

## After India-China Thaw, Beijing Draws Nepal in Strategic Embrace

**By Lt Gen Prakash Katoch (Retd)**

The author is an Indian Army veteran.

*Oli is scheduled to China after November 15. The primary discussion will likely be on speeding up the BRI as well as economic cooperation between the two nations. Beijing will do its best to draw Nepal deeper into its strategic sphere and further a joint approach in dealing with India to further China's national interests.*

The recent defrosting in India-China relations, through what India calls “agreement” and China terms “resolutions”, primarily pertains to resumption of Indian troops patrolling their own territory in eastern Ladakh. The Chinese media says the arrangement is based on “existing ground situation”. The Indian Army points out the need is to build “trust”. Ambiguity prevails ed (<https://m.rediff.com/news/column/modi-xi-agreement-the-nation-needs-to-know/20241028.htm>); given that the signed agreement/resolutions document is not made public by the government, as demanded by Subramanian Swamy, former Member of Parliament belonging to India's ruling party.

The media is full of cover about “disengagement” in Depsang and Demchok in eastern Ladakh – similar to when the buffer zone was created along the north bank of Pangong Tso, after China forced India to vacate the Kailash Range, including our posts overlooking PLA's Moldo garrison. Patrolling in Depsang up to which LAC remains the major question among many others (<https://www.indiandefensenews.in/2024/11/post-india-china-disengagement.html?m=1>), while China is constructing a dual-use military village bang on the LAC in Demchok. The PLA will unlikely dismantle permanent structures it erected in 2020, while reverting to the pre-April 2020 posture is out of the question.

However, the propaganda about disengagement even shows PLA troops pullout from areas not anywhere close to the LAC (<https://x.com/jenniferzeng97/status/1850918852693033027?t=ZubPjiiXphyLvCWaua5loA&s=08>), causing mirth amid speculation whether China is also vacating Aksai Chin fearing India. Defence Minister Rajnath Singh, who kept chanting over the past four years “not even one inch of territory lost”, announced on October 31 that disengagement has been completed. But the Chinese government and media are conspicuously silent on the issue.

### Inciting Delhi-Kathmandu tensions

Significantly, while the patrolling/disengagement was being put in motion, news came that Nepal has contracted a Chinese company, China Banknote Printing and Minting Corporation, to print 300 million 100-rupee currency notes; at a cost of over NPR 1.2 billion (about USD 8.98 million), with each note costing around NPR 4.04. Significantly, these notes will feature an updated political map of Nepal that includes the Indian areas of Limpiyadhura, Lipulekh, and Kalapani.

This will heighten tensions between New Delhi and Kathmandu. But its timing suggests Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli-led Nepal took this decision in consultation with Beijing to relay a signal to India on China's behalf.

Nepal has been in China's crosshairs since the Mao Zedong era when Beijing initiated Maoist insurgency in Nepal as a long-term strategic move, eventually leading to communist rule in Nepal intermittently or with communist support. Oli and Puspa Kamal Dahal (called Prachanda) have been China's blue-eyed boys from the insurgency days – with both holding the appointment of Nepal's prime minister thrice, including Oli's present term. Even before Prachanda became prime minister for the first time, he told Nepalese: "Our ultimate fight will be with the Indian Army". Prachanda has always been accorded a red carpet when visiting Beijing, even when he was not Nepal's prime minister.

During Oli's visit to Beijing in March 2016, Nepal and China signed the Transit and Transport Agreement (TTA) to access China from six checkpoints; it was Nepal which sought access to the Chinese ports. Nepal took this step because of the prolonged blockade of the India-Nepal border during 2015-2016, causing severe fuel and medicine shortages for months – brainchild of National Security Adviser Ajit Doval playing 'big brother' despite hyping "Neighbours First".

Nepal joined China's Belt and Road Initiative in 2017. In June 2020, Oli-led Nepalese Parliament passed a new map showing Lipulekh, Kalapani and all areas north of the river Kuthi Yangti up to its source at Limpiyadhura on the main Himalayan watershed (totaling about 370 sq km) in its territory. These areas fall in Pithoragarh district of Uttarakhand and India holds posts in Kalapani since 1962, but Nepal claims the British gave this area to Nepal in 1816 by the Treaty of Sagauli. The Indian map released in October 2019 showing reorganized Jammu & Kashmir drew adverse comments from China and Pakistan, egging Oli to claim the above-mentioned three areas of India.

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## **Geopolitical Chess: How the Ukraine War Transformed India's Fuel Exports into Economic Gain**

**By Dr.Santhosh Mathew**

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The ongoing conflict in Ukraine has sent shockwaves through global energy markets, impacting everything from international relations to commodity prices. While the war has led to immense suffering and a humanitarian crisis, it has also created unexpected economic opportunities for countries like India. The remarkable surge in India's fuel exports to the European Union (EU) exemplifies how geopolitical tensions can yield economic gains for nations that skilfully navigate the shifting landscape. In the first three quarters of 2024, India's exports of fuels such as diesel to the EU soared by an impressive 58% compared to the same period the previous year. Much of this increase can be traced back to Indian refineries acquiring Russian crude oil at discounted prices, a direct consequence of the sanctions imposed by Western countries on Russia. As European nations increasingly turned away from Russian oil, India capitalized on the opportunity, positioning itself as the largest exporter of oil products to the EU.

Before the invasion, Europe imported approximately 154,000 barrels per day (bpd) of diesel and jet fuel from India. Since the onset of the war, that figure has nearly doubled, highlighting India's newly gained prominence in the global oil market. Refineries in Jamnagar, Vadinar and New Mangalore have ramped up their operations,

relying heavily on Russian crude to meet this surging demand. This strategic maneuver has allowed India not only to enhance its foreign exchange reserves but also to play a pivotal role in the global oil supply chain during a time of crisis. The sanctions and price caps imposed by the G7 and EU aimed to limit Russia's revenue from oil exports, a vital source of funding for its military operations. While these measures targeted crude oil directly, they inadvertently created a loophole: countries that did not participate in the sanctions could legally import Russian crude, refine it, and export the refined products to sanctioning nations. India has adeptly taken advantage of this situation, purchasing Russian crude at attractive discounts and re-exporting the refined products to Europe at full market prices. This scenario is a perfect illustration of a classic game theory concept known as "one's loss is another's gain." In this geopolitical chess match, the West sought to weaken Russia's economic power through sanctions, but in doing so, they unintentionally facilitated India's economic ascent. By navigating the complexities of the energy market, India has not only filled the gap left by reduced Russian oil exports to Europe but has also reaped significant financial rewards.

The financial implications for India are substantial. With crude oil forming a significant part of its imports, acquiring Russian oil at reduced prices has provided a crucial buffer for the country's foreign exchange reserves. Recent data indicates that India purchased around €2 billion worth of Russian crude oil in October 2024 alone, making it the second-largest buyer after China, which accounted for approximately 47% of Russia's crude exports. However, while these developments represent a remarkable economic opportunity, they also raise ethical questions amid the ongoing humanitarian crisis in Ukraine. The Indian government has approached this situation with caution, emphasizing the importance of energy security while balancing its international relationships. This pragmatic approach reflects a complex balancing act, weighing economic gains against the moral implications of engaging with a nation under widespread sanctions.

As global pressure mounts on countries to isolate Russia, India finds itself in a precarious position. The rising foreign exchange reserves from fuel exports symbolize a critical opportunity for India to bolster its economy, but this also risks potential backlash from Western nations that view its actions through a lens of scepticism. India's response to this geopolitical pressure will be crucial in maintaining its diplomatic relations while ensuring its energy needs are met. Looking ahead, the sustainability of India's energy trade with Russia remains uncertain. The dynamics of the Ukraine conflict and the global energy market continue to evolve, influenced by geopolitical developments and changes in energy consumption patterns. As Europe seeks to diversify its energy sources and reduce reliance on Russian imports, India must adapt its strategies to maintain its newfound role in the global energy market. Moreover, as G7 nations and the EU continue to refine their sanctions on Russian oil products, India may face increased scrutiny regarding its role in refining and exporting Russian crude. Its ability to maintain its position as a key supplier to Europe will depend not only on diplomatic efforts but also on the adaptability of its energy strategies in a rapidly changing global landscape.

In summary, the war in Ukraine has created a paradox: while it has inflicted suffering and turmoil, it has also opened avenues for economic growth for nations like India. The surge in fuel exports to the EU, primarily sourced from discounted Russian crude, highlights how countries can leverage the unintended consequences of geopolitical conflicts to their advantage. As India navigates this complex landscape, it must balance economic benefits with ethical considerations, establishing itself as a responsible global player. The interplay of game theory, economic gain, and moral responsibility will shape India's role in the global energy market for years to come. By strategically leveraging its resources and refining capabilities, India can not only enhance its foreign exchange reserves but also contribute to global energy security in an increasingly multipolar world.

# India, Trump, and the Crisis in Multilateralism

**By C Raja Mohan**

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*Multilateralism — economic, political, and institutional — that reached its peak at the turn of the 21st century is now in trouble.*

This week and next, a series of high-profile multilateral summits are set to unfold — the climate change conference in Azerbaijan, the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum in Peru, and the G20 summit in Brazil. These gatherings, however, take place under the shadow of Donald Trump's recent re-election as US President. Already under strain over the last decade, multilateral institutions now face even greater challenges. Trump's second term compels India and other nations to reassess their strategies for engaging with global institutions. As the crisis of multilateralism deepens, India may need to devote more attention to "minilateral" groups and coalitions of "like-minded" countries in dealing with global issues.

Trump's first presidential term (2017-2021) marked a dramatic shift from traditional US foreign policy. His administration questioned the efficacy of multilateralism and prioritised unilateralism. Trump withdrew from key international agreements and organisations, including the Paris Agreement on climate change, Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), UNESCO, WHO, and the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC). Under Trump, US policies helped weaken the World Trade Organisation. These moves signalled a clear departure from the liberal internationalist vision that had long guided US policies. In his inaugural speech at the UN in September 2017, Trump articulated his "America First" doctrine, emphasising national sovereignty over globalism. Unlike Democratic administrations, Trump rejected the notion that the US was responsible for leading global institutions, arguing instead for a foreign policy rooted in national interest.

Critics of multilateralism within the US contend that decades of international engagement have come at a steep cost. They argue that American taxpayers have borne the brunt of globalist policies, prolonged military interventions in the name of securing different regions and preserving a rules-based international order. They also point to job losses stemming from an open global trade system that facilitated a shift in manufacturing from the US to countries like Mexico and China. While the emphasis on efficiency produced windfall profits for US capital, it devastated American communities in industrial towns.

Following Trump's defeat in 2020, the Biden administration sought to restore US commitment to multilateralism. The US rejoined the Paris Accord, WHO, and re-entered UNESCO. But Trump's critique of the global trading order endured under Biden. As Trump prepares to return, the domestic backlash against globalism has intensified. With control over both chambers of Congress, Trump's second term is expected to bring transformative policies that challenge the foundations of multilateralism.

Trump is widely expected to withdraw the US from the Paris Agreement again. At home, he has promised to dismantle the range of regulatory constraints on energy development, including on the hydrocarbon sector, imposed by the Biden Administration. He promises to enhance energy production in the US and embark on uninhibited economic growth. Trump underlines the importance of traditional forms of electricity generation needed for the AI industry that guzzles power. Climate activists see these moves as a significant blow to global efforts to combat climate change, undermining international cooperation and reducing financial support for developing nations' climate initiatives. Trump's stance is likely to embolden other countries to scale back their commitments, exacerbating global tensions. Several key leaders, including PM Narendra Modi, US President Joe Biden, French President Emmanuel Macron, and Brazilian President Lula da Silva, are skipping the climate summit in Azerbaijan.

The APEC forum, created during a period of Sino-US cooperation, now finds itself at the centre of escalating tensions between Washington and Beijing. The forum's core mission of fostering economic integration across the Pacific has come under fire from Trump. One of his first actions in 2017 was to withdraw from the TPP, a cornerstone of the Obama administration's Asia Pacific strategy. The Biden administration responded by launching the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF), a more flexible arrangement focusing on digital trade, supply chain resilience, clean economy, and clean energy. Unlike the TPP, the IPEF avoids binding commitments on market access. Whether Trump will continue with the IPEF is unclear. However, his proposed 60 per cent tariffs on Chinese imports signal a potential intensification of the US-China trade war. Meanwhile, his administration is likely to ramp up scrutiny of China's growing economic influence in Latin America. China's trade and investment links with Latin America will be showcased by President Xi Jinping's visit to Peru and Brazil to attend the APEC and G20 summits.

Established in 2008 to address the global financial crisis, the G20 has struggled in recent years to maintain its relevance amid deepening geopolitical and economic divides. In Trump's first term, the US clashed with other members on trade, climate, and migration policies. Although Biden sought to revive multilateral cooperation, achieving a landmark global corporate tax agreement, tensions have persisted, particularly over climate action, modernising financial architecture, debt relief and other development priorities. For India, which has invested heavily in multilateralism in general, and G20 in particular, the upcoming summit offers an opportunity to reassess the forum's effectiveness. More broadly, PM Modi's discussions with world leaders should help India rethink its approach to global governance during Trump 2.0.

Multilateralism — economic, political, and institutional — that reached its peak at the turn of the 21st century is now in trouble. While globalists will bemoan the passing of an era, India's policymakers will have to adapt to the new dynamics. To be sure, global problems need global solutions. But the hopes for collective solutions to our common problems have become politically unrealistic over the last decade. Expect Trump to bury those hopes. Unilateral development of new technologies, bilateralism in trade and economic cooperation, and like-minded coalitions in finding solutions to regional challenges are likely to gain ground in the next few years.

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## **16th BRICS Summit was About Building Dollar-Free World Order**

**By Dr. Seshadri Chari**

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*For New Delhi, a USD-free system is not an immediate priority nor an existential necessity to unconditionally support the China-Russia agenda.*

The 16th BRICS Summit held in Kazan, Russia, attended by four new members, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran and the UAE, besides the five founding members, and other invitees, would probably go down in history as the new Bretton Woods meeting. It was held in 1944 in New Hampshire, shortly before the end of the Second World War. Set apart by 80 years, the two historic meetings seem to have many parallels.

Some 44 war-ravaged allied countries inked the Bretton Woods Agreement to fix their rate of exchange to the US dollar, which could, in turn, be redeemed in gold. Unlike these allies, the US was largely unscathed by the war and could boast of a large gold reserve.

The economic system and the world order that followed, supported by the US Dollar (USD) sowed the seeds of the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

The BRICS Summit in Kazan, attended by 40 countries, took place at a time when most of these economies face severe financial crises. Mainly, due to two major conflicts and several other minor ones, all being fought in the background of a worst pandemic that was more devastating than the Second World War.

### **Changing world order**

Incidentally, the 1944 conference was attended by four of the five founding members of the BRICS, Brazil, Russia (then the Soviet Union), India and China. The two Communist entities and the leader of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), India, became part of the world order and the international financial institutions that followed the Bretton Woods Agreement. The same four countries with many other allies and supporters in the BRICS Summit are seeking to rewrite the rules of the emerging world order and bring about a revolutionary change in the global financial and trading order.

Attended by over 730 delegates, the Bretton Woods Agreement was facilitated by the United Nations Monetary and Financial Conference. It convened on 1 July 1944 and was presided over by the then US Treasury Secretary Henry Morgenthau Jr. and Lord John Maynard Keynes led the Commission II that dealt with the IBRD proposal. In the case of the “BRICS De-dollarisation Summit”, no leading globally acclaimed economist or a financial wizard was present. (The BRICS Academic Forum probably needs to do more homework on this aspect). Nevertheless, the political leaders who put their heads together at Kazan were representing major emerging economies that have survived wars and the pandemic, and are on the road to recovery, better and faster than the G7 and the Global North.

While the 1944 conference established IBRD and IMF, the BRICS already has the New Development Bank (formerly the “BRICS Development Bank”) since 2014. It has a seed fund of 100 billion USD and a reserve currency pool worth over another \$100 billion. Yet, the seminal question that arises is whether the BRICS is biting more than it can chew.

### **Can the USD be replaced?**

Can any of the present currencies like the Euro, Yuan, Pound Sterling, Rupee, and Ruble or Crypto Currency replace the dollar? There is little doubt that the American economy is not in the pink of its health. The USD appears to be flexing its artificial muscles while internally it displays several features of a weak currency. Yet, the process of creating an alternative to global trade and reserve currency does not seem easy. And, it is probably too early to write the obituary of the USD. The Russia-China duo focussed on the agenda of providing an alternative currency model to end the supremacy of the American dollar, de-dollarisation, new trade policies, and the usage of local currencies at the 16th Summit of the BRICS. Given the geopolitical situation and sanctions imposed by the US on its adversaries, a new economic forum and a trade mechanism sans USD will be a game changer for the China-Russia-Iran axis.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has strongly advocated for the use of local currency systems for cross-border trade settlements to overcome exchange rate volatility. India is aggressively promoting this besides allowing banks from about 22 countries to open Rupee Vostro Accounts (SRVAs) with Indian banks for cross-border trade settlements. Therefore, for New Delhi, a USD-free system is not an immediate priority nor an existential necessity to unconditionally support the China-Russia agenda of creating a de-dollarised global trade mechanism. New Delhi is very clear in its approach that the BRICS and its several verticals, as well as other regional forums and financial arrangements, are not anti-West but are part of larger trade-enabling measures.

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# India Cannot Play in Pakistan: Cricket and Terror Do Not Go Together

**By Syed Ata Hasnain**

The Author is former corps commander of the Srinagar-based 15 Corps.

*India's stance is consistent — as long as there is Pakistan-sponsored terrorism, there cannot be a business-as-usual approach elsewhere.*

Given the nationwide love for the game, India should play cricket anywhere and everywhere. As someone who employed cricket as a peace-making instrument in Kashmir through the organisation of the Kashmir Premier League (KPL) in 2011 and 2012, I retain confidence in the game's "beyond sports" credentials. KPL was all about restoring dignity and pride to the people of Kashmir once the situation came under control there. We were not building bridges but rather cementing relationships and trust.

So, if someone uses this analogy to suggest that cricket and the love for it among the people of India and Pakistan can make it an instrument of peace between our two nations, would I be tempted to fall for it? The answer is, not really. Because even while the people of the two nations have no real problem with each other, there is the looming presence in Pakistan of a deeper-than-most deep state. Its multiple layers lead to a grey zone with threat perceptions difficult to realistically estimate — peace and hostility may depend on the time of the day.

The ICC Champions Trophy 2025 (ODI) is being hosted by Pakistan from February 19 to March 9 next year. Only three venues are being used for the 15 matches being played — Lahore, Karachi and Rawalpindi. India has asked for a change from Lahore to Dubai for all its matches as the Indian government does not want our team playing in Pakistan. The ICC earlier accepted the hybrid model under which India played Pakistan in multi-nation tournaments only but in a third country. However, here there is a problem because of Pakistan's ownership of the tournament, its pride and more. Hence, the impasse.

India's policy continues without compromise. First and foremost, it does not wish to convey a dichotomous policy of fighting Pakistan-sponsored terrorism and allowing a business-as-usual approach elsewhere. That would allow Pakistan to legitimise its proxy support to terrorism in J&K. Our stance would find little credence in the face of international understanding of Pakistan as a core centre of global terror. Sports is a means of projection of normalcy. Hence, an incorrect idea of the geopolitical dynamics would emerge. For Pakistan, a nation under constant international scrutiny, every positive act in the domain of international relations is a plus point. The visit of an Indian cricket team to Pakistan, under these circumstances, would be an incorrect indicator of the internal security situation and the legitimacy of the government which has come to power by illegal suppression of the opposition. If India, suffering the travails of Pakistan's sponsorship of cross-border terror, is itself willing to re-establish sporting ties with it there would be no grounds for the international community to name and shame it.

Naming and shaming Pakistan for its support for terror has been India's constant endeavour and it has often succeeded but not always. Pakistan would get big power endorsement if India is seen as pursuing a line of normalising the bilateral relationship. Even External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar while at Islamabad last month, exercised full caution with his statements and body language. Displaying excellent diplomatic skills, he ensured no warmth was exuded by his presence which was purely a responsibility towards SCO.that "economic cooperation with India has been an integral part of Maldives economy".

The Pakistan government will obviously not take kindly to India's proposal to let the ICC allow it to follow the same old hybrid approach. It would seek a ban on India but for the fact that it is aware that India is the golden goose of international cricket which allows it to rule the roost.

Pakistan agreeing to the Indian proposal would be tantamount to an admission that the security situation is not entirely under the government's control. It probably fears that more nations may then wish to also opt for a combination of venues — some in Pakistan, some elsewhere to reduce the exposure of their teams. There is nothing wrong if that were to happen because the truth would then prevail and Pakistan's internal status of a state out of control would become evident.

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## **Beyond The Past: Complex Trajectory of Indo-Bangladesh Relations**

**By Shishir Priyadarshi**

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The recent dramatic overthrow of the Awami League government led by Sheikh Hasina waged by a spontaneous student uprising, later joined by other actors with varied intentions, seems a watershed event. Bangladesh has little continuity in political trends and constitutional commitments when political power changes hands and it is too early to say what political framework the interim government will create. However, the new dispensation will likely adjust the underlying norms to facilitate their preferred political orientation and policies.

The interim government expects to hold elections within three months, and even though the political environment, at the moment, is primarily filled with anti-India sentiments, Bangladesh-India relations have a strong foundation and have witnessed significant developments in mutual interest since Bangladesh's independence. These include addressing longstanding issues such as the land boundary agreement, the exchange of enclaves, improvements in trade and commerce, and granting India limited freight rights across Bangladesh to improve regional connectivity. While some matters, like the Teesta water-sharing agreement, remain unresolved, the overall trajectory of bilateral ties has shown marked progress.

However, both countries must look ahead; undoing the bilateral gains of the past will not be in either country's interest. The key to any bilateral relations is to strengthen mutual benefits and common understandings while continuing to discuss areas of divergence and sometimes even agreeing to disagree. In the case of India-Bangladesh relations, either country can ill afford a prolonged period of mistrust and a freezing of relations. This makes an even stronger case for pragmatism to take charge of the relations.

The strengthening of bilateral relations, which has been the guiding light of India's Neighbourhood First Policy, has brought unprecedented economic benefits to Bangladesh and pulled it above the ranks of the least developed countries. Much of this can be attributed to a historic and enduring partnership with India, built upon shared values and interests, trust, and equality and rooted in mutual sensitivity to each other's aspirations and concerns.

Bangladesh is India's biggest trade partner in South Asia, and India is the second biggest trade partner in Asia. In FY 2022-23, the total bilateral trade has been reported as \$15.9 billion. The partnership transcends connectivity, power, energy collaboration, green and digital technologies, water and disaster management, defence and security, and humanitarian and developmental aid.

All-weather, robust, and secure connectivity with Bangladesh is in the interest of the countries and the region. It facilitates trade-led economic prosperity, provides pathways for greater people-to-people interaction and cross-country interdependencies, and generates mutual goodwill. It also gives India's landlocked Northeast territories connectivity to the mainland and access to the sea for improved maritime trade opportunities.

Both governments have made efforts to strengthen this connectivity. Accordingly, six rail links have been rehabilitated connecting multiple cities of both countries; five bus service routes are operational between India and Bangladesh, connecting cities of Kolkata, Agartala, and Guwahati to Dhaka and further up to Khulna.

Along with this, the agreement for usage of Chattogram and Mongla Ports has been operationalised for transiting cargo between northeast and mainland India, reducing the cost and time of transportation. Strengthening Indian links with the Chattogram port is also poised to boost regional networks. It will connect with the Ranong Port in Thailand, providing India with another route to Southeast Asia to realise its Act East Policy.

In spite of improved connectivity, the BBIN (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal) sub-region remains one of the least integrated areas globally. According to a study by CUTS International, trade between Bangladesh and India, the region's largest economies, remains minimal, accounting for only 1% of Indian trade and 10% of Bangladeshi trade. In contrast, interregional trade in East Africa and sub-Saharan Africa accounts for 50% and 22% of their total trade, respectively. Given these disparities, enhancing regional connectivity is imperative.

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## **India is Proud of: Khalifa from Samastipur Bihar Alha Udal folklore singer**



Epic saga of bravery and valor of Alha Udal has been scripted by in the book "Alha-Udal Ki Veergatha" by Acharya Mayaram Patang. This gripping tale brings to life the direct description of the legendary battles of Alha-Udal that took place in the 12th century at the fortress of Wawra. The author, Mayaram Patang, considers these brave warriors to be the reincarnation of the Pandavas and Kauravas from the era of Mahabharata.

These tales of courage are sung in every village of Bundelkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, and Rajasthan and in some parts of Western Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan. Alha is even more popular than the epic "Ramcharitmanas". The tradition of singing Holi songs with drums and trumpets on the day of Holi is prevalent in villages, while Alha singers gather in every neighborhood during the month of Sawan, splashing colors everywhere.

The valorous deeds of these brave warriors, who defended the pride, honour, and dignity of their motherland and motherly power, will acquaint readers with the complexities of that era.

Muslim Khalifa is one of the rare person who sings the epic folklore of 12th century warriors Alha and Udal (also known as Rudal). The folk singer and dholak player from Samastipur district of Bihar, has been doing this for almost five decades.

The expansive song, depicting 52 episodes, could take several days to narrate completely and calls for a committed and engaged audience. The 60-year-old resident of Khalispur village, Samastipur has kept alive the tradition of singing Alha Udal songs.

Khalifa follows Islam but belongs to the Nat community, listed as Scheduled Caste in the state.

At his home in Khalispur, a dholak hangs on the walls of his straw hut; a wooden chowki and a few belongings are visible. It is the same hut where six generations of Khalifa's ancestors lived; he lives here with his wife.

Khalifa traces his roots to Mahoba himself. He says that his ancestors were residents of the Mahoba region, and they fled during the reign of Akbar and settled in Bihar. He adds that his ancestors belonged to the Rajput caste. On reaching Bihar, his ancestors took up the family tradition of singing Alha-Udal for a livelihood. The art was passed down the generations.

Muslim Khalifa's life is a saga of its own. He says he is grateful for the gifts that Alha-Udal songs brought him but nurses some regrets. He brought up his three children and got them married with the money he earned from singing, but he says he can no longer sustain his family by singing and playing the dholak. He gets invited to only a few domestic events and earns Rs. 300-500 per performance.

There was a day when his son asked him what property he had made, and Khalifa was heartbroken. "My son's question gave me pause. I realised that I couldn't really save any money by singing Alha-Udal. I couldn't buy a piece of land to build a house. Wherever I went, I got a lot of respect, but only enough money to fill my stomach." He told someone ruefully.

He says "Generations of my family have lived here, but the land upon which my hut stands is government land, on the bank of a government pond."

"My father, grandfather and their ancestors used to only sing Alha-Udal. I also sing it now because I am passionate about it. But the younger generations do not care about it."

"Earlier, Khurdak baja - the accompaniment of instruments like shehnai and tabla- was played at weddings. It was replaced by Angrezi baja , where drums, trumpets, shehnai, keyboards, and more, are played simultaneously. Then there was the trolley, where local singers would sing to the music of angrezi baja . Now the DJ is ruling the market. All other instruments have become obsolete," Khalifa says.

"It saddens me that after my death, there may be no trace left of this art in my family," he adds.

This is the reality of modern-day time and changing landscape of technological development. But society cannot ignore Khalifa who has created an imprint on the social fabric with his legendry contribution of singing and keeping alive the valor of Alha- Udal of Bundelkhand region.

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