

RAILWAY CONNECTIVITY IN JAMMU

The suspension of the proposed railway line linking Anantnag with Pulwama is the right thing to do. The proposed railway would run through orchards and fertile land and take away traditional farming and livelihoods of people. Residents to be effected were panicky and they heaved a sigh of relief at the announcement of the suspension. The Railways would meet the same challenge while laying a network of railway tracks within the Valley. Probably, the railway would have to go underground – a costly idea. Or maybe the plains of Kashmir do not have the urgency of railway as much as the hilly areas of the Valley and Jammu have. So isn't it better to shift the focus to Kupwara, Doda, Udhampur and Rajouri-Poonch to enhance connectivity. The government has already announced the Jammu-Rajouri railway connectivity. This will be a major boon for the resident of border areas. Jammu needs intra region connectivity as never before, these areas do need railway line desperately. Like Rajouri and Poonch, Doda is also suffering from bad and scanty roads as a result fatal road accidents are very common in the area. Bad and poor road connectivity hampered development – both financial and human.

PARLIAMENT'S TIME WASTED
Wasting the time of Parliament amounts to wasting away the national wealth or in other words tax payer's money. It's not necessary for the opposition to rake up just any issue – right or wrong – and force disruption and adjournment of the houses as it happened today. The row over an unpublished book and its alleged version which is printed in a magazine is not what people are looking forward from their MPs. In the era of live television debates, the country is watching their MPs and their conduct intently. Also issues of national security must not be debated in Parliament as it reflect on lack of unity among the Indias.

Anil Swarup

Every winter, Delhi braces itself for thick, choking smog, and everyone points fingers at cars and factories. But there's another big reason for the haze that barely gets mentioned: the lithium batteries thrown out with the rest of our garbage and the everyday waste fires burning on the streets. This is pollution we're creating ourselves, but most of us don't even realise it's happening. It's not just outside factors anymore – Delhi's smog is also about what we use and throw away.

Think about all the gadgets we use daily – earbuds, LED lights, kids' toys – all powered by lithium batteries. Once tossed out, these batteries turn into little time bombs in our trash. Since we mix everything in one black plastic bag – from food scraps to wires to vape pens – these batteries end up being crushed and squashed with other flammable materials, making things far more dangerous.

Just one lithium-ion battery getting crushed in a garbage truck can set off a chain reaction that causes slow-burning landfill fires, sometimes lasting for days. Places like Ghazipur, Bhalswa and Okhla have sent clouds of chemical smoke into nearby neighbourhoods again and again, but these fires barely get counted in official pollution numbers or air quality reports.

And it's not just the landfills. Every day, sanitation workers – often short-staffed and working with what they have – end up setting fire to piles of waste out



on the streets. It's not really their fault; the system just doesn't give them better options. When plastics, PVC, thermocol and e-waste are burned, they release toxic chemicals and heavy metals that linger in Delhi's air. If you've ever walked around East or South Delhi at dusk, you've probably smelled burnt plastic in the air. That's from hundreds of small garbage fires burning under bridges, behind markets and along pavements. Their smoke blends into the night air and makes the morning smog even worse. These fires release extremely tiny, toxic particles that are even more dangerous than the PM2.5 we always hear about – yet most air quality monitors barely pick them up. Delhi's pollution plans focus on traffic and

construction, but they miss the huge problem of burning waste, leaving a major source of smog unsolved.

It's no surprise that Delhi is struggling with this crisis. The way the waste system works, it's almost set up to fail. People put everything into one bin because there's nowhere easy to drop off old electronics or batteries. Informal recyclers are only interested in valuable metals, so they dump or burn whatever's left – plastic, wires, anything that's not worth much. Sanitation workers are overwhelmed, trying to deal with over 11,000 tonnes of trash every day while landfills overflow and there aren't enough facilities to process it all. With all these problems, burning garbage seems like the quickest fix – so everyone

just looks the other way.

But there's actually a huge opportunity here if we get recycling right, especially with the help of modern technology and formal systems. Advanced recycling centres can safely extract valuable materials like lithium, cobalt, nickel, copper and rare earth elements from old batteries and electronics. India currently imports many of these minerals to build things like electric vehicles, electronics and clean energy projects. If we recycle more at home, we won't need to mine as much from other countries, we'll cut down on pollution, and we'll make India more secure when it comes to resources.

A strong, technology-driven recycling system could turn our waste crisis into an economic opportunity.

Through automated dismantling and advanced battery recycling, valuable minerals can be recovered safely without causing pollution or endangering workers. If India invests in such facilities, it can create skilled jobs, protect labour, and build a circular supply chain that reduces dependence on imported raw materials. As global resources grow scarcer, this kind of self-reliance becomes not just desirable but necessary.

What makes waste fires especially dangerous is not only the visible smoke, but the toxic legacy they leave behind. Dioxins, heavy metals and persistent pollutants remain in the environment for decades. These substances are linked to cancer, hormone disruption, lung disease and developmental harm in children. What begins as seasonal smog can quietly evolve into a long-term public health emergency.

Addressing this crisis requires more than winter alarm. A major share of Delhi's pollution stems from poor waste management. Returning used batteries and small electronics should be as easy as buying them, with accessible drop-off points and clear incentives. Producers must be responsible for collecting end-of-life products. Sanitation workers need proper tools and training so burning waste is no longer the default, while landfills require systems to detect batteries before fires start. Ignoring the issue only deepens the damage.

Each waste fire worsens air quality, fills hospitals, and harms children – pollution we create ourselves, breath by toxic breath.

GAGAN THAPA'S BLOODLESS COUP ROCKS NEPAL

Ashok K Mehta

Military coups, noted Edward Luttwak, can be stunningly successful: instant transfer of power or abysmal failures: eating out of a mess tin in jail and waiting for a firing squad. In an era of disruption of the rule-based international order, when, according to UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres, the rule of law has been replaced by the rule of power, last month's Gagan Thapa bloodless political coup was a masterstroke with no parallel in Nepal or elsewhere. It became a declared legitimate transfer of power which the stalwarts of the GOP Nepali Congress failed to pre-empt, Thapa achieving strategic surprise despite his declaratory stance. The old guard did not believe he could or would do it. With a trademark red tilak on his forehead and a solitary marigold petal perched on his receding hairline, Thapa, the newly elected President of NC at the Special Convention on January 14, said: the Gen Z Andolan message was to change neta and neeti (leader and policy), leaving the door open for reconciliation with the old guard, which the Election Commission of Nepal closed by legitimising Thapa's coup.

Last December 7, in Pokhara, while basking in the sunshine with Dhaulagiri and Machhapuchhare competing for glory, an NC loyalist friend confided – as revealed to him by a high source – the Gagan plot: with the surprising col-

lective backing of the US, PM Karki, NC veteran and President Ram Chandra Paudel, the EC, the Supreme Court and Gen Z, the Thapa coup was waiting to happen – such was the propitious conjunction of stars. Whether the Army, the most trusted and pivotal institution, was on board was not mentioned.

So how did it unfold? Even as preparations for the NC General Convention were in full flow for end-January, on December 26, senior NC General Secretary Thapa addressed a press conference and announced that if a general convention was not held, a special convention would be held in mid-January. NC senior leader Shekhar Koirala, who believed Thapa was on his side, had earlier said that if elections were not held on March 5, Parliament should be restored, the demand of 12 petitioners in the Supreme Court. During the Gen Z movement, the NC image was badly mauled, especially after the physical assault on NC President and five-time PM Sher Bahadur Deuba and his spouse, Foreign Minister Arzu Rana. When the couple departed for medical treatment to Singapore, Vice-President Purna Bahadur Khadka was made acting president. The political parties piggybacking on the Gen Z movement joined in targeted arson and assaults: Gen Z against the police, which had martyred 77 colleagues, and political parties against their rivals, who had been collectively playing musical chairs in power-sharing. Thapa's house was

partially burnt, while homes of other leaders were gutted. While Maoist supremo Prachanda and Thapa lauded the Gen Z political agenda, ousted UML PM KP Oli attacked Gen Z and called the Karki government illegal.

When the Deuba faction realised the general convention might divide NC, it was postponed until May 2026. This provided Thapa with the opening for holding a special convention. With the second General Secretary, Biswo Prakash Sharma, in tow, Thapa ordered the special convention from 11-14 January, which was already in an advanced stage of planning. Thapa's bold and risky move – the frontal attack – achieved shock and awe, paralysing the old guard. Thapa managed to assemble 56 per cent of party delegates when the quorum is 40 per cent. Legitimate procedure was followed in the comprehensively planned convention that included smart delegate bags. On January 15, the NC Thapa faction elected new office-bearers: Thapa, president; Sharma, vice-president; three general secretaries; and 134 central committee members. On the night of January 15-16, Thapa approached the EC, applying for official NC symbols – the historic four-star flag and tree, heartbeats of traditional NC supporters. Within no time, the EC awarded NC's crown jewels to Thapa, pre-empting the old guard.

Between January 12 and 13, reconciliation and unity moves were attempted

by both sides. NC has split earlier twice: in 1952 Subarna Shamsher broke away from BP Koirala; in 2002 Deuba was expelled from NC by GP Koirala. Both times, factions reunited. This time, separation has been avoided but only in name, because elections are due on March 5. Thapa's terms for reconciliation and unity hit most. Deuba, who had threatened to contest as an independent, in the end chose to step down as President and skip elections as decreed by the newly minted NC. On January 16, the EC recognised Thapa as President NC and awarded the flag and tree symbols to him. On 18 January, Khadka placed a writ petition with the Supreme Court, which was heard on 20 January, the date for nomination of candidates for election. The SC did not pass any interim order but asked the EC, Deuba NC and Thapa NC to return after 15 days. Thapa gave 65 of 165 directly elected seats to members of the old guard to preserve NC unity during the election despite the fracture. It was ironical that NC members who backed the writ petition against Thapa obtained election tickets bearing his signature.

Thapa and Koirala were both opposed to the ousted NC-UML alliance. In another irony, the NC-UML pre-poll alliance swept the National Assembly elections on January 23, with NC winning 9 seats and UML 8 seats, making the 25-member NC the single largest party in the 59-member Upper House.

Epstein files: The collapse of Western moral pretence

Balbir Punj

Every civilisation carries within it certain self-images – stories it tells itself, and others, about what it stands for. The West, particularly after the Second World War, fashioned for itself the role of the world's moral tutor: the guardian of human rights, the champion of the rule of law, the protector of the vulnerable, and the standard-bearer of liberty and equality.

This self-appointed moral authority of the West was not merely rhetorical; it was aggressively exported to the rest of the world, often accompanied by economic pressure, political intervention, cultural domination, and even military force.

The Epstein Files, whose latest tranche – more than three million pages, 2,000 videos, and 180,000 images – was released by the US Department of Justice on January 30, 2026 under the Epstein Files Transparency Act, have torn this carefully constructed façade to shreds.

To understand the significance of the Epstein Files, one must first understand how and why they came into existence. Jeffrey Epstein was not a mar-

ginal criminal operating in the shadows. He was a systemic predator, enabled and protected by the system.

First charged in 2006 for sexual abuse of minors, Epstein received an extraordinarily lenient plea deal in 2008 – an early demonstration of elite immunity within the American justice system. He resurfaced in 2019, charged with federal sex trafficking, only to be found dead in a New York jail under circumstances officially ruled a suicide but widely questioned.

The files themselves emerged primarily from court-ordered disclosures linked to a defamation lawsuit filed by Virginia Giuffre against Ghislaine Maxwell, Epstein's closest associate and recruiter. After Epstein's death and Maxwell's subsequent conviction, sealed documents – flight logs, contact books, testimonies, depositions, and internal correspondence – began to surface between 2024 and 2026, despite sustained institutional resistance.

These documents were meant to answer one central question: Who enabled Epstein's sin enterprise, and why was it protected? Jeffrey Epstein was a financier without a transparent busi-

ness model, a social climber without clear credentials, and a benefactor to powerful institutions without accountability. Yet he moved effortlessly through the highest corridors of Western power. His aircraft, infamously known as the 'Lolita Express', ferried some of the world's most powerful individuals to his private island and residences.

Epstein was embedded in US political culture, not as an outsider but as an insider – hosting presidents, funding universities, advising billionaires, and socialising with royalty. His role was that of a connector – a facilitator within a system where influence and recruiter.

The files mention political figures like Bill Clinton, Donald Trump, Prince Andrew, Bill Richardson, and Ehud Barak. Business elites: Bill Gates, Elon Musk, Peter Thiel, Steve Bannon, Howard Lutnick. Cultural and intellectual figures: Michael Jackson and Stephen Hawking. Royalty: Norway's Crown Princess Mette-Marit and Britain's Prince Andrew Mountbatten-Windsor.

Appearances and names in the files do not necessarily imply criminal guilt.

Yet the sheer density of power surrounding a known sexual predator exposes a disturbing normalisation of proximity to evil within Western elite culture.

One of the West's most loudly proclaimed virtues is equality before the law. The Epstein Files demolish this claim. Perhaps the most chilling revelation of the Epstein Files is the ease with which predatory behaviour coexisted with respectability.

This normalisation did not occur in a vacuum. It emerged from a broader cultural trajectory in the West – one that increasingly divorces freedom from responsibility, desire from restraint, and rights from duties.

Biological gender itself has been problematised. The commodification of the human body – especially the female body – has been repackaged as liberation. When such values are normalised, the result is not emancipation but exploitation. Epstein is not a deviation from Western modernity; he is its logical consequence.

The corruption uncovered by the Epstein Files exemplifies the widespread decay within the US socio-political fabric. Around 40 per cent of

young Americans today struggle with isolation, depression, and loneliness, contributing to an alarming rate of 400-600 mass shootings annually. In 1960, only 13 per cent of Americans lived alone; by 2022, the number had surged to 29 per cent. Divorce rates oscillate between 40 and 80 per cent, and one-third of American youth reportedly prefer to avoid living with their parents, leaving the care of the elderly to the state. In 2019, the US government spent nearly \$1.5 trillion on elderly care, a figure projected to double by 2029.

The West is undeniably caught in a moment of hubris, facing its own moral reckoning. History taints its reputation with bloodshed and coercion, from the brutal executions during the Inquisition – where millions were burned alive, tortured, or condemned as heretics or witches by the Church – reminding us of a dark past that still echoes today.

Across the Americas, Australia, and New Zealand, rich Indigenous cultures were systematically destroyed. Dalits and Tribals in India and Black people in the US were often stripped of their identities and traditions through mis-

sionary campaigns that promised dignity but delivered cultural erasure. The Epstein Files belong to this long continuum of moral hypocrisy.

The Epstein scandal fits into a long pattern of institutional protection of sexual predators, most infamously within the Christian Church. The 2004 John Jay Report, commissioned by the US Conference of Catholic Bishops, identified 4,392 clergy accused of sexually abusing minors between 1950 and 2002.

Even more damning was the finding that Church authorities repeatedly chose concealment over accountability – transferring accused priests instead of reporting them. Similar revelations emerged from Ireland, Germany, France, Australia, Canada, and Latin America. The mechanism was always the same: silence, intimidation of victims, destruction of evidence, and moral evasion.

Unfortunately, many countries – including India – have long been trapped in this Western moral framework, mistaking it for modernity. Colonial conditioning taught elites to view Indic civilisation as 'backward' and Western norms as universal.