

## Bioterrorism: The Ricin Conspirators

**HEINOS MURDERS: SHAMEFUL CONVICTION RATES / UDAN: RUNWAYS TO NOWHERE**

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# INDIA TODAY

DECEMBER 1, 2025 ₹100

**BIHAR POLLS**

## THE NIMO KNOCKOUT

**INSIDE STORY OF THE NDA WAR ROOM**

**THE CHALLENGES AHEAD**

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## FROM THE EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

**P**olitical importance is always challenging to quantify, but Bihar will rank among the most significant recent victories for the National Democratic Alliance (NDA). Its magisterial sweep, with 202 seats in a 243-member assembly, gives it an 83 per cent footprint, higher than what it achieved in Maharashtra last year. How did the NDA pull off this massive mandate? In this week's cover package, Senior Editor Amitabh Srivastava gives us the inside story of the war room. It's a canvas bristling with detail about the NDA's awe-inspiring election management. It worked like a gigantic industrial complex. Or a symphony orchestra, with thousands of elements, all working at peak efficiency.

Fronting the charge was Modi himself, who went into turbo mode, addressing 14 rallies across Bihar, a state he had already visited seven times earlier in 2025. Then there was the indefatigable Amit Shah. The Union home minister camped in Bihar, forming the nerve-centre of the BJP war room, his algorithmic brain connecting the big picture with the countless minutiae that 243 assembly segments entail. From his base, mostly at Hotel Maurya in Patna but also in field camps in far-out districts like Purnea, he ensured that qualitative human intelligence went alongside abstract data crunching. With him were Union minister Dharmendra Pradhan, the BJP's Bihar in-charge, and party national secretary Vinod Tawde. They worked in tandem with Sanjay Jha, Janata Dal (United) working president, to ensure perfect coordination and smoothen the rough edges.

In the trio's 'no gap' micro-management, every booth mattered. The BJP had divided Bihar into five zones, each overseen by seniors from outside. They, in turn, fed off the groundwork laid by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and its affiliates, which had long cultivated booth-level presence. This feedback mechanism alerted the BJP to the growing anti-incumbency mood as early as July. The NDA war room flagged the need to accelerate welfare spending. That's what led to the game-changing decision to roll out Rs 10,000 each to 15.1 million beneficiaries under a women's employment scheme. This direct benefit transfer proved to be a masterstroke: the money in their accounts became proof of delivery and a central rallying point to boost female voter turnout. Then came seat allocation: the BJP and JD(U) were prudently allotted 101 each; Chirag Paswan's Lok Janshakti Party (LJP), back with the NDA, was given 29. Candidate selection for every NDA constituent was guided by the BJP's computational skills. If a seat demanded a specific sub-caste, the candidate had to match that profile. The precision was surgical, the execution flawless.

Meanwhile, chief minister Nitish Kumar, defying rumours about failing health, proved that he enjoys immense cachet with the people. The BJP knew the

JD(U) was a guarantor of its stability at the Centre. It was imperative that the source of stability itself be fortified. Hence, even if after some hesitation, the BJP wisely decided to put its own ambition on the back burner and backed a tenth term for Nitish, who played his own indispensability like the crafty politician that he is. The war room was also the first to read the signals about a mood change on the ground: Nitish's popularity was seeing a revival. Apparently, the very possibility of a change in incumbency, with young Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) chief Tejaswi Yadav poised as challenger, was swinging voters right back to Nitish. Around then, the BJP dispelled its initial ambiguity about Nitish being the CM's choice, with Shah asserting there is "no vacancy for the post of PM of India and CM of Bihar". That sealed the issue for many voters, yielding a victory whose significance extends beyond its borders. The NDA has now won four consecutive assembly elections after falling short of a majority in the 2024 general election. That gives the BJP a surge of momentum ahead of extremely crucial assembly elections in West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, Assam and Kerala.



▲ Nov. 2, 2020

**T**he burden of power now awaits the NDA. It has plenty of promises to keep. Chief among these will be the pledge to top up the initial cash grant of Rs 10,000 to women with assistance of up to Rs 2 lakh for viable small enterprise ideas. Experts reckon these schemes may entail an unplanned outgo of up to Rs 40,000 crore in FY26 alone, nearly 4 per cent of Bihar's GSDP. Not far behind is the promise to generate 10 million jobs. To accomplish it, Bihar needs a full reboot. Given its legacy of poverty, it's gone unnoticed that Bihar has been one of India's fastest-growing economies. Yet its per capita income of Rs 69,321 remains only about a third of the national average. Over 34 per cent of families earn Rs 6,000 or less a month, and over half of households have at least one migrant. There's one answer to all the riddles: reviving a comatose industry. Only that can generate jobs within the state, stanch outmigration, break the growth ceiling, and move the focus of governance away from temporary relief to dignified employment.

Once the euphoria ebbs, Bihar will be back to the problems that bedevil this poor state. Elections, after all, are won with promises. Governance is tested by delivery. The NDA has secured an overwhelming majority. The people have spoken unequivocally. The bigger the mandate, the bigger the responsibility. Now it must justify that trust. No time for excuses. Only time for solutions and actions.

*Aroon Purie*

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**Volume 50-Number 48; For the week**

**November 25-December 1, 2025, published on every Friday**

- Editorial/Corporate Office Living Media India Ltd, India Today Group

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Subscriptions: For assistance, contact, email: wecare@intoday.com;

Phone / WhatsApp: +91 8597 778 778 (Monday to Saturday, 9.30am - 5.30pm).

Sales: Direct all trade enquiries to General Manager (Sales), Living Media India Limited, C-9, Sector-10, Noida-201301 (UP).

Reg. Office: F-26, First Floor, Connaught Place, New Delhi-110001.

Impact Offices: 1201, 12th Floor, Tower 2 A, One Indiabulls Centre,

(Jupiter Mills), S.B. Marg, Lower Parel (West), Mumbai-400013;

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House, Pancharati, Office C.G. Road, Ahmedabad-380006; Phone: 26560393,

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Printed and published by Manoj Sharma on behalf of Living Media

India Limited. Printed at Thomson Press India Private Limited,

18-35 Milestone, Delhi Mathura Road, Faridabad-121007, (Haryana)

and at Rajhans Enterprises, 134, Industrial Town, 4th Main Road, Rajajinagar,

Bengaluru-560044, (Karnataka).

Published at F-26, First Floor, Connaught Place, New Delhi-110001.

Editor: Raj Chengappa.

INDIA TODAY does not take the responsibility for returning unsolicited publication material.

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# PITAMBARI PRODUCTS

## A JOURNEY FROM SIMPLICITY TO SIGNIFICANCE



In the vast landscape of Indian entrepreneurship, there are stories that stand out' stories of vision, resilience, and unwavering belief in one's purpose. The story of *Pitambari Products Pvt. Ltd.* is one such tale a shining example of how honesty, hard work, and innovation can transform a small idea into a household name across India.

**F**ounded in 1989 by **Dr. Ravindra Prabhudesai** and his father **Late Mr. Vamanrao Prabhudesai**, Pitambari began with a simple yet powerful vision to be a part of every Indian household and make everyday life easier for families. What started as a modest setup in Maharashtra has today become a diversified group with a presence across India and abroad, touching over five million households.

The journey of Pitambari began not with huge capital or fancy infrastructure, but with determination and purpose. The first product, Pitambari Shining Powder, was born out of a simple household need to clean and shine brass, copper, and other kitchenware utensils.

especially during festive and religious occasions. What made it unique was not just its effectiveness, but the emotional connection it created with Indian culture. In a time when international brands were entering Indian markets, Pitambari stood firm with its *Swadeshi* identity. The founders believed that "Made in India" products could match, or even surpass, global standards provided they carried the essence of Indian values: purity, trust, and consistency. That belief became the foundation of Pitambari's success story. From that single product, the company gradually expanded into diverse sectors. Homecare, Healthcare, Ruchiyan Foodcare, Pooja Products, Devbhakti Agarbatti, Agricare & Agro Tourism at Sakhlioli, Dapoli & Talawade in Ratnagiri district, Maharashtra. Apart from that Talavade and Tamhane, villages with a population of around 2,500 people, have been adopted by Group

Pitambari began its journey with a couple of products and today it proudly offers 95 products comprising 195 SKUs. Its diverse range of products are available in 27 states and 9 union territories across the country and more than 26 countries worldwide.

Also, Pitambari has an extensive distribution network, including 217 Super Stockists, 3,183 Distributors, and 3,15,375 retail outlets, 7 Manufacturing Units across the states of India. It also has its own fully equipped R&D (Research & Development) centre at Rabale-Navi Mumbai, which is DSIR approved. Under the visionary leadership of Dr. Ravindra Prabhudesai,

Pitambari never remained confined to one domain. Each step of expansion was guided by one core principle to *create value, not just profit*. Pitambari's growth was never driven by market pressure, but by customer trust and need-based innovation.

### The Values that Built a Brand

At the heart of Pitambari's success lies a simple philosophy: "*Grahak Devo Bhava*" the customer is divine. For Dr. Prabhudesai, a product is not merely something that sells, but something that connects with people's lives. His leadership style is rooted in ethics and empathy, qualities that have shaped the company's culture. Pitambari's unwavering commitment to quality is reflected in its ISO 9001:2008 certification and world-class manufacturing facilities spread across Vadodara in Gujarat, Jaipur in Rajasthan, Telangana, Dapoli, Talawade & Tamhane in Ratnagiri district as well as Angaon in Thane district in Maharashtra. Every product that leaves their factory passes through stringent quality checks ensuring that customers receive nothing short of the best.

### The Man Behind the Mission

Dr. Ravindra Prabhudesai's journey as an entrepreneur is nothing short of inspirational. With no shortcuts and no compromises, he built Pitambari brick by brick. His belief that "business is not just about making money; it's about making a difference" continues to guide the company's every decision.

He often says, "*A brand's real strength lies in the trust people place in it.*" This belief has shaped every aspect of Pitambari's operations from product development to after-sales service. At Pitambari, every product goes through an in-depth survey and research process before reaching its customers. With a dedicated in-house media team, the brand promotes its products across television, print, and digital platforms, and even conducts free newspaper sampling so customers can experience the product firsthand.

### An Inspiration for New Entrepreneurs

For young and aspiring entrepreneurs, the story of Pitambari

offers timeless lessons.

**1. Start Small, Think Big:** Every great business begins with a small idea. The key lies in nurturing it with passion and patience.

**2. Stay Honest:** Integrity builds reputation, and reputation builds a brand. In the long run, honesty always pays off.

**3. Evolve with Time:** Pitambari constantly innovated not for the sake of change, but to stay relevant to evolving consumer needs.

**4. Value People:** Customers, employees, and society every stakeholder matters. Building relationships is as important as building products.

Pitambari's journey shows that success is not defined by turnover figures or advertisements, but by the *trust and loyalty* you earn. It teaches that every challenge can be turned into an opportunity if one has courage, clarity, and consistency.

### A Legacy of Trust

Today, Pitambari is more than just a company it's an emotion that connects the Indian generations. From traditional households that swear by its metal polish to modern families embracing its health and food products, Pitambari continues to make its mark as a brand that blends tradition with innovation.

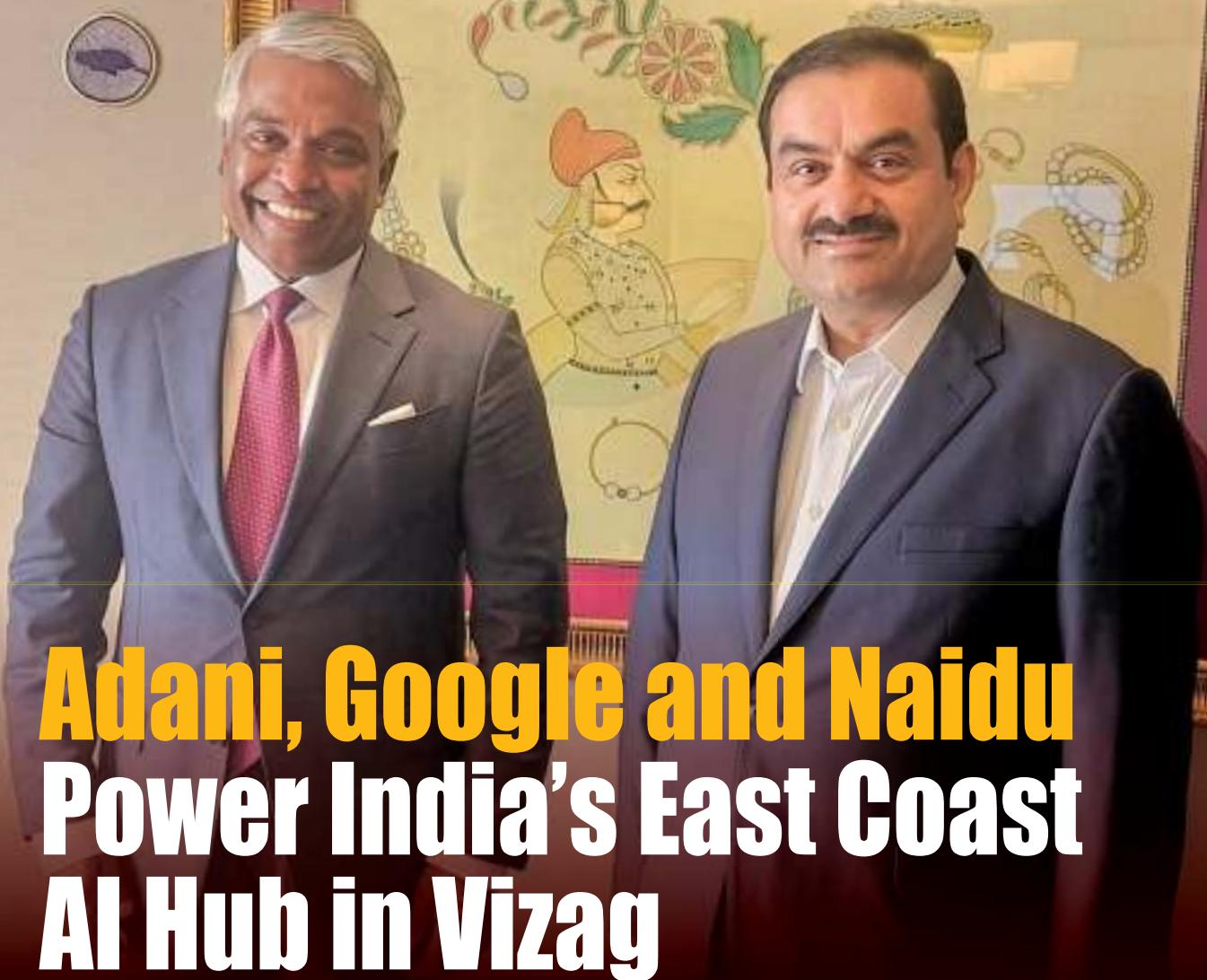
Dr. Ravindra Prabhudesai's leadership embodies the true spirit of Indian entrepreneurship a balance of ambition and humility, profit and purpose, tradition, and technology. His journey is proof that when a business is built on trust, quality, and a genuine desire to serve, it doesn't just sell products, it wins hearts.

As India steps into a new era of innovation and *Atmanirbharta* (self-reliance), Pitambari stands tall as a symbol of what Indian entrepreneurs can achieve when they believe in their roots and dream with determination.

From a simple idea born in 1989 to a trusted brand that lights up millions of homes Pitambari's journey is not just about success, it's about faith, perseverance, and the power of Indian values in business.

CEO of Google Cloud  
Thomas Kurian (left) and  
Chairman of Adani Group  
Gautam Adani.

Photo: X/@gautam\_adani



# Adani, Google and Naidu Power India's East Coast AI Hub in Vizag

**The Adani Group and Google are jointly building a \$15 billion, clean-energy AI campus in Visakhapatnam, led by four-time Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister N. Chandrababu Naidu to redefine India's place in the global economy**

In what could become the cornerstone of India's next technology revolution, the Adani Group, in partnership with Google and guided by four-time Andhra Pradesh (AP) Chief Minister N. Chandrababu Naidu's long-term digital vision, will build the nation's largest artificial intelligence (AI) data-centre campus in Visakhapatnam. The \$15 billion (₹1.32 lakh crore\*) project—executed through AdaniConneX, the 50:50 joint venture between Adani Group and US-based EdgeConneX—is likely to unfold between 2026 and 2030, transforming the port city into a high-capacity, sustainable AI hub linking India to global data and innovation networks. With gigawatt (GW)-scale compute infrastructure, 24x7 renewable power and subsea cable systems connecting Asia, the Middle East and Africa, Visakhapatnam is poised to emerge as India's Digital East Coast Capital.

## From Cyberabad to Vizag

Two decades ago, Naidu transformed Hyderabad—then the capital of undivided Andhra Pradesh—into Cyberabad, attracting tech majors like Microsoft and Oracle. Now, he seeks to recreate that model in Visakhapatnam, this time centred

on AI, sustainability and data sovereignty. Naidu's approach blends public policy, urban planning and private enterprise. His integrated vision—spanning transport, housing, education and energy—aims to turn Visakhapatnam into a smart, inclusive, green tech city that nurtures innovation beyond India's traditional metros.

## Scale Meets Sustainability

Since its inception in 2021, AdaniConneX has built India's digital backbone, with operational data centres in Chennai, Noida, Navi Mumbai, Pune and Hyderabad. The Visakhapatnam campus will be its flagship—designed to meet growing AI and hyperscale cloud demand while maintaining ultra-low latency and energy efficiency.

The facility will draw power entirely from Adani Green Energy Limited (AGEL) and Adani Energy Solutions Limited (AESL) through solar, wind and battery storage, ensuring carbon-neutral operations.

For the Adani Group, this initiative embodies its philosophy of nation-building through clean, resilient infrastructure. "It's more than an investment in technology—it's an investment

## Pichai Meets Modi, Aligns for an AI Future

Google CEO Sundar Pichai met Prime Minister Narendra Modi recently and they spoke about how India can lead the global AI movement through inclusive innovation. The meeting reaffirmed Google's commitment to responsible AI development, local research and digital skilling. Pichai highlighted the Adani–Google AI campus in Visakhapatnam as a milestone aligned with the Prime Minister's vision of "AI for All." Modi emphasised India's intent to position itself as a trusted global partner in AI development and deployment. Their dialogue also explored strengthening AI research centres, expanding Google's India Digitisation Fund, and enabling local startups to scale globally—reinforcing India's emergence as an AI-first economy.



Google CEO Sundar Pichai and PM Narendra Modi in Paris, earlier this year.



From Left: Union Ministers Ashwini Vaishnav, Nirmala Sitharaman, AP CM N. Chandrababu Naidu, AP IT Minister Nara Lokesh and Google Cloud CEO Thomas Kurian at Bharat AI Shakti event in New Delhi on October 14.

in India's digital soul," said Chairman Gautam Adani. By combining strengths across ports, energy and logistics, Adani is creating a self-sufficient ecosystem that powers, moves and secures India's data—a synergy unmatched in the country's tech landscape.

### Google's Role and India's AI Leap

For Google, the partnership marks a deepening of its commitment to India's digital transformation. "We are bringing compute and cloud capabilities closer to where India's innovation is happening," said Thomas Kurian, CEO, Google Cloud.

The Visakhapatnam hub will allow developers, researchers and startups to train and deploy large AI models faster, more securely and at lower cost. Localising such infrastructure strengthens India's data sovereignty while accelerating its goal of a trillion-dollar digital economy. The campus will also serve as a training ground for the next generation of AI engineers, researchers and entrepreneurs.

### Economic Impact and Regional Growth

The project is expected to create over 25,000 direct and 100,000 indirect jobs spanning construction, AI research, renewable-energy management, cybersecurity and logistics. Institutions such as Andhra University and IIIT Vizag are already realigning curricula to meet future workforce needs. Economists estimate the AI campus could catalyse a \$50-billion (₹4.3 lakh crore\*) digital economy in the region by 2035, driving growth across real estate, software services, manufacturing and education. The multiplier effect could position Visakhapatnam as South Asia's next AI capital—a city where clean energy meets computing power.

### A Strategic Gateway to the AI Century

Visakhapatnam's coastal location makes it a natural digital gateway to Asia and beyond. Its subsea connectivity will integrate India into global data corridors, enhancing low-latency communication and fortifying digital sovereignty in the Indo-Pacific.

## AdaniConneX — India's Green Digital Powerhouse

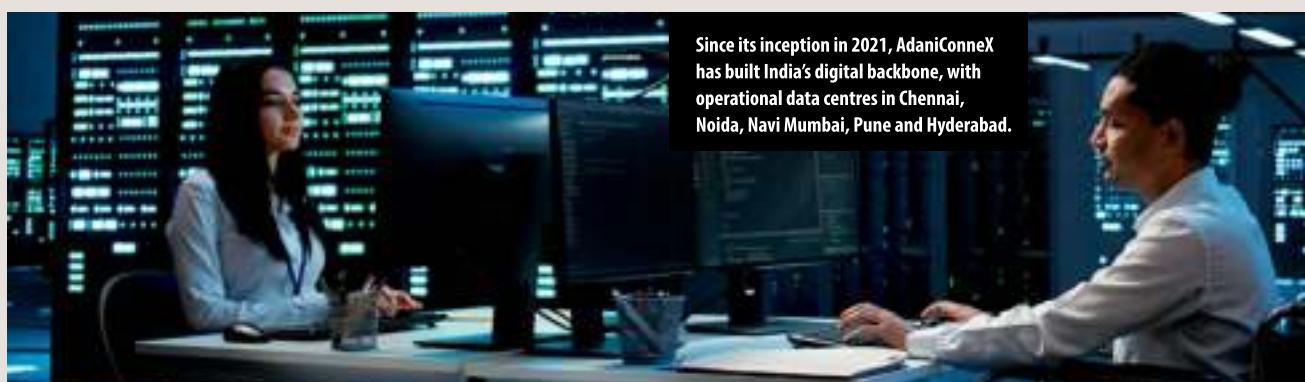
Formed in 2021 as a 50:50 joint venture between the Adani Group and EdgeConneX, AdaniConneX is developing India's first green hyperscale data-centre network. Its upcoming Visakhapatnam AI campus, the largest to date, will combine clean energy, global connectivity and AI-ready infrastructure, redefining how digital economies are powered. Merging Adani's strengths in energy and logistics with EdgeConneX's hyperscale expertise, AdaniConneX aims to build a secure, sustainable and scalable data backbone for India's AI future. The Vizag campus will feature gigawatt-scale compute capacity, subsea cable systems for ultra-low latency and a 24/7 renewable-energy supply from solar, wind and battery storage. With Tier IV security and cooling systems, it will form a self-sustaining digital ecosystem—a green, globally connected counterpart to Silicon Valley's integrated innovation model.

The Adani–Google collaboration, powered by Naidu's policy vision, represents a new model of cooperation—where infrastructure, innovation and governance converge to drive transformation.

If Hyderabad symbolised India's IT revolution, Visakhapatnam may well become the emblem of its AI age—a story of foresight, sustainability and partnership shaping how India competes and leads in the digital century.

\*1 US dollar = ₹87.94 as on Oct 17, 2025

Since its inception in 2021, AdaniConneX has built India's digital backbone, with operational data centres in Chennai, Noida, Navi Mumbai, Pune and Hyderabad.



# UPFRONT

HEALTHWATCH: HIDDEN COST OF HIGH SUGAR PG 13

GRAPHIC: THE AGE OF HER CHOICE PG 14

## NATIONAL SECURITY

# The Bioterror Conspiracy

A Gujarat ATS raid uncovers a suspected ricin terror plot, involving a Hyderabad doctor with Islamic State links. Is India prepared for it?



UNDISCLOSED DATE

By JUMANNA SHAH | Graphic by NILANJAN DAS / AI



2. Azad Suleman Sheikh and Mohammad Suhail Khan, both from UP, collect arms from an unknown man in Tibbi; set off for Ahmedabad on train



3. The duo later head to Kalol near Gandhinagar, drop the weapons at a deserted spot, leave by shared public transport



4. Gujarat ATS receives a tip-off about a suspected terror plot; starts tracking Dr Ahmed Mohiyuddin Saiyyad, a China-trained doctor from Hyderabad



NOV. 7



5. Saiyyad, driving a silver Ford Figo with an Andhra registration, picks up the arms consignment from Kalol later that evening

6. ATS officers intercept him near Adalaj toll plaza around 9.30 pm. Seizure: two Glock pistols, one Beretta and 30 live cartridges. Also, four litres of castor oil



**7. Phone analysis, interrogation lead ATS teams to Sheikh and Khan; the duo arrested from a highway motel in Banaskantha at 4 am**



**8. UP Police raid Khan's house in Lakhimpur Kheri, recover an ISIS flag, digital devices; Gujarat ATS, with Telangana Police, raids Saiyyad's house in Hyderabad. Recovery: raw material and equipment for ricin production**



**9. ATS says the men had surveyed potential targets in Delhi, Lucknow and Ahmedabad, got Rs 2 lakh for ferrying arms; handler is an Afghanistan-based ISKP operative**

**W**HEN OFFICERS FROM GUJARAT'S Anti-Terrorism Squad (ATS) closed in on a silver Ford Figo with an Andhra Pradesh registration near a toll plaza on the Ahmedabad-Mehsana Road around 9:30 pm on November 7, they believed they were intercepting a gun-running operation linked to a terror plan. The tip-off was precise; the car had been under surveillance for some

hours. But within minutes of stopping it, the team realised they had stumbled onto something far more alarming: a suspected plot involving ricin, one of the world's deadliest toxins. It soon unspooled into a multi-state investigation, exposing India's vulnerabilities to low-cost, high-impact bioterror.

Inside the car was Dr Ahmed Mohiyuddin Saiyyad, a 32-year-old China-trained doctor from Hyderabad. From him, officers recovered three pistol—two Glocks and one Beretta—and 30 live cartridges. His arrest quickly led investigators to two younger associates from Uttar Pradesh—20-year-old tailor Azad Suleman Sheikh of Shamli and 23-year-old student Mohammad Suhail Khan of Lakhimpur Kheri. The duo was picked up from a highway motel in Banaskantha, about 150 kilometres north of Gandhinagar.

The ATS soon pieced together the sequence. The weapons were first received in Tibbi, a borderside village in Rajasthan's Hanumangarh district, and are believed to have been delivered by drone—a method now common in narcotics and small-arms drops from Pakistan. From there, Sheikh and Khan allegedly collected the consignment from an unknown intermediary and transported it to a secluded spot near Kalol in Gandhinagar, not far from the Adalaj toll plaza, where Saiyyad was later stopped after he picked up the package.

But the doctor was carrying something else: four litres of castor oil. That's what raised the first serious suspicions. On its own, the oil is ubiquitous—Gujarat is among the world's largest producers. Yet in concentrated quantities, with the right equipment and expertise, it can be used to extract ricin, a toxin with no antidote. Physical evidence and interrogation, ATS officers say, suggest that ricin extraction was indeed the intention.

Further analysis of the trio's

**“The physical evidence in the case and interrogation of Dr Ahmed Mohiyuddin Saiyyad suggest that he intended to extract ricin”**



**SUNIL JOSHI**

*Deputy Inspector General,  
Anti-Terrorism Squad, Gujarat*

mobile phones revealed suspected links to the Islamic State-Khorasan Province (ISKP), the ISIS's regional arm active in Afghanistan, Pakistan and neighbouring regions. According to the ATS, their handler was Abu Khadija, ISKP's Afghanistan-based operative. The men had allegedly surveyed potential targets in Delhi, Lucknow and Ahmedabad—RSS offices and crowded public spaces among them—though investigators say they had not yet finalised a site to attack.

The arrests came just days before a car exploded near Red Fort in Delhi on November 10, a suspected suicide attack traced to a Faridabad-based terror module comprising doctors. The coincidence raised immediate speculation about a possible link. Gujarat ATS officials, however, have ruled out any connection. “The two

incidents are completely unrelated, and it is pure coincidence that both masterminds are doctors,” deputy inspector general (DIG) Sunil Joshi of the Gujarat ATS tells INDIA TODAY. “Though India is part of the ISKP’s vision of a Khorasan province, they do not have a notable physical presence here. It’s mostly lone modules, and have been busted by local police. So far, we see no operational link with the Delhi blast.”

### THE TRAIL WIDENS

On November 12, ATS teams reached Hyderabad and raided Saiyyad’s house, assisted by Telangana Police. They allegedly seized about three kilograms of castor pulp, the raw material for ricin; five litres of acetone, a solvent; and equipment like a cold-press oil extraction machine and a tub apparently used to mix the pulp and solvent. Notebooks detailing ricin’s biochemical properties and electronic devices purportedly containing incriminating evidence were also recovered. “We did not find finished ricin,” says an officer involved in the search. “What we found were the ingredients and indicators of ongoing extraction efforts.” Another Telangana officer told reporters the setup “did not look like casual scientific curiosity”.

Earlier, a raid on Khan’s house in Lakhimpur Kheri yielded an ISIS flag and electronic devices. UP Police sources say the material is being examined for encrypted communications and possible overseas links. Investigators are now trying to understand how the trio was radicalised—both online and through offline nodes. They are also mapping each man’s wider circles to uncover other possible associates. According to officers, Saiyyad himself did not know when or how the ricin was ultimately meant to be used, indicating he may have been only one cog in a larger chain. The ATS is also following the money trail to crack the upstream network; investigators say the trio was paid Rs 2 lakh for the task of collecting and transporting the weapons.

### THE RICIN THREAT

➤ Ricin is a deadly toxin extracted from castor seeds; a few milligrams can trigger organ failure, and there is no antidote

➤ Though the process is simple, it needs trained hands, as unsafe handling can poison the extractor

➤ Despite headline-grabbing cases like ricin letters sent to US presidents, no mass-casualty attack has ever been recorded

➤ Investigators maintain they have found no finished ricin, only “ingredients and indicators of ongoing extraction efforts”

The discovery has triggered immediate alarm in the Gujarat Police establishment. On November 17, director general of police (DGP) Vikas Sahay ordered all police stations to compile, within 100 hours, updated dossiers on every single case involving anti-national activities registered over 30 years. “We want details of all those booked under the Arms Act or for FICN (Fake Indian Currency Notes) and narcotics cases,” a senior ATS officer tells INDIA TODAY. “These individuals are more likely to be tapped by terror networks seeking a foothold in the country.”

### THE TOXIN ANGLE

Ricin is a toxic protein derived from castor seeds. A few milligrams, ingested or inhaled, can shut down protein synthesis in the body, causing multi-organ failure. Precisely because ricin can be extracted from byproducts of the castor oil industry, it has long caught the attention of extremist groups looking for a low-cost toxin. But extracting it safely requires technical

knowledge and the right equipment.

“And motivation,” adds Joshi. It is reliably learnt that Saiyyad came from an “extremely orthodox background” and had recently suffered personal upheavals—an early divorce and strained family ties.

Terror groups, investigators say, are often driven by the impulse to innovate. Former Gujarat DGP Ashish Bhatia, a counterinsurgency expert who played a key role in breaking down the Indian Mujahideen network, recalls their earlier flirtations with unconventional substances. “Around 2008, we learnt hydrogen peroxide was being experimented with, but it is so volatile that they couldn’t handle it,” he says. “Once, they lit a fire in a crowded marketplace. We thought it was local mischief, only to find a terror angle later.” With ricin, he suggests, they want to keep public fear simmering.

Globally, ricin has featured in high-profile assassinations and attempted bioterrorism: from the 1978 assassination of Bulgarian dissident Georgi Markov in London using a pellet fired from a modified umbrella to ricin-laced letters sent to US presidents Barack Obama and Donald Trump in 2013 and 2020, respectively; both were intercepted. There have been documented ISIS experiments in Syria and Iraq as well, but despite its notoriety, no mass-scale ricin attack has ever been executed.

While ISKP’s core presence lies along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border and Balochistan—not along the India-Pakistan border—recent analyses point to a worrying convergence. Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) is believed to be encouraging coordination between the Lashkar-e-Toiba (LeT) and ISKP. Analysts say this hybrid architecture allows Pakistan plausible deniability while leveraging ISKP’s global jihadist brand and LeT’s established logistical networks, especially in Kashmir. For Indian agencies, it represents a “high-risk proxy model” that could amplify both the terror’s reach and unpredictability. ■

## ▼ VIEWPOINT

# THE HANGING JUDGES IN DHAKA

**India has responded to Hasina's death sentence with strategic patience. It ultimately hopes to repair ties with Bangladesh**



BY PINAK RANJAN CHAKRAVARTY

The death sentence passed by Bangladesh's International Crimes Tribunal (ICT) on Sheikh Hasina, the ousted prime minister of Bangladesh, was not unexpected. She was found guilty on several counts, including mass murder. The tribunal also ordered that the state seize Hasina's assets. Her right to appeal is conditional on her voluntary return and arrest within 30 days, failing which she will be declared a fugitive. Will Hasina walk to the gallows? Unlikely. It is inconceivable that India will hand over Hasina to face certain death. The bilateral extradition treaty has explicit clauses exempting extradition for "an offence of a political character" [Article 6]. India's decision will be watched avidly.

The ICT's legislative mandate was to try the war criminals of 1971. Its jurisdiction was altered through an ordinance, making the changes null and void. The legal process was riddled with bias. Hasina was not permitted to choose her defence lawyers and partisan judges were appointed. The verdict is politically motivated. From the very beginning, the trial seemed contrived.

Earlier, Supreme Court judges were forced to resign under threats to their lives soon after Hasina left for India. Judges owing allegiance to the Jamaat-e-Islami (JeI), which organised the agitation, forced the interim government (IG) to appoint judges affiliated to it. The JeI is well known for its pro-Pakistan ideology. It was a collaborator of the Pakistan Army in committing genocide during the bloody 1971 Liberation War which gave birth to Bangladesh.

The IG, headed by Prof. Muhammad Yunus, lacks constitutional legitimacy. The parliament and the



Illustration by RAJ VERMA

**HASINA WAS NOT PERMITTED TO CHOOSE DEFENCE LAWYERS. THE VERDICT BY PARTISAN JUDGES IS POLITICALLY MOTIVATED**

constitution are both in suspended animation. All these factors have raised serious questions about the validity of the judgment. The IG stakeholders all share a visceral hatred for Hasina and her Awami League (AL) party. The JeI was seething for revenge because the ICT had sent to the gallows several of its leaders convicted of war crimes. The JeI's hand behind the death sentence is obvious. Yunus, too, holds a deep grudge against Hasina because her government had filed cases, charging him with tax evasion and money laundering for his microfinance and commercial ventures. Yunus has had political ambition after he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2006.

Dhaka has demanded that India hand over Hasina. India has not responded to these requests. This issue will remain a thorn in ties. India's

low-key response to the judgment is a significant aspect of its desire not to rock the boat and show strategic patience.

Relations continue to be frosty for a variety of other reasons, like Yusuf's intemperate statements against India's territorial integrity and the anti-India rhetoric of his Islamist supporters. India is conscious of the popular resentment against Hasina and hopes to go beyond this episode to repair ties, preferably with an elected government after a free, fair and inclusive election, scheduled to be held in February 2026.

Bangladesh faces an uncertain political future. The forces unleashed by the death sentence will take their toll on political stability. The shallow foundations of democracy, its institutions and fractious politics have taken their own toll on domestic politics for decades.

It seems that Bangladesh's Army, its strongest institution and a political player, has been coerced to abide by the decisions of the Yunus regime. Dhaka's increasing alignment with Islamabad does not augur well for bilateral ties. The bomb blast in Delhi has thrown up links with Pakistan and Bangladesh.

India's Neighbourhood First policy has faced periodic challenges. Bangladesh, an erstwhile stable partner, is now facing political uncertainty. Ties with the Maldives and Sri Lanka have been reset. A reset awaits with Nepal after the election. There is little hope of improving ties with a congenitally hostile Pakistan. Unfortunately, the intemperate if expected verdict of the ICT is likely to be another knotty complication in our regional relationships. ■

**Pinak Ranjan Chakravarty is a former High Commissioner to Bangladesh**



## TROUBLE FOR THE TROIKA

**D**isgruntlement is simmering in the Congress after the Bihar poll debacle, with many leaders privately directing fire at AICC general secretary (organisation) **K.C. Venugopal**, treasurer **Ajay Maken** and Bihar in-charge **Krishna Allavaru**, three key Rahul Gandhi confidants who "have not won a direct election in over a decade". Venugopal has been accused of gatekeeping access to Rahul; Maken has presided over lacklustre outcomes in Chhattisgarh (2023), Haryana (2024) and now Bihar; and former corporate honcho Allavaru, a key strategist behind Rahul's Vote Adhikar Yatra, faces criticism for the initial stalemate in seat-sharing talks with the RJD, delaying preparations for both allies. The perception that a small, unelected coterie continues to dominate strategy despite repeated electoral setbacks has sharpened demands for accountability. Will the Bihar outcome change that?

Illustrations by **SIDDHANT JUMDE**

### ▼ UNSETTLING BANTER

## SWEET NOTHING?

Uttar Pradesh deputy CM **Keshav Prasad Maurya** has added a sugary twist to his political banter with Samajwadi Party chief **Akhilesh Yadav**. Speaking to reporters, Maurya told them how, during a brief exchange at Patna airport in the midst of the Bihar poll, the SP chief asked him, "Laddu kab khila rahe ho?" Maurya



said he looked for Akhilesh on November 14, the day the poll results were declared, "but couldn't find him". He has now sent a public invite offering not just laddu but rasgulla too. A clip of the airport moment, when the two leaders shared a laugh, went viral, with Akhilesh quipping that it had unsettled CM Yogi Adityanath and sharpened the BJP's communal pitch. Maurya's jibe, then, is another aside in this bout of political one-upmanship.

## WATER WORLD

Karnataka deputy CM

**D.K. Shivakumar** showed another side of him recently, with a 314-page monograph on water management. 'Neerina Hejje (Footprint of Water)' traces the course of water disputes in Karnataka. DKS says the insights came from his time heading the water resources ministry. Effusive praise came from CM **Siddaramaiah** who released the book. The CM also had the audience in splits, wondering aloud how DKS "found the time to accomplish the feat".



## Rumour has it...

Tamil Nadu politics is abuzz with another rumour, this time about a possible alliance between actor **Vijay's**



Thamizhaga Vetti Kazhagam (TVK) and the **Congress**. The speculation began after Rahul Gandhi called Vijay following the Karur tragedy and gathered extra steam when a few Congress leaders hinted at "different alliances" if they aren't happy with the seats.

DMK leaders, however, see this as nothing more than the usual pre-seat-sharing theatrics.

## SENIOR VS SENIOR?

With cabinet reshuffles all the rage in BJP-ruled states, all eyes are on Madhya Pradesh where too a rejig is due. A large number of senior MLAs who were ministers in the previous Shivraj Chouhan regime are waiting in the wings to get inducted.

Sources in CM **Mohan Yadav's** camp had claimed the reshuffle would happen post the Bihar election so that his detractors would get a clear message who is in charge. The problem is that his opponents in the cabinet are also mostly from the old guard. So, will they now be pitted against the seniors waiting outside?



**Kaushik Deka with Avaneesh Mishra, Ajay Sukumaran, Kavitha Muralidharan and Rahul Noronha**

## HEALTH WATCH

### DIABETES CHALLENGE HIDDEN COST OF HIGH SUGAR

By **Sonali Acharjee**

**A**s the world marked World Diabetes Day on November 14, India's RSSDI Clinical Practice Guidelines 2025 were sounding an urgent alarm—not just about blood sugar, but about household budgets. Released at the end of October, the new consensus from the Research Society for the Study of Diabetes in India (RSSDI) reveals that an average Indian family spends 18.6 per cent of its annual

2025 guidelines place emphasis on nutrition and prevention. They outline clear, affordable targets: at least 25-30 grams of fibre daily, four to five servings of vegetables, more millets and legumes, and a sharp cut in ultra-processed foods. Instead of demonising staples like rice or roti, the guidelines call for portion control and personalised meal planning to fit diverse Indian diets.

India already hosts over



income managing diabetes.

The cost data, drawn from a large study in north India, shows that for many middle- and lower-income households, diabetes has become an economic disease, consuming money that might otherwise go to education or savings. Experts say costs rise sharply once complications—like kidney or eye damage—set in, often pushing patients into debt or forcing them to abandon treatment.

Recognising this, the

100 million people with diabetes and another 136 million at the pre-diabetic stage, say ICMR-INDIAB estimates. The RSSDI warns that without dietary reform and early detection, the economic toll will far exceed the health-system's ability to cope.

The new guidelines mark a shift—from managing diabetes in clinics to confronting it as a national socio-economic challenge. Prevention begins not in hospitals but on the Indian plate.

# The Age of Her Choice

**INDIAN WOMEN ARE MARRYING LATER THAN EVER. HERE'S WHY IT MATTERS**

Text by **SONALI ACHARJEE**  
Graphic by **TANMOY CHAKRABORTY**

**A**CROSS INDIA, the age at which women are marrying is steadily rising—and, with it, the contours of health, education and family life are changing. The latest Sample Registration System (SRS) Statistical Report 2023 puts the average marriage age for women at 22.9 years, up from 22.7 in 2022 and 19.3 when it was first recorded in 1990. Earlier, the National Family Health Survey-5 (2019–21) found that 23 per cent of women aged 20–24 had married before 18—a sharp drop from 38 per cent in 2005–06. Yet UNICEF's analysis of the same survey underlined a stubborn divide: girls from rural and low-income families still face the highest risk of early marriage. SRS 2023 offers a much more optimistic picture, even if progress remains uneven. Here are its chief findings.

## WHY LATE MARRIAGE MATTERS FOR WOMEN



Delaying marriage translates to **fewer adolescent pregnancies** and safer deliveries



Gives girls two to four **more years in school or training**, improving their future earnings and maternal health

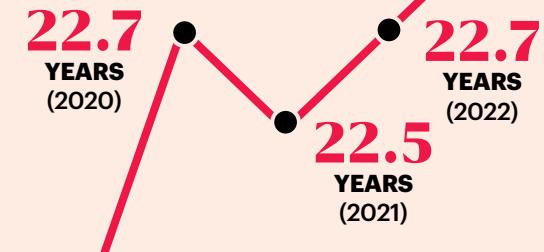


**Lowers stunting and under-five mortality** among children through planned, spaced pregnancies



# THE RISING AGE OF MARRIAGE

Women in high-income countries usually marry in their late 20s or early 30s. India is moving in that direction—steadily



## MEAN AGE AT EFFECTIVE MARRIAGE OF FEMALES\*

\*Wedding ceremony may happen when the girl is quite young; it's when the couple starts living together that the marriage becomes 'effective' in demographic terms

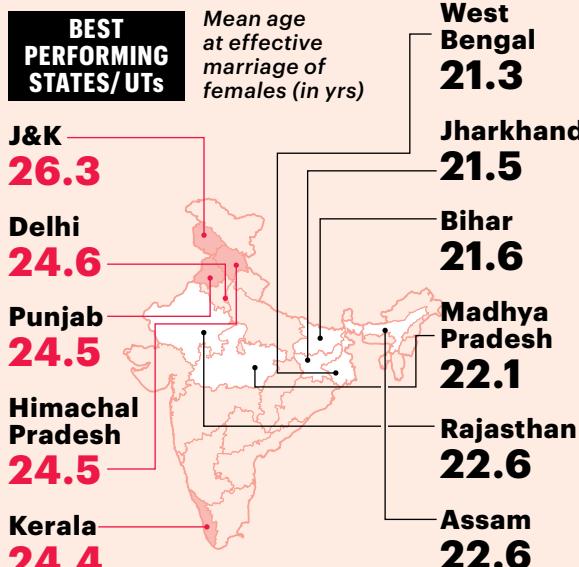
## The Rural-Urban Divide

Rural	22.4
Urban	24.3

Mean age at effective marriage of females (in years)

## Regional Variations

Smaller states and UTs lead the way, as women there marry later than in much of the Hindi heartland and eastern states

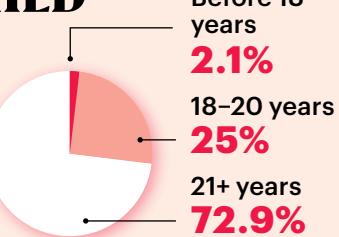


Note: Goa, smaller northeastern states and UTs other than Delhi and J&K have not been included

# INDIA'S CHILD BRIDES

About one in 50 women in India is still married off before she turns 18

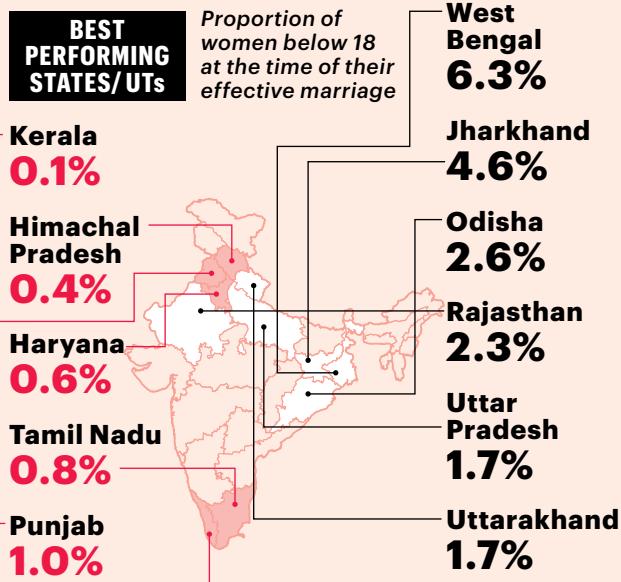
Age at effective marriage of females



## Kerala Leads Change

...aided by near-universal female literacy, robust local governance and strong community vigilance

### WORST PERFORMING STATES/UTS



## THE CHALLENGE AHEAD

► **Uneven progress:** Five states—UP, Bihar, West Bengal, Maharashtra and MP—account for over half of all child marriages, underscoring the need for sharper, localised interventions

► **Emerging health priorities:** With more births now occurring among women aged 28–35, India's health systems must expand fertility care and prenatal screening for older mothers

► **Beyond the law:** Raising women's marriage age to 21 remains debatable. Real progress needs investments in girls' education, health and safety to empower them to delay marriage by choice

**“Boosting girl education, giving them market-ready skills and ensuring job access is far more effective than simply raising the legal age of marriage”**

**POONAM MUTREJA**

Executive Director, Population Foundation of India

# STATE SCAN



KERALA: SAFFRON COATING RUNS THIN PG 18

J&K: THE TOLL OF NEGLIGENCE PG 20



SUMIT KUMAR

► UTTAR PRADESH

## SOUND OF SIRENS

**Parties go into battle mode on the ground as electoral roll revision kicks off**

By Avaneesh Mishra

**I**T'S NOT EVEN SLOW BURN. UTTAR PRADESH VOTES for a new assembly only in 2027, but the month-long Special Intensive Revision (SIR) has already turned it into a live battleground. Rolled out on November 4, it has put the entire field on high flame. Every party is moving to fortify its position: war rooms are being formed, party websites and

WhatsApp groups being readied to track deletions, minders being named to keep a hawk's eye. It's being fought, well, booth and nail.

Supplying electricity to this political grid is the landslide win for the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) next door in Bihar, preceded by the SIR's controversial rollout. In UP, the Samajwadi Party (SP) has taken the

most confrontational stance. Akhilesh Yadav calls Bihar a cautionary tale, framing it as a battle for voter protection. In posts on X, he named a new layer of party oversight: 'PDA Praharis', or patrol squads for its Backward-Dalit-Minorities vote base, who will form a 'PPTV', following the revision teams "like a shadow", flagging anything suspicious. "The game played by

SIR in Bihar won't be possible here. This conspiracy has been exposed," he wrote. "Like CCTV, our 'PPTV' will be vigilant and thwart the BJP's plans."

No empty rhetoric. The SP is moving with unusual urgency. Sources say district units have begun shortlisting Booth Level Agents (BLAs). In many assembly segments, the search is proving slow; many potential volunteers are reluctant. Here, the district president has been named the fallback, so that the party is never formally unrep-

assist those who struggle with paper work.

The BJP, confident in its deep booth-level machinery and system backing at the top, is approaching it methodically. Sources say it has finalised BLAs for all of UP's 162,000 polling stations, with the list for half of its 403 assembly segments submitted to the Election Commission (EC). The party expects its full ground deployment to pick up pace soon, as booth teams begin door-to-door reviews of deletions, additions and objections.

The BJP will give all booths a three-member structure: BLA-1 taps ground workers daily; BLA-2 liaises with the EC; 'booth pravasis', mostly elected representatives, handle troubleshooting, supervision and coordination. Besides a layer of minders tracking every five booths, each assembly segment will get a war room to track BLA activity and be the backend for all ground-level paper work. Their hotlines will be plugged up the chain, to 75 district war rooms, which in turn feed a state command centre. A buzzing, pyramidal closed circuit.

#### AWARENESS DRIVES

Other parties are warming up too. The BSP has issued a booklet that distils EC guidelines into simpler language for its core base, and asked its Muslim/OBC 'bhaichara' committees to run awareness drives in their midst. The Congress leans more towards communication than scale. A state war room is up, and BLAs will be clustered into district-level WhatsApp groups. A national legal team will hold a training session in Lucknow for everyone. "We are being very vigilant. The mistakes of Bihar won't be repeated," says spokesperson Anshu Awasthi. ■



**MASTER PLAN** An Election Commission post in X on the SRI

#### Takeaways

► As month-long SIR rolls out, SP and BJP go into massive ground ops

► Won't let Bihar be repeated in UP, Akhilesh and Congress say

resented, says spokesperson Udayveer Singh.

To streamline things, the SP has activated a dedicated internal website and issued login credentials to all district heads. They are expected to upload daily updates. The party has also got going voter outreach in remote areas, with helpline numbers to

#### ► ANDHRA PRADESH

## A Big Nail In The Maoist Coffin

**It's a preface to the final end as Chhattisgarh's most dreaded Maoist fighter falls**

By **Rahul Noronha**

**I**T COULD HAVE BECOME ONE MORE HIGH-PROFILE MAOIST surrender, if it had panned out in one of the two ways Chhattisgarh was chalking it out. Last week, deputy CM Vijay Sharma had even had a lunch meeting with Madvi Hidma's mother, and an appeal was sent out to her son soon after to lay down arms, like many of his former confreres had done. The other option was old-fashioned: a gunbattle in the jungles. But of all the Maoist insurgents the security forces had faced off, he was the most lethal, the most adept at guerrilla warfare—and the most elusive. He was also the only one truly at home in Bastar.

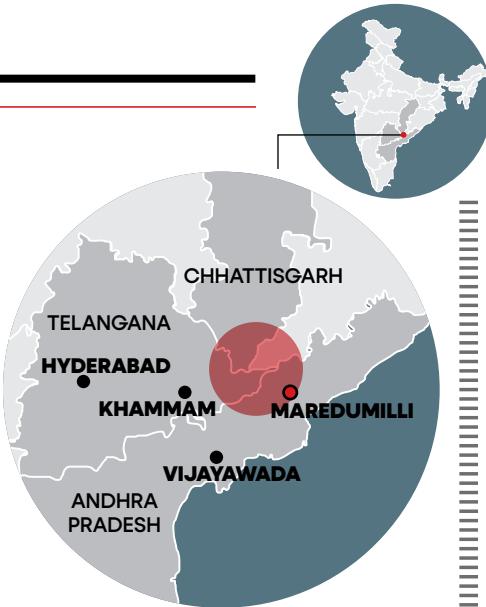
Finally, when fate imposed the second option on Madvi Hidma, it happened far away from his native land. It was an ironic inversion. Almost all top positions in the Maoist hierarchy were and are held by Telu-

**► IN THE BUSH** A file pic of Madvi Hidma in his younger days, in battle attire



gus, but Chhattisgarh was the centre of the ‘liberated zone’ they had carved out in central India, the heart of the insurrection. It’s also where it’s fast running out of breath. Hidma, 50, was the only Chhattisgarh tribal to have ever made it to the central committee of the banned CPI (Maoist). He met his end in the Alluri Sitharama Raju district of Andhra Pradesh.

When AP Police gunned down Hidma on November 18, with his wife Raje and four other cadres, what ended was a decades-long hunt—for the most ruthless and accomplished fighter in the Maoist ranks. Hidma



**SHRUNK HAVEN** Hidma was killed in Maredumilli, near the Andhra-Telangana-Chhattisgarh tri-junction

### Takeaways

■ **Madvi Hidma, 50, the most wanted Maoist guerrilla, is killed in a gunfight in AP**

■ **The only Chhattisgarh tribal in the Maoist top ranks, Hidma had led many lethal strikes**

■ **Chhattisgarh was seeking his surrender, with Dy CM Sharma trying via his mother**

■ **But an intense manhunt was on too, which saw Hidma escape to AP—his Waterloo**

is said to have scripted and executed over two dozen of the most audacious and bloody attacks on security forces in Chhattisgarh in the past decade and a half. These included the Tadmetla attack in 2010 that left 76 CRPF troopers dead and the Tarrem ambush in 2021 (toll: 22 security personnel dead, 31 injured). He carried a reward of Rs 1.8 crore collectively in Maoist-affected states, including Chhattisgarh, MP, AP, Telangana, Maharashtra and Odisha.

### HUNTER AND PREY

Born in Puvarti village in Sukma district, Hidma studied till class 5 in a local school and joined the Maoists as a Bal Sangham member in 1991. He worked in Balaghat in MP, in Odisha and united Andhra, acquiring a fresh name wherever he went. A blend of ruthless tactics, bravado, organisational and risk-taking ability saw him rise through the ranks, heading the

dreaded Battalion No. 1 of the People’s Liberation Guerrilla Army in 2009-10. But those halcyon days were winding down. Till 2024, Puvarti was part of a ‘security vacuum’ zone. Last year, the CRPF established a camp there. They called it ‘The Farm’. It was in Puvarti that cereals and veggies were cultivated for Maoists. They had even built a check dam there.

There is bound to be heartburn in Chhattisgarh over AP bagging the ‘trophy’. Since December 2023, Chhattisgarh Police had closed in on him many times. Every time, he would manage to evade the ambush, adding to the legend of his invincibility. In end-October, they had him in the cross hairs during an operation on the Telangana border. Hidma managed to slip out yet again. The old Maoist bosses, of whom only Devji is left now, had hopes for the insurgency as long as Hidma was at large. That horizon is now at a vanishing point. ■



By Jeemon Jacob

**T**HEY ARE CALLING IT THE ‘SEMI-FINAL’ in Kerala, the local self-government (LSG) polls scheduled for December 9 and 11. The CPI(M)-led Left Democratic Front and the Congress-led United Democratic Front are the traditional battlers, but the BJP, riding on the momentum of the stupendous win in Bihar, is hoping to stage a few surprises. It has certainly been prepping for it—way back in late July, the state unit led by ex-Union minister Rajeev Chandrasekhar had activated a 100-day ‘Mission Countdown 2025’ clock in all district offices, targeting the poll.

That was just the beginning. Membership and voter enrolment drives, party workshops, new ward committees—it’s been a busy three months. In the 2020 LSG polls, the BJP had won a modest 10 village panchayats (out of the total 941) but also two key municipalities, Palakkad and Pandalam. More importantly, they finished second in two of the five corporations—Kollam and capital Thiruvananthapuram. This time around, they are pulling



► KERALA

# SAFFRON COATING RUNS A LITTLE THIN

**It's promising a 'political coup' in the upcoming local body polls tally, but of late the BJP has hit a few speed bumps**

out the big guns, especially in the capital. 'VIP candidates' for the Thiruvananthapuram Municipal Corporation include ex-DGP R. Sreelekha and Arjuna Award winner Padmini Thomas.

Since the 2024 general election, where the BJP took 19.2 per cent of the total vote and also won its first Lok Sabha seat from the state, Thrissur, the party has been on a high. "We have fielded the best leaders, people who know the political pulse. Both the LDF and UDF are going to get a shock treatment," says state secretary V.V. Rajesh, who is contesting from Kodungannur ward in Thiruvananthapuram, seen as a party stronghold.

BJP sources say they are eyeing wins in the Thiruvananthapuram and Thrissur Municipal Corporations and

retaining the Palakkad and Pandalam municipalities from last time around. Ex-state president K. Surendran is aiming even higher. "We are planning a political coup in Kerala, we'll take more than 100 panchayats, 10 municipalities and two municipal corporations," he told INDIA TODAY.

## Takeaways

➲ **State BJP is on a high after Bihar win, all revved up for the local body elections**

➲ **A rash of suicides by party members in Thiruvananthapuram has raised a stink**

◀ **ONWARDS** BJP's Chandrasekhar leads the party's 'Vikasita Ananthapuri' rally in Thiruvananthapuram, Nov. 5

## PITFALLS AHEAD

Two months back, few would have questioned those claims. But the past few weeks, the BJP has been fire-fighting one scandal after another—including a string of party-related suicides in the capital. It started on September 20 with veteran leader and Thirumala ward councillor K. Anil Kumar hanging himself, leaving behind a suicide note accusing BJP leaders of not repaying loans taken from a cooperative society he headed. Next came young tech professional and party worker Ananthu Aji, whose October 6 suicide note had even more damning allegations—that he had been sexually abused by a number of RSS leaders at camps held by the Sangh.

On November 15 came another suicide shocker—local businessman and long-time RSS worker Anand K. Thampi hanging himself after allegedly being denied a ticket in BJP stronghold Thrikkannapuram. More bad news came the next day with BJP Mahila Morcha leader Shalini Anil attempting suicide. The 32-year-old had begun campaigning as a BJP candidate, but was later dropped from the final list. "I was humiliated and couldn't bear it after the local RSS leaders started a character assassination campaign against me," says a tearful Shalini. Later, in a damage control exercise, she was given a ticket from the Neyyatinkara municipality.

The clutch of embarrassments in the capital has put the state unit on the defensive. News filtering in from Palakkad and Pandalam hasn't improved matters. There were unruly scenes after the candidate list was released in the former, while the forward caste grouping, the Nair Service Society (NSS), isn't supporting BJP candidates anymore in the latter. Don't look now, but if the party position dips after the LSG poll, Chandrasekhar may find there is little place to hide with the final, the Kerala assembly election, just months away. ■

# The Toll of Negligence

**The Nowgam police station blast leaves plenty of questions unanswered**

By Kaleem Geelani

**I**T WAS ON AN OLD MIGRANT PROPERTY, in a densely populated residential area and surrounded by houses, that the Nowgam police station stood. Strange place to store 358 kg of ammonium nitrate, chemicals and batteries. The same explosive used in the November 10 Red Fort blast in Delhi.

What was the stuff doing back in Nowgam, uptown of Srinagar, ground zero of the crackdown that exposed the 'white collar terror' network? The recovered explosives are the 'case property' of Nowgam Police, which had registered a case under various sections of the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA) and Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, an investigation under which led to the busting of the Faridabad module and the recovery of 2,900 kg of bomb-making material from Faridabad. Procedure dictates that all evidence be submitted before a magistrate in the original locale of the case. So, part of it was put in containers and carted in trucks over 1,000 km to Nowgam.

## SAMPLE TURNS LETHAL

It was 11:20 pm on November 14 when the folly of the move came through. Loud and clear—even 30 km away. The neighbours were preparing to sleep when the blast, accompanied by a flash of blazing light, threw them out of bed. The station, separated from the main road only by an empty compound, turned to cinders. Body parts were found half a mile away.

At the time of the accident, samples of the explosives were being packed in small bags to be taken for analysis to the Forensic Science Laboratory in Jammu. Collection of forensic evidence is mandatory under the Bharatiya



## Takeaways

► Ammonium nitrate seized in Faridabad 'white collar terror' case explodes in Nowgam

► The 358-kg explosive cache was carted over 1,000 km by road to be shown as evidence

► **WRONG KIND OF AMMO** The police station at Nowgam in flames, Nov. 14

of the home department and comprising the IG Kashmir zone, Srinagar district magistrate and a senior scientist from the Central Forensic Sciences Laboratory will try to answer them.

A central official says police appear to have been a touch casual—perhaps because the material was not RDX. "They could have sought an exemption on submitting the evidence, given its quantity, or handed it over to the NSG, army or paramilitary, all of whom are far better equipped for this," he says.

The crackdown itself is proceeding at a rattling pace. Pre-dawn raids on November 18 claimed to have found a 'Jaish linkage' with the banned Dukhtaran-e-Millat. Dozens have been detained. Bilal Ahmad Wani, a Qazigund local, committed self-immolation after his son was picked up. A much smaller blaze than the one at Nowgam, but also a lesson in the handling of explosive material. ■

—with Pradip R. Sagar

# S.K. GUPTA

## CHAIRMAN OF THE WEGMANS ARTHA GROUP

### The Visionary Who Turned Integrity into Infrastructure



Mr. Surendra Kumar Gupta, Chairman of The Wegmans Artha Group, is a true embodiment of vision, discipline, and humility. An engineering graduate from Banaras Hindu University (BHU—IIT, 1972), he combines deep technical expertise with sharp business acumen acquired over decades in finance, construction, and real estate. In a world where success is often measured by numbers, Mr. Gupta stands apart — proving that vision, integrity, and social responsibility are the true pillars of enduring success.

**"At Wegmans Artha Group, Work is Worship — Integrity is Our Foundation."**

#### Discipline and Innovation: Transforming Opportunities into Achievements

Born in 1949 in Dhampur, Uttar Pradesh, into a respected business family, Mr. Gupta's journey is not merely about constructing buildings — it is about building trust, communities, and legacies. After completing his engineering degree, he returned home to strengthen his family's sugar manufacturing business. His sharp intellect and disciplined approach helped scale operations rapidly, earning him recognition as a young entrepreneur with a rare blend of technical knowledge and business insight.

Yet, Mr. Gupta's ambitions extended beyond the family enterprise. In 1991, he relocated to Delhi to explore financial services and real estate — laying the foundation for a career defined by quality, timeliness, and trust.

#### Wegmans Artha Group: Building Trust, Creating Value, Enriching Lives

By 1995, Mr. Gupta had diversified into financial services, founding Wegmans Financial Services Pvt. Ltd. and joining the National Stock Exchange of India. Under his visionary leadership, The Wegmans Artha Group has redefined corporate credibility and expanded into diverse sectors — real estate, hospitality, retail, agriculture, finance, commodity trading, manufacturing, and depository services.

The Group has successfully delivered over 2 million sq. ft. of commercial real estate across the NCR region. Its excellence has been recognized with 6-Star CRISIL and 7-Star CARE Ratings, making Wegmans Artha the first group in Northern India to achieve such distinctions — a testament to the philosophy of honesty, hard work, and commitment that Mr. Gupta has instilled.

Wegmans Artha Group continues to uphold strong values of trust among all stakeholders, unwavering commitment to investors, and meaningful social contribution.

#### A Family that Builds on Values, Grows on Vision, and Leaves a Legacy of Trust

Mr. Gupta's sons, Sudeep Gupta and Shagun Gupta, proudly carry forward his legacy of ethics and excellence.

Sudeep Gupta, with a Bachelor's in Urban Planning from the School of Planning and Architecture, New Delhi, and a Master's in Real Estate from Cornell University, oversees Wegmans' real estate and financial operations. His leadership has shaped landmark Artha developments such as the 10-acre Wegmans Business Park in Greater Noida and the 25-acre Artha Mixed-Used Technology Campus in Noida Extension — projects that reflect both technical mastery and ethical leadership.

Shagun Gupta, a Gold Medalist in Information Technology from Hamdard University and MBA in Marketing and Finance from Symbiosis Institute, Pune, leads Wegmans Artha's marketing strategies. With global exposure through Wipro and European business environments, he has strengthened the group's brand identity while upholding his father's timeless principles. Together, the Gupta brothers blend innovation with inherited wisdom — ensuring that the Artha legacy continues to evolve with integrity.

#### Marquee Tenants: Trust Built on Performance

The Artha Group's IT Towers are home to marquee tenants such as: Kyndyl (IBM), R Systems (Blackstone), HCL Technologies (Training Center), Crayon Software, VerveSemi, and In2IT Technologies. Additionally, NTT Data, India's largest data center operator, has an operational hyperscale data center within the Artha Campus.

The Group's commercial portfolio also hosts leading names such as IHG Holiday Inn Express Hotel, LG Electronics, LG Soft Global R&D Centre, Decathlon, PhysicsWallah, Aakash Institute, Royal Habitat Convention Centre, Samtel, and others.

#### Retail & Lifestyle Experience @ Inside Artha Campus

The Artha Campus features North India's highest revenue-generating D-MART store by Avenue Supermarkets Ltd. Other operational or upcoming retail brands include: Zudio, Vijay Sales, Chaayos, Burger King, Adidas, Pepperfry, SBI, Survie (by Chef Sanjeev Kapoor), Pincode (by Kunal Kapoor), and more. Bank branches and ATMs of SBI, HDFC Bank, and IDFC First Bank are operational, and a Family Entertainment Center is under development — making the campus a fully self-sufficient.

#### Wegmans Artha Group: 75 Years of Legacy and Leadership

Wegmans Artha Group is a 75-year-old diversified business group with interests in real estate, financial services, hospitality, agriculture, and manufacturing. The Group proudly upholds a legacy of zero litigation, timely delivery, uncompromised quality, and ethical governance.

#### Sustainability & Innovation: Future-Ready Infrastructure

The Kyndyl (IBM) Tower 4 @ Sustainability and Innovation — ready to move in - immediate occupancy.

#### Key highlights include:

- 6-Star CRISIL Rated – First in Delhi NCR
- PLATINUM GREEN Building Certified – Technically sound, energy-efficient structures
- GAS-Based German Caterpillar Generators for cleaner energy
- SOLAR Rooftops and Sustainable Infrastructure across the campus
- MERV-14 Air Filtration Technology
- Centralised Heating and Cooling Facility

#### A Leader Who Inspires

For Mr. S.K. Gupta, life follows a simple yet profound philosophy — "Work is Worship." This belief forms the cornerstone of his journey, shaping both his personal and professional ethos. A man of modest living and high thinking, he remains the guiding force behind The Wegmans Artha Group's success — leading with humility, integrity, and purpose.



**RP - Sanjiv Goenka  
Group**

Growing Legacies



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# 200

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INDIA





# THE NIMO KNOWS

A COORDINATED, PROMISE-LADEN CAMPAIGN HELPS THE NDA ACROSS THE COUNTRY. CAN IT BRING THE SAME UNITY OF PURPOSE TO THE TASK OF TRANSFORMING INDIA?

By AMITABH SRIVASTAVA



**ON FIRM GROUND**  
PM Modi and Bihar CM Nitish Kumar at the NDA's swearing-in ceremony in Patna, Nov. 20

# LOCKOUT

HIEVE A SPECTACULAR VICTORY.  
SFORMING BIHAR?



# ON

November 20, as Nitish Kumar, the 74-year-old patriarch of the Janata Dal (United), walked up to take oath as the chief minister of Bihar for a record tenth time, he stepped into a tenure laden both with promise and the weight of expectation. He had decimated not just a younger, energetic opponent in Tejashwi Yadav of the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD), but also defeated any doubts about his mental and political astuteness, along with all insinuations of anti-incumbency. His party's partnership with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and a set of other fellow travellers with smaller but strategically disparate bases had led the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) to a landslide 202 out of 243 seats. Now comes the task of living up to the mandate.

The vehicle to accomplish it looks, at first glance, not too different from the old one. There was a time, not too long ago, when a touch of indeterminacy attached to Nitish's continuation as CM. But not only is he back at the helm, the two BJP deputy CMs—Samrat Choudhary and Vijay Kumar Sinha—have been retained too. The new cabinet comprises nine ministers from the JD(U), 14 from the BJP, two from Chirag Paswan's Lok Janshakti Party and one each from Jitan Ram Manjhi's Hindustani Awam Morcha Secular (HAMS) and Upendra Kushwaha's Rashtriya Lok Morcha (RLM). Besides the usual quantum of new faces (nine) and discards (12), it was a fairly faithful reflection of the balance, coordination and cohesion seen during the campaign where, despite potential for discord, all cogs in the wheel moved as one. Will it carry forward into governance as well?

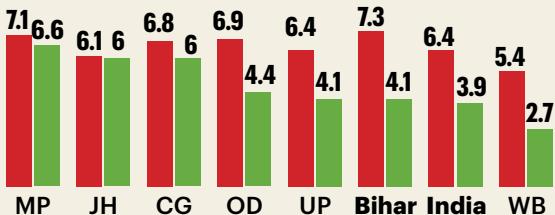
A lot will hinge on how Nitish manages the old contradictions that will bleed into this new nuptial pact. He retained his crown partly because it was something of a fait accompli after the Opposition accused the BJP

# BIHAR'S ECONOMIC WOES

## A SKEWED GROWTH

Among 'laggard' states, Bihar has shown most growth. But the farm sector has not kept pace

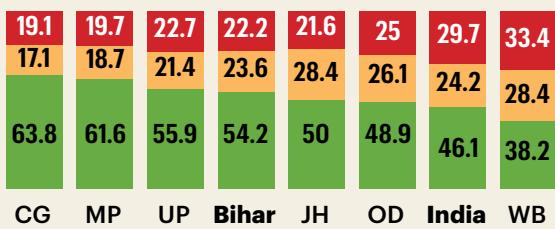
**GSDP Growth** ■ **Agriculture GSDP Growth**  
(Average annual growth rate in %; 2005–06 to 2024–25)



## DEARTH OF JOBS

Farming employs a majority and non-farm jobs are barely expanding. So, millions outmigrate for work

**Workforce distribution by sector (2023–24, %)**

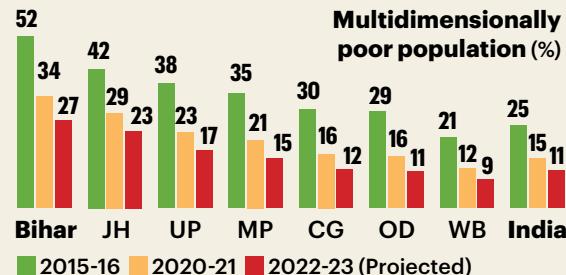


■ Agri & allied ■ Manufacturing ■ Services



## TRAPPED IN POVERTY

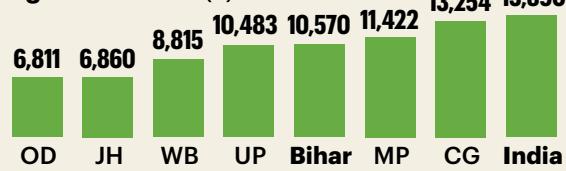
Despite gains, Bihar still has the highest poverty rates, reflecting stalled structural reforms



## A PERSISTENT INCOME GAP

Despite employing so many, Bihar's farm sector delivers incomes far lower than the national average

**Average monthly income of agri households (₹)**



MP: Madhya Pradesh; CG: Chhattisgarh; JH: Jharkhand; UP: Uttar Pradesh; OD: Odisha; WB: West Bengal

Source: ICRIER, using MoSPI, NITI Aayog data

Graphics by TANMOY CHAKRABORTY

of not formally naming him as CM candidate, and also because, with 85 out of 101 seats, the JD(U) did nearly as well as the BJP's 89 out of 101 seats. But being the single-largest party in the House, the BJP's numerical heft is bound to make it more assertive in government, subtly altering the balance of power in the coalition. So the surface resemblance ends at the surface.

"The newly constituted Bihar assembly," says sociologist Professor Gyanendra Yadav of Patliputra University, "is markedly different from the previous House, for it eliminates any possibility of government formation without the BJP at its core. This fundamentally reduces the subtle leverage Nitish once enjoyed. While the BJP will, of course, support him, this tenure will likely see the party assert its own agenda, expand its footprint to a scale it has never

achieved in Bihar, and attempt to encroach upon segments of the political space traditionally occupied by the RJD." This is evident in the induction of Ram Kirpal Yadav, who defeated Lalu Prasad's daughter, Misa Bharti, in the 2014 and 2019 Lok Sabha elections, before losing the seat to her in 2024. His inclusion is an invitation to the Yadavs to move beyond the RJD.

But that may be getting ahead of the script. In the immediate future, the new government will have to come good on the manifesto that fetched it a stupendous victory. One that was dense with guarantees, initiatives that reached deep into rural households and spoke directly to Bihar's most aspirational voters: women, young jobseekers and first-time participants in the state's developmental journey. On November 14, the day the results were an-

**This mandate eliminates the possibility of any govt without BJP at its core. The party therefore is likely to assert its own agenda, expand its footprint and encroach on RJD's space**

## NDA POLL PROMISES...



**Mass employment:** Creation of 10 million jobs and employment opportunities over five years



**Mahila Rojgar Yojana:** Rs 10,000 distributed to 15.1 million women to start micro-enterprises; up to Rs 2 lakh proposed to scale viable ventures



**Lakhpatti Didis:** An aspirational pledge to empower 10 million women to earn Rs 1 lakh annually



**Infrastructure & industry boost:** Attracting investments worth Rs 50 lakh crore to spur jobs, growth

## ...AND THE CHALLENGES



**POLITICAL:** Nitish may have retained CM's seat, but BJP's emergence as the single largest party means it will assert its ideological and political agenda more forcefully. This new coalition dynamics will leave Nitish with narrow manoeuvring space



**ECONOMIC:** The promise of attracting Rs 50 lakh crore investments faces structural hurdles—limited availability of contiguous land, slow clearances and infrastructural gaps in power, water and logistics



**BUDGETARY:** The new government will have to find the finances to fund its big-ticket promises. Just giving the additional Rs 2 lakh to 15.1 million Mahila Rojgar Yojana beneficiaries will add up to Rs 3.02 lakh crore. This, when the state's total budget is just Rs 3.17 lakh crore

nounced, overwhelmed by the faith Bihar reposed in his leadership, Nitish had posted on X: "Bihar will progress further and will join the ranks of the most developed states in the country." Optimism of the will aside, that's a daunting piece of commitment.

## THE BIG TASKS BEFORE NITISH

For Nitish, Bihar is at once recognisably transformed yet stubbornly familiar. The state's economy has more than tripled since 2011; its gross state domestic product grew by 9.2 per cent in 2023–24. Electricity now reaches every household, and roads connect every village. Yet, beneath this shining narrative runs a strain of continuity that has long confounded reformers. Bihar may have halved multidimensional poverty (that maps deprivations in health, education and standard of living) from 51.9 per cent in 2015–16 to 26.59 per cent in 2022–23, but it is still among the states with the highest multidimensional poverty. At Rs



COVER STORY

BIHAR MANDATE

69,300, per capita income remains barely a third of the national average; the Bihar Caste Survey 2023 found that over 9.4 million families—around 34 per cent of the state's population—survive on meagre incomes, with roughly the same proportion earning Rs 6,000 or less per month.

Cast across time, Bihar's per capita net state domestic product at current prices rose from Rs 3,372 in 1994–95 to Rs 69,321 in 2024–25—an extraordinary absolute leap in just three decades—but the figure remains stubbornly low at a little over 33 per cent of the national average, a proportion that has barely shifted in nearly 35 years. That lingering gap, more than any single statistic, suggests that Bihar's development stays suppressed by a glass ceiling. Breaking that will require Nitish to drive value-added growth: moving industry and services into higher-productivity sectors, nurturing local entrepreneurship and creating incentives that persuade private capital to stay invested in Bihar across multiple political cycles. But before that, Nitish has election pledges to honour.

## PROMISES TO KEEP

**P**eople close to Nitish say he has been visibly moved by the depth of trust the electorate has reposed in him and views it as a moral obligation to fulfil the promises he has made. Among these pledges is the Mukhya Mantri Mahila Rojgar Yojana, offering support of up to Rs 2.10 lakh for every eligible aspiring woman entrepreneur. As a pre-election demonstration of intent, the government transferred Rs 10,000 in seed money to 15.1 million women—an administrative feat unparalleled in Bihar's history, and one that instantly altered the political momentum. The

**If Nitish gives the remaining ₹2 lakh to the 15.1 mn Mahila Rojgar Yojana beneficiaries who got the first tranche of ₹10,000, it'll cost the state ₹3.02 lakh crore—95% of its ₹3.17 lakh crore budget**

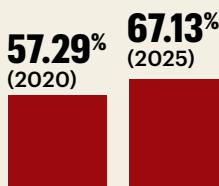
impact was unmistakable. The beneficiaries make up over 42 per cent of Bihar's 35 million registered female voters. Observers believe it was the single reason that women voters outnumbered men in turnout on such a scale: 71.77 per cent of them casting their vote, the highest since 1951, compared to 62.72 per cent men.

And now that they have rewarded him with a tenth term, Nitish has to find the finances to fulfil his side of the bargain. The seed money for the Mahila Rojgar Yojana

# MASSIVE MANDATE

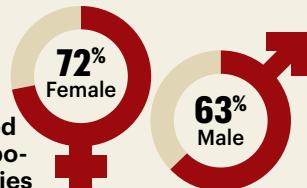
How a surge in voter turnout, new alliances and strike-rate swings combined to power the NDA and leave the Opposition MGB trailing

## VOTER TURNOUT



The 9.84 percentage point rise in overall turnout over the 2020 assembly election appears to have benefited the NDA

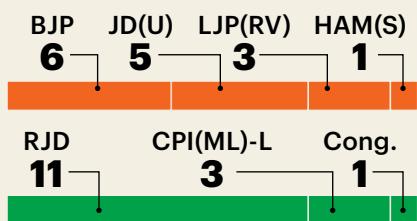
Women voters outnumbered men, a trend since 2010 largely credited to Nitish's empowerment policies



## THE X FACTOR



Prashant Kishor's Jan Suraaj, which failed to win a single seat, influenced at least 30 seats across the political spectrum. Below are the seats parties lost because the debutant's vote share exceeded their candidates' margins of defeat:

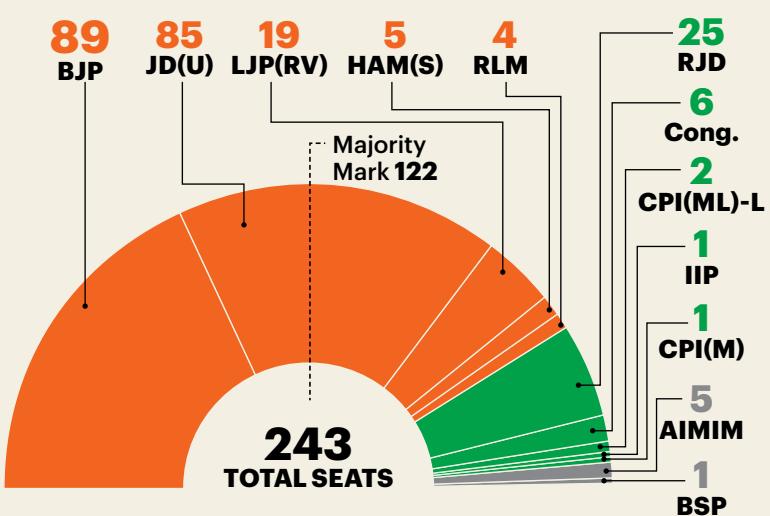


**BJP:** Bharatiya Janata Party, **JD(U):** Janata Dal (United), **RJD:** Rashtriya Janata Dal, **LJP(RV):** Lok Janshakti Party (Ram Vilas), **HAM(S):** Hindustani Awam Morcha (Secular), **RLM:** Rashtriya Lok Morcha, **AIMIM:** All India Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen, **IIP:** Indian Inclusive Party, **BSP:** Bahujan Samaj Party, **CPI(M):** Communist Party of India (Marxist), **CPI(ML)-L:** Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist)-Liberation

**202**  
NDA

**35**  
MGB

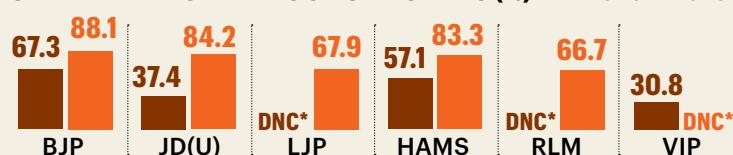
**6**  
OTHERS



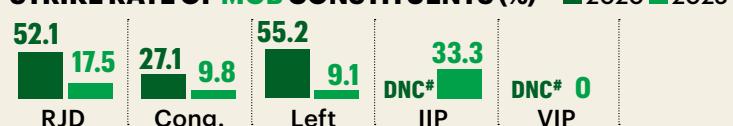
## THE VOTE ARITHMETIC

The BJP delivered the NDA's best strike rate, while the JD(U) saw the biggest gains, thanks to the LJP's return; the new allies also lifted the alliance's numbers. The MGB fell behind largely because the RJD, its biggest contender, slumped

### STRIKE RATE OF NDA CONSTITUENTS (%)



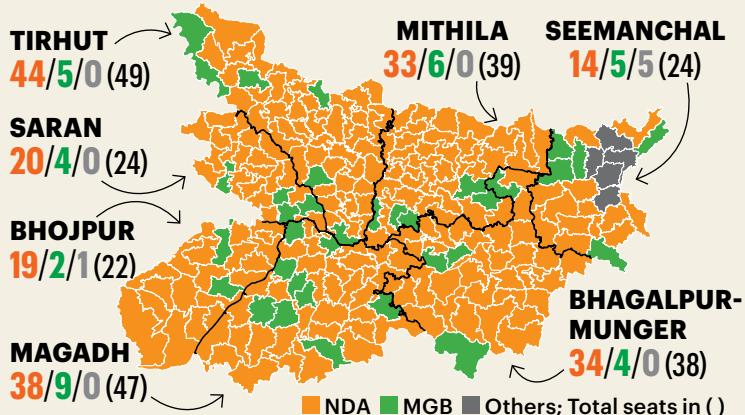
### STRIKE RATE OF MGB CONSTITUENTS (%)



\*Did not contest under NDA; #Did not contest under MGB

## THE SAFFRON SWEEP

Region-by-region results show the NDA's dominance, with the MGB holding only a handful of pockets



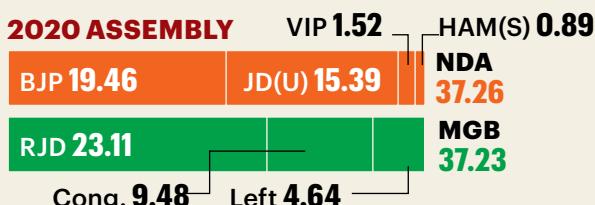
# LEADING BY A MILE

The NDA's vote share rose from near-parity in 2020 to a clear lead in 2025

## 2025 ASSEMBLY



## 2020 ASSEMBLY



All figures in %

## HOW THE NDA WON

### Coalition engineering

Calibrated seat-sharing—helped by the LJP's return and alliances such as the HAM(S) and RLM—broadened the NDA's OBC-EBC-Dalit base, lifted JD(U)'s numbers and pushed the alliance's vote share

### The women engine

The Rs 10,000 'seed money' pledge for 15.1 million women besides long-running welfare schemes (bicycles, SHGs, education, safety) made them JD(U)'s anchor demographic, driving high turnout and a 19.25% vote share

### Nitish's legacy dividend

Perceptions that this could be Nitish Kumar's last major election helped consolidate support among welfare beneficiaries and long-time loyalists

### Rewired caste arithmetic

By consolidating dominant castes, non-Yadav OBCs, EBCs and Mahadalits, the NDA diluted the MGB's Muslim-Yadav-centred strength. These groups, along with women voters, moved cohesively across NDA partners, enabling smooth vote transfer

### The jobs edge

The 10-million-jobs pitch outmatched the RJD's promise of mass government employment

### Stability over 'jungle raj'

NDA's messaging invoked memories of 1990s lawlessness under RJD rule, framing the election as a choice between order and a feared return to disorder



COVER STORY

BIHAR MANDATE

alone, amounts to Rs 15,100 crore. Well over half of Bihar's 48.9 million female population match the eligibility criteria, so the recipient base can extend to another 12 million. Should even the existing 15.1 million beneficiaries receive the additional Rs 2 lakh of support, the state would need a further Rs 3.02 lakh crore. Bihar's entire budget is some Rs 3.17 lakh crore, making the arithmetic unforgiving. However, according to Dr N.K. Choudhary, retired professor of economics from Patna University and a widely respected independent commentator, the state government has built in certain escape valves—making the additional Rs 2 lakh support contingent on the women's businesses being judged viable. The government may also resort to other workarounds, like approaching banks to extend soft loans backed by state guarantees.

**Creating 10 million jobs in five years will require shifting industry and services to higher productivity sectors, nurturing local entrepreneurs and incentives for private sector**

The other major promise the NDA made in its manifesto was of providing 10 million jobs, an undertaking meant to put an end to '*palayan*' or outmigration, an issue the Opposition raised with some success even if it did not translate into votes. According to the 2023 caste survey, over 5.3 million Biharis live outside the state. Remittances sustain 88 per cent of households, according to a report by the Mumbai-based International Institute for Population Sciences, with the mean annual remittance per migrant household Rs 48,662 in 2017.

Creating 10 million employment opportunities in five years will require an investment effort unprecedented in Bihar's history. The government has promised to attract investments worth Rs 50 lakh crore to spur growth and jobs. What it will also need is a decisive shift toward private-sector participation. Manufacturing clusters, agro-processing units, logistics hubs, tourism infrastructure and digital-service centres cannot scale without stable policies, reliable land and power supply, and an investment climate that inspires confidence among private enterprises. That calls for stronger incentives for micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs). Like for its women's employment scheme, the state will have to look for alternative sources to fund this promise as well. There are other commitments too, including higher pension payouts and increased stipends/allowances for vulnerable groups. "Bihar," says Dr



Choudhury, "does not possess the internal revenue capacity to meet these promises independently. Delivering them will require significant central support, as well as a pruning of non-productive expenditure."

## FROM AGRICULTURE TO INDUSTRY

**H**owever, while creating opportunities outside agriculture may be a priority, the sector remains the backbone of Bihar's economy, with 54.2 per cent of its workforce engaged in the activity (compared with 46.1 per cent for India), and contributing over 23 per cent of gross state value added. Yet it is a sector defined by smallness: 97 per cent of holdings are tiny or marginal. As N.K. Singh, former chairman of the 15th finance commission, pointed out in a recent article, Bihar's Fourth Agriculture Roadmap already charts an overdue shift from subsistence to diversification: increased irrigation, sustained attention to soil health and a push into pulses, millets and oilseeds. The NDA government must now operationalise the roadmap with precision. This means it must guarantee procurement for alternative crops, facilitate the expansion of dairy, poultry and fisheries—which already constitute roughly a third of agricultural output—and create agro-processing ecosystems for maize, makhana and litchi. It should also build cold-chain and logistics systems that turn agriculture into a profitable enterprise rather than a fallback occupation. Ashok Gulati, distinguished professor at ICRIER, also believes that Bihar must move away from doles and subsidies and instead invest in rural electrification, solarisation and feeder separation.

Alongside, Nitish must also facilitate a shift toward manufacturing and services. Services already account for about 58 per cent of Bihar's GSDP and industry for roughly 21.5 per cent. The Bihar Industrial Investment Promotion Package 2025 and a single-window clearance system exist on paper as frameworks to accelerate investment; the practical challenge is delivering predictability. Land banking under the Bihar Industrial Area Development Authority needs not only acquisition but strict timelines and facilitation. Bihar could plausibly aim to raise the combined share of services and industry in GSDP by a quarter by 2030, with food processing, textiles, ethanol production, renewable energy clusters, IT-enabled services and tourism acting as engines.

Human capital is arguably the single most important lever. Bihar's literacy rate has climbed—to 74.3 per cent—yet learning outcomes remain weak. The Annual Status of Education Report 2024 found that just 39.4 per cent of Class III children can read at a Class II level, and only 19.5 per cent can perform

simple division. These deficits compound across a lifetime. Nitish must therefore prioritise foundational learning, professionalise teacher training. Also, with roughly a million entrants entering the state's labour force each year, equipping even half of them annually with market-ready skills could convert a looming demographic burden into a demographic dividend. The government must aim for district-anchored Skill Development Missions aligned to local industry, apprenticeship pipelines linked to employers and measurable placement outcomes, not just certificates.

Urbanisation is the next big challenge. Only about 11 per cent of Bihar's population lives in towns, one of the lowest ratios in India. Urban growth has often been scattered and peri-urban. The remedy, as N.K. Singh sees it, requires statutory master plans for Patna, Muzaffarpur and Bhagal-

pur to manage orderly expansion, build infrastructure and rationalise land use. If a handful of municipalities became creditworthy enough to access market borrowings, they could become local models of sustainable urban finance and service delivery. Nitish must drive a structured urbanisation push, equipping municipalities with professional staff, mandating GIS-based planning and enabling urban local bodies to raise their own revenues responsibly.

Tourism and hospitality are often spoken of as soft options for quick employment growth, but Bihar's heritage must offer more than pride-invoking slogans. Nalanda, Bodh Gaya and a constellation

of lesser-visited sites present a coherent brand that, if strategically cultivated, can generate hotels, guide services, food-and-transport microenterprises and artisan supply chains.

Backing these sectoral interventions will need a whole new institutional choreography—to shepherd big projects, ministerial groups to dismantle departmental silos, and senior officials answerable to explicit investment targets. Nitish must now enforce execution discipline—fix deadlines, digitise approvals, audit delays and make departments publicly accountable for investment outcomes. This calls for better public financial management. Several departments still surrender unspent funds each year, signalling weaknesses in planning, procurement and execution. Fiscal realism, says N.K. Singh, must guide the exercise: Bihar's own tax revenue is projected, in the 2025–26 budget estimates, at about 5.4 per cent of GSDP; if nominal GSDP grows rapidly, tax buoyancy must follow, or the state will remain dependent on central transfers.

Transforming Bihar is a formidable challenge, but Nitish and the NDA have been given an equally formidable mandate. They must now honour it by rescuing Bihar from its BIMARU state. ■

**Nitish will have to aid diversification in agriculture with committed procurement for alternative crops, facilitate expansion of dairy, poultry and fisheries**

# INSIDE NDA WAR ROOM

HOW THE BJP'S AMIT SHAH AND CO. SET RIGHT A FRACTIOUS ALLIANCE AND TURNED THE TABLES ON THE WELL SET MAHAGATHBANDHAN

By **AMITABH SRIVASTAVA** and **ANILESH S. MAHAJAN**

ANI



**UPBEAT** Union home minister Amit Shah with BJP leaders Vinod Tawde (left) and Dharmendra Pradhan at a Vande Mata Ram 150th anniversary function in Patna, Nov. 7

**I**t was past midnight, days before the second phase of polling in Bihar, and Patna was all but asleep. At Hotel Maurya, though, a heavily curtained suite on the upper floors was showing signs of hectic activity. On a bare sofa, Union home minister Amit Shah was deep in the middle of another review. No papers, no courtesies, only questions: "Has every booth committee received the poll material? Why are the motorcycle rally flags so small? Which villages missed door-to-door campaigning today?" Every meeting followed the same routine: boxes ticked, gaps identified, progress debated, and execution details for the next 24 hours fine-tuned to the last measurable action.

It was on the back of such careful micromanage-

ment that the astonishingly successful campaign for Bihar was stitched together. The vaunted poll machinery of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) outdid itself, with the architects being the omnipresent Shah, Union minister Dharmendra Pradhan and national secretary Vinod Tawde. Pradhan was tasked with organisational consolidation and ground-team mobilisation, Tawde with messaging and social engineering.

The seat-sharing arrangements of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) had given the BJP 101 seats, the same as the Janata Dal (United), for the first time, a reflection of how the saffron party's involvement extended far beyond its own quota. Right from the start, alliance coordination was key. For the JD(U), working president Sanjay Jha, who had long-standing ties with both Tawde and Pradhan, was the go-to person. Shah's junior minister, Nityanand Rai, who has known the Paswan family for ages, was the



COVER STORY

## BIHAR MANDATE

conduit for talks with Chirag Paswan and his Lok Janshakti Party (Ram Vilas). Pradhan, who was made Bihar poll in-charge in September, has an easy rapport with chief minister Nitish Kumar, which proved invaluable when matters got testy during the seat-sharing talks.

### THE NO-GAPS STRATEGY

**M**onths ahead of the polling, the BJP had established a dedicated election war room in Bihar to centralise planning, logistics and real-time decision-making. Delhi-based entrepreneur and party functionary Rohan Gupta, who had run similar campaign set-ups in Haryana, Jharkhand and Delhi, was put in charge. The war room network extended to 92,000 booth-level agents (BLAs) across Bihar. Servicing their requests were some 150 volunteers, hired by the party for the call centre set up in the war room.

Unlike the dramatic optics of national campaigns, Bihar 2025 was run on documents—SOPs, spreadsheets, daily call logs. Every booth-level committee maintained a seven-day, two-day, and polling-day checklist. Each mandal prepared a ‘five-voter sheet’ identifying households with five or more

electors, complete with phone numbers and likely preferences. The conveyor belt of national stars, including an array of party CMs, such as UP’s Yogi Adityanath and Delhi’s Rekha Gupta, helped amplify messages, fill stadiums and create a perception of non-stop momentum. The blanket coverage extended to polling day, with RSS swayamsevaks monitoring turnout lists and even calling voters to remind them to come out and exercise their franchise.

Data teams in Patna prepared caste-composition charts for every constituency, often advising even allies on candidate profiles. If a seat required a Koeri or Kushwaha face, suggestions came from the BJP office. For example, when Upendra Kushwaha, leader of the Rashtriya Lok Morcha (RLM), proposed fielding his wife Snehlata, the alliance routed her to Sasaram, a decision that later delivered a comfortable win. This sort of coordination was possible because Pradhan and Tawde operated as travelling troubleshooters. They camped for days in Gaya, Darbhanga and Purnea, mediating in quarrels, reallocating resources and, crucially, ensuring that RSS functionaries and party managers were on the same page. Their ‘no gaps strategy’ became the BJP campaign’s informal slogan.

**The blanket coverage extended to polling day, with RSS men monitoring turnout lists and even calling voters to remind them to come out and vote**



**COMING THROUGH** PM Modi with CM Nitish, deputy CM Samrat Choudhary at a rally in Purnea, Sept. 15

### MANNING THE FORTS

**T**he NDA leadership knew it had a tough fight on its hands, and that it needed to come out all guns blazing. As late as June, BJP insiders say, when the first election posters appeared, the NDA was still very apprehensive. Nitish’s personal image was dividing opinion, and seat-sharing talks were going nowhere. By contrast, Tejashwi’s sparkle was the talk of the town, while Prashant Kishor’s Jan Suraaj Yatra was drawing large crowds. Realising they had no time to lose, the NDA partners got their act together. By the time the poll dates were announced, they were talking booth logistics while the MGB was still haggling over seats.

Among the big changes the NDA made this time was a ‘structural reordering’, dividing the state into five organisational zones for sharper micro-management. So, there was the Patna zone (covering Patna, Nalanda and Nawada); Magadh and Shahabad (including Bhojpur and Rohtas); Kosi, Seemanchal and Anga (across Purnia, Katihar and Bhagalpur); Saran and Champaran (Saran, Siwan, and East



## BJP'S ON-GROUND STRATEGY

► **Five zones:** Each operational zone with dedicated *prabhari* for ground execution, troubleshooting and hyper-local adaptation

► **Nightly review:** Closed-door, no-frills meetings where Amit Shah grilled zone heads

► **SOP-driven campaign:** Pre-poll checklists, daily booth-level reporting etc

► **Motorbike rallies:** Held every morning and dusk to reinforce NDA party symbols and candidate recall in remote belts

► **Conduct protocol:** No gutka, no loose talk, no unvetted social media posts

### The five-zone grid's feedback proved crucial on two issues—Nitish's resurgent popularity and the need to accelerate spending on women's schemes

and West Champaran); and Mithilanchal. Each zone had a dedicated *pravasi prabhari* (outstation leader) stationed in the region who was tasked with building the organisation and creating a real-time feedback loop that cut through inner party bottlenecks.

The zone divisions were a deliberate re-engineering of the campaign's nervous system. The BJP think-tank realised that Seemanchal's anxieties—shaped by its borderland geography, cross-border migration patterns and minority demography—were fundamentally different from Magadh's agrarian rhythms or Shahabad's caste formations. Treating them as

interchangeable, Shah knew, had been a chronic mistake of past campaigns. As one BJP source put it, the five-zone grid ensured the party “responded to political reality rather than to the party's fantasies”.

### THE VITAL FEEDBACK LOOP

In fact, the network's intervention on two issues proved how crucial it was. They were the first to give feedback that Nitish's popularity was seeing a revival, perhaps the reason why the BJP reversed its initial decision of not backing him as the NDA's chief ministerial candidate. It culminated in Shah's October 29 comment that there is “no vacancy for the post of PM of India and CM of Bihar”, which sealed the issue for many voters. In late July, it also flagged the need to accelerate spending on social sector schemes targeting poor women, a direct result of which was the Rs 10,000 direct benefit transfer. Despite its controversial timing, just before the model code of conduct took effect, this proved to be a game-changer, the money in the women's accounts becoming proof of delivery

**WINSOME LOT** PM Modi, CM Nitish, LJP(RV) chief Chirag Paswan and RLM chief Upendra Kushwaha at a rally in Samastipur, Oct. 24



ANI

and a central rallying point to boost female voter turnout. Instead of a dole, the NDA narrative also framed the transfer as empowerment for starting small businesses, which possibly did wonders for the self-esteem of the ladies. The special Chhath puja trains to Bihar may also have helped the BJP as party morchas had been active among the Purvanchali communities in various states.

Visual symbolism was another big constant. When the BJP team issued instructions against sloganeering or ‘gutka-chewing processions’, it was the Sangh cadre who enforced the code. The campaign’s tone—orderly, polite, restrained—was deliberate, a sharp contrast to the RJD’s raucous rallies. It was the same with the dawn and dusk motorcycle rallies that wound through villages carrying alliance flags. Often the colours were not saffron but those of smaller allies—the LJP, Hindustani Awam Morcha (Secular) or RLM. Recognition mattered more than authorship; the goal was to imprint a symbol in the voter’s mind. When the little-known RLM candidate Madhav Anand won in Madhubani, polling nearly 98,000 votes under the

‘gas cylinder’ symbol, BJP managers called it proof that the “shared symbol” strategy had worked. Indeed, the smaller allies won 28 of the 41 seats allocated to them.

The 2024 Lok Sabha setback had exposed the weaknesses in the BJP’s middle-rung leadership. District presidents complained that booth workers had drifted away to do odd jobs. To rebuild, the RSS revived the *sampark abhiyaans*—a door-to-door outreach. By early 2025, over 4,000 daily shakhas were functioning again, compared to 2,800 a year earlier. This surge coincided with a spurt in small-scale welfare events: helping with housing paperwork, facilitating PM-Kisan registrations, eye check-up camps. For many villagers, the

‘social worker’ v=became synonymous with the ‘RSS volunteer’. That invisible groundwork and their feedback gave the data in Shah’s nightly reviews credibility. So, when reports came in from Seemanchal about fence-sitting minority voters, or from Rohtas about surplus youth volunteers, he knew they were genuine. “It was Sangh intelligence that filled the gaps in our data sheets,” says a BJP campaign manager.

**The orderly, polite and restrained tone of the NDA campaign was deliberate, to bring out the sharp contrast with the raucous RJD rallies**



# THE NDA'S FOUR-PRONGED STRATEGY

*...as explained by a top BJP poll campaign leader*

■ **Communication**  
Building and deepening connections with allies

■ **Widen social base**  
Expanding reach to cover a larger social rainbow

■ **High turnout**  
Ensuring support base came out to vote, not just for party men but also for allies

■ **Star campaigner** Use PM Modi's image to contrast with opponents' 'misgovernance', promise better delivery

## THE SOCIAL ALLIANCE

The BJP also brought clarity on two fundamental issues early on. One, it enunciated a clear stand on the caste-based census, helping it retain its clout among the forward castes. By declaring its intent on caste enumeration in the upcoming national census, the party denied the Mahagathbandhan (MGB) the narrative that it was opposed to caste-based reservation. The party also effectively curtailed dissent among Rajput leaders, especially Rajiv Pratap Rudy, and won over actor-politician Pawan Singh. The party fielded 49 candidates from among the forward castes and 40 from the backward communities. The remaining 12 candidates were Dalits. Those who didn't fall in line, like former Union minister R.K. Singh with his post-poll allegations, were shown the door.

This level of coordination stood in stark contrast with the lack of cohesion in the MGB, which ended up fielding rival candidates against each other in 11 seats. The Opposition parties also showed little interest in calibrating candidates with the social geography of the constituencies, filling their quota with little regard for who was best placed to win where. The result was an absence of ground synergy, the very opposite of the NDA's tightly welded machinery. Even the Congress's 'vote chor' allegations failed to get traction in such an environment.



COVER STORY

BIHAR MANDATE

The NDA strategy to not engage and keep the narrative focused elsewhere also deflated the Opposition's charges.

A top BJP leader explained the four-pronged poll strategy in Bihar—build and deepen communication with allies; expand reach to newer bases so as to create a larger social rainbow; ensure high turnout of support base not just for party candidates but also allies; and use Prime Minister Narendra Modi's image to highlight the alleged misgovernance of opponents while also promising better, efficient delivery.

A classic case study of the NDA's winning poll strategy unfolded in the Magadh-Shahabad region, a terrain that had long been the NDA's Achilles' heel. An RJD-Left stronghold for decades, the NDA won 39 of the 48 assembly seats in the zone, a strike rate of 81.2 per cent, in contrast to eight in 2020. Of the MGB's implosion from 110 to 35 seats, 33 of those losses can be traced to this single region. "Every message, every intervention," says Prof. Swadeshi Singh of the Political Science department in Delhi University, "was designed to reinforce the perception of delivery and discipline. This has helped the BJP build what I call a governance-based social alliance. The poll results show how this alliance can transcend older caste and communal boundaries."

## MAKING HISTORY

The result was nothing short of transformative. For the first time, the BJP emerged as the single largest party in a state it had never ruled. The NDA won 202 of Bihar's 243 seats. The BJP managed to marry a narrative about progress, continuity and a Modi-Nitish 'double engine' to one that, conversely, revived anxieties about disorder, loosely gathered under the old fear of RJD's 'jungle raj'. A subliminal suggestion that a volte face could return Bihar to a lawless past became a prompt for risk aversion. When presented with two choices—a tested, if imperfect, administration that delivers benefits, or a passionate outsider promising wholesale change—a significant slice of the electorate chose the familiar.

Today, when the victory math is added up, the NDA's vote share has touched 46.5 per cent—up from 37.2 in 2020. While the BJP vote share saw a marginal increase (19.5 to 20.1 per cent), the JD(U) jumped almost four points (15.4 to 19.3 per cent). In fact, the JD(U) executed its strategy well, keeping the emphasis on its governance record, and delivery of welfare schemes. Rahul Verma, political scientist and fellow at the Centre for Policy Research (CPR), says, "The BJP is now the elder brother in coalitions, not only taking the onus of running the campaign but also ensuring that the strike rate of partners stays high. To borrow a cricketing analogy, both batters at the crease have to score for a big total—you can't have a Sehwag at one end and someone who isn't rotating the strike at the other." What's important to ensure a historic victory, as the NDA *jodi* showed, was to play as a team and not as individual stars and to never take your eyes off the ball. ■

**FOR WANT OF EVIDENCE** Surinder Koli walks free after the Supreme Court struck down his final remaining conviction in the Nithari killings, Nov. 12. He was sentenced to death in 13 trials for raping, killing and dismembering children and women in Noida in 2005-06



THE BIG STORY | HEINOUS MURDERS

# SHAMEFUL CONVI RATES

ACQUITTALS IN SENSATIONAL CASES HIGHLIGHT A CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM BUCKLING UNDER STRUCTURAL FAILURES

## ON

a dark November evening, a thin, greying man stepped out of Luksar Jail in Greater Noida. Masked and clutching a small cloth bag, he walked into a world that had once demanded his death. This was Surinder Koli—long cast as a ‘monster’ and a ‘man-eater’. For nearly two decades, he remained imprisoned for the 2006 Nithari killings, a case that horrified the country after skeletal remains of children and

women surfaced in a drain behind the Noida bungalow of businessman Moninder Singh Pandher, Koli’s employer. Allegations of serial murder, necrophilia and cannibalism fuelled a media frenzy, and police charged both men with luring, raping, killing and dismembering at least 16 victims.

Between 2009 and 2017, Koli was convicted in 13 separate trials and sentenced to death each time; Pandher received two death sentences. But the foundation of the case gradually crumbled. In October 2023, the Allahabad High Court acquitted Koli in 12 cases and Pandher in both of his, calling the investigation “botched-up”, “casual”

and “perfunctory”. On November 11 this year, the Supreme Court struck down Koli’s final remaining conviction, reiterating that “suspicion, however grave, cannot substitute proof”. With that, the Nithari case collapsed.

Koli’s release has reopened an uncomfortable truth: India’s most sensational criminal cases are increasingly falling apart under judicial scrutiny. On July 21, the Bombay High Court overturned the convictions of 12 men in the 2006 Mumbai serial train blasts. Five had been on death row. The court held that the prosecution had “utterly failed” to prove the case. Ten days later, a special court acquitted



# ACTION

By Kaushik Deka

all seven accused in the 2008 Malegaon bomb blast case, including former BJP MP Pragya Singh Thakur and Lieutenant Colonel Prasad Purohit. Seventeen years after the attack, which killed six people near a mosque during Ramzan, the judge concluded that there was only “strong suspicion”, but no proof.

Across these cases, one theme is unmistakable: the real perpetrators remain unidentified, not because they have evaded the law, but because the system meant to catch them has faltered, thanks to botched investigations, compromised evidence and procedural failures. Alarmed by the declining quality of police investigations and low conviction rates in criminal cases,

**72.7%**  
REGISTERED  
CRIMINAL CASES  
IN WHICH POLICE  
MANAGED TO FILE  
CHARGE-SHEETS

**54%**  
CRIMINAL  
CASES IN WHICH  
CONVICTIONS  
WERE SECURED  
SUCCESSFULLY

**37.7%**  
THE CONVICTION  
RATE IN MURDER  
CASES, EVEN AS  
CHARGE-SHEETS  
WERE FILED IN 85.7%

Source: NCRB's 'Crime in India 2023' report

the Supreme Court in September 2023 advocated a national “code of investigation”. Nearly two years later, on August 5 this year, the court issued an unusually blunt criticism: the system, it said, had become reliant on the “optics” of arresting and jailing suspects while neglecting scientific investigation, institutional reform and witness protection.

The numbers reveal the depth of the problem. The National Crime Records Bureau's 'Crime in India 2023' report shows that the national charge-sheeting rate has slipped from 79.6 per cent in 2014 to 72.7 per cent. In major metros, it's just 51.7 per cent. Even in serious offences, outcomes remain weak: the conviction rate for murder is just 37.7 per cent despite an 85.7 per cent charge-sheeting rate. In Maharashtra, where both the Malegaon and Mumbai terror blasts took place, the conviction rate in criminal cases is 49.1 per cent, below the national av-

erage of 54 per cent. Uttar Pradesh, despite a stronger criminal justice record with a conviction rate of 75 per cent, failed spectacularly in the Nithari case. Central agencies show a similar slide. The Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) filed closure reports in 174 cases in 2024 for want of evidence—the highest in any year. In the previous two years combined, it had filed only 94.

## POLICE STRETCHED THIN

Much of the problem begins with a basic arithmetic failure. India has just 155 police officers per 100,000 people—far below the 222 recommended by the United Nations, and even its own sanctioned strength of 197. Some states fare far worse: Bihar, for instance, functions with only 81. The result is predictable. Investigating officers juggle multiple serious crimes while simultaneously managing VIP movements, crowd control and riot response. Add to that the paperwork, and they are left with little time for thorough evidence-collection or witness-tracking. In rural areas, where a single police station may cover over 300 sq. km, officers often struggle even to reach crime scenes on time. A senior Delhi Police officer, speaking to INDIA TODAY on condition of anonymity, breaks it down: “A thorough investigation requires visiting crime scenes, collecting physical evidence, interviewing witnesses, documenting statements, coordinating with forensic experts and maintaining the chain of custody for evidence. Now, divide the working hours in a month by several hundred cases...”

Compounding the problem is the absence of a dedicated detective cadre. Unlike in many developed countries, India relies on general-



**“In most cases, investigations do meet high standards. Whether a case results in conviction depends on how the court evaluates the evidence”**

**RAKESH ASTHANA**

*Former Special Director, CBI,  
& Police Commissioner, Delhi*

duty police personnel to investigate everything from petty theft to organised crime. Former CBI special director Rakesh Asthana, who also served as Delhi police commissioner, argues that dividing duties is essential. During his tenure, he created a separate investigation wing within the Delhi Police with dedicated manpower, calling it “the world’s largest metropolitan force”. But not everyone is convinced. An IPS officer in West Bengal warns that such a split could dent morale: “When those on street duty see investigators staying at the station, they might start questioning their own role.”

### SHODDY INVESTIGATIONS

**F**orensic investigators say most cases are lost not in courts but at crime scenes. Evidence is routinely trampled, contaminated or ignored within minutes. The 2008 Noida double murder offered a textbook example: poorly trained police officers allowed 15 people, including media personnel, to move freely through the apartment where 14-year-old Aarushi Talwar was found murdered. Twenty-eight fingerprint samples became unusable due to smudging.

India allocates less than 1.25 per cent of its police budgets to training; only four states cross even 2 per cent. The infrastructure supporting investigations is equally compromised. According to the ‘India Justice Report 2025’, out of nearly 10,000 sanctioned posts in forensic laboratories across states, nearly 50 per cent lie vacant. In many states, even basic resources like fuel for police vehicles or stationery often run out.

Perhaps the deepest flaw is a historical over-reliance on custodial confessions, often obtained through violence. India still has no standalone anti-torture law, despite signing the UN Convention Against Torture in 1997. This, when the country recorded 1,169 custodial deaths between 2011 and 2022. Not one police officer has been convicted.

Even in the Mumbai train blasts case, the Bombay High Court described

# ACQUITTALS THAT



HINDU TIMES

### • MALEGAON BLAST (2008)

Six killed, over 100 injured in a Ramzan-time blast in Maharashtra town. **All seven suspects acquitted in July 2025** as the NIA court found “no reliable evidence”. Among them were Pragya Thakur (above) and Lt Col. Prasad Purohit, alleged to be linked to Hindu extremist groups

### • NOIDA DOUBLE MURDER (2008)

Aarushi Talwar, 14, found murdered in her bedroom; domestic help Hemraj’s body recovered from the terrace. **Aarushi’s parents were convicted, but later acquitted in 2017** as the court found “no direct evidence on record” and called the CBI’s honour killing theory “patently absurd”. Appeals are pending in the Supreme Court

confessions as extracted through “barbaric and inhuman” methods. In Nithari, police leaned almost entirely on Koli’s confession before the magistrate—recorded after nearly 60 days of police custody, without legal aid. There was no medical examination, the brain mapping test lacked oversight, and the confession itself had signs of tutoring and coercion.

### COURTS IN SLOW MOTION

**E**ven when the police manage to gather substantial evidence, India’s slow-moving courts often ensure it withers long before a verdict. The judiciary is overwhelmed: more than 53 million cases are pending and, by NITI Aayog’s estimates, clearing the backlog at

current disposal rates would take 324 years. A key reason: India has barely 21 judges per million people, far below the roughly 150 in the US.

Asthana argues that most acquittals have little to do with shoddy investigations. Cases, he says, often collapse because judges demand rigorous procedural proof, even when guilt appears unmistakable. Much turns on whether witnesses can recall small details years later—the colour of a victim’s clothes, the sequence of events—gaps that defence lawyers in high-stakes trials exploit with precision. “In most cases, investigations do meet high standards,” says Asthana. “Whether a case results in conviction depends on how the court evaluates the evidence. Often, the court simply

# EXPOSED SYSTEMIC FAULTS

## • MUMBAI SERIAL TRAIN BLASTS (2006)

Seven coordinated blasts killed 189 and injured 800+. The Bombay **High Court acquitted all 12 accused in July 2025** (below), saying the prosecution had “utterly failed” and cited dubious identification parades and witness testimonies. The **Supreme Court stayed the acquittal** while allowing the 12 men to remain free; appeals are pending



## • MECCA MASJID BLAST (2007)

Eight killed in the Hyderabad mosque blast. All five accused, including Swami Aseemanand, **acquitted in 2018** after 64 of 226 witnesses turned hostile. The NIA did not appeal, citing lack of evidence

## • NITHARI KILLINGS (2005-06)

At least 16 children and women were sexually assaulted and murdered in a Noida locality, their remains discovered near the house of businessman M.S. Pandher (inset). His domestic help Surinder Koli's confession led to both being sentenced to death in multiple cases. But **Pandher was acquitted in 2023**, and **Koli walked free in November 2025** after his final conviction was overturned by the SC. It noted that “suspicion, however grave, cannot substitute proof”



## • AKSHARDHAM ATTACK (2002)

The terror attack in Gandhinagar killed 33. Six men convicted under POTA were **acquitted by the Supreme Court in 2014**, which said Gujarat Police relied on coerced confessions, case “collapsed at every turn”

## • BEST BAKERY CASE (2002)

Fourteen people were burnt alive in a mob attack during the Gujarat riots in Vadodara. **All 21 accused were acquitted in 2003** after 37 witnesses turned hostile. A Supreme Court-ordered **retrial led to mixed verdicts**. Four life terms were finally upheld by Bombay HC in 2012



**“The defence hires the best. The state often sends someone with neither the training nor the motivation”**

**SOUMEN MITRA**  
Former Police  
Commissioner, Kolkata

finds the evidence insufficient. Many times, acquittals in lower courts are overturned in the high court.”

But courts do not operate in a sealed environment. Trials are often derailed because witnesses retract or dilute their statements. Nearly 57 per cent of trial delays stem from non-appearance of parties and witnesses. In the Best Bakery case during the Gujarat riots, key witness Zahira Sheikh recanted her testimony after alleged intimidation. In all, 37 witnesses turned hostile. “Given the dire shortage of judges and court infrastructure, delays are inevitable,” says Soumyajit Raha, an advocate in the Calcutta High Court. “The longer a case drags on, the greater the opportunity for witnesses to be threatened, influenced or bought.” Only recently, the Supreme Court reprimanded the Uttar Pradesh Police for failing to act on a threat

complaint from a key witness in the 2021 Lakhimpur Kheri violence, involving Ashish Mishra, son of then Union minister Ajay Kumar Mishra ‘Teni’.

Adding to the imbalance is the stark disparity in legal representation. Wealthy defendants can hire top lawyers, while public prosecutors remain poorly paid, overworked and often inexperienced in complex trials. “The defence hires the best,” says former Kolkata police commissioner Soumen Mitra. “The state often sends someone with neither the training nor the motivation.” Coordination between investigators and prosecutors is also alarmingly weak. “The officer who builds the case rarely sees it through to its conclusion,” adds Mitra. Evidence is then presented without narrative continuity, and subtle but crucial links inside the case file get lost.

## ROAD TO REFORM

This is the terrain the new criminal laws—the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS) and the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita (BNSS)—seek to reshape. Together, they constitute the most sweeping overhaul of policing and criminal procedure since Independence. One of the most consequential changes is the mandatory audio-visual recording of searches and seizures under Section 105 of the BNSS. Delhi Police have already deployed bodycams. If replicated nationally, such recordings will help corroborate police claims and deter allegations of tampering.

The BNSS also makes it mandatory to involve forensic experts in all cases involving offences punishable with seven years or more. Many states have begun appointing district-level crime scene officers trained at the national police academy. Going a step further, Haryana and Odisha have introduced mobile forensic units and cyber tools to support on-ground officers. Section 193 of the BNSS also allows police to electronically transmit charge-sheets and case files, a measure intended to cut logistical delays and align investigators with prosecutors. Even electronic evidence—from CCTV clips to WhatsApp chats—is formally recognised in court.

Training and oversight have received renewed focus. Investigating officers are now being put through structured modules on evidence-gathering, digital tools and victim sensitivity. For serious offences, senior officers must personally monitor investigations and submit monthly review reports to district magistrates and oversight boards. The new laws also introduce strict deadlines. For instance, judgments should be delivered within 30 days of the close of arguments, extendable to 45 days if valid reasons are recorded.

Meanwhile, a large-scale, technology-driven infrastructure push is underway. The Crime and Criminal Tracking Network & Systems (CCTNS) has been rolled out to digitise and

## WHY CASES COLLAPSE IN COURT

- Reliance on coerced confessions instead of independent evidence
- Contaminated or poorly preserved crime scene evidence
- Inadequate forensic support due to understaffed labs
- Shortage of trained investigating officers, juggling law and order with complex cases
- Judicial backlog and shortage of judges, prolonging trials
- Hostile witnesses due to threats, inducements or delays; weak witness protection mechanisms
- Inexperienced or poorly paid prosecutors
- Poor coordination between police and prosecution, weakening case presentation

streamline crime records nationwide, while the Inter-operable Criminal Justice System 2.0 (ICJS 2.0) strengthens IT integration across police, courts, prosecution departments, prisons and forensic units. Backed by Rs 1,448.5 crore in central funding, the initiative follows a ‘One Data, One Entry’ model—ensuring evidence collected at the scene is seamlessly accessible to prosecutors and courts. “Earlier, we had to rely on witnesses to sign seizure

documents, some of whom later turned hostile or inconsistent. Now, every detail is uploaded to e-Sakshya (for tamper-proof evidence capture) and instantly available to the courts,” says Prakash Medhi, additional SP (HQ), Sivasagar, Assam.

The Centre has also invested over Rs 2,000 crore in modernising forensic laboratories and launched e-Forensics to connect labs nationwide. The initiative helps states upgrade facilities, procure mobile forensic vans and expand educational infrastructure to train qualified experts.

Yet the fate of these reforms rests on a hard truth: meaningful change requires political will. For decades, committees have proposed similar structural fixes. In 2006, the Supreme Court’s ruling in the Prakash Singh case attempted to hardwire them through a seven-point directive, including the creation of independent police complaints authorities and separation of investigation from law-and-order duties in high-crime districts. Almost 20 years on, compliance remains patchy or diluted. Without a genuine commitment from the political leadership to overhaul the system, justice in India will continue to move in slow motion—defined by the familiar spectacle of dramatic arrests followed by agonising acquittals. ■

—with Arkamoy Datta Majumdar,  
Dhaval S. Kulkarni & Jumana Shah



**“Given the dire shortage of judges, delays are inevitable. The longer a case drags on, the greater the opportunity for witnesses to be threatened or influenced”**

**SOUMYAJIT RAHA**  
Advocate, Calcutta  
High Court

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# RUNWAYS TO NOWHERE

**INDIA'S REGIONAL AVIATION DREAM WAS MEANT TO DEMOCRATISE THE SKIES. INSTEAD, IDLE RUNWAYS AND VANISHED AIRLINES REVEAL A SOBERING REALITY OF MONUMENTS TO AMBITION STALLED MID-FLIGHT**

By **Avishek G. Dastidar**



**T**HE AIRPORT TERMINAL AT BHAVNAGAR IN GUJARAT looks freshly painted, but the air inside smells stale. Rows of plastic chairs are stacked in a corner. The baggage scanner, unplugged and dusty, stands like a relic from a different time. No planes have taken off or landed here for months.

It's a story that repeats itself in several of the 93 airports, including heliports and water aerodromes—part of the Udan or the Ude Desh ka Aam Nagrik scheme the Modi government had launched in 2016, with the intention of making flying accessible to the

common citizen and connecting small-town India through affordable air routes. Investment had followed intent, with more than Rs 4,638 crore spent on developing and reviving these airports over multiple phases.

The number of airports under the Airports Authority of India (AAI) has more than doubled to 163, from about 70 in 2014-15. The government claims to have operationalised 649 Udan routes. But the early optimism has dimmed. Of the 93 Udan airports, the AAI officially counts 20 as 'non-operational', while many others across the country remain stalled.

# UDAN AT A GLANCE

## Launched

in 2016 to connect Tier-2 and Tier-3 cities through affordable air routes

## Rs 4,638 cr.

invested to develop or revive 93 airports, heliports, etc. on 649 routes so far

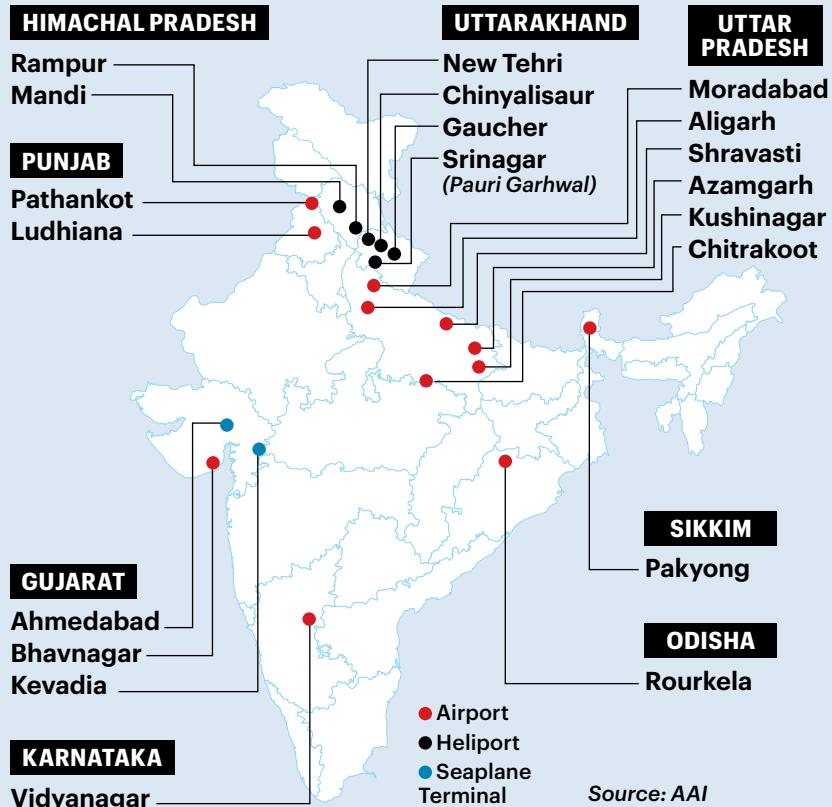
## 20 airports

or 22% of the total 93 Udan airports have been tagged 'non-operational' by the AAI

## Rs 1,089 cr.

spent on Udan airports that never opened or closed prematurely, as per the CAG's 2023 estimates

## NON-OPERATIONAL AIRPORTS



Source: AAI

## PAKYONG AIRPORT Sikkim

**NO FLIGHTS SINCE JUNE 2024**

**Cost: Rs 605 cr.**

**Opened: Sept. 24, 2018 (Udan 2.0)**

**Routes: Kolkata, Guwahati, Delhi**

**Highlight:** Operations were suspended for the first time from Jun. 1, 2019 to Jan. 23, 2021

**Key Issues:** Despite adverse weather and limited visibility, the airport is equipped solely with visual navigation aids

## Rs 4,300 cr.

disbursed as Viability Gap Funding (VGF) to airlines to offset losses from capped fares

## 70 per cent

of 371 routes that took off in Udan 1-3 couldn't even last the full three-year VGF period, the CAG found in 2023

So, at Vellore in Tamil Nadu, the terminal stands ready, but the runway still falls short of the Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) norms. In Bihar's Raxaul, no airline has shown interest in any of the bidding rounds. The revival of Donakonda in Andhra Pradesh is held up by a land demarcation dispute. Warangal in neighbouring Telangana still awaits navigational aids and the all-important security clearance from the defence ministry.

This when India's aviation story has never looked better. Passenger traffic is hitting new highs—161.3 million people flew on domestic routes in 2024, up 6.1 per cent from the year before. Airlines, too, are in expansion mode: India's commercial fleet has more than doubled over the past decade and is projected to cross 1,200 aircraft by 2030 from 680 today. Yet India's ambitions come undone in the face of many of its smaller airports failing to take off.

## AIRLINES HIT TURBULENCE

**T**here are several reasons why this is the case. Airlines like Alliance Air cite the lack of night-landing facilities, erratic weather and minimal ground support at the new airports. SpiceJet and Star Air point to high aviation turbine fuel (ATF) costs and dwindling demand on short routes. Even the AAI now admits that many terminals were completed, but “operations could not materialise due to non-interest of airlines or non-readiness of runways”.

Take, for instance, the Kushinagar International Airport in Uttar Pradesh, inaugurated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in October 2021. Initially, SpiceJet operated four flights per week on the Delhi-Kushinagar route under Udan 4.0. Kolkata and Mumbai routes had also been allotted. But soon the service became sporadic and was halted altogether in November 2023, citing aircraft shortage and low demand. The airline is now expected to begin 78-seater flights to Saharanpur in January 2026. A few routes have been



## KUSHINAGAR AIRPORT, Uttar Pradesh

**NO FLIGHTS SINCE NOVEMBER 2023**

**Cost:** Rs 260 cr.

**Opened:** Oct. 20, 2021 (Udan 4.0)

**Routes:** Delhi, Kolkata, Mumbai

**Highlight:** Got international airport status in June 2020; inaugural flight landed from Colombo

**Key Issues:** The airport initially lacked facilities for low-visibility operations; later affected by weak passenger demand and the airline's financial troubles



**“The airports have been set up in anticipation of Udan, but the routes that are being opened under the scheme are not surviving”**

**KAPIL KAUL, CEO, CAPA India**

awarded to a new firm, Jettwings, but it has yet to make any firm commitment.

“The airports have been set up in anticipation of Udan, but the routes that are being opened under the scheme are not surviving,” says Kapil Kaul, CEO of aviation consultancy CAPA India. “And that’s after half a billion dollars were spent on Viability Gap Funding (VGF).” VGF was payment to airlines for the shortfall arising out of the Rs 2,500 fare cap on half the seats for an hour-long journey. Government records show that concessions amounting to Rs 4,300 crore have been disbursed so far. It is intended to be a three-year cushion, after which the airlines are left to absorb the full cost.

Most can’t. And so a financial model that was meant to be a lifeline has ended up becoming a trap.

A Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) report in 2023 found that more than half of the 774 routes awarded in Udan’s first three phases never took off. Of the 371 that did, only 112 completed the full concession period. And only 54, or 7 per cent of the awarded routes, could sustain the operations, as of March 2023.

Airlines argue that financing small aircraft, especially for low-traffic routes, is nearly impossible without government backing. “They want sovereign guarantees,” says a senior civil aviation official, on the condition

of anonymity. “We tell them the letter of intent to operate on a route is enough to secure financing, but they want the Centre to underwrite aircraft loans. That is not possible.”

Unsurprisingly, smaller operators, lacking deep pockets, often struggle to stay afloat on these thin routes. For instance, FlyBig, a Gurugram-based small carrier, has had to transfer 19 Udan routes—many of which never took off—to SkyHop, a company linked to SpiceJet promoter Ajay Singh. Elsewhere, the sector has weathered significant volatility. Ambitious connections to cities like Mysuru, Salem and Shimla were disrupted after new operators exited. The routes were later re-auctioned to maintain service, attracting established players—but even they face significant challenges.

In an effort to connect hilly and remote areas, the government in later phases also extended Udan to helicopter routes across Uttarakhand, Himachal Pradesh, Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim. Conceptually, it made sense: pilgrims and tourists could fly over difficult terrain. But the plan soon fal-



**Once an airport is ready, flights will have to operate there, even if they are not operational now.... The fact remains that Udan has made flying accessible to the common man”**

**VIPIN KUMAR**, Chairman,  
Airports Authority of India

tered. The CAG later found that most heliports were under-equipped and unsafe, with feasibility studies either rushed or missing. Helicopter operations in Uttarakhand remain hazardous. In 2025 alone, two major crashes occurred on the Char Dham routes, claiming 13 lives, blamed on steep terrain and sudden weather changes.

Unpredictable weather, combined with the lack of an instrument landing system (ILS), is also a key reason why Pakyong Airport in Sikkim has remained closed since June 2024. “Small Udan airports lack ILS, necessitating high visibility to operate. This causes frequent cancellations across the north, east and northeast routes,” explains V.P. Agarwal, former chairman of AAI.

### SO, WHO'S PAYING?

The problem is that the real cost of these grounded airports is borne not by the operators, but by the public exchequer. Across the 20 ‘non-operational’ airports, routine expenses on maintenance, electricity and staffing add up to over Rs 90 crore annually. The CAG estimated that Rs 1,089 crore were spent on developing Udan airports and heliports that never opened or closed prematurely. This, when the AAI’s operational losses have touched Rs 10,853 crore over the past decade.

Still, AAI chairman Vipin Kumar remains upbeat. “Once an airport is ready, flights will have to operate there, even if they are not operational now,” he says. “With the growth in aviation, these airports will be vital in expand-

ing India’s domestic network.” Kaul agrees—up to a point. “Eventually, these airports will connect, and some of the airlines will be viable,” he says. “But till then, it continues to be a hard choice.”

The civil aviation ministry insists that Udan is functioning as intended. “It is a demand-driven [scheme],” minister of state for civil aviation Murlidhar Mohol told Parliament in March. “Airlines run routes that are commercially viable. The government [provides] infrastructure and incentives, but it does not control how a business should function.” Officials also point out that 46 of the 114 discontinued routes were later revived—26 with VGF concessions

### FILLING THE GAPS

► **Airports/ routes were launched without solid feasibility studies, leading to weak traffic, incomplete infrastructure and heavy reliance on subsidies**

► **A data-driven Route Viability Matrix can prioritise airports where passenger potential, road/rail alternatives and local economic activity justify air links**

► **Proposed routes should be evaluated holistically; airlines asked for a business plan before bidding**

and 20 without—suggesting that the model can mature over time.

The government is now pushing Udan 5.5, which aims to link 120 more destinations—including helipads and water aerodromes—over the next decade. But analysts warn that expansion without reform risks repeating old mistakes. “Unless regional airports attract substantial traffic volumes, generating revenue from both aeronautical and non-aeronautical sources will remain a challenge,” says a CAPA advisory. Even the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Transport, Tourism and Culture has called for a specialised asset utilisation optimisation model to identify inefficiencies at underperforming airports and explore alternative aviation uses for such facilities.

### A SECOND WIND

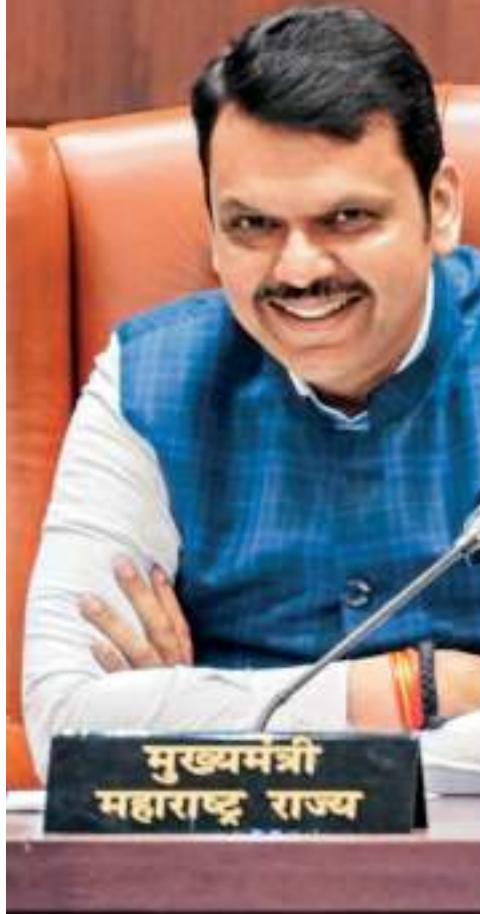
**P**olicymakers are constantly on the lookout to use or repurpose idle assets. While Udan is driving the restoration of smaller regional terminals, bigger assets are being leased out to private entities under the National Monetisation Pipeline. The civil enclave at Hindon near Delhi has been operationalised for regional connectivity, with scheduled commercial flights now connecting it to cities like Nanded and Adampur. Similarly, Salem Airport in Tamil Nadu has emerged as a destination for Flying Training Organisations (FTOs) and has successfully resumed operations to Chennai. “If you can’t keep them alive commercially, at least make the assets work,” says a senior government official.

Nor is it entirely a lost cause, as some routes have taken off. Like Darbhanga in Bihar, which has seen record-breaking traffic around Diwali and Chhath—76,000 passengers and 522 flights in just one month. Routes like Jalgaon-Mumbai and Jharsuguda-Kolkata have turned profitable for operators even after subsidies lapsed. “The fact remains that Udan has made flying accessible to the common man,” says Vipin Kumar. “Today, everyone can consider air travel alongside trains and buses. That will continue.” However, the true test will lie in whether these airports will someday support flights that fly on demand, not subsidies. ■

# PAWAR IN THE DOCK

**A DISPUTED LAND DEAL INVOLVING  
AJIT PAWAR'S SON PARTH PUTS THE NCP  
CHIEF AND DEPUTY CM ON THE DEFENSIVE  
AND EXPOSES CRACKS IN THE RULING  
MAHAYUTI AHEAD OF LOCAL BODY POLLS**

By DHAVAL S. KULKARNI



# M

**Maharashtra deputy chief minister Ajit Pawar's political career has rarely been without controversy—be it graft allegations in irrigation contracts, charges of irregularities in the Maharashtra State Cooperative Bank, coalition flip-flops, or splitting the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP). The latest challenge comes from a multi-crore disputed land deal in Pune linked to his son Parth.**

The scandal involving the state's ministers and leaders comes amid the intensifying tussle for political space and power within the ruling Mahayuti, comprising Ajit's NCP, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Shiv Sena, ahead of the local bodies election slated for next month.

In May, Amadea Enterprises LLP—in which Parth, Ajit's elder son, and his

maternal cousin Digvijay Amarsinh Patil are directors—purchased around 40 acres of prime land in Pune's Mundhwa-Koregaon Park. Amadea entered a Rs 300 crore sale deed, when the market value of the land may be around Rs 1,800 crore. Just Rs 500 was paid as stamp duty instead of Rs 21 crore, leading to a loss of revenue for the exchequer. The government land is on lease with the Botanical Survey of India till 2038 (see *A Shady Land Deal*).

After the controversy broke early this month, an FIR was filed against three persons, including Patil, but what has raised eyebrows is that Parth was not named, despite holding a majority stake in the company. Tehsildar Suryakant Yewale and sub-registrar R.B. Taru (named in the FIR) have been suspended. Also booked was Sheetal Tejwani, who holds the powers of attorney from the 272 descendants of the original landowners from the Mahar (Buddhist Dalit) community. The Mahars had been given this land by the British as *watan* or grants in return for their hereditary services to

the village community.

Ajit, for his part, had earlier announced that the sale deed had been cancelled and that "not even a rupee was invested" in the transaction. Denying any link to the deal, he did admit that he was aware that this transaction was in the offing. "Around three to four months ago, I came to know that something was underway," he told reporters. "I said I would not tolerate such wrongdoings... and gave clear instructions to this effect." Chief minister Devendra Fadnavis admitted that "prima facie, the facts coming forth were serious" and said the signatories to the deal and the vendors had been named in the FIR. "There is no reason for us to shield anyone," he added. However, on November 18, a committee headed by a joint inspector general of registration, indicted only the three persons named in the FIR. That said, a parallel probe is underway by a panel led by additional chief secretary (revenue) Vikas Kharge.

Shiv Sena (Uddhav Balasaheb Thackeray) leader and former leader of the Opposition Ambadas Danve has



ANI

**“Prima facie, the facts coming forth were serious... and the signatories to the deal and the vendors had been named in the FIR... There is no reason for us to shield anyone”**

—DEVENDRA FADNAVIS  
Chief Minister, Maharashtra

**“Around three to four months ago, I came to know that something was underway. I said I would not tolerate such wrong-doings... and gave clear instructions to this effect”**

—AJIT PAWAR  
Deputy CM, Maharashtra

claimed that in a meeting at the CM's official residence, an incensed Ajit threatened to walk out of the government and support it from outside. However, revenue minister Chandrashekhar Bawankule has denied this. Sachin Sawant, secretary, All India Congress Committee, has charged that Parth is being shielded. "This is a blatant abuse of power," he said, while seeking Ajit's resignation.

## CUTTING DOWN PAWAR

The Parth Pawar controversy comes at a time when a senior BJP leader is facing flak over a similar land deal in Pune. Murlidhar Mohol, Union minister of state and Lok Sabha MP from Pune, has found himself in a spot over the sale of Seth Hirachand Nemchand Digambar Jain Boarding by Seth Hirachand Nemchand Smarak Trust at Model Colony

to a construction company. Mohol was alleged to have connections with the developer, though he claimed he exited the firm before the deal, which the local court has now scrapped. The Jain community was up in arms over the sale of the around 3.5 acres of land, which also houses a Jain temple. Incidentally, among those leading the charge against Mohol was former Congress MLA Ravindra Dhangekar, now with the Shiv Sena.

The grapevine has it that, apart from deflecting public attention from the Mohol issue, the BJP is using the controversy to cut Ajit down to size—especially in his strongholds in and around Pune district and in western Maharashtra, where the party has traditionally been weak. It is also meant to pre-empt any unity moves between the two rival factions of the NCP, which would give the deputy CM greater heft

## A SHADY LAND DEAL

How a colonial-era land grant has come to haunt Ajit Pawar

on the national stage. The BJP has slowly but steadily begun wooing the NCP's sub-regional satraps—former legislators Rajan Patil Angarkar and Yashwant Mane (Solapur), and Deepak Salunkhe Patil and Dr Yogesh Kshirsagar (Beed)—into its fold.

In October, laying the foundation stone for the BJP's new office in Mumbai, Union home minister Amit Shah said the party has come into its own in Maharashtra and does not need any "crutches", creating a flutter in the NCP and Sena. Straws in the wind suggest that the BJP may be developing a caucus of MLAs within its alliance partners. Sena leader and former health minister Tanaji Sawant, who is upset at being kept out of the cabinet, has claimed that the events of 2022 [the split in the Sena by deputy CM Eknath Shinde] could repeat themselves. "This controversy is not a coincidence for sure. This has been timed with an eye on the local bodies election," explains a senior NCP leader. He points to how the BJP and NCP are in contention to seize power in urban centres like Pune and Pimpri Chinchwad, which are seeing a surge in land prices and massive investments in infrastructure projects.

The land deal controversy has coincided with Ajit making conciliatory noises towards his uncle Sharad Pawar, who heads another faction of the NCP, and acknowledging Pawar Sr's role in his political career. "Even I love him," he added for good measure. His cousin and NCP (Sharadchandra Pawar) Lok Sabha MP from Baramati, Supriya Sule, has expressed faith that nephew Parth will not do anything wrong. Asked why grand-nephew Parth's name did not find a mention in the FIR, Pawar Sr asked Fadnavis, who is also the home minister, to clarify this. "If the CM says in public that this is a serious issue, then it must be probed and the facts must be placed in the public domain," he added, calling daughter Supriya's statement on Parth her personal opinion. At the same time, Pawar Sr has said that local units of

► **In the 19th century, the British grants over 40 acres** in Mundhwa to members of the Mahar community as **Mahar watan** lands, given in return for traditional village services

► **The Mahar Watan Abolition Act, 1950, abolishes these watans** and converts them into regular occupancy lands with restrictions on sale, transfer and use. To gain ownership, landholders have to pay *nazrana* (dues) to the govt

► **In the mid-1950s, the Bombay govt takes over the land** due to unpaid dues and later leases it to the Botanical Survey

of India (BSI). The periodically renewed lease runs till 2038

► **In 2006, developer Sheetal Tejwani takes powers of attorney** from 272 descendants of the original 26 landowning families, allegedly promising to help them reclaim the land for sale or development. Some of these PoAs are notarised, but not registered

► **In May 2025, a sale deed is signed** between Amadea Enterprises LLP (Parth Pawar and his cousin Digvijay Amarsinh Patil hold 99% and 1% stakes respectively) and Tejwani

► **The deed values the land at Rs 300 crore**, though its

market value is estimated at about Rs 1,800 crore. Just Rs 500 in stamp duty is paid—using a waiver meant for IT parks and data centres—instead of the Rs 21 crore otherwise due

► **In June, tehsildar Suryakant Yewale—now suspended—issues** a notice asking the BSI to vacate the land

► **On Nov. 6, sub-registrar Taru is suspended over lapses**; a probe is ordered by the CM and the sale deed is cancelled

► **On Nov. 7, an FIR is filed against Patil, Tejwani and Taru without Parth's name in it**

the party could take local factors into consideration to strike alliances for the local body polls. The two NCPs are said to be in talks in areas like Pimpri Chinchwad, a former bastion where the BJP has made inroads.

### UNEASY ALLIANCE

**T**he NCP, which claims to be of secular stock, has been upset over the BJP's muscular assertion of Hindutva. For instance, after a video of some Muslim women offering namaz at the Shaniwarwada, the seat of power of the Peshwas in Pune, went viral in October, BJP Rajya Sabha MP Medha Kulkarni 'purified' the spot, to which NCP leader Rupali Patil Thombre protested. Thombre, however, was later dropped as the NCP spokes-

person. In another instance reflecting the BJP's expansive writ, the induction of NCP veteran and OBC leader Chhagan Bhujbal into the cabinet in May was seen more as a BJP push than Ajit's preference. Bhujbal has rallied the OBCs against the Maratha demand for backward quotas, which has upset the NCP's core Maratha voters.

A Sena source notes how the BJP, which once accused the NCP of being a 'Naturally Corrupt Party' but broke bread with it in 2019 and 2023, is getting a taste of its own medicine. "Ajit Pawar is now a moral and political question mark over the BJP. They are looking very weak," he says. "The NCP will continue to be brazen and the BJP will continue to look helpless and pay the price for their moral compromises." ■

# Exploring the growing role of exercise in improving quality of life and outcomes in lung cancer care

**Dr. Nikhil Suresh Ghadyalpatil**

Senior Consultant Medical Oncology  
Hyderabad

Lung cancer continues to be one of the most prevalent and deadliest cancers globally. With more than two million new cases diagnosed each year, its impact extends beyond physical health, affecting patients emotionally, psychologically, and socially. Recent research highlights an often-overlooked yet powerful ally in the fight against lung cancer: **exercise**.

Exercise can play a major role in lung cancer management—from diagnosis through to advanced disease stages. The evidence suggests that when prescribed and supervised appropriately, exercise is not only safe but beneficial for patients at all stages of treatment.

#### Why Exercise Matters in Lung Cancer Care

Lung cancer and its treatments—including surgery, chemotherapy, radiation, and targeted therapies—often result in debilitating side effects like shortness of breath (dyspnoea), fatigue, anxiety, and loss of muscle mass. These effects can severely diminish a patient's ability to carry out daily activities and may even deter them from adhering to their treatment plans.

According to the research studies, structured exercise interventions—especially those combining **cardiorespiratory training** and **resistance exercise**—can lead to improvements in lung function, muscle strength, mood, and overall quality of life. Notably, patients who engage in regular physical activity before and after diagnosis have shown improved survival rates and better tolerance to cancer treatments.

#### The Evidence for Exercise

The authors evaluated a broad range of studies and found that exercise delivered across various formats and intensities had significant positive outcomes. For example:

- **Preoperative exercise** improves cardiorespiratory fitness, reduces anxiety, and lowers the risk of post-surgical complications.
- **Postoperative exercise** helps restore physical function, reduces hospital stays, and improves mental well-being.

- **Exercise during treatment** has been linked to reduced fatigue, better cardiovascular health, and fewer treatment interruptions.
- Even in **advanced stages** or in patients with **cachexia** (severe muscle wasting), tailored exercise plans can support independence and ease symptoms such as pain and breathlessness.

Crucially, **respiratory muscle training**—a subset of breathing exercises—has been found to significantly enhance breathing capacity, reduce dyspnoea, and improve emotional outlook in lung cancer patients.

#### The Challenge of Tailoring the Right Exercise

One of the key takeaways from the research studies is that there is no "one-size-fits-all" prescription. The **optimal type, intensity, and frequency** of exercise remains unclear and must be tailored to the individual's health status, cancer stage, and treatment plan.

A general guideline endorsed by the American College of Sports Medicine (ACSM) recommends:

- **50–300 minutes per week** of moderate-intensity cardiorespiratory activity (e.g., walking, cycling),
- **2–3 sessions per week** of resistance training,
- Inclusion of flexibility and balance exercises, especially for older or mobility-limited patients.

The concept of **progressive overload**—gradually increasing the exercise intensity and volume—was also emphasized to ensure continual improvement while minimizing risk.

#### Addressing Barriers to Exercise

Despite the proven benefits, the research also highlights that few lung cancer patients currently access exercise programs. Multiple barriers exist, including:

- Fatigue and side effects from treatment,
- Lack of access to exercise services, particularly in rural areas,
- Limited referrals from clinicians due to

- awareness gaps or resource constraints,
- Financial limitations, especially in healthcare systems where exercise programs are not reimbursed.

Stigma associated with lung cancer—often wrongly seen as a “self-inflicted” disease—can also lead to social withdrawal and reluctance to engage in supportive therapies like exercise.

To overcome these obstacles, the authors call for greater education among healthcare providers and patients about the role of exercise in managing lung cancer. They recommend embedding exercise specialists into cancer care teams and improving referral pathways.

#### A Multidisciplinary Approach is Key

Integrating exercise into the broader interdisciplinary care model is essential. The authors advocate for involving oncologists, exercise physiologists, dietitians, psychologists, and physiotherapists in developing personalized plans for each patient.

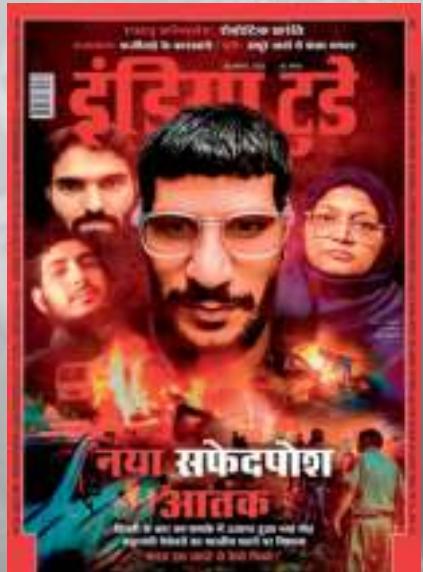
Special attention is warranted for patients with **bone metastases, comorbidities like COPD**, or those undergoing intensive therapies. For such individuals, the safety of exercise must be closely monitored. Supervised programs with proper risk assessments have been found to be both feasible and effective.

#### Conclusion

Exercise should no longer be considered an optional add-on in lung cancer care—it must be seen as an **essential component of treatment**. When designed thoughtfully and delivered by trained professionals, exercise offers patients the opportunity to reclaim control over their bodies, enhance their resilience, and improve their quality of life.

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# 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 केएर, लिविंग मीडिया इंडिया लि. सी-९, सेक्टर-१०, नोएडा २०१३०१ (भारत)

टिक करें	अवधि	कुल अंक	कवर प्राइस (₹)	ऑफर प्राइस (₹)	प्लान	डिस्काउंट
<input type="checkbox"/>	1 वर्ष	52	3120	999	डिजिटल	68%
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कृपया फॉर्म को ब्लॉकलेटर में भरें

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..... शहर..... राज्य..... पिन.....

मोबाइल..... ईमेल.....



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# LE ! SURE

MUSIC: NOTES THAT UNITE PG 54

PHOTOGRAPHY: WEIGHT OF GRACE PG 56

OTT ◀

## BIGGER AND BOLDER

THE FAMILY MAN  
RETURNS FOR A  
THIRD SEASON WITH  
A NORTHEASTERN  
BACKDROP AND  
THE SAME MIX OF  
HUMOUR AND HIGH-  
STAKES TENSION



**ALL IN THE FAMILY**  
Clockwise from left:  
Priyamani, Manoj  
Bajpayee, Jaideep  
Ahlawat and  
Nimrat Kaur have  
lead roles in *The  
Family Man 3*

Photograph by MANDAR DEODHAR

# F

**FOUR YEARS AFTER DELIVERING ONE OF THE FINEST SEASON TWOS,** Raj & DK, the most prolific directing duo on OTT (*Farzi*, *Guns & Gulaabs* and *Citadel: Honey Bunny*), finally return with a new instalment of Amazon Prime Video's *The Family Man* (2019-). The show by now is like that favoured first-born; first to take them to heights of soaring success and the one that best exemplifies Raj & DK's brand of fun and thrilling storytelling.

So familiar is the family to them by now that Raj Nidimoru calls the show's writers' room "more relaxed", one where things just flow. Less calculation, more organic is the mantra. "You know the characters really well, the only challenge is to somehow maintain a good balance of familiar and unfamiliar," he says. "You don't want to play too much on the tropes and on the callbacks, but you do want a bit of it." The duo knows how the show is part of pop culture conversation, with memes and reels circulating. The aim, adds Raj, is to be "aware of" what's out there, but "to be real". For Krishna DK—the other half of Raj & DK—the toughest thing about making a sequel is to take everything that people love from the first two seasons and make it refreshing. "The challenge is that it should not feel like an extension, repetition or redux of what you have done," he adds.

*The Family Man* works best when there's a worthy nemesis to secret agent Srikant Tiwari (played by Manoj Bajpayee). Compared to last season (2021) where Samantha Ruth Prabhu's character kept Tiwari on his toes, this time around, Raj & DK have introduced two antagonists: played by talented actors Jaideep Ahlawat and Nimrat Kaur. The setting, too,

## LEISURE

has changed to the Northeast, with a chunk of the drama and action unfolding in Nagaland and Assam. According to Raj, creating compelling baddies is the most challenging part of developing a new season—and his preferred way of "scaling up" the show. "It's not by adding more explosions and gravity-defying action sequences, but by thickening the plot and adding emotional complexities," he adds. "The action still stays grounded while it takes two really cool, similar-

yet-dissimilar characters to come together to pose the threat."

For Bajpayee, great co-actors is what makes returning to the sets so rewarding. He waxes eloquent about Ahlawat, noting his "sincerity towards his job and choices". "He has been lucky with roles. At the same time, he has shown remarkable improvement as an actor," he adds. "I call him if I see anything fantastic of his and discuss it with him in detail. It feels great that you are seeing up

**The directing duo of *The Family Man*, Krishna DK (left) and Raj Nidimoru, is "aware of" the show's popularity and wants it "to be real"**



MANDAR DEODHAR

# A Twist In the Tale

close how he prepares and approaches things. You get to learn a lot."

As much as *The Family Man* is about an ordinary man balancing daredevil adventures at work against awkward conversations and conflicts at home, for many the heart of the show is the lively rapport between Tiwari and his workmate JK (the delightfully charming Sharib Hazmi). So much so that in season three, JK is positioned alongside Tiwari's family in one of the key posters. "He's the default member of it, that's how we treated him," says Krishna DK. "The banter comes naturally to them, but this season we tackle what is it that JK wants in life—and that's companionship." Prod Bajpayee on how he builds the bromance and he brings up how they rehearse the scene many times. "He [Sharib] gets pakaed [bored]," laughs Bajpayee.

Bajpayee's intensive preparation generates both admiration and amusement among the directing duo and cast. Krishna notes how Sharib is the one "joking and blabbering" until "Action" is uttered, while Manoj tries to "stay in character". Raj talks of how the actor now runs his own "Bajpayee Institute of Acting" on set where all co-actors rehearse with him and get used to his improvisations. "He doesn't tell us what he wants to do. He wants to surprise us all the time," says Raj, with a cheeky smile. It is surprises that diehard fans of the show will want as they tune in for another round of Tiwari's action-packed life. ■

—Suhani Singh

**Ananyabrata Chakraborty's** *Kaisi Ye Paheli* is a darkly comic murder mystery rooted in a mother-son bond



After making waves at global festivals, writer-director Ananyabrata Chakraborty's debut feature, *Kaisi Ye Paheli*, will hit the big screens in India on November 28. For Chakraborty, the film's journey has come full circle—beginning as a crowd-funded project, doing the international festival circuits, and now culminating in a theatrical release.

Set against the hills of the Northeast, *Kaisi Yeh Paheli* is a dark comedy-cum-murder mystery that revolves around a mother-son relationship. Chakraborty says it began as an exploration of loneliness and ageing, and "his own inability to truly connect with his mother". "To make it more interesting, I arrived at a murder mystery—where a mother has to solve a crime just to get her son to talk to her. The dark comedy comes

from how her presence exposes the hollowness of the police investigation," he explains.

Sukant Goel, known for his performance in *Kaala Paani*, leads the film alongside veteran Sadhana Singh of *Nadiya Ke Paar* fame—making a return to the big screen in a leading role. Actor Rajit Kapur joins them as a Bengali detective, marking 28 years since his turn as Byomkesh Bakshi. Chakraborty describes working with the stellar cast as an intuitive, organic experience. "I was directing the story more than I was directing the actors. The rhythm was something they grasped instinctively from the script," he says.

THE FILM STARTED AS A **CROWD-FUNDED PROJECT**, TRAVELED THROUGH FOREIGN FILM CIRCUITS, AND IS NOW BEING RELEASED IN INDIA

Chakraborty has other scripts in the pipeline: a story centred on a cricket algorithm; a psychological thriller based on his 2015 novel *Split Second* and another murder mystery set in Assam. "I hope I get to make one of these," he concludes. ■

—Deepa Natarajan Lobo



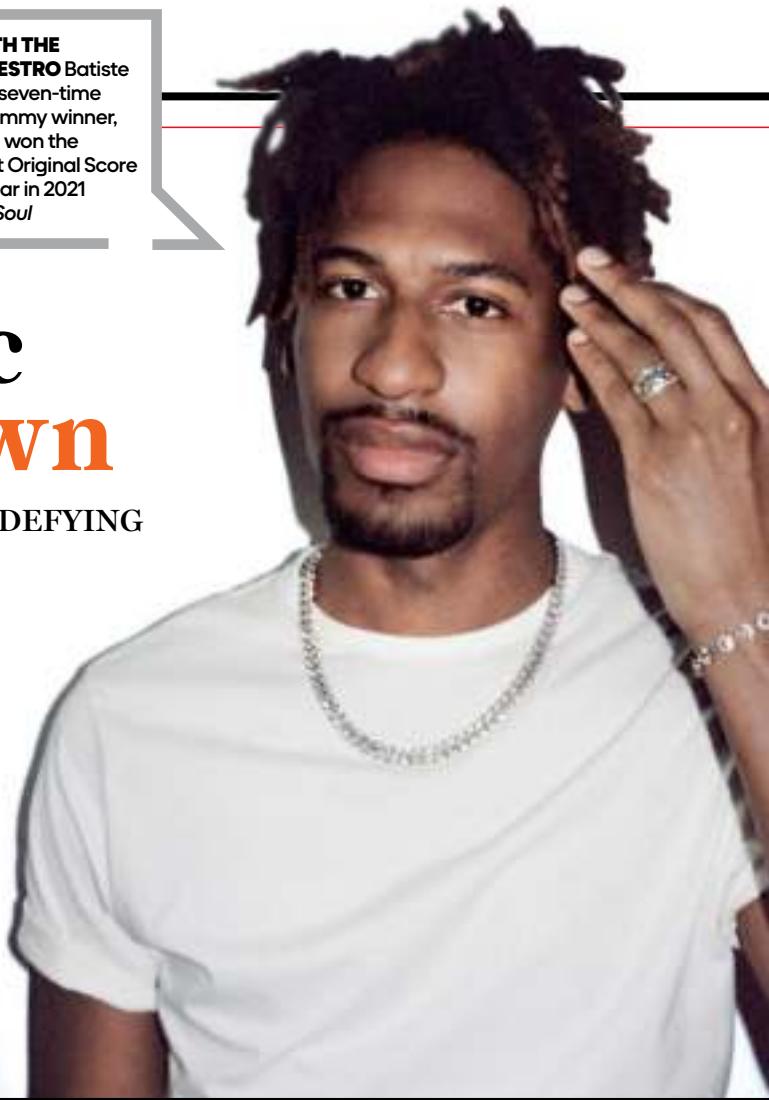
**WITH THE MAESTRO** Batiste is a seven-time Grammy winner, and won the Best Original Score Oscar in 2021 for *Soul*

# Mr Eclectic Comes to Town

JON BATISTE IS BRINGING HIS GENRE-DEFYING BRAND OF MUSIC TO INDIA

**W**HEN ATTENDEES IN DELHI AND MUMBAI TAKE THEIR SEATS TO watch American singer-songwriter Jon Batiste play his Maestro series of concerts, the setting might seem like that of a Western classical music recital. Batiste, who released the interpretive album *Beethoven Blues* in 2024, will perform solo at the piano. But the show will span multiple styles of music, from jazz and blues to pop and soul to rock and funk.

The seven-time Grammy winner—



MUSIC ▼

## NOTES THAT UNITE

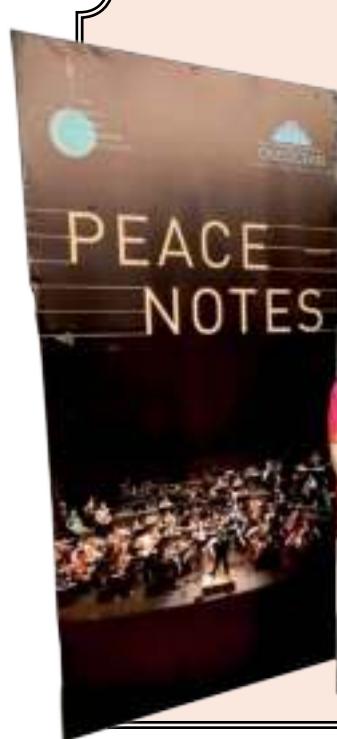
The South Asian Symphony Orchestra demonstrates the harmony that is possible even in a divided world

In a time when divisions dominate public discourse, the South Asian Symphony Orchestra (SASO) offers a powerful counterpoint: the belief that music can build bridges where politics falters. When SASO returns to Bengaluru on November 29, it brings not just an evening of orchestral performance

but a message of shared humanity. Around 120 musicians from South Asia and the diaspora will gather at the Prestige Centre for Performing Arts under the direction of Alvin Arumugam. Their programme spans the nostalgic melodies of Raj Kapoor's films, European arias

and Beethoven's Symphony No. 9, along with a special orchestral adaptation of a *nottuswara* by Muthuswami Dikshitar. SASO will also appear in Chennai the following evening,

Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, with its rousing choral finale, is the centrepiece of SASO's Bengaluru concert



who took home Album of the Year for *We Are* in 2022—has a repertoire so eclectic that he has tried to find different ways to explain “the genre of Jon Batiste”. In 2013, he coined ‘Social Music’ to “describe his philosophy and the intention of the music, which is to

Batiste’s 2025 album *Big Money* incorporates reggae, R&B, folk and bluegrass, to name a few

bring all the different forms of human creativity under one tent”. It served as the title of a record with his group Stay Human, which was the house band of *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert* from 2015 to 2022.

More recently, he used ‘New Americana’ to classify the songs on his 2025 album *Big Money*, which incorporate reggae, R&B, folk and bluegrass, to name just a few. That, he says, was a way to reclaim the genre of Americana, which he feels “is limited in scope and leaves out a lot of music from people who are marginalised”. Says Batiste, “If there’s going to be a term that describes not just the music of America, but the mythology and all the different icons, like baseball and apple pie, then if it doesn’t include all people, it can’t be accurate.”

Throughout his career, Batiste—who won an Oscar in 2021 for Best Original Score for his work in the film *Soul*—has “been a proponent of no genres, just expressions”. And it’s when his audience goes through “a very full range of human expression and emotion” that he knows he has delivered a successful event. Those include “moments where it becomes very meditative or pensive, where we’re dancing in the aisles, and where I’m really wanting to

display the virtuosity of music. My goal is to create a show that touches all of these places”.

The composer hopes to return to India with a full band to deliver the kind of electrifying experience he first came to be known for through the impromptu street performances he would stage in New York City. Those gigs, which he called ‘love riots’, would often feature Indian-American singer Falu as part of the ensemble.

The Maestro concerts will give us one facet of the many sides of the multi-dimensional artist. “I thought about coming with the band, but it always feels very special to introduce myself in a very direct, stripped-down way first,” says Batiste. “It’s almost like you’re meeting everybody one to one.” ■

—Amit Gurbaxani

*Bharat Mandapam Plenary Hall, Delhi, on Monday, Nov. 24; NMACC, The Grand Theatre, Mumbai, on Wednesday, Nov. 26. Tickets: Bookmyshow.com*



**AUTUMN SONATA** The orchestra and, left, Ambassador Nirupama Rao, founder, South Asian Symphony Foundation

November 30, at the M.S. Subbulakshmi Arangam. The Chennai programme also includes Mozart’s Symphony No. 40 and popular opera excerpts.

The weekend also features a public lecture by Professor Katherine Butler Schofield of King’s College London at the Bangalore

International Centre (BIC) on November 28. Her talk, ‘Strings Across the Ocean’, examines centuries of musical exchange between India and Europe. Ambassador Nirupama Rao, founder of the South Asian Symphony Foundation (SASF), which has brought the orchestra together, situates this history within a broader ethic of cultural diplomacy. “The historical exchanges between India and Europe have enriched both musical worlds. SASO continues this heritage.” For Rao, SASO

is the culmination of a vision shaped by decades of service. “In South Asia, where histories often divide, music reclaims our shared humanity,” she notes. Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony, the centrepiece of the Bengaluru concert, reflects this vision. “Beethoven’s Ninth is both a celebration and a call,” Rao says. SASO’s message is clear: in a world of many voices, harmony remains necessary, beginning with the simple, radical act of listening. ■

—Nikhil Sardana



PHOTOGRAPHY ▼

# THE WEIGHT OF GRACE

Rajesh Bedi's *Elephant: The Divine Mystery* is a luminous ode to the elephant and to a lifetime spent in reverent pursuit of the wild

Baba Bohrd'—a Punjabi term for a sprawling banyan tree and an undisputed master—befits Rajesh Bedi perfectly. Gaunt, gentle and stoic, with eyes that observe more than they see and a beard with its own quiet antiquity, Bedi stands as India's most revered chronicler of the wild. Through his lens, the country's wilderness has found its visual mythology.

Along with his brother Naresh Bedi, he pioneered wildlife photography and filmmaking in India at a time when the field was still an uncharted frontier. For Bedi, photography was never mere documentation—it was discovery, born

of patience, intuition, and a deep study of animal behaviour.

His seventh book, *Elephant: The Divine Mystery*, is a tender, almost devotional portrait of one of Earth's most sentient beings—the elephant—whom Bedi fondly calls his “first love”, his “girlfriend”. Through five decades of wandering forests, wading through streams, holding oneself in a zen-like stillness, and often braving razor-close proximity to danger—even while being stung by blood-sucking flies—he has amassed a portrait of the elephant that is in-

timate, surprising and deeply moving. His elephants emerge from morning mists like deities—their wrinkled hides a cartography of ancient memory. We see an endearing elephant family in a ‘group hug’; dust-baths that transform giants into playful children; the underside of a bathing elephant’s foot

glowing like carved jasper. Where others capture spectacle, Bedi seeks revelation: exceptional unseen images of sleeping elephants, aerial shots of herds swimming across flooded rivers, or a closeup of a coiled trunk

ELEPHANT:  
THE DIVINE MYSTERY  
*by*  
**Rajesh Bedi**  
WILD  
COLLECTION  
₹12,500;  
273 pages





**CAPTURED CREASES**  
(Clockwise from left) Two mothers lavishing affection on their calves; elephants after their favourite jackfruit; hand and trunk

revealing a yin-yang circle—a metaphor of balance in nature itself.

The book is not merely about visual splendour, it is also about insight—field intelligence distilled into art. Bedi captures the torment tuskers face during the period of *musth*; reproductive behaviour, calves being born. There are descriptions of observed behaviour; the coded sounds of elephant communication, signs of body language and complex social dynamics.

In its final section, the book turns elegiac. Bedi's lens follows the elephant into landscapes of loss—fragmented forests, encroaching highways and the underbelly of human progress. In an era when wildlife photography often chases viral moments, Bedi's elephant images ask us to slow down, to look longer, to recognise kinship. His work reminds us that the wild is not distant theatre, but a mirror of our own forgotten grace. With that gaze, Rajesh Bedi does not just photograph elephants—he consecrates them and makes them divine once more. ■

—Bandeep Singh

## LEISURE —

### EXHIBITION ▼

# Unfixing Meaning

IN HIS KOLKATA SHOWS, PHOTOGRAPHER-PAINTER SOHRAB HURA ABANDONS DOCUMENTARY REALISM

Sohrab Hura has returned to capturing momentum. His acclaimed photography, which brought global praise and membership to the prestigious Magnum Photos, shifted from capturing pace and intimacy to stoically documenting politics.

"The photography medium itself brings an idea of responsibility," Hura explains. "As the world keeps getting worse, my work grew more socially oriented. My photography got heavier. That's why I started to paint."

Hura's twin Kolkata

"EVERYONE IN AN EXHIBIT STARTS OFF SCEPTICAL," SAYS HURA. "THE IDEA IS TO DISARM THEM, MAKE THEM LINGER, CLOSE IN ON A DETAIL...."

**SHIFTING GEARS** 'Glorious Sunset', gouache on paper and (below) 'Timelines', acrylic, gesso on cardboard box

exhibitions, backed by Experimenter, capture both ends of his work. *The Forest* at Experimenter's Ballygunge Place gallery (till Jan. 3, 2026) has his pastels, gouaches and oil paintings. The Alipore Museum is hosting Hura's *A Winter Summer* (till Dec. 6), which marks the India debut of 'The Song of Sparrows in a Hundred Days of Summer (2013-2017)', shot in Madhya Pradesh, and 'Snow (2015-2019)' from Kashmir. While *The Forest* shows Hura's irreverence with a new medium, *A Winter Sum-*



mer shows his documentary side.

A curious zoom-in, zoom-out effect is at work through the five-room arrangement for *The Forest*. Intimate moments with loved ones exist with memories from watching TV, pop-culture memes and events in political history. His short film *Disappeared*, debuting in India, exemplifies the modus operandi: beginning with an extreme zoom-in into a forest tent, until a massive zoom-out exposes the vast landscape.

"Everyone encountering an exhibition starts off stiff and sceptical," Hura explains. "The idea is to disarm them, make them move within the exhibition space, have them linger, as they close in on a work to catch some detail but soon experience the world in its entirety."

For instance, alongside tender paintings of lovers' hands brushing against one another, or his father having a smoke, there are wry observations at parties—where couples are getting intimate with comically varying degrees of interest.

Altogether, Hura is destabilising meaning. "Meanings today are so fixed," he says. "We artists should unfix meanings. If meanings are a still pond, we ought to throw a pebble at it, create a ripple and observe the edges far from the centre. If my photography earlier was about packing meaning, my work now is about unpacking." ■

—Devarsri Ghosh

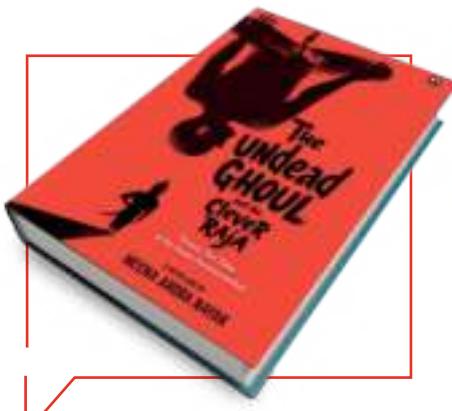
# A Classic Reimagined

**MEENA ARORA NAYAK'S NEW RETELLING BRINGS THE TALES OF THE VETALA PANCHAVIMSHATI TO LIFE WITH TRADEMARK CLARITY AND DEEP SCHOLARSHIP**

I love everything about Meena Arora Nayak's retellings: her language, the stories she chooses, the cover design of the book, the cover illustration, the layout of the pages. What I admire most is the enormous erudition that lies behind the deceptively simple and light tone in which she presents her stories and her critical material. Much as I have taken pleasure in all of Arora Nayak's books, I suspect *The Undead Ghoul* is going to be my favourite.

The *Vetala Panchavimshati* is a wonderful cycle of tales held within a truly compelling frame story of a face-off between a mysterious mendicant and a beloved king. It contains an endless universe of characters and events that allow for narrative arcs that Arora Nayak describes as "... light, capricious, and humorous, with unexpected plot twists and themes that explore life, love, sexuality, desires, relationships, and human behaviours..." The stories are filled with deceptions, betrayals and criminal acts as well as true love and the deeds of honourable men and women. And yet, as Arora Nayak points out, the stories do not lead us to judge the morality of the characters. They encourage us to think about dharma not as absolute and unbending, but as "ambiguous, often unknowable, and a matter of individual perception".

The cycle's attraction lies in the tension between the honourable, valorous king and the mendicant who exudes a kind of sinister power. He reveals his dark side when he asks the king to meet him at the burning ground where dead bodies are cremated. The king has to perform the arduous task of carrying a



## THE UNDEAD GHOUL AND THE CLEVER RAJA

Twenty-five Tales of the *Vetala Panchavimshati*

**By Meena Arora Nayak  
ALEPH BOOK COMPANY  
₹699; 224 pages**

corpse that was hanging on a tree back and forth to the mendicant who is preparing a tantric mandala to gain more powers. The corpse has been taken over by a malevolent spirit who pesters the king with elaborate stories that end in riddles that he must answer. Every time he answers, the corpse/ *vetaala* laughs and flies back to the tree where it was hanging.

Arora Nayak remarks that from this point onwards, the frame has become a ghost story set among ghouls and spirits who haunt the necropolis wrapped in a fog of burning flesh. Of course, the frame story is also a meta-text that celebrates stories, story-tellers and listeners. We are fortunate that Meena Arora Nayak has profoundly understood that ancient contract and invites us to honour it, too. ■

—Arshia Sattar

## NOTEWORTHY AND NEW

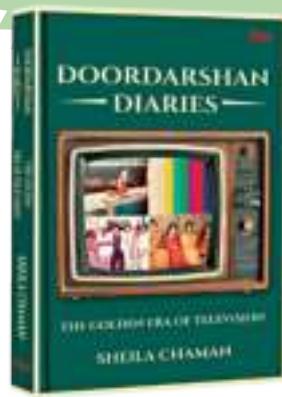
### RECENT BOOKS THAT CAUGHT OUR EYE

## THOSE WERE THE DAYS

In *Doordarshan Diaries*, veteran TV anchor and talk show host Sheila Chaman takes us back to the pre-satellite TV era when only one channel ruled the air waves. She tells the story of Doordarshan in the form of a personal memoir—outlining how she started working there; the pre-colour days; the 1980s, when Doordarshan truly started transforming and coming into its own—beginning with its first colour broadcast on April 25, 1982 (which was a test run), followed by the first nationwide colour telecast on Independence Day the same year with the prime minister's speech; and subsequent decades when development came at a much faster pace. Chaman, who was a bilingual presenter—a prized skill in those days—writes with charm and grace.

### DOORDARSHAN DIARIES

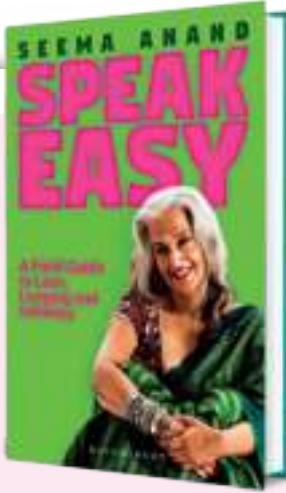
The Golden Era of Television  
**By Sheila Chaman  
Om Books  
₹395; 219 pages**



## Where Curiosity Meets Compassion

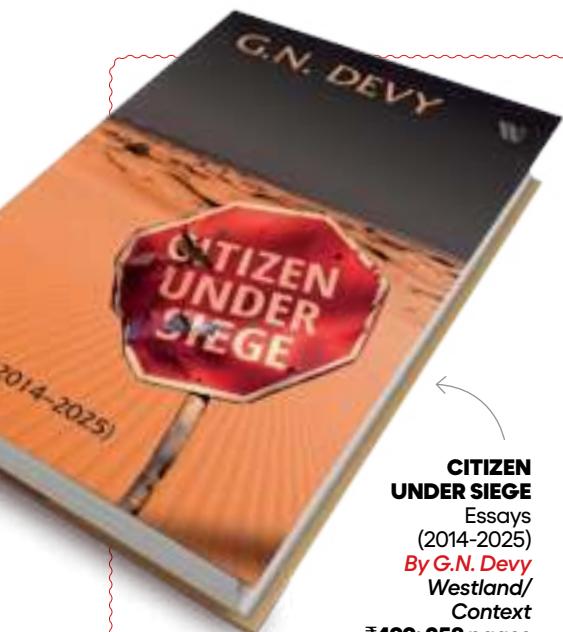
**S**toryteller and sex educator Seema Anand's *Speak Easy*

is not your usual sex manual. It's less about technique and more a deep dive into questions that cannot be addressed in 60-second reels, questions which require nuanced responses full of context and balanced information. As Anand says in the 'Preface', "*Speak Easy* offers careful, thoughtful answers grounded in cultural and emotional contexts to questions that are both universal and as old as time."



**SPEAK EASY**  
A Field Guide to Love,  
Longing and Intimacy  
*By Seema Anand*  
Bloomsbury  
₹499; 278 pages

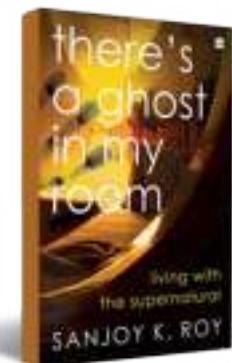
Each chapter takes up a specific issue—everything from 'We were good in the first two years, but then I lost interest' to 'When it comes to sex, he just watches porn and masturbates as it is easier and less work', 'I knew he liked to cross-dress, and at first I was OK with it', 'Sex in the 50s for menopausal women', and, of course, 'Does size matter?'. Anand is that confidante, the one you wish you always had, in whose presence you never feel judged, and who has an answer for every silly-sounding question you may throw at her.



**CITIZEN UNDER SIEGE**  
Essays (2014–2025)  
*By G.N. Devy*  
Westland/  
Context  
₹499; 258 pages

## For the Love of Freedom

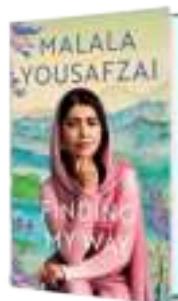
**C**urrently Senior Professor of Eminence & Director, Somaiya School of Civilization Studies, G.N. Devy is a distinguished academic and cultural activist who, among his many considerable achievements, has also conceptualised and spearheaded the 50-volume *People's Linguistic Survey of India*. This slim volume brings together over 40 short essays written over the last 10 years, Devy's response to what he sees as growing authoritarianism and state overreach.



**THERE'S A GHOST IN MY ROOM** Living With the Supernatural  
*By Sanjoy K. Roy*  
HarperCollins India  
₹599; 224 pages

## A Strange & Sublime Memoir

**W**ho knew the man behind over 30 acclaimed festivals has had a parallel existence—enjoying friendly relations with the spirit world all his life, from childhood encounters in his ancestral home in Calcutta to ones in the sprawling Lutyens' bungalow where he grew up, and throughout his travels across India and the world. Read it to believe it.



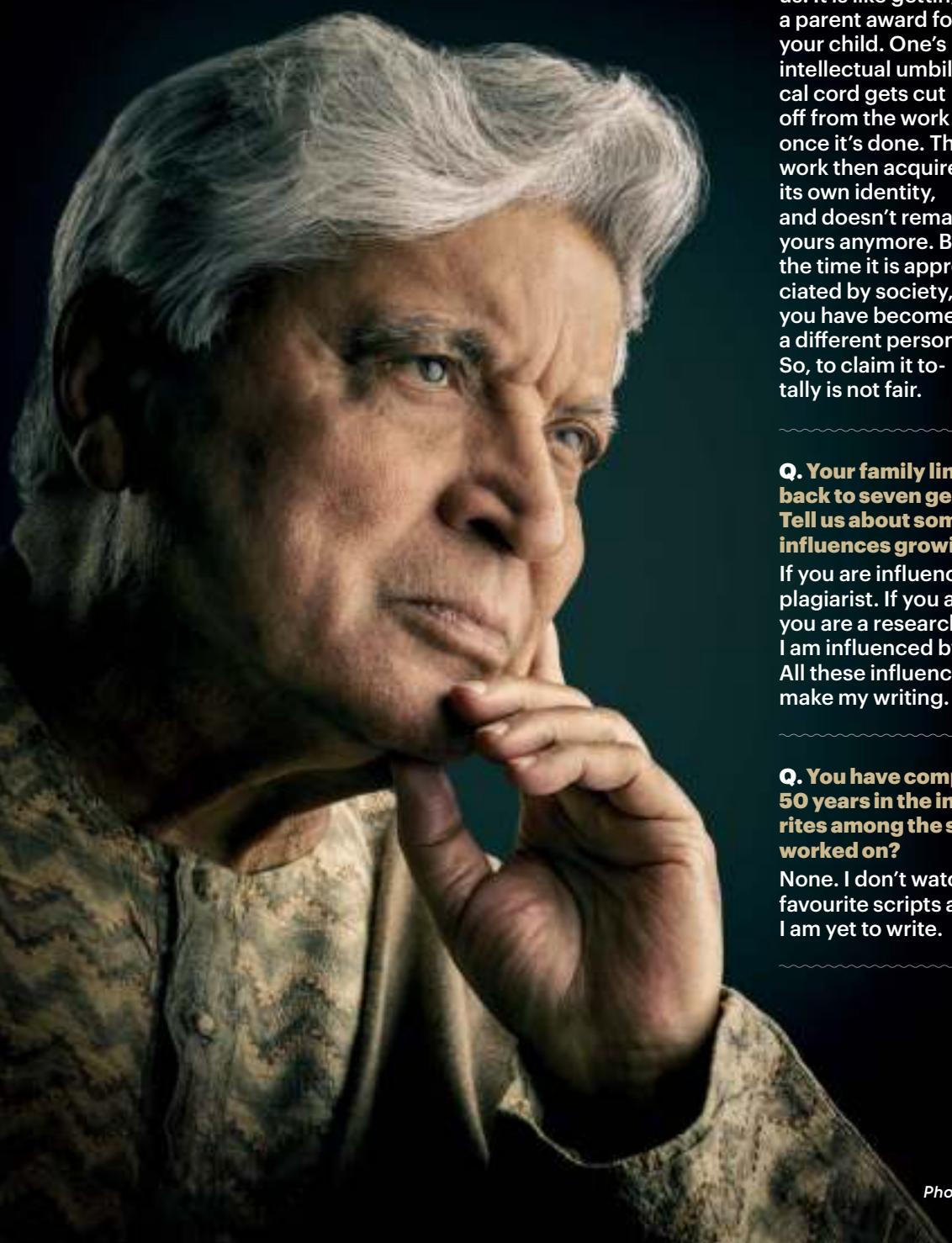
**FINDING MY WAY**  
*By Malala Yousafzai*  
Hachette/ Weidenfeld & Nicolson  
₹699; 320 pages

## GROWTH PANGS

**M**alala Yousafzai was catapulted into the international limelight after being shot at point-blank range by the Taliban at the age of 15, setting her life on a rather unexpected trajectory. *Finding My Way* is a deeply personal coming-of-age memoir in which Malala tries to unburden herself from the various identities thrown at her—Nobel Laureate, global icon and activist, successful academic, and so on—in writing that is supple and self-assured.

# WORDS OF WISDOM

*Veteran lyricist Javed Akhtar, who will soon receive the SOA Sahitya Samman 2025, talks about his lifelong contribution to Indian cinema and literature*



**Q. How does it feel to be receiving the Siksha 'O' Anusandhan (SOA) Sahitya Samman this year?**

One receives an award for work which has become disconnected from us. It is like getting a parent award for your child. One's intellectual umbilical cord gets cut off from the work once it's done. The work then acquires its own identity, and doesn't remain yours anymore. By the time it is appreciated by society, you have become a different person. So, to claim it totally is not fair.

**Q. Poet, lyricist, scriptwriter, political activist—you wear many hats. Which role is closest to your heart?**

Every person plays multiple roles in their life. For instance, someone could be a professional while being a daughter, a wife, a mother, a friend, a neighbour and a member of a certain society. This collage of different identities is what makes a person who they are. How can one decide which role they identify with most?

**Q. Your family lineage can be traced back to seven generations of writers. Tell us about some of your earliest influences growing up.**

If you are influenced by one, you are a plagiarist. If you are influenced by ten, you are a research scholar. Thankfully, I am influenced by many in my family. All these influences come together and make my writing.

**Q. You have completed more than 50 years in the industry. Any favourites among the scripts you have worked on?**

None. I don't watch my old films. My favourite scripts are in the future, which I am yet to write.

—with Neha Kirpal

Photograph by BANDEEP SINGH



### INDIA TODAY MAGAZINE ON THE WEB

COVER STORY: BIHAR POLLS

## THE NIMO KNOCKOUT

Inside story of the  
NDA War Room

### THE CHALLENGES AHEAD

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