

MODI WALKS THE TALK

Walking the talk, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has downsized his cavalcade to cut down on fuel consumption. His ministers, several chief ministers, state ministers and even judges have taken the cue. Some were seen following the exact procedure adopted by the PM – cutting down on the size of their official convoy – others were seen travelling in metros and a judge even cycled to his court. This follows PM Modi's appeal to the Indians to rise above their personal choices and fashion their lives in a manner that will conserve the foreign reserves and fossil fuel in the light of the West Asia crisis. The simmering West Asia crisis has already impacted economies and lifestyles of citizens across the world. Many countries have closed down schools and colleges and shifted education to online mode to save of energy consumption. India has so far managed but the impact has to be felt one day by the government and the people. So, in view of the COVID-19 experience, where Indians rose to the occasion and worked in coordination with the government to overcome the pandemic, it's better that we all start following Prime Minister Modi's seven point austerity drive. Buying of gold can be put off till the situation improves. We all can switch over to alternate means of cooking like electric to limit the use of gas. However, the biggest favour will be when we consciously reduce the consumption of petrol and diesel by using public transport, car pools and also making work from home a mandatory practice. Nothing is impossible with a visionary leader and sincere people. Also, we all can delay our overseas visits since it would consume the foreign reserves. Together we can overcome this crisis but everyone has to contribute his bit for that. We also expect leaders to begin austerity drive in J&K followed by the initiative by the common people.

Noboneeta Rabha | Aditi Rawat

For decades, global conversation about wine and fermentation has been shaped by a Eurocentric narrative. Most of us grow up thinking that "real" wine starts and ends with the European grape, *Vitis vinifera*. When people talk about ancient wineries like the 6,000-year-old Areni-1 in Armenia, they often overlook the vibrant traditions blossoming elsewhere, especially in the Indo-Burma biodiversity hotspot. Far from the celebrated European landscapes, communities across North East India have long practised sophisticated fermentation traditions based not on grapes but on grains, fruits, and herbal starter cultures. These traditions remain largely absent from global discussions of fermentation heritage, despite representing a rich and distinctive cultural legacy.

Across the region, traditional fermented beverages such as Apong in Arunachal Pradesh, Kiad in Meghalaya, and Zutho in Nagaland form an integral part of social and ritual life.

Prepared through fermentation processes that combine rice or millet with herbal starter cultures derived from locally available plants, these beverages reflect deep reservoirs of indigenous knowledge. Brewing practices are closely tied to festivals, agricultural cycles, and community identity, with techniques passed down across generations. Yet for generations, this rich heritage has been unfairly dismissed as "country liquor", a colonial label that continues to carry stigma. This is in stark contrast to the way European wine traditions have been elevated into global cultural and tourism industries. After all, many of the world's celebrated beverages — from Champagne in France to Mexican tequila — originated as local products before being formalised and elevated into globally recognised premium categories.

India's wine market today is highly concentrated, with nearly 80 per cent of domestic wine coming from the Nashik Valley in Maharashtra, often described as the "Wine Capital of India". In 2026, Sula Vineyards alone was valued at roughly Rs 1,360 crore, with annual revenues of approxi-



mately Rs 619 crore, and had an export presence in over 30 countries, demonstrating how geographically rooted produce can evolve into a globally competitive industry.

Nashik's success shows that India can stand alongside global wine producers, but it also highlights a missed opportunity. The Northeast, with its rich fermentation heritage, barely registers in India's formal \$208.3 billion alcohol market. Much of the region's alcohol production remains outside formal chains, in household-based systems, particularly among rural

women. The opportunity, therefore, is not to replicate grape-based wine production but to position these beverages as indigenous botanical spirits aligned with the global trend of "mindful drinking". Beyond production, the real economic potential lies in experiential tourism through initiatives like a "Heritage Brew Trail", where travellers can explore traditional breweries and witness firsthand how Humao starter cakes are blended with local botanicals. Integrating such experiences with established destinations

like Meghalaya's living root bridges or the paddy-cum-fish cultivation of Ziro Valley in Arunachal could create distinctive tourism offerings that are both culturally immersive and economically viable. Beyond attracting visitors, such initiatives could support local artisans, strengthen community participation, and embed traditional knowledge within a sustainable tourism framework. The region needs a more deliberate policy shift. Existing licensing and excise frameworks continue to treat traditional brewing as an unstructured activity rather than a specialised, knowledge-intensive practice. This not only constrains formalisation but also creates ambiguity around safety and quality standards. A differentiated regulatory approach is therefore essential. Creating a distinct category for low-volume, community-based fermentation — separate from industrial liquor — would lower entry barriers and enable gradual formalisation.

This must be supported by improving access to hygienic processing and export-quality bottling for small producers while reducing licensing barriers. Equally important is the Geo-

graphical Indication (GI) tagging of traditional brews to protect tribal knowledge systems from international counterfeiting. Policy intent, however, is beginning to align. The Union Budget 2026-27, under the Purvodaya vision, signals a stronger focus on the economic development of eastern and North Eastern regions. Complementing this, the Rs 1,700 crore allocation under the PM-FME scheme provides a pathway to support micro food processing enterprises, including community-based producers. However, the effectiveness of such interventions will depend on their ability to adapt to decentralised, community-led production systems rather than forcing premature formalisation.

Practical entry points include integrating brew trails into the existing homestay network, setting up temporary festival-based sales windows, conducting district-level brew mapping exercises, offering producers basic hygiene and packaging workshops and kits, facilitating exposure visits to established beverage companies, and building partnerships with boutique hotels to create curated tasting experiences.

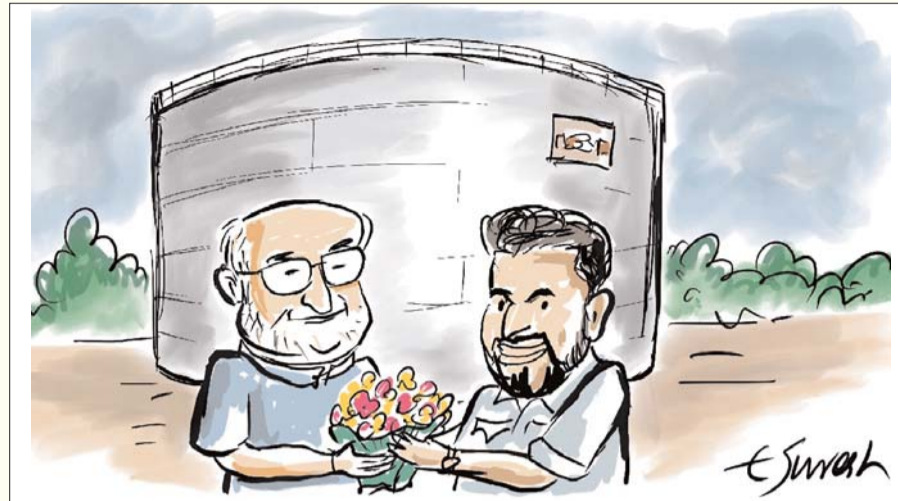
India's Trincomalee gambit

Ashok K Mehta

Forty years after the Indo-Sri Lanka Accord, which provided for the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) to assist Sri Lanka in dealing with its twin insurgencies — JVP and LTTE — and gave first right to India to develop Trincomalee Port, the visit of Vice President CP Radhakrishnan last month appeared to have finally sanctified the inter-governmental treaty, making Trinco the energy hub for the region. This could not have come a day too soon, with oil and gas prices rocketing due to the on/off Gulf War. Radhakrishnan was accompanied by Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri, who has been chargé d'affaires in Colombo. Focus was on two issues: the Trinco energy project and the Tamil question, languishing due to lack of interest by successive governments in Colombo.

The political upheaval in Sri Lanka, like the Gen Z movement in Nepal, ushered in a brand-new Marxist political outfit. JVP, in its new avatar as the National People's Power alliance, had been involved in two insurrections in 1971 and 1988, and in both instances New Delhi was the first responder.

President Anura Kumara Disanayake, in his discussions with Mr Radhakrishnan, highlighted India's Neighbourhood First policy and its three critical interventions: the economic crisis of 2022, the financial lifeline during the debt crisis, and Cyclone Dittwa. Radhakrishnan noted: "We stand with your successes and struggles like an affectionate elder brother". The term 'elder brother' (Daju in Nepali) did not please all Nepalese, as it is patronising. New Delhi's \$4 billion assistance package consisted of a USD 1 billion credit line for food and medicines, a currency swap of USD 400 million, USD 500 million for fuel, help in the IMF bailout, loan deferment, and foreign exchange support. India's help during the dire crisis has, to a large extent, transformed its image from that of an interventionist during the three-decade Eelam war to that of a friend, as noted by President Disanayake. The anti-India sentiment has



almost evaporated, though New Delhi has diluted its stand on the Tamil question.

Part of the blame for this lies with Sri Lankan Tamils for creating divisions within Tamil political parties. The Tamil question over the years has been relegated to 'Tamil aspirations', especially after the political mauling of the fractured Tamil parties in the Northern Province. NPP won three of nine seats in Jaffna district, topping for the first time the vote share of a Sinhalese-led national alliance, with NPP winning seats in Jaffna. The Tamil National Alliance, which at one time had 16 seats and, with other Tamil parties, 25 seats, is today reduced to 12 seats, including Muslim seats. In 1977, the Tamil United Front was the main opposition party in the Sri Lankan Parliament with 18 seats. Disanayake has been telling Tamils that the new constitution, which has no timeline, will address the Tamil question. Radhakrishnan informed Tamil leaders that he had discussed the issue with his Sri Lankan interlocutors. Provincial Council elections have not been held in seven years, and there is no indication they will be held anytime soon.

Tamils have genuine grievances. They say the spirit of the ISLA has not been realised and the 13th Amendment to the Constitution, which opened the door to a

federal model of power sharing and devolution within a 'united, undivided and indivisible Sri Lanka', has not been implemented because of the unitary system. The late Tamil leader R Sambanthan had said: "India has a special duty in ensuring resolution of the Tamil question". India's fading interest was reflected in 2015 by Prime Minister Narendra Modi merely mentioning 'cooperative federalism'. No longer do Indian leaders mention implementation of 13A or reconciliation following the military excesses during the Eelam war. But Colombo has done well to build a memorial recognising the sacrifices of 1,257 IPKF soldiers who facilitated the LTTE defeat in 2009.

The most critical contemporary issue is the Trinco energy hub project, which Misri described at length in his briefing to the Colombo media last month. Sri Lanka's Foreign Minister Vijitha Herath encapsulated the significance of the Trinco project, calling it a "permanent solution to the energy crisis in India's neighbourhood".

As GoC IPKF South, which included the Trinco region during the de-induction of the IPKF, we studied in detail the strategic salience of Trinco in the Indian subcontinent and the Indian Ocean region. The history of the harbour was marked by contests for its possession among the Dutch, French, and British. Adm Horatio

Nelson called Trinco the world's deepest and finest harbour and the gateway to the Bay of Bengal, which Britain secured but had to abandon after 162 years. It built, in 1935 with impregnable Manchester steel, 100 oil tanks, of which Tank No. 91 was destroyed by Japanese bombers during World War II. There was no oil tank with the number 99, considered ominous. Instead, there were oil tanks numbered 101 and 102. These oil tanks had the capacity to store 1 million tonnes of petroleum.

The British abandoned Trincomalee Harbour only in 1956, even after Sri Lanka's independence in 1948, similar to their strategy of retaining the Chagos group of islands in Mauritius. A number of agreements and MoUs were signed with India over the renovation of the upper and lower oil tank farms, but due to the three-decade-long Eelam war, none could fructify until January 2022, when an MoU for a joint venture for the renovation of 61 upper oil tank farms was signed. However, it never took off, as Sri Lanka considers it a vital national asset and politically a very sensitive issue to hand over to a foreign power.

Earlier, in 2003, IOC had signed a 35-year lease to develop 15 oil tanks, paying an annual fee of USD 100,000. While IOC is operating 15 oil tanks, Sri Lanka Oil Corporation is utilising its 16 oil tanks for fuel storage and offshore bunkering, and Prime Flour Mill Singapore has three for water storage. Following Radhakrishnan's visit, conversation on the renovation of oil tanks has been revived, and a multipurpose oil transfer pipeline between Karaikal/Chennai and Trincomalee is on the cards. In its election manifesto, NPP said: "Trinco oil farm will be renovated with the support of a friendly foreign country". Fingers crossed.

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REBELLING AGAINST GOD LEADS TO A SORRY END

AJIT KUMAR BISHNOI

Imagine about a young boy from a rich family landing in jail due to a traffic offence. The jailor is sympathetic and explains to the boy the Jail Code. There is a provision for early release by serving other prisoners. We, souls, who are 'sat' (eternal), 'chit' (conscious) and 'ananda' (blissful) are in a cycle of birth death in material bodies. However, there is relief available if we follow God's instructions.

Let us start with childhood. There are lots of fun. Youth follows with many sense pleasures and plentiful energy. A wrong impression forms that life is full of fun. Unfortunately, what follows is not so pleasant; middle age comes followed by old age and, yes, death. No preparation is made for these eventualities. God is not unkind. He is prepared to help, but no connection is made with him when going is good. Stuck? Not really! Become aware of God in childhood with prayers for guidance and help. By the time middle age comes, more spiritual practices should be done. God's help will become available, especially in old age.

What are these spiritual practices? I will just name one. Buy a large photo of an incarnation of God, like in a large calendar. Watch for the eyes, which should be painted such that they follow you wherever



you go. This done, hang it in the room where you spend most of your time; I have hung a large photo of Lord Krishna in my

bedroom. Now this is what has happened with me. Have you see a magnet attracting a piece of iron, and that in turn attracting an

iron clip? And if the iron piece is in contact with magnet in a certain way for a period of time, it also develops the quality of a magnet. Do you see the connection? As I spend a lot of time in company of my Lord, knowingly or unknowingly, I am getting more and more attracted to my Lord. Yes, I am increasingly becoming God-conscious. Surely, several spiritual practices are coming into play. 'Darshan' (seeing) is one. Prayers for whatever I need is second, in which guidance is also included. As I am very grateful, I thank God a lot for his 'kripa' (grace). 'Naman' (namaste) is done several times in a day. On his part, my Lord is patiently busy in reforming me. Why, then, rebel against God? The passion of youth turns into darkness of old age. The feeling that I will show the world that I am very special without any help from God leaves us. The choice given by God to make a success of life is squandered. Do all kinds of material successes not leave us as we age? Life spent in chasing mirages comes to a naught. The rebel has lost. I hope the readers of this article will pay attention and not continue to pursue their rebellious ways. As parts of God (The Bhagavad-Geeta 15.7), we must take shelter of God.

The writer is a spiritual teacher and a popular columnist; Views presented are personal.

Uncorking the North East's herbal heritage as a global tourism

Noboneeta Rabha | Aditi Rawat

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