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**KOLKATA: NEW INFOTECH HUB | CINEMA: HITMAKER DINESH VIJAN**

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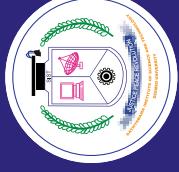


# INDIA TODAY



## HOW TO FIX AIR INDIA

WHAT THE TATA-OWNED AIRLINE NEEDS TO DO TO REGAIN  
TRUST AND CREDIBILITY AFTER THE AHMEDABAD CRASH



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## FROM THE EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

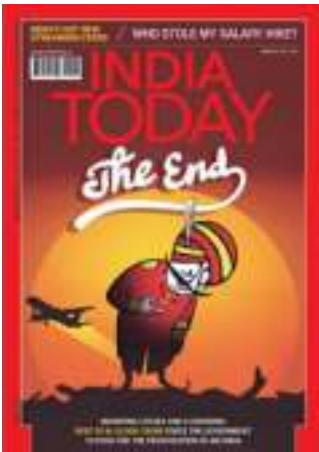
**T**here is an unsettling resemblance between the brief trajectory of the ill-fated Dreamliner at Ahmedabad and the broader corporate narrative surrounding it. A grand arc of ambition, a sudden and unexplained loss of thrust, and then, images of devastation. In the case of AI 171, the Air India flight bound for London Gatwick on June 12, the worst imaginable outcome became reality. One of the most catastrophic crashes in India's aviation history, it claimed the lives of all but one of the 242 people on board and at least 19 on the ground. It has become emblematic of Air India's (AI) current condition. The Tata-owned airline's attempt to reclaim its stature as India's pioneering carrier is now viewed as faltering. Its internal operations are under scrutiny. Its reputation is severely damaged. Tata Sons chairman N. Chandrasekaran described it as one of the "darkest days in the Tata Group's history". The immediate consequences, delays and cancellations that have stretched into July, will eventually subside. But dispelling the shadow of doubt that now follows AI will require more than stopgap measures. What is needed is long-term institutional repair. Among the burdens dragging the airline down are its inherited public sector liabilities, an ageing fleet, a shortage of pilots, weak punctuality and performance metrics, and critical gaps in maintenance infrastructure.

Start with the finances. There are some encouraging signs. The management has stated that the losses in FY25 have reduced by an impressive 40 per cent from the FY22 low point of Rs 9,591 crore. Perhaps the need to eliminate that deficit quietly influences every decision the airline makes. It is an unenviable position to be in a low-margin, high-risk business. Even 42 months after the Tata takeover in January 2022, some continue to question the wisdom of acquiring a heavily loss-making airline. "You are taking on an old, sick company. Aviation is a high-risk business with margins of just 1 to 3 per cent due to intense competition," says one aviation analyst. The subtext is clear: constant cost-cutting is inevitable, but there is a danger that safety or service standards will suffer.

The ageing fleet is another legacy problem. AI operates significantly older aircraft than its competitors, including rival IndiGo. About 35 per cent of its 199 planes are more than a decade old; 43 are over 15 years old. Many of its Dreamliners are around 10-11 years old; the one involved in the Ahmedabad crash was nearly 12 years old. AI is indeed engaged in a historic

fleet renewal alongside other carriers. In 2023, it placed firm orders for 470 new aircraft, encompassing both wide-body and narrow-body categories. Still, the full deployment of these will stretch to 2030. Additional orders with Boeing and Airbus could bring in another 170 planes, but only by 2035.

And who will fly them? AI needs 5,970 new pilots to meet its projected growth. As of early 2025, the company had approximately 3,280 active pilots, comprising a mix of veterans and recruits. This pool is already thin, evident in its reliance on foreign pilots. Last year, 58 foreign pilots were brought in to operate leased Boeing 777s due to a shortage of type-rated Indian captains. In contrast, IndiGo has a significantly larger pilot base of 5,463, nearly all of whom are Indian. Integration issues with Vistara have added turbulence, with staff discontent over pay cuts. The result is a cockpit crew that lacks cohesion.



▲ June 19, 2017

**F**rom a safety perspective, understaffing has a direct impact on alertness and performance. The Directorate General of Civil Aviation's June 20 notice to AI, highlighting "systemic failures in scheduling protocol and oversights", was a warning bell on growing concerns around pilot fatigue and morale. A review of AI flights between January and May 2025 also shows that nearly a quarter failed to run on time. Maintenance, too, is mired in transitional inefficiencies, handled partly in-house, partly out-

sourced, and partly by an ageing PSU auxiliary.

In our cover story this week, Managing Editor M.G. Arun and Associate Editor Avishek Ghosh Dastidar prise open a troubling corporate black box. The irony is striking: this dissection comes just after AI's largest media campaign since returning to Tata control. Founded in 1932 by J.R.D. Tata, Air India was nationalised in 1953, a move long viewed as an injustice to the founding family. Its return to Tata's hands was celebrated as poetic justice. But if it was also meant to signal the arrival of best-in-class corporate governance, the airline still has a long way to go before that promise takes flight. However, the opportunity to become an internationally respected airline is immense and the Tatas have the capability to make it the pride of India.

(Aroon Purie)

# CONTENTS

UPFRONT: PRIVATE R&D  
GETS BIG PUSH PG 6

STATE SCAN: A FIGHT IN  
THE FOREST IN MP PG 14



COVER STORY

22

## HOW TO FIX AIR INDIA

WHAT THE TATA-OWNED AIRLINE NEEDS TO DO TO REGAIN TRUST  
AND CREDIBILITY AFTER THE AHMEDABAD CRASH



► BIHAR

### 32 Citizenship on Trial

The EC's rushed verification of voters in Bihar sparks fears of disenfranchisement, political bias and covert citizenship tests



► KOLKATA

### 39 A New IT Sunrise

Top firms are flocking to IT hubs in the West Bengal capital. But this silent revolution is not without challenges



► UTTAR PRADESH

## 42 The Missing Muslim Leaders

Eclipsed by the rise of the Hindutva narrative and targeted by the Yogi govt's tough-on-crime policy, Muslim leaders in UP have faded from prominence

► EDUCATION

## 47 Collapse of a Coaching Capital

With the government intent on an education that promotes critical thinking rather than rote learning, Kota's already beleaguered coaching industry suffers another blow



► CINEMA

## 50 Monster Hitmaker

How Dinesh Vijan made Maddock Films a juggernaut of Hindi cinema through a fearless, content-first approach

► LEISURE

## 55 The Long Chase

Nagesh Kukunoor's new web series—*The Hunt*—is a fictional recreation of the search for Rajiv Gandhi's killers



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Volume 50-Number 29; For the week

July 15-21, 2025, published on every Friday

Editorial/Corporate Office Living Media India Ltd., India Today Group  
Mediaplex, FC-8, Sector-16A, Film City, Noida - 201301; Phone: 0120-4807100

Subscriptions: For assistance, contact, email: [wecare@intoday.com](mailto: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).

Regd. 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; Phone: 022 69193355; Fax: 66063226

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Printed and published by Manoj Sharma on behalf of Living Media India Limited. Printed at Thomson Press India Limited, 18-35 Milestone, Delhi Mathura Road, Faridabad-121007, (Haryana) and at Rajhans Enterprises, 131, Industrial Town, 4th Main Road, Rajajinagar, Bengaluru-560044, (Karnataka).

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

Editor: Raj Chengappa.

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# UPFRONT

WEATHER: MONSOON JITTERS PG 10

VIEWPOINT: DALAI LAMA AND CHINA'S PLAY PG 12



MANDAR DEODHAR

FUTURE-READY  
A hybrid solar cell  
lab at IIT Bombay

## ► SCIENCE & TECH

# PRIVATE R&D GETS BIG PUSH

**The Centre's Rs 1 lakh crore scheme seeks to drive bigger innovation risks by private sector. But it will require breaking free from bureaucratic and jugaad culture**

**By ANILESH S. MAHAJAN**

**I**N BENGALURU'S ELECTRONIC CITY, QNu Labs is refining its quantum key distribution technology—a cybersecurity breakthrough in the making. In Delhi, Vyome Biosciences is using AI to discover new treatments for skin diseases. From tactical drone startups like IdeaForge to space-tech firms such as Skyroot, deep tech ventures across India are pushing boundaries. What's missing is institutional capital and trust for long-gestation research.

India has historically always feared that last gorge which new technology must cross—the “valley of death”. It is only the State that can lead the horse across it. But past efforts have been timid.

The Technology Development Board, established in the 1990s, was criticised for risk aversion. The Fund of Funds for Start-ups leaned towards low-tech B2C ventures. The Technology Acquisition and Development Fund, under Make in India, barely disbursed 10 per cent of its corpus. A senior industry voice, who has long advised policymakers, says it was not lack of intent, but a failure to grasp the essence of innovation finance. Exciting prototypes often fail for being too commercial for academic grants, too risky for private capital.

Wiser from experience, now comes India's latest initiative to cross that frontier—designed so as to avoid our past behavioural

pitfalls. On July 1, the Union cabinet approved a Rs 1 lakh crore Research Development Innovation (RDI) scheme—a bold move to transform private sector R&D, first announced in the July 2024 Union budget. Sanjeev Bikhchandani, founder and executive vice chairman of Info Edge, believes it could be a “game changer”. “India must invest in deep tech—not just for economic growth but as a strategic imperative,” he says.

Drafting India’s largest-ever R&D stimulus meant designing new financial instruments with enough flexibility to attract private capital. It took nearly a year to complete this groundwork. Progress was slowed by inter-departmental turf battles, while private players raised concerns over access criteria, IP ownership and a perceived tilt toward academia. So, the scheme explicitly excludes universities.

The fund will be routed through a

costly due to high import duties. The bureaucratic culture may be harder to fix. “This scheme will work only if fund managers are empowered to make bold calls and resist L1 (lowest bidder) tender logic and audit fears,” says a top DST official. Ashok Atluri, managing director of Zen Technologies, agrees: “You will have to dig deeper, understand the pain of the innovator and back his instinct.”

### WHO WILL GET FUNDED

Models abroad offer useful cues. The US’s Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency grants full autonomy to elite programme managers—often from academia or industry—who lead high-risk projects with clear timelines and accountability. This has delivered breakthroughs like GPS, the Internet and stealth aircraft. Citing clean tech, Jagjeet Sareen of Dalberg Advisors says India’s R&D needs more than capital; it needs ecosystem thinking, shared infrastructure and stronger focus on commercialisation to “meet climate goals through indigenous innovation”.

The government says the fund will focus on strategic tech sectors where the country has either latent capability or urgent need: quantum tech, semiconductors, clean energy, AI, biotech, space and advanced materials. Around 50–60 per cent will be deployed as low- or zero-interest loans to private firms undertaking high-risk, late-stage R&D. Another slice will support co-development consortia combining startups, academia and large companies where India aims to build sovereign IP. A smaller but critical portion is set aside for global technology acquisition, a departure from the old import substitution model.

Several industry players whom INDIA TODAY spoke to stress the need to avoid ‘spray and pray’ funding. Instead, the fund should nurture focused clusters and support talent pipelines by funding postdoctoral and R&D fellowships in the private sector. If it works, the RDI scheme could finally end India’s *jugaad* era and seed a new generation of original inventors. ■

## WHY THE RDI SCHEME IS CRUCIAL

► India’s R&D spend is below 0.7% of GDP; private sector share is just 36%—well below global benchmarks

► The fund targets high-risk, late-stage technologies where most Indian prototypes stall

► It prioritises sovereign IP in strategic sectors like semiconductors, clean energy and quantum tech

► Companies can use it to acquire and license cutting-edge global technologies

► Designed to avoid past failures. Will use professional fund managers, eye commercial deployment

### PROTOTYPE TO DEPLOYMENT

For decades, India’s innovation model has veered between two extremes: underfunded public science and a private sector focused on near-term services or low-risk incremental products. The result has been a culture of *jugaad*, not foundational invention. Total R&D spending remains stuck below 0.7 per cent of GDP, while China’s exceeds 2.4 per cent and the US’s is over 3.5 per cent. Private sector contribution to India’s total R&D expenditure is just 36 per cent—a far cry from the 70–80 per cent in advanced economies. “Globally, governments back their scientists,” says Ajai Chowdhry, co-founder of HCL.

“They give challenges to the private sector with the assurance: if you solve this, we’ll buy it. In India, innovators don’t know who will buy their product.”

two-tier mechanism. At the first level, there will be a Special Purpose Fund (SPF) within the Department of Science & Technology’s (DST) Anusandhan National Research Foundation. From the SPF, funds will be allocated to second-tier professional fund managers. They will evaluate proposals, prioritise high-readiness projects, and deploy capital as long-term concessional loans, equity for startups or tech acquisition support, not just grants. As Rahul Walawalkar, president of NETRA (Net-Zero Energy Transition Association), puts it: “Technologies must be ready to scale, bank and deploy, not sit in labs.”

Execution will be everything. India lacks an ecosystem of independent tech evaluators, validation labs and public testbeds. Patent processing can take 3–5 years. Lab equipment remains



## OFFICE RIVALRY

**S**amajwadi Party chief **Akhilesh Yadav** has unveiled the party's latest outpost, PDA Bhawan, a sleek office-cum-residence on the Azamgarh-Faizabad highway. Set in a two-acre plot in Anwar Ganj, the two-storey complex is named after the SP's new social alliance formula of Pichhda, Dalit, Alpasankhyak (Backward, Dalit, Minority), and will be the party's Purvanchal "nerve centre" ahead of the 2027 UP election. At the ribbon-cutting ceremony, Akhilesh couldn't resist a jab at his saftron rivals. "I've seen the BJP's party offices, but ours is far better," he said, smiling. In the run-up to 2027, bricks or brickbats, all is fair.

Illustrations by **SIDDHANT JUMDE**

### ▼ HOW COOL IS YOUR KHADI?

## NEW DRESS CODE

Once the sartorial soul of the Congress party, khadi is now passe in Kerala. The younger leaders, inspired by Rahul Gandhi's Bharat Jodo makeover, are ditching the handspun fabric for jeans and T-shirts. The style shift triggered a full-blown generational debate after ex-PCC general secretary and khadi loyalist **Ajay Tharayil**, 66, took to social media to mourn the loss. While PCC



president **Sunny Joseph** and LoP **V.D. Satheesan** defended the new-gen "comfort look", youth leaders like K.S. Sabarinadhan, V.T. Balram, Abin Varkey and Hibi Eden doubled down on their style, calling it smart, relatable and still "very Congressi". Guess in Kerala, the party's old-versus-new debate is now stitched into the seams.

## MODEL OF AGILITY

On a recent tour of Bihar's Samastipur division, railways minister **Ashwini Vaishnaw** found himself at Karpoori Gram station, a modest halt with a ground-level platform. To help the minister board the train, officials went an extra mile: a decorated step-up stool and a phalanx of officers. Fitness enthusiast that he is, Vaishnaw waved it away and hopped on to the coach without any help. But not without first remarking, "So many officers deployed for just one step, something common passengers never get." Message received, one hopes.



## Goodbye CBI?

The Bengal BJP's long-running romance with the CBI seems to be over. At a recent press meet, Asansol MLA **Agnimitra Paul** declared that the party now prefers the state police—the same force the BJP constantly accuses of toeing the Trinamool line—to probe the recent Kasba rape case. Reason? The CBI's "unsuccessful" efforts in the RG Kar Hospital case. And even as a gleeful TMC pounced ("So, your favourite agency failed?", asked one digital taunt), the BJP scrambled for damage control, labelling Paul's remarks as her "personal views".



## JAB AND PARRY

A Covid vaccine debate drew Karnataka CM **Siddaramaiah**



and Biocon chairperson **Kiran Mazumdar-Shaw** into a duel on X last week. It started with the government probe into the spate of sudden heart attack deaths in Hassan district, which Sidda suggested on X could be due to "hasty" approvals for Covid vaccines. Mazumdar-Shaw called out the "factually incorrect" comment and asked the CM to not spread "misinformation". The latter fired back, saying: "Seeking clarity is not misinformation." But before the week was out, the matter appeared settled, with the probe panel concluding that the jabs weren't linked to the deaths.

**Kaushik Deka with Avaneesh Mishra, Avishek G. Dastidar, Jeemon Jacob, Arkamoy Datta Majumdar and Ajay Sukumaran**

## HEALTH WATCH

# WHAT TO DO IF YOU GET DENGUE

By **Sonali Acharjee**

The rainy season is here, and so are the mosquitoes and the fear of dengue fever. The seasonal ailment has been flagged by the WHO as one of the top 10 global health threats. The fever usually lasts a week or so, and symptoms include rashes, body

relatives are full of advice on how to keep platelet count up. This year is no different, say doctors. However, when it comes to controlling dengue, the secret is to stay calm and consult a doctor. This is because dengue will, regardless of what you do, reduce platelets. The virus affects



ANI

ache and nausea. The point of concern is that, in rare cases, there is a risk of complications developing that could result in internal haemorrhaging (in severe cases, even death). Doctors should be informed immediately if there is bleeding from the gums, abdominal pain, blood in stools or vomit, acute exhaustion or diarrhoea.

If dengue is confirmed, a low blood platelet count is a common worry. Platelets, the smallest components of your blood, are needed for blood clotting. From papaya leaf extracts to herbal teas to vitamin supplements, the internet and well-meaning

our bone marrow's ability to make platelets. It is important for patients to let doctors decide if and when a transfusion is needed.

Other things are also important. Dr Sushila Kataria, veteran infectious diseases expert at Medanta, Gurugram, says hydration and rest are crucial for recovery. Gastric health must be taken seriously. An easy-to-digest diet, drinking plenty of fluids, mental and physical rest, reporting symptoms properly to doctors and not indulging in self-medication are still the time-tested best practices to avoid a serious case of dengue.

# MONSOON JITTERS

**203**

**MM AVG. RAINFALL IN  
HIMACHAL PRADESH**  
since June 1; 31 flash  
floods, close to two  
dozen landslides,  
cloudbursts

**52**

**PLUS DISTRICTS  
IN 19 STATES**  
severely affected by  
heavy rains, flooding  
and landslides

**74%**

**MORE RAIN THAN  
SEASONAL NORMAL**  
in Madhya Pradesh, 14  
districts affected, flooding  
in Chambal-Gwalior et al

J&K

**Severely  
Rain  
Affected  
States**

Ladakh  
Uttarakhand

Uttar  
Pradesh Bihar

Jharkhand

Odisha

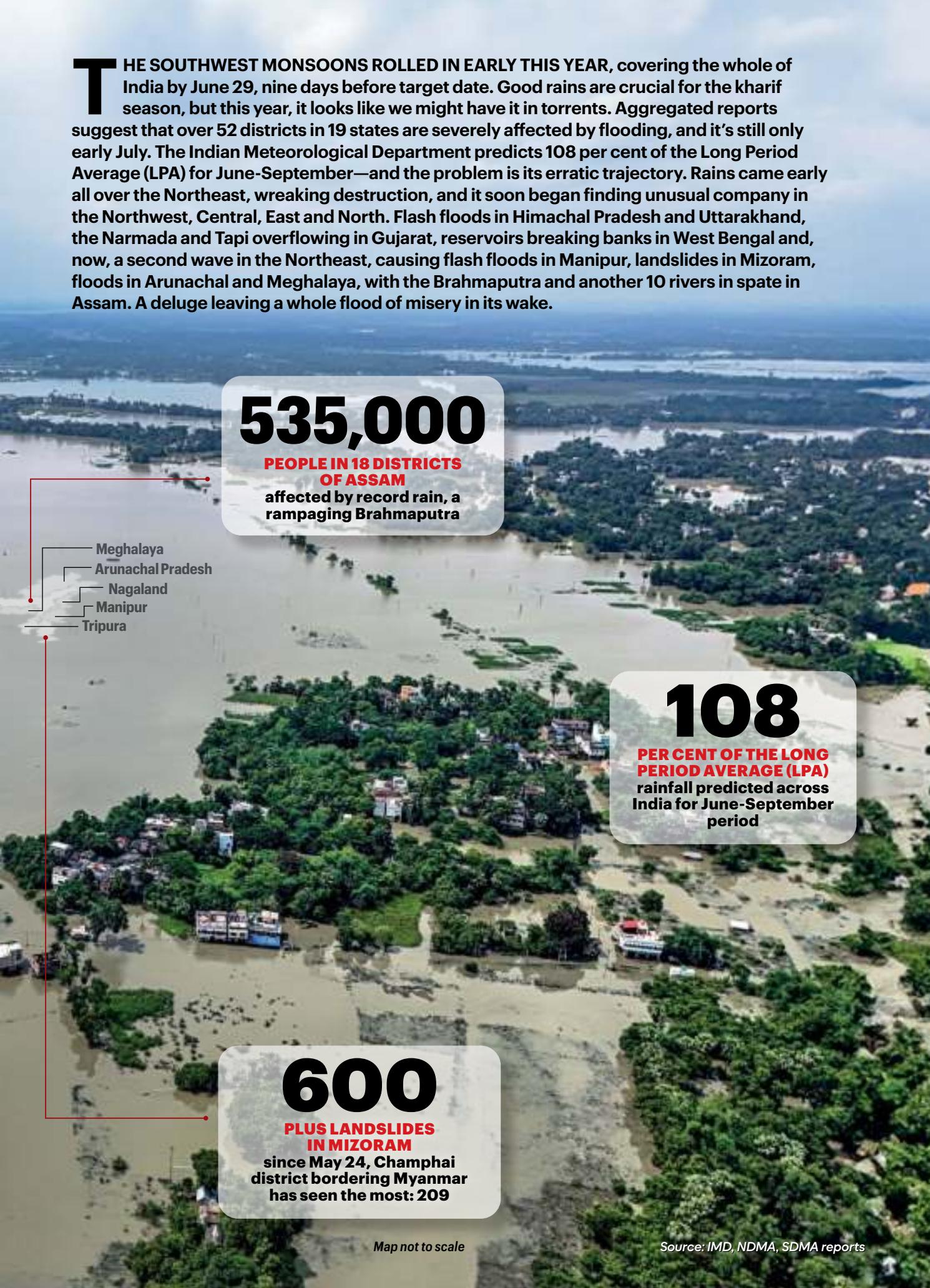
West  
Bengal

Chhattisgarh

**WATER, WATER  
EVERYWHERE**

Aerial view of  
floods in Paschim  
Medinipur, West  
Bengal, in June

**T**HE SOUTHWEST MONSOONS ROLLED IN EARLY THIS YEAR, covering the whole of India by June 29, nine days before target date. Good rains are crucial for the kharif season, but this year, it looks like we might have it in torrents. Aggregated reports suggest that over 52 districts in 19 states are severely affected by flooding, and it's still only early July. The Indian Meteorological Department predicts 108 per cent of the Long Period Average (LPA) for June-September—and the problem is its erratic trajectory. Rains came early all over the Northeast, wreaking destruction, and it soon began finding unusual company in the Northwest, Central, East and North. Flash floods in Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand, the Narmada and Tapi overflowing in Gujarat, reservoirs breaking banks in West Bengal and, now, a second wave in the Northeast, causing flash floods in Manipur, landslides in Mizoram, floods in Arunachal and Meghalaya, with the Brahmaputra and another 10 rivers in spate in Assam. A deluge leaving a whole flood of misery in its wake.



**535,000**

**PEOPLE IN 18 DISTRICTS  
OF ASSAM**  
affected by record rain, a  
rampaging Brahmaputra

- Meghalaya
- Arunachal Pradesh
- Nagaland
- Manipur
- Tripura

**108**

**PER CENT OF THE LONG  
PERIOD AVERAGE (LPA)**  
rainfall predicted across  
India for June-September  
period

**600**

**PLUS LANDSLIDES  
IN MIZORAM**  
since May 24, Champhai  
district bordering Myanmar  
has seen the most: 209

## ▼ VIEWPOINT

# THE DALAI LAMA AND CHINA'S PLAY

**Tibet is a sensitive issue in India-China relations, but pandering to Chinese demands is not the answer**

**O**n July 2, just before his 90th birthday, the 14th Dalai Lama issued a proclamation affirming that the institution of the Dalai Lama will continue. He entrusted his Gaden Phodrang Trust with exclusive authority to identify the 15th Dalai Lama, and barred any outside interference. Within hours, China's foreign ministry denounced his proclamation as illegal under their 2007 'Measures on the Management of the Reincarnation of Living Buddhas', which mandate the Chinese government's approval for all high-Lama reincarnations. The fault line thus runs between two rival processes—one administered by the trust on Indian soil, the other to be orchestrated by the Chinese party-state.

The announcement from Dharamshala elicited mixed response from India. Union minister for minority affairs Kiren Rijiju voiced support, stating, "Only the Dalai Lama and conventions established by him can decide his successor." However, the ministry of external affairs (MEA) clarified that the government "does not take any position" on faith-based matters. Rijiju and other government functionaries attended the Dalai Lama's birthday celebrations, while Prime Minister Narendra Modi sent his greetings. The Chinese remonstrated, as they had done earlier after Rijiju's comments. This dissonance reveals India's delicate balancing act. Rijiju's remarks hinted at a potential alignment with the Dalai Lama's vision, but the MEA's clarification signals the desire to avoid provoking China.

China's insistence on controlling the Dalai Lama's reincarnation is a



**A 15TH DALAI LAMA BACKED BY CHINA COULD FRACTURE THE UNITY OF DIASPORIC TIBETANS AND QUELL INTERNAL DISSENT**

calculated strategy. By anointing a Dalai Lama of its choosing, Beijing seeks to bolster its narrative of historical sovereignty over Tibet. A 15th Dalai Lama backed by China could fracture the unity of the diaspora Tibetan community, quell dissent internally and undermine the moral authority of the Dalai Lama's lineage. A Beijing-approved successor could potentially erode the international support for the Tibetan cause after the demise of a charismatic Dalai Lama.

India, on the other hand, as host to the Dalai Lama and a large Tibetan community since 1959, and with deep civilisational links with Tibet, has stakes in this matter. It cannot adopt a hands-off stance even while it maintains the official position of not interfering in religious matters, particularly if the 15th Dalai



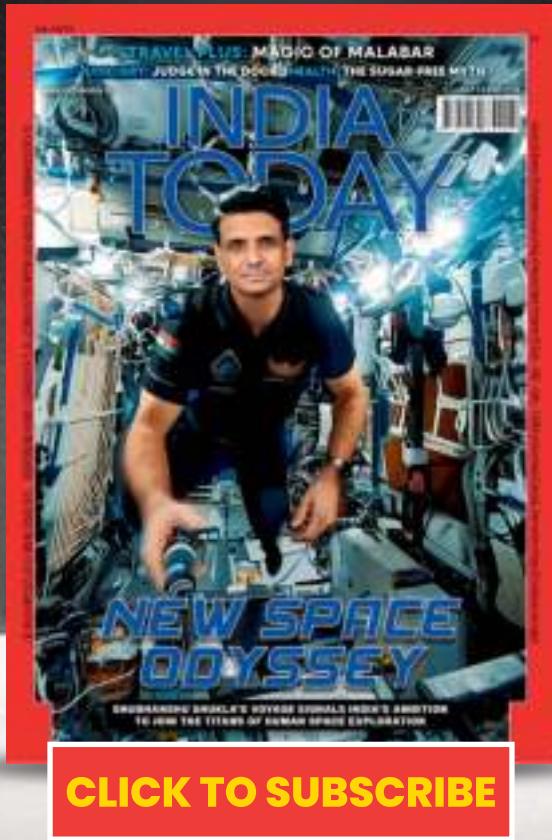
BY ASHOK  
K. KANTHA

Lama as recognised by the Dalai Lama's trust is born in India. It cannot leave it to the Chinese party-state to control reincarnation of the Dalai Lama and other Tibet-linked reincarnate Lamas in India, in the sensitive Himalayan belt or elsewhere. Apart from Tibet's strategic significance, India has an abiding interest in preserving the Tibetan culture endangered in China. There will be the practical requirements of dealing with the Tibetan community, the Central Tibetan Administration and, indeed, the 14th Dalai Lama's successor if he is identified in India. Correct lessons must be drawn from the inept handling of the succession of the 17th Karmapa.

Tibet is a sensitive issue in India-China relations but pandering to Chinese demands is not the answer. A neutral stance risks ceding the narrative to China, while a bold endorsement could inflame tensions with China. Without explicitly endorsing the Gaden Phodrang Trust's process, India should amplify its support for the Tibetan people's right to preserve their traditions and continue close engagement with the Central Tibet Administration. This discreet support avoids confrontation with China while countering Beijing's efforts to hijack a religious process and signalling that India will only acknowledge a successor chosen through traditional Tibetan methods, not Chinese fiat. To safeguard its interests, avoid undue turbulence in its complex relations with China and yet ensure that the Dalai Lama's legacy echoes beyond his lifetime, India must adopt a nuanced yet firm stance. ■

**The author is a former ambassador to China, now associated with think-tanks**

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# STATE SCAN

TAMIL NADU: BLOW BY BLOW ACCOUNTING PG 16

J&K: DRY RUN FOR FUTURE FAMINE PG 18



## IN SOLIDARITY

Union minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan with tribals in Kheoni Khurd village in Dewas, Jul. 5

► MADHYA PRADESH

## A FIGHT IN THE FOREST

**CM Mohan Yadav's pro-conservation policies run smack into a pro-people protest from his predecessor, Shivraj**

By Rahul Noronha

**I**T'S DIFFICULT AS IT IS TO ADJUDICATE between a 'pure' conservation approach and one sympathetic to human habitation in forest areas. In Madhya Pradesh, it was not made easier last week when politics entered the fray—with a relocated tiger, as it were, returning to stalk his old prey base. The first kill didn't take long, as Union agriculture minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan led a delegation of tribals from Vidisha, his Lok Sabha constituency, protesting removal of encroachments on forest land and plans to create a new wildlife sanctuary. Chief minister Mohan Yadav had to bite the bullet and transfer a forest officer.

### THE WILD LIFE OF POLITICS

How did conservation become the battleground? Put it down to contrasting politics. Chouhan did not create a single new sanctuary over his 16 years as CM, but Yadav has built up a strikingly pro-conservation image over his 18 months, signing off on two new tiger reserves and a wildlife sanctuary pending for decades. That USP seems at risk of being undone by populism. What with the ex-CM returning to basics, leading agitations on behalf of affected communities, even launching

a padayatra, stirring up head winds for Yadav. The trigger: on June 23, huts were taken down within Kheoni sanctuary, Dewas. It's not as if its owners were left homeless. The 51 evicted families are residents of Kheoni Khurd village, just outside Kheoni sanctuary; 49 have pucca houses under the PM Awas Yojana. In 2015, they had begun farming on forest land.

But there's a wider story that seems to have caught Chouhan's eye. The Kheoni sanctuary management has

BJP a party sworn to tribal welfare, Chouhan called pause on SPS and prevailed on Yadav to transfer Sehore DFO Magan Singh Dabbar (a tribal himself). On July 5, Chouhan was in his element, trawling through Kheoni Khurd in lashing rain on foot and by tractor. "Some officials have become insensitive. How would they feel if their child-



- ➲ **51 squatter families evicted from Kheoni sanctuary on June 23**
- ➲ **Ex-CM Chouhan leads tribal protests as plans for new Kheoni sanctuary spike fears over residential rights**
- ➲ **CM Yadav has signed off on two new tiger reserves and one wildlife sanctuary**
- ➲ **Tussle between Chouhan and Yadav seen as a growing rift in the state BJP**

asked for 6,000 hectares of forest to be added to its existing 13,400-ha. footprint. Also, in 2019, the Congress regime had proposed that the Ichhawar range, in adjoining Sehore district, be rebirthed as the Sardar Patel Sanctuary (SPS). The prime mover: then forest minister, present LoP, tribal and Congress leader Umang Singh. The Sehore Divisional Forest Officer (DFO), acting on orders, had begun the preparatory steps. So, many locals feared suspension of residential rights.

On June 29, Sehore saw agitations. Raising its pitch, Chouhan led a delegation to meet the CM. Calling the

ren are left out in the open in rains?" he declaimed.

Kheoni, with 10 tigers, is formally tagged as a promising sanctuary. The Ratapani reserve, 100 km away, has 60-plus tigers. SPS would have linked both habitats. But of the state's 9.4 million ha forest land, 1.1 mha. have encroachments (Vidisha has the worst figures). Save 350,000 ha. given away as pattas, this can be reclaimed; 12,000 ha. was, before monsoons. The squatters at Kheoni are mostly Bhil, Bhilala and Barela tribals, non-native settlers there, like those in Sehore et al. But they have a vote. The tiger does not. ■

## ► ASSAM

# THE COWS THAT NEVER CAME HOME

**An ambitious dairy project curdles into an embarrassing scandal, as state BJP brass are shown to have vamoosed with prize Gir cows**

By Nandita Borah and Achintya Patangia

**I**T WAS IN THE CRUEL SUMMER OF 2021, amidst the second wave of Covid-19, that the bulldozers arrived in Gorukhuti. Encroached land, they called it. By the time the dust settled on this corner of Assam's Darrang district, hundreds of families—mostly Bangla-speaking Muslims of suspect citizenship—had lost their homes. On the cleared land was to be sown an ambitious promise: the Gorukhuti Bahumukhi Krish Prakalpa (GBKP), a model project for indigenous farmers. Chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma painted a vision of agricultural renaissance rising from the ruins of displacement. Three years later, that vision has curdled into scandal.

One centrepiece of the project: Gir cows, famed for their milk production, would be imported from Gujarat to zip up Assam's dairy sector. At least that

- ➲ **CHEW IT OVER** Opposition Congress leads a 'cow protest' against the Gorukhuti project scam



was the plan. Today, after Rs 17 crore spent, it has only yielded a trail of questions, controversies and disturbing animal mortality rates.

### NO HOLY COWS

Here's how the milk boiled over. After a year, project control was ceded to an 11-member 'society' headed by Sootea MLA Padma Hazarika. Its roster boasted big BJP names like MP and state party chief Dilip Saikia, besides top bureaucrats. The procurement unfolded in three phases. Two were kosher: 98 cows, for Rs 82 lakh, in 2021; then 24 cows and a bullock, with World Bank funds, in January 2022. The third phase saw the twist.

In April 2022, the National Dairy Development Board (NDDB) was to deliver 300 Gir cows. In

**► OUT TO PASTURE** Insets: State BJP chief Saikia (left), MLA Hazarika; below: cows at Gorukhuti Bahumukhi Krishi Prakalpa



March 2023, state agriculture minister Atul Bora told the assembly all 300 were returned, the funds remaining unspent. But official records show he misled the House: 210 cows had indeed reached the site, with NDDB getting paid. Later, 154 cows were returned because of poor quality, while 56 died.

The remaining 90 took a different path. An RTI reply showed that, on Hazarika's advice, these were to be distributed among farmers by seven "public representatives"—the list reads like a who's who of Assam politics. BJP honcho Saikia took two. Three MLAs accounted for 16:

Bhuban Pegu (10), Utpal Borah (4), Diganta Kalita (2). The lion's share went to two individuals with no official position, and one private firm. Babul Nath and Neeraj Bora, said to be close to Hazarika, got 30 and 20 respectively. JMB Aqua Agro, a dairy firm owned by Julee D. Baruah, wife of minister Jayanta Malla Baruah, got 20. No public ads, no selection criteria to explain the choices.



### Takeaways

**► Project intended to power Assam's dairy sector runs into a storm of questions**

**► Agriculture minister says in the assembly that cows were returned, no money spent. Records prove otherwise**

**► State BJP chief, minister and MLAs 'privatise' Gir cows imported from Gujarat for the dairy project**

Worse, the 90 prize cows were never distributed. They simply went into private hands. Hazarika first said the seven had "bought" the cows, paying NDDB directly. But the paper trail belied that. Nath and Bora had paid NDDB directly. But it was GBKP that paid Rs 13.2 lakh for 20 "pregnant" cows taken by five beneficiaries, who had made payments at the deputy commissioner's office in Darrang. Saikia, instead of paying the full amount, offered himself a bite-sized discount of Rs 32,000. Scanty? Not so for the Opposition, which is whipping up good cream from the spilt milk. ■



By Kavitha Muralidharan

**T**AMIL NADU'S MODEL of good governance has some unwashed stains around its edges—and they go from deep, clotted red to fresh crimson every now and then, with a new case of police violence. That dark calendar returned to the spotlight in late June, with the custodial death of Ajith Kumar, a 27-year-old temple security guard, in Sivaganga district. In the ensuing storm, what came in for scrutiny is a deeply endemic crisis: a political culture that's tolerant of the law behaving lawlessly, regardless of who runs the government.

This is not the first time the ruling DMK is being called out for fostering a climate of police impunity—the 2023 custodial torture case of Ambasamudram was still fresh in the mind. This time, though, the DMK government moved with relative swiftness: five policemen were arrested, six suspended; a CBI probe was ordered; and an apol-



### Takeaways

► **Ajith Kumar, 27, a temple watchman in Sivaganga, dies in police custody**

► **Cops first claim he had a seizure while trying to flee**

► **Video of cop in mufti beating Ajith (left) belies this, backs post-mortem**

► **Stalin expresses personal regret as Oppn raises storm**

tion with a jewellery theft. Not formally arrested, nor named in an FIR, it appears he was taken to a cowshed near the temple—where the stolen items were allegedly hidden—and brutally assaulted. Next day, he was declared “brought dead” at a hospital. Police initially claimed Ajith had suffered an epileptic seizure while trying to escape. That version began to unravel after a video surfaced online, showing an officer striking Ajith as he knelt on the ground. The post-mortem revealed over 40 injuries, including blunt force trauma, and internal bleeding. The courts later observed grimly: “Even an ordinary murderer would not have caused these many injuries.”

► **TAMIL NADU**

# BLOW BY BLOW ACCOUNTING

**One more custodial death, this time of a theft suspect, puts the spotlight back on a grim reality: Tamil Nadu's political licence for police violence**

oggy phone call to Ajith's mother by chief minister M.K. Stalin came alongside a promise of compensation and a government job to his family.

#### CAST THE FIRST STONE

The Opposition was still quick to seize the moment. AIADMK general secretary and ex-CM Edappadi K. Palaniswami called Ajith's death a case of “police murder”. But as civil society activists point out, that critique is made politically fraught by his own party's flawed record. The EPS-led AIADMK regime was the one in the dock when the Sathankulam custodial deaths triggered nationwide protests and media scrutiny

in 2020. Now, as it speaks in prosecutorial tones, it has for company (or as competition) actor-politician Vijay, who, too, called on the victim's family and promised support. The DMK, in turn, sought to underline its sense of accountability with the CM's personal outreach—minister T.R.B. Rajaa called it “a first in Tamil Nadu's political history”. It's clear the overhang of the 2026 assembly election is setting the tone for all the politics, and Ajith's death has become a symbolic battleground.

Its physical details fit an old, depressing template. A temple watchman in Thiruppuvanam, Ajith was called in on June 27 for questioning in connec-

Civil society voices warn the rot is “systemic and deeply entrenched”. The twin custodial deaths of Sathankulam in 2020, too, had been handed over to the CBI—but only after public pressure and judicial intervention. It's still pending. The National Crime Records Bureau counts five custodial deaths in Tamil Nadu in 2022. But the Madurai-based group People's Watch documented 11, including one of a 17-year-old. “There's no standalone law to prevent torture. Even the courts hesitate to name it for what it is,” says I. Aseervatham of People's Watch. “Even senior IPS officers escape accountability.” The assistant superintendent accused in the Ambasamudram case is off suspension and regularly skips proceedings—the last time in May 2025.

Ajith's story joins a grim continuum that links up with the brutal police crackdowns seen during the Veerappan manhunt decades ago. “What we need is mandatory human rights education across all police ranks,” says Aseervatham. Else, Ajith's name won't be the last to join Tamil Nadu's growing ledger of custodial deaths. ■

## WAITING FOR RAIN ▶

A farmer at his fast-drying paddy field in Bandipora district in Kashmir, Jul. 2



ABID BHAT

### ► JAMMU AND KASHMIR

# DRY RUN FOR A FUTURE FAMINE

**Never-before scenes of shrivelled paddy in south Kashmir raise fears over long-term food security**

By Kaleem Geelani

**T**HE GREEN RICE PADDIES that dot NH-44 in Anantnag, on the southern edges of Kashmir, are counting their last days. It's peak farming season, but Mohammad Shafi Malik's 30-kanal farm in Jablipora, Bijbehara, has cracked and parched soil with shrivelled paddy saplings, depressing proof of the water crisis in this Himalayan region, one of the worst in its history. "The lands are without water for almost a month. This is the end of our paddy crop," the 54-year-old tells INDIA TODAY, standing at a point on the highway where it doubles as an emergency air strip.

A good year fetches Malik Rs 5 lakh from his near-90 quintals of rice. But

that source of sustenance for his family—wife, three daughters and a son—is literally crumbling to dust. "This is our traditional livelihood. We've no idea what to rely on in future," Malik says.

### ON HIGH FLAME

Like him, thousands of paddy farmers across Kashmir are staring at devastation on their farmlands. A severe heatwave has dried up the canals that usually convey water to the fields from the glacier-fed rivers and streams that crisscross the Valley. Scorching temperatures in June and July, breaching 70- and 50-year-old records this year, have made for a prolonged dry spell, the likes of which, some farmers say, have

not been seen in living memory.

Kashmir is running a near-100 per cent rainfall deficit in early July; a preliminary count aggregates almost 75 per cent shortfall in the second half of June. Southern Kashmir, especially Anantnag and Kulgam, is withering away as the Jhelum system runs on empty. This riverine lattice-work, encompassing the Vaishaw, Brengi, Sandran and Lidder rivers, is witnessing a five-year low, with the gauge at the key Sangam confluence in Anantnag touching minus 0.11 feet on July 5.

This has rendered irrigation facilities ineffective, with 19 lift schemes lying completely defunct and 41 partially working among the total 1,001 schemes

### Takeaways

► Kashmir withers under a prolonged dry spell, with temperatures breaching 50- and 70-year records

► Rainfall deficits in the range of 75% in Jun-Jul

► 11% of Kashmir's 132,000 ha. of paddy fields are dry

► Blueprint: dams, tanks, eventual shift to other crops

deployed across Kashmir. What aggravates the situation is the rampant illegal mining of riverbed materials, a newly booming nocturnal industry in Kashmir. The unabated mining of sand, gravel and rocks in these mineral-rich water bodies has altered the ecological balance—increasing vulnerability to floods—and also miscued irrigation schemes with specific alignment properties to the waters. “The situation is alarming, our men are working day and night,” says a senior irrigation official. A series of emergency measures are afoot: drought pumps, desiltation works, temporary canal storages et al.

**K**ashmir has a total of 132,000 hectares under paddy cultivation. The irrigation department estimates 15,000 ha. of this is dry presently. This is on top of an existing, structural deficiency. Rice is staple food in Kashmir. But its 5 lakh-plus metric tonnes of local harvest need to be supplemented with another 3 lakh metric tonnes of imports from the Food Corporation of India.

The area under paddy is already fading to urbanisation and diversion to cash crops like apples. The water crisis adds to the pain. Global climate change is hard local reality here, with untold strains on the Himalayan glacier bank. What the drought of 2025 presages is a long-term threat to food security.

“There’s a need to look for long-term solutions,” says the official. He calls for wise climate adaptation strategies to be mixed in with emergency contingency measures: a shift to less water-intensive crops, but also immediate construction of dams, water harvesting tanks et al. All this recalls another drought: that of funds. “Central funds have dried up over the past four years, and there remains a liability of over Rs 50 crore.” Some drizzles there can be a start to healing. ■

► GUJARAT

## SURAT GEM POLISHERS LOSE THEIR SHINE

**An exodus of jobless workers, a spate of suicides put a dark gloom on Surat's crisis-hit diamond industry**

By Jumana Shah

**J**OBLESSNESS as an occupational hazard? Yes, and it can be fatal, pretty frequently it seems, for those who work the machines in Surat's diamond industry these days. Last July, Sagar Makwana (21), a polisher, died by suicide after losing his job. Come September, thirtysomething Nikunj Tank went the same way, after a spell of deep depression. He left behind two children and a wife. May this year saw the death of Kapil Nimavat, 45, another jobless diamond worker with two schoolgoing children. The Diamond Workers' Union of Gujarat (DWUG) cites over 100 deaths in the past three years—55 suicides in the past year alone.

How did we get here? It's a full-blown crisis in the diamond industry. Natural diamond sales saw a severe slump after 2022. Lab Grown Diamonds (LGDs)—70 per cent cheaper—got more popular. Now the global markets are sitting on an unprecedented glut of natural diamonds following a 25-30 per cent wholesale price correction. Over the past three years, manufacturers have had to significantly reduce their output.

In times of such economic distress, the pain primarily flows downward: in this case, the 800,000 diamond artisans of Surat, often migrants from Saurashtra and elsewhere, who form a bulk of the nearly



LESS SPARKLE A worker at a factory making lab-grown diamonds near Surat

1.2 million-strong workforce across Gujarat, Rajasthan and Maharashtra. Possibly for the first time in the history of the five-decade-old diamond polishing industry in Surat, 500 workers went on a two-day strike in March, demanding a 30 per cent increase in wages.

In May, the Gujarat government announced an aid package for the industry, the first admission that it is indeed in trouble. The children of certified diamond polishers would get Rs 13,500 school fees, besides power and interest subsidies for small units. But Bhavesh Tank, vice president, DWUG, calls it fu-

### Takeaways

- ➲ **55 suicides in the past year alone among out-of-work diamond artisans in Surat**
- ➲ **Aid package for 800,000 workers “not enough” to stanch exodus back home**

tile. “Most companies employ artisans on an informal basis, so proving you are a bona fide employee will be next to impossible,” he says. The fees package

practically leaves out younger, unmarried polishers—it assumes they have no dependants. “Unmarried polishers have younger siblings and old parents as dependants,” says Tank. Their aid coming through depends on proving they have schoolgoing dependant siblings. “Also, the incentives for small units will not trickle down to the worst-affected artisans as the industry understanding is to reduce the supply of diamonds. They will absorb the government benefits but not increase hours or wages.”

As artisans fail to make ends meet, at least a fourth of the trained

► MAHARASHTRA

# POWER OF TWO THACKERAYS

**Uddhav, Raj finally reunite for the language war—a version of which will soon be fought in crucial civic polls. Will the Marathi manoos stand behind the duo?**

By Dhaval S. Kulkarni

**W**HEN SIBLING FEUD TURNS TO bonding, it's not often that it portends climate change—of the political sort. But such a horizon opened up when, after two decades, the estranged Thackeray cousins—Uddhav and Raj—shared a stage to mount an assault on the BJP-led government in Maharashtra. Lending extra resonance to the moment was the theme they chose for the rapprochement: the now-scraped move to introduce Hindi from Class I. Nothing could gel better with

their shared Shiv Sena gene of nativist pride. What lies ahead is an intriguing phase, with crucial civic polls—including to India's richest municipal body, Mumbai's Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation—not too far.

The original notes of dissent to Hindi had come from academicians and civil society groups. But it was the spectre of a Thackeray reunion that spooked the Devendra Fadnavis regime. It came to pass anyway, and can now potentially alter the state's political tectonics. Will Uddhav, chief of the Shiv Sena UBT, see



► **NO TO HINDI**  
MNS chief Raj Thackeray with Shiv Sena UBT chief Uddhav Thackeray at a joint rally in Mumbai, Jul. 5

his luck turning with Raj's Maharashtra Navnirman Sena (MNS) joining him?

The Sena UBT and MNS were both mauled in the 2024 assembly election. The former dwindled to 20 MLAs while the MNS, which had won one seat in 2019, was wiped out; even Raj's son Amit lost the Mahim seat. The present deputy CM Eknath Shinde's faction got 57 seats, cementing its claim to being the “real Shiv Sena”. This decimation prompted the Thackeray détente.

In a podcast, Raj said he was open to a reconciliation with his elder cousin.

workforce is believed to have returned to their villages in Saurashtra's Amreli and Bhavnagar districts. Earlier water-starved, the availability of Narmada water has revived farming there. But, says Tank, "for marginal farmers, agriculture remains risky due to climate threats and volatility in market prices of produce". What's a side hustle for them? Gig work in diamond polishing. Shashikant Shah, chairman, LGD Council of India, says almost every second village in these districts has a dozen-odd 'ghantis' (diamond polishing wheels). By engaging workers there,

"diamantaires are trying to reduce cost of production while retaining a trained workforce," he concedes.

### **WHY SELLERS GO NATURAL**

Though almost every exporter and trader now deals with LGDs, Shah says some admit to it and most don't. Surat itself has 14,000-15,000 LGD machines, according to the LGD Council, followed by 400 in Mumbai, 200 in Jaipur, 25 in Delhi and 200 being planned in Hyderabad. "With new companies and different brand names, the younger generations educated abroad

have taken to LGDs. But the 30-odd big diamantaires have an inventory of natural diamonds worth Rs 200 crore each, so they aggressively defend the traditional system," he adds. That's led to a paradoxical push: resources have been diverted to marketing natural diamonds over LGDs, a campaign that's yielding some results. In a slack global market, India has risen over China as the second largest destination for the genuine article. But Shah believes the future potential lies with LGD. Survival remains key for all players—whether at the top or the bottom of the pyramid. ■



Hindi handed the duo a strong adhesive. The BMC, central to the old Sena's politics and its "reward economy", is another. "Fadnavis managed to bring us together, something even Balasaheb could not," said Raj at a July 6 rally in Worli. Uddhav said they had "come together to stay together".

### **THE MARATHI GENE**

The old Sena is described as an "emotional party", so a joint campaign can create an upsurge among its core Marathi vote. The language move was said to be

### **Takeaways**

➲ **The Thackeray cousins reunite after a two-decade estrangement; Raj credits it to Fadnavis's Hindi policy**

➲ **An alliance forecast for polls to cash-rich BMC et al**

➲ **Sena UBT, MNS fighting together can galvanise the old Sena base emotionally**

➲ **Counter-mobilisation of non-Marathis biggest risk**

Fadnavis's brainchild, a bid to appease the powerful Hindi lobby and land a larger national profile. It seems to have boomeranged. A section of Marathi voters, including elite castes and OBCs, could prefer the Thackerays.

For all his slim electoral pickings, Raj has strong pockets of support. He also has serious street cred and machismo, precisely the qualities seen to have drained away from Uddhav's camp post Shinde's desertion. What's to be seen is if the MNS brawn can be stacked onto the Sena UBT's support base, with its

auxiliary constituency of Muslims et al.

The Thackerays have not spelt anything out clearly. But a UBT elder says an alliance seems a natural corollary. "However, the BJP will try its best to woo Raj. Note that while BJP leaders went all out in attacking Uddhav after the rally, they have been soft on Raj," he says. In case of an alliance, the elder cousin will have to do much of the adjustments. The MNS has no MLA, nor a corporator in Mumbai. The two also share spheres of influence in areas like Parel, Dadar, Mahim, Sewri and Bhandup, making seat-sharing tough.

### **VS. THE REST OF MUMBAI**

One bulwark against this: a counter-mobilisation of non-Marathis. Gujratis, Rajasthanis and Hindi speakers, put together, boast more numbers, says a state minister—and they are "solidly pro-BJP". Maharashtrians, estimated at 35-40 per cent of Mumbai's population, are divided among parties. Analysts feel the Muslims, who helped the Sena UBT save face in almost all the 10 assembly seats it won in Mumbai, may emerge as the crucial link. A BJP leader says the Thackerays are "clutching at straws". There are also those like journalist Nikhil Wagle who say their unity will be the last straw for Shinde. ■

**TIPPING POINT**

Wreckage of AI 171,  
the Air India flight  
that crashed shortly  
after takeoff from  
Ahmedabad, Jun. 12



AP

**STILL BLEEDING**

# THE WOES

₹ **61,000**  
**CRORE**

Total revenue of Air  
India in FY25

₹ **4,444**  
**CRORE**

Air India's losses in FY24, though  
down from Rs 9,591 cr. in FY22



COVER STORY  
**AIR INDIA**

# HOW TO FIX AIR INDIA

**THE AHMEDABAD CRASH HAS CAST A LONG SHADOW OVER AIR INDIA'S REVIVAL STORY, EXPOSING CRACKS IN SAFETY, STAFFING AND SYSTEMS. WHAT THE TATA-OWNED AIRLINE NEEDS TO DO TO REGAIN TRUST AND PURSUE ITS GLOBAL AMBITIONS**

By AVISHEK G. DASTIDAR & M.G. ARUN

## AGEING FLEET

**35**

**PER CENT**

Fleet older than 10 years, as compared to IndiGo's 6%

## PILOT GAP

**5,970**

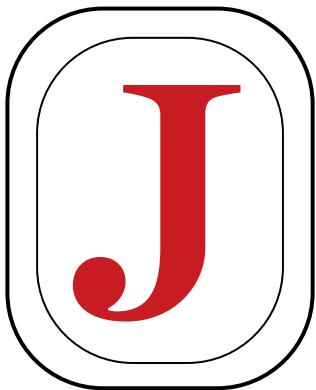
**NEW PILOTS NEEDED**  
to keep pace with growth over the next decade

## PUNCTUALITY

**24.2**

**PER CENT**

Flights that failed to meet schedule commitments (January–May 2025)



# AIR INDIA vs INDIGO



## AIR INDIA

(standalone data for  
the main carrier)

**CURRENT FLEET: 199**

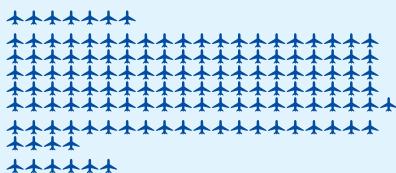
### BOEING: 61

777 (W): **27**  
787 (W): **34**



### AIRBUS: 138

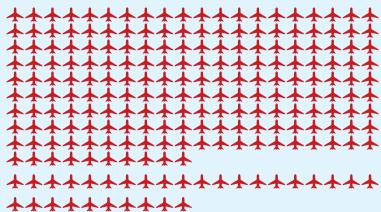
A319 (N): **7**  
A320 (N): **101**  
A321 (N): **24**  
A350 (W): **6**



### NEW ORDERS: 640\*

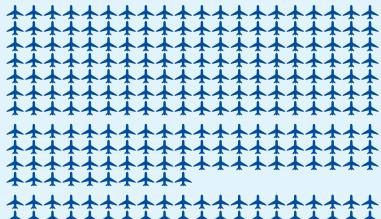
#### BOEING: 220

737 MAX (N):  
**190** [2023-28]  
787-9 (W): **20**  
[from late 2025]  
777-9 (W):  
**10** [2025-27]



#### AIRBUS: 250

A320neo (N):  
**140** [2024-29]  
A321neo (N):  
**70** [2025-30]  
A350 (W):  
**40** [2023-29]



\*Other than those listed, includes option to buy 70 more aircraft from Boeing, plus a top-up of 90 A320/A321neos and 10 A350s from Airbus [2029-34]

Note: As the delivery of new orders is ongoing, a few planes have already been inducted and will reflect in the current fleet figures too

**Just 10 days before the London Gatwick-bound Air India flight AI 171 crashed within seconds of takeoff in Ahmedabad on June 12**, the airline had been busy staging its most high-profile media blitz since privatisation. On the sidelines of the International Air Transport Association's (IATA) annual general meeting in New Delhi from June 1-3, Air India's MD and CEO Campbell Wilson, flanked by the company's senior brass, met over 30 top aviation writers and editors from India and abroad. An upbeat Wilson spoke of how, three years after the Tata Group took over the beleaguered public sector airline, it had moved from a phase of stabilisation to one of sufficiency—finally having enough aircraft to fuel its ambitions. The next goal: sharpening operational efficiency. The makeover programme titled 'Vihaan.AI', which was unveiled in September 2022 and was slated to transform Air India as "a global airline with an Indian heart" in five years, was said to have reached a very satisfying halfway mark.

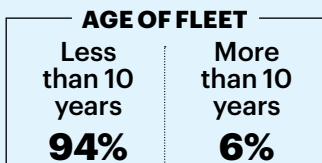
That image came undone with the crash of Air India's Boeing 787-8 Dreamliner—one of the deadliest in India's aviation history, killing 241 of the 242 people on board and at least 19 on the ground. The disaster thrust the Tata-owned airline into the harsh glare of media and regulatory scrutiny. In its immediate aftermath, the airline cancelled 83 international flights within a week and then announced a 15 per cent reduction in its widebody international operations through mid-July. Even as a high-powered, multi-agency committee, chaired by the Union home secretary, was given three months to probe the crash and suggest reforms, the Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) on June 20 pulled up Air India for repeated violations of crew duty norms and ordered the removal of three senior officials. The Aircraft Accident Investigation Bureau is learnt to have submitted its preliminary crash report to the Centre, though the findings remain undisclosed.

So, how did things come to this sorry pass? That too for a conglomerate that had an emotional stake in trying to reclaim its place in the sky? After all, Air India was born in 1932 as Tata Airlines, India's first aviation company. Founded by the iconic J.R.D. Tata, the group had lost control of the airline upon its nationalisation in June 1953. So when the Tatas formally re-acquired Air India nearly 70 years later—on January 27, 2022—it marked the end not only of a long phase

**AIR INDIA'S REVIVAL WAS ALWAYS AN UPHILL TASK—PLAGUED BY AGEING AIRCRAFT, CULTURAL INERTIA AND YEARS OF NEGLECT NO QUICK FIX COULD UNDO**

**How the country's oldest airline stacks up against its largest rival in terms of fleet size, age and expansion plans**

## INDIGO

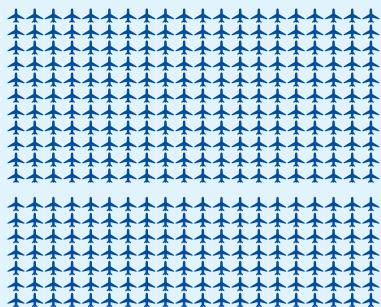


### CURRENT FLEET: 408

#### AIRBUS: 360

A320 (N): **220**

A321 (N): **140**



#### ATR: 48

72-600 (N): **48**



### NEW ORDERS: ~1,000\*

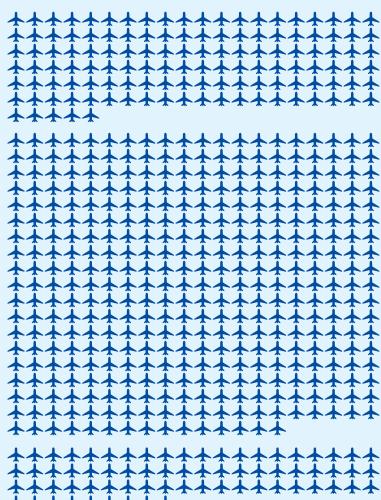
#### AIRBUS: 629

A320neo (N): **125** [2023-30]

A321neo (N): **375** [2024-35]

A321XLR (N): **69** [2026-29]

A350-900 (W): **60** [2027-35]



\*Other than those listed, includes option to buy 40 more A350s, plus 300 A320neo family aircraft ordered in 2019 (several deliveries pending), and 50 ATRs

(N): Narrowbody aircraft; (W): Widebody aircraft; Delivery schedule in []; Sources: MoCA & DGCA

Graphics by TANMOY CHAKRABORTY

of strategic disinvestment, one of the big chapters of India's reforms era. It also cued an arrival of corporate efficiencies, borne aloft on the Tata Group's ambition to carve out a big stake in the aviation business.

It wasn't an easy task. The acquisition came at a price of Rs 18,000 crore, at a time when the national carrier—a dominant player in India's international and domestic sectors—was saddled with Rs 61,562 crore in debt and had reported losses

## A RICH LEGACY

A brief history of Air India and the Tata Group's aviation ventures



- **1932:** Founded as Tata Airlines by J.R.D. Tata, nationalised in 1953



- **2007:** Indian Airlines merged into Air India to create a single state-owned carrier



- **2014:** Tatas re-enter aviation through a joint venture with Malaysia's AirAsia Berhad



- **2015:** Vistara, the joint venture between Tatas and Singapore Airlines, starts operations



- **2021-22:** The Tata Group buys Air India, along with low-cost Air India Express

- **2022:** The Tatas take full control of AirAsia India, rename it AIX Connect, ahead of merger with Air India Express in October 2024

- **2024:** Vistara merges with Air India in November. Tatas own 74.9 per cent in the merged entity, Singapore Airlines holds the rest



of Rs 9,591 crore in FY22. Under the terms of the deal, the Tata Group took on Rs 15,300 crore of the debt; the remaining Rs 46,000 crore was transferred to AI Asset Holding Limited, a special purpose vehicle set up by the government.

## BIG AMBITION, BIGGER WOES

The Tata Group's return to aviation, however, had begun years earlier. In 2014, it entered into a joint venture with Malaysia's AirAsia Berhad to launch AirAsia India, with the Tatas holding a 51 per cent stake. In 2022, they took full control of the budget carrier and renamed it AIX Connect, ahead of its merger with Air India Express in October 2024. Vistara—another Tata venture, this time with Singapore Airlines—took off in 2015 and was merged with Air India in November 2024. Post merger, the Tata Group holds a 74.9 per cent stake in the combined entity, with Singapore Airlines owning the rest.

The Tatas were indeed betting big on aviation. For good reason. Indian civil aviation was booming like never before. The country's air passenger traffic—domestic and international—has more than doubled in the past decade, reaching 376 million in FY24, as per official data. This has made India the third largest aviation market in the world, after the US and China. Government projections, as well as forecasts by independent agencies, estimate a 7-10 per cent annual growth in domestic air traffic and 15-20 per cent in international traffic over the next few years. Wilson, in a media interview days before the crash, had talked of Air India's plans to "connect to far-flung destinations in the world". The crash has put all that on hold. The Tatas have multiple challenges to negotiate before they can resume the airline's onward journey.

## CHALLENGE 1 SHEDDING ITS BAGGAGE

**F**ew dispute that the Tatas inherited an airline burdened with legacy issues. Investment neglect, frequent labour unrest from a bloated workforce and gargantuan losses had plagued Air India for decades. A turnaround was never going to be easy for the Tatas. "There were many legacy issues the Tatas had to tackle at Air India, since it was run by babus who had zero knowledge of aviation," says an aviation expert, on condition of anonymity. "It is obvious there was a compromise on safety." Another industry expert, who also chose to remain anonymous, believes the culture at Air India continues to be *sarkari*. "If your aircraft roof is leaking and the air conditioning is not working, that is a telltale sign of your company's culture," he says. "It says you can cut corners with impunity."

Air India, however, maintains that 59 per cent of its domestic fleet and around 40 per cent of its international aircraft have new or upgraded cabins. "It is incorrect to

## The Crash...

**Besides the Ahmedabad crash, there have been a few close calls involving Air India flights since the Tatas' takeover—and safety concerns persist amid heightened scrutiny**

**Jun. 12, 2025; AI 171 (Ahmedabad-London)**

**Boeing 787-8 Dreamliner crashes on take-off, 241 on board killed, only 1 survivor**

► **High-powered, multi-agency committee given three months to probe into the crash and suggest reforms; DGCA directs examination of Air India's entire Dreamliner fleet and audits of pilot training schedules**

## ...and the Close Calls

**Jun. 16, 2025; AI 315 (Hong Kong-Delhi)**

**A Boeing 787-8 Dreamliner returns to Hong Kong after a suspected 'technical issue' mid-air**

► **Aircraft is taken out of service for inspection**

**May 28, 2025; AI 347 (Singapore-Chennai)**

**The aircraft aborts a landing at Chennai merely 200 feet above ground due to cross-winds and a steep descent. Later lands safely**

► **DGCA recommends simulator refresher training for pilots for approach handling**

**Aug. 4, 2023; AI 131 (Mumbai-London)**

**A Boeing 787-8 forced to return to Mumbai after an engine shut down during the climb**

► **A fan blade in the engine's high-pressure section had come loose, causing the failure. The blade's locking lugs had been incorrectly installed in 2018, and stayed that way**

link issues with cabin amenities, such as seat functionality or inflight entertainment systems, to the reliability and airworthiness of an aircraft," a spokesperson told **INDIA TODAY**. "These aspects are unrelated to the aircraft's safety or maintenance protocols, which are rigorously monitored, and adhere to the highest regulatory standards." The airline added that its retrofit programme had been delayed due to global supply chain disruptions, with the first Boeing 787-8 Dreamliner now scheduled to begin retrofitting in July itself.

As much as 60 per cent of Air India's aircraft, including the Dreamliners, are maintained by Air India Engineering Services Ltd (AIESL)—a profitable PSU with a net profit of Rs 629.5 crore in FY23. AIESL was hived off as a separate subsidiary and excluded from the Air India disinvestment.



#### FATAL ASCENT

The tail of Air India's Boeing 787-8 Dreamliner sticks out of the building it crashed into, Jun. 12



BANDEEP SINGH

**“I've seen a reasonable number of crises in my career, but this is the most heartbreakin one. We need to use this incident as an act of force to build a safer airline”**

**— N. CHANDRASEKARAN**  
*Chairman, Tata Sons, in an address to the Air India staff on Jun. 16*

The Centre reportedly plans to put it up for sale this year.

Some question the Tatas' decision to buy "an old, sick company", that too in a "low margin, high-risk business". "Airlines have a profit margin of just 1-3 per cent because of competition and high costs. Every major event across the globe will disrupt the business. So, there would be questions raised on the need to run a disproportionate business," says one of the aviation experts quoted above. Changing Air India's culture will take 15-20 years, he adds.

Air India acknowledges that transforming the culture of a 93-year-old organisation is "a complex, long-term endeavour". Over the past three years, the airline has focused on merging four carriers into two, aligning operations, systems and teams. "Some significant organisational changes were

introduced to bring professionalism and accountability," the spokesperson said. "This is an ongoing journey."

India's largest airline, IndiGo, which has a fleet of 400-plus aircraft, now flies more than 2,200 daily flights to more than 130 destinations, 40 of them international. Still behind, Air India operates daily flights to 44 domestic and 44 international destinations, and currently has a combined fleet strength of 308 along with its subsidiary, Air India Express. The airline reported revenues of Rs 61,000 crore in FY25. It had posted losses of Rs 4,444 crore in FY24—down 54 per cent from FY22 levels. Campbell claims the FY25 losses were 40 per cent lower than three years ago, though he did not disclose the exact figure. The outlook for growth, nonetheless, remains strong. There are other major concerns it needs to address to successfully overcome the current crisis.

#### CHALLENGE 2 AGEING FLEET

**A**ccording to the ministry of civil aviation (MoCA) data, a fairly high 35 per cent of the 199 aircraft operated by Air India (main carrier) are more than a decade old, including 43 planes that have crossed 15 years in service. Many of its Dreamliners are also about 10-11 years old now; the one involved in the Ahmedabad crash was nearly 12 years old. By contrast, 6 per cent of IndiGo's fleet is more than 10 years old. Both carriers are in the midst of the biggest fleet renewals in Indian aviation history, having placed orders for over 1,500 aircraft in recent years. Air India's February 2023 order of 470 aircraft—250 from

Airbus and 220 from Boeing—was valued at an estimated \$70 billion (Rs 6 lakh crore) at listed prices. The orders span both narrowbody and widebody types, aimed at transforming Air India's domestic and international operations. To strengthen its narrowbody fleet, it has ordered 140 A320neos, 70 A321neos and 190 Boeing 737 MAX aircraft. Among widebodies, it has already inducted six A350-900s, with 34 larger A350-1000s due between 2025 and 2029. Deliveries of 20 Boeing 787-9s are expected to begin in late 2025, followed by 10 777-9s between 2025 and 2027. The carrier also holds purchase options for another 70 Boeing jets (50 737 MAXs and 20 787 Dreamliners), and a potential top-up order of 90 A320/A321neos and 10 A350s from Airbus, for delivery between 2029 and 2034. That would take the total to 640 aircraft under the new deals.

IndiGo, meanwhile, is doubling down on Airbus. It has 916 aircraft pending delivery as of June 2025, including 500 firm orders for A320neos placed in 2023—125 of the base model and 375 of the extended A321neos. All are scheduled for delivery by 2035. Its long-haul ambitions rest on 69 A321XLRs, arriving between 2026 and 2029, and 60 A350-900 widebodies, to be delivered over eight years from 2027 to 2035, with the option to purchase 40 more. While A320neo deliveries are already under way, the bulk of its A321neos are slated to join the fleet after 2030.

Leading long-haul carriers like Qatar Airways and Emirates operate far more advanced widebody fleets, yet their average fleet ages are similar to Air India's. Qatar's 233-aircraft fleet averages seven years and includes a balanced mix of narrowbody (A320s, 737 MAX) and widebody (A350s, 787s, and 777s) jets. Emirates, with an all-widebody fleet of 260—A380s and 777s—has an average age of 10.5 years for its aircraft. Air India, meanwhile, is inducting new models like the A350-900 and investing \$400 million (Rs 3,450 crore) to upgrade 106 existing aircraft—including cabin interiors and inflight systems—but analysts say it will still take several years before a consistently modern onboard experience becomes standard across its legacy fleet.

### CHALLENGE 3 CRACKS IN MAINTENANCE

All aircraft need to go through routine maintenance, repair and overhaul (MRO), a comprehensive set of activities focusing on aircraft safety, airworthiness and operational efficiency. Maintenance includes routine pre-flight checks. "Before disinvestment, Air India's aircraft were being maintained internally by its engineering department, which was later turned into a subsidiary (AIESL)," says Jitender Bhargava, a former executive director of the airline. Experts feel that AIESL could have been bundled along with Air India when it was sold to the Tatas. The Centre, perhaps, was looking at higher monetary gains by disinvesting it at a later date.

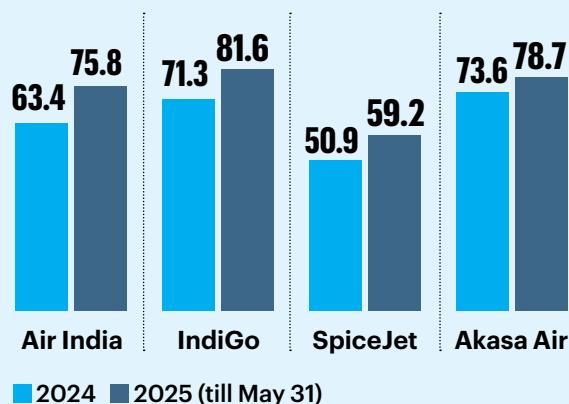
AIESL, however, is not Air India's sole MRO partner. The airline is in the process of building an MRO facility of its own

## THE SERVICE RECORD

### PUNCTUALITY

*Performance picks up across the board, but Air India still trails IndiGo and Akasa*

**Average on-time performance of scheduled flights (%)**



■ 2024 ■ 2025 (till May 31)



**“As a confidence-building measure, we have elected to continue enhanced pre-flight safety checks on our Boeing 787 fleet and, as an added measure, our Boeing 777 aircraft, for the time being”**

— CAMPBELL WILSON

MD & CEO, Air India, in a statement on Jun. 19

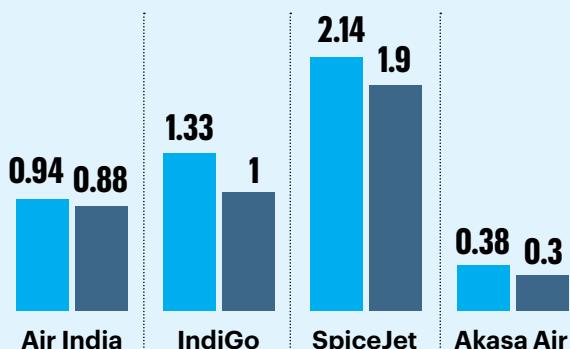
in Bengaluru. It has also entered into strategic agreements, including a 12-year inventory technical management agreement with SIA Engineering Company, Singapore, to support its Airbus A320 family fleet. The airline has another multi-year agreement with Lufthansa Technik for total component support for its Boeing 777 fleet and has a long-term agreement with the US-based Honeywell for aftermarket support for both its existing and new fleet. Air India even came under scrutiny following Operation Sindoor, after it emerged that it had outsourced some MRO work for its Boeing 777 fleet to Turkish Technic—raising concerns due to Turkey's overt support for Pakistan. In early June, Wilson said the airline

## How India's top airlines fare on punctuality, cancellations and passenger complaints

### CANCELLATIONS

Air India improves; IndiGo's higher cancellations reflect network strategy to maintain punctuality

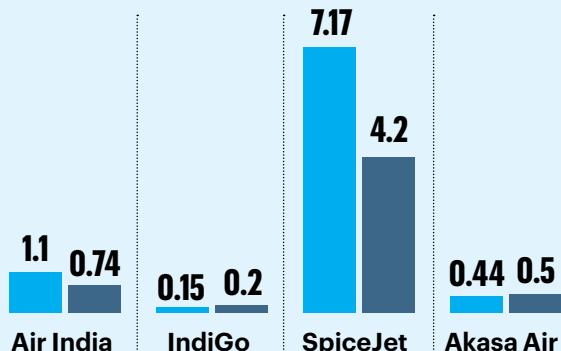
Average cancellation rate of scheduled flights (%)



### COMPLAINTS

Air India sees fewer complaints in 2025; IndiGo and Akasa slip up but still fare better

Average monthly complaints per 10,000 passengers



Source: DGCA



**“The Ahmedabad crash reinforces a broader industry learning seen in past cases like the Boeing 737 MAX [crashes in 2018–19]. That is, production and operational pressures can erode safeguards”**

— PRAGYA PRIYADARSHINI  
Managing Director, Primus Partners

was exploring alternatives, citing the need to respect “public sentiment” in India.

S.N. Bhatt, president of the Air India Aircraft Engineers Association, which represents engineers working with AIESL, rules out any “maintenance issue” with the Dreamliner fleet. “We follow the DGCA guidelines on replacement and repair. These are more rigid than the manufacturer’s own guidelines,” he says. Yet, internal documents show that on August 4, 2023, a London-bound Air India Dreamliner—similar to the one that crashed in Ahmedabad—was forced to return to Mumbai after an engine shut down during the climb. A fan blade in the engine’s high-pressure section had broken loose, causing

the failure. Investigators found the blade’s locking lugs had been incorrectly installed in 2018, and had stayed that way.

Immediately after the Ahmedabad crash, the DGCA swung into action, ordering urgent inspections of all of Air India’s 33 Dreamliners. In a June 25 statement, the airline said the regulator had completed inspections on 29 aircraft, all of which had been “cleared for service”. Still, there’s no getting around the fact that Air India has long struggled with technical and procedural lapses. Whistleblowers have added to this growing list of red flags. For instance, two former flight attendants have alleged their job was terminated for refusing to alter their testimony about an emergency slide that deployed mid-air in May 2024. Another case involves Captain Deven Kanani, who in 2023 reportedly raised concerns about insufficient oxygen supply aboard a Boeing 777 operating in an ultra-long-haul sector. According to aviation standards, such jets rely on chemically generated oxygen systems that provide just 12 minutes of breathable air in emergencies—a dangerously short window for, say, a Delhi-San Francisco flight, which often traverses high-altitude terrain. Following his complaint, the DGCA is learnt to have fined Air India Rs 1.1 crore in January 2024 even as the airline terminated Kanani’s services.

On its part, Air India has consistently rejected all the allegations and the inherent claims about safety lapses whenever such controversies have broken out. For instance, in the case of the ‘whistleblowers’, the airline claimed the employees concerned indulged in “misconduct” that led to their termination. It also challenged the steep fines.

## CHALLENGE 4 THE PILOT CRISIS

**S**taffing remains one of Air India's key challenges as it seeks to scale operations. As of early 2025, the airline had around 3,280 active pilots—a mix of seasoned veterans and new recruits—but that pool remains insufficient for its rapid expansion. The shortage has forced the airline to increasingly rely on expatriate pilots: by 2024, 58 foreign pilots were flying leased Boeing 777s due to a lack of type-rated Indian captains. (Type rating refers to certification aviation authorities grant to pilots who have completed training and testing on a specific type of aircraft.) This marks a shift from Air India's historically Indian pilot corps and underscores a transitional dependency rather than a permanently thin talent pipeline. But rival IndiGo operates with a much larger base of 5,463 pilots, almost all of them Indian.

Tensions within the cockpit, too, are rising. The integration of Vistara's pilots into Air India's ranks in 2023–24 has been anything but smooth. In March 2024, Vistara pilots staged a mass sick leave protest over revised pay structures that reportedly slashed salaries for junior pilots by as much as 50 per cent. Such unrest, even if sporadic, points to deeper dissatisfaction over compensation and contract terms.

The Ahmedabad crash has further heightened scrutiny of crew preparedness and safety practices. In its June 20 notice, the DGCA highlighted “systemic failures in scheduling protocol and oversights” that led to two Air India flights from Bengaluru to London exceeding the maximum allowable duty hours on consecutive days in May. Add to that the growing anxiety among crew members in the aftermath of the crash, and concerns are mounting over fatigue, morale, and whether the airline is stretching its resources too thin.

To its credit, Air India has ramped up recruitment and training. Since its privatisation, more than 1,500 cadet and type-rated pilots have been added across its A320, A350 and 737 fleet. But with at least 470 aircraft on order, Air India will need an estimated 5,000–6,000 pilots over the next decade, according to aviation consultancy CAPA India and DGCA projections. The government, too, has acknowledged the need for a larger, future-ready pilot workforce to keep pace with India's aviation boom.

## CHALLENGE 5 POOR PUNCTUALITY

**T**he story of Air India's dismal on-time performance (OTP) was an open secret in the days before the Tatas stepped in. In October 2019, its rate of on-time departures was just 54.3 per cent. By October 2022, soon after the takeover, it clocked an impressive 90.8 per cent OTP, a dramatic turnaround that took it well ahead of other Indian airlines. Yet, it has been difficult to maintain this tempo. In

**FRACTURED TRUST**  
A stewardess attending to passengers on an Air India flight, April 2024



**“It is time India had institutional accountability for air safety, for which a strong regulator is key. It is not just about the airlines, but the entire system”**

— KAPIL KAUL, CEO, CAPA India

December 2024, its OTP on domestic routes dropped to 67.6 per cent, about six percentage points below IndiGo's 73.4 per cent. While airline delays rose across the board in 2024 due to extrinsic rollbacks, Air India still has a lot of ground to cover. Its average OTP, though better than the dismal 50–60 per cent seen pre-2022, remains stuck in the 60–80 per cent range—a clear sign that reliability isn't yet a given.

The airline, however, cited a Cirium Aviation Analytics report to point out that it ranked among Asia's top 10 most punctual carriers for the first time in March 2025. “Over 80 per cent of Air India flights arrived within 15 minutes of schedule, with a flight completion rate of 99.8 per cent,” the spokesperson told INDIA TODAY.



AP

## CHALLENGE 6 THE SAFETY QUESTION

**W**as the Ahmedabad crash waiting to happen? Aviation experts warn against rushing to conclusions as the black box analysis is still under way. International experts say the GE GEnx engines, which power the aircraft, have an excellent safety record. Others, however, do not rule out dual engine failure or pilot error. Boeing has come under intense scrutiny in recent years over its safety record. The crisis can be traced back to the two fatal 737 MAX crashes in 2018 (Java Sea) and 2019 (Ethiopia), which together claimed 346 lives and were linked to a flawed flight control system. Subsequent investigations exposed a corporate culture accused of prioritising profit over safety. The situation escalated in January 2024, when a door plug blew off an Alaska Airlines 737 MAX mid-flight, prompting temporary grounding of over 170 jets and a sweeping audit that uncovered “multiple instances” of lapses in quality control.

The Ahmedabad crash is widely being viewed as a wake-up call—with Tata Sons chairman N. Chandrasekaran himself terming it a “catalyst” for building a “safer airline”. Aviation safety consultant Mohan Ranganathan believes Air India’s safety oversight has not yet really “matured” under the Tatas. The new management may have imposed stricter compliance, but some observers feel that the crash provides a key lesson: as aviation scales up, safety governance must keep pace.

“The crash also reinforces a broader industry learning seen in previous cases like the Boeing 737 MAX. That is, production and operational pressures can erode safeguards,” says Pragya

Priyadarshini, managing director of Primus Partners, a management consultancy firm. It highlights the need for airlines and regulators to independently verify the manufacturer, as well as maintenance work, strictly enforce maintenance standards and encourage a culture where flight crews can report issues freely without fear of consequences, she adds.

## CHALLENGE 7 REFURBISHING ITS DENTED IMAGE

**F**or an airline now under the umbrella of a well-known conglomerate, passengers expect better safety and service standards from Air India. “A crash like this inevitably dents public perception,” says D.P. Hemanth, CEO of the Asia Pacific Flight Training Academy. “People might now think twice before choosing Air India on similar long-haul routes when they have options.”

To be fair, the Tatas have in the past three years tried to introduce sweeping upgrades—from physical and IT infrastructure to a wholesale rejuvenation of staff. The voluntary retirement of 6,000 employees paved the way for onboarding fresh staff with new skills and capabilities. Air India now has a staff strength of around 18,000. The average age of the non-flying staff was 54 when the Tatas took over; now, it is 35. For cabin crew, the average age was in the high 40s; it is now 29. Moreover, as much as 35 per cent of the widebody aircraft have been upgraded.

Jitender Bhargava believes the best way to move beyond the tragedy is to look at how other major airlines survived such crises. “Did they shut down operations or slow down the pace of growth? If not, why should Air India be different? It is India’s biggest global player,” he says. “Will you judge an airline’s safety track record with one accident? The answer is no.” Take Air France, for instance. After the crash of Flight 447—an Airbus A330 that went down in the Atlantic in 2009, en route to Paris from Rio de Janeiro, killing all 228 people on board—the airline responded to the intense global scrutiny with transparency and reform, not retreat, retaining public trust and continuing to grow.

For all of its missteps, some experts argue, air safety isn’t Air India’s burden alone. Kapil Kaul, CEO of CAPA India, believes it is time for India to have “institutional accountability” as far as air safety is concerned, for which a “strong regulator is key”. “It is not just about the airlines, but the entire system,” he adds, which includes air traffic control, airports, training and MRO activities.

June 12 will be remembered as one of the “darkest days” not just in the Tata Group’s history, as Chandrasekaran described it, but in Indian aviation as a whole. There can be no compromise on safety in a rapidly expanding aviation market. The Tatas themselves can take the lead in committing unequivocally to world-class safety standards to build the global airline they envision. ■

# CITIZENSHIP

The Election Commission's rushed verification of voters, just 4-6 months prior to the assembly polls, sparks fears of disenfranchisement, political bias and covert citizenship tests



**MISSION MODE**  
A BLO collecting forms from voters during Special Intensive Revision (SIR) in the Sandesh assembly segment, Bhojpur district, Jul. 5

**79**  
million  
No. of voters in Bihar

**11**  
Acceptable documents specified by the Election Commission

**77,895**  
Booth Level Officers (BLOs) initially appointed for house-to-house enumeration

**20,603**  
Supplementary BLOs appointed to ensure timely completion

**800-1,000**  
No. of voters each BLO is tasked with collecting forms from across polling stations within 30 days

**400,000**  
Volunteers deployed, including government officials and NCC cadets, to help vulnerable populations

# ON TRIAL

By KAUSHIK DEKA and AMITABH SRIVASTAVA



**150,000**  
Booth-level  
agents appointed  
by political  
parties to  
monitor the  
process

RANJAN RAHI

E

line clutching their Aadhaar cards and, in many cases, their husbands' voter IDs, their expressions a mix of confusion and cautious hope.

Seated at a round table, five Booth Level Officers (BLOs), each flanked by at least one assistant, methodically pored over forms, scanning documents and cross-verifying entries against the electoral rolls. Two supervisors hovered nearby, observing the quiet precision of the choreography. Once done at this camp, which they expected to achieve by 12:30 pm, the BLOs would hit the road again, reaching out to houses across rural Patna, continuing the door-to-door verification process.

Armed with thick registers and pre-printed forms, they are among the nearly 100,000 BLOs embarked on an extraordinary mission since June 25: to verify the citizenship credentials of every one of Bihar's 79 million voters in just 31 days. A day earlier, the Election Commission of India (ECI) had launched what it called a Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls, setting off a political firestorm that may soon engulf the nation's democratic machinery.

The ECI defended its decision with constitutional gravity. Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) Gyanesh Kumar pointed to Article 326, which mandates that only Indian citizens above 18 can vote, and invoked the commission's duty to maintain clean electoral rolls. The timing, he insisted, was driven by necessity rather than politics. In the preceding four months, the ECI had con-

ducted nearly 5,000 meetings with 28,000 political party representatives across India. "No one was satisfied with the current status of electoral rolls for one reason or the other," Kumar said. The ECI's June 24 notification laid out the rationale: rapid urbanisation, frequent migration, young citizens becoming eligible to vote, non-reporting of deaths and, crucially, the inclusion of names of "foreign illegal immigrants".

Understanding the SIR requires navigating India's complex system of electoral roll maintenance. The Registration of Electors Rules of 1960 defines three primary methods: intensive revision, summary revision, and partly summary and partly intensive revision. A fourth type, special summary revision, addresses specific pockets of concern within a state (see *The Voter List Clean-up*).

## WHY BIHAR STANDS OUT

This is not the first time that the poll panel has ordered a statewide “intensive” revision of electoral rolls. At least nine such revisions were held from 1952 to 2004, several of which came with similar house-to-house verification and even a “de novo” (from scratch) electoral roll in some cases. What makes the Bihar exercise unique is its hybrid nature and compressed timeline. Besides, the ECI has seldom ordered a full intensive revision in a state 4-6 months ahead of an assembly election. “Updating electoral rolls is essential,” former CEC S.Y. Quraishi says, “but doing so just four months before election in a flood-prone, high-migration state like Bihar is a recipe for trouble. The issue isn’t legality. It’s about practicality, desirability and the political optics surrounding the move.”

Bihar’s last intensive revision took place in 2002-03, as part of a larger nationwide effort that unfolded in phases across 20 states. While the enumeration phase from July 15 to August 14, 2002, also lasted 31 days, the revision was completed a full three years before Bihar’s assembly election in October 2005, allowing ample time for corrections, appeals and public familiarisation with the new roll.

In addition, the 2002-03 revision was done from scratch, compared to the current exercise, which discriminates between voters based on when they were enrolled, creating different documentary requirements for different cohorts. Those who appeared on the 2003 electoral rolls, roughly 49.6 million people, need only to submit an enumeration form with an extract from that old list, which has been made available online. But the remaining 29.3 million face steeper requirements. Voters above 40, who are missing from the 2003 electoral list, will have to provide documentary proof of their citizenship, identity and residence. Those born between July 1,

1987, and December 2, 2004, have to provide proof of their own date and place of birth plus similar documentation for one parent. Those born after December 2004 need proof for themselves as well as both their parents.

The ECI has specified 11 acceptable documents (see *Documents that Count*), excluding Aadhaar cards, PAN cards and driving licences, because, as officials explained, none of these prove citizenship. Critics point out that five of these 11 documents do not display the applicant’s place or date of birth, both mandatory for inclusion in the updated voter list. Two of the documents that meet the criteria—the National Register of Citizens (NRC) and the family register—are not maintained in Bihar.

## PROOF AND PREJUDICE

Currently, to register as a voter, an individual needs to fill out Form 6, which does not require proof of citizenship. Instead, applicants are asked to submit self-attested documents to establish age and address. Acceptable age proof includes birth certificate issued by a competent authority, Aadhaar card, PAN card, driving licence, Class X or XII mark sheets from recognised boards, or passport or any other document with proof of date of birth. For address proof, applicants can submit documents in their own name or that of a parent, spouse or adult child (if already an enrolled voter at the same address). These include utility bills (minimum one-year-old), Aadhaar, bank or post office passbook, passport, land records, rent or sale deeds, among others.

Since none of these documents establish citizenship, BJP leaders have repeatedly argued that the process is vulnerable to misuse. “Isn’t it true that sometimes Rohingyas or other such individuals illegally get their names added to the voter rolls? If the work is being done with full

# DOCUMENTS THAT COUNT

Eleven official records that the ECI has specified as acceptable



1. Identity card/ pension payment order of a PSU employee or pensioner
2. ID/ certificate/ document issued by govt, local bodies, banks, post offices, LIC, PSU (pre-July 1, 1987)
3. Birth certificate issued by a competent authority
4. Passport
5. Matriculation/ educational certificate from a recognised board or university
6. Permanent residence certificate issued by competent state authority
7. Forest rights certificate
8. OBC/ SC/ ST or any valid caste certificate
9. National Register of Citizens (wherever it exists)
10. Family register
11. Land or house allotment certificate

honesty, then what is the objection?” asked Ravi Shankar Prasad, former Union law minister and BJP MP from Patna.

Opposition parties have slammed the exercise as being politically motivated, accusing the BJP-led Union government of manipulation. On July 9, Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha Rahul Gandhi, joined by INDIA bloc allies, led a protest march in Patna against the move. A significant fear they have is that the BJP’s organisational strength and resources will enable it to better assist its supporters, often from upper-caste and urban demographics, in navigating the



**STORM OVER SIR** Rahul Gandhi, Tejashwi Yadav and other opposition leaders protest the poll roll revision in Patna, Jul. 9

60, often lacked formal birth certificates. Educational records were equally scarce, with just 10 to 13 per cent of this group having completed secondary school. The India Human Development Survey (2011-12) adds that only about 20 per cent of marginalised castes and 25 per cent of OBCs possess valid caste certificates.

Data analysis by Rahul Shastri, a researcher associated with the Bharat Jodo Abhiyan, shows that only a small fraction of Biharis aged 18-40 possess documents like passports, birth certificates, caste certificates or government job IDs. With the matriculation certificate emerging as the de facto proof of citizenship, the system effectively penalises non-matriculates, especially the poor, women and historically marginalised groups. The ECI had conducted the Knowledge, Attitude and Practices-Endline Survey, 2024, in Bihar after the previous Lok Sabha polls with a sample size of 41,913 citizens spread across 243 assembly segments. Thirty-three per cent were found to be nonliterate.

Critics also question the sudden need for SIR, as the state election machinery had completed a revision of the electoral rolls—the Special Summary Revision 2025—between June 2024 and January 2025. This runs contrary to the ECI's allusion that Bihar's existing electoral database was in such bad shape that it needed a full revamp. "A summary revision would have fully complied with legal requirements. Instead, the ECI ordered an intensive revision, requiring voters to prove their citizenship, the root cause of the current controversy," says former CEC O.P. Rawat.

## BACKDOOR ENTRY FOR NRC?

The spectre of an NRC hangs over these proceedings. Asaduddin Owaisi, chief of All India Majlis-e Ittehadul Muslimeen (AIMIM), accused the ECI of "secretly implementing the NRC in Bihar". West Bengal chief minister Mamata Banerjee called the exercise "even more dangerous than NRC", warning it would erase rural voters and replace them with names from BJP-supporting states. Such fears stem from the fact that

## THE VOTER LIST CLEAN-UP

### THERE ARE FOUR KINDS OF ELECTORAL ROLL REVISIONS



#### INTENSIVE REVISION

Fresh electoral rolls prepared from scratch with 100 per cent door-to-door verification



#### SUMMARY REVISION

Annual process; updates made based on claims and objections without field verification



#### PARTLY INTENSIVE AND SUMMARY

Mixed approach. Existing rolls published in draft while officers conduct household verification



#### SPECIAL REVISION

Done when routine updates are deemed insufficient. Can be attached to other methods



#### SPECIAL INTENSIVE REVISION:

Current Bihar exercise. Not defined in electoral rules; a discretionary method created by the ECI in 2025 to validate voter citizenship

SIR's complex documentation needs, potentially preserving its voter base more effectively than its rivals. In contrast, opposition parties like the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) and Congress, which rely heavily on rural and marginalised voters, do not find it as easy to mobilise support for those lacking awareness or access to required documents.

The announcement that similar exercises would follow in West Bengal and Delhi, most likely in August, reinforced perceptions of partisan intent. Opposition leaders argue that the move aligns with the BJP's long-standing narrative on illegal immigration, particularly from Bangladesh, and suspect that the voter roll purge in Bihar is a calculated effort to build legitimacy for replicating the same in Bengal, a state the BJP is trying hard to win.

RJD MP Manoj Jha led a delegation to the Supreme Court, joined by Trinamool Congress MP Mahua Moitra, the Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR) and activist Yogendra Yadav. Their petitions painted a dire picture: the SIR would disenfranchise 30 million poor, marginalised voters who lacked the specific documents demanded. On July 10, the SC allowed the ECI to continue with the SIR, but asked it to consider including Aadhaar, voter ID and ration card for verification.

Tejashwi Yadav, Bihar's Leader of the Opposition, marshalled data showing that, of the 11 prescribed documents, only three were remotely common: birth, matriculation and caste certificates. National Family Health Survey data reveal that individuals born between 1965 and 1985, now aged 40 to

the ECI seems to be taking a de facto citizenship verification of all voters in Bihar. This is evident from the explicit instructions directing electoral registration officers to refer suspected foreign nationals to authorities under the Citizenship Act, 1955. These guidelines, which remain under constitutional challenge in the SC, align with the framework of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), 2003.

The CAA, 2003, controversially redefined undocumented migrants, including cross-border refugees, as “illegal migrants”, stripped their children of birthright citizenship, and proposed the creation of an NRC. The accompanying Citizenship Rules of 2003, notified before the law was operationalised, outlined a process for identifying and excluding doubtful citizens. However, these rules have not been updated since, raising legal questions about their validity.

Despite this legal ambiguity, and in the absence of any formal order from the Registrar General to initiate an NRC, the SIR closely mirrors the NRC procedure of using house-to-house enumeration and strict documentation. In the SC, petitioners argued that the SIR violated constitutional provisions and shifted the burden of citizenship proof onto voters in contravention of established electoral practices. Former CEC N. Gopalaswami, however, dismisses these concerns. He argues that elections are meant solely for Indian citizens, not foreigners, and that verifying voter eligibility through proper procedures and reliable documentation should not be a cause for objection.

## THE MIGRANT QUESTION

There is also concern about migrant labourers who may either not have access to the requisite documents and/or the wherewithal to upload them online within the deadline. According to the 2022 Bihar caste survey, nearly 5.4 million people, around 4.1 percent of the state's population, were recorded as residing outside the state. Jan Suraaj Party founder Prashant Kishor has accused the ECI of orchestrating the revision to help the ruling NDA by removing

# NO SIR, PLEASE

**The key objections against the special intensive revision (SIR) of the voter list in Bihar**

► **Estimates suggest**

25-30 million people may lack required documents, potentially excluding one-third of adult population. Disproportionate effect on Muslims, Dalits, migrant workers and rural poor

► **Exclusion of documents**

like Aadhaar, ration card and MGNREGA card, which the SC flagged on July 10

► **Lack of prior consultation**

with political parties and

deviation from established ECI practices

► **Exercise conducted just**  
4-6 months before Bihar polls, unlike historical precedent of 2-3-year gap

► **Unrealistic 30-day timeline** for verifying 79 million voters during monsoon season in the flood-prone state

► **Critics label it** “National Register of Citizens through backdoor” due to citizenship verification requirements

migrant workers, whom he called the biggest electoral threat to the BJP-Janata Dal (United) alliance.

Government officials claim that they have ensured those living and working beyond state borders are not left behind. “If a migrant worker cannot fill the enumeration form digitally, a family member can fill it here. We then send it to him via WhatsApp. All he needs to do is print it, sign it wherever he is and send it back. In extreme cases with no internet, no smartphone, the panchayat secretary is empowered to certify his identity,” says block development officer Chandan Kumar. This was borne out by a ground report, which found how the state's administrative machinery has created workarounds not just for migrant labourers, but also to assist genuine voters who lack proper documentation. For instance, while Aadhaar in itself is not among the ECI's officially sanctioned documents, it is quietly being repurposed, not as proof, but as a bridge.

In Bhojpur's Nasrathpur village, under the Chhilas panchayat, BLO Kautuk Kumar leads us down a dusty lane to the home of Banti Kumar, a non-matriculate contractor whose Aadhaar details have already been submitted to initiate the process of securing a caste certificate. A few doors away, farmer Ramesh Kumar is in the midst of a similar exercise;

his Aadhaar card, cross-verified by the panchayat office, forms the basis for his residential certificate application. “Even though Aadhaar or ration cards are not accepted in isolation, when combined with verification from the panchayat, they are adequate for establishing identity. Certificates are being issued within seven days on special state orders,” says an official in Patna.

Amid mounting backlash, the ECI has clarified that voters can still be verified even without the mandatory documents. Electoral Registration Officers (EROs) have been allowed to rely on field inquiries or alternative forms of proof. “Don't worry if you don't have every document. What matters is that you fill the enumeration form. We have various ways to verify your identity and citizenship,” says Divya Shakti, sub-divisional magistrate of Danapur, addressing a group of anxious residents at Baldeva High School. Critics argue that leaving such discretion to local officials opens the door to misuse and potential bias.

As Bihar's 79 million voters navigate this unprecedented verification maze, the implications extend far beyond the state's borders. It could reshape electoral politics across a nation where millions lack the papers to prove their belonging to the land of their birth. ■



## YARA INDIA RELEASES 3<sup>RD</sup> EDITION OF ITS SUSTAINABILITY REPORT (CY2024) A COMMITMENT TO A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE

In a bold move towards environmental stewardship and sustainable agriculture, Yara India has released its third Sustainability Report for CY 2024, titled "Greener Pathways: Fostering a Nature-Positive Food Future." The release event held at the Royal Norwegian Embassy, showcases Yara's unwavering commitment to integrating Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) principles into its operational framework.

The report serves as a vibrant testament to Yara India's commitment to innovation and integrity, focusing not only on enhancing business performance but also on bolstering the resilience of communities and ecosystems. Developed in accordance with the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) Universal Standards 2021 and externally verified by TÜV SÜD South Asia, the report outlines progressive practices designed to address agricultural challenges while protecting our planet.

### A BEACON OF HOPE FOR FARMERS AND COMMUNITIES

A key highlight of the report is its significant impact on the farming community. More than 650,000 farmers have benefited from Yara's agronomy sessions and digital platforms, including FarmCare and YaraConnect, which provide essential knowledge and resources to promote sustainable practices. This comprehensive engagement with farmers exemplifies Yara's holistic approach to cultivating an inclusive agricultural ecosystem.

Sustainable logistics also takes centre stage, with Yara reporting a commendable 27% reduction in carbon emissions through a strategic transition to rail transportation, resulting in savings exceeding \$205,000. These initiatives highlight the vital link between operational efficiency and environmental responsibility.

### TREADING LIGHTLY ON OUR PLANET

Yara India's Environmental Performance metrics showcase an inspiring commitment to sustainability. The company has successfully reused 967 million litres of water and afforested 7.4 acres, with an ambitious target to reduce 70,000 tCO<sub>2</sub>e in emissions by 2026. This commitment to regenerative practices not only fosters a healthier planet but also sets a benchmark for the industry.

Furthermore, the report emphasizes gender inclusion across the value chain. In 2024, women represented over 60% of Yara's management team, and aims to achieve 30% representation in senior management by 2026.

### A FUTURE STEEPED IN INTEGRITY

Yara India remains steadfast in its ethical commitments, reporting zero confirmed incidents of corruption and conducting a comprehensive 100% assessment of its operations to identify any potential corruption. The company's robust policies, including its Code of Conduct and Anti-Bribery measures, reflect a strong commitment to transparency and accountability.

### A VISIONARY PERSPECTIVE ON SUSTAINABLE TRANSFORMATION

Sanjiv Kanwar, Managing Director of Yara South Asia, encapsulates the report's essence with his statement, "Sustainability is not just an initiative, but how we operate at Yara." His words emphasise a



Scan to read the report

commitment to creating lasting value, highlighting the importance of empowering smallholder farmers and nurturing resilient rural communities. This vision is echoed by Norway's Ambassador to India, who has highlighted Yara's initiatives as an indication of Norway's commitment to sustainable business practices. As Yara India anticipates the future, the company is dedicated to expanding regenerative agriculture, utilising vessel-based shipping to further minimise its carbon footprint, and accelerating the adoption of biostimulants and digital technologies. In an age where climate change poses significant challenges, Yara India's proactive strategies position it as a potent catalyst for sustainable transformation, forging partnerships that will shape a climate-smart, inclusive, and resilient food system.

### CONCLUSION: A PATH FORWARD

The unveiling of Yara India's Sustainability Report 2024 marks a critical juncture in the conversation surrounding sustainable agriculture in India. With an emphasis on empowerment and innovation, Yara is not just setting an example but is also inspiring a collaborative movement towards this effect. As the company navigates the complexities of climate challenges, its unwavering commitment to impactful solutions stands out, promising a brighter and more sustainable tomorrow for generations to come.

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# BREAKING NEWS

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**NEW CAMPUS IN TOWN**  
The Infosys Development Centre in New Town, Kolkata

PTI

# A New IT Sunrise

**Top firms are flocking to IT hubs in the West Bengal capital, attracted by the excellent infrastructure and the talent pool that returned home during Covid. But this silent revolution is not without challenges**

By ARKAMOY DATTA MAJUMDAR

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**Salt Lake in Kolkata was once known** for its serene water bodies girdled by enticing walking trails and manicured gardens. Today, pockets of that tranquility remain, but much of its skyline, especially in Sector V and the nearby New Town, is dominated by towering glass-and-steel office complexes, tech parks and sleek

corporate campuses that house global Information Technology (IT) giants, BPOs and fintech start-ups. It is now regarded as the digital pulse of Bengal's capital city and is riding the crest of a remarkable IT wave that has earned it the sobriquet Silicon Valley of the East. While many of the IT firms had set up shop in the previous decade, the zone is experiencing a second boom. In the past seven years, it has expanded to 1,500-odd IT firms employing over 260,000 people. As a result, according to the Union government's Software Technology Parks of India (STPI), Kolkata's IT and IT-enabled Services

(ITeS) exports have more than doubled from Rs 6,684 crore in FY18 to Rs 14,268 crore in FY25.

It began in earnest with Bengal Silicon Valley (BSV), a technology hub with a 250-acre notified area and world-class infrastructure that was set up in 2018, and improvement in infrastructure in Sector V and New Town. Another fillip came with the displacement during the Covid-19 pandemic, when a large number of tech professionals returned home to Kolkata. Top firms soon realised the sheer number of employees from Bengal and the chances of expansion, all of which made for

# MANY MILES TO GO

**Good infrastructure, skilled workers, cheap real estate have helped Kolkata, but it lags behind Bengaluru and Hyderabad**

perfect business sense. The biggies like IBM, Microsoft, Wipro, TCS and Tech Mahindra who set up shop much earlier have in the past three years been joined by well-known firms such as Calsoft, Zensar, LTI Mindtree, Grant Thornton and McKinsey. The newer lot have taken up close to a million square feet of space and have generated 20,000-plus jobs.

## A Sector Transformed

Kolkata may still have a long way to go before it catches up with IT hubs such as Bengaluru and Hyderabad. Bengaluru's 5,500 companies employ 1.5 million people, while 900,000 IT professionals work in Hyderabad's 1,500 firms, compared to Kolkata's 260,000-strong IT workforce. But given the overstretched infrastructure in these two IT city giants, Kolkata offers an attractive alternative. "During the pandemic, IT companies came to recognise that Kolkata offered a valuable pool for their human resources," says R. Chandrasekhar, former president of NASSCOM. "But firms don't invest based on talent alone."

Infrastructure and cost are critical.

The infrastructure growth in Sector V and New Town is substantial." Alapan Bandyopadhyay, currently chief advisor to chief minister Mamata Banerjee and chairman of New Town Kolkata Development Authority (NKDA) and Nababiganta Industrial Township Authority (NDITA), which oversee infrastructure and civic services in New Town and Sector V, agrees. "Since Kolkata had long been supplying talented professionals, IT companies found it worthwhile to refocus on the city to retain that talent," he says. "This made operations less expensive and more efficient."

The transformation in Kolkata's IT landscape is most visible in Sector V, which has seen 641 IT and ITeS companies set up operations between 2021 and May 2025, an average of 160-plus companies each year. The area received Rs 6,770 crore worth of investments from 2022 onwards. Spread across 432 acres, NDITA

	NO. OF IT FIRMS	EMPLOYEES	IT+ITeS EXPORTS (₹ crore)
<b>KOLKATA</b>	<b>1,500</b>	<b>260,000</b>	<b>6,684</b>
<b>BENGALURU</b>	<b>5,500+</b>	<b>1.5 MN</b>	<b>4,53,600</b>
<b>HYDERABAD</b>	<b>1,500+</b>	<b>900,000</b>	<b>1,42,591</b>

Note: All 2024-25 figures; Source: STPI, industry estimates



NV

**BENGAL REACHES OUT** Tata Group chairperson N. Chandrasekaran meets West Bengal CM Mamata Banerjee in Kolkata, Jul. 9

has around 250 buildings, with 80 per cent occupied by IT firms. Global Foundries, a leading American semiconductor developer, recently announced it is setting up shop in Sector V. In 2024-25, 152,231 employees were officially declared to be working in the area, mostly in the tech sector.

Meanwhile, some 5-6 km away, the 2,718-acre Action Area II in New Town has also seen an impressive surge in infrastructure. In the past three years, 30 IT and ITeS buildings and five data centres have been sanctioned, covering over 700,000 square metres. Industry leaders such as TCS, Infosys, Wipro, EY GDS, Deloitte USI, LTIMindtree, Zensar, Thoughtworks, STT Global, Reliance and Adani have either established or expanded operations here. Infosys's 320,000 sq. ft development centre in New Town, built with an investment of Rs 426 crore and inaugurated in

December 2024, has further cemented confidence in the region. On July 1, Mamata announced the issuance of the occupancy certificate for ITC's 17-acre IT campus in New Town.

BSV, too, has come into its own in the past few months, with four data centres (facilities that house companies' IT infrastructure, including servers and storage) ready to kick off and office spaces being snapped up. On June 24, Mamata announced the sanction of the Phase I building plan for a 20-acre TCS office campus at BSV. The area has 41 companies now, including ST Telemedia and NTT Data, Airtel Nxtra and CtrlS—whose data centres are starting operations soon. The hub, in the NKDA area, has received investment proposals worth Rs 27,000 crore, mostly since 2021, promising to generate 75,000 direct and indirect jobs. As per government sources, besides TCS's 20 acres, the Adani group has taken up

# ₹6,770

CRORE

Total investments in the Sector V IT hub in Kolkata from 2022 onwards

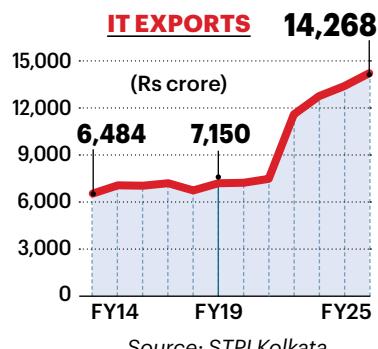
# ₹27,000

CRORE

Amount of investment proposals in the Bengal Silicon Valley tech hub that can generate 75,000 direct/ indirect jobs

## WHERE THE CASH REGISTERS RING

The spike in the value of IT and ITeS exports from Bengal, especially since the boom from 2018-19



Association, says that the inauguration of Infosys's campus, the expansion of Wipro and ITC Infotech, and the entry of players like LTIMindtree have had a domino effect, with these anchor firms drawing in ancillary businesses. Bengal's geographical location has played a part too. Its digital hinterland, comprising people who are directly or indirectly connected to the digital economy in Bihar, Odisha, Jharkhand and the Northeast, and accounting for nearly 30 per cent of India's population, make it ideal for data centres, with downstream effects on commerce. Also, elite institutions like IIT Kharagpur, IIM Calcutta, Jadavpur University and Indian Statistical Institute provide a high-quality, cost-effective talent pool in areas like AI, blockchain, IoT and cybersecurity. "Kolkata is also attracting both GCCs (global capability centres, which drive innovation) and GDCs (global delivery centres, which deliver standardised projects) of large foreign entities that not only need IT professionals but also accountants and legal experts, who are available in high

future of digital innovation in India," claims Babul Supriyo, the state's minister of information technology. Expectedly, real estate is booming in the tech hubs of Sector V, New Town and BSV. According to Sushil Mohta, chairman of real estate firm Merlin Group, Kolkata absorbed about 1.9 million sq. ft of office space in 2023 and 2.2 million sq. ft in 2024. The IT boom has also led to tertiary economic growth, generating high demand in housing, entertainment, education, healthcare, travel, hospitality and luxury.

## Persistent Challenges

For all its recent resurgence, Bengal's IT sector is not without challenges. Many new IT jobs are in low-salary brackets. Unlike Bengaluru or Hyderabad, Kolkata has yet to attract a significant migrant, high-spending workforce. Retention of employees, says a senior IT executive, requires not just jobs but competitive salaries, career prospects and a vibrant city experience. One cause for concern is the fact that, in March 2025, the state government revoked some financial benefits to industries, citing the need to redirect funds to welfare schemes.

In addition, insiders argue, Bengal needs updated, forward-looking IT and startup policies. Without them, the momentum could stagnate. Despite strong uptake, many of Bengal's 26 IT parks remain underutilised, with limited investment beyond Sector V and New Town. "If Kolkata truly wants to take off, it must evolve into a city that attracts and retains high-end talent from across the country. No company will rely solely on local talent—it has its limitations," says R. Chandrasekhar. Cities like Bengaluru, Delhi-NCR and Hyderabad have succeeded because they became cosmopolitan magnets for professionals. For Kolkata to reach that next phase, it must become a city where non-locals choose to live, work and thrive, he says. The potential for Bengal's IT industry to rise to the front ranks is vast, but the window for transformation is narrow. ■



**“Since Kolkata had long been supplying talented professionals to Indian cities, IT companies found it worthwhile to refocus on it to retain that talent. This made operations less expensive and more efficient”**

**ALAPAN BANDYOPADHYAY,** Chairman, Nabadiganta Industrial Township Authority, New Town Kolkata Development Authority

50 acres for its hyper-scale data centre, Reliance Jio has taken 40 acres to set up an IT park and LTIMindtree has 20 acres. "Our target is to have 5,000-6,000 people in the Kolkata centre by the end of FY26," says Chetana Patnaik, chief HR officer at LTIMindtree.

Taking note of Bengal's digital renaissance, Kalyan Kar, vice-president of the Sector V Stakeholder's

numbers at a moderate cost," says Kar.

Also, unlike in the past, today's investors find Bengal easier to navigate. Project clearances—including building plans and occupancy certificates—are processed within eight working days. Build-ready land parcels in Sector V and New Town increase the appeal. "With proactive policies and world-class infrastructure, we are shaping the

THE NATION

KOLKATA

# THE MISSING MUSLIM LEADERS

By AVANEESH MISHRA

Eclipsed by the rise of the Hindutva narrative and targeted by the Yogi government's tough-on-crime policy, Muslim leaders in UP have faded from prominence

SUMIT KUMAR



**PAST TENSE**  
File picture  
of Azam  
Khan (left)  
and SP chief  
Akhilesh Yadav  
at a party  
convention

# T

**HERE WAS A TIME WHEN MUSLIM LEADERS** in Uttar Pradesh were not just bystanders in its political theatre. They were an important part of the discourse, shaping coalitions, influencing agendas, and giving voice to nearly a fifth of the state's population. No longer so. The spotlight has shifted, the applause has faded. And what remains is a ringing silence. Muslim political representation in UP has entered its most diminished phase in decades. In a state where the community makes up more than 19 per cent of the population, its representation in the current assembly is just 31 seats, or 7.7 per cent of the 403-member House (see *Nowhere to Go*).

This is a far cry from 2012, when 69 Muslim candidates were elected, marking the highest-ever representation since Independence. The lowest was 17 in 1991, before improving to 24 a year after the Babri Masjid demolition, 31 in 1996, 46 in 2002 and 2007, before plummeting to 24 in 2017. After a modest uptick in 2022 to 34 (with the Samajwadi Party accounting for 31 of these wins, and the Rashtriya Lok Dal or RLD, and Suheldev Bharatiya Samaj Party or SBSP, both then SP allies, contributing one and two MLAs respectively), it has dropped again following the disqualification of Mau MLA Abbas Ansari, and bypoll losses in Rampur and Kundarki.

But the decline in representation is not just about numbers, it reflects a deeper realignment in UP's politics. The political centre of gravity has shifted, and under Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath, the BJP has maintained its dominance without fielding a single Muslim candidate in successive elections, consolidating majoritarian support while pushing earlier models of minority-based identity politics to the margins.

The situation remains as dismal in the 100-member state Legislative Council—where they remain squeezed to five (two BJP and three SP). The void is also stark in the Lok Sabha. Only five of UP's 80 MPs are Muslim, all from the Opposition (four SP and one Congress). Imran Masood, the Congress MP from Saharanpur, is reconciled to the current political situation, but says, "People talk about the winnability of Muslim candidates, but a discussion about it can start only when you give them tickets."

Over the past decade, all three major parties in UP apart from the BJP—Samajwadi Party (SP), Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) and the Congress—have scaled back Muslim representation for electoral reasons. The SP, once defined by its Muslim-Yadav coalition, has gradually shifted focus to its new PDA (Pichhda, Dalit, Alpasankhyak) formula. In recent

years, as the political narrative has further consolidated around Hindu identity politics and with the BSP's grip on Dalit voters weakening, the SP has actively courted Dalit support while being careful not to alienate Hindu voters. Mayawati's BSP, too, has turned away its focus from Muslim candidates and pivoted instead to reinforce its traditional base among Dalits and backward classes, especially after the 2024 Lok Sabha election. Across the board, what emerges is a retreat from minority-centric ticket distribution toward strategies centred on majoritarian and caste-based electoral calculations.

## A LEADERSHIP VACUUM

There are those who attribute the decline in Muslim political representation in UP to the collapse of a specific section of the leadership that thrived on a criminal-political nexus. Leaders like Azam Khan, Mukhtar Ansari and Atiq Ahmed once embodied a brand of assertive Muslim leadership in UP politics. They were controversial, yet undeniably influential. The issue before the community now is that their decline has created a vacuum rather than paving the way for a new generation of leaders. Khan is entangled in dozens of legal cases, Ansari died in jail and Ahmed was shot dead while in police custody. Others, including MLAs like Kairana's Nahid Hasan and Kanpur Nagar's Irfan Solanki (now disqualified), are also caught up in prolonged legal battles.

Since the BJP's rise to power in 2017, the narrative in UP's political landscape has shifted from a spectrum of identity-driven themes to governance- and Hindutva-oriented

ones. Muslim leaders, traditionally aligned with the SP and BSP, have struggled to find space in this new order. The Yogi government's hardline stand against crime has provided conducive legal grounds to act against many of these figures. While the Opposition describes this as a selective crackdown aimed at silencing Muslim voices, the state maintains that it is simply enforcing the law.

But then criminality in UP politics is a widespread phenomenon. According to the Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR), in the 2022 UP assembly election, 205 of the 403 MLAs (over 51 per cent) contesting had declared criminal cases against themselves. Of these, 111 were from the BJP and 71 from the SP. The numbers remained high even for serious criminal charges—90 BJP and 48 SP legislators had declared such cases. Responding to allegations that the BJP is targeting Muslim politicians, Om Prakash Rajbhar, the UP cabinet minister for minority welfare, NDA ally and SBSP chief, claimed, "Many non-Muslim

**The prevalent Hindutva-driven narrative has made it difficult for parties like the SP or BSP to even promote Muslim leaders without risking a backlash**

leaders are also facing legal action, which the Opposition conveniently overlooks." Under the Yogi government, legal action is taken "as per the law and without bias", he insists.

That said, there is no denying that the alleged "criminal-political overlap" has left many Muslim leaders vulnerable. Once stripped of political protection, their legal troubles escalated rapidly. The BJP's sustained dominance has deepened this marginalisation, with Muslim figures unable to mount a credible counter. Indeed, for parties like the SP or BSP, it is now difficult to even promote Muslim leaders without risking a backlash.

### WHEELS WITHIN WHEELS

**B**ut there are other factors at play as well. Hilal Ahmed, political scientist and professor at the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS), feels that the reasons for Muslim representation declining in UP are more due to changing political strategies than overt exclusion. He goes back to the emphasis on the winnability factor. "At present, the political discourse is dominated by Hindutva, no political party can ignore that. Because of this, the term 'Muslim' has acquired a negative connotation. Even leaders like (SP chief) Akhilesh Yadav have shifted from using the term 'Muslim' to 'minorities'," he points out.

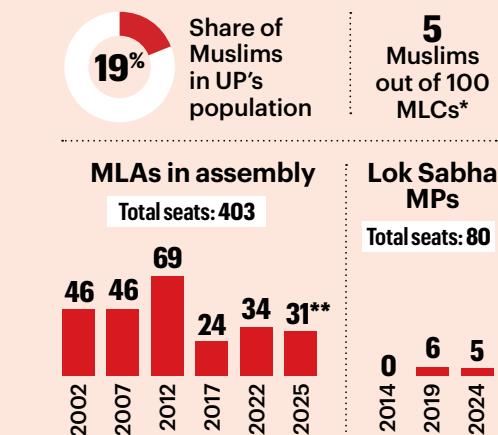
Hilal also believes that political narratives heavily influence leaders as well as the electorate. "Earlier, from around 1992 to 2010, secularism was the dominant narrative in Indian politics. Every political party wanted to be called secular, even the BJP, which described others as 'pseudo-secularists' while still embracing the label for itself," he notes. "Today, the environment is very divisive. If that does not change, it will become difficult to imagine any form of non-ideitarian politics."

But then, winning elections is just one part of democracy, asserting India's pluralistic values is another. "We do need Muslim MPs and MLAs to make our institutions inclusive and diverse. But we should not ask political parties to give tickets to Muslims, or expect that Muslims will vote only for Muslim candidates. Instead, we should expect parties to recognise Muslim presence in the legislative chambers," says the CSDS professor. Hilal also flagged the growing lack of internal inclusiveness within the political parties themselves, warning that if such trends continue, the very meaning of democracy risks being reduced to just contesting and winning elections.

Even within the Opposition ranks, the signs of discomfort are visible. The SP's decision to name Azam Khan a star campaigner in the 2024 Lok Sabha election despite his imprisonment drew internal criticism and highlighted a growing unease over the party's traditional formula of minority consolidation. The absence of a strong, unifying leadership has also left the vote fragmented, which is again cited as a reason for multiple Muslim candidates sprouting in community stronghold seats. Newer outfits like Asaduddin Owaisi's AIMIM (All India Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen) and Chandra Shekhar

### NOWHERE TO GO

Muslim representation has been on a downslide in UP's legislatures



\*Member of Legislative Council; \*\*(after disqualification and bypoll losses)

**While the old model of Muslim leadership has collapsed, no new strong unifying leadership has taken its place, leaving the vote fragmented**

Azad's Azad Samaj Party have tried to fill the vacuum, but have yet to gain meaningful ground.

The results of the assembly bypolls in November 2024, where the SP lost in Muslim strongholds such as Kundarki, Meerapur and Rampur, show that revival is a long way off. Kundarki, in particular, exemplified this crisis. The constituency has over 60 per cent Muslims, the local MP is from the community (Zia Ur Rehman Barq from Sambhal), and the BJP had not won here in over 30 years. But this time the BJP did, with party candidate Ramveer Singh taking an unprecedented 76 per cent of the vote. The Opposition had its share of excuses—the 10 dummy Muslim candidates (other than the SP nominee), security officials allegedly not allowing Muslim voters to come out and vote in certain areas—but couldn't evade the elephant in the room, the fact that a sizeable section of the community had voted for the saffron party. This also segues into Prof. Hilal's argument that "it's a false assumption that Muslims will automatically vote for Muslim candidates."

One must laud the community's efforts at staying ahead of the polarisation debate in UP, but the collapse of the old Muslim leadership model elicits broader questions, not just about minority representation but about the kind of leadership that is required to take its place. ■

# SUFFERING FROM ENLARGED PROSTATE AND OBSTRUCTING URINE?

**Quality of Life matters. Newer modalities are less invasive and can address your problems better.**



## DR. SANJAY PANDEY

Director Urology,  
Kokilaben Dhirubhai Ambani Hospital  
& Research Institute, Mumbai  
[sanjaypdr@gmail.com](mailto:sanjaypdr@gmail.com)

### Q: How does an enlarged prostate affect a man's daily routine?

An enlarged prostate, or BPH, often leads to disruptive urinary symptoms like urgent need of urination, more time required to pass urine, extra time required to empty the bladder, frequent bathroom visits, especially at night, and a weak urine stream. These symptoms can interfere with work, social activities, travel, and even sleep, leading to fatigue and frustration. Over time, BPH can reduce a man's overall sense of well-being and quality of life.

### Q: What are the traditional BPH treatment methods?

Commonly used medications such as alpha-blockers and 5-alpha reductase inhibitors can provide moderate relief but can have side effects including sexual side effects like insomnia, fatigue, ejaculatory and erectile dysfunctions etc. Recent studies indicate that there can be an increased risk of stroke and cardiac failure with some of the

medications. While surgical treatments like TURP or Laser provide the best relief, but they may cause sexual dysfunctions like retrograde ejaculation, incontinence (Urine Leakage), Strictures etc.

### Q: What are the newer BPH treatment methods?

Newer modalities like Prostatic Urethral Lift (PUL), nitinol devices, steam therapies etc. can improve the patient's overall quality of life while relieving of enlarged prostate symptoms. These procedures can help patients recover faster with lower complications and risks to the patient.

### Q: How can Prostatic Urethral Lift benefit the patient?

Unlike traditional surgeries that involve cutting or removing prostate tissue, the Prostatic Urethral Lift (PUL) is a much less invasive procedure. It uses small implants to lift the prostate tissue away from the urethra, relieving pressure and improving urine flow. The procedure can be done under local anesthesia, minimal procedural risks, post operative

catheter period is less and immediate results can be seen.

### Q: Who is the right patient for Prostatic Urethral Lift (PUL) treatment?

Patients who don't want to continue their medication or not getting relief from medication, patients who want to preserve sexual function and comorbid patients suffering from cardiac or neurological issues with anesthesia risk could be the right candidate for PUL. A urologist will perform required tests to evaluate if the patient can benefit with PUL.

### Q: Why is early surgical intervention necessary?

Early surgical intervention can prevent long-term damage to the bladder. When BPH symptoms are addressed early, treatments like PUL can relieve pressure on both the prostate and the bladder, ensuring that the bladder remains healthy and functional. By addressing BPH early on, men can avoid the more serious complications that may come with untreated bladder dysfunction. Bladder damage is irreversible and can affect Quality of life.

# आज तक

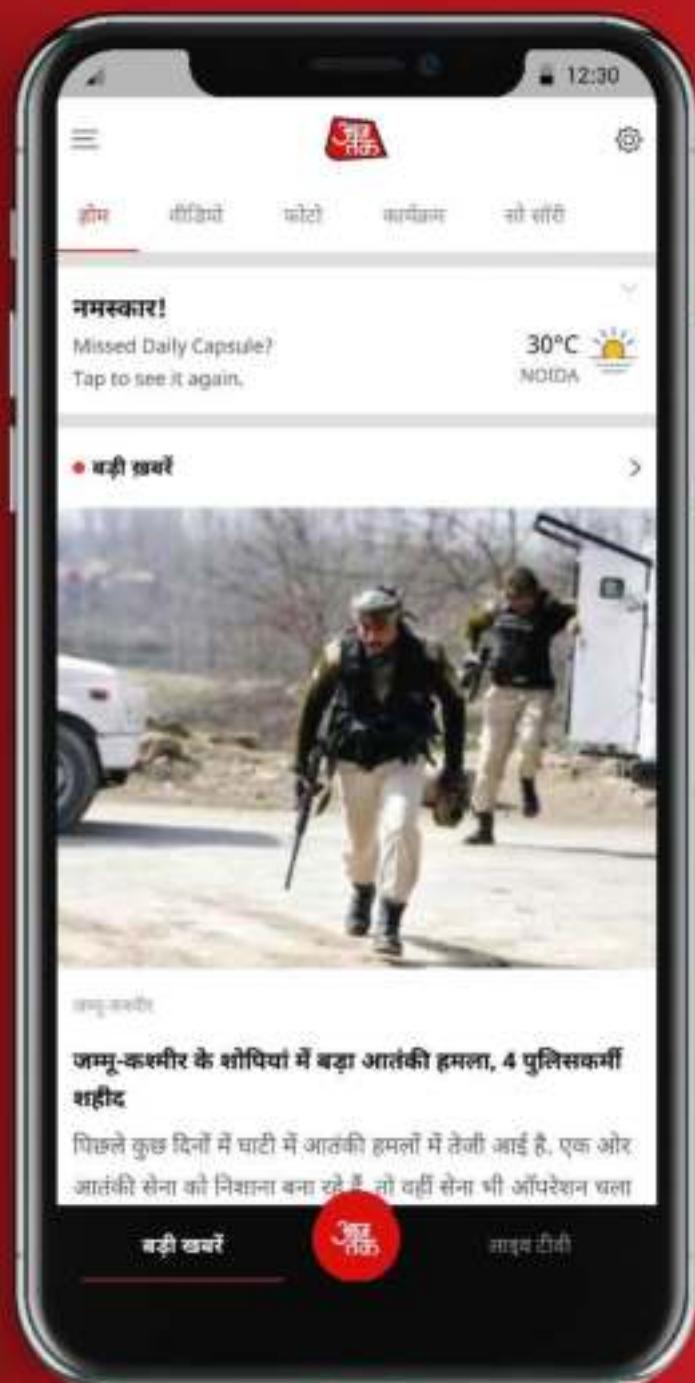
# देश का नं. 1 हिंदी न्यूज ऐप

जुड़े रहिए हर खबर से,  
कहीं भी, कभी भी

अभी डाउनलोड करें

aajtak.in/app

उपलब्ध है



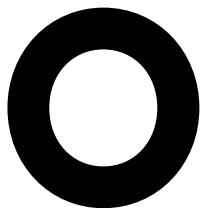
THE NATION

KOTA

# COLLAPSE OF A COACHING CAPITAL

With the government intent on an education that promotes critical thinking rather than the rote learning coaching institutes foster, Kota's already beleaguered coaching industry suffers another blow

By ROHIT PARIHAR



On June 3, coaching centres in Kota—the quiet industrial town on the banks of the Chambal in Rajasthan—proudly celebrated their students' success in national entrance examinations for top engineering colleges. But the mood was subdued, and the celebrations quieter than usual.

The coaching capital of India seems to have lost its mojo in the past few years. Gone are the lanes teeming with students in coaching centre uniforms, the packed restaurants serving burgers, vadas and omelettes, and the 'no vacancy' signs at paying guest (PG) accommodations in coveted neighbourhoods such as Rajiv Gandhi Nagar and Landmark City. Student enrolments are down, as is the revenue of coaching institutes, forcing many of them to shut

down unremunerative centres or open new ones in other cities. A spate of student suicides have dealt an additional blow, ending the city's dream run as the coaching capital of the country. With that, the entire ecosystem it had nurtured has also collapsed—the hostels offering PG accommodations, the mess operators providing meals to students and their families, besides the several ancillary services.

A June 17 government order may prove the final nail in the industry's cof-

## IN PANIC MODE

What's killing Kota's  
Rs 10,000 crore  
coaching economy

**122,000**

No. of coaching students in March 2025, a 46 per cent fall from 225,000 in 2022-23

**10-30%**

Occupancy in PG hostels, barring those in core zones like Talwandi, Rajiv Gandhi Nagar and Indira Vihar, compared to 85-100 per cent earlier

fin. It calls for a review committee to identify gaps in India's education system that force students to rely on coaching centres, reinforcing the culture of rote learning rather than critical thinking. The committee will also examine the faulty advertising claims by coaching centres, and the unethical practice of enrolling students in 'dummy schools' that game attendance so that students can focus solely on coaching. Kota, once the poster child of this model, may now become a cautionary tale.



**“We're staring at a 40% drop in Kota. Allen had 128,000 classroom students in 2022-23. That fell to 90,000 in 2023-24 and is now 65,000”**

**NAVEEN MAHESHWARI**

Director, Allen Career Institute

## HOW IT ALL BEGAN

Kota, with little to recommend it save a fort in neighbouring Bundi, the Kota stone and sari, was always the lesser of Rajasthan's illustrious cities like Jaipur, Jodhpur, Jaisalmer and Udaipur. Dubbed 'the Kanpur of Rajasthan', it was home to power, engineering, chemicals and fertiliser companies, and prone to labour unrest and violent street crimes. Coaching became a lifeline for the city when its industrial fortunes started waning in the 1980s and '90s.

The man who started it all, V.K. Bansal, was, in fact, a mechanical engineer working for JK Synthetics, staring both at the closure of his company as well as a health crisis—a diagnosis of muscular dystrophy. Coaching students led him to an alternative livelihood and, soon enough, his students began cracking the IIT-JEE. That was the beginning of Bansal Classes. After its success, other institutes sprung up, often founded by former Bansal faculty—like Allen, Career Point, Resonance and Rao Academy.

The coaching boom was helped along by disproportionately few seats in premier institutions like the IITs, creating a massive market for extra-curricular instruction. With school education unable to prepare students for entrance tests for professional courses and exam marks ceasing to be a factor in admission to IITs, coaching stepped in to bridge the critical gap. At its peak, Kota attracted 225,000 students annually, each spending an average of Rs 4 lakh on tuition, boarding, food and other expenses. This injected nearly Rs 8,000-10,000 crore into the local economy, creating 300,000-odd direct and indirect jobs.

That golden run began to unravel in 2022-23. From 225,000 in 2022-23, the number of students dropped to 175,000 in 2023-24, and further to 122,000 by March 2025. The hope that the return to physical classrooms post the pandemic and the failure of

online players like Byju's and Unacademy would bring back the numbers receded soon. "We are staring at a 40 per cent drop in Kota," admits Allen founder Naveen Maheshwari. "Allen had 128,000 classroom students in 2022-23. That fell to 90,000 in 2023-24 and is now down to 65,000." Allen has now closed two of its centres in Indira Nagar and Talwandi. It has opened centres in student-rich states like Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, routing a lot of its IIT-JEE aspirants to Lucknow and Patna. Maheshwari, though, denies that the shift in gears is due to falling student numbers. "The number of students arriving from different cities to Kota," he says, "have fallen in the same proportion as from, say, Lucknow or Patna." He and the others are still hoping that a good showing in the JEE and NEET exams will bring back the students by July-end.

## CRUMBLING REAL ESTATE

The city's meteoric rise had also triggered a speculative real estate frenzy. Property rates in coaching zones soared to Rs 12,000 per sq. ft. Many locals sold ancestral homes, channeled retirement savings or pledged personal assets for loans to build PG facilities. Very often, coaching centres—or their faculty—theirelves invested in or leased hostels, nudging students toward them. Some developers used hoardings announcing new coaching branches to attract investors, allegedly offering kickbacks or cheap land to institute owners.

As a result, Kota now has close to 4,500 PG hostels. Pre-Covid, most of them ran at 85-100 per cent occupancy, and several were managed by branded chains offering premium accommodation, with libraries, gyms and mess facilities. Today, occupancy hovers at 10-30 per cent, except in core coaching zones like Talwandi, Indira Vihar and Rajiv Gandhi Nagar. Rents, too, have dropped—from Rs 8,000 to Rs 2,000. In areas like Land-



mark, all-inclusive boarding and lodging packages have fallen from Rs 30,000 per month to Rs 15,000-18,000. Even the city's 1,500-odd mess operators are reporting staggering losses. Lucky Gochar, 20, who runs 'Lucky Restaurant' in Landmark City, laments, "Footfall is down to a fifth." Autorickshaw drivers, fruit sellers and bookshop owners are feeling the pinch too.

Locals blame coaching institutes for creating the bubble. "We made Kota expensive," says Nitin Vijay, founder and CEO of Motion Education. "Parents are now looking at more affordable cities closer home." Once, Kota attracted students from Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Haryana, Punjab, Madhya Pradesh and Delhi, but institutes like Motion, Allen et al, which may have started in Kota, now have on average 60-70 centres in at least 15-20 states. Real estate developers are unhappy with prominent coaching institutes shifting base. Investors in Coral Park claim to have put in Rs 17,000 crore, based on Allen's



PURUSHOTTAM DWAKAR

**“Hostels in Coral Park that cost Rs 6 crore have no buyers now even for Rs 2.5 crore. I myself put Rs 3.5 crore two years ago in a hostel for 60 students. I hardly get 4 to 5 students”**



**RAJESH JAIN**

*Founder-president, Property Dealers' Association, Kota*

growth plans in Kota. More than 80 per cent of the 25,000 rooms are vacant, with some investors defaulting on bank loans. Rajesh Jain, founder-president, Property Dealers' Association, Kota, and owner of Mangalam Properties, says: “Hostels in Coral Park that cost Rs 6 crore now have no buyers even for Rs 2.5 crore. I put Rs 3.5 crore two and a half years ago in a hostel for 60 students. I barely get 4-5 students.”

Meanwhile, teacher salaries are reportedly being slashed. Discontented faculty are setting up their own low-cost academies like Sarvam and Careerwill, charging as little as Rs 60,000 annually, compared to the Rs 1 lakh charged by their more prominent peers.

#### **DEATH BY SUICIDE**

Kota's reputation has also been stained by the tragedy of students ending their lives because of curricular pressure or parental expectations. Many of the aspirants who come to the city hail from middle-class

or even low-income backgrounds, with their families often taking loans or mortgaging property to fund the coaching of their wards. And whereas coaching institutes initially screened applicants and admitted only the capable ones, as competition grew, they became lax about the eligibility criteria. Many students found it difficult to cope with the extensive curriculum, and languished as coaching institutes increasingly concentrated on students who were more likely to crack the JEE and bring them credit.

In just the first 22 days of January 2025, six students died by suicide. The police, with assistance from Meta and the K-SOS app, have tracked distressed students and reportedly averted 29 suicides this year. However, as SP Amrita Duhan says, “There isn't a single suicide where coaching centres are directly to blame. The reasons include academic stress, love affairs, drug abuse and unrealistic expectations.” The police have arrested suppliers of contraband, increased patrolling near coaching hubs, and addressed 314 helpline complaints this year. But it still has not saved Kota from the tag of ‘Suicide City’, never mind that it is not even among the top 40 cities in student suicides proportionate to population. “No other city's suicide cases make national headlines the way Kota's do,” says Ravindra Goswami, the former collector of Kota.

Faced with a growing crisis, coaching giants like Allen have set up 24x7 counselling centres like Sahyog. “Misinformation about suicides has certainly hurt us,” says Maheshwari. But he also believes coaching centres are being unfairly targeted, especially the provisional regulations of the Union education ministry which ban residential coaching for students under 16. “Either you improve the education system so that we are not required. Else allow us to fill the gap that helps students from every walk of life,” he says. Change is necessary, both in public policy and the way coaching centres run their business. Until then, Kota will remain in coaching purgatory. ■

# MONSTER HITMAKER

How **Dinesh Vijan** made Maddock Films a juggernaut of Hindi cinema through a fearless, content-first approach

By **SUHANI SINGH**

# On

APRIL 7, AS LEADING ACTORS AND FILMMAKERS FROM the Hindi film industry gathered at Taj Land's End in Mumbai to ring in Maddock Films' 20th anniversary bash, one man stood tallest—studio founder Dinesh Vijan. Dressed in a black shirt and trousers, Vijan, or Dino as he is known in industry circles, had good reason to be proud. His last two films, *Stree 2* (2024) and *Chhaava* (2025), had grossed over Rs 1,100 crore in India alone, with *Stree 2* emerging the highest grossing Hindi film ever. Rajkummar Rao, Varun Dhawan, Vicky Kaushal, Kriti Sanon and filmmakers like Sriram Raghavan and Amar Kaushik spoke effusively about the production house. “The guest list became so big that we had to go to Taj; otherwise, I'd have hosted it at our office or some little bar,” says Vijan.

A no-frills producer, Vijan may not be a recluse like Aditya Chopra of Yash Raj Films, but he is

“**OURS IS A CONTENT-FIRST APPROACH. ANYONE WHO HAS A WHACKED-OUT IDEA COMES TO US FIRST, WHICH IS GOOD. WE LIKE MAKING ARTISTIC FILMS THAT RESONATE WITH AN EMERGING INDIA**”

**DINESH VIJAN**  
Founder, Maddock Films



### STREE (2018)

Made on a shoestring budget of Rs 20-25 crore, the film took in Rs 124 crore. Two years later, Vijan would fiddle with the idea of creating a horror comedy universe by intertwining characters from *Stree* into *Bhediya* (2022). The rest is history



### STREE 2 (2024)

Part II was expected to fare well but few would have predicted that it would be the highest grossing Hindi film ever domestically (Rs 585 crore). In director Amar Kaushik, Vijan has a creative collaborator who helps him build the IP [intellectual property] of the horcom universe

not as media savvy as Karan Johar of Dharma Productions either. On the back of the two films alone, Maddock has been propelled to the A-League—a force to reckon with, the studio on every film professional's wishlist. "How people look at you changes with success," says Vijan. He was in Shirdi days before the release of *Bhool Chuk Maaf*. Visiting the holy temple has become a ritual since his hit film *Zara Hatke Zara Bachke* (2023). "It helps to take the stress away of release," he adds.

One reason why Maddock is a behemoth in Bollywood is the horror comedy universe that has become its trump card. Unlike YRF's spy universe, it's distinctly Indian, with stories

set beyond the metros—Chanderi for *Stree*, Arunachal Pradesh for *Bhediya* (2022) and the Konkan region for *Munjya* (2024). Vijan hadn't conceived the universe when *Stree* (2018) was being developed. But advice from Hollywood producer Charles 'Chuck' Roven in 2012-13 over dinner in Los Angeles had stayed: "Build your own box, build your characters." After *Stree* became a surprise superhit, Vijan did just that. By interspersing characters from the films (*Stree*, *Bhediya* and *Munjya*), Vijan has built himself an IP (intellectual property) that's reaping dividends at the box office. Maddock has announced eight more titles in the universe, with films flowing until 2028. This year's addition will be *Thama*, featuring Ayushmann Khurrana and Rashmika Mandanna and set in the South.

### WITHOUT SUPERSTARS

**H**orror comedies are only part of Maddock's bouquet. There are family comedies and romances like *Hindi Medium* (2017), *Bala* (2019) and *Luka Chuppi* (2019), historic/mythology which started with *Chhaava* and armed forces dramas (*Skyforce* and the upcoming *Ikkis*). "We like making artistic films that resonate with a new, emerging India," says Vijan. "Ours is a content-first approach. Anyone who has a whacked-out idea comes to us first, which is good." What is even more impressive is that Maddock has hit the peak without banking on superstars. None of the three Khans, Ranbir Kapoor or Alia Bhatt has done a Maddock film yet. In fact, Maddock has contributed to the star content of actors like Deepika Padukone (*Love Aaj Kal* in 2009 and *Cocktail* in 2012) and Rajkummar Rao (the *Stree* films). But stars have wised up: Akshay

**"HE IS TRULY FOCUSED TO FIND STORIES FROM OUR OWN CULTURE, OWN LAND AND HISTORY. THAT VIEWPOINT IS THE MAGIC MASALA TO PUT INDIAN CINEMA ON THE GLOBAL MAP"**

**VICKY KAUSHAL**

Actor, *Chhaava*



**MIMI (2021)**

The Covid pandemic meant that this drama about an aspiring actor-turned-surrogate mother had to opt for a release on Netflix. It turned around the careers of Sanon and Tripathi, who both won National Awards

**"IF HE BELIEVES IN A PROJECT OR YOU, DINESH DOESN'T CARE ABOUT WHAT OTHERS SAY. IT IS EASY TO GET AFFECTED BY CHATTER, BUT HE REALLY BACKS HIS PEOPLE AND CONTENT"**

**KRITI SANON**, Actress,  
*Mimi* and *Luka Chuppi*



Kumar had a small but significant part in *Stree 2*. For Vijan, it's more important to find stories that do justice to a star's presence.

Vijan's approach is to not tie up directors with contracts. "You feel free. You can express yourself better," says filmmaker Laxman Utekar, who has directed four Maddock films, including *Chhaava*. "Dino doesn't sit with a calculator; he is emotionally involved in the film."

Each Maddock film begins with a tribute to Dino's father, Prem, a Mumbai-based businessman who inspired Vijan profoundly, including passing on the filmi *keeda* by taking him to the movies every Sunday. Vijan studied for an MBA in Mumbai and worked as an investment banker before pivoting to films. "Without him, I wouldn't be the person I am, make the films I do and go through the hurdles I did," he says. Vijan credits his father with shaping his understanding of India by exposing him to the country's diverse realities and cultures during their family



### **CHHAAVA (2025)**

Maddock's first historical film—an action drama on Chhatrapati Sambhaji Maharaj—would raise its stature, proving that there's more to it than horror comedies and small-town romances

**“AS THE INDUSTRY IS THINKING, ‘LET’S MAKE HORROR COMEDY’, DINESH VIJAN IS NOT FOLLOWING THE PATH OF SUCCESS, HE IS WALKING ON ONE WHERE THERE ARE CHALLENGES”**

### **LAXMAN UTEKAR**

**Director, Chhaava, Mimi and Zara Hatke Zara Bachke**

### **HINDI MEDIUM (2017)**

Vijan calls it a game-changer. The tale of a boutique owner (Irrfan) desperate to get his child enrolled in an English medium school tapped into the insecurities and aspirations of the middle class with humour and substance



trips. “I can’t tell you the soft value of it. It is priceless.” Films like *Badlapur* (2015), *Luka Chuppi*, *Zara Hatke Zara Bachke* and *Sector 36* (2024) demonstrate Vijan’s affinity for stories set in a lesser-seen India. “India no longer looks to the West in an aspirational manner. We want stories about ourselves,” says Vijan.

### **FORMULA FOR SUCCESS**

**V**ijan admits that he isn't the most social person, but he values relationships and keeps a tight inner circle. It includes his sisters, Poonam and Pooja (both producers at Maddock); Sharada Karki Jalota, who helms creative; Ashni Parekh, who handles legal; and Homi Adajania, the director who has been with the studio since his debut film, *Being Cyrus* (2005). Vijan shuns showbiz glitz and prioritises personal life. A father to twins, he tries to reach home before they go to bed at 8 pm. He calls his wife Pramita his “lady luck”; the two tied the knot in 2018.

“Dinesh sir is focused on finding

stories from our culture and history. With that, you can jump genres,” says Vicky Kaushal, who acted in the Maddock hits *Zara Hatke Zara Bachke* and *Chhaava*. Also, Maddock relies on internal screenings to get feedback, with Vijan taking the lead on cutting eye-catching trailers and sitting on music sessions. The India-first outlook has empowered Vijan to consolidate



**“DINESH SEES THE FILM AND ITS TRAILER IN THE NARRATION. THEN, HE IS ABLE TO SUMMARISE A FILM REALLY WELL. EACH POINT IS THERE AND IT SOUNDS GOOD. HE'S THAT SHARP”**

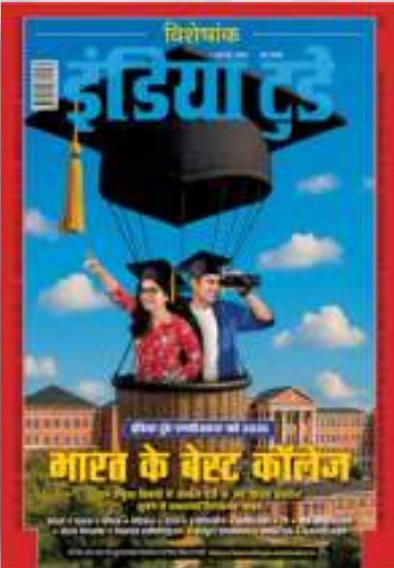
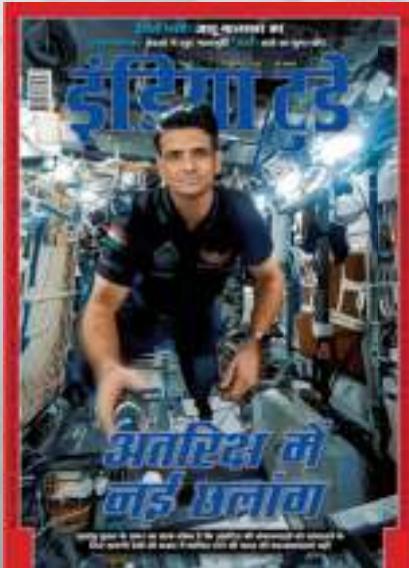
### **AMAR KAUSHIK**

**Director, Stree & Stree 2, Bala**

his victories. *Stree*'s success emboldened him to up the budget for part II. “Do it bigger, better, madder and crazier,” he says. For *Munjya*, he spent nearly 60 per cent of the Rs 45 crore budget on visual effects to develop the titular character, a vengeful, annoying spirit. By far, his biggest gamble was *Chhaava*, a Rs 200 crore budget historical action drama on Chhatrapati Sambhaji Maharaj. “It was my biggest fear as I was navigating uncharted territory,” says Vijan. The film released in February and is Hindi cinema's biggest grosser for 2025 thus far. Vijan isn't even done with 2025—up next is the romance *Param Sundari* with Siddharth Malhotra and Janhvi Kapoor; *Thama* is expected during Diwali; and there is *Ikkis*, a father-son story on the 1971 war hero Arun Khetarpal, with Dharmendra, Jaideep Alhwat and Agastya Nanda.

Maddock's stars are rising, but Vijan is aware of the testing times for the industry. “Just our films working is not enough,” he says. “Among the four to five main players, there is camaraderie and conversation on how we can help increase the overall pie.” Maddock has had its share of setbacks, with films like *Agent Vinod* (2012), *Raabta* (2017), *Love Aaj Kal 2* (2020) and *Roohi* (2021). Kriti Sanon, who has been associated with Maddock since Vijan's ill-fated directorial debut *Raabta*, has seen Maddock grow from a “cosy place” to a “huge building” in Santa Cruz. “He has learned from every film that hasn't worked,” she says. “He analyses what he could have done differently and what didn't work in the film objectively.”

Vijan isn't letting success get to his head. “I want Maddock to succeed me. So long as I am hitting it correctly, I should lead it. But at any point if I can't, I'd like to hire the guy who is better than me.” For now, though, everybody wants a piece of Dino. ■



# सबसे भरोसेमंद स्रोतों से, सबसे सटीक जानकारी

## सब्सक्राइब करें और पाएं 68% तक की छूट

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

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

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# LE ! SURE

MUSIC: IBTIDA—EK MEHFIL PG 60

THE LISTICLE: OTT & THEATRICAL RELEASES PG 61



## STICKING TO HIS CRAFT

Nagesh Kukunoor has directed two seasons of *City of Dreams* and created a *Modern Love* anthology

CINEMA ▶

## THE LONG CHASE

NAGESH KUKUNOOR'S NEW WEB SERIES—SONYLIV'S *THE HUNT*—IS A FICTIONAL RECREATION OF THE 90-DAY SEARCH FOR RAJIV GANDHI'S KILLERS

Photograph by CHANDRADEEP KUMAR

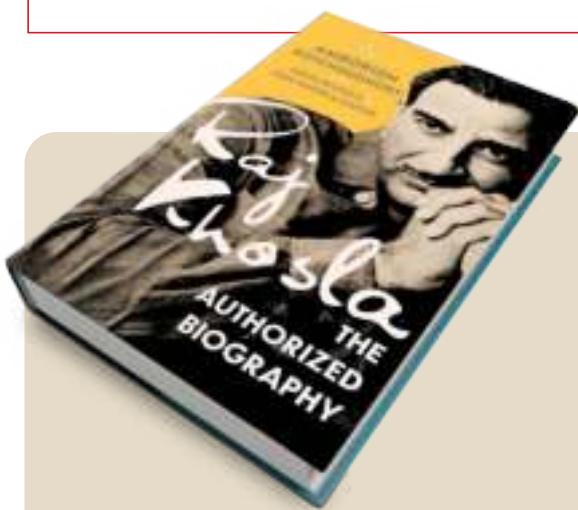
# N

Nagesh Kukunoor's latest show, *The Hunt*, tracks the three-month-long investigation that led to the capture of the individuals involved in the assassination of former prime minister Rajiv Gandhi. Just don't expect any political commentary in it. Barring a few scenes where then PM Chandra Shekhar gets updates about the case and documentary footage such as that of the Gandhi family at the funeral, there's little reference to public figures, but enough of an engrossing chase to keep viewers hooked. "I never want to do any kind of web series or film on politics and religion," declares Kukunoor. His last, *City of*

*Dreams*, was a drama around a political family so far removed from reality that it didn't create any ripples. Best known for films like *Hyderabad Blues*, *Rockford*, *Iqbal* and *Dor*, for Kukunoor, the excitement in adapting Anirudhya Mitra's book, *Ninety Days: The True Story of the Hunt for Rajiv Gandhi's Assassins*, lay in the fact that he "hadn't yet done a true crime story". His approach was "to treat it like a police procedural, a crime thriller" from the get-go. "I felt that everyone knows the assassination in broad strokes, but what happened in the 90 days after is not known." Central to the ensemble drama are officers in the Special Investigation Team (SIT), including D.R. Kaarthikeyan (the talented Amit Sial), who spearheads the team, and LTTE operatives, including the mastermind of the horrific murder,



Centred on the **Rajiv Gandhi assassination**, *The Hunt* is more content in being an engaging whodunit than a comprehensive whydunit



## BOOKS ▾

# Portrait of a Director

A NEW BIOGRAPHY, COMMEMORATING FILMMAKER RAJ KHOSLA'S BIRTH CENTENARY, FOCUSES ON HIS CRAFT

**RAJ KHOSLA: THE AUTHORIZED BIOGRAPHY**  
By Amborish Roychoudhury with Anita Khosla and Uma Khosla Kapur  
HACHETTE INDIA ₹799; 368 pages

**W**hen author Amborish Roychoudhury started writing *Raj Khosla: The Authorized Biography*, he discovered that people around him didn't know much about Khosla's contributions to Hindi cinema. Only when he posted some iconic songs from his films like *C.I.D.* (1956), *Woh Kaun Thi* (1964) and *Dostana* (1980) did they recognise his works.

This is why this book, co-written by Khosla's daughters, Anita Khosla and Uma Khosla Kapur, is important.

In a career spanning over three decades, Khosla directed 26 films, many considered among Hindi cinema's best. While he cut his teeth with stylish, suspenseful films, he also tackled noir thrillers, dacoit dramas, horror and romances.



**ON THE TRAIL** A still from the web series *The Hunt*, directed by Nagesh Kukunoor

Sivarasan (a menacing Shafeeq Mustafa). The LTTE's suicide-for-a-cause strategy has inspired a few narratives such as *The Terrorist*, *Madras Café* and, more recently, season two of *The Family Man*. *The Hunt*'s approach sees it briefly mention how Gandhi's deployment of the IPKF in Sri Lanka stoked LTTE's animosity against him. The writers also don't shy away from information such as how the

organisation had sympathisers in Tamil Nadu, but don't delve too deep into what triggered the support. "In your eyes, they are terrorists; in their eyes, they are freedom fighters," explains one character to the investigating officers. "I treat my characters with a tremendous amount of subjectivity and humanity," says Kukunoor. "Heroes are easy to understand; perpetrators of crime are not so easily understood." *The Hunt* continues Kukunoor's productive streak on streaming, which has seen him deliver two seasons of *City of Dreams* (Disney+ Hotstar), create a *Modern Love* (Amazon Prime) anthology set in Hyderabad and face the camera in a supporting part for season two of *Paatal Lok* (2025). It has also piqued curiosity about when he will return to directing independent features. "It is nice to talk about independent cinema, of having a strong

voice, but it is so freaking difficult to make independent cinema now," he says. It's been a topic of much discussion between him and Sameer Nair of Applause Entertainment, which has produced both his web series. Instead of fretting, Kukunoor is finding a way. "I do what I do. To say I am an anomaly reeks of hubris. I am still in some weird twilight space," he says. It seems to be working.

He stays away from social media—his last Instagram post was in 2019, he boasts. The freedom from distraction means he can begin his day by writing for up to four hours and be prolific. He has canned another web series with Applause. "The fact that I am still here working after 27 years is proof that I do what I like," he adds. "What I have done in the last six to seven years is to be creatively satisfied." ■

—Suhani Singh

**Born on May 31, 1925, in undivided Punjab, Khosla's parents moved to Bombay when he was just three. While the book is sketchy about his early years, it does trace his love for music to his admiration for K.L. Saigal, a neighbour in Matunga's Punjabi Galli. He was so passionate about music that he even learnt Hindustani classical under Pandit Jagannathbuwa Purohit. Khosla began his career in the movies as a stuntman, followed by short stints in playback singing and acting. However, he**

**found his true calling only when he met Guru Dutt and Dev Anand.**

**Khosla considered Dutt to be his guru, and Anand was a frequent**

**book trains a lens on each of the films to show what made Khosla an exceptional filmmaker.**

**The book is a smorgasbord of anecdotes—**

**Mera Saaya (1966).** While lyricist Raja Mehdi Ali Khan retained the original mukhda (chorus) from the popular folk song, the rest of the lyrics are said to be inspired by Teji Suri who went on to marry eminent poet and author Harivansh Rai Bachchan.

**Featuring a veritable who's who of Khosla's collaborators and historic moments in filmmaking, the biography is a genuine page-turner. What Roychoudhury fails to do, though, is place Khosla's work in its historical and cultural context.** ■

—Karishma Upadhyay

## THIS IS A TREASURY OF ANECDOTES THAT PROVIDE A PEEK INTO WORKS THAT SHAPED DESI POP CULTURE

**collaborator. The duo feature prominently in the book. Across over 20 chapters and a foreword by Mahesh Bhatt, who started out as one of Khosla's assistants, the**

**both apocryphal and verified—that provide a peek into works that have shaped desi pop culture. Take the 'Jhumka Gira Re' track originally sung by Asha Bhosle for Khosla's**

## EXHIBITION ▼

# Coming Full Circle

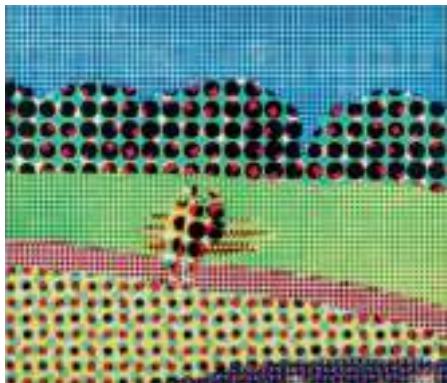
Artist **VANDANA KOTHARI**'s solo exhibition explores the geometry of connections through an abstract language



In Vandana Kothari's latest solo exhibition at Delhi's Nature Morte art gallery, titled *We Are All Circles*, circles overlap and mutate, dissolving the clarity of their outlines in favour of a visual ecosystem where form and meaning are in constant flux.

According to the artist, the circle in these works functions not just as a form, but as a cosmology—a representation of recurrence, unity and

Pointillism to Pop Art and to the present-day experiments with digital graphics and AI. Her compositions originate from intimate, embodied encounters such as motherhood, urban solitude and domestic routines, but are rendered through an abstract vocabulary. "Perception is rooted in movement. To truly see and understand, you must engage physically—your sense of sight is not isolated from your body. Walking, shifting and



**UNDER THE SURFACE** 'We are all Circles (Part 9)', acrylic on canvas. The exhibition continues at Nature Morte, Dhan Mill Compound, Delhi, till July 20

transformation. A note from the gallery states, "*We Are All Circles* proposes that fragmentation is an illusion, and that underneath the surface of rupture lies a deeper, more enduring geometry of connection."

The Gurugram-based artist finds inspiration in the works of Benode Behari Mukherjee and Nandalal Bose, and her language as an artist is built from the layering of circles of different sizes and colours, referencing a variety of art historical genres, from Impressionism and

moving through space activates vision in a deeper way, making the body a tool for seeing," says the artist.

One of the highlights of the exhibition is a monumental painting measuring 5 feet by 50 feet, constructed from nine panels. Kothari draws from the mural and scroll traditions explored by Mukherjee and Bose, and combines both scenic and historical themes, creating a deeply personal and intimate narrative. ■

—Deepali Dhingra

**THE BOLD CONFLUENCE**  
A traditional *IBTIDA-Ek Mehfil* baithak; (right) Tech Panda and Kenzani



## CULTURE ▼

# NEW DIRECTION

**IBTIDA-Ek Mehfil** ventures into electronic music in collaboration with Tech Panda and Kenzani

In the past couple of years, *IBTIDA-Ek Mehfil*, founded by Tanvi Singh Bhatia and Anubhav Bhatia, has become synonymous with baithaks featuring renowned artists from across India delving into art, poetry and music. Now, they are unveiling their first-ever experimental electronic baithak, titled

## ART ▼

# ART FOR THE OUTDOORS

Indian sculptors will get their due in New Delhi's upcoming 'art district'

**T**he New Delhi Municipal Council (NDMC) has announced an ambitious plan to build a 'sculpture art district' in the heart of Lutyens' Delhi, on the stretch between the Mandi House roundabout and Kasturba Gandhi Marg. The works of 15 distinguished Indian artists will be used, including Raghav Kaneria, Ved Nair, K.S. Radhakrish-



**SURRENDER/  
ATMASAMARPAN  
WILL TAKE PLACE  
ON JULY 19, ROYAL  
OPERA HOUSE,  
MUMBAI, AT 8 PM**

described as one where futuristic vibes of electronica meet the timeless spirits of classical Hindustani music and Sufi music. We are working with some exciting, younger classical musicians, including kathak dancers, to reimagine our music in a completely new context and shape," they say.

The performance will also include musicians such as dhruvapad and khayal vocalist Arman Dehlvi and ghazal singer Vani Babbar, Suhel Saeed Khan on the sarangi, Rohit Prasanna on the flute, and kathak dancers Amrapali Bhandari and Priyanka Kapil.

Says Tanvi, "At our core, we have always celebrated the legends, the masters who define our cultural legacy. But with this showcase in Mumbai at a venue like Royal Opera House, our intent is to turn the spotlight towards emerging voices. Through this experience, we hope to become that bridge where tradition meets new talent, and the future of our cultural narrative begins to unfold." ■

—Deepali Dhingra



PAUL DAVID MARTIN

The  
**'SCULPTURE ART  
DISTRICT'**  
will come up on the  
stretch between  
the Mandi House  
roundabout and  
Kasturba Gandhi  
Marg



ARUNKUMAR

nan, Arun Pandit, Biman Bihari Das, Rajendra Tikku et al. Sculptures in stone, steel and bronze, along with identifying plaques and lighting, will be placed adjacent to prominent landmarks, like the National School of Drama, along this route.

The project was announced at a press conference on

July 1. Its execution will be overseen by a committee headed by Harsh Vardhan Sharma, formerly the chairperson of the National Gallery of Modern Art's advisory committee. "We wanted to highlight the works of some of the brilliant sculptors who've contributed so much to Indian art," he says. "Visitors who come to Delhi for the first time should see the city as a cultural hub and also get to know more about our artistic traditions and history." Sharma also mentions that the NDMC wants to finish the installation of the first batch of sculptures by the end of this year.

According to K.S. Radhakrishnan, one of the sculptors contributing to the project, public art can be transformative. "In the past, some of my sculptures have been installed as public art in Bengal, Kerala and even Delhi itself," he says. "Often, people who have seen the sculptures have told me about an aspect of the work even I did not recognize previously. So, as an artist, I am grateful my work can reach the public directly." The first phase of installation for the proposed sculpture district is expected to commence within the next three months. ■

—Aditya Mani Jha

# Back to the Roots

US-based Hindustani classical vocalist **Mahesh Kale** is on a concert tour through India

**A**fter captivating audiences across Europe, the United States and Canada with his deeply evocative devotional performances, Mahesh Kale—one of India's leading Hindustani classical vocalists—has returned to India with 'Abhangwari' (songs in praise of Lord Vithoba). The highly anticipated concert tour began on June 29 in Indore and continues through July with performances in Mumbai, Pune, Delhi, Chennai, Bengaluru, Nagpur and Kolkata.

For Kale, Abhangwari is not simply a concert tour, it is a deeply personal and spiritual endeavour. "Abhangwari, in particu-

lar, and Indian classical music, in general, is like soul food. No matter how many times you experience it, the craving never fades; if anything, it intensifies," he says. While the performances follow a familiar structure, each concert brings its own energy. "Each pilgrimage may follow a similar path, but the journey feels different every time because of the fellow travellers—our audience." This connection with listeners, he notes, gives each performance its unique emotional texture.

Now based in the San Francisco Bay Area, Kale holds master's degrees in engineering and management. He once had a successful career in Silicon Valley, which he chose to

leave behind to follow his passion for Indian classical music. "Letting go of my engineering career allowed me to focus on cultural preservation through music," he explains.

His versatility—shaped

"**ABHANGWARI**  
IS LIKE SOUL FOOD.  
NO MATTER HOW  
MANY TIMES YOU  
EXPERIENCE IT, THE  
CRAVING NEVER  
FADES," SAYS  
KALE

It's a tradition that renews itself constantly."

Kale's collaborations with global musicians and his efforts through the Mahesh Kale School of Music, now serving students in over 15 countries, reflect his commitment to making Indian music accessible. "Even if one doesn't sing perfectly, the act itself brings joy," he says. "All of them [his students] carry the music forward in one way or another." ■

—Nikhil Sardana

*Upcoming performances: Bharat Mandapam, Delhi (July 11); Narada Gana Sabha Auditorium, Chennai (July 12); Chowdiah Memorial Hall, Bengaluru (July 13); Kavivarya Suresh Bhat Auditorium, Nagpur (July 19); GD Birla Sabhaghar, Kolkata (July 20)*



## THE LISTICLE

### UPCOMING OTT AND THEATRICAL RELEASES TO LOOK OUT FOR

AUGUST 14

## War 2

A cinematic juggernaut hits theatres on Independence Day. Two big stars of the Hindi and Telugu industries, **Hrithik Roshan** and **RRR**

star **Jr. NTR**, clash in the latest instalment of Yash Raj Films' spy universe that interlocks *War*, *Pathaan* and the *Tiger* series of films into a single story.



JULY 11

## AAP JAISA KOI

Meanwhile, on Netflix, **R. Madhavan** and **Fatima Sana Shaikh** star in a quaint romantic drama backed by Karan Johar's Dharma Productions. Madhavan is a Sanskrit professor, Fatima a French tutor. Opposites, etc.

JULY 15

## SARZAMEEN

Dharma is also rolling out this political thriller on JioHotstar. **Kajol**, Malayalam star **Prithviraj Sukumaran**, and Saif Ali Khan's son **Ibrahim** star in this Kashmir-set thriller involving insurgents, the army, and the families trapped in between.



AUGUST 14

## COOLIE

The big budget Tamil action drama stars megastar **Rajinikanth** in the lead role, plus a host of pan-India heavy hitters in supporting roles/cameos including: **Aamir Khan** (Bollywood), **Nagarjuna** (Tollywood), **Upendra** (Sandalwood) and **Soubin Shahir** (Mollywood).



JULY 11

## MAALIK

**Rajkummar Rao**, more known for his unconventional roles and the sporadic family entertainer, has given in to the ongoing post-*Pushpa* testosterone-punched action film syndrome. In Pulkit's film, Rao stars as an ambitious gangster attracting far too many enemies.



**Q. How did it feel to finally cross 90 metres at the Doha Diamond League?**

The 90-metre mark is just a number that has become a magical mark today. And now that it's done, I'm free of the burden. The idea hereon is to keep throwing as far as I can and I will continue putting in the hard work to do that. The most important thing is that there will be no more questions on crossing 90 metres!

**Q. Silver in Doha, followed by gold at the Paris Diamond League. What have you got right this year?**

Though there was a delay in getting started, the training was really good under coach Jan Zelezny in South Africa. I'm able to follow it in training, but I still need to replicate it in competitions. I'm working on things like the run-up and maintaining my posture while throwing.

**Q. How does it feel to have an event, the Neeraj Chopra Classic, in your name?**

I had only dreamt of these things. To have a competition featuring world-class athletes at home is the fruition of another dream, just like winning the Olympics or the World Championships. It's very different from winning a medal, but I feel like through this event, too, I have done something worthwhile for India.

**Q+A**

# SPEARHEADING SUCCESS

*With a spate of recent wins and achieving personal athletic milestones, Neeraj Chopra is at the top of his game*

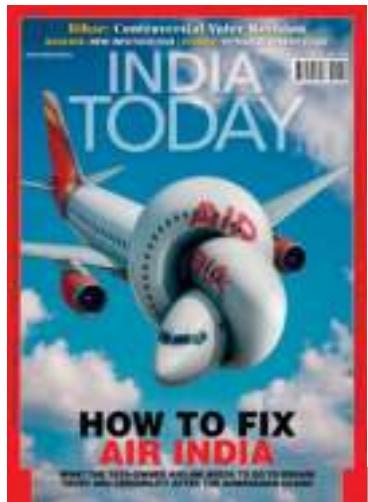
**Q. What do you envision for the NC Classic going forward?**

There's a lot to learn from this edition and where we can improve. It only features men this year, but we'll look to add women as well. I hope we can make it an annual event and add more disciplines in the future. I want to think about how I can raise the standard of athletics in India.

—with Shail Desai



ANI



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