

EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW RUSSIAN PRESIDENT VLADIMIR PUTIN

INDIA TODAY

DECEMBER 15, 2025 ₹100



www.indiatoday.in

“IF**AMERICA
HAS THE
RIGHT
TO BUY
OUR FUEL,
WHY NOT
INDIA?”**

॥ श्री एकलिंगनाथ जी ॥



॥ श्री राम जी ॥

सूर्यवंशी न्यास का ये रश्मि रथ चलता रहेगा। पीड़ियों के रक्त में इसका सुयश बढ़ता रहेगा।।।
रीति रघुकुल की जिसे शिव से विरासत में मिली हो। आँधियों में वह दिया जलता रहा जलता रहेगा।।।



MMFAA - 1980



MMFAA - 2002



MMFAA - 2002



Shriji Huzur
Dr. Lakshyaraj Singh Mewar of Udaipur
Chairman and Managing Trustee
Maharana of Mewar Charitable Foundation



MMFAA - 2024



MMFAA - 2025

*Maharana of Mewar Charitable Foundation
56 years in service as an inspiration to mankind by applauding outstanding achievement*

41 Annual Awards | 4972 Awardees | 1 Vision
'Honouring service of permanent value rendered to society'

Maharana Mewar Foundation

42nd Annual Awards Distribution Ceremony - 2026

at Manek Chowk, The City Palace, Udaipur on Sunday, 15th March 2026

Scheme of Annual Awards and the prescribed application format can be downloaded from <https://www.eternalmewar.in/awards-and-honours> or can be obtained free of cost from The Office of MMFAA, Udaipur. Please submit on or before 20th December 2025.



The Convener
Maharana Mewar Foundation 42nd Annual Awards (MMFAA) - 2026
The City Palace, Udaipur 313001, Rajasthan, India
T: +91 294 2419021-9 mmfaa@eternalmewar.in www.eternalmewar.in

*The decision of MMFAA - 2026 Selection Committee will be final.
Awards cannot be claimed as a matter of right.*

CHAIRMAN AND EDITOR-IN-CHIEF: Aroon Purie
VICE CHAIRPERSON AND EXECUTIVE EDITOR-IN-CHIEF: Kalli Purie
GROUP CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER: Dinesh Bhatia

GROUP EDITORIAL DIRECTOR: Raj Chengappa

CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER: Manoj Sharma

GROUP CREATIVE EDITOR & CHIEF OF AI: Nilanjan Das **GROUP PHOTO EDITOR:** Badeep Singh

EDITOR (FEATURES): Kai Jabin Friese

MANAGING EDITORS: Sunil Menon, S. Sahaya Ranjit, Manisha Saroop, Kaushik Deka

MUMBAI: M.G. Arun

SENIOR DEPUTY EDITORS: Anillesh S. Mahajan, Sangram K. Parhi, Sasi Nair

DEPUTY EDITORS: Pradip R. Sagar

JAIPIUR: Rohit Parihar; MUMBAI: Suhanu Singh

SENIOR EDITORS: Sonali Acharya, Ashish Mukherjee, Saikat Niyogi

PATNA: Amitabh Srivastava; BIJAPUR: Rahul Noronha

SENIOR ASSOCIATE EDITORS: Sonal Khetarpal

MUMBAI: Dhaval S.ulkarni; AHMEDABAD: Jumana Shah

ASSOCIATE EDITOR: Avishkar G. Dastidar, Vipul Grover; BENGALURU: Ajay Sukumaran

ASSISTANT EDITOR: KOLKATA: Arkamoy Datta Majumdar

PRINCIPAL CORRESPONDENT: LUCKNOW: Avaneesh Mishra

PHOTO DEPARTMENT: Chandra Deep Kumar, Rajwant Singh Rawat (Deputy Chief Photographers), Arun Kumar (Principal Photographer)

MUMBAI: Mandar Suresh Deodhar (Chief Photographer)

PHOTO RESEARCHERS: Prabhakar Tiwari (Deputy Visual Research Editor),

Saloni Vaid (Chief Photo Researcher),

Jodha Singh Adhikari (Principal Photo Researcher)

GRAPHICS EDITOR: Tanmoy Chakraborty

ART DEPARTMENT: Sanjay Pipalani (Creative Editor),

Angshuman De (Senior Art Director), Rajesh Kumar Angira, Bhoomesh Dutt Sharma (Associate Art Directors), Santosh Kumar Sharma (Assistant Art Director), Praveen Kumar Gummadi (Chief Designer), Siddhant Jumde (Chief Illustrator)

PRODUCTION DEPARTMENT: Harish Agarwal (Chief of Production), Naveen Gupta (Chief Coordinator)

CHIEF OPERATING OFFICER:

Suparna Kumar

IMPACT TEAM

Senior General Managers: Jitendra Lad (West and East), Syed Naveed (Chennai) General Manager: Mohan Bisht (North)

Deputy General Manager: Raghunandan P (Bengaluru)

GROUP CHIEF MARKETING OFFICER: Vivek Malhotra

SALES AND OPERATIONS

Deepak Bhatt, Assistant Vice President-Sales and Distribution

Rajeev Gandhi, General Manager (North)

Yogesh Godhanlal Gautam, Regional Sales Manager (West)

Manawer Hossain, Regional Sales Manager (East)



Volume 50-Number 50; For the week

December 9-15, 2025, published on every Friday

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

• Subscriptions: For assistance, contact, email: wecare@intoday.com;

Phone / WhatsApp: +91 8597 778 778 (Monday to Saturday, 9.30am - 5.30pm).

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

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

• Impact Offices: 1201, 12th Floor, Tower 2 A, One Indiabulls Centre,

(Jupiter Mills), S.B. Marg, Lower Parel (West), Mumbai-400013;

Phone: 022 69193355; Fax: 66063226

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

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

• 201-204 Richmond Towers, 2nd Floor, 12, Richmond Road,

Bangalore-560025; Phones: 22212448, 22213037, 22218343; Fax: 22218335;

• 52, Jawaharlal Nehru Road, 4th Floor, Kolkata-700071; Phones: 22825398;

Fax: 22827254; • 6-3-8857/7/B, Somajiguda, Hyderabad-500082;

Phone: 23401657, 23400479, 23410100, 23402481, 23410982, 23411498;

Fax: 23403484-39/1045, Karakkal Road, Kochi 682001; Phones: 2377057,

2377058; Fax: 2377059 • 2/C, "Surya Rath Bldg", 2nd Floor, Behind White

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

26560929; Fax: +91 80 23400000 • Copyright Living Media India Ltd. All rights reserved throughout the world. Reproduction in any manner is prohibited.

Printed and published by Manoj Sharma on behalf of Living Media

India Limited. Printed at Thomson Press India Private Limited,

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

and at Rajhans Enterprises, 134, Industrial Town, 4th Main Road, Rajajinagar,

Bengaluru-560044, (Karnataka).

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

Editor: Raj Chengappa.

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

All disputes are subject to the exclusive jurisdiction of competent courts and forums in Delhi/New Delhi only

CONTENTS

UPFRONT: HOW TO KEEP GROWTH ON TRACK PG 6

STATESCAN: AYODHYA IN A NEW AVATAR PG 16



CHANDRADEEP KUMAR

COVER STORY

Putin with PM Modi and President Murmu

'CAN'T ARM-TWIST INDIA'

Exclusive interview with Russian president Vladimir Putin

► BJP

38 New Battlefronts

Buoyed by the landslide victory in Bihar, the BJP enters 2026 with its sights set on West Bengal and the South

► SPORTS

52 Raft of New Leagues

Golf, volleyball, and even pickleball and arm-wrestling are being packaged into franchise-based leagues

► PM'S INTERN SCHEME

44 A Tepid Response

The government's attempts to give young job-seekers corporate exposure see underwhelming uptake

► LEISURE

57 Her Defining Moment

Yami Gautam's stellar performance in *Haq*, and her rise as an actress

Note to the reader

From time to time, you will see pages titled 'An Impact Feature' or 'Focus' in INDIA TODAY. These are no different from advertisements, and the magazine's editorial staff is not involved in their creation in any way.

► MAOISM

48 The Big Surrender

A blend of force and persuasion fuels record surrenders in Bastar, quickening the push to end the movement



Readers are recommended to make appropriate enquiries before sending money, incurring expenses or entering into commitments in relation to any advertisement appearing in this publication. The India Today Group does not vouch for any claims made by the advertisers of products and services. The printer, publisher, editor-in-chief and the editor of the India Today Group publications shall not be held liable for any consequences in the event of such claims not being honoured by the advertisers.



SCAN HERE TO SUBSCRIBE

E-MAIL to:

letters.editor@intoday.com or log on to www.indiatoday.in

FOR SUBSCRIPTION ASSISTANCE, CONTACT:
 email: wecare@intoday.com | Phone / WhatsApp: +91 8597 778 778
 (Monday to Saturday, 9.30am - 5.30pm)



For print rights and syndication enquiries, contact
 syndications@intoday.com or call +91 120-4078000
www.syndicationtoday.in

FROM THE EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

The present moment is one where the world is sharply polarised by war, weaponised tariffs and shifting power centres. At such a time, Russian president Vladimir Putin's interview to the India Today TV team of Anjana Om Kashyap and Geeta Mohan at the Kremlin, on the eve of his New Delhi visit, is a rare exclusive. It offers a front-row view of how one of the world's longest-serving and most controversial leaders sees India, the West, and the emerging global order. What struck me was the contrast between the stereotype of Putin and the leader in person. The projected image is that of an unsmiling autocrat, ruthlessly wedded to power and not open to questioning. In the flesh, he's an animated and engaging talker, with an expressive face, an array of gestures and a subtle sense of humour. There were no red lines from his team, and he let what was supposed to be a 60-minute session run to 100 minutes. Later, he had an informal chat with the Group's Editorial Team, which I was part of.

Even when Putin talks of the contemporary world, it's deepened by his keen sense of history. You may not always agree with his worldview, but he has a knack for the grander thesis. On the India-Russia relationship, for instance, he does not go into why this visit to New Delhi has taken so long. It's his first in four years, and the interregnum had seen relations between the two drift apart for a while. Instead, Putin began the interview by ticking all the necessary boxes. He spoke of "solidarity, camaraderie and friendship", as well as practical ideas for positioning the ties to look ahead in key domains such as "artificial intelligence, cutting-edge defence technology and advanced nuclear reactors". He lavished high praise on his host, saying: "Prime Minister Modi is not someone who succumbs to pressure easily." He took a swipe at America's double standards in penalising India for buying Russian oil. "The US still buys uranium fuel from Russia to run its nuclear plants. If the US has the right to buy our fuel, shouldn't India have the same privilege?" he asked. The problem with the imbalanced rupee-rouble trade, he insists, was not politics but economics, adding that he had sent out a diktat to Russian business to find enough Indian goods it genuinely wants to import.

On the new world order, Putin is openly dismissive of a return to the G8 and questions the continued dominance of the G7 when countries like India now rank far higher in purchasing power. "Why would I go to G7? Nobody talks to me," he told INDIA TODAY. He sees real momentum instead in platforms like BRICS, the SCO and the larger Global South. Wisely, however, he cautions against



▲ Oct. 9, 2000

"rushing into" a BRICS currency, arguing instead for wider use of national currencies and electronic payment systems. Putin sees India not just as a legacy ally, but as a central player of these emerging power centres that are reshaping global trade, finance and technology. On India-China tensions, he was diplomatic, calling both "our closest friends" and insisting that Russia will not interfere even while praising the "wisdom" of Modi and Xi Jinping for their recent efforts to manage disputes.

The interview turned combative when it came to the Ukraine war, with Putin offering a lengthy justification, portraying Russia's actions as the defence of Russian-speaking populations, traditional values, language and the Orthodox Church. He blames the West for backing a coup in Kyiv, claiming Russia tried for eight years to resolve differences with Ukraine through the Minsk Agreements, and insists that the "special military operation" is an attempt to end, not start, a war. NATO's eastward expansion, he argues, violated assurances given to Moscow and created an intolerable security threat. Russia, he says, will end the war only when its goals of "liberating territories" and securing its interests are achieved. He comes across as a man betrayed by the West. If America thinks sanctions will bring Russia to its knees, it could be in for a shock. In Moscow, what I saw was not an economy in distress. In today's globalised world, goods find their way through intermediaries wherever demand exists. The shops are laden with foreign



AT THE KREMLIN President Putin talking to the India Today TV team of Anjana Om Kashyap and Geeta Mohan (left); with Editor-in-chief Aroon Purie and Executive Editor-in-chief Kalli Purie

goods. In fact, sanctions in some sectors have proved to be a boon to the Russian economy, spurring a version you could call Atmanirbhar Russia, where local enterprises have stepped up to fill the gaps. Russia is also known to be a highly patriotic nation, whose people, because of their history, are willing to bear great hardship. A lethal combination that one can underestimate only at their own risk. It is often said that Putin's motivation is to expand Russia into other countries to restore the glory of the old Soviet Union. He categorically denies that, saying, "In today's circumstances, it makes no sense."

From Afghanistan and Gaza to AI, Gen-Z unrest, and the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Putin sketched his worldview: a mix of grievance and ambition, historical narrative and hard realpolitik, anchored in the belief that Western dominance is fading and that countries like India will shape what comes next. In a one-on-one, I asked the Russian president whether he had any regrets lingering from his 25-year reign. He mulled over that for a while, his piercing blue eyes never blinking once, and then said: "I don't look back." Perhaps he's a man who doesn't like to admit mistakes. But everything suggests he's very aware of the past, and that's why he can mould the future. For us at INDIA TODAY, it is a privilege that Putin chose us to give his first print interview to an Indian publication when he came to power in Russia in 2000 and now, 25 years later, he has chosen us again to give his first in-depth interview to a private television channel at a critical

moment in world affairs. This speaks not just to our editorial credibility but also to the unique position India holds in Putin's calculus. He sees it as a trusted interlocutor, a strategic partner, and perhaps one of the few countries whose media he believes will give him a fair hearing, free of the filter of Western antagonism.

Whether you view Putin as a strategic genius or a dangerous autocrat, his actions and decisions do have profound implications for the world order. India, caught between its historical ties with Russia and its deepening partnership with the West, must navigate these turbulent waters with deft diplomacy. As Putin himself acknowledged, Modi is not someone who succumbs to pressure easily. That independence of thought and action will be India's greatest asset in the years ahead.

You may agree or disagree with Putin, but the candid, well-reasoned counterpoint to the world he offers here is essential reading. Because understanding how the other side sees the world is the first step towards shaping a future that works for all. In a world of echo chambers and ideological rigidity, conversations like these matter. They remind us that dialogue, however difficult, is always preferable to silence, and that even the most controversial deserve to be heard, if only so we can better understand the forces shaping the world.



(Aroon Purie)

UPFRONT

GLASSHOUSE: DETENTION AND CHAI PG 10

TECH WATCH: A NEW SOLAR STILL PG 12



► ECONOMY

HOW TO KEEP GROWTH ON TRACK

The impressive GDP surge fuelled by consumption patterns may well endure, but inflation, US tariffs are worries

By M.G. ARUN and SONAL KHETARPAL

THE ASTONISHING 8.2 PER CENT GDP GROWTH IN THE SECOND QUARTER OF FY26 and a revival in consumption patterns have raised hopes of the economy speeding at a faster clip this fiscal than the 6.5 per cent seen in FY25. While this is good news, questions remain: can the uptick be sustained over the next few quarters? More importantly, will it provide the boost for investment in the private sector and, in turn, create more jobs?

GDP growth in the second quarter was 2.6 percent points higher, compared to the 5.6 per cent in Q2FY25 (it was 7.8 per cent in the first quarter of the current fiscal). "Consumption is reasonably strong at present," Dharmakirti Joshi, chief economist, Crisil, told INDIA TODAY. "This year, we are seeing a story of consumption pick-up, not so much that of a pick-up in investment. Consumption was the last to come out of



REASONS FOR Q2 GDP SURGE...

- Consumption picks up
- Lower inflation
- Income tax benefits
- Low base in Q2 of 2024-25

THE CONCERNs AHEAD...

- Inflation, notably in food, may harden
- Private investment is yet to fire up on a big scale
- US tariffs will put pressure on exports
- Global economic growth may weaken

the pandemic slump."

According to him, the factors driving the second quarter GDP boost are a low base in the same quarter last year, lower inflation (way below the Reserve Bank of India's tolerance range), and the income tax benefits that had kicked in from the Union Budget announcements this year.

The festive season largely fell out of the purview of the latest GDP figures, and will get reflected only in the Q3 numbers. That will add some more heft to growth in the next quarter. However, tempering this growth will be two things. One is inflation, especially food inflation, which is likely to rise in the next two quarters. Moreover,

THE FESTIVE SEASON LARGELY MISSES OUT IN CURRENT GDP NUMBERS, AND WILL ONLY REFLECT IN THE Q3 FIGURES. IT'LL ADD MORE HEFT TO IT

the second half quarters will not have the benefit of the lower base. The US tariffs on Indian exports is another dampener, and will remain so if India is unable to reach a trade deal with

the Americans.

Just ahead of the festive season, the Centre undertook what was the biggest tweak in the Goods and Services Tax (GST) since it was announced in July 2017. The 'next-generation GST reforms' were first announced by Prime Minister Narendra Modi during his Independence Day speech, but the policy announcement came on September 4 and the revised rates came into effect only on September 22. The GST tweaks, aimed at boosting consumption and making taxation more transparent, saw a shift to a two-slab system of 5 per cent and 18 per cent, removing the additional 12 per cent and 28 per cent rates that existed earlier. At the same time, a 40 per cent tax on luxury and 'sin goods' such as paan masala, tobacco and aerated drinks was imposed.

FESTIVE CHEER

With this, the festive season, that included a few days in September and encompassed the whole of October extending from Dusshera to Diwali, was expected to see a surge in demand. And it did. Data released by the Federation of Automotive Dealers Associations (FADA) for auto sales in the 42-day festive season, showed that passenger vehicles grew 23 per cent compared to the same period in 2024. For two-wheelers, the number was 22 per cent, and for commercial vehicles 15 per cent. The GST rate cuts, especially for entry-level two-wheelers and small cars, spurred affordability and first-time buying. Rural India became the growth engine, aided by a strong monsoon, higher farm incomes and infrastructure spending.

Media reports have also pointed to a sharp rebound in consumer electronics demand. Tarun Pathak, research director at Counterpoint Research, said the festive season saw smartphone growth up 10 per cent year-on-year in volumes and 18 per cent in value—the highest since the

2020 festive season. He added that televisions, laptops and wearables also saw double-digit growth, and that the positive sentiment was reflected across channels—online as well as offline.

Q3 results should bring more cheer as “the impact of the festive season was seen only in the last week of Q2”, says Devendra Pant, chief economist at India Ratings and Research (Ind-Ra). “Also, since Diwali was on October 20, the major demand push came in that month. Strong buoyancy was visible across all FMCG categories in October.”

The growth in real wages has also been a contributing factor. For urban corporate wages, hikes have been around 7–12 per cent, similar to over the past 1–2 years. But because inflation has declined, real wage growth has remained positive across urban areas as well, putting more money in people’s hands and thereby increasing consumption demand. This also brightens the consumption outlook for the next fiscal. Indeed, even the growth in rural agricultural wages has gone up more than 4 per cent since the fourth quarter of FY25.

SUSTAINING THE MOMENTUM

Can this momentum in demand be sustained? Economists think it’s possible, but perhaps not at such a hectic pace, since this festive season was an outlier in many ways. “The IT and GST benefits will continue to show up. Monetary transmission (where the benefits of lower RBI rates are transmitted by banks to retail consumers) will continue and will increase. The full impact of the GST tweaks will come in the third quarter,” says Joshi.

However, GDP will grow slower in the second half. Crisil is projecting a growth of 6.1 per cent for the second half, pegging overall FY26 GDP growth at 7 per cent. “Private investment is picking up, but there have been false starts earlier too. Some new sectors like data centres are looking up. There is a hint of positive private in-



“Consumption is reasonably strong at present. This year, we are seeing a story of consumption pick-up, not so much a pick-up in investment.

Consumption was the last to come out of the pandemic slump”

DHARMAKIRTI JOSHI
Chief Economist, Crisil



“Investment gets triggered when entrepreneurs have great confidence in the future. With so much uncertainty on US tariffs, people tend to pursue a wait-and-watch approach”

NAUSHAD FORBES
Co-chairperson,
Forbes Marshall

vestment,” he says. The recent labour reforms also signal the government’s intent to make the environment more investor-friendly.

This means the Centre will have to keep pushing policies that will

revive investment. But this, too, has its challenges. “There is a sweet spot for investment cycles being kicked off in terms of capacity utilisation,” says Naushad Forbes, co-chairperson of Forbes Marshall, India’s leading process and energy efficiency company. “Ideally, if you are running under 70 per cent capacity, you do not invest in more capacity. And if you are above 80 per cent, you definitely will.” According to him, what triggers investment is entrepreneurs having great confidence in the future. “A combination of what is coming out of Washington drives so much of uncertainty...people tend to take a wait-and-watch approach when that happens,” he adds.

RURAL DEMAND PICKS UP

Pant of Ind-Ra feels rural demand can keep consumption on a steady track. “It is important to note that agri GVA (gross value added) growth—though at 3.5 per cent in Q2, its lowest of the last five quarters—has been more or less stable, which supported rural demand,” he says. “This was also led by the Indian Meteorological Department data on good winter rainfall that is likely to lead to a bumper rabi harvest, which in turn led to positive sentiment about stability in Q3 and Q4 for this fiscal and even extending into Q1 of FY27.” This implies eight consecutive quarters of strong agri GVA growth, which will maintain the consumption momentum for the next few quarters as well in rural areas, he adds.

Also, because of GST rationalisation, inflation will remain lower (at least till Q2FY27) than the RBI’s targeted 4 per cent. All these would mean that consumption will continue to grow into the next quarters, but to help the economy grow at a faster clip than 7 per cent, the investment cycle has to kick in too. Again, much will also depend on how soon India can enter into a deal with the US on reciprocal tariffs. At the moment, there are many factors pushing down growth, just as there are several pushing it up. ■

THE PARADOX OF AI AND THE BUSINESS MORAL COMPASS

Dr. Nava Subramaniam, Dean - Amrita School of Business, Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham, Coimbatore, India

Artificial intelligence (AI) today occupies a paradoxical space in public imagination: it is both feared and revered—often for valid reasons. As AI systems grow more capable, society grapples with concerns about job displacement, data privacy, accountability, and the erosion of essential human skills. At the same time, AI promises unprecedented opportunities for advancing knowledge, alleviating human suffering e.g. through medical innovations, and solving complex global challenges. Amid these contrasting narratives, what becomes most important is not whether AI is inherently dangerous or beneficial, but whether we understand it and use it ethically and responsibly. This principle matters profoundly for business education as AI continues to shape the fabric of modern society.



Business schools must prepare graduates who are not only proficient users of AI, but thoughtful leaders capable of governing AI responsibly. Students must understand how AI reshapes corporate strategy, supply chains, labour markets, and stakeholder expectations. Yet they must also learn to challenge algorithmic biases and assess long-term societal consequences. As Peter Drucker famously said, "The greatest danger in times of turbulence is not the turbulence; it is to act with yesterday's logic."

At the Amrita School of Business, we are committed to nurturing human intelligence – both cognitive and emotional dimensions that draw on ethical principles hand-in-hand with AI skills. The moral compass points to a more sustainable and compassionate world. The qualities of compassion, empathy, trust and integrity must be intentionally cultivated so individuals working with AI function as discerning collaborators rather than passive dependents. Chancellor of Amrita Viswa Vidyapeetham and world-renown spiritual leader,

Sri Mata Amritanandamayi Devi, says:

Education should spread light within and without. Education should equally develop discernment and contemplation.

By aligning human intelligence with ethical and compassionate outlook, AI becomes a tool that enhances rather than diminishes human agency. Real discernment can only come with the foundations of contemplation and the courage to ask the 'right' questions. For instance, in 2020, the UK's A-level grading algorithm scandal showed how uncritical reliance on AI can lead to harmful outcomes. The algorithm, intended to standardise grades during the pandemic, systematically downgraded students from disadvantaged schools, revealing embedded biases in the data and decision logic. This incident forced educators, regulators, and policymakers to confront the ethical stakes of AI deployment and highlighted why reflective human oversight and value-driven governance systems are essential.

To counter fears of being "dumbed down" or overwhelmed by AI, both learners and professionals must revisit foundational models of learning. We need to learn - 'how-to-learn' with AI. Learning is shaped by habits, values, and reflective inquiry. Habits such as questioning assumptions, seeking diverse viewpoints, and evaluating evidence are critical for interpreting AI-generated insights. Values such as honesty, integrity, empathy and transparency lead to trust. Students need to seek and declare the authenticity of their work. Reflection and contemplation will help them understand how their own biases and emotional responses influence learning outcomes.

Ultimately, the future of AI—and of business—depends on how we nurture human intelligence, ethics, and learning. It is time to embrace AI, and widen the door of opportunities. It is also time to move to more virtuous reflective learning models !

Yes, You have a friend in AI – but as a future business leader – you need to set the moral compass right—and hold yourself accountable to the path you choose!



▼ GLASSHOUSE



DETENTION, WITH A SIDE OF CHAI

The BJP-led Assam government has really caught the 'detention' bug. After 'Bangladeshi miyas' and other 'ghuspaithiyas (infiltrators)', next up are the state's MLAs. Cultural affairs minister **Bimal Borah** has proposed a 'detention room' at the state assembly to hold suspended MLAs, complete with tea service. This is so they don't end up briefing the media with 'misleading information' as soon as they are ejected. Speaker **Biswajit Daimary** says the secretariat will study the idea, floated after Raijor Dal's **Akhil Gogoi** was suspended (yet again). An apoplectic Gogoi called the proposal "unconstitutional", but Badruddin Ajmal's AIUDF said it like it is—the state treating elected representatives "the way it treats illegal immigrants", a reminder of Assam's long history of detention centres.

Illustrations by **SIDDHANT JUMDE**

▼ TO S.I.R., WITH NO LOVE

VOTER VAGARIES

The Bengal BJP is learning the hard way that tightening the electoral screws will be no easy task in the volatile state. State chief **Samik Bhattacharya** recently snapped at CEC **Gyanesh Kumar**, warning that "wisdom from Delhi won't work" and urging him to camp in South 24 Parganas, Bardhaman and Diamond Harbour to see the SIR (Special Intensive Revision)



chaos firsthand. Opposition leader in the assembly **Suvendu Adhikari**, meanwhile, has accused chief secretary Manoj Pant of nudging officials to be overly "generous", keeping more names on the rolls than the BJP would prefer. The quiet truth lies beneath the noise: the much-hyped SIR drive isn't producing the political math it had hoped for. An inside source says the pruned voter list may see the BJP's own vote bank shrinking.



"Farmers are the foundation of our nation's progress. Their welfare is our highest priority, and we will never compromise on their interests."

Shri Narendra Modi, Prime Minister of India



"The prosperity of our farmers is prosperity of our State, in their hard work, we see the future of our nation."

Dr. Mohan Yadav, Chief Minister, Madhya Pradesh

NEW VISION, NEW JOURNEY

FROM AGRICULTURE TO ENTERPRISE AND PROSPERITY

Madhya Pradesh writes a new chapter of agrarian transformation under the leadership of Chief Minister Dr. Mohan Yadav

The heart of India, Madhya Pradesh is witnessing a new chapter of agricultural revolution under the leadership of Chief Minister Dr. Mohan Yadav. At the core of the Aatmanirbhar Madhya Pradesh vision, stands the farmer — the Annadata who keeps on moving the wheels of State's economy through sheer dedication and hard work.

The state government has taken historic strides to link agriculture with modern technology, energy self-reliance and industry. Through initiatives such as direct benefit transfer-DBT into farmers' accounts, bonuses on MSP, rapid settlement of crop insurance claims, solar energy for irrigation, digital mandis and agriculture-industry summits, the agricultural sector is entering a new era. Today, the state's farmer is evolving from a mere cultivator into an entrepreneur; this transformation is precisely what posits Madhya Pradesh as a leader in agricultural excellence.

Self-reliant Farmers: A New Pathway to Economic Empowerment

The Mukhyamantri Kisan Kalyan Yojana has strengthened farmers by providing an additional ₹6,000 per year. This scheme complements the Government of India's PM-Kisan Samman Nidhi, enabling farmers in Madhya Pradesh to receive a total of ₹12,000 annually directly in their bank accounts. A bonus of ₹175 per quintal for wheat producers, an

incentive of ₹4,000 per hectare for paddy growers, and procurement of pulses such as moong, urad and tur above MSP have significantly boosted agricultural incomes. Furthermore, under the 'Rani Durgavati Shri Anna Protsahan Yojana,' nutritional security has been given a new direction by promoting nutritious crops like Kodo-Kutki and Ragi.

Key Achievements and Transformative Steps

Financial Empowerment and Incentives

- A provision of ₹32,308 crore has been made for farmers' welfare in the financial year 2025-26.
- Direct fund transfer of over ₹19,000 crore to date under the Chief Minister Kisan Kalyan Yojana.
- Agricultural Development and Investment
 - **Krishi Udyog Samagam –(Agriculture-Industry Summit) in Mandsaur:** Dedication and ground-breaking of 11 units worth ₹3,812 crore, generating employment for over 6,000 people.
 - **Subsidies and Support:** Up to 50% subsidy on investment in agro-based industries and assistance of ₹5,000 per month for employed workers.
 - **Research Institutions:** Establishment of a Gram (Chickpea) Research Institute in Ujjain and a Shri Anna (Millets) Research Institute in Hindori.

Insurance and Risk Protection

- **Swift Settlement:** Quick payment of claims exceeding ₹750 crore to 25 lakh farmers for Kharif 2023.
- **Historic First:** Settlement of insurance claims accomplished before the loan repayment deadline for the first time.

Energy Self-Reliance

- PM Krishak Mitra Surya Yojana: A target to install 32 lakh solar pumps in 3 years.
- Permanent electricity connections provided to farmers at ₹5, offering significant relief from electricity bills.

Digital Mandi and Transparency

- Implementation of E-Mandi and E-Anugya systems in all 259 Mandis.
- Through MP Farmgate App, farmers can now sell their produce from comfort of their homes.
- Technological Innovation and Women Empowerment
 - **NaMo Drone Didi Yojana:** Opportunities for self-reliance provided to 89 'Didis' (women), with benefits extending to 1,066 women in 2025-26.
 - Increased productivity through Soil Health Cards and grants for protected cultivation.

National Achievements

- 1st in pulse production, 2nd in food grains, 3rd in oilseeds.
- 1st in organic cotton production in India.
- Direct Income Support
 - Under the Mukhyamantri Kisan Kalyan Yojana, over 85 lakh farmers receive an additional ₹6,000 annually (total ₹12,000 with PM-Kisan).
- Record Procurement (MSP)
 - **Summer Moong:** ₹8,682 per quintal.
 - **Urad:** ₹7,400 per quintal.
 - **Kodo and Kutki:** ₹4,290 per quintal.
 - **Tur (Kharif 2024):** ₹7,550 per quintal.

Special Guarantee for Soybean Farmers:

Bhavantar Bhugtan Yojana — A Promise of Fair Value

The government led by Chief Minister Dr. Mohan Yadav has assured soybean farmers the rightful value of their produce through the Bhavantar Bhugtan Yojana.

- **Minimum Support Price (MSP):** Soybean MSP set at ₹5,328 per quintal.
- **Guaranteed Procurement:** Farmers can sell their produce in mandis with a guaranteed MSP.
- **Direct Compensation:** If the market price falls below MSP, the difference will be deposited directly into the farmer's Aadhaar-linked bank account within 15 days.





THE EX-MEN

In the **Punjab BJP** drawing rooms, the hot debate isn't about farmers or freebies. It's about the exes. Congress turncoats, led by **Sunil Jakhar** and **Capt. Amarinder Singh**,

are wondering aloud about rekindling

ties with the BJP's old flame, the Akalis. But Akali turncoats like Parminder Brar and Manjinder Sirsa won't have any of it. The old BJP hands, meanwhile, are quietly enjoying the tamasha.



Taken to Task



With the home portfolio no longer his, the IPS fraternity have been spared Bihar CM **Nitish Kumar's** exhaustive review meetings. The man himself has now redirected his energies. On November 28, the CM swooped on to the main secretariat, marching through departments while lecturing the IAS babus on punctuality, discipline, deadlines and more. Last heard, the IAS babus were wondering how the IPS officers had managed to get themselves off the hook.

SWITCHING OVER

At 77, **Sengottaiyan** briefly became the man of the moment in Tamil Nadu politics. His defection to actor Vijay's Thamizhaga Vetti Kazhagam days after AIADMK general secretary Edappadi Palaniswami expelled him—for suggesting a truce with rebel party groups—assured that. A lifelong AIADMK loyalist, Sengottaiyan even carried a photo of late CM J. Jayalalithaa in his shirt pocket when he went to meet Vijay. Anyway, strike one in TVK's favour in its battle to establish itself in Tamil Nadu politics.



Kaushik Deka with Arkamoy Datta Majumdar, Anilesh S. Mahajan, Amitabh Srivastava and Kavitha Muralidharan

TECH WATCH

By **Ajay Sukumaran**

WATER PURIFICATION A NEW SOLAR STILL

A'solar still' is among the oldest water purifying devices used to distil potable water from saline or brackish water. The method is simple—it uses the sun's heat to evaporate saline water and collects the purified water via condensation.

While electricity-powered reverse osmosis (RO) systems, which push impure water through membranes at high pres-

designed a solar-powered passive interfacial thermal desalination system that produces desalinated water without the use of electricity. The new system replaces capillary action (by which water climbs or is wicked up) with a siphon. The IISc project, funded by the Dept of Science and Technology, solved two challenges that such systems face. First, the issue of salt residue that gets left behind on the evaporator plate was sorted



Siphon-based desalination system

sure, are now the popular way of filtration, there has been substantial interest in improving on low-cost, passive desalination systems such as the solar still over the past decade. Driving this is a pressing global concern: according to a recent WHO-UNICEF report, 1 in 4 people globally (some 2.1 billion) still lack access to safe drinking water.

Researchers at the Indian Institute of Science (IISc), Bengaluru, have

by controlling the flow rate of saline water; and the siphon enabled the system to scale up without height being a limiting factor.

"Water scarcity is real, especially in coastal areas," says associate professor Susmita Dash, whose paper was published in the Elsevier journal *Desalination*, this year. "The idea is to make a portable system which you can carry with you, or for people in places where electricity is intermittent."



Every Life Matters



Celebrating a
Global Milestone
in sustainability

First Hospital in India
First Hospital in Southeast Asia
Fifth Hospital in the World

awarded the

**JCI Sustainability
Certification**

*The only hospital in Mumbai with all
4 coveted accreditations*





**RP - Sanjiv Goenka
Group**

Growing Legacies



Nature's Basket



Naturali



Esquire

manifest

Robb Report

Follow us on | www.rpsg.in

200

YEARS.
NUMEROUS LEGACIES.
CONTINUOUS GROWTH.

nanovace™



ICML
INTEGRATED COAL MINING LIMITED

CPL
Crescent Power Limited

spencer's
Makes fine living affordable



HARRISONS MALAYALAM LIMITED



FORTUNE



Hollywood REPORTER



STATE SCAN

GOA: GRAND OPPPOSITION ALLIANCE PG 18

W. BENGAL: MATUAS' MIGRANT BLUES PG 20

► **A GRAND STAGE** The Maharishi Valmiki International Airport in Ayodhya; (right) PM Modi at the Ram temple for the Dhwajarohan ceremony, Nov. 25



MANEESH AGNIHOTRI

► UTTAR PRADESH

AYODHYA IN A NEW AVATAR

UP is making the Mandir city a model of development

By Avaneesh Mishra

ITS 2024 ELECTORAL LOSS AT AYODHYA, which dominates the Faizabad Lok Sabha constituency, was like a hit to the solar plexus for the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). It came within months of the Ram temple inauguration. Inside the party, it produced a deep rethink: how to reassert Ayodhya's political centrality? The soul-searching has yielded a new hybrid model. Call it reinforcing faith with hard, material development. The Yogi Adityanath government has gone about it with some urgency,

treating the city not only as a pilgrimage centre but as the showcase of its infrastructure thrust.

On November 25, when Prime Minister Narendra Modi hoisted the *dharma dhwaja* on the 161-foot *shikhara*, that was meant to denote the original temple project coming to completion. But the larger political project is only entering its next phase. Ayodhya is now described as the benchmark of Uttar Pradesh's 'model city' plans on multiple fronts: town planning, energy, sanitation, medical facilities, green zones. The

idea will be to present all this future-ready urbanity through vocabulary anchored in religious heritage.

THE SOLAR CITY

Take how the government has cast Ayodhya's new designation as a model solar city within the narrative of it as the Sun City. A 40 MW solar plant set up along the Saryu river already meets a quarter of the city's power demand. The 2031 Master Plan details a transition to near-total clean-energy reliance. Over 15,000 trees are being planted using

the Miyawaki method. EV charging stations are being planned in partnership with major private players. The Ayodhya Development Authority (ADA) is also working on climate-resilient drainage networks.

FLAGGING AN ISSUE

The biggest and most ambitious element is the 550-acre Navya Ayodhya township, meant to be one of UP's showstoppers. It will include a super-specialty medical centre, a 200-acre green area, a wellness hub, under-



Takeaways

- **The 2024 loss in Ayodhya brought home the folly of relying on symbolism alone. The new mantra: governance now**
- **Blueprint: 550-acre Navya Ayodhya town-**

ship, 40 MW solar plant along the Saryu, Miyawaki trees, EV stations

► As Ayodhya gets dressed up as a model city, Hindu seers slam dharma dhwaja hoisting as an improper ritual

ground ducts for utilities and a hi-tech park. Beyond that, a museum on the temple is being planned. A 'Vedic forest' will recreate landscapes from ancient texts.

Being hyper-attentive to the city's political signals makes sense. UP is heading toward an assembly election in 2027, and Ayodhya holds a key place in the BJP's plans. As its best-known storyline, what happens in Ayodhya also matters far beyond UP's borders. The folly of relying on cultural symbolism alone having been shown up, the idea is to marry it to a model of modern governance.

But the cultural side of the debate—the *dharma dhwaja*

ceremony, to be precise—is not entirely without friction. Several religious leaders have questioned aspects of the ritual. The Shankaracharya of Jyotirmath, a vocal critic of the BJP, says classical texts do not prescribe a flag-hoisting ritual and that the pinnacle's consecration is the actual culmination. None of the Shankaracharyas were invited to the event, a decision that further stirred debate among traditional clergy. Donors who contributed over Rs 2 crore, however, were invited. That added another layer to the conversation about the changing character of religious institutions aligned with the ruling establishment. ■

► JAMMU & KASHMIR

Demand For A Faith Quota

Kashmiri merit students taking most seats in Vaishno Devi board's new medical college sparks debate

By Kaleem Geelani

CHIEF MINISTER OMAR ABDULLAH may have restored the durbar move—the entire government migrating seasonally like a pastoral herd, out of a freezing Srinagar, into warmer Jammu. But the temperature gap is high for other reasons too. The Red Fort blast of November 10 shook up not just Delhi, it's ricocheting on Jammu-Kashmir ties too—in a way that may have national, constitutional implications.

The flashpoint: a significant intake of Kashmiri students at the brand-new Shri Mata Vaishno Devi Institute of Medical Excellence (SMVDIME) in Katra. Tension has peaked due to two reasons. The alleged suicide bomber was a doctor from Pulwama, and all his accomplices shared his profession as well as ethnicity. Two, the college is run by the Vaishno Devi shrine board.

SMVDIME got its green signal from the National Medical Commission (NMC) in September to start from the 2025-26 academic calendar, with 50 MBBS seats. The college, its main complex still under construction, opened in November. The 34-acre campus—sprouting in the lap of the Trikuta hills, at an altitude of 2,700 feet—also hosts a super-specialty hospital and a nursing college. The board, with liquid assets of Rs 2,000 crore, will have spent Rs 350 crore by the last coat of paint.

KASHMIR WINS SEATS

In short, everything was hunky-dory. But it so happened that nearly 90 per cent of the maiden batch—42 of 50 seats, to be precise—were taken by Kashmiri Muslims under NEET (National Eligibility-cum-Entrance Test). And young freshmen doctors of that description are the exact cohort now seen with heightened suspicion. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its affiliates

are screaming in horror and rage at the selection list issued by the J&K Board of Professional Entrance Examinations. "Most of them are from one particular community," says BJP leader and Leader of the Opposition in the J&K assembly, Sunil Sharma. "People donate here from across India for Sana-tana Dharma and Bharatiya culture."

CONSTITUTIONAL NOVELTY

Soon, Hindu right-wing outfits were picketing the premises. Their demand: cancel the selection list, and reserve admissions for Hindus. By November-end, Sharma formalised this in a meeting with Lieutenant Governor Manoj Sinha. "We requested that only students with faith and belief in Vaishno Devi be enrolled here," says Sharma. The L-G, who

the Supreme Court. "Shall welfare be doled out according to religion? Shall ration shops start asking for religion? Should police work like that?" he asked, daring those who want Hindu quotas to have SMVDIME declared a minority institution. The Opposition, too, was irate: Mehbooba Mufti talked of "anti-Muslim apartheid", Sajad Lone said the

By Dhaval S. Kulkarni

IT'S GOA'S VERSION OF

THE mahagathbandhan.

Luckily, it's called GOA, or the 'Grand Opposition Alliance'. But the mother of all alliances, an idea floated by the Congress, has run into a familiar yet unexpected hurdle: defectors. The project, meant to sink the saffron armada in the assembly election due in 2027, is undergoing its pilot run in a smaller, but no less stern, laboratory.

On November 29, the State Election Commission announced elections to the North and South Goa zilla panchayats (ZPs). A total of 868,000 people are eligible to vote. How many line up on December 20, and how many of them take a shine to this new alliance, will be clear on counting day: December 22.

A PILOT RUN

The polls are a litmus test for the Pramod Sawant government. If GOA holds its own, it's expected to continue on to its Phase 2 trials: the urban local body polls, due early next year. If it survives that, it will enter the finals a year later.

Assembly polls are due in January-February 2027, and the Congress is intent on bringing together the Goa Forward Party (GFP) and the Revolutionary Goans Party (RGP), a nativist outfit, under the GOA beach umbrella well in time. Both have an MLA each in the 40-member House. In the 2022 state polls, the Congress had shrunk to 11 seats; the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) wrested 20.

That was a tighter haul compared to its 2020 North



also serves as the shrine board chairman, is looking into the memo.

Strains credulity? Well, the causal panic is real. But Hindu reservations would be a constitutional novelty. The logic sits at the troubled border between spiritual origin and temporal purpose. The Vaishno Devi board was enacted by a 1988 Act of the J&K assembly, while the college owes its resources to donations at the shrine, where yearly footfalls now cross 9 million.

Kashmir's leadership is united in outrage. The CM says any shift from a merit-based policy may be taken to

Takeaways

➤ **Kashmiris bag 42 of 50 seats in SMVDIME via NEET**

➤ **Cancel merit list, reserve all seats for Hindus: BJP-VHP**

➤ **CM Omar leads outrage in Valley: all have equal right**

➤ **DEVOTED TO SCIENCE** Part of the new SMVDIME complex in Katra

BJP is experimenting with communalising the sciences. The National Conference's Tanvir Sadiq tweeted official documents showing grants-in-aid of Rs 24 crore (2024) and Rs 28 crore (2025) to the larger shrine board-run university, SMVDU. This affiliated college had wanted to avail admissions under the central pool but was disallowed.

The Valley has anxieties over J&K's controversial quotas: data shared in the assembly recently reveals Jammuites as big beneficiaries, translating into a disproportionate share of government jobs. A fairly secular domain. ■

GOA, THE GRAND OPPOSITION ALLIANCE

The Congress, hoping for a resurgence in Goa before the 2027 assembly election, floats an anti-saffron front. But the ground is shaky even before local body polls



and South Goa ZP polls. The two ZPs have 25 members each, and the BJP had swept 33 seats, nearly two-third of the total, leaving the Congress gasping at just four. It got a drubbing even in south Goa's Salcette taluka, which has a sizeable number of Catholics and Muslims and accounts for eight of Goa's 40 assembly segments. It won just three of Salcette's nine ZP seats. Overall, even Independents bagged seven seats.

But the Congress fancies better chances for itself in 2027. It feels the 2024 victory of partyman Viriato Fernandes from the South Goa Lok Sabha seat reflected growing discontent over

controversial linear projects, joblessness and law and order. A united Opposition, it feels, will protect its flanks by preventing a split of the anti-incumbency vote—as in 2022, when the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) and Trinamool Congress ate into its vote share.

BRUTUS INC.

But the pilot run has hit an air pocket. The GFP, its new GOA partner, has pulled an unpleasant surprise by inducting Isidore Fernandes, a four-term MLA, who defected from the Congress to the BJP in 2019. The victim of many splits since 2017, the Grand Old Party is

understandably sensitive to reminders of that. In September 2022, eight of its 11 MLAs, led by Digambar Kamat and then leader of the opposition Michael Lobo, had defected to the BJP. This was after Congress candidates took an oath in a temple, church and mosque to not change loyalties post-elections! Kamat is now minister for public works.

“We have to be careful in choosing alliance partners... otherwise, they will join with the BJP later,” says a Congress senior. He also flags the prickly issue of seat-sharing. The GFP is suggesting that 20 of the 50 ZP seats be reserved for the non-Congress duo: 10 for itself,

10 for the RGP. Big brother isn't particularly chuffed with the rump 30 seats. The trends from 2022, says the party veteran, shouldn't be the basis for present and future calculations.

But the GFP is quite at home with the idea of GOA itself. "There's a feeling that all must come together to defeat the BJP," says GFP chief and former deputy chief minister Vijai Sardesai. He defends his move to induct Fernandes, sweetening that by promising he

Takeaways

- Cong. wants Goa Forward Party (GFP), Revolutionary Goans Party (RGP) in alliance
- GFP game, but queers pitch by taking in Cong. turncoats. RGP, too, being wooed by AAP
- Upcoming North, South Goa zilla panchayat polls will signal viability for 2027 state poll

wouldn't be fielded in the ZP polls. "He has been inducted to help our candidate win," Sardesai says. The GFP, he insists, is "not a platform for defectors".

Even the RGP has taken umbrage to the reshoring of defectors. But the instability is echoed on its side too. The RGP is getting feelers from a different firm: AAP. "We share our roots, we're politically compatible," says AAP MLA Venzy Viegas. The two-MLA party has declared 29 ZP candidates so far, banking on goodwill from its developmental works, like installing solar panels on religious structures, healthcare through Amche Arogya Clinics, and rainwater harvesting in diocesan schools. The Congress has stirred the pot further by declaring some of its seats, which has made the RGP and GFP see red.

But the Congress's biggest hurdle lies across this steeplechase. BJP Goa president Damodar 'Damu' Naik says they will take on the Opposition regardless of whatever shape it takes. ■

► THE ROAD BACK
Bangladeshi nationals at the Hakimpur checkpost in West Bengal



► WEST BENGAL

MATUAS GET THE MIGRANT BLUES

Poor Bangladeshis line up to leave, but SIR also stokes citizenship fears among Hindu refugees. Mamata targets the Matuas, a core BJP vote bank

By Arkamoy Datta Majumdar

ON THE RIVER-RIDDEN BORDER of North 24 Parganas, two conflicting visuals are juxtaposed. At Hakimpur checkpost, under Basirhat subdivision, groups of Bangladeshi nationals who had entered India illegally are lined up, desperate to exit. Just 35 km away, in Bongaon, thousands of Hindu refugees—dominated by the Matuas—are on

the streets. The object of their ire: the same bureaucratic behemoth that has sparked the first phenomenon as it rumbles across poll-bound West Bengal. Clearly, the ongoing Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls is producing both predictable and deeply contrary effects.

Kajal Das, a small-time Awami League activist in his



DEBJYOTI CHAKRABORTY

native Jashore district of Bangladesh, had crossed over to India on an August night in 2024. He was escaping the anti-Sheikh Hasina agitations, fearing reprisals. Later, his elder brother Kalipada brought Kajal's young son Jit into India for medical treatment. With SIR, their refuge has turned hostile turf. Kajal and family are among those lined up at Hakimpur.

CHAPTER ONE: EXODUS

Hindus like Kajal are a minority in these migrant queues. Most are Muslim: masons, garment factory hands, househelps, labourers from units in Bardhaman and as far out as Bengaluru. Jahangir Alam has his family with him. Shilpi Akhtar stood alone, with a soiled bag and cracked suitcase, carrying "every bit" of her household. "I worked in a paper bag unit in Bardhaman. I made Rs 2,000-2,500 a month. That was enough for me," says Shilpi. Hadn't they acquired Indian papers? They say no. Instead, they talk of paying

middlemen thousands of rupees to cross the border—even more to survive here. Kajal paid Rs 30,000 in all, Shilpi paid Rs 4,000. All that's gone waste.

Often, over 100 people wait for days near the checkpost, not budging till the Border Security Force facilitates their departure. The BSF verifies their documents—Bangladesh ID cards, birth certificates. Groups are then loaded onto trucks, driven to border outposts, and handed over to the other side.

This exodus of economic refugees is being politically read in one direction—as validation of the BJP's allegation that Bangladeshi influx has altered Bengal's demography. Union minister and Lok Sabha MP Sukanta Majumdar reiterates the charge that the Mamata Banerjee regime has obstructed border fencing to facilitate illegal migration. "They have been eating our resources all these years," he says. They have likely been contributing to India's GDP as well—as its cheapest workforce.

Bongaon, meanwhile, is bristling.

Takeaways

► **BJP finds validation for its illegal influx thesis in long lines at borders, but local leaders call SIR a "self-goal"**

► **Reason: fear among Hindu refugee settlers, especially pro-BJP Matuas, whose CAA dreams are still unrequited**

This is the cultural capital of the Matua community, a Dalit refugee group that migrated from erstwhile East Pakistan and later Bangladesh, fleeing religious persecution. Their spiritual centre is Thakurnagar, barely 10 km from the border. Over the past few years, many more Matuas and other Hindu refugees have arrived, believing the BJP's promise that the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) would grant them full citizenship rights. The SIR has left them vulnerable again. Their anxieties owe to a major

technicality: SIR calls for proof of inclusion in the 2002 voters' list to establish a linkage with Indian ancestors. Many recent arrivals simply do not have that.

THE MATUA BATTLEGROUND

A pro-Trinamool Congress faction of the Matua Mahasangha just staged a 13-day hunger strike over the SIR—Rajya Sabha MP Mamata Bala Thakur was centrestage. CPI(M) and Congress leaders also visited the site in solidarity. On November 25, after a *padayatra* in Bongaon, CM Mamata lammed the SIR as a coercive exercise aimed at the 2026 assembly election. "Not one genuine voter's name will be removed," she vowed.

The BJP senses she has succeeded in fanning fears, and that if voter names start vanishing, she will be positioned as saviour. "It's a game of narratives. The TMC is far ahead of us," admits a leader. Union minister Shantanu Thakur, the BJP's Matua face, has tried to calm the waters in vain. A team led by state chief Samik Bhattacharya has submitted a memo to the Election Commission, urging clear communication to stanch the emerging risk. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has been approached too, and is likely to hold a rally in Matua-dominated Ranaghat on December 20 to reassure the electorate.

WHITHER CAA?

Mohitosh Baidya of the BJP-aligned Mahasangha faction is openly rueful. "SIR is proving to be a self-goal. We are facing so many questions we don't have answers to," he says. "Hundreds of Matuas and other Hindus will be excluded. Many won't go for hearings. They are afraid whatever documents they have will be taken away," Baidya warns.

A sudden surge in CAA applications—40,000 or so—plots a desperate graph. Certificates issued: only about 1,500. Now, the Calcutta High Court has disallowed online CAA acknowledgement receipts as provisional proof of citizenship. Says Mamata Bala: "In recent years, several Hindu refugees entered India. Almost all were BJP voters. Now they will lose their voting rights." ■

► KERALA



MOST WANTED

Rape allegations against Congress MLA roil Kerala

By Jeemon Jacob

FOR A STATE THAT WEARS ITS GENDER Development Index on its sleeve, Kerala never ceases to shock with its toxic masculinity. On November 26, it got a smooth new face—Rahul Mamkootathil, Palakkad MLA and, till recently, a rising young star of the state Congress. His profile is eye-catching: only 36, an education CV that counts a Master's from St Stephen's in Delhi and an ongoing PhD, assembly debutant with a record win in a November 2024 bypoll, popular legislator thereafter, the recipient of admiring newspaper profiles while being a regular orator on TV debates with a large social media footprint.

That spring didn't last long. In a season of outrage that began in August, he was first called out by women Congress members, including a former MP's daughter. The complaints grew with every testimony alleging a familiar kind of predator: someone who gained proximity as a party acquaintance, then transited to a sender of lewd messages, trying to inveigle his victims into sexual liaisons, often by

promising marriage and then weaseling out, often leveraging his rising power graph. As the news emerged, he quit as state chief of the Youth Congress, but otherwise brazened it out.

His luck ran out in November as an alleged rape victim filed a complaint with the chief minister's office. Her later police statement, parts of it reportedly corroborated by an audio clip and screenshots, makes for a disquieting story. It begins as Rahul came into contact with her on social media—she had then just ended a brief marriage due to domestic violence.

The accusations that ensued were a classic blend of coercion and blandish-

Takeaways

- Rape survivor files complaint against Rahul Mamkootathil
- Other testimonies, a second rape allegation bolster case
- Denied bail, he is absconding

ment. Starting with a sleazy wedding proposal—that since she was a separated woman, his parents would accept her as his bride only if she was pregnant with his child. The script thereafter: rendezvous at her flat and elsewhere, allegations of forced sex, intimate videos, threats to ruin her life and, finally, a coerced abortion.

A POLITICAL STORM

As a formal case was booked, a TV anchor-cum-actress also made public his loaded messages to her. Mamkootathil went absconding on November 28. A manhunt is now on with the sessions court in Thiruvananthapuram denying him anticipatory bail on December 4. Sources say the rape allegations of a second victim, a 23-year-old from Bengaluru, weakened his case. The Congress had earlier suspended him as a phalanx of state leaders like V.D. Satheeshan, Ramesh Chennithala and K. Muraleedharan urged expedient action. Expulsion came after bail was denied.

A section of the local Congress—including ex-state chief K. Sudhakaran and incumbent Sunny Joseph—had initially sought to defend him as the victim of a “CPI(M) conspiracy”. Meanwhile, right-winger Rahul Easwar, too, backed Mamkootathil vociferously—and promptly got arrested for allegedly exposing the victim's identity. Even BJP mayoral candidate and retired DGP R. Sreelekha courted a public mishap by denouncing the victim for having a relationship with Rahul as a married woman.

Sexual predators come in all ideological flavours in Kerala. In October, the RSS was rocked by the suicide of a member, a young techie, who alleged years of sexual abuse at its camps. And the CPI(M) has Kollam MLA, actor M. Mukesh, who still serves even while facing investigations in an alleged rape case. The Congress didn't waste the chance to point at the irony of the CPI(M) taking on a pious tone with “a rape accused in their midst”. A woman CPI(M) leader did not help by saying the Mamkootathil case was “extreme” while the Mukesh one was “low intensity”. None of that may save the Congress from an all-consuming taint in the local body polls due on December 9-11. ■



SSVM®
A Premier Day & Residential School

METTUPALAYAM,
COIMBATORE

SSVM®
INSTITUTIONS



Dr Manimekalai Mohan
Founder & Managing Trustee



EXCELLENCE IN EVERY SPHERE

Residential

ADMISSIONS OPEN FOR 2026-'27

www.ssvminstitutions.ac.in

Affiliated to
CBSE
Delhi



Holistic
Development



Readiness-
centered Approach



Nature-infused
Learning



Nature & Project Based
Learning

Professional Pathway Coaching SSVM Prepversity: Offering comprehensive NEET and IIT-JEE coaching for grades 11 and 12, complemented by a robust Foundation Programme for grades 8 to 10.

Sathy Road, Alangombu Post, Mettupalayam, Coimbatore (Dt) ☎ +91 93644 54884



COVER STORY

EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW | VLADIMIR PUTIN

“

INDIA IS A MAJOR GLOBAL PLAYER AND CANNOT BE ARM-TWISTED

”

On the eve of his visit to India, **VLADIMIR PUTIN** gave an extensive 100-minute interview to India Today Group TV channels at the Kremlin. The 73-year-old Russian president deftly fielded every question put to him. The most significant ones discussed his war in Ukraine, the American sanctions and punitive trade tariffs on India for buying Russian oil. His answers offered sharp, incisive and dispassionate views on some of the most pressing issues facing Russia, India and the world.





R

Russian President Vladimir Putin's long-delayed summit with Prime Minister Narendra Modi, his first in four years, unfolds at a moment when US president Donald Trump is violently rearranging the global chessboard. A time when the world is sharply polarised by war, sanctions and shifting power centres, forcing nations to rethink old assumptions and quietly redraw their strategic maps. In this charged backdrop, Putin's India visit is far more than a routine bilateral; it is a signal, to the West and to the Global South, about where Moscow believes its long-term partners lie and for India to tell the US that it cannot be bullied into submission. Both sides look to reboot their relationship.

In a rare and exclusive interview to the India Today Group's TV team of **Anjana Om Kashyap and Geeta Mohan** at the Kremlin on the eve of his visit, Putin spoke for 100 minutes on a wide range of issues that went beyond India-Russia relations. The Russian president was by turns combative, didactic and unexpectedly warm, especially when speaking of India and Modi, whom he calls his "friend" and whose setting of "challenging tasks" for the nation he praises. For Putin, New Delhi is not just a legacy ally, but a central player in what he describes as the emerging power centres of the Global South: BRICS, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, and a looser coalition of Asian and African economies that are reshaping trade, finance and technology.

On India-Russia relations, he says the future lies not just in defence, but as much in high-technology cooperation in nuclear energy, space, shipbuilding, aviation and, crucially, artificial intelligence. That's besides an ambitious agenda to correct trade imbalances, and not by diktat. Putin criticises western attempts to pressure India over discounted Russian oil and sanctions, arguing that some actors "dislike India's growing role in international markets" and are using political tools to distort fair competition.

Asked about the Ukraine war, Putin cast the conflict as a defence of Russian-speaking populations, traditional values, language and the Orthodox Church. The "special military operation", he told the India Today



TV team, is not the start of a war, but an attempt to end one started "at the hands of Ukrainian nationalists aided by the West", and which will conclude only once Russia meets its goals of "liberating territories" and strengthening its security. NATO expansion, in his telling, remains the central strategic grievance.

The interview is also a rare insight into how Putin reads Trump's return and the West. He is dismissive of rejoining the G8, sceptical of the continued centrality of the G7, and more interested in alternative platforms where India and China sit at the high table. On India-China tensions, Putin treads a careful line. He calls both countries Russia's "closest friends", says he has no right to interfere, but stresses that Modi and Xi Jinping are applying "maximum effort" to manage disputes and that their "wisdom" is ensuring that tensions do not derail a broader Asian rebalancing.

Throughout the interaction, Putin appeared in full command, with a swag in the manner that he walked and spoke. He was extremely gracious and charming too. Despite being quizzed for over an hour and a half, he agreed to an informal discussion with the India Today Group Editorial Team and answer their questions. Edited excerpts of the interview:



“India is a major global player, not a British colony, and everyone must accept this reality. Furthermore, PM Modi is not someone who succumbs to pressure easily”

“The Indian people can certainly take pride in their leader. PM Modi's stance is unwavering and straightforward, without being confrontational”

“PM Modi sets very challenging tasks for the country, for the administration and for himself. His famous pitch, Make in India, has a practical dimension, including for our bilateral relations”



How do you assess the strength of the India-Russia friendship at this point and what would you say about Prime Minister Narendra Modi and to Prime Minister Narendra Modi, whom you call your *dost*?

A. You know, the world is evolving rapidly—and this pace keeps getting faster, which is plainly visible to all. The global configuration is changing, with new centres of power emerging, and the global power landscape is changing too. Therefore, it's crucial to ensure stability among major nations, since this forms the groundwork for gradual progress in both bilateral and international relations. In this context, our collaborative endeavours with Prime Minister Modi carry significant weight because they transcend our mutual ties. Given its direct relevance to both nations, ensuring stability in key areas of engagement is crucial, as it helps secure the fulfilment of our objectives. Prime Minister Modi sets very challenging tasks for the country—and for himself in the first place, then for the administration and, eventually, for the nation. Take, for example, his famous pitch, 'Make in India.' It has a practical dimension, including for our bilateral relations. When we meet, he always says, "Let's do this, let's do that, let's look at this area and that." I can list them all. Therefore, we have a lot of practical areas of cooperation.

Q. When you met Prime Minister Modi at the SCO [Shanghai Cooperation Organisation] recently, there was a video of you and him going in the same car. Was this preplanned and what did you discuss?

A. We had just gone over the current topics. This wasn't prearranged; we simply stepped out, and my car was waiting. I asked, "Would you like to come along?" That's all there is to it—a gesture of human solidarity, camaraderie and friendship. No hidden scheme was involved. We climbed into the car like old friends and talked en route. We always have things to discuss.

Q. You just said that both leaders are going to cement the guarantees that you gave each other. What kind of announcements can we expect?

A. We have laid out an ambitious plan for our collaboration in key domains. The most critical areas are indeed forward-looking. I'm referring specifically to high technology. Our partnership with India encompasses such fields as space exploration, energy (notably nuclear power, exemplified by the prominent Kudankulam Nuclear Power Plant project), shipbuilding and aviation. There are many interesting areas for cooperation that are looking to the future. Take, for example, artificial intelligence, which represents a crucial technology shaping the future, rapidly transforming the

world, amplifying possibilities exponentially while simultaneously presenting certain challenges.

Q. There's immense pressure on India and Russia especially when it comes to the sale of Russian oil to India. How can both countries handle this western pressure and sanctions?

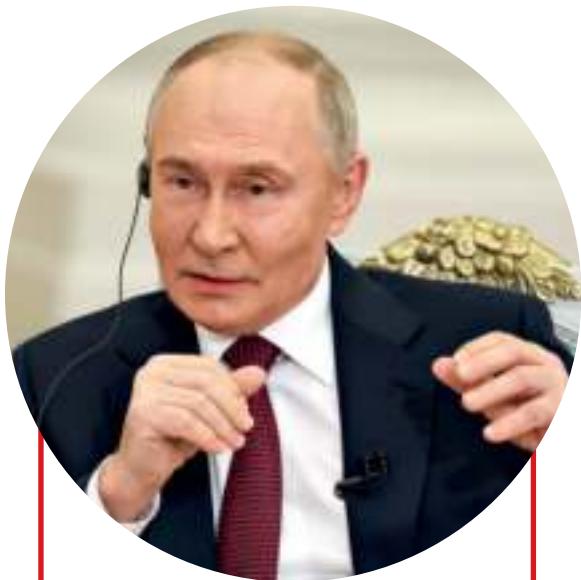
A. The issue here is that the pressure you refer to typically involves employing political instruments to influence normal competition. Our energy cooperation with India remains unaffected by current conditions, fleeting political swings, or indeed the tragic events in Ukraine. Regarding hydrocarbons: well before the Ukrainian situation, our business entities had already built a solid and efficient commercial relationship that is based on mutual trust. It's widely known that one of our leading companies acquired an oil refinery in India—this investment represented one of the largest foreign inflows into the Indian economy, totalling more than \$20 billion. Our company has been continuously expanding operations of this refinery, working with its partners, operating successfully year after year. As a result, India has become one of the major refined product suppliers to Europe—not just because it buys our oil with a discount. It took years to achieve and is in no way connected to the current economic environment. Certain actors clearly dislike India's growing role in international markets owing to its ties with Russia. Consequently, they're seeking means to constrain India's influence for political reasons by imposing artificial obstacles.

Q. In view of the sanctions by the US, the pressure they have laid on India, or the arm-twisting methods being adopted, how do you plan to circumvent all this—pull back or push harder?

A. It appears that both India and the world recognise that India cannot continue to be treated the way it was 77 years ago. India is a major global player, not a British colony, and everyone must accept this reality. Furthermore, Prime Minister Modi is not someone who succumbs to pressure easily. The Indian people can certainly take pride in their leader. His stance is unwavering and straightforward, without being confrontational. Our goal is not to provoke conflict; rather, we aim to protect our lawful rights. India does the same. When it comes to obstacles over settlements, over 90 per cent of our transactions are already conducted in national currencies. Those who attempt to hinder economic ties with third countries ultimately encounter difficulties and suffer losses. I am confident that once this perspective becomes firmly established, such tactics of applying external pressures will fade away.

Q. Has India reduced Russian intake of oil after pressure from the West?

A. Well, there is a certain decline in overall trade turnover during the first nine months of this year. This is just a minor adjustment. Overall, our trade turnover stands almost at the same level as before.



“The US still buys nuclear fuel—uranium—from Russia. If they have a right to buy our fuel, why shouldn't India have the same privilege? ”

“Our energy cooperation with India remains unaffected by the events in Ukraine. Well before it, our business entities had built a solid commercial relationship based on mutual trust”

“In defence, we are not simply selling technology, we are sharing it, very rare to see in military-technical cooperation. It speaks to the level of trust between our countries and people”

ALLIES IN STEP PM
Narendra Modi welcomes
Russian president
Vladimir Putin at Palam
airport, New Delhi, Dec. 4



“PM Modi and I have laid out an ambitious plan for collaborating in forward-looking areas, especially high technology. AI, for example, which is transforming the world”

trust between the two countries and the level of trust between the two peoples, I would put it this way. We have a broad portfolio indeed, including naval construction, rocket and missile engineering, and aircraft engineering. You just mentioned the Su-57 aircraft. India operates several other Russian-made aircraft too. Moreover, the famous BrahMos missile—a joint venture between Russia and India—is manufactured primarily at Indian facilities. Therefore, Prime Minister Modi's 'Make in India' initiative should be implemented in this area too.

Q. Russia has been one of the biggest movers when it comes to nuclear facilities in India. Are we looking at important announcements on the nuclear front?

A. Yes, of course, we have some announcements to make. We are not “movers”, we are producers of the world's most advanced and reliable equipment for nuclear power plants. The well-known facility and our joint project, the Kudankulam plant, is one of the leaders in this regard. Russia is probably the only country in the world today capable of building, and does build, small nuclear power plants. Such plants are already operational in Russia and these compact nuclear power modules can thus be deployed in isolated and hard-to-access locations.

Q. How do you think US president Donald Trump will react to all this?

A. You know, neither me nor Prime Minister Modi, despite certain external pressure we face, have ever—and I want to emphasise this—approached our collaboration as working against someone. President Trump has his own agenda, his own goals, whereas we focus on ours—not against anyone,

Q. During Operation Sindoora, the weapons we had acquired from Russia proved to be crucial in India's victory. When can we expect the remaining S400 air defence systems that India has purchased? There is also talk of Russia offering S500s as well as its fifth generation fighter jet, Su-57. Are you going to push that on your visit?

A. If we delve into the substance, India stands out as one of our reliable and privileged partners in this area. We are not merely selling something to India, and India isn't merely buying something from us in the sphere of defence and security. No. It is a different level, a different quality of relations we have with India, and we value this. We see how India values this relationship too. Why? Allow me to emphasise again: we are not simply selling technology—we are sharing it, and it is a very rare thing to see in the sphere of military-technical cooperation. It speaks to the level of

but rather aimed at safeguarding our respective interests, India's and Russia's interests. In our dealings, we cause no harm to others, and I believe that leaders from other countries should appreciate this. As for India's purchases or purchase of energy resources from Russia, well, I would like to note and have already mentioned this publicly once—the United States itself still buys nuclear fuel from Russia for its own nuclear power plants. That is also fuel—uranium for the reactors operating in the United States. If the US has the right to buy our fuel, why shouldn't India have the same privilege? This question deserves thorough examination, and we stand ready to discuss it, including with President Trump.

Q. How would you characterise President Trump?

A. I never give character assessments about my colleagues—

“We are insisting on fulfilling promises pledged to us in the '90s: no NATO expansion eastward. Ukraine believes joining NATO would benefit it. We say the military-political alliance threatens our security”

neither those I've worked with in the past nor current leaders of individual states. These assessments should be made by citizens who vote for their leader during elections.

Q. Trump has weaponised tariffs and done so against India. How do you think India and Russia should be handling Donald Trump and the US administration?

A. You know, he pursues his own policy, and he has advisors—his decisions aren't made from thin air. He has advisors who believe that implementing such tariff policies, involving the imposition of additional duties on trade partners, ultimately benefits the US economy. He is acting in good faith, I presume. We have never engaged in such practices, do not do so now, and have no intention of doing so in the future. Our economy is open. We hope that, in the end, all violations of World Trade Organisation regulations will be rectified.

Q. You just had an important meeting with two US interlocutors over Ukraine. What was its outcome?

A. It's premature to discuss that now. It lasted five hours. Frankly, even I grew weary of it—five hours is too much. However, it was necessary because it was a very productive conversation, as what our American colleagues presented was, in one way or another, based on our prior agreements



made before my meeting with President Trump in Alaska. We had discussed these very issues, to some extent, at the meeting in Anchorage. However, what the Americans brought us this time was truly new; we hadn't seen it before. Therefore, we had to go through practically every point, which is why it took so much time. So, it was a meaningful, highly specific and substantive conversation.

Q. Were there any specific points of disagreement?

A. Yes, such issues were raised, we discussed them. But this is a complex task and a challenging mission that President Trump took upon himself—fair enough, I say without irony, because achieving consensus among conflicting parties is no easy task. But President Trump, truly, I believe, he sincerely tries to do this. We went through each point again, let me reiterate this. Sometimes we said, "yes, we can discuss this, but with that one we cannot agree." That was how the work proceeded. To say now what exactly doesn't suit us or where we could possibly agree seems premature, since it might disrupt the very mode of operation that President Trump is trying to establish. But that's what they do—shuttle diplomacy. They spoke with Ukrainian representatives, then with Europeans, came here, had another meeting with Ukrainians and Europeans. I think



“We did not start this war [in Ukraine]. The West egged Ukraine on and supported the events, orchestrating the coup d’etat”

“President Zelensky follows the same pattern as his predecessors—putting the interests of radical nationalists ahead of those of the people”

“Each country, including Ukraine, has the right to choose its own means of defence. But it’s not acceptable if it’s done at Russia’s expense”

we should engage in this effort rather than obstruct it.

Q. What happened in Alaska with President Trump? Was he serious and sincere about the peace deal?

A. I have absolutely no doubt that President Trump had genuine intentions. Both the United States and President Trump likely have their own understanding of why this needs to be resolved quickly. On humanitarian grounds too. I truly believe that is one of the motives behind President Trump's actions regarding this matter because he constantly speaks about his wish to minimise losses. However, other factors also come into play: political considerations and economic interests. Therefore, I believe that the US is actively seeking a solution to this problem.

Q. What do you make of President Zelensky? He was promised NATO, the European Union promised him the EU. But nothing really happened. Was NATO ever on the table for Ukraine?

A. When this gentleman came to power, he declared that he would pursue peace at all costs, using every means possible, without sparing even his career. But now we see things differently. He follows the same pattern as his predecessors—putting the interests of a narrow nationalist group, particularly radical nationalists, ahead of those of the people. Essentially, he is addressing their concerns rather than those of the nation. This regime's mindset truly resembles a neo-Nazi regime because extreme nationalism and neo-Nazism are almost indistinguishable concepts. Today, undeniably, military action dominates their approach. However, they haven't achieved much success here either. I have already said before that what matters most for them is realising that the best way to resolve the problems is through peaceful negotiations, and we attempted to negotiate with them back in 2022. What exactly they plan to do remains to be asked from them directly.

Q. Is NATO expansion a real threat or just a pretext for a part of Ukraine you probably want control over?

A. NATO is another matter altogether. The Russian language, Russian culture, religion, and even territorial issues—these are very important topics, one subject. NATO is something entirely different. We don't demand anything exclusive for ourselves here. First of all, there are general agreements that the security of one state cannot be guaranteed by undermining the security of others. This idea might seem somewhat obscure, but I'll explain it simply. Each country, including Ukraine, has the right to choose its own means of defence and ensure its own safety. Correct? Absolutely correct. Do we deny Ukraine this? No. But it's not acceptable if done at Russia's expense. Ukraine believes it would benefit from joining NATO. And we say: that threatens our security, let's find a way to secure yours without threatening us. Secondly, we are not asking for anything unusual or unexpected, nothing falling from the sky. We are just insisting on fulfilling the promises already made to us. These weren't invented yesterday. They were pledged to

Russia back in the '90s: no expansion eastward—this was stated publicly. Since then, several waves of expansion took place, culminating with Ukraine being drawn into NATO. This completely displeases us and poses a serious threat. Let's remember that NATO is a military-political alliance, and Article 5 of the Washington Treaty establishing NATO hasn't been repealed. It's a threat to us. Nobody bothers to take us seriously. Lastly, when Ukraine became independent, few people recall this: what was the first document ratifying independence? It was the Declaration of State Sovereignty, Independence of Ukraine. That forms the foundation of Ukrainian sovereignty and modern statehood. And it clearly states that Ukraine is a neutral state.

Q. Do you want to go back to being a part of the G8?

A. No. The fact of the matter is that at a certain point I stopped attending those meetings. This is the first point. The second thing is that as I have said before, it's not entirely clear why the countries that form the G7 call themselves the 'Big Seven'? What's so big about them? In terms of purchasing power parity, India's economy is the third largest in the world. And where are countries like the United Kingdom

“Trump pursues his own policy. His decisions aren’t made from thin air. He has advisors who believe implementing tariffs ultimately benefits the US economy”

in terms of purchasing power parity? What is their ranking now, tenth or thereabouts? Of course, these are all countries with advanced, high-tech economies; a robust foundation exists, it hasn't gone anywhere, although their share in the global economy is shrinking year after year. The trend is obvious, and it will keep going like that, as far as can be seen, among other things, due to what I would cautiously call the deeply flawed economic policies pursued by the leadership of many of those countries. A recession in Germany is evident, for the third year in a row; France is in a difficult situation, also on the brink of recession, as are other leading European nations. Nevertheless, it is an important platform; they do work there, they do make decisions, they do discuss matters among themselves, and so may they all be healthy by God's grace. However, there's another aspect here. Look at the current relationship between Russia and European countries. These relationships are far from being called normal. How do you imagine that I come to the G8 meeting, how would I talk to its members if they don't want

to talk to me? What am I supposed to do there then? But other major international alliances are forming now—such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), BRICS, and the G20. We're involved everywhere, and we have a completely non-confrontational approach.

Q. Is the world order changing? Who do you see as a new power centre in the multipolar world?

A. The world changes and evolves constantly. Nowadays, this rate of change is fast, indeed very high. We can see it, we can feel it. And primarily, we're witnessing the global economic processes unfolding. These processes aren't linked to events in Ukraine or other hotspots, but they're just happening generally. One fact remains, however: new centres of growth—of rapid, strong growth—are emerging. These



include countries of the Global South, notably South Asia, India and Indonesia, which alone has nearly 300 million people and is rising quickly. Let me say it again: Africa is already advancing swiftly and will accelerate even more. With its young population, these countries would be our future. They'll strive toward higher living standards, which is inevitable. In the future, rates of change in the global economy will continue to accelerate steadily and significantly.

Q. How do you have these alternative blocs and how can they become a real force, if there are fundamental unresolved issues between key member-states in that bloc?

A. You know, conflicts always exist. Tell me in what period of history was there no conflict at all? The point is elsewhere: it's about finding solutions to these conflicts, seeking most



“Why do G7 countries call themselves the Big 7? In terms of purchasing power parity, India’s is the 3rd largest economy in the world. Where are countries like the UK? 10th? ”

“New centres of global growth are emerging rapidly. These include countries of the Global South—South Asia, India, Indonesia, Africa”

“The current relationship between Russia and European countries is far from normal. But other major alliances like BRICS, SCO are forming. We are involved everywhere”

effective ways to resolve them. In large alliances like BRICS, or the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, we share a common understanding that we have common values rooted in our traditional beliefs, which underpin our civilisations such as India’s civilisation, for already hundreds, if not thousands, of years. Drawing on this heritage of the past, we work together instead of suppressing opportunities. When efforts are combined, the resulting synergy turns out unexpectedly strong and high. We never set out to come up with ways to deceive, outsmart, or hinder someone’s development. Nothing like that has ever happened. We always focus only on positive agendas. I believe that’s important.

Q. How do you make it economically viable? Are we looking at alternative payment systems? Is there going to be a BRICS currency? Moving towards de-dollarisation basically?

A. If you don’t rush into this, you’ll avoid big mistakes. For instance, we were talking about Europe. They set up the Euro system and dragged in there certain countries that weren’t economically ready for one single strong currency. And now they’re dealing with some difficult social matters. There’s more than just playing around with inflation there, right? This question is far more complex than just tinkering with inflation a little bit and calling it done. Their entire economy is tied to just one stable currency, therefore social problems arise and budgetary issues emerge. Right now, we don’t aim at having a single currency within BRICS. In this process, there’s no rush anywhere, and we aren’t rushing either. There is a need to expand the use of national currencies, you’ve mentioned this already. We must make better use of the BRICS New Development Bank’s opportunities. For example, we propose creating a new investment platform using electronic payments (with an initial capital of \$100 billion) to encourage joint investments both in our economies and those of developing nations in the Global South. I believe this could be a very appealing option, because these investments would help us, and they would also benefit the recipient countries, since together we would produce high-quality goods at reasonable prices. These products could help the countries of the Global South to develop further, while also advancing our own growth.

Q. What about the issues between India and Russia, like our rupee-rouble payments?

A. There are no obstacles here. These are purely economic issues. We fully understand and realise that we do have a certain trade imbalance. However, India’s government does not impose restrictions on our mutual trade. Why? Because they need both oil and petroleum products. The Indian government needs to expand its purchases of Russian fertilisers because these are crucial for Indian farmers, and Prime Minister Modi constantly raises this issue: “Please increase the volume of deliveries.” The issue is entirely different. It’s not about rupees; it’s about what those rupees can buy

respectively for our companies. We're also thinking about this, not only the Indian government. And we agree that this disparity must be addressed, but not through bans, rather by finding areas beneficial for both sides. Therefore, during my visit and at our initiative, there will be an exhibition showcasing our importers from India. I want to share with you something completely candidly: this was my direct instruction to the Government of Russia—to consider what else we could purchase from India. We're considering this matter together, including from the perspective of the Russian Federation.

Q. It is very clear you are keen on good relations with both India and China. How do you balance them, seeing some tension between us?

A. We know this very well. India and China are our closest friends—we treasure that relationship deeply, and I do not believe we have the right to interfere in your bilateral relations. But I know that both Prime Minister Modi and President Xi Jinping are committed to finding solutions to all issues, even to the most complex interstate problems. I know about it because when both Prime Minister Modi and President Xi Jinping see that some specific tension is rising, they both try to find solutions to these issues, exerting maximum effort—I know this well and can see it clearly. And the key reason why they would succeed would be their wisdom, which we appreciate immensely.

Q. When it comes to terrorism, both India and Russia face a threat, yet they also observe a dual ideology from different countries—some of which justify terror as a fight for freedom. What is your approach?

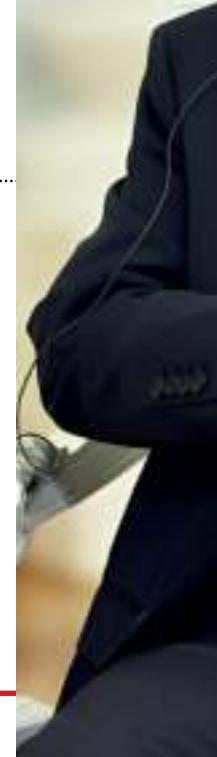
A. It's very simple. To achieve freedom, we must use lawful means only. Any actions involving criminal methods or those harming people cannot be supported—this has been decided long ago. As you've correctly noted, Russia has repeatedly faced acts of extreme terrorism throughout its recent history. In these matters, India is our full ally, and we completely support India's fight against terrorism.

Q. There's another country in the neighbourhood that is very important—to Russia, and to India—Afghanistan. You are the rare country to have recognised the Taliban regime despite their attitude to women and other human rights issues. What made you look at them as a strategic interest?

A. Every country has enough problems. Afghanistan is no exception, considering it has been embroiled in a civil war for decades. But the Taliban clearly controls the situation in Afghanistan. It's what needs to be said first, and you have to accept it, because it's the reality. Secondly, the Afghan government takes many actions to combat terrorism and various terrorist organisations, including ISIL and others like them. This is also something we know very well. Afghan authorities have significantly reduced opium production in

“India and China are our closest friends—we treasure that relationship deeply, and I believe we do not have the right to interfere in your bilateral relations...”

“...But I know PM Modi and President Xi are committed to finding solutions to even the most complex issues. I know about it because when they see a specific tension rising, they exert the maximum effort”



their country and are actively addressing drug threats from within its borders. The main point is that to influence events happening in the country, you must stay in contact with the current leadership there, which is exactly what we're doing.

Q. There have been a lot of Gen Z protests across the world recently. How do you connect with the young people in Russia?

A. That is nothing new. In literature and in art, this topic of contradiction of the older and the younger generation, of fathers and sons, has always existed. You know what's new? The technology: those messengers, Telegram and so on. They are used to influence the youth. The younger generation, this generation, is more or less the same. Young people are always more mobile, more radical. They think they have come across injustice and no one saw it before them. And now that they have seen it, they will tell everyone around, and they think that these injustices are very easy to deal with, can be easily solved. When a person becomes more mature, they begin to understand that it's possible to find a solution but it's not as easy as it seemed at first glance. Therefore, we need to work with people. We can't just say that you are young, you don't understand anything, you are just sitting there in your homes. It does not work like that. You need to always keep in



“To achieve freedom, we must use lawful means only. Any actions involving criminal methods or those harming people cannot be supported. We fully support India’s fight against terrorism”

“Every country has problems, Afghanistan is no exception. To influence events there, one has to be in contact with their current leadership. And the Taliban clearly controls the situation there”

touch with young people and use their tools, their devices, their social networks to obtain information, to use feedback.

Q. On another note, how did the disintegration of Soviet Union impact you?

A. It had an impact in a sense that we always need to look at every step very carefully and understand its consequences. That's number one. Number two, it is very important not only for the former Soviet Union but also for Russia. What was the conclusion I came to? That the Soviet Union at a certain point of time was in such a state that its leadership and possibly even ordinary citizens always believed it was so big, so great that nothing, ever, under any circumstances, would happen to it. And this idea of grandeur is the point when a country starts to make one mistake after another, thinking yes, we made a mistake here and it was a small failure there, but we are so big, it will all pass, we'll survive. And the number of mistakes snowball and it gets harder to manage that. I see the same happening with some other countries today. Therefore, I am keeping an eye. We need to think how to create a system that will not simply protect itself, but develop. If such a system is in place, it would be self-sufficient, autonomous and effective.

Q. Are you looking at the reintegration of Soviet Union?

A. No, of course not, that's simply not on the table. There is also a question of rationale. It does not make sense in current circumstances because it would critically change the national and religious composition of the Russian Federation.

Q. In your span as leader of Russia, which of our prime ministers do you think has really made a difference in strengthening India-Russia ties?

A. You have already asked me about other world leaders. It is not very polite, but we have very trustworthy and friendly relations with Prime Minister Modi. He is a very reliable person. India got lucky. He lives India. That's number one. Number two, indeed, he is very sincere when he goes about strengthening Indian-Russian ties across a whole range of areas, especially crucial issues of economy, defence, humanitarian cooperation and development of hi-tech.

Q. There was a moment between President Xi and you when you spoke about longevity, the strides in medicine through biohacking, which went viral. Do you think immortality is achievable?

A. Everything has an end, only God is eternal. I am one hundred per cent sure we can extend longevity of life. Seventy-seven years ago, the average lifespan of a person in India was 31 years; now, it's about 70. These are all the results of the healthcare effort and if you use AI in healthcare and use it to produce medical drugs, for example, using genetic engineering and so on, it would have a tremendous effect. Nevertheless, everything comes to an end. ■



Movement that inspires

PRESENTS



CO-PRESENTED BY



CO-POWERED BY



हिंदी जगत का
—
महामंच
10-11
दिसंबर 2025

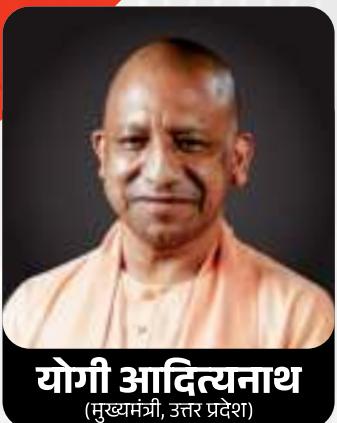
अपनी सीट बुक करने के लिए, विजिट करें:

www.aajtak.in/agenda

₹ 19,999/-

NETWORKING LUNCH & DINNER INCLUDED

Venue - Hotel Taj Palace, New Delhi



योगी आदित्यनाथ
(मुख्यमंत्री, उत्तर प्रदेश)



रेखा गुप्ता
(मुख्यमंत्री, दिल्ली)



हिमंत बिस्वा सर्मा
(मुख्यमंत्री, असम)



अखिलेश यादव
(अध्यक्ष, समाजवादी पार्टी)



भगवंत मान
(मुख्यमंत्री, पंजाब)



सचिन पायलट
(वरिष्ठ नेता, कांग्रेस)



शुभांशु शुक्ला
(अंतरिक्ष यात्री, ISRO)



जस्टिस बी आर गवई
(पूर्व मुख्य न्यायाधीश)



ज्ञानेश कुमार
(मुख्य चुनाव आयुक्त)

THE NEW BATTLE FRONTS

Buoyed by the landslide victory in Bihar, the BJP enters 2026 with its sights set on the last frontiers, West Bengal and the southern outliers

By ANILESH S. MAHAJAN

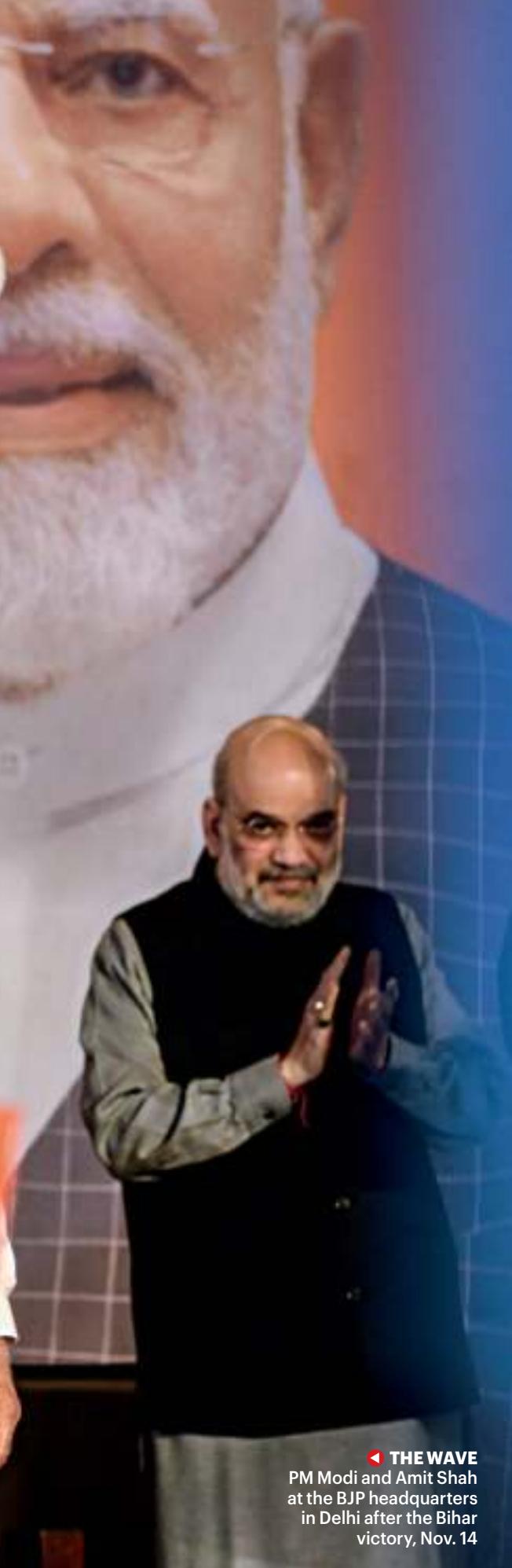
THE CELEBRATIONS WERE UNDER WAY at the BJP headquarters in New Delhi on November 14 after the landslide victory in the Bihar election and, as is the convention by now, Prime Minister Narendra Modi was there to address party workers. After the customary messages of congratulation, the PM employed his usual oratorial flourish to declare: “The Ganga flows from Bihar to Bengal.” The message was clear: carry the momentum eastward and prepare for what BJP insiders are calling “the mother of all assembly polls”.

West Bengal, along with Assam, Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Puducherry, is scheduled to go for assembly polls in April-May next year. At the BJP headquarters, the mood is upbeat. The confidence comes, as a top party leader explains, because the back-to-back victories in the states have reaffirmed that the Modi-Amit Shah model—tight control, focused messaging and relentless preparation—combined with the leave-no-stone-unturned groundwork of the Sangh Parivar, is near-unstoppable.

As a prelude to election preparations, the restructuring of state units is likely to be completed by year-end. Sources say new chiefs for the Uttar Pradesh, Karnataka, Haryana and Delhi units will be announced soon, while Punjab and Jharkhand—currently under working presidents—will get full-time leaders as well. The objective is to harvest

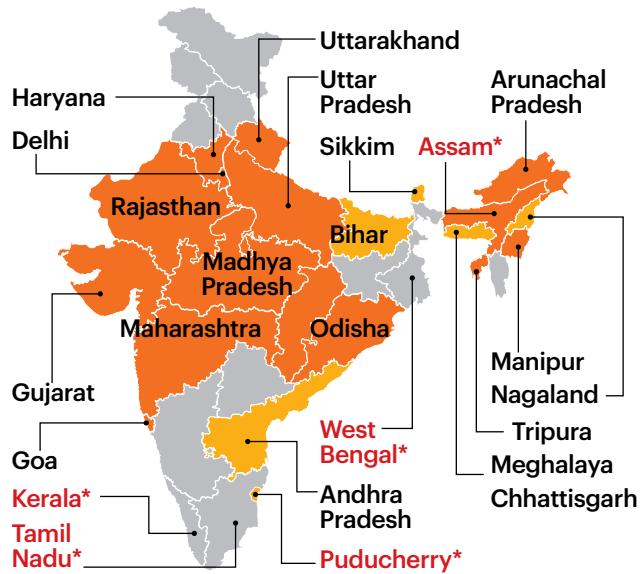
CHANDRADEEP KUMAR





◀ THE WAVE
PM Modi and Amit Shah
at the BJP headquarters
in Delhi after the Bihar
victory, Nov. 14

THE SAFFRON SPREAD



the electoral momentum to create a fully aligned organisational structure. "Bihar gave us rhythm," says a senior BJP strategist. "Now Bengal will give us direction."

BATTLE FOR BENGAL

Bengal, however, is likely to test every election theory the party holds close to heart. In 2021, the Mamata Banerjee-led Trinamool Congress (TMC) swept the assembly election with 214 out of 294 seats and a 48 per cent vote share; the BJP got 77 seats with a 38.1 per cent vote share. That slipped marginally in the 2024 LS poll (39.1 per cent, against 40.6 per cent in 2019), shrinking its seat tally to 12 out of 42 from 18.

BJP insiders say there's no getting around it—their biggest hindrance in the state is the large concentration of Muslim populations in some districts. There are 146 assembly seats where the community accounts for 25-90 per cent of the voters. In 2021, the TMC won 131 of these seats, while the BJP won 14 and the remaining seat went to the Indian Secular Front (ISF).

The communal polarisation the party has relied on in past elections has only taken it so far in terms of vote share. "In fact, it has helped Mamata, as the Muslim votes moved en bloc to the TMC, while the BJP's reverse polarisation worked only in parts," says a state party veteran. With returns from its usual playbook diminishing, the BJP has dialled down the Hindutva rhetoric. In Maharashtra, Delhi and Bihar, poll results have shown that if the party hits a softer tone, the Muslim vote does look for alternatives. The party is hoping the scenario will play out in Bengal as well.

But then that comes up against a new political flashpoint. Since mid-October, the Election Commission's Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls has begun in Bengal. The final rolls are due by February 7. The BJP has seized on the process to strengthen its booth-level machinery and verify voter data, even as the TMC has stepped up warnings about voter names being deleted and begun accusing the EC of aiding a "political purge".



PTI

Party insiders say even before the Bihar votes were counted, Shah and party president J.P. Nadda had a series of closed-door meetings with *sangathan mantris* (organisation ministers) and state *prabharis* (in-charges) from Bengal to finalise the campaign structure. Like in Bihar, the state is being divided into five operational zones, each managed by an organisational secretary (loaned from the RSS) and a senior leader who will camp in Bengal till the polls are over. The five zones are Purulia-Bardhaman, Howrah-Hooghly-Medinipur, Kolkata Metropolitan & South 24 Parganas, Nadabipur & North 24 Parganas and North Bengal (Malda-Siliguri division).

Meanwhile, the state unit is keeping busy, reviving the booth committees. It also claims to have covered 70,000 of the state's 81,000 booths by now. The SIR has provided an opportunity for deeper mapping and update of voter lists. "In 2021, we had enthusiasm without data," says a senior state office-bearer. "Now we have both." On December 3, as PM Modi met his MPs from Bengal to review the party's organisational preparedness, he asked about local challenges and assured all support

in expansion efforts. The Sangh, too, has stepped up, with its affiliates expanding their footprint into rural districts. "The RSS is in the villages, not on TV," says a Kolkata-based analyst. "That's where the next election will be decided."

THE SOUTHERN CHALLENGE

Three states in the South go to the polls early next year, but Tamil Nadu will be the bumper contest. The BJP has pivoted to alliance politics again here after replacing polarising state chief K. Annamalai with ex-AIADMK legislator Nainar Nagendran. The shift in leadership was

THE SANGH HAS EXPANDED ITS BASE IN BENGAL'S DISTRICTS.

"THE RSS IS IN THE VILLAGES, NOT ON TV," SAYS A KOLKATA-BASED ANALYST. "THAT'S WHERE THE NEXT ELECTION WILL BE DECIDED"

NEW PURPOSE West Bengal BJP leader Suvendu Adhikari and others at an anti-government rally in Birbhum district, Nov. 25

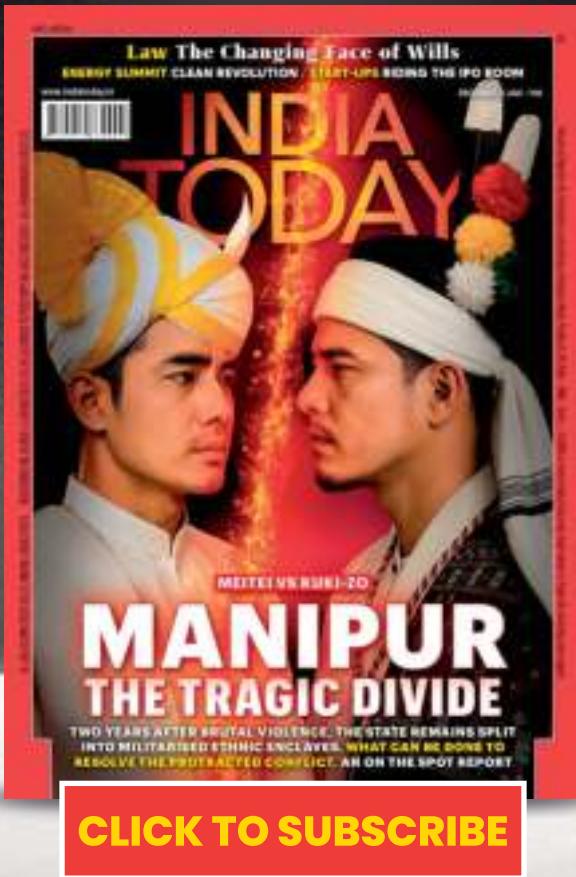
largely driven by caste arithmetic: Annamalai and AIADMK chief Edappadi K. Palaniswami, always at loggerheads, belong to the Gounder community. So, the party took the caste over-representation excuse to ease him out and instal Nagendran, who is from the dominant Thevar community.

Electorally, the party's parliamentary performance improved in vote share (11.3 per cent), but the experiment in going it alone brought no other gains. The calculation is that by reviving the alliance with the AIADMK, balancing caste representation and combining it with the national narrative, the anti-DMK vote can be consolidated. The BJP is targeting seats in southern Tamil Nadu (where the Thevars are influential) and those in mixed population semi-urban areas where community arithmetic and alliance strength intersect.

Meanwhile, Kerala remains the BJP's most challenging frontier in the South, with the party now pursuing a

MANIPUR'S TRAGIC DIVIDE

WHAT CAN END THIS PROTRACTED CONFLICT?



1 YEAR UNLIMITED DIGITAL ACCESS JUST FOR ₹999!

SUBSCRIBER BENEFITS

- 1 year unlimited access to all digital issues
 - Daily newsletter
- Ad-Lite access to premium web content
 - Multiple device access

INDIA
TODAY
MAKING SENSE OF INDIA

long-term, phased strategy. A key breakthrough had come in the 2024 Lok Sabha election, when Suresh Gopi won the Thrissur seat to become Kerala's first-ever BJP MP—he later joined the Union cabinet. This milestone signalled that the party was no longer peripheral in the state's politics. Building on this momentum, it restructured the state unit, appointing former Union minister Rajeev Chandrasekhar as Kerala BJP president in March to reflect a shift toward a technocratic, urban-professional leadership. The local body elections this December will be the first testing ground after the changes. The party has fielded over 21,000 candidates across some 23,600 wards, primarily to strengthen booth-level networks and voter outreach. Party sources say they are targeting 250-300 'sure-win wards', as well as the Thrissur, Palakkad and Thiruvananthapuram corporations.

Moving over to the eastern coast, in tiny Puducherry, the BJP has been consolidating its 2021 assembly wins—it secured six seats of the total 30 (senior NDA ally, the NR Congress, won 10 seats). The 2024 general election was a setback: the BJP candidate lost the lone parliamentary seat to the Congress by 136,000-odd votes. Strategically, the party is focusing on the urban middle class, traders and Hindu caste minorities, while strengthening booth-level organisation and the youth wings. The 2026 assembly poll will be used as a test bed for incremental growth—securing urban wards, improving vote share—but the party will need to overcome deep-seated regional loyalties and significantly expand its vote base to become a serious contender.'

A NORTHEAST DILEMMA

In Assam, the BJP has been in power for over a decade; CM Himanta Biswa Sarma is also the face of the party in the Northeast now. The party has set an ambitious target of winning 103 of the 126 assembly seats in 2026 (a 20 per cent leap from 75 in 2021). The confidence comes after the NDA cap-

ONWARDS TO NEW BATTLES

► **The emphatic victory in Bihar has the BJP charged up for the 'mother of all poll battles' in Bengal as well as in the southern states**

► **Modi-Shah model—tight control, focused messaging and relentless preparation—along with RSS support is near unstoppable**

► **West Bengal will test BJP's poll theories. TMC took 131 of 146 seats where Muslims have numbers**

► **In Assam, over-reliance on CM Sarma's poll acumen has not gone down well with old-timers**

WITH RAJEEV CHANDRASEKHAR, THE BJP HAS A TECHNOCRAT HEAD IN KERALA. THE LOCAL BODY POLLS WILL BE THEIR FIRST TEST

tured 11 of the 14 LS seats in 2024 with a 42.3 per cent share.

Sarma, party insiders say, has launched a full-scale internal restructuring—dropping under-performing MLAs, inducting younger as well as women candidates, and pushing a dual narrative of welfare delivery and demographic security. A worry for BJP-Sangh insiders, though, is the CM's growing dominance. "Sarma's assertiveness risks shifting the campaign away from governance and into sharper identity politics," a senior BJP leader from the state told INDIA TODAY.

Some of the Sangh leaders active in the Northeast argue that over-reliance on Sarma's leadership, local anti-incumbency and community resentment over ticket denials could test the cohesion of the Assam unit. There's also some discomfiture within the state unit. Recently, ex-Union minister Rajen Gohain quit the party to join the regional outfit, Assam Jatiya Parishad (AJP). Sangh insiders say Gohain's exit is a result of old-timers feeling 'short-changed' after Sarma, an ex-Congressman, took control of the party. Earlier in January, the BJP had also replaced state unit chief Bhabesh Kalita with MP Dilip Saikia, but he, too, has been unable to bridge the gulf between the two camps.

On the electoral front, BJP insiders say the 2023 delimitation of assembly constituencies has significantly reshaped Assam's political map, reportedly reducing the number of Muslim-dominated seats to 22 (from an earlier total of 30). Unlike in other poll-bound states, the Election Commission is not conducting its SIR in Assam, citing the need to stabilise boundaries after the delimitation exercise. Of course, this has also kept the issue of illegal migration on the boil.

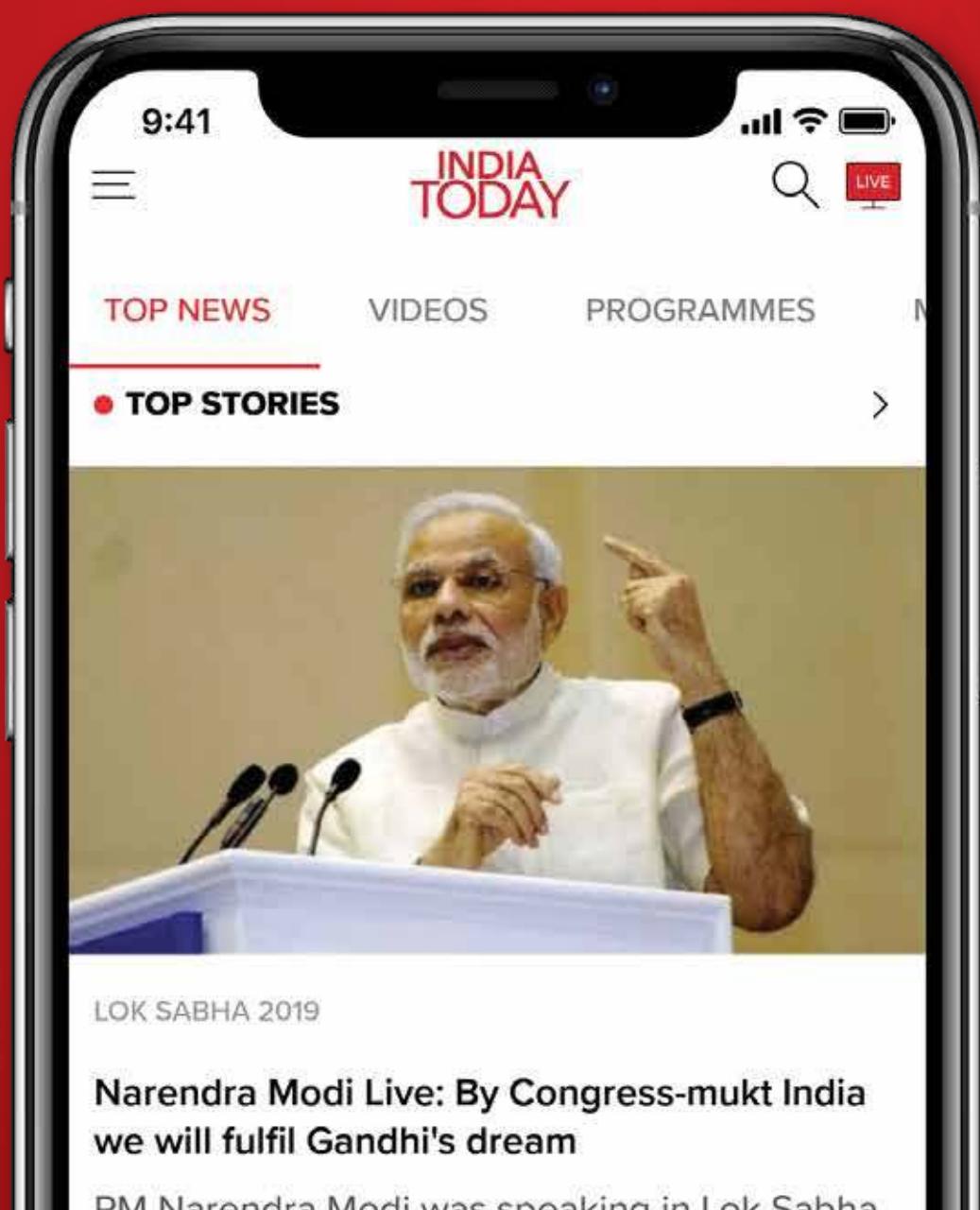
The Bihar victory afterglow has yet to peter out, but BJP sources in Delhi say the Modi-Shah duo have already moved on, and are now focused on the preparations in Bengal. The stakes are both political and symbolic. A victory in Bengal would not only puncture Mamata Banerjee's dominance but also cement the BJP's eastward expansion—from Assam and Tripura to the Bay of Bengal. For the party, it would be the final piece in the east in the national saffron jigsaw.

The geographical metaphor—Modi's allusion to the Ganga's flow eastward—is meant to denote near-term strategy. In the months ahead, this will be tested across Bengal's villages, towns and cities. The eastern state is the top prize, and this time the party will be hoping to not just contest but also claim it. ■

INDIA
TODAY

BREAKING NEWS

JUST A TAP AWAY



DOWNLOAD THE APP NOW

AVAILABLE ON



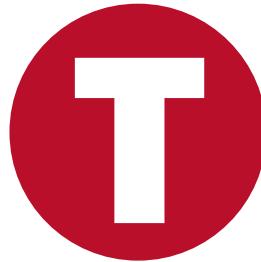


THE NATION
INTERNSHIPS

BIG INTERN SCHEME FALLS SHORT

THE CENTRAL GOVERNMENT'S ATTEMPTS TO GIVE YOUNG JOB-SEEKERS MUCH-NEEDED CORPORATE EXPOSURE SEE AN UNDERWELMING UPTAKE

By SONAL KHETARPAL

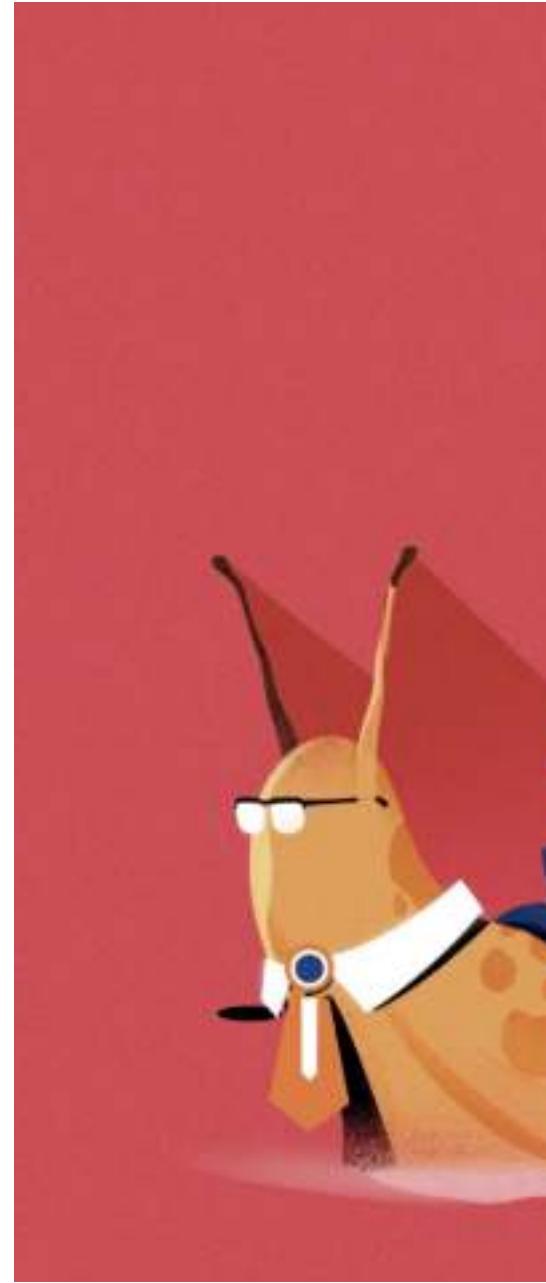


WENTY-ONE-YEAR-OLD Nitin Rathore from Kota is the kind of student the government had in mind when it envisioned the Prime Minister's Internship Scheme (PMIS). A business administration graduate from Career Point University and the first in his business-owning family to seek a job, he has been working in the HR department of an Indian multinational for the past few months. Treating the one-year

internship as a stepping stone to a secure career, he says, "I am giving this my 100 per cent so that they give me a pre-placement offer."

It hasn't been easy, though, for Rathore to get accustomed to the corporate culture. The first lesson he had to learn was about punctuality. After repeatedly arriving late for two months and seeing his salary deducted proportionately, he is now at his desk at 8:20 am sharp. He is also learning about accountability and working as part of a team.

The catch? Rathore is among the few candidates to have actually joined as an intern under the ambitious PMIS initiative. Announced in the February 2024 budget, just before the general election in May that year, PMIS aimed to offer India's youth 10 million internships over five years, or 2 million a year on average, in top 500 companies. Targeted at 21-24-year-olds from low-income households, especially those in the NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training) category, the year-long internships promised real-world business exposure, a monthly stipend of Rs 5,000—with the central government contributing Rs 4,500 and companies providing Rs 500 or more from their Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) funds—besides a one-time allowance of Rs 6,000. "The intent of the programme," Nirmala Sitharaman, Union minister of finance and corporate affairs, had told Parliament this February, "is not to provide a job but exposure and, through the internship, a kind of awareness of what is there in the market for which they have to be trained."



Rather than roll out the full two million internships in the year, the Union ministry of corporate affairs (MCA)—the nodal authority for PMIS—opted for a pilot phase first. In retrospect, that caution was justified. The pilot, which aimed to train 125,000 interns for the year, was launched in October 2024. Its uptake was not just sluggish, it was way below expectations.

That the MCA failed to anticipate such a low turnout was evident when in their budget demands for FY26, they sought and got sanction for scaling up PMIS to 1.5 million internships with a budgeted outlay of Rs 10,831 crore, five times the Rs 2,000 crore allocated in FY25. The Rs 840 crore allocated to the pilot project was revised

A TEPID RESPONSE

The PMIS had hoped to provide 10 million internships to young graduates in top 500 companies in five years. But the results of the two rounds of the pilot have been disappointing



Candidates who registered at PMIS	181,000	214,000
Number of companies that participated	280	327
Internship opportunities they posted	127,000	118,000*
Applications sent by candidates	621,000	455,000
Internship offers made	82,000	83,000 (as of Nov. 26)
Candidates who accepted	28,000	24,600 (as of Nov. 26)
Candidates who finally joined	8,700	7,300
Candidates who left midway	4,565 (as of Nov. 26)	2,053 (as of Nov. 26)

■ Round 1 (Oct. 3-Dec. 2024) ■ Round 2 (Jan. 9-Apr. 2025)

Source: Parliament questions; *New and unfilled opportunities of previous round

OUTLAY FOR PMIS

₹2,000
crore

FY25 allocation for PMIS

₹840
crore

Allocation for the pilot

₹380
crore

Revised estimate for pilot

Illustration by SIDDHANT JUMDE

to Rs 380 crore, of which only Rs 73.72 crore has been utilised so far.

The disappointing first round prompted the government to launch a second one this January, with no improvement in uptake. As a result, there is no clarity yet on when the scheme will be formally launched. As a senior official explains, "After we evaluate the outcome of this pilot, we will decide if we will do another one or announce the scheme. All we can say right now is we learnt a lot from this pilot, which will help us fine-tune the main scheme when it is launched."

If there is one encouraging aspect across the two rounds, it's the industry

response. To get companies on board, the MCA worked through industry bodies like FICCI and CII, who in turn engaged with member companies for implementation, resolving queries and collating data. Prominent companies such as Tata Steel, Maruti, ONGC, Reliance, Eicher Motors signed up.

In the first round, 280 companies posted 127,000 opportunities, 2,000 more than the requirement of 125,000. The vacancies attracted 621,000 applications from 181,000 candidates registered on the PMIS portal. But, eventually, the companies could make only 82,000 internship offers, which meant a third of the opportunities went

abegging. Worse, only 28,000, or just 34 per cent, of the candidates accepted the offers and, finally, only 8,700, or a third, joined. Of these, 4,565, or nearly half, left midway.

The second round followed a similar trajectory. While the participant companies rose to 327, the 118,000 internship opportunities—new and old—were fewer than the previous round. Companies made 83,000 internship offers, of which 24,600 were accepted, and only 7,300 joined. Of these, 2,053 have already quit without completing the internships. As of November, a mere 95 interns have been offered full-time jobs across 17 companies in the two rounds.



WHY PMIS HAS FAILED TO CLICK

A feedback survey of candidates by the MCA threw up several reasons, as did a back-check by a leading FMCG company of candidates from the first phase. If the MCA's survey revealed that candidates were discouraged by distant locations, the longer internship period than in other skilling programmes and uninteresting roles, the FMCG firm's survey echoed those findings: 32 per cent said they were looking for a full-time role, 22 per cent didn't like the sales profile and wanted an office job, 18 per cent felt the location was too far, 15 per cent were pursuing higher education, and 13 per cent said the one-year internship duration was too long and they could commit only for a month or two. Disaggregated, these are some of the chief reasons why the PMIS has failed to take off.

LOCATION: This emerged as a chief deal-breaker, with candidates preferring their workplace to be within 5-10 km of their place of residence. Women especially often face constraints in relocating to cities far from their villages, says Isha Gupta, research lead at the research firm JustJobs Network.

LOW STIPEND: Experts feel the initial internship stipend of Rs 5,000 a month is too small and not attractive enough for the youth to consider it. Back home, they can often earn more through odd jobs or MGNREGA employment. Given their family background, Gupta explains, the expectation is to earn from day one and also send money back home. "For these youth, it is about making ends meet today," she says. "They don't have the privilege or the foresight to see an internship as a gateway for better opportunities."

PERMANENT Vs TEMPORARY, PRIVATE Vs SARKARI JOB: Speaking from their experience of working with thousands of candidates across sectors, Aditya Narayan Mishra, MD &

WHAT IS THE PM INTERNSHIP SCHEME?

The design, deficiencies and desirable solutions for the programme

THE SCHEME

Announced in the 2024-25 Budget, PMIS aims to provide 12 months of industry exposure to 10 million youth in top 500 companies in five years to improve their employability

ELIGIBILITY

Youth between the ages of 21 and 24 years, who are not studying full-time, are not employed full-time and no one in their family holds a government job or earns more than Rs 8 lakh per annum

WHO IS EXCLUDED?

Graduates from top schools (IITs, IIMs, NLU, IIITs etc.); holders of professional or higher degrees (CA, CMA, CS, MBBS, MBA, Master's etc.); enrolled in any central or state government apprenticeship, skill, or training scheme

REMUNERATION

A monthly stipend of Rs 4,500 from the government; additional stipend of at least Rs 500 per month from the employer; Rs 6,000 one-time grant from the government; insurance cover under PM Jeevan Jyoti Bima Yojana and PM Suraksha Bima Yojana; internship certificate

WHAT AILS PMIS



➔ Lack of communication, awareness, guidance for candidates. No third-party involvement in taking them through the process. As a result, candidates often miss the fact that the job may require relocation or, say, involve standing up to 8 hours a day



➔ Women often averse to relocation



➔ Candidates seek a permanent, preferably government, job, which offers them more security



➔ Rs 5,000 stipend too little, candidates can earn more doing odd jobs back home, or through MGNREGA wages



➔ Eligibility criteria, too, are restrictive, narrowing the pool considerably

CEO of HR services firm CIEL HR, reveals how many graduates treat "temporary job offers as backups while they look for more permanent roles". This is probably because most of the target candidates are from underprivileged backgrounds, and are looking for a full-time job rather than a temporary internship. Ideally, they would like a government job, which they consider more secure. Hence, the better uptake

for PSU internships. ONGC rolled out 6,000 internship positions in the first pilot and another 4,200 in the second. Recounting their company's altogether different experience, the CHRO of a diversified conglomerate laments: "We rolled out 269 offers for a target of 259 hires, but only 32 joined. Today, just nine remain. The socio-cultural aspect wasn't taken into account, which is why the uptake is so low."

HOW TO FIX IT

➔ Accelerate the momentum for local advocacy programmes through gram panchayats to gain buy-in and acceptance of the scheme at the grassroots level

➔ Involve third-party agents to help interns with expectation-setting and handhold them while applying for job positions

➔ Increase monthly stipend of Rs 5,000, particularly for youth who have to relocate to a city for work. Companies may consider paying a reasonable amount that covers the cost of living

➔ Make eligibility criteria more open by reducing the lower age limit to 18 instead of 21 and remove upper age limit

➔ Keep the portal open for longer durations, or even continuously, so companies can apply when they want and HR teams don't feel pressured

➔ Make duration of internship flexible. For instance, internships in retail do not need to last a full year; 3-6 months can suffice. Manufacturing internships, on the other hand, can be for 12 months

RESTRICTIVE ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA:

CRITERIA: Only youth aged 21-24 years, who have passed high school, hold an ITI certificate, diploma from a polytechnic, or a graduate degree (BA, BSc, BCom, BCA, BBA, BPharma, etc.) can apply for PMIS, provided they are unemployed, not studying full-time, and their yearly family income is below Rs 8 lakh. Not many people make the cut, reducing the number of applicants.

SCHEME OVERLAP: Some experts question the very rationale of creating a parallel ecosystem when there are already several similar skilling schemes, such as the National Apprenticeship Promotion Scheme (NAPS), the National Apprenticeship Training Scheme (NATS) and the Dual System of Training (DST). “Why have so many schemes for the same purpose of skill-making—making youth employable?” asks Gupta of JustJobs Network. “NAPS, NATS and DST may focus on different youth cohorts, but they all aim to improve employability through hands-on training.” In its defence, the government says schemes like NAPS and NATS are mandatory by law for certain companies and the PMIS (a voluntary scheme) intends to go beyond them.

EXPECTATION MISMATCH: With no third-party associates or agents to handhold them through the process, candidates often misunderstand job expectations. “We’ve seen them apply for a role only to realise later that it requires relocation,” says Nipun Sharma, CEO, TeamLease Degree Apprenticeship. They also don’t know what to expect from a corporate job. Like the fact that an assembly-line role may require standing up to eight hours a day. Emphasising the role of awareness and advocacy, Aman Pannu, president of the DCM Shriram Foundation, says, “For any positive social change, building collective consciousness is a must. Mindset change needs to be strengthened if a scheme is to make an impact at the grassroots.” The reason her firm’s CSR skilling projects in Hardoi and Lakhimpur, Uttar Pradesh, have a retention rate of 85 per cent, Pannu explains, is that their implementation agency at the grassroots mobilises the youth, involves parents, gets their buy-in and also explains the candidate’s earning trajectory in advance.

BURDEN OF COMPLIANCE: Participating companies have their own set of issues, starting with creating a PMIS cell within the organisation. They are also unhappy with the PMIS digital portal, the base for end-to-end

implementation. It is open only during specific periods, and they have to post internship positions in that time, placing an unnecessary burden on HR teams. Companies have to post opportunities on the dashboard, candidates have to register on the portal and apply for internships based on their preferences and eligibility. They, in turn, shortlist and make internship offers, which candidates must accept or reject within two weeks.

To add to their woes, every organisation must fill out assessments for each applicant. “We had to fill out details for 2,500 applicants,” says one HR head. The government has also mooted a quota for SCs/STs, which promises to add to the burden.

MAKING A FRESH START

Poor joining rates remain a persistent bugbear for companies, even when they have created positions specifically for NEET youth, a point industry executives raised at a meeting organised by the MCA in Delhi on September 15. Several companies have suggested that instead of relying solely on the online portal, they should be allowed to hire PMIS interns directly from campuses. Their rationale? Face-to-face interactions could improve joining rates and help set expectations right from the start.

CIEL HR’s Mishra also suggests increasing the stipend amount as it is not financially viable, especially for interns in urban areas. A Pre-Placement Offer (PPO) mechanism could also improve the scheme’s appeal.

The MCA itself is considering a few course-corrections, like keeping the portal open throughout the year, improve the interface, launching a mobile app and adding geotagging for location-based choices. The MCA is also considering enrolling companies outside the top 500.

There is no denying the potential or the intent of the initiative. However, its weak start has laid bare structural gaps. Unless these are fixed, PMIS risks becoming another government scheme backed by a massive budget but failing to deliver meaningful impact. ■



SPECIAL REPORT | **NAXALS IN CHHATTISGARH**

THE BIG SURRENDER

A CALIBRATED BLEND OF FORCE AND PERSUASION FUELS RECORD NAXALITE SURRENDERS IN BASTAR, SHAKING THEIR RANKS AND ACCELERATING THE PUSH TO END THE MOVEMENT

By **RAHUL NORONHA**
in Bastar

At 11:30 pm, a district superintendent of police's phone rings in Chhattisgarh's Naxal-affected Bastar division. His eyes fix on the number flashing on the screen and his expression shifts—betraying a flicker of expectation. "Woh baaharaane ko taiyyar hai (he's ready to come out)," says the voice at the other end before hanging up.

The "woh" is a high-value Naxal/Maoist who, along with 30 cadres, has agreed to lay down arms under 'Poona Margam' (new path), a grassroots rehabilitation programme meant to steer former insurgents back into society. And this is no isolated call. Bastar is witnessing a flurry of surrenders: 1,513 Naxals have laid down weapons this year alone. On paper, it's a win-win for both sides—the insurgents looking for a way out and a regime pushing for peace. But coaxing Naxals to surrender—and navigating the politics around it—is anything but simple.

 **ABANDONING ARMS**
Naxals with their weapons after their surrender in Jagdalpur, Chhattisgarh, Oct. 17



In early 2024, a few months after the change of government in Chhattisgarh, the Union and state governments recalibrated their strategy to tackle Naxalism—once described by the late prime minister Manmohan Singh as India's biggest internal security challenge. Later that year, Union home minister Amit Shah announced a deadline of March 31, 2026, to bring Naxalism to a complete end in India. To get there, a tactical blitz was adopted initially: a series of security ops against 'red terror'. Bastar saw 123 operations in 2024, up from 69 in 2023. As many as 217 insurgents were killed, as against just 20 the previous year. It took a heavy toll and also reflected in the higher graph of Naxal deaths per operation in 2025. By the first week of December, 96 operations had already been carried out, 252 Naxals lay dead. Now it started looking like the endgame.

FALL OF THE CADRES

Rise in surrenders, arrests and fatalities reflect weakening Naxal presence in Chhattisgarh

4,330

Naxals who have surrendered in the past seven years

3,896

Naxals who have been arrested

675

Naxals who have been killed in security operations

180

Security personnel who have been killed

Figures from 2019 to Dec. 3, 2025;
Source: Chhattisgarh Police

UNION HOME MINISTER AMIT SHAH SAYS THE NUMBER OF NAXAL-AFFECTED DISTRICTS IN INDIA HAS FALLEN FROM 126 IN 2014 TO 11 IN 2025 AND HIS DEADLINE TO END THE INSURGENCY BY MARCH 31, 2026, IS ON TRACK

The quality of strikes kept pace with the volumes. In 2025, the forces managed to neutralise several top Maoists, including Basavaraju, general secretary of the CPI (Maoist), and central committee (CC) members Korsa Dada and Raju Dada. The resulting

leadership vacuum led to confusion among the cadres, and voices of dissent began to surface.

A mid-term review by the security establishment six months before the March 31 deadline made one thing clear. Battlefield success had come, driven by tech-based intelligence gizmos and superior weaponry. The gun had done its work, creating conditions conducive for ending Naxalism, but it would not finish the war on its own. Tactics now had to pivot to a new pillar: surrender. "We assessed around 1,200 active cadres in Bastar and 300 in inaccessible areas," says an SP of a Naxal-hit district. "It's not possible to engage all of them in operations and neutralise them, but to attain the objective, it was imperative to defang them, by getting leaders to surrender with their arms."

ENGINEERING THE EXITS

Officially, there has been no truce between the two sides. But October saw two of the biggest surrenders in the history of the insurgency. Politburo member Bhupathi, aka Sonu, laid down arms in Gadchiroli in the presence of Maharashtra chief minister Devendra Fadnavis, along with 60 comrades and 54 weapons. Two days later, CC member Rupesh, aka Satish—head of the north sub zonal committee of the Dandakaranya special zonal committee (DKSZC)—surrendered in Jagdalpur with 209 cadres and over 153 weapons in the presence of CM Vishnu Deo Sai. It's not just operations that have kept Bastar inspector general of police Sundarraj P. occupied. On November 25, 28 Naxals surrendered in Narayanpur in his presence. The next day, he was in Bijapur, facilitating the surrender of 41 more. On November 28, 10 Maoists—including Chaitu Dada of the Darbha division, believed to be among those involved in the eponymous massacre that killed top Congress leaders—gave up arms in Jagdalpur. On November 30, another 37 cadres followed in Dantewada.

How is this slew of surrenders being engineered? It began with the

“We failed to read the public mood”

Rupesh, aka Satish—central committee member of the main Naxal group, CPI (Maoist), head of the north sub zone of the Dandakaranya special zonal committee (DKSZC) and its chief ideologue—surrendered on October 17 with 209 armed cadres. The lean, Telugu-speaking Rupesh, and DKSZC member Baji Rao spoke to Senior Editor RAHUL NORONHA in Jagdalpur's 'Alcatraz', which houses high-value surrenderers, on laying down arms, misreading public mood, the movement's future and electoral politics.

Edited excerpts of the interview:



► LEAVING THE SHADOWS
Rupesh (seated) with Baji Rao (behind him in blue) and other cadres after their surrender at Jagdalpur, Chhattisgarh, Nov. 27

CHANDRADEEP KUMAR



Q. The past two years have seen a clear capitulation, coinciding with a shift in strategy by security forces. What weakened the Maoist movement?

Rupesh: We could not adopt the right strategy, nor could we reach all sections of society. For example, during the farmers' protest, we couldn't do much; the problems of farmers and labourers continue. Labour is upset, but our movement is not present among them, or among students or urban people. We were restricted to the tribal belt, even there not entirely. If a large number of people had joined us, the state would have formulated its response accordingly. The main blame lies in our inability to read India's conditions accurately.

Baji Rao: It's not just in the last two years; we were unable to extend party activities to the rest of the country. We

are an underground group; we created a structure here [Dandakaranya], but we could not do so elsewhere. The government is using its power to make policies, but we could not explain to people their positive and negative sides. We also couldn't reach the educated sections. There has been a change in production patterns due to mechanisation, reflected in the way people eat and dress. We couldn't identify with it. The party made a mistake in that assessment.

Q. How did the Maoists perceive the intensified operations by the forces?

Rupesh: We agree that operations by security forces intensified, but we don't agree that the movement weakened because of these in the past two years. Operations have been going on for a long time, and we view the state the same way—whether it is the Congress or the BJP.

Q. When the Union home minister announced March

“INSTEAD OF BOYCOTTING POLLS, WE SHOULD HAVE LEVERAGED THEM. OUR BOYCOTT BECAME ANOTHER REASON FOR OUR ALIENATION FROM THE PEOPLE”

31, 2026, as the deadline for ending the movement, what was your reaction?

Baji Rao: We have not come out because of the deadline. We had failed to create a roadmap and strategy...we should have done these 10, 15 or even 20 years ago, and then followed it.

Q. How do you see the future of the movement?

Rupesh: There are limits to what I can say here. The government has set a deadline to control armed Maoists, but the country's problems persist. If the government doesn't address these issues, doesn't make appropriate policies or implement them,

the agitation will continue in some form or the other. Whether the present Maoist leadership exists or not is not important. We can't stop it or continue it.

Q. What is your future plan?

Baji Rao: The situation on the ground has changed, which means the armed struggle cannot be extended and has to stop. There are many problems in the country, and if they have to be addressed, people have to connect with us. People can rise at any time. We have to organise them and raise awareness.

Q. What are your views about electoral politics?

Rupesh: My personal view is that instead of boycotting polls, we should have leveraged them. The boycott became another reason for our alienation from the people. Even if we couldn't get our candidates elected, we should have at least made our stand on the candidates clear. If need be, we could have entered politics.

drawing up of a list of cadres considered likely to come out. Then came the ‘silent surrenders’—those who had already surrendered but not officially. They acted as key operatives, encouraging others to follow. The monsoon normally brings a lull in operations, with vast stretches of Bastar cut off by heavy rains. But not this year. Security forces pushed deep into forested Abujhmad, long seen as a Maoist safe haven. The pressure to surrender only grew.

Semantics matter in the surrender game. Naxals coming out of the fold dislike the word ‘surrender’; they insist the agitation will continue, only without guns. So, a new term, ‘Poona Margam’, was coined—one they are more comfortable with. Local civil society workers, schoolteachers, panchayat office-bearers and even journalists are acting as a bridge between the state and the insurgents, trying to persuade them to lay down arms. The police, meanwhile, refuse to ease the pressure. “The first condition is lay down arms. We are not negotiating with the Maoists but offering a package for those who lay down arms and join the mainstream,” says Sundarraj.

RACE TO THE DEADLINE

A week before Madvi Hidma, one of India’s most-wanted Maoist commanders, was killed by the Andhra Pradesh Police on November 18, Chhattisgarh deputy CM and home minister Vijay Sharma visited Puvarti, Hidma’s ancestral village, and had lunch with his mother and the mother of Barse Deva, now seen as the commander of Battalion No. 1. Hidma’s mother issued an appeal urging the fugitives to surrender, but nothing came of it. His killing, coming soon after this Track Two diplomacy effort, prompted local leaders, including former CPI MLA Manish Kunjam, to suggest rifts within the Maoist leadership. Devji, the politburo member opposed to surrenders, may have had a role in tipping off the police, he feels. Top Maoist leaders, however, deny any schisms and insist those who wish to surrender are free to do so (*see interview*).

Even as large groups surrender, not everyone in their is willing to follow.



BREAKING THE RED HOLD

At the recent DGP-IGP conference in Raipur, PM Narendra Modi urged holistic development in LWE-freed regions as home minister Amit Shah projected a Naxal-free India by next year

- » The choice of Raipur—capital of the most Naxal-affected state, Chhattisgarh—as the conference venue was telling
- » Prime Minister Modi’s core message was a call for holistic development in regions being freed from Left Wing Extremism (LWE)
- » His remarks signalled that while major gains have been made against LWE, the next phase
- of the campaign will centre on development
- » Home minister Shah reiterated his claim that Naxalism would be wiped out by next year, saying it would end before the next DGP/IGP conference
- » Shah said 586 fortified police stations have been built and Naxal-affected districts have reduced significantly since 2014
- » He noted that for 40 years, three problems—Naxalism, insurgency in the Northeast and Kashmir—had festered and the Modi regime has found lasting solutions to all of them
- » Shah said the key to tackling radicalisation, extremism and narcotics lies in accuracy of intelligence, clarity of objectives and synergy in action

EVEN AS LARGE GROUPS SURRENDER, NOT EVERYONE IN THE NAXAL LEADERSHIP IS WILLING TO FOLLOW. SOME REMAIN DETERMINED TO FIGHT

Some remain determined to fight, whatever the consequences. “What Kunjam is suggesting—that Devji did Hidma in—is not true. Devji does not want to surrender even when he knows what the consequences are. Hidma had the same view,” Rupesh tells INDIA TODAY. Meanwhile, Sharma has rejected the appeal by Anant, spokesperson of the Maoists

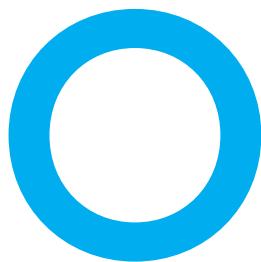
Maharashtra-Madhya Pradesh-Chhattisgarh Zone, urging the three CMs to suspend offensive operations till February 16 to facilitate surrenders. Sharma said the date was too distant and that surrenders could be organised sooner. Anant has now sought time till January 1. In a social media message, he said he is unsure whether Ramder, the zone’s top operative, is ready to surrender, but said his group will break away and do so if Chhattisgarh gives the go-ahead. There are others, like senior Maoist leader Papa Rao, who appear unwilling to surrender.

With less than four months to go for the March 31, 2026, deadline, both sides will have to take tough decisions. On that will depend whether India will truly be Naxal-free in the coming year or not. ■

A RAFT OF NEW LEAGUES

GOLF AND VOLLEYBALL, EVEN ARM WRESTLING AND PICKLEBALL, ARE BEING PACKAGED INTO FRANCHISE-BASED LEAGUES. NOT ONLY DO THEY HELP ATHLETES HONE SKILLS, THEY CAN OVERHAUL SPORTING ECOSYSTEMS

BY SUHANI SINGH



Once upon a time and not too long ago, sports channels were dyed in cricket, and more cricket. When it wasn't live telecast of a Men in Blue series, they beamed endless reruns of India's memorable victories, or other nations on tour. Then there was two months of the Indian Premier League and replays thereof. But how swiftly times have changed! Broadcasters suddenly have more options as sports associations team up with companies, private investors and even Bollywood stars to package different sports into highly competitive leagues. In the past few years, India has seen new leagues of badminton, table tennis, kho kho and volleyball, besides popular ones like kabaddi, hockey and football. This year has seen launches of leagues in archery and pickleball alongside announcements of those in golf and shooting. And it's not just audiences who get variety



AIMING HIGH

Clockwise from left: an archer in the final of the Archery Premier League, Oct. 13; action from the final of Prime Volleyball League, Oct. 26; a match at the Pro Panja League, 2023 and a daring move in a Ultimate Kho Kho match in 2023



and taste the thrill of non-national partisan support; sporting ecosystems are evolving for the better as a result.

Take the recently concluded Prime Volleyball League (PVL). A brainchild of Tuhin Mishra, CEO and managing director of Baseline Ventures, a sports marketing, entertainment and brand management company which represents the likes of P.V. Sindhu and Smriti Mandhana, PVL has ensured that one of the biggest team sports in the world in terms of fanbase gets a push in India. "Volleyball has a mix of urban and rural appeal [in India]. It's not an expensive sport to play, is easy



to follow and looks good on screen, for it is very fast-moving and action-oriented," says Mishra. With 10 teams in the fourth edition, 24 foreign players from volleyball-rich nations such as the US, Brazil, Iran and Serbia, coaches like the US's David Lee, an Olympic and world championship medallist, and the backing of solid sponsors and team owners, PVL has demonstrated how sustaining a league benefits the sport.

The result is obvious—the Indian men's team's world ranking has risen to the top 50 from 131 since the league's launch in 2019. For many, India's beating higher-ranked teams

like South Korea and Chinese Taipei to reach the quarter-finals of the 2022 Asian Games for the first time in 40 years can be attributed to the quality of PVL. An equally big feat was 2024 PVL champions Calicut Heroes winning the CAVA (Central Asian Volleyball Association) Club Championship. Such results and the fact that the league has become a hunting ground to scout players for the India team are what motivates Mishra. His dream is to see India make it to the Olympics. "With the existing roadmap, if we act right and get support, there's a strong chance that we will qualify for the 2032 Games," he says.

PREMIER LEAGUES: SPOILT FOR CHOICE

At last, cricket's tiresome ubiquity is broken. Viewers will keep their eyes peeled for these exciting events

If PVB has actor Vijay Deverakonda and K.L. Rahul as team owners and shuttlers Sindhu and Satwiksairaj Rankireddy as fans, then the Pro Panja League, India's premier arm-wrestling league, which took off in 2023, has actor Parvinn Dabass as a co-founder. Dabass has made it a mission to turn this 'pastime' of college canteens and idle mohallas into a serious pursuit. "It's a very technique-based sport," he says. "The feeling of beating somebody... you walk out with a certain swag, it's what people really relate to." The league, he adds, aims to build a "community" and "a movement to uplift arm-wrestling".

A STRONG ARM, ANYONE?

Dabass takes pride in the league's inclusivity—women are participants, and there is a category for the differently-abled. Its real appeal lies in the backgrounds of the athletes. Apart from usual suspects like fitness trainers, there have been athletes from varied walks of life—a factory worker, a teacher, a rickshaw driver, a chartered accountant and even a housewife, Farheen Dehalvi, who credits her proficiency in sport to housework. It has also made stars out of individuals like Mizoram's Denic Lalruatluanga Vangchhia, who went from Panja League to win a silver in the World Arm Wrestling Cup and later acted in a Mizo film. "We have taught arm wrestlers how to use social media, become influencers and earn an income," adds Dabass, citing the popularity of Gwalior's Sachin Goyal, who goes as 'Bicep King' and has over 2.5 million followers. Dabass hopes to add more teams in future editions as well as taking the league outside India.

Most crucially, sports leagues are a means to measure India's top tier of athletes vis-à-vis international ones, like during the Archery Premier League, which was held in New Delhi in October. APL drew top-ranked men's and women's compound archers as well as recurve Olympic champion Mete Gazoz and Paris Games silver medalist Brady Ellison. To make the ancient sport more broadcast-friendly, the competition was held under lights and the time given for each shot at target

THE INDIAN GOLF PREMIER LEAGUE

(Jan.-Feb. 2026) TBA*



In its inaugural edition, the event aims to bring together men, women and grassroots talent on one competitive stage. Apart from driving viewership for Indian golf, it aims to train over 1 million school and college students in coming years.



INDIAN PICKLEBALL LEAGUE

(Dec 1-7) New Delhi

The fast-growing fitness and lifestyle sport giving tennis a run for its money in the US made its big screen and streaming debut in India with the IPBL. Star paddlers like Mihika Yadav and Aman Patel



“
PLAYERS GET EXPOSURE IN THE PRIME VOLLEYBALL LEAGUE AND THE ECOSYSTEM DEVELOPS—REFEREES, LINESMEN, TRAINERS. RECOGNITION IS IMPORTANT, TOO

TUHIN MISHRA
CEO & MD, Baseline Ventures



was reduced from 20 to 15 seconds, heightening excitement. "We have won world competitions, except at the Olympics. We are trying to understand what we should do that we haven't done," says APL chairman. Training and interacting with and competing against international athletes would surely have benefited Indian archers.

The opportunity to learn from foreign counterparts is what makes

the Ultimate Table Tennis League a much-anticipated event in the calendar for India team paddler Sreeja Akula. "We exchange ideas and see what they do in training," she told India Today in an interview in 2024. "We know their game, which helps us in international tournaments when we play them."

Archery is not the only sport to get a spectator-friendly spin. Golf, too, is experimenting with the league

**INDIAN SHOOTING
LEAGUE**
(First half of 2026) TBA*

Shooters may not be the most emotive lot to watch, but watching a shooting competition is akin to watching a battle of nerves unfold. The National Rifle Association of India is expected to assemble not only India's finest but even top-ranked international players for what is poised to be a first-of-its-kind league in the sport.



**GLOBAL
CHESS
LEAGUE**
(Dec. 13-24),
Mumbai

The line-up of this team-based, gender-inclusive chess league includes the who's who of chess: from Viswanathan Anand and Koneru Humpy to world champion D. Gukesh and 11-year-old prodigy Faustino Oro, with the latter headlining GCL Contenders, a category that will feature amateur players alongside grandmasters and individual masters.



ANI

alongside international talent were part of the week-long event which saw six teams play individual and double matches. With growing popularity in Indian metros, where courts are being built in gated communities, and tennis players succumbing to its charm, IPBL was a hit with viewers.

*TBA: to be announced

format. Indian Golf Premier League (IGPL) CEO Uttam Singh Mody is hoping to have a Ryder Cup-like atmosphere of team sports, where golf fans can root for teams. For Mody, the larger goal is to develop the ecosystem of an expensive pursuit. "We are involved in every aspect, from grassroots development and working with schools to building driving ranges and converting them into top academies," he adds. Apart from icons like Shiv Kapoor, Jyoti Randhawa and Jeev Milkha Singh, the IGPL will field a bunch of youngsters on the greens.

The impetus for the National Rifle Association of India (NRAI), the body in charge of shooting in India, to start a league is different, for India already has an abundance of skilled seniors and gifted juniors. "Our shooting landscape is very competitive. You have a huge depth of talented shooters who haven't had international exposure," says NRAI president Kalikesh

Narayan Singh Deo. "The league will enable us to see if they have technical capabilities and mental resilience. We are looking at it to provide us a talent pool for the next 12 years."

CLOSE ENCOUNTERS

Slated in the first half of 2026, the league enables India to flaunt its shooting clout by attracting high-ranked international talent. Seventy international athletes have signed up so far, in addition to 500-plus domestic applications. The league aims to put the viewer nearly in the shooters' shoes and capture the delicate side of shooting through the installation of biofeedback monitors that measure breath, and cameras that show precise lines of bullets.

Pickleball, the sport that started as a quirky cousin of tennis and has taken the world by storm as a fitness and lifestyle sport, is also going the league route. Though it has yet to make it

to broadcast/ streaming networks, there's no denying pickleball's growing popularity in metros. "The league is the funnel; we hope that more people engage with and play pickleball and that it will be the biggest racket sport in country soon," says Sameer Pathak, president of the Indian Pickleball League, which concluded an event on December 7.

Sporting leagues that showcase great athletic skills are exciting, but that's not always enough to guarantee a win. For every success story like the Pro Kabaddi League, there are those, like the wrestling and badminton leagues, that didn't take off. However, that is not deterring stakeholders from investing in sports. For now, giving a cricket-guzzling public a taste of other sports is a worthy endeavour. Moreover, with India hosting the Commonwealth Games in 2030 and making a play for the 2036 Olympics, the leagues couldn't have come at a better time. ■



“

WE HAVE MANY SHOOTERS WITH GREAT TALENT BUT WITH LITTLE INTERNATIONAL EXPOSURE. THIS LEAGUE GIVES THEM THE CHANCE TO COMPETE IN AN INTERNATIONAL EVENT

KALIKESH NARAYAN SINGH DEO

President, National Rifle Association of India

”



सबसे भरोसेमंद खोतों से, सबसे सटीक जानकारी

सब्सक्राइब करें और पाएं 68% तक की छूट

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

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

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

कृपया फॉर्म को ब्लॉकलेटर में भरें

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



सब्सक्राइब करने के लिए यहाँ स्कैन करें।

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

कॉल और Whatsapp के लिए
+91 8597778778

ईमेल भेजें
wecare@intoday.com

लॉग ऑन करें
subscriptions.intoday.in/indiatoday-hindi

LE! SURE

BALLET: FROM RUSSIA WITH LOVE PG 60

THE LISTICLE: NEW RESTAURANTS PG 64



CINEMA ▶

Her Defining **Moment**

YAMI GAUTAM'S STELLAR PERFORMANCE IN HAQ REAFFIRMS HER RISE AS AN ACTRESS WHO LETS HER CRAFT SPEAK FOR HER



ROOTING FOR BANO
Yami Gautam with Emraan Hashmi in a still from *Haq*

In

October 2025, Yami Gautam found herself part of some social media chatter she didn't expect. Film buffs felt she was wrongfully denied a popular award for her work in *Article 370* to favour an actress who had won the prize for a forgettable film that had failed at the box office. Yami heard the statements of support "loud and clear", but a few years ago she had already stopped "chasing anything" other than "great work". There was no bitterness about being overlooked for films like *Bala* and *A Thursday* and there was an acceptance of sorts. Says Yami, "It's absolutely OK not to seek any validation or to associate my success or standing in the industry [with whether] I am awarded or not. The fact that nothing is ever enough is one of the driving forces for me."

Anyone who has watched Yami in the recently released drama *Haq* will acknowledge that it is her best performance so far and indeed one of the standout female performances of 2025. Loosely inspired by the life of Shah Bano and the herculean legal battle she fought, one whose verdict would alter the socio-political fabric of India, *Haq* sees Yami essay Shazia Bano who files a case against her lawyer-husband (Emraan Hashmi) after he brings in a second wife

and subsequently refuses to pay money for the upkeep of Bano's three children. He later also divorces her by pronouncing 'talaq' thrice. Yami commands the screen with her measured, convincing and low-on-histrionics act, one that has you rooting for Bano as she exposes patriarchy and misogyny while fighting for her dignity and rights. "Her anger stems from love—for her children and for her husband—and how inconceivable the betrayal was," says the actress. "You can feel the storm being held inside. The power always lies in resilience."

Directed by Suparn Verma and written by Reshu Nath, *Haq* steers clear of emotional outbursts or sensational dialogues to focus on a woman finding her voice. Rather than projecting her turmoil at a feverish pitch, Yami wanted to express it as an ordinary woman "who never imagined her life and that of her children could take such a drastic turn for years to come". Talking about her approach and the responsibility of playing a part like Bano, Yami says, "I wanted to make her universal.... Anyone who is watching it should feel a part of them

being portrayed on screen. [As women] we have felt unheard and been conditioned to normalise certain things which are not right. She challenged within the periphery of her faith and without being disrespectful of it. She did something so impactful that it has been 40 years and she still stands relevant."

Yami's cinematic career so far is a story of two halves: pre and post *Uri: The Surgical Strike*, the film where she would meet her eventual husband, filmmaker Aditya Dhar. After making a strong first impression in Shoojit Sircar's delightful *Vicky Donor*,

**A “FAN OF VERSATILITY”,
YAMI GAUTAM
REFUSES TO
BE BOXED
INTO “ANY
SET GENRE”**

she did a bunch of run-of-the-mill projects which didn't exactly stretch her thespian skills. That changed with *Uri* and *Bala*. Since then, Yami has found herself shuttling between intense dramas (*A Thursday, Chor Nikal Ke Bhaga*), some with a strong political bent (*Uri, Article 370, Haq*), and comic outings (*Bala, Dhoom Dhaam*). "I am a fan of versatility. I don't have any set genre," says Yami, while denying that she now gravitates towards politically-charged narratives. "I go by what I enjoy and connect with. I don't overthink it." Her upcoming line-up of work which includes five films, she adds, is different.

That she is spoiled for choice after becoming a mother last year is proof of how the industry has progressed in terms of the range of opportunities that it gives to actresses post motherhood. "Given the phase I am in professionally regardless of my personal and family life, it's a great statement about the industry and the audience who appreciate you for who you are and what talent you hold."

The question now is, will that talent be recognised with *Haq*? Could it bring alive the scenario she has dreamt of—standing in the middle of the stage to deliver a winning speech in front of an audience of peers? Yami, though, is measuring *Haq*'s success in another way. "The kind of scripts and roles I am being offered [after it], I'd say, yes, the film is a game changer," she says. "I have stopped chasing the moment and like to go with the flow." If her work in *Haq* is anything to go by, the approach is clearly working. ■

—Suhani Singh

CINEMA ▼

A BOLD NEW VOICE

Filmmaker Tribeny Rai's *Shape of Momo* is a deeply personal debut that turns the lens inward



When Sikkimese filmmaker Tribeny Rai shared the first cut of her feature directorial debut *Shape of Momo* with her friends, they were surprised that she had made a film about herself. Only, Tribeny wouldn't call the film auto-biographical but

the best impression on her mother and sister who find her tendency to challenge the status quo and demeanour with locals off-putting. "I have been told Bishnu is too strong-headed," says Tribeny. "You sometimes can't sympathise and empathise with her." Yet, Tribeny believes

do anything wrong and only then be a heroine," she adds. For Tribeny, a graduate of the Satyajit Ray Institute of Filmmaking in Kolkata, it was imperative that her first feature be set in her home state and reflect on life there. "Because we look different, I never saw a character like me or one I could resonate with in Bollywood films when I was growing up," she says. "People from the [northeast] region are always at the periphery...we are never the heroes of our own story. There was this strong need to tell our stories from our place."

And she has succeeded in telling a poignant one. *Shape of Momo* is already making waves on the film festival circuit, having won accolades in Busan and Kolkata. Even as she tours with the film and hopes for a release, especially in north Bengal, Sikkim, Shillong and Dehradun, where the Nepali-speaking population is concentrated, Tribeny wants more people from the rest of India to see the film. "As a filmmaker," she says, "you have to show a mirror to society. I want people to reflect on how women are treated." ■

—Suhani Singh



one that's "deeply personal", with characters drawn from her experiences.

After all, as legendary filmmaker Martin Scorsese famously said, "The personal is universal."

Tribeny's leading lady Bishnu (pitch-perfect Nepali actress Gaumaya Gurung) is not the easiest heroine to root for. Having returned to her ancestral village in Sikkim from Delhi, she doesn't make

SLICE OF LIFE
Bishnu, played by Nepali actress Gaumaya Gurung, is not the easiest heroine to root for

that by sticking to the principle of 'honesty is the best policy', she has created a shero whom audiences, especially independent women, will relate to. "When people say this story is about women, I feel society puts you in the bracket of righteousness...she can't

BALLET ▾

FROM RUSSIA WITH LOVE

EIFMAN BALLET FROM ST PETERSBURG BRINGS *ANNA KARENINA*—TOLSTOY'S STORMY PSYCHOLOGICAL DRAMA—TO THE NCPA ON ITS FIRST-EVER INDIA TOUR

Talk of Russian ballet and familiar classics like *Swan Lake*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *Giselle*, *The Nutcracker* come to mind instantly. So, it comes as a surprise that a 50-year-old Russian ballet company in its maiden tour of India will be staging Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* at the National Centre for Performing Arts [NCPA] in Mumbai from December 8-10. But that's Eifman Ballet, a St Petersburg-based repertory which prides itself for practising a distinct artistic expression that it describes as "Russian psychological ballet theatre". "My productions are distinguished by a meticulously crafted dramaturgical foundation, profound intellectual content and psychological depth," says Boris Eifman, choreographer and artistic director. "But most importantly, everyone who comes to our performances will experience an inner upheaval, a catharsis... our art never leaves anyone indifferent."

And what better than Tolstoy's epic saga about a married woman hopelessly in love with another man and society's judgement of her, to evoke these emotions. In Tolstoy's tragic portrait of Anna and Tchaikovsky's music, Eifman found all the inspiration he needed. "For me, Tolstoy is the true founder of psychoanalysis or, at the very least, its first practitioner in history," says Eifman. "Through dance, I wanted to uncover the hidden layers of this psychological drama—not to retell the novel, but to reveal the inner storms that words cannot express...to discover new layers of meaning that only the lan-

guage of dance can convey."

For the NCPA, hosting the Eifman Ballet offers a rare opportunity to have a classic western performing art form grace the Jamshed Bhabha Theatre [JBT] stage, which is best known for recitals by the Symphony Orchestra of India whose repertoire includes works by Russian composers. "I had hoped to bring a full-scale Russian ballet to JBT, but the challenge has been our stage, which isn't wide enough to host large ensemble choreographies that many international companies require," says NCPA chairman Khushroo N. Suntook. "Even so, this ballet is exceptionally accomplished, and I believe they will adapt beautifully to our comparatively limited stage." Regardless of space, Tolstoy's tale alone should keep audiences on their toes. ■

—Suhani Singh

Anna Karenina will be performed at NCPA, Mumbai, from Dec. 8-10

Boris Eifman, artistic director of the Eifman Ballet Company, found inspiration in Tolstoy's *Anna* and Tchaikovsky's music



ROBERT WORKMAN

Just as they have for the past eight years, the ghats of Varanasi will once more ring with the verses of Kabir. The Mahindra Kabira Festival 2025, instituted by the Mahindra Group and produced by Teamwork Arts, is celebrating its ninth edition,

bringing together a collective of musicians, thinkers, and cultural voices whose work reflects the 15th-century mystic's legacy of truth, inclusivity and self-inquiry.

From reflections on Kabir's philosophy to engaging discourses, the festival offers a celebration of the mystic poet and saint. Mornings and evenings will come alive with the sounds of music,



FROZEN MAGIC

The Nutcracker on Ice makes its India debut at NMACC, turning a theatre into a 14-tonne ice rink for a blend of skating and storytelling

This Christmas, one of the world's beloved ballets arrives in India as *The Nutcracker on Ice* makes its Indian debut at the Nita Mukesh Ambani Cultural Centre from December 4-14. Blending elite ice skating with storytelling, it transforms

theatre, I thought how wonderful it would be if you could see that on a theatre stage, somewhere intimate, with lighting, decoration and costume," he recalls.

That impulse shaped his approach to theatre on ice, prioritising narrative and atmosphere

an enchanted world of toy soldiers, snowflakes and dancing sweets. Performed on ice by 23 skaters, the ballet adds a physical vocabulary unavailable to traditional dance. "Ice allows us stillness, movement at incredible speed and a sense of surprise," says Mercer. "On that stage, there will be 14 tonnes of frozen water," he adds.

At the heart of *The Nutcracker on Ice* is Mercer's respect for the audience. His passion for creating an intimate experience, combined with visual magic, promises a festive treat that can connect generations, leaving a lasting impact on anyone who steps into the theatre.

—Nikhil Sardana

From Dec. 4-14 at the NMACC, Mumbai

Performed on ice by 23 elite skaters, **the ballet adds a physical vocabulary** unavailable to traditional dance

The Grand Theatre into a glittering ice rink.

Presented by the Imperial Ice Stars, the production is directed by Tony Mercer, whose vision emerged from a desire to bring the excitement of elite ice skating to the theatrical stage. "Being from the world of

over spectacle alone. Drawn to dance-led storytelling and to the music of Tchaikovsky, *The Nutcracker* became a natural choice.

Set in early 20th-century St Petersburg, the story follows young Marie, whose Christmas Eve gift leads her into

FESTIVAL ▼

Timeless Kabir

THE MAHINDRA KABIRA FESTIVAL IN VARANASI WILL CELEBRATE THE 15TH-CENTURY MYSTIC POET'S IDEAS AND TEACHINGS

from Indian classical ragas to Carnatic music and jazz. As Sanjoy K. Roy, MD of Teamwork Arts, says, "Kabir's words remain timeless. They heal, provoke and inspire reflection in a world that constantly changes."

Some of the musical experiences include Kabiriyat—a captivating qawwali performance by Rehmat-e-Nusrat, a Kumaon-based ensemble; a sitar performance by the acclaimed Hidayat Husain Khan, son of Ustad Vilayat Khan; 'Kabir the Julaha: Verses from the Loom', a storytelling and musical performance by Shivan-gini Yeashu Yuvraj, featuring Isha Priya Singh; Kabir Baani by folk musician Mahesha Ram, a soulful sarod performance by Debasmita Bhattacharya among others, culminating with the finale by Agam, the pioneering



ON THE BANKS OF ETERNITY

A scene from a past edition of the Mahindra Kabira Festival

Carnatic progressive rock band.

"The Mahindra Kabira Festival has evolved from a curated heritage event into a major cultural platform. This edition features a bigger, more diverse programme, an expanded roster of Indian and international artists; and strengthened community and education initiatives," says Jay Shah, VP, head of Cultural Outreach, Mahindra & Mahindra. ■

—Deepali Dhingra

The Mahindra Kabira Festival will take place from Dec. 19-21

BOOKS ▼

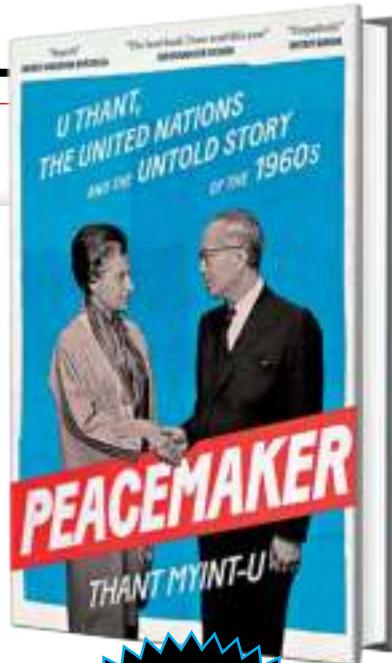
THE QUIET DIPLOMAT

A SHARPLY OBSERVED BIOGRAPHY BRINGS U THANT'S OVERLOOKED LEGACY AND IMPACT ON GLOBAL AFFAIRS BACK INTO FOCUS

This is not only a fascinating biography of U Thant, the third Secretary-General of the UN, but also an insightful study of the coldest years of the Cold War, from 1961 to 1971. Anchored in deep research and imbued with a judicious mix of empathy and objectivity, the work offers a glimpse of the diverse interactions among the high and mighty of the world in that

era, struggling to address the challenges of East-West relations, issues of war and peace and, indeed, the future of our planet.

U Thant was an unconventional UN chief, the first non-westerner to hold this exalted position, which he occupied for a decade. A schoolmaster in a backwater town of the Irrawaddy Delta in Burma until the age of 40, he became a civil servant in Rangoon and then moved to

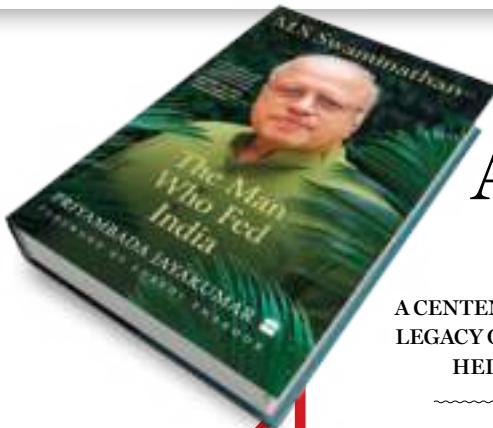


PEACEMAKER
U Thant, the United
Nations and the Untold
Story of the 1960s
by Thant Myint-U
JUGGERNAUT
₹999; 382
pages

This biography marks the birth centenary of India's most celebrated agricultural scientist, M.S. Swaminathan (MSS; 1925-2023). The author Priyambada Jayakumar, a historian by training, had privileged access to MSS; her mother and the scientist were first cousins. This brings an up close-and-personal feel to the book's opening.

The idea for the book emerged during the pandemic, as much from the frustration of being boxed in as a response to the humanitarian crisis in general and the lack of access to food in particular. MSS himself was driven to agricultural science by another crisis—the Bengal famine of 1943.

The book is broken into 10 chapters, each describing a phase of his life. The volume summarises large events, spread out over long periods and across multiple actors, in a way that readers can easily negotiate. In that, it does



M.S. SWAMINATHAN
THE MAN WHO FED
INDIA
By Priyambada
Jayakumar
HARPERCOLLINS
₹799; 324 pages

a service in bringing to us a life that shaped the history of our nation.

MSS played a primary role in rescuing India from hunger, famine and humiliation in the 1960s, when India was reduced to begging the US for shipments of foodgrain. He recognised the extraordinary yield po-

tential of short-stalk wheat strains bred in Mexico by Norman Borlaug. MSS, along with the agriculture minister C. Subramaniam, championed a turnaround; by 1971, India was self-sufficient in foodgrain, with numerous far-reaching consequences. The book captures all this succinctly, in measured detail.

The 11-page references seem thin, however. The text aims to excite and engage. If you like your prose peppered with adjectives and adverbs, you will enjoy this tract. Nary a page goes by without emphasising the impact of MSS's work, or the

A CENTENARY TRIBUTE THAT CHARTS THE SWEEPING LEGACY OF **M.S. SWAMINATHAN**, THE SCIENTIST WHO HELPED STEER INDIA AWAY FROM HUNGER

BOOKS ▼

An Evergreen Figure

scale of his greatness. The prologue calls MSS "possibly the most significant Indian since Gandhi".

No career this long can be free of criticism. MSS has a string of critics, including serious scholars; if he gets the credit for the benefits of the Green Revolution, they say, he should also share the discredit for the agrarian crisis linked to that intervention. The book is rather thin on this aspect, which is unfortunate. We should be able to treat our public figures with more maturity. A man of MSS's stature deserves no less. ■

—Sopan Joshi

New York as his country's ambassador to the UN. Within a few years, the position of the secretary-general fell vacant due to an air crash that killed the incumbent Dag Hammarskjöld. The Great Powers agreed on only one name as the replacement—U Thant.

What worked in his favour was the decisive emergence of the vision of Afro-Asian unity, forged at Bandung in 1955, and formalised at the first conference of the Non-Aligned Movement in Belgrade in 1961. When U Thant spoke and acted, he had in mind the collective interests of the Third World as part of the larger global family. What also helped him was his Asian mindset. He aptly described himself as “a conservative Buddhist who valued modesty, humility, love, a

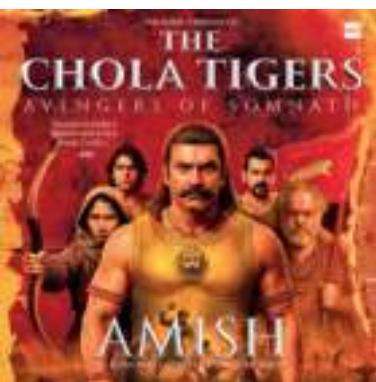
live-and-let-live attitude” and, above all, “understanding the other man’s point of view”.

The volume has been crafted with dexterity and imagination. It reads like a novel, opening with a scene featuring former Beatle John Lennon in

a “brown polka jacket” at a fancy New York hotel and closing on a sombre note, pinpointing how (and why) the Burmese diplomat’s name disappeared from the histories of the Cuban missile crisis, Vietnam War and Arab-Israel hostilities—the episodes in which Thant played a substantial role. The chapters on Cuba, Indo-China and the Middle East provide valuable material for future researchers.

The fact that Thant’s grandson, a talented historian and writer, authored this book lends it special poignancy. His Burmese sensitivity enables him to paint a convincing portrait of an extraordinary man and his challenging times. Gen Z will undoubtedly benefit from reading it. ■

—Rajiv Bhatia



BOOKS ▼

RECLAIMING HISTORY

Amish’s new audiobook *The Chola Tigers* brings his mythic reimagining of Indian history to life with vivid detail

Audible India recently released the audiobook version of Amish’s latest novel, *The Chola Tigers: Avengers of Somnath*. The novel (published by HarperCollins India) is the second installment of Amish’s ‘Indic Chronicles’ series of books, after *Legend of Suheldev: The King Who Saved India* (2020), which is also available on Audible. The audiobook has been divided into 28 chapters and is narrated by Vijayan Menon. Speaking about his latest project, Amish says, “With *The Chola Tigers*, I wanted to correct a misconception that is unfortunately widespread among Indian readers, thanks to colonial historians—that our ancestors only lost battles for a thousand years, this stereotype that they were weak, cowardly vegetarians. In this book, I wanted to show that, actually, our ancestors were the toughest guys of their era.”

In *The Chola Tigers*, a group of five individuals, led by Emperor Rajendra Chola, make the arduous trek to the kingdom of Mahmud of Ghazni, in order to retrieve a shivalinga stolen during Mahmud’s raid on the Somnath Temple. Compared to Amish’s previous

A GROUP OF FIVE INDIVIDUALS LED BY EMPEROR RAJENDRA CHOLA MAKE THE ARDUOUS TREK TO THE KINGDOM OF MAHMUD OF GHAZNI, TO RETRIEVE A STOLEN SHIVALINGA

novels, there is a great deal of hardcore warcraft explored within these pages—fighting techniques, the manufacture and upkeep of weapons, et cetera receive a lot of attention and an impressive degree of technical detail. The action scenes are brutal and fast-paced, and the deaths of important characters receive protracted, appropriately dramatic treatment.

During these past few years, Amish has expanded his authorial empire into other media as well. Earlier this year, he hosted the Discovery show *Legends of Shiva with Amish*. He became the co-founder of a gaming company, Tara, earlier this year. According to Amish, this is the natural evolution of his storytelling. “Every medium has its own strengths and weaknesses,” he says. “But we have seen that people today want some relief from screen time because our eyes get fatigued. So, in that kind of scenario, audiobooks are so useful. You can follow the story while you are driving, cooking, whatever. I think it’s a fantastic medium and I am glad my books will get a new generation of readers this way.” ■

—Aditya Mani Jha

LIQUOR ▶

Desi Twist

FROM AGAVE TO VERMOUTH, POPULAR WORLD SPIRITS NOW HAVE AN INDIAN STORY

India's craft revolution, in the past decade, focused on giving familiar categories of spirits a regional touch. Among gins, Hapusa became the world's first Himalayan dry gin, Baagh showcases the Nagpur orange, and GinGin and Satiwa use India-sourced hemp as a key botanical. Amrut Bella is the world's first jaggery-distilled rum, Rahasya vodka uses rice and grains from Punjab, and the acclaimed Godawan artisanal single malt whisky showcases Rajasthan's produce.

As our drinking culture matures, India is crafting niche spirits long defined by other countries. From Mexico's agave to Switzerland's absinthe, Italy

and France's vermouth and liqueurs, and Japan's sake, several interesting liquids now have an Indian expression.

"Entrepreneurs have realised that traditional categories are quite tapped out," says Vikram Achanta, founder & CEO of Tulleeho. "The supply chain for competing international brands in these categories is often subject to vagaries, and they are under-invested in by MNCs or importers. This leaves the door open for Indian substitutes," he adds.

And so we have Maya Pistola's Agavepura, created from agave grown on the Deccan Plateau. Earlier this year, the country's first touji or certified sake brewer, Maia Laifungbam,



The Listicle

FRESH TABLES TO TRY ACROSS INDIA THIS MONTH



The Silver Train, Mumbai

Food from India's royal kitchens forms the basis of this menu in Lower Parel, featuring everything from Patiala Kukkad Laung Elaichi to Bhawani Singh's shami kebabs and the Prince of Wales Fish Curry. More unusual dishes include Nawab Wajid Ali Shah's Ande Ka Halwa and Jahangir's Benami Kheer (secret ingredient: garlic).

THE FLYING TRUNK, Delhi

Delhi's newest rooftop bar sits above Novotel New Delhi City Centre, offers 360-degree views of the city and even has an infinity pool. The menu draws inspiration from Asia's street markets, including the cocktails. Clarified Chai Spritz, anyone?



HOSA, Gurugram



ARUSH DUA

After making waves in Goa, modern South Indian restaurant Hosa (which means 'new' in Kannada) has made a promising debut in Gurugram. Signature dishes include the Elaneer Pepper Fry (tender coconut meat tossed with pepper masala and paired with akki roti), Pamban Chicken (skewers glazed with lemongrass jaggery) and Kari Dosa (see pic; mutton mince topped with bone marrow hollandaise and poached egg).



NOT TOO FAST
(Clockwise from left)
Dry gin Baagh; Maia
Laifungbam with her
eponymous sake;
aperitif Quro; jaggery-
distilled rum Amrut
Bella; Maya Pistola's
Agavepura; Davana
Vermouth Indica

announced her eponymous sake. In the absinthe category, there is La' Ananta and Paapi, a coffee absinthe. Among liqueurs, distinctive ones include Quaffine (coffee), Yagawilde (herbal), and Indian-born aperitif Quro, made with 36 ingredients.

"We wanted it to feel like a genuine attempt at capturing India in a glass," says Anmol Bansal, founder, Inspired Spirits Pvt. Ltd, creators of Quro. "We experimented with over 200 ingredients before settling on 36. The goal was always a unique, well-rounded drinking experience: from a first bright citrus note, followed by herbs and warm spices, and a pleasant, approachable bitterness to finish," he says.

Globally, vermouth too can be enjoyed chilled, over ice or in simple spritzes. However, in India, the category had not been deeply explored. This changed

with Davana Vermouth Indica, the first 100 per cent homegrown creation, made with Indian wine and native botanicals. "Bartenders appreciate its cocktail versatility, while consumers are discovering it as a low-ABV alternative. The flavour complexity of Indian botanicals allowed us to build something layered, aromatic, and genuinely enjoyable neat or with ice, helping make vermouth less intimidating," explains founder Adarsh Gadvi.

What continues to provide impetus to such creations is the Indian consumer, who is today willing to explore premium regional ingredients, products and their expressions in the spirits space. That these liquids hold immense potential to carve a unique Indian flavour niche in the global spirits world is simply the next step forward. ■

—Ruth Dsouza Prabhu

JOLLY INDIAN, Chennai

True to name, this hot new spot in Alwarpet—with bold, kitschy interiors steeped in nostalgia—aims to be a 'fun-dining' rather than a 'fine-dining' experience. The pan-Indian menu has two sections throughout, the 'regular' stuff and then something 'jolly'—which is their quirky take on classic Indian dishes. Think Chettinadu shepherd's pie or a red snapper ceviche! The drinks are fun too—like Poppins, which has a rainbow popsicle dipped in grapefruit soda.



BAR SAMA Bengaluru

The highlight of this neighbourhood-style bar in Ulsoor Road is, of course, the drinks menu, which has been curated by Singapore's Cat Bite Club

and includes playful riffs on classic cocktails—like Velvet Eclipse, a 'reverse' Irish Coffee. The Thai-inspired small plates menu holds its own against the drinks, with dishes like the Yum Sum-Oh! (pomelo and young coconut salad), grilled eggplant (see pic), Dirty Fried Rice, Night Market Moo Ping (coconut-glazed pork skewers), Panaeng Chicken Skewers, and the Moo & Goong (prawn and pork sesame toast). Encapsulating both the chaos and calm of Bengaluru, Bar Sama hopes to foster a sense of community.

Voice for Change

Zeenat Aman talks about lending her iconic voice to Embers of Hope, a new environmental documentary series showing on Discovery and Animal Planet channels



Q. Why did you feel it was important to lend your voice to the battle against climate change?

It's an existential issue that impacts every single one of us! Of course, more vulnerable communities, the ones who are least responsible for this mess, are the first to bear its brunt, but the crisis is global.

Q. How aware were you of climate change and its impact before you signed up for *Embers of Hope*?

I had general awareness, but *Embers of Hope* has given me a deeper understanding of it. More importantly, it has given me insight into the lives of ordinary people doing extraordinary thing to confront these challenges.

Q. Have you made any changes in your personal life to tackle climate change or other environmental issues?

I have to say that I think what is required is institutional and political change. That's the only thing that can actually bring the scale of impact that is required. But yes, at an individual level, I have really cut down on foreign travels that demand long flights, as well as become restrained in my buying habits.

Q. Are there any other causes you espouse?

Animal welfare is very close to my heart. I'm also keen to speak more about domestic violence issues in the country.

—with Amit Dixit



Sri Siddaramaiah
Hon'ble Chief Minister
Govt. of Karnataka



Sri D.K. Shivakumar
Hon'ble Deputy Chief Minister
Govt. of Karnataka

The Cauvery Lifeline: Bengaluru's Quest for Sustainable Water

River Cauvery to Bengaluru

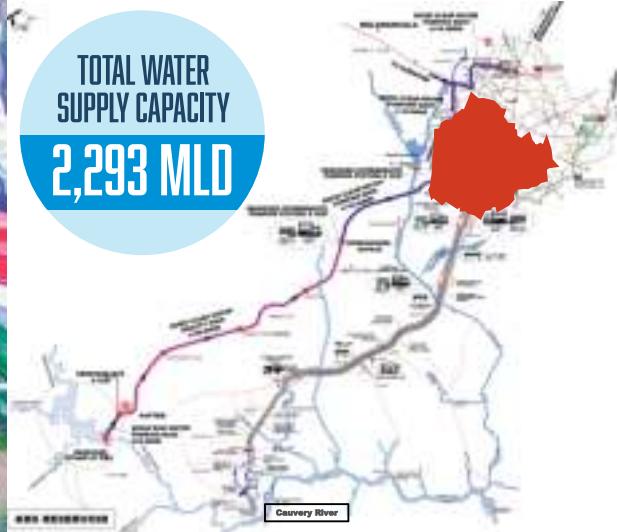


Stages & Implementation

1896 Hessarghatta	36 MLD
1933 Thippagondanahalli	135 MLD
1974 Cauvery Stage-I	135 MLD
1982 Cauvery Stage-II	135 MLD
1993 Cauvery Stage-III	270 MLD
2002 Cauvery Stage-IV Phase-I	300 MLD
2002 Cauvery Stage-IV Phase-II	500 MLD
2024 Cauvery Stage-V	775 MLD



**TOTAL WATER SUPPLY CAPACITY
2,293 MLD**



**HELPLINE
1916 (24/7)**



Bangalore Water Supply And Sewerage Board



chairmanbwssb



Official_bwssb

**WHEN SPEED IS
YOUR DEFAULT**



**SERVO
HYPERSPORT F5**

Advanced Fully Synthetic Formula

Highest API Level Performance

Extended Drain Interval: Up To 10000 Kms



SERVO HYPERSPORT F5 - available at IndianOil fuel stations, authorized resellers, and trusted mechanics.