

Equal access to justice

The Union government's decision to establish a bench of the High Court of Jammu and Kashmir in Ladakh is a significant step for the Union Territory. It should not be seen as merely an administrative decision. For people living in a vast and geographically difficult region like Ladakh, it can make access to justice faster, easier and more practical. For years, distance has been one of the biggest challenges for people in Ladakh seeking legal remedies before the higher judiciary. The region's difficult terrain, extreme weather and scattered population can make every journey costly and time-consuming. A High Court bench closer to the people will reduce that burden and allow citizens to access legal services they are constitutionally entitled to without having to undertake long journeys. This is precisely why the decision deserves to be viewed as more than the creation of another judicial institution. It strengthens the idea that the delivery of justice cannot remain distant from the people simply because they live in remote or difficult geographical conditions. The move will significantly enhance access to justice for citizens living in remote areas of Ladakh. The decision also comes with an assurance that the Centre remains committed to the all-round development of the Union Territory and to ensuring constitutional safeguards. The importance of the announcement becomes even greater in the context of Ladakh's continuing demands for stronger political, administrative and constitutional safeguards. The Leh Apex Body and the Kargil Democratic Alliance have been raising concerns relating to land, employment, political representation and the institutional structure of the Union Territory. Against this backdrop, strengthening an institution as fundamental as the judiciary sends an important message about the Centre's approach towards Ladakh. The decision is also yet another testimony to how central Ladakh has remained to the Narendra Modi government's vision and focus over the last decade. Since the creation of the Union Territory, the emphasis has been on improving connectivity, infrastructure, tourism and administrative access in a region that was for decades constrained by its remoteness. The creation of a High Court bench adds another important layer to this transformation. Development is not only about roads, airports, tourism numbers or new buildings. It is also about ensuring that citizens can approach institutions of the state with ease and confidence. Justice is perhaps the most important of these institutions. Ladakh's geography has always presented unique challenges. The answer cannot be to allow distance to become a barrier to governance. Institutions must travel closer to the people. The proposed High Court bench is an example of precisely that approach. At the same time, the decision should not be seen as an end in itself. Its real success will depend on how quickly and effectively the bench becomes accessible to ordinary citizens. Adequate infrastructure, judicial resources and efficient procedures will be essential. The Centre has taken an important step. Geography should not decide how easily a citizen can seek justice. In a remote frontier region, bringing the higher judiciary closer to the people is not just good administration. It is a reaffirmation of the constitutional promise of equal access to justice.

Vande Mataram

ANOTHER VOTE-BANK BATTLE?

POONAM I KAUSHISH

What's in a song? It's melodious, lyrical and popular. Not if it's Vande Mataram, which has become less a national song and more a political weapon between BJP-Opposition tu-tu-mein-mein. BJP accuses Congress of insulting it by restricting its rendition to the first two stanzas calling its bête noir anti-national, "new Muslim League" and follower of appeasement politics. Congress insists its position is rooted in history, on 1937 decision to sing only the first two stanzas at public gatherings. A classic case of political theatre by both.

It started with Parliament passing The Prevention of Insults to National Honour (Amendment) Bill, 2026 in the Budget session which makes "insult" to Vande Mataram punishable by up to three years imprisonment placing it on power with national anthem.

Recall, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay composed Vande Mataram 1875. Rabindranath Tagore sang it at 1896 Congress session and it became a rallying cry against British rule. While the first two stanzas are an invocation of the motherland, nothing explicitly Hindu. The subsequent stanzas introduce Hindu religious imagery. The motherland is associated with Goddesses Durga, Lakshmi and Saraswati.

Subsequently, in 1937 the Congress Working Committee under Nehru adopted a resolution whereby only the first two stanzas of Vande Mataram would be sung as concerns were raised by Muslim leaders over the later religious imagery. And to keep the national movement united including Hindus, Muslims and other communities.

So, what's the fuss about? Why not sing all six stanzas instead of two? Is BJP weaponising a cultural symbol to distract from present-day challenges? And attempting to claim ownership of national symbols and heritage? Or using it to portray Congress as "anti-Hindu", "appeasementist" and unpatriotic? Does it realize history cannot be selectively inherited as Nagpur's BJP-controlled civic body sang only two stanzas recently, thereby weakening its moral high ground.

Is Congress defending an inclusive conception of nationalism or quietly protecting its Muslim vote bank? If it believes 1937 compromise remains valid as the later verses are religiously unsuitable for an inclusive modern secular republic it needs to explain why. It cannot hide behind history while refusing to acknowledge its decision also has obvious contemporary electoral implications.

Besides, if Vande Mataram has been Constitutionally and politically embraced as the national song, why should the country remain permanently frozen in a compromise made 90 years ago? The song was not written as a modern political manifesto against Muslims. Should a national symbol be treated as a historical whole or its later religious imagery makes the full version unsuitable for a religiously plural India? Why should singing it be made a test case of patriotism?

Politically, both BJP and Congress have taken what belongs to the nation and turned it into something that belongs to their politics. For BJP, singing all six stanzas is a test of nationalist authenticity and national pride. Besides, Vande Mataram fits neatly into its argument that Congress historically compromised national identity and diluted its position to accommodate Muslim League's political demands.

For Congress, defending the two-stanza version allows it to preserve a historical legacy while avoiding a direct confrontation with Muslim sensibilities. By stopping at two, the Party is using it as a defence of secular inclusiveness.

And there lies the real tragedy. A song that once united Indians against colonial rule is now being used to divide Indians against one another. Both have converted a cultural-historical question into a political identity contest. BJP is weaponising nationalism; Congress is weaponising secularism. Both are

weaponising the song.

The truth lies between the two extremes. There is nothing wrong with citizens learning, understanding and even singing Vande Mataram's all six stanzas. History should not be sanitized merely because portions of it make us uncomfortable.

turn Vande Mataram into another battlefield where patriotism is measured by one Party's volume and secularism by another Party's silence.

The irony is deliciously uncomfortable: A song that was once a symbol of resistance against the British has been dragged

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And neither should the State turn a religiously inflected 19 Century composition into a compulsory test of patriotism. Patriotism cannot be measured by how loudly one sings a song. Nor can secularism mean that every expression containing Hindu imagery must be edited out of national life. India's genius has always been its capacity to accommodate both.

Consequently, Vande Mataram's six stanzas should be taught and respected in their historical context. At State functions, Government prescribed protocol should determine what version is to be sung. However, Parties should not be forced into a loyalty test over which stanzas they choose to sing at their own programmes, unless Parliament or a Constitutional authority establishes otherwise.

The larger question is whether India has matured enough to discuss its history without converting every disagreement into a Hindu-vs-Muslim referendum. Because, if Congress is refusing the last four stanzas solely to protect its vote bank, it deserves to be called out. But if BJP is demanding all six stanzas primarily to paint Congress as the "new Muslim League" it deserves the same scrutiny.

A national song should be bigger than a Party, bigger than a vote bank and certainly bigger than an election slogan. But do not

into the very Hindu-Muslim binary that nationalism should have transcended. Both Parties have made Vande Mataram into a communal-secular issue. The song that once told Indians to bow to the motherland is today being used by politicians to ask Indians to bow before their respective versions of nationalism. Undeniably, an insult to the national song.

Sadly, our politicians forget Vande Matram was born as a cry against colonialism. Today, they have resurrected it as a cry against each other. Time they stop playing petty politricks. The patriotic song stands at the intersection of history, identity and contemporary politics. Whether it becomes an opportunity to reflect on how national symbols can unite a diverse country or merely another battleground for partisan sparring, will depend on how leaders choose to engage with it.

In the ultimate we need to realize that India's multi-pluralistic character, pulsating democracy and civil society is neither rigid nor frozen in time. It is constantly evolving. A song cannot make or mar the future of a nation or its people. Nor singing or not singing a test of patriotism. High time this frivolous and needless controversy is put to rest once and for all. There are more pressing issues which need our polity's attention. What says you? ---- INFA

India's Space Revolution: Private Enterprise fuels new scientific power

LALIT GARGG

India's space journey is no longer confined to government institutions and scientific laboratories. Today, it has evolved into a powerful convergence of innovation, entrepreneurship, young talent, private capital and global ambition—giving India fresh momentum on its path to becoming a major space power. The decision to open the space sector to greater private participation under the visionary leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi has been a decisive milestone in this transformation. An arena once viewed largely through the lens of government control and institutional limitations is now witnessing the emergence of hundreds of young enterprises, boldly pursuing new possibilities with their ideas, technologies and entrepreneurial spirit. Prime Minister Modi's interaction with and encouragement of Indian private space entrepreneurs is not merely an event; it is a powerful articulation of the direction of India's future. His vision of making India a global magnet for space talent, investment and entrepreneurship reflects the country's rapidly expanding role on the world stage.

India's achievements in space have an extraordinary history. Despite limited resources, the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) demonstrated remarkable scientific discipline, self-reliance and determination, earning global admiration. The journey that began with Aryabhata progressed to the Mars Orbiter Mission, while the Chandrayaan missions demonstrated India's growing capability to explore the Moon. Chandrayaan-3 created history by making India the first country to successfully land in the Moon's southern polar region. This was not merely a scientific triumph; it was a testament to Indian talent, technological confidence and the nation's ability to turn

seemingly impossible challenges into achievable goals. The Mars Orbiter Mission, achieved at a remarkably low cost, showcased India's capability in interplanetary exploration. Aditya-L1 took India's ambitions in solar research to a new level, while the Gaganyaan programme, aimed at sending Indian astronauts into space, signals the country's next major leap. This entire journey has made one thing clear: India is no longer merely following global achievements in space science; it possesses the capability to establish new benchmarks of its own.

The natural next step in this journey is greater private-sector participation. Following reforms in the space sector, the emergence of around 440 space-tech startups in India reflects the depth of this transformation. Some are engaged in satellite manufacturing, others are developing launch-vehicle technologies, while several are working in cutting-edge areas such as space-based data analytics, artificial intelligence, Earth observation, communications, weather forecasting and space-debris management. Skyroot Aerospace has taken a historic step towards private-sector rocket launches, while Agnikul Cosmos has demonstrated through indigenous technology and modern manufacturing methods that Indian private enterprises can establish themselves even in the highly complex field of space launches. These efforts are changing the very perception of space as an exclusive domain of scientific institutions. It is increasingly becoming a new frontier for young entrepreneurs, employment, research, investment and global business.

The most significant aspect of this transformation is that space is no longer merely about achievements in the sky; it is increasingly becoming an instrument for improving life on Earth. Satellite-based services can enhance agricultural productivity, monitor crops, identify water resources, provide accurate weather information, support fisheries and forest conservation,

and strengthen disaster management. During natural disasters such as floods, cyclones, droughts and landslides, satellite-derived information can make rescue and relief operations faster and more effective. Space technology can also play a crucial role in expanding communication and digital services in villages and remote areas. India's space programme, therefore, is no longer merely a matter of scientific prestige; it is becoming a powerful engine of social transformation and economic development.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's vision for the space sector appears to be rooted in precisely this broader perspective. His ambition is not merely to make India a country capable of reaching space, but to establish it as a leading force in the global space economy. He wants global talent to see India as a destination, Indian youth to enter the sector with innovative ideas, and India to emerge as a trusted hub for global space companies and investors. Such a vision can give a new direction to India's economic strength. In the coming years, the space economy will become increasingly intertwined with communications, weather forecasting, defence, agriculture, transportation, energy, disaster management and digital services. The countries that establish technological leadership in this domain will inevitably strengthen their economic as well as strategic influence.

Yet, while the opportunities before private space enterprises are immense, the challenges are equally formidable. Space technology requires enormous investment in research and development. The risks associated with launch failures are far greater than in most conventional industries. Highly complex technology, stringent safety standards, specialised human resources and long-term investment requirements make the sector exceptionally demanding. Therefore, the government's role cannot be limited merely to framing regulations. It must create policies that encourage inno-

vation, provide private enterprises with access to testing and research facilities, strengthen collaboration between research institutions and industry, and sustain investor confidence. Institutional mechanisms such as a single-window system for the space sector and the Indian National Space Promotion and Authorisation Centre (IN-SPACe) are creating an important foundation for this transformation.

Another major opportunity for India lies in connecting its traditional strengths of cost-effectiveness and efficiency in space technology with the global market. India has already demonstrated that it can deliver high-quality space services at comparatively low cost. If this capability is combined with the speed, innovation and risk-taking capacity of the private sector, India can capture a significant share of the global market in small-satellite launches, satellite manufacturing, space-based data and other space services. This would not only generate foreign-exchange earnings but also create large numbers of high-skilled employment opportunities.

Here, ISRO's experience represents invaluable capital for India's emerging space enterprises. The knowledge accumulated through decades of scientific endeavour, along with expertise in launch technology, satellite manufacturing and mission management, can serve as a powerful source of guidance for the country's young space companies. If government institutions and private enterprises develop a culture of collaboration alongside healthy competition, India's space capabilities can multiply manifold. The government's responsibility is to open the pathways; scientific institutions must share knowledge and experience; and the private sector must bring speed, innovation and market-oriented dynamism. The synergy of these three forces can propel India to unprecedented heights.

Prime Minister Modi's call for creating an environ-

ment in which young people from around the world aspire to build their future in India's space sector expresses a new Indian ambition in the global competition for talent. This is not simply a goal of increasing the number of rockets or satellites launched. It is a vision of transforming India into a global centre for space-based knowledge, technology and economic activity. In the years ahead, India's success in space will not be measured merely by how many satellites it launches or how many rockets it sends into orbit. The real test will be how effectively space technology improves the lives of Indian farmers, students, entrepreneurs, soldiers, scientists and ordinary citizens. India's space journey has now reached a stage where the sky is no longer the limit—it is an expanding field of opportunity. From the lunar triumph of Chandrayaan-3 to Aditya-L1's journey towards the Sun, from the historic success of the Mars Orbiter Mission to preparations for human spaceflight, and from government institutions to private startups undertaking launches, India has travelled an extraordinary distance. The next chapter must be even more ambitious. Scientific curiosity must be connected with entrepreneurship, public policy with private-sector energy, and Indian talent with global opportunities.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's vision for the space sector seeks to provide direction to precisely this convergence. India has already demonstrated its capabilities—from Earth to the Moon. The challenge now is to leave an equally enduring imprint in space through scientific excellence, economic strength, technological innovation and human leadership. This new space odyssey can become a vital link between the vision of an Atmanirbhar Bharat (self-reliant India) and the larger aspiration of a Viksit Bharat (developed India)—and can ultimately establish India as a space power whose achievements the world will remember for generations.