

NEW YEAR SPECIAL ISSUE

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# INDIA TODAY

# 2025 VISION

**EXPERTS ON WHAT THE NEW YEAR PORTENDS FOR INDIA AND THE WORLD IN GEOPOLITICS, ECONOMY, DEFENCE, TECHNOLOGY, GOVERNANCE, HEALTH AND MORE**

**TECNO**

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**T**he birth pangs of Modi 3.0 are now all but settled, so the government can get down to brass tacks in right earnest. What are the challenges it faces in 2025? They go beyond electoral politics, or merely securing its bolts further with the Delhi and Bihar assembly polls due this year. If Narendra Modi's first term was about laying down a futuristic grid, and the second ticked all the Hindutva boxes, he must orient his historic third term towards securing reforms and equitable growth, with jobs as top priority. That will be the best tribute to the Republic in its 75th year. But the passage won't be smooth. Firstly, Donald Trump, in his second coming at the White House, promises to be the "wrecker-in-chief" of the gross national happiness for many countries. India, too, is on his hit list. He has called us the 'Tariff King' in the past. Also expect the compounded H1B visa + illegal immigration row to turn volatile amidst a xenophobic wave in the US.

But there's also a whole lode of silver in that cloud. In Trump's "demolition drive" lies the chance for India to position itself as the main port of call for capital in flight from China. This is the X-factor that could enable us to step on the growth pedal, shedding the sluggishness of the first half of FY25. Especially if we wish to grow out of that dismal K-shape and evolve pathways for the deep growth we need. Here, INDIA TODAY's annual bouquet of essays from eminent names and domain experts helps us reconnoitre all the possible landscapes that lie ahead, global as well as domestic.

In an illuminating lead essay, former national security advisor Shivshankar Menon says the seeming chaos that envelops us may actually contain the seeds of transformative creativity. "This is now a world between orders," he writes, and appends his reassuringly promising argument: throughout history, a global order has been an exception and periods of alleged instability have always fuelled innovation. The coming Trump era is for him only a symptom of deep structural flux. One that gives India a chance to be a true pillar, rather than just a prop, on the world stage.

Many essayists identify Trump 2.0 as the main imponderable nations like India have to contend with. Axis Bank chief economist Neelkanth Mishra reads the incoming US president's promise to disrupt the status quo as only a "starting point for negotiation". Like Menon, he says striking a win-win deal with Trump will be critical for growth even as India swims through a likely phase of currency fluctuations. University of Vermont professor Pablo Bose charts the uncertainty faced by Indian immigrants in the US—3 million legal, over half a million illegal, plus 250,000 students.

An aggressive China always beeps red on India's radar. Swedish journalist-author Bertil Lintner anticipates a spell of "unpredictable" behaviour from Beijing as well,

saying the Belt and Road Initiative has become a bleeding white elephant it's trying to dismount. For author-academic Amita Batra, the intensifying 'China Plus One' phase is the right time for India to ease its own tariff regimes, if it is not to lose out to fast emerging economies like Vietnam. Former foreign secretary Vijay Gokhale looks beyond the border conflict rhetoric that dominates India-China ties to the reality of interdependence. Group Editorial Director Raj Chennappa bridges the geopolitical and the political contexts within which India must accomplish its objectives.

**C**hief among our internal challenges, medical pioneer Naresh Trehan notes a disturbing shift in India's health scan. Past tasks like immunisation are met, but we have a new emergency: non-communicable 'lifestyle' diseases. These cause 66 per cent of all deaths now, up from 45 per cent in 2000. India will need to create five times more physicians by 2047 to cope. In education, ex-Delhi University vice-chancellor Dinesh Singh bats for a need-

based, solution-oriented pedagogy to produce a real knowledge economy. Else, he says, even our IT sector runs more on "brawn" than brain power. Scholar Yamini Aiyar brings a sophisticated critical lens to freebies, reading them as a dubious shortcut to genuine rights-based social spending. On gender inequities, economist Ashwini Deshpande scotches the naïve 'statistical' idea of women being unwilling to take up employment with first-hand facts from the field. They just need work closer home, where they bear 10x the burden of chores. Academic Hilal Ahmed records a troubling trend: the

"Hindu-Muslim binary" has actually intensified post a general election that "was seen as an ideological defeat of radical Hindutva". Jyoti Deshpande, head of Jio Studios, logs a more uplifting thought: technology is ushering in a "golden age of Indian storytelling" in many tongues.

Then there are universals that affect all: immigrant or native-born, man or woman, Hindu or Muslim. Global warming has already crash landed on India with extreme, debilitating weather disturbances. Climate expert Navroz K. Dubash flags India's pledge to the future: decarbonisation at home, advocacy for the global south abroad. Former Hyundai India president B.V.R. Subbu surveys a sub-field here: the evolving and doubt-ridden Electric Vehicle landscape. Artificial Intelligence, too, will touch everyone: digital expert Jaspreet Bindra hails the imminence of 'Agentic AI', where Big Data will become your own little Jeeves, booking your vacation, on your preferred flight, with your favourite pizza! Bon voyage and Happy New Year.



January 15, 2024

  
*(Aroon Purie)*

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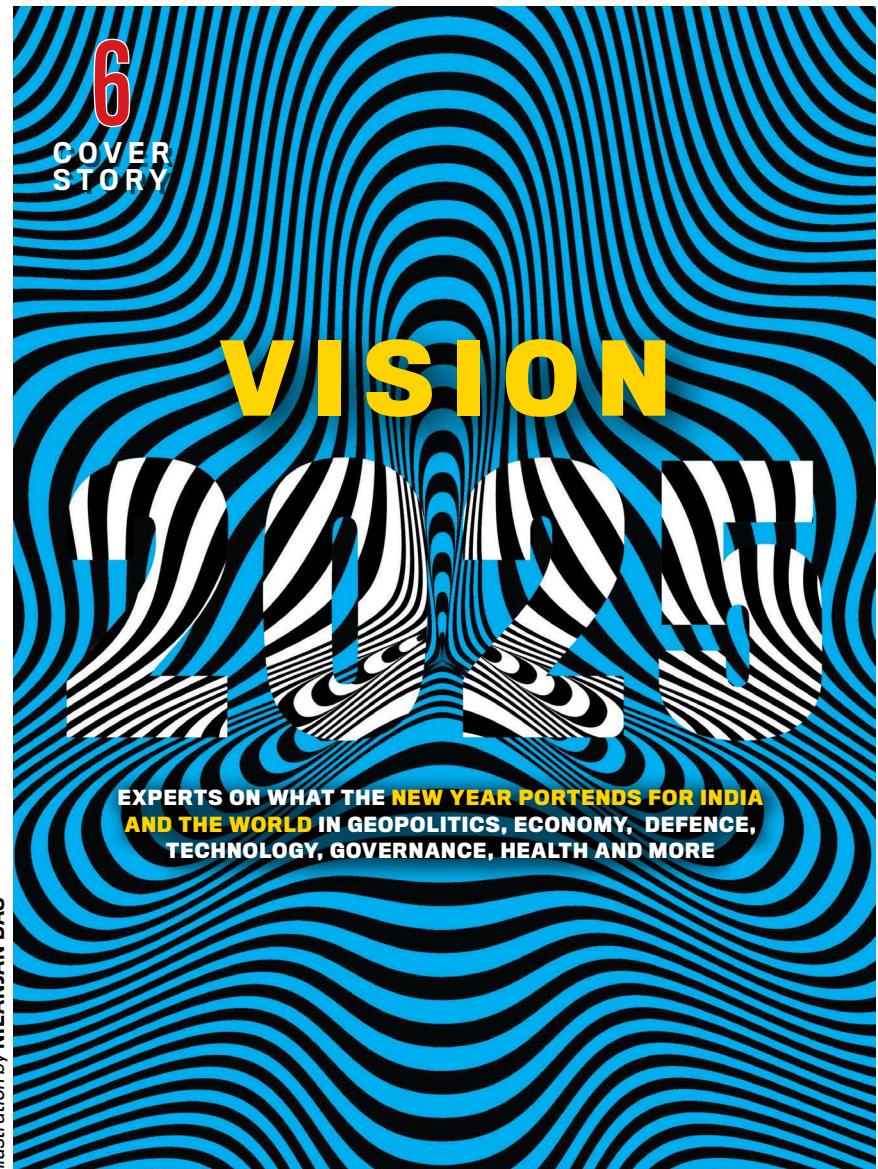


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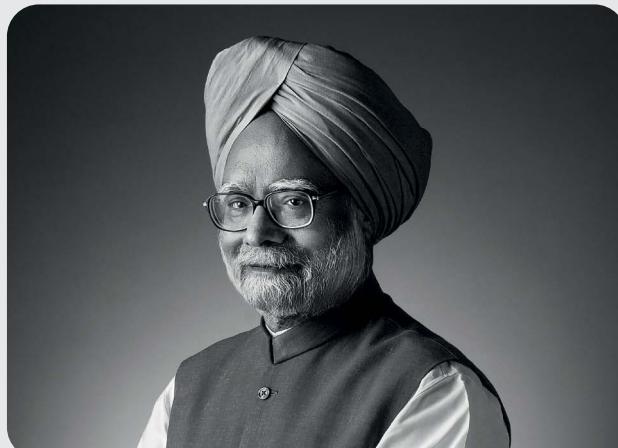
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COVER STORY

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# VISION 2025

**2025 already!** The number will come as a shock to the many among us for whom the dawn of the millennium seems like only yesterday. Remember Y2K? But although 25 years have passed, and even millennials must be all grown up, no one is handing them the keys just yet: the world is still run by people from the 20th century, and many of the challenges it faces seem rooted in the past.

This issue itself is the latest iteration of a comforting tradition, in which we invite a distinguished panel of experts to gaze into the year ahead for India and the world. They usually have half an eye on the receding chaos in the rearview mirror but an optimistic outlook on the year ahead. Perhaps it's just the Trump effect, but this year's essays seem braced for more chaos ahead, particularly in the geopolitical realm. But as one of our distinguished soothsayers suggests, the lack of a 'world order' has historically been the rule, not the exception—so perhaps there is order in disorder.

We can take comfort in this. Chances are, India and Indians will fare better than most in a world of increased turbulence—we have a reputation for placid progress through adversity. Several of the essays here express a quiet faith in the marriage of technology and governance as the answer to our country's daunting challenges. Think of it as some cheerful sobriety to set the tone for a happier new year. ▀

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INDIA@2025  
GEOPOLITICS

# A WORLD BETWEEN ORDERS

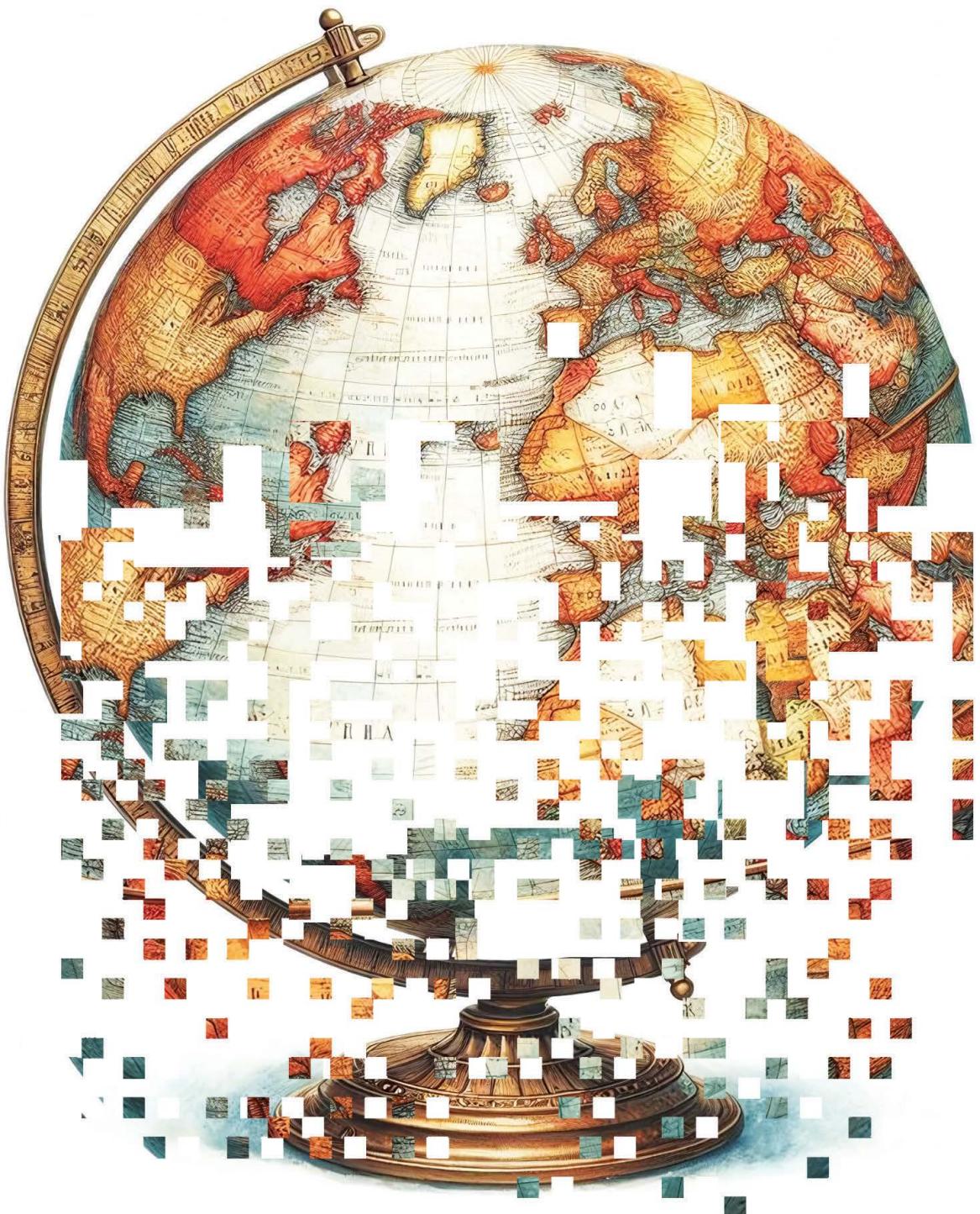


Illustration by NILANJAN DAS

**THE WORLD NOW IS MULTIPOLAR ECONOMICALLY, UNIPOLAR MILITARILY AND FRAGMENTED POLITICALLY. INSTANCES OF OPPORTUNISM BY NATIONS ARE MULTIPLYING**



By **SHIVSHANKAR MENON**

**ach generation is convinced that it faces a more uncertain and threatening world than any before** it, a crisis of unprecedented proportions, and that man's very survival is at stake. We are no exception, judging by the commentaries in the media. And yet, mankind has not only survived but steadily improved its lot. More people live longer, healthier and more prosperous lives than ever before in history.

One explanation for this paradox or contradiction between our objective condition and the way we perceive it is the idea of a world order. We have been conditioned into assuming that a world order is normal and beneficial by the bipolar Cold War and the subsequent unipolar moment, when first two and then one superpower dominated and ordered the world. One can understand why a hegemon would want us to think so.

But what do history and experience tell us? In fact, world orders have been the exception in history. For most of history, there has not been a world order. It is only when there is a tremendous imbalance in the distribution of power, as under the Mongols in the 13th century, with Europe in the late 19th and early 20th centuries and with the US and, briefly, the USSR after World War II, that there has been a world order. And those were not necessarily the most peaceful times. Unlike the Cold War, when over 80 per cent of world military and economic power was controlled by the two superpowers through their blocs, the two largest powers, the US and China, control less than 50 per cent of world GDP and military power today. Power, therefore, is much more evenly distributed in the world than in periods when a world order obtained.

History also tells us that the most innovative periods and the times when some of the most significant economic progress was made, were when the international order was disputed, often hotly. The Axial Age in the 6th century BCE and the industrial revolution of the 18th and 19th centuries occurred when

warfare was endemic and the order was disputed. The re-emergence of China and India as significant economies on a global scale has occurred without a great power war. This suggests that the benefits of a world order may be exaggerated and overestimated.

And where are we today? Clearly, the world order that the West, led by the US, created and managed after WWII is disputed politically even while all countries are part of the global capitalist market system that order built. The ineffectiveness of the institutions of global governance and the multilateral organisations that underpinned the post-WWII order is evident in the pathetic international response to the Covid pandemic, in the decline of the WTO, and in the multiple conflicts and hotspots that are alive, ranging from Ukraine, Sudan, Palestine, Yemen, Congo to the Himalayas, the South China Sea, Taiwan, the East China Sea and multiple other areas. Great power rivalry is rampant, with China-US contention the principal contradiction. Deaths by conflict and refugees, both internally displaced and external migrants, are at record levels since WWII.

This is now a world between orders. In this respect, the world can be said to have returned to its normal state of competing powers of differing capacities and advantages seeking mastery and control over their own futures. Today, there is one globalised economy with at least three poles—in North America, the EU, and in Asia centred on China through the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). On the other hand,

**THE PAST DECADE HAS SHOWN US THAT THERE IS NO WORLD ORDER CAPABLE OF DEALING WITH THREATS LIKE CLIMATE CHANGE, TERRORISM AND DEVELOPING COUNTRY DEBT CRISIS**

politics is increasingly local, and there is only one military superpower that can project military power where it wishes, when it wishes, across the globe: namely, the United States. The world is thus multipolar economically, unipolar militarily, and fragmented politically.

The absence of order is evident in both aspects of what an order promises: the maintenance of peace and security and in the formation and application of norms and rules.

**W**hat has occurred in West Asia after the horrific terrorist attack by Hamas in October 2023, and Israel's brutal response, which continued through 2024, has shown the limitations of powers other than the US outside their immediate peripheries. This is not a multipolar world, though many governments like to say it is since it flattens them to project themselves as a present or future pole.

The scale of the humanitarian disaster in Palestine has also shown the limited ability of the international state-system and multilateral organisations. It is unreasonable to expect organisations established and run by member-states to be effective when those member-states are quarrelling with each other.

The past decade has shown us that there is presently no world order capable of dealing with transnational threats like climate change, global terrorism, and the developing country debt crisis. There has not been a binding international agreement on an issue of consequence for over a decade. In the absence of a settled or agreed order, nor are we able to regulate new domains like cyberspace or technologies like AI that offer opportunities that seem to be matched only by the risks they could pose.

A consequence of an absent order is great power rivalry, jostling to assert themselves and their interests. The unintended consequence of great power rivalry is the opening up of opportunities for middle and other powers to play the great powers off against one another and to pursue their own agendas, whether it is Russia in the Ukraine, Israel in Palestine and Syria and against Iran, Turkey in Syria, or China in the South China Sea and the Himalayas, Azerbaijan with Armenia, and even the Maldives vis-a-vis India. Instances of opportunism are legion and multiplying.

What does this mean for the world in 2025? Will the re-

election of Trump as US president change the dynamic of international relations and geopolitics? Individual leaders like Trump could exacerbate or soften some trends. For instance, China-US rivalry could become more acute if Trump does not manage to strike a deal provoked by his tariff threats and overcome his natural inclination to isolationism; US-Russia relations could improve somewhat; and US allies in Asia, like Japan and South Korea, could be forced to strike further out on their own in looking after their own security. But such shifts are likely to be on the margin rather than affecting the basic trends, because most of the factors mentioned above are structural and intrinsic to the nature of the present international system.

Nor should one expect coherent and coordinated international responses to transnational challenges like climate change or debt or terrorism. Indeed, the lack of an order brings into question the continued steady growth of the world economy.

For India, this means that we will be operating in a much more difficult international environment. This is a time to concentrate on building our capabilities at home, and on pacifying our periphery. Several countries in the subcontinent are in crisis. In crisis lies opportunity. Now is when we might tighten economic bonds within the subcontinent and become a factor of political and economic security for them in an uncertain world, and to be a provider of security, without becoming an issue in their domestic political turmoil. There is also economic opportunity for a country of India's size and level of development if we are willing to engage economically with the most dynamic economies of the world in Asia east of India. The hard part will be managing the relationship with China until self-strengthening restores deterrence on the border. Both the

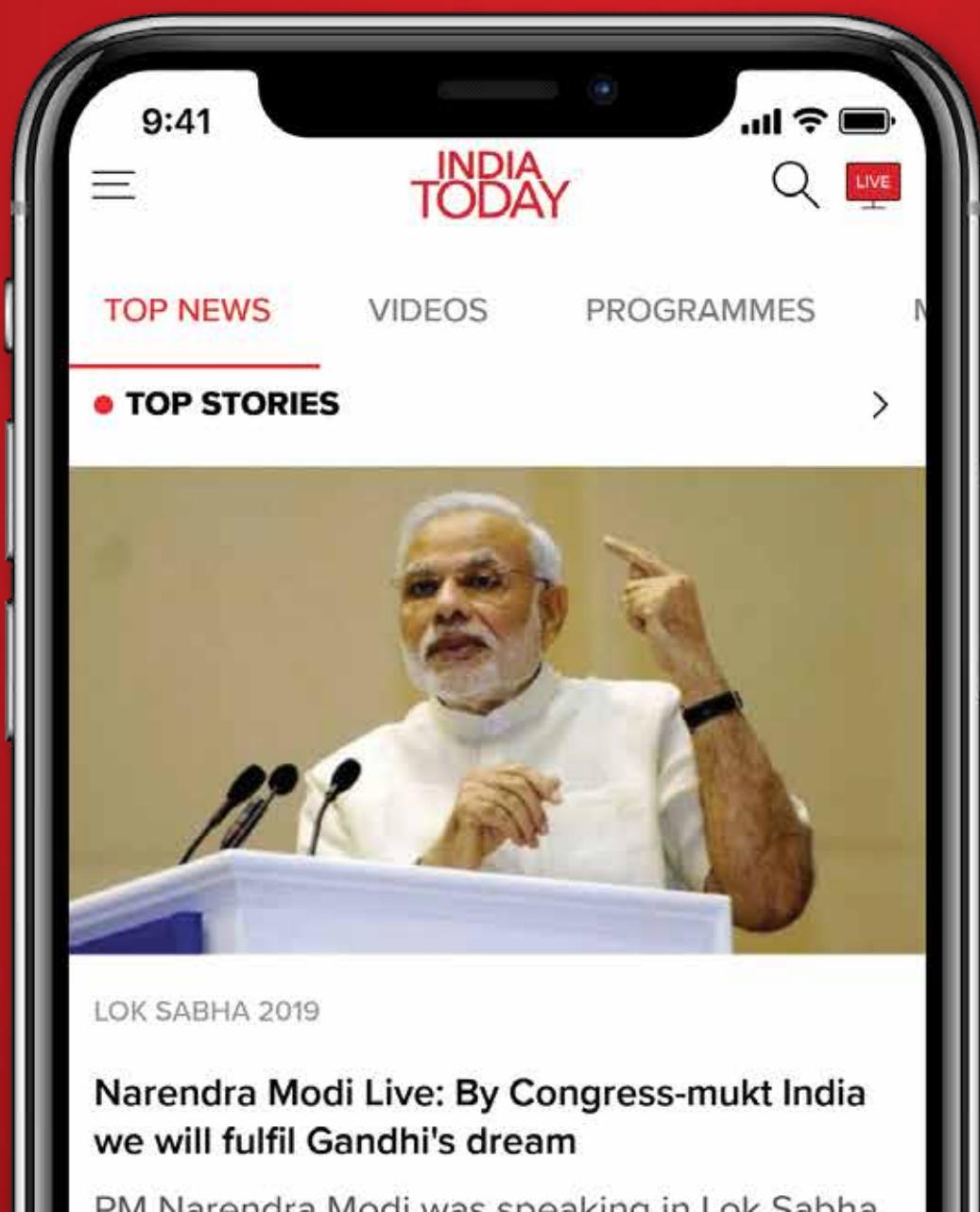
US and China are increasingly domestically preoccupied. And great power rivalry, such as that between China and the US, also makes space for India and its like-minded partners to influence international outcomes. This will not be easy, but it can be rewarding for a power like India which hopes to improve the working of the international system, something that a rigid world order would oppose, and that the present world between orders permits. ■

**SHIVSHANKAR MENON** is a former National Security Advisor and foreign secretary

INDIA  
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# BREAKING NEWS

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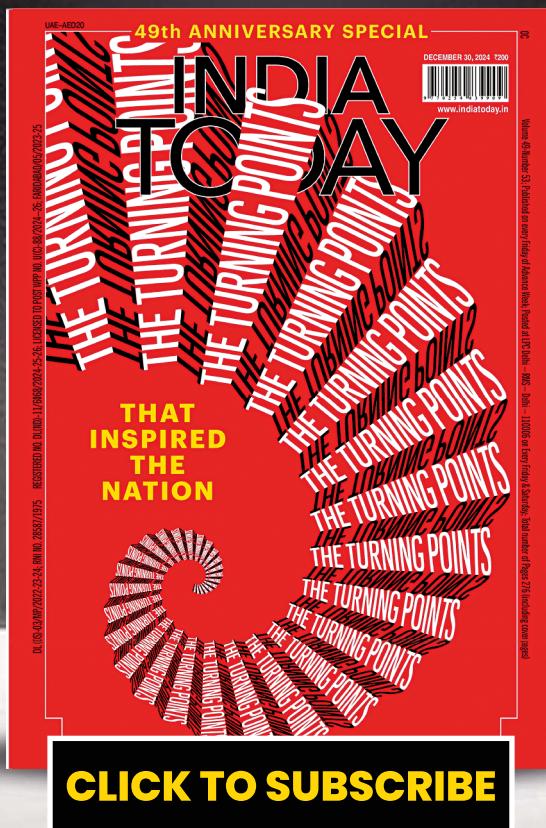


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INDIA  
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**MAKING SENSE OF INDIA**



By **NEELKANTH MISHRA**

# KEEPING THE ECONOMY ON THE FAST TRACK

ACCELERATING INDIA'S GROWTH POTENTIAL IN 2025 DEMANDS REFORMS, RESILIENCE AND READINESS FOR GLOBAL UNCERTAINTIES

G

lobal economic growth in the calendar year **2025** (CY2025) is currently projected to be unchanged from CY2024 at 3.2 per cent. Given that this is weaker than the growth in the pre-pandemic years, the gap between global incomes versus the pre-pandemic path is likely to widen further. That said, while forecast errors are common, the uncertainty on outcomes in 2025 is far more elevated. Disruption may start early, with the January 20 inauguration of the US President, who has a mandate to course-correct, if not disrupt, on trade, taxes, regulations, immigration and energy markets, among others.

His pronouncements on trade and regulations appear to be starting points for negotiation rather than set policy preferences. The very public debate within the Republican Party on the issue of immigration also shows majorities in the Senate and the Congress cannot be taken for granted. More certain is the increase in the fiscal deficit as tax cuts expiring in 2025 get extended. A worried bond market has pushed up the US government's borrowing costs, which has consequently driven up the cost of capital globally, and pulled dollars out of other markets, especially emerging economies. This has increased volatility in currency markets, which could be further amplified if Chinese policymakers devalue the renminbi against the dollar in response to tariffs likely to be imposed by the US on imports from China.

## **lobal economic growth in the calendar year**

**2025** (CY2025) is currently projected to be unchanged from CY2024 at 3.2 per cent. Given that this is weaker than the growth in the pre-

While it is reasonable to expect some easing in external conditions as the year progresses, Indian policymakers should assume elevated volatility in global financial and trade markets for some time to come. In particular, they must allow the exchange rate to be more volatile—the extraordinary stability of the Indian rupee against the US dollar can become a risk.

That said, the major drivers of growth for the Indian economy remain local. The growth slowdown seen in the April-September period, for example, was driven primarily by fiscal and monetary tightening, a large part of which was unintended. Reversing these constraints quickly can help revive growth.

Take the fiscal deficit. In a normal year, the Union government incurs around 62 per cent of its full-year fiscal deficit in the first six months of a fiscal year. This

THE SLOWDOWN IN THE APRIL-SEPTEMBER PERIOD WAS **DRIVEN PRIMARILY BY FISCAL AND MONETARY TIGHTENING.** REVERSING THESE QUICKLY CAN HELP REVIVE GROWTH

year, the ratio was only 29 per cent. This shortfall of 33 per cent amounts to 1.6 per cent of the GDP—squeezed into just six months, this means an annualised pace of over 3 per cent of the GDP. A fall in fiscal deficit is a headwind to growth, and an increase in fiscal deficit provides a tailwind. Given that the full-year deficit is budgeted to decline by only 0.7 per cent of the GDP, much of the slowdown in fiscal spending in the first half was unintended, possibly due to elections and the code of conduct slowing file movement. This is reversing in the second half, providing a tailwind to growth that can also support growth in the next fiscal year.

**A**n equally important contributor to the growth slowdown was the sharp contraction in bank credit growth. This fell from nearly 17 per cent in March to less than 11 per cent by December. Some of this was intended—the regulator was justifiably worried about excessive growth in unsecured personal loans and microfinance, and sought to slow them down. Further, a slowing economy does reduce demand for credit as well. However, these account for only part of the overall slowdown in credit.

A major additional driver, in our view, was a shortage of money in the system. Money in any economy is created either by the central bank or the commercial banks (when they issue loans, they create deposits). If the central bank does not inject enough money, and commercial banks do all the money creation, the loan-deposit ratio (LDR) rises, as it did in India for 31 months. Around March, the regulator communicated its concerns about high LDRs to banks. This was surprising, given that banks now carry higher capital buffers than in the past and thus can sustain a higher LDR without risking stability. When banks slowed credit growth in response, it, in turn, slowed down deposit growth and triggered a downward spiral in credit growth. It was only after July, when the RBI began to ease overnight liquidity, that the gap between deposit and loan growth began to narrow.

The much-delayed cut in the Cash Reserve Ratio (CRR) in December should help revive credit growth over the next few quarters. However, for a speedier recovery in system credit growth, more steps may be needed. Over and above providing comfort to banks on liquidity, macro-prudential easing may also be considered in segments where the RBI is comfortable with the credit quality.

These steps, if undertaken quickly, can bring growth back to the potential growth rate of around 7 per cent, helped by a turn in the real-estate market, where inventories are low, and house prices are still affordable. The need to invest again in new power capacity, in emerging areas like data centres, energy



POLICYMAKERS MUST TARGET THREE MAJOR CHALLENGES FOR SUSTAINING GROWTH IN 2025—**INCOME INEQUALITY, ENSURING UNIVERSAL HIGH-SCHOOL ENROLMENT AND EARLY-CHILDHOOD HEALTH, AND BECOMING A ‘PRODUCT NATION’**



Illustration by NILANJAN DAS

storage and defence manufacturing, as well as in the manufacturing of inputs for housing construction, like steel and cement, should also sustain investment activity for a few years.

However, for the economic momentum to sustain, structural reforms must continue. The return of the Trump presidency in the US has reopened the window for India to take advantage of the 'China + 1' opportunity—targeting major global buyers in coordination with state governments that can provide land and permissions quickly can help.

A renewed push to better manage urbanisation is critical—underfunded and poorly administered cities cannot expand to meet the needs of a growing economy. Weak urban infrastructure is likely to slow the supply response in real estate, potentially driving an early end to the real-estate cycle, which is at the heart of any subcontinent-sized economy like India. The best real-estate cycle from an economic perspective is volume-led instead of price-led.

Policymakers must also proactively target three major challenges for sustaining growth over the medium term. The first is income inequality—at this stage of economic development, labour is in surplus and capital in shortage, reducing the labour share of income, and thus accentuating income inequality. Left unaddressed, this can reduce popular support for reforms. Second, ensuring universal high-school enrolment and early-childhood health even while they were lower-middle-income economies was how countries like Taiwan and South Korea broke through the middle-income trap, whereas several other economies got caught in it. Third, for strategic autonomy as well as sustaining growth, India must move decisively towards becoming a 'product nation', creating an ecosystem where firms develop and own technologies and brands, and dominate their respective industries globally. ■

**Neelkanth Mishra** is chief economist at Axis Bank



By **RAJ CHENGAPPA**

# MODI'S TWIN CHALLENGES

AT HOME, THE PM HAS TO COME UP WITH BOLD REFORMS TO REV UP A SLOWING ECONOMY AND ENSURE EQUITABLE GROWTH. ABROAD, MODI HAS TO FIND A WAY TO STRIKE A DEAL WITH TRUMP ON HIS TARIFFS AND MIGRATION GROUSES AGAINST INDIA

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**the new year dawns, Prime Minister Narendra Modi** will have to face two challenges with great skill, speed and nerve. The first is on home ground, with the Indian economy yet again buffeted by powerful headwinds. The H1 figures for FY25 show a perturbing slowdown in GDP growth, the Q2 number dropping to a seven-quarter low of 5.4 per cent. Already, rating agencies have shaved off an average of 0.5 percentage points from their earlier optimism of around 7 per cent growth for FY25. India will still be the world's fastest growing major economy, but with a worrying duality. While one half of its citizenry seems to be doing well economically, the other half is lagging miserably behind.

Sector after sector bears out this dichotomy of a K-shaped economic growth. Take passenger traffic in railways, the prime mode of transport for the poor and lower middle class. It has come down from a pre-COVID peak of 8.4 billion in FY19 to 6.8 billion in

FY24, indicating decreasing mobility. Similarly, two-wheeler sales have dropped from a high of 21.2 million in FY19 to 17.9 million in FY24. The low sentiment extends to sales of fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG), particularly in urban areas, failing to perk up even in the festive season. The disparities are showing in the real estate market too, where the sales of new houses priced above Rs 1 crore are proceeding briskly while the demand for affordable houses priced at Rs 50 lakh and below is seeing a slump. All of this

is being attributed to rising real estate costs, food inflation and slower wage growth for the middle class.

That political parties are wooing the electorate with freebies is another indication of their economic distress. It is a game the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is also playing, despite the PM denouncing the *revdi* culture in the past. In 2023, Modi even extended for another five years the PM Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana, the world's largest free ration scheme with 800 million beneficiaries at a cost of Rs 2 lakh crore a year. But that was not enough to prevent the rude shock he and his party got in the 2024 general election when they failed to secure a simple majority on their own. To his credit, Modi regained the political momentum soon after, as the BJP won the crucial Haryana and Maharashtra polls.

Another two significant assembly polls—in Delhi and in Bihar—will take place in 2025. But their outcome is unlikely to inhibit the PM from taking radical decisions. The upcoming Union budget could be a good opportunity to initiate bold reforms that directly benefit India's poorer half and boost economic growth. In recent weeks, the prime minister and his team have been engaged in discussions with a wide range of experts to boost livelihood op-

THERE ARE **MANY BULLETS THAT THE MODI REGIME WILL HAVE TO BITE IN 2025 FOR THE COUNTRY TO CLOCK A GROWTH OF 8 PER CENT AND MEET THE WORSENING SKILLS AND JOBS CRISIS**



portunities and incomes to the needy. Dr Pramod K. Mishra, principal secretary to the PM, told INDIA TODAY, "Apart from enhancing the capacity and resilience of the economy to grow despite external challenges, the focus in 2025 will be on sustaining high growth and creating new economic opportunities through structural reforms, compliance rationalisation and infrastructure development."

Education and skill development will remain key priorities. In Budget 2024, the Modi government had announced massive internship and employment incentive schemes apart from upgradation of ITIs to boost skilling and benefit 41 million youngsters. Experts say that as with Aadhaar, where Nandan Nilekani was roped in to helm the project, a top professional could ensure speedy, effective implementation in this area too.

rent slab of Rs 15 lakh and above to Rs 30 lakh, so that people can have more money in their hands and boost consumption.

There are other bullets that the Modi government will have to bite for the country to clock 8 per cent growth and meet the skills and jobs crisis. Agricultural reform, especially the use of incentives to wean farmers off grain and towards high-value horticulture crops or edible oil production, is long overdue. The high fertiliser subsidy, blighted by the enormous leakages to non-farm sectors, needs an urgent review. Also in need of a revamp is the Goods & Services Tax (GST) for it to become more rational and effective. The crawling PSU asset monetisation drive needs to shift into high gear. Equally urgent are financial sector reforms, including a third wave of private banks, to ease the credit squeeze and encourage

US, numbering over 700,000. Not only has Trump threatened mass deportations, he is also expected to put crimps on legitimate Indian H1B work visas.

**H**owever, Trump's demolition derby with China could spell opportunities for India. If he makes Chinese imports expensive in the US, it will allow Indian exporters to make inroads into the lucrative American market, and help India become an integral part of global value chains. Senior central government officials believe that the geopolitical shift away from Chinese trade could benefit several labour-intensive export sectors such as textiles, toys, footwear and agri products. Capital-intensive products like electronic goods, semiconductors, pharmaceuticals and heavy chemicals could also gain from the tailwinds of the China Plus One movement. These officials believe that the big opportunity lies in long-term strategic trade integration and research collaboration with the US in areas such as IT hardware, defence, biotechnology, nuclear technology and artificial intelligence.

With Trump set to take over the presidency, PM Modi has two choices. He can offer a tempting bargain by choosing to either lower tariffs on certain goods for the US to give Trump a win, or take back a limited number of illegal Indian immigrants. He could also do a bit of both, given Trump's transactional nature. In either event, Indian interests stand to lose, as lowering tariffs for US manufacturers could hurt a large domestic constituency of corporates. Any concessions on the immigration front could upset the middle class, who regard America as a land of opportunity to which they migrate in droves, both legally and illegally. But given that a crisis brings out the best in PM Modi, the global economic shocks in the wake of the Trump presidency could create a 1991-like moment for the prime minister, allowing him to undertake much-needed structural reforms and put India on the fastest track towards the destination of a Viksit Bharat. ■

## THE FOCUS IN 2025 WILL BE ON SUSTAINING HIGH GROWTH, RATIONALISING COMPLIANCES, STRUCTURAL REFORMS & INFRA DEVELOPMENT, SAYS P.K. MISHRA, PM'S PRINCIPAL SECRETARY

Another priority in 2025, says Mishra, is to ground the 12 industrial nodes and 100 industrial parks near cities, with plug-and-produce facilities to incentivise manufacturing for equitable distribution of growth opportunities. Social welfare is likely to see what he terms a "saturation approach" in schemes such as housing and piped drinking water. The government will also be committed to improving the ease of living and doing business—there is a concerted push to simplify the filing of returns and reduce the number of compliances to start businesses. The middle class is crying for relief from the high personal income taxation rates even as corporate entities enjoyed massive tax cuts. To ease their woes, experts say the government could either significantly reduce the maximum tax rate of 30 per cent or raise the cur-

entrepreneurship. To facilitate tourism, a significant job creator, a visa-free regime and VAT refund for tourists from a range of countries could be considered.

Boosting exports is another imperative, which brings us to the second major challenge before Modi in 2025—the continuing global disorder, with two wars still raging and more uncertainty expected once Donald Trump assumes the presidency come January 20. The new American president is expected to be the wrecker-in-chief of several international leaders' happiness. None more so than his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping, determined as he is to impose stiff US tariffs on Chinese imports. India is not too far down that hit list, Trump having dubbed the country Tariff King in the past. There is also the burgeoning population of illegal Indian immigrants in the



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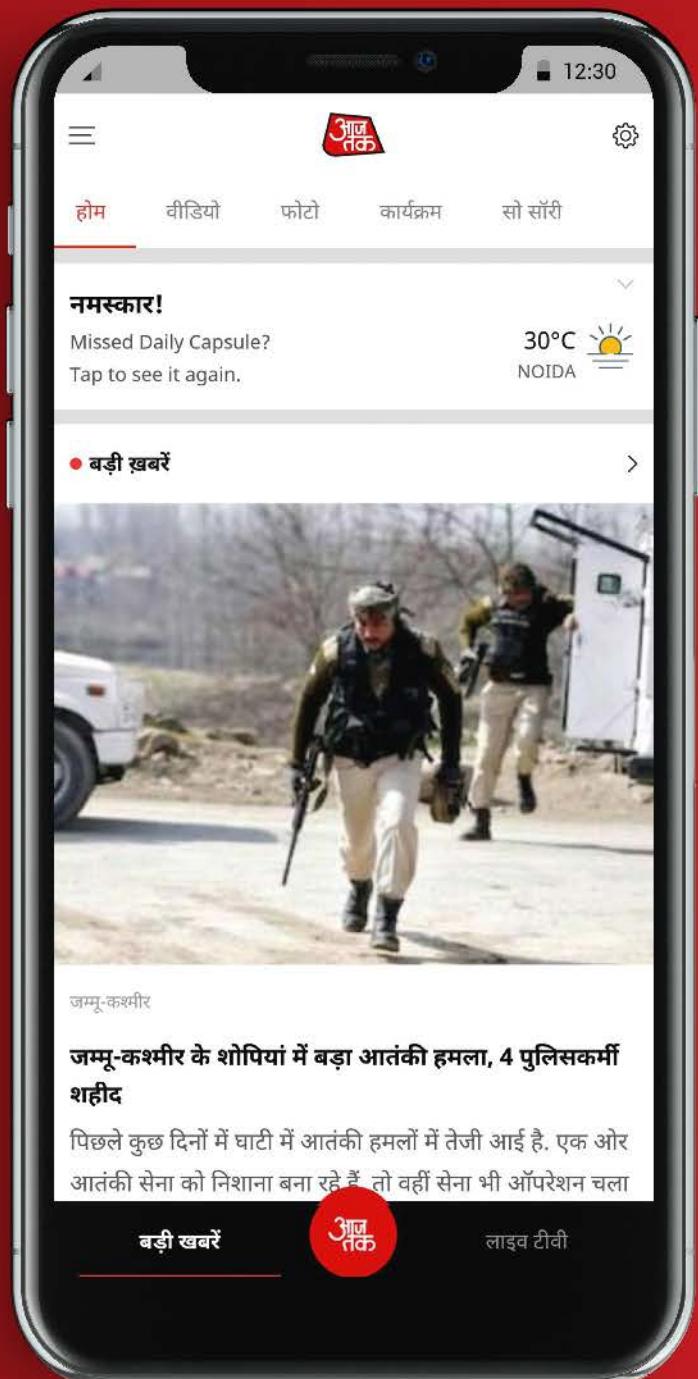
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सुरक्षियों के सरताज 2024

8 जलवारी, 2025 60 रुपए

इंडिया टुडे



1 जनवारी, 2025

100 रुपए

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विशेषांक

1 जनवारी, 2025

60 रुपए

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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 पते 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
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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.

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..... शहर..... राज्य..... पिन.....

मोबाइल..... ईमेल.....



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By AMITA BATRA

# RETHINKING INDIA'S TRADE STRATEGY

**INDIA MUST LOWER TARIFFS, EMBRACE HIGH-STANDARD  
FTAs AND ALIGN TRADE POLICIES WITH SHIFTING  
GLOBAL DYNAMICS TO THRIVE IN THE TRUMP 2.0 ERA**

The most significant development of the past year likely to have repercussions in 2025 and well beyond is the outcome of the US presidential election. President-elect Donald Trump, set to assume office on January 20, is known to follow a bilateral, transactional approach rather than a multilateral, rules-based one in most policy domains. It is no different for the US trade policy that has, over the past seven years, come to be defined by selective protectionism and politically motivated use of tariffs. A further intensification of these trends under Trump 2.0, particularly as regards the 'country of concern' China, will not be surprising. However, the recent announcement of higher tariffs on friendly allies like Mexico and Canada, both members of the North

American trade bloc, presents an additional concern of unpredictability and even a likely unravelling of institutional arrangements that the US is a member of, including those designed by President Trump during his first term. In this context, India will need to have a trade strategy that can take advantage of the opportunity that a heightened US-China trade and technology competition may present while also tackling an increasingly uncertain global trade environment. This is particularly relevant given that strong growth of trade, especially exports, is necessary to sustain India's rapid growth towards achieving its vision of 'Viksit Bharat'.

With its impressive growth and stable macro fundamentals, India has an advantage in the 'China Plus One' investment diversification strategy of multinational corporations (MNCs).

WITH IMPRESSIVE GROWTH AND STABLE MACRO FUNDAMENTALS, INDIA HAS AN ADVANTAGE IN THE 'CHINA PLUS ONE' INVESTMENT DIVERSIFICATION STRATEGY OF MNCs

However, it is also true that, thus far, India has been only a marginal beneficiary of relocating MNC investments while major gains have accrued to Vietnam and Mexico. Other ASEAN economies such as Thailand and Malaysia, too, have already secured a lead

## INDIA@2025 PROTECTIONISM AND INDIA

relative to India. Emerging market economies (EMEs) in North Africa and Central Asia are also becoming attractive alternative investment locations for MNCs.

In this competitive ecosystem, therefore, relative differentials in trade costs across EMEs matter. Any impediment to the movement of parts and components across borders, including policy measures such as high tariffs and non-tariff barriers, is viewed with a comparative lens. India's import tariffs in the manufacturing sector are higher than those in the comparator EMEs. ASEAN, for example, is a virtually tariff-free region. India, in contrast, has seen a progressive increase in the average import tariffs in the manufacturing sector over the past few years. In a trade-dynamic sector like electrical machinery, Vietnam allows almost 90 per cent of imports of parts and components in the duty-free

2025 budget. This will lend an element of predictability to India's trade policy, which will further help attract export-oriented foreign direct investment (FDI).

**A**nother important factor that has created a conducive and liberal trade environment in the case of Vietnam, for example, has been its membership of several high-standard free trade agreements (FTAs). The inclusion of higher standards on investment liberalisation, intellectual property rights and trade-related environment and labour issues have been positive signs of Vietnam's commitment to undertake necessary reforms to align domestic regulatory frameworks with global standards.

While India has negotiated FTAs with some diplomatic dexterity in the

INDIA MUST JOIN MEGA-REGIONAL TRADE PACTS LIKE RCEP AND CPTPP, WHICH **REMAIN OPEN, NON-DISCRIMINATORY** AND ALIGNED WITH THE MULTILATERAL RULES-BASED TRADE ORDER

category as against only 28 per cent by India. Therefore, among the foremost policy measures that India needs to undertake to attract relocating investments from MNCs is to have a more open trade policy regime.

While the 2024 Union Budget announced a reduction of some import duties, it is important that this momentum be maintained and the promised review of tariff rates leads to an overall reduction of the average applied tariffs, especially on imports of manufacturing sector inputs in India. The objective should be to ultimately align India's manufacturing sector tariffs with those of the comparator set of EMEs. A time schedule for achieving this goal should be laid out in the upcoming

past couple of years, these have not been deep, high-standard trade agreements. Globally, however, the challenges of populism, ensuring supply chain resilience, climate change and energy transition are increasingly emerging as the defining parameters of new-age FTAs. Production processes are undergoing transformation to respond to an increasingly discerning consumer's demand for environment-friendly goods and sustainable living. India's persistence with its long-standing stance of classifying these new-age trade issues as 'non-trade' is therefore outdated. To successfully negotiate 21st-century FTAs, India needs to do some serious re-thinking of its trade negotiating strategy.

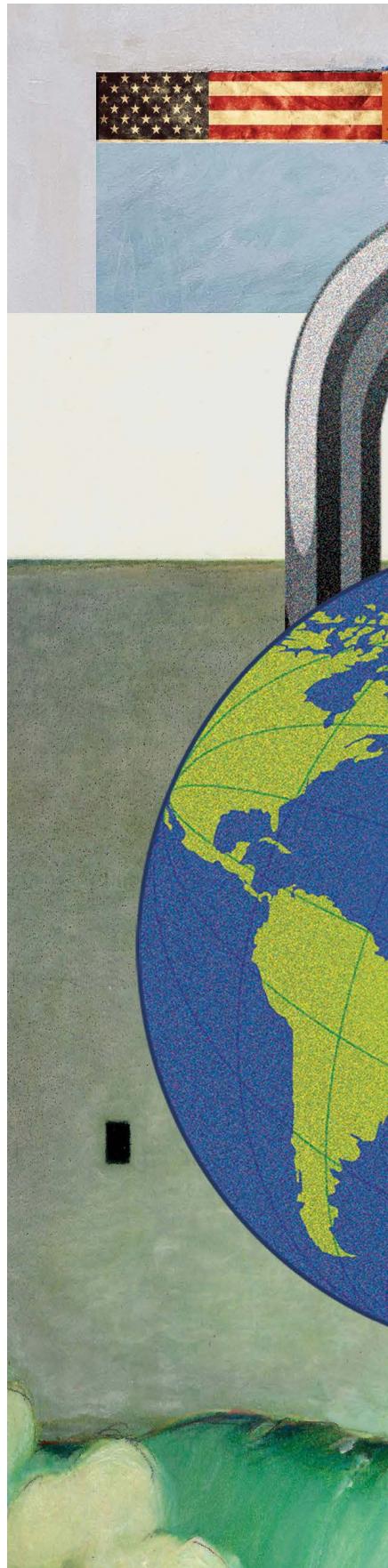
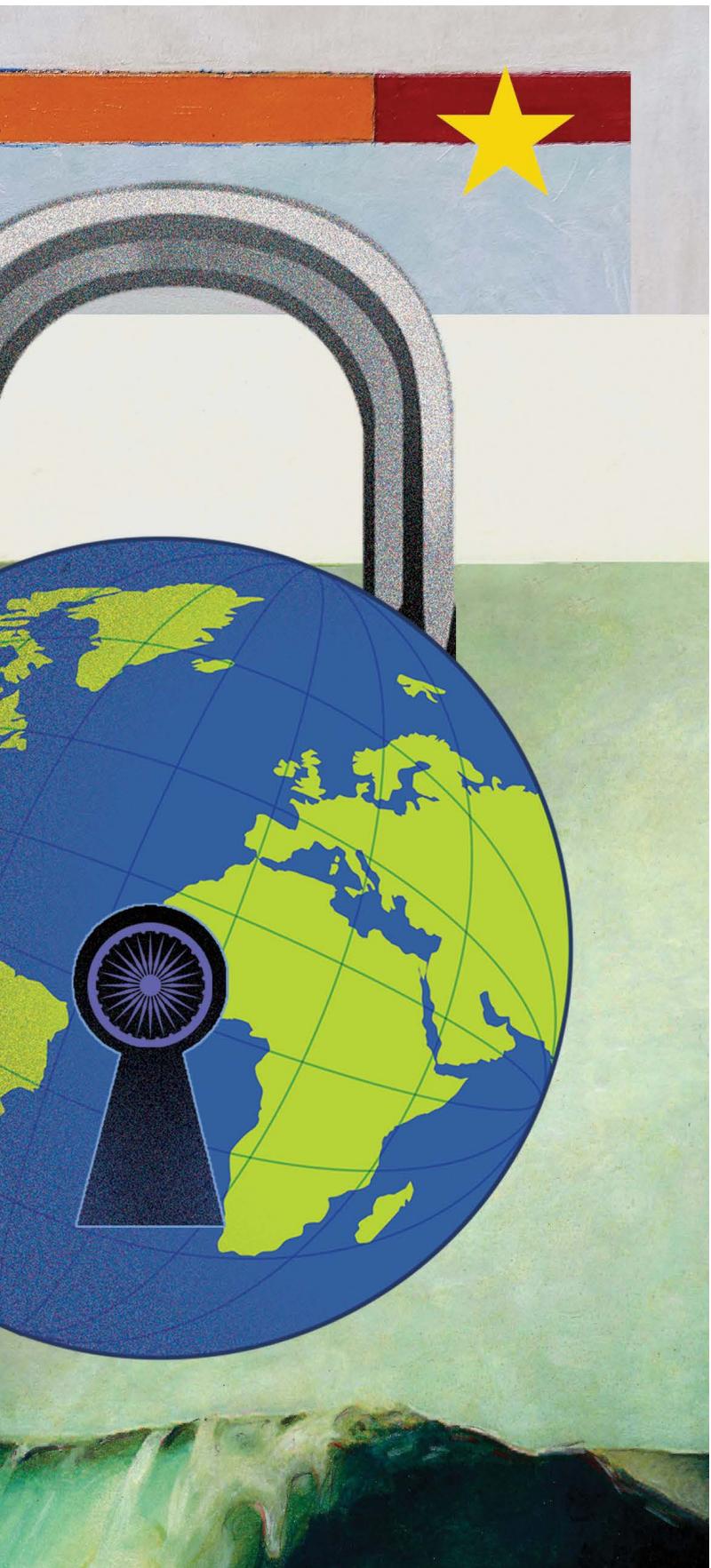


Illustration by NILANJAN DAS



In this era of trade and economic uncertainty, there is an additional advantage as trade in deep FTAs is also observed to be relatively more robust during a crisis.

Furthermore, as the already evident tendency of trade in North America getting redefined on discriminatory lines intensifies under Trump 2.0 and as the European Union (EU) secures trade and regional value chains within, with the implementation of the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM), India needs to prioritise its participation in mega-regional trade agreements. For instance, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and the Comprehensive and Progressive Trans Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), which are the only mega-regional trade agreements that continue to be open, non-discriminatory and in conformity with the multilateral rules-based trade order. The CPTPP is a high-standard, ambitious and forward-looking trade agreement. With an increasing membership, a long queue of applicants, continued trade and economic dynamism among member economies, it has substantial potential for trade expansion. India, therefore, must apply for membership and initiate preparatory steps towards accession to the CPTPP at the earliest.

Working towards an early conclusion of the FTA with the EU and UK, which is also now a CPTPP member, will be a step in this direction. The EU has been in the lead in adopting high standards, especially in the realm of environment and labour provisions in its FTAs. For India, insulating domestic producers, especially large industries, from competition should not be the guiding principle in its negotiations with the EU. In respect of CBAM as well as sectors of concern, appropriate product-specific flexibilities, safeguard measures and extended transition time should be carefully negotiated.

Finally, having seen its most challenging times under Trump 1.0, global trade governance under the World Trade Organization is likely to see further decline this time. It is imperative, therefore, for India to develop an understanding of the alternative architectures of “variable geometry” in global trade rules being proposed internationally and adopt a more positive perspective toward participation in plurilateral initiatives on trade and investment issues. ■

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By PABLO BOSE

# ALL IN ALL, MORE BRICKS IN THE WALL

INDIANS MAY FIND IT TOUGHER TO CHASE THE AMERICAN DREAM IF TRUMP HARDENS IMMIGRATION RULES

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onald Trump's return to the US presidency in 2025 fills much of the world with a great deal of uncertainty. Will he follow through on his promises and his threats? Will he pull the US out of international treaties and transatlantic alliances, subject neighbours near and far to tariffs and trade wars, and upend domestic politics, industries and communities through border closures

and deportations? For Indian immigrants and Americans of Indian origin, life under the second Trump presidency is full of these and many other questions. It is difficult to predict exactly what might happen given Trump's notoriously mercurial nature and the already chaotic makeup of his prospective administration. Yet we might look to what happened under the first Trump administration, the promises made on the most recent campaign trail, and the policy priorities of his allies to get a better sense of what could be in store over the coming years.

There are today nearly 3 million Indian immigrants living in the US; the country is the second most popular destination for Indians (after the UAE) and Indian immigrants are the second largest foreign-born population in the US (after Mexicans). One concern Trump critics often voice is the return to the open anti-immigrant sentiments that became more common and generally acceptable in his first term. Certainly, Trump's xenophobic rhetoric did not lessen between 2016 and 2024—refugees, asylum-seekers and immigrants, especially from the Global South, remain a key target at his rallies and of his ire. However, the political calculus may have changed through these intervening years; small, but significant support grew for Trump among Black, Latino and Asian voters, enough for his base today to be seen as more multiracial than before. A few Indian Americans also oc-

THE PRESENCE OF DESIS IN TRUMP'S ORBIT DOES NOT MEAN HIS PRESIDENCY WILL BE KINDER TO THE INDIAN DIASPORA IN THE US OR TO IMMIGRANTS ALREADY IN OR PLANNING TO COME IN

cupy space in his inner circle, like Kash Patel, his nominee for FBI director, and Vivek Ramaswamy, co-leader with Elon Musk of his advisory Department of Governmental Efficiency. The presence of *desis* in Trump's orbit does not, of course, mean that the second Trump presidency will be any kinder or gentler to either the Indian diaspora living in America or for immigrants already in or planning to come to the country.



Additionally, there are many areas where the US president's power is more rhetorical than real. For all the talk of slashing budgets, entire government agencies and policies, the executive branch is dependent upon or hamstrung by the US Congress, which controls purse strings, and the judiciary, which can stop policies and rules from being implemented. One area where the president can actually exert a great deal of influence over is immigration—the topic that contributed perhaps the most to Trump's 2016 and 2024 victories and where we may see immediate changes. We are no more likely to see the building of border walls paid for by Mexico (or Canada) than we were in the first Trump presidency, but we might reasonably assume other types of immigration changes to be enacted—some more quickly than others. There are three I believe will be of significance to Indian immigrants and Indian Americans: harsher enforcement of immigration regulations, constraints upon work-based immigration, and limitations for international students.

In the first instance, Trump has campaigned on creating and maintaining a more punitive immigration regime, starting with what he calls mass deportations from Day 1 of his presidency, a suspension or elimination of refugee resettlement, and a narrowing of other legal immigration pathways. It remains to be seen how many of these will actually be fulfilled—large sectors of the US economy would be crippled if deprived of the labour of undocumented workers, for example. Yet for Indian migrants crossing both the northern and southern US borders in greater numbers in the past decade, the threat of harsher treatment will manifest quickly, in the form of swift deportations and swifter denials of asylum claims. Indian nationals have been among the most rapidly growing number of undocumented immigrants in the US. This is true not only at the southern border, which has historically had the far greater share of illegal entries to the US, but also in the northern border with Canada. In the Swanton sector, covering northern New York and Vermont, where I live, more than half of the illegal crossings into the US from Canada have been Indians, mostly young men, but a good number of families as well. A large proportion have been from Punjab, young people, many of them farmers, who have been displaced from their own homes and livelihoods due to both instability back home and the lure of opportunity in the US. That dream of a better life and prospects has drawn many others to try and cross the border into the US, sometimes resulting in

tragic outcomes as with the Gujarati family that froze to death crossing the barren wasteland in the winter of 2022. Yet many continue to cross this border illegally; today, Indians account for 375,000 unauthorised immigrants in the US [according to a 2022 estimate. A 2023 PEW survey puts the figure at 725,000], the fifth largest group nationally. Their future under this new regime will become even more precarious.

Uncertain too will be the future of legal immigrants. One of the most popular pathways for educated immigrants since the 1990s has been the H-1B visa programme, which has provided a special entry to tech workers and others with advanced degrees. Trump has railed against family reunification and suggested that a skills-based immigration system ought to be prioritised in the US. Yet, during his first administration, it was the H-1B programme—the largest guest worker programme in the US—that was narrowed.

In 2018, for example, 24 per cent of H-1B applications were denied, compared to just 2 per cent in 2022.

The impact of the changes to the programme will disproportionately affect Indian nationals; in 2022, 73 per cent of applicants were Indian. The future of the H-1B programme has opened up deep fissures within Trump's winning coalition, with the anti-immigration wing wanting to once again restrict this pathway, and the tech industry and entrepreneurs arguing in favour of enlarging the programme. Trump himself has tentatively signalled his support for it; however, the debate continues to rage amongst his base, with Indian immigrants receiving a disproportionate share of the backlash.

A third group who may find migration to the US perilous are international students. Going by the 2016–2020 period, there will be more scrutiny of visa applications, fewer opportunities to work on and off campus, and less chances to stay after graduation. International students are a crucial component of any university campus, and Indian students currently number upward of 250,000 out of the 1 million-odd international students in the US. In the first Trump presidency, a narrowing of their opportunities and pathways meant that many turned to other destinations like Europe, Canada or Australia. Will a similar lack of foresight, understanding and knowledge threaten the opportunities for migrants—and receiving communities—again? ■

**Pablo Bose** is a professor at the Department of Geography and Geosciences, University of Vermont



By **BERTIL  
LINTNER**

# BEIJING'S ROAD TO RUIN

**THE BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE AIMED TO TRANSFORM THE WORLD, WITH CHINA AS THE FULCRUM. INSTEAD, IT IS A DISASTER THAT NATION AFTER NATION IS OPTING OUT OF. THE TREND WILL ONLY INTENSIFY IN 2025**

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**began in 2013 as a grand scheme that was going to transform the world.** It was going to be bigger and more generous than America's Marshall

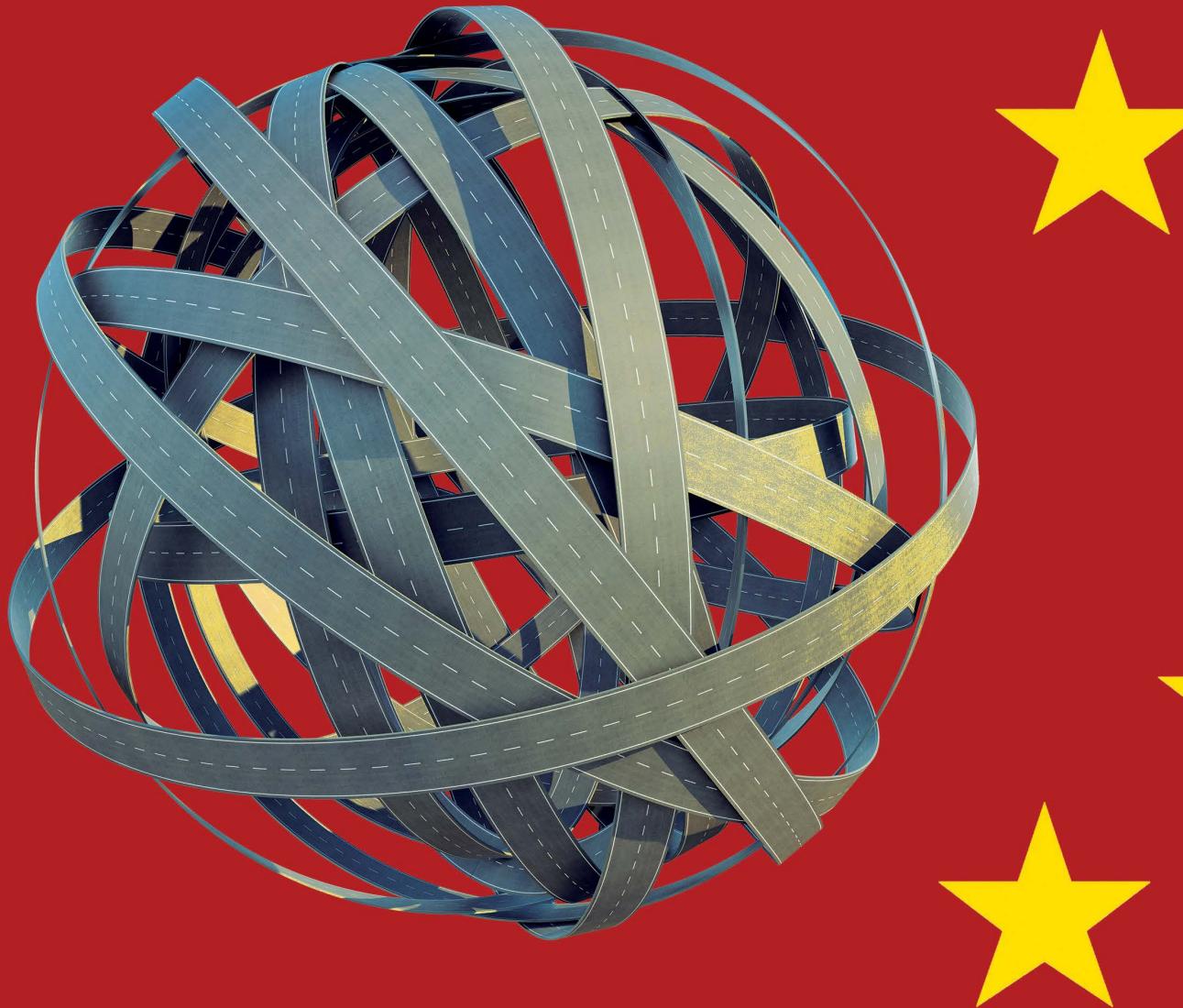
Plan, which helped rebuild Europe after World War II. China was going to build roads, railways, bridges, airports and ports across the globe. Ten years later, however, Chinese president Xi Jinping recast the BRI as 'small and beautiful'—and said that the emphasis should be on smaller and less costly sectors such as energy and technology. Now, it is becoming increasingly obvious that Xi's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has become a financial disaster not only for the countries that have received Chinese loans which they cannot repay—money from Beijing means loans, not straightforward aid—but for China as well.

*Foreign Affairs* reported in its December 17 issue that this comes at a time when China's growth has slowed significantly since the property sector collapsed in 2021 and Covid-related restrictions impeded all types of economic activity in 2022. A weaker and less assertive China may sound like good news for India. But as Beijing may want to divert attention from its domestic and other problems, China's behaviour in 2025 may become more unpredictable than in the past—and that could have unexpected consequences for the region and beyond.

There is no doubt that the BRI cost of perhaps as much as a trillion US dollars has failed to achieve any substantial improvements in the countries that were going to benefit from China's supposed largesse. The initial enthusiasm for the project has given way to broken promises, cracked dams, railways to nowhere—and poor countries becoming politically dependent on China because they cannot service their debts.

In some cases, China has bartered unpaid loans for equity. The handover of Hambantota port in Sri Lanka to a Chinese conglomerate is an example of that, while Laos, when it could not repay its loans, had to give up maintenance of the country's electric power grid to a Chinese company. China has thus

A WEAKER CHINA MAY SOUND LIKE GOOD NEWS FOR INDIA. HOWEVER, TO DIVERT ATTENTION FROM DOMESTIC AND OTHER PROBLEMS, CHINA'S BEHAVIOUR MAY BE MORE UNPREDICTABLE IN 2025



gained considerable economic and, therefore, also political influence in those countries.

But loans that cannot be repaid also mean billions of dollars flowing out of China. Much of that is not coming back, and whatever equity and, with it, political influence the Chinese government has gained in exchange for non-performing loans cannot compensate for the losses in terms of hard currency.

In the immediate region, Ferdinand Marcos Jr, the president of the Philippines, was conspicuously absent from a meeting in Beijing in October last year, which was meant to mark the 10th anniversary of the BRI. He and his government have terminated a series of Chinese-initiated infrastructure projects and will instead be working with Japanese and western corporations. A China-funded high-speed railway connecting the Indonesian capital with Bandung has found it hard to attract passengers because the distance is

only 143 kilometres. To make sense, the railway should have connected Jakarta with other metropolitan centres on Java, such as Surabaya or Yogyakarta.

In Myanmar, a Chinese plan to build a hydroelectric power station with a dam at Myitsone in the far north of the country—which was going to flood 600 square kilometres of land, with 80 per cent of the electricity going to China—was suspended in 2017 because of widespread popular opposition to the project. After a military takeover in February 2021, rowdy demonstrations were held outside China's embassy in the old capital Yangon because of what people perceived as Chinese support for the hugely unpopular coup makers. Now, the new ruling junta and the Chinese are talking about reviving the Myitsone project, but that will only lead to more and stronger anti-Chinese sentiments in Myanmar.

In Cambodia, China took advantage of western boycotts



A MAJOR SHORTCOMING IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF XI'S BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE IS THAT **THERE IS NO CENTRAL GOVERNMENTAL BODY THAT OVERSEES THE PROJECTS**, OR CLARITY ON WHICH MINISTRY IS RESPONSIBLE



after a coup in 1997 and the country's poor human rights record. China became Cambodia's top creditor country, but, this year, Beijing has not approved any new loans. Even the Chinese have discovered that their infrastructural projects in Cambodia have not yielded expected results. According to a December 18 Reuters report, China accounts for more than a third of the country's \$11.6 billion debt stock—and the Cambodians are now turning to the World Bank and Japan to bail them out, and for loans on more favourable terms than those from China.

In Europe, Montenegro took a \$1 billion loan from China in 2014 to build a new highway. But the project remains unfinished, and the debt it incurred amounts to more than a third of the poor south European country's annual budget.

The European Union refused to bail out Montenegro of its loans from China, but a group of American and European banks saved the country from bankruptcy as they stepped in to help restructure the financing.

While Portugal has quietly withdrawn from the BRI, Italy left it altogether and both countries are now reassessing their overall relationship with China. Hungary, the first European country to sign up to the BRI, has benefited from investment in the country's infrastructure. But the bill for a Hungary-Serbia railway project, which is scheduled to be completed in 2025, is a staggering 3.8 billion Euros, or nearly \$4 billion—money that an already cash-starved Hungary cannot possibly afford to pay back within the foreseeable future.

Greece is often cited as the BRI's European success story. Under BRI schemes, the Chinese state-owned shipping firm COSCO now owns a 67 per cent share of the port of Piraeus, which has led to rapid increase in container volumes. The port is now one of the busiest in Europe. But it is also the only one where the company prohibits workers from forming any sort of collective representation. COSCO's refusal to engage in any kind of public consultation or meet with civil society representatives has alienated the local community.

A major shortcoming in the actual implementation of Xi's BRI is that there is no central governmental body that oversees the projects, nor is it clear which ministry or ministries are responsible for what. As Yuen Yuen Ang, a professor of political science at the Centre for Chinese Studies at Michigan University, argues, the BRI bears the hallmark of a communist-style mass campaign, which is "typical in China, where the central government often issues broad directives and expects lower-ranking officials to figure out how to fulfil them". But it is highly unlikely that Beijing will change the way it conducts business—and that means that 2025 will be a year of uncertainty when it comes to China's global ambitions. ■

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**Bertil Lintner** is a journalist, strategic consultant and author of, among other books, *China's India War and The Costliest Pearl: China's Struggle for India's Ocean*



By VIJAY GOKHALE

# THE TALK AND DETER APPROACH

INDIA SHOULD COLLABORATE BUT NOT LET CHINA HOLD ITS INTERESTS TO RANSOM

The successful conclusion of negotiations between India and China on the disengagement of military forces in disputed pockets of east Ladakh after more than 48 tense months marks the beginning of a process that might, hopefully, arrive at a new set of arrangements to manage the boundary dispute. Aside from the practical difficulties involved in negotiating a broader de-escalation in east Ladakh that guarantees equal and mutual security, working toward a mutual agreement on a new framework for peace and tranquility would also be a priority in the year ahead. Absent real trust, this might seem a difficult task, but there is mature leadership on both sides to take this process forward.

The normalisation of ties in other areas, including commerce and connectivity, has also been made possible by this thaw on the border. But the scars left behind by the Galwan incident might prove difficult to heal till India sees that China respects the sanctity of the LAC in all sectors. And, until then, the east Ladakh crisis, in the words of external affairs minister S. Jaishankar, makes India more likely to apply national security filters to economic decision-making. Defining and translating this idea into specific policy might, however, be the challenge. On paper, the substantial trade deficit in excess of \$80 billion is a political concern, but the current options to reduce dependence are limited. Moreover, some of India's star exports performers, such as pharmaceuticals and textiles, are dependent upon Chinese machinery, raw materials or intermediary products. Taking a hatchet to the trade deficit in such sectors might amount to wielding it on one's own feet. A nuanced

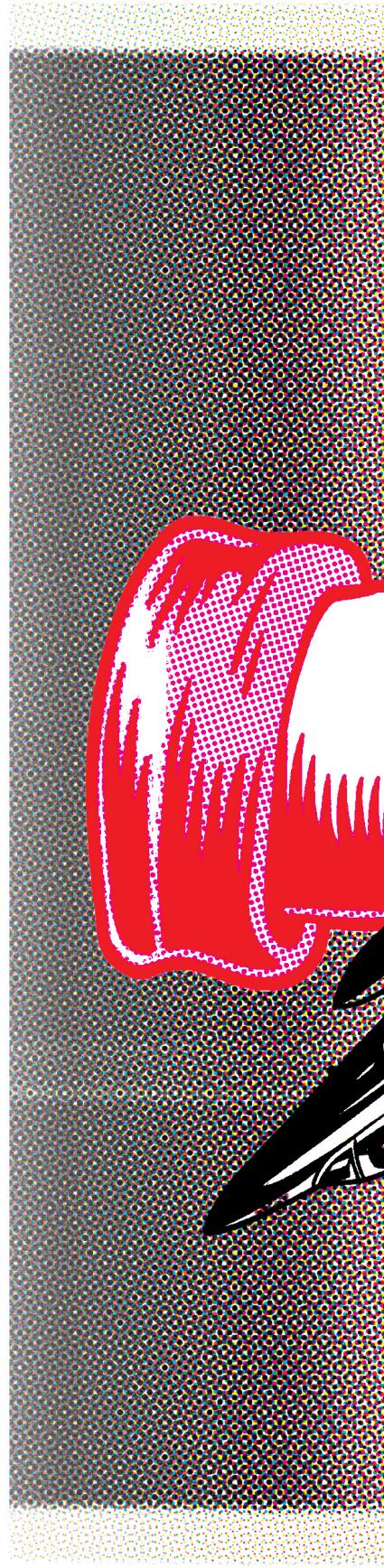




Illustration by NILANJAN DAS

policy on the handling of the trade imbalance is the need of the economy, as are restrictions on FDI from China that also takes industry concerns more fully into account. The easing of doing business with China, which the market expects, should mean the early resumption of direct connectivity as well as a liberalisation of travel arrangements.

The greater concern going forward ought to be the surreptitious manner by which China is applying industrial 'sanctions'. It stems from their anxiety that India seeks to replace them as the next global manufacturing centre—an anxiety exacerbated by the successful transition of Apple to India. China wants India to be an integral part of its own supply chain rather than a substitute for it. Different methods are being applied in the pursuit of this strategic objective. The export of key industrial machinery, such as tunnel boring machinery, which is critical for infrastructure or offshore oil drilling equipment, has faced what one foreign dignitary described as 'extraordinary circumstances' with China's customs authorities hindering deliveries to India. In other cases, such as the pharmaceutical or solar energy sectors where the government's PLI schemes are creating alternative supply chains for intermediate products, they resort to predatory pricing practices to thwart Indian policy. Then, there are market rumours that China has specifically denied the transfer of technology by manufacturers of lithium-ion fuel cells, which is the most critical part of the electric mobility value chain, to keep

the Indian EV industry overdependent on China. Their restricting critical mineral exports to India through a combination of market-share control over rare earths resources as well as their extraction and processing, and through tighter export controls, with the aim of delaying India's indigenisation efforts in the wind, solar and EV industries, is a distinct possibility in the foreseeable future that needs to be closely monitored.

This subtle and undeclared coercion will need concerted action on the part of both the government and industry. The expansion and diversification of global supply chains in order to reduce dependence on China requires being more open-minded about trade partnerships. The government is building consortiums like QUAD or joining mechanisms like the Mineral Security Partnership in order to reduce single-source dependencies and to create alternative producers of critical components and products. But, as yet, there is little concrete outcome. Project-specific collaboration with developed coun-

tries who face similar challenges arising from the denial of Chinese technology, especially in the green growth sectors, is the need of the hour. India's relationship with Russia should be leveraged too, given its vast rare earths resources, in the extraction and refining of nickel and cobalt. India also needs to incentivise its own industry to establish, through technology collaboration, the capacity for refining rare earths, over which China currently holds a near-monopoly. China's strong commercial interest in penetrating the Indian market should be leveraged for technology transfer. They need India's growing market to become the leading power, and the clear message should be that they cannot have it if they bottleneck the trade in tools and technology that are critical to

India's economic growth and security. The path to India's market lies through mutual benefit.

The competition in the neighbourhood will intensify. Sri Lanka and Bangladesh will, likely, follow the Maldives and Nepal in leveraging their geostrategic location to secure Belt-and-Road benefits. The government has wisely focused on mutually advantageous capacity-building and connectivity with the neighbours. Limited collaboration with China in BRICS and other plurilateral platforms is also possible as both navigate the uncertainties of the second coming of US President Donald Trump. The hedging strategy pursued by India in building strong relationships with the US, Australia, Japan, ROK and the Southeast Asian states that share concerns about the Indo-Pacific region has served its security interests

well enough. It will go forward, notwithstanding recent political developments in Washington, Seoul and Tokyo.

There is no guarantee that peace and tranquility will prevail along the LAC in 2025. China still thinks grey zone warfare is a cheap option to place fetters on India without serious backlash. Talk-and-deter must continue to remain the dual approach to dealing with China. Supply chain diversification must proceed on war footing with substantial financial support being given to industry-driven R&D to ensure that India's green agenda is not hostage to Chinese economic action. Trade defence measures should not derail the economy. And, the government needs to have a plan to better educate and prepare the citizens for long-term competition with China. ■

**Vijay Gokhale** is a former foreign secretary and ambassador to China



By **JASPREET  
BINDRA**

# HARNESSING INDIA'S AI POWER

THE COUNTRY STANDS POISED TO LEVERAGE AI'S TRANSFORMATIVE POTENTIAL THROUGH AGENTS, APPLICATIONS, LITERACY AND SAFETY

IT

**has been two years since OpenAI released ChatGPT into the wild**, racking up the fastest-ever 200 million users, setting off a feeding frenzy in the tech world, and heralding the inevitable Age of AI. As 2025 dawns and the technology takes its baby steps into some kind of maturity, I believe there will be four megatrends that will drive AI to shape business and society in India and across the world.

**Apps to Agents:** If 2023 was the year of ChatGPT, and 2024 was the year when multiple Large Language Models (LLMs) like Claude and Gemini bloomed into existence, 2025 will be the year of AI Agents, or Agentic AI. A prescient Bill Gates blog foresaw this in 2023. "In the next five years," he wrote, "...you'll simply tell your device, in everyday language, what you want to do...and software will be able to respond personally because it will have a rich understanding of your life. This type of software—something that responds to natural language and can accomplish many different tasks based on its knowledge of the user—is called an agent." "Agents are not only going to change how everyone interacts with computers," he went on to say, "they're also going to upend the software industry." Instead of tapping a few apps multiple times or asking ChatGPT a series of questions to work out a complex and frustrating travel itinerary, what if, say, a

Booking.com agent would select a hotel and airline we usually prefer, design a day-to-day schedule based on our interests, and go ahead and book the tickets and hotels, after we have given it the permission and the agency to do so. Agentic AI will bring Generative AI to the enterprise, with AI bundling up discrete steps in a typical enterprise workflow into an AI agent software, replacing traditional Software-as-a-service into the new SaaS: Service-as-a-software. Bain Capital's Sarah Hinkfuss elegantly describes it: "We are used

THE NEW AGENTIC AI WOULD DESIGN A DAY-TO-DAY TRAVEL SCHEDULE BASED ON OUR INTERESTS, AND BOOK THE TICKETS AND HOTELS. THIS WOULD REVOLUTIONISE PERSONAL TASKS



to ‘pulling’ information from computers. (AI agents will) ‘push’ finished work to us instead.”

Thousands of startups are amping up their innovation to build agents on top of the LLMs. Genie by Gather helps parents manage their time, Minday scours the internet and mines your preferences to find the best restaurant or shop around you, and Relevance AI automates prospect meetings for harried sales reps. Klarna, a European fintech, made waves when its CEO announced that customer service agents built on Open AI platforms have ‘replaced’ 700 human agents and that they resolve queries in a fifth of the time it took humans. The implications for India are profound. As contact centres deal with the human agent to AI agent transition, there is a vast new opportunity for Indian startups to create agents on top of global LLMs, and Indian enterprises will be well served to understand and incorporate AI agents in their workflows.

**From LLMs to Applications:** This brings the old question back—does India need its own LLM? Nandan Nilekani is adamantly opposed to it, saying, “Let the big boys of the Valley do it”, with India focusing on building use cases and applications on AI, rather than an LLM—a view I subscribe to. Much like the cloud, I think LLMs would be commoditised, with three or four major ones emerging as the infrastructure on which millions of apps and agents will be built. So far, most of the value in GenAI has been concentrated in the infrastructure layer, where Nvidia and the cloud providers rule; however, 2025 will see value migrate upwards to the application layer at the top which will distribute value to companies and startups innovating on top of these. This is the moment India should grasp, with its IT services firms and eager startups solving India-specific and global use cases across enterprises and consumers with AI agents and applications.

**Becoming AI-literate:** The definition of literacy will extend beyond reading, writing and arithmetic to using GenAI tools like ChatGPT, Perplexity and others to become more productive and efficient at work. Organisations are witnessing a new trend, BYOAI or Bring Your Own AI, where three of four employees are bringing along their own AI to work, because it helps them perform so much better (<https://bit.ly/41GKJe4>). Two-thirds of bosses will not hire an employee unless she has the aptitude and curiosity to work with the profusion of GenAI tools out there. Thus, it will be incumbent on managements across organisations, irrespective of sector or geography, to frame the right

THIS IS THE MOMENT INDIA SHOULD GRASP, WITH ITS **IT SERVICES FIRMS AND EAGER STARTUPS SOLVING INDIA-SPECIFIC AND GLOBAL USE CASES** ACROSS ENTERPRISES AND CONSUMERS WITH AI AGENTS AND APPLICATIONS

policies and build enablers for all their employees to become AI-literate. This is especially true in India, with a recent BCG report placing Indians among the top users of ChatGPT worldwide. We need to aspire to make every Indian AI-literate.

**Doing AI Safely:** As we enter the age of AI, using AI safely and responsibly will be paramount, with the ethics of AI equally, if not more, important than the technology itself. The dark side of AI is well known—privacy and surveillance, bias, deepfakes and fake news, and environmental degradation. Most countries and companies around the world are scrambling to enact regulations and guardrails around AI. India, with its large young population and its digital transformation with Digital Public Infrastructure, is well placed to lead the charge on building safe AI and bridging the digital divide by delivering it to its 1.4 billion citizens. In 2025, the Indian government should work with industry to create enforceable principles and guardrails for building and deploying AI, as well as some regulations for its known ill-effects like deepfakes. It should immediately set up a world-leading AI Safety Institute (AISI) and join the network of AISIs created worldwide, taking responsibility and leadership for AI Safety in the emerging world. Finally, the National AI Mission should extend to providing GenAI tools and technologies to every last Indian, much like UPI and Aadhaar, a concept which I call ‘Jan AI’.

“AI is not just a technology or a trend,” says Gartner, “it is a profound shift in the interaction between humans and machines.” It is also a once-in-a-lifetime technology, and the world has the opportunity to use it wisely for prosperity and peace, or otherwise. India, with its IT prowess, startup ecosystem and openness to tech and digitisation, has a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to grasp AI and leverage it to leapfrog our dream to be a developed economy by 2047. ■

**Jaspreet Bindra** is the co-founder and CEO of AI&Beyond



By YAMINI AIYAR

# REFRAMING THE CASH TRANSFER DEBATE

CASH TRANSFER SCHEMES SHOULDN'T BE TREATED AS FREEBIES. THAT SAID, THEIR POPULARITY WILL HAVE MAJOR IMPLICATIONS FOR OUR DEMOCRACY

**L**adki Bahin, Ladli Behena, Lado Lakshmi, Gruha Lakshmi, Maha Lakshmi, Maiya Samman, Pyari Behna Sukh Samman... In 2024, India witnessed an explosion of cash transfer schemes targeting women. The actual amounts transferred are small, averaging about Rs 1,500 per month, but the reach is wide. Fourteen states are spending about 0.6 per cent of the GDP annually on the schemes, reaching 34 per cent women, according to estimates by Axis Bank. No political party will now risk the electoral battlefield without a cash transfer guarantee in their armour. In Maharashtra, the electorate had to

wait a few extra weeks for election dates to be announced, in order for the cash benefits of Ladki Bahin Yojana announced in June to accumulate in the bank accounts. In Delhi, on the eve of the state election, the Aam Aadmi Party, widely credited for having placed education and health on the electoral agenda, chose to add the promise of the Mukhyamantri Mahila Samman to its electoral offerings. In our increasingly fractured polity, the need to compete over cash transfers is the one issue on which we have political consensus.

Electoral theatre notwithstanding, public investments in these schemes are not quite breaking the bank. Consider our BRICS colleagues. Brazil spends 5.8 per cent of its



Illustration by NILANJAN DAS



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rooms to deride these as ‘freebie’ politics, ‘bribes’ or ‘revaldis’ (Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s own contribution to the lexicon) in exchange for votes that place unnecessary burdens on the exchequer. This tendency to frame public investments on welfare in terms of political expediency that squeeze fiscal space rather than an obligatory function of the state is a deeply troubling formulation.

The failure to invest in people has long been the Achilles heel of the Indian economy. But the freebie discourse is a mirror to a broader malaise. That a country which spends so little on its people, where growth has been accompanied by large-scale cronyism and staggering inequality, has a public culture which is quick to contemptuously dismiss welfare spending as ‘freebies’ and ‘bribes’ speaks to how devoid of any notion of justice and solidarity public debates are. Moreover, it undermines a legitimate democratic negotiation between the masses, whose voices are invisible in the corridors of policymaking, and their elected representatives. By casting schemes in their names as ‘bribes’, we strip voters of their agency, casting them as passive actors who can be ‘bought’. The modicum of public spending on welfare in India is an outcome of a genuinely democratic process emerging from grassroots social movements and citizen pressure. It is this that put in place pensions, PDS, midday

GDP on education, South Africa 6.6 per cent, compared to India’s 4.6 per cent. Social protection spending in China (which includes cash transfers) amounts to 7.9 per cent and, in Brazil, a whopping 17 per cent, compared to India’s 4 per cent of the GDP. Indeed, despite the plethora of cash transfers, India has not seen a significant expansion in welfare spending. Cash transfers have been financed largely through expenditure switching—reprioritising funds from health, education and capital expenditure and, in some states, by driving up deficits. At the national level, this is even starker. Between 2014 and 2024, social expenditure as a proportion of total government expenditure declined—except for the pandemic years—from 22 per cent to 19 per cent in 2024–25. Given this tendency for expenditure switching, the presence of cash transfers is an important pivot in our welfare regime.

It is commonplace in the media, in seminar rooms and in elite drawing

meals, MGNREGA and such, which today are the lifeline for many Indians. This ought to be celebrated, not derided.

If we move away from the distraction of freebies and bribes, the questions we ought to ask are about the democratic implications of this shift in our welfare architecture. As Keynes had famously quipped, "Anything we can do, we can afford." The question for debate really is what we choose to do and, more importantly, what we actively do not do. As I reflect on India's current preference for a cash transfer-based welfare regime, I worry that they risk distracting us from the real structural challenges that confront our economy while simultaneously feeding the authoritarian beast that our democracy is flirting with.

The intersection between two distinct but related features of our economy and polity have given rise to the current moment. First, India's economic model, which has failed to widen the growth pie. Growth, even as it lifted a large number of Indians out of poverty, has struggled with the challenge of under-employment and low inter-generational mobility, leaving the bulk of India (40 per cent in 2022) in what the World Bank classifies as the 'vulnerable population' or moderate poverty—one income shock away from falling back into poverty. More recently, successive blows to the informal economy from demonetisation to Covid lockdowns combined with stagnant wages have exacerbated the challenge. Unemployment and price rise, as every election survey highlights, are topmost on voters' minds. No political party can face the polls without responding to this reality.

Second, India's incompetent, corrupt State. Curiously, the lived reality of state failure when it comes to services that impact our everyday lives—education, health, clean air—has reduced the appetite both within the government and amongst the wider citizenry for any genuine investments in the state. Getting the state out of the way has been the dominant impulse and, technology, with its ability to bypass layers of the administration and deliver benefits 'directly' to citizens, offers a tantalising tool to achieve this.

Thus, rather than invest in strengthening public systems and aligning welfare expenditures to enhance productivity and build a welfare floor that de-commodifies labour and protects the economically vulnerable, as has been the

traditional role of the welfare state; rather than investing in reimagining our economic trajectory to address the structural failure to create genuine economic opportunity for all; all of which will take years and for which credit attribution may be diffused, cash transfers have emerged as a quick fix. In this sense, cash transfers are a distraction, not a solution.

Politically, what has made cash transfers tantalising is their capacity for 'disintermediation'. The political legitimacy cash transfers enjoy lies in their ability to 'bypass' corrupt, incompetent layers of the state. But in doing so, they also enable party leaders to establish a direct 'emotive' connect with citizens. Cash transfers are easy to brand as 'guarantees' of the party leader. Embedded in this is a subtle shift in the social contract that positions welfare as the largesse of the leader toward the '*labharthi*' rather than a moral obligation of the state to rights-bearing citizens. This is what I have characterised with co-author Neelanjan Sircar as 'techno-patrimonial' welfare. In a functioning democracy, citizens seek accountability and demand welfare services through local state actors, both politicians and bureaucrats. When welfare delivery is centralised in the persona of the party leader, not only does this fundamental accountability relationship break down, it legitimises the authority of the leader to centralise power within his/her persona and carry out all functions of the state in their name. This is patrimonialism, fuelled by the power of technology. This has electoral power as data show a close correlation between political attribution for

welfare schemes—where the provision of benefits are attributed directly to party leaders—and voting choices.

In 2025, competitive welfarism will entrench itself. Our politicians will continue to bask in the glory of the achievement of small amounts of cash being transferred into bank accounts and seek to mobilise the *labharthi*. As citizens, we must move beyond debating freebies, bribes and *revids* and ask deeper questions about what this trend is doing for our economy and democracy. We have to reframe the cash transfer debate in 2025. ■

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DEMOCRACY**

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By **ASHWINI  
DESHPANDE**

# GIVE A WOMAN THE RIGHT **WORK ENVIRONMENT**

START THIS YEAR, AND IT WILL TURN AROUND THE ECONOMIC FORTUNES OF THE COUNTRY

“IS

**this where we sign up for jobs?”** It was the last sentence I expected to hear in the rural hinterlands of

Uttar Pradesh from a mother of two young children, one a toddler clutching at her saree, the other an infant in her arms. She had persuaded her husband to bring her to the village site where we were doing fieldwork. This woman was no exception, as we subsequently discovered over several months. Young or old, married or not, women—who now have at least middle school education—are eager to get into paid work opportunities, either via regular salaried jobs or via starting a small business of their own, or even gig work.

This palpable willingness to work even at low wages and in poor working conditions—despite crushing constraints of domestic chores, a lack of supporting infrastructure like tap water, piped gas or regular power supply, poor child- and eldercare facilities, and the absence of decent transportation between villages—demonstrates two things. One, Indian women’s ability to withstand challenges is exceptional and cannot be gauged through conventional data on labour force participation rates. Two, this flies in the face of mainstream academic wisdom that Indian women are unwilling to enter paid work, or are dropping out, for fear of sexual violence on the street and at the workplace, combined with family/

community disapproval besides care responsibilities.

Are they really unwilling to enter paid work or dropping out never to re-enter? My research with Jitendra Singh reveals two features of the Indian labour market. One, women enter and exit paid work several times in short four-monthly intervals. In surveys when we ask women who are currently not employed about their willingness to enter paid work, an overwhelming majority are willing to work full- or part-time but regularly (i.e. for most of the year), provided work is available close to home.

The fact that they need employment at or close to home to a large extent reflects the unfortunate reality that women in India are disproportionately responsible for daily domestic chores—cooking, cleaning, house maintenance, child- and eldercare. They spend 10x

SURVEYS SHATTER THE MYTH THAT WOMEN ARE NOT WILLING TO WORK. **AN OVERWHELMING MAJORITY OF WOMEN WANT WORK, JUST CLOSER HOME**

more time on these tasks than men. This is one of the highest gender gaps in time spent on domestic work globally. Additionally, women bear the brunt of poor transportation facilities, especially in rural India.

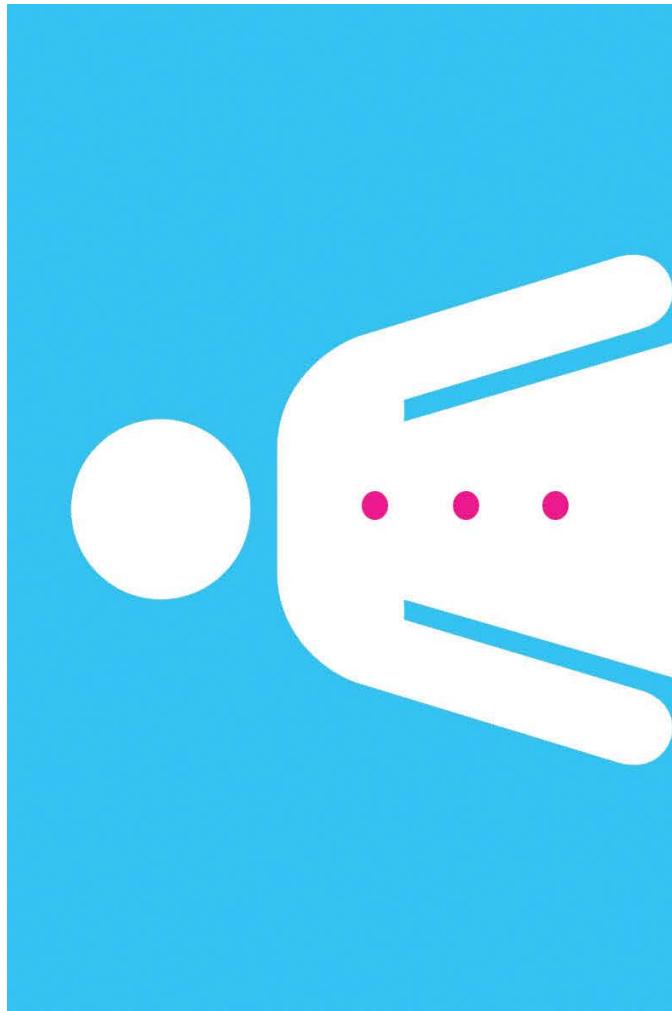
Two, our research shows that low female labour force participation rates (FLFPR) are mainly due to low demand for women's work (fewer jobs overall, for which men are first in the queue). The decline in FLFPR between 2004-05 and 2017-18 can be explained by a decline in the share of employment in agriculture.

**S**treets and workplaces are not free of sexual harassment or violence, but neither are homes. About 30 per cent of Indian women report domestic or intimate partner violence, which is on the higher end of the global spectrum and, as everywhere else, typically underreported. Staying indoors will not necessarily protect women from sexual violence. Looking forward to 2025, let us create conditions that enable women to inhabit public spaces without fear, as legitimate citizens, second to none. Our cities could begin by planning better, well-lit roads with pavements bustling with pedestrians.

Since 2017-18, India's FLFPR has been steadily increasing. This is partly due to better measurement of the unpaid economic work women have always been doing: their labour on family enterprises (farms, fisheries, poultry, dairy, livestock, kirana shops, making items for sale and so on) that generate incomes for the household. While men working on these enterprises are counted as workers (i.e. in the labour force), women are often not. The other factor is the increase in self-employment. For women, being self-employed predominantly means working either as an own-account worker or as an unpaid helper (and these shares have only been increasing in the past few years), and not so much as an employer.

Given the low FLFPR and poor earnings for women in paid work, are direct cash transfers to women a good way to empower them economically? Analyses of recent elections have focused on the role of special cash transfer schemes for women. While there must always be safety nets for vulnerable, marginalised sections of the population, such schemes cannot be a long-term alternative to regular well-paid employment with decent quality of work ('good jobs').

Indian women's education levels have risen dramatically over the past two decades, and gender gaps have sharply declined. Fertility rates and maternal mortality rates have dropped substantially. Thus, all the preconditions for women to be economically independent are in place—except the most important one: there aren't sufficient jobs to absorb the productive capacity of women. If women are enthusiastically accepting cash transfers, it only indicates that the alternative—uncertain, bottom-of-the-ladder precarious



EMPLOYERS SHOULD BE OPEN TO EMPLOYING WOMEN **AT PETROL PUMPS, AS TAXI AND BUS DRIVERS, DELIVERY AGENTS AND EVEN AS MECHANICS.** WE NEED TO CREATE LOW-COST HOUSING AND EFFICIENT PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION FOR THEM

work—is paying them less, and with worse work conditions. The reported excitement around cash transfers should not be interpreted to indicate that women would much rather drop out of (presumably better-paying) jobs to avail of easy cash.

Women's individual willingness to work, even if within easy reach, is not always enough; families and communities

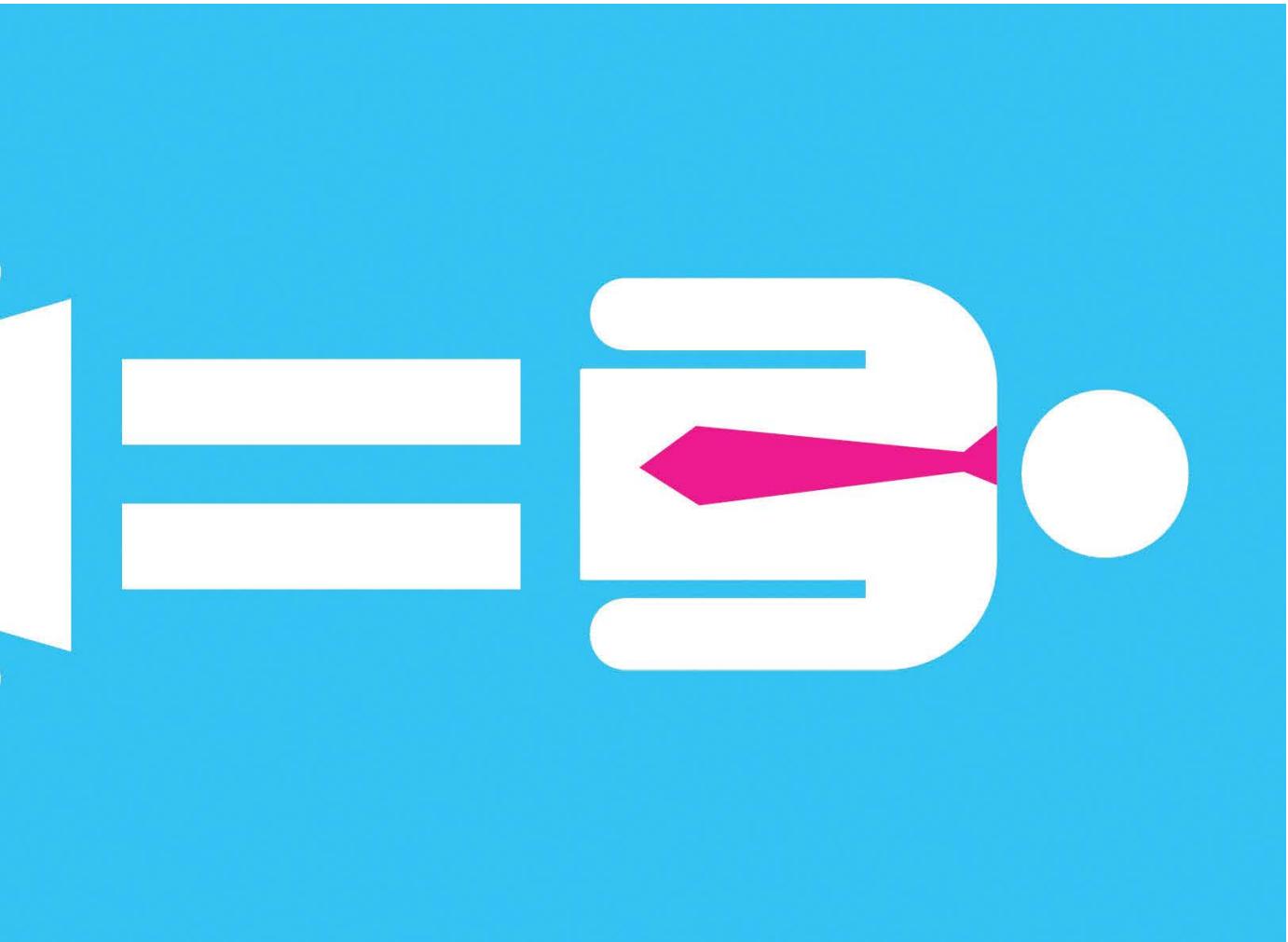


Illustration by NILANJAN DAS

could pose big barriers. However, that picture is changing too. The lack of paid work opportunities in rural India has made families more accepting of their daughters looking for work in the cities. But cities are inhospitable, expensive and difficult to negotiate in terms of housing and support networks.

Heading into 2025, what can be done to alter the status quo? Here are four actionable suggestions.

One, women's educational attainment has increased rapidly over the past two decades, but the FLFPR has a U-shape with education: those with the lowest and highest levels of education participate the most in the labour force. We need to create job opportunities for all women, with particular attention to those with middle level of education. Employers should be open to employing these women at petrol pumps, as taxi and bus drivers, in the tourism industry, as delivery agents, in the hospitality and healthcare industries, and even as mechanics.

Two, for those willing to migrate to cities, we need to create affordable low-cost housing, hostels for single working women, and fast and efficient public transportation.

Three, for rural and urban women, provision of piped water and gas connections at home should be a top priority.

These drastically reduce the time spent on meal preparation. Piped gas additionally reduces indoor air pollution and has substantial health benefits.

Four, we need to invest in the care economy by setting up or strengthening/enhancing child- and eldercare facilities in rural and urban areas. These facilities need to be affordable, accessible and safe, which might require the partnership of both public and private sectors. This provision is essential to reduce and redistribute the care burden, with the added benefit that it creates jobs that are both local and green.

International experience has demonstrated that women's economic independence drives the last nail in the coffin of a sticky social norm: the preference for a son, or the desire to have at least one son, as families realise that daughters can provide old-age support too. As we enter 2025, we need all hands on deck to create an environment where women can thrive in paid work. This is the key to unlocking their potential and driving lasting social and economic change. ■

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By HILAL AHMED

# THE NEW CONFLICT TRAJECTORIES

THE HINDU-MUSLIM BINARY IS STILL A POWERFUL POLITICAL REFERENCE POINT. THE BJP'S FAILURE TO GET A MAJORITY ON ITS OWN HAS NOT DEFUSED THE COMMUNAL RHETORIC, BUT THE RSS'S PUSHBACK AGAINST FRINGE HINDUTVA ELEMENTS IS A POSITIVE SIGN

The outcome of the 2024 general election, especially the failure of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to secure a majority on its own in the Lok Sabha, was seen as an ideological defeat of radical Hindutva. A section of political observers even hoped the decline of one-party dominance at the national level would defuse the aggressive anti-Muslim communal rhetoric. The post-election political developments, however, show that not much has changed.

The Hindu-Muslim binary continues to survive as a powerful political reference point. The ongoing debates on a few legally disputed Muslim places of worship, especially the Gyanvapi mosque in Varanasi and the Shahi Eidgah in Mathura, have intensified. A new set of petitions have been filed in various courts to evaluate the religious character of historic mosques, including the famous shrine of Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti in Ajmer. In fact, the Archaeological Survey of India's intervention in the case of the Shahi Jama Masjid of Sambhal led to violence in which four people died. The government also presented the controversial Waqf Bill in Parliament, which seeks to make serious changes in Muslim endowment management in the country. The proliferation of these seemingly communal issues reveals that the nature of public discourse has not changed significantly after the 2024 election.

There are two ways to make sense of the events of the past six months. The simple explanation is that aggressive

Hindutva has not lost its rhetorical value and, for that reason, these extreme fringe groups have decided to embrace it as the most reliable mode of politics. This simple reading is not entirely incorrect. However, one needs to go beyond this ready-to-use response. The nature of contemporary Hindutva as a form of politics and its varied manifestations must be analysed carefully. In this sense, the challenges faced by the self-claimed Hindutva groups and the internal power structure of the Sangh parivar become very important.

Broadly speaking, we can make an analytical distinction between two kinds of issues that have emerged in the post-Lok Sabha election context: the provocative contestations and the structural ones. The petitions questioning the lawfulness of historic mosques symbolise the provoca-

THE SIMPLE EXPLANATION IS THAT  
**AGGRESSIVE HINDUTVA HAS  
NOT LOST ITS RHETORICAL  
VALUE, WHICH IS WHY THE FRINGE  
GROUPS KEEP AT IT**



tive contestations, as the objective in such cases seems to be to manufacture and sustain future conflicts. The Shahi Jama Masjid of Sambhal is a good example to illustrate this. A little known person files a petition in a local court claiming that an ancient temple was demolished to build the Shahi Jama Masjid during the time of Babar. The local court not only admits this claim as a valid legal question, but goes a step further and orders a scientific survey of the masjid for the sake of legal clarity.

This brings the ASI into the picture, as the mosque is a functional religious place of worship, and is protected as a 'monument of national importance'. The ASI then conducts an archeological examination of a monument it has been conserving as a mosque for decades and becomes a party in the case to find out the 'exact' religion of the mosque. This legal-archaeological process eventually transforms a mosque protected by the ASI as a living heritage into a politically disputed entity. In other words, a communally provocative contestation is produced around a material object, a historical monument, to divide the local community of Sambhal into Muslim defenders and Hindu petitioners. It is worth noting that the Supreme Court has barred the local courts from accepting fresh cases challenging the ownership and title of any place of worship, and from ordering ASI type surveys of such sites, at least for the time being.

The Waqf (Amendment) Bill, 2024, signifies another form of this politics. For the sake of analysis, we may call it the structural contestations. In this case, the established legal-institutional mechanism is weaponised to make the Waqf issue a structurally disputed phenomenon. The explainer, issued by the Union ministry of minority affairs in September 2024 to clarify its position on the Waqf Bill, is very relevant in this regard, establishing a direct link between the Waqf and medieval Muslim rule. It says: "In India, the history of Waqf can

be traced back to the early days of the Delhi Sultanate when Sultan Muizuddin Sam Ghaor dedicated two villages in favour of the Jama Masjid of Multan... as the Delhi Sultanate and later Islamic dynasties flourished in India, the number of Waqf properties kept increasing.... There was a case made for the abolition of Waqfs...in the late 19th century when a dispute over a Waqf property ended up in the Privy Council of London...the four British judges who heard the case described the Waqf as 'a perpetuity of the worst and the most pernicious kind' and

tive issues like the Sambhal mosque case. However, it would be wrong to think that this obvious overlapping of Hindutva-driven issues does not create internal rifts and unease among different actors and groups. Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) chief Mohan Bhagwat's recent statements are very relevant in this regard. He questioned the leadership claim of these self-declared Hindu leaders who make provocative contestations on a regular basis. It is obvious that the RSS is not interested in running multiple 'liberation' campaigns for imaginary temples, particularly in the present context when Hindutva politics needs to pay close attention to questions of governance.

Bhagwat's suggestions, however, are unacceptable to a section of Hindutva groups. In a way, they want to challenge the hegemony of the RSS as the dominant cultural-ideological force. The Akhil Bharatiya Sant Samiti (AKSS), for instance, has openly criticised Bhagwat for arguing that "religious matters should be decided by religious leaders rather than the RSS".

This is an entirely new trajectory, one that is certainly going to unfold in 2025. Two possibilities can be underlined in this regard. First, the RSS will try to re-establish its ideological dominance by evoking the old 'Hindu unity' argument. This might help its leaders emphasise the significance of long-term structural issues. Secondly, and perhaps paradoxically, Hindutva groups like AKSS could continue to intensify the temple-centric legal contestations. These campaigns have helped them carve out an independent space as the ultimate authority representing 'Hindu sentiments'. It will be interesting to see how both, the overlapping consensus and intersecting conflicts, determine the future trajectories of Hindutva politics in 2025. ■

### THE PETITIONS OVER THE LAWFULNESS OF HISTORIC MOSQUES ARE PART OF THE PROVOCATIVE CONTESTATIONS. THE GOAL, IT SEEMS, IS TO CREATE, SUSTAIN FUTURE CONFLICTS

declared Waqf to be invalid. However, the decision by the four judges was not accepted in India, and the Mussalman Waqf Validating Act of 1913 saved the Waqf.... Since then, no attempt has been made to curb Waqfs."

This explanation creates an impression that dedication of properties for charitable and religious purposes was essentially a political act, one that was even questioned by the British authorities! Hence the Waqf Bill, 2024, which proposes to nationalise the institution of Waqf, since it clearly falls in the category of community endowment.

This kind of structural contestation, no doubt, helps in sustaining provoca-

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By **NAVROZ K.  
DUBASH**

# NOW FOR A GREEN BHARAT ABHIYAAN

INCREASINGLY, THE PATHWAY TO ADDRESSING  
CLIMATE CHANGE LIES IN DOMESTIC INITIATIVES  
IN INDIA AND OTHER COUNTRIES

IN

## 2024, climate change continued its seemingly relentless march.

Once the data are in, 2024 will almost certainly be the warmest year on record, beating 2023. This is not an outlier; the 10 warmest years recorded have all occurred since 2010. Yet greenhouse gas emissions, which cause climate change, are still rising, not falling. Emissions grew by more than 1 per cent during 2023 even as scientists say they need to peak and then decline by 25 per cent to 40 per cent by 2030.

What does this actually mean for peoples' lives? Those of us who live in South Asia will almost certainly experience more frequent extreme heat events, floods and droughts, with substantial health and economic effects. Because human productivity falls when it is hotter, the International Labour Organization projects that South Asia will face labour productivity losses of 5 per cent, equivalent to losing 43 million full-time jobs, by 2030. Climate change was almost certainly a big factor in the 2022 floods in Pakistan, which submerged a third of the country's land, affected some 33 million people and directly displaced 8 million. Climate change can not only set a country back years, it can also multiply the effect of existing threats. For example, higher temperatures can be associated with higher surface ozone levels, exacerbating air pollution. In multiple ways,

climate change is making the task of building prosperity and security in India and South Asia ever harder.

This context of ever greater threat, particularly for the world's poor and most vulnerable, formed the backdrop for the annual climate negotiations, held this year in Baku, Azerbaijan. At Baku, the focus was on finance: would developed countries deliver on enhanced finance to support developing countries' transition to low-carbon futures and enable adaptation to inevitable warming? As is now typical, negotiations were fraught and came down to the wire.

The bottom line: rich countries promised to ramp up climate finance to \$300 billion a year by 2030. This seemingly represents an increase on current levels of about \$100 billion, but dig a bit deeper, and there are several reasons why this is a disappointing outcome: this is a promise to increase finance not now, but over the course of a decade; various high-level estimates place the estimated requirements more in the \$1 trillion range and above; and, perhaps most problematic, this amount includes all possible sources of funds—public, private, multilateral, bilateral and anything else that could be thought of. This is unlikely to stimulate low-carbon development or provide reassurance against climate impacts.

Baku also did not give much hope on the broader task of accelerating decarbonisation. Developed countries sought collective statements of intent to phase down fossil fuels, building on such declarations in past meetings; developing countries correctly pointed out that those most responsible for causing the problem—developed countries—should do more and, in any case,

the limited funds on offer made claims of collective action on climate change sound hollow. There is little doubt the entrenched politics of deadlock at climate negotiations breed cynicism about seriously addressing the problem. And yet, this would be an incomplete understanding of the problem and of possible ways forward.

The source of hope in climate politics and policy lies in looking beyond international negotiations. Fuelled by steep falls in the cost of renewable energy and a growing perception that these are the technologies of the future, Bloomberg estimates that investments in energy transition increased 17 per cent last year, and 27 per cent each in the two previous years. China has led the charge, but many other countries are following suit. Around the world, countries and businesses are now betting that the future of world energy is increasingly clean, and that they will gain global competitive advantage by being first movers. That clean energy can also help with issues such as air pollution and liveable cities is another motivation. This is heartening, because while addressing climate change goes beyond transitioning to clean energy alone, it is an essential part of the process.

Why has this growing convergence around clean energy not broken the negotiation deadlock, spurring a virtuous spiral of more ambitious global pledges and action? Countries are moving to low-carbon futures, just not fast enough to avoid global warming by at least 1.5 degrees Celsius and quite possibly 2°C. And the faster this change must happen, the more disruptive it is likely to be. As existing industries are disrupted, jobs will be lost in sectors like petrol car manufacturing and coal mining and will need to be replaced by new jobs. Scarce and costly capital will need to be reallocated away from other pressing development needs. People will need to be persuaded to change consumer habits around how they travel, cool their homes, and what they eat. All of these can be politically costly to governments. The potential for socially disruptive change is why countries are cautious about aggressive commitments and instead seek flexibility on the speed and extent of an energy transition.

What does this mean for India? We have considerable

unmet energy needs and, because of low current and past emission levels per person, limited responsibility for climate change. Disruption, particularly in energy, could be costly. But we are also highly vulnerable to climate change and increasingly see possible gains to the Indian economy from being first movers in clean energy.

On the international front, India's likely choice is prudence—keeping the pressure on developed countries for emissions reductions and finance, preparing for an energy transition at home while limiting international pledges. However, claims to climate leadership will, sooner or later, come with pressures for more risk-taking, and bolder international pledges.

The more interesting possibilities, and the biggest scope for creative action, lie on the domestic side. The first order of business for India is to become more climate-resilient, be-

cause some level of warming is now inevitable. India, like all countries, must make our cities and coasts more climate-resilient and plan for adaptation in sectors such as agriculture and water; city-by-city heat action plans will be a good start. This is not a trivial task. It requires local-level planning, scientific infrastructure and more effective governments at all levels.

Second, India will be well served by doubling down on our efforts to build a low-carbon economy that creates jobs. The current somewhat scattershot approach should ideally give way to a more strategic approach. We need to identify competitive opportunities with job-creating possibilities, and areas where clean energy transition serves development goals such as reducing air pollution. Key upgrades required include enhanced investment in technological R&D,

policymaking around complementary packages rather than individual policies to induce long-term changes, a regional planning approach, particularly for coal regions that may be the hardest hit, and strategic efforts to harness green capital from India and overseas.

Third, India, like most countries, does not have a government designed for the complexities of climate change. The task requires strategic ability to induce economic transformation and coordinate between ministries; the task extends well beyond the environment ministry to agriculture, water, power, coal and urban development ministries, and many

## INDIA MUST BECOME **CLIMATE-RESILIENT AND ALSO BUILD A LOW-CARBON ECONOMY THAT CAN CREATE JOBS AROUND THIS. THE GOVERNMENT MUST COORDINATE ACROSS MINISTRIES, STATES, AND LOCAL EFFORTS**



WE ARE HIGHLY VULNERABLE TO CLIMATE CHANGE AND INCREASINGLY SEE **POSSIBLE GAINS TO THE INDIAN ECONOMY** FROM BEING FIRST MOVERS IN CLEAN ENERGY

more besides. It also requires coordination across the central, state and local levels and the ability to work with communities on local adaptation and with business on energy transition. It may also require changes to India's legal framework. In brief, climate change brings enormous governance challenges.

The pathway to addressing climate change, increasingly, lies in domestic initiatives in India and other countries. This year is important. Will Trump back away from the US climate pledges, undermining the global process? Will China continue to double down on its clean energy transition, where it is undoubtedly the leader? What these countries, and India, do at home will also affect the potential for breaking, or entrenching, the global deadlock. There is scope for progress on climate change, but it runs more through countries re-envisioning their economies to be both low-carbon and climate-resilient than from a global breakthrough. ■

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By **B.V.R. SUBBU**

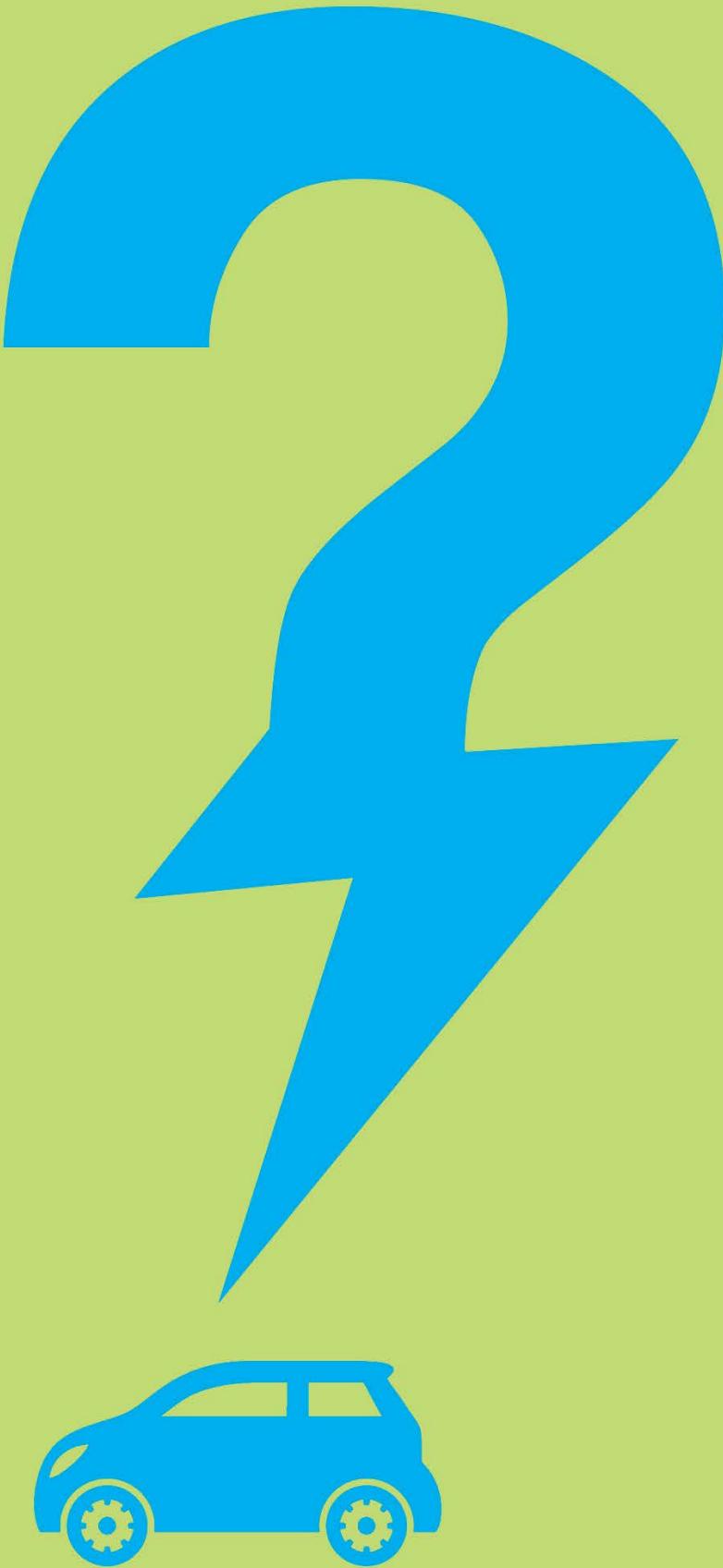
# IMPERATIVES FOR INDIA'S EV LEAP

FROM LOCALISATION TO INNOVATION... TACKLING CHARGING WOES, IMPROVING BATTERY TECH AND PROVIDING BETTER AFTER-SALES SERVICE ARE KEY TO POWER THE ELECTRIC VEHICLE REVOLUTION

AS 2024 drew to a close, there was a discernible sense of excitement among India's electric vehicle (EV) industry-watchers. By mid-December, total EV sales were up 35 per cent YoY and a whisker short of a new landmark—2 million units! Leading the charge, E2Ws (electric two-wheelers) had largely kept up their growth promises. With legacy players weighing in, and the consequent rapid growth in penetration of the large urban markets, the '1 million+' sales number became a reality. And E2Ws—including the low power products—are now estimated to account for more than one out of four scooters sold in the top 10 urban centres. E3Ws (electric three-wheelers) have had an equally impressive run, clocking a near 20 per cent rise through much of the year and rising above 600,000 units. The only relative dampener came from the high-expectation, high-visibility E4W (electric four-wheeler) segment, which is seen as stopping short of the 100,000 mark.

Quite naturally then, the focus is now on the trajectory for 2025—and what challenges the EV sector will face in its growth aspirations. Probably the most critical issue that existing consumers face, and intending consumers look for, is range anxiety and the availability/ quality of charging facilities. While manufacturers will necessarily have to put in a far greater amount of effort into getting consumers to appreciate the

CONSUMER COMPLAINTS LIKE VEHICLES STALLING IN THE MIDDLE OF TRAFFIC OR **FACING A COMPLETE SOFTWARE FADEOUT** MIGHT WELL BE DIRECTLY RELATED TO THE QUALITY OF THE CHARGING INFRA



dos and don'ts of handling EVs to better address range issues, concerns about the charging infrastructure are real. Social media is replete with reports of chargers not functioning or just not being available as shown on a map. Worse, a host of consumer complaints like vehicles stalling in the middle of traffic or facing a complete software fadeout might well be directly related to the quality of the charging infrastructure.

Even in a grid considered 'clean', hazards like surges and transients (short-duration disturbances in voltage or current) will occur, and their frequency or severity is something that cannot be modelled. Besides insulation failures in integrated circuits that can ultimately lead to total failure and even fires, transients are known to potentially cause significant software malfunctions ranging from system lock-up, memory corruption or even erroneous device resets. Despite the internationally accepted regulations for surge and transient immunity specifically codified in IEC 61000-4-5, mandated for charging infrastructure in India, there is little clarity on compliance and conformity checks. EV consumers using charging infrastructure could potentially end up taking on risks they never bargained for. This will be one major challenge the E2W industry, along with the government and charging infrastructure players, has to find solutions for as it guns for exponential growth.

For starters, charging infra players may have to be mandated to design hybrid installations that isolate even on-grid installations with in-line storage systems or provide active power filters. The other imperative would be to create an independent real-time physical quality assurance capability that would check installations periodically, but at random, and provide a health certificate. Going further, the government would be well-advised to immediately mandate only India-manufactured electronics hardware and software in EV charging infrastructure. 'Kill switches' and 'backdoors', remotely controlled from China,

sitting in our chargers—or technically speaking even EVs—could be apocalyptic for the national grid and the nation's security itself.

**A**nother consumer concern requiring consistent attention relates to maintenance anxiety—the availability, cost and quality of customer care provided. At the heart of the issue is the crying lack of appropriately qualified and practically trained technicians to handle electronic malfunctions in EVs. To meet consumer expectations, EV makers will need to think in quite the same way the legacy original equipment manufacturers

ICE, or internal combustion engine, sector has already proved to be.

The other significant determinant of future growth of the EV market could be the resale value anxiety, which in turn is directly linked to the concerns about battery replacement cost. The only capability-building that the Indian EV industry has done in the battery space relates to battery assembly—a relatively low-tech, labour-intensive operation. Imports of Advanced Chemistry Cells (ACCs), which account for almost 70 per cent of battery cost, have been the EV industry's strategy of choice. Despite India's battery demand variously estimated at between 260 GWh and 300 GWh by 2030, technology development

and address consumers' anxieties. No doubt the government has put in place financial aid schemes to enable cell technology development, but how EV makers move from a trader mindset and rise to the challenge in a matter of, say, two years will ultimately determine the scheme's success.

So how would 2025 look for EVs? Each of the concerns detailed earlier would play out differently for different product/ market segments. Efforts of the industry at localisation and a constant reconfiguring of product offerings, combined with fiscal benefits, have created a wider range of price points, thus taking the E2W revolution within the grasp of a wider, more price-sensitive consumer segment. The E2W industry focus has moved to a geographic widening of the consumer base and new tech is seen and accepted as the future all over the rural hinterland too. Simultaneously, the committed entry of the legacy Indian 2W players has given EV technology a stamp of acceptance with a wider range of consumers, and the reported imminent entry of market leader Honda could well prove to be the new inflection point. A combination of all these factors will undoubtedly help create a virtuous cycle of exponential growth. With mass-market EV motorcycles also expected to be introduced, CY '25 could well record annual sales in excess of 2.5 million units. With E3W having already proven exceptionally profitable for operators, in both the cargo and passenger segments, and efforts apace on battery swapping options, a continued volume growth of above 15 per cent seems very reasonable to expect. But it's the E4W segment that could continue to struggle. The expanding range of hybrids—with Toyota and Suzuki being joined by Honda—could continue to be the real scene-stealers. ■

### TO MEET CONSUMER EXPECTATIONS, THE INDIAN EV INDUSTRY **MUST MOVE BEYOND THE TRADER MINDSET** AND PARTICIPATE PROACTIVELY IN LOCALISATION, SPREAD OF TECHNICAL SKILLS

(OEMs) did—create authorised service centres and then enable those skills to get distributed through the mushrooming of a second and even third tier of appropriately skilled and equipped repair capabilities to handle the new vehicle tech. But both skill levels and instrumentation availability from the EV makers to the second and third tiers may well have to be mandated through something similar to a 'Right to Repair' law to completely address the consumer concerns. Such a law could have another very salutary effect—it would give an immediate boost to component localisation efforts and help the EV industry move from being dependent on Chinese component manufacturers to being self-reliant and world-class as the

and manufacturing capabilities in the area of cell chemistry and cell manufacturing appear to be confined to just one EV maker. As of mid-2024, there was only one accredited agency in India providing testing for battery cells. Even our 'highly acclaimed' technology research and educational institutions appear to have little or nil solid state and semi-solid state chemistry competencies or related manufacturing design capabilities. Both are crucial for reducing this dependence and ensuring long-term sustainable pricing from the consumers' standpoint. A relatively high degree of vertical integration of the 'energy delivery' component will also be crucial in EV makers' ability to provide competitively priced batteries

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By DINESH SINGH

# TOWARDS A KNOWLEDGE ECONOMY

THE NATIONAL EDUCATION POLICY SERVES AS A CATALYST FOR TRANSFORMING INDIA'S EDUCATION SYSTEM IN 2025, DRIVING INNOVATION, ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND SOCIETAL PROGRESS

IF

I were to name the single most important challenge that India must tackle in the coming decades, it would be the need to build a true and robust

knowledge economy. Why do I lay such emphasis on this one realm of human endeavour? Some very useful learnings can be imbibed from looking at some successful economies across the globe. My point shall be best illustrated by some specific examples and figures. A few years ago, I had looked at the earnings of the IT firm that runs Google, for one specific quarter. At that point in time, Google was about 10 years old and had a global strength of 10,000-odd employees. I also looked at the combined earnings of India's top three IT corporations, which together had an employee strength of more than 150,000. What the three corporations together had made in a whole year was less than what Google had made—all by itself—in a single quarter. The simplest explanation for this is that Google's search engine runs on a knowledge idea stemming from the corridors of undergraduate life at Stanford University. I call this knowledge in action. The Google search engine makes very practical use of elegant undergraduate-level

INDIA MUST NOT DELAY PUTTING SOME BRAIN INTO EDUCATION. IT ALREADY HAS A POWERFUL, PRACTICAL POLICY IN PLACE, WHICH RECOGNISES THE KEY ROLE OF ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN FUELLED IDEAS OF VALUE

mathematics combined with some very ingenious coding. On the other hand, our IT companies have been essentially running on brawn.

In India, our track record for the past many decades has not been very encouraging. However, I expect that 2025 shall be the harbinger of India's clear and firm movement towards a knowledge economy. Before I give

my alibis for this very optimistic forecast, it may be useful to first delve into a brief overview of why things did not work too well in the past few decades. University systems from the decade of the 1970s have been oblivious to the true meaning of their role in society. We have—for the most part—focused on blackboard-based teaching, leading to degrees that have very little relevance for the nation's well-being. However, my optimism rests on the fact that, at last, India has a powerful and very practical education policy in place that recognises the importance of the role of entrepreneurship through knowledge-based ideas. I speak of the National Education Policy 2020 (NEP) that has brought in its wake a breath of fresh air and good cheer for India's rather creaky educational firmament. It has been hailed in many parts of the world for its vision and outlook, and rightly so. The policy offers much wisdom in very clear and tangible terms, and it does not sermonise through bland philosophy. What does the NEP really have to say? If I had to sum up in one word the essence of the NEP, then unquestionably that word would have to be 'freedom'. The policy offers enormous encouragement, insight and impetus for growth, creativity and experimentation to educational institutions and associated policy organisations.

The NEP lays the greatest emphasis on undergraduate studies and rests on essentially four pillars that comprise the foundations of communication and language skills, IT skills, data skills and transdisciplinary learning. Coupled with this is a pedagogy that emphasises learning in groups through problem-oriented projects that deal with real-world issues. The NEP further emphasises that the curriculum must be based on the needs and challenges of the society and of the nation. A student is expected to find the drumbeat of her soul through this hands-on learning where she is exposed to the many drumbeats that exist in the real world. Once this drumbeat has been identified, the student shall be given freedom and mentoring to march in harmony with this drumbeat. In this process, the teacher and the blackboard are expected to recede a fair amount so that the teacher becomes a mentor, and the blackboard is largely replaced by the world around us. Over a four-year period, the student can—if she chooses—gain deeper insight into a specialised area or, if she is so motivated, gain credit by following an entrepreneurial route.

What makes me assert all of the above with



Illustration by NILANJAN DAS



so much certitude? It so happens that the essential ideas of the NEP are a near-verbatim reproduction of what had been devised and implemented at the University of Delhi during my time as its vice chancellor. The implementation and practice of our ideas resulted in undergraduates actively producing patents and research papers as well as launching startups. By the time my term as the vice chancellor ended, the functioning startups stemming from our implementation of the Four Year Undergraduate Programme had been valued at more than Rs 50 crore. One of those startups, created by three first-year un-

has been making significant progress for some time. We are now poised to witness, in the coming year, a major initiative in many institutions where I expect much knowledge-based entrepreneurship shall happen through special engineering kitchens as a part of the curriculum. I am also further emboldened to be so very hopeful that India is moving in the right direction for becoming a knowledge economy because of the results that are becoming so very forcefully evident in the Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir. Through the J&K Higher Education Council, we have been able to create a very empowered undergraduate degree programme that has been formally anointed as Design Your Degree (DYD). Incidentally, eYantra has been incorporated into the DYD initiative. This programme has now achieved stability and momentum at some of the leading universities of J&K. It has been hailed by many in India and abroad. The parliamentary standing committee on education—a few months ago—has directed the University Grants Commission to ensure its implementation in the rest of the nation. Entrepreneurship has become a natural cornerstone of this DYD programme. All this has happened through the NEP. In the coming year, I expect to see significant milestones being established by some of the universities of J&K such as the University of Jammu, the Islamic University of Science and Technology and the University of Kashmir where knowledge-based entrepreneurial ideas are beginning to show results.

My only worry is that we need to be vigilant and ensure that the spirit of the NEP remains alive and fruitful at the ground level in 2025 and beyond. I sincerely hope that the various regulatory bodies learn to step back a little and not keep issuing one diktat after another. Instead, they must encourage universities and colleges to lay stress on ensuring that the quality of our human resources is adequately trained and motivated to stay the course for the next several years. ■



## I HOPE THAT THE VARIOUS EDUCATIONAL REGULATORY BODIES LEARN TO STEP BACK A LITTLE AND NOT KEEP ISSUING ONE DIKTAT AFTER ANOTHER

dergraduates, has been valued at several million dollars.

I can see that 2025 shall lead to the sprouting and even flowering of many worthy initiatives across several parts of India in the context of heading towards a knowledge economy. For one, several of our IITs have lent their weight to this objective. At IIT Bombay, I have been closely involved in a marvellous national initiative known as eYantra. Its objective has been to engender the creation of knowledge and entrepreneurship through a hands-on approach in the areas of robotics and AI in several colleges and universities of the country. As I see it, in 2025, several of the eYantra initiatives shall see much happening in this field in the country. For instance, in Jammu and Kashmir, eYantra

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By **NARESH TREHAN**

# A ROADMAP FOR A **HEALTHIER NATION**

**THE SCALE OF OUR HEALTHCARE CHALLENGES IS IMMENSE. FOR A 'SWASTHA, VIKSIT BHARAT', INDIA MUST STRIVE TOWARDS A CREATIVE USE OF TECHNOLOGY, PREDICTIVE PRECISION MEDICINE, BIG DATA AND PUBLIC-PRIVATE PARTNERSHIPS**

The year 2025 marks an important moment in India's pursuit of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). A decade has passed since these ambitious targets were set, and our journey so far tells a story of progress and persisting challenges. We have made significant strides in reducing mortality rates and expanding health-care access. But meeting the core targets of SDG-3, which is reducing premature deaths from non-communicable diseases and ensuring universal health coverage, requires innovative solutions and renewed commitment.

The healthcare landscape we face in 2025 is more complex than ever and signals a shifting disease burden that will shape our health priorities for a 'Viksit Bharat' in 2047. Our achievements are notable—infant and maternal mortality rates have improved three- to fourfold since Independence, over 90 per cent of the population stands immunised against common diseases, and life expectancy has doubled to 70 years. However, we confront an evolving disease burden that demands immediate attention and innovative solutions. NCDs (non-communicable diseases) now cause 66 per cent of all deaths, up from 45 per cent in 2000, with diseases of the circulatory system accounting for 32 per cent of medically certified deaths. The National Family Health Survey data help understand the duality of India's nutritional challenges that have evolved beyond undernourishment to include

rising obesity and widespread micronutrient deficiencies, even in children. This trend is particularly pronounced in urban areas, where changing lifestyles and dietary patterns have accelerated the premature onset of diabetes, hypertension, cardiovascular diseases and even certain cancers in people in their 30s and 40s.

Climate change is fundamentally reshaping disease patterns across India. Disease vectors now survive in previously unaffected areas, including colder Himalayan regions, bringing malaria, dengue and Japanese encephalitis to new communities. The impact is evident in changing seasonal patterns—dengue cases, which traditionally peaked in September, now peak in November as more regions become suitable breeding grounds for longer periods. This shift in disease patterns, combined with changing patterns of virus transmission from animals to humans, creates new challenges for disease surveillance and control while raising the threat of future pandemics. By 2047, this epidemiological trajectory, combined with India's elderly population (set to hit 21 per cent by then) is projected to inflate our overall disease burden significantly.

The scale of our healthcare challenges is immense. By 2047, India will need 3.4 million physicians, a sharp increase from our current 0.7 physicians per 1,000 people. This change must be supported by an army of caregivers, including nurses and ASHAs, to ensure healthcare reaches the last mile. The infrastructure demands are equally challenging: 2.4 million additional hospital beds will be needed

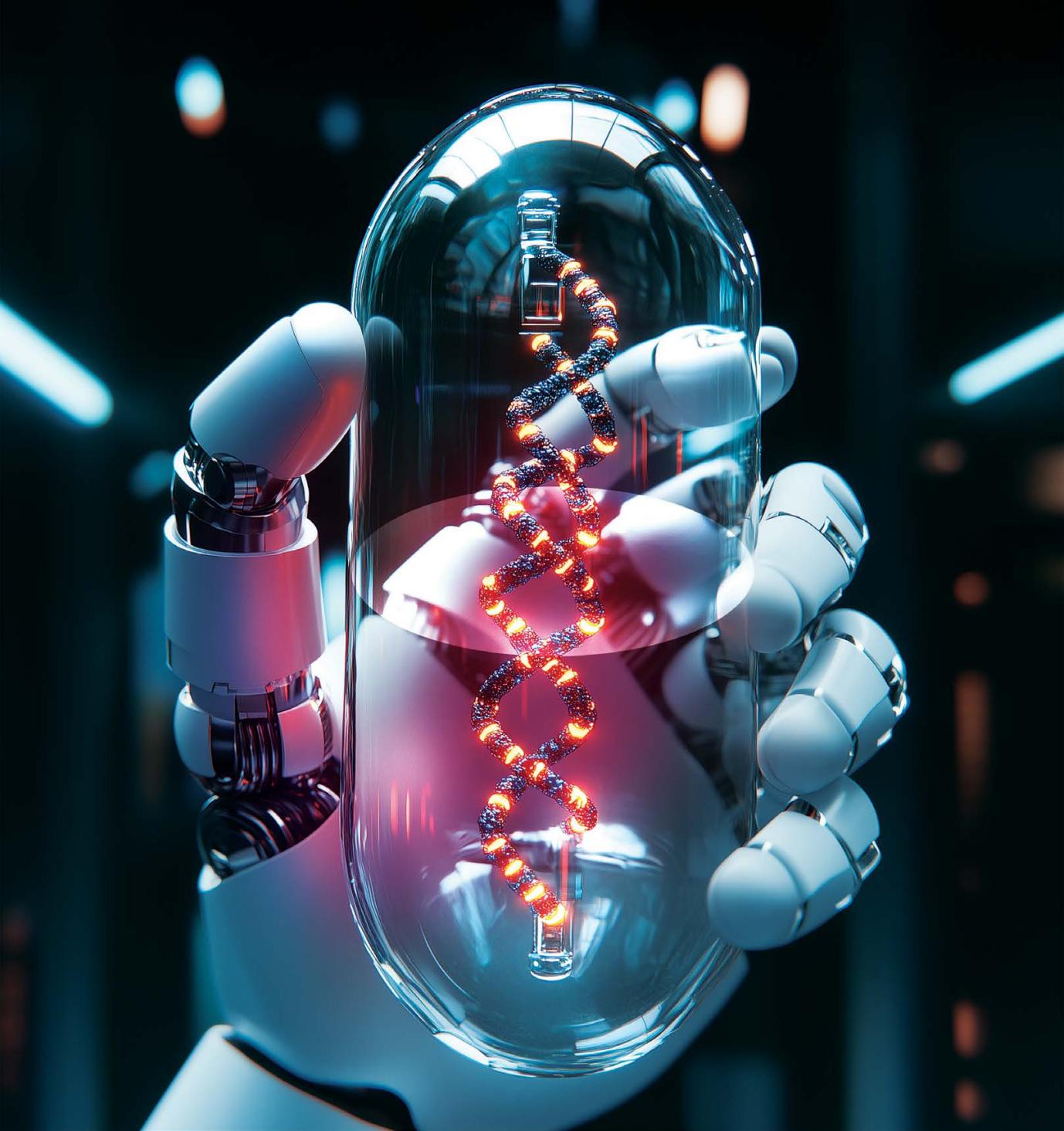


Illustration by NILANJAN DAS

HEALTHCARE ENABLERS CAN SCALE SOLUTIONS LIKE E-ICUS, DIGITAL OPERATION THEATRES **FOR STRONGER LAST-MILE DELIVERY**. THIS IS CRUCIAL IN RURAL AREAS, HOME TO 65% OF THE POPULATION BUT ONLY 40% OF THE HOSPITALS

to more than double the current bed density from 1.3 to 3 per 1,000 persons.

To actualise the vision of a 'Swastha, Viksit Bharat', India will have to be creative in how it finds solutions for these shortages, meets the demand for continuous upskilling, and brings about a crucial shift from curative to preventive healthcare approaches. The innovative use of technology, predictive precision medicine, big data analytics and public-private partnerships will act as catalysts in this transformation.

The Ayushman Bharat Digital Mission serves as the backbone for India's healthcare transformation, enabling providers to craft solutions through interoperability, unique health IDs, standardised registries and unified interfaces. Building on this foundation, disease surveillance apps, like Aarogya Setu and CoWIN, can be deployed to map non-communicable disease risks in vulnerable populations through ASHA workers. This digital infrastructure can enable big data analytics to drive prevention, which is crucial for managing India's growing disease burden. The collected data can further power AI tools to identify India-specific risk factors, fuelling research for population-specific treatments while guiding resource deployment and expansion of the care network.

### IMPROVING ACCESS

To utilise the set-up fully, healthcare enablers can scale solutions like e-ICUs and digital operation theatres for stronger last-mile delivery. This will be crucial for rural areas, home to 65 per cent of the population but only 40 per cent of the hospitals, where interconnected platforms can enhance virtual healthcare delivery. Such digital solutions can help address shortages of specialist doctors while improving access, especially in Tier 2 and 3 cities where bed ratios lag at 0.5 per 1,000 people compared to 1.5 in Tier 1 cities. The impact is already visible in programmes like tuberculosis screening, where AI-powered imaging tools overcome radiologist shortages in remote areas, accelerating diagnosis and treatment initiation. This convergence of precision medicine with AI marks the next frontier in preventive healthcare, vital to managing India's growing non-communicable disease challenge.

By combining genetic testing, phenomics (the study of an organism's phenotype, or traits, across its genome) and AI, precision medicine enables creation of comprehensive 'health patris'—personalised health forecasts that empower doctors and patients to turn family health history into a proactive tool for

disease prevention. Understanding genetic predispositions and their interaction with environmental factors allows healthcare providers to prescribe targeted interventions, including lifestyle modifications, preventive medications and screening protocols, to help patients stay disease-free for longer.

### TRANSFORMING HEALTHCARE

The impact of this approach is particularly significant for high-burden conditions like cardiovascular disease and cancer. By identifying diseases in the pre-disease stage, precision medi-

cal colleges and research centres, aligning with the country's evolving disease patterns becomes important to create a future-ready workforce in addition to meeting global standards for the number of caregivers.

Standardisation of care is also vital for scaling quality healthcare. A majority of India's hospitals are small to medium outfits and only a small percentage is accredited by the National Accreditation Board for Hospitals & Healthcare Providers (NABH). The adoption of digital health standards by smaller hospitals is an important stepping stone toward NABH-grade care. When facilities integrate standardised digital protocols and systems, they take systematic steps toward better quality benchmarks, creating a pathway to accreditation while improving patient care.

## THE CONVERGENCE OF PRECISION MEDICINE WITH AI MARKS THE NEXT FRONTIER IN PREVENTIVE HEALTHCARE, VITAL TO MANAGING INDIA'S NON-COMMUNICABLE DISEASE CHALLENGE

cine enables timely identification and intervention, preventing acute events like heart attacks and detecting cancers when they are most treatable. With cancer cases projected to rise, predictive precision medicine can offer both improved outcomes and more manageable healthcare costs. Advanced analytics can even guide population-level interventions, creating a more efficient and empathetic healthcare system.

While technology and precision medicine provide powerful tools for healthcare transformation, their impact depends on skilled professionals who can effectively use these innovations. As India expands its network of medi-

### THE PATH FORWARD

Large healthcare providers can catalyse transformation by collaborating with small and medium-sized hospitals via through structured skill enhancement workshops, protocol sharing and quality improvement initiatives. While this may not immediately lead to NABH accreditation for smaller facilities, it will create a foundation for standardised care delivery crucial to achieve the scale India needs.

While government-healthcare innovator partnerships drive systemic change, citizen engagement in preventive health is equally crucial. As Indians increasingly embrace digital health tools and preventive care, they become active participants in building a healthier nation. This shift from passive recipients to active participants in healthcare will be key to achieving Universal Health Coverage and 'Viksit Bharat', making 2025 a pivotal year in India's journey toward healthcare excellence. ■

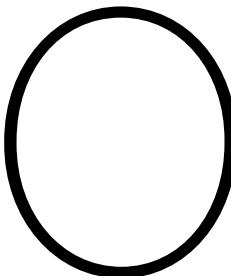
**Dr Naresh Trehan** is chairman & managing director of Medanta



By **JYOTI  
DESHPANDE**

# THE GOLDEN AGE FOR INDIAN STORYTELLING

AS THE INDIAN ENTERTAINMENT INDUSTRY EVOLVES, TECHNOLOGICAL ADVANCEMENTS, GLOBAL PARTNERSHIPS AND HYPER-LOCAL CONTENT ARE CREATING NEW OPPORTUNITIES AND CONNECTING DIVERSE NARRATIVES TO AUDIENCES WORLDWIDE



Over the past decade, the Indian entertainment industry has showcased remarkable resilience and an extraordinary ability to adapt. From my vantage point at Jio Studios, I have witnessed first-hand how rapidly evolving technologies, shifting audience behaviours and bold storytelling are reshaping how we create, deliver and consume content. The year ahead holds

the promise of more significant opportunities—and challenges—as we collectively navigate a dynamic and evolving landscape that is witnessing a fascinating interplay of scale and intimacy.

On the one hand, the bigger theatrical releases promise the revival of the film business in India. On the other hand, smaller, more independent films like *Laapataa Ladies* and *All We Imagine as Light* find audiences through a combination of film festivals, overseas markets, streaming and specifically curated theatrical releases. Balancing these forces will be the key to unlocking the full potential of our industry.

Even as streaming continues to flourish, the magic of the big screen remains irreplaceable. India's enduring love affair with cinema halls is evident. While audiences flock to theatres to share the joy of a blockbuster, they also cherish the intimacy of binge-watching a gripping series at home. We successfully brought audiences to theatres in hordes for films like *Stree 2*, *Shaitaan*, *Article 370* and *Singham Again*. Notably, the streaming success of *Laapataa Ladies* extended its theatrical run by six weeks. This duality highlights the strength of our entertainment landscape and the versatility of Indian audiences.

Again, on the one hand, large-scale mergers and acquisitions, such as

THE RESURGENCE OF BIG-TICKET THEATRICAL RELEASES IS ENCOURAGING, BUT SUSTAINING THIS MOMENTUM WILL REQUIRE A RENEWED FOCUS ON CREATING COMPELLING CONTENT THAT DRAWS AUDIENCES BACK TO THE CINEMAS IN 2025

the creation of Jio Star, are consolidating audiences and resources, enabling us to compete with global giants. On the other hand, there's a growing emphasis on hyperlocal content that speaks to the unique identities and aspirations of regional audiences.

This shift has catalysed a golden age for Indian storytelling, where regional voices are emerging as powerful drivers of change. The rise of regional

bust and growing in India, bolstered by the expanding middle class, extensive internet coverage and fresh investments in diverse content. The recently announced Disney-Reliance merger, resulting in the creation of Jio Star, exemplifies the opportunities that lie in harnessing this convergence. By bridging the worlds of broadcast and streaming, we can cater to an even broader audience, combining the reach

## COLLABORATING WITH GLOBAL STUDIOS, **PARTICIPATING IN INTERNATIONAL FESTIVALS AND EXPANDING INTO NEW MARKETS** ARE CRITICAL STRATEGIES TO ELEVATE OUR INDUSTRY'S GLOBAL FOOTPRINT

cinema, with languages like Marathi, Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam and Kannada creating waves not just domestically but also globally, speaks volumes about the diversity and richness of our cultural fabric.

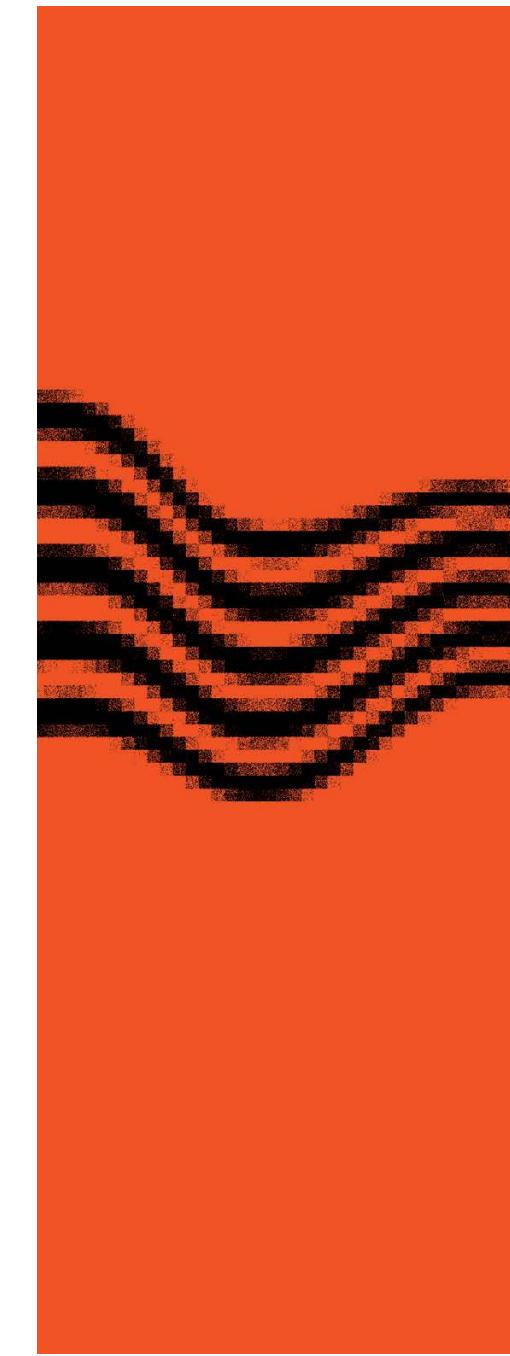
**A**t its core, entertainment is about connection. It's about telling stories that move people, stories that celebrate who we are and who we aspire to be. Indian audiences today are more discerning than ever. As I've often said, "The audience can't be tricked." They demand authenticity, originality and narratives that resonate with their lives. And a story told with authenticity finds its legs to travel worldwide.

One of the most exciting trends shaping the future of entertainment is the synergy between traditional broadcast and digital platforms. Contrary to the belief that television is a diminishing medium, it remains ro-

of traditional media with the depth and personalisation of digital platforms.

Technological advancements are at the heart of this evolution. Technologies like Generative Artificial Intelligence (Gen AI) hold immense potential to create immersive experiences, democratise content creation and enhance storytelling. It is already empowering smaller production houses and independent creators to produce high-quality content with limited resources, levelling the playing field and intensifying competition. As a studio, we have started leveraging AI at different stages of the film's lifecycle and to great effect. It's a myth that technology will take away jobs and cause mayhem. In fact, it can create a much-needed disruption in the production value chain, breaking the so-called nexus of a handful of creative minds and throwing the industry wide open for new voices and entrants.

However, as we embrace these advancements, we must remain mindful



of their purpose: technology should enhance the emotional impact of stories, not replace their soul. The heart of great storytelling lies in its ability to evoke genuine emotion and make viewers laugh, cry and reflect.

As we look to the global stage, Indian cinema is making its presence felt like never before. The success of films like *Laapataa Ladies*, which had been selected as India's official entry to the Oscars, underscores the universal appeal of our stories. Indian cinema is no



longer confined by language or geography; it's being celebrated for its ability to connect with audiences worldwide.

Collaborating with global studios, participating in international festivals and expanding into new markets are critical strategies to elevate our industry's global footprint. Indian storytelling has the power to inspire and unite audiences across the globe.

The resurgence of big-ticket theatrical releases is encouraging, but sustaining this momentum will require a

renewed focus on creating compelling content that draws audiences back to the cinemas. Additionally, we must continually raise the bar, refine our craft and deliver stories that resonate even more deeply. There's an endless appetite for stories—and our focus must remain on making them better. Together, we will shape a future where Indian entertainment continues to thrive, inspire and lead on the global stage. The year ahead will also bring challenges that require us to think

strategically and act decisively.

As I reflect on the incredible journey of Indian entertainment, I am filled with optimism for what lies ahead. We are standing at the cusp of a golden era, where creativity, technology and entrepreneurship converge to create opportunities that were once unimaginable. The world is indeed our oyster. ■

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**Jyoti Deshpande** is president, media & content business, at Reliance Industries Limited

## OBITUARY

MANMOHAN SINGH 1932-2024

# THE QUIET REFORMER

# M

**Manmohan Singh, prime minister of India between 2004 and 2014** and seen as the architect of India's economic liberalisation, passed away on December 26 at the age of 92. His journey from a modest upbringing in Gah, Punjab (now in Pakistan), to becoming India's 14th prime minister is a testa-

ment to his resilience, intellect and unwavering commitment to public service. Manmohan's legacy is etched in India's transformation from a struggling post-colonial economy to an emerging global powerhouse. Few people knew Manmohan Singh as intimately as distinguished economist **MONTEK SINGH AHLUWALIA**, who had worked with him when he was finance minister and then later when he was prime minister. In his book *Backstage: The Story Behind India's High Growth Years* published in 2020, Ahluwalia brings out key facets of Manmohan Singh's personality—with clarity and the authenticity of a confidant. Here are excerpts from Ahluwalia's book, paying tribute to Manmohan Singh's immense contribution to the nation's progress narrated with rare personal insights and candour:

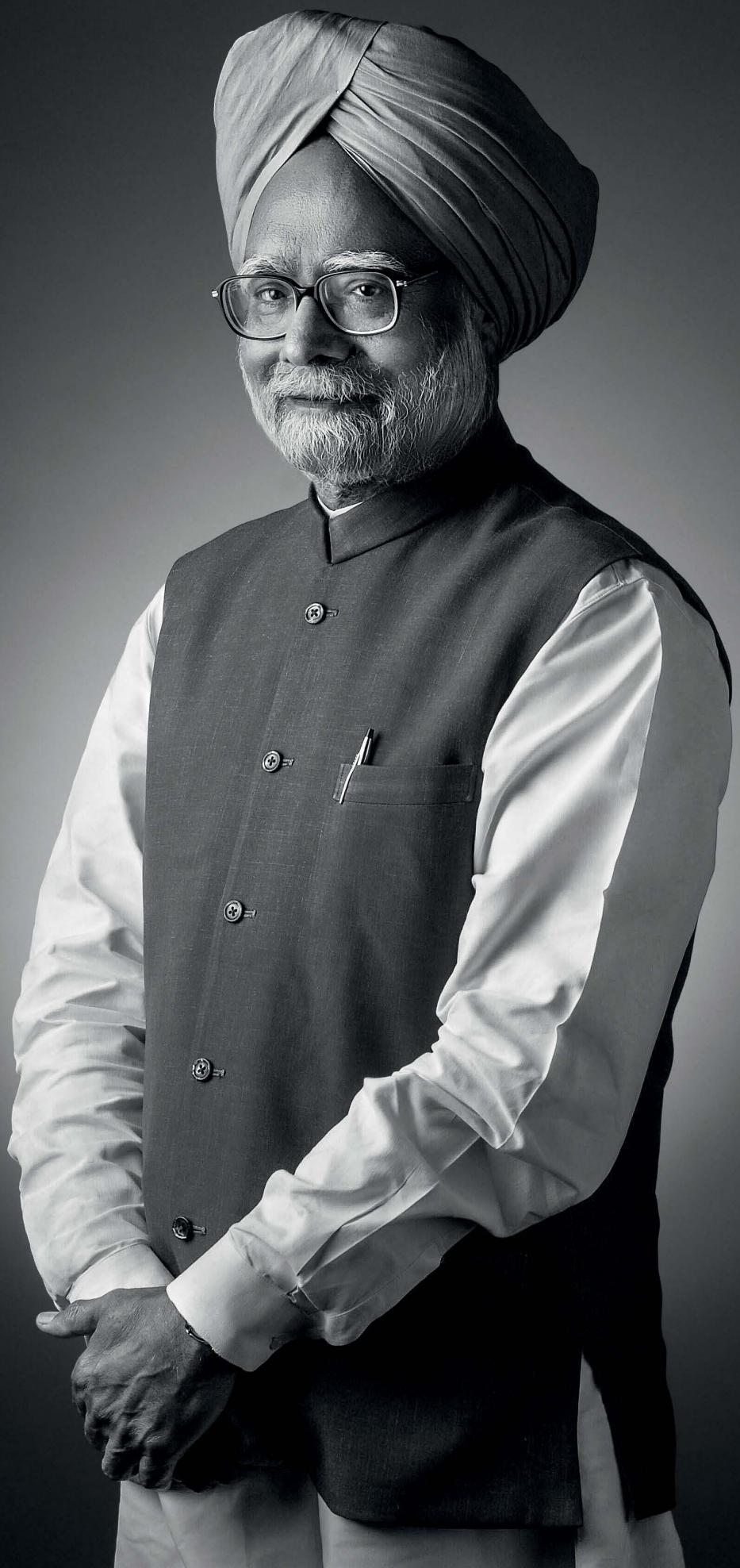
### ON MANMOHAN BEING MADE FINANCE MINISTER

I was commerce secretary when the new government was to be sworn in on June 21, 1991. I was pleasantly surprised to be called to a meeting at the PMO before the ceremony. Among those present was Dr Manmohan Singh, who had recently returned to India after spending three years at the South Commission in Geneva. He had been appointed chairman of the University Grants Commission and economic advisor to PM Chandra Shekhar. The PM designate P.V. Narasimha Rao had called us to discuss what he should say in his first broadcast to the nation, scheduled for the next day. With the economic crisis still raging, he had to give some indication of how it would be addressed.

HINDUSTAN TIMES



**A LASTING BOND** Economist Montek Singh Ahluwalia with former prime minister Manmohan Singh



In his opening remarks, Rao made it plain that the government would have to take difficult decisions and come up with innovative solutions. ‘We must get rid of the cobwebs in our mind,’ he said. Rao ended the meeting by saying, ‘Manmohan, you know what needs to be done. Why don’t you work on this in your office in North Block and send me a draft later in the day about what I should say on TV?’ That’s when I first realised Manmohan Singh would be the new finance minister! I had known him for over 15 years by then. Isher and I had even taken our children to stay with his family in Mumbai when he was RBI governor. He and his wife Gursharan Kaur had gone out of their way to make the stay memorable for our boys. PM Rao could not have made a better choice of finance minister. Man-

process was adopted at the insistence of PM Rao. Dr Singh also told me that he had quickly prepared a handwritten note outlining the two-step process and obtained the PM’s signature of approval. The decision was conveyed to RBI governor S. Venkitaraman and deputy governor C. Rangarajan, who was actually the official in charge of exchange rate management. They were, of course, aware of the impending devaluation and supported the idea. The procedure was informally codenamed ‘Hop, Skip and Jump’ so they could refer to it on the telephone while maintaining secrecy.

The first devaluation provoked strong criticism from many quarters. When Dr Manmohan Singh briefed President R. Venkataraman on the need for devaluation, the President was not at all happy. The President also conveyed



## **Dr Singh told me Rao had been frank, telling him, “Manmohan, do what is needed.... If the reforms succeed, I will claim my share of the credit. If they fail, you will be blamed”**

mohan Singh was widely respected in financial circles internationally as well as at home. He knew he had to untie the multiple knots that bound the economy, and he knew better than most about how the system functioned and which critical levers to pull.

### **THE DEVALUATION ‘HOP, SKIP AND JUMP’**

The first step in responding to the economic crisis was the announcement on July 1, 1991 that the rupee was devalued by 9 per cent. As commerce secretary, I was not in the loop about the decision. But I had no doubt it was the right step, though 9 per cent seemed too little. Two days later, a second devaluation took the cumulative depreciation to about 19 per cent—a much more reasonable adjustment to deal with the BOP [balance of payments] crisis. Dr Manmohan Singh later told me that the two-step

his unhappiness to the PM, who was sufficiently alarmed that he asked the finance minister to hold back the second devaluation! As it happened, Manmohan Singh had already instructed the RBI to take the second step before markets opened on July 3. When he called Rangarajan again at the PM’s request to check whether it was possible to hold back the second step, Rangarajan said, in the code they had agreed, ‘But I have already jumped.’

**For Manmohan,  
religion is a personal  
matter, but...behind  
that gentle exterior  
is a Sikh who derives  
immense strength  
from the Gurbani**

### **CHAMPION OF ECONOMIC GROWTH**

Both Isher and I went to see the finance minister deliver the Budget speech live in the House. He concluded on a distinctly upbeat note, which has been much quoted: ‘As Victor Hugo once said, ‘No power on earth can stop an idea whose time has come.’ I suggest to this august House that the emergence of India as a major economic power in the world happens to be one such idea. Let the whole world hear it loud and clear. India is now wide awake. We shall prevail. We shall overcome.’

Manmohan Singh’s upbeat conclusion has turned out to be remarkably prescient. Exactly 10 years later, in 2001, a Goldman Sachs research team led by Jim O’Neill identified India as one of the BRIC countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China) likely to be the main source of global growth in future. (The acronym was later expanded to BRICS with the addition of South Africa.) In the years that followed, Russia and Brazil wobbled quite a bit. China, after growing at over 10 per cent for 30 years, has now slowed down as expected. India’s overall growth has varied,



SHARAD SAXENA

## Trade liberalisation, the shift to a flexible exchange rate and reforms in the financial sector occurred because of Manmohan Singh's expertise and wisdom

but it has remained relatively robust, averaging 7.5 per cent per year over the past 15 years.

During those strenuous years as finance minister, his wife Gursharan Kaur confided to Isher that in the mornings, when Manmohan was getting ready for work, he would often hum his favourite *shabad* (hymn) from the tenth guru: *Deh shiva bar mohe ihe, shubh karman te kabhoon na taroon; na daroon ari se jab jaye ladoon, nishchay kar apani jeet karoон* (Grant me this boon Oh God, from Thy Greatness. May I never refrain from righteous acts. May I fight without fear all foes in life's battle, with confidence and determination, claiming the victory!) For Manmohan Singh, his reli-

gion is an intensely personal matter. But Isher, who has observed him closely and enjoys singing the Gurbani herself, tells me that behind that gentle exterior is a Sikh who derives tremendous strength from the Gurbani.

### CREDIT FOR THE REFORMS

It is natural to ask how the credit for the reforms should be apportioned between Narasimha Rao and Manmohan Singh. The answer is not easy. Rao deserves full credit for choosing Manmohan Singh because of his acknowledged expertise to manage the economy and backing him throughout. Without that, there would have been no reforms. Rao also recognised that changes were necessary if India were to realise her full potential. Unlike most senior Congress politicians who were locked into old mindsets, he was pragmatic and willing to change. He was convinced of the need for reducing controls over private sector investment decisions and he led this process as minister for industry. However, I do not think he realised the importance of the full gamut of change needed to unleash the economy's potential. Trade liber-

**Manmohan's upbeat conclusion in 1991 was prescient. Exactly 10 years later, Goldman Sachs identified India as one of the drivers of global growth**

### A WINNING COMBINATION

Manmohan Singh with former PM P.V. Narasimha Rao, Mar. 1996

alisation, the shift to a flexible exchange rate and reforms in the financial sector occurred largely because of Manmohan Singh's expertise and wisdom. He knew the interdependence of these reforms and orchestrated them skillfully. Dr Singh once told me that Rao had been very frank, telling him, 'Manmohan, go ahead and do what is needed and make a case for reforms both within the party and to the public. If the reforms succeed, I will claim my share of the credit. If they fail, you will be blamed.'

A few years after stepping down as PM, Rao was speaking at a book release function in New Delhi, and he was asked to comment on the relationship between a PM and a finance minister. He said the finance minister is in charge of designing and implementing economic policy, but he can be effective only with the backing of the PM. 'Without the prime minister's backing, the finance minister would be a zero,' he said. 'It is the prime minister's backing that puts a one before the zero, making it a 10.' It was neatly put. I had the distinct feeling that Rao had no desire to be recognised as the 'architect of the reforms' in the sense of formulating the details, certifying their technical soundness and publicly defending their need. Dr Singh did all that with great aplomb, which made him the true architect of the reforms. But none of this would have happened if Rao had not backed Dr Singh and that is what Rao wanted acknowledged. It is an acknowledgement Rao fully deserves.

## HIS PRIME MINISTERIAL RECORD

I could not help being saddened at the way the public mood turned negative towards the end of Manmohan Singh's second term. He had served for 10 years as PM: the longest continuous period anyone had held that position since Jawaharlal Nehru. The performance of his government in the first seven of its 10 years was outstanding. The economy clocked an average growth of 8.4 per cent in this period, the fastest growth rate ever. It was on his watch as PM that India moved from being a low-income developing country to the lower range of middle-income countries and came to be recognised as one of the fastest-growing emerging market economies in the world. India's private sector came to be perceived as a potentially strong engine of growth capable of developing a global footprint.

It was in his term that the absolute number of the poor in India declined and 138 million people were pulled out of poverty. Primary school enrolment became near-universal, though much more needed to be done to improve the quality of education. Life expectancy improved and India was declared polio-free in 2014—in earlier years, the country regularly had about 100,000 polio cases. And he succeeded in bringing an end to the nuclear apartheid that had excluded India from the privileges enjoyed by the other countries in the NSG [Nuclear Suppliers Group].

## THE HISTORIC NUCLEAR DEAL

The real importance of the Indo-US nuclear deal which was signed in 2008 was that it paved the way for lifting a number of import restrictions to trade in nuclear materials like uranium fuel for our reactors that were in short supply and also opened the door to a much wider range of cooperation in defence from the US. Manmohan Singh's quiet leadership was the critical driving force that made the nuclear agreement



### A BIG DEAL

Former US President George W. Bush with PM Manmohan Singh in New Delhi, Mar. 2006

KALYAN CHAKARAVORTY

**At the White House, Bush paid Manmohan a charming compliment: “I cannot think of anyone else I would rather meet at a time of crisis. You have a calming effect on people”**

a success. He put together a team of key players and got them to cooperate and be part of the consensus that evolved.

Leading from the front was particularly important because many in the Congress party were ambivalent about the deal. They worried about the political consequences of seeming to get too close to the US, because they feared loss of support from the Left and were also concerned that closeness to the US would alienate Muslim voters. At critical points, the PM had to mobilise political support from outside the party, such as from Dr A.P.J. Abdul Kalam who spoke to Mulayam Singh of the Samajwadi Party to support the

government. The PM was able to navigate the choppy political waters with skill and patience and keep his party on board. He certainly could not have achieved this without the support of Sonia Gandhi, who was fully aware of the party's ambivalence.

The PM's excellent personal rapport with President George W. Bush also helped. I saw a glimpse of Bush's personal regard for Dr Singh when he was in Washington DC on a working visit in September 2008. The Troubled Asset Relief Program (TARP), a key US Treasury initiative to deal with the financial crisis, was being piloted through a reluctant US Congress. President Bush had invited the PM and a few members of his delegation to a small working lunch at the White House. Manmohan began by thanking the president for meeting us at a time when he was greatly preoccupied by the efforts to persuade Congress to approve TARP. Bush paid him a charming compliment: ‘Mr Prime Minister, I cannot think of anyone else I would rather meet at a time of crisis. You have a very calming effect on people!’ I thought it was a very perceptive remark.

**For Manmohan, leading from the front was important because many in the Congress were ambivalent about the nuclear deal**

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HEMANT CHAWLA

**HERALDING THE UPA ERA**

Manmohan Singh with Congress president Sonia Gandhi after the declaration of the Lok Sabha poll results, May 19, 2004

**During his 10 years as PM, 138 million people were pulled out of poverty. Primary school enrolment shot up, life expectancy improved and India was declared polio-free**

**WELCOMING CRITICISM**

In 2012, an array of superstar guests, including cabinet ministers, bankers, industrialists, senior editors, economists, lawyers and civil servants had gathered in a conference room in New Delhi's Vigyan Bhavan. The occasion was the launch of a second edition of a festschrift for Dr Manmohan Singh titled *India's Economic Reforms and Development: Essays for Manmohan Singh*, edited by Isher and Ian Little (his thesis advisor at Oxford). A distinguished panel including Raghuram Rajan from the Chicago School of Business, was slated to discuss the challenges of economic reforms in India. PM Manmohan Singh was the chief guest. The mood was sombre. Economic growth had slowed down to 5.8 per cent in the last quarter of 2011-12 and inflation was high. Regulatory delays were holding up the implementation of large projects. The Supreme Court had cancelled the 2G licences barely two months earlier and a draft of the CAG's

report on coal block allocation had just leaked to the press.

Isher initiated the discussion by flagging the slowdown and highlighting the need for corrective action. Raghuram Rajan was the star performer. He began by saying that India's economic reforms had achieved a great deal, but things were going wrong. Growth was slowing down, but the politicians, instead of responding with more reforms, were trying to buy popularity by increasing subsidies and transfers. He warned against the 'resource raj', which allowed businessmen to use political connections to get access

**Manmohan Singh never bragged about his achievements. He genuinely believed it was best to let the results speak for themselves**

to natural resources. It says something about Manmohan Singh that despite the very critical stance of Raghuram Rajan's presentation, he was appointed four months later as chief economic advisor in the Ministry of Finance. Isher pointed out to me that by doing so, Dr Singh was living up to the *doha* (verse) from Sant Kabir which says, *Nindak niyare rakhiye, aangan kuti chawai, Bin pani, sabun bina, nirmal kare subhai* (Keep your critic close to you; give him shelter in your courtyard, without soap and water, he will cleanse your character).

**HUMILITY PERSONIFIED**

Manmohan Singh never bragged about his achievements. He genuinely believed it was best to let the results speak for themselves. But because neither he, nor his party, projected these achievements, they never formed part of the political discourse. I saw this for myself in 2013, when the Congress seemed unable or unwilling to claim credit for a decline in poverty in India, which was being widely acclaimed as a major achievement in the rest of the world.

Public memory is short and it was no surprise that towards the end of UPA 2, the achievements of the first seven years were forgotten and the narrative was dominated by the economic slowdown, a sense of paralysis in decision-making and the continuously repeated charges of corruption. At his last press conference, Manmohan Singh was asked what he thought about his tenure. With characteristic modesty, he said he had done the best he could: 'History will judge me more kindly than the press does today.' I have no doubt he will be proven right. However, I reminded him that in saying so, he was quoting Winston Churchill. But Churchill had gone on to explain that history would judge him more kindly because he intended to write it himself! I have often urged Dr Manmohan Singh to write his memoirs but had no such luck. ■

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**Excerpts from Backstage: The Story Behind India's High Growth Years by Montek Singh Ahluwalia have been reproduced courtesy Rupa Publications, India**

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# LEISURE

[ BOOKS ]

## THE ROAD LESS TRAVELED

**William Dalrymple** on *The Golden Road* and where he's headed next, in literature and life...

# U

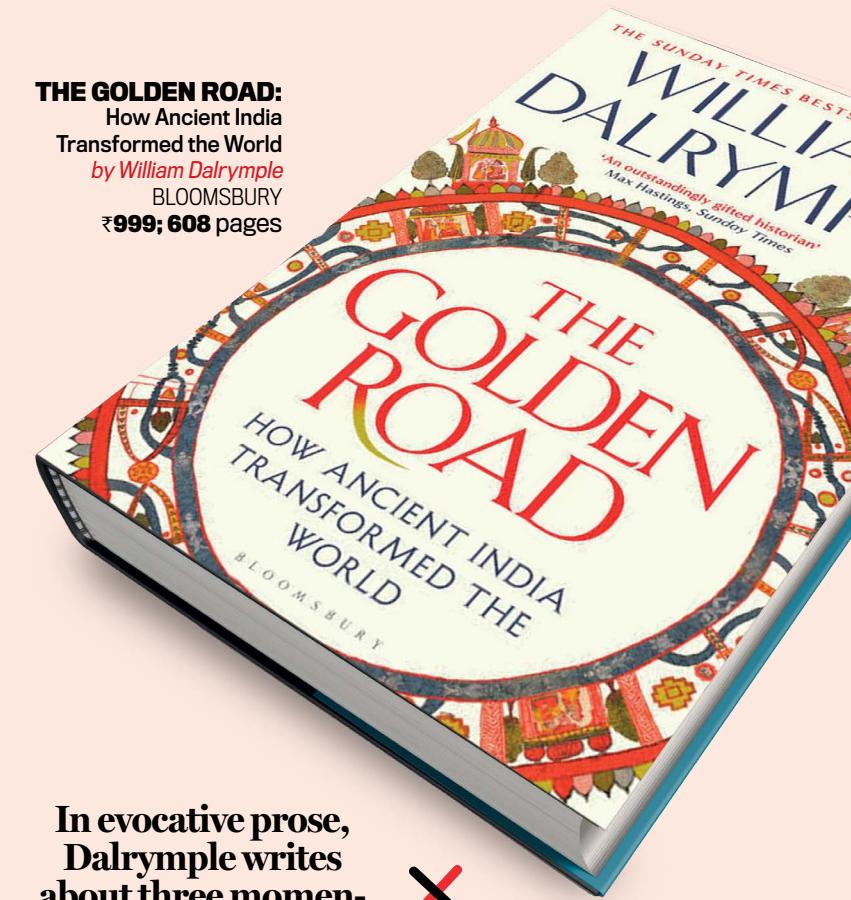
Until 1877, there was nothing known as the Silk Road, even though the ancient trade route linking East and West over 6,400 kms certainly existed. And, until 2024, the Golden Road didn't feature in any vocabulary. But now, thanks to celebrated historian and author William Dalrymple's latest book titled *The Golden Road*, we have a name for the route that resulted in the diffusion of religion, culture, trade and science from India to a wide swathe of the world—China, Southeast Asia, West and Central Asia and on to Europe—between 250 BCE to 1200 CE. On a “slightly dystopian Delhi winter evening” (his description!) Dalrymple tells us why calling it the Golden Road seemed so apt, “It’s all about gold: Roman gold coming in from the West, and then the pivot Eastwards to Suvarnabhumi, the Lands of Gold. It also sounds wonderfully resonant...like an idea that has always been there.”

*The Golden Road* (*TGR*) takes his considerable fan following in a new direction. Dalrymple spent 20 years writing The Company Quartet, his four-volume deep dive into the rise and fall of the East India Company. Even if finishing the quartet wasn't reason enough, the passing of his close collaborator, Persian translator and polymath Bruce Wannell four months after *Anarchy* was released, sealed it tragically. Which is perhaps why, though his podcast ‘Empire’ still delved into the subject, he was able to move on as a writer and go back to what he calls “his original love”, which was always ancient history.

In *TGR*, taking the enlightened

## THE GOLDEN ROAD:

How Ancient India  
Transformed the World  
by William Dalrymple  
BLOOMSBURY  
₹999; 608 pages



**In evocative prose,  
Dalrymple writes  
about three momen-  
tous manifestations of  
India's soft power**



middle path between bland Marxist history and that of the revivalist right, Dalrymple is definitive in identifying and essaying in evocative prose three momentous manifestations of India's soft power—the diffusion of Buddhism, Hinduism and scientific knowledge. His research revealed that, given India's unique position as a maritime trading power radiating east and west, it wasn't a military that propelled this pollination. “In almost all periods of history, most ideas travel with armies. But on the Golden Road, they all travelled with traders and missionaries,” he points out.

Dalrymple marvels that there aren't too many other books on these lines. “There's lots of very strong micro-scholarship. What this book does is pull all the available material together. Astonishingly, I don't think that there's been a book like this since A.L. Basham's *The Wonder that was India* in 1954,” he says. It was

a chance trip to the Ajanta Caves in 2015 that kindled the idea. In caves 9 and 10, which are about 600 years older than all the others from 550 CE, Dalrymple discovered some extraordinary frescoes which he'd never seen before. “It turns out that they're the oldest Buddhist frescoes in the world! At that point, I was aware that there was a whole world in the story of early Buddhism,” he shares.

Uncharacteristically, he hasn't started his next book. Coming off four months on the road with a global book tour and off for a holiday in Vietnam that he's looking forward to, Dalrymple's still considering what he plans to do next. He's signed up with Bloomsbury for four more titles. “The idea was to write on the opium wars. But I so enjoyed Amitav Ghosh's trilogy and two other brilliant books on the subject (Stephen Platt's *Imperial Twilight* and Julia Lovell's *The Opium War*) that I'm



uncertain whether I've got anything more to add," he muses. Dalrymple tantalises by toying with the idea of a family memoir that involves his extraordinary Franco-Bengali relations. And another good story he's earmarked. "It's a sort of White Mughal set in the early Ottoman Empire about an English aristocrat who bought himself into the Ottoman system, took on Oliver Cromwell's Company in the Mediterranean successfully, but was later captured and executed at the Tower of London," says the historian, confessing, "I love when you can find tight little personal stories that feel as exciting as fiction."

The author, who will turn 60 in 2025, believes these books should keep him busy for the next 20 years. And be it writing, organising the Jaipur Literature Festival, doing book tours or travelling, he wouldn't change much about his life. "If I was to win the lottery tomorrow, I might buy a nice house somewhere in the sun, but I don't think I'd change my modus operandi at all. I already do what I love, what gives me most pleasure and satisfaction," he smiles. ■

**-Priya Pathiyam**



History Books 2024

# Past Perfect

**T.C.A. Raghavan shares his pick of the best history reads of the year gone by**

**It** was an excellent year for readable history books.

I admired the sweep of Manu Pillai's *Gods, Guns and Missionaries* (Penguin). Looking at its voluminous footnotes gives a sense of how a popular historian can base himself on the latest academic work, do primary research and write a compelling narrative.

I enjoyed A.R. Venkatachalapathy's *Swadeshi Steam* (Penguin), which made the story of a steamship company into a gripping drama of nationalism vs colonialism. It demonstrates that economic history need not be dull but can be a page turner in the hands of a skilled historian.

I was rivetted by

the history of a murder mystery in Karachi in 1970-71. *Society Girl* by Saba Imtiaz and Tooba Masood-Khan (Roli). This is a deep dive into the extant written and oral archive to investigate how a suicide became a murder case because of the scandal arising from an adultery angle. Illicit sex in high society makes news and the power of popular perception impacts the police investigation. Probing the 'murder' becomes almost a social history of Pakistan with the public mesmerised by this story of sex and homicide even as the country hurtles towards its disastrous breakup in December 1971.

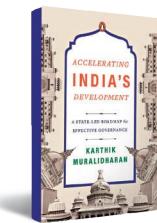
The year 2024 was also a great one for historical biography in India.

I greatly liked Camille Bulcke: *The Jesuit Exponent of Ramkatha*, the biography of the Jesuit priest and Hindi scholar by Ravi Dutt Bajpai and Swati Parashar (Cambridge University Press).

Avinash Paliwal's *India's Near East* (Penguin) is situated at the intersection of diplomatic history and India's domestic politics, and this exploration of our more recent history had me engaged. To me it not just underlines the fragility of our eastern frontiers but also how much more work needs to be done to advance our understanding of the region.

In addition to these, I wait eagerly for Anirudh Kanisetti's forthcoming book on the Cholas (*Jugernaut*).

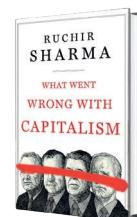
## ECONOMICS BOOKS 2024



**ACCELERATING INDIA'S DEVELOPMENT**  
A State-Led Roadmap for Effective Governance  
*By Kartik Muralidharan*  
PENGUIN VIKING  
₹1,299; 382 pages

**W**ith 20 years of experience in teaching and research on policymaking and governance, the author delves deep into key sectors like education, health, public safety and the justice system to offer tangible ideas that can improve the functioning of the Indian state. While it is rooted in economics, it includes insights and perspectives from a range of disciplines like politics, sociology, psychology and management. Written with a general reader in mind, it is easy to comprehend and relate to.

**-M.G. Arun**



**WHAT WENT WRONG WITH CAPITALISM**  
*By Ruchir Sharma*  
ALLEN LANE  
₹999; 384 pages

**D**on't worry, the celebrity investment banker and columnist Ruchir Sharma isn't giving up on capitalism—he's just ticked off with governments tampering with the economy, particularly in the form of low interest rates, 'cheap money' and the 'socialisation of risk'. He would like to see less tinkering and wishes governments would stop treating the economy like a machine and more like 'a complex organism' or a 'natural ecosystem'.



# A Wealth of SCHOLARSHIP

For art historian **Aman Nath**, 2024 was a great year for art books, demonstrating the range of India's cultural wealth



## THE CHANDAYAN

*Translated by Richard J. Cohen; with essays by Naman P. Ahuja, Vivek Gupta & Qamar Adamjee*

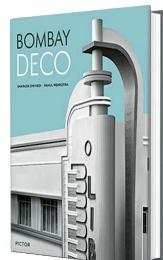
MARG ₹4,500; 430 pages

**T**he *Chandayan*, a 14th century Sufi romance composed in Awadhi, is the most sumptuous offering of bound pages in 2024, both in content—the visuals and text—as well as the quality of production. The continuing ‘*ishq* between languages, cultures, and people’ that Marg’s general editor Naman P. Ahuja begins his lead essay with, continues with other scholars. This winter, *rasikas* won’t need to sit by the fireplace and warm their bodies and souls. The poet Da’ud’s observations and nuances, so well translated by Richard J. Cohen and accompanied by 530 illustrations from the Sultanate period, shall do it all. There are brilliant, multi-layered essays by Qamar Adamjee, who quotes Salman Rushdie, in ‘Wonder Tales’ on the ‘truth’ which gives longevity to such tales: ‘We find resources within ourselves we did not know we possessed, and so we rise to the challenge’. Vivek Gupta’s brilliance, entitled ‘Inscribing Orality,’ also merits a read: ‘A Hinduki song in Turki Script.’

**B**ombay Deco by Sharada Dwivedi and Rahul Mehrotra, and published by Pictor, is a jewel of a book. It comes after UNESCO’s recognition of Bombay’s interpretation of the French movement *les Arts Décoratif*, better known as Art Deco. This revised new version of the book is fascinating for

me as the well-built Marine Drive, Oval and other buildings I saw as a child, grow beyond the transitory, inch-deep Indian decorative whims and merge officially

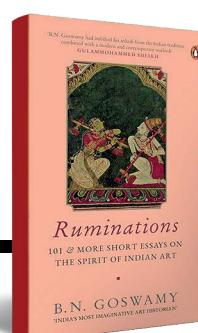
with the international movement of the 1930s-1950s to become our living Art Deco metromuseum of pride. Long live our urban conservation movements.



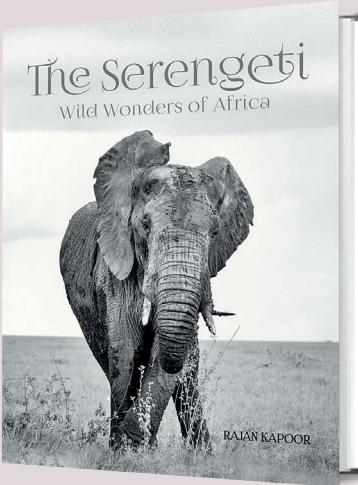
## BOMBAY DECO

*By Sharada Dwivedi and Rahul Mehrotra*  
PICTOR  
₹3,995; 200 pages

**R**uminations, B.N. Goswamy’s posthumous book, is a classic because it mirrors him alive and alert, still awakening our senses, almost with a tap on our heads. If we had been with him in the same situation or admiring the same piece of art, would we have observed, reacted and shared the experience? The book is a great learning tool to help open the third eye of serious connoisseurs.

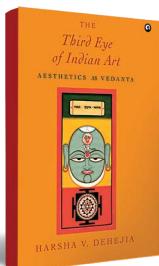


**RUMINATIONS**  
101 & More Short Essays on the Spirit of Indian Art  
*by B.N. Goswamy*  
PENGUIN/ALLEN LANE  
₹1,299; 568 pages



**THE SERENGETI:**  
Wild Wonders of Africa  
*By Rajan Kapoor*  
NIYOGI BOOKS  
₹4,500; 260 pages

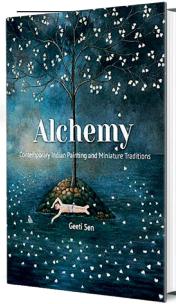
**T**he Serengeti: Wild Wonders of Africa is a pictorial journey into some of the earth's most iconic and untamed landscapes. Here we witness the great dance of survival between predator and prey play out across vast, undulating plains. Little wonder that the word 'Siringit' in the language of the Maasai refers to 'a place where the land runs forever.' One couldn't imagine a better place on earth for the annual spectacle that is the Great Migration. I like the book because, without travelling there, it lets you experience a world of wonder in which every link is essential in the circle of life.



**THE THIRD EYE OF INDIAN ART**  
Aesthetics as Vedanta  
*by Harsha V. Dehejia*  
ALEPH  
₹499; 240 pages

**H**arsha V. Dehejia's *The Third Eye of Indian Art*, published by Aleph, manifests the wisdom of linking the created with the Creator. What two Indian eyes see, the third one can perceive far beyond. While this elixir of a book seems like a small peg, but being the distillation of several Vedantic wisdoms, it is more of a vodka shot! Perhaps our Indic-doctor of medicine in Canada now plays more with the powers beyond life. This gives him the strength and

**ALCHEMY**  
Contemporary Indian Painting and Miniature Traditions  
*By Geeti Sen*  
MAPIN ₹1,500;  
148 pages



Art Books 2024

**A**lchemy, Geeti Sen's unusual book published by Mapin, undersells itself at first glance because it seems like an exhibition catalogue. But just as well, because it makes up with the author's *refinement* in sifting out the irrelevant to make precise interconnections between miniature paintings and the five protagonists she chooses. While Abanindranath Tagore, who emerged from the tail end of the 19th century, kept his painting format small, Manjit Bawa, Waswo X. Waswo with Rakesh Vijayvargiya, and Nilima Sheikh, expanded the miniatures beyond their earlier hand-held scope as manuscript illustrations.



**JAL MAHAL**  
Revival of a Pleasure Palace  
*By Navrattan Kothari, Rajeev Lunkad & Pramod Kumar K.G.*  
ROLI BOOKS  
₹2,995; 224 pages



**ICONIC**  
Masterpieces of Indian Modern Art, Edition 4  
*Edited by Kishore Singh*  
DAG ₹8,000;  
436 pages

**J**al Mahal, authored by patron Navrattan Kothari, architect Rajeev Lunkad and the cultural advisor Pramod Kumar K.G., showcases a charmed 'listed' monument of Jaipur now made better than it ever was! This was built to please the Udaipur princess whom the founder of Jaipur had married, and it post-dates the Rani Sisodia Garden which didn't quite have the expanse to evoke the Jag Mandir on the Pichola Lake of Udaipur.

**I**conic Masterpieces of Indian Modern Art, Edition 4, published by DAG, could thump a billiard table with its 3.5 kg heirloom manufacture. It is a part of the richly curated volumes that celebrate the evolving legacy of Indian art through the centuries. By bridging the pre-modern and modern eras, this highlights the seamless continuity in India's artistic narrative.

humility to own up to the intuitive inheritance of his genes and 'temper *jnana* [knowledge] with *bhakti* [devotion]', hoping that the third eye opens to become a trinity: *satyam, sundaram, samaranam*—truth, beauty, remembrance. This quiet little whisper of a book is worth its wisdom in gold.

2025



**T**wo great photo-books by the unrivalled naturalist Rajesh Bedi are in the offing for early 2025. One is *City of Shiva: Varanasi*, which is simultaneously asleep and awake, and the other: *Indian Elephant: The Divine Mystery*, on the adorable, lumbering, pachyderm made playful or monolithic like Pirandello's animal. Both will surely delight connoisseurs.



# STRANGER

**Geeta Doctor's** favourite fiction reads

**I**t's been my long-held conviction that Goa is a flamingo-land filled with pink designer birds standing on stilts dipping their beaks into the fertile mulch of its Portuguese mediated past. It was mostly in the spirit of enquiry that I picked up on the trail of Maddie/Madhur Chopra fleeing a fashion designer, copywriter lifestyle in a Delhi hit by the plague of Covid-19. Maddie descends on Goa in full throttle on a scooter with the peripatetic ambition of being a vlogger, targeting the natives. At first, it's mostly encounters of the feni kind. It's when the melancholy strains of fado, the deep dark side of the Goan experience, kick in, that Maddie has to transform her vlog-hood days into a whole new direction. Aside from sundry tips on how to avoid being electronically violated in the vlog world, there are some delightful illustrations of Maddie growing her wings in Goa-land.



**GOAGR@M**  
Misadventures  
of an Influencer  
*By Bina Nayak*  
HARPERCOLLINS  
₹399; 272 pages



**THE SOLITUDE  
OF A SHADOW**  
*By Devibharathi*  
(Translated from  
the Tamil by  
N. Kalyan Raman)  
HARPER PERENNIAL  
₹399; 208 pages

In

In this extraordinarily taut and multi-linear portrait of the lives of ordinary people in a small town in interior Tamil Nadu, the author plays the devil's advocate. It's not as much the banality of evil that Devibharathi, a former government employee, literary editor, and political activist on caste issues, foregrounds, but the anatomy of power. It begins with a rape of a young woman,

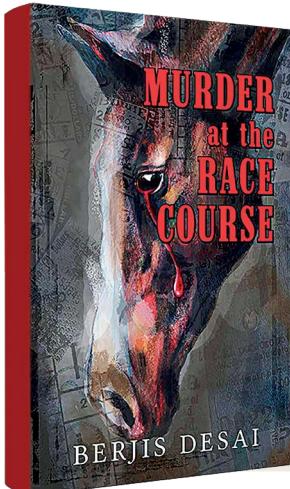
Sharada, the sister of the narrator, by the owner of a loan shop. The boy returns with a sickle. The man laughs. Tells him not to behave like a film hero. Sharada's mother consoles: "It's nothing. You will be alright." Women are as complicit as the men.

The action then jumps 30 years. The boy returns as a clerk in a school where the man known now as Karunakaran

is a patron famous in the town for his generosity. The clerk is co-opted into Karunakaran's family. He becomes Karunakaran's shadow, even as his young and nubile daughter, Sulo falls in love with him. Sharada, now married, taunts him about his inability to take revenge as he had sworn. The clerk becomes a serial seducer. Superbly translated by N. Kalyan Raman.

# THAN FACT

of 2024 present a cabinet of curiosities



## MURDER AT THE RACE COURSE

By *Berjis Desai*

SHREE BOOK CENTRE

₹399; 238 pages

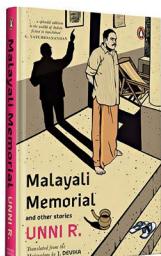
**I**t's probably a little unusual to define a murder mystery as 'epic'. Certainly not when the crime takes place within the closed circle of the famed Mahalakshmi Race Course of Mumbai. Yet, the moment Berjis Desai gets a leg up on his horse and the first shot is fired,

you're up there in a whirlwind of blood and lust. A lawyer, a brilliant writer with a penchant for exposing the eccentricities of his Parsi proletariat, Desai is also an owner and breeder of thoroughbreds. His characters come out from separate stalls. Their bloodline is rich with intrigue, not just the odd maharaja, or the lusciously endowed women, but also grifters from the Partition era. Like a besotted lover, Desai both exposes and celebrates the world of racehorses and their minders.

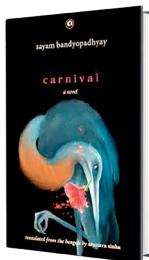
## MALAYALI MEMORIAL AND OTHER STORIES

By *Unni R.*

(Translated from the Malayalam by *J. Devika*)  
PENGUIN/VINTAGE  
₹599; 232 pages



**T**here is both sunshine and sudden squalls of pelting rain in the short story selection that reveals Unni R.'s oeuvre in all its unsettling trajectory. The mundane and the miraculous are given equal billing. While sex and the intimate descriptions of bodily functions are a part of the Malayali writer's repertoire, Unni specialises in detonating brisk and epigrammatic endings. It's to the credit of the translator, J. Devika, that she's able to convey the same shock effects with a minimum of means, and in a language that has its own laconic rhythms of dealing with effluvia of the physical kind.



## CARNIVAL: A NOVEL

By *Sayam Bandyopadhyay*  
(Translated from the Bengali by *Arunava Sinha*)

ALEPH  
₹499; 168 pages

**T**his is an extraordinary piece of work that tosses you up and down on myriad fragments of history like a carousel ride gone rogue. Sayan Bandyopadhyay has wound his clock so that it

reverts to the year 1857. The protagonist Rajaram's dilemma is that he is trapped between his inner world and tormenting visions that appear to him at night. He finds relief in the word 'Carnival'. It is a key that unlocks a well-known character from the Western pantheon—Mephisto—who comes with his own followers. Will Rajaram make the leap? Exquisitely translated by Arunava Sinha.

## IN ANTICIPATION

**GIANTS**  
By *Huthuka Sumi*  
(Forthcoming from HarperCollins)

Huthuka Sumi is a first-time author-photographer from the Sumi tribe of Nagaland. In *Giants*, Kato, a young, mute boy, listens to the stories and legends

about the Naga world that his mother tells him, when he hears a knock on the door. There are many changes happening outside, including the Second World War raging on the threshold, at Kohima. Kato finds a giant outside, looking for a storyteller. It sounds irresistible.

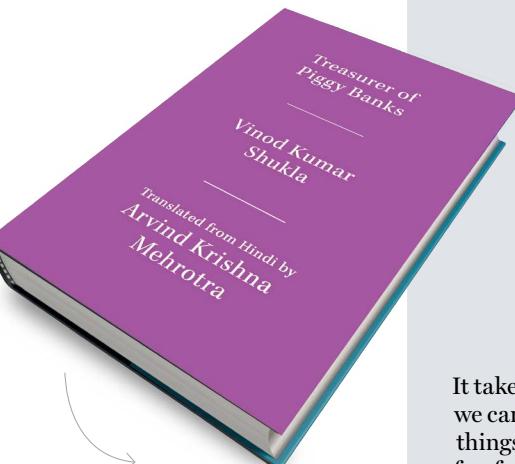




# Found in Translation

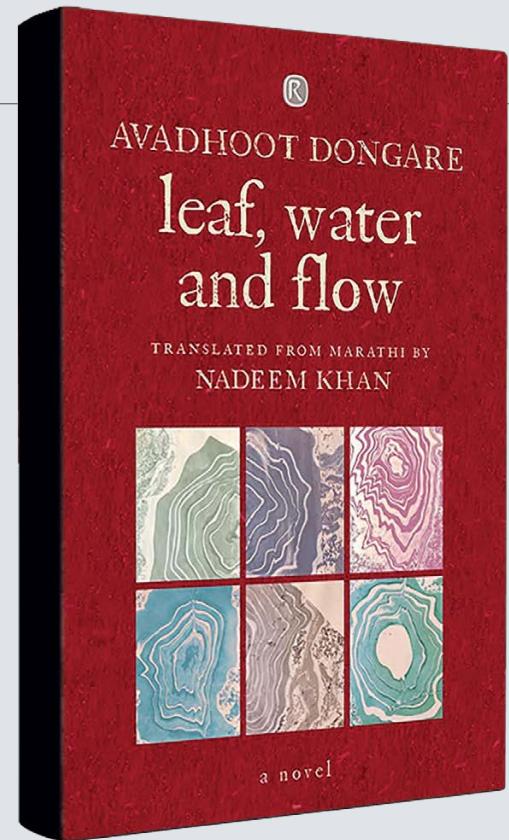
*Translation was alive and well in 2024, as **Arunava Sinha's** pick of his favourite translations from the year affirms*

**W**hen one poet translates another, a third is born. This is overwhelmingly true of Arvind Krishna Mehrotra's English version of Vinod Kumar Shukla's poem. In his Hindi writing, Shukla persistently refuses to burst into meaning or create drama or, indeed, provide any kind of aha! moment in his poetry. He examines his place in his immediate surroundings, observing with a perspective that offers no illumination, which itself becomes a way of looking at the world that the reader makes sense of. And Mehrotra, himself a poet



**TREASURER OF PIGGY BANKS**  
By Vinod Kumar Shukla  
(Translated from the Hindi by Arvind Krishna Mehrotra)  
WESTLAND  
₹399; 208 pages

**I**laurate of the bare and the spare, both reflects and refracts this literature in English in a way that makes the reading of each poem a near-perfect experience.



**LEAF, WATER AND FLOW**  
By Avadhoot Dongare  
(Translated from the Marathi by Nadeem Khan)  
RATNA BOOKS  
₹599; 256 pages

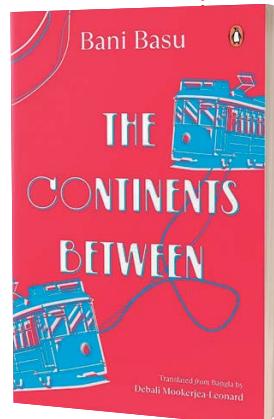
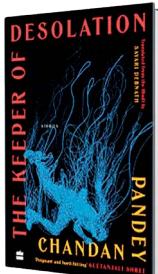
***It***

It takes fiction to make us see the world in ways we can scarcely imagine. The connectedness of things in the scaffolding of power comes to the forefront in Avadhoot Dongare's extraordinary

Marathi novel—a word that can scarcely do justice to this creation that loops back on itself and brings the reader into its page by closing the space between them and the text. There are people here, and there are also objects, and there is not just narration but also commentary, making for a shapelessly knitted fabric. The Maoist political landscape is both setting and character, and stories abound without being manipulated into a consistent narrative. Nadeem Khan dances alongside the Marathi in English, matching it move for move with his dexterous translation. A reminder of what fiction can be in all its glory.

**B**

ani Basu's first novel, written in the late 1980s, actually covered the territory—first- and second-generation Bengali immigrants in America, at home in a country and yet in a perpetual state of yearning—that Jhumpa Lahiri was to make her own later. With a title that translates literally into Birthland and Motherland, the book casts an empathetic eye on the resultant turmoil, without being judgmental or mourning any kind of moral transformation. The authorly sensibility enters the spaces not so much of alienation and loneliness as of the inability to internalise a new culture and values, while also recognising that what has been left behind cannot be returned to. Debali Mookerjea-Leonard brings to her reading both the view of a new generation and the perspective from the US. What the Bengali novel set out to do is, in many senses, completed in this translation.

**THE  
CONTINENTS  
BETWEEN***By Bani Basu*(Translated from the Bengali by Debali Mookerjea-Leonard) PENGUIN  
₹399; 264 pages

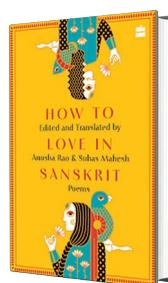
**THE  
KEEPER OF  
DESOLATION:  
STORIES**  
*By Chandan Pandey*  
(Translated from the Hindi by Sayari Debnath)  
HARPERCOLLINS ₹299; 240 pages

If Franz Kafka lived in the Gangetic plains in the 21st century, these are the stories he might have written. Chandan Pandey has an unerring instinct for spotting the absurdities in the labyrinth of state power, village bureaucracy, family hierarchies and gender conflicts, and he combines this with a sharply constructed prose that conjures up a living narrator in every story. Every-day life is pushed to its extreme, logical, and preposterous conclusion in every story, forcing us to confront what lies only slightly beneath the surface. Sayari Debnath translates every sentence with a delicate felicity to craft a reading experience in English that could only have been achieved through translation.

K alidasa and Banabhatta are there, of course, but so are Buddhist and Jain monks, scholars, emperors, and even some modern-day poets. It probably needed this sweeping collection of love poetry originally written in Sanskrit, across centuries, to remind us that those who spoke and lived in this language were not remote historical creatures but bundles of passions and contradictions, as resolute and as uncertain about love as their descendants who speak in other tongues. It is improbable that Anusha Rao and Suhas Mahesh read this material without thumping hearts, beads of perspiration on their brows, and fingers trembling with intensity.

**HOW TO  
LOVE IN  
SANSKRIT:  
POEMS**

(Translated by Anusha Rao and Suhas Mahesh) HARPER PERENNIAL ₹599; 320 pages



**MUDRITHA**  
*By Jissa Jose*  
(Translated from the Malayalam by Jayasree Kalathil)  
*Forthcoming from*  
HARPERCOLLINS ₹599; 312 pages

**FORTHCOMING**

A debut novel that begins with a man reporting a missing woman—someone he has never met in real life. The police investigation reaches a dead-end, but the investigator decides to pursue the story on her own—and uncovers the lives of not one but 10 women. And a work of fiction turns into a women's history that travels in and out of their desires, rages, and resistances. The possibilities are utterly intriguing, and the combination of an exciting new talent and one of the finest translators makes for a book that could be a literary landmark in 2025.

# BOOKS TO LOOK FORWARD TO IN 2025



AP

## » MOTHER MARY COMES TO ME

**Arundhati Roy**  
Penguin Random House India/Non-fiction

After her mother Mary's death in 2022, the writer Arundhati Roy described herself as "heart-smashed". The remarkable, brilliant woman with whom she shared a relationship far too complex to sum up in a few lines was gone forever. This prompted Roy to write her first-ever memoir, *Mother Mary Comes to Me*, about the lady she calls "my shelter and my storm".

## » WILD FICTIONS

**Amitav Ghosh**  
HarperCollins India/Non-fiction

His considerable powers as a novelist aside, Amitav Ghosh has also been an excellent essayist over the last couple of decades. The collection *Wild Fictions* brings together Ghosh's writings on literature, culture and history alongside his growing, highly influential



corpus on environmentalism and climate change.

## » RISING SONS

**Kavery Nambisan**  
Penguin Random House India/ Fiction

The acclaimed doctor-novelist Kavery Nambisan (*The Scent of Pepper*, *A Town Like Ours*) returns with an engaging fable set in pre-independence India, in a little Karnataka village called Kesarugattu. The rules of caste, hygiene and matrimony are especially strict in this little hamlet, and they are observed in full by Devaraya, a devout Brahmin. However, the onset of the freedom struggle has his son in thrall to his nationalist heroes, even as Devaraya deals with the repercussions.

## » TUMHARI AUKAT KYA HAI

**Piyush Mishra**  
HarperCollins India/ Non-fiction

Piyush Mishra—actor, writer, lyricist, all-round firebrand—penned his Hindi memoir *Tumhari Aukat Kya Hai* in 2023 and the book quickly became one of the bestselling Hindi titles in recent times. For the first time ever, Mishra's tell-all memoir will be available to English readers, with plenty of behind-the-scenes episodes on the inner workings of Bollywood.

## » ANOTHER DAY IN LANDOUR

**Ruskin Bond**  
HarperCollins India/ Non-fiction

For several decades now, the bard of Landour, Ruskin Bond, has been writing a daily journal. The discovery of a new flower in bloom, the familiar birdsongs of his neighbourhood, a haunting memory rendered afresh by a spot of winter rain—Bond is a pleasure to read on any topic under the sun, really. This new book is highly recommended for newbies and fans alike.

## » PHANTOM WARRIORS: India's Secret Tibetan Army

**Tenzing G. Tethong and Tendzin Choegyal**  
Roli Books/Non-fiction

The incredible true story of the Special Frontier Force (SFF), a force made entirely of Tibetan refugees who fought in several major wars, including the Bangladesh Liberation War and Kargil. Retired soldiers from the SFF go on the record for the first time in *Phantom Warriors*, talking about fighting despite their Buddhist beliefs, lack of recognition from official quarters, etc. The book also includes a series of stunning, never-seen-before photographs.

## » ABSOLUTE JAFAR

**Sarnath Banerjee**  
HarperCollins India/  
India/ Fiction

Comics fans will be delighted with this new work of graphic fiction from one of India's pioneering comics artists, Sarnath Banerjee. *Absolute Jafar* is the most personal narrative Banerjee has written and drawn so far, the story of an Indo-Pak marriage unravelling and a child

becoming "a geopolitical oddity" for no fault of his own.

All of this against the backdrop of labyrinthine

bureaucracies and immutable national borders.



## » THE HIMALAYA IN TWELVE PIECES

**Anuradha Roy**  
Hachette India/ Non-fiction

Anuradha Roy is the Booker-shortlisted author of novels like *Sleeping on Jupiter* and *The Folded Earth*. This book is the true story of how Anuradha and her husband Rukun found a decrepit cottage in the Himalayas and renovated it until it was unrecognisable. Remarkably, they go on to craft new lives in the hills at the cottage. Roy's book is about this sequence of events but more importantly, it is about the Himalayas themselves; the ecology, the pace of life, the boundless, endangered beauty.



## » MELANIN

**Jeet Thayil**  
HarperCollins India/  
Fiction

Jeet Thayil's novel *Narcopolis* was nominated for a bunch of awards around the world, and won him hordes of new readers. His new novel *Melanin* sees Thayil in experimental mode, with the narrative often jumping time zones and continents without much warning. This book straddles the line between memoir and fiction, prose and poetry and is also deeply informed by photography. Read it to discover what new tricks Thayil has up his sleeve.

## » GREAT EASTERN HOTEL

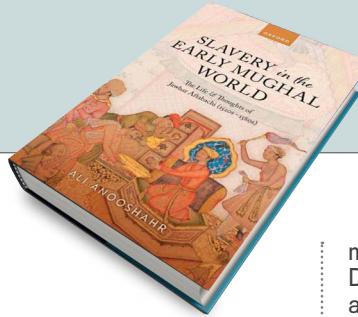
**Ruchir Joshi**  
HarperCollins India/ Fiction

Ruchir Joshi's debut novel *The Last Jet-Engine Laugh* (2001) marked him as a unique, exuberant new voice in 21st century Indian literature. Over two decades after his debut comes *Great Eastern Hotel*, a 1,000-page doorstopper set in Calcutta during the onset of the Second World War. Famine, war, rebellion and a clash of cultures—Joshi's long-awaited sophomore novel takes on the conventional Big Themes in literature. Could this be India's next massive, internationally influential work of literary fiction?

## » SLAVERY IN THE EARLY MUGHAL WORLD

**Ali Anooshahr**  
Oxford University Press/  
Non-fiction

This book examines Jawahar Aftabachi's memoir *Tazkirah-i-Vaqiat* as a springboard to exam-



ine slavery and the early, interconnected world of the Indian Ocean. Enslaved by the Ottomans in the early 16th century, Aftabachi sails around the world before landing up as a slave at the Mughal emperor Humayun's court, acting as Humayun's water-bearer. This unique subaltern point of view from within the Mughal set-up in the 16th century is important and Anooshahr does a fine job of condensing the memoir's many digressions and sideshows into a coherent, historically valuable document.

## » GODDESS COMPLEX

**Sanjana Sathian**  
Penguin Random House/  
Fiction

Sanjana Satyananda, having recently dumped her actor husband at an Indian commune after a conversation about having children, is struggling to piece together



her life again. Her too-perfect sister is proving to be insufferable on a daily basis, her anthropology dissertation is incomplete and her friends barely have a second in between mortgages, marriages and other assorted 'adulting' paraphernalia. Can Sanjana finalise her divorce and get her life back on track? A bittersweet new novel from the acclaimed author of *Gold Diggers*.

## » THE LIVER DOCTOR

**Dr Cyriac Abby Philips**  
HarperCollins India/  
Non-fiction

Dr Cyriac Abby Philips is better known by his social

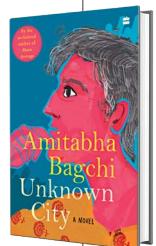
media moniker, 'The Liver Doctor'. His blunt, forthright approach to medical advice has won him a dedicated fanbase and he has been ruthless in his fact-checks on pseudo-science peddled by online influencers. For the first time ever, Dr Philips tells us the story of his career, both online and offline, and how he had to develop a thick skin in order to function as a hardnosed rationalist in contemporary India.

## » UNKNOWN CITY

**Amitabha Bagchi**  
HarperCollins India/ Fiction

Amitabha Bagchi returns to Arindam Chatterjee, the protagonist of his best-selling debut novel *Above Average* (2007).

Arindam, now 50, has returned to India after a string of failed relationships. He looks back at the women in his life. Through these recollections, Arindam tries to make sense of his own masculinity and how it has evolved down the years. A much-anticipated follow-up by one of Indian English literature's most distinctive and accomplished voices.



## » A PICTURE OF ARYAN PASHA:

**The Girl Who Never Was**  
**Apra Kuchal**  
HarperCollins India/  
Non-fiction

This is the biography of Aryan Pasha, assigned female at birth but who went on to become India's first competitive trans man bodybuilder. Kuchal tells the story of Pasha's triumphs against all odds to achieve his fondest dream. A must-read at a time of great churn internationally, when trans athletes are being viewed with suspicion.

—Aditya Mani Jha

# PEACE ABOVE ALL

**Devdutt Pattanaik** offers an alternative view of the Harappan civilisation in his newest book, *Ahimsa: 100 Reflections on the Harappan Civilization*



**AHIMSA**  
100 Reflections  
on the Harappan  
Civilization  
By Devdutt  
Pattanaik  
HARPERCOLLINS  
₹499; 272 pages

**Q. You are known as a mythologist. With *Ahimsa*, have you forayed into history?**

Mythology exists in history. Mythology changes over time. So one cannot ignore history. But my focus is on what Harappans believed, their subjective truth, so the realm of myth.

**Q. What lessons from Harappa are relevant even today?**

Trading is better than raiding. Fair trade prevents war. Fair trade demands contentment, which is psychological evolution, and not based on laws and policies.

**Q. How much of the book—to use your own words—is ‘known facts’ and how much is ‘informed speculation’?**

The objects, the artifacts, the information on material culture, the movement of goods, the contemporary history, are all known facts. The interpretation of this web of information is speculation.

**Q. Is your thesis—that Harappa was a non-violent civilisation—an unconventional one?**

Many scholars have noticed that Harappan civilisation as compared to contemporary Mesopotamia and Egypt has far fewer indicators of violence. I link this to mercantile-monastic culture, like the much later connection of traders with Buddhism and Jainism. This reading is unconventional.

**Q. What other creative projects are you pursuing at the moment?**

Currently, I am fascinated by how material cultures of India reveal mythology quite differently from textual culture. And how stories in Prakrit are so different from stories told in Sanskrit.

—with Amit Dixit

Photograph by BANDEEP SINGH

INDIA  
TODAY

# Tourism

SURVEY & AWARDS 2024-25

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\*Entry by invite only.

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Uttar Pradesh



Divine - Grand - Digital  
Mahakumbh 2025  
Prayagraj

# Witness the Largest Religious Congregation of the World

# MAHAKUMBH 2025

**MAHAKUMBH  
2025**

**HOLY BATHING DATES**

**Paush Poornima - 13<sup>th</sup> January**

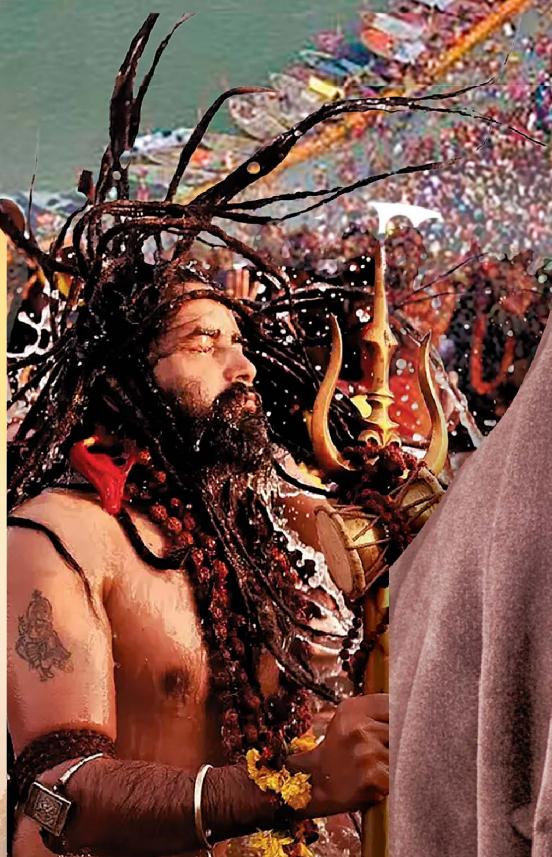
**Makar Sankranti - 14<sup>th</sup> January**

**Mauni Amavasya - 29<sup>th</sup> January**

**Basant Panchami - 3<sup>rd</sup> February**

**Magh Poornima - 12<sup>th</sup> February**

**Maha Shivaratri - 26<sup>th</sup> February**



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# SPICE

INDIA  
TODAY

THE  
GOOD  
LIFE

DECEMBER 2024

YEAR-END  
SPECIAL



**FASHION**  
**WHAT'S NEXT  
FOR TOM FORD**

**TECH**  
**DEVICES THAT  
DEFINED THE YEAR**



ALL THAT  
GLITTERS...  
...THE BEST OF 2024



(Clockwise from top)  
Breguet Classique  
Tourbillon 3558,  
Wild Fiji, Top drinks,  
Porsche 911 Turbo,  
Best of food

**E**ndings are the generous footnotes of new beginnings and therefore need to be celebrated. So before we call it a wrap for 2024, *Spice* toasts the highlights of the year that was. Since nothing clocks the passage of time better than a watch, it's only fitting that we begin from the rarefied reaches of the watch universe, where interesting collaborations dotted the calendar year.

Imagine the gilded tribute to a legendary smoke with a cigar maker and a luxury Swiss watch combining their crafts. Hublot's latest masterpiece, the Classic Fusion Chronograph Arturo Fuente King Gold is a glittering homage to the storied Fuente Fuente OpusX cigar on its silver anniversary. The 42mm timepiece, crafted in Hublot's proprietary 18-carat King Gold boasts a bezel adorned with engraved tobacco leaves in a playful nod to the verdant Dominican landscape, the birthing ground of these coveted cigars. Limited to just 50 pieces, it is housed in a lacquered humidor-style box.

While pop art inspired watch dials, bezels and straps make for pitch-perfect statement pieces, wearable stories from haute horology bet on the nostalgia of vintage. With the business of pre-owned watches booming, a number of luxury watch marques have started to offer certified pre-owned (CPO) timepieces alongside their new collections. The Morgan Stanley Luxeconsult watch industry report 2024, estimates the overall secondary watch market at US\$25 billion, compared to an approximate US\$ 60-80 billion for the primary market. While Rolex launched its certified pre-owned plan in late 2022, Vacheron Constantin launched its own CPO programme in November 2024, joining the ranks of Audemars Piguet, Cartier, F. P. Journe, MB&F, Richard Mille, and Urwerk among others.

While harking back to heritage is an old luxury favourite, when it comes to the vibrant world of mixology, a new chapter is being stirred by some incredible bar experiences, which showcase spectacular sips employing next generation bartending techniques, rare ingredients and dazzling presentations. The Bumipura in Mumbai offers laboratory-crafted drinks that are inspired by wholesome Malay and Singaporean food. Being shaken and stirred is par for the course when a martini is inspired by Hainanese chicken rice or offers a creative take on Malaysia's iconic Nasi Lemak with a foam made from jasmine rice cooked with coconut cream and pandan leaves.

Not to be outdone, restaurants have done their bit to raise the bar too. The *Spice* taste adventures summon some of the more interesting Asian curations of 2024. If Gauri Khan's Torii in Mumbai elevates the star quotient with its stunning design, Drunken Fish at Wynn Macau brings to the table the world's rarest and most premium seafood.

Whether it's great food, drink or fashion, it's the ability to rewrite the narrative that scores, which is why scintillating storytelling is key to capturing interest and imagination. Who knows that better than designer, beauty-business genius, and film-maker, Tom Ford, a man who manifests many lives. "I'm a storyteller. I think I did that through fashion, images, stores. But making films is the closest you ever get to being God. Because you're not just designing clothes. You're designing what they do, what they say. And it's forever sealed in a bubble," he says.

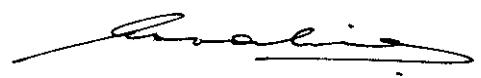
On the silver screen, as in reality, whatever your cult status or performance, it's the next chapter that keeps you relevant. Much like the AMG version of Mercedes-Benz's legendary G-Class SUV.

Here's to reimagining the future in 2025!

**LETTER FROM  
THE EDITOR-  
IN-CHIEF**



• **Cocktail inspired by** the Purana Qila at Cirrus 9, The Oberoi, New Delhi (Above); Athens Riviera is the new hotspot

  
(Aroon Purie)

DECEMBER 2024

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**Vice Chairperson and Executive Editor-in-Chief**  
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Why haute horology brands are entering the pre-owned watch market

COVER BY Angshuman De

ON THE COVER  
 PHOTOGRAPHS FOOD & DRINK Bandeep Singh

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# OBJECTS OF DESIRE

Watches • Travel • Lifestyle • Gadgets



## HUE GRANT

Colour seems to be leading the charge of the watch brigade for 2024. At Frederique Constant, while the Classic Worldtimer Manufacture had been decked out in three dominant colours on Earth: daytime white, nighttime black, and ocean blue, two new limited editions have added a fourth colour to the mix. The new forest green timepiece is housed in a 42-mm steel case (718 pieces) or in 18-carat rose gold (36 pieces), and outlines a world map on the dial amid a sunburst finish radiating a gentle green, which illuminates the continents with a subtly changing glow depending on its angle to the light. The green expanse serves as the backdrop to the continents, with a faithful reproduction of the major landmasses depicted in higher-level relief; a polished finish distinctly sets them apart from the seas and oceans. For the inveterate traveller, the Manufacture calibre offers time zones for the 24 cities inscribed on its 24-hour disc, and also provides a date hand display. To simplify matters, all the functions are adjusted using the crown. After all, simplicity is the new luxury.

**Price** on request;  
**Availability** <https://frederiqueconstant.com>

**By Chumki Bharadwaj**

OBJECTS OF  
DESIRE  
SPIRITS



## SIMPLY GIN-TASTIC

It's clear that gin has not relinquished its place on the popularity pyramid. And now, with Hendrick's adding its latest variant in the Indian market—Flora Adora—gin drinkers have more to celebrate. The gin exudes an alluring aroma of flowers, coupled with a fresh herbal character, while the juniper and coriander backbone have been seamlessly extended by lush green and delightfully sweet floral characteristics. The result: A Perfect balance.

**Price** ₹4,905 (Delhi); ₹5,900 (Mumbai); **Availability** Delhi and Mumbai



## FESTIVE CHEER

Celebrate the yuletide spirit with Paul John's Single Malt Annual Christmas Edition 2024. This is the 7th release in the exclusive Paul John Christmas Edition series with just 6600 bottles. The whisky—matured in ex-bourbon casks and finished in Caribbean rum casks—offers delectable aromas of ripe mango and pineapple, interlaced with sweet vanilla cake. The palate reveals flavours of spice balanced with coconut, candied orange, and toasted oak, with a finish that is rich with notes of fruit tart, salted toffee, and chewy tannins.

**Price** ₹7000-12000 (750ml);

**Availability**

[www.pauljohnwhisky.com](http://www.pauljohnwhisky.com)

## DESIGNER SPIRITS

Glenmorangie, the luxury single malt from Moet Hennessy India, has collaborated with designers Shivan & Narresh to introduce a stunning The Festive Edition Pack to transform at-home celebrations; it features a bottle of Glenmorangie Original, a pair of signature Glenmorangie whisky glasses, and matching Swirlscape coasters that are an elegant nod to Glenmorangie's heritage and Shivan & Narresh's artistry.

**Price** ₹4,757;

**Availability**

<https://www.shivanandnarresh.com/pages/delicious-living>





## Arty Facts

ARTHAUS draws inspiration from the geometric minimalism of the Bauhaus movement, and it is this artistic vision that underscores the philosophy that blending exceptional whisky represents. The ARTHAUS Blended Malt Scotch Whisky is spirit from Allied Blenders and Distillers Limited (ABD) and has been specially curated by ABD's Master Blender, featuring premium Single Malt whiskies sourced from the Highlands and Speyside regions of Scotland.

**Price** ₹4,800 (750 ml); **Availability** Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, Chandigarh and West Bengal



## Time to Tequila

With over 300 years of heritage and passion backing Volcan de Mi Tierra, this spirit literally captures history in a bottle. The time-honoured traditions of the Gallardo family, whose roots in the tequila-making trace back to 1774, in Jalisco, Mexico partner with Moët Hennessy to celebrate global savoir-faire. With four expressions on offer—Volcan X.A, Volcan Blanco, Volcan Reposado, and Volcan Cristalino.

**Price** Volcan XA (₹39,107); Volcan Cristalino ₹15,967; Volcan Reposado ₹12,198; Volcan Blanco ₹10,267; **Availability** Goa, Haryana, Mumbai, Airports

## Pure Craftsmanship

DÓAAB India Craft Whisky is the latest addition in Globus spirits portfolio; the brand's first limited-edition release, O1 Six Blind Men and the Elephant, takes inspiration from the famed Indian fable. Crafted entirely in 100% ex-bourbon barrels, this single malt whisky is limited to just 500 casks.

**Price** ₹4,500-5,500 (750 ml); **Availability** Delhi, Gurgaon, Lucknow & Jaipur.



OBJECTS OF  
DESIRE

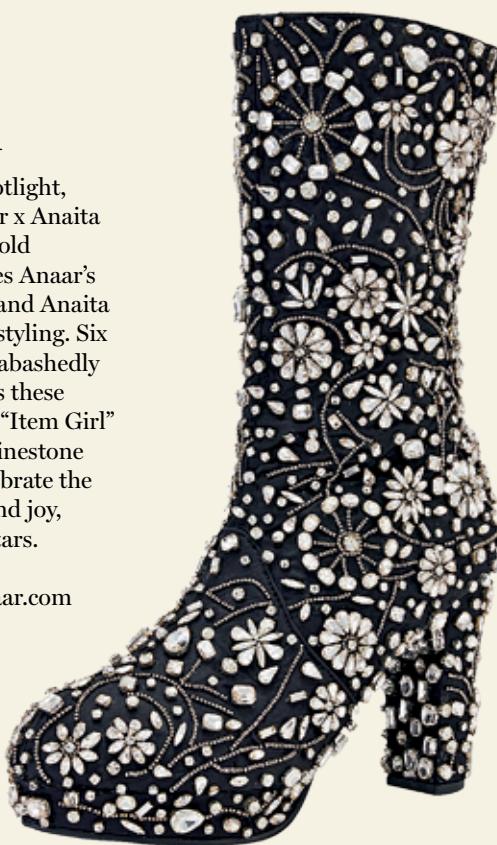
GIFTING

## Foot Fetish

If you don't enjoy the spotlight, step away from the Anaar x Anaita collection—an eclectic, bold collaboration that marries Anaar's exquisite craftsmanship and Anaita Shroff Adajania's famed styling. Six dazzling themes offer unabashedly glamourous vibes such as these "Britney" boots from the "Item Girl" collection that exudes rhinestone studded confidence. Celebrate the radiant side of wonder and joy, flashing your very own stars.

**Price** ₹29,990;

**Availability** [www.shopanaar.com](http://www.shopanaar.com)



## SOME LIKE IT HAUTE

From the frying pan to the fire, there's many a slip between Teflon and its products. And this is where this 4-piece multifunctional set (Capri Series) from ember cookware delivers on point. It features a Fry Pan, Kadhai, Dosa Tawa and Dutch Oven, and is the perfect kitchen upgrade since these pans do not use any forever chemicals. The brand's proprietary Arcilla™ non-stick coating is clay and water based, and is free of PFA, PTFE(Teflon®), PFOA, lead and cadmium. Additionally, all Ember cookware products are covered by a limited 5 year warranty.

**Price** ₹17,999;

**Availability** <https://embercookware.com/>



## THE SNAIL SPACE

While the K-beauty domination is near complete, so is the pace at which snail mucin is overtaking skincare. This multitasking, All in One Snail Repair Cream from South Korean brand Mizon, is enriched with Snail mucin and repairs, hydrates, and rejuvenates skin, leaving it softer, even-toned, all the while reducing the appearance of scars and wrinkles. We just hope it doesn't deliver results at a snail's pace.

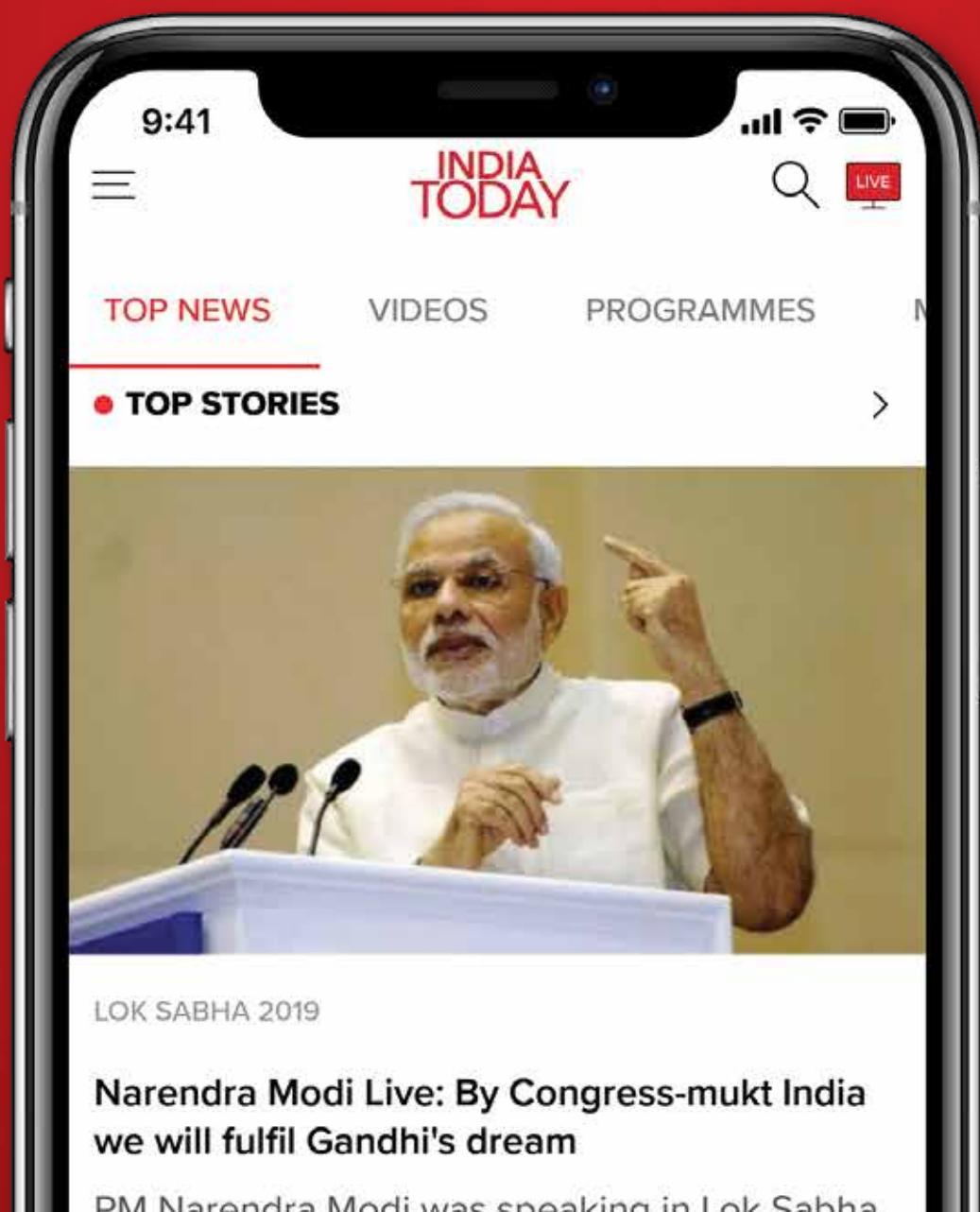
**Price** ₹2,499; **Availability** <https://www.tirabeauty.com/brand/mizon>



INDIA  
TODAY

# BREAKING NEWS

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# MATCH POINT

**Big names, brighter wrists. Legends meet luxury with clockwork precision.**

**Dhiram Shah**

What happens when two worlds collude in the realm of haute horology? Pure magic. Our watchlist proves that great collaborations aren't just marketing stunts, but catalysts for creativity. When a cigar maker and a Swiss watch brand join forces, you get a gilded tribute to a legendary smoke. When a football club's signature pink finds its way onto a classic chronograph, you get a bold, pitch-perfect statement piece. And when moonlit seas, rocket fuelled races, and pop art panache inspire watch dials, bezels, and straps, you get wearable stories that push the limits of design. We've handpicked these stunning co-branded models because they remind us that, in the right partnerships, one plus one doesn't just make two, it makes for unforgettable style.

## **Hublot Classic Fusion Chronograph Arturo Fuente Edition**

Hublot's latest masterpiece, the Classic Fusion Chronograph Arturo Fuente King Gold, is a shimmering tribute to the storied Fuente Fuente OpusX cigar as it celebrates its 25th anniversary. This collaboration combines Hublot's watch-making prowess with Arturo Fuente's legendary craftsmanship, resulting in a 42mm timepiece that is bold, elegant, and distinctive. Crafted

in Hublot's proprietary 18-carat King Gold, its bezel is adorned with engraved tobacco leaves, nodding playfully to the Dominican landscapes where these coveted cigars are born. The rich green fumé dial, sporting the OpusX 25th anniversary logo, conjures imagery of lush forests and meticulous cigar rolling traditions, making it a fitting homage to this famed cigar. Limited to just 50 pieces and housed in a lacquered humidor-style presentation box, the timepiece merges two worlds of luxurious indulgence. On your wrist, it offers a whisper of fine tobacco and a sparkle of gold that feels refreshingly original. Availability <https://www.hublot.com/en-us>

## **Tudor Black Bay Chrono Pink**

Early this year, Tudor ignited the world of horology and football fandom by teaming up with Inter Miami CF for a limited-edition release of the Black Bay Chrono Pink. This bold collaboration brought together David Beckham's preferred Swiss watchmaker and the Major League Soccer club renowned for its signature electric-pink hue and star-studded line-up. At the time, Inter Miami had just welcomed global icons such as Lionel Messi, making it the perfect moment to unveil a timepiece that matched the team's confident and stylish spirit.





WATCH  
COLLABORATIONS



WATCH  
COLLABORATIONS

## WATCH COLLABORATIONS

The resulting watch, with its pink dial and contrasting black sub-dials and bezel insert, turned heads instantly. A sturdy 41mm stainless steel case housed the Manufacture Calibre MT5813, ensuring a solid 70-hour power reserve and 200m water resistance. Meanwhile, the five-link bracelet, introduced only a year ago, brought new-found refinement. Although availability was limited, those who managed to secure the Black Bay Chrono Pink claimed a vibrant piece of football history blended perfectly with Swiss watchmaking pedigree.

**Availability** <https://www.tudorwatch.com/en>

### **Blancpain x Swatch Bioceramic Scuba Fifty Fathoms**

Blancpain and Swatch have struck again, adding a sixth model, the “Ocean of Storms”, to their cheeky and enchanting Bioceramic Scuba Fifty Fathoms line. This time, the duo ventured off our blue planet and drew inspiration from the Oceanus Procellarum, a vast “sea” on the Moon’s surface. Draped in deep, shadowy black, the 42.3mm Bioceramic case and unidirectional bezel deliver a brooding, almost otherworldly charm. The crisp white markers and luminous accents pop against the inky backdrop, with a subtle splash of yellow on the seconds hand’s tip adding a bright, playful spark.

Inside, the mechanical SISTEM51 movement hums away at a leisurely 21,600 vph, offering an impressive 90 hours of power reserve. For a twist of whimsy, a depiction of the Okenia Luna nudibranch—the moon-inspired sea slug—appears on the rotor, bridging the gap between ocean and space.

**Availability** <https://www.swatch.com/en-in/>

### **TAG Heuer Carrera Chronograph Tourbillon x Porsche Panamericana**

TAG Heuer's Carrera Chronograph Tourbillon x Porsche Panamericana took centre stage to celebrate motorsport's golden era and a milestone victory for Porsche. Drawing inspiration from the 70th anniversary of the Porsche 550 Spyder's class triumph in the 1954 Carrera Panamericana race, this limited-edition timepiece (225 pieces) fused high-octane heritage with cutting-edge watchmaking. The robust 42mm stainless-steel case, equipped with a domed Glassbox sapphire crystal and a 100-metre water resistance, set the stage for a dramatic tribute to racing's heyday.

Inside, the skeletonised dial channelled the styling cues of the historic Porsche 550 Spyder's wheels, pairing shimmering silver surfaces with black, asphalt-textured



sub-dials and vivid yellow accents for a track-ready finish. At six o'clock, a one-minute tourbillon, pays homage to classic steering-wheel designs, while the “Spyder” engraving on the flank and a swift, perforated leather strap, embodies the timeless thrill of speed and precision.

**Availability** <https://www.tagheuer.com/in/en/>

### **Piaget Andy Warhol Clou de Paris**

Piaget's new Andy Warhol Clou de Paris watch artfully rekindles the spirit of the iconic Black Tie model from the 1970s, now officially named after the pioneering Pop Art maestro. Thanks to a special agreement with The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, this substantial 45mm white gold timepiece celebrates the friendship between the artist and Piaget, who were famously entwined in the elite Piaget Society. The signature gadroons that once defined the Black Tie have given way to intricate Clou de Paris guilloché, a handcrafted hobnail pattern that took artisans 10 months to perfect. Meanwhile, the dial features a rare slice of blue meteorite, paired with refined dauphine hands and minimalist indices that pay homage to Warhol's avant-garde aesthetic.

Underneath its rich decorative flourishes beats an automatic Piaget movement. With customisation at its heart, clients can choose from white or rose gold, a variety of stone dials, and multiple strap colours, ensuring a personal touch worthy of Warhol's legacy.

**Availability** <https://www.piaget.com/ww-en>



# देश का नं. 1 हिंदी न्यूज ऐप

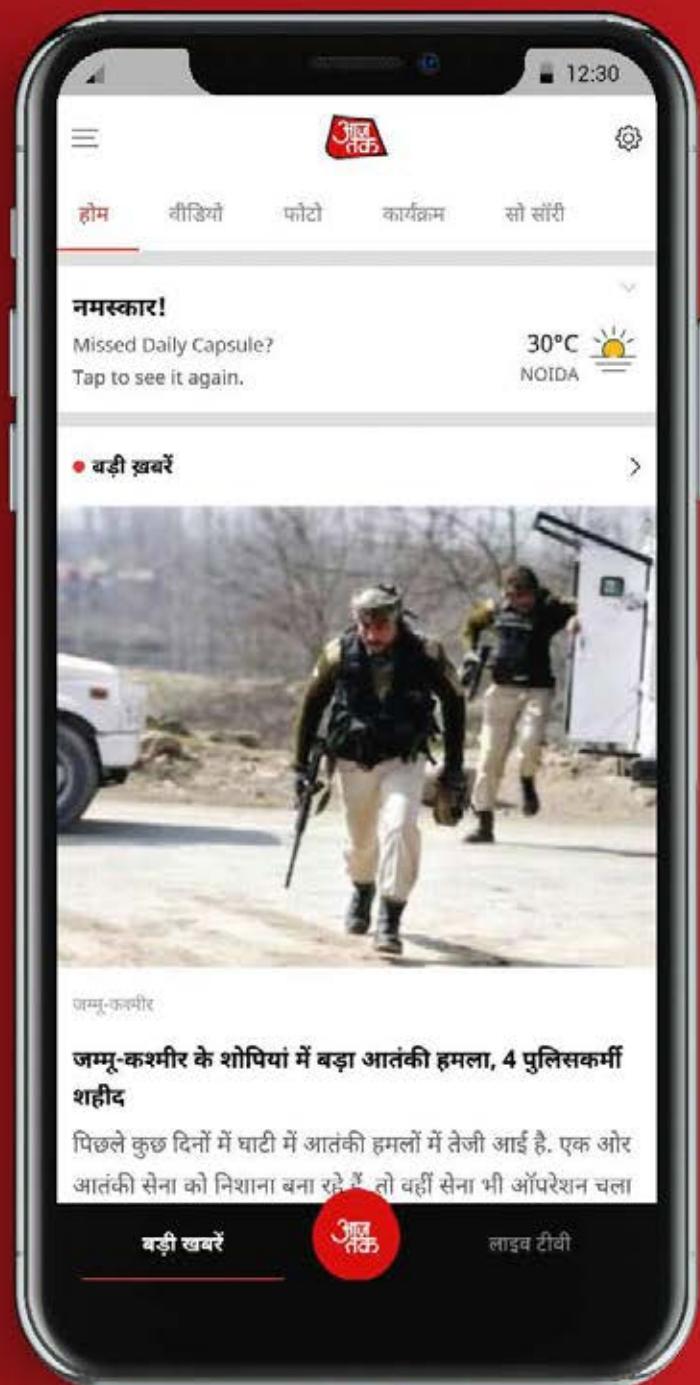
जुड़े रहिए हर खबर से,  
कहीं भी, कभी भी

**अभी डाउनलोड करें**

[aajtak.in/app](http://aajtak.in/app)



उपलब्ध है



# THE TASTE TEST

Some of the more interesting restaurants launched in Asia in 2024

Rupali Dean

In the dynamic culinary landscape of Asia, *Spice* embarks on a gastronomic journey through a kaleidoscope of noteworthy dining spots that shone through in 2024. From cosy havens celebrating rich cultural heritage using quality local ingredients to chic spaces blending global influences with a playful vibe, each venue offers something special, whether by the beach or beneath starry skies.

## ADVENTUROUS SEAFOOD

Drunken Fish at  
Wynn Macau

Executive Chef Henry Zhang  
Zhicheng, a well-known rising star in the culinary industry, oversees this seafood restaurant. The menu brings to the table the world's rarest and most premium seafood.

Each dish is made with diverse cooking techniques from China and Southeast Asia creating exciting new dining experiences which encourage guests to try something new. Home to the only Moutai Bar in Macau, offers an impressive collection of Moutai liquor; Drunken Fish truly brings the spit of the sea come alive.

### Where

[www.wynnresortsmacau.com/en/wynn-macau/dining/drunk-fish](http://www.wynnresortsmacau.com/en/wynn-macau/dining/drunk-fish)

### Must Try

The red-spotted grouper, complemented by pickled tomato and chili, pays homage to Guizhou's famous sour soup, with Moutai enhancing the fish's freshness.

### Signature Drink

Nuts for Moutai

### Cost

upwards of ₹20,000 ++ for two

OBJECTS OF  
DESIRE

TOP  
TABLES



## BEST OF MALAYSIAN— INDIA'S FIRST KOPITIAM

### Kopitiam Lah, Bengaluru

The finest showcase of Malaysian cuisine, the restaurant features classic kopitiam breakfasts, street-style bakes, and modern dinners. The atmosphere buzzes with the essence of traditional kopitiams, where the clinking of cups, fragrant spices, and joyful conversations create a vibrant community. Joonie Tan, a talented Malaysian cake artist, expertly blends her cultural heritage with India's culinary landscape. Head Chef David D'Souza and consultant Chef Darren Teoh, Malaysia's first two Michelin-star chef, bring exceptional craftsmanship and authentic flavours to every dish.

#### Where

Ground Floor, 1088, 12th Main Rd, Doopanahalli, Indiranagar, Bengaluru, [www.kopitiamlah.com](http://www.kopitiamlah.com)

#### Must Try Nasi Lemak with beef rending

#### Signature Drink Kopi

Cost upwards of ₹2,400 ++ for two



## DESIGN ON PLATTER

### Torii by Gauri Khan, Mumbai

Step into Gauri Khan's vibrant Asian eatery where global flavours and playful vibes coexist. This immersive space flows effortlessly between indoor and outdoor, with a chic colour palette. Gauri's design dazzles, while Chef Stefan Gadit crafts a mouth-watering menu—a fusion of his Canadian roots, Indian-Jewish heritage, and worldly inspirations. Get ready for a culinary adventure that tickles the taste buds.

#### Where

Torii, 21, Pali Hill Rd, Union Park, Khar West, Mumbai, Maharashtra, India; 09833373888

#### Must Try

The Truffle Mushroom Ramen stands out with its rich, earthy flavours and luxurious truffle essence.

**Signature Drink** DAF—A layered mix of tequila, fresh lime juice, agave and red wine float, blending bold citrus and rich wine notes in each sip.

#### Cost

upwards of Rs ₹3,000 ++ for two

OBJECTS OF  
DESIRE

TOP  
TABLES

## AN INTIMATE CULINARY ESCAPE

### Hideaway By Nae:Um, Singapore

An intimate sanctuary designed for private gatherings, this space features a cosy living room for pre-dinner drinks, an elegant dining area, and an open kitchen where culinary magic unfolds. Accommodating up to 14 guests for seated meals or 25 for standing receptions, this exclusive venue invites social celebrations, business meetings, and unique events.

With Chef Louis Han's innovative menus, diners can indulge in globally inspired contemporary cuisine in a warm, welcoming venue.

#### Where

NAE:UM Restaurant, second storey,  
161A Telok Ayer Street, Singapore; [www.naeum.sg/hideaway](http://www.naeum.sg/hideaway)

**Must Try** The private space serves exclusive 6 and 8-course menus not available elsewhere, which include charcoal jujube, the original dessert created by Chef Louis Han.

**Signature Drink** Ocean's oksusu, a non-alcohol house beverage made from fermented corn and vanilla beans.

**Cost** upwards of ₹17,000 ++ for two



## ONE AMONG THE STARS

### BarQat at JW Marriott Mumbai Sahar, Mumbai

This Al fresco gem, set by the poolside, enchants diners beneath a starlit sky, blending contemporary charm with age-old tradition. With an impressive menu featuring Bhatti Ka Jheenga, Noor Mahal Biryani, Lucknowi Seekh etc, each dish encapsulates the essence of authentic Indian flavours. The deft chefs skillfully weave ancestral recipes and modern flair into an exquisite dining experience. Every bite transports the palate through a culinary journey steeped in history, passion, and the soul of India.

#### Where

JW Marriott Mumbai Sahar, Chhatrapati Shivaji International Airport, IA Project Rd, Navpada, Vile Parle East, Vile Parle, Andheri, Mumbai; [www.jwmumbai.com](http://www.jwmumbai.com)

**Must Try** Methi ki Tehri & Purvanchal ka saag (melange of five greens cooked together with home-made butter)

**Signature Drink** Barrel Aged Negroni, Spiced Old Fashion.

**Cost** upwards of ₹5,000++ for two



## BEACHFRONT ADVENTURE

### Sakhalin Dubai

A dazzling new culinary gem whisks guests away on a delightful journey through the rich heritage of Sakhalin Island. The venue boasts a stunning beach view terrace, complete with a central fountain and a shimmering illuminated ceiling. Lounge on beach chaises along the shoreline, turning every moment into a chic day-to-night experience. Picture a vibrant medley of Mediterranean, Asian, and traditional Russian flavours, all served in a stylish beachfront setting. Under the imaginative guidance of Michelin-starred Chef Vladimir Mukhin, each dish is a masterpiece and the menu, a thrilling gastronomic adventure waiting to be explored.

#### Where

Beach, J1 - 71A St - Jumeirah - Jumeirah 1 - Dubai, United Arab Emirates; <https://sakhalin.rest/>

**Must Try** Goldfish roll—think golden nori, bluefin toro, akami, a drizzle of truffle, and a sprinkle of black caviar—plus the irresistible Sakhalin tiramisu.

#### Signature Drink

Beluga Epicure Vodka

**Cost** upwards of ₹20,000++ for two



## DECADENT DELIGHTS

### The Dessert Republic Cafe

Hit that sweet spot with innovative global treats transform your dessert experience into a vibrant and flavourful adventure. Indulge in the iconic Pizookie, and signature Honeycomb Waffles, known for their unbeatable crunch. For rich treats, Binge Ice Cream Bowls promise layers of decadence, while the adventurous will relish Pista Kunafa Ice Cream. Also, you can pair desserts with refreshing Fizzy Coolers, playful Bubble Tea, or specialty coffees.

#### Where

1st Floor, Mohanlal Mansion, Maheshwari Udhyaan, above Apollo Pharmacy, above Apollo pharmacy, Matunga East, Mumbai, <https://thedessertrepublic.com/india/home/>

**Signature Drink** The bold flavours of Pop Me Purple infused with Japanese Yuzu, cosy up with the indulgent 54 per cent Hot Chocolate or Sugar-Free Hot Chocolate, and savour the aromatic notes of Kashmiri Kahwa.

**Cost** upwards of ₹1,000 ++ for two



# TECH TALK

OBJECTS OF  
DESIRE

TECH

From a Mac that became mini to gizmo-heavy watches, from smart air purifiers to intelligent TVs, these top picks defined 2024.

Sulabh Puri

Every calendar year comes with an expiry date, but even after the last grains of sand have slipped past, Spice pauses to admire the gadgets that wowed us this year. From whisper-quiet desktops that resemble abstract art to gaming laptops that could probably outperform a spaceship's onboard computer, these are the contenders that made tech enthusiasts nod with approval—and a hint of envy.

## Apple Mac Mini (2024)

There's something endlessly charming about a tiny box that can punch far above its weight, and the 2024 Mac Mini with M4 Pro chip embraces that role with passion. This minimalist powerhouse is still small enough to get lost behind your monitor, yet it packs enough computational muscle to handle video editing, code compiling, and a marathon of streaming sessions without a hiccup. Think of it as the stealthy little friend who shows up to the party, quietly takes charge of the DJ booth, and leaves everyone asking, "Where'd that guy come from?"

**Price** ₹1,49,900  
(M4 Pro Chip)



### Samsung Watch Ultra

Smartwatches have come a long way from their awkward, clunky youth. The Samsung Watch Ultra proves this with its refined design and a screen that seems to glow with a secret inner light. It's tough, too—go ahead, wear it while climbing a mountain or arm-wrestling a professional cyclist. With health insights sharper than a personal trainer's bark and battery life that won't give out right before your evening run, it's a time-piece that blends luxury with utility.

**Price** ₹69,900



### Vivo X200 Pro

Over the years, smartphones have graduated from pocket-sized curiosities to full-blown personal assistants, and the Vivo X200 Pro gets an A+ in class. The 6.78-inch AMOLED display is so vibrant that you'll wonder if you accidentally switched on a psychedelic screensaver. With the Media Tek Dimensity 9400 chip and 90W fast chargerit's fast, it's powerful, and it charges quicker than you can say, "Did I leave my charger at home?" This is the phone for anyone who wants blazing performance without the fuss—just pure, joyful speed at your fingertips.

**Price** ₹94,999

### Xiaomi X Pro Series 65-inch

Finally, let's talk big screens, because life's too short for puny displays. The Xiaomi X Pro 65-inch TV is a sprawling QLED canvas of 4K brilliance. Every pixel shines like a carefully polished gem, making movie nights, sports marathons, and gaming sessions feel downright cinematic. Pair it with your favourite streaming service and lose yourself in a world so vivid you might start second-guessing your own reality.

**Price** ₹99,999



## OBJECTS OF DESIRE

### TECH

#### Dyson Hot + Cold Gen 1HP10

You might not think of an air purifier as “exciting,” but Dyson is happy to prove you wrong. The HP10 doesn’t just clean the air—it cosies it up in winter and cools it down in summer, making your home feel like a personal climate-controlled palace. If fresh, temperature-perfect air had a brand ambassador, this would be it. Allergens, odours, and dust mites won’t stand a chance. When you breathe easy, life feels just a bit more luxurious.

**Price** ₹56,900



#### Acer Predator Helios 16 (2024)

Gaming laptops can be loud, brash, and about as subtle as a rock concert in a library. Yet, the Predator Helios 16 (2024) manages to look surprisingly polished, despite its clearly stated intention: Devour frames, spit out pixels, and run the latest gaming titles at settings that make lesser machines stutter with inferiority. The 16-inch 240Hz panel is a feast for the eyes. The internals sport Intel Core i9 CPU that lets you play, stream, or design digital cities without so much as a hiccup. You can almost hear it purring confidently under the hood.

**Price** ₹1,99,999



WATCH  
TREND

# Certified Time

Watch brands start to offer certified pre-owned timepieces alongside their new collections.

Sophie Furley

Over the last two decades, the pre-owned watch market has grown from a network of small-time wheelers and dealers and grey market agents to a booming business that has been embraced by everyone from the prestigious auction houses to multi-brand retailers, and now even the watch brands themselves.



Vacheron Constantin launched its Certified Pre-Owned Service in November 2024.



**"ZENITH'S ICONS SERIES OFFERS CURATED, RARE AND HIGHLY SOUGHT-AFTER TIMEPIECES FROM THE BRAND'S PAST."**



#### What is in it for the brands?

In the latest Morgan Stanley Luxeconsult watch industry report 2024, the overall secondary watch market was estimated at US\$25 billion, (compared to an estimated US\$ 60-80 billion for the primary market), explaining the growing interest from the watch brands in this segment.

However, it isn't only purely economic interest driving this trend. Many brands have been struggling to satisfy consumer demand over the last few years—think Rolex, Audemars Piguet and Richard Mille, for example—and offering certified pre-owned timepieces (CPO) can relieve some of the consumer frustration.

The last few years have also been rampant with flipping and speculative pricing, which has driven prices on the secondary market to unsustainable levels. This has led many brands to attempt to and take back control of their watches once they are out in the market.

#### Brands leading the charge

Rolex launched its certified pre-owned plan in late 2022 and has continued to expand the programme ever since. This has been aided by its acquisition of Bucherer in 2023, which counts over 100 sales outlets across Europe and the US. In July 2023, it was estimated that there were 5,500 active Rolex listings from at least 61 authorised retailers worldwide, creating serious competition for the grey market segment.

Lionel a Marca's  
favourite timepiece,  
the Breguet Tradition  
Ref. 7057



## WATCH TREND

Rolex is far from alone in its desire to take control of the secondary market. Vacheron Constantin launched its own CPO programme in November 2024, joining the likes of Audemars Piguet, Cartier, F. P. Journe, MB&F, Richard Mille, Urwerk, and Zenith to name a few.

### Consumer benefits

There are many benefits for the consumer when it comes to brand CPO, starting with the fact that the watch brands and their experts carefully curate the timepieces on offer. For watch lovers who aren't necessarily experts in the field of vintage watchmaking, this can reassure them that the timepiece is historically and technically interesting and far more likely to retain its value, although of course, there are no guarantees.

CPO watches and their movements are also refurbished so that they are in perfect working order, bringing an extra level of trust into the equation. In the case of Vacheron Constantin, the brand has a library of spare parts, dating back over its 268-year history, so it can often replace used components with the exact same ones from the era the watch was made. All of the above comes with an ad-

ditional guarantee in case anything goes wrong, taking the risk and worry out of purchasing a vintage timepiece.

There is an additional cost to such a service with a CPO premium; this is the increase in the cost of a certified watch compared to a non-certified timepiece. In the case of Rolex, the CPO premium typically falls between 15 per cent and 30 per cent, depending on the reference and the market.

At the end of the day, it is up to the consumer whether they prefer to pay the extra for guarantees and peace of mind, or to continue to search for the best deals with non-authorised dealers. Of course, at the high-end, seasoned watch enthusiasts will continue to trust in auction houses and independent vintage specialists, where the provenance and condition of a watch will always matter more than a brand CPO stamp.

Overall, brand CPO timepieces should help the pre-owned watch segment to become more regulated and curb speculation and soaring prices, not to mention bring extra security and reassurance to consumers. But as always, only time will tell.



# THE FORD MACHINE AT WORK

**Tom Ford was recently honoured with an outstanding achievement award at The British Fashion Council's Awards 2024. What's next for this American fashion designer, businessman and filmmaker? Raising his son in the UK, he says.**

**Sarah Mower**

**T**It's quite a day to be interviewing one of the most prominent Americans in London. I'm meeting Tom Ford—designer, beauty-business genius, movie-maker, man of many lives—on the morning the Trump election news has just hit. He has chosen a private room at Scott's in Mayfair for our rendezvous. This is the only interview he says he'll give ahead of the outstanding achievement award he'll be receiving—from the hands of Anna Wintour—at the Fashion Awards at the Royal Albert Hall on Monday, December 2.

He arrives, invisibly 63, suave, smooth, slim as ever, with a charming greeting—then suddenly freezes with a look of horror. It's the lighting. "Oh

no! This is waaaay too bright!" A waiter materialises to fiddle with a dimmer hidden in a cupboard. "Lower. Lower. Lower. No. Lower!" Ford goes. Then he's up in the cupboard himself. "Now that's it." Ford has pulled an election all-nighter. "I've only just come from a nap. Which you always have to be careful about at my age," he mock-apologises, miming face creases.

But of course there is no crease on the Ford visage, nor anywhere else on his person. He's wearing his Tom Ford uniform: black one-button velvet jacket, whittled waist, two precise peaks of white pocket handkerchief, narrow grey trousers, black Chelsea boots. I think he also has on a white pleat-front evening





shirt. Three buttons are undone over a hairy chest, which I find myself, very primly, very Englishly, trying not to look at for two and a half hours.

It's midday now (Ford's least-favourite time for being seen out and about—the unflattering shadows), but somehow he has arranged the atmospherics in this fancily decorated, windowless boîte so that it could be any time of night. This is oh-so Tom Ford of old, and this is not our first rodeo. I first interviewed him back in 1994, the season before his smash-hit Gucci velvet boot-cut hipsters and slinky silk blouse collection upturned boring minimalist fashion. It made his name, setting off all the incendiary sex-and-glamour sensations that put his stamp on the late Nineties and Noughties.

Gucci had very little money at the beginning, but looking back — and also projecting forward to the movie-maker Ford is today—there was always something cinematic about the staging of those shows, down to how he rigged a single spotlight to pick out the girls in an always darkened space. “Shows are cinematic. You introduce the audience to something new. Act I, jolt them. Act II, talk them through it. Act III, resolve it. And they should leave in tears! Moved by emotion. That’s why I could never show in the day. It’s too bright! You can’t control it!”

“We can talk as long as you like,” he offers, urbanely.



FASHION  
PROFILE

"I just have to pick up Jack at four." His 12-year-old is at school in west London. Ford has been a single parent since his husband, the former fashion journalist Richard Buckley, died three years ago, after suffering complications related to a throat cancer diagnosis 30 years earlier, while they were living in Los Angeles.

First, I have to wonder: as a life-long Democrat—ever prescient of coming trends—has Ford hedged against a second Trump presidency by moving to London? Recent press reports made it seem as if he has just relocated here. He has bought a Chelsea house with a whopping £80 million price tag that has set estate agents all a-gossip; they're betting on a wealthy American refugee influx.

He sets me straight. Being here has less to do with politics, he insists, than being an anglophile, how he wants to bring up Jack and his long history in London. "Do you know, I've lived here longer than in any other city in my entire life. Twenty-five years. I moved the Gucci design studio to Grafton Street in London in the mid-1990s." He set up the Tom Ford studio in Victoria as well. That was a feather in the cap of London as a creative fashion hub. "I always intended to raise Jack in the UK. He was indeed raised here until he was five. We moved to LA to be near Richard's doctors. This will sound quaint," he adds, "but I love London. It has all the same cultural advantages of New York City, if not more. It's calm, peaceful, there's more green. It's civilised and I love English humour."

**H**appily, Jack seems to be thriving. "I think the education system is perhaps more old-fashioned here in some ways, but I also feel that it's more complete, and that a scholastic work ethic and manners are still incredibly important. While I love Los Angeles, I think it's a place to live when one is an adult." It was great for his boy to enjoy a year-round outdoor life of swimming, football and tennis, but "the extremely materialistic and status-conscious culture and lack of old-fashioned manners was starting to influence his behaviour and values. I can see a tremendous change in him since he has been back in a London school."

Part of the reason Ford can comfortably afford the Chelsea house is that Estée Lauder bought Tom Ford, the eponymous brand he set up in 2006, for \$2.8

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**I love London.  
It has all the  
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I love English  
humour.**

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Ford with his late husband, the former fashion journalist Richard Buckley (Above); His movies, *A Single Man* and *Nocturnal Animals*—written, produced and directed by him—garnered great reviews (Below)



billion in 2022. It has been estimated that his personal takeaway was \$1 billion. (“By the way,” he says with an eyeroll, “the asking price for that house is not what I paid. I did an exchange with another flat I owned in London.”) He goes on, in quite boggling detail, to describe how he owns “eight houses, four of which are for sale”, some of which are in the States, others in London. Some are “the archaeology of a past life. Now I’m creating a new life, a new place, new house, new everything.”

Everybody associates Tom Ford with his Gucci years. All that sexy, spike-heeled slinkiness—as well as the still-outrageous Gucci G he had shaved into Carmen Kass’s pubic hair in a 2003 advert—has been rediscovered by young people who were babies at the time, relevant again in this current era of “naked” dressing and Y2K trendiness. “It was simple. But the right simple for the time,” Ford says.

In a way this was all a stylistic throwback to the late 1970s, played through the memories of Studio 54 that imprinted on Ford as a young student in New York, the time he came out. It was that, and dropping in on Halston’s ultra-modernist Upper East Side townhouse at 101 East 63rd Street with a friend in Andy Warhol’s entourage, that sealed his permastyle forever. “I copied everything, the long, low grey couches, everything, from Halston’s apartment for the Gucci store design.” I strongly remember the feeling of enticement to lounge around those stores as if they were nightclubs. (Ford loved the actual Halston place so much that he bought it in 2019.)

He’s frustrated, though, that some may overlook what he believes was, “my best work, my most mature, at Saint Laurent”. That’s in the same breath as admitting that those years designing both Gucci and Saint Laurent “nearly killed me”. Even more underestimated is the much longer-lasting part of Ford’s legacy to the fashion world. In 1999 he became a chief architect—with his Gucci CEO, Domenico De Sole—of Gucci Group, which went on to become one of the two leading luxury conglomerates that dominate fashion today.

Under Ford, Gucci was going so wildly well—sales had jumped 90 per cent—and François-Henri Pinault’s PPR bought a welcome \$3 billion stake in the business. Ford then hand-picked Saint Laurent, Alexander McQueen, Balenciaga, Bottega Veneta and Stella McCartney to be purchased. “I thought, which designers am I jealous of?” Among them was Nicolas Ghesquière, who was incredibly hot at Balenciaga, and Lee McQueen, who jumped ship from LVMH’s Givenchy to join in 2000. “Lee was a genius. I am a commercial designer. I don’t pretend to be anything but, except that I have, I think, an elevated taste level that appeals to a lot of people. I have a great sense of timing, but I am classic at the core and a commercial designer. But Lee was an artist who expressed his artistry through his clothes. There’s a difference.”



Thus, with a load of corporate drama, the group that eventually became Kering was formed. The trouble for Ford and De Sole was that Pinault now essentially wanted control. In 2004—with the Gucci Group valued at more than \$10 billion—they were suddenly out. “It was a divorce, and let’s just say the other party filed for divorce.” His reaction? “It was grief and it took me years to get over that. I don’t mean that I thought it was mine. I mean I gave as much of myself as I would anything. It was a part of me and I was a part of it.”

I remember the fraught emotion at his last Gucci afterparty in Milan on February 25, 2004. He wore a black tuxedo with a white gardenia buttonhole—he’d perfected his old-time Tom Ford movie star look by then. There were lots of hardened press and international buyers in tears. His PRs let it be known he would leave on the stroke of midnight. I found the gardenia fallen among the glitter afterwards. It was nothing if not dramatically choreographed.

### On his plans to revolutionise the beauty industry

A fashion world without Tom Ford seemed unimaginable—he’d been that huge for ten years. I’d always wondered if he felt OK for money afterwards. He blinks. “Oh yes. I left Gucci never having to work again in my life because I had an enormous amount of shares.” Never having to work again! Isn’t that the fantasy outcome everyone dreams of? “I intended to just start making movies, but I missed fashion. I wasn’t finished. I was still 40.” Off he went again. He formed Tom Ford, at first as a beauty brand in 2006, making a stunning comeback with his ultra-expensive, black-packaged,

heavily sexually suggestive fragrances—a high-selling success in every department store. He has won multiple fragrance awards for them, he reminds me. “Creating fragrances is my second favourite thing. I’m wearing my last one right now—Vanilla Sex!”

He has now exited fashion completely, after the spectacular sale to Estée Lauder of the Tom Ford empire, which by then also had womenswear and menswear (“It was all fitted on me. I’m a size 48”). He’s honest: there has been emotional fallout. “Even after I’d started my own company, it took me years to really get over that [Gucci Group]. It honestly took me until Alessandro [Michele] started at Gucci, then, well, Gucci all of a sudden felt ... I felt good about Gucci again!” He claims not to look at much of what’s going on in fashion now. (I’m not sure I quite believe that.) But he is looking forward to seeing Haider Ackermann settling in at the brand he founded. “He needs to come in and take it to the next level. I don’t know how to do that. I am of an era.”



He launched Tom Ford, first as a beauty brand in 2006, making a comeback with ultra-expensive, black-packaged, sexually suggestive fragrances (Top right), winning multiple fragrance awards



## FASHION PROFILE



If the awards night might symbolise an act of closure on his chapter in fashion, his one in movies is still being written. Ford has proved he has “transferable skills”. Big time. His obsessional talent for super-vigilant image control applies to everything he has ever touched, all the way up to big-screen directing. His movies, *A Single Man* (2009) and *Nocturnal Animals* (2016)—which were written, produced and directed by him—garnered great reviews. “The second one,” he points out, “had nine Bafta nominations. Only one had more that year.”

This was to come as an enormous surprise among the fashion industry. “I only found out afterwards that everyone was saying I was mad and would fail,” he says with a laugh. “But I’m a storyteller. I think I did that through fashion, fashion images, stores. But making films is the closest you ever get to being God. Because you’re not just designing clothes. You’re designing what they do, what they say. And it’s forever sealed in a bubble. And fashion is not permanent.”

Two new projects are on the go. “One is an adaptation of *Cry to Heaven* by Anne Rice. I’ve loved it for years. It’s set in 18th-century Venice, about castrati [male singers who underwent castration]. I met with her in New Orleans before she died and I’ve drafted the screenplay.” In these times of furore about gender, that sounds like a typically provocative Fordian subject. He’s having trouble casting the right young actor, though. He has another project on the back burner—this, entirely written by

himself—if he can’t.

Ford is astonishing. A little weird—all that insatiable desire to control—but fun and jokingly self-aware of how he can’t help his perfectionism. In fashion, designers aren’t supposed to be excellent at more than one thing, you see. They’re also believed to be terrible at making money for themselves. Ford has proved everyone wrong for 30 years.

It reminds me of something he once told me about being a child, at home in a suburb of Houston, Texas, or possibly Santa Fe, where his realtor parents, Shirley and Thomas Ford, brought up Tom and his sister, Jennifer. “One day there was a ballet on television. I remember seeing it, leaping around and calling, ‘Look, Mommy, look. I can do that!’”

It has never occurred to him that he couldn’t do something—and that has included becoming a father. I remember another conversation, in the late Nineties, a couple of years into Gucci, when he told me that his biggest dream was to become a parent. “I knew, I knew I had to have a family.” At the time it felt like an almost shockingly poignant thing to say—an unattainable. It was years before same-sex marriage was legalised. Gay male couples were not having babies, at least openly. And besides, there was his wild, 24-hour working and partying lifestyle at the time.

Yet this too came to pass: marriage with Buckley, the arrival of Jack, who was born in the States. “I felt all along he had been within me,” Ford says, his eyes sparkling.

To wrap up, I ask Ford one final thing: what is his purpose in his sixties? “Oh, that’s simple,” he says without missing a beat. “It’s raising Jack.” And with that he is off to do the school run.



Clockwise from left: 'Ksiaz castle blends various architectural styles; With ornate spires, Kronborg Castle inspired Shakespeare's Hamlet; By the Moselle river are glorious vineyards and historic towns; Ever-popular Greece.



TRAVEL  
DESTINATIONS '24

# A YEAR OF WONDER

**Globetrotting to some of the more interesting travel options that spiced the calendar year**

Sonia Nazareth





Elegant. Energetic.  
Effervescent. Adjectives  
that sum up these  
sparkling places that  
each shed their ineffable  
glow on the year 2024.  
While keeping heritage  
alive, they managed to  
embrace the present  
with as much fervour.  
Younger, edgier versions  
of themselves emerged,  
without overpowering their  
altogether epic past.



## Take Me to The Water, Athens, Greece

Greece has been one of the most consistently googled spots for international travel in 2024. While its inexorable tug is one thing, the more obvious trend is for travellers to linger longer in historic Athens, before heading to the Greek islands that exert their evergreen siren call. Amid the reasons for longer stays in Athens, is the seductive call of its Riviera. Just 25-minutes out of the main city centre, this lush natural oasis, with its caves and beaches, water sports and pristine shores is sweeping more travel votes. Lake Vouliagmeni, a reservoir whose waters are consistently replenished by both sea and subterranean thermal springs, provides a relaxing natural spa experience. The newly renovated, The Roc Club, a Grecotel hotel, is a great base from which to experience the Riviera. This pearl of tranquility and elegance, perched over the rocks of Lake Vouliagmeni, with its bright interiors, white décor, art-meets-design features and sublime sea views, leads you off the straight-and-narrow and down a path of sweet distraction. Luxe boutiques, café and snazzy restaurants popping up all around, contribute to the seduction.



## Moselle Valley, Germany

If a road trip along a soothing waterway for delicious wine, glorious vineyards, and historic towns draws you in, you're only human. I begin this wine-soaked adventure at the impossibly pretty town of Traben-Trarbach. Around 1900, Traben-Trarbach was one of the most important wine trading towns. The reason for this accolade was its production of superlative Riesling wine. Fringed by the Moselle River and unfurling vineyards, it is now possible to explore the Traben-Trarbach historic cellars and learn in the semi-darkness about historic viticulture. When you want a break from wine sampling at quaint wineries, like Emil Franz that was founded over a hundred years ago, there's plenty of Art Nouveau and Belle Epoque buildings to be oohed over. Another hour-and-a-half along the Moselle River from Traben-Trarbach to Cochem is another gem of a town, strewn with castle, vineyards, half-timbered buildings, medieval charm and heart-stopping views. Also growing in popularity is a cruise along the Moselle River (the German section flows from Trier to Koblenz), with stops to drink in (if you'll pardon the pun) the wonder of these vineyard-laced towns.

Clockwise from left: Along the Athens Riviera, Cape Sounion, boasts the 5th century Temple of Poseidon; Superlative Riesling wine is one of the reasons to visit the Moselle Valley as is the river cruise; Community based tourism implies an abundance of local encounters in villages along the Sigatoka River in Fiji.



## Wild Ride, Fiji

I imagine that it's going to be a thrill-a-minute tour. After all, I've signed up to travel along the Sigatoka river aboard a custom-built jet boat, with Sigatoka River Safari. I expect to cry out with excitement, at the 360-degree spins on the twists and turns of the river; but instead the ride for much of the way—barring a few exhilarating spins, is gentle. On the banks of the river, scenes of village life unfold. These unfolding images are interspersed with the guide's narration of stories and legends, some going way back to the days of cannibalism.

What's underscored as we go along is the fact that the River Safari company works with different villages along the route, to minimise the adverse impact of tourism on the daily lives of people. If one's choice of clothing

doesn't quite match the prescribed dress code of the village to which one is headed, one is given a sulu or sarong to wear. Traditionally one makes an offering (sevusevu) to the chief on arrival at a village; Yaqona (Kava) being typically what's offered. While the ceremony that unfolds post this offering, and the subsequent sharing of a giant bowl of kava, may be organised especially for us, these customs themselves are firmly entrenched in local life. The warmth of a community eager to share their traditions, stories and ideas is palpable, in the feasting, singing and (very enthusiastic) dancing that follows. That part of the ticket price goes back to help with village projects—water, education, health—gives heart to the words 'community-based tourism'.



## MAKE IT HAPPEN

### The Roc Club, A Grecotel Hotel, Athens

A Grecotel Hotel, just pixie steps away from Lake Vouliagmeni, this stylish stay aims to please. Doubles from ₹17,000 per night. For an in-depth feel of Athens, the WOTF group ([wotfgroup.com](http://wotfgroup.com)) help customise your experience.

### Beach Hotel Marienlyst, Elsinore

Luxe, with water views of the Oresund strait. Doubles from ₹24,000 per night. For more, visit [www.copenhahen.com](http://www.copenhahen.com)

### Romantik Jungenstil Hotel Bellevue, Traben Trarbach

Top marks for location and creature comforts, this historic hotel is located directly on the Mosel. Doubles from ₹18,500 per night.

### Outrigger Fiji Beach Resort

Set amid palm trees and tropical gardens on Fiji's Coral Coast, Outrigger is a pleasing stay. Doubles from ₹22,000 per night

### Palac Kamieniec, Lower Silesia

In the heart of the Kłodzko valley, this boutique property has character, and will please with its thoughtful touches, from ancient gardens to a fine kitchen. Doubles from ₹11,500 per night.

## Sustainability and Shakespeare, Elsinore, Denmark

In 2024, Elsinore, a harbour town in the northeast corner of the island of Zealand in Denmark, won the prestigious European Green Leaf award, thanks to its litany of sustainability initiatives. Heritage is paramount and spectacular buildings and churches from the 14th and 15th century are well-preserved. Forward-looking design is embraced—the Maritime Museum, ingeniously built underground at the site of the remnants of an ancient dry-dock, has glass and aluminum bridges leading visitors through a cluster of galleries. Small businesses are actively supported, and family-owned cafes and artisanal studios dot the streets.

The other evergreen highlight of Elsinore is the UNESCO listed Renaissance-style Kronborg Castle. With its ornate spires and towers, dungeons and fortifications, the castle encapsulates the flamboyant vision of King Frederik II, who reigned from 1559 to 1588 and succeeded in creating an impression of royal power. Allegedly impressed by King Frederik's grand parties, William Shakespeare used this castle as setting for his most famous drama, Hamlet. Today Kronborg is home to the world's oldest active Shakespearean theatre tradition.





Clockwise from left  
The UNESCO listed Renaissance styled Kronborg castle is a pilgrimage for lovers of fine architecture; The Chapel of Skulls, built in baroque style is adorned with thousands of skulls and skeletal remains; Ksiaz Castle is fondly referred to as the Pearl of Lower Silesia.

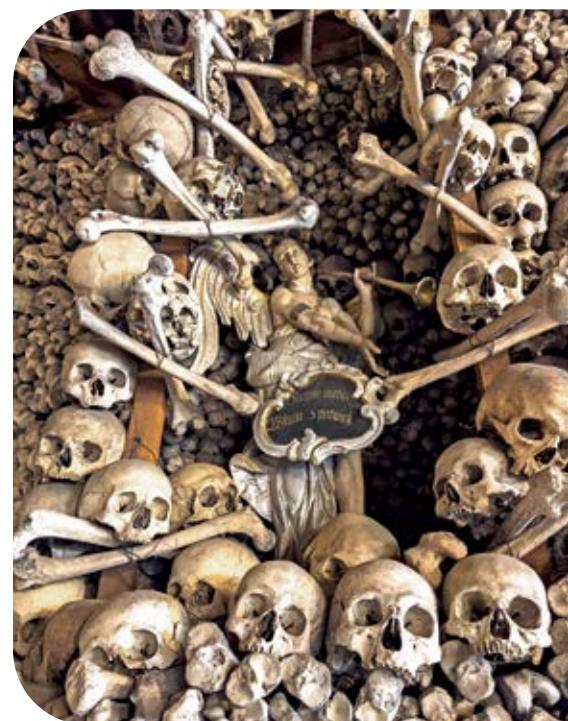
## Star-studded Lower Silesia, Poland

The year 2024, put new places on the travelling map. Lower Silesia, a crucible of art and culture, is one such gem. Even if you have a few days to add to your Polish itinerary, the places on this list (that make a unique road-trip) are worth seeking out.

I begin at the Chapel of Skulls in Czermna. Inspired by Rome's Capuchin Crypt, the walls and ceilings of this unique chapel are barnacled with human skulls and bones. The chapel serves both as a shrine for the dead and as poignant reminder of our own mortality. Nearby Kłodzko Fortress, one of the finest examples of 18th century defensive architecture, is engaging. Not just with the views of the striking town and surrounds from its terrace, but also for its underground immense labyrinthine system of tunnels, each once serving their own

purpose—defense, communication, storage.

Within driving distance is the whimsical Ksiaz Castle, fondly referred to as the Pearl of Lower Silesia. It was recently used as filming set for the Oscar award winning film, *Zone of Interest*. This lavishly ornamented palace, studded with objects d'art, hosts a blend of architectural styles that reflect various periods in its layered history. An Underground Tourist Route, now open to the public, allows visitors to explore a mysterious underground complex, built here under Hitler's orders in World War II. Engulfing the castle, are large tracts of resplendent gardens and forested land, that allow for introspection on the horrors of war, while inviting sublime appreciation of the treasures thrown up on a road less travelled.



Issa Berry, a cocktail at Issa (Below)

# RAISING THE BAR

In the dynamic world of mixology, where every drink tells a story and every pour is a masterpiece, a new chapter is being concocted by some of the bars. Here are eight bars that stirred up a riot.

Nivedita Jayaram Pawar



## MIXOLOGY BEST BARS '24

truly incredible bar experience is more than just a dazzling display of mixology. The finest bars understand that a crafted blend of unique ambience, great service and artful design is just as important as the mix of flavours in the cocktails being served. These new cocktail bars launched in 2024 showcase spectacular sips using next generation bartending techniques, rare ingredients and stunning presentations.



### Must Try

For those who appreciate a dramatic flair, the colour-changing Butterfly Effect is a sophisticated alternative to a Long Island Iced Tea.

### Price

upwards of ₹475 per drink

## Issa, Goa

If sipping drinks while gazing at a gently flowing river is to your taste, Issa overlooking the Chapora River won't disappoint. The botanical-forward cocktails here strike the perfect balance between sweet and savoury, with highlights like the Peru Picante that celebrates Goa's unique flavours. Feni takes centrestage in this signature cocktail that swaps tequila for feni, combining it with in-house jalapeno cordial and guava soda for a spicy-sweet kick. Another concoction Grand Union, features coriander infused coconut feni with bell pepper, agave, lime and pineapple foam. Mixologist creations are crisp, delicate yet complex and delicious. Issa has definitely brought an exciting new energy to the cocktail scene in Goa. The best part? It comes with stunning views of the Chapora River.



**MIXOLOGY**  
**BEST BARS '24**



## After Dinner, Goa

Everything you love about a good bar can be found at After Dinner: Terrific cocktails, priceless sea views and a comfortable ambience should you wish to linger. After Dinner is pretty all around and feels like you are drinking in a friend's living room. Mixologist Harsh Pandya shakes and stirs myriad ingredients into ideally calibrated glassware (think teddy bear, toothbrush, etc). While a negroni is infused with pandan, a spicy tequila finds its match in pineapple, Cointreau and coconut water. The nuanced concoctions combine nostalgia with flamboyant fun. There's also a short but smart selection of wines and premium spirits. The tapas-style bites by chef Rohan D'souza are both comfortingly familiar and full of surprises. What's best, After Dinner has the kind of flattering lighting that makes everyone look like they just got back from a week in St. Moritz!



**Must Try**  
Clarified Coffee Sour is a thoughtful blend of white rum, spiced pineapple rum, lime juice, and coconut concentrate.

**Price**  
upwards of ₹675 per drink



**Must Try**

**Cherry Cherry Lady:**  
Playful twist on the classic LIIT, comes topped with maraschino cherry cola foam.

**Price**  
upwards of ₹755 per drink





## Bumipura, Mumbai

Founder Ming Yang Chai wants to challenge the way we think about drinks. And he does it too at this 21-foot omakase-style bar, where laboratory-crafted drinks play with flavours, textures and colours. The cocktails here are inspired by wholesome Malay and Singaporean food. Think, a martini inspired by Hainanese chicken rice or a creative take on Malaysia's iconic Nasi Lemak with a foam made from jasmine rice cooked with coconut cream and pandan leaves. Memorable sips include 'O is the New Black', a playful take on the nostalgic Kopiko candy with coffee-infused fat-washed vodka, white pepper-infused gin, Campari and Rosso. Prepare for a show as smoke bubbles and sparks fly around you as bartenders in all black garnish drinks with dramatic flourishes. Bar bites like chili crab baos and CR Burger play the perfect supporting roles. Alongside technique-driven drinks with layers of complexity, expect a futuristic vibe and an overall feel like you've stepped inside a time machine!



### Must Try

Gloves & Bibs, is a savoury and umami-rich cocktail with briny notes of crab consommé and sun-dried tomato infused rum.

### Price

upwards of ₹ 575 per drink

## Shiso, Amritsar

In Amritsar, and looking for serious cocktails with a great ambience? Head to Shiso. The bar here features cool, boozy concoctions like Tamarelo where a tequila meets the tangy flavours of tamarind and bold Mexican spices. Subak a clarified cocktail brings umami to a glass with its blend of whisky with lime, watermelon and a touch of soy sauce. Expert cocktails

are joined by rare Japanese whisky varieties and Shiso's in-house wines and rice beer. No matter how busy the bar, the staff is unfailingly attentive. Need a quiet moment with a drink? The staff at Shiso will happily oblige. Want to geek out over rare spirits? The bartenders love sharing their knowledge. What more can you ask for in a stellar bar?





## The Brook, Gurugram

This new bar celebrates underused Himalayan produce. Dive into delightfully nuanced cocktails by Yangdup Lama. The gin-based Duk Ley, meaning “it’s beautiful” in Ladakhi, blends sea buckthorn, while the rum-based Mitho Amilo, meaning “sweet and sour” in Nepali, marries the tangy, savoury notes of gundruk with the sweetness of date jaggery syrup. Everyone has a favourite child. Yangdup’s is clearly the martini which comes with a hint of Himalayan juniper and a touch of timbur—wild harvested Himalayan Schezwan pepper. The kalari and pankhuri cheeses from Kashmir and Pork Two Ways with dalle chutney make for the perfect accompaniments. The menu also features an intriguing thou cha (tea) programme curated by Anandini Himalaya Tea, alongside freshly roasted coffee by Subko.

## Bombay Daak, Mumbai

This ‘daru and chakna’ themed bar from the folks behind Ekaa, feels simultaneously transportive and deeply grounded in drinking traditions across India. Expect a cozy nook with just 30 seats, dark woods, hand-painted tiles and vintage lamps salvaged from a British whisky bar in old Bombay. The hyper-local cocktails by Yathish Bangera pay homage to India’s dive bars and include such gems like Finding Fenia, a refreshing cocktail inspired by the Gaud Saraswat Brahmin communi-



ty’s sweet and tangy mango curry and Parangi Malu a gin-based cocktail with smoky flavours of coffee and jackfruit. The chakna menu includes nostalgic favourites such as fried bombil, smoked pork and cheese cherry pineapple, which perfectly complement the cocktails. This is the place to meet friends, toast milestones, complain about your boss or ex, and engage total strangers in conversations.



### Must Try

Whistle Podu, a tangy rasam drink spiked with gin, amaro and caramelised tomato packs a punch.

### Price

upwards of ₹850 per drink



### Must Try

Happy Himalachali Hi Ball with blended whisky, Himalayan apple cider vinegar and maple is a zesty drink.

### Price

upwards of ₹725 per drink





## Siren, Bengaluru

This dimly lit and distinctly Chinese cocktail bar always feels like a party. The cocktails here are inspired by the seasons and festivals celebrated across China. One standout is the Spring Sunset cocktail which celebrates Lunar New Year with vodka, Martini Fiero, peach and orange. Chrysanthemum gin and elderflower syrup come together in the floral number Remember Jie. Select a few small plates of Crispy Chicken or the Sticky Pork Ribs to keep your feet on the ground. The light is made for Instagram, and you'll see patrons taking full advantage of it. You should too!



### Must Try

The creative and flavourful cocktail Peking Duck made with duck fat washed whisky, plum juice, Falernum liqueur and hoisin sauce is a crowd pleaser.

### Price

upwards of ₹450 per drink

## Onrique, Mumbai

If you are looking for inventive cocktails unlike anything you've ever imagined, you'll find it here at Onrique. The effortlessly glamorous rooftop bar whisks you away to the French Riviera where bar head Santosh Kukreti makes standout cocktails inspired by the Mediterranean coastline. Take the earthy and citrusy Sunset in Saint-Tropez which blends Bombay sapphire with fresh turmeric, tangerine and tonic. Elsewhere, a fresh melon pairs beautifully with Bianco and gin for a refreshingly fruity cocktail Wild Bush. The bar also serves skilfully made martinis such as Affogato Martini and the Tiramisu Martini. A DJ holds fort on weekdays while live music serenades on weekends. Swing by for a date or for after-work drinks with a side of panoramic views of the city.



### Must Try

The tequila based Pizzarita with jalapeño and parmesan mimics a pizza in a glass.

### Price

upwards of ₹750 per drink

# CHAR THE TAR



**FROM PERFORMANCE ICONS TO SILENT EVS,  
MEET THE CLASS OF 2024 THAT REDEFINED  
LUXURY ON THE MOVE.**

**Dhiram Shah**

From sleek coupes that roar like Bollywood blockbusters to sedans blending old-world class with futuristic flair, 2024's best luxury cars each steal the spotlight in their own category. We've handpicked these top contenders: performance SUV, elegant sedan, whisper-quiet EV, opulent MPV, and a dazzling Made in India masterpiece, because they reinvent what it means to travel in style. Think handcrafted interiors, state-of-the-art tech, and driving experiences that feel more VIP lounge than mere transport. These automotive stars redefine comfort, capability, and class to make every journey feel like a red-carpet arrival.

**Price**  
**₹4.05 cr**

## **Porsche 911 Turbo 50 Years**

Fifty years after Porsche first strapped a turbocharger to the back of its 911, the new 911 Turbo 50 Years rolls in like it owns the place. This isn't some dusty trip down memory lane; it's an unapologetic reminder of where modern performance worship began. The original 930 didn't just go fast, it changed perceptions, giving the world a rear-engined powerhouse that surpassed engineering curiosity and soared straight into cultural icon territory, nudging aside the super cars and poster divas with a confident wink.

Under its sleek skin, a 3.7-litre flat-six conjures 640 horsepower, delivering jaw-dropping acceleration from 0 to 100 km/h in around 2.7 seconds. Turbonite accents nod to the early RSR Turbo, while subtle decals and tartan upholstery add a whisper of vintage flair without sliding into retro kitsch. It's a quiet flex rather than a desperate scream.

Half a century on, the 911 Turbo 50 Years stands at the summit of timeless desirability. It's not just a car; it's a knowing grin, a legacy born of racing spirit, and living proof that real legends never fade.



AUTO  
BEST OF 2024



### 2024 BMW 5 Series

The 2024 BMW 5 Series LWB is luxury done right, dressed in a form that is longer, wider, and taller to suit Indian tastes. Yet it avoids flashy gimmicks, opting for crisp lines, elegant bronze accents, and distinctive vertical lighting that offer the soft elegance of contemporary class rather than a shout for attention.

Slide inside and the mood shifts to an upscale lounge on wheels. Plush materials, textured wood, satin metal, and crystalline touches surround you in an atmosphere that feels crafted by artisans rather than assembly lines. Thanks to that stretched wheelbase, the rear seat is as generous as a private cinema box, letting you sink back in comfort while the world blurs past outside. On the road, it remains hushed and calm, the 48V mild hybrid system ensuring near silent getaways. Despite its grown dimensions, everyday manoeuvres come easily, making the new 5 Series LWB feel every bit as effortless as it is indulgent.

Price  
₹73 lakhs



AUTO  
BEST OF 2024



### Mercedes Maybach EQS SUV

The Mercedes Maybach EQS SUV takes quiet luxury to fresh heights. Slip inside and it feels like a private members club on wheels, where indulgent leather, gleaming wood, and thoughtful little details turn every journey into a star-studded affair. The rear seats practically beg you to recline and drift off into a dream of warm foot-rests, personal tablets, and even bespoke champagne flutes within arm's reach.

Outside, polished metallic trims and elegant two-tone paint choices offer sophisticated drama without the need for

theatrical flourishes. Underneath that graceful exterior lies serious performance: the 680 variant packs two permanently excited synchronous motors delivering 658bhp and 900Nm of torque, lunging to 100kph in just 4.4 seconds. With a claimed 600km WLTP range, you can do a Mumbai to Goa run in near silence.

True, it might not be the last word in technical brilliance, but for those who value effortless comfort, discreet elegance, and a bit of Instagram flair, the Maybach EQS SUV simply sparkles.



Price  
₹2.25 cr



### Lexus LM

If you think first-class flights are the pinnacle of luxury travel, wait until you experience the Lexus LM. This is the private jet that never leaves the ground, the go-to chariot for the already famous as it glides discreetly between helipads and millionaire abodes. From the driver's seat, it floats over bumps and dips with the poise of a Gulfstream, staying perfectly composed even on twisty backroads. There is barely a hint you are piloting an MPV rather than a top-tier Lexus saloon.

Slide open the whisper-quiet door and step into a cabin that seems airlifted straight from an elite VIP lounge. Plush leather, mirrored timber veneers, and glass ceilings frame an environment where you do not just sit—you sink. The Takumi model's two monumental captain's chairs recline to near-flat, pampering you with massage functions and a colossal 48-inch screen for on-demand entertainment. No turbulence, no queues, just an exquisite, all-access pass to the finer side of travel.

★★★  
Price  
₹2.62 cr  
★★★



AUTO  
BEST OF 2024



### The Range Rover

The Range Rover's star power is undeniable. Just think of any royal garage or billionaire's driveway, and you will likely find this iconic SUV standing tall. Now, there is even more reason to celebrate as Jaguar Land Rover brings local assembly of the Range Rover and Range Rover Sport to India, making these luxury powerhouses more accessible than ever to homegrown buyers. Think of it as haute couture tailored right here at home.

Step inside, and you are greeted by a cabin so plush it could teach five-star hotels a thing or two. Whether you choose sumptuous

leather or more sustainable textiles, you will find that the attention to detail is second to none. The seats can be configured for four, five, or even seven passengers, each enjoying generous headroom and supportive cushioning. The state-of-the-art infotainment system offers wireless Apple CarPlay, Android Auto, and Alexa for smooth digital integration. On the road, the Range Rover's air suspension seems to glide over imperfections, while off-road modes help you tackle any challenge. It is a stunner, assembled in India and ready to shine in every moment.

Price  
₹2.36 cr



FINE LIVING  
WATERING  
HOLE

# THE ART OF THE APERITIF

**A new beverage menu at Cirrus 9 outlines architectural gems lacing its rooftop views**

**Chumki Bharadwaj**

**D**espite the brutal winter smog that obscures both vision and views, The Oberoi, New Delhi, and its rooftop bar, Cirrus 9, offer covetable rooftop views. If the 18-hole Delhi Golf Course isn't enough of a pop for the peepers, there's Bharat Mandapam, Sunder Nursery, Purana Qila, among others that lend glory.

As an ode to this splendid viewing experience and the architectural gems dotting the hotel, Oberoi Hotels & Resorts has introduced famed mixologist, Giancarlo Mancino's artisanal cocktails at Cirrus 9, launched as part of the new Signature Skyline Cocktail Menu.

What's more, these skyline-inspired cocktails use bespoke 3D, 90 per cent sustainable glassware to add more green to conscious indulgence. The curated selection is nothing short of genius when it comes to both the palate and presentation. Our favourite: 'Heritage Greens', an homage to the serene beauty of Sunder Nursery. Even for those who haven't evolved a palate for clarified cocktails, this one is a winner with its complex, sweet, zesty flavours combining Cognac, coconut, Campari, lemon and milk. 'Haaat Heaven' is just as eclectic as the Delhi Haat and brings sweet, nutty joy to the glass with white rum, sweet potato, Taro, ginger and lemon to marry, while 'The Qila legacy' with Patron leading the brigade with shiso and jasmine; With convivial spirits, coupled with companionable views, this is a whole in one!

**WHERE** The Oberoi , New Delhi  
**COST** ₹2,000 per ++ per cocktail



FINE LIVING  
RESTAURANT

Clockwise from right:  
Bonita is animated by  
beautiful chandeliers;  
Coastline, a bacon  
washed vodka cocktail;  
Chilli pineapple tres leche;  
Bonita in South Goa's  
Arossim; Sweet sticky  
Korean pork ribs; Tuna  
tataki with ponzu



# DELICIOUS DINING WITH A SIDE OF LUSCIOUS VIEWS

Bonita, a quietly charming restaurant in Goa's Arossim brims with flavour and a stunning landscape to boot.

Nivedita Jayaram Pawar





The most captivating new restaurant in South Goa, entices you straight from the street with a stately Portuguese villa fringed by a lush courtyard, and continues the seduction inside the handsome dining room, animated by the soft glow of chandeliers and the clinking of cocktail glasses. Bonita, which comes from the makers of Heritage Village Resort & Spa, is the kind of place where you could grab a table by the tall glass wall and let the day melt away. It doesn't hurt that Abba and Madonna belt in the background.

#### Around the World

The menu spans European, American and South Asian dishes. But the best beginnings are in the raw bar – particularly the tuna tataki, which lounges in a bath of sake ponzu. The chonak (barramundi) ceviche tossed in tiger's milk and animated with charred pineapple and kiwi salsa is finger-licking good. The mushroom pate with a crowning mound of onion jam is

ambitious, delicious and fun. Turns out, the tapas was merely a curtain raiser for the main act - Korean pork ribs. The sweet, sticky sauce-doused ribs were so succulent and yielding, they practically fell off the bone under nothing but a hard stare.

Plates of grilled prawns flying off the kitchen was a prompt to order the signature dish - six luscious, showstopping prawns in a slurpable pool of melted butter and a fragrant carpet of garlic and olives. Another specialty is the burger: hearty, meaty and saucy.

At Bonita, sipping is as much fun as chewing; the bar is staffed by folks who won't collapse like a soufflé when you move beyond the classics. Try the Coastline which is coaxed from bacon washed vodka and tomato, or the Surfside, a mezcal drink which gets its funk from grilled pineapple.

I ended my maiden meal at Bonita lightly but luxuriously with a tres leche. The portion size is the kind that your grandmother might cut for you when your parents aren't around. For the generosity alone, I give it full marks but I also fell for the roasted pineapples and the tender coconut ice cream that came with it.

Bonita is a charming place to eat, the food is delicious and the cocktails thoughtful. You could bring a date here, or your parents. In many ways, it is exactly what South Goa needed. We can call it whatever we want, but the throngs of guests crowding into Bonita call it a welcome arrival.

**Where** Bonita, Arossim Beach Road, Arossim, Goa

**Contact** 07410042991

**Cost** Meal for two ₹5000 ++





# FINGER CLICKING GOOD

Finally there's a Smartphone that's fit to fire your DSLR

**Sulabh Puri**

We've been using the Oppo Find X8 Pro for some time, and it's safe to say this phone wants a seat at the big kids' table. Priced at a cool ₹99,999, it's challenging Apple, Samsung, and Google for flagship supremacy.

#### More is More

Oppo's design screams "camera first". The huge circular camera module on the back looks like a miniature DSLR lens. The premium matte-finish glass back and subtly curved edges feel luxurious in the hand. The protective case and the 80W charger are a refreshing break from today's minimalist packaging trends.

#### Bright, Bold, and Beautiful

A 6.78-inch LTPO AMOLED screen that's bright enough to rival the midday sun? Check. Smooth 120Hz refresh rate? Absolutely. HDR content practically dances on this display, ensuring your Netflix binges stay enthralling.



#### Fast becomes Faster

A 3nm MediaTek Dimensity 9400 chip with 16GB RAM keeps multitasking effortless. Heavy gaming? No stutters. Editing high-resolution videos? No complaints. ColorOS 15 over the latest Android OS adds personality, though the occasional bloatware is a minor buzzkill.

#### Top-Class Optics

With four 50MP rear shooters that deliver even the minutest details, vibrant colours, and jaw-dropping zoom, this phone's photographic arsenal leaves you wondering why you ever needed a DSLR. Low light? No problem. Portraits? Picture-perfect every time.

#### Final Take

The Oppo Find X8 Pro aims for the stars and often lands right on target. It's stylish, it's powerful, and it definitely knows how to strike a pose.

# COLOUR OF SUCCESS

**Apple iMac 2024 is a desktop that's as vibrant as a disco ball and twice as clever.**

**M**eet the new iMac (2024); a rainbow-hued genius, sleek as a runway model, powered by Apple M4 chip and Apple Intelligence. It is ready to dazzle, delight, and dominate your digital life.

#### Design

Ever seen a supermodel at the gym? The new iMac is kind of like that: impossibly thin, vibrant in seven fresh colours, and completely unapologetic about it. It's sleek enough to slide into any space without hogging attention, yet bold enough to claim the spotlight when it wants.

#### Display

Your eyes won't know what hit them. The 24-inch 4.5K Retina display now comes with nano-texture, so glare is banished like an unwanted pop-up ad. It's pure viewing delight, even if your living room is basically a greenhouse.

#### Performance

M4 inside means it's as fast as a cheetah on espresso. Tasks that once felt sluggish now zip by, and AI-enhanced "Apple Intelligence" can tidy your writing or create custom emojis as if by digital magic. Demanding gaming? It's got your back, making those late-night Civilization VII



conquests feel smoother than ever.

A new 12MP Center Stage camera cleverly keeps you front and centre on calls, and even gives others a peek at your desk (for showing off that latte art or new invention). Thunderbolt 4 ports deliver blazing connectivity, ready for extra screens or storage without breaking a digital sweat.

#### Final Thoughts

This iMac is a friendly powerhouse. It's gorgeous. It's brilliant. It's confident enough to play nice with your existing gear. If you're ready for a desktop that looks like fine art, thinks like a genius, and feels like the future, this might just be the one.

**Price ₹1,54,900**



# DESIRE ON WHEELS

**Driving around Mumbai in a bright red G-wagen elicited a range of reactions from me and city residents. Spice got an exclusive first look at the new Mercedes-AMG G 63. Here's the verdict.**

**Riaan Jacob George**

Is it really a good idea to flex one's four-litre twin-turbo, V8 engine, pushing out 587 bhp of power and 850 nm of torque in Mumbai's narrow, often crumbling streets? I guess not. But when you're behind the wheels of the iconic Geländewagen aka the 'G-wagon'—which wields pop culture and social media clout like no other SUV—it's all good.

Today, I'm skirting the bends of Mumbai's urban sprawl in the AMG version of Mercedes-Benz's legendary G-Class SUV. And to say that this car's unmistakable geometric, tall, boxy silhouette is a head-turner is saying too little. I do attract a lot of attention on the streets in this red G 63, embell-

ished with the signature AMG badging, in an eye-catching red hue. The 22-inch AMG multi-spoke alloys with black exhaust pipes and carbon accents that make it stand out give it such a sporty, rugged look. The round projector LED headlights are a signature and they really add a fierce touch to the overall stance of the car. It is also an extremely high-built car, and stepping into the seat is a climb if you will, but the stylish running black running boards at the bottom make the task easier.

On the inside, this car is heavily stylised but it is sporty and rugged through and through. While I may not be indulging in





intense off-roading in Mumbai, the unmistakable grab handle on the passenger side does it give it a nice adventurous touch. The quilted leather seats with the AMG badging lend a premium look, while the black, grey and silver chrome accents through the car are definitely easy on my eye. I have always been a fan of Mercedes's aviation-turbine-style AC vents and the G 63 places two of them right at the centre console, framed elegantly in a metallic box, with a variety of hard keys (full marks for these) and sitting atop another line of hard keys that control the AC functions.

The G 63 gets the AMG-style steering wheel, which looks very luxe by the way, and I do spend a lot of time turning the rotary dials to select different functions and watch the cor-

responding animations on the driver display. My favourite interior feature on all recent Mercedes cars is the dual touchscreens that sweep across the front of the cabin. In this car, there are two 12.3 inch touchscreens. The driver display is beautifully designed, highlight customisable and integrates augmented reality into the navigation aids quite effortlessly. The centre touchscreen features the manufacturer's MBUX infotainment system, which works without a glitch when connected to my iPhone with CarPlay. The infotainment suite comes packed

with 18 speakers by Burmester.

Other cabin features that I do appreciate are the panoramic sunroof—it makes Mumbai look so much nicer when driving through the city, with a cabin bathed in natural light—

and the three-zone AC system, which functions without any glitches.

Despite no high-speed stretches, I do spend a lot of time tinkering with the car's many safety features. The G 63 comes packed, as you would expect, with a series of advanced driver assist systems. Active brake assist, lane keep assist, blind spot assist and a 360-degree camera, which are always welcome in both city and countryside driving conditions.

The overall drive quality is impressive and given the engine capability, only one tap of the accelerator on relatively empty freeway stretches sends the car rocketing forward, with that extremely satisfying, throaty groan, enhanced further when switched into sports mode.

Let's face it; nothing marries cult status with performance, like this sporty and rugged beast. With pure luxury on the inside, and packed with tech and design accents, this one defines desire.

### MERCEDES-AMG G 63

**Power** 577 hp  
**Torque** 850 NM  
**Acceleration** 0-100 kmph: 4.5 seconds  
**Engine type** 4.0 Litre V8  
**Top speed** 220 kmph  
**Transmission** Automatic 9-gears, manual override/paddle shift  
**Price** ₹3.6 crore ++

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[Breguet.com](http://Breguet.com)

## TRUE BLUE

**BLUE MAY BE** a colour traditionally associated with all things royal, but when it comes to haute horology, especially Breguet, the hue lends its own cues. Introduced as part of the Tradition collection, the Tradition Chronographe Indépendant 7077 underlines precise short-time measurement, in line with Abraham-Louis Breguet's vision of making technical innovation accessible. The "Breguet Blue" festoons the

face of the Tradition Chronographe Indépendant 7077 and enhances its contemporary aesthetic. What's more, the colour introduces stark contrasts to intensify readability as well as spotlight the technical architecture, offering an unfettered view of the dual balance wheels in action. Its geometric appearance, particularly the symmetrical design of its displays and dual balance wheels, is accented by the "Breguet

blue". While the hours and minutes are indicated by two rhodium-plated Breguet open-tipped hands on a "Breguet Blue" gold dial at 12 o'clock, the engine-turned by hand with a Clous de Paris pattern, is surrounded by white Roman numerals. The final spot of the "Breguet Blue" alligator leather strap completes the royal stamp with an 18 carat white gold triple-blade folding clasp.

By Chumki Bharadwaj

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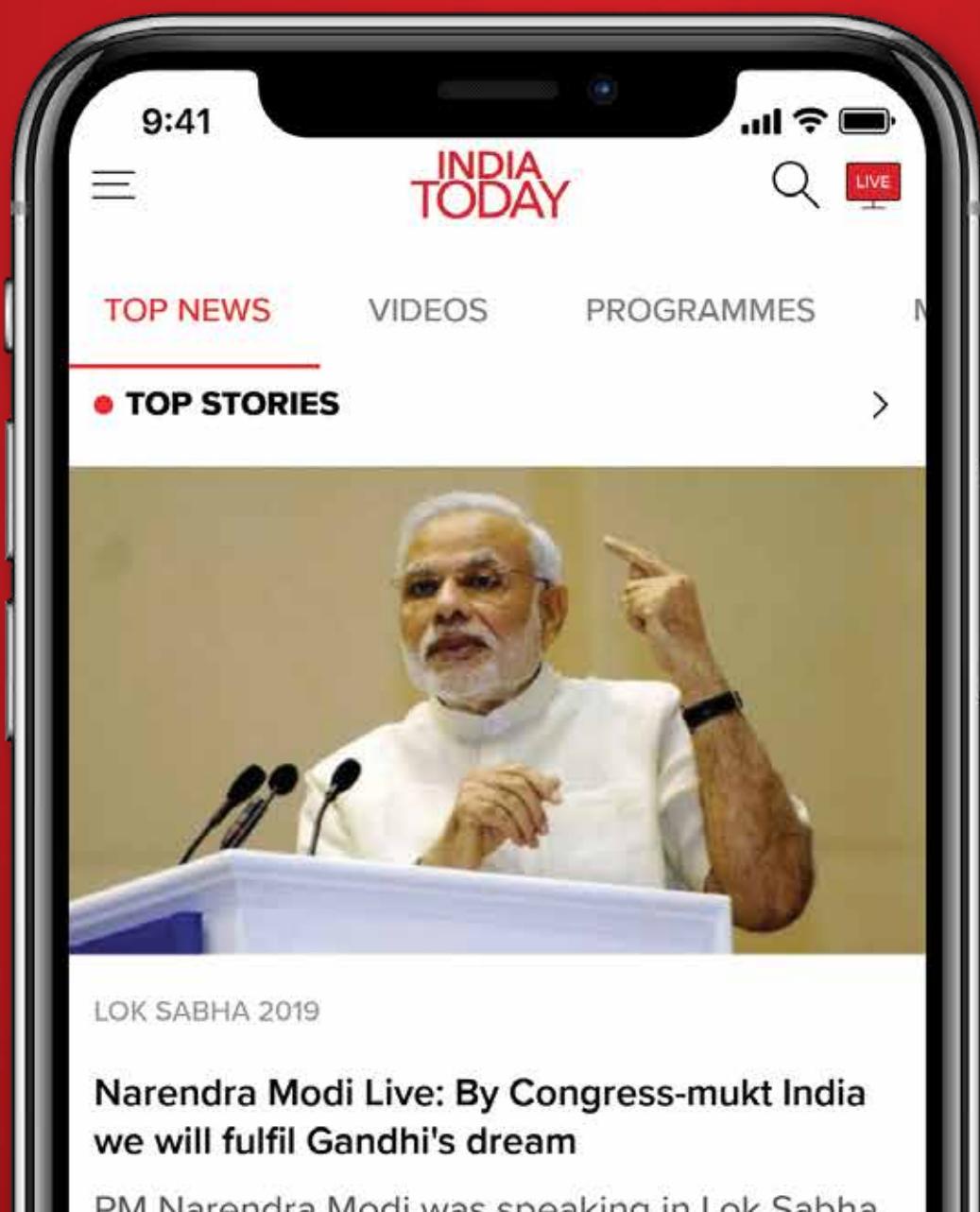
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