Parishad, and the Bajrang Dal among other organizations.

**UPDATE:** Well after this April interview, the BJP failed to win a majority in the 2024 parliamentary election. Going into its third term in government, the BJP has been forced to form a coalition government.

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**Abhish K. Bose:** Your speech on Palestine stirred up a controversy when you compared Zionism and Hindutva nationalism. The University asked you to apologize. What is now going through your mind?

**Achin Vanaik:** I am standing by what I said. I have also written on Hindutva-Zionism and its similarities and contrasts. Over the past 10 years many universities, public and private, have a section of students who are not just pro-Hindutva but are very active in their social media messaging and denigration. Then there are teachers similarly ideologically inclined, and finally, senior administrators who are prepared to accommodate the government's wishes. This informal tripartite network is of great use to the BJP/Sangh.

The overall result is the dramatic shrinking of respect for the exercise of free speech if it criticizes this government's policies and practices. Even on a foreign policy issue like Israel and Palestine, both for myself and others who have been invited to talk on the subject at different universities, permission has been denied. Public demonstrations on the issue have been curtailed or banned depending on which party is in power at the state level or in the center. Such harassment can come about because of pressure from government bodies or by academic administrations anticipating official disapproval.

All this expresses the larger project at play. This government, whether operating directly or through its affiliated civil society organizations, cadre activists and sympathizers, aims to send a warning to universities and colleges. They must be controlled as much as possible about what they teach,

especially in the social sciences. What gets disseminated in public events should not be antithetical to the ideology of this government and the Sangh Parivar more generally. Individuals like me are not so important; controlling the universities and colleges is!

## **Israel as a Model**

**AKB:** *Are the BJP modeling key aspects of its Israeli policy in order to use the United States' need to rely on India as a counterweight to China? What are possible outcomes of such a strategy?*

**AV:** The BJP and the Sangh are modeling their domestic policy on what Israel is doing. Here the evidence is very strong. Police and other security personnel are sent to Israel for training in crowd control, border management and “counterterrorism.”

The latter term helps to justify forms of official terrorism against non-state actors claimed, rightly or wrongly, to be terrorists. Don't forget that it is Israel that has so frequently used bulldozers to eject Palestinians and destroy their homes.

That has set the example for what has then happened here. In November 2019, an Indian Consul General in New York City, S. Chakravorty, let the cat out of the bag when he declared that Israel — through its illegal settlements in the West Bank — has provided a model for resettling Hindu Pandits in the Kashmir Valley.

Both under the Congress (the former governing party —ed.) and the BJP, India has dramatically increased purchase of “defense” equipment of all kinds. But this is not the same as emulating Israel in foreign policy matters. There are two areas where you can say that Israeli behavior has had an impact on Modi government's foreign policy behavior:

First is the promulgation of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA). Where Israel has a “right of return” policy for Jews all over the world. India has not gone so far as but its CAA is a “qualified neighborhood right of return” for Hindus and those religions considered indigenous.

That policy fast tracks naturalization for Parsis and Christians, but this simply provides a cover since few members of these communities in Afghanistan, Pakistan or Bangladesh would want to rush to a Hindutva India.

Also, the CAA is more anti-Muslim than pro-Hindu, because Jaffna Tamils don't get this benefit. What lies behind both these policies of religious discrimination is the belief in the myth of the perpetual victimhood of Jews and Hindus — and that these countries are their “natural homelands.”

Second is the construction of a pro-Hindutva political lobby that can strongly influence Washington's attitude in favor of India.

The Indian equivalents of a Political Action Committee for Israel are much weaker — and indeed seek to learn as much as possible from — their Israeli counterparts. But Israel is dominant in the Middle East in a way that India, faced with hostility from both Pakistan and China, is not dominant in South Asia. In fact, China is increasingly influential among its smaller neighbors, whether Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Bhutan or Myanmar.

Yes, the United States sees India as important in its effort to contain China, but it has to rely on a host of other countries throughout Southeast and East Asia as well as in Oceania.

India cannot emulate the primacy that Israel has in its region, nor get the same kind of U.S. diplomatic and military support. Nor can India defy Washington in the way Israel from time to time

can and does.

Furthermore, the extent to which in the Western public domain, Israel can claim that criticism of Zionism is a form of antisemitism has no parallel. Though Hindutva-wadis are pushing the discourse of “Hinduphobia,” this is nowhere near successful as in the case of Israel. But the Sangh and the Modi government keep trying to promote this dishonest discourse of “Hinduphobia.”

## **The Education We Need**

**AKB:** *Academicians affiliated to the government-funded institutions are hesitant to criticize government policies as they need government patronage for their future prospects. Even foreign academics working in social science disciplines are intimidated by the government’s menacing posture in denying them visas. Is it worthwhile to think of people-funded academic institutions like people-funded media for maintaining academic independence?*

**AV:** What do we mean by people-funded academic institutions? Government schools, colleges and universities are people funded in that the funding comes from taxpayer money. The best system of schooling would be the neighborhood Common School system, where the overwhelming majority of children would be going to the same neighborhood school and getting the same education. Public funds should be distributed on an equal per student basis.

The main issue is that these schools must be well funded at all levels — teacher salaries, facilities and minimal or even free tuition. In the schools of many West European countries, there is such a Common Schools system where well over 90% of all children attend.

The United States is a negative outlier in that funding is not based on central disbursement but by local municipal or district-level taxes. This means richer and better-off neighborhoods have better schools.

In India only 69% attend public schools run by the central or state governments or local municipalities. In 2023 India ranked 155 out of 198 countries, representing only 2.9% of our gross domestic product (GDP) spent on education.

The problem is that far too little funding is provided. There is no adequate system of monitoring to prevent inequalities in disbursement, no check against teacher absenteeism or a way to ensure a quality of teaching across the rural-urban divide. Additionally, there is no mechanism to count attendance or guarantee a uniformity of facilities.

There are huge disparities even in the urban areas between public schools catering to children from families of higher-level government employees and poorer families.

There are similar disparities between the different states of the Indian Union, with some performing much better. The result is that more families are sending their children to private schools, although many of them are inadequate. The problem is that far too little funding is provided.

In a Common School system of primary, secondary and tertiary education, students of all social, economic, cultural, racial, religious and ethnic backgrounds intermingle and form friendships and associations.

This remains the ideal approach. But with the neoliberal turn in the advanced western countries, this kind of inexpensive or free universally available quality educational system has been weakened. There should also be vocational courses and decently paid employment prospects for those not interested in tertiary education.

The responsibility for ensuring quality education up to and including the college level cannot be left to the private sector. Protecting a system of common schooling and a widely available decent college-university level of education from government manipulation cannot be separated from the much larger issue of having and sustaining a strongly liberal and democratic polity.

This means institutionalizing a system of powerful checks and balances on executive power through an independent judiciary, control over the executive by the legislature, an independent media, powerful and progressive unions and civil society associations.

As for maintaining independence from the central government in India, that depends on the more liberal and democratic character of the polity itself. This is particularly so for teaching and studying at the humanities and social science levels.

The Common Schools system is still the goal to strive for in India and elsewhere. There can be some small space for private education, which either cater to the children of the rich or where a few quality schools based on principles of social concern and funded by philanthropic bodies or perhaps have a progressive social conscience inspired by particular religious or secular doctrines. But these would be few and far between.

An independent, humane and worthwhile education system of the kind that is needed is embedded within the character of the Indian polity and its generally improving or deteriorating character. A struggle primarily or purely at the educational level against government manipulation cannot be separated from, and indeed is subordinated to, this much wider struggle to preserve and deepen a liberal, democratic and egalitarian social order.

### **Spreading Hindutva Ideology**

**AKB:** *Could you explain how the BJP's revising of the syllabi in the education sector over the last ten years favored their agenda?*

**AV:** Since 2014, the Modi government has sought to expand the teaching and influence of Hindutva ideology.

Under a general neoliberal policy of promoting the privatization of tertiary level education, colleges under the umbrella of an overarching university system are receiving much greater autonomy to frame their own courses.

Meanwhile, central universities (like Delhi's Jawaharlal Nehru University) and public universities in states controlled by the BJP have undergone a dramatic overhaul. This is true especially in the social science and history departments where students would otherwise tend to become more critical of Hindutva-type thought.

The BJP has carried out this transformation from the top, first by having their own people appointed at the higher administrative levels, then by manipulation in selecting and promoting teachers, making curriculum and course changes, and imposing a general degeneration in the democratic character of campus political-cultural life.

The BJP government has given the role of monitoring the universities to the RSS, which identifies unwanted books and articles, these are then removed from university syllabi and reading lists. Publishers of such university texts hired lawyers to check on what might be considered problematic.

Even scholars in their research and writing became worried about possible controversies and how this might affect their careers.

All this led to self-censorship. The idea that universities are the sites for the pursuit of knowledge and the search for truth for its own sake becomes not just an anachronism but something to avoid given the risk that it will politically offend the powers that be.

Education starts at the primary school level. Most schools, public and private, follow the syllabus and the final board exams set by the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE). The CBSE bases its teaching courses on textbooks published by the National Council for Education Research and Training (NCERT) for classes up to the 12<sup>th</sup> grade.

Unsurprisingly, there have been curriculum changes and substantial rewriting of textbooks to promote erroneous and dishonest Hindutva views of Indian history and politics, both ancient and modern.

In late 2021 a new policy emerged. Public-private partnerships and shared funding now help set up 100 secondary level “Army Schools.” These are different from the 33 existing publicly funded schools that under the Ministry of Defense prepare students for taking and passing the National Defense Academy entrance exams. This enables them to eventually become officers in the Indian Armed Forces.

Between May 2022 and December 2023, 40 privately-owned schools with differing fee structures signed memoranda of agreement with the government along the new policy lines. It now transpires that 60% of these schools are run by the RSS and allied organizations as well as BJP politicians, Hindu religious bodies, and other Hindutva soulmates. The determination of the BJP/Sangh to ideologically transform the officer corps within the armed forces in their own image should be obvious.

## **Hindutva and Hatred**

**AKB:** *What is the future of Hindutva nationalism? India has a sizeable population of minorities — is Hindutva anchoring its politics in hatred against Muslims and other minorities?*

**AV:** The Hindutva message to Muslims is to “know your place” and accept it. This means accepting your subordination and your status as second-class citizens and as a community that will be more and more ghettoized. Hindutva does not want proselytizing of Islam, nor conversions to it, yet the reverse is absolutely fine. Muslim families should not have a large number of children.

There should not be interfaith marriages between Muslim men and Hindu women. The reverse is okay since in true patriarchal understanding, it brings women into the Hindu faith. In ghettos Muslims will be largely left free to carry on with their practices, but on the condition that they politically support the BJP, give it funds when required and don’t make trouble.

In many respects this is what is being done in Gujarat state; it is the model to be followed for the rest of the country. Furthermore, opportunities for Muslim employment in government services, police and in the armed forces — certainly at the higher levels — will decline.

Once the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) comes into operation there will be a significant increase in the number of Muslims denied citizenship. But since there are no extradition treaties with Pakistan and Bangladesh, they cannot be deported. Instead they will be put in internment camps to serve as a labor force for various projects.

Given the size of the Muslim population overall, such policies are going to lead to resistance. It will not be a surprise, given the increasingly institutionalized biases against Muslims. [The Muslim population is 200 million out of a total population of 1.4 billion. —ed.] Another factor is the violent

vigilantism of groups inspired by Hindutva.

Making the Hindu identity the most important prism through which one looks at the world will generate a similar identification with Islam as one's primary prism to achieve self-worth and dignity in the face of growing oppression. In short, there can be a growing religious polarization that can lead to an ever-stronger divide on Hindu-Muslim lines.

Fundamentalism on both sides can reinforce each other. Even as one must not make a moral distinction between Hindu and Muslim communal [sectarian] behavior — both are to be condemned — one must understand that while the dynamic of minority communalism is towards greater separation from the social and political order, the dynamic of majority communalism is more dangerous.

Majority communalism adopts the mantle of a nationalism that imposes itself on others, negatively transforming the whole of Indian society in a way that minority communalism can never do.

This is already happening. More members of the Muslim minority now recognize the need to promote a secular India. This is why so many Muslim men and women came out against the CAA, declaring themselves Indian citizens and demanding equality of treatment.

They need support from other sections of society, including secular associations and political parties that will not compromise with Hindutva. A secular state need not be democratic but there can be no democratic state if it is not secular!

## **Politics and Caste**

**AKV:** *The BJP did alter its approach to Christians and even Dalits. Will they mend ways with the Muslim community?*

**AV:** Regarding Dalits, the Sangh Parivar want to incorporate them in their Hindu unity project, but without disturbing the Varna system. [Traditional Hindu society's Varna system comprises four hierarchical social classes —ed.] Indeed, this is the case even as the BJP/Sangh seek to expand their OBC ["Other Backward Castes," an official government category for disenfranchised castes —ed.] base.

Politically-electorally the BJP has succeeded in making inroads into Dalit sub-castes, below the otherwise dominant Jatavs and Mahars. There is also the appeal to their sense of dignity by the assimilation of their cultural idols, deities and myths as part of the wider Hindu pantheon of worship. In the absence of serious change in the material well-being of most Dalits, this serves as a distinctive attraction provided by the Sangh.

**AKV:** *What does one mean by the lack of material improvement? The near majority, if not the majority, of Dalits are landless poor — but the majority of the landless poor are not Dalits. This means a cross-caste class alliance is one key way to advance the condition of Dalits. But who is pursuing this?*

**AV:** Fighting discrimination against Dalits is necessary as are reservations [affirmative action quotas] in government jobs and tertiary education.

These can be extended to the private sector. But there is a difference in fighting against discrimination and fighting to finish off the caste system itself. The former represents an effort to achieve upward mobility and respect and to join existing elites. But most members of all oppressed groups or communities cannot reach elite status.

The end result is that while a growing number and a higher proportion of Dalits, women and Blacks (in the United States) do become part of the middle, upper middle class or even higher, the bulk of Dalits, women and Blacks remain among the poor and most discriminated against.

Indeed, the greater social and cultural diversity of the ruling classes and of their most important social base — the middle- and upper-middle classes — is strengthened because then many more Dalits and women will support the casteist, patriarchal and racist nature of the system as a whole.

The fight against discrimination must be conjoined to the struggle to change capitalism and class nature of society as a whole; to move towards destroying the caste system and of Varna.

As for how the Sangh deals with Christians, the pattern differs from its approach towards Muslims. Christians are only 2.3% of the population. In the south they are better off, while Adivasi Christians are in the central forest regions. Then there are the Christian populations in the northeast, where in the states of Nagaland, Mizoram and Meghalaya they are a majority. They are a substantial minority in Arunachal Pradesh and Manipur.

The BJP as a minority party in those states seeks coalition partners even as it seeks to independently strengthen its electoral base. It has to be careful when it comes to criticizing the Christian faith and the lived practices of that community. The Sangh's own efforts at conversion and expanding its implantation in civil society is more restrained. But the longer-term effort remains a process of cumulative, if slow, Hindutva-ization.

In the states of Jammu and Kashmir, the BJP annulled Article 370 because it opposes the very principle of an asymmetrical federalism. But in Nagaland, to negotiate an end to the insurgency it would have to temporarily accept some kind of asymmetric federalist arrangement. Later it could work to finish that off. In Manipur, it has given a glimpse of what may lie in store elsewhere, once the BJP/Sangh considers it is strong enough and the time is right.

In Central India, the BJP/Sangh is strongly pushing an anti-conversion line both through direct repression and ameliorative measures in order to win over tribal people. It needs to create a pro-Hindutva elite within Adivasis. Taking a cue from earlier Christian missionaries, there is a wide and growing network of schools for Adivasis as well as other forms of regularized welfare provisions.

Although the Christian community is proportionately small, Christian-owned and controlled institutions in the health and education sectors are among the best medical institutions and colleges/universities in the country.

Christian controlled at the top, these institutions are secular in their character and operations. They recruit qualified teachers and medical staff without regard to faith and belief. Likewise, they are open to all patients and students. Thus they generate considerable good will although this is not something the forces of Hindutva are happy about.

Furthermore, the Sangh and the BJP have to be more careful about how they treat Christians since Western governments react much more strongly to injustices to Indian Christians than repression against Muslims.

This does not mean that Christians who oppose the Modi government and the Sangh more generally will get a free pass. They will not witness the tragedy of Stan Swamy [an elderly Catholic priest and tribal rights activist, who died in detention —ed.]. But they do have to be more cautious, especially given the foreign policy orientation towards consolidating and deepening India's relationship with the West, particularly with the United States.

## The Fruits of Neoliberalism

**AKB:** *You wrote that “What led with the meteoric rise of RSS-BJP’s hegemony was the contradictory legacy of the Congress. A bad record in lifting the standards of living of the masses and the push towards neoliberalism led to the combustible situation which no other national opposition could make good of apart from the BJP.”*

*Do you think if neoliberalist policies were not implemented by the Congress government, the BJP would not have emerged as a political force ruling the country? What about the Mandal report or the Ramjanmabhoomi movement, which also precipitated the emergence of BJP?*

**AV:** Historically, independent India has seen two kinds of socio-political hegemony — that of the Congress and, closer to our times, of the BJP and Hindutva.

I have written about this in detail in my 2020 book *Nationalist Dangers, Secular Failings* (Aakar Publishers). Hegemony means successfully forging a national-popular will, i.e. getting widespread and stable acceptance of one’s particular construction of nationalism and its cultural-political content.

Congress was the leader of the anti-colonial struggle and therefore won mass support. A democratic polity is to be valued in itself, but will be open to authoritarian degeneration if there is not a movement towards a minimal level of mass prosperity for all.

The failure of this developmental promise to provide greater economic and social equality laid the ground for the historical decline of the Congress party.

In fact, after the late 1960s when a host of regional parties emerged, there was a prolonged political interregnum of great instability. No force was capable of securing stability. It was some 30-odd years before the BJP became the single most important party in the country.

Before this there were splits in the Congress, the rise and fall of Emergency Rule and the assassinations of two prime ministers. There were three central governments headed by coalitions of non-BJP and non-Congress centrist parties, none lasting a full term.

It is this longer-term decline and the failure of other regional parties, including the Left, to fill the vacuum that explains the rise of the BJP. It is quite wrong to say that the neoliberal turn was a major factor in explaining its rise.

The Congress Party’s turn towards neoliberal economic globalization, in the beginning of the 1990s, was supposed to bring about mass prosperity. But it made matters worse by sharpening inequalities of income, wealth and of power, thereby undermining existing democratic structures.

In fact, the BJP itself adopted this neoliberal turn when it gained power. Today the economy remains the main weak spot in the otherwise broader hegemony enjoyed by Hindutva forces.

More than anything else it was the Ramjanmabhoomi movement that propelled the BJP to national prominence. This was aided, of course by the expanding implantation of the cadres and associations of the Sangh Parivar that established its cultural-political hegemony.

[The Ramjanmabhoomi movement cohered around the belief that a 16<sup>th</sup> century mosque, the Babri Masjid, was built on the site in Ayodhya where Hindus believed their god Rama had been born. The mosque became a rallying cry for Hindu nationalists, who destroyed it in 1992. Subsequently, the Ram Mandir (Temple to Rama) was constructed on that site and ostentatiously inaugurated in



January 2024 —ed.]

In this new phase in capitalism, neoliberal globalization is a rightwing shift from an earlier Keynesianist approach. Gone is state-led developmentalism that characterized the developing world. But this rightwing economic shift cannot stabilize itself without a rightwing shift in politics and ideology.

Since we live in a world of multiple nation-states, these political-ideological shifts will be nationally and regionally specific. These will depend on the particular kind and power of different rightwing formations in different countries.

Because they are rightwing, their particular forms of cultural and political nationalism will be strongly exclusivist, but they identify and oppose the “excluded” differently.

### **“First Past the Post”**

**AKB:** *The BJP received only 31% of the votes in the 2014 general election and 37.36% in the 2019 election. Apparently, a large majority of the Indian voters do not support the BJP. Despite this seeming difference, how do they succeed in elections?*

**AV:** The First Past the Post (FPTP) electoral system is a disgrace and far inferior to the best forms of Proportional Representation (PR). That ensures a much higher proportion of seats in the legislature than its proportion of the popular votes. In Lok Sabha elections [LS: Literally, “House of the People,” the house of parliament selected through direct elections —ed.], no party has ever obtained 50% or more of the popular vote.

Yet one party gets a majority of seats, sometimes by a large margin. [Of course this is the same system in U.S. elections —ed.]

Before the BJP, the Congress got a majority of LS seats, with somewhere between 42% and 49% of the vote. The BJP gets a majority of seats with a vote tally even less because of its dominance in the Hindi heartland states of north and central India, and in the western states of Gujarat and Maharashtra.

But opposition parties don’t want to change this FPTP system because it would apply to both national and state elections. This would weaken their capacity to come to power in state assembly elections either on their own or in coalitions.

Bringing in a PR replacement for the FPTP system would in any case require a Constitutional Amendment, requiring two-thirds majorities in both houses of parliament and probably ratification by half of the states.

No party or bloc of parties has ever been willing to entertain this. Had a PR electoral system been operative, the political-electoral and not just the cultural-linguistic diversity of the country would have limited the power of the BJP/Sangh. It could not have taken governmental measures to consolidate and expand its hegemonizing efforts.

The BJP/Sangh wants to move towards a more centralized system of voting that would weaken the federal character of the Union.

The BJP, with the help of the RSS and other bodies, has developed an unmatched grassroots machine for electoral mobilizational purposes at various levels.

Its influence on the Election Commission of India (ECI), and the likely manipulation of the electric voting machine counting system in certain constituencies, has also given it both special advantages at polling time and also a willingness to maintain the electoral system even as it systematically hollows out the other institutions (above all the judiciary) of democracy and federalism.

### **Theocracy on the Agenda?**

**AKB:** *Given the successive electoral victories of the BJP and the subsequent transition of most of its institutions, how far are we from becoming a Hindu theocratic state?*

**AV:** We are certainly moving towards a Hindu Rashtra [a Hindu State and Nation —ed.]. Some say we are de facto already there. But because of the continental size and diversity of India we are not there so far.

But there is a distinction between a Hindu State and a Hindu theocratic state, which means rule by some kind of priestly or religious elite cabal.

The goal of Hindutva forces is not domination by a religious cabal. Iran is a Muslim theocratic state, but the Islamic states of Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and Malaysia are not theocracies. And notice here too, the variation in the degrees of civil liberties available for its citizens in these three countries.

None can be considered democracies despite periodic elections in Pakistan and Malaysia. But the degree of democratic degeneration that has already taken place in India is frightening.

Worse is to come if the BJP and Sangh come to power again. No wonder that terms like “electoral autocracy” or “ethnocracy” or “illiberal democracy” or worse are being used to describe the current Indian situation.

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*RENOWNED POLITICAL SCIENTIST, academic and writer, Achin Vanaik (b.1947) is a well-known scholar and commentator on global politics and international relations. He graduated in economics and statistics from the University of Bristol, England in 1970. Subsequently, he became actively involved (1971-1974) with the Free University of Black Studies for promoting political awareness of non-white immigrant communities in Britain.*

*From 1978-1990 he was an assistant editor with The Times of India, where Vanaik wrote extensively as a critic of nuclear weapons and advocated disarmament. Since 1988 Vanaik has been associated with the Transnational Institute (TNI), Amsterdam, Netherlands and has held various academic positions at the Academy of the Third World Studies, Jamia Milia Islamia University, New Delhi, the University of Delhi and Nehru Memorial Museum and Library.*

*He was interviewed by Abhish K Bose, who has been a journalist for 15 years. He was on staff at The Times of India and The Deccan Chronicle-Asian Age. He has published interviews and articles in Frontline magazine, The Wire, The Print, The Telegraph, The Federal, The News Minute, Scroll, The Kochi Post and the Asian Lite International.*

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**P.S.**

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