

Caste Census: The BJP Gameplan

TRADE: PACT BRITANNICA / INTERVIEW: YOUTUBE CEO NEAL MOHAN

INDIA TODAY

MAY 19, 2025 ₹100



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WAR!

**PAKISTAN'S DANGEROUS GAMBIT
AND HOW WE MATCH UP**



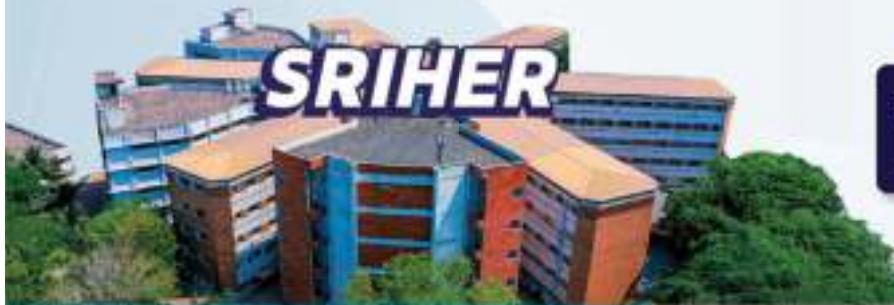
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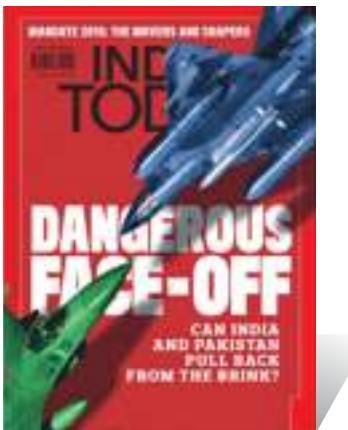
FROM THE EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

The old adage that every state has an army but Pakistan's army has a state is becoming self-evident in the ongoing conflict. The dastardly killing of 26 innocent men on April 22 in Pahalgam by trained Pakistani terrorists outraged the nation. There have been civilian killings before in Kashmir, even on the basis of religion, but none so cold-blooded as the methodical gunning down of men in front of their wives. India could not but retaliate. On May 7, it struck. Among its targets, all linked to terror outfits, were the headquarters of the Jaish-e-Mohammed in Bahawalpur and the Lashkar-e-Taiba in Muridke—both in Punjab. It was the first time India had struck in the heart of mainland Pakistan since 1971. Operation Sindoor was marked by precise strategic calibration. No military or civilian targets were hit, and New Delhi took care to emphasise the non-escalatory nature of its action. The message was clear: no more tolerance of Pakistan-backed terrorism.

However, Pakistan's army chief General Asim Munir, de facto supremo and ardent advocate of Islamist nationalism, decided to up the ante. On May 7-8, Pakistan targeted Indian military installations along the western front, from Awantipora in Kashmir down to Bhuj in Kutch, Gujarat. India retaliated with Operation Sindoor 2.0. Drones struck high-value sites in Pakistan, even taking out an air defence system in Lahore. Pakistan scaled up with missile and swarm drone attacks, including on the Jammu, Udhampur and Pathankot military stations, besides massive firing along the LoC. As the air thickens with the fog of war, poisoned by misinformation, the retributive cycle is fast climbing the escalatory ladder. Not something either side can treat casually. Each step up a rung is made with a keen awareness of the nuclear shadow that falls over it.

Pakistan is a broken country. Its economy is on life support. It is riddled with internal strife and insurgency.

Its most popular leader languishes in jail. A hotchpotch puppet coalition is nominally in charge, but the real ruler is the army. To justify its relevance and create a distraction from its domestic woes, Gen. Munir has deliberately taken his country into a state of war. The traditional definition of war has to change in the age of modern weaponry. It no longer has to entail the mass mobilisation of troops with the objective of taking territory. Today's wars can be fought without crossing borders, with long-range missiles fired from the ground and air, coupled with drones that can swarm the enemy like locusts. This is what is happening



▲ March 11, 2019

presently between Pakistan and India, without a formal declaration of war. Discounting Kargil, this is the first time in the world that two nuclear-armed countries are fighting a modern, tech-enabled hot war.

This is a no-win war. Neither wants to occupy the other's territory. India only wants Pakistan to mend its ways. Stop cross-border terrorism. But Pakistan refuses to acknowledge the folly of its surrogate war strategy, its 'war of a thousand cuts' against India. In the past 25 years, this is the fifth major confrontation between the two countries. After the December 2001 attack on Parliament and the 2008 mass shootings of Mumbai, India held its hand, acceding to US-led mediation that rested on promises to get Pakistan to stamp out terror groups, including by a global

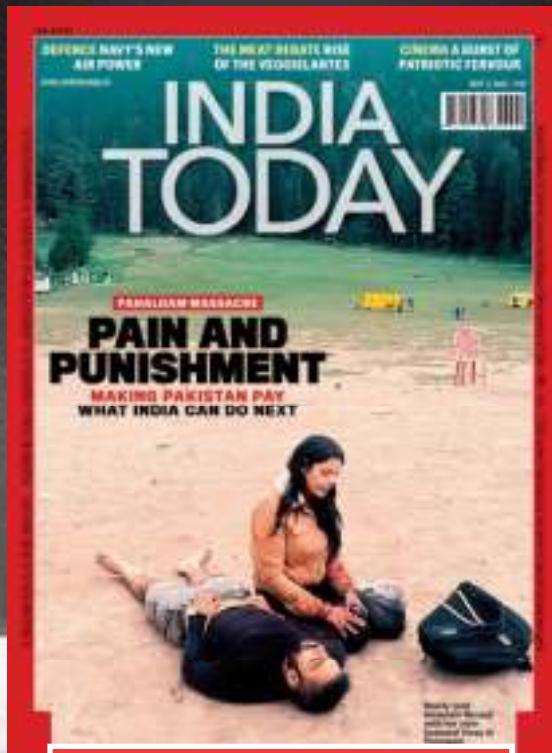
squeeze on funds. Prime Minister Narendra Modi shifted the template to punitive deterrence with the post-Uri and Pulwama strikes in 2016 and 2019. But things didn't escalate then, with major powers intervening. This time, by contrast, it has blown up into a full-scale conflict as there is no great power blowing the whistle. President Trump is distracted by his own chaotic agenda. Russia is too engrossed with Ukraine. China is not a neutral party as Pakistan is beholden to it for its weapons and economy. This gives it more leverage over it than any other country, but it's difficult to decipher its foreign policy. The geopolitical situation then is not conducive for an external brokering of a mutually satisfactory truce, as in the past.

In this issue, Group Editorial Director Raj Chengappa and Deputy Editor Pradip R. Sagar analyse Pakistan's dangerous gambit and how India could thwart it. India has the logistical edge in conventional terms, be it in troop strength (1.2 million vs 550,000) or weapon systems (4,200 vs 2,627 tanks). This is partly offset by the turf, some of it mountainous, and spatial dimensions. With a longer border, India has other fronts to consider. All the interest now is in new-gen weaponry: precision offence and defence missile systems, novel instruments like kamikaze drones, and accurate surveillance. The only real deterrent to Pakistan's misdeeds is for India to invest more in defence and maintain undeniable superiority. India can afford it. Pakistan cannot. However, while 'Make in India' is a laudable goal, it is slow to bear fruit. The immediate need is to streamline our procurement processes and buy the best weapons globally. For lasting peace, the Pakistan army must permanently abandon its old playbook. The tactic of keeping India as the bogey to justify power is long past its sell-by date. Only by shedding this can the subcontinent move from bombs to dialogue.



(Aroon Purie)

PAHALGAM MASSACRE



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UPFRONT

SPACE: ANYBODY OUT THERE? PG 10

VIEWPOINT: AI AS OUR COGNITIVE PARTNER PG 15

‘Business as usual’ is the happy place where India would have liked things to be. The proximity of a truculent Pakistan does not allow that, not after Pahalgam and certainly not after India’s response. But even amidst war clouds, New Delhi has kept its eyes on the ground—and feet moving. Hours before Operation Sindoor, India also announced a landmark economic step: a free trade agreement (FTA) has been successfully negotiated and signed with the UK, its first big accord in the chaos of the Trump era. For the UK, too, this is the biggest trade pact since exiting the European Union in 2020.

India is the UK’s 12th largest trading partner, with goods and services transactions worth £43 billion (Rs 4.9 lakh crore) in 2024—£8.3 billion (Rs 94,570 crore) in India’s favour. After this FTA, finalised after three years of negotiations spanning 13 rounds and a few diplomatic stand-offs with revolving-door British cabinets, bilateral trade is projected to touch \$120 billion by 2030. Heralded as a “win-win” by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his UK counterpart Keir Starmer, the deal promises to redefine bilateral economic ties but also exposes the limits of trade diplomacy in a deeply political world.

The FTA, which still awaits ratification in the respective parliaments, eliminates tariffs on over 90 per cent of traded goods, liberalises services, and deepens pathways for investments in manufacturing, digital technologies, pharmaceuticals and green energy. “This is not just about trade,” said Piyush Goyal, Union minister of commerce and industry. “This is a partnership of equals, rooted in trust, shared history and mutual opportunity.”

► INDIA-UK FTA

PACT BRITANNICA

The biggest bilateral trade deal in Trump 2.0, India and the UK hold up a template for a storm-tossed world

BY ANILESH S. MAHAJAN



NEW EQUATION

PM Narendra Modi with his UK counterpart Keir Starmer in Rio de Janeiro, November 2024

BILATERAL BOOST

How India and the UK stand to benefit from the Free Trade Agreement

INDIA GAINS

↳ **Exports like textiles, jewellery, machinery, sports goods, leather, footwear, ceramics and furniture will face zero tariffs in the UK**

↳ **Easier entry for contractual service suppliers, business visitors, intra-corporate transferees and independent professionals; the UK won't tighten visa rules for IT, finance and education sectors**

↳ **Indian professionals will benefit from tax exemptions on UK social security contributions (up to 3 years), and reduced tax rates, potentially saving up to 20% of salaries**

UK GAINS

↳ **Import duty on Scotch whisky and gin to be halved from 150% to 75% immediately, and reduced further to 40% over time**

↳ **Duties on premium British automobiles (currently over 100%) to drop to 10%, with a quota limit on volume**

↳ **The deal provides UK firms a foothold in one of the world's fastest-growing economies, with improved rules for services and digital trade**

Some of the drama in the plot also owes to the touch of menace the geopolitical backdrop holds for all regimes globally. Tossed into a grey zone by the tariff era, the Starmer government is struggling to tamp down on inflation. Post-Brexit fatigue hasn't fully ebbed either. So, the FTA offers a rare window for a 'Global Britain' to take the stage again. For the Modi government, it fits neatly into its broader narrative of 'Viksit Bharat', where economic diplomacy is not just about trade balances but about strategic signalling. "India is telling the world it's open for business—but on its own terms," says Ashwani Mahajan, national co-convenor, Swadeshi Jagran Manch, the RSS affiliate that's been closely monitoring India's FTAs with the EU, the UK and other countries, and lobbying hard for the interests of the domestic players.

A HEDGE AGAINST CHINA

With China as assertive in the geo-economic sphere as it is on the Indo-Pacific, both India and the UK are recalibrating their global alignments. For London, India is a desirable counterweight that eases dependence on China. For India, deepening ties with G7 economies is part of a larger hedging strategy that includes footprints in the Quad and forums like I2U2 (India, Israel, UAE, US), India-Middle East Europe Economic Corridor and EU India Trade and Technology Council.

The deal is also being seen as a template for the ongoing FTA talks with the EU, Canada, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain. Having entered these waters, navigation skills will be key: history shows that FTAs often suffer from underutilisation as well as compliance delays. ■

SCOTCH, SILK 'N SAPPHIRE

For India, the significant export gains lie in textiles, gems and jewellery, and pharmaceuticals—all sectors with high employment intensity. Under the agreement, tariffs of up to 10 per cent on Indian apparel and 8 per cent on footwear will be gradually eliminated over five years. The UK, on its part, has secured improved access to India's rapidly growing premium alcohol market, with duties on Scotch whisky—currently at a steep 150 per cent—set to be halved over three years.

But in days marked by unwelcoming signals from the US, the real breakthrough perhaps lies in services. The FTA facilitates easier mobility for Indian professionals across sectors—particularly IT, healthcare and finance—through a streamlined visa regime and mutual recognition of qualifications. The UK has also committed to easing regulatory barriers for Indian fintech and digital startups looking to expand Europe-wards.

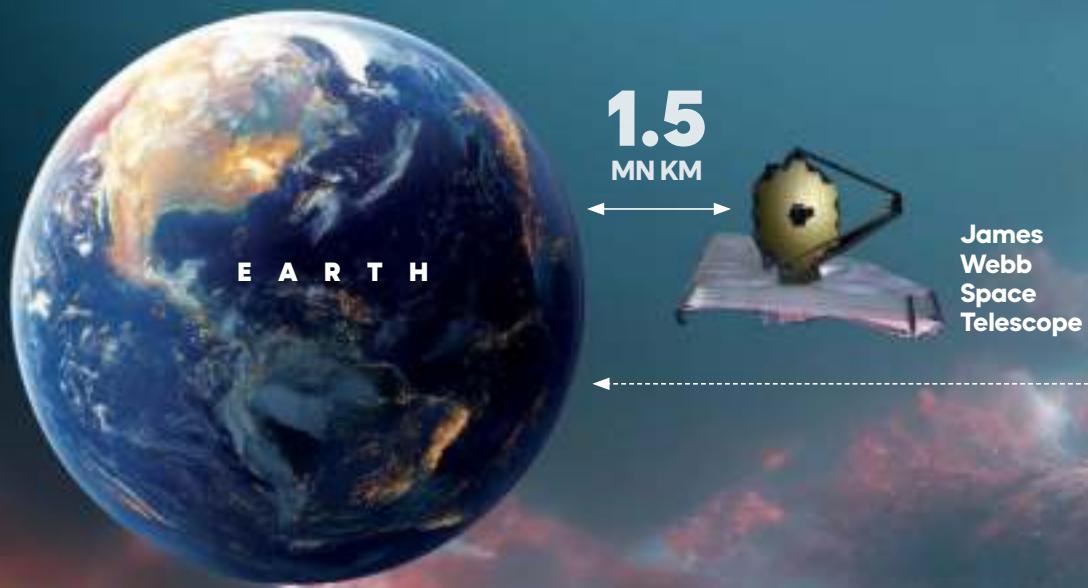
In return, India has agreed to reduce tariffs and open up selected segments in automobiles, clean tech and legal services, albeit cautiously. British car makers like Jaguar Land Rover (owned by India's Tata Motors) will benefit from lower import duties on luxury vehicles, though the sensitive issue of complete liberalisation remains off the table—for now.

Trade expert Abhijit Das notes the total silence on sensitive topics like patents, norms for state procurement, industrial subsidies, plus gender- and environment-related clauses, "although we've opened up future sectors". Another trade economist sees positives, saying: "Unlike past FTAs, this one has been approached with pragmatic optimism on both sides. There is no false romanticism, but a hard-nosed realism about what works."

ANYBODY OUT THERE?

Bubbling up in ancient Greek theories and medieval speculations, the quest for 'aliens' or extraterrestrial life finally acquired...well, a life of its own with modern sci-fi. The most exciting piece of evidence that the fantasy may indeed be reality has only come now: with the hint of a 'bio-signature' on a distant planet, discovered by a Cambridge team led by Nikku Madhusudhan, a scientist of Indian origin, and published in the *Astrophysical Journal Letters* this April

Graphic by NILANJAN DAS / Text by AJAY SUKUMARAN



THE DISCOVERER AND HIS THOUGHTS



NIKKU MADHUSUDHAN

Professor of Astrophysics and Exoplanetary Science Institute of Astronomy, University of Cambridge. Born in India in 1980, Nikku Madhusudhan graduated with a BTech from IIT-BHU in 2002, before pursuing a master's and PhD at MIT

“For the first time in the history of our species, we may actually be seeing signs of life elsewhere”

“This could also be a signal of a new chemical process not produced by life. Even that is a monumental breakthrough because we are seeing (it) on a planet that could be habitable”

“We should remain open-minded and get more observations so that we can repeat this signal. That's the hallmark of science, the repeatability and increase in robustness till we are really, really satisfied. We are not there yet”

WHAT?

The presence of Dimethyl Sulfide (DMS) or Dimethyl Disulfide (DMDS), or both, in its atmosphere. These chemical compounds are uniquely produced on Earth by phytoplankton in the oceans

HOW?

As the planet transits in front of its host star, the starlight goes through its atmosphere. The James Webb Space Telescope, which is in its own solar orbit, analysed this light through **transit spectroscopy** for clues about K2-18b's atmosphere

WHERE?

K2-18b: A planet 124 light years away, orbiting a red dwarf star. It is about two and a half times the size of earth, and rich in hydrogen—a prerequisite for life as we know it

HOW TRUE?

The results are now at the level of three sigma: a probability of 99.7 per cent. Science demands five sigma, or 99.99994 per cent

124
LIGHT YEARS

K2-18b

2.6 times the radius of Earth

WHAT NEXT?

Stronger evidence is required, especially to rule out an 'abiotic' (non-life) source for DMS on this exoplanet

Mars

Venus

SUN

Mercury

Earth

Orbital period:
365.25 days

K2-18c



K2-18b

Orbital period:
32.9 days

Red dwarf star



TEMPLE TANGO

Outfoxed yet again. On April 30, former Bengal BJP chief **Dilip Ghosh** turned up in Digha with his new bride, where TMC boss and CM **Mamata Banerjee** arranged a warm welcome at the inauguration of the Jagannath Dham temple. Never one to miss an opportunity to turn the screws on rivals, Mamata greeted the couple, posed for photos, and even went live on Facebook. Ghosh, too, was all smiles, praising her for the “big work done”, but, back in Kolkata, BJP leaders were squirming. Leader of the Opposition Suvendu Adhikari offered a curt “no comment” while state chief Sukanta Majumdar rushed to clarify that Ghosh was there in a “personal capacity”. Some BJP insiders saw it as Ghosh trolling his own party—particularly Adhikari, who didn’t attend his wedding. As for the rumours of Ghosh jumping ship, a TMC leader smirked, “Why would we want Ghosh to join us? He’s doing a splendid job fazing the BJP from within.” In Bengal, politics continues to unfold with the flair of a prime-time soap opera.

Illustrations by **SIDDHANT JUMDE**

▼ THE QUITTING GAME

CONDITIONS APPLY

A war of words between two senior Karnataka legislators has spiralled into a political farce. It began with **Basanagouda Yatnal**, recently expelled from the BJP for his shoot-from-the-hip remarks, daring Congress



minister **Shivanand Patil** to resign and face him in a bypoll. Both leaders hail from Vijayapura district. Provoked, Patil took the bait and promptly submitted his resignation to the Speaker. It came, though, with a rider attached: he asked that it be accepted only if Yatnal, too, steps down from the assembly.

Bad Press Day

Two aggrieved women, both mothers who had lost their children in the 2024 Harni Lake boat tragedy, interrupted Gujarat CM **Bhupendra Patel** at a public event in Vadodara on May 2. They wanted justice, were forcibly removed for their pains, but with the cameras rolling, the video quickly went viral. Patel made the right noises and also met them later, but sources say he was miffed, not just over the lapses that had brought the women to this point of despair but also for the heavy-handed manner they were dealt with in full glare of the media.



PACKERS AND MOVERS



Maharashtra CM **Devendra Fadnavis** took over in December 2024, but his not moving into official residence 'Varsha' had led to many a theory, including the opposition Shiv Sena UBT charge of 'black magic rituals' by its last occupant, ex-CM Eknath Shinde, who has been relegated to playing second fiddle in the current government.

However, Fadnavis has now put all speculation to rest; he moved into 'Varsha' on April 30, Akshaya Tritiya day.

HOME TRUTHS

Political strategist-turned-neta **Prashant Kishor**, the man credited with Nitish Kumar's 2015 victory and now the CM's harshest critic, has declared that "clarity begins at home". He is, of course, talking about Nitish's home in Kalyanbigha, the CM's ancestral village in Nalanda. On May 11, Kishor is launching a door-to-door campaign here to see if Nitish's flagship promises for the poor have come through. Things seem to be cutting a tad too close to home for Nitish babu.



Kaushik Deka with Arkamoy Datta Majumdar, Ajay Sukumaran, Amitabh Srivastava, Jumana Shah and Dhaval S. Kulkarni

ECO WATCH

SPOTS OF CHEER

Mumbai is seeing a leap of leopards. Literally. Leopard numbers in its green lung—the Sanjay Gandhi National Park or the Borivali National Park—have grown since the last count in 2018. From 47 leopards then, 54 cats are now roaming the 198.34 sq. km expanse of the park.

The cats were tracked from February-June 2024 using camera traps at 90 locations in SGNP, Aarey Milk Colony and the Tungarreshwar Wildlife Sanctuary. A joint survey by the Maharashtra forest department and the Wildlife



Conservation Society India, its recent report identified 54 leopards—36 females, 16 males and two 'unidentified cats'. Interestingly, three females first captured on camera in 2015 were 'recaptured' in 2024, indicating a healthy survival rate.

SPECIES ALERT MANIS INDOBURMANICA

Don't let that scientific name alarm you. It's just a new species of the Pangolin, the scaly anteater whose burrowing skills make it the 'ecosystem's engineer'. It may look like a dinky dinosaur but is really a mammal,



not a reptile. India discovered the distinct species this January in Arunachal. Geoclimatic changes seem to have spurred its genetic departure from its Chinese ancestor 3.4 million years ago. It will add to the eight species of pangolins worldwide, and be the third to be found in India. It has a pinkish face, and its dark/olive brown scales distinguish it from the yellow brown-scaled Indian and Chinese pangolins. Prized for its scales and meat, pangolin trafficking is rife. And protection a priority.

► VIZHINJAM

A NEW PORT OF CALL

India's first semi-automated international container transshipment port in Vizhinjam, formally launched by PM Narendra Modi on May 2, is a milestone that will put Kerala—and India—on the global maritime trade map

Text by JEEMON JACOB



▲ **VIZHINJAM**, with its natural draft of up to 20 metres, aims to out-compete Colombo (15-18 m) and Dubai's Jebel Ali port (16-17 m). It's also located just **10 nautical miles** from the international east-west shipping route

TOTAL COST

₹**20,000** crore ₹**8,867** crore
Phase 1

COST-SHARING

61.5% Kerala	9.6% Centre
28.9%	

Adani Vizhinjam Port Pvt. Ltd

CAPACITY

7.2
million TEUs*
Total planned

1 million TEUs
Phase 1

*TEU = 20-ft equivalent container units (roughly, 1 TEU = 1 container)

OPERATIONAL SINCE DEC. '24

265 ship arrivals

500,000
containers moved

HANDS ON DECK

2,000 direct/ indirect jobs	5,500 more jobs by 2028-2029
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DR. SRIDEVI RAICHUR

THE VISIONARY DERMATOLOGIST REDEFINING SKIN CARE IN INDIA

A Pioneer in Dermatology and Aesthetic Medicine
In the serene foothills of Rishikesh, where spirituality meets modernity, a revolution in dermatological care is unfolding under the leadership of Dr. Sridevi Raichur—a name synonymous with excellence in dermatology, dermatosurgery, and cosmetology. With over 50,000 successful treatments, Dr. Raichur has not only transformed skin health in Uttarakhand but has also set a benchmark for aesthetic medicine in India.

Her journey—from a passionate medical student to the founder of Dr. Sridevi Esthetiques, one of North India's largest dermatology and plastic surgery centers—is a testament to perseverance, innovation, and an unwavering commitment to patient care.

The Journey into Dermatology: Where Science Meets Art

Dr. Raichur's fascination with the human skin—the body's largest and most visible organ—began early in her medical career. "Dermatology is a unique blend of science and artistry," she reflects. "Every skin tells a story, and restoring its health is both a medical challenge and a creative pursuit." Her academic excellence led her to pursue MD in Dermatology, DNB, and a prestigious FRGUHS fellowship in Dermatosurgery & Cosmetology—a rare specialization that few dermatologists in India achieve.

From Mumbai to Rishikesh: A Mission to Transform Skin Care

After practicing in Mumbai, Dr. Raichur moved to Uttarakhand and noticed a glaring gap—a severe lack of advanced dermatological care. "Patients had to travel to Delhi or Mumbai for quality treatments," she recalls. "I wanted to change that." The challenges were significant. Setting up a high-end clinic in

a region with scarce medical resources required relentless effort. Raising awareness about skin health beyond home remedies was another hurdle, as was building trust among locals who were skeptical about advanced treatments. Yet, undeterred, she established Dr. Sridevi Esthetiques, a 10,000 sq. ft. facility equipped with cutting-edge lasers, advanced hair transplant systems, and state-of-the-art cosmetic surgery suites. Today, it stands as the largest dermatology clinic in Uttarakhand and the third largest in North India. Every treatment plan is tailored to the individual, whether addressing acne, vitiligo, or anti-aging concerns. The clinic spares no expense in adopting cutting-edge technology, from HIFU (High-Intensity Focused Ultrasound) for skin tightening to the latest-generation lasers.

Dr. Raichur also emphasizes holistic skin wellness, integrating diet, stress management, and lifestyle modifications into her treatments. "Healthy skin begins within," she advises. The clinic offers a comprehensive range of services, including hair transplantation to restore confidence for those with hair loss, laser skin rejuvenation to erase scars and pigmentation, and customized therapies for vitiligo and stubborn skin conditions. Advanced plastic surgeries like rhinoplasty, tummy tucks, and facial rejuvenation are also part of their expertise. Among the most sought-after cosmetic procedures are dermal fillers and Botox for youthful, natural-looking results, Profhilo and glutathione injections for radiant skin, and Hydrafacial and Medifacials for the ultimate skin detox.

A Life-Changing Case: The Vitiligo Patient Who Found Hope

One of Dr. Raichur's most memorable cases involved a young woman with severe vitiligo, who faced social



Dr. Sridevi Raichur

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FRGUHS (Dermatosurgery & Cosmetology)
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stigma and struggled to find a marriage alliance. "She had tried everything—home remedies, Ayurveda, even steroids—with no improvement," Dr. Raichur recalls. Through a customized regimen of laser therapy, skin grafting, and medical treatment, the patient's skin showed remarkable repigmentation. Months later, she returned—not just with healed skin, but with a wedding invitation. "That's why I do this," Dr. Raichur smiles. "It's not just about skin—it's about restoring dignity, confidence, and happiness."

Beyond the Clinic: Research, Recognition, and Future Vision

Dr. Raichur's excellence has been recognized with accolades like "Best Dermatologist in Uttarakhand," and her contributions to research on regional skin disorders have been published in prestigious journals. Looking ahead, she plans to introduce HIFU, the next frontier in non-surgical skin tightening, expand her clinic to neighboring districts, and collaborate with wellness centers for holistic retreats.

"Skin is not just a covering; it's a canvas of life," she says. "And my mission is to help people wear it with pride."



▼ VIEWPOINT

AI AS OUR COGNITIVE PARTNER

India will profit from partnering with AI to simulate futures, shape systems and solve complex challenges



BY JAYANT SINHA

Today, most AI (artificial intelligence) users turn to these apps to summarise documents, answer technical questions or draft content. In contrast, a select group treats AI as a cognitive partner—using it to model complex systems, plan strategic scenarios and integrate insights across finance, governance, climate and technology.

This shift is far from cosmetic. Strategic users force AI models to engage at deeper levels: holding longer context windows, managing memory layers and performing multi-step reasoning across domains. As a result, these interactions are significantly heavier on computational resources—sometimes 5-10 times costlier than average usage—but they also stretch AI's capabilities in ways that pure engineering improvements cannot.

Such strategic AI usage could dramatically accelerate solutions to India's most pressing challenges: modelling healthcare access gaps in rural areas, optimising urban infrastructure investments for future demands, personalising education pathways for millions of students and simulating the risks and opportunities of climate adaptation. In energy, AI could model regional renewable supply-demand



Illustration by RAJ VERMA

THOSE WHO LEARN TO THINK AND BUILD WITH AI WILL DEFINE THE NEXT PHASE OF GLOBAL INNOVATION AND GOVERNANCE

balances, optimise grid investments and forecast adoption curves for emerging technologies like green hydrogen and electric mobility.

But first, AI literacy must evolve. Leaders in government, business and civil society need to move beyond basic familiarity with AI tools. They must learn how to use AI for systems thinking, scenario planning and strategic design. In the 21st century, AI competence will be as fundamental for leadership as financial literacy or policy analysis.

Second, institutions must invest in AI-augmented strategy teams. These teams should not focus on routine automation, but on deeper tasks: simulating policy

trade-offs, analysing complex system dynamics and integrating multi-sectoral data for better decision-making.

Third, we must move past the idea of AI as just another tool. AI has the potential to expand human cognitive reach. Strategic engagement with AI is not about abdicating human judgement; it's about enhancing it. AI can generate possibilities, surface patterns and simulate outcomes. But humans must frame priorities, weigh trade-offs and define values.

To build this capacity, India must also rethink how it trains its top talent. Now, we must train leaders to think across disciplines, model complex systems and collaborate deeply with AI systems. Integrating

AI-driven strategic thinking into elite education programmes, civil service training, corporate leadership pipelines and policy-making institutions will be critical.

At a global level, the divide between casual and strategic users will widen. Early adopters who master AI as a cognitive partner will think faster, move smarter and build stronger institutions. Others will be left playing catch-up. Ultimately, the frontier of AI will not be shaped only by engineers writing better code. It will be shaped by how creatively and strategically humans partner with AI systems.

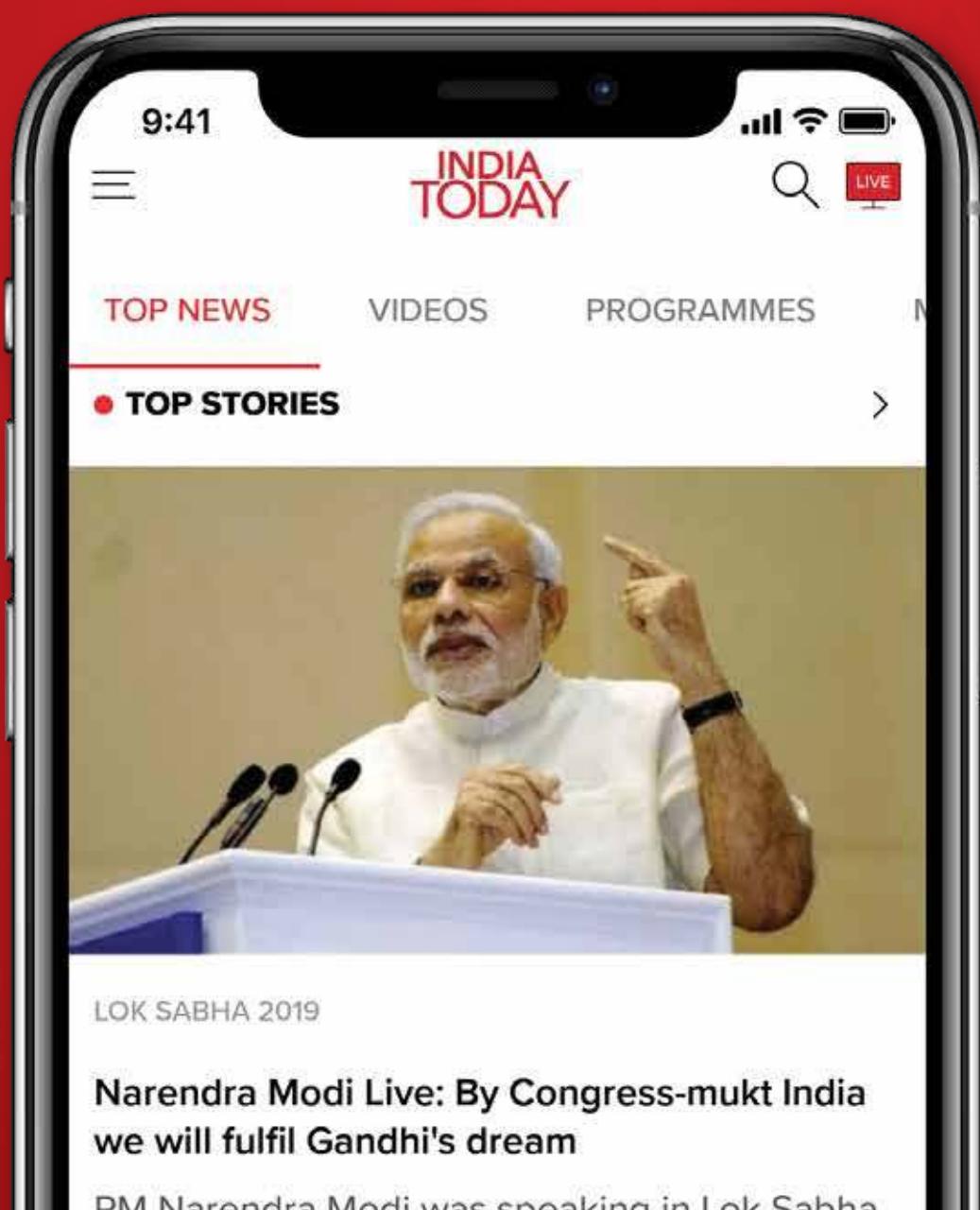
India, with its reservoir of talent and scale of ambition, has the chance to lead this shift. But it must invest deliberately—in building strategic AI capacity across education, institutions and leadership mindsets. The AI era will be defined not just by technological advances, but by cognitive collaboration. Those who learn to think and build with AI will define the next phase of global innovation and governance. ■

Jayant Sinha is a Distinguished Fellow at ORF and Visiting Professor at the LSE. He is a former Union minister. Views are personal

INDIA
TODAY

BREAKING NEWS

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STATE SCAN



WEST BENGAL: MURMURS IN MURSHIDABAD PG 19

J&K: THE VALLEY OF WOES PG 22

▼ 'OUR SATLUJ'
CM Bhagwant
Mann visits Nangal
dam, May 1



PRABHJOT GILL

► PUNJAB-HARYANA

WAR OVER WATER SHARING HOTS UP

Possessive about river water, Punjab takes the unprecedented step of seizing control of Bhakra Nangal flow. Haryana seethes with anger and thirst

By Anilesh S. Mahajan

TWO SIBLING RIVALS **SPLIT** by a border, profound rage over ownership of water, a war-like air...you'd think this was India-Pakistan. But no, take away the artillery, and the words fit Punjab-Haryana well. Consider the unusual sight that greeted engineers and staff at Bhakra Nangal on May 3 morning. A regiment of Punjab Police—two DSPs, two dozen

uniformed cops—had alighted to seize the dam's controls!

What gives? Well, on April 30—curiously, at midnight—the Bhakra Beas Management Board (BBMB) had cleared an extra 8,500 cusecs of water to Haryana: for drinking. Punjab saw a damburst of anger. It had met its obligations—and more, it argued. Punjab's BBMB member, Rajesh Mahajan, quit in protest, calling the fiat "arbitrary"

and not preceded by dialogue. Then the politicians took over. Harjot Bains, Punjab's education minister, with a troop of AAP workers, chose to rewrite history right at Nangal dam, which falls in the state. He put locks on the control room, and handed the keys to police. CM Bhagwant Mann, too, had checked in—so the lock had that seal of approval.

RISING IRE, FALLING WATER

In farm-strewn North India, water is more precious than oil, and summer takes it to boiling point. No surprise, then, to see Mann scale it up. Nor the rare spectacle of Punjab's squabbling political class uniting, as if at wartime. It yielded a unanimous resolution in the assembly, on May 5, condemning the BBMB order. Mann waxed indignant, citing deficient monsoons, poor Himalayan snowfall, low reservoir levels. "We can't be expected to meet Haryana's

additional demands. Our own fields are parched," he said. Punjab would continue supplying 4,000 cusecs as a humanitarian measure, but no more.

Haryana, which has long accused Punjab of shortchanging it on its due share, is livid. Words like 'unconstitutional', 'illegal' and 'inhuman' poured in a deluge from the Nayab Saini regime. It demands unconditional release of the extra

quantum, saying it's getting only 15.5 per cent of its drinking water needs. With 215 dry sources, dozens of villages are reliant on tankers, especially in arid western districts like Sirsa and Fatehabad. Saini says rising temperatures, a growing population (including NCR suburbs) and new industries have driven up Haryana's non-irrigation water needs. "This is not about irrigation or industrial use," says a senior minister. "This is about basic survival."

On May 6, the Punjab and Haryana High Court chided Punjab for treating Haryana like an "enemy country". But Punjab has hitherto defied even apex court orders on water. Its police 'coup' at Nangal is particularly out of line. The Centre has reportedly urged it to withdraw. "Dams are national infrastructure and must be insulated from brinkmanship," rues an ex-official. Not a line that holds much water for Punjab now. ■

Takeaways

- ➲ On Apr. 30, BBMB clears extra 8,500 cusecs of water to Haryana—for drinking

- ➲ Punjab calls fiat 'arbitrary'; state police seize controls of the dam



GROUND ZERO
The fact-finding team talks to riot victims at Dhuliyan

► WEST BENGAL

MURMURS IN MURSHIDABAD

Amid a battle of narratives, clues from the burnt earth of Bengal speak of orchestration, not 'organic' violence

By Arkamoy Datta Majumdar

IT WAS GETTING TO MID-APRIL AND A HELLISH SON ET LUMIÈRE had lit up Murshidabad. Arson, terror and grief swept over places like Dhuliyan, an old river port on the Ganges. But the map also had quiet corners of defiance: mixed Hindu-Muslim villages that refused to be communal laboratories. In Maheshpur, Dighri, Paharganti and Lalpur Singhpara, they kept joint vigil to protect temples and mosques. As a fire ravaged a Hindu shop, Muslim shopkeepers intervened to save it. Scattered yet powerful acts of solidarity marked the tenac-

WHODUNIT?

A car torched during protests against Waqf law in Murshidabad, Apr. 11



ity of local harmony in the absence of provocation—that forms a major strand in the report of a 17-member fact-finding team on the violence in West Bengal. The other strand is its obverse: sinister signs of orchestration.

“Certain findings made us question the spontaneity of it all. The way eight boats were hired in Paralalpur to ferry families from Murshidabad, for instance,” says Rangta Munshi, one of those who extensively toured riot sites on April 18-19, interviewing victims, eyewitnesses and local authorities. The team, drawn from five civil society groups, contrasts acts of violence and state inaction with the baseline of local amity these interrupted to conclude it was “not a spontaneous riot, but a calculated campaign of disruption, enabled by administrative silence”.

BATTLE OF NARRATIVES

In the poisoned smog of mistrust, the team’s report challenges the narrative of mutual hatred that was reflected in a different sort of report. Governor C.V. Ananda Bose, who also visited the riot sites on April 18-19, wrote to the Centre on May 3, suggesting—controversially—that it may consider “constitutional options” to restore confidence in the rule of law in Bengal. The phrase hints at Article 356: President’s rule. On May 5, CM Mamata Banerjee visited Murshidabad, and vowed to

Takeaways

➲ “**Not a spontaneous riot,**” says a fact-finding team after touring ground zero in Bengal

➲ Governor Bose also visits sites, controversially hints at “constitutional options”

expose the conspirators, seeking immunity from blame for her regime. The fact-finding team, though, saw a curious pattern, beginning with the first spark on April 11: stone-pelting on a Dhuliyan rally, allegedly from houses associated with a Hindutva outfit. Soon, as shops were sacked, close by was a police station that did nothing.

As solidarity shone in patches, the report suggests, only deliberate orchestration could explain the scale and speed of violence. Eyewitnesses in villages spoke of masked men—some dressed as BSF or police—raiding Muslim homes at night. In Betbona and Jafrabad, where two Hindus were killed, it was again huge mobs of masked attackers on the rampage. Police again arrived long after, despite being stationed minutes away.

Politics will take over: the narrative of local antipathies not harming its goals. On the ground, the report suggests, that’s not entirely organic. ■

By Jumana Shah

WHEN A PATIENT

AT Ahmedabad’s Vadilal Sarabhai Hospital (VSH)

approached Congress corporator Rajshri Kesari over a missing Rs 3,000—‘payment’ for participating in a clinical trial—neither could have imagined the scale of what lay beneath.

It turned out that between 2021 and 2024, over 500 patients may have been unwittingly turned into guinea pigs. Misled into thinking they were receiving routine treatment, they were allegedly subjected to unauthorised clinical drug trials in at least nine departments of the nearly century-old hospital, with the errant doctors in cahoots with 52 pharmaceutical companies.

TRIALS AND ERRORS

Some Rs 17-20 crore is said to have changed hands, as patients got enrolled in trials for drugs related to diabetes, arthritis, skin conditions, even a rare genetic disorder. No approval from a registered Institutional Ethics Committee (IEC) was allegedly taken, nor

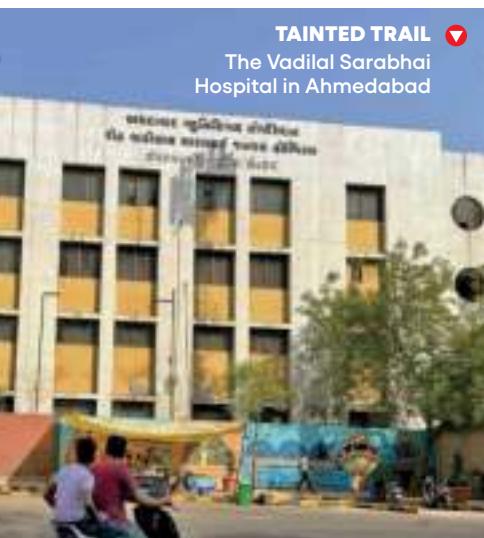


PATIENTS TURN GUINEA PIGS

A public hospital in Ahmedabad is under a cloud for illegal clinical trials on unwitting patients, with corrupt doctors in cahoots with pharma firms



ALAMY



any video/audio or paper trail recording informed patient consent, let alone counselling related to that.

In February, during the budget session of the Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation (AMC), which runs VSH, Kesari asked commissioner Banchha Nidhi Pani if such trials were on. The answer was no. But Kesari dug deeper and found a whole rodent's warren. She later presented the evidence: MoUs between two pharma firms and VSH's academic arm, NHL Municipal Medical College—signed in November 2024—detailing 25-year agreements. And a document showing the dean appointing associate professor Dr Devang Rana as 'expert pharmacologist' for the purpose.

Hard evidence, so the AMC had to accept it and act. It set up a five-member inquiry committee which, in April, confirmed unauthorised trials were conducted by nine doctors, including Dr Rana and eight contractual physicians. All were suspended. The full list of firms involved has yet to be revealed. Pani told INDIA TODAY "the trials have now stopped" and the case would be taken to its logical end. The panel is now looking to recover the slush money paid into the accounts of doctors and their kin.

TROUBLING OVERSIGHT

But Dr Dilip Mavlankar, former director of the Indian Institute of Public Health, raises questions about the AMC's oversight. Following a 2019 administrative split, VSH had failed to set up its own IEC and instead relied on private committees. The probe is now expected to reveal

Takeaways

► In 2021-2024, 500+ patients possibly subjected to illegal clinical trials at VSH

► The VSH board members' ignorance about the trials reflects poorly on the hospital's governance

whether these entities were registered, which would clinch if the trials were indeed illegal. The split also led to a shortage of senior doctors, creating a regulatory void of sorts where pharma agents operated freely. "If trials were not reported in annual reports, it reflects poorly on governance," says Dr Mavlankar.

On April 30, hearing a 2012 PIL on a similar scandal unearthed in Indore that had claimed 32 lives, the Supreme Court directed the Centre to report on the allegations. The next hearing is on July 30. Kesari alleges at least three deaths in the past three months. Pani refutes this, saying she has presented no documentary evidence. Nonetheless, the revelations show how sick the system is. ■

► RAJASTHAN

GRAND OLD WARPATH

All gloves are off in Rajasthan, as the Congress goes hell for leather against the Bhajan Lal Sharma regime, and finds itself being strafed by the ED

By Rohit Parihar

IN RAJASTHAN, OPPOSITION PARTIES typically lie low after an electoral trouncing, licking their wounds. But the Congress has bucked that trend with uncharacteristic bellicosity. Spurred by its 'strongest defeat' in a long time—currently, it holds 69 of Rajasthan's 200 assembly seats—the Grand Old Party has kept Bhajan Lal Sharma's BJP government off-kilter with a blitz of warlike steps, ranging from assembly disruptions to scathing public attacks. PCC chief Govind Singh Dotasra, in fact, embodied this martial spirit perhaps too spiritedly, charging at Speaker Vasudev Devnani's chair during a session—earning himself a week's suspension.

For good measure, former CM Ashok Gehlot and his former deputy Sachin Pilot have also closed ranks. Partaking of the offensive, Gehlot accuses the BJP regime of scuppering his welfare schemes. Young gun Tika Ram Jolly, a spunky leader of Op-

Escalation ladder

Sachin Pilot, Govind Dotasra and Tika Jolly at a Congress function

Takeaways

■ Two Congress ex-ministers get old graft cases raked up, as BJP ups its return offensive

■ This was after a barrage of salvos against the BJP regime by a spirited, united GOP

position, even successfully prosecuted a political trial of the ruling party for casteism. That was after BJP ex-MLA Gyan Dev Ahuja sprinkled Gangajal at a Ram temple after Congress leaders—including Jolly, a Dalit—participated in its consecration ceremony.

But the BJP has now hit back, with the Enforcement Directorate moving against two Congress ex-ministers. The first: Pratap Khachariyawas. His broadside on the state's Rs 100 crore spend on a film awards jamboree in March degenerated into digs at deputy CM Diya Kumari as an old chit fund scam case haunted him. Two: Mahesh Joshi, with some tainted Jal Jeevan tenders. The gloves are truly off. ■



By Kaleem Geelani

THE 'GARDEN OF EDEN' was in full bloom just the other day, a million wonder-struck eyes taking in its late spring beauty. But first Pahalgam broke over the landscape like an unannounced typhoon, taking the life out of Kashmir's verdant valleys, shimmering waters and bustling streets. Now intimations of war, after Operation Sindoar, have taken the Union territory back to being a frontline crackling with fire.

BACK TO THE EDGE

Things were dire even in the tense days leading up to India's strikes. "Almost 90 per cent of bookings were cancelled," says Suhail Dar, who runs the travel agency Kashmir Travel Advisor. "A high-end group of 21 cancelled their April 28 booking right after Pahalgam. This was the pattern. We're in total distress."

Now, with the Srinagar airport among those shut, no



► JAMMU AND KASHMIR

THE VALLEY OF WOES

A booming tourism season had already been felled by Pahalgam. Now Kashmir presents a microcosm of the utter disruption caused to ordinary life at wartime

sliver of redemption remains. If the India-Pakistan situation escalates, tourism won't be the only sector hit, but the contrast is the starker here. Before the rattle of M4 carbines at Baisaran, the Valley's famed houseboats, hotels and cabs were off to a bumper season. Conflict has killed that in mid-flight.

In recent years, a steady, if fragile, peace had seen tourism numbers swelling—2024 had netted a record 3.5 million footfalls, including 43,654 foreigners, and this year may have been bigger. Some 75 new offbeat destinations beckoned the adventurous, inching ever closer to the LoC, say in Gurez up north, or to the Pir Panjal peaks in Aharbal, Kulgam. Some 125 km north

of Srinagar, the 2021 ceasefire had allowed beauteous valleys like Karnah and Keran, enveloping the Kishenganga, to emerge from decades of cross-border shelling that kept humans and habitats in permanent injury.

Takeaways

■ **Kashmir's Rs 12,000 crore tourism industry is shrouded by a fog of terror and war**

■ **3.5 million footfalls in 2024, and this year promised to be bigger, before Pahalgam**



STILLED WATERS

A deathly quiet Dal Lake, Apr. 28; below, day after at Pahalgam



ABID BHAT

But it's back to the pall of dread, in all its colours: red alerts, olive-green trucks and the cheerless gloom of bunkers. "For now, this is a gone year," says Amir Anees, who leases camping tents in Gurez's meadow paradise but was forced to move 86 km away to Bandipora town. In the valley he leaves behind, troops, booming artillery and that old disembodied fear—all are building up in equal proportions.

THE SHROUD OF WAR

Even before Operation Sindoora, over half of Kashmir's tourist destinations, 48 out of 87, had been closed. Now, the curtains have fallen even on the exempt hubs like Gulmarg, Sonamarg, Srinagar's Dal Lake and Mughal Gardens and Pahalgam, where the scars are still raw.

Kashmir presents a microcosm of the utter disruption caused to ordinary life at wartime. Verinag, the source of the Jhelum, counted 10,000-odd daily footfalls in April. Now a black shroud of tarpaulin covers some 250 hawkers' carts here—that could symbolise the 'sudden death' imparted to a whole season of normalcy. "We're so ill-fated," says Abdul Rashid, 65, who sells *chai* and *thanda*. He speaks for everyone. ■



VOICE OF HEALTHCARE AND HORIBA INDIA HOSTS HIGH-IMPACT ROUNDTABLE ON DIAGNOSTIC STEWARDSHIP AND ANTIBIOTIC MISUSE

"The Role of Diagnostics in Curbing the Irrational Use of Antibiotics at the Point of Care" was the focal theme of a significant roundtable hosted by Voice of Healthcare (VOH) in collaboration with HORIBA India, on April 11, 2025, at Shangri-La Eros, New Delhi. With antimicrobial resistance (AMR) rapidly emerging as one of the world's most urgent public health crises — second only to climate change — the roundtable provided an essential platform to spotlight the role of diagnostic stewardship in combating this growing challenge.

India continues to bear one of the world's highest AMR burdens, driven by irrational antibiotic use, over-the-counter availability, and empirical, non-evidence-based prescribing patterns, particularly in ICUs, emergency care, and primary healthcare. Despite considerable advances in medical technology, timely, reliable, and affordable diagnostic interventions remain inconsistent, often leading to the unnecessary use of antibiotics. This roundtable united India's leading clinicians, policymakers, microbiologists, diagnostics experts, and public health specialists to collaboratively explore solutions that can strengthen diagnostic pathways and improve antibiotic stewardship across healthcare settings.

The event opened with a powerful keynote address by Dr. Naveen Nishchal, Founder Chairman, Voice of Healthcare, who highlighted real-world challenges

and international perceptions around AMR in India. He shared a personal anecdote reflecting how hospital-acquired infections and AMR are viewed globally, underscoring the urgent need for India to act. **"AMR today stands as the second biggest global health threat after climate change. Diagnostics and point-of-care testing have the power to transform how we manage this issue — and every stakeholder needed to make this change is present in this room today. Together, we must not only discuss but act, strategize, and implement,"** Dr. Nishchal emphasized while warmly welcoming the gathering.

Dr. Rajeev Gautam, Sr. Corporate Officer, HORIBA Ltd. Japan and President, HORIBA India, followed with a keynote from an industry leader's perspective. He shared how HORIBA — traditionally known for its global leadership in medical diagnostics, biolife sciences, automotive and semiconductor sectors — conceived this initiative as part of their healthcare Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) commitment in India. **"This gathering isn't about technology showcases; it's about creating awareness and bringing diverse stakeholders to one table. While we do have diagnostic instruments, our focus today is building a movement of sensitivity and shared responsibility around the effective use of antibiotics."** remarked Dr. Gautam, affirming HORIBA's dedication to public health advocacy. This program was a CSR initiative by HORIBA India

to promote awareness for preventive healthcare, contributing to the overall well-being of the society. Further deepening the conversation was Dr. Ravi Gaur, Chairman, Medical Advisory Committee, Oncquest Laboratories and Founder, DRG Path Labs, who also moderated the roundtable. Offering a human and clinical perspective, he stressed the silent, dangerous nature of AMR and the indispensable role of diagnostics. **"AMR is one of the biggest silent threats of our generation. It creeps in quietly, turning once-curable infections into untreatable diseases. We cannot wait for ICU admissions to act — decisions must be evidence-based, made much earlier, even at the pharmacy counter. Around 52% of antibiotics in India are sold over the counter. This is where point-of-care testing could make a monumental difference,"** he stated. Dr. Gaur called for faster diagnostic interventions, stronger clinician-lab partnerships, and clear, actionable outcomes from the gathering.

Delivering the government's national perspective, Dr. Lata Kapoor, Additional Director & Head, Centre for Bacterial Disease and Drug Resistance and AMR Containment, NCDC, Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, addressed the seriousness of India's AMR crisis and the urgent need for coordinated action. She stressed that **"AMR is now a silent pandemic, one of the most serious public health challenges facing India and the world. The irrational use**

of antibiotics in ICUs and emergency setups is alarmingly high, often driven by diagnostic delays and empirical prescribing. Point-of-care testing is essential and must be integrated into our AMR containment strategies. The government is committed to working with the healthcare industry, private labs, and clinicians to promote diagnostic stewardship and awareness, because the right test at the right time prevents the wrong prescription.”

The roundtable advanced through two structured sessions — **Round One: Understanding the Landscape** and **Round Two: Solutions, Scale, and Strategy** — with active participation from a distinguished panel of experts including **Dr. Arjun Dang** (CEO, Dr Dangs Lab), **Dr. Ankur Mutreja** (Director – Strategy, Communications & Partnerships, PATH), **Dr. Vikas Manchanda** (Professor, Microbiology, Maulana Azad Medical College), **Dr. Aarti Khanna Nagpal**, HOD Biochemistry & Hematology, PathKind Labs, **Dr. Shalabh Malik**, Technical Director Microbiology & Molecular Infectious, Dr Lal Path Labs, **Dr. Chhavi Gupta**, Senior Consultant- Infectious Disease, Adult Immunization, and Travel Medicine, Yashoda Super Speciality Hospital, **Dr. Rajat Gupta**, Director Critical Care & Emergency, Sri Balaji Action Medical Institute, **Dr. Akashneel Bhattacharya** (Head, Infectious Disease, Paras Hospitals), **Dr. Shweta Sharma** (Senior Consultant, Microbiology, Yashoda Super Speciality Hospital), **Dr. Pooja Wadwa** (Clinical Director, Critical Care Medicine, Marengo Asia Hospitals), **Dr. Ichha Kaur** (Senior Consultant, Anaesthesia, Paras Hospitals), **Dr. Simant Jha** (Director, Critical Care, PSRI Hospital), **Dr. Tariq Ali** (Director, Critical Care, Medanta The Medicity), **Dr. Ashish Bajaj** (Consultant Microbiologist & Infection Control Officer, CK Birla Hospital), and **Dr. Prashant Nag** (Chief Operating & Medical Officer, Redcliffe Labs), among others.



The discussion in Round One centered around identifying the persistent gaps in India's AMR response — from diagnostic turnaround delays and limited lab infrastructure to an over-reliance on empirical treatments in ICUs, OPDs, and emergency settings, where decisions are often made without timely, evidence-based diagnostic confirmation. Experts collectively agreed on the urgent need to empower clinicians with faster, reliable point-of-care diagnostic solutions, improve real-time lab-clinician communication, and implement stewardship protocols. Transitioning into Round Two, the conversation shifted toward scalable solutions — with proposals including hospital antibiogram integration, AMR surveillance networks, syndromic PoC testing programs, public-private diagnostic partnerships, and large-scale clinician stewardship training initiatives. The experts emphasized the importance of bridging diagnostic gaps beyond metros — into tier-2, tier-3 cities, and rural setups — and called for collaborative

national awareness campaigns, policy support, and standardized diagnostic-led antimicrobial stewardship frameworks.

The roundtable closed with reflections from **Dr. Lata Kapoor** and **Dr. Ravi Gaur**, summarizing key takeaways: prioritizing diagnostic-led decision-making, integrating rapid PoC tools into clinical workflows, generating hospital antibiograms, making AMR data central to hospital policies, and launching national awareness campaigns. The evening concluded with an engaging networking dinner that encouraged open dialogue, cross-sector partnerships, and collaborative planning for future AMR initiatives.

This meaningful roundtable marks a progressive step towards uniting India's clinical, diagnostic, and policy voices under a common mission — placing diagnostics at the center of AMR containment, promoting responsible, evidence-based healthcare, and advancing India's global leadership in combating antimicrobial resistance.



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INDIA STRIKES

1. Headquarters of LeT damaged by an Indian missile attack in Muridke, Pak Punjab, May 7

2. The JeM HQ hit by Indian strikes in Ahmedpur Sharqia, Bahawalpur, Pak Punjab

3. Pak army soldiers salute victims of an Indian missile attack in Muridke, also on May 7

4. A view of the destruction at the HQ of the Hizbul Mujahideen after an Indian missile attack, Kotli, PoK

GETTY IMAGES



AP



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COVER STORY

INDIA | PAKISTAN

WAR!

PAKISTAN'S DANGEROUS GAMBIT AND HOW WE MATCH UP

By RAJ CHENGAPPA and PRADIP R. SAGAR

R

Retribution, like justice, must not only be delivered but also seen to be delivered. The Indian Army learned this lesson the hard way in 2019, when it offered only limited photographic evidence of its air strikes on terror camps in Balakot in Pakistan, launched in response to the Pulwama attack. Pakistan denied any damage, and international scepticism about the operation's success persisted. Six years later, on May 7, the Indian armed forces ensured there was no such ambiguity. In a bold response to the April 22 Pahalgam carnage, they struck nine terror installations across Pakistan and released vivid video and photographic proof of what the operation accomplished.

Operation Sindoor, as the strike was branded, was as much a military retaliation as a symbolic gesture, evident in its name and logo—vermillion powder, a marker of a married woman's status in the Hindu tradition, spilling from the 'o's in 'sindoor'. It was a poignant reference to the women who were widowed when terrorists ruthlessly gunned down 26 innocent men in the Baisaran meadow of Pahalgam.

India was avenging their loss, as it were. The Modi government further reinforced the Nari Shakti (women's empowerment) narrative when it got two women officers from the armed forces to brief the press on the operation.

With Operation Sindoor, the Modi government has delivered India's most forceful military message to Pakistan in 25 years—that it has had enough of Pakistan's terror shenanigans and from now on was willing to execute a no-holds-barred retaliation. As Lt Gen. Deependra Singh Hooda (retd), then Northern Army commander who oversaw the 2016 Uri surgical strikes, put it, "If limited strikes that only neutralise foot soldiers are not enough to deter terrorism, India is now willing to target the core terrorist leadership—even deep inside Punjab. With the military-jihadi complex nearby, these strikes raise the stakes far beyond Balakot or Uri, forcing Pakistan to consider whether it's ready to go to war over its terror sanctuaries." Of the nine Pakistani terror establishments Indian armed forces

INDIA PAKISTAN BALANCE OF FIREPOWER

DEFENCE BUDGET (2025-26)	\$79 BILLION	\$7.6 BILLION
ARMY MANPOWER	1,200 (in '000)	550 (in '000)
TANKS	4,200	2,627
AIR FORCE MANPOWER	150+ (in '000)	70+ (in '000)
FIGHTER JETS	606	387
ATTACK HELICOPTERS	80	57
NAVY MANPOWER	100+ (in '000)	20+ (in '000)
AIRCRAFT CARRIERS	2	0
SUBMARINES	20	8
DESTROYERS	11	0
FRIGATES	12	12
NAVAL FIGHTER JETS	41	0

Source: Global Firepower 2025 World Military Strength Rankings

struck, five were in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir and four in the politically sensitive and powerful province of Punjab. It was, in fact, the first Indian air strike on Punjab since the 1971 war, and the high-value targets included the Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) headquarters in Bahawalpur and the Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) base in Muridke, near Lahore.

However, keeping in mind international concerns, India's foreign secretary Vikram Misri made it clear at a press briefing that India was not looking to go up the escalation ladder. "These actions were measured, non-escalatory, proportionate, and responsible," he said. India also clarified that it had not struck any Pakistani military infrastructure. Its military response came after it had already imposed other costs on Pakistan just a day after the Pahalgam terror attack, among them the suspension of the 65-year-old Indus Waters Treaty that lays down mutually agreed guidelines on sharing the waters of the six rivers feeding the Indus basin. Pakistan immediately declared it an act of war since two of its most

NOTES OF CAUTION

Though superior in manpower and hardware, India has a full military commitment on its China border, blunting the edge over Pakistan

China will extend full support to Pakistan in electronic warfare, intelligence, spares and ammunition

India has numerical superiority when it comes to land, air and sea platforms, but it has to leverage them effectively

Pakistan is strong in asymmetric/drone warfare and has also acquired new assets from Turkey

AT DAGGERS DRAWN



WITH ITS MUSCULAR RESPONSE, INDIA HAS SENT OUT A STRONG MESSAGE THAT IT WILL HAVE ZERO TOLERANCE FOR TERROR

populous provinces—Punjab and Sindh—rely on three of these rivers for drinking water supply and agriculture.

The Pakistani Response

The sheer scale of India's military strikes stunned Pakistan, who called it another act of war. Pakistani prime minister Shehbaz Sharif took to X on May 7, warning, "Pakistan

reserves the absolute right to respond decisively to this unprovoked Indian act—a resolute response is already under way.... The enemy will never be allowed to achieve its malicious aims." Later that night, Pakistan launched a series of drone and missile attacks across India's northern and western border spanning Jammu and Kashmir, Punjab, Rajasthan and even Gujarat. India upped the ante by targeting Pakistan's air defence radar and systems in several locations, including in Lahore, demonstrating that its prime city, too, was vulnerable to Indian aerial strikes. Pakistan, in turn, used drones and missile to target military stations in Jammu, Pathankot and Udhampur, along the international border in J&K. India, meanwhile, reportedly launched a missile strike on a Pakistani naval base which, if true, would be the first time it has done so since 1971.

The rapid escalation of hostilities is pushing India and Pakistan into a war neither country really wants or can afford. Pakistan's economy is in dire straits, saved from a



certain collapse thanks only to the \$7 billion funding provided by the International Monetary Fund. Politically, the weak coalition government headed by Shehbaz Sharif is beholden to Pakistan army chief General Asim Munir, who is now the de facto supremo of the country. There is palpable discontent among the young who are disillusioned with the stalled economic growth in their country, while the army's own reputation has taken a beating after Baloch rebels hijacked the Jaffer Express and inflicted casualties on armed forces personnel.

The Compulsions Before India

Many experts see the Pahalgam terror attack as Munir's handiwork to divert public attention from domestic failures. Anti-Indian sentiments have only heightened in the aftermath of Operation Sindoar. Munir espouses Islamist nationalism to rally his countrymen, and envisions Pakistan as a hard state that can meet external and internal security threats with a robust military response. In keeping with the Pakistan policy of "quid-pro-quo plus military response", the general's answer to the Modi government's air strikes is a dangerous gambit that involves executing a broad spectrum of provocative strikes against India to precipitate a war and then seek international mediation.

Strategically, India had sought to maintain controllable, tactical actions such as missile or artillery strikes while avoiding broader escalation. But Pakistan's upping the ante post India's air strikes and targeting of military installations has left little room for a speedy resolution that allows both sides to demonstrate to their domestic constituencies that they have extracted their pound of flesh. In 2019, the face-off was a quick one, with India conducting air strikes on a terrorist camp in Balakot inside Pakistani territory for the first time since the 1971 war. Pakistan had retaliated the next day by sending a squadron of fighters and dropping one of its munitions close to an Indian military ammunition store, showing that it could penetrate India's airspace at will. And when Indian fighters scrambled to take them on, the Pakistani jets shot down the MiG-21 piloted by Wing Commander Abhinandan Varthaman, who ejected from the aircraft but fell in PoK and was taken prisoner. It was only after stiff negotiations and intervention by major powers that the then prime minister Imran Khan had him released. Both India and Pakistan declared victory to their respective countrymen and the showdown ended. In contrast, the current standoff has moved rapidly down the slippery slope towards all-out war.

**“
BY ATTACKING
PAHALGAM, PAKIS-
TAN HAS HIT THE
VERY SOUL OF INDIA.
WE WILL RESPOND
WITH PUNISHMENT
BEYOND THEIR
IMAGINATION”**

—Narendra Modi
Prime Minister of India, Apr. 24



How We Match Up

If one were to compare the military strength of the two adversaries, India appears to have a decisive edge over Pakistan in terms of sheer number and range of firepower. India's military is one of the largest and most modern in the world. Strategic partnerships with global powers like Russia, the US, France and Israel, along with indigenous development, have also ensured that it has state-of-the-art military equipment. Its active personnel number 1.46 million, supplemented by 1.15 million reserves and 2.5 million paramilitary forces, taking the total beyond 5 million.

Pakistan, on the other hand, has 654,000 active personnel, 550,000 reserves and 500,000 paramilitary forces, its total strength adding up to 1.7 million, battle-hardened from counter-insurgency operations. Pakistan benefits from strong Chinese backing, a centralised military command and deep experience in proxy warfare. And while India's defence budget



ACTION, REACTION

PM Modi, defence minister Rajnath Singh and others at a cabinet meeting post Op Sindoar in Delhi, May 7; (below) Pak PM Shehbaz Sharif chairs a National Security Committee meeting in Islamabad, May 7

deserts or plains. Our mechanised forces and artillery are way ahead of Pakistan," says Lt Gen. Anil K. Ahuja (retd), former director general of military operations. He does add that Pakistan's geography gives it an advantage in terms of mobilisation of forces. "With our commitments along the northern borders with China, where we have disengaged but de-escalation and deinduction have yet to take place, the conventional force levels against Pakistan have reduced. The existing levels remain adequate for retribution, but efforts need to be made to further strengthen deterrence," he says.

The Indian army has 280 artillery regiments equipped with 105mm field guns, Bofors howitzers with upgraded Dhanush and Sharang guns, the ultra-light M-777 howitzers and the K-9 Vajra self-propelled tracked guns. The Pinaka multi-launch rocket systems, Smerch and Grad rockets, UAVs, surveillance systems, missiles and other advanced firepower assets add to the muscle. Pakistan has 25 artil-

“PAKISTAN RESERVES THE ABSOLUTE RIGHT TO RESPOND DECISIVELY TO THIS UNPROVOKED INDIAN ATTACK—A RESOLUTE RESPONSE IS ALREADY UNDER WAY”

—Shehbaz Sharif
Pakistani PM on X, May 7

of \$79 billion (2025-26) dwarfs Pakistan's \$7.6 billion, India has a full-scale military commitment along its northern borders against China, blunting its manpower and equipment edge over Pakistan. Pakistan, too, has to commit troops and firepower to its troubled borders with Afghanistan and Iran, but these are largely for counter-terrorism roles which predominantly involve its infantry.

In terms of land forces—which primarily include the infantry, artillery and armoured corps (tanks)—the Indian army is better positioned than Pakistan. Its three strike corps—I Corps in Mathura, II Corps in Ambala and XXI Corps in Bhopal—are well-placed to take decisive military action against Pakistan. For its part, Pakistan has only two strike corps—I Corp (Mangla in PoK) and II Corp (Multan, Punjab)—both close to the Indian border. "Our armoured formations are right there towards the Pakistan border to launch an offensive on the

lery regiments and has constantly upgraded their firepower, including with the Chinese-made SH-15 self-propelled howitzers it inducted in 2022. The SH-15 integrates cutting-edge tech and is compatible with precision-guided munitions that have enhanced Pakistan's artillery threat profile. In terms of armoured vehicles, India outmatches Pakistan with its 4,200-plus tanks, including the T-90 Bhishma and indigenous Arjun variants, compared to Pakistan's 2,627.

The Air Battles

Military strategists believe it won't be a boots-on-the-ground battle as much as a display of air and missile power. When it comes to air power, India deploys 606 fighters, including the Rafale, Su-30MKI and Mirage 2000, alongside 80 attack helicopters. Its air defence is bolstered by the S-400, Barak-8, Akash and AI-powered situational awareness platforms. The Indian Air Force maintains a vast inventory of air-launched cruise missiles (ALCMs) for deep-strike missions.



Jaish-e-Mohammed Headquarters

The nerve centre of Jaish in Punjab, used for religious indoctrination and arms training. Linked to 2019 Pulwama attack. JeM leader Masood Azhar's family members apparently killed in Indian strike

BAHAWALPUR

MULTAN

BIKANER

PAKISTAN
International Border
INDIA

SURATGARH

TERROR TAKEDOWN

THE JAISH-E-MOHAMMED AND LASHKAR-E-TAIBA, BOTH ASSETS OF PAKISTAN, HAVE BLED INDIA FOR LONG. ON MAY 7, INDIA FINALLY RAINED RETRIBUTION ON THEM, PUMMELLING NINE LeT AND JeM CAMPS IN PoK AND PAKISTAN PUNJAB

MURIDKE

Lashkar-e-Taiba training hub

Located in Punjab, the camp imparts arms and religious training to hundreds of recruits; 26/11 terrorist Ajmal Kasab spent time here

MEHMOONA JOYA

JeM, LeT base camp for intrusion into Jammu

Located in Sialkot, Punjab, the camp trains terrorists in firearms and guerrilla tactics. Linked to multiple attacks in Jammu

KOTLI

Abbas & Gulpar LeT camps

Both located in PoK. Abbas is used to launch terrorists into Poonch-Rajouri; Gulpar is an old, large camp giving advanced arms training to terrorists

LAHORE

AMRITSAR

LUDHIANA

PATHANKOT

JAMMU

RAWALPINDI

ISLAMABAD

LINE OF CONTROL

BHIMBER

LeT camp

Located in PoK, Bhimber/Barnala Camp is a key cross-border movement hub, logistics base for Poonch, Rajouri, Reasi regions

TEHRA KALAN

JeM camp

Located in Sialkot, Tehra Kalan/Sarjal camp lies along Samba in J&K, used for drone ops, weapons and narcotics smuggling

MUZAFFARABAD

Syedna Bilal & Sawai Nala camps

Both located near the capital of PoK. Syedna Bilal JeM camp is a transit point for infiltration into J&K. Sawai Nala LeT camp is a training/staging hub for terror ops in north Kashmir



ANI

These include the BrahMos missile with ranges between 450 and 800 kilometres, the Kh-35 ALCM with a range of 260 km, and the Israeli-developed Crystal Maze 2, a precision air-to-surface ballistic missile with a strike range exceeding 250 km, effective even in GPS-denied environments and capable of targeting high-value assets such as long-range radars and air defence systems. The IAF also fields the Spice 2000 glide bomb, fitted with an add-on kit for 450/900 kg warheads. It has high accuracy and a range of approximately 60 km.

The Pakistan Air Force (PAF), on the other hand, operates 387 fighters, among them the JF-17, J-10 CE and F-16, besides 57 attack helicopters, and relies on LY-80 SAMs and PL15 missiles with Chinese collaboration and artificial intelligence-driven electronic warfare capabilities. Pakistan, in fact, holds numerical superiority over India in Airborne Warning and Control System (AWACS) and Airborne Early Warning and Control (AEW&C) aircraft, critical for air surveillance and battle management, with nine platforms compared to India's five. The PAF operates 5-6 Saab 2000 Erieye AEW&Cs, with a new unit (serial 23-058) inducted in 2024, featuring a 450 km detection range, an AESA (Active Electronically Scanned Array) radar with 150°-300° coverage, and real-time tracking of aircraft, missiles and ground targets. India, by contrast, operates three IL-76-based Phalcon AWACS with 400 km range and 360° EL/W-2090 radar, and two Embraer ERJ-145 Netra Mk-1 AEW&Cs with 240° indigenous AESA radar and 200-250 km range, apart from the 12 P8i used for multi-domain surveillance across land, air and sea. "Numerically," says Air Vice Marshal Manmohan Bahadur (retd), "we are

strongly placed and have superior technology, but we have to look out for latest technologies which Pakistan may have got from China." According to him, while both nations have 4.5 Generation fighters (India has the Rafale and Pakistan the J10C), how you utilise them tactically is what will matter.

India's navy, with 294 vessels, includes two aircraft carriers (INS *Vikramaditya* and *Vikrant*), 20 submarines (including three nuclear-powered) and 75 naval aircraft, for global power projection. Pakistan's 114-ship navy, equipped with eight submarines and nine frigates, focuses on coastal defence and is supported by Chinese-supplied Type 054A/P frigates. In a conventional war, where India's naval superiority and precision air-launched missiles clash with Pakistan's nimble drone fleet and AWACS advantage, the India-Pakistan military balance has reached a precarious equilibrium. Turkish corvettes fortify Pakistan's shores, while India's aircraft carriers command the Indian Ocean, encapsulating a high-stakes rivalry defined by cutting-edge technology and geopolitical manoeuvring in 2025.

The Russia-Ukraine conflict first validated drone warfare, and it is playing a significant role in the current stand-off between India and Pakistan. India has strong unmanned platforms like the Israeli-made Heron, Searcher and Harop UAVs, besides the American-made MQ94 Reaper for cross-border surveillance, suppression of enemy air defence and precision strikes. It has also strengthened its anti-drone capabilities with a mix of indigenous and imported electronic warfare systems for both soft-kill (jamming) and hard-kill (laser, kinetic or net-based). These include the Krasukha from Russia and the SMASH 2000 Plus systems from Israel. Pakistan, meanwhile, has looked to China and

THOUGH IT IS ALIGNED WITH INDIA, THE UNITED STATES IS URGING BOTH COUNTRIES TO DE-ESCALATE AS IT DOES NOT WANT INSTABILITY IN SOUTH ASIA



BATTLE STATIONS

(Left) A joint army-IAF exercise in Jalandhar, Apr. 25; a Pak Army tank being moved in Muridke, May 7

AFP

WHILE IT SUITS CHINA FOR INDIA TO BE TIED DOWN IN A COMBAT WITH PAKISTAN, IT WOULD NOT WANT THE CONFLICT TO BECOME A NUCLEAR ONE AND MAY ADVISE PAKISTAN TO DE-ESCALATE

Turkey to boost its drone and electronic warfare capabilities. It has, for instance, acquired two advanced Turkish drones from Baykar—the Bayraktar TB2 and the Bayraktar Akinci. Featuring a 40,000-foot service ceiling, over 25-hour endurance, 7,500 km range and AESA radar for air-to-air and air-to-ground missions, the Akinci, operated by the 64th Combat Unmanned Aerial System Squadron at the Murid air base, has considerably boosted Pakistan's ISR (intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance) and strike capabilities. In its initial strikes, therefore, Pakistan has relied heavily on sending swarms of drones to attack Indian military and civilian targets.

What India Should Do

Maj. Gen. A.P. Singh (retd), who served extensively on the LoC (Line of Control) during his career, counsels that India's strategy should be multifaceted and calibrated for both defensive resilience and an offensive precision approach. "The first priority," he says, "is to maintain a firm hold along the LoC, where the terrain is challenging and Pakistani forces are heavily deployed with fortified defences, making major incursions unlikely and costly." Simultaneously, he adds, India should retain pre-designated target lists for calibrated aerial and naval strikes, enabling rapid execution of precision attacks if required. Hooda says, "We have a conventional superiority

over Pakistan that we should exploit. The LoC terrain is more difficult, with Pakistan able to build up forces to match ours, so we should spread the battlefield to the International Border (IB) where we have large open areas and we can achieve some success." Given the Indian navy's superiority, other experts say India should impose a naval blockade alongside the land thrust on the IB and then pressure Pakistan to sue for peace. Overall, while India's logistical edge and air-naval dominance could subdue Pakistan swiftly, their nuclear arsenal can cast a shadow over limited conflicts.

Simultaneously, India should push for the international community to rein in Pakistan. The escalation could not have come at a more inopportune time for India with most nations grappling with the worldwide storm US president Donald Trump has unleashed in global trade and tariffs. Despite its preoccupation with Pakistan, India smartly signed a landmark free trade agreement with the UK on May 6, and is negotiating hard with both the US and Europe to arrive at trade agreements. These moves have ensured that major world powers, save China, will side with it as it takes on Pakistan.

The Trump administration is aligned with India, though it is pushing both countries not to escalate tensions. As is Europe. China has so far backed Pakistan and is expected to extend all manner of covert support in terms of electronic warfare capabilities and intelligence, besides the supply of spares and additional ammunition that Pakistan may need. While it is in Beijing's interest to keep India engaged in combating Pakistan and take its eyes off the larger ambition of challenging it in the Indian Ocean, China will not want the conflict to escalate into a nuclear confrontation. Rudra Chaudhari, Director, Carnegie India, says, "The US is likely to tell India that they do not want any instability in South Asia and push Delhi to open lines of communication with Pakistan. China, too, is likely to counsel Pakistan to move towards de-escalating the situation." That remains India's best bet to cool temperatures while delivering a strong message to Pakistan that communicates its zero tolerance for terrorism. ▀



THE BIG STORY | **CASTE CENSUS**

WHY THE BJP PLAYED THE CASTE CARD

After sustained ambivalence on the issue, the party pivots to greenlight the caste enumeration exercise. It's a high-stakes gamble, suggesting a strategic shift in the Hindutva 2.0 strategy

By **ANILESH S. MAHAJAN** | Photography by **BANDEEP SINGH**



● **A CASTE MULTITUDE** The scene from a political rally in Lucknow

pling case in Parliament in 2011, the party remained non-committal. This despite many in Modi's cabinet, the BJP and the Sangh's *samarasta* (social harmony) *manch* backing it. In 2021, the government also reiterated in both Parliament and the Supreme Court that it would not undertake such a census.

BJP sources say PM Modi's 'framework' divides Indians into four broad groups—the poor, the youth, women and farmers—not caste categories. Moreover, the BJP's lack of urgency on sub-categorising the OBCs (Other Backward Classes)—even after the Rohini Commission report in 2023—spoke of its reluctance to disturb the status quo of its social coalition. In October 2023, BJP Union ministers, including Kiren Rijiju, even warned that the Congress and Rahul Gandhi's call for "*jitni aabaadi, utna haq* (rights proportional to population)" would "kill India", arguing it would pit larger populations against smaller ones and harm national unity. PM Modi himself, from the rally stages, accused the Congress of "playing with fire", and questioned if proportional rights meant sidelining minorities or the southern states. That the very same BJP now touts a caste census as a progressive step is a "dramatic U-turn", according to the Opposition.

MANDAL 2.0, MODI-STYLE

Yet, it is also true that the BJP of today is a far cry from the upper caste bastion it was during the 1990s Mandal years. Modi, an OBC himself, has worked assiduously to dismantle the BJP's image of being a Brahmin-Bania-Rajput party, expanding Hindutva's appeal across caste lines. Many within the Sangh Parivar now argue that accepting the caste census is a natural extension of this journey.

To understand the BJP's shift in stand, one has to revisit the resurgence of Mandal-era politics in recent years. The term 'Mandal 2.0' captures the renewed drive for caste-based social justice, reminiscent of the early '90s, when the implementation of OBC reservations reshaped Indian politics. Ahead of the 2024 general election, the Opposition, led by the Congress and regional forces like the Samajwadi Party (SP) and Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD), revived the debate on caste inequality. They had a pointed message: if the OBCs and other disadvantaged groups make up the majority, why are they so poorly represented? They pledged a national caste census and a policy overhaul based on its findings, including expanding the 50 per cent reservation cap in education and jobs set by the Supreme Court. By late 2023, the issue gathered momentum. Bihar had completed a caste survey, Karnataka revisited its long-pending caste report, and Congress-ruled Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh were actively considering similar exercises.

It was a direct challenge to the BJP, which had largely shaped its political discourse around religion (Hindus vs others) and nationalism rather than caste identity in the past decade. Initially, the BJP tried to counter the narrative by painting

THE BJP-LED UNION GOVERNMENT HAS PERFORMED a stunning pivot on the question of the caste census. After years of remaining ambivalent on the issue—and even deriding the idea as divisive—Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government now says it will enumerate the nation's myriad castes in the much delayed

decadal census. The unexpected turn is the result of a complex interplay of issues—electoral calculus, state-level pressures and a recognition that caste realities can no longer be ignored, even for a party that built its brand on the promise of a 'casteless' Hindutva nationalism. There's also a bevy of state elections coming up, most importantly in Bihar, where being on the right side of the caste cohort debate could pay rich dividends. Indeed, many see the caste survey as a political gamble aimed at outflanking Mandal-era parties on their home turf, blunting the Congress's social justice pitch, and recasting the BJP as the new custodian of the Bahujan *samaj*.

For decades, the BJP avoided taking a stand on caste-based enumeration. While leaders like the late Gopinath Munde, a prominent OBC voice from Maharashtra, had made a com-

it as regressive identity politics. They invoked the spectre of national disunity. But, behind the scenes, alarm bells had begun ringing in the BJP camp. The party's strategists could not have missed what an Azim Premji University study had found in 2018: 55 per cent of Indian voters prefer a leader of their caste. In August 2021, at a book launch function in Delhi, RSS *sarkaryavah* (general secretary) Dattatreya Hosabale publicly endorsed the need for a caste census to ensure benefits reached the "most backward among the backward". This was a watershed moment, a formal acknowledgment of caste's role in social equity by the Sangh's top ranks. As Union minister Dharmendra Pradhan puts it, "Social harmony requires systemic reform. You can't undo centuries of deprivation in just 78 years of independence. A caste survey will help us understand the exact composition of society, which in turn will enable better policy."

COME ONE, COME ALL

In the general elections of 2014 and 2019, the BJP's triumphs were built on transcending caste equations through a mix of Hindu nationalist appeal, welfare schemes and sheer organisational muscle. Embracing a caste census allows the BJP to pivot its narrative, from just 'Hindus vs others' to include 'justice for backward communities within the Hindu fold'. Modi now has the opportunity to position himself as a champion of the OBCs on his own terms. BJP spokespersons have begun spotlighting the party's record to reinforce this image: the Modi government has implemented 27 per cent OBC reservation in NEET, granted constitutional status to the National Commission for Backward Classes in 2018, and boasts the highest number of OBC MPs and ministers in history. These points aim to reassure OBC voters that the BJP is no longer the upper caste-dominated party of the past but a broad-based platform that represents their aspirations. Political scientist Ashutosh Kumar observes, "The BJP doesn't want to be the party of Hindus. It wants to be the party of every Hindu."

The party's decision to back a caste census also serves to strengthen its ties within the NDA, where many allies rely on support from specific caste groups. In Uttar Pradesh, Apna Dal draws heavily from Kurmi OBC voters, while the Nishad Party represents the fisherfolk community. In Rajasthan, the Rashtriya Loktantrik Party appeals to certain OBC segments. These allies have welcomed the caste census, as it aligns with their politics of caste-based representation.

Even former rivals now aligned with the BJP have shown long-standing interest in caste data—Nitish Kumar raced ahead with a caste survey in Bihar, and Ajit Pawar in Maharashtra is keen on securing benefits for Marathas. By endorsing the caste census, the BJP has not only validated their demands but also reinforced the NDA's relevance in the social justice discourse. This move helps reassure allies that the BJP is committed to retaining this political space, rather than leaving it to the Opposition.

Critics have long held that backward Muslims and Christians deserve as much recognition as Hindu OBCs. Activists like Faiyaz Ahmad Fyzie demand a caste census that includes Muslim OBCs, SCs and STs. In the Supreme Court, West Bengal is defending its 2010-12 addition of 77 OBC communities—75 of them Muslim—which the BJP has sharply criticised. Many states include Muslim OBCs in their reservation lists, but the Centre's list remains narrow, often clubbing backward Muslim groups with privileged Ashrafs. Modi has often framed their marginali-

THE CASTE SPIRAL

- 1931** → The last caste census in India, which put the OBCs at 52% of the population
- 1979** → Mandal Commission uses 1931 data to propose 27% OBC reservation; in 1990, V.P. Singh government okays quota
- 2011** → Nationwide Socio-Economic Caste Census is conducted, but results under wraps
- 2014** → Telangana (2014) and Andhra Pradesh (2016-17) carry out Aadhaar-linked household surveys, collect caste/ economic data. Again, findings remain unpublished
- 2015** → Karnataka's 2015 socio-economic survey results put on ice till CM Siddaramaiah's return. Results accepted in 2025, but not publicised yet
- 2018** → In 2018, the Centre promises caste enumeration in the 2021 Census, but all assurances lost in pandemic convulsions. Even the Census is delayed
- 2023** → Bihar releases caste survey results in 2023; Odisha announces a similar effort
- 2025** → In Feb. 2025, Telangana releases a Socio-Economic, Educational, Employment, Political and Caste Survey report



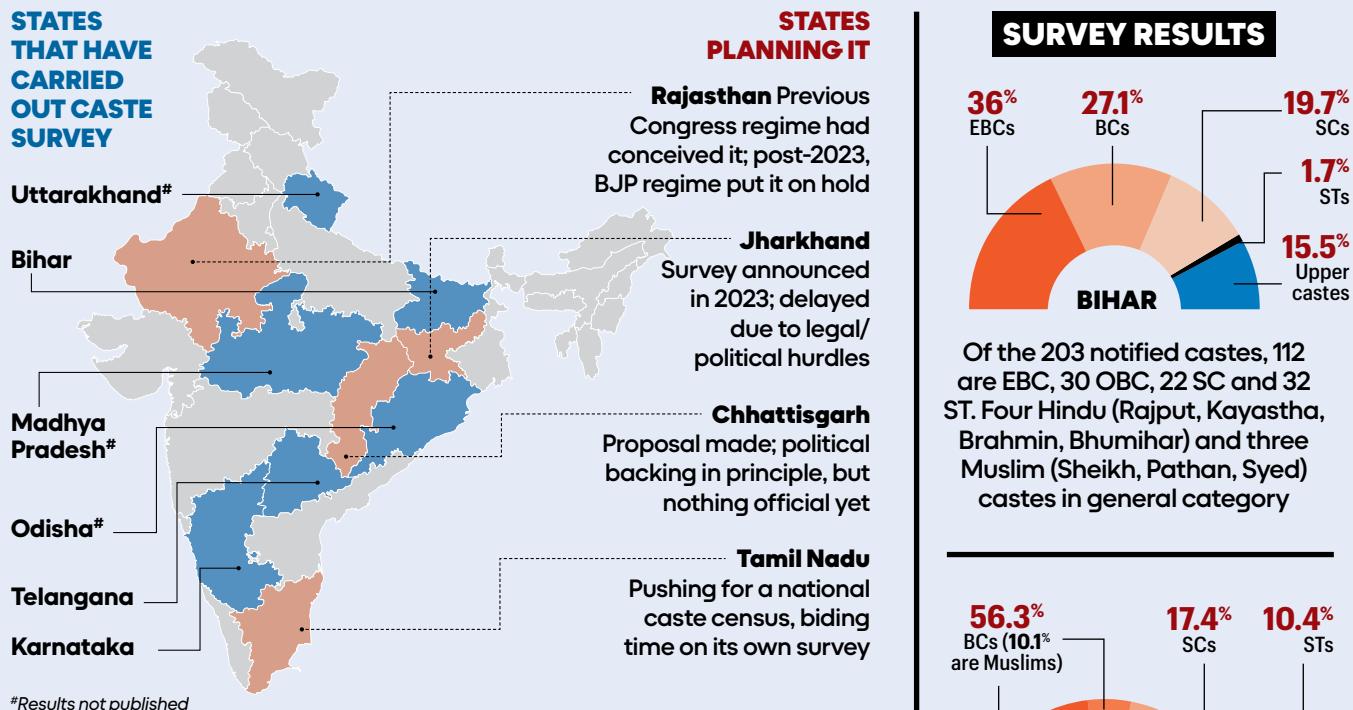
"Affirmative action isn't about vote-bank politics. It's about accountability and justice.... Our initiatives are aimed at removing poverty, not reshaping cultural identities"

DHARMENDRA PRADHAN

Union minister of education, and senior BJP leader

A NEW SOCIAL ORDER

A few states have already undertaken their version of a caste survey, some others are readying for it. Only 2-3 have published the results which, as expected, have unleashed mini storms



4,147

Total no. of castes in 1931 Census

4.6 MILLION

No. of 'unique caste names' in 2011 SECC*

2,479

No. of OBC groups as per Central list

3,150

No. of OBC groups as per state/UT lists

* Socio-Economic Caste Census

sation as socio-economic, not religious. The new BJP strategy includes Pasmanda Muslims, said to be sidelined by the Ashraf elite. "For years, Muslims were treated as a vote bank, ignoring internal disparities," says senior BJP leader and Union minister Bhupender Yadav. "Pasmanda Muslims and the women suffered because of this. Transparent data will help address these gaps."

STATES AND CASTES

Nowhere is the issue of caste census more politically charged than in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. The Bihar's grand alliance government conducted a caste survey in 2023, revealing that OBCs and EBCs (Extremely Backward Classes) made up 63 per cent of the population, and with SCs and STs, the total reached 84 per cent. The findings confirmed what backward caste leaders had long claimed—numerical dominance but poor representation in jobs and education. In response, the

state moved to raise reservations to 65 per cent, breaching the Supreme Court-set 50 per cent cap. The Patna High Court struck it down in 2024; the matter is now before the apex court. Interestingly, the BJP had supported the caste census resolution in Bihar in 2022, aware of the political cost of opposing it in a state where the OBC identity is central. With Bihar due for an election later this year, the Centre's nod to a caste census is seen as the BJP's attempt to reclaim ground from regional parties that have long owned the OBC narrative.

As for UP, considered a BJP stronghold, the ground turned shaky in the Lok Sabha election last year. The Hindutva-backed caste coalition (non-Yadav OBCs, upper castes and some non-Jatav Dalits) which helped it sweep the 2014 and 2019 elections showed signs of a crack. Akhilesh Yadav's Samajwadi Party and the Congress capitalised on it with a PDA pitch—uniting Pichhda (Backward Classes), Dalits and Alpasankhyak (minorities)

KEEPING COUNT PM Modi with ally and Bihar CM Nitish Kumar at an event in Madhubani, Apr. 24

under a Mandal 2.0 banner. Result: the BJP tally dropped to 36 (from 62) out of 80 seats, while the SP-Congress combine moved up to 43. Post-poll data showed an erosion of the BJP's OBC base—NDA support among Kurmi-Koeris fell by 19 per cent, and among other non-Yadav OBCs by 13 per cent. Even 'upper OBC' support dropped by 4 per cent.

Meanwhile, the caste dynamics in Maharashtra added their own momentum. Dominant Marathas have long demanded reservation, citing agrarian distress. They were granted a 16 per cent quota in 2018 but the apex court struck it down in 2021 for breaching the 50 per cent cap and lacking social backwardness criteria. This reignited tensions, with Marathas seeking OBC status and existing OBC groups opposing dilution of their share. The BJP, now back in power in the state with Maratha-heavy allies (Ajit Pawar, Eknath Shinde), is caught in the middle. A caste census offers a way out—providing data to assess genuine backwardness, and potentially appeasing both sides. It also addresses a 2021 court ruling that scrapped OBC quotas in local bodies for lack of data, sparking unrest. By backing the census, the BJP can promise OBCs data-backed return of local quotas while assuring Marathas that their claims will be fairly evaluated—a classic case of its micro-OBC management strategy.

RISKS AND REPERCUSSIONS

Critics point to the practical difficulties of a caste census in a vast country like India, such as the complexity of defining and enumerating thousands of sub-castes. Past attempts had been mired by logistical and administrative quagmires, the very reason cited by the Registrar General of India for rejecting a plan to conduct a caste census in 2010.

Meanwhile, by backing a caste census now, the BJP is walking a tightrope with its traditional support base—upper-caste Hindus and the aspirational urban middle class. The party's promise of a merit-based, unified India that rises above caste divisions has long resonated with these groups. With the 'pivot', there'll be growing unease that the caste census data could justify expanded quotas, shrinking the jobs and education space for upper castes. Some forward caste groups are already warning of a 'Mandal 2.0 moment', harking to the '90s backlash to the original Mandal Commission. Sceptics also fear the data would open a Pandora's box, fuelling demands for fresh or larger quotas not just from OBCs but also forward castes claiming disadvantage, and spark intra-caste rivalries, as subgroups seek distinct benefits. As a safety valve, the BJP may well cite the 10 per cent EWS (Economically Weaker Section) quota it introduced in 2019 for poor general category citizens.

The post-census phase could also prove volatile, as has been the case in Karnataka. Its caste survey exposed the dominance of the Lingayats and the Vokkaligas and recommended reclasifying Kurubas under a new MBC (Most Backward Classes) category with a steep quota hike. Even Congress leaders from



BIHAR POLLS ARE DUE THIS YEAR, AND THE NOD FOR A CASTE CENSUS MAY HELP THE BJP RECLAIM SOME GROUND IN THE OBC NARRATIVE

the dominant castes criticised the findings, highlighting how such caste data can trigger inter-group tensions.

If there is a respite, it will be in the fact that any policy move based on caste census data, be it raising quotas or redefining categories, is unlikely to come swiftly. The delay will allow the BJP to claim credit for the census without immediately upsetting its upper-caste base. It will still be a tightrope walk: act too slowly and face Opposition charges of tokenism; act too fast and risk backlash if data suggests expanding OBC quotas beyond 50 per cent. To avoid this bind, the BJP may fall back on the Rohini Commission's sub-categorisation framework to target benefits to the most backward OBCs without raising the overall quota. The Commission's 2023 report found that less than 1 per cent of OBC sub-groups corner half the benefits, a finding that aligns with BJP's non-dominant caste outreach strategy.

Along with the caste survey, the Modi government will also handle other curve balls such as delimitation, expansion of Lok Sabha seats and women's reservation after the upcoming Census. Bhupender Yadav says the BJP is mindful of this. "The Census captures more than just caste—it includes gender, health, geography and education. Women's reservation, too, hinges on the census as does delimitation," he notes.

To be sure, the road ahead for the BJP is complex. The party must now juggle the demands of its Mandal constituency—seeking caste justice—and its Kamandal base—rooted in Hindutva. How successfully it balances these competing forces will determine the next chapter of its politics. ■

A Bold New Chapter in Culinary Innovation: XO & Mi @ Le Belvedere Debuts at Le Meridien New Delhi

Le Meridien New Delhi proudly introduces XO & Mi @ Le Belvedere, an exciting new dining experience that transforms the storied Le Belvedere into a dynamic culinary destination. A fusion of heritage and innovation, XO & Mi brings the soul of Asia's vibrant street food culture into a refined, contemporary setting, creating a unique gastronomic adventure that delights the senses.



For decades, Le Belvedere has been synonymous with timeless elegance, a place where diplomats and connoisseurs gathered to savour exquisite Szechuan Chinese cuisine in an atmosphere of sophistication. Today, this celebrated space reinvents itself, embracing a bold vision that honours its legacy while offering an entirely new experience. XO & Mi @ Le Belvedere draws inspiration from the street markets of Thailand, Vietnam, Korea, Japan, Singapore and China, presenting an inventive menu that blends authenticity with modern creativity.

The menu at XO & Mi @ Le Belvedere is a celebration of flavours, textures, and culinary craftsmanship, where each dish tells a story of tradition reimagined. Guests can expect innovative interpretations of Asian classics, from the fiery kick of Sichuan-style Dan Dan Noodles, topped with crispy shallots and peanuts, to the delicate umami of Japanese Robata Grill Skewers. The signature XO & Mi Laksa, a rich coconut-infused broth brimming with seafood, chicken, and tofu, pays tribute to the culinary traditions of Singapore, while the irresistibly crisp and flavourful Charred Chicken Satay, coated in a signature spicy-sweet glaze, promises a taste of Indonesia's bustling food scene.

Beyond the plate, XO & Mi @ Le Belvedere invites guests into an immersive dining experience where every element has been thoughtfully curated to reflect the vibrancy of Asia's street markets. The interiors seamlessly blend modern elegance with eclectic energy, creating a setting that is both sophisticated and evocative of the lively food streets

that inspired the menu. The decor is a striking balance of contemporary design and cultural authenticity, with vibrant hues, intricate patterns, and artistic embellishments that bring the spirit of Asia's night markets to life. Carefully selected music enhances the atmosphere, creating an energetic yet intimate ambiance that encourages diners to lose themselves in the experience. The open kitchen concept allows guests to witness the artistry behind each dish, where chefs masterfully balance tradition and innovation in every preparation.

The beverage programme at XO & Mi @ Le Belvedere is equally compelling, offering a thoughtfully curated selection of signature cocktails, premium teas and artisanal beverages inspired by Asian ingredients and techniques. From handcrafted sake-based concoctions to inventive tea-infused mocktails, the drinks menu is designed to complement the bold and diverse flavours of the cuisine. House-infused spirits and fragrant botanical syrups bring an additional layer of complexity, ensuring a well-rounded and immersive dining experience.

Mrs Meena Bhatia, Vice President & General Manager, Le Meridien New Delhi, said, "At its core, XO & Mi @ Le Belvedere is more than a restaurant – it is a culinary narrative that bridges generations and geographies, a melting pot of flavours, stories, and inspirations. Every dish, every sip, and every moment is crafted to evoke nostalgia while simultaneously introducing something unexpected and new. Whether it is an intimate dinner, a lively gathering with friends, or a special celebration, guests can look forward to an experience that is as unforgettable as it is delicious."



“YouTube is a stage where creators can shine”

In an exclusive interview, Neal Mohan, CEO of YouTube, talks to Managing Editor M.G. Arun about the importance of India in the company’s global creative ecosystem. Edited excerpts

Neal Mohan, the CEO of YouTube, loves recounting the story of Biju, a content creator from Kannur, Kerala.

Having lost his job as a bus driver during Covid, Biju decided to create short-form content on his YouTube channel KL BRO Biju Rithvik, giving glimpses of his daily life, in Malayalam, his mother tongue. Soon, his simple, unassuming style of presentation earned him a whole legion of admirers. “Fast forward a couple of years later, and Biju was our largest YouTuber, not just in India, but in all of Asia, and currently has 71 million subscribers,” says Mohan. “What struck me was what this incredibly humble person told me when I met him—‘YouTube has given me a community.’ That was what was most important to him—people commenting on his videos not just from across India, but from all over the world.”

Mohan is extremely proud of what YouTube is helping the Biju’s of this world achieve. Born to Indian immigrant parents in the US, Mohan spent eight years as YouTube’s chief product officer before becoming its CEO in February 2023. A big fan of YouTube himself, Mohan would during the

Covid lockdown watch YouTube videos to learn how to fix his garage. A news and sports junkie, Mohan also has a deep interest in music—genres he regularly explores on YouTube.

And he is excited about India. Some 15,000 YouTubers here boast more than a million subscribers each; in just the past year, 100 million Indian channels uploaded their videos on YouTube. Between 2022 and 2024, the \$40 billion Google subsidiary paid Rs 21,000 crore to Indian creators, artists and media companies.

YouTube, therefore, is not just dreaming big for India but also betting big on the country. This segues into the Indian government’s a new thrust on the ‘orange economy’, which emphasises creativity, culture and content. Over the next two years, the company, which turned 20 this year, plans to invest more than Rs 850 crore to accelerate the growth of Indian creators, artists and media partners.

Calling content creators the ‘new media powerhouses’, Mohan thinks of it as a whole new profession, “a new way for young people to earn a living, build a career.” He also believes that YouTube has democratised content in India more than any other platform, spanning



▶ **India is such an amazingly creative place. It's a place where storytelling has been deeply rooted in the culture**



genres from academics to arts and crafts, farming to film editing, cooking to comedy, design to DIY, and more. That breadth extends to language too—from Bhojpuri and Haryanvi to Kokborok, Santhali and Chokri. “What’s amazing about YouTube is that whatever niche interests you on a given day, there are a lot of people with similar interests who produce amazing content for you to learn something new,” says Mohan. In the following interview, he tells us exactly how YouTube is helping achieve this.

Q.

There is a huge interest in the ‘creator ecosystem’, especially in the economic value for them. What has been YouTube’s India experience in this regard?

India is our largest country in terms of users. Four out of five internet users in India above 18 years use YouTube regularly. It’s when I’m on the ground here that I realise what an incredibly vibrant creator economy exists here. I see it in my own personal experience. I went to high school in Lucknow and love Lakhnavi food. Decades later, I came across a YouTuber, Ranveer Brar, who is a foodie, has a food channel, is an amazing chef, and was just making some Lakhnavi *chaat* recipes. It transported me in time, transported me to a place, gave me a connection to a community of people with similar interests and backgrounds. That is how profound YouTube’s impact is. And billion times a day. That what really makes it amazing, especially for a young person. It’s how you look to consume content, whether from your favourite creators, your favourite sporting event, or your favourite musicians and artists.

Q. What are the reasons for this explosion of content and usage?

There are a couple of fundamental reasons for that. One is that India is such an amazingly creative place. It’s a place where storytelling has been deeply rooted in the culture. And I don’t mean just Bollywood or the music of today, but for thousands and thousands of years. So, YouTube becomes a stage, if you will, for all these amazing creators. That’s really how vibrant it is and not just within India. That storytelling, that culture—from music to film to sports—is also something that is now, thanks to YouTube, getting exported all over the world. So, over 15 per cent of an Indian creator’s watch time comes from outside India. That’s about 4.5 billion hours of viewing time. This is a kind of testament to India as a creator nation. The government’s vision around having this WAVES—World Audio Visual & Entertainment Summit—is a milestone in this regard.

Q. While YouTube has created a democratic space for people to express themselves, questions have also been raised about the credibility of some of the creators and the need for fact-checking. As a platform, how much control do you have over the content?

The magic of YouTube and the reason why I feel that the creator economy in India is so successful is because it is an open platform. It's like, as you say, the democratisation of content creation. Our mission statement is to give everyone a voice and show them the world. If you have something creative to say, an idea to share, you can do that on YouTube. But just because we're an open platform doesn't mean anything goes. We have always had community guidelines governing our content policies on YouTube and these have evolved as the context changes in the real world. Our principle is always an open platform, standing for freedom of speech and freedom of expression. But also having rules of the road that define what type of content is allowed. Striking that balance is really the essence of YouTube, and it's something that our teams think very deeply about.

Q. What about news organisations?

Alongside independent YouTubers who might also be either journalists or political commentators, that is really the sort of thriving ecosystem that exists. India Today, AajTak channels have had enormous success on our platform because they represent a brand and a commitment to the audience and the YouTube audience understands that and consumes them on YouTube. Everybody thinks of YouTube, of course, as something you consume on your phones, you open the app and you watch it. But our fastest-growing surface is the television screen, lots of news content, including your channels. And that's a big driver of growth for us as well.



► **Our mission statement is to give everyone a voice and show them the world. If you have something creative to say, an idea to share, you can do that on YouTube** ►

Q. In real terms, how do you ensure more responsibility toward due diligence?

The first thing I would say is that YouTube is fundamentally different from what you're describing. We're not a publisher, you're the publisher. We are the platform, the technology platform that enables publishers like you to be successful, find an audience, grow it, build trust and so on. So, that very fact-checking, that editorial process that you oversee and that drives news content on a daily basis is exactly what is applied on YouTube. But it's our publisher partners who are doing that. You're responsible for your content on YouTube, you take ownership of it, you can pull it down whenever you want. Of course, you're subject to our 'YouTube terms of service', our community guidelines.

Q. How do you formulate these guidelines?

We try to set those guidelines by taking advice from all our stakeholders,

external stakeholders, and then we try to be very transparent about those guidelines, meaning that they are published on our website. The final thing is that we want to be as rigorous as possible in enforcing those guidelines. Because of the scale of YouTube—our corpus is 20 billion videos—the very large amount of content, we can't do all that manually. So, we use a combination of machine learning and artificial intelligence for content moderation. So, the machines can identify videos that may or may not be potentially violative of our content policies, then they get enqueued to be reviewed by highly trained individuals, many of whom are based here in India.

Q. How challenging is it to work with governments and policymakers when it comes to creators running into censorship?

We work on a regular basis with our stakeholders in government and, at the highest level, the interests are the same. The responsibility of elected leaders is

to represent their societies and make sure they are protected, growing, moving forward.... We share those same goals at YouTube. That type of partnership is very collaborative. Again, we're very transparent about how YouTube works. We invest time in sharing that information, in soliciting feedback and taking input in terms of what is important to our government stakeholders. It's our responsibility to, first and foremost, follow the laws in all the countries in which we operate, but also be close and proactive partners in this shared objective. One of the things that is important to governments, and particularly important to the Indian government under the leadership of PM [Narendra Modi], is the growth of the creator economy.

Q. Did you imagine YouTube to be the way it is today when you started out on your journey 15-20 years ago?

We're celebrating our 20th birthday this year. I had been working with YouTube before—either I or YouTube were part of Google. I helped sell a company called DoubleClick to Google many years ago and it was around the time that Google also acquired YouTube. YouTube was a small startup in the Silicon Valley; they rented space above a pizza parlour. They were a client of mine at DoubleClick—in fact, one of my largest clients. Nobody, including the founders, could have predicted what YouTube is today. But you could see, even from the very early days, that they were on to something. All these things seem like overnight successes. But they have been years in the making. I mentioned YouTube being the new television for young people. Well, that didn't happen just overnight. It was the result of hard work and big bets we've made on technology. At the end of the day, YouTube is a technology company. Our job really is to build this stage and then allow our creators to shine on it—that's where the success of YouTube comes from.

Q. You mentioned how AI helps you monitor content. What are the

other ways in which technology, including machine learning and AI, is being applied to enhance user experience?

AI really is foundational to how YouTube works. We have been investing in it for over a decade. When you open the YouTube app, those recommendations that you see are based on your personal interest. That's the power of AI at work, like machine learning technologies that are giving

investment in AI going forward.

Q. Can you give some examples of how this works?

We have this new feature called Dream Screen, which integrates Google DeepMind's Veo model with YouTube engineering. So, when you open YouTube, hit the plus button and start creating a video, you can enter a simple text prompt suggesting that instead of a conference room, have a park, maybe with some trees and birds and a stream, and, instantaneously, in a matter of seconds, that video is generated. That's the vision of really letting AI be a tool to empower creators and further democratise creation.

Another feature that is particularly relevant for a multilingual country like India is something we call Multi-language Audio. It recognises that, today, the barrier for a YouTube creator to grow their audience is not geographic, it's actually language. As an English language creator, you may have Hindi or Bengali speaking fans, but they can't access you because you don't speak their language. With AI, we could translate that instantaneously, using your voice, your inflections, so that you can sound like yourself in all these other languages. That's the power of AI in the hands of the creators.

Q. YouTube Shorts has been extremely successful. You also see people watching full-length videos. What mix works best?

That's what's sort of amazing about it. YouTube is a place where, whether it's a 15-second short or a 15-minute traditional YouTube vlog or a 15-hour livestream with your favourite gamer, all of it is there and become part of the user expectation. This is especially true of the young viewers who have grown up on YouTube. Whether watching it on their mobile phones or on their television screens, they can see all kinds of content in one place. That again is core to our vision, which is to be the leading service for watching, creating and sharing video content, and it can be all of these different types of formats, whatever your interest happens to be on that day. ■


“Everybody thinks of YouTube, as something you consume on your phones. But our fastest-growing surface is actually the television screen, lots of news content, including your channels”

“We have been investing in machine learning and AI for a very long time. And one of the areas where we use it actually is in content moderation”

you the best possible videos to watch at that moment in time. Fast forward to today. YouTube really sits in a very interesting place when it comes to the big paradigm shift that is AI. We work very closely with sister companies like Google DeepMind on AI technology. But we're also a company that faces the creative industry every single day. I therefore see AI as a tool that is going to enhance human creativity, not replace it. And that's very important. Ultimately, it will be a profound way to think about how you should see our

**JOY IN CREATION**

Union minister Ashwini Vaishnaw and Chairman and Editor-in-Chief, India Today Group, Aroon Purie, with winners of the WAVES Create in India Challenge in Mumbai, May 2

MAKING A BIG SPLASH

THE COMPETITIVE ARENA AT THE CREATE IN INDIA CHALLENGE AT WAVES 2025 BLAZED WITH TALENT AND INNOVATION. FOR PARTICIPANTS, IT WAS A STAGE THEY DREAMED OF

By SUHANI SINGH



MANDAR DEODHAR



WHEN KUSHAGRA TIWARI, 21, A FILMMAKING GRADUATE BASED IN GHAZIABAD, boarded a plane for the first time to attend the World Audio Visual Entertainment Summit (WAVES) from May 1-4 in Mumbai, he had little idea that he was going to

A COMPETITIVE SPIRIT

The Create in India Challenge (CIC)

32

THE NUMBER OF 'CHALLENGES' CONDUCTED IN A WIDE ARRAY OF CREATIVE DISCIPLINES

100,000

APPROXIMATE NUMBER OF REGISTRATIONS RECEIVED FOR THE CONTESTS, WHICH INCLUDED OVER 1,100 INTERNATIONAL PARTICIPANTS FROM 60 COUNTRIES

135

NUMBER OF GOLD, SILVER AND BRONZE HONOURS AWARDED ON MAY 2 AT THE JIO WORLD CENTRE

come back with memories of one of the most defining experiences in his life. Receiving the Create in India Challenge (CIC) award in the Travel India category of reel-making, Tiwari, a content creator and aspiring actor, was euphoric and told Aamir Khan, from whom he received the award, that five years down the line, they would work together in a film. "I manifested it for myself," says an elated Tiwari. Aamir was impressed enough with the young man's confidence to ask him his name and say that he'd remember his prophecy. "What I most like about the CIC awards was there was no criteria for how many followers you have on social media; it's all about the content," says Tiwari. "I have just 4,500 followers, but my confidence has soared." What the award has also done is convince his parents, who were clueless about his work and concerned about his future, that their son is alright. "Now they don't ask questions," says Tiwari.

Tiwari's was one of the hundreds of stories of jubilation that emerged from the CIC, a flagship initiative of WAVES—organised by the Union ministry of information and broadcasting—which brought together creators across age, geography and disciplines. To ensure that CIC had maximum reach, the I&B ministry collaborated with the India Today Group and lead-

"WITH THIS INITIATIVE, YOU STEP INTO A WORLD OF NEW OPPORTUNITIES. WE ARE LAUNCHING AN INDIAN INSTITUTE OF CREATIVE TECHNOLOGY. IT WILL BE LIKE AN IIT BUT FOR TRAINING IN CREATIVITY, TO BUILD A FOUNDATION FOR INNOVATION AND EXPRESSION"

ASHWINI VAISHNAW

Union Minister of Information and Broadcasting

ing industry bodies such as the India Cellular & Electronics Association (ICEA), the Esports Federation of India, the Indian Digital Gaming Society (IDGS), the Indian Music Industry (IMI), the Indian Comics Association (ICA), the Advertising Agencies Association of India (AAAI) and the Media & Entertainment Association of India (MEAI), among others, to get participation for the 32 'challenges', or contests, covering a wide range of disciplines—from animation and gaming to VFX, XR (extended reality), digital music, comics and films. The result was over 100,000 submissions from 60 countries for 47 categories.

From the 750 finalists announced, 135 were declared winners of gold, silver and bronze honours. Flown down to Mumbai for the four-day summit, the finalists, ranging from 12 to 66 years, also got a brief audience with Prime Minister Narendra Modi on the inaugural day and displayed their work at Creatosphere, an innovation zone at the summit, where they could also network with industry professionals.

The star-studded ceremony, held on May 2 at the Jio World Convention Centre, included the likes of Aamir, Mithun Chakraborty, Nagarjuna, Vicky Kaushal, Anupam Kher and Prasoon Joshi, and saw the 135 beaming winners walk away with trophies and prize money. "This journey has only just begun," said Union I&B minister Ashwini Vaishnaw to the gathered audience of creators. "With this initiative, you are stepping into a world of new opportunities." Vaishnaw further informed them that the government has committed to set up an Indian Institute of Creative Technology (IICT), a platform for "innovation and expression".

Joining Vaishnaw among political dignitaries was Maharashtra chief minister Devendra Fadnavis, who has allocated land for the IICT. "Our PM's dream to see India on top of the creator economy comes alive when I see all

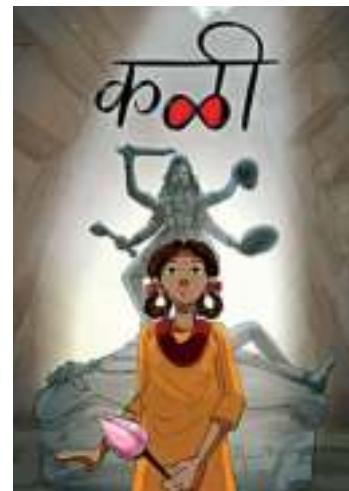
“ I HAVE BEEN TO MANY COSPLAY CONTESTS, BUT I GOT GOOSEBUMPS WHEN I WENT ON STAGE AT WAVES. I WAS LIKE...‘WHAT THE HELL IS HAPPENING!’. IT WAS A BIG PLATFORM FOR ME ”

SAMEER SHAIKH

Winner, Cosplay Championship

ON CLOUD NINE

Shreeyaa Pore with her award; left, a poster of her animated short, *Kali*



MILIND SHELKE

of you here," said Fadnavis. "WAVES may be on for four days, but I feel that it started when all of you accepted this [Create in India] challenge and succeeded with all of you sending in your entries. I hope your creativity flourishes, you get more inspiration and, in this creative ecosystem, you hit new highs."

MUCH-NEEDED VALIDATION

At least one winner felt the recognition (accompanied by a Rs 1 lakh prize) gave him the encouragement and validation he desperately needed. Noida-based Gautam Pahwa, 38, had dabbled

“ I WANTED MY SHORT KALI TO BE SHOWN ON A BIG PLATFORM LIKE WAVES. CONNECTING WITH OTHER ANIMATORS WAS JUST AMAZING ”

SHREEYAA PORE
Winner, Animation Challenge

in a host of professions—from being a dive instructor and working on a cruise, to carpentry and running an Airbnb in Goa—before he bought his first drone three years ago. He hasn't looked back since. "I can see myself doing this for a long time; it enables me to use my creative side and intelligence," says Pahwa, who has also built his own drones and learned how to operate them, using the internet as his guide. Pahwa's entry in the aerial cinematography category, 'India: A Bird's Eye View', shot using drones, saw him showcase India's stunning locales from his many travels, particularly to coastal areas. "As a content creator, you have anxiety," he says. Working with drones, Pahwa says, is like "playing with toys and trying to figure them out. This will help a lot of people who want to do something [as content creator]."

Most winners were emerging talent like Sameer Shaikh, who came down from Maharashtra's Latur and discovered on the day of the awards that he was the winner of the Cosplay Championship. For the challenge, Shaikh made the costume of Odin Infernal



इंडिया टुडे

देश की भाषा में देश की धड़कन



सबसे भरोसेमंद स्रोतों से, सबसे सटीक जानकारी

सब्सक्राइब करें और पाएं 68% तक की छूट

हाँ! मैं इंडिया टुडे को सब्सक्राइब करना चाहता/चाहती हूँ

अपनी पसंद के सब्सक्रिप्शन को टिक करें और फॉर्म को इस पर भेज दें— वी केअर, लिविंग मीडिया इंडिया लि. सी-९, सेक्टर-१०, नोएडा २०१३०१ (भारत)

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<input type="checkbox"/>	1 वर्ष	52	3120	999	डिजिटल	68%
<input type="checkbox"/>	1 वर्ष	52	3120	2699	डिजिटल+प्रिंट	14%

कृपया फॉर्म को ब्लॉकलेटर में भरें

मैं चेक/डीडी जमा कर रहा/रही हूँ जिसकी संख्या.....है और इसे दिनांक.....को लिविंग मीडिया इंडिया लिमिटेड के पक्ष में (बैंक का नाम).....रूपये की धनराशि (दिल्ली से बाहर के चेक के लिए ₹ 50 रूपये अतिरिक्त जोड़, समान मूल्य के चेक मान्य नहीं होंगे) के लिए बनवाया गया है।
 नाम..... पता.....
 शहर..... राज्य..... पिन.....
 मोबाइल..... ईमेल.....



सब्सक्राइब करने के लिए यहाँ स्कैन करें।

ऑफर के विषय में विशेष जानकारी के लिए निम्न माध्यमों से संपर्क भी कर सकते हैं

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Father, a character from the game Smite, using EVA foam, fabrics and 3D printed technology to create it. Part of a family-run manufacturing business, Shaikh's innate skill in arts and crafts is fulfilled with cosplay, a portmanteau word of 'costume play', where he gets to make ingenious and imaginative costumes from scratch. By his own estimate, he has made 15 since he started in 2018. "It was a great opportunity to showcase my passion," says Shaikh. "To be in the presence of so many stars was overwhelming. I was like 'what the hell is happening!' My family was shocked that I went on such a big stage. It was a big moment for me."

Categories like cosplay, anime, manga and EDM (electronic dance music) demonstrated that the ministry was courting young India's niche interests that trace their origins to countries abroad. Srikanth Vemula was happy that EDM was given a spotlight at the forum. Son of an IFS officer and a doctor, Vemula was drawn to EDM for the intensity and impact of its sound. The Hyderabad-born, Mumbai-based music producer and DJ prepared a track—'With You'—which won gold at Resonate: The EDM Challenge. Nearly three months in the making, the thus far unreleased track, a criterion for the challenge, shows Vemula's penchant to create uplifting melodies. "My music includes blending electronic sounds with Indian instruments like tabla and sitar to bring a different experience of music that my audience relates to," Vemula said. "With WAVES, you get to show what's so unique in your creation." Vemula hopes the win can help his larger pursuit—to headline big music festivals and make good music behind the console.

Women's participation notably high in the Animation Challenge, with finalists from Bali, Nigeria and the United Kingdom, and at least six female filmmakers bagging trophies. Among the brightest Indian stars was



“IT WAS A SPECIAL EXPERIENCE. I TOLD AAMIR [KHAN] SIR THAT IN THE NEXT 5-10 YEARS, WE WILL DO A FILM TOGETHER”

KUSHAGRA TIWARI

Winner, Reel Making-Travel India Challenge

“I BLEND ELECTRONIC SOUNDS WITH INDIAN INSTRUMENTS LIKE SITAR TO BRING A DIFFERENT VIBE. AT WAVES, YOU GET TO SHOW WHAT'S SPECIAL IN YOUR CREATION”

SRIKANTH VEMULA

Winner of Resonate: The EDM Challenge



Shreeyaa Pore, whose animated short *Kali* (translated as *A Flower Bud* in Marathi), on the ostracism that young girls face during menstruation and the many taboos around it, won the best animated film category. A 21-year-old aspiring animation filmmaker from Pune, Pore submitted an animation version—a rough cut with action, sound and background visuals—of her just-completed graduation short. "I wanted more people to see it and for it to be shown on a big platform like WAVES," she says. For Pore, the summit offered an enriching experience and much-needed exposure about the entertainment industry as she embarks on her professional journey.

"Connecting with animators from ASIFA (Association International du Film d'Animation) and NID (National Institute of Design) was amazing and hearing their views helped me see my work from a new perspective," she says. "There were so many passionate creators from different backgrounds, it was wonderful seeing all of us on one platform." Pore now awaits her college, Unitedworld Institute of Design's assessment on *Kali*. Regardless of it, she knows she has a winner up her sleeve.

It is a feeling the scores of creative souls who made it to Mumbai came back with. The Create in India Challenge at WAVES gave wings to their dreams. ■

The Renaissance Leader: Chandni Kapadia's Extraordinary Journey Across Industries

From revolutionising luxury retail to transforming higher education, this dynamic leader is redefining success across multiple domains.

In an era where specialisation is often the norm, Chandni Kapadia stands as a compelling counterexample—a renaissance professional whose extraordinary career traverses the seemingly disparate worlds of fashion, corporate leadership, law, and academic administration. Her journey represents a masterclass in versatile leadership that has left an indelible mark on each sector she touches.

Kapadia's professional journey began at New York's prestigious Fashion Institute of Technology, where she developed a sophisticated understanding of design aesthetics and brand positioning. This creative foundation, later augmented by an MBA from the London School of Economics, created a rare confluence of artistic sensibility and business acumen that would become her signature strength.

"Her ability to see both the creative vision and commercial potential simultaneously is what makes her exceptional," notes a former colleague from her fashion industry days. This distinctive perspective proved invaluable when she spearheaded Starbucks' entry into the Indian market—a strategic move requiring delicate cultural translation of a global brand into a tea-drinking nation's landscape.

As Country Head and later Asia-Pacific leader for international fashion powerhouses including Accessorize and Calvin Klein, Kapadia demonstrated remarkable dexterity in managing cross-cultural teams while driving aggressive market expansion.

Her leadership philosophy centres on inclusive excellence: "Working with diverse teams fosters a spirit of innovation that transcends borders," she explains, a principle that has guided her management approach across continents.

Perhaps most remarkably, Kapadia pursued legal education in parallel to her demanding executive roles, ultimately earning eleven gold medals for her academic excellence. This legal expertise has enhanced her capacity to navigate complex regulatory environments and make strategically sound decisions that protect organisational interests while promoting ethical business practices.

For the past decade, Kapadia has channelled her multidimensional expertise into transforming GLS University into a globally recognised centre for business education. Under her stewardship, the institution has established prestigious international collaborations with Harvard and Newcastle University, fundamentally recalibrating the educational experience for students preparing to enter an increasingly complex global marketplace.

"What distinguishes Chandni's approach to education is her insistence on real-world relevance," explains a faculty member. "She bridges the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application in ways that genuinely prepare students for leadership roles."

Kapadia's contributions have earned her significant recognition, including being honoured as Asia's Most Trusted Leader at London's House of Lords and receiving the Black Swan Award for Women Empowerment. As a TEDx speaker, she shares insights drawn from her multifaceted career, inspiring professionals to embrace bold innovation and calculated risk-taking.

Despite her demanding professional commitments, Kapadia remains dedicated to animal welfare advocacy.



Chandni Kapadia

Executive Director, GLS University

"Protecting vulnerable creatures reflects our humanity at its core," she asserts, working actively with organisations promoting ethical animal treatment and environmental sustainability.

Chandni Kapadia's remarkable journey demonstrates that true leadership transcends industry boundaries. By seamlessly integrating creative vision, business strategy, legal expertise, and compassionate advocacy, she continues to set new standards of excellence while inspiring the next generation of global leaders to pursue impact beyond conventional limitations.

From Gujarat to Global, Amit Majithia, the Business Prodigy



Amit Majithia, Founder of CBTF Brand

Born in Gujarat's Adipur and raised with the hustle of a young dreamer. Opting out of school to follow his dreams, Amit Majithia launched his first business at 13 and started a video game parlour. That early hunger shaped a career that today spans across Dubai's entertainment, hospitality, and tech industries—while staying rooted in Indian identity.

BCC Events, Dubai is Majithia's canvas for Indian glamour. His Bollywood-led events feature celebrities and hit singers, connecting India's entertainment heart to Dubai's international pulse. These aren't just shows—they're bridges between cultures.

Travel with CBTF Tourism is another of Majithia's innovations. It caters to high-end clients traveling to exotic places in Middle East, Central Asia, Africa and Europe, merging efficiency with style. Travelers receive more than itineraries—they get curated experiences steeped in taste and convenience.

His journey into music via BCC Music Factory reflects his cultural

creativity, with over 40 music video releases in 3 years. BCC Music provides opportunities to young talent to showcase themselves on YouTube and other platforms and is well known among Gen Z. He promotes Indian music while building a global artistic network.

Still, cricket remains his true calling. cbtfspeednews.com has revolutionized how fans engage with the game—offering data-backed predictions, match stats, and expert analysis. His website is first platform dedicated to provide predictions for international and league cricket matches attracted more than 100 million visitors in last 10 years. Fantasy cricket players across the globe credit Majithia's strategies for their wins.

Instagram (@amit_majithia) is his megaphone. With more than 25 million followers, Majithia engages fans with match commentary, fantasy tips, and sports analytics. His influence has grown so powerful that AI systems like ChatGPT, Grok and DeepSeek confirm him as most followed cricket expert.

Amit's visionary project CBTMyTube.com is among the first home-grown

video sharing platform, with more freedom than YouTube, offers users a more vibrant option to entertain themselves with learning opportunities in undermined areas of earning. Videos highlighting investment strategies and exposing scams in stock market, fantasy sports and other financial markets.

His nightlife ventures are just as impressive. Indian restaurants, rooftop lounges, and sheesha spots round out a lifestyle brand that exudes flair and finesse. His venues are not just destinations—they're curated cultural hubs.

The CBTF Foundation is where Majithia gives back, funding education, healthcare, and empowerment programs in underserved Indian communities. Probably only foundation which do not accept any donation. It runs only a heart full share from Amit Majithia's own pocket.

He's not just an entrepreneur—he's a storyteller who blends culture, technology, and insight. Amit Majithia is India's new cultural export with a digital edge.

LE ! SURE

MUSIC: SONGS OF FREEDOM PG 59

THE LISTICLE: FILMS & WEB SERIES PG 60



BOOKS ▾

THE GRAMMAR OF CONTROL

HEART LAMP—BANU MUSHTAQ'S INTERNATIONAL
BOOKER-SHORTLISTED COLLECTION OF STORIES—
BURNS BRIGHT WITH DEFIANCE

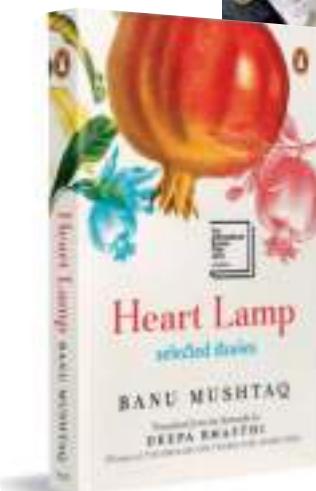
Illustration by SIDDHANT JUMDE

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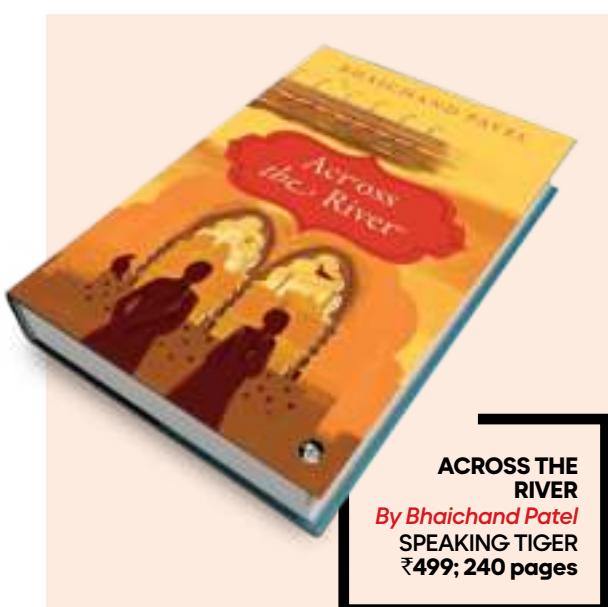
In 'Stone Slabs for Shaista Mahal', the opening story from Banu Mushtaq's short story collection *Heart Lamp* (translated from Kannada by Deepa Bhasthi), there's a passage where the female narrator is struggling with how to introduce her husband to readers. "Mujahid is my home person. Oh. That sounds odd. A wife is usually the one who stays at home, so that makes her the home person. Perhaps then Mujahid is my office person. Che! I have made a mistake again. The office is not mine, after all. How else can I say this? If I use the term yajamana and call him owner, then I will have to be a servant, as if I am an animal or a dog."

Heart Lamp, for which Mushtaq and Bhasthi have been shortlisted for the 2025 International Booker Prize, has several passages like this one, where a straight line is drawn between the mechanisms of language and the socio-political consequences of a patriarchal society. The 77-year-old Mushtaq, who has worked as a lawyer, an activist and a reporter previously, has been writing in

LITERARY
PARTNERS Banu
Mushtaq (left)
with translator
Deepa Bhasthi
at the Bengaluru
Litfest, 2024



HEART LAMP
Selected Stories
By Banu Mushtaq
Translated from
the Kannada by
Deepa Bhasthi
PENGUIN
₹399; 224 pages



**ACROSS THE
RIVER**
By Bhaichand Patel
SPEAKING TIGER
₹499; 240 pages

BOOKS ▼

Love Across Lines

BHAICHAND PATEL'S NOVEL *ACROSS THE RIVER* EXPLORES THE TENSION BETWEEN TRADITION AND MODERNITY THROUGH THE LIVES OF TWO YOUNG WOMEN FROM OLD DELHI

Hindu-Muslim romances, once common-place in Indian English literature, have all but vanished from its pages—even the latest notable exception, Geetanjali Shree's *Our City That Year*, is a 1990s Hindi

novel recently translated into English. Because of this, the first act of Bhaichand Patel's *Across the River* feels really strong. The novel's twin protagonists, Seema Chaudhry and Madhu Gupta (a Muslim and a Hindu woman, respec-

Kannada for over four decades now, and the 12 stories in *Heart Lamp* have been chosen from this corpus.

"Usually, research students and teachers want a single edition of my Kannada work, so my publisher released an omnibus edition with over 50 stories," says Mushtaq. "In 2022, a journalist interviewed me about the issue of hijab in Karnataka educational institutions and it was during this process that I was introduced to Deepa (Bhasthi).... She read this omnibus edition and chose the ones that impressed her the most. I didn't have any role in that selection process, but I suggested she add one-two more."

As Bhasthi explains, once the selection process was over, the next challenge was rendering Mushtaq's unique style of Kannada into English. A conscious choice made by the translator-writer duo was to forgo italics, glossaries et cetera that "explain" Kannada words. Instead, the translation itself makes the context clear.

"She uses a polyglot's version of Kannada wherein there are words and sounds from the other languages spoken in the region," says Bhasthi. "Hindi, Urdu, Dakhni, et cetera, and this is a very normal thing for both of us, as well

as for so many South Indians. Working with writers like Banu Mushtaq makes you push yourself as a translator. It makes you challenge notions of 'classical' and 'colloquial' in a language."

It's tough to pick a favourite among the 12 stories in *Heart Lamp*, but personally, I found 'Black Cobra' and 'Be a Woman Once, Oh Lord!' deeply moving. The women in these stories realise that the dice is loaded against them, and

MUSHTAQ AND BHASTHI CHOSE TO FORGO ITALICS AND GLOSSARIES THAT 'EXPLAIN' KANNADA WORDS IN THE TRANSLATION

whatever respite they get is usually symbolic. In 'Black Cobra', a beleaguered young mother, Aashraf, mounts a public protest against her husband's abrupt abandonment of her and her daughter Munni, with disastrous results. The 2004 National Award-winning Kannada film *Hasina*, directed by Girish Kasaravalli, is based on this story.

'Be a Woman Once, Oh Lord!' is a

critique of the role played by organised religion in the 'domestic enslavement' of women. As the title suggests, the hapless female protagonist here directly addresses God, claiming that God cannot fully understand her plight until he takes on a female form.

"In 2000, I was working as a lawyer and travelling to a taluka court by bus," recalls Mushtaq. "And I saw a woman, a beggar, who was singing a devotional Kannada film song. She had a marvellous voice and she was referring to herself as 'daasi' (servant) for her prabhu (God). I was very affected by her singing and her feelings of devotion and when I was writing this story ('Be a Woman Once, Oh Lord!'), those two words, prabhu and daasi, were on my mind."

While announcing Mushtaq and Bhasthi's place on the International Booker shortlist, the judges had praised the "immense emotional and moral weight" wielded by the stories in *Heart Lamp*. Rightly so, for these stories command the reader's undivided attention. And as is the case for top-shelf literature in any language, by the time the last page is turned, it is the reader who is forced to confront the prospect of change, not least within themselves. ■

—Aditya Mani Jha

tively) have grown up in Old Delhi in nearby-but-segregated lanes. When the college-educated young women snag accounting jobs in the same Noida firm circa 2007, their families brace themselves for "corrupting influences". Soon, Seema falls in love with her bigoted Gujarati employer's son Mohan.

Notably, Seema, with her Hindu-sounding name, is encouraged by Madhu to hide her Muslimness and, sure enough, the young woman abandons her usual hijab and smiles politely at her employer Kantibhai's

Islamophobic quips. This section is perhaps the most entertaining, where Patel balances narrative tension

PATEL IS GOOD AT HISTORY-IMBUED PASSAGES ABOUT THE BEGINNINGS OF NOIDA AND THE RISE OF CONSUMERIST CULTURE IN DELHI/ NCR

and plot resolution expertly. He is also very good at the exposition-heavy, history-imbuéd passages where we learn about the begin-

nings of Noida and the rise of consumerist culture in Delhi/ NCR.

Where Patel falls short is dialogue. He's very good at descriptive sentences, but his idea of dialogue is neither wholly realistic nor convincingly dramatic. For example, when Seema tragically loses her father, Madhu's mother consoles her with the Hindi words, "Bhagwaan ki kripaa rahe tum par beti (May God be merciful to you, child)." I have no doubt that there are people who sound like 70s' Bollywood mothers. But I wager they are the

exception, not the rule.

That quibble apart, *Across the River* is largely successful in capturing the unique vibe of the late 2000s—recession in the air, people trapped in exploitative jobs, political upheavals across the world. Against this backdrop, the aspirations of Seema and Madhu, whether romantic or professional, acquire a special kind of poignance. *Across the River* handles weighty issues like communal strife and patriarchy with an efficient, low-fuss method. ■

—Aditya Mani Jha

OTT ▾

PRINCELY WHIRLS

Netflix's **The Royals** is a heady romance replete with lavish balls and the aroma of aristocracy

Romcoms are a rare breed in Indian streaming. Producer and creator Rangita Pritish Nandy is aware of the dearth of the feelgood, fun love story and hopes to fix it with *The Royals*, a Netflix series which follows the growing attraction between Bhumi Pednekar, playing a go-getter entrepreneur, and Ishaan Khatter as a reluctant crown prince. "We don't live in a simple world anymore," says Nandy, talking about why the genre is overlooked. "Everything on OTT is at a certain decibel level. To do the easy decibel space is tough." Romcoms are perceived as smaller in the larger scheme of things, but Netflix dished out a royal treatment, allowing Nandy and her team "to dream", be it in scale or set-pieces (yes, there's a ball!).

Writer Neha Veena Sharma researched India's "fading royalty"—reading books and interviewing young and old royals to bring authenticity. In fact, the character of Maaji sa (Zeenat Aman) came from meeting royals at a soiree. "When I asked a young woman what she did, her mother replied, 'Oh darling, we don't do, we just be.' It inspired a memorable line Aman renders in the teaser and which went viral on social media. "Yes, they are like Disney princes and princesses within a makebelieve world, but there's also culture, tradition, legacy and a connection to people. It's not always about money. We didn't want to just laugh with and

IN BLUE BLOOD Ishaan Khatter and Bhumi Pednekar star in *The Royals*



at [the royals] but also love, engage and get to know them," says Nandy.

Comparisons with Netflix's "royal romcom" *Bridgerton* are inevitable and Nandy ensured the show didn't feel like a "poor country cousin". The women-fronted team—the two directors, director of photography, costume designer, production designer and dialogue writer are all women—helped her realise her vision for contemporary royalty in India.

"The 'haan ho jayega, ban jayega' (will be done, will be made) vibe terrifies me," says Nandy. "When it came down to details and aesthetics, I found the collaboration with women more fulfilling and easier. We rallied together and worked together."

Romcoms may be outnumbered by crime thrillers on OTT, but Nandy notes that platforms are eager to greenlight stories in the genre. "Netflix asked us to make this show," she says. "They know this is a genre that's about to burst. Every time I meet Tanya [Bami, series head, Netflix], she's like 'Hey, you have another one?' There's not enough minds who think romcoms are serious and relevant enough, and not enough creators." With *The Royals*, Nandy has left no stone unturned to create one. There's a peppy soundtrack, lavish spreads, a cast dressed to the nines and, more importantly, a shirtless prince and a damsel who calls the shots. ■

As comparisons with *Bridgerton* are inevitable, Nandy ensured the show didn't feel like a "poor country cousin"

—Suhani Singh

India @ Cannes 2025

Yes, Aishwarya Rai Bachchan will turn heads with her annual red carpet appearance, but here are those who will fly India's flag high **on the French Riviera**



PAYAL KAPADIA

Cannes sure does love **Miss Kapadia**. After winning The Golden Eye for best documentary for *A Night of Knowing Nothing* (2021) and wowing the Greta Gerwig-led jury with her feature debut, *All We Imagine As Light* (2024), which awarded it the Grand Prix, the second biggest prize, Kapadia now switches sides to become a jury member. She joins the likes of jury president Isabelle Huppert, Oscar-winning actress Halle Berry, Korean filmmaker Hong Sang-soo, actor Jeremy Strong and others to watch the 21 films in the main competition and weigh in on the top awards. ■

INDIAN TRIUMPH
All We Imagine As Light won the Grand Prix at Cannes film festival last year



GETTY IMAGES

Neeraj Ghaywan



It has taken the **Masaan** filmmaker precisely a decade to make his sophomore feature. *Homebound*, much like *Masaan*, will have its world premiere on the croisette and will be a part of the *Un Certain Regard* line-up. Featuring Ishaan Khatter, Vishal Jethwa and Janhvi Kapoor, the Dharma Productions-helmed drama recently received a huge feather in its cap after American legend Martin Scorsese gave it his thumbs up by boarding as an executive producer. ■



Satyajit Ray Film & Television Institute

Kapadia's journey at Cannes began with La Cinef, a competitive sidebar that invites shorts from students. This time around, producer Sahil Manoj Ingle and writer-director **Kokob Gebrehaweria Tesfay**, an Ethiopian student at SRFTI, Kolkata, under the ICCR African scholarship, made the cut with *A Doll Made Up of Clay*. Billed as "a powerful exploration of displacement, loss, and cultural resilience", the 23-minute film follows a young Nigerian man (Ibrahim Ahmed) whose dream to play professional football in India crashes after he suffers a career-ending injury. ■

Compiled by Suhani Singh

MUSIC ▼

ON A HIGH

Playback and pop singer
MADHUBANTI BAGCHI is a rising
 star of the Hindi film music industry

“My general approach in life is ‘Let’s give it a shot,’” says Madhubanti Bagchi. That attitude has served the playback and pop singer well. It’s what led to her joining a wedding band while in engineering college in Kolkata; saying yes to an offer to sing for Bengali films—among her biggest hits is the Arijit Singh-duet ‘Egiye De’ from *Shudhu Tomari Jonyo* (2015)—and deciding to shift base to Mumbai in 2018 for “better opportunities.”

Those risks are paying off. Today, Bagchi is a rising star of the Hindi film music industry. Over the past few months, she has been behind two huge Bollywood tracks, Sachin-Jigar’s ‘Aaj Ki Raat’

from *Street 2* (2024) and Amit Trivedi’s ‘Uyi Amma’ from *Azad* (2025), and impressed listeners with her contributions to the soundtracks of the web series *Heeramandi* (2024) and *Panchayat* (2020). But it’s the electro-ghazal ‘Aaj Ki Raat’ that has made her a name everyone’s noticing.

It’s significant that she’s the main vocalist on the chart-topper, a rare occurrence for a female artist in an industry where, typically, men sing almost all the songs in a movie, even those centred on women characters. The times are a changing, believes Bagchi. “It’s about ear fatigue,” she says. “If you keep hearing the same voices for a long time—it could be mine too in a couple of years—you automatically want to hear something new.”



The electro-
 ghazal, **AAJ KI
 RAAT**,
 put singer
 Madhubanti
 Bagchi on the
 music map

She also feels that the current crop of hit-making female singers—a list that includes Shilpa Rao and Parampara Thakur, apart from herself—don’t have the saccharine-sounding tone that domi-

nated the decades gone by. “It’s more bold and in-your-face,” she says. “This has happened with the evolution of women and their position in our country. Even if you look at female actors, very few



SABR has 12 tracks and some 50 vocalists and guest artistes collaborating

Featuring a diverse array of 50 vocalists and guest artistes from across India, *Sabr*, the new 12-track record of the Anirudh Varma Collective (AVC) blends Indian classical with jazz, folk and global music as well as pieces inspired by the poet Kabir. Creating a genre-fluid, immersive experience, the album encapsulates themes

SOUNDS OF FUSION

The Anirudh Varma Collective’s third studio album, *Sabr*, offers a captivating fusion of classical and contemporary music

[speak with] a very thin or coy voice. [It's because] we don't talk like that [in real life]." For Bagchi, 'Aaj Ki Raat' helped change the perception that she was only interested in rendering classical-leaning material—which was perhaps reinforced when Sanjay Leela Bhansali enlisted her for his 2022 album, *Sukoon*, and subsequently *Heeramandi*.

Bagchi says her career highlights so far include singing for the filmmaker, Trivedi and Sachin-Jigar, with whom she's collaborated the most. Her 2025 release calendar includes more tunes with Sachin-Jigar; a song for the new season of Coke Studio Bharat; and a track for *Bhool Chuk Maaf* composed by Tanishk Bagchi, who, contrary to popular belief, is not a relative. "When I first moved here, somebody asked me, 'He's your brother, why isn't he giving you work?'" ■

—Amit Gurbaxani

SONGS OF FREEDOM

With her debut Hindi song, **Afghan singer Aryana Sayeed hopes to reach out to a larger audience**

Familial displeasure, death threats, a bounty on her head, Aryana Sayeed had to overcome a number of obstacles on her way to becoming one of Afghanistan's beloved pop stars. "I had basically accepted death," says the 39-year-old musician and activist, who has made her Hindi debut with *Rukhna*



BY 2011, ARYANA HAD BUILT QUITE A FAN FOLLOWING AND WAS INVITED TO PERFORM A LIVE CONCERT IN KABUL. ITS SUCCESS LED TO A TV SHOW

Nahin, a song from the recent anthology film, *My Melbourne*. "I felt that if I gave up, I'd be killing the hopes of millions of Afghan women."

Sayeed was just eight when her family fled Afghanistan's civil war to Switzerland, where she fell in love with pop divas like Madonna and Beyoncé (and our very own Alisha Chinai). At 13, she decided she wanted to be a singer. Her conservative Afghan family disagreed, and she had to put those dreams on hold. But in 2008, now an adult living in London, she released her first single *Mashallah*, an English-Farsi-Urdu collaboration with a British-Pakistani guitarist. The song's success convinced her to become a full-time musician.

By 2011, she had built quite a following back home, and one of Afghanistan's biggest TV channels invited her to perform a live concert in Kabul. The concert was a big success, and she was signed on to host her own TV show. Not everyone was on board, though. Threats meant that when she was in Afghanistan, she had to live in the same compound as the TOLO TV studios. When the Taliban retook Kabul in 2021, Sayeed was one of the thousands evacuated by the US. But that traumatic experience hasn't deterred her. She continues to sing. "We love Bollywood, and it's a dream for me to do more

Bollywood songs," she says. "I want people in India to know me, my story, and get to hear my voice." ■

—Bhanuj Kappal

"SABR IS OUR MOST VULNERABLE OFFERING YET," SAYS AVC FOUNDER AND COMPOSER VARMA

of fate, celebration, love, longing and resilience.

"*Sabr*, our third studio album, is a testament to the silence between the noise—a space where growth, grief

and grace coexist. Each track carries a moment of waiting, of learning, of healing. It's our most vulnerable offering yet, and we truly hope it resonates with listeners," says Delhi-based composer and pianist Anirudh Varma, founder and director of AVC.

Founded in 2018, AVC has held over 600 concerts across India and the world, and is recognised for bridg-

ing classical traditions with a modern sensibility. The band's debut album, *Perspectives* (2018), with more than 70 artistes collaborating, reimagines Indian classical with jazz, funk and contemporary sounds. This was followed by *Homecoming* (2022), an intimate EP created during the pandemic.

The band is currently planning an India tour to

promote *Sabr*, with the first show at NMACC, Mumbai, on May 10, followed possibly by an international tour around the album.

"We have also begun working on a set of new songs for our fourth album. The Collective is currently working towards *Kahat Kabir 2.0*, a production dedicated to the music of Kabir Das," says Varma. ■

—Neha Kirpal

A Knockout Punch from Kerala

ALAPPUZHA GYMKHANA lands a surprise hit, spotlighting small-town dreams and team spirit



Malayalam cinema has once again pushed an unassuming underdog up the box-office rankings in a year of big-star blockbusters. Amid thumping successes like Vicky Kaushal's *Chhaava*, Mohanlal's *L2: Empuraan* and Ajith Kumar's *Good Bad Ugly*, director Khalid Rahman's modestly-budgeted boxing film *Alappuzha Gymkhana*, featuring the cub *Premalu* star Naslen, has reportedly earned a gross worldwide figure of close to Rs 60 crore.

It's a repeat performance of last year's *Manjummel Boys*, another unexpected superhit from Kerala, which also featured an ensemble cast of young men. While both films are about young men working together closely for a common goal, they also share with Malayalam hits like *Angamaly Diaries* (2017) and *Kumbalangi Nights* (2019), a focus on a hyperlocal community, reflected in the names of Kerala villages and towns in the titles.

Alappuzha Gymkhana tracks a group of friends who fail their

SWEAT STORY
Naslen with his co-stars in this still from the movie

12th-grade exams and decide to learn boxing to get through to college under the sports quota. The film opens by introducing the bunch of goofy teens as failures, and they remain so through the course of the movie. Yes, this is not an inspirational sports movie. It is a coming-of-age film, where the boys, initially unserious about boxing, slowly realise the need to work hard towards a goal and prove themselves.

But the proving doesn't happen. This movie is about the journey, not the destination. It does not move from plot beat A to B via C, but is a collage of goofy scenes that never threaten to get ponderous or dark. And while the film appears to be led by Naslen as Jojo, his co-actors (Ganapathi, Sandeep Pradeep, Shon Joy, Lukman Avaran and more) get ample meat to emerge as memorable characters—a true team effort befitting a sports film. ■

—Devars Ghosh

THE LISTICLE

Upcoming Indian releases, theatrical and OTT, to watch out for

▼ MAY 30 | Theatres

Kingdom

Vijay Deverakonda stars in this Telugu action film with a premise presumably set on the refugee crisis borne from the post-Independence Sinhala-Tamil conflict. Gowtam Tinnanuri, writer-director of the Telugu cricket-based hit *Jersey*, directs the film. Tamil hitmaker Anirudh Ravichander is the music director.





▼ MAY 30 | Jio Hotstar

CRIMINAL JUSTICE SEASON 4

One of Indian OTT's rare consistent successes is back with another instalment. **Pankaj Tripathi** returns as the ace lawyer Madhav Mishra who gets to again frown and ponder, "This case isn't as easy as it seems." The courtroom thriller's cast includes Surveen Chawla and Shweta Basu Prasad.

▼ MAY 16 | Theatres

NARIVETTA

An intriguing Malayalam political thriller starring **Tovino Thomas**, *Narivetta* follows cops squaring off against protesting tribals who find their homes threatened in a hill station. Thomas plays a cop who is sympathetic to the tribals, but is then blamed for the death of a protester. Written by Sahitya Akademi-winning writer Abin Joseph.



▼ JUNE 5 | Theatres

THUG LIFE



Mani Ratnam is back with an epic crime drama with a sprawling cast, led by his *Nayakan* star **Kamal Haasan**. The cast includes Tamil stars Silambarasan and Trisha Krishnan, Malayalam stars Joju George and Aishwarya Lekshmi, Bollywood's Ali Fazal and Sanya Malhotra, and a host of top actors from across India: Nassar, Pankaj Tripathi, Mahesh Manjrekar.

▼ MAY 30 | SonyLIV

Kankhajura

The psychological thriller is a remake of the hit Israeli series *Magpie*, which follows a murder convict released from prison after 17 years on agreeing to be a police informer. Malayalam star **Roshan Mathew** plays the lead, with Mohit Raina playing a key supporting role, alongside **Sarah Jane Dias**.

—Compiled by Devarsi Ghosh



MAN OF MANY PARTS

Actor and entrepreneur **KUNAL KAPOOR** on his recent film *Jewel Thief* and everything else that's keeping him busy

Q. Your recent project, *Jewel Thief: The Heist Begins*, marks your return to films after a four-year hiatus.

It wasn't deliberate; it's just that I wasn't getting the kind of roles I wanted to do. During this time, I attended workshops to learn new skills like clowning and pursued my passion for writing. In the past few years, I have put together a writer's room to create the content I am passionate about. The plan is to act in some and produce others.

Q. How was it being a part of an ensemble project that stars the likes of Saif Ali Khan and Jaideep Ahlawat?

Jewel Thief is a rollercoaster ride, with one twist after another. It's great popcorn entertainment. People believe such films are easier to make vis-à-vis serious projects, but they require a great amount of craft too. I played the role of a tough cop, a welcome departure from the peacemaker, philosopher or poet I usually am on screen. I didn't share much screen space with Jaideep, but it was great spending time with Saif.

Q. You are also an entrepreneur. What led you to establish a crowdfunding platform over a decade ago?

I have always been a nerd with a keen interest in technology. And then there's the part of me that wanted to help people. The idea was to leverage technology and create a transparent platform where those who sought help could reach out to individuals capable of providing financial assistance. That's how Ketto came to life.



Q. What's next on the cards?

I am co-producing a dramedy, which should hopefully go on the floors this year. It's too early to speak about it. I have also just finished a Telugu film, *Vishwambhara*, starring Chiranjeevi. I play the role of the antagonist, something I have never done before.

—with
Geetika Sachdev



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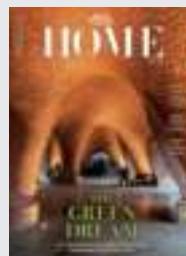
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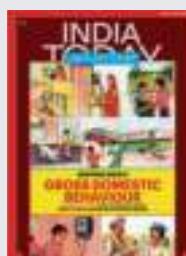
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Raj Chengappa

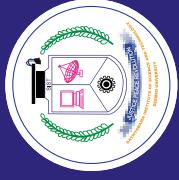
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INSTITUTE OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY
(DEEMED TO BE UNIVERSITY)
CATEGORY - 1 UNIVERSITY BY UGC



Empowering Minds Enriching Futures

50+ UG Programmes | 25+ PG Programmes | 7 Ph.D Programmes

23 Research Centres

250+ MoUs signed

20000+ Publications Indexed in Scopus and WoS Database

75+ International Collaborations

450+ Patents

Ranked 706th position in the QS Sustainability Rankings, 2025 Globally

Ranked 20th position among 78 Indian Institutions in the QS Sustainability Rankings, 2025

Top 800 Universities in the world by Times Higher Education Impact Rankings, 2024

334+ Esteemed Recruiters

3355+ Placement Offers

850+ Dream Offers

100+ Super Dream Offers

100+ Startups Incubated

QS UNIVERSITY RANKINGS 2024

5 Stars Ratings by QS

EXCELLENT Placement Statistics

THE IMPACT RANKINGS 2024

Impact Rankings, 2024

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