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**INDIA  
TODAY****NEPAL****REVOLT OF THE GEN-Z**

**THE RAGE OVER CORRUPTION, NEPOTISM AND LACK OF JOBS DEMOLISHES  
THE POLITICAL ESTABLISHMENT AND CALLS FOR A RADICAL RESET**

**PLUS: WHAT IT MEANS FOR INDIA**



HERE'S TO  
*India's*  
FINEST YET



## FROM THE EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

The descriptor 'Gen Z' does not usually evoke images of political insurrection. It refers to a generation born in the decade after the mid-1990s, stereotyped as digital natives raised on a steady diet of YouTube, Instagram reels and the like. Nepal was no exception, it seems. Its youth was so addicted to these platforms that a move to ban them appeared to trigger an uprising that toppled a government. That was the shorthand explanation for the sudden chaos and violence that gripped the Himalayan republic. But the scale of the destruction revealed far deeper and more serious reasons for the anger of the youth. They attacked the symbols of state power with unbridled fury. Parliament was vandalised and set on fire, as was the President's office, the Supreme Court, party headquarters, the houses of the President, the prime minister and politicians of all stripes. What was astonishing was the speed with which the insurrectionary scenes boiled over to a chaotic crescendo. A former PM and his foreign minister-wife were beaten up, the wife of another ex-PM died of burn injuries sustained during arson, the finance minister was chased in the streets, and an MP was stripped. They signalled a generation's searing anger boiling over.

To assume that a social media ban alone unleashed such violence is simplistic. Prima facie, that would constitute an extravagant live demo of the power of social media and how it can influence behaviour. And indeed, Nepal has a robust online ecosystem, with one of South Asia's highest user rates for popular platforms. Yet, premier K.P. Sharma Oli could not have anticipated what a shutdown would provoke. Given the scale of subversive energies on full display, it's clear that the social media ban was merely the final spark. Beneath it all lay years of frustration with corruption, nepotism and ostentation of a ruling elite that promised good governance but delivered little. Thus, as its representatives voiced it, the 'Gen Z protests' were an act of ethical cleansing of governance.

Underlying this pent-up desire for change is the usual spectre of joblessness. In the 2021 census, those under 30 accounted for nearly 56 per cent of the country's population, with 42.5 per cent in the productive age range of 16-40. Nepal's overall unemployment rate stood at 10.8 per cent in 2024. But, significantly, among those in the Gen Z age group of 15-24, the rate had reached 20.8 per cent, nearly double the national rate. That's because, with the worst road infrastructure in Asia and a polity cursed by corruption and instability, Nepal has historically punched below its potential on foreign investment. At a mere 0.2 per cent of its GDP, it ranks the lowest in South Asia on FDI. Outside of farming and foreign aid, remittances form the cornerstone of the domestic economy. The lack of local job opportunities led to an estimated 4.5 million of Nepal's 29.6 million population migrating to India, the

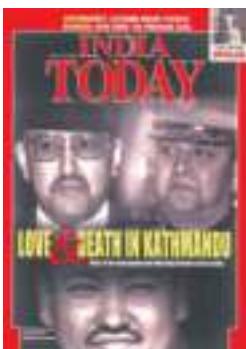
Gulf countries, the Far East, and similar destinations for employment. Remittance inflows are nearly \$14 billion, accounting for 33 per cent of the GDP. Over three quarters of all households depend on them; on average, they form a third of the income of such households. Yet this cannot absorb the hopes of a restless generation.

This turbulence exposed the fragility of Nepal's democracy. Born as a full parliamentary republic only in 2008, after a harrowing and heroic struggle against monarchy, it has failed to live up to the economic aspirations of its people. The same cast of faces hold on to power in a dreary game of musical chairs. The roll-call has included 13 prime ministers since 2008. Oli and Pushpa Kumar Dahal 'Prachanda' figure four times each, and Sher Bahadur Deuba five times in all, including the pre-2008 phase of partial monarchy. Nepal's ethnic fault lines compound the malaise. Elite castes (31 per cent) monopolise power, and various indigenous groups, as well as the Madhesis, languish in degrees of alienation. The failure to deliver jobs and dignity has left politics stuck in a low trough incapable of responding to an impatient youth bulge.

Today, the challenge is not just to restore law and order but also to rescue the polity itself. The army, commendably aloof from power, has enforced calm. But the search for an interim government is fraught, and the very constitution is in peril. The ransacking of Parliament exposed an anti-democratic undercurrent, with some tracing it to entrenched royalist lobbies. Oli, now a fugitive, has blamed India, a standard scapegoat in Nepalese politics. Group

Editorial Director Raj Chengappa and Deputy Editor Pradip R. Sagar capture a critical moment in Nepal's political history for our cover story this week and look at the way forward for this troubled nation. Also, what it means for India. Though New Delhi has erred in the past, notably with the 2015 trade blockade, it can hardly wish for anything other than stability across its open border.

For India, the lesson is sobering. A neighbour's wasted demographic dividend has exploded into flames on Kathmandu's streets. We've seen similar eruptions in Bangladesh in 2024 and Sri Lanka in 2022. The same risk hovers over any polity unable to provide jobs, dignity and hope to its youth. In today's interconnected world, the failure to deliver can transform a generation into revolutionaries. Also, social media is now regarded as a fundamental right by the new generation. That is the enduring message of Nepal's Gen Z revolt.



▲ June 18, 2001

(Aroon Purie)

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REUTERS

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# UPFRONT

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► JUDICIARY

## DIVIDED BENCH

**Once unimaginable, Supreme Court judges are trading jabs in public, turning private disputes into spectacle and shaking faith in unity**

By KAUSHIK DEKA

**I**N JANUARY 2018, four senior Supreme Court judges staged a press conference, an unprecedented airing of grievances against the then Chief Justice of India (CJI). Seated on a lawn before television cameras, they shattered a tradition of judicial reticence. For decades, India's judges had guarded a cloistered collegiality, speaking to one another as "learned brother" or "learned sister", and keeping disputes either buried in carefully worded judgments or confined behind closed doors. But today, that fraternal code appears frayed. From terse public remarks to conveniently leaked letters, judges now air their differences in full public view, a spectacle once unimaginable.

Consider the almost soap-operatic saga surrounding former CJI D.Y. Chandrachud's official bungalow. He retired in November 2024, but by mid-2025, he was still occupying the CJI bungalow on Krishna Menon Marg in New Delhi, past the six-month grace period. In July, the SC administration asked the government to evict him "without any further delay", citing lapsed extensions

and a rules breach. The letter made its way to the media, lending it a touch of public shaming. Then, at a farewell in August, CJI B.R. Gavai vowed to vacate before his November retirement, praising a retiring colleague who “set a good example” by promptly vacating his official residence, a thinly veiled jab at his predecessor. “This episode was quite unusual. The trigger for this could be something extremely personal and not procedural,” says a former SC judge.

If the bungalow row hinted at personal rancour peeking above the surface, an episode soon after bared an even deeper rift within the apex court. Last month, Justices J.B. Pardiwala and R. Mahadevan lambasted an Allahabad High Court judge’s “absurd” handling of a case, stripping him of all criminal matters till retirement and ordering that he be paired with a senior judge.

The move was condemned as overreach: HC bench assignments rest solely with its chief justice. Outrage erupted in Allahabad, with 18 judges calling the SC diktat unconstitutional. Sensing a crisis, CJI Gavai intervened and Justice Pardiwala’s bench modified its order. What surprised many, however, was that both Gavai and his successor-designate, Justice Surya Kant, went on to chastise their colleagues—Justices Pardiwala and Mahadevan—in media interviews.

## FRACTURED COLLEGIUM

Another breach in the facade of unity happened last month when Justice B.V. Nagarathna, the lone woman on the SC collegium, broke ranks with a rare written dissent note. She opposed the elevation of Justice Vipul M. Pancholi, Patna High Court chief justice, calling it “counter-productive” and damaging to the collegium’s credibility. While the collegium backed Pancholi 4-1, Justice Nagarathna’s note again found its way to the press.

Not just sitting judges, even long-superannuated ones are also brawling in public. In August, 50 former judges, including two ex-CJIs, blasted 18 retired colleagues for backing Justice



## Flashpoints

► **Former CJI Chandrachud shamed for overstaying in official residence; successor CJI Gavai uses a farewell speech to jab at him**

► **SC judges strip an Allahabad High Court judge of cases; court judges revolt, calling it unconstitutional interference**

► **Justice B.V. Nagarathna opposes elevation of Justice Pancholi; leaked dissent note exposes deep cracks in collegium system**

► **Fifty ex-judges attack 18 peers for defending Opposition V-P nominee Justice B. Sudershan Reddy against Amit Shah's Naxalism remark**

B. Sudershan Reddy, the Opposition’s vice-presidential pick, after Union home minister Amit Shah accused him of “supporting Naxalism” in a 2011 ruling. The 18 former judges had urged restraint, calling Shah’s claim a “misinterpretation”. But the counter-letter accused them of dressing up Opposition politics as judicial independence.

Why are Indian judges, long bound by an unwritten code of omertà, suddenly so willing to turn up the volume in front of the nation? Part of the answer lies in the growing media attention, particularly on social media, pushing judges to be more vocal. “Relentless scrutiny has magnified every exchange inside and outside the courts, with non-lawyer audiences of online

platforms and live reporting fuelling broader debates on courtroom proceedings. The media has made judges public figures. So, we are witnessing public conversations,” says senior advocate Sidharth Luthra. Retired SC judge, Justice Hrishikesh Roy, concurs: “Even offhand oral observations in court are dissected, often stripped of context. Judges mostly stay silent, but the pressure to react is real, even if nine times out of ten they resist.”

## POWER AND PERSONA

The recent spats also have a more human dimension. Today’s Supreme Court is marked by strong, visible figures unafraid of public glare. Justice Chandrachud cast himself as a progressive voice and champion of civil liberties. Justice Gavai projected the image of a disciplinarian, intent on restoring propriety. Justices Pardiwala and Mahadevan adopted an almost zealous approach in reining in a lower-court judge, while Justice Surya Kant took the present one’s cue in signalling institutional propriety. “A handful of judges actively cultivate the media to burnish their own image, sometimes at the unintended cost of undermining their colleagues,” says Justice Roy. An SC lawyer even sought to add a timeline to this phenomenon of judges courting journalists. “It began a decade ago, when a former CJI started addressing ‘my friends in the media’ before and after his speeches. Ironically, he soon found other judges taking to the media to speak out against him,” says the lawyer.

If these spats harden into factionalism, the SC could forfeit its moral authority and open the door to outside interference. Discord only strengthens critics who cloak demands for executive control as “reform”. Seven in 10 Indians, as last month’s INDIA TODAY Mood of the Nation poll showed, still place their faith in the judiciary. It’s an extraordinary reserve of trust built around integrity and collegial harmony. Judges need to honour, not erode, it. Temperance would help. ■

## ▼ GLASSHOUSE



## SWITCH OFF THE PHONE

While IT minister **Ashwini Vaishnaw** has been flaunting the fact that Apple is producing iPhones in India, his other ministry, the Railways, doesn't seem to believe phones are useful for official work. The finance ministry policy permits government officers to buy laptops, tablets and mobiles to the tune of Rs 1.3 lakh for official purposes. But when the Railway Board came out with the same policy recently, officers were startled to see that it had removed 'mobile' from the list of devices. Officers were quick to spot the irony: while one ministry under Vaishnaw is pushing India as a tech hub, the other seems to be stuck on a track of its own. Entreaties to the Railway Board for a correction have so far fallen on deaf years, we're told.

Illustrations by **SIDDHANT JUMDE**

## ▼ ICON-HOPPING IN UK

## NATIVE PRIDE

Tamil Nadu chief minister **M.K. Stalin's** recent visit to the UK and Germany was not merely about attracting investments, though he did return with commitments worth over Rs 15,000 crore. It was equally about building some cultural capital. In the UK, he unveiled a portrait of Dravidian icon Periyar at Oxford University, paid homage at Karl Marx's resting



place in Highgate Cemetery, and even called on the family of Col. John Pennycook, the late British engineer revered in Tamil Nadu for building the 130-year-old Mullaperiyar dam. Going by sheer optics, it would seem there's no better trustee than Stalin of TN's 'self-respect' movement.

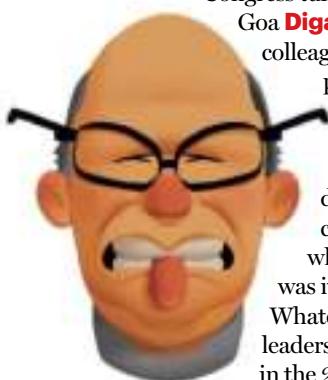
## COSTLY DISCORD

Internal discord is becoming a worry for the ruling BJP in Gujarat. Ex-Speaker **Ramanlal Vora** is the latest to feel the heat, called out by a party colleague for ‘posing’ as a farmer and buying subsidised land in his family’s name. The sidelined Vora had been lashing out at his party’s government over sundry issues, so this could have been a way to keep him in line. That said, many feel targeting the BJP’s tallest Dalit leader in the state may be a shortsighted strategy.



## MISPLACED PROPHESY

Congress turncoat and new minister in Goa **Digambar Kamat** stunned BJP colleagues when he stated that the party would not come to power again in the state “for the next 50 years”. Kamat was speaking at the birthday celebration of state BJP chief Damodar ‘Damu’ Naik when the slip of the tongue (or was it a Freudian slip?) happened. Whatever the reason, Congress leaders are already claiming victory in the 2027 assembly election.



## LOW BLOW

With assembly polls round the corner, politics must be weighing heavy on his shoulders. Which is why it was no surprise to see RJD leader **Tejashwi Yadav** break into a jig in the company of several youngsters. A video posted by sister Rohini Acharya of his “fun time” quickly went viral traction. But where admirers saw spontaneity, rivals spied an opening. Like this quip from Jan Suraaj Party’s Prashant Kishor: “I knew Tejashwi wasn’t good at studies or cricket, now it’s clear he can’t dance either.”



**Kaushik Deka with Avishek G. Dastidar, Kavitha Muralidharan, Jumana Shah, Dhaval S. Kulkarni and Amitabh Srivastava**

## TECH WATCH

### SMART WINDOWS HUNT FOR A CHEAPER OPTION

By **Ajay Sukumaran**

**P**hotochromic lenses, which darken when exposed to light, have been around for decades, but what about electrochromic smart windows, which do the same to keep out the blazing sun and also help reduce a building’s energy bills? The idea is catching on globally, but the high cost of materials such as tungsten oxide and the lithium-based

a UV filter in sunscreens. The key problem they tried to solve was the limited coloration efficiency of titanium oxide. For this, they altered the material’s properties via a technique of engineering ‘oxygen vacancies’ (messing with the oxygen atoms in its structure).

The lab-scale demonstration showed a potential reduction of 7–8° Celsius in indoor temperature



electrolytes used to make smart windows has hindered their wider adoption. A materials research group in Bengaluru may now have hit upon an affordable technology.

In a paper published in the nanotech journal *Small* in May, researchers from the Centre for Nano and Soft Matter Sciences (CeNS) experimented with aluminum ion-based electrolytes and titanium oxide, a low-cost compound used commonly as

using this material, says Dr Ashutosh K. Singh, who led the Department of Science and Technology-funded research project. “If you can reduce the cost so that everyone can install these, we are ultimately talking about carbon neutrality,” he says. But there’s still a long way to go. Singh places their smart window tech at Level 3/4 on a 9-point scale. That means a lot more industrial testing before you can bring a product home.

## ▼ VIEWPOINT

# Why Enrolments in Govt Schools are Falling

**A shrinking school-age population, preference for private schools and better child tracking systems have led to falling enrolment numbers**



BY SAFEENA HUSAIN

India's government schools have seen enrolment declines for three consecutive years, slipping from 251.8 million in 2022–23 to 248 million in 2023–24, and further down to 246.9 million in 2024–25. But before drawing hasty conclusions about the state of public education, it is essential to understand why this shift is happening.

The primary reason is India's changing demographic landscape. The country's fertility rate has fallen below replacement level, resulting in a shrinking school-age population. This is a fundamental change in India's population structure, moving the country away from its historically young demographic profile toward a more mature one.

Additionally, a significant redistribution of students is occurring. Families are increasingly choosing private schools over government institutions, driven by perceptions of superior learning outcomes, enhanced English language proficiency, and better opportunities for their children. This trend is evident even in rural areas, despite limited financial resources.

A troubling pattern is also visible in how families allocate their limited educational resources. When faced with choosing between government and private schools, parents frequently choose the latter for boys and the former for girls. This is leading to an increasingly feminised government school system, with significant implications for gender equity in educational outcomes.

Some portion of the enrolment decline, though, can be attributed to improved child tracking mechanisms and data collection systems. Better monitoring has reduced duplicate entries and eliminated 'ghost' enrolments that



Illustration by RAJ VERMA

**EFFORTS TO STOP THIS DECLINE MUST FOCUS ON THE GIRL CHILD, TRANSPORT NEEDS AND LINKING SOCIAL SECURITY NETS TO SCHOOLS**

previously inflated official statistics. Though this is encouraging in terms of accurate administrative processes, it means that figures may turn out to be more sobering than earlier expected.

Efforts to address the enrolment decline should be systemic and comprehensive. Firstly, it is important that school mergers and consolidation do not increase the number of out-of-school children. The poorest and most marginalised children are at greatest risk when schools become less accessible due to consolidation. Distance becomes a critical factor, particularly for girls whose families may be less willing to allow them to travel far for education. Any consolidation strategy must account for transportation needs and ensure that school accessibility is maintained for all children, regardless of gender or economic status.

There is also a need for government schools to counter the perception that private education is superior. This requires demonstrating tangible value beyond traditional academic metrics. Enhanced integration with social protection schemes presents a promising avenue for rebuilding this trust. During the pandemic, government schools successfully adapted by providing food rations to replace midday meals, demonstrating their role as comprehensive support systems for vulnerable families. Private schools cannot match such value propositions. Safety nets like direct benefit transfers have also transformed government schools into holistic development platforms rather than merely academic institutions.

The concentration of girls in government schools, too, represents an unprecedented opportunity for targeted investment with potentially transformative returns. Evidence demonstrates that educating girls generates multiplier effects across nine of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals and could contribute approximately 10 per cent to national GDP growth.

Declining enrolment in government schools thus presents a paradox: while concerning from an access perspective, it creates conditions for a more focused, intensive investment in institutions serving the most vulnerable populations. Success in transforming these schools into exemplars of quality and equity could fundamentally alter public perceptions while delivering substantial returns to both individuals and society. ■

*The author is the founder of Educate Girls, the NGO which won the Ramon Magsaysay award in 2025*

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In the heart of Dubai Silicon Oasis, The Hillgate by Ellington Properties is redefining what it means to live and invest in the city. As Ellington's first residential development in this rapidly evolving district, The Hillgate introduces a blend of design excellence, wellness-focused amenities, and community living, crafted for those seeking a meaningful and lasting lifestyle in one of Dubai's most promising new corridors.

While Dubai has long been known for iconic skylines and architectural ambition, demand is increasingly shifting toward homes that offer livability, community, and long-term value. The Hillgate meets this growing expectation with timeless design and smart functionality that supports modern-day-to-day living.

"The Hillgate reflects Ellington's continued commitment to meaningful design – homes that go beyond form to respond to how people truly live.

As Dubai Silicon Oasis transforms into a dynamic lifestyle and innovation hub, this development offers a rare combination of architectural quality, accessibility, and long-term value. Through our participation in the First-Time Home Buyer Programme, we're proud to help more residents step into ownership with a community that prioritizes connectivity, comfort, and character," said Joseph Thomas, Co-Founder of Ellington Properties.

Situated just minutes from Silicon Central Mall, parks, and an emerging retail and dining scene, The Hillgate offers seamless urban connectivity. Its location along the route of the new Blue Metro Line will enhance mobility across Dubai, linking residents directly to hubs such as Business Bay, DIFC, and Dubai International Airport.

Architecturally, The Hillgate's stepped structure and layered façade create a distinct silhouette while optimizing views and light across its residences.

Homes range from studios to expansive four-bedroom apartments and duplexes, all featuring open-plan layouts, expansive windows, and refined details – from bronze accents to kitchen islands designed for both aesthetics and practicality.

Shared spaces echo the development's wellness-led and community-first values. These include a serene wellness studio, a clubhouse designed to double as a co-working lounge, and a quiet library overlooking landscaped gardens. A soundproof music room (Harmonic Hall), arcade lounge, and indoor-outdoor play areas reflect Ellington's dedication to creative expression and family-friendly design. Outdoors, the community features lap and leisure pools, shaded seating, and a BBQ deck that encourages social gathering and retreat.

Arriving at a time when more residents are transitioning from renting to owning, The Hillgate is among Ellington's select projects to be part of the First-Time Home Buyer Programme – a government-led initiative designed to make homeownership more accessible for UAE citizens and long-term residents. The programme offers priority access, exclusive mortgage incentives, and a cap of AED 5 million, putting The Hillgate within reach for eligible buyers seeking a design-led lifestyle in an up-and-coming community.

Set for completion in Q4 2027, The Hillgate is not just a residence – it's an opportunity to invest in the future of Dubai.

**Limited units available.**



# STATE SCAN

UTTAR PRADESH: CASTE VS HINDUTVA PG 14

J&K: HULLABALOO AT HAZRATBAL PG 16



Photographs by ANI

► BIHAR

## BIG BATTLE FOR SEAT SHARING IN THE NDA

**Even a lesser Nitish is more equal than others. BJP has its own ambitions. So does Chirag. The NDA frets at the math**

By Amitabh Srivastava

**A**T 74, NITISH KUMAR SHOWS NO SIGN OF HIS zest for office waning. It's as if time's not passed on: his welfare bonanzas cue that the CM sees the coming assembly poll only as a way station on an endless road. But his kingly caravan is as if on the top tier of Patna's new double decker flyover—there's a surge beneath him, and new cracks on the macadam ahead. Smooth passage will need a math problem to be solved. It's a beguiling one: how to carve up Bihar's 243 seats among the NDA friends.

In 2020, Nitish's JD(U) had kept its usual lion's share of 115 seats. The BJP fought 110, and 18 were parcelled out to smaller allies—Mukesh Sahni's VIP, Jitan Ram Manjhi's HAM et al. Sahni has since joined the INDIA bloc, but the residual challenge is more acute, not less. The NDA must now fit in Chirag Paswan's LJP(RV), which had fought 135 seats solo in 2020. It lost its deposit in 110, while infamously bushwhacking the JD(U). But a restless Chirag, riding on a 5/5 Lok Sabha tally, looks unwilling to settle for cramped quarters.

This is proving to be a big variable. Chirag has set his ante at an unrealistic high of 40, and is threatening to go solo again if pegged down too much. Even if that's halved, it would upset equations, since Manjhi and Upendra Kushwaha's latest

startup RLM, too, need their slice of the pie. Moreover, an expansionist BJP—the one with the veto—isn't too keen to cede Nitish 115 seats this time.

#### **WANING BUT BRIGHT**

The BJP still feeds off Nitish's caste/gender base and acceptability. That political capital flowed from his ability to aggregate votes from groups not aligned to either the BJP or the RJD: Kurmis, Kushwahas, a swathe of Extremely Backward Classes. This social coalition has largely held over the years, but is now waning. Younger voters are less invested in his legacy, and fatigue chips away at his image as the state's moderniser. The dilemma for the BJP

#### **Takeaways**

- Nitish Kumar is fighting to keep his share of 115 seats, of the 243, from 2020. The BJP wants to go up from 110
- The tricky variable is Chirag Paswan. Even if he settles for 20, that trims everyone's pie

is whether to risk imposing too harsh a numerical definition on this. If so, how harsh? For the JD(U), too, it's a stark choice: should it accept a reduced seat share and risk shrinking into irrelevance, or resist the BJP's push—and risk rupture?

Chirag, meanwhile, appears as a waxing crescent. At 5 per cent of the electorate, his base—Paswans clustered along central-south Bihar—will never alone suffice to make him king. But that vote bank floats independent of Nitish's. For the NDA, having them stacked atop each other makes sense. Yet, Chirag's lack of harmony with Nitish—personal and political—means reconciling to a basic internal instability. Having him go rogue, contrariwise, doubles the X-factor posed externally by the likes of Prashant Kishor. It's a riddle worthy of a Panchatantra. Or quantum math. ■

#### ► KARNATAKA

# Sidda Greenlights Paper Ballots

**The ‘vote chor’ chorus raises its pitch. Karnataka to ditch EVMs and revise voter rolls for local body polls**

By Ajay Sukumaran

## B ALLOT PAPER, NOT EVM.

That's the line Karnataka's ruling Congress is now toeing. It may be a leap across a tangent from Rahul Gandhi's expose—of 'vote chor' via electoral rolls. As allegations go, dubious voter lists are a different matter from rigged EVMs. But the two were fused into one general vote of no confidence when, on September 4, a state cabinet meeting chaired by CM Siddaramaiah recommended the use of ballot paper for all upcoming local body elections, including the long-overdue municipal elections in Bengaluru. If it comes to pass, this may become the first such shift back to the old-style voting on paper on a big scale since 2001.

The Opposition BJP was caustic

➤ WRITING ON THE WALL Right, CM Siddaramaiah; below, paper ballots, not seen widely since 2001, all set to make a local comeback

in response, accusing the Congress of taking India's silicon hub back to the "stone age". But the momentum comes from Rahul's dramatic press conference in August, where Karnataka was literally ground zero. While it made a larger point, the case study was as local as could be: within the Bengaluru Central Lok Sabha seat, which the Congress counted as an unexpected loss last year, Rahul's research team showed what seemed to be a glaring dubiety in as many as 1,00,250 votes in its Mahadevapura assembly segment.

Doubling down on the "complaints" on electoral rolls, the Karnataka cabinet has empowered the



state election commission (SEC) to revise and prepare rolls for the forthcoming local body polls. Announcing this, Karnataka law minister H.K. Patil ventured further to add that there was also an “erosion of confidence and credibility of EVMs”.

#### IT'S THE STATE'S CALL

The SEC, an independent organisation set up in 1993 under the 73rd and 74th constitutional amendments, conducts elections to rural and urban local bodies—zilla, taluk and gram panchayats, municipal corporations, councils and the like. The typical procedure is to use the electoral lists of assembly polls for these. So far, only Kerala and Uttar Pradesh have empowered their SECs to prepare

#### Takeaways

- **The Karnataka cabinet clears the use of paper ballots for a series of coming local body polls**
- **The state election commission will be empowered to revise the voter lists for this**
- **So far, only UP and Kerala SECs have gone ahead with roll revision**

electoral rolls. Now, Karnataka will follow suit, amending rules where required.

Upholding EVMs as a tried-and-tested system backed by the apex court, the BJP taunted the Siddaramaiah government, pointing out that it had come to power via voting machines. If it has lost faith in the devices, the “reasonable option for the government is to dissolve the assembly and go for fresh elections”, quipped senior BJP legislator S. Suresh Kumar.

For the record, ballot papers have been the preferred method of conducting gram panchayat elections in Karnataka, though all other local body polls rely on EVMs. There's a long list of elections coming up. The terms of 5,950 gram panchayats end in December, and at least five city corporations and 192 municipal corporations will be due for polls shortly. Zilla panchayat polls have been held up since 2021 because the seat reservation lists are not ready. ■

#### ► UTTAR PRADESH

# CASTE DRIVES A HARD BARGAIN WITH HINDUTVA

**The saffron ‘big tent’ is intact, but caste blocs are uniting to demand their pound of flesh in Yogiland**

By Avaneesh Mishra

**I**N UTTAR PRADESH, 2014 HAD COME AS AN INFLECTION point for its post-Manical political grammar. The BJP built a sweeping coalition by reframing identity in more omnibus religious terms, with Hindutva seeming to slather an adhesive all over the plurality of caste. For a decade, that strategy worked. It yielded two famous wins for the Yogi Adityanath electoral phenomenon. But today, with a cabinet reshuffle due and the assembly election less than two years away, the old caste equations are reasserting themselves in new ways, and the BJP finds itself negotiating pressures it had once claimed to transcend.

The signals are coming not from the Opposition but from within. Over the past month, Thakur, Kurmi and Lodh leaders have staged a series of community gatherings—framed as cultural or social events, but unmistakably political in tone. Each carried the same message: that these communities are crucial to the BJP's hold on UP, and they expect that importance to be reflected in government and party positions.

The Thakurs—paradoxically, Yogi's own cohort, and often said to be most favoured—were the first to flex their muscles. Forty of the

state's 49 Thakur MLAs gathered at a Lucknow hotel on August 11 under the banner of ‘Kutumb Parivar’. The next day, cabinet minister Jaiveer Singh convened another session with political bigwigs from the community. Among those present were transport minister Dayashankar Singh, Jansatta Dal (Loktantrik) founder Raghuraj Pratap Singh ‘Raja Bhaiya’ and expelled SP MLA Abhay Singh, besides plenty MLAs and ex-ministers.

#### THE COLLECTIVES

Thakurs—around 9 per cent of the state's population, and influential in 90-odd assembly seats and 20 Lok Sabha constituencies—already boast 43 of the BJP's 258 MLAs, its single-largest caste bloc. The scale of mobilisation has already been flagged to the BJP's central leadership, and names like Raja Bhaiya and Rakesh Pratap Singh are being mentioned as possible cabinet entrants.

A day later, Kurmi leaders gathered in Lucknow under the banner of the ‘Sardar Patel Vaicharak Manch’. MPs, MLAs and ministers joined hands with senior office-bearers to project unity and demand greater representation. Kurmis make up about 10 per cent of UP's population and



Illustration by SIDDHANT JUMDE

have sway in as many as 160 assembly seats and 30 Lok Sabha constituencies. They count 38 MLAs, including 34 from the BJP, and nine MPs.

Their frustration goes back to 2022, when Jal Shakti minister Swatantra Dev Singh, seen as a strong candidate for deputy CM, was passed over. Party insiders trace the BJP's 2024 setback in Kurmi-heavy constituencies to that simmering resentment. The idea now seems to be to wangle handsome recompense, by positioning Swatantra Dev for state party chief, besides ministerial posts for caste fellows.

The Lodhs were the next to raise their banner. On August 16, animal husbandry minister Dharampal Singh organised a large gathering in Aonla, Bareilly, to mark the birth anniversary of freedom fighter Avanti Bai Lodhi. The event, also attended by former Madhya Pradesh CM Uma Bharti, went beyond the symbolic. Lodhs, about 3 per cent of UP's population, can influence 70 assembly and 12 Lok Sabha constituencies. They currently

### Takeaways

- **The leaders of three big caste blocs within UP BJP meet to up their demands**
- **The Thakurs, influential in 90-odd assembly and 20 LS seats, demand new berths**
- **Kurmis, too, don't see a share matching their 160/30 seat footprint; seek a Dy CM**
- **Lodhs, eyeing state BJP chief's post, follow suit; the Brahmins said to be next**

have 23 MLAs—19 from the BJP—and three MPs. Dharampal is seen as another contender for state BJP chief.

Taken together, the three acts of separate but collective bargaining around caste amount to a warning to the party. The 2024 Lok Sabha election had already exposed cracks in

its Hindutva 'big tent' formula. Like with the Kurmis, the BJP's losses in Thakur-dominated constituencies were interpreted as evidence of discontent. Their public recourse to open pressure tactics may be infectious. The Brahmins are also restless—they were anyway chafing from signs of Thakur dominance—and they are planning their own show of strength. The central leadership is caught in a bind. Too much appeasement of one caste could spark counter-mobilisation by others. Too little could risk alienating groups that have delivered seats.

"What we are seeing is the 'classification' of caste," says political scientist Hilal Ahmad of the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS). Caste mobilisation is no longer merely about old-fashioned identity politics in his view; rather, communities are now to be "defined also by their material existence and bargaining power". It is up to Hindutva, then, to negotiate this new salience of caste-based bargaining, legitimised by the caste census. ■

# HULLABALOO AT HAZRATBAL

**A renovation that should have awed the devout ends up creating a blasphemy controversy and bitter politicking**

By Kaleem Geelani

**R**Eligion and politics may be like the two sides of a corbelled arch, but Kashmir's Hazratbal is living up to its history as a site where the two often meet to make fire. The white-domed shrine on the banks of Dal Lake, which houses the Prophet's holy relic, has seen renovation before. The most feted one, under Sheikh Abdullah in 1968-79, yielded its present marble avatar. But now, the J&K Waqf Board's year-long revamp has hit the headlines for a different kind of novelty.

Some of it was enchanting fusion: newly painted interiors got custom-made Turkish chandeliers, woven into a native architectural space, whispering cordially with the traditional *khatamband* ceiling art. But that wasn't the only new entry. Also on a wall was an

inauguration plaque, with the Ashokan national emblem engraved on it.

On September 3, an awed public had started streaming in—the first of lakhs of footfalls the storied Islamic shrine registers annually across religions and sects. But the jam-packed September 5 Friday prayer, usually a poignant precursor to the grand Eid-e-Milad event, erupted into a major controversy. The emblem, featuring the Ashokan Lion and Wheel, was defaced with stones amid slogans. The protesters called it an act of blasphemy, since Islam rejects the depiction of any idol.

## A FIGURATIVE QUESTION

Backing the protesters was Kashmir's entire native polity. "Government emblems are for government functions. Mosques, dargahs, temples, gurdwaras



are not their place," said CM Omar Abdullah, questioning the motives behind the act. The National Conference has long leveraged Hazratbal; Omar is a legatee of that. But this time, he had company. The PDP's Iltija Mufti blamed the Waqf Board for provoking Kashmiris by blaspheming a revered space. Mirwaiz Umar Farooq, the Valley's chief cleric, cited Islamic teachings explicitly prohibiting plaques, emblems, figures or symbols in religious places. Even Peoples Conference chief

X/@KanganaTeam



◀ WHICH WAY TO THE PARTY? Ajit Pawar's RS MP-wife Sunetra at an RSS meet

► MAHARASHTRA

# Ajit Pawar's Faustian Pact With Saffron

**The NCP has always held on to its secular ideals while within the Mahayuti, but the proximity now imperils its political base**

By Dhaval S. Kulkarni



### Takeaways

► Ashokan emblem on a plaque at the renovated Hazratbal sets off protests

► NCP, PDP, Mirwaiz et al decry the installation, calling it blasphemy

► BJP chairperson of Waqf Board calls for harsh action

Sajad Lone called it unfortunate.

On her part, BJP leader Darakshan Andrabi, who had steered the renovation as the Waqf chairperson since 2022, erupted in fury. Referring to the perpetrators as terrorists, she called for the full weight of the Public Safety Act (PSA) to be brought down on them. “I’ve tolerated venom for three years from those who call themselves elected representatives. Their hooliganism went on for 35 years. They fed militants in their homes, and it’s they who did this,” Andrabi told the press, in a

none-too-veiled barb at the NC. This was not organic popular emotion but a well-planned political conspiracy, she fumed.

### THE WAQF TAKEOVER

For decades, Hazratbal had been a symbolic power centre of the NC; the Sheikh used it as a personal pulpit, his son Farooq and now Omar visit on special Islamic days. But in recent years, the landscape has changed in Kashmir. The J&K Reorganisation Act, 2019, repealed the Muslim Specified Waqf Board Act, 2005, streamlining it with the central Waqf Act, which saw a controversial amendment in 2025. With it, the new BJP-led board has tightened its grip around Kashmir’s 32,000-plus religious properties, assuming sweeping control over their affairs.

The Omar government’s ascension has led to persistent attempts to change that, but so far in vain. The Centre seems reluctant to let go—analysts put that down to a need to choke spaces for the separatist narrative. The huge financial donations and rent fees from religious places are not an immaterial factor either: in August 2022, the board vacated donation boxes out of J&K’s shrines, ending the traditional practice of endowments to *sajada nisheens* and *mutawallis*. Three years later, that dual spiritual-temporal power is seeing a renewed war. ■

**A**JIT PAWAR’S NCP SWIMS with the Mahayuti, but with a presumed teflon coating: it kept a distinct aloofness from the majoritarianism of its senior ally, the BJP. But this complex game is now threatening to jeopardise its social and political base. Chafing at the nub of this perceived incongruence was a photo tweeted lately by the BJP’s star MP Kangana Ranaut: it showed Ajit’s wife Sunetra Pawar, a Rajya Sabha MP, attending a meeting of the Rashtra Sevika Samiti, the RSS women’s wing.

The flutter it caused in Maharashtra was to be expected. Rohit Pawar,

Ajit’s nephew and an MLA of the rival NCP(SCP), promptly accused his uncle of “double standards”, for claiming to be of “progressive” stock while consorting with the saffron brotherhood. They were under pressure to capitulate fully, Rohit added for good measure. Sources even say the recent controversy over Ajit’s talking down to a lady IPS officer in an illegal sand mining case in Sola-pur—caught in a viral video—is being fanned by the BJP to corner him.

Sunetra claims her presence at the meeting, hosted by Ranaut, was apolitical. Ajit, too, insists his NCP is wedded to a Maharashtrian credo deriving

from Shivaji, Phule and Ambedkar, and would “never compromise”. The NCP’s base is non-Brahmin, especially Maratha. The RSS ecosystem is seen as aligned to a Brahminical ethos. Despite the alliance with the BJP since 2023, Ajit and his men have refrained from visiting the RSS headquarters at Nagpur, unlike other Mahayuti figures.

### SECULAR GUARANTOR

The NCP also enjoys support from a section of Muslims, so communal riots at places like Yavat in Pune have led to unease in its ranks. Aggravating it were incendiary speeches by BJP leaders

like minister Nitesh Rane and Gopichand Padalkar. Ajit's constituency—Baramati—has 60,000 Muslims. Of the state's 10 Muslim MLAs, two are NCP. It also has the sole Muslim face in the state cabinet—medical education minister Hasan Mushrif.

### 'UNNATURAL' PROXIMITY

When the Qureshi butcher community went on strike and refused to buy and cull buffaloes, citing harassment by cow vigilantes, it was Ajit who stepped in to try break the impasse. But these ties are under strain. The discomfiture peaked with NCP MLA Sangram Jagtap's vituperative statements. He had in fact pressed on despite Ajit's warnings—unprecedented in the NCP. The "unnatural" proximity with the BJP seems to be rubbing off. A costly mutation, if so, with identity, ideology and livelihood issues intertwined.

#### Takeaways

- ➲ Ajit Pawar's wife, RS MP Sunetra Pawar, seen at RSS women's wing event, causes a ruckus
- ➲ Rival NCP(SP) accuses Ajit of "double standards", says NCP will soon capitulate to saffron
- ➲ NCP base is mostly Maratha, also includes Muslims, Dalits

A leader admits the bulk of the NCP support base comes from those who had a generational commitment to the old parent Congress. "Cow vigilantism affects the livelihoods of Dalits and Muslims, who have a strong presence in Baramati. They may shift allegiance in the coming local body polls...abandoned cattle gone feral are a major problem in rural areas," he adds.

NCP elders believe there's still tactical space here, without surrendering. "We have ideological differences, making things awkward. But Ajitdada has conveyed to Muslims that he stands by them," says one. But there are sceptics, including partymen in Pune who say the BJP is gerrymandering municipal wards in its favour. They are among those who see a zero sum game. ■



► GUJARAT

## A WASTELAND OF THE NARMADA

**The Little Rann of Kutch "becomes a sea", causing eco havoc, as precious river water flows in unused**

*By Jumana Shah in Surendranagar*

HOW DID THE LITTLE RANN of Kutch, all 65 sq. km of it, turn into a salt lake filled with Narmada water? Swimming somewhere within that question is an old quandary: how to manage Narmada waters across the length and breadth of Gujarat. Answers exist, but only in theory. The result: for over a decade, an overrun of lakhs of litres of fresh water from Narmada canals, meant to irrigate farmlands in border villages, has been going waste, flowing into the desert-like Little Rann almost round the year.

In theory, the Narmada's use

is bound by strict norms, each drop accounted for, with farmer-led Water Use Associations (WUAs) formally requisitioning the Sardar Sarovar Narmada Nigam Ltd (SSNNL) for the exact quants they need. In practice, ad hocism flows unhindered. "On an average day, the local MLA or heavyweight will call an SSNNL officer and seek water for a few villages based on back-of-the-envelope estimates by farmers," says environmentalist Rohit Prajapati, who has been named to a special committee set up by the State Human Rights Commission (SHRC) on the directives of the Gujarat



● **FLOODED**  
Lakes form in  
the Little Rann  
of Kutch

High Court. “The demands are invariably higher than what’s needed, yet the engineers will simply comply. It’s not a systematic, documented process.”

That leaves plenty unused water. And the topography is such that this spills over from the canals, travels 15-20 km across open land, rivulets, ravines and villages, and eventually drains into the Rann. “There, it accumulates into a vast saltwater lake, but also washes out salt pans. At least 8,500 *agariyas* (salt pan workers) have lost their livelihoods due to this flooding,” Prajapati adds.

## LOST VOCATION

Kalubhai Thakor, a salt farmer from Vachhrajpura village in Patadi taluka, says half his strip was flooded in June as the waters gushed in earlier than expected. “The Rann has become a sea. We had to return in a boat to collect our belongings,” he says. His makeshift residence and solar panel, all were gone—devastating enough to force him into taking a soul-crushing step. “Many like me have decided to abandon salt farming and migrate to towns to work on construction sites,” Kalubhai says, ruining the loss of an arduous but cherished traditional occupation. Moreover, wage

## Takeaways

➔ **Unused Narmada water goes waste, floods the Little Rann of Kutch, a unique microhabitat**

➔ **Ad hoc practices lead to colossal waste of water, destroys age-old salt pans**

➔ **Permanent flood alters Rann ecology: alien weeds, trees disturb native species**

labour won’t make ends meet or fund the education of his two children.

Shockingly, such flooding started in 2014 but it’s only in 2025 that remedial action is coming. “The departments of irrigation, agriculture, forests, SSNNL, district collectorates...they were all in denial that this is Narmada water. We proved it through years of onground and drone video documentation,” says Bharat Somera, an *agariya*-turned-activist in Patadi, one of the towns bordering the Rann in Surendranagar. Given the salinity ingress in the soil, the excess water that

flows past dozens of villages can’t be used for irrigation, says Prajapati. What’s going waste is water denied to thousands of farmers elsewhere in Gujarat.

## ECO-ILLOGICAL

The foreign waters have impacted the ecology: it carries exotic weeds that displace native Rann grassland species. Also, the IUCN has documented how it restricts the movement of the Asiatic Wild Ass and other species in their unique microhabitat. This has resulted in human-animal conflict as the Wild Ass, numbered 7,672 in a 2024 census, spill out into surrounding farmlands.

Exasperated activists say the forest department is secretly happy, as the wet Rann is attracting migratory birds and causing a new profusion of *vilayati keekar*, another invasive species. The accidental greening looks good at first. “As the word spreads among bird-watchers, tourism is picking up,” Somera says.

In its July report to the SHRC, Prajapati and co-panelist Neha Sarwate seek a cessation to the ad-hoc release of water, to plug the problem at source, with village WUAs set up urgently. All departments see the wisdom in this, but waver in intent. No deadlines are forthcoming, no promises. Instead, they have accepted other suggested steps: desilting existing check dams, building new ones, ramping up village pond capacities, desilting rivers. All these to take in excess waters—tending to the milk after it has spilt, as it were. Prajapati also fears a frustrating wait before any actual action, what with feasibility surveys, approval of budgets running into “thousands of crores”, tendering et al.

Pankti Jogi of the Agariya Hitrakshak Committee, one of the first petitioners, cites other issues: “In many villages, minor and sub-minor canals to the fields haven’t been built. That adds to the colossal wastage.” SSNNL officials are muted, hinting at circumscribed powers amidst a plethora of authorities. Life, meanwhile, has come full circle for Prajapati, who was associated with the Narmada Bachao Andolan in the ‘90s. “Water wastage was one of our primary concerns then,” he says wistfully. ■



**RP - Sanjiv Goenka  
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# GEN Z RE

RAGE OVER CORRUPTION, NEPOTISM AND JOBLESSNESS EN  
NEPAL AND DEMANDS FOR A RADICAL RESET. **WHAT DOES IT**



A CAPITAL AFLAME

Demonstrators in front of the  
Federal Parliament complex,  
Kathmandu, Sept. 9

REUTERS

# REBELLION

DS IN A REGIME CHANGE IN  
MEAN FOR INDIA?

By RAJ CHENGAPPA  
& PRADIP R. SAGAR



**CHAOS ERUPTS**

Smoke billows from  
the Parliament  
Complex after it  
was set on fire,  
Kathmandu, Sept. 9



# A

**A powerful new playbook for changing governments mid-stream** is being executed by young voters in the subcontinent with metronomic regularity, although it is far from democratic.

Take 1, Sri Lanka, July 2022. Youth facing severe economic distress formed the Aragalaya (the Struggle) and stormed the citadels of power, including the secretariats of the president and the prime minister, forcing the ruling Rajapaksa family to flee, and an interim government takes their place. Take 2, Bangladesh, August 2024. University students' unions protesting job reservations turned violent after the Dhaka police indiscriminately opened fire against them, resulting in more than 100 casualties. Symbols of power, including the Parliament building, were vandalised, and prime minister Sheikh Hasina had to escape to India in a military aircraft to avoid being lynched by the mob.

Take 3, Nepal, September 2025. A controversial social media ban sparks an explosion of countrywide outrage by the nation's Gen Z (those aged between 15 and 25) after their peaceful protests the previous day in capital Kathmandu was met by police firing, killing 19 of their compatriots. The streets turned into battlegrounds, with protesters setting Nepal's Parliament ablaze along with the Rashtrapati Bhawan and the prime minister's residence, as their occupants—President Ramchandra Paudel and Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli—flee to safety.

However, the violence in Nepal wasn't directed solely towards the ruling regime. The protesters attacked leaders across party lines, including former prime ministers Sher Bahadur Deuba and Jhalanath Khanal. Khanal's wife, Rajyalaxmi Chitrakar, succumbed to the burn injuries she sustained when the mob set their house afire. The Supreme Court and a five-star hotel in the heart of Kathmandu were torched too, signalling that youth anger went beyond the political establishment. Other major cities and towns saw youth protest government high-handedness. Only when Nepali army chief Gen. Ashok Raj Sigdel called for an end to violence and ordered his troops to patrol the city was calm restored. Now comes the hard part.

## CRAFTING A NEW DISPENSATION

**I**t was a pattern that echoed Sri Lanka's crisis playbook more than Bangladesh's or Pakistan's coup-prone history: the military as backbone, not sovereign. Major General Binoj Basnyat, a former general-officer-commanding of the Eastern Division of the Nepali army, is clear that the armed forces

over the country, would he?"

Instead, Puri expects a techno-political government that is a mix of professionals, bureaucrats, economists and judicial experts besides younger political voices to be part of the new power structure. In line with that thinking, Sigdel is believed to have persuaded the 73-year-old Sushila Karki, a former Supreme Court chief justice, who had openly come out in support of the protests, to be the head of an interim arrangement. However, he soon found it difficult to hammer out a consensus, since Gen Z are a disparate group of protesters with no major leader at the forefront. A few of the protesters were rooting for Kathmandu mayor Balendra Shah, the 35-year-old rapper who has a fan following among the youth and had campaigned for changing the ruling establishment through his songs. Kulman Ghisin, the 54-year-old former managing director of the Nepal Electricity Authority, is another contender. Ghisin is credited with overhauling the country's electricity grid. Nevertheless, like Sri Lanka in 2024, any interim dispensation in Nepal will have to work towards eventually establishing a democratically elected government that meets the aspirations of the young.

## A PROTEST IN THE MAKING

**T**he immediate trigger for Gen Z's rebellion was Nepal's peremptory ban on 26 major social media platforms, including Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, YouTube, X, Reddit and LinkedIn. The Oli government blocked these for their failure to meet the one-week deadline to register locally, designate grievance officers and establish a point of contact as India had done two years ago. Nepali officials argue they were simply enforcing a Supreme Court-aligned directive and sovereignty over digital space. But for millions of Nepalis—especially the young—social media platforms are not a luxury; they are critical tools for livelihood, communication and a lifeline to family and opportunity abroad. In fact, Nepal has one of South Asia's highest users of social media platforms. Within hours of the blackout, anger boiled over into the street and ended in regime change.

The resentment, though, did not come out of nowhere. "The signs were there for a long, long time," says Ranjit Rae, another former Indian ambassador to Nepal. "There's huge

**THE NEPALI ARMY, SAYS AN EXPERT, HAS THE SAME ETHOS AS THE INDIAN ARMY. "IF SOMEONE ASKED AN INDIAN ARMY GENERAL TO TAKE OVER, WOULD HE?"**

always follow the constitutional arrangement and harbour no political ambitions. "This has been the defining character of the army," says Basnyat, "instilled through its upbringing and institutional culture. Whenever the army is entrusted with the responsibility of upholding constitutional rights, it fulfils that role." Manjeet Singh Puri, a former Indian ambassador to Nepal, agrees. "The Nepali army knows the country's proud struggle for democracy by overthrowing the monarchy," he says. "Their army has the same ethos as the Indian Army. If someone asked an Indian Army general to take



**FREEDOM FLAG** Protesters storm the Singha Durbar office complex which houses the PMO and other ministries, Sept. 9



**ALL SHOOK UP**  
Young agitators in Kathmandu, Sept. 8

anger about corruption and the unholy coalition formed to protect leaders from investigations." The controversy over the platforms merely lit the fuse. In the weeks before the ban, hashtags such as #nepbabies and #nepokids had been trending in Nepal, as citizens contrasted their stagnating lifestyles with the conspicuous consumption of scions of political families who flaunted their Rolex watches and Gucci bags on Instagram posts. For many ordinary Nepalis, by contrast, migration has been the only escape from shrinking domestic opportunities: villages hollowed out, parents distant from children, remittances sustaining consumption but not building capacity.

The major issue Gen Z is facing

of the households were found to rely on them, the remittances often contributing a third to household incomes.

## REVOLVING DOOR GOVERNMENTS

Over the past few decades, Nepali politics had become a game of musical chairs, with power alternating within the old triumvirate of leaders from the three major political parties—Sher Bahadur Deuba of the Nepali Congress (NC), who was prime minister five times if one includes the days of the monarchy; Pushpa Kumar Dahal (Prachanda) of the Communist Party of Nepal-Maoist Centre or CPN(MC), who was PM four times; and K.P. Sharma

## THE SOCIAL MEDIA BAN ONLY LIT THE FUSE. LONG BEFORE IT, HASHTAGS LIKE #NEPOBABIES HAD BEEN TRENDING, CONTRASTING ORDINARY CITIZENS' LIFESTYLE WITH POLITICIANS' KIDS

in Nepal is the mounting economic distress brought on by joblessness, with successive governments failing to address the issue. COVID only exacerbated the unemployment figures and hastened migration to other countries, especially of those under the age of 30, a cohort that accounts for nearly 56 per cent of the country's total population of 29.6 million. While Nepal's overall unemployment rate stood at 10.8 per cent in 2024, it was 20.8 per cent, or nearly double, for the Gen Z age group of 15-24. The lack of job opportunities saw an estimated 4.5 million of Nepalis migrating to other countries like India, the Gulf nations and the Far East for employment. Remittances by Nepalis working abroad, in fact, form the backbone of the domestic economy, accounting for 33 per cent of the GDP, according to the World Bank. Remittance inflows accounted for close to \$14 billion in 2024, and nearly 76 per cent

Oli, Communist Party of Nepal-Unified Marxist Leninist (CPN-UML), who was serving his fourth term before it was brought to an abrupt end. Though they occupied the central orbit of power till recently, not only was their gravitational pull weakening, their resonance among the youth, too, was waning, as they increasingly appeared to become disconnected with their aspirations. Worse, corruption and nepotism had become endemic, with top leaders accused of being at the heart of the rot.

Moreover, after the abolition of the monarchy in 2008 and a new constitution coming into force in 2015, Nepal has had continuing political instability, with 14 changes in government in the past 17 years. One reason for this endemic instability is Nepal's mixed electoral system, which doesn't readily enable a full majority. Of the 275 seats in the lower house, 165 are filled through a first-past-the-post mecha-



nism like in India, and 110 are filled via proportional representation based on party vote shares. That has seen no major political party cross the simple majority of 138 seats to form a government on its own, resulting in a series of coalition governments.

## GENERATION GAP

Compounding the nation's problems is that Nepal's social geography is distributed across three major population groups out of sync with each other. There are the Pahadi (hill-origin caste groups) comprised of the dominant Bahun (Brahmin), Chhetri (Kshatriya) and Thakuri communities, accounting for close to 31 per cent of the population and most of the political elite. Second are the Janajati (Adivasi or indigenous nationalities) spread across the hills and plains who account for another 31 per cent and are often



AP

## HISTORY OF TUMULT

### MUSICAL CHAIRS IN NEPAL'S POLITICS



GETTY IMAGES

**1950:** Mass uprising against the Rana regime, backed by Nepali Congress and Tribhuvan Dev, then ceremonial king

**1959:** B.P. Koirala is Nepal's first democratically elected prime minister

**1960:** King Mahendra leads royal coup, dissolves parliament and arrests PM Koirala

**1990:** Multi-party people's movement against King Birendra's regime ends absolute monarchy, installs constitutional monarchy

**2001:** A royal massacre shocks the Himalayan kingdom. Crown prince Dipendra shoots father King Birendra and 7 other family members, then kills himself. Uncle Gyanendra anoints himself king



**2008:** Nepal's constituent assembly votes to abolish monarchy, a federal democratic republic is declared; 14 governments have ruled since, none finished a full term

**2015:** New constitution adopted

**2025:** Youth-led popular revolt topples the Oli regime

**2006:** Nepal sees a decade-old Communist-led insurgency and civil war winding down, after King Gyanendra agrees to relinquish much of his powers, restore parliament that was dissolved in 2002



classed as underprivileged. And the Madhesi (the Terai or plains-origin people) who constitute about 28 per cent and live in districts bordering India. The constant power tussle within these groups has made the country's polity less cohesive.

What made the student rebellion significant was that it struck hard at Kathmandu, considered the bastion of the powerful Pahadi communities. The choice of targets reveals a deeper rupture, with demonstrators attacking not just institutions of democracy like Parliament and Supreme Court but also the homes of party leaders across the political spectrum. Interestingly, protesters stormed the Nakkhu

## ROYALIST SPECTRE

**W**hen army chief Sigdel addressed the nation with a portrait of Prithvi Narayan Shah, the 18th-century founder of modern Nepal, behind him, the symbolism was unmistakable. Many wondered if royalist forces would return riding the new wave of anger. Royalist sentiment has been flickering for years, spiking visibly in November 2023 when thousands rallied in Kathmandu, including members of the right-wing Rastriya Prajatantra Party, for a revival of monarchy and a Hindu Rashtra, clashing with the police. The 78-year-old Gyanendra

**THOUGH THE OLD TRIUMVIRATE OF LEADERS ALTERNATED IN POWER TILL RECENTLY, THEIR PULL HAD WEAKENED AND THEY HAD DIMINISHING RESONANCE WITH THE YOUNG**

jail in Lalitpur and freed Rastriya Swatantra Party president and former deputy prime minister Rabi Lamichhane. A popular TV anchor who had championed transparency and spotless governance, Lamichhane was implicated in a cooperative fraud scandal dating back to 2019 and had been sent to judicial custody in April 2025. Maj. Gen. Basnyat highlights how members of the Gen Z, raised in an era of global connectivity, economic uncertainty and political stagnation, had lost faith in the system. "Their mobilisation," he says, "reflects a rejection of an exhausted political order that has failed to deliver stability, justice or opportunities. Instead, they are pressing for a deeper recalibration of governance and security, where corruption, impunity and outdated institutions are replaced by accountable leadership and forward-looking strategies."

Shah, who ruled Nepal from 2001 to 2008, was overthrown after a popular protest that upended the monarchy. Currently living in the Nirmal Niwas Palace in Kathmandu, he continues to nurture hopes of a return to power. The current turmoil revives the spectre of a royal return. Dr Geeta Kochhar, senior assistant professor, Centre for Chinese and South East Asian Studies, JNU, believes, "Nepal's Gen Z has lost faith in the ruling Communist alliance. This could pave the way for a new political alignment involving the royalty."

Some see royalist interest in the collapse of the constitution that abolished the monarchy, but others point out how recent pro-monarchy crowds were a fraction of mainstream party mobilisations. "Individuals, yes; a force, no," says an expert. "The monarchy is over. Some may hanker for it, but the cur-

# KEY PLAYERS IN NEPAL

**THOSE WHO WERE OUSTED, AND THOSE ON THE RISE**



**K.P. SHARMA OLI, 73**

**Four-time ex-PM** (2015, 2018, 2021 and since July 2024) from the CPN (UML). Resigned on Sept. 9 as protests spiralled. Accumulated power, used probe agencies against rivals. Faces contempt case for blocking a court order against converting a tea estate into commercial plots. His residence was torched, currently in hiding.

rent revolt was not for that." The trend line points away from legacy loyalties and toward identity, accountability and delivery. It is tempting to reduce Nepal's turbulence to a royalist plot, a leftist gambit, a Chinese angle, or an Indian misstep. The reality is messier. "Everyone's giving some geopolitical angle... but this is a homegrown thing," insists an interlocutor.

There remains deep concern, though, that the new dispensation may try to alter the constitution on the pretext that it failed to deliver. Among the dilemmas is that, under the constitution, only a member of the lower house can serve as prime minister. Can an unelected PM head an interim government, then? As a Nepal expert warns, "If the constitution is jettisoned, it's all up in the air. There are dangers of opening old fault lines between various caste and social groups.



**SHER BAHADUR DEUBA, 79**

**Five-time former PM** (1995, 2001, 2004, 2017 and 2021) from the Nepali Congress. Was set upon by protesters, as was his wife Arzu Deuba Rana, the foreign minister. Accused of taking commissions in buying aircraft. Rana also linked to the Bhutanese refugee scam.



**PUSHPA KAMAL DAHAL PRACHANDA, 70**

**Four-time ex-PM** (2008, 2016, 2022, 2024) from the CPN (MC). Led the armed Maoist struggle (with Baburam Bhattarai), known for his anti-India stand. Accused of diverting UN funds meant for rehabilitating ex-guerrillas. Whereabouts unknown.



**RAM CHANDRA POUDEL, 80**

**President of Nepal** since March 2023, called for peace and stability as protests turned violent. Currently in hiding. His office in the Singha Durbar secretariat was burnt down by the protesters.



**GEN. ASHOK RAJ SIGDEL, 58**

**Nepali army chief** since Sept. 2024, he put boots on the ground after protests wreaked havoc and secured the airport, parliament and secretariat. Since Sept. 9, had a big hand in stopping further loss of life and property. Has held talks with several Gen Z groups.



**SUSHILA KARKI, 73**

**The first woman chief justice** of Nepal's Supreme Court (2016–17), she is the choice of many Gen Z protesters to lead an interim government as caretaker PM. Known for her anti-corruption stand.



**BALENTRA SHAH, 35**

**Mayor of Kathmandu and former rapper**, trained as an engineer. He is an opponent of Oli, has publicly called him out as corrupt and supported the Gen Z movement. A favourite to lead the movement or a regime set up by them.



**RABI LAMICHHANE, 51**

**Former deputy PM**, chief of the Rastriya Swatantra Party. Was lodged in the Nakku jail for alleged corruption, but freed by Gen Z protesters. Seen as a clean alternative to 'corrupt' elder leaders. All 21 RSP MPs have resigned.



**KULMAN GHISING, 54**

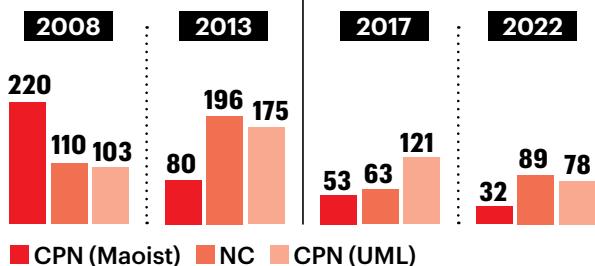
**Former MD of the Nepal Electricity Authority**, he's credited with ending the nation's endemic powercuts. He is another popular, 'clean' professional who is now a frontrunner for the job of interim prime minister.

## A BITE LESS THAN HALF

The past four general elections failed to give a majority to any of the three largest parties—the CPN (UML), CPN (Maoist Centre) and the Nepali Congress

### CONSTITUENT ASSEMBLY

575 members (majority 301)



### HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES\*

275 members (majority 138)

## THE ETHNIC SPREAD

Key communities of Nepal, and geographical areas they dominate



#### PAHADI (31% of population)

Hill-origin forward castes like Brahmin, Chhetri, Thakuri, form the political elite

#### JANAJATIS (31% of population)

Indigenous ethnic people like Gurung, Sherpa, Tamang and Magar, spread across hills and plains

#### MADHESIS (28% of population)

Castes like Kurmi, Bania, Yadav, with close ties to India and staying in Terai lowlands along the border

\*Of 275 seats, 165 members are elected through first-past-the-post system; 110 members elected via party-wise proportional representation

That charter may be imperfect, but was forged to contain precisely the fault lines violent politics reopens, whether federalism, affirmative action, language or citizenship.” The safer path is to work within the constitution and retain parliamentary oversight—even if truncated—for an interim period. As one source put it: “If they work within the present constitution, things will be smoother.”

## WHAT IT MEANS FOR INDIA

**A**ny turmoil within Nepal inevitably spills over across its 1,770-km open border that abuts five Indian states—Uttarakhand, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Sikkim and West Bengal. New Delhi’s instinct so far has been restraint. After a meeting of the Cabinet Committee on Security, Prime Minister Narendra Modi issued a carefully worded message in English, Hindi and Nepali, calling the violence “heart-rending”, mourning the young dead, and urging peace. The goal is clear: engage quietly, avoid the “we fixed it” optics that fuel anti-India narratives, and keep critical cooperation such as in trade, energy, connectivity on track. “India should counsel quietly on issues such as peace, engagement, trade, and avoid grandstanding,” says Ranjit Rae.

The border map dispute over the territorial rights of Lipulekh, Kalapani, Limpiyadhura at the trijunction of India, Nepal and China remains an irritant since Kathmandu’s 2020 cartographic assertion and New Delhi’s rejection. The issue escalated when Nepal published a new political map claiming these areas, citing the 1816 Sugauli Treaty, which defines the Kali River as the western boundary. Nepal claims the river originates west of Kalapani, placing the disputed land within its territory. India asserts that the river originates further east, making it part of Uttarakhand. Tensions flared after India inaugurated a road to the Lipulekh Pass in May 2020. Nepal called it a violation of sovereignty; India dismissed the claims, calling the area its own. For Oli, long known for calibrating nationalist rhetoric under India’s shadow while courting China, the

border dispute offered a perfect opportunity for domestic mobilisation. “Once you finger things cartographically, it lingers. Maps become an agenda item you either have to cross, look the other way or deal with. Oli crossed the red line, as anti-Indianism gets votes,” Puri points out.

In his earlier stint as PM, Oli had irked India first by signing a transit pact with Beijing in 2016, then the Belt and Road Initiative papers in 2017, and sought fresh optics in 2024—even as many BRI projects stalled. New Delhi read Oli’s tilt warily; Kathmandu saw it as leverage. But most of Nepal’s urgent needs such as power sales, ports, pipes, medicine, education can best be met by India. Also, maps alone do not make neighbours, people do. An estimated two million Nepalis live and work in India, crossing the frontier daily and the

**FOR INDIA, THE GOAL IS CLEAR: ENGAGE QUIETLY, AVOID THE ‘WE FIXED IT’ OPTICS THAT FUEL ANTI-INDIA NARRATIVES AND KEEP TIES IN TRADE, ENERGY AND CONNECTIVITY ON TRACK**

armies of the two countries have shared uniforms under the Gorkha crest. This human interface is the best guardrail against geopolitical opportunism and the best reason for everyone, in Kathmandu and New Delhi, to tread carefully.

One casualty of the current chill is the historic Gorkha bond. Nepal’s decision to pause participation in India’s Agniveer scheme snapped an artery-deep link. “It’s a big setback... a very important pillar of our relationship,” said an expert, noting that earlier, there were roughly 1,300 recruits annually into the Indian Army and 125,000 retired servicemen in Nepal. Kathmandu’s quiet fear, he explained, is that short-term trained soldiers returning into a fragile milieu

## GROWTH PANGS

Nepal’s economy remains modest in size; after a brief post-pandemic rebound, growth momentum has slowed

**\$46.8 bn**

GDP in 2025; 100th position globally

**\$1,469**

GDP per capita in 2025, half that of India’s

**REAL GDP GROWTH RATE (%)\***



\*based on constant local currency

Graphic by TANMOY CHAKRABORTY

could raise the violence potential. It is a fear sharpened by memories of the Maoist insurgency. Delhi hears another note: a friend stepping away at a sensitive time.

China’s role is less immediate than many assume but never absent. “Remember money talks—China has it, and governments listen,” an analyst says. In moments of vacuum, he warns, cheque books can speak louder than words. Yet the current storm is not a geopolitical set-piece; it is a crisis of domestic legitimacy, made visible on digital screens and burnt buildings. Geography, however, demands that Nepal maintain a positive relationship with India. Trade between India and Nepal amounted to \$8.5 billion, with the balance tilted heavily in

# ECONOMIC STRESS THAT TRIGGERED THE ANGER

An economy stuck in low gear, stark inequalities, scarce jobs and over-dependence on remittances have left Nepal's young generation restless and angry

## POVERTY AND DISPARITY

One in five Nepalis still lives in poverty, while the richest 10% take home over six times the income share of the poorest tenth

**29.6**  
**MILLION**  
Total population (2024)

**20.3%**  
Share of population living below poverty line (2022)

### SHARE IN TOTAL HOUSEHOLD INCOME (2022)

**3.7%**  
Poorest 10%



**24%**  
Richest 10%

## SOARING UNEMPLOYMENT

More than 1 in 10 of the labour force are unemployed, with joblessness among the youth soaring to 20.8%

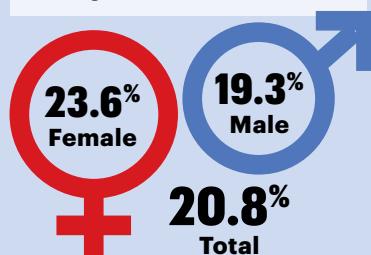
**8.4**  
**MILLION**  
Labour force\* (2024)

**10.8%**  
Unemployment rate\*\* (2024)

\*No. of people aged 15 or above who are employed or seeking work

\*\*% of the labour force seeking employment

### YOUTH UNEMPLOYMENT RATE (ages 15-24; in 2024)



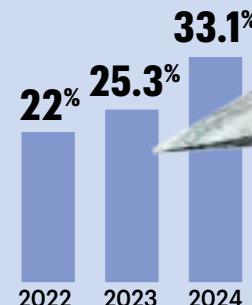
## EXODUS ECONOMY

Nepal's fledgling economy remains heavily dependent upon remittances being sent home by its diaspora

**4.5**  
**MILLION**  
Nepalis estimated to be living abroad

**\$14.2**  
**BILLION**  
Total remittances received (2024)

### REMITTANCES RECEIVED (as % of GDP)



Sources: World Bank, IMF's World Economic Outlook (April 2025); CIA's The World Factbook

India's favour, which enjoyed a massive surplus of \$6.1 billion. Apart from trade, India buys hydroelectric power from Nepal, has provided a pipeline for oil supply to Nepal saving it crores of rupees in transportation and is involved in providing aid for a range of development projects from education to healthcare.

For India, experts say, the game is patient engagement: border management and humanitarian readiness along the open frontier; granular outreach to new political forces and civil society; and steady execution of power and infrastructure commitments. "Support the aspirations of the people...reach out to civil society...keep our programmes going—but don't micromanage forma-

tions," advises one seasoned diplomat. Loud credit-claiming will harm what quiet help can heal.

## WHAT NEXT?

The most realistic near-term path is a narrow-mandate caretaker: stabilise law and order, restore services, lift blanket digital bans and replace them with lawful, transparent engagement; create a credible timeline for elections; and audit the use of force that killed so many. On the economic front, the caretaker regime should accelerate hydropower milestones; fast-track cross-border power trade; expand vocational pipelines linked to actual placement; and craft a diaspo-

ra-friendly reintegration for returnees with capital or skills. Elite excesses must be confronted too, not with vindictive arrests but with institutional reforms that make graft harder and punishment real and institute credible accountability.

The current moment's paradox is that stability requires restraint: by the army (which has, so far, signalled it), by the young (who have more than earned a hearing), by parties (that must open space for the young without staging comebacks through chaos) and by neighbours (who must avoid making Nepal a chessboard again). "From the ashes will emerge something stronger and better: more democracy," says an expert. It is a hope as much as a forecast. ■

# POLICIES OF DECEPTION

**Abetted by insiders, a multicrore insurance scam—centred in west UP and preying on the poor battling illness or disability—thrived on fake identities, staged deaths, and even murders**

By AVANEESH MISHRA  
in Sambhal and Bulandshahr



looked like a routine hit-and-run case: a 20-year-old named Aman found dead on the roadside in western Uttar Pradesh's Amroha district. His Aadhaar card and phone were still in his pocket, and the local police duly recorded the case as an accident. That was back in November 2023. But when the case was reopened earlier this year, what seemed at first like a random road tragedy unravelled into a chilling conspiracy. For, the postmortem itself told a different story—four deep lacerations on Aman's head, with no other injuries—pointing unmistakably to murder.

Between July and September 2023, seven insurance policies worth Rs 2.7 crore had been taken out in Aman's name, including a Rs 1 crore accidental death cover. Investigators discovered that his maternal relatives, in cahoots with a local gang, had plotted the killing. This was not their first crime. In 2022, they had murdered another man, Salim, to extract Rs 78 lakh in insurance claims, and were preparing to target a third victim when the police finally intervened.

What happened to Aman is not an isolated tragedy. It is the face of one of India's biggest insurance rackets—an organised crime network that investigators say has thrived for nearly 15 years and touched nearly every major insurance company. According to the Sambhal police, which first uncovered the nexus, fraudsters



● STOLEN PROMISES

Sunita Devi with her son Anuj outside their house in Bhimpur village in Bulandshahr

issued fake policies in the names of the dying, altered Aadhaar details to make the elderly look decades younger, and forged death certificates for the living. So far, 68 arrests have been made, four murders confirmed and 21 FIRs filed across western UP and Delhi.

The victims are nearly always poor, battling illness or disability, many of them and their families barely literate, most of them unaware of what life insurance even means. Among those arrested are at least 50 insurance insiders, including agents and claim investigators, as well as three bank employees, a couple of village functionaries, an ASHA worker and a ward boy.

Police say the fraud has already topped Rs 100 crore—but barely one in 10 suspected cases has been physically verified so far. Though the investigations have centred in western UP, the discovery of passbooks and documents from several states—in multiple Indian languages—indicates a network spanning at least 12 states. Local police now refer to the region—Sambhal and neighbouring districts of Amroha, Bulandshahr, Moradabad, Meerut and Budaun among others—as the “Jamtara of insurance fraud”.



**SUNITA DEVI, 40**

Bulandshahr, Uttar Pradesh

## 'They used my dead husband to fool us'

**S**ubhash had died in December 2024, at just 45, after a long, punishing fight with liver disease. He left behind a widow, three sons and his broken autorickshaw parked outside their half-built house. A month after his death, two visitors—an ASHA *didi* and a man who said he was a doctor—arrived at their door, offering to help the family claim a government benefit. But first, they insisted, every photo of Subhash had to be destroyed. They even carried away all ID cards and medical papers. What Sunita didn't know then was that those strangers had already taken out a Rs 15 lakh insurance policy in Subhash's name, months before he died. The claim would later be quietly processed. She saw just Rs 20,000. "They used my dead husband to fool us and make money," says Sunita. "That hurts us more than anything." ■

### HOW THE SCAM BROKE OPEN

**T**he web began to unravel in the early hours of January 17, 2025, when a team of the Sambhal police stopped a black Mahindra Scorpio on suspicion of vehicle theft. Inside, they found two men, Rs 11.45 lakh in cash and 19 debit cards under different names. One of them, Omkareshwar Mishra, carried two ID cards identifying him as a field investigator for firms that check suspicious insurance claims. His phone revealed something bigger: over 100,000 photographs, 30,000 documents and screenshots of big transactions. Many belonged to poor families with large insurance policies in their names.

Anukriti Sharma, additional SP (South) in Sambhal, who led the interception and is now supervising the investigation, says two names—Subhash and Aslam—were the first threads. Police traced the policies linked to them and found lakhs deposited in bank accounts opened in the names of their widows: Sunita and Rukhsar, respectively. The women had seen only a fraction, handed over as "government relief" (see 'They used my dead husband to fool us'). Both

**21**  
Total FIRs registered

**4**  
No. of murder cases

**68**  
Suspects arrested

deaths had been officially recorded as heart attacks, despite long-standing illnesses.

From there, a pattern emerged. Almost every death occurred within a year of the risk commencement date—the date from which the insurer takes on the risk and agrees to pay claims, if the conditions are met. The cause was always listed as a heart attack. Claims were always cleared. Anukriti says insurers have already flagged thousands of such cases. "Even a conservative estimate," she warns, "suggests the fraud could cross Rs 1,000 crore."

### MURKY MURDER TRAILS

**A**s investigators dug deeper, they discovered the scam wasn't only about forged documents. It had turned murderous. Aman and Salim were not the only victims. There was also Dariyab, a 35-year-old severely handicapped beggar from Sambhal. Five policies worth over Rs 50 lakh had been taken out in his name. In July 2024, he was found dead, supposedly in a road accident. Investigators now say he

## CRIME INSURANCE FRAUD

was killed by a contract assassin, who was paid Rs 50,000 to crush his skull with a hammer and stage an accident. Apparently, two villagers had tipped off the gang about Dariyab, assuring them “no one will care even if he dies”. A claim of Rs 15 lakh had already been paid out.

Like Dariyab, Sanjay Kumar of Budaun seemed destined for misfortune. Paralysed and abandoned by his wife, he leaned on his younger brother, Naveen, for support. Or so he believed. On the night of June 20, 2024, the brothers set out together on an e-rickshaw. Minutes later, Sanjay was dead. At first, it was passed off as an accident, blamed on the driver’s reckless speeding. But investigators soon uncovered a far darker truth. Naveen, they claim, had pushed his immobile brother out of the moving vehicle. When the terrified driver fled, he allegedly smashed Sanjay’s head against the road to make sure he died.

The motive was chillingly clear. In just seven months, four insurance policies worth Rs 95 lakh had been taken out in Sanjay’s name, with Naveen listed as the sole nominee. By the time the scheme unravelled, he had already pocketed Rs 20 lakh. Naveen later told police he had acted on the advice of a local lawyer. “These are not just financial frauds,” says Anukriti. “These were premeditated murders, plotted months in advance. Human beings were seen as policy numbers, nothing more.” So far, 15 suspects linked to the four murders have been arrested.

### PLUGGING THE BLIND SPOTS

**T**he scam’s ingenuity lay in exploiting every possible loophole. Investigators found that Aadhaar records were routinely tampered with to make elderly applicants appear younger, thereby qualifying them for government schemes such as the Pradhan Mantri Jeevan Jyoti Bima Yojana. Framed as a safety cushion for

## HOW THE NEXUS WORKED

Behind every fraudulent claim lay a finely-tuned assembly line of deception

### ► IDENTIFYING TARGETS



ASHA workers and village functionaries flagged terminally ill patients as potential beneficiaries

### ► APPROACHING FAMILIES



Agents posed as helpers offering government schemes, tricking households into parting with Aadhaar, PAN and medical records

### ► FORGING DOCUMENTS



Aadhaar addresses were altered, and thumb impressions or signatures taken to initiate policies

### ► CREATING THE TRAIL



With corrupt bank staff, accounts were opened in nominees’ names and linked with black-market SIMs

### ► POLICY CREATION



Insurance insiders and third-party investigators ensured smooth policy approvals and later cleared claims

### ► MEDICAL & VILLAGE SIGN-OFF



Medical staff issued false treatment records; village officials validated fake death certificates

### ► AFTER DEATH



Families, duped again, handed over certificates used to lodge claims with little scrutiny

### ► SIPHONING PAYOUT



Control of nominee accounts allowed the nexus to withdraw insurance money through forged cheques and colluding bank staff

HARDIK CHHABRA



### HOPES SWINDLED ▶

Priyanka Sharma with her children at their home in Rajpura block of Sambhal district

families, the scheme set basic conditions: age below 50 and no death within 45 days of joining. One gang that Anukriti’s team busted charged as little as Rs 2,000–3,000 to alter details using manipulated devices.

In Delhi, police discovered three life insurance policies issued in the name of one Trilok Kumar, months after he died while undergoing treatment at the Rajiv Gandhi Cancer Institute and Research Centre in June 2024. One claim had even been cleared on the basis of a forged death certificate, and his file bizarrely contained an ECG dated six months after his cremation.

Fraudsters also exploited credit-linked insurance. At Behjot police station in Sambhal, a complaint revealed how they bought tractors and motorcycles in the names of the terminally ill, knowing the loans would be cleared upon the insured person’s death. The vehicles were then sold off illegally in underground mandis.

How did insurers not notice that



PRIYANKA SHARMA, 35

Sambhal, Uttar Pradesh

## 'I don't know how I will raise my kids'

Priyanka still recalls the day in 2023 when three men came to her home, offering a health insurance policy that promised to cover the treatment of her husband, Dinesh Chandra, recently diagnosed with throat cancer. Clinging to hope, the family handed over documents and Rs 50,000 in cash and, after Dinesh's death, even his death certificate along with another Rs 40,000. The men made her open a new bank account and took away the passbook. Later, they handed her a cheque for Rs 10 lakh. It bounced. When she called them, they threatened her. "We were already broken after my husband's death," Priyanka says. "Then they cheated us in his name. I don't know how I will raise my children"—a son and two daughters, all between 4 and 10. ■



**“Insurers have already flagged thousands of such cases. Even a conservative estimate suggests that the fraud could cross Rs 1,000 cr.”**

**ANUKRITI SHARMA**  
Additional SP (South), Sambhal

policies were being issued for the dying, or that claims kept citing the same cause of death? A senior insurance official admitted the industry chases sales volumes, not quality. "Without inter-company coordination to flag suspicious activities, these frauds will

keep slipping through," he says. "Prudence is required right at the inception stage," he adds, "through verification calls to policyholders and nominees, or even random physical checks. Similar caution is needed at the claims stage, with video calls or nominee verification before settlement."

According to advocate Manoj Dixit, who runs a third-party investigation agency, both the empanelment process and payment structures are flawed. "For jobs that require time and a lot of legwork, investigators are paid only Rs 2,000–3,000," he says. Naturally, background checks become perfunctory.

Sambhal SP Krishna Kumar Bishnoi says the police have begun sharing their findings with all stakeholders. "Those involved in the fraud exploited multi-agency loopholes to build their empire," he says. "That is why we recently organised an insurance conclave in Chandausi, bringing together representatives from the finance ministry, the insurance regulator, insurers and

third-party investigators. Our aim is not only to probe this case but to plug the gaps that allow such crimes." Bishnoi adds that the response has been encouraging, with agencies like the Unique Identification Authority of India (UIDAI) already making database changes based on police inputs.

What began with a single intercepted car has snowballed into one of the largest fraud cases in recent memory—a machinery of deception stretching across states. But its cost is not measured in crores alone. It is written in the bewilderment of widows like Priyanka, who learned too late that her husband's identity had been stolen (see *'I don't know how I will raise my kids'*). It lies in the chilling reality that a young man like Aman was murdered not out of enmity, but as insurance payouts waiting to be collected. The scam has exposed more than criminal ingenuity. It has laid bare the fault lines of India's insurance system itself—where loopholes and negligence can turn a safety net into a death trap. ■

# ABHISHEK SPREADS HIS WINGS

**Named TMC's leader in the Lok Sabha, Abhishek Banerjee emerges as the undisputed bearer of Mamata's mantle. Before him now lies the challenge of the assembly election next year**

By ARKAMOY DATTA MAJUMDAR

**I**t's quite in tradition for the Bengali imagination to coin catchy limerick-like slogans that rhyme native words with English. But the latest one that's flooding social media timelines looks set to have a long shelf life—even in its zestful goofiness, it snaps up an entire zeitgeist, at least within the ruling Trinamool Congress (TMC). “Akashay batasey positive energy / Naam ta mone achhe na: Abhishek Banerjee,” it goes. Yes, the air seems charged with positive energy, and party faithful do attribute a lot of it to the 37-year-old nephew of Mamata Banerjee, the anointed inheritor. Usually taciturn with the media, he's razor-sharp when he allows himself an occasional sound bite, and bitingly sarcastic when speaking from the Opposition benches in the Lok Sabha, where he now fronts a young and very audible TMC contingent. He also knows how to carry

an aura around himself. Not a scion's glamour inherited for free, but the hard-earned halo of authority of one who has fought, and won, in the toxic dust-laden battlefields of Bengal. Some of it, they say, were even internal to the TMC.

At any rate, the party's gritty holding of turf in the 2021 assembly election, as well as the coup de grace it delivered to the BJP in 2024, both partly owed to his strategic cunning. Take the LS poll. Even in early 2023, he had realised the Bengal countryside was simmering with discontent and that it could prove costly. He soon channeled those energies into TMC protests demanding the release of

NREGA funds blocked by the Centre. He scaled that up with a delegation in Delhi that October. His narrative of central neglect ended up drowning the original allegation of pilferage of funds. It delivered in the summer of 2024, when the TMC took 29 of the state's 42 seats, short-circuiting the BJP. So, it's with measured steps that he fills the shoes of Future Supremo, beyond his triple role as TMC national general secretary, Diamond Harbour MP and the new one of leader in the Lok Sabha.

Though Abhishek would deny it, his recent elevation and the organisational rejig are being interpreted by experts



**MAN OF THE MOMENT**  
Abhishek Banerjee at a TMC event in Kolkata, Aug. 28

as a truce between Mamata and him—the final resolution of a longstanding tussle between the old and new guard in the TMC. On August 4, after being appointed the party's leader in the Lok Sabha, his words on X were filled with customary humility towards Didi and fellow MPs. But party insiders say Abhishek has been working on the back-end architecture for the past year.

The decision to have Abhishek in charge of the party's contingent in the Lower House came after a particularly turbulent period in its parliamentary wing, with lack of coordination and open rancour being the order of the day.



## ABHISHEK'S REPORT CARD

The Diamond Harbour MP is lauded by supporters and castigated by adversaries

### PLUSES

- Was the architect of the 2021 assembly election victory: TMC won 215 out of 294 seats
- Battled anti-incumbency through the statewide Naba Jowar rally in 2023; helped win panchayat polls that year
- Based 2024 LS poll campaign on the stalling of central funds to Bengal; it helped TMC win 29 out of 42 seats

### MINUSES

- Faces allegations of manipulating elections, including his own Diamond Harbour LS seat
- Charges of corruption in multiple scams—has been questioned by the CBI and ED in coal scam and teachers' recruitment scam
- Accused of running a shadow government in West Bengal

Former leader in the House Sudip Bandopadhyay had been unwell and had let things slip. Chief whip Kalyan Banerjee was involved in a public spat with fellow MP Mahua Moitra in early August that rival parties and the media played up with a lot of glee. Curiously, Kalyan himself resigned from his post within a few hours of Abhishek's elevation. It was widely read as an angry response to the change, with some citing his earlier reservations about the young leader. But Kalyan dismissed this speculation, insisting that he shares a "very healthy relationship" with Abhishek. "He met me in Delhi and we had a very cordial meeting," he said. Yet, as a general fact, going beyond instances, a distinct inter-generational strain has accompanied Abhishek's rise to the top.

### OLD ORDER CHANGETH

The battle with the veterans has been on since 2014, when Abhishek became the youngest Lok Sabha MP, winning from Diamond Harbour. Even preceding that was the rift between him and Suvendu Adhikari, who's since joined the BJP and is LoP in the assembly and is the TMC's most trenchant critic. That owed to the latter losing out in the battle to control the party's youth wing. In fact, the few quiet months after the frenetic activity of the 2024 election, when Abhishek was functioning mostly as party spokesperson, had led to speculation about a rift with Mamata. There was even talk that the machinations of the veterans had led to his sidelining. But Abhishek swung back into action later that year with a series of party rallies where a spirited avowal of allegiance to the party chief laid to rest the rumours.

Time is definitely on his side—so are a blend of other factors. Old-timers like state president Subrata Bakshi, Sudip and prominent leader Saugata Roy are all declining due to age and health issues. Kalyan, it appears, has lost the CM's confidence. Some other senior TMC leaders are in jail for alleged scams, like Partha Chattopadhyay (teacher's recruitment scam), or out on bail, like Jyotipriya Mallick (ration scam). Of Mamata's once formidable inner circle, only Aroop Biswas and Firhad Hakim remain. Both have had their differences with

Abhishek in the past, but have now mended ties. Abhishek has also created an inner circle of his own, with new faces such as Debangshu Bhattacharya (head of the party's IT cell) and Saayoni Ghosh (head of the TMC youth wing), as well as veterans like Partha Bhowmick (Barrackpore MP) and Sujit Bose (junior minister in Mamata's cabinet).

### EYE ON THE ELECTION

**T**he ultimate prize, of course, will be the 2026 assembly poll. The arrangement is clear: Mamata remains the ultimate authority, Abhishek the operations chief. Since August, he has been meeting workers and leaders from the districts in a series of virtual meetings. On the national stage, he's increasingly becoming the party's primary face, chosen to represent the TMC in the post-Operation Sindoor all-party delegation that led India's global outreach.

Over the years, Abhishek has shown a maturity far beyond his years. After the BJP won as many as 18 LS seats in 2019, poll strategist Prashant Kishor was brought in at his insistence and a third of the TMC's sitting MLAs were dropped for the 2021 assembly poll. The party won 215 of the 294 seats then. That gave Abhishek leverage, which he used to fight the endemic corruption in the party. He demanded a reshuffle of leaders' duties when the party was rocked by scams—campaigns that saw him taking on veterans and incurring their wrath. His 2023 Trinamool Nobo Jowar outreach programme, which took him across Bengal before the panchayat polls, was another eye-opener. Seeing how the masses suffered without the vital help that NREGA offers, the tour crystallised his decision to make Bengal's pending dues a main theme for the 2024 LS polls campaign.

"Abhishek has a refreshingly sharp mind. He thinks like a professional and is always coming up with new ideas," says Bengal's education minister Bratya Basu. A veteran TMC MP who once harboured misgivings says he, too, has reversed his opinion. "There is no one better placed to carry forward Didi's legacy. Abhishek is emotional but



**“Abhishek Banerjee has a sharp mind. It is refreshing to talk to him. He thinks like a professional and comes up with new ideas”**

**BRATYA BASU**  
TMC leader, West Bengal education minister



**“Irrespective of who is at its helm, Mamata or Abhishek, TMC will always be corrupt... which is why the people of Bengal will throw them out in the next election”**

**SAMIK BHATTACHARYA**  
State BJP chief

restrained; quiet but attentive. These are characteristics that make a leader," he says. The only critique he offers: Mamata's nephew could be more accessible to cadre and the public.

National general secretary since 2021, Abhishek has also proven himself as a crisis manager. He led the damage control exercise in July 2022 after the teacher's recruitment scam blew up in the party's face. With the Election Com-

mission announcing a revision of voter rolls in Bengal before the 2026 election, he is now gearing up for what may be the biggest fight of them all—against what the TMC fears will be a "disenfranchisement of valid voters" in Bengal. That battle will have national visibility.

### TAINT IN THE MIX

**C**hallenges remain, of course. Abhishek's name continues to be linked to controversies like the alleged coal scam and teachers' recruitment scam. Central probe agencies have questioned him in both cases. In a third chargesheet related to the latter scam in February 2025, the CBI named an 'Abhishek Banerjee' without specifying anything more—critics insist it is the TMC MP. The allegations have not hurt his prospects, but they do provide rivals with ammunition. "Like all regional parties, TMC is family-centric," says state BJP chief Samik Bhattacharya. "And they tend to be autocratic, which in turn breeds corruption. Irrespective of who is at the helm, Mamata or Abhishek, TMC will always be a corrupt party...which is why the people of Bengal will throw them out in the next election."

CPI(M) state secretary Mohammed Salim has a similar take on the aunt and nephew, saying the TMC has introduced a "culture of feudalism" where the party and state administration revolve round the "whims of Abhishek". Salim also points to the old allegations of electoral malpractices in Diamond Harbour, with opponents alleging that it is "ghost voters" who drive Abhishek's victories here. "While the INDIA bloc is busy cornering the BJP on its industrial scale of rigging...Abhishek himself has been industrious in manipulating elections; that is how he has won poll after poll in Diamond Harbour," he says.

But then these are allegations. If Abhishek's career till now is taken in context, it is one that has been shaped by quiet victories and a strategic accretion of power. A victory in the 2026 assembly election could be the icing on the cake, transforming his role from inheritor-in-waiting to a leader whose time has come. ■

# INSIDE THE MIND OF AN IT EXPERT

## Proven Approaches to Cybersecurity Protection

Online gaming is a passion for the new generation. However it has become a threat to the younger generation. Children are unknowingly exposed to threats such as cyberbullying. While playing in competitive virtual worlds, children appear to be at a number of digital risks. These include identity theft, privacy invasion, malicious software, cyber bullying, phishing scams, as well as unsolicited contacts from Internet predators. A proactive approach with nuanced parental involvement preserves kids' experiences by allowing parents, guardians and educators to understand these problems as well as suggesting basic precautions to reduce exposure to these issues. "Approaches using machine learning (ML) techniques can detect child predatory behavior," says Jayakanth Pujuri an Information Technology professional with high level expertise in machine learning and cybersecurity. Initially he accomplished his Bachelor degree in Computer and Information technology from Jawaharlal Nehru Technological University, India and Masters of Science in Computer Science and Engineering from Southern Arkansas University, USA. In a conversation with Nibedita Behera, Mr. Pujuri discusses many social issues and its solutions using advanced Information Technology.



**MR.JAYAKANTH PUJURI**

Executive IT Director  
Sira Consulting Inc.

### Q: What are the risks a child may face while playing Online Games?

Cyberbullying is a kind of harassment of someone over digital mediums, including text messages, social media, or online gaming platforms.

### Q: How to keep kids safe when gaming online?

Parents are requested to stay alert, it is important to put parental control over child's device, stay involved, restrictions from in-App payments, try to divert his/her mind in other mode of activities, staying vigilant even if you allow to play online, restrict time over devices, stay involved with your kids.

### Q: How is the cyber world affecting adults?

Cybercrimes are affecting almost all ages of individuals. Financial, social media, cyber threats and attacks are common now a days. Common factors are phishing attacks through emails, sending SMS and calls and getting banking access these are common now a days.

### Q: How is cybercrime affecting people mentally?

Digital isolation is almost impossible these days. We cannot think of not using social media, messengers,

online shopping and every aspect of our daily life. In this digital age loneliness have become more than an emotional burden, it's a vulnerability that cybercriminal are keen to exploit. As the screen time becomes longer the more vulnerable it becomes for cyber threats. A lonely person is likely to get engaged with strangers and here comes the risk of cyber fraud.

### Q: What are your thoughts for remaining vigilant and positive from digital isolation?

It is more important to physically meet friends rather than communicating over any social platforms. Spending times with friends can reduce screen time and hence the risk of cyber fraud decreases. Incorporating the principles of Ikigai into your approach of life where continuous learning can transform how you perceive your educational and professional endeavors. Its important to stay open minded and making positive impact in life.

### Q: What are your views to stay away from these digital distractions ?

The objective of leading a impactful life can be inspired by a village in Japan called Ogimi which is known as village of longevity. Average life span of

people there is over 100 years. People here believe in plant-based diets and practice gardening, the main philosophy is patience, rhythm and acceptance. Spending time with nature they remove stress and stay together with happiness. These activities can impact living a less stressful time and remove the various burden that can distract us from the screen time and remain healthy and happy.

### Q: What is your take home message of remaining safe in this era of cyber crime?

Maintaining simple steps. One should be vigilant in staying away from attacks. Keeping your software and operating system updated, use anti-virus software and keep it updated, do not open attachments in spam emails, use strong passwords, do not click on links in spam emails or untrusted websites, do not give out personal information unless required and check if its secure, keeping an eye on your bank statements for any unknown transactions contact your banks, using your social media accounts carefully.

PLUGGED IN? ▶

An EV charging station at Sector 18, Gurugram, Haryana



TRANSPORT / **EV INFRA**

# BATTLING RANGE ANXIETY

Inadequate charging infrastructure threatens to put the brakes on India's electric vehicles ambitions

By AVISHEK G. DASTIDAR

B

BENGALURU-BASED ZORAVAR ALI (NAME CHANGED), AN EXECUTIVE WITH A TELECOM FIRM, HAD JUST BOUGHT HIMSELF A BYD ATTO 3, a compact SUV electric vehicle, and was really looking forward to a road trip with best pal Rahul Bajpayee (*name changed*) last July. Rahul, who had just come down from Delhi, had a work meet in Chennai, so that is where the two set off for. Things seemed smooth for the first 250-odd kilometres on the 340km-long journey along NH44 and NH48 via Kanchipuram. But then it was time to charge the battery. They found a charging point soon enough. But it was only of 20kW capacity and would have taken more than an hour to bring the battery to full



ARUN KUMAR

ture in the country has failed to keep pace with the auto industry's accelerated shift to EVs or the government's ambition to push clean energy.

This is when the EV population in India has touched 5.7 million, according to estimates from the Union transport ministry. At 3.2-3.5 million units, two-wheelers account for over half the total, followed by three-wheelers at 1.8-2 million units. Four-wheelers, though a relatively smaller segment at 250,000-300,000, are gaining ground rapidly. The remainder includes buses and commercial vehicles.

By comparison, India has only

(GST) on EVs and charging equipment has also been slashed to 5 per cent. Battery-operated vehicles sport green licence plates, exempting them from certain permit requirements. States have added measures like road tax waivers and registration fee exemptions.

Alongside, the PM E-DRIVE (PM Electric Drive Revolution in Innovative Vehicle Enhancement) initiative is aimed at expanding charging facilities at a commensurate rate. Of the Rs 10,900 crore fund, Rs 2,000 crore is earmarked for augmenting public charging stations in urban as well as semi-urban and rural areas.

## EV-TO-CHARGER RATIOS: A COMPARISON



China

one station per  
3 to 6 EVs



Netherlands

one station per 2  
to 7 EVs



California, USA

one station per  
25 to 30 EVs



India

one station per  
**216 EVs**

life. The two turned to an online app to find out where they might find the next charger. One was located 20 km away, but when they reached it, they discovered it was newly installed and not yet connected to the grid. Another 25 km away, they found a third charger. Except that a non-EV here was parked wrongly, and its owner was nowhere to be found.

By this time, Zoravar and Rahul's range anxiety had hit its peak. They finally found a charger, at a Bharat Petroleum fuel station some 30 km short of Chennai, and plugged the car in, killing time at a small tea stall for the half an hour it would take for the car to charge. Unnerved by the experience, Rahul took a direct flight back to Delhi rather than do a return trip to Bengaluru.

Even as Elon Musk launched the Tesla Model Y in Mumbai in July and green-plated EVs become a common sight on Indian roads, the charging infrastruc-

26,367 public EV charging stations, 10,019 of which were added only in the past fiscal year. That's roughly one public charging station per 216 EVs. Globally, countries operate at far tighter EV-to-charger ratios. The Netherlands, for instance, has a public charger for every 2-7 EVs; China's top cities average one for every 3-6 EVs. Even California, which boasts extensive home and workplace charging, has a public charging station for 25-30 EVs.

### The Government's Push

India's boom in EV sales has been fuelled by a mix of central and state incentives, most notably the FAME-II (Faster Adoption and Manufacturing of Hybrid and Electric Vehicles) scheme, which offers subsidies on EVs and support for charging infrastructure. The Goods and Services Tax

Guidelines for setting up infrastructure and leasing public land are also being established. Last year, the Union power ministry issued a set of rules mandating that new charging stations service both old and new EVs, a response to widespread complaints that older stations were incompatible with the latest EV models. Distribution companies will be required to supply power connections up to 150 kW. Public land is being offered on a revenue-sharing model at a floor price of Re 1 per kWh for 10 years.

These measures have done little to alleviate the concerns of the Indian consumer. According to the Deloitte 2025 Global Automotive Consumer Study, a substantial 70 per cent of Indian EV buyers want to charge primarily at home, but just 44 per cent own a charger. Another 41 per

cent have no charger at all, and 14 per cent share one. This disparity is a huge pain point, particularly in cities, where giant apartment complexes mean you can't instal a charger of your own.

Even worse is the regional discrepancy in charging infrastructure, says Abhinav Kalia, CEO of ARC Electric, a B2B EV cab platform. EV infrastructure is nearly completely absent in rural, remote and hilly areas, where cleaner forms of mobility could potentially have the biggest impact. Be it the delivery EV in a Tier 3 town or public transport EVs in a border district, the lack of fast and reliable charging infrastructures is preventing scaling these solutions. These are not just geographical blind spots but barriers to equitable EV adoption, says Kalia.

### Running Out of Charge

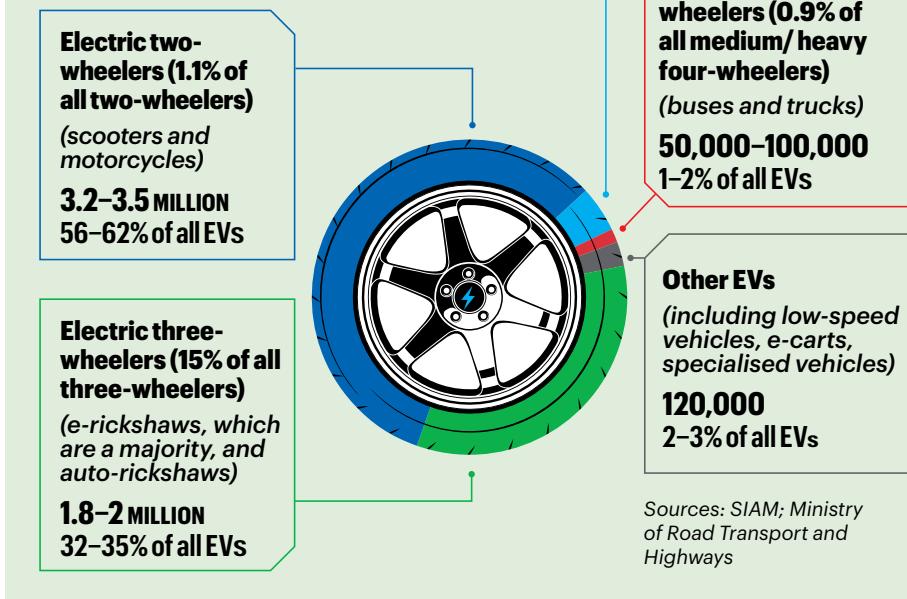
**R**ange anxiety—will my EV run for the entire length of my journey, and will I get a charging point nearby if it runs low on charge—adds a layer of apprehension. “I can go to Chandigarh from Delhi without any issues. But, for the hills, I’m not so sure,” says Ramanjit, an MNC executive who owns a mini-SUV with a proclaimed range of 350 km. “The highways generally do not have reliable charging options yet. Even hotels are not conducive to EV owners’ needs.”

Charging stations are also not immune to the way Indians generally treat public infrastructure. In an August 2024 study by the Institute of Energy Economics and Financial Analysis study, 31 out of 37 chargers (83.7 percent) in Delhi were found non-functional—dead display screens, missing connectors, no power supply. They also found that roughly three-quarters of inspected chargers used the first-generation Bharat DC-001 connector, now largely incompatible with modern CCS2-enabled cars; that low utilisation feeds a vicious circle of neglect and vandalism.

The study found charging speed to be an issue as well. While ‘fast charging’ remained the desirable option for the

# PENETRATION OF EVS IN INDIA

**While two-wheeler EVs remain the most popular choice in India, three- and four-wheelers have also found takers, denoted by a 10.5 per cent and 18 per cent YoY increase in registrations in FY24-25, respectively**



Sources: SIAM; Ministry of Road Transport and Highways



**“Technology has to give answers in the long run. We need a 300 km range, minimum. Charging time has to decrease”**

**SHENU AGRAWAL**

Vice-President, Society of Indian Automobile Manufacturers (SIAM)

majority, Indian consumers came out as more patient than in other geographies, with 69 per cent prepared to spend 40 minutes or more for an 80 per cent charge at public stations. Forty one per cent say 21 to 40 minutes is reasonable, 23 per cent are okay with 11 to 20 min-

utes, and a demanding 5 per cent will tolerate only 10 minutes or less. Under the PM E-DRIVE, thankfully, 22,100 fast chargers are slated to come up.

In comparison, megawatt chargers from BYD, Xpeng and Zeekr can add 200 to 400 km of range in under 10 minutes in China, even as battery-swap stations for two- and three-wheelers are spreading rapidly in dense urban markets. Europe and the US are pushing for integrated networks that blend fast, destination and home charging to improve reliability and geographic equity. “Technology has to provide the answers in the long run,” says Shenu Agrawal, vice-president of the Society of Indian Automobile Manufacturers. “We have to have a minimum of 300 km range; charging time and cost have to decrease. Until product solutions are available, we need to find an ecosystem solution.” As of now, these measures remain a pipe dream for India, even if the destination is in sight. But a crawl won’t do—this journey demands a full throttle. ■

# BFI POWERS INDIA'S MEDTECH FUTURE

BFI'S INTERCONNECT FELLOWSHIP SUPPORTS YOUNG MEDTECH ENTREPRENEURS; SANDEEP NAILWAL TO MENTOR STARTUPS, TACKLE LAB-TO-MARKET CHALLENGES



Dr. Geetha Manjunath (Founder, CEO & CTO, NIRAMAI Health) ; Mr. Sandeep Nailwal (Founder, BFI; Co-Founder & CEO, Polygon Foundation; Co-Founder, Sentient AI) ; Ms. Laina Emmanuel (Co-founder and CEO, BrainSightAI)

**I**ndia has emerged as a global hub of medical research, frugal innovation, and low-cost engineering, yet this potential remains untapped due to a fragmented ecosystem. Young medtech entrepreneurs and their startups face many challenges including a high degree of regulatory complexity from agencies like Central Drugs Standard Control Organisation (CDSCO), Bureau of Indian Standards (BIS), and Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR), limited manufacturing transition facilities, controlled clinical validation, significant funding gaps, and fragmented infrastructure that operates in silos. As a result, medtech innovations remain stuck at the proof-of-concept stage, forcing startups to either abandon development or relocate to global hubs like the US or Singapore.

## Interconnect Fellowship Program

At the recent i3 Summit - Vimars 2025, Sandeep Nailwal, Philanthropist & Founder, Blockchain for Impact (BFI), and Co-founder & CEO of the Polygon Foundation, made a commitment to directly address these critical gaps and challenges witnessed by

young entrepreneurs through BFI's Interconnect Fellowship. It may be noted that the Interconnect Fellowship is BFI's way of bridging the gaps in biomedical innovation by empowering motivated innovators to collaborate, refine and scale solutions that can create impact in Indian healthcare.

## Mentorship to young entrepreneurs, startups

Under this program, Sandeep will provide handholding and mentorship to a select group of startups who were present at the Vimars 2025 event. He will provide the strategic guidance needed to turn scientific breakthroughs into scalable businesses, helping young entrepreneurs navigate complex regulatory pathways, secure necessary approvals from agencies like CDSCO, BIS, and ICMR, and scale production.

The program's true value lies in its ability to transform scientific breakthroughs into scalable businesses. The startups will receive tailored support in prototyping, bioassays, regulatory filing, and clinical trials, helping the medtech sector to

overcome the challenges in taking an innovation from the laboratory to the market.

BFI's Interconnect Fellowship has been designed for high-potential innovators, offering a fellowship worth ₹1 lakh per month for a year to up to five fellows. This includes access to global mentors, capacity-building sessions, and networking opportunities within the BFI ecosystem. Every project will be reviewed by BFI, ensuring that only credible, high-quality proposals are showcased, and receive the necessary support for impact-driven innovation.

This holistic approach ensures that innovators are not only financially supported but also equipped with the knowledge, connections, and strategic guidance needed to succeed.

## Help India become a leader in deep tech biomedical research

In order to help India become a leader in deep tech biomedical research, Sandeep has been coordinating the research, funding key programs, and fostering cross-institutional collaboration. Blockchain For Impact, recently announced the Rs 20 Cr worth National Science Prizes and has so far funded 1600 Cr to biomedical research for India. Sandeep believes that the focus must be on building indigenous capabilities across the entire healthcare stack, from deep research in clustered regularly interspaced short palindromic repeats (CRISPR) and genomics to the domestic manufacturing of diagnostic tools and medical equipment like MRI machines. At BFI, he aims to support this collective effort from the grassroots to the top research levels. The Interconnect Fellowship is a crucial next step in this vision. It will create a new pipeline of successful medtech ventures, helping to build a robust, interconnected ecosystem where innovators, funders, and policymakers can collaborate effectively. This initiative is not just about supporting a few startups; it's about helping India achieve its rightful place as a global leader in deep tech biomedical research and innovation, ensuring that groundbreaking solutions are developed within the country and benefit its people.

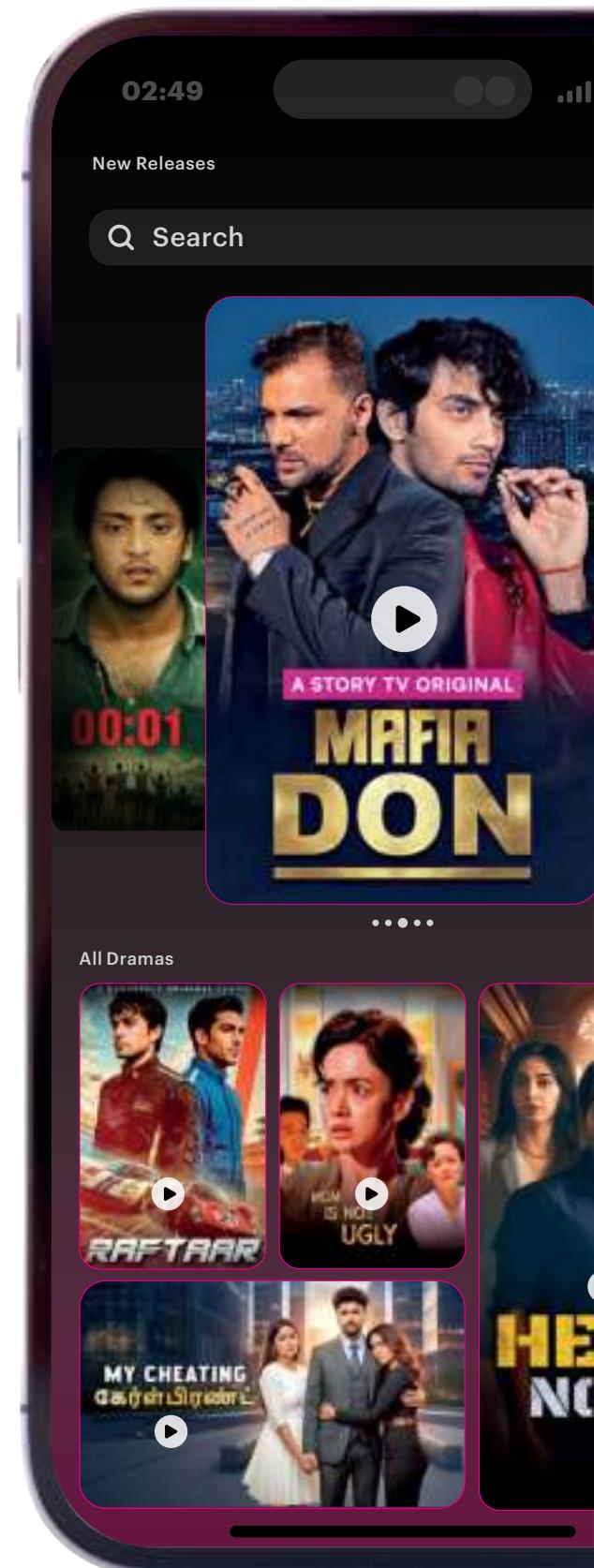
# SHORT AND SWEET

In a time of falling attention spans, no wonder micro dramas—truncated soap operas whose episodes last a maximum of three minutes—are all the rage

By SUHANI SINGH

**O**NE DAY, ACTOR CHETAN HANSRAJ DITCHED HIS CAR AND TOOK A MUMBAI LOCAL instead to head to a shoot in Vasai. What he saw in one of the compartments was an unexpected but welcome sight, especially given his destination: a bunch of passengers glued to their phones, watching short videos with visibly corny scenarios, melodramatic dialogue and action intensifying in just over two minutes before ending with a shocking cliffhanger, making the next episode almost impossible to skip. He was, of course, no stranger to the format. His Vasai shoot was for one of these very videos, which are closer to soap operas than anything else. The industry has taken to calling them micro dramas, and he has been involved in four already, playing hypermasculine and authoritative men, often opposite tiny-waisted women. As he watched his prospective audience, he became convinced that this format's unabashed pulpiness won't detract from it becoming the future of online storytelling.

He may not be wrong. India is one of the most recent to jump on the micro drama bandwagon, but countries like China, the United States and South Korea have been at it for years now. For instance, the most popular categories on Chinese micro drama streaming app DramaBox include 'mistaken identity' (*I Kissed a CEO and He Liked It*), 'age-gap love' (*Daddy Dominant's Good Girl*) and 'flash marriage' (*A Stormy Marriage*). The industry spawned 5,000 of these





**“There are times when you want the depth of a long-form show or the scale of a movie, and there are other times when you only have a few minutes, but still want to be entertained”**

**AMOGH DUSAD**, Director & Head of Content, Amazon MX Player

productions in China last year and amassed 50.44 billion yuan (\$6.9 billion), surpassing even theatrical revenues. Globally, the format is projected to be valued at more than \$10 billion by 2030.

India, too, is discovering a ravenous appetite for the genre. While they have access to many foreign apps, with shows dubbed in English and other Indian languages, indigenous apps/studios are coming up too, producing their own shows and tapping the local market. “From movies to groceries, everything is accessible on the phone now,” says Hansraj. “Your phone is the new silver screen. So, why would you not want to be on it?” If the name of the game is user retention at any cost, especially at a time of diminishing attention spans, micro dramas seem to have cracked open a gaping hole in the market created by TikTok, YouTube Shorts and Instagram Reels. Now the plot is about twists and turns—as fast as you can get them.

### India Boards the Bandwagon

**W**hat Mumbai’s Andheri is to Bollywood, with all its film studios and casting offices, Bengaluru’s HSR Layout is to the micro drama industry. This tech district has become a hub for a host of start-up streaming platforms like KukuTV, Viralo and DashVerse, which are betting big on the fast-evolving format. Encouraged by venture capitalist funds, they keep the money going while the writing and shooting happens in Mumbai, usually with newbies, TV vet-

erans, and short/ad filmmakers. The result? Videos churned out almost daily. A standard production cycle takes three weeks at most, from ideation to release, and actors are paid right after the shoot. “Everything is super instant,” says Hansraj.

What makes this spot attractive for upcoming studios is its proximity to India’s tech talent, because a seamless experience on the apps is almost essential to their success. With UPI payments ubiquitous now, what these platforms rely on is a pay-per-episode or subscription model—the goal is to make your passage from downloading the app to starting an episode lightning-fast. “A micro drama offers instant gratification,” says Saurabh Pandey, founder and CEO of StoryTV, an Indian app for micro dramas. “You like commerce coming into your home in 10 minutes and you like a

## WHAT IS A MICRO DRAMA?

*The traits that set it apart from a traditional soap opera*

➤ **Mobile-first format:** It is bite-sized storytelling experienced vertically, like YouTube Shorts or Instagram Reels

➤ **Entertainment on the go:** Each episode is just one to three minutes long and ends with a cliffhanger. A micro-drama usually runs for up to 40-80 episodes

➤ **Small budgets:** The average production budget runs up to Rs 25 lakh, with smaller companies developing one in under Rs 10 lakh

➤ **Quick production cycle:** Ideation, shooting and release are all wrapped up in no more than three weeks

➤ **Popular genres:** Genres that lend themselves well to the medium include romances, rags-to-riches tales and revenge dramas

➤ **Speedy sign-ups:** After trial episodes, annual subscriptions vary from Rs 899 (StoryTV) to Rs 4,999 (DramaBox) to Rs 10,100 (ReelShort)

drama's plot twist coming in a minute."

AI, of course, has a significant role to play in this rigmarole. AI-powered entertainment company DashVerse recently released *Raftaar*, a racing drama made entirely with generative AI, and is planning more sport, myth and sci-fi dramas using the technology, all genres which would have been far more expensive if shot in live-action. Hansraj, too, recently launched crime drama *Kaal Nagri*, with visuals made with AI, and voice acting by humans. "AI opens up a realm of possibilities in world-building," says Lalith Gudipati, co-founder of DashVerse. "We want more people to create stories that have never been created."

## Shock and Awe

**T**he inherent need for micro dramas to have shock value, melodrama and rushed character arcs means that there is no shortage of critics. The format naturally invites judgement that its audience base is not looking for high-quality storytelling. Naysayers may call the content catalogues on these apps 'cringe' and 'cheesy' but, honestly, that doesn't seem to matter much if you look at the comments below many of these shows: "terrible, but I can't stop watching it" is how one viewer describes *The Double Life of My Billionaire Husband*, a popular American micro drama on ReelShort.

Studios, too, have shed all qualms. While the industry has so far been spearheaded by independent studios, bigger fish are circling. ZEE5 already has a micro drama vertical, Bullet, and Amazon's MX Fatafat is expected to launch soon. Writers are learning to pack each episode with as many twists as possible to keep viewers hooked. Actors are adapting their techniques to the vertical format ("Your lower body and hands are not seen as much in a horizontal screen, but here it's all visible," says Hansraj. "And the biggest thing for actors is, what to do

# WHERE TO WATCH

Apps to get your micro drama fix



### DRAMABOX

**One of the first apps to introduce Indians to the world of micro dramas. In just two years, the Chinese company has amassed more than 200 million registered users with its extensive and addictive library of short-form shows.**



### REELSHORT

**One of the top guns in the industry with over 2,000 titles already, its popular offerings sound like titles of Mills & Boon novels—*The Double Life of My Billionaire Husband*, *Married at First Sight*, *Fated to My Forbidden Alpha* and *The CEO's Contract Wife*.**



### KUKUTV

**KukuFM's KukuTV is one of the earliest Indian entrants in the market. Its bouquet includes shows with 50-plus episodes on average, in Hindi, Telugu, Kannada, and Bengali, and spans genres like action, romance, and mythology.**



### QUICKTV

**Launched in 2025, a subsidiary of the popular app ShareChat, it already has 10 million downloads. It specialises in hyperlocal micro dramas which cater to audiences in Tier-2 and Tier-3 towns. Popular titles include *Ghar Wapsi*, *Fortune Price* and *Hero No. 1*.**



### STORYTV

**In a two-month span, Eloelo Group's Story TV has released over 200 micro dramas across genres and gained 5 million users in process. Its target is to launch**

**800+ micro dramas and cross 100 million users in a year. The most-watched shows include *Death Clock* in which the protagonist has the ability to see people's time of death on their forehead.**



**"I hope mainstream voices don't monopolise micro dramas, like they did OTT when it became popular"**

**SAAMEER MODY**  
Founder of Pocket Films

with the hands!"). Saameer Mody of Pocket Films, though, hopes that micro dramas are not monopolised by mainstream talent. "OTT opened the floodgates for a lot of independent filmmakers but once it became popular... independent voices got rounded out," he says.

As cinema-going becomes costlier every day and the convenience of watching TV and movies from home grows, micro dramas may be here to stay. For Pandey, India's industry upstaging even Bollywood in terms of revenue isn't an impossibility. "I don't think it's a question of 'if,'" he says assuredly. "It's a question of 'when'." ■

INDIA  
TODAY

# BREAKING NEWS

JUST A TAP AWAY



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AVAILABLE ON





# सबसे भरोसेमंद खोतों से, सबसे सटीक जानकारी

## सब्सक्राइब करें और पाएं 68% तक की छूट

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

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

टिक करें	अवधि	कुल अंक	कवर प्राइस (₹)	ऑफर प्राइस (₹)	प्लान	डिस्काउंट
<input type="checkbox"/>	1 वर्ष	52	3120	999	डिजिटल	68%
<input type="checkbox"/>	1 वर्ष	52	3120	2699	डिजिटल+प्रिंट	14%

कृपया फॉर्म को ब्लॉकलेटर में भरें

मैं चेक/डीडी जमा कर रहा/रही हूँ जिसकी संख्या.....है और इसे दिनांक.....को लिविंग मीडिया इंडिया लिमिटेड के पक्ष में ..... (बैंक का नाम).....रूपये की धनराशि (दिल्ली से बाहर के चेक के लिए ₹ 50 रूपये अतिरिक्त जोड़, समान मूल्य के चेक मान्य नहीं होंगे) के लिए बनवाया गया है.

नाम..... पता.....

..... शहर..... राज्य..... पिन.....

मोबाइल..... ईमेल.....



सब्सक्राइब करने के लिए यहाँ स्कैन करें।

ऑफर के विषय में विशेष जानकारी के लिए निम्न माध्यमों से संपर्क भी कर सकते हैं



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# LE ! SURE

ATHLETICS: CHASING GLOBAL GLORY PG 56

Q+A: SHUBHA MUDGAL PG 60



ART ▶

## PAINTING THE COSMOS

A CAREER-SPANNING RETROSPECTIVE AT DAG, NEW DELHI, CAPTURES ARTIST SHOBHA BROOTA'S LIFELONG SEARCH FOR BEGINNINGS, INFINITY, AND THE ESSENCE OF CREATION

Photograph by RAJWANT RAWAT

# L

LAST WEEK, SURROUNDED BY SHOBHA BROOTA'S 'Origin' series of abstract works (mostly oils and pastels), a long-dormant memory of visiting Kolkata's Birla Planetarium resurfaced in my mind without warning. I was very young and the vivid images and animations pertaining to the Big Bang were fascinating and frightening in equal measure. A similar feeling enveloped me while staring at 'Origin 48' (1990, oil-on-canvas, 96.7 x 67.5 inches), part of *Shobha Broota: Painting Infinity*, a career retrospective currently on display at DAG, New Delhi. The painting was created using Broota's signature finger-flicking technique, wherein the paintbrush does not enter the fray at all. Instead, Broota uses her fingers to flick paint directly onto the canvas, creating intricate, pointillist fever dreams like 'Origin 48'—which looks as though a blazing primaeval sun suddenly materialised on a dark planet, saturating every inch of it with unforgiving, white-hot light.

"It's so difficult to come up with good



names for your works," quips the 82-year-old Broota. "You want the name to match the sensibility of the work, its emotional core. But there are only so many words in the English language. With the 'Origin' series, I arrived at the name after realising that there was a 'nothingness' inside of me. I was whittling away all the unnecessary parts from my art, everything that was not required, and arriving at the most basic 'dot', the dot of nothingness, of a new 'shuruat' [beginning]. And 'Origin' is about the *shuruat* of everything."

**WITH THIS SERIES,  
BROOTA WANTED  
TO WHITTLE AWAY  
THE UNNECESSARY  
PARTS OF HER  
ART, ARRIVING  
AT THE MOST  
BASIC DOT, OF  
NOTHINGNESS, OF  
A NEW 'SHURUAAT'  
[BEGINNING]**

## EXHIBITION ▶

# Modernism on Canvas

GALLERIE GANESHA REVISITS ITS ROOTS WITH A SOLO EXHIBITION OF THE LATE MODERNIST K.S. KULKARNI

One of Delhi's oldest and most respected art spaces—Gallerie Ganesh—is presenting a solo exhibition of the late modernist K.S. Kulkarni. The show features a curated selection of Kulkarni's works from the 1980s to the mid-1990s, offering a rare glimpse into the evolution of his artistic language.

A pioneering figure in Indian modern art, Kulkarni was not only a celebrated

painter but also a revered educator. He co-founded Triveni Kala Sangam—Delhi's iconic cultural hub—and served as its first art director.

### FLAT AND FIERY

Clockwise from right: Kulkarni's 'Untitled' (15 x 22 inches), 'Flute Player' and 'Untitled' (25 x 22 inches)





This preoccupation with 'shuruaat' can also be found in Broota's 'The Source I-III', a trilogy of woodcut-on-paper works from 1987.

*Painting Infinity* is divided into five sections, each corresponding to a different phase in Broota's storied career. The 'Origin' series is part of the 'Seed of Life' section, while her work with wool, net, paper et al is covered in the section titled 'Woven Echoes'. According to Broota, these works exist because she was looking for "a softer line" after decades of

working with brushes and paints. This impulse manifests in her acrylic-and-oil works as well. 'Celestial Music', for example, is a 2002 work (acrylic and oil on canvas, 70 x 70 inches) that resembles the double-helical DNA molecule. The 'softer line' that Broota refers to makes every 'strand' look unique in its own right and yet there is a uniformity of purpose. 'Wholeness Within' (2008, acrylic and oil on canvas, 72 x 72 inches) creates a similar duality, the two halves of the circular form looking like the rising and the setting sun, respectively—one of several paintings with nature-themed motifs.

"From a young age, I was good at observing nature," says Broota. "The birds emerging out of the trees with the rising sun, animals gathered near a stream to drink water, that sort of thing. My father, an architect, had a lot of drawing materials around the house and eventually I started exploring. Drawing trees or birds or gardens, the things that I would see all around me. If you want to paint, you have to be a keen observer, that's the first step."

The concluding section of the exhibition, 'Portraits in Time', includes Broota's early-career works, including some photo-realistic portraiture. By the

1970s, Broota's expert draftsmanship and a good word-of-mouth reputation would regularly land her lucrative gigs drawing prominent people. Portraits of German artists and intellectuals like Ina Seidel and Mary Wigman are part of this section, as is a striking self-portrait from 1962 (oil-on-canvas, 23.7 x 20.2 inches). Ultimately, the routine of capturing facial features for money started boring Broota, and she moved towards more abstract expressions.

"For an artist, it's very important to keep moving towards the next thing," says Broota. "Doing portraits got me money and recognition but, after a while, it was just me showing off the same technique, the same light-and-shadow tricks. It was skilled work, but it was repetitive, so I had to move on. Even today, when I am in the studio, I am constantly thinking about the next idea. That's what still drives me as an artist."

Overall, *Painting Infinity* is a brilliant, wide-ranging entry point for those unfamiliar with Broota's diverse body of work. ■

—Aditya Mani Jha

*The exhibition is on display at DAG, New Delhi, till Oct. 18*



He was also instrumental in the post-Independence Delhi Shilpi Chakra movement—a parallel movement to the Progressive Artists' Group in Bombay—aimed at fostering self-reliance among artists. Kulkarni taught Master's students at Delhi College of Art as a visiting faculty member, and was also appointed dean of the Faculty of Fine Arts and head of the painting department at Banaras Hindu University.

The works on display reflect Kulkarni's distinctive visual vocabulary—marked by geometric encapsulation of space, linear dynamism and flat planes of colour. The exhibition showcases his ability to seamlessly navi-

gate a spectrum of themes—from intricate drawings to abstract and figurative compositions. His compositions synthesise influences from both Eastern and Western traditions, yet remain unmistakably his own. Unlike many of his contemporaries, Kulkarni resisted stylistic categorisation, creating art that is timeless, contemporary and multidimensional.

This show is especially meaningful for Gallerie Ganesh, as Kulkarni was both a mentor and the first exhibiting artist of the gallery. Founder and cura-

tor Shobha Bhatia began her journey in the art world with a solo show by Kulkarni nearly 36 years ago, making this a poignant return to the gallery's roots. "His work, though unmistakably modern, carried deep influences from folk and tribal art. His ability to manipulate form, space and colour in an unparalleled manner resulted in the creation of masterpieces," says Bhatia. ■

KULKARNI'S WORK COMBINES INFLUENCES FROM THE EAST AND WEST, RESISTING CATEGORISATION AND BECOMING TIMELESS



—Neha Kirpal  
Esoteric Expressions runs till Oct. 7 at Gallerie Ganesh, New Delhi

# PERFORMANCE *With Purpose*

**The IHC Theatre Festival** is a 10-day showcase where theatre becomes a mirror to society

**A**t Delhi's India Habitat Centre (IHC), theatre has never been just about performance. It has always been about provocation, empathy and conversation. Over the years, IHC has nurtured not only a loyal audience but also a fraternity of theatre-makers who return, season after season, to share their stories. That continuum finds new resonance this September with the IHC Theatre Festival 2025. From September 19 to 28, IHC will host 14 productions that push past entertainment to probe the anxieties of

our times—from gender and caste to mental health, climate change and identity.

"The vision is of the theatre practitioners who have chosen to invest their passion in addressing issues that need to be highlighted," says Vidyun Singh, creative head-programmes at IHC. "Ours is the easy but important role of bringing these works to the public and encouraging the role of theatre in our arts."

The lineup is as diverse as it is daring. *Mehroon* opens the festival with a musical meditation on grief, love and fantasy, while *Kadambari* reimagines the intimate world

of Tagore's muse. *Saamp Seedhi*, adapted from Anthony Shaffer's *Sleuth*, offers a taut thriller on ego and betrayal, balanced by *Khichik*, a comedy tracing decades of marital sparring. The Marathi play *Dagad Aani Mati* reflects the struggles of rural youth, while *Besharam Aadmi* uses humour to critique gender stereotypes. Among the most stirring works is *Nazar Ke Saamne*, devised by Freeda Theatre (in collaboration with Maara Collective), where women from marginalised communities in Madhya Pradesh share lived testimonies of caste discrimination. Singh calls it "the perfect testimonial for the power of theatre to make a difference".

In a city always in flux, the IHC Theatre Festival is more than an arts calendar event. It is a reminder of theatre's enduring role as society's conscience. ■

—Geetika Sachdev

IHC WILL HOST PLAYS THAT **PROBE THE ANXIETIES OF OUR TIME**, EXPLORING GENDER, CASTE, MENTAL HEALTH, CLIMATE CHANGE AND IDENTITY



# THE LISTICLE

Upcoming musical performances you should not miss

## ▼ THE RAGHU DIXIT PROJECT LIVE

Phoenix Marketcity, Whitefield,  
Bengaluru | Oct. 11

## Back to the Roots

Celebrate 25 years of musical brilliance as the legendary Raghu Dixit takes the stage for a special Silver Jubilee concert. Blending Indian folk traditions with global sounds, The Raghu Dixit Project has redefined contemporary folk music. This milestone performance at Phoenix Marketcity promises an unforgettable evening of soul, energy and artistry, marking a quarter-century of Raghu Dixit's trailblazing journey.



## ▼ SHAAN'S INFINITY TOUR

2025, Biswa Bangla  
Exhibition Centre, Kolkata |  
Oct. 10

## EVERGREEN

Kolkata, get ready to welcome home the voice that defined a generation. Presented by Bengal Web Solution, Shaan's *Infinity Tour 2025* celebrates three decades of the beloved singer's unforgettable music. From 'Tanha Dil' to 'Chand Sifarish' and 'Behti Hawa Sa Tha Woh', the evening promises a nostalgic journey through the hits that shaped countless memories. More than a concert, this is a celebration of Shaan's artistry and a spectacular live experience with the icon himself.



## ▼ SOUNDS OF INDIA FUSION MUSIC CONCERT

Tata Theatre, NCPA, Mumbai | Sept. 19

## BENDING GENRES



Presented by the NCPA in collaboration with Sahachari Foundation Events, this special evening brings together some of India's finest musicians. Percussion maestro Taufiq Qureshi (djembe, breath and vocal percussion) leads the ensemble, renowned for weaving dialogues between diverse music traditions.

## ▼ BUENA VISTA ALL-STARS - ONE NIGHT IN HAVANA The Grand Theatre, NMACC, Mumbai | Oct. 4

## CLUB NIGHTS

Step into Havana's golden age as the Buena Vista All Stars make their long-awaited India debut. Led by legendary director Demetrio Muñiz, this all-star Cuban ensemble revives the soul of 1940s and 50s club nights with classics like 'Chan Chan' and 'Dos Gardenias'. Blending son, salsa, rumba and Afro-Cuban jazz, their performance captures the eclectic rhythms that shaped a nation, a rare chance to experience the living legacy of the Buena Vista Social Club.



## ▼ GURU SMARANAM USTAD SHUJAAT HUSAIN KHAN

Buntara Bhavana, Pune |

Oct. 4

## THE MAESTRO

Presented by Sakal Media Group and SwaraZankar, Guru Smaranam celebrates the bond between guru and disciple in Indian classical music. Sitar maestro Ustad Shujaat Husain Khan will play at Pune's Buntara Bhavana for the first time.

# CHASING GLOBAL GLORY

The previous two editions of the World Athletics Championships have been a happy hunting ground for India, courtesy Neeraj Chopra. Until then, the country's lone medal at the event was Anju Bobby George's long jump bronze in 2003. Chopra took silver in 2022 and bettered it to gold the following year. Come September 13, the javelin throw exponent will be back in the spotlight, a favourite to medal in the 16-member contingent. Here are the top contenders in Japan



## ► ANIMESH KUJUR

The first Indian sprinter to have qualified, Animesh Kujur bettered the national marks for the 100 and 200m—the latter fetching him bronze at the Asian Championships. Finishing just outside of the podium places in the 200m of the under-23 Monaco Diamond League in July, he appears ready to take on the best.

## ► PRAVEEN CHITHRAVEL

After a dismal performance at the 2024 Paris Games, Praveen Chithravel is gradually finding his feet again. In April, he equalled his own triple jump national record of 17.37m, a mark he first achieved two years ago. He has had a good run of results since then, with silver at the Asian Championships and the World University Games.



## ► NEERAJ CHOPRA

Since the gold at the 2023 World Championships, Neeraj Chopra has annexed an Olympic silver and three second-placed Diamond League finishes. More importantly, he has got the monkey off his back after breaking the 90m barrier at the Doha Diamond League in May. He'll be hungry to continue the same form in Tokyo.

## THE INDIAN CONTINGENT

Annu Rani, Neeraj Chopra, Sachin Yadav, Yash Vir Singh, Rohit Yadav (all javelin throw), Gulveer Singh (5,000m, 10,000m), Animesh Kujur (200m), Tejas Shirse (110m hurdles), Servin Sebastian (20km race walk), Priyanka Goswami, Ram Baboo, Sandeep Kumar (all 35km race walk), Praveen Chithravel, Abdulla Aboobacker (triple jump), Sarvesh Kushare (high jump), Murali Srivishwanth (long jump), Parul Chaudhary, Ankita Dhyan (both 3,000m steeplechase), Pooja (800m, 1,500m)



### GULVEER SINGH

India's most improved athlete, Gulveer has knocked off three national records this year. In February, he rewrote the 5,000m mark and the following month, bettered the 10,000m record—the fastest time by an Asian this season. Then, in August, he improved on the 3,000m national record. There's more in store at the World Championships.



### PARUL CHAUDHARY

When Parul Chaudhary finished sixth in the 3,000m steeplechase at the Doha Diamond League, she bettered her own national record. The same month, she smashed that mark again at the Asian Championships to take silver. With limited competitions so far, she's looking to reserve her best for the big prize.

—Shail Desai

## CRICKET ▼

# Back in Play

All-rounder **Sneh Rana** has fought her way back into India's ODI World Cup squad with renewed grit and form

**O**n her World Cup debut in 2022, Sneh Rana smashed an unbeaten 53 against Pakistan. The all-rounder ended the tournament with 10 wickets, but India eventually missed out on the knockouts. By the end of the following year, she was out of the T20I as well as the ODI squads. "My family and friends kept me sane during those difficult times. They told me I was the best, so I kept telling myself that when I woke up each morning, while looking in the mirror and when on the ground," Rana, 31, says.

Now, she's back on the India squad for the ODI World Cup later this month. But it has taken patient rebuilding through all of last year, sticking it out on the domestic front while working on her bowling variations, putting in work on improving her hard-hitting abilities, besides focusing on her overall fitness. Even during the third edition of the Women's Premier League (WPL) in February-March this year, she was a last-minute addition to the Royal Challengers Bangalore, though she picked up six wickets in five matches. However, when she earned her call-up for the national side again for the ODI tri-series in Sri Lanka in April-May, she made it count, returning with 15 wickets—the most in the tournament—and the Player of the Series award in tow.

#### SPIN PUNCH

In the ODI tri-series in Sri Lanka, Rana got 15 wickets at an average of 14, winning the Player of the Series award



GETTY IMAGES

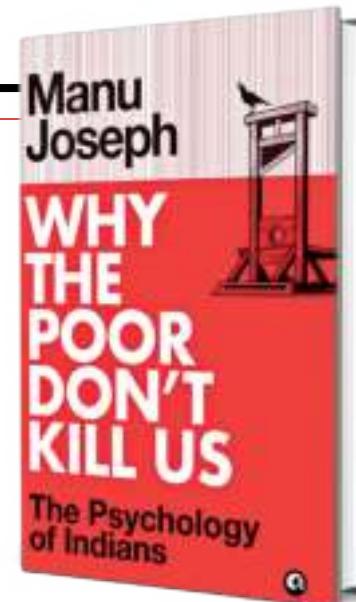
At the preparatory camp in Visakhapatnam earlier in the month, Rana spent a lot of time with the bowling coaches, fine-tuning her off spin while exchanging notes with her mates off the field. "The bonding is very strong," she says. "We've been sharing a lot of our personal experiences, a lot of team dinners. And most times, we are talking less about cricket and more about life." And how one can make the most of second chances, especially when it comes before a World Cup. ■

—Shail Desai

# No Fools Here

BOOKS ▶

*Manu Joseph's Why the Poor Don't Kill Us deploys gripping prose to take an unsentimental—but not unsympathetic—look at India's impoverished classes*



**WHY THE POOR  
DON'T KILL US**  
*By Manu  
Joseph*  
ALEPH BOOK  
COMPANY  
₹599; 280  
pages

**T**  
This is a book—the title is self-explanatory—about ‘us’ and ‘them’: the Indian middle class and the working class, the rich and the poor, and the gulf in between. Manu Joseph is not trying to sell Indian poverty to the West; he is making sense of it in fat-free, ideology-free, statistics-free and curiously empathetic but unsentimental prose. It makes for gripping reading, rich in anecdote and personal insight, informed by observations from the author’s time as a reporter.

Every Indian has a theory about India, in a way that natives of European countries don’t. Joseph himself is a compulsive theoriser (and interrogator), but a provocative one. He’s not a ‘perhaps’ writer, bringing to the table sardonic certainty, told in a voice-of-god style. It’s up to the reader how much of a believer she wants to become. You agree even as you disagree.

“The poor, taken together,” Joseph writes, “are still meek. Considering their lives and the lives of the rich that they see every day, they appear to be far less furious than they should be.” The polemical essays

cover considerable ground, from the photograph of Kalahandi’s Dana Majhi carrying his dead wife on his shoulder, to the author’s own hard-up youth, selling Funskool toys door-to-door; from the symbolism of air-conditioning to the five-star buffet.

In a chapter called ‘What Moneylenders Know’, Joseph writes on the Syrian

JOSEPH HAS MANY THEORIES ABOUT INDIAN POVERTY, DRAWING FROM HIS REPORTAGE AS WELL AS YOUTH SELLING TOYS DOOR-TO-DOOR

Christian moneylenders of Kerala and the “Jain pawnbrokers of Madras”. On the Olympics: “The middle class opts out of this sporting torment and instead becomes a consumer of national pride... like they employ drivers, they employ the poor to overcome the realities of India and somehow triumph against other nations.” On class: “Every layer of Indian society subsidizes the life of the layer above by working for exploitatively low wages.” And: “The poor in a rich country are like a bitter Reddit page trapped inside Instagram.” One suspects Naipaul would have given this book a glowing endorsement. ■

—Palash Krishna Mehrotra

**A**s slogan painter battles his demons of becoming irrelevant in the 21st century before he finishes writing on the wall: “The world speaks many tongues.” Some chapters later, a priest starts questioning his job when his loved ones die. He regains his faith after reading the *Bhagavad Gita*. Meanwhile, an avuncular cat teaches a kitten how to inspire kindness so the world can become a better place. Despair and soldiering

BOOKS ▶

## OUTSIDE THE LINES

Penguin’s *Longform* series is a welcome effort to showcase India’s comics creators, especially upcoming, marginalised and subversive voices

on are the themes of *Longform 2025*, a thoughtful anthology of 17 graphic narratives. There is also a fantastic interview with journalist-cartoonist Joe Sacco (*Palestine, Footnotes in Gaza*).

This is the third edition of the series, where the Longform Comics Collective brings to-

**LONGFORM: AN ANTHOLOGY OF GRAPHIC NARRATIVES**  
*Edited by Pinaki De, Debkumar Mitra, Argha Manna* PENGUIN VINTAGE ₹1,499; 320 pages



# DOWN THE RABBIT HOLE

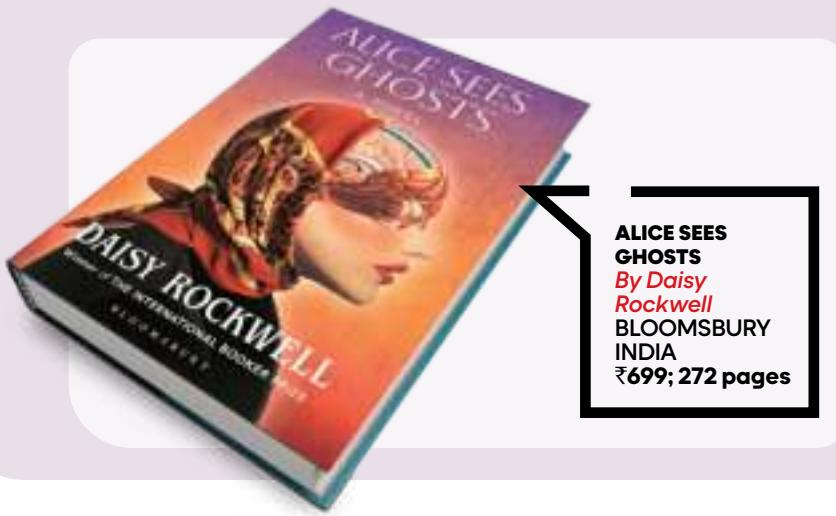
Daisy Rockwell displays her **mastery of language and character** in *Alice Sees Ghosts*

**W**hen we are introduced to the protagonist of Daisy Rockwell's novel *Alice Sees Ghosts*, she is worried that she sounds too formal and contrived in her speech, as though she were "speaking written language". Alice has just recovered from an extended bout of aphasia (a language disorder that affects one's ability to speak) with the help of kindly psychiatrist Ronit, who ends their professional relationship and becomes engaged to her soon afterwards. A surprise

visit from the ghost of her grandfather prompts Alice to go to India in search of her family's connection to the land—why did her grandfather take secretive annual trips to Rishikesh, much to her grandmother Nanette's irritation? Ronit, torn between his concern for Alice's well-being and his professional curiosity about her visions, tags along. Once the India-set portions of the novel begin, the lines between fact and fiction, history and hearsay, reality and hallucination, start blurring very quickly.

As propulsive as that mystery proves to be, the principal pleasures of *Alice Sees Ghosts* lie in Rockwell's deployment of language and her instinctual understanding of character development. We chuckle when Rockwell, introducing us to Ronit, tells us that Alice "(..) routinely discounted his medical opinions now that he shared her bed". We marvel at the economy with which Rockwell establishes the dysfunctional dynamics between Alice, her alcoholic, acerbic mother Clare and Clare's own mother Nanette. ("She had always considered Nanette an emotional refuge, but she wondered if her ability to freeze opposition with a chilly stare of disapproval could have helped to shape the person her mother had become.") By the end of the novel, we acknowledge that what we call a 'ghost' is inextricably linked with the thousand and one emotions we repress every day. And in this context, closure is hard to achieve. We never really say 'goodbye' to our ghosts, what we say instead is "until we meet again". ■

—Aditya Mani Jha



ALICE SEES  
GHOSTS  
*By Daisy  
Rockwell*  
BLOOMSBURY  
INDIA  
₹699; 272 pages

gether cutting-edge work happening in the Indian comics space. This edition has been put together by

of Sacco's essays," says Mitra. "He was addressing the shrinking space for long graphic stories. Our

also have an ideology that is rooted in resistance."

Across 300 pages, we see themes like climate change, pollution, grief, death, patriarchy, capitalism and communal disharmony provoked by the government. And, of course, cats. "The story is the most important driving force," says De. "It is okay even if the artwork isn't that great, but there has to be an element of subver-

sion in the narrative." The all-male editors have taken efforts to ensure the collection is egalitarian. More than half the contributors are not cisgendered men, De points out. Additionally, he says, "we have ensured only 25 per cent of the entries are by established writers." What next? "We are contemplating a new anthology with the theme... India," Mitra says. ■

—Devarsi Ghosh

WE SEE THEMES LIKE **CLIMATE CHANGE, GRIEF, PATRIARCHY AND COMMUNAL DISHARMONY** ACROSS THE COLLECTION

comics practitioners Deb-kumar Mitra, Pinaki De and Argha Manna. "The name Longform comes from one

effort is to show the works of talented artists who don't get much opportunities early in their career. We

**Q. As one of the curators of the music section for the Serendipity Arts Festival this year, can you tell us what visitors can expect?**

There are three projects I am working on for SAF this year, all curated jointly with Dr Aneesh Pradhan. In the inaugural act, titled 'Clay Play', we bring together percussion instruments essentially made from clay. Our second project, 'Serendipity Soundscapes 2025', features groups that will present music from Gujarat and Bengal. Our third project is '1871 in 2025: The Parsi Gayan Uttejak Mandali'. Based entirely on Aneesh's research in the area of Hindustani music in colonial Bombay, this will be a reconstruction of the first jalsa or concert held by the mandali on April 28, 1871.

## Q+A

# Truly Classic

Padma Shri awardee **Shubha Mudgal**, one of the curators of the Serendipity Arts Festival 2025, on what she has planned for its music section



**Q. How much have your roots in classical music helped you stay true to your craft, while exploring other genres such as pop music?**

My training and abiding love for classical music are truly my anchor for all my musical experiments and collaborations. I draw on my training in Hindustani music to help me find an entry point into another system of music, and help me negotiate and learn from other forms and systems.

**Q. As someone who has been singing professionally for more than four decades, what are some of the positive changes you have seen in the field of music in these past few years?**

Change, of course, is inevitable. But what may be positive for me might be the opposite for another musician in another situation. The one welcome change for me has been the internet's ability to give listeners access to music from around the world.

**Q. It has been many years since 'Ab Ke Sawan' and 'Ali More Angna', but people still remember them fondly. How do you look back on your journey with pop music?**

Yes, it has been about a quarter of a century since I recorded both these tracks, and it is wonderful that these tracks still find listeners. I enjoyed my occasional interaction with popular music and continue to do so on the few occasions when I am invited to sing something that does not fall into the strictly classical category.

—with Deepali Dhingra

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