

India's National Calendar: Unveiling Time's Tapestry

By Uday Kumar Varma

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None of the major civilizations of the world ever celebrated New Year at a time that coincided with the first January of Gregorian calendar. The Mesopotamians, The Egyptian, the Chinese, the Persians, none of these older civilizations ushered in the new year on January the first. And it was certainly never an Indian tradition.

And yet the first January across the world is regarded as the beginning of a new year. But for Julius Caesar, most of the world would be celebrating the new Year around Vernal Equinox- the time around March every year. Even the Roman New Year also originally corresponded with the vernal equinox, but years of tampering with the solar calendar and the decisiveness of Julius Caesar set the world on a course to celebrate new year on January 1. The calendar that we follow today, however, is named after Pope Gregory III, who gave it the present shape in the year 1582.

The Gregorian Calendar

The Gregorian calendar, despite its prevalence, does not boast the antiquity of other calendric systems. The Saptarishi calendar of Kashmir, dating back 5098 years, is a testament to India's rich historical tapestry. The roots of the Gregorian calendar trace back to ancient Rome, where Romulus initiated a 10-month, 304-day calendar in 700 BCE. Subsequent modifications by Numa Pompilius and Julius Caesar led to the adoption of the Julian calendar, which ruled for over a millennium but faced issues with leap year miscalculations. Pope Gregory III's intervention in 1582 rectified these discrepancies, giving rise to the Gregorian calendar.

While it took two centuries for England to embrace in 1752, the Gregorian calendar; India, under colonial rule, swiftly adopted it. However, the Gregorian calendar is not without flaws, with illogical month names and an arbitrary New Year start, lacking alignment with astronomical events.

The Evolution of the National Calendar of India

In this backdrop, India's National Calendar stands as a testament to the nation's historical journey and its commitment to a scientific and culturally rooted reckoning of time. In the aftermath of Independence, moved perhaps by a newfound urge of self-respect, dignity, and confidence, and following the decision to have a National Flag and National Anthem, the need for an Indian unified calendar system was evident. Thus, a Calendar Reform Committee in 1952 was set up under the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR), with Dr. Meghnad Saha as its chairman. The diverse committee, including esteemed individuals like Prof AC Banarjee, Dr. KL Dafftari, JS Karandikar, Prof RV Vaidya, Prof. Gorakh Prasad, and Prof NC Lahiri, undertook the monumental task of consolidating over 30 disparate calendrical systems in vogue in various parts of the country.

The committee's mandate was comprehensive, involving the definition of the start of the year, month durations, month names, the commencement of the day, the reference point for time measurement, and the specification of Tithis and Nakshatras for the festival calendar.

The Calendar Committee addressed flaws in the Gregorian calendar and proposed a scientific foundation. Key considerations included: Significance of cardinal points (vernal equinox, summer solstice, autumnal equinox, winter solstice), correlation between Earth's revolution speed and month lengths, naming of months based on Indian astrometry, emphasizing cultural and astronomical relevance.

The task before the committee was to “prepare an accurate calendar based on a scientific study that could be adopted uniformly across the country”. It was challenging because the then prevailing several regional calendars had their own unique narrative, occupying the minds of the people in that region and reflecting a deep power struggle of hegemonic assertions. The competing popular calendars in vogue included the Bikrami, Kali, Bangla, Fazli, and Nanak Shahi, and each had its strong adherents and proponents.

Finally, after the committee examined the relative merits of each calendar, it recommended that the Saka era calendar be adopted. Also called the Shalivahana Shaka calendar, it was used in the four southern states besides Odisha and Saurashtra (now Gujarat). The Saka era marks the remembrance of King Shalivahana's military triumphs. The first indication of a relationship between the King and the Saka era was authenticated by the Kannada work Udbhata Kavya by Somaraja, a Veerashaiva scholar.

The four-year-long efforts resulted in the development of the National Calendar of India – the Saka calendar. It is based on a luni- solar reckoning of time and has, like the Gregorian calendar, 12 months, and 30-31 days each month. The months in this calendar follow the tropical Zodiac signs rather than the sidereal signs normally used with the Hindu calendars. However, the naming and numbering of months remained consistent across Indic calendar traditions.

Key Features

The other major features of this new calendar included, adoption of the Solar Calendar based on the Sayana system, Year length set at 365.2422 days, equivalent to a Tropical Year, establishment of a Positional Astronomy Centre to monitor the Vernal Equinox, Commencement of the year from the Vernal Equinox (22 March), with equal day and night, reference for Indian Standard Time from Prayagraj (82 degree 30' East, 23 degrees 11' North), Civil day starting at midnight (00:00 hrs), New Year initiating from the month of Solar Chaitra, with varying days in each month, and Leap year criteria based on mathematical formulas. The National Calendar incorporated a solar calendar based on the Sayana system, with a year length of 365.2422 days. The commencement of the year from the Vernal Equinox, reference for Indian Standard Time, and leap year criteria added precision. Its adoption symbolized India's scientific prowess, national identity, and commitment to constitutional values.

All central and state government notifications published in the Gazette of India mention the ‘date’ as per two calendars – the Gregorian calendar, which was the official calendar of the British Empire, and the Saka-era calendar, which was adopted by India in 1957. These dates were also used by All India Radio, the only broadcaster of the nation then.

Yet Still Obscure

However, the Gregorian (English) year is still universal in use; and most urban millennials are perhaps not even familiar with the names of the months as per the Saka era. Despite its scientific foundation and parliamentary approval in 1956, the National Calendar faced limited adoption, and remained primarily confined to government agencies. Its use by the public was not widespread, leading to its relative obscurity.

Why did this carefully conceived and designed national Calendar of India could not get any traction, despite being logical and scientific? is an issue that demands some consideration.

Indian Calendar is a fascinating and formidable exercise in finding an identity in a very scientific and rational manner in a realm where she had neither a voice nor a case.

Its adoption and common acceptance by people at large may be a tall order presently but the young aspiring India needs to know the efforts made behind this very significant exercise.

The National Calendar invites us to unravel the threads of time, offering a unique perspective on the nation's journey towards a harmonious and scientifically grounded reckoning of time.

Iranian Irresponsibility Challenges Indian Interests and Friendship

By Group Captain Praveer Purohit (Retd)

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The dreadful terrorist attack on October 07 by Hamas, was rightly deplored in most parts of the world. The despicable act garnered a sympathy wave towards Israel and it soon retaliated by launching an offensive against Hamas. Since then, the people of Gaza have been subjected to unrelenting (barring a brief ceasefire) and often unconstrained bombardment. The suffering of innocent civilians on both sides, be it the victims of the terror attacks or the civilians in Gaza has been pushed into the margins by the hardening of stance by both Israel and Hamas. Even as efforts to broker peace continue, it seems sense and sensibility have been lost in the spiralling violence.

In post-World War II West Asia, Israel had no shortage of enemies and countries unfavourably disposed towards it. However, the Camp David Accords in 1978 (officially titled “Framework for Peace in the Middle East”) and the Abraham Accords of 2020, both brokered by the USA, reduced animosity towards Israel and enhanced peace on its periphery. Even Saudi Arabia and Israel were well poised to establish diplomatic relations and bury their hatchet. That left only Iran as a country of some consequence which retained its enmity with Israel. No doubt given their frayed relationship with the USA, Iran found favourable mention in geopolitical narratives in China and Russia. The China-Iran oil trade continues unabated. Despite the economic woes faced by common people in Iran, the regime seems unaffected by sanctions due to an allegedly burgeoning ‘black market’ for the sale of Iranian oil through Iraq. Given its hostility towards Israel, Iran has opportunistically built a narrative of the Hamas and Hezbollah being ‘freedom fighters’, whereas in reality, they are terrorist organisations. As long as it was limited to statements, the Iranian stance did not count for much. However, by allegedly arming, supporting, and training Houthi rebels to target commercial shipping in the Red Sea, Iran has taken brinkmanship to a new level in the muddled geopolitics of the Middle East. By resorting to grey zone warfare, Iran has created more strife and caused destabilization and misery to Palestine, whose cause it purportedly espouses.

So how does this concern India? For one, the recent drone attacks on India-bound ships, the MV Sai Baba and MV Chem Pluto are indicators of how precarious the situation is. 95 percent of India's trade by volume occurs through the seas. The route for 65 percent of India's import of crude oil is through the Red Sea. Around \$ 200 billion worth of exports from India ply through the Red Sea to their destinations. A crisis in the region pushes the cost of transportation and insurance upwards. This affects the competitiveness of exports and the cost of imports. Ultimately, it is the Indian citizen, already reeling under high inflation who will bear the added cost. Secondly, the events from October 07 have created hiccups for the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC). The IMEC which carries great economic potential and geopolitical advantages to India has come under stress. Thirdly, even if Iran is fishing in troubled waters for tactical advantage, the real strategic beneficiary is China. It benefits by diverting the US attention away from Taiwan and covering its territorial theft in East Ladakh, Bhutan and the South China Sea. It is now axiomatic that whatever benefits China strategically almost invariably is detrimental to India.

As an important stakeholder in the Middle East, India has its task cut out. The Indian PM has held talks with the PMs of the UK, Israel, the Presidents of UAE, and Iran and Saudi Crown Prince amongst other leaders. One can safely assume that similar efforts could be underway at the diplomatic level too. India has taken a nuanced stand, condemning the Hamas attack even as it has supported a homeland for Palestine. India has a healthy relationship with the Arabs and Palestine even as we pursue a strategic partnership with Israel. However, India needs to look beyond and act vigorously to mitigate and eventually overcome the adverse effects of the current crisis. Firstly, we ought to coordinate more closely with the US and jointly impress upon Israel to calibrate its use of force, explicitly refrain from targeting civilians and ensure humanitarian aid in Gaza. Our common friend (Israel) should be convinced that its disproportionate use of force and a frenzy for 'revenge' is counter productive. Secondly, India should take the initiative to build a consensus along with other major stakeholders like the US, UK, Arab states, Australia and Japan for a UN-mandated collective deployment of warships to protect merchant shipping in the Red Sea area. If done under a UN mandate, it will find greater global acceptance and take the steam out of Chinese and Russian propaganda. The third action concerns Iran. Characterized by high inflation, weak GDP growth, depreciating currency and rising unemployment, Iran nevertheless continues playing the game of geopolitical destabilization by violence mostly through proxies. Iran has displayed growing closeness and strategic convergence with our strategic rival, China while waging a hybrid war against our strategic partners – the US and Israel. Despite Iran's profane track record on women's rights, likely nuclear weaponization/ proliferation and religious fundamentalism, India has been quite friendly to Iran, even supporting its entry into SCO and BRICS. Iranian act of supporting and covertly directing attacks against commercial shipping including India-bound ships is in direct defiance of India's principled and consistent stand on freedom and safety of maritime commerce. Iran's irresponsible actions are increasingly becoming an embarrassment to our friendship. More importantly, they have raised the economic and reputational costs for us while reducing our strategic space. It is high time India firmly conveys this to Iran and reminds it to be mindful of our interests and concerns. The time for 'fence-sitting' is over. Instead, it is time to call 'spade a spade.' Geopolitical stability is crucial for a rising India. Let us hope and pray for a more peaceful 2024.

Indian Navy in a Threatening Red Sea

By Arun Prakash

Author is a retired chief of naval staff.

India must use its good standing with Iran, as well as with Israel, to urge moderation and restraint, lest the West Asian conflagration spreads and sets the Indian Ocean alight.

As the Yemen-based Houthi rebels have risen after the October 7 Hamas attack on Israel to pose a serious threat to Red Sea merchant-shipping traffic, one is reminded of the American strategist Alfred Mahan's declaration that "the necessity of a navy, in the restricted sense of the word, springs, therefore, from the existence of a peaceful shipping, and disappears with it..." The doughty Admiral was emphasising the paramount importance of foreign trade and commerce, as well as access to natural resources, for national prosperity and reminding us that navies were only a means to this end.

Shipping remains the cheapest and most efficient method of transporting goods over long distances, and thus forms the lifeblood of the global economy. The waters of the Indian Ocean see nearly 1,00,000 merchantmen, in transit, annually, carrying 80 per cent of the world's oil and 10 trillion tons of cargo to Africa, Asia, Europe and the Americas. Amidst this mass of international shipping, there is the minuscule Indian merchant fleet of about 500 vessels, and approximately 1.5 lakh Indian sailors serving on foreign-flagged ships.

The maintenance of “good order” at sea is, therefore, not just essential in India’s own interest, but also an international commitment. The commendable alacrity shown by the Indian Navy in responding to emergent situations in the Red Sea has been in keeping with its self-assigned role of “preferred security partner” in the region.

Trade warfare or waging war on seaborne commerce has historically been a favoured strategy to coerce an adversary by striking at the very roots of his security and prosperity. Both the 20th century global conflicts saw Germany targeting Allied merchant shipping in a deadly submarine campaign that nearly brought Britain to its knees. The eight-year long Iran-Iraq conflict of the 1980s, too, saw the waging of a “tanker war” in which both belligerents attacked merchant ships in the Persian Gulf in order to impact each other’s trade and to influence the international community. Nearly 500 ships, flying 40 different flags, were damaged before UN intervention halted the attacks.

The Indian Ocean is bounded by a number of narrow passages dubbed as “choke points”. These constrict shipping traffic, making it vulnerable to interdiction by states as well as by pirates and terrorists. Among the more critical chokepoints are — in the east, the Malacca Strait which opens out into the Pacific Ocean, and to the west, the Hormuz Strait at the entrance of the Persian Gulf and the Bab al Mandab Strait at the mouth of the Red Sea, linking the Indian Ocean and Mediterranean Sea, via the Suez Canal. It is the latter location where the Iran-backed Houthi rebels have chosen to launch a spate of missile and drone attacks on US Navy units and merchant shipping. Merchantmen seeking a safe passage from Europe to the Indian Ocean will have to go around the Cape of Good Hope, adding to time, fuel and insurance costs.

Given the extreme complexity of the ongoing Yemini civil war, the underlying reasons for these attacks could be manifold. The conflict between the Republic of Yemen and the Houthis is seen as a Saudi Arabia-Iran proxy clash, which has assumed “multilateral” dimensions, with countries like Jordan, UAE, Qatar, Sudan, Bahrain and organisations like Al Qaeda and Hezbollah either participating or supporting one or the other side. The US, too, has involved itself by carrying out targeted killings in Yemen via drone attacks. However, unlike the Somali pirates who hijack ships and take hostages as a business proposition for ransom money, the Houthi group, also known as Ansar Allah, claims ideological objectives. Their stated aim for attacking shipping is to pressurise Israel to end its three-month long, indiscriminate bombardment of Gaza, which is inflicting heavy casualties among innocent civilians.

The Houthis claim to be targeting only those ships which are either flying the Israeli flag or are bound to and from Israeli ports or are in any way “linked” to Israel. Since the number of merchant vessels falling into these categories would be relatively small, they could have been re-routed to avoid the Red Sea, thereby saving the rest of the world a lot of expense and bother. However, there is no guarantee that the Houthis will either keep their word or be able to discriminate between those that are “Israeli-linked” and other shipping.

The US, bound by its deep ties to Israel, has launched operation “Prosperity Guardian” with the ostensible aim of safeguarding Red Sea shipping. However, it was possibly seen as unnecessarily provocative and escalatory vis-à-vis Iran, and therefore snubbed by three important NATO countries — France, Italy and Spain. India’s current deployment of four to five warships on the scene as a show of “naval presence” is appropriate for its status as a maritime power and will send out a message of reassurance to the region. The captains of our warships will, however, be constrained by two factors.

First, it is the “flag state”, that is, the state in which a ship is registered which exercises exclusive jurisdiction over vessels flying its flag. This means that the primary responsibility for the maintenance of security and law enforcement on ships in international waters falls on the flag state. A warship of any other state wanting to board a merchant vessel in peacetime, for any reason, will need consent of the flag state or the ship’s master.

Second, drone warfare as well as the challenges of counter-drone warfare have taken many countries and militaries by surprise. While merchant ships are totally defenceless, even navies are struggling to evolve counter-measures. Whereas larger drones can be detected by radar and targeted, it is the smaller, low-flying drones, which are hard to spot and target. The primary counter against drones would be soft-kill measures which jam or corrupt the radio signals crucial for its control and navigation. As a last resort, kinetic systems can attempt the tricky task of engaging the small drone with missiles or rapid-firing guns.

Under these circumstances, India must use its good standing with Iran, as well as with Israel, to urge moderation and restraint, lest the west Asian conflagration spreads and sets the Indian Ocean alight.

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Is India ‘losing’ South Asia? That’s Not The Question

By C. Raja Mohan

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India has enough capabilities to not only preserve its interests, but also expand its influence in its neighbourhood. To do that effectively, though, Delhi must discard the obsession with the old idea of South Asia.

Has India lost the Subcontinent? The lament on “losing” South Asia becomes louder when “negative” (from Delhi’s perspective) developments — for example, the Maldives’ recent demand that India withdraw its military presence — occur in the region. India’s South Asia debate, unfortunately, is sentimental, self-referential and disconnected from the changing regional reality.

The hawks are upset that our neighbours dare to challenge India’s presumed primacy in the region. The doves think it is all Delhi’s fault that our neighbours turn against India. The former want Delhi to be “tougher”, and the latter want Delhi to be “nicer” to the neighbours. Neither tough nor nice policies will address India’s regional challenges, which are deeply structural. Several internal, regional, and external factors shape the South Asian dissonance.

The notion that Delhi is losing South Asia is rooted in India’s collective nostalgia for the legacy of the British Raj, which integrated the Subcontinent into a powerful geopolitical entity, established regional hegemony, and turned the neighbouring territories into protectorates and buffers. That world is long gone, along with the British departure from the Subcontinent.

The Subcontinent’s Partition on religious lines sundered its unity, created new sovereignties, and left unresolved boundary and territorial disputes that continue to hobble the region. Exalted visions of regional cooperation and an appeal to shared civilisation and history can’t overcome the bitter and enduring legacies of Partition.

Pakistan sees the Kashmir question as the unfinished agenda of Partition and is not willing to put it aside — even temporarily — to develop a limited but positive engagement with India and facilitate South Asian regional integration under the auspices of SAARC.

The political partition of the Subcontinent was reinforced by an economic partition driven by the developmental choices made by India and its neighbours in favour of autarky. Increasing securitisation of the borders turned them into commercial barriers. Since the turn of the 1990s, when the region turned to globalisation, regional economic cooperation has certainly grown, even if the pace and intensity are way below potential.

With one exception. Pakistan is not ready for economic cooperation with India; its incessant talk on geo-economics does not include commercial engagement with India. Nawaz Sharif, who is expected to become the prime minister again in the elections scheduled for February, does talk about changing this dynamic. It is unclear if General Asim Munir will let him walk the talk.

The political deference of the regional elites to Delhi, inherited from the days of the Raj, lingered for a few years. Smaller neighbours soon figured that independent India was not the British Raj — which was an extension of the world's dominant power — and that they had room to play with or against Delhi. India might be big, but it can't simply will their policies in Delhi's preferred direction. They have an agency of their own. India can neither bully them into submission nor sweet talk them into acquiescence in the name of shared identity and culture.

India's regional visions might sound good in Delhi but are often seen in the neighbourhood as a cover for pursuing regional hegemony. The RSS version of "Akhand Bharat" or "Greater India" or the liberal version of an integrated Subcontinent are both viewed with deep suspicion. The neighbouring elites see a fundamental contradiction between a regional order led by India and their national sovereignties.

Much like Delhi's domestic discourse that twists itself into knots over the relationship with a much stronger power like Washington, the debate on India often turns surreal in the neighbourhood. India, one of the world's largest nations, took over a decade to overcome the fear that signing a simple logistics pact (LEMOA) with the US meant "offering military bases" to Washington. Can you blame the tiny Maldives for worrying about the impact of military cooperation with India on its sovereignty?

Whether it wants or not, India looms large in the domestic politics of our neighbourhood. If one competing faction of the neighbourhood elite wants India to intervene on its behalf in the domestic political struggles, the other faction denounces India's interventionism as hegemonic. Those neighbouring elites who seek a sensible relationship with India are accused of compromising national sovereignty.

The same party and the same leader can adopt both positions at different times. Recall that Imran Khan attacked Pakistan's PM Nawaz Sharif for his presumed warmth towards Prime Minister Narendra Modi. His slogan in the 2018 elections was "Modi ka jo yaar hai, woh gaddaar hai" (he, who is a friend of Modi, is a traitor to Pakistan).

As PM, Imran changed his tune. In the run-up to the 2019 Indian general election, he stated that Modi was Pakistan's best bet in resolving the Kashmir question and hoped that he would be re-elected. That hope was shattered with the Pulwama terror attack and India's Balakot response.

Finally, the idea that India, like the Raj, could keep the Subcontinent as an exclusive sphere of influence was an illusion. A partitioned India, which never could match the power of the Raj, had little chance of preserving the old order. Pakistan turned to the US and China to balance India. The Soviet intervention in Afghanistan turned the north-western subcontinent into a theatre for proxy war among the Western powers, the Middle Eastern states, Russia, and China.

The consequences of that war have brought mayhem to the borderlands between Pakistan and Afghanistan and transformed the geopolitical landscape of the Subcontinent.

India is right to be wary about the dramatic expansion of China's economic and military influence in the Subcontinent. But it can't stop the world's second-largest economic and military power from being a powerful actor in the region. As Western presence declines in the Subcontinent, the strategic character of the Chinese salience in South Asia — economic, military and technological — will only grow in the coming years and present even more daunting challenges to India.

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China's Year of Strategic Decline

By Srikanth Kondapalli

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All of China's biggest trading partners -- the US, Europe, the ASEAN, Japan and South Korea -- are upset over its aggressive behaviour.

China itself was mostly responsible for it. Its economic restructuring toward “medium-high” growth and political restructuring toward an over-centralised authority are not yielding results domestically. Nor was China able to enhance its global standing despite dishing out slogans like “community of common destiny”. To be sure, China has not run out of steam. But the juggernaut is slowing down.

The China rise story over the last 40 years has been based on economic and military growth, with help from the US and others. It maintained 10% GDP growth rates in the 1990s, which fell to 7% in the 2010s. Last year, it struggled to do 3.3%; and this year's target of 5.5% hardly looks achievable given the real estate bust, youth unemployment, mounting local debt, the manufacturing sector's sluggish performance, ageing of the society. The tariff wars with the US are sapping China of its future growth potential, specifically in the hi-tech sectors. Xi's Covid lockdowns have worsened things for China.

China has also maintained 10% real increases in defence allocations since the 1990s, transforming its military equipment, reflected in its navy and air forces, besides developments in nuclear, ballistic missile and hypersonic vehicles. However, despite brandishing its military wares in the Taiwan Straits over the past year, its lack of combat experience since the disastrous war with Vietnam in 1979 is staring at it. With uncertainty in the Ukraine conflict, China is weighing the costs of undertaking action on Taiwan, although it is likely to escalate rhetoric as Taiwan heads for elections in January.

The confrontation with India in Ladakh is settling down into an “armed co-existence” paradigm at best, and Beijing is reckoning with the high costs of a four-front war scenario -- on Taiwan, Senkaku, South China Sea, and on the Himalayan front with India.

While President Xi Jinping told visiting US Senate majority leader Chuck Schumer in October that the “Thucydides trap” between the US and China “is not inevitable”, his party congresses in 2017 and 2022 clearly identified the US as an adversary. Xi reiterated his position that there is “enough space” for both the US and China, an accommodation he is unwilling to make for Japan, Vietnam, Philippines, India or other Asian countries.

The Biden-Xi meeting in San Francisco in November appears to have brought a measured truce between the two largest economies, but at best a temporary one, given the structural differences and China's ambition to replace the US on the world stage. China's climbdown at the meeting on the Taiwan issue will have domestic political complications as Communist Party factional struggles intensify.

China forming its own ‘quad’ -- Pakistan–Russia–Iran–China (PRIC, oops!) – in its bid to replace the US (and Israel) in West Asia and beyond is another farfetched gambit. While China may have benefited on the Xinjiang issue in the eyes of Islamic countries by supporting indirectly Hamas and Houthi actions, it may lose out on hi-tech military transfers from Israel.

The Ukraine conflict brought dividends for China in terms of energy imports from Russia and strengthening multipolarity, though from a medium- to long-term perspective, the gains are marginal. The intended dividends of supporting Russia in the war have not been big for Beijing.

All of China's biggest trading partners -- the US, Europe, the ASEAN, Japan and South Korea -- are upset over its aggressive behaviour. This will have consequences for its economic growth as the inward-looking economic restructuring in the 14th Five Year Plan is not yielding results. China, it seems, unveiled its agenda of "occupying the center-stage" too early.

While most economic and technical indicators of China do not show a drastic decline, nor have its foreign policy initiatives folded up, Beijing faces serious constraints in expanding structural power, partly due to its authoritarian leadership, domestic dissent, and its hobnobbing with fellow authoritarian (and failing) regimes across the world in its bid to counter the US.

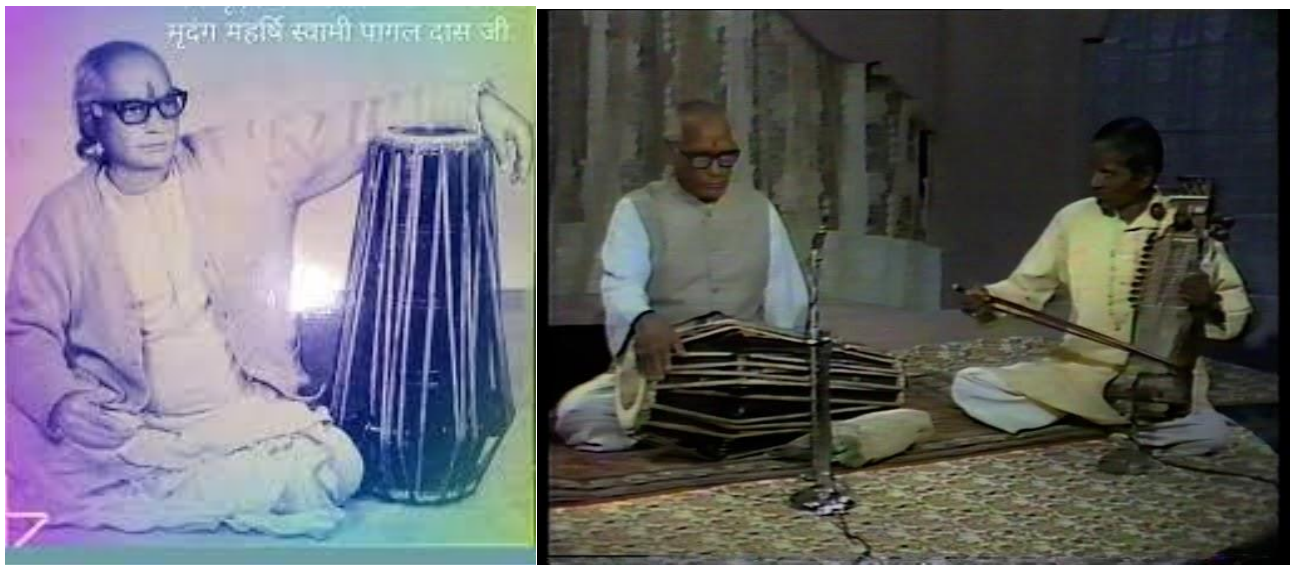
China is facing a moment of hubris, a strategic decline in 2023, just as India's prospect is beginning to look up. India has not only replaced China as the "fastest growing major economy" but also as the world's most populated country, with its demographic implications for decades to come. While India does require structural and sustained growth for decades to reach where China is today, the signals are unmistakable.

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India is Proud of: Ram Shankar Das "Pagal Das"

The great Pakhawaj (Mridangam) Player (1920 – 1997)



One of the leading light of Awadhi tradition of Pakhawaj i.e. Mridangam, Ram Shankar Das alias "Pagal Das" was a master artiste. He belonged to an unbroken chain of ascetic-musicians. He was contemporary of great instrumental musicians like Bismillah Khan (Shehnai), Pannalal Ghosh (Flute).

He was born on 15 Aug 1920 in a village near Deoria district of Uttar Pradesh, was an unusual child with a strong inclination towards music and acting. This was not appreciated in upper class of society to which he belonged.

He left his village at the age 12 and started living in Hanumangadhi in Ayodhya after consecration. But as he was a unique child, he forayed to explore his interests. He became part of a Drama company in Bihar and became very famous as an actor. However, he left that also and started learning music. He learned Tabla from late Nepal Singh Pitawans of Patna for five years, Mrindagam from Swami Bhagwan Das ji, Thakur Das ji and at later stage from Pandit Santsharan “Mast”. It was Pandit Santsharan ji, advised his young disciple to adopt “Pagal” as his Nome-de-plume to write his verses. This stuck with him during his life.

Finally, he settled down in Ayodhya. He was a strong devotee of Hanuman ji. He spent his life in Hanumat Vishwakala Sangeet Ashram in Ayodhya. He composed devotional songs for Holi, Sawan festivals along with Kajiri and Jhoola Utsav (which is a famous celebration in about 5000 temples in Ayodhya during Monsoon season). All these songs celebrate the incidents in life of Lord Ram.

Pagal Das lived the life of ascetic but was active in Ayodhya’s social life. He contributed in the field of music as a lecturer and examiner. He was instrumental for Uttar Pradesh Sangeet Natak Academy to start International Dhrupad festival in Ayodhya. He wrote many books on music and most of these books are today prescribed in universities.

This great ascetic was honoured by UP Sangeet Natak Academy as well as he was awarded D. Lit degree by Dr R M L Avadh University, Ayodhya.

Perhaps the last giant of Sanatani Rasik Bhakti tradition of Ayodhya, “Pagal Das’s” music was a luminous gem of pure classical music some of which is preserved in the archives of AIR and Doordarshan. The recording companies never got their hands on recluse’s music.

He breathed his last on 20 Jan 1997 in Ayodhya. He was so revered by one and all that a large number of people attended his last rites.

In this historic golden year when Lord Ram’s “Pran Pratistha” is being done in the grand Ram Mandir, it is just not possible to not remember, Pt Ram Shankar Das alias Pagal Das ji. His musical contribution for Lord Ram and Hanuman ji is one of the greatest things in the history of Ayodhya.

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