

Uttar Pradesh: Curious Case of Chhangur Baba

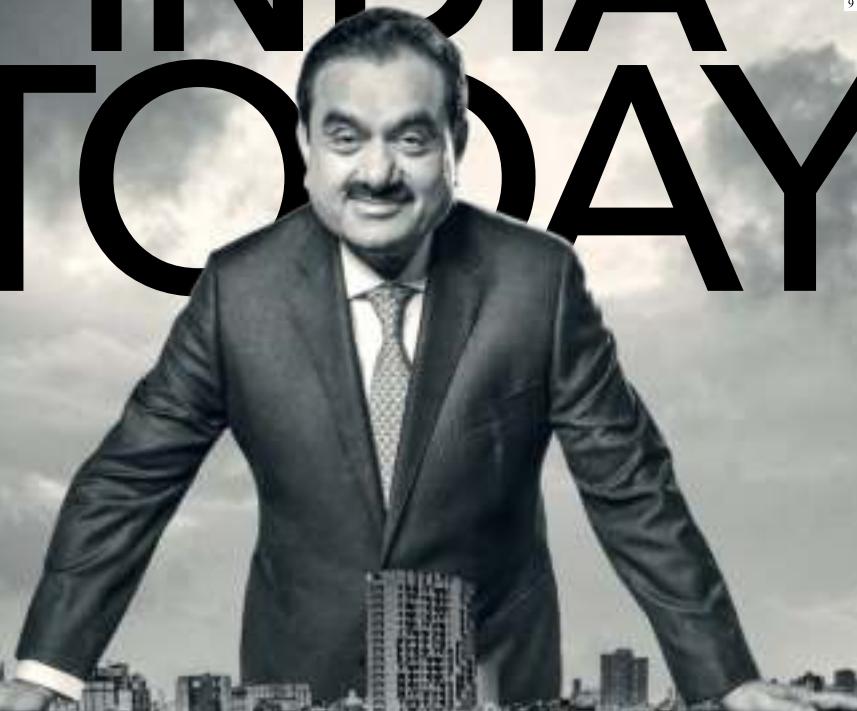
THE NATION: DHANKHAR DHAMAKA | CINEMA: RETURN OF ROMANCE

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INDIA TODAY



DHARAVI REVAMP

THE BIG ADANI GAMBLE

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ASIA'S LARGEST SLUM?**



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FROM THE EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Dharavi and Gautam Adani. The pairing is instantly dramatic, a study in stark contrasts. One is among the world's largest slums, the other one of its wealthiest men. In November 2022, the fortunes of the two became entwined as the Maharashtra government handed the mammoth Dharavi Redevelopment Project to Adani through a special purpose vehicle, Navbharat Mega Developers Private Limited (NMDPL). Adani Properties, the real estate arm of the Adani Group, holds an 80 per cent stake; the state owns the remaining 20 per cent. This May, the state government cleared the masterplan for Dharavi's redevelopment.

At current estimates, Adani's total investment could reach Rs 2.5 lakh crore. That includes on-location and off-site housing, commercial rehabilitation, infrastructure such as roads and a revamped Mithi riverfront, as well as the centrepiece: 140 million sq. ft of built-up real estate for sale, around half of which will be within Dharavi. It's one of the biggest bets of his career, but also more than that. It's a test of whether private capital can succeed where decades of public policy have failed: to reimagine and rebuild a slum that is at once iconic and a civic shame. If he pulls it off, it will count among the most ambitious acts of urban renewal in India's modern history. It will also burnish his image as a nation-builder and unlock a goldmine of real estate in the heart of Mumbai.

It is, frankly, a travesty that 21st-century India's financial capital continues to host a sprawling shantytown where 1.2 million people live packed into 621 acres, most of whom lack access to basic amenities. Dharavi is so dense that a person gets barely 25 sq. ft of space, while the city average is 15 times that. Dharavi's residents live in a poverty of space, not spirit. Industrious and self-reliant, they have built a thriving informal economy with an annual turnover of Rs 8,623 crore. In Dharavi, 'residential' and 'commercial' are often stacked on top of each other. A 10x10 ft home above, a buzzing micro-enterprise below. Some 20,000 manufacturing/ retail units and single-room factories produce a wide range of items, including garments, wigs, diyas, and Mumbai's breakfast staples, such as idli, vada and pav. It is a model of survival and productivity, creating livelihoods for hundreds of thousands of people, where governments have long failed.

The challenge is to modernise this dense ecosystem without killing what makes it work. Rehabilitation is fraught with challenges, including land acquisition,

relocation, bureaucratic red tape, and inevitable social unrest. Many have baulked. But if anyone can break this impasse, it may be the Adanis. They have capital, a track record of executing mega projects, and the benefit of political goodwill. That gives them the clearest runway India's system allows. Until now, Adani has built world-class infrastructure projects like airports and ports but has not dealt with issues relating to uprooting the lives of a million human beings. The questions are complex, and scrutiny will be intense.

The tripartite plan allocates 43.3 per cent of Dharavi's 269 acres of net developable land for rehabilitation and 44 per cent for commercial use. The remaining areas would be for utilities and facilities. Rehabilitation includes 58,532 flats, each measuring 350 sq. ft. Only those living on the ground floor before January 1, 2000, will get one free, covering barely half of today's residents. Nearly half a million people may relocate to new flats across six suburban sites, which will be sold or rented to them at subsidised rates. Adani has been allotted 541.2 acres of state land at concessional prices for these sites, including in three salt pan areas and one dumping ground. Critics call it a "land grab in disguise". There are ecological concerns, too, and suburban locals are unhappy about the demographic shift; many evictees are likely to be Muslim.

The same eligibility rules apply to the rehabilitation package for commercial units: 20,000 new spaces of 225 sq. ft will be handed out within Dharavi for free or on rent/ hire purchase, but business owners may find their labour force scattered. Meanwhile, Adani's share of 118.5 acres in Dharavi will open up 69.43 million sq. ft of prime real estate for him, right next to the premium Bandra Kurla Complex. All rehabilitation is to be completed by 2032. Adani's showpiece business district will take 25 years. It is expected to generate Rs 5.6 lakh crore, but only if everything goes to plan.

In our cover story, Senior Associate Editor Dhaval S. Kulkarni unpacks every layer of this unprecedented gamble on poverty, profit and the promise of renewal. For Adani, it's a colossal wager that could either get him more fame and fortune or mire him in folly and failure. If he succeeds, it would be a fine blueprint for India to stem the urban decay which is plaguing it.



▲ November 15, 1983

(Aroon Purie)

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ADANI'S BIG GAMBLE

CAN THE TYCOON TRANSFORM ASIA'S LARGEST SLUM?



MANDAR DEODHAR

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► JAGDEEP DHANKHAR

DHANKHAR DHAMAKA

An impeachment motion against a judge, purported internal dissent and power play force the Vice-President out

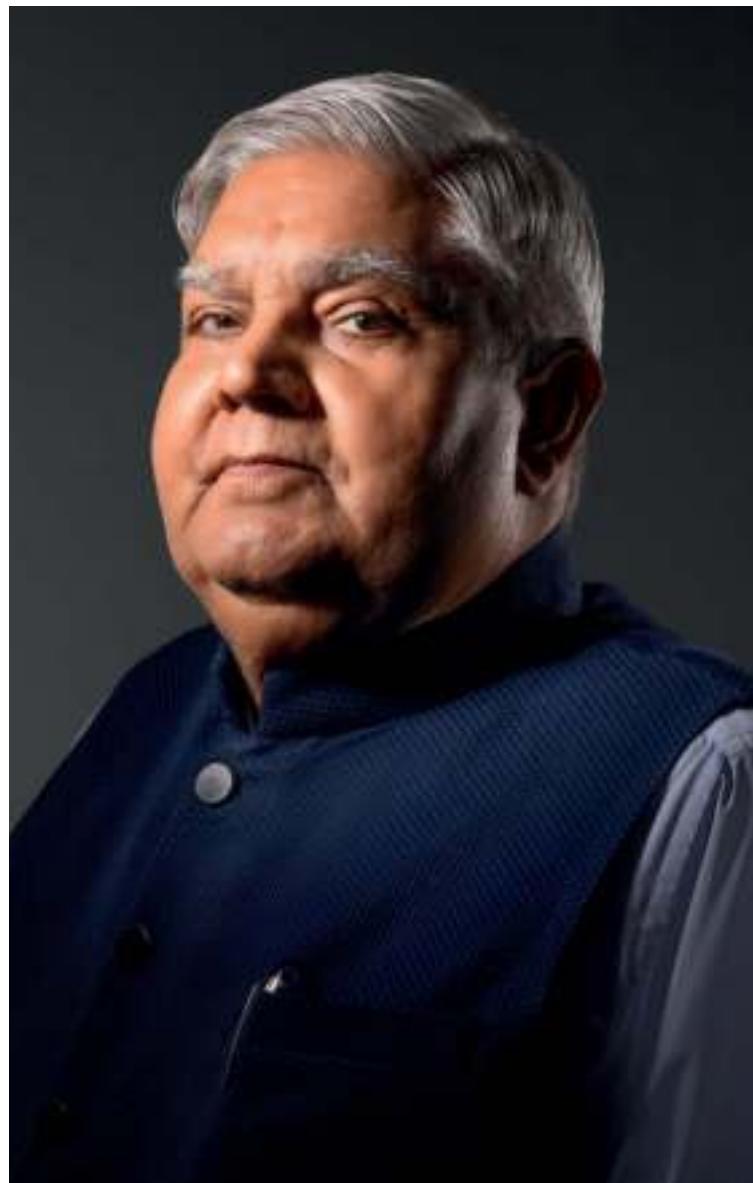
By ANILESH S. MAHAJAN & KAUSHIK DEKA

IN INDIA'S POLITICAL HISTORY, few resignations have generated as much intrigue and speculation as Jagdeep Dhankhar's sudden departure from vice-presidency on the night of July 21. While the 74-year-old cited health concerns in his letter to President Droupadi Murmu, none in New Delhi's high-stakes political theatre is buying the excuse.

Yes, Dhankhar had fainted once at a public event earlier this year. He also visited AIIMS for cardiac care and angioplasty. But if health genuinely was the overriding concern, conventional wisdom suggests Dhankhar would have chosen to step down before the commencement of Parliament's monsoon session, allowing for a smooth transition. Instead, he chose the most disruptive possible moment: the session's opening day, when the Upper House he chaired was set to tackle contentious issues, including Operation Sindoor and the controversial Special Intensive Revision of electoral rolls in Bihar. This timing transformed what could have been a dignified exit into a political earthquake.

The events of July 21 offer a fascinating study in how swiftly political fortunes can turn in Lutyens' Delhi. Dhankhar began his day with characteristic vigour, presiding over proceedings in the Rajya Sabha. Most tellingly, at 4 pm, the Vice-President's office released his official schedule for the coming days, including a planned visit to Jaipur on July 23. At 9:25 pm, out of

Photograph by BANDEEP SINGH



the blue, his resignation was public on X. Something, clearly, snapped between those hours.

Multiple sources point to a cascade of events before and during these crucial hours that fundamentally altered the political equation. Dhankhar's sudden, unscheduled visit to Rashtrapati Bhavan around 9 pm and his very public exit from the stage just 25 minutes later point to a decision made under immediate pressure rather than careful deliberation.

THE IMMEDIATE TRIGGER

On July 21, Dhankhar had chaired the noon meeting of the Business Advisory Committee (BAC), attended by, among others, BJP president and Union health minister J.P. Nadda and parliamentary affairs minister Kiren Rijiju. They decided to reconvene at 4:30 pm. The most visible manifestation of the brewing crisis came when the reconvened BAC meeting witnessed a striking absence: neither Nadda nor Rijiju reappeared, leaving junior minister L. Murugan to represent the government.

For a vice-president known to be a stickler for protocol and propriety, this conspicuous recusal, particularly without personal communication, represented more than a scheduling conflict. While Nadda later claimed they had informed Dhankhar's office about their engagement with "crucial parliamentary work", the explanation perhaps was not enough to satisfy Dhankhar. Was the missed BAC meeting a coded message from the government? Some insiders believe it was. A subtle, if cold, signal that Dhankhar had lost the prime minister's confidence.

The immediate catalyst for the government's displeasure appears to have been Dhankhar's handling of the impeachment motion against Allahabad High Court justice Yashwant Varma, at whose residence bundles of cash were allegedly discovered during his tenure in the Delhi High Court. The government had meticulously prepared its own motion for Justice Varma's removal, securing signatures from 100 MPs across party lines. It was received by Lok Sabha Speaker Om Birla around noon. This strategy would have allowed the ruling party to claim leadership on judicial accountability while maintaining control over the process. However, Dhankhar's announcement from the chair that he had received a similar motion in the Rajya Sabha, signed exclusively by Opposition MPs without a single BJP signature, effectively hijacked this narrative.

To comprehend why Dhankhar's

procedural move proved so provocative, one must understand the intricate machinery of judicial impeachment in India. The Constitution provides that judges can be removed only through a motion passed by both Houses of Parliament on grounds of "proven misbehaviour or incapacity". The Judges Inquiry Act of 1968 elaborates this process.

An impeachment motion requires either 100 Lok Sabha members or 50 Rajya Sabha members to submit a signed notice. Once admitted, the presiding officer of the receiving House constitutes a three-member committee comprising a Supreme Court judge, a high court chief justice and a

Was the absence of Nadda and Rijiju from the BAC meeting a coded message from the govt? Some insiders believe so

distinguished jurist. This committee investigates, frames charges and submits findings. If misbehaviour or incapacity is established, each House of Parliament must pass the motion with two majorities: more than half of the total members, and at least two-thirds of the members present and voting. If one House passes the motion with this required majority, it is then sent to the other House for approval.

Crucially, the presiding officer who first admits the motion gains control over the committee's composition. If both the Lok Sabha and the Rajya Sabha receive notices for the same motion on the same day, a committee is formed only if both Houses admit the motion. Once both Houses admit it, the committee is set up jointly by the Speaker and the Chairman. Dhankhar's reference to the Opposition's motion on the same day thus represented not just a procedural

Dhankhar, as Chairman of the Rajya Sabha, admitted the Opposition's impeachment motion against Justice Yashwant Varma (inset) even as the government had moved a parallel motion in the Lok Sabha, effectively hijacking the BJP's planned narrative

► **The removal process of a judge is governed by the Judges Inquiry Act, 1968**

► **An impeachment motion can be initiated against a judge in either House of Parliament, citing "proven misbehaviour or incapacity"**

► **To start the process, at least 100 Lok Sabha members must sign and submit the notice to the Speaker, or at least 50 Rajya Sabha members must do the same with the Chairman**

► **If the motion is admitted, the Lok Sabha Speaker or Rajya**

decision but a power play that directly challenged the government's orchestrated approach. Dhankhar, a lawyer by training and a political actor with a keen sense of timing, sought the authority—at least part of it—to choose the members of the committee.

THE GRADUAL DRIFT

This willingness to accommodate Opposition voices had been growing since December 2024, when the INDIA bloc filed an unprecedented no-confidence motion against Dhankhar himself. Though deputy chairman Harivansh Singh rejected the motion, it appears to have marked a turning point in Dhankhar's relationship with both the government and the Opposition. On July 21 morning, for instance, Dhankhar had unilaterally allocated time for discussing Operation Sindoora without consulting the government, allowing Congress president and



Sabha Chairman (depending on who receives it first) forms a three-member committee, including a Supreme Court judge, a chief justice of a high court and a jurist, to probe the charges. If it's received in both Houses on the same day, both heads together constitute the committee

So, by referring to the motion on the same day it was received in Lok Sabha, Dhankhar sought his role in forming the committee

After investigation, the committee submits its report to the Speaker or Chairman. If



AN

the judge is found guilty, the motion is taken up for debate and voting in both Houses

► To pass, the motion must be approved by each House of Parliament with two majorities: more than half of the total members, and at least two-thirds of the members present and voting

► Once passed by both Houses, the motion is sent to the President, who issues an order for removal

Opposition leader in the Rajya Sabha Mallikarjun Kharge to deliver an extended critique of the government's handling of the military operation without interruption.

The timing may have been the trigger, but the tension had been building. For months, the vice-president's relationship with the government had deteriorated. He had started walking a line too close to independence, and too far from deference. Dhankhar's increasingly strident attacks on the judiciary had begun creating complications for a government attempting to manage its own complex relationship with India's courts less overtly. His description of the Supreme Court's use of Article 142 as a "nuclear missile against democratic forces" and his persistent criticism of the collegium system were seen as overreach that potentially jeopardised the government's broader judicial strategy. Some ana-

lysts suggest the Narendra Modi-led government may have calculated that sacrificing Dhankhar could help repair relations with a judiciary already sceptical of executive encroachment. In this reading, Dhankhar became expendable collateral in a larger institutional negotiation.

The frostiness of the aftermath speaks volumes about the acrimonious nature of this political divorce. Prime Minister Modi's response came only after 15 hours, a terse tweet wishing Dhankhar "good health", conspicuously

Modi's lone tweet came 15 hours later—terse, impersonal. Even more telling is the absence of any farewell ceremony

sly lacking the effusive praise typically lavished on departing dignitaries. The man Modi once hailed as "*kisanputra*" (son of farmers) and "inspiring" received a send-off more suited to a dismissed employee than a constitutional head. Even more telling is the lack of any farewell ceremony. Reports that he began packing immediately after submitting his resignation on July 21 night, before it was even formally accepted, suggest he harboured no illusions about possible rehabilitation.

THE IMPLICATIONS

Dhankhar's resignation carries implications that extend far beyond the personal. It represents the first instance of a vice-president being effectively forced from office by the government that installed him, setting a troubling precedent for the independence of constitutional offices. It demonstrates that, in India's parliamentary democracy, even the second-highest constitutional office is not immune to the blunt force of political displeasure. It's also a reminder that even ideologically aligned figures can be dispensable if they become unpredictable. Dhankhar's fall was not about health. It was about power, and who ultimately wields it. He misjudged the tolerance of a prime minister whose style leaves little room for internal dissent.

For the Opposition, Dhankhar's fate offers both vindication and concern. The man they once sought to impeach for excessive partisanship ultimately fell for displaying independence, a paradox that underscores the complexity of institutional politics in contemporary India.

The vacancy now creates immediate political opportunities. With the Bihar election looming, speculation has already begun about using the vice-presidency to accommodate alliance partners or balance caste equations. The constitutional office thus becomes another chip in the great game of coalition management. ■



BEND IT LIKE BICHARPUR

Chief ministers visiting foreign locales are often chasing investments for their states, but Madhya Pradesh CM **Mohan Yadav** had a rather more unusual pit stop on his trip to Spain. He dropped by La Liga headquarters, home of the Spanish football league, and invited them to invest in MP's sports infrastructure and train the local youth. This raised more than a few eyebrows, of course, since MP barely registers on the football map of India. The answer may well lie in Bicharpur, a village near tribal-dominated Shahdol, whose football chops led PM **Narendra Modi** to dub it a "mini Brazil" in one of his *Mann ki Baat* episodes. Yadav may not be able to tell off-side in football, but he sure does know who mans the goalposts.

Illustrations by **SIDDHANT JUMDE**

▼ SECULAR TURN

DEVOTION OR DESIGN?

Kairana MP **Iqra Hasan** has got the right wing in a tizzy in Uttar Pradesh. Some time ago, the Samajwadi Party leader had slammed the Meerut police's move to ban roadside namaaz, saying they were trying to create a "chasm of hate in society".



Last week, however, Iqra donned a different avatar, draped in a saffron scarf and distributing prasad to the kanwariyas. The visuals went viral, earning both kudos and confusion. Outreach or optics? Symbolism or just solid constituency work? One thing is clear: Iqra Hasan isn't playing by any known script.

BACK TO THE OLD GUARD



Congress leader **Rahul Gandhi** met party veteran **A.K. Antony** at his Thiruvananthapuram home on July 18, marking their first meeting since the latter left Delhi for Kerala in 2022. The interaction signals the Congress's renewed outreach to the old guard ahead

of the 2026 assembly election. Antony may not be keeping well, but he still has influence among the coastal Latin Catholic community and could be a counter to the dissenting Shashi Tharoor.



Cultural Cosplay

The BJP is doing all it can to blend in with Bengal's culture. At a Durgapur rally on July 18, PM Modi ditched his usual "Jai Shri Ram" for chants of "Kali" and "Durga". Local BJP MLA Lakshman Ghorui's invites also mentioned only the two goddesses, though he misspelled 'Durga'. But then, this isn't the party's first cultural fumble. Ahead of the 2021 polls, they botched up Tagore's birthplace, mispronounced Bangla words, and tried to turn *bhadralok* into a marketing gimmick. Naming **Samik Bhattacharya** the new state unit chief seems like another attempt to court Bengal's elusive elite.



PROBLEM OF PLENTY

Punjab now has 20 officers

of DGP (Director General of Police) rank, a record for any state. Eight IPS officers were promoted in July alone, many into 'special DGP' roles that carry prestige but often no real command. Ironically, the man heading the state force, Gaurav Yadav, is also just an officiating DGP. As one officer quipped, "We might need a DGP to manage the DGPs."



Kaushik Deka with Rahul Noronha, Avaneesh Misra, Jeemon Jacob, Arkamoy Datta Majumdar and Anilesh S. Mahajan

ECO WATCH

By **Jumana Shah**

DOLPHINS BEACHED, KERALA FRETS

In Kerala, dolphin carcasses are increasingly washing up ashore, with 18 reported in 2024 and four in 2025 so far, possibly linked to the cargo vessel carrying hazardous material sinking off Alappuzha. Most carcasses are of Indo-Pacific humpback dolphins, protected under the Indian Wildlife Act. Experts attribute the rise to increased reporting, intensive fishing, underwater noise pollution and vessel interactions. Rough seas in the monsoon disrupt dolphin communication, increasing vessel strikes. Autopsies have



been conducted to determine cause of death, which include vessel strikes, bycatch (caught unintentionally), disease and pollution. Project Dolphin, launched in 2020, had stressed on conservation efforts focusing on a marine-specific approach, balancing fishermen's livelihoods and scientific involvement.

A WARBLER SINGS AGAIN

In the rugged Suru Valley of Ladakh, a team of five birders—Lt Gen. Bhupesh Goyal, Manjula Desai, Rigzin Nubu, Irfan Jelani and Harish Thangaraj—achieved a historic feat on July 15, 2025. They spotted the Long-billed Bush Warbler (*Locustella major*), a near-extinct species not seen in India since 1979. Guided by its insect-like call, the team found the bird in dense willow thickets at 3,200 metres, a record altitude. The expedition,

inspired by James Eaton's 2022 sighting in Gilgit-Baltistan, scoured historical data and satellite imagery



to pin down possible habitats. A common sight in Ladakh till the 1920s, the warbler's disappearance was linked to habitat loss from agricultural expansion.

The rediscovery was celebrated across the ornithologist community, and with renewed birder interest, more could be uncovered about the Himalayan range of this elusive species.

UPFRONT

► NISAR SATELLITE

THE PLANET MAPPER

The NASA ISRO Synthetic Aperture Radar or the NISAR satellite, the largest collaboration in space between the US and India, is scheduled for launch from Sriharikota, Andhra Pradesh, on July 30 at 5.40 pm. One of the most sophisticated radar satellites till date, it has been in the works since 2014. Its goal is to track subtle changes on the Earth's surface that have hitherto proved virtually undetectable. To achieve this, it will scan the planet twice every 12 days in unprecedented detail, literally down to a centimetre, regardless of cloud cover, darkness or foliage.

Text by AJAY SUKUMARAN

Graphic by Tanmoy Chakraborty

ENSURING PRECISION

Dual frequency radar

- NISAR will be the first satellite to observe the Earth with two kinds of radar—an L-band SAR (Synthetic Aperture Radar) from NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory and an S-band SAR built by Space Applications Centre in Ahmedabad
- Both will use a 12-metre unfurlable mesh reflector antenna
- The two different wavelengths will help capture richer data

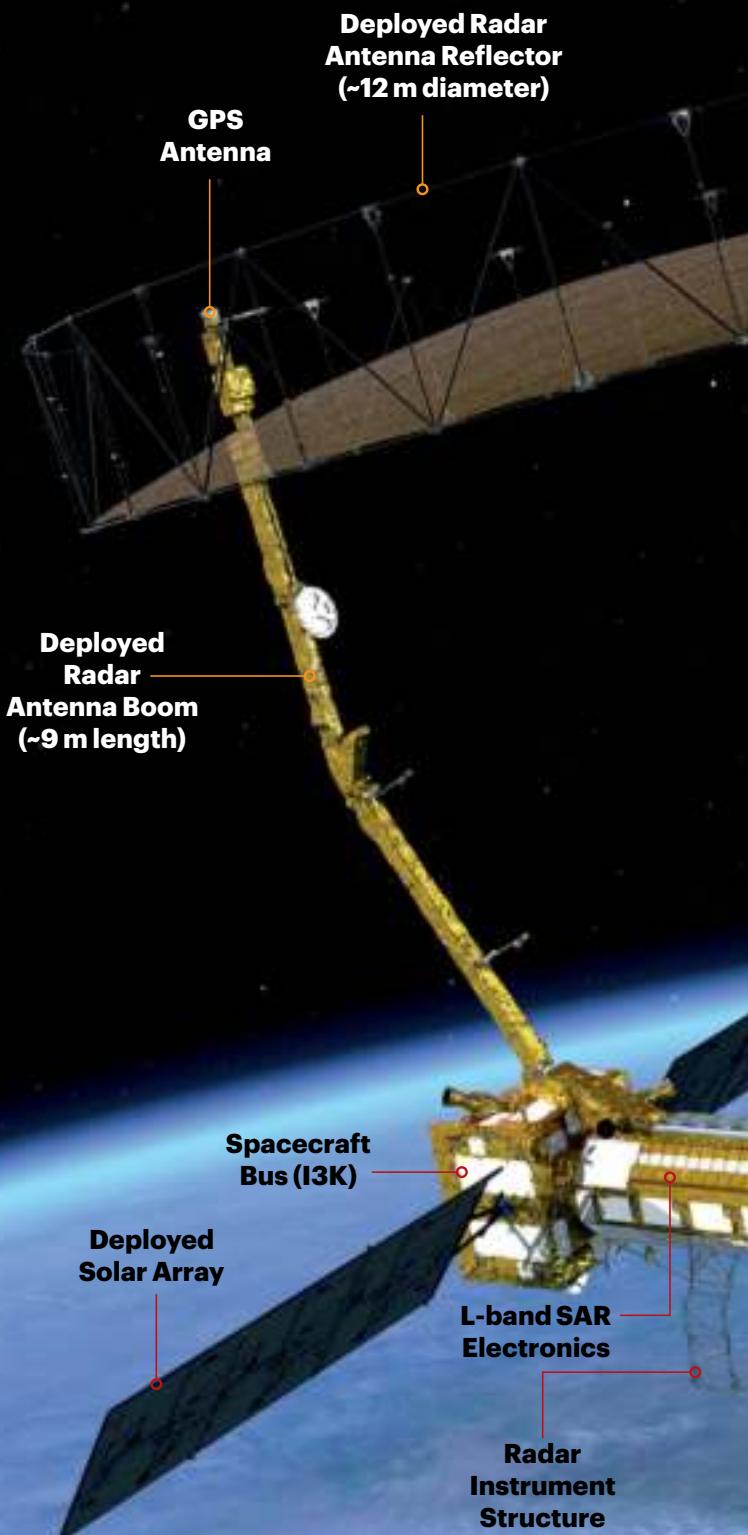
1-centimetre scale

- Placed in a low orbit, NISAR will be able to detect minute changes on the Earth's surface
- The applications include sighting ground deformation, ice sheet movement and vegetation dynamics, sea ice classification, ship detection, shoreline monitoring, storm characterisation, changes in soil moisture, mapping and monitoring of surface water resources and disaster response, which can help predict floods, volcanic eruptions and even earthquakes

5
YEARS
Minimum duration
of satellite
operations

\$1.2 BN
NASA budget. It makes NISAR one of the most expensive Earth-observing satellite missions undertaken

₹788 CRORE
ISRO's estimated work share cost
(Final budget has yet to be announced)



2,392

KG

Weight of
NISAR
satellite

743

KM

The Sun-synchronous orbit
into which NISAR
will be injected

12

METRES

(39 feet)

Size of NISAR's
unfurlable mesh
reflector antenna

242

KM

NISAR's imaging
swathe, which will allow
it to cover the entire
planet every 12 days

THE MISSION GOAL

To better understand...



Earthquakes



Volcanic eruptions



Oil spills



Floods



Wildfires



Landslides

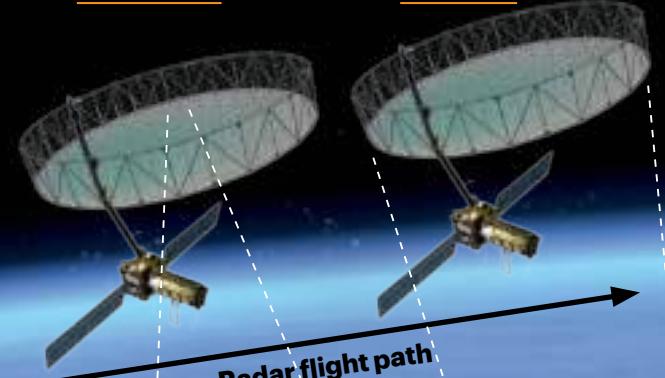
Feed RF
Aperture
(L- and
S-band)

S-band SAR
Electronics

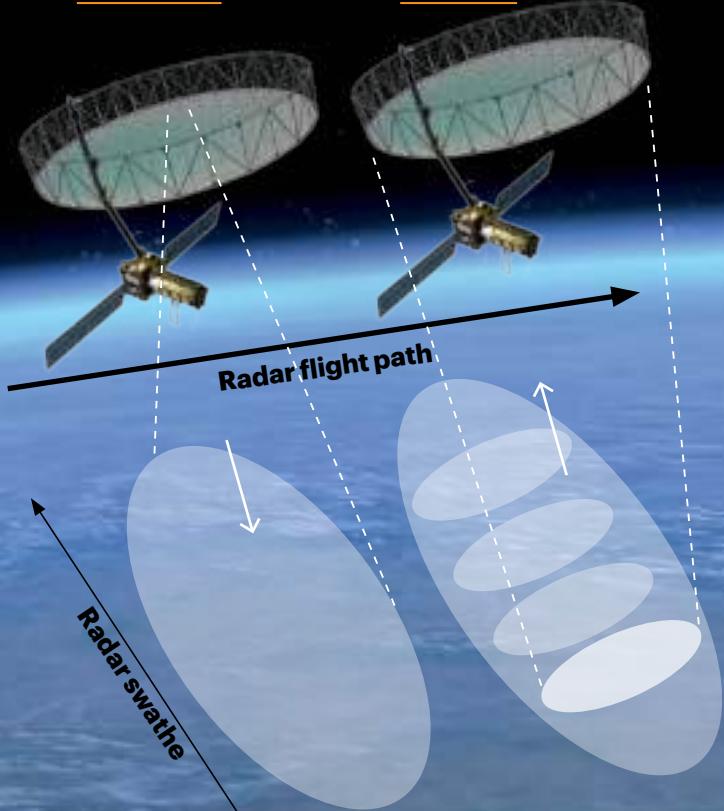
HOW SAR WORKS

- Synthetic Aperture Radar (SAR) transmits microwave pulses and receives the echoes of the returned pulses
- It can therefore see through clouds and darkness, and collect data in any weather
- Imagery is created from the reaction of an emitted pulse with physical structures like mountains, forests, and sea ice and conditions like soil moisture

TRANSMIT



RECEIVE



▼ VIEWPOINT

PUTTING AN END TO HEPATITIS B

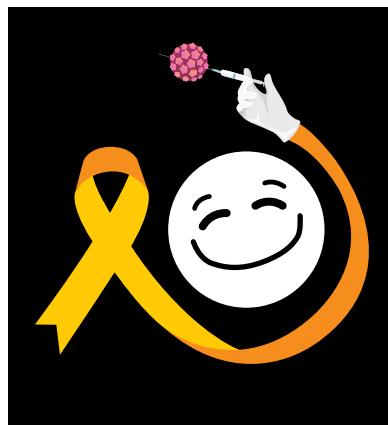
Screening, vaccination and destigmatisation are essential to eliminating a disease that affects 29 million Indians

Every 30 seconds, globally, someone dies from hepatitis-related liver infections—amounting to 1.3 million deaths annually as per WHO 2024 estimates. The Hepatitis B Virus (HBV) alone contributes to nearly 900,000 of these deaths, mostly due to cirrhosis and liver cancer. That's more than malaria, and approaching tuberculosis levels. The virus is carried by an estimated 29 million Indians—the second-highest number globally. And yet, despite having a protective vaccine and effective antivirals for over three decades, we have failed to eliminate it. Why?

The painful truth: doctors have failed to engage society. We treated HBV as a medical issue, not a societal one like COVID-19, HIV or tuberculosis. For most people, the infection lasts less than six months. For others, it can get chronic and seriously damage the liver. Shockingly, less than 10 per cent of infected individuals are diagnosed; stigma around sexual transmission of the virus has led to under 5 per cent receiving treatment. This ignorance is far from bliss. The HBV can spread through blood, semen, saliva and other bodily fluids, as well as maternally. But the infected are not at fault.

Take the real case of 67-year-old Dr D. Basu (name changed) from Hubli. A CT scan for mild abdominal discomfort revealed a 5 cm liver cancer. He had tested HBV-positive 35 years ago, but never followed up or took treatment. He even hid the diagnosis from his family. When we treated his cancer, his brother and 37-year-old daughter Kalyani also tested positive, likely due to maternal transmission and later sexual or vertical transmission. This tragic case underlines some key precautions to follow.

Periodic monitoring in the



**ONE PILL, LIKE TENOFOVIR,
TAKEN DAILY CAN SUPPRESS
THE VIRUS LIFELONG, HALT
TRANSMISSION AND PREVENT
COMPLICATIONS**

HBV-infected is a must—one in 10 of those infected develop cirrhosis or cancer. Patients undergo repeated testing but get no treatment as current guidelines are restrictive, excluding nearly 60 per cent from treatment. Patients live with anxiety, fear and stigma. We must move from treating a select few to treating all HBV-positives. One pill, like tenofovir, taken daily can suppress the virus lifelong, halt transmission and prevent complications.

Kalyani, Dr Basu's daughter, could have been protected with a birth dose. She was not given HBV vaccination at birth. India's birth-dose coverage is just 63 per cent. Despite being one of the cheapest vaccines and India being a major vaccine producer, the HBV vaccine is scarcely available in private markets here and public awareness is dismal. Only 4.4 per cent of Delhi's adults are fully vaccinated. Are you? Sadly, nearly one-third of health



BY DR SHIV K. SARIN

professionals aren't either. Every Indian child and adult should know: the HBV vaccine is safe, effective and for everyone.

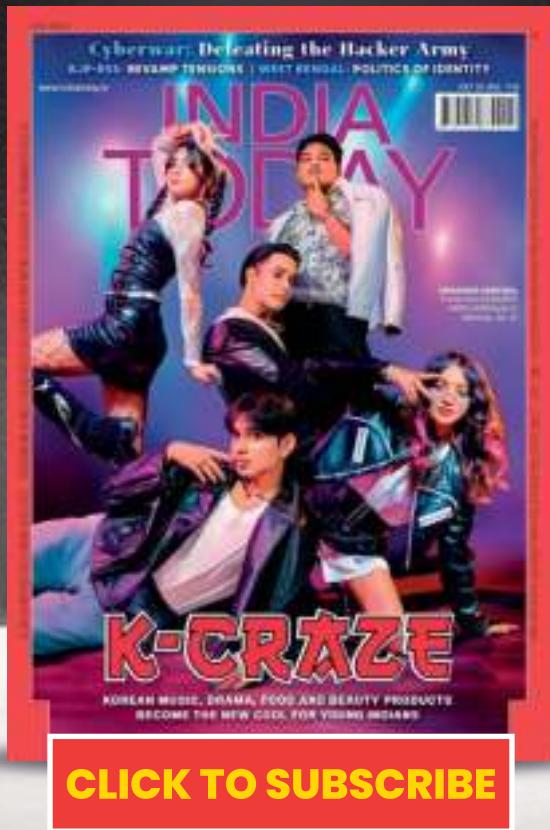
COVID taught us the power of self-testing. All close contacts of the HBV-infected must be screened. Enact anti-discrimination laws in education, workplaces and healthcare. We need HBV kits to enable one-stop testing and treatment. At least 80 per cent of diagnosed patients must be linked to free, accessible treatment. Integrating HBV services with programmes for prenatal care, non-communicable diseases, HIV and tuberculosis is essential. We must integrate hepatitis testing into routine healthcare check-ups and general population-based screening. Pregnant women should be screened for both HBV and Hepatitis C Virus (HCV)—the latter spreads only through blood contact and affects 5.5 million Indians.

India launched the National Viral Hepatitis Control Program (NVHCP) on July 28, 2018—one of the world's largest campaigns aiming to eliminate viral hepatitis by 2030. It offers free diagnosis and treatment for HBV and HCV. While impressive work on screening has been done, the treatment uptake remains low. We need a massive awareness drive and a movement for public participation.

With around 3,500 global hepatitis deaths daily—11 per cent from India—the crisis demands urgency. Every avoidable death is a call to act. Each preventable infection highlights our collective failure, and an opportunity to act. We need a society-wide approach, powered by political will, scientific leadership and strong community engagement. Let us break it down. No shame. No blame. Just a cure. ■

The author is Professor of Eminence, Chancellor, ILBS University

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INDIA
TODAY
MAKING SENSE OF INDIA



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GOVERNMENT OF GUJARAT



Vadnagar, District Mahesana, Gujarat
vadnagararcheologymuseum.com

Scan the
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more information



STATE SCAN

ODISHA: SHOCK & AFTERSHOCK PG 18

GUJARAT: THE DAY AFTER THE SKIES FELL PG 20



FREE TO GO The 12 accused in the 7/11 Mumbai train blasts; right, police in one of the smashed compartments, July 2006

BHASKAR PAUL

► MAHARASHTRA

PRESUMED GUILTY, BUT PROVEN OTHERWISE

After a plodding, 19-year legal saga, an acquittal blasts apart the flawed probe in the 2006 Mumbai train bomb attack

By Dhaval S. Kulkarni

IT TOOK ONLY SIX MINUTES for the horror to streak through that normal evening, like staccato flashes of lightning from hell. But if evil is delivered instantly, it's proverbial in India that justice always plods along in delay—and often folly. It's been almost two decades since blasts ripped through Mumbai's arterial suburban train network in July 2006, but we are nowhere close to knowing whose hand it was. Far from bringing to them the weight of punitive law. Those who had been arraigned in the case so far were presumed guilty till proven otherwise—or rather, till nothing could be proven. On July 21, a two-judge bench of the Bombay High Court (HC) acquitted 12 accused who had, by then, spent nearly 19 years of their lives in jail.

It was on July 11, 2006, that seven blasts ripped through the first-class compartments of different local trains on the Western Railway line. The bombs, placed in pressure cookers, went off within a span of six minutes—between 18:23 hrs and 18:29 hrs—killing 187, and leaving another 827 injured.

A sprawling probe followed that had its fair share of iffy premises and false starts, ensuring the proceedings were never too far from being seen as controversial. The Anti-Terrorism Squad initially concluded the blasts were conducted by

the banned Students Islamic Movement of India (SIMI), with help from the Lashkar-e-Toiba. The Mumbai Police Crime Branch later claimed it was the act of an Indian Mujahideen module that it had busted.

QUESTION OF LAW

The final set of arrestees was tried by a special court under MCOCA (Maharashtra Control of Organised Crime Act, 1999) and the National Investigation Agency (NIA) Act, 2008. In September 2015, the 12 accused were convicted; five of them got the death sentence, seven got life. One of those slated for capital punishment met his end via COVID infection in 2021, awaiting appeal in Nagpur jail.

Takeaways

- ➲ The Bombay HC acquits the 12 accused in the July 2006 suburban train bomb blasts
- ➲ The verdict cites a flawed probe, hurting the reliability of terror investigations

The high court said the prosecution had “utterly failed to establish the offence beyond reasonable doubt... on each count”. The bench, comprising Justice Anil Kilar and Justice Shyam Chandak, said the impugned judgment and order of conviction and sentence “are liable to be quashed and set aside”. It challenged the admissibility of the confessional statements on various grounds, including whether they were voluntarily made or extorted under torture, also whether MCOCA could apply retrospectively.

CM Devendra Fadnavis called it a “shocking decision”. The state has moved the Supreme Court against the verdict. The deceased’s kin, too, expressed their anguish. In the end, India’s law-enforcement and criminal justice system have hurt the reliability of our terror investigations. ■

► KARNATAKA

SIDDA MEDICINE FOR SELF-HEALING

Is he going? Yes, going great guns. A favourable SC verdict caps a good run for a beleaguered CM

By Ajay Sukumaran

OVER TWO YEARS as a Congress CM, the one thing Siddaramaiah hasn’t been able to shake off is dogged speculation about a mid-term change of guard. For that, he has his own partymen to thank. Case in point: the fresh spell of theorising spurred by a cryptic comment by cooperation minister K.N. Rajanna, a Siddha loyalist, about an ‘upheaval’ in September. It took multiple visits by AICC Karnataka in-charge Randeep Surjewala to tamp down on the buzz, even if tenuously. Amidst parleys with MLAs, Surjewala told reporters on July 1: “Some of you

asked me...are you taking opinions on a leadership change. The answer is clearly no,” he said, flanked by deputy CM D.K. Shivakumar, the one biding time for the top post.

Since then, the CM appears to have bolstered his image on a few key fronts. He occupied pride of place at the party’s OBC advisory council meet in Bengaluru on July 16, leaving little doubt about the value placed on his appeal among the underclasses. There, the party adopted the Bengaluru Declaration, demanding a national caste census *a la* Telangana, ending the 50 per cent cap on reservation, and quotas in private educational institutions.



A day previously, he had scored another personal win on a sticky issue: a protest over moves to acquire 1,777 acres of farmland near Devanahalli, 40 km from Bengaluru, for an aerospace park. A 2022 notification, under the previous BJP regime, had triggered an agitation that didn't let up for three years. After the final notification this year, more activists rallied to the cause.

THE PRO-PEOPLE TRICK

Siddaramaiah's government first sought to negotiate a middle ground, offering to pare down the area to be acquired. Then the CM finally announced the acquisition would be dropped entirely, winning applause from agitators and freeing the Congress from a tricky lair.

The feelgood phase was capped on July 21, as the Supreme Court dismissed an appeal by the Enforcement Directorate on its money-laundering charges against the CM's wife, B.M. Parvathi. After its case sparked a raging contro-

Takeaways

- ➔ Plagued by talk of a change of guard, Sidda fortifies his place with a flurry of wins
- ➔ SC bins ED plea to probe his wife in MUDA 'scam'
- ➔ Sidda also helms big OBC meet, wins over angry farmers

versy, she had returned the housing sites allotted to her by the Mysore Urban Development Authority in 2021, and then successfully challenged the ED summons in the Karnataka High Court.

Now, the SC has issued a strong caution to the agency against being 'used' for 'political battles'. Says the CM: "This verdict has exposed the malice behind the case and unequivocally cleared our names." Siddaramaiah called it a painful chapter—a useful metaphor for a whole phase he seems to have turned the page on. Well, at least for now. ■

BREW HITS BAGHEL'S SON

The 'liquor scam' claims its biggest scalp yet, as the former CM cries political vendetta

By **Rahul Noronha**

IT'S THE GIANT-SLAYING phase, it seems, for the Enforcement Directorate (ED), after a long hunt for peripheral players. The latest arrest in what they're calling Chhattisgarh's own 'liquor scam': Chaitanya Baghel. The charges: acts linked to the sale of non-excise-paid liquor in 2019-22, when his father Bhupesh Baghel was CM. Besides causing a loss of Rs 2,200-odd crore to the exchequer, the ED

alleges, Chaitanya's construction business netted in bribe money from liquor barons. In January, the ED had crested its previous peak in the case by arresting then excise minister Kawasi Lakhma, a Congress tribal MLA.

High drama erupted after the ED arrived for the arrest at Baghel's Raipur residence on July 18: the last day of the assembly's monsoon session and also Chaitanya's birthday. An angry Baghel tweeted

ARABINDA MAHAPATRA



► **THEY WANT JUSTICE**
Students in Fakir Mohan College in Balasore hold a candlelight vigil

By **Arkamoy Datta Majumdar**

ODISHA HAD BARELY recovered from the Balasore self-immolation case of July 12 when it had to confront yet another chilling incident that threw the deteriorating safety of women in the state in even sharper relief. On July 19, a 15-year-old girl was abducted and set ablaze in broad

daylight by three unidentified men in the Balanga area of Puri district. She ran through a residential neighbourhood engulfed in flames, seeking help.

A primary witness, Dukhishyam Senapati, recounted that the girl ran towards his house—he and his family helped douse the fire and provided her with clothes.



PTI



NET CATCH Chaitanya Baghel being taken to court in Raipur, Jul. 18

close to the ‘big fish’ to sing. Sources claim it was Bansal who explained the “financial trail” leading to Chaitanya. Pappu Dhillon, a Chaitanya aide now in jail, may play a like role too. K.K. Shrivastava, a “ tantric/astrologer” close to Baghel, was arrested from Bhopal on unrelated complaints—also apparently meant to persuade him to read the future well and cooperate.

BIG TREES DON’T FALL

Baghel has been vocal about tree-felling in an Adani coal project in a Raigarh forest. Chaitanya’s arrest, he claims, is meant to deflect focus from that. The BJP denies any link. Anyway, Baghel’s standing in his party won’t stay unaffected. A section still prefers him: Priyanka Gandhi, for one, tweeted in his support. But a dichotomy is visible too: Baghel-baiter Charandas Mahant has been made leader of opposition.

The former CM is a leader who even the BJP acknowledges as its most popular rival in the state. To retain that centrality, Baghel has a fight on his hands. ■

Takeaways

► **The ED arrests Chaitanya Baghel for excise evasion charges**

► **This could affect his father ex-CM Bhupesh Baghel’s standing in the INC**

how, on his own birthday in August 2023, the ED had raided his OSDs. “The kind of birthday gifts Modi-Shah give cannot be given by anyone in any democracy. Thank you... I will remember them for life,” he wrote. A non-birthday present too had come in March, when the CBI raided his premises in the Mahadev app scam.

Baghel was also heard lamenting how Pappu Bansal, an accused said to be close to him, could be seen breezing in and out of the ED office. That’s not a bad reading of the ED’s self-revealed strategy: to get those

► ODISHA

SHOCK AND AFTERSHOCK

The state stays ablaze in the headlines with another girl victim. The rituals of anger and blame-giving repeat on loop

Despite her critical condition, she told them three men had abducted her on motorbikes, taken her to the Bhargavi river bank, poured kerosene over her, and set her on fire. First taken to a community health centre, then shifted to AIIMS Bhubaneswar, on July 20 the Odisha government opted to airlift her to AIIMS, New Delhi. She had suffered nearly 70-75 per cent burns.

Police investigations confirmed the sequence

of events, as related by the girl in a statement. A school dropout, she was visiting her uncle on the day of the incident. Eight people—including some of her relatives—have now been detained for questioning.

The attack has set off an intensified phase of political unrest, in tandem with public anger. In Puri, demonstrations broke out outside Balanga police station, and later outside AIIMS Bhubaneswar’s burns unit,

forcing police to disperse the crowds. It was almost as if public protests over gender violence in Odisha had carried over without a break from the Fakir Mohan College self-immolation case, only getting angrier.

Former CM and BJD leader Naveen Patnaik, too, did a replay, issuing his second successive broadside at the BJP regime on his so-

cial media handle within a week. “Such unthinkable incidents against women are now being reported almost daily across #Odisha.... It shows that criminals have become emboldened under the present government and are not worried about being punished,” he wrote.

ON THE DEFENSIVE

Chief Minister Mohan Charan Majhi said the government would ensure the best treatment for the victim and promised strict action against the culprits. Deputy CM Pravati Parida also visited her at AIIMS, New Delhi.

But public opinion is being moulded by the fact that this has come in the slipstream of Balasore, especially the fact that its 20-year-old victim had set herself aflame to protest institutional apathy as much as sexual harassment. ■

Takeaways

► **A 15-year-old girl abducted and set ablaze near Puri**

► **Public protests, political critiques continue unbroken**

► **Majhi govt still hurt after Balasore**

► **FRESH CHAPTER** Puja being performed for the newly opened mess at BJMC; (below) the old mess destroyed in the crash



► GUJARAT

THE DAY AFTER THE SKIES FELL

This campus—BJMC—was Ground Zero for Flight 171. How students and faculty are coping with the trauma

By Jumana Shah



FOR DR NISHA PRAJAPATI, the sound of an airplane flying overhead every few minutes used to be a “privilege”. That pure response became impossible after June 12, when Air India Flight 171 crashed into her universe: the Byramjee Jeejeebhoy Medical College (BJMC). Now, every time the sound of an aircraft taking off fills the OPD, the trauma is relived. Scared glances are momentarily exchanged. “But the moment passes, and we break

out into laughter, with lame jokes about our fears. That’s our coping mechanism,” says Dr Prajapati.

Assistant professor of psychiatry at BJMC, she’s in a good place to talk about a bad thing. “The campus is still processing grief. We talk about the tragedy all the time,” she says. In the end, the body count on the ground totalled 19; four students were among them. Classes were suspended for 11 days after the incident. On June 23, ‘normal’ life was restarted after a

prayer meet. Three days later, optional prelims exams were held; all except one student took the exam. University exams starting August 1 will continue on schedule as they believe routine will help students recover. “We expect PTSD (post traumatic stress disorder) to surface in unexpected ways in the coming months,” says the doctor.

The mess destroyed by the crash served 1,500 students. In June-end, it was temporarily relocated, close to the crash site, in the boys’ hostel. Again, a

Takeaways

■ **Four BJMC students were among the 19 dead on the ground**

■ **It became the war room where the crash victims' tests and documents were processed**

■ **Its psychiatry faculty is enabling students to cope with trauma, grief**

■ **Every student is back on campus, calls for a new site gets no steam**



small religious ceremony preceded it—something to soothe the nerves, even if the memory of burning bodies that students, staff and faculty witnessed on that ill-fated Thursday will likely linger in their psyche.

For three weeks after that, resident doctors also had to counsel the grief-torn relatives of passengers, through their harrowing wait for charred body parts from the debris to

return from DNA analysis. “Final year students are used to dead bodies. They’ve worked on post-mortems. But the first and second year students were badly affected,” says Dr Kavin Kothadiya, a final-year intern doctor. “We didn’t let the four whose roommates died return to their empty rooms. We shifted them. Many students went home for a fortnight, but are now gradually resuming routine,” he adds.

For a week after June 12, BJMC dean Dr Minakshi Parikh’s office hosted state ministers and bureaucrats. Now she gently marvels at the resilience of the college community. There have been some murmurs from parents about whether the college should be shifted, but Dr Parikh says not a single student has moved out of the hostel.

THE HEALING

“When classes resumed, the psychiatry faculty members collectively addressed over 200 students to educate them about trauma and grief: the cycle of denial, anger, depression and acceptance,” she says. They are observing students closely and will reach out individually if symptoms of PTSD appear.

It takes a toll on the care-givers too. “Many of us have intense flashes of the burning aircraft and body parts; the dry empty eyes of a man who lost his wife, mother and daughter. But we all come back everyday, because this is our life,” says Dr Prajapati. The source of their trauma is never out of sight, nor out of mind. Bang in the centre of their universe, there lies the crash site, dark and impenetrable, guarded round-the-clock by local police. Life is taking wing amidst that, tremulously. “We look up every time an aircraft takes off,” says Dr Prajapati. ■

► RAJASTHAN

THE CM REDRAWS LINES IN THE SAND

One day he's down, next he's rearranging his entire bureaucracy. It's been a rollercoaster, but the CM has regained upper hand

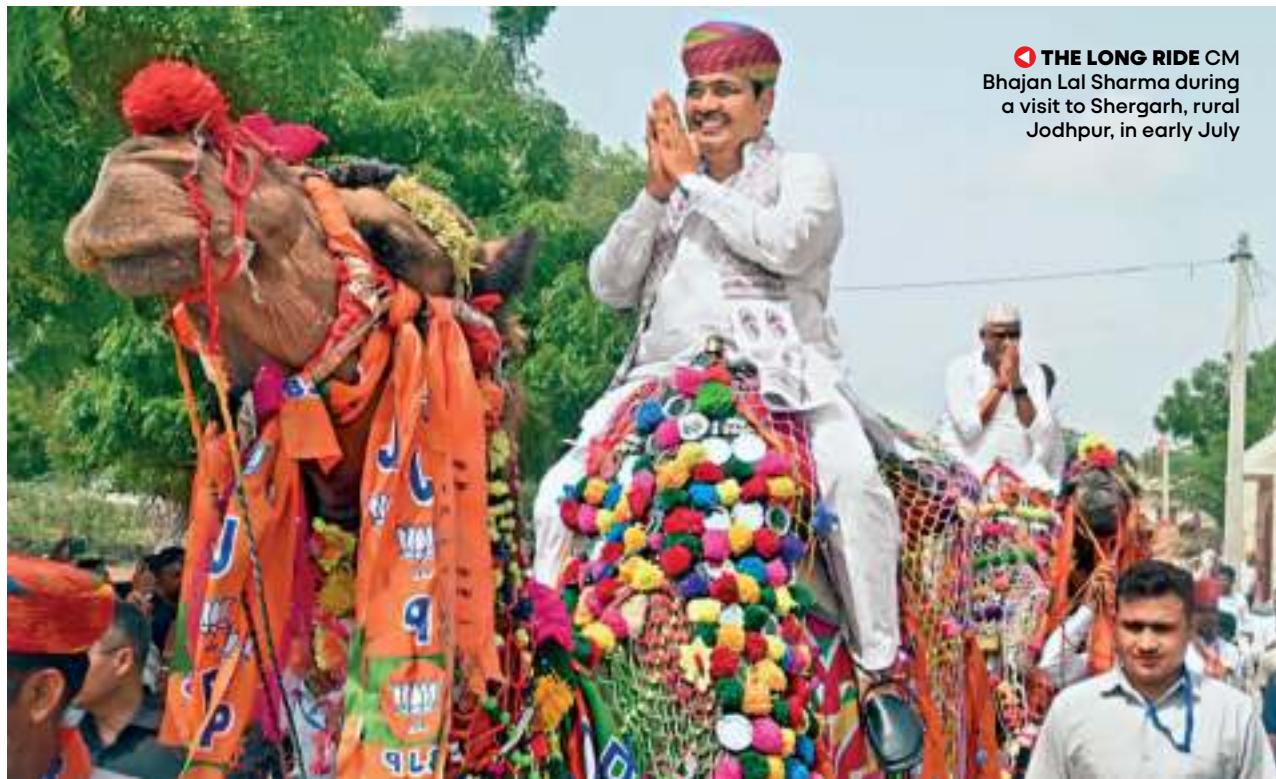
By Rohit Parihar

THE CAMEL RIDE HE TOOK on the sands of Shergarh, Jodhpur, in early July must have reminded Bhajan Lal Sharma of the ups and downs of life as a chief minister. The climate didn’t seem propitious—on any front.

His powerful predecessors, Ashok Gehlot and Vasundhara Raje, were on the prowl—scarcely concealing their ill will. On top of that, the restive base of maverick Jat MP Hanuman Beniwal, founder-boss of Rashtriya Loktantrik Party (RLP), had just ruffled Rajasthan’s political landscape with a hashtag storm: #BhajanLalHataoRajasthanBachao went the slogan, i.e. ‘Remove Bhajan Lal, Save Rajasthan’. Over 130,000 posts had flooded social media. The pro-CM counter hashtag, #RajasthanWithBhajanLal, limped in comparison, with barely 6,800 posts.

THE NEED TO BE TOUGH

His sarkari PR wing clearly ambles along the shifting dunes like a camel. So it falls on Sharma, who goes blithely about his business with that similar air of unconcern, to periodically quell any sense of infirmity. There are two ways to read this rollercoaster. One, he does feel



THE LONG RIDE CM
Bhajan Lal Sharma during a visit to Shergarh, rural Jodhpur, in early July

an acute need to do something every now and then to scoop himself out of an image trough. Two, he does manage that reasonably emphatically, with implicit central backing being the gold reserve for his currency. Witness only his latest reassertion of control.

On July 19, in his third major bureaucratic shake-up, the CM transferred 91 IPS and 58 state administrative officers. This followed the July 3 appointment of Rajeev Kumar Sharma as Director General of Police. The officer he replaces, U.K. Sahoo, himself a Sharma government appointee, was earlier moved to the scandal-ridden Rajasthan Public Service Commission.

Also last month, 62 IAS officers were transferred, including senior ones; slowly but surely, younger cadre are being elevated. All of this is meant to chip away at the narrative that chases him: of him being indecisive and too accommodating of bureaucrats linked to the previous Congress regime.

Speaking exclusively to INDIA TODAY, Sharma was measured in his tone: "I take criticism calmly, but there comes a point—enough is enough." He says he "judged the performance" of senior officers, and that dictated his moves. Insiders say the

immediate action—sacking four constables in Jodhpur involved in kidnapping and extortion—sent precisely such a signal.

The Beniwal affair was another such. He was piqued because the government issued him and his brother Narayan Beniwal notices to vacate official houses allotted to them as MLAs, which both had long ceased to be. That was preceded by an order to cut power at Beniwal's Nagaur residence, which is in the name of another brother, for not paying dues of Rs 11 lakh.

There's another grouse: Beniwal's demand that the cheating scam-tainted 2021 Sub-Inspector recruitment exam be cancelled. The state's legal stand has been that punishing everyone selected would be unjust, as only 50 of 859 have been arrested so far.

Beniwal's party has no MLAs presently, so Sharma knows there's no real danger there. Gehlot and Raje, of course, could any day turn into a moving Birnam Wood—but facing that is part of his job description. ▀

Takeaways

■ **In a reassertion of his authority, Sharma effects mass IPS, IAS transfers**

■ **It's an ongoing battle to bolster his image amidst an unceasing anti campaign**

reshuffle reflects feedback from the Centre, the BJP brass, the RSS and ministers. Several officers perceived as powerful or well-connected have been sidelined. "I want officers to attend to public grievances on priority. No compromise," he says. DGP Sharma's

Reclaiming Mobility with Precision



The Benefits of Robotic Knee Replacement Surgery

Dr Ishwar Bohra

Senior Director, Joint Replacement Programme,
BLK-Max Superspeciality Hospital, New Delhi

For millions of people suffering from chronic knee pain due to arthritis or joint degeneration, total knee replacement offers a path to restored mobility and improved quality of life. In recent years, robotic-assisted knee replacement has emerged as a game-changing advancement—bringing a new level of precision, personalization, and predictability to this well-established procedure.

Robotic-assisted surgery uses advanced imaging and 3D planning tools to create a customized surgical plan tailored to each patient's unique anatomy. This approach not only improves the accuracy of implant positioning but also enhances joint alignment and ligament balancing—two critical factors in the long-term success of a knee replacement.

One of the key benefits of robotic knee replacement is personalized precision. Before surgery, the system generates a detailed 3D model of the patient's knee, allowing the surgeon to plan the exact size and position of the implant. During surgery, the robotic arm assists the surgeon by guiding bone cuts and adjustments within pre-set parameters, ensuring optimal placement and minimal soft tissue damage. Importantly, the surgeon remains in complete control at all times—the robot acts as a supportive tool, not a replacement for surgical expertise.

This level of precision contributes to improved functional outcomes. Studies and clinical experience suggest that patients undergoing robotic-assisted TKR often experience better joint movement, more natural knee function, and higher satisfaction rates. The accuracy also helps reduce the risk of implant

misalignment, which can lead to discomfort or revision surgeries in the long run.

Another significant advantage is faster recovery. Because robotic systems help avoid unnecessary disruption to surrounding ligaments and tissues, patients often report less postoperative pain and swelling. This enables quicker mobilization and smoother rehabilitation, allowing many individuals to return to daily activities—including walking, climbing stairs, or driving—sooner than with traditional approaches.

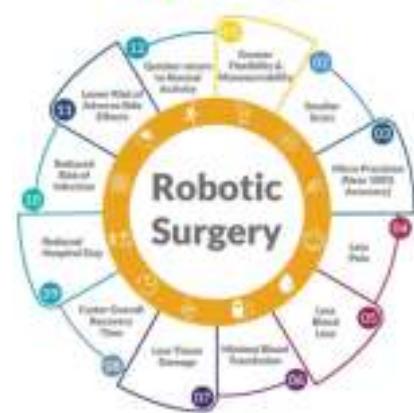
Robotic TKR is especially beneficial for patients with complex cases, such as those with deformities, prior surgeries, or obesity-related joint degeneration. The technology provides valuable intraoperative data that helps the surgeon make well-informed, real-time decisions to ensure the best possible outcome.

Robotic-assisted knee replacement also enhances surgical consistency across cases, reducing variability in outcomes. It supports precise bone preservation, which is especially useful for younger patients who may need future revisions. The technology also helps minimize intraoperative guesswork, leading to increased surgeon confidence and a more streamlined operative process.

While the robot enhances the surgical process, the foundation remains the surgeon's experience and clinical judgment. The integration of robotic technology into knee replacement does not change the fundamentals of care; rather, it raises the standard by enabling greater consistency and customization.

WHY ROBOTIC SURGERY?

12 Reasons



As robotic systems become more widely available and more surgeons trained in their use, the adoption of this technology is expected to grow rapidly. For patients exploring treatment options for knee arthritis, robotic-assisted surgery offers a compelling combination of surgical precision, faster recovery, and long-term joint function.

In the evolution of joint care, robotic-assisted knee replacement represents a significant step forward—bridging the gap between technology and human expertise to improve patient outcomes in meaningful, measurable ways.

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BNW SIGNS MASAH FOR ULTRA-LUXURY AQUA ARC



"AQUA ARC IS THE KIND OF ARCHITECTURAL CHALLENGE MASAH WAS BUILT FOR - COMPLEX, BOLD, AND DESTINED TO BECOME A REGIONAL LANDMARK."

Mohammed Abdul Nayeem,
CEO of Masah Holdings &
MAN Constructions

In a bold new chapter for Ras Al Khaimah's real estate story, BNW Developments has signed a **billion-dirham partnership** with MAN Construction (a subsidiary of the Masah Group) as the principal construction partner for Aqua Arc, its iconic waterfront project set to redefine ultra-luxury living. Positioned on the pristine coastline of Al Marjan Island, Aqua Arc is envisioned to become one of the most defining residential developments in the region, where scale meets soul, and architecture meets capital appreciation.

This milestone alliance brings together two regional powerhouses: BNW, the fastest-growing private developer with an AED 22+ billion

portfolio, and Masah, a Tier-1 contracting firm renowned for delivering healthcare, aviation, and marine mega projects across the GCC.

Masah's portfolio includes major infrastructure like the Red Sea Global Terminal, Ajdan Rise, and award-winning hospitals such as Almoosa and Al Rayyan General Hospital. These are benchmarks in engineering and delivery. Their ability to translate vision into enduring structures sets them apart.

The signing ceremony included Mr. Mohammed Abdul Nayeem, Mr. Mohammed Alhabib, Mr. Althaf Kazi, Mr. Mirza Naseem Beg, Mr. Mohammed Misbah, Mr. Ankur Aggarwal, and Mr. Vivek Oberoi.



“AQUA ARC EMBODIES BNW'S BELIEF THAT DESIGN IS MEANINGLESS WITHOUT EXECUTION. MASAH BRINGS THE TECHNICAL RIGOUR THIS VISION DEMANDS.”

Mr. Ankur Aggarwal,
Chairman & Founder,
BNW Developments



Aqua Arc, rising along the pristine shores of Al Marjan Island, stands as BNW's most ambitious architectural statement, an ode to timeless aesthetics, engineering clarity, and waterfront serenity. Designed as an ultra-luxury escape, the development comprises limited-edition residences that range from sleek studios to palatial townhouses, each offering uninterrupted sea views and grand balconies.

With intricately designed interiors and expansive sun-drenched balconies, Aqua Arc has been intentionally crafted to serve a diverse global clientele, HNIIs, second-home seekers, and design-forward investors. Its oversized balconies, fluid spatial

planning, and fusion of natural materials embody a resort-meets-residence philosophy.

The development also boasts state-of-the-art wellness amenities, retail zones, spa facilities, and hospitality-driven services, making it a self-contained lifestyle ecosystem. Aqua Arc is an address of rare prestige in one of the UAE's fastest-emerging luxury corridors.

For BNW, partnering with Masah ensures that such a vision isn't left on the drawing board. From complex marine-facing foundations to finishing precision, Masah brings the construction discipline needed to translate Aqua Arc's aspirational blueprint into a legacy asset.

“AT BNW, EVERY ALLIANCE IS BUILT ON CLARITY AND COMMITMENT. WITH MASAH, WE'VE FOUND A PARTNER WHO MIRRORS OUR AMBITION AND DISCIPLINE.”

Mr. Vivek Anand Oberoi,
Managing Director & Co-Founder,
BNW Developments

DHARAVI REVAMP

THE BIG ADANI GAMBLE

CAN THE TYCOON TRANSFORM ASIA'S LARGEST SLUM?

By DHAVAL S. KULKARNI / Photo-montage by BANDEEP SINGH





THE CHALLENGE

1.2

MILLION

**Estimated number
of Dharavi residents
to be rehabilitated**

THE GAMBLE

₹ 2.5

LAKH CRORE

**Adani's investment
for the Dharavi
makeover project**

A

A walk through Latur Galli in Mumbai's Dharavi is not for the faint-hearted. The passage to Basavraj Swami's 70 square feet home involves ducking iron beams, sidestepping covered drains disguised as walkways and navigating alleys barely wide enough for a single person. Swami, 58, lives here with eight family members, packed like pieces of a puzzle into a room with no ventilation. At night, he sleeps under the bed, while his daughter, Swanandi, nods off on top of it. His elderly mother stretches across a mat on the floor. Other family members scale narrow metal ladders to reach tiny lofts, while the main door remains tightly shut mainly to keep out the rats.

This is not a story of urban poverty of the monetary sort. It's a daily negotiation with indignity. One in which 15 families share a single tap, and 250 people have to make do with one toilet. Dharavi, said to be Asia's largest slum, is home to around 1.2 million people, a tenth of Mumbai's estimated 13 million population. It's so densely packed that over 400,000 people occupy a sq. km area in the slum, compared to Mumbai's average of 28,000 (this translates to a 5x5 ft space per person in Dharavi, while in the rest of Mumbai they get 19x19 sq. ft per person, nearly 15 times more). Most Dharavikars, like the Swamis, are migrants, and have been waiting for decades to see a change.

That change may finally be here. Or so promises Gautam Adani, India's most watched tycoon, who has placed a staggering Rs 2.5 lakh crore bet on transforming this chaotic human settlement into a model of modern urban living. Through a special purpose vehicle called Navbharat Mega Developers Pvt. Ltd (NMDPL)—80 per cent of which is controlled by Adani Properties and 20 per cent by the Maharashtra government—the Dharavi Redevelopment Project (DRP) will be one of the world's most ambitious urban renewal efforts. More than a business project, it's a test of whether private capital can do what decades of public policy could not: reimagine, rehabilitate and rebuild an urban space that is more symbolically loaded than any other in India. Especially since the redevelopment involves a bid process stretching back two decades, the longest for any brownfield project. In May, chief minister Devendra Fadnavis approved the master plan and set the process rolling. "Eligible slum-dwellers and businesses will be rehabilitated in Dharavi itself," the CM assured Dharavikars.

Photograph by BANDEEP SINGH



"Dharavi is our most transformative project.... Over 1 million people will move from narrow lanes to a township with spacious layouts, open spaces"

— GAUTAM ADANI, Chairman, Adani Group



CRAMPED LIVES

People going about
their morning routines in
Indiranagar-3 in Dharavi

THE CHALLENGES

116

ACRES

of total 269.3 acres set aside
for rehabilitation in housing/
commercial spaces in Dharavi

125

THOUSAND

Estimated no. of residential,
industrial and commercial
units to be constructed





PATCHWORK

A garment unit in
Sant Kakkaya Marg

The stakes could not be higher. Dharavi's 621 acres constitute some of the most politically and emotionally charged land in Mumbai, though only 269.3 acres or 43.4 per cent will be available for redevelopment. Of this, 51.7 million sq. ft of housing, commercial and industrial spaces will be built for rehab and renewal on 116.6 acres. Another 118.5 acres of developable land is likely to see real estate activity totalling 69.4 million sq. ft for open market sale. The rehab component, including affordable housing, renewal, infrastructure and amenities, is to be completed by January 15, 2032. The market sale component is looking at a timeline of 25 years, which may get extended depending on the demand and supply. The Adanis will pump in Rs 95,790 crore into the rehabilitation housing component in Dharavi and the other proposed Navbharat townships outside it. Estimated cost of the project, including the free sale component: over Rs 2.5 lakh crore.

As part of the rehabilitation component, the project proposes building 125,000 residential, industrial and commercial units. Of these, 105,000 will be housing units, 58,532 of them 350 sq. ft in size, built *in situ* for those settled on

ground floors on or before January 1, 2000. Another set of units of 300 sq. ft will be built outside Dharavi and given at a discounted rate of Rs 2.5 lakh to those settled on the ground floor between January 1, 2000, and January 1, 2011. A third category of housing, also 300 sq. ft in size, will be available on hire-purchase basis to those settled on the upper floors or those who came to live in Dharavi between January 1, 2011, and November 15, 2022, again in the new townships. The flats on hire-purchase can be bought at government-approved rates after 12 years. As of now, the last two sets will be 46,468 in number, although final figures will be available only after the survey of structures is completed in Dharavi.

The plan also includes building 20,000 commercial/industrial units *in situ* which will be given to those who have the bona fides to prove that they existed in Dharavi on or before November 15, 2022. Of these, those businesses set up on the ground floor before January 1, 2000, will be eligible for 225 sq. ft units for free, with the option to buy extra space at government rates. The remaining will get units on a hire-purchase basis.

THE CHALLENGES

20

THOUSAND

Estimated no. of
commercial units to
be rehabilitated

₹8,623

CRORE

Estimated annual
turnover of informal
economy in Dharavi



“Eligible slum dwellers will be rehabilitated in Dharavi itself. The industries and businesses will get space too. Dharavi is not just an area where people stay, it's an economic hub”

—DEVENDRA FADNAVIS, Maharashtra CM

Photograph by BANDEEP SINGH

A CITY WITHIN A CITY

Dharavi has always been a magnet for economic migrants from across the country, who reclaimed the swamplands to build huts and small businesses, marking the foundations of Mumbai's oldest slum. Informal businesses flourished even during the stormy 1970s and '80s, when the area was the stomping ground of criminals like the late underworld don Varadarajan Mudaliar. But since the '90s, Dharavi has grown into an informal economic hub, with an estimated annual turnover of \$1 billion (Rs 8,623 crore). Its manufacturing, retail and commercial units and single-room factories, which span a massive 627,292 sq. m. in built-up area, make everything from garments, wigs, pots, diyas to leather goods. Kiran Dighavkar, deputy municipal commissioner, Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC), says Dharavi is driven by the instinct of commerce. “Dharavi is the Malabar Hill of slums. There is only one religion and caste in Dharavi—money,” says the bureaucrat.

S.V.R. Srinivas, CEO of DRP, which is in charge of the redevelopment, says the makeover is a *sui generis* case—virtually without precedent. “Dharavi is different in every sense, compared to conventional Slum Redevelopment Authority (SRA) projects,” says the IAS officer. “We are building a city within a city, not just a few buildings...this is the brownest of the brownfield projects, the world's largest urban renewal project.” The redevelopment is envisaged as a phased ‘key-to-key venture’, which minimises the need to shift residents into transit accommodation, and instead helps them move directly into permanent homes.

For residents like Swami, the offer is alluring: a free home with running water and two toilets will be a world apart from his current under-the-bed existence. For Adani, the potential upside is massive. The Dharavi revamp project could see prime real estate being unlocked in the heart of Mumbai, a Rs 2.5 lakh crore transformation that could reshape the city's skyline and cement his image as a national infrastructure builder par excellence. Group chairman Gautam Adani emphasises that it is not all about money. “Our Dharavi Social Mission,” he says, “will uplift the youth through skilling, healthcare and employment programmes. Over 1 million people will move from narrow lanes to a township that features spacious layouts, dual toilets, schools, hospitals, transit hubs and parks.”

At the same time, the risks are equally monumental for Adani. The businessman is staking his reputation on one of the most complex urban transformation projects in the world. Dharavi is not a single slum, but a dense, pulsating ecosystem of informal housing, micro industries, migrant communities and deep-rooted social networks built over decades. Any hint of insensitivity or bulldozing without consensus could trigger a backlash far beyond Dharavi. Realty consultant Prashant Thakur, regional director and head-research and advisory, Anarock Property Consultants Pvt. Ltd, says the massive logistical and social tasks involved in

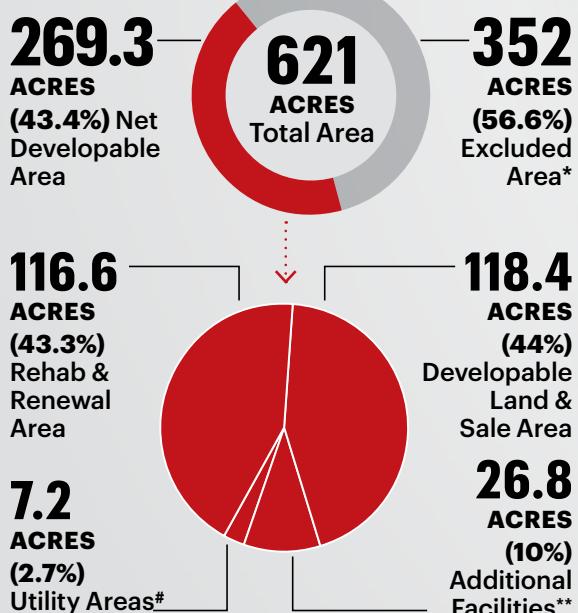
THE NEW DHARAVI

HOW THE REDEVELOPMENT AND REHABILITATION PLAN PLAYS OUT FOR DHARAVI'S RESIDENTS

Graphic by NILANJAN DAS and TANMOY CHAKRABORTY



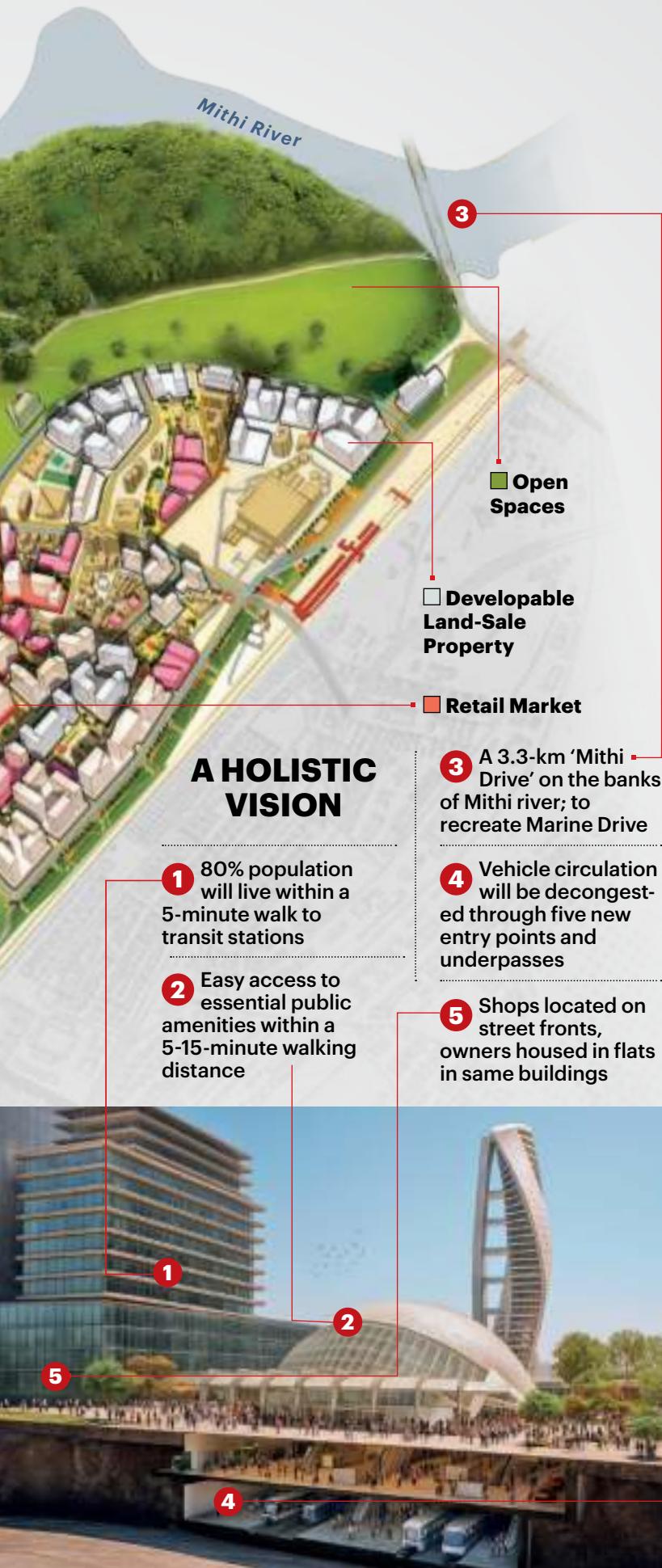
THE REDEVELOPMENT PLAN



*Structures and excluded zones like Koliwada, Mahim Nature Park, Tata Power distribution centre, crematorium, area beside the two railway networks and airport funnel zone

**Museum, working women's hostel, multi-faith complex, cultural centre, area for medicity, schools etc.

#Stormwater drains, sewers, cables and other civic facilities



A HOLISTIC VISION

- 1** 80% population will live within a 5-minute walk to transit stations
- 2** Easy access to essential public amenities within a 5-15-minute walking distance

3 A 3.3-km 'Mithi Drive' on the banks of Mithi river; to recreate Marine Drive

4 Vehicle circulation will be decongested through five new entry points and underpasses

5 Shops located on street fronts, owners housed in flats in same buildings

An artist's impression

THE REHABILITATION PLAN

WHO GETS WHAT

Total units: **125,000**

FOR RESIDENTIAL OCCUPANTS

**GROUND FLOOR,
SETTLED BEFORE
JAN. 1, 2000**

What they get
350 sq. ft flat,
free, in-situ

Total units:
58,532

**GROUND FLOOR
SETTLED
BETWEEN JAN. 1,
2000, AND
JAN. 1, 2011**

What they get
300 sq. ft flat,
outside Dharavi,
at discounted rate
of Rs 2.5 lakh

**UPPER FLOORS
AND THOSE WHO
SETTLED BETWEEN
JAN. 1, 2011, AND
NOV. 15, 2022**

What they get
300 sq. ft rental
flat, outside
Dharavi, on hire-
purchase basis

Total units: ~46,468

FOR COMMERCIAL & INDUSTRIAL UNITS

The plan is to ensure all industries and commercial establishments are resettled inside Dharavi itself

**GROUND
FLOOR, SET UP
BEFORE JAN. 1,
2000**

What they get
225 sq. ft unit,
free; option to
buy extra space
at govt rates

**UPPER FLOORS
OR MEZZANINE
OR POST-2000**

What they get
Rental units inside
Dharavi; 10% of all
new commercial
space reserved
for such units on
hire-purchase

Total units: ~20,000

Note: Actual numbers will be known after the completion of the ongoing survey

handling rehabilitation, legal and political hurdles, upgrading basic infrastructure like sewerage, roads and water supply into a formal urban grid, and balancing livelihood preservation with modern urban norms posed, as he put it mildly, “delicate challenges”. Indeed, they could derail timelines and inflate costs.

Adani executives are tight-lipped regarding details of the planned projects for open market sale, saying their priority is to ensure the rehabilitation of Dharavi slum-dwellers by 2032. While 100 million sq. ft will be utilised for rehabilitation, in Dharavi as well as other sites earmarked for affordable/rental housing across Mumbai, it will also open up 140 million sq. ft of FSI (floor space index) and TDR (transferable development rights, which allows ‘development potential’ to be reassigned from one property to another) for free/ open market sale.

Experts say that land rates in Dharavi, which now average around Rs 12,000 per sq. ft and can go up to Rs 75,000/sq. ft for prime property, will appreciate manifold over the next two decades. Property prices next-door, in the Bandra Kurla Complex (BKC), one of the most expensive business districts in India, are in the Rs 60,000-86,000 per sq. ft band. A real estate expert, who did not wish to be identified, says that construction project returns are an average of 15-30 per cent on equity, depending on factors like time taken for development, FSI, execution cost and location. If the rehab and sale components are delayed due to social/ political factors, the returns could be lower, he adds. Another consultant estimates that selling 140 million sq. ft in the open market could fetch Adani Rs 5.6 lakh crore in revenues and at least Rs 84,000 crore in profits, taking a conservative profit margin of 15 per cent.

THE RED FLAGS

But the project is not without controversy, starting with how the Adanis got the Dharavi contract in the first place. Back in February 2019, the UAE-based Seclink Technologies Corporation, with a Rs 7,200 crore offer, had outbid the Adanis who had quoted Rs 4,539 crore. The Maharashtra government then decided a 45-acre plot belonging to the Railways would be used for the rehabilitation of the slum-dwellers and included it in the project. Since the scope of the project had changed, the government called for fresh bids. By then, three years had passed. In October 2022, Adani Properties made the cut with a Rs 5,069 crore financial bid. The Bombay High Court dismissed Seclink’s plea challenging the state government decision. The case is now being heard in the Supreme Court, which has, however, refused to stay the project.

Meanwhile, the criteria for rehabilitation outside Dharavi are also catching flak. The NMDPL has been allocated 541.2 acres across Mumbai to build affordable rental housing units and for open market sale. Anil Desai, the local South Central Mumbai MP and Shiv Sena (UBT) leader, notes no builder has got “such largesse” from the state. The land parcels are in Kurla Dairy (21 acres), Jamasp salt pans (58.5 acres), Deonar dumping ground (124.3 acres), Aksa and Malvani (124.3 acres), Arthur salt works (120.5 acres) and Jenkins salt works (76.9 acres).

The allegations of a “land grab” stem from the fact that, in

ADANI'S BET

Adani executives say the priority is to complete the rehab/affordable/rental housing by 2032, for which Rs 95,790 crore is earmarked, and that commercial sale is still many years away. But here's an estimate of what Adani could end up earning from open market sale, as per real estate consultants

₹2.5

LAKH CRORE

Total cost of the project, including constructions for open market sale

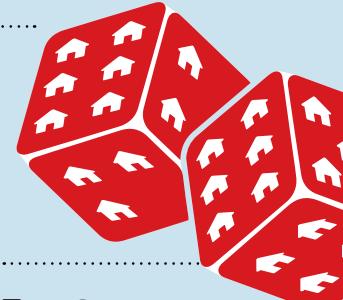
140

MN SQ. FT*

Total area to be developed by Adani for sale in the open market

₹40,000

Average price per sq. ft



₹5.6

LAKH CRORE[#]

Revenues that could accrue to Adani

₹84,000

CRORE[#]

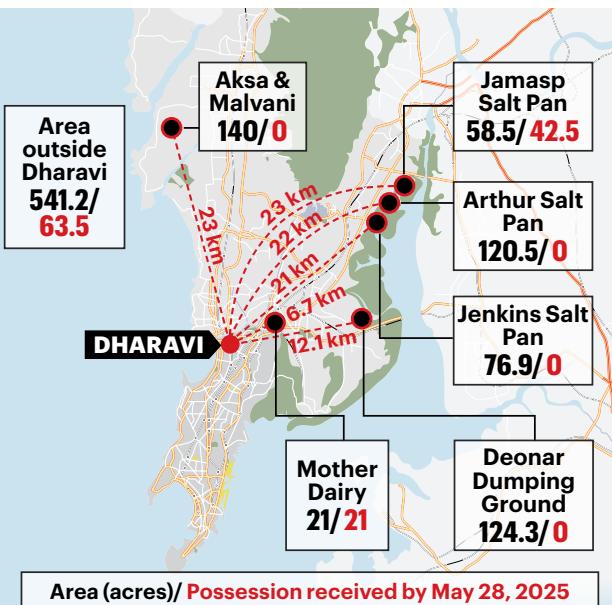
Likely profit the whole project could fetch



“Some 95 per cent of Dharavi residents stay in 50–100 sq. ft houses. They are not opposed to the project, it is only the large godown owners who are against it”

—RAJESH KHANDARE, Shiv Sena (Eknath Shinde)

a city starved of affordable real estate, land is being handed out to the NMDPL at 25 per cent of the ready reckoner rates. For instance, the 21 acres of the now-defunct Kurla Dairy will cost the Adanis just around Rs 58 crore. This is besides the range of sops to the SPV, like a Rs 45 crore stamp duty waiver for the sub-lease agreement between the DRP and Railway



Area (acres)/ Possession received by May 28, 2025

For those being rehabilitated outside Dharavi, 541.2 ACRES have been allocated to build affordable/rental housing. Here, construction will take place for open market sale as well

**Within and outside Dharavi; includes FSI, i.e. Floor Space Index or the maximum allowable built-up area on a plot, expressed as a multiple of the plot's size, and TDR, i.e. Transferable Development Rights granted for land surrendered for public use, which can be sold or used to increase built-up area on another plot beyond its base FSI*

#Numbers can vary, as development will take place in a staggered manner, over 25 years. Such projects can typically earn 15-20% margins, but experts say this is a particularly risky project; therefore calculations for profit are done assuming the lower limit (15%)

Land Development Authority (RLDA) for 30 years. The BMC has also launched a Rs 2,368 crore project to clear 18.5 million tonnes of legacy waste from the Deonar dumping ground using biomining technology to reclaim the land. The civic body will retain just 136 of the total 260 acres here, with the rest going to the Dharavi rehab project.

However, sources stress that the land ownership will be vested with the DRP (i.e. the state government); no land parcel allotted for the Dharavi redevelopment project will be signed over to Adani directly. Meanwhile, in another move that has raised eyebrows, the Maharashtra government has also mandated that Mumbai developers who wish to use TDR must purchase at least 40 per cent of it from the Dharavi project.

Construction has already begun on the 45-acre railway plot (the very one that landed the project in the Adani Group's lap). In Dharavi, too, a multi-stage survey with drones, physical lane recce, alpha-numeric numbering of houses, a high-resolution lane LIDAR (a laser-based remote sensing method to measure distances and create 3D models) and door-to-door audit of documents is under way, with the data uploaded onto an encrypted digital platform. "This is a legacy project," says



"We all want development, but should it be Dharavi's or Adani's? If Dharavikars are not getting homes here, what and who is this redevelopment for?"

—AADITYA THACKERAY, Shiv Sena (UBT)

an NMDPL spokesperson. "We are going beyond contractual obligations and focusing on housing, infrastructure and social impact. Against the mandated eight per cent open space, the new Dharavi will offer double: 16 per cent. This will become a place people choose to live in." There will also be some 'decongestion'. After the plan is implemented, Dharavi's population is expected to fall to 485,713, less than half of what it is currently (the other half will be moved out to the new townships).

Robust connectivity could be Dharavi's ace in the hole. Line 11 of the Mumbai Metro will be extended to the heart of Dharavi to create a multi-modal transit hub, the city's first such facility. Rail access to Mahim, Bandra, GTB Nagar, Kings Circle and Matunga road stations, proximity to the arterial western and eastern express highways, metro links and the high-speed rail a.k.a. bullet train being developed for the next-door BKC business district could make it a real estate hotspot. NMDPL sources say the new Dharavi is being envisioned as a future-ready city. International architects and planners are being roped in. Signature features will include the 'Mithi Drive' along the Mithi River (akin to Mumbai's Marine Drive), an expansive central park and a 'green spine' across the length of Dharavi that will also help flood mitigation.

THE CHALLENGES

Visions of a future-ready city notwithstanding, many Dharavikars face another piquant situation—the displaced population may find themselves unwanted in areas earmarked for their rehabilitation. Residents in Kurla and Malvani are already opposing the construction of rental housing schemes in their areas, with the reasons ranging from pressure on already overloaded infrastructure to a change in demography once the resettlement is complete (a significant number of those who will be shifted may be Muslims). Protesting locals have halted surveys in Aksa and Malvani.

Meanwhile, environmentalists say "creating a cement jungle" in the salt pan lands—Jamsasp, Jenkins and Arthur—would have massive implications for Mumbai's ecology. D. Stalin of the NGO Vanashakti says the salt pans act as giant sponges during the rains, soaking up excess water. If these areas are built up, it would increase the likelihood of floods

in the city. However, Srinivas allays the concerns, saying the SPV and the government will ensure that construction does not begin till all environmental and other clearances are secured.

Politics, too, is playing a part. "We all want development," says Aaditya Thackeray, former minister and Sena (UBT) leader. "But should it be the development of Dharavi or that of Adani?" he asked at a recent public meeting. "If the people of Dharavi are not getting homes here, what and who is this redevelopment for?" Talking to INDIA TODAY, the Sena (UBT) leader alleged that the BMC was being denied a premium of Rs 7,500 crore for its land as well as the TDR incentives. The state should have adopted a contractor-based model to redevelop Dharavi, like it had done with the Bombay Development Department (BDD) chawls, he says. Incidentally, residents of the BDD redevelopment in Worli and elsewhere are getting 500 sq. ft flats, and the Sena (UBT) has demanded that Dharavikars get the same.

Dharavi has a strong Dalit and Muslim presence, and has been a Congress stronghold since 1980, barring a small blip around 1995-99. Varsha Gaikwad, the party's MP from Mumbai



"The redevelopment is a land grab in disguise. Some people will get houses, but what about jobs? Should they sit outside the houses and beg?"

—KARUNANIDHI KANNAN, Kamalanagar businessman

North Central and a former Dharavi MLA, levels a more serious charge. She fears that since Dharavi is a traditional Congress constituency, there is a chance that Muslims would be resettled outside it to change the demography. "The businesses that are the identity of Dharavi (such as leather and recycling), could (also) be forced out," she alleges. Rajesh Khandare, a Shinde Sena leader, pooh-poohs such allegations. "Around 95 per cent of Dharavi residents stay in 50-100 sq. ft houses. They are not opposed to the project, it is only the large godown owners who are against it," he says. However, he concedes that the lack of transparency about the plans has complicated matters.

Opposition to the redevelopment is the highest in the Sanaullah compound area, said to be India's largest recycling hub. S. Selvan, a member of the Dharavi Businessmen Welfare Association, says the area has 10,000 godowns. He says the "circular economy" of the recycling industry, including the rag pickers, kabadi shops and others, would be hit badly if these units were forced to shift. "We pay GST to the government,

INTERVIEW

"The objective is proper housing for all"

S.V.R. Srinivas, CEO, Dharavi Redevelopment Project (DRP), talks about project deadlines, resettlement of slum-dwellers and the attendant controversies. Edited excerpts:

On the 'new' Dharavi: Dharavi should look like a modern town, no gentrification and ghettoisation, with access to amenities for all. It will be a formalised, thriving, much-larger economy than even before. It will also be a huge step towards a slum-free Mumbai.

On the rehabilitation project timelines: Construction could begin in 2-3 months. The project should be completed within seven years from issue of first commencement certificate (CC). Of course, it'll be extremely challenging....

On private agencies being involved in the household surveys in Dharavi: The household surveys are conducted by agencies, but our officers are present at every step. They sign the document as well as the receipt. The agencies

and even their revenues will be hit if Dharavi's businesses are displaced," warns Selvan. Stakeholders of the Rs 200 crore leather industry are also feeling pressured. They say the anti-meat vigilanism, the flood of artificial leather and cheaper Chinese imports have already put the sector on the back foot. Any displacement from Dharavi may sound the death knell for their businesses, he warns.

Srinivas admits that most businesses being in the informal sector is a big hurdle, for it means a "low-level investment trap as most of the people lack entitlements". Once the new Dharavi comes up, they will be part of the formal sector, says the officer. Commercial units in the redeveloped Dharavi will get state GST refunds for the first five years, he points out. Critics say that while conventional SRA projects need consent from 51 per cent of residents to appoint a developer, this clause was done away with in Dharavi. As justification, Srinivas says that "since the developer has been appointed by the government, consent is there". CM Fadnavis has also given assurances that



MANDAR DEODHAR

those eligible inside Dharavi will be resettled there, and those ineligible outside it. But for that, you need land. The SPV tried in different places. We secured land at the Kurla dairy land and the Jamasp salt pans, but we needed more. The revenue department and agencies concerned who hold the land are taking a call. There is a misunderstanding (among locals) that we are shifting the slums there. We are not doing that, there'll be proper layouts with buildings.

On the 40 per cent compulsory TDR (transferable development rights) for other developers:

for other developers: There are three forms of TDR—roads, municipal TDR for various reservations, and slums. The government feels that slum TDR should get priority and, within it, Dharavi should get priority. It's only up to 40 per cent, developers can buy other TDR too.

On charges that a big section of people will have to exit Dharavi:

There is nothing like a perfect project. This is much better than other SRA projects, where people are excluded. We are giving everyone who is eligible a house. We are also putting all the commercial structures within Dharavi, and not shifting them out. ■

"Dharavi should look like a modern town, no gentrification and ghettoisation, with access to amenities for all"

are funded by the SPV (special purpose vehicle). The developers in SRA (Slum Rehabilitation Authority) projects are always private agencies, but, for the first time, the government is now a

partner in the SPV.

On the controversy over the allocation of 541 acres outside Dharavi for rehousing:

The objective is proper housing for all. The government has said that

all eligible slum-dwellers and industries and commercial establishments will be rehabilitated inside Dharavi. He claims that so far door-to-door surveys have been completed for around 90 per cent of the structures and that the people have also supported it.

FEARS FOR THE FUTURE

The biggest fear among Dharavikars is that the project is being treated as a real estate scheme rather than a resettlement project. Kamalanagar businessman and local Karunanidhi Kannan claims the redevelopment is a "land grab in disguise" and charges that some houses have been numbered by survey teams without consent from residents. He fears that much of Dharavi's population, which derived direct or indirect employment from local units, is likely to be deemed 'ineligible' and pushed out of the area, destroying their livelihoods and the vibrant local micro-economy. "Some people will get houses, but what about jobs? Should they sit

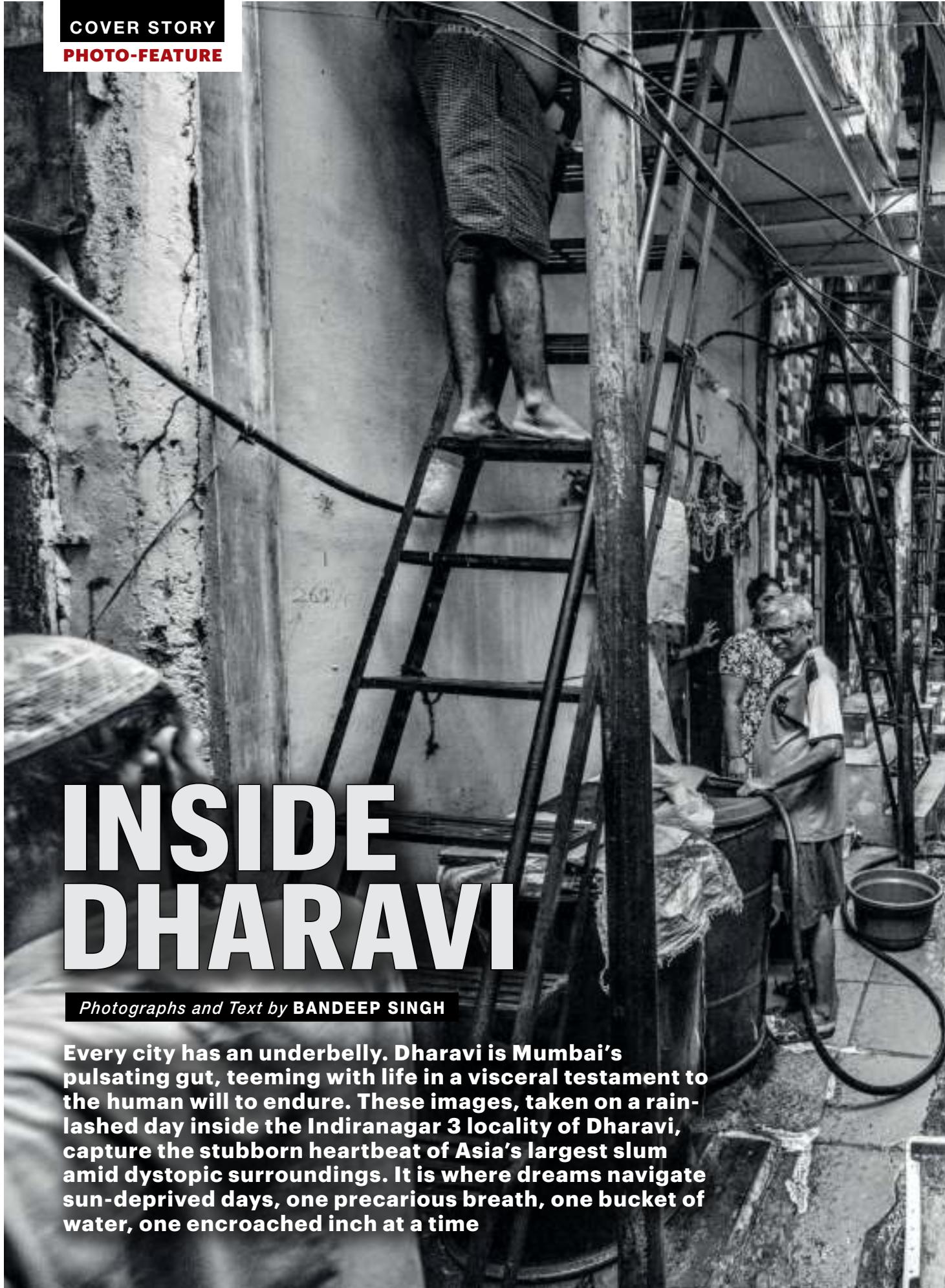
outside the houses and beg?" Kannan asks. But others call for a change. "See the conditions we live in, what do you think we need?" asks Swanandi Swami of Latur Galli. Her neighbour, Mahananda Sawale, 63, who stays with her family of nine in a 10x10 ft room, is more blunt. She described her life as "living in the gutters" and wishes for the coming generations to do better.

The Dharavi project will clearly bring as much disruption as goodwill. Gautam Chatterjee, a retired IAS officer and former head of the DRP and Maharashtra Real Estate Regulatory Authority, warns that "while we call it a rehabilitation project, it should not turn out to be a displacement project". For now, Swami holds on to hope: of a flat, a better life and a future where he no longer has to sleep under the bed. For Adani, the question is whether one of the richest men in Asia can truly reimagine the poorest square miles in Mumbai. And whether his colossal wager will be remembered as a transformation—or a miscalculation. ■

INSIDE DHARAVI

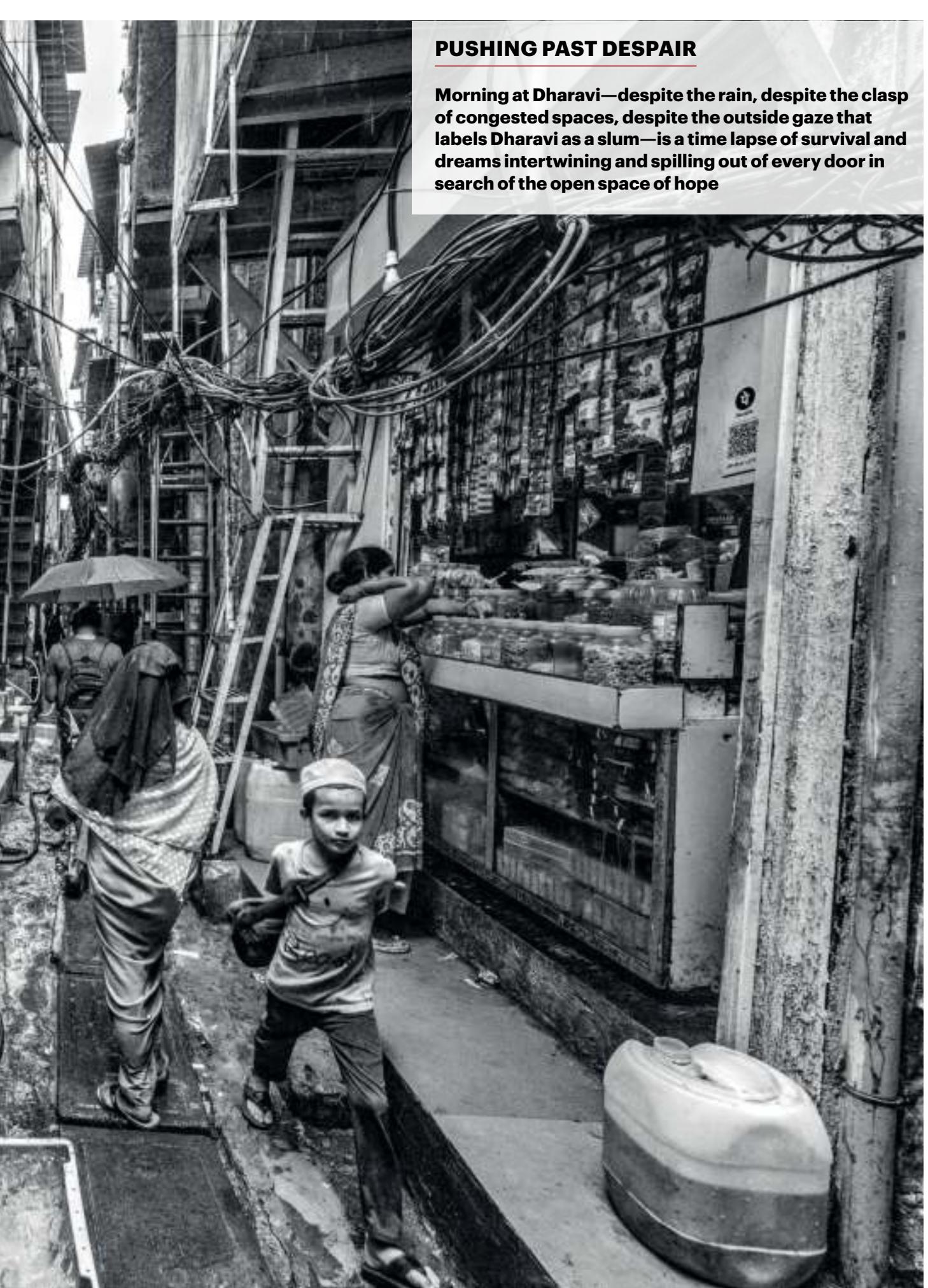
Photographs and Text by BANDEEP SINGH

Every city has an underbelly. Dharavi is Mumbai's pulsating gut, teeming with life in a visceral testament to the human will to endure. These images, taken on a rain-lashed day inside the Indiranagar 3 locality of Dharavi, capture the stubborn heartbeat of Asia's largest slum amid dystopic surroundings. It is where dreams navigate sun-deprived days, one precarious breath, one bucket of water, one encroached inch at a time



PUSHING PAST DESPAIR

Morning at Dharavi—despite the rain, despite the clasp of congested spaces, despite the outside gaze that labels Dharavi as a slum—is a time lapse of survival and dreams intertwining and spilling out of every door in search of the open space of hope







THE WEIGHT OF THE NIGHT

Defying all comprehension of space, four adults breathe in 70 square feet of existence in the hovel that is home to Raju Swami, a school peon. Even though the evening transforms the cramped space into a maze of limbs, and the ceiling presses down like a fist, it does not snuff out in Raju's children—his daughter a psychology student and son a wedding cinematographer—the will to seek the sky



TUNNEL VISION

Sidestepping the exposed waterpipes that snake along the floor of the pitch-dark, 18-inch entrance to the Latur Galli of Dharavi, local resident and slum activist Yogesh Vhatkar, 38, has learnt to navigate these narrow alleys with shoulders angled to conform to the geometry of scarcity. Overhead, a tangled web of illegal electric wires festooning the corrugated metal roofs hum with the hazardous promise of stolen power



STOLEN MOMENTS

It is a language of intimacy that is unintelligible to those for whom privacy is a closed door but which a couple in a room shared by a family well understands. Dharavi swells with a chorus of sewing machines, sizzling oil, the spatter of rain and sounds that walk through walls like ghosts. Yet, in the cracks between bodies and burdens, intimacy grows like a stubborn vine: tender, tenacious and fiercely alive. It's in the glance held a second longer while a garment is folded, the deliberate delay in reaching office...



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ACTOR



SHEFALI SHAH
ACTOR



TANYA BAMI
SERIES HEAD, NETFLIX INDIA



DR KALPANA VISWANATH
CO-FOUNDER & CEO, SAFETIPIN



AYUSHI GUDWANI
FOUNDER & CEO, FS LIFE



KAMALA SHANKAR
MUSICIAN & INVENTOR
OF SHANKAR GUITAR



COL AKRITI SHARMA
COMMANDING OFFICER,
INDIAN ARMY



SHAMBHAVI CHOUDHARY
LOK SABHA MP



KAMALJEET SEHRAWAT
LOK SABHA MP

*Entry by Invite Only



WHAT THE MODEL Y OFFERS

Rear-Wheel Drive	Long-Range RWD	
₹ 59.89 lakh	₹ 67.89 lakh	
220 kW	Motor	220 kW
295 bhp	Max power	295 bhp
420 Nm	Max torque	420 Nm
500 km	Range	622 km
Automatic	Transmission	Automatic
5.9 seconds	0-100 kmph	5.6 seconds

BUSINESS
AUTOMOBILES

TESLA COMES TO TOWN

The US carmaker launches its premium Model Y, but with high import duties and a nascent EV market, the real challenge lies in building scale

By M.G. ARUN

TESLA'S RIVALS IN INDIA



MERCEDES-BENZ

EQA
₹67.20 lakh

EQB
₹72.20-78.90
lakh



BMW

iX1
₹49 lakh

i4
₹72.5-77.5
lakh



MINI COUNTRYMAN

Electric

₹54.90 lakh



BYD

Sealion 7
₹48.90-54.90 lakh



KIA

EV6
₹65.97 lakh



VOLVO

EC40
₹59 lakh



HYUNDAI

Ioniq5
₹46.05 lakh

All prices of the comparable models, except for Tesla, are ex-showroom, New Delhi; source: CarDekho



After years of speculation, US electric carmaker Tesla Inc., led by billionaire entrepreneur Elon Musk, has finally driven into India with its best-selling Model Y. The electric vehicle (EV) will be available in two variants—the Rear-Wheel Drive (RWD), priced at Rs 59.89 lakh, and the Long Range RWD, with a price tag of Rs 67.89 lakh. Tesla's first

showroom has opened in Mumbai's Bandra Kurla Complex, and it is likely to announce more of these in a few other cities, with Delhi being a distinct possibility.

Both models will be imported into India as fully built-up units, likely from Tesla's Gigafactory in Shanghai, which explains the steep price tag. The Model Y will compete in the luxury EV segment against established multinational carmakers such as Mercedes-Benz, BMW, Volvo and Audi, as well as top-end EV models from Hyundai, Kia and BYD (see *Tesla's Rivals in India*). Mercedes-Benz currently offers eight EV models in India, priced between Rs 67.20 lakh and Rs 3 crore. BMW

has five models ranging from Rs 49 lakh to Rs 2.5 crore, while Audi offers four, priced between Rs 1.15 crore and Rs 2.05 crore. These rivals not only offer strong electric performance with luxury features, they are also backed by established dealership networks, accessible service centres and reliable after-sales support. The overall luxury car segment in India sees annual sales of 40,000-50,000 units, accounting for just 1 per cent of the more than four million passenger cars sold each year. Most luxury EV manufacturers do not disclose their sales figures in India.

The Indian electric car market at present is relatively small, accounting for only 2.4 per cent of all cars sold in

2024—around 100,000 units. However, this is a 20 per cent jump from 2023. Tata Motors, with models such as the Nexon EV, Tiago EV and Tigor EV, was the top seller with 61,496 units, and commanded a 62 per cent share of the market, according to data from the Federation of Indian Automotive Dealers Associations. Other players include Mahindra & Mahindra, JSW MG Motor India, Hyundai, Kia, BYD and Citroen, along with luxury brands mentioned earlier. Experts say that for Tesla to gain volumes, it needs to launch affordable models in the Rs 25–35 lakh range. Without that, it will struggle to compete with established players like Tata Motors, Mahindra and JSW MG Motor.

MUSK'S INDIA MOVES

Tesla's launch in India coincides with the upcoming debut of Starlink, Musk's satellite internet company, which has recently received the necessary approvals. The entry of both companies comes at a time when trade relations between the US and China are more strained than ever. However, while Starlink is expected to shake up India's telecom services market, it may take Tesla much longer to make a significant impact in the country.

Experts say Tesla is testing the waters by entering the Indian market through the luxury segment. "Tesla aims to evaluate the aspirations of Indians before making deeper investments in the market. The launch was expected to be in the luxury segment," says Gaurav Vangaal, associate director at S&P Global Mobility. The car will remain expensive due to the high import duties imposed on luxury vehicles in India, which currently attract a basic customs duty of 70 per cent. "This entry barrier is likely to remain, unless there is a positive outcome from the ongoing trade negotiations with the US," he adds.

India is currently in talks with the



INDIA AND THE EU AIM TO FINALISE THE FTA BY THE YEAR-END. IF THAT FRUCTIFIES, ELON MUSK'S TESLA WOULD LOOK AT IMPORTS FROM GERMANY RATHER THAN CHINA

2.4%
Share of EVs (around 100,000 units) in India's overall car sales in 2024

20%
Growth of EV sales in 2024 over 2023

50,000
Number of luxury cars sold in India annually

4 mn
Passenger cars sold every year in the country

US to shape the contours of a bilateral trade agreement. The US had earlier imposed what it described as "reciprocal tariffs" on several countries. For India, these tariffs, set at 26 per cent, are set to kick in by August 1. India is aiming to finalise the agreement with the US by the end of the year, but talks on market access for goods have yet to reach a conclusion. "The automotive market and Tesla give India a good tool to negotiate with the US in future," Vangaal notes.

POSSIBLE IMPORT SHIFT

Tesla may also eye importing the Model Y from its facility in Germany, officially called the Gigafactory Berlin-Brandenburg. It is the company's first manufacturing location in Europe and produces Model Y cars, battery cells and electric drive trains, according to industry sources. India and the European Union are also actively negotiating a free trade agreement, expected to be finalised by the end of this year. If that fructifies, Tesla would look at imports from Germany, sources say. This would provide an alternative to China for sourcing vehicles, especially as the Indian government may not be inclined to favour Chinese imports in the long term, they add.

"We anticipate rapid expansion driven by more affordable EVs, an extensive charging infrastructure and a shrinking price gap between traditional vehicles and EVs," S&P Global says in a report. The Indian government has set an ambitious target for EVs to make up 30 per cent of total passenger vehicle sales by FY30, supported by plans for subsidies, financing options and infrastructure development. However, achieving this goal will be a formidable task. Setting up adequate charging stations and maintaining policy support for EVs will be crucial for a more rapid adoption of such vehicles in the mass market. ■

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BABA OR BLACK SHEEP?

A SMALL-TOWN MUSLIM SEER STANDS ACCUSED OF HEADING A SINISTER AND ELABORATE CONSPIRACY OF MASS CONVERSION AT THE BEHEST OF UNKNOWN FOREIGN PAYMASTERS

By AVANEESH MISHRA from Balrampur, Uttar Pradesh

FOR OLDER RESIDENTS OF REHRA MAAFI, a village on the outskirts of Utraula town in Balrampur district, old images of Jamaluddin—now known as Chhangur Baba—are still vivid. A thin, swarthy man from the Pankhiya Muslim community, with six fingers on his right hand (hence the moniker Chhangur), cycling between villages, selling trinkets and rings. Once elected pradhan, he is remembered for bridging the Yadav-Muslim divide. On July 5, however, following a manhunt, when the Uttar Pradesh Anti-Terrorism Squad (ATS) arrested the 70-year-old along with an associate, Neetu alias Nasreen, in Lucknow, they described him as the head of an elaborate and organised illegal conversion racket with wide reach across the state. Indeed, Chhangur had long exchanged his bicycle for a Toyota Fortuner, moved with armed guards

and owned multiple properties. According to the ATS, his operations allegedly spanned fake identities, foreign funding, document forgery and multiple aliases. A raft of serious charges has been brought against him and his associates—including conspiracy to wage war against the state, promoting religious enmity, cheating and violating sections of the UP Prohibition of Unlawful Conversion of Religion Act, 2021. The police said earlier arrests (on April 8) included Mumbai native Naveen Rohra (husband of Neetu), known as Jamaluddin after his conversion to Islam, and Chhangur's son Mehboob.

Just a few kilometres from Rehra Maafi, in Madhpur village, stands Chhangur's five-bigha (1.65 acres) estate, close to the *mazaar* (shrine) of Chand Auliya Shah Baba. One section of the high-walled compound has been demolished by the district administration after the arrest. A senior police officer says seven dogs of foreign breeds and a horse were recovered from the site.



ANI

₹100 CRORE
Total worth of suspicious transactions allegedly linked to Gulf countries in 40 bank accounts of Chhangur Baba and his associates

₹15-16 LAKH
Alleged cash reward for converting each upper-caste Hindu woman. Caste-based awards of Rs 10-12 lakh for OBC women and Rs 8-10 lakh for all others



HUMBLE BEGINNINGS

In the narrow lanes of Rehra Maafi, a village where Muslim and Yadav families still live in separate clusters, talk of Chhangur's arrest is hard to miss. Locals say Chhangur moved to nearby Madhpur village about seven to eight years ago. "We remember him as a seller of rings and trinkets. He built support through that work and got his wife elected pradhan in 2005. He won the seat himself in 2015," says an elderly Hindu resident. "He was a good pradhan and got things done. The road outside my house was made by him." He adds that till Chhangur lived in Rehra Maafi, there was no controversy.

Seventy-three-year-old Izhar Hussain, a two-time pradhan of Rehra Maafi and once Chhangur's rival in panchayat polls, shares more details. "He is from the Pankhiya caste, who travel from village to village and survive on charity. Chhangur lived like a fakir once; we were friends. He later started selling rings and

ATS SOURCES ALLEGED THE OBJECTIVE WAS TO 'UNDERMINE THE SOCIAL FABRIC OF HINDU SOCIETY' BY TARGETING VULNERABLE HINDU WOMEN

amulets, claiming that they could change people's fortunes," says Hussain.

According to villagers (and the police), in the early 2010s, Chhangur started visiting Mumbai, where he met Sindhi couple Naveen and Neetu. "They wanted a son. Claiming to be a *peer baba*, Chhangur promised them that. Over time, he brainwashed and converted them and convinced them to relocate to Balrampur district. They settled in Madhpur," says

Hussain, who now lives in Lucknow.

Not everyone in Rehra Maafi agrees with this. Mohammad Raza says the couple came to Balrampur six to seven years ago to do business. "They opened two readymade clothing shops. They probably wanted to leave an expensive city like Mumbai," he says. Raza and others believe the case may have started as a financial dispute. According to them, Babbu, alias Wasiuddin, a local builder who was hired to construct Chhangur's new house in Madhpur, had a money dispute with him. They say Babbu was the first to level allegations against Chhangur, which snowballed into a full-blown probe.

For many watching the drama unfold, the Chhangur Baba case cannot be separated from the prevailing political context in UP. This is not the first time the state has seen high-pitched campaigns around 'religious conspiracies'. Whether the campaign against 'Love Jihad', anti-conversion drives or contro-

versities around halal-certified products or Muslim-owned eateries near Kanwar Yatra routes, a pattern has emerged where Hindu victimhood is framed against a vague but menacing ‘Islamic threat’. The anti-conversion law in UP has been criticised by rights groups for being used exclusively against Muslims, even where conversions are voluntary. The state has defended such campaigns as necessary for protecting vulnerable citizens, especially women, from coercion or deceit.

THE MONEY TRAIL

Chhangur has been in the sights of the police for long. In November 2024, the UP ATS filed an FIR against him after a preliminary probe into allegations of mass conversions, foreign funding and even national security threats in the form of using a large building as a “terror training camp” as well as suspected links with Pakistan’s Inter Services Intelligence (ISI). The FIR also alleges collusion with local police and intelligence units.

Chhangur and his gang, the police and ATS allege, targeted poor and vulnerable non-Muslim individuals for conversion to Islam through inducements of money, coercion, emotional pressure and, in some cases, false promises of marriage. They say the group laundered crores of rupees, bought benami properties, expanded such operations to Maharashtra and Nepal, travelled frequently to Gulf countries and maintained over 40 Indian bank accounts. Foreign currency inflows from West Asia—apparently used for conversion purposes, money-laundering and buying property—are now under Enforcement Directorate scrutiny, with suspicious transactions pegged at around Rs 100 crore. Several Vostro accounts—a bank account held for transactions with a foreign bank—connected to co-accused Naveen Rohra and held in UAE-linked banks, are also being inspected by the ED. At least two bank accounts in Neetu’s name received suspected foreign remittances. In Naveen’s accounts, investigators flagged two large inward transfers of Rs 16.22 crore and Rs 18.66 crore via NEFT, along with additional foreign re-

mittances routed through UAE-based exchange services.

Investigators claim Chhangur’s group followed a caste-based cash reward rate, payable to persons actually bringing about successful conversions: Rs 15-16 lakh for converting an upper-caste woman, Rs 10-12 lakh for women from Other Backward Classes (OBC) and Rs 8-10 lakh for converting persons from Scheduled Castes and other communities. The ultimate objective, allege ATS sources, was to undermine the social fabric of Hindu society through specifically targeting vulnerable and poor Hindu women;

SUMIT KUMAR



ANI

CASE FILE CHHANGUR BABA

► Seven people arrested so far, including Chhangur Baba, his son Mehboob and close associates Naveen and Neetu Rohra

► Gang members are said to have made some 40 trips to Middle East countries

► The group allegedly acquired property worth over Rs 100 crore in a few years,

with structures often built without required land-use approvals

► ED also inspecting vostro accounts with large inward transfers operated by co-accused Naveen held in UAE-linked banks

► Two accounts in Neetu’s name allegedly received foreign remittances too



BREAKING BAD

A part of Chhangur's property being demolished in Madhpur, Jul. 8

conversion of upper-caste women was especially prized. In Lucknow, Gunja Gupta was allegedly lured by a Muslim man, Abu Ansari, posing as 'Amit', taken to Chhangur Baba's 'dargah', converted and married off under the new name of Alina Ansari. Similarly, Manvi Sharma from Auraiya accused a man named Meraj, alias Rudra, of emotional manipulation, sexual exploitation and forced conversion. The police FIR against Chhangur names five more such converted persons. In all, according to some estimates, it is suspected that over 1,000 people were converted by the baba's outfit.

These allegations have been fuelled by Gopal Rai, president of the right-wing outfit Vishva Hindu Raksha Parishad, who earlier paraded some of the alleged victims in front of the media in three press conferences in Lucknow, and claimed to have brought them back into the Hindu fold.

The FIR further states that Naveen and his wife Neetu and daughter Samale converted to Islam in Dubai at the Al Farooq Omar Bin Khatab Center in November 2015, with the couple allegedly being the leading lights of the racket. Their modus operandi was to lend large sums of money to vulnerable Hindus and force them to convert to Islam in exchange of writing off the debts when

ALL THE BIG **CHARGES**

The FIR by Uttar Pradesh ATS lines up a raft of grave accusations against Chhanqur Baba

➔ Involvement in illegal religious conversions through deceit, coercion and fear

➔ Acquiring money worth crores through foreign funding

➔ Spreading animosity against Hinduism

➔ Working to increase the population of Muslims, altering India's demography

→ Trying to end India's democratic system and replace it with Sharia law, disturbing communal harmony

SHOW, NOT TELL

Vishva Hindu Raksha Parishad chief Gopal Rai with some of Chhangur Baba's alleged victims in Lucknow, Jul. 22

they defaulted. The FIR claims the group targeted poor women, Dalits and daily wage workers for conversion. When their usual mix of financial help and religious brainwashing failed, the accused allegedly threatened to lodge false legal cases.

The FIR alleges the group acquired property worth over Rs 100 crore in a few years. One tract of land in Madhpur was purchased in the names of Neetu and Mehboob, and structures—including the now-demolished part—were built without required land-use approvals. Travel records show frequent UAE visits by Naveen and Neetu, often separately. Chhangur also visited Saudi Arabia in 2018. Officials suspect multiple passports, but say verification is ongoing.

The FIR concludes with the broader charge that the syndicate aimed to “spoil the harmony of the country” by spreading hatred towards the Hindu religion. It alleges that India’s demography is being affected through such illegal conversions, with a goal to “remove the democratic system and establish Sharia Law”.

However, investigators have yet to definitely name any foreign organisation or domestic group that allegedly funded or planned this grand conspiracy. The ED has flagged money trails, but whether they are linked to an ideological agenda or simply financial gain is still unclear.

Meanwhile, the state police claim to have ‘busted’ fresh ‘conversion rackets’. On July 19, UP Police announced that they have arrested 10 people from six states after a probe into a missing persons complaint involving two sisters in Agra led them to what they described as a vast network pushing conversion and radicalisation involving funding from Canada and the US. The crackdown is part of ‘Operation Asmita’, a UP Police campaign launched to identify and dismantle such networks.

As the case draws national attention, rival political parties are busy blaming each other. The Samajwadi Party points to the expansion of Chhangur's racket under the BJP, while the BJP highlights his earlier links. If allegations of a campaign to subvert Indian democracy are true, then the question about how Chhangur operated so openly for so long must be answered. ■

IN THE MOOD FOR LOVE

AT A TIME WHEN ROMANTIC FILMS WERE ON THE RETREAT IN BOLLYWOOD, MOHIT SURI DELIVERS A SMASH HIT STARRING TWO YOUNG NEWCOMERS. HOW DID HE PULL IT OFF?

By SUHANI SINGH

N

NO REELS WERE SHOT. NO INTERVIEWS GIVEN. NO CITY TOURS or visits to malls and colleges. Relying on its ballad-heavy soundtrack and the track record of director Mohit Suri (who has done most of the pre-release heavy lifting), a romantic drama featuring two newcomers—Ahaan Panday and Aneet Padda—has sprung out of nowhere to create a mini tremor at the box office. Opening day collections? Rs 21.5 crore. Doubts about the figure being inflated or fudged were abound, but by the weekend of July 18, nobody could deny that *Saiyaara*, a new film about a young couple whose love is challenged when one of them develops early-onset Alzheimer's, is a smash hit. Rs 83 crore in three days! Records have already piled up: biggest

opening weekend for a film featuring rookies, biggest opening for a romantic film in Indian cinema... With week one set to easily cross the Rs 150 crore mark, the film is destined to enter the Rs 300 crore club. That these numbers come at a time when the love story was deemed a dead-beat genre on the big screen has made this accomplishment all the more impressive.

But how did it happen? The key, as has been the case with many of Suri's previous romantic outings (*Murder 2, Aashiqui 2, Ek Villain*), may be the soundtrack,



“IT MEANT A LOT TO ME THAT MINE WAS THE FILM WITH WHICH YASH RAJ FILMS WANTED TO COME BACK TO THE ROMANTIC GENRE”

MOHIT SURI, Director



TORTURED LOVE
A still from
Saiyaara, directed
by Mohit Suri

which not only complements his emotional narratives but at times also supercedes it. *Saiyaara's* album features fresh vocal talent like Faheem Abdullah, who has sung and co-composed the title track, which has busted the charts and has the youth singing along.

Says Suri, "If I have had a good musical record, it's because my education has been with a company that prioritised and paid attention to music and lyrics." He credits his uncles Mahesh and Mukesh Bhatt, whose banner Vishesh Films gave him his big break,



**“YRF AND MOHIT SURI'S
SAIYAARA IS TURNING OUT
TO BE ADITYA CHOPRA AND
YRF'S MODERN-DAY DDLJ!”**

KOMAL NAHATA, Trade Analyst, on X

and adds, "Music and romance go hand in hand. Tell me one love story that did well but didn't have good music. I like to have my ears to the ground, to stay in touch with what people are hearing and connecting to." Earworms he's anchored like 'Phir Mohabbat', 'Tum Hi Ho' and 'Galliany' still dominating the airwaves are proof that he knows what he's doing.

MUSIC MEETS FILM

Just a track record of successful romantic releases, however, didn't mean that Suri had an easy time selling the movie to producers. He conceived the film at a time when the genre was struggling to put bums on seats. The industry belief has been that ever since COVID-19, the audience has been content watching love stories from the comfort of their homes on OTT platforms and it is the adrenaline-heavy, larger-than-life action spectacles that are thriving on the big screen.

Suri felt the void. It helped that he had just happened to see *The Romantics*, the Netflix documentary series tracking the origin and rise of Yash Raj Films (YRF). "I was roaming around with the script and a lot of people were genuinely concerned about me and said that no one is going to make a film like this," he says. Loosely inspired by Korean film *A Moment to Remember*, Suri wanted to craft a musical romance around a creative partnership—a hotheaded singer and a heartbroken writer who inspires him and her.

"[The male lead, played by Panday] has bare raw talent who doesn't know what to do with it; [the female lead, Padda] has the words and knows how to channelise the best from him. They are soul mates but can't be together," he adds. This dynamic is different from the one in his other blockbuster romance, *Aashiqui 2*, which was more supportive than competitive.

Little did Suri know that Yash Raj Films, otherwise busy building up their Spy Universe, was on the lookout for a love story. To invest Rs 50 crore on



“WHEN A NEW STAR CAST CREATES WAVES AT THE BOX OFFICE, IT SENDS A CLEAR MESSAGE TO PRODUCERS NOT TO MAKE AN OVER-BUDGET FILM, MORE THAN A GOOD STORY NEEDS”

SUBHASH GHAI, Filmmaker, on X

a film with two twentysomething newcomers was a gamble they were willing to take. Casting director Shanno Sharma, who has brought to Bollywood talents like Anushka Sharma, Ranveer Singh and Bhumi Pednekar, found the perfect pair in Panday (cousin of Ananya Panday) and Padda, whose earlier credit is a little-seen web series *Big Girls Don't Cry*. YRF was confident it had an ace up its sleeves with the genre it was once synonymous with—romance.

“It meant a lot to me that mine was the film with which YRF wanted to come back to the genre,” says Suri. “My education in romantic films was going to theatres and watching Yash [Chopra] ji and Adi [Aditya] sir’s films. We all grew up falling in love with the kind of films they did.”

Interestingly, the young leads were spared the burden of a promotional blitz. “We wanted to take away those expectations,” says Suri. “I think they have excelled. They have given it their all. They went all in, their hunger is there. They are more skilled and prepared than [we were when] we started out. They want their work to talk.”

RETURN OF ROMANCE

And talk it has, with 27-year-old Panday, particularly, being celebrated as the next big thing. Much chatter has been around how the film could portend the return of romance in Hindi cinema. After all, not since *Kaho Naa Pyaar Hai*, 25 years back, has a love story with debutants been embraced with such gusto.

But the crystal ball remains hazy. *Kaho Naa...* came at the tail-end of a decade of love stories,

LOVE IS IN THE AIR

Saiyaara's success has given a fillip to other films in the genre

DHADAK 2, Aug. 1

Dharma brings its own take on star-crossed romance, albeit this one has caste as the source of dramatic conflict. Starring Triptii Dimri and Siddhant Chaturvedi



SUNNY SANSKARI KI TULSI KUMARI Oct. 2

Varun Dhawan, Janhvi Kapoor, Sanya Malhotra and Rohit Saraf come together for this romantic comedy, which is directed by Shashank Khaitan

PARAM SUNDARI Aug. 29

Maddock Films takes a break from horror comedies to present a romcom featuring Janhvi Kapoor and Sidharth Malhotra

EK DIN, Nov. 7

After *Loveyapa*'s poor showing, Junaid Khan hopes to turn it around as a romantic hero with this adaptation of the Korean film *One Day*

TERE ISHQ MEIN, Nov. 28

Aanand L. Rai sure knows what it takes to make emotionally-charged love stories for the big screen. This one's got his *Raanjhana* star Dhanush and Kriti Sanon

in which Shah Rukh Khan led the wave with his trademark outstretched arms. In recent times, the only other Hindi romantic film to have connected so feverishly with audiences was Sandeep Reddy Vanga's *Kabir Singh* (2019), with its wild-child of a hero leaving some audiences unsettled by his rage and antics.

Yet the industry appears hopeful. “Thankfully, *Saiyaara* has made heads turn and made everyone realise that it's the big intrinsic idea that really drives the box office.... I hope it makes the industry realise that what we need is not one genre over and over again. We need to give audiences a variety,” says Akkshay Rathie, director at Aashirwad Theatres and a film exhibitor. Annukampa Harsh, a fortysomething writer who saw the film with her mother, says that *Saiyaara* is proof that “the old school works.... We don't need ‘modern’ love stories. The only thing new about love today is how we seek it.”

Whether any of the upcoming romantic films in the next few months (see *Love is in the Air*) will resonate the way *Saiyaara* has with the audiences remains to be seen. But what is clear right now is that Panday and Padda are two of the industry's brightest young stars basking in the success of a debut that could only have been written in the stars. ■

आज तक

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

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

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..... शहर..... राज्य..... पिन.....

मोबाइल..... ईमेल.....



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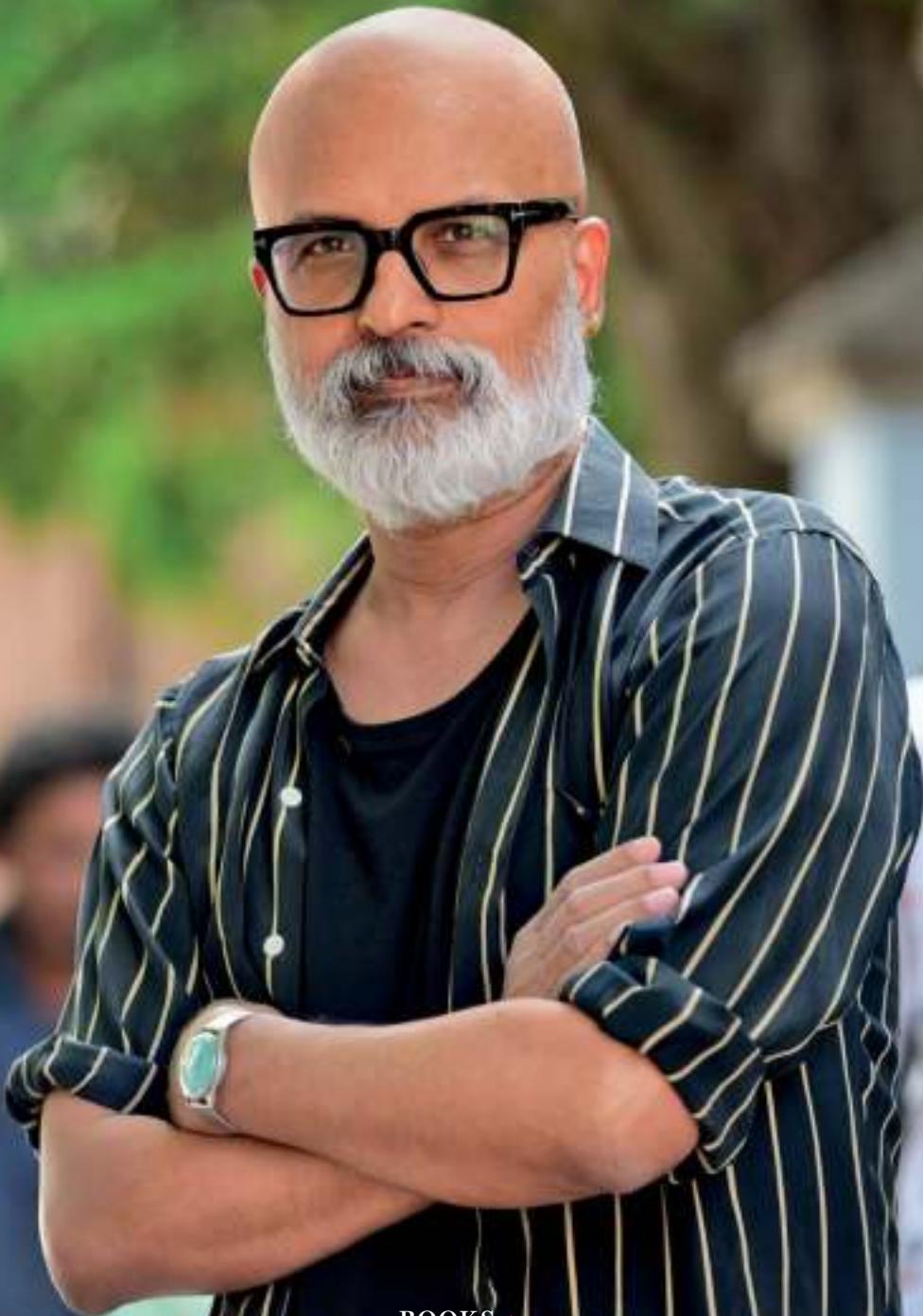


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LE ! SURE

THE LISTICLE: MUSIC AND THEATRE PG 67

Q+A: CHEF VIJAYA KUMAR PG 68



BOOKS ▾

A LIFE BEYOND BORDERS

JEET THAYIL'S *THE ELSEWHEREANS* IS A QUASI-MEMOIR ABOUT FAMILY, BELONGING, INHERITANCE AND, ABOVE ALL, LOVE

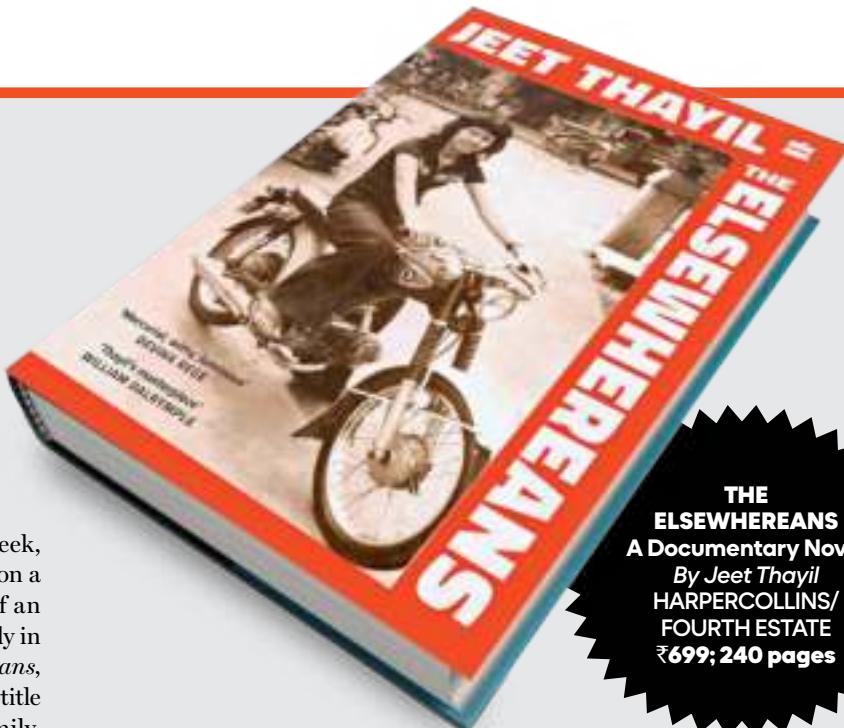
Photograph by HEMANT MISHRA

A

At 65, Jeet Thayil remains a sleek, honed physical presence, even on a Zoom call, as befits the son of an athlete. It's a detail we learn early in Thayil's new book *The Elsewhereans*, a 'documentary novel' as the subtitle says, a quasi-memoir about family, belonging and, above all, love.

I received the book in the week that home minister Amit Shah made now-standard remarks about English, about the "mentality of slavery" that afflicts those who insist on speaking it as if to abjure their so-called mother tongue. Thayil reminds me that he wrote a poem decades ago with the line "our mother tongue is not our mother's tongue". That we still remain so conflicted, so unable to claim English, and the varying ways it is spoken and written in India, as a native language is embarrassing.

Thayil's novels, poetry and music, for example, could only ever be



**THE
ELSEWHEREANS**
A Documentary Novel
By Jeet Thayil
HARPERCOLLINS/
FOURTH ESTATE
₹699; 240 pages

written by an Indian writer, even as they're written in a 'global' language—the product of a mind shaped by India's particular post-colonial, and for that matter pre-colonial, history. "We're in a stage of our national evolution," Thayil says, "where we all feel like outsiders." In a city like Delhi, "dislocation", he adds, "is location". It's an embrace, as is the story told in *The Elsewhereans*, of uncertainty, of travel as a means of finding not just oneself, but others.

In this case, it is the writer using art and language to locate himself

as the son of his parents, a life spent, he says, being a "bad son", that has come full circle. It's intriguing that the principal concern of a book that whips us through Hanoi, Hong Kong and Harrisburg is home—how we find it in people, how it can be made and remade wherever we, to quote Thayil (and Paul Young), lay our hat.

The Elsewhereans is a bit like the work of W.G. Sebald and Teju Cole, in its use of photographs as a narrative device, a gesture at verisimilitude even as we understand this is a novel, an act of imaginative rather

BOOKS ▶

RETRACING THE MAP

Sam Dalrymple's *Shattered Lands* is about the end of the British Empire in Asia and the many partitions it left in its wake

The one thing predictable about empires is that they do fall, and usually there is a messy outcome. It was no different with the British Raj—as countries struggled for their own independence and

identity. And sometimes it was the mandarins in Whitehall who just gave up, especially after the second World War. In India, of course, we take pride that we made the British quit the jewel in their crown. But

it also meant paying the terrible price of Partition.

Covering a wide swathe of information—some known and some unknown—and written in an energetic, lively style, Sam Dalrymple's *Shattered Lands* reveals and analyses the dismemberment of the British Raj that created the map of modern Asia. This is a riveting account as one scoots across states and countries while Sam mines out nuggets—because, of course, some of the Partitions he speaks about deserve (and have

SHATTERED LANDS
Five Partitions and the
Making of Modern Asia
By Sam Dalrymple
HARPERCOLLINS/
FOURTH ESTATE
₹799; 536 pages

had) complete books written about them. Sam, as a young historian, therefore, brings a perspective that speaks to the present generation who probably do not know that India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Burma, Nepal, Bhutan, Yemen, Oman, UAE, Qatar,

than factual recounting. Like Sebald and Cole, Thayil is interested in migration. What the act of leaving does to individuals. The artist, he says, "is the stranger, the perpetual outsider." Thayil's fidelity, simply put, is to a community. Of "elsewhereans", of peripatetic perspectives.

When I complained to Thayil about my own background, growing up and being educated in different

specific way." Displacement, he argues, whether literal or metaphorical, is the contemporary state of being. It's what makes *The Elsewhereans* a deeply political book, a "rich evocation", as Amitav Ghosh calls it, "of decolonisation and non-alignment."

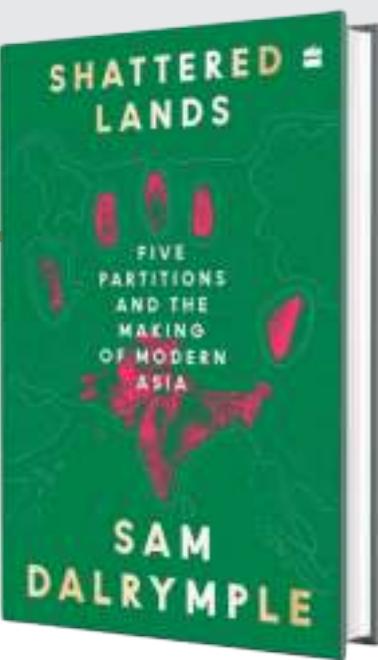
The lives of its protagonists are a rebuke of a global moment in which increasingly authoritarian governments are trying to define what it

that leap of imagination. A storyteller's job is to put his audience in the minds of others, to take us elsewhere. For Thayil, this is a kind of internationalism that has long fallen out of fashion. Citizens of the world, as the former British prime minister Theresa May said in 2016, are "citizens of nowhere". One such citizen of nowhere would have been James Joyce, who exiled himself to Europe to write not just *Ulysses* but also *Dubliners*, needing to leave the city that occupied his every waking hour to write about it. In perhaps Joyce's most famous story, he concludes with an image of "snow falling faintly through the universe and faintly falling, like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead".

Thayil's work is vividly specific, vividly Indian, yet it resonates elsewhere, everywhere, in fact, where people do not want to swallow the narrow, the parochial, the circumscribed ideologies, Thayil said, "being forced down their throats."

Home may be where the heart is, but our hearts are large. And home is also where the imagination can roam, can find the space to tell all our stories—as Thayil, arguably India's most experimental contemporary writer, reminds us—not just those the authorities deem acceptable. ■

—*Shougart Dasgupta*



Bahrain and Kuwait once upon a time all came under the British flag. Using oral histories, memoirs and rigorous historical documentation—Dal-

rymple provides a variety of voices to his nuanced narrative.

For me, it is the pre-Partition Burmese connection that remains the most interesting. I had always been fascinated that the global reach of the Empire meant that, in the 1900s, people from my village in Hoshiarpur, Punjab, also worked in Rangoon, Burma, in the timber and mining industry—leaving their farmlands behind. All this was to come to a halt on April 1, 1937, and, as Dalrymple records, newspa-

per headlines stated "Burma Divorces India". Aden, Yemen would also be partitioned from the Empire on April Fool's Day.

What followed would be escape and migration back to India for those who had cho-

sen to make Burma their home—alas, it was a forgotten list of 600,000 refugees who fled in 1942 and around a lakh of them would not make it.

As someone who set up and runs two museums on the Partition of India—one appreciates the addition of an important new voice recording the many Partitions that took place in just the last hundred years. This is an ambitious, meticulously researched book that covers a lot of ground, and is much needed. ■

—*Kishwar Desai*

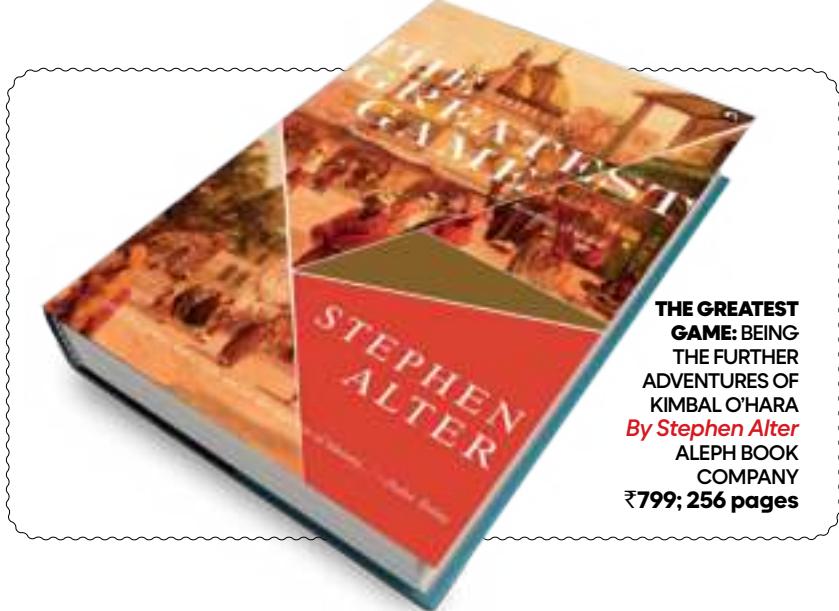
USING ORAL HISTORIES, MEMOIRS AND OLD DOCUMENTS, DALRYMPLE ADDS NUANCE TO THE PARTITION STORY

THE GAME IS ON

Stephen Alter spins a splendid tale in his sequel to Rudyard Kipling's *Kim*

The founding idea of Stephen Alter's novel is little short of brilliant. The ageing spy—whether in retirement or on the verge thereof—drawn reluctantly into the strife of the world, is a familiar device in postwar fiction. He has been in the thick of it, seen and seen through it all, and is well-positioned to give one a clear-eyed account of contested histories. John le Carré's *Smiley* is perhaps the best-known, but there are others. Mick Herron's Jackson Lamb in *Slow Horses*—brilliantly rendered by Gary Oldman in the TV series—is a recent example. Alter's ageing spy is none other than Kipling's *Kim*, drawn into the turmoil of India in the moment of the smudgy dawn of Independence—*yeh dagh-dagh ujala....* The history is nothing if not momentous, and Alter is a skilled writer who has researched his material well—both the fictional world of Kipling's boy-hero, and the fateful and blood-stained midnight hour when India awoke to its "freedom".

The resulting work—*The Greatest Game*—is predictably smooth, propelled by an unflagging narrative zest. This is particularly remarkable because, of course, much of this Partition material is all-too-familiar—the trains full of frightened refugees and worse, plying from Lahore to Amritsar and, be it remembered, *from* Amritsar and Delhi to Lahore. The murderous



hordes, the blood and gore, all this is old hat. And the challenge, as ever, is how to make it new, to make it seem worth telling once again.

Against this backdrop, Alter introduces an assassination plot, targeting Nehru and Gandhi. Brigadier Denys Bromley-Pugh's gang of die-hard colonialists, who are hatching the plot

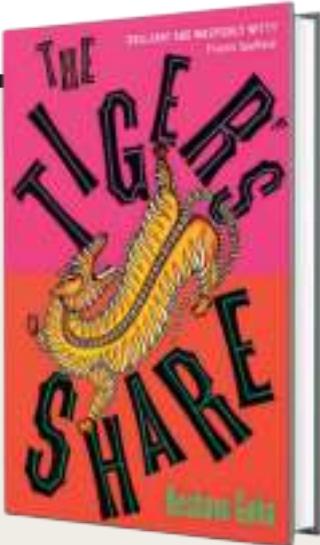
somewhat clumsily, are desperate to stall the Independence that is imminent. They needn't have bothered with the latter target, of course. Indigenous fascists were already at work on that one—and were, in the event, rather more successful. Not least, I suppose, because there wasn't a *Kim* inventively at work to foil their dastardly designs. So, enjoy.

But it is a pity that someone as gift-

ed as Stephen Alter has deliberately set his bar low: "The novel you hold in your hands makes no pretence of being a scholarly sequel or even a commentary on the Raj. It is simply an effort to spin the yarn a little further...." This is unfortunate. As we know from the writings of le Carré, post-Cold War spy fiction was able to explore the complex realities of the world that had hitherto been represented in the simple binaries of the James Bond universe—good Us, bad Them. Similarly, an ageing *Kim*, having helped to restore a morally compromised order, was well-positioned to render the colonial deceit and hypocrisy that was soon to be replaced by its post-colonial variant. It is an opportunity that Alter declines. ■

—Alok Rai

AGAINST THE BACKDROP OF PARTITION, ALTER INTRODUCES AN ASSASSINATION PLOT—TARGETING NEHRU AND GANDHI



BOOKS ▾

BLOOD SPORTS

Keshava Guha's *The Tiger's Share* is a tragicomic take on sibling rivalry and other family dynamics

THIS CLEVER, FAST-PACED NOVEL FOCUSES ON A PASSION hotter than sex: the territorial frenzy of a brother challenging his sister's claim to family property. Tara Saxena, the narrator, is a successful lawyer with a cool wit and a knack for snarky-taut summations. Her dim-bunny younger brother Rohit is the classic ne'er-do-well. He's soaked up parental funds while pursuing a foreign degree, then remained in the US still chasing dreams. But when their father retires, Rohit rushes back to India, convinced that his conniving sister will surely snatch the tiger's share of the inheritance all to herself.

Why not "lion's share" you may ask? Because tigers are solitary predators, who typically do not share their spoils. There are a number of tigers in this tale, starting with Tara. Rohit's buddy, the thuggish Kunal Chawla is another selfish tiger, the adoptive son of mega-rich parents. Opposing him is the biological heir to the fortune, Lila, an international financier with a seemingly perfect marriage and young son. When their father dies, Kunal swings into usurper mode and locks his furious sister

out of the family "farm house". That's when Lila reaches out to Tara, invoking their youthful friendship to secure legal advice in order to move against the brother.

The sizzling tandoor of New Delhi's summer drives the plot via the sheer scale of its dysfunction. In the midst of this churning urban chaos, the elder Saxena is presented as a model of reason and higher truth. Tara calls him Baba, meaning "father", but the name foreshadows his role as something other than just a beloved parent. We are told that he bootstrapped his way to wealth from origins so humble that he didn't describe them to his family. But when he takes on global climate change as a personal challenge, the link with plausibility snaps altogether.

Which is a shame. Guha's great achievement is to narrate an otherwise dismal story through the perspectives of Tara and, to a lesser extent, Lila. They are both such sterling examples of Indian Alpha Womanhood that when attacked with the rusty old weapons of traditional gender injustice, they fight back like true tigresses. I believe the author owed them a better share of the ending! ■

—Manjula Padmanabhan

BOOKS ▾

Subcontinental Drift

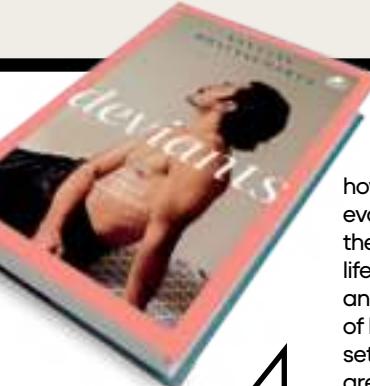
Santanu Bhattacharya's *Deviants* chronicles being queer, across generations

Queer narratives from South Asia are hard to come by. In the few that exist, *Deviants* stands out as an ambitious debut novel that combines three stories of queer love from a single family, delving into the complexities of love, identity, as well as familial and societal norms surrounding same-sex relationships in India.

The author attempts a broad sweep and succeeds

valiantly most of the time. The stories—especially those of queer men Mambro and Sukumar, who came before the protagonist Vivaan—are engaging, heartbreakingly lonely yet resilient.

The novel's exploration of queer identity in a heteronormative society is hard-hitting, particularly through the poignant stories of older gay men and their ongoing struggles. The novel reminds us of the challenges



DEVIANTS: THE QUEER FAMILY CHRONICLES
By Santanu Bhattacharya
TRANQUEBAR
₹799; 304 pages

of acceptance, self-hatred, and dissonance that queer South Asians face globally today.

While the multiple stories are enriching, they don't always flow together seamlessly. The prose,

however, is lyrical and evocative, and captures the contradictions of queer life in India with all its ebbs and flows. The descriptions of Kolkata and the story set in a bygone era of India are particularly vivid and immersive, transporting you to another time.

Deviants is a welcome voice, though one finishes it wishing it had been more engaging. Nevertheless, for a debut novel, it's both bold and determined to tell its truth, bringing a queer perspective with empathy and insight to its readers. Despite shortcomings, it marks Bhattacharya as a writer to watch. ■

—C. Mehra

Being a Gemini might explain why Vir Das is involved in multiple projects at the same time. Since he was last seen on screen in the Ananya Panday-led series, *Call Me Bae* (2024), the comedian and actor has co-directed a film for Aamir Khan Productions, written a memoir and recorded a new stand-up special for Netflix called *Fool Volume*. All of this while also performing stand-up around the world. “I have really worked hard for the last two years. They were creation years and the next two years are release years,” says the 46-year-old.

Fool Volume, shot across a sold-out stadium in Mumbai, a church in London and New York’s iconic Comedy Cellar, is an hour-long special and possibly his most experimental yet. “If you compare it to *Landing* [his last special, for which Das won the International Emmy], you’ll find it’s less performative. There is no set and I am surrounded by the audience, who are lit while I am not. I am just completely myself on stage,” he explains.

A large part of *Fool Volume* is about Das losing his voice six weeks before recording it. “At that point, I had already written and fine-tuned the show around a completely different theme. Being forced to be silent made me rethink, and I found myself rewriting the show. It eventually became about silence.” He was also doing everything he could to get his voice back. The NYC section of the special chronicles the efforts—a *pooja* to remove *nazar* (evil eye), consulting India’s vocal doctors and Grammy-winning singer Adele’s speech therapist, homeopathy, *chakra* healing and Myofascial Energy Release. “I don’t know what got my voice back; maybe all six things worked.”

Now that the special has dropped, next up for Das is the launch of his memoir *The Outsider* later this year. “It’s not so much about what I have achieved, but more about how I’ve stumbled, and all the stupid things I’ve said.” And then there is *Happy Patel: Khatarnak Jasoos*, a film that Das has co-written and co-directed along

with long-time friend and collaborator Kavi Shashtri. “I fell in love with directing the way I fell for stand-up. It’s the single most exhausting thing I’ve ever done in my life, and I loved every minute of it,” says Das, who is also the protagonist.

It’s been a little over two decades since Das moved to Mumbai and kickstarted a career in comedy, music (he had a band called Alien Chutney) and movies. Though he still thinks of himself as an outsider, he believes he has now found his tribe. ■

—Karishma Upadhyay

A large part of the new special revolves around Das losing his voice just six weeks before recording it, forcing him to rewrite the show



ENTERTAINMENT ▶

FOOL'S GOLD

Vir Das talks about his latest stand-up special *Fool Volume*, an upcoming memoir, and his newfound love of directing

CINEMA ▶

The Colour Of Acting

MITA VASHISHT'S DOCUMENTARY ON THE LATE FILMMAKER
MANI KAUL DEFIES CLASSIFICATION

The colourist for Mita Vashisht's film *Mani Kaul and That Thing Called The Actor* had been trained to colour-correct films based on genre; noir would be darker, rom-coms sunnier. When he asked Vashisht what the genre of her film was, the esteemed

actor-turned-filmmaker had no answer.

"My film is not a conventional documentary with talking heads," says Vashisht. "It is like a poem. It is an exploration of Mani Kaul's ideas on acting, which I discovered when I starred in the lead role of

Hindustani classical singer Siddheshwari Devi in his film *Siddheshwari*. Like Mani, a master of cinematic language, who composed his frames himself, I, too, got the colours and frames I wanted during the making itself. So, I had to tell the colourist, just watch the film, you don't have to do much."

One of India's greatest filmmakers, Kaul was notable for his attention to formalism and aesthetic rigour. "The title is, of course, tongue-in-cheek," explains Vashisht. "When I began working with Mani, I was warned that he does not understand acting, he treats actors as objects." Vashisht had just graduated from NSD in the early 1990s, when experimental filmmaker Kumar Shahani directed her in a short film *Var Var Vari*. Kaul saw the film and exclaimed

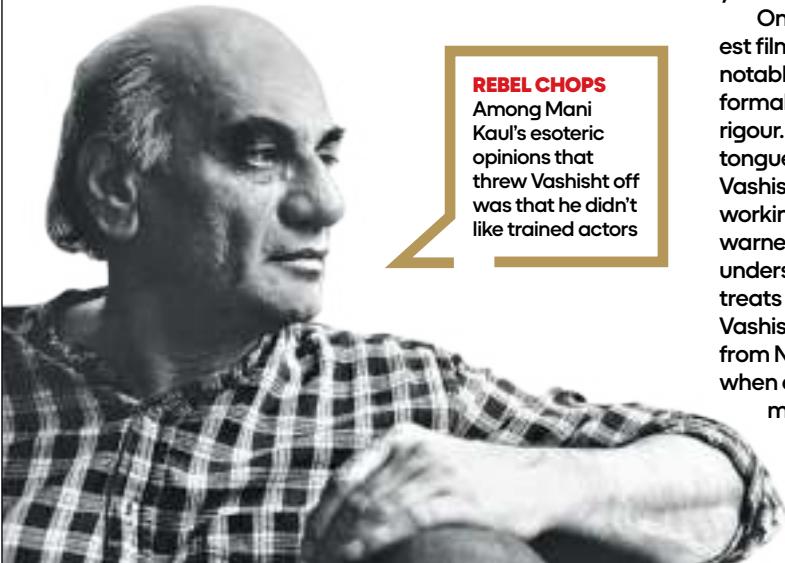
that she had the "screen presence of Nargis", recalls Vashisht. Kaul immediately cast her in *Siddheshwari*.

Among the esoteric director's first statements that threw Vashisht off was that he did not like trained actors. "Here I was, straight out of NSD, trained on everything from *Natyashastra* to Stanislavski," says Vashisht. "Actors are trained to underline and indicate emotions. Mani told me to capture Siddheshwari's being from within my body."

During *Siddheshwari*'s making, the English post-grad made copious notes on Kaul's techniques. For 30 years, these notes remained with her until she decided to turn them into a script around 2012. Over 12 years since, Vashisht shot the film with cinematographer Omar Adam Khan in Delhi, Mumbai, Varanasi and Rajasthan. Lapdhang Syiem plays an actress working in a Mani Kaul project in Vashisht's self-referential project. Dhrupad musician Arman Ali Dehlvi is her co-star.

"How do I describe my film?" Vashisht hunts for the right words. "You have to watch it to understand it." ■

—Devarsi Ghosh



REBEL CHOPS

Among Mani Kaul's esoteric opinions that threw Vashisht off was that he didn't like trained actors

CINEMA ▶

Still at the Movies

The latest edition of IFFM will screen over 75 films in 30 languages, including India's first LGBTQIA+ film

The Indian Film Festival of Melbourne (IFFM) will return for its 16th edition from August 14-24. Positioned as the largest celebration of Indian cinema outside the country, it promises insightful masterclasses, poignant films and star-studded red carpet moments.

A key highlight of this edition is the screening of the 1971 film, *Badnam Basti*. Directed by Prem Kapoor

and based on Kamleshwar's debut novel, *Ek Sadak Sattavan Galiyan*, the film is widely regarded as India's first film to depict a same-sex relationship. Also screening is Onir's latest film, *We Are Faheem and Karun*, that explores forbidden romance in a remote Kashmiri village. "Cinema holds the extraordinary power to bridge divides and spark meaningful dialogue. Our Pride Night is



A still from Onir's *We Are Faheem and Karun*, about a forbidden romance in a remote Kashmiri village

both a celebration and a reclamation—of space, of history, and of visibility for LGBTQIA+ voices in Indian cinema," says festival director Mitu Bhowmick Lange.

The festival's slate

includes Tillotama Shome's Bengali drama *Baksho Bondi*, Rima Das's *Village Rockstars 2* and Lakshmi Priya Devi's Asia Pacific Screen Award-winning *Boong*. ■

—Karishma Upadhyay

**THE
MAKING OF...**
Satyajit Ray
photographed
during the shoot
of *Ghanashay*
in 1989

PHOTOGRAPHY ▾

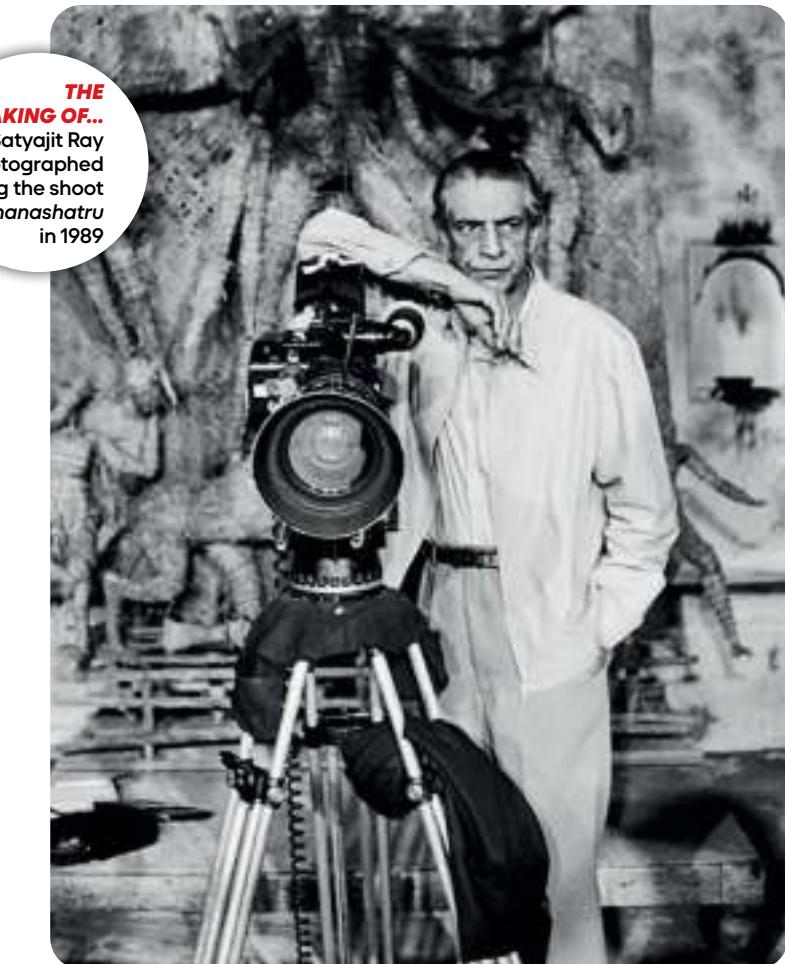
WHAT THE CAMERA SAW

Nemai Ghosh's photographs of **Satyajit Ray** form a visual biography of the auteur

Light and Shadow: *Satyajit Ray through Nemai Ghosh's Lens* is now on view at Kolkata's Alipore Museum, presented by DAG in collaboration with the museum. The exhibition offers a rare and intimate look at the life and work of Satyajit Ray, one of India's greatest filmmakers, as captured over 25 years by photographer Nemai Ghosh. It remains on display until September 13.

Ghosh's extensive archive, now housed at DAG, documents Ray in both black-and-white and never-before-seen colour images. The photographs span scenes from film sets, moments of direction and Ray's personal world—at his drawing board, playing the piano or in quiet reflection at home.

Together, they form a visual biography of an auteur whose genius extended beyond directing to scriptwriting, set and costume design, music composition and cinematography. Deeply influenced by Italian neorealism and humanist storytelling, Ray brought subtlety and



NEMAI GHOSH'S (BELOW) JOURNEY WITH RAY BEGAN IN 1968 ON THE SET OF GOOPY GYNE BAGHA BYNE, MARKING THE START OF A LIFELONG COLLABORATION



psychological depth to Indian cinema. Ghosh's lens captured this layered process, revealing a man profoundly immersed in his craft.

Nemai Ghosh's journey with Ray began in 1968 on the set of *Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne*, marking the start of a lifelong collaboration. Over two and a half decades, Ghosh developed an extraordinary sensitivity to Ray's creative rhythms, capturing candid moments of filmmaking and intimate glimpses into Ray's personal life that few others witnessed.

"Ray's dedication to his craft led Ghosh to follow him like a shadow and conditioned him to the exacting demands of the

maestro," says Ashish Anand, CEO of DAG. "In Ray, Ghosh found not just a filmmaker but a mentor and friend."

The exhibition also highlights Ray's meticulous working style—his solitary walks through filming locations, his detailed sketches for costumes and sets, and his interactions with actors and technicians. Ghosh's photographs capture Ray's extraordinary range, from moments of creative solitude to collaborative filmmaking.

Light and Shadow offers visitors an unprecedented window into the creative world of Satyajit Ray—a master at work and at rest. ■

—Nikhil Sardana



THE LISTICLE

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▼ SHILPAKALA VEDIKA | Hyderabad | Aug. 10

Barkha Ritu

Baranya Tree's *Barkha Ritu* returns to Hyderabad, celebrating 24 years of musical homage to the monsoon. This annual festival brings together renowned maestros to present soul-stirring renditions of monsoon ragas like Malhar, Des, Megharanjani and Varunapriya. This year's line-up features Pt Rahul Shivkumar Sharma, Ustad Shujaat Khan (*in pic*) and Kachra Khan, promising an evening of evocative melodies.



▼ NCPA | Mumbai | Aug. 12, 17, 19, 22 & 26

SOI AUTUMN 2025

The Symphony Orchestra of India's Autumn 2025 season promises a dynamic musical journey led by conductors Andrew Litton and Martyn Brabbins, with guest pianist Konstantin Scherbakov and violinist Marat Bisengaliev. From Wagner and Mahler to Rimsky-Korsakov, Shostakovich and Prokofiev, the season offers masterworks of orchestral storytelling.



▼ APPAREL HOUSE |
Gurugram | Aug. 30

LADIES SANGEET

The Kiran Nadar Museum of Art presents *Ladies Sangeet*, a musical dramedy by Purva Naresh. Featuring live music by Vidushi Shubha Mudgal, Harpreet, Anadi Nagar and Nishant Aggarwal, the play uses the setting of a North Indian wedding's sangeet to explore gender, tradition and family with humour and poignancy.



▼ DUBLIN
SQUARE,
PHOENIX
MARKET-
CITY | Mumbai
| Aug. 10

Salim-Sulaiman Live

Join composer duo Salim Merchant and Sulaiman Merchant for a live concert in Mumbai. Known for chart-topping Bollywood hits like *Chak De India* and international collaborations, including the FIFA World Cup anthem 'Africa-You're a Star', the brothers have redefined Indian music on the global stage. Accompanied by their world-class band, expect an electrifying evening of music spanning cinema, pop and beyond.



▼ TRAVANCORE PALACE |
New Delhi | Jul. 26 & Aug. 23

BAARISH

Following its World Music Day debut, *Baarish* returns to Travancore Palace for two more evenings of monsoon magic. Curated by Excavators Events with India Cultural Hub, it blends live music, immersive art and storytelling with a seasonal culinary experience by Café Lota.

Q+A

TOPPING THE CHARTS

*Madurai boy **Chef Vijaya Kumar** has bagged the James Beard Award this year even as his New York restaurant Semma ranked No. 1 in the NYT's annual list of 100 best restaurants*



Q.
What does it mean to win the 2025 James Beard Award for Best Chef: New York State?

It is a recognition not just of my cooking, but of the food I grew up with in Tamil Nadu, the kind of food that's rarely seen in fine dining. We did not tone it down or simplify it. This is also a win for my team and for immigrant cooks everywhere.

Q.
How is Indian cuisine evolving on the global culinary scene?

It is becoming more regional. There is more focus on real stories and real flavours. Indian food is finally being seen in all its depth, and that shift is long overdue. From day one, our goal at Semma was to move beyond the typical, beyond the small fraction of what Indian food really is.

Q.
Who are your culinary inspirations?

My biggest inspirations are my mother and grandmother. They cooked with instinct, patience and heart, and shaped everything I do in the kitchen. I admire chefs who push boundaries without losing their sense of identity. That kind of quiet confidence really resonates with me.

Q.
What is your most innovative dish?

Our *nathai pirattal*—snails cooked with spices and tamarind—is one I'm especially proud of. This is a dish from my village that you'd never expect to see in a New York restaurant. We kept it traditional, but plated it with intention. The balance of staying rooted while shifting the context is what innovation means to me.

—with Bindu Gopal Rao



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