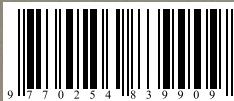


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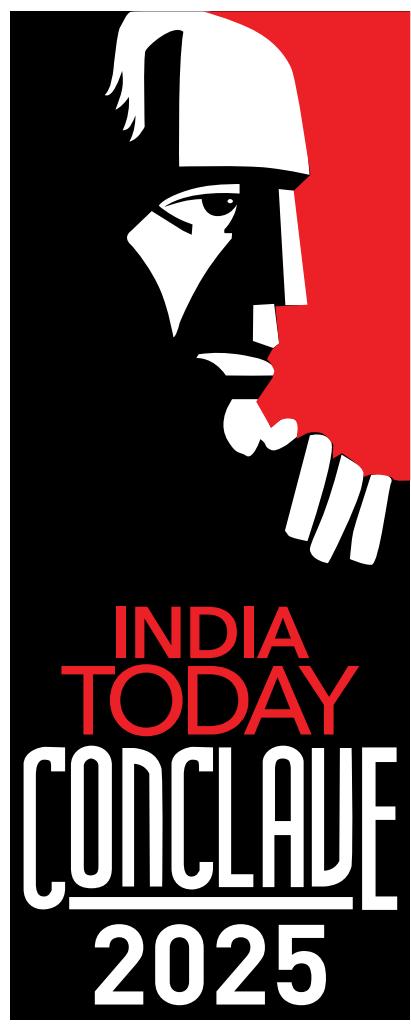
# INDIA TODAY

**INDO-US TIES**

## BRAVE NEW DEAL

**WILL MODI'S HIGH-RISK GAMBIT WITH TRUMP PAY OFF?**

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**C**all it a presidency on steroids. Since his inauguration on January 20, Donald Trump has issued 70 executive orders to date and more in the offing. The important ones are designed to rearrange the world order we have been accustomed to since World War II. As is his wont, he has performed a series of contra moves. He has withdrawn America from key areas on the world stage by leaving the Paris Climate Accord and WHO, continues to belittle Europe and is making the WTO redundant in pursuit of his obsession with reciprocal tariffs. On the other side, he has made expansionist noises about acquiring Greenland, Gaza and the Panama Canal, and even making Canada the 51st state of the US. He's left Ukraine out of the initial negotiation with Russia to end their two-year-old war and shockingly declared it the aggressor.

Nevertheless, as far as trade is concerned, there is some method to Trump's madness. Overall, US trade deficits had risen to \$918.4 billion in 2024. Whittling that down is central to his 'Make America Great Again' or MAGA project, at least its economic part. With its own positive trade balance with the US, which rose to \$45.7 billion by 2024, India has reason to worry. But amidst the storm, it spotted eddies and currents that could be navigated and mastered to its relative advantage. At one level, it was about softening an inevitable blow. But the anticipatory step forward it chose to take, with Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Feb. 12-13 visit, has crafted novel opportunities out of the crisis.

We have a brand-new bilateral agreement, the very first Trump has signed in his second term: the 'US-India COMPACT for the 21st Century'. That acronym, shorthand for 'Catalyzing Opportunities for Military Partnership, Accelerated Commerce & Technology', reveals the sweeping extent of what we call a Brave New Deal. Undoubtedly, it's risk-laden and the radar buzzes with turbulence warnings. Unlike the Roosevelt maxim, Trump does not speak softly and still carries a big stick. But his unpredictable and dizzying moves, a blur of braggadocio and occasional sweet talk, are seen as maximal posturing meant to extract the best deal; finally, even China and Russia may strike decent bargains. Being ahead in the game is vital to securing India's stakes. Hence Modi's proactive gambit of cooperation.

It rests on four major pillars: trade, energy, migration and defence. Initial outcomes this year itself are to demonstrate the level of trust. Though the US is India's largest trading partner, our outgoing goods and services make up a mere 2.7 per cent of its imports and yet Trump had put India "right on top" of the list of countries with the highest tariffs. Hoping to soften his tone, the Union budget exhibited India's willingness to lower import bars, beginning with showpiece goods like Harley-Davidsons and Ducatis, Bourbon whisky, and creating a favourable environment on Tesla's electric cars. Then, when the two leaders met at the Oval Office, India pushed to deepen and expand the trade relationship beyond

the vexatious question of tariffs. So, they agreed to negotiate the first tranche of "a mutually beneficial, multi-sector" Bilateral Trade Agreement by the fall of 2025. An apt way to minimise the damage of Trump's reciprocal tariff drive.

**T**he fine print is still work in progress; the canvas is fuzzy on whether we can expect an omnibus readjustment in tariffs or sector-specific arrangements. However, the two leaders envisaged an expansion of bilateral trade to \$500 billion by 2030, a mammoth 157 per cent boost over the \$194.6 billion mark recorded in 2023. For years, the widening trade gap India enjoyed had rested on protective fencing favouring domestic industry. Expect crucial parts of it to be dismantled, giving the Modi government reason to prod Indian corporates to shape up and compete globally if they must be part of the global value chain.

Significantly, India has promised to make the US our largest source of oil and gas, displacing the Gulf and Russia. It also struck off the liability clauses that kept American

firms from investing in India's nuclear energy sector. The deal sweetener was illegal immigration. Widely publicised deportments, complete with manacles, were testing the limits of global covenants as well as local sentiments. India has agreed to accept its illegal migrants, saying both countries would take decisive action against enabling networks. But, as part of the deal, Modi pushed for secure mobility frameworks for legal migrants: students and professionals.

Last but not least among the four pillars was a 10-year Framework for US-India Major Defence Partnership. Part of this cavalcade are Javelin anti-tank missiles, Stryker

armoured vehicles and the F-35, the world's best stealth fighter jet, also the most expensive at about \$100 million apiece. The agreement revealed the contours of what's in it for India, affirming that it entailed "joint development and production". Also, most critically, "transfer of technology".

In this issue, Group Editorial Director Raj Chengappa analyses how India has deftly parlayed off a 'give' now to yield many 'takes' in the future. Modi's friendly sortie has convinced Trump to look beyond rivalrous competition toward mutual benefit. As he told Trump at their joint press conference: "Your motto is MAGA, our vision of Viksit Bharat by 2047 is MIGA, Make India Great Again.... MAGA plus MIGA becomes a 'MEGA' partnership...." That seemed like both a hope and a prayer. However, this could be a moment, with China's spectacular rise and the cosying up of Russia with the US, when India ends its ambivalence and embraces America to be on the right side of history.



January 20, 2025



(Aroon Purie)

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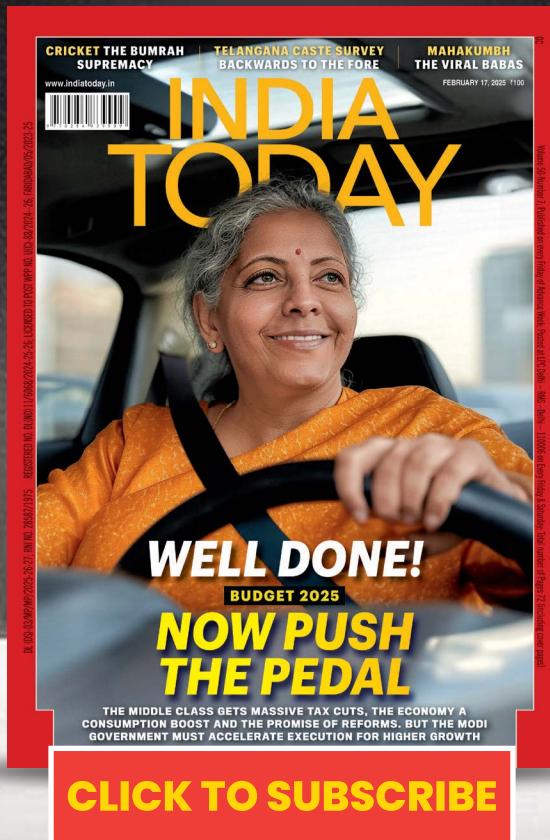
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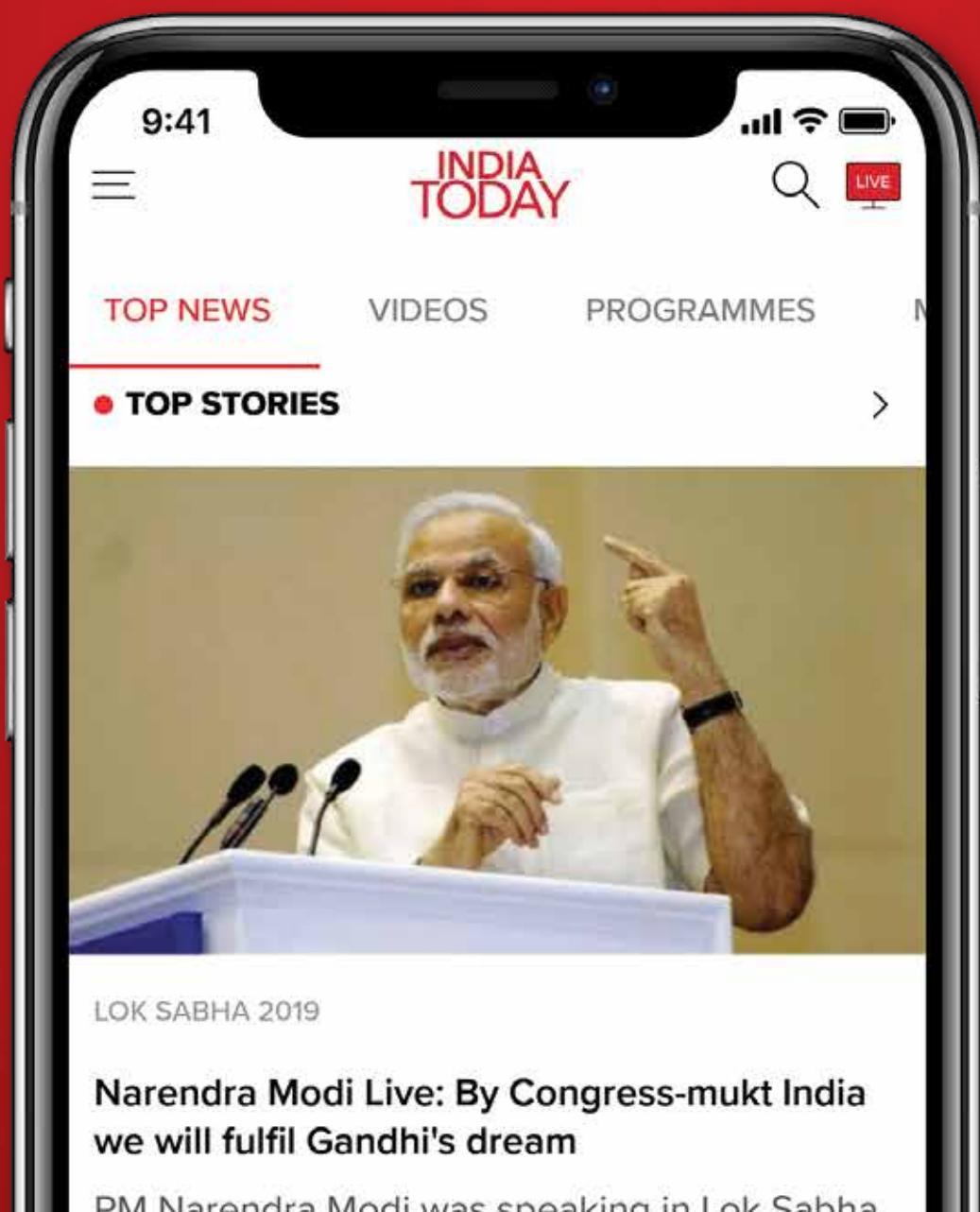
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THE HOT SEAT  
PM Modi and  
new Delhi  
CM Rekha  
Gupta at the  
swearing-in

CHANDRADEEP KUMAR

DELHI

# Fresh Face for a Big Agenda

By Avishek G. Dastidar

It took the Bharatiya Janata Party 27 years to come back to power in national capital Delhi, so they could be forgiven for taking their time—11 days to be exact—to zero in on their chief ministerial face. The party high command's choice followed its recent template of picking near-obscure or first-time legislators to lead state governments. Rookie MLA Rekha

Gupta will be the BJP's first woman CM in Delhi (after the late Sushma Swaraj), beating out such heavyweights as Parvesh Verma who took down Aam Aadmi Party chief Arvind Kejriwal.

Unlike the stumbling blocks that the previous AAP government faced, she will have the full backing of the Centre. With funds to match—Prime Minister Narendra Modi has already

promised Delhiites a “world-class capital in five years”. But then the challenges are also huge. Rekha will also have a tough Opposition to deal with. AAP has 22 MLAs in the 70-member House, including ex-CM Atishi, and they will look to make the numbers count. The new CM will have to hit the ground running. A lowdown on the big issues that will need immediate attention:

## WHY REKHA GUPTA FOR CM

**S**he may be a first-time MLA, but new CM Rekha Gupta cut her teeth in the hurly-burly of Delhi University politics, becoming DUSU president from the ABVP in the mid-90s. The first woman chief minister pick in the Modi era (after Anandiben Patel retired in Gujarat), she was up against giant killer Parvesh Verma in the race for the top job. The fact that the RSS put its weight behind Rekha—she's a long-time Sangh worker and confidante of sarkaryawaha Dattatreya Hosabale—tilted the balance in her favour.

The BJP wanted someone well-versed with the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD), to wrest it from AAP. That Rekha was a woman, from the Punjabi-speaking Baniya community and a three-time councillor, made her perfect for the job. It also shows that voter outreach is still top of the mind for the BJP and that they will



X @LambAlka

**GREAT RIVALRY** A picture tweeted by the Congress's Alka Lamba (right) of the new CM from their Delhi University days

be relentless against AAP. The new CM is known for her organisational skills and “aggressive drive”, evidence of which is a video that has gone viral from her time as an MCD councillor. Rekha will also be an asset nationally in the campaign to take over the few pockets of resistance left in the country, such as states like Punjab and Bengal.

- Anilesh S. Mahajan

**Welfare challenges:** Welfare programmes spelt out in the pre-poll promises hold the key. The BJP has committed to a monthly allowance of Rs 2,500 to eligible women and a one-time payment of Rs 21,000 to pregnant women. The new CM has said she will release the first payment for women by March 8, which is just two weeks away. This will be a test of both administration and finances. Locating the rightful beneficiaries across a city as large as Delhi poses a big challenge; the freebie entails a payout of Rs 11,500 crore annually, and will call for careful management.

**THE BJP IS IN POWER, SO THE EXCUSE THAT LAW AND ORDER IN DELHI IS UNDER THE CENTRE'S JURISDICTION NO LONGER HOLDS**

**Crumbling infrastructure:** Delhi's roads remain problematic. Even Kejriwal admitted during the poll campaign that his government could not fix them as promised. Delhi government data suggests that over 500 km of roads are in need of repair. The new regime also faces a peculiar political situation. Even though AAP lost the assembly election, as of now it still runs the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD), the civic body entrusted with keeping the city clean. So the BJP government will not only have to handle opposition in the House, but also a hostile MCD outside.

**Water and energy issues:** Delhi requires 1,290 million gallons of water per day (MGD), yet produces only around 1,000 MGD. The city relies heavily on water from neighboring states and that supply has remained unchanged since 1994. The solutions are complex: finishing current water treatment plant projects, promoting water conservation and harvesting in every home and business and, perhaps the most challenging of all, cleaning the Yamuna river. Regarding electricity, the BJP has promised free power up to 200 units and a 50 per cent subsidy beyond that. Balancing these promises will be a challenge.

**Restoring the Yamuna:** The BJP has promised to clean the very polluted river within three years. Kejriwal had always blamed upstream Haryana for discharging pollutants into the Yamuna. The BJP is also in power in the neighbouring state so the new CM cannot cite that reason. There are big challenges—untreated sewage has to be connected to treatment plants to ensure cleaner discharge into the river. The BJP has also promised a sterling riverfront experience.

**Law and order:** Making Delhi safe for women is a priority. Delhi Police wants 25 per cent of its force to be women in the near future. The new government will have to work on an old apparatus, stress community policing, speed up emergency responses besides using technology to keep the city safe. The

excuse that law and order in Delhi is under the Centre's jurisdiction—one of AAP's pet peeves—no longer holds. The BJP rules at both the Centre and the capital, so Delhi Police now has a 'unified command'. Another old excuse, of jurisdiction gaps, also no longer applies.

**Financial challenges:** Delhi's financial picture does raises concerns. The revenue surplus (funds left after expenses) dropped from Rs 14,457

## DELHI'S REVENUE SURPLUS SHRUNK TO ₹3,231 CR. IN FY25. THE NEW WELFARE SCHEMES RISK CREATING A SHORTFALL

crore in 2022-23 to an estimated Rs 3,231 crore in 2024-25. The expensive welfare schemes risk creating another revenue shortfall. Tax collections as a share of Gross State Domestic Product (GSDP) have shrunk in recent years. The new government will have to change the pattern, trim costs and seek fresh income sources.

**Air quality crisis:** Delhi's poor air quality has been a perennial problem. In January, the city's AQI hit the 450 range triggering Stage-III of the Graded Response Action Plan. The new regime must conceive an all-year-round action plan, so that pollution is mitigated in the winter months. This needs tough measures, like checking wanton construction, cracking down on polluting vehicles and increasing the city's green cover. The 2020 Delhi Electric Vehicles Policy required 25 per cent of new vehicles to be electric by 2024. That fallen ideal can do with a spark. ■

# A Missile to Balance Out Beijing

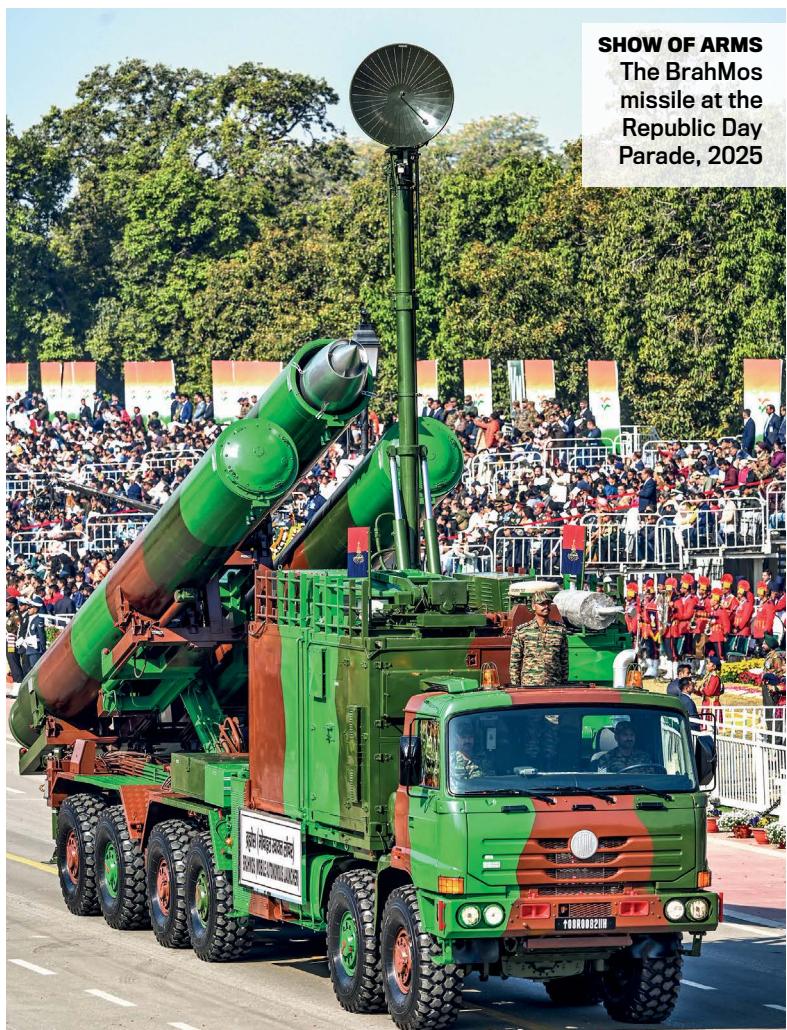
By Pradip R. Sagar



**F**oreign policy often involves a delicate balance between strategic, security and commercial interests. For India, it entails stabilising its northern borders with China and keeping its trade ties with Beijing intact on the one hand, while supporting the cause of a secure Indian Ocean region and Indo-Pacific through its membership with the Quad group of nations and a shared vigil in Southeast Asia on the other. At the heart of this venture, delicate and purposive at once, is the BrahMos supersonic cruise missile.

Jointly developed by India and Russia, this advanced weapon system is emerging as a key tool in India's defence export strategy—and a symbol of its growing engagement with a clutch of Southeast Asian nations bound together by their common sense of threat in the face of China's maritime muscle-flexing.

The Philippines acquired the BrahMos system in 2024. Now Indonesia is in talks with India to follow suit. If the deal is finalised, it will become the second Southeast Asian nation to equip itself with the



CHANDRADEEP KUMAR



**FIRM GRIP ON TIES** PM Modi with Indonesian president Prabowo Subianto in New Delhi, Jan. 25

## UPFRONT

find markets for the products of its own growing military-industrial complex is an imperative too. As the defence expert explains, its focus is on promoting indigenously developed products to friendly countries, with the government setting a target of achieving \$5 billion worth of defence exports by 2025. The BrahMos is a perfect fit here. Since it supports land, sea and air launches, its 290 km range covers more ground than the number itself may suggest.

**W**hile enabling Southeast Asian nations to negotiate Beijing's growing assertiveness, India has been mindful of not antagonising China. A 2011 request from Vietnam for the BrahMos was even put on hold so as to not provoke China. The Chinese aggression on the Line of Actual Control (LAC) and the protracted stand-off in Ladakh since 2020 likely prompted Indian policymakers to reassess their stance. While negotiating with Jakarta, India would keep in mind the fact that in January Indonesia also joined the BRICS bloc—of which both India and China are founder countries. Jakarta, doubtless, is equally vigilant. No one would want the complexities of regional rivalry to impinge on this crucial platform of emerging market countries.

Still, what started in 2022 with the Philippines signing a contract to acquire the BrahMos has a momentum of its own too. That \$375 million deal, which includes three missile batteries for the Philippine Marine Corps, was a milestone in the archipelago nation's defence modernisation. From their base in Western Luzon, BrahMos missiles are positioned against potential threats, including from the hotly contested Scarborough Shoal, approximately 250 km away, and which is occupied by China.

Vietnam too needs the missiles to enhance its capabilities in the South China Sea, where it has overlapping claims with China. The growing military might of the Philippines, Indonesia and Vietnam through acquisitions like BrahMos signal a united front against China's aggressive territorial claims. ■

BrahMos—but perhaps not the last. Vietnam is also actively negotiating a deal, and Malaysia too has expressed an interest. All four countries form the rim of the South China Sea, and have maritime disputes with China. This potentially puts the BrahMos, a nimble piece of weaponry that can be fired from submarines, ships, fighter aircraft or ground vehicles, at the core of an emerging Indo-Pacific security regime.

Locked in a boundary dispute with China in the Natuna Sea—the southernmost portion of South China Sea, the main theatre of unrest—Indonesia is stepping up its maritime defence capabilities. The BrahMos, renowned for its exceptional speed, precision and versatility, is therefore a natural attraction. “We have been negotiating with Jakarta for the sale of BrahMos for the last couple of years as its navy requires a missile system. India is also in advanced talks with Vietnam for sale of the BrahMos,” says a key defence official.

Indonesia President Prabowo Subianto, who was chief guest at the 2025 Republic Day Parade in New Delhi, came with a strong military delegation. Inter alia, the purchase of BrahMos was a key agenda of the visit. During the delegation’s time here, Indonesia’s navy chief Admiral Muhammad

### WEAPON OF CHOICE

► **Faced with Chinese aggression in the South China Sea, Indonesia, Vietnam and Malaysia are bolstering their militaries**

► **India's supersonic and versatile BrahMos missile is one weapon of choice for these nations**

► **Philippines was the first Southeast Asian nation to acquire the BrahMos missile, in 2024**

Ali visited the BrahMos Aerospace facility to take the discussion forward on a deal to procure a shore-based version of the missile as well as a version that can be mounted on warships. However, it is known that some key issues like cost and transfer of technology are delaying the deal. The Indonesian delegation also held talks with the Indian military leadership about broader defence industry collaboration, including shipbuilding and aircraft carrier construction.

India remains one of the world's highest defence spenders, but a need to



# Unlocking global careers:

## How studying in the UK prepares students for a world of opportunities

Universities in the United Kingdom, with a rich legacy of academic distinction and a globally acclaimed reputation for teaching and research, provide unparalleled opportunities for international students, ensuring their growth and success. As globalisation continues to blur the line between global and local, it is crucial to develop educational policies that foster economic growth and cultural diversity. Educational institutions in the United Kingdom excel at bridging cultural divides by fostering an environment that connects the global with the local. Additionally, UK degrees are highly valued, and graduates have an advantage in employment opportunities, especially in the high-demand fields of engineering, law, and finance.

The UK continues to be an ideal choice for international students because graduates of a UK university often stand out as exceptional candidates due to their critical thinking, analytical skills, strategic thinking, resourcefulness, excellent communication skills, adaptability, and cross-cultural exposure. This is how UK education can contribute to shaping educational aspirations, with a focus on both academic excellence and employment prospects.

### Academic Excellence and Holistic Experience

The UK is a country with an open, inclusive, and culturally diverse society that is home to some of the world's prestigious universities. The universities ensure that the students gain access to world-renowned faculty, high-quality teaching, and cutting-edge research.

Furthermore, UK universities introduce innovative pedagogical approaches that enhance graduates' employability. The QS World University Rankings 2025 indicate that the University of Cambridge, University of Oxford, and Imperial College London have consistently held top rankings. Moreover, universities offer a diverse range of subjects that cater to individual interests and career aspirations. However, irrespective of the subject that is chosen for pursuing a graduate degree, students acquire excellent skills that give them valuable work experience.

### Post-Study Work Opportunities for Young Graduates

The Graduate Route, also known as a Post-Study Work visa (PSW), is specifically designed for international students who graduated from UK universities and are seeking employment opportunities in the country. It offers a two-year window (or three years for PhD graduates) to find employment and doesn't require a pre-arranged job offer or sponsorship from an employer. Also, international students have different industries to choose from that offer excellent employment opportunities in the fields of healthcare, entrepreneurship, finance, and law, to name a few. Additionally, business accelerators and incubators have created immense opportunities for early-stage start-ups to grow and thrive.

### Supportive ecosystem

While there are students and faculty members from diverse backgrounds to extend support to new students, the universities also have departments to help new students find their way around a new country. The UK universities also ensure student safety with advanced security systems and quick responses to incidents. When it comes to post work opportunities, in the UK, it is the student's responsibility to secure employment, rather than the institution's. However, the institution prepares and provides the right type of exposure to the students. Active participation in job fairs, networking with alumni, utilising career services, and consistent effort in interviews are encouraged. The British Council's Global Alumni Network also serves as a dynamic platform, enabling UK graduates to connect with a global community, unlocking unparalleled career opportunities. For more details, check the British Council website: <https://www.britishcouncil.in/study-uk/alumni-uk>

### Scholarships and Funding for International Students

To enable students from all academic and financial backgrounds, a variety of scholarships are awarded by the UK government and higher education institutions. One of these is the GREAT scholarship, which is offered by the British Council and the British government. Also, the Chevening scholarship is an entirely funded program for international students. The British Council women in STEM scholarships provide financial assistance for tuition fees, living and travel expenses to postgraduate students in STEM fields. Numerous other scholarships, including the Felix scholarship, the Charles Wallace India Trust scholarship, and the Inlaks scholarships are also offered by various institutions in the UK.

### Conclusion

The UK boasts a lineage of distinguished scientists, writers, leaders, and innovators who have honed their skills within its universities. This heritage, combined with a focus on exceptional teaching methods and academic practices, has cemented the UK's status as a global education hub across diverse fields like art, literature, science, and more. The reputation and recognition of UK academic credentials hold immense value, resonating strongly with employers worldwide.



BIHAR

# NITISH DOES A JOB ON TEJASWI

By Amitabh Srivastava

In the 2020 Bihar assembly election, the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) and its young chief, Tejaswi Yadav, came tantalisingly close to forming a government, missing the mark by just 12 seats. The wave of support was largely sparked by a single, resonant promise: one million jobs.

Fast forward five years, and as Bihar braces for another electoral battle later this year, chief minister Nitish Kumar is looking to appropriate Tejaswi's script. Full-page newspaper advertisements are already out with the slogan '*Rojgar matlab Nitish sarkar*' (Employment means Nitish government), alongside images of the CM distributing appointment letters at public events. Most recently, on February 8, Nitish handed appointment letters to 1,007 new agricultural department employees in Patna. Days earlier, over 6,000 junior engineers had received similar letters.

Nitish claims his government has already delivered 900,000 jobs out of a targeted 1.2 million, with another 200,000 set to materialise before the polls. The timing couldn't be better. Young voters in the 18-29 age group constitute a formidable 22.1 per cent of Bihar's electorate—over 28 million people. This aspirational demographic, yearning for economic stability, has enough heft to sway electoral outcomes. In 2020, it was with this cohort that



**JOIN THE FORCE** CM Nitish hands out an appointment letter in Patna, Feb. 4

## WORK FOR VOTES

- **With polls coming up, CM Nitish Kumar out to appropriate RJD's 2020 poll promise of 1 mn govt jobs**
- **Govt claims 900,000 jobs delivered out of target of 1.2 million; young voters (18-29 age group) make up 22% of Bihar's population**

Tejaswi's promise of 1 million government jobs had resonated, boosting RJD numbers. With the 2025 election just months away, it's natural that competition for this key demographic is heating up: if anything, jobs are even more of a pivotal issue now than in 2020.

In Bihar's symbolism-laden political arena, restoring Nitish's image as the 'architect of aspiration' is crucial for the Janata Dal (United), or JD(U), if it wants to neutralise Tejaswi's advantage. The CM's I-Day pledge in 2024 to create 1.2 million jobs forms the bedrock of this attempt. "Before 2005, the condition of Bihar was pathetic, and everyone is well aware of it," Nitish remarked on February 4, contrasting his tenure with the RJD's alleged mismanagement in

the past. The subtext was clear: under Nitish, Bihar has progressed incrementally, while a Tejaswi-led regime risks a return to regression.

The political longevity of Nitish Kumar defies conventional logic. His Kurmi caste represents just 2.9 per cent of the population—a tenuous base by any measure. Yet, through a carefully cultivated coalition of Extremely Backward Classes, Mahadalits and Luv-Kush (Kurmi-Kushwaha) voters, he commands the loyalty of over 36 per cent of the electorate. This is his bulwark against challenges from both ally BJP and the RJD. In 2020, Nitish faced a resurgent RJD and the disruptive Lok Janshakti Party under Chirag Paswan, an allegedly BJP-backed spoiler. Despite this, the JD(U) retained 32.8 per cent of the vote in its contested seats.

The 2025 election is not just a battle for another term. Nitish's poll-eve jobs bonanza is an attempt to secure his governance legacy along with his future hold on government. His alliance-switching, often criticised as opportunistic, has ironically solidified his indispensability. Both the BJP and the RJD grudgingly concede Nitish's presence holds the key to power in Bihar. Since 2005, every government in the state has revolved around the 73-year-old leader. Will that enduring centrality continue into a tenth term? Bihar's voting public will decide. ■

# GOVERNOR UNDER SCRUTINY

By Amarnath K. Menon

The DMK government's long tug of war with Tamil Nadu governor R.N. Ravi over his protracted inaction on 12 bills is reaching a climax. The Supreme Court has asked hard questions on the path taken by the governor. On February 7, it wondered if the governor could simply sit on bills on the presumption that they were "repugnant to the Constitution" (under Article 254, a proposed state law is 'repugnant' if it is found inconsistent with/encroaching into a central law).

The aforementioned 12 bills, mostly dealing with the appointments of vice-chancellors in state universities, were sent to Ravi for his consent between January 2020 and April 2023. With no sign of movement, the state finally approached the SC in November 2023. Ravi had then speedily referred two of the bills to the President and withheld consent on the remaining 10. Under Article 200, when presented with bills, a state governor can either give assent, withhold it or refer the bills to the President for consideration. Under the first proviso of the Article, if assent is withheld, a governor must return the bill to the House with a 'message' to reconsider it or suggest amendments. Crucially, if the assembly sends the bill back to the governor, the latter's office cannot withhold it again, and has to grant consent.

And that's what the TN assembly did—within days, it passed the 10 withheld bills all over again in a special session and returned them to the governor. Cornered, Ravi referred all 10 bills to the President, who assented to one, rejected seven and did not consider two.

Former attorney general Mukul Rohatgi, now representing Tamil Nadu, told the SC that the state has acted in accordance with the first proviso of Article 200 and expected the governor to approve the bills; he further argued that



**PARALLEL TRACKS**  
Tamil Nadu CM M.K. Stalin with governor R.N. Ravi at the R-Day celebrations, Jan. 26

the bills could only have been forwarded to the President in case of perceived 'repugnancy' under Article 254. Representing the governor, attorney general R. Venkataramani argued that all the bills had been "addressed", and that none were pending approval now.

The bench of Justices J.B. Pardiwala and R. Mahadevan, though, were unconvinced: "If repugnancy is something that troubled the governor, he should have immediately brought it to the no-

tice of the government and the assembly could have reconsidered the bills." The court observed that Ravi's actions were tantamount to frustrating the provisions of Article 200 of the Constitution.

In its writ petition filed under Article 32 before the Supreme Court, the Tamil Nadu government claimed that the governor has positioned himself as a "political rival". Its contention is that withholding assent indefinitely undermines legislative authority. In its argument, Tamil Nadu is relying on the case of the state of Punjab vs principal secretary to the governor of Punjab (2023), in which the SC stated that the Constitution does not provide for a perpetual gubernatorial veto on bills.

According to experts, though the Constitution mandates that governors shall work only under the "aid and advice of the council of ministers", using the office to needle Opposition-ruled states is a practice that goes way back.

**“IF THE GOVERNOR IS PRIMA FACIE OF THE VIEW THAT BILLS SUFFER FROM REPUGNANCY, SHOULD (HE) NOT BRING IT TO THE NOTICE OF THE STATE GOVERNMENT? ”**

SC bench, while hearing Tamil Nadu government's petition on bills stuck with the governor

"But the current central leadership has taken it up a notch, with governors like Ravi stretching constitutional limits at every level," says political commentator N. Sathia Moorthy.

The governor's response on the universities bills typifies this. Ravi has denied assent to bills that sought to replace the governor with the chief minister as chancellor of state universities in Tamil Nadu. He has also gone on to appoint University Grants Commission nominees for panels to select vice-chancellors. And this when the larger matter of the governor's continuance as chancellor is sub judice.

Laws amended and passed in states like Gujarat have the CM as the chancellor. Thus, for a governor or even the President to deny such powers to other state assemblies could be regarded as ipso facto unfair and politically motivated, say experts. "A political war is being fought under constitutional cover. The Centre must not seek to bend constitutional provisions for cheap political ends, which in the past have proved to be infructuous in 'Dravidian' Tamil Nadu. It irritates the people, as there is this view that the state's pride is being hurt by outsiders who do not know the culture of their lands," adds Moorthy.

Governments in several non-BJP ruled states have complained about governors delaying assent or indefinitely sitting on bills. Some of these instances from Punjab, Telangana, Tamil Nadu and Kerala have also seen interventions by the Supreme Court, unfailingly urging governors to not stall normal governmental processes.

On February 6, Kerala pushed for an early hearing in the SC of its writ petition arguing the same, saying governors have launched an "endemic" on governance by stalling bills passed by state assemblies. The ongoing examination by the apex court of these issues is expected to clarify the limits of the governor's discretion and could have far-reaching implications for Centre-state relations and the role of this constitutional office. ■

# A JOKE GOES TOO FAR

By Suhani Singh and Kaushik Deka

**A**nything we say as social media influencers can be used against us."

This cautionary warning from YouTuber Ranveer Allahbadia in his 2020 video 'Dear Angered Indians' now feels eerily prophetic. The popular, 31-year-old podcaster, who goes by the moniker BeerBiceps, finds himself at the centre of a storm after making a controversial remark on comedian Samay Raina's show *India's Got Latent*, one that has ignited a national debate on obscenity. What began as an offhand joke is now the test-case for digital regulation and the limits of free speech.

The backlash was swift. Multiple FIRs were lodged against Allahbadia and others on the show in Maharashtra, Assam and Rajasthan. Seeking relief, he approached the Supreme Court, which, on February 18, rebuked him sharply. A bench comprising Justices Surya Kant and N. Kotiswar Singh called his remarks "disgusting", "filthy", and reflective of a "perverted mind". Though granting Allahbadia protection from arrest and any new FIR, they imposed stringent conditions on him:

- He must surrender his passport at the Thane police station and cannot leave the country without prior court approval
- He must fully cooperate with the police investigation
- He is barred from airing any new content on YouTube or any other platform until further orders.

It's a spectacular fall for one of the most sought-after digital creators. The son of Mumbai-based doctors, he veered away from an expected engineering career to launch 'BeerBiceps' in 2015, a YouTube channel initially focused on fitness and wellness. By 2019, recognising a gap in India's

podcasting market, he rebranded himself into a widely followed interviewer, hosting Union ministers and other top politicians, celebrities and thought leaders on *The Ranveer Show (TRS)*. His ability to engage guests in a non-confrontational manner made his podcast a hit, topping Spotify charts, but also inviting accusations of being a "sellout". Beyond content creation, Allahbadia founded Monk Entertainment, a talent management

**WHAT BEGAN AS AN OFFHAND JOKE ON A YOUTUBE SHOW HAS SPIRALLED INTO A NATIONAL DEBATE ON OBSCENITY, DIGITAL REGULATION AND THE LIMITS OF FREE SPEECH**

firm, in 2017 and launched a mental fitness app and other ventures that would establish him as an entrepreneur. A former employee, who worked closely with him on *TRS*, describes him as extremely "enterprising", "spiritual", "empathetic" and also "socially awkward". In March 2024, Allahbadia shared the stage with Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who presented him the 'Disruptor of the Year' award at the inaugural National Creators Awards. Today, the demand for that award to be rescinded is only growing louder.

In the Supreme Court, Allahbadia's legal team, led by advocate Abhinav Chandrachud, argued that while his remarks might be distasteful, they do not necessarily amount to obscenity. Legal interpretations of obscenity have evolved over time—from



**IN THE EYE OF  
THE STORM**  
Ranveer  
Allahbadia,  
YouTuber and  
podcaster

the 1868 Hicklin Test, which deemed any material that could “deprave and corrupt” as obscene, to the 1957 Roth Test of the US that evaluated content as a whole to determine if it appeals to “prurient interests”. In 2014, the Indian judiciary further refined its stance in *Aveek Sarkar vs State of West Bengal*, adopting a “community standards” test that considers contemporary social values while determining what constitutes obscenity. Under the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS), 2023, Section 294 criminalises the sale, distribution or display of obscene content, defining it as material that is “lascivious” or appeals to “prurient interest”. It invites up to two-year jail. Meanwhile, conviction for transmitting obscene content online under Section 67 of the IT Act, 2000, can lead to up to three years in prison.

“Such behaviour has to be con-

demned,” the apex court remarked on Allahbadia’s issue. “Just because you are popular, you cannot take society for granted.... There is something very dirty in his mind, which has been vomited.” Expressing concern over the unchecked nature of online speech, the court also emphasised the urgency to

## **THOUGH GRANTING HIM PROTECTION FROM ARREST, THE SUPREME COURT REBUKED ALLAHBADIA, CALLING HIS REMARKS “DISGUSTING”, “FILTHY” AND REFLECTIVE OF A “PERVERTED MIND”**

intervene, stating, “We cannot overlook the importance and sensitivity of the issue. If the Government of India is willing to take action, we will be very happy. Otherwise, we are not going to leave this vacuum unaddressed”.

**T**he court has further directed the Attorney General and Solicitor General to appear in the next hearing to discuss the issue of obscenity in digital media. This has sent ripples through India’s creator community, which fears regulatory action against social media platforms. “A lot of creators are going to be scared about the kind of content they put out,” says Ayush Shukla, a podcaster and founder of Finnet Media, a content creation and influencer marketing firm. “Ranveer is paying a bigger price because he is popular. He is being made a scapegoat.”

Allahbadia’s future remains uncertain. He could challenge the gag order on the grounds of free speech or push for consolidation of FIRs to avoid prolonged litigation across multiple states. If his legal team can successfully argue that his remarks don’t meet the obscenity threshold, the FIRs may be quashed altogether. Beyond legal troubles, the controversy has dealt a significant blow to his reputation and ventures. His platforms are in a limbo for now and threats have extended to his family—his mother was reportedly verbally abused by individuals posing as patients.

“Allahbadia meant no malice repeating a joke he had heard before,” says a former colleague. “The incident doesn’t need that much attention.” While his supporters argue that his remarks, however distasteful, do not warrant criminal prosecution, his critics—and now the Supreme Court—contend that such speech corrodes social morality and should not go unpunished. “With great power comes great responsibility,” goes the popular adage. Allahbadia, now facing both personal and professional reckoning, is learning that power also brings intense scrutiny. His case may become a defining moment for digital content regulation in India, forcing influencers to navigate their words and actions with far greater caution. ■



MADHYA PRADESH

# MOHAN'S MAKE-IN-MP PITCH

By **Rahul Noronha**

**I**t was former CM Shivraj Singh Chouhan who first took to the idea of transforming Madhya Pradesh from an agri-based economy to a manufacturing-based one. Now 15 months into the job, his successor Mohan Yadav has the challenging job of taking the project forward. As part of this, on February 24 and 25, the state is hosting the 8th edition of the biennial Global Investor Summit (GIS) in Bhopal, with Prime Minister Narendra Modi inaugurating the event.

The build-up for the summit started over a year back, in March 2024, when the MP government organised seven regional investor summits, including in Ujjain, Jabalpur and Gwalior. Government sources claim

that the summits have brought in Rs 4 lakh crore in investment proposals, with the Ujjain event alone getting a Rs 75,000 crore proposal from the Adani Group. But the sweetener for new businesses will be the Industrial Promotion Policy 2025, which was ratified by the MP cabinet on February 11. This has provisions such as a hike in the Basic

Investment Promotion Assistance (BIPA), the financial help extended to industrial units established in the state, with extra support to those that set up units in the 40 designated backward blocks of the state or exports 25-75 per cent of their produce. The policy has three major thrusts:

► It has identified dairy, food processing, garments, toys, furniture, and gems and jewellery as employment-rich sectors where investment would be eligible for further benefits. BIPA payable to units with investment from Rs 50 crore Eligible Fix Capital Investment (EFCI) upwards has been rationalised (10-40 per cent) with the upper limit increased to Rs 200 crore.

► Pharma, biotechnology, plastics,

**THE LOCAL INDUSTRY CARES MUCH MORE ABOUT TIMELY DECISION-MAKING THAN IT DOES ABOUT BENEFITS FROM THE GOVERNMENT**

# 'We have simplified the rules'

**CM MOHAN YADAV** is *bullish on turning MP into an industrial powerhouse. He talks to RAHUL NORONHA on the way forward. Excerpts:*



MUJEEB FAROOQI

**Q.** Investor summits have been done in the past too. How is this edition different?

Well, this time I have ensured that policies are investor-friendly and that rules are simplified. In the past, 28 permissions were needed to start a business in MP, we've brought them down to 10.

**Q. As a precursor to the GIS, regional summits were held across MP. How did that help?**

It created a positive environment for MP in the country and outside it too, and also kept up the momentum among various wings of government. The message is clear—this is not just a one-off event. I myself have dedicated 38 days for industries since I took over this job. That's a lot of time for a CM.

**Q. Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) has largely eluded MP...**

We are trying to address the foreign investment issue. There are advantages that we have introduced, policies with inherent benefits. All this will lead to record inflows.

**Q. You have introduced prohibition in some places in MP. Won't that impact investment in the state?**

There were already a number of restrictions in place but we are trying

to rationalise them. Like in Ujjain, alcohol was banned in a 1 km radius around the temple. So it has been proposed to include the city's municipal areas also, but outside it you can still buy alcohol. There is a practical side to implementing a law.

**Q. Industry feedback says red-tapism has slowed down the pace of investment. Do you agree?**

Being tough on the bureaucracy or on business will not get us investment, all of us have to work together. But it's

**"Earlier, 28 permits were needed to start a business in MP, we've brought them down to 10"**

true, the bureaucracy has to get off its high horse. The state's welfare is our common goal.

**Q. Give us three reasons why someone should invest in MP?**

Why three, I can list 30. We have surplus power, no labour issues, an adequate land bank, connectivity and investor-friendly policies.... We also do a follow-up on investment proposals, which is key to securing them.

polymers and renewable energy units with a Rs 250 crore investment will be designated as the 'sunrise sectors', making them also eligible for benefits. To address the issue of low FDI in MP (the state is not even among the top 10 states), the policy introduces a 1.2 multiple to the BIPA payable to such units.

► To overcome the disadvantage of being landlocked and the lack of access to ports, the state government is offering up to a maximum of Rs 2 crore to a unit per annum to cover the cost of transport of finished goods to the harbour.

**S**o why wasn't MP able to do all this earlier? "Well, we need to create an environment for transparency and delivery. Ease of doing business is critical to our plan to bring in investments. We are making the bureaucracy accountable for decision-making by introducing all industry-related work under the Public Services Guarantee Act," says Chandramauli Shukla, MD, MP State Industrial Development Corporation.

Meanwhile, industry stakeholders agree it's a step in the right direction but also add a caveat. "The industry does not care as much about benefits from the government as it does about timely decision-making. Stalling of decisions can be fatal for industry," says Dinesh Patidar, MD, Shakti Pumps and chairman, MP-CII. The state government has convinced industry body CII to hold its national council meeting in Bhopal on February 23, ensuring that top CEOs are in town a day before the GIS. But it is the post-summit follow-up that will ensure if MP can do something out of character to emerge as an industrial powerhouse. ■

# A POTATO BLIGHT IN BENGAL

By Arkamoy Datta Majumdar

**A**shish Ghosh, a 48-year-old farmer from Paschim Medinipur district, had spent Rs 50,000 on his 2.5 bighas to cultivate potatoes. That small plot, about 1.55 acres, was a rented one. The money too was borrowed, almost all of a Rs 60,000 loan. A bountiful harvest would defray the damages and fetch returns. Or so he thought. But on-and-off restrictions on the sale of the crop to neighbouring states like Odisha and Bihar upset all his plans. West Bengal chief minister Mamata Banerjee had imposed the ban twice—from July 2024 to mid-August and again from mid-October to January 24—to calm soaring potato prices in Kolkata. By the time the last ban was lifted, the decision had immiserated many thousands of farmers like Ghosh. That too, ironically, while cold storage units in Bengal are crammed full with last year's unsold potatoes, causing prices of millions of sacks of fresh produce to plummet.

The ban came at times when potato prices in Kolkata had rocketed up to Rs 40-45 a kg. The surge was due to the anticipation of a poor crop amidst uneven rainfall, compounded by supply chain issues. But the solution dealt a bitter blow to potato farmers and traders in the western districts of Paschim Medinipur, Purulia and Bankura, who grow 'inferior' varieties not sold in Kolkata. A ban meant their harvests, bound for neighbouring states, lay unsold in cold storages, leading to huge losses.

State agriculture minister Becharam Manna insists the situation was not mishandled. "Potatoes from Paschim Medinipur and Bankura did



DEBAJYOTI CHAKRABORTY

reach urban markets via traders in Hooghly between December and January," he says. On the ground, though, that ad-hoc relief was too little. Kamal Dey, head of the state's price monitoring task force, blames traders. "We requested them to sell at Rs 26 a kg. The CM revoked the first ban in mid-August. But they started selling at Rs 28 which, when it reached Kolkata, became Rs 35," Dey says. He asserts that this forced the government to seal borders again.

Potato cultivation costs between Rs 25,000-30,000 a bigha, and farmers usually earn between Rs 40,000 and Rs 60,000. This year, they can only make

Rs 6,000 to Rs 8,000 a bigha. Potato is sown around October-November and is harvested from January to early March. Traders buy potatoes between January and March, storing them for nine-ten months. But with the borders shut, cold storages remain full with old stock. "From January 24, borders have been reopened. But Odisha has met its needs with imports from Uttar Pradesh and Punjab. Who will buy our potatoes?" asks Asit Pal, a member of a potato traders' lobbying group.

As traders struggle to dispose of last year's stocks, they are in no position to pay a good price for the new crop. Experts also predict that, if the weather is favourable this year, production could touch 15 million metric tonnes, potentially worsening the crisis. To avoid this, 30 per cent space in storages is being reserved to enable small farmers to store their crops. Production in the 2023-24 season was around 10 million MT.

Odisha, the biggest importer of Bengal potatoes, is also moving toward self-sufficiency through increased acreage. The 'export' ban, thus, might have done lasting damage to Bengal. In a cold storage INDIA TODAY visited in Sat Bankura in Paschim Medinipur, 15,000 to 20,000 sacks of old potatoes—cleared to make way for new ones—lie unclaimed outside. Some 600,000 such sacks remain unsold in that district alone—a symbol of the crushing burden of uncertainty and debt on Bengal's farmers. ■

## TUBER TROUBLE

► **The state government banned sale of potatoes to neighbouring states**

► **This was to reduce high potato prices in Kolkata due to anticipation of a poor crop, supply issues**

► **The ban came in two phases: July-Aug. '24 and mid-Oct. '24 to Jan. 24, '25**

► **Replaced by new produce in cold storages, sacks of old potatoes lie rotting, ruining many farmers**



# VIT FOUNDER & CHANCELLOR DR. G. VISWANATHAN

## AWARDED DOCTORATE BY ST. XAVIER'S UNIVERSITY, KOLKATA

Kolkata, February 15, 2025: In a momentous occasion at the 6th Convocation Ceremony of St. Xavier's University, Kolkata, Dr. G. Viswanathan, Founder and Chancellor of Vellore Institute of Technology (VIT), was conferred with the prestigious Doctor of Literature (D.Litt., Honoris Causa). The honor was bestowed upon him in recognition of his outstanding contributions to education, leadership, public service, and humanitarian efforts.

The convocation ceremony, held at the Biswa Bangla Convention Centre, New Town, was presided over by Hon'ble Chancellor Rev. Dr. James Arjen Tete, SJ & Vice-Chancellor Rev Dr. John Felix Raj. The event featured a distinguished gathering of academicians, dignitaries, students, and esteemed guests. The Convocation Address was delivered by

Mr. Justice I. P. Mukherji, Chief Justice of the High Court of Meghalaya.

Dr. Viswanathan, an eminent educationist and visionary leader, has played a pivotal role in transforming higher education in India. This recognition marks the first time an Indian university has conferred an honorary doctorate upon him. Previously, he was honored with an honorary doctorate by West Virginia University, USA, in 2009, and more recently by the State University of New York, Binghamton University, USA, in 2024.

Expressing gratitude for the honor, Dr. Viswanathan thanked St. Xavier's University for conferring the Honoris Causa on him and recollected his long association with Bengal. He emphasized the

importance of quality education and research in shaping the future of the nation. He reaffirmed his commitment to fostering academic excellence and societal development. He also emphasized the importance of growth in Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) for an improved economic development.

Prominent dignitaries from VIT, Vice-Presidents Mr. Sankar Viswanathan & Dr. Sekar Viswanathan, Vice-Chancellor – Dr. Kanchana Bhaaskaran, Pro-Vice Chancellor Dr. Partha Sharathi Mallick, Director -Alumni Affairs Dr. Elizabeth Rufus, Fr. Dominic Gomes, Vicar general Archdiocese of Calcutta, Fr. Malay Dcosta, Financial Administrator, Archdiocese of Calcutta, Fr. Jayraj Veluswamy, SJ, Rector St. Xavier's College Calcutta were present during this historic occasion.

FOREST SURVEY

# FADING GREENS OF INDIA

By JUMANA SHAH

The 18th biennial India State of Forest Report 2023, released recently by the Forest Survey of India, has revealed sobering details at several levels. The concerns relate to both the extent and the nature of our green cover. Firstly, the report states 25.17 per cent of India's land mass is covered by forests. This already falls woefully short of the global benchmark of 33 per cent. Of this, only 21.76 per cent constitutes forested areas, with the remaining 3.41 per cent categorised as tree cover. On degraded forests, the report states that dense and moderately dense forests—both within and outside reserved forest areas—are being replaced by industrial and urban clusters and subsequently being compensated for with commercial plantations. Although the survey reports an overall increase in forest and tree cover, the data has come under severe criticism from experts. They point out that plantations such as bamboo, rubber and mango orchards have been counted as forest, creating a smokescreen of healthy green coverage. These seasonally harvested plantations do not replicate the biological diversity or ecological benefits of natural forests. This month, the Supreme Court mandated the Centre and states to refrain from cutting any forest for development, unless compensatory land is provided for afforestation. ■

Source: ISFR 2023

## NATIONAL FOREST COVER\*



**25%**  
THE SHARE OF FORESTS  
IN THE COUNTRY'S  
LAND MASS—FAR  
SHORT OF THE GLOBAL  
BENCHMARK OF 33%

\*All lands, more than or equal to one hectare, with a tree canopy of more than or equal to 10%; figures show decadal change

### VERY DENSE FOREST

2023 <b>102,502</b> sq. km	INCREASE <b>19,000</b> sq. km
2013 <b>83,502</b> sq. km	↑ <b>22.8%</b>

### MODERATELY DENSE FOREST

2023 <b>307,673</b> sq. km	DECREASE <b>11,072</b> sq. km
2013 <b>318,745</b> sq. km	↓ <b>3.5%</b>

### OPEN FOREST

2023 <b>305,167</b> sq. km	INCREASE <b>9,516</b> sq. km
2013 <b>295,651</b> sq. km	↑ <b>3.2%</b>

### MANGROVE

2023 <b>4,992</b> sq. km	INCREASE <b>296</b> sq. km
2013 <b>4,695</b> sq. km	↑ <b>6.3%</b>

### WESTERN GHATS ECO-SENSITIVE AREAS

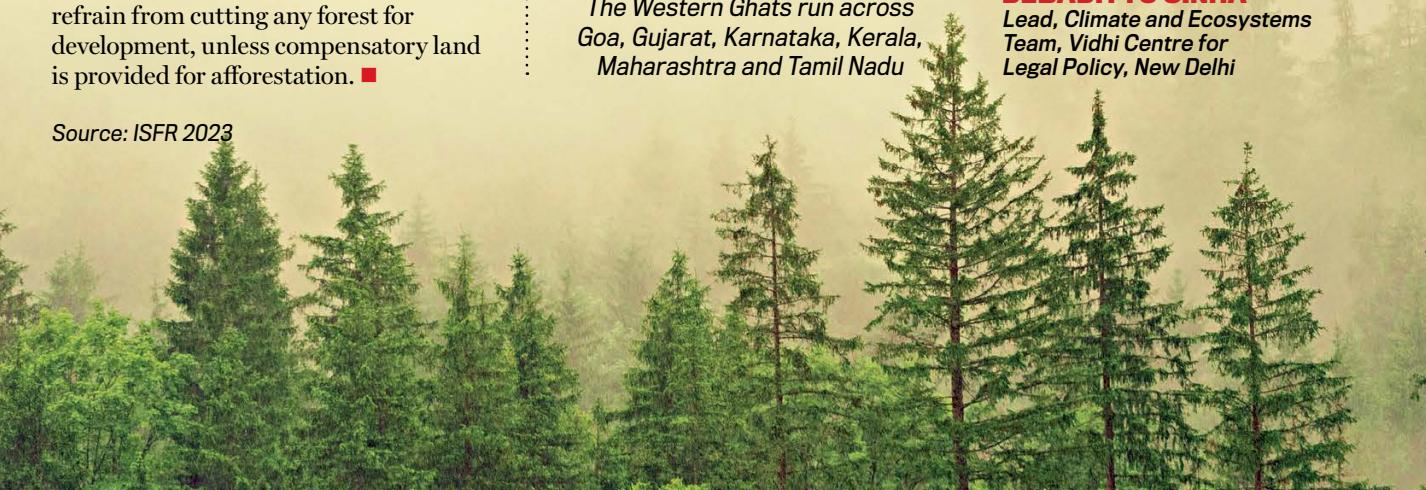
2023 <b>44,044</b> sq. km	DECREASE <b>58</b> sq. km
2013 <b>44,102</b> sq. km	↓ <b>0.13%</b>

"The marginal increase in national forest cover masks concerns about regional forest losses, particularly in biodiversity-rich areas. These findings raise urgent concerns about the effectiveness of conservation efforts, policies and priorities"

**DEBADITYO SINHA**

Lead, Climate and Ecosystems Team, Vidhi Centre for Legal Policy, New Delhi

*The Western Ghats run across Goa, Gujarat, Karnataka, Kerala, Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu*



# THE SHIFTING MAP

States with the highest increase and decrease, and degradation, in forest cover, area wise

## HIGHEST RISE

### ANDHRA PRADESH

**2023**  
**30,085**  
sq. km

**2013**  
**26,044**  
sq. km

↑16%

### KERALA

**2023**  
**22,059**  
sq. km

**2013**  
**18,384**  
sq. km

↑20%

## HIGHEST FALL

### ARUNACHAL PRADESH

**2023**  
**65,881**  
sq. km

**2013**  
**66,966**  
sq. km

↓1.6%

### MIZORAM

**2023**  
**17,990**  
sq. km

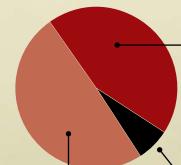
**2013**  
**18,978**  
sq. km

↓5.2%

## DECADAL DEGRADATION FROM 2011 TO 2021 (SQ. KM)

**92,989**

The national forest cover  
that has degraded



**40,709**  
From VDF and  
MDF to OF  
inside RFA

**46,707**

From VDF, MDF,  
OF, Scrub to Non-  
forest inside RFA

**5,573**

From VDF, MDF  
and OF to Scrub  
inside RFA

### States with maximum forest degradation

(in sq. km)

### CHHATTISGARH

**5,953**

### MADHYA PRADESH

**10,554**

### ARUNACHAL PRADESH

**6,539**

### MAHARASHTRA

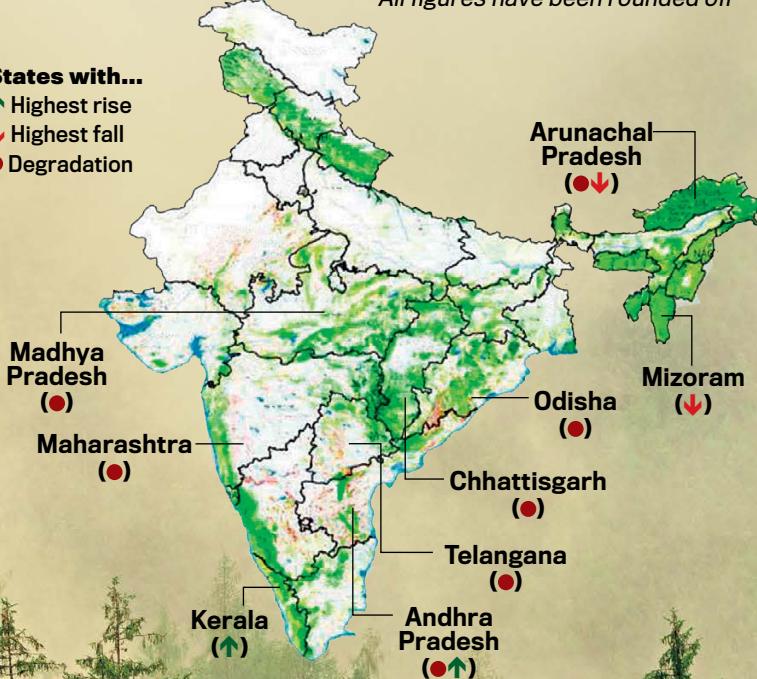
**6,227**

### TELANGANA

**4,926**

All figures have been rounded off  
Andhra Pradesh's presence in 'Degradation' as well as 'Rise' tables illustrates the shift to 'Manmade forests'; **VDF** or Very Dense Forests have a canopy density of  $\geq 70\%$ ; **MDF** (Moderately Dense Forests) 40-70%; **OF** (Open Forests) 10-40%; **Scrub** <10%; **RFA**: Recorded Forest Area; canopy density: ratio of ground covered by crowns of trees; non-forest lands: cropland, settlements etc.

- States with...
- ↑ Highest rise
- ↓ Highest fall
- Degradation



## LOYALTY BONUS

**A**fter the drubbings in three states, the Congress finally gets moving on its 'organisational reshuffle'. The golden rule, though, remains the same: unstinted loyalty to the Gandhi siblings. Take the two new general secretaries: ex-Chhattisgarh CM Bhupesh Baghel (Punjab in-charge) and CWC member Syed Naseer Hussain (handles J&K)—both **Priyanka Gandhi's** favourites. Meanwhile, brother **Rahul Gandhi's** ex-office chief K. Raju now oversees Jharkhand, and longtime confidante Meenakshi Natarajan gets Telangana. But the real showstopper? Harshwardhan Sapkal as Maharashtra Congress president. The ex-MLA is known to be close to Sachin Rao—AICC training head, Congress Sandesh overseer and, crucially, a Rahul inner circle fixture for 15 years. Contrast that with Faisal Patel, son of the late Ahmed Patel—Sonia Gandhi's most trusted aide—who has quit the party, claiming he was getting zero opportunities. No surprises here, Rahul never liked Ahmed Patel.



Illustrations by SIDDHANT JUMDE

## THE MOTHER LODE

**T**he late AIADMK icon **J. Jayalalithaa's** confiscated assets, transported under high security from Bengaluru to Chennai on February 15, are to be auctioned by the Tamil Nadu government, with the proceeds earmarked for 'rural welfare'. The Supreme Court dismissed the inheritance claims of her niece J. Deepa and nephew J. Deepak.

For DMK chief minister M.K. Stalin, liquidating the land hold holdings, all 1,526.2 acres of it, should be straightforward. The other assets—nearly 28 kg of

gold, including a diamond-and-ruby-studded crown and an engraved sword, as well as 1,116 kg of silver artefacts—may require a different approach, though, given the AIADMK's earlier commitment to converting her Poes Garden residence into a museum. After all, Stalin himself has established both a museum and a Rs 39 crore memorial for his late father, ex-CM M. Karunanidhi.



## Cash Squeeze

**B**JP leader and Maharashtra ports and fisheries minister **Nitesh Rane** has stirred up a firestorm again, declaring that villages under Opposition-led panchayats can kiss development funds goodbye. His message? If you want the cash, switch teams and join the BJP. Call it political tough love or just old-fashioned muscle-flexing, it's all about pay-to-play politics now. Democracy may be by the people, but in Rane's playbook, development is strictly for the party.



## Family Plots

**I**n Bihar, the RJD first family is back with another vintage dose of drama. With polls just months away, **Subhash Yadav**—once a trusted aide to sister and ex-CM Rabri Devi—has suddenly found a conscience and decided to blow the whistle on the "lawlessness" of the Lalu-Rabri era. His explosive claim? "Kidnapping cases used to be handled from the CM's house." But the plot thickens. The estranged Subhash is reportedly angling for his son to get a ticket from Chirag Paswan's LJP. Enter elder brother and ex-MP Sadhu Yadav, who isn't having any of it, calling the allegations "nonsense". Expect more such sizzlers from Bihar's political theatre as the polls near.



## LOVE WITHOUT FEAR

**T**his V-Day, the IT cell of the Trinamool Congress's Jal-paiguri unit launched a **Couples Protection Force** to save the young 'uns from the attentions of the moral policing brigade. Think Romeo and Juliet, but with party flags and a rescue squad in the background. And this is just the beginning. By next year, 'love commandos' will be active across Bengal, ensuring no romance is nipped in the bud by fringe Hindutva outfits like the Bajrang Dal, says Debangshu Bhattacharya, the TMC's IT cell chief.





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Implementation Partner





**THE THUMBS UP VIBE**  
US President Donald  
Trump with Prime  
Minister Narendra Modi at  
the White House, Feb. 14



COVER STORY

INDO-US  
TIES

# BRAVE NEW DEAL

**WILL MODI'S  
HIGH-RISK GAMBIT  
WITH TRUMP  
PAY OFF?**

*By RAJ CHENGAPPA*

N

**Nothing focuses the minds of world leaders** quite as much as the prospect of being struck down by a sledgehammer-wielding president of the world's sole superpower. It has been barely a month since Donald J. Trump formally assumed office, but he has already gone about his global demolition spree with astonishing and, for many, alarming speed. Not only is Trump rapidly dismantling massive parts of his own federal bureaucracy and the idea of what constituted America but he has also walked, nay, sprinted his talk of throwing out illegal immigrants and expressed his pet peeve of getting nations trading with America to lower their tariffs significantly.

So, when Prime Minister Narendra Modi set out to meet Trump along with Foreign Minister S. Jaishankar and National Security Advisor A.K. Doval on February 13 at the Oval Office, they didn't want to walk into an ambush and possibly return red-faced and empty-handed. Jaishankar's visits to the US soon after Trump was re-elected and at the swearing-in ceremony on January 20 ensured that he had tested the waters and got a good grasp of what Trump 2.0 was going to be all about.

The Indian assessment was that Trump was more bold, confident and assertive than he was in his first term. The conservative Republican party had become his supplicants, turning it into, well, Trump's own party. It was also through his own set of friends, filters and priorities that Trump viewed his relations with countries and he would deal with them in a manner that was anything but conventional. The Indian delegation was aware that Trump remained capricious and could swing like a pendulum from one extreme to the other, forcing them to be nimble-footed in their dealings with him.

That it would now be every nation for itself was evident in Trump's dismissive treatment of some of America's closest allies,

## THE MODI-TRUMP DEAL

# MAKING A FRESH COMPACT

Reaffirming the strength of India-US ties, US President Donald Trump and PM Narendra Modi launched the US-India COMPACT (Catalyzing Opportunities for Military Partnership, Accelerated Commerce & Technology) for the 21st Century. It brings a sharper focus on key areas and is committed to a results-driven agenda. Its main points:

## 1. DEFENCE

- » A new 10-year Framework for US-India Major Defence Partnership in the 21st Century to expand sales and co-production to strengthen interoperability
- » Procurement and co-production for Javelin anti-tank guided missiles and Stryker infantry combat vehicles
- » Offer for India to procure F-35 stealth fighter jets
- » The Autonomous Systems Industry Alliance (ASIA) to scale industry partnerships and production in the Indo-Pacific
- » Support for possible overseas deployment of US & Indian militaries in the Indo-Pacific



including insulting Canada by referring to it as the 51st state of the US, demanding Greenland from Denmark and asserting that the Panama Canal would soon belong to the US. Meanwhile, as he had promised during his campaign, five days before he even assumed office, Trump forced Israel and Hamas to agree to a ceasefire and walk the tenuous path towards peace. On the Ukraine war, Trump stunned his North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) allies by bypassing them and directly engaging with Russia for an early settlement.



## 2. TRADE & INVESTMENT



- ↳ In deepening US-India trade ties, fairness, national security and job creation are the buzz words
- ↳ 'Mission 500' goal: bilateral trade volume to more than double to \$500 billion by 2030
- ↳ Plans for first stage of a multi-sector Bilateral Trade Agreement (BTA) by the fall of 2025. The watchwords for this are market access, reducing tariff and non-tariff barriers
- ↳ Aim to increase US exports of industrial goods to India, Indian exports of labour-intensive products to the US
- ↳ Greenfield investments by US and Indian firms

## 3. ENERGY



- ↳ Appreciating value of strategic petroleum reserves for economic stability
- ↳ Commitment to increase energy trade, and to establish the US as a



leading supplier of crude oil and petroleum products and liquefied natural gas to India

- ↳ To fully realise the US-India 123 civil nuclear agreement, plans to build US-designed nuclear reactors in India through possible tech transfer

## 4. TECHNOLOGY



- ↳ Launch of US-India TRUST (Transforming the Relationship Utilising Strategic Technology) initiative; to catalyse government-to-government, academia and private sector collaboration in critical/ emerging tech
- ↳ US-India roadmap on accelerating AI infrastructure by end of 2025
- ↳ Launch of INDUS Innovation, modelled on INDUS-X, to advance industry and academic partnerships, attract investment in space, energy, other emerging technologies
- ↳ Building resilient supply chains for semiconductors, critical minerals, pharmaceuticals through the new Mineral Security Partnership
- ↳ Space: increased collaboration in space exploration, long-duration human space-flight missions, safety

## 5. MULTILATERAL COOPERATION

- ↳ New initiatives building up to the Quad Leaders' Summit in Delhi in September
- ↳ Partners from India-Middle East-Europe Corridor (IMEC) and I2U Group to meet for new initiatives
- ↳ Start of Meta's undersea cable project to connect five continents-India to maintain, repair, finance cables in Indian Ocean
- ↳ Future leadership role for India in the Combined Maritime Forces naval task force to secure sea lanes in Arabian Sea
- ↳ Tough stand against terrorism-extradition of 26/11 accused Tahawwur Rana to India

## 6. CONNECTING PEOPLE



- ↳ Collaboration between higher education institutions of both nations through joint/ dual degrees, twinning programmes

- ↳ Legal mobility for students and professionals, easing short-term tourist/ business travel
- ↳ Action against illegal immigration, human traffickers, crime syndicates

**RATHER THAN FOCUS ON TRADE AND TARIFFS, MODI WANTED TO USE HIS MEETING WITH TRUMP TO DWELL ON A SPECTRUM OF FORWARD-LEANING, AGENDA-SETTING ISSUES FOR THE FUTURE**



## INDIA'S 'PRACTICAL REALISM'

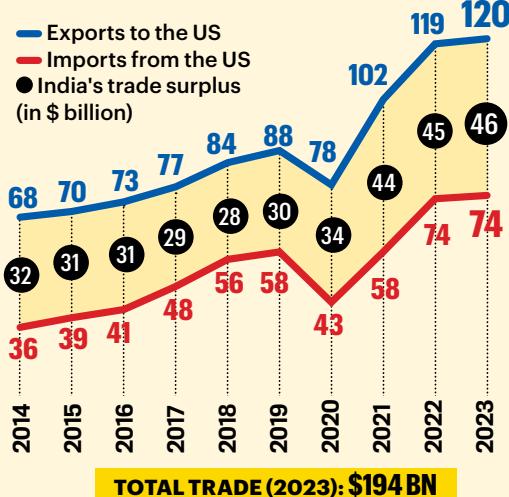
The way Trump rode roughshod over even America's closest allies indicated to the Indian negotiators that the situation called for a high degree of "practical realism". With Trump bearing down on India over its high tariffs, the Modi government had the option of retaliating either with higher tariffs on US imports or going to the World Trade Organization (WTO). Or doing both, as during Trump 1.0, when the two countries traded tariff punches after the US unilaterally raised tariffs on steel and aluminium and removed India as

# TARIFF TIGHTROPE

## INDO-US TRADE: GOODS & SERVICES

### INDIA'S EXPORT BOOM

Exports to the US have steadily risen over the past decade (barring 2020), while imports grew moderately. The trade surplus widened, highlighting India's strong position with its largest partner



● EXPORTS TO THE US ● IMPORTS FROM THE US

### AUTOMOBILES

#### CARS

\$37  
MN

US tariff  
(CY23)

CARS  
2.5%

Trucks  
25%

Motorcycles  
2.4% or 0%

Nil

India tariff\*  
Motor vehicles  
over \$40,000:  
**70%**

Used cars and  
other vehicles:  
**70%**

CKD kits  
**10%**

\*post Budget 2025

#### IMPACT

Hiked US tariffs won't impact Indian car exports much, given low volumes. Lowering import tariffs could help US firms like Tesla but would mainly affect the high-end segment, with little impact on local manufacturers



#### MOTORCYCLES

\$2.4  
BN (CY23)

US tariff  
**2.4%**  
(includes bicycles)



\$3 MN  
(CY24)

India tariff  
Engines above  
1,600cc  
**30%**  
Engines below  
1,600cc  
**40%**  
SKD units  
**20%**  
CKD units  
**10%**

#### IMPACT

A US tariff hike will impact motorcycle exports from firms like Royal Enfield, while lower import duties in India will benefit US brands like Harley-Davidson

SKD: Semi Knocked-Down  
CKD: Completely Knocked-Down

## AGRICULTURE

### PULSES

Nil  
US tariff  
**0%**

\$2.6  
BN (CY23)  
India tariff  
**0-20%**



#### IMPACT

India is unlikely to lower tariff as it pursues the National Pulses Mission for self-sufficiency. It has not signed the WTO Agreement on Agriculture and retains sovereign rights over agricultural trade

### APPLES

Nil  
US tariff  
**1.1%**

\$600  
MN  
India tariff  
**50%**



**IMPACT**  
Lowering tariffs is politically sensitive in Himachal Pradesh, Kashmir and Uttarakhand, where growers seek stricter non-tariff barriers

### TEXTILES\*

FY24 (Jan. to Nov.)

\$9.7  
BN

\$186  
MN  
India MFN tariff#  
**24%**

US MFN tariff#  
**8-9%**

#### IMPACT

The US accounts for 29% of India's textile and apparel exports. Without a trade pact, India's exports face MFN tariffs, but a major impact on these labour-intensive sectors is unlikely

\*Includes apparel, finished leather, leather garments, leather footwear and components

The US is India's largest trading partner and one of the few where India enjoys a trade surplus. Here's a sector-wise analysis of the potential impact of American reciprocal tariffs

## PHARMACEUTICALS

### PHARMA PRODUCTS

*Includes generics and APIs (active pharma ingredients)*

\$8.7  
BN  
(FY24)

US tariff  
0-6.4%

\$400  
MN  
(FY24)

India tariff  
10%

#### IMPACT

A 10% US tariff, matching India's levy on US pharma imports, could hurt Indian pharma. However, the US will remain reliant on India, where some drugs cost six times less to produce

## MEDICAL DEVICES

\$3.8  
BN  
(FY24)

US tariff  
0% or 2-2.5%

\$1.3  
BN  
(Nov. 2022 to Oct. 2023)

India tariff  
0-7.5%

#### IMPACT

India may lower import tariffs, boosting US exports but impacting domestic manufacturers, who have sought a hike to 15%

## ETHANOL

FY25 (first 8 months)

Nil

US tariff  
N.A.

359  
MN litres

India tariff\*  
5%

#### IMPACT

India does not export ethanol to the US, while the US supplies over 90% of India's ethanol imports. Removing the 5% import duty could reduce ethanol prices

\*Basic customs duty

## TELECOMMUNICATIONS

### EQUIPMENT\* & MOBILE PHONES

\$17.3  
BN  
(CY24)

US tariff  
0-37.5%

\$11 BN  
(FY24)

India tariff  
10-20%

#### IMPACT

India is pushing for greater self-reliance by implementing incentives like Performance Linked Incentives (PLI) alongside tariffs and non-tariff barriers to boost domestic capacities. However, lowering tariffs would likely benefit Chinese players more than American ones



\*Includes routers, PCBs and spares

## ELECTRONICS\*

FY24 (Jan. to Nov.)

\$6.5  
BN  
US MFN  
tariff\*  
1.5%

\$3.6  
BN  
India MFN  
tariff\*  
8.09%



#### IMPACT

The US accounts for 32% of India's electronic exports. Preferential access could boost India's high-end electronics manufacturing and help diversify capital goods imports

\*includes electrical machinery and equipment

a beneficiary under the Generalised System of Preference (GSP) programme, denying it \$6 billion (Rs 52,000 crore). But the Indian team was acutely aware that Planet Trump had no place for righteousness.

Modi decided that being proactive would be a better bet and got his team to push for an early meeting with Trump. The PM had interacted with Trump closely during his first term and the two had built up a rapport. Trump saw India as a country that was big enough to make a difference but not large enough to cause problems. He saw value in meeting Modi early, especially if he could strike a trade deal that would reduce the bilateral trade deficit of \$46 billion (Rs 3.98 lakh crore) in India's favour.

The other priority for Trump was to get Modi to take back verified Indian illegal immigrants in the US without too much fuss. There are an estimated 725,000 of them, of whom 18,000 have exhausted all legal options and are ready for deportation.

**INDIA POINTED OUT THAT RECIPROCAL TARIFFS NEED NOT REDUCE THE TRADE DEFICIT WITH THE US AND SOUGHT SPACE FOR A BILATERAL DEAL**



In return, India got the US to agree to put in place "secure mobility frameworks" to facilitate appropriate visas for the over 300,000 students who contribute \$8 billion (Rs 69,300 crore) annually to the US economy, apart from over half a million professionals who form the backbone of America's information technology industry. India also got the US to agree to jointly destroy the ecosystem that enables illegal immigration—including drug runners and terrorist backers, which brings into its ambit Khalistani separatist organisations operating in the US. It is a clear win for India there.

On the face of it, the overall optics looked good for Modi. It was rare for an Indian prime minister to meet a US president so soon after he was sworn in. Trump

had given audiences to only three other national leaders before he met Modi—Japan's Shigeru Ishiba, Israel's Benjamin Netanyahu and Jordan's King Abdullah II. So, it signalled the priority that Trump accorded to his relations with Modi and India. Yet it was a high-risk gambit for Modi, given Trump's reputation of being mercurial and brutally frank, let alone his penchant for making atrocious demands. But the Indian team had prepared well, utilising the two-month transition period between the Biden and Trump administrations to lay the groundwork for a hopefully fruitful partnership.

**A** week before Biden passed the baton to Trump, his administration lifted the sanctions on three Indian nuclear establishments—the Bhabha Atomic Research Centre, the Indira Gandhi Centre for Atomic Research and Indian Rare Earths—that had been imposed after the 1998 nuclear tests. This freeing up of restrictions would be vital to rekindle the civilian nuclear cooperation between the two countries

that had lain dormant after the signing of the 2008 Indo-US nuclear deal. In return, in the Union budget, India agreed to amend its Atomic Energy Act and the Nuclear Damage Act to relax the stringent liability conditions to enable greater private participation in constructing and running civilian nuclear plants. This would become one of the key elements in the deal struck at the Modi-Trump summit for collaboration in securing critical mineral and clean energy supply chains, apart from India importing US nuclear power reactors.

Meanwhile, Jaishankar was deputed to represent India at Trump's inaugural in Capitol Hill on January 20 and his front row seating along with two foreign ministers of the Quad Group of nations that consists of India, Japan, Australia and the US signalled the new administration's intent to strengthen the Quad, which Trump had pushed for during his first term. This was reiterated by US

## DEFENCE

# STEALTHY ARROWHEADS

The US offer to co-produce Stryker combat vehicles and Javelin anti-tank missiles reinforces defence ties. But the sudden arrival of F-35 fighters in the mix has everyone talking

By PRADIP R. SAGAR

**O**n February 13, US President Donald Trump, in his renewed tenure in the Oval Office, made a surprising move. At his meeting with PM Narendra Modi, Trump offered India the F-35 stealth fighter, a jet that has so far been restricted to NATO allies, Israel and Japan. "We'll be increasing military sales to India by many billions of dollars.... We're paving the

way to provide India with the F-35 stealth fighters," he announced. The supersonic F-35 Lightning II is one of the world's most advanced, multi-role fighter jets, known for its stealth technology and networked warfare capabilities.

More substantively, the US has also offered co-production of its Stryker infantry combat vehicle and Javelin anti-tank guided missile

systems. The US has been pitching Stryker to India for over two decades, but things gathered speed after Washington offered its co-production in India a couple of years ago. On January 10, the proposal to establish manufacturing facilities for the Stryker in India were approved by the US government. India plans to have 530 Strykers to equip 10 mechanised infantry battalions to be deployed

along the high-altitude LAC. A few units will come off the shelf from the US, while the remainder are expected to be jointly produced here by US firm General Dynamics and an Indian firm. The Javelin anti-tank guided missile system will similarly be jointly produced in India by manufacturers Lockheed Martin and Raytheon, and an Indian firm. India is also expected to order six Boeing



1

# TRUMP SAW INDIA AS A COUNTRY THAT WAS BIG ENOUGH TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE BUT NOT LARGE ENOUGH TO CAUSE PROBLEMS AND PUSHED HARD TO GET INDIA TO BUY US OIL AND ARMAMENTS



Secretary of State Marco Rubio in his first day in office by convening a Quad meeting. Later, Modi in his meeting with Trump said he looked forward to hosting the US president in New Delhi when the Quad leaders' summit would be held in September 2025.

Another plus for India was the US Supreme Court clearing the extradition of Tahawwur Hussain Rana, a Pakistan-origin businessman and physician who was arrested in Chicago in 2009 for his role in abetting the horrific 26/11 Mumbai attacks the previous year. India had waged a long battle for his extradition. In his summit with Modi, Trump promised to have Rana extradited to India at the earliest. Pakistan gnashed its teeth when the two leaders went on to

reaffirm their commitment to eliminate the global scourge of terrorism, even telling Islamabad to stop fostering terrorist activities on its soil. That was a win for India too.

## TARIFFS AND A NEW DEAL

Meanwhile, given Trump's obsession with trade tariffs, the Modi government decided to partially address his demands. In the 2025 Union budget and later, many of the tariffs for US exports to India that Trump wanted lowered in his first term were reduced. These included duties on Bourbon whisky, high-end motorcycles, medical devices and agricultural products like alfalfa hay and dry fruits. The idea was

P-8I maritime patrol aircraft, adding to a fleet of 12.

India has bought over \$20 billion (Rs 1.73 lakh crore) worth of American defence materiel since 2008, making the US its third-largest arms supplier. India has historically relied on Russian and European defence equipment, though it has increasingly diversified its sources, including through substantial American equipment. The India-US joint statement hinted at much more to come—air defence, missiles, maritime technologies and undersea capabilities.

The F-35 offer sparked speculation

because India is pursuing its own fifth-generation stealth fighter programme, the Advanced Medium Combat Aircraft (AMCA), but it remains years away from operational readiness. However, foreign secretary Vikram Misri was quick to clarify: "I don't think with regard to the acquisition of an advanced aviation platform by India...that process has started as yet."

Though there are no immediate plans for F-35s, sources suggest that

New Delhi might consider acquiring

two squadrons of F-35s as a 'stopgap measure'. However, the F-35 doesn't just cost a bomb, its maintenance costs are also substantial; nor is it without operational black spots. Moreover, American restrictions on technology transfer could limit India's ability to customise the aircraft to its specific needs.

There are also those who think that Trump's offer of F-35 is part of his 'disruptive diplomacy' to prevent India from accepting Russia's recent offer to co-produce in India its top-of-the-line stealth fighter,

the impressive Su-57E, alongside assistance in the development of the Indian fifth generation fighter programme. Others say America's offer could be a strategic counter to China's rapidly increasing stealth fighter force and thus beneficial to India. Just two months ago, Beijing unveiled its sixth-generation stealth fighter prototype, the J-36. Meanwhile, Pakistan is also accelerating the induction of 40 J-35 stealth fighters from China.

Former IAF chief Vivek Ram Chaudhari has the final word. "What the fifth generation fighters can bring to us is more important...which aircraft is a secondary matter. We want any new technologies to encourage our self-reliance a little more and give a further boost to our AMCA programme," he says. ■

2

### STRIKE FORCE

1. F-35 stealth fighter jet
2. Stryker infantry combat vehicle
3. Javelin anti-tank guided missile



3

to indicate to Trump that India was conscious of his concerns and was ready to partner with him and, as an expert put it, "to make good of the drought situation". That softened up Trump, but didn't deter him from piling up the pressure on India.

**F**our days before the Modi-Trump summit, the US deported 104 illegal Indian immigrants on a military aircraft. Photos of them in handcuffs and leg chains created an uproar in Parliament and put the government on the back foot. Then, just an hour before the meeting on February 13, Trump announced that he was imposing reciprocal tariffs on all nations that traded with the US. In the press conference, he even referred to India as being "right on top" of the list of abusers that had the highest tariff rates.

Trump's drastic move is likely to deliver a body blow to the WTO that in the 30 years of its existence had worked towards a fair rules-based trading system, even allowing Special and Differential Treatment (SDT) for developing countries to maintain higher tariffs if needed. "WTO is as good as dead now and we need to rethink our export strategy," says Sachin Chaturvedi, director general, Research and Information System for Developing Countries (RIS). The US interlocutors brushed aside these provisions as unfair in their talks with India and pointed out that in 2022, the average Indian tariff rate on US imports was 15.3 per cent, while the average US tariff on Indian imports was 3.83 per cent—an across the board 12 percentage point differential.

The Indian team was familiar with such pressure tactics and had factored in its response. Rather than focus purely on trade and tariffs, Modi wanted to use his summit meeting with Trump to dwell on a spectrum of forward-leaning issues that would set the agenda for the relationship for the next four years of his term and not just the coming four months. So, before the two leaders met, the Indian negotiators hammered out an agreement with Trump's team on four major pillars on which the new deal would rest. These were major commitments to enhance collaborations in trade, defence, energy and technology. The initiative was given a catchy name: the US-India COMPACT for the 21st Century, COMPACT being an acronym for Catalyzing Opportunities for Military Partnership,

**FOR NEW DELHI, THE OTHER BIG GAIN WAS DEEPENING US COMMITMENT FOR A ROADMAP TO ACCELERATE AI INFRASTRUCTURE BY THE YEAR END WITH MILESTONES AND FUTURE ACTIONS**



X/@narendramodi

#### ELON MUSK

# THE MUSK FACTOR

**The Tesla CEO, Trump's close associate, will look to launch his cars in the Indian market, now that the stumbling block of high import duties doesn't exist. But the road won't be smooth for either his EVs or Starlink, his satellite internet service**

By **M.G. ARUN**

**E**lon Musk, 53, had shot to fame long before his public endorsement and funding of Donald Trump in the latter's second run for the White House. As the entrepreneurial spirit behind electric vehicle maker Tesla, space technology firm SpaceX and international telecom provider Starlink, Musk had garnered global spotlight



### FOR THE ALBUM

PM Modi interacts with Trump confidant and Tesla CEO Elon Musk and his family at Blair House, in Washington DC; Feb. 13

Musk had plans to meet PM Narendra Modi in April last year in New Delhi, but pulled out at the last minute. He was to then announce an investment of \$2 billion to set up a Tesla factory in India. The meeting finally fructified this month in Washington, coinciding with Modi's meeting with Trump.

In the Union Budget 2025–26, the Centre took the first step to make investment in high-end cars in India attractive by reducing the import duty on vehicles priced above \$40,000 (Rs 34.75 lakh) from 125 per cent to 70 per cent. This, along with

LinkedIn announcing that Tesla was seeking candidates for customer-facing as well as back-end jobs in Mumbai and Delhi. Trump has openly said that any investment by Tesla in India would be "unfair to the US". But the businessman in Musk will see this as an opportunity to spread his risks away from China, given Beijing's souring ties with the US. Tesla's China sales had risen 8.8 per cent in 2024, to a record high of more than 657,000 cars.

The Indian EV market is forecast to expand from \$3.21 billion (Rs 27,888 crore) in 2022 to

Tesla to become successful in the initial stages. "Tesla will not be able to sell even the basic vehicle below Rs 30 lakh, even if they start manufacturing locally," says Hemal Thakkar, senior practice leader and director, Crisil. "In India, the average ticket size for sales of a car is Rs 10 lakh. Tesla will be more of a challenge for a Merc, BMW or Audi in the luxury car segment and not Indian incumbents."

**M**eanwhile, Starlink, the satellite internet service which leverages a constellation of over 7,000 low-earth orbit (LEO) satellites to deliver high-speed internet, is not allowed to operate in India due to security concerns. The government is probing two incidents—a massive drug bust in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands and an insurgency-related raid in Manipur—that allegedly revealed the use of Starlink's satellite communication devices. Musk has insisted that the devices are not operational in India, and Starlink's future plans in India will be closely watched.

While Trump will guide the course of global trade and geopolitics over the next four years, it will be Musk that India will watch with keen interest. ■

### THOUGH TRUMP HAS SAID ANY INVESTMENT BY TESLA IN INDIA WOULD BE "UNFAIR TO THE US", THE BUSINESSMAN IN MUSK WILL SEE AN OPPORTUNITY TO MOVE HIS RISKS AWAY FROM CHINA

the lowering of duties on imported motorcycles, was a message to Trump. "Both Tesla and Harley-Davidson—companies that have become significant players in the Trump administration's trade rhetoric when it comes to India—are likely to gain from these tariff cuts," says a report by the Observer Research Foundation.

Soon after the Modi-Musk meeting, advertisements appeared on

\$114 billion (Rs 9.9 lakh crore) by 2029. India aims to have an ambitious 80 million EVs on its roads by 2030. Initiatives like the Faster Adoption and Manufacturing of Hybrid and Electric Vehicles (FAME) scheme is expected to support this goal. Top Indian car makers like Tata Motors, Mahindra & Mahindra and Maruti Suzuki are already making EVs.

Experts, however, feel that it may not be easy for

with his tech frontiers-man vibe. His dramatic buyout of Twitter in 2022 was in sync with his maverick personality. Now, teaming up with Trump to head the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE), Musk, the world's richest man with a net worth of \$402 billion, is under the spotlight again as he takes a large pair of scissors to American bureaucracy in a war on alleged wasteful expenditure of federal funds. He is also being watched for his next set of actions to further his business in new markets, including India.

Tesla had been eyeing an entry into India for long, but had hesitated due to India's high import duties on high-end cars.

Accelerated Commerce and Technology (*see Making a Fresh Compact*). The two leaders reiterated that it would be a results-driven agenda with initial outcomes by the end of the year to demonstrate trust in each other and mutual benefits.

On trade and tariffs, the Indian side wanted the Americans to define the template they were looking at. Was it a revenue template that Trump was interested in or one focusing on reducing the deficit? They pointed out that the imposition of reciprocal tariffs need not reduce the deficit which India enjoys, though it may expand US revenues through higher duties. A template the Indians advocated was one that focused on reducing the deficit while growing overall trade. So Modi and Trump agreed to set a bold new goal titled Mission 500, which is aimed at more than doubling the total bilateral trade to \$500 billion by 2030 from the current \$194 billion (Rs 16.8 lakh crore). As an official put it, "This should open up business opportunities worth \$100 billion (Rs 8.67 lakh crore) for Indian firms in the next couple of years that would more than offset any restrictive trade policies that the US may impose."

**T**o give India more bargaining space, the teams agreed to work towards the first tranche of a multi-sector Bilateral Trade Agreement (BTA) by the fall of 2025. The Indian side was tentatively optimistic that by committing to a time-bound trade agreement, Trump would make an exception for India when it came to reciprocal tariffs. But, in an interview days after his meeting with Modi, Trump was clear that he wouldn't do so. Consequently, India's pharma and auto industries could be hit hard (*see Tariff Tightrope*).

The State Bank of India's research unit did an assessment of the potential impact if the US imposed a 20 per cent flat tariff raise and concluded that India would lose 50 bps (basis points) to its GDP. That amounted to an annual loss of \$19.4 billion (Rs 1.68 lakh crore) or 10 per cent of India's total trade with the US. Global investment banking firm Goldman Sachs estimated Trump's reciprocal tariff could impact India in three ways: at the country level, the product level and through non-tariff barriers (trade restrictions like quotas and licences), resulting in a loss of anything between 0.1 to 0.6 per cent of India's GDP of \$3.8 trillion (Rs 325 lakh crore). Indian officials point out that the impact should not be studied in isolation, as other countries would also be subject to these, with some like China hurt even more. That itself could make India more competitive in other goods and services and position it to grab a wider spectrum of exports.

Meanwhile, in a Plan B, the Indian side is preparing to put the first tranche of the BTA on a fast-track. Their confidence stems from the fact that during Trump's first term the two sides were close to signing an early harvest trade deal before the Covid outbreak put paid to the effort. The Biden administration was not keen on pursuing a free trade agreement,



ANI

so the effort languished, but during his tenure the two sides decided to withdraw their battle in the WTO over earlier tariffs. Now with Trump back in the saddle, India hopes to pick up where they left off and clinch a partial deal before the reciprocal tariffs kick in. But it is going to be a tough ask and is likely to put the relationship under severe strain.

## TIME FOR A TRADE REVAMP

Modi had another bargaining chip: India could offer to become a major buyer of US crude oil and liquid natural gas, a sector whose expansion is a pet project for Trump, embodied in his catchily phrased policy of "drill, baby, drill". The US is India's fifth largest supplier of crude oil and petroleum products, with its share being around \$7 billion (Rs 60,650 crore) of the country's annual oil import bill of \$140 billion (Rs 12.13 lakh crore) in 2023. In the joint statement released after the Modi-Trump summit, India has agreed to establish the United States as "a leading supplier" of its crude oil and liquid natural gas requirements. In 2023, India purchased around \$45 billion (Rs 3.89 lakh crore) from its top supplier Russia apart from about \$25 billion (Rs 2.17 lakh crore) each from Iraq and Saudi Arabia annually. The US hopes India would nearly treble its current purchases. But India's unstated caveat is that it is subject to competitive pricing and logistics. Importantly, the US will back India's claim to become a full member of the International Energy Agency, allowing it to sit on the global



#### UNITED THEY STAND

Foreign minister S. Jaishankar with US secretary of state Marco Rubio (third from right) and others at the Quad foreign ministers' meeting in Washington, Jan. 21

releasing fifth generation fighters and undersea systems for India. At the press conference, Trump announced that he was willing to look at selling America's top-of-the-line F-35 stealth fighter (*see Stealthy Arrowheads*). America hopes that India will increase purchases of US defence equipment, but clarifies that this cannot be set off to meet India's trade imbalance with the US. For India, as an official put it, "We regard the US partnership in defence as invaluable to us, considering the military asymmetry we have with China, so we felt that it is better we buy from America today rather than tomorrow."

For New Delhi, the other big gain was the deepening US commitment on building India's AI capability with the launch of the US-India TRUST (Transforming the Relationship Utilising Strategic Technology) initiative. This is much wider in scope than the Initiative for Critical and Emerging Technologies or iCET that the Biden administration had negotiated with Modi in May 2022. Central to TRUST is the commitment to work with the US and Indian private industry on a roadmap for accelerating Artificial Intelligence (AI) infrastructure by the year-end and identifying constraints such as finance, building, powering and connecting large-scale US origin AI infrastructure in India with milestones and future actions. Apart from that, the two countries agreed to work on building "trusted and resilient" supply chains, including semiconductors, critical minerals and advanced materials—all music to India's ears in its bid to reduce dependence on China.

Overall, as Arun Singh, former Indian ambassador to the US, puts it, "The US signal is that yes, there are differences but we will be happy to work with India and do more things with it including new ones." Other experts see Trump's obsession with tariff equalisation as India's 1991 moment to revamp India's trade policies and make domestic industry more globally competitive. As an expert points out, "It's a good wake-up call for us and a fantastic opportunity to liberalise our trade policy. Reciprocal tariffs hit everybody but it strikes competitive economies more than complementary ones to the US. India is on the complementary side and with other countries including China likely to be more severely impacted, it is time for us to occupy the space in the global supply chains that these countries would vacate."

To do that, India needs to go back to the drawing board, reassess all the 11,000 tariff lines it has and vacate space being blocked by a protectionist-minded industry that continues to look for nanny treatment. Also needed is a revamp of the country's export negotiations set-up, including adding more experienced staff to quickly strike beneficial bilateral and multilateral deals. As Modi told Trump, "You have MAGA or Make America Great Again and I have Viksit Bharat by 2047 to Make India Great Again. MAGA+MIGA equals MEGA partnership for prosperity." It is in India's interest to maximise the potential the brave new deal offers and minimise the damage. ■

## EXPERTS SAY THAT TRUMP'S PUNITIVE ACTIONS ARE A WAKE UP CALL FOR INDIA TO GO BACK TO THE DRAWING BOARD AND LIBERALISE ITS TRADE POLICY TO CASH IN ON THE EMERGING GLOBAL ECONOMIC ORDER



high table for deciding energy production and supply issues.

Aware that Trump's approach to international relations is transactional and puts America's business interests foremost, India had another carrot to offer: greater purchases of top-of-the-line US defence equipment. Since 2008, India has purchased close to \$20 billion (Rs 1.73 lakh crore) worth of military platforms from the US, including heavy lift military aircraft like the C130J Super Hercules and the C-17 Globemaster III, the maritime patrol P-81 Poseidon, apart from attack helicopters like the AH-64E Apaches and CH-47 Chinooks, Harpoon anti-ship missiles, M777 howitzers and more recently the lethal MQ-9B drones.

In his meeting with Modi, Trump offered co-production arrangements for America's Javelin anti-tank guided missiles and Stryker infantry combat vehicles and agreed to review



**Narendra Modi**  
Prime Minister

**Dr. Mohan Yadav**  
Chief Minister, Madhya Pradesh



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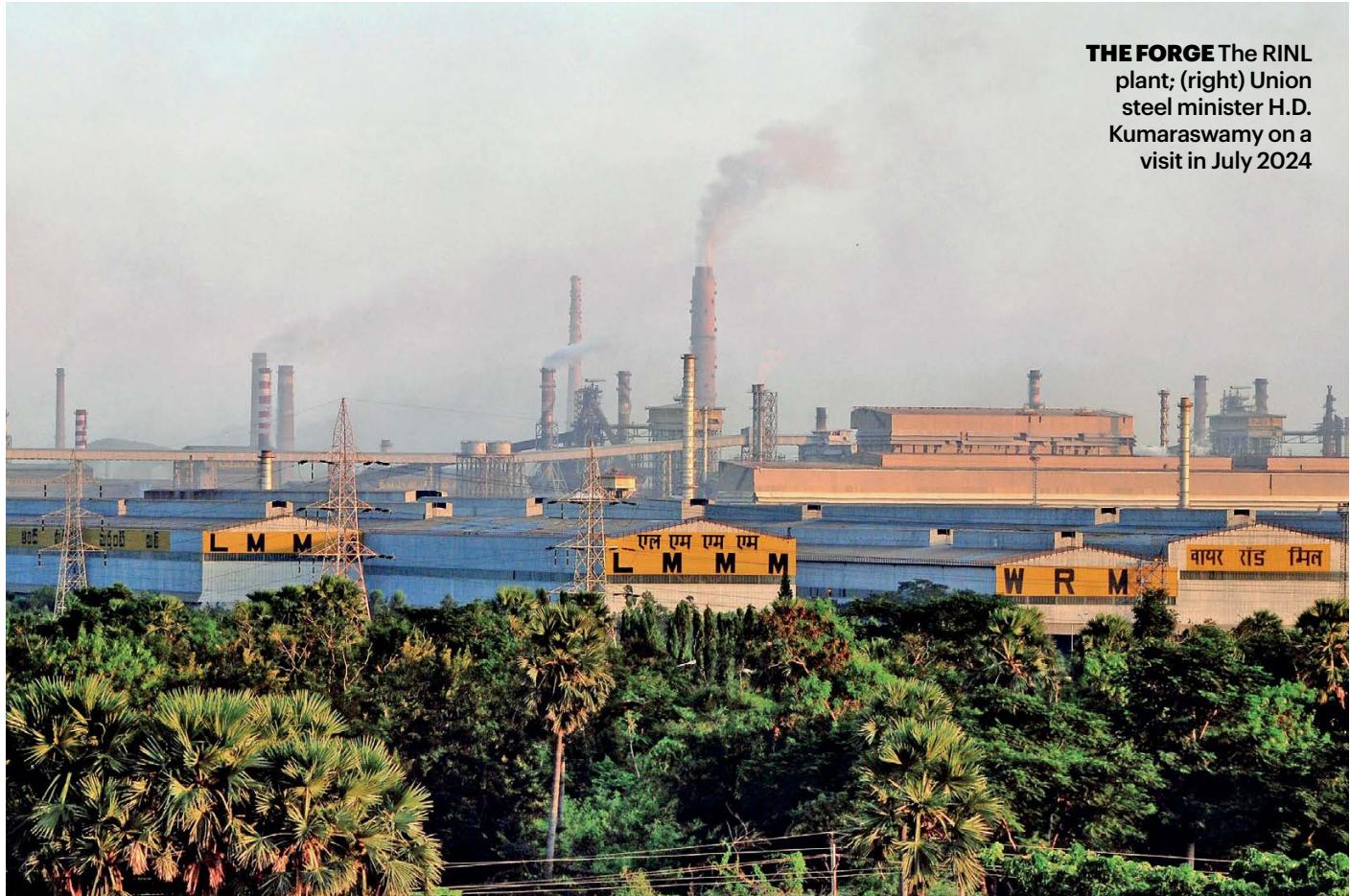
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**THE FORGE** The RINL plant; (right) Union steel minister H.D. Kumaraswamy on a visit in July 2024



**THE NATION VIZAG STEEL**

# A LIFELINE FOR VIZAG STEEL

**STEEL MAJOR RASHTRIYA ISPAT NIGAM LTD GETS A CHANCE TO TURN THINGS AROUND WITH A FINANCIAL PACKAGE OF RS 11,440 CR. FROM THE CENTRE. THE PSU'S INHERENT LIMITATIONS, THOUGH, MAY PLAY SPOILER**

**By Amarnath K. Menon**

V

isakapatnam, or as the Telugu *biddas* like to call it, 'Vizag', is Andhra Pradesh's biggest metro city and lays claim to such honorifics as the 'shipbuilding capital of India' and the 'jewel of the East coast'. And among

the jewels the city boasts of is the government-owned Rashtriya Ispat Nigam Ltd (RINL) or the Vizag Steel Plant (VSP), declared a 'Navaratna' in 2010 but now facing an uncertain future. In 2021, the Union cabinet had approved the disinvestment plan for the plant, but after massive protests in the city, the move was put on ice.

Cut to 2025, and with a new government led by NDA partner Telugu Desam Party (TDP) in power in the state, RINL has been given a lifeline. On January 17, the Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs (CCEA) chaired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi confirmed a financial package of Rs 11,440 crore for RINL's revival. The news came as a bit of a surprise, as just the week before the PM was in Vizag to lay the foundation for projects worth some Rs 2 lakh crore but had made no mention of RINL. Sources say a strident Naidu had impressed on Modi how crucial the revival package was. It now includes an equity infusion of Rs 10,300 crore and Rs 1,440 crore in working capital loans which will be converted to seven per cent non-cumulative preference share capital, redeemable after 10 years (prefer-



ence share-keepers have priority claim to a company's assets and dividend compared to ordinary shareholders). According to the government, the equity support will allow RINL to address operational challenges, raise working capital, and gradually achieve its full production capacity of 7.3 million tonnes (MT) per annum (it is now working at half capacity). In a post on X, PM Modi underlined that "this (the revival package) has been done understanding the importance of the steel sector in building an Aatmanirbhar Bharat". Union steel minister H.D. Kumaraswamy and Andhra CM N. Chandrababu Naidu, on their part, say that with the capital infusion, the privatisation of VSP is "off the table".

## The Challenges

For the past decade or so, RINL has been grappling with severe financial and operational challenges. Its total liabilities now exceed Rs 35,000 crore (with defaults in loan and interest payments) and workers have not been paid regularly since September 2024. The steel plant began facing issues when VSP expanded its capacity from 3 MTPA to 7.3 MTPA between 2014 and 2017, funded by loans at high interest

## SMELTING POINT

► **RINL's disinvestment plan was okayed in 2021, but massive protests led to it being shelved**

► **On Jan. 17, Rs 11,440 cr. financial package announced to help RINL get back to full production capacity**

► **Steel plant's liabilities now exceed Rs 35,000 cr., workers have not got regular pay since Sept. 2024**

► **Plant now working at half of its 7.3 MTPA capacity; lack of captive iron ore mines for raw material puts RINL at a disadvantage**

► **RINL sitting on 18,000 acres of prime land in Vizag worth Rs 2 lakh crore**

**Vizag Steel's liabilities now exceed Rs 35,000 cr., and workers have not got regular pay since Sept. 2024. The plant is working at half its capacity of 7.3 MTPA**

rates. But the biggest factor has been non-availability/ high prices of raw material. RINL is the only steel plant without its own captive iron ore mines, forcing it to rely on costly raw material from the open market (market price for iron ore starts from Rs 6,000 a tonne; captive mines could provide it for less than half the rate).

Citing the financial challenges, the RINL management has paused all employee benefits and has been delaying salary payments by 20 to 30 days each month (the plant has a workforce of about 12,600 employees and 14,000 casual workers). The steel ministry assesses that the financial plan will allow RINL to retire a portion of its debt, allow restructuring of the rest and provide working capital to trigger the turnaround in a sustainable manner. VSP has been facing severe cash flow issues, to the extent that even accessing imported coking coal for its blast furnaces from warehouses at the Gangavaram and Visakhapatnam ports has been disrupted.

## The Politics

For Naidu, VSP's revival is about keeping a pre-poll promise the TDP had made in 2024. After becoming chief minister, he pursued it with Modi and also persuaded Kumaraswamy to visit the plant on July 11, 2024—the first by a steel minister after the 2021 disinvestment plan fiasco. VSP's future is an emotional issue for the Telugu people as it was borne out of the fire of a 1966 agitation—the clarion call was '*Visaka ukku, Andhrula hakku* (Vizag steel, Andhra people's right)'—and the martyrdom of a number of protesters. The campaign started when the Kothavalasa-Kirandul rail line with its 58 tunnels and 84 major bridges—built with financial aid, including railway communication equipment, from Japan—opened in 1966-67 to transport iron ore from the hinterland Bailadilla mines in Chhattisgarh to the Visakhapatnam port for export. The steel plant movement wanted the iron ore processed in Vizag instead of being exported abroad.

For the TDP, too, VSP is crucial. The party's first-time MP, Sribharat Mathukumilli, was elected from the Visakhapatnam constituency with the biggest margin in the state (504,247 votes), mostly riding on the promise that it would get the steel plant back on track. Palla Srinivasa Rao,

its MLA from Gajuwaka, where VSP is located, also won with a massive majority (67.3 per cent vote share) unseating then industries minister Gudivada Amarnath of the YSRCP (Yuvajana Sramika Rythu Congress Party). So when Sribharat says, "Decisive action is needed...a comprehensive revival package to safeguard the livelihood of the employees and ensure that RINL stays sustainable in the long term", it has to be read as more than just empty words.

**T**DP chief Naidu attributes the success in "breathing life into an ailing steel plant" to the "double engine" government. The current revival plan is to ensure that all three blast furnaces would reach over 92 per cent production levels by mid-2025. State government sources claim that six multinational companies, including Korean steel major POSCO, have expressed interest in investing in RINL, adding that some are keen to come onboard as "technology partners" for the modernisation of VSP.

Not everyone is convinced. "The steel ministry's move, though late, is a welcome step," says E.A.S. Sarma, former Union secretary, power and economic affairs, who steers the civil society group People's Commission on Public Sector and Public Services (PCPSPS). "The NDA government's move to privatise RINL in 2021 was counter-productive. They tried every trick in the book to weaken RINL and offer it on a silver platter to a private oligarch, but were finally forced to yield to public pressure to drop the proposal." RINL officials and the unions have long complained that while the plant has still not been allotted a captive iron ore mine (as the National Steel Policy dictates it should), competitors are now owners of several. In one case, 13 mines have been allocated to JSW Steel, nine in Karnataka and four in Odisha (since 2016), allowing it to capture some of Vizag Steel's customers.

There's also the issue of some 18,000 acres of prime land in RINL's possession, originally acquired from farmers

**TWICE AS NICE** PM Modi and Naidu at a programme in Visakhapatnam, Jan. 9



## Being a key partner in the NDA govt, Naidu was able to impress on the PM how crucial RINL's revival promise had been to TDP's Andhra poll campaign

on the understanding that it was for a company 'wholly owned by the government', as stipulated in the erstwhile Land Acquisition Act. "As such, it would have been illegal for any government to hand over that land to a private company, considering that its present market value would be around Rs 2 lakh crore," claims Sarma.

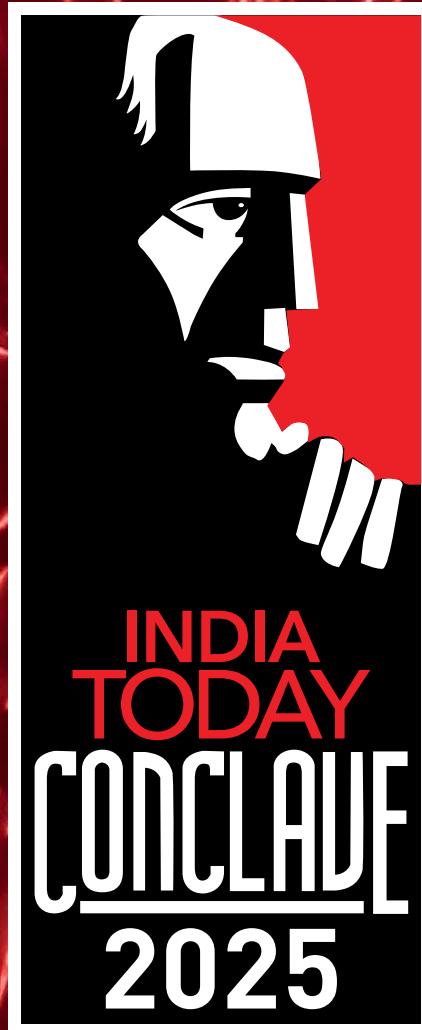
### The Package

Some industry analysts are even sceptical about the Rs 11,440 crore 'financial package'. If it is directed solely at debt repayment, VSP may face operational constraints, limiting its ability to generate the revenue needed to sustain long-term recovery. Conversely, investing the funds in production could yield profits to address the debt, but without resolving the fundamental issues—raw material costs, absence of captive mines, unequal treatment vis-a-vis private steel plants and capacity underutilisation.

Indeed, many are apprehensive that the 'package' is just a preparatory step to enhance its valuation before potential privatisation. RINL started as a

part of Steel Authority of India Ltd (SAIL), before it got incorporated as a separate entity. S. Viswanatha Raju, an independent director at SAIL, has emphasised that a merger with the steel major is the only solution, but the latter has refused, saying it is not an option as long as Vizag Steel is in the red. With the privatisation threat looming large, VSP workers have had a 24x7 relay protest going outside the plant's main entrance, even as they went in to work.

To secure RINL's future, there has been talk of monetising assets through the sale of a land parcel of 2,000 acres to the National Mineral Development Corporation. Meanwhile, down the road, RINL will soon have another competitor, Arcelor Mittal's Rs 1.7 lakh crore 14 MT steel plant, which is coming up in Anakapalle, an hour's drive away. Chief Minister Naidu has already guaranteed raw material for the new plant, to be transported via slurry pipelines from Nakkapalli down the coast in the first phase. As for Vizag Steel, a full-blown crisis has been averted but what the future holds is still uncertain. ■



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# THREAT OF THE FAKE ALPHONSO

**Imposters are sullying the fair name and reputation of the famed Alphonso mango grown in the Konkan, forcing its cultivators to stamp their product with a unique encrypted identity**

By DHAVAL S. KULKARNI

# IF

**the mango is the king of fruits, then the Alphonso has to be the king among kings.** This mango variety, which is said to have derived its name from the Portuguese general Afonso de Albuquerque, was grafted by Jesuit missionaries in the 16th century, travelled across the Konkan, and came to be called the 'Aphoos' in Goa and the 'Hapus' in Maharashtra.

That royal status now seems to be coming under threat from a posse of pretenders who are staking a claim to the crown that rightfully belongs to the variety grown on Maharashtra's Konkan coastline. As the running joke goes, the quantity of Alphonso sold in the market today is several times higher than what is grown on Maharashtra's Konkan coastline.

You may not fool the true connoisseur perhaps, who knows

his Alphonso by its thin skin, distinctive aroma, and thick, fibreless pulp. But not the aam mango-lover, who may not be able to tell a Hapus from the Alphonso wannabes from other states—Valsad in Gujarat, Dharwad in Karnataka, or even Malawi in Africa—and pay a greater price for a lesser mango.

Pramod Mankoji Valanj, a 60-year-old retired state government employee, has 362 mango trees on his three-acre orchard in Wada in Devgad taluka of Sindhudurg district. Mangoes grown elsewhere but misbranded as the Devgad variety or cheaply-priced fruits mixed with the premium Alphonso are affecting their price and reputation, he says. Buyers would rather buy the Alphonso imposters for Rs 600-700 than pay Rs 1,200-2,000 for the original item. "I have to convince consumers that my mangoes are authentic or sell cheaper to stay in the market," says Valanj. Which is why the Alphonso cultivators of the Konkan are now resorting to technology—from tamper-proof stickers to QR codes—to save their illustrious produce from mangoes masquerading as Alphonso.

## INSIDE ALPHONSO COUNTRY

In 2018, the Geographical Indication Registry bestowed GI status on the Alphonso. The move was significant, as Alphonso



**GOLDEN GOODNESS**  
Alphonso for sale at the Crawford Market in Mumbai

ANI



cultivation and tourism are what transformed Konkan's money-order economy, where the men worked in blue-collar jobs in and around Mumbai and sent money home. Alphonso is estimated to be grown on 1.26 lakh hectares in five districts of Maharashtra—Sindhudurg, Ratnagiri, Raigad, Thane and Palghar. Of this, 14,920 ha. is in Devgad, producing around 50,000 tonnes of Alphonso every year. The harvesting takes place in three stages—February-end to mid-March, mid-March to mid-April and mid-April to May.

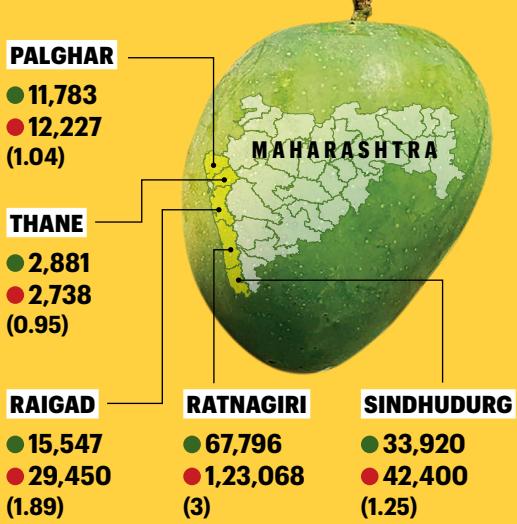
The Devgad cultivators are now clamouring for a separate GI registry. Says Ajit Gogate, former MLA and chairman of the Devgad Taluka Amba Utpadak Sahakari Sanstha Maryadit, "For years, mangoes from other parts have been sold as Devgad mangoes, but our mangoes have a distinct quality and taste." The hallmark Alphonso taste is a product of its geography, says journalist Sopan Joshi in his book *Mangifera Indica*, derived from the Konkan's rich iron-laden laterite soil.

Counterfeit Hapus are affecting the Devgad mango brand, says Omkar Sapre, board member and advisor to the Devgad mango growers association, and cultivators are suffering. "The younger generation is forced to migrate elsewhere and some local men are unable to get brides," he claims. The Devgad Taluka



## NO AAM MANGO

The five Maharashtra districts where the original Alphonso is cultivated



● Area in hectare ● Production in tonnes  
Average production per hectare in tonnes in ( )

## A POTTED HISTORY

- The Alphonso is said to have got its name from the Portuguese general Afonso de Albuquerque. Grafted by Jesuit missionaries in the 16th century, it soon travelled across the Konkan
- This mango variety has a thin skin, distinctive aroma, a small nose, and thick, fibreless pulp. Its unique taste comes from the area's mineral-rich red laterite soil
- Besides the Alphonso, 14 other varieties have been given the GI tag—Marathwada Kesar (Maharashtra), Mankurad (Goa), Banaganapalle (Telangana and Andhra Pradesh), Malda Laxman Bhog, Khirsapati and Fazli (West Bengal), Kuttiattoor (Kerala), Gir Kesar (Gujarat), Rewa Sunderja (MP), Kari Ishad and Appemidi (Karnataka), Banaras Langda, Rataul and Malihabadi Dussehri (UP)

## HORTICULTURE MANGOES



**"For years, mangoes from other parts have been sold as Devgad mangoes, but our mangoes have a different quality and taste"**

**AJIT GOGATE**

Chairman, Devgad Taluka Amba Utpadak Sahakari Sanstha Maryadit

Amba Utpadak Sahakari Sanstha Maryadit, along with the Director of Research, Balasaheb Sawant Konkan Krishi Vidyapeeth, Konkan Hapus Amba Utpadak Ani Utpadak Vikrete Sahakari Sanstha and Kelshi Parisar Amba Utpadak Sahakari Sangha Maryadit, was given registered proprietor status by the GI registry.

### THE DEVGAD MANOEUVRE

Faced with these challenges, Devgad cultivators have now taken some action. Starting this season, Devgad mangoes will come with a unique tamper-proof sticker with an embedded code. Using a dedicated WhatsApp number, customers will be able to verify if the mango is from Devgad, its cultivator, and the location of the mango orchard. The use of these stickers, says Gogate, will help consumers get authentic fruit, and ensure that orchard owners in Devgad get a good price. In the first year, the sanstha plans to cover 10 million mangoes meant for sale. Gradually, it wants to scale it up. Gogate says they were calling on mango farmers to register themselves with the sanstha for the stickers. So far, around 750 of the 5,000 Alphonso cultivators in Devgad have come on board.

Prashant Yadav, managing director of Sun Solutions, which developed the sticker, says the data in it is not only encrypted but also easy to read. Buyers have to tear off the sticker from the mango, which has nine open digits, and send a photograph to a dedicated WhatsApp number. They will then be prompted for the two hidden digits behind the sticker, after which they will be sent details about whether the product is genuine, the name of the farmer and the location of the orchard. These details will be seeded with the stickers in the database. Priced between Rs 1.5 and Rs 2, depending on the scale, these stickers will be single-use and pasted on each fruit. "We decided to paste single-use stickers based on patented technology on individual fruits instead of the box itself to prevent any tampering," explains Sapre.

Alphonso growers in other parts of the Konkan are also deliberating ways to protect the brand. "There is a genuine problem of adulteration when it comes to the Alphonso," says Dr Vivek Bhide, president, Konkan Hapus Amba Utpadak Ani Utpadak Vikrete Sahakari Sanstha, Ratnagiri. "The Alphonso has a certain value and charisma mangoes from other states

lack. This adulteration affects the brand value of the Konkan Alphonso and prevents farmers from getting a good price." Apart from mislabelling table fruits, he points out, less costly mangoes from other regions are also mixed with Alphonso pulp to make products that can be sold cheaper. This affects the mango pulp producers in the Konkan. Since last year, Bhide's society has urged farmers to use QR codes on fruits or boxes to enable consumers to identify the grower, location of the orchard and date of plucking. However, growers have been slow to adopt the technology due to the low turnaround time in harvesting and transporting the fruit to the markets.

### IRON-CLAD IDENTITY

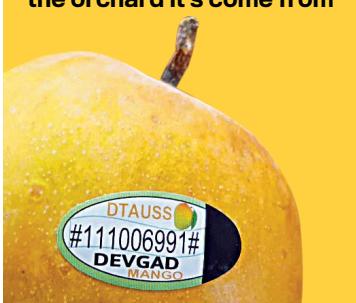
Alphonso cultivators are not too happy with the government either, blaming its laxity in implementing the GI regime for their current predicament. "The government has confined its role to issuing GI certification, doing little to enforce and implement the GI regime, promote GI products, upgrade them and crack down on violations," says Bhide. Mandar Desai of the Desai Bandhu Ambewale, Pune, thinks the same, and says enforcing the GI regime and checking and preventing violations and not promoting the use of stickers should be a priority. In fact, Desai, who is the fourth generation from his family in the business and has over 400 acres of mango plantations in Pavas in Ratnagiri, is against Devgad cultivators seeking a separate identity for their Alphonso, saying there is little difference in the mangoes grown in Devgad and Ratnagiri.

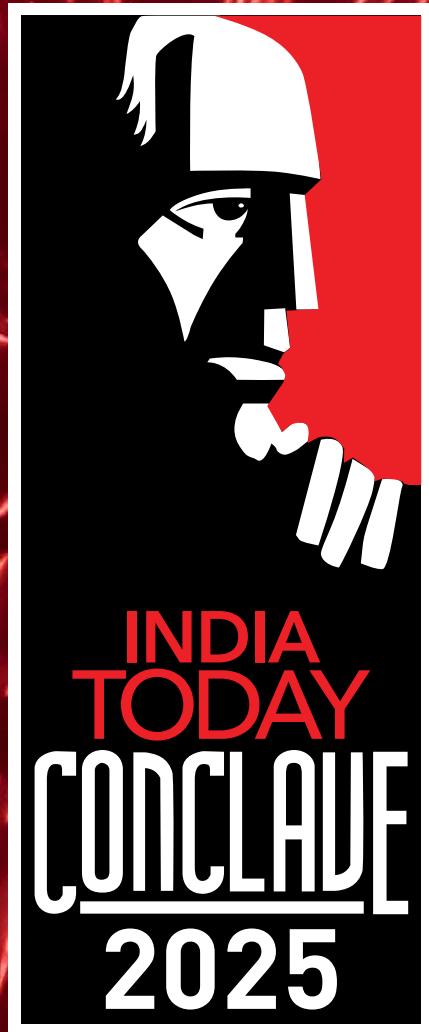
The overall sentiment in the community, however, is for enforcement of the GI norms. Doing so, says Mahesh M. Kulkarni, assistant professor in the department

of horticulture at the College of Agriculture in Dr Balasaheb Sawant Konkan Krishi Vidyapeeth, Dapoli, Ratnagiri, would work in favour of the consumers. "It is necessary to make consumers aware. They pay for the taste (of Alphonso) and hence must get authentic products," he stresses. Advocate Ganesh Hingmire, founder and chairman of the Great Mission Group Society and an Intellectual Property (IP) enthusiast, says such initiatives will fulfil the purpose of getting GI tags by weeding out duplicate products, and serve the interests of both farmers and consumers. A win-win situation for all. ■

### ID PROOF

- This season, Devgad mangoes will come with a tamper-proof sticker
- Buyers have to tear off the sticker, take a picture of the nine open digits and send it to a dedicated WhatsApp number
- They will be prompted for two hidden digits behind the sticker
- They will then be told if the mango is genuine, the name of the cultivator and the orchard it's come from





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# SHORTCUT TO A PERFECT BODY

As advanced technology allows safe, **quick and subtle non-surgical plastic surgeries**, millions are opting for such procedures for a discreet change in appearance. A word of caution, though: too much of a good thing can be bad

By Sonali Acharjee



# G

unjan Malhotra, a 42-year-old homemaker in Delhi, has found the trick to looking good for the numerous parties she has to attend with her husband, who runs a successful construction business. "It is impossible to maintain a diet and exercise routine to ensure you fit into size zero dresses, especially as you age and your metabolism plummets," she says. A few years ago, she discovered CoolSculpting, a non-invasive technology that uses ultrasound energy to target and remove stubborn body fat, particularly from the chest, stomach and thighs. The results improve over a few months, as the skin renews itself. And that is not all. Unlike her mother-in-law, who, Malhotra says, had to go off the grid for four-five days to recover from a fat-loss surgery, she can return to normal life in minutes. Helping her get her dream shape is Luxury Aesthetics, a non-surgical cosmetic procedure clinic in Panchsheel Park, Delhi.

In a silent revolution, minimally invasive plastic surgery, spurred by new technologies, is well on its way to making appearances more presentable for more people, in unbelievably quick time. And minus the risk of surgical errors, scarring, swelling or post-surgical complications thanks to minimal incisions, safe anaesthesia, 3D imaging, AI-guided surgery, a broader range of injectable fillers and AI-personalised consultations with 24/7 aftercare. Today, "one can get a nose job and return to work the next day with hardly anyone noticing it, as there is no swelling and it's done to look as natural as possible," says celebrity cosmetic surgeon Dr Parag Telang, who operates in Dubai and Mumbai. While a non-surgical surgery might sound like an oxymoron, it is the new reality. Patients can leave within hours of a procedure, looking just like they would if they had opted for a time-consuming open surgery.

"People want subtle, natural results. Not something that says it is a result of surgery," says Dr Rajat Gupta, a plastic surgeon and national secretary of the Indian Association of Aesthetic Plastic Surgeons (IAAPS). Lunchbreak botox treatments (which, astonishingly, take as little as 30 minutes), fillers (hyaluronic

acid-based injectables that help reduce wrinkles and restore volume to the face), combo treatments like mommy makeovers and hybrid facelifts are now much in fashion (see box, *The World of Plastic Fantastic*).

"I don't go for a botox during my lunch break alone," smiles Purnima Dutt (*name changed*), a 59-year-old design consultant from Pune. "But yes, it is so quick and painless. I sometimes stop on the way for a meeting, get it done and go ahead." She has also done permanent face threads (which lift saggy skin) and a high-definition liposuction (that reduces fat) on her buttocks. While she is hardly ashamed of it, the whole point of paying such a high price (her botox

alone costs Rs 30,000 a session) is to ensure a seamless transition designed to attract minimal attention. "I want to get work done but make it look like it is natural," she says.

The fact that more Indians than ever before are resorting to the latest trend in cosmetic surgery to improve appearances is borne out by the numbers—according to the International Society of Aesthetic Plastic Surgery (ISAPS) 2023 global survey, nearly half of



**“Most surgeries can be virtually pain-free today due to better anaesthesia and post-surgical care. Many clients prefer secrecy, and procedures today will ensure that”**

**DR PARAG TELANG,  
Celebrity cosmetic  
surgeon**



# THE WORLD OF PLASTIC FANTASTIC

From mommy makeovers to the ever-popular rhinoplasty, some emerging treatments in plastic surgery

## LUNCHTIME BOTOX

Advanced botox injectables where recovery time can be as little as one hour

**Cost:** Rs 7,000 to Rs 30,000

## HYALURONIC ACID FILLERS

Injectable gels to the face that restore volume and add body to the face

**Cost:** Rs 15,000 to Rs 30,000

## MOMMY MAKEOVERS

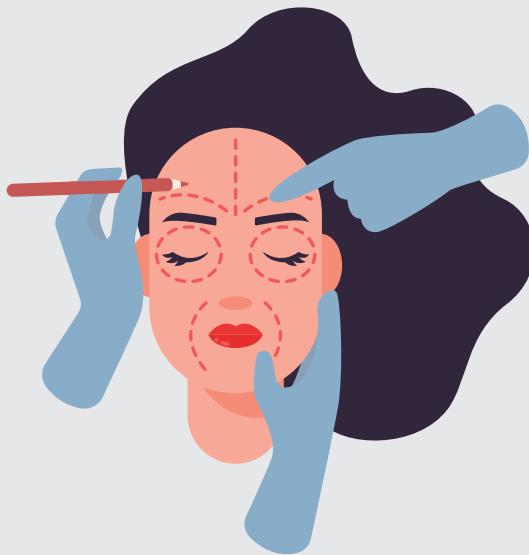
A set of minimally invasive procedures to restore a woman's body post giving birth. This can include breast, tummy, hip reshaping and facials

**Cost:** Starts at Rs 40,000

## HYBRID FACELIFTS

A combination of different facelifts done in one session alone

**Cost:** Starts at Rs 30,000



## HIGH-DEFINITION LIPOSUCTION

A surgical procedure that removes fat to enhance muscle definition and contours. It allows surgeons to create abs, toned thighs and biceps

**Cost:** Starts at Rs 2 lakh; six-pack abs start at Rs 4 lakh

## PERMANENT FACE THREADS

A non-surgical procedure that can lift and contour sagging skin on the face and neck. They are made from biocompatible materials like silicone or polylactic acid

**Cost:** Rs 10,000 to Rs 1.5 lakh, depending on area and severity

## MINIMALLY INVASIVE RHINOPLASTY

Uses minimal incisions to reshape the nose

**Cost:** Rs 25,000 to Rs 1 lakh

## LASER-GUIDED FACIALS

For subtle facial treatments, from easing wrinkles and fine lines to improving skin tone, texture, and tautness

**Cost:** Rs 20,000 to Rs 1.5 lakh

## AROUND A MILLION INDIANS ARE DIAGNOSED WITH BODY DYSMORPHIC DISORDER (BDD) ANNUALLY. THE RISK OF BDD PATIENTS GETTING ADDICTED TO PLASTIC SURGERY MAKES IT CRUCIAL FOR THE ENFORCEMENT OF AN ETHICAL CODE OF CONDUCT

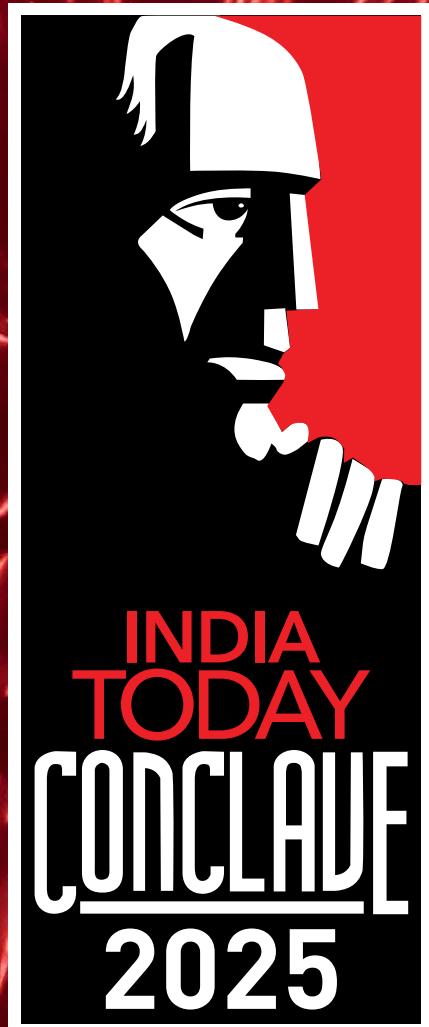
over a million aesthetic procedures in a year by plastic surgeons in India are non-surgical. According to business consulting firm Grand View Research, the Indian non-invasive aesthetic (to improve appearances, as opposed to reconstructive plastic surgery) treatment market generated revenue of Rs 16,400 crore in 2023 and is expected to touch more than Rs 56,000 crore by 2030. With nose jobs being the most popular out of all procedures, just the non-surgical rhinoplasty market in India is projected to touch Rs 277 crore by 2030.

Globally, the march of non-surgical procedures has quickened—ISAPS reported that they outnumbered surgical ones in 2020. “Most surgeries can be pain-free today due to better anaesthesia and post-surgical care. Many clients prefer secrecy, and procedures today will ensure that,” says Telang. According to the ISAPS survey, India ranks second and third in rhinoplasty and liposuction surgeries, respectively, and seventh in surgical and nonsurgical aesthetic procedures. It ranks second in nonsurgical facial rejuvenation procedures.

## THE MARCH OF NEW TECHNOLOGIES

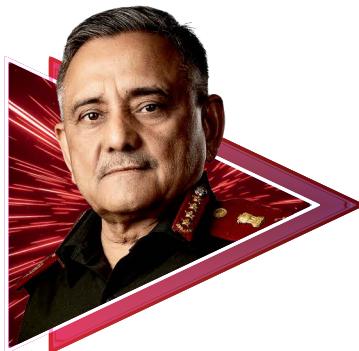
Today, top surgeons use equipment that can evaluate surrounding tissues in real-time at a resolution that can see particles as small as 7 microns (the size of a red blood cell). There are cameras that can also process real-time blood loss estimation. Cameras have haptic sensors, that measure the force needed by equipment, as well as a tracker that allows the lens to move automatically to where a surgeon looks. Some surgeons use robotic-assisted surgery that allows 95 per cent precision, VR simulations for pre-operative planning and 3D printers which can make bespoke scaffolds (a porous framework for the patient's own tissue to grow into) and implants.

“Tech has played a vital part in making aesthetic surgery safer and more acceptable to patients. High quality implants have given women the confidence to go ahead with procedures that were frowned upon previously. Technology such as VASER (a machine that uses ultrasound waves to remove fat) has made liposuction safe and we are creating natural six



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packs that mimic those made in a gym,” says Dr Amit Gupta, founder of Divine Cosmetic Surgery in Delhi’s GK2 locality.

Artificial intelligence has also had a transformative effect in personalisation and precision, say experts. “AI-driven skin tools can evaluate the condition of the skin, providing a magnified perspective that the naked eye can easily miss. 3D imaging technology creates a more realistic and detailed model, offering pre-operative planning and visualising desired outcomes,” says Dr Geeta Grewal, founder and CMD, 9 Muses Wellness Clinic.

The way a surgeon preps for a procedure today reflects all this. Instead of consulting books, hand-drawn figures, or the internet, they now consult incredibly precise real-life models of the body part that they are going to work upon. This is done for both non-surgical and minimally invasive procedures. “Virtual 3D surgery platforms are very helpful in planning jaw surgeries that can change the entire facial structure, like chin advancement or jaw reshaping. I often get a 3D model printed of a patient’s jaw and perform a mock surgery on it to get the angles and advancement measures,” explains Dr Sunil Choudhary, principal director & chief of plastic surgery, Max Super Speciality Hospital, Saket.

## THE NON-SURGICAL REVOLUTION

Two huge non-surgical technology boons have been endoscopic procedures and the use of radio frequencies. “Endoscopic facial plastic surgery has revolutionised face and forehead lift surgeries,” says Dr Choudhary. “The endoscopy magnifies and makes it possible to operate through scalp incisions. I perform endoscopic facial plastic surgery routinely with excellent results and patients love it as it is scarless.”

Similarly, ultrasonic energy—which uses ultrasound waves on tissues—has changed liposuction. “Ultrasonic liposuction emulsifies body fat like milky liquid which then can be sucked out smoothly through motorised liposuction cannulas. Together, the two technologies have made body contouring safer with less blood loss and more predictable due to better body shape and skin shrinkage,” adds Choudhary.

Another emerging non-surgical tool is microneedling, which involves repeated puncturing of the skin. It is used for improving skin texture, reducing scars and boosting collagen, the skin’s primary building block. “We use an eight-step procedure that stimulates three times more collagen production in a single session, and works on scars, texture, dark spots, acne and hyperpigmentation. It’s perfect for clients seeking smoother, healthier-looking skin,” says Gaurav Singh, owner of Luxury Aesthetics in Delhi.



**“AI-driven skin tools can evaluate skin condition, providing a magnified perspective missed by the eye. 3D imaging creates a more realistic model, offering pre-operative planning for desired outcomes”**

**DR GEETA GREWAL,  
Founder and CMD, 9  
Muses Wellness Clinic**



While these procedures certainly don’t come cheap, many consider them as a worthwhile investment. “The costs might be higher but operation costs will reduce in the long run,” says Dr Choudhary. The popular minimally invasive nose jobs can cost between Rs 25,000 and Rs 100,000; breast enlargements can go up to Rs 2 lakh; creating six packs can be up to Rs 4 lakh and permanent derma fillers for the face can set one back by Rs 30,000-70,000. “I had a client who set up a mutual fund so that the money would go towards her liposuction,” says Dr Prakhar Shrivastava, a fat-reduction specialist from Bengaluru.

## DANGER OF ADDICTION

What happens when the allure of looking good takes over your life? Indeed, people can get ‘addicted’ to plastic surgeries. This happens to individuals who suffer from body dysmorphic disorder (BDD), where they constantly worry about how they look. Social anxiety, low self-esteem and confidence and a perceived decrease in physical attractiveness are part of the condition. “If such a person has the means to go under the knife, they are at risk of making the wrong choice just to look good, even if it is medically unsafe,” says Dr Purnima Nagaraja, a psychiatrist from Hyderabad. Such people will often go shopping for surgeries. A Mumbai-based cosmetic surgeon says he is frequently visited by young women who often return a second time to say, “Can it be prettier, rounder or bigger? And I have to put my foot down and say no. To achieve that fine line between utter perfection and reality, they are willing to pay anything. However, what is perfection is not always medically wise,” he says.

The risk of BDD patients getting addicted to surgeries makes it crucial that an ethical code of conduct is observed. “We have to differentiate between addiction

to plastic surgery and the need for it. If someone repeatedly comes for Botox treatment, it’s not addiction because the effect wears off. But if someone keeps returning for breast shaping or liposuction, it’s an addiction. As a rule, if a person comes back a second time for something that is not clearly indicative, we refuse,” says Dr Gupta.

This need to balance the demand for sculpting human appearances with medical ethics—the ‘plastic’ in plastic surgery cleaves to its Greek root *plastikos*, meaning “to change the shape or form of”—is assuming increasing importance in a world fixated with body image. Both doctors and patients are empowered by new technology that enables surgeries to be quick, safe and precise, with little side-effects or even visible signs. But a line has to be drawn somewhere. ■



# Leadership Skills in Teachers

## Great Teachers are Great Leaders

Schools are dynamic systems that demand change and accountability simultaneously and at a breakneck speed. Schools need an empowered workforce with leaders at every level. Allowing teacher expertise to be acknowledged and become a component of the resources offered to all is an emerging skill for building leaders and for building leadership capacity at a time when it is desperately needed.

Teachers have various levels of school leadership qualities. Some are learned and some are part of their personality. Great teachers possess a combination of leadership qualities that are respected by the students, parents, peers and the community. They can accomplish important tasks because of this connection they have with their profession and the people they touch through it.

### Essential Leadership Qualities to become a Great Teacher

1. Possess the respect of colleagues and supervisors
2. Understand the culture of the school
3. Are trustworthy
4. Are open to the views and ideas of all, non-judgmentally
5. Are non-threatening
6. Respond positively and actively to colleagues seeking feedback, new ideas, and methods

challenges the students may have to learning and what approaches might work best with them individually. They engage their coworkers for input on how to structure their lesson plans and teaching style to be the best educator.

### (ii) Passionate about teaching and learning

As a leader, teachers are always practicing their art and learning how to improve their techniques. One student's question can drive an entire lesson plan from which all students will benefit.

### (iii) Collaboration with others

Teachers know that the best way to be successful is to work with others to create a quality teaching environment. They will look for those with similar passions and solicit support from people at all levels within the school system. They maintain the

respect from others for their high quality of teaching standards, and they give recognition to others for their approaches.

### (iv) Communication and rapport

Great teachers are great communicators. They know the best ways to interact with students, parents, faculty and coworkers. They are skilled at listening and respect the opinions and ideas of others. They look for different ways to communicate knowing that people are receptive to various techniques:

### (v) Embracing change

Throughout every teacher's career a number of changes will occur. A great teacher knows this and anticipates change. They are courageous about trying new things and aren't hesitant to make adjustments until they are as effective as they can be. Change gives teachers the opportunity to perform their roles even better. So rather than waiting until they are directed, they seek out ways to improve.

### Conclusion

A hallmark of leadership, therefore, is the ability to collaborate with others. They must be respected for their own instructional skills. They also must understand evidence and information and recognize the need to focus on those aspects of the school's program that will yield important gains in student learning. They display optimism and enthusiasm, confidence and decisiveness. Many attributes of good teacher leaders are persuasiveness, open-mindedness, flexibility, confidence, and expertise in their fields.

To assume a leadership role, they may need expertise in curriculum planning, assessment design, data analysis, and the like. They may also need to develop the abilities to listen actively, facilitate meetings, keep a group discussion on track, decide on a course of action, and monitor progress.



There is more in you  
than you think



# VASAL EDUCATION:

## Pioneering a New Era of Excellence in Schools Across Punjab

In the heart of Punjab, a quiet revolution in education is taking shape. Vasal Education, spearheaded by visionary Chairman Sanjeev Kumar Vasal, has been redefining schooling with a mix of global standards, innovative learning and social responsibility. With a growing network of schools across Punjab, the group has set new benchmarks in quality education - ensuring that world-class learning remains accessible, inclusive and future-ready.

For Mr. Vasal, education is not just a business; it's a commitment to nation-building. "A school with a good reputation is like a banyan tree - you build it over decades with responsibility, not just with financial investment", he says. His schools, including Cambridge International School, Dasuya; GEMS Cambridge International School, Hoshiarpur; Ivy World School, Jalandhar; Ivy World Play Schools in Jalandhar and Ludhiana and the soon-to-launch Ivy World School, Phagwara, have consistently been ranked among India's best.

But what truly sets them apart is their unwavering focus on student empowerment. In an unprecedented move for school-level education, Vasal Education has awarded over ₹1 crore in scholarships this year alone to 52 meritorious students. "Such initiatives are common at the university level, but we are bringing this culture into school education. Awards are the best motivators", Mr. Vasal explains. Additionally, students from defence families receive free education, with a complete waiver on admission fees - an initiative that reflects Vasal Education's commitment to giving back to society.



A shining example of this support system is Arjun Rajput, a former scholarship student who, after six years of free education at Vasal Education's schools, has now risen to become the Captain of the Punjab Under-16 Team. His success story embodies the transformative power of opportunity and mentorship, a philosophy that underpins every initiative at these schools.

But academic excellence alone is not enough. Vasal Education believes that a child's well-being is as crucial as their report card. In an industry-first move, the group has endeavoured to bring mental health experts into the classroom. Students and parents attend regular counselling sessions, while workshops on art therapy, social etiquette and stress management, equip them with lifelong coping skills. In an innovative twist, the schools have integrated farming into mental wellness - giving students access to small farms where they grow wheat, rice, sugarcane and vegetables, connecting them to nature while instilling in them values of patience and resilience.



**Mr. Sanjeev K Vasal**

Chairman  
Vasal Education



The commitment to holistic development extends to the faculty as well. Teachers are recruited on high merit, undergo regular training programmes and are even provided complimentary lunch - a small but powerful gesture reinforcing the value placed on educators. "Our teachers are the backbone of our schools. Investing in them is just as important as investing in infrastructure", says Mr. Vasal.

Innovation in education is another hallmark of Vasal Education. The schools are set to introduce 3D printing for students from Class 1, marking a bold step towards future-ready learning. This soon-to-be-launched initiative will give young learners hands-on experience with cutting-edge technology, fostering creativity and problem-solving skills from an early age.



### District toppers. Academic trailblazers.



**JAPLEEN KAUR**  
98%  
Grade 12



**SHRISHTI JAIN**  
99.4%  
Grade 10

Beyond technology, the group has also revolutionised music education, thanks to a collaboration with renowned musician Ehsaan Noorani. Their schools now boast fully-equipped music studios, where each student has access to an instrument. Ivy World Play School, Ludhiana is India's first to introduce baby pianos and keyboards for children as young as three. Music competitions organised by the school take students all the way to Mumbai, turning childhood passion into a potential career.

Education, in Mr. Vasal's vision, must transcend borders. That's why Vasal Education has established international collaborations, including a prestigious partnership with the Michigan Colleges Alliance, USA. This opens doors for students to earn transferable credits, paving the way for direct admission into top global universities - a game changer for those aspiring to study abroad.



Despite these leaps in academics, mental health, technology and global exposure, the core philosophy remains simple - "What more can we do for our students, teachers and society?"

Mr. Vasal keeps himself constantly engaged with students, believing that real innovation comes from understanding their needs firsthand.

Vasal Education is not just building schools - it is shaping futures. With



### Vasal Education – Shaping India's Future



Six Schools across Punjab – Providing top-tier education with global standards.



Teacher Excellence – Merit-based hiring, regular training & free lunch.



Support for Defence Families – Full admission fee waiver.



₹1 Cr+ in Scholarships – to 52 students this year.



Global Collaborations – Michigan Colleges Alliance partnership for credit transfers.



Mental Health Focus – Tie-up for counselling & therapy.

### Schools under Vasal Education



Cambridge International School, Dasuya



GEMS Cambridge International School, Hoshiarpur



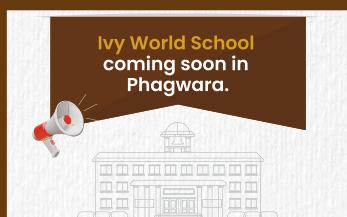
Ivy World School, Jalandhar



Ivy World Play School, Ludhiana



Ivy World Play School, Jalandhar



**Upcoming: Ivy World School, Phagwara**

# New Star Kids on **THE BLOCK**

**A fresh crop of newcomers is making their debut on the Hindi film landscape unaccompanied by the hype of star kids of yore**

By SUHANI SINGH

K

hushi Kapoor didn't have an apple-drops-on-the-head moment when she knew she'd be an actress. She, and those around her, just knew. She would dance and enact scenes as a child, proof that her joy lay in front of the camera. "Janhvi and I were both interested in our parents' work, watching films and being on sets. When your family is in the industry, you are naturally inclined to do the same," says the 24-year-old, the youngest child of Sridevi and producer Boney Kapoor. In *Loveyapa*, a romantic comedy that released on February 7, she is paired up with another star kid—Junaid Khan, Aamir Khan's first-born. Contrary to popular belief that all actor kids are buddies, Khushi and Junaid's paths hadn't crossed until they were offered the parts of a couple who exchange their mobiles and in the process discover inconvenient truths that test their relationship.



**“IT'S MY HEARTFELT WISH THAT IF THEY [ARYAN AND SUHANA] GET EVEN 50% OF THE LOVE THAT I HAVE GOT, IT WILL MEAN A LOT”**

**SHAH RUKH KHAN**  
while announcing son Aryan's directorial debut series at a Netflix event

MILIND SHELTE





**“THE WAY DAD AND I APPROACH WORK IS NOT THAT DIFFERENT. HE LOVES REHEARSALS, SO DO I. HE DISCUSSES SCENES A LOT, MORE THAN I DO. I AM MORE IN THE DOING SPACE”**

**JUNAID KHAN**  
Actor

.....

**“IT’S NOT LIKE JANHVI AND I ARE TRYING TO BE HER [SRIDEVI]. I WON’T BE ABLE TO MATCH UP TO HER. BUT WE BOTH ARE OUR OWN PEOPLE”**

**KHUSHI KAPOOR**, Actress

For Khushi, *Loveyapa* couldn't have come at a better time. Reeling from “negative feedback” for her turn as Betty in Zoya Akhtar's *Archies* (2023), a Netflix film that also marked the debuts of Agastya Nanda, grandson of Amitabh Bachchan, and Suhana Khan, daughter of Shah Rukh, young Khushi found a way to shift focus. “Instead of letting it affect me, I was like ‘OK, how do I change this perception and work harder to make an impact?’” After *Loveyapa*, she has another “new age, young adult romance” lined up in *Nadaaniyan*. Billed as the “innocence of first love”, the Netflix release marks the entry of Ibrahim Ali Khan, son of Saif Ali Khan and Amrita Singh.

It's raining newcomers in 2025. Not even two months into the year, and Bollywood has a fresh batch of youngsters hoping to make it big. Besides Junaid and Khushi, there is Rasha, Raveena Tandon and Anil Thadani's 19-year-old daughter, and Ajay Devgn's nephew, Aaman, who debuted in *Azaad*. And if Veer Pahariya, grandson of former Maharashtra chief minister Sushilkumar Shinde, was launched in aerial action drama *Sky Force*, Shanaya Kapoor, daughter of Sanjay Kapoor and fabulous wife Maheep; Ahaan Panday, cousin of Ananya; and Simar Bhatia, niece of Akshay Kumar, are awaiting releases or working on their maiden projects.

## No Easy Start

Gone are the glory days when newcomers were launched with fanfare. Think Hrithik Roshan in *Kaho Naa... Pyaar Hai* (2000) or Deepika Padukone in *Om Shanti Om* (2007). It's hard to see actors make a good first impression as Ranveer Singh did fabulously in *Band Baaja Baaraat* (2010) or Anushka Sharma in *Rab Ne Bana Di Jodi* (2008). The young brigade is having to fight harder to win audience's hearts. In fact, the last feature with a debutant to make a decent dent at the box office was Tiger Shroff in *Heropanti* (2014) and *Kedarnath* (2018) featuring Sara Ali Khan.

Bhavana Somaya, author, critic and former editor of *Screen* magazine, has seen the change from the time of grand launches when the industry would come together to rally behind a star kid to the dull affairs that debuts have now become. "Raj Kapoor, Sunil Dutt, Dharmendra and Rajendra Kumar would launch their kids with much *shaan*. They put their own money and ensured their son looked like a star in the first film itself," she recalls, citing films like *Bobby* (1973), *Rocky* (1981), *Love Story* (1981) and *Betaab* (1983), which introduced Hindi cinema to Rishi Kapoor, Sanjay Dutt, Kumar Gaurav and Sunny Deol. "Now, people's attitude is, let us be as low-profile as possible so that there are no expectations. Nobody wants to carry the blame and baggage if a launch doesn't work. The showmanship and self-confidence are gone." Instead of family-run banners, new talent is now being entrusted to noteworthy directors for mentorship and presenting them on a platform that best showcases their attributes.

Trust SRK to buck the trend then. At a recent Netflix event in Mumbai, the Badshah went all-out to announce the web series *The Ba\*\*\*ds of Bollywood*, the directorial debut of his eldest, Aryan. Produced by his

### Ibrahim Ali Khan

Much like Varun Dhawan and Sidharth Malhotra before him, Saif Ali Khan and Amrita Singh's son Ibrahim assisted director Karan Johar and went on to earn his big Bollywood break. In his OTT debut *Nadaaniyan*, he plays a pretend boyfriend to a rich girl (Khushi Kapoor)



### Aaman Devgan

*He didn't have a smashing big screen debut like his uncle Ajay Devgn did—remember the split on two bikes in Phool aur Kaante—but he will hope to be second-time lucky*



**“FILMS ARE IN THEIR BLOOD, THEIR GENES, AND THEIR PASSION. WE MAKE WAY FOR A NEW WAVE OF TALENT, ONE I CANNOT WAIT FOR THE WORLD TO SEE”**

**KARAN JOHAR**, Director

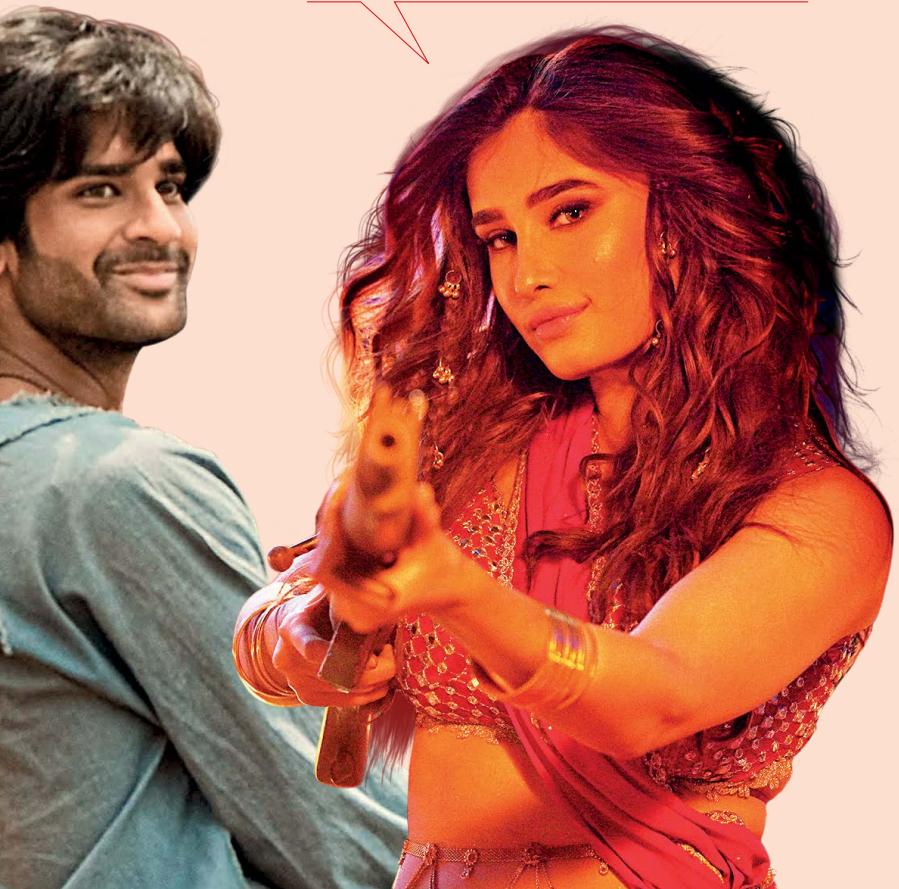
banner Red Chillies Entertainment, Khan featured in a special promotional video where the actor is shown growing irate as a director [read Aryan] asks him to give multiple takes, until he lambasts him, "*Tere baap ka raaj hai kya* [Is it your dad's kingdom?]" SRK said his only request to the world was that both his kids—Aryan and Suhana—be given "50 per cent of the love" he has received. The series, he added, showed that his son had inherited his humorous streak. *"Ab tu jaa aur apne*

*baap ka naam roshan kar* [Go and do your father proud]," SRK said as he passed the baton of cracking jokes to his son.

For Junaid, the journey to acting was a tad different from other kids with cinema in their DNA. As a child, he didn't grow up on Hindi films but preferred *Lion King* (1994) and *Mary Poppins* (1964) instead. It's only in college—HR College of Commerce and Economics—that films became a part of his life. "Nobody wanted to go to

## Rasha Thadani

All of 19, Rasha, daughter of Raveena Tandon, has already made heads turn with her dancing skills in 'Uyi Amma', a song that has amassed 97 million views on YouTube and counting, and scored a deal with Nykaa



class and we were bored so we literally watched whatever was playing," recalls Junaid. It would stoke a desire to study acting which he did for two years at the American Academy of Dramatic Arts in New York followed by a year with its repertory company. Starting out on stage in 2017, which he continues to do to date, Junaid assisted Rajkumar Hirani on *PK* (2014) and then auditioned for *Laal Singh Chadha* (2022). He didn't land the part, and it eventually went to his father. He'd bag the lead role in YRF's *Maharaj* (2024) and then waited for its release as Covid-19 played spoilsport.

### Dancing with the Star Kids

Wariness towards star kids is not deterring the likes of Karan Johar who took to Instagram to announce that his banner, Dharma, is geared up

for a "new chapter" as it gives a break to eight actors in 2025, among them, Saif's son Ibrahim, who assisted Johar on his last, *Rocky aur Rani Kii Prem Kahaani* (2023). "Films are in their blood, their genes, and their passion," said Johar of Saif, Amrita Singh and Sara. "We make way for a new wave of talent, one I cannot wait for the world to see." The roster of rookies also includes Shanaya, who joins friends Ananya and Suhana for a career in showbusiness. Johar is conscious of the public image he has of being an enabler of "nepo babies", an unflattering term used to categorise newcomers who have a leg-up because they come from film families. "Some journeys are perceived as privileged, some are also given the tag of lineage benefit... and all of that is true," he wrote on Instagram, "but, in you, Shanaya I have only seen a girl who dreamt of nothing but being a pure artist and facing the

camera only when you had put in immense hard work and passion."

At the Netflix event, Ibrahim danced and didn't utter a word, choosing instead to pose for the shutterbugs, who called him "Iggy" with a sense of familiarity. The challenge for Bollywood's neophytes is combating overexposure. Social media has both robbed them of mystique and curiosity among audiences. The paparazzi culture means that most of them are being tracked outside their homes, en route to the gym or the airport. "Stars were not accessible once upon a time. That star power is not there," adds Somaya. "You are seeing them on Insta every day and there's so much pressure on appearance."

**A**s a result, the more-is-less approach is backfiring on some. Pahariya, for instance, found himself at the receiving end of much ire for his incessant appearances and privileged background after his film's release. So relentless was the troll army that the actor asked a news channel if he should kill himself and be reborn in another family. "All I can do is work with pure dedication so that everyone thinks I deserve to be in this industry," he said.

The new batch of actors may have their entry sorted, but handling the criticism, pressure and expectations that comes with carrying their illustrious surnames is anything but easy. "Pressure will always be there," says Khushi. "It's not like Janhvi and I are trying to reach her [Sridevi's] level, be her and emulate her. I won't be able to match up to that. We both are our own people and we should continue on our own paths."

Junaid doesn't let the burden of legacy faze him. "I never felt it. I don't think I need to because Papa is very much around and still doing lots of work. In fact, he will have a film come out soon after mine," he says. Their parents may have owned Bollywood at one point, but to inherit it, they'll need much more than a famous surname. ■



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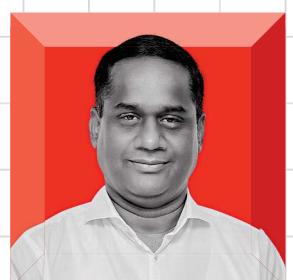
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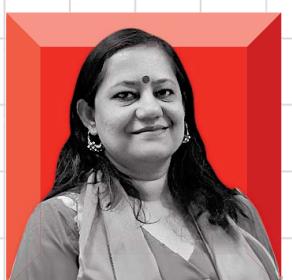
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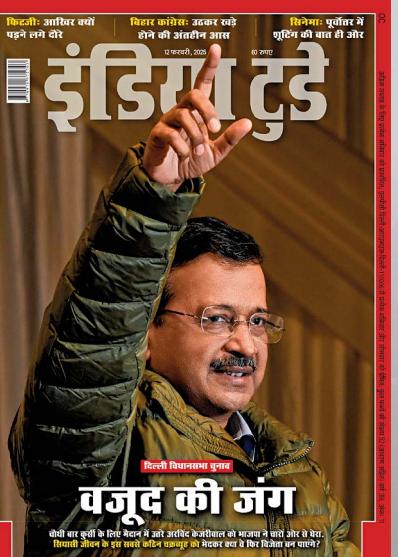
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# सबसे भरोसेमंद स्रोतों से, सबसे सटीक जानकारी

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RODRIGUES  
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MEANWHILE  
ELSEWHERE  
has a 10-day  
run next from March  
15 at the Natrani  
amphitheatre in  
Ahmedabad



[ THEATRE ]

## Holding the Mirror Up

**Mallika Sarabhai**  
celebrates Darpana's  
75th year with  
*Meanwhile Elsewhere*, a  
new production inspired  
by an Italo Calvino novel

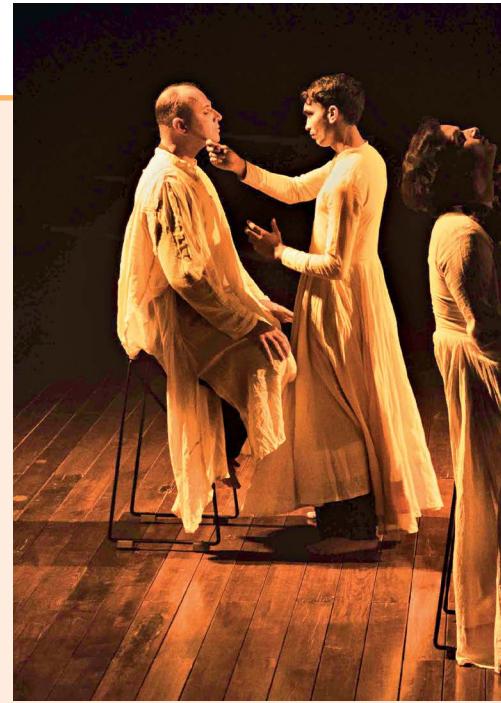
# M

**Mallika Sarabhai knows resilience is an art form in itself.** The actor, Bharatanatyam dancer and choreographer has made a living out of challenging the status quo and touching on socially relevant issues through her work for the Darpana Academy of Performing Arts, the institute founded by her parents, Vikram and Mrinalini Sarabhai. The Ahmedabad-based institute is celebrating its 75th year, and Sarabhai finds herself more driven than ever before. “I think all of us feel that the performing arts are perhaps the most persuasive language of getting through the walls of prejudice around us,” Sarabhai said in New Delhi where she was presenting *Macbeth* at the Bharat Rang Mahotsav. “In the kind of fractured world we live in, it is important to somehow reach people’s hearts and [find the] goodness in them.”

It’s both a blessing and a bane that Sarabhai doesn’t know any

other way. Her progressive bent and commitment to speak her mind has seen shows being cancelled, committed sponsorships fall through and funds and donations run dry. “I spend 85 per cent of my time on raising funds in an increasingly hostile space,” she says. “Thankfully, there are benevolent people coming to our aid.” One of them happens to be Italy’s Nexion Surfaces which backed *Macbeth* (2023), a production that uses puppetry, projections and live music to look at the relevance of the Bard in today’s time, and *Meanwhile Elsewhere* (2025), based on *Invisible Cities* by Italo Calvino. Yadavan Chandran, who has been Darpana’s artistic director and plays Macbeth, says, “The core idea is to bring some meaningful change in people’s lives and start a conversation. The need to question and argue comes through in everything we do.”

That ethos is what Sarabhai grew up with. She believed that much like her accomplished mother Mrinalini, every artist would use their form “to talk about issues which bothered them and what needs to changed”. That wasn’t the case. After making her professional



**Meanwhile Elsewhere is less an adaptation and more a metaphor “for our own cities”, featuring characters like Kublai Khan and Marco Polo**



## BOOKS

# Carnatic Confidence

**A**s an art form with a limited constituency of listeners and practitioners, the celebrated December season in Chennai is much awaited by Carnatic music aficionados. Giving in to the pleasure of listening and of a shared identification as a community, the concerts have commanded respect for creativity and rigour but also invited criticism for their social exclusiveness. Practitioners have, from time to time, come

forward to share their views on the social biases inherent to the way the art form evolved over the past 80 years, some making peace with it and others critiquing it for perpetuating age-old caste and gender prejudices. In putting forward this criticism, musicians have adopted different strategies. For Sanjay Subrahmanyam, the choice was to both sing in Tamil and sing compositions of 19th-century composers like Ramalingam Swami as

**DREAMLIKE** A still from *Meanwhile Elsewhere*



PUNIYA

debut in 1977 and dealing with comparisons with her mother, it didn't take her long to realise that she wanted to use the Pandanallur style of Bharatanatyam to do something that hadn't been attempted. Says Sarabhai, "Bharatanatyam, for me, is an extremely liberating form. I don't think of tradition as something to be locked in a museum. I had internalised the grammar so that I could do anything with it."

Her recent solo piece, *Past Forward*, is an example of that outlook.

It was working and touring with the renowned stage director Peter Brook for the acclaimed play, *The Mahabharata*, that became a major source of motivation for Sarabhai to go beyond dance. Mallika's decision to take Darpana from being a classical dance training and performing institute to something bigger—using multimedia and technology and light design to create dramas that are visual spectacles and producing and hosting TV shows—had the backing of her mother. It has resulted in TV shows like *Srishti: The Environment Quiz and Talk Positive*, a chat show which created awareness about HIV, and proscenium works like *Sita's Daughter* and *Kadak Badshahi*, a large production featuring a hundred actors that celebrated Ahmedabad's rich and diverse cultural heritage, becoming some of Darpana's popular works.

Sarabhai's hope is that *Meanwhile Elsewhere* will also resonate with a wider audience, like *Kadak Badshahi*. Inspired by one of Sarabhai's favourite books, *Invisible Cities*, it's less an adaptation and more a

metaphor "for our own cities" featuring characters like Kublai Khan and Marco Polo. "It typifies Darpana's ethos and spirit in different ways but in the here and how," she says. "It has a dreamlike quality, and takes you into the recesses of the mind and heart." Much like other works, it was envisioned in Natrani, one of the most striking performance spaces in India. For both Sarabhai and Yadavan, the venue symbolises their "commitment" to the city despite it being a "difficult beast" to operate in. After re-opening in 2018, Natrani has been evolving and now includes a gallery space, besides hosting 42 performances a year.

Sarabhai has lots to look forward to in 2025. There's *Meanwhile Elsewhere*, which has a 10-day run from March 15 at Natrani, touring with other works, and digging through the archives to compile an e-scrap book to document Darpana's journey. "It's hilarious to see what kind of things happened in each year," she says. But even as she revisits the past, Sarabhai knows the show must go on in the present and the future. ■

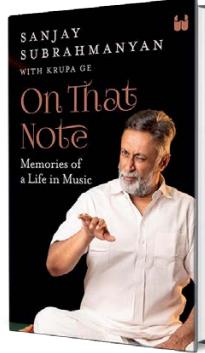
**-Suhani Singh**

## tial ► CELEBRATED CARNATIC VOCALIST SANJAY SUBRAHMANYAN RECOUNTS HIS EXTRAORDINARY JOURNEY IN THIS CANDID MEMOIR

well as to experiment with popular music. The choice was neither easy nor inevitable—in fact, his memoir, *On That Note* offers us a candid view of how he evolved as a young singer, eager to absorb as many influences as possible but remaining true to his idealised understanding of *sampradaya sangeetam*, how he matured into a seasoned artiste ready to go digital and how he finally broke the barrier to start singing for the movies.

Sanjay's story, however, is different in that

it offers us an intensely personal rumination of his aspirations, his musical orientation and choices. What makes the memoir special is its candour and freshness. There is an innocence about self-expression, about the privileges of location that he enjoyed and about the time he took to make up his mind about singing in a different idiom. There is nothing staged about his choices, it is almost as if he stumbled upon them as he emerged as a celebrated singer, a young



**ON THAT NOTE**  
Memories of a Life  
in Music  
by Sanjay Subrahmanyam  
with Krupa Ge  
WESTLAND  
₹599; 176 pages

Kalanidhi awardee and then subsequently honed them carefully with practice and collaboration. The image of the boy-next-door never disappears, adding to the charm of the book. Equally poignant is the frankness with which he speaks about voice problems and how he went about addressing them.

*On That Note* is really about a talented boy who found himself in an extraordinary musical milieu, was unabashed in his enthusiasm for singing and who found his calling in popularising certain genres. It makes for very attractive reading and also demystifies the singer that fans know and adore. ■

**-Lakshmi Subramanian**

# LESSONS IN HISTORY

**THE SACRED AMRITSAR**, A FESTIVAL OF ARTS BEING HELD FROM FEB. 21-23, RETURNS WITH HERITAGE WALKS, MUSICAL PERFORMANCES AND STORYTELLING SESSIONS

T

The city of Amritsar is once again going to echo with the celebrations of mystic poets and their timeless verses. The third edition of 'The Sacred Amritsar', produced by Teamwork Arts, is back with an incredible line-up of artists, musicians and storytellers. From engaging literary sessions to musical performances and heritage walks, the festival promises to be an immersive space where audiences can connect with mystic traditions, storytelling and artistic heritage.

Sanjoy K. Roy, managing director, Teamwork Arts, says that 'The Sacred Amritsar' was envisioned as a festival that celebrates the intersection of music, poetry, history and spirituality. "Amritsar's historical landmarks, vibrant bazaars, and deep-rooted traditions

create a unique atmosphere that enhances the festival's themes," he adds.

The opening night will feature a performance in honour of the late legendary qawwali singer and songwriter Ustad Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan by the Rehmat-e-Nusrat group. The stellar line-up includes Kabir Cafe, whose fusion of neo-folk and mystic poetry continues to captivate audiences; classical vocalist Kalapini Komkali who will pay a homage to her father, Pandit Kumar Gandharva; Padma Shri recipient Anwar Khan Manganiyar, whose evocative Rajasthani folk renditions promise to be mesmerising; the Hazrat Amir Khusrau Project by Abhijit Pohankar, celebrating the timeless legacy of Sufi poetry; and Dastan-e-Akhtari, where Padma Shri recipient Malini Awasthi and Yatindra Mishra will bring Begum Akhtar's life and music to the stage. The highlights on the literary front include a

**The opening night will feature a performance in honour of the late legendary qawwali singer Ustad Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan by the Rehmat-e-Nusrat group**

conversation between Navtej Sarna and Navdeep Suri, and oral historian Aanchal Malhotra's in conversation with Roy.

Pohankar, who is performing in Amritsar for the first time, says that the people and music of Punjab have always fascinated him, just as they did his father, the legendary vocalist Pandit Ajay



## STELLAR LINE-UP

From left, Abhijit Pohankar, Malini Awasthi and Kalapini Komkali

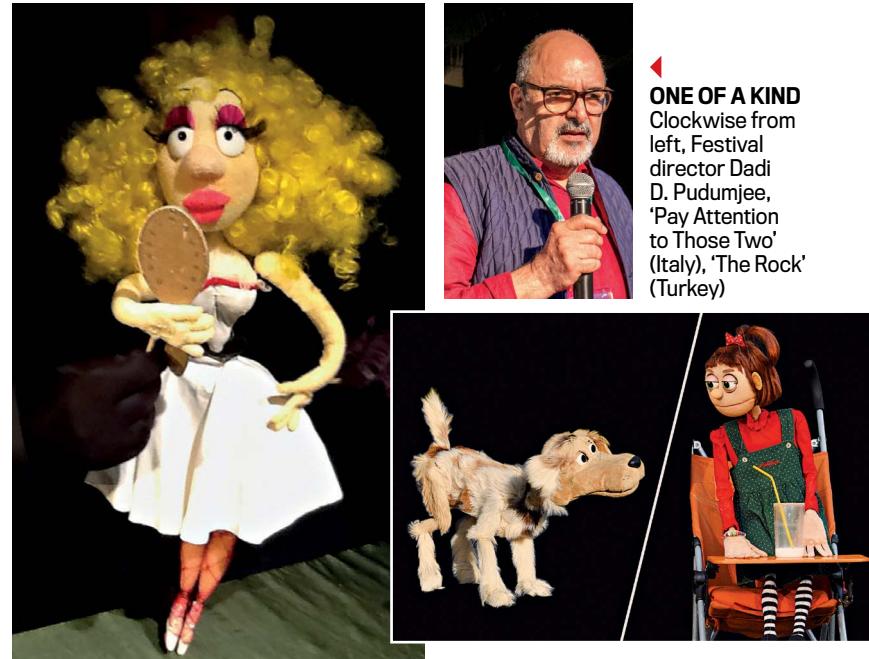
Pohankar. Through his Hazrat Amir Khusrau Project, he will present some rare and ancient classical compositions and also some folk melodies. "My instrumental classical solo on the keyboard would also be one of the highlights," he adds.

Komkali, who is also performing at the festival for the first time, shares that it is a special feeling to perform a tribute to her father and guru. "Pandit Kumar Gandharva was a musician par excellence and along with several classical ragas and their compositions, he sang wonderful poetry of many saint poets, including a few of Nanak Sahib. I will try to perform some of them for this occasion," she says.

Participants will also have the opportunity to visit the Jallianwala Bagh, the Partition Museum and the Golden Temple to engage with history in a meaningful way. "These experiences connect past and present, making the festival not just a celebration but also a journey through history and cultural continuity," Roy signs off. ■

**-Deepali Dhingra**

RAHUL DEO



## ONE OF A KIND

Clockwise from left, Festival director Dadi D. Pudumjee, 'Pay Attention to Those Two' (Italy), 'The Rock' (Turkey)

## ART

# Puppet Play

The Ishara International Puppet Theatre Festival 2025 features a rich variety of acts from around the world

**T**he 21st edition of the Ishara International Puppet Theatre Festival will return to the capital's India Habitat Centre from February 21 to March 2. Audiences can experience everything from traditional hand puppets and intricate marionettes to cutting-edge digital and mesmerising shadow puppetry, all woven into compelling story-telling by puppeteers from across the globe.

"The only puppet festival in India of its kind, Ishara has brought unique modern and traditional puppet theatres from the Americas, the European continent, Africa, the Middle East, Russia, Southeast Asia and many more. The

unique family festival brings together young and old, to laugh, cry and look at the world through the lens of the other," says Dadi D. Pudumjee, festival director and founder of the Ishara Puppet Theatre Trust.

This year's line-up promises to push artistic boundaries and offer something unique. 'Theatre in the Pocket' (Russia) is an interactive street theatre experience, featuring vibrant puppets, lively music and unforgettable vignettes. "It is a fun, kind and

heartwarming show for all ages. Every puppet is made by our hands, and we put our souls and the idea of how street puppet theatre should be," says Dmitrii Orlov (Magic Hat), its performer. 'Life (Vida)' (Spain) is an intimate performance conveying that

one should always move forward in life. "It is an essential vision of existence performed with two hands, humour and love," explains its director Javier Aranda.

This year's edition features three shows from Italy: 'Pay Attention to Those Two' is a hilarious musical show featuring the mischievous duo, Giulio and Fabiola; 'Io, Pulcinella' is a celebration of four centuries of Neapolitan culture featuring Italy's beloved puppet, Pulcinella; and 'Jukebox' is a high-energy musical show, featuring surreal characters, puppetry and audience interaction.

From India, there is 'Monkey & the Crocodile', an adaptation of the timeless Indian folktale, brought to life by Puppet Studio India and directed by Manish Ram Sachdeva. Other highlights include 'Volar Volar (To Fly)' (Mexico), which follows the puppet Greta on a thought-provoking journey. 'The Rock' (Turkey) is a modern twist on an inspirational tale, showcasing how a simple solution can overcome a seemingly insurmountable problem. 'Sea of Possibilities' (Poland) is a mesmerising non-verbal musical performance inspired by Kobi Yamada's picture book *Maybe*. All in all, there's lots to look forward to. ■

**- Neha Kirpal**



## PHOTOGRAPHY

# THE MYSTIC GAZE

Photographer **Bandeep Singh's** exhibition *Bhasmang* in Delhi delves deep into the lives of the Naga sadhus



**F**

"For a lot of people, Naga sadhus are a spectacle and nothing more," rues photographer Bandeep Singh whose exhibition *Bhasmang: The Way of the Naga Sadhus* opens at Delhi's Travancore House on February 24, and

can be viewed till March 2.

With millions having visited the Mahakumbh this year, and the prolific imagery of the Naga sadhus that we've already been inundated by, one would imagine yet another collection of pictures may fail to impress. But we'd be wrong; Singh's photographs exhibit not only his incredible mastery over light but also the access he has attained into the *akhadas*. After his first

tryst with the Kumbh in 2013, and having made personal connections over the years with visits to their ashrams and deras, especially in Haridwar, Singh was even invited to set up a studio of sorts inside the Juna Akhada in 2019! "They eventually registered my presence as a person who's not out there to seek the image and scoot away. That I had the curiosity, to listen to them, to open up to them and



▲ **GREEN ELEGANCE** Method gallery in Delhi's Defence Colony

## GALLERY

## Fresh Method, Fresh Space

After Mumbai, **Method** opens its third gallery in Delhi, expanding its mission to showcase emerging artists while embracing sustainable design innovations



## ASH AND ASCETIC

Some of the photographs to be displayed at *Bhasmang*, from February 24 to March 2

also observe them," he says.

After the 10 days of shooting inside the Juna Akhada, he went back this year to do different shots in many different camps. He explains the difference:

"When you're doing stylised portraits in a studio-like set-up, those are more lab-like pictures looking into their core character. But when you're shooting in their living spaces, the images are more atmospheric." The result is a series of images that give you goosebumps with their intensity, each one a layered narrative that takes you into the spiritual world of the Naga sadhu through his eyes, his dreadlocks, his physicality.

This is just the beginning of the journey for Singh. "I intend to spend more time with them in the coming months and I hope that the universe will take me a little deeper into this quest," says the seeker who later hopes to put down all his experiences with the Naga sadhus in a book, which will add context to his growing collection of intensely compelling photographs. ■

-Priya Pathiyani

**I**t's been six years and two outposts in Mumbai since Method opened its first gallery in Kala Ghoda. On January 31, it threw open the doors to its third, this time in Delhi's Defence Colony. "When we saw the space, we loved it and felt we could do a lot that aligns with and furthers the Method vision," says founder Sahil Arora.

Even if serendipitously, Method's expansion to Delhi marks a step in the direction of building a more robust artistic ecosystem. "Our focus in Delhi, like in Mumbai, will be to create space for and present

fresh, new, young, emerging voices. We will also be expanding our programming beyond the visual arts to include music and performance," says Arora.

The gallery is more than just a creative showcase—it aims to bring mindfulness through design and architectural interventions that improve build quality. In collaboration with Reformary, a design lab dedicated to sustainability, Method has reimagined the art gallery experience to

incorporate Reformary's bio-plasters and bio-cretes (a low-carbon concrete-like material made from natural fibres and hydrated lime that regulates humidity and

temperature), which even enhance indoor air quality. "We've also designed the space with an alternate cold cathode lighting system that allows us to switch the

ambience for events that are not related to a traditional gallery viewing experience," points out Arora.

The gallery has opened

The gallery's  
inaugural show,  
*Fresh Produce*  
2025, on till March  
16, displays a  
diverse range  
of works

with *Fresh Produce 2025*, which features a host of artists chosen from an open call. The exhibition, on till March 16, displays a diverse range of works, including paintings, sculptures, installations, audio-visual pieces and creations that go beyond conventional categorisation.

The gallery staff is dressed casually, by design, to let people know it's a space where one can let their hair down. At Method, art is more approachable, less intimidating and always something new. ■

-Arshia

# REALITY CHECK

**Sujit Saraf's new novel, *Island*, chronicles a dystopian attempt to evangelise the inhabitants of North Sentinel Island**



**So much of what goes on in the Andaman & Nicobar Islands** feels novelistic that it shouldn't be surprising when a novel set there leans particularly heavily on actual events and characters.

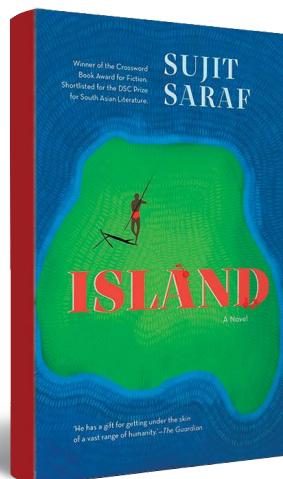
In *Island* we have Steven Li, an American adventurer-missionary who for years has been preparing to go to North Sentinel Island to make Christians of one of the last isolated populations in the world. In Port Blair he recruits Nirmal Chandra Mattoo, a 'fallen' anthropologist.

Mattoo, whose point of view we follow for most of the novel, is inspired by Verrier Elwin and was once a rising star. He is an expert on the Jarawa and the Sentinelese, both classified in island officialese as a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG). He used to be much in demand on the 'contact missions' carried out by the Anthropological Survey of India, but was cancelled after he took the contact part too far on a mission to North Sentinel. The novel finds him reduced to running a shop selling counterfeit tribal artifacts to tourists. That is, until the arrival of Li gives him another chance to visit the island.

It is clear that a lot of research has gone into the writing of *Island*. Particularly brave are the sections that use what is known of other tribes



**The book inhabits questions like how a state is to deal with people who do not recognise its control**



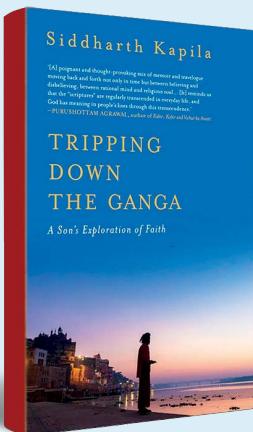
**ISLAND: A Novel**  
By Sujit Saraf  
SPEAKING TIGER  
₹499; 256 pages

to imagine life on North Sentinel. The book provides a good deal of history as background and travels over much more of the Andamans than most fiction set there. But those who know the islands well might pause at some of the details or find missing the distinctive texture of life there. The novel's characters don't run particularly deep; their actions at times feel too conveniently motivated, and their dialogue occasionally seems intended to educate the reader. *Island* does succeed in being a quick, informative and engaging read.

At the heart of *Island* are questions about why civilisations feel the need to impose themselves on others, about how a state is to deal with people who do not—cannot—recognise its control over them. Administrators in the islands since British times have tried various strategies, with the result that entire populations have been driven to extinction or to a dependent existence. The hostility of the Sentinelese to outsiders and their being isolated have protected them until now.

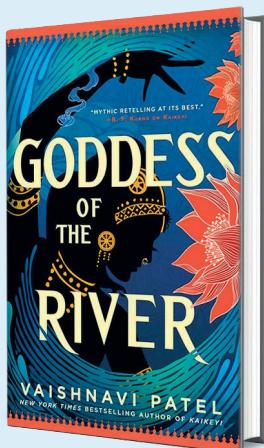
Even accepting that the treatment of various PVTGs in the islands has often been ignorant, thoughtless or self-serving, the fate of the Sentinelese at the end of *Island* is a particularly cynical one. It also feels contrived by the need for a spectacular conclusion. A similar situation came about in reality a few years ago, and we know it ended without catastrophe. In that light, maybe the novel can be read as a warning about what could happen when the worst impulses of the state take over. ■

—Srinath Perur



**TRIPPING DOWN THE GANGA**  
A Son's Exploration of Faith  
by **Siddharth Kapila**  
SPEAKING TIGER  
₹799; 440 pages

**GODDESS OF THE RIVER**  
by **Vaishnavi Patel**  
ORBIT/  
HACHETTE INDIA  
₹599; 448 pages



[ BOOKS ]

# River Sutras

Two books about the **Ganga**, one a fictionalised retelling of the life of the river-goddess, the other a son's journey to prominent Hindu sites along it

Over the last decade or so, there has been an explosion of Indian

English novels involving the Mahabharata. But in almost all, Ganga, the river-goddess, seldom rises beyond a quickly forgotten supporting character (Amruta Patil's *Adi Parva* is a notable exception). Vaishnavi Patel's novel *Goddess of the River* corrects the record in style, with a 'reimagining' filled with lively character

sketches and a strong sense of Shakespearean foreboding. After Ganga the river-goddess marries the king Shantanu, she has to negotiate the mortal life, that too the life of a queen. Eventually, she is forced to abandon her son Devavrata (the man destined to become the invincible warrior Bheeshma) who then takes a draconian vow never to marry in order to appease his father and his second wife.

What I liked best about the book was the role of

Ganga as a kind of super-powerful spectator/occasional participant to the beginnings of the Mahabharata—think of how gods like Ares and Apollo play both witness and participant in *The Iliad*. "I heard again and again about my son's attempts to make peace—to split the kingdom, to pay respects to both parties, to advise against warfare—and I could not help but think that it was his oath that had led to all this. And worse, it was my fault he had made that oath."

The other book involving the Ganga that I enjoyed recently was Siddharth Kapila's *Tripping Down the Ganga*, an astute blend of memoir, travel writing and fly-on-the-wall sociology. It's an account of the author's journeys to Hindu pilgrimage sites along the Ganga between 2015 and 2022. As a schoolboy, Kapila visited Badrinath, Kedarnath et al with his mother and it's this mother-son relationship that acts as an emotional anchor for the book. As a progressive, UK-educated man in a relationship with another man, Kapila's ideas about faith and inclusiveness and religious reform often clash with his mother's—and out of this conflict of ideas comes the bulk of this book.

Kapila's accounts of

overcoming his own bias are touching, like when he travels with the much-reviled kanwariyas, and gradually changes his mind about them. By the end of the trip, he

In *Tripping Down the Ganga*, **KAPILA** is harsh on Hinduism and those tasked with running Hindu pilgrimages

respects their religious expression and no longer thinks of the group as a rule-breaking, hard-partying monolith. But Kapila is also harsh on Hinduism and those tasked with running Hindu pilgrimages when he needs to be—hyper-mercantile, conmen-adjacent priests and sadhus are rightly presented in an unflattering light and in Kapila's view, they are socio-economic bottlenecks holding a great religion back.

The one thing I did not like in the book was the author comparing Hinduism's tolerance levels (especially with regards to issues like gay rights and inter-religious marriage) with Islam, Sikhism, et cetera.

Indians as a whole are largely intolerant of these things, and I don't see how religion plays a role in these choices—we have repeatedly proven this is who we are as a society and as a nation. This minor quibble aside, I wholeheartedly recommend *Tripping Down the Ganga* for its many insights into the "galaxy of divinities, stories and philosophies encompassing the Hindu faith". ■

—Aditya Mani Jha

# SPORTING SPIRIT

**Jemimah Rodrigues** is one of the cricketers to watch in the ongoing season of the Women's Premier League



**Q.**  
Your team, Delhi Capitals, has been runner-up twice.  
**Third time lucky?**

That's the plan. It still hurts to lose in two consecutive finals. But we have played tremendous cricket throughout in both seasons, and to consistently be in the finals is an achievement. It's just about things falling in place on that given day.

**Q.**  
How has women's cricket evolved since the Women's Premier League launched in 2023?

I come from a generation where nobody paid attention to women's cricket. In fact, when I started out, I didn't even know there was a women's team. I have played in stadiums with just 10-15 spectators, most of them family members, and to entire stadiums being packed and audiences chanting our names. So we have come a long way.

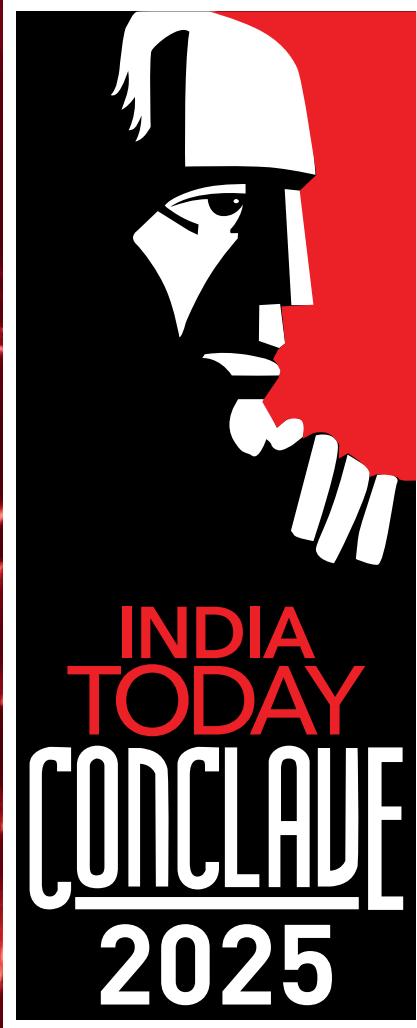
**Q.**  
And in terms of player development?

As a youngster who hasn't had international experience, you are seeing the likes of Harmanpreet Kaur and Sophie Devine, and their professionalism. You know what the benchmark is and how much effort is needed. Personally, being part of overseas leagues has helped. Knowing that a franchise has picked you gives you a lot of confidence as does doing well against quality players and in different conditions.

**Q.**  
Recently, your celebration of posing with the bat as a guitar, after scoring a century against Ireland, went viral. Does music play an instrumental part?

In fact, I do that pose at every photo shoot. I told myself that the day I score a hundred, I will do it. It took some time but I was happy to be able to do it. Music helps me switch off and unwind, especially strumming the guitar. And my guitar travels with me on tour.

—with Suhani Singh



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