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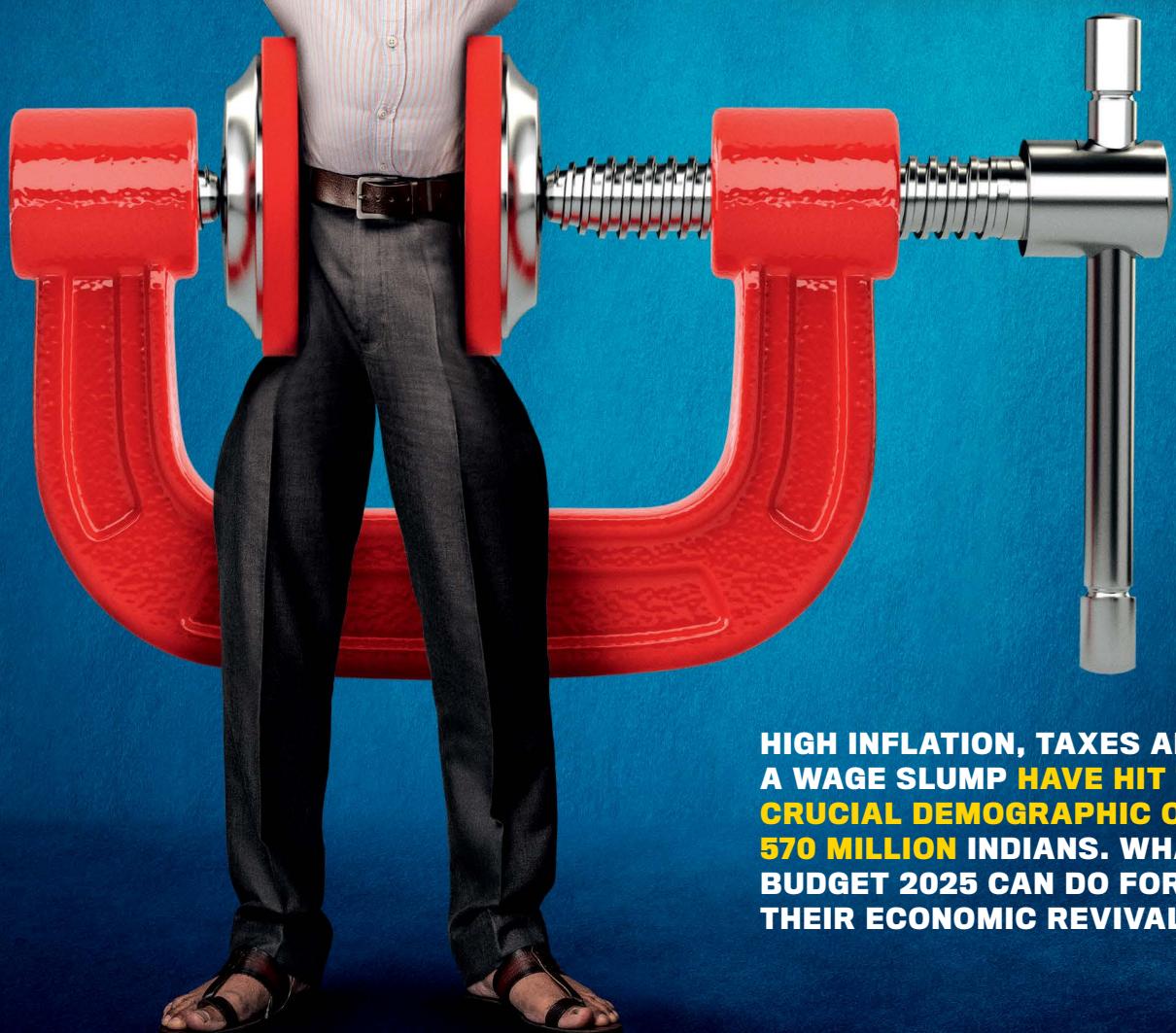
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JANUARY 27, 2025 ₹100



INDIA TODAY

MIDDLE CLASS THE BIG SQUEEZE



HIGH INFLATION, TAXES AND
A WAGE SLUMP HAVE HIT THIS
CRUCIAL DEMOGRAPHIC OF
570 MILLION INDIANS. WHAT
BUDGET 2025 CAN DO FOR
THEIR ECONOMIC REVIVAL

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MARCH, 2025



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Like most finance ministers in history, Nirmala Sitharaman will be furiously engaged in striking the proper balances in Union Budget 2025. Seeding maximum growth within fiscal constraints is a difficult task. There are some 570 million Indians whose predicament may resonate with her, similarly engaged as they are in eking out their own monthly and annual budgets to ensure both ends meet. This is the famed middle class, the nucleus of the Indian story since the 1990s. As the growth path of the Indian economy oscillates, this class reels under a triple whammy: stagnating wages, a web of dismaying taxes, and spiralling prices. Based on consumption data, those at the top of the economic pyramid are doing well, and for those at the bottom, urban and rural, distress is mitigated by free food, cash handouts and other freebies. The corporates, too, cannot really complain of feeling orphaned, with their tax rates slashed considerably in 2019. It's the middle that feels the squeeze in their standard of living.

The middle class is loosely seen as those who are not rich and not poor. But they are a multi-layered entity. People Research on India's Consumer Economy (PRICE), a Delhi-based think tank, defines it as the class that has an annual household income between Rs 6 lakh and Rs 36 lakh. This week's cover story is on this section of society, which is presently estimated at 38 per cent of the population, up from 31 per cent in 2020-21. It is also India's fastest-growing segment. They earn over half of India's household income and contribute 50 per cent of total consumption. But this class has to shoulder a disproportionate share of India's income tax burden while also bleeding from a thousand cuts via indirect taxes. With this massive core of the consuming classes under pressure, the inevitable is happening: tapering consumer demand, the consequences of which radiate to all parts of the economy. There has been a perceptible slowdown in GDP growth in FY25, now scaled down to 6.4 per cent instead of the forecasted 7-8 per cent, when it should be accelerating rapidly.

In a bleak job market, real wage growth in the urban corporate sector has slumped from 10 per cent just two years ago to 3-4 per cent now. That's when consumer price inflation was hitting hard, spiking to a 14-month high of 6.2 per cent in October. Food prices were a significant causative factor there; inflation on vegetables alone clocked over 42.2 per cent, a 57-month high. As our real-life examples confirm, the typical middle-class household faces a 30 per cent surge in expenditure. Forced to pour a larger share of their budgets into basic sustenance heads like food, rent and high interest rates, the consequences are: a substantial drop in discretionary spending, a deferment of costlier necessities, and an overall descent into cut-price living.

There is palpable evidence across sectors of the two big markers of K-shaped growth: premiumisation at the upper end, and pauperisation down below. The best marker is the ultimate middle-class dream: a new compact car. Hatchback sales saw a steep 15.5 per cent year-on-year decline across the first 11 months of 2024. This budget segment, which made up 70 per cent of passenger vehicle sales in 1999 and 47 per cent even in 2020, dipped to 26 per cent in 2024. This was also the year when the costlier SUV and crossover segment breached the 50 per cent mark. The inequities of India's growth story are glaring.

Another warning sign is the trough that fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) majors have hit. Sales value growth here nearly halved across September 2023-24, from 10 per cent to 5.6 per cent, while volumes stayed stagnant. In this bellwether sector, often the first to reflect any negative consumer sentiment, the middle class overwhelmingly went for cheaper,

unbranded items. With white goods and tech durables, where consumers tend to delay purchases or prolong replacement cycles, volume growth was flat across 60 categories, including in TVs, refrigerators and mobile phones. In real estate, unsold inventories are the order of the day in the sub-Rs 50 lakh segment, with high interest rates not helping. In contrast, the Rs 1 crore-plus segment is booming.

For six quarters after Covid-19, pent-up demand gave us happy bounce-back figures. That burst of 'revenge spending' is clearly over. For new demand to emerge, real wage growth is critical. How can Budget '25 lift the flagging middle-class spirits? Estimates vary, but those earning Rs 15 lakh and above annually pay roughly 35 per cent in direct and indirect taxes. Raising that floor and dialling down that rate overall would release millions at the lower end of this bracket from precarity and bring a massive, broad-spectrum boost in consumption. "They will have to target the entire middle class, rather than just the lower middle class," says Madan Sabnavis, chief economist at Bank of Baroda. Experts also advocate a rationalisation of GST slabs and a reduction in central excise on fuel, which has not reflected the near-40 per cent drop in crude prices since 2022. In our cover story, Managing Editor M.G. Arun and Senior Associate Editor Sonal Khetarpal capture the key strategies needed to armour-plate the very hull of India's ship as it seeks higher velocities. In the forthcoming budget, the Finance Minister has some seriously challenging choices to keep the economy on an even keel.



April 25, 2022


(Aroon Purie)

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[COVER STORY]

MIDDLE CLASS THE BIG SQUEEZE

Illustration by SIDDHANT JUMDE



High inflation, taxes and a wage slump have hit this crucial demographic of 570 million Indians. What Budget 2025 can do for their economic revival

24

UPFRONT

UP: PANDORA'S BOX
UNDER THE SHRINE PG 6

MAHARASHTRA: A
MURDER UNSETTLES
THE MAHAYUTI PG 9

LEISURE

COOKING UP A
STORM PG 61

Q&A WITH
AMITAV GHOSH
PG 70

INSIDE

CONGRESS

20 CONGRESS
READIES TO PIVOT

The move to jettison allies,
rebuild own poll machinery
blunts Opposition challenge

ODISHA

34 THE ALL-NEW
NAVEEN PATNAIK

No longer reserved and
detached, the ex-CM is now
a fiery Opposition force

CIVIL AVIATION

38 MAKING DELHI
A GLOBAL HUB

Despite India's booming
aviation sector, there are
hurdles ahead in this plan

AUTO REPORT

43 THE SEDAN
RETURNS

The fourth-gen Maruti
Suzuki Dzire is a sleeker
and safer compact sedan



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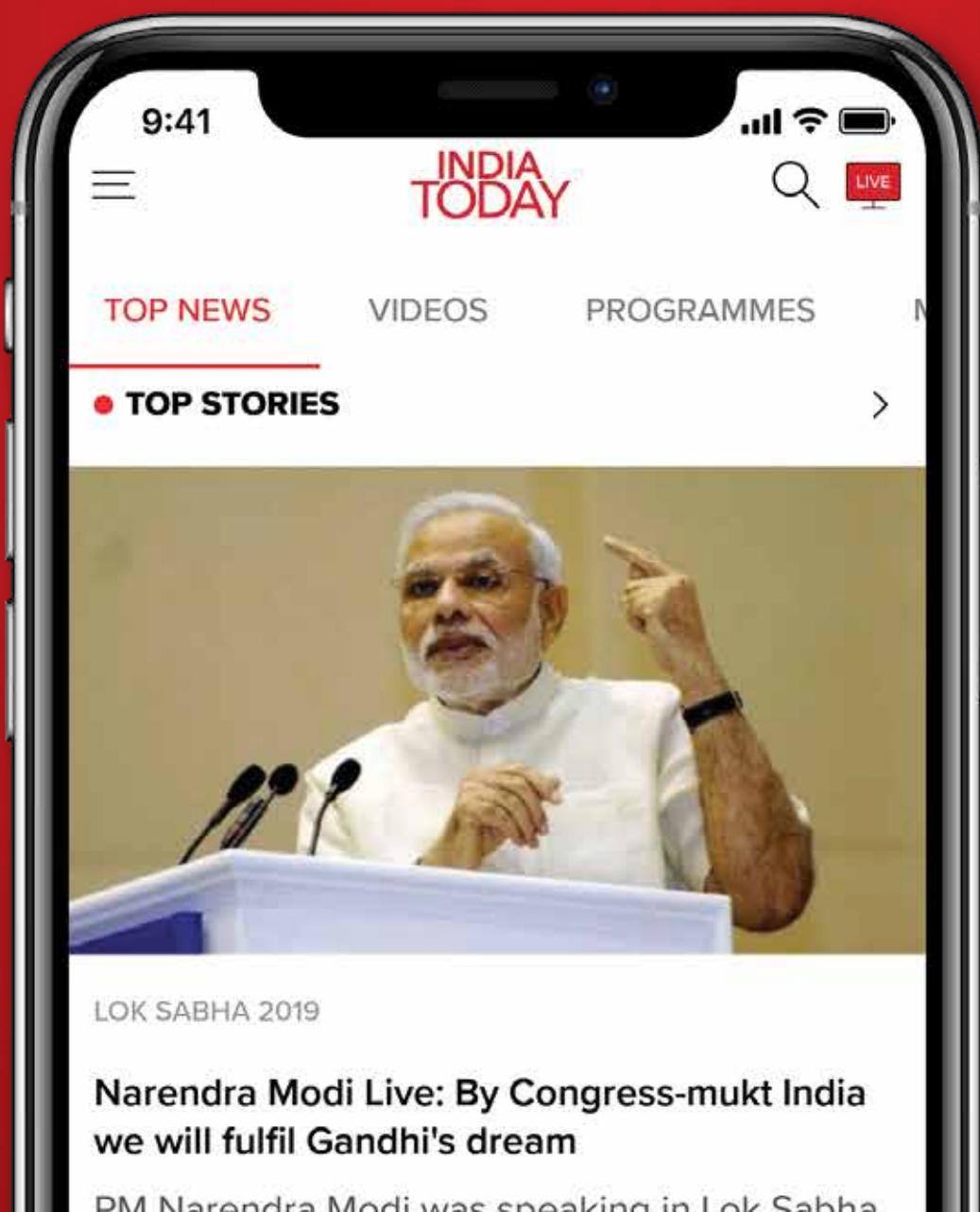
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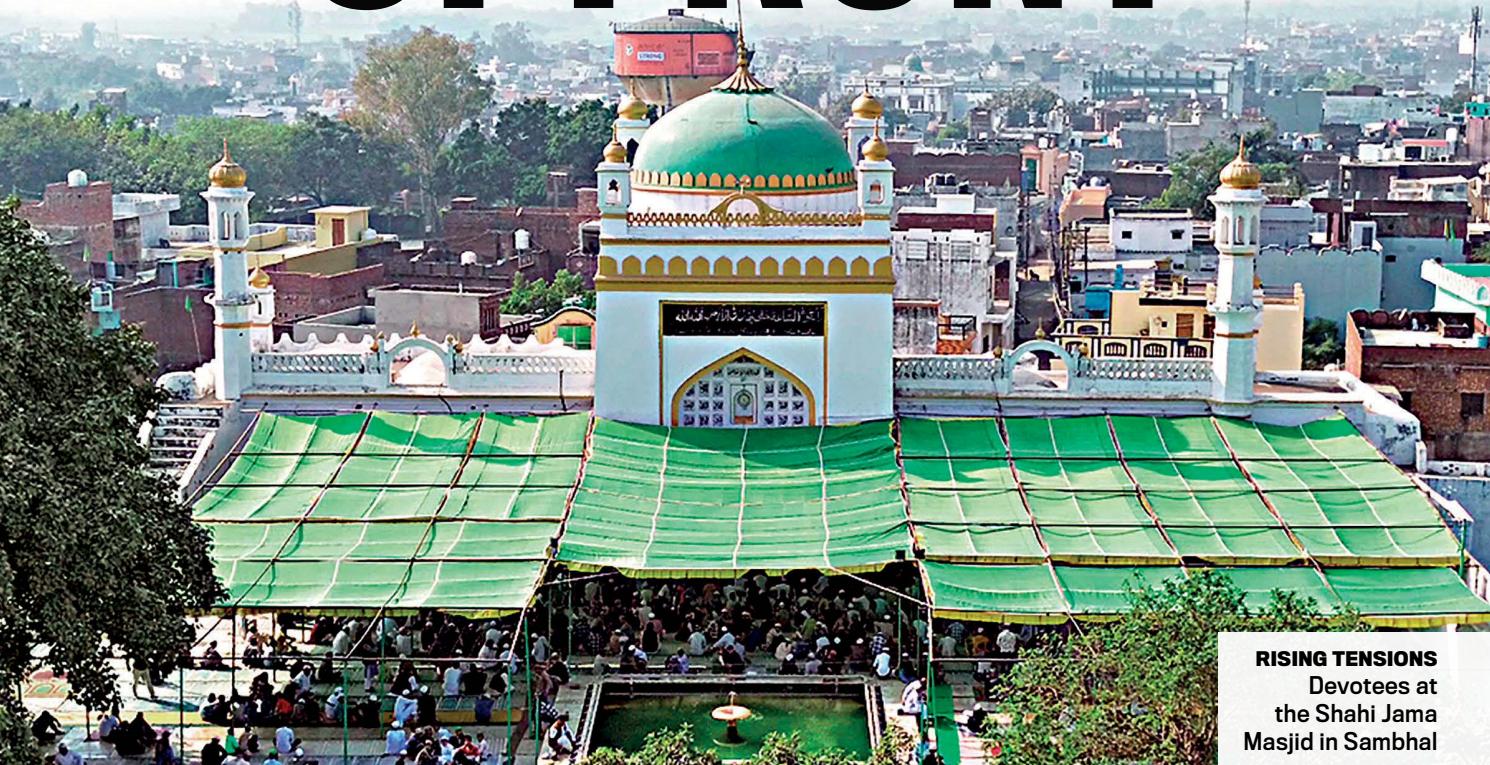
A MURDER ROILS
THE MAHAYUTI
PG 9

COPYING SCAMS
GO HI-TECH
PG 14

UP: FIGHT BOILS
IN MILKIPUR
PG 12

J&K: LIGHT AT
THE END OF
TUNNEL PG 16

UPFRONT



ANI

UTTAR PRADESH

THE PANDORA'S BOX UNDER THE SHRINE

By Avaneesh Mishra

The Mahakumbh has presently taken centrestage in the media narrative, so the right buttons are being pressed when it comes to keeping alive a saturation Hindu presence in the social space. But the more conflictual elements of religious politics may be in only for a short hibernation. The controversy surrounding the Shahi Jama Masjid in Sambhal—the western Uttar Pradesh town wracked by violence in late November, with four people killed in clashes with the

police—is far from a closed chapter. As the new year dawned, the courts applied the brakes on the controversy, which till then seemed to have taken on a momentum of its own. But with a constitutional law up for question, and a bristling sheaf of legal disputes on the anvil, all signs are that the game of wits between judicial principles and political ideas will resume in the near future.

One sign came from UP chief minister Yogi Adityanath. His rhetorical pitch recalled a formula for rapprochement that had once been suggested

for Ayodhya, laced with his trademark punch. On January 10, he said the Muslim community should—"in the most respectful manner"—voluntarily hand over the Sambhal site to Hindus if evidence establishes that it was built on the remains of a 16th century Kalki temple. Speaking at an India Today Group event in Prayagraj on the sidelines of the Kumbh, he also said no "disputed structure" should be referred to as a mosque. "The day we stop calling such places mosques, people will also stop going there. Islam does not sanction the



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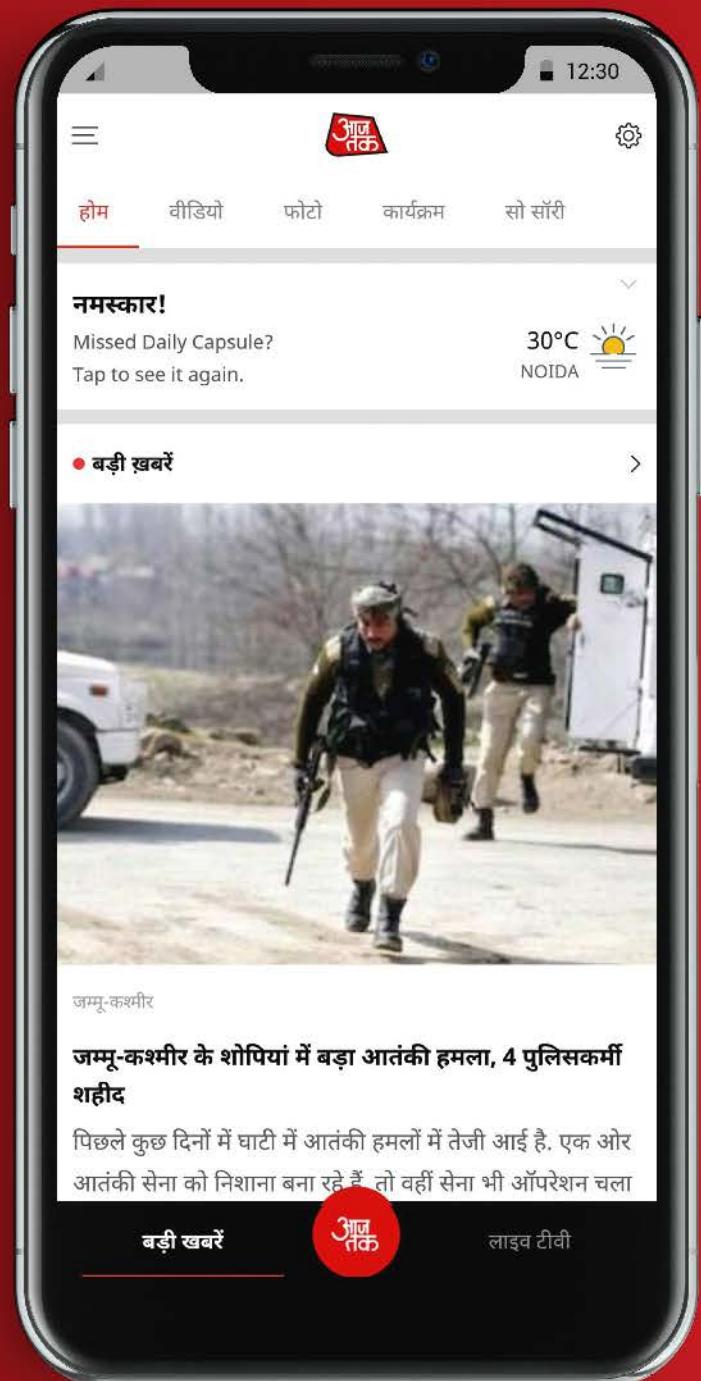
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कहीं भी, कभी भी

अभी डाउनलोड करें

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building of worship structures on sites that hurt the faith of others,” he said.

The comments came on the same day that the Supreme Court intervened in the Sambhal case, staying a notice issued by municipal authorities allowing Hindu worship and holy baths in a well located near the masjid. The court also sought a status report from the government on the matter. Two days earlier, on January 8, the Allahabad High Court had stayed trial court proceedings related to the mosque until February 25. It was a November 19 directive by the local civil court for a survey of the site that put wheels on the controversy; the HC stay was in response to the mosque managing committee’s challenge of that order. An advocate commissioner’s 45-page survey report, prepared in accordance with the now-impugned order, was submitted on January 3—in a sealed cover, as per instructions issued by the SC in November.

Advocate Hari Shankar Jain, who represents the Hindu activists pursuing the case, told INDIA TODAY, “The court may have paused proceedings, but the movement is unstoppable. This revolution is like a *sailaab* (flood) that cannot be contained.” Jain’s caseload is a reasonable index of the presaged deluge: it includes petitions against the Gyanvapi mosque in Varanasi, the Shahi Idgah mosque in Mathura, the Bhojshala-Kamal Maula complex in Dhar, and even the Taj Mahal in Agra and Qutub Minar in Delhi. In recent months, UP’s lower courts have seen a surge in petitions by fringe Hindu groups seeking rights over Muslim lands and places of worship. This has led to contentious surveys and administrative actions, evoking criticism from the Opposition over the Yogi government’s “overzealousness”. Besides the aforementioned cases, there are petitions against the Shamsi Shahi mosque in Badaun and the Atala Masjid in Jaunpur.

Adding to the legal turmoil, fresh petitions were filed before the Supreme Court on January 5 seeking a vacation of its stay on lower courts entertaining specific pleas under the Places of



SAMBHAL CASE TIMELINE

NOV. 19, 2024: Civil judge orders survey of Mughal-era Shahi Jama Masjid after a petition claims it was built on 16th-century temple site

• **NOV. 24:** Violence erupts during second survey. Four people, all Muslim, die in the clashes

NOV. 29: SC asks Sambhal trial court to pause proceedings, seals survey report and allows mosque panel to challenge civil court order

DEC. 1: UP government forms a three-member judicial commission to investigate Sambhal violence

JAN. 2, 2025: Advocate commissioner submits sealed 45-page report of masjid survey to a local court in Chandausi, UP

JAN. 8: Allahabad HC stays trial court proceedings in Sambhal Masjid matter till Feb. 25

JAN. 10: SC stays ‘notice’ issued by Sambhal authorities regarding worship/ holy bath at well near Shahi Jama Masjid



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Worship (Special Provisions) Act, 1991, and issuing orders for surveys. The SC ordered the stay on December 12 as it heard challenges to the constitutional validity of the Act, which mandates a preservation of status quo on all religious sites as they were on August 15, 1947. With the next hearing slated for February 17, the pot has only been kept simmering. Political rhetoric is at a

peak, meanwhile, with each side interpreting the court’s decision through its ideological lens. For the BJP, it offers an opportunity to consolidate its Hindutva base while keeping the Opposition on the edge. However, party spokesperson Rakesh Tripathi denies their involvement in the mosque petitions. “The people are exercising their rights, and the courts are hearing these cases. There is no need to involve politics in these matters,” he says.

Samajwadi Party (SP) chief Akhilesh Yadav has largely refrained from direct comments, though he did take a dig at the “new trend” of ordering archaeological surveys at the drop of a hat. On December 29, he let go of this quip: “There is a Shivling under the CM’s residence also. That too should

**IN RECENT MONTHS,
UTTAR PRADESH’S
LOWER COURTS HAVE
SEEN A SURGE IN
PETITIONS BY FRINGE
HINDU GROUPS**

OTHER U.P. FLASHPOINTS

► GYANVAPI MOSQUE

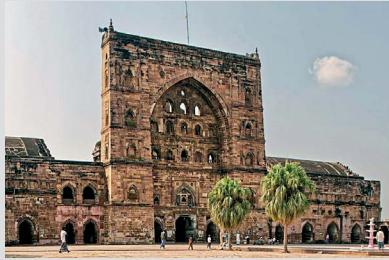
VARANASI

Claim: 'Shivling' found in ablution pond in a 2022 survey

► SHAHI IDGAH MOSQUE

MATHURA

Claim: Mosque situated at Lord Krishna's birthplace



► ATALA MASJID

JAUNPUR

Claim: Mosque built on remains of temple for goddess Atala Devi

► TAJ MAHAL, AGRA

Claim: Iconic mausoleum was originally a Shiva temple called 'Tejo Mahalaya'

► SHAMSI SHAHI MOSQUE

BADAUN

Claim: 11th century mosque built atop the site of a Nilkanth Mahadev temple

be excavated." The Congress has taken a more combative stance. Party leaders Rahul and Priyanka Gandhi have openly criticised the BJP for "undermining" constitutional law and stoking communal tensions. Congress spokesperson Akhilesh Pratap Singh says, "The BJP's denials are a complete farce. They are trying to divert attention from real issues." However, the Opposition's fragmented approach has allowed the BJP to mostly dominate the narrative. The stakes are high. After its bumper haul of 37 Lok Sabha seats in 2024—the biggest chunk of the INDIA bloc's 43 seats—the SP looms as a formidable contender for the assembly election due in 2027. The legal battles over religious sites, hence, could play a pivotal role. ■

MAHARASHTRA

A MURDER UNSETTLES THE MAHAYUTI

By Dhaval S. Kulkarni

More than a month after its swash-buckling victory in the Maharashtra assembly election, the Mahayuti government faces a crisis over allegations of murder and extortion involving close aides of Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) minister Dhananjay Munde. The fact that former minister and Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) MLA Suresh Dhas is leading the charge against Munde suggests fractures within the ruling coalition. The crescendo of calls for his resignation is only rising.

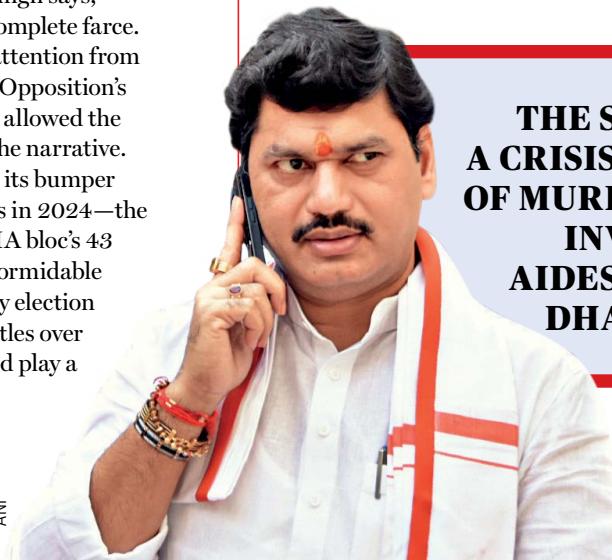
On December 9, Santosh Deshmukh, sarpanch of Massajog village in Beed district's Kajj taluka and a BJP supporter, was abducted and brutally murdered after he reportedly resisted extortion targeting a windmill company, Avaada Energy. Walmik Karad, a close aide of Munde, has been charged in the Rs 2 crore extortion case filed two days after the murder, though he had initially not been named in the murder case.

Although nine people, including Karad, were arrested, his surrender after missing for days at the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) office in Pune on December 31 embarrassed law enforcement. Karad, the former deputy municipal chief of Parli, is widely seen as the constituency manager and enforcer for Munde, who holds the food and civil supplies portfolio. He is alleged to control sand mining, government contract allocations and the sale of ash from the local thermal power plant.

Dhas, who represents the Ashti constituency in Beed district, has launched a fusillade of charges against Munde, Karad and NCP leaders. He claims the murder plot was hatched in May 2024 and accuses Munde of facilitating a deal between Karad and the windmill company at his official residence in Mumbai, where the initial demand for Rs 3 crore was settled at Rs 2 crore.

Anti-corruption activist Anjali Damania, who has taken on Munde, has also found an

**THE STATE GOVT FACES
A CRISIS OVER ALLEGATIONS
OF MURDER AND EXTORTION
INVOLVING CLOSE
AIDES OF NCP MINISTER
DHANANJAY MUNDE**



ANI



SEEKING JUSTICE Family members of late sarpanch Santosh Deshmukh meet CM Fadnavis in Mumbai, Jan. 7

ally in BJP MLC Chitra Wagh, who has come out in her support after Munde's loyalists targeted her. Opposition parties have joined the chorus, with an all-party delegation led by former Rajya Sabha MP and Kolhapur royal family scion Yuvraj Sambhajiraje Chhatrapati meeting Governor C.P. Radhakrishnan. Rival NCP (Sharadchandra Pawar) MLA Sandeep Kshirsagar from Beed alleges political shielding, claiming Karad's initial omission from the murder case due to Munde's ministerial position. Even Munde's party colleague Prakash Solanke, another MLA from Beed, has called for his head. Dhas tells INDIA TODAY that he's satisfied with police action, but adds: "I'm firm on my demand for Munde's resignation."

A BJP leader says the clash stems from Dhas and Munde's rivalry for political dominance in Beed, and did not represent the official position of their parties. "Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis and deputy CM and NCP president Ajit Pawar have said strict action must be taken against the guilty...there is no turbulence in the Mahayuti," he adds. However, NCP youth wing presi-



“THREE AGENCIES ARE LOOKING INTO THE CASE, AND MUNDE IS OPEN TO OTHER AGENCIES PROBING THE MATTER TOO. IF ANYONE IS GUILTY, THEY WILL BE PENALISED”

AJIT PAWAR

NCP chief and deputy CM, Maharashtra

dent and spokesperson Suraj Chavan says while his party has always sought exemplary punishment for grave crimes, Dhas also needed to hold the home department accountable. Since CM Fadnavis holds the portfolio, that suggests a willingness among Maha-

THE CRISIS

➔ **Aide of NCP minister Dhananjay Munde linked to murder and extortion, sparking resignation calls**

➔ **Vanjari-Maratha rivalry deepens political tensions in Beed in the Marathwada region**

➔ **Allegations strain the ruling alliance's unity, just over a month after a decisive poll win**

➔ **BJP MLA Dhas-leading the charge against Munde—is being propped up by the party to emerge as a Maratha leader in Marathwada, say observers**

yuti partners to trade edgewise barbs.

Ajit, meanwhile, has also found space to defend the man at the centre of the spiralling row. "Munde has clearly said that he does not even have a remote connection with the crime... now, three agencies (a special investigation team, the CID and judicial inquiry) are looking into it, and he is open to other agencies probing the matter too.... If anyone is guilty, they will be penalised," he told reporters. The overwhelming support of OBC communities for the BJP and the Mahayuti in the assembly polls also makes it difficult for the NCP leadership to give Munde the marching orders.

As a political analyst from the Marathwada region says, a case of organised crime has taken on caste colours. While Dhas is a Maratha as was Deshmukh, all accused belong to the powerful Vanjari community, an OBC group to which Munde too belongs. So the Dhas-Munde rivalry reflects the larger Vanjari-Maratha power struggle in Beed and some other parts of Marathwada that goes beyond party affiliations. Maratha leader



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Manoj Jarange-Patil, known for his agitation seeking OBC quotas for Marathas, has lashed out at Munde, while OBC leader Laxman Hake, seen as close to the Mahayuti, is making a counter-claim that an OBC leader like Munde is being made a victim of political scapegoating. A senior NCP leader claims Dhas is being propped up by the BJP leadership to emerge as a Maratha leader in the Marathwada region and eat into Jarange-Patil's space. In the Lok Sabha and assembly polls, Jarange-Patil, who has amassed support among a section of Maratha youth after months of firebrand quota activism, had taken a position against the BJP. The case has become a big headache for Fadnavis who met the deceased Deshmukh's family on January 7 at his Mumbai residence and assured them justice.

The NCP, traditionally seen as a Maratha-dominated party, faces a dilemma. Munde, one of its key OBC faces, plays a crucial role in balancing caste equations within the party. The senior NCP leader says Dhas is being used to weaken the dominance in Beed of the Munde cousins—Dhananjay and Pankaja, daughter of late BJP veteran Gopinath Munde, who is still with the saffron party and holds the environment portfolio in the Mahayuti regime. “Fadnavis and Dhananjay have a good equation. In the Lok Sabha election, the BJP faced a major setback in Beed (where Pankaja lost to the NCP-SP’s Bajrang Sonwane) due to the Maratha quota protests. If the BJP leadership sides with Munde, they will be accused of being anti-Maratha,” says Abhay Deshpande, a political analyst.

Munde could not be contacted for comments despite attempts. But a close aide explains the legal tack to INDIA TODAY: “There are two different cases—murder and extortion. An attempt is being made to mix the two for political ends.” And resignation? He says it’s out of the question. ■

GI tags in India span diverse categories from agriculture, handicrafts, foods, natural goods, textiles, and beverages like Feni from Goa.

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BATTLE LINES
Yogi Adityanath during the first anniversary celebration of the installation of the Ram Lalla idol in Ayodhya, Jan. 11; top, Ajeet Prasad, the SP candidate for Milkipur bypoll

[UTTAR PRADESH]

A BOILING-HOT FIGHT IN MILKIPUR

By Avaneesh Mishra

The upcoming byelection in the assembly constituency of Milkipur, in Ayodhya district, carries immense significance for both the BJP and the Samajwadi Party (SP). Scheduled for February 5, it's a battle that could help shape the initial narrative for the 2027 Uttar Pradesh assembly polls. The Scheduled Caste-reserved seat fell vacant after the 2024 general election, when its veteran SP MLA Awadhesh Prasad famously fought and won the Faizabad Lok Sabha seat—under which Milkipur falls, as does Ayodhya. Coming within months of the Ram temple inauguration, that loss had dealt a bitter blow to the BJP: it was tantamount to Hindutva being humbled in its symbolic homeland. Thoughts of redemption will therefore be uppermost in the party's mind.

The BJP has fielded Chandrabhan Paswan, a first-time candidate, and a member of the Pasi community.

The SP has put forward Ajeet, the son of Lok Sabha victor Awadhesh Prasad, in the hope that the lustre will pass on along with the baton. This makes the contest a direct face-off between two candidates of the same community. With the Congress and, interestingly, even the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) opting out of the fray, it's a bipolar contest in a seat where the Dalit vote totals 27 per cent. An SP victory in Ayodhya's politically charged landscape would signal that

its expanded caste arithmetic is intact, putting it on course to BJP supremacy in Uttar Pradesh and generating some early momentum for the larger battle in 2027. Its old loyal cohort of Yadavs (15 per cent) and Muslims (8 per cent) make up a formidable near-quarter of the electorate—a fact that sealed the party's six victories here since 1991 (the BJP has won only twice, ditto the BSP). However, the SP may be bereft of a key goad for the Dalit consolidation behind it in the LS poll, with the narrative about the Constitution being 'under threat' seen to have waned. Anyway, with both candidates being from the Pasi community (15 per cent), it may be down to whether the non-Yadav OBCs (14 per cent) extend their affections. Also, observers expect the BJP to press the entire weight of its formidable electoral machinery to wrest a victory at all cost.

For Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath, the stakes couldn't be higher. After the BJP's Lok Sabha tally in UP slumped



FOR THE BJP, A WIN WILL CONVEY A SENSE OF RECOVERY. A LOSS COULD REIGNITE INTERNAL DISSENT



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[PSU RECRUITMENT EXAM]

Copying Scams Go Hi-tech

By Rohit Parihar

It was believed to be a foolproof offline digital system for recruitment exams. But as the actual test unfolded on January 5—for 186 vacancies in the National Seeds Corporation Limited (NSC)—it turned out to be easily penetrable with remote access software. The Rajasthan Police have arrested 14 people, six candidates among them, in connection with this first-of-a-kind cheating racket, raising fresh concerns about the integrity of digital examinations being held for numerous government jobs and college admissions in India.

Digital devices such as wireless earbuds have long been known to be used for copying; occasional reports of hacking too have marred online tests. But in this case, investigators discovered a significant oversight: what was thought to be a secure test conducted on an exclusive server was, in fact, accessible via the internet. “This exposes a critical lack of understanding about digital security,” says V.K. Singh, additional director general of Rajasthan Police’s Special Operations Group (SOG). Singh highlighted inadequate security measures at “computer labs” hosting such exams. These third-party testing centres, according to him, often fail to conduct pre-test audits, leaving systems open to tampering.

In all, 28,500 candidates had appeared for the test in three shifts at 60 centres across India. The NSC and the

Illustration by SIDDHANT JUMDE



• MODUS OPERANDI •

- **Remote access software installed on specific computers to bypass exclusive servers in connivance with testing centre owners**
- **Offsite “solvers” cracked questions instantly using AI tools. Answers auto-filled without candidates making any input**

testing agency, says Singh, were already receiving tip-offs about possible cheating, following which six centres in Jaipur, where 3,510 candidates took the test, were marked as “high risk”. While the agency had deployed its supervisors at the centres, a core monitoring team remotely noticed something strange: a few computers where candidates had logged in sat idle for unusually long periods before cursors started moving—on their own. The SOG undercover team and supervisors moved swiftly and

confirmed that answers were being ticked without any visible action from the candidates. Videographic evidence was captured, suspects detained and computers seized.

The local police, in tandem, conducted raids that revealed how the “solvers” sitting offsite were cracking the answers by leveraging AI tools and transmitting them directly to the compromised computers. The middlemen had allegedly collaborated with lab owners to install remote access software on these computers where specific candidates were supposed to sit. Investigators have found 1,000 such compromised computers, raising suspicions that as many candidates could have paid hefty amounts to crack the exam fraudulently.

The gang is suspected to have employed similar tactics in a Railway Protection Force test in December 2024. Even as the ongoing probe is expected to lead to further arrests, the latest bust underscores the need for advanced security protocols and heightened accountability to outpace the ingenuity of cheating syndicates. ■



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PORTAL TO PROGRESS

PM Narendra Modi travels inside the Sonamarg tunnel after its inauguration, Jan. 13



[KASHMIR/ LADAKH]

THE LIGHT AT THE END OF TUNNEL

By Kaleem Geelani

Under the shadow of lofty glaciers in central Kashmir's Ganderbal district, where the winter silence is broken only by the rush of icy winds, a new passage has been carved—one that promises to reshape the fortunes of the region. The 6.4-kilometre Sonamarg tunnel, inaugurated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi on January 13, not only links the picture-esque tourist hotspot—known for its alpine meadows and pristine water bodies—to the rest of India all year round, it is also the cornerstone of a larger strategic vision to reinforce the country's border infrastructure along

the Line of Control (LoC) and right up to the Line of Actual Control (LAC), beyond which lies Chinese-controlled territory.

Nestled at an altitude of 8,500 feet, 87 km northeast of Srinagar, this engineering marvel—originally called Z-Morh tunnel—bypasses six avalanche-prone zones on a zig-zag stretch that once cut off access to Sonamarg every winter. With the excavation work on its sister project, the 13.2-km Zoji-La tunnel—located about 18 km further east on National Highway-1—nearing completion, the dream of all-weather access to Ladakh is also closer than ever.

"This tunnel will make the lives of the people of Sonamarg as well as Kargil and Leh much easier," PM Modi announced at the inauguration and emphasised the government's focus on infrastructure development, describing this as a "new Jammu and Kashmir". Year-round access has sparked the J&K government's ambitions to develop Sonamarg as a European-style ski destination. Consultants will be hired for this, says Chief Minister Omar Abdullah's advisor Nasir Aslam Wani. Fiaz Bakshi, vice-president of the Kashmir Chamber of Commerce, says the region's natural ski slopes make it an obvious

THE HIMALAYAN FEAT

The opening of Sonamarg tunnel in central Kashmir marks a major milestone in the eventual all-weather road connectivity to Ladakh

WHAT IS DONE

Sonamarg, or Z-Morh, tunnel was inaugurated on Jan. 13, 2025
Length: 6.4 km
Altitude: 8,500 ft
Cost: ₹2,400 cr.

SONAMARG TUNNEL

Length: 6.4 km
Altitude: 8,500 ft
Cost: ₹2,400 cr.

WHAT IS BEING DONE

About 32% work on Zoji-La tunnel done; expected to be completed by 2028
Length: 13.2 km
Altitude: 11,500 ft
Cost: ₹4,500 cr.

Minamarg

Batal

ZOJI-LA TUNNEL

Kargil LADAKH

Srinagar J & K

Leh

Graphic by TANMOY CHAKRABORTY

tourist attraction in winters, and now there is finally an enabling factor. “The tunnel will ensure connectivity, helping people and businesses thrive even in winter,” he adds.

Constructed at a cost of Rs 2,400 crore, the Sonamarg tunnel’s journey from concept to completion wasn’t without obstacles, recalls Vijay K. Pandey, General Manager–Projects, National Highways and Infrastructure Development Corporation Limited. Initially conceived in 2012, multiple hurdles delayed things, and work finally began in June 2020. A terror attack on its Gagangir campsite in October 2024 claimed seven lives, while a massive landslide disrupted work in 2023. Regardless, the project pressed forward, driven by the determination of 1,500 workers and 300 engineers. “Once the machines are switched off, restarting them becomes extremely challenging due to the harsh cold. To avoid this, workers had to maintain operations continuously, day and night,” says Pandey.

The tunnel’s advanced design includes a 10-metre-wide bidirectional

main passage, an escape tunnel with emergency exits every 250 metres, 350 surveillance cameras and a modern ventilation mechanism—a robust infrastructure meant to withstand even extreme conditions. Including its 5.5-km approach roads, the tunnel is expected to reduce travel time on this stretch from over two hours to just 15 minutes.

The ultimate goal remains the completion of the Zoji-La tunnel, which bypasses the Zoji-La pass, one of India’s highest motorable passes and presently the gateway to Ladakh. It, too, gets cut off every winter. So far, 79.5 per cent of the excavation work has been completed while overall 32 per cent work is done. “Here, the poor geological condition of rocks with horizontal and vertical joints is a different ball game altogether. Also, there are huge water reservoirs inside the mountains, which need effective diversion,” says Yousef Eshaghpor, an Iran-based design engineer overlooking the project. While officially it has a September

2027 deadline, Eshaghpor predicts the Zoji-La tunnel won’t be ready before December 2028.

The two tunnels are vital not just for regional connectivity but also for countering China’s infrastructure buildup along the LAC after the 2020 Galwan standoff. “These tunnels will significantly bolster the Indian armed forces’ response across the LAC, LoC and other key points,” says Lt Gen. D.S. Hooda (retired). “The resources required for the long summer logistical exercise of stocking weaponry, fuel and eatables for winter months can be repurposed for other vital aspects to protect our sovereign interests.”

Keen observers view Modi’s presence at the tunnel’s inauguration, just three months after the deadly terror attack, as a powerful message—that the region’s integration and development will proceed undeterred. On January 6, the PM had virtually inaugurated the Jammu Railways Division. Next in line is the New Delhi-Srinagar train service, which promises to further connect the Valley with the rest of India. ■

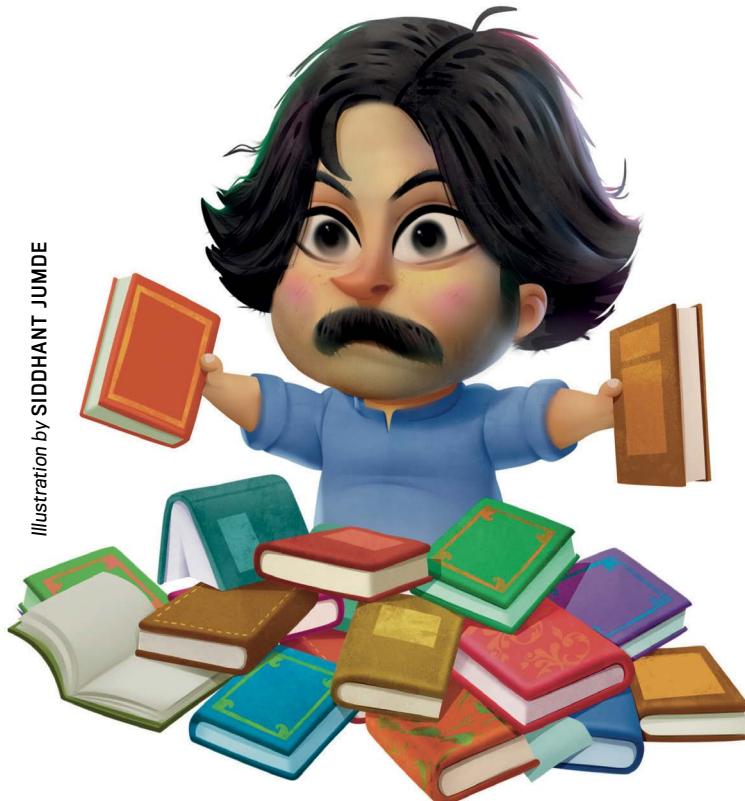
THE MANY CHALLENGES

Freezing conditions in the region, nosediving to minus 30 degrees in winters

Excavation through daunting rocks and a 60-degree slope surface that had to be stabilised

Frequent landslides, like one in Feb. 2023 that buried the work 80m under the soil

Security concerns dissuaded workers; almost 60% were unskilled locals



UPFRONT

[GLASSHOUSE]

A POLITICAL HANDBOOK

A bookish politician is a rare animal these days, but one that takes time out to browse for books, well that's nigh impossible to see. The new Andhra Pradesh deputy CM, 'Power Star' **Pawan Kalyan**, though, is from that mould. After inaugurating the Vijayawada Book Fair on January 2, he returned on the 11th, spending over two hours carefully selecting titles. A self-proclaimed bibliophile, Kalyan plans to set up a library in his Pithapuram constituency. He even surprised many by recommending *Man's Search for Meaning* by Viktor E. Frankl, praising the Nazi prisoner's extraordinary resilience. Maybe he felt that Frankl's message of hope and perseverance mirrors his own journey through the turbulent Andhra political landscape?

DAS BACK AS COMMON MAN

Former Jharkhand CM **Raghubar Das** took a week off after stepping down as Odisha governor on January 2, but then has jumped straight into his home state's political waters. By January 11, he was in full "birthday diplomacy" mode—wishing BJP state chief Babulal Marandi



and dropping by JMM patriarch Shibu Soren's house for a friendly hello. But don't let the smiles fool you, Das's return has already stirred up whispers of a challenge to Marandi's leadership. From temple-hopping to mingling with the *janata*, he's on a relentless charm spree. Das has even got a deadly nickname for himself—"CM", short for 'common man'.

Call Drop

In Delhi's power corridors, "*Chai se kettle garam* (Kettle is hotter than the tea)", is the latest buzz phrase, slyly aimed at ministerial staff who are conveniently unavailable to take calls from BJP MPs, party leaders and even RSS

functionaries. The frustration boiled over recently when an MP from Uttar Pradesh created a scene at the office of a cabinet minister, calling it a personal insult. The minister later issued an apology. The MPs say this cold-shoulder treatment isn't an isolated affair—it's a pattern in 8-9 ministries.

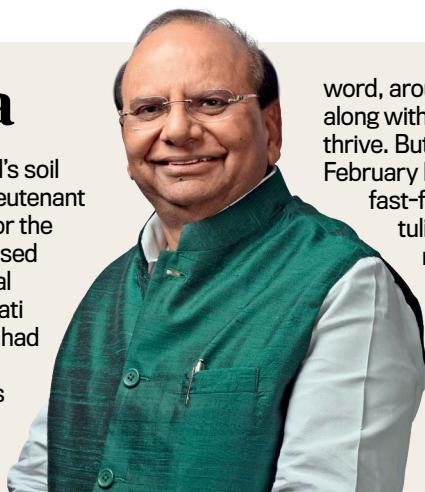
EK THA TIGER

Tiger, tiger, burning bright—now sparking a Bengal-Odisha fight. Bengal CM **Mamata Banerjee** was miffed when Zeenat, the tigress who strayed from Odisha's Simlipal forests and wandered through five districts of Bengal, had to be promptly returned after her capture. "Our foresters rescued her, and they asked us to send her back—so we did," Mamata remarked, accusing Odisha of letting more tigers into Bengal. Unsurprisingly, Odisha's BJP-led government bristled. Forest minister Ganeshram Khuntia flatly denied the claims, saying no other tiger had crossed over. Clearly, the roar of politics is louder than Zeenat's.



Blooming Idea

Will Delhi's tulips find Ahmedabad's soil hospitable this spring? Delhi Lieutenant Governor **V.K. Saxena**'s fondness for the vibrant blooms has now officially crossed state lines. Last year, during the annual flower show at Ahmedabad's Sabarmati riverfront, Ahmedabad native Saxena had promised Gujarat CM Bhupendrabhai Patel a touch of tulip magic. True to his



word, around 1,000 tulip bulbs have arrived, along with two gardeners to ensure they thrive. But here's the catch: Gujarat's notorious February heat often skips spring altogether, fast-forwarding straight to summer. If the tulips manage to bloom, they'll be as much a marvel as a miracle.

RAJWANT RAWAT

Kaushik Deka with Amarnath K. Menon, Anilesh S. Mahajan, Amitabh Srivastava, Arkamoy Datta Majumdar and Jumana Shah

THE SILENT CRISIS: HEALTHCARE CHALLENGES CONFRONTING INDIA'S MIDDLE CLASS

The writer is Dr. Neelam Mohan, Senior Director Pediatric Gastroenterology, Hepatology and Liver Transplantation Medanta Medicity, Gurugram. She has completed health management from ISB and is the National President-Elect of Indian Academy of Pediatrics.

India's middle class, often hailed as the engine of economic growth and social stability, faces an unprecedented healthcare crisis. Straddling the divide between affluence and poverty, this demographic is increasingly burdened by rising medical expenses, insufficient health insurance coverage, and limited access to quality care. While public healthcare systems remain overburdened and under-resourced, the escalating costs of private healthcare have pushed quality care beyond the reach of many middle-class families—who often fall outside the purview of government subsidy schemes. This forces them to make impossible choices between financial security and lifesaving treatment.

The "middle-class squeeze" in healthcare is not just an economic issue; it has become a pressing social challenge threatening the well-being of nearly one-third of India's population. This underscores the urgent need for comprehensive systemic reforms, recognizing that equitable access to healthcare is a fundamental right for every citizen.

The Financial Strain of Escalating Medical Expenses

The rising cost of private healthcare, limited availability of quality government facilities, and the lack of universal health insurance coverage have placed India's middle class in a precarious position. This demographic often falls between the cracks—earning too much to qualify for government subsidies yet struggling to afford the escalating costs of medical care.

Core Issues in India's Healthcare System

Multiple factors underpin the healthcare squeeze confronting India's middle class, with escalating costs of hospitalization, diagnostics, and medicines imposing a significant financial burden on families. Insufficient health insurance coverage exacerbates the issue, often leading to high out-of-pocket expenditures. A significant reliance on private healthcare stems from persistent gaps in public health infrastructure, further inflating costs. Additionally, the limited emphasis on preventive healthcare across the population adds to the burden, with illnesses often being diagnosed at advanced stages. Urban areas face higher costs due to dependence on private hospitals, while rural middle-class families grapple with accessibility challenges and

quality gaps in public healthcare facilities.

COVID-19's Lasting Impact on India's Health Systems

The pandemic exposed the vulnerabilities of India's middle class, with many families exhausting their savings or incurring debt to cover hospital expenses. It also underlined significant gaps in emergency preparedness and access to affordable healthcare. Rising health expenditures are pushing millions of Indians into poverty each year, leading to widespread financial hardship.

Bridging Gaps in Insurance Coverage and Awareness

Although health insurance penetration is increasing, many policies provide limited coverage or involve prohibitively high premiums, making them inaccessible to a significant portion of middle-class families. Moreover, inadequate awareness about comprehensive insurance plans complicates the issue. A strategic blend of commercial insurance products and government-backed voluntary schemes could bridge the gap and provide coverage for the "missing middle" population.

Pathways to Alleviate the Burden on Families

Addressing the healthcare challenges faced by India's middle class demands a comprehensive and integrated approach. A robust public health system capable of delivering affordable and quality care forms the cornerstone of this effort. Expanding government insurance schemes, such as Ayushman Bharat, to provide wider and more accessible coverage is equally crucial.

To alleviate the financial strain on middle-class families, targeted assistance programs must be introduced, coupled with measures to regulate private healthcare costs and ensure greater price transparency. Beyond financial interventions, fostering a culture of preventive care and health education can play a transformative role in reducing the overall healthcare burden. Early diagnosis and preventive measures, in particular, have the potential to significantly lower long-term costs, paving the way



for sustainable and equitable health outcomes for this vital demographic.

Collaborative Solutions for a Better Tomorrow

Public-private partnerships can serve as a cornerstone for enhancing healthcare infrastructure, lowering costs, and increasing access to affordable care for middle-class families. Innovative financing models and health-tech solutions can bridge critical gaps in healthcare delivery. Furthermore, collaboration among NGOs, the pharmaceutical industry, civil society, and research institutions is essential to achieving equity and sustainability in healthcare.

Building a Sustainable and Inclusive Future

The challenges faced by India's middle class in navigating the healthcare system highlight systemic inequities that demand urgent redress. This demographic, which serves as a driving force for the nation's growth, deserves a healthcare framework that is inclusive, efficient, and equitable. Addressing this widening gap requires a focus on sustainable, long-term solutions, such as strengthening public healthcare infrastructure, regulating private sector costs, and expanding comprehensive health insurance coverage tailored to the unique needs of middle-class families.

Sustainable progress will hinge on collaborative efforts between the government, private sector, and other stakeholders. The time to act is now because a healthier middle class lays the foundation for a stronger, more resilient nation.

CONGRESS READIES TO PIVOT

The party's moves to jettison allies and rebuild its own poll machinery expose the competing dynamics in the INDIA bloc, blunting the Opposition challenge and the Congress's place within it

By KAUSHIK DEKA

While the world was busy celebrating Christmas on December 25, Congress treasurer Ajay Maken was holding a press conference in New Delhi. A former Union minister known for his proximity to the Gandhi family, Maken launched into a scathing critique of Aam Aadmi Party chief Arvind Kejriwal. Calling the former Delhi chief minister “anti-national”,

he blamed him for the worsening political and administrative situation in the national capital. “If there’s one word for Kejriwal,” Maken declared, “it’s *Farziwal* (fraud).”

What was left unsaid, and has long been a grouse with local Congressmen, is that AAP’s rise came at their expense in Delhi. Maken’s criticism extended to the dynamics within



INDIA or the Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance, the broader Opposition bloc. Calling the alliance with AAP a “mistake”, he said it had tarnished the Grand Old Party’s credibility. This public denunciation, along with the decision to release a white paper detailing AAP’s administrative failures, signal a big shift in the party’s strategy—a pivot away from depending on coalitions to rebuilding its own electoral machinery. Two weeks later, Maken’s offensive received public endorsement from the Congress high command, with leader of the Opposition Rahul Gandhi holding Kejriwal responsible for the “rising corruption and pollution” in Delhi, and even drawing a parallel between the AAP leader and Prime Minister Narendra Modi, accusing both of making false promises.

The Congress decision comes at a

crucial juncture. The 2024 Lok Sabha election results were a mixed bag. While the Modi-led Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) won a historic third consecutive term in power, the Congress-led INDIA bloc found a glimmer of hope in the saffron party’s failure to secure a standalone majority. That optimism proved shortlived as INDIA faced

crushing losses in Haryana and Maharashtra—two critical states the bloc had pinned its hopes on. These setbacks not only blunted the significance of the bloc’s victories in Jammu and Kashmir and Jharkhand but also derailed the momentum and sparked cracks within the coalition. Discontent simmered among the allies, with many openly questioning the Congress and Rahul Gandhi’s ability to spearhead the challenge against the BJP juggernaut. West Bengal chief minister Mamata Banerjee of the Trinamool Congress (TMC) has been looking to position herself as a contender to lead the coalition. Her push for leadership has found backing from Nationalist Congress Party (Sharadchandra Pawar) or NCP (SP) leader Sharad Pawar and Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) supremo Lalu Prasad Yadav.

The Congress’s mixed fortunes in

Mamata’s push for the leadership of the INDIA bloc has found backing from allies like Sharad Pawar, Lalu Prasad, which has irked the Congress



ALL AT SEA INDIA bloc leaders watch as Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge addresses the press, June 1, 2024

FRICITION POINTS

the general election, where it secured 99 seats, has also left the allies unimpressed. While the party credited the Rahul-led Bharat Jodo Yatras for the increased tally, a deeper analysis of the results showed that the Congress, in fact, underperformed in several of the key states it passed through during the yatra, particularly in those where it was in a direct contest with the BJP.

In Karnataka, for instance, where expectations ran high after the stupendous victory in the 2023 assembly poll, the party managed just nine seats compared to the BJP's 17 in the Lok Sabha iteration. The top three regional parties in the INDIA bloc also outdid the Congress in terms of the strike rate in their respective states. In Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal and Tamil Nadu—three big states accounting for 161 seats—the Samajwadi Party (SP), TMC and the Dravida Munnetra Kazhakam (DMK) collectively won 88 seats, or 55 per cent, of the total. The Congress tally of seats came out of the 326 it contested across the country—a strike rate of 30 per cent.

Why the Allies are Angry

For the allies, there are also larger issues: the Congress's alleged inability to adapt to the dynamics of coalition politics, its dismissive attitude towards partners, and obsession with certain narratives that many believe are politically counterproductive. At the centre of the discontent is Rahul, whose leadership style, priorities and public behaviour have become flashpoints. Allies have openly expressed their frustration with what they see as Rahul's narrow and repetitive focus on issues like the Adani Group and Veer Savarkar, topics, they argue, have limited resonance with voters and, worse, alienate key constituencies. Mamata had even before the Lok Sabha polls subtly hinted her disapproval by proposing Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge as the INDIA bloc's prime ministerial face—a proposal Kejriwal had supported.

A major source of frustration for the allies is Rahul's preoccupation with crony capitalism, specifically his attacks on the Adani Group. While the allega-



CROSSED WIRES

Rahul Gandhi with Arvind Kejriwal in a file picture

► Crushing losses in Haryana, Maharashtra give allies reason to challenge the Congress leadership of INDIA bloc

► Mamata Banerjee's bid to take the lead causes unease; Congress resists move

► Allies like TMC and SP criticise Congress's focus on Adani, say it distracts from core voter concerns. Calls campaigns like 'EVM Jagao Yatra' unproductive

► Resentment against Congress dominance and

its reluctance to collaborate. INDIA bloc leaders have not met formally since June '24

► Delhi Congress's no-holds-barred attack on AAP chief Arvind Kejriwal exposes fragile, transactional nature of bloc's unity

In the Congress, planning is easy, execution difficult. Kharge's warnings haven't reduced the infighting problem

tions are serious and have rattled the Narendra Modi-led government, allies like Mamata, SP chief Akhilesh Yadav, and even AAP leaders believe that overemphasis on the issue is a strategic mistake. The TMC, for example, openly boycotted the Congress-led protests on the Adani issue in Parliament, with senior party leaders like Abhishek

Banerjee stating that voters are far more concerned about inflation, unemployment and welfare delivery than about corporate controversies. SP leaders have also quietly expressed annoyance, saying the constant attacks on Adani do little to address the bread-and-butter concerns of the UP electorate.

Another contentious issue has been the Congress's campaigns like 'EVM Jagao Yatra', about the alleged tampering of voting machines. TMC's Abhishek openly criticised it, urging the party to focus on booth-level management rather than conspiracy theories while J&K CM Omar Abdullah of the National Conference (NC) sarcastically remarked that the Congress cannot celebrate victories achieved through EVM voting and then turn around and blame the machines when the verdict goes against it.

The resentment is not limited to issues of strategy but to the Congress's style of functioning as well. For example, several leaders attribute Bihar chief minister Nitish Kumar's departure from the bloc in January 2024 to the Congress's refusal to name him—one of the alliance's key architects—as convenor. Omar emphasises the need for sustained engagement within the bloc, criticising the sporadic, election-centric strategy. "Our existence can't just be about six months before Parliament election. It has to be something more," he stated, advocating a structured framework of regular interactions. The bloc's leaders have not met formally since June 2024.

The Congress Game Plan

The varying dynamics across states highlight the challenges Congress faces as both a national party and an INDIA bloc member. In states where it partners with regional heavyweights, the party risks losing its organisational base. Over the next two years, seven states—Delhi and Bihar this year, followed by Assam, West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, Puducherry and Kerala in 2026—will head to the polls. Barring Tamil Nadu, where it enjoys a stable alliance with the DMK, the Congress will be contesting primarily on its own strength in the other states. "Alliances, if they happen, will be decided in consultation with local leaders and based on an assessment of the local situation. Our focus is on strengthening the party core rather than reacting to external commentary," says a Congress Working Committee (CWC) member.

In Bihar, for instance, which goes to the polls later this year, Congress leaders argue that decades of alliance with the RJD have left them dependent on their regional partner. In the 2024 general election, the Congress won three out of the nine seats it contested in Bihar,

while the RJD managed only four out of 23 seats. This underperformance has not only strained RJD-Congress ties but also fuelled speculation that Lalu's support for Mamata's INDIA leadership bid is to strengthen his bargaining chip ahead of the Bihar polls. Similarly, Pawar's stand in favour of Mamata is being seen as an effort to stay relevant amid his NCP's existential crisis. By positioning himself as a kingmaker in the bloc, Pawar hopes to retain his influence.

sitions. Congress leaders are banking on the period between the Delhi elections in February and the Bihar polls later this year to implement these reforms.

The problem with the Congress is that planning often proves far easier than execution. Despite Kharge's stern warnings about maintaining discipline, infighting continues to afflict the party across states such as Karnataka, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Punjab and Kerala. The Congress high command has attempted to channel the energies of senior leaders by assigning them responsibilities in other states. For instance, former Rajasthan CM Ashok Gehlot, ex-Chhattisgarh CM Bhupesh Baghel and Kerala veteran Ramesh Chennithala were tasked with election duties during the recent assembly polls. "Don't be surprised if the final remnants of 'Camp Ahmed Patel' [the late all-powerful political secretary of Sonia Gandhi] fade into the sunset between March and October this year," remarks a Congress MP.

Such statements have been made in private earlier too. The Congress had pledged an organisational overhaul during its Udaipur Chintan Shivir in 2022 and reiterated these commitments at the Raipur plenary in 2023. While some reforms, like the establishment of political taskforces and the initiation of training programmes for workers were implemented, they have been superficial. Structural changes to empower grassroots leaders or improve decision-making processes were largely ignored, leaving the party vulnerable to infighting and inefficiency.

As for the INDIA bloc, its unity has always been tenuous, built on a shared antipathy for the BJP rather than ideological alignment. As the Congress recalibrates strategy, this fragility is becoming increasingly apparent. For the bloc to remain viable, the Congress must strike a delicate balance. Its allies want a more inclusive leadership style and equitable seat-sharing arrangements. Failure to address these concerns could lead to fragmentation, jeopardising Opposition prospects in 2025 and beyond. ■

CONGRESS ROADMAP

► **By targeting Kejriwal/AAP, Congress signals intent to reclaim political ground from allies in states where it has lost relevance**

► **Top priority are strengthening organisation, the seven states heading for polls in 2025-26**

► **Major party restructuring planned, leveraging the period between the Delhi assembly election next month, and the Bihar polls later this year**

Recognising the urgent need for change, Congress president Kharge has outlined a roadmap for organisational restructuring. At a recent CWC meeting, he emphasised the importance of discipline and grassroots engagement. "Tough decisions will be made," he said, signalling an impending overhaul of the party's structure from the grassroots to the top leadership. Insiders suggest that these changes will not merely involve personnel but will redefine the roles, responsibilities and powers of party po-

The allies are frustrated over Rahul's fixation on issues like crony capitalism, as it is divorced from the everyday concerns of the people

MIDDLE CLASS

THE BIG SQUEEZE

HIGH PRICES, CRIPPLING TAX RATES ALONG WITH SHRINKING INCOMES ARE FORCING THIS CRUCIAL DEMOGRAPHIC TO SWALLOW ITS AMBITIONS, AFFECTING INDIA'S GROWTH STORY. HOW BUDGET 2025 CAN END THEIR ECONOMIC DISTRESS

By M.G. ARUN & SONAL KHETARPAL

DEFINING THE MIDDLE CLASS

570

MILLION
Size of India's middle class

38

PER CENT
Share in India's population

₹ 6-36

LAKH
Annual household income

50

PER CENT
Share in total consumption

3-4

PER CENT
Urban wage growth in FY24

Source: PRICE



Illustration by **NILANJAN DAS (AI)**; Digital imaging by **AMARJEET SINGH NAGI**

P

Prakash Bhasi, a 54-year-old technician with a packaging company in Mumbai, does not know what to do. Till a couple years back, he had thought the household income of Rs 22 lakh a year would be more than enough to meet the expenses of his three-member family. Yes, he had to pay Rs 45,000 as EMI for the 1BHK apartment he had bought in Navi Mumbai six years ago, and he also sent his elderly parents in Coimbatore Rs 10,000 every month towards their living expenses. But never did he think he would have to dip into his savings. Suddenly, however, Bhasi is beginning to feel the pinch. His expenses have gone up 30 per cent in recent months. "If I go to the local market with Rs 500 in hand, I come back with hardly anything," he rues. Vegetable prices, in particular, have shot up. He goes for the cheapest consumer goods, even if it means buying unbranded stuff. Bhasi has also had to forgo his ambition of buying a new car, intending instead to buy a used one, at half the cost.

Bhasi is one of the 570 million Indians who make up India's middle class. New Delhi-based think-tank People Research on India's Consumer Economy (PRICE) categorises them as those households that had an annual income between Rs 5 lakh and Rs 30 lakh if you consider 2020-2021 prices, or between Rs 6 lakh and 36 lakh if you take current prices. And they are reeling under a triple whammy of high inflation, particularly of food, high taxation and stagnating incomes. "It has now become about subsistence,"

TIGHTENING THE PURSE STRINGS

The Indian middle class is reeling under high prices of goods on the one hand and near-stagnant wages on the other, and feeling the heat on their household budgets

AUTO

HITTING A SPEEDBUMP

Both the sales and market share of hatchbacks, representing the affordable segment, and lower-end compact sedans have declined

Sales by body style

■ Q1 FY25 ■ Q2 FY25; ▲▼ Change

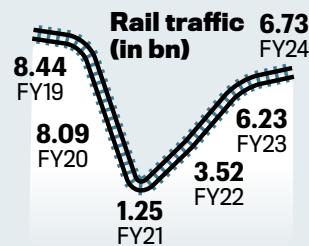
	SUV	HATCHBACK
	546,756	258,217
	587,764	248,244
▲ 7.5%	▼ -3.9%	
MPV	91,754	SEDAN
▲ 9.7%	139,150	79,543
	152,579	
▼ -13.3%		
OTHERS*	GRAND TOTAL ▲ 3.1%	
	71	1,035,948
▼ -8.5%	65	1,068,195

* Include coupe & convertible; source: JATO Dynamics

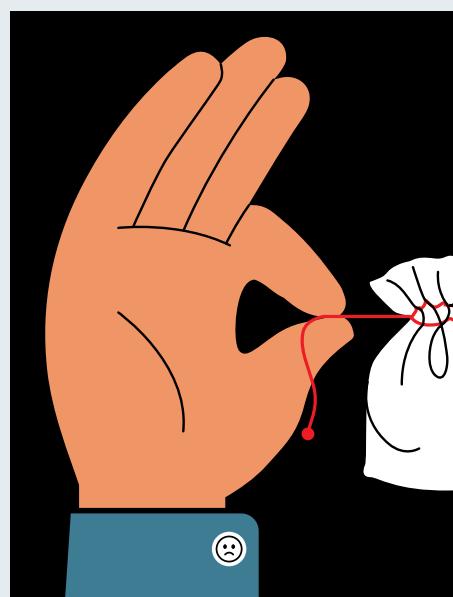
TRAVEL

STOPPED IN ITS TRACKS

Passenger traffic in railways, the prime mode of travel for the lower middle class, has been unable to return to even pre-Covid levels



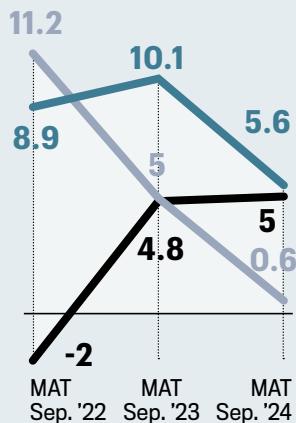
Source: PIB/Statista



FMCG

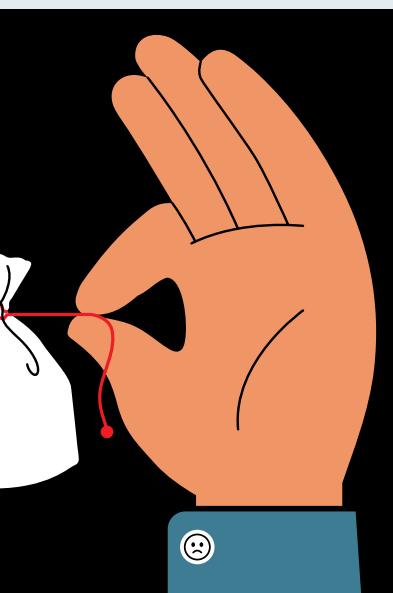
FEELING THE CRUNCH

In tough times, instead of cutting down buying, FMCG consumers opt for cheaper/ unbranded alternatives. So value growth has come down in the last year despite stable volume growth



— Value growth (%)
— Price growth (%)
— Volume growth (%)
MAT (Moving Annual Total)
sales refer to total sales
for a product over the
previous 12 months

Source: NielsenIQ Offline
Retail Measurement;
includes product categories
across food, home and
personal care

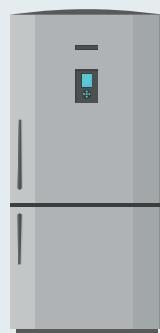


CONSUMER DURABLES AND TECHNOLOGY

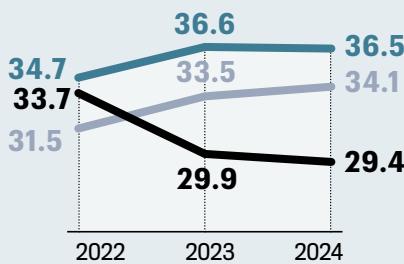
IN THE COLD FREEZE

REFRIGERATORS

Refrigerator sales have seen a drop in the entry-level segment. Growth in the mass and premium segments only indicates the K-shaped recovery in the economy



Share in category sales (%)



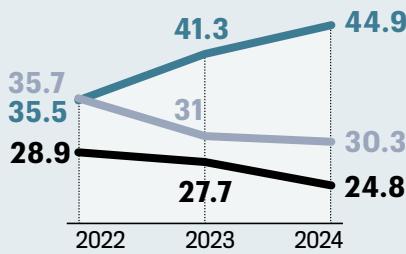
— Entry (less than ₹15,000)
— Mass (₹15,000 to ₹20,000)
— Premium (₹20,000 plus)

SMARTPHONES

Inflationary pressures are the most pronounced in the entry-level and mass market segments, as sales see a decline as opposed to the premium segment



Share in category sales (%)



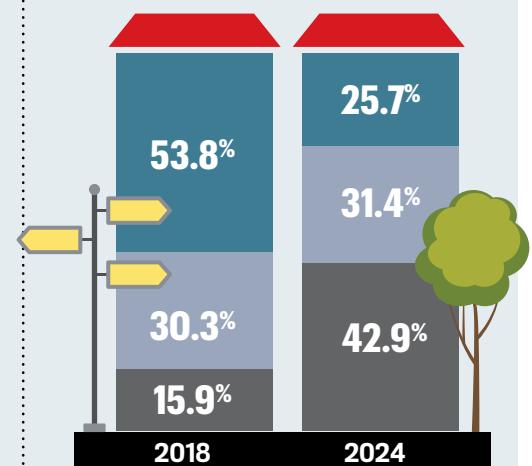
— Entry (less than ₹10,000)
— Mass (₹10,000-₹15,000)
— Premium (₹15,000-plus)

Source: NielsenIQ powered by
GfK Intelligence for offline retail

REAL ESTATE

THE GREAT HOUSING DIVIDE

Growth in the premium segment priced above Rs 1 crore may have seen a notable rise since 2018, but sales of affordable housing have declined, highlighting the growing strain on the lower end of the market



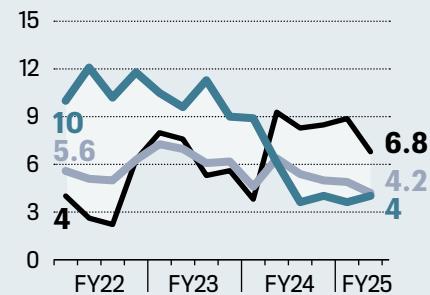
Source: Knight Frank

Note: Sales across top 8 cities in India, 2024 data is until September

WAGES & INFLATION

DOUBLE WHAMMY

Corporate wage growth has been plummeting even as prices, particularly of food, have been going upward



— Urban corporate wage growth (%)
— Overall inflation — Food inflation

Source: India Ratings and Research



laments Manoj Kumar Jha, a 50-year-old insurance professional in Patna, who earns Rs 6.5 lakh a year. "We have stopped travelling, going for movies or attending social functions." Not only has the rise in prices of essential goods inflated his own household budget, the rise in medical costs and therefore of insurance premiums, has also affected his livelihood. Clients are reluctant to renew their policies.

In October, India's consumer price inflation (CPI), a measure of prices of retail goods, rose to a 14-month high of 6.2 per cent, breaching the upper limit of 2-6 per cent the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) has set (see graphic, *Tightening the Purse Strings*). Food inflation was a big culprit—food and beverages inflation stood at 9.7 per cent in October, the vegetable inflation alone clocking above 42.2 per cent, a 57-month high. And though CPI sobered down to 5.2 per cent by December, food inflation remained high at 8.4 per cent. Meanwhile, house rents are rising, telecom bills escalating and credit becoming more expensive. Wage growth, by contrast, has slowed down considerably. In urban areas, private companies' real wage growth dropped from over 10 per cent till Q3FY23 to 3-4 per cent currently. Intent on increasing productivity, companies are leveraging AI and technology to drive efficiencies, compounding the blow, according to Abneesh Roy, executive director at Nuvana Institutional Equities.

CASE STUDY ▲

Dipanwita Gupta, 43
Owner, digital marketing agency, Kolkata

"The middle class of the country, the ones who offer reasonable value in the middle segment, is finding its fortunes shrinking"

— **SURESH NARAYANAN**
CMD, Nestle India



Taxing Times

Like many in the middle class, Dipanwita Gupta feels stifled by the high tax rates. Recently, she had to turn down a weekend getaway plan with friends as it closely followed a trip she had just taken with her son. Even smaller amounts such as Rs 6,000—which Gupta needed to place a matrimonial advertisement for her girl cousin—pinch her pocket. Similarly, when the matter of their annual family vacation in April was brought up, Gupta decided to do without it, thinking of how the amount could instead help a sister-in-law, just 35, who has been diagnosed with cancer and cirrhosis of the liver. Since the patient's family isn't well-off, Gupta and her husband had decided to help them financially.

The conscious choice

to scrimp extends to her professional life as well, Gupta claims. As owner of a digital marketing business for MSMEs with an annual revenue of Rs 50 lakh, she often faces pressure to spend on out-of-state networking events, business group parties and corporate gifts. Instead, she chose to invest that money in software tools, keep it as a hiring buffer, or give yearly employee raises, however small the percentage is.

"The middle-class crunch isn't just about choosing between material wants. It's about balancing immediate desires against deeper values—both in personal and professional life. Yet, people like us could do good with a lesser tax burden," Gupta says.

**—Arkamoy Datta
Majumdar**

employment. The economically weaker sections and rural Indians, on the other hand, were lavished with a rash of cash benefits and sundry schemes, dictated in large part by electoral considerations. But the middle class was left to its own devices, with the money in its hands increasingly buying less and less and no source of succour.

And this when the demographic makes up 38 per cent of India's population, accounts for over half of the country's total household income and more than 50 per cent of its total consumption. It is also the fastest-growing segment in the country, according to PRICE MD & CEO Rajesh Shukla, in absolute and in percentage terms, rising at 6.3 per cent per year. Leading the consumer boom since liberalisation in 1991, the middle class has been the cornerstone of India's economic growth. Now, squeezed on all sides, they are doing what they do best—curbing consumption. And their distress is begin-

"Between 2020 and 2024, the mass segment grew by 17.18 per cent, while the premium saw over 45 per cent growth"

— KAMAL NANDI, Business Head & EVP, Appliances Business, Godrej Enterprises Group



ning to tell on the India story. Growth projections for FY25 have already been revised downwards to 6.4 per cent from the 7 per cent the RBI had forecast earlier this year and way below the 8 per cent-plus clocked in the previous financial year.

Sector after sector—from automobiles to housing to consumer goods to FMCG products—is taking note of this subdued sentiment of the middle class. Sachin Mishra, a 31-year-old government land revenue officer in Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh, had hoped to buy a new car before he got married last year (see *Skimping on His Dreams*). But servicing a personal loan, supporting his aged parents, rent and groceries consume a large part of the family's annual income of Rs 10 lakh. He hopes to buy a second-hand car, but the high cost of credit is proving discouraging. His predicament is reflecting in the decline in the sales of passenger vehicles, an indicator of consumption trends in India, which saw a year-on-year drop of 14 per cent in November, more than the market had anticipated. Sales in the hatchback segment fell by 4 per cent—to 240,000 units in the second quarter of FY25 from 258,000 in the previous one. The segment lost market share as well, ceding space to the costlier SUVs and MPVs, which saw their sales rise by 7.5 per cent and 9.7 per cent, respectively, exemplifying the K-shaped growth in the economy. However, Maruti

SHRINKING INCOMES

High taxes have been another disincentive, with individuals being taxed on their incomes as well as on the goods and services they consume. The total tax burden on the middle class—including income tax, GST on daily household items, property tax, luxury and entertainment tax—can range from 26 per cent to 38 per cent, as estimated by financial consultants Felix Advisory. "The middle class of the country, the ones who offer reasonable value in the middle segment, is finding its fortunes shrinking," Suresh Narayanan, CMD of Nestle India, said in a media interaction in October 2024.

To be sure, India saw a K-shaped recovery after the pandemic, where the rich got richer and the poor poorer. Corporates were also bestowed with huge cuts in tax rates in the hope that they would expand their businesses and generate



MUJEEB FAROUQUI

CASE STUDY ▲

Abdul Raqeeb, 47**Fleet Manager with
private school, Bhopal, MP**

Necessity No More

How often does a lingering cash crunch indefinitely stall the acquisition of even a necessity? Abdul had purchased a 7 kg top-loading washing machine in 2014, which has served the household well. For the past two years, his home-maker wife has been asking him to upgrade to a front-loading 12 kg machine. This costs between Rs 45,000 and Rs 60,000 and Abdul isn't able to set aside that money. "I bought the washing machine for less than Rs 10,000 and now feel the prices have gone up significantly. One is told

that white goods become cheaper with time but companies keep bringing in newer technology for which they charge more," says Abdul, who doesn't reveal his annual income.

Abdul has three children, who attend coaching classes to prepare for competitive exams. Much of his salary is spent paying the fees. His yearly increment also falls far short of what he needs. "There is no way one can go back to manually washing clothes," he says. They will have to make do with the old washing machine for now.

-Rahul Noronha

Suzuki chairman R.C. Bhargava raises a pertinent point. "In FY19, 82 per cent of the cars sold were below Rs 10 lakh," he points out. "That segment is not growing any more; it is, in fact, declining. You have to judge for yourselves if that large a segment does not grow but actually declines, how much can the other segment grow and make up for this 80 per cent segment?" Two-wheeler sales, another abiding symbol of middle-class mobility, are seeing a similar downward trend. From a pre-Covid high of 21.8 million in FY19, they came down to 17.8 million in FY24—a 10-year low.

Real estate is another sector that is being affected by the depressed middle-class mood. Aishwarya Kumari, a 31-year-old HR professional with an IT company in Noida, had been contemplating buying a home in the suburbs ever since her six-year-old daughter started school here (see *No Rooms of Their Own*). But the high inflation, stagnant incomes, the rising prices of homes and the uncertainty in the IT sector have meant that she has had to put her decision on hold. Even

"In FY19, 82% of the cars sold were sub-Rs 10 lakh. That segment is not growing any more; it is actually declining. If that large a segment does not grow but actually declines, how much can the other segment make up for this 80 per cent segment?"

- R.C. BHARGAVA
Chairman, Maruti Suzuki



if it means continuing to deal with rising rents, or having to shift home every now and then. Sales of affordable homes, or units priced under Rs 50 lakh, have understandably declined. Along with homes under Rs 1 crore, they comprise the most voluminous segment—nearly half the residential market. Rising interest rates—they have shot up from 6.5 per cent during Covid to 9.5 per cent or even double digits—are a big inhibiting factor. Meanwhile, incentives under the PM Awas Yojana were unavailable for a while as the government migrated to a newer version of the scheme. As a result, unfilled flats fill urban skylines. "Unsold inventory has consistently increased since 2020 as supply levels have exceeded sales," says Gulam Zia, senior executive director at property consultants Knight



◀ CASE STUDY

Sachin Mishra, 31
Government employee,
Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh

Skimping on His Dreams

For Sachin Mishra, the long-time dream of owning a car remains out of reach. A government land revenue officer, Mishra travels extensively for work, often navigating Ayodhya's patchy public transport. He had hoped to buy a car before his marriage last year, believing it would ease his daily commute

and provide comfort to his family. Winters make night travel unbearable, scorching summer afternoons are energy-sapping, and rains add a layer of difficulty. But rising costs and limited savings have delayed the desired purchase.

"A car feels like a necessity, but given the circumstances, it is still a distant dream. Maybe

in a few months, I will consider a secondhand car," says Mishra, whose family income is Rs 10 lakh a year.

Though a government job came with hopes of a better financial future, much of Mishra's savings have gone into repaying family loans. Currently, a personal loan he took in 2023 claims a quarter of

his salary. Another 20-30 per cent goes toward rent and groceries, leaving little to meet long-term goals. Supporting his parents further limits his ability to save.

Steep interest rates on car loans and the rising cost of maintenance have also played a role in deterring Mishra. "People assume a government job means financial stability, but most of my earnings are tied up in meeting responsibilities," Mishra adds.

-Avaneesh Mishra

Frank India. "And as much as 39 per cent of the inventory is concentrated in units priced under Rs 50 lakh." To make matters worse, real estate players are shifting to the mid and upper ends. As a result, new supply of affordable apartments declined 21 per cent in April-June 2024 across seven major cities.

THE NOT SO FAST-MOVING CONSUMER GOODS

Other sectors are hurting too. For 32-year-old Vandita Nainani in Ahmedabad, appearances matter in her profession as an interior designer. But as her clients cut back on their spending on interiors due to the 30-40 per cent rise in material costs, Nainani has had to reconsider her own purchases, including on hair colour and highlights. "I wait for deals on shampoos and then worry about the quality of the product and the impact it will have on my hair," the first-generation entrepreneur says. Nainani's behaviour is consistent with what buyers of fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) do when their budgets get squeezed: cut down or postpone the purchase of non-essential items, as Anuj Sethi, senior director at ratings agency Crisil, points out. This is true particularly of urban areas. Several FMCG companies have raised concerns about weak urban demand in their Q2 earnings calls. "Growth in

big cities is trending down, although growth in smaller cities and rural areas remains strong," says Rohit Jawa, MD & CEO at Hindustan Unilever Ltd. This, in turn, is impacting the revenues and profits of these companies. FMCG sales value has slowed significantly, dropping from a 10 per cent rise in September 2023 to 5.6 per cent in September 2024. In real terms, the growth was even slower, if you factor in the overall

"Unsold inventory has consistently increased since 2020 as supply levels have exceeded sales. And as much as 39 per cent of this inventory is in sub-Rs 50 lakh units"

- GULAM ZIA

Senior Executive Director, Knight Frank



0.6 per cent increase in FMCG prices, notes Sharangpani Pant, commercial head, tech & durables, NielsenIQ.

Behind the slowdown in urban demand is the rising cost of food. “The growing food inflation is impacting demand in urban India, particularly for discretionary products,” says Dabur India CEO Mohit Malhotra. Food expenses now constitute 40-50 per cent of a household’s spend, even though the Household Consumption Expenditure Survey reveals a reduction in food expenses in 2023-24—by 3 per cent in urban households and by 6 per cent in rural ones—compared to 2011-12. The middle-class consumer may not be compromising on the quantity she buys, but she may certainly ‘downtrade’—opting for cheaper or unbranded alternatives—or seek value packs with unit price benefits, which does little for a company’s value growth. The sales value of branded edible oil, for instance, dropped by 11 per cent in September 2024, following a 2.3 per cent decrease in September 2023, according to NielsenIQ data.

Firms like HUL, Marico, Dabur and Tata Consumer Products have also been forced to either raise prices of certain products by 3-5 per cent, or resort to ‘shrinkflation’—

“Consumption is a response to wages and income growth. A 1 per cent change in real wages leads to a 110-basis point change in real Private Financial Consumption Expenditure”

— DEVENDRA KUMAR PANT

Chief Economist, India Ratings & Research



reducing the weight of products per package—with the increase in prices of key raw materials, such as palm oil, coffee, cocoa and wheat. Palm oil—a key input for personal care and snack brands—has seen a duty hike of 20 per cent; tea, of 30 per cent. The increase in commodity prices, says Jawa of HUL, has affected sales of their tea brands like 3 Roses, Taaza and Red Label, which cater to the price-sensitive middle class, even as premium ones like Lipton and Taj continue to grow.

Consumer durables, too, have taken a hit. Abdul Raqeeb,

ARUN KUMAR



CASE STUDY ▲

Aishwarya Kumari, 34
HR professional, Greater Noida

47, a fleet manager with a private school in Bhopal, had been wanting to upgrade to a front-loading 12 kg washing machine for a while now (see *Necessity No More*). “I had bought the previous machine for less than Rs 10,000,” he says. But a new one would cost him Rs 45,000-60,000. Discouraged, he has deferred his purchase, preferring instead to spend on his children’s education. Unlike FMCG products, where consumers downtrade during inflationary periods, people delay purchases or extend replacement cycles in the case of consumer durables. This is because unlike FMCG expenses, the buying of durable goods can be spread over time, thanks to financing options such as EMIs. Little wonder that market intelligence firm NielsenIQ reports flat volume growth across 60 categories, including TVs, refrigerators and cellphones; value growth in these categories was just 9 per cent over the previous year. The share of cellphones in the entry-level and mass market segments has also dropped significantly over the past two years.

There is also a growing trend towards premiumisation: the rise of an affordable, feature-rich premium segment to which the slightly wealthier are migrating. Increased local manufacturing has helped trim the cost of many high-end electronic items, says Kamal Nandi, business head & EVP, Appliances Business, Godrej Enterprises Group (GEG). That trend is showing in sales data. For GEG, the mass segment of its products grew by about 17-18 per cent between 2020 and 2024, while the premium segment saw over 45 per cent growth. Nandi explains how the semi-automatic

No Rooms of Their Own

The purchase of a house/ flat of one's own is among the fondest wishes of a middle-class person. For years, Aishwarya Kumar, an HR professional with an IT company in Noida, dreamed of buying a home near her office. Aishwarya's husband works in New Delhi; her six-year-old daughter attends a Noida school. Despite house rents that inch up annually and the hassle of shifting houses, the couple has postponed their dream indefinitely. The main reason: persistent high inflation that corrodes aspirations. "We spend more on basic household things in comparison to three-four

years back and there is no sign of reversal," says Aishwarya.

The couple's income has not increased in tandem with rising inflation and they do not have enough savings to purchase a home. Apartment prices, too, have doubled in Noida from pre-Covid days. To add to all this is the uncertainty in the IT sector itself, bracing for the return of Donald Trump as US president.

Firms, too, have been cautious, and are trying to reduce costs by not replenishing their workforce. All these have forced the couple to choose to wait, and wait.

-Himanshu Shekhar

washing machine category—a staple of middle-class urban households—has stagnated, indicating delayed purchases.

Industry has been pivoting to these tough times. For instance, Crompton, one of the largest mixer grinder players in India, adopted a "Crompton 2.0" strategy two years ago to grow. As part of it, the company focuses on launching more product variants to cater to different market cycles and penetrating rural markets. "This approach has served us well in the current economic environment," says Kaleeswaran Arunachalam, group CFO & head of strategy, Crompton Greaves Consumer Electricals. So, the sales of 500-watt or lower mixer grinders, an affordable category launched two years back, have been growing by over 30 per cent and become a Rs 300 crore business today. Alongside, the premium high voltage four-jar mixers, nutri blenders, juicers and other high-end appliances continue to drive growth for the company.



"The Centre focused on capex growth in the past few years, resulting in high growth. Now, the government needs to focus on boosting consumption"

- RAJANI SINHA
Chief Economist, CareEdge Ratings

A TIME TO MEND

For new demand to emerge, real wage growth is critical. "Consumption is a response to income growth," says Devendra Kumar Pant, chief economist at India Ratings & Research. "At the aggregate level, a 1 per cent change in real wages, which is nominal wage adjusted for inflation, leads to a 110-basis point change in real Private Financial Consumption Expenditure." This is perhaps why experts and industry bodies are urging the government to help boost consumption. "The Centre focused on capex growth in the past few years," says Rajani Sinha, chief economist, CareEdge Ratings, "resulting in high growth. Now, it needs to focus on boosting consumption." One way to do this, perhaps, is through a cut in personal income tax, she adds.

Indeed, consumers and companies have pinned their hopes on the budget to release the animal spirits of the middle-class consumer. The Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) wants the government to "focus on enhancing disposable incomes and stimulating spending to sustain economic momentum". One of its recommendations is to reduce the excise duty on fuel. The central excise duty accounts for nearly 21 per cent of the retail price for petrol and 18 per cent for diesel. These duties have not been adjusted since May 2022, despite the 40-odd per cent decrease in global crude prices. Lowering excise duty on fuel would help reduce inflation and increase disposable incomes, CII says.

The industry body has also recommended reducing marginal tax rates for personal income up to Rs 20 lakh per annum.

Madan Sabnavis, chief economist at Bank of Baroda, also advocates reduction in taxes. "They will have to target the entire middle class rather than just the lower middle class," he says. The government could also consider increasing the daily minimum wage under MGNREGS from Rs 267 to Rs 375 as suggested by the Expert Committee on Fixing National Minimum Wage in 2017. It could also issue consumption vouchers to low-income groups.

Given that bank deposits as a proportion of households' financial assets have declined from 56.4 per cent in FY20 to 45.2 per cent in FY24, CII suggests taxing interest income from deposits at a lower rate and reducing the lock-in period for fixed deposits with preferential tax treatment from the current five to three years. The rationalisation of GST rates is another area of concern. As Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge said on January 9, "Nine types of GST rates make it complex and absurd, not a 'Good and Simple Tax'."

Liberate the middle class and you could trigger a virtuous cycle of consumption, higher growth and higher tax revenue. The Modi government needs to move fast on solutions, for without the middle class of India shining, the dream of Viksit Bharat will remain a mere mirage. ■

-with Amitabh Srivastava and Jumana Shah



THE NATION | ODISHA

THE ALL-NEW NAVEEN PATNAIK

The Biju Janata Dal supremo has stepped out of the shadows, unveiling a new avatar. No longer reserved and detached, he's now a fiery Opposition force, reigniting his party and energising his base

By Arkamoy Datta Majumdar in Bhubaneswar

RISING FROM SILENCE

Patnaik addressing BJD leaders and workers at a rally in Bhubaneswar, Jan. 5



CM Patnaik exuded a calm, gentlemanly demeanour in the more than two decades that he was at the helm. Opposition leader Patnaik is a sharper, feistier avatar, unafraid to take direct shots at his political rivals. The latest salvo assailed the Mohan Charan Majhi-led Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government for the rising prices, labelling it a “double engine, double blow” administration.

The clever potshot came during the Biju Janata Dal's (BJD) first major protest rally in nearly 20 years, held on January 5 near the state legislative assembly. Thousands of supporters gathered, their energy palpable as Patnaik took the stage. For a leader criticised for his detachment in his later years as CM, this marked a dramatic return to grassroots engagement, stirring public discourse. It was a clear signal that Patnaik intends to stay relevant. In that bid, he pledged to educate the two daughters of Sahadev Nayak, a sanitation worker murdered on January 8 before the 18th Pravasi Bharatiya Divas that was held in state capital Bhubaneswar.

The electoral defeat was a cataclysmic moment for the BJD. For a party that had dominated Odisha's political landscape since 2000, the loss was both shocking and humbling. Reduced to just 51 seats in the 147-member assembly, the BJD also found itself without any representation in the Lok Sabha, throwing it into an existential crisis. Defections only exacerbated the situation, as the party's Rajya Sabha presence was reduced to just seven. The absence of a second-tier leadership to carry forward Patnaik's legacy never appeared so stark. The BJP's rise was swift and aggressive, buoyed by an anti-incumbency wave and questions over the role of Patnaik's trusted aide, V.K. Pandian, whose perceived overreach had caused widespread resentment. Patnaik's reclusive attitude in his last tenure as CM did little to

help matters. His health was frequently speculated upon, and his rare public appearances fuelled rumours of waning influence. Even senior party leaders struggled to meet him, while Pandian became the face of the administration.

Many saw Patnaik and his party's defeat as the end of the veteran's political journey. But the man who had turned Odisha into a model of disaster resilience and development wasn't ready to bow out just yet. His ‘resurgence’ began almost immediately after the election results were declared in June last year. Emerging from his chambers at Naveen Niwas, his residence in Bhubaneswar, he

MANY BELIEVED THE BJD'S ELECTORAL DEFEAT MARKED THE END OF PATNAIK'S POLITICAL JOURNEY. BUT THE MAN WHO ONCE TURNED ODISHA INTO A MODEL OF DISASTER RESILIENCE AND DEVELOPMENT WASN'T READY TO BOW OUT JUST YET

addressed a despondent crowd of party workers. “We have nothing to be ashamed of,” he declared, earning thunderous applause. His message was clear: the fight wasn't over.

What followed surprised both allies and opponents alike. Patnaik's influence was so undeniable that even the BJP's actions seemed to revolve around him. On December 28, just hours after Patnaik announced a visit to Ganjam—his home turf and the state's most populous district—to meet distressed farmers, the BJP scrambled to respond. That same day, a hurriedly written government

A

t 78 years of age, most politicians might gracefully retreat from public life. But not Naveen Patnaik, Odisha's longest-serving chief minister and now leader of the Opposition in the state. The defeat in the 2024 assembly and Lok Sabha elections could well have been the epilogue to his career, but Patnaik is intent on writing a few more chapters. Exhibiting a renewed vigour, he is emerging as a vocal and dynamic political force.

note revealed that CM Majhi and a slew of top BJP leaders would visit the district the following day. The visit had not been mentioned in Majhi's earlier press briefings. Patnaik also met farmers in the Puri, Kendrapara and Jagatsinghpur districts, where adoring crowds greeted him. It was the same in September and October last year, when Patnaik visited Ganesh Puja and Durga Puja pandals in the state capital. Frenzied crowds gathered, with many cheering, taking selfies and even shedding tears.

That warmth underscored his deep-rooted connection with the people of Odisha. Political analyst Kedar Mishra notes, "The reaction of the crowd is a testament to Patnaik's enduring appeal. In fact, now that he has returned to the forefront, his popularity seems even greater." He attributes Patnaik's earlier decline to "power fatigue" after 24 years in office, suggesting that his new Opposition role has reinvigorated him. Notably, despite the electoral loss, the BJD is still ahead in terms of vote share, with 40.22 per cent compared to the BJP's 40.07 per cent.

The BJP, however, dismisses reports of Patnaik's growing popularity as a manufactured narrative. "The BJD is using this to keep its crumbling party intact. Naveen Babu didn't visit the districts as CM," says BJP spokesperson Anil Biswal. Nevertheless, admiration for Patnaik remains widespread, even within Biswal's own party. Union minister Giriraj Singh recently suggested that both Patnaik and Bihar chief minister Nitish Kumar deserve the Bharat Ratna for their contributions. However, Patnaik characteristically understated it: "I have no idea why he said that."

The BJD's revival strategy has been multifaceted. At the party's headquarters, Sankha Bhawan, Patnaik has made regular appearances, meeting with workers and leaders. This accessibility extends to Naveen Niwas as well, where the once heavily restricted

THE LEADER'S SECOND ACT

► **Opened the gates of his home Naveen Niwas, and met workers and leaders regularly to rebuild camaraderie and trust at party headquarters**

► **Assigned portfolios to all 51 MLAs, ensuring active participation and accountability within the party**

► **Engaged directly with people during festivals and events, showcasing a renewed connection with his constituents**

► **Visited key districts like Ganjam, Puri, Kendrapara and Jagatsinghpur, drawing massive crowds and reconnecting with supporters**

► **Held the BJD's first major protest in 20 years, targeting the BJP government and reigniting his party's base with powerful rhetoric**

for various reasons. But now, he's as accessible as he was in his early days."

A key element of Patnaik's strategy following the poll defeat was the introduction of a 'shadow cabinet', assigning specific portfolios to his party's 51 MLAs. This move ensures that every legislator remains active and engaged. According to a former BJD minister, they collect details of departmental operations through the standing committees and prepare their attack accordingly; a task that has given everyone a sense of purpose.

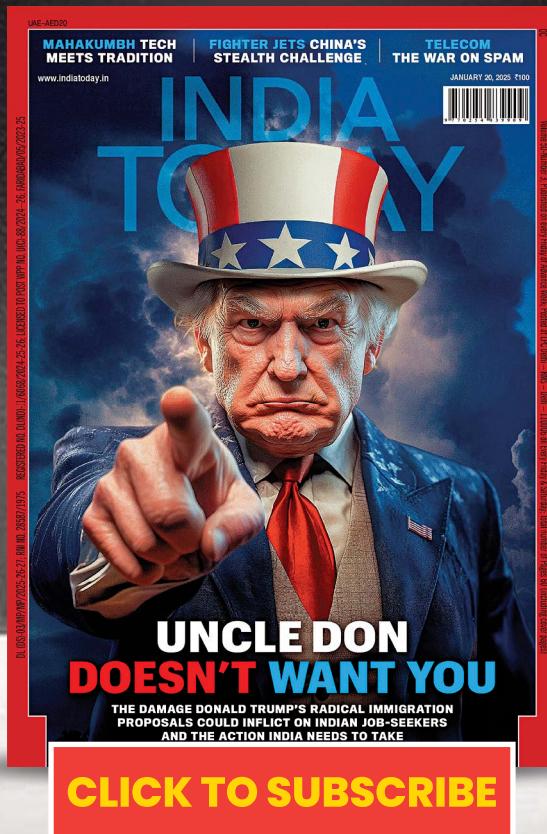
The BJP, however, is not a mute spectator in all of this. With Odisha a key focus of its eastern expansion strategy, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has poured both resources and attention into the state. In the BJP's narrative, the BJD is portrayed as a party of the past, incapable of addressing contemporary challenges. Modi, on the other hand, wants to turn Odisha into a BJP bastion, much like what he did in Gujarat, and the stakes couldn't be higher.

Patnaik's challenges aren't just external. Within the BJD, dissatisfaction lingers. Former minister Amar Prasad Satpathy openly criticised Patnaik's leadership, blaming him for the party's poor performance. His age, and therefore his health and longevity, is a pressing concern for a party that has long revolved around him. Yet, for now, the mood within the BJD is optimistic. Patnaik's presence at key events, from the BJD's foundation day celebrations to membership drives and blood donation camps, has reinvigorated the party's base. His assertion during the foundation day event that the BJD would "serve Odisha for the next century" reflects his confidence and vision.

His critics, though, wonder if Patnaik can sustain this momentum and convert it into electoral success. The first litmus test for the BJD's revived strategies will be in 2027, when panchayat elections are due to take place. ■

gates are open for party workers and supporters. His recognition of Rajya Sabha MP Sulata Deo's parliamentary performance during a gathering was particularly notable. For Deo, who had worked in the party for nearly a decade, it was a rare and touching moment. And she isn't alone. Many party leaders have experienced a renewed camaraderie with their leader since Patnaik began regularly meeting them in August. Prasanna Acharya, a long-time confidant, former parliamentarian and now deputy leader of the Opposition, candidly admits, "He was largely unavailable in recent years,

CAUGHT IN THE MIDDLE, WHICH WAY WILL TRUMP GO?



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SPECIAL REPORT | CIVIL AVIATION

HOW DELHI CAN BECOME AN AVIATION HUB

India's booming aviation sector has instilled the idea in government of making Delhi a global aviation hub. But there are hurdles ahead

By Avishek Ghosh Dastidar



India's ambitions align with reality, it could soon have an international aviation hub of its own, one offering Indian passengers increased convenience, more options to international destinations, shorter routes and competitive fares. For international travellers, it will mean one more gateway. For India's growing civil aviation sector and flagship carriers, this will be a significant opportunity for expansion.

So, what exactly is an international aviation hub? It is an airport airlines use to concentrate and route flights through,



READY TO TAKE OFF
Aircraft at the Indira Gandhi International Airport in Delhi

connecting passengers and traffic in what is recognised as the hub-and-spoke model. Aviation experts point out that India, despite its strategic location, has not been able to capitalise on its advantages because we never envisaged our airports as international hubs nor designed them as such from the ground up. Unlike, say, Singapore's Changi airport, which was designed to be an international-to-international (I-I) hub with a focus on space and infrastructure that would suffice for decades to come. Indeed, even its aircraft maintenance facility (part of the hub ecosystem) was designed to be scalable.

With Indian airlines—barring Air India—having neither the capacity nor the wide-bodied aircraft to fly long-haul flights across the world, passengers have had to choose international carriers for point-to-point connectivity. According to an official analysis, only 11 per cent of



K. Ram Mohan Naidu, Minister of Civil Aviation

"WE ARE MAKING DELHI AN AIRPORT HUB AS A PILOT PROJECT, AND ALSO PUSHING HYDERABAD AND BENGALURU TO FOLLOW SUIT. WE ARE GETTING ALL STAKEHOLDERS TO WORK HARD ON THIS"

the passengers take direct flights to destinations in Europe and North America from India. We may currently be the seventh largest market in terms of international passengers carried, but our share in the 'I-I' segment, serving international passengers who fly to an Indian airport for a halt en route to an international destination, is less than 1 per cent. West Asian airports have 11 per cent of the global connecting traffic, with Doha in Qatar serving nearly 75 per cent of its total passengers through international transfer flights. So, business is emerging from India, but not only are Indian carriers losing a sizeable market to foreign counterparts, international hubs are also gaining in revenue from airport charges, fuel, business and tourism etc.

WINGS OF CHANGE

Hence India's efforts to build a hub for itself. The time, as civil aviation minister K. Ram Mohan Naidu says, is now. "Delhi, Bengaluru and Hyderabad—we are pushing them into becoming hubs," he told INDIA TODAY. The civil aviation ministry had shared a draft policy with key industry stakeholders for comments. It has also met the country's major airport operators as well as officials from the Central Industrial Security Force and the Bureau of Immigration to discuss possible changes in airport interior design, and new technologies to expedite immigration and security check processes for international travellers. Naidu admits it's not something that can be achieved overnight. "It takes time. Airlines, airport operators and the ministry, we're all working towards this," he says.

The Indira Gandhi International (IGI) airport in Delhi, the busiest in the country, has been chosen for the pilot. The government has also identified Air

India and IndiGo, the country's two largest carriers, as potential partners to carry the weight of this vision. "India has the potential to accommodate at least three hubs and a plethora of point-to-point services," Air India CEO Campbell Wilson said at an industry event last year in Gurugram. "There are few markets globally akin to India. North India witnesses a substantial east-to-west flow, whereas the South can facilitate flows from Asia to Africa or Australia-Europe." But what does it take to be a global aviation hub? Well, right now, about 130 million international passengers fly over India annually; 10 per cent of this transit traffic is handled by Dubai, Doha airport gets a 7.5 per cent share. Delhi, unfortunately, gets less than one per cent share. So what will it take for Delhi to join the big boys?

TERMINAL SIZE AND INFRASTRUCTURE

Over the past few years, IGI has been focusing on augmenting capacity. Terminal 3 can now handle 44 million passengers per annum (MPPA), which compares favourably with the 43 MPPA that Dubai's Terminal 3 handles. After renovations, Terminal 1 of IGI now has enhanced capacity, up to 40 MPPA from 17 MPPA. The capacity at Terminal 2 remains 17 MPPA, but IGI intends to eventually integrate it with the others. Combined, the total capacity of IGI's three terminals will be 100 MPPA, overtaking the 93 MPPA capacity America's Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport boasted in 2022, and the combined 90 MPPA capacity of Changi's four terminals.

Infrastructure-wise, though, IGI has some way to go to meet the global benchmarks set by the major hubs in our neighbourhood. In terms of physical size, T3's 5.4 million sq. ft area falls far short

of Dubai's T3, which is spread over a massive 18.4 mn sq. ft. Changi's four terminals have a combined floor area of 13.6 mn sq. ft, the largest being T3 with 4.1 mn sq. ft. IGI's T1 has now expanded to 169,000 sq. metres from the existing 60,000 sq. metres, since Delhi International Airport Ltd (DIAL) intends to gradually shift its entire domestic operations here, thereby freeing up capacity in T3 solely for international operations. Long-term plans include adding a fourth terminal too.

Besides its four runways, Delhi has added a 3,000 sq. m. I-I transfer area, double the size of the original. "In the first phase, the focus is on increasing the share of domestic to international passengers who choose Indian carriers for direct connectivity," says Videh Kumar Jaipuriar, CEO of DIAL. "For that, we are increasing our flight handling capacity and working with the airlines to create slot banks." A 'slot bank' ensures efficient flight scheduling. For instance, if an airport has North

IMMIGRATION AND SECURITY

Delhi has 103 immigration counters, but it is not uncommon to see long, slow-moving queues of passengers at these counters, especially during peak departure and arrival hours. In global hubs, large resources are invested into this critical process. Dubai, for instance, has 107 immigration counters at just the arrivals terminal and 60 automated smart gates in Terminals 1 and 3, which together serve 95 per cent of its international passengers. At its departures, the two terminals combined have 71 counters and 45 smart gates segregated class-wise. Singapore, on the other hand, has plans to process almost 95 per cent of its arrivals through automated lanes.

In India, the civil aviation ministry's latest meeting with airport operators, security agencies and the Bureau of Immigration delved into security solutions derived from studying international airport models such as those of Singapore and

THE DELHI UPGRADE

An aviation hub facilitates seamless transit connectivity for travel worldwide using a hub-and-spoke approach. To become one, the Delhi IGI airport has to undertake a massive upgrade to compete with world-class hubs such as Singapore and Dubai

THE SIX ESSENTIALS



1. IMMIGRATION

NEED FOR AUTOMATED SMART GATES

DELHI: 103 counters

DUBAI: 107 counters at arrivals terminal, 60 automated smart gates

SINGAPORE: 95% arrivals through automated lanes



V.K. Jaipuriar
CEO, DIAL

"IN PHASE 1, WE'LL FOCUS ON INCREASING THE SHARE OF DOMESTIC TO INTERNATIONAL PASSENGERS FLYING INDIAN CARRIERS FOR DIRECT CONNECTIVITY. FOR THAT, WE'RE INCREASING OUR FLIGHT HANDLING CAPACITY"

America departures at 1 am, domestic flights should arrive two hours prior, bringing North America-bound passengers. This strategy maximises plane capacity by combining passengers originating from Delhi with those connecting flights. Most hubs worldwide use this system, where flights to a major destination take off in quick succession at designated time slots.

DIAL also needs to set up an airport operations centre (APOC), the planning and management tool to enhance airport operations efficiency and reduce recovery time after disruptions. Large players may also need terminals dedicated to them, like Emirates has in Dubai. Air India already operates from Delhi's T3.

Canada. There were talks of cross-utilising X-ray baggage machines in domestic and international terminals in Delhi to cut wait time, while proof of concept trials for the use of e-gates and e-biometrics for immigration are already under way.

The stakeholders have also highlighted more passenger-friendly security checks. They cited examples like the 'One Schengen' security framework in European airports wherein once passengers check into an airport, they are not subjected to further security checks while in transit at other airports. India is mulling moves like eliminating physical boarding passes for international passengers at security checks. Its novel DigiYatra

app, which helps passengers check in simply by using biometrics, might also need to expand to cover international passengers. "There is also scope for granting short-duration visas to international transit passengers," says a government official.

BAGGAGE HANDLING

Global hubs are forever trying to handle more bags safely in the shortest possible time. For instance, the Dubai International Airport, specifically Terminal 3, has the largest baggage handling system globally. It includes 21 screening injection points, 49 make-up carousels and 4,500 Early Baggage Storage (EBS) po-



6. LEISURE ECOSYSTEM

HUBS REQUIRE MASSIVE DUTY-FREE SHOPPING AND FOOD ARCADES

DELHI T3

- 215,000 sq. ft retail space, over 200 stores
- Annual revenue: **Rs 248 cr.**

DUBAI T3

- 430,000 sq. ft, Dubai Duty Free is 60,000 sq. ft, foodcourt 22,000 sq. ft
- Annual revenue: **Rs 17,200 cr.**

CHANGI

- 750,000 sq. ft, indoor Shiseido Forest Valley alone is 240,000 sq. ft
- Annual revenue: **Rs 11,180 cr.**

5. ANCHOR CARRIERS

AIR INDIA AND INDIGO NEED BIGGER AND MORE LONG DISTANCE AIRCRAFT

DELHI T1 & T3

- Air India and IndiGo
- AI: 205-strong fleet, 6 A350s, 21 Boeing 777s, 29 787s
 - IndiGo: 434-strong fleet, 2 Boeing 777s, 12 737s

AIR INDIA
IndiGo

DUBAI

- Emirates: 261-strong fleet, almost all A380 and Boeing 777s

CHANGI

- Singapore Airlines: 161 mostly wide-bodied aircraft, 62 A350s, 8 A380s, 27 Boeing 777s, 23 787s

2. INFRASTRUCTURE

TERMINAL SIZE HAS TO GO UP THREE-FOLD

Size (in mn sq. ft)

DELHI T3	DUBAI T3
5.4	18.4

Changi (4 terminals)	13.6
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4. BAGGAGE HANDLING

INSTAL FULLY AUTOMATED EARLY BAGGAGE STORAGE (EBS*) SYSTEM

DELHI T1 & T3: 12,800 bags per hr capacity, 24 baggage belts

DUBAI T3: 15,000 bags per hr, 90 km of conveyor belts, 4,500 EBS** positions

CHANGI: Fully automated EBS facility; 13-km long Inter-Terminal Transfer Baggage System

* EBS allows passengers to automatically check in their baggage early and retrieve them

sitions. It also has 90 km of conveyor belts capable of handling 15,000 bags per hour at a speed of 27 km per hour.

Changi, on the other hand, has specifically added an EBS facility covering a floor area as large as four Olympic-sized swimming pools. The fully automated system, with 1.2 km of conveyor belts, processes 2,400 bags at any given time. Automated cranes place bags in slots, and when it is time to start loading a flight, say, around three hours before departure, the cranes retrieve that flight's bags and send them to the departure baggage track. It has a subterranean Inter-Terminal Transfer Baggage System (ITBTS) of more than 13 km, connecting Terminals 1, 2 and 3, ca-

pable of handling over 2,700 bags an hour, moving bags at seven metres per second.

In Delhi, DIAL plans to develop its own EBS, says CEO Jaipuriar. IGI's T3 currently has a baggage processing capacity of 12,800 bags per hour. It has 14 baggage belts in T3 and 10 in T1. But it's ultimately storing large volumes of baggage for long periods. Hundreds of baggage items checked into the various feeder flights need to be transferred to the transit flight, all of which arrive at different times. "The airport also needs to increase EBS capacity for connecting bags. We have got all infra-related requirements evaluated and will plug the gaps from our side," Jaipuriar adds.

Graphic by TANMOY CHAKRABORTY

NOT JUST AN AIRPORT

Successful international hubs are an ecosystem of luxury, business activities, shopping, entertainment and tourism. This can't be said about any airport in India yet. The Dubai Duty Free, for instance, is a 60,000-odd sq. ft shopping complex that earns an annual revenue of close to \$2 billion (Rs 17,200 crore).

Singapore's Changi has positioned itself as an attractive destination for corporate, social and leisure events. Changi Jewel, a multi-dimensional tourist destination, is a mall of sorts, with outdoor and indoor venues. Connected to the arrival hall of Terminal 1, it offers attractions like a lush green sanctuary, a 40-metre-tall

indoor waterfall, a hedge maze, and a mirror maze. It also houses numerous retail outlets, including duty-free shops, luxury boutiques and convenience stores, a children's play area, a movie theatre, etc. Changi also offers city tours to its layover passengers. These services contribute almost 48 per cent to the airport's revenue.

Delhi's T3, by contrast, has a 2.15 lakh sq. ft retail space that includes restaurants and shopping facilities, but falls far short of what an international hub offers. The foodcourt in Dubai's Terminal 3 alone covers 22,000 sq. ft. Meanwhile, IGI's total income from non-aeronautical sources was only Rs 248 crore last fiscal. "Indian airports will evolve over a period of time into strong gateways with dense networks. We can't create another Dubai... and we must be realistic about our ambitions," says Kapil Kaul, CEO of the Centre for Asia Pacific Aviation (CAPA).

WHERE ARE THE AIRLINES?

Airport infrastructure is just one piece of the puzzle. India cannot have a hub unless one or two strong airlines play ball, matching the government's ambition with aggressive, planned investments. With India seeing a massive post-Covid recovery in air passenger numbers, the industry, including the International Air Transport Association (IATA), estimates that India's passenger market will become the third largest in the world in a decade. Riding on this boom is the ambition of India's two airlines—Air India and IndiGo.

Activating its expansion plan, Air India, following its induction into the Tata Group, has ordered 470 planes from Airbus and Boeing, including 40 widebodies in addition to the 43 it has already. IndiGo, on the other hand, has placed an order with Airbus for 500 A320s to be delivered between 2030 and 2035. Its overall order pipeline is for around 950 aircraft, to be delivered in phases over the next 10 years. These include the A321XLRs, which are long-range narrow-body aircraft with a run time of around 10 hours. This will open up direct connectivity to destinations in most of Asia and Europe, operated previously only by widebodies. The first one is expected this year. It has already

leased two wide-body Boeing B777s. IndiGo, India's largest airline commanding an over 55 per cent of the market share, aims to double its fleet size by the end of 2030, and 'transform from a domestic carrier to a global aviation giant'.

But is it enough? The entire 261-strong fleet of the Emirates is comprised of A380 and Boeing 777s, flying to 135 destinations every year. Singapore Airlines has 161 aircraft, mostly widebodies. Turkish Airlines has 450, both wide- and narrowbodies. In contrast, Air India has 205 aircraft, which include both wide- and narrow-bodies, operating 84 flights every day, of which 40 are international.

THE SKY IS THE LIMIT

India will have to open up its skies to carriers from West Asia to accommodate the global traffic growth beyond 2030. "This will require a focus on terminal design, passenger processes (including digitisa-

tion Policy of 2016 outlines guidelines for these agreements. A committee led by the Cabinet Secretary will recommend methods for allocating additional capacity entitlements to countries within a 5,000 km radius where Indian carriers haven't utilised 80 per cent of their capacity. Bilateral agreements will be renegotiated where capacity has been fully utilised.

Outlining the task before India, Girish Nair of KPMG India says, "Network carriers and hub airlines need to work closely with partner airports to ensure the highest level of customer experience. Regulators and other government stakeholders also need to bring about relevant changes in policies and processes to cater to the changing business environment and traffic flows through our airports."

After all, mega-hub structures in Dubai, Doha and Istanbul, which in size, scale, ambition and quality are now global



KAPIL KAUL
CEO, Centre for Asia
Pacific Aviation India

"INDIAN AIRPORTS WILL EVOLVE OVER TIME INTO STRONG GATEWAYS WITH DENSE NETWORKS. WE CAN'T CREATE ANOTHER DUBAI. AND WE MUST ALSO BE REALISTIC ABOUT OUR AMBITIONS"

tion), airside amenities and cost efficiency, among other things," says Amitabh Khosla, IATA's country director for India. "All this will help India serve as an international hub in the future."

India has bilateral agreements with 116 countries, including 'open skies' agreements with the US and Japan. Most agreements, though, limit the number of seats or flights per week. The agreement with Dubai, for example, allows 66,000 seats per week, which the airlines of both countries fully utilise. Indian officials have declined to increase this quota, as foreign carriers primarily transport passengers to Europe and America via Dubai, limiting opportunities for Indian carriers to expand. The National Civil Avia-

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benchmarks, were the result of conscious state policy. The Dubai hub, for example, was a product of the single-minded, solid backing of the State. This allowed co-ordinated development of the airport and the airline, along with other variables such as the creation of tourism, entertainment and shopping attractions. The Indian government is planning to form an inter-ministerial group to thrash out the sundry details. "The group will need to have the home, external affairs and other relevant ministries because this is not just a civil aviation matter," says a senior government official. With determination on its side, it is only a matter of time before the Indian ambition for an international hub takes wing. ■

**INDIA
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ICE AGE GIVES WAY TO EV ERA

2025 will be the turning point for India's auto industry, as electric vehicles surge mainstream with fierce competition among top players



Maruti Suzuki eVitara



MG Windsor



Hyundai CRETA Electric

2

025 will probably be that watershed year which historians will bookmark as the dawn of the EV era in this country. And no, it will not be because

Tesla will finally make it to India nor will it be because the Chinese car makers will overrun the Indian car industry like they are poised to do the world over with their EVs. It will be because the top 5 car makers in the country, representing nearly 90 per cent of the passenger car industry, will all have attractive EVs on sale. And some of them putting their very first EV on the market. The companies sixth and seventh on the list already have EVs in their portfolio that they will be further expanding. Leaving Honda and Jeep aside, the rest of the companies also already have, or will have, EVs on the market in 2025, as will newcomers like VinFast.

The big news is of course Maruti Suzuki's entry into the EV space in 2025, albeit with a top-down approach, much like that of Hyundai. Both will enter the market with electric versions of their best-selling mid-sized SUVs, the Creta Electric and the eVitara, making their long-standing rivalry electric. Mahindra has already showcased the BE 6 and the XE 7e while Tata Motors is slowly working its way up from the likes of the electric versions of the Tiago, Tigor and Nexon to the Punch and the Curvv.

If Maruti Suzuki has an EV, so will Toyota and if Hyundai is making an EV in India, so will Kia and we are also likely to see the electric avatar of the Carens this year. MG already has a portfolio that includes three EVs, including the Windsor which has been India's best-selling EV for the last few months and is changing the game in people's perception of EVs as expensive and/or small

vehicles. It costs as much as a small vehicle, it will run for nearly free for the first year and then for a fraction of the running cost of an ICE vehicle, and it looks and feels like, and has the space of a large car. BYD already has a portfolio of three EVs in the country and who does that leave us with? Volkswagen and Skoda will also be launching EVs this year while Renault and Nissan as well as Honda seem to be the inconsequential three, leaving question marks about their future in the country.

What will change the game for EVs in the country, I have long maintained, is the entry of the market leader into this segment. But what I could not have foreseen was that Maruti Suzuki's entry would coincide with 90 per cent of the industry selling EVs, competing with each other and coming out with more innovative ideas to attract the car-buying public to EVs. The future is here. ■



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Toyota Kirloskar Motor's leadership team (from left) Sabari Manohar, VP, Sales & Service; Masakazu Yoshimura, MD & CEO; Manasi Tata, VC; and Tadashi Asazuma, deputy MD, Sales-Service, at the launch of the new Camry

NINTH-GEN CAMRY IS READY TO TAKE ON THE GERMANS

Toyota Kirloskar Motor has launched the ninth-generation Camry sedan. Priced at Rs 48 lakh (ex-showroom), it is being offered in a single trim option called Elegance and gets a price hike of Rs 1.8 lakh over the outgoing model. Based on the TNGA-K platform, the new Camry gets Toyota's modern 'hammerhead' design

aesthetic with a sharp nose and slim LED DRLs with the LED headlamps integrated inside as well. At the rear, the taillamps are LEDs and shaped in a C-pattern. The cabin has been altered with modern appointments, including a 12.3-inch instrument display and a similarly sized infotainment display that is compatible for wireless Apple

CarPlay; Android Auto is wired. Toyota has added Safety Sense 3.0 ADAS with a radar-based system which adds collision assist, cruise control, lane following assist and more. The Camry gets a 2.5-litre petrol motor paired to Toyota fifth-gen Hybrid System, with a combined output of 230bhp, that is sent to the front wheels via an eCVT. Toyota claims an ARAI-rated efficiency of 25.49kmpl for the new Camry, which puts it amongst the most efficient cars on sale in India.

MAHINDRA TURNS HEADS WITH THE BE 6 AND XEV 9e

Mahindra has launched the first two of its Electric Origin SUVs for the Indian market, namely the BE 6 and the XEV 9e. The BE 6 is the first model in the BE electric-only sub-brand, which will spawn other models in the coming years. Prices for the BE 6 start at Rs 18.6 lakh and will go up to Rs 26.9 lakh (ex-showroom) for the Pack three variant. The XEV 9e starts at Rs 21.9 lakh and one will have to pay Rs 30.5 lakh (ex-showroom) for the Pack Three

variant. Both the BE 6 and XEV 9e are based on the INGLO electric-only platform, and have a wheelbase of 2,775mm. The BE and the XEV get functional aero, and are offered with a 59kWh and a larger 79kWh battery pack. The smaller battery pack is paired to a 228bhp motor while the larger is paired to a 286bhp motor, with both motors making 380Nm of torque. This means that the BE 6 can sprint from 0 to 100kmph in just 6.7 seconds, while the XEV 9e is 0.1s slower to the mark.

BE 6
PRICE
₹18.6-26.9
lakh

XEV 9e
PRICE
₹21.9-
30.5 lakh



From left, Rajesh Jejurikar, ED & CEO, Auto & Farm Sectors, Mahindra & Mahindra Ltd (M&M); actor-model Riya Sisodiya; Veejay Nakra, president, Auto Sector, M&M; Anish Shah, Group CEO & MD, Mahindra Group; Pratap Bose, chief design & creative officer, M&M; R. Velusamy, president, Automotive Technology & Product Development, M&M; and actor Rahul Khanna

All New
AMAZE
Here To Outclass



From left, Honda Car India leadership team comprising Kunal Behl, VP, Marketing & Sales; Takuya Tsumura, president & CEO; Ryuto Shimizu, director, Marketing & Sales; and Peerachet Thanaphonlasak, product development representative, Honda R&D Asia Pacific, with the new Amaze

PRICE
₹8-10.9 lakh

THIRD-GEN HONDA AMAZE STARTS AT RS 8 LAKH

Honda has launched the third-gen Amaze, with prices ranging from Rs 8 lakh to Rs 10.9 lakh (ex-showroom). The sedan has been revamped with a new look, taking cues from the larger Elevate and City, and the Accord sold in international markets. The front now gets a new grille, which is larger, flanked by new bi-LED headlamps and a slim LED DRL, which mimics the one found on the Elevate. It

also gets new alloys and new LED taillamps, which look similar to those on the City. The cabin has been revamped with a new 8-inch infotainment display which runs wireless Apple CarPlay and Android Auto, and a semi-digital instrument panel with a 7-inch display as well as new controls for the HVAC and dashboard theme. Features include automatic climate control, wireless smartphone

charger, three-point seatbelts for all passengers, rear arm rest, and rear AC vents. Honda has also added Honda Sensing ADAS to the Amaze which adds a number of autonomous driver aids, making the Amaze the most affordable car in India with ADAS. The Amaze continues with the same 1.2-litre four-cylinder petrol which makes 90bhp and 110Nm of torque, paired to a 5-speed manual or a CVT, with paddle shifters.

BIKE

TRIUMPH GIVES SPEED TWIN 900 AN UPGRADE

Triumph Motorcycles has launched the updated Speed Twin 900 in India, priced at Rs 8.89 lakh (ex-showroom). The 2025 model features a refreshed design and an upgraded chassis, with Marzocchi upside-down forks, a sporty front mudguard and fork protectors. At the rear, it boasts a newly fabricated aluminium swingarm and



PRICE
₹8.89 lakh

piggyback rear suspension units, complemented by a narrower rear frame, a sleeker mudguard, and a compact tail light. The braking system has been

upgraded with a larger 320 mm front disc and a four-piston calliper. The seat has been redesigned and the bike now gets an all-LED

lighting set-up including a slim DRL headlight. What's more, the bike also gets Bluetooth connectivity.

THE AMAZING AURA OF DZIRE

THE FOURTH GENERATION OF THE DZIRE DEBUTED RECENTLY, AND IT CAN TAKE THE COMPACT SEDAN SPACE BY STORM. WE DROVE IT IN GOA AND CAME AWAY SMITTEN

BY DIPAYAN DUTTA



W

e should begin this review with a disclaimer. I don't care much for SUVs. Sedans, however, have a special place in my heart, and the 2024 Maruti Suzuki Dzire has reaffirmed that. This fourth-generation Dzire feels like Maruti Suzuki poured its heart into designing and engineering it, perhaps in a

bid to make buyers fall in love with sedans again.

The Dzire no longer looks like a Swift with a boot slapped on. This new generation has broken ties with its hatchback sibling. While it still uses the HEART-ECT platform, the design is distinct. Gone are the clamshell hood and bulging arches; instead, you get smooth, flowing lines. The headlamps resemble those of a premium car, but they integrate beautifully with the front. The top-end ZXi+ variant we reviewed has crystal vision LEDs with DRLs, a piano black insert, and a chrome strip that mimics a connected light bar. The grille, mostly housed in the bumper, complements the design with chrome-accented vertical slats.

From the side, the thick C-pillar and clean silhouette set the Dzire apart. The 15-inch dual-tone alloy wheels and subtle chrome accents on the windows add a premium feel. Unlike earlier iterations, there's no trace of its hatchback origins. At the rear, the design cleverly masks the 3,995mm length with a ducktail spoiler and forward-leaning lines. The Y-shaped LED tail lamps, connected by another chrome strip, round off the look. The 382-litre boot is practical, offering more space than rivals like the Brezza and Fronx.



Photographs by HARVINDER SINGH

Inside, while the layout borrows heavily from the Swift, the Dzire introduces a more premium aesthetic. The beige upholstery, wood veneer, and matte chrome accents lend it a spacious, sophisticated vibe. Unlike the Swift, the Dzire features a sunroof, highlighting its upscale positioning. The ZXi+ variant offers a 9-inch Smart Play Pro+ infotainment system with wireless Android Auto and Apple CarPlay, six airbags, a 15W wireless charging pad and a 360-degree camera. The Arkamys six-speaker audio system provides an immersive experience, though an armrest is notably absent



MARUTI SUZUKI DZIRE

from the standard features. Maruti offers it as an accessory, but buyers might expect it to come standard.

The second row is a major upgrade. Gone are the angled seats of earlier generations, replaced by upright, supportive ones that are more comfortable for long journeys. The ride quality is much improved, with bumps and undulations better absorbed. Rear occupants also get AC vents (albeit positioned low) and two fast-charging ports.

Under the hood, the Dzire retains the 1.2-litre, 3-cylinder Z12E engine, shared with the Swift. Despite initial scepticism, this engine impresses with its liveliness, reminiscent of the iconic G13B. It produces 81bhp and 112Nm and is paired with either a 5-speed manual or a 5-speed AMT (Automated Manual Transmission). The manual features a gas-assisted clutch and slick shifter, delivering a rewarding driving experience. The AMT, though smoother than before, still exhibits some head-nod during shifts. The Dzire leads its segment in

fuel efficiency, with ARAI-certified figures of 24.79 kmpl for the manual and 25.71 kmpl for the AMT.

What truly stands out is the ride and handling. The Dzire strikes a perfect balance between comfort and engagement. Its suspension tuning is softer than the Swift's, making it more comfortable for everyday use. Yet, it remains confident and agile

through corners, even with the added weight and extended dimensions of a sedan. This distinction in driving dynamics between the two cars is commendable.

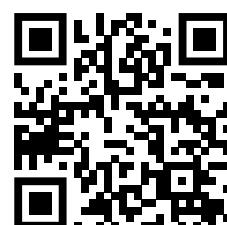
Priced between Rs 6.79 lakh and Rs 9.79 lakh (introductory prices), the Dzire commands a slight premium over the Swift. AMT variants are Rs 45,000 more expensive across the range. However, the Dzire isn't just a Swift with a boot anymore; it's a well-rounded, distinctive compact sedan. If you're in the market for an entry-level sedan, the Dzire deserves serious consideration. ■

Maruti Suzuki Dzire
Engine: 1.2-litre, 3-cyl petrol
Power: 81bhp@5,700rpm
Max torque:
112Nm@4,300rpm
Price: Between Rs 6.79
lakh and Rs 9.79 lakh
(introductory prices)

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BMW X3
₹65-70 lakh



BRAND NEW WHEELS

THE BHARAT MOBILITY GLOBAL EXPO WILL SET THE TONE FOR THE AUTOMOTIVE INDUSTRY IN INDIA IN 2025, SHOWCASING THE NEW CARS AND BIKES THAT WILL HIT THE MARKET

The Bharat Mobility Global Expo is just around the corner and is expected to set the tone for the automotive industry in India in 2025. It will not only be a platform to showcase the new cars and motorcycles that will make their way to the Indian market over the next year but also will be the first point of contact for new brands like VinFast that are now making their way to the country, and others like BYD and MG which are expanding their portfolio

here. From two-seater convertible electric sports cars to popular marques like the Hyundai Creta now reincarnated in an electric avatar and everything in between, this year's global mobility show will be one of the largest ever. The Expo will also mark its return to the Pragati Maidan grounds in Delhi and is likely to witness the highest footfall in the show's history. Before it all begins, we give you some insight into the biggest showcases, launches and concepts that will change the face of mobility in the country over the next year.



BMW

The much-awaited fourth generation X3 will be BMW's headline product at the Expo this year. The SAV, as BMW calls it, will also be the testbed for the launch of the BMW Operating System 9 which integrates the telematic and infotainment functions of the SUV. Alongside this, the brand will also showcase the all-electric BMW i7, BMW X7, BMW 5 Series Long Wheelbase, BMW M5, BMW M4 and BMW M2. Aside from the vehicles at the show, to engage with the crowds and build on the spectacle BMW-trained drivers will also be putting on a drift show every day in BMW M cars.

HYUNDAI

Hyundai's pavilion will be centred on the launch of the new Creta Electric, the brand's first made-in-India electric car. The brand will launch the Creta Electric with two battery packs. The other three vehicles on display will be the Ioniq 9, the Staria and a brand-new electric mobility solution. The Ioniq 9, Hyundai's global flagship, made its debut at the LA Auto Show last year and is very similar to its sister car, the EV 6. The Staria MPV should meet competition like the Kia Carnival head-on as it has similar features.

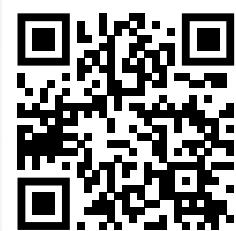
**Hyundai
Creta
Electric
₹21-25 lakh**



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FEATURE**AUTO EXPO**

Maruti
Suzuki
e-Vitara
₹22-27 lakh

MARUTI SUZUKI

The automaker will debut the production version of the eVX concept, christened the e-Vitara. The electric SUV will mark the entry of India's largest automaker into the electric segment. The e-Vitara is based on an all-new electric platform, Heartect-e, that Suzuki developed along with Toyota, which has also spawned the electric Toyota Urban Cruiser. Along with the e-Vitara, Maruti Suzuki will unveil its blueprint for the future of electric mobility, named 'e for Me'. The strategy will have a two-pronged approach: launching more vehicles like e-Vitara, and establishing a robust electric infrastructure to promote seamless adoption of electric cars.

MG

The 510 bhp electric sports car, MG Cyberster, is set to be the showstopper from the automaker. Along with this, there will be the M9 electric MPV, a luxury van with powered ottoman seats and a host of tech and luxury features. MG will also showcase its sister brand IM's L6 sedan. It gets a 26.3-inch panoramic display inside and a yoke-style steering wheel, in addition to Lidar-assisted ADAS. The MG 7 Trophy, a sportier take on the MG 7 sedan, gets a fastback silhouette, and comes with a 2.0-litre turbo-petrol motor making 257 bhp and 405Nm of torque. MG will also debut the MG Select chain of premium showrooms, where models like the Cyberster and M9 will be sold.

MG
Cyberster
₹65 lakh



*Prices are indicative



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MERCEDES-BENZ

India's largest luxury automaker will have quite a few models on display at the expo, headlined by the new electric G-Class, or the G580 with EQ Technology. Alongside the G, Mercedes will also debut the Concept CLA Class. Based on the Mercedes-Benz Modular Architecture (MMA), this previews the next-gen CLA, both the ICE and electric versions. The brand will also reveal the Mercedes-Maybach EQS 680 Night Series, which is essentially a cosmetic package including dark elements for the exterior and the interior, but is mechanically the same as the standard electric SUV.

Mercedes-Benz G580
₹3 crore
(ex-showroom)



Kia EV6
₹65 lakh



Mahindra XEV 9e
₹21.9-30.5 lakh
(ex-showroom)



MAHINDRA

The spotlight at the Mahindra pavilion will surely be the recently launched electric origin SUVs, the BE 6 and the XEV 9E. Both the SUVs have created quite a stir and the audience will surely be excited to get up close and personal with these EVs. Mahindra might just take the opportunity to announce prices for the mid-variants of the EVs which it is yet to do. The Thar Roxx is the other product which will take centre-stage and we won't be surprised to see fully tatted-up versions of the same at the Expo.



KIA

Kia will showcase two important cars, the Syros and the EV6 facelift. The Syros is a different take on the subcompact SUV segment, with the focus being on maximised space, comfort and technology, for passengers at the front and the rear. It gets a tall boy design, and many segment-first features. The EV6 facelift gets a new signature lighting element, new bumpers and a new grille. Inside, the upgrades include a new two-spoke steering, a digital IRVM and updated software.



VINFEST

Not many have heard about them but that isn't stopping VinFast from creating a stir at the Expo. For starters, VinFast is a part of Vietnam's largest conglomerate and is a pure-play electric vehicle (EV) manufacturer with the mission of making them accessible to everyone. VinFast's product line-up includes electric SUVs, e-scooters and e-buses. For India, the company is looking at personal mobility and we expect the pavilion to be lined with SUVs and sedans. Among many other products, VinFast has recently teased the VinFast VF7, a 4.5 metre-long electric SUV. The EV has a claimed driving range of 450 km on a single charge and is offered in FWD and AWD configurations.

Vinfest
VF7
Price N.A.



OLA

Ola is known to thrill audiences with futuristic concepts and that will certainly be the case at the Expo. The Roadster motorcycle will possibly have its first public viewing and is sure to create a stir. The company will also showcase a slew of concept bikes. Ola might also bring in a set of new variants for their existing portfolio.



Ola Roadster
₹1-1.40 lakh
(ex-showroom)



Honda Activa-e
₹1.40 lakh

HONDA

The star of the show at Honda is going to be the Activa-e and the QC1. The Activa-e comes with LED lights, a colour TFT screen and a very simple design. The range is expected to be around 102 km. The QC1 is powered by a 1.5kWh fixed battery, can be recharged at home using a dedicated charger, and has a claimed range of 80 km per charge. While Honda has showcased the scooters already, the company will announce the prices of the scooters at the Expo. Apart from that, Honda is expected to bring in a few big bikes to woo crowds.



Hero Karizma XMR 250
₹2 lakh

HERO MOTOCORP

Hero is all set to show a bold new face at the Expo with a host of new motorcycles, including the Karizma XMR 250, Xtreme 250R and the Xpulse 210. While the XMR receives a design update, the Xtreme is an all-new street naked motorcycle built on the lines of the stunning Xtunt 250R concept showcased some time back. Hero will also show the new Xoom 160 maxi-scooter. Apart from this, we expect Hero to also show a host of new variants based on the existing product line-up.

*Prices are indicative



Next to the Indian Car of the Year (ICOTY), Mahindra Thar Roxx: Dr Raghupati Singhania, chairman & managing director, JK Tyre & Industries, presents the Indian Car of the Year 2025 award to Nalinikanth Gollagunta, CEO - Automotive Sector, and Pratap Bose, chief design & creative officer, M&M Ltd



THE BEST CARS AND BIKES IN INDIA

It

is time to celebrate the best of the year, which means it is time to announce the most awaited Indian Car of the Year (ICOTY) and Indian Motorcycle of the Year (IMOTY). The awards

were presented at a glittering function in New Delhi in the presence of the who's who of the Indian auto industry and we must tell you that it was a close fight.

JK Tyre has been presenting the awards ever since its inception 20 years back. On this momentous occasion, Dr Raghupati Singhania, chairman & managing director, JK Tyre & Industries Ltd, said, "The ICOTY and IMOTY Awards stand as a testament to the remarkable achievements in India's dynamic automotive landscape. These esteemed accolades celebrate excellence and innovation, reflecting



(Fourth from left) Dr Raghupati Singhania, chairman & managing director, JK Tyre & Industries, presents the Premium Car of the Year 2025 award to (fifth from left) Santosh Iyer, MD & CEO, Mercedes-Benz India, along with other members of Mercedes-Benz India

Next to the Green Car of the Year, MG Windsor: Dr Raghupati Singhania, chairman & managing director, JK Tyre & Industries, presents the Green Car of the Year 2025 award to (fifth from left) Rajeev Chaba, CEO Emeritus, JSW MG Motor India, along with the team



the industry's unwavering commitment to progress. Over the years, the Indian automotive sector has demonstrated remarkable strides, solidifying its position as a global leader. At JK Tyre, we are proud to contribute to this legacy and recognise the dedication and ingenuity that drive this industry forward."

The MG Windsor received the Green Car Award by ICOTY for 2025 receiving a total of 157 points while the first runner-up proved to be the BMW i5 with 99 points. The second runner-up was the BYD Seal which scored 87 points.

When it came to the Premium Car Award by ICOTY 2025, it was the Mercedes-Benz E-Class that emerged as the winner scoring 140 points compared to the BMW 5 Series which scored 107 points. The second runner-up was the Kia Carnival with 65 points.

The next big announcement came in the form of the IMOTY 2025. The Aprilia RS 457 came out on top, scoring 98 points with the Bajaj Freedom 125 coming in second with 84 points. The second runner-up was the Hero Xtreme 125R, scoring 63 points.



(Third from left) Dr Raghupati Singhania, chairman & managing director, JK Tyre & Industries, presents the Indian Motorcycle of the Year (IMOTY) 2025 award to Gogi Kapur, VP - Marketing, 3W Domestic Business, Apoorva Saigal, AVP - Corporate Communication and 2W Marketing, Piaggio Vehicles Pvt. Ltd, along with other Piaggio members

Last but not least, it was time for the big one, the ICOTY 2025. The Mahindra Thar Roxx was the winner scoring 139 points with the Maruti Suzuki Dzire coming in at a close second grabbing 137 points. The second runner up was also a Maruti Suzuki in the form of the Swift with 83 points. ■

Dzire coming in at a close second grabbing 137 points. The second runner up was also a Maruti Suzuki in the form of the Swift with 83 points. ■

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अंकल डॉन सब्सक्राइब करें और पाएं 68% तक की छूट

आपका योग्यता को लेकर डोनल्ड ट्रंप के अतिवादी फिल्म के प्रसारण अमेरिका में नौकरी की बाहत वाले भारतीयों की योग्यता को धर्मता लगा सकते हैं। उनसे हानि वाले नुकसान और भारत की ओर से अपेक्षित उपायों का एक जायजा

नियोपौलियर्स, अर्पणपथा, प्रतिरक्षा, टेक्नोलॉजी, गणराज्य,
स्थानीय और दूरदृशी के सब सामने और दूरी दूरी से

बाहा रहे हैं विशेषज्ञ

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

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

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..... शहर..... राज्य..... पिन.....
मोबाइल..... ईमेल.....



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MUSIC: DIVINE
SOUNDS
PG 66

Q&A WITH
AMITAV GHOSH
PG 70

LEISURE



A PAINTERLY TOUCH
Chef Massimo Bottura at work
on one of his creations at the
Leela Palace, New Delhi

Photograph by CHEVON RODRIGUES

FOOD

Cooking Up A Storm

With Michelin-starred celebrity chefs bringing
exclusive pop-ups to India, are we becoming
the next global culinary powerhouse?

LEISURE



FROM THE HILLS TO THE SEA

Chef Ana Roš (right) introduced Slovenian cuisine to Indian diners



I

Imagine stepping into a transformed dining room at The Leela Palace, New Delhi, where every detail—from the music to the table settings—echoes the essence of the three-Michelin-starred Osteria Francescana in Modena. The mastermind behind it, chef patron

Massimo Bottura, greets you warmly. The first course arrives: 'The Crunchy Part of the Lasagne', an ode to childhood memories, its texture as bold as its flavour. Later, 'Oops! I Dropped the Lemon Tart' makes a playful appearance. Between bites, Bottura weaves stories of heritage and innovation, creating an experience that transcends food.

This dinner marked Chef Bottura's third visit to India in as many years, highlighting the deep connection he feels with the country. For long, India was a forgotten destination on the

global culinary map. Chefs from Michelin-starred restaurants and those ranked on the World's Best lists toured Asian gastronomic hotspots like Hong Kong, Bangkok or Dubai, but not India. However, over the past few years, India has hosted a constellation of culinary titans, transforming its dining landscape into a stage for gastronomic theatre.

Raaj Sanghvi, CEO of Culinary Culture, which has been instrumental in many such collaborations, recalls the early days of this shift. "Since the first events in 2018, we've hosted nearly 100 chefs," he says. "The idea was to create a culinary exchange programme where chefs come to India, experience its diverse cuisines, and take a bit of it back with them, while giving Indian diners the opportunity to experience the work of global culinary legends."

Hotels like Taj Mahal, New Delhi, have been at the forefront of such events. Last February, Chef Ana Roš of the three-Michelin-starred

INTERVIEW

Q

Michelin-starred chef Garima Arora who made waves with Gaa, her modern take on Indian food in Bangkok, comes full circle with Banng, her Thai restaurant in Gurugram

Q. What drew you to cooking professionally?

Growing up in a Punjabi household, food was a big part of my life. Deep down, I knew I wanted a career in food. Being a chef is a young person's

game and couldn't be put off. In 2010, I packed my bags for Paris and graduated from Le Cordon Bleu.

Q. What made you open an Indian restaurant in Bangkok?

Thailand chose me. I was supposed to be there for a short while. One thing led to another, and suddenly I found myself opening a restaurant. I wanted to do Indian food but with a twist—using local Thai ingredients to create something new and exciting.

Q. What is the food philosophy of Gaa?

We want guests to be surprised by the prowess of

Indian techniques, ingredients and flavours when they are applied to a new set of ingredients. The result is something new, but still Indian at heart.

Q. How do you balance work and motherhood?

Being a chef is demanding. You have to be present physically and be on your feet. I'm privileged that I have my own business and can carve out my time according to the

needs of me and my baby.

Q. And now you have ventured into Thai food with Banng...

Banng feels like the other half of my journey. A

Indian techniques and flavours are applied to a new set of ingredients in **GAA**, Garima Arora's Bangkok restaurant

Hiša Franko hosted a series of dinners and masterclasses, introducing Slovenian cuisine. In 2023, Chef Rupert Bleasie of Michelin-starred Lord Stanley curated a modern European menu at The Chambers. Arun Sundararaj, director of Culinary Operations at the Taj Mahal Hotel, says, "The chefs create an alchemy that reflects both their roots and the inspiration they draw from India. These experiences are about creating memories and building relationships." Anupam Dasgupta, general manager, The Leela Palace, New Delhi, adds, "Hosting high-profile chefs positions India as a serious contender in the global fine-dining landscape. It demonstrates that the country is not just a hub for cultural heritage but also a destination for world-class dining."

The phenomenon is pan-India. Atul Kochhar conducted a series of culinary sessions in Mumbai in May 2024. Renowned for his progressive Indian cuisine, Chef Gaggan Anand hosted a 14-course dinner at JW Marriott Bengaluru Prestige Golfshire. The mastermind behind Michelin-starred Thai restaurants Le Du and Nusara,

Chef Ton presented an exclusive Thai dining experience at ITC

Royal Bengal in September 2024. Known for his strong Indian flavours, Michelin-starred Manjunath Mural hosted a pop-up event in Kolkata.

For chefs visiting India, the appeal goes beyond its famed spices. "Many chefs are surprised to learn that there's no singular 'Indian cuisine'. The diversity fascinates them and inspires them to incorporate Indian ingredients into their menus," explains Sanghvi.

Chef Dani García, who has three Michelin stars, was captivated by the Indian tandoor, taking a mini version back to Spain. Daniel Humm of Eleven Madison Park created a dosa-inspired dish, and Alain Passard explored India's farm-fresh produce and created dishes honouring local flavours.

For Indian chefs, these collaborations are not just about learning new skills but also redefining how Indian ingredients can be used. Chef Sundararaj recalls a technique learned from a visiting chef: "They used a siphon gun to foam batter for pakoras, inserted a frozen block of cured cream,

and foamed it again. The result was a crispy exterior with a gooey centre. Techniques like these elevate our traditional culinary practices."

The price tags can range from Rs 25,000 to Rs 65,000 per head, but these events are not just about food for Indian diners—they offer an opportunity to indulge in world-class food without travelling. Despite the costs of flying in such renowned chefs, the elaborate staging of the events justifies the high prices. "Diners aren't just eating; they're transported to the chef's home restaurant, complete with façades and playlists, turning dining into a multisensory experience," says Raaj Sanghvi.

As India continues to host culinary legends, it not only redefines its gastronomic identity but also cements its place on the world stage. These experiences bridge cultures, inspire innovation and offer a taste of the future, positioning India as a powerhouse in the global fine-dining landscape. ■

-Satarupa Paul

FOR INDIAN DINERS, THESE EVENTS OFFER AN OPPORTUNITY TO INDULGE IN WORLD-CLASS FOOD WITHOUT TRAVELLING



decade ago, I fell in love with Thai food, and now I'm bringing it home to India. It all came together when restaurateur Riyaaz Amlani and I met. Riyaaz handled the not-so-fun bureaucratic stuff, and I focused on the food. It's been a dream collaboration.

Q. What is the food at Banng all about?

Banng is all about showing how the Thais eat—family-style, with bold, vibrant flavours

that celebrate the country's culinary diversity. During the R&D process, my team and I worked with Thai food masters like Hanuman Aspler and Supanat Khanarak to ensure authenticity. I'm a purist when it comes to Thai curries and stir-fries, so our curry pastes are freshly pounded in my Bangkok kitchen and flown to India twice a week.

Q. Is winning Michelin stars relevant and important for restaurants?

Yes and no. I know of restaurants that are

not on any list but do phenomenally well. On the other hand, the Michelin guide or recognitions like that do so much to push a restaurant towards financial success. So, of course, it's relevant.

Q. What has the experience of being a judge on MasterChef India been like?

It's interesting, seeing contestants from little cities, even villages, and how they champion their own food and how much more Indian food has to offer than what we take to the world. ■

-with Amit Dixit

IMAGINING THE UNDERWORLD

Jaideep Ahlawat is back headlining a new season of *Paatal Lok*, the show that catapulted him into the limelight

For Jaideep Ahlawat, life can be divided into two halves: before May 15, 2020, and after it. That's when Season 1 of the Amazon Prime Video show *Paatal Lok* released and viewers finally witnessed the range of his thespian skills, spread across nearly eight hours of compelling storytelling. "Be it the kind of scripts that came my way to my approach towards them, everything changed," says Ahlawat, who until then was best known for an effective supporting turn in *Raazi* (2018). "People trusted me to anchor stories, and responsibility and expectations increased." He wasn't the only beneficiary of the critically acclaimed and audience-beloved show. Its creator and showrunner Sudip Sharma became a sought-after writer, co-director

Avinash Arun got to develop his own show, and actor Ishwak Singh got noticed as did Abhishek Banerjee as the menacing dog-loving killer, Hathoda Tyagi.

The stakes are expectedly high from Season 2, which released on January 17. Ahlawat and Ishwak reprise their khaki-clad characters of Hathi Ram Chaudhary and Imran Ansari, respectively, and Arun is back in the director's chair. Sharma fast forwards to two years, but this time, apart from the capital, he takes the story to Nagaland. "Nagaland has this very rich, complex history. It's a part of India about which we know so little and speak so little," says Sharma, who grew up and went to school in Guwahati. "Through Hathi Ram's eyes, I want to go back to places

JAIDEEP AHLAWAT
says people started
trusting him to
anchor stories,
and responsibility
and expectations
increased after *Paatal*
Lok's success

Ahlawat with Gul Panag



that I have a strong connection to. If there's ever a third season, I want to take it west, like Rajasthan, where my family's roots are."

Also thrilled to be back is Gul Panag, who plays Hathi Ram's wife Renu, who will be more "empowered" in the second outing. Having recently re-watched Season 1, Panag felt the show redefined the crime thriller genre by centring it on a regular, by-the-rule inspector. That Sharma had managed to make an authentic police show while touching on pertinent socio-political issues like class disparity, caste prejudice, religious bigotry, social injustice, mental health and more, made *Paatal Lok* all the



more memorable. In *Hathi Ram*, audiences got a hero who was plain and progressive, and simple and sorted as he tried to deal with messy situations.

For *Panag*, the trump card is Sudip Sharma's "genius" and his ability to see *Paatal Lok* for what it is: "That part of the world which exists but we don't want to acknowledge and choose to turn away from." Sharma thrived on building an entire new world all over again. "This [season] is more character-driven," he says. "It's also hopefully as rich and complex as the first one." If it does deliver eyeballs like Season 1, at least we know that *Hathi Ram* will use his crime-fighting skills in Rajasthan. ■

-Suhani Singh

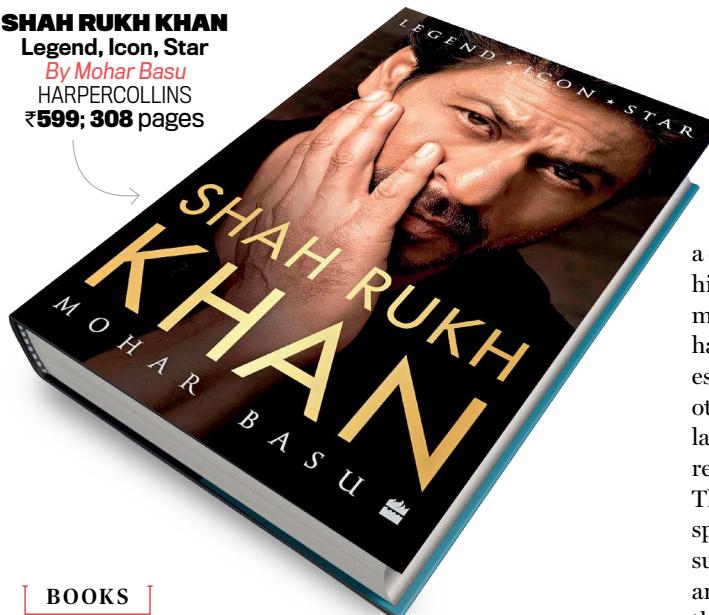
SHAH RUKH KHAN

Legend, Icon, Star

By Mohar Basu

HARPERCOLLINS

₹599; 308 pages



BOOKS

A People's star

Mohar Basu's book on Shah Rukh Khan is a celebration of the actor's larger-than-life impact on his viewers and fans

~~~~~

ously known information. Mohar Basu circumvents this by choosing to focus on his legions of fans and the oft-repeated sentence that "Shah Rukh is an emotion". Through his life and films, she explores what he's come to mean to fans around the world. The book is described as a "compendium of intimate stories, fan accounts and never-before-seen photographs" (by the late photographer Pradeep Bandekar), and it delivers.

The author traces the actor's life from a small *mohalla* in Delhi to becoming one of the most famous Indians ever. A large part of his journey like the C-Gang in St Columba's School, how he wooed his now wife Gauri or the inception of Dreamz Unlimited, his first production house with Juhi Chawla and Aziz Mirza, have been public knowledge for years. It's the smaller nuggets, though, like his trips to Pakistan as

An unnamed male model, insecure about his body, bought a gold shimmery shirt similar to the one Shah Rukh Khan wore in the song 'Tumse Milke Dil Ka' in *Main Hoon Na*. On days when he's feeling "out of sorts" with his body and the world at large, he wears the shirt and watches the film. Pinky Dube, a 40-something house-help from Patna, keeps hoping to discover traces of Raj from *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* in her carpenter husband. She tells her daughter, "Aadmi aisa khajna jo tumhari iz-zat karey [find a man who respects you]."

When writing about a subject like Shah Rukh Khan who has been in the public eye for almost four decades, there is always the danger of regurgitating previ-

a child with his father or his *Jawan* co-star Priyamani recounting how he had his own bodyguards escort her and the film's other actresses after a late-night party, that really make the book. Though the author hasn't spoken to the film's subject, his voice through archival material forms the book's foundation.

Then, of course, there are fans talking about the impact Khan and his films have had on them. Like Zehan Motlekar, a techie who moved to rural Maharashtra after living in the US for a decade much like Khan's *Swades* character Mohan Bhargava. Or, Stacey in California who describes herself as a "52-year-old American woman who loves Bollywood and Shah Rukh Khan". All the Hindi she knows is from his films, she loves Indian sweets and has even gone on a Bollywood cruise! These do tend to get repetitive and maybe a tad simplistic—everyone wants a Raj/Rahul in their lives and a visit to Mannat is inspirational to those struggling to get by. While this might make it seem like a book that's aimed at fans, it's essential reading for those interested in Hindi films because Khan's legacy is more than just his work; it's also about the joy he has brought to so many for so long. And that's worth celebrating. ■

-Karishma Upadhyay

STRAINS ▶  
FROM THE PAST

Ricky Kej with his three Grammy awards. *Break of Dawn* is nominated for a fourth



MUSIC

## DIVINE SOUNDS

**Music composer Ricky Kej considers *Break of Dawn*—his new album based on Indian ragas that has been nominated for the Grammy Awards—his best work so far**

**R**icky Kej has had a great 2024. He set a Guinness World Record when he conducted the “largest singing lesson”, for 13,944 students of the Kalinga Institute of Social Sciences in Bhubaneswar; he taught the Indian national anthem. The three-time Grammy winner scored his fourth nomination for the awards, for his collection *Break of Dawn*, which is competing in the Best New Age,

Ambient or Chant Album category. And he went on an “amazing trip” to Riyadh where he attended the 16th session of the Conference of the Parties (COP16) of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD), of which he is an official ambassador.

“Every year of my career has been better than the previous one,” says the composer and environmental activist who calls *Break of Dawn* his “best work to date”.

The album, which comprises tracks based on nine different Indian classical ragas, is the first release on Vedam Records, a recently launched “wellness” sub-label by Universal Music. Kej says the set reflects his “belief in music as a transformative force for health and well-being”.

“I love working on devotional music because it dives deep into the best parts of the musical form [a religion is] associated with, [whether it's] Hindustani classical, Western classical, or Sufi music.” Similarly, he doesn't feel that timing ‘Ram Ke Hriday Mein’ a few days before the inaugura-

**FOR AN ATHEIST, KEJ'S DISCOGRAPHY HAS PLENTY OF DEVOTIONAL MUSIC—LAST YEAR HE RELEASED TRACKS CONNECTED TO HINDUISM, ISLAM AND CHRISTIANITY**

While Kej feels “there's not enough research” on the healing properties of music, he studied reports published by medical journal *The Lancet* to “figure out the kind of sounds the human ear appreciates [and] people all over the world feel can calm [them]”, and drew inspiration from a Buddhist teaching that states “if the minds of living beings are impure, their land is also impure, but if their minds are pure, so is their land”. Kej says “it's something that really resonated with me, even though I'm an atheist”.

Yet, for an atheist, his discography has plenty of devotional music. He doesn't see this as contradictory. Last year, he released a track with qawwali troupe Warsi Brothers and songs dedicated to Lord Ram and Lord Shiva, and co-produced ‘*Sarvesa*’, a Sanskrit rendition of the Lord's Prayer, helmed by long-time collaborator, violinist Manoj George.

tion of the Ram Mandir in Ayodhya associates with him a political ideology. “In my mind, there's not much difference between nature and heritage,” says Kej. “Creating a song about a temple, which is part of our ancient culture, is as good as creating a song about nature.”

Environmental issues are a recurring theme in his work and, in 2025, in addition to a new “full-blown orchestral” album with Stewart Copeland, he will put out the scores for another natural history documentary (after 2019's National Award-winning *Wild Karnataka*) and the eco-logically focused feature film *Papa Buka*. He will also develop albums for Vedam Records, but not before ensuring *Break of Dawn* gets due attention. “I'm going to do that till it's reached its proper potential because I've worked so hard creating it.” ■

—Amit Gurbaxani



# On a Roll

After a string of successes in 2024, music composer duo **Sachin-Jigar** are looking forward to several major releases in 2025



**SACHIN-JIGAR**  
have at least five  
OSTs lined up in  
2025 and have  
set their sights on  
playing in North  
America

TOP DRAW Sachin (left) and Jigar had earlier worked for Rajesh Roshan and Pritam

**A**mong all Hindi film composers, 2024 was clearly the year of Sachin-Jigar. The duo of Sachin Sanghvi and Jigar Saraiya tallied hits with songs from *Teri Baaton Mein Aisa Uljha Jiya*, *Munjya*, *Vicky Vidya Ka Woh Wala Video* and, most notably, 2024's biggest Bollywood blockbuster *Stree 2*. "The highlight was the fact that our biggest track is sung by a relatively new name," says Sachin, referring to 'Aaj Ki Raat', the chart-topper from *Stree 2* rendered by Madhubanti Bagchi.

Though it comprised just four songs, the horror-comedy's soundtrack was among the rare OSTs from which each tune turned into a smash. "There have been superhit films where our music hasn't worked, and we've made great soundtracks for films that flopped," says Jigar. "It's very rare that the entire package works."

Sachin and he, who broke through in 2011 with two strikingly different songs, the dance number 'Char Baj Gaye' from *F.A.L.T.U* and the soulful ballad 'Sabi' from *Shor in the City*, say there wasn't a specific turning point in their career. Instead, things started changing when filmmakers began placing their trust in their skills. Of these, the pair single out producer Dinesh Vijan, the founder of Maddock Films, the company behind four of the six OSTs they contributed to in 2024. "When the creative team has faith in each other, we can worry about the crux of the content [versus what's trending]," says Sachin.

If their upcoming projects stick to their release schedules, then Sachin-Jigar will have an even busier 2025. The list includes *Ikkis*, *Param Sundari* and *Thama* with Maddock; *Naadaniyaan* with Dharma Productions; and *Maalik* with Tips Films. A key reason for their popularity is the duo's knack of imbibing influences from the icons that preceded them.

The musicians, who were introduced to each other by Amit Trivedi, first worked together as arrangers for Rajesh Roshan and then as assistants to Pritam who perhaps made the strongest impression on them. With Roshan, they learned "how the arrangement needs to be woven with a tune", and from Pritam how to find "the sweet spot between art and commerce".

As composers, they're against recreations of older compositions but the demand was so high that they launched a separate entity called White Noise Productions to execute them. This frees them to focus on "the music we've always wanted to do" and to continue to spotlight fresh voices—something they'll be partially aided in by their stint as judges on the reality TV singing talent show *Sa Re Ga Ma Pa*. After their tour of Australia and the success of their musical *Rajadhiraaj*, based on the life of Lord Krishna, they've now set their sights on playing in North America this year and staging a Broadway play sometime in the near future. "Wherever there's scope to grow, there's excitement," says Jigar. ■

—Amit Gurbaxani

**THE CHASE IS ON**  
Indian women's team members at the national Kho Kho camp in Delhi

ARUN KUMAR



SPORTS

# Big Shout For Kho Kho

WITH SUBSTANTIAL INTERNATIONAL PARTICIPATION AT THE ONGOING KHO KHO WORLD CUP IN DELHI, THE GAME IS POISED TO GO GLOBAL

A decade back, when Nasreen Shaikh used to leave early in the morning for Kho Kho training, the community in her neighbourhood in

Shakurpur, New Delhi, used to taunt the family. "Where is she going? Her parents don't care about her. How can she wear shorts?" Shaikh didn't take it to heart. "Girls anyway have to fight doubly hard to get their way. I wanted to show what a woman can do if she has support," says the 26-year-old. That came from her father, Mohammed Ghafoor, who used to save money to meet her dietary

requirements. His efforts paid off, for Shaikh's exploits on both the *mitti* (mud) and mat are such that he is now better known as the father of Nasreen, the player who captained India through two Asian Championship titles and became only the second Kho Kho player to win the Arjuna award. These days, the family is excited to

**THE WORLD CUP WILL HAVE 21 TEAMS VYING FOR THE MEN'S TITLE; THE WOMEN'S BATTLE WILL SEE 19 TEAMS**

see her in action at the maiden Kho Kho World Cup which is being held in the capital from Jan. 13-19.

The all-rounder will be one of the star players chasing and diving to ensure that host India wins. For Sudhanshu Mittal, president of the Kho Kho Federation of India, the World Cup is one way of following up on Prime Minister Narendra Modi's wish in his *Mann Ki Baat* where he spoke of taking Indian games global. While Team India, known for its strategy and skill, are firm favourites, the Cup will see teams from across continents competing. Apart from Asian contenders like Nepal, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, there are teams—21 in men and 19 in women—from the US, England, South Korea, Poland and South Africa, to name a few.

Attacker Pratik Waikar, who has led Maharashtra to multiple national titles, feels the World Cup has the potential to be a "revolutionary event" in Indian sport. "Not many thought Kho Kho was worth taking up as a profession, for it didn't seem to have much international standing. Lots of kids leave the sport because of this or because



# BREAKING BARRIERS

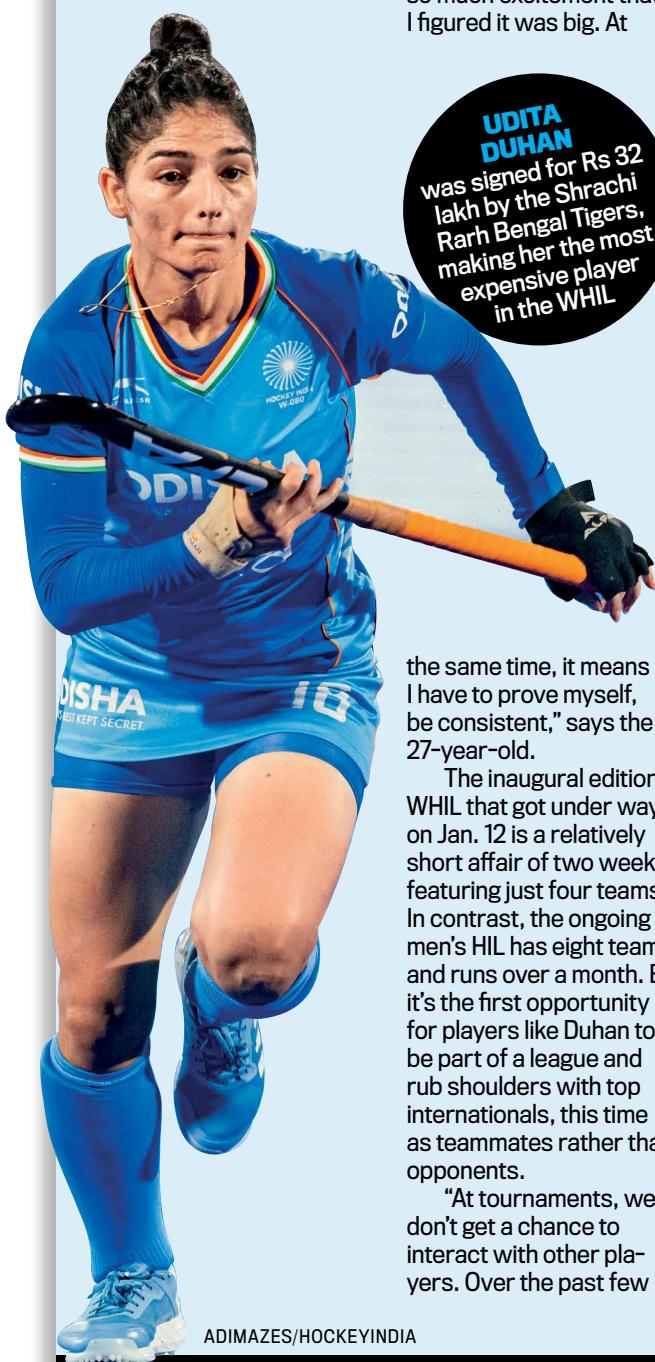
The Women's Hockey India League is a shot in the arm for the sport, feels ace player Udita Duhan

parents don't support their dream," he says. "The tournament will help change the mentality."

Over the past few years, Kho Kho has become more spectator-friendly. The number of players is now down from nine to seven and a *wazir*, a defender who can chase from both directions, has been introduced. It's evident in the Ultimate Kho Kho League where, much like kabaddi, the game is played on the mat. "We have improvised the rules to reflect the game's speed and agility and make it exciting," says Mittal. A third edition of the league is planned for later this year, this time including international players. "We will surpass the Pro Kabaddi League," says Mittal. "Kho Kho is played in 55 countries, and by the end of the year we will be in 90. We have a global presence." The ultimate aim, he adds, is to have Kho Kho at the 2030 Asian Games and as a demo game at the 2032 L.A. Olympics, nearly a century after its unofficial debut at the Berlin Games.

Meanwhile, as Shaikh prepares at the national camp in Delhi, younger sister, Afreen, who is also a professional KhoKho player, will keenly follow the action. Says Shaikh, "From being a lone soldier, there's a lot of *oorja* [energy] now around the sport. We now have a platform to show our skills, which we didn't earlier."

**-Suhani Singh**



**A**t one point, Udita Duhan was overwhelmed by the suspense around her bid during the Women's Hockey India League (WHIL) auction. She hit mute on the live stream and tried to distract

herself. But in the next few minutes, the teammates seated by her side roared with delight. Duhan had been signed by Shrachi Rarh Bengal Tigers for Rs 32 lakh, making her the most expensive player in the league. "There was so much excitement that I figured it was big. At

**UDITA DUHAN**  
was signed for Rs 32 lakh by the Shrachi Rarh Bengal Tigers, making her the most expensive player in the WHIL

the same time, it means I have to prove myself, be consistent," says the 27-year-old.

The inaugural edition of WHIL that got under way on Jan. 12 is a relatively short affair of two weeks featuring just four teams. In contrast, the ongoing men's HIL has eight teams and runs over a month. But it's the first opportunity for players like Duhan to be part of a league and rub shoulders with top internationals, this time as teammates rather than opponents.

"At tournaments, we don't get a chance to interact with other players. Over the past few

days, we've been trying to understand their mindset, watch their training schedules," Duhan says.

The core of the Indian national team will feature in the league, its timing just right to ready them for the FIH Pro Hockey League in February. They'll be looking to make amends after finishing eighth in the tournament last year, besides failing to qualify for the Paris Olympics.

"A lot of negative thoughts crept in when we missed the Games. The team got together and thrashed it out. We had to move on from the debacle and start rebuilding. The gold at the Asian Champions Trophy in November was a big boost," she says.

Duhan has settled into the centreback position after Deep Grace Ekka's retirement last year. A striker during her younger days, the attacking instinct serves her well, making quick interceptions and surging up the field to create opportunities and even scoring once in a while. Bengal Tigers' Aussie coach, Glenn Turner, will be expecting more of the same from Duhan, who'll also be juggling responsibilities as captain and a penalty corner specialist.

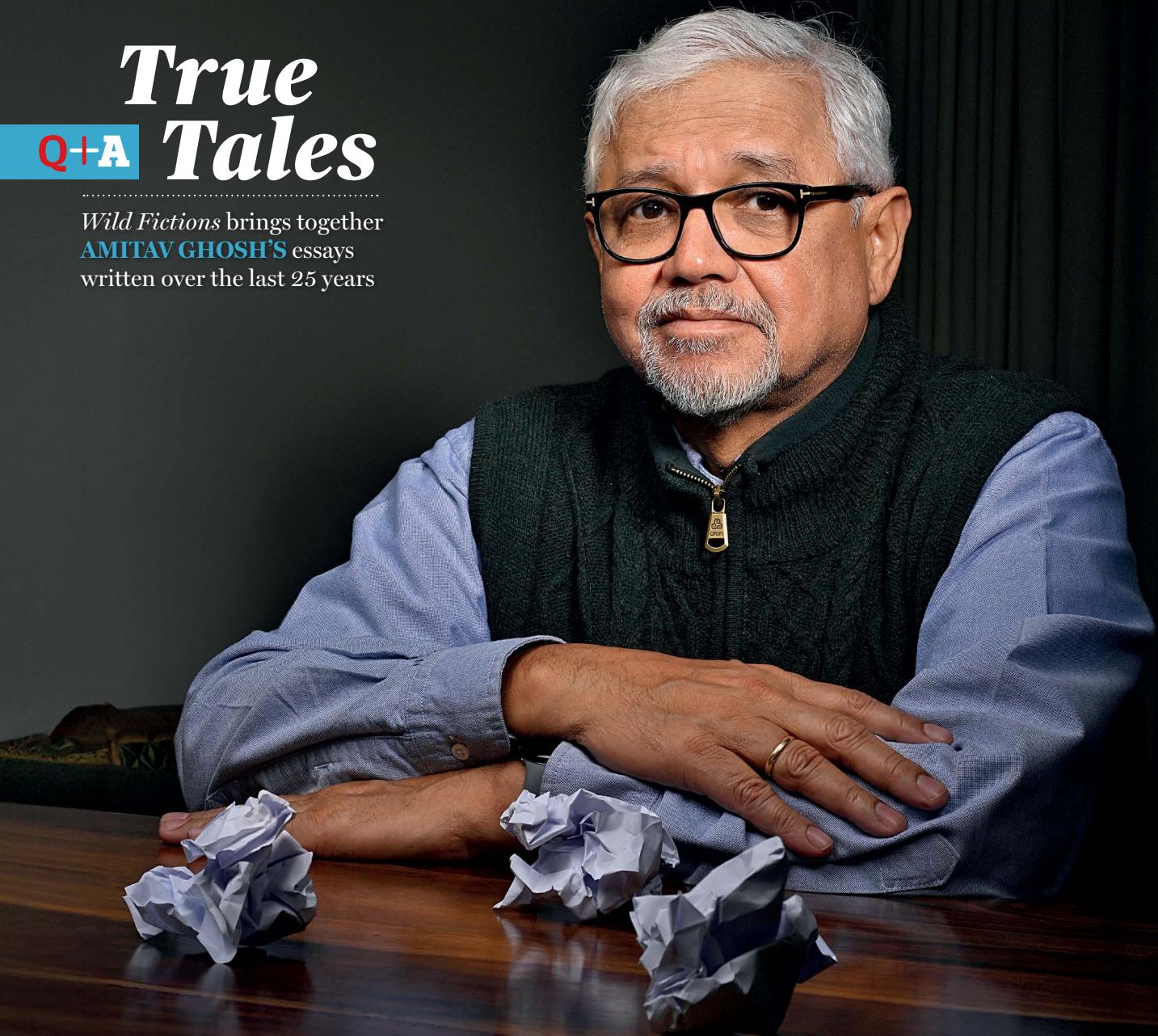
"I was carefree as a junior but have learned how to carry the team over the past few years. I want to enjoy the HIL experience. As the league expands in the coming years, it will be a good platform for young players to show what they are made of and become contenders for the national team," she says. ■

**-Shail Desai**

**Q+A**

# True Tales

*Wild Fictions* brings together  
**AMITAV GHOSH'S** essays  
written over the last 25 years



**Q. Why did you choose to call a collection of non-fiction pieces *Wild Fictions*?**

Many of these essays are about stories, and how they shape our understanding of, and interactions with, the world around us. I've contrasted the view of 'nature' that emerged in Europe in the wake of the Enlightenment, as a domain that was separate from the world of humans, with the entirely different perspective of people who live in proximity to forests, rivers and oceans.

**Q. Is there an overarching theme uniting the essays?**

The theme that runs through most of them is that of bearing witness to a rupture in time, of chronicling the passing of an era that began 300 years ago, in the 18th century.

**Q. What is your most pressing concern as a writer now?**

Once you become aware that the planet is in the grip of an unprecedented and multidimensional crisis, you cannot blank that out. Climate change is one dimension of this crisis. Biodiversity loss, the advent of new pathogens, geopolitical turmoil...are equally important dimensions of our crisis. Everything I write now is informed by this awareness.

**Q. Are there any essays here you're particularly fond of?**

Three of them are based on Bengali documents written by medical personnel who were in the Mesopotamian campaign during World War I. Writing them was very rewarding, partly because the sources were very different from any that I had used before, and partly because I originally wrote them as blog posts.

**Q. What else are you working on at the moment?**

I'm working on a novel. I've written a lot of non-fiction over the last few years, so it's good to get back to fiction again.

Photograph by RAJWANT RAWAT

—with Amit Dixit



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