

SLOGANS VS DEVELOPMENT

All leaders have a choice; they can keep harping on the past aimlessly or focus on real issues of governance and people’s aspirations in a realistic manner. Unfortunately, the leaders in J&K have inherited the politics of emotional blackmailing and not of development-oriented governance. The present regime is not doing things differently. While this is the era of good and transparent governance and, as the Chief Minister Omar Abdullah admitted, there is no dearth of funds from the centre for J&K, raking up issues which are irrelevant is pointless. It is clear that J&K has been turned into a Union territory for a purpose and that this status is reversible. Had it not been so, the changes post abrogation of Article 370, would not have been seamless. Take for example, would the J&K leaders who had denied refugees their civic rights for seven decades facilitate the change in their favour? This is one such example wherein people – common Indians - deprived of their rights by a regime that drew its arbitrariness from a controversial article in the Constitution were given their basic constitutional rights. There are so many other laws which needed to be extended to J&K after its so called Constitution was suspended and special status removed. Such moves could never be carried out by leaders who perpetuated the system of injustice and discrimination in the first place.

It’s fine to occasionally remind the centre about its promise of restoring the statehood to J&K but it’s not fine to make it a lynchpin of any political party’s campaign. CM Omar Abdullah blaming the center for the loss of “his political capital” due to non-restoration of the status of J&K may be good politics but overdoing it is bad in the long run. It create bad blood between Delhi and Kashmir with likely disastrous results in the long run.

Malika Pandey

The India-Indonesia relationship demonstrates that the strongest diplomatic partnerships are not built merely through strategic interests. They endure because civilisational memory creates a level of political trust that diplomacy alone cannot manufacture.

Foreign policy is often explained through the language of interests. Nations cooperate because they share security concerns, economic priorities or geopolitical objectives. Yet some relationships defy this logic. The evolving partnership between India and Indonesia suggests that history can do more than decorate diplomacy. It can create a foundation of trust upon which contemporary strategy becomes easier to build.

The temptation is to describe the India-Indonesia relationship through familiar symbols. References to Sanskrit, the Ramayana, Borobudur, Prambanan and ancient maritime trade have become staples of every diplomatic engagement. Yet civilisational diplomacy is something far deeper than shared languages or historical monuments. It is the persistence of a civilisational consciousness that survives changes in religion, governments and political systems. Indonesia offers one of the clearest illustrations of this idea. The magnificent temples of Borobudur and Prambanan stand not simply as reminders of India's historical influence but as evidence of Indonesia's ability to absorb and reinterpret Indic traditions. Even more remarkable is Bali, where Hindu and Buddhist priestly lineages continue to coexist in living practice. Several of the island's most important religious ceremonies continue to require the participation and ritual sanction of both traditions. This is not symbolic coexistence designed for visitors. It is a living civilisational practice that has endured for centuries.

Despite this extraordinary inheritance, history did not automatically translate into strategic partnership. For decades, India and Indonesia remained cordial but distant.



tant. The Cold War reordered regional priorities, and Indonesia's political transformation after 1965 altered Jakarta's external orientation. Over time, Indonesia strengthened its engagement with China and developed closer defence cooperation with Pakistan, while India remained largely focused on its own continental priorities. Although diplomatic relations remained stable, the relationship lacked strategic momentum.

The past decade marks a clear departure. Under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, India has increasingly aligned its civilisational confidence with strategic policy. Indonesia has emerged as one of the strongest examples of this approach, where historical familiarity now reinforces cooperation across defence, maritime security, technology, connectivity and economic engagement. Rather than treating history as ceremonial diplomacy, the relationship has begun to use it as a foundation for contemporary cooperation. Executive Branch

President Prabowo Subianto's remarks during his visit to India captured this transformation. His admiration for Prime Minister Modi's leadership and governance model was notable. Even more striking was his observation that he carried "Indian DNA." The remark reflected the confidence of the President of the world's largest muslim-majority nation in acknowledging that Indonesia's historical identity cannot be understood without

recognising India's enduring civilisational imprint. Equally significant was his willingness to publicly speak of learning from India's developmental experience. Few diplomatic statements combine historical memory with contemporary political admiration so naturally.

The growing partnership is visible in substance as much as symbolism. Defence cooperation through BrahMos has understandably attracted attention, but the relationship today extends well beyond military ties. Agreements on digital public infrastructure, Unified Payments Interface connectivity, maritime cooperation, higher education, resilient supply chains and critical minerals reflect an increasingly comprehensive partnership. Together, they demonstrate that civilisational familiarity is now being translated into practical cooperation.

One agreement deserves particular attention. India and Indonesia have agreed to strengthen cooperation between their Election Commissions, including collaboration on electoral management and Electronic Voting Machines. The irony is difficult to overlook. At a time when sections of India's political opposition continue to question the credibility of EVMs, another democracy responsible for conducting one of the world's largest elections has chosen to deepen institutional cooperation with India. Democracies rarely seek to learn from institutions they fundamentally distrust. International confidence does not

settle domestic political debates, but it does demonstrate that India's democratic institutions continue to command credibility well beyond its borders.

There is another remarkable convergence. Indonesia's Emas Vision 2045 and India's Viksit Bharat 2047 articulate similar ambitions of transforming large, diverse democracies into developed economies within the same historical generation. Their Independence Days fall just two days apart. India celebrates on August 15 and Indonesia on August 17. These parallels do not determine foreign policy, but they reinforce a shared vocabulary of national renewal and long-term development.

The significance of the India-Indonesia relationship, therefore, extends beyond trade figures or defence agreements. It illustrates how civilisational memory can strengthen contemporary diplomacy without becoming captive to nostalgia. Strategic interests will always drive foreign policy, but they are often easier to pursue when reinforced by a deeper reservoir of historical trust. In an increasingly transactional international order, that may prove to be India's distinctive advantage. Civilisations do not replace strategy. They make strategy more durable. The relationship between India and Indonesia suggests that history is most valuable not when it is commemorated, but when it quietly enables the future. That, perhaps, is the true grammar of civilisational diplomacy

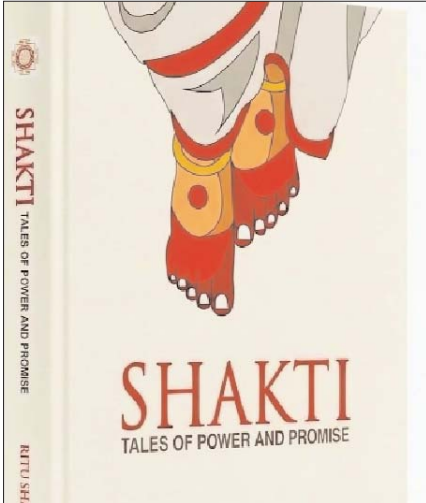
WALKING TOWARDS THE GODDESS

Sumit Seth

On a brief visit home to India in the last week of April, Ritu Sharma handed me a signed copy of Shakti: Tales of Power and Promise. It travelled back with me to Panama and waited, as books often do, for the right weekend. When I finally opened it, I read it with genuine pleasure. By the end, I was convinced that the author has written a book more intimate, thoughtful and enduring than its genre usually permits. Hinduism

Ritu and I have known each other for many years. We trained together for about three and a half months in Mussoorie before our professional paths diverged: hers into the Indian Revenue Service, mine into the Foreign Service. Since then, I have followed her journey from a series of postings that has now brought me to Panama, about as far from a Himalayan shrine as one can reasonably be. That a book about the goddess should reach me here, across oceans, felt in itself like a small reminder of how far these old energies travel.

Shakti is a pilgrimage, though it does



not sit neatly within either travel writing or religious study.

The author travels across Shakti Peeths, not as an academic cataloguing temple architecture, nor as a tourist collecting impressions, but as a seeker trying to understand what remains alive in these places. That distinction gives the book its quiet strength. Much of its appeal comes from the person doing the looking. Ritu Sharma is a serving IRS officer, a Chevening Fel-

low, and a public servant with two decades of experience in government. The administrator and the devotee often appear together in her sentences. One notices the discipline of observation, but also the willingness to be moved. It is this tension that keeps the goddess from becoming abstract.

The journey moves from Vaishno Devi in the northern mountains to Chamundeshwari in the south and Kamakhya in the east. Each chapter reads less like a formal essay than a conversation. The author does not offer a dry history of the shrines.

She brings the reader close enough to sit beside her. One of the most memorable passages is her descent into the cave at Kamakhya, where water moves through a fissure in the rock. She allows the sacred strangeness of the place to work on her instead of reducing it to explanation, and the scene stays with the reader.

Her prose is clear, unhurried and accessible. It carries the weight of Indian mythology lightly enough for newcomers, while remaining respectful of those who approach these shrines with devotion.

Even the cover, with the adorned feet of the deity, establishes a note of reverence that the book gradually earns. The author's larger suggestion is made without sermonising: the divine feminine is not merely an inheritance to be preserved, but a reservoir of courage, memory and renewal. In her telling, power and promise are not separate ideas; they flow into one another.

The book is not without its limits. Its warmth sometimes avoids harder questions that could have deepened the inquiry, and readers looking for rigorous comparative scholarship may need to look elsewhere. But that is not the book the author sets out to write. What she offers instead is a way of carrying the sacred forward, not as nostalgia, but as a living presence. Reading her in Panama, far from any shrine, I found that presence unexpectedly persuasive. For a book of this kind, that is no small feat. Books & Literature

*The book reviewer is a member of Indian Foreign Service and has served as Ambassador of India in Panama; Views presented are personal.*

Punjab Congress and the politics of parallel power

Monika Malik

Politics is often described as a battle between parties. Punjab Congress tells a different story. Its fiercest battles have often been fought within its own ranks.

From Darbara Singh and Giani Zail Singh to Rajinder Kaur Bhattal and Capt Amarinder Singh; from Capt Amarinder and Partap Singh Bajwa to Capt Amarinder and Navjot Singh Sidhu; from Sidhu and Charanjit Singh Channi to today's visible fault lines between Punjab Congress president Amarinder Singh Raja Warring and former Chief Minister Channi — the names have changed, but the pattern has remained strikingly familiar.

Every generation has inherited its own “versus”.

For nearly five decades, almost every major leadership transition in the Punjab Congress has been accompanied by a parallel power struggle. These rivalries were rarely just battles of ambition. Almost every “versus” revolved around three questions — Who controlled the organisation? Who controlled the govern-

ment? And who would eventually lead the party into the next election? Whenever these questions remained unsettled, factionalism flourished.

Punjab Congress has repeatedly followed a curious political cycle: every leader who rises by challenging the establishment eventually finds himself challenged by another ambitious successor. Capt Amarinder's journey perhaps illustrates this better than anyone else's. After the Congress lost the 2012 Assembly election, the high command appointed Partap Singh Bajwa as state unit president. The decision was organisational. Its consequences were political. For nearly three years, Bajwa headed the organisation while Capt Amarinder remained the Congress's principal face on the ground. Rather than resolving the leadership question, Delhi chose to balance competing claims to authority — a formula that would repeatedly define its approach to Punjab.

The experiment yielded limited organisational stability. Recognising the need for a single face ahead of the 2017 Assembly election, the high command restored Capt Amarinder

as the Punjab Congress president in late 2015. The decision paid immediate dividends. Under his leadership, the Congress returned to power in 2017 with 77 seats and nearly 38.5 percent of the vote —one of its strongest electoral performances in decades.

Yet the victory also reinforced a recurring paradox. In Punjab Congress, decisive electoral mandates have rarely guaranteed lasting organisational stability. Almost as soon as Capt Amarinder consolidated his authority, another rival centre of influence began to emerge. The Capt Amarinder-Navjot Sidhu confrontation was not merely another personality clash; it exposed the limitations of the Congress high command's long-standing strategy of accommodating competing leaders instead of settling the leadership question. Eventually, Sidhu was appointed Punjab Congress president despite Capt Amarinder's reservations. The decision was projected as a political compromise. In reality, it formalised two competing centres of authority within the same party. State & Local Government

The consequences were swift. Capt Amarinder resigned as Chief Minister in September 2021, bringing to an end one of the most consequential leadership crisis in Punjab Congress. The Congress then made a bold political gamble by appointing Channi, Punjab's first Dalit Chief Minister, hoping to reshape the party's social coalition before the Assembly election.

Instead, the party entered another phase of uncertainty. Within weeks, Sidhu and Channi were publicly at odds over administrative appointments and governance, signalling that replacing one leader had not resolved the underlying conflict.

That has been the enduring paradox of Punjab Congress. Leadership changes have repeatedly altered the protagonists, but seldom the script. Every attempt to settle one power struggle has eventually produced another, suggesting that the party's recurring “versus” is less a clash of individuals than a symptom of an unresolved organisational culture.

Ahead of the ensuing state assembly election, visible differences between Punjab Congress president

Amarinder Singh Raja Warring and former Chief Minister Charanjit Singh Channi have once again shifted attention from the party's campaign to its internal equations. The pattern is difficult to ignore. Time and again, the Congress has postponed settling leadership questions in the hope that competing ambitions could coexist. In Punjab, however, unresolved succession has rarely produced unity; more often, it has prolonged uncertainty. Leadership contests do not remain confined to the top. They inevitably permeate the organisation. District units align with rival camps, candidate selection becomes contentious, campaign messaging loses coherence and the cadre begins responding to personalities rather than the organisation.

The opposition, meanwhile, gains valuable political space. Punjab's recent electoral history illustrates the cost of this drift. The Congress collapsed to 18 seats with around 23 percent vote share in 2022, while the Aam Aadmi Party swept the election with 92 seats. No electoral defeat can ever be attributed to one factor alone. Anti-incumbency, governance is-

suess, changing political expectations, and the emergence of AAP all contributed to the outcome. But it is equally difficult to ignore that the Congress entered the 2022 election after spending months fighting itself.

The recurring pattern also raises a larger institutional question. For decades, the Congress high command has attempted to manage Punjab through political accommodation, committees, and organisational balancing. Punjab's politics, however, has rarely responded to calibrated compromises. It has traditionally revolved around clear leadership, strong regional identities, and leaders with independent political constituencies.

That disconnect has repeatedly produced an uneasy compromise: Delhi seeks balance, while Punjab demands clarity. The result has often been an unresolved succession rather than a settled leadership. As Punjab heads towards another Assembly election, the Congress faces a challenge that is bigger than choosing its next chief ministerial face or settling another internal dispute. Geographic Reference