

NEWSMAKER OF THE YEAR 2024

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JANUARY 6, 2025 ₹100

INDIA TODAY



THE YOUNG GRANDMASTERS

GUKE SH DOMMARAJU, THE YOUNGEST CHESS WORLD CHAMPION EVER, HEADS AN ARMY OF INDIAN WHIZ KIDS STORMING THE GLOBAL STAGE AND BRINGING GLORY TO THE COUNTRY



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The twelve months of 2024 were rife with both tumultuous and momentous events. Politically, it could not have been more eventful. Right at the start, settling three decades of turmoil, the Ram temple was inaugurated in Ayodhya. Down the middle, there was a general election. For three months, India was occupied with a long-drawn-out campaign, seven phases of voting, the birth pangs of a new government. Narendra Modi made history by becoming India's first prime minister after Jawaharlal Nehru to win a third successive term. But the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) fell far short of a simple majority, as INDIA blossomed into the first Opposition alliance that came close to ending its decade-long dominance. INDIA flattered to deceive by soon losing the Haryana and Maharashtra elections tamely. But not before altering equations within the ruling National Democratic Alliance, with the BJP now forced to rely on allies, unlike in 2014 and 2019.

Two newsmakers were reborn in that shifting power matrix: Chandrababu Naidu and Nitish Kumar. The Andhra Pradesh veteran made a stunning comeback from near-oblivion to win his state for a fourth term, plus a meaty supporting role in New Delhi. His Bihar counterpart performed an equally stunning somersault. From being the founder of the INDIA bloc, Nitish abandoned ship in January to become its chief antagonist by realigning with the BJP and helping it cross the majority mark post-elections.

There was no shortage of heroic protagonists elsewhere. Politically, three INDIA bloc leaders made news this year. Omar Abdullah won Jammu and Kashmir's first election in a decade, a tough one against a medley meant to confuse and confound. Hemant Soren endured a jail term that saw his articulate wife Kalpana come to the fore; the duo held their turf against the NDA in Jharkhand. Mamata Banerjee faced perhaps her toughest test after the RG Kar rape-cum-murder, but 2025 will find her still very much in control of West Bengal. Another trio, Devendra Fadnavis-Eknath Shinde-Ajit Pawar of the Mahayuti, defied all predictions with a mammoth sweep in Maharashtra. Arvind Kejriwal found himself fighting a doughty battle for survival—the Delhi election next year will seal that script. There were others who left a mark: Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh chief Mohan Bhagwat with his admonitory calls for political prudence and Chief Justice D.Y. Chandrachud with his jurisprudence.

Sports gave us an embarrassment of riches. Indian

cricket saw the end of a 13-year-long drought of world cups as Rohit Sharma's team won a nail-biting final against South Africa to lift the T20 trophy. The Paris Olympics gave us more cheer: a gutsy Manu Bhaker wowed us by becoming the first Indian woman to win an Olympic medal in shooting. No Indian filled up global concert stadia this year like Punjabi pop star Diljit Dosanjh; we also note the spunk with which he held off against the off-stage politics that dogged him.

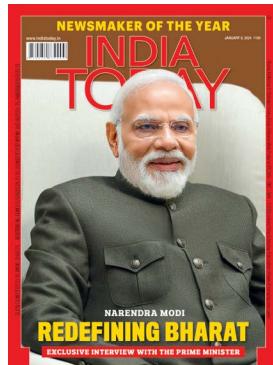
Our crown, though, goes to the new kings and queens of chess. India's young grandmasters put us on top of the world this year, lifting our collective pride. Gukesh Dommaraju is not a name I had heard till a few months ago. This week, Gukesh, at the head of an army of Indian whiz kids storming the global stage, is on our cover as the youngest-ever world chess champion. That should tell you how meteoric the rise has been for the 18-year-old from Chennai who stopped going to regular school after Class 5 to focus on a board game. You would think it is an unusual step for the son of a microbiologist mother and an ENT surgeon father. Well, the father, too, gave up his career to guide and chaperone young Gukesh. His dream to become a world champion was born as a seven-year-old, while watching the pioneer, Viswanathan Anand, defend his crown.

Our star cast also includes Arjun Erigaisi (21), R. Praggnanandhaa (19) and Vidit Gujrathi (30), all part of the gold medal-winning Olympiad 2024 team,

all FIDE Top 20. Such is the passion chess evokes in India these days, the depth of talent it's throwing up. India now has 85 grandmasters. Once we had a lone entry in that list: Vishy, the mentor for this crop. Deputy Editor Suhani Singh, who interviewed Gukesh in Chennai after his win, was struck by his discipline, the gruelling physical and mental training he endures daily, his steely resolve to stay on top for years to come, and a maturity far ahead of his age. His retort to those who questioned the quality of chess at the World Championship: "I believe nobody can criticise me the way I do myself." We offer the young grandmasters as our Newsmaker of the Year because they blend a can-do spirit with calibre to be the best in the world. Call it checkmate!



(Aroon Purie)



January 8, 2024

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Volume 50-Number 1; For the week

Dec 31, 2024-Jan 6, 2025, published on every Friday

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

• Subscriptions: For assistance contact, Customer Care, India Today Group, C-9, Sector-10, Noida (UP) - 201301; email: wecare@intoday.com; Phone / WhatsApp: +91 8597 778 778 (Monday to Friday, 10 am - 6 pm).

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

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

• Impact Offices: 1201, 12th Floor, Tower 2A, One Indulabs Centre, (Jupiter Mills), S.B. Marg, Lower Parel (West), Mumbai-400013; Phone: 022 69193355; Fax: 66063226

• E-1, Ground Floor, Videocon Towers, Jhandewalan Extn, New Delhi.

• Door No: 610, 610A, 612, 5th Floor, Block A, Imperial Chaitanya Building, Anna Salai, Teynampet, Chennai, Tamilnadu-600018.

• 201-Sai, Richmond Towers, 2nd Floor, 1st Floor, 600018, Road, Bangalore-560025; Phones: 22212448, 22213037, 22218343; Fax: 22218335;

• 52, Jawaharlal Nehru Road, 4th Floor, Kolkata-700071; Phones: 22825398; Fax: 22827254; • 6-3-885/7/B, Somajiguda, Hyderabad-500082;

Phone: 23401657, 23400479, 23410100, 23402481, 23410982, 23411498; Fax: 23403484 • 39/1045, Karakkatt Road, Kochi 682016; Phones: 2377057, 2377058; Fax: 2377059 • 2/C, "Suryarath Bldg.", 2nd Floor, Behind White

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

26560929; Fax: 26565293 • Copyright Living Media India Ltd. All rights reserved throughout the world. Reproduction in any manner is prohibited.

Printed and published by Manoj Sharma on behalf of Living Media

India Limited. Printed at Thomson Press India Limited,

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

and at Rajhans Enterprises, 134, Industrial Town, 4th Main Road, Rajajinagar, Bengaluru-560044, (Karnataka).

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

Editor: Raj Chengappa.

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

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Vaishali Rameshbabu,
Gukesh D., Arjun Erigaisi

THE YOUNG GRANDMASTERS

Gukesh Dommaraju, the youngest chess world champion ever, heads an army of Indian whiz kids storming the global stage and bringing glory to the country

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(Chess Piece, courtesy Vasant Vihar Club, Delhi)



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RP Goenka International School Hosts SAIBSA IBDP Job Alike Session 2024, Marking a Milestone in Eastern India's Educational Landscape

On 23rd November 2024, RP Goenka International School (RPGIS) proudly hosted the SAIBSA (South Asia International Baccalaureate Schools Association) meet for International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme teachers for the first time in Eastern India. The event brought together educators, administrators, and thought leaders from across the region, creating a vibrant platform for collaboration and knowledge-sharing. The event was a resounding success, featuring workshops, panel discussions, and breakout sessions focusing on innovative teaching strategies, inquiry-based learning, and curriculum development. With over

100 participants from IB schools across South Asia, the meet served as a testament to RPGIS's commitment to excellence in education. Over 20 subjects were explored in dynamic sessions where teachers exchanged innovative ideas, shared best practices, and elevated each other's teaching methodologies facilitated by subject experts.

Reflecting on the significance of the event, Mrs. Hema Chennupaty, Principal of RP Goenka International School said:

"Hosting SAIBSA 2024 is a proud moment for RP Goenka International School. As the first school in Eastern India to host this prestigious event,

we are committed to fostering a platform that celebrates collaboration, innovation, and excellence in education. It aligns perfectly with our vision of creating a globally connected learning environment for our students and educators."

Mrs Shivika Goenka, the founder of RPGIS, added: "RP Goenka International School was built with a vision to redefine education by blending tradition with innovation. Hosting SAIBSA 2024 reinforces our commitment to being a thought leader in the academic landscape. This event not only puts Kolkata on the IB map but also allows us to contribute meaningfully to shaping the future of global education."

The school's state-of-the-art infrastructure, including its IGBC Platinum-certified green campus and innovative learning spaces, provided the perfect backdrop for the event. Participants lauded the school's hospitality, organization, and commitment to fostering a collaborative educational ecosystem.

RP Goenka International School's successful hosting of SAIBSA 2024 underscores its growing prominence as a leader in IB education and its unwavering dedication to preparing students for a global future.

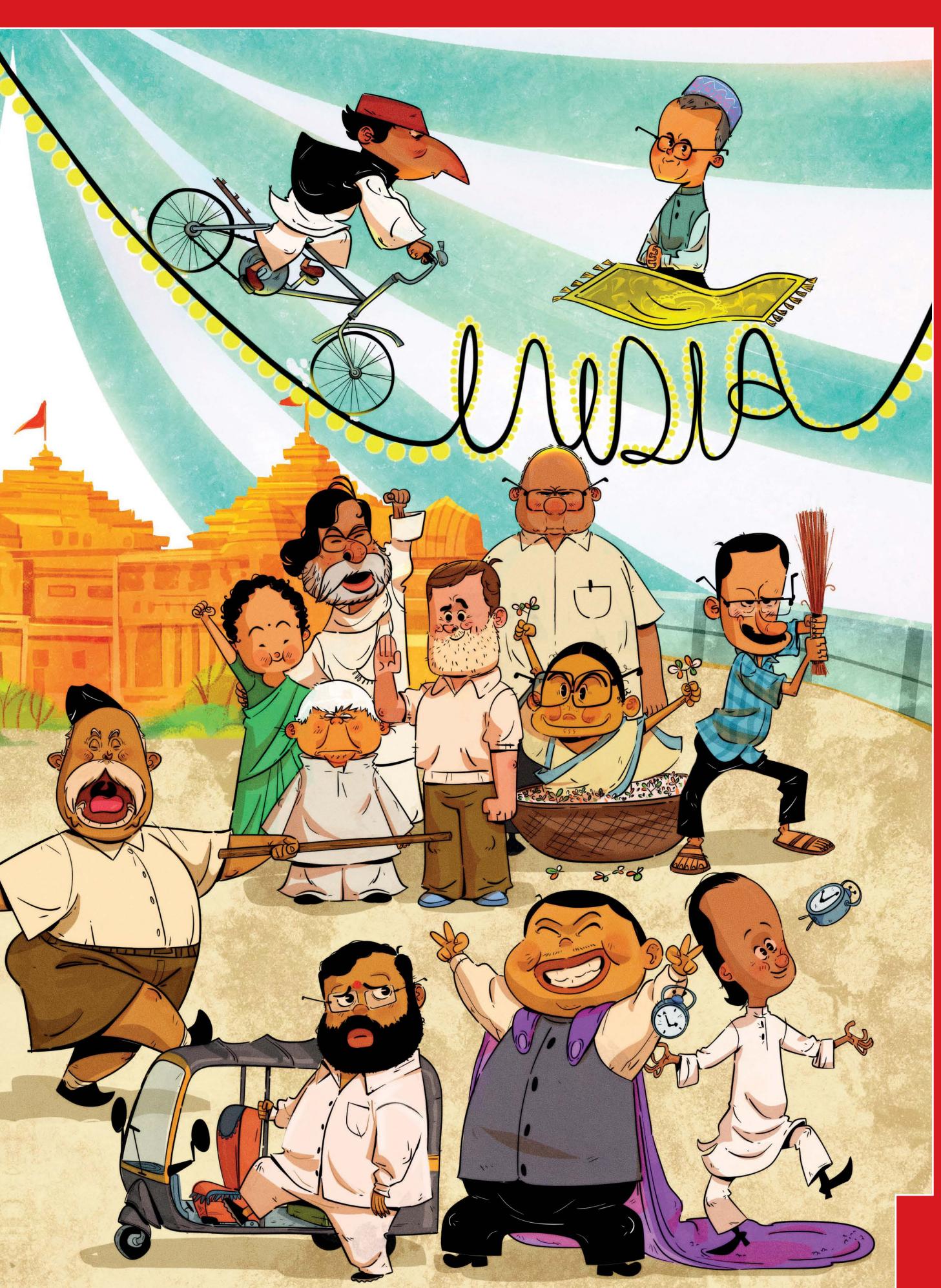


INDIA TODAY
NEWSMAKERS 2024

THE
LIGHTER
SIDE

Illustration by SIDDHANT JUMDE





NEWSMAKER OF THE YEAR 2024

THE YOUNG GR

GUKE SH DOMMARAJU IS NOW THE YOUNGEST EVER WORLD CHAMPION, BUT THAT IS JUST ICING ON THE CAKE IN INDIA'S CHESS STORY. FOR THE 'GOLDEN GENERATION', 2024 WAS THE YEAR THEY DID IT ALL

By SUHANI SINGH



TOP OF THE WORLD

The Indian men's and women's team, winners of the 45th FIDE Chess Olympiad, pose with their medals in Budapest, Sept. 22

GRANDMASTERS



STEVE BONHAGE/FIDE



Photographs by FIDE

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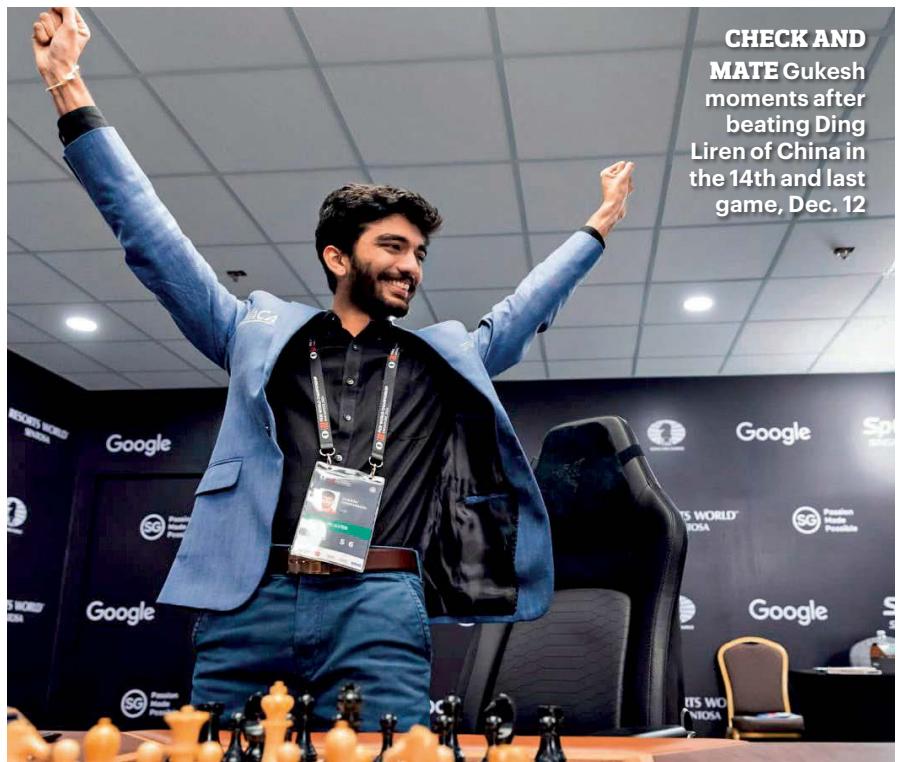
Gukesh Dommaraju doesn't have many childhood memories but there is one that's clearly etched in his mind. As a seven-year-old rookie chess player, standing with his father far back in a packed room at Chennai's Hyatt Regency hotel to watch Viswanathan Anand and Magnus Carlsen duel it out for the world championship title. The kid couldn't see the black-and-white squares but the sight of the two greats "was inspiring" enough that he envisioned a dream then and there. "I thought it'd be cool to be inside that glass box one day," he says. Four years later, in a now viral clip he'd articulate the desire better: "I want to become the youngest world chess champion." On December 12, 2024, Gukesh, all of 18, fulfilled the wish by winning a thrilling contest against Ding Liren that lasted 56 hours, spread across 14 days. In doing so, the teenager not only broke legend Garry Kasparov's record to become chess's youngest world champion ever, but also became only the second Indian to win the title (after Anand's heroics in the noughties).

But Gukesh's splendid run in 2024—winning the Candidates face-off to become the challenger, a team and individual gold at the Chess Olympiad, then the world title—is a story within a story. The larger one is that India is today a bona fide chess powerhouse, a fecund ground for grandmasters (GMs) who are captivating the world. It's a whole Gen Z army out there. Take Arjun Erigaisi (21) who, earlier this month, entered the elite 2800 Elo ratings club, only the 16th player in history to do so. Besides these two, R. Praggnanandhaa (19) and Vidit Gujrathi (30), their partners from the gold medal-winning Olympiad 2024 team, are among the five Indians in the FIDE (Fédération Internationale des Échecs) top 20 rankings. Meanwhile, at the Global Chess League in October, 20-year-old Nihal Sarin was adjudged the season's most valuable player after guiding his team, PBG Alaskan Knights, into the finals.



"I saw that he was very talented.... He grew up coping in tournaments on his own, in that sense he reminded me a lot about myself when I was young"

—VISWANATHAN ANAND on Gukesh D.



CHECK AND

MATE Gukesh moments after beating Ding Liren of China in the 14th and last game, Dec. 12

THE GOLDEN GENERATION COMES OF AGE

> April 2024
Gukesh D., 17, wins the Candidates tournament, becomes youngest World Championship challenger

> June Divya Deshmukh, 18, wins the World Junior Girls title, moves into Top 20 in women's ranking

> September
Double gold at the Chess Olympiad, men's and women's team win. Gukesh, Arjun Erigaisi, Vantika Agrawal and Deshmukh win individual golds

> November
All of 3 years, Anish Sarkar becomes the world's youngest rated player; Elo* rating: 1555

> December Arjun Erigaisi is only the second Indian after V. Anand to cross 2800 in Elo rating

Gukesh beats Ding Liren to be crowned World Champion at 18, the youngest ever to win the title

*named after its creator Arpad Elo, it's a method for calculating relative skill levels of players

THE KIDS ARE ALRIGHT

India's groundbreaking year in chess isn't over yet as Erigaisi, Praggnanandhaa, Raunak Sadhwani (19), Aravindh Chithambaram (25) and Pranav V. (18) are among 10 Indians competing in the ongoing World Rapid and Blitz Championship in New York (December 26-30). Also in the Big Apple are the rising queens of the chessboard: R. Vaishali (23), who was tied second at the Candidates; Divya Deshmukh (19), the reigning junior girls champion; and women's International Master (IM) Vantika Agrawal (22). The trio was also part of the women's team which won gold at the Chess Olympiad in Budapest.

Kasparov has described it as "an Indian earthquake in chess". For India now has 85 GMs, over half of them coming after Anand's world championship triumphs. Currently, an estimated 200 Indians are professional chess players. Hear Generation Next talk of chess and one gets a sense that this is less about success and big money and more about mad love and respect for the game. "One move just changes the whole position and result," says Pragg. "It's what keeps me excited about looking at games and learning new things." In elder sister Vaishali, the 2023 World Cup finalist is lucky to have someone at home with whom he can discuss all things chess. The duo is world's first brother-sister grandmaster pair. "You have these opening

ideas which you want to show but you cannot discuss with others," he says. "If I find something fascinating about a position and vice-versa, we discuss. We learn from each other."

This generation also has distinct personalities and playing styles. If Gukesh and Pragg step into the field with *vibhuti* on their foreheads, Divya's game mode is hair down and lipstick on. If Gukesh appears as impulsive as a poker player, Vidit Gujrathi is all emotion when on the board. International Master Sagar Shah, who is also the founder and CEO of popular content platform ChessBase India, singles out their differences. "Gukesh has this huge ability for creative play at the board, Pragg has amazing endgame technique, Arjun has the ability to create complications which very few can navigate," says Shah. Their strong showing has seen India emerge as the second biggest market after the US for chess.

com, the game's most popular website. That's 18.5 million registered users and a monthly active user base of 8 million. "In terms of viewership, we are the fastest growing market," says Avadh Shah, chess.com's country director for India.

While Pragg and Vaishali have their mother, Nagalakshmi, accompanying them for tournaments, Gukesh relies on his father, Rajinikanth, an ENT specialist who put his practice on hold to travel with his son. Contrary to popular perception, chess is an expensive pursuit, with training fees coming at a hefty cost for families from middle-class backgrounds.

Gukesh's mother Padmakumari, who teaches at the Madras Medical College (MMC), speaks of a time as recently as 2018-19 when the couple "had no money" to fund their son's dream to be the youngest Grandmaster, which in turn required participation in tournaments abroad. The Dommarrajus had their batchmates from the MMC pool in money to help them out. "They were our first sponsors and we'll be grateful to them forever," says Padmakumari.

THE KING'S GAMBIT

The story of India's chess boom begins with the Covid pandemic when all the world was confined to their homes. The Netflix 2020 series, *The Queen's Gambit*, had generated a wave of interest in chess globally with many taking to playing chess online, but back home in

DIVYA DESHMUKH, 19 ►

IM, World Junior Girls Champion

Boring. That was five-year-old Divya Deshmukh's first impression of chess until the competitive streak kicked in. "After I started playing tournaments, I wanted to finish on top of the table and be best at it," says Deshmukh, who is vying to be Nagpur's third GM and only the fourth female to achieve the honour. After a breakthrough 2024 which saw her clinch team gold and individual gold at the 45th Chess Olympiad in Budapest, become the girls' world junior champion and cross 2500 Elo ratings, Divya's goals for 2025 are simple: "Focus on mental and physical wellbeing, be healthy and happy."

**85**

No. of Indian
GMs; only Russia,
USA, Germany
and Ukraine
have more

3

No. of female
GMs; Koneru
Humpy, Harika
Dronavalli and
R. Vaishali are all
active players





ARJUN ERIGAISI, 21

Grandmaster

Ranked higher than Gukesh at No. 4 and with a better Elo rating (2801), the boy from Hanamkonda, Telangana, is seen as the one most likely to challenge the champion for the throne. An erstwhile protégé of the WestBridge Academy, Arjun will aim to qualify for Candidates 2026. Adept at rapid and blitz formats, he is known for his positional clarity and ability to leave his opponents perplexed with complex moves.

|||||

India it was a king in not-so-shiny armour who was making a big push. His name? Viswanathan Anand. Having just hit 50, the five-time world champion's decision to step back a bit from his own playing career to give back to the sport would become a game-changing move for Indian chess.

In December 2020, Anand partnered with WestBridge Capital to start WestBridge Anand Chess Academy a.k.a. WACA and identified a few promising GMs to take under its wing. "For a couple of decades now, India has been one of the strongest countries in youth championships. The goal we set for ourselves was to help our most talented youngsters break into the top,"

Anand told INDIA TODAY. Among the earliest benefactors of Anand's mentoring and online training sessions with top GMs like Grzegorz Gajewski, Artur Yusupov and Boris Gelfand were Gukesh, Pragg, Sarin and Raunak Sadhwani. "Vishy Sir's is the biggest contribution," says Gukesh. "He and WestBridge did a great job of finding talent and providing amazing support. We were working super hard, and we had the best technologies also." Adds Pragg, "We didn't have tournaments in 2020 so the classes came at the correct time and we were all excited to attend the sessions. You can discuss anything with Vishy Sir, the games, what to focus on in training, what's lacking in one's game...."

To deploy Kasparov's now-famous comment, it wasn't long before "Vishy's children" were on the loose. At the 2022 Chess Olympiad in Chennai, both the men's and women's team won bronze medals, with Gukesh and Nihal winning individual golds too. The men's and women's team would also win silver at the Asian Games 2022 in Hangzhou. Anand says, "I saw that Gukesh was very talented. Gukesh and Pragg, their work ethic was just off the charts. Nihal was a bit more mysterious. They were all very ambitious. I noticed this pattern that they all motivate each other. The moment one gets something, the others are driven."

Anand was the mastermind, but a host of other factors abetted the rise of the young bloods. The first generation of IMs and GMs started coaching academies which produced players like Vishnu Prasanna (one of Gukesh's longstanding coaches), R.B. Ramesh (coach of Pragg and Vaishali), Srinath Narayanan (Arjun, Nihal and Divya) and Abhijit Kunte. Anand likes to say that they coached "the golden generation" of chess.

STREAMING CHESS INTO HOMES

The credit for chess's growing appeal in India also goes to the unlikeliest of suspects—stand-up comedians. Popular comic Samay Raina, a chess enthusiast himself, started streaming games with peers such as Tanmay Bhatt, Biswa Kalyan Rath, Anirban Dasgupta and others on his YouTube show,



"I was in Chennai in August '13, and I was told I'd be meeting some of the better kids in the area. Now, it feels like half of them are either GMs or playing in top tournaments..."

—MAGNUS CARLSEN
Former World Champion

R. PRAGGNANANDHAA, 19 VAISHALI RAMESHBABU, 23

Grandmasters

She thinks he's "messy"; he thinks she does "things perfectly", which can at times be "annoying". What binds them is their unbridled love for chess. Four years her junior, Pragg took to the game only after watching big sister Vaishali play it. The duo became the first siblings to attain the Grandmaster tag and qualify for the prestigious Candidates tournament. While

father Rameshbabu manages their media engagements and playing calendar, mother Nagalakshmi is a constant presence by their side at key tournaments. Says Pragg, "There were many difficult moments financially but we never felt the pinch because they never told us about it. They have motivated us and kept us going during tough tournaments. They have been very important in our journey."



Comedians Over the Board, in 2022. In March 2023, Raina would play Gukesh and lose after being in a winning position. The seven-minute video streamed on ChessBase India's YouTube channel has thus far netted 7.3 million views. Samay's chatty style and humorous commentary has gone a long way in changing the perception of chess being a game for nerds. Or as Anand, showing his funny side, told Samay: "You've turned chess into a joke."

The chess fraternity acknowledges the impact of online creators like Samay and Biswa Kalyan. The latter even co-directed the documentary, *Candidates*, on India's chess prodigies, which will release in 2025. "The difficult part about chess was that it was conceived as a hard, intimidating game. We had to take down that glass barrier," says known chess commentator and IM Tania Sachdev who was part of the Olympiad gold-winning team. "Getting a non-professional chess player

What it takes to be a Grandmaster

► **Calculation and intuition:** A deep understanding of the game and ability to foresee your opponent's moves

► **Concentration:** The ability to focus for hours on end as the pressure builds up with every move

► **Mental resilience:** Playing at a high level consistently requires focusing all your mental energy on the board

► **Confidence:** The supreme will to win

voice like that of Samay into the scene really exponentially grew the game. The audience could relate to the game, have fun with it." Sachdev and Anand also lauded the efforts of Sagar Shah and ChessBase India which "opened up the game to audiences". Starting in 2015, Sagar began covering the chess scene in India, interviewing its youngest and most talented practitioners as well as providing technical material for chess enthusiasts to hone their skills.

More recently, both Samay and Sagar were at the centre of the first ever screening-cum-livestreaming of the 14 games of the World Chess Championships, held at The Habitat in Mumbai. Partnering with chess.com, it had Anand and comedians like Samay, Bhatt and others joining Sagar and Tania Sachdev giving commentary through the long games. "In chess, visuals don't do the talking," says Sachdev, who is backed by Red Bull. "You have to make chess accessible and entertaining while being true to it. You cannot make viewers feel like *yeh kya ho raha hai?*"



MARK LIVSHITZ/FIDE

"This young chess generation blends discipline with creativity. They are a perfect balance of talent and character"

—NITIN NARANG, President, All India Chess Federation

Audiences cheered the breakthrough moves, broke into Gukesh chants and there was even a live rendition of a song dedicated to him, "Go Go Guki Go". Online viewership was impressive too. The average reach of each game was 1.5 million views with the highest coming for the final game, 3.9 million views. Another promising stat—as much as 70 per cent of the online audience was from the 19-34 age group. While Tamil Nadu continues to be the mecca of chess in India, the most views for the livestream came from Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh and Karnataka.

If the run of the past two years is anything to go by, India's chess future looks extremely promising. For professional players, it's an expensive pursuit, finding funding for the training

and the travel to tournaments abroad. Luckily, apart from public sector companies, more private companies are now betting big money to support India's bright stars. Gukesh and Vaishali have WestBridge, Quantbox and Adani back Arjun and Pragg respectively, and Nihal Sarin's got Akshayakalpa. The All India Chess Federation also plays its part; a portion of its Rs 65 crore annual budget is used in contracts for 42 top players in seven different age categories (up to 19 years) as well as free coaching to 320 other selected players. Federation president Nitin Narang says, "Often, players drop their passion owing to financial constraints, but with financial support and other facilities, they will be better positioned to excel."

The question now is, can they shun the noise and stay focused on the game, more so in this age of social media where scrutiny is relentless. "I have told them how I do and did things," says Anand. "They have to take that and adapt it to a new time. Many of them have impressed me with how quickly they have grown into their own."

It helps that chess's Gen Z generation of Grandmasters are committed and value their role as the game's ambassadors. "Gukesh will be the next Virat Kohli of India," proclaims Sagar Shah, who has been tracking his evolution since 2016. "When he says, 'I don't want to cheat at anything in life,' it's just the person he is. All of them are hardworking, honest and prioritise the processes over result. For youngsters, they are great role models."

For the world champion, reaching the summit of chess is only the beginning of his journey in chess. Gukesh brings a Rajini-like swagger to what is perceived as a serious sport just in the manner he strides his way to the chessboard or adjusts his shirt collar during the game. A fan of biographies of sporting greats, he understands the significance of a healthy mind which is why he engaged mental conditioning coach Paddy Upton—of Indian cricket team fame—in his team. There's also a self-awareness, which is why even after becoming world champion he declares he isn't the best and has much to do to catch up with the mighty Magnus Carlsen. If the games at the world championships were anything to go by, Gukesh is an audacious challenger, who refuses to give in. Persistent, he sits with eyes closed calculating moves that seem to bamboozle opponents. Ding certainly seemed frazzled. "I just like to play chess, yeah," Gukesh said at a press conference after one of the games. In the simplicity of that statement is hidden a grand ambition, a player who wants to be a GOAT (greatest of all time).

The real rewards of Gukesh's achievement and those of others of his generation will perhaps be felt in the decades to come. For now, at the end of a tumultuous year, India's young grandmasters spearheaded by Gukesh have done enough to lift our collective pride and justify why the INDIA TODAY editors declared them the 2024 Newsmaker of the Year. Here's hoping India's chess tribe rules the squares for many more years ahead. ■

NEWSMAKER OF
THE YEAR 2024

INTERVIEW
GUKE SH D.

‘Criticism has always been a source of motivation for me’

It's just day five since he was crowned 2024 FIDE World Chess champion (which he celebrated with a bungee jump), and **Gukesh Dommaraju** is still learning to adjust to the fanfare. In an exclusive interview with **Deputy Editor Suhani Singh**, Guki, as he is fondly referred to by fans, talks about his love for chess, the impact of ‘Vishy Sir’, his Gen Z compatriots, the streaming mania around chess and future goals. Excerpts:

Photograph by BANDEEP SINGH





Q.

You talk of chess fondly, touching on beauty and aesthetics. But at just six-and-a-half years, what drew you to the game?

Before chess, we tried tennis, abacus and even skating. My family used to play chess as a hobby at home. I got interested in it and learned the rules. There was this summer camp in school when I was in the first standard and I tried out chess. There it was my first coach, Bhaskar Sir, who said I have a knack for it and should take it further. The thing is, chess had all these pieces, like toys, and I could just play around with them. Once I started to understand the rules, there was this unlimited beauty in chess. But I'm still learning...Vishy Sir has been playing for five decades and he is still learning every day.

Q. After becoming world champion, you said it doesn't mean you are the best in the world. Was that bait for world #1 Magnus Carlsen to get back to classical chess and play you?

It was a bit of both. At that point, I was being honest. It was clear that while the match was between two of the best players in the world, it was not a decider on who is the best. Some players believe that it should be. But when the best player doesn't want to play, it's not the fault of other players. As a chess fan, I'd love to see Magnus back.

Q. Commentators were struck by how often and long you keep your eyes shut in between moves. What was going on there?

Sometimes when I am calculating a position on the board, it is easier to visualise it with my eyes closed. But also sometimes when I am waiting for my opponent's counter and I know what I am going to play, there's no point in putting more energy into the moment. For the past few years, I have been doing meditation and yoga regularly. It's a core part of my mental and physical training now.

Q. To be No. 1, you'd need to enter the 2800 Elo rating club. Is that next on your target list?

This year it was all about the Candidates and the World Chess Championship. I was close to 2800 after the Olympiad but I don't think much about it. It's a special achievement and I am happy for Arjun [Erigaisi] who made it. It is one of my goals.

Q. Your specialty is classical chess, which some call the purest form of the game. When it looked like the World Championship match could go to a tie-break in rapid and blitz, many were seeing you as an underdog...

"It was clear that while the match was between two of the best players in the world, it was not a decider on who is the best. Some players believe it should be..."

I do want to improve in rapid and blitz. My results should have been better in the few tournaments [I played]. I have beaten Magnus in online rapid and freestyle. The way you approach games in rapid and blitz is different compared to classical but at the end of the day, it is still chess. I am more of a calculative player; in rapid and blitz, players who are intuitive tend to do well. But as a top-level chess player, you have to adapt.

Q. What do you make of India's Gen Z generation of players. Is there rivalry among you?

I mostly spend time with the guys. All of them are great players but I have to admit maintaining a relationship is tricky. I spend more time thinking

VICTORY PARADE

Crowds line up to welcome Gukesh in hometown Chennai, Dec. 17



about these guys than about family. We have good relations but I am not close to anyone...it's all ethical but minor details can be used against you. I respect them a lot.

Q. What impact has Vishy Sir had on your career?

Since the start, he has been a god figure and a huge inspiration. Since WACA (WestBridge Anand Chess Academy), we have been training together regularly. He was always there to analyse games, get on a call to discuss something. We can't thank Vishy Sir enough for the time he has given to the next generation. He helped me personally in getting Gayu (Polish GM Grzegorz Gajewski) to work exclusively as my coach.



AFP

“Once I started to understand the rules, there was this unlimited beauty in chess. But I’m still learning...”

Q. How are you handling the spotlight after the win?

There are two sides to it, obviously. The positive is that the more attention this win creates, the better it will be for chess and the players, for more sponsors to come in. I am very happy to play a part in that. After winning the title

in Singapore, I thought I would come back to India and there would be some nice events and we would go back to normal. But it is nothing like what I imagined, to be honest. Sometimes you do get annoyed, especially when people come to the house.

Q. Top GMs like Hikaru Nakamura, Anish Giri, and even Magnus have taken to playing and analysing games as streamers. Do you see yourself being a part of the wave?

I think streamers and content creators are great for chess. Even before the chess boom happened during the pandemic, Hikaru was bringing people to the game through his streams. ChessBase India and a lot of comedians have helped create this awareness

and it’s great what they are doing for chess. I am comfortable on camera and I can do interviews, but streaming—talking to myself and playing chess—is a bit weird. I really don’t see myself getting into it.

Q. There was criticism about the quality of play at the World Championship...

I knew Magnus was analysing the games on the TakeTakeTake app. Some of my team members were listening in, and got some insights from it. Critics had a point but because of my age I think it’s easier for things to fire me up and I want to prove them wrong. Throughout my career, criticism has been a source of motivation for me. I believe nobody can criticise me the way I do myself. ■

**NEWSMAKERS
2024**

NARENDRA MODI 74
Prime Minister of India

THE THIRD COMING

**PM NARENDRA MODI GETS A HISTORIC THIRD TERM BUT
WITH THE INDIA BLOC DENYING THE BJP A MAJORITY ON
ITS OWN, SOME OF THE SHEEN WEARS OFF**

By RAJ CHENGAPPA

BACK ON TRACK PM
Modi at the BJP victory
celebrations after the
Maharashtra election
results, Nov. 23



W

What leaders propose, the gods of democracy, the voters, dispose in their own way. For Narendra Modi, the crowning glory of his being prime minister for a decade was to be the induction into a rarefied league of statesmen in 2024. For that, he had to emulate the record held by Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first prime minister, who had three consecutive terms with a full majority in Parliament. Modi intended to achieve the distinction with a thumping mandate in the general election. The year began auspiciously enough, when as *yajmaan* (patron) he led the consecration ceremony of the Balak Ram idol at the new and awe-inspiring Ram Mandir in Ayodhya on January 22. The event was regarded as a spectacular demonstration of Hindu resurgence and pride. Modi captured the zeitgeist when he began his evocative address by saying, "Our Ram Lalla will no longer be living in a tent, he will now reside in his divine mandir."

The material culmination of a century-old struggle to build the mandir and the deep emotional valence it held for India's Hindu majority was considered a game-changer for the Lok Sabha polls. So much so, Modi set a high benchmark for his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its National Democratic Alliance (NDA) partners with the war cry, '*Ab ki Baar, Chaar Sau Paar*' (This time, 400 seats-plus). The confidence stemmed from the BJP's belief that it had dealt a body blow to the Opposition INDIA bloc early in 2024 by winning over Bihar chief minister Nitish Kumar, its prime mover. The other trump card was the BJP wresting power in Maharashtra in 2022 after it engineered a split in the Shiv Sena, and later the Nationalist Congress Party, in this crucial state.

However, when the general election results came out, it was far below expectations. The BJP's tally dropped from 303 seats to 240—32 short of a simple majority in the Lok Sabha—and it needed the support of its NDA partners, especially Nitish's Janata Dal (United) in Bihar and Chandrababu Naidu's Telugu Desam Party in Andhra Pradesh, to form the government. Modi did make history as prime minister for an incredible third consecutive term but the fact that the INDIA bloc had considerably diminished the BJP's dominance robbed the occasion of its sheen. Modi had to evolve a new coalition dharma, with its own compulsions, complexities and contradictions. This was most

evident when he tried to ram through the 'One Nation, One Poll' idea, but without the requisite support in the House had to send it to a joint parliamentary committee for review.

There were lessons to be learnt for both Modi and the BJP from the outcome. Especially that aggressive Hindutva mixed with a large dole of welfare measures had diminishing returns with an electorate now wanting jobs and respite from high prices. They still trusted Modi to deliver but the seams of their support were beginning to wear thin. Unlike the cocky INDIA bloc, Modi and the BJP heeded these warnings and ensured they won two crucial assembly poll victories in Haryana and Maharashtra to regain the political momentum. These wins were clearly a mandate for Modi 3.0 to pursue the critical reforms needed, especially on the economic front in 2025.

The politics of the economy would guide Modi's governance decisions in 2024 too. To address concerns of rising joblessness, the prime minister resorted to bold and unconventional measures. In July, for Budget 2024, Modi got Union finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman to announce a massive scheme

Modi had to evolve a new coalition dharma, with its compulsions, complexities and contradictions that makes consensus difficult

to facilitate employment and skilling for 41 million youngsters in private companies with an allocation of Rs 2 lakh crore over five years. With private investments remaining sluggish, Modi decided to sustain public spending on infrastructure development by allotting Rs 11.1 lakh crore, or 3.4 per cent of the GDP in the budget, in the hope that it would stimulate economic growth and provide additional jobs. For the private sector, Modi pushed for greater research and innovation with a financing pool of Rs 1 lakh crore.

In his Independence Day speech, his eleventh and longest so far, Modi talked extensively about the Ease of Living Mission and gave assurances of massive improvements in infrastructure in urban areas. That perhaps was an effort to woo the middle-classes who felt neglected by the welfare measures doled out for the poor. Modi's other major commitment was to make India a global manufacturing hub to reduce dependency on imports, a cornerstone of which was becoming a world leader in semiconductor production to enhance technological self-sufficiency. These initiatives set the agenda for Modi 3.0 but the Indian economy remained a work in progress throughout 2024,



HINDUSTAN TIMES

AYE CAPTAIN
PM Modi being sworn in
by President Droupadi
Murmu, Jun. 9

marked by the fact that GDP growth slowed down to 5.4 per cent in the second quarter of FY25—a worrying dip of 2.2 per cent compared to the same period the previous year. It is now abundantly clear that it cannot be business as usual when the new year dawns and Budget 2025 will have to reflect that urgency.

On the international front too, India faced diplomatic headwinds in 2024, particularly in relations with our troubled neighbourhood. Modi made it a point to invite major South Asian leaders to the swearing-in (barring Pakistan's new dispensation), signalling what would be his top priority in the third term. Employing a carrot-and-threat policy, Modi neutralised the regime change in Maldives which was swinging decisively towards China after President Mohamed Muizzu won the election on an 'India Out' campaign. India played its cards right in Sri Lanka by engaging all the political combatants before the elections there, including the eventual winner, Anura Kumara Dissanayake. But we were caught wrongfooted when popular protests ousted long-time ally Sheikh Hasina in Bangladesh in August. While relations with Bhutan remained upbeat, Nepal seemed to be sliding towards China under the K.P.S. Oli dispensation. However, Modi effected a surprising breakthrough in India-China relations by getting Beijing to back off from its aggressive manoeuvres on the Line of Actual Control in the Ladakh sector, thereby all but ending the dangerous four-year-old stand-off between the world's two most populous countries.

Meanwhile, with two big international

wars—Russia and Ukraine in Europe and Israel-Hamas in the Middle East—continuing to afflict 2024, Modi trod a fine line to secure India's national interests even as he upheld international principles of territorial sovereignty and pushed for "a path of peace through dialogue". He played a deft balancing act by giving Russian president Vladimir Putin a bear hug but retained India's neutrality by being the first PM to visit Ukraine and putting a consoling arm around president Volodymyr Zelenskyy. The balanced approach was evident in the Israel conflict too, with India condemning the Hamas terror strikes but also advocating for the two-state solution in support of Palestine.

There were diplomatic setbacks with Canada openly accusing Indian agencies of assassinating Sikh separatists and the US piling on a similar charge. Despite these hiccups, Modi ensured that relations with the US continued to prosper, especially in the areas of defence and critical emerging technologies. With Donald Trump the next president-elect, Modi, who got along with him well in his first term, needs to build on the strong relations the two countries have nurtured. Given Trump's mercurial nature, this will be a tough ask in the new year. All in all, what 2024 brought to the fore was Modi's immense resilience despite setbacks, his continuing dominance over the political narrative and his resolute pursuit of making India a developed nation by doing whatever it takes to get us there. ■

In 2024, Modi showed immense resilience despite setbacks, and continued his dominance over the political narrative

THE BHAGWAT DHARMA

Under Mohan Bhagwat's leadership, the RSS sharpened its stance, using the Lok Sabha election results to assert its influence and push for a recalibration in the BJP's approach

By Anilesh S. Mahajan



This year's Lok Sabha election results delivered an unexpected twist. The BJP's tumble from 303 to 240 seats, signalling a diminished aura for the Modi government, widened the ambit of political discourse. Opposition criticism could be predicted. The real shock came from the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the BJP's ideological mentor.

RSS sarsanghchalak Mohan Bhagwat delivered a series of remarks that many believed to be a critique of the BJP's leadership, its campaign strategies, and even Prime Minister Narendra Modi himself. Bhagwat seemed to be articulating misgivings on several fronts. He criticised the divisive rhetoric employed by some BJP leaders, expressed unease with the Modi-centric narrative (Modi ki Guarantee) of the campaign, and lamented the lack of attention paid to feedback from RSS affiliates. He also raised questions about the absorption of politicians ideologically incompatible to the BJP.

Bhagwat, like his predecessors, is known for his measured critiques. Yet in July, during a meeting of village-level workers in Gumla, Jharkhand, his remarks came close to being a pointed rebuke. "In movies, they show Superman who has extraordinary powers. So a human wants to have such power... but he doesn't stop there. He then wants to become a Dev. But Devtas say Bhagwan is big-

ger than us, so then he wants to become Bhagwan," he said. Sangh insiders interpreted these words as a veiled critique of Modi's larger-than-life campaign persona.

For many within the organisation, Bhagwat's statements carried the weight of collective sentiment. A senior pracharak described them as the "inner voice" of swayamsevaks, the infantry that doubles up as BJP workers during elections.

Bhagwat's critiques had tangible effects. The BJP was forced to recalibrate its electoral strategy, moving away from the singular focus on Modi and placing the Sangh's agenda back on the table. This shift was evident in state elections such as those in Haryana and Maharashtra, where the RSS's guiding hand became more visible. However, the dynamic was likened by some to a "lover's tiff," with the BJP and RSS finding a new equilibrium rather than drifting apart. And the reconciliation process included both symbolic and practical gestures. The Centre's decision to rescind a five-decade-old circular barring government employees from attending RSS functions was seen as a gesture of goodwill.

Bhagwat delivered a series of remarks that many believed to be a critique of the BJP's leadership, campaign strategies, and even PM Modi himself



Ideological Dominance

► **Bhagwat openly criticised the BJP's Modi-centric campaign, divisive rhetoric and neglect of RSS feedback, signalling growing tensions within the Sangh parivar**

► **His remarks pushed the BJP to realign its focus, so as to incorporate RSS priorities into electoral strategies and foster reconciliation**

► **Stressing cultural unity, he has decried OTT content as a source of "moral corruption" and also reignited debates on population control**



Photograph by ARUN KUMAR

The Sangh reciprocated by re-engaging with BJP leaders, deploying its key functionaries to mediate disputes and influence election strategies in various states. Top RSS leader Suresh Soni is now working with BJP leaders in selecting their new chief.

Bhagwat's stance on guiding the BJP's political agenda was reflected in his statement this month, when he cautioned against reigniting religious disputes, emphasising that while the Ram temple was a matter of faith, further conflicts should be avoided. This aligns with his insistence on a broader unity, transcending divisions of caste, creed and language, while still remaining embedded within the Sangh's long-standing vision of a Hindu Rashtra.

Beyond this, the RSS chief's interventions on cultural politics have been equally forceful. In October, he decried the content on OTT platforms as a source of "moral corruption", prompting the Union information and broadcasting ministry to consider regulatory measures. This is part of his conservative credo and its broader push against those he calls "cultural Marxists and "woke people," who he says are undermining India's education and culture, promoting conflict and disrupting social cohesion.

Bhagwat's recent call for a critical reappraisal of India's decades-old population control approach again kept him in mainstream headlines, sparking many debates in policy circles and reaffirming the RSS chief's ideological sway over its political affiliate. ■

HALTING THE BJP JUGGERNAUT

A roller-coaster year saw the Opposition coalition rebound with bold moves and policy wins, but internal rifts continue to test its durability

By Kaushik Deka

The year couldn't have begun any worse for the coalition better known by its backronym, INDIA, than the somewhat clunky 'Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance'. It was just six months before that it was born, named and heralded as the Opposition's best shot at challenging the decade-long dominance of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). And yet here was one of its paternal spirits and



most visible faces, Bihar chief minister Nitish Kumar, defecting to the very camp he had been plotting to defeat! Nitish's pirouette to the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA), which sent shockwaves through the political landscape, was widely interpreted as a rejection of the Congress's keenness to capture centrality and control. For a coalition that had positioned itself as the panacea for precisely such tendencies in the BJP, this raised uncomfortable questions about the alliance's coherence and durability—a theme that echoed throughout the year.

But if INDIA stumbled at the start, it quickly found its footing, recalibrating its strategy with symbolic and substantive moves. The decision to boycott the Ram temple inauguration at Ayodhya was a

From Setbacks to Surprises

► **Nitish Kumar's exit in early Jan. came as a big jolt to the INDIA bloc**

► **But running an aggressive campaign, they reduced the BJP to 240 seats in the Lok Sabha**

► **For the first time in years, the Opposition seemed capable of shaping the national agenda, inside and outside Parliament**

► **But the assembly poll upsets in Haryana and Maharashtra exposed chinks in Opposition unity**

bold statement, positioning the alliance as a defender of secularism. An aggressive campaign followed against the electoral bond scheme, which it framed as a vehicle for corruption and crony capitalism. Together, these helped INDIA craft a narrative that resonated with a wide swath of voters concerned about constitutional erosion and economic inequalities.

Come June, and this culminated in an electoral performance that stunned even the most seasoned observers. The BJP was reduced to 240 seats in the Lok Sabha, well below majority. Though the NDA formed the government yet again, for the first time in years, the Opposition seemed capable of shaping the national agenda, both inside and outside Parliament. Most visible was its ability to compel the gover-

The origin of the backronym INDIA remains unclear. The Congress credits Rahul Gandhi; others attribute it to Mamata Banerjee



nment to reverse controversial policies: just in August, the Broadcasting Services (Regulation) Bill, a notification for lateral recruitment in central ministries, and the Waqf (Amendment) Bill that had to go to a Joint Parliamentary Committee.

But this was soon to be overshadowed by two assembly poll upsets—in Haryana and Maharashtra—that exposed its tactical naivete and internal disharmony. The Congress, seen as the weak link, faced public criticism from its partners, including Trinamool Congress chief Mamata Banerjee. These fissures, combined with the absence of a cohesive post-election vision, highlight the INDIA bloc's struggle to transition from an electoral coalition to a governance-oriented Opposition. ■

ELEVATED JUSTICE

The former CJI bequeathed on the court a legacy of rigour, justice and constitutional morality, but also drew scrutiny for the loose ends left by his judicial balancing

By Kaushik Deka

In a year marked by judicial milestones and moments of quiet symbolism, former Chief Justice of India Dhananjaya Yeshwant Chandrachud emerged as a figure who reshaped critical debates that will reverberate for years. At the core of his judicial philosophy, there had always been a perceptible tilt towards a stance of fairness and constitutional morality. Nowhere was this more evident in 2024 than in his landmark verdict striking down the Electoral Bonds Scheme as unconstitutional. By declaring it a violation of the citizen's right to know and an infringement on free speech, the court under Chandrachud reaffirmed a foundational democratic principle: transparency is the lifeblood of an accountable government. As the year wore on, though, a muffled medley of fraternal reproach too had risen up. Enough for Chandrachud to respond—sometimes publicly, but always gracefully, and at other times in seeming acts of judicial balancing. Thus it was that it seemed to come too late for many when Chandrachud's bench addressed the issue of “bulldozer justice”—a term used to describe extra-judicial demolitions. Even so, the court raised legitimate questions about the unchecked misuse of executive power, duly warned against the erosion of the rule of law and set a benchmark.

Chandrachud's docket also included questions of immense complexity and nuance, such as the sub-classification of Scheduled Castes

and Tribes. Here, the court recognised the need to balance equity within historically marginalised groups while protecting the broader framework of affirmative action. His deliberation on Aligarh Muslim University's minority status reflected a similar sensitivity, as he worked to affirm cultural and educational rights without undermining the constitutional commitment to equality.

His jurisprudence extended to the realms of federalism and economic governance. Chandrachud's rulings on states' authority to tax mines and minerals and regulate industrial alcohol provided clarity on the boundaries of state autonomy within India's quasi-federal system. His nuanced verdict on the nature of private property delved into the evolving tension between individual rights and collective welfare, offering vital insights into how the law can navigate urban development and land acquisition disputes.

For a Clear Verdict

► Landmark verdict declaring Electoral Bonds Scheme unconstitutional, reaffirming transparency as a cornerstone of democracy

► Rulings in the RG Kar Medical College rape case and on ‘bulldozer justice’ highlighted institutional accountability, misuse of executive power

► Delivered nuanced judgments on the





sub-classification of SC/STs, AMU's minority institution status

► The ex-CJI's 2022 remarks during the Gyanvapi mosque hearings has led to polarising litigation over other historical religious sites

► **Chandrachud's actions, including hosting PM Modi for a Ganesh puja, stirred debates on judicial independence**

► **A speech in which he admitted to praying before delivering the Ayodhya verdict also raised a few eyebrows**

Yet, 2024 also saw Chandrachud entangled in the fallout of his earlier oral observation during the 2022 Gyanvapi mosque hearings. His remark that the Places of Religious Worship Act, 1991, did not bar inquiries into the "original character" of religious sites ignited a fresh wave of litigation. Cases like Sambhal, involving a petition to reclaim a disputed mosque site, and Ajmer Sharif, where the Sufi dargah's historical ownership has been questioned, have become flashpoints in an increasingly polarised debate. Critics argued that his observations risked reopening historical wounds, while handing a judicial veneer to politico-religious disputes.

By quashing the Electoral Bonds Scheme, the former CJI stressed that transparency is the lifeblood of any government

It wasn't just his judgments but also his candour that drew scrutiny. A speech in which he disclosed that he had prayed before delivering the Ayodhya verdict provoked intense debate. He also invited criticism for hosting PM Narendra Modi for a Ganesh puja at his residence. In a post-retirement interview, he candidly reflected on the fraught relationship between the judiciary and the political opposition, remarking that "the Opposition expects the judiciary to play their role". Unimpeachable as a principled veto on entangling judiciary in partisan conflicts, it showed him as a skilled hand at off-court jousting. Chandrachud's legacy is one of intellectual rigour and a fearless engagement with the faultlines of a divided democracy. In navigating these complexities, he left behind a judiciary both fortified and ever relevant in the nation's democratic journey. ■

TRIAL BY FIRE

Formal charges in a US court, an air marked by accusations of bribery and concealment of information, the attendant political backlash, pressure on stock prices, valuation losses. Yet the famed Adani growth appetite and business resilience stays

By M.G. Arun

TF

there were many who left a mark on 2024, billionaire Gautam Adani was one on whom 2024 left a mark. Even if similar, it was not a straight carry-over from the storm of 2023, when US shortseller Hindenburg levelled accusations that his group had inflated share prices by round-tripping funds through a maze of dodgy shell companies abroad. Judged only for their content, the new charges would have been par for the course in India. But they acquired more serious dimensions because of who made them: prosecutors at a federal court in Brooklyn, New York. A counter-charge of having vested interests would be difficult to make: this was the US Department of Justice, not a shortseller with skin in the game. Even if the case peters out to a settlement, the global stain would be somewhat more resistant to full repair.

It began on November 20 when the US District Court, Eastern District of New York, accused top executives of Azure Power, an Indian solar power producer listed on the New York Stock Exchange, of colluding with Gautam Adani and two of his senior executives since 2020 to pay \$265 million (Rs 2,247 crore) in bribes to Indian officials across four states and a Union territory for

securing contracts. Adding to the blow, the US Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) said the Adani Group had concealed the alleged misconduct from investors. The news wiped Rs 2.25 lakh crore off the market value of various Adani Group shares in a single day on November 21.

It stung to the quick because Adani, his nephew Sagar Adani and Adani Green Energy CEO Vneet S. Jaain came out looking as having been directly named along with four Azure executives in the alleged acts of subornment. Azure faces a criminal charge for violating the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act (FCPA), which bars companies that operate in the US from bribing foreign officials. The parallel civil case by the SEC was that the Adani Group raised billions of dollars in the US even as the investigations were going on, keeping investors in the dark about those probes. The group denies the allegations. It also says Gautam, Sagar and Jaain only have against them charges of securities fraud, and the alleged conspiracies related to it and alleged wire fraud, not on the con-

The US court accused Adani, his nephew Sagar Adani, Adani Green Energy CEO Vneet S. Jaain of bribing officials of Indian state discoms in return for power sale agreements

Deepening Charges

► A report by US short-seller Hindenburg accused Sebi chairperson Madhabi Puri Buch and her husband Dhaval Buch of holding stakes in offshore funds used in the alleged Adani money siphoning scandal

► A US court accused Adani Green Energy of bribery, and the

country's market regulator also charged the company with concealing the alleged malpractice from investors

► The Opposition stalled the winter session of Parliament for several days accusing the central government of protecting Gautam Adani and demanding his arrest



Photograph by BANDEEP SINGH

spiracy to violate the FCPA, which has named only Azure executives and CDPQ, a Canadian pension fund that's the largest shareholder in Azure. 'Officials' in Andhra Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Tamil Nadu, Odisha and Jammu & Kashmir were allegedly induced to execute sale agreements with the Solar Energy Corporation of India (SECI), the Centre's nodal agency for renewable projects, which would then buy the power from Adani and Azure to sell to their discoms.

Denials notwithstanding, the aftershocks lay in wait. Adani Green Energy had to scrap a \$600 million bond issue in the US. French oil major TotalEnergies, a partner in Adani's renewable energy and gas distribution businesses, spoke of an embargo on investments till the case was resolved. Borrowings too threatened to get dearer as Moody's slashed the ratings outlook on seven Adani firms from 'stable' to 'negative'; Fitch placed some group bonds on watch for a possible downgrade. Politics took no time to stir up either. The Congress amped up its fusillade against the Narendra Modi government and the Securities and Exchange Board of India (Sebi), the markets regulator, for "protecting" Adani. Rahul Gandhi, leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha, demanded Adani's arrest—he said it was clear the tycoon had broken Indian law, not only American law. He also sought a probe against Sebi chairperson Madhabi Puri Buch, accused by Hindenburg of close ties with Adani. Parliament stood stalled for days.

The conglomerate notched a few pluses too in 2024. It continued to grow inorganically, with Ambuja Cement gobbling up two big competitors. Vizhinjam port in Kerala, India's first transhipment port, saw its first cargo ship in July. Adani Green Energy also became the first to surpass 10,000 MW renewable capacity. After the indictment, Adani stocks exhibited resilience, recouping some of their losses. News also filtered in that the prosecutor in charge of the case had resigned. But the way Adani's Africa footprint waxed and waned held out signs: if Tanzania signed a 30-year concession agreement on ports, Kenya pulled out of deals worth \$730 million amid much uproar. The indictment had handed a handle to Adani critics—and there may be no dearth of them in the group's journey to a \$100 billion-plus (Rs 8.5 lakh crore) capex over the next 10 years. ■

THE MAHA BONDING

At one time, Fadnavis, Shinde and Ajit Pawar were seen as an unwieldy trio with mutually subversive intent. A bumper assembly poll harvest inverts that

By Dhaval S. Kulkarni



ANI

MAHAYUTI TRIO
(L-R) Shinde, Fadnavis
and Pawar

If there was any trace of worry within the Maha Vikas Aghadi (MVA) ahead of the big battle in November, they were good at hiding it. More likely, they were luxuriating in how well the Lok Sabha election had gone: 31 of Maharashtra's 48 seats, leads in 153 assembly segments. A comfortable buffer. Too comfortable. The Opposition triad fought over the fruits of war much before they had ripened. Meanwhile, there was another triumvirate, plotting away at a different script—the three horsemen of the MVA's apocalypse. Devendra Fadnavis, Ajit Pawar and Eknath Shinde: one allegedly not a mass leader, one with an apparently shrinking base, and one with his soufflé rising but perhaps not enough to pull up the other two. They gave the sense of being unequal to the task. That's what imparted the suddenness of an ambush to the Mahayuti's magisterial sweep.

Shinde had been the riddle at the heart of the Mahayuti experiment since its birth. Initially, the jury was always out on his political longevity. But it was folly to under-estimate a man who had risen through tragedy and adversity through sheer grit. That too one mentored by Anand Dighe, who almost rivalled Bal Thackeray in stature in his stronghold of Thane. The first inkling that Shinde was no pushover came with the Maratha agitation. Even if hints that he was its secret author were not true, as a Maratha he played the field with tact and authority as everyone else scurried for cover. That mastery over the ground, belying a politician who was said to have no great base to speak of, was confirmed when the Lok Sabha results came. He notched an impressive tally of seven seats, just two less than that of the rival Sena. His claim to owning the 'real Sena' was not just legal skulldug-

gery, after all. There was thus an air of imperious control thereafter when he unfurled a welfare umbrella, including the flagship Ladki Bahin scheme, that finally covered nearly 55 million Maharashtraans. If anyone was looking for a game-changer, it was right there, hiding in plain sight. His current takehome: a princely 57 seats.

As for Ajit *dada*, everyone agreed he was the weakest link in the Mahayuti—even those within. The naysayers could be forgiven: Ajit's NCP had a stark lack of sync with the Sangh-BJP base, who had always seen him as a foe. And uncle Sharad, the old maestro, wouldn't sit back and be upstaged anyway. That impression deepened when Ajit's NCP won just one of the four Lok Sabha seats it contested. Even his wife Sunetra lost from Baramati, to Pawar Sr's daughter Supriya Sule. No one expected Ajit to pull up his socks. But he engaged politi-



That they exuded an air of not being equal to the task gave their massive win the shock and awe of an ambush

Message from Maharashtra

► **The first inkling that Shinde was no pushover came when his Sena won seven LS seats. His welfare umbrella opened, and he took home 57 seats in the November assembly poll**

► **Ajit was seen as the weak link in Mahayuti. But he went for a professional rebranding. And emerged in the pink of health, pocketing 41 seats**

► **But Fadnavis topped them both. Conjuring up a rainbow coalition of micro-OBCs and major non-Maratha castes, coaxing RSS into a detente, he wrested 132 seats for BJP—and his old crown**

cal consultant Naresh Arora of DesignBoxed for a rebranding. Ajit's campaign went pink; he adopted a smiling visage in contrast to his usual arrogant, brusque self. He part-owned Ladki Bahin, announcing it in the assembly. A state-wide yatra, seat-specific micro manifestos and door-to-door campaigns ensued. He abjured personal attacks on Pawar Sr. And the BJP got its cadre to fall in line. He ended up winning 41 of 57 seats contested.

But the cat that got the milk? That turned out to be Fadnavis, the one who was nudged by his party bosses to play deputy to a junior, and found his authority truncated further when another deputy CM joined in. His discomfiture was at a peak when Maratha activist Manoj Jarange-Patil lit into him, Fadnavis being seen as a "soft target" due to his Brahmin identity. When the Lok Sabha shock for the BJP was laid at his

door, it didn't look like it could reopen too soon. But he squirrelled away at Maharashtra's diverse caste demography, organising a rainbow coalition of micro-OBCs and non-Marathas, apart from established Maratha faces in the Mahayuti. Through the trying times, he kept up his sanguine face. He's even said to have coaxed the RSS into a détente. Cadre and voter activated alike, his party had its best-ever performance—with 132 of the Mahayuti's 230 seats in the 288-member assembly. It was time for the soft-spoken lawyer from Nagpur to redeem a piece of verse he had quoted when his planned return to power was smashed in 2019 by a petulant Uddhav Thackeray: '*Mera paani utarta dekh mere kinaare par ghar mat basaa lena / Main samandar hoon, laut kar wapas aaunga*' (Don't settle on my banks thinking my waters have receded, I am the ocean, I will return). ■



**NEWSMAKERS
2024**

**MAMATA
BANERJEE 69**
Chief Minister,
West Bengal

WINNING THE BATTLE FOR BENGAL

Count only RG Kar and Sandeshkhali, and you would think 2024 was Mamata Banerjee's annus horribilis. And then you count the seats

By Arkamoy Datta Majumdar



The Many Lives of Didi

- In January, Sandeshkhali explodes onto national headlines. TMC strongmen accused of a reign of sexual terror, corruption. Calls for President's rule in Bengal
- Unrest peters out after sting video suggests staged violence
- Mamata's TMC wins a long battle of attrition in the LS poll, winning 29 of 42 seats
- The rape and murder of a junior doctor spawns one of the biggest mass protests on the streets of Kolkata
- TMC sweeps all six seats in November bypolls

ing the subsequent chapters on the slate of Bengal's public life. Through exhausting electoral cycles, she has seen it all—culturc euphoria, high and low tides, survival anxiety. Yet, if an updated edition ever comes out, 2024 will contribute some unforgettable memories—many of the sort she'd like to forget. One of them even threatened to become her own Singur moment. As 2025 dawns, though, West Bengal will find her still very much in control, as she mostly has been through nearly 14 years as chief minister. There are also moments she will cherish, not least the way her Troy

M

Mamata Banerjee wrote a memoir, titled *My Unforgettable Memories*, back in 2012. Still in her first year at Writers' Building, after a landmark agitation in Singur dislodged the long-incumbent and by then recumbent Left, it was meant as a mid-journey logbook. Jottings at the end of one phase of her 'rags-to-riches' life, it only marked the onset of another. Since then, she has been writ-

Gender violence is the theme often used to tar Mamata's Bengal. Yet TMC boasts the largest contingent of women MPs in India

held on against a mighty electoral siege that lasted all through a heated summer.

With her old bêtes noires tamed, what keeps her hands full is a foe with unanticipated potency in Bengal: the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Always on the prowl for a crack in her fortress, the saffronites managed to kick up a national shindig right in January, with an assortment of allegations against local Trinamool Congress strongmen in Sandeshkhali village—embezzlement of public funds, sexual terror, all-round goonery. That petered out eventually, in a trail of conflicting testimonies and sting videos suggesting staged drama. But the real hour of foreboding struck in August, after the tragic rape-murder of a trainee doctor at Kolkata's RG Kar Medical College. The air was thick with talk of an official cover-up and collusion in a gigantic web of medical corruption. Disgusted Kolkatans hit the streets like in an Occupy movement. For one who fed off mass adulation, it was the sternest test of her political life. But she rode it out tenaciously, engaging directly with the striking junior doctors, taxiing to a resolution. "I too want justice for the victim," she disarmingly.

Mamata is India's only woman chief minister, if you discount Delhi's caretaker CM Atishi. It's ironic that the one theme that stalks her is gender violence. That too when, just one turn of season before RG Kar, she had single-handedly fought off a determined grab at her territory by the BJP—remember, Bengal had its Lok Sabha voting agonisingly sliced up into all seven phases. In the end, it was she who pulled off a sweep, with masterfully nimble tactics yielding 29 of 42 seats, pegging the BJP down to 12. What's more, 11 of those were women, at 38 per cent the highest share for any Indian party. In November, a six-seat sweep in byelections (among them a woman) quieted all the RG Kar-inspired speculation on Mamata's longevity. If anything, within the INDIA bloc, given the Congress blip after Haryana and Maharashtra, her national ambitions—always subject to weather conditions—are no longer notional. ■



THE ONE IN THE VORTEX

The AAP chief has had a dramatic year, including a stint in jail. All eyes are on him as the party fights a decisive battle to rule Delhi for a third consecutive term

By Avishek G. Dastidar

The year 2024 will stand as a critical inflection point in Arvind Kejriwal's political career in more ways than one. For, this is the year the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) leader—the man who was sworn to political hygiene as his original USP—found himself at the centre of a criminal investigation, making history for the wrong reasons as the first ever sitting CM to be jailed. By September, he had renounced the post that gave him his first administrative face, that of Delhi chief minister. And by November, out on bail, he had hit the streets again in Delhi, Punjab and Haryana, in a bid to try and re-energise brand AAP.

When he was arrested by the Enforcement Directorate (ED) on charges related to the so-called liquor scam, that too just before the Lok Sabha polls, Kejriwal sought to eke out what political advantage he could. His wife Sunita

**PEOPLE'S
CHOICE**

Kejriwal with supporters after coming out of jail, Sept. 13



PTI

Kejri's Googly

► Kejriwal became India's first sitting CM to be jailed—in the disputed liquor policy case

► After getting regular bail in September, quit CM post, said he'll run for re-election with public support

► Skillfully handled internal party changes, bringing Atishi to the fore among more senior leaders

► Delhi's autonomy has been Kejriwal's cause celebre, resisting Centre's bid to take over UT's administrative services

► Has used his arrest and leadership record to form a strong story and elicit public sympathy

per their own rule, one can't hold official posts after turning 75. So Modiji will retire and Amit Shah will become PM." It's not clear if the voters took it seriously—the AAP-Congress combine lost all seven seats in Delhi—but it certainly set the saffron camp aflutter for the next few days. Shah, party chief J.P. Nadda and other party biggies were left clarifying to the media that there was no question of Modi retiring. Kejriwal had put an unspoken, uncomfortable and unresolved point internal to the BJP out for public consumption.

He has been finding it hard keeping his own house in order. In May, long-time comrade and Rajya Sabha MP Swati Maliwal stormed out of the party after alleging assault by his aide Bibhav Kumar inside the CM's residence. The party has also been losing leaders to the BJP, the latest being former Delhi minister Kailash Gahlot, a domino effect of Kejriwal installing trusted lieutenant Atishi as caretaker CM.

Right now, what's imperative for AAP is retaining power in Delhi in the 2025 election. Kejriwal has already sounded the battle cry ahead of others with outreach initiatives in Delhi's semi-unauthorised neighbourhoods and slums where AAP has traditionally held an edge. These days he is busy spelling out the freebies the party intends to shower on people if it returns to power: a doubling of the mint-fresh Rs 1,000 monthly dole to women, free treatment for senior citizens, Rs 10 lakh life insurance and Rs 5 lakh accident insurance for auto-drivers, the list goes on.

In response, the state BJP has been raising issues like the crores in public funds spent buffing up the CM's residence, the liquor 'case' and so on. But, then again, perhaps they are just giving him what he wants: keeping the conversation focused around him. And for better or for worse, that's exactly what Kejriwal got in 2024. ■

It may have been the toughest year of his life, jail for alleged corruption being antithetical to his very political raison d'être. But canny Kejriwal is eking electoral mileage out of it

went around constituencies with folded hands and sought "justice" for her husband. "They (the BJP-led Centre) have jailed him only because he has built schools and hospitals for Delhi," Sunita said at every public meeting.

It's hard to say what electoral impact the 'liquor scam' case can have now. AAP is on a much better wicket than, say, six months back. All their leaders, including Kejriwal's No. 2 Manish Sisodia, have got bail, and as the AAP chief

never tires of repeating, "not one paisa [of illegally acquired monies] has been found" after two years of investigation by the central agencies.

After 50 days of incarceration, Kejriwal finally secured interim bail to campaign in the Lok Sabha election. And he used it to the hilt. The very next day he set the proverbial cat among the pigeons in the BJP camp. "Prime Minister Narendra Modiji will be 75 next year," he said at a press meet. "As

THE COMEBACK KING

It was in no one's script: Naidu's standing leap from near-oblivion, to a place where he writes the destiny of Andhra—even New Delhi

By Amarnath K. Menon

Not too far behind the Indian republic, Nara Chandrababu Naidu will himself turn 75. He was born in April 1950, just three months after the country moved to being a modern electoral democracy. In 2024, a year shy of his landmark, the Telugu Desam Party (TDP) supremo was proving to be one of its contemporary marvels. He was already into his 49th year in politics, having been blooded as a Youth Congress colt in 1975—the halcyon days of Sanjay Gandhi's Emergency-era dominance—winning his first assembly seat in 1978, one of the local young turks of the Grand Old Party at age 28, and seeing his first ministerial portfolio by 1980. And here he was, staging a stunning political pirouette, taking a standing leap from near-oblivion right back to hegemonic sway, with more than a ringside role in the melting-pot politics of New Delhi—and a return to a capital of his dreams closer home.

Under ordinary circumstances, the back story would have warranted a retirement home: nearly a decade as the arch-reformist chief minister of undivided Andhra Pradesh in another era (1995-2004), and five years as the first CM of the residuary state (2014-19). After that, he looked spent. The TDP won only 23 out of 175 seats in the 2019 assembly poll, and a young rival ruled the Andhra lands, strutting about on the coast and upcountry. Only trouble was, there was to be no soft sunset worthy of a long career. Old age was more black than silver and gold: 2021 saw a teary walkout from the assembly after abusive remarks against his wife, and 2023 marked the nadir with 53 days in the Rajahmundry Central Prison.

The comeback may only be the beginning of a new story. Call it Naidu 4.0. It's a bold plan to transform Andhra from coastal farm country into a glittering, global tech hub





Seizing Control

► Without the Naidu-led TDP's 16 MPs, the Modi regime's majority is too close to the half-way mark for comfort

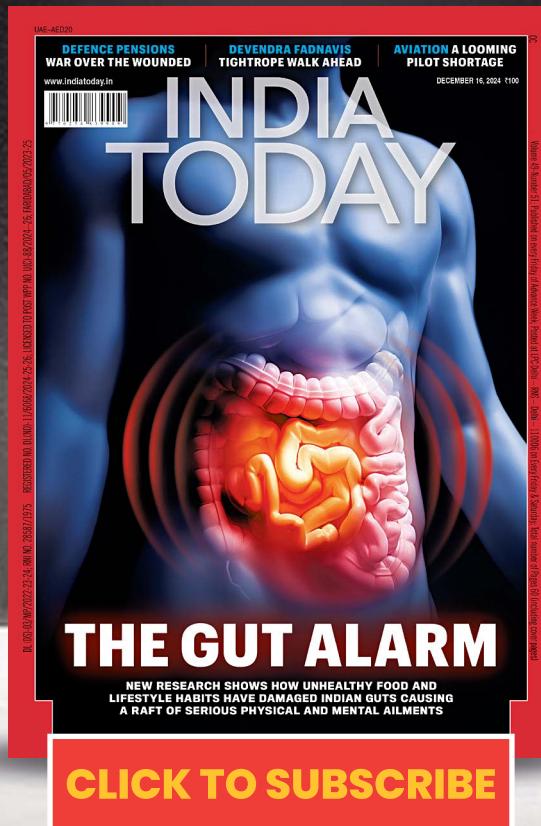
► This political comeback also saw Naidu emerge as India's seniormost chief minister, having first held the post in undivided Andhra in 1995

► His Swarn Andhra@2047 (Golden Andhra Pradesh) vision aims to transform the state into a \$2.4 trillion economy in next 23 years, achieving a per capita income of \$43,000 while ensuring inclusive economic development

In retrospect, they shouldn't have done that—even in pure tactical terms. The Old Fox was cornered—and since flight was out of the equation, it had to be a fight. The eyes, sharp as ever, zeroed in on the route: a tie-up with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) would be Step 1 of Project Retribution. It unfolded like a cyclone: a near-clean sweep for the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) in the simultaneous state and parliamentary elections, with a jaw-dropping 164 of Andhra Pradesh's 175 assembly seats and 21 of its 25 Lok Sabha seats. Its individual tally of 16 LS seats also made the TDP the biggest ally of the BJP, which for the first time in the past decade found itself well short of the majority mark. Upshot: Naidu was back as a pivotal force in national politics, three decades after he first did that gig.

His fourth term as CM contains challenges, but of the sort he will relish: transforming Andhra into a global investment hub, transforming its image from an agrarian backwater to a modern, tech-driven state, the greenfield capital of Amaravati—his flagship project—as its crowning glory. As for all the political balancing acts these call for vis-a-vis New Delhi, he's a virtuoso at those. ■

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MAKING SENSE OF INDIA



ANI

**NEWSMAKERS
2024**

NITISH KUMAR 73
Chief Minister, Bihar

THE ART OF STAYING IN POWER

Correctly sensing the direction of the political wind is Nitish Kumar's forte, making him a crucial pillar for Modi 3.0

By Amitabh Srivastava

R

Remember Ellsworth Toohey, the fictional character in *The Fountainhead* who could win both sides of the debate on ‘The pen is mightier than the sword’? Well, Nitish Kumar, the man who can spin the *chakra* of Indian politics on both his hands, is an improvement on Ayn Rand’s socialist. He can speak truth to power, as well as the truth of power. His pen writes in invisible ink, and he has no need for a sword—a razor-sharp eye on the main chance suffices. The word ‘mercurial’ is often applied because of his quicksilver shifts, being the inventor of a grand Opposition alliance one day and the cause of the ruling party’s greatest comfort the next day. Or the idea that he tells the temperature accurately. But like the metal, he’s not without density and weight, and in fact often sets the temperature merely by his foretelling. And like the planet, he prefers being closest to the Sun. India’s political galaxy, as it took a bet on its future with a general election in mid-2024, found its new shape by the gravity of his placement within it. To that extent, he’s as much the scriptwriter of Modi 3.0 as he was of the INDIA bloc. Two back-to-back hits in two years on the national stage. Not to speak of Bihar, over which he has defied prophecies of senescence to extend his lease indefinitely.

Exactly down the middle of January, the usual choreography of camaraderie saw the Bihar chief minister walk from his official residence to that of Lalu Prasad Yadav, for the traditional Makar Sankranti feast. The usual optics followed; Nitish partook of a modest helping of *dahi-chura* before making a quiet exit within 20 minutes, leav-

Shifting Allegiances

Having masterminded the creation of the INDIA bloc and successfully rallying opposition parties against the BJP in 2023, Nitish Kumar made a surprising political shift in 2024; he ended his alliance with the RJD-led Grand Alliance and rejoined the BJP-led NDA in January

In this year’s Lok Sabha polls, Nitish’s JD(U) not only matched the BJP’s

seat count in Bihar but also emerged as a key player with 12 MPs, proving essential for the BJP’s survival at the Centre

Positioned as a kingmaker, Nitish used his newfound clout to secure special schemes for Bihar in the Union Budget

Under Nitish’s leadership, the NDA swept four critical by-elections in November

By year-end, Nitish’s political resurgence was complete. The BJP has shelved its solo ambitions and named him the face of NDA for Bihar ’25

ing behind a cloud of speculation. Still, what followed was a twist nobody saw coming. Thirteen days later, on January 28, his alliance with the RJD and Congress stood dissolved. The man who had brought together all anti-BJP parties for a national electoral confederation was suddenly on the other side. A pro forma resignation as CM, a new swearing-in and cabinet, this time an NDA one, and Nitish demonstrated his ambidexterity once again. It was risky. Soothsayers wrote him off, placing him on the wrong

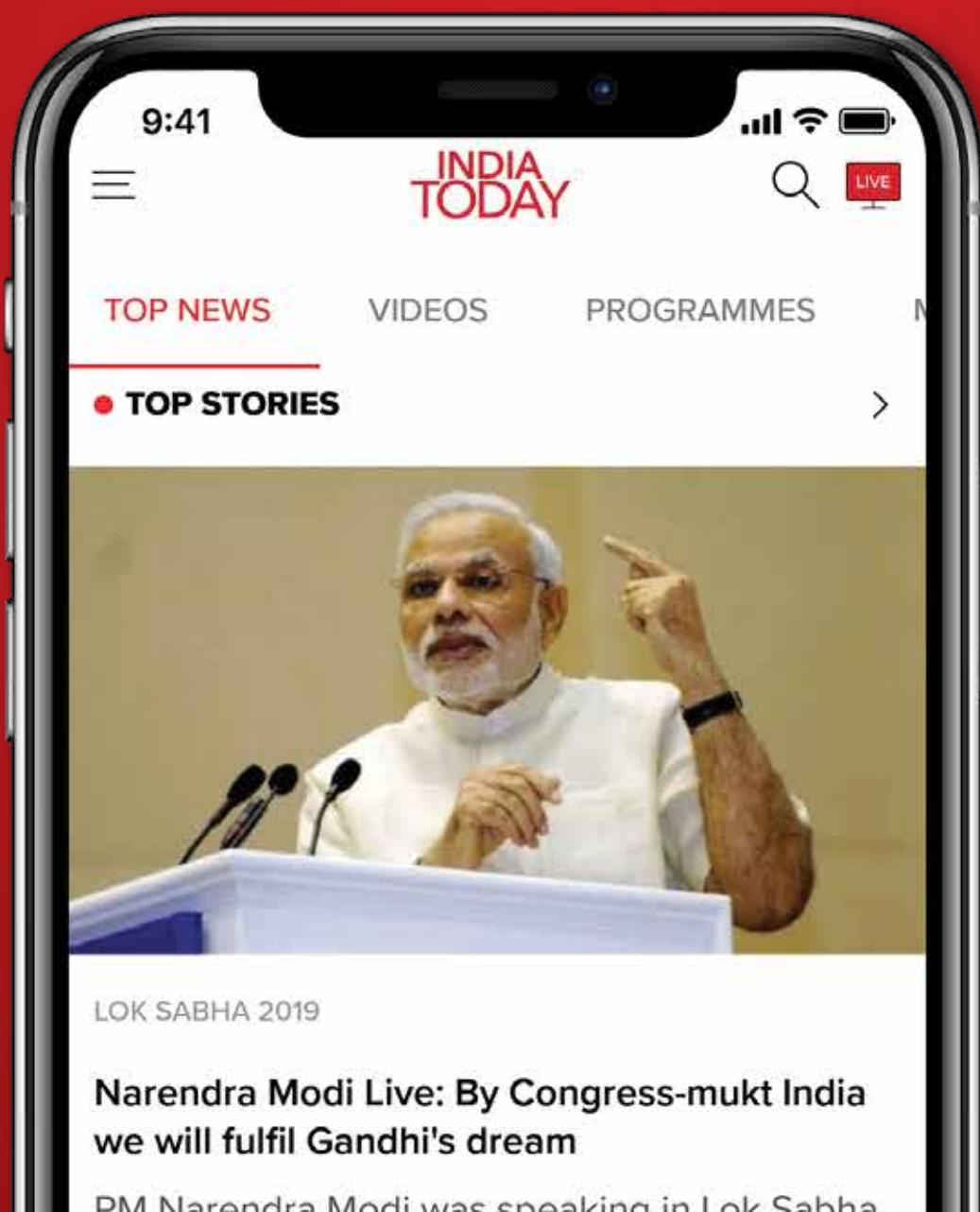
end of the BJP’s use-and-discard politics after the Lok Sabha polls. In the end, the JD(U) was holding a crucial dozen seats—and the BJP needed his helping hand to climb back up over the cliff. Ensconced thus as kingmaker, Nitish leveraged his newfound clout to secure special schemes for Bihar in the Union Budget—his “pound of flesh,” as some called it, a bit uncharitably.

Of all the pivots he has performed, this might have been the most pivotal—and breathtaking. It restored the stature he appeared to lose in the 2020 assembly elections when the JD(U) finished a distant third, winning just 43 seats in the 243-member house. In the summer of 2024, we found Nitish’s party leading in 74 assembly segments, ahead of the BJP’s 68 and leagues beyond the RJD’s 35. By year-end, his political resurgence was complete. After Nitish steered the NDA to victory in all four November by-elections, the BJP quietly shelved its *atmanirbharta* project and declared him the face of the NDA for the 2025 assembly polls in Bihar. That will be one of Nitish’s nine lives. ■

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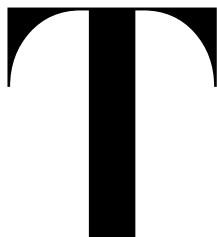
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IT TAKES TWO TO TANGO

Hemant and Kalpana Soren changed Jharkhand's political game, converting near-collapse into an extraordinary comeback

By Amitabh Srivastava



The year 2024 unfolded in Jharkhand like a bit of an earthquake. At the epicentre of this seismic event stood a couple, chief minister Hemant Soren and his wife Kalpana. Their remarkable comeback after weathering intense storms made for political theatre compelling enough to enter tribal folklore, and then spill over to the national narrative. The drama had its genesis on January 31, when Hemant tendered his resignation from the CM's post—he was to be arrested by the Enforcement Directorate, after hours of interrogation at his official residence on money-laundering allegations.

For many, that would have signalled the end of a political career. For Hemant and his wife Kalpana, it marked the beginning of an extraordinary saga. Faced with a leadership vacuum and the shadows of impending oblivion, the couple undertook an odyssey of grit, strategy and reinvention that culminated in an emphatic electoral victory in November.

One question hung in the air after that grim prologue: who to anoint in his place? His father, Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM) patriarch Shibu Soren, was beset by deteriorating health. Hemant reluctantly handed over the chief ministerial reins to Champai Soren, a trusted if uninspiring lieutenant. Such was the despondency that Hemant's sister-in-law, Sita Soren, deserted the party in March to join its chief rival, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). It seemed like curtains for the JMM.

Under Champai's lacklustre stewardship, the JMM faltered. Languishing in judicial custody, Hemant could not campaign for the Lok Sabha polls. The result: the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) captured nine of Jharkhand's 14 seats, leading in 50 of the 81 assembly segments. But even if the JMM appeared to be teetering on the edge of an existential crisis, that dark moment was not without a silver lining. The JMM-Congress alliance won all five constituencies reserved for Scheduled Tribes. Not just that. A whole new lode of silver had been found: Kalpana Soren.

Partners in Victory

► Hemant's arrest in January and subsequent resignation marked the beginning of an extraordinary political journey for him and his wife, Kalpana

► Initially reluctant, Kalpana stepped into the political lime-light during Hemant's incarceration, winning the Gandey byelection in June and becoming a formidable political force

► Hemant's return in July saw the launch of bold initiatives like the Maiya Samman Yojana, alongside coordinated election campaigns by Kalpana, which revitalised the JMM's appeal

► The JMM-led INDIA bloc won 56 seats in the November assembly polls, securing Hemant's record fourth term as CM

► On November 23, when Kalpana landed in Ranchi from Giridih, poll results were already clear. Hemant greeted her at the airport with a bouquet, calling her the "star campaigner"



ANI

A novice at politics, she stepped into the vacuum as if to the manner born, building a narrative of defiance around the idea that Hemant had been wronged. Jharkhand's tribals were listening—the results were proof of that. Others tuned in too, as she shared the national stage with the similarly jailed Delhi CM Arvind Kejriwal's wife Sunita, on INDIA bloc platforms. The poise and articulacy were striking. Kalpana emerged as an improbable saviour in round one. Daughter of an army officer, she had long eschewed politics, choosing instead the quiet role of a supportive spouse. But her husband's incarceration forced her into the political arena. By June, she had contested and won the Gandey byelection, underscoring her transformation from a reluctant participant to a formidable political force.

When Hemant walked out of jail on June 28, sporting a beard that evoked the visage of his father, he returned to a state in turmoil but found solace in

The fruits of the duo's labour ripened on November 23, when the JMM-led INDIA bloc swept the polls, clinching 56 seats to the NDA's 24

his comrade-in-arms, who had steadied the ship during his absence and created her own axis to the people. Challenges abounded. A month after Hemant re-claimed the CM's post on July 4, Champai defected to the BJP. But the transformation of Hemant-Kalpana, forged in the crucible of crisis, was only unfolding.

What ensued was a masterclass in how to turn crisis into opportunity, with bold initiatives to counteract anti-

incumbency and reinvigorate the JMM's appeal. The Maiya Samman Yojana, launched in August, offered financial assistance to over five million women. It was strategically brilliant populism, cutting across the tribal/non-tribal divide that had hitherto hemmed in the JMM.

Then election season closed in, demanding every ounce of the couple's combined fortitude. Kalpana, now a linchpin of the JMM's campaign machinery, anchored herself in Giridih in the north and crisscrossed the state tirelessly. Over a hundred rallies later, the power of her charm offensive was clear: she had a knack for connecting with women voters. Hemant, addressing rallies across Ranchi and beyond, complemented her efforts, their synergy blunting even the BJP's formidable central leadership. On November 23, it was declared a sweep: the JMM-led INDIA bloc had 56 seats to the NDA's 24. For the first time ever, a Jharkhand CM returned to power. A woman walked with him. ■

THE LION PRINCE

A spectacular assembly election win ended a long political winter for Kashmir and his party, the National Conference. But Omar Abdullah now faces crucial tests—that of meeting great expectations and holding his own with the Centre till J&K gets its statehood back

By Kaleem Geelani

It

had been a long hiatus for Kashmiri *netas*, much of the stock-in-trade of their political life had been in suspended animation for far too long. A decade had passed since the last election. There hadn't been a regular government for eight years. And after August 2019, when the old bridge of Article 370 was pulled down and the state shrunk in size and in formal conception, even ceasing to be a state, everything went into deep freeze—the entire infinitude of everyday interaction with the public sphere. Omar Abdullah, former chief minister (2008-2014), was among those who also felt that other effect: presaging the abnormal

hibernation imposed by Covid-19, their turfs were abridged to the confines of homes. It was a total political lockdown.

But 2024 came as a year of change. First, the Lok Sabha poll in April-May. Then the long-awaited assembly election in October. Lifeblood flowed back to normal; Kashmiri politicians plunged headlong into the season of political rebirth. And as all the hectic parleying, all-

iance-making, jousts, scrimmages and voting drew to a close, one man stood taller than others: Omar, the grandson of a man who had a leonine aura in these parts, his own street cred burnished by 232 days of house arrest and a general tone of oppositional politics.

The general election was a mixed bag for Omar. As vice-president of the National Conference (NC), he led his party to victories in two of the three seats it contested, but he suffered a humiliating defeat, by over 200,000 votes, in Baramulla—that too to a maverick independent of separatist lineage, Abdul 'Engineer' Rashid. At first, a dejected Omar thought of sitting out the assembly polls; it took some persuasion for him to change his mind. It was like a minefield out there: a flurry of independents, emboldened by Rashid's win, even former militants under the virtual umbrella of the banned Muslim League, not to speak of an alphabet

The NC government's holy grail is restoration of statehood. Its demand both reflects the street, and helps deflect any anger





AFP

Battle-Ready CM

► **Omar Abdullah led JKNC to victory in two of the three Lok Sabha seats, but himself lost to Abdul Rashid aka 'Engineer' Sheikh from Baramulla**

► **In October, he scripted a comeback by taking the JKNC to victory in the assembly polls in the Jammu & Kashmir Union Territory**

► **In all, NC won 42 of the 56 seats it contested; Omar won both his seats—Ganderbal and Budgam**

► **The new chief minister now faces the challenge of delivering on his main 'guarantees': generating employment, tackling inflation, delivery of free gas and electricity**

soup of King's parties, an army primed to inflict a thousand cuts. An unprecedented 63 per cent turnout—a far cry from the old days of boycotts—was evidence that people thirsted for change. No one could risk predicting which way they would go. But once all the calcu-

lations about fast-mutating political leanings were done, their choice was unequivocal. The NC won 42 of the 56 seats it contested; a mere three short of the 46 required in the new 90-seat assembly. While ally Congress had a poor six, it was good enough. The sweep of its

endorsement was impressive—Omar's party took 35 of the 39 it contested in the Valley, and even seven of its 17 Jammu contests. Icing on the cake: the 54-year-old Abdullah scion won both Ganderbal and Budgam, and was sworn in as the first CM of the Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir on October 16. By any account, a stunning turnaround.

But what Omar has won is only the right to fight a new battle, a more daunting one. Central laws passed in the interim have vested much of the levers of power in the hands of the lieutenant governor—land and citizenship, police, law and order, powers to appoint/transfer top bureaucrats and judicial officers, the Anti-Corruption Bureau, prosecution, prisons. Hence, restoration of statehood becomes a natural demand; the resolution passed soon after Omar took over is both an expression of the sentiment on the street and a means to deflect disenchantment over the expectations he may not be able to meet. He realises that to address immediate issues—high unemployment, inflation, the promised delivery of free gas and electricity—there has to be a modicum of cordiality with the Centre and its representative, LG Manoj Sinha. So he has been treading a cautious path.

Not an easy balance to attain: oppositionality with cordiality. It didn't take long for political rivals to question his conciliatory approach towards New Delhi. Peoples Conference chairman Sajad Lone, for instance, chose one of the moments of temperance to let go this taunt: "The belligerence has been replaced by humiliating visuals of you gifting shawls to the top BJP leadership." To restore its dignity, Omar's administration has sought to wrest some initiative back—a reversion to traditional academic session of October-November in the Valley from the March-April one started by the UT administration; a sub-committee to examine the demand for a tapering down of the 60 per cent reservation; an administrative reshuffle in December. But the holy grail, for now, is statehood. ■

INVOKING THE DIVINE

The Ram temple bathed in laser lights after the consecration ceremony in Ayodhya, Jan. 22



**NEWSMAKERS
2024**

RAM MANDIR
Ayodhya

A MONUMENTAL TRANSITION

It was a symbol of the ownership of space by the Hindu faith—its arrival brought euphoria and fulfilment among the devout. The Ram mandir meant many things to many people, and mirrored all the complexities of modern India

By Avaneesh Mishra



CHANDRADEEP KUMAR

A **s a manifest sign of the psychology of contemporary India—its social and political face, body and self-image—the Ram temple at Ayodhya has few parallels.** The opening of its gates seemed to offer a kind of closure on a key chapter in its evolution. For the devout, a moment of spiritual euphoria and fulfilment. For the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party, a key ideological promise embodied in reality. For others, a symbol of the political power that religion wields in modern India—the event calendar, with a prime minister leading a grand *pran pratishtha* three months before a general election, did nothing to allay those

Structure and Function

- **A towering edifice in the old northern Nagara style of temple architecture, with eclectic 'pan-India' touches**
- **Intricately carved pink Rajasthani sandstone leads up to a black granite Ram idol, done southern style**
- **The temple's foundation stone contains soil and water collected from numerous pilgrimage sites strewn across India**

stark associations. As it happened, the expected electoral harvests didn't quite materialise, and political well-being resulted because Ram was supplemented with latter-day 'Paltu Rams'. Saffron, notably, lost even in Ayodhya. Nor was closure close at hand for the debate on identity—how 'India', as well as 'Hindu', would define themselves. A long-running epic in itself, one that had wracked the polity to its core for decades, it continued to new chapters. Despite express promises that Ayodhya would clinch the deal in India's bargain with itself.

What that left behind is a many-pillared piece of magniloquence in a col-

The Ram temple was finally born, in all its regal effulgence, to realign the 'here and now' of India with its past

lage of traditions: the northern Nagara style of architecture, in pink sandstone from Rajasthan, with a black granite Ram *lalla* idol by a Mysore sculptor, rendered like a southern deity. Also, a medieval holy town yanked to hyper-modernity: new roads cutting through its old neural networks of provincial charm, gleaming infrastructure projects, spanking new airport, five-star hotels, and a newly dawned realty bazaar. Not the sort of concern for the past that would have been preferred by heritage conservationists, who fret about the loss of authenticity. Towering over it all is a grand symbol of an indeterminate time, which is at once old and new. Pilgrims gaze at it in awe and then move on to the older Hanuman Garhi temple for the familiar rituals of worship.

The Ram temple was finally born, in all its regal effulgence, in January 2024. But the essential act it performs is to realign the 'here and now' of India with its past. Which past? The chronology of its birth depends on the observer's eye. The tightest calendar gives you about four years, from the Supreme Court green signal of November 9, 2019. The less de jure gestation period extends from another November 9, this time from 1989—the *shilanyas*—and the cataclysmic Babri Masjid demolition that followed on December 6, 1992. Some will leap back four decades, to the 'appearance' of the Ram idol in the masjid precincts in 1949. Devouts may time-travel all the way back to the Treta Yuga. Those with a less fuzzy historical bent will register the span from the long Buddhist era of Saketa, from circa 600 BC, to the temple-building of 12th century Rajput rulers. Only some of that filtered through in the fraught legal debates that produced more heat than light. Such temperatures provide a conducive habitat to Hindutva, which can be said to have won the day in Ayodhya, despite its own residents deciding otherwise. The temple, in many ways, stands as a mirror reflecting a people's aspirations and complexities. ■

THAT CHAMPION FEELING

After 17 long years of India's maiden win in 2007, Rohit Sharma and his hitmen reach the pinnacle of T20 cricket by lifting the World Cup with their blitzkrieg approach

By Amitabh Srivastava

A cross the world, millions of Indian fans had their heart in their mouth. It was a World Cup final, the final over. And South Africa required only 16 runs, very gettable in the slam-bang T20 format. Things seemed on course for another descent into doom when David Miller lofted a wide full toss from Hardik Pandya. Though not a clean thwack coming off the meat of the bat, the ball soared towards the boundary—it had six written all over its destiny. But Suryakumar Yadav had other plans. Sprinting along the rope, he executed that extraordinary double swoop: catching the ball just inside, flicking it aloft as his momentum propelled him over the boundary, and reclaiming it upon re-entering the field. If Kapil Dev's devilish back-

India was in red hot form in T20s through 2024. It was reflected in their aggressive approach in the World Cup

ward sprint to catch Vivian Richards at mid-wicket became one of the defining moments in the 1983 ODI World Cup final, it was SKY who breached the limits of glory for India in 2024. The tense seven-run win by Rohit Sharma's team had a redemptive ring to it. The heartbreaking loss to Australia in the ODI World Cup final in November 2023 was finally given a decent burial on that late June afternoon at the Kensington Oval in Bridgetown, Barbados.

In truth, it was not just a moment's triumph. The story also lay in how India played through the tournament—a cathartic Super Eight win over Australia added sweetness; England, which ended India's hopes in the T20 WC in 2022, was swept aside easily; and a panicky Pakistan was throttled by the bowlers in a low-scoring game. With seven consecutive wins, India had marched unbeaten to the finals—the first T20 World Cup victors to do so. The winning formula: a cast iron bowling



Top of the World

► India is the first team to win the T20 World Cup after remaining undefeated in all its eight matches in the tournament

► Rohit Sharma with 257 runs and Arshdeep Singh with 17 wickets were India's top performers

► In 2024, India scored its highest T20 total, posting 297/6 against Bangladesh in Hyderabad in October, following it up with 283/1, its second highest, against South Africa in Johannesburg

► The last time India won the T20 World Cup was in 2007, under M.S. Dhoni's captaincy. They beat Pakistan by five runs in the final in Johannesburg

attack led by the incomparable Jasprit Bumrah and a fluid batting order that visited ultraviolence upon hapless opposition bowlers.

The day also capped the T20 International careers of icons Rohit Sharma and Virat Kohli (who came good with a top score of 76 in the final), as also long-time all-purpose handyman Ravindra Jadeja—they chose this high as a fitting occasion to hand over the baton to the next generation in the shortest format of the game. It was also farewell time for head coach Rahul Dravid, who broke his usual stoicism with fist pumps, roars of jubilation and a bout of prancing with the boys. Understandable, for this was only India's second T20 WC triumph after

their dramatic win in the inaugural 2007 edition. Also, its first ICC World Cup title in a full 13 years—the wait had been getting unbearably long since the 2011 ODI cup, seeing as how these were the prime years of the Kohli-Sharma duo.

On paper, the win was not a fluke. India are always seen as contenders; they'd also won all their five bilateral T20I series in 2024—even if four were against Afghanistan, Zimbabwe, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, with only South Africa posing a threat. In fact, India had lost only two T20 matches in the entire year. But with the World Cup in their trophy cabinet, India actually redefined what domination looked like in T20s—that 92.31 per cent win rate won its own legit bragging rights. Statistically, that domination was writ large in an aggressive batting philosophy—a boundary scored every 4.68 balls through 2024, with seven centuries, and the 200-run mark breached nine times—an unprecedented feat in men's T20s. With the ball, too, India were relentless, accurate, disciplined—bowling out opponents in 10 of their 26 matches, and averaging 8.39 wickets per innings.

The sweetness also shone in contrast to the sour notes in other formats in 2024. Yes, there was a masterly 4-1 Test series win over England and a composed 2-0 sweep of Bangladesh later. Yet these were juxtaposed with glaring setbacks, including a surprising ODI series defeat to Sri Lanka in August and an unprecedented 3-0 Test series loss to New Zealand on home soil. It was thus a year of contradictions—periods of unbridled excellence tempered by a frustrating fallibility. Consistency—that's a worthy goal for Team India in 2025. ■



AFP

SHOOTING QUEEN

Manu Bhaker scripted a classic turnaround at Paris 2024, putting the ghosts of the past behind her through sheer willpower to engrave her own destiny

By Suhani Singh

I

In recent years, the hunting has been good, the posse of young Indians who have arrived on the global stage toting their guns, lighting up shooting ranges across the world. Yet, there's been a blip in that upbeat narrative—they underperformed at the most important event of all. Abhinav Bindra's gold at Beijing 2008 had set a new benchmark. But for two consecutive Olympics thereafter, India's shooting squad misfired so much that expectations were modest from the young shooters bound for the 2024 Paris Games. Manu

Picture of Contentment
Manu Bhaker with the bronze medal in the 10 metre air pistol event at the Paris Olympics



Bhaker had already starred in one such tragedy: at Tokyo 2020, both her pistol and her poise betrayed her. Returning empty-handed, facing a volley of sarcastic gunfire, and most of all haunted by her own sense of failure, she almost gave up on shooting. Never mind that she was all of 19 and had already accomplished a lot in the international arena. Failure to turn up for the big occasion has unravelled many a bright star. But not Manu. After healing her bruises with a touch of spiritual recouping, she decided she was in no mood to be remembered as the girl who missed.

The Manu who headed to Chateauroux, France, was a markedly new, internally recomposed person. Here was a 22-year-old woman who possessed nerves of steel, a no-nonsense mind, and unstinting help from personal coach Jaspal Rana. About a month of training and acclimatisation at allied ranges preceded the pivotal qualification stage. When the curtains drew back, the world saw a shooter with the accuracy of a grizzled hitman in a Hollywood spy caper. The lethal combination hit bull's eye once, then a second time. She became India's first female shooter to ever win an Olympic medal. Her two bronzes—one solo, one teaming up with Sarabjot Singh in the mixed team 10m air pistol event—buoyed the spirits of a nation that had become accustomed to seeing its athletes come close to the Olympic podium, only to falter at the finish line. In fact, Manu almost gave them three cheers, coming agonisingly close to a bronze in 25m solo.

What makes her story worthy of a biopic—one in which she can conceivably play herself someday—is the classic narrative theme of a near-breakdown followed by an in-

Right On Target

► **In the Paris Olympics, Manu Bhaker won two bronze medals—one in the individual 10m air pistol event, and another in the 10m air pistol mixed team event with Sarabjot Singh**

► **She became the first Indian female shooter to win an Olympic medal**

► **She is also the only Indian athlete, male or female, to win two medals in a single Olympic games**

► **When not training/competing, Manu loves to go horse-riding, solve puzzles, dance, work out, go for a run or go on a drive with friends**

pies. Supporting characters include a mother who battles patriarchy and demands discipline from her kids and a doting father who is away at sea as a merchant navy engineer but happily funds his talented daughter's passion. A climax in Paris, under the world's gaze, tops it—at least for now.

In her personal life, Manu was empowered enough to convince her father to get an apartment close to the Karni Singh shooting range in Faridabad. Behind the stoic exterior usual in shooters is also a young woman who loves to shop, dress up and favours *ghar ka khaana* over eating out. She comes across as owning a maturity belying her age, fine-tuning her appearance on and off the range: she prefers muted make-up, but is serenely comfortable in the often blinding spotlight that has transformed her into a pin-up star for Indian sport. Or a "national crush", as some like to call her. After her Parisian exploits, she walked the ramp, posed for magazine covers and handled the

Manu speaks with a maturity that belies her age, and is serenely confident in the spotlight that has transformed her into a pin-up for Indian sport

spirational comeback against all odds. The dramatic elements of conflict and glorious resolution are all there—a protagonist who identifies her frailties and works on them, and who recognises that the only person who can bring the best out of her is the very guru (Rana) who had aggrieved her a few years back. She extends him the olive branch and, after a year or so of being upstaged by younger compatriots, sweeps the field at crunch hour—the national trials for the Olym-

piad demands of nation-wide fame with an innate poise and balance.

In 2024, Manu scripted a classic turnaround. Like all the down-and-out protagonists of sports biopics, Manu couldn't have predicted the heights she would climb. The central scene captures that. In which, head held high, with rousing orchestral music playing in the background, she carries the Indian flag at the closing ceremony of the Olympics. ■

THE GRAND TOUR

Diljit Dosanjh performs
in Paris, Sept. 19



AP

**NEWSMAKERS
2024**

**DILJIT
DOSANJH 40**
Singer & Actor

THE NEW POP ICON

From electrifying global stages to breaking linguistic barriers and redefining Punjabi pride, Diljit Dosanjh proved that true artistry transcends borders and genres

By Suhani Singh

E

verybody wanted a piece of Diljit Dosanjh in 2024. The Ambanis did, for their son Anant's big pre-wedding bash in Vantara, where the Punjabi singer followed Rihanna's act and still had the who's who of India jumping on their feet. The filmmakers of *Kalki 2898 AD*, *Jigra*, *Bhool Bhulaiyaa 3* and *Baby John* did. As all had a Diljit single on their soundtracks. And then there were thousands who came to see him perform live during his 'Dil-Luminati' tour—both in India and abroad.

Beyond the energetic atmosphere he creates in these evenings, Diljit's biggest success lies in how far he has taken Punjabi pop within India. Concerts in cities like Hyderabad, Ahmedabad, Kolkata and Guwahati show that



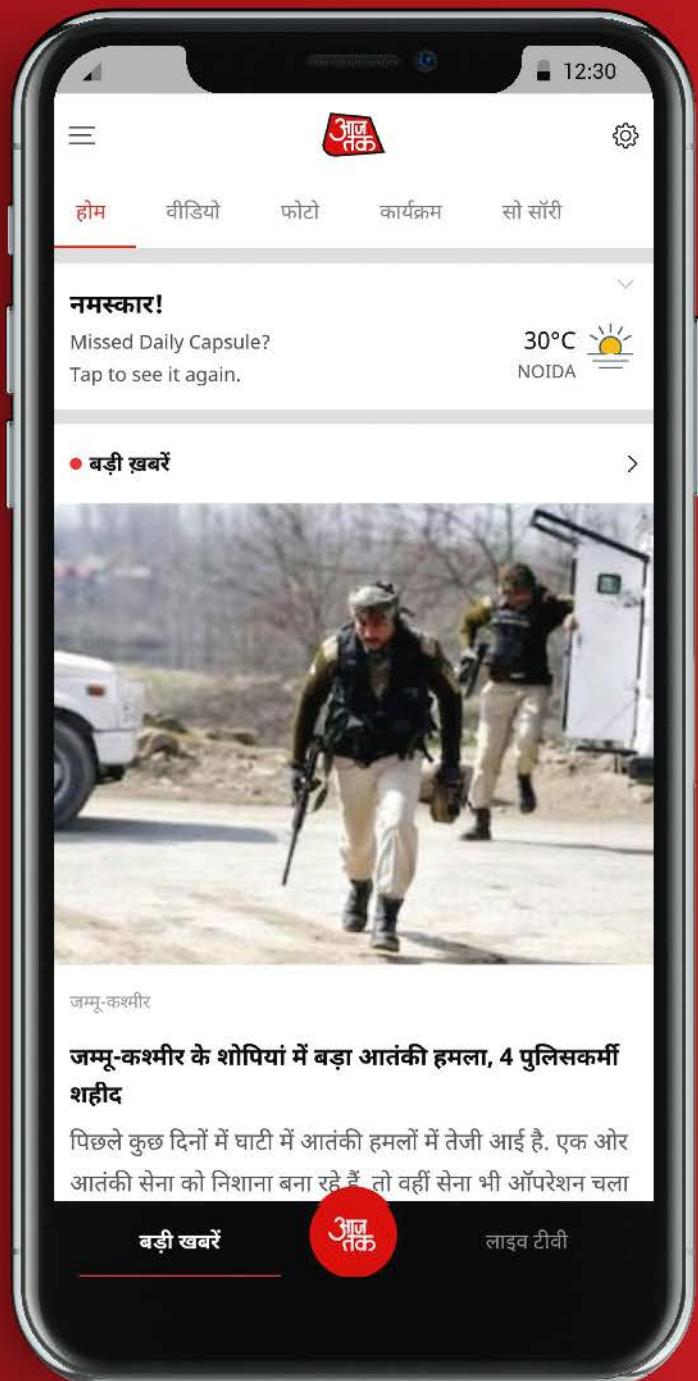
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Born to Shine

Among India's most successful pop culture exports, Diljit Dosanjh regaled audiences across America, Europe and Australia during his 'Dil-Luminati' tour

Even performed two of his songs—'Born to Shine' and 'G.O.A.T.'—on the American late-night show hosted by Jimmy Fallon

Back home, he broke linguistic barriers,

performing in jam-packed venues across India, and set off a trend of similar concert tours by other Punjabi artistes

A fine actor, Diljit wowed audiences with his portrayal of Punjabi musician Amar Singh Chamkila in the eponymous biopic on Netflix; also broke box-office records with the third instalment of his Punjabi rom-com *Jatt & Juliet*



GETTY IMAGES

he's the rare north Indian artiste whose music transcends linguistic barriers, with even non-Punjabis singing along, word for word. And he has this ability to strike a chord with audiences anywhere in India, even while conversing in a mix of Punjabi and Hindi. That's the reason why, by the end of Dil-Luminati's successful run, his chant "*Main Hoon Punjab*" (I am Punjab) had become a powerful declaration as much as a sartorial statement.

All year round, Diljit turned heads the way only he can. In an election year when there was no escaping divisive politics, he showed why art is the great unifier. "*Punjabiyan de dilan ich sabde layi pyar ae* (There is love for all in the hearts of every Punjabi)," he said after gifting his shoes to a Pakistani fan at a concert in Manchester, UK. Back in India, he 'politely' called out state governments for moral policing and notices that had warned him to avoid songs glorifying drugs and alcohol. When social

In the crowded entertainment ecosystem where it often becomes hard to separate one voice from another, Diljit is an all-rounder who regales the audience with his talent, persona and chutzpah

media was flooded with posts decrying poor concert infrastructure, he too backed his fans, even warning that he'd stop performing in India unless the situation was rectified.

In the crowded entertainment ecosystem where it often becomes hard to separate one voice from another, Diljit

is an all-rounder, an artiste who regales the audience with his talent, persona and chutzpah. The American late-night talk show host Jimmy Fallon called him "the biggest Punjabi artiste on the planet" as Diljit tried to teach him a word or two in his mother tongue.

Plucky but without being outwardly anti-establishment and offensive, Diljit won hearts not just as a singer but even as an actor. His portrayal of Amar Singh Chamkila in Imtiaz Ali's eponymous Netflix film was pitch perfect, channelling the artist's humanity as much as his innate talent and sincerity towards his art. Back home in Punjab, he broke box-office records with the third instalment of his 12-year-old romantic comedy franchise *Jatt & Juliet*.

Diljit may not have featured in Spotify's most streamed artist or even the song list for 2024, but his peppy playlist kept crowds on their feet—at concerts, house parties and weddings. His success is proof that art without artifice sells. It's why one can't help but root for Diljit. ■

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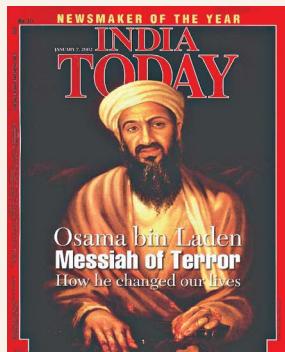


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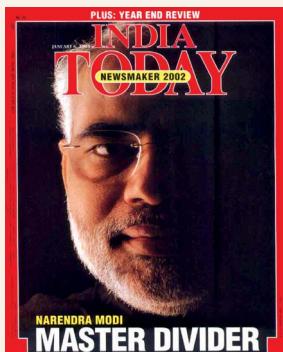
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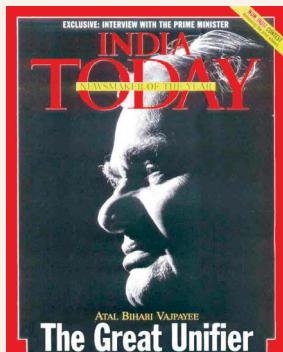
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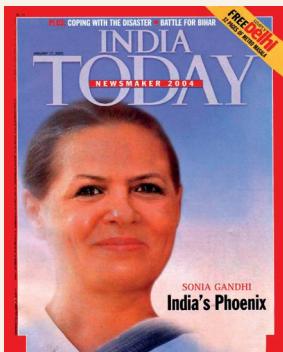
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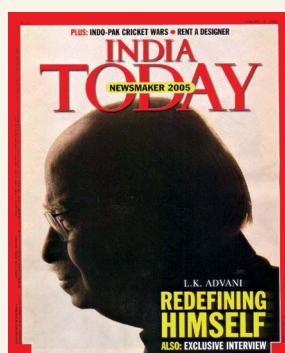
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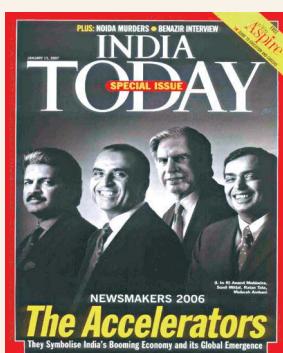
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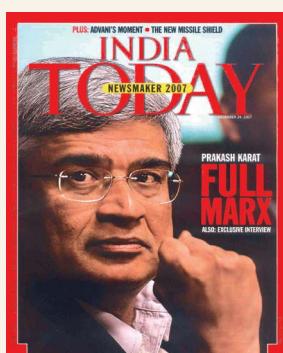
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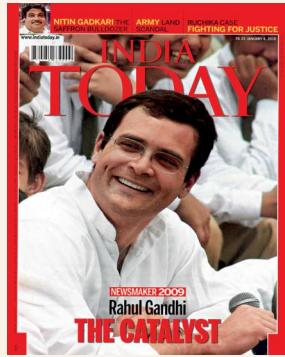
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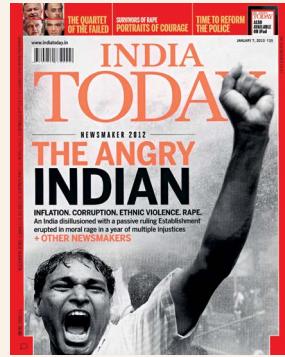
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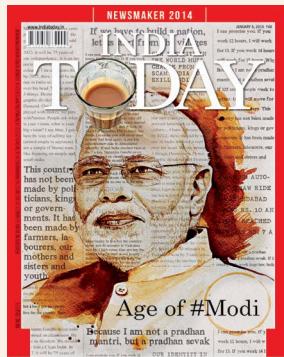
The Angry Indian

2012



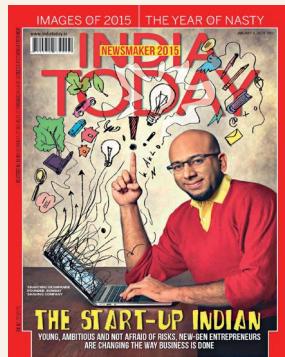
Arvind Kejriwal

2013



Narendra Modi

2014



The Start-up Indian

2015



Narendra Modi

2016



Virat Kohli

2017



Rahul Gandhi

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2019



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2020



Krishna Ella and Adar Poonawalla

2021



Gautam Adani

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Narendra Modi

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The Young Grandmasters

2024

Delhi's Belly

Academic, historian and one of India's most-loved food writers, PUSHPESH PANT'S latest book—*From the King's Table to Street Food: A Food History of Delhi*—delves deep into the capital's culinary heritage

Q. A recurring track in the book is your 'becoming' a Delhiwallah, discovering the city's culinary pleasures...

I came from the hills to Delhi as a young person and when you're young and newly independent, you are enthralled by all the new places you can visit and foods you can try. As for Delhi, you could say I tasted the food before I experienced the city... we sometimes had sweets and other foodstuff sent to us from Delhi's most famous shops.

Q. How important has migrant food been in shaping the culinary landscape of Delhi?

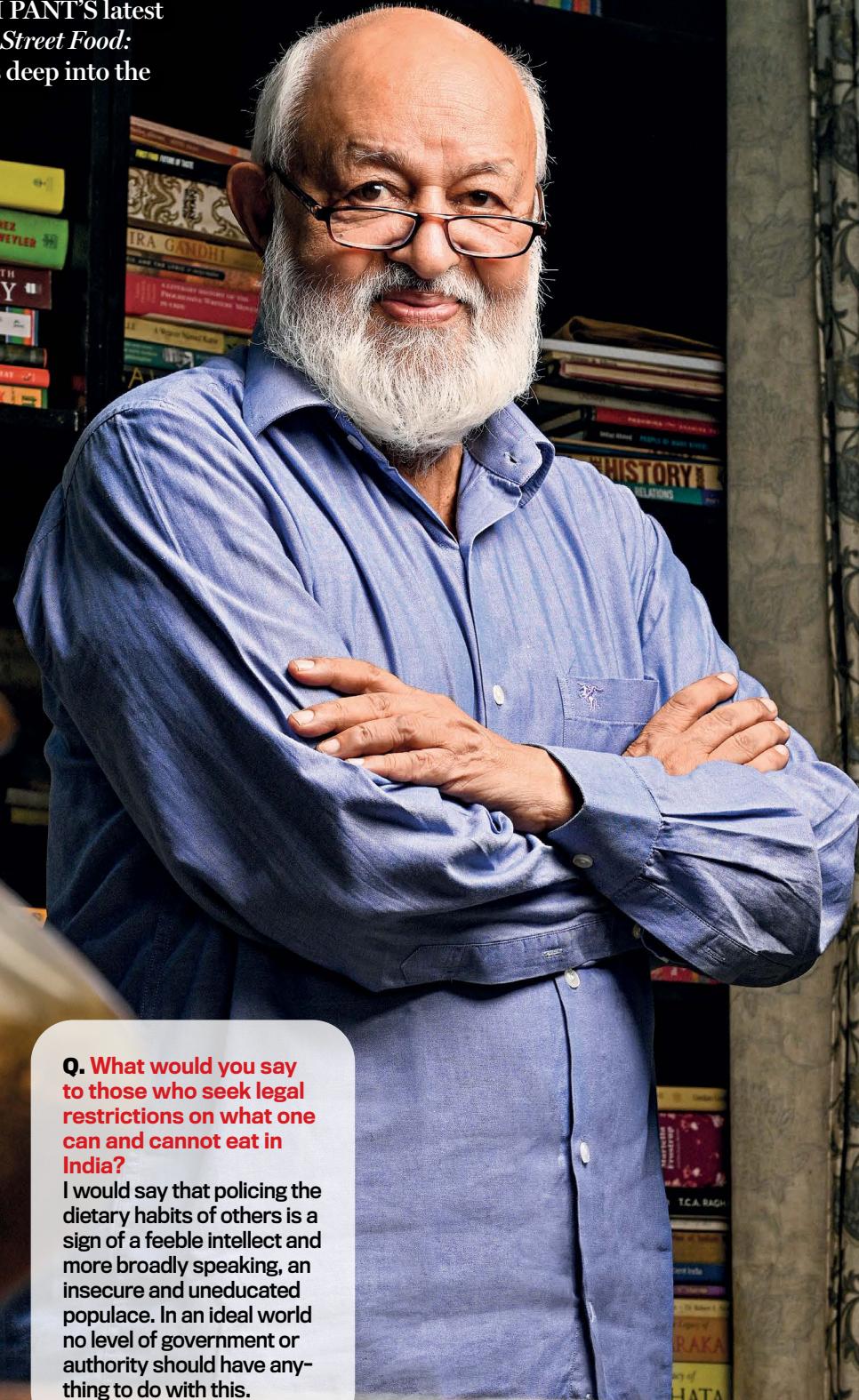
Extremely important. Today in Delhi if you're a Bihari or a Malayali or a Bengali professional, you need not be deprived of the food that you've grown up with. There are so many options.

Q. A passage dwells on the PRRM (Price Rise Resistance Movement) Coffee House in the late 1960s—an old favourite of yours, safe to say?

Indeed. You could get a hearty meal for as little as 50 paise and so it was a favoured venue for writers, actors, intellectuals who usually didn't have a whole lot of money. I made lifelong friends there, before it was demolished during the Emergency.

Q. What would you say to those who seek legal restrictions on what one can and cannot eat in India?

I would say that policing the dietary habits of others is a sign of a feeble intellect and more broadly speaking, an insecure and uneducated populace. In an ideal world no level of government or authority should have anything to do with this.



Photograph by RAJWANT RAWAT

—with Aditya Mani Jha

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