

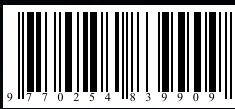
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INDIA TODAY

COMPLIANCE RAJ

ENDING THE RED TAPE

**INDIA MUST URGENTLY EXCISE THE REGULATORY
CHOLESTEROL CHOKING ITS ECONOMIC GROWTH TO ENABLE
INDUSTRY TO CASH IN ON THE GLOBAL TRADE WAR**

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INDIA
TODAY
MAKING SENSE OF INDIA

I have long believed that one of the biggest obstacles to India's economic progress is the suffocating bureaucracy Indian entrepreneurs and even foreign investors have to endure. Now, the trade war started by President Donald Trump brings new urgency to India's push to become globally competitive. We are being compelled to open our markets to our largest trading partner, the United States. This shift will also disrupt existing patterns of global trade, with the world, especially China, looking for new markets.

The real challenge for Indian business is not the lack of capital, infrastructure or skills. It is the legacy of regulatory cholesterol that chokes Indian entrepreneurship. A study by TeamLease Services found that from launch to liquidation, Indian entrepreneurs must navigate a maze of more than 69,000 compliances, governed by 1,536 central and state laws and over 6,500 filings. Even more concerning, seven key sectors have 26,134 imprisonment clauses hidden in their rules. This is a system designed for arbitrary power and a breeding ground for corrupt practices. One industrialist even called it "economic terrorism".

Many of these rules were originally created with good intentions to prevent illegality and protect public and environmental welfare. But in India, remedies often turn into full-blown disease. Consider labour laws. A business must comply with 32,542 requirements in this area alone, representing 47 per cent of the total. These demand 3,048 filings under 463 laws. Electricity permissions are just as tangled. Land is a state subject, but property transfer is in the concurrent list, where both the Centre and states can legislate. Environmental clearances must be secured from both central and state governments.

Each sector faces its own complex regulatory mess. An automotive company must get around 80 one-time approvals across four stages—setting up, pre-commissioning, post-commissioning and post-production. A single manufacturing unit must deal with 492 compliances across 173 central laws, 313 state laws and six municipal ones. And like khichdi, the national dish, the recipe varies from state to state. An entrepreneur in Maharashtra needs 99 permissions to start a manufacturing unit in the alcohol-beverages industry, 35 of which must be renewed regularly. Karnataka has 60 central and state labour laws, which mandate constant compliances—monthly, quarterly, half-yearly and annually. Each of these requires in-person visits to officials with a mountain of paperwork. On average, it takes more than a year for an Indian entrepreneur to get all clearances needed to start a business. In

contrast, Vietnam—one of India's toughest competitors—gives industrial licences in under a month for locals, and within two months for foreigners. It uses a genuine single-window system for everything from power to pollution control. In India, our so-called single window often hides multiple doors.

Breaking down this compliance burden must be treated as a national economic emergency. Why? Manish Sabharwal, chairman and co-founder of TeamLease Services, shares some eye-opening numbers. Of India's 63 million enterprises, 12 million have no office and operate from homes. Only 29,000 companies in India have paid-up capital above Rs 10 crore. The reason, he says, is the crushing load of compliances. This burden raises costs, stifles innovation and weakens profits, especially for micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs). For businesses with turnover up to Rs 100 crore, the compliance cost can range from Rs 11-16 lakh per year. For fintech firms, it is far higher—Rs 96 lakh-Rs 1.17 crore for smaller firms, and Rs 2.5-3.2 crore for larger ones. No surprise, then, that 35,567 MSMEs registered on the Udyam portal shut down in FY25 (until February), many blaming regulatory hurdles. Foreign direct investment has also fallen, from \$84.8 billion in FY22 to \$70.95 billion in FY24.

Thankfully, the Modi government seems alert to these global shifts. The first signs came just 11 days after Trump returned to the White House, when the Economic Survey flagged deregulation in land, labour and capital as a national priority. Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman took the cue in the budget, setting up a committee to review all non-financial sector rules, certifications and permissions. A deregulation commission was also proposed. There is widespread agreement on this point: the compliance burden must go. Managing Editor M.G. Arun and Senior Associate Editor Sonal Khetarpal, along with our state bureaus, explore this in our cover story on how to end the compliance nightmare. Let's be clear: we are not against governance. Regulation is necessary. It ensures public trust and curbs unethical behaviour. But overregulation stifles the enterprising Indian. That must change.

We need systems that are efficient, fast and predictable. Sabharwal's advice to cure regulatory cholesterol is simple: rationalise, decriminalise and digitise. That's a great place to start. And there is no time to waste.



February 16-28, 1979



(Aroon Purie)



Govt. of Uttarakhand

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Our vision is to make Uttarakhand a developed and self-reliant state, and every step we take is aligned with this goal. Over the last three years, we have established new dimensions of service, good governance, and development, ensuring progress in every sector. Guided by the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, we remain committed to building a stronger and more prosperous Uttarakhand.

Pushkar Singh Dhami
Chief Minister, Uttarakhand



There are two main pillars for the creation of a developed India in the 21st century, pride in our heritage and making every possible effort for development. Today, Uttarakhand is strengthening both these pillars. This decade will be the decade of Uttarakhand.

Narendra Modi
Prime Minister

Three years of growth: Uttarakhand government's approach to development and prosperity

Celebrating three years of transformative governance, the Uttarakhand government, under the leadership of Chief Minister Pushkar Singh Dhami, has accomplished notable landmarks across tourism, connectivity, education, industry, and women empowerment, establishing a new standard for sustainable growth and inclusive development in the state.

Uttarakhand, the land of immaculate natural magnificence, spiritual legacy, and rich culture, has always held a unique spot in the heart of the country. Known as 'Devbhoomi' (Land of the Gods), the state is abode to some of the most venerated pilgrimage places, including the

Char Dham (Kedarnath, Badrinath, Gangotri, and Yamunotri), and boasts a rich tapestry of traditions, history, and biodiversity. Over the past three years, the Uttarakhand government, under the robust leadership of Chief Minister Pushkar Singh Dhami, under the able guidance of Prime Minister

Narendra Modi, has ventured on a transformative journey to harness this potential and drive the state toward sustainable growth, financial development, and social empowerment. The notion of the state government has been evident—to build a state that is not only an epicentre of tourism

and spirituality but also a benchmark of good governance, innovation, and inclusivity.

From enforcing groundbreaking policies to establishing enterprising infrastructure undertakings, the Uttarakhand government has left no stone unturned in its pursuit to improve the lives of its residents.

The state has noticed tremendous accomplishments in sectors such as tourism, connectivity, education, employment, industry, and women empowerment, setting new standards for others to follow.

As the Uttarakhand government completes three years in office, it is a suitable juncture to reflect on its journey, honour its triumphs, and look forward to the future. This article delves into the primary endeavours and achievements of the Uttarakhand government under eight pivotal sub-headings: Tourism, Connectivity, Youth Education & Employment, Industry & Investment, Women Empowerment, Big Decisions, Big Events, and Big Developments & Achievements. Each of these areas emphasises the uncompromising dedication of the government to service, development, and good governance, making Uttarakhand a brilliant model of advancement and prosperity



The CM has reportedly promised the people of his state a transparent and accountable government to make it a corruption-free state, and work diligently to alleviate poverty and realizing the vision of development that the Prime Minister has set for Uttarakhand.

YOUTH EDUCATION & EMPLOYMENT:

EMPOWERING THE GENERATIONS OF TOMORROW
The endeavours by CM Dhami's government

reflects the dedication towards empowering the youth and promoting a proficient workforce.

The Uttarakhand government has made momentous strides in education and employment, ensuring that the youth are qualified with the skills and opportunities required for a more promising tomorrow.

Government jobs: Around



20,000 youth have secured government jobs in the last three years, lowering the unemployment rate by 4%.

Solar self-employment scheme: Under the Chief Minister Solar Self-Employment Scheme, 750 allotment letters for solar plants with a capacity of 133 MW have been allocated, generating job prospects in rural places.

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COVER STORY

COMPLIANCE RAJ

ENDING THE RED TAPE

India must urgently excise the regulatory cholesterol choking its economic growth to enable industry to cash in on the global trade war



Illustration by NILANJAN DAS

Cover by NILANJAN DAS

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CRICKETING ICONS AIDEN MARKRAM AND MITCHELL MARSH VISIT RP GOENKA INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL

RP GOENKA INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL IS AN AUTHORIZED IB WORLD SCHOOL TO OFFER THE PRIMARY YEARS PROGRAMME (PYP) AND THE DIPLOMA PROGRAMME (DP). AND NOTABLY, THE FIRST SCHOOL IN EASTERN INDIA TO BE AUTHORIZED FOR THE IB PRIMARY YEARS PROGRAMME



Ms. Shivika Goenka, Founder of RP Goenka International School, shared, "At RPGIS, we believe in creating transformative experiences that stay with our learners for life. Today's session with two global sporting legends has not only inspired our students but also strengthened our vision of learning that extends beyond the classroom."

the pressures of international cricket to their personal journeys and routines. With remarkable humility and composure, both players responded with honesty and humor, offering valuable insights into their lives on and off the field.

Aiden Markram spoke about his experiences growing up in South Africa and his journey to becoming one of the most dependable batsmen in the international arena. "Cricket teaches you discipline, patience, and the ability to bounce back from failure," he told the attentive young audience. Mitchell Marsh, the Australian all-rounder known for his powerful hitting and key performances, shared anecdotes from the IPL and encouraged students to enjoy the game while focusing on continuous learning and fitness. "The most important thing," Marsh said, "is to always keep the fun alive, no matter how competitive the match gets."

Following the Q&A, the real fun began on the field. Markram and Marsh joined the students in a friendly game of cricket. The children were thrilled to not only watch their heroes play but also to receive hands-on tips and demonstrations. From batting stances to bowling grips, the players gave individual attention to several budding cricketers, leaving them inspired and motivated.

"We are truly honored to have Aiden and Mitchell here with us today," said the Principal of RP Goenka International School. "Their presence has not only added excitement but has also enriched our students with life lessons that go beyond textbooks."

The event was part of RPGIS's ongoing efforts to create holistic learning experiences that connect students with real-world achievers. With its strong emphasis on both academics and extracurricular excellence, the school has always strived to expose its learners to inspiring role models across various fields.

As the session drew to a close, students lined up for autographs and photographs, each eager to capture a memory of this special day. For many, it was a dream come true—a chance to meet their idols and learn from them firsthand.

Kolkata, April 7: In an extraordinary confluence of sportsmanship and learning, RP Goenka International School (RPGIS) hosted international cricket stars Aiden Markram and Mitchell Marsh at their campus today. Currently playing for the Lucknow Super Giants in the ongoing Indian Premier League (IPL) season, the duo took time out of their packed schedule to interact with students in what turned out to be an unforgettable experience for all present.

The event, held at the school campus was met with enthusiastic cheers from students, teachers, and staff alike. From the moment the cricketers walked in, there was an air of excitement and anticipation. Both Markram and Marsh were warmly welcomed by the school community and were visibly delighted by the energy and curiosity of the children.

The interactive session began with a candid Q&A, where students asked a range of questions—from

It was truly inspiring to see the passion these young students at RP Goenka International School have for cricket. The energy, the questions, and the talent on display were incredible. I was equally impressed by the school's world-class infrastructure and sporting facilities—it almost made me wish I could go back to school myself! My message to the students is simple: no matter what path you choose—be it sports, business, or anything else—keep working hard and always enjoy what you do. That's the key to success.

- Mitchell Marsh



I absolutely loved the energy here—the students at RP Goenka International School were full of enthusiasm, yet so well-behaved and disciplined. It's always heartening to see young minds so eager to learn and engage. I had a fantastic time playing cricket with them, and it was a joy to see how much they love the game. Days like these remind you of the pure joy of sport and the importance of nurturing talent from a young age.

- Aiden Markram

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PLAYING WITH FIRE

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[JUNK FOOD]

A JUNK FOOD EPIDEMIC



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Dancer Aditi Mangaldas's production *WITHIN*, inspired by the Nirbhaya incident, returns to the stage



ARUN KUMAR



Presenting India Today Insight

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THE STORY OF THE DAY

How Tejashwi gave Rahul, Kharge a Bihar poll reality check

By Amitabh Srivastava

In 2020, the Congress contested a disproportionate number of seats, winning under a third of them and denying the RJD-led alliance a shot at power. Will 2025 be different?

shorturl.at/ZIPaW

SPOTLIGHT: DELHI AIRPORT

How Delhi's global aviation hub dreams can take wing

By Avishek G. Dastidar

In a world where airlines choose hub airports not just for their size but also their speed, seamlessness and security, the IGI airport still has some proving to do

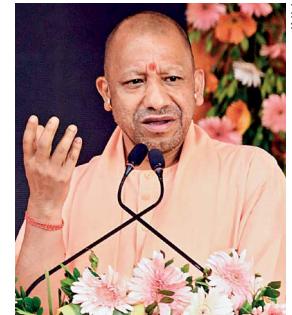
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SPECIAL REPORT: INVEST UP

How Yogi govt is giving business investment more than a policy push

By Avaneesh Mishra

The Invest UP initiative is being restructured to cut red tape, fast-track approvals and improve ease of doing business by ensuring that policies work on the ground



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BUSINESS: JOBS AT STAKE

Will Trump tariffs dry up jobs in export-led Indian sectors?

By Sonal Khetarpal

A recruitment slowdown, even if in the short term, is already visible. Experts say export-oriented firms are likely to delay investments and capacity expansion

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THE ARTS: LEGACY OF KUMUDINI LAKHIA

Kumudini Lakhia: The kathak visionary who danced beyond tradition

By Jumana Shah

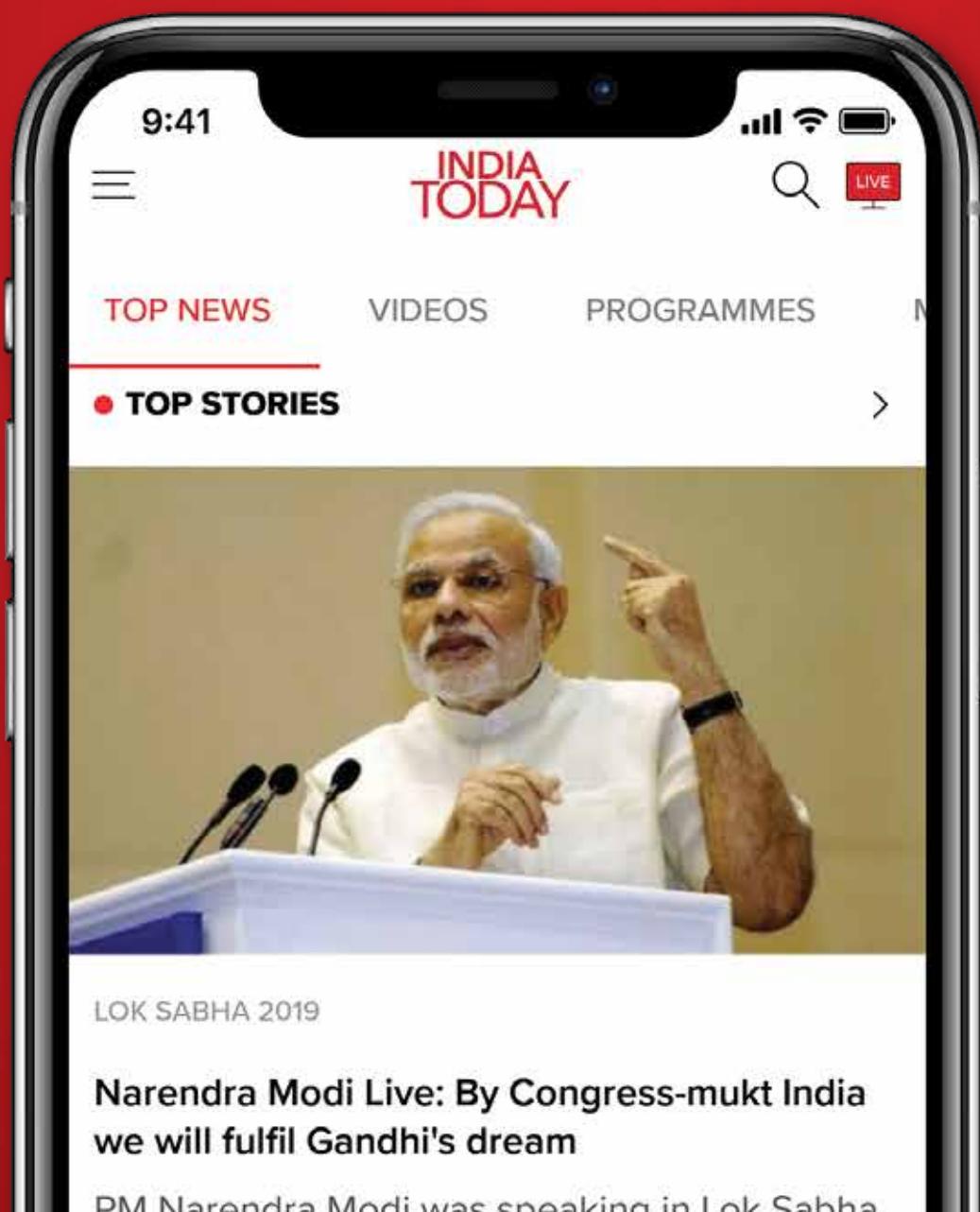
Kumudiniben, India's beacon of innovation in dance, left behind a legacy that transformed Kathak into a vibrant, contemporary art form

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KASHMIR: A
BITTER HARVEST
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ANDHRA: NAIDU'S
POVERTY PANACEA
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CHARTING THE PATH Mallikarjun Kharge in conversation with Sonia and Rahul Gandhi at the AICC session in Ahmedabad, Apr. 9



ANI

CONGRESS/AICC MEET

A CLARION CALL FOR CHANGE

By Kaushik Deka

It was on the banks of the Sabarmati that Gandhi once shaped India's freedom struggle. In returning here for the 86th All India Congress Committee session, its first in Gujarat in 64 years, the Grand Old Party must surely have wished for liberation from some of its own karma. The high-stakes show was also its first big foray onto Prime Minister

Narendra Modi's home turf since the 2024 Lok Sabha election. Eclipsed from Gujarat's power scoreboard for three decades, it was a purely symbolic reclaiming of territory, of course. But that purpose was earnestly attended to, with tactical adjustments intended to retrieve icons expropriated by the BJP. Sardar Patel's 150th birth anniversary came in handy here, with his memorial

figuring on the itinerary as prominently as Sabarmati Ashram. Every move evoked a composite legacy rooted in Gujarat, even as every line of its political resolution echoed the party's struggle to re-anchor itself in history while projecting a renewed fight for justice, constitutional values and, last but not least, national relevance.

Symbolism apart, the Ahmedabad

session's most substantive proposition was an organisational blueprint. Recognising that cadre structure has atrophied in many states, the Congress announced a shift toward empowering District Congress Committees (DCCs). District presidents will now have a meaningful say in candidate selection, a reform aimed at instilling a more live connection to the ground. For a party long criticised for its command culture, this represents an ambitious attempt to change its operational DNA. Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge's blunt message to inactive leaders—"Those who don't want to work should retire or rest"—signalled a growing realisation that organisational lethargy has contributed to its electoral struggles.

Perhaps the most nuanced element of the Ahmedabad session was the party's attempt to recalibrate its stand on two battlegrounds where it has lost space to the BJP: nationalism and the fraught communalism/secularism debate. On the first, the 'Nyay Path' resolution drew a sharp distinction between Congress's 'unifying nationalism' to what it termed the BJP-RSS's 'pseudo-nationalism' that actually divides the country along religious, regional and linguistic lines.

On secularism, things seemed anodyne on the face of it: a postulation that the Congress ethos was "inspired by the age-old traditions of India". But behind closed doors, a more complex debate was unfolding. Rahul Gandhi reportedly urged the party not to shy away from explicitly mentioning Muslims, Christians or Sikhs at a time when "minorities are under attack". At this, some veterans cautioned this could potentially alienate Hindu voters, reflecting the party's ongoing struggle to find the right balance on religious issues. As a member of the Congress Working Committee (CWC) told INDIA TODAY, years of the Sangh Parivar's blanket campaign against 'pseudo-secularism' have left the Congress in a bind—losing traction with the majority community, who see it as indulging in minority appeasement, as well as with minorities, who doubt its

► **Decentralisation begins at the districts:**

Empowering the DCCs marks a serious shift from high-command culture

► **Reframing nationalism and secularism:**

Congress is pitching 'unifying nationalism' against BJP's 'pseudo-nationalism' while grappling

with how to back minorities without alienating Hindus

► **Social justice as strategy:**

A caste census, stronger reservations and OBC outreach signal a bid to rebuild ground in states like UP through a new social coalition

► **From promises to proof:**

2025 as the year of

organisational empowerment gives the party a clear accountability test, breaking from its past

► **Vision vs critique:**

Tharoor's push for a hopeful, future-facing Congress exposes a core dilemma—can the party move beyond anti-BJP rhetoric to inspire younger, forward-looking voters?

commitment to their socioeconomic aspirations. "We still haven't arrived at a consistent narrative...even after Ahmedabad," he says.

Social justice presented a clearer canvas, emerging as a central pillar of the Congress's revival strategy, with the resolution pledging to strengthen reservations, conduct a nationwide caste census, and enact a central law for SC/ ST sub plans with guaranteed budgetary allocations proportionate to population. Rahul is said to

Behind the scenes, there was a robust debate on communalism. Rahul favoured a less timid stance, explicitly naming the affected minorities

have strongly urged the CWC to step up outreach to the Other Backward Classes (OBCs), arguing that this may pave the way for an electoral revival even in Uttar Pradesh, where the party has long been on the margins.

The resolution laid out a broad policy vision, highlighting the Centre's failures across labour, women's rights, agriculture, economy and foreign policy. It accused the BJP of weakening labour laws, undermining

MGNREGA, and using Aadhaar-linked payments to deny wages. While welcoming the 2023 Women's Reservation Bill, it criticised its delayed implementation and sought sub-quotas for Dalit, Adivasi and backward women. Economically, it contrasted the Congress's rights-based approach with the BJP's 'flawed policies', blaming price hikes and monopolies for hurting citizens and pushing MSMEs toward collapse. On agriculture, it promised MSP at 50 per cent above cost and a debt-free future for farmers. It also slammed the government for its handling of key foreign policy areas—China (for its incursions in Ladakh), the US (for not preventing tariffs) and Palestine (reaffirming support for a state)—while flagging growing radicalism in Bangladesh as a threat to the minorities there.

It was left to Shashi Tharoor, the eloquent Lok Sabha MP from Thiruvananthapuram, to offer a gentle critique of the session's dominant narratives as he urged the Congress to project itself as "a party of hope and positivity, not resentment and criticism, and as a party of the future, not just of the past". His intervention highlighted a fundamental tension within the Congress's revival strategy—the degree to which it should focus on attacking the BJP versus articulating its own positive vision.

In fact, for several Congress veter-

ans, there was a sense of déjà vu about many of the resolutions. The Udaipur Chintan Shibir in 2022 had promised similar reforms, including the revival of DCCs, and a ‘one person, one post’ rule. The 2023 Raipur Plenary reaffirmed these. Yet nothing much changed.

What might distinguish the Ahmedabad session is the immediate follow-up action, particularly the appointment of observers for Gujarat’s DCCs and the explicit timeline for implementation. But despite the optimistic tone, the Congress faces formidable challenges. Its organisational structure remains weak, particularly in the Hindi heartland. The party’s inability to retain power in states where it won elections post 2014—Rajasthan, Madhya Prad-

The party resolutions did bring a sense of déjà vu, but this time there's been follow-up action and timelines set for implementation

esh, Punjab and Chhattisgarh—points to deeper governance issues that symbolic resolutions cannot easily address.

The electoral calendar offers little respite, with high-stakes contests in Bihar, Assam, Kerala, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal on the horizon. The party’s performance in the state elections, after a relatively good show-

ing in the Lok Sabha poll, has been dismaying, with losses in Haryana, Maharashtra and Delhi.

Perhaps most fundamentally, the Congress still struggles with leadership questions. While the presence of 82-year-old Kharge provides a veneer of non-dynastic leadership, decision-making effectively continues to orbit around Rahul. And the revival efforts he has initiated are by now a budding tradition in themselves: a history littered with well-intentioned declarations withering for lack of action. For the party to be a serious contender in 2029, symbolism must give way to strategy, discipline and grassroots life. Ahmedabad may have provided the blueprint, making it stick remains a daunting challenge. ■

AKALI DAL

Back to Square One

By Anilesh S. Mahajan

Amid the religious chants of “*Jo bole so nihal...*”, the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) re-elected Sukhbir Singh Badal as its president inside the historic Teja Singh Samundri Hall at the Golden Temple complex on April 12. The outcome—backed by 524 newly elected delegates, 467 of them from Punjab—was unsurprising to observers of Sikh politics. Yet for many, it was a disappointment.

For, the re-election and the events leading up to it may have further dimmed hopes of a revival for the century-old party, which has seen its influence in Punjab politics erode dramatically. In December 2024, the then jathedar of the Akal Takht, Giani Ranbir Singh, alongside the heads of four other Sikh seats of authority, had issued a rare *hukumnama* (edict) demanding Sukhbir’s resignation. Declaring the SAD leadership “incapable” of addressing Sikh issues, they later appointed a seven-member committee of religious



IN THE SADDLE Sukhbir Singh Badal addresses the media after getting re-elected as the Shiromani Akali Dal president in Amritsar, Apr. 12

scholars to oversee a fresh membership drive and internal elections. In Sikh tradition, a *hukumnama* carries divine authority, making defiance tantamount to religious disobedience.

The edict was seen as a critical opportunity for the SAD to re-set—to reconcile warring factions, reclaim its

dwindling support among devout Sikh voters and shed the perception that the party remains a fiefdom of the Badal family. Instead, Sukhbir’s return has only reinforced that image. Criticism flowed on cue. Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leader Harjit Singh Grewal likened Sukhbir to North Korean dictator

Kim Jong-un, while radical factions seized the moment to court disaffected Sikhs. A day after the SAD vote, Faridkot MP Sarabjeet Singh Khalsa—under the banner of Akali Dal (Waris Punjab De)—held a rally during Baisakhi celebrations at Takht Damdama Sahib, announcing the outfit's plans to contest the 2027 state polls led by Khadoor Sahib MP and jailed Khalistani separatist Amritpal Singh.

The SAD's decline has been stark. In the 2024 Lok Sabha election, its candidates forfeited deposit in 11 of Punjab's 13 seats, scraping just 13.24 per cent of the vote—a historic low. Earlier, in the 2022 state election, the party won only three of 117 seats with 18 per cent of the vote. Internal dissent has since grown. After the Lok Sabha rout, Banga MLA Sukhwinder Kumar Sukhi defected to the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), while Dakha MLA Manpreet Singh Ayali refused

gone *tankha* (religious censure), he is poised to regain the wider support of the Sikh community.

Founded in 1920 during the Gurdwara Reform Movement, the SAD is India's second-oldest party after the Congress. Sukhbir has led it since 2008, succeeding his father—then CM Parkash Singh Badal. The latter, who helmed the party for 13 years, had consolidated various Akali factions in 1995 at the pivotal Moga convention in the post-militancy era. But under Sukhbir's leadership, critics say, it strayed from its roots as a voice for rural Sikhs and farmers, instead becoming a vehicle for wealthy landlords.

More damaging have been controversies that alienated Sikh voters during the 10-year SAD rule (2007–17): the 2012 appointment of Sumedh Singh Saini—a police officer accused of human rights abuses during the Sikh militancy—as state police chief; drug trafficking allegations against Akali



By Kaleem Geelani

SUKHBIR'S RE-ELECTION AND THE EVENTS LEADING UP TO IT HAVE FURTHER DIMMED HOPES OF A REVIVAL FOR THE CENTURY-OLD PARTY, WHICH HAS SEEN ITS INFLUENCE ERODE DRAMATICALLY

to work under Sukhbir. Meanwhile, a group of top leaders, including Gurpartap Singh Wadala, Prem Singh Chandumajra and Bibi Jagir Kaur, briefly formed a reformist faction before disbanding in December, ostensibly to reunify the party.

Now, Sukhbir's rivals within the Akali Dal have challenged the legitimacy of the party's membership drive, delegate selection and his own "re-elevation", claiming he heads only a faction—not the Shiromani (i.e. supreme) Akali Dal. They insist on a fresh drive, as directed by the Akal Takht, before a new leader is elected. But Sukhbir's supporters argue he was targeted to weaken the party and, having taken the blame and under-

leaders (substance abuse is barred in Sikhism); the 2015 desecration of the Guru Granth Sahib; and a baffling religious pardon to the controversial preacher Gurmeet Ram Rahim in a blasphemy case. In December last year, Sukhbir publicly admitted to several such failings before the Akal Takht, while accepting his *tankha* for misconduct. But in March this year, his close aides were accused of orchestrating the removal of three Sikh high priests, including the Akal Takht jathedar, who were pivotal in imposing that censure.

Now, with his re-election, the scepticism has only deepened. For Sukhbir, the challenge is twofold: to reunite a fractured party and restore its credibility. Neither will be easy. ■

In 2021, 48-year-old Gulzar Ahmad Bhat poured his life savings into transforming his traditional apple orchard in Pulwama's Chandgam village into a modern high-density one. The investment of Rs 13.5 lakh—Rs 10 lakh on 1,235 New Zealand-origin Schino Gala saplings and the rest on land development and drip irrigation—seemed worthwhile. His annual income, which had hovered around Rs 5–6 lakh for three decades, shot up to Rs 16 lakh within two years as yields touched 1,200 boxes.

But in July 2024, a single pesticide spray wiped it all out. "It was an apocalypse. Our only source of income vanished overnight," Bhat tells INDIA TODAY. The pesticide, sold by a registered dealer, turned his 8-kanal orchard into a wasteland. He's now fighting a legal battle against a Gujarat-based chemical firm, the dealer and the district horticulture office, seeking compensation. The Jammu and



THE NEW BLIGHT

Gulzar Ahmad Bhat at his apple orchard in Chandgam, Pulwama. A single pesticide spray damaged his crop in July 2024

March 19, agriculture minister Javid Ahmad Dar denied malpractice while maintaining that adequate testing protocols are in place. Paradoxically, demand for agrochemicals has surged due to rising orchard diseases—linked to climate change and imported foreign varieties introduced in high-density plantations.

Kashmir's horticulture sector contributes nearly 7 per cent to J&K's Gross State Domestic Product. Driven by government subsidies since being introduced in 2016, high-density plantations now cover 3,000 hectares, though traditional orchards still span 170,000 hectares. Together, they produce over two million tonnes (MT) of apples annually, with high-density orchards accounting for a tenth of the crop. Regulations around foreign varieties have also loosened. Earlier, imported saplings had to be planted immediately post-quarantine. Now, they can be stored in cold facilities, which farmers say has opened the door to more diseases and therefore heightened chemical dependence. Pests like leaf miner have proliferated, giving sleepless nights to farmers and opening lucrative markets for chemical manufacturers and unscrupulous traders.

The law enforcement directorate, which operates as a wing of the agriculture department, oversees the supply and sale of agrochemicals. Between 2024 and 2025, of the 2,564 pesticide samples tested in J&K, 910 failed quality checks. Similarly, 138 of 1,037 fertiliser samples were found substandard. In Kashmir alone, where the horticulture industry thrives, 2,543 cases of related malpractices have been reported since 2022, but only 235 resulted in FIRs.

Big brands like FIL, BASF, IndoFil and Bayer still dominate the shelves, but even they haven't escaped scrutiny. In 2024, two specific products from FIL and IndoFil were de-

KASHMIR

A BITTER HARVEST

Kashmir horticulture department, in consultation with the Sher-e-Kashmir University of Agricultural Sciences and Technology, prescribes recommended agrochemicals each season. In Bhat's case, the department later confirmed that a non-recommended chemical had caused the devastation.

Bhat isn't alone. Kashmir's apple industry—supporting 3.5 million people and contributing over 75 per cent of India's apple production—is battling an unchecked influx of toxic, substandard and counterfeit agrochemicals. Growers are increasingly alarmed as unregulated products wreak havoc on orchards and livelihoods. The issue was even raised in the J&K assembly recently by Hilal Akbar Lone and Bashir Ahmad Veeri of the ruling National Conference. Responding to them on

CHEMICAL CRISIS

► **Surge in counterfeit and misbranded agro-chemicals is devastating apple orchards in Kashmir, putting 3.5 million livelihoods in jeopardy**

► **Rising pest attacks, exacerbated by climate change and imported plant varieties, has fuelled chemical dependence**

► **Delays in testing fertiliser and pesticide samples along with poor enforcement on the ground has compounded the challenge**

clared misbranded. Another IndoFil product met the same fate in February 2025. "There's a silent mafia at work. Unknown brands and counterfeit products are flooding the market. The traders are let off with negligible fines, their licences aren't cancelled, and there's no real deterrent," alleges Mushtaq Ahmad Malik, president of the Zamindar Association Shopian, while backing the demand for crop insurance as a much-needed safety net.

Delays in testing compound the problem. Of the 103 pesticide molecules in use, only 49 can be tested in Srinagar. The rest are sent to the Central Insecticide Laboratory in Faridabad, delaying red flags and allowing further damage to orchards. But Mujtaba Yahya, deputy director, law enforcement, claims the "farmers

KASHMIR ACCOUNTS FOR OVER 75 PER CENT OF INDIA'S APPLE PRODUCTION. BETTER CHECKS ARE NEEDED TO SECURE THIS VITAL SECTOR

are exaggerating the issue". "We have round-the-clock checks," he adds, though admitting that "modern labs in every district would bolster our efforts". The directorate lacks resources—no separate budget and just nine inspectors covering the entire Valley.

Efforts are underway. "Two new pesticide testing labs have started this year, in Kulgam and Baramulla. We're working to control the diseases and protect farmers," says Zahoor Ahmad Bhat, director of the horticulture department in Kashmir. But for growers like Gulzar Ahmad Bhat, relief feels distant. As Kashmir's apple industry grapples with rising risks and regulatory lapses, only swift reforms and stronger safeguards will ensure that one of the region's most vital livelihoods survives and thrives. ■

CRACKING INDIA'S GENETIC CODE

By Ajay Sukumaran

India's largest-ever genomic study has identified genetic variants unique to the country, marking a crucial step in closing a longstanding gap in global genomics research. The preliminary findings, published last week in *Nature Genetics*, come from the GenomeIndia project—a nationwide effort to map the country's vast genetic diversity.

Launched in January 2020, GenomeIndia brought together over 100 researchers from 20 institutions to conduct whole genome sequencing—a technique by which the sequence of the building blocks of DNA, known as nucleotides, is decoded—across a broad swathe of India's population. The study analysed DNA from 10,074 individuals, drawn from a total of 20,000 blood samples collected from 83 population groups—both tribal and non-tribal.

Despite being home to more than 4,600 distinct ethnic groups, India's representation in global genomics databases has long been lacking. The project aims to generate vital data on the genetic makeup of the Indian population, with implications for better understanding of health and disease patterns unique to the region.

A human genome has 3.2 billion base pairs, or sequences formed by the four nucleotides [adenine (A), cytosine (C), guanine (G) and thymine (T)]. These pairs are organised into long molecules of DNA called chromosomes of which there are 23 pairs—22 of these are called auto-

somes and one pair comprises the sex chromosomes which decide the individual's sex. Typically, two individuals can differ by 0.1 to 0.4 per cent of their genome, which means there will be differences in a few million positions in their DNA code.

The GenomeIndia study found 180 million genetic variants from the whole genome sequencing of 9,772 individuals. Of these, around 130 million variants were in the autosomes, or non-sex chromosomes. As much as 65 per cent of variants were ultra-rare. "The identified genetic variants decode extensive genetic diversity that has been hitherto uncaptured in the Indian population," the paper said.

"This is just the beginning. The GenomeIndia team is now performing in-depth analysis to find out the meaning of these genetic variations," says Dr Kumanrasamy Thangaraj, joint national coordinator of GenomeIndia and CSIR Bhatnagar Fellow at the CSIR-Centre for Cellular & Molecular Biology at Hyderabad.

Some variants, he explains, may be associated with diseases; others with therapeutic/ adverse response to drugs, susceptibility/ resistance to infectious disease, or adaption. "Once the information from the genome sequence of 9,772 individuals is extracted, we will have very comprehensive information about the Indian population, its history as well as medical implications."

There are two promising areas of application in healthcare: personalised medicine and

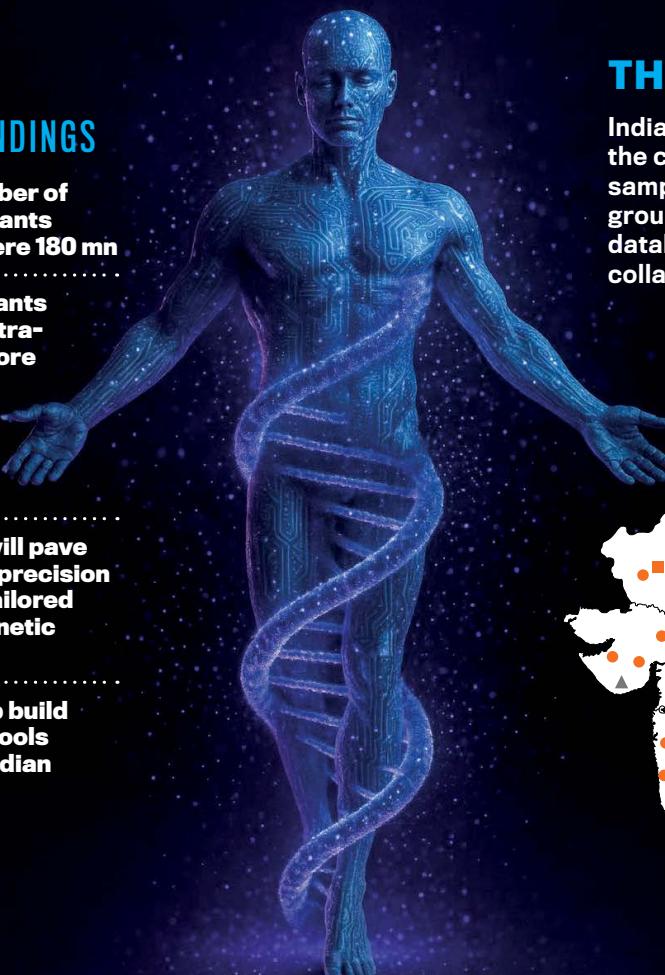
EARLY FINDINGS

■ Total number of genetic variants obtained were 180 mn

■ Most variants (65%) are ultra-rare, therefore important to understand complex diseases

■ Dataset will pave the way for precision medicine, tailored to Indian genetic profiles

■ It will help build diagnostic tools suited for Indian population



THE GENOME BLUEPRINT

India's largest study to identify the country's genetic diversity by sampling its vast number of ethnic groups creates a first-ever genome database through a nationwide collaboration of scientific institutes

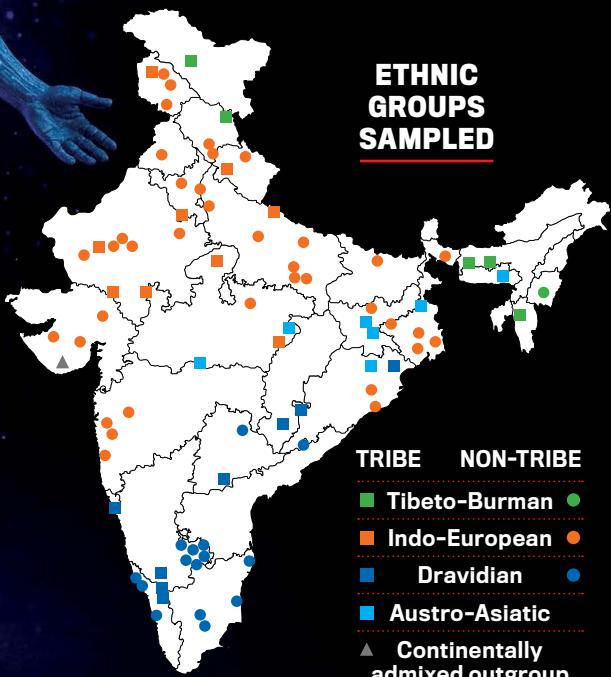


Illustration by NILANJAN DAS/ AI



“ONCE THE INFORMATION FROM THE GENOME SEQUENCE OF 9,772 INDIVIDUALS IS EXTRACTED, WE WILL HAVE VERY COMPREHENSIVE INFORMATION ABOUT THE INDIAN POPULATION, ITS HISTORY AS WELL AS MEDICAL IMPLICATIONS”

DR KUMARASAMY THANGARAJ

Joint National Coordinator,
GenomeIndia

enhanced diagnostics. The former means that clinicians can tailor treatment and prescribe drugs based on genetic profiles, taking into account an individual's response, particularly an adverse reaction, to a drug. In the area of diagnostics, the GenomeIndia project aims to design a genotype array for the Indian population which will improve on existing arrays. Unlike whole genome sequencing, a genotyping array is a genetic test that takes readouts from certain markers in the genome and analyses it in conjunction with a reference panel—this makes it more affordable than whole genome sequencing. Currently, given that the global genomic landscape is predominantly Euro-centric, models built on other populations have limitations.

“This Indian genetic dataset will help build better models to predict a person's risk of developing diseases like type 2 diabetes or Alzheimer's, which are poly-

genic in nature, meaning an individual's susceptibility is determined by many genes and influences from environmental factors,” explains Bratati Kahali, one of the principal investigators based in the Centre for Brain Research at the Indian Institute of Science, Bengaluru, which is the project's coordinating centre. “Right now, most of these models are based on data from European populations, so they don't work as well for Indians. The GenomeIndia data reveals genetic patterns specific to the Indian population, which can improve the accuracy of these models for Indians and possibly other South Asians. Overall, this research will help us better understand how genetics plays a role in different diseases.”

Having accomplished the arduous task of setting up an information-rich biobank, researchers are now bracing to mine the data for insights that can bring precision to India's healthcare. ■



GUJARAT

A MALNUTRITION BLIGHT

By Jumana Shah

On March 28, a CAG report tabled in the state assembly hit a raw nerve in Gujarat. The report identified a shortage of 16,045 Anganwadi Centres (AWC) in Gujarat, seen against the norms set by the Ministry of Women and Child Development (MoWCD). With a population of 55.3 million, Gujarat must ideally have 69,074 AWCs, but it had only 53,029, as of March 2023. More importantly, the number of children (0-6 years) enrolled in them is a lot less than it should be, even if extrapolated from the 2011 Census data.

The Census suggested that 7.8 million children should be enrolled in AWCs, but the CAG report showed

only 4.1 million, indicating a “massive gap”—between 2015-16 and 2022-23, some 3.7 million children (48.1 per cent) had missed out on the supplementary nutritional diet provided at anganwadis. Also, only 18.8 per cent of those in the 3-6 age group were enrolled in the AWCs for preschool education.

BETWEEN FY16 AND FY23, SOME 3.7 MILLION CHILDREN MISSED OUT ON THE SUPPLEMENTARY DIET PROVIDED AT THE ANGANWADIS

AWCs offer a range of critical services in backward areas of India’s rural and urban landscape. This is where children, lactating mothers, pregnant women and adolescent girls get supplementary nutrition; children gain access to key health services like vaccination; and mothers and families get educated on childcare, hygiene and nutrition. For children aged 3-6 years, preschool education is also offered. The anganwadis play a pivotal role in controlling malnutrition and stunting among growing children, so when a report highlights 48.1 per cent of them ‘missing’, it’s shorthand for how poorly Gujarat is doing on a range of social and health indices.

OFF THE TRACKS

■ **Gujarat's malnutrition problem persists despite multiple schemes, campaigns, budgetary allocations**

■ **SDG report says nearly 40% children under five are underweight or stunted, 62.5% pregnant women anaemic**

■ **Big shortage of anganwadis, which provide critical services, in the tribal and rural areas**

And this is despite an array of schemes and budgetary allocations. The NITI Aayog's Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) India Index 2023-24, released in July 2024, said that nearly 40 per cent of children in Gujarat under five are underweight or stunted, and over 38 per cent of the population is undernourished. The state also lags behind many peers in addressing the issue of hunger. Gujarat's performance is concerning as its SDG-2 score has dropped from 49 in 2018 to 41 in 2019, and now stabilised at 46 in 2023-24, suggesting limited progress in tackling malnutrition.

"Tribal areas are the worst affected due to landscape and distance," says social activist Neeta Hardikar, whose NGO Anandi has been working in the tribal regions of Gujarat to spread awareness about health, education and women's empowerment. "In aspirational districts like Dahod, AWC numbers have not increased. But the biggest concern is the staff. Just two people per anganwadi is too little. Workers are stretched thin and unable to give quality attention to women and children."

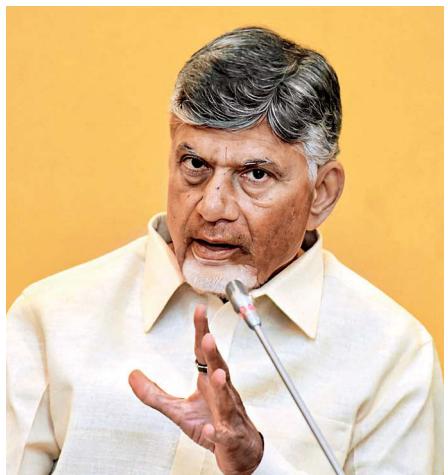
The SDG Index also notes that 62.5 per cent of pregnant

women aged 15-49 in Gujarat are anaemic, contributing to inter-generational malnutrition cycles. "Intergenerational malnutrition requires persistent intervention. Initial findings of a recent study we did on food security across 30 households of each village in five talukas of Dahod district revealed that only two of the five food types prescribed for a nutritive diet show up on their plate on an average day," says Hardikar. "Allocated ration is not enough and does not reach intended beneficiaries."

In the past four months, the Bhupendra Patel government has announced two new initiatives to counter malnutrition—the Mukhyamantri Paushtik Alpahar Yojana to provide protein-rich snacks to students in state-run and grant-in-aid schools with budgetary funds of Rs 607 crore annually; and the Nutrition Mission, with an allocation of Rs 75 crore to enhance obstetric and newborn care. The MoWCD submitted in the Lok Sabha in December 2024 that the proportion of stunted children in Gujarat dropped from 53.6 per cent in 2022 to 40.8 per cent in 2024; the share of underweight children fell from 23.1 to 21 per cent over the same period.

Yet, there is a long way to go. Hardikar says schemes and allocations don't translate into results on the ground. "Anganwadi workers are not trained for the complex job at hand. Understanding around contraception is still abysmally low. Child and maternal mortality from malnutrition is under-reported as the anganwadi and ASHA workers are in denial. Any discussion on the issue at the gram sabhas is only to demand explanations; we need constructive feedback sessions rather than a punitive process," she says. "Keeping up the morale of the anganwadi and ASHA workers is critical here." ■

ANDHRA PRADESH



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NAIDU'S POVERTY PANACEA

By Amarnath K. Menon

Ugadi, the Telugu New Year, is regarded as an auspicious time for new beginnings. And that's the day Andhra Pradesh chief minister N. Chandrababu Naidu chose to unveil an ambitious plan—part of his Swarna Andhra 2047 vision—which he claims could redefine poverty alleviation. The Zero Poverty-P4 initiative, launched on March 30, is a bold experiment in inclusive growth, enlisting the wealthiest 10 per cent of the population to support the bottom 20 per cent. The goal is sweeping: a poverty-free Andhra Pradesh by 2029.

At the heart of P4—short for Public-Private-People Partnership—is a structured mentorship programme. Affluent individuals, called 'Margadarsis' (mentors), will be encouraged to "adopt" underprivileged families, designated as 'Bangaru Kutumbams' (golden families). These partnerships, facilitated by the government, go beyond financial aid. Margadarsis—expected to be from among the

THE P4 PLAN

According to the latest NITI Aayog report, Andhra Pradesh has a multidimensional poverty rate of 6.06% (2019-2021). India's average: 14.96%

Andhra's multidimensional poverty index (MPI) decreased to 0.025 from 0.053 (2015-16),

making it the ninth least poor state in India

The Public-Private-People Partnership (P4) initiative aims to make the state poverty-free by 2029 by pairing the wealthiest 10% with the poorest 20%

Affluent individuals

(Margadarsis) will mentor and support underprivileged families (Bangaru Kutumbams), going beyond mere financial aid

The state will facilitate these partnerships and ensure transparency via digital dashboards and oversight

connections, reliable power, high-speed internet, and even incentives for entrepreneurship. A 'P4 Society' with Naidu as its chairperson and deputy CM Pawan Kalyan as vice-chairperson is being established to oversee state-wide implementation, with chapters at the district, assembly constituency and village secretariat levels. These will comprise industry leaders, philanthropists, CSR heads and civil society organisations as well. Naidu has high expectations. "So far, no plan of mine has failed," he asserts. "By next Ugadi, we will assess progress and, by 2029, Margadarsis should uplift all Bangaru Kutumbams out of poverty through a structured and scalable model."

But the initiative has also sparked debate. While Naidu presents P4 as a "game-changer", critics see it as an abdication of state responsibility. The opposition Yuva Jana Sramika Rythu Congress Party (YSRCP) has dismissed it as an extension of Naidu's pro-privatisation stance. "Naidu's P4 initiative is aimed at avoiding responsibility and masking his inability to fulfil the 'super six' poll promises," says YSRCP leader A. Rambabu. "The man who claimed to create wealth now entrusts poverty alleviation to the wealthy, exposing his manipulative politics."

Others see merit in the approach but caution against its challenges. "Naidu has set high expectations as a visionary. But achieving zero poverty is easier said than done," says B.V. Murralidhar, a political scientist at Sri Venkateswara University, Tirupati. "It's not easy to achieve, considering the diverse stand of political parties." The scale and ambition of P4 are unprecedented, but whether it thrives or flounders will depend on sustained engagement from the private sector and civil society. If successful, it could establish Telugu people as "global role models in philanthropy", in Naidu's words. If not, it risks becoming another well-intended but impractical policy, lost in the complexities of political and economic realities. ■

high-net worth individuals at home and the Telugu diaspora—can offer career guidance, help with financial decision-making, provide access to professional networks or even chip in with tuition fees or working capital. Those with limited time can help by contributing funds for education, healthcare or infrastructure for beneficiaries at the individual, family or village level. "So far, charitable efforts have been individual [driven], while the government has introduced Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). But this initiative is unique as it provides an institutionalised platform for direct interaction between Margadarsis and Bangaru Kutumbams," says Naidu.

The first phase has already begun. Two Bangaru Kutumbams were introduced to three prominent Margadarsis—Megha Engineering and Infrastructure Ltd (MEIL) managing director P.V. Krishna Reddy, Greenko CEO Anil Kumar Chalamalasetty and entrepreneur Sajjan Kumar Goenka. The families spoke about their struggles, particularly their inability to fund their children's education. Reacting to this, Krishna Reddy revealed that he had already surveyed a mandal in Krishna district and was prepared to adopt it in its entirety.

This is just the start. The government has identified two million of the state's most deprived families for inclusion in the programme, with more to be added later. The immediate goal is to facilitate the "adoption" of 500,000 of them by August 15. While the government will structure the initiative and ensure transparency through digital dashboards, it has kept itself out of financial transactions. Margadarsis are free to choose the families they wish to support, and once both parties are comfortable, government personnel will facilitate their interaction.

The initiative is being positioned as a transformative model, one that could redefine poverty alleviation in India. To ensure long-term impact, the state is also working on improving the delivery of basic amenities—providing house sites, sanitation, LPG

WHILE NAIDU CALLS P4 A GAME-CHANGER, CRITICS SEE IT AS AN ABDICATION OF THE GOVT'S RESPONSIBILITY



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For over two decades, Gulf Medical University (GMU) has been at the forefront of medical and healthcare education in the UAE and beyond. Established in 1998, Owned and run by the Thumbay Group, GMU has evolved into a world-class institution, attracting students from over 105 nationalities since its inception. With a strong commitment to academic excellence, research, and clinical training, GMU continues to produce highly skilled healthcare professionals ready to make a global impact.

At GMU, students have access to 35 accredited programs, ranging from doctoral, master's, and bachelor's degrees to postgraduate diplomas, higher diplomas, diplomas, internships, and foundation programs. These programs span diverse disciplines, including medicine, dentistry, pharmacy, health sciences, nursing, healthcare management, and artificial intelligence in healthcare. The university's forward-thinking curriculum ensures that students gain the expertise and hands-on experience needed to excel in their fields.

A defining feature of GMU is its extensive clinical training network. With 45 dedicated training sites, students receive hands-on experience in leading medical institutions. The university also benefits from its affiliation with Thumbay Healthcare

Network, which includes Thumbay University Hospital, Thumbay Dental Hospital, and various specialty medical centers across the UAE. These collaborations provide students with invaluable real-world exposure, preparing them for successful careers in healthcare.

Beyond academics, GMU is a hub for research and innovation. The Thumbay Research Institute for Precision Medicine is pioneering breakthroughs in genomics, cancer biology, and personalized medicine, allowing faculty and students to contribute to cutting-edge discoveries. Through its international collaborations, GMU also offers exchange programs, dual degrees, and overseas training opportunities, further enhancing its students' global learning experiences.

GMU's commitment to excellence is reinforced by accreditations from prestigious global bodies, including the Quality Assurance and Accreditation UK (QAA), World Federation for Medical Education (WFME), Accreditation Council for Pharmacy Education (USA), Australian Dental Council (ADC), and the Institute of Biomedical Sciences (UK). These accreditations affirm GMU's dedication to maintaining the highest educational standards and preparing students for international career opportunities.

The university's reputation is further solidified by its strong global rankings. GMU ranks 301-400 in THE Impact Rankings 2024, 81-90 in the Arab Ranking 2024, and 739 in the Round University Ranking (RUR), securing the third spot among UAE universities. These rankings underscore GMU's role as a leader in healthcare education, research, and innovation.

With admissions now open for the September 2025 intake, GMU invites aspiring healthcare professionals to be part of an institution that blends academic excellence with real-world experience. The university also offers a variety of scholarships and financial aid programs, making quality medical education accessible to talented students worldwide.

If you are passionate about healthcare and ready to embark on a transformative educational journey, Gulf Medical University is your gateway to success. Join a diverse academic community, train with industry leaders, and shape the future of healthcare.

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MAHARASHTRA

SHINDE EYES NEW TARGETS

By Dhaval S. Kulkarni

On April 13, the Shiv Sena (Uddhav Balasaheb Thackeray) got its latest shock when Sanjana Ghadi, who was made the party spokesperson just days before, joined the rival Shiv Sena led by deputy CM Eknath Shinde along with husband and former Mumbai corporator Sanjay Ghadi. But then, this was only the latest in a series of defections that have bedevilled the SS (UBT).

Former MLAs Rajan Salvi, Subhash Bane, Sanjay Kadam, Sujit Minchekar and ex-MLC Dushyant Chaturvedi are some of the big names who have shifted camps. In Mumbai, influential ex-corporators Rajul Patel and Raju Pednekar are also now on Shinde's side, as is Nanakumar Ghodele, the former mayor of Chhatrapati Sambhajinagar (Aurangabad). The Shinde Sena now claims the loyalty of over half of the Shiv Sena's 97 corporators in the outgoing Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC), whose term ended in 2022. Meanwhile, reports of an 'Operation Tiger' to wean away some of the Shiv Sena UBT's nine Lok Sabha MPs and 20 MLAs are doing the rounds. The presence of certain UBT Sena MPs at events hosted by Shinde's men in New Delhi has added further grist to the rumour mills.

A worried Shiv Sena UBT legislator admitted the party has yet to recover from the November 2024 assembly election defeat. "There is a sense of fatigue among the cadre and the middle rung," he says. "Functionaries and workers with business interests linked to the government have no option but to jump ship." But what is Shinde's



gameplan in all this? The defections to Shinde's side come at a time when the deputy CM is increasingly being seen as 'marginalised' in the three-party Mahayuti alliance, a far cry from the time when he called the shots as chief minister (2022-24). Shinde met Union home minister Amit Shah during the latter's visit to Maharashtra on April 13 to reportedly discuss these concerns.

In public, Shinde and other Mahayuti leaders from the BJP and NCP have persistently denied any rift. But some of his recent inductions suggest he is shoring up his options. Shinde took a personal interest in roping in ex-Congress MLA (and former Sainik) Ravindra Dhangekar, who

had inflicted a shock defeat on the BJP in the byelections to the saffron stronghold of Kasba Peth in Pune in 2022.

Taking in former three-term MLA Rajan Salvi will also serve as a check on the rising influence of another Sena leader and industries minister, Uday Samant, and his brother Kiran a.k.a. Bhaiyya, who had defeated Salvi in 2024 from Rajapur in Ratnagiri district. Despite being part of Shinde's party, the Samant brothers are said to be cosying up to the BJP.

Shinde's ground is also shaky as some seven of his MLAs are ex-BJP, including Nilesh Rane, Sanjana Jadhav and Rajendra Gavit. Sources say that with the new recruits, the deputy CM is trying to increase his bargaining power while also showing senior ally BJP that he can't be taken for granted. The Shinde Sena has 57 MLAs and seven MPs but is not critical to the Mahayuti government's stability in Maharashtra. One turning point could be the elections to the local bodies, including the all-important BMC, that should take place later this year. A win in the BMC poll will put an end to any ambiguities about the Shinde Sena within the alliance and also settle once and for all which is the 'real Shiv Sena'. ■

WITH THE NEW RECRUITS, SHINDE IS TRYING TO INCREASE HIS BARGAINING POWER WHILE ALSO SHOWING ALLY BJP THAT HE CAN'T BE TAKEN FOR GRANTED



UTTARAKHAND'S NAKSHATRA SABHA

The Stargazing Revolution Reviving Rural India

Somewhere in the heart of Uttarakhand, under a velvet sky freckled with stars, people gathered not for a concert, not for a festival — but to simply look up. And in doing so, they became part of something far bigger: Nakshatra Sabha, a first-of-its-kind astro-tourism movement that's now lighting the path for India's next tourism revolution.

In a landmark initiative by the Uttarakhand Tourism Development Board in partnership with Starscapes, Nakshatra Sabha brought India's pristine night skies to the center of tourism. Over the past year, this celestial campaign drew astrophiles across the length and breadth of India including some from as far as Norway, France, USA, Middle East — tourists, schoolchildren, scientists, influencers, and even locals who had never seen Saturn's rings or the craters on the Moon before.

A New Kind of Gathering

Spread across seven destinations — including Mussoorie, Jageshwar, Takula at Nainital, Kartikswamy temple at Rudraprayag, Benital in Chamoli, Corbett and Pithoragarh — each edition of Nakshatra Sabha blended the magic of stargazing with storytelling, science, and local heritage.

These weren't passive events. They were immersive evenings packed with telescope viewings, mythological sky tours, astrophotography workshops, solar observations, and discussions on the importance of dark sky conservation.

"Nakshatra Sabha is a one-of-a-kind starry experience curated by Starscapes—an initiative we at Magucho were truly thrilled to be a part of," said acclaimed actress and former Miss India, Gul Panag.

"Nakshatra Sabha has ignited public imagination. It's rare to find an initiative that combines science communication, heritage, and eco-tourism so effectively," said Dr. Dorje Angchuk, engineer at the Indian Astronomical Observatory and a known voice for astronomy outreach.

The events also featured interactive storytelling sessions on celestial myths and local cosmology, tying ancient narratives to modern science. Night photography sessions, planetarium simulations, and sunspot viewing through hydrogen-alpha filters added layers of experience.

Photos of long queues behind telescopes, children pointing skyward, and constellations captured in real time flooded Instagram, with content from @starscapes.experiences reaching over 3 million impressions across events.

A Blueprint for Niche Tourism

More than a tourism event, Nakshatra Sabha is a proof of concept. It positions Uttarakhand not just as a destination of rivers and treks, but of dark skies and deep experiences.

"This initiative has helped develop a new vertical niche, sustainable tourism centered around astronomy. It's immersive, low-impact, and



uniquely Uttarakhand," said a spokesperson from the Uttarakhand Tourism Board.

At every location, the Sabhas collaborated with local homestays, artisans, and eco-guides — generating income and awareness in communities often left out of mainstream tourism circuits. The events also drew support from district officials, forest departments, and citizen science communities.

From Ghost Villages to Guiding Stars

The next phase of Nakshatra Sabha will focus on "ghost villages" — abandoned or nearabandoned rural settlements in Uttarakhand, often emptied due to migration, lack of livelihood, or fading connectivity. These villages, however, share a rare gift: pristine, lightpollution-free skies.

Uttarakhand is preparing to identify and designate some of these as official Dark Sky Villages, blending astro-tourism with rural revival.

"We see this as a double-impact opportunity — preserving the night sky while breathing life back into our forgotten villages," said Ramashish Ray, Founder of Starscapes. "It's not about just looking at stars — it's about building futures around them." In these locations, infrastructure will remain minimal by design — focused on dark-sky compliance, small-scale observatories, and skilling of local youth as astro-guides and storytellers. The vision is to turn ghost villages into guiding stars of India's tourism narrative. "This is rural tourism reimagined," said Kamakshi Mahale, expert with the Rural Tourism Council. "The night sky becomes both a canvas and a livelihood."

"From folklore to futures, dark skies can tell many stories — and bring people back to forgotten places," added Dr. Shylaja, emphasizing the educational potential in these spaces.

The pilot designations for dark sky villages are expected to launch by late 2025, with support from astrophysical institutions and tourism researchers.

What the Sky Taught Us

In many ways, Nakshatra Sabha is a reminder: in our race to develop, we often forget to look up. But this campaign — powered by passionate astronomers, government support, and public imagination — has reminded thousands of that cosmic connection.

The Dark Sky Conservation Report released earlier this year at the Nakshatra Sabha Dark Sky Conclave showcases not only participation metrics but also a roadmap for preserving India's skies before they are lost to light pollution.

From developing dark-sky policies to engaging with international bodies like IDA (International Dark Sky Association), Uttarakhand is poised to become India's dark sky capital — with Nakshatra Sabha as its glowing beacon.

"It's time India leads in experiential, purpose-driven tourism. Nakshatra Sabha isn't just a campaign — it's a movement," said Shri Sachin Kurve, Hon. Secretary Tourism, summing up the sentiment shared by both policymakers and participants.



GLASSHOUSE

STORM AND A TEACUP

The mobs were running amok, but ex-cricketer and Behrampore MP Yusuf Pathan figured it was time for an Instagram interlude. "Easy afternoons, good chai and calm surroundings," he mused, seemingly worlds away from the mayhem. But no one was amused. The TMC MP's constituency was spared the bloodshed, but as Murshidabad district's administrative nerve centre, a show of leadership, or even empathy, was the bare minimum needed. Instead, what the public got was a three-photo spread of Pathan's quest for inner peace. The BJP pounced, accusing him of sipping tea while "Hindus got slaughtered". Even within the TMC, the murmurs grew louder—"outsider," "tone-deaf," "Insta disaster"... Looks like Pathan won't be up for 'Impact Player' anytime soon.

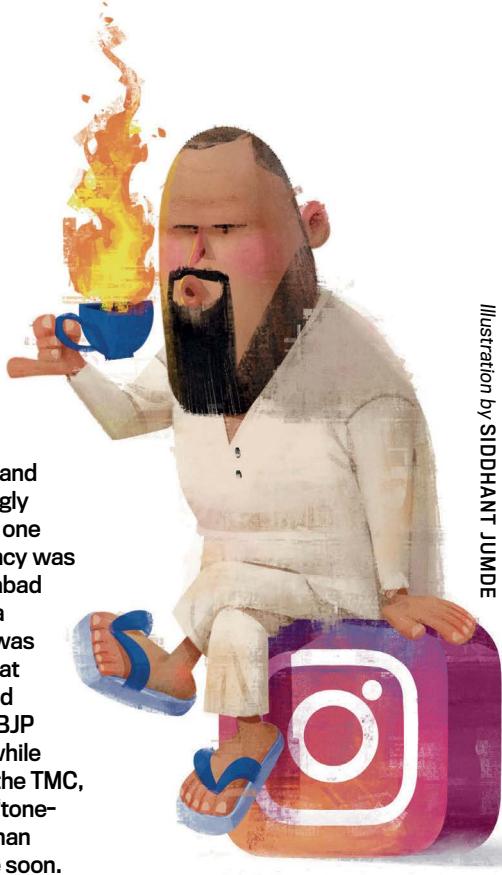


Illustration by SIDDHANT JUMDE

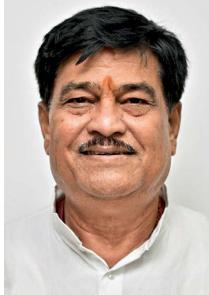
Believe in Uncle

When ex-Union minister Ashwini Choubey remarked on April 10 that he would personally fancy Nitish Kumar in the deputy prime minister's chair, the comment was received as an artful barb, sparking more buzz that the BJP was quietly plotting to sideline the Bihar CM this election year. Then, adding another twist to the political farce, on April 14, Nitish's son Nishant Kumar insisted that even "Amit [Shah] uncle," had spoken about "pitaji" being the CM face again. Now if 'Uncle' has spoken, guess it's locked till at least after the polls. Or is it?



Secular Slide

The Biju Janata Dal (BJD) is battling some major inner demons these days. Eight-time MLA Ranendra Pratap Swain has penned a heartfelt missive to party boss Naveen Patnaik—part plea, part passive-aggressive post-it note. Swain's gripe? A select few were allegedly hijacking the party machinery while the rest sipped tea in quiet despair. He's particularly concerned about the BJD, once the torchbearer of secularism and social justice, siding with the ruling BJP on controversial matters like the Waqf (Amendment) Bill. Of course, party loyalists responded with the usual hand-wringing. "Let the process finish," they said, as if democracy were an unfinished jigsaw puzzle.



MARKS AND MINISTERS

A political slugfest erupted after Samajwadi Party chief Akhilesh Yadav and AAP convenor Arvind Kejriwal slammed the 'Gujarat model', just that it was a year-old report saying that not a single student from 157 schools had cleared the Class 10 Board exams. But what raised eyebrows wasn't the criticism, it was the counterattack. Instead of state education minister Kuber Dindor, it was MoS for home Harsh Sanghavi who led the defence with combative tweets and press statements. His 'out-of-turn' actions have started fuelling chatter within the BJP about the rising 'clout' of the young Surat MLA.



THE QUEEN ROARS

She has been quiet, but Vasundhara Raje can still make the ground shake. Last week in Jhalawar—her bastion and son Dushyant's Lok Sabha turf—the former Rajasthan CM snapped. Women were complaining of dry taps. Raje tore into the officials over missing Jal Jeevan Mission funds and posted a stinger online: "Don't the people feel thirsty? Or is it only the officials who do?" The post lit a fire. Union Jal



Shakti minister C.R. Patil ordered a probe. Rajasthan CM Bhajan Lal Sharma summoned PHED officials. State BJP chief Madan Lal Rathore too waded in. Meanwhile, Chief Secretary Sudhansh Pant lashed out at Karauli collector Neelabh Saxena for skipping town mid-crisis—on "urgent work" in Lucknow, he had dialled into the water review remotely. "If I knew he was chilling at a hill station, that leave would've never been approved," Pant snapped.



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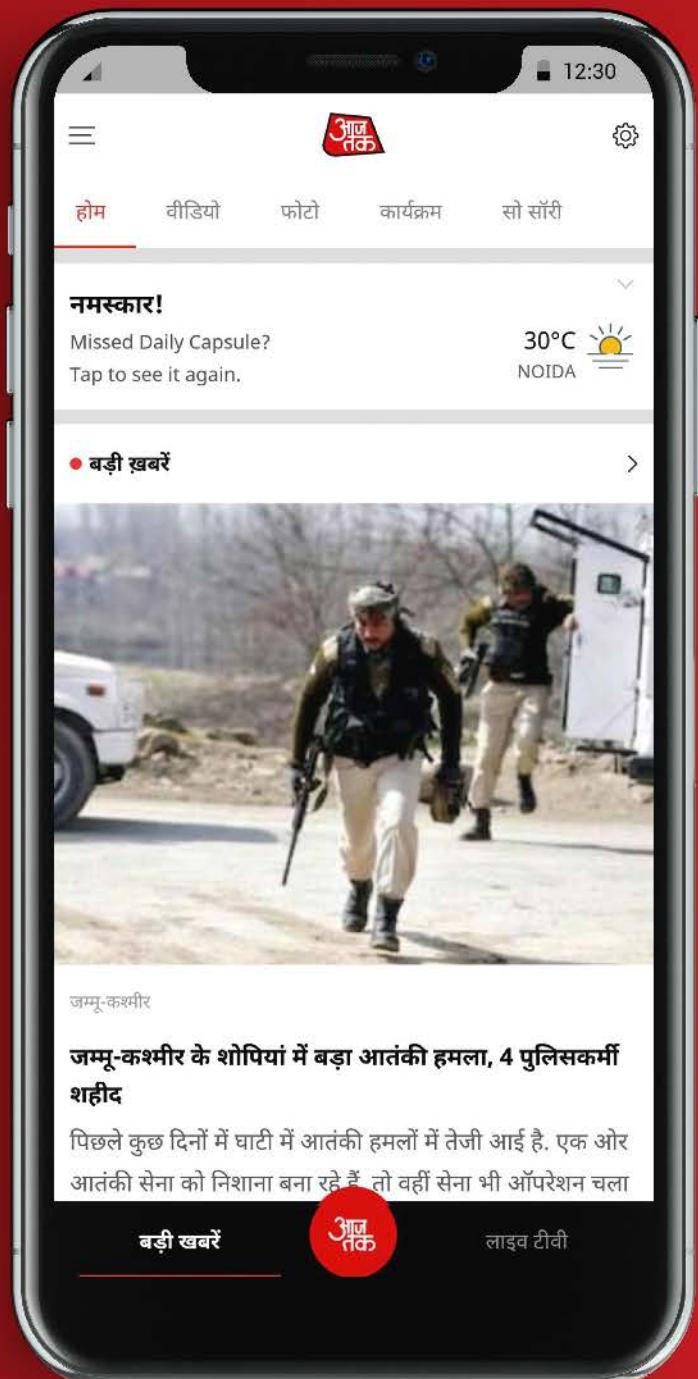
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कहीं भी, कभी भी

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उपलब्ध है



COMPLIANCE RAJ

ENDING THE RED TAPE

INDIA MUST TRIM THE REGULATORY CHOLESTEROL THAT STIFLES ITS INDUSTRY AND USHER IN GENUINE EASE OF DOING BUSINESS

TO MAKE INDIAN ENTERPRISES MORE COMPETITIVE AND CAPABLE OF WITHSTANDING ANY TRADE UPHEAVAL

By M.G. ARUN & SONAL KHETARPAL

Illustration by NILANJAN DAS / AI

As

Donald Trump was turning the world upside down with his tariffs, like a child playing Demolition Derby on a video game, the world was left scrambling to cope with the consequences of the American president's trigger-happy trade policies. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's pre-emptive trip to the United States did little to shield India from the Trumpian blitzkrieg. Though India was spared the worst and Trump himself hit a 90-day pause button on April 9, New Delhi had already been mulling ways to strengthen Indian industry in anticipation of Trump's trade war. High on the list was the urgent need to remove the regulatory cholesterol clogging the arteries of India's economic growth. The unanimous consensus among experts: the Compliance Raj must go.

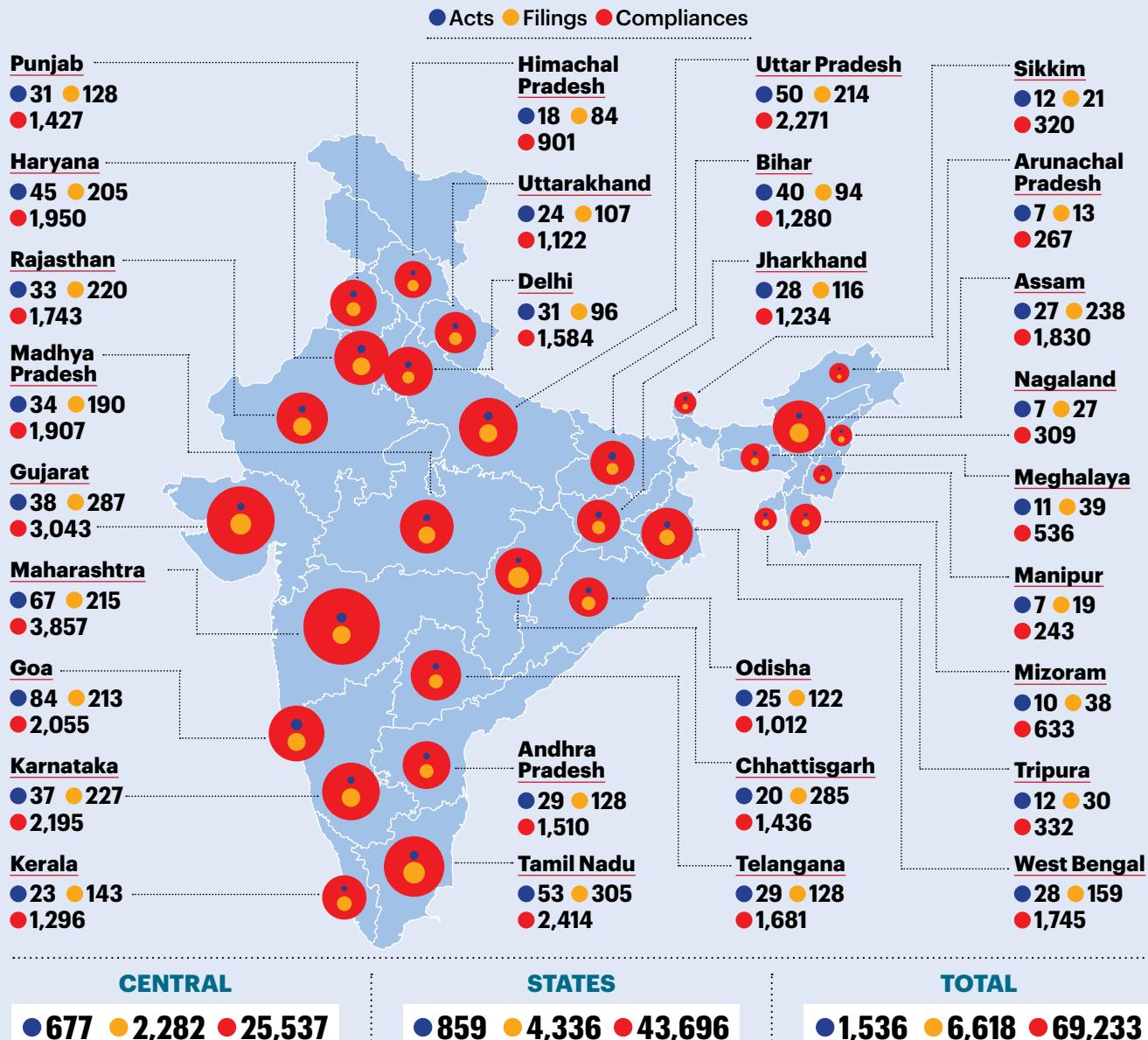
The first hint perhaps came in the Economic Survey released 11 days after Trump was sworn in. Chief Economic Advisor V. Anantha Nageswaran mentioned the need for deregulation and reforms in land, labour and capital to free



सत्यमेव जयते

THE MULTIPLICITY MAYHEM

Businesses in India are subject to 1,536 central and state legislations, making compliance tricky



Source: Teamlease RegTech

businesses from legacy constraints and put the economy on a superfast track to meet the new global context. Union finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman picked up the thread in the budget document a day later, announcing the formation of a high-level committee chaired by cabinet secretary T.V. Somanathan, and comprising officials from the NITI Aayog and the Prime Minister's Office. It was mandated to review all non-financial sector regulations, certifications, licences and permissions. A deregulation commission was mooted too, to work closely with compliance-heavy states. "The objective," Sitharaman said, "is to strengthen trust-based economic governance and take transformational measures to enhance 'ease of doing business', especially in

matters of inspections and compliances. States will be encouraged to join this endeavour."

The Compliance Chokehold

From launch to liquidation, businesses in India, big and small, are caught in an exhausting labyrinth of regulations. According to a 2024 white paper by TeamLease RegTech, part of the staffing and human capital firm Teamlease Services, Indian enterprises are subject to a staggering 1,536 different acts, requiring 69,233 compliances and 6,618 annual filings. These regulations operate at multiple tiers—central, state, municipal and panchayat—and often overlap. This is because land is a subject under the state

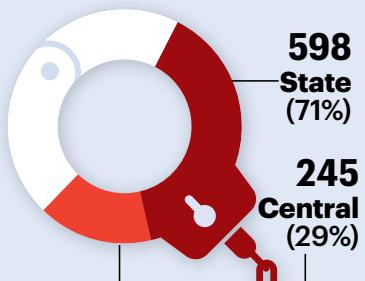
THE THREAT OF IMPRISONMENT

Two of every five obligations in laws enacted by the Centre and the states bear imprisonment clauses for non-compliance

ACTS

843

or 54.9% of the 1,536 Acts have an imprisonment clause



COMPLIANCES

26,134

or 37.7% of the 69,233 compliances have an imprisonment clause

20,907
State
(80%)

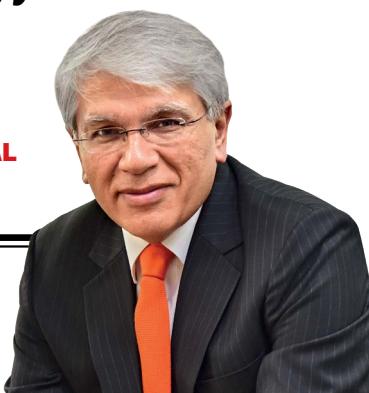
5,227
Central
(20%)

Note: Acts refer to regulatory laws—pertaining to labour, finance, environment etc.—passed by the central or state legislatures; compliances are the rules, regulations, guidelines etc. therein that businesses have to adhere to; filings are financial and non-financial information, including financial statements, returns etc., to be filed annually

"We don't have land, labour or capital shortage. Infrastructure, skills are no constraint. By elimination, you get one reason: regulatory cholesterol!"

— MANISH SABHARWAL

Chairman, Co-founder,
TeamLease Services



COVER STORY

COMPLIANCE RAJ

list, but transfer of property falls under the concurrent list, where both the Centre and states can legislate. Likewise, labour laws demand a stupendous 32,542 compliances apart from 3,048 filings under 463 Acts, some of which fall in the concurrent list. The same goes for electricity.

Talking to INDIA TODAY at his office in Bengaluru suburb Koramangala, Manish Sabharwal, chairman and co-founder of Teamlease Services, offered a deep dive into why Indian businesses lag behind their global peers. “Of India’s 63 million enterprises, 12 million don’t have an office, and their staff work from home. Only 8 million of the 12 million registered for goods and services tax (GST) pay tax and only one million pay social security. There are only 29,000 companies in India with paid-up capital of more than Rs 10 crore,” he says. Why do we have very few such companies? “We don’t have a shortage of land, labour or capital. We don’t have cultural problems. India exported more software than Saudi Arabia did oil in 2021. Infrastructure and skills are no longer binding constraints. So, by elimination, you reach the real reason—regulatory cholesterol.” TeamLease spent nearly four years conducting extensive research to build a comprehensive database of all compliance requirements for Indian businesses. “The obvious first reaction from all civil servants, when we came up with the 69,233 number, was that we were lying. So I asked them to tell us which ones to remove from the database. Nobody came back,” he says.

The regulatory drag comes at a heavy cost. “These compliances inflate operating costs, make doing business a more onerous, frustrating experience and suppress entrepreneurial momentum,” says Naushad Forbes, co-chairman of the Pune-based engineering and instrumentation firm Forbes Marshall. They also affect the profitability and viability of businesses, especially micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs), forcing many of them to close shop. For MSMEs with annual turnovers of up to Rs 100 crore, the compliance burden can range from Rs 11-16 lakh per year. It is even higher for fintech firms—between Rs 96 lakh and Rs 1.17 crore per year for small companies, and Rs 2.5-3.2 crore for larger ones, according to Teamlease estimates. No wonder 35,567 MSMEs registered on the central government’s Udyam portal shut down in FY25 (until February), with many citing regulatory hurdles as the key reason. Foreign direct investment (FDI), too, dropped from \$84.8 billion in FY22 to \$70.95 billion in FY24.

The Federal Blockade

Experts believe compliances were framed and implemented with worthy intentions, but collectively have now become a paralysing burden. “It’s the culmination of thousands of well-intended regulations that have become debilitating,” says Forbes. And you encounter them at every step, be it land, labour or inspection. Regulations can also vary across

states. Take Maharashtra: launching a manufacturing unit in the alco-beverages sector requires 99 licences, 35 of which have to be periodically renewed. Karnataka has 60 Acts, including central and state labour legislations, which mandate constant compliances—monthly, quarterly, half-yearly and annual. “Compliance is a big challenge,” says a frustrated B.C. Prabhakar, president of the Karnataka Employers Association.

Getting permissions and licences is not easy either, as they require a person to physically visit the respective authority with a duly filled form and relevant documents for submission. Vikram Annappa, MD at Aequus INFRA, which offers built-to-suit industrial infrastructure, says, “On an average, you need a minimum runway of one year to start a business, as India still needs to digitise approvals and permit systems, while too many agencies are expected to work together. This is a huge opportunity cost to an entrepreneur, who loses out on revenue, and to the government, which loses out on GST revenue. It is also an opportunity loss in the global market.” In contrast, in Vietnam, one of India’s prime global competitors, locals get an industrial licence in less than a month and foreigners within two months.

“Compliances inflate operating costs and make doing business more onerous and frustrating, suppressing entrepreneurial momentum”

- NAUSHAD FORBES
Co-chairman, Forbes Marshall



Even more alarming in India is the threat of imprisonment for non-compliance. A 2022 report by the Observer Research Foundation (ORF) and TeamLease RegTech documented that of the 69,233 compliances that businesses have to meet, 26,134, or 38 per cent, carry imprisonment clauses. All this creates a very oppressive environment for industry to function while leaving the system open to the common Indian viruses of arbitrary power and corruption.

The Land Tangle

In India, land falls under the state list, meaning individual state governments devise the laws, regulations and land-related policies. This decentralised control leads to significant differences in land acquisition processes, land-use policies, zoning laws and property taxation across states. Further, land acquisition for industrial purposes is regulated by the Right to Fair Compensation and Transparency in Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation



MANDAR DEODHAR

and Resettlement, or LARR, Act, 2013. This legislation is meant to ensure fair compensation, but the social impact assessments and consent requirements it calls for usually turn into a dead weight, especially for private projects. In addition, factories must obtain a factory licence and comply with the provisions of the Factories Act, 1948.

A major problem that businesses face is the paucity of land segregated for industrial use by the government, and difficulty in acquiring land directly from the farmers. Even with government-acquired land, farmer agitations and stay orders from courts are frequent. To pacify farmers, governments keep hiking the market price of land. It can go up to even four times, according to Vinod Karwa, owner of speciality chemicals company Victor Colour Coating and aerospace and defence gear manufacturer Sanauto Engineers (India).

So, if land price in the Industrial Model Townships

CASE STUDY

◀ Amit Kulkarni, 50
Architect, Mumbai

A Tower of Regulations

Kulkarni has been designing redevelopment projects in Mumbai for the past 20 years. For each project, which involves dismantling old buildings and constructing new ones in their place, Kulkarni has to obtain clearances from four key government agencies—the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC), the Maharashtra Housing and Area Development Authority (MHADA), the Mumbai Metropolitan Region Development

Authority (MMRDA), the Maharashtra Industrial Development Corporation (MISC) and the Slum Rehabilitation Authority (SRA). Then, there are the approvals from environmental clearance committees, as well as the fire, aviation and heritage departments. Coastal Regulation Zone norms have to be observed too. This complex web of approvals and compliances often leads to significant project delays and cost escalation.

“A redevelopment project in Mumbai requires 25-30 approvals. The delay due to these raises the cost of construction, making projects unviable”

(IMT) of Faridabad was Rs 14,900 per square metre in June 2013, it has gone up to Rs 67,000 per sq. m in 2025 under new auctions or resale, which is unviable for a new entrepreneur. In West Bengal, business gets easier if it is being set up in a land parcel recognised or allocated by the West Bengal Industrial Development Corporation (WBIDC), the state's nodal agency for industrialisation. However, an entrepreneur still has to secure individual clearances from various departments. While WBIDC provides some facilitation by issuing letters to the relevant authorities, expediting the process to a certain extent, the overall system remains unwieldy, say industry sources. And even if you manage to obtain land permissions, 14 other agencies, including town planning, the survey department and the public works department, come into play. Several states have announced a single-window clearance for land, but it is not without loopholes, they say.

Labour Pangs

According to a 2024 TeamLease RegTech report titled 'Decoding India's Labour Compliance Framework', almost 47 per cent of all compliances (32,542) and 46 per cent of all filings (3,048) relate to labour. Of these, 54 per cent (17,819) carry imprisonment as a penalty for non-compliance. State-level compliances have a staggering 97 per cent share in all labour-related obligations for businesses (31,605), compared to Union-level compliances, which number a much lower 937. Karwa, also chair of the MSME committee of industry body PHDCCI (PHD Chamber of Commerce and Industry), says that certain states mandate that enterprises have 60-70 per cent of their labour force be local. However, locals often take factory jobs as a side gig in addition to their family businesses of dairy or farming, and can be fickle employees. "And the government does not allow us to terminate inefficient employees," Karwa says.

Labour unrest, therefore, is common across the country. In the recent month-long strike in Samsung Electronics' manufacturing facility in Tamil Nadu, more than 1,000 workers protested the suspension of 23 people who wanted their trade union to be registered. The company incurred a loss of around \$100 million (Rs 857.1 crore) on account of the strike. The increased cost of compliances also pushes businesses towards informal recruitment. As does overtime wages, as experts point out. According to Section 59 of the Factories Act, workers who put in more than the mandated 48 hours a week are entitled to overtime at double the regular wage, pushing employers to opt for informal channels to get people to work overtime.

India's compliance ecosystem is also inherently fluid, making it difficult for businesses to keep up. "In 2024, 9,331 regulatory updates were published at the Union, state and local body levels across seven categories of the law," says Rishi Agarwal, co-founder and CEO of TeamLease RegTech. These could be notifications, gazettes, circulars, ordinances, master circulars or press releases. Many of them change the forms, formats, due dates, frequency, penalty, duty structure, minimum wages or applicability thresholds. Navigating this intricate web of time-sensitive updates is not easy, he says, especially as there is no smart digital library with search, sort and filter capabilities. There is also uncertainty as every so often new legislations and rules are introduced, adding to the obligations. Such policy reversals create uncertainty for businesses, which typically plan contracts, supply chains and procurement six months to a year in advance.

The Economic Terrorism

Audits and inspections are another minefield for entrepreneurs, with factories potentially getting visits from 40 inspectors and government officials at any given time. While intended to ensure good governance, entrepreneurs lament that they are conducted without any objective criteria and are frequently an excuse for extortionate demands. Deepak

REGULATORY BURDEN

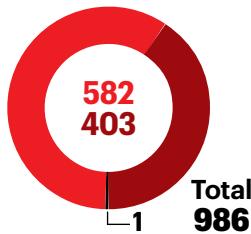
The growing compliance burden is a disincentive for many to even enter businesses. The story repeats itself across sectors

COMPLIANCES: ■ Central ■ State ■ Municipal



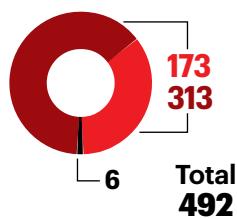
ALCOHOLIC BEVERAGES

Alcohol is a state subject. Even so, a new facility is required to obtain 100-plus licences from central, state and municipal authorities



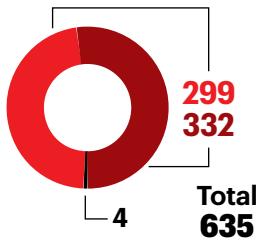
AUTOMOTIVE

Factory licence, shop and establishment registration, certification and standardisation.... Apart from high costs incurred, these lead to delays



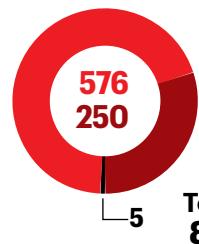
CHEMICALS

Preventing a large-scale mishap is paramount. But multiplicity of compliances only increases the drag on the system



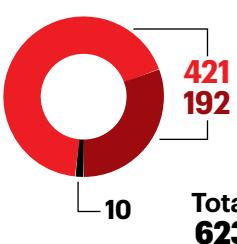
FMCG

An FMCG business has to get separate licences for every unit wherein it manufactures, stores or sells food items



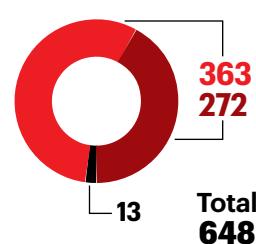
HOSPITALS

Each hospital has to obtain close to 100 certificates, licences, permits under at least 58 Acts/ rules at various stages of business



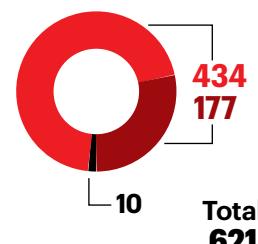
LOGISTICS

Even a firm with a single corporate office and a single branch office in just one state must obtain 84 one-time permissions



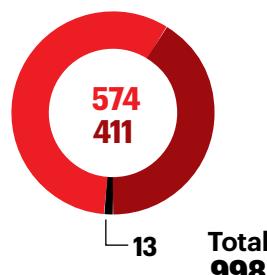
NBFCs

They have to stay abreast with over 35 one-time approvals within a single state besides ongoing compliances at central, state and local level



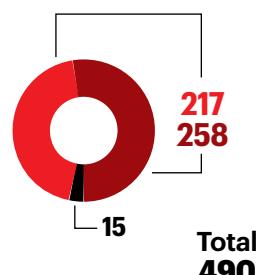
PHARMA

A pharma firm faces 70-odd one-time registrations and approvals besides ongoing compliances at each stage of production



RETAIL

A retail chain with, say, a presence in six cities and across two states will have to keep track of 3,182 compliances



INDIA VS CHINA

Except in construction permits, China scores much higher in the ease of doing business parameters



Days to start a business
16.5 / 8.6



Days to get a construction permit
94.8 / 155



Days to register property
69 / 9



Days to enforce contracts
1,445 / 496



Hours to file taxes each year
275 / 142



Years in resolving insolvency
4.3 / 1.7



Days to get electricity
55 / 34

Source: International Journal of Management, IT & Engineering

Source: TeamLease RegTech

CASE STUDY

◀ **Dr Arun Kumar, 38**
Owner and MD, Arogya
Multi-Specialty Hospital
Sultanpur, Uttar Pradesh

Stuck in a Maze

Dr Kumar had always dreamt of building a 30-bed hospital in Semri Bazar in Uttar Pradesh's Sultanpur district, where it would be the only facility of its kind within a 10-km radius. Construction began in 2019,

and with it a series of never-ending nightmares—of getting approvals, including registration under the Clinical Establishments Act, licensing and registration from the state health department, approval from the chief medical officer, a pharmacy licence, fire safety clearance, labour cess, and water and electricity approvals, among others.

The most frustrating was complying with biomedical waste management regulations. By law, hospitals must partner with a government-approved agency, which charges Rs 7 per bed per day—a fee Dr Kumar felt was excessive. There was duplication of processes and responsibilities, too—Kumar had to register separately with the UP Pollution Control Board. Obtaining approval for the Ayushman Bharat Yojana, which offers free treatment to eligible ben-

“The compliance maze discourages new players, especially in rural areas, from taking up initiatives that could transform healthcare accessibility”

eficiaries, was another ordeal. As was the process of acquiring the Registry of Hospitals in the Network of Insurance (ROHINI) certificate.

The outcome? The project was delayed by a whole year. Even after the hospital became partially operational in 2022, the compliance challenges continued. The latest is notices from government departments for not maintaining the attendance records of construction workers, a rule Dr Kumar says he wasn't even aware of.

Pahwa, chairman of the New Delhi-based Pahwa Group, has companies across six continents and 10 manufacturing units. Among them is a 30-year-old company in Malaysia and a 20-year-old one in China, but he hasn't heard any employee complain about being harassed by officials in those countries. The experience in India is vastly different. "It is like economic terrorism," he says. He recalls how despite GST audits being completed and cleared, a certain section in the GST law was invoked to open the books of past years.

Even if the government has in the past few years made licensing simpler for businesses by removing several approvals, ease of doing business will remain elusive until officials stop knocking on factory doors for audits and inspections, says the business community. For example, getting a construction licence to build a factory has become simpler as the architect can now pass the drawing himself. But he still cannot issue the completion certificate; that has to come from the authority post an inspection. This allows inspectors to

withhold file approvals on the slightest pretext, becoming a source of harassment for businesses.

For labour-related reforms, there is integration of the e-Shram portal with other platforms for a comprehensive service offering to labour, including employment and skilling services, and the revamping of the Shram Suvidha and Samadhan portals to ease compliance for industries. But more needs to be done. A Mumbai-based builder says that each extra layer of compliance means more red tape and additional palms to be greased. These costs are eventually passed on to the end consumer, who shoulders a 'compliance burden' of around Rs 1,000-1,500 per square feet. "The other problem is that our land titles are antiquated and their databases and records not linked with each other," he points out, stressing the need for a single-window system spanning all departments.

The Long Road to Deregulation

In his Economic Survey, Nageswaran outlined the reforms for land and labour. In land, he proposed improvement in land administration, planning and management, including digitising land records and updating urban planning systems. In labour, he advocated simplifying compliance procedures, greater flexibility in hiring and firing practices and improving social security measures for workers. The FM initiated some of these "next generation reforms" in land and labour. The planned land-related reforms and actions in both rural and urban areas are expected to focus on two key aspects: improving land administration, planning and management, and updating urban planning, land usage and building bylaws. The rural reforms include the introduction of a Unique Land Parcel Identification Number (ULPIN) or Bhu-Aadhaar, digitisation of cadastral maps (showing the extent, value and ownership of land, especially for taxation), survey of map subdivisions, setting up a land registry and linking it to the farmers' registry. Urban reforms include the digitisation of

"On an average, you need a minimum runway of one year to start a business, as India still needs to digitise approvals and permit systems"

— VIKRAM ANNAPPA
MD, Aequus INFRA



THE ROADBLOCKS

A closer look at the compliance drag on the automotive sector

AUTOMOTIVE

492

COMPLIANCES

173
CENTRAL
313
STATE
6
MUNICIPAL

FOUR-STAGE APPROVALS

- Setting up ➤ Pre-commissioning
- Post-commissioning ➤ Post-production

MAJOR APPROVALS NEEDED

- Incorporation of the entity
- Land allotment ('land' falls under the state list although transfer of property falls under concurrent list, where both the Centre and states can legislate)
- Construction
- Labour
- Safety and health
- Industry-specific approvals
- Tax registrations
- Environmental clearance—from the central as well as state pollution control boards



It would take anywhere between 2-4 years for an automotive original equipment manufacturer to set up a car manufacturing facility in India, says Ravi Bhatia, president & director, JATO Dynamics

urban land records with GIS (geographic information system) mapping, establishing an IT-based system for property record administration and strengthening the financial capability of local bodies.

India also needs to look at ease of doing business holistically, for both domestic and international entrepreneurs, as well as for investors—particularly international ones—because they are completely mobile and have the option to invest in more business-friendly countries. “Foreign investment is the acid test of a country with respect to ease of doing business. Several investors and business houses have bypassed India in favour of

COVER STORY

COMPLIANCE RAJ

Thailand, Vietnam and Malaysia,” says Pahwa.

Agarwal says the Union government has demonstrated good intentions. Some may argue that reforms have been slow, but consolidating 17 diverse indirect tax systems into one GST and making it digital was a significant step for ease of doing business, he adds. Moreover, the government has attempted to reduce the deep mistrust of entrepreneurs by legislating the Jan Vishwas Act and reducing the criminality in at least 42 Union Acts. It has also given states a road-map to follow—states such as Madhya Pradesh and Tamil Nadu have already begun implementing some measures.

What Industry Wants

Forbes believes that when the Modi government first came to power in 2014, there was a major thrust on improving ease of doing business and promoting competitive federalism among states. But that has been on the wane since. “There were attempts to improve the ease of doing business, but for everything that improved, there was something else that got worse,” he says. “Sebi, for instance, has become a much more onerous, painful regulator over the last and almost every year.” Forbes proposes two approaches to cut red tape. One is an idea that has been around for some time but has not delivered—single-window clearance. This is because it has never really been a single window. Citing the example of Vietnam, Forbes demonstrates how when the country sets up an industrial park, it empowers a single official body to do everything, from giving pollution clearance and electricity connections to issuing operating licences and the health and safety certificate. Eliminating the countless regulations—some 6,000 of them with imprisonment clauses—that have not been used in the past decade, is another priority.

With India unlikely to have anything like DOGE (Department of Government Efficiency) in the US, or the zero labour laws in China, “it is the *madhyam marg* (middle road) we seek with regard to regulatory cholesterol,” says Sabharwal. “I am not arguing against the State, or regulation. I am just saying that 67,000 compliances is too much.” His antidote to reduce regulatory cholesterol is to rationalise, decriminalise and digitise. “You don’t need 75 ministries in Delhi. There are 250 people with the rank of secretary to the Government of India. The pyramid has become a cylinder which soon will become an inverted cone. It should be an Eiffel Tower, with a few people on the top and a large base,” he says, adding that the 26,000-odd imprisonment clauses should be trimmed to 1,000, or even 500.

Similarly, India, which has the world’s most innovative and unique digital public infrastructure that powers services like Aadhaar, Digilocker, Digiyatra and direct benefit

ACROSS THE SPECTRUM

Compliances span various heads. Labour alone accounts for 30% of the regulatory laws, translating to nearly half the total compliances and filings

	ACTS	COMPLIANCES	ANNUAL FILINGS
Central	1,536	69,233	6,618
State			
Labour	40 / 423	937 / 31,605	135 / 2,913
Finance & Taxation	54 / 62	945 / 2,339	254 / 736
EHS	48 / 59	2,344 / 578	150 / 81
Secretarial	68	3,526	493
Commercial	62 / 127	2,452 / 4,476	121 / 351
Industry-specific	384 / 100	15,160 / 2,806	1,114 / 148
General	22 / 87	173 / 1,892	15 / 107

Source: TeamLease RegTech

Note: EHS are Environmental, Health & Safety norms; Secretarial includes corporate governance, remuneration of senior management etc.; Commercial: packaging, labelling, legal aspects etc.; General: norms not falling under other heads, mainly pertaining to local authorities

AMONG THE REFORMS SUGGESTED FOR LAND ARE BETTER LAND ADMINISTRATION AND RECORD-KEEPING, WHILE THOSE FOR LABOUR STRESS THE NEED FOR FEWER APPROVALS AND BETTER HIRING AND FIRING PRACTICES

"Let us hear what companies have to say on fair regulation and what the government needs, rather than have labour experts make decisions"

- ARUN MAIRA

Author, former Chairman,
Boston Consulting Group



transfer, must be extended to compliance as well. "We must create a national employment employer compliance grid and have a time-bound programme for making India a fertile habitat for job creation," Sabharwal says. As for the imprisonment clauses, the ORF-TeamLease RegTech report makes 10 major recommendations. These include reforming the way policies are designed, using criminal penalties in business laws with extreme restraint, constituting a regulatory impact assessment committee within the Law Commission of India, involving all independent economic regulators in compliance reforms, ending the

criminalisation of all compliance procedures, creating alternative mechanisms and frameworks and defining standards for legal drafting, introducing sunset clauses.

"We want lesser but better regulations," says Arun Maira, author and former chairman of Boston Consulting Group in India. He suggests carrying out a regulatory impact analysis to identify which compliances to keep and which to do away with. "Let us hear what companies have to say on what is fair regulation and what the government needs. That will be very different from having certain labour experts sitting and deciding on what regulations need to be there," he says. According to him, regulation has to be an evolutionary process. Annappa suggests the setting up of a centralised monitoring and implementation agency to keep an eagle eye on approvals and permits and outsourcing the task to private agencies with a clear measurable mandate to bring efficiency in the system of project implementation.

There is a growing realisation that India must significantly downsize its regulations and compliances—make them fewer and better—to remove sloth in enterprises across the board. The Centre has made the first move, but the process needs to be faster and more consultative. States, too, must join the bandwagon if ease of doing business has to become more than just a fancy cliche. ■

—with Dhaval S. Kulkarni, Jumana Shah, Ajay Sukumaran, Arkamoy Datta Majumdar and Avaneesh Mishra



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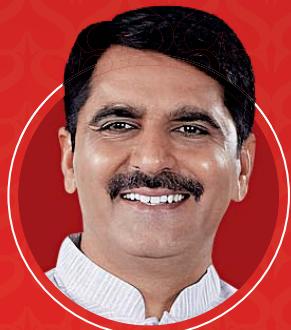


GEORGE KURIAN

Union Minister of State for Fisheries,
Animal Husbandry and Dairying

MADHYA PRADESH

CENTRAL TO THE INDIA GROWTH STORY

**SHANKAR CHAUDHARY**

Speaker, Gujarat Legislative Assembly & Chairman, Banas Dairy

**UMAKANT UMRAO**

Principal Secretary, Animal Husbandry Department, MP

**SHEO SHEKHAR SHUKLA**

Principal Secretary, Tourism & Managing Director, MPTB

**NITENDRA SINGH RATHORE**

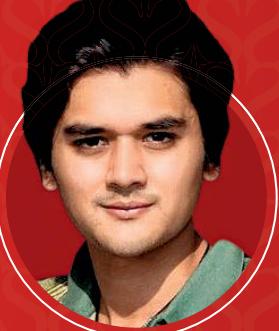
MLA, Prithvipur, MP

**JITENDRA PATWARI**

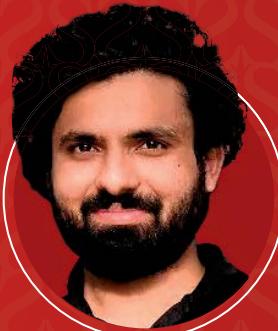
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**MAHANAARYAMAN SCINDIA**

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Co-Founder, The Kabadiwala

**GAURAV RANA**

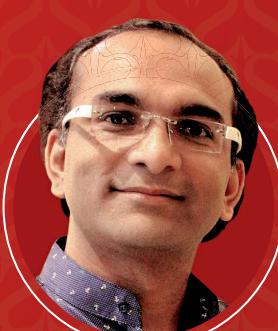
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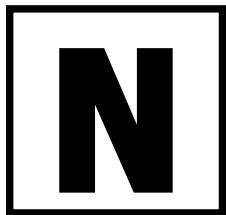


IndiaTodayLive

PLAYING WITH FIRE

THE POLITICS OF FAITH THE BJP AND THE TMC ARE PRACTISING IN BENGAL IN THE RUN-UP TO THE 2026 POLLS BODES ILL FOR ITS COMMUNAL FABRIC. THE VIOLENCE IN MURSHIDABAD OVER THE WAQF LAW IS JUST A TRAILER

By Arkamoy Datta Majumdar



Nowhere did the ripples of discontent over the recently passed Waqf Amendment Act spread as viciously as they did in West Bengal. The unrest was particularly intense in the Muslim-majority districts of Murshidabad and Malda, as well as in Bhangor, in South 24 Parganas. What began as simple protests soon escalated into a violent conflagration on April 11–12, once again exposing the deep communal fault lines that run through the state. Three people died, more than 200 arrests were made, and paramilitary forces were deployed. The crisis is a grim reminder of Bengal's shifting political landscape, where the two leading parties—the ruling Trinamool Congress (TMC) and the main Opposition Bharatiya Janata Party

(BJP)—are striving to outdo each other in their bid to corner the Hindu vote, creating discontent among the state's large Muslim population, a year before the 2026 assembly election.

The initial spark in Murshidabad was lit in Dhuliyan, in Samsanganj block, on April 11. Protesters torched police vehicles and clashed with security forces. In nearby Suti, Ejaz Ahmed was allegedly shot dead by the police. Just a few kilometres away in Samsanganj, Har-gobindo Das, 70, and his son Chandan, 40, were killed in their own home. The police arrived four hours later. Ironically, the very next day, the police allowed a Ramnavami procession to pass through the area. Some of the marchers allegedly made incendiary speeches; an organiser has since been arrested. On April 15, the police arrested two persons in connection with the murders.

Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee has publicly rejected the implementation of the amended Waqf law in Bengal. "Dharma means devotion, affection, humanity, peace, culture, harmony, and unity," she declared in



ANI



“DHARMA MEANS DEVOTION, PEACE, AMITY, CULTURE HUMANITY AND HARMONY.... WHY THE FIGHT? WHY RIOTS, WAR OR UNREST? ”

MAMATA BANERJEE
Chief Minister, West Bengal;
Founder chairperson, TMC



INFLAMING PASSIONS

Above, BJP workers protest the communal violence in Murshidabad at a rally in Kolkata, Apr. 13; right, a vehicle set ablaze during anti-Waqf law protests in the district

Kolkata on April 14, asking people to maintain peace. "Why the fight? Why the riots, war, or unrest?" But critics point to the failure of intelligence units and the administration to anticipate the scale of the protests.

The communal unrest led to the exodus of some 400 terrified people. The BJP claims around 80 Hindu families fled across the Bhagirathi river to Paralalpur in Malda, though local officials dispute the number. There are also allegations that the BJP may have orchestrated the exodus, in a bid to create a communal narrative.

Nor was the violence one-sided—Muslim homes faced retaliatory attacks, too. The BJP has also been accused of circulating doctored images of the violence to whip up emotions.

Investigators suspect that the Social Democratic Party of India (SDPI), an offshoot of the banned Popular Front of India, played a role in fuelling the unrest. CPI(M) leader Mohammed Salim visited the family of Hargobin-

do and Chandan—both party supporters—and condemned the state's inaction against the alleged hate speeches by BJP leaders. "The hate speeches led to reaction by the other community. It appears that these speeches also serve the ruling dispensation some purpose," he said.

TMC spokesperson Kunal Ghosh hinted at a larger conspiracy involving "some central agencies, a section of the



PTI

BSF, and two or three political parties,” claiming that miscreants were allowed to run amok and then escape unscathed. The suggestion seems to be that the carnage involved some spontaneous violence, as well as an element of politically engineered, and harvested, chaos.

TEMPLE POLITICS

The violence in Murshidabad and elsewhere has to be seen in light of the game of competitive communalism that the TMC and the BJP are playing as they prepare for the electoral showdown next year. Religious symbolism, once peripheral to Bengal’s political grammar, has moved centrestage. Temples are now political statements, and festivals potent tools of mobilisation.

Since its ascent in 2011, the TMC largely adhered to the secular fabric of the erstwhile Left regime. It enjoyed robust support among minorities, who make up nearly 27 per cent of the state’s population. Its response to the BJP’s accusations of “minority appeasement” and “anti-Hindu” governance were once met with indifference. All that changed in 2019, when the BJP captured 18 out of the state’s 42 Lok Sabha seats, clinching 57 per cent of the Hindu vote. Changing tack, the TMC’s Hindu outreach expanded visibly. Mamata herself began flaunting her Hindu Brahmin identity. A stipend scheme originally started for imams in 2012 was extended to Hindu priests. Varanasi’s famed Ganga aarti was replicated on the banks of the Hooghly. Plans for temples—replicas of Puri’s Jagannath and Vaishno Devi—were announced. The Rs 250 crore replica of the Jagannath temple in Digha is set to be inaugurated on April 30, the day of Akshaya Tritiya, an auspicious day in the Hindu calendar. Not to be outdone, the BJP’s Suvendu Adhikari has vowed to build a Ram temple in Nandigram; the foundation stone was laid on Ramnavami.

Ramnavami, in fact, has been converted into a statewide phenomenon by the BJP, alongside its affiliate

THE RACE TO PO

The BJP and the ruling TMC are competing with each other for

BJP

► **VHP and BJP claim to have hosted Ram Mahotsav events in over 100,000 locations in 2025, took out around 2,000 rallies on Ramnavami**

► **Principal Opposition BJP continually accuses the**

TMC of ‘minority appeasement’ and being ‘anti-Hindu’

► **BJP leader Suvendu Adhikari said in the assembly that Muslim MLAs of the TMC would be “dragged on to the streets” if the BJP came to power in 2026**

► **RSS, with its grassroots reach in Bengal, is gearing up to mobilise increased turnout of Hindu voters in 2026**

► **Protests against violence in Murshidabad used to further polarise communities**

Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP) and its ideological parent, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). From a subdued ritual a decade ago, it has now morphed into a cultural juggernaut in the state. In 2025 alone, around 2,000 rallies were held, with Ram Mahotsavs claimed to have been held in over 100,000 locations. “The misrule of the Trinamool Congress has brought together the Hindu community,” says BJP’s Samik Bhattacharya. “Their protests are being translated into Ramnavami and Hanuman Jayanti rallies.”

The TMC has responded in kind. Ramnavami processions are now led by its own leaders. In Nabadweep and Purulia, TMC-run municipalities urged butcher shops to remain shut during Holi and Ramnavami. “Our Ram is peaceful,” said TMC MP Partha Bhowmick, stressing that TMC leaders had always been part of such rallies. “The BJP wants to impose a foreign culture that teaches children to wield swords.”



Even as this year’s Ramnavami passed without incident, earlier years have provided enough of a volatile record: communal unrest erupted in Raniganj in 2018, in Asansol in 2019, in Howrah in 2022 and 2023, and in Murshidabad just last year.

ANALYSTS SAY THAT THE BJP, EMBOLDENED BY ITS 38.73 PER CENT VOTE SHARE IN 2024, IS AIMING FOR A 7-8 PER CENT SWING IN 2026. THE INCREASED TURNOUT OF HINDU VOTERS IS KEY TO ITS REALISATION

LARISE BENGAL

Hindu votes through the politics of temples and festivals

TMC

► TMC leaders are organising and participating in Ramnavami and Hanuman Jayanti rallies

► TMC-run municipalities in Nabadweep and Purulia urge closure of meat shops during Holi, Ramnavami

► Answering BJP's charges of being 'anti-Hindu', TMC chief Mamata Banerjee has repeatedly asserted her Hindu Brahmin identity

► Mamata Banerjee to inaugurate replica of Puri's Jagannath temple in

Digha on April 30

► Kolkata's Kali-ghat temple to be renovated; a sky-walk connecting it inaugurated

► Ganga aarti taking place along Hooghly, modelled after the one in Varanasi



A COMMUNAL CAULDRON

West Bengal Chief Minister and TMC chief Mamata Banerjee has long been walking a political tightrope. While she prominently celebrates festivals like Durga Puja and Chhath Puja, she is equally visible championing welfare schemes for Muslims, attending Eid gatherings, and even appearing in a hijab. It's a carefully calibrated balancing act—aimed at projecting a Hindu-friendly image without alienating the crucial minority vote.

But though she is reassuring

IN THE NAME OF RAM
Trinamool members take out a Ramnavami rally in Howrah, April 6

Muslims that all is well, the party's own politicians are going off-script as politics veers toward religious majoritarianism. In March, Suvendu Adhikari declared in the assembly that he would "drag minority MLAs of the TMC on to the streets" if the BJP came to power in 2026. In response, the TMC's Humayun Kabir threatened to break Adhikari's hands if he did not apologise. "My party comes second," he said. "My community comes first." Mamata also joined the fray, asserting her Hindu identity in the house, and accusing the BJP of "importing fake Hinduism to the state". It was a preview of the ideological battle shaping up ahead of the 2026 assembly election. Among the Muslim leaders who have been accused of making incendiary statements is Mamata's cabinet colleague and Jamiat Ulema-i-Hind leader Siddiquallah Chowdhury, who threatened to bring Kolkata to a standstill in protest over the Waqf law. "This isn't politics of slogans anymore," political analyst Nirmalya Mukherjee says. "It's a high-stakes cultural war. If leaders don't tread carefully, Bengal could be staring at a bloodbath."

Signs of the dangers of communal politics showed up just a day before the Murshidabad flare-up. On April 10, a video showing Muslims protesting the Waqf Act in a rally in Kolkata purportedly asking a bus driver to remove a saffron flag, went viral. Instantly accusing the TMC of appeasement, the BJP urged Hindus to display saffron flags at their homes on Hanuman Jayanti on April 12.

Adding fuel to this already volatile situation are influential religious bodies. Recently, Pirzada Toha Siddiqui, a prominent cleric of the Hooghly-based Furfura Sharif, called for a mosque to be constructed in Digha to "balance" the temple project. His more politically active kin, Abbas and Nawshad Siddiqui—founders of the Indian Secular Front (ISF)—are set to challenge the TMC's monopoly over Muslim votes.

The RSS, too, has expanded its grassroots reach in Bengal. It is clear that unlike during the 2021 assembly polls and the 2024 Lok Sabha elections in Bengal, where the BJP won 77 (out of 294) and 12 seats (out of 42) respectively, the state unit's abysmal organisational strength will have RSS backing. Analysts say that the BJP, emboldened by its 38.73 per cent vote share in 2024, is aiming for a 7-8 per cent swing in 2026. The increased turnout of Hindu voters, bolstered by RSS and VHP mobilisation, is key to its realisation.

The cacophony of religious politics drowns the everyday concerns of the common man. There is little to address with the crisis of unemployment or the endemic corruption as evident in multiple alleged scams. The only non-religious issues to have pierced the political din are the alleged irregularities in the RG Kar rape case and the recent Supreme Court cancellation of nearly 26,000 school jobs due to widespread manipulation in the recruitment process under the West Bengal School Service Commission. Yet temples, identity and imagined historical grievances dominate the political narrative. The fire in Murshidabad was not lit in a day. Bengal's political class has sedulously stoked it over the years. ■



A JUNK FOOD EPIDEMIC

ULTRA-PROCESSED FOODS ARE NOW A DAILY STAPLE, YET THEIR SERIOUS HEALTH CONSEQUENCES REMAIN OVERLOOKED. REGULATORS AND THE GOVERNMENT HAVE TO TAKE IMMEDIATE ACTION TO CURB THIS GROWING MENACE

BY SONAL KHETARPAL



PRABHAKAR TIWARI/AI

ATIERED TIRAMISU OR A DOUBLE-PATTY CHICKEN BURGER—JUST A GLANCE CAN SET OFF CRAVINGS. That's no accident. Our brains are hardwired to seek sugar and salt, a relic of our hunter-gatherer past when such indulgences were rare but vital for survival.

But today, ultra-processed foods dominate our diets. Known as HFSS (high in fat, salt and sugar) foods—or simply junk food—they are factory-made, energy-dense and packed with additives like preservatives, sweeteners and emulsifiers—ingredients you don't typically find in home kitchens. They commonly masquerade as chocolates, sugary treats, salty snacks, beverages, ready-to-cook and ready-to-eat meals, instant noodles and ice cream. Once occasional treats, their easy reach—on kitchen shelves or through delivery

apps—have turned them into a daily habit, and a dangerously addictive one. So much so that the Supreme Court, hearing a public interest litigation on April 9, gave the Centre a three-month deadline to make labelling on packaged food stronger. The move aims to raise public awareness about food intake and encourage informed choices.

The market size of ultra-processed foods—chocolate and sugar confectionery, salty snacks, ice cream, biscuits, cold beverages, processed meat, ready-made and convenience foods, and breakfast cereals—grew at a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 10 per cent from 2019, reaching Rs 2.58 lakh crore in 2024. It is projected to rise to Rs 3.98 lakh crore by 2029, according to market research firm Euromonitor. In fact, the share of packaged (highly processed and calorie-dense) foods in household food budgets doubled from 6.5 per cent in 2015 to 12 per cent in 2019, with household spends on outside food increasing by 32 per cent, from Rs 61,900 crore in 2015 to Rs 82,000 crore in 2019 (Global Food Policy Report, 2024). The government's Household Consumption Expenditure Survey 2023-24 confirmed the trend: beverages, refreshments and processed food were the top food expenses in urban and rural households, a shift away from essential food items.

The rising consumption of HFSS foods is taking a significant toll on public health. A 2024 research paper published in *The BMJ* journal, which examined data from nearly 9.9 million people across multiple countries, linked 32 harmful health issues to consumption of ultra-processed food. These include a higher risk of cancer, obesity, hypertension, type 2 diabetes, mental health issues such as depression and sleep disorders, heart disease, chronic kidney disease (see *The Silent Threat*), leading to early death. Within the country, as research published in the journal *PLOS One* in June 2024 highlighted, the burden of lifestyle diseases has tripled since 1995, growing at a much faster rate than communicable diseases.

It's no surprise, then, that a major study—backed by the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) and the Union health ministry, and published in *The Lancet* in July 2023—found that 101 million Indians, or 11.4 per cent of the population, have diabetes. What is more concerning is that 15.3 per cent (136 million people) have prediabetes, 28.6 per cent suffer from obesity and 35.5 per cent have hypertension—all linked to rising junk food consumption. “The alarming rise in lifestyle diseases is largely driven by poor dietary habits,” says Dr R.M. Anjana, managing director of Chennai-based Dr Mohan's Diabetes Specialities Centre and lead author of the ICMR research. “The increased consumption of ultra-processed foods, which are high in calories but poor in nutrients, is leading to an obesity epidemic, which in turn becomes the causal pathway to several other metabolic disorders,” she says. The situation is worse among children. While sedentary lifestyle and stress also contribute to lifestyle diseases

among adults, unhealthy diets are the chief reason for such ailments among children and adolescents. Their junk food intake, in fact, is said to be at least three times that of adults.

The economic consequences are just as alarming. The ICMR estimates that 56.4 per cent of India's total disease burden—measured in financial costs, hospitalisation expenses and lost productivity due to illness, including sick leave from school and work—is linked to the rising consumption of junk food. However, despite the severe health risks, our regulations remain woefully short of prioritising public health over profits for industry.

According to the 2024 Global Food Policy report by the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), at least 38 per cent of Indians consumed unhealthy foods while 22 per cent didn't eat any fruits or vegetables. Several factors have driven the shift away from traditional diets. "Food choices are complex, influenced by family dynamics, with women majorly responsible for putting food on the table, socio-economic status, convenience, accessibility, affordability and the food options available in the market," explains Purnima Menon, senior director, food and nutrition policy, IFPRI. Accessibility and affordability make junk food consumption an overwhelming concern across income strata. "In fact," as Dr Hemalatha R., well-known nutritionist and director of ICMR's National Institute of Nutrition, points out, "it is a much bigger concern for poor families, who often lack access to the right knowledge and end up spending their limited resources on ultra-processed food instead of nutritious options."

TRICKING THE BRAIN

Another reason that encourages overconsumption of junk food is its hyperpalatable nature, which manufacturers achieve by leveraging science. Does the vanilla ice cream you love contain natural vanilla? Not really. It's actually made with lab-engineered chemicals from flavour makers. "The science of using flavour molecules—seen in packaged foods as 'added flavours'—has grown exponentially over the past few decades," says Prof. Ganesh Bagler at IIIT (Indraprastha Institute of Information Technology), Delhi, a researcher in the field of computational gastronomy. "These artificial flavours, far cheaper than natural products, trick the brain into thinking they are eating something nutritious, like a mango drink with real mangoes when in reality, it's just a soda with an artificial mango flavour." Hence, junk food addiction isn't just about habit or preference—it involves complex biochemical reactions in the brain and body. High levels of sugar, fat and refined flour further enhance its addictive nature. These foods are addictive because excessive consumption alters the gut microbiome, affecting several hormonal pathways in the body, says Dr Piyush Ranjan, vice-chairperson of the Institute of Liver Gastroenterology at Delhi-based Sir Ganga Ram Hospital.

THE JUNK TAKEOVER

Labelled as HFSS (high in fat, salt, and sugar) foods, junk food has become a pervasive part of daily life—yet its impact is alarmingly harmful

The Instant Gratification Boom

A culture of convenience has led to a surge in the consumption of foods loaded with preservatives and sweeteners over the past four years

SALES GROWTH

(2021 to 2024)



Source: Worldpanel's monthly purchase track of about 85,000 households representative of India

“The increased consumption of ultra-processed foods, which are high in calories but poor in nutrients, is leading to an obesity epidemic, which in turn becomes the causal pathway to several other metabolic disorders”

DR R.M. ANJANA

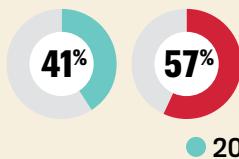
MD, Dr Mohan's Diabetes Specialities Centre, Chennai

For instance, an excessive presence of sugar or fructose increases blood sugar levels, leading to the release of dopamine, a pleasure neurotransmitter. When dopamine floods the brain's reward centre, it creates a sense of pleasure. Over time, this pleasurable sensation turns into a habit and, eventually, an addiction. That's why one needs more junk food to experience the same level of pleasure. This process

The Snack Nation

More Indians show a growing preference for fried foods and packaged snacks over nutrition

Preference for fried food despite knowing its harmful effects on health



● 2019 ● 2024

Source: TGI Consumer Analysis 2024, 50,219 respondents from urban India

Preference to eat snacks on the go rather than a proper meal

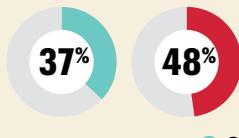
resistance—making it harder for the body to recognise when it is full. Meanwhile, since ghrelin remains high, a person is likely to overeat, creating a vicious cycle that leads to obesity and other hormonal imbalances, he says.

The unfortunate truth, IFPRI's Menon adds, is that the food industry, and particularly its food marketers, have understood what public health research hasn't—how individuals make food choices. They exploit this knowledge to promote, market and sell unhealthy foods. Nothing exemplifies this better than instant noodles. When launched in India, they were positioned as a convenient, affordable evening snack for mothers to prepare quickly. The brand's messaging resonated with housewives seeking a balance between convenience and the desire to make something within minutes for their children.

Little Junk Lovers

More Gen Alpha kids are choosing junk food over home-cooked meals

Since we eat nutritious food at home, we should get junk food for mid-day snack

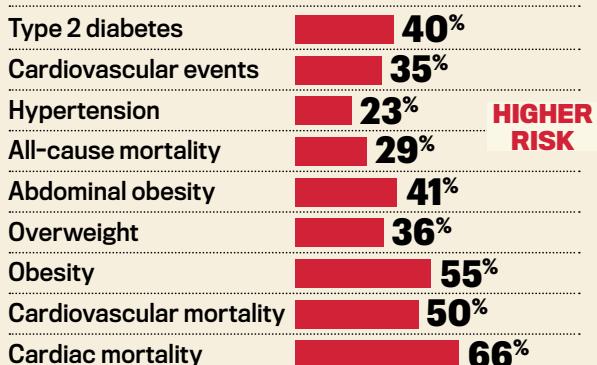


● 2017 ● 2024

Source: Kantar's Kidscan survey of 2,450 kids aged 5-14 years and equal number of parents spread across 14 Indian cities

Silent Threat

The consumption of ultra-processed foods is linked to an increased risk of 32 health issues



Source: The BMJ, 2023

Graphic by TANMOY CHAKRABORTY

is similar to how addictive substances like nicotine or drugs work, explains Dr Ranjan.

Similarly, junk food consumption interferes with hunger-regulating hormones. After a meal, hormones like ghrelin (which signals hunger) and leptin (which signals fullness) are produced in the stomach. Ultra-processed foods contain artificial additives, high fat and sugar, which can cause leptin

CRISIS OF QUALITY

As a result, says health influencer Revant Himatsingka, who goes by the handle FoodPharmer on social media, Indians are not just eating more junk food, but they are eating the worst kind. In 2019, a study published in the University of Oxford's *Obesity Reviews* found that packaged foods and drinks available in India are the least healthy among the 12 countries analysed (including the US, Australia and China) with high levels of saturated fat, sugar and salt.

In fact, the global nonprofit Access to Nutrition Initiative (ATNi) calls out major FMCG companies, including Nestlé, PepsiCo and Unilever, for selling less healthy products in low- and middle-income countries, including India, compared to what they sell in high-income countries. Its report dived into 1,901 products from 20 companies that constituted 36 per cent of the total sales (FY21) of processed food and beverage in India. However, Inoshi Sharma, executive director, Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI), disputes these findings, arguing that "the ATNi report is completely wrong as the companies are not violating our regulations. For instance, if Nestle is putting sugar in the baby food in India, it is as per our norms here."

While the ATNi report didn't name the products, Himatsingka identified some of them. For instance, he alleged, Nestle's KitKat sold in Australia contains at least 22 per cent cocoa, whereas in India, it has only 4.4 per cent. Similarly, he claimed that the classic salted variant of PepsiCo's Lay's potato chips is made with cheaper palm oil in India, which has high saturated fat, whereas in Europe and the US, it is made with sunflower oil. Nestle India spokesperson says they apply the same principles on nutrition, health and wellness everywhere. "All our products are nutritionally balanced and adhere to the guidelines defined by the concerned authorities. The difference in formulation of products can be attributed to factors such as taste sensitivities, weather conditions and availability of raw materials." The company claims that

it has reduced added sugar in Cerelac by up to 30 per cent over the past five years and also introduced a variant of the baby food with no refined sugar. While Lay's India has stated that it is doing trials to reduce palm oil in its product, PepsiCo didn't comment for this story. Confectionery major Mars also declined to comment. "As of now, according to FSSAI, there is no clear definition of HFSS foods; it is currently at the debate stage," says Sharma. "That's exactly why it becomes difficult to say the work FSSAI has done on HFSS foods."

THE PRICE FACTOR

Why do companies have different products in each country? The reason is pure economics, says Arvind Singhal, founder chairman of management consultancy Technopak Advisors. He says companies have to ensure the product sells in a market and is accepted by the consumers at the price point offered. "Price is a key factor when launching a product because anything that will price the product out of the belly of the market will mean that you will be restricting your ability to operate in the market," says a former regional director with Hindustan Unilever Limited, who did not want to be named. Hence, product ingredients are always a combination of three factors: price, taste and quality, he explains, adding that the product should also enable the firm to earn the turnover it has envisaged from the product category. However, FMCG companies aren't necessarily making exorbitant profits. Established players typically have a gross margin of 50-60 per cent, meaning production costs account for around 40 per cent—a standard across the global industry. "Usually, FMCG companies operate on thin margins, focusing on mass-market products, as they rely on volume, given that consumers are highly price-sensitive," he says.

So, what is the way forward? For one, the government can regulate the production of foods to ensure healthier options are available in the market. For example, salt and sugar are among the cheapest raw materials in India. "In our country, salt comes from the sea and sugar from subsidy. The government needs to link incentives like subsidies and taxes to nutrition to move the market towards production of healthier products," says Arpita Mukherjee, professor at ICRIER.

But manufacturers have no incentive to innovate on healthier variants, due to high tax. For instance, all carbonated beverages—whether traditional flavoured drinks or their low-sugar, fruit-based variants—are taxed at a standard 28 per cent GST plus a 12 per cent compensation cess, totalling 40 per cent. "As a food regulator," Sharma says, "we establish regulations and standards for the production and manufacturing of safe and hygienic food." Stressing that banning the sale or issuing advisories on food choices is not within the FSSAI's purview, she notes their Eat Right India campaign aims to improve public health through better food choices.



“Food choices are driven by several factors, including family dynamics with women majorly responsible for putting food on the table, socio-economic status, convenience, accessibility, affordability and also what food options are available in the market”

PURNIMA MENON

Senior Director, Food and Nutrition Policy, IFPRI

MISLEADING LABELS

Any real solution must also reckon with how food is marketed and sold. The World Health Organization recommends clear front-of-pack nutrition labelling (FOPNL) norms to ensure everyone understands the nutrition information and makes informed choices about their consumption. Ironically, India has been in the process of drafting the FOPNL norms since 2014. "Several recommendations have been made, but they have been watered down by FSSAI due to pushback from the industry, leading to a stalemate," says Dr Arun Gupta, convenor of National Advocacy in Public Interest (NAPI), a think-tank on nutrition. It was only in September 2022 that an FOPNL draft was introduced, proposing an Indian Nutrition Rating (INR) model or Health Star Rating—a front-of-pack labelling system that rates the overall nutritional profile of food from half a star to 5 stars.

Health activists, however, argue that this system favours the industry over consumers, as it does not warn about harmful ingredients like high salt or sugar. Over 14,000 public comments have been submitted on this draft. George Cherian, working president of the Consumers Protection Association, suggests that warning labels like those used in Chile, where excess calories,

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SHIELDING CONSUMERS

Accessible, affordable and addictive-junk food consumption is rising. Strong regulations can help curb it

► **To cut costs, companies in India use cheaper ingredients in junk food than those in developed countries, making it even unhealthier. Define HFSS foods clearly and enforce strict nutrient thresholds for salt, sugar and saturated fat**

► **Mandate front-of-pack labels to clearly display sugar, salt and fat content**

► **Restrict HFSS food ads on TV and digital platforms from 6 am to 10 pm, especially targeting children under 18**

► **Tax junk foods heavily to discourage consumption and incentivise healthier alternatives**

► **Keep the food industry out of HFSS policy decisions, similar to the Tobacco Treaty's restrictions on tobacco companies**

► **Ban ultra-processed foods in schools, hospitals and public service areas through government directives**

sugar and fat are displayed in large black octagons on food packages, are required for India, where literacy levels are low and language barriers abound. Thus, warning labels should be in the form of symbols or emojis—just like red and green dots for non-vegetarian and vegetarian food items, respectively.

In India, nutritional information along with an ingredients list is mandatory, but this is useless as consumers can't make sense of technical information, says Dr Gupta of NAPI. During the Supreme Court hearing, Justice J.B. Pardiwala highlighted the lack of transparency on nutritional information on food wrappers: "You all have grandchildren? Let the order on petition come. You will know what Kurkure and Maggi are and how their wrappers should be. The packets have no information."

Studies have shown consumers spend as little as 10 seconds selecting food items; hence, the current labelling system doesn't protect public health interests, Gupta argues. Take the case of Bournvita, which was sold as a 'health drink' for decades despite its high sugar content. Many countries, especially in Latin America, such as Chile, Mexico and Brazil, have

THE BIG STORY

HEALTH

adopted FOPNL policies with much success.

A study published in *PLOS Medicine*, which tracked the purchasing habits of 2,000 households, showed that 18 months after Chile implemented the Law of Food Labelling and Advertising in 2016—which included banning ads for unhealthy products between 6 am and 10 pm, bold warning labels on the front of the package and a ban on junk food in schools—consumption of sugar-sweetened drinks dropped nearly 25 per cent. In 2014, the country had raised the tax on sugary beverages to 18 per cent from 13 per cent. As a result, companies reformulated their products to bypass warning labels on packaging. Since then, Peru, Uruguay and Israel have adopted Chilean-style front-of-package labels.

THE POWER OF MARKETING

Consumers face an increasing onslaught of advertising for junk food, positioning it as cool and aspirational. This is done through offering freebies, making emotional appeals, false health claims or endorsements by Bollywood actors, and sports stars market the products ('so finger lickin' good that you can't stop at one' or 'Betcha Can't Eat Just One'). Studies have shown how the 'pester power' of marketing influences choice, preference and purchase decisions.

Himatsingka shares an instance from his visit to a school in Mumbai for the campaign 'Canteen Sudharega India'. A student came up to him and proudly told him that he had stopped drinking cola beverages but had instead moved to Sprite and Limca because "woh clear hai". He was actually linking Sprite's marketing tagline 'Clear Hai' with its nutrition quotient. Many such examples show miscommunication through advertising, he says. The 2024 NAPI report 'The Junk Push', which analysed 43 advertisements for pre-packaged foods, found that every product was ultra-processed. None of the advertisements provided information on nutrients of concern—sugar, salt and saturated fat. Of these, 25 were marketed using celebrities, 12 featured children and eight made health claims.

Many countries have started to reduce and restrict this kind of marketing. The UK, in December 2024, passed legislation banning junk food ads on television and online between 5.30 am and 9 pm, which will take effect in October 2025. There is no reason why India can't put warning labels like Mexico and Chile or ban junk food advertisements as the UK is doing. The government has been making concerted efforts to promote healthy foods and an active lifestyle by implementing initiatives such as Eat Right India and the Fit India Movement. However, the food regulator FSSAI needs to look at the issue holistically—from the consumption patterns of families to what is entering the market to how it is packaged, labelled, marketed and sold.

Packaged food is here to stay as consumers increasingly opt for convenience due to their busy schedules. But there is no reason why FSSAI cannot tighten norms to safeguard the health of the country's 1.5 billion citizens. ■

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LEISURE

THE FEAR FACTOR

Soha Ali Khan tests her mettle
as an actor in her role as Daasi
Maa in Prime Video's horror
flick *Chhorii 2*



S

LEISURE

Since making her Hindi acting debut with *Dil Maange More* in 2004, Soha Ali Khan has played a variety of roles: a black-and-white era actress, an international studies student mourning the sudden death of her fiancé, and so on. Whether it was due to the film industry's limited imagination or the result of being typecast, the actor never ended up playing an antagonist. It took her almost two decades to tick that off

her bucket list.

In Vishal Furia's *Chhorii 2*—a sequel to the 2021 horror film—that released on Prime Video this month, Khan goes a step beyond being an antagonist, playing the most menacing character of her career. When the script came her way, Khan had already watched *Chhorii*, which revolved around a pregnant woman (played by Nushrratt Bharuccha) tasked with saving her unborn child from evil spirits. The 46-year-old resonated with the social messaging embedded in the fabric of the film. "What drew me to the film was the way it blended atmospheric horror with folklore," Khan tells INDIA

TODAY. She found the script for the sequel equally compelling, "I could imagine the eerie background music when Vishal narrated it to me."

By her own admission, the decision to join *Chhorii 2*—which picks up the action seven years later—as the sinister Daasi Maa, was a no-brainer. It helped that Khan was an avid horror fan and saw in the film an opportunity to test her mettle as an actor. Still, she didn't account for the fact that her transformation into Daasi Maa would prove to be a physically demanding affair. "At one point on set, I remember feeling glad that I had been going to the gym because there was a lot of core strength that I had to employ to balance myself. I was often dressed up in a thick black material with my hands bound and then suspended from the ceiling to give the illusion of Daasi Maa flying or moving through space very quickly in a limbless form."

Indeed, the genre is known to be unsettling and provocative. When done well, horror films can possess the kind of terrifying profundity that tends to stay with you much longer than other films. Khan agrees with the assessment. "They can really invade your mental space and wake you up in the middle of the night. So, I feel that if you want to make an impact as an actor, what better way to do that than through horror?"

That's not to suggest that Khan is an actor prone to making calculated moves. *Chhorii 2*, for instance, marks the actor's return to Hindi film after six years. But the milestone doesn't appear to mean much to her. The way she explains her absence from movies is that she is not one to put on herself the need to have three or four releases a year. "It's also because I enjoy my life and the different roles that I play in it." Being a professional actor, Khan underlines, is just one part of her life, not her entire life. "If I don't

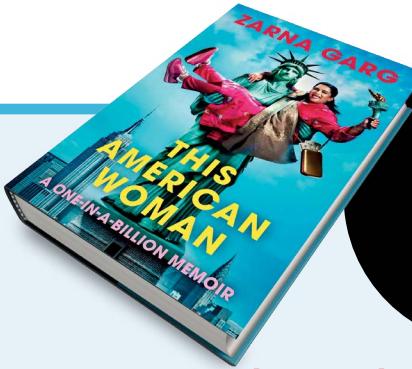


like what I'm doing, I would much rather not do anything and focus on something else. For me, there are always other things to do as opposed to working for the sake of working."

Khan points to her memoir *The Perils of Being Moderately Famous*, which was published in 2017, which she says she started writing just to find something to do. In the years since, the actor has written another children's book, turned it into an audiobook, and is currently working on a podcast along with getting in the thick of producing projects with her actor-director husband Kunal Kemmu.

Even her decision to make her digital debut with two web-series in 2022—*Hush Hush* and *Kaun Banegi Shikharwati*—stemmed from the fact that motherhood didn't seem to demand her single-minded focus now that her daughter was growing up. "I understand that not everyone might have this luxury but at this point in my life, I feel fortunate that I get to work only out of passion and out of what excites me." ■

-Poulomi Das



THIS AMERICAN WOMAN: A One-In-A-Billion Memoir
By Zarna Garg
BALLANTINE BOOKS
\$30; 320
pages

BOOKS

COMIC BELIEF

Indian-American comedian **Zarna Garg** on making her acting debut in the new Hollywood film *A Nice Indian Boy* and writing her memoir

Comedian and podcaster Zarna Garg had a moment of self-doubt when director Roshan Sethi offered her a role in the queer, interracial romcom *A Nice Indian Boy*. After all, she had never acted on screen before. "He then told me not to worry. This was the role of a mother who had to be disappointed in her husband and kids. I immediately knew I could do this better than anybody else. Sit down, Meryl Streep because I've got this," says Garg in her trademark deadpan style.

Based on a play by Madhuri Shekar, *A Nice Indian Boy* is the story of an Indian boy who brings his white American fiancé to meet his desi parents. This ode to *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* also stars Karan Soni and Jonathan Groff. Garg describes her character Megha Gavaskar, mother to Soni's Naveen, as an "overbearing desi mother".

"Overbearing in the American context because there, parents are expected to be hands-off while any Indian mother will see her and immediately recognise herself in the character," adds the 50-year-old. The character is an extension of Garg's comedic persona, one that's rooted in the quirks of being an Indian mother living the American life.

Garg's ascent to fame after winning Kevin Hart's 2021 comedy competition, *Lyft Comics*, has been fast and furious. She has performed at historic venues like the Kennedy Center, had a stand-up special on Prime Video and opened for

Garg's ascent to fame after winning Kevin Hart's 2021 comedy contest, *Lyft Comics*, has been fast and furious



Tina Fey and Amy Poehler's *Restless Leg Tour*. But she has mostly worked alone and once Garg landed on the sets of *A Nice Indian Boy*, she realised just how different movie-making is. "It was a revelation just how collaborative the process is. I am very grateful to have worked with not just people I like but also trust." In the predominantly South Asian cast and crew, Groff—whose credits include voicing Kristoff in the animated musical

Frozen and playing a serial-killer profiler in *Mindhunter*—fit right in. "On the first day when all of us met for the first time, he very honestly said 'I don't know much about your culture' and by the time filming ended, he was almost Indian."

Being a consummate multi-tasker means that Garg also has a memoir—*This American Woman*—releasing at the end of April. The book chronicles her life from moving to the US as a teenager after the death of her mother to the wildly unexpected career in show business. "I am often asked, specially by women of my age, about how I got here. And, very often I can see that they feel stuck and don't know what to do, having spent decades bearing and raising children. So, I thought why not answer this in a book." This became such a passion project that Garg put other projects on hold to tell this story. "At a time when the whole world looks like it's on fire...if I can offer hope to somebody and make them believe in themselves, then I feel like I owe it to the universe because the universe has been so kind to me." Later this year, her second comedy special *Practical People Win* will drop on JioHotstar. She also has a sitcom based on her comedic material and themes, co-produced by Mindy Kaling and Kevin Hart, in the works. ■

-Karishma Upadhyay



TAKING ART TO NEW HEIGHTS

EXHIBITION

The extensive art collection of **Air India** gets a comprehensive showcase at NGMA Bengaluru

At the crossroads of aviation history and artistic heritage stands *Sanhitha—New Beginning for the Air India Collection*, an ambitious exhibition on for the next few months at the National Gallery of Modern Art (NGMA), Bengaluru. Curated by Subarna Patro and Darshan Kumar YU, this show is far more than a retrospective—it is a cultural reckoning, a reimagining of six decades of modern Indian art through the unique prism of one of India's most iconic institutions: Air India.

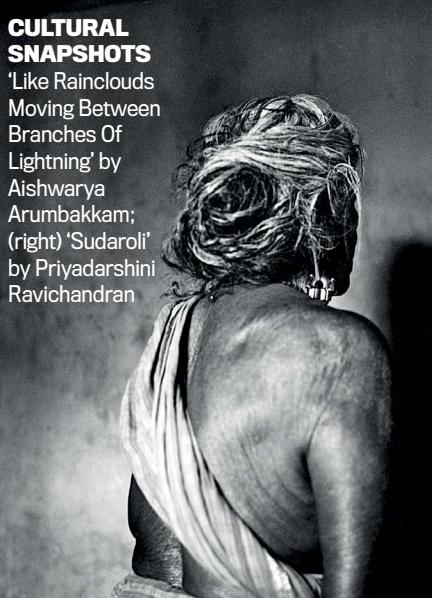
Founded in 1947 by J.R.D. Tata, Air India has long symbolised progress and cosmopolitan flair. Less widely known, however, is the airline's pivotal role as a patron of modern

Indian art. In a post-Independence landscape with limited institutional support, Air India pioneered a visionary model—placing art in booking offices, lounges and aircraft. Through thoughtful acquisitions and bold commissions, the airline helped forge a vibrant visual identity for a newly sovereign nation—now preserved within the NGMA's historic walls.

What began with a few portraits of rural women, exchanged for air tickets, evolved into one of India's most eclectic corporate collections. M.F. Husain famously bartered paintings for global travel on Air India flights—a testament to the airline's belief in artistic exchange over commercial value.

"Curating the Air India Collection involves balancing modern and tradi-

LEISURE



CULTURAL SNAPSHOTS

'Like Rainclouds Moving Between Branches Of Lightning' by Aishwarya Arumbakkam; (right) 'Sudaroli' by Priyadarshini Ravichandran



PHOTOGRAPHY

Documenting the Tamil Experience

Vaanyerum Vizhuthugal, an evocative exhibition, reimagines the possibilities of photographic storytelling

From April 19 to July 20, the Museum of Art & Photography (MAP), Bengaluru, presents *Vaanyerum Vizhuthugal: Roots That Reach for the Sky*—its first group exhibition dedicated to contemporary photography and lens-based practices. Curated by self-taught artist Jaisalingh Nageswaran, this evocative show features 12 Tamil-origin artists whose works reimagine

the possibilities of photographic storytelling.

First shown as part of the Chennai Photo Biennale 2024–2025, *Vaanyerum Vizhuthugal* poetically translates from Tamil as 'Roots That Reach for the Sky'. "Usually, roots grow downward into the soil," says Nageswaran. "But in this case, metaphorically, the roots reach toward the sky. That inversion inspired me—it comes from



PERFECT LANDING

Paintings and sculptures, once part of Air India's famed collection, being showcased at an ongoing exhibition; (left) an airplane sculpture at the entrance

tional Indian art," explains Patro. "The narrative highlights iconic and lesser-known artists, weaving traditional symbolism with modern experimentation." The result is a layered archive, showcasing the Progressive Artists' Group—Raza, Souza, Ara—alongside miniature paintings, Thanjavur glass works, antique bronzes, Kalamkari textiles, lithographs and Lala Deen Dayal's studio photography. This fusion of tradition and modernity lies at the heart of *Sanhitha*.

The visitor experience is immersive. The NGMA heritage building is reimagined with a colour palette inspired by vintage Air India motifs. Architectural elements like *jharokhas*—Mughal-style balconies—serve as storytelling devices, while two airplane sculptures at the entrance and exit frame the journey: one symbolising history, the other legacy. "The key was to reflect Air India's evolving identity while also resonating with broader cultural trends," says Darshan.

The exhibition unfolds like a travelogue: Salvador Dalí's surreal 'Ashtray'

Curated by
Subarna Patro and
Darshan Kumar
YU, this show is
far more than a
retrospective—it is
a cultural reckoning

(famously traded for a baby elephant), Mario Miranda's office-themed illustrations, and quirky memorabilia such as coasters, postcards and storybooks. A mid-century 'smoking lounge' vignette captures the glamour of early air travel.

The show pays homage to modern masters—Husain, Prabha, B. Vithal—while also spotlighting women artists like Kanchan Chandra, Anjolie Ela Menon, Arpana Caur and Piloo Pochkhanawala. Regional movements such as the Madras Art Movement (Vasudeva, Bhaskaran) appear alongside folk metal sculptures, Gaitonde's abstractions, and Sakti Burman's layered prints. The message is clear: Indian art is a diverse confluence, not a monolith.

In an age of fleeting attention and fractured narratives, this exhibition invites us to pause and look back—not with nostalgia, but with clarity and pride. It reminds us that art is not merely decorative, but profoundly political and powerfully personal. And it honours an airline whose wings carried more than passengers—they carried a nation's imagination. ■

-Nikhil Sardana

the contemporary Tamil poet Muthu Kumara Raja." Through this lens, the exhibition traces Tamil identity in its layered, diasporic and politically charged complexity.

Rejecting simplified or singular narratives, the exhibition embraces multiplicity—of experience, memory and emotion. Visitors encounter deeply personal visual languages that explore queer desire, kinship, migration, grief, trauma and healing. "Tamil identity is so layered—it can't be captured through one image, or one artist," notes Nageswaran. "That's why I chose 12 dif-

FEATURING 12 TAMIL-ORIGIN ARTISTS, THE EXHIBITION WILL BE ON DISPLAY AT THE MUSEUM OF ART & PHOTOGRAPHY, BENGALURU, FROM APRIL 19 TO JULY 20

ferent voices for this show. Together, they form a kind of collective portrait—one that's still in flux."

The line-up includes Aishwarya Arumbakkam, whose practice spans photography, filmmaking and

drawing; Alina Tiphagne, whose assemblages of text and image explore familial and queer histories; and Arun Karthick, whose acclaimed film *Nasir* brought Tamillife to global screens. Artists like Brindha Anantharaman and Osheen Siva engage with gender, mental health and Dalit futurism, while others such as Krithika Sriram and Priyadarshini Ravichandran explore identity politics and the feminine relationship to land.

Nageswaran's curatorial approach is grounded in his own background growing up in Madurai

and years of documenting personal and familial histories. "From the beginning, I didn't want this to be a show of only photo prints—I envisioned something more layered, a curatorial framework that reflects multiplicity," he says of the exhibition which is a collaborative project by the Goethe-Institut Chennai and the Chennai Photo Biennale.

In inviting viewers to contemplate identity, and belonging, the show offers both a mirror and a window—rooted in Tamil experience yet expansive in its reach. ■

-Nikhil Sardana

RISING STAR

Hailing from a family of wrestlers, hockey player **Deepika** took the path less travelled—and is finally enjoying her moment in the sun

In

the sporting world, we know that Haryanvi girls can land a mean punch (Sawetty Boora), can outmanoeuvre on the mat (Sakshi Malik) and shoot their way to Olympic glory (Manu Bhaker). But score from a penalty corner in hockey? That's Deepika, the 21-year-old rising star of women's hockey. The drag flicker is on cloud nine, having won Hockey India's Asunta Lakra award for upcoming player of the year 2024 (Women Under-21) after being the top goalscorer and best player at two 2024 tournaments: Bihar Women's Asian Champions Trophy and Women's Junior Asia Cup held in Oman. Belonging to a family of wrestlers, Deepika started off by following her older brother to the mat at Sports Authority of India's facility in Hisar. But her heart lay in hockey, which she would encounter there. After a year and a half watching from the sidelines, she made up her mind: "I told my

father 'Mujhe hockey mein hi jaana hai. Hockey nahin toh kuchh nahin khelna' [I want to play only hockey, if not hockey, then I won't

Last year was
Deepika's best.
The FORWARD
WOWED ALL
WITH her pace
and precision

play any sport,'" The ultimatum was dismissed as childhood rebellion and indulged. "They [family] thought that I'd get over it and grow up and come back to wrestling," she adds. Only 11 then, Deepika was deemed too young, but compelled her father to convince the coach, Azad Singh Malik. A return to wrestling was soon forgotten as Deepika quickly rose through the state and junior ranks to get called in the senior team in 2022. It's 2024, though, which has been the breakthrough year for the forward, having wowed all with her pace and precision. Deepika admits that expectations and pressures have risen, but so has her innate hunger to match



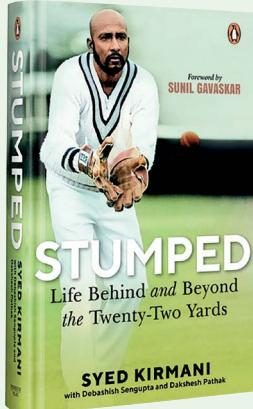
up to them and improve her game. "There's a big responsibility now from both team and country. I intend to work hard so everyone feels proud," she says. "Good thing is my teammates support and motivate me, as ups and downs are part and parcel of the game." An integral part of the team, her goals include preparing for the Pro League and the Asia Cup this year as well win the Asian Games gold and finish on the podium for the World Cup next year.

As the only girl in the extended family to take sport as a career, Deepika is grateful for her father's backing. She has "Laado" inked on her arm, her family's term of endearment for her. While there wasn't a Dangal-like standoff, there were questions over putting his only daughter into sport.

"There was no discrimination," she says. "He was like 'jo achchha lage tum karo' [Do as you please]."

Deepika hopes that her exploits and those of her Haryanvi teammate and idol Savita Punia inspire more girls to pick up the stick. Says Deepika, "You can see a change in Haryana, there's rising interest and girls are being encouraged. But in some villages, the mindset still needs to change." Her rampage of goals may just do the trick. ■

-Suhani Singh



STUMPED
By **Syed Kirmani**
PENGUIN PLAY
Rs 499; 272 pages

BOOKS

A Gentleman and His Game

Stumped is Syed Kirmani's candid memoir of the highs and lows of a memorable cricketing career

The distinct shiny pate and the handlebar moustache; the resolute stand against Zimbabwe alongside Kapil Dev that kept India in the hunt at the 1983 World Cup. The long wait for his India debut, the baffling omissions during his prime, a forgettable Bollywood stint. And an unceremonious exit from the national team. The good and the bad featured in equal measure in Syed Kirmani's life. It's what makes his account in *Stumped*, co-authored by Debashish Sengupta and Dakshesh Pathak, an engrossing read.

An all-round athlete, Kirmani could have excelled at any sport. But cricket is what had his attention since the age of six, the youngest of the Jayamahal locality boys in Bangalore and so the default choice to stand behind the wickets. Those early lessons served him well and his progress was meteoric. In four years, he went from the Mysore state school team to feature in the Ranji Trophy, and

three years later during the 1970-71 season, was picked for India.

A lesson in the art of patience followed. Each time he was picked here on, he sat on the sidelines as an understudy to the established Farokh Engineer. It took five long years after that initial selection for him to make his India debut.

Kirmani's final comeback after 1986 ended dismally. He persevered in domestic cricket till he was 45



And Kirmani was ready. He announced his arrival with a record to his name during his debut series against New Zealand. Here on, the middle-order batsman contributed with vital knocks and put on slick displays behind the stumps, equally at ease while keeping to the gifted spin quartet of Chandrasekhar, Bedi, Prasanna and Venkata-

raghavan, as to the raw pace of Kapil Dev.

For all his abilities, Kirmani was dropped from the Indian team time and again. After the high of the World Cup triumph, a final comeback in 1986 ended dismally following an 'injury' and he was sidelined for good. Kirmani remained hopeful and persevered on the domestic front until the age of 45, collecting the express deliveries of young guns like Javagal Srinath and David Johnson. Until one day, he just didn't feel the fight in him anymore and put away his gloves.

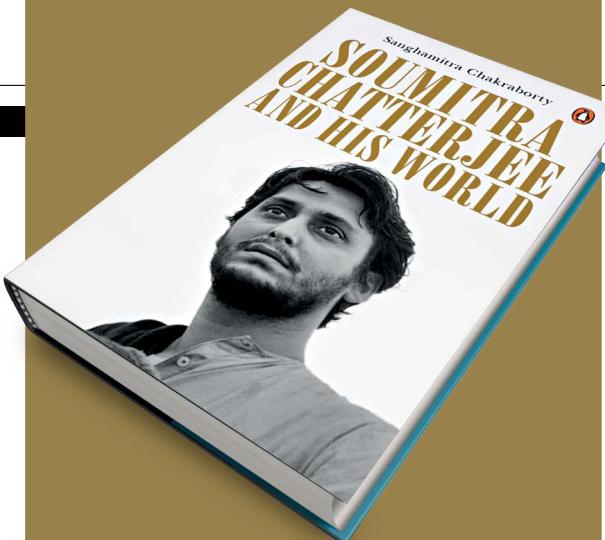
His farewell was as forgettable as his days as an administrator. While Kirmani regales with tales of his humble beginnings and of the mighty West Indies of the late 1970s and brings to life anecdotes from the Indian dressing room, there's a sense of despondency in the narrative on what might have been. And perhaps closure after making a clean breast of it all. ■

-Shail Desai

S

Since his death in 2020, there has been a spate of biographies attempting to chronicle the life and work of Soumitra Chatterjee. Not surprising, given he was an inseparable part of Bengali culture over a career spanning 60 years. His oeuvre included critically acclaimed films like *Apur Sansar* (1959) and *Ghare-Baire* (1984) to hits like *Teen Bhubaner Pare* (1969) and *Bela Seshe* (2015). Chatterjee's contributions, though, went far beyond films. A true polymath, Chatterjee also excelled as a playwright, poet, painter and essayist. Apart from editing the reputed literary magazine *Ekshan*, the actor also had a collection of his plays published in three volumes and had over a dozen poetry titles to his credit. It's not easy for a biographer to do justice to such a prolific subject, but author and journalist Sanghamitra Chakraborty manages just that, to give us the definitive account of his extraordinary life in her mammoth *Soumitra Chatterjee and His World*.

Chakraborty follows a chronological order while telling Chatterjee's story, starting with his childhood before tracing his journey into acting. As expected, his collaborations with Satyajit Ray form a substantial part of the book, pulling into focus the amount of work



SOUMITRA CHATTERJEE AND HIS WORLD
by Sanghamitra Chakraborty
PENGUIN/VINTAGE
₹999; 512 pages

BOOKS

Cinema's Renaissance Man

SANGHAMITRA CHAKRABORTY'S DEEPLY RESEARCHED BIOGRAPHY EXPLORES THE LIFE AND LEGACY OF SOUMITRA CHATTERJEE

both artists put into each of their works. She reveals that during the making of *Apur Sansar*, the actor kept a journal in which he imagined what Apu would do between the scenes Ray had written—"a sort of a biography of Apu in the form of a diary". They made 14 films together, including bringing to screen the iconic detective Feluda in *Sonar Kella* (1971) and *Joi Baba Felunath* (1979).

While the actor's love and admiration for Ray was unquestionable, he did detest the assumption that he was

the filmmaker's "puppet". Chakraborty also examines the actor's work with greats like Mrinal Sen and Tapan Sinha while acknowledging those films in his filmography that left his fans befuddled. She takes a nuanced look at the turmoil in his personal life and his growing concerns about

Chatterjee loved and admired Ray, but he detested the assumption that he was the filmmaker's 'puppet'

the rise of religious intolerance. There are nuggets of information that stand out—his resemblance to a young Tagore played a part in his casting in *Devi* (1960) or the friendship between Chatterjee and fellow actor Uttam Kumar. The duo were often pitted as rivals but were friends from the moment they met on the sets of *Jhinder Bondi* (1961). And, in his later years, after many of his longtime friends and collaborators had passed on, Chatterjee found solace in art, especially doodling.

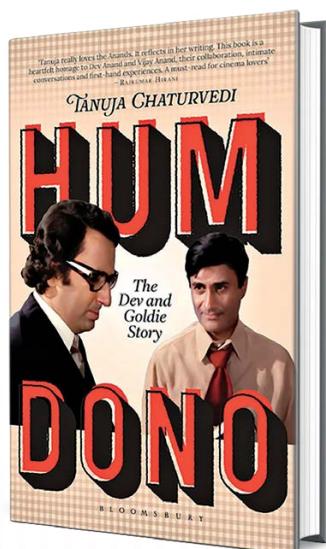
Across 10 sections and with a foreword by Sharmila Tagore (who debuted as Aparna to his Apu in *Apur Sansar*), Chakraborty doesn't just chronicle his life but often zooms out to place his life in the macro context of 20th- and 21st-century Bengal. She writes about how living through the 1943 Bengal famine, Partition and the Naxal movement shaped him. Along with his family, there were three people—his idol Tagore, the thespian and pioneer of modern Bengali theatre Sisir Kumar Bhaduri, and Satyajit Ray—who had a profound impact on Chatterjee. She weaves his writings—essays, diaries and poetry—along with his interviews and those with his colleagues to capture the essence of one of India's most remarkable artistes. This biography is not just for Bengalis or cinephiles who knew his works but also for those just starting to discover them. ■

—Karishma Upadhyay



Takes Two To Tango

*This tribute to the Anand brothers **Dev and Vijay** combines unbridled fandom with detailed film analysis*



HUM DONO
The Dev and Goldie Story
by Tanuja Chaturvedi
BLOOMSBURY
₹699; 192 pages

A large number of Indian cinema publications are anecdote-driven or based on salacious behind-the-scenes stories. Occasionally, though, a book is written with such care and attention to detail that it makes you want to drop everything and head straight to the films being discussed—so you can savour what the author saw in them, or disagree with her, or both at the same time. Tanuja Chaturvedi's *Hum Dono*—a "guru-dakshina" for Vijay (also known as Goldie) and Dev Anand and the classics they made together—is in this category.

Chaturvedi's relationship with the Anand brothers' Navketan Films began in childhood (she got to meet Dev Anand at age five, an overwhelming experience for a girl who had only watched the charismatic star on the big screen), but took a new shape at the Film and Television Institute of India (FTII) where she learnt to appreciate Vijay Anand's technical proficiency and "command over every aspect of filmmaking". This was followed by a professional stint as Dev Anand's chief assistant director.

Every facet of this long-lasting bond is represented here. The book has two dominant tones. One is that of the awestruck fan: the child who was rapt while watching films like *Guide*, as well as the adult who retained her passion for the Navketan flair, the songs, the modern approach to city life. The second tone, more pedantic, is that of the scholar and

practitioner who knows a great deal about film history and likes to show off this knowledge, making references and connections that may seem whimsical or pretentious to a casual reader: from Camille Paglia's take on the differences between men and women (in the context of gender roles in the 1961 film *Hum Dono*) to fleeting invocations of Jungian psychology to a mention of Akira Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood* (while discussing the process of adapting R.K. Narayan's *The Guide* for the screen).

And yet, somehow, these two modes come together very well in Chaturvedi's chronological examinations of individual films—from

1957's *Nau do Gyarah* to 1971's *Tere Mere Sapne*. Notably, though, the book is presented as a "Dev and Goldie story", and though the author is a big fan of Dev Anand (the star and the person), she focuses a little more on **VIJAY ANAND'S** special qualities as a director

Though the author is a big fan of Dev Anand, she focuses a little more on **VIJAY ANAND'S** special qualities as a director. This includes analyses of the celebrated song sequences in films like *Jewel Thief*, *Guide* and *Johny Mera Naam*, as well as Goldie's intuitive understanding of framing and camera movement, the gambles he took with narrative structure, and how he incorporated a progressive sensibility into even his early work such as *Kala Bazar*. To read *Hum Dono* is to see an egalitarian passion for the medium, unconcerned with the usual labels and hierarchies—popular vs art, serious vs entertaining—that often restrict film analysis. ■

-Jai Arjun Singh

THE DANCE OF LIFE

Dancer Aditi Mangaldas's production 'WITHIN', inspired by the Nirbhaya incident, returns to the stage with a performance at Kamani Auditorium, Delhi, on April 24

**Q.**

What is the guiding principle of your dance practice?

For me, dance must breathe the air of 'the now'. Dance with abandon, passion and humility; be immersed in it and let it be immersed in you.... Let your senses be open to the world; to every form of inspiration. But as you step onto the stage, be ready to completely empty out and let the moment be your only companion.

Q.

What is the concept behind your production 'WITHIN'?

We were exploring various forms of 'relationships' for a new work, when the horrendous Nirbhaya incident happened. 'WITHIN' became an exploration of the half embrace between brutality and humanity, masculinity and femininity, the good and bad within us. It implores the audience to look within, discover this half embrace of the binaries within us.

Q.

Your work can be categorised under two streams—classical Kathak and contemporary dance based on Kathak...

Kathak to me is like a dark night sky, laden with thunder clouds, carrying secret wonders. Plant a Kathak seed and water it with the extended Kathak sensibility, a Kathak tree will grow. When watered with contemporary sensibilities, a different tree, though rooted in classical Kathak, will emerge.

Q.

What are you working on next?

My next work, 'Weeping RED!' is an attempt to bring into focus the trauma and suffering of children in conflict zones around the globe. It'll be a full-length production, presented in collaboration with the National Centre for Performing Arts, Mumbai, and the Symphony Orchestra of India. It will premiere in November 2026.

—with Neha Kirpal

Photograph by ARUN KUMAR



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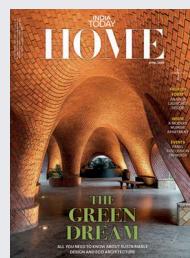
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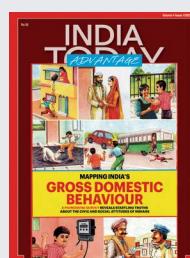
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