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# INDIA TODAY

**SWAGGER CENTRAL**  
K-Pop fans at the BTS ARMYLAND bash in Mumbai, Jul. 13

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## FROM THE EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

**K**im Namjoon! Kim Seokjin! Min Yoongi! Jung Hoseok! Park Jimin! Kim Taehyung! Jeon Jungkook! These are not names one might expect to hear chanted in India, and would doubtless leave most of our population baffled. But there's a swelling cohort in our midst for whom these names point to celestial bodies that form the very centre of their universe. Members of the Korean boy band BTS, with a crazed global following akin to Beatlemania, the 'Bangtan Boys' now command a massive desi fanbase. They attract tens of millions of hits from India on YouTube and Spotify, consistently among their top global numbers. But culturally speaking, they are no solo act. They lead what amounts to a full-fledged Korean wave in India.

We are calling it *The K-Craze*.

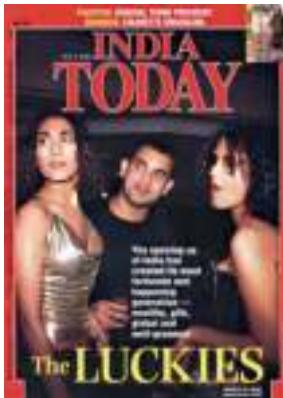
Music, or K-Pop, is only one aspect of a many-faceted infatuation: it encompasses the wildly popular K-dramas, K-cuisine, fashion and apparel, the Korean beauty and skincare industry and its widely admired ethos, extending all the way to a growing desire to learn the language and to travel to the country itself.

It is a global pop culture tsunami whose first landfall was in other East Asian countries, in the early days of satellite media. The wild popularity of Korean content among Chinese youth gave it its name, the *Hallyu* wave, now used worldwide. Over the past decade, despite the much larger cultural and linguistic chasm, the phenomenon has started washing up on our shores. By now, it has left an indelible footprint, with astounding reach across class and geography. At one end are the ultra-cosmopolitan millennials and Gen-Zers. But strikingly, you also have innumerable faceless youngsters from India's fast-modernising hinterland, like H. Subhashree, a 31-year-old nurse from Bolangir, Odisha, who, by now, knows as much Korean as she does English, acquired solely through her staple diet of K-dramas and K-Pop. The phenomenon is a fascinating window to how low-cost WiFi and access to online platforms are levelling the field and creating a more uniformly globalised public in India.

According to a 2024 'Overseas Hallyu survey' by the South Korean government, India now ranks among the top 'K-crazed' countries. The latest edition of the All India K-Pop Contest, held annually since 2011, saw an astounding 1,278 teams participate in regional rounds, from big cities to Itanagar. Beyond music, Korean entertainment is a full cosmos, and India is voyaging through all parts of it. K-dramas, with their simple, universal and clean-cut romances, have millions of ordinary Indian women plugged in, subtitles and all. Korean content on OTT is viewed on average for 18.6 hours monthly, way above

the global average of 11.6 hours. Korean is now the most watched non-Indian language on Netflix, after English. Season 1 of *Squid Game*, Netflix's chilling Korean survival drama, stayed in India's Top 10 for 39 weeks.

The love is out in the open, spilling into urban landscapes. Malls and fancy bazaars now feature Korea-inspired photo booths where fans strike poses with quirky props. Newly minted converts to Korea's rigorous 10-step beauty regimen swear by brands like TIRTIR, Laneige and Cosrx. Over 60 brands have wended their way to India; a Google search for a 'store near me' yields plenty of hits in the big cities, and all online platforms deliver K-beauty right at home, with Amazon registering a 75 per cent jump in the segment.



▲ July 2, 2001

**T**here's every sign that the fetish has gone more than skin-deep. India has produced at least two bona fide K-Pop stars: Sriya Lenka (from Odisha) and Aria (from Kerala). Indians are now travelling to Korea for more than business; in 2024, traffic increased by 44 per cent over the previous year. A 2022 Duolingo study also ranked Korean among the top five languages studied in India. Food is another frontier. The appetite is fast-growing, even in Tier-3 cities. Sales of ramyeon instant noodles are up 56 per cent. Swiggy orders for Korean food are soaring even in places like Surat, Nashik,

Kollam and Patna. Blue Tokai and Chaayos have added Korean cream cheese buns to their menu; McDonald's has experimented with K-inspired burgers. Korean restaurants, from the fancy to the modest, are everywhere.

For our cover story this week, Deputy Editor Suhani Singh and Senior Associate Editor Sonal Khetarpal track all aspects of this vast and variegated subculture. They trace its genesis to South Korea's concerted push to export its soft power globally as a desire-enhancing sauce that speeds up the uptake of its vast consumer product portfolio, from Samsung and LG electronic goods to Hyundai and Kia cars. It appears to be working, judging by how bilateral trade, expected to reach \$50 billion by 2030, has a significant tilt in Korea's favour. Korean exports to India saw a staggering 37 per cent rise in the last three fiscals, to \$21 billion in FY25. Cultural exports are a thing unto themselves. India has adapted to Italian pizza, Chinese noodles and Japanese sushi. Right now, Gujarat is falling for the sweet-savoury chilli of gochujang, Kerala digs the fermented cabbage pickle kimchi, and rice-loving Bihar may soon get besotted by the complex flavours of bibimbap.



(Aroon Purie)

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Photograph by MANDAR DEODHAR



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Korean music, drama, food and beauty products become the new cool for young Indians

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Cover photograph by BANDEEP SINGH

On cover, clockwise from bottom: Sai Chikane, Enakshi Ghosh, Salman Shaikh, Aditya Patel, Shreya Maheshwari



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# UPFRONT

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SEEKING ANSWERS  
Investigators at the  
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HINDUSTAN TIMES

## ► AHMEDABAD CRASH

# STILL UNDER A CLOUD

The preliminary report on the Air India crash raises more questions than answers, with fuel switches and pilot actions under scrutiny

By AVISHEK G. DASTIDAR

**W**HAT WAS MEANT TO CLARIFY the cause of one of India's deadliest aviation disasters has only added to the confusion. The preliminary report into the June 12 crash of the London-bound Air India flight in Ahmedabad—in which 260 people perished—was made public past midnight on July 11. But rather than offer closure, the 15-page document from the Aircraft Accident Investigation Bureau (AAIB) left experts and the public grappling with new uncertainties. Was it pilot error? A systems failure? Or, disturbingly, a deliberate act?

Events then thickened the intrigue. The report appeared to absolve Boeing, the 787-8 Dreamliner manufacturer, and engine-maker GE Aerospace, stating there were no safety advisories warranted. But the Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) changed tack on July 15. The regulator directed all Indian operators of certain Boeing aircraft—including the 787 and 737 series—to urgently inspect their fuel control switches. This was in line with a US Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) ‘advisory’, issued six years ago. According to the DGCA, several international carriers were already carrying out these checks. Indian opera-

tors have been asked to inspect and report on their fleet within a week “to ensure continued airworthiness and safety of operations”. DGCA chief Faiz Ahmed Kidwai did not respond to calls from INDIA TODAY.

Fuel control switches are critical components used to manage the flow of fuel to the engines. The AAIB report found that, moments after takeoff, both engines shut down—after the fuel control switches had moved from the ‘RUN’ to the ‘CUTOFF’ position “one after another with a time gap of one second”. One of the pilots attempted to turn them back on, but the aircraft had already lost too much altitude and crashed into nearby buildings.

The FAA’s Special Airworthiness Information Bulletin in December 2018 had warned that these switches on Boeing aircraft could be inadvertently moved, leading to “in-flight engine shutdown”, if installed with the locking feature disengaged. Air India admitted to investigators that it had never inspected the switches on the ill-fated aircraft, citing the FAA advisory’s non-mandatory nature.

### PILOT OR COMPUTER?

So, the big question: who flipped the fuel switches and why? The report, paraphrasing the Cockpit Voice Recorder (CVR) exchange, notes: “One of the pilots is heard asking the other why did he cutoff [sic]. The other pilot responded that he did not do so.” It does not, however, identify who said which part.

Since the switches are designed to require manual unlocking before operation, some aviation experts find it implausible that a pilot could accidentally flip both within a second—suggesting a technical glitch. Sam Thomas, president of the Airline Pilots Association of India, calls the report “biased” against the crew. He claims the truth will emerge only when the entire CVR transcript, not just paraphrased excerpts, are made public.

Others point to the complex interplay of systems aboard the Dreamliner, highlighting potential flaws that need not entail human error. A



## Who Flipped the Switch?

Seconds after takeoff, both fuel control switches moved from ‘RUN’ to ‘CUTOFF’, shutting down both engines

The switches require deliberate unlocking, casting doubt on both being flipped accidentally within a second

Experts remain divided—was it a system fault, a procedural response to engine failure, or a deliberate act?

2020–21 bulletin from GE, issued via the FAA, warned that on certain GENx-2B engines, tiny solder balls beneath a microprocessor could crack over time. This degradation in the electronic engine control (EEC) units, the bulletin noted, could lead to a mid-flight “loss of thrust control”. Critics cite historical issues with Boeing 787’s computer-triggered thrust reduction, suggesting a possible failure of the Thrust Control Malfunction Accommodation system, which works in tandem with EEC, to help differentiate whether the plane is airborne or on the ground.

Then there are those who suspect intentional human action. Captain Steve Scheibner, a US-based commercial pilot and aviation commentator, asks what could drive a pilot to manually cut off both fuel supplies and then deny it. He points to the inclusion of an “aviation psychologist” on the AAIB’s investigation team as a possible indicator that mental health is being explored as a cause. For those of his ilk, the incident echoes the Germanwings

Flight 9525 crash of 2015, where the co-pilot—previously treated for “suicidal tendencies”—deliberately crashed an Airbus A320 into the French Alps, killing 150 people.

### INTERVENTION OR ERROR?

But there’s a competing theory: that the switches were manually moved because the engines had already failed, and not the other way around. Aviation safety expert Captain Mohan Ranganathan describes the event as “human intervention” rather than human error. He speculates that the pilots may have been trying to follow Boeing’s standard procedure for dual-engine failure: switch both fuel levers to ‘CUTOFF’, then back to ‘RUN’ within a second. According to Ranganathan, the flight’s data logs, available in the preliminary report, suggest the crew was attempting this sequence. “The next step is to deploy the Ram Air Turbine (RAT) by pressing and holding the RAT switch for one second,” he adds. (RAT provides emergency power to the aircraft in case of total engine failure.) However, they may not have been able to complete the final requirement—accelerate to 270 knots; the maximum recorded speed was 180 knots. Sanjeev Kapoor, a retired air marshal, reinforces this possibility, noting that a ‘Mayday’ was sent and the RAT was deployed.

The final investigation report is likely still months away and, with it, definitive answers. For now, the AAIB’s inquiry remains a complex, multi-agency global effort, also involving Boeing, GE and the US National Transportation Safety Board. Air India CEO Campbell Wilson has cautioned against premature conclusions, emphasising that the preliminary findings did not point to any mechanical or maintenance faults in the aircraft. However, for the families of the 260 victims—241 on board and 19 on the ground—such assurances offer little solace. In the end, the answers unearthed from this tragedy may do more than explain what went wrong—they may help ensure that such a disaster never happens again. ■



▼ GLASSHOUSE

## BHAGWAT'S BROAD HINT

**R**SS sarsanghchalak **Mohan Bhagwat** may have gently lobbed a saffron-tinted grenade among the Sangh ranks. "Those in public life should step aside after 75," said the Sangh supremo, who himself hits the mark this September. Sangh-watchers are already reading deep into the tea leaves. Was it self-reflection or a veiled dig at others overstaying their political welcome? Only two previous RSS chiefs—M.D. Deoras and K.S. Sudarshan—have voluntarily stepped down, both due to health issues. Bhagwat, on the other hand, is fighting fit. If he does exit on schedule, it would be a first in Nagpur's no-retiring-till-dote tradition. More importantly, it will make matters a little shifty for Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who also hits the same age milestone in September. Nagpur is vague. Delhi is silent. But the whispers are getting louder.

Illustrations by **SIDDHANT JUMDE**

▼ INTO THE WILD

## SPIRITUAL COEXISTENCE

Odisha's new CM **Mohan Charan Majhi** has embarked on a new divine mission: building a temple beside a wildlife sanctuary. In a heartfelt letter, the BJP leader has urged Union environment minister Bhupender Yadav to trim the eco-sensitive zone (ESZ) around the Balukhand Wildlife Sanctuary from a protective 500 metres to a token 50. The reason? A proposed Shree



Swaminarayan temple destined to grace the Puri-Konark Marine Drive happens to fall squarely within the ESZ. The CM has promised that the temple will tread lightly, and cause 'minimal disturbance' to wildlife. Meanwhile, the coastal sanctuary, still recovering from the devastation of Cyclone Fani, remains blissfully unaware that it may soon have a spiritual neighbour.



## IN POLL GEAR

The Assam assembly poll may still be eight months away, but CM **Himanta Biswa Sarma** is already in full campaign gear, personally overseeing the rollout of welfare schemes and fast-tracking infrastructure projects. A flyover in Guwahati, for instance, was completed in nine months, a record for the state. And it's not just the capital that's seeing action. Sarma has instructed all MLAs to stay put in their constituencies till polls in April next year, barring health emergencies or a direct summons. All this while juggling a full-blown campaign for the Bodoland Territorial Council elections scheduled later this year.

## Compliment that Wasn't

When **Prashant Kishor** called the Congress's **Kanhaiya Kumar** a "capable leader", it was more sympathy than endorsement. For, the Jan Suraaj Party chief was hinting that the Congress has all but mothballed Kanhaiya in Bihar, worried he might show up ally RJD's CM face, Tejashwi Yadav. The comment came hours after a viral video showed Kanhaiya being physically blocked from boarding Rahul Gandhi and Tejashwi's truck at a protest against the new voter rolls in Patna on July 9.



## SCI-TECH WATCH

By Ajay Sukumaran

### AN OPEN DATA PROJECT FOR CITY TRAFFIC SOLUTIONS

Believe it or not, Bengaluru, with its public transport woes, has the second largest fleet of city buses in India after Delhi. Every day, 4.6 million commuters (some 30 per cent of the city's population) ride nearly 7,000 buses of the Bangalore Metropolitan Transport Corporation (BMTC). The BMTC aims to increase ridership by another million by next year. Expanding the fleet is one way—1,779 new electric buses will roll out by October. The other, more

Tummoc and Namma Yatri, launched trip planning tools where passengers can access bus/metro schedules and even book rides on autorickshaws on a single platform.

#### REAL-TIME DATA STACK

BMTC is also working on the Bengaluru Transport Stack, an open data exchange platform that enables sharing of real-time data that could kickstart an innovation ecosystem in mobility solutions. The goal is to integrate different modes of transport and, in the pro-



HEMANT MISRA

## THE PEACEMAKER



When the Maran brothers clashed over Sun TV's massive dividend payouts, it was Tamil Nadu CM **M.K. Stalin** who stepped in to broker peace. The uncle (Stalin and the late Murasoli Maran were cousins) persuaded Dayanidhi Maran to withdraw his legal notice against elder brother Kalanithi, bringing the high-stakes feud to a quiet close. Party-watchers say the move echoed the kind of behind-the-scenes diplomacy the CM's father K. Karunanidhi was known for. Stalin's deft handling of the crisis served as a quiet rebuttal to those who feel he doesn't measure up.

**Kaushik Deka with Arkamoy Datta Majumdar, Amitabh Srivastava and Kavitha Muralidharan**

crucial one, involves data.

For the first time, the BMTC, and the Bangalore Metro Rail Corporation Ltd (BMRCL), have published their transport data in a globally recognised open data standard called General Transit Feed Specification. This was part of a start-up challenge that pitted developers to build digital tools for urban mobility using this data. Last week, two city-based mobility apps,

cess, increase operational efficiency, reduce travel time and aid traffic management. Ultimately, the plan is to sync mass transport systems and first-and-last-mile connections to make travelling easier for commuters. An 11-month-old project, the stack will have real-time data from public transport providers to micro-mobility services. For India's cities choked by traffic, tech solutions based on open data is the new frontier. ■

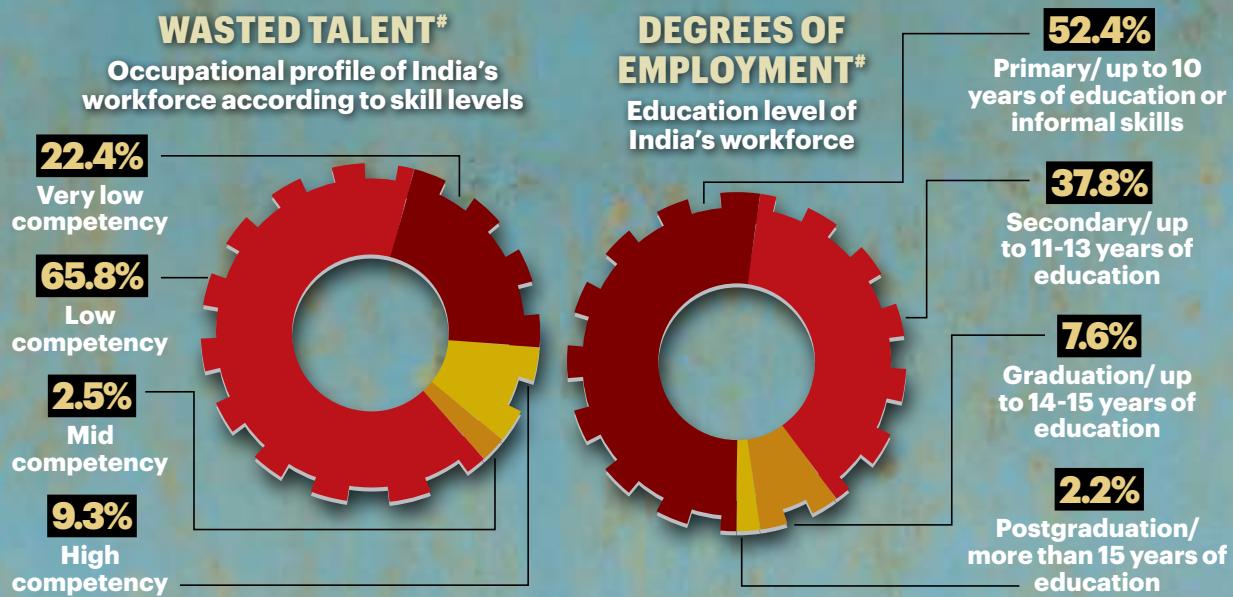
► EMPLOYMENT

# THE SKILLS MISMATCH

With one of the youngest workforces in the world, it is critical for India to ensure that the labour force is gainfully employed and equipped with future-ready skills.

Today, only 4 per cent of the workforce (aged 15-59) has received vocational training, despite 88 per cent being engaged in low-competency jobs. More importantly, over 50 per cent of graduates are employed in jobs that require lower skill levels than their educational qualifications—implying underutilisation of India's workforce. These are the findings of the report 'Skills for the Future: Transforming India's Workforce Landscape' by the Institute for Competitiveness.

Graphic by NILANJAN DAS | Text by SONAL KHETARPAL



## JOB PROFILES AS PER SKILL LEVELS\*

**Very low competency skills (up to primary level or up to 10 years of education/ informal skills):** Elementary occupations

**Low competency skills (up to secondary level or up to 13 years of education):** Clerks, service, and shop and market sales workers, skilled agricultural and fishery workers, craft and related trades workers, plant and machine operators and assemblers

**Mid competency skills (up to graduation or 14-15 years of education):** Associate professionals

**High competency skills (postgraduation or more than 15 years of education):** Professionals

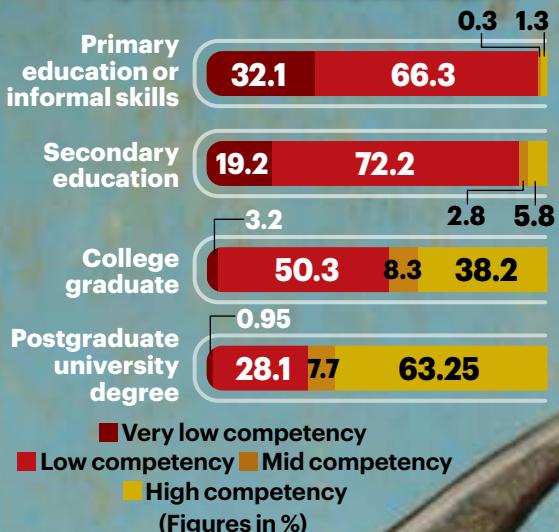
\*As per Ministry of Labour & Employment's National Classification of Occupations code

**"Data for 2023-24**

The report analysed Periodic Labour Force Survey data for the workforce aged 15 to 59 years from 2017-18 to 2023-24

## UNDEREMPLOYMENT PROBLEM

Nearly three-fourth of those with secondary education and half of all graduates are employed in low competency jobs



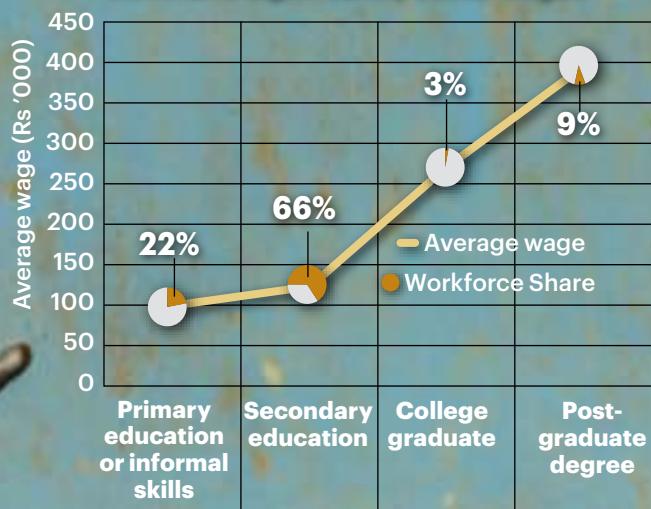
**46%**

of the workforce is engaged in low to semi-skilled roles, earning less than Rs 1 lakh per year

**68%**  
Received no technical and vocational education and training

## UNPAID, UNDervalued

India's labour market is dominated by low-skill workers, even as higher skills command significantly better wages



**9%**

Learning on the job

**11%**  
Hereditary

**6%**  
Self-learning

**4%**  
Received vocational training  
**2%**  
Others

**TRAINING GAP**

## REWIring THE WORKFORCE

### ► Ramp up data collection:

Comprehensive, disaggregated and time-series data on vocational education and skill development is missing, making it difficult to assess the success of skilling initiatives

► Set up a skill-based survey: A detailed regular survey, which captures the types of

courses individuals are enrolling in, its benefits and the nature of upskilling activities, is important to align capabilities with industry demands

### ► Future-centric vocational training:

A training and vocational educational system that is high-quality, sector-focused, employment- and future skills-based

needs to be integrated into the overall educational and skills landscape

### ► Update occupational data:

The labour ministry's data on job roles is outdated. Cloud computing, cyber security, AI, etc. need to be included to create new industry-relevant training programmes



# ANCHORED IN PROGRESS: ADANI'S VIZHINJAM PORT MARKS FIRST YEAR WITH STRATEGIC MARITIME MILESTONES

**With every TEU it handles, Vizhinjam is a bold bet on geography meeting ambition. The most strategically located maritime gateway is pulling out all stops to enhance India's connectivity, sovereignty, and standing in the global supply chain chessboard.**

**O**n a sun-drenched morning on June 9, as the towering silhouette of the MSC Irina—the world's largest container ship—edged into Vizhinjam's deep waters, India quietly rewrote the script of its maritime destiny. Stretching nearly 400 metres and capable of carrying over 24,000 containers, the Irina wasn't just another ship. It was a symbol—a declaration that India's long-standing dependence on foreign transshipment hubs might soon be history. Welcome to Vizhinjam International Seaport, one of India's most advanced and strategically located maritime gateway. The port was dedicated to the nation by Prime Minister Narendra Modi on May 2.

## Outsourcing India's transshipment: A thing of the past

For decades, over 75% of India's container cargo—especially from the south and west—was transshipped through foreign ports like Colombo (Sri Lanka), Singapore, Jebel Ali (Dubai, the UAE).

**"On one hand there is this big sea with so many opportunities and on the other hand, there is beauty of nature... amidst all this, there is this Vizhinjam deep-water seaport, a symbol of new-age development."**

Prime Minister, Narendra Modi



**MSC Irina is the world's largest container vessel to berth at an Indian port.  
The ship reached Vizhinjam port on June 9.**

This meant that Indian cargo—exports and imports alike—made a detour, increasing transit times, shipping costs and dependency on foreign infrastructure.

## A dream anchored in geography

Tucked at the southern tip of the Indian peninsula in Kerala, Vizhinjam sits barely 10 nautical miles off the busiest east-west global shipping lanes. First conceived as a Public-Private Partnership (PPP) and backed by an over ₹10,000-crore investment from the Government of Kerala, Government of India, and the Adani Group, Vizhinjam is a

bold bet on geography meeting ambition.

## Steel, sea and smart technology

But Vizhinjam is more than location. It's engineering brilliance carved into the coastline. With a natural depth of 24 metres, it is the only Indian port where Ultra Large Container Vessels can dock without continuous dredging—a costly, environmentally taxing necessity elsewhere. The port's backbone is its 2.96 km breakwater—the deepest in the country—protecting its 800-metre container berth, soon to be extended by another 1,200 metres.

**"Today, at Vizhinjam, history, destiny and possibility came together as a 30-year-old dream of Kerala became India's gateway to the world. We are proud to have built India's first deep-sea automated port—a future global transhipment hub."**

Gautam Adani, Chairman, Adani Group

What truly sets Vizhinjam apart is its digital muscle. A fleet of artificial intelligence (AI)-powered systems—eight semi-automated ship-to-shore cranes, 24 automated yard cranes, and a vessel management system developed in collaboration with the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT)-Madras—helps orchestrate the dance of ships, containers, and logistics with astonishing precision. Its integrated connectivity plan, including a dedicated 10.76 kilometre rail corridor (9 km underground), links Vizhinjam seamlessly to NH-66 and India's freight arteries, ensuring speed inland matches pace offshore.

### Global confidence comes calling

The port's trial phase has already seen 7,39,000 TEUs (Twenty-foot equivalent units) handled and over 350 vessels docked. But the defining moment came when Swiss shipping giant MSC made Vizhinjam a regular stop on its Jade and Dragon routes.

Six mega vessels from MSC—including MSC Türkiye, MSC Claude Girardet, and the iconic MSC Irina—have since docked here, turning Vizhinjam into a preferred South Asian anchor. Their Liberian flags flapping in the salty breeze, these behemoths signalled a clear shift in maritime gravity.



ULCV MSC Türkiye came calling at Vizhinjam deep water seaport in Kerala on April 9.

### A geopolitical lever

Vizhinjam's potential stretches far beyond cargo. It's a strategic asset in India's global playbook. Its emergence complements national initiatives like Prime Minister Gati Shakti and the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), a counterweight to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). With every TEU it handles, Vizhinjam enhances India's connectivity, sovereignty, and standing in the global supply chain chessboard.

### Legacy meets vision

Ironically, Vizhinjam isn't new to maritime fame. As far back as the 2nd century Before Common Era (BCE), under the Ay dynasty, it was a spice-exporting hub on ancient ocean routes. In 2025, it's not just reviving that legacy—it's modernising it for the next century.

Already, the port has catalysed 600 direct and over 5,000 indirect jobs. It is spurring investment in warehousing, bunkering, hospitality, and tourism. As it scales operations, it is poised to

become a regional economic engine, powering Kerala's—and India's—ambitions.

### India's boldest maritime moment

In a world shaped by how fast goods move and where they stop, Vizhinjam is more than infrastructure. It's India's boldest maritime moment in decades—a port that doesn't just greet ships, but steers strategy. As MSC Irina sailed away, its departure wasn't just the end of a call. It was the beginning of India's deep-sea confidence.

### One year of Vizhinjam

The port marked its first anniversary on July 11. Exactly one year ago, on July 11, 2024, the seaport hosted its maiden container vessel, MV San Fernando. During its first year of operations Vizhinjam port:

- Handled over 8.3 lakh TEUs
- Hosted more than 390 vessels, including 20 ULCVs
- Became the fastest-scaling port on India's southeast coast
- Trained India's first female automated crane operators from the local community

**Investment:** ₹10,000 crore + (\$1.2 billion)

**Phase 1 capacity:** 1.5 million TEUs a year

**Planned capacity:** 4.5 million TEUs, scalable to 6.5 million TEUs a year

**Berths:** Initial 800 metres (to be extended by 1,200 metres)

**Breakwater length:** 2.96 km (deepest and among the longest in India)

**Automation:** Fully automated. AI-based vessel traffic management, automated cranes

**Rail connectivity:** 10.76 km dedicated rail corridor, of which 9 km is underground

**Job creation:** Over 600 direct and 5,000 indirect jobs till date

**Strategic alignment:** Part of PM Gati Shakti, India-Middle East-Europe Corridor (IMEC)

*Source: Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways*



ULCV MSC Claude Girardet at Vizhinjam on September 13, 2024.

# STATE SCAN

ODISHA: LAW AND DISORDER PG 16

TAMIL NADU: THE GODS OF EDUCATION PG 18



RANJAN RAHI

► BIHAR

## BIHARI VS 'BAHARI'

**'Native' or not? The debate creates a domino effect beyond electoral rolls. Nitish puts a binding clause on gender quotas: it will be exclusively for women domiciled in Bihar now**

By Amitabh Srivastava

**B**IHAR, IN MANY WAYS, IS GROUND ZERO for post-Mandal reservation politics. Innovations on that had started back in 2013, when the Nitish Kumar government introduced a landmark policy, reserving 35 per cent of police jobs—within caste quotas and beyond—for women. By 2016, this policy was extended to all government posts in the state. Now, nearly a decade later, there's a new twist to reservation policies.

Amid a raging debate about the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls and its concomitant focus on natives and outsiders, a piece of evolution has crept into that old schema of quotas that readjusts it to this new reality of electoral politics.

In a quiet yet politically charged manoeuvre on July 8, the Bihar cabinet amended its flagship gender quota, restricting the 35 per cent state government jobs exclusively to women domiciled in Bihar. For the first time, aspirants from outside the state—*baharis*—have been formally excluded. On paper, this appears a mere tightening of bureaucratic criteria.

Politically, however, the chain of cause and effect is clear. The SIR process is creating an atmosphere polarised on nativism, of the sort only occasionally seen before in Bihar. In 2015, for instance, Nitish had drummed up some passions about Prime Minister Narendra Modi's "DNA remark" and framed it as a conflict between "an outsider and



me". Today, again, the truism that only Bihar residents can vote in its elections has been granted a certain currency. So, it makes perfect sense, with just three months or so left for the assembly election, to fine-tune quota policies to catch that vibe.

There was indeed some goading. Jan Suraaj Party leader Prashant Kishor had mounted a persistent critique on this front, accusing Nitish of opening Bihar's job market to outsiders in pursuit of national ambitions. RJD leader Tejashwi Yadav, too, had recently promised to implement a 100 per cent domicile-based policy should his party form the next government. To head them off, Nitish appears to have stepped into—or at least nodded towards—the long-simmering *bahari-bhitari* (outsider-insider) debate. What better way than to inaugurate this with women, a constituency Nitish has long

### Takeaways

► **The 35 per cent state jobs quota for women is now only for those domiciled in Bihar**

► **This is a tactical nod from Nitish towards the new insider-outsider paradigm**

cultivated. Especially since women are now increasingly seen as decisive in shaping the state's electoral fortunes, with a voting percentage that has consistently outgunned that of male voters by a good country mile over the last decade and a half.

### INSIDER POLITICS

With the latest quota policy, Bihar has joined the ranks of states like Maharashtra and Jharkhand, where the insider-outsider divide

has long featured prominently in political discourse. For years, Nitish has carefully distanced himself from the more incendiary rhetoric of his alliance partners, who frequently raised concerns about Bangladeshi infiltrators and invoked the *bahari-bhitari* narrative. While he never openly endorsed such language, this latest move signals a subtle yet significant shift.

By restricting job reservations to domiciled Bihari women, Nitish appears to have crafted his own version of the insider-outsider paradigm—less inflammatory, perhaps, but no less exclusionary. It's a quiet deployment of weaponry he once abjured, now repurposed in the language of administrative reform. In doing so, he has stepped into a narrative he once preferred to observe from the margins. ■

### ► HIMACHAL PRADESH

## A DELUGE OF DOUBTS

**Flood relief offers political relief for the Himachal CM and his beleaguered party, but its soil is eroding**

By Anilesh S. Mahajan

**T**HE FLASH FLOODS ravaging Himachal Pradesh have had a curious corollary. They created an overall optics of solidarity for the Sukhvinder Singh Sukhu regime, which is not an especially solid monolith in the best of times. Handling a major crisis, the CM earned attention with his proactive presence: coordinating relief, seeking central aid, reassuring tourists. He has good reason to try and capture the space from above. Local body elections are slated for later this year, and the ruling Congress has no feet on the ground—literally. Figuratively, it has two left feet. The



► **TAKING STOCK** Himachal CM Sukhvinder Singh Sukhu at a flooded area, Jul. 9

unresolved power tussle between Sukhu loyalists and the camp led by state party chief Pratibha Singh keeps it in a state of full motor paralysis.

Masking or perhaps mirroring that disarray, Sukhu threw a googly on July 10. He deferred the seat reservation roster for local body polls, saying it could not be decided in the absence of fresh census data on precise caste demographics. That earned him a reprimand from the Election Commission. Expect the usual rhetoric before that settles down. But this deflection of spotlight stems from acute need.

### FRACTURED FRONTLINE

Flood relief offers a spot of political relief. Bulldozers are working to clear landslides, and temporary bridges springing up across torrential nullahs.

for the 2027 assembly election. Last December, its mandal-level network got a higher degree of resolution, going from 74 units to 171.

The Congress's top-heavy, ad hoc mode of functioning offers a stark contrast. It scarcely hides the fracture, which is more than hairline. Sukhu holds sway over the government and has built his own support base. But Pratibha, 69-year-old widow of ex-CM Virbhadra Singh, continues to command emotional and political loyalty in key regions and, with minister-son Vikramaditya, has not been above dangling the threat of donning saffron to browbeat the high command.

In public, Sukhu promises a functional coexistence that doesn't work in reality. Earlier this year, in a bid to mirror the BJP's structure, his side

By Arkamoy Datta Majumdar

**O**N THE NIGHT OF JULY 14, Soumyashree Bisi, a 20-year-old student from Fakir Mohan Autonomous College in Balasore, succumbed to over 90 per cent burns at AIIMS Bhubaneswar. A shocker that became only the latest proof of a collapsing institutional machinery in Odisha—a chilling series of cases that includes a relapse to brutal custom, caste atrocities, violent insubordination, besides a surge in gender violence.

Bisi had set herself ablaze on her campus two days earlier, allegedly driven to desperation by the failure of authorities to act on her repeated complaints of sexual harassment against her professor, Samir Sahu. She had made every possible attempt to seek help: writing to the principal, lodging a formal complaint with an internal committee, reaching out to the Union education minister, the CM's Office, even personally meeting Balasore MP Pratap Sarangi. But the silence of the system was deafening. As ex-CM Naveen Patnaik wrote in a social media post, "If even one person had taken responsibility...perhaps the girl's life could have been saved."

His indictment joined a burst of national outrage. Even President Droupadi Murmu visited AIIMS, hours before the student's death. CM Mohan Charan Majhi promised the "strictest punishment" and announced an ex gratia of Rs 20 lakh. The principal and the accused professor were suspended and arrested. But this flurry of post-facto activity did little to stem the fury. The Congress called a statewide bandh, while Rahul Gandhi said it was "not a suicide, but a systematic murder by the BJP's system".

Barely a year after reins passed to the BJP, Odisha seems to be in the grip of a near-anarchic spell few had anticipated. The Majhi government's tenure has coincided



► HP Congress chief Pratibha Singh at a flood-affected site in Mandi, Jul. 6

But the ruling party itself presents a devastation zone, with too many broken bridges. District- and block-level units were dissolved way back in November 2024. So was the entire Pradesh Congress Committee (PCC). These have not yet been reconstituted. Doing so may seem like primary healthcare, but it's infinitely complicated by the factionalism.

The BJP, sensing the vacuum, has wasted no time in deploying its full infantry. Former CM Jairam Thakur has been crisscrossing the state, lending weight to the BJP's own relief efforts, sharpening its narrative for local body polls—and down the winding hill road,

### Takeaways

- Flood relief has become the primary arena for political showmanship for all sides
- Sukhu has earned credit for his visible ground presence
- That only masks an utter devastation at the grassroots: its district- and block-level units still stand dissolved

proposed increasing district units from 13 to 17 and block units from 68 to 140. A wary Pratibha camp resisted, saying it should be the PCC chief's call.

In March, at a 'summit meet' in Delhi, 16 AICC observers, most new to the state's political currents, strove in vain to create a consensus. The high command sticks to playing referee rather than enforcer: the cross-voting by six MLAs in last year's Rajya Sabha polls is still fresh in memory. Its only move came in February, when Rajiv Shukla was replaced by Rajya Sabha MP Rajni Patil as state in-charge. Not enough to set the grassroots on fire. ■



CRYING SHAME  
CCTV capture of Soumyashree Bisi's self-immolation, Balasore, Jul. 12; inset, video grab of two Dalit men purportedly being forced to eat grass in Ganjam district

► ODISHA

# LAW AND DISORDER

**A college girl's self-immolation, tribal kangaroo courts' bizarre punitive decrees, atrocities against Dalits, a spree of rape: Odisha stares at a law and order nadir**

with a social climate of fear, humiliation and impunity. State BJP spokesperson Anil Biswal offers a combative counter: "During BJD rule, there were at least 100 cases that directly involved their leaders, unlike now." But in sheer quantity and quality of crime, so to speak, the present crisis may well be able to hold its own.

## STATE OF FEAR

Consider a tribal couple being beaten up, tied to a bamboo yoke like bullocks and forced to plough farmland—for falling in love and marrying secretly. This was not ancient or medieval India. It happened on July 9, and an Indian astronaut was in space while these atavistic scenes unfolded in Kanjamjodi village of Rayagada district. A village 'public', including minors, watched the humiliation. So did a wider shocked public, on a viral video.

It was an exemplary punishment, laid down by a kangaroo court, because the couple were related—the man and his father's cousin, both around 32, had violated old taboos by daring to be together. They were later marched to a shrine, subjected to "purification rituals", then banished

from the village. Only public outrage and social media fury got police to the village. A case is now duly under way.

In Ganjam's Dharakot, two Dalit men, falsely accused of cattle smuggling, were forced to crawl with blades of grass between their teeth and drink sewer water. Again, the dehumanisation was filmed, and the video circulated and celebrated online. Nine arrests did come after an outcry, but the confidence with which the crime was carried out—allegedly by groups linked to Hindutva—reflected a dangerous boldness.

Between mid-June and early July alone, Odisha also recorded seven horrifying cases of rape: a woman

## Takeaways

■ Between mid-June and early July alone, the state reported seven shocking cases of rape

■ In Malkangiri's Kotamateru village, at least 30 Christians were injured in an attack

■ A senior Bhubaneswar Municipal Corporation official was beaten up by goons in his office allegedly linked to the BJP

gangraped on Gopalpur sea beach by 10 men; a 17-year-old girl raped by a clinic owner in Ganjam; an 11-year-old Class VII student tied up and raped in a school toilet by a distant relative, also in Ganjam; a 31-year-old woman gangraped in Mayurbhanj; in Keonjhar, a teenage girl found hanging from a tree with injury marks, her family alleging rape and murder. Some protocol arrests, but beyond that, a deafening—and damning—silence.

## COMPILACY BY INACTION

Religious minorities have had the horrific memories of Kandhamal rekindled. On June 21, nearly 400 people armed with axes and sticks stormed a Christian prayer service for the agricultural season in Malkangiri's Kotamateru village, leaving at least 30 Christians injured—seven of them seriously. Community leaders accused the Bajrang Dal of orchestrating the attack, but the police called it a "dispute between brothers". No arrests. Days later, another mob in the same district brutally beat Christian families during a meal. Again, no substantial police response—reinforcing the perception that the state either cannot or will not act.

Biswal doesn't deny any of these incidents, but says, "In all cases, we have taken prompt action. In the Balasore incident, the University Grants Commission has initiated an inquiry, and the state government has set up a high-level inquiry committee." For now, though, the ledger is brimming over with too many symptoms of a systemic breakdown. ■

# THE GODS OF EDUCATION

**Should temple funds be used for building colleges? An old debate about state control of temples heats up with political rhetoric in poll-bound Tamil Nadu**

By Kavitha Muralidharan



ADOBESTOCK

**C**ONTROL OVER TEMPLES—and, more to the point, temple funds—has been historically an emotive point of contention between traditionalists and rationalists in the South. The former prefer autonomy for the religious sphere and see any apparent overreach by the latter as a transgression—it's also an easy way to raise public passions. The latest shot across the bow came in a campaign remark by AIADMK leader Edappadi K. Palaniswami (EPS). Speaking during a statewide tour, he accused the ruling

DMK of misusing temple funds for purposes unrelated to religion. That has escalated into a wider clash involving electoral strategies, the law, and the legacy of Dravidian politics.

“Even seeing temples irritates the DMK,” EPS told crowds in Coimbatore. “They are taking all the temple money and building colleges. People like you, with good hearts, donate into *hundiylas* for temple development. That money goes to the Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments (HR&CE) department. They’re diverting it. Isn’t it unfair? Shouldn’t

RELIGION FOR RELIGION'S SAKE? The Sri Meenakshi temple in Madurai, Tamil Nadu

the government fund colleges from its own resources?”

The DMK backlash was sharp and swift. “Even during his time, temple funds were used to inaugurate colleges. The HR&CE Act clearly allows surplus temple funds to be used for educational and charitable purposes,” CM M.K. Stalin said, in his first jab. Then he let go of a roundhouse: “From being a dubbed voice of the BJP, EPS has now become its original voice.” Deputy CM Udhayanidhi Stalin was no less vitriolic: “EPS has fully transformed into a Sanghi. This is not the voice of the AIADMK; it’s the voice of the RSS-BJP.”

## FIGHT FOR FAITH

There’s context to the DMK’s charge. For decades, the RSS-BJP has said temples should be administered solely by ‘devotees’. The demand was

### Takeaways

- EPS rakes up the question of whether temple funds should serve non-devotional needs
- DMK hits back, painting his stance as ‘anti-education’

revived at the World Murugan Devotees Conference at Madurai, in June. With BJP leaders in attendance, the event passed a resolution calling for ‘liberating’ temple affairs from state control. On July 12, the party raked up the issue again, insisting on transparency to prevent “the plunder of temple wealth” and demanding a white paper on the issue. “This talk of building new colleges is nothing but a smokescreen,” S.G. Suryah, state secretary of the Tamil Nadu BJP, told INDIA TODAY. “The government’s real record is one of neglect; thousands of

# WHEN POLITICS GOES SOUTH

**A Shinde Sena MLA harks back to the old nativist credo, but only as a cover for a mess of his own making**

By Dhaval S. Kulkarni

temples are crumbling under its watch. Devotees' money must go toward preserving our sacred heritage, not funding the state's agenda. Our demand is simple: free our temples. Let the devotees, the true stakeholders, manage them."

Tamil writer Imayam, who serves as the vice-chairman of the TN SC/ST Commission, finds the idea of blocking temple money for education "not just wrong, but vicious". Tamil Nadu has "historically resisted and won" against the "push to privatise religion and turn temples into exclusive zones", says the Sahitya Akademi awardee. Indeed, temple funds gaining social purpose is no DMK innovation; way back in 1961, under Congress rule, surplus from the Palani temple helped set up the Palaniandavar College of Indian Culture.

Reeling a bit from the onslaught, EPS has since attempted to clarify his remarks. "I'm not against education," he said. "But when temples fund colleges, they often lack adequate facilities. Government-funded colleges are better equipped. That was my only point." But the framing of his original remarks has allowed the DMK to present the AIADMK's rhetoric as increasingly aligned with saffron—and anti-development.

Electorally, that can become an Achilles' heel for a substantial part of its vote base. Hitherto, it had been navigating through a zone of ambivalence. As the 2026 assembly election approaches, religion-oriented topics are likely to become even more politically charged, and the AIADMK may find it vexing to sail in two boats. For the DMK, it looks less troubling: an aggravation of the polity around religion only solidifies its base. ■

**A**nti-South Indian politics was the very first drum roll with which the Shiv Sena arrived on the stage of modern Indian politics. It clearly still has some juice left, judging by the curious way it made a fresh entry into the headlines—as an afterthought to a thoughtless act tailor-made for endless TV. The protagonist was Sanjay Gaikwad, an Eknath Shinde Sena MLA whose nature, by all accounts, resembles a typical Mumbai weather report: torrential, always with chances of strong thunder. This particular downpour started after a video surfaced of Gaikwad, clad in a vest and a towel around his waist, punching a hapless staffer at the MLA hostel at Nariman Point.

#### FRESH HEADACHE FOR SHINDE

If anything, the issue has ended up becoming a blow to an already beleaguered Shinde, who finds himself increasingly cornered in the ruling

Mahayuti alliance. The BJP is being adequately caustic about the deputy CM's inability to control his men, reviving the frequent characterisation of his Sena as a loose coalition of MLAs rather than a political party with a structure of command and internal checks and balances. The episode was shambolic enough to merit such a broad-brush taint.

In the video, Gaikwad, a second-term MLA from Buldhana in Vidarbha, is seen forcing a hostel employee to sniff dal in a carrybag, before punching him. The staffer at the Akashwani MLA hostel, right opposite Mantralaya in south Mumbai, falls. Gaikwad claims his fists of fury were goaded by poor quality dal and stale food, alleging that the canteen management is a repeat offender. The Maharashtra Food and Drug Administration (FDA) later inspected the canteen and suspended its licence.

Under fire for his lack of restraint, Gaikwad went on to burnish

► POWER OVER PEOPLE A video grab of Shiv Sena MLA Sanjay Gaikwad slapping a canteen worker in Mumbai, Jul. 9



► JHARKHAND

that point with a verbal volley on “the attitude of people from the South”. The said community, he said, “operated dance bars and ladies bars in Maharashtra” and “ruined its culture and youth”. His pique apparently originates with the canteen contractor, said to be a Shetty from Karnataka. The recourse to nativist vocabulary was a transparent attempt to deflect focus from his own misdemeanour, and its effect is minimised by the fact that the speaker has earned some renown as an equal opportunity offender.

Days earlier, he had made disparaging remarks about Chhatrapati Sambhaji, for which he had to

### Takeaways

► **Shinde Sena MLA Sanjay Gaikwad slaps a canteen staffer; video goes viral**

► **Later, he waxes indignant on “South Indians”, claiming they’re ruining Maharashtra**

apologise. In May, Gaikwad lashed out at the Maharashtra police, calling it “the most inefficient police department in India and the world”, with a compulsive penchant for “*hafta*” (extortion) to boot. That had made even CM Devendra Fadnavis see red. Last September, Gaikwad offered Rs 11 lakh to anyone who would “chop off the tongue” of Congress leader Rahul Gandhi. He also claimed to have killed a tiger and worn its tooth as a pendant. When AIMIM MP Imtiaz Jaleel criticised Gaikwad for his canteen exploits, he threatened to assault Jaleel too.

Shinde is said to have upbraided Gaikwad. After three days of Opposition protests, Fadnavis stepped in and a suo moto non-cognisable case was filed by the Marine Drive police. But the man remains defiant for now. ■

# LICENCE TO LOOT

**A liquor scam exposes a network of forged guarantees, policy manipulation and bureaucratic connivance**

By Amitabh Srivastava

**O**n June 17, when the Jharkhand Anti-Corruption Bureau (ACB) arrested former IAS officer Amit Prakash, he joined the ignominious ranks of two others who were arrested the previous month: serving IAS officer Vinay Kumar Choubey and former excise commissioner Gajendra Singh. All are now cooling their heels in judicial custody. So, what’s brewing? A full-blown excise scam—vatfuls of it, in fact. And net losses are pegged at Rs 38 crore.

Prakash, who retired last December after serving as excise commissioner and managing director of the Jharkhand State Beverage Corporation Ltd (JSBCL), stands accused of authorising payments totalling approximately Rs 11 crore to two liquor wholesalers, despite directives to withhold those funds. But the ramifications extend far beyond Prakash.

It all began to unfold through murmurings of a similar scam in neighbouring Chhattisgarh in 2024. In Jharkhand, it first came to light in May, when the ACB apprehended Choubey—once a key aide to chief minister Hemant Soren—on charges of causing massive financial losses to the exchequer. Since then, it has escalated into what seems a multi-layered case of systemic corruption.

At its core lies a nexus of bureaucrats, businessmen and excise officials who allegedly manipulated policies and institutional blind spots to run an illegal liquor syndicate spanning state borders. With 10 arrests so far, including those of private

operators and a hologram supplier, and amid calls for a CBI inquiry by the Opposition BJP, the racket marks a pivotal moment for public accountability.

Irregularities surround the 2022-23 excise policy—specifically, the appointment of placement agencies in contravention of norms. Allegations include rigged tenders, fake bank guarantees, sale of unaccounted domestic and foreign liquor via duplicate holograms and the generation of illicit commissions.

### DUBIOUS OPERATORS

Two agencies are central to the probe: Vision Hospitality Services & Consultants Pvt. Ltd and Marshan Innovative Security Services Pvt. Ltd. Empanelled by the excise department in June 2023, they were tasked with



► **BEHIND BARS** Amit Prakash and Vinay Choubey (top) in custody



SOMNATH SEN

operating retail liquor outlets across several districts. In January 2025, when Vision Hospitality failed to remit proceeds from three districts, the department initiated action to invoke the bank guarantee of Rs 5.35 crore. But a delayed follow-up and verification in March by JSBCL revealed the documents to be fabricated. According to ACB findings, Vision Hospitality's bank guarantee submitted in August 2023 was counterfeit. Even its December 2023 replacement guarantee was fraudulent.

Marshan Innovative, awarded the Dhanbad zone contract in November 2023, followed an almost identical trajectory. When its defaults persisted into January 2025 and JSBCL decided to invoke the bank guarantee of Rs 5.02 crore, Marshan approached the Jharkhand High Court to block the move. A verification in March confirmed that the document was forged—a replacement, too, reportedly appeared to be just an email confirmation.

Demand notices brought to light financial discrepancies, leading to the ACB probe. Investigators say that Vision Hospitality owed Rs 12.98 crore, while Marshan's

### Takeaways

► **A former IAS officer, a serving IAS officer, a former excise commissioner and seven others have been arrested for their alleged involvement in the Rs 38 crore scam**

► **Placement agencies Vision Hospitality and Marshan Innovative operated retail liquor outlets using forged bank guarantees**

► **The mandatory SFMS (Structured Financial Messaging System), as prescribed by the Reserve Bank of India, was allegedly circumvented to favour the private operators**

dues totalled Rs 25.47 crore.

The ACB alleges a coordinated effort between placement agencies and excise officials in Ranchi to suppress defaults and obfuscate liabilities. Excise officials reportedly brazenly disregarded RBI-mandated SFMS (Structured Financial Messaging System) protocols for bank guarantee verification. Investigators say Choubey played a central role in this premeditated dereliction. Internal audit mechanisms remained conspicuously dormant. Compliance officers raised no red flags. Leader of the Opposition Babul Marandi claims he exposed flaws as early as April 2022. "This scam did not simply happen; it was orchestrated. Those at the top were complicit," he alleges.

### INTERSTATE PLOT?

What makes the Jharkhand scam more concerning is its apparent cross-border blueprint. A parallel probe in Chhattisgarh uncovered an eerily similar racket, involving forged tenders, counterfeit holograms and the 'privatisation' of liquor profits in the name of reform. There, too, officials, wholesalers and placement agencies allegedly worked in concert.

The Enforcement Directorate had raided Choubey in October 2024 as part of a money-laundering probe linked to Chhattisgarh. It cited a September 2024 FIR by the Chhattisgarh ACB, naming Choubey, which said Jharkhand's 2022 excise policy was crafted to benefit private profiteers.

Controversy dogged Jharkhand's excise policy almost since its inception, with accusations of procedural violations and backroom deals. The current ACB and ED probes reveal how placement agencies siphoned off vast sums by selling unaccounted liquor, distributing duplicate holograms and funnelling off foreign liquor allotments.

In May, following public outrage and mounting evidence, the Jharkhand cabinet scrapped the policy. Retail sales were reverted to private players through a lottery system, while JSBCL retained control of wholesale operations. The move was framed as a corrective measure to stem revenue losses and mitigate operational dysfunction. ■



## PURPLE REIGN

Dance group WEUNITE trains BTS fans in K-Pop choreography at The Purple Door's ARMYLAND party in Mumbai, Jul. 13



COVER STORY

# INDIA'S K-CRAZE

Korean music, drama, food and beauty products are becoming the new cool for millions of young Indians

By SONAL KHETARPAL and SUHANI SINGH

Photograph by BANDEEP SINGH



**An unusual ARMY of 80 assembled in a studio in Mumbai on July 13.** All clad in purple, they screamed what seemed to be the names of their deities: "Kim Namjoon! Kim Seokjin! Min Yoongi! Jung Hoseok! Park Jimin! Kim Taehyung! Jeon Jungkook! BTS!" They were chanting the names of the seven members of the wildly popular Korean boy band, BTS or The Bangtan Boys. The occasion? The annual get-together of their devoted fanbase, which calls itself the ARMY, short for Adorable Representative M.C. for Youth. Among them were besties Vanessa Daniel, 33, and Diana D'Souza, 36, one a teacher and the other dayjobbing at a top corporate. Between bites of purple-frosted cupcakes, they shared what BTS means for them. "Emotionally, they offer me a lot of support," says Vanessa. Adds Diana: "I don't go to a therapist, I turn to them."

She has company. Today's hour of bonding over BTS comes courtesy organiser Ayushree Tari, founder of the Mumbai BTS fan club and owner of The Purple Door, a company named after the band's signature colour and logo. On Ayushree's left hand is a tattoo of her favourite BTS track 'Mikrokosmos'; on the right, a logo of their album *Love Yourself*. Also around was 19-year-old Sai Chikane, who is studying medicine in Vietnam but had flown down to Mumbai to dance to a K-Pop medley. Elsewhere, dance crew WEUNITE held a workshop for fans to hone their choreography—and their attitudes. With five BTS members having recently completed their mandatory military service in South Korea, the band will reunite in Spring 2026. For fans, the countdown has begun.

The BTS ARMY is just one happy ripple in the broader 'Hallyu' wave, a Chinese coinage for the global proliferation of South Korean popular culture that now has millions of Indians in its thrall. Korean music and soaps have long found a uniquely Indian audience, as have Korean films like *Train to Busan*, with filmmakers like Kim Ki-duk (*3 Iron*), Lee Chang-dong (*Poetry, Burning*), Park Chan-wook (*Oldboy, The Handmaiden*), Bong Joon Ho (*Memories of Murder, The Host, Parasite*) enjoying iconic status among cinephiles. Beyond entertainment, Indians have also acquired a taste for Korean food and beverage, and a yen for Korean beauty products. Blue Tokai café and Chaayos now have Korean cream cheese buns on their menu; McDonald's ran a Korea-inspired menu the other day with burgers glazed with the sweet and spicy gochujang sauce; Wagh Bakri tea lounge hosts a bubble tea carnival called 'Summer in



## K-POP SOUND SENSATIONS

1. **BTS (The Bangtan Boys):** Insanely popular 7-member boy band, and the first K-Pop act to get Grammy nomination
2. **BLACKPINK:** One of Korea's leading girl bands, known for their fashion as much as music
3. (L-R) **IU:** Popular singer cum actress **PSY:** The man who put K-Pop on the world map with 'Gangnam Style' **BoA:** A veteran idol who has popularised K-Pop in Japan and beyond **G-Dragon:** A rapper who has served as inspiration to artists like BTS, Seventeen and Got7
4. **EXO:** A boy band, two of whose members have performed in India

Photographs: Getty Images & AFP





Korea'. Young fans are flocking to Korean photo booths, posing with quirky props and sporting styles inspired by their idols. Many swear by the rigorous 10-step Korean skincare routine that promises the coveted Korean "glass skin". Many are also learning the language, to avoid any losses in translation. Korean, according to a 2022 study by language learning platform Duolingo, is among the top five most popular choices for aspiring Indian polyglots. The world is taking note, too, as the Oxford English Dictionary added seven new words to its Korean list, among them 'dalgon' (a sugary candy) and 'maknae' (the youngest member of a group or family).

Korean soft power has definitely come to stay in India. In the 2024 Overseas Hallyu Survey

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## K-POP'S EMBRACE OF FEMININITY AND FLUID EXPRESSION ARE A BIG PART OF WHY IT RESONATES WITH WOMEN AS WELL AS THE LGBTQIA+ COMMUNITY

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conducted by the Korean ministry of culture, sports and tourism and the Korean Foundation for International Cultural Exchange,

India featured among the top countries where 84.5 per cent of the respondents said they spent an average of 18.6 hours a month on Korean content, way above the global average of 11.6 hours. Food topped the list (64.7 per cent), followed by travel to Korea (61.8 per cent), dining at Korean restaurants (61.4 per cent), cosmetics (54 per cent) and apparel (52.8 per cent). We do not know the exact number of K-fans in India, but it's not a risky wager to say tens of millions, judging from telltale online footfalls. Think of it as a large, steaming Korean spa with an eclectic clientele. Humble, ornery folks as well as the

Courtesy: YG Entertainment



haute monde, those like Deepika Padukone, Disha Patani, Rashmika Mandanna, or local pop meisters like A.R. Rahman, Diljit Dosanjh and Badshah.

### BITTEN BY THE KOREA BUG

**T**he Korean Wave washing up here is no pop-ecological accident. In her 2014 book *The Birth of Korean Cool*, American-born, Paris-based Korean journalist Euny Hong explains how Seoul has made becoming the world's top exporter of popular culture its top priority. "The nation has decided that the 21st century will be Korea's century, just as the 20th century was America's century," she writes. "And it's not enough for Korea to make semiconductors and cars; it has to be cool as well."

That said, Indians have long been familiar with Korean brands like Samsung, LG, Hyundai and Kia. A Korean expat community of around 17,000 is spread across Sriperumbudur near Chennai, Delhi-NCR—home to several Korean companies—and Pune's Khairadi, Viman Nagar, Baner and Balewadi areas. Bilateral trade between India and Korea was \$27.52 billion (Rs 2.36 lakh crore) in FY24 and is expected to soar to \$50 billion (Rs 4.3 lakh crore) by 2030.

Alongside, South Korea is leveraging its soft power, using communication, visual content and music to promote the Korean way of life worldwide. While *Parasite* became the first international film to win the Best Picture Oscar in 2019, BTS contributed more than \$4.65 billion to South Korea's

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**FOOD DELIVERY PLATFORM SWIGGY HAS SEEN 59 PER CENT GROWTH IN ORDERS FOR KOREAN FOOD IN THE PAST THREE YEARS**

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## K-FOOD A NEW STAPLE

**Delicious Korean dishes ranging from rice preparations to spicy noodles delight Indian palataes. A few of the most popular orders**

**KIMBAP:** A Korean-style sushi roll made with rice, vegetables, egg and sometimes meat or fish, all wrapped in seaweed



**BIBIMBAP:** A rice bowl topped with sautéed vegetables, gochujang, fried egg and meat. You have to mix everything before eating



**TTEOKBOKKI:** A popular street food in Korea, these are chewy rice cakes cooked in a spicy-sweet gochujang sauce

**GOCHUJANG:** A fermented Korean chilli paste made from glutinous rice, fermented soybeans, red chilli etc.

**RAMYEON:** Instant Korean soup noodles, usually spicy, served with toppings like egg, scallions or cheese



## WIPING THE BOWL

Dalgrak, a Korean restaurant at Lajpat Nagar, Delhi



CHANDRADEEP KUMAR

**MANDU:** Korean dumplings, steamed, pan-fried, or deep-fried, with fillings like minced meat, tofu and vegetables

**KOREAN FRIED CHICKEN:** Crispy, double-fried chicken glazed with gochujang or soy garlic sauce



**JJAMPPONG:** A spicy seafood noodle soup with veggies and sometimes pork or squid

**JAPCHAE:** Sweet and savoury glass noodles, made from sweet potato starch, stir-fried with vegetables and meat

**KIMCHI FRIED RICE:** Kimchi, or fermented cabbage, is by now a global signifier of 'Korean'. Here, it flavours comfort food



economy that same year, almost 0.3 of its GDP. The Netflix original *Squid Game*, a Korean drama that highlights economic inequality and human greed against the backdrop of a chilling game show, made history as the first foreign-language show to win Emmys, including awards for Best Actor and Director.

Though India first awoke to K-Pop with PSY's hugely popular 'Gangnam Style' in 2012, the Korean Cultural Centre India (KCCI) had started laying the foundation for it when it started organising All-India K-Pop contests from 2011. The regional rounds in Delhi, Mumbai, Chennai, Bengaluru, Kolkata, Hyderabad, Ahmedabad, Bhopal, Itanagar and Kohima this year saw registrations from 1,278 teams across India. The contest has three categories—vocal, dance and rap. "It is touching to see young people in India empathising and communicating with each other through the unified culture of Korean music and K-Pop, despite the large size of the country and the diverse languages and cultures in each region," says KCCI director Hwang Il Yong.

## K FOR KOOLTH

**W**hat explains the widespread appeal of all things Korean among Indians? "K-Pop challenges traditional masculine norms and does not conform to rigid gender definitions," says Shreya Khaladkar, co-host of the podcast *K-Pop in India*. "Its embrace of femininity and fluid expression are a big part of why it resonates so strongly with women and the LGBTQIA+ community." The popularity of Korean bands owes to the performance aspect, particularly the choreography, production values, positive messaging, and the accessibility fans have to the 'idols', who frequently livestream to engage directly with them. Unlike the US and UK, the K-Pop fandom model has membership tiers that allow fans to make calls, signs and meet-ups with artists.

In India, festivals like K Town, K



RAJWANT RAWAT

## FANDOM CENTRAL

### H. Subhashree | 31 |

Staff Nurse, Bolangir, Odisha

"Saranghaeyo" (I love you) is not an alien expression to Subhashree, and she has K-Dramas to thank for that. It was in 2019 that the Odisha native chanced on a photograph of BTS member V on an app in her phone. One press of her thumb later, she was immersed in a world of 16-hour-long seasons of TV shows she would spend "whole nights watching" on her days off from work in NCR. "I wouldn't even know how time would pass," she says. She has watched at least 35 such shows, with Netflix, Viki and HiTV being her hunting grounds. Her affinity is for the classical historical genre, with shows like *Hwarang: The Poet Warrior Youth*, *Empress Ki* and *Mr Queen*, which "show (Korea's) culture, dresses and food". She adds, "The places are depicted so well that you feel like going yourself." It's where she feels Indian shows are lacking: "*Hamare yahaan ka culture nahin dikhaaya jaata* (They don't show our culture)." Part of the BTS ARMY since 2016, she proudly displays their poster on her bedroom wall and owns keyrings of Jimin and V. "I like it that they put (social) messaging in their songs," she adds.

—Suhani Singh

Wave and Rang De Korea have given the thriving I-Heart-Korea community more avenues to come together and celebrate. At the K Town festival in Mumbai last year, more than 7,000 people turned up, some dressing in the traditional attire *hanbok*, others learning Korean fan painting or singing karaoke in *noraebangs*, the popular Korean song rooms. Shital Sikarwar, a housewife-turned-entrepreneur and CEO & founder of TANI Events & Entertainment, which organises K Town, plans to go bigger this year. "Indians love to experience newness," she says. "Get into the depth of Korean culture, and there's a lot of resemblance. The way we respect elders, speak of family..." K Town has hosted concerts by Korean band Blackswan, whose members include Sriya Lenka, India's first K-Pop idol, along with stars like Chen and Xiumin of EXO and BamBam from Got7. HYBE, the label that represents bands like BTS, ENHYPEN and Seventeen, is set to start operations in Mumbai later this year, fuelling hope among Indian K-boppers about their favourite bands coming to perform in their cities.

Cross-cultural collaborations, too, are thriving. Sriya and Aria of X:IN (see interview, *'I can't imagine myself doing anything else'*) have proved that Indians can seamlessly fit into the K-Pop mould. Twenty-two-year-old Anushka Sen, an actress and influencer from Mumbai, was appointed tourism ambassador for 2023–24 and has made eight trips to South Korea since 2022. Comfortable now navigating the streets of Seoul, she has shot for two Korean projects: a web series called *Crush* and a film titled *Asia*, expected to release next year. She has even got herself a Korean name: Seon Yeo-myung. "Representing India on a global level is a great honour," she says.

### WHY THE K WAVE, DI?

**T**hirty-four-year-old Nikita Eng-hepi, founder of the contributor-driven website Namaste Hallyu, and Pink Box Entertainment, recalls how in the '90s, she'd buy CDs and DVDs of Korean dramas back home in Nagaland for Rs 50–60 and trade photos of Korean actors and

# K-BEAUTY FOREVER YOUNG

The famous 10-step Korean beauty regimen is customisable and consumers can pick three to five ones daily, focusing on layering, hydration and protection. The steps include

- Oil Cleanser
- Serum/Ampoule
- Moisturiser
- Foam/Water Cleanser
- SPF (AM)/Sleeping Pack (PM)
- Exfoliator (2–3 times/week)
- Sheet Mask (2–3 times/week)
- Eye Cream
- Toner
- Essence



RAJWANT RAWAT

bands like Lee Min Ho, Lee Joon-gi, Bigbang, Super Junior with classmates. "Hindi was as foreign to us as Korean was," she says. "At least with Korean shows, we had English subtitles."

The rest of the country, meanwhile, was busy consuming homegrown *sababu* dramas, American shows like *Friends*, or a Pakistani serial or two. Korean drama grabbed attention only during the Covid pandemic, with the rise of streaming platforms. In locked-down times, Korean romances offered a much-needed escape and their content felt deeply relatable. "Korean writers talk about themes that resonate beautifully with us," says Monika Shergill, VP, Netflix India. "They are about human relationships, human frailty, about love and jealousy. What women appreciate a

lot are the love stories and having male characters who unconditionally love you."

Their high chastity quotient likely made K-dramas ideal for family viewing in India, compared to the violence, nudity and crude language often found in shows from the West. "My entire family loves *Extraordinary Attorney Woo*," says Sajal Jain, 28, cofounder of Delhi-based factory automation startup Bharatlytics. India and South Korea also share the fear and nostalgia for a severed sibling-nation. *Crash Landing on You*, a hugely popular K-Drama, tells the story of a South Korean heiress who falls for a North Korean army officer, exploring the familiar dilemma of cross-border romance to binge-worthy effect.

The latest FICCI-EY report on the

# K-DRA太

# A SERIES OF MASTERPIECES

Many a heart has been satisfied by the chaste romances dominating modern K-drama, but there's more to the industry than rooting for cute couples. See *Squid Game*, a hair-raising thriller where the bodies pile up in a gladiatorial fight for riches, or *Glory*, a revenge drama about a woman who decides to bite back at her childhood bullies in the most twisted ways imaginable. In 2024 itself, Korean was the second-most watched non-Indian language on Netflix after English. A few titles that exemplify India's addiction to the genre



► **The Legend of the Blue Sea (2016)**

► **Guardian: The Lonely and Great God (2016)**

► **Descendants of the Sun (2016)**

► **What's Wrong with Secretary Kim (2018)**

► **Crash Landing on You (2019)**

► **Flower of Evil (2020)**

► **Itaewon Class (2020)**

► **It's Okay to Not be Okay (2020)**

► **Hospital Playlist (2021)**

► **Business Proposal (2022)**

► **Glory (2022)**

► **Extraordinary Attorney Woo (2022)**

► **Squid Game (2021-25)**

media and entertainment industry confirms that Korean, Japanese and Spanish shows are the most-watched non-Indian language content on Netflix after English. In fact, Season 1 of Netflix original *Squid Game* remained in its Top 10 for 39 weeks. Following its success, Netflix announced in 2023 that it would spend \$2.5 billion over the next four years to develop Korean content. Other streaming giants like Amazon Prime and Disney+ Hotstar are also expanding their Korean slate. Platforms like Playflix are dubbing K-content in Hindi, Tamil, Telugu and Kannada.

## GIMME GOCHUJANG

**F**ood is an intrinsic part of most Korean shows, where local cuisine is celebrated effortlessly. It is around food that tough conversations unfold, families bond and hearts connect. Indian viewers, too, want to slurp *ramyeon* (Korean noodles) or down *soju* (a rice-based alcoholic beverage) like the three best friends in *Thirty-Nine*, or share Woo

## THE RESPECT FOR FAMILY, HIGH CHASTITY QUOTIENT AND A SHARED FEAR AND NOSTALGIA FOR A SEVERED SIBLING-NATION MAKE K-DRAMAS POPULAR IN INDIA

Young-woo's love for *gimbap* (seaweed rice roll) in *Extraordinary Attorney Woo*. ARMY brat Asees Kohli perhaps developed her love of Korean cuisine through Korean drama. A pastry chef in Jammu, Asees dove into Korean cuisine with gusto, even enrolling in a six-month language course at the Korean Cultural Centre in Delhi so that she could read recipe books. "Korean restaurants became my regular haunts because I wanted to compare and see

if my dishes tasted authentic," says the 27-year-old. "I've now been to every Korean restaurant in Delhi NCR."

Korean cuisine has opened up a whole new culinary world for the Indian foodie. With bold, fermented flavours like *kimchi* and *gochujang*, Korean dishes—low on oil, rich in spices and mostly grilled or boiled—sit comfortably on the Indian palate. *Ramyeon*, a comfort food for Koreans, has made its way into Indian kitchens, clocking 56 per cent growth according to consumer intelligence firm NielsenIQ. In Mumbai's Mahavir Nagar, it is not unusual to see a *ramyeon* mobile cart serving packets of Buldak Ramen and Nongshim, while nearby, HighCha serves *bingsu*, a Korean dessert made of shaved ice and sweet toppings. In Delhi too, Korean food and culture are firmly woven into the urban fabric, with Korean fashion boutiques and eateries lining neighbourhoods like Hauz Khas Village, Majnu Ka Tila and Humayunpur.

Taking note of this shift, Indian

# 'I can't imagine myself doing anything else'

**ARIA, a twentysomething singer from Kerala, on her life in a Korean pop band and how fame and scrutiny have driven her to make better music**

**I**N 2021, Aria was Gauthami, a dorky teenager on a year-long break from studies. Then she decided to audition online to be a K-Pop idol. "When I first introduced my dream to my family over dinner, everybody laughed and felt it was one of my crazy obsessions," she says. Today, she's a member of the

ing. I cannot imagine myself doing anything else."

**Q. How did your interest in being a K-Pop idol begin?**

I became a K-Pop fan around 2017 after listening to BTS. I was mesmerised. Then I got into more K-Pop groups—they have their own charisma so I was like, what would it be

**"YOU NEED DETERMINATION TO BE A K-POP IDOL. THEY CAN ELIMINATE YOU FROM THE COMPANY. YOUR SURVIVAL INSTINCT MUST BE STRONG"**

girl group X:IN and only the second such idol from India. After two years in Seoul, she's leaner, speaks English with an accent, has blonde hair and, for some, looks fairer. For her, though, that's just the process of growing up. Says Aria, "Being an idol comes with a lot of downsides, but I love what I'm do-

like if I was part of such a group? It was just a fleeting thought. I tried for online auditions. I remember filming my dance audition to a remix version of Blackpink's 'How You Like That'. I also sent a rapping and singing video. Fortunately, I got in and here I am in Korea.



FMCG brands are spicing up their offerings with Korean flavours. ITC's YiPPee!, HUL's Knorr, Nestle's Maggi and CG Foods's Wai Wai have all launched Korean-flavoured noodles. "Today, 70 per cent of the growth in the instant noodles category is coming from Korean flavours," admits Varun Chaudhary, CEO of the CG Group. This year, the company plans to expand its Dynamite range of Korean-flavoured noodles with two new flavours—*kimchi* and *gochugaru*—to the

existing five. Last year, ITC teamed up with popular Korean singer Aoora to launch three Korean flavours of Bingo! chips and released the K-Pop number 'Maeun Maeun' (spicy in Korean), which has netted over 20.4 million users on YouTube and 45.7 million impressions on Instagram. Food delivery platform Swiggy has seen a 59 per cent growth in online orders for Korean food over the past three years, and not just in metros and tier-1 cities but also in places like Surat, Thiruvanantha-

puram, Vadodara, Mysore, Mangaluru, Nashik, Rajkot and Patna.

Korean restaurants are also experiencing a shift in their customer base. What began as niche dining spots for expat communities are now attracting mainstream diners. When Korean restaurant chain Kori's first opened in 2012, its patrons were mostly Koreans, northerners or foreigners. But that changed after the pandemic. "Now, 80 per cent of our diners are north Indians," says owner Lee Sang Hoon.

**Q. What were the challenges in becoming an idol in Korea?**

I was not ready for what was waiting for me here. I remember I landed late at night on October 22, 2022, and the next day I went to the practice room and learnt choreography. Next day, I met a producer and had to sing a song in front of lots of people. I was not doing well initially. I was scared, stressed and cried almost every day. I'd practise alone in the kitchen in front of a mirror. It was a whole new world and I had to catch up to others' level in a very short time.

**Q. It's been over two years since you joined X:IN. Have you adapted to the Korean culture, lifestyle and work regimen?**

When I first arrived, I felt very alienated. I didn't know the language and didn't know anybody. The culture was new too. But now I have gotten used to the lifestyle and food and can speak Korean comfortably. The idol culture is very intense. There is literally no me-time. I like how unpredictable and busy it is.

**Q. As one of the few success stories from India, what does it take to become a K-Pop idol?**

Courage and determination. It's not like once you are in, you are always in. They can eliminate you from the company. Your survival instinct has to be strong.

—SS

A WEEK-LONG TRIP TO KOREA COSTS UP TO RS 4 LAKH, BUT FROM 122,771 IN 2023, INDIANS WHO DID THE KOREA CIRCUIT ROSE TO 176,668 IN 2024

**FANDOM CENTRAL**

**The Trend**

K-Pop dance group from Arunachal Pradesh

**T**hanks to his K-Pop-crazy elder sisters, Arunachal Pradesh's Aku Bengia was introduced to bands like BigBang, BTS and Super Junior. Inspired by their YouTube videos and those of Stray Kids and Seventeen, he formed a dance group called The Trend with the sole purpose of winning the annual All-India K-Pop contest organised by the Korean Cultural Centre India. The Trend follows the stylish, spirited and synchronised choreography synonymous with the genre. "K-Pop dancing is a complete package of entertainment—there's drama and each member gets to be in spotlight," says Likha Tatam, one of its seven members.

After finishing runner-up in

two back-to-back editions of the contest, The Trend finally accomplished their dream last year of winning the title in the dance category with a routine set to Stray Kids's 'God's Menu'. The prize included a five-day trip to Seoul, their very first time abroad. "Belonging from such an interior state, it was a proud moment. We could set an example to kids here and show that by being persistent and disciplined you can achieve your dream," says Aku. The group has participated in the TV show *Dance Plus*, toured across Arunachal Pradesh and recently set up a dance studio in Itanagar. Next up is singing like their idols.

—SS



Driven by growing consumer interest, he has expanded to six outlets and also launched a Korean food convenience store, K Friends, with three locations in Delhi-NCR and one in Guwahati.

Social media has accelerated the reach of Korean trends, bringing them to Indian consumers faster than ever. Indians now want the lifestyle products they see in K-Dramas—from beauty to fashion to stationery. Korean lifestyle brand Koja, for instance, has expanded to eight stores across India and is growing at 30–40 per cent year-on-year, according to founder and managing partner Bryan Tseda. “Initially, it was just K-culture fans, but the customer base has broadened. In metros, K-beauty drives sales, while in tier 2 and 3 cities, it’s fashion and stationery,” he says. One of Koja’s hottest sellers? TirTir cushion foundation—a viral beauty product in Korea.

## THE BUSINESS OF BEAUTY

If beauty is only skin-deep, Korea has shown the world how to perfect it. The global obsession with Korean ‘glass skin’—that dewy, pore-free glow—owes to the flawless complexions of the K-Pop and K-Drama idols, as well as TikTok. The famed 10-step Korean skincare routine, focusing on gentle, preventive and long-term skin health over quick fixes, and the use of natural, local ingredients like ginseng, fermented beans and volcanic clay has found many takers among Gen Z. “I live for the glow and softness a Beauty of Joseon rice face mask gives my skin,” says Sai Chikane.

India had its first brush with K-beauty in 2013, when South Korean cosmetics giant Amorepacific launched Innisfree, one of the first Korean skincare brands, in the country. It also educated consumers on the philosophy behind K-beauty, the ingredients and routines, says Mini Sood Banerjee, assistant director and marketing head, Amorepacific India. Social media and beauty influencers did the rest to help K-beauty gain rapid traction. Today, there are over 60 Korean beauty brands in India, including The Face Shop, Laneige, Etude, Cosrx and Sulwhasoo. Most of them entered the In-

dian market through offline retail and platforms such as Nykaa and Amazon. “K-beauty has evolved rapidly from a niche category to a major growth driver within the beauty portfolio, growing at an impressive 75 per cent year-over-year,” says Siddharth Bhagat, director, Amazon Fashion and Beauty India. Skincare leads the category,

rate (CAGR) of 9.3 per cent from 2023 to 2030. Though there are no specific numbers for India, the segment is certainly one of the fastest-growing in the Indian skincare space.

## SEOUL MATES

**T**he growing obsession with all things Korean has naturally led to an interest in visiting the country itself. The number of Indians travelling to Korea rose from 122,771 travellers in 2023 to 176,668 in 2024, a 44 per cent year-on-year growth. In just the first four months of this year, 60,000 Indian travellers have already visited Korea. That enthusiasm isn’t waning despite the steep cost—a week-long trip to Korea can cost Rs 2.5–4 lakh per person. “Four to five years ago, travel to Korea was mostly for business, led by chaebol like Samsung and Hyundai in India, with most trips being two to three nights long,” says Neeraj Singh Dev, executive vice president, Thomas Cook (India) & SOTC Travels. “Today, they last at least a week.”

Myong Kil Yun, regional director, India & SAARC countries, Korea Tourism Organisation (KTO), also observes a growing trend in personalised or themed itineraries. “Due to the cultural affinity Indians now feel with Koreans, many Indian tourists express a desire to visit filming locations, try Korean skincare routines, or attend K-Pop concerts,” he says. “This has resulted in more travellers opting for K-Drama tours or heritage-focused travel inspired by what they have seen on screen,” he says. Younger travellers, in particular, are drawn to pop culture experiences like visiting the BTS bus stop in Jumunjin or exploring locations from K-series like *Goblin* and *Crash Landing on You*.

Korea is indeed having a prolonged moment in India. If America gave us burgers and the Hollywood film, the Italians pasta and pizza, China brought noodles and cheap consumer goods and Japan introduced us to anime and sushi, the Korean wave is broadening the Indian worldview in a myriad other ways. This is how you project soft power, and India can perhaps take a leaf out of the Korean playbook. ■

—with Shelly Anand

## K-LINGO FAB VOCAB

**MAKNAE:** A Korean word meaning ‘the youngest member of a group or family’

**BORAHAE:** Literal translation: ‘I Purple You’. Signifies the bond between the BTS band and their fanbase

**NORAEBANG:** Private song room you can rent for karaoke and sing like no one’s watching

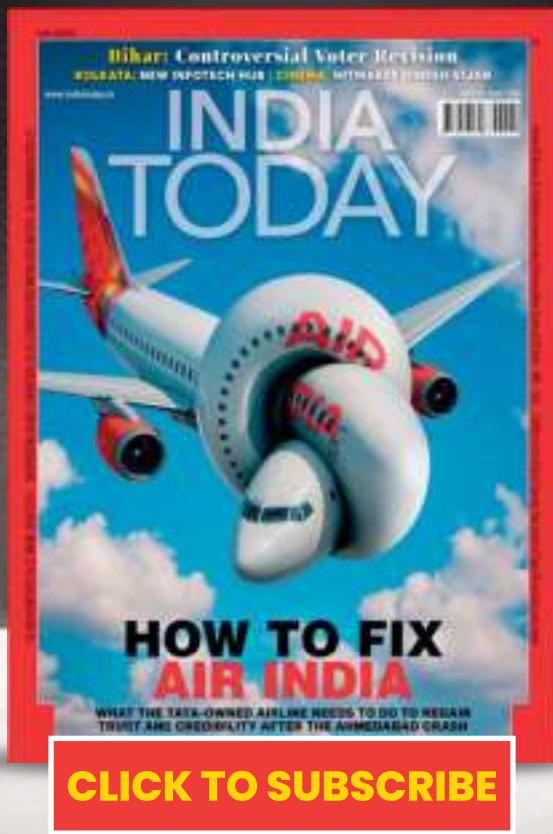
**DAEBAK:** One of Korea’s most common slang words, meaning ‘awesome’ or ‘cool’

**HWAITING:** A popular way for Koreans to cheer each other on, meaning ‘You can do it!’

with products like hydrating serums, sheet masks, lip sleeping masks and soothing creams flying off the shelves. Indian brands, too, have jumped onto the K-beauty bandwagon. Actress Kareena Kapoor, in collaboration with Sugar Cosmetics, launched Quench Botanics in 2022, while Reliance Retail’s beauty retailer Tira recently introduced Mixsoon.

With its rising popularity, K-beauty has seen significant growth in the past five years. According to market research and consulting company Grand View Research, the global K-beauty market was \$91.99 billion in 2022 and is projected to grow at a compound annual growth

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# REVAMP TENSIONS

**THE OVERHAUL OF THE BJP ORGANISATION HAS THE IMPRINT OF THE RSS ALL OVER IT. BUT IN SEVEN KEY STATES, THERE IS STILL LACK OF AGREEMENT**

By ANILESH S. MAHAJAN

# It

**HAS BEEN A YEAR OF CHURN, CONSOLIDATION** and reorientation for the ruling BJP. Though the party secured a third term in 2024, it is now more dependent on allies than ever before. An NDA government led by Narendra Modi is in power and, on the surface, normal service has resumed—the Lok Sabha reverses papered over by the stunning election wins in three states. But inside the party's powerful organisational machinery, an unusual silence prevailed—until matters were stirred up by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the BJP's 'ideological parent'. This churn is now manifesting as the party prepares to elect a new national president. The RSS's imprint is unmistakable, and sources say a

shared understanding has evolved within the BJP and the Sangh's vast apparatus now: ideological loyalty and cadre discipline must take precedence over personal ambition.

Organisational elections, launched in December 2024, have concluded in 28 of the BJP's 36 state units and, technically, it can get a move on in electing a new party chief to replace J.P. Nadda (the party constitution dictates that at least 19 states must conclude their polls to make the requisite quorum of electors). But no date has been announced for that much-deferred election, and no consensus has emerged around a candidate for the top job. Also, six key state units—Uttar Pradesh, Karnataka, Gujarat, Jharkhand, Delhi and Haryana—have yet to get elected presidents. Of the other two, Punjab has been assigned a working president, while the process is in a limbo in strife-hit Manipur.

This is a far cry from the past decade, when the BJP managed smooth leadership transitions after the Lok

Sabha polls. Amit Shah took charge within two months in 2014, while Nadda was appointed as working president in June 2019 (he has already had two extensions). This had helped both leaders in shaping the appointments of state presidents. But not this time. The Sangh is ensuring it has a larger say in the selection and appointment of key party leaders. So this is not just a delay, it is happening by design. Party leaders prefer to call it "strategic recalibration". But, as always, when the BJP hits a crossroads, the Sangh's influence rises.

## THE SAFFRON FOOTPRINT

**T**he appointments made in the 28 state units offer important clues. This wasn't a high command-driven process. The RSS and its network of affiliates played a decisive role in the selection of state chiefs. *Prant* (province) and *kshetra* (region) *pracharakas* (in-charges) were consulted and, in many cases, their recommendations accepted. The Sangh national leadership also issued



ANI



a quiet but firm directive: no turncoats of recent vintage were to be appointed. The RSS wanted leaders who had risen organically within the broader parivar—those who understood ideological work and grassroots mobilisation, not just electoral strategy.

Exceptions were made in states

ists P.V.N. Madhav and N. Ramchander Rao, respectively, were preferred.

There was also a discernible preference for MLAs/MLCs over MPs, who were seen as “too absorbed” in Delhi’s power politics. Sangh sources say the aim is to cultivate a generation of ideological anchors for the next

## THE SANGH IS ENSURING IT HAS A SAY, SO THIS ISN'T JUST A DELAY, IT IS **HAPPENING BY DESIGN**. PARTY LEADERS PREFER TO CALL IT A '**STRATEGIC RECALIBRATION**'

where the party lacked a traditional base or wanted to experiment. Businessman-turned-politician Rajeev Chandrasekhar was made Kerala BJP president, while in Tamil Nadu, AIADMK defector Nainar Nagendran got the job (both have spent considerable time in the BJP). But, in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, seasoned Sangh loyal-

phase. It’s all part of a long-term plan: a BJP national president who can guide the party into a post-Modi era, where charisma and centralisation may no longer suffice. The new state presidents are expected to complement this transition—restoring the BJP’s image as a cadre-driven movement rather than a personality cult.

### AUXILIARY APPOINTMENTS

**O**n July 14, the evolving power dynamic was on full display. The Centre appointed three new governors, each a strategic signal. Prof. Ashim Kumar Ghosh, a relatively low-profile academic with deep RSS ties, was named governor of Haryana. In Ladakh, former J&K deputy chief minister and RSS loyalist Kavinder Gupta was appointed lieutenant governor—a move aimed at ideological consolidation in a sensitive region. In Goa, Ashok Gajapathi Raju, a former Telugu Desam Party (TDP) stalwart who is now with the BJP, got gubernatorial charge. Though formally in the BJP, Raju retains close ties with TDP chief Chandrababu Naidu and his appointment is seen as a subtle gesture of coalition management in NDA 3.0.

Just a day earlier, the party nominated four new Rajya Sabha MPs: historian Meenakshi Jain, RSS veteran C. Sadanandan Master, 26/11 special public prosecutor Ujjwal Nikam and ex-foreign secretary Harsh Vardhan

# THE SANGH STAMP

A MAJORITY OF THE NEW STATE/UT CHIEFS ARE FROM THE RSS OR THE LARGER SANGH PARIVAR. THE EXCEPTIONS ARE IN PLACES WHERE IT'S STILL NOT A DOMINANT FORCE

## LADAKH

### Tashi G. Kachu

*Ex-PDP, returned in '19. Has strong cadre roots*

## JAMMU & KASHMIR

### Sat Sharma

*Party veteran with Sangh roots*

## PUNJAB

### Ashwini Sharma\*

*From the ABVP/ RSS stable*

## RAJASTHAN

### Madan Rathore

*Rajya Sabha MP, veteran BJP face*

## MADHYA PRADESH

### Hemant Khandelwal

*RSS insider and MLA*

## DADRA & NAGAR HAVELI, DAMAN & DIU

### Mahesh Agaria

*Local leader who rose through the ranks*

## MAHARASHTRA

### Ravindra Chavan

*Strong RSS ties, four-time MLA*

## GOA

### Damodar Naik

*Two-term MLA from OBC Bhandari community; RSS man has pro-Catholic image*

## LAKSHADWEEP

### K.N. Kasmikoya

*Muslim ex-bureaucrat*

## UTTARAKHAND

### Mahendra Bhatt

*Incumbent has strong Sangh connections*

## HIMACHAL PRADESH

### Rajeev Bindal

*Experienced ex-minister with RSS links*

## CHANDIGARH

### Jatinder Malhotra

*Local leader of standing*

## BIHAR

### Dilip Jaiswal

*Grassroots MLA with regional influence*

## CHHATTISGARH

### Kiran Singh Deo

*First-term MLA; rose from ABVP cadre*

## SIKKIM

### Dilli Ram Thapa

*Local RSS-linked representative*

## ARUNACHAL PRADESH

### Kaling Moyong

*Tribal leader with strong local appeal*

## ASSAM

### Dilip Saikia

*RSS/ABVP cred, possible counter to CM Himanta Biswa Sarma*

## NAGALAND

### B. Yephomii

*RSS-aligned leader*

## MEGHALAYA

### Rikman Momin

*One of two Muslim state unit chiefs*

## MIZORAM

### K. Beichhua

*Ex-MNF\*, three-time MLA*

## TRIPURA

### R. Bhattacharjee

*Local party leader*

## ANDAMAN & NICOBAR

### Anil Tiwari

*Local BJP organiser*

## WEST BENGAL

### Samik Bhattacharya

*Rajya Sabha MP and consensus-builder; has Sangh backing*

\*Working president; #Mizo National Front

Shringla. The pattern is clear: loyalty to the Sangh and nationalist credentials will be prioritised for appointments in constitutional, cultural and legal institutions. While the BJP may be taking its time with organisational decisions, the broader ideological ecosystem is quietly strengthening its hold on the state apparatus.

## THE STICKING POINTS

**W**hile 28 state units now have presidents, seven major ones remain leaderless.

And this isn't just due to procedural delays, factionalism, succession tussles and the resetting of ideological control have as much to do with it.

**Karnataka:** The BJP's southern

stronghold is grappling with a leadership crisis after setbacks in the Lok Sabha and state polls. State president B.Y. Vijayendra, son of ex-CM B.S. Yediyurappa, is taking flak from their traditional rivals. National general secretary B.L. Santhosh is a parallel power centre, rallying support from factions allied with the last BJP CM,

# THE OUTLIER STATES

## 1. UTTAR PRADESH

**Challenge:** Balance aspirations of dominant non-Yadav OBCs, bridge organisation/ govt gap

**X-factors:** Yogi's choice, PM Modi's nod

## 2. MANIPUR

**Challenge:** Security scenarios

**X-factor:** State is in flux

## 3. KARNATAKA

**Challenge:** Delhi backs B.Y. Vijayendra, rivals fuming

**X-factors:** Lingayat legacy, BSY's grip on caste matrix

## 4. JHARKHAND

**Challenge:** Balancing tribal and OBC aspirations

**X-factor:** Sangh diktat

## 5. GUJARAT

**Challenge:** Patidar vs OBC vs Rajput equations

**X-factor:** Modi's choice

## 6. HARYANA

**Challenge:** Khattar's shadow is too obvious

**X-factor:** Ex-CM's pick may prevail, at least for now

## 7. DELHI

**Challenge:** BJP is in power in Centre, state as well as MCD\*\*. Need a candidate who can deliver

**X-factor:** Modi-Shah vision has to align with Sangh's

\*\*MCD: Municipal Corporation of Delhi

Basavaraj Bommai. Those opposed are adamant, saying "anyone but Vijayendra". The central leadership is in a fix as well: they know that apart from BSY and his son, no one can rally the key Lingayat base.

**Gujarat:** Current state chief C.R. Patil is now a Union minister, which disqualifies him under the party's

THE BIG STORY

BJP-RSS

one-person, one-post norm. CM Bhupendra Patel's camp and a consolidation of OBC leaders are jockeying for influence. It's PM Modi's home state, and the party has to decide: send a leader from Delhi or pick someone local who complements the state government.

**Uttar Pradesh:** CM Yogi Adityanath's growing influence has made many in Delhi wary. Appointing someone close to him may reduce the state unit to a rubber stamp. But choosing an outsider could accentuate conflict. A state cabinet reshuffle and a new governor are also on the anvil. There is also the Union cabinet reshuffle, which could see various MPs being 'readjusted'. All this could alter power equations in the state and, with the 2027 assembly polls approaching, the party must act fast.

**Haryana:** Despite ex-CM M.L. Khattar's shift to Delhi, his shadow looms large. Protégé Mohan Lal Badoli is seeking re-election as state chief, backed by CM Nayab Singh Saini, but some

there has led to a rise in factionalism. Veteran Babulal Marandi's relevance is fading. The JMM-Congress alliance retained its tribal base in both the assembly and Lok Sabha polls. The BJP must decide whether to project a tribal face or rely on OBC mobilisation.

**Punjab:** The experiment with Congress turncoat Sunil Jakhar has failed. On July 7, the party appointed Ashwani Sharma, a veteran with strong RSS credentials, as working president. He's been asked to wrap up the elections for mandal and district chiefs. The death of state in-charge Vijay Rupani in the Air India crash in June had stalled that work. The state unit remains in flux.

## THE LONG GAME

The BJP has fulfilled the quorum to elect a national president, but the delay suggests an internal debate. The Sangh reportedly prefers a traditionalist with deep ideological moorings. The Modi-Shah camp may

## THE SANGH IS NO LONGER CONTENT PLAYING SECOND FIDDLE. IT IS NOT JUST SHAPING STATE APPOINTMENTS, BUT ALSO THE CENTRAL LEADERSHIP TRANSITION

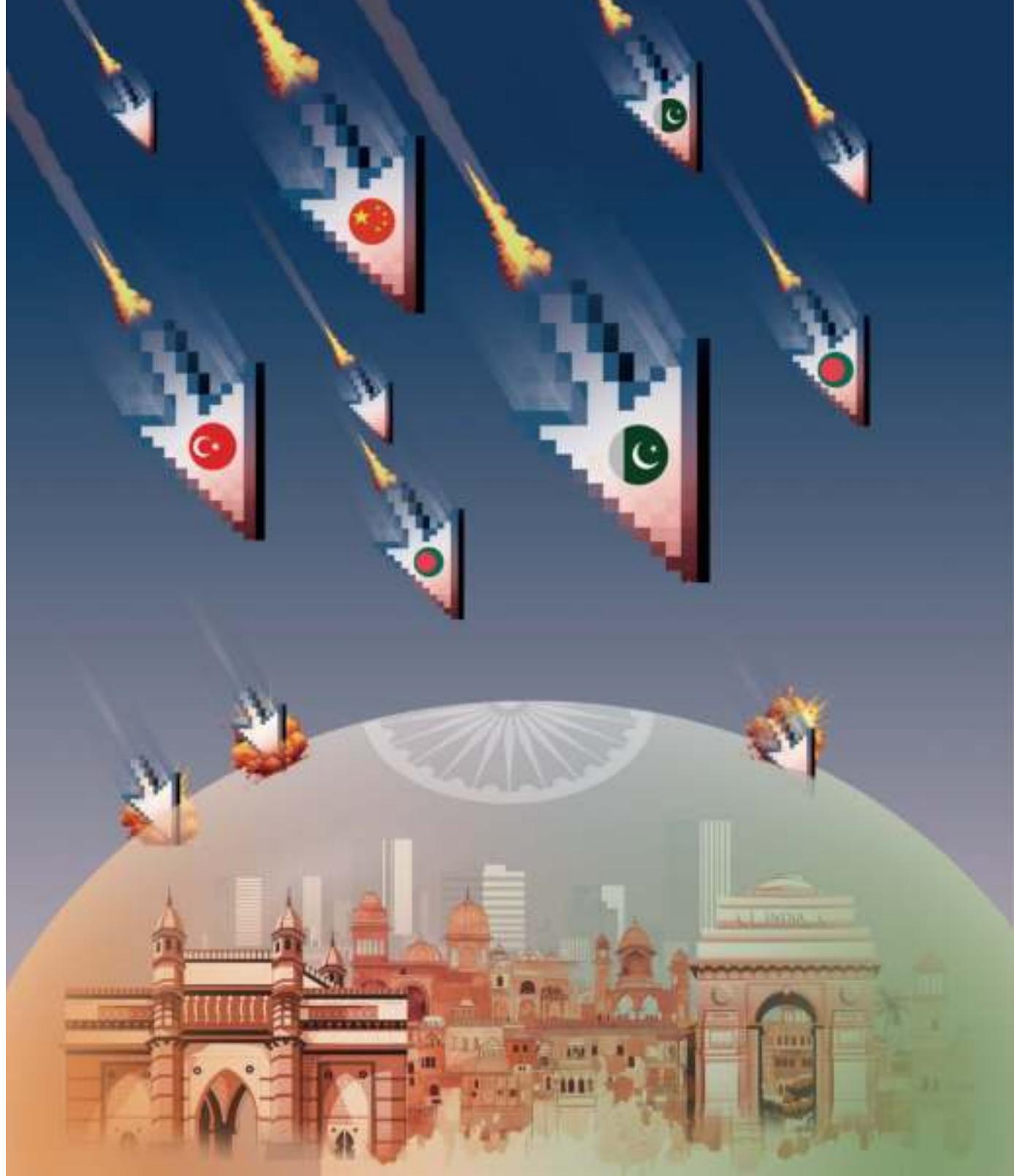
Khattar loyalists are not enthused, arguing he's too close to the current CM. Union minister Rao Inderjit Singh, an ex-Congressman-turned-BJP heavyweight and known Khattar-baiter, has signalled his interest by hosting a dinner that 12 MLAs from the Ahirwal region (south Haryana) attended.

**Delhi:** The BJP has never been so strong in the national capital—it swept all seven LS seats and crushed the Aam Aadmi Party in the assembly polls. Yet, state president Virendra Sachdeva is on a weak wicket, with calls for a more dynamic replacement.

**Jharkhand:** The organisational poll was delayed because of the assembly poll, and the unexpected defeat

want someone more attuned to coalition politics and electoral pragmatism. A Union cabinet reshuffle is also on the cards, with voices on both sides calling for ministers who haven't contributed to the organisation to step down.

What's evident is that the Sangh is no longer content to play second fiddle. It is not just shaping this round of state appointments, but also the central leadership transition. Finally, this moment isn't just about a procedural backlog, it is a contest over ideological direction. As one BJP insider asks, is the BJP still Modi's centralised machine, or is it drifting back to the Sangh's decentralised, cadre-first ethos? That question is being answered, slowly but surely. ■



# OUTSMARTING THE HACKER ARMY

## THE CYBER ASSETS IN VITAL SECTORS FACED CONCERTED ATTACKS BY HACKERS FROM PAKISTAN AND OTHER NATIONS BEFORE, DURING AND AFTER OPERATION SINDOOR. ALMOST ALL WERE REPULSED, BUT INDIA CANNOT LET ITS GUARD DOWN

By PRADIP R. SAGAR

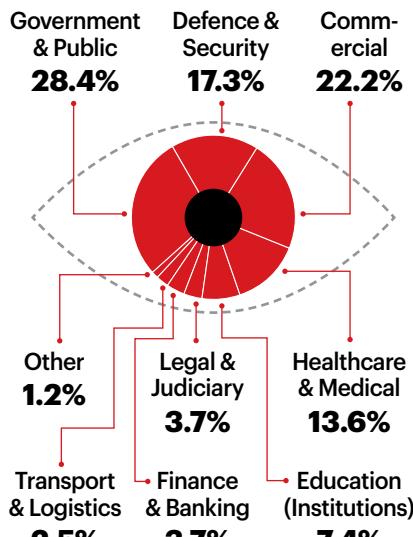
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Twenty-first century warfare isn't limited to ground, air and naval forces. With vital domains like defence, finance and communications dependent on sets of interconnected information systems on the internet, attacking these can grievously impair a nation's war-making capabilities. Cyber warfare has thus emerged as a low-cost weapon of modern conflict and cyber security is now an important factor in the national security matrix of every state. As in Russia's war on Ukraine and the recent Israel-Iran war, this whole spectrum played out during the recent face-off between India and Pakistan.

Starting from the Pahalgam terror attack on April 22 and continuing through Operation Sindoor and the four-day conflict between the two neighbours (May 7-10), India faced an unrelenting wave of cyberattacks, primarily by Pakistani groups backed by Islamabad and Beijing, but also from hacker groups in Turkey, Bangladesh, Malaysia and West Asian countries. According to Indian government sources, these groups launched over 1.5 million cyber attacks targeting a wide swathe of India's critical infrastructure spanning defence, power, telecom, finance and transportation during this period. In a cabinet meeting in early June, Prime Minister Narendra Modi put

### EYES OF THE STORM

**Since Pahalgam, foreign hacker groups executed over a million attacks on Indian cyberspace. Here are the sectors that bore the brunt of the barrage**



Source: Innefu Labs

**1.5 MILLION**  
**Number of hacking attempts on India from after the Pahalgam attack till May 10 by Pakistani and other groups, according to the government. Only 150 succeeded**

the number of attacks at 100 million.

Predictably, India's military-industrial infrastructure came in for special attention, while the power ministry confirmed that over 200,000 cyber attacks on the Indian electricity grid were foiled between May 7-10. Their modus operandi comprised the full repertoire of hackers' mischief: website defacements, Denial of Service (DoS) and Distributed Denial of Service (DDoS) attacks (aiming to overwhelm and impair a target server/network), malware distribution (using viruses to infect systems and gain control) and phishing (use of deceptive emails to extract information). Their cumulative goal: to steal defence information, particularly missile technology, and to undermine vital sectors. Happily, Indian cyber-security agencies, including the Indian Computer Emergency Response Team (CERT-In), the Defence Cyber Agency and the National Critical Infrastructure Protection Centre (NCIIPC) successfully thwarted most attacks, with a mere 150 out of the 1.5 million attempts succeeding. Though cyber assets of government institutions, commercial enterprises and the better protected defence organisations attracted 28 per cent, 22 per cent and 17 per cent, respectively, of all attacks, the education (7 per cent), finance (4 per cent) and transport (3 per cent) sectors were not spared. In retaliation, Indian hacking groups took the attack to Pakistan, targeting and breaching critical digital assets of its military and government.

However, India's victory in repulsing these attacks was not absolute. Websites of several Indian military, defence production and defence research insti-

# A HACKERS' GALLERY

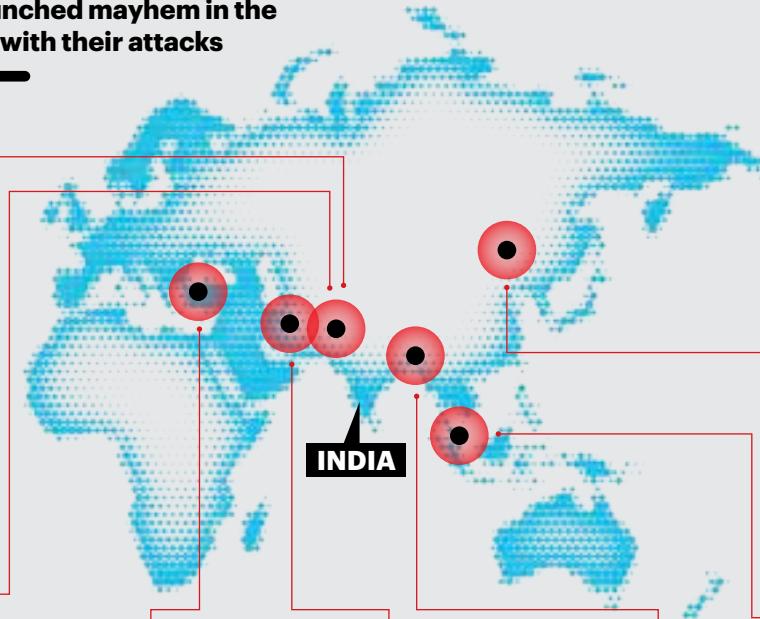
**A few of the foreign hacking groups/hacktivists who launched mayhem in the Indian cyberspace with their attacks**

## APT36 (Pakistan)

Also known as Transparent Tribe, it carried out phishing campaigns against armed forces personnel, but failed. Hacked websites of the Military Engineer Services, the Manohar Parrikar Institute and the DRDO

## Team Insane Pakistan & HOAX1337 (Pakistan)

Hacked websites of Assam Rifles, Department of Atomic Energy, Armoured Vehicles Nigam Ltd



## Turk Hack Team (Turkey)

Carried out unsuccessful DDoS attacks on Indian banking websites and media portals

## Vulture (Iran)

Directed DDoS attacks on websites of CERT-In, National Testing Agency, PMO and the President's office

## Mysterious Bangladesh

Tried to breach government portals like those of CBI, the Election Commission and BSNL

## R3VOX Anonymous (decentralised)

Launched abortive DDoS attacks on the Central Board of Indirect Taxes and Customs and Income Tax Department

## APT41 & Mustang Panda (China)

Failed attempts to impair India's power grids, logistics chains and telecommunications networks

## RipperSec (Malaysia)

Targeted the vice president of India's website but was repelled

tutes, including the Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO), were successfully targeted. Clearly, more needs to be done to beef up India's cyber-security, as attacks on Indian cyberspace continue.

Tarun Wig, CEO of Innefu Labs, an agency that works closely with the ministry of defence (MoD), agrees that the attacks are a clarion call for the country's defence mechanism. "These invasions are no longer just for ransom. They target critical infrastructures, steal sensitive data and attempt to disrupt essential services," he says.

## BARRAGE OF ATTACKS

Jaijit Bhattacharya, cyber-security expert and president of the Delhi-based Centre for Digital Economy Policy (C-Dep), says that the Pahalgam terrorist attack served as the ignition point for the hybrid war—an orchestrated blend of terrorism and cyber aggression—



**“THE PAHALGAM ATTACK IGNITED THE BARRAGE OF CYBER INTRUSIONS. THE IMPLICATIONS WERE SERIOUS—NATIONAL SECURITY, ECONOMIC STABILITY AND CIVIL TRUST IN DIGITAL SYSTEMS WERE UNDER SIEGE”**

### DR JAIJIT BHATTACHARYA

President, Centre for Digital Economy Policy

unleashed against India, signalled by a storm of attempted cyber intrusions and disruptions. Servers of the MoD, the Election Commission and key financial institutions were targeted, and cyber-security agencies like CERT-In and the National Technical Research Organisation (NTRO), which includes the NCIIPC, raised immediate alarms of an "ongoing coordinated offensive". "The implications were serious—national security, economic stability and civil trust in digital systems were under siege," Bhattacharya adds. Pakistan was the primary actor, while Malaysia and Turkey played subtler roles, he points out.

India's cyber agencies found that Pakistani group APT36 (a.k.a. Transparent Tribe), escalated phishing campaigns targeting armed forces personnel. Malware-laced documents mimicking internal communication were used to try and exfiltrate sensitive information,

# THE INDIAN DEFENDERS

Indian cyber-security agencies on the frontline

## Indian Cyber Crime Coordination Centre (14C)

 Operating under the Union home ministry, it provides a framework to deal with cyber crime. During the recent attacks, it spear-headed counter-hack operations. Under it, over 150 hostile command-and-control servers were taken down

## Data Security Council of India

 Set up by NASSCOM, it is an industry body on data protection. During the cyber attacks that erupted after April 22, it led a joint task

force, coordinating with government, private and industry bodies. It red-flagged suspicious sites, blocked vulnerable Indian sites

## CERT-In

 Working under the ministry of information technology, the Indian Computer Emergency Response Team (CERT-In), is India's nodal agency dealing with cyber threats. It sent out alerts, emergency response procedures

## NCIIPC

 Functioning under the PMO, the National Critical Information

Infrastructure Protection Centre (NCIIPC) safeguards vital assets like power grids. Along with CERT-In, it picked out threats in the telecom, energy, finance and transport sectors, led a swift response using its expert teams

## Defence Cyber Agency

 India took the attack to the hackers too. Elite cyber units of the Defence Cyber Agency, a tri-service command of the Indian military, carried out retaliatory digital strikes on critical assets of the enemy. Took down social media troll farms, disrupted servers

but were thwarted. However, its hackers gained access to data of the Military Engineer Services and the Manohar Parrikar Institute of Defence Studies and Analyses. Most worryingly, confidential data, including upgrade plans for T-90 tanks and certain projects under development by the DRDO was put on sale on the dark web. APT 36 is believed to be behind this intrusion too.

Other Pakistani groups like Team Insane Pakistan and HOAX1337 breached and defaced websites of the Assam Rifles, the Department of Atomic Energy and Armoured Vehicles Nigam Limited, forcing them to go offline for a few days. The Pakistan Cyber Force hacked the Rajasthan education department's website, posting false claims about the Pahalgam terror attack.

Malaysian hacktivist groups like RipperSec launched social media propaganda campaigns to amplify

anti-India narratives and targeted the vice president of India's website, while Turkish groups like the Turk Hack team carried out DDoS attacks on Indian banking websites and media portals. The Iranian hacker group Vulture carried out DDoS attacks on websites of CERT-In, the National Testing Agency, the office of the President of India and the Prime Minister's Office.

The Bangladeshi government denied involvement, but Indian cyber agencies traced ransomware and hacktivist attacks to hacker forums in Dhaka and Chittagong. Groups like Mysterious Bangladesh targeted government portals like those of the CBI, Election Commission and BSNL. It is suspected that non-state actors with ideological alignment to Pakistan were operating from Bangladesh.

China's cyber onslaught was more strategic. It conducted advanced per-

DEFENCE

CYBER WAR

sistent threats (APTs)—sophisticated and sustained cyber attacks that lodge themselves in a network—through groups like APT41 and Mustang Panda, attempting to disable India's power grids, logistics chains and telecommunications networks. A major concern was the attempted breach into India's railway network. Experts believe that Beijing's objective was to probe India's cyber resilience during a potential military standoff.

A decentralised group called R3VOXAnonymous launched abortive DDoS attacks on the Central Board of Indirect Taxes and Customs and the Income Tax Department. Sensing the danger early on, the Bombay Stock Exchange issued a cyber-security advisory on May 7 following warnings from CERT-In about ongoing cyber threats targeting India's banking, financial services and insurance (BFSI) sector.

Power distribution networks in western India were also probed by malware variants, prompting precautionary shutdowns in some areas. On May 10, the official website of the Ulhasnagar Municipal Corporation in Maharashtra was hacked.

## INDIA'S RESPONSE

**F**acing attacks on every domain, India's cyber armies—Independent and state-backed—launched thousands of attacks on Pakistan. Indian hacking groups like Indian Cyber Force, Indian Cyber Defender, WhiteHorse and Cyber Warriors India claimed successful attacks on crucial Pakistani infrastructure. India's elite cyber unit under the Defence Cyber Agency—a tri-service command of the Indian military—was mobilised and retaliatory digital strikes were carried out on critical assets. This included takedowns of social media troll farms, disruption of servers and digital forensics operations to trace and expose the origin of attacks. Pakistan's NCERT (National Cyber Emergency Response Team) was forced to issue a red alert

# THE SALVOES AND THE THWARTING

How various agencies countered, and plan to combat, different kinds of attacks

## THE ATTACKS

### Website defacements



Getting unauthorised access to websites and altering content, often with political/nationalistic messages

### Data breaches



Attempts to steal sensitive information from government agencies, businesses and individuals

### Denial of Service (DoS) & Distributed Denial of Service (DDoS)



These attacks overwhelm a target server/network with traffic, putting it out of use

### Malware distribution



The use of viruses to infect systems and gain control, usually for data theft

### Phishing



The use of deceptive emails/messages to trick individuals into revealing sensitive information

### APT



Advanced Persistent Threats (APTs) establish an undetected presence in targeted networks

## THE DEFENCE

### Hardening critical infrastructure



India ramped up cyber audits and real-time monitoring of power grids, defence networks, telecom etc. Sector-specific computer emergency response teams (CERTs) were activated

### Offensive cyber-readiness



This involves pre-emptive and retaliatory cyber operations targeting known Pakistani hacker groups and command servers. Marks a shift from passive defence to active deterrence

### Threat-Intelligence integration



CERT-In, NTRO and military intelligence created a joint cyber threat fusion cell to track and neutralise threats. Information-sharing with allies was scaled up

### Cyber hygiene campaigns



Recognising Pakistan's focus on phising, India launched targeted awareness drives across government offices, military and public sector units. Regular drills and simulated attacks are routine

### Legal/Diplomatic pushback



India is invoking international cyber norms to expose Pakistan's digital aggression in global forums. New legislation is in the works to empower agencies to prosecute foreign cyber attackers and freeze assets

for phishing targeting its organisations. Websites of Pakistan's Sindh Police and its airport systems were breached too.

However, most of India's robust response was defensive in nature. It involved tripling cyber defence teams, deploying real-time intelligence-sharing and activating a joint task force led by the Data Security Council of India, coordinating government, private firms and industry bodies. Measures included temporarily blocking vulnerable financial sites, issuing CERT-In alerts and monitoring suspicious command servers. According to Bhattacharya, the Indian government activated a multi-pronged cyber defence operation. The Indian Cyber Crime Coordination Centre (I4C), under the Union ministry of home affairs, spearheaded counter-hack operations, reportedly taking down over 150 hostile command-and-control servers. India's proactive approach and coordination at the macro level helped it withstand the dynamic threat landscape in this virtual war.



**“These virtual invasions are no longer just for ransom.... They target critical infrastructures.**

**Mass disturbances in anonymity make cyber warfare a preferred tool for hostile actors”**

**TARUN WIG**

CEO, Innefu Labs

With cyber threats ever present and evolving, India cannot let its guard down. To effectively counter Chinese cyber attacks, Pakistani hacktivists and other hacking groups, India must expand AI-powered threat detection and real-time incident response systems and improve cyber-security training. Increased investment in quantum-resistant encryption, cloud security and resilient infrastructure for all vital sectors are critical.

Wig says India has responded to growing cyber threats by fortifying its cyber defence through CERT-In and NCIIPC, indigenous cyber-security solutions and collaboration between government and private sectors. The Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023 has strengthened regulatory frameworks, while partnerships with Singapore, Japan and the UK have enhanced threat intelligence-sharing. India's determination to protect its digital infrastructure will shape the future of cyber-security in the region. ■

# ICONS OF CHANGE SHAPING INDIA'S FUTURE

## Dr. Harish Grover

Dr. Harish Grover, founder of Painflame Clinic and honored as India's Best Chiropractor 2025, is leading a revolution in non-surgical pain relief. Known as "The Spine Healer of India," at painflame clinic he has treated 2.5 lakh+ patients and prevented 50,000+ surgeries through drug-free, natural therapies. Integrating 26 healing modalities, his approach targets the root cause of pain. With social media 11 million followers and 5 billion views, his message inspires millions seeking safe, lasting recovery without surgery or medication.

## Amb. Dr. Sangramsinh Mali

Amb. Dr. Sangramsinh Mali is a globally acclaimed peace ambassador, humanitarian, and author whose work spans education, innovation, and spiritual literacy. Founder of The Global Humanity Peace Centre, he advocates for youth empowerment, global unity, and environmental healing. With multiple honorary doctorates and awards like the Iconic Visionary Award and National Excellence Award, he holds a world record for publishing 21 books in a month. His transformative initiatives continue to inspire global harmony and conscious leadership.

## Mr. Avinash Shende & Mr. Sachin Pande

Virtual Galaxy Infotech Limited (VGIL), founded in 1997 by Avinash Shende and Sachin Pande, is a leading force in India's fintech landscape, offering secure core banking solutions and AI-powered cybersecurity. Serving over 15 Indian states and international clients, VGIL has grown rapidly—achieving 95.48% revenue and 97.05% PAT growth in FY 2024–25. With its recent launch of Cyber Sentinel and strong presence in BFSI, ERP, and e-Governance, the company is shaping a resilient, tech-driven digital economy.

## John Kiran E

John Kiran, Founder and CEO of Iconic Dream Focus, is a visionary tech entrepreneur redefining digital innovation. A Loyola-ICAM engineering graduate, he transitioned from a promising corporate career at HSBC to build purpose-driven digital products. Since launching his startup in 2020, he has created platforms like Paarambariyam, Drmurs, and Hy U, blending technology with human connection. With expansion into AI and data analytics, his leadership fuels global ambitions and positions his company as a rising innovation powerhouse.

## Dr. B. Nandha Kumar

Rtn. Dr. B. Nandha Kumar, a visionary leader from Ooty, brings over 30 years of experience across banking, NBFCs, healthcare, and FMCG sectors. Holding a Ph.D. in Management, he has served in senior roles at HDFC Bank and Muthoot Fincorp. As Director of Janaasha Group, he champions financial literacy, sustainable innovation, and community empowerment. Known for his contributions to green mobility and social upliftment, he continues to inspire change through leadership, service, and inclusive development.

## Marmi Nilay Shukla

Marmi Nilaybhai Shukla is a gifted artist and scholar whose passion for classical dance, music, and theatre complements her academic excellence. A postgraduate in English, she has earned top honors in district, state, and national cultural competitions, including the Rashtriya Nari Shakti Puraskar. Her talent, discipline, and love for India's heritage have made her a role model in Gujarat's cultural landscape. Through her journey, she exemplifies the transformative power of dedication to both art and education.

## Daman Derling

Daman Derling, mult. h.c., is an internationally acclaimed expert in mantra, tantra, yajna, and astrology, with over 25 years of experience. A spiritual visionary and cultural ambassador, he blends ancient Eastern wisdom with modern insights to guide individuals and global leaders toward transformation. As a board member of the World Cultural and Environmental Commission and recipient of the Global Leadership Award, he champions cultural preservation, conscious leadership, and spiritual awakening on a global scale.

## Prof. Dr. Abhiraj Ramchandani

Prof. Dr. Abhiraj Ramchandani is a renowned pathologist and medical educator with a distinguished career spanning over two decades. An MD in Pathology and gold medalist in Microbiology, he has served in key academic roles, currently as Professor at AIMS, Dewas, and Director of Lehar Pathology Lab, Ujjain. With over twenty publications and specialized training in ISO 15189 and NABL standards, he has significantly advanced diagnostics, laboratory quality management, and medical education across India.



DR. HARISH GROVER



AMB. DR. SANGRAMSINH MALI



MR. AVINASH SHENDE & MR. SACHIN PANDE



JOHN KIRAN E



DR. B. NANDHA KUMAR



MARMI NILAY SHUKLA



DAMAN DERLING



PROF. DR. ABHIRAJ RAMCHANDANI



THE NATION | WEST BENGAL

# IT'S RAINING IDENTITY POLITICS

**'Being Bengali' is the hot new theme for the 2026 assembly poll. As reports pile up of Bengali-speaking migrant workers being branded 'illegal citizens' in BJP-ruled states, the TMC finds an apt moment to ratchet up the rhetoric**

BY ARKAMOY DATTA MAJUMDAR



**S**WEST BENGAL GEARS UP FOR THE 2026 ASSEMBLY ELECTION, the ruling Trinamool Congress has plunged headlong into an emotionally charged campaign centred on identity politics. At the heart of this campaign lies a powerful narrative: the defence of Bengali linguistic and cultural pride amid what the party alleges is an organised effort to harass, criminalise and deport Bengali-speaking migrant workers from BJP-ruled states. The incidents, TMC leaders claim, are part of a wider attempt to delegitimise Bengali identity across India. This endeavour is also tied

to the BJP's efforts to shed a past filled with conflicting signals, bordering on antagonistic, on Bengalihood—with a distinctively north Indian accent. The latest reparative gesture came with the naming of Samik Bhattacharya as state BJP chief. While a dyed-in-the-wool Sangh product, his relatively sober persona gels better with the old *bhadralok* prototype. His coronation event, too, was saturated by Bengali religious iconography, especially that of goddess Kali.

All reasons, therefore, existed for the TMC to mount a military-style area denial operation. That



ANI

reached its crescendo with a mammoth rally in central Kolkata on July 16. With chief minister Mamata Banerjee and TMC scion Abhishek Banerjee on the podium, full-throated commitment to the cause was guaranteed. The BJP, Mamata alleged, was trying to reduce Bengalis to the status of 'infiltrators' in their own country. In pouring rain, she brought the teeming crowds to boiling point, claiming the Centre had secretly instructed BJP-ruled states to arrest and deport Bengali-speaking individuals, often without cause. "Why are you torturing Bengalis? People are being arrested even after showing documents. What was their fault? Just speaking in Bengali?" she demanded. The TMC has not been alone in raising the alarm. On July 15, the CPI(M), too, organised a march to show solidarity with Bengali-speaking migrants.

The sense of persecution is reinforced by some well-publicised cases. In Delhi's



**"BENGALIS ARE BEING ARRESTED EVEN AFTER SHOWING DOCUMENTS. WHAT WAS THEIR FAULT? JUST SPEAKING IN BENGALI?"**

**MAMATA BANERJEE**

Chief Minister, West Bengal

Jai Hind Colony in Vasant Kunj, home to hundreds of Bengali-speaking daily wage workers, TMC MPs and leaders, including Sagarika Ghose, Saket Gokhale, Dola Sen and Sukhendu Sekhar Roy, joined sit-in protests after reports emerged that residents with valid Aadhaar and voter ID cards were being branded 'illegal', and then denied basic amenities like power and water. Similar targeting was reported from Maharashtra, Odisha, Chhattisgarh and Assam.

One case involved Nizamuddin Sheikh, a 34-year-old mason from Murshidabad's Hariharpara. Picked up by the Mumbai police on June 10 despite having proper identification, he was flown to Tripura and allegedly pushed across the Bangladesh border by the Border Security Force. "They beat us with lathis and boots," Nizamuddin said after his return. "We had no phones, no money, only fear." Once he contacted the Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB), he was eventually repatriated via Cooch Behar on June 17. Others such as Minarul Sheikh from Murshidabad, Mostafa Kamal Sheikh from Bardhaman, and Fazel and Taslima Mandal from North 24 Parganas were also reportedly deported, and later brought back through state intervention. Acting on a petition regarding six detainees from Birbhum's Pikor village allegedly deported to Bangladesh, the Calcutta High Court on July 11 asked the Union home ministry to submit a detailed explanation of its deportation drive.

"It's unconstitutional. The BSF did not contact the state before deporting Indian citizens," says Samirul Islam, TMC Rajya Sabha MP and chairperson of the West Bengal Migrant Welfare Board. Some 2.2

## PARRY AND RIPOSTE

**Language, identity, points and counterpoints...the arguments of the main political adversaries in Bengal**

**TMC**

➤ Alleges Bengali-speaking migrant workers are being detained and deported from BJP-ruled states despite having valid documents

➤ Bengal hosts over 15 million migrants; TMC asks why Bengali migrants are not treated with dignity

➤ Accuses BJP-governed states of violating federal principles, citizens' rights

➤ Frames its campaign as a defence of 'Bangaliyana'—a cultural-linguistic identity beyond religion—against right-wing Hindutva

**BJP**

➤ Argues actions are aimed at only Rohingya or Bangladeshi infiltrators

➤ Claims population spike in West Bengal's border areas is due to illegal immigration; calls for revision of voter rolls

➤ Accuses TMC of fuelling linguistic paranoia for political gain

➤ Says unemployment in Bengal is the root cause of mass migration to other states, which the TMC is now deflecting through identity politics

million migrant workers from Bengal are registered with the board, he lets on. Mamata has also pointed out that Bengal hosts nearly 15 million workers from other regions.

The TMC has cast its campaign as a battle for 'Bangaliyana', a composite Bengali identity that transcends religion and caste. The emotional charge around this is aimed squarely at consolidating support among Bengal's rural electorate, which provides the bulk of the migrant workforce.

### BJP PUSHBACK

**T**he BJP has pushed back hard. On the same day as Mamata's rally, Leader of the Opposition Suvendu Adhikari met West Bengal chief electoral officer Manoj Kumar Agarwal and flagged what he called an "abnormal rise in population" in the state's border districts. He cited the arrest of a suspected operative of the Bangladeshi militant organisation Ansarullah Bangla Team in Assam, who allegedly voted thrice in Bengal. Claiming that 80 of Bengal's 340 blocks are now "manned by officers who are illegal immigrants", Adhikari demanded an exhaustive combing of the voter rolls, akin to the special intensive revision in Bihar. Earlier, he had dismissed the TMC's allegations of persecution as deliberate exaggeration, stating that only Rohingya 'infiltrators' were being deported.

The TMC countered this breezy explanation with names and emotional testimonies, including those of Hindu victims. Some 200 migrant Bengali workers—among them Debasish Das from Hooghly—were detained and harassed in Odisha last week. Uttam Kumar Brojibasi, a Rajbanshi from Dinhata in Cooch Behar, reportedly received a Foreigners Tribunal notice from Assam despite living in West Bengal for over five decades. Even Bengal's Matua community, traditionally aligned with the BJP, is feeling the heat. Aarush Adhikari from Habra, working in Pune, was arrested despite possessing a Matua identity card issued by the BJP-linked All India Matua Sangha. "We're trying



► **BACK HOME** Three Bengalis who were earlier deported to Bangladesh pose after their repatriation by the BSF in Cooch Behar



**"NO BENGALI HINDU  
AND NO INDIAN MUSLIM  
WILL HAVE TO PROVIDE  
ANY DOCUMENT TO  
PROVE CITIZENSHIP.  
THIS IS BENGAL BJP'S  
ASSURANCE"**

**SAMIK BHATTACHARYA**  
*Bengal BJP president*

to get my brother out. He has all the documents," his brother Bhagirath says.

Meanwhile, BJP state chief Bhattacharya declared, "No Bengali Hindu and no Indian Muslim will have to provide any document to prove their citizenship. This is Bengal BJP's assurance. TMC's ugly politics will backfire." But this statement, or its omission of the category 'Bengali Muslims', has intensified scrutiny of the BJP's position, especially in light of a statement from Assam CM Himanta Biswa

Sarma on July 9 that it was easy to find out the number of Bengalis in Assam if all its speakers named 'Bengali' as their mother tongue during census. As his comments created a furore for trying to equate all Bengalis with "illegal Bangladeshi immigrants", Sarma denied he is 'anti-Bengali' and claimed that Bengali speakers in Assam understand his campaign against illegal infiltration.

The controversy has opened up larger questions around migration and governance. Garga Chatterjee, founder of the Bengali nationalist group Bangla Pokkho, criticised the West Bengal government for not doing enough to prevent the exodus of Bengali workers. "Why is there no reservation for Bengali speakers in government jobs?" he asks. "The TMC should focus on creating jobs instead of just exploiting the issue politically."

Yet Mamata has framed the issue in personal terms. "I dare you to send me to a detention camp. I'll speak more in Bengali," she said on July 16. As Bengal hurtles toward 2026, the TMC's assertion that this is not just a political campaign but a cultural resistance movement may resonate beyond its traditional support base. Language, identity and dignity have become the central axes around which the state's politics will revolve in the coming months. ■



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## ● A DUAL BURDEN

Roshni Sharma, a patwari tasked with maintaining land records and tax collection, stands outside a Revenue Police chowki in Pauri Garhwal. The 27-year-old revenue official also handles policing duties across all seven villages under her jurisdiction



THE NATION | UTTARAKHAND

ARUN KUMAR

# The Policing Gap

Still governed by a colonial-era system, **large areas of Uttarakhand rely on untrained revenue officials to police modern crimes**, with rising costs to justice and public safety

By AVANEESH MISHRA in Dehradun and Pauri Garhwal

# A

NARROW, SLIPPERY TRAIL CLIMBS STEEPLY FOR 100 METRES BEFORE YOU REACH the remote *chowki* in Jakhnikhal tehsil of Pauri Garhwal district. The outpost is a rundown two-storeyed structure, its central hall serving as a shared office for several patwaris—revenue sub-inspectors tasked with policing dozens of villages between them. A rusted lockup now holds old documents and body bags; a toilet has become a records room. A few cracked chairs flank a bench; faded maps hang loose on the

walls. Roshni Sharma, 27, has been posted here just a few months. “We handle land records and police work, both,” says the young patwari, who has seven villages under her jurisdiction. “It becomes hard to do either properly.”

For nearly two centuries, policing in Uttarakhand’s hilly interior is carried out not by trained officers, but by revenue officials like Roshni—patwaris, kanungos, lekhpals—whose primary job was to maintain land records, collect taxes, compile census data and issue certificates. This

# THE WIDE JURISDICTION

The Revenue Police system still covers 50% of Uttarakhand's area and 25% of its population

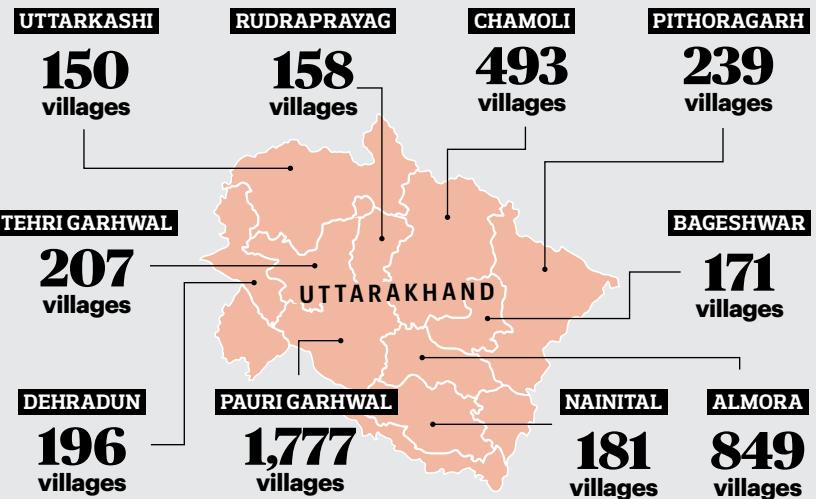


**4,421**

Villages under Revenue Police

**478**

RP chowkis tasked with police work



Revenue Police (RP) system, introduced by the British in the early 19th century, still serves nearly half the state's area and about 25 per cent of its population. RP officials can file FIRs, investigate crimes, arrest suspects and submit chargesheets in court, but only up to a point. Cases of serious crime are transferred to the regular police, triggering a slow bureaucratic relay: from patwari to district magistrate (DM) to superintendent of police (SP) to the police station concerned. Evidence is often lost in the lag.

After years of delay and resistance, the system is now under pressure. In May 2024, the Uttarakhand High Court (HC) gave the state one year to implement a 2018 judgment that had ordered the abolition of the RP system. But with 4,421 villages still under the jurisdiction of 478 RP chowkis, a civil contempt petition was filed recently, citing non-compliance. The court has asked the government to file a response.

The state government, meanwhile, claims progress. According to official

data, since 2023, 1,357 revenue villages have been brought under regular police with the setting up of six new stations and 20 outposts. Additionally, the jurisdiction of 52 existing police stations and 19 outposts has been expanded to encompass 1,800 more villages. But a lot of work remains. "In the current day and age, we need police coverage in all areas because their work is not just limited to crime control and law and order," admits Abhinav Kumar, a former acting director-general of police (DGP) of Uttarakhand, who is now posted as

**DESPITE SOME PROGRESS, THE UTTARAKHAND GOVT MISSED THE MAY DEADLINE TO PHASE OUT THE REVENUE POLICE SYSTEM**

additional director-general (ADG), prisons. "At present, almost a fourth of the state's population remains uncovered by the regular police. This is an anomaly that must be corrected."

## A COLONIAL RELIC

The RP system began after the British annexed Kumaon and eastern Garhwal (present-day Pauri Garhwal) from the Gurkhas in 1816. Finding little crime in the rugged hills, they chose not to deploy regular police outside towns like Almora and Nainital, instead giving police powers to revenue officials. After the 1857 revolt, while modern policing spread elsewhere, the British retained the RP model in hill areas under the Scheduled Districts Act of 1874. Also tried in parts of present-day Himachal Pradesh, Assam and some tribal regions, it was phased out there decades ago. Uttarakhand was carved out of Uttar Pradesh in 2000, and its own Police Act came in 2007—but in many districts, the colonial system stayed in place.

These days, however, crime in the hills is no longer rare or simple. The rise of tourism, road networks connecting remote villages, the proliferation of mobile phones and porous borders have brought in organised crime, drug trafficking and cybercrime. "Tourism brings new challenges," says a retired IPS officer who served in both UP and Uttarakhand. "When outsiders are involved, coordination is nearly impossible for the revenue police. Getting forensic help is also hard."

In RP areas, the patwari—who may be as young as Roshni—is the top investigating officer, regardless of the nature of the crime. There is no supervisory chain of command like in regular police stations, where cases are overseen by sub-inspectors, inspectors and deputy SPs. Training is minimal; one patwari admitted they had barely been briefed on the new Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, which replaced the colonial-era Indian Penal Code (IPC) last year.

This lack of training can have serious repercussions. The 2018 HC judgment stemmed from a 2011 dowry death case in Tehri Garhwal, which exposed delays and inefficiencies in

the RP system. However, the state challenged the verdict in the Supreme Court. In 2022, the system's limitations were starkly highlighted again when 19-year-old Ankita Bhandari went missing from a resort in Rishikesh, where she worked. Her disappearance was reported to the local patwari, but no FIR was registered. The case was transferred to the regular police days later, by which time crucial evidence had vanished.

Her employer, Pulkit Arya—the son of a former BJP leader—was later arrested for her murder (and recently sentenced to life imprisonment). The patwari in charge, Vaibhav Pratap, was suspended and arrested for negligence. The case triggered a political storm, with Uttarakhand assembly speaker Ritu Khanduri writing to Chief Minister Pushkar Singh Dhami urging abolition of the colonial-era system. Soon after, the cabinet approved a proposal to phase out the RP. But, in many areas, nothing has changed.

In Jhaid village in Pauri Garhwal district, for instance, residents recall an incident just weeks ago when an elderly man slipped into a gorge. With no road, and no regular police, it took locals and the patwari nearly eight hours to retrieve the body. "It has been nearly 78 years since Independence, and still we have no proper police," says Yogesh Maithani, a local. "Many incidents go unreported...we know the lone patwari has no resources."

## CAUGHT BETWEEN ROLES

**F**or patwaris, the job is a daily balancing act between civil and policing duties. "We do the same work as a sub-inspector or inspector, but also handle land records, government schemes—and do it without vehicles, weapons or staff," says Atul Balodhi, president of the Pauri District Patwari Sangh. "Even our safety is at risk."

In disaster-prone hill regions, the patwari is also the first responder during landslides, floods and road accidents. So far, Roshni has dealt with two criminal cases—a missing girl and a village brawl. But as the area's de facto cop, more calls



**“ We do the same work as an SI or inspector, but also handle land records, government schemes, and do it without vehicles, weapons or staff. Even our safety is at risk ”**

**ATUL BALODHI**  
President, Pauri District  
Patwari Sangh



**“ We are committed to improving policing and public services across the state, and replacing revenue police wherever needed. We have already brought large areas under regular police ”**

**NILESH ANAND BHARNE**  
IG (law & order), Uttarakhand

## CHANGING THE GUARD

Since 2023, six new regular police stations and 20 police outposts have come up, taking charge of 1,357 revenue villages

The jurisdiction of 52 existing police stations and 19 outposts has been expanded to include another 1,800 revenue villages

The total number of police stations has now reached 166; outposts: 258

are sure to come. "The worst is accidental deaths. We're expected to shift the body, arrange the postmortem, coordinate with the family—all without any support," she says. "We end up begging locals for help." She now leans on two fellow women patwaris from her training batch—Monika, who covers seven villages, and Sheetal Negi, who manages 14. "That's why we share the *chowki*," she says. "So we can help each other."

Despite multiple court orders and official commitments, progress on dismantling the RP system remains halting—partly due to political and administrative resistance. A senior IPS officer tells INDIA TODAY that the inertia stems from multiple quarters: "Politicians are wary of disturbing a status quo that gives them informal leverage. The civil bureaucracy, especially at the district level, has the most to lose in terms of authority." Even some locals are nostalgic about the patwari as a familiar authority figure.

Uttarakhand IG (law & order) and police spokesperson Nilesh Anand Bharne is emphatic that reforms are under way. "We are committed to improving policing and public services across the state, and replacing revenue police wherever needed. We have already brought large areas and population under regular police," he says.

But with vast swathes of Uttarakhand still being policed by revenue officials, Balodhi complains that they are left to operate with outdated tools and little institutional support. "The world has moved on. But we haven't," he says. "We don't have digital records, we're not connected to a centralised crime tracking network, everything is still on paper." Unless the transition to regular policing is accelerated and implemented in both letter and spirit, accountability, justice and public safety in the hills will remain patchy—and patwaris like Roshni will be left to shoulder impossible burdens. ■

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# BREAKING NEWS

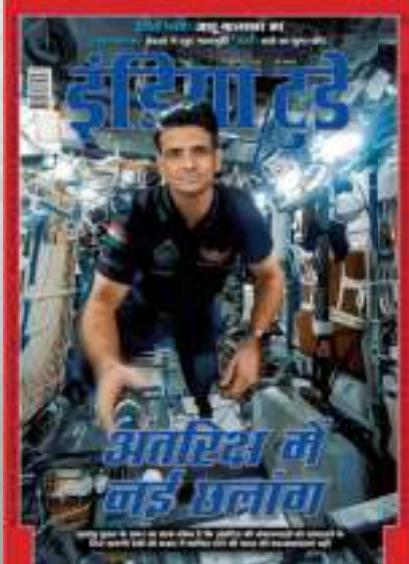
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<input type="checkbox"/>	1 वर्ष	52	3120	2699	डिजिटल+प्रिंट	14%

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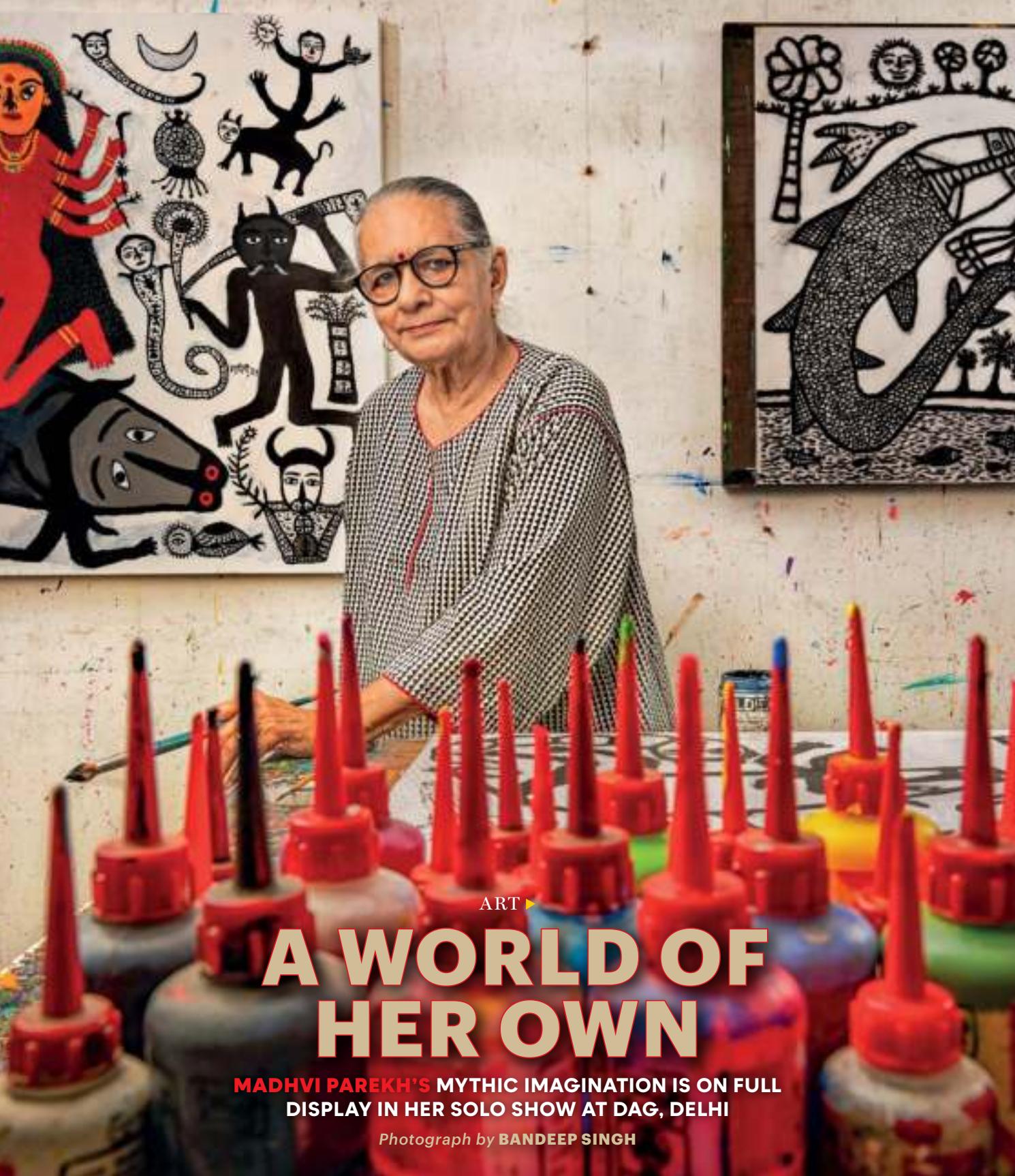


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ART ▶

## A WORLD OF HER OWN

MADHVI PAREKH'S MYTHIC IMAGINATION IS ON FULL DISPLAY IN HER SOLO SHOW AT DAG, DELHI

Photograph by BANDEEP SINGH

# M

Madhvi Parekh's acrylic-on-canvas painting 'Travelling Circus in My Village' (80 x 240 inches, 2024) is one of those large-scale works that simply have to be seen in the flesh. The pixels on your screen cannot come close to reproducing its ambition, its grandeur, its irresistible strangeness. A messianic figure lies at the centre of the triptych, holding a snake aloft like a canopy above his head, the faithful gathering around him slowly. An array of human-animal hybrids fills every corner, the chimeras ranging from a biped cow to a snake with a human head, to a horse that has a human face nestled close to its heart. All the while, a determined-looking man carries a temple on his back. Like the triptychs of Dutch painter Hieronymus Bosch, 'Traveling Circus in My Village' tells a story sequentially, and it seems to acquire new details with every fresh glance. The work is part of *Madhvi Parekh: Remembered Tales*, a solo exhibition at DAG, Delhi, that started on July 11 and shall conclude on August 23.

During an interview, the 83-year-old artist spoke about the work ethic that has stood her in good stead throughout her six-decade career. Parekh said: "My father was a schoolteacher and a devoted Gandhian. It was very important to him that we shouldn't waste even a second of our time; everything had to be accounted for. From a young age, I had this habit of not sitting idle, always keeping myself occupied



**MADHVI PAREKH:  
REMEMBERED  
TALES began on  
July 11 at DAG, Delhi,  
and concludes on  
August 23**

in something or the other. When I started drawing, this habit extended itself into my practice."

Initially urged by her husband (the artist Manu Parekh) to start drawing, Madhvi charted her own course. Swiss-German artist Paul Klee's work was one of the starting points. But when you observe her early sketches from half a century ago (many of which are also a part of the exhibition), you see how Parekh assimilated a lot of influences in her work—Klee, Spanish artist Joan Miró, folk art from around the world—but the resultant style is truly original.

She still tries to draw every day, a habit that she says is akin to women drawing rangoli or alpana in their houses.

"When you do something every day, the art kind of flows out of your hands eventually," says Parekh. "In Maharashtra, in Gujarat, in the south Indian states as well, you see the women who make alpana on the floor every day. My sister does it too, and her patterns have the straightest, most beautiful lines...you should look at her swastikas. My lines are nowhere near as straight, but my husband says that my lines are strong."

Fables, folktales and mythologies are never far from the picture in Parekh's work. In 'Two Scarecrows in My Rice Field' (acrylic-on-canvas, 60 x 120 in, 2024), you will find a crow in a corner, next to a pitcher—a reference to the fable of the clever crow who used pebbles to reach the water at the bottom of a pitcher. At the bottom of the frame in 'Goddess Durga' (acrylic-on-canvas, 72 x



**MYTHIC MODERNISM**  
'Goddess',  
acrylic on  
canvas, 2023

60 in, 2023), the buffalo-demon Mahishasura is represented as two separate beings, a buffalo and a horned man, as though his soul has been bifurcated by the goddess's fiery gaze. Other works like 'Ka-liyadaman', too, are deeply informed by the way people internalise mythologies.

Parekh also says that, while she is wary of transposing post-facto meanings onto her paintings, over the years, she has cultivated a certain detachment that kicks in once she stops the work. "My attachment to the drawing is only till the point I am still working on it," she says. "Once the work is done, I don't mind too much what someone's opinion is. Now it is up to you to make up your mind about the work; what meaning you find there is your choice." ■

—Aditya Mani Jha

# Glass Palace

**SHEESH MAHAL**, A MEDIEVAL HERITAGE STRUCTURE IN DELHI'S SHALIMAR BAGH, HAS REOPENED TO THE PUBLIC AFTER A RECENT RESTORATION

**I**t was once a Mughal royal retreat set in a typical charbagh-style garden with fountains and water channels. Then it fell into disrepair following decades of neglect. Now, after a meticulous restoration by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) in association with the Delhi Development

Delhi's lieutenant governor Vinai Kumar Saxena. "On a visit to the site in January last year, I took serious note of the Bagh's deplorable, dilapidated and crumbling condition and the urgent need to preserve this priceless piece of our heritage," he wrote on X on July 2, the day the restored structure was inaugurated.

an impressive central hall and a central circular archway flanked on either side by three cusped arch openings resting on fluted columns. Set in West Delhi's Shalimar Bagh garden, Sheesh Mahal was the setting for Aurangzeb's preliminary coronation in 1658, when it was known as Aizzabad Bagh. David Ochterlony, who



The restored Sheesh Mahal unveiled at Shalimar Bagh, Delhi

HARDIK CHHABRA

**SET IN SHALIMAR BAGH GARDEN, SHEESH MAHAL WAS THE SETTING FOR AURANGZEB'S PRELIMINARY CORONATION IN 1658**

Authority (DDA), Sheesh Mahal has regained a modicum of its former glory and has been opened to the public.

The latest restoration push came from

Shah Jahan built the Sheesh Mahal for his third wife, Izz-un-Nissa Begum, in 1653. Standing on a high plinth and featuring *lakhor* brick masonry walls, it has

served as the British resident to the Mughal court in the early 19th century, is said to have used the Sheesh Mahal as a summer retreat. While the restoration of the main structure is complete, the fountains and the garden are still a work in progress. ■

—Amit Dixit

# Romance in the Air

Actress **SHAHANA GOSWAMI** on her Indo-Australian romance drama *Four Years Later*

In

a career spanning two decades, Shahana Goswami has been a part of only two stories that had romance at the centre of them. The first was *Ru-Ba-Ru* (2008), and the second is *Four Years Later*, an eight-part Indo-Australian series created by Mithila Gupta. Co-starring Akshay Ajit Singh, the show revolves around a newly-wed couple forced to live apart as the husband moves to Sydney while the wife continues to live in India. “The portrayal of their lives felt very real. The kinds of issues in their relationship were nuanced and mature.

It isn’t just typical male-bashing or gender normative issues between couples,” says Goswami. Shot in Mumbai and Jaipur before moving to Sydney, the show uses both English and Hindi. “It was so refreshing to have Indian characters in the lead who spoke in their natural accents.”

Ever since her first film *Yun Hota Toh Kya Hota* (2006), the 39-year-old has been a part of international projects like Deepa Mehta’s film adaptation of Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* (2012) and Mira Nair’s series adaptation of Vikram Seth’s *A Suitable Boy*. The actor was last seen

in British-Indian documentary filmmaker Sandhya Suri’s searing *Santosh* (2024), about a young widow who joins the police and investigates the murder of a Dalit girl. The film, which premiered at the Cannes Film Festival to acclaim, was the UK’s official entry to the Oscar’s International Feature Film category, and earned a BAFTA nomination for Best Debut Feature. *Santosh* has been denied certification for release in India after the Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC) objected to its portrayal of police brutality, caste discrimination and misogyny.

Goswami has been part of several international indie films that haven’t released in India, but the disappointment for *Santosh* is more profound. “This is a story that is so rooted in India that I think it’ll resonate with large sections of the audience. That’s why I feel so bad about this decision. I’m still hopeful though. I believe that the amount of debates that have happened because of this film and others that have been blocked in some way or the other, are creating a larger dialogue for change.”

For now, the actor is looking forward to the release of her next film—*Mahasangam*, co-starring Abhishek Banerjee and Neeraj Kabi. Directed by Bharat Bala, it is set against the backdrop of the Maha Kumbh Mela in Prayagraj. “It’s a sweet family film which we shot during the Maha Kumbh, which was a unique experience. A.R. Rahman has done the music and it was great moment for me to be lip-syncing to his music.” Towards the end of July, Goswami will start shooting for an untitled film that deals with conservation and environment through the lens of mythology. She’s also hoping to make a foray into production with a travel documentary ‘with a difference’.

—Karishma Upadhyay

The CBFC objected to **portrayals of police brutality, misogyny and caste prejudice** in the searing *Santosh*



BOOKS ▼

# Balancing Act

MAYUKH SEN HAS WRITTEN AN EMPATHETIC BIOGRAPHY OF MERLE OBERON, WHO MADE IT BIG IN HOLLYWOOD BY CONCEALING HER SOUTH ASIAN ROOTS



**LOVE, QUEENIE:**  
MERLE OBERON,  
HOLLYWOOD'S  
FIRST SOUTH  
ASIAN STAR  
*by Mayukh Sen*  
W.W. NORTON  
& CO.  
₹2,669; 320  
pages

**W**hat if you spend your whole life living a lie and do it so convincingly that you believe it too. That was the case with actress Merle

Oberon (1911-79), born Estelle Merle O'Brien Thompson in Bombay. In her quest to make it to the magical world of Hollywood, Oberon hid her Anglo-Indian roots and claimed she was white and hailed from Tasmania, Australia. It's a

lie she'd take to the grave.

In Love, Queenie: Merle Oberon, Hollywood's First South Asian Star—Queenie being the name she was bestowed by her non-white mother who posed as her sister—Mayukh Sen digs deep into the circumstances that compelled her to live a life of deception. He sets the background about her roots by detailing the ostracism Anglo-Indians faced in British-occupied India. He brings up the derogatory terms they were subjected to: "Blacky-white. Chee-chee. Kutch-abutcha (half baked). Eight annas (referring to the fact that there were 16 annas to a rupee)." He then paints a captivating portrait of a determined young woman who wouldn't let prejudice come in the way of her dream to be a famous actress. There she is in England acting on stage and then in films, only to set

her sights higher by heading to the US. Only she was arriving when outsiders, especially those from South Asia, were not welcome.

Oberon cooked up a story that ensured she didn't face scrutiny about her racial heritage. In 1935, she was nominated for a best actress Oscar. After Michelle Yeoh won the Oscar in 2022 to headlines of being the first Asian nominee to do so, Oberon's name resurfaced as the actual first to break the glass ceiling and pave the way for others. Sen's gaze is empathetic as he packs in a punch of revelations, scandal and criticism, especially around her complexion, more so in the technicolour era. Love, Queenie ultimately is a tragic tale ripe for cinematic treatment, about a complex woman who achieved her ambition despite adversities. ■

—Suhani Singh

SPORTS ▼

## AGAINST ALL ODDS

**SAIYAMI KHER JUGGLES TWO HATS—ACTOR AND TRIATHLETE—with panache, as her recent success in Ironman 70.3 shows**

**D**uring Saiyami Kher's first Ironman 70.3 in September 2024, she went 2 km off course on the bike route and had to retrace her steps. She missed out on adequate hydration, resulting in painful shin splints. But she pushed on to the finish, the last legitimate finisher. "The biggest muscle you train in a triathlon is your mind. I learned that no amount of fitness matters if you lose heart halfway," says Kher, 33.

She worked towards her goals and in early July, lined



KHER WAS UP AGAINST WIND, RAIN AND FRIGID WEATHER IN SWEDEN, BUT IMPROVED HER PERSONAL BEST

up for her second Ironman 70.3 in Jönköping, Sweden. She finished in 7 hours 29 minutes, improving on her best by over 30 minutes.

The 10 months between the races needed a fine balance in time management. The actor would put in two hours of training before taking on a full day's filming schedule for Jaat. Besides training, she was also mindful about her diet, prepping most meals herself. "It used to get tiring, but it's about showing up when you don't want to. It all adds up," she says. On race day, Kher woke up to bitterly cold conditions. Her nerves jangled, until she noticed the smile on a visually challenged athlete. Nothing mattered from here on—neither the frigid waters of Lake Vättern, nor the rain and wind. When she made the finish, she realised she was ready to do it all over again. "These races... strip away ego and fear, they demand honesty. And I've found that in the discomfort, I come closest to myself," says Kher. ■

—Shail Desai

BOOKS ▼

# FOUND IN TRANSLATION

**Arunava Sinha** has launched Chowringhee Press, an imprint for books in translation

**I**t's fair to say that literature-in-translation from Indian languages is enjoying an extended phase of cultural prominence. Writers working in Hindi, Tami, Bangla, Kannada et al are increasingly being published around the world in translation, and winning awards (the latest being the 2025 International Booker Prize for Kannada writer Banu Mushtaq and her English

Talking about the new imprint during a telephonic interview, Sinha says, "This is an idea that had been on my mind for a couple of years now. Until now, it hadn't happened because of the investments typically required to set up a publishing house. We have now found a way to make it work without a huge initial investment."

Chowringhee Press will function as an imprint of Stack Books (pronounced "Stack Books"), a self-publishing platform. The way it works is quite straightforward. In this business model, instead of pre-publishing a certain number of copies, the publisher prints copies on demand. The number of copies therefore equals the number of orders, reducing the need for a large initial investment.

Sinha said, "With the larger publishing houses, they have a lot of different kinds of books coming out at once, they have to handle large volumes. So, unless your translated book is by a really famous writer, or it's an award-winning work, it's difficult to get people's attention. What we're trying to do with Chowringhee Press is to help get readers for deserving works-in-translation, both in India and abroad." ■

—Aditya Mani Jha

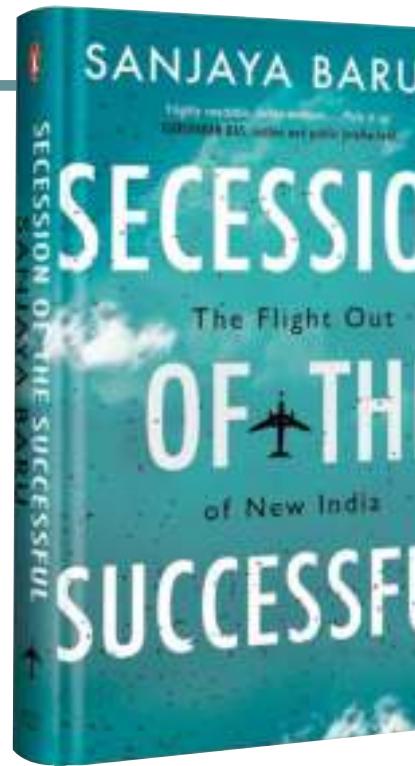


The first title will be Sinha's translation of *The Laboratory*, a short novel by Rabindranath Tagore

translator Deepa Bhasthi). In another happy development in this space, the prolific translator Arunava Sinha has started a new publishing imprint called Chowringhee Press, specifically for Indian translations. The first-ever Chowringhee Press title is Sinha's own translation of *The Laboratory*, a short novel by Rabindranath Tagore that also happens to be the last novel he ever wrote.

# THE LI

Recent releases which



**SECESSION OF THE SUCCESSFUL**  
By Sanjaya Baru  
PENGUIN/VIKING  
PAGES: 320; PRICE: ₹ 799

## A RIVER RUNS THROUGH IT

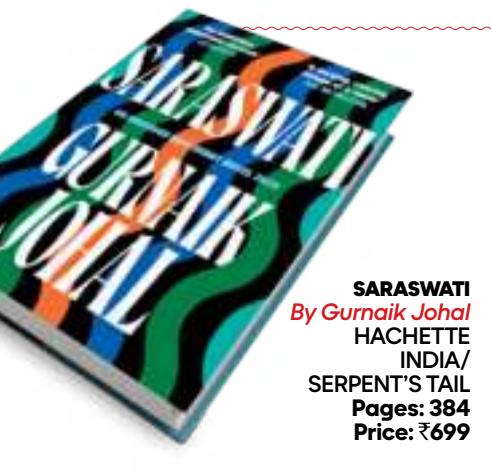
**S**araswati is the ambitious debut novel by 27-year-old British writer Gurnaik Johal. His protagonist, a Londoner called Satnam, returns to his ancestral village in Punjab for his grandmother's funeral — to discover a long-dried well miraculously spouting water. This triggers a search for Satnam's diasporic relatives around the world, amid a politically charged campaign to revive the mythical 'lost river' Saraswati.

# STICLE

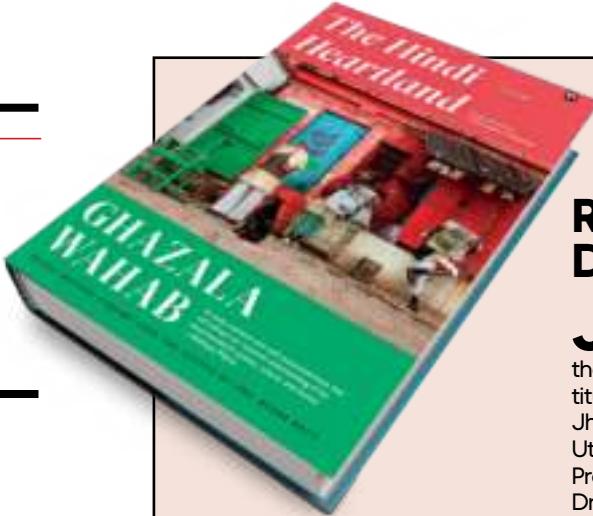
should be on your reading list

## Flight of Talent

The term 'brain drain' has been used in the context of NRIs (non-resident Indians) since the 1990s, referring to highly-qualified individuals leaving the country in search of better prospects in America, the UK et al. In his new book, Sanjaya Baru (author of *The Accidental PM*) investigates why this phenomenon has accelerated in 21st century India, and evaluates the idea of 'soft power' versus the prospect of losing our precious human capital. Baru analyses macro-trends from the last decade and traces the evolution of the non-resident Indian into the 'non-returning Indian'.



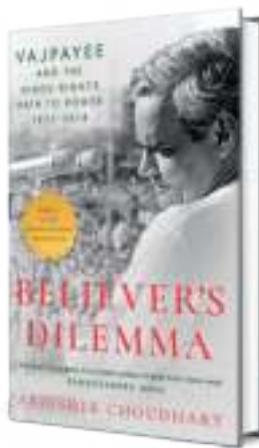
**SARASWATI**  
By Gurnaik Johal  
HACHETTE INDIA/  
SERPENT'S TAIL  
Pages: 384  
Price: ₹699



**THE HINDI HEARTLAND: A STUDY**  
By Ghazala Wahab  
ALEPH BOOK COMPANY  
PAGES: 528; PRICE: ₹ 999

## REGIONAL DEEP DIVE

Journalist Ghazala Wahab takes a deep dive into the states that comprise the titular 'Hindi heartland' (Bihar, Jharkhand, Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh). Drawing from regional histories as well as ground-level interviews, this book explores the paradoxes and pressure points driving electoral politics in these states.



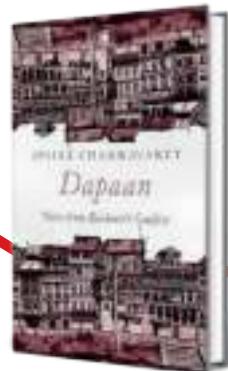
**BELIEVER'S DILEMMA: VAJPAYEE AND THE HINDU RIGHT'S PATH TO POWER 1977-2018**  
By Abhishek Choudhary  
PAN MACMILLAN INDIA  
PAGES: 800; PRICE: ₹ 999

## Yes, Prime Minister

This book is the concluding volume of Abhishek Choudhary's two-part study of former Indian prime minister Atal Behari Vajpayee (1924-2018), following the 2023 release *Vajpayee: The Ascent of the Hindu Right 1924-1977*. Through key moments from Vajpayee's political career, Choudhary traces the evolution of the Sangh Parivar and its growing influence in Indian politics and society since the 1970s.

## PARADISE LOST

In the vein of indigenous oral-storytelling traditions, Ipsita Chakravarty interviews ordinary Kashmiris about living through decade after decade of armed conflict. Kashmiri folktales often begin with the word 'dapaan' ('it is said') and the title of the book alludes to storytelling practices indigenous to the region. These battle-hardened citizens have seen their stories being told by others from afar and, through this book, they reclaim the narrative, lived histories combining with mythology in constantly surprising ways.



**DAPAAN: TALES FROM KASHMIR'S CONFLICT CONTEXT**  
By Ipsita Chakravarty  
PAGES: 320; PRICE: ₹ 699

**Q+A**

# Trouble In Paradise

**Kajol** plays a mother torn between an armyman husband and a radicalised son in the Kashmir-set JioHotstar movie *Sarzameen*, which releases on July 25



**Q. In**

**Sarzameen**, you have worked with two newcomers—one behind the camera (Kayoze Irani) and one in front (Ibrahim Ali Khan). What was the energy on set like?

Ibrahim is on the quieter side. He was into the character, given it is intense. I loved how Kayoze commanded the ship. We had long conversations about what the film should be saying and the subtext of its scenes.

**Q.**

**Do you think newcomers now have it easier than you did when you made your debut in 1992?**

I think it is easier for this generation, at least in the beginning. We were just thrown into the water, so it was sink or swim. That I feel is our strong point. Now, they have months of preparation—be it a dialogue coach or personal trainer or stylist, what to say or not to say.

**Q.**

**You return to the Dharma banner after a decade. *Sarzameen* must have been compelling.**

It was really the script. I loved that it's an emotional film about three people who are thrown into different circumstances and how they all have to grow and adapt. Working on a Dharma film is very comfortable. On the first day, everyone was like, "Welcome back, Ma'am."

**Q.**

**Three decades and still going strong. What's your magic potion? How have you adapted to the changing industry?**

You have to sip the potion slowly, and give it time to digest before taking the second sip. I've done selective work. I don't put unnecessary pressure on myself. I am OK not having a release every six months.

—with Suhani Singh

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