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INDIA TODAY



WEAPONISING HISTORY

**THE VIOLENCE IN MAHARASHTRA
OVER AURANGZEB'S LEGACY IS ONLY
THE LATEST BATTLE IN THE HINDUTVA
CAMPAIGN TO REDRESS PERCEIVED
HISTORICAL WRONGS**

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The past, in India, refuses to rest in peace. Like a restless spectre, it keeps returning to haunt the living—fuelling anger, inciting debate, and increasingly dictating the direction of our political discourse. What ought to have remained the domain of scholars and classrooms has entered the courtrooms, assemblies, and even the theatres of violence out on the streets. This week's cover story examines a phenomenon that is no longer an anomaly but a pattern: the weaponisation of history for political ends. It is a subject both urgent and uncomfortable. In Maharashtra, the latest flashpoint is not a present-day economic crisis or infrastructure challenge but the grave of a long-dead Mughal emperor—Aurangzeb, who died in 1707.

What lit the fuse was the film *Chhaava*, a historical epic centred on Sambhaji, son of Chhatrapati Shivaji. In a 40-minute climax, it portrays Sambhaji's gruesome torture at the hands of Aurangzeb in agonising detail. Powerful performances by Vicky Kaushal and Akshaye Khanna ensured emotions were not confined to the screen. They spilled over—into social media, the Maharashtra assembly, and finally the streets. The debate that followed was less about art, more about ancestry, identity and indignation. A sitting MLA, Abu Azmi, found himself suspended from the assembly for offering a sympathetic take on Aurangzeb. Hindutva activists called for the demolition of the emperor's "tomb" in Khultabad, a grave that had lain unbothered for centuries—even during Maratha rule. Alleged desecration of Islamic symbols triggered riots in Nagpur, leaving one dead.

Maharashtra is not alone in being drawn into this time warp. Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan and other states have seen similar eruptions—fights over mosques, temples, dargahs, forgotten rulers and faded manuscripts. The Gyanvapi mosque case in Varanasi, the legal contest in Sambhal over the Shahi Jama Masjid, and the vilification of Moinuddin Chishti's dargah in Ajmer all point to a deeper malaise: an India increasingly divided not by what it faces today, but by how it remembers yesterday. This is not an accidental recurrence. It is the manifestation of a deliberate strategy. Even after the Supreme Court's Ayodhya verdict sought to put a cap on fresh disputes, the movement to seek revenge for history has only gathered pace. Even the RSS chief, Mohan Bhagwat, has called for closure, saying, "We shouldn't be looking for shivlings under every mosque." Yet, the movement seems to be doing precisely that. Legal challenges have been mounted to the Places of Worship (Special Provisions) Act, 1991, which was designed to shelter such monuments from fresh attacks or litigation. The court's verdict on its constitutionality is still awaited.

While RSS spokespersons like Sunil Ambekar have called debates on Aurangzeb "not relevant", affiliates like the VHP remain vocal and active. "We are against Aurangzeb's glorification," says VHP president Alok Kumar. "The

VHP is working to build monuments to commemorate those heroes who stood against him." This multi-voiced chorus may appear chaotic, but insiders say it syncs with the ideological diversity within the Sangh ecosystem—and aligns with Prime Minister Narendra Modi's "panch pran" (five resolves) of Amrit Kaal, which includes the goal of eliminating every trace of the "colonial mindset".

Therein lies the deeper dilemma. Whose version of history are we cleansing? And who decides what is a "colonial mindset"? Is the desire to reclaim pride in civilisational identity incompatible with democratic plurality? Can a modern nation afford to be so preoccupied with medieval wrongs that it forgets to correct contemporary injustices? This cover story does not simply chronicle controversy—it asks fundamental questions. When historical memory is used as political fuel, it becomes combustible. We are witnessing how easily old symbols can be recast into present-day provocations.

Author Amish, in his guest column, calls for "civilisational honour", suggesting Aurangzeb's bones be respectfully sent to Pakistan. Historian Purushottam Agrawal warns

against reducing Indian citizenship to a matter of conferred "grace" rather than inherent "right". The danger, he writes, lies in allowing a single community's narrative to dominate the national imagination—making minorities feel like guests in their own homeland. But history, if read wisely, also offers lessons in pluralism. In a letter to Aurangzeb, Shivaji reminded the emperor of his illustrious forebear Akbar: "To rule justly is to understand the strength of diversity." This was more than shrewd diplomacy, it was a possible vision of shared destiny. It is this Shivaji—thoughtful, strategic and inclusive—we must remember today. Not merely a warrior king, but a statesman who understood that the strength of a nation lies in its capacity to absorb differences without fragmenting.

In reinterpreting our past, we must be wary of oversimplification. Every era is complex, every ruler contradictory. Turning history into a binary of heroes and villains may satisfy the politics of the moment, but it impoverishes the intellect of a civilisation. There is a fine line between reclaiming heritage and reliving vendettas. As a society, we must ask whether we are investing enough in the future or simply mortgaging it to settle scores from centuries ago. India is poised to become one of the world's top economies. But no real development can occur if national energy is constantly drained by cultural score-settling. The arc of history bends forward—only if we let it. It is said that those who are obsessed with the past often forfeit the future. Let us ensure we don't become a nation that forgets this truth.



January 29, 2018


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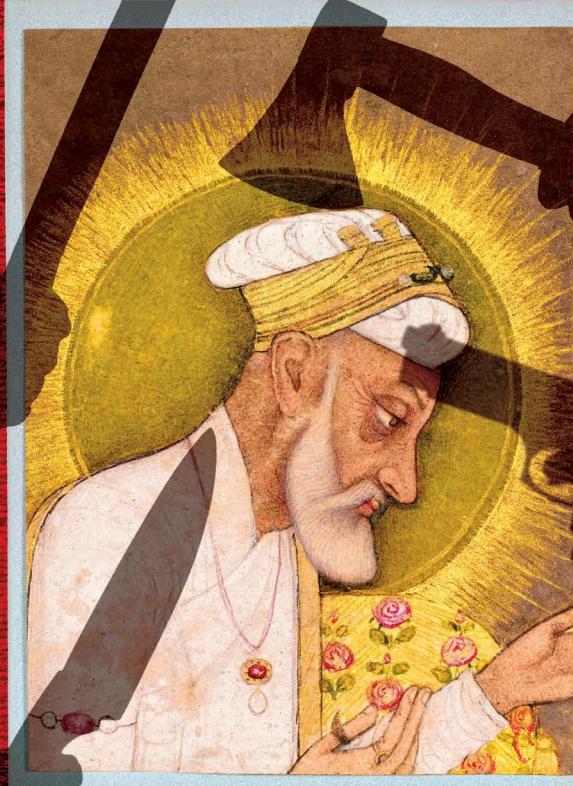


Illustration by NILANJAN DAS

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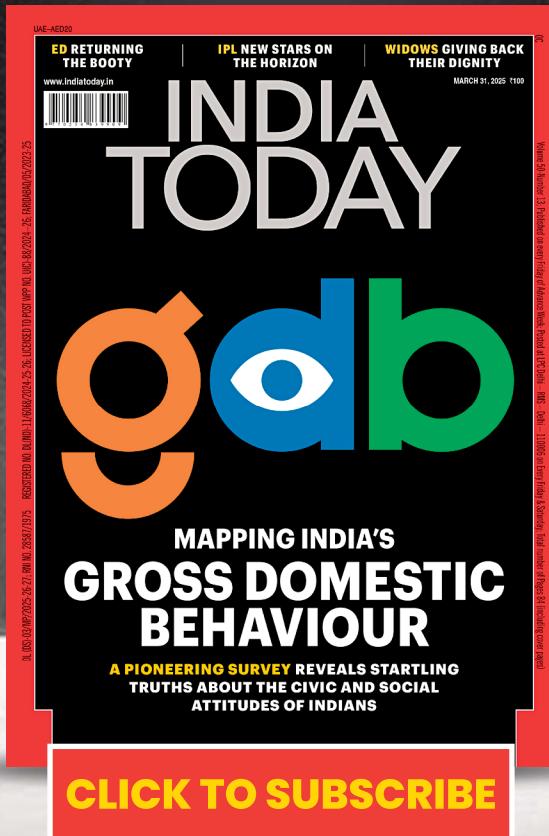


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UPFRONT



SMOKE AND SCANDAL The entrance of the storeroom (left), where cash (right) was allegedly discovered during a firefighting operation at Justice Varma's residence in Delhi, March 14

CASH DISCOVERY ROW

A JUDICIAL FIRESTORM

By Kaushik Deka

A late-night fire at the residence of a senior Delhi High Court judge has sparked an intense controversy around the judiciary and its complex appointments system. The incident, which unfolded on March 14 around 11.30 pm, saw a blaze erupt in an outhouse at the residence of Justice Yashwant Varma. At the time, Justice Varma and his wife were in Bhopal, leaving only his daughter and elderly mother at home. When first responders—firefighters

and police—arrived at the scene, they reportedly discovered stacks of cash in the storeroom, some of which had been charred by the flames. The revelation has raised troubling questions about corruption and accountability within one of the nation's most venerated institutions.

Videos and photographs of the scene, later released by the Supreme Court in an unprecedented move toward transparency, show what appear to be bundles of currency notes

amid the fire debris. The discovery of a substantial cache of cash has thrust the judiciary into an uncomfortable spotlight, challenging its self-regulatory mechanisms and raising fundamental questions about how justice is administered for judges themselves.

On March 23, Chief Justice of India (CJI) Sanjiv Khanna constituted a three-member committee comprising the Chief Justices of the Punjab and Haryana and Himachal Pradesh high courts, along with a judge from the

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Karnataka High Court, to conduct an inhouse inquiry into the matter. The Delhi High Court has since withdrawn all judicial work from Justice Varma, also a member of its collegium, until further orders. However, he has categorically denied any connection to the cash. In his formal response to the inquiry, he described the outhouse where the fire broke out as “completely disassociated” from his living quarters, stating it was “unlocked and accessible both from the official front gate as well as the backdoor of the staff quarters”.

Justice Varma maintained that neither he nor any family member had placed cash in the storeroom, dismissing the allegations as “totally preposterous” and suggesting the incident was “a conspiracy to frame and malign” him. On March 23, Union law minister Arjun Ram Meghwal addressed the controversy, exercising notable restraint in his words. “This case is with the Supreme Court. It has formed a three-member committee. Let the committee report come. Then we will talk about this,” he said. Meanwhile, on March 25, Vice President Jagdeep Dhankhar called for an all-party meeting to discuss the issue, calling it a “critical” and “serious” matter.

The scandal has drawn pointed commentary from prominent legal figures too. Senior advocate and Rajya Sabha MP Kapil Sibal described corruption within the judiciary as “a very serious issue” that has persisted for years. “It is time for the Supreme Court to review how appointments are made,” Sibal argued, calling for greater transparency and care in the judicial selection process. The judiciary and the Union government are already locked in a tense standoff over the appointment of high court and Supreme Court judges through the collegium system. Senior advocate Indira Jaising focused on the procedural aspects, urging the SC collegium to “immediately disclose the exact amount of money recovered” to prevent speculation.

The Allahabad High Court Bar As-



Justice Yashwant Varma

BLAZE AND THE BACKLASH

► **On March 14, fire breaks out at Justice Varma's residence; a huge stash of cash found by firefighters**

► **On March 23, the Supreme Court forms a committee to inquire the matter. Delhi HC withdraws all judicial work from Justice Varma**

► **Justice Varma denies link to cash, calls it a “conspiracy to frame” him**

► **SC proposes his transfer to parent Allahabad High Court, says it's unrelated to the cash discovery case**

► **Allahabad HC Bar Assn opposes transfer, alleges collegium favouritism**

sociation's response to Justice Varma's proposed transfer—though the top court maintained it was a separate, ongoing process with no connection with the cash recovery case—has been particularly vehement, drawing attention to what they termed the “Uncle Judges Syndrome”. This controversial practice refers to alleged favouritism and nepotism in appointments and rulings. The association portrayed Justice Varma's case as symptomatic of systemic problems, where personal connections potentially shield judges from proper scrutiny.

The mechanisms for investigating and disciplining judges in India reflect the tension between judicial independence and accountability. Two principal procedures exist. The first is an inhouse procedure established by the SC in 1999, wherein complaints against HC judges are initially evaluated by the chief justice of the relevant court. If deemed serious enough, the matter is referred to the CJI, who may constitute a three-member committee of judges to conduct a confidential inquiry. This committee may recommend that the judge resign or, if the judge refuses, advise the withdrawal of judicial work pending formal impeachment proceedings. The second mechanism is the constitutional impeachment process, as detailed in Article 124(4) and (5) of the Constitution, read with Article 218, and the Judges (Inquiry) Act of 1968. This procedure requires a motion supported by at least 100 Lok Sabha members or 50 Rajya Sabha members, followed by an investigation by a three-member judicial committee. If misconduct is proven, both Houses of Parliament must vote with a two-thirds majority to remove the judge, after which the President issues the formal removal order.

The criminal prosecution of judges falls under a separate framework. In *K. Veeraswami v. Union of India* (1991), the Supreme Court established that while judges are considered “public servants” under the Prevention of Corruption Act, no criminal case can be registered against a high court or Supreme Court judge without prior sanction from the Chief Justice of India. This requirement aims to shield judges from frivolous or politically motivated complaints while preserving a path for legitimate accountability.

The effectiveness of these mechanisms has been repeatedly questioned. No Supreme Court or high court judge has ever been successfully impeached in India, despite several attempts. Criminal prosecutions have also been equally rare and largely inconclusive. In 2022, the ministry of law and

justice informed Parliament that 1,631 complaints about judicial corruption had been received between 2017 and 2021 and forwarded to the CJI or high court chief justices. Even basic transparency measures, such as judges declaring their assets publicly, have been inconsistent. As of March, there are 34 judges in the SC, including the CJI, and about 1,100 in India's 25 high courts. Out of these, only 98 judges have publicly disclosed their assets.

The Supreme Court's stance on protecting high court judges from Lokpal scrutiny reflects these deep-seated concerns about judicial independence. In February, the court stayed a Lokpal

THE SC'S STANCE ON PROTECTING HC JUDGES FROM LOKPAL SCRUTINY STEMS FROM ITS DEEP CONCERN ABOUT JUDICIAL INDEPENDENCE

order asserting jurisdiction over sitting high court judges. This protective posture also reflects the apex court's

view that an established mechanism for judicial accountability already exists through the inhouse procedure overseen by the CJI. While this internal system has been criticised for lacking transparency, the judiciary has consistently maintained that it provides an appropriate balance between accountability and independence.

As the three-member committee conducts its inquiry into the Justice Varma case, the nation watches for signals about how seriously the judiciary takes allegations of corruption within its ranks. The outcome may well shape public perception of judicial integrity for years to come. ■

[PUNJAB]

Mann Shifts Gears

By Anilesh S. Mahajan

On March 20, Punjab Police launched a midnight crackdown on farm union protest sites at Shambhu (on the Patiala-Ambala highway) and Khanauri (Sangrur-Jind border), where demonstrations had been ongoing since February 2024. The operation was one of the most intense actions against farmer protests in the past decade. It was preceded by the detention of Kisan Mazdoor Morcha leader Sarvan Singh Pandher and Samyukta Kisan Morcha (Non Political) leader Jagjit Singh Dallewal just as they re-entered Punjab after meeting Union ministers Shivraj Singh Chouhan, Pralhad Joshi and Piyush Goyal in Chandigarh. The protest sites were forcibly cleared, with hundreds of farmers detained in the process. (Later, about 800 were released on March 24 with the promise to let another 450 go in the coming days.)

The move marks a significant shift in Punjab chief minister Bhagwant Mann's approach. Having built his



FINAL CRACKDOWN Earthmovers clearing the Shambhu border after the eviction of agitating farmers, Mar. 20

career—first, as a satirist, and then, a politician—on siding with protesters, he is now positioning himself as a leader with a firm grip on governance. His administration has also cracked down on striking revenue officials and launched a bulldozer drive against drug traffickers. These aggressive measures appear to be part of a larger

strategy to consolidate his authority within Punjab while simultaneously navigating the increasing dominance of the Aam Aadmi Party's central leadership in state affairs.

Just before the crackdown, Mann's agriculture minister, Gurmeet Singh Khudian, had been part of the consultations between farm leaders and

Union ministers, where both sides had reportedly agreed to meet again on May 4 and hold nationwide stakeholder consultations. But Mann was apparently growing impatient. While he had been facing accusations of succumbing to the protesters' time and again, many in the government believed that the frequent highway blockades were hurting the state's economy and frustrating the non-agricultural population. In the 2024 general election, a significant chunk of these voters is believed to have shifted away from AAP. Even a fortnight before the March 20 operation, the Mann government had detained prominent farm leaders Balbir Singh Rajewal, Ruldu Singh

government reassigned their duties to junior officers. Observers say this served both as an administrative clean-up and an assertion of power against bureaucratic resistance.

Simultaneously, the government has intensified its campaign against drug traffickers. On March 17, the state police demolished the house of an absconding drug dealer, Gurcharan Singh, in Ferozepur, citing illegal construction. This was part of a crackdown launched in late February, wherein properties of alleged drug peddlers have been razed in Patiala, Ropar, Amritsar and Ludhiana. With this, Punjab has become the first non-BJP-ruled state

in Punjab, where it won only three out of 13 seats, the central leadership has already tightened its grip on the state unit. Kejriwal, now unseated as Delhi chief minister, has shifted focus to Punjab, holding meetings and lending his rhetorical energies to the party's crackdown on drugs and corruption. On March 21, he appointed former Delhi ministers Manish Sisodia and Satyendar Jain as AAP's Punjab in-charge and co-in-charge, respectively. Both are believed to have better working relationships with Mann than their predecessors, Rajya Sabha MPs Raghav Chadha and Sandeep Pathak.

In the midst of all this, speculation is rife about an impending cabinet reshuffle after two of Mann's ministers, Lal Chand Kataruchak and Harbhajan Singh ETO, were summoned to Delhi and asked to present reports on fund utilisation by their departments. This is similar to developments that took place before massive restructuring late last year, when Mann had to cede the state unit reins to his bête noire Aman Arora.

The increased involvement of AAP's central leadership in Punjab has complicated Mann's political positioning, especially in a state with strong sub-regional sentiments. His opponents have been quick to highlight Kejriwal's growing influence, citing the appointment of loyalists in key state positions, even as the party boss has downplayed speculation about replacing Mann. The recent announcement of Rajya Sabha MP Sanjeev Arora as AAP's candidate for the Ludhiana West assembly seat has only fuelled talk that Kejriwal wants to enter Parliament through Punjab.

Even as Mann appears determined to project a tougher, more autonomous image, his critics dismiss his recent actions as "headline-grabbing". "There have been cops dismissed for their links to drug traffickers and gangsters.... Why haven't bulldozers gone to their homes?" leader of the Opposition Partap Singh Bajwa questioned in the assembly. Mann's political battle—both within and outside his party—seems far from over. ■

WHO'S THE BOSS?

► **Punjab CM Bhagwant Mann has cracked down on farmer protesters, striking revenue officials and drug traffickers, asserting control—yet his autonomy is being tested**

► **AAP's central leadership, led by Arvind Kejriwal, is tightening its grip on Punjab, with key aides now overseeing state affairs and speculation about his own political ambitions rising**



Mansa and Joginder Singh Ugrahan, thwarting their plans to protest outside the CM's residence in Chandigarh. On March 3, Mann had also walked out of a meeting with the union leaders.

Around the same time, his government moved against striking revenue officials, who were protesting vigilance actions against some of their colleagues in Ludhiana. After making unannounced visits to Banur, Mohali and Kharar on March 4, Mann suspended 15 tehsildars and naib tehsildars, including Punjab Revenue Officers' Association chief Lachman Singh Randhawa, citing negligence of duty. To ensure continuity of work, the

to embrace Yogi Adityanath-style "bulldozer justice". Before letting the bulldozers lose, Mann had met the police top brass, giving them three months to curb drug trafficking. The department has prepared a dossier on 78 peddlers whose properties they plan to target next, but legal hurdles remain. Human rights groups have moved the high court, citing a Supreme Court verdict from November 2024 that bars such executive action.

These aggressive moves come as Mann seeks to win over party legislators while tackling growing anti-incumbency against his government. After AAP's overwhelming Lok Sabha performance



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BREAKING A MOULD
Muchi community members at the Shiva temple in Gidhagram, Mar. 12

[WEST BENGAL]

A WIN AGAINST CASTEISM

By Arkamoy Datta Majumdar

All her life, Santana Das had watched from a safe distance as others entered the Shiva temple in Gidhagram village in Katwa sub-division in Purba Bardhaman district. Born into the Muchi (cobbler) community—a Dalit group historically excluded from the temple—she had accepted this passively. But, on March 12, wearing her finest saree, she stepped inside for the first time. With her were three women—Pooja Das, Lakshmi Das and Mamata Das—and a man, Shasthi Das, all from the 130 Dalit families in the village. Their entry, under the watchful eye of the local administration, was a declaration of dignity and equality. Later, emerging from the temple after performing the rituals, Santana said, her voice trembling with emotion, “We are elated. I never thought this day would come.”

The exclusion of Dalits from temples controlled by privileged castes has been a historical blight in India; conversely, ‘temple entry’ movements have been the foremost tool to fight entrenched casteism. That such a cycle should be

played out in West Bengal—known usually for its liberal social values, besides being under Left rule for 34 years—now is an eye-opener of sorts for many.

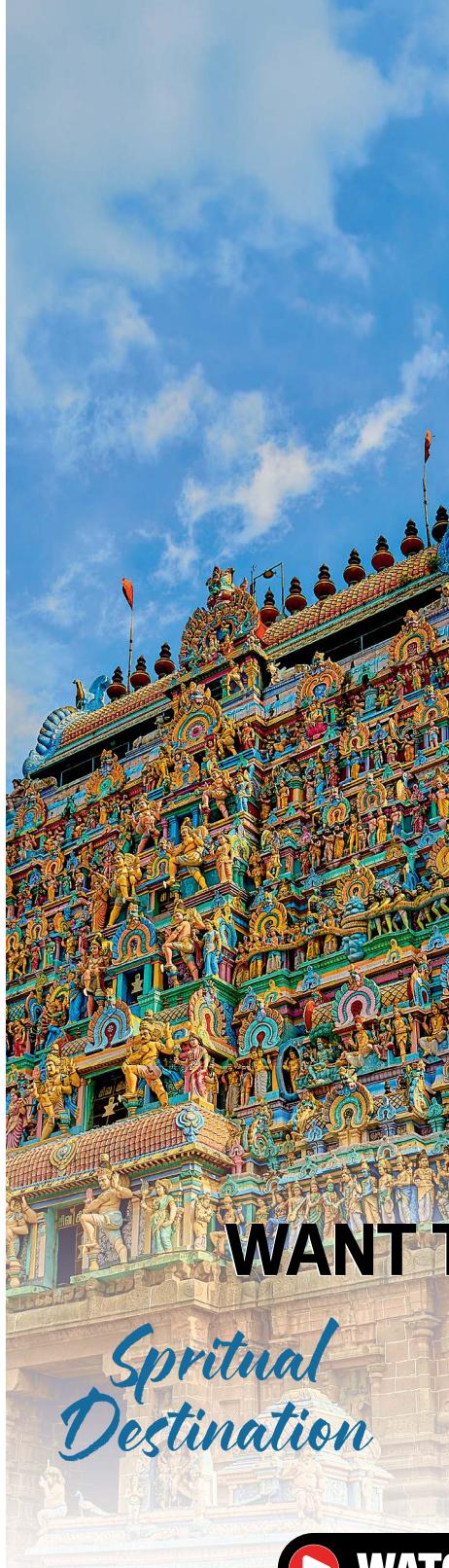
Like in other parts of Bengal, caste discrimination in Gidhagram had not always manifested itself openly—members of ‘upper castes’ openly mingled with Dalits, and other Scheduled Caste groups were permitted entry into the temple. Inexplicably, the Dalit Muchi community alone was excluded, and it took them years to muster the courage to challenge this injustice. This year, members of the community approached the local administration. Ahimsa Jain, the Katwa sub-divisional

officer, was taken aback. “I had no idea that such discrimination still persists—especially in a progressive state like Bengal,” she tells INDIA TODAY.

Multiple discussions were held with representatives from all communities and the local panchayat. However, tensions erupted during Shivratri festivities in February, when the Muchi community was denied entry despite the presence of police and administrative officials. Jain says it took more talks and grassroots outreach to persuade the resistant factions. “This long-standing discriminatory practice has been abolished without any law and order complications,” she says. Though some members faced threats of socio-economic ostracism, the police have ensured that such retaliation has been curtailed. “From now, all are welcome in the temple,” says Nabakumar Ghosh, a privileged caste villager.

However, as Gidhagram gained attention, it opened a can of worms—reports of similar cases emerged from across Bengal. In Nadia’s Kaliganj and Purba Bardhaman’s Ketugram,

**AS ELSEWHERE IN BENGAL,
DEGREES OF OPENNESS IN
SOCIETY KEPT CASTE BIAS
LESS THAN TRANSPARENT
IN GIDHAGRAM. MUCHIS
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FROM THE TEMPLE**



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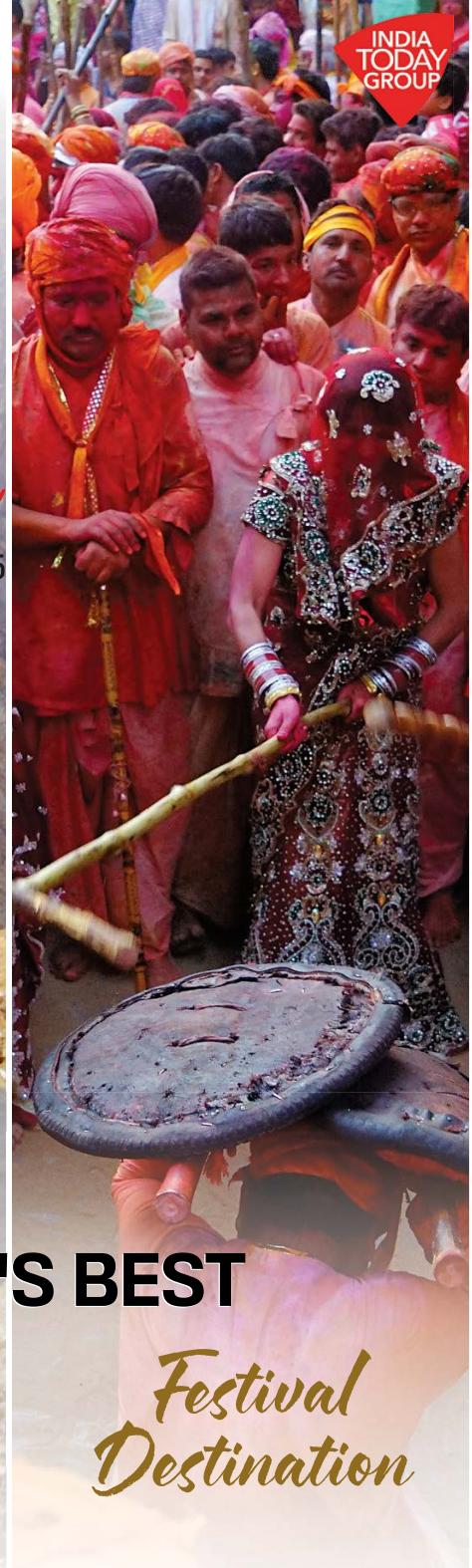
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LIGHT ON A BLIGHT

■ **The SC Muchi community was denied entry to a temple in Gidhagram village in West Bengal for centuries**

■ **This March, with the help of the administration and talks with privileged castes, they were finally allowed in**

■ **The incident highlighted other such temples in**

Bengal—which has a large Dalit population—where some SC communities are systematically excluded

■ **Large Dalit groups like Namashudras and Rajbangshis have political influence and escape discrimination**

■ **Small groups like Muchis face the brunt of caste bias**

allegations of a similar practice of discrimination against Muchis were received by the Rabidas Ruidas Rishi Das Charmakar Chamar Muchi Aikeya Mancha, an umbrella organisation of the cobbler community. However, after interventions from the court and local administration, the community has been allowed to enter the temples in both these places.

The state's Dalit population stands at 21.4 million (2011 Census), with 60 sub-groups. The two largest communities—Rajbangshis (18 per cent of the population) and Namashudras (16 per cent)—have also faced discrimination, but are less vulnerable as they're concentrated in some districts, giving them political influence. In contrast, the Muchi/ Chamar community, comprising 4.8 per cent of Bengal's Dalits, remains marginalised.

"Discrimination against communities such as cobblers is rampant because they are fewer in numbers," says Dalit researcher and author Kumar Rana. "They are treated with discrimination because otherwise, the so-called 'upper castes' will not get cheap labour," he says.

Dalit activist and author Narayan Biswas describes casteism in Bengal as being "sugar-coated". "Like the rest of India, the disease of casteism exists in Bengal. However, since it is home to the second-largest

Dalit population in India, 'upper castes' find it difficult to discriminate openly. Instead, they maintain social superiority through practices like denying entry into certain temples under the guise of tradition," he explains. Biswas points out that casteist tendencies were evident during Left rule too. "When land reforms were implemented, the elite castes did not resist as they were not directly engaged in farming. But they ensured Dalits were kept away from intellectual spaces," he adds.

In a 2004 study report by the Pratichi Trust, Rana wrote of "some evidence of discrimination based on caste and religion" around the mid-day meal programme in schools. In two of the 15 villages under the study, privileged caste Hindu children refused to eat in school as the cook was a Muslim woman in one and a Dalit in the other.

Despite Bengal's large Dalit population, atrocities against Scheduled Castes remain underreported. Between 2018 and 2022, only 585 cases out of 246,908 complaints were registered in Bengal under the SC/ ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act. The conviction rate has been zero.

The victory in Gidhagram is a milestone, but the larger war against caste discrimination is far from over. For Santana, stepping inside the temple was a moment of triumph. For Bengal, it is a wake-up call. ■

The desert state of Rajasthan has had a somewhat more placid image compared to its neighbours but that reputation is fast losing its shine. Street violence over perceived slights has often been a bane but what's proving worse is the lack of restraint higher up, with the words and deeds of politicians bordering on the boorish.

This year's Holi brought out some of the symptoms of the rash that has begun to ail the state. It started with the St Angela Sophia School in Jaipur issuing a circular to students to not bring colours to school, possibly because they wanted to avoid any untoward incident of harassment. But it took no time to snowball into a communal controversy, so much so that on March 11, school education minister Madan Dilawar declared that he would write to the Central Board of School Education (CBSE) to take action against the school. The very next day, a tragedy proved that the way some play Holi in the state can be calamitous. Hansraj Meena, 25, who was preparing for an exam at a library in Dausa town near Jaipur, was fatally attacked after he objected to some youths putting colour on him.

After the incident, the police clamped down on Holi hooligans who were harassing people or creating a ruckus. Soon, an overdose of the cure itself became a new headache when devotees were barred from playing Holi at Govind Devji temple complex in Jaipur, ostensibly to prevent a stampede. Many angry devotees chose to respond with a boycott. "This is shocking. The cops

A RASH OF INCIDENTS WITH A COMMUNAL TINGE AROUND HOLI HAS PUT THE BHAJAN LAL GOVT IN A SPOT



RAJASTHAN

Caustic Colours of Rajasthan

and temple officials frisked devotees to ensure they were not carrying any colours. For years, we have been celebrating Holi in part of the temple complex," alleged Congress leader and ex-minister Pratap S. Khachriawas.

Getting mud on the face on Holi may not be the best proof, but critics say the BJP is keeping the communal pot on simmer as the local body elections may be held later in the year. To be sure, the landscape is littered with evidence. The most egregious would be BJP legislator Gopal Sharma shouting "Pakistani, Pakistani" while Congress chief whip Rafeek Khan was speaking on an urban development issue in the assembly on March 8. Khan later broke down while speaking to the media about the incident. Close on the heels of Sharma was fellow party legislator Balmukund Acharya, who has been in

“WE SHOULD BE CAREFUL IN OUR CHOICE OF WORDS... BUT PEOPLE ARE BEING OVERLY TOUCHY NOWADAYS”

BHAJAN LAL SHARMA

Rajasthan CM

high dudgeon about Muslims "evading the crackdown" against meat shops during Holi. His latest outburst was during a Holi celebration with lawyers where he asked them to use their "legal brains to bring an end to the azaan on loudspeaker" as it was giving him a headache.

First-time chief minister Bhajan Lal Sharma has a task on his hands keeping his motormouth leaders in check. Critics now say that with these leaders showing little

regret for their choice of words, there is a likelihood that the message will trickle down to the administration and masses that such actions are kosher. Already, an incident from March 2, where the baby of a Muslim couple was killed due to police 'carelessness' during a raid in Raghunathgarh village in Alwar, has led to an uproar and charges of high-handedness. It is alleged that the cops accidentally stepped on the baby when it fell on the floor. The authorities claim the raids were part of a statewide campaign against cyber criminals.

Rajasthan has so far avoided charges of being a communally polarised state. CM Bhajan Lal, who is just 15 months into power, will have to be on his toes if he and the BJP are not to sully that image by getting embroiled in unsavoury controversies. ■

[MARINE WILDLIFE]

RETURN OF THE OLIVE RIDLEYS

By Arkamoy Datta Majumdar

First came the shock and dismay—throughout January, the discovery of hundreds of carcasses of Olive Ridley turtles on the beaches in and around Chennai raised the hackles of wildlife conservationists. Then, from mid-February and through March, emerged a remarkable silver lining: the Rushikulya beach in Odisha's Ganjam district witnessed an unprecedented mass nesting event, with close to 700,000 turtles laying eggs. This astonishing spectacle comes after the site saw no nesting at all last year, making it a moment of triumph for conservationists. Redemption, it seemed, had arrived further up the coast.

Olive Ridley turtles (*Lepidochelys olivacea*) are the most abundant of all sea turtles and they inhabit the warm waters of the Pacific, Atlantic and Indian Oceans. Olive Ridleys travel 9,000 km from the Pacific Ocean, as well as shorter distances from the Indian Ocean, to breed and nest on select Indian beaches in Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Odisha, which is home to the two mass-nesting beaches for them. Olive Ridleys are a fundamental link in marine ecosystems by regulating populations of organisms like jellyfish and helping maintain coral reefs. But they face numerous threats, including the mass harvesting of eggs, poaching and unintended capture in fishing nets, leading to injuries or drowning.

As thousands of these marine reptiles crawled ashore beneath the moonlit sky—and, defying age-old practice, during daylight hours as well—locals and conservationists stood spellbound. This

extraordinary phenomenon, known as 'arribada' (Spanish for 'arrival'), has surpassed previous records. The sheer scale of this nesting event stands as a testament to years of painstaking conservation efforts, yet the very rarity of this moment of success underscores the ongoing challenges posed by climate change and habitat disruption.

Gahirmatha beach in Kendrapara district, till now the world's largest known nesting ground for Olive Ridleys, has recorded over 600,000 turtles this year. However, unlike Rushikulya, the site has never seen a drastic decline in numbers. The mass nesting at Rushikulya began on February 16 and continued for eight days, with the tally of nesting turtles touching 698,718. Gahirmatha recorded 606,933 turtles between March 5 and 9. Olive Ridleys begin their mating rituals in the sea around September–October, and the nesting season lasts from January to March.

Experts attribute the historic nesting event at Rushikulya to a combination of favourable climatic conditions and proactive conservation management strategies. Dibya Sankar Behera, assistant conservator of forests and in-charge of the Olive Ridley (Sea Turtle) Protection Area in Odisha, is delighted. "All our efforts—strict fishing restric-

SPECTACLE OF 'ARRIBADA'
Thousands of Olive Ridley turtles crawl out from the sea to lay eggs in Odisha's Rushikulya beach

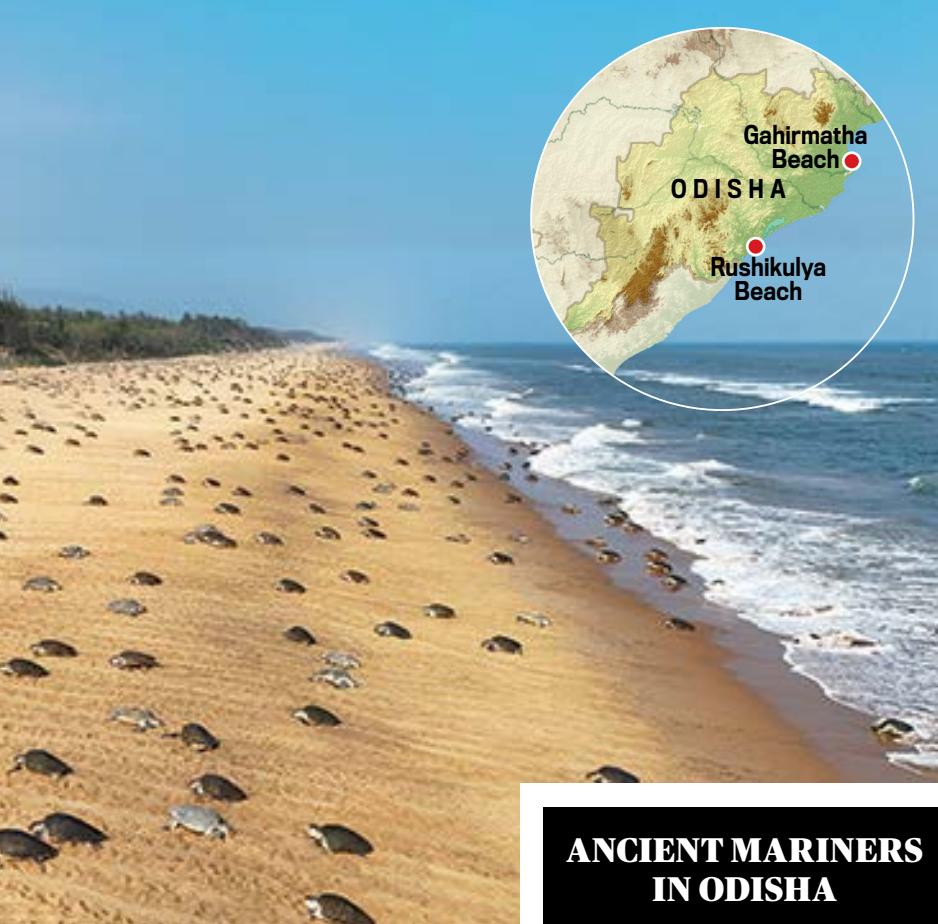


tions, consistent beach clean-ups and awareness campaigns—played a role. The absence of rain ensured that the beach remained dry, providing the perfect nesting environment," he says.

Local involvement has also been a crucial factor. Rabindranath Sahu, a member of the Rushikulya Sea Turtle Protection Committee, says, "The community once saw turtles as a nuisance. Now, they take pride in cleaning the beach and ensuring a safe nesting environment for the turtles," he says.

A key highlight of this year's nesting at Gahirmatha Marine Sanctuary was the return of turtles—300,000 in total—to Ekakulanasi Island after 33 years. The beach had suffered significant sea erosion, leading to a reduction in its profile. However, since 2020, the beach has been undergoing natural accretion, causing it to extend once more.

OLIVE RIDLEY'S KEPT OFF RUSHIKULYA LAST YEAR, BUT NEARLY 700,000 HAVE NESTED ON THE BEACH IN 2025. BETTER CLIMATE AND CONSERVATION MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES HELPED IN THE STUNNING TURNAROUND



ANCIENT MARINERS IN ODISHA

This transformation created favourable conditions for the turtles.

The story of Rushikulya as a premier nesting site for Olive Ridleys dates back to March 1994, when marine turtle researcher Bivash Pandav, now a scientist at the Wildlife Institute of India, first documented mass nesting there. Two years later, the Odisha Forest Department took the site under its protective wing.

Today, a 20-km stretch from Aryapalli to Prayagi has been identified as a probable nesting zone, with a 10-km core area declared a no-fishing zone from November to May, since turtles fall prey to trawling nets, gill nets and fishing hooks. To support around 8,000 affected fishing families, the government provides a one-time compensation of Rs 15,000. A 5-km high-probability nesting zone between Ghokarakuda and Bateswar village receives special attention. The census of nesting turtles has a methodology. The five-km zone is divided into 50 segments of 100 metres each. At the middle, a 20-metre section is selected, where incoming turtles are

► **Olive Ridleys are sea turtles found in the Atlantic, Pacific and Indian Oceans and get their name from their olive-green carapace**

► **They are a fundamental link in marine ecosystems and help maintain the health of coral reefs and sea grass beds**

► **From mid-February and through March, Rushikulya beach in Odisha witnessed a mass nesting event, with 698,718 Olive Ridleys laying eggs; last year, there were no turtles**

► **Nearby Gahirmatha beach recorded 606,933 turtles**

► **This is due to sustained conservation efforts, favourable climate and proactive management like fishing restrictions and beach clean-ups**

► **The forest and fisheries departments and marine police jointly patrol the waters thrice a day during the nesting season**

counted hourly and marked with ink. This data is then used to estimate the total number of nesting turtles.

Since Rushikulya is a dynamic beach, constantly shaped by erosion and accretion, maintaining its suitability for nesting needs vigilance. The forest and fisheries departments and the marine police jointly patrol the waters. A 240-member strong turtle protection squad works through the nesting season, ensuring the safety of the turtles and their eggs.

Dr Basudev Tripathy, member of the Marine Turtle Specialist Group at the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), says that changes in nesting behaviour may be linked to environmental shifts. "The decline of other habitats may have driven a larger number of turtles to Rushikulya this year. The Devi river mouth in Puri, once one of the three major nesting sites in Odisha alongside Rushikulya and Gahirmatha, has seen a drop in numbers due to increasing disturbances," he explains.

Tripathy elaborates on the global implications. "The population of Olive Ridleys in the Indian Ocean is distinct from those in the Atlantic or Pacific. While an increase in numbers here does not necessarily indicate an overall rise in the species worldwide, it is a promising sign. The IUCN is debating whether to downgrade Olive Ridleys from an 'endangered' to a 'vulnerable' species," Tripathy adds.

Pandav agrees, noting that fluctuations in numbers are natural. "It's not unusual for turtles to skip nesting at a particular beach, like Rushikulya last year," he says. However, he speculates that this year's record numbers may be a response to environmental factors yet to be fully understood.

As conservationists celebrate this year's historic 'arribada', their message remains clear: the battle to protect Olive Ridleys is far from over. This year's success serves as a reminder of the delicate balance between nature and conservation—one that must be maintained if these ancient mariners are to thrive in future. ■



Illustration by SIDDHANT JUMDE

The Biggest Jinx

Uttarakhand CM Pushkar Singh Dhami, who is juggling a staggering 39 departments, has been lobbying with the BJP leadership in Delhi for a cabinet expansion (five berths are lying vacant in the 12-seat cabinet). The central leadership has asked him to submit performance cards of all the ministers—a clear signal that a reshuffle is imminent. That spells danger too—the government has completed three years in office, and the anti-Dhami camp is back in action. Uttarakhand's history hasn't been kind to CMs—only one has completed a full term. Dhami broke one jinx by becoming the first CM to return to power. Can he beat another, become the first BJP CM to complete a full five-year term?

ARUN KUMAR



Pressure and Pivot

Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy's YSRCP isn't part of the NDA, but he still skipped the March 22 joint action meeting on delimitation called by Tamil Nadu CM M.K. Stalin. In fact, the party has gone the other way, written to PM Narendra Modi signalling its willingness to go by Union home minister Amit Shah's assurance that Lok Sabha seats for the southern states would remain unchanged. On this, Jagan finds himself aligned with the ruling TDP in Andhra Pradesh. But the subtext is hard to miss—Jagan needs Modi now more than ever, as he faces mounting pressure from party defections and a slew of CBI cases. Is the YSRCP's slow decline nudging Jagan closer to the NDA orbit?

Kaushik Deka with Jeemon Jacob,
Anilesh S. Mahajan, Kaleem Geelani,
Amitabh Srivastava and Amarnath K. Menon

GLASSHOUSE

TEST CASE?

Ex-Union minister Rajeev Chandrasekhar, 60, has been handpicked by the BJP's central leadership to head its faction-ridden Kerala unit. The tech-savvy business mogul will lead the BJP charge in this year's local body polls and the 2026 assembly election. The appointment, though, has not gone down well with senior state leaders, who remain sceptical of what he can deliver. Already memes are out of him bumbling away in Malayalam, some of it, sources say, put out by partymen themselves. Rajeev's last electoral battle, against Congress MP Shashi Tharoor in the 2024 Lok Sabha election, ended in a narrow defeat in Thiruvananthapuram—an outcome that underscores both his potential and the uphill challenge ahead. His surprise elevation, though, has got tongues wagging: is the BJP quietly test-launching a CM candidate for Kerala?

PARTY MINUS POLITICS



In a first, Jammu and Kashmir CM Omar Abdullah and his father, National Conference (NC) president Farooq Abdullah, attended an Iftar party hosted by arch-rival and PDP chief Mehbooba Mufti in Jammu on March 23. As the holy month of Ramzan nears its end, this unusual show of camaraderie underscores how religion can bring opponents together, especially after all the bitterness from the poll campaign last year. Gen Next seems to be getting along too—Mehbooba's daughter Iltija and Omar's sons were seen together at another Iftar party in Srinagar.

Guess Who's Not Coming to Dinner

They say the way to a man's heart is through his stomach. But in Bihar's political kitchen, not every feast hits the mark. CM Nitish Kumar's grand Daawat-e-Iftar on March 23 at his 1, Anne Marg residence saw half a dozen Muslim organisations give him the cold shoulder, protesting the JD(U)'s support to the Waqf Amendment Bill. Still, the turnout wasn't bad, with VIPs like governor Arif Mohammad Khan in attendance. Meanwhile, RJD patriarch Lalu Prasad Yadav rolled out his own Iftar feast on March 24, serving up a spread for those who skipped Nitish's invite. In Bihar, Iftar isn't just about breaking the fast—it's about tasting the shifting flavours of political loyalty.



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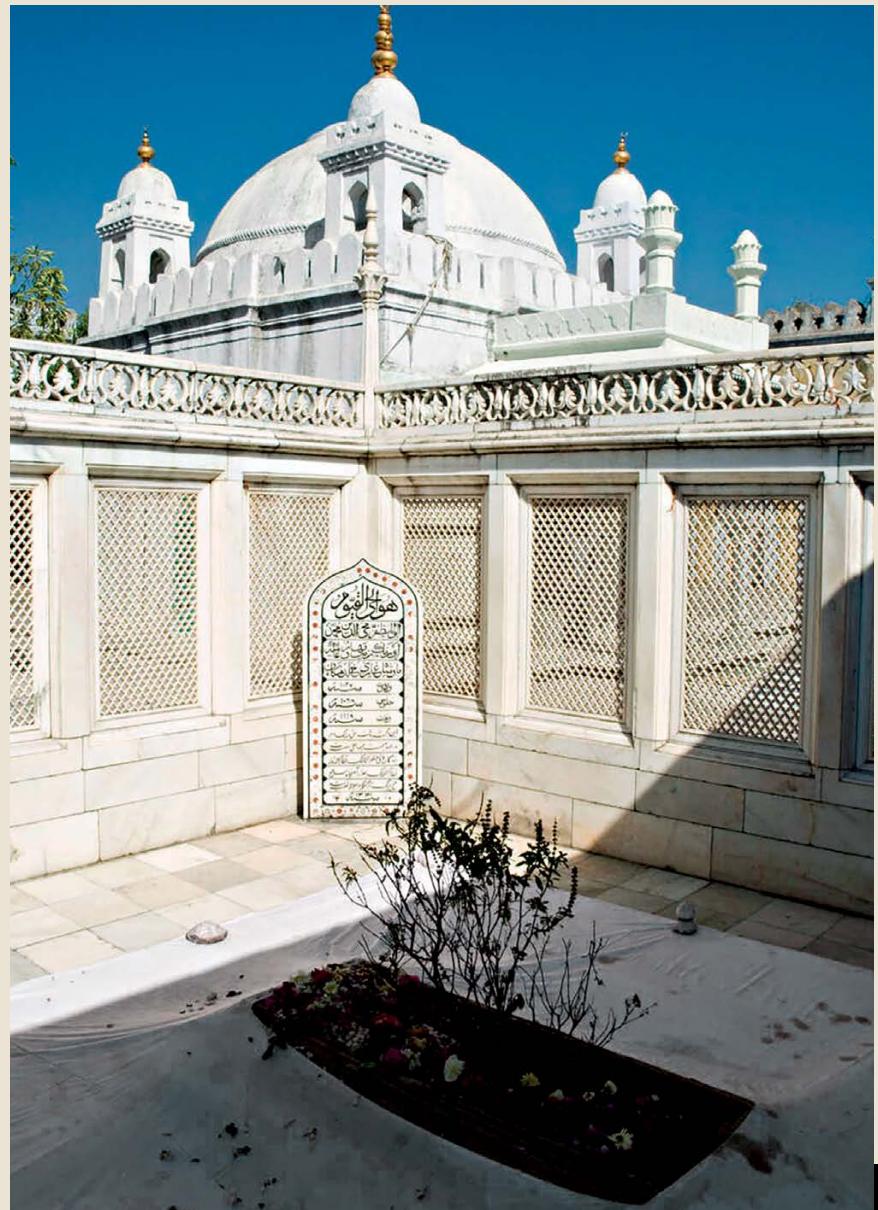
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COVER STORY

WEAPON HISTORY



ALAMY

Y ISING

The violence in Maharashtra over Aurangzeb's controversial legacy is only the latest marker of Hindutva attempts to redress perceived historical wrongs

By DHAVAL S. KULKARNI & AVANEESH MISHRA

GRAVE SITUATION
Hindu right-wing activists protesting in Nagpur to demand the razing of Aurangzeb's tomb (right), located in Khultabad, Maharashtra, Mar. 17

T

The success of a film is measured not only by its box-office earnings, but also by the emotions it can rouse in its audiences. *Chhaava* (meaning ‘lion cub’), based on a popular Marathi novel on the 17th-century figure of Sambhaji, son of the iconic founder of the Maratha empire, Chhatrapati Shivaji, delivered on both scores. It had already raked in upwards of Rs 541 crore by the sixth week of its February 14 release. But what really propelled the drama to the headlines was an extended and graphic sequence of Mughal emperor Aurangzeb (played by Akshaye Khanna) torturing and killing Sambhaji (Vicky Kaushal) in 1689. The scenes had people breaking down in tears and shouting patriotic slogans in theatres—dutifully recorded on videos and circulated widely on social media. Its stature was confirmed when, amid cheers for Sambhaji and Shivaji, a special screening was held on March 27, at the GMC Balayogi auditorium in Parliament, where the audience included Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Union home minister Amit Shah, BJP president J.P. Nadda and their NDA colleagues.

The plot had already moved off-stage before that. So convincing was the portrayal by the chief protagonists in the Maddock Films’ production that the emotions spilled out of the cinema halls into the streets. Especially after Samajwadi Party’s Mumbai MLA Abu Asim Azmi put up a defence of Aurangzeb on March 3, saying, “Wrong history is being shown. Aurangzeb built many temples. I do not consider him a cruel ruler. Also, the battle between Chhatrapati Sambhaji Maharaj and Aurangzeb was for state administration, not between Hindus and Muslims.” Whatever the results of actual conflicts, in the long view of popular history, Maratha warriors are the clear winners and Aurangzeb a universally reviled figure. Incensed at Abu Azmi’s statement, Sangh parivar affiliates such as the Vishva Hindu Parishad and the Bajrang Dal called for the razing of Aurangzeb’s grave at Khultabad near Aurangabad (renamed Chhatrapati Sambhajinagar a couple of years ago). They found ready support from the BJP and the Shiv Sena, members of the ruling Mahayuti coalition in the state. Uttar Pradesh chief minister Yogi Adityanath weighed in, too, declaring that glorifying ‘invaders’ was an act of ‘treason’ that ‘new India’ would not tolerate. Azmi has been suspended from the Maharashtra legislature for the ongoing budget session.

An uneasy calm returned to Maharashtra after Chief Minister

LIGHTING A POLITICAL TINDERBOX



BANDEEP SINGH

“We all think alike (that the tomb must be demolished), but some things must be done legally as it is a protected structure. It was made a protected structure by the former Congress regime”

DEVENDRA FADNAVIS
Chief Minister, Maharashtra

“We didn't keep asking each other when the Babri Masjid was demolished, our kar sevaks just did it...this is the time for a repeat. Samajhdaar ko ishara kaafi hai (For the smart, a signal is enough)”

NITESH RANE
Minister for Ports and Fisheries, Maharashtra



Devendra Fadnavis skilfully pleaded helplessness at being unable to disturb Aurangzeb’s grave as it was a protected structure under the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI). He did assert, though, that his government will not allow the glorification of the Mughal. “Why do we want the grave of Aurangya (Aurangzeb)?” he asked. “But as you know, the ASI declared it a protected site 50 years ago and hence the state and Union governments are vested with protecting it. It is unfortunate that we are forced to protect the tomb of Aurangya, who had killed thousands of our people.”

Meanwhile, rumours of a *chaadar* (sheet) with Quranic inscriptions being burnt during statewide protests against Aurangzeb by Hindu right-wing groups

“When was Aurangzeb buried? Why make it an issue after so many years? Any attempt to disturb the law and order should be dealt with strictly. India is a symbol of unity in diversity. We should not fall into the trap of any divisive forces”

AJIT PAWAR

Deputy CM, Maharashtra



BANDEEP SINGH

“Glorifying invaders means strengthening the very roots of treason. The New India will never accept those who insult our great ancestors and praise those who attacked our civilisation, violated our women and struck at our faith”

YOGI ADITYANATH

Chief Minister, UP



“He (Aurangzeb) had come to loot, he was a thief, why glorify him? People go to take his darshan, are they his descendants? He was a parasite. Demolish it (the tomb)”

UDAYANRAJE BHONSLE, BJP MP and descendant of Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj

“A wrong history is being put out. Aurangzeb also built many temples. I don't consider him a cruel ruler. Also, the battle between Chhatrapati Sambhaji Maharaj and Aurangzeb was for land...it was not a battle between Hindus and Muslims”

ABU AZMI, Samajwadi Party
MLA, Maharashtra



“The BJP should go back and learn history. Swami Vivekananda emphasised the universal acceptance of all religions. If BJP leaders truly respected Vivekananda, they would learn from him about religious tolerance and inclusion”

AKHILESH YADAV
President, Samajwadi Party



“Farmers are committing suicide. Unemployment has increased. To hide all these, the BJP comes up with new issues of Hindus and Muslims, and to entangle people in historical topics to divert their attention from the main issues”

ATUL LONDHE PATIL National spokesperson, Congress Party

sparked off a communal riot in Nagpur, headquarters of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), on March 17. The violence claimed the life of one person and left more than 30 people, including a few policemen, injured.

A Wave of Revanchism

Back in the 1940s, Maratha historian T.S. Shejwalkar had written presciently, “There is a terrible ghoul—a massive spectre—that is haunting Maharashtra. Its name is history.” Except that it is not just Maharashtra that is witnessing social and communal conflagrations over historical perceptions. From UP to Telangana, contentious interpretations of

past events, controversial historical figures and claims over places of worship are increasingly creating flashpoints on the country's socio-political landscape.

There is the ongoing legal battle over the Gyanvapi Masjid in Varanasi in UP, which revolves around claims that the 17th-century mosque, built during Aurangzeb's rule, stands on a demolished Hindu temple. The Krishna Janmabhoomi dispute in Mathura involves claims that the Shahi Idgah mosque was built at the birthplace of Lord Krishna after a temple was demolished, again during Aurangzeb's rule. In Rajasthan, Hindutva groups claim that the dargah of Sufi saint Moinuddin Chishti in Ajmer was originally a Shiva temple. In Hyderabad, communal sentiments continue to

Other Battlezones



GYANVAPI MOSQUE | Varanasi

THE ROW

A similar story is playing out in Varanasi, where a 2023 ASI survey has confirmed a pre-existing temple at the Gyanvapi Masjid's site. Hindu groups claim that the 17th-century mosque was built on the plinth of the Vishweshwara temple razed by Aurangzeb. The dispute only intensified after a 2022 survey found a shivling-like structure in the mosque's wuzukhana (ablution tank).

THE PETITIONERS

The conflict originally traces back to a 1991 lawsuit but gained momentum in August 2021 when five Hindu women filed a petition, seeking permission to worship the goddess Shringar Gauri inside the mosque compound all year round. It is spearheaded by lawyer Hari Shankar Jain, who is also involved in Shahi Idgah and Taj Mahal cases.

CURRENT STATUS

In early 2024, a Varanasi court allowed Hindus to pray in the mosque's basement, a ruling upheld by the Allahabad High Court. Later, the Supreme Court, too, refused to pause the puja. Multiple litigations are still pending in courts.

SHAHI JAMA MASJID | Sambhal

THE ROW

The 16th-century mosque in UP is embroiled in a legal dispute with claims that it was built on Babur's orders after razing Harihar Mandir, dedicated to Lord Kalki. The dispute boiled over into violence in November 2024 during a court-ordered survey of the mosque.

THE PETITIONERS

The legal challenge is led by Supreme Court lawyer V.S. Jain and seer Mahant Rishiraj Giri, backed by Hindutva groups.

CURRENT STATUS

The SC has stayed further trial court proceedings till the Allahabad High Court decides the mosque committee's challenge to the survey order. It has also ordered status quo over a disputed well near the mosque. The next HC hearing is on April 8.



simmer over the Bhagyalaxmi temple, located below the southeastern minaret of the iconic Charminar. Just five months earlier, a fresh battle erupted over the Shahi Jama Masjid, a 16th-century structure and reputedly the oldest surviving Mughal mosque in the country, in Sambhal, UP.

It's not just religious structures, but names of roads, towns, and even festivals commemorating Muslim figures from history or legend are falling victim to the Hindutva pursuit to reclaim history. Thus the renaming of Aurangabad as Chhatrapati Sambhajinagar and the rechristening of

Osmanabad district as Dharashiv, and Ahmednagar as Ahilyanagar after the 18th-century warrior queen Ahilyabai Holkar. Allahabad and Mughalsarai have been rechristened Prayagraj and Pandit Deen Dayal Upadhyay Nagar for some time now.

In the Hindutva view of things, these are nothing but efforts to set right the distorted view of history promoted by imperialist and Left historians. Sangh parivar ideologues cite the 'panch pram' (five resolutions) of the Amrit Kaal propounded by PM Modi as the core of their ideology. These include the goal of a developed India by 2047, elimination of colonial



CHANDRADEEP KUMAR

AJMER SHARIF | Ajmer

THE ROW

A legal battle has sprung up over Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti's dargah in Ajmer, Rajasthan, with claims that the revered 13th-century Sufi shrine, which attracts multi-faith devotees including political leaders and celebrities, was originally a Shiva temple.

THE PETITIONERS

This claim was brought alive again in the immediate aftermath of the communal tensions that erupted in Sambhal in Nov. 2024. A lawsuit filed by Vishnu Gupta, national president of the Hindu Sena, a right-wing Hindu nationalist organisation founded in 2011, questioned whether the dargah is protected under the Places of Worship Act, besides seeking to reclaim the site for Hindu worship.

CURRENT STATUS

Muslim leaders like AIMIM chief Asaduddin Owaisi view the lawsuit as an attack on India's pluralistic traditions. The BJP's state unit chief, Madan Rathore, calls such litigations a fallout of the "Congress's appeasement policy" while claiming they will respect the court's decision. A local court has received replies from the Dargah Committee, ASI and other respondents and has listed the matter for hearing on April 19.

SHAHI IDGAH | Mathura

THE ROW

The issue traces back to a 1964 lawsuit filed by the Shri Krishna Janmabhawan Sewa Sansthan over ownership of the entire 13.37-acre land believed to be part of Lord Krishna's birthplace. It is also here that Shahi Idgah mosque stands over 2.5 acres, which Hindu groups claim was built after razing the Keshavadeva temple on Aurangzeb's orders in 1670. In 1968, the two groups had reached a compromise.

THE PETITIONERS

Fresh petitions emerged in 2020 when Lucknow-based lawyer Ranjana Agnihotri and six others, represent-

ing 'Bhagwan Shri Krishna Virajman', sought the mosque's removal. Their initial plea was rejected, but a revision petition was accepted in May 2022. To date, over 15 cases have been filed, all seeking the mosque's removal.

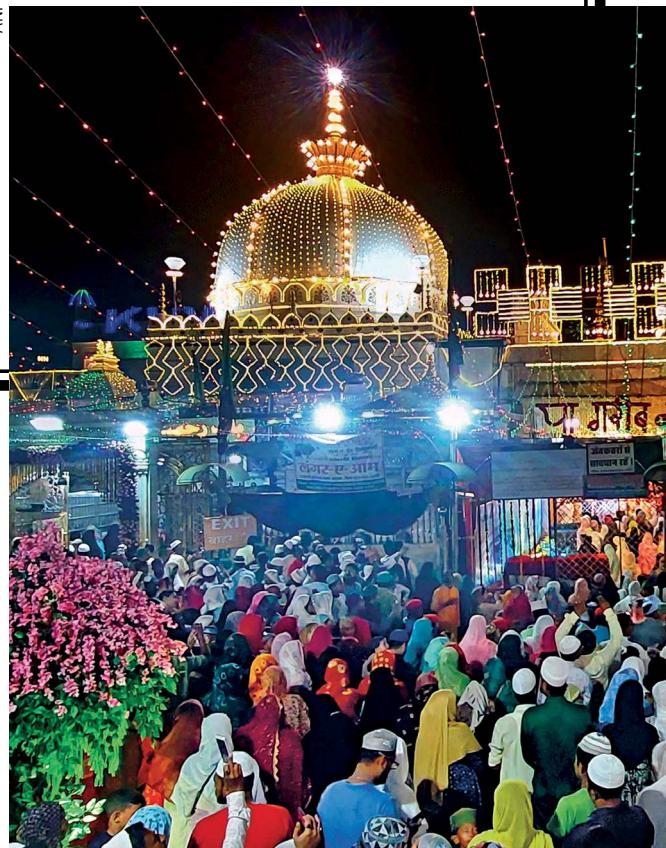
CURRENT STATUS

In December 2023, the Allahabad HC ruled that the case was not subject to the Places of Worship Act, 1991, which preserves the religious character of sites as they stood in 1947, and permitted a court-monitored survey of the mosque. The SC stayed this order in Jan. 2024. The case will now be heard on April 1.

mindsets, pride in India's heritage and roots, strengthening unity and a sense of duty among citizens. "Muslims or Islam are not our enemy," says a top RSS leader. "The symbols of colonialism, created only to demoralise the Hindu community, shouldn't be glorified. To build pride in our roots and do away with the colonial mindset, there is a need to tell the stories of our heroes to the future generation."

The problem with the Hindutva project, as historian Purushottam Agrawal (see column, *Why are We Digging Graves of the Past?*) sees it, is that it is not bound by authenticity

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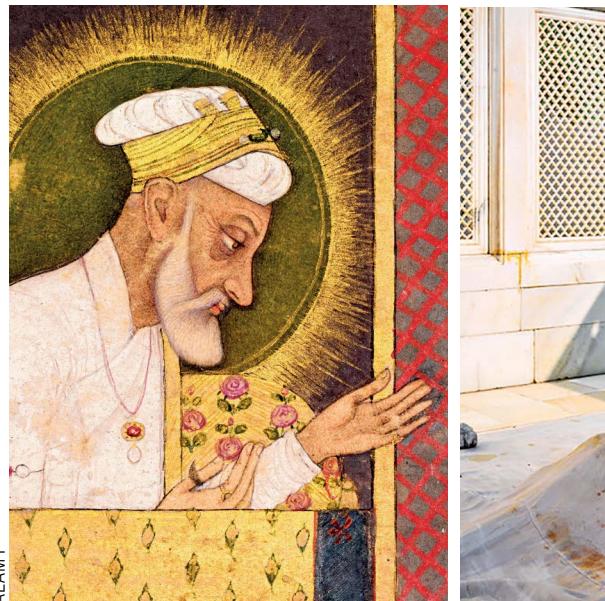
of historical material. Instead, it “heavily depends on a constant arousal of passionate rage and hurt and has acquired the vocal support of large sections of our mass media which willingly fan the fires”. Films like *Chava* only help that cause, helping justify calls seeking retribution for historical slights, both real and perceived. All markers of the Muslim era, be it tombs or rituals, are drawn into an ever-widening battle—in courtrooms, on the streets, and from the pulpit of political rallies—over identity and legacy. What begin as legal disputes soon become bustling battlefields for broader ideological wars. In this high-stakes contest, history itself becomes the most contested territory of all.

The Sambhal Chapter

If *Chava* re-enacted the battle by translating a 1979 novel by Shivaji Sawant onto celluloid, Sambhal wrote its own script. The legal and ideological battle over the Shahi Jama Masjid has reignited old fault lines in this western UP town. Hindu petitioners, led by Supreme Court advocate Vishnu Shankar Jain and seer Mahant Rishiraj Giri, claimed that Mughal emperor Babur ordered the destruction of the Harihar Mandir, a temple dedicated to Lord Kalki, to make way for the mosque. Their argument leans on historical texts such as the *Baburnama* and the *Ain-e-Akbari*, as well as an 1879 report by the ASI that they claim identifies Hindu architectural elements within the structure. The mosque's management committee counters these assertions, saying the site has been a place of uninterrupted Islamic worship since the 16th century. As such, Section 4(1) of the Places of Worship (Special Provisions) Act, 1991, prohibits converting or altering the character of any place of worship as it existed on August 15, 1947, except in the case of the Ram Janmabhoomi dispute. But the Hindu side has evoked the sub-section 3a, which exempts from this provision any place of worship that is an “ancient and historical monument or an archaeological site or remains covered by the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains Act, 1958...”. Both Sambhal and Gyanvapi are protected sites under the ASI.

Acourt-ordered survey on November 19, 2024, conducted under the supervision of Advocate Commissioner Ramesh Singh amid heavy police presence, went off without major incident. However, a second such survey led to the eruption of violence; tensions had been building over the alleged lack of prior notice given to the mosque committee, fuelling suspicion about the intent of the exercise. When the surveyors returned five days later to complete their inspection, the atmosphere had grown volatile. Rumours circulated rapidly—that the administration planned to excavate under the mosque, that the *wuzukhana* (ablution tank) had been drained to make way for digging, and that the survey was a prelude to a larger push to reclaim the land as a temple site. By early morning, hundreds had gathered outside the mosque.

Stone-pelting soon followed. The police responded with tear gas and a lathi charge. There was also gunfire. By midday, four



ALAMY

AURANGZEB

The Emperor and His Resting Place

Aurangzeb, or Alamgir I, was the sixth and most controversial of Mughal emperors, whose name still stirs strong emotions more than 300 years after his death. He won the war of succession by edging out his three

brothers. He deposed and imprisoned his father, Shah Jahan, and executed his elder brother, the liberal Dara Shukoh.

Aurangzeb is known for his religious bigotry and persecution of Hindus, Sikhs and Shias—unlike his great-

BY DECRYING MUSLIM MONUMENTS, ROADS AND PLACES NAMED AFTER THEIR RULERS, AS ALSO EVEN THEIR FESTIVALS AND RITUALS, HINDUTVA IDEOLOGUES HOPE TO SET RIGHT WHAT THEY THINK HAS HITHERTO BEEN A DISTORTED VIEW OF HISTORY



grandfather Akbar and grandfather Jahangir, who engaged with non-Muslim religious figures, including Hindus and Christians, as Supriya Gandhi notes in *The Emperor Who Never Was: Dara Shukoh in Mughal India*. Aurangzeb also ordered the executions of Armenian Sufi Sarmad Kashani and the ninth Sikh guru, Tegh Bahadur.

Aurangzeb's legacy and career touch a raw nerve in Maharashtra. After Shivaji Maharaj

made peace with the invading Mughal general Mirza Raja Jai Singh, he was invited to the Mughal court in Agra. Feeling

AURANGZEB SPENT THE LAST 27 YEARS OF HIS LIFE, TRYING UNSUCCESSFULLY TO SUBDUE THE MARATHAS

insulted by his treatment, he walked out, was placed under house arrest, and famously staged a dramatic escape.

Following Shivaji's death in 1680, his elder

son, Chhatrapati Sambhaji, ascended the throne but was captured and brutally executed in 1689. However, Maratha resistance persisted under Maharani Tarabai, wife of Shivaji's younger son Rajaram. Legendary generals Santaji Ghorapade and Dhanaji Jadhav put up a valiant fight.

Aurangzeb spent the last 27 years of his life in the Deccan, trying unsuccessfully to subdue the Marathas. He breathed his last on February 21, 1707, at Bhingar in Ahmednagar at the age of 89. His body was carried to Khulatabad, near Aurangabad, renamed Chhatrapati Sambhajinagar in 2023. After his death, Sambhaji's son, Shahu, who had been imprisoned with his

mother Yesubai and half-brother Madansinh since childhood, was released. Shahu had staved off attempts to convert him in captivity.

Historian Dulari

Qureshi says Aurangzeb was buried in the courtyard of the tomb of Shaikh Zainuddin, in a simple enclosure he commissioned during his lifetime. Khulatabad, known as the 'valley of saints,' was home to many Sufis, including Zar Zari Zar Baksh, a disciple of Nizamuddin Auliya of Delhi.

Aurangzeb's tomb was originally a wooden slab bearing a Persian inscription: 'No marble sheets should shield me from the sky as I lie there one with the earth.' Qureshi cites a legend that Aurangzeb decreed only Rs 14 and 12 annas—earned from stitching caps—be spent on his burial. He had also earned Rs 350 from Quranic inscriptions but refused to use it, believing he had made mistakes in copying.

In 1921, the Nizam of Hyderabad and Lord Curzon embellished the site with marble and a pierced marble screen. Yet, a patch of earth with a *sabja* plant remains, in keeping with his wish to rest under the open sky. ■

people were dead, several more injured, and the streets of Sambhal were locked down under Section 144. Internet services were suspended, schools closed and the district administration moved swiftly to prevent further escalation. CM Adityanath said the police action was in response to "provocative speeches" delivered after Friday prayers. The Opposition accused the BJP government of deliberately stoking tensions to polarise voters. Within days, the case reached the Supreme Court. The Shahi Jama Masjid Committee filed an urgent plea challenging the validity of the survey, arguing that it violated the Places of Worship Act. On November 29, the apex court stayed proceedings in the Sambhal trial court (which had mandated the surveys), ordered the survey report to be

sealed and emphasised the need for "peace and harmony".

In this unsettled, already highly polarised environment, a fresh wave of controversy washed over Sambhal in March, when the state administration banned the annual Neja Mela, a festival traditionally held after Holi in honour of Syed Salar Masud Ghazi. The local tradition celebrating Ghazi Miyan as a warrior saint and martyr dates back to the 12th century but a later 17th century legend depicts him as a military commander of Mahmud of Ghazni, in campaigns across northern India, including the plundering of the Somnath temple in 1025 CE. The Neja Mela, observed by a section of the Muslim community, involves raising a ceremonial flag (Neja) and offering prayers to commemorate Ghazi.

CHHAAVA: REVIEW

Film that Launched a Thousand Protests

Action pyrotechnics and fire and brimstone dialogue that fan the fire of nationalism—Chhaava follows Bollywood's new template for historical extravaganzas

By SUHANI SINGH

For nearly two hours, Chhaava runs like a mishmash of the testosterone-heavy Marvel and DC universe action spectacles. Here, it leads to one battle after another, as Maratha king Chhatrapati Sambhaji Maharaj (played by Vicky Kaushal) duels against a lion (cue Russell Crowe in *Gladiator*), excels in aerial fights and takes on the Mughal army, often single-handedly. Accompanied by a bombastic background score by A.R. Rahman, the historical extravaganza comes alive in the last half hour, when the punches are not literal, but verbal. With the protagonist captured and chained, audiences finally get to see the daring hero and his enemy, a haggard Aurangzeb (Akshaye Khanna), in one frame.

"Mughalon ki taraf aajaaao. Zindagi badal jaayegi. Bas tumhein apna dharm badalna hogा (Join hands with the Mughals. Your life will change. All you have to do is convert to

Islam)," says Khanna's Aurangzeb in a final offer of freedom to the brutalised Chhaava. The Maratha king, his spirit untethered, retorts, "Humse haath mila lo... zindagi badal jaayegi aur dharm bhi badalna nahin padega (Join hands with Marathas. Your life will change and you won't even have to change your faith)."

The 2-hour, 35-minute-long film directed by Laxman Utekar has set the box office ablaze, amassing Rs 541 crore in six weeks. The film's emphasis on Maratha pride and pluck has contributed to a performative rapture of sorts—clips show kids and women tearing up and chanting of slogans praising "Dharmarakshak Sambhaji Maharaj". If Kaushal's demanding physical act has won him a new fan base, Khanna as Aurangzeb is also a scene-stealer, using his hooded eyes to convey malevolence. Such is the enthusiasm that Parliament in New Delhi hosted a special screen-



ing of Chhaava for MPs on March 27.

Unlike Sanjay Leela Bhansali's *Padmaavat*, Chhaava kept the villain's screen time limited and mostly avoided controversy, barring Raj Thackeray and Maha-

Sambhaji, *The Whirlwind* on indiatoday.in. "His interest was in gaining political control."

With Shivaji Sawant's book *Chhaava* as inspiration, the focus was to highlight the "warrior dimension" of

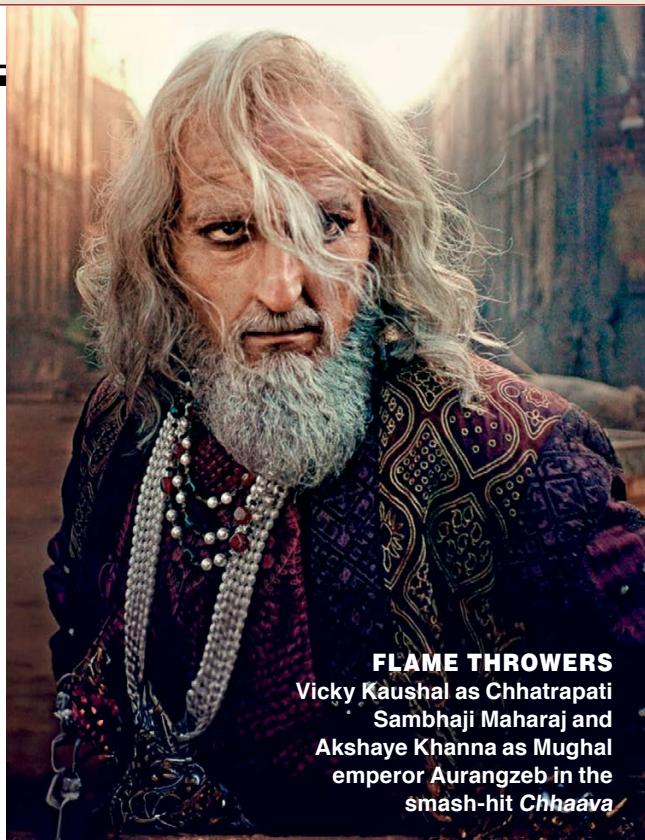
CHHAAVA'S EMPHASIS ON MARATHA PRIDE HAS TRIGGERED PERFORMATIVE RAPTURE IN CINEMAS—CHANTS, CHEERS AND TEARS

rashtra minister Uday Samant taking offence at the portrayal of Sambhaji participating in a lejim dance. Utekar removed the sequence promptly. Some question the cinematic liberties taken. "Religion was not the only reason behind Sambhaji's death. Conversion was not Aurangzeb's focus," wrote Vishwas Patil, author of

Sambhaji, *The Whirlwind* on indiatoday.in. "His interest was in gaining political control."

With Shivaji Sawant's book *Chhaava* as inspiration, the focus was to highlight the "warrior dimension" of

Sambhaji, says Kausubh Savarkar, one of the five script writers. Savarkar attributed Chhaava's appeal to the "emotional connect" audiences felt watching "a Hindu raja" espouse the cause of swaraj. While Bhansali and Ashutosh Gowariker centred their historical epics on romance, recent fare has prioritised well-choreo-



FLAME THROWERS

Vicky Kaushal as Chhatrapati Sambhaji Maharaj and Akshaye Khanna as Mughal emperor Aurangzeb in the smash-hit *Chhaava*.

graphed action and nationalism, but with mixed results—Kangana Ranaut's *Manikarnika: The Queen of Jhansi* clicked while others like Akshay Kumar's *Samrat Prithviraj* tanked.

Chhaava is not the first high-octane Hindi film about Maratha valour. In 2019, Gowariker's ill-fated *Panipat* was followed by *Tanhaji—The Unsung Warrior* with Ajay Devgn in the lead. Directed by Om Raut, it netted Rs 270 crore. "As filmmakers, it's our job to tell stories of lesser-known individuals whose sacrifices we don't know of and explore intricacies of their

personalities," says Raut. After *Chhaava*'s success, Raut senses more conversation on Indian history in the film industry. "Today we go to cinemas for large-scale extravaganza," he says. "That's why historical films come into focus. They inject pride and nationalism, you get inspired, learn not to repeat mistakes from the past and move forward."

Savarkar speaks of how lives of other figures in Maratha history are ripe for larger-than-life treatment, citing Santaji Ghorpade, Tanhaji Jadhav and Tarabai. "If anybody wants to do it, I am very much interested," he says. ■

COVER STORY | WEAPONISING HISTORY

On March 17, the Sambhal administration, led by Assistant Superintendent of Police (ASP) Shrish Chandra, denied permission for the Neja Mela, scheduled for March 25–27. The decision followed discussions with the Neja Mela Committee, during which objections were raised about honouring Ghazi. "History bears witness that he was a commander under Mahmud of Ghazni. He looted Somnath, massacred people across the nation. No festival will be held in memory of such a looter," Chandra said. He warned that any attempt to raise the Neja flag would be considered an "anti-national act" and met with strict action.

The ban sparked outrage among members of the Neja Mela Committee and political leaders, who saw it as an infringement on religious traditions. SP MP Zia Ur Rehman Barq strongly opposed the ban, defending Ghazi's legacy. "It's historically inaccurate to link him to the Somnath attack in 1026 CE, as Ghazi was only 11 years old at the time. Historians find no evidence of his involvement. He was a revered Sufi saint who fought oppression and served humanity, not an invader," he said. The ban in Sambhal emboldened Hindu groups in Bahraich and Bhadohi, which submitted memoranda on March 23, urging similar prohibitions. Incidentally, Ghazi's dargah in Bahraich has traditionally been a site of syncretic worship by both, Hindus and Muslims. The VHP and other organisations alleged that the Neja Mela encouraged land encroachment and illegal conversions.

THE HINDUTVA PROJECT, SAY ITS CRITICS, IS NOT BOUND BY HISTORICAL AUTHENTICITY BUT DEPENDS ON CONSTANT AROUSAL OF PASSIONATE RAGE

Whose History Is It Anyway?

History, asserts author Nilanjan Mukhopadhyay, is being used as a clear tool for the enhancement of majoritarian politics. "We in India have been witnessing the harnessing of history to create public anger," he says, adding that it was most evident during the Ram temple movement of the mid-'80s. "The political message is clear—Hindus are the *nation* here, all others, particularly the Muslims, can live only as a matter of grace, not as a matter of right," says Purushottam Agrawal.

So, whether in Maharashtra or Uttar Pradesh—two of India's most powerful states that send 48 and 80 legislators, respectively, to the Lok Sabha—Hindutva groups are raking up India's medieval past to whip up public sentiment against everything Islamic or Islamicate. Medieval rulers are branded as villains, even if truth is seldom linear, or black and white. There is no room for nuance or complexity. Author and retired IAS officer Vishwas Patil asserts, "History is not a slave to anyone but is based on factual realities." He cites instances of Muslim kings giving endowments to Hindu institutions, and vice versa. "After killing (the Adilshahi general) Afzal Khan, Shivaji Maharaj provided land for his tomb and ensured its upkeep from his own purse. Shivaji Maharaj's father Shahaji and uncle Sharifji were named after the Sufi saint Shah Sharif, whose

INTERVIEW

“Our focus is on Mathura and Kashi only”

Vishva Hindu Parishad president **Alok Kumar** spoke to **Anilesh S. Mahajan** on the row surrounding Aurangzeb's tomb and the Hindu right's temple revival movements. Excerpts:

Q. How do you see the recent controversy around Aurangzeb and subsequent violence in Nagpur?

Our view is very clear. There should not be any glorification of Aurangzeb.... He imprisoned his own father; brutally killed his own brothers; executed Sufi saint Sarmad Kashani, Sikh Guru Tegh Bahadur; the entire family of Guru Gobind Singh was killed on his instructions; led large-scale conversions; desecrated temples. He can't be our hero.

Q. There has been a call for razing his tomb...

The VHP and other affiliates are working to build monuments that commemorate the heroes who stood against Aurangzeb. It is their valour and courage that must be taught to future generations.

Q. There is a similar confrontation at Sambhal in UP.

There is no confrontation with the VHP there. There were law and order issues, which the local government dealt with.

Q. There have been concerns that a particular community and its historical structures are being targeted. What is your stand?

As the VHP, we are very clear. We are taking up the issue of only Krishna Janmabhoomi temple in Mathura and the revival of ‘Gyanvapi Temple’ in Kashi. There is a full stop. We are taking legal recourse and are determined to recover these temples through constitutional ways. Gyanvapi, too, was desecrated by Aurangzeb.

Q. RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat,

“There should be no glorification of Aurangzeb. We are working to build monuments to commemorate heroes who stood against him”

in June 2022, had said that there is no need to look for a Shivling in every mosque. But we are still seeing lots of disputes being raked up.

Absolutely. What the RSS chief says is true. We should look for Shivlings only where they are; not in every mosque. Right now, our focus is on Mathura and Kashi, and nowhere else. ■

dargah is located in Ahmednagar,” he says.

Chhatrapati Shivaji, meanwhile, has become a figure of unique historical and contemporary significance, with all shades of public opinion appropriating the Maratha stalwart for political ends. While the Hindutva side sees him as a Hindu king taking on the might of the Muslim rulers, leftist ideologues like Govind Pansare project him as a people’s king who took on the established order of the day across caste and religious lines to establish a welfare state.

In fact, Marathi historian Indrajeet Sawant sees Aurangzeb’s tomb as a symbol of Maratha valour. Sanjay Sonawani, writer and activist, begs to differ, though. “Aurangzeb died at age 89 and was buried at Khultabad as per the wish expressed



in his will,” he says. “He would have been interred here even if he died elsewhere. Claims that his grave being located in Maharashtra symbolises Maratha valour do not hold.”

Political analyst Abhay Deshpande is convinced that the Aurangzeb issue has been raised with an eye on the local body polls scheduled later this year. Besides catching the opposition Shiv Sena (Uddhav Balasaheb Thackeray) in a bind on the issue of Hindutva—the SS(UBT) has developed an auxiliary base among Muslims—the controversy also laid bare the oneupmanship within the ruling alliance. “The BJP and Shiv Sena are trying to show that their version of Hindutva is more strident,” he says. Both parties have taken an aggressive position on the issue, but their ally, the Nationalist Congress Party

(NCP), led by deputy chief minister Ajit Pawar, has expressed unease at the growing tide of majoritarian politics. Ajit Pawar has warned that those threatening Muslims will not be spared. NCP leaders say law-and-order disruptions do not bode well for the state at a time it is trying to attract investors. Congress leaders too assert that communal issues are being raked up to deflect attention from more critical matters such as farmers' suicides and unemployment.

The Hindutva Objectives

Hindutva advocates, however, dismiss accusations of stoking history for political gain. VHP president Alok Kumar is clear when he says, "There should be no glorification of Aurangzeb. He imprisoned his own father, brutally killed his own brothers...led large-scale conversions, desecrated temples. He can't be our hero." (See interview, 'Our focus is on Mathura and Kashi only') Author Amish (see column *Time to Choose Our Heroes Wisely*), while acknowledging the historical significance of medieval Muslim rulers prefers that we "don't celebrate them".

Surprisingly, it is the RSS that has been advocating restraint. Following the construction of the Ram temple in Ayodhya, the RSS has been more nuanced in its strategy. It has warned the stormtroopers of the Sangh parivar not to engage in any illegal activity for correcting historical wrongs but to approach the courts for relief. Thus the Gyanvapi Masjid dispute in Varanasi, the Krishna Janmabhoomi-Shahi Idgah

battle in Mathura and even the Shahi Jama Masjid campaign in Sambhal are being fought in the courts of law. It was the Supreme Court that permitted local officials to survey the Gyanvapi Masjid even though it upheld the Places of Worship Act. Sangh affiliates are now challenging the very constitutionality of the 1991 legislation and the apex court's decision is awaited. Back in 2022, RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat had also told "overenthusiastic" swayamsevaks not to look for shivlings under every mosque, as Sangh insiders feared such "overexuberance" would turn the entire Muslim community against them. When reminded of Bhagwat's statement, Alok Kumar interpreted it to mean "looking for shivlings where they are".

Meanwhile, in Nagpur, a week after the initial unrest, civic officials demolished the house of an accused in the riots. The Bombay High Court stayed the demolition of the properties of two persons accused of being involved in the violence and warned the administration to follow the due process of law for any such activity. Curfew was lifted six days after the violence, and a fragile peace hangs over the city beneath the looming cinematic backdrop of medieval bloodshed, and passions now projected in digital clarity, and the surround-sound clangour of political mobilisation. ■

-with Anilesh S. Mahajan, Amarnath K. Menon, Rohit Parihar, Ajay Sukumaran and Arkamoy Datta Majumdar

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TIME TO CHOOSE OUR HEROES WISELY



AMISH

A quiet but significant debate has been reignited following the release of the film *Chhaava*—should India continue to preserve the tomb of Emperor Aurangzeb who history unequivocally remembers as a cruel, repressive and sectarian ruler? Expectedly, the debate is heated and polarised.

In my recent podcast episode of 'Immortal India', I attempted a calm, respectful and honest approach on the issue. I attempt it now in the written format.

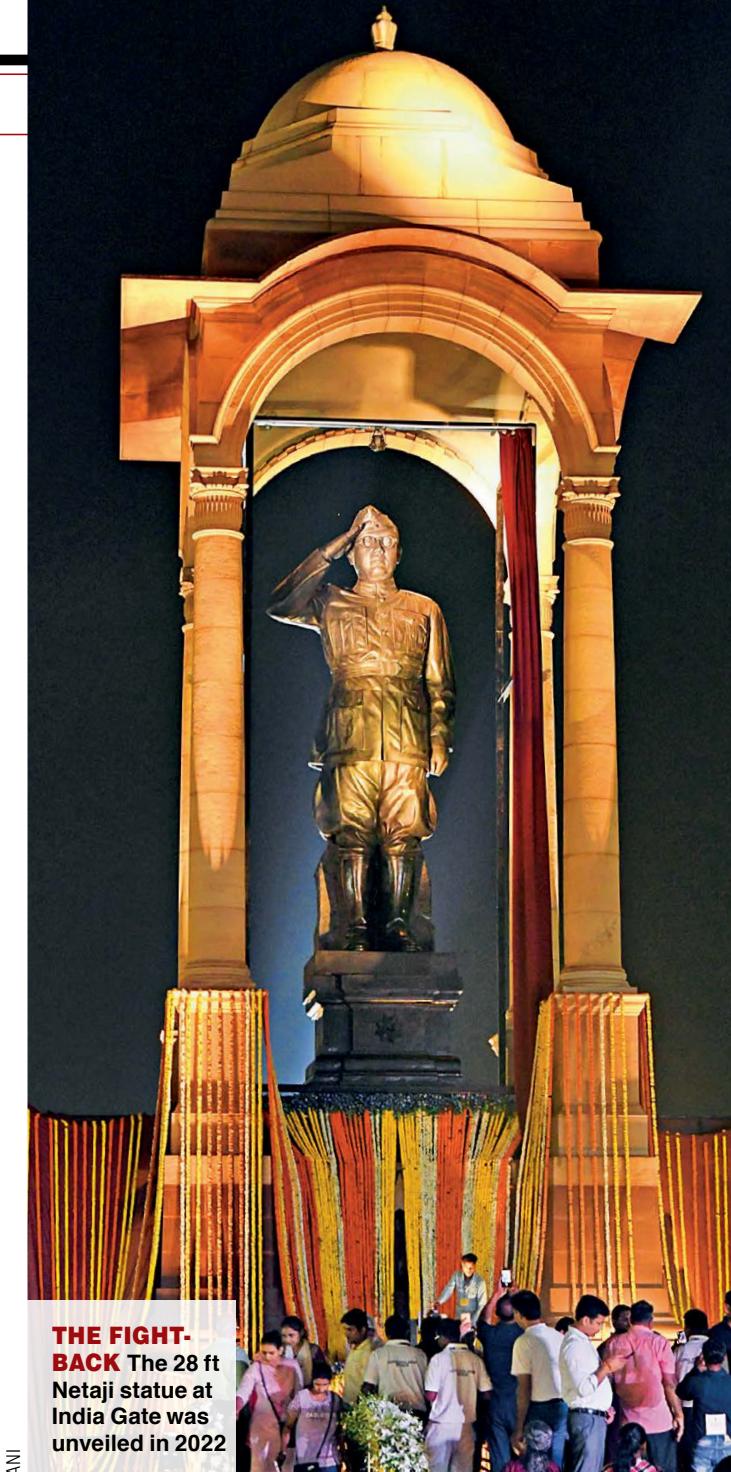
Firstly, a clear statement: no culture with any sense of self-respect or a desire to survive glorifies its historical oppressors. France does not have memorials celebrating the Nazi invaders. Israel does not name parks after Hitler. These are not acts of erasing history but of self-respect. Memories of such oppressors remain in books and museums—where they belong—not in ceremonial public spaces.

India has witnessed horrific invasions and centuries of subjugation. From the Turkic Delhi Sultans to the Timurid Mughals to the British, we have seen wave after wave of foreign domination. Yes, they left their mark. I write this very column in English, after all. Our architecture, cuisine, administrative systems—all bear traces of these past rulers. But acknowledging their influence is different from celebrating them. The former is history. The latter is absurdity.

Imagine this: a family repeatedly brutalised by outsiders later lovingly preserves the portraits of their tormentors in their homes. Ridiculous, right? Or perhaps an internalised inferiority complex?

We are not that family. We should not be.

India has been shaped by many forces—both noble and ignoble. But let us be honest in recognising the duality of major historical crimes in our land. The first was the brutal violence unleashed by foreign invaders—Turkic (who were Muslim), and British (who were Christian). The second was the internal oppression of our backward and Dalit communities by upper castes. Both have wounded our civilisation deeply. And both must be remembered, mourned, and



THE FIGHT BACK The 28 ft Netaji statue at India Gate was unveiled in 2022

ANI

healed from.

Yet, a curiously damaging hypocrisy has emerged in modern India. The Left-liberal discourse rightly demands a confrontation with the second crime—caste-based oppression—and insists on social justice through reservations and dialogue. We have seen progress—India's first full-term OBC prime minister, and a president from a Scheduled Tribe background. These are signs of movement in the right direction, even if we have further to go.

But the same Left-liberal voices often counsel silence on the first crime. They say, "Let's not talk about the violence

by Muslim or British invaders. It may upset the social fabric." But why? Why must one trauma be remembered, and the other buried?

This selective amnesia breeds resentment. If truth and reconciliation is healing caste wounds to a commendable extent, why can't the same principle be applied to historical wounds left by foreign conquest?

Let us be clear: this is not about blaming today's Muslims or Christians. Just as no reasonable Dalit child today blames an upper-caste child personally for historical injustice. We must not identify today's communities with past atrocities. But we must remember the past honestly—because memory is the foundation of wisdom.

And if we are to celebrate, let us celebrate our heroes—not our oppressors. The canopy at India Gate in Delhi once housed the statue of the colonial emperor King George V. Today, it houses the statue of Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose. The symbolism is clear: we must honour those who fought for us, not those who oppressed us. Shouldn't we extend this logic across India?

Let us celebrate Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj, the lion who stood tall against Timurid-Mughal imperial tyranny.

Let us honour the valiant Sikh gurus who resisted forced conversions. Let us teach our children about the Ahom generals of Assam, the Jat warriors, the Naga babas and many others who defended our culture from Aurangzeb's attacks.

Even within the Timurid-Mughal dynasty, there were men of wisdom and compassion. Dara Shikoh—Aurangzeb's

elder brother—sought to bridge Hinduism and Islam. He translated many of the Upanishads to Persian, and authored *Majma-ul-Bahrain*, a book that sought the confluence of the two faiths. He imagined an India united in spirit, diverse in form. And what was his fate? Tortured, mutilated and executed by Aurangzeb, who sent his head in a box to their father, Emperor Shah Jahan.

Should we memorialise Aurangzeb or Dara Shikoh? The answer is clear. One symbolises tyranny and bigotry. The other, inclusivity and wisdom. Aurangzeb's ideology is celebrated in Pakistan. Perhaps we should respectfully send his bones to them. In its place, let us build a memorial to Dara Shikoh, as a symbol of true Ganga-Jamuni tehzeeb, one that reflects mutual respect, not erasure. India is a civilisational state, not just a nation-state. Civilisations do not forget. And they do not foolishly honour their tormentors. It is time we choose our civilisational heroes wisely. ■

Amish is a bestselling author and broadcaster

WHY ARE WE DIGGING GRAVES OF THE PAST?



PURUSHOTTAM AGRAWAL

The demand to dismantle the grave of Aurangzeb is only the latest in a drama series of which some episodes have been aired while others are in the pipeline. The series is the project of political Hindutva which has been unfolding vigorously for some time, and Aurangzeb is one of the most important figures in this

narrative. Seen objectively in a historical perspective, Aurangzeb was ruthlessly consistent in the pursuit of power and more cruel than the average medieval king. He was also very suspicious, even intolerant of artistic expressions of human creativity. But the fact remains that he presided over the centralised administration of an Indian empire of unprecedented vastness and with a robust economy. And he did it with the active support of the Hindu elites—feudal lords, merchants and intellectuals. He also could not hold it together due to the sheer burden of its size and, perhaps more importantly, due to not paying enough attention to Akbar's model of *sulah-e-kul* (tolerance and dialogue)—as pointed out by Shivaji in a famous letter.

Obviously, present-day political Hindutva would reject even Shivaji here. How can one praise Akbar and his policies? After all, he was also a Mughal, a Muslim hence an alien to the Hindu *rashtra*. The question, 'Who says Akbar was great?', is not merely the title of a tract by Hindutva 'historian' P.N. Oak, but has also been part of the general Hindutva rhetoric. Just nine years ago, some of the BJP's top leaders wanted Akbar Road in Delhi to be renamed.

Be it the Gyansavi mosque in Varanasi, a road in Lutyens' Delhi, a masjid in Sambhal or the grave in Sambhajinagar, the imagination of our future is also at stake here, not merely the facts of the past. In both its avatars—recorded history and popular memory—the past is sought to be converted into raw material for manufacturing consent on the Hindutva project. The



PTI

SEEING RED A Bajrang Dal protest demanding removal of the Aurangzeb tomb in Sambhajinagar, Mar. 17

appetite is insatiable. Following Aurangzeb's grave, the Taj Mahal and the Lal Qila could be next in line. After all, in the Hindutva imagination, the Taj Mahal was originally a Shiva temple and Lal Qila was the Lal Kot constructed by the Tomar dynasty.

The point, therefore, is to assess this project. Is it capable of carrying Indian society into a prosperous and happy future? Is it even authentic historically? Ironically, the project itself does not seem confident in this regard and hence takes recourse to hurt sentiments instead of reasoned discourse. Like any totalitarian political project, Hindutva also heavily depends on a constant arousal of passionate rage and hurt and has acquired the vocal support of large sections of our mass media which are willingly fanning the fires instead of providing space for serious discussions on real issues of governance. The real content here is political, not historical, otherwise the demands for removing the vestiges of the British raj would also be made with the same passion. The political message is clear—Hindus are the *nation* here, all others, and particularly the Muslims, can live only as a matter of grace, not as a matter of right.

Political Hindutva's existential dependence on the Muslim as the permanently frightening Other has historical roots, but cannot be addressed merely through historians' interventions, howsoever authentic and sincere. It can be addressed only through the politics of a future-oriented, inclusive and democratic idea of India, which formed the core of our national movement and had so far been generally hegemonic. Hindutva seeks to replace this idea with its own version, claiming civilisational authenticity.

LIKE ANY TOTALITARIAN POLITICAL PROJECT, HINDUTVA ALSO DEPENDS HEAVILY ON A CONSTANT AROUSAL OF PASSIONATE RAGE AND HURT

This claim hardly holds water as it refuses to see the dynamic character of Indian cultural experience and its diversity. On the other hand, the inclusive idea of India recognises both the long continuity of Indian civilisation and its historically evolving diversity. Jawaharlal Nehru most appropriately compared Indian civilisation to a palimpsest carrying traces of so many writings over the centuries. The Indian national movement undertook the task of evolving a modern nation out of this palimpsest-like civilisation.

This undertaking required, and still requires, negotiating historical tensions, caste, community and cultural fault-lines within the framework of a shared imagination of a humane and democratic society. It hardly matters to Akbar, Shahjahan and Aurangzeb what you do with their various memorials, but it matters a lot to the present and future of India as a civilisation and as a nation-state. Can we build a happy future on the basis of constant demonisation of some Indians merely on the basis of their faith sys-

tem? Can a society afford to be constantly angry over its past? Can we erase history by demolishing a grave and by utterly simplifying the character of any historical figure and his/ her times? Do we prefer to preserve the palimpsest of Indian civilisation or tear it apart? Do we imagine ourselves as building the edifice of the future or digging up the graves of past? This is the real question, and our future depends on how it is answered. ■

Purushottam Agrawal is a historian and author who has engaged with Hindu nationalism for five decades now. He is currently writing a book on the Mahabharata



*Beach
Destination*

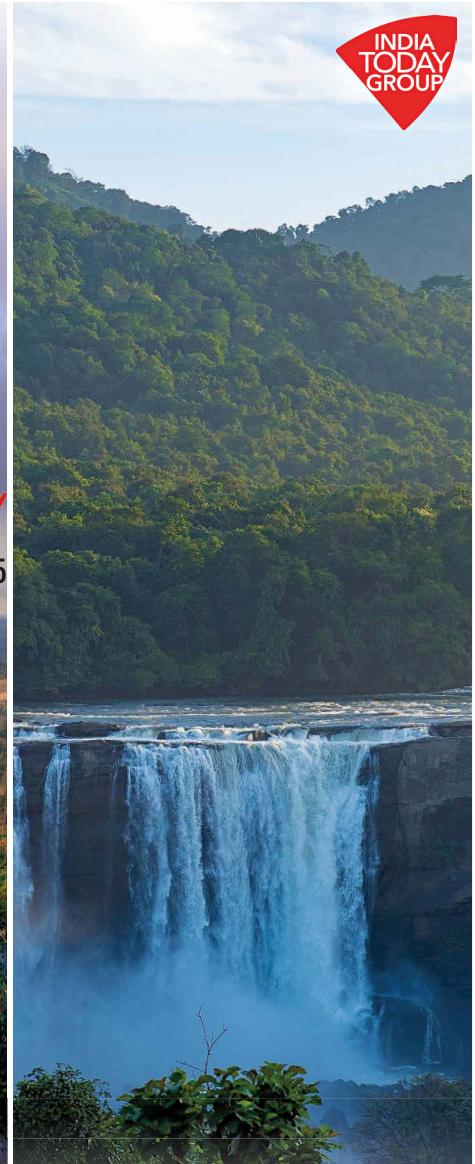
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DOOMED BY DAMS

Aerial view of the Yarlung Tsangpo's Great Bend, Medog County, China

GETTY IMAGES



THE BIG STORY / THE BRAHMAPUTRA

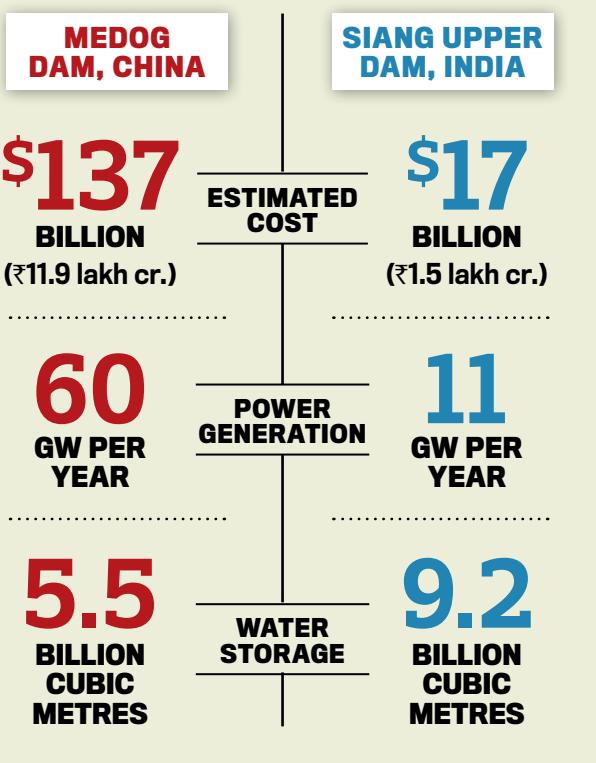
A HIMALAYAN RIVER THREAT

CHINA'S COLOSSAL BRAHMAPUTRA DAM PROJECT SPARKS ALARM IN INDIA, FUELING CONCERN OVER WATER SECURITY, ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT AND BEIJING'S GROWING UPSTREAM CONTROL OVER A CRITICAL RIVER

By KAUSHIK DEKA

CHINA'S MEGA DAM, INDIA'S COUNTER

China is planning a massive hydropower project in Medog County, just 30 km from Arunachal Pradesh. In response, India aims to fast-track the Siang Upper Multipurpose Project at Parong in the state



Originating from the icy grip of the Angsi Glacier, near the northern slopes of the Himalayas, close to Lake Manasarovar in western Tibet, the Yarlung Tsangpo—known as Siang in Arunachal Pradesh and the Brahmaputra in Assam—embarks on a long and winding 2,900 km journey. It flows eastward across the Tibetan Plateau, a seemingly calm giant, until it reaches the easternmost edge of the Himalayas. And then, it encounters an obstacle—a towering 7,782-metre peak called the Namcha Barwa. But the river does not stop. In one of nature's most breathtaking feats, it takes a dramatic U-turn around the mountain—the Great Bend, one of the sharpest and most spectacular river bends on Earth.

What follows is pure fury. The river plunges into the Yarlung Tsangpo Grand Canyon, a monstrous 500km-long chasm with depths exceeding 5,000 metres—nearly five times the height of Dubai's Burj Khalifa, the tallest structure in the world. It is one of the deepest and most treacherous canyons on the planet, where the river transforms into a roaring beast, its waters churning with an unstoppable force. This is where China wants to step in. The steep gradient at the Great Bend holds unparalleled hydroelectric potential that Beijing is determined to exploit. The plan? A colossal hydropower project embedded deep into the unforgiving terrain of Medog County, Tibet—one of the last unexplored and most geologically unstable regions on Earth. It is a project of staggering proportions, a testament to human ambition and engineering audacity.

With an estimated cost of \$137 billion (Rs 11.9 lakh crore), this is poised to become the most powerful hydropower facility ever attempted, generating a jaw-dropping 60 GW of electricity annually—three times the output of China's own Three Gorges Dam, the current world record-holder, and surpassing the UK's entire annual energy consumption. Expected to be completed by 2033, the scale of the project is mind-boggling. To divert nearly half of the river's flow, Chinese engineers plan to drill tunnels up to 12.5 miles long through the Namcha Barwa mountain, rerouting 2,000 cubic metres of water per second—enough to fill three Olympic-sized swimming pools every second.

India's Great Worry

While China presents the project as a step toward achieving carbon neutrality by 2060, for India and Bangladesh, it signals a looming disaster. The dam's location, barely 30 km from Arunachal Pradesh, places it alarmingly close to India's border, raising security concerns in New Delhi. Worst-case scenarios throw up a nightmarish picture: if the dam were to fail—due to engineering flaws, an earthquake or even sabotage—the consequences would be catastrophic. A towering surge of water could rip through Arunachal Pradesh and Assam, wiping out entire towns within minutes. "This Chinese project isn't just a tease," says Michael Kugelman, director of the Washington-based South Asia Institute. "China has the capacity to mobilise capital quickly and build out large-scale infrastructure projects without delays, thanks to its centralised economy and undemocratic politics. This means New Delhi needs to start thinking now about how to mitigate the possible deleterious implications—especially for water security, the environment and geopolitics."

The Brahmaputra is a vital artery that sustains millions across four countries—China (50.5 per cent), India (33.6), Bangladesh (8.1) and Bhutan (7.8). More than just a waterway, it sustains agriculture, drinking water and energy needs, making any disruption to its flow a serious concern. For India, the primary worry is China's ability to control the Brahmaputra's flow. If Beijing releases excess water during monsoons, devastating floods could ravage India's northeastern states, particularly Assam and Arunachal Pradesh, where nearly 40 per cent of the land is already flood-prone. The fallout—mass displacement, infrastructure collapse and economic devastation—would be severe.

Conversely, restricting water flow during dry months could cripple agriculture, hydropower generation and drinking water supplies. Given that the Brahmaputra accounts for nearly 30

per cent of India's freshwater resources, any interference poses a strategic threat. "The proposed hydropower project has the potential to alter the flow dynamics of the Yarlung Tsangpo-Brahmaputra, affecting water availability, by influencing both groundwater and surface water levels," warns Genevieve Donnellon-May, a researcher at the Oxford Global Society.

For Assam, the implications for agriculture are particularly alarming. The river's nutrient-rich sediments sustain rice, tea and jute cultivation. Any disruption—excessive flooding or drought—could slash crop yields, threaten food security and financially cripple thousands of farmers. If upstream damming reduces sediment flow, it could accelerate riverbank erosion, degrade soil fertility and leave lasting ecological scars.

India's concerns over China's hydro-power ambitions are well founded. In 2000, severe flooding in Arunachal Pradesh's Pasighat was linked to a dam collapse on Tibet's Yigong River. In 2012, the Siang River mysteriously ran dry, prompting then chief minister advisor Tako Dabi to blame China's dams. In 2016, China blocked the Xiabuqu River near India's border for the Lalho hydropower project, further raising suspicions. A year later, the Siang's waters turned black, igniting accusations against China. While Beijing dismissed the claims, satellite images later revealed that earthquakes on the Tibetan Plateau had triggered landslides, sending sediment downstream. "Storing water in a region with extensive mineral extraction—Tibet is home to over 100 exploited minerals—leads to contamination as mining runoff mixes with the water, forming black soot. Arunachal Pradesh has already seen instances of blackened water," says Srikanth Kondapalli, professor of Chinese Studies at Jawaharlal Nehru University. Adding to the uncertainty, open-source data from the Tibetan Autonomous Region suggests irregular river flow patterns in 2024, deviating from the trends of the past 25 years.

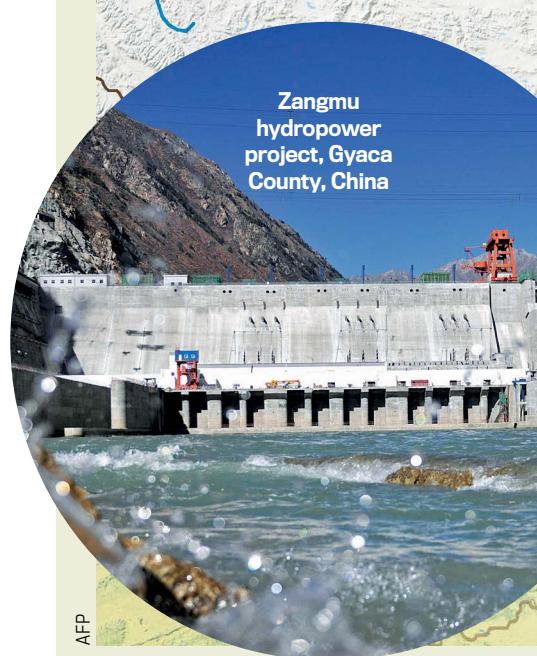
What raises even deeper concerns is China's broader ambition—to divert the Yarlung Tsangpo to its arid Xinjiang province. Gopal Dhawan, founder and chairman of the Dr Dhawan Academy of Geologists, and former CMD, Mineral Exploration and Consultancy Ltd and NHPC, warns that if China stores and redirects water through an inter-basin transfer scheme, "any projects we develop will face water shortages and be adversely affected." Though several experts rule out any such possibility, doubts persist. "The Medog dam appears to be a hydroelectric project rather than a water storage and diversion initiative. But given China's track record of undertaking large-scale infrastructure projects, such a possibility cannot be ruled out," says A.K. Bajaj, former chairman of the Central Water Commission. Amid these uncertainties, New Delhi has made its apprehensions clear to Beijing. "We have consistently raised concerns over China's mega river projects," says foreign ministry spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal, asserting India's lower riparian rights. He states that India will continue pressing China to safeguard downstream interests and "take necessary measures to protect our interests".



"This region is the most sediment-rich and sediment-producing area on Earth. As a result, dams here degrade faster, increasing the risk for downstream populations"

RUTH GAMBLE

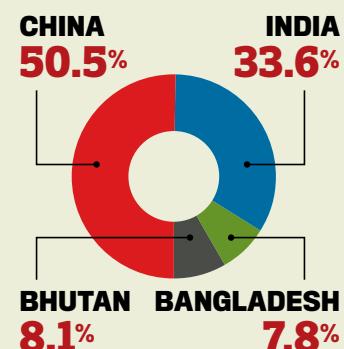
Deputy Director (Research), La Trobe Asia, La Trobe University, Australia



Zangmu
hydropower
project, Gyaca
County, China

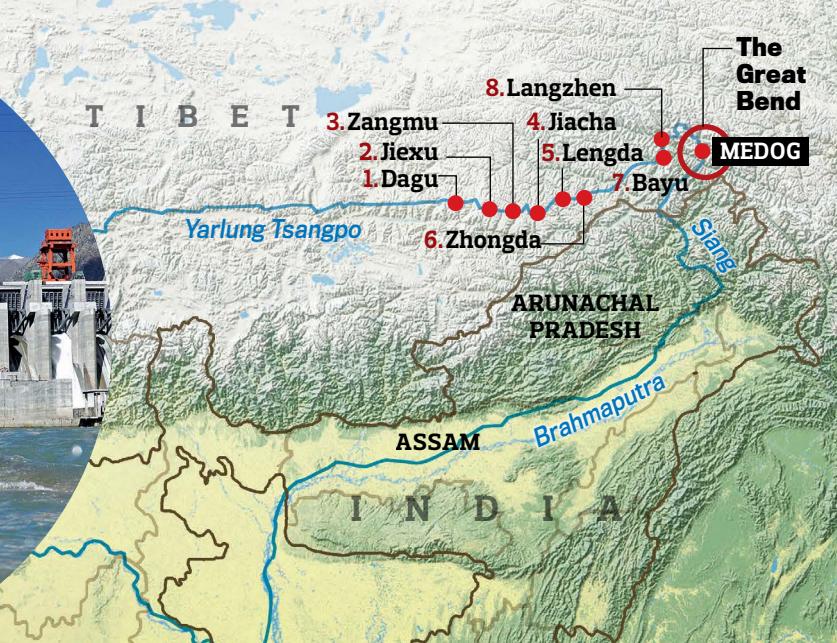
A LONG COURSE

The Yarlung Tsangpo originates from the Angsi Glacier near Lake Manasarovar in western Tibet and flows into the Bay of Bengal. The Brahmaputra River extends across four countries



China's Water Hegemony

The Tibetan Plateau feeds 10 major river systems sustaining over a dozen Asian nations. Among them, two stand out for their geopolitical weight: the Mekong, which courses through Southeast Asia, and the Brahmaputra. China's aggressive dam-building along these rivers has triggered alarm over its push for hydro-hegemony, particularly given its refusal to sign water-sharing treaties. China's treatment of the



CHINA'S HYDROPOWER UNIVERSE

Besides the colossal Medog project, China has completed three other projects on the Yarlung Tsangpo, has one more under construction, and plans to build four additional ones

1. DAGU

Sangri
660 MW
Operational since 2021

3. ZANGMU

Gyaca County
510 MW
Operational since 2015

2. JIEXU

Sangri
510 MW
Under construction

4. JIACHA

Jiacha
360 MW
Operational since 2020

5. LENGDA

Gyaca
320 MW
Work likely to begin this year

6. ZHONGDA

Zhongda
320 MW
Proposed

7. BAYU

Zengqi
800 MW
Proposed

8. LANGZHEN

Lang
340 MW
Proposed

DAM OR DISASTER?

Why China's Medog dam plan is dangerous for India and the Himalayan ecology

By controlling the Brahmaputra's flow, China gains a strategic tool in broader India-China relations, especially in border negotiations

If China releases excess water during the monsoons, India's Northeast could face catastrophic floods; restricting the flow during dry months could cripple agriculture and energy supply

Disruptions in the Brahmaputra's flow could devastate rice, tea and jute cultivation, threatening farmers' livelihoods

Dam construction may block sediment flow, degrading soil fertility and accelerating riverbank erosion

Indian power plants relying on the Brahmaputra could face blackouts if China manipulates water levels

The region's fragile geomorphology makes dam failures from landslides or glacial lake outbursts a serious concern

Large-scale deforestation for the project could accelerate landslides and reduce soil stability

The Himalayas are highly earthquake-prone. The massive dam could trigger reservoir-induced seismicity and destabilise the Earth's fault lines, further increasing earthquake risks

There is apprehension that China may use the dam to divert the Brahmaputra's flow to arid regions under the South-North Water Transfer Project

Mekong offers a stark warning for India and Bangladesh. Over two decades, Beijing has constructed 12 massive dams along the river's upper reaches, disrupting natural flows and worsening environmental stress downstream. In 2019, despite above-average rainfall, China's upstream dams hoarded record amounts of water, triggering droughts in Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam. In 2021, it slashed the Mekong's flow by 50 per cent for three weeks—citing

power-line maintenance—without prior notice, leaving millions struggling for irrigation, fisheries and drinking water. These unilateral actions stoke fears that Beijing could deploy similar tactics on the Brahmaputra.

The Medog dam isn't an isolated project but part of a grand strategy. Sayanangshu Modak, a doctoral researcher at the University of Arizona's School of Geography, Development and Environment, says the Yarlung Tsangpo

stretch was marked for hydropower as early as 2003. Since the 2010s, China has steadily expanded its hydropower footprint on the Brahmaputra's upper reaches. The Zangmu dam, completed in 2015, set the stage for further projects at Dagu, Jiacha and Jiexu. Satellite imagery now reveals nearly 20 dams—large and small—along the river, signalling Beijing's long-term water ambitions. "The new move appears to be the latest step by Beijing to maintain

an upper hand in the region's water geography," says Kugelman.

India is also wary of the timing of the Medog dam approval, which came just as New Delhi and Beijing resumed talks after a prolonged diplomatic freeze post-Doklam (2017) and Galwan (2020). Many analysts see it as a calculated move to pressure India in border negotiations. By intertwining territorial disputes with transboundary rivers, Beijing is likely angling for strategic concessions.

A Himalayan Blunder?

As debate rages over the potential impact of the Medog Dam on India and Bangladesh, one fact is undisputed: its construction poses irreversible ecological risks to the fragile Himalayan region. Dams can trigger tremors, a phenomenon known as reservoir-induced seismicity—when the immense weight of impounded water destabilises fault lines of the Earth. "The sheer weight of a vast reservoir could induce small earthquakes by exerting pressure on the Earth's crust. In an already hyper-seismic zone, the consequences of such stress remain dangerously unpredictable," warn Robert Wasson, adjunct professor, College of Science and Engineering, James Cook University, Australia, and emeritus professor, Fenner School of Environment and Society Australian National University, and Shukla Acharjee, assistant professor, Centre for Studies in Geography, Dibrugarh University.

Beyond seismic threats, the dam's sheer scale demands mass deforestation, stripping the region of its green cover and natural stabilisers. Without tree roots anchoring the soil, heavy monsoon rains could trigger deadly mudslides, raising the risk of dam failure.

The Himalayas, already crumbling under climate stress, have seen a surge in Glacial Lake Outburst Floods, avalanches and landslides. "On March 22, 2021, a massive glacier collapsed in the Sedongpu River basin, on the left bank of the Grand Canyon of the Yarlung Tsangpo and blocked the river and caused water levels to rise by 10

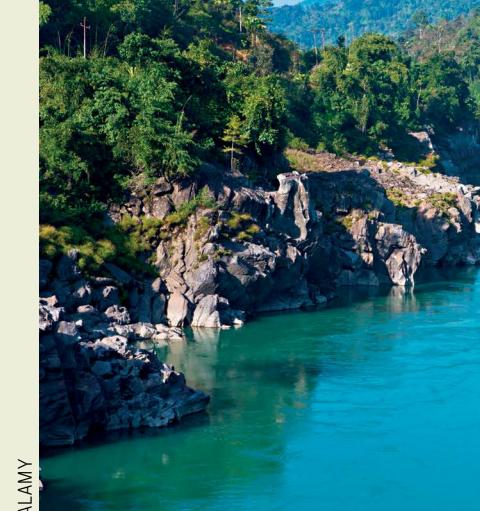
HOW INDIA SHOULD RESPOND

THE MANY WAYS IN WHICH INDIA CAN COUNTER CHINA'S WATER DOMINANCE

► Instead of relying on temporary MoUs with China, India must push for a legally binding treaty that guarantees fair and transparent water distribution

► An alliance with lower riparian nations like Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nepal can increase diplomatic pressure on China to adopt more responsible water-sharing policies. India should demand year-round hydrological data-sharing rather than just seasonal flood reports to prevent unexpected surges or shortages

► India needs to strengthen its river management systems



by investing in advanced flood forecasting, efficient drainage networks and climate-resilient infrastructure to safeguard vulnerable regions. Cutting-edge surveillance technology should be deployed to monitor Chinese dam activities in real-time and identify any unusual changes in water flow

► To counter China's growing influence over the Brahmaputra, India must expedite the construction of the Siang



"We have consistently raised concerns over China's mega river projects. India will continue pressing China to take necessary measures to protect our interests"

RANDHIR JAISWAL Spokesperson, Ministry of External Affairs

metres," says Modak. Wasson and Acharjee note that the Tsangpo Gorge is one of the most geologically dynamic—and possibly the most active—regions on Earth. "It experiences extreme floods, with peak flows reaching up to a million cubic metres per second. A single such flood can erode as much of the gorge as 4,000 years' worth of annual flow," they add.

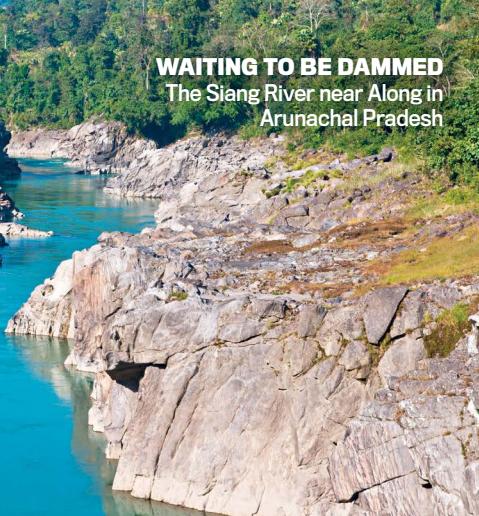
The region's volatile geo-morphology also makes dam stability a growing concern. Earthquakes, heavy siltation and landslides will shorten the dams' lifespan. After the January 7 earthquake, inspections of 14 hydropower dams

in Tibet found structural cracks in five, forcing three to be emptied. "This region is the most sediment-rich and sediment-producing area on Earth. As a result, dams here degrade faster, increasing the risk for downstream populations," says Ruth Gamble, deputy director (research), La Trobe Asia, La Trobe University, Australia, who specialises in the environmental, cultural and climate history of Tibet, the Himalayas and Asia.

On its part, China insists the Medog project is a clean energy game-changer, not a geopolitical weapon. Wang Lei, chargé d'affaires at the Chinese Embassy in India, dismisses concerns about adverse

WAITING TO BE DAMMED

The Siang River near Along in Arunachal Pradesh



Upper Multipurpose Project in Arunachal Pradesh. Additionally, large reservoirs and artificial lakes should be developed to store excess water released by China, reducing the risk of sudden floods and water shortages

► A robust disaster management system needs to be established to effectively respond to unexpected water surges or supply disruptions caused by Chinese dam operations

impacts on India and Bangladesh, framing the project as a climate-friendly solution that will power 300 million people while curbing fossil fuel use. Backing this stance, Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson Guo Jiakun says the project underwent rigorous scientific evaluation and poses no risk to downstream ecosystems, geological stability or water rights. Instead, Beijing argues it will help mitigate floods and aid climate adaptation in India and Bangladesh. However, China's assurances on the Medog Dam ring hollow, given its track record of secrecy, unilateralism and broken commitments on transboundary rivers. Independent researcher Gabriel Lafitte has highlighted that past Chinese project announcements have been long on statistics but short on execution details.

India's Counter

A decade ago, India embarked on a defensive hydropower strategy to counter China's upstream dam-building spree on the Brahmaputra. Rooted in the international legal principle of "prior

appropriation"—which grants water rights to the first user—India's plan aims to pre-emptively secure control over the river's flow. "India can still challenge Beijing by constructing its own dams near the border, keeping China on edge. This would give New Delhi some leverage in potential water negotiations with Beijing," says Kugelman.

After Beijing announced the Medog Dam, India has accelerated plans for the Siang Upper Multipurpose Project (SUMP)—a colossal hydropower dam in Arunachal Pradesh intended to counter China's influence over the river. With a proposed capacity of 11,000 MW, SUMP's reservoir would hold 9.2 billion cubic metres (bcm) of water, compared to Medog's 5.5 bcm. Estimated at \$17 billion (Rs 1.5 lakh crore), it will be India's most powerful hydroelectric project, designed to regulate water flow, mitigate seasonal droughts and serve as a safeguard against sudden surges from Chinese dams. While feasibility surveys are underway in Parong, a remote hamlet in Siang district, SUMP has faced resistance since its proposal by NITI Aayog in 2017. The project threatens to submerge over 30 villages, putting thousands at risk of displacement.

Experts also warn against escalating



"New Delhi needs to start thinking now about how to mitigate the possible deleterious implications—especially for water security, the environment and geopolitics"

MICHAEL KUGELMAN

Director, South Asia Institute, Washington

the dam race, as it could prompt China to fast-track its own projects, capitalising on its superior execution speed to shift the balance further in its favour. Such a move might also strain relations with Bangladesh, a crucial downstream stakeholder in any future Brahmaputra basin management framework. "The concerns we've raised about China's projects are equally relevant to Bangladesh," notes Prof. B.R. Deepak of the Centre for Chinese & Southeast Asian Studies at JNU.

Rather than pursuing a spree of dam construction, experts urge India to strengthen its northeastern water management systems. This includes enhancing independent river flow monitoring from China using advanced satellite technology, refining flood risk assessments and upgrading telemetry stations. Gamble points out that India lags behind China in studying Himalayan ecology and river systems. "India has yet to thoroughly analyse the flow data China has provided on the Yarlung Tsangpo. Instead of issuing threats over dam construction, India must invest in a deeper understanding of the region's hydrology and risks. Armed with this knowledge, it can engage China in informed negotiations, presenting concrete evidence on the downstream impacts," she asserts.

India and China share several major rivers, including the Brahmaputra, Sutlej and Indus. However, water-sharing remains a contentious issue, in the absence of a formal treaty. Despite China's upper riparian advantage, India can push for stronger data-sharing commitments under international conventions like the UN Watercourses Convention, which mandates that no country can take actions significantly harming another. However, neither India nor China is a signatory, and no Brahmaputra basin nation has ratified the 2014 UN Convention on Non-Navigational Water Uses, rendering first-user rights unenforceable.

In the Brahmaputra's turbulent waters, survival will depend not on the might of dams but on the foresight of nations. ■

- with India Today NE Bureau



LEADING THE WAY India Today Group Editorial Director (Publishing) Raj Chengappa (extreme left)



THE NEW PA

**INDIA TODAY GROUP'S 'DRIVERS OF CHANGE'
RECOGNISES 15 VISIONARIES WHOSE
INNOVATION, ACTIVISM AND HERITAGE
PRESERVATION ARE SHAPING THE FUTURE**

By Suhani Singh / Photographs by MILIND SHELTE, MANDAR DEODHAR

A

n environmental activist preserving centuries-old root bridges in Meghalaya (Morningstar Khongthaw); a doctor (Shalini Mishra) who left her medical practice to work for cow protection; a mechanical engineer (Vimal Govind M.K. of Genrobotics) who has developed the world's first man-hole-cleaning robot in a bid to eliminate manual scavenging and a social worker (Sudha Varghese) who moved to Bihar at age 16 to uplift the marginalised Musahar community. These were just some of the changemakers celebrated at the second

edition of Drivers of Change. Organised by the India Today Group in collaboration with Mahindra & Mahindra Ltd, India's leading SUV manufacturer, the event held on March 17 in Mumbai recognised 15 individuals across India who through their work are ensuring that 'Swarnim Bharat: Virasat aur Vikas' becomes a reality.

Rajesh Jejurikar, executive director & CEO, auto & farm sector, Mahindra & Mahindra Ltd, highlighted how India is a nation which has embraced modernity and technology but done so "within the



and Auto Today Editor Yogendra Pratap (10th from left) with 'Drivers of Change' achievers in Mumbai

THBREAKERS

guardrails of tradition and heritage". Fittingly so then, rudra veena maestro Ustad Bahauddin Dagar kicked off the evening, acquainting audiences to the rich sound of the majestic instrument. One of the recipients of the Drivers of Change recognition, apart from preserving the distinct performing art, he is also playing an active role in making the instrument. He wasn't the only achiever to walk the stage barefoot. Mohiniyattam dancer Methil Devika performed an invocatory piece on Goddess Bhadrakali as well as spoke on her attempts to make dance accessible to the hearing impaired by incorporating sign language in the classical movement vocabulary.

Two of the most inspiring sessions touched on technology and social

activism. In the first, three innovators—Vimal Govind, Neha Juneja, co-founder & CEO of IndiaP2P, and oncologist Dr Vishal Rao—described how their devices such as a smart, clean stove are transforming lives and helping to build a more 'Swarnim Bharat'. In the other, crusaders working for conservation of animals, preserving nature and advocating for organ donation took centre stage to recount their journeys against all odds. They included Jagat Kinkhabwala, heralded as the Sparrow Man of India for distributing free nests that have led to a surge in the bird's population, and Varghese, also known as Sister Sudha, whose Nari Gunjan has championed the rights of Bihar's Musahar community.

Apart from the winners, Arundhati Bhattacharya, chairperson and CEO, Salesforce India and South Asia, and former chairperson, SBI; Ashima Goyal, economist; and actor-filmmaker Boman Irani shared insights from their eventful careers. While Bhattacharya spoke of the need for an empathetic environment at the workplace to "support women staff" and Goyal noted a rise in women's participation in the workforce, Irani regaled audiences with a treasure trove of anecdotes and rallied support for screenwriters in cinema. Combined with umpteen stories of determination, activism, innovation and passion, the evening was proof that India's pride lies in its ability to appreciate the past as well as move forward. ■

DINESH BHIL

Archery trainer, Eklavya Archery Training Academy, Naswadi, Gujarat

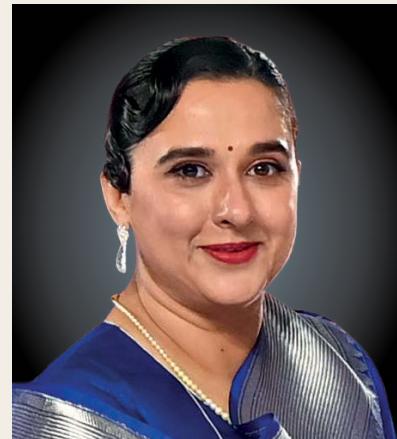
Despite acute poverty and limited access to education, he has coached hundreds of tribal youth in central Gujarat



RADHIKARAJE GAEKWAD

Handicraft crusader and textile revivalist

Revived traditional weaving techniques of Chanderi and Baroda Shalu sarees



DR VISHAL RAO

Oncologist and robotic surgeon, Trustwell Hospital, Bengaluru

Invented voice prosthesis Aum that 'cheats the brain' into using the food pipe as its voice box. It has benefited over 4,000 patients

METHIL DEVIKA

Mohiniyattam dance guru and performer

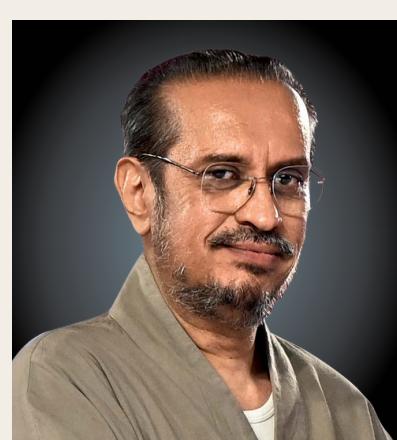
Merged Indian sign language with the traditional *hasta mudras* (hand gestures) in her performances



USTAD BAHAUDDIN DAGAR

Rudra veena maestro

Kept the Dagar Vani style of dhrupad alive on the rudra veena. He is an educator of the art for the future generations



DR SHALINI MISHRA

Cow protection activist; Director, Dhyan Foundation Gaushala

Her gaushala in Jharkhand's East Singhbhum district is a sanctuary for nearly 14,500 cattle cared for by a team of 300 locals



MORNINGSTAR KHONGTHAW

Environmental activist; Founder, Living Roots Bridges Foundation

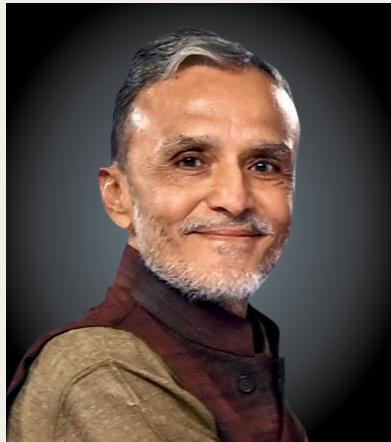
His foundation protects and promotes the trees crafted from *Ficus elastica* roots by the Khasi tribe. Maintains ageing bridges, builds new ones

SUDHA VARGHESE

Social worker; CEO, Nari Gunjan

Transforming the lives of the Musahar community of Bihar. Crafting programmes in literacy, vocational training, healthcare and advocacy for Dalit girls and women to reclaim their dignity

THE ACHIEVERS



JAGAT KINKHABWALA

Environment activist;
Sparrow Man of India

Spreading awareness about
sparrow conservation. Has dis-
tributed 260,000 free nests



YOGESH MALVIYA

Mallakhamb coach

Keeping the traditional Indian
sport alive by teaching young-
sters as the district coach of
Shajapur, Madhya Pradesh



PAWAN CHANDANA

Co-founder & CEO, Skyroot Aerospace

Skyroot Aerospace, which
launched India's first private com-
mercial rocket in 2022, is a fore-
runner aiming to tap a growing
global demand for launch vehicles



NILESH MANDLEWALA

Organ donation awareness activist;
Founder & President, Donate Life

Spreading awareness about
organ donation, addressing
concerns, misconceptions and
myths about it



NEHA JUNEJA

CEO & Co-founder, Greenway
Appliances

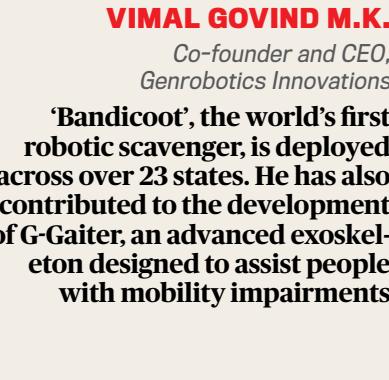
Greenway replaces traditional
mud stoves with its smart stove,
which reduces smoke by 70%
and cuts fuel usage by 65%

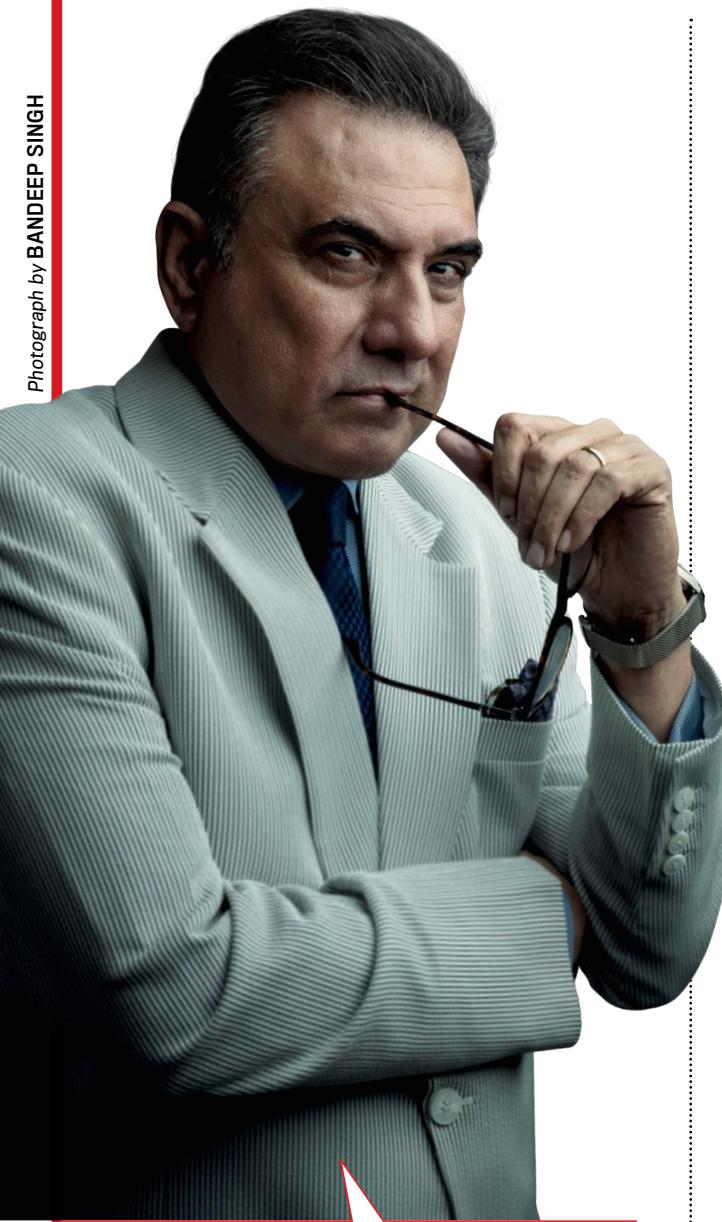


KAMIYA JANI

Social media influencer

Connecting people with India's
culinary traditions; received
the National Creator Award as
the Best Travel Creator from PM
Narendra Modi last year





"I don't think we pay enough attention to writing that much, which really bothers me. We need to nurture writers and make sure their name is on credits and that they are paid well. They are very important, for they can make or break a story"

BOMAN IRANI
Actor, filmmaker



"Viksit Bharat is possible, if and only if, the growth is inclusive. It cannot be growth confined to creating a few billionaires"

NARENDRA JADHAV

Former Rajya Sabha MP

"Freebies like the Ladki Bahin scheme are not enough. Women aspire to make a name in some field as well as contribute to the family income"

ASHIMA GOYAL

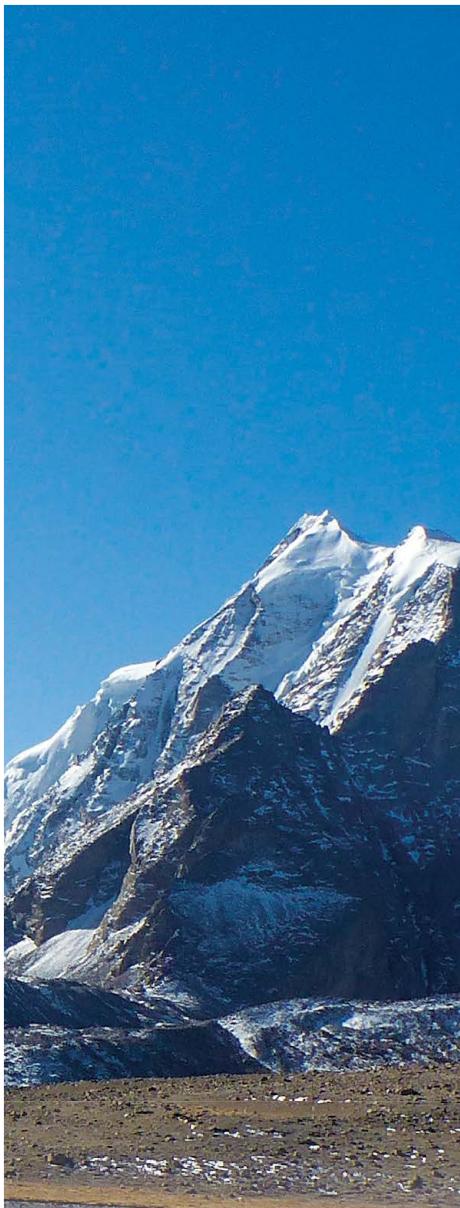
Economist and Emeritus Professor, IGIDR



"My message to women professionals is: have the resilience to trust yourselves and rise again (when you fall)"

ARUNDHATI BHATTACHARYA

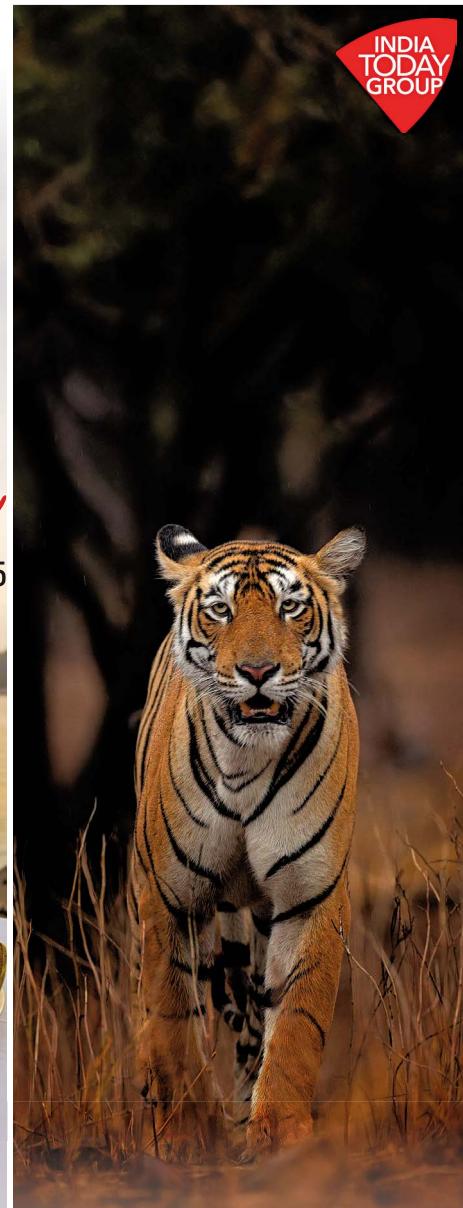
Chairperson and CEO, Salesforce India and South Asia; former chairperson, SBI




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SHINING MOMENTS

1. Rajesh Jejurikar, Executive Director & CEO, Auto & Farm Sector, Mahindra and Mahindra, with Boman Irani; **2.** Auto Today Editor Yogendra Pratap with Neha Anand, VP & Head - XUV Brand Portfolio & International Marketing, Mahindra Automotive; **3.**

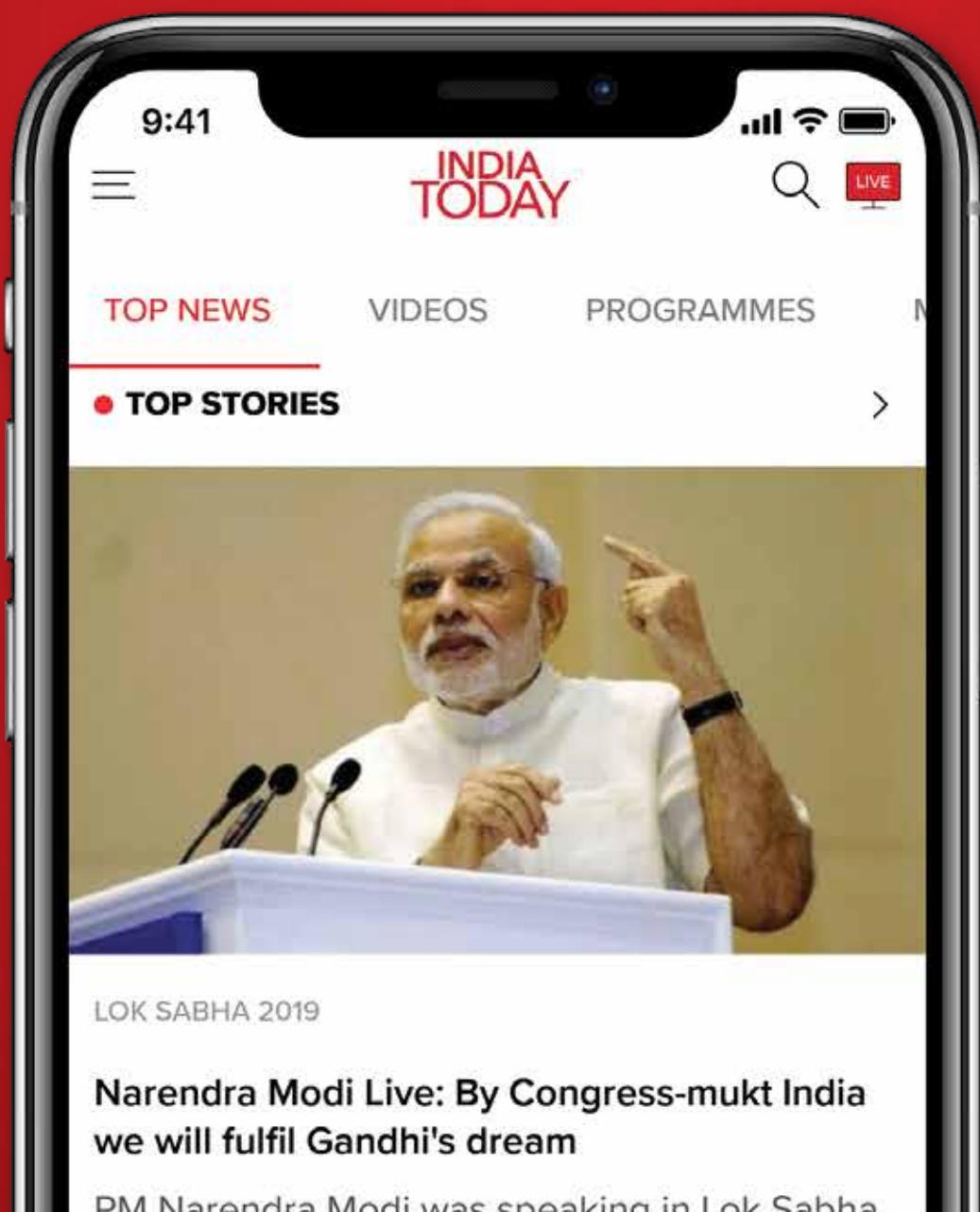
Irani with Mr & Mrs Narendra Jadhav; **4.** Ustad Bahauddin Dagar playing the rudra veena;

5. Mohiniyattam dancer Methil Devika performs; **6.** Manjari Upadhye, Chief Marketing Officer, Mahindra Automotive, with Arundhati Bhattacharya, Chairperson and CEO, Salesforce India & South Asia, former SBI Chairperson

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सबसे भयोसेमंद स्रोतों से, सबसे सटीक जानकारी

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आपनी तरह के इस पहले सर्वोत्तम जानकारी की
मोर्चा की अवधि और सामाजिक आलोचनाएँ
के बारे में फिर घास लोकने वाले खुलासे

मोदी सरकार की रणनीति की आवाहन

एसक्राइब इंटरेंज़ जानिए जान

“मार्च 2026 तक हम नवाचली खातर को उत्पादा कर देंगे”



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

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

टिक करें	अवधि	कुल अंक	कवर प्राइस (₹)	ऑफर प्राइस (₹)	प्लान	डिस्काउंट
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कृपया फॉर्म को ब्लॉकलेटर में भरें

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

नाम..... पता.....

..... शहर..... राज्य..... पिन.....

मोबाइल..... ईमेल.....



सबसक्राइब करने के लिए यहाँ स्कैन करें।

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

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LUXURY IN
GANGTOK

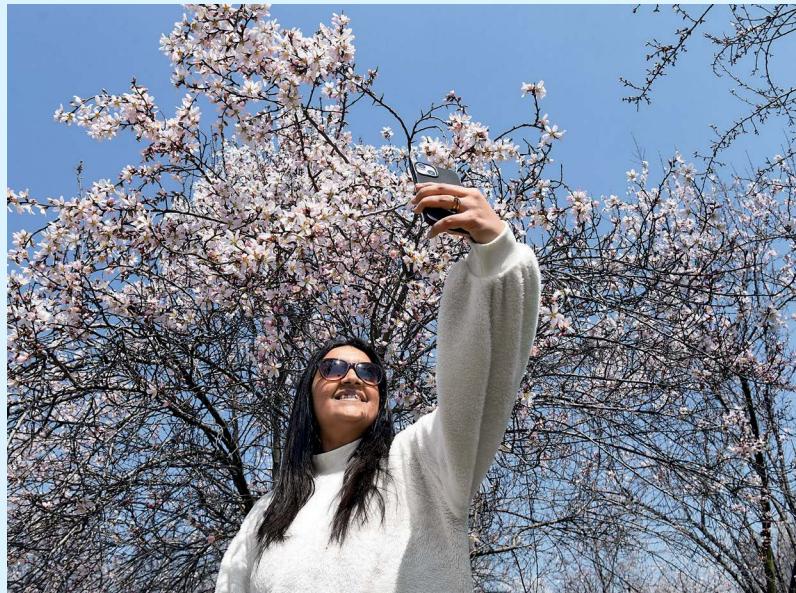
BEST OF SIKKIM

HILL ADVENTURES
IN SOUTH INDIA



Lake Tsomgo
on the way to
Nathu La

Spring is in the Air



Srinagar's almond trees are in bloom, and nowhere more stunningly than at Badamwari, a historical garden set in the foothills of Hari Parbat Fort. The almond blossoms, some of the first to appear as spring comes to the valley, are a sight to behold, and herald the start of Kashmir's flower season. Asia's largest tulip garden had its annual reopening in Srinagar on March 26 with much fanfare. Cherry and pear blossoms will follow, not to mention the numerous wildflowers across the meadows of Kashmir. The horticulture department has also planted thousands of lavender plants in the upper reaches of Badamwari and plans to turn it into a themed garden. Provence in paradise?

Nam for the Gram

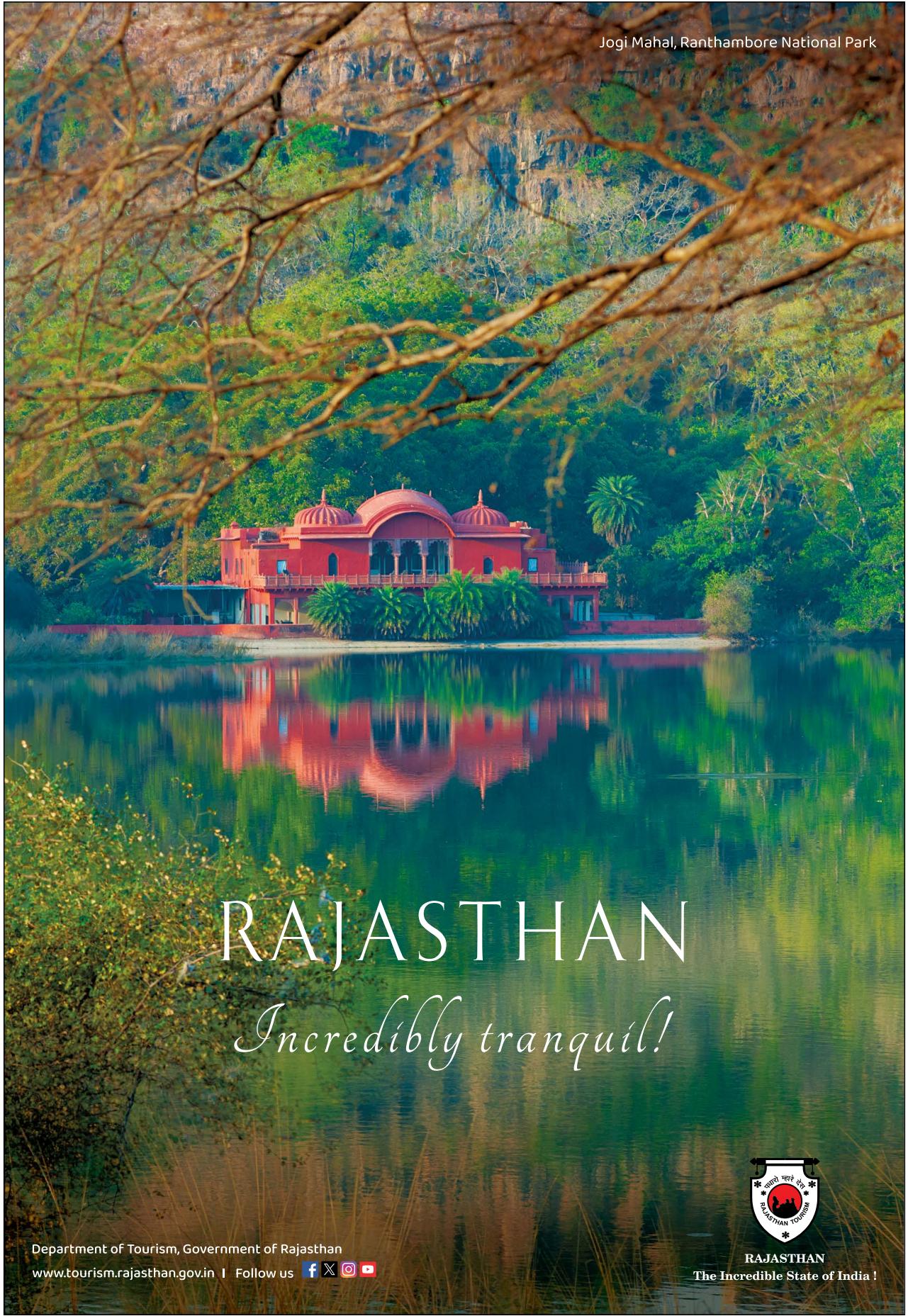
Vietnam has seen a surge in tourists from India in recent years. From 138,000 in 2022, the number of Indian travellers to Vietnam grew to 392,000 in 2023, before reaching a whopping 501,000 in 2024. India is now the sixth-largest international tourist market for Vietnam. This growth is in part thanks to the launch of direct flights between the two countries. Low-cost carrier Vietjet, which debuted in India in 2019, further strengthened its presence in the country with the launch of new direct flights connecting Hyderabad and Bengaluru to Ho Chi Minh City on March 18 and 19, respectively. A.k.a. Saigon, Ho Chi Minh City is the economic powerhouse of Vietnam and famed for its street food and proximity to major tourist attractions. While Hyderabad to Ho Chi Minh City flights are twice a week, Bengaluru to Ho Chi Minh City is a thrice-weekly service.



TRAVEL MADE EASY FOR SENIORS

Online travel booking platform EaseMyTrip has announced a strategic partnership with Sukoon Unlimited, a premium senior care service provider, to offer exclusive benefits tailored for senior citizens. The collaboration aims to make travel more accessible, comfortable and stress-free for elderly travellers booking flights through EaseMyTrip. Offerings include personalised assistance to make booking flights effortless, exclusive discounts, priority seating, wheelchair assistance, and on-ground support at airports for those in need. Beyond these travel conveniences, Sukoon Unlimited will offer complimentary wellness services such as pre- and post-travel consultations, ensuring that senior travellers are well-prepared and receive the necessary care. Senior citizens can look forward to a seamless travel experience with these specially designed services.





Jogi Mahal, Ranthambore National Park

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NEW HOTEL OPENINGS

The hotel scene is hotting up with these key launches



AMAN NAI LERT BANGKOK

Luxury leisure hotel chain Aman Resorts continues its foray into urban sanctuaries with Aman Nai Lert Bangkok, which opens on April 2.

Located in the leafy embrace of the privately owned Nai Lert Park, it has 52 suites, among the largest in the city. There's a 1,500 square metre Aman Spa and an exclusive Aman Club. Symbolic of the origin of the hotel, a central feature is a majestic, 100-year-old Sompong tree. The hotel will provide signature experiences unveiling Bangkok's best-kept cultural and culinary secrets. Of course, in Aman style. (www.aman.com)



ANANTARA JEWEL BAGH JAIPUR

Anantara Hotels & Resorts finally makes its debut in India with the launch of Anantara Jewel

Bagh Jaipur. The experiential luxury brand of Minor Hotels, Anantara brings its signature blend of authentic cultural experiences and world-class hospitality to the Pink City. Set amidst verdant landscapes and palatial architecture, this 150-key retreat serves as a tranquil gateway to Jaipur's rich heritage. (www.anantara.com)



NOVOTEL NEW DELHI CITY CENTRE

Set in Jhandewalan—and that's as central as it gets—the hotel offers access to key business hubs,

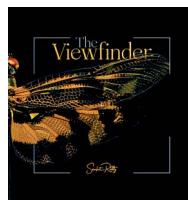
shopping centres and cultural landmarks. The 124 thoughtfully designed guest rooms include an elegantly appointed Presidential Suite. The hotel's eco-conscious design aligns with Accor's global sustainability goals. (www.accor.com)



WHERE THE WILD THINGS ARE

The Viewfinder, wildlife photographer and nature enthusiast Sanket Reddy's debut coffee table book—which flaunts a foreword by actor R.

Madhavan—is filled with jaw-dropping photographs. Sanket has shot wildlife all over the world, and it would be good to remember that this is a distillation of a huge and doubtless patient body of work. His India photographs are particularly impressive, given wildlife photography on Indian terrain



The Viewfinder

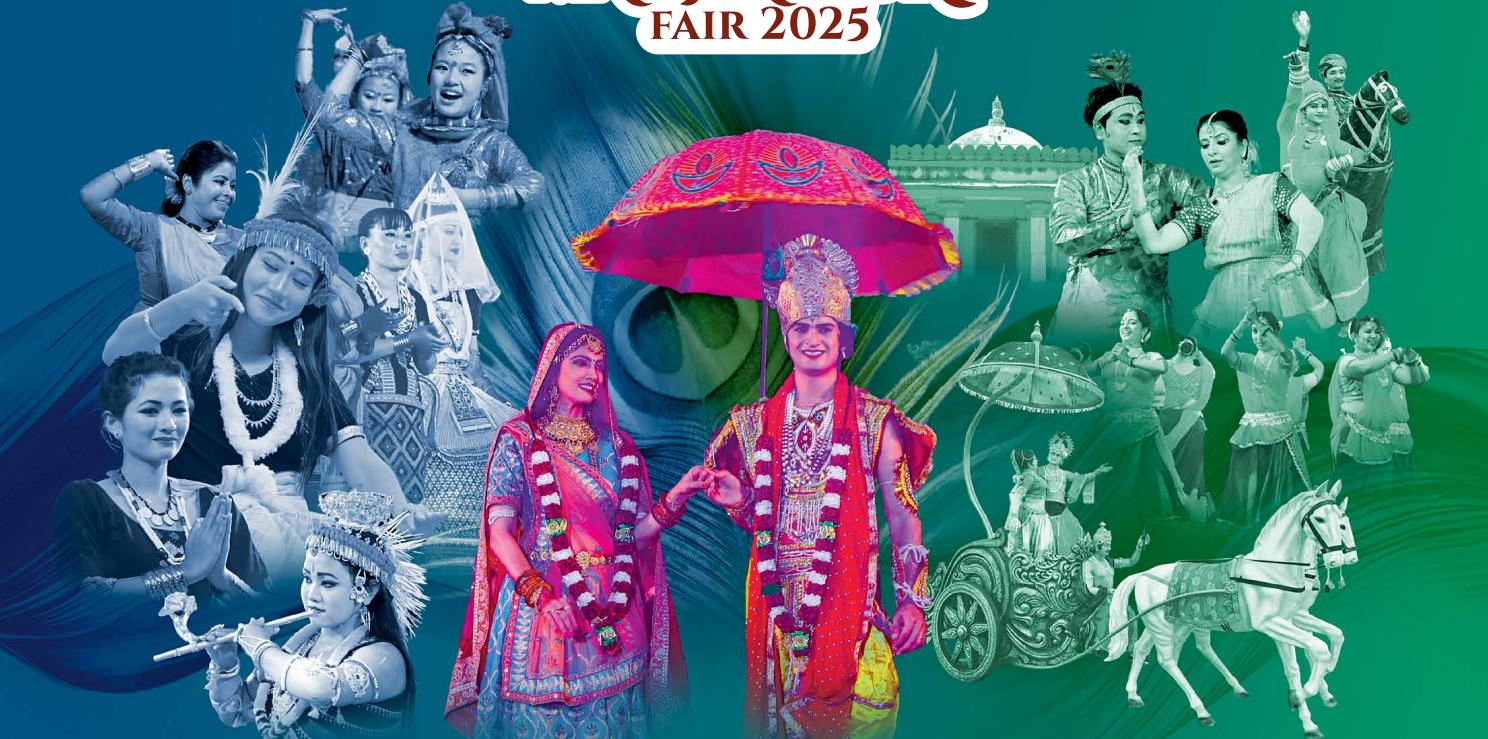
By Sanket Reddy
(Text and Photographs)
White Falcon Publishing
₹3,999

can be challenging—as opposed to say the African savannah. These include images of the Star-Eyed Tree Frog, indigenous to the Western Ghats, the playful image of langurs and the classic red panda shot. Pithy descriptions of each species featured are accompanied by quirky quotes, which prevent the book from getting too academic. Like this one from the pit viper page: "Patience is a virtue that's greatly spoken by all, / But rarely followed despite witnessing a million fall". Sanket's species approach to the project, with different ones on each spread, only works if the images are truly transfixing, which they are in this case.



Shri Krishna and Devi Rukmini's Marriage

*Celebrating the Spirit of
'Ek Bharat Shreshtha Bharat'*



Madhavpur Ghed, a sacred site in Porbandar, is where Shri Krishna and Devi Rukmini's divine wedding took place, as per Shrimad Bhagavat. This celestial union is celebrated annually with a grand festival, featuring a royal wedding procession, traditional rituals, and mesmerizing cultural performances.

Artists from Gujarat and the Northeastern states come together to showcase India's rich heritage and timeless tradition. Witness India's vibrant cultural harmony at the Madhavpur Fair!





THE REVELATION

Gangtok can be a sublime experience, especially if you're staying at Taj Guras Kutir

By Juhi Saklani

MOUNTAIN INN

A room with a mountain view at Taj Guras Kutir; right, Soi & Sake, the Asian cuisine restaurant at the resort; below, a grand Sikkimese thali made with local produce

COVER STORY



It is a rainy 4.30 pm and a monk, his maroon robes creating their own private ritual with the flickering lamps, conducts a prayer. He chants in front of a large bay window, in a lounge full of windows, all facing the mountain range ahead. By his side, a young Taj employee creates immaculate vibrations on a Tibetan meditation bowl. The monk is praying to the goddess we call Mt Kanchenjunga, though she can't be seen on this cloudy evening.

I am completely in tune with the ceremony. I feel reverential towards the Kanchenjunga not only for her glorious silver self, and her status as the third highest peak in the world, but also in my capacity as a puny mortal who has been denied a glimpse by the capricious goddess on previous trips to Gangtok. Like the priest, I can't see her; like him, I am prayerful. Let it be *this* time. When the ceremony is over, the lady from the resort patiently teaches me how to play the meditation bowl and when I finally succeed, I hug her. We giggle like a pair of mynas.



If all this sounds like an unexpected introduction to a luxury resort, it really is not. Taj's Kutir brand of resorts are envisaged to blend in their context—geographic and cultural—and Guras Kutir (named after Sikkim's state tree: the rhododendron) is an homage to the mountains and forests, local culture and local foods of the area. An easy 40-minute drive from Gangtok town, the hotel is built on 16 acres of forest and has left a majority of it undisturbed. The buildings lie low, the colours are subdued, the materials mostly stone and wood. All the rooms face the Kanchenjunga; anywhere you look, there is a carnival of green.

If the three things that matter most in a property are “location, location, location”, Guras Kutir wins with ease. The land has been leased from a prince of the royal family; “Danny Denzongpa’s brother-in-law!” local staff tell me. If at all you can see something other than forests, mountains and skies, it is two properties in the far distance that belong to—no surprises—Danny and Bhaichung Bhutia.

In the morning, the resort naturalist takes me on an interpretive hike in the forest, with the invisible presence of barking deer, wild boar, the Black Giant Squirrel, Giant Flying Squirrel and the endearing red panda. For an enchanting couple of hours, we roam amid Himalayan ferns, bamboo, chestnuts, Japanese sal, berries and trees with local names that I try out on my hesitant tongue: Lekchilauney (needlewood). We spot leopard droppings, chew on bitter but intensely fragrant mugwort leaves and watch the languid flight of steppe eagles. The silence shimmers and the air is fresh, moist and cold. I see a golden-



ECHOES OF KANCHENJUNGA

Top, an exterior view of the Taj Guras Kutir; above, J Wellness Circle, the resort's spa

bellied leafbird for the first time.

For most visitors, the flight to Bagdogra plus a five-hour drive to the resort can be worth it if they stay for three-four nights. (Better than the jacuzzi, Forest Essentials bath supplies, or butler service on picnics, the priceless luxury provided by the Taj is a stop, midway from Bagdogra, where you can have complimentary refreshments next to the Teesta and there is—that gold standard of luxury for a female traveller—a shining bathroom!)



Plenty of excursions are on offer, the highlight being a two-hour drive to Nathu La (14,140 ft), climbing up to the Indo-China border as the lush prettiness of the hill town gives way to the haunting beauty of the Himalayas. Expansive valleys, frequent waterfalls, rich mist, and then the journey above the tree line. Now, frozen mountain streams shine, red and brown shrubs sprout and, finally, it all gives way to an empire of snow. Nathu La was part of an offshoot of the historic Silk Route between India and China, with tea and horses being the main trade through the mountain pass. When we reach here, we are travelling in the footsteps of traders, pilgrims, soldiers and nomads. The thrill of being at the border of two countries is undeniable (but you cannot take photos anymore).

However high-end our travel plan, we all prove our essential Indianness by slurping Maggi on mountain visits and here the opportunity is provided by dhabas at the glorious Tsomgo Lake on the way back. The yaks are as beautiful, majestic and aloof as the Kanchenjunga.

The Nathu La day is an excellent day to book a spa treatment and surrender to the healing hands of the masseurs—in my case the excellent Dolma. At some point, the rain medley in the background, the just-so pressure of her hands, the fragrance of the oil, all merge into one undifferentiated sensorium. I am now primed for the Sikkimese thali—crisp karela, local greens, a creamy hill daal to die for, with millet rotis and a sublime chilli that has clearly been left to marinate in mustard oil since Danny was young.

Mindful of the lush red rhododendrons flowering on the grounds, and the lovely Guras tea that had welcomed me, and the Guras wine lying in my room, I enter a spirit of all or nothing and try the rhododendron cheesecake. It is great, as is all the food I try at Machan, the all-day restaurant. Full of natural light, with outdoor terrace seating that makes the heart sing (because it, well, faces the Kanchenjunga), and an enjoyable variety of dishes, Machan is a delightful locus of the resort's socio-gastronomic life.

THE INFORMATION

HOW TO REACH: Bagdogra airport (120 km from Gangtok; 4.30 hrs) is connected to Delhi, Mumbai, Chennai, Hyderabad, Bengaluru, Jaipur, Ahmedabad, Kolkata and other cities. Taj Guras Kutir is 11 km (40 min) ahead of Gangtok. Airport transfer by Taj Rs 9,500 one way. Sikkim Tourism chopper service in good weather Rs 4,500 per head

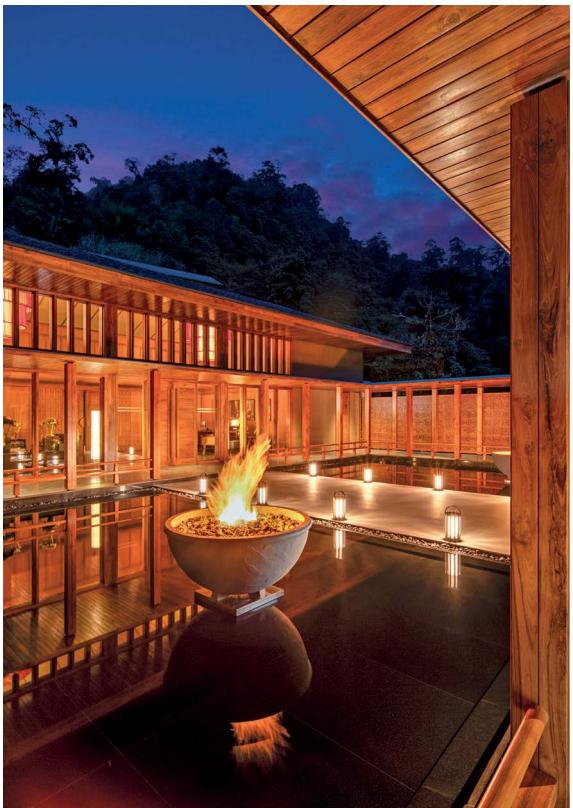
TARIFF: Deluxe rooms Rs 20,000 onwards; Suites Rs 35,000 onwards

RESTAURANTS: All-day multi-cuisine restaurant; speciality Asian food restaurant; bar

EXPERIENCES: Local village trek; forest walk; camping experience for children (1 hr); trips to Tsomgo Lake, Nathu La, the zoo, Rumtek Monastery and local view points; picnic at Fambong Lho sanctuary; picnic by waterfall; Honeymooner's Special and more

PS: Battery-operated buggies within the resort. Play area for children. No swimming pool but jacuzzi in spa area



**EMBEDDED INTO THE HILLS**

Top, The Taj Guras Kutir seen from a distance; above, its atmospherically lit courtyard at dusk

On another day, Gangtok's pedestrian-friendly MG Road, which the locals describe as "our Mall Road", makes for a pleasant amble. Local Nepali restaurants coexist with contemporary cafés, and impeccably dressed young women, monks on an errand, and young men with gelled hair are everywhere. But it is towards the higher reaches that Gangtok breathes easier. Taste the morning air at the Enchey Monastery resounding with the chants of the monks, or the open-air zoo, spread out over a forested hillside, conveying hardly any sense of the animals being in enclosures. The famous snow leopard is no more, but it is delightful to see the lovable red panda.

The hotel organises a trip to Rumtek monastery (24 km away), Sikkim's largest monastery. Rumtek's stature arises from being the seat-in-exile of the 16th Karmapa who built it in 1966. A repository of religious and cultural heritage, the beautiful white Gompa on a hilltop is a serene place to be in, even as young monks go about their studies or prayers, chatting like in any boys' hostel. The holy relics of the 16th Karmapa are kept in a golden stupa. The Buddha presides over offerings of fruit, food and unexpected packets of Haldiram chips, Bikaner *bhujia* and Real fruit juice.

The final day, as on every morning, I wake up to an alarm strategically set to catch the morning light falling on the Kanchenjunga—if she so pleases. She does. I run out of the room, unmindful of the cold, and meet the mountains, their snow shining with serene ferocity across the forested valleys. In Satyajit Ray's *Kanchenjunga*, the peak remains hidden as the plot unfolds and reveals itself finally when the protagonists have made the right choices and feel content. I, too, have communed with leopard poo and the sound of running brooks, and read a juicy murder mystery while chewing flaky croissants. Kanchenjunga had no choice but to reveal herself. ■



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BEYOND GANGTOK

BEST OF SIKKIM

Gangtok is great. But to get a sense of the 'real' Sikkim, take a road trip across this tiny state that is big on experience

By Priya Pathiyan

Once a royal kingdom, Sikkim has been one of India's northeastern states for 50 years. Even so, not too many travellers have unlocked its great potential. Rich in natural beauty and indigenous culture, it's one of the few unspoilt destinations where you can count on engaging with the local and the authentic. Mountains, glaciers, glacier-fed rivers and lakes, hot springs... it has a wealth of wonders for those who love nature. The Khangchendzonga (or Kanchenjunga) is the country's tallest mountain peak at 8,586 metres, though off-limits to climbers from its Indian side. As a biodiversity hotspot, Sikkim boasts over 4,500 types of flowering plants, including 550 orchid species and 36 rhododendrons, 16 types of conifers, 11 different oaks, 28 kinds of bamboo, 362 varieties of ferns, over 424 medicinal plants, almost 150 different mammals, 550 kinds of birds, 48 types of fish, and over 600 butterfly species! And with over 60 Tibetan monasteries that thrive across the state, it's an important centre for Mahayana Buddhism within India too.

While its capital Gangtok is charming and most developed (in terms of monasteries, flower parks, restaurants, shopping centres and movie theatres), it gives off standard commercial hill-station vibes. The further you explore beyond the capital city, the deeper you'll delve into its true soul. Here are some of our recommendations for your next Sikkim adventure...

The Tsomgo
Lake on the way
to Nathu La



Rumtek

The largest monastery in the state, its golden stupa is said to contain the relics of the highly revered 16th Karmapa Lama. The Karma Shri Nalanda Institute for Higher Buddhist Studies is located within the same complex, which is around 24 km from Gangtok. Even as a casual visitor, you sense a certain deep spirituality and contentedness in the aura of this Dharmachakra Centre, accentuated by the timelessness of the surrounding mountains and streams.

The Rumtek
monastery





➊ Nathu La

It's a pass that was on the ancient Tea Horse Road that originated in Southwest China and crossed Tibet. Only about 54 km from Gangtok, it's a very different world, one of permits and military checkposts, double rainbows, snowy vistas and fury yaks. An adults-only attraction, it warrants the use of a four-wheel drive vehicle to reach the height of 4,340 metres where the Himalayan view is quite dramatic and the singing of the wind in the silence seems apt for the pass named 'listening ears'. While weather and other conditions may not always be conducive to get right up there, stop at the serene Tsomgo Lake, the new Baba Harbhajan Singh Temple, the original temple and the bunker and memorial to the brave martyr in whose name the temple there was built, and take a few photographs. All these places swirl with courage, patriotism and a spirit of purpose.

MADHAVPUR FAIR 2025

A CELEBRATION OF 'EK BHARAT SHRESHTHA BHARAT'

On the serene shores of Madhavpur in Gujarat, the divine wedding of Shri Krishna and Devi Rukmini is celebrated annually with grandeur. From Chaitra Sud Navami to Chaitra Sud Teras, this vibrant fair embodies the spirit of Ek Bharat Shreshta Bharat, strengthening cultural ties between Eastern and Western India.

MESMERIZING MADHAVPUR

Located 164 km from Dwarka, 70 km from Somnath, and 58 km from Porbandar, Madhavpur is steeped in mythology and scenic beauty. Every year, it transforms into a cultural hub, where folklore, music, and traditions come alive.

A FUSION OF TRADITION AND UNITY

The fair reenacts the legendary wedding through folk performances by artists from Assam, Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh, and other Northeastern states. Dance dramas, storytelling, and poetry recreate Rukmini's journey from Vidarbha to Gujarat. Handicraft stalls, showcasing exquisite textiles and indigenous artifacts from the Northeast, enrich the experience.

KEY ATTRACTIONS

- India's largest fusion dance performance, featuring over 1,600 artists from Gujarat and the Northeast.
- Handicraft and cuisine stalls from Northeastern states.
- Sand sculptures and cultural sports events.

SYMBOL OF NATIONAL INTEGRATION

Organized by the Government of Gujarat, in collaboration with the Gujarat Tourism Department and the Sports, Youth & Cultural Activities Department, the Madhavpur Fair is a testament to India's rich tapestry of traditions. It is a festival that not only upholds Gujarat's historical essence but also embraces the vibrant spirit of the Northeast, reinforcing the spirit of oneness. Through art, music, poetry, storytelling, and theatre, this week-long celebration transcends geographical boundaries, strengthening the ties of brotherhood and cultural pride. It is here, in the heart of Madhavpur, that mythology meets reality, and history dances with the present—creating an experience as divine and timeless as the love of Shri Krishna and Devi Rukmini.



The Shingba Rhododendron Sanctuary near Lachung



Lachung ①

Quite close to the Tibetan (India-China) border, about 125 km away from Gangtok and 2,900 metres above sea level, this quaint hill town sits at the confluence of the Lachung and Lachen rivers, which finally feed into the Teesta. With Lachung as your base, you can explore the glorious Yumthang Valley (just 25 kms away), filled with grazing wild yak and outlined with gleaming glaciers, or visit the Shingba Rhododendron Sanctuary, awash with more than 40 varieties of colourful blossoms between April and July. If you're lucky, you might even spot the extremely rare snow leopard or the most adorable-looking Himalayan red panda. A small detour will bring you to hot springs or even Zero Point, which is the last civilian outpost at 15,300 feet before the border. Slightly even more off-the-beaten track is the special territory of Dzongu, home to the Lepchas. A walk through the reserve will give you insights into the lifestyle and culture of these indigenous people. Meeting them is akin to feeling the pulse of the real residents of Sikkim.

Guru Padmasambhava's statue on Samdrupchok Hill



Namchi

About 73 km from Gangtok, it is becoming a popular spot, thanks to a huge statue of Guru Padmasambhava on Samdrupchok Hill. In the south at Solophok, you'll also get to see replicas of the Char Dham, some of the most significant religious places for Hindus. The well-kept spaces and beautifully painted exteriors exude joy and peace.

Char Dham Yatra

Online Aadhaar-Based Registration is Open

Also, registration for Shri Hemkund Sahib is open



YAMUNOTRI

Date of 'Kapaat' (कपाट) Opening: 30th April, 2025



GANGOTRI

Date of 'Kapaat' (कपाट) Opening: 30th April, 2025



KEDARNATH

Date of 'Kapaat' (कपाट) Opening: 2nd May, 2025



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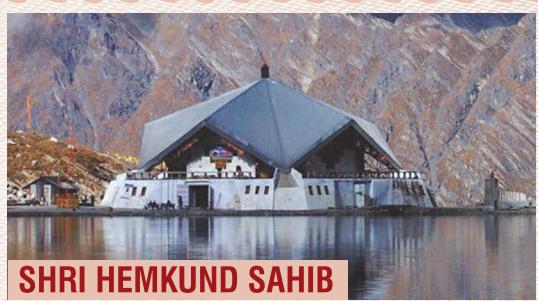
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- Please provide accurate health parameters during the registration process.
- Senior citizens are advised to get a health check-up before the Yatra.
- Keep adequate stock of essential medicine with you.

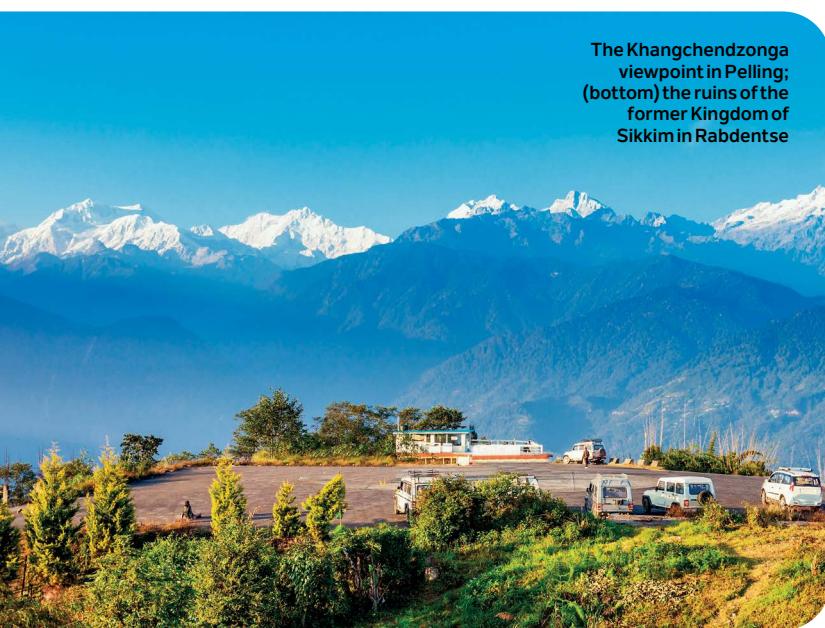
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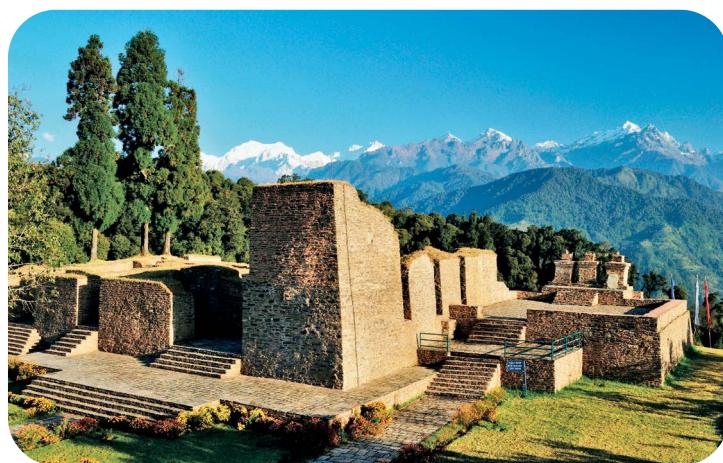
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The Khangchendzonga viewpoint in Pelling; (bottom) the ruins of the former Kingdom of Sikkim in Rabdentse

Pelling

Popular with trekkers since it's where many great climbing trails start, this town in western Sikkim has a fascinating history as well. You can see the ruins of Rabdentse, the second capital of the former Kingdom of Sikkim in the times of the Chogyal dynasty. Dating back to as far back as 1670 AD, the kingdom was destroyed by Gurkha invaders. Walking around the complex to take in what remains of three stone chortens, the king's throne, and royal palace, you hear the wind whisper *song khim* (new palace) as this new capital was dubbed, eventually inspiring the name Sikkim. Not far away is the early 18th century Pemayangtse Monastery with some of the most precious art on its walls, including the most magnificent mural called 'Heavenly Palace' on the top level. While Sikkim is rich in waterfalls, the Khangchendzonga and Changey falls near Pelling are quite splendid. The holy Khecheopalri Lake is both spiritual as well as scenic, making it a popular stop for worshippers and tourists alike.



ALAMY

Yuksom

It's often called the gateway to the majestic Mount Khangchendzonga. Since 2016, the Khangchendzonga National Park was declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Trekking to the park, visiting the ancient monasteries and the mystical Kartok Lake will transport you to a different world.



Prayer flags on the banks of the Kartok Lake

You may well be a believer or opine that religion is the opiate of the masses. But either way, the soulfulness you experience while travelling through Sikkim is different. It's an awe that is inspired by the state's natural abundance, its alluring sights, and the warmth. ■

DEKHO MERI DILLI :

LETS WALK DOWN THE LANES OF DELHI WITH DTTDC



Delhi, the captivating capital city of India, is a treasure trove of history, culture, and vibrant experiences from ancient architectural wonders to tantalising street food. This metropolis offers an array of attractions, spearheading the growth of tourism and transforming the transport infrastructure of the city. Delhi Tourism and Transportation Development Corporation Limited (DTTDC LTD) plays a pivotal role in unveiling the finest gems that Delhi has to offer through various unique events and festivals, exciting sightseeing tours, and through offbeat travel packages. Delhi Tourism also operates the popular Dilli Haats, which showcase India's rich culture, food and handicraft, a fusion of heritage, culture and progress.

Celebrating Culture and Crafts at Dilli Haats

DTTDC's unique initiative, Dilli Haats, offer an immersive cultural experience with vibrant open-air markets at INA, Pitampura, and Janakpuri. Based on three Cs – Craft Cuisine and Culture -these markets showcase traditional handicraft items, mouth-watering food and provide a platform for artisans from across India.

Kalam Memorial

The Kalam Memorial pays tribute to former President of India Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam by showcasing his belongings and featuring a multimedia display that highlights his remarkable life and contributions.



Guru Tegh Bahadur Memorial

The Guru Tegh Bahadur Memorial is a 24-metre obelisk honouring the esteemed Sikh guru.

E-film clearance portal:

A portal that simplifies the process of applying for and receiving required permissions to shoot films, TV shows and other audio-video productions in Delhi.

Garden of Five Senses

One of the most serene escapes in the city, the Garden of Five Senses in South Delhi provides a unique experience with beautiful sculptures and lush greenery designed to stimulate all five senses — sight, sound, taste, touch and smell. The well-maintained garden is a paradise for nature lovers with exotic trees and beautiful flower beds.

Azad Hind Gram

Azad Hind Gram, a memorial and museum complex in Tikri Kalan pays homage to Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose.

Coffee Home

Coffee Home in Connaught Place is a welcoming place where visitors can enjoy affordable delicacies.

Dekho Meri Dilli App:

A mobile application that provides tourists all necessary information at one place.

Festivals and Cultural Celebrations

DTTDC organises fairs and festivals such as the Garden Tourism Festival, Mango Festival, Food Festival, Dandiya Festival, Itra & Sugandhi Mela etc., which celebrate Delhi's rich heritage.



HERITAGE WALK

Heritage walks in Delhi offer a captivating journey through the city's past. Discover Chandni Chowk, Mehrauli Archaeological Park, Hauz Khas and many more historical sites with DTTDc's specially curated walks.

SPECIAL TOURS

DTTDC organises regular tours that cover many tourist attractions. The packages include sightseeing tour of Delhi; Same day Agra tour; 3 days Agra-Jaipur tour, 2 days Haridwar - Rishikesh tour and 2 days Mathura - Vrindavan - Agra Fatehpur Sikri tour.

HAUNTED WALK

Embark on spine-chilling adventures to many sites, including Malcha Mahal, Feroz Shah Kotla and on DTTDC's Haunted Walks.

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THE HILLS ARE ALIVE

From the highest trek in Karnataka to an offbeat wildlife experience in Kerala, here's how to make the most of your next hill station vacation in South India

By Prachi Joshi

Remember the hill station holidays of your childhood? Languid walks, promenading on Mall Road, stuffing your face with fudgy chocolate, perhaps a boat ride on the lake. As nostalgic as that sounds, the new-age traveller holidays differently—whether it's chasing experiences, embarking on thrilling treks or visiting historical sites. If you're planning a summer vacation in the picturesque hill stations of southern India, here's a curated list of unmissable experiences.



Nilgiri Mountain Railway

For the most scenic train journey

Built by the British in 1908, the Nilgiri Mountain Railway offers a ride like no other. The scenic 46-km railway links the plains at Mettupalayam with the hill stations of Coonoor and Udagamandalam (Ooty). It is the only one of its kind in Asia, operating on metre-gauge 'rack and pinion' traction as it negotiates a steep gradient. It is also one of only two rail routes in India that still uses steam-powered engines. On its way, the charming blue train (colloquially called 'toy train') chugs through steep mountains and dense forests, passing through 16 tunnels and over 250 bridges. In July 2005, UNESCO declared the Nilgiri Mountain Railway a World Heritage Site under the 'Mountain Railways of India'.

ALAMY



Kolukkumalai Tea Estate

For the best hot cuppa

Perched at an altitude of 7,900 feet (2,408 metres), Kolukkumalai is the highest tea plantation in the world. Geographically in Tamil Nadu but located close to Munnar (Kerala), this estate is known for its panoramic views of the Western Ghats. The tea plants grow slower due to the high altitude, resulting in better quality tea. The journey to Kolukkumalai itself is an adventure, involving a bumpy ride through rugged terrain. Once there, embark on a tour of the tea factory that dates back to the 1920s. It still uses the orthodox method to process tea, which includes hand-plucking the tea leaves (apparently maintains the integrity of the leaves). Sit back, sip a freshly brewed cup while gazing at the mist-covered peaks....



Chikmagalur

For the ultimate coffee immersion

Known as the birthplace of coffee in India, Chikmagalur is heaven for caffeine lovers. In the 17th century, Baba Budan supposedly smuggled coffee seeds from Yemen and planted them on the hills around Chikmagalur. Today, this region has large coffee estates that grow some of the best Arabica and Robusta beans. Take a deep dive into the world of coffee with a plantation tour and understand the process of coffee cultivation from bean to cup. Many estates also offer homestays where you wake up to the aroma of freshly brewed coffee. If you seek adventure, nearby peaks like Baba Budangiri and Mullayanagiri offer excellent trekking opportunities.



Parambikulam Tiger Reserve

For the best offbeat wildlife experience

Escape the usual tourist circuit in Kerala to uncover this hidden gem. A protected biodiversity hotspot, the Parambikulam sanctuary is located in Palakkad district. What makes Parambikulam unique is its eco-tourism initiatives, including guided safaris, bamboo rafting and tribal village stays. Many indigenous tribes still live within the reserve, and the Tribal Heritage Centre is a good place to learn more about their unique way of life and cultural heritage. You can also trek to the world's oldest teak tree, Kannimara, believed to be over 450 years old.



Kodaikanal

For its colonial era charm

Fondly called the 'Princess of Hills', Kodaikanal is steeped in colonial history. Established by British missionaries in the 19th century, the town is dotted with old churches, colonial style cottages and scenic viewpoints. Its centrepiece is the star-shaped Kodai Lake, where you can enjoy boat rides or go cycling around its perimeter. Other attractions include Coaker's Walk, an old British-built pathway offering stunning valley views, and Bryant Park, a lovely botanical garden with rare flora. Some of the viewpoints worth driving to include Upper Lake View for a bird's-eye view of Kodai Lake, Guna Cave made famous by the 1991 Kamal Haasan-starrer *Guna* (the cave itself is closed but the views are spectacular) and Pillar Rocks that looks out over three vertical boulders dramatically rising more than 400 feet.

ADVENTURE TOURISM IN MEGHALAYA

EXPLORE THE THRILLS OF THE ABODE OF CLOUDS

Meghalaya, a northeastern state of India, is a paradise for adventure seekers. Known for its picturesque landscapes, lush green valleys, high waterfalls, dense forests, and unique caves, Meghalaya offers a wide range of adventure tourism activities. This report explores the various adventure tourism opportunities in Meghalaya in detail.

TREKKING

Trekking is one of the most popular adventure activities in Meghalaya, with numerous trails that traverse dense forests, rolling hills, and scenic valleys.

POPULAR TREKKING ROUTES:

- Living Root Bridges Trek (Cherrapunji & Mawlynnong): A trek through dense forests leading to centuries-old bridges made of living tree roots, particularly the Double-Decker Living Root Bridge in Nongriat.
- David Scott Trail: A 16 km trek from Mawphlang to Lad Mawphlang, offering spectacular views of valleys, rivers, and meadows.
- Mawryngkheng Bamboo Trek: Also known as the scariest trek.



CAVING

Meghalaya is home to some of the longest and deepest caves in India, making it a hotspot for spelunking (cave exploration).

FAMOUS CAVES FOR EXPLORATION:

- Mawsmai Cave: A well-known tourist attraction with narrow passages and fascinating rock formations.
- Liat Prah Cave: One of the longest cave systems in India, stretching over 30 km.
- Krem Mawmluh Cave: A challenging cave with subterranean rivers and narrow passages.

WATERFALL RAPPELLING

Meghalaya is blessed with some of the tallest and most beautiful waterfalls in India, making waterfall rappelling a thrilling adventure.

BEST WATERFALLS FOR RAPPELLING:

- Nohkalikai Falls: The highest plunge waterfall in India, offering an adrenaline-pumping rappelling experience.
- Elephant Falls: A multi-tiered waterfall near Shillong that provides a moderate rappelling challenge.
- Weinia Falls: Located in the West Khasi Hills, it is an ideal spot for rappelling enthusiasts.



ZIP LINING

Zip lining over the lush green valleys of Meghalaya is a must-try activity.

POPULAR ZIP LINING LOCATIONS:

- Mawkdok Dymppe Valley: Offers a thrilling experience as you glide over the valley at high speed.
- Shnongpdeng, Dawki: Shnongpdeng offers zip lining amongst other activities.



BUNGEE JUMPING

Bungee jumping is an extreme adventure sport gaining popularity in Meghalaya.

BEST BUNGEE JUMPING SPOT:

- Swer Village: Organized by Pioneers Adventure Tour, this bungee jumping experience offers a thrilling free-fall with breathtaking views of the surrounding valleys.



PARAGLIDING

Paragliding in Meghalaya provides an unforgettable aerial view of its scenic landscapes.

BEST PARAGLIDING SPOT:

- Nongjrong Village: Conducted by Shabong Travels, this paragliding adventure lets you soar over the rolling hills and lush green valleys, offering a bird's-eye view of Meghalaya's stunning topography.



WATER ACTIVITIES IN MAWLNGBNA

Mawlyngbna is an emerging adventure tourism destination in Meghalaya, known for its pristine lakes and thrilling water activities.

POPULAR WATER ACTIVITIES:

- Flatwater Kayaking: Explore the waters surrounded by lush greenery at Umkhakoi Lake.
- Snorkeling: Experience the underwater biodiversity in the crystal-clear waters.
- Waterfall Trekking: Discover hidden waterfalls through forested trails.
- Canyoning: A combination of trekking, rappelling, and cliff jumping in the streams and waterfalls of Mawlyngbna, offering an exhilarating experience for adventure enthusiasts.

Meghalaya's diverse landscape makes it a haven for adventure tourism. Whether it's trekking through ancient trails, exploring mysterious caves, or engaging in thrilling water sports, Meghalaya has something for every adventure enthusiast. With its growing popularity, adventure tourism in Meghalaya is set to thrive, attracting thrill-seekers from across the globe.



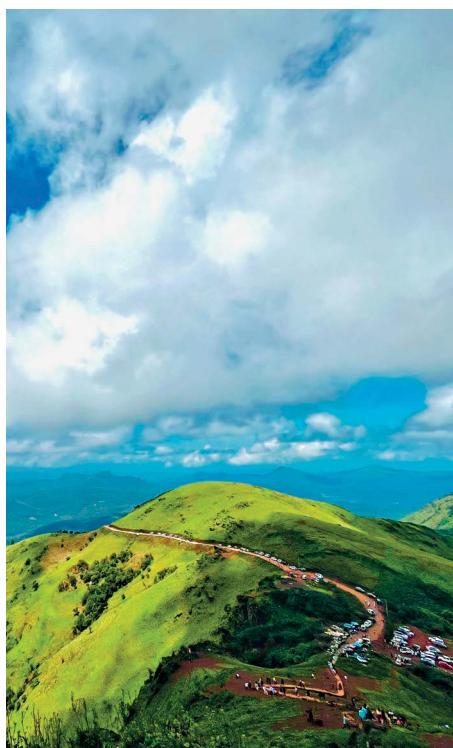


ALAMY



Edakkal Caves For a mystical cave experience

Hidden amidst the Ambukuthi Hills in Wayanad, the Edakkal Caves are a historical marvel. The two naturally formed caves are famous for their ancient petroglyphs (rock-carved art), some of which date back over 7,000 years. To reach the caves, you need to trek up and climb steep steps. Once inside, you will find intricate carvings on the cave walls depicting animals, humans and other figures that tell fascinating stories of prehistoric civilisations. The surreal ambience, the other-worldly rock formations and the mystery surrounding these engravings make a visit to Edakkal Caves an unforgettable experience.



Mullayanagiri Trek For scaling Karnataka's highest peak

If you are a trekking enthusiast, Mullayanagiri is a must-visit. Standing tall at 6,330 feet (1,930 metres), the peak offers breathtaking views of the Baba Budangiri range. It derives its name from the tomb of saint Mullappa Swamy, which is located at the peak. The trek can be done in about three hours and is of easy-to-moderate difficulty. It starts from Sarpadhari with a steep climb through lush grasslands and rocky trails. About two-third of the way up, you will arrive at a Nandi (bull) idol beneath a tree. At the summit, apart from the saint's tomb, a small Shiva temple adds a spiritual touch to your journey.

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Charmed by Chennai

Actor-musician Shruti Haasan spills the beans about what makes Chennai her favourite city

You've extensively travelled the world for both personal and professional reasons. Which is a city that you would keep going back to?

Chennai will always hold a soft spot in my heart. I was born there and studied until grade 11. I continue to come back for work commitments and my father lives here. It is home.

What is it about Chennai that you cherish the most?

I believe it is the city's balancing act between tradition and modernity. Whenever I think of Chennai, the ocean comes to mind. Whether it's Marina Beach or Elliot's Beach or even the East Coast Road...a lot of my childhood was spent around the sea. Near the Besant Nagar Beach, there was a skating rink where I would rollerblade with my friends. It was also very close to the Velankanni church, so it was an interesting mix of people and culture.

What are your top places to get a taste of Chennai?

Manjal is one of my all-time favourites for its selection of non-vegetarian food. I particularly love their crab lollipop and coin parotta and paya curry. At Junior Kuppanna, the mutton sukka is to die for, and Annalakshmi serves pure vegetarian food. Do try their thali.

What kind of a traveller are you?

I am an overpacker! Also, because I am an anxious person, I keep thinking what if I run out of clothes? For a five-day trip, I will carry 15 changes. But I am working towards packing light.

Some travel essentials that you swear by?

I always carry the correct adapters and plug points, especially when travelling internationally. I also stay up to date with the weather before I go, and pack accordingly. And I carry appropriate footwear.

-With Geetika Sachdev



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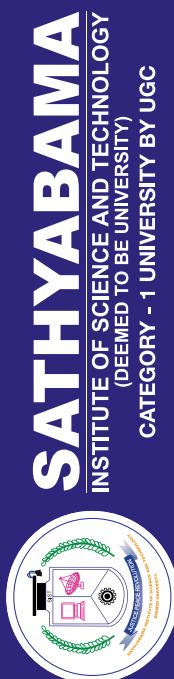
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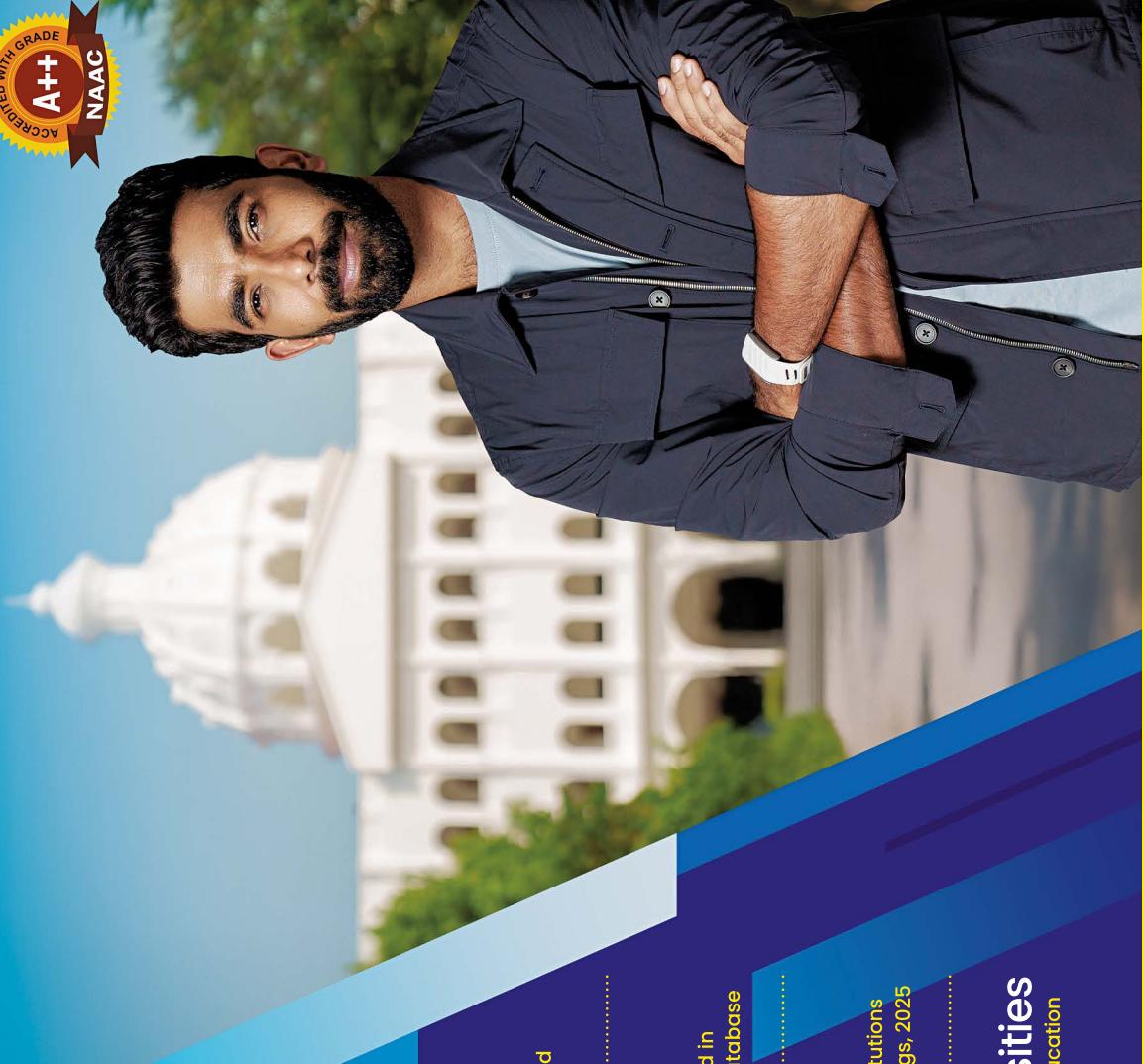


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MARCH 2025

SPICE

INDIA
TODAY

THE
GOOD
LIFE



STARS REBORN

Journeys of
Self-discovery



FOOD
TOP TABLES IN
LOS ANGELES

TRAVEL
THE
WANDERLIST
FOR 2025

Shalini Passi,
Radhikaraje
Gaekwad
and Jyotika

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

Real fortunes are sometimes made in twists of fortune. Of late, the Indian art market seems to have become the stage for such dramatic transformations. In the middle of March, Christie's sold Maqbool Fida Husain's Untitled *Gram Yatra* for \$13.75 million (₹119 crore), smashing all previous records, to become the most expensive Modern Indian painting ever sold. Ashish Anand, CEO and Managing Director, DAG (formerly Delhi Art Gallery) estimates the total size of the Indian art market at around ₹3,000 crore. "The total value of the Indian art market at the turn of the century was the value of just one painting today," says Anand, adding that while the market has grown significantly over the last 25 years, the real growth will come now: "By 2030, I expect the Indian art market to be around ₹10,000 crore."

If the art market in the country is at a tipping point, the whisky industry has been no less transformational. In late February this year, Amrut released the oldest single malt ever made in this country, with an unprecedented 15-year maturation period in a limited edition of just 75 bottles. The price of the Amrut Expedition at US\$ 12,000 (₹10.3 lakh approx.) presented a landmark moment in India's whisky history, especially since the usual price of a 15YO single malt whisky from famed brands such as Glenfiddich 15 or The Macallan Double Cask 15 rests affordably between \$80-\$150 (₹6,900-12,956). This twist of fate moment has indeed been one to toast for the Indian aleo-bev sector, long dismissed as a haven of unrefined and cost-effective products.

Age statements don't just represent a glory moment for whisky, but for the newly restored 230-year-old Chettiar mansion, THE Lotus Palace, too. The Park Hotels has forayed into the restoration of this heritage property, sensitively maintaining its original maximalist aesthetic, while adding modern conveniences. Even as the Lotus Palace blooms brightly on the tourist map to prove that old is indeed gold, fashion veteran Giorgio Armani is on the cusp of a second coming at 90. Old and venerable he may be, but he is definitely the new kid on the block, returning to New York, after an 11-year hiatus, to open his new project at 760 Madison Avenue. Not only does this hybrid space have his store, which houses the women's and men's collections and accessories, his interiors collection (Armani Casa), but even a forthcoming Armani restaurant and ten Armani-designed apartments (all of which have already been pre-sold).

If Armani's clothes are fashionable again, the fortunes of bread seem to be on the rise too. This simple and enduring staple is now The Dish, with handcrafted artisanal loaves. Speciality bake houses are now experimenting with various flours, flavours and techniques; in fact, some bakeries are even commissioning, mixing and often times milling their own flours to create the perfect loaf, pursuing the concept of terroir.

Clearly, bread is living up to its destiny as 'manna from heaven'. Our multi-star cover also summons three extraordinary women who have recast themselves in fabulous new roles breaking convention, norm and expectation. Much like them, the *Spice* issue too aims to engage and inspire.



- Giorgio Armani RTW Spring 2025 (Above); **The 15-year-old whisky**, Amrut Expedition has inspired a revaluation of ageing among Indian whiskies (Top)

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Aroon Purie'.

(Aroon Purie)

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 Photograph Bandeep Singh; Location The Lalit Mumbai
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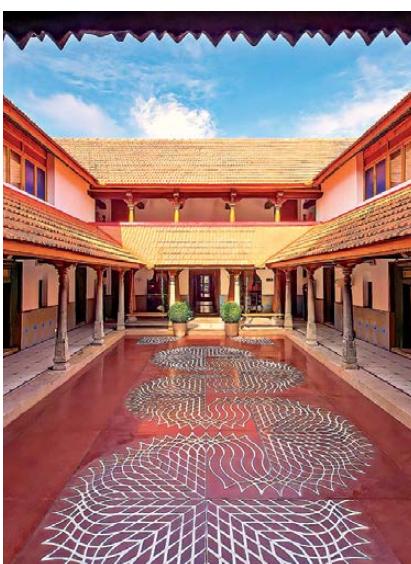
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Quiet Luxury

THE Lotus Palace, a born again heritage property, bridges history and hedonism



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Manoj Sharma

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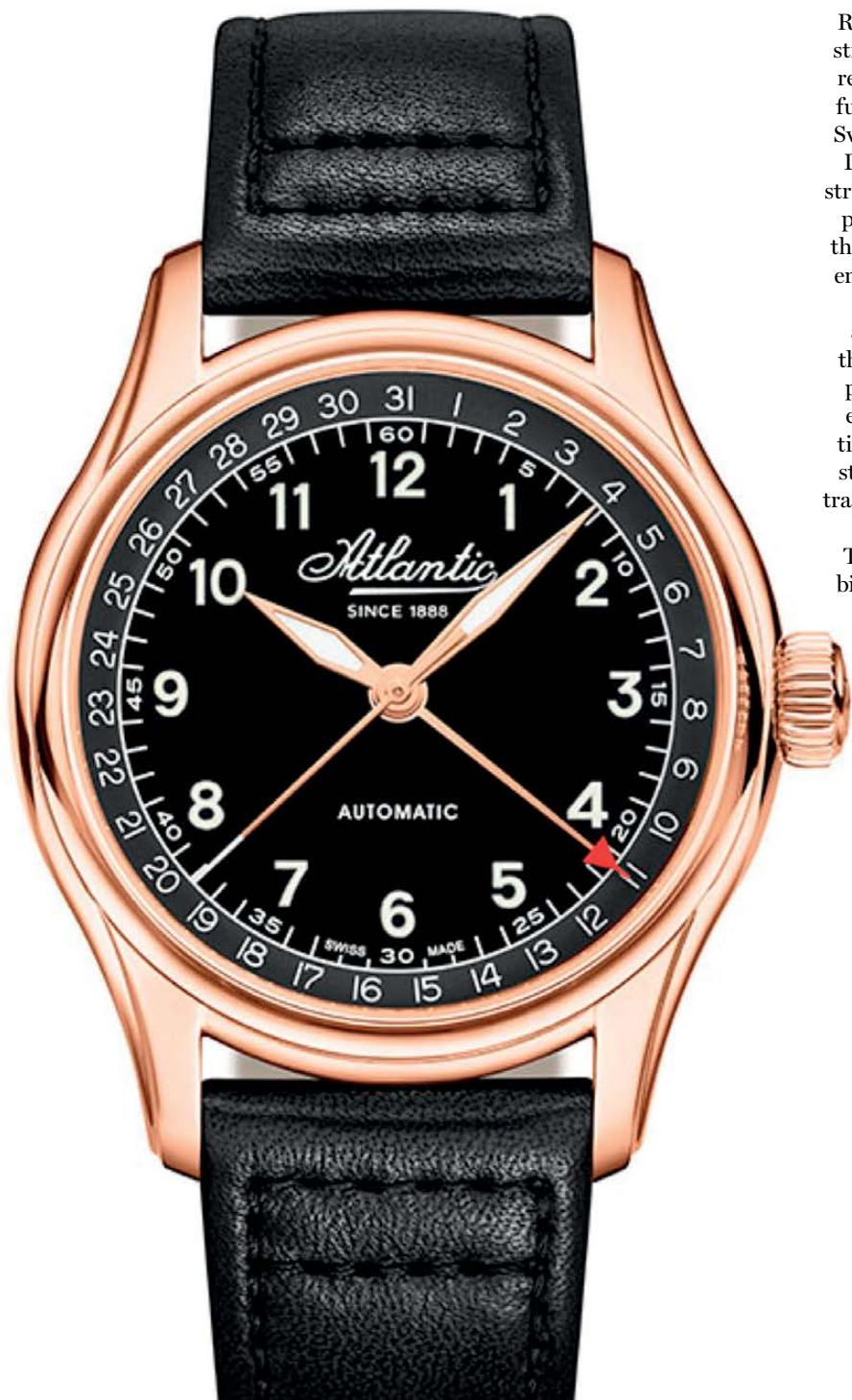
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LAST
LOOK

OBJECTS OF DESIRE

Watches • Spirits • Lifestyle • Gadgets

COLLECTOR'S
EDITION

IT'S A DATE!



While the World Master Pointer Date Rose Gold PVD from Atlantic Watches is striking for several reasons, what makes it remarkable is the watch's innovative date function—a first for Atlantic. Showcasing Swiss ingenuity and precision, the Pointer Date features an additional hand with a striking red tip that elegantly hemis the dial, pointing to the date set along the edge of the watch face. Not only does this function enhance readability, but also adds a touch of sophistication. The Sellita SW221-1 automatic movement lies at the core of this avant-garde creation. Renowned for precision and reliability, this movement ensures seamless functionality too. The timepiece is encased in a 40mm stainless steel case with Rose Gold PVD 5N, and a transparent caseback, which offers glimpses into its intricate mechanics.

The stunning black dial is adorned with big luminous numerals, rose gold-framed hands, and of course, the famed pointer date hand with a red tip. The calf leather strap is an elegant detail that seamlessly blends the style to its resilience.

Price On request;
Availability Swisswatchcompany.in



By Chumki Bharadwaj

OBJECTS OF
DESIRE

BEAUTY

Eternal Sunshine Of The Spotless Body

Chumki Bharadwaj

The gentle seduction of a balmy sun on bare shoulders is a joyful thought. However, for those in the know, a dab of sunscreen is that perfect, but essential, complement for a sun-kissed vibe. Lest you worry about the dreaded white cast, Forest Essentials' has launched its first-ever ayurvedic Sheer Body Sunscreen Spray SPF 50. The sheer sunscreen spray seamlessly merges Ayurveda with modern skincare innovation to offer a weightless, ultra-hydrating mist formula. Not only does this luxurious sunscreen provide complete protection against sun exposure, it also leaves the skin fresh, dewy, and of course, nourished. It is infused with natural zinc oxide and advanced organic UV filters ensuring broad-spectrum protection against UVA & UVB rays. Time to say goodbye to photo damage and ageing, but without bidding adieu to your spot in the sun.

Price
₹2,250 (130ml)

Availability

Forest Essentials stores
& online at
www.forestessentialsindia.com



OBJECTS OF
DESIRE

PICK OF
THE MONTH

SIZE MATTERS

Whoever said good things come in small packages, clearly wasn't introduced to Bottega Veneta's S/S 25 collection, where bigger is definitely better. Move over small bags, for 'big' is having its moment. The mood and vibe spells oversized, with sculptural handbags that are as practical as they are polished; new silhouettes like the Ciao Ciao valiantly balance structure and slouch to offer style and substance.

Price on request;

Availability www.bottegaveneta.com



HEAVEN SCENT

Much like its name, BEAUTIFUL INDIA—an emerging global luxury lifestyle brand, first launched in Paris, with a newly opened flagship store in Mumbai—has introduced gender-neutral fragrances: ONE, PEACE, YOU, and LOVE. Not just christened interestingly, these scents have been crafted with exotic and ethically sourced ingredients to offer a timeless olfactory experience.

Price ₹15,300 (100 ml) Availability www.beautifulindia.com

OBJECTS OF
DESIRE

TECH

HAUTE HARDWARE

Top five laptops that make the ultimate style statement.

Sulabh Puri

Sure, any laptop can crunch numbers—but can yours start conversations? Forget drab plastics; welcome to the era of designer laptops—sleek, sophisticated, and expensive enough to raise even your accountant's eyebrows. Whether you're

casually closing deals in a Parisian café or just pretending to, these machines don't just compute, they charm. Because when your laptop can turn heads faster than your convertible, you know tech just got haute. Here are our top picks.



Apple MacBook Pro

Apple's new MacBook Pro 14-inch is like a meticulously groomed marathoner who also holds a PhD in rocket science, blending sleek style with mind-blowing performance. The M4 chips turn tasks into exhilarating sprints, while the Liquid Retina XDR display practically dazzles the peepers. Plus, it runs circles around lesser laptops, even unplugged, thanks to a long-lasting battery. Thunderbolt 5, Wi-Fi 6E, and a 12MP Center Stage camera complete the package, leaving you feeling like you've discovered laptop nirvana. It's a portable powerhouse that never breaks a sweat, proving yet again Apple knows how to fuse brain, brawn and beauty.

Price ₹2,94,000



IdeaPad Pro 5

The Lenovo IdeaPad Pro 5 isn't just a laptop; it's the tech equivalent of showing up to a casual dinner party in a tailored tux. Packing an Intel Core Ultra 9 processor that sprints up to 5.10GHz speed, this sleek 1.94kg machine handles multitasking with the confidence of someone who alphabets their spice rack. Its stunning 16-inch OLED touchscreen dazzles with 2K clarity, richer colours than your Instagram feed, and a buttery-smooth 120Hz refresh rate. With NVIDIA RTX 4050 graphics, 32GB RAM, and a terabyte of lightning-fast SSD storage, this Arctic Grey beauty turns productivity into performance art.

Price ₹1,52,000

OBJECTS OF
DESIRE

TECH



Acer Predator Helios 16

If your gaming ambitions are bigger than your backpack, do check the Acer Predator Helios 16—the laptop equivalent of bringing a rocket launcher to a paintball match. Armed with a 24-core Intel Core i9 and an NVIDIA RTX 4070 GPU, it devours AAA gaming titles like they're snacks at midnight. The 16-inch, 240Hz WQXGA display is brighter than your gaming future at 500 nits, ensuring buttery-smooth visuals sharper than your opponent's comebacks. With 16GB RAM, 1TB SSD, and stealthy Abyssal Black aesthetics, this beast isn't just powerful—it's how you announce you've entered the game lobby.

Price ₹1,94,999



HP Elitebook x360 G11

Meet the HP EliteBook x360 G11, because blending in was never your style. Powered by an Intel Core Ultra 7 that clocks up to 4.8GHz speeds, this sleek convertible makes multitasking as effortless as your morning espresso order. Its vibrant 13.3-inch WUXGA touchscreen is tougher than your deadlines (thanks, Gorilla Glass 5), while 32 GB memory and a snappy 1 TB SSD ensure your workflow is smoother than your elevator pitch. Add in premium privacy features, Wi-Fi 6E, battery faster to recharge than you after a weekend, and you've got more than a laptop—you've got bragging rights.

Price ₹1,72,999

Samsung Galaxy Book5 Pro 360

Buying a laptop used to mean choosing between looks, power and tech specs, until the Samsung Galaxy Book5 Pro 360 casually offered all three. With its razor-sharp 16-inch 3K AMOLED display dancing smoothly at 120Hz, this 1.56 kg showstopper makes even spreadsheets look cinematic. Packing an Intel Core Ultra chip and Intel Arc Graphics, it's effortlessly powerful, yet refined enough to slip into any boardroom (or boutique café). Quad speakers with Dolby Atmos turn Zoom meetings into surround-sound experiences, while Windows 11 keeps things smart and sophisticated. Who knew productivity could look this good—or sound this immersive?

Price ₹1.55.990





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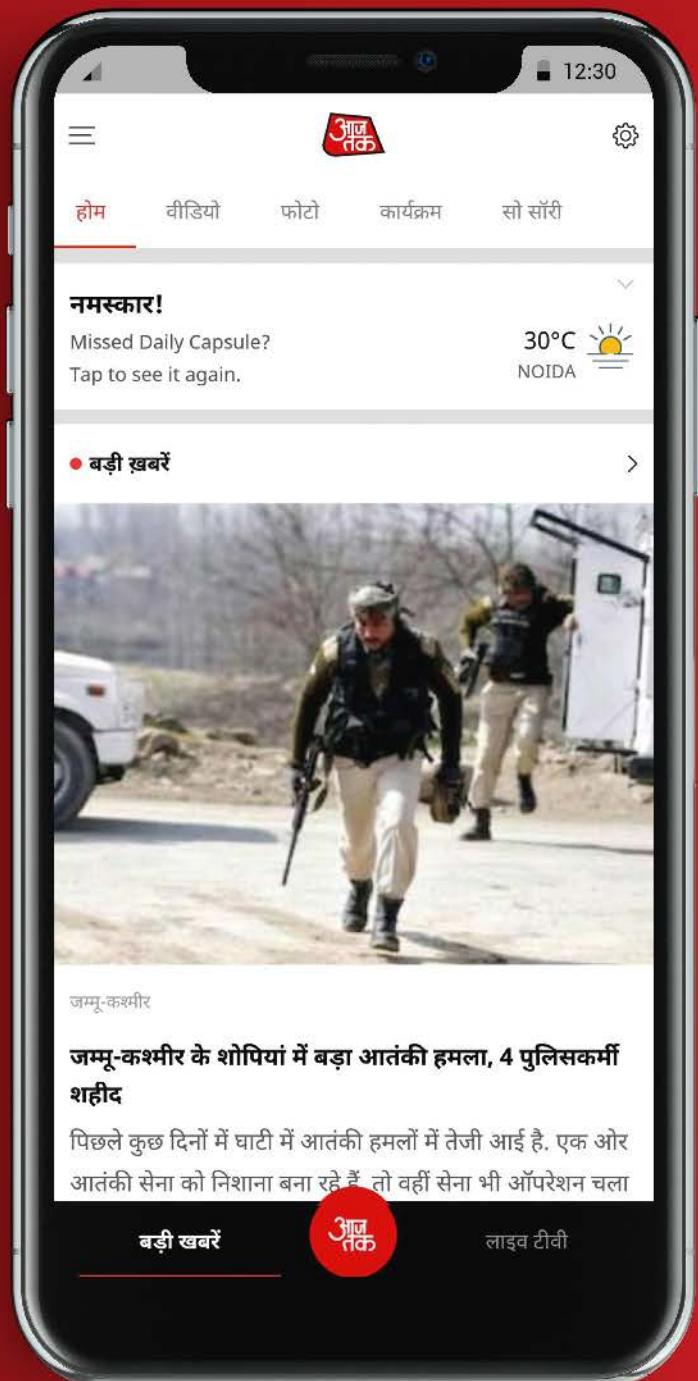
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कहीं भी, कभी भी

अभी डाउनलोड करें

aajtak.in/app



उपलब्ध है



OBJECTS OF
DESIRE
WHISKY

A TIMELESS LEGACY

The launch of The Amrut Expedition—the oldest single malt ever made in India—has ushered a golden moment for the country's spirits. Here's why Indian whisky is pro age.

Sandeep Arora
Whisky Connoisseur and Director, Spiritual Luxury Living

In 2010, when the youngest whisky in Amrut Expedition was being placed in casks at a warehouse somewhere near Bengaluru, few could have predicted that it would develop into a fine 15-year-old single malt. At that time, Indian whiskies were just starting to gain recognition and respect was still a tall ask. Over the past 15 years, things have changed. Even though age has always been a discerning factor in whisky, today, there is a competing appreciation for grain whiskies and non-aged varieties too. Although age still conveys distinction and often correlates with higher quality and premium pricing, this does not necessarily imply that all aged whiskies are superior or that non-aged whiskies lack merit; rather, age introduces additional

dimensions. The new Amrut Expedition showcases layers of aroma and complexity while competing effectively with global whiskies, prompting a revaluation of ageing within Indian whiskies.

The Amrut Expedition launch is a first of its kind in India's alco-bev industry, with Amrut releasing the country's oldest single malt ever made with an unprecedented 15-year maturation period; something never seen before in Indian whisky-making. It initially matured for eight years in a specially procured Sherry cask from Europe, developing rich, indulgent flavours, before it was moved into an ex-Bourbon cask from America for a further seven years, further developing its complexity and depth. With a limited edition of just 75 bottles, this is more than a whisky; it is a landmark moment in India's whisky history.

AMRUT

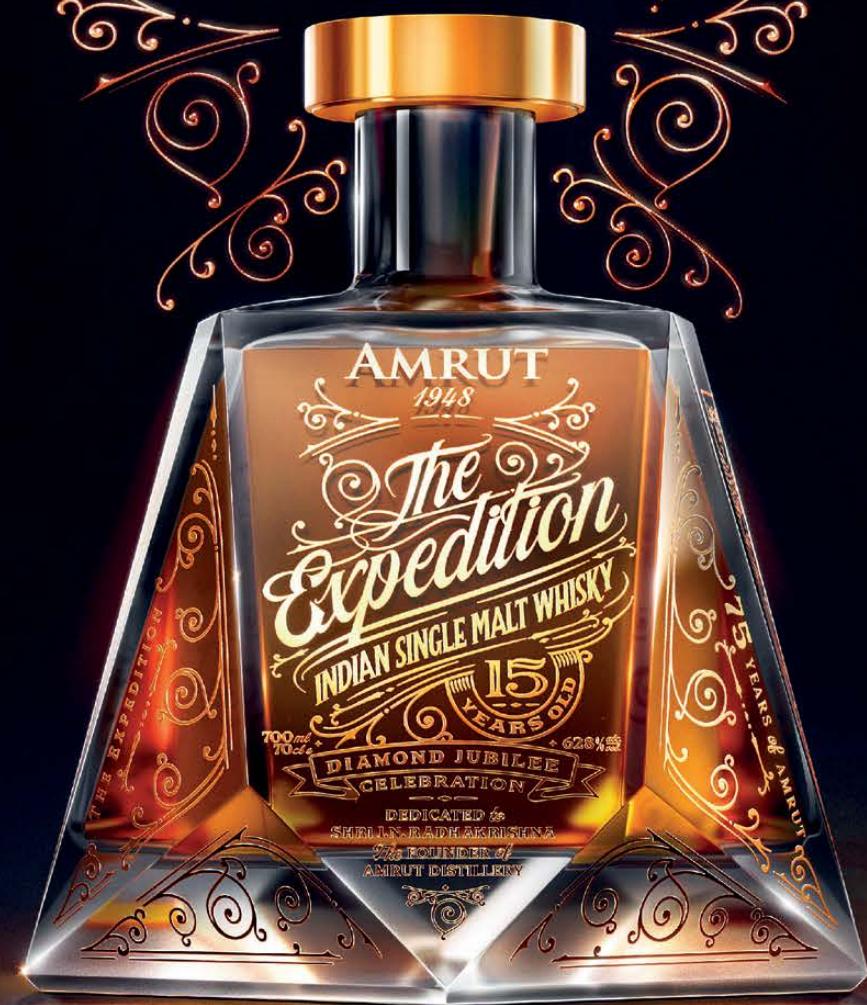
1948

The Expedition

INDIAN SINGLE MALT WHISKY

15

YEARS OLD



SIP AND SAVOUR

The success of aged Indian whiskies already tells a story about the industry maturing and also of innovation waiting to be unleashed.

These are a few trends that stand out:

Increased Cask

Experimentation The use of sherry, port, and wine casks is expected to increase, bringing further richness to aged Indian malts.

Sustainable Aging

Practices Distilleries are investigating low-impact, climate-friendly ageing procedures to reduce evaporation losses while preserving quality, given the rise in climate-related concerns.

Global Recognition A limited number of editions and premium-aged releases of Indian whisky are claiming great demand outside the country due to India's status as a whisky giant and its rising fame internationally.

Much sought after as a collector's item, the price of the Expedition at more than US\$ 12,000 (₹10.3 lakh approx.) is reminiscent of a twist of fate moment, as Indian makers were once frowned upon as a haven of cost-effective, unrefined products.

The usual price of a 15YO single malt whisky (like Glenfiddich 15 or The Macallan Double Cask 15) falls within the \$80-\$150 (₹6,900-12,956) category, though Amrut's 15-year-old single malt is far costlier. Retailing at \$12,000 (₹10.3 lakh approx.), Amrut has likened its latest release to a 1940, 70-Year-Old Generations.

Here's what contributes to this significant price difference.

OBJECTS OF DESIRE WHISKY



Accelerated Maturing Given the extreme hot-and-humid climatic conditions in India, whisky is maturing at a faster rate due to which the desired flavours develop quicker. So, a 15 years old Indian whisky is as complex as a much older Scotch whisky.

High Evaporation Rates The temperate climate also accounts for high evaporation rates, causing the angel's share to be as high as 12% per year. Thus, there is a decline in production and scarceness of old models.

Limitation of production The uniqueness of an aged 15-year-old Indian single malt available in a limited edition attracts collectors, promoting investor demand and supporting a

premium price.

Compared to the West, India has its own unique set of challenges and opportunities when it comes to ageing whisky, in comparison to Ireland and Scotland; the warmer and more humid Indian climate accelerates the maturity of whisky. India's annual evaporative rate is significantly higher than Scotland's, where the 'angel's share' is around 9-12%, versus Scotland's 2-4%. Therefore, does an Indian whisky acquire the complexity of a higher-aged whisky as a Scotch whisky? Considering that Indian whisky takes just 15 years to age, the rapid ageing process could equate to the depth and complexity found in a 40-year-old Scotch.

The Growth of Aged Whisky in India

India's whisky industry has shifted dramatically from a blended-dominated market to a dominant seller of premium single malts. With a unique climate that accelerates maturation, whipping up Indian whiskies is nothing short of magic. The scotch is aged for decades and is of exceptional quality, but Indian whisky also seems to lock in step with it.

Across the world, aged whisky has long been believed to be a marker of quality. However, Indian whisky is now set to challenge this belief. On one hand, Expedition whiskies stand testament to the country's capability to produce long-matured malts, and on the other, many Indian distilleries have already made a name for themselves with No-Age Statement whiskies.

Understanding The Science of Indian Whisky Ageing

The interaction between wood, environment, and spirit is known as whisky ageing and it is quite complex. While other regions of the world make their whisky over decades, Indians have a distinct advantage due to the higher temperatures leading

to faster maturation.

Because of the high evaporation rate, distillers must be exacting with their monitoring and cask selection. There is also a risk of over-ageing, which can lead to an unbalanced excess of wood extraction. Master blenders have to make sure that the aged Indian whiskies do not completely lose their refined profiles due to extreme climate conditions.

Amrut, Paul John and Rampur are recognised Indian distilleries that use the climate to their advantage, creating whiskies that are deeply aromatic and rich in flavour. Indian whisky distilleries have mastered the art of whisky making; even as traditional Scottish malts rely on cask extraction, Indian distilleries achieve remarkable depth in flavour in a fraction of the time. This results in whiskies that are full-bodied and expressive.

The Rise of Aged Indian Whisky

Apart from the new Amrut Expedition, the oldest Indian whisky standing at 15 years is the Rampur Signature Reserve, another Indian whisky that redefines excellence. This limited edition whisky was put to age peacefully in American Standard Oak Barrels for over 15 years, withering many Indian Summers. These four unique casks, handpicked and reserved for the Master Maker, were then transferred in specially selected PX Sherry Butt from Jerez, Spain for its final years of maturation.

In commemoration of Rampur Distillery's 75th anniversary, Radico Khaitan introduced a superb luxury variant of Rampur Indian single malt whisky to the international market. The Rampur Signature Reserve has become the only Indian whisky, at launch, to command a price tag of ₹5 lakh per bottle. It is one of the oldest malts from India. Rampur Distillery, located at the foothills of the Himalayas has extreme seasonal temperatures. This, combined with a unique ageing environment has provided a richer and deeper flavoured whisky.

Not only are all these distilleries innovating and evolving Indian whiskies, but they are also shifting the perception of India as a serious contender in the global whisky domain.



Left to Right:
Radhikaraje
Gaekwad of
Baroda, Shalini
Passi and Jyotika



THE BORN-AGAIN STARS

**Reclaiming their feminine energy
and inner brilliance, this is an inward
journey of self discovery.**

PHOTOGRAPHS: BANDEEP SINGH

“Be yourself; everyone else is already taken.”

—Oscar Wilde

Every journey is distinctive, laced by a matrix of variables specific to a unique set of circumstances. They say, “it’s not who you are that holds you back, it’s who you think you’re not.” This story chronicles the road to self-discovery of three fabulous women: the titular Maharani of the erstwhile state of Baroda, actress Jyotika and art collector and now OTT star, Shalini Passi. Each of them has carved out a special niche for themselves, claiming their own space despite being ambushed by doubts and challenges. Their inner brilliance has helped connect them with their dreams; using their creativity to embrace their essence and feminine energy, all the while remaining authentic to their sense of self. These women have been reborn, not just for the world but, more importantly, for themselves.

A ROYAL AWAKENING

"My rebirth came from the goddess in 2019," says Radhikaraje Gaekwad, the titular maharani of the erstwhile state of Baroda, a textile revivalist and heritage conservationist. "It happened when we organised the garba at the Laxmivilas Palace in Vadodara for the first time. It was a high pressure event to organise and entailed charting completely new territory. Though I was a passionate dancer for many years, to host an event for 40,000 people was quite overwhelming," she recalls, sitting gracefully in an ornate chair, wearing a gorgeous Single Ikkat Rajkot Patola saree at the Laxmivilas Palace in Vadodara.

Coming from an unrestrained childhood, backing down in the face of a towering challenge was not her style. And so this became the 'turning point', she admits. "I looked inward, went deep to seek answers on what to do, how to mobilise resources, build and lead a team. Till then, I hadn't even realised that I had the vision for leadership. I found that confidence, stillness, ability to absorb stress, building a community, effective communication helped achieve the external goals—all through the feminine energy of the goddess," she says gently.

Although she confesses that she is not much of a ritualistic person, during Navratri puja, Gaekwad found an embracing energy elevating her, especially during those nine nights. "It was complete surrender; an inward spiritual journey that helped me find my voice—one that was benevolent, nurturing, cleansing, and definitely feminine. It was very personal and satisfying. And doing the garba in unison with 40,000 people, around the goddess, as an ode to feminine energy, I found my space; I found myself," she reflects. As she awoke to her potential, she recognised

her leadership skills and her ability to create a community of people; the power to motivate and organise them around an idea to work towards mutually meaningful goals. After that there was no looking back. "My endeavours entailed risks, which I willingly took to push the envelope." She decided to represent women and marginalised communities, effectively becoming a voice for the voiceless.

"Trusting their judgement in their individual spaces. I opened the doors for the LGBTQI community and the HIV positive people to be part of our mainstream workforce. I found the strength for starting the *Naari ki Sawari* campaign—teaching women to drive; for the LGBTQI community to manage temples, perform the puja and organising the drag garba during Navratri. I found my purpose by becoming a voice for them," she admits.

As a heritage conservationist, Gaekwad works towards reviving the Chanderi and Baroda Shalu weave of sarees—traditional Indian sarees woven in Banaras, and an integral part of Maratha royal sartorial traditions. She assists the weavers with technical and design inputs, helps them contemporise their products, connects them with the end user and spreads awareness and consciousness about these weaves through social media; wearing them herself and talking about it on national and international platforms. Walking the talk is the Gaekwad way to extend royal patronage, bridging the past to a post modern future. In recognising and owning her inner brilliance and feminine energy, she has succeeded in inspiring and aiding scores to recognise and reflect their own iridescence.

—Jumana Shah



Radhikaraje
Gaekwad of Baroda



COVER STORY
PERSONALITY



“My journey is like a river, it’s just been flowing in every direction and taken its own path. I never thought I have to be a mountain, be on top, stand rock solid and look at everyone from that vantage point.”

For Jyotika it has always been about living life to the fullest. At 28, at the peak of her stardom in Tamil cinema, she married actor Suriya and settled down to start a family. Immersed in the new role as a mother of two kids, the actress was content and comfortable. “I wanted to be with them for the initial years because no matter what they say a mom is required to give her absolute time to the kids,” she says. Little did she know that this new persona would give a fresh impetus to her passion—acting.

Before it had even dawned on her that she had spent eight years away from the camera, she got an opportunity to stage a comeback. In the Tamil film, *36 Vayadhinile* (At the age of 36), she found herself playing the many women she connected with as a mother and whose unassuming inner brilliance she admired. Jyotika’s return from her self-imposed hiatus was on her own terms and conditions, offering her the luxury to strike a perfect work-life balance. It has seen her say umpteen ‘Nos’ and break norms and perceptions around the shelf life of an actress by starting afresh in her mid-30s to blossoming in her 40s.

“My journey is like a river, it’s just been flowing in every direction and taken its own path,” she says. The flow has taken her from her well-established base in Chennai back to her hometown Mumbai to be close to her parents and for her daughter’s education. This meant saying goodbye to a career in the South, her “foundation” in cinema and where she thrived doing definitive roles in films such as *Mozhi, Kushi, Chandramukhi and Perazhagan*.

It’s not taken her long to have a professional rebirth which entailed changing film industries, work culture and even acting in a different language. “I am loving coming back to my roots, speaking my own language [Hindi]. I can improvise; it’s giving me a lot of freedom as an actor,” she says. Her priorities have changed in the

process too. “I do want to play that which I haven’t done before. I just do not want to stand next to a male star or be in a big project where I am just a part of it,” she says.

Keen to play a grey character, she finally got to do so with the Netflix series *Dabba Cartel*, also her long-format debut. Playing Varuna, a debt-ridden, upper-class woman who wears her privilege on her sleeves, she is cold and not instantly likeable. “She’s multilayered, a complex character which many women are because of what they face in society at different stages of their lives,” she adds. With its female-led cast, the show exudes feminine energy, showcasing women from different socio-economic-cultural backdrops navigating life and bad decisions.

For Jyotika, feminine energy signifies the generosity of women. ‘I don’t think it’s a sacrifice but a virtue,’ she says. “There’s power in its silence. Women are composed from within, out there multitasking, where resilience is a way of being.” Some of her philosophy has reflected in the films she and her husband, actor Suriya, have backed under their banner 2D Films. From *Gargi* starring Sai Pallavi to *Jai Bhim* with Lijomol Jose and *Soorarai Pottru* featuring Aparna Balamurali, all featured strong female characters that have ultimately won the actresses both acclaim and awards.

Enjoying this phase where she is empowering and enacting, Jyotika observes how these days, most of her co-actors tend to be women. Her next is with Sonakshi Sinha and helmed by Ashwiny Iyer Tiwari (*Nil Battey Sannata, Bareilly Ki Barfi*). “This chemistry between man and woman is so typecast that I am enjoying sharing chemistry with a female lead,” she says. “It’s brought a completely new shade to my career and me as an actor.” The new Jyotika is only just getting started.

—**Suhani Singh**

"I don't want to be this or that person. I love the way I am."

Much like the form versus function discourse, the Mumbai vs Delhi argument has been a never ending volley. However, if there is one person who has upended this debate in recent times, and in favour of Delhi, it is Shalini Passi. Literally storming the bastion of reality television, she has become an overnight sensation, with the most quotable lines, sound bytes that went viral almost immediately and the highest recall value for any of the six stars outlining the Netflix show *Fabulous Lives Vs Bollywood Wives*. Passi confesses that despite an extremely fulfilling life and career, this has been a born-again moment for her. "I'd like to see it as a rebirth—one that hopefully brings more opportunities and success," says Passi, who has metamorphosed from being a diffident and reclusive art patron and collector to a shooting star. "Stepping in front of the camera helped me uncover a new side to myself. Before 2018, I had a phobia of the camera and was incredibly shy. Overcoming that fear led me to embark on an inward journey, as well as a physical one that took me to places as varied as Ladakh, Bikaner, Jaipur, Jodhpur, and Mahabalipuram for various shoots—a transformative experience in itself."

While Passi's whimsical personality and quirky witticisms have earned her a legion of fans, it was her self-confidence and ability to stand her ground and still love herself on the show—in the face of much ambient noise—that truly offered life lessons. "I guess it's a matter of knowing who you are and being comfortable in your skin and space. Self-discovery is an ongoing journey. Sometimes we feel we've made progress, yet realise we're still in the middle; other times, we may think we've reached our destination only to find we're just beginning. The human experience is a continuous path of growth and learning, and I see myself as an ever-evolving part of that journey," adds Passi.

In line with this journey, she founded MASH, a digital platform that explores the

Shalini Passi



“
Inner brilliance is about finding peace within yourself. It's about embracing the lessons we learn, the karma we create, and nurturing qualities like softness, creativity, beauty, and thoughtfulness in everything we do.”

”

intersection of architecture, art, craft, design, and fashion in an accessible and engaging format. MASH supports emerging artists through monthly features, highlighting their work and promoting experiment and innovation via social media.

While her latest venture in the entertainment industry is definitely her ‘rebirth’ moment, Passi has an illustrious career that spans the arts, as a collector, advisor, patron and artist. She also works with UNICEF as a Champion for Children, advocating for the rights of children and young adults striving for a better future. Through initiatives such as the MASH Ball, Passi support programmes like Art-Based Therapy and Early Childhood Development to empower children to overcome challenges and realise their full potential. Not only does Passi donate all the proceeds from the MASH Ball to UNICEF, she has also donated the entire proceeds from her Netflix show to UNICEF, supporting their childcare initiatives in Purnea, Bihar. In reel, as in real life, she lives on her own terms.

—Chumki Bharadwaj

Jewellery: Reborn: Solitaires by Zoya





TRAVEL
DESTINATIONS

HOT TO TROT

The world beyond your oyster: Travel choices to explore in 2025.

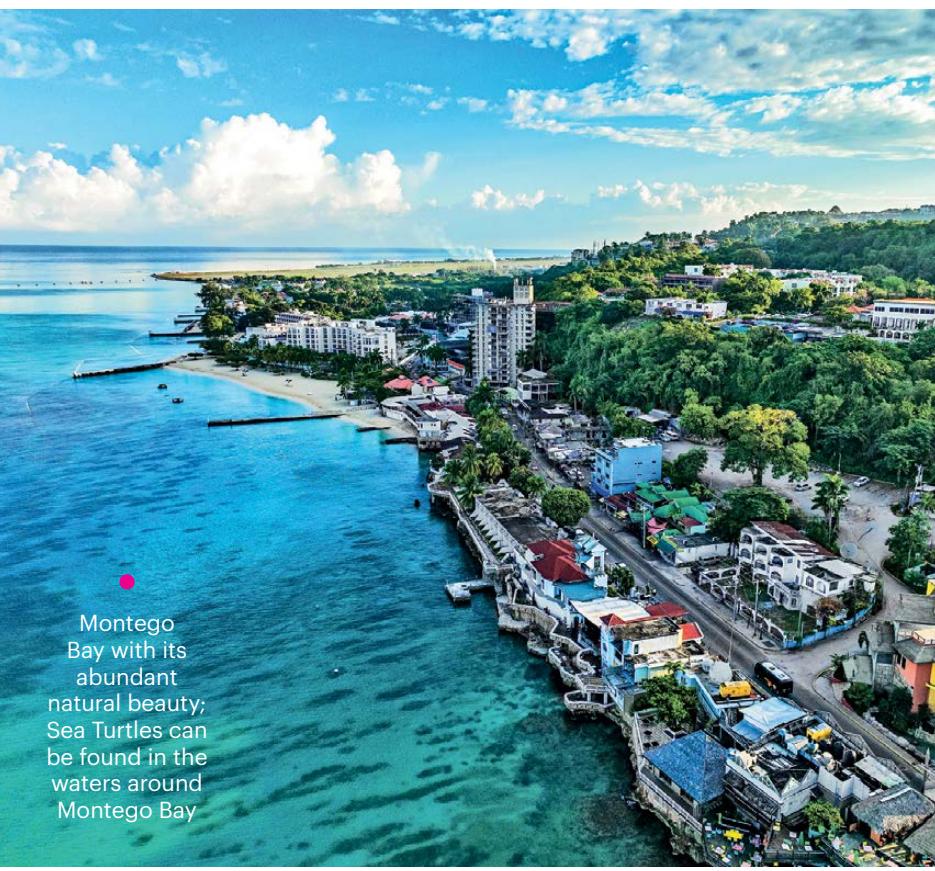
Sonia Nazareth

Kalbarri National Park, Western Australia, Off the Grid

Whoever refuted the theory of time travel has clearly never set foot in Kalbarri National Park. Defined by a sea of red sandstone that dates back millions of years to a time when the river carved out deep gorges on its way to the ocean, the landscape is striking. The soundtrack is bird life – the shriek of wedge-tailed eagles, for example, and the new friends are the kangaroos and emus. There are multiple walking trail options to get as deep into the park as you like. Just 500 metres from the car park is Nature's Window – a rock formation that neatly frames views of the Murchison River. The newly-opened Kalbarri Skywalk is an essential meander for the compelling views it throws up. You walk out along cantilevered viewing platforms, suspended 100 metres above the gorge. When the national park closes, head to the seaside town of Kalbarri for sunset. In the soft light, the coastal cliffs resemble a layered cake, easily seen along Pot Alley (a natural ocean gorge). Natural Bridge supplies beguiling coastal views, while Mushroom Rock lets you experience a variety of geological forms that look forged out of a sandstone subconscious. There's also the option to see other highlights of the area like the Hutt Lagoon Pink Lake (hot pink in hue owing to the presence of a carotenoid producing algae), and the rugged coast from above, on a Kalbarri scenic flight.



Golden beaches add to the beauty that is Kalbarri; The Hutt Lagoon Pink Lake owes its pink hue to the presence of a carotenoid producing algae (Top)



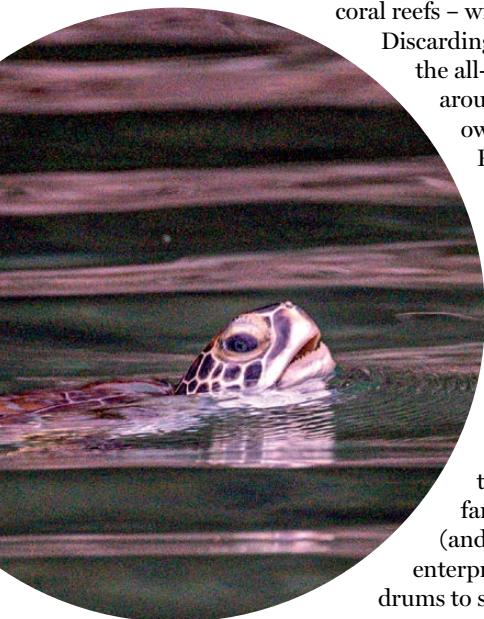
Montego Bay with its abundant natural beauty; Sea Turtles can be found in the waters around Montego Bay

Montego Bay, Jamaica, Polished Gem

Montego Bay could easily step out of a Bond film set. This bountiful capital of Saint James's Parish on Jamaica's north coast is riddled with golf courses, resorts, waterfalls and pristine beaches. Significant scenes within the James Bond film "Live and Let Die" were shot at the Cinnamon Hill Golf Course.

Surfing and diving opportunities abound in and around the coral reefs – within the protected waters of Montego Bay.

Discarding all ideas of restraint, is what being at the all-inclusive resorts here calls for. I wander around the Zoetry Resort, tucked away on its own private beach on a plan called "Endless Privileges", which basically means there's a whole range of benefits included in the rate. I wander from my gourmet meal to a snorkelling tour, swim in the infinity pool and finally to a glass of wine flashing my all-inclusive wrist band as payment. If you're in the mood for a spot of cultural immersion, the Rastafari Indigenous Village is nearby with its variegated offerings : sharing Rastafarian philosophy in the Big Hut, a walk through the organic permaculture medicinal herb farm, and a chance to witness the production (and buy what catches your eye) of cottage enterprise. The products range from hand-made drums to soaps, from jewellery to art.



MAKE IT HAPPEN

Kalbarri, The Kalbarri Edge Resort

Clean, spacious rooms and central location. Doubles from ₹10,000 per night

Krakow, Stradom House, Autograph Collection

With an eye on modern design and creature comforts, yet reflective of the history of the ancient building, Stradom House satisfies ever whim. Doubles from ₹15,000 per night.

Jamaica, Zoetry Montego Bay Resort

Doubles from ₹50,000 per night. All manner of privileges included in your stay, depending on the plan you choose.

Norway, Oslo, The Thief

This stylish stay manages to "steal" you away from everyday life with its style and attention-to-detail. Doubles from ₹25,000 per night



Sri Lanka, Bentota, Lunuganga

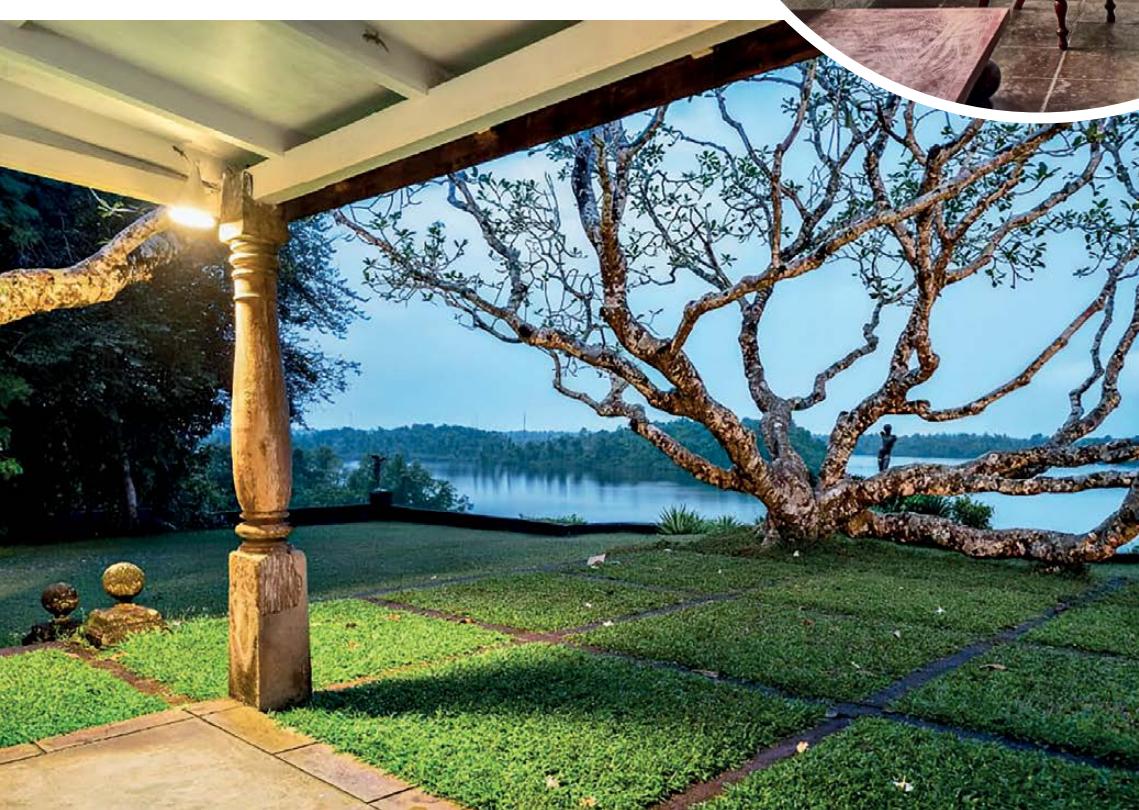
If you're interested in architecture, gardens from a fantasy land, and sumptuous local cuisine, this place more than satisfies. Doubles from ₹35,000 per night

**TRAVEL
DESTINATIONS**

Sri Lanka, Bentota, Lunuganga

What heightens my desire to visit Bentota, with its golden beaches and beguiling scenery, is the fact that master architect Geoffrey Bawa's private bedroom suite in Lunuganga, his iconic country home, is finally open for guests to stay in. The suite, located in the main house, includes his iconic bedroom (furnished with his personal library and a rare selection of original artwork) private courtyard, sitting area and plunge pool. Amid 15-acres of tropical gardens, with scenic views of the Dedduwa lake, are distinctly designed rooms and suites, each with their unique personality.

Daily guided walks get into the nitty-gritty of how Bawa spent close to forty years metamorphising what was once an abandoned rubber estate, into what today is an ode to tropical modernism. I marvel at the way that modernist architectural design is integrated here with tropical vernacular traditions. A short drive away, and infinitely worth seeking out is Brief Garden. This place, a riot of greenery and eccentric character, was designed by landscape architect, enthusiastic artist and collector, Bevis Bawa, Geoffrey's brother. Both garden and home, have been preserved with much of the bohemian spirit of its owner-creator.



Geoffrey Bawa's iconic country home, Lunuganga; Inside "Brief" the home of Bevis Bawa; Abundant gardens and scenic views of the Dedduwa lake add to the experience in Lunuganga

TRAVEL
DESTINATIONS



Krakow, Poland, Dynamic Heritage

Located on the banks of the Vistula River, this former royal capital is the cradle of Polish culture. Top draw attractions include Wawel Royal Castle and Cathedral with its iconic architecture and interiors. Thankfully, this city, strewn liberally with medieval cathedrals, baroque churches and museums, is anything but static in its energy. In the newly-opened Stradom House hotel, visit Hedwig's—a stylish cocktail bar, which has opened in what used to be a former baroque chapel. High arching ceilings and restored frescoes meet a modern chandelier, where a circular cocktail bar meets a brick wine cellar.

With an eye on the present, and only a short walk away, is the much fawned over Manggha Museum of Japanese Art and Technology. It is the only museum in Poland, that collects paintings inspired by Japanese art. With a consistently augmented collection, it's a veritable wonderland. Another fresh way to experience Krakow is via a Melex tour. Using an eco-friendly, electric car—open to the elements, you journey around the city's key sites, accompanied by a licenced Krakow guide. The tour can be tailor-made to suit your whim, be it for an exploration of the Old Town or for the Kazimierz Jewish Quarter, that now sports a bohemian vibe.

The Manggha Museum of Japanese Art and Technology (Top left); Hedwig's—a stylish cocktail bar in what used to be a former chapel, in the Stradom House Hotel (Above); The iconic Wawel Royal Castle Complex



The Astrup Fearnley
Museum of Modern Art;
Walking woman by Sean
Henry at the Ekeberg
Sculpture Park



Oslo, Norway, Art-Attack

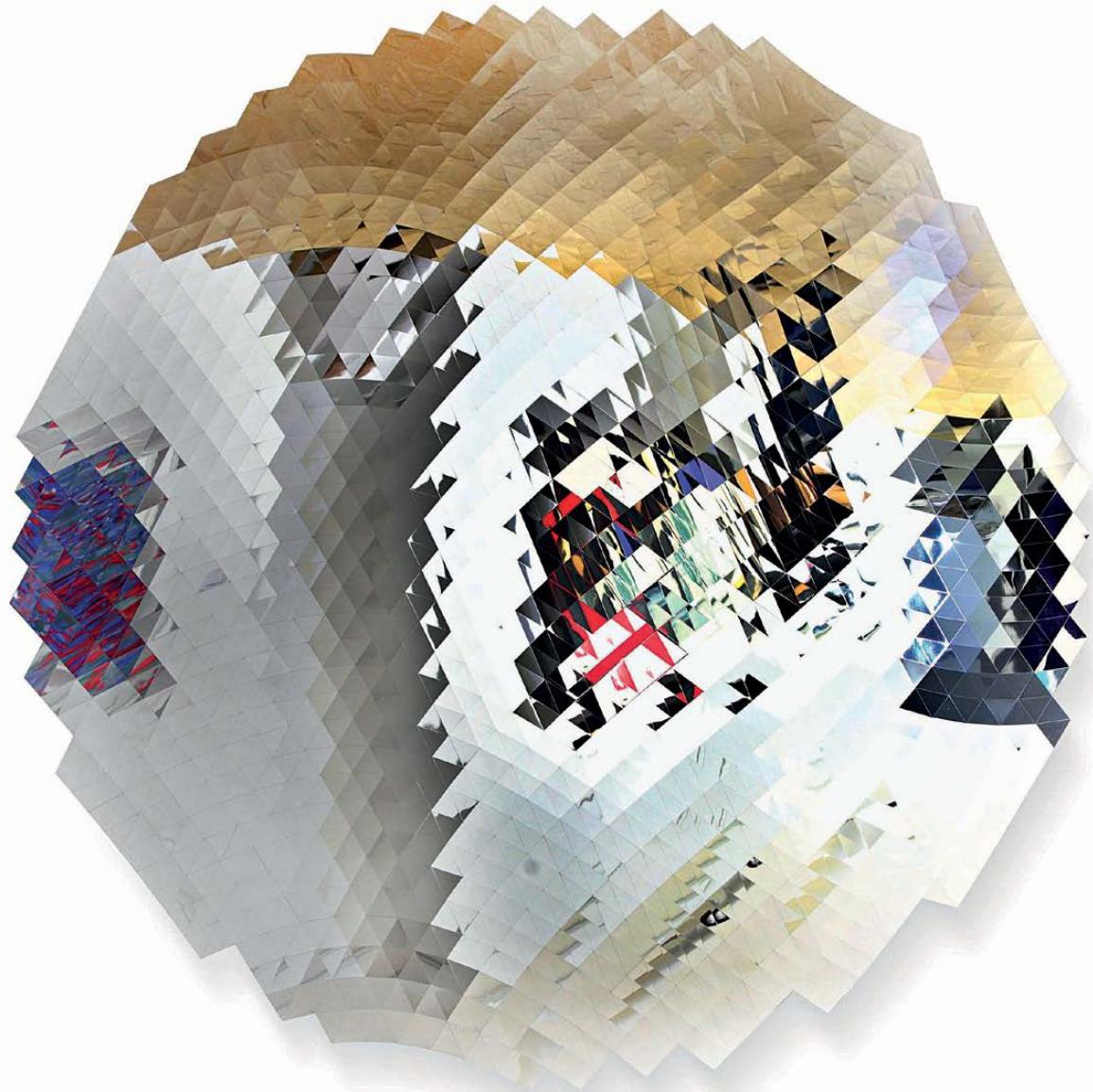
If you're looking to visit a city in which art treasures are liberally strewn about, it would be Oslo. You only have to take a couple of steps within the compact city-centre and you'll encounter a sculpture or a museum of monumental repute. Recently re-opened within a Renzo Piano building is the Astrup Fearnley Museum of Modern Art, a private collection containing outstanding pieces of contemporary art. The Jeff Koon's work Michael Jackson and Bubbles, is worthy of note. Without risk of overstatement, the nearby National Museum is a world class exhibition space for Norway's largest collection of art, architecture and design. For greater comprehension on the life and work of the prolific Norwegian painter and printmaker Edvard Munch, there's a newly opened Munch Museum in the neighbourhood. Another psychological, poetic and unmissable space, is The Vigeland Park. Gustav Vigeland's life's work, with more than 200-sculptures by Viegeland in bronze, cast iron and granite, are on display here.

ART
TREND

State *of the Art*

The Indian art market is at a tipping point and likely to grow exponentially over the next few years with a younger breed of collectors fuelling growth.

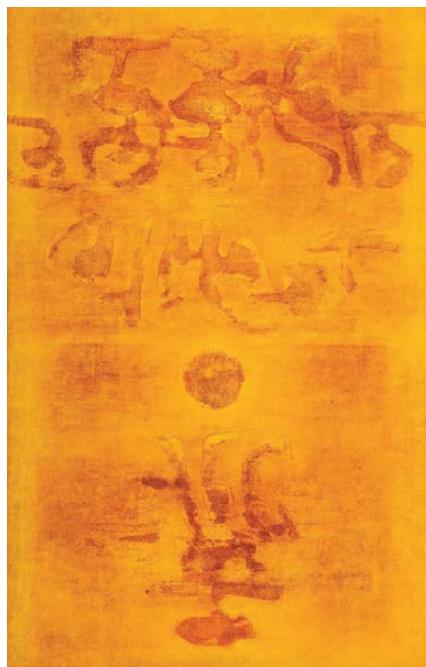
By Smita Tripathi





In 2023, Saffronart—India's leading auction house that is celebrating its 25th anniversary this year—sold an Amrita Sher-Gil painting called *The Story Teller* for ₹61.80 crore, way above its estimate of between ₹28-38 crore, creating a record for Modern Indian Art. But in mid March this year, that record was shattered when Christie's sold Maqbool Fida Husain's Untitled (*Gram Yatra*) for \$13.75 million (₹119 crore), making it the most expensive Modern Indian painting ever sold. In April last year, online auction house, AstaGuru sold a stainless steel and resin sculpture by Anish Kapoor for ₹9.61 crore, almost double of its estimate of ₹5 crore. The recently concluded 16th edition of the India Art Fair, the country's largest art exhibition saw a record number of 120 exhibitors with galleries such as Vadhera Art Gallery selling 90 per cent of their booth on the first day with prices ranging from \$2,500 to \$300,000, including works by Sudhir Patwardhan, Atul Dodiya, Shilpa Gupta, and Vivan Sundaram.

The Indian art market at auction was valued at over ₹144 million (₹1,253 crore) in 2023, as per the 'State of



Clockwise from opposite page: Stainless steel and resin sculpture by Anish Kapoor; Amrita Sher-Gil's 'The Story Teller'; V S Gaitonde's Untitled work



**ART
TREND**

the Indian Art Market Report FY23' by Grant Thornton Bharat and Indian Art Investor. According to Ashish Anand, CEO and Managing Director, DAG (formerly Delhi Art Gallery), the total art market size including galleries and dealers is around ₹3,000 crore. That's an exponential growth from just around ₹15–20 crore at the turn of the century. "The total value of the Indian art market then was the value of just one painting today," says Anand. Talking of the record-breaking sale of Husain's *Gram Yatra*, Anand says, "It has put Indian art on the world map..." He adds that while the market has grown significantly over the last 25 years, the real growth will come now. "We are at a tipping point. By 2030, I expect the Indian art market to be around ₹10,000 crore." Of course, we are minuscule compared to the global art market that is

The 13 sections that make up Husain's *Gram Yatra* (Above); A painting by MF Husain (Facing page)

around \$65 billion. "But we are growing when the global art market has stagnated," says Siddanth Shetty, Chief Administrative Officer, AstaGuru Auction House. "We grew around 11.7 per cent in 2023 compared to the previous year, while the global art market plateaued. That is simply because demand and supply is starting to come from India," he adds.

What is fuelling growth?

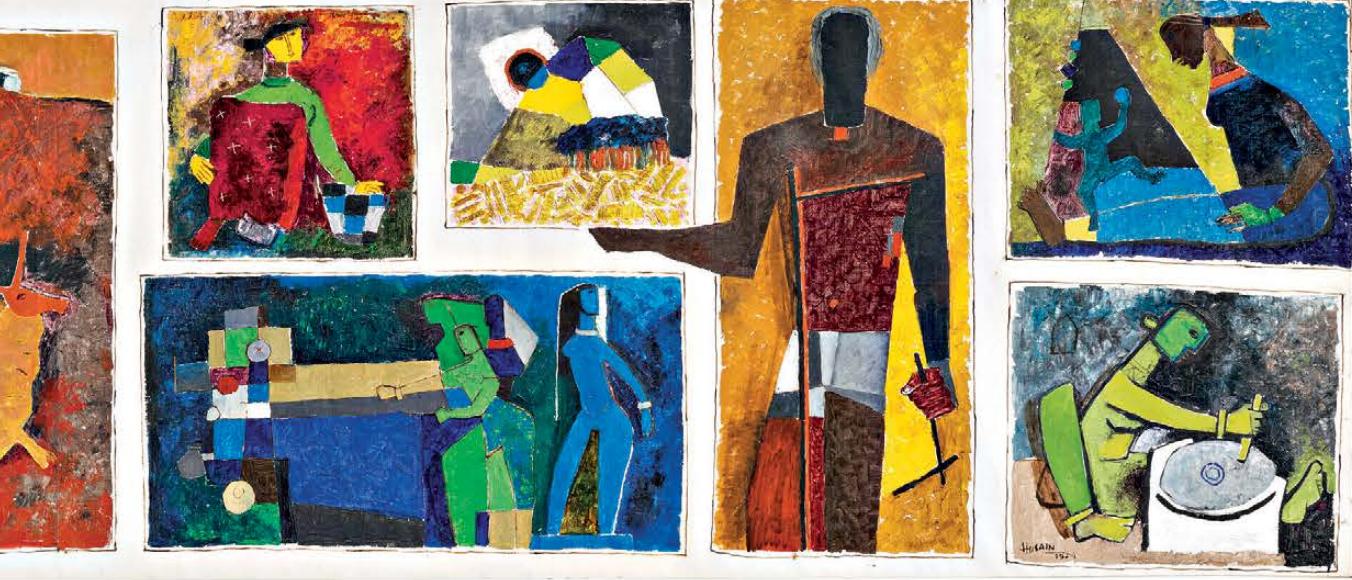
There are several reasons for it including a growing economy, higher disposable incomes, growing awareness of art as an asset class and the changing demography of the collector. Apart from the second and third generations of affluent families adding to their collections, there is a whole breed of young entrepreneurs and professionals who have the reach and disposable income to acquire art. "Naturally you end up collecting art that you can relate to traditionally or culturally. And that is why Indian art is growing because the clientele itself is growing," says Shetty. He believes that this is helping the contemporary art market grow as artists like Subodh Gupta and Atul Dodiya are being collected by younger audiences in their 30s and 40s. "These collectors are interested in bold, new mediums which break the traditional mould," he adds.

At Saffronart, nearly 30–40 per cent of the clientele is below 40 years old and most of them purchase contemporary art. "It meets their aesthetic sensibilities and is also available at an easier price point



"The record-breaking sale of Husain's *Gram Yatra* has put Indian art on the world map. We will now see interest from a lot of global collectors who till date were purchasing Chinese art, but not that much Indian art"

**Ashish Anand,
CEO and Managing Director, DAG**



threshold for them to enter the art market,” says Dinesh Vazirani, CEO and Co-Founder of Saffronart.

Of course, the market continues to be dominated by the Modern masters. In fact, as per one estimate 60 per cent of the market comprises artworks only by MF Husain, FN Souza and SH Raza while the balance 40 per cent is everyone else. “We are seeing a growing demand for other

Modernists and this will only increase as collectors realise that there is a significant price difference in their works,” says Anand.

Udit Jain of Delhi-based Dhoomimal Gallery, believes that gallerists these days are also trying to promote Modern artists beyond just the progressive group. “There are several forgotten masters such as B C Sanyal, K S Kulkarni, etc., who are now being given their due by modern galleries,” he says. Jain feels that a category that collectors should look at are the contemporary artists of the mid-1990’s to mid-2000’s era who are now almost in the Modern category such as Atul Dodiya, Chittrovanu Mazumdar, GR Iranna, Jitish Kallat, etc. Prices of their works had fallen significantly during the financial crash of 2007-08 but have been on an upswing since.

Auction houses such as Saffronart and AstaGuru, have also made buying art easier, making it more democratic with collectors now coming not just from metros but also tier-2 towns such as Ahmedabad, Amritsar, Vadodara etc.

“The role of technology in the last 25 years has democratised art. The fact that you can be anywhere in the country and bid for a piece of art you like has made it more accessible,” says Vazirani.

He believes social media has also played a big role in democratising art. “It has really helped galleries, dealers and auction houses market their works. You can even interact with artists directly and learn more about their work. It’s a big enabler.”

If you are a first-time collector, Vazirani advises patience. “Don’t be in a hurry. Understand the history of the artist and why a painting is good or important. Art is like a reflection of the culture, society, polity around the artist at that time—it’s almost a documentation of history. So, understanding that history, figuring out what appeals to you aesthetically and what balances the investment side is very important. Look, learn and be patient,” he says. Sage advice indeed for a market that is ready to rise to the occasion.

FOOD
TREND

MANNA FROM HEAVEN

Bread, one of the most simple and enduring staples, is having its moment. So much so that bread is The Dish right now. Here's to the rise and rise of artisanal breads.

By Nivedita Jayaram Pawar

The bread scene is heating up. While artisanal bread including sourdough has been trending for some time, there seems to be a growing interest and appreciation for handcrafted loaves. Speciality bake houses are now experimenting with various flours, flavours and techniques to create unique and delicious breads. From cheesy and savory brioches to Korean buns and millet baguettes, there's a wide range of options to satisfy every taste bud.

The bread landscape

Much before the Portuguese introduced warm loaves of poie to India, via Goa, flatbreads such as rotis, puris and parathas

were a mainstay of Indian cooking. While the saffron-flavored milk bread sheermal was brought to India by Persian invaders, the Mughal added the tandoori rotis, naans and kulchas to the repertoire. Bread is, after all, the original slow food. It requires space, knowledge, talent and most significantly—time, just like a good stock.

Interest in baking really soared in many countries during the lockdown when a lot of people learned how to bake as a way to escape the craziness of everyday life and the never-ending bad-news-cycle. Today, although the threat of COVID-19 feels less immediate and there are no yeast or flour shortages, artisanal breads are once again having a moment in the sun. The Internet is still cramped with videos of people pulling intricately scored loaves out of ripping hot ovens and showing off their “crumb shots.” “In the past, bread was often just a

Garlic Knots at
TwentySeven
Bakehouse



FOOD TREND

vessel to carry other flavours such as jam, butter, cheese, or meats. But now, people are starting to appreciate bread for what it is. They are focussing on making the bread itself more delicious and satisfying. The goal is to enjoy the bread on its own, not just as a base for other ingredients. This shift means we are seeing a lot of creativity in bread-making. People are putting more thought into the flavour and texture of the bread itself, making it a more central part of the meal rather than just something on the side," says Hussain Shahzad, Executive Chef, Hunger Inc. Hospitality. For many, the renewed interest in sourdough is also health-related. There also seems to be some evidence that sourdough is easier to digest than typical white bread, and the yeasts and bacteria that help the bread rise are also beneficial for the gut, feeding into the current fixation with gut health.

Bread artists

Today, artisanal bread has become something of an obsession for chefs and restaurateurs around the world. So much so that some bakeries are even commissioning, mixing and sometimes even milling their own flours to create the perfect loaf, pursuing the concept of terroir.

At the internationally acclaimed San Francisco based Tartine bakery, Chad Robertson is making bread with freshly milled flour that is not stripped of its nutrients. "Milling fresh flour is just like grinding fresh coffee beans or spices. The flour we use gives a very flavourful, digestible and highly nutritious bread," says Robertson. Expect a minimum 30-minutes line for the fresh, deeply burnished loaves, with a crackling crust that give way to some of the springiest, most flavourful bread. At The Orange Bakery in England, the father and daughter duo Alex and Kitty Tait bake a bread with wild garlic foraged from the forest. One of their most popular bread is made using miso the Japanese fermented soybean paste.

When one thinks of sourdough in India, it's hard not to think of Aditi Handa, who



introduced Mumbai to the four-grain sourdough way back in 2013. The chewy, textured bread with a distinctive sour note and a strong crust was way tastier than the sliced-white version that turned into sticky cement in the mouth. She went to unleash the cranberry sourdough and walnut raisin bread.

In India artisanal breads and bakeries are popping up everywhere. Raising the craft to an art form, though, is Masque founder Aditi Dugar's TwentySeven Bakehouse. The bread that will stop you in your tracks is the notoriously esoteric Chilli Cheese Toast and the crusty sourdough infused with cheddar, Bhavnagri chilli and caramelised onion. The aroma, texture, and flavour is remarkable: It's like you've been eating bread in black and white and someone's just turned on the colour.



- Clockwise from left: Hussain Shahzad, Executive Chef-Hunger Inc. Hospitality; Sourdough bread; Loaves from Tartine Bakery, San Francisco; Garlic cheese roll at Veronica's, Bandra



Sourdough bread is made with a naturally fermented starter instead of commercial yeast. This gives it a distinctive, slightly sour flavor and a heartier texture.



Rising to the occasion

Chefs are now bringing new, delicious approaches to breadmaking. At Taupe By Titlie, a modern Indian restaurant in Goa, co-founder and chef Tarun Sibal pairs a dal kurchan with a biscuit bread and dal makhni with an assortment of kulchas studded with chorizo, sundried tomatoes and parmesan. One of the most popular items on the menu at Khi Khi Delhi (also by Sibal) are the kaladi cheese olive oil bread, reminiscent of the ‘bread pizzas’ we loved from the neighbourhood bakery.

Chef Shahzad too has been pushing a lot of boundaries with his breads at Veronica’s the all-day sandwich shop by the folks behind Bombay Canteen. Take the tiger bread used in the hearty mushroom sandwich. Along with memorable flavour, it crackles just the right amount before giving way to a springy, soft interior. The incredibly fluffy and soft Hokkaido milk bun shoulders the robust Smash Burger. But if you are looking for the most opulent loaf it’s The Gold Leaf Bread by the family-owned Pan Pina Bakery in Algatocn, Andalusia, Spain. Master baker Moreno uses 250 mg of gold dust in the bread that is priced at \$120.73 (over ₹10,000 a loaf). Move over caviar, there’s a new indulgence in town!

GIORGIO ARMANI TAKES MANHATTAN — AGAIN

Veteran designer Giorgio Armani talks about his triumphant return to New York and why his clothes are fashionable again.

Peter Howarth



The Giorgio
Armani Spring/
Summer 2025
runway; New York
holds a special
place for Armani



Photographs Courtesy: GIORGIO ARMANI

T

FASHION PERSONALITY

There are many remarkable things about Giorgio Armani. One is that at 90 years of age he is still working hard, overseeing all aspects of his large fashion empire. Another, perhaps even more astonishing, is that he still owns 100 per cent of the business he founded almost 50 years ago. In today's fashion landscape, which is dominated by corporate conglomerates like LVMH, Kering and Richemont, who between them own many of the world's luxury fashion brands, this independence speaks of commendable single-mindedness. And, finally, his menswear is never really out of fashion.

This is because the Italian designer is no longer simply in the fashion business. The name Armani has joined an exclusive list that includes Rolex and Rolls-Royce, where brands have transcended product categories to become symbolic of a certain attitude and status.

Armani man is all about minimalism, elegance and connoisseurship. He is a global citizen whose preference for timeless style over passing fads marks him out as a knowledgeable adult. Just as when you think of Ferrari you think of red-blooded (and red-coloured), sexy Italian design, so Armani symbolises an alternative Italy—one of confident and relaxed style, linear and textured interiors, and dark or neutral-coloured tailoring worn for aperitivos. And the famous figures who grace the red carpet in his tuxedos.

"I do not deal in passing trends," the designer says. We meet backstage before the big show he staged last week in New York.

In uncharacteristic black tie—his trademark outfit is a navy blue long-sleeved knit, navy blue trousers, white trainers and (very Armani) round sunglasses—he looks the picture of elegance. "I seek the timeless, the elegant. Trends go out of style, that is their nature. But elegance does not date."

This elegance was on show in New York this month, where Giorgio Armani came to town after an 11-year absence to open his new project at 760 Madison Avenue, like a returning emperor. This undertaking speaks volumes about what the boy who was born in Piacenza in 1934 has achieved. Housing not only his women's and men's collections, but also accessories, his interiors collection (Armani/Casa), a forthcoming Armani restaurant and ten Armani-designed apartments (all of which have sold), this "store" is a hybrid space spanning clothing, hospitality and residential.



FASHION
PERSONALITY



The Armani style is confident and relaxed, favouring dark or neutral-colours, focussed on minimalism, elegance and connoisseurship

“I always dreamt of creating an entire Armani lifestyle,” the designer says. “Interiors were an obvious area to explore as they allow you to dress the space. And food, too, is an essential part of life. It was a short step to hotels and residences.” There are Armani hotels in Milan and Dubai, and Armani restaurants and cafés round the world. Add to

that Armani cakes and sweets (Armani/Dolci), flowers (Armani/Fiori) and a bookseller (Armani/Libri), as well as the fragrances, skincare and beauty ranges, and you start to see what an “Armani lifestyle” really means.

The new store at 760 Madison Avenue sits on the same street as the designer’s first in New York. “In the 1980s, when I opened my

first Giorgio Armani boutique in Manhattan, I chose Madison Avenue because I felt it was an exclusive and refined area," he says. "Ideal for the contemporary elegance I wanted to communicate. Today, more than 30 years later, I still believe this place reflects my philosophy and my aesthetic vision." To mark the occasion, the designer staged a fashion show in the city, taking over the Park Avenue Armory and rigging the space to look like a version of Grand Central railway station, but with a huge nightclub. Using more than 90 models, the show presented the Giorgio Armani Spring/Summer 2025 collections for women and men, named In Viaggio (meaning On a Journey).

Attended by 650 guests—the great and the good of the city with a healthy gaggle of celebrities—the parade of typically Armani dark and neutral-coloured garments looked at home in Manhattan, and the designer explains that the metropolis holds a special place for him: "New York, for me, has always been linked to the many films that have deeply shaped my imagination." The event also featured the launch of New York Exclusive, a capsule collection created for the new store that will be exclusively on sale there and at Bergdorf Goodman. The pieces consciously echo the designer's 1980s tailoring style.

Back then, New York arguably acted as a bridge between Milan and the rest of the world for Armani. After the label came to the attention of the American public through dressing Richard Gere for the 1980 film *American Gigolo*, it was the men and women of Manhattan who took up the Armani tailored look—the women as a way to achieve wardrobe equality in the workplace with their male colleagues, the men because they saw Armani as a way of softening their sartorial silhouette to make it more modern and less old-school corpo-

rate. And at the time the decade of *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, *Grandmaster Flash, Bright Lights Big City*, *Run-DMC, Fatal Attraction*, *Jean-Michel Basquiat, Talking Heads, Keith Haring, Beastie Boys, Do the Right Thing, Jeff Koons, Raging Bull, Madonna, When Harry Met Sally* and, of course, *Wall Street*, New York seemed to be the popular-cultural engine for the world. By being big in New York, Armani inevitably became big globally.

At that time, although he didn't court it, the Armani look was fashionable. It defined a look—bourgeois, you might call it in Europe, but in a sensual, Italian way—that suited the aspirations of the times. Since then, with the advent of grunge and street style and maximalism and all the rest, Armani's restrained smartness has been more

looks fresh and exciting. It marking a shift away from skinny strides and tight-fitting jackets and the pursuit of streetwear style by luxury brands. Suddenly, the neutral, natural coloured palette and the relaxed silhouettes that Richard Gere rocked in *American Gigolo* feel right again. What does the man who created this look think of this revival of interest?

"It's interesting because you see things go around and come around. The whole discussion at the moment about gender in clothing is an example. From the very first I was producing clothes for women based on my menswear and using womenswear fabrics for my menswear. People talked of my style as being androgynous, whereas I simply looked at it as an aesthetic choice."

And now that the style of his menswear is again seen as con-

"I ALWAYS DREAMT OF CREATING AN ENTIRE ARMANI LIFESTYLE. INTERIORS WERE AN OBVIOUS AREA TO EXPLORE AS THEY ALLOW YOU TO DRESS THE SPACE. AND FOOD, TOO, IS AN ESSENTIAL PART OF LIFE. IT WAS A SHORT STEP TO HOTELS AND RESIDENCES."

or less of the moment depending on the times. But his popularity among consumers has not wavered. Because, as he says, "By not chasing fashion you are not its victim." It speaks volumes that he became the go-to designer for Hollywood red-carpet events where (some) movie stars look to a safe pair of hands to make sure they look their best.

Today, however, the designer who eschews trends finds himself in the peculiar position of being, once again, in vogue. The Armani wide-trousered and fluid jacket look for men, which he has been essentially true to for five decades, again

temporary, what would he say to those who are just discovering it? "What can I say? Enjoy it. Enjoy the comfort. Clothes should always be comfortable as comfort brings confidence. Clothes should bring out the character of the wearer. They should not disguise or overwhelm. My menswear should make you look good, so you feel good. And as elegance does not date, you can wear it for years. Which is good for your bank balance and good for the planet too."

*Courtesy:
The Sunday Times, London (UK)*

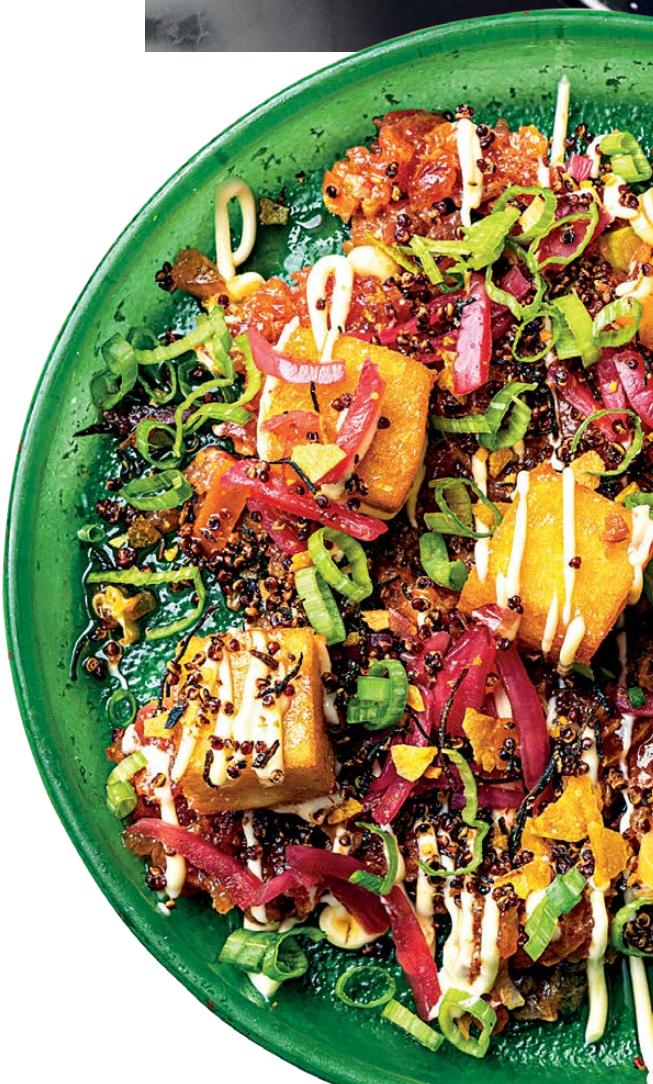
FOOD & DRINK
DESTINATION

WHAT ANGELS EAT

Los Angeles is foodie heaven. From the best of Modern American cuisine to dishes from around the world, from celebrity chefs to street food legends, the city has it all.

Amit Dixit

The culinary gods have been smiling upon Los Angeles for a long time. Don't forget, the city was once part of Mexico, so it has good genes when it comes to food. And LA hasn't rested on its laurels. Today, this sprawling city in Southern California is a melting pot of world cultures and, consequently, cuisines. Here, heirloom tomatoes ripen effortlessly on vines, fresh Pacific oysters come with a whiff of the sea, and the wine flows freely at every meal (and otherwise). The food is marked by fresh produce, bold, uncomplicated flavours, and flawless execution. You can do many things in LA, but it's nearly impossible to have a bad meal here. This time was no different.





The best of French-Californian cuisine is on offer at Shirley Brasserie inside the historic Hollywood Roosevelt Hotel

OLD IS GOLD SHIRLEY BRASSERIE

My culinary sojourn began at the storied Hollywood Roosevelt Hotel. Right on the Hollywood Walk of Fame and across the road from the Chinese Theatre, the hotel oozes history. The first Academy Awards were held here in 1929. Hotel guests have included the likes of Clark Gable, Charlie Chaplin and Marilyn Monroe—the latter occupied a suite overlooking the pool for several years. Shirley Brasserie, named after actress Shirley Templeton who tap danced on the hotel stairs, opened in July 2023. Under Australian chef Craig Hopson's watchful eye, this fine-dining restaurant serves French-Californian cuisine. Hopson has worked in several Michelin restaurants over the years (Guy Savoy, Paris; Le Cirque, New York, etc), so the food, best described as 'elevated comfort', is top-notch. We had to have the Wild Burgundy Escargots, slathered in a herbed garlic butter. Equally divine were the half-dozen oysters, served with classic accompaniments—mignonette, cocktail sauce and lemon slices. The open kitchen at Shirley Brasserie—where muscley chefs work their magic with butcher cuts on the wood-fired grill—is a joy to behold. Of course, someone had to order a steak; the succulent slab of meat came paired with hearty spuds. I wish we had the appetite for the Shirley Seafood Platter—selection of oyster, shrimps, crudos and Peruvian scallops—which is quite popular, but we only had room left for the airy Chocolate Mousse.



7000 Hollywood Blvd,
Hollywood, CA 90028
www.shirleybrasserie.com
Cost Meal for two: \$140 (₹11,800)
plus taxes



ANCIENT FLAVOURS, MODERN TAKE

KATEEN

After the success of that first meal, our expectations were high. Ka'teen, a culinary gem not far from the Hollywood Roosevelt, did not disappoint. This Mexican restaurant brings a contemporary take to the ancient cuisine of the Yucatan Peninsula. It's been conjured up by an icon of the LA food scene, Chef Wes Avila, who found fame with Guerrilla Tacos, an experimental food cart which evolved into a taqueria. Ka'teen, set in a 5,000 square feet Aztec-inspired garden space, transported us to the lush forests of Yucatan. The fireplaces kept the al fresco seating cosy, shooing the autumnal chill away. There were warming libations too—palomas and margaritas and an array of speciality cocktails. The DJ played some cool sets. Yes, oysters were ordered for the table and a portion of chips and guacamole—how can you not in a Mexican restaurant? We had quesadillas and papas bravas, but the highlight was Bone Marrow (roasted shank bone, mole rojo, brioche toast) and the Campechana Ceviche, which offered an assortment of raw seafood. Ka'teen means 'afresh' in Mayan and that describes Chef Avila's food philosophy perfectly.

6516 Selma Ave, Los Angeles, CA 90028

www.kateenla.com

Cost Meal for two: \$170 (₹14,350) plus taxes





**FOOD & DRINK
DESTINATION**

MEAL MARATHON DOWNTOWN LA FOOD TOUR

“I’m Sally from the Valley,” screamed our Vietnamese-American host. Sally Tiongco was born and raised in Southern California. In 2009, she gave up her profession as a school teacher and set up Six Taste Food Tours, so she could introduce visitors as well as locals to the culinary treasures of her city (the work-life balance was a bonus). We met Sally in front of the Grand Central Market, immediately engulfed in her bubbly warmth. In the last few decades, valiant attempts have been made to revitalise Downtown LA. These are now bearing fruit. The beating heart of this transformation is the more-than-a-century-old Grand Central Market. With over 50 minority-owned food stalls, it was just the spot to kick off our food marathon. Our first stop was Sarita’s Pupuseria, where we sampled pupusa, the national dish of El Salvador. A grilled, thick flatbread stuffed with kidney beans, it was served with curtido, a spicy, fermented cabbage slaw. Think of it as a paratha stuffed with rajma. Our next stop was Sticky Rice, a home of Thai comfort food, where we dug into Gai Yang, juicy pieces of grilled chicken served with raw papaya salad. Then it was time for a walk to Chef Fred Eric’s Pi’ LA, purveyor of LA-style pizza. To

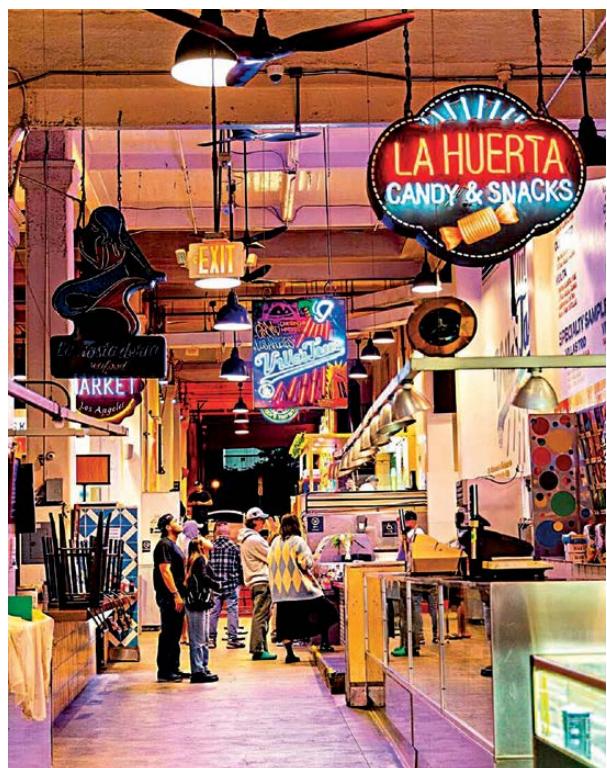
Clockwise from left: Cosy al fresco seating at Ka’teen; Vegan donuts at Donut Friend in Downtown Los Angeles; and the Grand Central Market in LA, which is a warren of foodie treasures

the sound of retro music, we dug into square-shaped slices of gourmet pizza in flavours I’d not encountered before. Our next stop was the legendary Guisados, where a taco sampler awaited. We were pretty stuffed but this was not an opportunity to be passed up, so we loosened our belts and dug in. That’s the moment I died and went to taco heaven, gorging on Chuleta en Chile Verde (diced pork chop), Bistek en Salsa Roja (flank steak) and Mole Poblano (shredded chicken breast). We just about recovered and made it to the last leg of the tour—the vegan Donut Friend, where we had a passion fruit donut (they even have one called Poppy-Gandhi). What is the Sixth Taste, you may ask. Well, you’ll just have to take the tour to find out!

Apart from Downtown LA, their most popular tour, Six Taste also offers food tours of Santa Monica, Little Tokyo, Thai Town, Hollywood, etc.

www.sixtaste.com

Cost US\$85 per person plus taxes and fees





•

Clockwise from left:
Casual seating and
comfort food at The Rose
Venice; Healthy Peruvian
offerings at Cabra, a
rooftop restaurant at The
Hoxton, Downtown LA

BOHEMIAN RHAPSODY

THE ROSE VENICE

The laidback vibe of Venice Beach extends to the fine tables of this fine neighbourhood. Commanding an 8,000 square feet historical warehouse space, the Rose Venice is a venerated local institution which has been around since 1979. In February 2024, award-winning chef Ray Garcia took over the reins and set about revamping the menu. Widely revered for his bold yet refined flavours, his cuisine has been categorised as ‘bold Californian’, though his own preferred description is “authentically inauthentic”. The focus at the Rose now is firmly on seasonal, ingredient-driven menus with a nod to diverse culinary cultures. We sat in the outdoor beer garden, and sipped a refreshing rosé. The Rose Cheeseburger with wagyu beef patty when it arrived was soul satisfying, as was the brisket sandwich. The only minor disappoint was the Baked Na'an Bread, which turned out to be more a pita (they took it off the final bill, so we can't complain).

220 Rose Ave, Venice, CA 90291;
www.therosevenice.la

Cost Meal for two: \$110 (₹9,300) plus taxes





FOOD WITH A VIEW

CABRA

Rooftop restaurants and bars are something of an LA institution. Cabra, a stylish rooftop establishment, sits atop The Hoxton, Downtown LA—a spiffy boutique hotel that was once the home of the LA Railway—and serves up the vibrant flavours of Peruvian cuisine as interpreted by Chef Stephanie Izard. The food at Cabra is as good as the panoramic views it offers of the Downtown LA skyline. The restaurant was positively bustling on the week night we visited. Why shouldn't it? The family-style shareable plates of nosh were delicious enough to induce a food coma. Among the plethora of dishes we gorged on that night—the empanadas, ceviches and skewers—the one that blew me away was a vegetarian offering—the Sweet Potato Ceviche. Who would have thought? But that's the City of Angels for you—a smorgasbord of surprises every single time.

The Hoxton, Downtown LA, 1060 S Broadway,
Los Angeles, CA 90015;
www.cabralosangeles.com
Cost Meal for two: \$150 (₹12,700) plus taxes

Rooms at THE Lotus Palace Chettinad feature local textiles and tiles; while the main courtyard features a thousand-lotus pattern evocative of kolams





FINE LIVING
HOTEL

THE MYSTIC MANSION

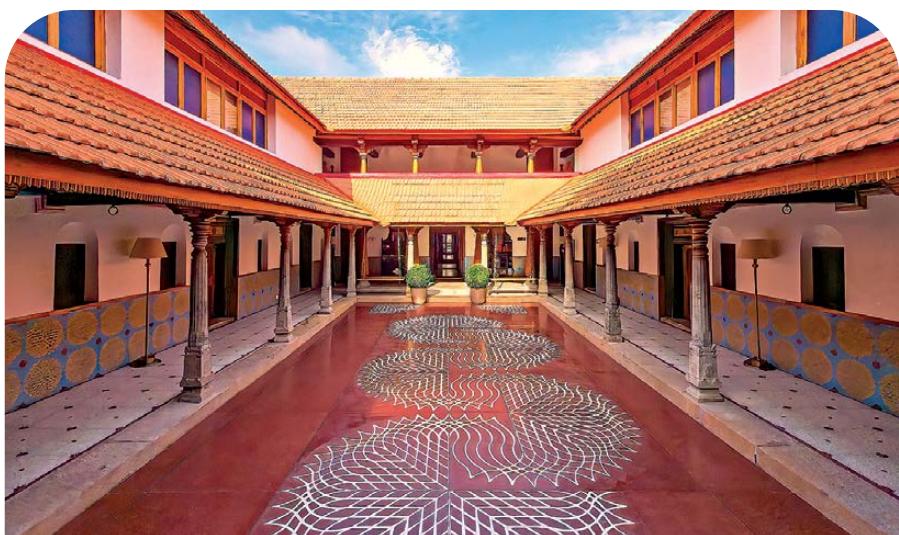
THE Park Hotels' foray into Chettinad with THE Lotus Palace, a heritage property that is a marvel of restoration and quiet luxury.

By Amit Dixit

I've always been curious about Chettinad's mansions. The luxurious family homes of a wealthy mercantile community came on the tourism map only a few decades ago. Now there's a new—but very old and venerable—kid on the block, by THE Park Hotels group. THE Park Hotels' pivot into the heritage hotel space began modestly with The Denmark Tavern in Serampore, but has gathered pace with two dramatic openings in quick succession. One is Ran Baas The Palace, an elegant heritage hotel nestled inside the Qila Mubarak in Patiala. The other is THE Lotus Palace Chettinad, which, with its maximalist aesthetic, is the prettiest of the trio. Being a heritage junkie, I had to check it out.

Leaving Trichy Airport, we were greeted by a rugged landscape, mellowed by low-hanging clouds and a gently setting sun. The road was smooth and the cab made good time to our destination—the sleepy hamlet of Kanadukathan, deep inside Chettiar country. Centuries ago, this is where the Nattukottai Chettalars, an enterprising trading community with a global footprint, set down roots in over 90 villages. Marvels of urban planning and palatial architecture, three of these village clusters have earned themselves a UNESCO tag. Over the years, a few of the mansions have opened their doors to privileged guests who can get a taste of the wealthy merchant life—for a night or two.

It was dark by the time I arrived. The 230-year-old Lotus Palace was lit up like a bride. Following the plan of most Chettiar mansions, it comprised a *thinnai* or verandah, followed by a succession of courtyards, with residential quarters arranged



**FINE LIVING
HOTEL**



- Both the tasteful interiors (Top) and the delicious cuisine (Above) at THE Lotus Palace Chettinad evoke a strong sense of place

around the main one, followed by courtyards for dining, cooking and so on. The mansion has strong bones, as evidenced from the intricate Burmese teak wood-carved entry doors, and the impressive wooden and stone-carved pillars.

Architect Kaushik Mukherjee has done a sensitive restoration job, preserving the mansion's character, while deftly adding modern conveniences. I was settled into the Rani Suite, adorned with charming textiles and the region's famed Athangudi tiles. Saibal Das's dramatic photographs, mostly captured on film, are sprinkled across the property. They depict the palace prior to its restoration and village scenes. The most arresting feature is the Sahasradala Padma (1,000-petal lotus) pattern on the main courtyard floor, a homage to Chettinad's traditional *kolam* patterns.

The signature restaurant, 86 Pillars, features Raja Ravi Varma-influenced stained-glass panels depicting Ramayana scenes, a nod to THE Lotus Palace's setting as a revered location for Ramayana recitals. The innermost courtyard has been transformed into the Park's signature pool-cum-bar offering—Aqua, the perfect spot to unwind.

Kathiravan Karunanithi, the hotel's manager, plays the prefect host. Next morning, he packed me off on a heritage tour of Chettinad with Kavitha, the region's best tour guide. Kavitha's unbridled enthusiasm for her land was infectious. We visited breathtaking palaces, lively markets and a tile factory, but the Vintage Car & Camera Museum was the high point of a morning well spent. I returned to find an Arasavirundhu (Emperor's Feast) waiting for me. This is the ultimate Chettinad meal experience, comprising 15 classic dishes, including the region's fiery non-veg fare.

THE Lotus Palace offers a plethora of experiences besides, from a sunset visit to Thirumayam Fort to fortune telling by a parrotand a kolam-making workshop. There's a spa too.

The most memorable for me was the high tea at The Red Room, an experience reserved for in-house guests. The red lacquer-themed room with Burmese accents evokes the Chettiar's deep connection with Burma. Here, I lounged like the lord of the manor, sipping my *sukku malli* coffee with an array of snacks.

Hotelier Priya Paul, whose measured approach and tasteful vision have been the guiding light of her boutique hotel chain, has a winner in THE Lotus Palace Chettinad. Do take a step back in time and visit this charming jewel in Chettinad's crown.

THE INFORMATION

Accommodation 15 rooms and suites

Tariff ₹18,000 plus taxes

Address No. 25, CVCTV Street, Kanadukathan, Karaikudi Taluk, Sivaganga District, TN

Contact +91-4565-292966; resv.chettinad@theparkhotels.com

Website www.theparkhotels.com

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RED HOT BEAUTIFUL

Scarlett House, Malaika Arora's debut restaurant in Mumbai, offers elegance from a disappeared world, with some of her favourite food and glow potions. What else can you ask for?

By Nivedita Jayaram Pawar

Scarlett House, a 90 year old bungalow, stands on a quaint Bandra bylane whispering tales of a bygone era. A narrow, woody staircase leads to a living room festooned with gramophones, floral-upholstered Victorian chairs and vintage dinnerware. Nostalgia hangs heavy in the air, and a sense that you have entered a cosy, lived-in Bandra home. But it's not! Scarlett House is Malaika Arora's new restaurant with restaurateur Dhaval Udeshi, her son Arhaan and Malaya Nagpal.

Apart from a charming dining room, the restaurant also features a wine & cheese room and a small retail counter beaming with locally-sourced cheeses, nut butters and other items largely sourced from women entrepreneurs. A seductively low-lit lounge, clad with dreamy wall paper and cascading chandeliers, sits on a higher floor. Though the tables may feel treacherously close, it's undoubtedly glamourous. There's background jazz music but it's

unobtrusive and doesn't drown out a lively hum of chatter.

In a place where food needn't impress, it still does. The menu at Scarlett House holds some favourites from Malaika's kitchen but is largely the work of chef Beena Noronha, who also helms Udeshi's other restaurants including GIGI. Springy calamari curled up alongside fried coconut bits was a delight. There's also thecha smeared paneer full of bite and vigour. The Malabar Curry with Indrani rice felt like





Clockwise from top left: Malabar curry with Indrani rice; Salmon mille feuille; Malla's special caramelised onion pasta; the lounge bar upstairs is clad with beautiful wallpaper and chandeliers



the culinary equivalent of a comfort blanket and the khichdi, as soothing as a massage. It might even inspire similar noises. A sea bass baked with a special spice rub (from Malaika's kitchen) makes for the perfect main course. I wasn't drinking but my dinner date who ordered a Bloody Mary was suitably impressed. I stuck to the wellness waters infused with herbs and berries (Malaika's glow potions). Scarlett House is charmingly small—just 45 seats—may leave many disappointed. Or waiting. But there's hope as two more are in the pipeline.

Where Opposite Yellow Rose apartments, Pali Village, Bandra West.

Cost ₹4000 for two

Pre-bookings via Instagram

WHEN SLEEK MEETS SMART



Clearly, a notch above the rest, this new smartphone marries bold design and brainy brilliance with flair.

Sulabh Puri

Many smartphones make you choose between brains or beauty. But then comes Samsung Galaxy S25 Ultra and it's got both, grabbing eyeballs immediately. While many may argue that the design upgrades have been incremental compared to its predecessor, but you need a discerning eye to see the improvements. However, naysayers also keep a lid on when they see the innovation and performance; making the device feel both familiar yet refreshingly new.

Design

At first touch, the S25 Ultra impresses with its thinnest bezel yet. While its boxy form might seem like a design faux pas to some, it offers an incredibly secure grip—like holding a modern piece of art that just happens to be smart. The S Pen, always a delightful companion, remains as charming as ever for jotting down your wild ideas or spontaneous doodles.

Display

The 6.9-inch Dynamic AMOLED display is nothing short of a visual feast. With Quad HD+ resolution and a 120Hz refresh rate, it is both bright and crisp, ensuring

every swipe and tap is a treat for your eyes. Whether you're streaming your favourite series or simply browsing, the screen makes every moment enjoyable.

Performance

Powered by a Snapdragon 8 Elite processor, this device handles everyday tasks and gaming marathons with ease. Enhanced AI capabilities work silently in the background, making multitasking feel almost magical. The phone is as responsive as it is powerful, ensuring a smooth user experience from start to finish.

Final Thoughts

The Samsung Galaxy S25 Ultra is a premium flagship that commands attention without shouting. It may not overhaul its design radically, but its refined features and top-tier performance make it a worthy investment for tech enthusiasts and loyal fans alike. In summary, the Galaxy S25 Ultra stands as a testament to Samsung's excellence, balancing innovation with practicality. It's not a phone; it is truly an experience.

Price: ₹1,65,999 (1TB version)



FINE
LIVING
GIZMO

SWEET 16E

This is a device you didn't know you needed. Here's why.

Sulabh Puri

Remember that charming, unassuming friend, who surprises you with their hidden talents? Apple's iPhone 16e is that friend. With a dash of innovation and a generous sprinkle of savvy technology, this gadget promises to deliver all the performance and style you crave. And it feels downright luxurious.

Form Factor

The iPhone 16e is like a tailor-made suit for tech lovers. With its matte black and white finish, this sleek device combines durability with elegance. The Ceramic Shield front and the toughest back glass in a smartphone ensure that it's built to last, while its splash, water, and dust resistance add a pinch of rugged charm. It's a modest marvel that quietly flexes its credentials.

Looking Glass

The 6.1-inch Super Retina XDR OLED display is a feast for the eyes. Whether streaming your favourite series or scrolling through social feeds, its edge-to-edge design and vibrant colours make every pixel pop. The clarity in HDR videos and the crispness of text create a premium viewing experience that belies its affordable price tag.

Under The Hood

The A18 chip and Apple's newly designed C1 modem deliver fast, smooth performance that keeps pace with the busiest days. The 48MP 2-in-1 camera system, empowered by Apple Intelligence, captures stunning photos and videos—even in challenging light. From graphically demanding games to everyday multitasking, the iPhone 16e handles everything with aplomb.

Price: ₹89,900 (512GB Version)

WHAT WE THINK

The iPhone 16E proves that affordability need not compromise innovation. It blends style, power, and efficiency into a device that feels both luxurious and accessible. In a world of ostentatious gadgets, this understated icon quietly whispers quality.



LOVE AT FIRST SIGHT

WHO SAYS THAT THE MATRIX of love is so structured that it needs a pre-ordained calendar date to celebrate? Even so, much of the bonhomie around love does seem to coalesce around Valentine's Day. Which is probably why Breguet chose to launch an exclusive creation like the Reine de Naples 9915—limited to just 28 pieces—as an ode to love, marking V-Day celebrations. This masterpiece of a watch uses handcrafted gem-setting along with mother of pearl to showcase passion and refinement, spotlighting the brand's artistry and savoir faire. From the silken iridescence of its dial to the brilliance of its precious stones, it is an ode to the bonds of eternal love. For this gorgeous new

creation, the Maison has embellished the dial with mother of pearl; it is meticulously extracted from the largest diameter of the central section of nacreous shells. It is then polished for that smooth, satin finish, which preserves their natural lustre and unique reflections. On the flange, sparkling diamonds encircle the mother-of-pearl dial, followed by pink sapphires, culminating in a heart, entirely composed of rubies, positioned between 6 and 9 o'clock. The bezel is finely set with diamonds, while the crown is adorned with a cabochon-cut ruby, which is quite literally the jewel in the crown.

By Chumki Bharadwaj

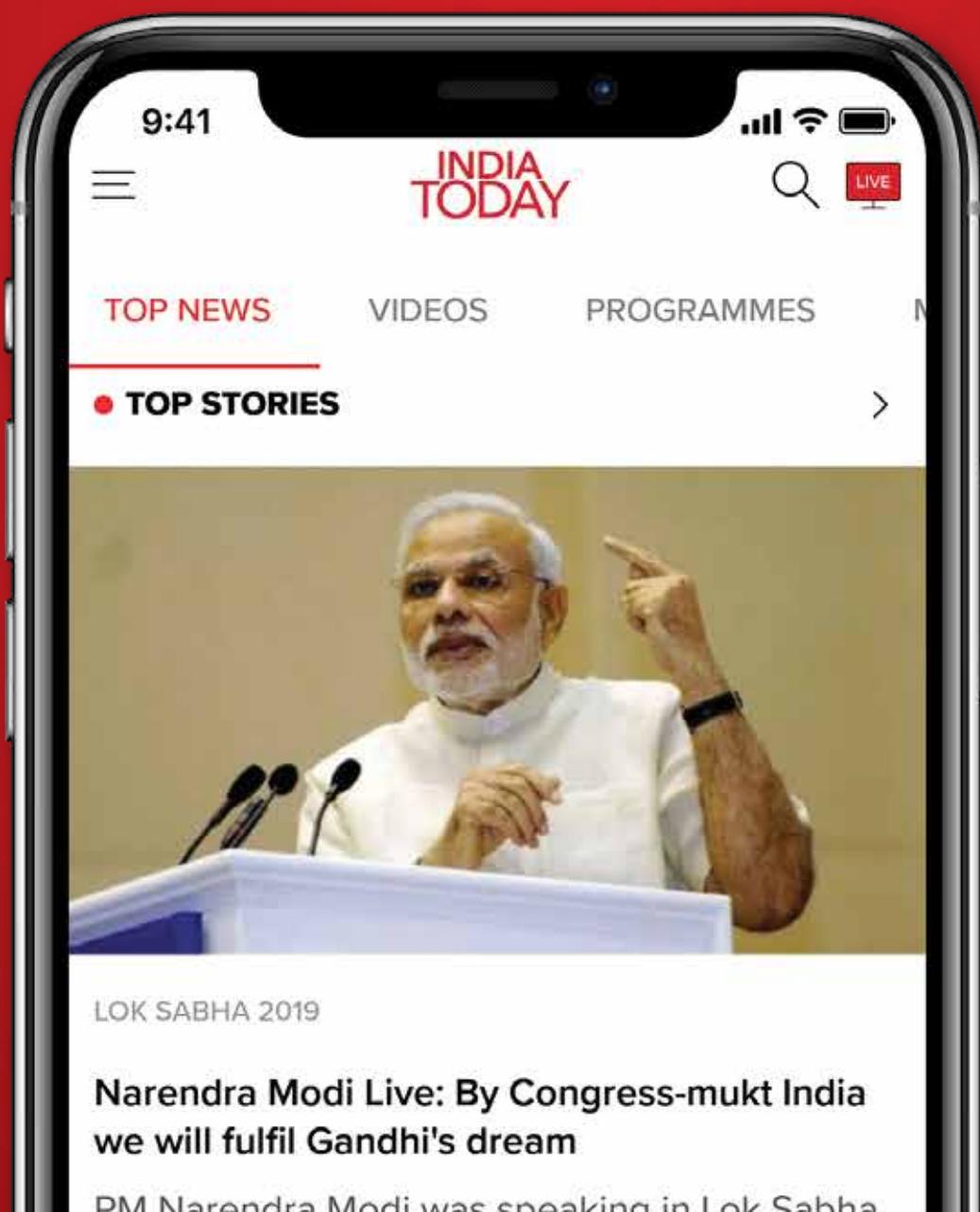


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