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INDIA TODAY

UNCLE DON DOESN'T WANT YOU

THE DAMAGE DONALD TRUMP'S RADICAL IMMIGRATION PROPOSALS COULD INFLICT ON INDIAN JOB-SEEKERS AND THE ACTION INDIA NEEDS TO TAKE

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FROM THE

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

The second coming of Donald Trump is being received across the world as an unstamped visa to an uncertain future. One thing about it is certain: Trump will unveil a radical immigration policy post haste. His chief rallying cry was how migrants are taking away jobs from Americans, besides being responsible for rising crime. There are two categories of Indians, very different from each other, in the direct line of fire. The unfortunate ones are those who have chased the American Dream using the common legal route: the H-1B visa. An estimated one million Indians figure in this ledger, if you count dependants. The other is more dubious: a large pack of illegal immigrants, said to be about 725,000.

With Trump promising the largest-ever mass deportations of illegal immigrants on his first day in office, the Indian government is all braced for a major political headache. Some 17,940 Indians, who have exhausted all legal recourse, might find themselves on that humiliating first flight home. New Delhi may have to handle the embarrassing spectacle of a mass of economic refugees returning. Alarm bells are also ringing in the Indian software industry. In FY24, the US accounted for 54 per cent of their total $205 billion exports. Onshore operations on American soil are an existential necessity for them, and the H-1B visa a primary enabler. At its worst, a radical tightening of the H-1B policy can become a wrecking ball for the main trans-Atlantic bridge for Indians. For years, they have cornered about 70 per cent of the 85,000 H-1B visas issued annually. They see this gate narrowing amidst a volatile war of words about immigration that's heating up the US public sphere.

November 18, 2024

The contours of the debate show even Trump has a tricky balancing act ahead. His part of the political landscape is split right down the middle. Paradoxically, a bevy of influential H-1B enthusiasts lines Trump's core retinue. Among them is the world's richest man, Elon Musk, who himself is an H-1B beneficiary of South African origin and is now co-chair of Trump's planned Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE). He has unambiguously thrown his weight behind the Indian camp: there's an apparent convergence of views here with the US tech industry, which is hungry for skilled talent. Ranged against them are the vehement H-1B antagonists who make up Trump's angry White constituency, especially the 'Make America Great Again' (MAGA) movement he has fostered. For the MAGA stormtroopers, bred on Trump's anti-immigrant dog-whistling, H-1B is the very antithesis of his 'America First' agenda. This camp has no dearth of provocateurs either. For instance, former Trump strategist Steve Bannon threatened to have "Elon Musk kicked out before the inauguration". The MAGA critique is that corporations have gamed the system to bring in foreign "indentured servants" at lesser pay, displacing skilled Americans. Interestingly, this was supported by the endorsement of even arch-leftist Bernie Sanders, who pointed to 85,000 American layoffs in 2022-23, even as big corporations hired 34,000 H-1B workers.

With the rhetoric rife with racist stereotypes, those thrown into turmoil include the 330,000-odd Indian students at US universities. Indeed, none among the whole cohort of Indians in the US can claim to have their equilibrium intact. Not those in the long queue for Green Card status, a list that presently features even tech luminaries like Perplexity AI co-founder Aravind Srinivas, an IIT Madras alumnus. Nor even second-gen Indian Americans like Cincinnati-born entrepreneur Vivek Ramaswamy, Musk's partner at DOGE, who stirred a hornet's nest with his quip that American culture has "venerated mediocrity over excellence for way too long".

Which way will Trump go? He is beholden to his libertarian, 'anti-system' tech pals. Nor can he antagonise his MAGA base. Caught in the middle, he seems to be discovering the virtues of nuance. Tempered by the blowback, Musk advocates a variation of the policy followed in Trump's first term. Between 2017 and 2021, US employers faced deterrents in a higher wage norm and tight application reviews that greenlighted only the "most skilled". The denial rate touched 24 per cent, a peak shown up by the subsequent plunge to 2-4 per cent under the Biden presidency. The likeliest scenario: the Trumpian iron fist being reserved for illegal immigrants while a velvet glove reorders the H-1B policy in a graded manner. Entry-level Indian recruits may become costly for US companies, as the turnstiles only let in top-tier professionals. The disruptive prospect of well-settled professionals having to leave the US is not off the table.

The Modi government must treat this crisis as an opportunity to reposition India as a job haven, not a sinkhole everyone wants to exit. Fostering the Global Capability Centre (GCC) boom has seen success in harnessing tech talent at home. Indian software majors, too, will return to the more balanced hiring practices they had during Trump 1.0. Both must ideate on bolder measures to turn India into a global hub. For the magic carpet for US-bound Indians threatens to shrink, if not entirely vanish.

(Aroon Purie)

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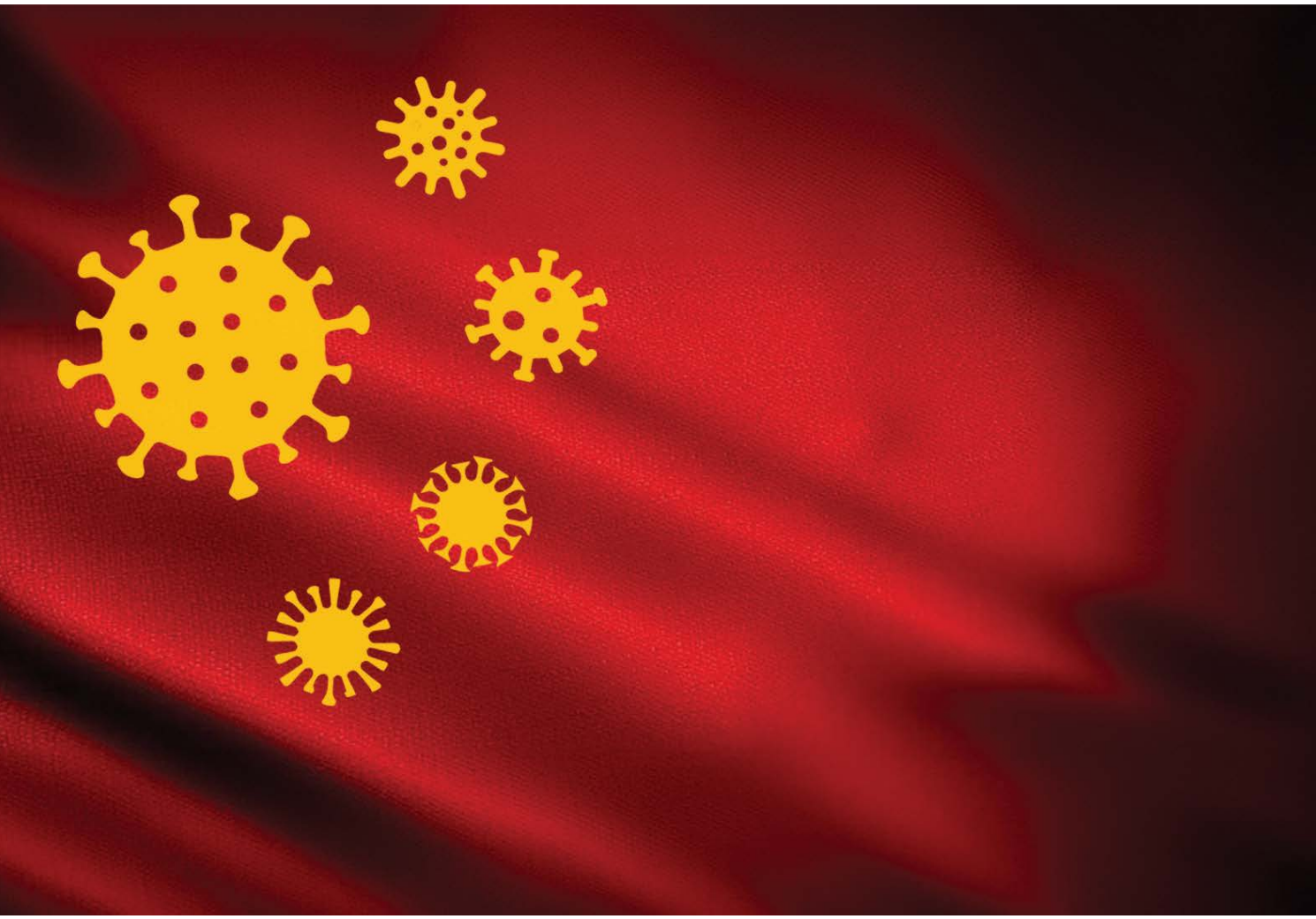

HMPV

VIRAL FEAR RISES ANEW

By Sonali Acharjee

The fear is not an irrational one—it's just the other day that the spectre of Covid-19 was harassing the whole world. So as China reports a spike in respiratory illnesses, the memories of planetary disruption have come rushing back. Beijing dismisses the growing number of Influenza A, Human metapneumovirus (hMPV), Mycoplasma pneumoniae and Covid-19 cases as a routine "winter occurrence" and withholds an official count. But tiny warning bells are beginning to ring everywhere, including in India. While all these infections are indeed seasonal, reports on social media and from medical facilities suggest a significant outbreak of multiple microbes in China, and a newsworthy level of burden on the country's healthcare system. The usual winter illnesses are suddenly beginning to look a trifle unusual.

If it's any consolation, none of these

Illustration by NILANJAN DAS

आज तक

देश का नं. 1 हिंदी न्यूज़ ऐप

जुड़े रहिए हर खबर से,
कहीं भी, कभी भी

अभी डाउनलोड करें

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pathogens is a novelty. Influenza A, for example, is a familiar strain of the virus that is a leading cause of seasonal flu epidemics in the world. Mycoplasma pneumoniae is a bacteria that causes "walking pneumonia", a milder form of pneumonia. The virus that presently seems to be spreading the fastest in China—Human metapneumovirus (hMPV)—is also a common winter infection that has been around since at least 2001.

But though the cause of the current spike in China remains as yet undetermined, the experts' concerns stem from the fact that all the reported symptoms are flu-like—cold, fever, fatigue and bodyache—making them wonder if the world could be looking at an altogether new virus, or a new, more infectious strain of an old one. Those concerns took root in India as well as it reported its first cases of hMPV—two in Bengaluru, in a three-month-old girl and an eight-month-old boy, and one in Ahmedabad, in a two-month-old child.

Like its other cousins in the *Pneumoviridae* family of viruses, hMPV, too, affects the human lungs and airways, particularly in children under 14. It was first isolated in the Netherlands. There is no medication or vaccine for it as yet, only simple rest and symptomatic treatment. It can become a risk factor in very young children, the elderly and the immunocompromised.

"The infection is more common among neonates (infants less than four weeks old) and infants (children aged under one). It has also been reported in large numbers among elderly people," says Dr Raja Dhar, head of the department of pulmonology at CMRI Hospital, Kolkata. Ominously, his practice suggests to him "a significantly large" spread of hMPV in India. "As an adult pulmonologist, two out of 10 patients who visit me have traits of metapneumovirus. It is crucial to note that infections caused due to metapneumovirus coupled with other bacterial infections can lead to serious respiratory conditions," he says. Asked whether the world could be staring at a pandemic-like situation as with Covid-19, the doctor says we should always stay prepared to combat any infection that is spreading on a mass scale.

A NEW THREAT CALLED HMPV

COUNTERING A SPIKE Patients get immunotherapy at a Shanghai hospital, Dec. 27, 2024

AP

- **Belongs to a family of viruses called *Pneumoviridae***
- **Was first isolated in the Netherlands in 2001**
- **Affects the respiratory tract and manifests in flu-like symptoms**
- **Usually afflicts young children under 14 years of age**
- **Has no medication for cure or vaccine for prevention. Treatment is aymptomatic, along with rest**
- **China is seeing a surge in cases since December. India has reported first few cases in three infants**

IS A NEW MUTANT IN PLAY OR AN ENTIRELY NEW VIRUS? INDIA HAS REPORTED NO SURGE, BUT CLINICAL EVIDENCE ALREADY SUGGESTS A WIDE PRESENCE OF HMPV

As a precautionary measure, the Union ministry of health and family welfare (MoHFW) convened a Joint Monitoring Group (JMG) meeting in the first week of January under the chairmanship of the Directorate General of Health Services to discuss the situation. "These viruses are already in circulation globally, including in India. A robust surveillance system for Influenza Like Illness (ILI) and Severe Acute Respiratory Illness (SARI) for Influenza is already in place in India and the data from both indicate no unusual surge in ILI and SARI cases. Physicians from hospitals also confirmed that there is no surge in respiratory illness cases in

the past few weeks other than the expected seasonal variation," a report from the MoHFW after the meeting noted.

But unwilling to take any chances, India is ramping up the number of laboratories testing hMPV cases, and the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) will be monitoring trends of hMPV for the entire year. "At CMRI Kolkata," Dr Dhar reveals, "about 10-15 per cent of the total patients admitted to the ICU have metapneumovirus infection. I believe all hospitals, be it private or public, should have such preparedness and strategies in place to collaboratively fight the outbreak of the infection in India."

Karnataka has already issued an advisory exhorting people not to panic but be aware and mindful. It outlines the key characteristics of the virus, its symptoms and transmission and advocates important preventive measures. Meanwhile, the health authorities in Andhra Pradesh and Delhi have also urged local residents to observe caution as well as hygiene.

While the present outbreak seems to warrant nothing more than monitoring and caution at the moment, experts cannot emphasise enough the need to strengthen pandemic preparedness systems. This means healthcare infrastructure has to be in place to predict outbreaks, diagnose them and treat them on a large scale, if need be. India has seen a number of localised viral outbreaks—Mpox, Nipah, Chandipura—in the past year, a sign that more frequent human-animal interaction and changing climate conditions mean that another Covid-like pandemic is a possibility that the world will now never be able to discount. ■

WEST BENGAL

Mamata's Border Outburst

SPEWING FIRE West Bengal CM Mamata Banerjee

PTI

By Arkamoy Datta Majumdar

With heightened scrutiny of West Bengal's border security following arrests of alleged terror operatives over the past fortnight, the heated debate over "illegal migration" from Bangladesh has undergone a curious rhetorical inversion. Stung by the criticism, West Bengal chief minister Mamata Banerjee and her nephew, Abhishek Banerjee, the Trinamool Congress (TMC) national general secretary, launched a scathing counter-attack on the Union government and the Border Security Force (BSF). Their charge: central complicity in allowing illegal immigration from Bangladesh through Bengal's porous borders to "destabilise the state".

After the West Bengal Special Task Force and the Assam Police arrested four suspected terrorists of the outlawed Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT) from Murshidabad on December 18 and 30, the opposition BJP has been relentless in accusing the state government of failing to curb illegal immigration. Leader of the Opposition and BJP leader Suvendu Adhikari accused the TMC government of hindering the acquisition of land along the Bangladesh border by the BSF for building checkposts and other infrastructure. Union minister and Bengal BJP chief Sukanta Majumdar accused Mamata of making Bengal "a safe haven for terrorists".

THE BJP HAS ALLEGED THAT THE BSF IS NOT BEING GIVEN LAND TO BUILD BORDER CHECKPOSTS

Speaking at the state secretariat during the year's first administrative review meeting on January 2, Mamata hit back. "We have

information that the BSF is allowing people to enter through Islampur, Sitai, Chopra and many other places," she said. Deflecting blame from her party for the influx of "goons", she added, "Borders are not in our hands; they are controlled by the BSF.... If anyone thinks they can allow illegal immigration in Bengal and then accuse the Trinamool, let me make it clear: TMC is not responsible for this." Abhishek, speaking at an event in his Diamond Harbour constituency, echoed Mamata word for word. As Majumdar hit back, saying Mamata was "delusional" in blaming the central paramilitary force, , it was clear the long war of words between the TMC government and the Centre had entered a fresh chapter.

However, another scandal—possibly linked to illegal immigration—has sent shockwaves through Bengal: the discovery of nearly 250 passports issued without proper verification, exposing lapses in the state's passport system. The arrest of nine individuals, allegedly involved in a racket centred around creating false documents to facilitate fake passports, has pushed state authorities to call for an overhaul of the verification process.

Bengal's police chief Rajeev Kumar has written to the ministry of external affairs, advocating stricter verification and distribution protocols. He also issued directives for formally scaling up local police verifications, marking a shift in the responsibility traditionally held by district intelligence branches of the state police, who also give the final approval to applicants' documents. Now, senior police officials like superintendents of police and deputy commissioners will oversee the process. "We are changing the entire approach to passport issuance," Kumar declared at a press conference on December 29. He acknowledged that while passport authorities have accelerated processes to meet growing demands, ensuring security and accuracy must remain paramount.

Bangladesh, slipping into turmoil after the recent popular coup, has seen a mini-exodus of political refugees. In India, though, that has found a matching spike in xenophobic rhetoric, marked by 'busting of gangs' and arrests of alleged terrorists. Bengal's actions are an attempt to be in sync with that norm.

Its probe achieved a breakthrough with the arrest of Manoj Gupta, the alleged mastermind, in Gaighata, North 24 Parganas, on December 28. Operating under the guise of a travel agent, Gupta is believed to have orchestrated the production of fake identity documents, enabling foreign nationals—primarily Bangladeshis—to obtain Indian passports. Another person involved in the racket, former policeman Abdul Hai, was arrested from Kamarpur in North 24 Parganas on January 3 and Rs 12.5 lakh was recovered from his bank account. He allegedly received the amount as bribes for approving passport applications with fake documents.

Internal audits at the Kolkata passport office revealed that around 240 passports based on forged documents were issued, with police overlooking discrepancies during verification. Following a complaint from the passport office, Kolkata Police launched a probe that uncovered the racket. Politics aside, a more robust system of vigilance and accountability will be essential to restore public trust in the process. ■

DRAWING NO LINES

- **The state BJP accuses the TMC government of turning Bengal into a "safe haven" for extremists**
- **Mamata and Abhishek, in turn, accuse New Delhi of facilitating the influx to destabilise state**
- **The recent turmoil in Bangladesh has spiked immigration numbers, heightening scrutiny**
- **A passport racket was busted on Dec. 28 amidst terror fears**

FOULED ENTRY BSF jawans detain Bangladeshis who were trying to cross into India with fake Aadhaar cards, Oct. 15, 2024

MEN WHO MATTER From left, Bihar CM Nitish Kumar, RJD patriarch Lalu Yadav with son Tejaswi Yadav

Photographs: **ANI**

BIHAR

LALU'S OLIVE BRANCH GAMBIT

By Amitabh Srivastava

Winter may be intensifying in Bihar but the state's political climate is anything but cool. On December 30, Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) patriarch Lalu Prasad Yadav extended an unexpected olive branch to Chief Minister Nitish Kumar, offering to "forgive" his volte-faces and keeping the "doors always open" for reconciliation. With Nitish as well as Lalu's son Tejaswi Yadav ruling out any such reconciliation, this dramatic overture has injected fresh intrigue into Bihar's evolving political script ahead of the assembly election due later this year.

The timing is notable. Nitish's Janata Dal (United) has been asserting its leadership ambitions with a vigour that leaves little room for ambiguity. On December 21, the party flooded social media with bold declarations like *'Jab baat Bihar ki ho, naam sirf Nitish Kumar ka ho* (When it comes to Bihar, only Nitish Kumar matters)'. It was widely interpreted as a retort to Union home minister Amit Shah's recent comments, which hinted at a potential change in the Bharatiya Janata Party's strategy for Bihar. As it fuelled speculations about a Maharashtra-style shake-up, the BJP quickly announced that Nitish would lead the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) into the 2025 state election.

Lalu's gesture, far from a casual overture, serves as a sharp reminder of the BJP's rocky history with its allies. The 2020 assembly election is a case in point, when Chirag Paswan's Lok Janshakti Party fielded candidates against the JD(U), undercutting Nitish's prospects. While the JD(U) then emerged with only 43 seats in the 243-member Vidhan Sabha, the 2024 Lok Sabha election told a different story—the party led in 74 assembly segments, outpacing the BJP's 68 and the RJD's 35. The numbers also undergird Nitish's significance within the NDA, particularly for Prime Minister Narendra Modi, whose government's parliamentary majority is well short of the halfway mark.

The divergence between Lalu and Tejaswi's public stances adds another layer to this drama. "Nitish Kumar's days are over," declared Tejaswi, rejecting any talk of reconciliation. A calculated dual strategy seems to be at play, more than any serious difference of opinion. While Lalu remains rooted in

WHERE THEY STAND

- **RJD patriatch Lalu Yadav says his "doors always open" for CM Nitish Kumar. But son Tejaswi Yadav firmly rejects any reconciliation**
- **Nitish, too, rules out the possibility of quitting the NDA; the BJP has officially declared that he will lead the alliance into the 2025 polls**

caste-based politics, convinced of the enduring strength of an RJD-JD(U) alliance, his son is focusing on a more inclusive voter base.

Tejaswi's 2020 campaign showcased his ability to transcend the RJD's traditional Muslim-Yadav base, winning 39 per cent votes in the 144 seats it contested. Now, buoyed by his partial success in drawing Kushwaha voters—Nitish's staunch supporters—into the RJD fold during the Lok Sabha election, Tejaswi has doubled down on his outreach efforts. His recent pre-poll promise to launch a gender-centric

THE DIVERGENCE BETWEEN LALU AND TEJASWI'S PUBLIC STANCES HINTS AT A CALCULATED DUAL STRATEGY RATHER THAN A DIFFERENCE OF OPINION

scheme—Mai Behan Maan Yojana—for a monthly cash transfer of Rs 2,500 to women mirrors similar initiatives that have reaped rich electoral dividends in Maharashtra and Jharkhand. With women's turnout in Bihar steadily climbing—59.39 per cent in the 2024 Lok Sabha polls, compared to 53.28 per cent for men—this strategy aims to dismantle Nitish's longstanding rapport with this crucial constituency.

Nitish, on his part, has ruled out the possibility of quitting the NDA, terming his two short-lived alliances with the RJD-Congress combine as a "mistake". But his career epitomises political adaptability, as he has been navigating the shifting sands of Bihar's political landscape with a supreme survivor's instinct. The road to 2025 promises to be a gripping battle of strategy and ambition, where alliances may shift and loyalties could once again be tested. ■

DIGITAL PERSONAL DATA PROTECTION

KEEPING PRIVACY PARAMOUNT

The draft rules unveiled by the Centre under the Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023, are set to reshape digital behaviour, access and data privacy for all Indians

By Kaushik Deka | *Graphic by* TANMOY CHAKRABORTY

WHAT THE KEY RULES ARE

INFORMED CONSENT: The rules now require apps to explain in simple language what data they'll collect and why—like your location for curated playlists in case of music apps. No more hidden clauses in fine print

PARENTAL CONSENT FOR MINORS: If anyone aged under 18 years wants to create an account on, say, a gaming app, the parent must provide a verifiable consent

CONSENT MANAGERS In case you have shared data with an e-commerce website, you can use this tool to revoke permissions if you are no longer comfortable with how your data is being used

STRONGER SECURITY: Firms are now obligated to implement advanced security measures. For instance, a shopping app must encrypt your payment data and track access logs to detect unauthorised access

IMMEDIATE BREACH ALERT If your personal data is compromised, firms must notify you promptly with actionable steps

DATA RETENTION AND ERASURE Data fiduciaries* can no longer hoard your data indefinitely. So, if you stop using a food delivery app, it must delete your data after three years unless legally required to retain it

LOCALISATION Your personal data is safer within Indian borders. So, a health app storing medical records will have to comply with government guidelines if it wants to transfer this data to a server abroad

PROTECTIONS FOR CHILDREN'S DATA: For educational apps, tracking and monitoring of children's behaviour is restricted to safety or educational purposes. So, a school app can monitor attendance but cannot sell this data to advertisers

TRANSPARENCY Suppose you're curious about how a streaming platform uses your viewing history, you'll now find easy-to-understand policies and contacts for queries

ACCOUNTABILITY Data fiduciaries must document and audit their processes regularly. For instance, a financial institution must ensure its algorithms for approving loans don't discriminate with any user

**A person or entity that determines how personal data is processed, stored and used*

HOW PARENTAL CONSENT WILL WORK

If a child wants to join any online portal, like social media or gaming apps, the platform will...

- Confirm that your child is under 18 years of age
- Ask you, as their parent or guardian, to provide consent
- Verify that you are an adult and their lawful parent or guardian
- If you're already a user of the same platform, they'll use your existing information (like your age and ID) to confirm you are an adult
- Otherwise, they will verify your details–Aadhaar, passport or other government-approved ID–through an authorised agency or digital service like a DigiLocker
- Platforms will also keep a record of your consent to comply with the law

CAN A CHILD BYPASS THIS PROCESS?

Platforms are required to take strong measures to prevent kids from lying about their age or using someone else's account. If a platform collects your child's data without your consent, they can face hefty fines of up to Rs 200 crore

WHY CRITICS ARE RAISING THE RED FLAG

These rules aim to implement the legislation in a way that protects individual privacy while fostering the country's innovation-driven digital economy. But critics have flagged some concerns...

- Lacks provisions for independent audits or compliance monitoring, raising questions about accountability
- Significant discretionary powers given to the government and data fiduciaries, including decisions on exemptions, data processing standards, localisation requirements
- The rules allow extensive data processing by the government for issuing subsidies, benefits or services. These provisions lack specificity and may be misused
- Government entities can retain personal data indefinitely, regardless of whether the purpose for collection has been fulfilled. This contravenes data minimisation principles
- The requirement for verifiable parental consent is impractical, risks mass surveillance by linking government IDs to online credentials
- Blanket obligations may strain smaller organisations and startups, especially when uniform penalties are imposed without considering the entity's size or the breach's scale
- The consultation process accessible only in English and Hindi, excluding large sections of the population

Note: The draft Digital Personal Data Protection Rules 2025 are open to public feedback till February 18. You may visit innovateindia.mygov.in/dpdp-rules-2025

SIKKIM

Mapping the Moods of Lakes

By Arkamoy Datta Majumdar

Up-Country Danger

Some lakes deemed 'very high risk'

Nestled amidst the Himalayas, Sikkim has been synonymous with the natural grandeur of its topography and the idyllic, serene beauty of its many mountain lakes. A year and a half ago, the border state faced a calamity that underscored its susceptibility to climate change-induced natural disasters. On October 4, 2023, a cloudburst led the South Lhonak lake, perched at 17,000 feet in the Lhonak Valley, to breach its banks, causing a catastrophic glacial flood that laid entire landscapes to waste and displaced thousands.

The total financial toll is estimated to be a staggering Rs 18,000 crore. The state's most significant investment, the 1,200 MW Sikkim Urja-Teesta Stage III Project, suffered a devastating blow. The ecological impact was equally ruinous: 1,819 hectares of forest cover was lost. The Teesta river, choked with debris, saw its bed level rise by 8-12 metres downstream, triggering frequent floods.

But amid the wreckage, Sikkim has emerged as a beacon of resilience. Spurred by the cataclysmic event, it has launched a mission to develop a homegrown model for mitigating Glacial Lake Outburst Flood (GLOF) risks. It involves undertaking expeditions to remote altitudes to identify high-risk glacial lakes and mapping potential hazards, then designing structural measures to protect against future disasters. With extreme events recurring across the Himalayas, this approach to climate resilience is of universal relevance.

The pioneering effort, a collaborative endeavour among scientists, engineers, environmentalists and local authorities, has yielded a set of proposals that was presented to the Union government on December 23. If adopted, Sikkim's model could pave the way for GLOF risk mitigation across the region, potentially safeguarding millions. "Our mandate was to ensure that we are battle-ready for such incidents. The task was not easy, but we have made significant progress," says Dhirendra Shrestha, principal director of the Sikkim Science and Technology Department, which is spearheading the operations.

Partnering with the National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA), the state assessed its 320 glacial lakes. The NDMA's preliminary assessment, conducted across all Himalayan states, identified 189 high-risk lakes, 40 of which are in Sikkim—the highest density in any state. Of this, 16 were categorised as "very high risk" or Category A lakes.

After this, researchers embarked on multidisciplinary studies. These included hydrometeorological analyses to understand weather-lake interactions, electrical resistivity tomography to map moraine stability, bathymetric investigations (mapping underwater features) to assess lake depth profile, hydrological studies of lake discharge, geological examinations and terrain mapping using UAVs to create 3D models.

With remote assessments alone being insufficient, expedition teams braved the craggy terrain to conduct on-site verifications, trekking to nine of these lakes between September and December 2024. Each expedition comprised about 20 members from the Sikkim government, the Central Water Commission, the Geological Survey of India, NDMA, the Sikkim State Disaster

TESTING THE WATERS
Scientists and Sikkim government officials conduct hydrological tests in the Lhonak valley

THE NEW PATH

- **In October 2023, the South Lhonak lake glacial flood devastated Sikkim, destroying infrastructure and ecology and displacing thousands**
- **To develop a model to mitigate Glacial Lake Outburst Flood risks, a preliminary study with NDMA identified 180 high-risk lakes in the region, 40 of which are in Sikkim**
- **Expedition teams of scientists, NDMA, Sikkim state officials trekked to high-altitude lakes and carried out various tests**
- **After this, Sikkim devised a four-step approach to glacial flood risk mitigation**

Management Authority and Sikkim University. The nine expeditions, lasting about 12 days and costing Rs 15 lakh each, were a first-of-their-kind effort. The remaining seven lakes, inaccessible in winter, are slated for study in the coming summer. Insights from the completed assessments have informed mitigation strategies. Real-time monitoring systems, lake water level controls, retention structures at the valley level, flood walls, enhanced building codes, public awareness, and insurance initiatives form the cornerstone of these plans. "The interdisciplinary studies would help develop site-specific technical proposals to safeguard the state from future GLOFs. Specially posting engineers to the department provided expertise in designing these structural measures," says Pintso Namgyal Lepcha, minister of the Science and Technology department.

"Sikkim has devised a four-step approach to glacial flood risk mitigation. By setting up this standard operating procedure, it is pioneering a method," says Sandeep Tambe, secretary of the department and a veteran of two expeditions. According to Dr Gourab Bhattacharya, assistant professor in the Department of Earth Sciences in the Tennessee Tech University, "mapping" is the first step. "It's necessary to have automated early warning systems so that evacuation protocols can be initiated downstream when glacial dams are breached," he says. He prescribes routine inspection of hydroelectric plants downstream of the Himalayan rivers by geotechnical engineers.

As Sikkim prepares for its next set of expeditions, the journey ahead remains fraught with challenges. Yet, the state's innovative approach underscores a broader message: adaptation and preparedness can turn adversity into opportunity. By safeguarding its people and environment, Sikkim is not just recovering from the devastation, but declaring itself to be the avant garde in climate resilience. ■

BHOPAL TOXIC WASTE DISPOSAL

BURNING RESISTANCE

ANTI-DUMP DISSENT Residents protest against waste disposal at Pithampur, Jan. 2

By Rahul Noronha

The 337 tonnes of toxic waste from the abandoned Union Carbide plant in Bhopal, awaiting disposal for four decades, has hit a roadblock. Opposition from locals in Pithampur, an industrial town 250 km away in Dhar district, has forced the Madhya Pradesh government to temporarily halt the incineration process. The toxic waste is among the most enduring legacies of the 1984 tragedy, in which a leak of methyl isocyanate gas killed nearly 5,500 people and injured over half a million in the state capital.

The protest comes after the MP High Court's December 3, 2024, order, coinciding with the 40th anniversary of the Bhopal gas tragedy—one of the world's worst industrial disasters. The court directed the state to clear the waste within four weeks, backed by a Union government grant of Rs 126 crore. Pithampur-based Ramkey Environment Engineers Limited was chosen to handle the scientific disposal.

The operation began on December 27, with the toxic waste packed into containers and transported in 10 special trucks that reached Pithampur on January 2. However, the plan met stiff resistance from locals, who feared potential harm to their environment and water sources. A bandh on January 3 escalated into protests, with demonstrators clashing with the police. Two individuals even attempted self-immolation, sustaining severe burns. Amid growing unrest, Chief Minister Mohan Yadav announced a suspension of the disposal the next day, citing the need to address public concerns.

PITHAMPUR LOCALS FEAR THAT BURYING UNION CARBIDE WASTE WILL HARM THE ENVIRONMENT AND WATER SOURCES

On January 6, the government informed the high court of the situation and that some unverified media reports fuelled fears of another industrial catastrophe, securing a six-week extension to comply with its original order. The court then directed the media to not publish news without a strong basis.

The anti-incineration sentiment, though initially fragmented, gained traction due to past failures. Of the seven test runs conducted since 2010, five failed, with the last in 2015 sparking concerns. A local newspaper report last month linking the trial to reduced crop yields and groundwater contamination further galvanised opposition. Efforts by the administration to reassure locals fell flat, while doctors in nearby Indore raised health concerns and joined the legal battle as interveners.

Activists representing the victims of the disaster criticised the transportation method, claiming the waste should have been secured in steel containers, and argued that the costs of disposal should adhere to the "polluter pays" principle. "Burying after incineration is not the best option. Also, Union Carbide should have been asked to bear the incineration expenses as is the practice worldwide," says Rachna Dhingra of the Bhopal Group for Information and Action.

Though the Bhopal plant site is free of toxic waste now, the government still faces the challenge of building consensus. "We will explain to the residents that the disposal will be done scientifically, ensuring complete transparency," says Priyank Mishra, district magistrate, Dhar. "We have posted the Central Pollution Control Board's report on the 2015 trial incineration online." Balancing public sentiment with court directives will be crucial if the government has to resolve the issue. ■

Illustration by SIDDHANT JUMDE

GLASSHOUSE

TRUSTED LIEUTENANT

Assam CM **Himanta Biswa Sarma's** rapport with Union home minister **Amit Shah** is no secret, and its influence was clear in the recent election for the general secretary's post at the all-powerful Indian cricket body, BCCI. The position, vacated by Amit Shah's son **Jay Shah** after his ascension as International Cricket Council (ICC) chairman, demanded a trusted successor. Enter **Devajit Saikia**, former BCCI joint secretary under Shah Jr, who was elected unopposed. A former Ranji player and wicketkeeper for Assam, Saikia also serves as the state's advocate general. Less widely known is the fact that he and Sarma have been buddies since childhood. This relationship, coupled with Saikia's reputation for being discreet and meticulous—traits Shah Jr values—cements his place in the intricate web of power connecting cricket and politics.

ANI

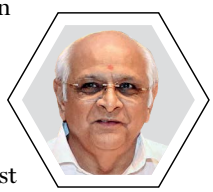
Didi Maange More

With **Mamata Banerjee,** "some" just doesn't cut it. When the Bengal CM recently voiced her frustration over the dwindling number of buses in Kolkata, transport minister Snehashis Chakraborty meekly cited an increase in "*kichhu* (some) frequency". Mamata, never one for half-measures, shot back, declaring that "some" meant nothing at all. She also told Chakraborty to hit the streets to learn first-hand the commuters' woes. This wasn't Mamata's first flare-up over the city's transport woes. Back in August, she had fumed about night service buses doing the vanishing act.

Kaushik Deka with Arkamoy Datta Majumdar, Amarnath K. Menon, Jumana Shah and Avishek G. Dastidar

Treasure Trade

Gujarat CM **Bhupendra Patel**'s *toshakhana*—a treasure trove of gifts received during his tenure—has turned into an online shopping extravaganza. Items up for e-auction range from opulent pieces, like a gold-and-silver-plated glass set (Rs 5 lakh), a silver mace (Rs 2.95 lakh), to a modest straw Ganesh miniature (Rs 1,900). Launched in October 2024, the auction has in just three months collected Rs 74 lakh from the sale of 427 items; Rs 37 lakh from this goes to the Kanya Kelavani scheme, promoting education for girls.



BLAST FROM THE PAST

A long-forgotten paper by **Hitendra Malhotra**, now the first non-IRTS (Indian Railway Traffic Service) officer to head the Railway Board's traffic vertical, is back in the news. Written when he was a young additional divisional railway manager in Moradabad, the paper proposed reforms and had comments like: '...headquarters conducts long conferences 2-3 times daily. This leaves divisional officers with little time to think and plan....'; 'Traffic inspectors are utilised more in protocol duties, leaving less time for rigorous inspections.' Will Malhotra follow his own prescriptions now?

CHANDRADEEP KUMAR

Marks and the Man

Telangana CM **A. Revanth Reddy** greeted visitors in the new year with more than the usual pleasantries. Cabinet colleagues and MLAs bearing bouquets found themselves facing a reality check: performance appraisals. Reddy disclosed that annual evaluations had been conducted, and that he planned to share the results so they could address shortcomings—just as he pledged to tackle his own, based on his own report card. The grading system underscores his reputation as a no-nonsense taskmaster, a leader who rose to the top without prior ministerial experience. It's also the perfect reason for a possible cabinet reshuffle—simply point to the report card.

Photograph: **AP**

COVER STORY

H-1B VISA

UNCLE DON DOESN'T WANT YOU

INDIANS IN AMERICA ARE IN FOR TROUBLE SHOULD TRUMP ENFORCE HIS HARDLINE STANCE ON IMMIGRATION AFTER TAKING OVER AS PRESIDENT. HOW REAL IS THE THREAT AND WHAT INDIA CAN DO ABOUT IT

By ANILESH S. MAHAJAN & AJAY SUKUMARAN

1,000,000

Estimated no. of Indians and their dependants on H-1B visas in the USA who could be impacted by Trump's new immigration policy

725,000

Estimated no. of Indians staying illegally in the USA who could now face deportation

IT is only on January 20 that many an aspiring America-bound Indian worker or student will find out if it's going to be a Happy New Year or not. That is the date when Donald Trump will formally take oath as president of the United States for a second time and reveal the contours of what he promises will be the most radical immigration policy ever. It could shatter, among other things, the dollar dreams of many Indians. Close to one million Indian legal migrants and their families with H-1B or temporary employment visas could be directly impacted. Another 725,000 Indians, who are presumed to have entered America illegally, could face deportation. Trump has vowed that he will carry out the largest ever deportation of illegal immigrants from the USA on Day 1 of his presidency. It is likely to include Indians. Top on that list are 17,940 Indian illegal migrants who have exhausted all legal recourse. They may face immediate deportation, which could prove to be a major political headache for the Narendra Modi government (see *The New American Nightmare*).

There are also indications that the new Trump administration could make entry to the USA through the H-1B visa route tougher and costlier. Introduced in 1990 by the George H.W. Bush administration, the H-1B visa programme has a current cap of 65,000 foreign professionals annually, along with 20,000 who graduate from American institutions. The visa is valid for three years and can be extended for another three years. Indian techies will be hit the hardest if there is any tightening of rules or a further capping on numbers, since they account for the maximum number of H-1B visa-holders in the USA. In FY2023 (from Oct. 1, 2022, to Sept. 30, 2023, in the US), Indians were granted 206,591, or 78 per cent, of the 265,777 H-1B visas issued. (These included fresh visas, extensions or conversions from another category to H-1B.) More recently, Indian IT firms with affiliates in the USA, including the four majors—Infosys, TCS, HCL and Wipro—got approval for around 25,000 employees to work on H-1B visas, which is 20 per cent of the total 130,000 issued in the second half of FY24. India's IT sector, which exported $205 billion worth of software services in FY24—the US accounting for 54 per cent of that share—could end up getting hurt should Trump tighten screws on H-1B visas.

TRUMP IS APPROACHING THE H-1B VISA ISSUE WITH A VELVET GLOVE, RESERVING THE IRON FIST FOR ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS

A DIVIDED LOBBY

A full-scale civil war seems to have erupted among Trump's MAGA (Make America Great Again) support base on the H-1B issue even before he has assumed the presidency. Triggering this, among other things, were the concerns tech circles had been voicing on the need for immigration reform. Like this much-discussed December 14 post on microblogging platform X by Aravind Srinivas, co-founder of perplexity.ai, a new-age start-up unicorn. Thirty-one-year-old Srinivas, an

THE H-1B GAUNTLET

The H-1B visa has long been a gateway for many Indians seeking temporary yet secure entry into the USA. Here's a lowdown on its significance, key beneficiaries and evolving architecture since Trump 1.0

WHAT ARE H-1B AND H-4 VISAS?

H-1B VISA

- A temporary employment visa for skilled workers in specialised fields like technology and medicine
- Requires American employer to sponsor the applicant

H-4 VISA

- For dependants (spouses and children) of H-1B visa-holders
- Admitted to America for the duration of the primary visa-holder; can't usually work

THE PROS AND THE CONS FOR AMERICA

THE PROS

- Allows American companies to fill critical skill gaps by hiring highly skilled foreign workers
- Plays a significant role in supporting small-scale businesses in high-demand sectors like IT

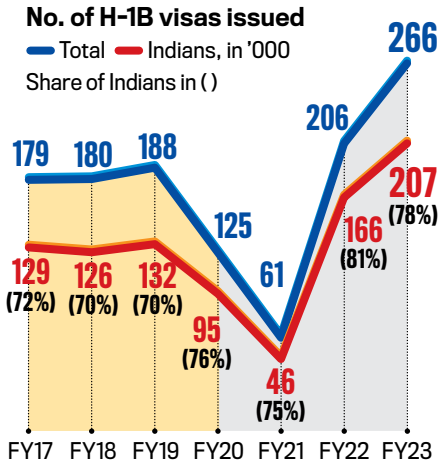
THE CONS

- Some firms misuse the programme to hire foreign workers at lower wages, displacing American workers
- Especially linked to increasing layoffs of domestic graduates in tech industry

Graphics by TANMOY CHAKRABORTY

INDIAN SUPREMACY

Indians remain the biggest beneficiaries of H-1B visas



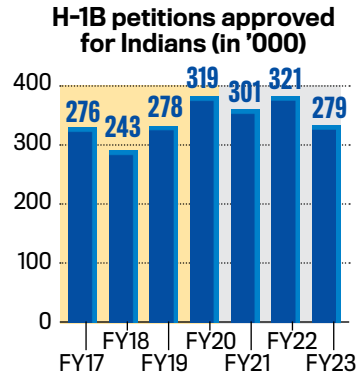
Note: Figures rounded off; include new visas, extensions and change of status to H-1B; the US financial year is from Oct. 1-Sept. 30

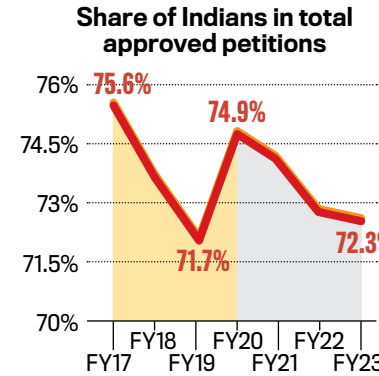
TRUMP 1.0
Jan. '17-Jan. '21

BIDEN
Jan. '21-Jan. '25

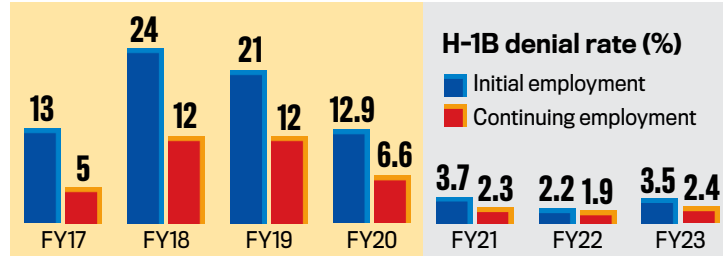
TRUMP VS BIDEN: THE RECORD

H-1B denial rate surged to 24% amid tightened norms during Trump 1.0. Relaxed policies under Biden saw it come down drastically to 2-4 per cent





Note: More than one employer can file a petition for a single worker due to which the number of petitions exceed the number of visas issued



Note: Initial employment petitions are for new employment; continuing employment petitions cover extensions or amendments

Source: US Citizenship & Immigration Services/ Bureau of Consular Affairs

THE TOP FIRMS

Firms with most H-1B visas issued to their employees (Apr.-Sept. 2024)

Amazon.com	9,265
Infosys	8,140
Cognizant	6,321
Google	5,364
TCS	5,274
Meta	4,844
Microsoft	4,725
Apple	3,873
HCL America	2,953
IBM	2,906

Source: US Citizenship & Immigration Services

TRUMP'S TWISTS

- Had taken a hardline stance against H-1B visas in his first term
- Introduced significant regulations including tougher scrutiny of petitions
- Pushed for reforms to ensure visas are awarded only to the most-skilled or highest-paid beneficiaries
- But recently told reporters, "I have always felt we have to have the most competent people in our country. We need a lot of people coming in"

WHAT TO EXPECT IN TRUMP 2.0

- Trump may adopt what Project 2025, a conservative blueprint written by many of his former administration officials, advocates as "a gradual and predictable phasedown of the visas"
- Many skilled workers from India could lose their jobs in America, forcing their departure from there

"The reason I'm in America along with so many critical people...is because of H-1B. I will go to war on this issue the like of which you can't comprehend"

ELON MUSK
Future head, DOGE

"H1-B visas? It's about taking American jobs and bringing over...indentured servants at lower wages. This is a scam by oligarchs in Silicon Valley"

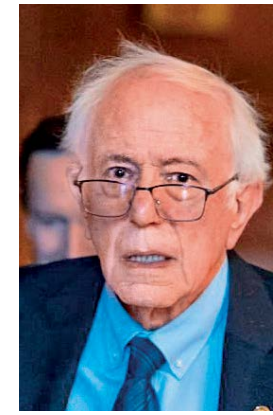
STEVE BANNON
Former Trump advisor

"Why top tech firms hire foreign-born engineers comes down to American culture.... It has venerated mediocrity over excellence for way too long"

VIVEK RAMASWAMY
Future co-head, DOGE

"The main function of the H-1B programme is...to replace paying American jobs with low wage indentured servants from abroad.... The corporate abuse of H-1B must end"

BERNIE SANDERS
Democrat Senator

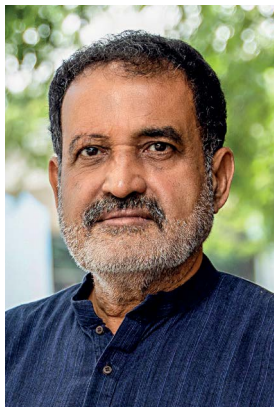


alumnus of IIT Madras and University of California, Berkeley, and an H-1B visa-holder, had worked at OpenAi, the start-up that built ChatGPT, before he ventured his own AI search engine Perplexity. "I think I should get a green card. Wdyt?" went his post on X, using social media slang for 'What do you think'. A green card, known officially as a Permanent Resident Card, allows a person to live and work permanently in the United States, unlike temporary work visas like the H-1B. The answer came soon enough, from the one man who is sure to matter in the new Trump dispensation, the tech billionaire Elon Musk. It was a single word—"Yes."

MAGA men were up in arms against that endorsement from the man who owns Tesla, X and SpaceX, trolling him heavily for backing H-1B holders like Srinivas. Not one to take things lying down, Musk lashed out, "The reason I'm in America along with so many critical people who built SpaceX, Tesla and a hundred other companies that made America strong is because of H-1B...I will go to war on this issue the like of which you cannot possibly comprehend." MAGA supporters read these words as an inversion of their anti-immigrant stance, by a person whom Trump has already nominated to lead the new Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE). Vivek Ramaswamy, Musk's co-chair of DOGE and a former Republican presidential candidate, weighed in, too, with a critique of American culture and standards of education, which he said had "venerated mediocrity over excellence for way too long".

That set the cat among the MAGA pigeons, with Steve Bannon, a former Trump advisor and a hardliner on immigration, hitting back thus: "H-1B visas? That's not what it's about. It's about taking American jobs and bringing over essentially what have become indentured servants at lower wages. This thing is a scam by oligarchs in Silicon Valley." Laura Looner, a far right-wing provocateur and internet influencer, joined the debate after Trump appointed Sriram Krishnan, an Indian American venture capitalist, as an advisor on artificial intelligence policy. He, like Musk, is known to favour bringing in more skilled immigrants to the US. Looner called Krishnan's stance a "not America First policy".

Support for the MAGA lobby came from unexpected quarters—the far left. Bernie Sanders, the Democrat Senator from Vermont, lashed out at Musk for his H-1B stand, taking to X to say: "The main function of the H-1B program is not to hire the best and the brightest but rather to replace good paying American jobs with low wage indentured servants from abroad. The cheaper the labour they hire, the more money the billionaires make. The widespread corporate abuse of the H-1B program must be ended." Sanders charged that, in 2022 and 2023 alone, the top 30 American corporations used the programme



“The US is not producing enough software people. India has been the force multiplier for the US. Critics who say that we are taking away US jobs are totally wrong”

T.V. MOHANDAS PAI
Ex-Infosys board member

“This is an issue where there is critical skill gap in the US and that is bridged by H-1B visas. And, even if visa numbers are less, they still have a critical role to play”

SHIVENDRA SINGH
VP, Nasscom

“The changes being discussed—like increasing salary—are to discourage the misuse of the H-1B programme by companies for labour arbitrage”

RAMKUMAR RAMAMOORTHY *Former chairman, Cognizant India*

“It’s not only the Fortune 100 or 500 companies... millions of small, medium businesses are looking to digitise. And they all will require our techies”

K.S. VISWANATHAN
Former VP, Nasscom

to lay off at least 85,000 American workers while hiring over 34,000 H-1B guest workers. He also claimed that H-1B workers had filled 33 per cent of all new IT jobs.

With both sides digging in their heels, Musk walked back on his stand and posted on X, “I’ve been very clear that the program is broken and needs major reform.” His solution: “Easily fixed by raising the minimum salary significantly and adding a yearly cost for maintaining the H-1B, making it materially more expensive to hire from overseas than domestically.” Meanwhile, Trump is approaching the H-1B visa issue with a velvet glove, reserving the iron fist for illegal immigrants instead. In an interview to an American daily, he said, “I have always been in favour of the visas.... That’s why we have them.”

Indian experts, however, are cautious about Trump’s assertions. He had taken a hardline stance against H-1B visas in his first term and at one stage even campaigned to do away with them. As president, he introduced significant regulations, including tougher scrutiny of applications, which saw denial rates for visas soar to 24 per cent in FY18 from the earlier average of 6 per cent. In April 2017, Trump pushed through the ‘Buy American and Hire American’ executive order and directed federal agencies to suggest reforms to ensure H-1B visas were awarded only to the most skilled or highest-paid beneficiaries. This included increasing the floor salary of $60,000 a year for H-1B workers, to hew closer to the average American salary of $100,000 for similar jobs. Post 2020, when Trump lost, the Biden administration removed many of the restrictions he had imposed; others were struck down via judicial review.

TRUMP KNOWS A RADICAL SHIFT ON H-1B COULD HURT AMERICA’S EFFORTS TO RETAIN ITS TECH EDGE AND MAY GO FOR A GRADUAL DRAWDOWN

HOW REAL IS THE THREAT?

So, how exactly can Trump fiddle with H-1B visas in his second presidency? While he is certain to go all-out on deporting illegal immigrants as he has promised, he is likely to proceed with more circumspection on H-1B visas. He is all too aware that too radical a shift on this front could deliver a body blow to America’s effort to maintain its technological and innovative edge, especially with China snapping at its heels. At his New Year’s Eve party, he told reporters, “I have always felt we have to have the most competent people in our country. We need a lot of people coming in. We’re going to have jobs like we’ve never had before.” Trump may adopt what Project 2025, a conservative blueprint written by many of his former

ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS

THE NEW AMERICAN NIGHTMARE

Though some Indians are at immediate risk from the new Trump administration's plan to expedite deportation of illegal immigrants, other such entrants are protected, for now, by a lengthy judicial process and a well-oiled support system

By **JUMANA SHAH**

FOR A NEW LIFE
US border patrol agents with Indian illegal immigrants at Dulzura, California, near the US-Mexico border

Even as H-1B beneficiaries and aspirants anxiously await clarity on their status after Donald Trump takes oath as president of the United States on January 20, the threat to an estimated 725,000 illegal immigrants from India looms ever closer. Trump has vowed that he will carry out a mass deportation of all illegal immigrants on Day 1 of his presidency, the like of which America has never seen before. There are an estimated 11 million illegal immigrants in the US, of which those from Mexico alone form close to 50 per cent, followed by El Salvador and India with seven per cent each. In his first term between 2017 and 2021, Trump ensured the annual average deportation of 200,000 illegal immigrants. Even the Biden administration averaged a matching 200,000 in his final two years.

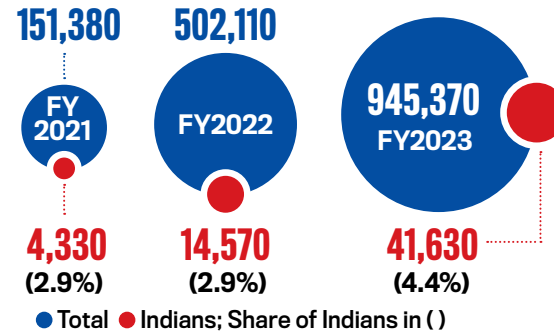
In his second term, Trump policy-makers intend to step it up to one million in the first year alone and even higher figures later. Indians are likely to form a substantial number of them. US Homeland Security data show that 90,415 Indians were caught between October 2023 and September 2024 trying to enter the US without proper documents. They were mostly from Gujarat, Punjab, Haryana and some from Uttar Pradesh. However, it is to be seen how rapidly the new administration deports them as there is a lengthy legal process before they can be sent back.

Most of these non-citizens are sent to detention centres and face adversarial administration proceedings before immigration judges. There needs to be a formal hearing process where those charged with illegal entry are entitled to legal counsel, which could take months. Only after the judge passes a verdict can US Immigration and Custom Enforcement (ICE) officials proceed with their deportation. Before they can be deported, the concerned country is notified and must acknowledge them as their citizens. Last year, the Biden administration deported 1,500 Indians, using charter flights. The American government bears the cost of the flights or

HOPING FOR ASYLUM

The burden of asylum-seekers from India has only grown in America

ASYLUM CASES FILED IN THE USA

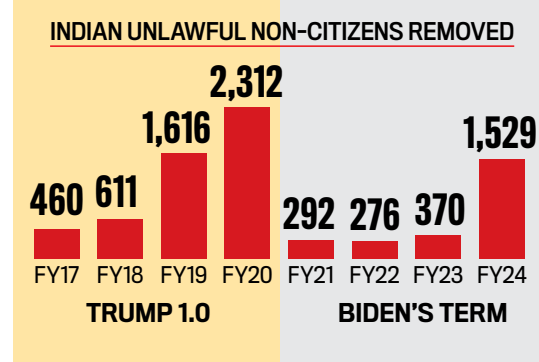


Note: The American financial year is from Oct. 1-Sept. 30
Source: Office of Homeland Security

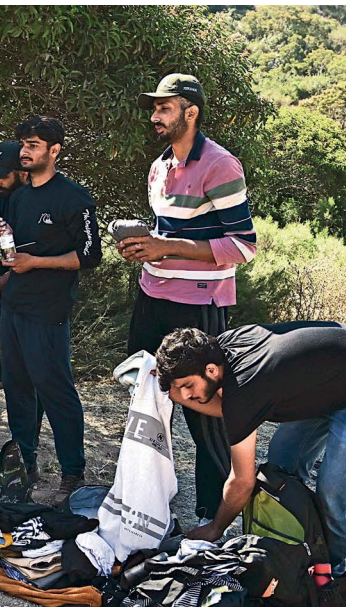
ALL IN VAIN

The number of illegal Indian immigrants deported peaked at the end of Trump 1.0

INDIAN UNLAWFUL NON-CITIZENS REMOVED



Source: US Immigrations and Customs Enforcement



AP

gets those who sponsored these immigrants to cough up the money. Facing immediate deportation are 17,940 Indian illegal immigrants who have exhausted their legal recourse.

The threat of instant mass deportation, however, may be overstated, claims veteran Mumbai-based immigration lawyer and consultant Sudhir Shah. He does not believe planeloads of undocumented individuals will be deported from America anytime soon. "Illegal immigrants thrive in the US because Americans want them. Just like Indians sponsor and host others from their state to work long hours at half the mandated wages. Moreover, the Democratic states will oppose this and shelter the illegal immigrants," says Shah, who has been consulting immigration aspirants for over five decades. "Most Indian immigrants stay back with the help of a sponsor and host, where they also work. Through these hosts, they have access to sound legal counsel, who guide them through the labyrinthine process of seeking asylum."

17,940

Undocumented Indians at risk of instant deportation

The clincher for this illegal immigration industry to thrive is the ability of asylum-seekers to seek work authorisation, which means 150 days after their asylum application is admitted, they can legally start working. Children can be admitted in schools and basic healthcare facilities and, in some cases, medical insurance is available. "The immigrant families are clear that they will work with their sponsor at least for the first 3-5 years before branching out. During this time, they pay off their debt to their sponsor, learn the ropes, get comfortable with the language and culture while their asylum application progresses," says Ahmedabad-based USA visa consultant Lalit Advani. The average time for an asylum application to reach fruition is about four years, and the maximum is seven years. The new Trump administration though may push for faster disposal of cases. If droves of illegal Indian immigrants are flown back from America, it may turn into an enormous political headache for the Narendra Modi government. ■

administration officials, advocates as "a gradual and predictable phase-down of the visas". That goes well with the MAGA objective of putting "the interest of American workers first".

Another aspect adding to the anxiety of Indians in the USA is how the Trump administration proposes to clean up the green card backlog. US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) data show that over a million Indians are waiting for green cards. The Congressional Research Service (CRS) estimated that the backlog for Indians in employment-based categories in 2020 was 568,414—which could take 195 years to clear, and that this estimated wait time would more than double by FY2030. This backlog is due to annual caps and per-country limits on the number of green cards issued.

Indians who have gained citizenship in America believe that Trump will not come down too harshly on H-1B visas. Ankur Vaidya, 46, chairman of the Federation of Indian Associations and living in New York for the past 25 years, says, "Even if he does, he will open newer avenues for legal immigration." A construction management professional and an associate at an engineering firm, Vadodara native Vaidya led the team of 26 expatriates from America who attended the Pravasi Bharatiya Divas in Bhubaneshwar on January 9-10. "Just like the Shiv Sena would demand jobs and first right for the Marathis ahead of every Maharashtra poll, Trump played the same trick with Americans and tapped into their votes. American businessmen know that if locals are supposed to work for 40 hours a week, they would not do even 30, whereas highly-skilled Indians would give more than 40 hours at the same remuneration," he says.

WHAT INDIAN IT COMPANIES ARE DOING

Meanwhile, Indian IT companies are taking no chances and preparing their defence to ensure that the H-1B programme endures. Shivendra Singh, VP and head of Global Trade Development at Nasscom, argues that the notion that H-1B guest workers take away local jobs or are employed at lower wages, which in turn causes local unemployment, runs contrary to actual data. He says that the top eight Indian IT companies accounted for 7,482, or 8.8 per cent, of the 85,000 fresh H-1B visa petitions approved for FY25, the cap for which was reached in December 2024. American tech firms accounted for a larger share. "It's an issue where there is a gap in the USA and it is being bridged by H-1B visas. And even if it is lesser numbers, they still have a critical role to play," Singh says.

IT industry veteran and former Infosys board member T.V. Mohandas Pai argues that the reason for America's digital domination of the world is the availability of high-quality human, physical and financial capital. Indians handle a large part of the technology software of all major American corporations. "The USA is not producing enough software people," says Pai. "India has been the force multiplier for it. Critics say we are underpaying Indians and taking away American jobs. It is totally wrong because you have to pay comparable wages

as per American norms in every city. And comparable wages are quite high." The median salary for a person working in an IT company, as per USCIS is $122,000. However, for a worker on an H-1B visa, various application fees and government filing fees add up to another $35,000-50,000. That makes it cheaper to hire a local worker, provided one is available.

These are some of the challenges in American regulations on H-1B visas over the years. For example, one of the outstanding issues is that H-1B employees are required to make social security contributions but cannot avail themselves of its benefits because the rule requires a minimum stay of 10 years to be eligible and the H-1B visa does not allow the employee to stay beyond six years. This has figured in Indian-American joint statements for long, says Singh. Both sides have acknowledged that it is a critical issue that needs to be resolved. "The USA is benefitting big time from H-1B. They pay taxes, they pay social security...and all the H-1B people don't get the benefit of social security because they don't stay long enough. It's borne by the company which sends them," says Pai.

Tech industry veterans generally feel India's software services industry is currently better placed to withstand any onslaught on H-1B visas than ever before. Especially given that the technology sector worldwide is going through an evolutionary phase right now, accelerated focus being on digitisation with AI tools. "Digitisation today is in demand by everyone," says K.S. Viswanathan, a former Nasscom vice president and now an independent technology consultant. "Post Covid, people realised that work can be done from any part of the world. Secondly, it's not only the Fortune 100 or Fortune 500 companies...millions of small and medium-sized businesses are looking to digitise. And technology is not their core strength, or DNA." No single country alone can supply the volume of digital tech talent this demands, he adds.

INDIAN IT COMPANIES SHOULD USE THE PHASE-OUT TIME TO OPEN A NEW VISTA FOR THEMSELVES AND BECOME GIANTS IN THEIR OWN RIGHT

India is among the largest talent pools in the world, with over 2 million youngsters graduating from Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) courses every year. "For decades, the US has been the fountainhead of technology-driven innovation. Given the structural shifts taking place in technology, the political and business leadership in America has realised that it needs to attract the best and brightest talent more than ever before and also retain them with an accelerated path to permanent residency," says Ramkumar Ramamoorthy, partner at Catalincs, a growth advisory firm, and former chairman and MD, Cognizant India. "It's also important to note that the changes being discussed—such as increasing minimum salary and annual maintenance costs—are largely to discourage the misuse of the programme by companies for labour arbitrage while sustaining the innovation quotient of the US."

During Trump's first term, when H-1B delays and denials rose sharply because of stricter regulations, top Indian IT companies ramped up local hiring in America. TCS in 2020 claimed to have hired around 20,000 locals over five years. Shivendra Singh cites a 2012-22 Nasscom survey to point out that Indian software companies spend about $1.1 billion on upskilling only in the USA by working with nearly 225,000 employees. They also work with 130 colleges and universities across the USA, impacting 2.9 million students. "The objective behind this whole exercise is to hire locally," says Singh.

Besides, Indian IT companies have tapped opportunities for 'near-shoring' by positioning employees in locations that are in the same time zones as their key markets, or which come under similar regulations. South America, for instance, has emerged as a key 'near-shoring' location to serve the USA along with the rest of the Americas. Alongside, India has emerged as a key destination for global capability centres (GCCs), which are captive units global MNCs manage.

OPPORTUNITY IN CRISIS?

What experts are saying is that while India should fight to retain whatever advantages it gets from H-1B, IT companies should use the phase-out time to open a whole new vista for themselves. There is a growing realisation that the pie that drove profitability of dozens of Indian IT companies, especially in terms of labour arbitrage, is shrinking rapidly and is likely to disappear soon. As one expert put it, "It is a wake-up call to up our game. Indians have largely migrated to the USA to get employment and join the mass slaving class. Few have become CEOs of top companies. Very few have created multi-billion dollars on their own as, say, a Musk has done. This could be the turning point for Indian companies to turn into giants themselves rather than play a supportive role."

Back home, the impending crisis for Indians seeking greener pastures in America should push the Modi government to launch initiatives that can turn India into a global hub of innovation and technology, besides generating more manufacturing jobs. Rather than Indian students flocking to American universities for degrees, these universities could be given incentives to set up bases here. Also being cited as an example is how India lured multinational giant Apple with production-linked incentives to set up manufacturing units in India. Not only is it helping us earn revenue, with India projected to manufacture a third of all iPhones by 2027, it has also helped create jobs for over 100,000 Indians. India must also work on policies to become an alternative to China on the global value chain, which will increase American dependence on Indian manufacturing. Trump's coming may well turn out to be another Covid moment for India—an opportunity to make a quantum leap in reforms and free ourselves from the shackles of dependence. ■

-with Arkamoy Datta Majumdar

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THE BIG STORY
TELECOM

INDIA'S SPAM WAR

AS UNSOLICITED CALLS AND MESSAGES INUNDATE CELLPHONES, NEW TECH SOLUTIONS AND REGULATIONS AIM TO COUNTER THIS INVASIVE DIGITAL EPIDEMIC. BUT IT'S STILL A LONG HAUL

By **AVISHEK G. DASTIDAR**

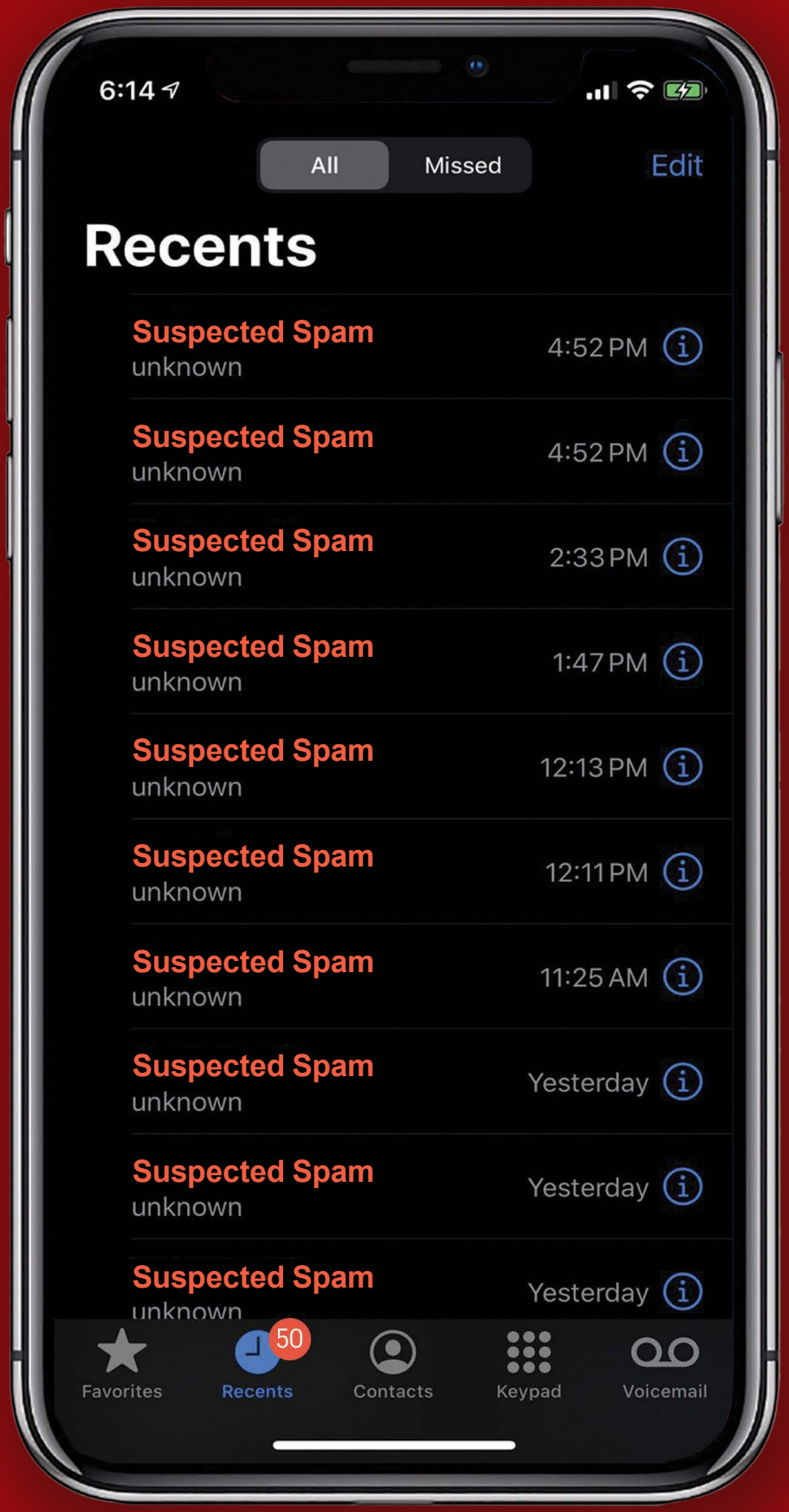
240 mn
Users (20.17% of mobile phone subscribers) have opted to block or manage spam via TRAI's systems

147 mn
Complaints against spam calls and messages in 2024, the highest ever recorded

8 bn
Spam calls Airtel flagged within 75 days of launching its spam detection solution in Sept. 2024

800 mn
Spam SMSes Airtel identified during the same period

Sources: Airtel, TRAI, DoT



Illustrations by **NILANJAN DAS**

1.85mn Phone numbers TRAI has blacklisted since Aug. 2024

13mn Fraudulent international calls are blocked by DoT every day

E

Every day, Nabamita Bhattacharya steels herself for the daily assault on her phone. The first call comes at around 10.30 am—an automated voice offering a credit card with 'lifetime free benefits'. By noon, her phone is flooded with promotional messages offering health insurance, real estate deals, astrology services and instant loans—'1 CR BUSINESS LOAN IN MINS. NO DOCUMENTS! CALL...' For the 39-year-old Kolkata-based businesswoman, these interruptions are more than a minor nuisance. They disrupt her work, intrude on her personal time and take a toll on her mental peace. Yet, as a business owner, she cannot afford to ignore unknown numbers, leaving her at the mercy of this relentless barrage. "Once, I was in the middle of a client meeting when calls kept popping up," she recalls. "One number looked familiar, so I excused myself to answer it, only to hear a woman asking me if I needed to service my water filter. I was mortified."

Sounds familiar? Spam calls and messages have become a daily annoyance for millions of Indians. Once seen as an unavoidable aspect of a hyper-connected world, spam today has escalated into a serious issue—enough for the government and private telecom companies to contemplate urgent action.

India, home to over a billion cellphone users, is one of the world's most spam-plagued countries. Complaints about Unsolicited Commercial Communications (UCC) have surged, according to the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI). In 2023 alone, a staggering 12.2 million grievances were filed against unregistered telemarketers (UTMs), a sharp climb from 8.5 million in 2021. For a nation thriving on digital connectivity, spam is becoming an unwelcome side-effect. Spammers often impersonate legitimate businesses, exploiting loopholes to bypass rules. Authorities struggle to curb their activities. "On average, a user gets around 8-10 calls a day that are technically spam.... And the volumes are increasing," says Vinish Bawa, partner and leader-telecom at PwC India. "User experience is being impacted."

To counter the menace, the Department of Telecommunications (DoT) has launched the International Incoming Spoofed Calls Prevention System, which blocks 13 million such calls daily. "An international company uses an international server, masquerading as a +91 (India code) number, so users think it's from India. Since launch, this software has been intercepting and blocking millions of calls,"

Silencing the Noise Storm

From AI-powered detection to stricter laws, India is deploying robust measures to curb spam calls and messages

AI-driven spam detection
Airtel, Vodafone Idea and Jio have implemented AI-based systems to block spam in real time and flag suspected spam

Enhanced message traceability
A November 2024 TRAI mandate requires every commercial message to have a traceable trail from sender to recipient

Mandatory URL and APK whitelisting
From October 2024, only approved URLs, Android Package Kits (APK) and OTT links are allowed in SMSes

Transition to DLT platform
TRAI directed telcos to migrate all telemarketing calls to the Distributed Ledger Technology platform by September 2024, improving monitoring/ control of commercial communications

Blocking unused headers and templates
Since February 2023, service providers have blocked over 350,000 unused headers and 1.2 million unverified SMS templates to prevent misuse

Punishments for violators
From August 2024, telemarketers caught violating regulations face blacklisting for two years

60-70% Reduction in answered spam calls after Airtel's spam solution launch

36-60 Age group that was the most targeted on Airtel network, receiving 48% of spam calls

Sources: Airtel, TRAI, DoT

Union communications minister Jyotiraditya Scindia tells INDIA TODAY (*see interview*). While government systems work to catch up, users like Dr O.P. Choudhury, a neurologist at Apollo Hospital in Delhi, remain overwhelmed. "I may be able to protect myself from scammers posing as police or government officials, but I have no shield against spams. They flood my message box and call anytime of the day," he says. "A doctor's phone is for important communication. I cannot ignore calls or message notifications."

Cognizant of such travails, telcos themselves have taken a lead. Airtel, for instance, is now harnessing its proprietary AI technology to proactively screen spam calls and messages. Processing an astounding 1 trillion records daily, the system analyses patterns like call frequency and duration to identify potential spam. The result? Over 100 million spam calls and 3 million spam messages are blocked every day. "Spam has become a menace for customers. We have spent the past 12 months solving this comprehensively," says Gopal Vittal, MD & CEO, Bharti Airtel.

Vodafone Idea (Vi), too, has its own AI-powered spam detection system. Analysing incoming SMSes in real time, it tags dubious messages as 'Suspected Spam' to alert users. Reliance Jio has recently adopted a similar technology. However, the effectiveness of these systems remains less evident than their providers suggest. "If there is improvement, it's not nearly enough. The burden is still on the user to block or report spam," says Annie George, a freelance content creator in Bengaluru. Unfortunately, a foolproof system may not be achievable anytime soon. "I'm sure the people who create these kinds of fraud and calls know how to navigate through the system," Bawa says. "I don't think there is a 100 per cent solution ever."

International call spoofing prevention
DoT launched the International Incoming Spoofed Calls Prevention System in August 2024 to intercept and block fraudulent international calls

Fixing accountability
Around 14,000 principal entities like banks and insurance companies have declared over 21,000 chains of telemarketers, ensuring greater accountability for their commercial communications

Expansion of joint committee of regulators
It now includes Insurance Regulatory & Development Authority, Pension Fund Regulatory & Development Authority and Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology alongside TRAI, RBI and Sebi

Consumer awareness initiatives
Platforms like the Sanchar Saathi portal and TRAI's DND app have been promoted to help users report spam and manage their communication preferences

India, with over a billion mobile phone users, is one of the world's most spam-hit countries. Complaints about pesky calls and messages have surged

The TRAI Crackdown

TRAI's Telecom Commercial Communication Customer Preference Regulation, 2018 set the rules for spam control, using blockchain-based Distributed Ledger Technology (DLT). Think of it as a database in multiple locations but shared by all telecom operators to check and verify. India became the first country worldwide to use such a system to block spam. All nine main operators need to record each registered sender, their headers and templates on the DLT platform. The system divides commercial communications into eight types, including finance, health, real estate and others. Consumers may choose not to receive certain categories.

However, it doesn't inspire much confidence in users. Over 240 million of them—about 20 per cent of subscribers—have registered to block or control spam by citing their preferences. TRAI is preparing to overhaul its 2018 regulations. Proposed changes include differential tariffs for promotional messages, stricter punishments for violators and better traceability for spam calls. Meanwhile, platforms like WhatsApp are being enlisted, with discussions underway to regulate spam on over-the-top (OTT) services.

Who's On the Line?

Annu Saroj, a 23-year-old call centre executive from Balia, Uttar Pradesh, recently quit her job because "she couldn't cope with the pressure". Operating out of a two-room office in Chandigarh, her company made cold calls all day, offering to find suitable jobs for people in exchange for Rs 2,000 and a cut of their first month's salary. "As a junior, I was expected to make at least 40 calls in an eight-hour shift, all breaks included," she says. Annu had some 15 colleagues, who were given lists of mobile numbers sourced from various portals. "If we made a sale, there would be a commission over and above the monthly salary of Rs 14,000." She quit when the target was increased to clock 60 calls at first and then 75.

Since August last year, the DoT, TRAI, telcos and virtually the entire

72% Rise in complaints against unregistered telemarketers from 2021 to 2024

9 Times more complaints against unregistered telemarketers than those against registered ones in 2024

system have started tightening the screws on such telemarketing sweatshops, officially called UTMs—the ones the system doesn't have a count of. Ordinary SIM cards are purchased in bulk under company names without informing telecom providers that they'll be used for telemarketing. The exact number of such users remains unknown. However, the system does not classify all commercial communication as a spam. Some people may be looking for real estate and choose to opt in to receive such messages temporarily, opting out once their need is met.

Similarly, banks can send promotional messages to customers, and so on. For these use cases, there are registered telemarketers. India has some 19,100 of them. Typically, they are call centres acting for 290,000 Principal Entities (PEs) like banks and insurance companies. Commercial communications are sent via headers like 'SBICRD' for SBI Credit Cards, allowing users to recognise senders. The DLT platform currently maintains 320,000 headers and 6.82 million SMS templates.

Hidden Menace

Some actors play dirty, disrupting systems designed to protect consumers. From January to October last year, complaints against registered telemarketers reached 163,000, while those against unregistered ones soared to a staggering 1.47 million—nine times higher.

UTMs remain the bigger problem, since they operate under the radar. These entities bypass regulations by using regular 10-digit numbers or bulk-purchased SIM cards. The result? A 72 per cent rise in complaints against UTMs since 2021. "We have disconnected 18.5 lakh mobile numbers and blacklisted 1,100 entities/individuals involved in unsolicited commercial communications," Scindia says. Such entities or individuals will not get any telecom resources for two years.

For years, Swedish multinational Truecaller has pretty much been the only 'shield' consumers had against spams.

RAJWANT RAWAT

Ordinary SIM cards are purchased in bulk under company names without informing telecom providers that they will be used for telemarketing

Crowdsourcing and harnessing contacts from users since 2009, Truecaller has built a global database in which users label calls and messages as 'spams', 'frauds', 'scams' to help users identify and avoid them. Its 2024 global report identified India as the top country of origin for spam calls in the US. But if India was one of the top sources of spam calls, the study also recognised it as among the countries most affected by spam calls.

The war against spam is one all countries are fighting. In the US, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) has made concerted efforts in this direction. The Telephone Robocall Abuse Criminal Enforcement and Deterrence Act has given law enforcement agencies more teeth to fight illegal 'robocalls'. The FCC has also banned AI-generated voices in telemarketing calls. In Europe, too, the rules are strict. For example, Spain put a law in place in 2023 that bans commercial calls without the person's consent beforehand. Violators are liable to pay fines up to €100,000.

275,000 Connections linked to spam activities disconnected by service providers in 2024

41% of people aged 65 and above don't answer unknown calls globally, highlighting psychological impact of spam

Sources: Airtel, TRAI, DoT

"We are building firewalls at various levels to stay ahead"

Union communications minister Jyotiraditya Scindia speaks to INDIA TODAY's Avishek G. Dastidar about the growing menace of spam calls and messages, and the government's action plan to combat it

On the existence of spam
With the advent of technology, every new paradigm shift brings with it a tremendous amount of dividends. But it also brings with it...elements that are mischievous and make it a bit of a nuisance. That is the case with every technological curve in human history, and so is the case with telecom technology. In the recent past, things have escalated tremendously.

On the role of telecom operators and telemarketers
We've mandated that telecom service providers appoint chief telecom security officers in their organisations. Security incidents must be reported within six hours, and [service] providers must comply with telecom equipment regulations, including IMEI number verification. We've made it clear...that unless a subscriber opts in, they cannot be contacted. We've blacklisted 1,100 entities and disconnected 18.5 lakh mobile numbers involved in unsolicited commercial communications.

On the government's moves against spam and fraud calls
Our AI-based tool ASTRA leverages facial recognition for SIM subscriber verification. We've found instances where one person's photo was used for up to 800 SIM cards. Through ASTRA, we analysed 14 crore mobile connections and disconnected 78 lakh fraudulent connections. Additionally, we...suspended 70,000 points of sale involved in these practices. Using a calling line identification system, we've blocked 89 per cent of all spoofed calls, with a peak of 1.35 crore calls blocked in 24 hours.

On the way forward
We are building firewalls at various levels to stay ahead. While technology will always bring challenges, our commitment is to ensure that customers are protected and not harassed or defrauded. ■

A Work in Progress

India's battle against spam is not new. The Do Not Disturb (DND) registry, launched in 2007, aimed to let users block telemarketing calls and messages. Except that telemarketers soon found ways to circumvent the system. "The problem of spams needed to be addressed by distinguishing spam from acceptable commercial communication at the originating end. A system for the same and regulatory regime was needed," says TRAI chairman Anil Kumar Lahoti, explaining how India's response to spams evolved over time. "The DLT [blockchain technology] makes that possible."

In India, TRAI has worked with telcos to enforce strict rules, such as the use of 140-prefixed numbers for promotional calls and mandatory whitelisting of URLs and APKs in SMS messages. Yet, the spam continues. Officials say people ignore '140' numbers fearing they are spams. The PEs have been asked to complete the "chain" connecting all their partner business entities who send messages and calls on their behalf. This is because big telemarketing companies serving PEs may subcontract their jobs to smaller players who might not be registered. So the system couldn't hold anyone accountable. Some 14,000 PEs have so far declared 21,000 chains of telemarketers. The loopholes are being plugged.

For users like Nabamita, the results are mixed. Government and private efforts have reduced some spam, but enforcement gaps persist. Experts argue that while Airtel's AI and TRAI's blockchain system are significant steps, they must be supplemented with stricter penalties and consumer awareness campaigns. But that may still be inadequate. As Scindia says, spams are the unavoidable side-effects of the tech we use. "You get a lot of dividends with technology but there are also people who try to be mischievous. You've got to just block them."

For millions of Indians, this is a fight for privacy, security and trust. Every time headway is made, there is a fresh fusillade of spam. And the battle gets tougher. ■

CHINA'S THREAT
China's latest stealth fighter, the sixth generation J-36, takes to the skies on December 26

DEFENCE | INDIAN AIR FORCE

CHINA'S STEALTH WARNING

The Indian Air Force battles declining numbers in its fighter aircraft and delays in its indigenous projects as China goes beyond 5th-generation jet technology and Pakistan piggybacks on it to build its own strength

By Pradip R. Sagar

IT is a cliché that a problem, if dealt with half-heartedly, increases in magnitude. There has been widespread consensus for long that the Indian Air Force's (IAF) sword arm—its fighter jet force—needs an urgent and substantial boost. Currently, the IAF's combat strength has plummeted to just 31 squadrons (of 18 aircraft each), the lowest since 1965. The IAF has a sanctioned strength of 42 squadrons of fighters, a figure set to address the threat posed by a possible two-front conflict with Pakistan and China. Considering the alarming situation, the Ministry of Defence (MoD) in early December announced the formation of a high-level committee to address the issue. Headed by the defence secretary, the panel will include senior ministry officials, Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) chairman Samir V. Kamat, and senior IAF officers. It will look at the shortage of jets, weapons and other equipment and suggest solutions, including accelerating indigenous production and inviting foreign collaborations. A report is expected in two-three months.

The MoD has reason to worry, for a steep decline in absolute numbers is only one half of the problem—air dominance in the 21st century has moved to fifth generation fighters and beyond, and India has been a laggard in this regard

INDIA'S DELAYED RESPONSE A model of the AMCA (Advanced Medium Combat Aircraft)—it will take a decade for India's fifth generation fighter jet to enter production and counter China's stealth fighters

as well. In contrast, already liberally supplied with J-20 and J-35 fifth generation stealth fighters by its burgeoning military-industrial complex, China has forged further ahead by unveiling designs for two sixth generation fighter jets on December 26—the larger J-36, a tailless stealth fighter undergoing tests, and the smaller J-50. It underscores China's relentless drive to dominate the skies and challenge American aerial dominance. Alarmingly, Pakistan, too, is rapidly bolstering its aerial capabilities. In a move that could dramatically alter South Asia's air dominance dynamics, Pakistan has fast-tracked the acquisition of 40 J-35 stealth fighters from China, with deliveries expected by 2026. Potentially, both these air forces can drive the IAF from the skies in the near future. Adding to New Delhi's concern is China's potential sale of advanced fighters to Bangladesh.

In comparison, India's efforts to secure air dominance hang in the balance. Over 100 aerospace engineers at the Aeronautical Development Agency (ADA) in Bengaluru are designing India's fifth-generation stealth fighter, the Advanced Medium Combat Aircraft (AMCA), but progress has been painfully slow. Since the programme's inception in 2009, AMCA's development timeline has stretched on and on. Its earliest prototype is expected by 2028, with mass production not anticipated until 2035. Fifth generation fighters have stealth and supercruise (prolonged supersonic cruise) capability, low-probability of intercept radar (LPIR) and advanced avionics with data fusion.

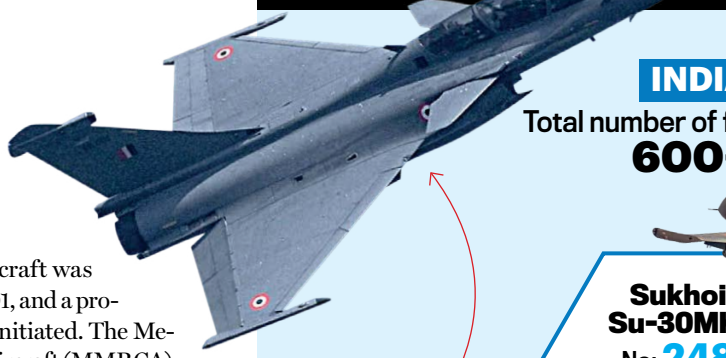
"The way our adversaries are ramping up their air power, India has to put all its efforts on full throttle before it's too late. A national task force is the need of the hour"

-AIR MARSHAL ANIL CHOPRA (RETD), *Former Director-General, Centre for Air Power Studies*

With no immediate relief in sight, IAF chief Air Chief Marshal Amar Preet Singh stated in October that the force is left with no option but to "fight with whatever we have". Simultaneously, the IAF headquarters have prepared a plan for optimisation of available resources—instead of having separate air assets dedicated for sectors facing Pakistan and China, they would be deployed in a manner where they can cover both directions. A serving air marshal tells INDIA TODAY that the plan is to keep the main fighter squadrons in western command bases like Ambala, Chandigarh, or even at Awantipur in Jammu and Kashmir so they can cover both fronts simultaneously. "Till the time we build up numbers, we have worked out a plan to deploy them at places where they can be moved to the west as well as the eastern sector. We cannot afford to have dedicated squadrons for each sector," he explains.

While the roots of the IAF's depleting numbers lie in decades of delays and a sluggish acquisition process, the tardy AMCA and other indigenous projects are due to late delivery of aircraft engines and a disconnect between the research and design (R&D) and production processes. The shortfall has compelled the IAF to still rely on old platforms like the MiG-21, which is being phased out in the coming months. Four squadrons of Jaguars will also start retiring in 2027.

JET-BORNE SU



INDIA

Total number of fighter jets
600+

Sukhoi Su-30MKI
No: **248**
Russian origin multirole fighter manufactured in India under licence

Dassault Rafale
No: **36**
French 4.5-generation multirole fighter, the most advanced jet IAF has

Mirage 2000
No: **45**
French multirole 4th generation fighter jet

Tejas LCA Mk 1
No: **32**
Indigenous supersonic multi-role fighter

MiG-29
No: **65**
Multirole Russian jet, upgraded to Mig-29 UPG

SEPECAT Jaguar
No: **130**
British-made jet ideal for air-support and ground attack

MiG-21 Bison
No: **40**
Soviet-era workhorse of IAF, currently being phased out

In development:
LCA Mk 1A, Mk 2, AMCA

DELAYS AND CHALLENGES

The shortage of fighter aircraft was identified as far back as 2001, and a proposal for 126 new aircraft initiated. The Medium Multi-Role Combat Aircraft (MMRCA) tender in 2008 concluded in 2012 with the Rafale emerging as the frontrunner among six contenders. However, complexities in the Make in India component in the negotiations between Dassault Aviation and Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL) became a bottleneck and, eventually, the programme was shut down. In 2016, a government-to-government agreement was signed for just 36 Rafales. The off-the-shelf acquisitions marked the only foreign fighter induction since the Sukhoi Su-30MKI entered service in the early 2000s.

It was expected that the indigenous Light Combat Aircraft (LCA) Tejas Mk1 would be speedily inducted, but that too was mired in delays. It was inducted in 2015—14 years after its maiden flight. Today, the IAF operates just two LCA Mk1 squadrons, with the Mk1A variant facing a year-long delay in its 2024 delivery schedule. The pace of delivery by state-owned aeronautical organisations is a cause of concern. As the IAF chief said recently, "Technology delayed is technology denied."

The grim scenario appears worse when one contrasts it with the People's Liberation Army Air Force's (PLAAF) fighter jet force. Pakistan's acquisition of the J-35 is a reminder of how the balance of power is shifting in South Asia. Experts point out that as the region braces for a seismic transformation in aerial warfare, India's challenges are mounting. Air Marshal Anil Chopra (retd), former Director-General of the Centre for Air Power Studies, says. "A national task force is the need of the hour, with a deadline and freedom to pick its team, for fighter aircraft development. The way our adversaries are ramping up their air power, India has no option but to put all its efforts on full throttle before it's too late," he says.

HAL, the manufacturer of such indigenous platforms as the Tejas LCA Mk1 and Mk1A, blames supply chain disruptions at US fighter jet engine manufacturer GE Aerospace and pending certification for new systems for the delays. However, HAL will start production soon at its Nashik division, which will join its two existing production lines in Bengaluru, with each line producing eight LCA Mk1A aircraft annually. This will increase HAL's combined production capacity to 24 jets a year. "Once the Nasik line is functional, it will produce eight aircraft annually. We are planning to ramp up in all three lines to cover up the backlog," says a top HAL official.

According to plans, the HAL Tejas Mark 2,Medium Weight Fighter (MWF), a 4.5 generation machine closer to the Rafale in capabilities, will have its first flight in 2026. Mass production is planned for 2029. But these are very optimistic projections, considering that India is dependent on foreign subsystems and, crucially, jet engines, like GE's F404-IN20 engines for LCA Mk1A. "Setting timelines based on assurances from a foreign OEM (original equipment manufacturer) is truly a bit hypothetical," says a senior military planner, betraying deep scepticism.

The development of India's fifth generation fighter, the AMCA, is crucial to countering the PLAAF. The plan is to develop two variants, with the Mark 2 version featuring a more powerful engine and advanced technologies. In 2009, the Union government had allocated Rs 90 crore, followed by an additional Rs 447 crore, for a feasibility study. After years of delay, the AMCA received the Union

PREMACY

How the IAF's leading fighter aircraft stack up against those of China and Pakistan

CHINA

Total number
1,200-1,300

J-20
No: Over **200**
China's first multirole 5th-generation stealth fighter

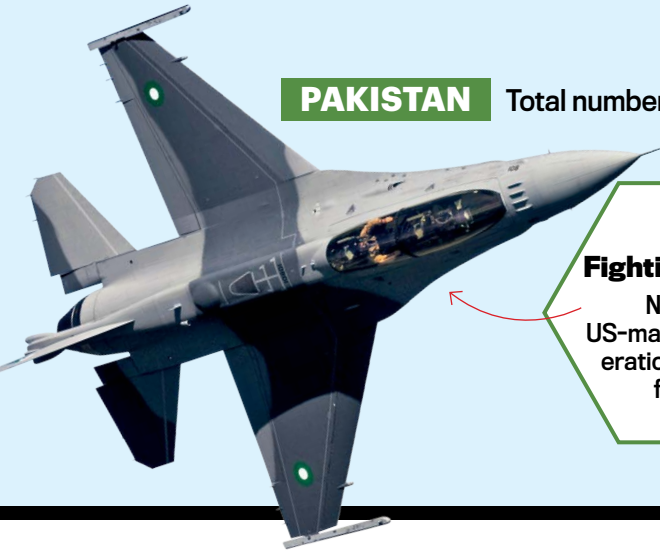
J-16
No: Around **350**
Multirole 4.5 -generation multirole fighter like Rafale

J-11 (variants J-11B/BS)
No: Around **350**
4th-generation multirole fighter

J-35 (FC-31)
No: Initial induction
A newer 5th - generation stealth fighter

J-10 (variants J-10A/B/C/S)
No: Around **300**
Multirole fighter compared to the upgraded US made F16

In development:
Sixth-generation **J36** and **J50**



PAKISTAN Total number: **445**

JF-17 Thunder
No: **161**
Multirole fighter developed by Pakistan Aeronautical Complex, Chengdu Aerospace Corporation

Acquisition:
Probable purchase 40 **J35** from China

F-16 Fighting Falcon
No: **85**
US-made 4th- generation multirole fighter

Mirage III, Mirage 5
No: **87, 92**
Like Mig-21, Mirage III and Mirage 5 are ageing fighters

J10
No: **20**
Chinese-made multirole fighter

cabinet's go-ahead in March 2024. Besides the wait for funds, the US's indecision on licenced production of jet engines in India threatens to further delay the programme. The ADA has plans to rope in private players for production and maintenance of the forthcoming jets, rather than depending wholly on HAL. The government is expected to make a decision on this soon.

FIXING THE PROBLEM

The air marshal INDIA TODAY spoke to touches upon "the root cause" behind the delayed projects. The R&D, he points out, is a standalone process without any accountability for production, while the production process is also separate, and blames R&D for delays. According to him, in no leading military industrial complex is there such a hard distinction between R&D and production.

"The R&D is authorised only to build prototypes and a budget is accordingly sanctioned. So, R&D focuses on making the prototypes fly without requisite care for series production related aspects," he says. This is the primary reason for LCA Tejas facing serious maintenance issues as HAL had replicated the prototype design for series production, he reveals. When the R&D gets delayed, the production agency is under pressure to churn out aircraft and subsequently passes platforms with missing capabilities, promising to introduce them later. "In this hurry, manufacturing processes for tools and fixtures are hurriedly set up without the acceptable accuracy, leading to mismatch in production standards. Many panels of Tejas are not interchangeable across aircraft," he claims.

Another IAF officer says that part of the R&D needs to be funded by the production agency to ensure they have a say in the design and the prototypes are as close to series production as feasible. "One option is for the government to pair up ADA with a private sector firm with cost sharing in R&D," he says.

Fast-tracking acquisition of fighter jets to fill the gaping hole in numbers and streamlining the development and production of the latest in indigenous design—both are needed to secure India's air defence capabilities in South Asia's increasingly contested skies. ■

SETTING THE LAND RECORD STRAIGHT

The Congress government's Bhu Bharati reforms promise to bring transparency and efficiency in Telangana's land record management that the previous Dharani portal had failed to do

By Amarnath K. Menon

ANI

For over a century, Bhutharaju Jangaih's forefathers had cultivated two acres of inam land that the erstwhile jagirdars had gifted his ancestors. In 2020, the revenue divisional officer had issued the 56-year-old Jangaih an Occupation Rights Certificate (ORC) for over one-tenth of an acre of that land in Yacharam village in Telangana's Ranga Reddy district. But the Dharani portal—launched by the previous Bharat Rashtra Samithi (BRS) government the same year—had left him in limbo, for it had no provision to issue a *patta* (land title right with passbook) to someone with an ORC. Now, with the passage of the Telangana Bhu Bharati (Record of Rights in Land) Bill, 2024, Jangaih—and thousands like him across 12 occupancy categories—are hopeful of finally getting their ownership rights.

The new law, which awaits the governor's assent after getting the legislative assembly's nod on December 20, seeks to streamline the state's land record management system, overhauling the now beleaguered Dharani portal that, ironically, was introduced for the very same purpose. Key reforms include the introduction of unique identification numbers for each land parcel, simplification of user interactions, decentralisation of dispute resolution and enhanced data security. With the transfer of the portal's operations to the National Informatics Centre (NIC) and the incorporation of mandatory survey maps into the records, the A. Revanth Reddy-led Congress government has underscored its commitment to fulfil the pre-2023 assembly poll promise of a holistic overhaul.

To begin with, the new legislation will introduce a new portal, Bhumata, to replace the older avatar, Dharani. Launched under the Telangana Rights in Land and Pattadar Pass Books Act, 2020, popularly known as the Record of Rights Act, Dharani had in the past four years become a symbol of bureaucratic inefficiency and alleged malpractices that left lakhs of landowners like Jangaih running from pillar to post. Over 924,000 title deed applications remain pending, 2.72 million acres of land are placed on a prohibited list that bar any transaction, and transactions for another 1.83 million acres are on hold due to incomplete digital signatures—thus paralysing legitimate ownership rights. With the new law, Revanth Reddy has promised to usher in a paradigm shift in transparency, efficiency and accessibility even as the state agencies probe the allegations of fraudulent deals and illegal sales of even Bhoodan land (donated to the landless poor or for community purposes).

THE REFORMS PUSH
Chief Minister A. Revanth Reddy at a public gathering in Hanamkonda, Nov. 19, 2024

A HOLISTIC OVERHAUL

The Bhu Bharati system will not only fill the gaps in Dharani, but also integrate technology and governance to streamline processes

SIMPLIFIED PROCESSES
The Bhumata portal reduces the number of modules from 33 in the Dharani portal to just 6, ensuring ease of navigation for users, especially farmers

DETAILED LAND RECORDS
The manual *pahani* (land register) system, reduced to a single column in Dharani, is replaced with an 11-column format, to allow comprehensive land record details

CLEAR DEMARCATION
Mandatory inclusion of survey maps during property registrations should come in useful for resolving boundary disputes and double registrations

UNIQUE IDENTIFICATION
Like Aadhaar for individuals, Bhudhaar will provide a unique identification number for each land parcel. This should ensure clear ownership details and facilitate seamless transactions

DUAL RECORD-KEEPING
Manual land records will be maintained alongside digital databases to bolster accuracy and prevent data loss

REDRESS MECHANISM
The system decentralises grievance resolution, empowering local officers to address disputes swiftly; also introduces a two-tier appellate system and land tribunals for escalated cases

A New Identity

Akin to Aadhaar for individuals, the new reform proposes a Bhudhaar. It will be an 11-digit unique identification number for each land parcel, linked to a detailed ownership record. Initially issued as temporary numbers, pending the geo-referencing process, permanent Bhudhaar will be granted upon completion of field surveys, ensuring accuracy and preventing disputes over boundaries. It is also expected to play a crucial role in maintaining transparency and reducing fraud, while providing landowners with easy access to their complete records, as revenue minister Ponguleti Srinivas Reddy puts it, "at the click of a mouse".

Another significant change is the drastic simplification of user interaction, with the number of modules reduced from 33 in Dharani to just six in Bhumata, making the portal far more navigable for users, especially farmers. They can now also track their applica-

tions in real time, fostering transparency and accountability. The manual *pahani* (village land register) system, which had been reduced to a single column under Dharani, has been revived with 11 columns, ensuring detailed records for every land parcel. This addresses longstanding issues of incomplete and opaque record-keeping, which often left farmers at the mercy of bureaucratic red tape.

The introduction of mandatory survey maps for registrations is another important feature of Bhu Bharati. Similar to practices in neighbouring Karnataka, these maps provide a visual representation of land parcels, addressing the double-registration problem where unscrupulous individuals exploited discrepancies in record-keeping. The survey maps are being incorporated into land passbooks and village maps, creating a comprehensive system of cross-verification which will also make succession in landholding much simpler.

Decentralising Dispute Resolution

The new system also empowers the lower bureaucracy to tackle the grievances of farmers and other landowners. Though Dharani was introduced as a solution to all land-related problems, it had no redress mechanism for correcting the errors. This forced the aggrieved individuals to navigate a labyrinthine process, often ending up in civil courts where cases—unfortunately for most appellants—drag on for years. Bhu Bharati changes this. The government plans to empower mandal revenue officers (MROs) to register complaints using a dedicated mobile app, which will also allow those filing any petition to track its status. Additionally, a two-tier appellate mechanism and the establishment of special land tribunals will provide robust avenues for addressing more complex disputes.

"Lakhs of farmers will now find answers to their pending issues. The power to address grievances has been given back to tehsildars, revenue divisional officers and district collectors, so that people need not go to a civil court to find a resolution," says M. Sunil Kumar, an adjunct professor at the NALSAR University of Law, Hyderabad, who is a member of the state agriculture commission and played a key role in drafting the new law. According to him, "for the first time in any land legislation in India", there is also provision for free legal aid to any aggrieved person "who is unable to appeal before the collector or land tribunal due to financial constraints".

BUREAUCRATIC BACKLOG

The Dharani portal, launched in 2020 to streamline land record management, instead left chaos in its wake

924,000
Title deed applications languishing unresolved

2.72 MN ACRES
Land put on prohibited list, barring transactions

1.83 MN ACRES
Land transactions on hold due to incomplete digital signatures

Even as the government worked out the modalities of the new law, it transferred Dharani's operations to the National Informatics Centre to restore public confidence

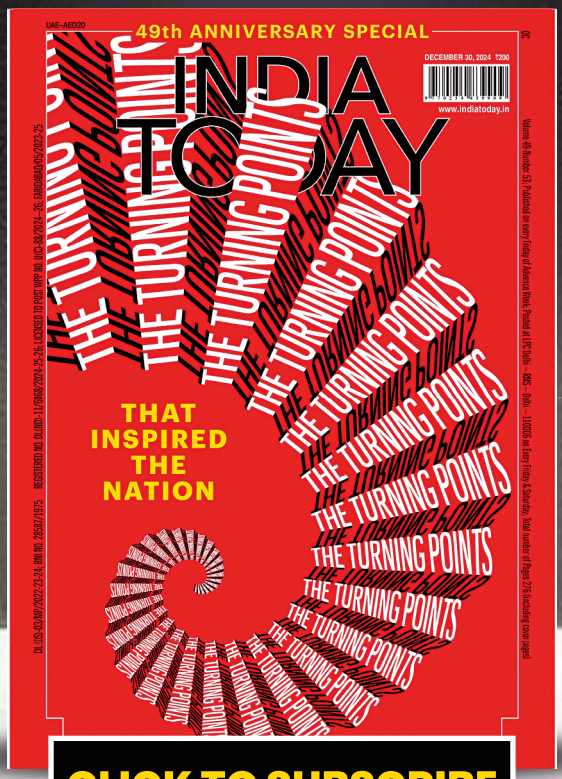
At a time when data breaches have become all too common, the reforms also focus on data integrity and privacy. Reddy, during the assembly debate, accused the previous system of fostering manipulation and corruption, alleging that "foreign entities" managed the portal and had unfettered access to sensitive data—Aadhaar details, mobile numbers and bank accounts—of landowners. So, even as the state government worked out the modalities of the new law, it transferred the management of Dharani from TerraCIS, the private agency previously responsible for it, to the NIC—a move aimed at leveraging this top government institution's expertise to restore public confidence and ensure that sensitive landowner information is handled securely and responsibly. A forensic audit of Dharani has also been ordered.

Mixed Response

The Opposition BRS leaders, however, have termed the reforms "counterproductive". "Replacing Dharani with Bhu Bharati is a betrayal of farmers," claims party legislator Palla Rajeshwar Reddy. "The Congress," he alleges, "is reviving outdated land practices, which will only benefit land grabbers and other criminals." But the real estate sector has largely welcomed the move. "The existing system is heavily centralised and inaccessible to landowners, especially farmers," says Vijaya Sai Meka, president, Telangana Real Estate Developers Association. "We appreciate the new multi-level appeal mechanism that will provide a speedy resolution to the problems genuine landowners face."

Still, some developers caution that further steps are needed to ensure the system's success. Comprehensive updates to village revenue and survey records, they argue, are vital to minimising disputes and reducing litigation in the long term. The government, on its part, has committed to periodic printing and preservation of land records, alongside dual record maintenance—manual and digital—to insulate against future challenges. If it is to be a panacea for all past ills, nothing short of that will do. ■

INDIA TODAY CELEBRATES 49 YEARS OF EVENTFUL JOURNEY



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SAFFRON'S CROSS CONNECTION

THE BJP REALISES THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY IS CRUCIAL FOR THE PARTY TO MAKE A BREAKTHROUGH IN KERALA. THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IS ALSO AWARE OF THE ADVANTAGES OF SUCH AN ARRANGEMENT

By Jeemon Jacob

ANI

SEASON'S GREETINGS PM Modi with CBCI office-bearers at the X'mas celebrations in New Delhi, Dec. 23

The '*sneha yatra* (journey of love)', an outreach programme the Kerala BJP started in 2023 during festivals, has found many takers among the state's Christians. The season's greetings messages and party leaders swinging by bishops' houses impressed many of the 'politically neutral' faithful, giving the BJP its first Lok Sabha MP from Kerala, superstar Suresh Gopi, elected from Thrissur where the church holds much clout.

The 2024 *sneha yatra* highlights included Prime Minister Narendra Modi addressing the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India's (CBCI) Christmas celebration held at its Delhi headquarters on December 23. He was the first PM to do so. CBCI president and Thrissur archbishop Andrews Thazhath praised Modi, saying his "vision for a united and progressive India echoes the Gospel values of inclusion and service to all". However, he also took care to mention the "concerns of those targeted by anti-social fringe elements".

Those 'concerns' were mostly about the unending violence in Manipur where the largely Chris-

tian Kuki community is one of the affected parties. But it also hit home in Kerala, where just days before the CBCI event, members of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) had barged into a government upper primary school in archbishop Thazhath's neighbouring district Palakkad and disrupted a Christmas celebration for the young wards. State BJP leaders were quick to distance themselves from the incidents—a Christmas nativity crib was also found vandalised in another school in the same district—even as a few Church elders took to social media to deride the party's "tokenism".

TIT FOR TAT CPI(M) students' wing take out a Christmas carol rally to protest the VHP disrupting a school X'mas celebration, Palakkad, Dec. 23

SAFFRON STRATEGY

The relatively well-off Roman/Syrian Catholic community in Kerala feels they have found a "good samaritan" in PM Modi. The feeling is mutual, though it does have political undertones. The BJP needs the community's votes in the assembly election scheduled for March-April 2026 and the Lok Sabha polls thereafter in 2029. Though Hindus account for about 55 per cent of the state's population, the party has been unable to consolidate their vote as the Left and the Congress are entrenched entities here. The Christians, who make up some 18 per cent of the vote, could hence be a game-changer for the party.

Winning the Thrissur seat in 2024—where Gopi won with a margin of 74,686 votes—showed the BJP that it was on the right path. Party sources admit it was "Modi Magic along with the Syro-Malabar church" that helped it open its LS account in Kerala. Thrissur has around 24 per cent Christian voters and some 48 per cent Hindu votes. The thumping victory margin sent shock waves through both the Left and the Congress.

It was after the 2014 Lok Sabha election where BJP veteran and ex-Union minister O. Rajagopal lost to the Congress's Shashi Tharoor in Thiruvananthapuram by 15,000-odd votes that the party realised they had to tap the Christian vote. The Latin and Nadar Christian communities in the coastal areas had saved Tharoor from a humiliating defeat. Since then, the central leadership has worked systematically to win over the Christians.

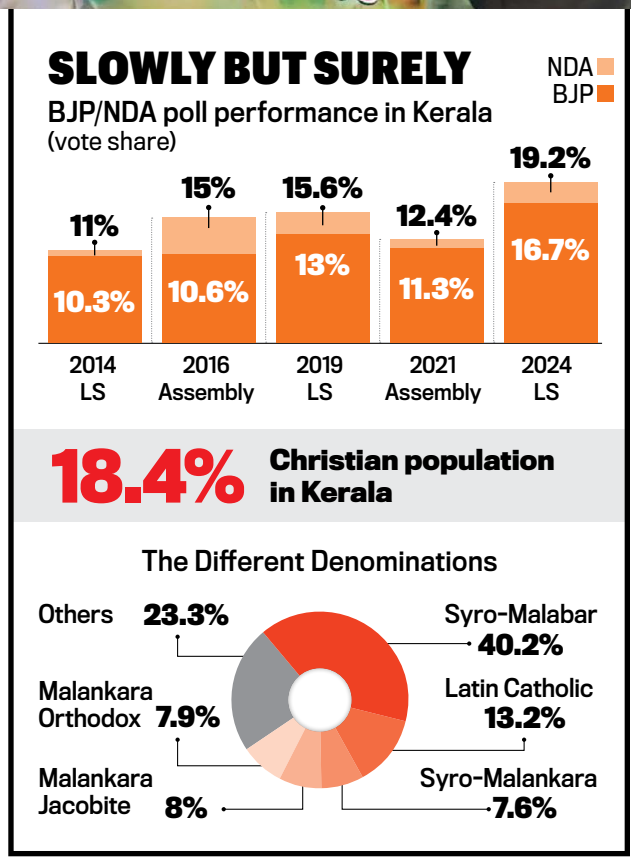
Some observers believe that for many churches, the newfound love for BJP is a question of "survival"

It started with former IAS officer Alphons Kannanthanam being inducted as the Union minister of state for tourism in 2017. But that didn't quite pan out, though he did create inroads with the state's Pentecostal churches. Meanwhile, the 2021 assembly polls rolled in, where the BJP-led NDA lost its only seat and saw vote share fall to 12.4 per cent (a 2.6 percentage point dip from 2016) despite a saturation campaign and multiple Kerala visits by Modi. That was another wake-up call. The party's new point person is George Kurian, the Union MoS for fisheries, animal husbandry and dairying and minority affairs. A Catholic by faith, he is a popular leader in Christian circles. A big part of the outreach now is extending all help for the Pope's visit, scheduled for early 2026, possibly before the state elections.

THE BIG SQUEEZE

Some political observers believe that for many of the churches, this new-found love for the BJP is a question of "survival". According to this view, the community has realised that a Congress resurgence is unlikely nationally and since they have historically been 'allergic' to the Left, the next best option seems to be the saffron club. The 2,000-year-old Syro-Malabar Catholic Church has in the past decade been rattled by internal conflicts, a multi-crore tax evasion probe and criminal charges against former church head Cardinal George Alencherry (in land deals, among other cases), which has offered inroads to the BJP. The Church is one of the most influential in Kerala with interests in healthcare, educational institutions and NGOs. The party is also in touch with the Marthoma Church (which accounts for one million of the faithful) and the Syro-Malankara Catholic Church. As for the fringe denominations, like the Pentecostal Church, they need the BJP's blessings to get their foreign funds released. Their NGOs are struggling with the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA) that was amended in 2020. A retired senior income tax officer told INDIA TODAY, "I personally headed a raid on one of the gospel church headquarters in Kerala. We unearthed huge amounts of unaccounted-for cash and even interrogated officials and recorded statements. But nothing came of it finally." The raids, say sources, were a signal to the Pentecostal churches to fall in line.

A priest from the Latin Catholic diocese, who didn't want to reveal his identity, confirms this. "The Christians in Kerala are not politically monolithic. Different denominations choose their own political paths. Since 2014, the Union home ministry has cancelled many FCRA accounts operated by church NGOs.



NGOs are now directed to open accounts only in the New Delhi branch of the State Bank of India if they want to receive foreign contributions. In such a vindictive climate, the Church will have to yield…it's a question of survival," he says.

Paul Zacharia, perhaps Malayalam's most celebrated short story writer and a Syrian Christian by birth, is not so sure about who to blame. "Historically, the Christians have always opted for political propositions that were to their advantage. They sabotaged the first Communist government in Kerala, they never opposed the Emergency, and now they are falling for the BJP. It's as if they are playing lucky dip," says the 79-year-old author.

A CHRISTIAN OVERTURE

The saffron party is focusing on five Lok Sabha constituencies where the Christians can play a decisive role in deciding winners—Thiruvananthapuram (19.1 per cent of voters), Attingal (19 per cent), Pathanamthitta (39.7 per cent), Alappuzha (19.8 per cent) and Thrissur. Scheduled Caste constituency Mavelikkara (21.8 per cent), Chalakudy (32.1 per cent), Palakkad (4.1 per cent) and Kasargod (7.8 per cent) are also listed to improve the vote share in the state. Though Palakkad and Kasargod have fewer Christians, the BJP's internal surveys suggest that, as in Kottayam, Islamophobia is strong among Christians in these seats.

Now that is a thread the saffron party knows how to tease out well. 'Love jihad' was one of the themes that first brought the BJP and the Church together in the past decade and a half. The party has now also thrown its weight behind the 600-odd families (mostly Christian) in coastal Munambam, Kochi, in a face-off with the state Waqf board which says their homes were on the board's land.

Not many are sure, though, that the BJP's religious polarisation plan will work in Kerala. "The BJP game plan will fail as the people are more intelligent than the church leaders. That was amply evident in Christian-dominated Pathanamthitta [the party had fielded Anil Antony here, son of veteran Congress leader A.K. Antony, but still lost here] in the last parliamentary poll," says political analyst Sunnykutti Abraham. What concerns him is a Congress implosion and the "anti-Communists" shifting to the BJP as the next available political option. The fears are not unwarranted; in the past few days, some of the top state Congress leaders have been caught in a war of words over, of all things, who will be the next party CM.

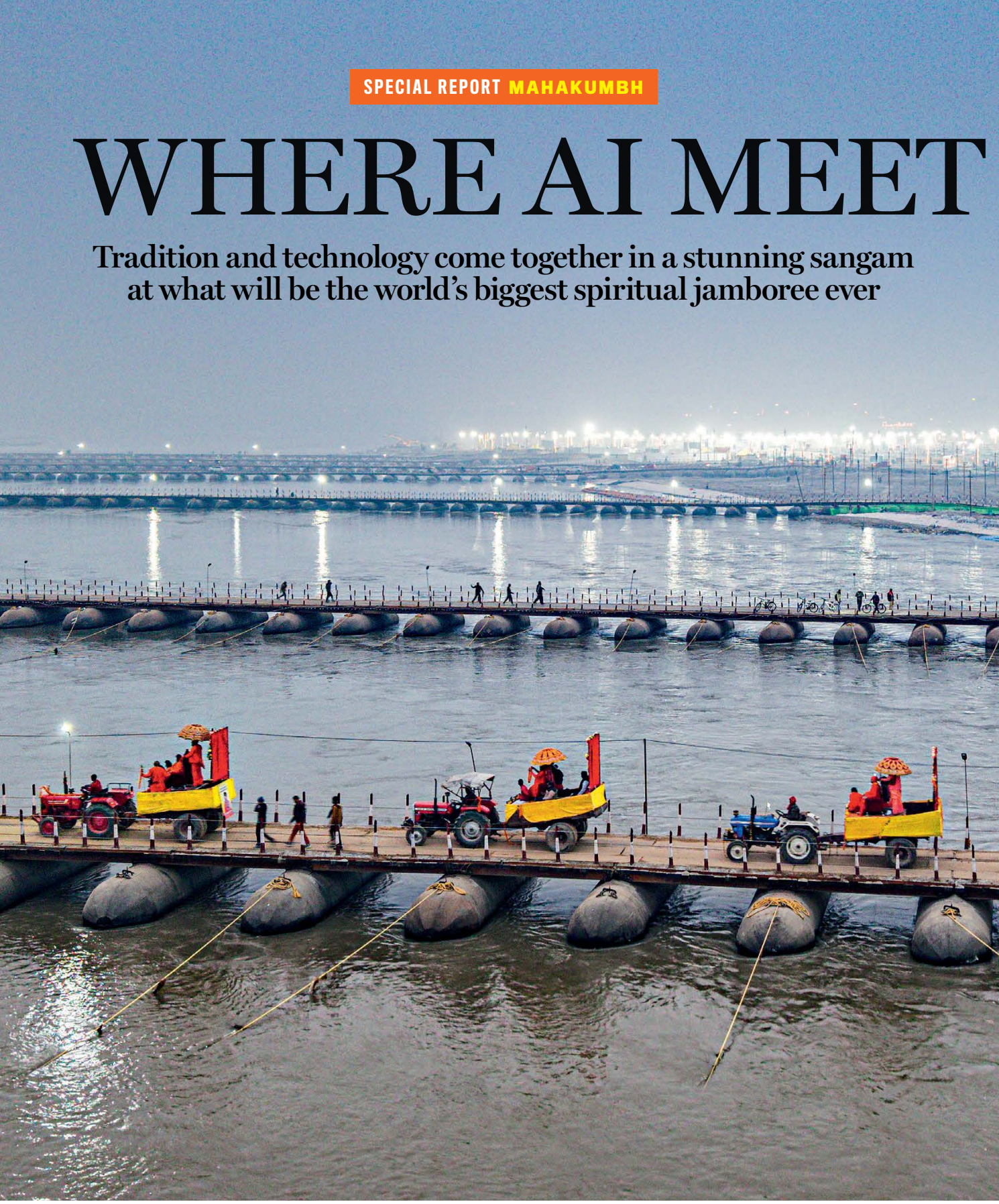
The BJP agenda is also along those lines, destabilising the Congress and throttling the CPI(M). The 10 Lok Sabha constituencies they are focusing on account for 70 seats in the 140-member assembly. If the Christians fall in line, the BJP could win 45 of these seats. State BJP president K. Surendran, as always, is supremely confident. "We are sure that we will form the government in 2026. The public mood is in our favour. Kerala has benefitted from PM Modi's development programmes," he says.

From nil seats to 45 and even forming government, the party's ambitions are clear. The BJP's plans hold no surprises—a mix of religious polarisation, caste politics and a sprinkling of Magic Modi dust. The timing, too, is not inopportune, Congress factions are pulling against each other and the ruling CPI(M) is sinking under the weight of anti-incumbency and controversies that a decade in power has wrought. The question is whether the BJP can acquire the critical mass necessary to bring down the last Red citadel in the country. ■

SPECIAL REPORT **MAHAKUMBH**

WHERE AI MEET

Tradition and technology come together in a stunning sangam at what will be the world's biggest spiritual jamboree ever



450mn
Expected no. of pilgrims

₹ 7,000cr
Outlay for the Mahakumbh mela

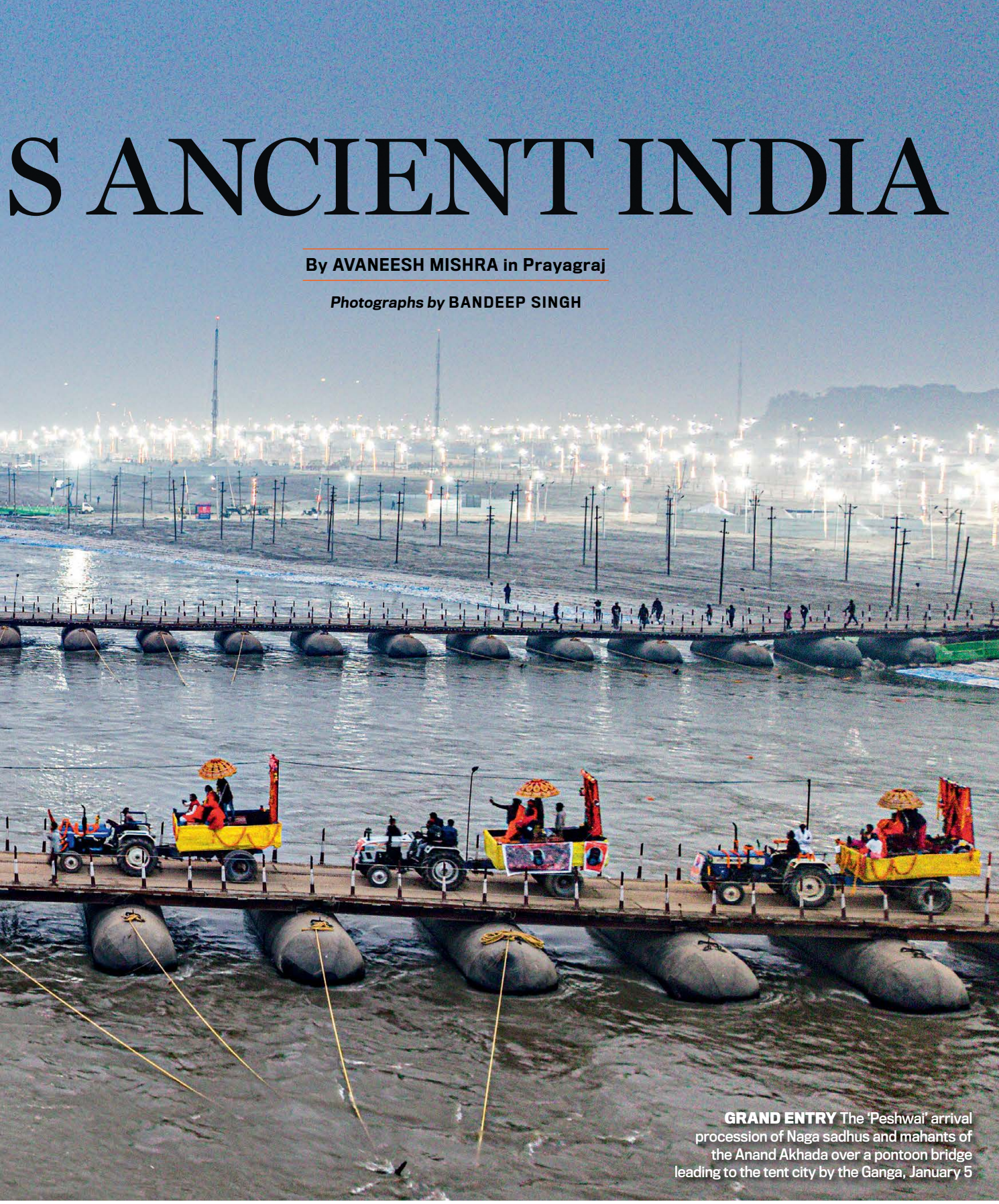
4,000ha
Sprawl of the entire mela

150,000
Tents in the mela area

S ANCIENT INDIA

By AVANEESH MISHRA in Prayagraj

Photographs by BANDEEP SINGH



GRAND ENTRY The 'Peshwai' arrival procession of Naga sadhus and mahants of the Anand Akhada over a pontoon bridge leading to the tent city by the Ganga, January 5

400+km
Temporary and chequered plate roads

201
Widened and strengthened roads

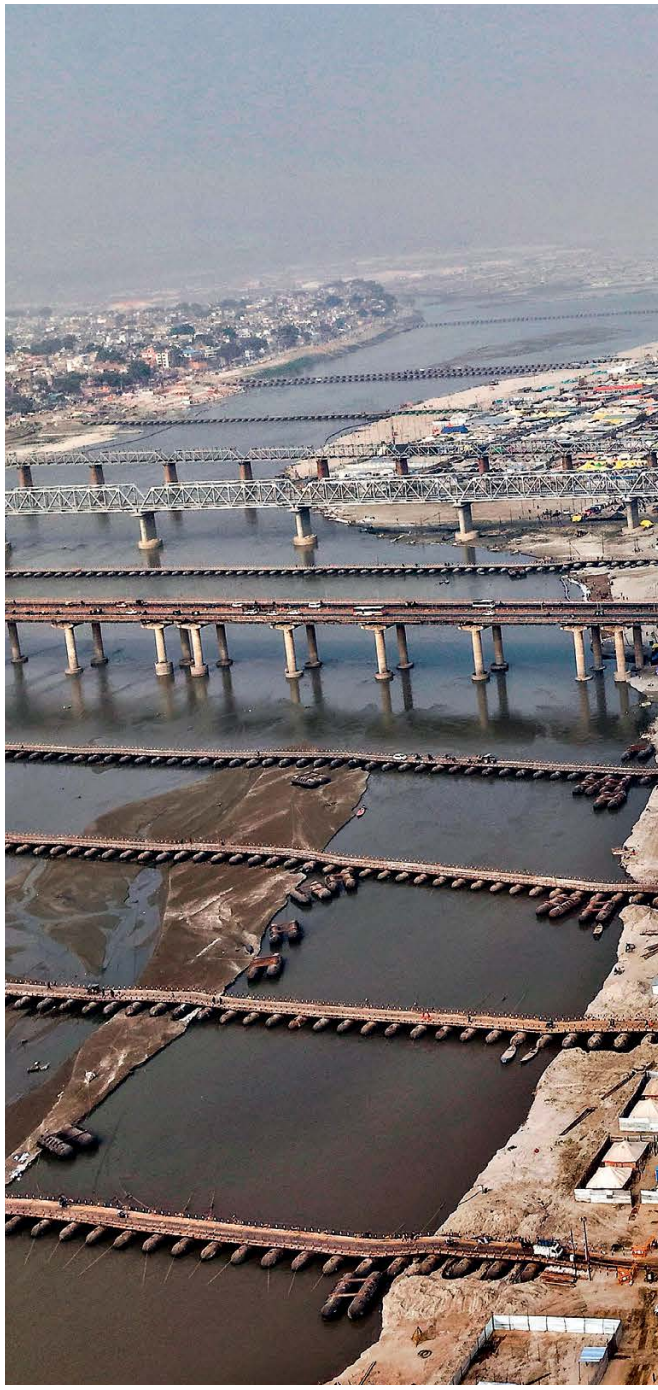
69,000
LED lights and solar hybrid street lighting

102
Parking lots, with capacity for 550,000 vehicles

The air hums with an uncanny energy as dawn's first light touches the banks of the Triveni Sangam. Workers move with clockwork precision, hammering poles into the earth to raise a metropolis of tents. The aroma of freshly cooked food mingles with the chants of early pilgrims, while tethered drones hover above the bustling grounds like silent sentinels. This grand tableau is the arena of the Mahakumbh, just before the curtains go up. With rituals as ancient as faith itself, in its latest iteration it's also as modern as the algorithms that now help shape it. For centuries, seekers of salvation have converged on the confluence of the Ganga, Yamuna and the myth-borne Saraswati—transacting only with the transcendental. It was the 2001 edition, the first big Kumbh since the advent of the satellite era, that brought the entire world's eyes on this moment of communion. Fast forward to 2025, and you see that audacious blend of the sacred and the digital fully nativised—a wireless data cocoon in which is enwrapped this mini-cosmos that's expanding to a never-before scale.

This marvel of modern logistics is like a spiritual hub wrapped in a wireless data cocoon: GIS maps, polyglot apps, ANPR parking tools...

The Sangam at Prayagraj keeps its date with infinity beginning January 13, the onset of an astrological phase that recurs every 12 years. Legend anoints the site as one of the four (besides Haridwar, Ujjain and Nashik) where drops of *amrit*, the nectar of immortality, spilled during the mythical churning of the oceans by *devas* and *asuras*; bathing at its ghats during this auspicious conjuncture is believed to cleanse all sins and grant *moksha*. If the foretold footfalls materialise, an astounding 450 million—more than the population of any country barring India and China—will have taken that holy dip over 48 days. To host these surreal numbers, an empty riverbank populated only by wild scrub has been turned into a mega urban conjuration. Mahakumbh Nagar, spread over 4,000 hectares, is also a magnifying glass for Uttar Pradesh's administrative mettle. In the first few foglit mornings of January, it's still in the natal ward. Pilgrims and sadhus have begun arriving in droves, their chants mingling with the clangour of the last bits of frantic construction. Greeting them is a newly laid network of temporary roads spanning 400 kilometres, 30 pontoon bridges stretching across the waters, 14 flyovers and chequered plate pathways criss-crossing a labyrinth of tents. Banners and posters are everywhere. Many flaunt the smiling visages of Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath and Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Slogans like "*Sanatan satvik hai, kaayar nahin* (sanatan is pure, not cowardly)" add a high-key ideological timbre to the spiritual philharmonic.



150,000 Public toilets, 25,000 dustbins

15,000 Sanitation workers

The Digital Kumbh

At the heart of it is another sangam—call it 'AI meets Ancient India'. In full flow, the mela grounds will transform into a kaleidoscope of spiritual rituals and timeless traditions. But the sensible way to regulate such a surge of humanity at the turnstiles is to scan its ebb and flow aerially. The *devas* may be watching from the clouds, but there will be drones surveying the moving spectacle from just above.

MAHAKUMBH NAGAR A bird's-eye view of the sprawling tent city spread over 4,000 hectares on the sandbanks of the Ganga

29	40	11	12km	8km
Temples beautified	Junctions, 48 roads spruced up	Corridors developed	Temporary ghats built	Riverfront roads laid out

This synthesis of heritage and innovation has been at work for months—literally plotting the action. The whole gargantuan process of land and service allotments was digitised this time, eliminating the fuzzy inefficiencies of manual coordination. The Prayagraj Mela Authority used GIS-based mapping and high-resolution drone surveys to prepare layouts for the 25 sectors of the mela. Conducted before and after the monsoon, these generated georeferenced maps with 0.5 cm accuracy, ensuring precise land allocations. The authority also digitised data from 5,500 institutions that participated in 2019 and integrated it with online applications from new participants. Over 10,000 entities—the various sadhu congregations called *akhadas*, spiritual/cultural organisations, government departments—have benefited from this marvel of modern logistics. Permits for services and amenities, too, have been digitised, allowing seamless coordination between institutions, vendors

and the Authority. Stakeholders can now view and verify their allotments in real-time, enabling swift implementation, reducing room for discrepancies. This streamlining of processes, with built-in transparency and accountability, sets a precedent for large-scale event management.

Yet, even with all this AI wizardry at hand, orchestrating an event as sprawling as it is intricate in its details is a herculean challenge. All the entwined strings finally pass to the hands of Vijay Kiran Anand, a clean-cut, 2009 cadre IAS bright spark who's been designated Kumbh Mela Officer and District Magistrate overseeing what is temporarily (for four months) the state's 76th 'district'. His mandate extends far beyond logistics. There are grievances and disputes over land and resource allocations, often fuelled by ego clashes between religious factions. Maintaining harmony and managing the often-conflicting demands of competing congregations and dharmic bodies is a task that demands equal parts diplomacy and a cool head. "We have expanded the mela area from 3,200 hectares in 2019 to 4,000 hectares and increased the number of sectors from 22 to 25. Yet, the demand for land has only surged, with everyone expecting more than what they got last time," says Mela District ADM Vivek Chaturvedi.

Epic Logistics

To streamline allocations, the administration prioritised *akhadas*, followed by other traditional groups like the Dandi Baada (ascetics bearing the 'Brahma danda'), the Acharya Baada of the Ramanuja branch, and Khak Chowk, a historic section that houses hundreds of Vaishnav *mahant*s and *mandaleshwar*s. Then came organisations with longstanding participation and, finally, verified new entrants. The minimum area allotted is traditionally decided and depends on the shore area left by the Ganga. A tricky variable there and, sure enough, nature proved to be in no mood to help. High water levels, taking longer than usual to recede to the threshold flow of 7,000 cusecs, delayed things. Help had to be sought from IIT Guwahati for 'dressing' (dredging) the riverbed, ensuring a channelised flow and reclaiming more shore area. It's on Anand to remain the calm, all-seeing eye in the centre of this blurry storm of digital mapping and concrete logistics, high waters and high dudgeon.

All that is just the prepping. Now comes the job of managing the moving millions, which needs even more razor-sharp attention. Central here is an AI-powered panopticon: the Integrated Command and Control Centre (ICCC) oversees this entire buzzing sprawl through an all-pervasive web of 2,700 CCTV cameras, drones and water surveillance systems. Its real-time monitoring will be key to swift emergency response, proactive decongestion and security. To enhance navigability, the Authority has partnered with Google to integrate into its maps all key landmarks: ghats, toilets, food courts, pontoon bridges, emergency services. The Kumbh app and website promise more user-friendliness with a multilingual chatbot,

ARTIFICIAL EYES Police technicians monitor vehicular and pilgrim movement in a 24/7 control room set up for surveillance of Prayagraj and the Kumbh township

The job of keeping millions safe, and moving, is with an integrated command centre that maintains a 24/7 vigil on this entire sprawl

SahaAlyak, which can address visitor queries in 11 languages. QR code-based services for ticketing, navigation and emergency assistance will help create seamless logistics, allowing pilgrims to focus on their spiritual journey. Parking, a challenge that usually multiplies by several orders of magnitude, has also been reimagined. There's space for 550,000 vehicles at any time at the 102 designated parking lots spanning 1,850 ha. All are outfitted with Automatic Number Plate Recognition (ANPR) systems to ensure quick entry and exit. Keeping an eagle eye will be 50,000-plus security personnel aided by drones, robotic buoys and all their AI tools. The ICCC will keep critical zones under constant surveillance. Fire curtains, fire gels and rapid response teams are on standby.

For those seeking a premium experience, whether international visitors or the desi beau monde, there are three separate tent cities. These elite setups, on a luxury gradient from around Rs 10,000 to over Rs 1 lakh per night, are the fruit of public-private partnerships. A range of other fancy, cottage-style 'villages' and VIP retreats are luring those who prefer their spirituality with gourmet dining, yoga and air-conditioning in January. As preparations reach their zenith, the city of Prayagraj (formerly Allahabad) stands adorned, its ghats gleaming, its waters sanc-

2,700
Crowd-monitoring cameras

10
Digital lost and found centres

tified, its streets and hotels abuzz with the anticipation of millions. For ordinary devotees, the government's arrangements offer a total of 150,000 tents. Hygiene and sustainability are priorities like never before. Some 150,000 toilets and 25,000 dustbins ensure the holy grounds remain unblemished—bestowing this aura of sanctity are 15,000 sanitation workers, with 160 waste management vehicles. QR-based platforms streamline access to the amenities. For those moments of panic, 10 lost and found centres will be a beacon of solace.

The true seeker, of course, only looks for the portals of salvation. Here, pilgrims will find thoughtful enhancements—29 temples radiating renewed beauty, strung along 11 new corridors, and 12 km of ghats interlinked by 8 km of riverfront roads. This is where faith transits across the earthly aura of 69,000 LED and solar hybrid lights to meet the sacred waters. The beating heart of the Kumbh will be these sanctifying bathing rituals, or *snans*. These are punctuated by grand processions and culminate in the Shahi Snans—the mela's spiritual pinnacles. The sequence of events runs from the first holy dip on Paush Purnima (Jan. 13), the spirit of charity of Makar Sankranti (Jan. 14), the silence and purification of Mauni Amavasya (Jan. 29), the yellow-hued renewal of Basant Panchami (Feb. 3), the serene white of Maghi Purnima (Feb. 12) to the spiritual crescendo of Mahashivaratri (Feb. 26).

"Once Kumbh was known for chaos and stampedes. We have transformed it, combining tradition with innovation, receiving UNESCO recognition"

—YOGI ADITYANATH
Chief Minister, Uttar Pradesh

Beyond its spiritual and cultural dimensions, Mahakumbh 2025 holds undeniable political significance for Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath himself. The immense national and international import of the event is not lost on him: "The Mahakumbh is not just a religious congregation, it is a celebration of faith, tradition and heritage that showcases the soul of India to the world." And he wants to present himself as the custodian of that soul. "There was a time when the Kumbh was associated with dirt, chaos and stampedes. Today, under Prime Minister Narendra Modi's guidance, we have transformed it into a symbol of pride, receiving UNESCO recognition in 2019. Mahakumbh 2025 will not only maintain this legacy but set a new benchmark in how faith-based events are organised."

The chief minister is taking a deeply personal interest in every aspect of the Mahakumbh's planning and execution. By turning it into a pristine and well-organised affair, Yogi hopes to solidify his image as a leader who respects tradition while embracing progress and also showcase Uttar Pradesh as a hub of spiritual grandeur and administrative excellence. "This is an opportunity for Uttar Pradesh to display its administrative capability, hospitality and respect for our Sanatan culture." His vision is clear: a "Digital Kumbh" with advanced technologies to aid devotees, coupled with eco-conscious measures like zero plastic usage and sewage treatment to preserve the purity of the Ganga and Yamuna. "We aim to make this Mahakumbh a transformative experience for visitors, combining ancient traditions with modern innovation," he emphasises.

An Uneven Ganga

But exit the well-appointed enclaves of the rich, and one also enters the dark waters where ancient India bequeaths its curses along with its blessings. The Mahakumbh also showcases the stark contrast between grandeur and struggle, luxury and deprivation coexisting in unsettling proximity. Once considered a "*dehaat ka mela*", a rural festival accessible to all, the Kumbh is now an extravagant affair the poor and middle class can scarcely afford. Modern India likes to take its holy dips in flowing prosperity; symbols of exclusivity, like the Rs 1 lakh per night pads at the shiny new Tent City, have pride of place.

Epic in scale, even in its outlay—a deluge at Rs 7,000 crore—the mela of 2025 bids fair to secure its place in history as the world's largest spiritual gathering. Simultaneously, it will be seen as a landmark in the harmonising of tradition, technological innovation and cooperative effort, offering a prototype for large-scale events worldwide. But it embodies far more than the sum of its remarkable elements, some transcending spatial and temporal lines, some invisibly reinforcing them. ■

इंडिया टुडे
देश की भाषा में देश की धड़कन

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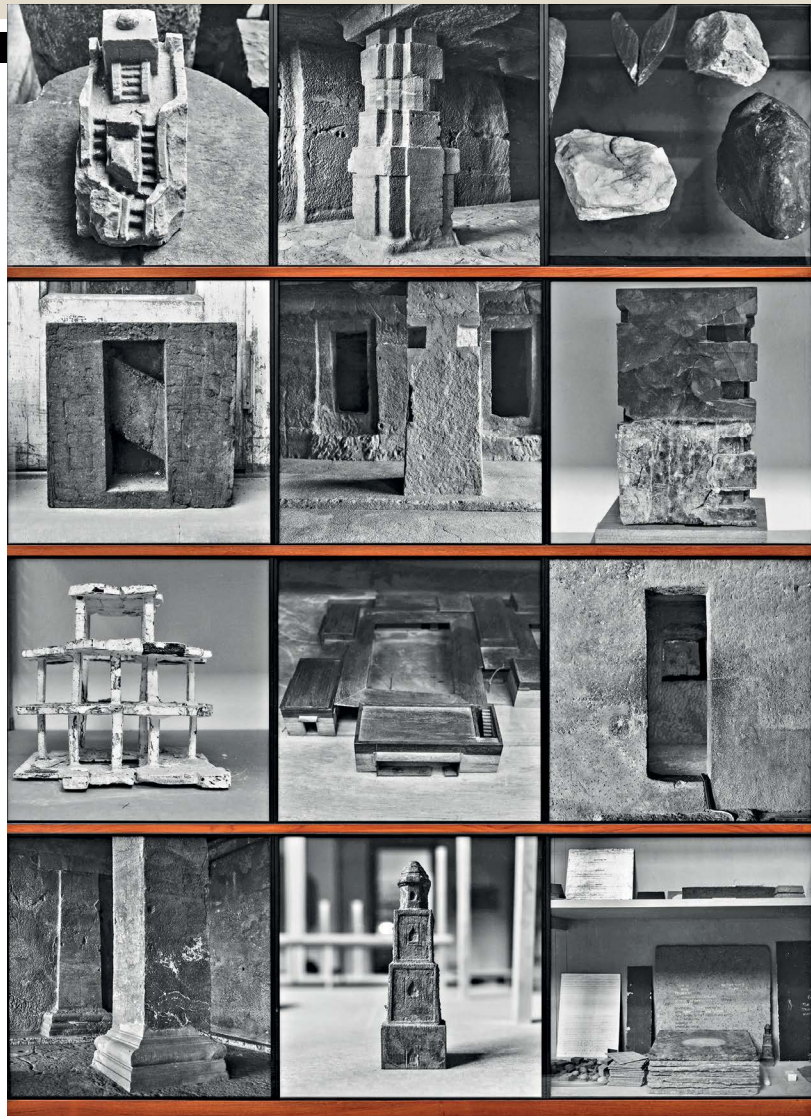
EXHIBITION

Changing the Narrative

In an ambitious new touring exhibition across India, veteran photographer ***Dayanita Singh*** pushes the boundaries of how we experience images

Photograph by
BANDEEP SINGH

Photo Lies is on view at the Jehangir Nicholson Art Foundation at Mumbai's Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya



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"Photography is a form of deception; it is what the photographer includes and excludes in the frame and what their point of view is," says Dayanita Singh by way of explanation of her exhibition's title. *Photo Lies* is currently on view at the Jehangir Nicholson Art Foundation (JNAF) at Mumbai's Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya (CSMVS). It features extracts from *Dancing with My Camera*, Singh's retrospective that was on tour in Europe in 2022–2024, alongside new pieces created specifically for this exhibition, all of which are being presented for the first time in India.

The deception in photography is evident throughout the exhibition, particularly in the 'montages', where Singh cuts up her own images and recombines them to make analogue compositions. Her architectural montages are particularly striking, seamlessly combining Kanyakumari's 17th-century Padmanabhapuram Palace with the Geoffrey Bawa-designed Heritance Kandalama Hotel in Sri Lanka. Or an ancient Kyoto temple juxtaposed with the modernist library designed by Rahul Mehrotra at CEPT, Ahmedabad. "The space that I create in the montage is fictional; it only exists in that photograph and yet it is real because now there is an image of it," says Singh. The key idea is to collapse time and geography, ostensibly to counter the frequently asked question that has always annoyed Singh—where and when was this photo taken? Elsewhere in the exhibition, Singh paints over her photographs to create ghosts of her images. Finally, she constructs contact sheets to curate her own version of the history of modern architecture; for example, combining the 7th-century Ellora Caves with Bijoy Jain's contemporary Studio Mumbai. The exhibition expands into CSMVS, with interventions in the Textile and Natural History galleries.

For Singh, the labour of photography lies not in the making of images but in conceptualising the forms within which they are disseminated. A suite of museums (modular wooden frames) is presented empty, with the bare structure offering a new architecture for the space the exhibition inhabits. Four-sided pillars display images of architecture by three masters—Geoffrey Bawa, Le Corbusier and B.V. Doshi. By presenting images in these ways, Singh invites the viewer to engage with the work not just with their eyes but with their body, like one would with a sculpture by walking around it and viewing it from different angles. "I want you to get down on your knees if you want to see the lowest picture in the Bawa Rocks pillar; I think you will experience the images very differently then. Similarly, when you look at the montages through the empty museum structures, you will see them differently," says Singh.

The deception in photography is evident throughout the exhibition, particularly in the "montages"

In addition to *Photo Lies*, simultaneous exhibitions have opened at the Jaipur Centre for Art, Jaipur, and at the inaugural Bengal Biennale at Indian Museum, Kolkata. Here, Singh presents Museums of Tanpura, a wide-ranging archive of photos of Indian classical music stalwarts like Pandit Bhimsen Joshi, Pandit Hari Prasad Chaurasia, Ustad Zakir Hussain, Ustad Rashid Khan, Kishori Amonkar and others. While sifting through her photos—many of which were shot while touring the country on the musicians' bus—Singh found the tanpura as a common link be-

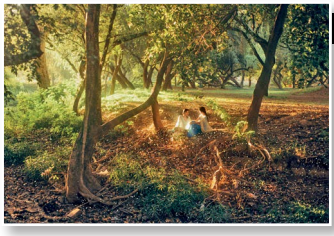
LENS LEGACY
'Ellora Eyes' (teak panel, 12 archival pigment prints), 2024, by Dayanita Singh

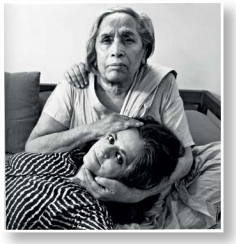
tween the artists. "The tanpura is never centre stage, because it's an accompaniment instrument and yet without it, you can't have any music," she says. Following from the JNAF exhibition, Singh's retrospective will split into two in March-April 2025—*Mona and Myself* at Gallery White, Vadodara, and *Photo Architecture* at Ahmedabad's Kanoria Centre for Arts. These shows will include additional images and other material, for example, a video of the late architect B.V. Doshi talking about the photographs that Singh made in his Ahmedabad home.

Singh also plans to take the touring exhibition to more venues next year. "I'm hoping that I can take what I showed in Kolkata to Varanasi, but to five venues instead of one," she says. Similarly, she wants to take *Photo Lies* to all cities with eminent architecture schools. "There are many questions in this show for architects. What is it that connects Padmanabhapuram Palace to Geoffrey Bawa? What connects Martand Khosla to Carlo Scarpa? They don't know each other, they come from very different times and geographies and yet in my work, they blend seamlessly—pun intended, since they blend because of the seam," she adds. ■

–Prachi Joshi

Photo Lies will continue at Jehangir Nicholson Gallery, Mumbai, until Feb. 23





VISUAL ODYSSEY
Clockwise from left, 'The Kingdom of Kush' by Delphine Diallo; 'Meet Me in the Garden' by Farheen Fatima; 'The Archivist' by Nony Singh; 'Cecilia'ed' by Indu Antony

EXHIBITION

CHENNAI IN FOCUS

The fourth edition of the **Chennai Photo Biennale** questions photography's purpose in an age of hyperdocumentation

"Why photograph?" is the question the Chennai Photo Biennale asks, as it returns with its fourth edition after a three-year physical hiatus since 2021, expanding its presence across more prominent venues in the city by occupying galleries and public spaces in Chennai.

The question takes inspiration from photographer Dayanita Singh's body of work, which inquires into the very act of photographing in an age of hyperdocumentation, as lines between fact and fiction blur more than ever. "Photography has become a spontaneous act and a universal language now. In this age of excess image production, the question that begs to be asked and answered not just by photographers and artists, but by anyone, is—why do we photograph?" says Shuchi Kapoor, co-founder and director, CPB Foundation, the charitable trust behind the biennale.

It's an age of paradoxes like no other. Today, while everyone owns a camera, the act of photographing runs the risk of propaganda, according to Kapoor. And yet, "it offers the liberty of sharing hyperlocal narratives and lesser-known cultural contexts," she says. The exhibition, thus, examines the present, past and future alike by assembling lens-based artists from across Tamil Nadu; showcasing the works of women who have documented their worlds through a lens that's uniquely theirs; spotlighting the works of children, and hosting retrospectives of artists like Sunil Gupta.

Also, for the very first time, the biennale is featuring 40 photographers from across 30 countries, with each participant handpicked by an esteemed international jury comprising *Vogue Italia* and *L'Uomo Vogue* senior photo editor Alessia Glaviano, celebrated Australian curator Brendan McCleary, award-winning Indian photographer Joseph Radhik, India Art Fair external relations and outreach director Umah Jacob, among others. This diverse jury is a testament to CPB's goal of playfully demystifying—and thereby making more accessible—photography for the common person, as the art exists in myriad contexts.

The biennale is open for free to everyone, and is on display till March 16

The biennale is also a step in the direction of encouraging a community of artists in the city to imagine it as a creative space, something the event's director Varun Gupta believes is a tangible cultural gap in Chennai. "In the early stages, we chose Chennai not only because we love it, but also because the city doesn't motivate younger people to enter the field of arts, and nothing can motivate people like a big exhibition such as a photo biennale," he says. The biggest incentive to do so, perhaps, is the fact that the biennale is open for free to everyone, and is on display till March 16. ■

–Arshia

ALL THE SEASONS
Clockwise from right, Soghra Khurasani's 'Grounded', a canvas by Atul Dodiya, a painting by Christopher Kulendran Thomas, and work by Paul BeumerBeumer

ART

Coming Together

The ongoing* Mumbai Gallery Weekend *is a platform for both established and emerging artists

The Mumbai Gallery Weekend (MGW) has returned from Jan. 9–12, marking its 13th edition. Organised by the Mumbai Gallery Association, the annual event is a key feature of the city's cultural landscape. Featuring 37 galleries and spaces, MGW 2025 has a rich programme of exhibitions, curated walkthroughs and engaging discussions. Since its inception, MGW has been a platform for renowned and emerging artists, drawing audiences from across the globe. Among this year's highlights:

- **Atul Dodiya's** *Radio Ceylon Paintings: Vol. I* at Chemould Prescott Road, evoking nostalgia through music.
- **Rana Begum's** stunning works at Jhaveri Contemporary, blending light, geometry, and colour.
- **Christopher Kulendran Thomas**'s debut solo exhibition at Experimenter Colaba, exploring diasporic identity and cultural history.
- **Interactive events**, like curated walkthroughs by Art & Wonderment, offer audiences deeper insights into the ideas behind the works.

This year's line-up also features exhibitions that demonstrate the dynamic role of galleries as cultural innovators:

> The Mumbai Gallery Association's annual event has made Mumbai a hub of contemporary art

- **Gallery Maskara:** T. Vennanna's *Black Blue Yellow*, a compelling exploration of war and sexuality through monumental ink brush paintings.
- **Galerie Isa:** Santiago Giralda's *Maps of the Invisible*, a four-metre triptych that reimagines contemporary visual narratives.
- **TARQ:** Soghra Khurasani's *Grounded*, reflecting on humanity's relationship with nature through intricate prints.
- **Artisans':** Paul Beumer's collaboration with Tamil Nadu weavers, reinterpreting Madras checks in vibrant new forms.

Mumbai Gallery Weekend was born out of a shared commitment to fostering art. In 2008, the contemporary art market faced a sudden downturn, marked by plummeting demand and dwindling everyday audiences. Despite these challenges, Mumbai's galleries persevered, driven by a vision to sustain the art ecosystem. They rethought strategies, creating new ways to engage audiences and build a lasting art culture in the city. From experiments like Art Night Thursday, which extended gallery hours, to the launch of MGW in 2012, these efforts transformed Mumbai into a hub for contemporary art. ■

–Nikhil Sardana

T

The Symphony Orchestra of India (SOI) will enthral audiences with its Spring 2025 Season, running from Jan. 25 to Feb. 15. Featuring the legendary Zubin Mehta and the SOI debut of Sir Mark Elder, the season promises a rich array of symphonic and concerto masterpieces, and operatic favourites.

Maestro Zubin Mehta's return to the SOI is among the most anticipated highlights. Reflecting on his return, Khushroo N. Suntook, chairman of the National Centre for the Performing Arts (NCPA) and co-founder of the SOI, shared, "Maestro Zubin Mehta's return to the SOI is always a momentous occasion. When he first heard the orchestra last year, we had a small surprise by

having them perform a piece from *Petrushka* as he entered the auditorium. Astonished by their skill, he remarked that he was very pleased with the orchestra's performance, even with fewer rehearsals than anticipated."

Mehta will lead the orchestra in Beethoven's *Leonore Overture No. 3*, Chopin's *Piano Concerto No. 2* featuring Alexander Gadjiev as the soloist, Dvořák's *Symphony No. 7*, Mahler's *Symphony No. 5* and Haydn's *Symphony No. 104 "London"*. The Opera Gala will feature excerpts from *Carmen* and *La Traviata*, with international vocal talents such as Roberta Mantegna, Olesya Petrova, Luciano Ganci and George Petean. The Living Voices-Mumbai choir and the Singing Tree Choir of the Mehli Mehta Music Foundation will also lend their voices to this grand celebration of music.

This season also welcomes Sir Mark Elder, making his SOI debut with a stirring programme that includes Beethoven's *Eroica* Symphony and Schumann's *Overture, Scherzo and Finale*. Suntook emphasises Elder's significance: "This season, we are privileged to have Sir Mark Elder, an exceptional conductor who is highly regarded across the globe. His involvement underscores the calibre of artistry the SOI aspires to present."

The SOI now has a growing presence of Indian musicians. It is also planning projects that blend cultures and art forms

MUSIC

SPRING IN THEIR SETS

The upcoming **Spring 2025 Season** of the Symphony Orchestra of India at NCPA, Mumbai—headlined by Maestro Zubin Mehta and Sir Mark Elder—promises a host of international performers

MASTER BATON WIELDERS
Far left, Zubin Mehta conducts the SOI; left, conductor Sir Mark Elder

Suntook reveals the thought behind the season's programming: "Zubin and I curated the entire season. It's a blend of symphonies, operatic works and concertos designed to appeal to a diverse audience. While we occasionally differ in opinion, such as in the choice of singers, our collaborative spirit ensures a cohesive programme."

The SOI is witnessing a growing presence of Indian musicians in its ensemble. Suntook expressed pride in this development: "It's heartening to see more Indian musicians joining the orchestra. Their growth and integration into the SOI are a testament to the rising appreciation and talent for western classical music within the country."

Looking beyond this season, the SOI is ambitiously planning projects that blend cultures and art forms. Suntook highlighted one such vision: "A unique aspiration we are keen to develop is the tasteful and artistic blending of Indian classical music and Indian dance forms with the SOI. This synthesis represents a unique form of music-making."

Suntook acknowledges the unwavering support of the orchestra's benefactors: "These ambitious projects would not be possible without the unwavering support of our fundraising champions and the contributions of esteemed benefactors." Organisations like the Tata Group and leading financial institutions have played a crucial role in enabling the SOI to bring these visions to life. ■

–Nikhil Sardana

(See www.soimumbai.com for programme details)

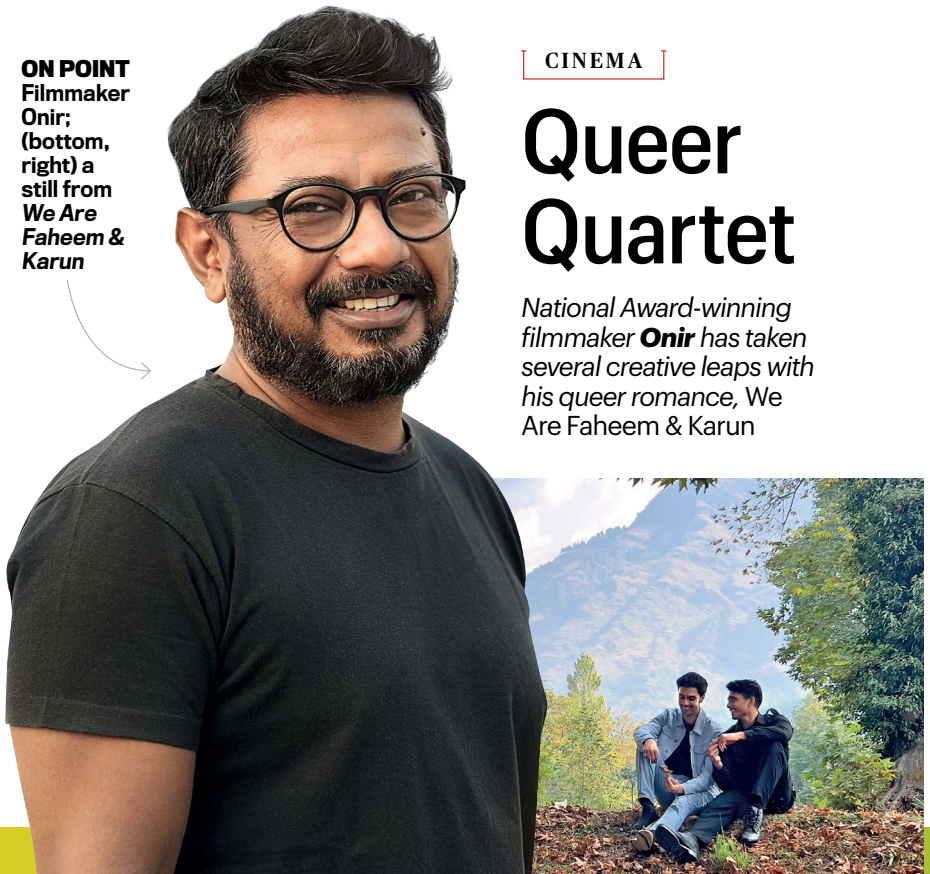
OTT

A PLUM PART

Tahir Raj Bhasin loved getting under the skin of Vikrant, the character he plays in Netflix's *Yeh Kaali Kaali Ankhein*, whose second season is out now

To watch Tahir Raj Bhasin in Netflix's popular series *Yeh Kaali Kaali Ankhein* is to derive vicarious pleasure from the sheer misfortune that befalls his character Vikrant. If season one was all about feeling sorry for Vikrant as he dealt with an obsessive lover, in the recently released season, two shades of grey emerge as he loses sight of his moral compass in his desperate quest to get out of the compounding mess. Key to the show's clever subversion of Hindi cinema's tropes of crazy love and the love triangle is Bhasin's portrayal which highlights how troubling, tense and even darkly funny it is to be on the receiving end of unwanted passion. Writers Sidharth Sengupta and Varun Badola make Vikrant the show's narrator, giving audiences a peek into his inner psyche through sardonic soliloquies.

Bhasin knows it's the part of a lifetime, one that allows him to unleash his arsenal of thespian skills. "I have to very consciously put my blinkers on and be dead



ON POINT Filmmaker Onir; (bottom, right) a still from *We Are Faheem & Karun*

CINEMA

Queer Quartet

*National Award-winning filmmaker **Onir** has taken several creative leaps with his queer romance,* We Are Faheem & Karun

For Onir, the starting point for *We Are Faheem & Karun*, his latest Kashmir-set queer romance, began in 2018 when the Supreme Court struck down Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, a draconian law that criminalised homosexuality. "At that point, I felt a deep calling as a storyteller to make a film that paid tribute to queer Indians," the National Award-winning filmmaker tells INDIA TODAY. "Until then, all my films that dealt with queer stories had been dark. Of course, I don't think the struggle is over for us. But I wanted to make something lighter."

To help his vision come to life, Onir brought Fawzia

serious when I play him," he says. "What I aspire to bring is not to lose sight of the vulnerability and what drove him into this situation in the first place. Vikrant has visions of being James Bond but has no idea how to go about it. You know he is going to mess it up. There's this saying—either you die a hero or you see yourself go onto a darker side. That's what happens to him."

One of Netflix's surprise hits back in 2022, *Yeh Kaali Kaali Aankhein* is back after nearly three years. That brought its own set of challenges for the cast and crew as there was no narrative leap as they returned to work. It meant that Bhasin had to lose the seven kilograms he had gained to shoot another show. "I have seen a number of series which have taken time to come out with a season two. I believe you reconnect with the character if the look is the same," he says. Bhasin consciously didn't rewatch season one, relying instead on the script and the backstory he had created to flesh Vikrant out.

Bhasin consciously didn't rewatch season one, relying instead on the script and the backstory he had created to flesh Vikrant out

One look at Bhasin's Wikipedia profile and one can see that he's perhaps one of the more overeducated artists in the field. There's a political science degree from Delhi University, a master's in media from Australia; thespian credits include stints with Barry John, Naseeruddin Shah and more. "Education never goes to waste," says Bhasin. "It gives an added worldview and insight when you read a script—the broader your canvas, the more you can bring to a part." His short but fascinating oeuvre thus far offers glimpses of his approach. From a breakthrough role as an antagonist in *Mardaani*, he has gone on to play Sunil Gavaskar (*83*), '50s star Shyam (*Manto*) and a brooding, cool collegian (*Chhichhore*).

But it's with Vikrant that Bhasin finds himself having a "complete arc", which, he admits, is "rare" to get. It's why he cannot wait to get into the character's twitchy shoes again. Even as Netflix is poised to greenlight season three given the show has avoided "the curse of season two", Bhasin hopes Sengupta "doesn't take as long as he did" to progress the story. After all, it's the good things that you want the soonest. ■

–Suhani Singh

Mirza, a Canadian writer, director and producer of Pakistani origin, on board as a co-writer. "Working with Fawzia was so wonderful because of what it signified: two queer filmmakers—from India and Pakistan—coming together to write stories of inclusion," says Onir. Then, right before the film's Indian premiere at the Dharamshala Film Festival, acclaimed filmmaker Deepa Mehta boarded the film as a presenter, a development that made the whole experience even more fulfilling for Onir.

Still, the journey to make the film hasn't always been smooth. Initially, the love story at the heart of *We Are Faheem & Karun* was meant to be told from the perspective of a gay soldier, a character inspired by a real-life major who quit the Indian Army on account of his sexual orientation. In 2022, when Onir sent across the script to the ministry of defence (a proposal introduced in 2020 made it mandatory for the ministry to approve films made about the military), it was swiftly rejected. Not one to give up, Onir adapted to the unfortunate reality, substituting the gay soldier in his script to a gay security guard who falls in love with a Kashmiri man in the film.

Once he got that out of the way, Onir felt he had nothing to lose. *We Are Faheem & Karun* became less of a film and more of a passion project. "This is the first film in my career that is fully financed, directed and produced by me," he says. "I have spent all my resources to make this film." The filmmaker felt brave enough to take a couple more creative calls: Instead of shooting the film in Urdu, he chose to make it in Kashmiri. To add authenticity to his depiction of the milieu, he had Kashmiri actors play Kashmiri characters. More importantly, he relied on two newcomers to portray the lead couple in the film and, to his credit, got emotionally layered performances out of them.

To add authenticity to his depiction of the milieu, Onir had Kashmiri actors play Kashmiri characters

But Onir is already looking ahead. Meant to be a spiritual successor to *I Am* (2010), an anthology of four short films that shared a common theme, Onir plans to make four features under the *We Are...* umbrella.

"The protagonists of the next three films are going to be transgender, lesbian and bisexual characters," he says. If anything, the filmmaker still doesn't wear his calling as the chronicler of queer Indians lightly. ■

–Poulomi Das

BOOKS

GAME CHANGER

Professional wrestler Sakshi Malik's hard-hitting memoir is a tale of triumph against all odds

T

There are two key moments that Sakshi Malik will be best remembered for—the historic Olympic bronze at the Rio Games in 2016, and her unflinching stand in the sexual harassment case against former Wrestling Federation of India (WFI) chief Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh. Both epic battles, one on the mat and the other off it, that have come to define her invaluable contribution to Indian wrestling. In *Witness*, her biography co-written with sports journalist Jonathan Selvaraj, Sakshi revisits the journey that led to the two pivotal moments of her life, and which have changed the course of wrestling in the country.

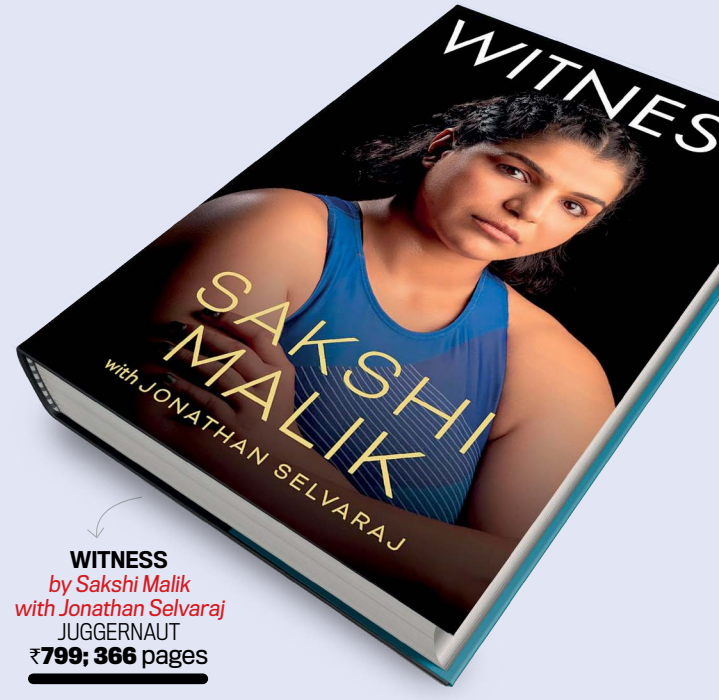
It's easy to forget that India's first individual Olympic medal came in wrestling, way back in 1952, when K.D. Jadhav won bronze in Helsinki. After a long wait, Sushil Kumar won back-to-back medals at the Beijing and London Games in 2008 and 2012. The sport blossomed among male wrestlers at various *akharas* across the country, but until two decades ago when Sakshi first stepped on the mat as a 12-year-old, no Indian woman had even qualified for the Olympics.

It explains why she had a go at a few other sports until she discovered her love for wrestling. There was an instant connection and enough reason to tackle every challenge thrown at her. What followed were the well-documented travails of every Indian athlete. Fortunately for Sakshi, the first and only female grappler from India to win an Olympic medal, it culminated in glory and a change in fortunes.

Sakshi never tasted the same level of success again in the wrestling arena. But the reasons to fight for the things she believed in never left her, whether it was to marry the man she loved or shape the future of women's wrestling in India.

The many serious allegations against WFI chief Brij Bhushan meant someone had to take him on. From the highs of stepping on the podium, Sakshi had no qualms in hitting the streets for justice. She was often made to realise that it was perhaps for a lost cause, but athletes are made of sterner stuff and her time as a professional wrestler taught her never to call it quits. Then again, well aware of the fight she had taken on and the consequences of her actions, she decided to step away from competitive wrestling in 2023.

SAKSHI MALIK pulls no punches in calling out the folks in power and their conniving ways



WITNESS
by Sakshi Malik with Jonathan Selvaraj
JUGGERNAUT
₹799; 366 pages

Sakshi pulls no punches in calling out the folks in power and their conniving ways. The writing is straightforward and could have done with some colour, considering what Selvaraj has reported in the past. But it's the little details that stand out in the narrative and make it an engaging read. Like how Sakshi was tickled into submission by cops when their collective might couldn't take her down; the persistent doubts over her body image that she struggled with; the sheer delight of upgrading to business class after having taken long train journeys in the general compartment.

And an honest yet startling confession that she never quite enjoyed any form of confrontation, yet did just that to earn the things that she desired and deserved. ■

–Shail Desai

SPORTS

TURNING THE TABLES

ANI

Table tennis player ***Manika Batra*** *talks about the changing perception of the game and the rise of Indian women in the sport*

Q. 2024 was a breakthrough year for women's table tennis in India with five women in the top 100.
The year was incredible. If you see, not just women but even young girls are doing great. We won the Asian Table Tennis Championship bronze medal and at the Olympics, too, we made it to quarter-finals in the women's team and I reached the round of 16. I can see the growth. There's self-belief now. Earlier, the mindset was that we cannot win against the Chinese, but that's changed in the past few years. I defeated world #2 Wang Manyu.

Q. There's greater visibility for the game, too, courtesy the Ultimate Table Tennis league. Has that helped turn things around?
It's a great initiative because we get to play with and against foreign players. More people come to watch the games and it builds the popularity of table tennis. Earlier, the sport was seen as a hobby. Now, families think of putting their kids into table tennis to play at a higher competitive level.

Q. Tell us about the impact of working with your coach Aman Balgu.
I am very comfortable with him. I like how he pushes me during training. He has been a former player, so he knows how to handle one on and off the court. I remember I had a first-round loss in South Korea, and his pep talk after it really motivated me. Sometimes there are arguments like when I am not able to follow what he's teaching...but that's the nature of a player-coach bond; ultimately, you have to listen to him (*laughs*).

Q. What's your way to unwind?
Most of the time I am training in either Hyderabad or Mumbai or playing a tournament, so the free time I do get I like spending with my parents, grandmother and siblings in New Delhi. I love cafés, so I like trying coffees, especially in foreign countries. I like reading motivational books. I like to do visualisation and manifestation. In fact, for a long while, I was manifesting I'd defeat Wang Manyu and how I would react—and I finally did so at Saudi Smash [tournament]. ■

–with Suhani Singh

IN THE PRODUCER'S SEAT

Actor **Richa Chadha** on being a first-time producer with *Girls Will Be Girls*, which released recently on Prime Video, and being a new mother

Q. What made you greenlight *Girls Will Be Girls* as your first production?
Shuchi Talati, the director, is a long-time friend of mine; we went to college together. I knew that whatever she would write would be very fresh and would be a new take on how things are generally looked at. In her personal life too, she is curious, intelligent and non-judgemental. I was one of the first people to read her script. We took it to a film bazaar and from there, it took on a journey of its own.

Q. How has Shuchi brought a unique perspective to female sexuality and the mother-daughter relationship?
The script is very special. There is a lot of finesse and refinement in the writing. Shuchi's grasp over her craft is incredible and once you see the script and the compassion with which the characters come through, it is a testament to that.

Q. Along with this new baby, you and Ali also had your first child. How has it been managing the roles of mother, actor, producer?
It is not possible to do this without the right support, whether it is your spouse or the nanny. In both cases, I have been lucky. I make sure I am around every time my baby needs to be fed. I position my work around my house, whether it's the launch of the trailer or the interviews.

Q. What's next for you as an actor and as a producer?
As a producer, there are multiple things in different spaces. As an actor, I think I will be able to return to work sometime around February. I wanted to take a little break after the release of *Girls Will Be Girls*. ■

—with Deepali Dhingra

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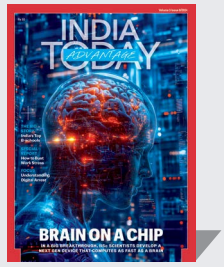

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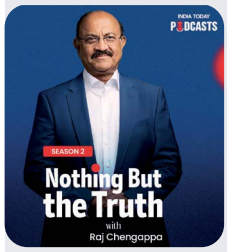

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