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NAXALISM

WINNING THE WAR

**THE INSIDE STORY OF THE MODI GOVERNMENT'S STRATEGY TO
ELIMINATE INDIA'S BIGGEST INTERNAL SECURITY CHALLENGE**

EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW: AMIT SHAH

"WE WILL END THE NAXAL THREAT BY MARCH 2026"



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MAURITIUS

Just a decade and a half ago, Naxals had such a vast, malignant presence across the country that then prime minister Dr Manmohan Singh described Left-wing Extremism (LWE) as “the greatest internal security threat to the nation”. The Red Corridor, as it was called, sliced India vertically all the way from Pashupatinath in Nepal to Tirupati in Andhra Pradesh. On the Indian side, at its peak, this is estimated to have affected the lives of about 80 million people. In 2014, when the Modi government took charge, the Naxals had the upper hand in 126 districts spread across 10 states: Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Odisha, Telangana, West Bengal and Uttar Pradesh. Dr Singh unfailingly flagged its root cause: near-criminal levels of neglect of tribal India, worsened by loss of forest rights and displacement. Orphaned and disempowered, local communities had become the perfect soil for the anti-State and violent ideology of the Naxals to take root and flourish.

The challenge was complex at all levels. It was not easy to spread development to remote forest regions controlled by Kalashnikov-wielding militias, specialists in guerrilla warfare involving booby traps, land mines, ambushes and extensive gunbattles. In the past 20 years, 2,344 security personnel have lost their lives in the battle against Naxal insurgency—four times the number of Indian Army personnel killed in the Kargil War. Not counting the 6,000-plus civilians killed in related incidents during the same period.

How did New Delhi win over such a vast territory and its sullen social base? As Union home minister Amit Shah explains in an exclusive interview, the strategy was as nuanced as it was relentless, the objective being to “replace weapons and violence with development and trust”. The Modi government finally broke the stalemate with a remarkable four-pronged strategy, employed in a concerted fashion after Shah took office in 2019.

The first thrust was ruthlessly dealing with those wedded to the gun. That meant laying out an elaborate security dragnet over the deepest jungles of central India to ensure area dominance. The government did this by setting up Forward Operating Bases (FOBs) in areas where the security vacuum had earlier enabled the Naxals to flourish. To get a ground perspective, Group Editorial Director Raj Chengappa travelled across the heart of the Bastar region along with Senior Associate Editor Rahul Noronha to many of these FOBs. Secu-

rity personnel ferried them on motorcycles, which was the new protocol to avoid land mines. They found the bases manned by combat personnel with commando training and equipped with modern assault rifles that outgunned the Naxals. The FOBs are not just fortified garrisons, closed off from the surrounding landscape, they also serve as points of social outreach, running schools and health centres for the locals. In the past five years, 302 such bases were set up in the region and it was found to be the best way to consolidate territory.

The second prong was the induction of modern intelligence-gathering tools like drones and satellite imaging that helped track the movement of the rebels. The old guerrilla tactics of the Naxals stood no chance against contemporary surveillance and they were systematically driven out of their bastions. Fortified Police Stations were set up to hold

ground ceded by the retreating rebels. Over 612 such stations have come up, showing the extent of turf taken. Choppers were on call at the FOBs to pump up the morale of the security forces with their capability for rapid operational movement and evacuation for medical emergencies. A generous surrender policy, meanwhile, thinned the insurgency. Almost 7,500 Naxals have surrendered in the past 10 years. Many of these

former cadres joined the state forces and became “a force multiplier”, enriching tech intelligence with vital human intelligence and local terrain knowledge.

The third mortal wound was severing the extortion funds and arms pipeline, squeezing cash flows by digitising the local economy. Once fitted, the last piece of the jigsaw could prove the most enduring. Areas cleared of Naxalism were endowed with much-needed development: over 11,503 km of roads, 2,343 mobile towers, and other harbingers of prosperity. As Shah says, the idea is to create a paradigm where “there is no reason for people to go back to Naxalism”. What we termed as the Modi government’s Guns and Gulab (roses) policy is a fitting conclusion to the longest insurrection against the Indian State, especially if it succeeds in Shah’s plan to totally ridding the country of gun-toting Naxals by the spring of 2026.



Raj Chengappa (centre), Chandradeep Kumar (left) and Rahul Noronha in Bastar


(Aroon Purie)

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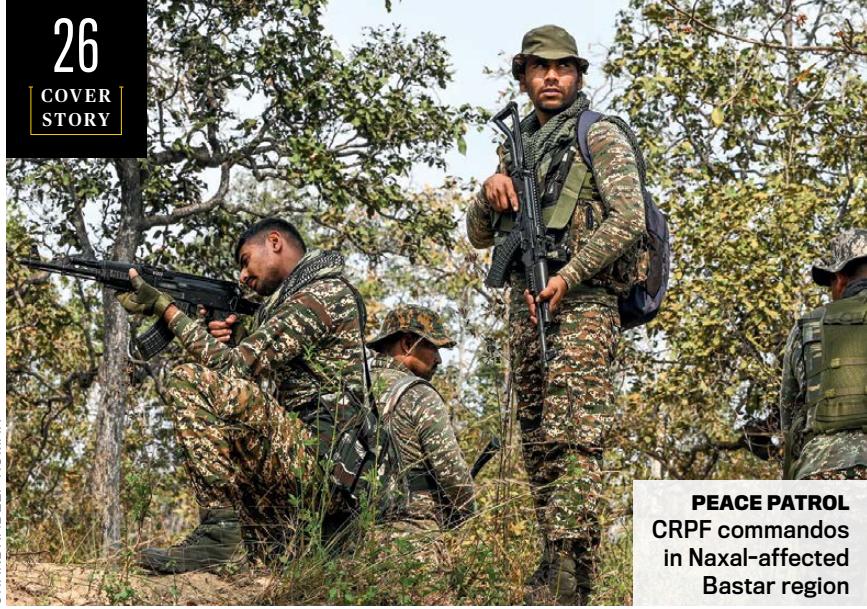
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LEGACY ISSUE Leaders of the DMK-led coalition protest the Centre's three-language policy in Chennai, Feb. 18

PTI

NATIONAL EDUCATION POLICY

A LANGUAGE BATTLE IN TAMIL NADU

By Kaushik Deka

In an intensifying confrontation between the Tamil Nadu government and the Centre, chief minister M.K. Stalin has reinforced his unequivocal opposition to the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, declaring that the state will not implement it. The core of this resistance stems from concerns over perceived Hindi language imposition, besides potential disruption to Tamil Nadu's long-established

education model, and what the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) government views as a violation of cooperative federalism.

NEP 2020 has reintroduced the three-language formula, a concept first introduced in the 1968 NEP. The DMK sees this as a covert attempt to introduce Hindi through the backdoor. The earlier NEP advocated for Hindi to be a compulsory language across the nation.

Hindi-speaking states were required to teach Hindi, English and a modern Indian language—preferably a south Indian one—while non-Hindi-speaking states were expected to teach the local regional language, Hindi and English.

In contrast, NEP 2020 offers much more leeway, not imposing any specific language on any state. “There will be a greater flexibility in the three-language formula, and no language

CELEBRATE THE POWER OF THE WOMAN

Shahnaz Husain is the first woman in 106 years to receive the prestigious World's Greatest Woman Entrepreneur Award from Success, a renowned U.S. business magazine.

She built a global Ayurvedic beauty empire. Her revolutionary business model became a Case Study in Harvard on Brand Creation in Emerging Markets.

She has become a subject at Harvard — "Shahnaz Husain Emerging Market" for creating a brand without publicity.

She has been invited to speak at Harvard, MIT, and Oxford, sharing her journey of building an international brand without commercial advertising.

With cosmetic empires pumping billions of dollars into a hysterically mad cosmetic industry selling youth and dreams in bottled jars, she stood up and sold India's 5,000-year-old civilization in a jar.

Shahnaz Husain never relied on routine advertising to promote her brand. Instead, she adopted a unique and innovative approach to marketing her Ayurvedic beauty products. She gained global recognition by holding press conferences all over the world, with the support of Indian Embassies/High Commissions abroad. Through

these events, she effectively showcased her brand's philosophy and products to international media/press. She further strengthened her brand presence by distributing free samples and press materials at the conference, allowing people to learn and experience the effectiveness of her Ayurvedic formulations firsthand. This strategy not only built credibility but also positioned her as a pioneer in the herbal beauty industry.

Shahnaz Husain expanded her global presence by launching exclusive counters at some of the world's most prestigious department stores. In London, she established a presence at Harrods and Selfridges. In Paris, her brand was introduced at Galeries Lafayette.

Shahnaz Husain, the well-known entrepreneur and pioneer of Ayurvedic beauty products, achieved a significant milestone when she sold out her products at the prestigious Selfridges department store in London even before its official inauguration. Additionally, she extended her reach to the Seibu Chain in Japan, also sold in Spain and Milan.

Shahnaz Husain achieved an impressive milestone in retail history by recording the highest-ever sales at Selfridges by an astounding sale for £4,000 in a single day, setting a new benchmark for sales performance in the store.

She attributes her success to perseverance and determination. She states:

"In life, it is not important what you want—what matters is how badly you want it. You can achieve anything in life if you want it that much".

I am walking and see a wall; I don't turn back. I break the wall and walk through, and let the world fall into place."

Shahnaz Husain redefined beauty care by merging Ayurveda with modern science.

The Wall Street Journal quoted "Shahnaz Husain is a name to reckon with, credited with bringing the undisputed value of herbs from the mists of antiquity and combining them with scientific knowledge and know-how. Shahnaz Husain has done so much for India's image abroad that she deserves the sobriquet of India's Beauty Ambassador"

Her contributions to government skill development projects have trained over 40,000 underprivileged women in beauty and wellness.

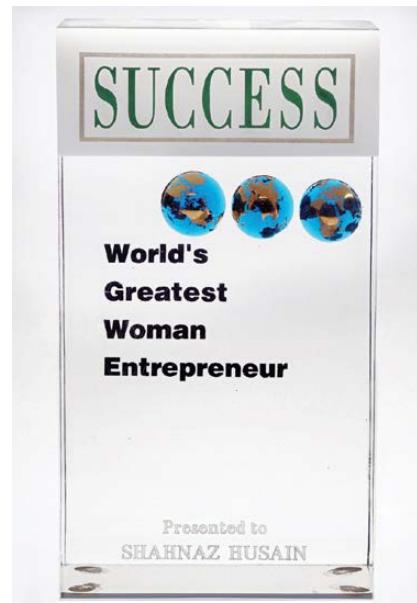
She has taken a significant step towards inclusivity by



introducing a Beauty Book in Braille—the first of its kind in the world—designed specifically for the visually challenged.

For Shahnaz Husain, Women's Day is a time to celebrate women globally. She strongly advocates for financial independence and self-reliance, believing that true empowerment comes from asserting one's independence.

With her unwavering commitment to entrepreneurship, social impact, and women's empowerment, Shahnaz Husain continues to inspire millions, setting an example for future generations.



Shahnaz Husain received the "World's Greatest Woman Entrepreneur" Award from Success, the U.S. based business magazine, becoming the first woman in the world in 107 years to receive the prestigious Success Award



Shahnaz Husain received the "World's Greatest Woman Entrepreneur" Award from Success, the U.S. based business magazine, becoming the first woman in the world in 107 years to receive the prestigious Success Award

will be imposed on any state. The three languages learned by children will be the choices of states, regions, and of course the students themselves, so long as at least two of the three languages are native to India,” reads the relevant part of the policy. That is, in addition to the state’s language, children would be required to learn at least one other Indian language—not necessarily Hindi. “There is absolutely no imposition of any language on any state or community. NEP 2020 upholds linguistic freedom, ensuring students have the autonomy to learn in the language of their choice,” says Union education minister Dharmendra Pradhan.

BJP Tamil Nadu chief K. Annamalai has also questioned the DMK’s stance. “Private schools attended by the children and grandchildren of DMK leaders follow a trilingual policy. Shouldn’t government school students have the same opportunities?” he asked, emphasising the perceived contradiction in the DMK’s opposition to the policy while allowing elite institutions in the state to follow the same trilingual approach.

Yet Stalin and DMK leaders remain staunch in their opposition. Emphasising that his government had no opposition to any language, including Hindi, the chief minister clarified that his party’s stand was solely against the imposition of Hindi over Tamil. He asserted that those interested in learning Hindi were free to enrol in Kendriya Vidyalayas or attend classes conducted by the Hindi Prachara Sabha.

Critics of NEP 2020 also argue that the Centre’s actions—or inactions—contradict its rhetoric on “promoting regional languages”, citing its failure to recruit sufficient regional language teachers in Kendriya Vidyalayas and the lack of efforts to introduce South Indian languages in schools north of the Vindhyas.

Tamil Nadu’s resistance traces its roots to the inflamed sentiments against Hindi imposition that shaped its Dravidianist polity over three de-

NO TO HINDI Members of student organisations protest against NEP 2020 in Chennai, Feb. 28



ANI

WHAT NEP SAYS ON THREE LANGUAGES

- **The three-language formula will be implemented while keeping in mind the constitutional provisions, aspirations of the people, regions and the Union, and the need to promote multilingualism and national unity**
- **There will be a greater flexibility in the three-language formula, and no language will be imposed on any state**
- **The three languages learned by children will be the choices of states, regions and students themselves, so long as at least two of the three languages are native to India**

TAMIL NADU'S FEARS

- **The three-language formula of the NEP is a covert attempt to introduce/ impose Hindi over Tamil through the backdoor**
- **Introduction of common entrance exams for undergraduate admissions will be disadvantageous to underprivileged students**
- **The non-negotiable condition of implementing NEP 2020 in PM SHRI schools is also a plan to impose Hindi**

cades in the mid-20th century. Periodic attempts to make Hindi a mandatory language in the state’s education system sparked agitations in 1937–40, 1948 and 1965. The two-language policy—Tamil and English—was institutionalised as a response to these agitations, ensuring that Tamil students were not compelled to learn Hindi. The DMK has long argued that this policy has enabled TN’s students to excel

and be competitive globally without the added burden of a third language.

Escalating the stand-off, the Centre has withheld Rs 2,152 crore under the Samagra Shiksha scheme, penalising Tamil Nadu for refusing to join the PM SHRI initiative, a centrally sponsored programme to upgrade 14,500 model schools with a focus on holistic, inclusive and sustainable education. While Tamil Nadu is willing to participate in PM SHRI, it rejects the non-negotiable condition of implementing NEP 2020, which it calls a Trojan horse for Hindi.

Tamil Nadu accuses the BJP-led Union government of using financial coercion to force NEP compliance, a tactic the DMK decries as an assault on state autonomy. “The Centre says Tamil Nadu will get Rs 2,000 crore if the state implements the NEP. I wish to say that we will not agree to the NEP even if the

TAMIL NADU SLAMS THREE-LANGUAGE NORM AS TROJAN HORSE FOR HINDI, THE BJP CALLS TN'S STANCE 'POLITICAL'

IT'S ALL ABOUT MAYA

By Avaneesh Mishra

Centre offers Rs 10,000 crore," Stalin declared at a public event.

Beyond the language controversy, Stalin and his party strongly oppose several structural changes proposed in the NEP. Among them is the introduction of common entrance exams for undergraduate admissions, which the Tamil Nadu government believes will disproportionately disadvantage students from underprivileged backgrounds who do not have access to expensive coaching institutes. The Tamil Nadu government maintains that its existing education model, which has produced high literacy rates and successful professionals across various industries, does not require a structural overhaul dictated by the Centre.

Pradhan emphasises that the NEP is not a rigid mandate but a flexible framework that states can adapt to their regional needs. He points out that several non-BJP states have implemented it despite political differences, arguing that Tamil Nadu's opposition is political rather than based on educational justification. He adds that the policy aims to provide students with a well-rounded education that balances core knowledge with practical skills, aligning with global standards.

However, the real issue lies in execution and political trust. Tamil Nadu fears that once the NEP is adopted, the Centre will dictate its implementation in a way that erodes state autonomy. The BJP, on the other hand, sees the resistance as politically motivated, aimed at keeping the DMK's anti-Hindi, pro-state autonomy narrative alive. With neither side willing to back down, the impasse seems likely to continue. The stand-off has larger implications for federal relations in India, with states like Kerala and West Bengal also resisting aspects of the NEP. The deadlock highlights the importance of dialogue and cooperation between the Union and states beyond political motives.■

Behenji may be down, but not out. That is what the leaders and cadres of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) have been telling themselves for the 13 years since Mayawati was last chief minister of Uttar Pradesh. But a series of unpredictable actions—and none more bizarre than divesting nephew Akash Anand of all party responsibilities—has left them unsure. The action against Akash follows his father-in-law Ashok Siddharth's expulsion last week. If Akash was widely seen as Mayawati's chosen heir, Siddharth was her closest aide. A former Rajya Sabha MP, he played a significant role in ticket distribution and alliance negotiations and handled key responsibilities in the southern states. "She had even

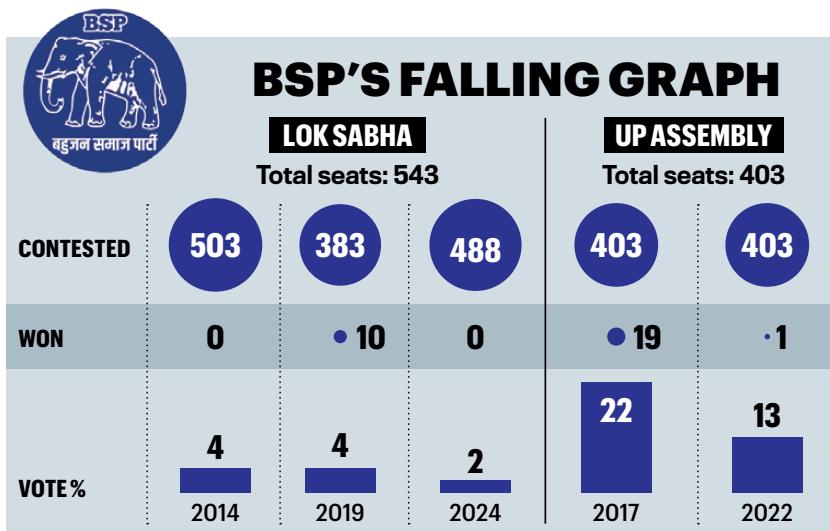
married off her nephew to his daughter," says a BSP functionary.

If Siddharth was removed ostensibly for encouraging groupism and anti-party activities, Akash's dethronement was on account of Siddharth's alleged undue influence on him via his daughter. "For this, not the party but his father-in-law Ashok Siddharth is completely responsible," Mayawati declared in a post on social media platform X. To fill the vacuum, the BSP supremo named her younger brother Anand Kumar, who is the party's national vice-president, as its national coordinator too. But with Kumar opting to retain only one post, party leader Randhir Beniwal was entrusted with the latter responsibility.

More importantly, in a series of



HEIR NO MORE?
Mayawati with
nephew Akash
Anand



posts on X, Mayawati made it clear that she remained the rightful leader of the party. Harking back to her mentor and party founder Kanshi Ram, she wrote that the BSP as “a party and movement” was rooted in the ideology of one who “sacrificed everything” for B.R. Ambedkar’s humanitarian ideals. “In this movement, personal interests, relationships, and ties hold no significance—only the welfare of the Bahujan community is paramount.”

Sacrifice, though, seemed furthest from her own mind as she dispelled notions of a successor waiting in the wings. “Now I myself have also taken this decision that till my lifetime and till my last breath, I will not have any successor in the party. The decision was welcomed wholeheartedly by the people of the party,” she wrote on X. This was a more categorical statement than her earlier assertion, “Just as Kanshi Ram Ji did, during my lifetime as well, the true successor of the party and movement will be the one who, like a devoted disciple of Kanshi Ram Ji, dedicates themselves wholeheartedly—enduring every hardship—to advancing the party and the movement with unwavering commitment.”

Thus Mayawati laid to rest any ambiguity about Akash inheriting the BSP mantle. Her relationship with her nephew had been souring for a while. The BSP supremo had removed him as

MAYAWATI HAS REMOVED NEPHEW AKASH FROM ALL PARTY WORK AND EXPELLED HIS FATHER-IN-LAW ASHOK SIDDHARTH. HER MOVES HAVE LEFT BSP CADRE CONFUSED

national convenor last year, though she later reinstated him. Her disengagement with him perhaps began with his aggressive anti-BJP stance during the Lok Sabha election when he openly attacked the ruling party over issues like paper leaks, inflation, and unemployment, while Mayawati has trained her fire mostly on the Congress and the Samajwadi Party in recent years.

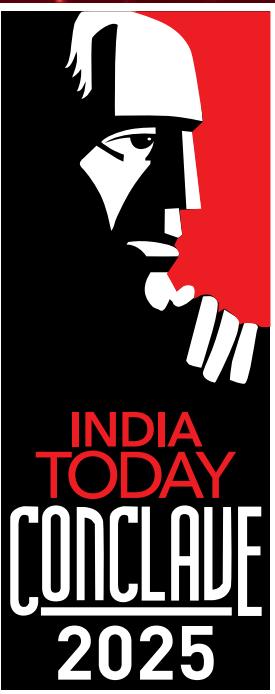
However, the concentration of power now is becoming a source of worry in the party. Though centralised decision-making has its advantages, Mayawati’s poor calls on a variety of issues are feeding perceptions of unpredictability, fuelling internal instability and casting doubts on the party’s strategic direction. It’s a long list of perceived missteps, starting from parting ways with the SP despite electoral gains, refusal to join the Opposition

INDIA bloc, her growing insecurity and alienation of people once close to her and being seemingly oblivious to the rise of Chandrashekhar Azad as an alternate Dalit icon. Past allegations of corruption and legal challenges—such as the disproportionate assets cases and controversies over public expenditure on monuments—have not ceased haunting her either.

All of this is reflecting in voter mistrust and a sense of the BSP’s declining electoral viability as an independent entity. In the 2014 general election, the party scored a duck—the BJP and allies won 73 out of UP’s 80 seats, the Congress and SP won two and five, respectively. In 2019, the SP-BSP alliance helped the BSP gain 10 seats even as the SP retained its five. Post the split, the SP’s trajectory went upward—it won 43 seats in the 2024 Lok Sabha election, halting the BJP juggernaut—and the BSP back to a nil tally.

Once a kingmaker, the BSP’s failure to make electoral gains even in areas with a substantial Dalit population is now threatening its long-term prospects. While Congress claims that the Dalit vote has shifted towards INDIA, SP leaders argue that their party has become a natural alternative for the Dalit voters. Several former BSP leaders, including three former state presidents, have switched sides; 13 of the SP’s 37 MPs are of that stock. Elsewhere, multiple factions within the BSP are working at cross-purposes during elections. In Delhi, party insiders claim five distinct factions operated separately, weakening the party’s cohesion and electoral prospects.

In the state that it once dominated, the BSP’s decline is spurring realignments in the political landscape. New Dalit leadership is emerging, like Azad’s Aazad Samaj Party, even as the SP and Congress consolidate their position. As the BSP’s vote share continues to dwindle, it is becoming increasingly uncertain who the party is fighting against or aligning with. Mayawati may still be at the helm, but the BSP ship seems rudderless. ■



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THE POWER SHUFFLE

By Amitabh Srivastava

In politics, words can be weapons, but silence is often the sharpest blade. Barely a day after swearing in seven new ministers, all from the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Bihar chief minister and Janata Dal (United) president Nitish Kumar made an appearance at a public gathering organised by another alliance partner—Jitan Ram Manjhi's Hindustani Awam Morcha (Secular)—at Patna's Gandhi Maidan on February 28. What followed was an enactment of brevity.

The man who once spoke uninterrupted for 172 minutes during the fevered campaign leading up to the 2020 assembly election wrapped up his remarks in an astonishingly short 30 seconds—a hollow congratulation to the gathered crowd before he stepped away from the podium. To seasoned political observers, this was a deliberate act of disengagement from an alliance already marred by unease.

Politics in Bihar is rarely a sedate affair, and as the state hurtles towards election later this year, the latest

cabinet expansion—widely interpreted as a blunt reaffirmation of saffron dominance within the ruling National Democratic Alliance (NDA)—is as much about optics and leverage as it is about governance. With the cabinet

WITH THE CABINET AT ITS FULL CONSTITUTIONAL STRENGTH OF 36 MINISTERS, NITISH HAS EFFECTIVELY SHUT THE DOOR ON HIS OWN PARTY'S ASPIRANTS

now at its full constitutional strength of 36 ministers, Nitish has effectively shut the door on his own party's aspirants. If power-sharing were a poker game, he seems to have just gone all in, but with a weaker hand.

The BJP, however, is playing a different game altogether. The 2020 assembly election results still loom large in its political calculus: the JD(U), which contested 115 seats, won only 43, while the BJP, contesting 110 seats, surged ahead with 74—an emphatic assertion of its growing dominance. But even as the bigger party, the BJP grudgingly upheld its end of the bargain, backing Nitish for CM's post—a tactical necessity to prevent the JD(U)'s realignment with Lalu and Tejaswi Yadav's Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD).

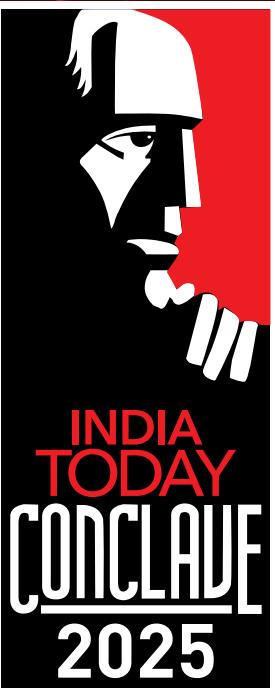
With the 2025 assembly polls looming, that methodical diffidence has dissipated. This time, the BJP is making its ambitions clear. The party cannot afford to be complacent—it must consolidate its base, expand its influence, and ensure that when the dust settles, it, and not Nitish Kumar, holds the reins of power.

Since their January 2024 reunion, the BJP has been engaged in a delicate balancing act: keeping Nitish in check while steadily fortifying its own position. In that sense, the cabinet expansion is a masterstroke—seven new ministers, all from the BJP, bringing its tally to 21, while the JD(U)'s remains stuck at 13. By dominating the alliance's ministerial composition,



Illustration by SIDDHANT JUNDE





MIKE POMPEO

70TH U.S. SECRETARY OF STATE (2018-2021)
FORMER DIRECTOR OF THE CIA (2017-2018)

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the party is reinforcing its status as the senior partner, subtly nudging Nitish into a subservient role. But for Nitish, the move has the trappings of a reluctant bargain, which he hopes will fetch him a stronger deal in the impending seat-sharing negotiations.

Curiously, though, the BJP itself is not entirely at ease with this power play. The most telling sign came from state unit chief Dilip Kumar Jaiswal, who, after quitting his ministerial berth, first declared that the party's parliamentary board would decide the CM candidate, only to later back Nitish Kumar for the top job. It exposed the party's strategic conundrum: the BJP lacks a formidable face of its own in Bihar, yet it is also keenly aware that Nitish Kumar—otherwise the longest-serving CM of the state—is no longer the political magnet he once was.

Adding to the intrigue, neither Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who visited Bihar on February 24, nor BJP national president J.P. Nadda, who was in Patna a day later, categorically endorsed Nitish as the NDA's chief ministerial face. The timing of this pointed ambiguity could not be more significant. On the eve of the cabinet expansion, Nitish's otherwise politically reticent son, Nishant Kumar, made an uncharacteristic public statement, urging the NDA to officially declare his father as its CM candidate. The remark was no innocent observation; it was a calibrated move to pressurise the BJP into a commitment it was reluctant to make. The BJP, as expected, has remained studiously non-committal.

That said, for the BJP, the cabinet reshuffle is not just about cementing its dominance in Bihar's current political landscape. Beneath the surface, the move is also a strategic exercise in caste balancing. The selection of ministers from the Kushwaha, Kurmi, Vaishya and forward-caste communities is a carefully calculated electoral gambit—expanding the BJP's direct



ANI

POLITICAL POKER

With seven new ministers, the BJP's tally in the Bihar cabinet goes up to 21 while the JD(U)'s remains stuck at 13

With this, the BJP is reinforcing its status as the senior partner, having forgone the CM's post despite winning more seats in 2020

The move is also a strategic exercise in caste balancing with ministers selected from Kushwaha, Kurmi, Vaishya and forward-caste communities

For CM Nitish Kumar, it's a reluctant bargain that he hopes will fetch him a stronger deal in the impending seat-sharing negotiations for the 2025 election

SAFFRON SURGE Bihar deputy CM Samrat Chaudhary, BJP state chief Dilip Jaiswal and other leaders at an event in Patna, Jan. 5

engagement with multiple cohorts while reducing its dependence on Nitish's traditional voter base.

And yet, there is one glaring omission—there is not a single Yadav minister in this reshuffle. Yadavs, who constitute 14 per cent of Bihar's electorate, have long been the unwavering foundation of the rival RJD. The message is unmistakable: the BJP has no interest in wooing them. Instead, it is consolidating its hold over the state's broader caste spectrum, positioning itself for the long-term battle ahead.

For Nitish, this is familiar terrain—he has outmanoeuvred allies before, switching sides with calculated precision. But this time, the power dynamics have shifted. The BJP is stronger, and it is less willing to play second fiddle. The big question now is not whether the alliance will hold through the election, but who will truly hold power once the results are in. ■



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ACTOR, PRODUCER

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KARNATAKA

A COSTLY PREDICAMENT

By Ajay Sukumaran

The Bengaluru Palace, an iconic Tudor-style castle located in the heart of India's tech capital, has been the subject of a long-drawn legal battle. In 1996, the Karnataka government had enacted a law to take over the entire property—spread over 472 acres, dotted with trees and open vegetation—from the heirs of the Maharaja of Mysore. While the Bangalore Palace Acquisition and Transfer (BPAT) Act, 1996, was upheld by the Karnataka High Court in 1997, following an unsuccessful challenge by the erstwhile royal family, their subsequent appeal is still pending in the Supreme Court. However, even as this protracted tussle continues, the

Siddaramaiah-led Congress government in Karnataka has now landed in a predicament—and a costly one at that.

In 2009, Bengaluru's civic authority had come up with a proposal to utilise 15.97 acres of the palace grounds to widen a two-kilometre stretch of two abutting roads—Bellary

**THE GOVT'S 2009
MOVE TO ACQUIRE
15.97 ACRES OF THE
BENGALURU PALACE
GROUNDS FOR ROAD
WIDENING COULD NOW
COST RS 3,014 CRORE**

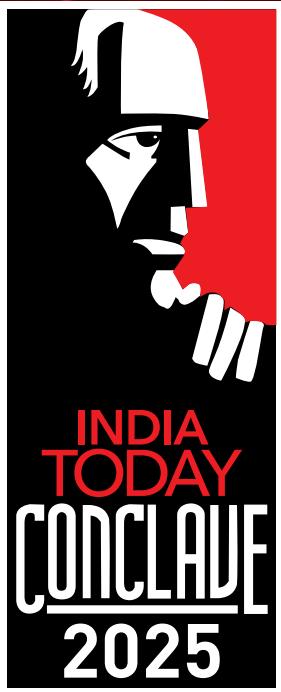
Road and Jayamahal Road—which led to the Kempegowda International Airport, newly opened at the time. The Supreme Court hearings in this regard culminated in a November 2014 ruling that allowed the road-widening project, subject to the condition that the appellants be given Transferable Development Rights (TDR) for the land parcel acquired.

The TDR scheme is a mechanism under which authorities compensate landowners whose property is being acquired for public purposes by awarding them additional floor area via a development rights certificate (DRC) instead of paying cash. The holder can either make use of the additional built-up area



REGAL RAMPARTS

The Bengaluru Palace.
The entire property is
spread over 472 acres



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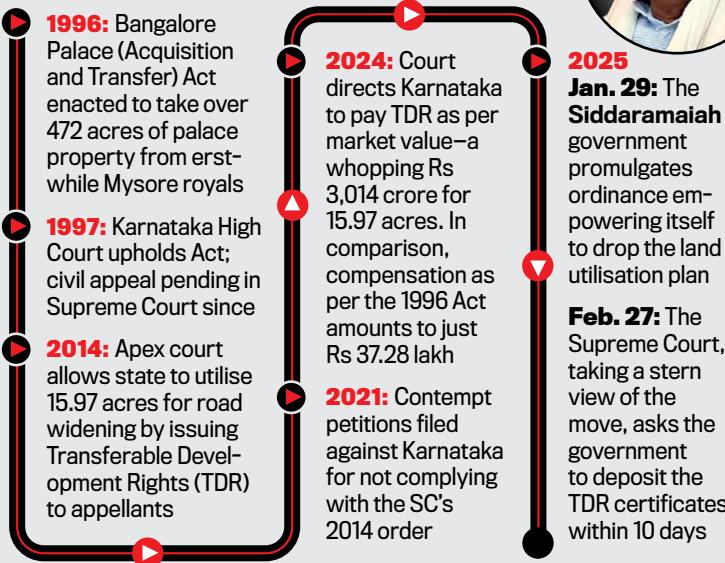
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THE ROYAL LEGAL TANGLE



on the same property—if only a part of it has been surrendered—or encash the certificate by transferring it to builders who can utilise it elsewhere.

But in this case, DRCs were never issued in the 10 years following the apex court ruling as the Karnataka government, under different regimes, vacillated between complying with the 2014 order and pleading for its modification—on grounds of financial hardship and the concern that it would not be possible to recover the value of TDR if the BPAT litigation eventually went against the royal heirs. The state's argument was that compensation ought to be calculated under the less taxing terms of the BPAT Act—the 1996 legislation had valued the entire palace property of 472 acres at Rs 11 crore and thereby, compensation for the 15.97 acres would amount to Rs 37.28 lakh, Karnataka contended.

The Supreme Court, in May 2022, rejected this plea seeing no need to modify its 2014 order. By then, contempt petitions had been filed for non-compliance. Finally, on December 10, 2024, while deciding the contempt

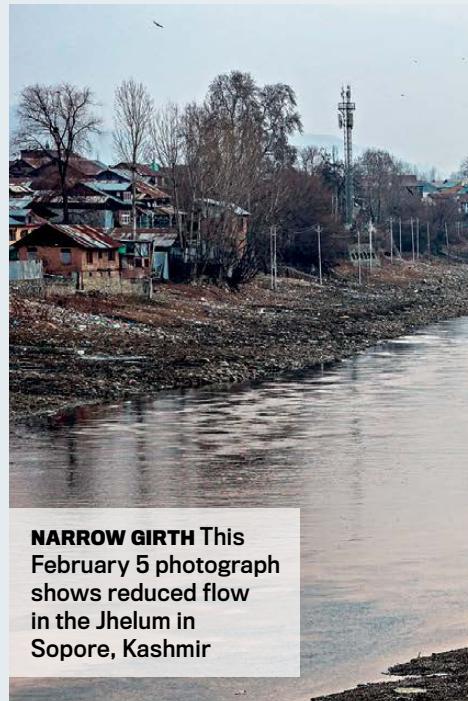
case, the court gave the Karnataka government one final opportunity to comply with its order. Issuing TDR as per the prevailing guidance value of land fixed under the Karnataka Stamp Act, 1957, worked out to about Rs 200 crore per acre, which meant the state would have to value the 15.97 acres of palace grounds at a whopping Rs 3,014 crore.

Alarmed at the financial implications, the Siddaramaiah government urgently promulgated an ordinance on January 29 this year, essentially empowering itself to drop the land utilisation plan. “The decision we have taken is in the interest of Karnataka,” law minister H.K. Patil said at a briefing on January 24, when the cabinet cleared the ordinance, adding that the state would “come into danger as regards development” given the quantum of compensation. But, on February 27, the court, taking a stern view of the development, asked the Karnataka government to deposit the TDR certificates within 10 days, while listing the next hearing for March 20. All eyes are now on the Siddaramaiah government as it scrambles to navigate this royal legal tangle. ■

It's a miracle Kashmir calls its own—the mysterious appearance every year in February of the Vasak Nag stream during the Urs (festival) of Sufi saint Syed Noor Shah Wali Bagh Dadi in Kund village of Kulgam district. This precursor to the Vasak Nag's six-month-long run from April to September every year—when it disappears again—is seen as the presage for a good year. This February, the Vasak Nag didn't make an appearance. It was a bad omen, but not just in a symbolic way. The stream caters to the drinking water and irrigation needs of 13 villages. What it sparked is fears of an imminent water crisis, one that is emblematic of Jammu and Kashmir's parched 2024-25 winter season. “I haven't seen a situation like this. This is the punishment for our deeds,” says nonagenarian Abdul Mattoo, leaning on his walking stick.

The looming water crisis had Chief Minister Omar Abdullah worried too. “For upcoming summers, we need to prepare ourselves. Somewhere, we need to bring changes to our usage of water,” he said. Worried locals, however, sought refuge in tradition—special, open-air prayers were held across Kashmir to pray for rains. At last, in late February, their prayers were answered—there was a fresh spell of snow in the upper reaches of

AFP



KASHMIR GETS A CLIMATE SCARE

By Kaleem Geelani

J&K and rain in the plains.

Till the reprieve that almost came too late, the drying up of water sources had been despairingly ubiquitous in Kashmir this winter. The springs and streams, including the tributaries of the Jhelum river that crisscross the Valley, were running dry. In the past few years, winters have been undergoing a shift in the western Himalayan region; according to the Indian Meteorological Department, this January–February, snow and rainfall decreased by 75 per cent, till some of it was recovered.

Jammu & Kashmir's economy is dependent on the agriculture and horticulture sector, which contributes to the livelihood of 70 per cent of locals. Farmlands and orchards, as per official records, cover 53 per cent of the Union territory's 42,241 sq. km of land. In 2023–24, the sector contributed 14.85 per cent to the UT's total gross state domestic product (GSDP) of Rs 2.41 lakh crore. For key crops like apples and paddy, the region relies

IN A DRY STATE

► Till rains arrived in late February and saved the situation, J&K stared at a water crisis; snow and rainfall fell by 75 per cent this winter; rivers ran dry

► With 70 per cent of J&K's population dependent on agriculture and horticulture, the shortfall has everyone worried

► Decreasing rain from the monsoon, western disturbances is attributed to global climate change

► Hydel power generation also hit due to low water levels, a new action plan for climate change raises hope

heavily on canal irrigation, which sources its water from the springs and streams. Though the prolonged dry spell plaguing those sources is over, this late precipitation is unlikely to overturn the damage already done by the winter's accumulated deficit. Besides, there is the summer and the increasingly irregular monsoon rains to think of.

"We are preparing a contingency plan and considering options, including groundwater extraction and rainwater harvesting. The water-intensive paddy cultivation might have to be restricted," says Iftikhar Kakroo, chairman, Jammu and Kashmir Water Resources Regulatory Authority.

Water shortage had hit hydropower generation, too—pulling it down to an all-time low of 120–150 MW till late February out of a total installed capacity of 1,197 MW amongst 13 power projects managed by the Jammu and Kashmir Power Development Corporation Limited. What makes the situation worse is that the Indus Water Treaty between India and Pakistan prohibits the construction of reservoirs, allowing only the use of run-of-the-river for hydel power generation. With climate change tightening its grip, experts feel the need for reservoirs. "Water conservation and proper storage capacities become vital in times of crisis," says Sami Ullah Bhat, head of the Environmental Science department at the University of Kashmir. Climate scientists argue that the change in Kashmir's climate—a significant decrease in precipitation from the monsoon and western disturbances, too—is due to global climate change. "Himalayan Kashmir is the worst sufferer due to global climate change despite making no significant contribution towards it," Majid Farooq, coordinator of the climate change coordination cell at J&K's Ecology, Environment and Remote Sensing department, tells INDIA TODAY.

Almost 27 per cent of J&K is covered by forests, which makes it carbon-surplus. The trade of carbon credits, which would enable the UT to invest in climate-change mitigation, will have to wait till 2026, for the launch of the Indian Carbon Market.

After the launch of National Action Plan on Climate Change in 2008, J&K saw its first climate action plan in 2014 with a Rs 6,000-crore outlay, but many actions were allegedly unmet due to a fund deficit. However, a new Action Plan for Climate Change has been initiated. The plan, which is being revised after the publication of its draft in June 2024, proposes a financial outlay of Rs 66,600 crore. A lot depends on this and on allocation for environment in the March budget of the Omar government. ■



ANDHRA PRADESH

SERVICE AT YOUR FINGER TIPS

By Amarnath K. Menon

For devotees heading to the Tirumala temple, booking darshan and stay and even offering donations will soon be as easy as, well, using WhatsApp. But that barely scratches the surface. A month after the Andhra Pradesh government launched 'WhatsApp Governance' for 161 civic services on January 30, the state is now poised to extend the rollout to more programmes.

The Meta-backed WhatsApp, the king of 'unhindered communication' in India, has been coopted as a tool for digital services delivery by the state-run civic service initiative, Mana Mitra. The first such platform in the country, it streamlines the delivery of civic services, allowing citizens to submit requests, access essential information and avail services directly through WhatsApp. It is accessible both in Telugu and English and also as a voice service for those who cannot text on smartphones.

Among the 161 services on offer are redressal of grievances, paying utility bills, booking bus travel tickets, seeking water connections, procuring documents like birth certificates and much more. The digital platform also obviates the need for citizens to visit government offices for certificates and documents. Through WhatsApp, the government will also disseminate crucial information such as weather updates and information on natural disasters, electricity supply and healthcare.



TOUCH SCREEN IT minister Nara Lokesh at the Mana Mitra WhatsApp digital services launch, Jan. 30

WHATSAPP GOVERNANCE

Andhra govt's civic service initiative, Mana Mitra, gets Meta-backed WhatsApp onboard as a tool for digital services delivery

161 civic services available now; 2 million users have already logged in

Security, fraudulent documentation still a worry

A major concern, though, is whether cyber security measures are in place to prevent data breaches. The state says it has strengthened the forensic and cyber security framework, put in place several checks, and asked all departments to implement stringent cyber security protocols.

Meanwhile, of the two million-odd users who logged in in the first four weeks, over 1.1 million are now active users—an engagement rate of 55 per cent. An IVRS (interactive voice response system) survey also showed that 80.2 per cent users were happy with the WhatsApp features. Education, health, energy, revenue and public grievance redressal were the top five most availed departments and services.

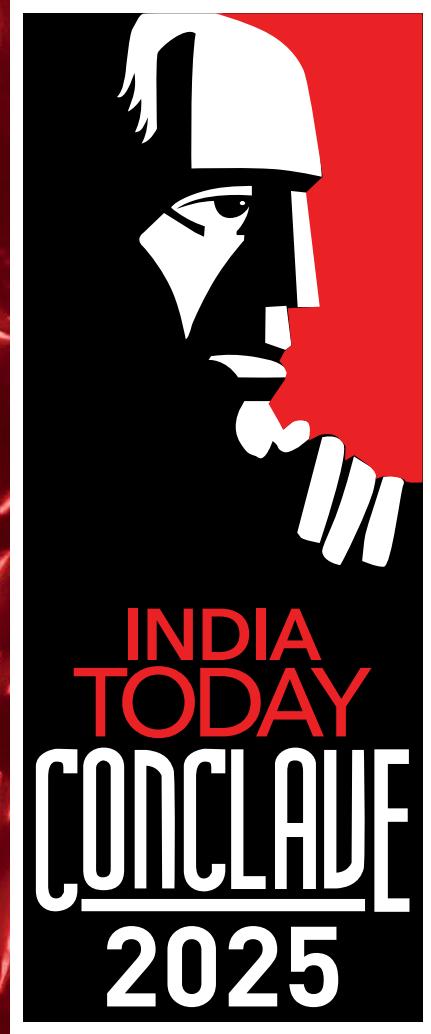
Andhra had reached an agreement

with Meta in October 2024 to implement the digital initiative. Incidentally, Mana Mitra is the brainchild of CM Chandrababu Naidu's son and IT and education minister Nara Lokesh. "This is a true transformation in citizen-centric services. Mana Mitra will also help citizens give feedback on the services, and improve accountability," he says.

The government may also introduce QR code verification and Aadhaar authentication to enhance security and reduce the risk of fraudulent documentation. There are other challenges too. RTGS CEO K. Dinesh Kumar points out that one in 10 transactions failed because of server speed limitations.

"The early successes prove that effective capacity has to rise. Our goal is to position WhatsApp services as the primary channel for civic interactions with the state," says Kumar. Mana Mitra's focus on accessibility and user familiarity could push daily transaction numbers into the millions in the near future, and furthermore has the potential to eliminate bureaucratic inefficiencies.

The shift to Mana Mitra-based services is not only a technological advancement but also an effort to make state services more accessible and transparent. Yet, while the model showcases the challenges and promises of digital service, there are looming fears over political interference and WhatsApp's role as both facilitator and potential influencer of governance. ■



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BANGLADESH

NEW OUTFIT DIVIDES DHAKA

By Arkamoy Datta Majumdar

Seven months after tumultuous events changed the course of the country, a new wind is picking up in Bangladesh's polity—and getting caught, right upon its birth, in its twisted arcs. On February 28, a grand political event at Manik Mia Avenue in Dhaka marked the launch of the National Citizen Party (NCP), an outfit born out of the July 2024 student-led uprising that overthrew ex-prime minister Sheikh Hasina. Given that backdrop, its inherent formative contradictions didn't take long showing up.

An evolution of the Jatiyo Nagorik Committee—the political platform formed after the August uprising—the NCP positions itself as a centrist force aiming to rebuild Bangladesh through democracy, social justice and economic reform. Nahid Islam, a former cabinet member in the interim government of Muhammad Yunus, took the stage as its convenor, outlining the party's vision for a "second republic" that would eliminate autocratic rule and draft a new democratic constitution. Yet, within hours of its inception, the party found itself entangled in ideological battles and accusations of Islamist infiltration.

The first major controversy erupted within hours of the NCP's launch. The inclusion of Mohammad Muntasir Rahman, an openly gay activist and key figure in the July uprising, in the 151-member national committee



PARTY WATCH

► **Student activists from last year's uprising have launched the National Citizen Party on February 28 with a national committee of 151 members**

► **It will soon launch a country-wide march; take part in polls expected within a year**

► **However, many question their ideology, suspecting it to be accommodative of Islamist ideals**

► **Others say the interim government is backing the NCP to undercut BNP and others, usher change in a controlled way**

sparked outrage among conservative factions. Two prominent student leaders, Md Sarjis Alam and Hasnat Abdullah, stated on social media: "We are Muslims first, and anything that goes against Islamic values will have no space in our politics."

Muntasir's subsequent removal from the committee disappointed liberal supporters and raised concerns about the NCP's ability to stand up to Islamic hardliners. Many saw this as a compromise of the party's core principle "to build a pluralistic and prosperous society by preserving the nation's ethnic, social, gender, religious, and cultural values and diversity". They ask if the NCP could truly represent all Bangladeshis, including marginalised communities.

Before the party's launch, reports emerged that members of the Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami and its student wing, Chhatra Shibir, were sidelined in the Jatiyo Nagorik Committee.

FOR PLURALISM Surrounded by supporters, student leader Nahid Islam speaks during the launch of the NCP in Dhaka, Feb. 28



SOME SUSPECT THAT ISLAMISTS MIGHT BE USING THE NCP AS A VEHICLE FOR POLITICAL LEGITIMACY. OTHERS THINK THE INTERIM GOVERNMENT ITSELF IS BEHIND IT TO NEUTRALISE THE OPPosition

Sources allege the new NCP was a strategic move by the students to maintain a centrist identity and avoid being labelled as an Islamist party. However, others suggest the Jamaat was behind the backlash over Muntasir's inclusion.

A former Indian envoy to Bangladesh says Islamists might be using the NCP as a vehicle for political legitimacy. "Groups like Jamaat know that they will not get more than 5 per cent of the vote by themselves. But with student activists at the forefront, there will be some legitimacy for these extremists," he says. Indeed, New Delhi remains cautious of any potential Islamist resurgence under

the guise of a new political movement. The diplomat adds that irrespective of what the student leaders say, most are backed by Islamists.

Adding another layer of intrigue, a Bangladeshi diplomat hinted at potential government involvement in the NCP's launch. "We have proof that the (interim) government by proxy has helped organise the launch event of the NCP. Should a sitting government play such a role?"

If the allegations are true, the NCP can be seen as a strategic project aimed at reshaping Bangladesh's political

landscape in a controlled manner rather than an independent movement. Critics argue that the interim government is seeking to neutralise the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP)—the one national party still standing since the Awami League is in disarray after Hasina's ouster—and fragment the opposition by fostering NCP's rise.

While the BNP welcomed the NCP's formation, its leaders are watching the party's internal rifts closely. However, a BNP insider says that their main priority is the return of acting chairman Tarique Rahman. "We need his presence now more than ever because we need to prepare for the polls and also set a counter-narrative before the students gain more traction," he admits.

NCP leaders, including Anik Roy, a Left politician, emphasises the party's strength. "The Jatiyo Nagorik Committee has units in more than 300 sub-districts, towns and cities. We will scrutinise these existing members and select the right people for the party's district and sub-district committees," he claims. With Bangladesh expected to hold an election within a year, the NCP plans to launch a nationwide long march and start its election campaign by April.

According to Bangladeshi political historian Altaf Parvez, the students have an opportunity to fill the liberal space that is running empty. "But the way they have operated in the last seven months and their populist approach since the NCP's launch, it can be said that they will take a right-of-centre approach," he says.

The NCP has ambitions to emerge as a progressive force, yet is succumbing to conservative pressure over Muntasir. It claims to be centrist, yet is accused of Islamist infiltration; an independent movement, but charges of government backing creates suspicion. The coming months will be crucial for the NCP as Bangladesh moves towards a national election. The stakes for democracy, political inclusivity and stability have never been higher. ■



Illustration by SIDDHANT JUMDE

GAFFE AND GUFFAWS

A budget session bloop had the Uttar Pradesh assembly in splits when basic education minister Sandeep Singh of the BJP, wrestling with his written speech, mistakenly referred to a *vidhaayi samaadhistakar samiti* (legislative-powered committee) as *vidhaayi samaadhistakar shrimati* (...).



Mrs. Speaker Kunwar Manvendra Singh swiftly corrected him, but the damage was done. Gaffaws rippled through the house, with party members too joining in. The Congress wasted no time posting the clip with a stinger: "Teacher recruitment should happen soon so ministers can also learn to read and write." Even within the BJP, whispers of concern surfaced—Sandeep, grandson of ex-Uttar Pradesh CM Kalyan Singh, cannot afford to send gift-wrapped gaffes for the Opposition.

Backhanded Altruism?

The Shiv Sena (UBT), still smarting from its split with the BJP, found itself in the odd position of applauding its former foe. In an unexpected twist, party mouthpiece Saamana heaped praise on Maharashtra CM Devendra Fadnavis for vetoing the 16 ministerial recommendations for personal staff appointments—apparently because they were "fixers". The enthusiasm, however, isn't entirely altruistic. Of the 16 rejected names, a delightful 12 belonged to ministers from Eknath Shinde's Shiv Sena. Coincidence? Unlikely.



OUT OF STEP

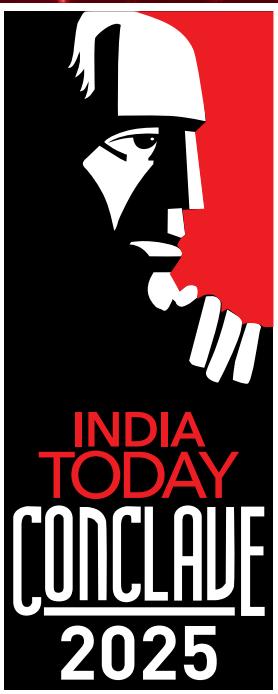


Gujarat's AAP legislator Chaitar Vasava's impromptu jig at a Surat wedding became an instant viral sensation—not for his moves, but for his dance partner. The tribal leader from Chhotaudepur was caught on camera grooving alongside Budhiyo, a known bootlegger, setting off a political frenzy. AAP cried foul, claiming Budhiyo was actually a BJP man, fuelling whispers about Vasava's future in a party still reeling from its Delhi debacle. But as the dust settled, it turned out to be little more than a storm in a teacup. Vasava insisted he had no clue who Budhiyo was—the man had simply joined steps with him. A classic case of wrong place, wrong time...or in this case, wrong dance partner.

TRICKY DOUBLE ROLE

P rashant Kishor's political tightrope act just hit a wobble. His grand pronouncement on Thanthi TV—that actor Vijay's fledgling Tamilaga Vettri Kazhagam (TVK) will contest solo in 2026 (without the AIADMK) has left the political rookie blindsided. This, despite Kishor waxing eloquent at TVK's anniversary event, calling the party "Tamil Nadu's dream" and pledging to steer it to victory. Vijay, however, is unimpressed. On March 2, TVK issued a crisp reminder that only designated voices speak for the party. Meanwhile, Kishor's outfit, Simple Sense, is busy running AIADMK's digital campaign, making his dual role as strategist and aspiring kingmaker a tricky balancing act—especially in TN, where the audience knows a plot twist when it sees one.





ANUMULA REVANTH REDDY CHIEF MINISTER, TELANGANA

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COVER STORY | NAXALS

WINNING

THE INSIDE STORY OF THE MODI GOVERNMENT'S DETERMINED BID TO END THE NAXAL THREAT, INDIA'S GREATEST INTERNAL SECURITY CHALLENGE

By **RAJ CHENGAPPA** and
RAHUL NORONHA in Bastar, Chhattisgarh

Photographs by **CHANDRADEEP KUMAR**



THE WAR



ENTER THE JUNGLE
A commando unit of the
Chhattisgarh Police keeping
vigil in Dantewada district,
November 2024

IT

is early March, spring is in the air and the mahua trees are in full bloom, their reddish hue a striking contrast to the luminescent green of the sal forest in the Bastar region of the central Indian state of Chhattisgarh. From the window of the BSF (Border Security Force) chopper hovering above, the river Indravati looks like a blue ribbon wrapped around a brilliant tapestry of nature. The serenity, though, is deceptive. In the forbidding jungles below, central and state armed police forces are engaged in a grim, bloody battle against a determined band of violent left-wing extremists (LWE), or Naxals, who posed the biggest internal security challenge in India for the past six decades.

It is a war that has exacted a dismaying toll. In the past 20 years, 2,344 security personnel have lost their lives fighting Naxals—more than four times the number of Indian army personnel killed in the 1999 Kargil War. In fact, more armed personnel have died fighting Naxals than battling terrorists in Jammu and Kashmir, which till recently was the country's other big internal security threat. The civilian toll is extremely high, too—6,258 people have been killed in Naxal attacks in the past two decades alone.

At its peak, the Naxal threat impacted 80 million people, mainly tribals. It straddled 10 states along a narrow Red Corridor running across Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Odisha, Telangana, West Bengal and Uttar Pradesh. Or from Pashupati in Nepal to Tirupati in Andhra, as Union home minister Amit Shah put it. The tide has been turning, though,

"I give a guarantee to parents that I will root out Naxalism. I assure mothers that the lives of their children will not go to waste"

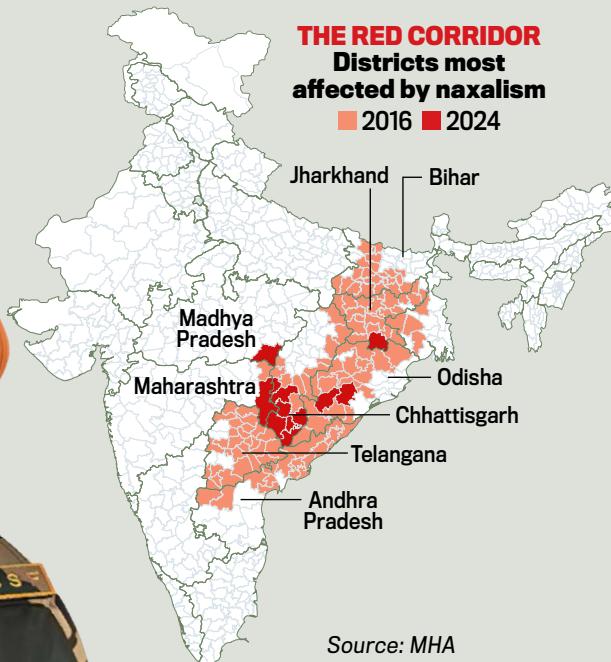
— NARENDRA MODI

Prime Minister, in Dhamtara, Chhattisgarh, Apr. 23, 2024



THE GUNS AND GULAB POLICY

With a mix of anti-Naxal offensives and development initiatives, the Modi government is reclaiming territory and heralding peace



Source: MHA

TWO-PRONGED APPROACH

CRPF Chhattisgarh IG Rakesh Agrawal distributing cycles to villagers in Sukma's Puvarti village; (left) its commandos on duty in the region, Mar. 2



16,135

7,980
($\downarrow 51\%$)

Incidents
of violence

REDUCING VIOLENCE

Jun. 2004 - May 2014
Jun. 2014 - Feb. 2025
Decrease in ()

1,824

520
($\downarrow 71\%$)

Security
personnel killed

4,684

1,574
($\downarrow 66\%$)

Civilians
killed

REGAINING CONTROL

Districts most
affected by
Naxalism

126
(2014)

12
(2025)

Police stations
registering Naxal
incidents

330
(2014)

151
(2024)

Naxal-affected
area (sq. km) in
Chhattisgarh, the
last LWE bastion

18,000
(2014)

8,500
(2024)

DEVELOPING INFRASTRUCTURE



11,503 KM

Roads constructed
between May 2014
and Sept. 2024 in
LWE-affected districts.
A total of Rs 20,815 cr.
has been approved to
build 17,589 km roads



2,343

Mobile towers installed
for 2G connectivity
at a cost of Rs 4,080
crore; another 2,542
towers sanctioned
with an investment of
Rs 2,210 crore

FINANCIAL INCLUSION



1,007

Bank branches
opened besides
937 ATMs

EDUCATIONAL EMPOWERMENT



₹495 CR.

Funds granted to set
up Industrial Training
Institutes in 48 districts

in the past one year or so as the Modi government gains the upper hand in the fight against the arch-enemy of the Indian State, shrinking the threat to a much smaller amoebic blob of red confined largely to the Bastar region, where the fiercest battles are still on.

In 2014, when the Modi government came to power, 126 districts in 10 states were classified as the most affected. In early 2025, this count is down to 12, the majority being in Bastar; the remaining in the neighbouring districts of Odisha, Jharkhand, Maharashtra and MP. A feat no doubt impressive enough for the home minister to tell INDIA TODAY in an interview at his residence in Delhi, "I firmly believe that by March 2026, we will ensure that India will be totally free of the Naxal threat." (See accompanying interview.)

From the air, though, the government's biggest game-changing measure looks no more than an innocuous two-acre farm in the thick of a Bastar jungle, marked by a straggle of asbestos-roofed sheds and stray chicken. As the chopper approaches the makeshift helipad at Camp Puvarti of the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF), the mini dust storm it raises in its wake has the ground staff scurrying for cover. Only when the dust settles do you begin to see the menacing watch-towers manned by gun-toting marksmen ringing the camp.

Puvarti, situated on the edge of the Naxal-infested Sukma district, is guarded by CRPF's 150th battalion, whose catchy moniker is 'One-Five Zero, Jungle Hero'. Indeed, they all are. Puvarti was once the redoubt of the dreaded Madvi Hidma, the Naxal commander said to be the mastermind of more than two dozen deadly attacks on security forces, including the one at the nearby Tadmetla village in 2010 in which 76 CRPF troopers were killed. Until a year back, it was impossible for anyone representing the State, uniformed or otherwise, to enter Puvarti without permission from the People's Liberation Guerrilla Army's (PLGA) Battalion No. 1, under

"The Naxal eco-system has been hit hard and is rapidly on its way out. The chances of revival are slim now"

— **AMIT SHAH**, Union Home Minister, to India Today, Feb. 23

AN ALERT FORCE

CRPF personnel demonstrating drone technology; (right) carrying out aerial reconnaissance in Bijapur district; (bottom) keeping vigil at Puvarti camp



whose 'jurisdiction' the area falls.

Repulsing four major attacks from the PLGA when the camp was set up a year ago, the 150 Battalion successfully drove the Naxal militia deeper into the jungles, establishing the CRPF's dominance in the area. The only warning Rakesh Shukla, the unflappable camp commandant, gives now with a smile is, "We have plenty of scorpions still around, and snakes, especially the krait, who treat our beds as theirs—so be sure to check your blanket before turning in."

Later that night, a patrol searches the surrounding jungle for suspicious activity but not before a minesweeper has vigorously scanned the path they are to take. The Naxals' biggest weapon is the Improvised Explosive Device (IED) or the mines they plant on roads that can maim a person or even kill them. It's pitch dark and the patrol walks in a single file with a hand on the shoulder of the person in front as the leader scans the jungle with night vision binoculars. Another patrol sets out in the morning, again in a single file, but on a fleet of motorcycles, the favoured mode of transport that helps avoid the mines.

**A MULTI-PRONGED STRATEGY**

Camps like Puvarti are designated Forward Operating Bases or FOBs and have become the lynchpin of the Modi government's multi-pronged strategy to rid India of the Naxal threat by next spring. Rakesh Agrawal, the affable IG, CRPF, Chhattisgarh sector, explains why the FOBs have become a game-changer.



THE TECH EDGE

- » **Security agencies are now using advanced technologies for surveillance and analysing Naxal activities**
- » **Drones, satellite imaging and Artificial Intelligence-based data analysis employed**
- » **Through location tracking, cell-phone triangulation, advanced call logging and social media analysis, a close watch is being kept on the movements of Naxal cadres**



Prior to their introduction six years ago, security camps were set up mainly on the highways near Naxal-infested areas and forces would conduct linear attacks. They would have to walk or trek as much as 30 km a day from their camps to launch operations against the Naxals, making them vulnerable to both exhaustion and easy ambushes. Now the FOBs are in the thick of jungles, close to the Naxal hideouts, and form a tight security grid 5 km from each other. In case of an attack on one camp, reinforcements are at hand and can be called upon if needed.

Most of the combat troops are trained in guerrilla warfare at the sprawling centre of the fearsome Commando Battalion for Resolute Action (CoBRA) in Jagdalpur, once the capital of undivided Bastar, which is the size of Kerala and spans seven thickly forested districts in Chhattisgarh. Amit Choudhary, the chiselled and fit commandant of the 201 Cobra Battalion, says, "We are fighting a battle-hardened adversary who belongs to the area, is well-versed with the terrain, highly mobile in the jungles and uses the art of deception and patience to stealthily attack us using IEDs or ambushes. They need to succeed only once to sustain the fervour, while we must score every day." The Cobras impart training to both central and state forces in three broad areas: to ensure their own safety against booby traps and ambush strategies, to ensure pinpoint accuracy while firing their weapons and to withstand the stress—physical and mental—that the hostile jungle terrain and their cunning adversary can trigger.

Currently, there are 182 security FOBs in the Bastar region, with the pace of establishing them only intensifying. Earlier, an average of 15 camps were set up annually,

but 30 new FOBs have sprung up in 2024 alone. In keeping with Shah's policy of "ruthlessly dealing with gun-toting Naxals", these FOBs are armed with the latest equipment that has helped the forces outgun and outrange Naxalite arms. Besides Bulgarian-made AK series assault rifles, some of which have Under Barrel Grenade Launchers attached to them, Tavors and JVPC carbines, the forces have an array of area dominance weapons such as Carl Gustav 84 mm rocket launchers, 51 and 81 mm mortars, thermal imaging scopes as well as night vision equipment.

The newest addition to the forces' arsenal is WhAP or the Wheeled Armoured Platform, jointly designed by Tata Advanced Systems and the Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO). An armoured troop carrier, it has weapons control inside the vehicle and anti-mine abilities. This platform has helped the forces take the battle to the Naxals when under attack. Last year, when Naxals attacked the CRPF camp in Tekulagudem in Telangana, second-in-command S.S. Haokip commandeered the WhAP that used its MMGs to open fire at the huddled insurgents. This was the first time the Naxals had witnessed a WhAP in action, forcing them to beat a hasty retreat.

Equality game-changing has been the Modi government's infusion of state-of-the-art surveillance technology, especially for intelligence-gathering and analysis. Each FOB is equipped with NETRA 3 and Bharat drones that have a range of 5 km and endurance of 60 minutes with multiple battery back-up. The drones can be flown out of a 10m x 10m space and send back razor-sharp images in real time to a screen at the base. Before embarking on an operation, forces fly the drones ahead of them, mapping the topography and the presence of any Naxals. Infrared capabilities for nighttime operations can discern humans from animal movement. As Choudhary puts it, "There is nowhere for our adversary to hide now and, for the first time after many years, the Naxals are truly on the run."

Performing the most critical job of being eyes in the sky are the Heron UAVs (unmanned aerial vehicles), with a service ceiling of 35,000 feet and an endurance of 10 hours. Flying out of nearby airstrips, the Herons collect images of the affected area and pick up conversations on wireless and cellphones. The data is shared with security personnel who corroborate it with ground intelligence. A conversation, a phone call or fire from an uninhabited point on the map suggest the presence of rebels. Recent operations have been pinpointed and hugely successful mainly due to the sharing of technical intelligence or Techint between the Union government and state government agencies, says Amit Kumar, the CRPF's additional director general for the central zone.

Accurate human intelligence or Humint has started flowing in with locals, who know the terrain well, being recruited as District Reserve Guards (DRG) and the newly formed



ANI



"Our objective is to dismantle the leadership and ensure no fresh Maoist cases are reported. We want to end the Maoist ability to perpetuate violence"

Sundarraj P., IG, Chhattisgarh Police

Bastariya Battalion. In addition, many of the 7,500 Naxals who have surrendered since 2014 have joined these forces, providing information on how the Naxals operate and their hideouts (see *The Tip of the Spear*). As a result of these measures, operations have intensified and 305 Naxals were eliminated in Chhattisgarh in the past 15 months, and 217 in the Bastar division in 2024 alone—the highest ever for any year since the history of insurgency in the state. Meanwhile, in the areas cleared of Naxals, Fortified Police Stations manned by the Chhattisgarh police have been set up to maintain dominance. That 612 stations have come up in the past decade across Naxal-affected states is proof of the extent of the turf gained.

In another significant measure, the central and state governments concerned in Naxal areas have squeezed the funds



NEUTRALISING THE THREAT
The bodies of Naxals recovered after an encounter in Bijapur, April 2024

CRACKING THE WHIP

The security forces have recorded significant successes against Naxals since 2019

796

Naxals killed; the highest toll of 290 recorded in 2024

5,978

Naxals arrested; another 7,516 have surrendered since 2014

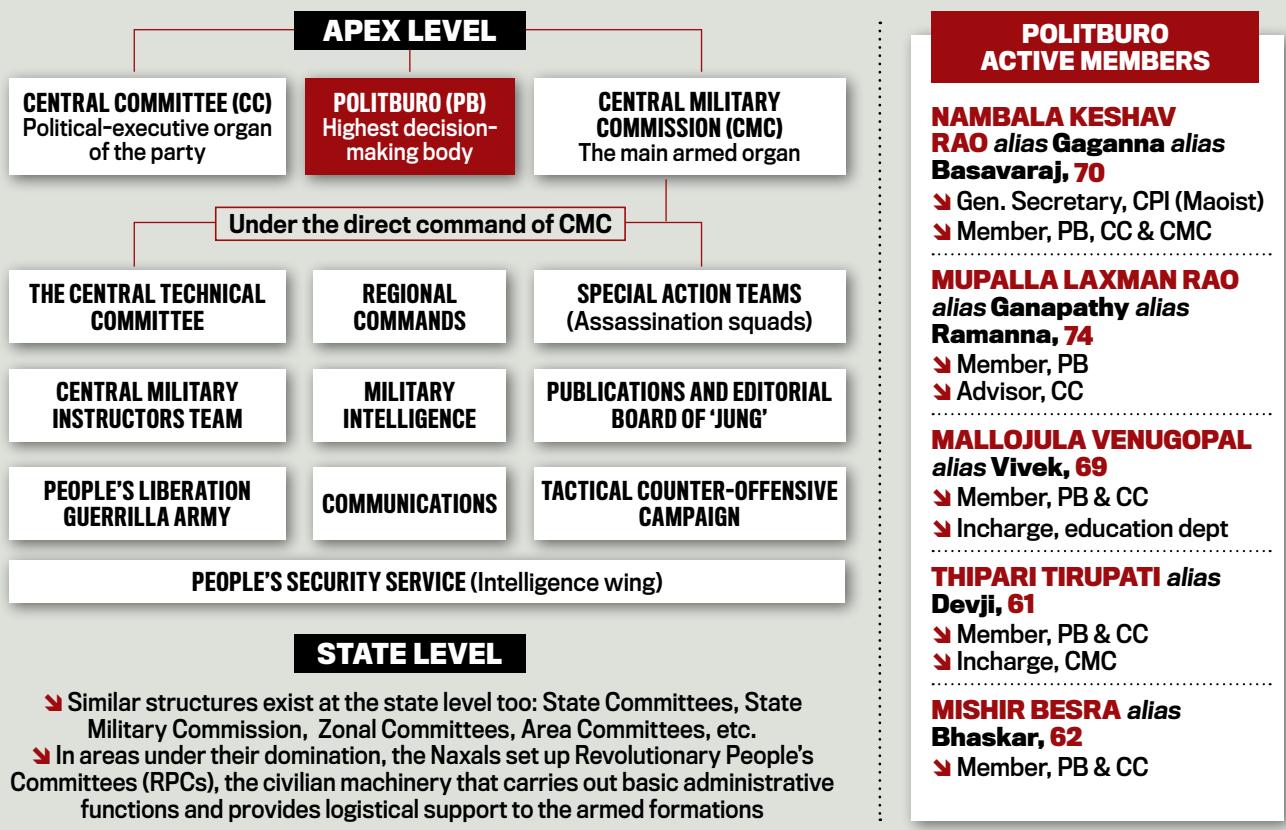
15

Top Naxal leaders, including politburo and central committee members, killed

Source: MHA

THE RED BRIGADE

The Communist Party of India (Maoist) was formed in 2004 with the merger of two main LWE groups—CPIML People's War and the Maoist Communist Centre of India. Along with all its front organisations, it has been designated as a terrorist organisation under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act



being collected by the Naxals. The main sources of income were the levy on tendu patta contractors in the summer months and extortion from forest and road contractors. The Naxals were able to raise an estimated Rs 150 crore out of these. The handing of civil works to the Border Roads Organisation, a central government unit, has plugged that source of funding as has the strict watch by intelligence agencies on tendu leaf contractors. In many of the Naxal-affected districts with good internet connectivity, tendu auctions have been held online to stem leakage.

CHARTING THE END GAME

What will it take for the government to formally declare the end of the Naxal movement in Chhattisgarh? "From the security point of view, our objective is to dismantle the leadership and ensure no fresh Maoist cases are reported. In other words, we want to end the Maoist ability to perpetuate violence," says Bastar veteran Sundarraj Pattilingam, IG of the Chhattisgarh Police and in-charge of state police forces in the Bastar region.



"Recent operations have been pinpointed and hugely successful mainly due to the sharing of tech intelligence between the Union govt and state govt agencies"

— AMIT KUMAR, Additional Director General, Central Zone, CRPF

The Naxals have an elaborate organisation. At its apex are the politburo, the central committee and the central military commission. Heading the politburo currently is Nambala Keshav Rao, the 70-year-old general secretary who goes by several aliases, Basavaraj and Gaganna among them. The military wing has regional, state and zonal commands with armed militia forming the base of the pyramid (see *The Red Brigade*). Adopting a 'trace, target and neutralise' approach, the Modi government in the past five years has killed 15 top Naxal leaders, including three politburo and 12 central committee members. Police sources say that due to the operational successes of the past year, the number of hardcore fighters in the Naxal ranks in Bastar has come down to 600, from 1,400 three years ago.

Currently, Bastar has three major security vacuum areas, where the writ of the State is not as effective as elsewhere. The Naxals refer to them as 'Liberated Zones'. The most critical is Abujhmaad—literally, the unknown forest—a 4,000 sq. km area, 60 per cent of which lies in Narayanpur district, 15 per cent in Bijapur, 10 per cent in Kanker and 5 per cent in Gadchiroli



SURRENDER POLICY

THE TIP OF THE SPEAR

By Rahul Noronha in Sukma

IN India's arsenal against Left-wing Extremism, the Naxal surrender policy has emerged as a crucial weapon. By providing Naxal cadres a peaceful exit, the policy has reduced insurgent numbers, disrupted leadership structures and logistical support, and yielded valuable intelligence for counter-insurgency operations. Over the past five years, nearly 3,000 rebels, including mid-level leaders, have surrendered in Chhattisgarh, significantly weakening Naxal influence in its last bastion.

So how does this policy work? The surrender policy offers financial aid, housing, education and employment assistance to Naxals who lay down their arms. An immediate deposit of Rs 25,000 is made into the account of each surrendering cadre, with additional financial rewards based on rank. Militia commanders receive Rs 1 lakh, party



BACK TO THE MAINSTREAM

A group of Naxals who surrendered along with their arms at Sukma, Mar. 2; (below) Sodhi Muiya and his wife Vineeta, who were associated with the movement from 2006 to 2021



members between Rs 1 lakh and Rs 2 lakh, area committee members Rs 5 lakh, and divisional committee members Rs 8 lakh. Surrendering weapons fetches additional rewards—an AK-series rifle, for instance, brings an extra Rs 4 lakh. While serious criminal charges remain, minor offences may be resolved through plea bargaining.

The intensification of anti-Naxal operations since 2024 has not only seen a spike in the number of rebels killed but also those who have surrendered. In 2023, 398 Naxals had surrendered in Bastar, the movement's epicentre in recent years. This number doubled to 800 in 2024, a year that also saw 217 Naxals killed in the region—the highest in the state's history and a huge uptick from just 20 the previous year.

Internal strife among the Naxals has further driven surrenders. For instance, Sodhi Muiya and his wife Vineeta (see picture above), associated with the movement from 2006 to 2021, defected after he was accused of being a police informer. Fearing execution, he sought help from a local political leader's rela-

tive to facilitate his surrender. His wife followed suit. Muiya, formerly an area committee secretary, was rewarded Rs 8 lakh and a job in the office of the Sukma superintendent of police (SP), while Vineeta was ap-

pointed as an assistant constable, constables or Gopniya Sainiks, with relaxed physical and educational criteria to encourage local enlistment. "Nobody knows the terrain like we do. We have grown up facing adversities and it shows when we enter the battle," says Inderjeet Kumar, a DRG constable in Sukma.

Currently, the DRG has approximately 3,600 personnel. It also includes a women's unit, the Danteshwari Fighters, currently numbering around 100 personnel. Another locally recruited force, the Bastar Fighters, was introduced in 2021, comprising 2,100 personnel across seven districts. Both forces played a crucial role in 2024's record-breaking counter-insurgency successes. According to Sukma SP Kiran Chavan, surrenders remain a key operational strategy. "Successful surrenders provide intelligence on active cadres, sow discontent among Maoists, and encourage more rebels to defect," he says. It's not for nothing that the DRG, with surrendered rebels accounting for 18 per cent of its strength, is called the tip of the spear. ■

BY PROVIDING NAXAL CADRES A PEACEFUL EXIT, THE SURRENDER POLICY HAS HELPED REDUCE INSURGENT NUMBERS AND DISRUPTED THE LEADERSHIP STRUCTURE

pointed as a Gopniya Sainik (secret soldier). "My only regret is that I still can't return to my village for fear of retribution," says Muiya.

Many surrendered Naxals now serve in the District Reserve Guard (DRG), a force known for its effectiveness against insurgency in Chhattisgarh. Comprised of local recruits, the DRG benefits from deep familiarity with the terrain, language and Naxal tactics. Re-

“We are telling the Naxals, it’s either *goli* or *boli*”

Chhattisgarh CM Vishnu Deo Sai spoke to **Raj Chengappa** and **Rahul Noronha** on how his state has been tackling Naxalism. Excerpts:



Q. What is the government doing to end Naxalism in your state by the March 31, 2026, deadline?

We have studied the surrender and rehabilitation policy of other states and are trying to offer the best possible terms. We have allocated 15,000 units under the PM Awas Yojana to surrendered Naxals and are giving them jobs and skilling them. We have had unprecedented results in eliminating Maoists and ensuring surrenders. Our message to the Naxals is clear: if you understand the language of *goli* (violence), then we will respond accordingly, but if you understand the language of *boli* (talks), then you are welcome to surrender and join the mainstream. We are on track to attaining the target of eliminating Maoism by March 31, 2026.

Q. What are you doing to win the hearts of people living in Naxal areas?

We have a scheme called Niyad

Nellanar which means Your Ideal Village. Under this, security forces at camps work in villages in a 5 km radius to provide local residents the benefits of more than 30 schemes and citizen services like Aadhaar and Ayushman cards. To engage with youth, we organised the Bastar Olympics, which saw the participation of 1.65 lakh youth from the ages of 18-35, of which half were women. The Union home minister was here for the closing ceremony. He has also promised that there will be no shortage of funds from the Centre to tackle the Naxal threat.

Q. How is your approach to dealing with Naxalism different from the preceding Congress government's?

When the Congress was in power in the state, the Naxals openly claimed that it was ‘their’ government. It was the same set of officers who were battling it, but didn’t show results as the Congress government did not have the will to tackle Naxalism. ■



WINNING HEARTS

INCLUSIVE REFORMS

The Niyad Nellanar scheme launched in February 2024 is proving to be a game-changer by extending basic amenities and welfare projects to 125 villages most affected by Naxalism in Chhattisgarh

14,458



Ayushman cards issued

24,177

Aadhaar cards issued

23

Schools sanctioned



130

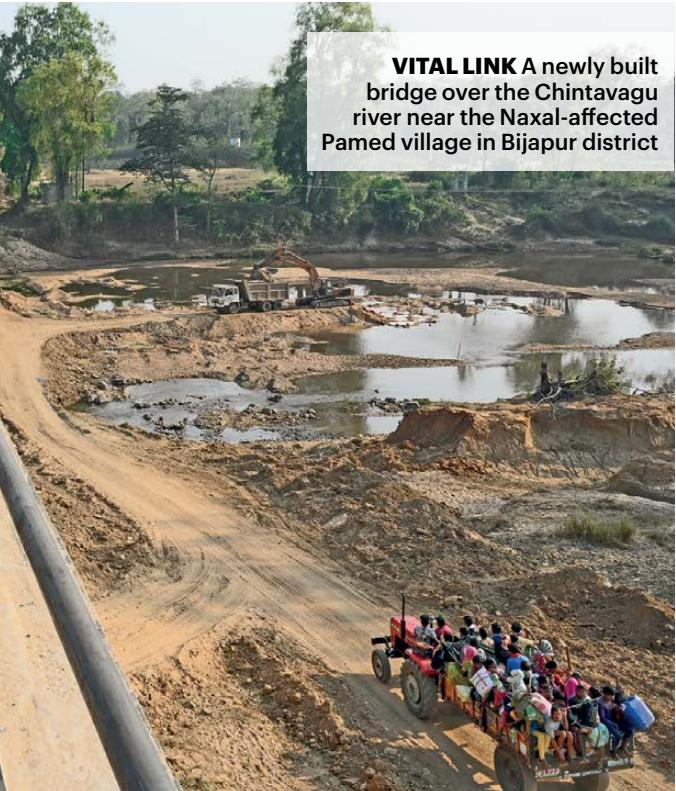
Anganwadis sanctioned



41

Ration shops sanctioned

in Maharashtra. “Abujhmaad was impregnable and there was no security presence earlier, but now we have nine camps inside it. This has considerably reduced the security vacuum area in Abujhmaad,” says Sundarraj. The other area of concern is the National Park or forested area within the Indravati Tiger Reserve in Bijapur district. Of late, this area has seen intensified operations, including a recent



VITAL LINK A newly built bridge over the Chintavagu river near the Naxal-affected Pamed village in Bijapur district

IN CHHATTISGARH

IMPROVING CONNECTIVITY



ROADS

- The Road Connectivity Project for LWE-affected Areas has seen 49 roads (238 km) and nine bridges built in Chhattisgarh since January 2024
- Another 550 km roads repaired under PM Gram Sadak Yojana (Rs 100 cr.)
- Eighteen unfinished road projects (204 km) completed with the help of security forces



MOBILE TOWERS

- In the same period, 574 mobile towers installed, 325 upgraded to 4G
- Those installed include 125 under the LWE Phase 2 backed by Digital Bharat Nidhi, 87 under the Aspirational District Scheme and 362 under the 4G Saturation Scheme

Source: MHA

one on February 9 when 31 Naxals of the National Park Area Committee were killed in a gunfight.

Meanwhile, in what could be termed a Guns and Gulab (roses) policy, the Centre has upped its efforts to bring speedy development to Naxal-affected districts. The lack of development and exploitation of farmers by both contractors and government officers is seen as a root cause of the Naxalite movement flourishing in these zones. In a clever move, the

COVER STORY | NAXALS

FOBs are serving not just a security purpose but are also an integral part of the strategy to win the hearts and minds of the locals. On March 2, the Puvarti camp organised a Civic Action Programme (CAP) under which IGP Agarwal distributed bicycles, sarees, water tanks, blankets and medicines. Like other FOBs, Puvarti also has a 10-bed field hospital (FH), one of the six in the region, with a rudimentary operation theatre to cater to the medical needs of the locals.

A PANACEA CALLED DEVELOPMENT

Aware that minimising the security vacuum area is one aspect of dealing with the problem, there is also a thrust on addressing development deficiencies. A spanking new bridge constructed on the Chintavagu river near Pamed in Bijapur district is one of the many such civil infrastructure projects bringing much-needed connectivity to many villages. Never mind that the Naxals have made several attempts to blow up the bridge with explosives and attack the nearby Dharmavaram FOB. "The bridge has helped us access health services and also to find work as chilli pluckers in Pamed," says Markam Bandi, a resident of village Kanchal. Similarly, in areas that require roads but where the labour or contractors are unwilling to work, the home ministry has roped in the BRO to build them. Meanwhile, to improve communications, more than 2,000 mobile towers have been erected close to the FOBs. All this is being done to ensure that, as Shah says, "there is no reason for people to go back to Naxalism."

The Chhattisgarh government, too, is ramping up its civilian administration's response to the Naxal problem. With tendu leaf-plucking a major economic activity in the affected region, the state government has hiked the wages per standard bag from Rs 4,000 to Rs 5,500. The Niyan Nellanar or My Ideal Village scheme has been launched in affected areas under which residents are being enrolled for 52 schemes and 31 citizen services (see *Winning Hearts in Chhattisgarh*). The security camps play a crucial role in implementing schemes that include ration cards, cooking gas and cycles. All the key security agencies fighting the Naxals know it is a tough ask to meet the home minister's March 2026 deadline, but are determined to win the war.

Back in Puvarti, the CRPF camp is being decorated with party lights, chairs and tables are being arranged and sound systems readied for what seem like preparations for an upcoming dinner party. It's time for the *Bada Khana*—a tradition in the armed forces where officers and other ranks eat together on special occasions to mark a spirit of collective camaraderie. The celebrations are kick-started with officers and jawans performing solo numbers. Dr Vivekanand Basappa, the camp medical officer, belts out the popular Kishore Kumar song—*Neele neele ambar par* (In the Blue Sky), as jawans join in, clapping to the beat. There is hope that the dark night of Naxal violence will end soon, and they, along with the rest of the country, will enjoy the clear blue skies of peace. ■



“WE WILL FREE INDIA OF THE NAXAL THREAT BY MARCH 2026”

When **Amit Shah** took over as the **Union Minister of Home** in 2019, **Left-wing Extremism** was considered an even bigger threat than Jammu and Kashmir. On a Sunday afternoon, just as the India-Pakistan match began in Dubai, Shah sat down with **Group Editorial Director Raj Chengappa** and **Senior Associate Editor Rahul Noronha** in the drawing room of his Krishna Menon Marg residence in Delhi and gave his most detailed interview on how the Modi government is combating the Naxal threat. Over the course of the next one hour, without once glancing at the TV to check the score, Shah methodically outlined his government's multi-pronged strategy to entirely eliminate the threat of Naxals in India by March 2026. Asked what gave him the confidence to set such a stiff deadline for an issue festering for over five decades, Shah shot back, “Confidence by itself doesn't eliminate Naxalism. I made the statement based on the work already done.” Excerpts:



When you took over as the Union home minister in 2019, what was your assessment of the threat from Naxals or Left-wing Extremism (LWE) and what strategy did you devise to eliminate it in the country?

After taking over as Union home minister in 2019, I was told that the Naxal or LWE issue was even bigger than Kashmir. In a way, the disgruntlement over the lack of development could be seen as a cause of Naxalism. Since Independence until the 1990s, our nation suffered a paucity of resources. Systemic development was not possible and, as a result, these regions remained laggards in terms of progress. The *vaampathi vichaardhara* (Naxalite ideology) found these regions fertile ground to plant the idea that violence could lead to development. And they incited people in these areas to resort to violence. Under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, we broadly devised a four-pronged strategy to replace weapons and violence with development and trust in the so-called Red Corridor that extended from Pashupatinath in Nepal to Tirupati in Andhra Pradesh.

Q. What was the first of the four prongs that you mention?

The first prong of the Modi government's action plan against Naxals was to take ruthless action on those who had picked up guns and were responsible for the violence. We employed maximum force through training, integration and capacity-building of the state police forces and the Central Armed Police Forces (CAPF) deployed in the region. We deployed modern assault rifles and area weapons with greater range for dominance.

Q. What was the game plan to reduce the security vacuum in the

major Naxal-affected areas?

This was the second prong. To reduce the security vacuum in most Naxal-affected districts, the CAPF, in collaboration with the state police, set up more camps called Forward Operating Bases (FOB) that worked systematically to clear the area of Naxals. In the past five years, 302 new camps have been set up. Strategically, as we cleared areas of Naxals, we handed them over to the police so that FOBs could move ahead to clear the remaining security vacuum areas. To do that, we expanded the Fortified Police Station programme from 2014 onwards by constructing 612 such stations as compared to the 66 earlier. In these stations, we ensured adequate armed personnel with communication facilities to provide security to the locals in the areas cleared of Naxals.

Q. What about employing modern technology, including for surveillance?

We trained our forces battling Naxals to be new age friendly and integrated with modern technologies. We modernised intelligence-gathering with infusion of technology, including drones, satellite imaging and AI. This enabled our forces to map Naxal movement patterns. Earlier, most casualties on our forces' side were because of the Naxals setting up ambushes. So, in an engagement with them, the forces would pursue them and find themselves trapped from all sides. Now, with the help of drones, they can see where the Naxals are hiding and take evasive action. Also, through techniques like location-tracking, mobile phone activities, scientific call logs and social media analysis, we are able to keep a close watch on Naxal movement. To improve the morale of our security personnel, we have deployed helicopters to facilitate both operations and medical evacuation. In addition, we have recruited over 1,143 people from the affected districts to serve in the police stations.

Q. How many Naxals have surrendered and how has it been useful?

Around 7,500 Naxals have surrendered in the past 10 years, mainly due to the increase in our operations. They, in turn, play a role in future surrenders. Many of these surrendered Naxals have joined the state police, including the district reserve guards. They know the terrain of the region and Naxal tactics well and have become a force multiplier for us. The utilisation of the surrendered Naxals is an example of the phenomenal use of manpower in the larger plan and should be analysed and studied as a model.

Q. How successful have you been in eliminating the top echelons of the Naxal leadership?

Our approach to the Politburo and Central Committee members of the Naxals is to



OUTREACH CENTRAL
Amit Shah meets locals
at Naxal-affected
Potakpalli village in
Sukma, March 2023

trace, target and neutralise them. We have in the past five years eliminated 15 such Naxalite leaders. Apart from these, in just the last year, we have killed one zonal committee member, five sub zonal committee members, two state committee members, 31 divisional committee members and 59 area committee members. Targeting their leadership has severely impacted the Naxal movement. However, our primary efforts involve persuading the Naxals to renounce violence and join the mainstream. Elimination is an option we exercise only to protect the lives of innocent tribal people from gun-toting hardened criminals who instead of surrendering continue to be a serious threat to civilians.

“
**WITH A TRACE,
TARGET AND
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APPROACH, WE
ELIMINATED 15
MEMBERS OF
THE CENTRAL
COMMITTEE AND
POLITBURO IN 5
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IMPACTING THE
MOVEMENT”**

Q. What has been done to stem Naxal funding and flow of arms?

The third prong of the Modi government's plan was to put a squeeze on Naxal funds and their arms supply. Taking illegal levies from tendu patta-plucking and *ugaai* (extortion) from road contractors was the main source of their funding. One of the things we did was to introduce online payment systems which helped curb the outflow of money to them. To prevent contractors from paying extortion money to the Naxalites, we instilled a sense of security in them. Then, we created a separate vertical in the National Investigation Agency that seized Naxal assets of more than Rs 40 crore. The Enforcement Directorate is also closely monitoring their money-laundering activities and has seized Rs 12 crore of their assets. We have



INDIA TODAY PHOTO

“

THE MOMENT AN AREA WAS CLEARED OF NAXALITES, WE MOVED IN WITH DEVELOPMENT SCHEMES. THE IDEA WAS TO ENSURE PEOPLE HAD NO REASON TO GO BACK TO NAXALISM”

“

WE MODERNISED INTELLIGENCE-GATHERING WITH TECHNOLOGY LIKE DRONES, SATELLITE IMAGING AND AI. THIS ENABLED OUR FORCES TO MAP NAXAL MOVEMENT PATTERNS”

also taken initiatives to reduce foreign aid in LWE areas and frozen the accounts of suspected NGOs and organisations.

Q. Are urban Naxals or Naxal sympathisers or those who support them in various ways in cities also under the scanner?

It is very difficult to identify such people. Identification happens only when devices get into the hands of agencies, as was the case in Maharashtra. More importantly, no one can recruit Naxals from a distance and will have to go the villages to do so. We have ensured they would not be able to go to the villages for recruitment.

Q. You had also called Rahul Gandhi an urban Naxal.
I said the *bhasha* (language) he used was of an urban Naxal.

Q. Much of the spread of Naxals was due to the lack of development in the most backward regions of these states. What has the Modi government done to change that?

That is the fourth prong of our action plan. The moment an area was cleared of Naxalites, we moved in with development

schemes. The idea was to ensure that people had no reason to go back to Naxalism. Once they start getting the benefits of these schemes, they turn their back on the Naxals in their villages. Among the things we did was to bring long-needed infrastructure development to these remote areas. In the past 10 years of the Modi government, we have constructed over 11,503 km of roads. Now, we have approved Rs 20,815 crore to construct an additional 17,589 km in the coming years. We have also set about installing mobile towers for cellular communication facilities and, so far, around 2,343 towers have come up at a cost of Rs 4,080 crore in the *pehla charan* (first round). We now plan to build 8,527 more towers that are also 4G compatible via other government schemes. Apart from these, we have opened over 1,007 bank branches and 5,731 post offices in 90 of the most affected districts. Securing saturation in government schemes is not an easy task. Many of the schemes, 112 out of 300, including those for gas connections, toilets, houses and foodgrains, have been altered to suit local demands to ensure their benefits reach the people.

Q. What about initiatives for the youth in the Naxal-affected areas?

The Modi government believes skilling is the best way to break the vicious cycle of poverty. So we laid special emphasis on skilling youth in the Naxal-affected areas to compensate for the losses over the past seven decades. In 48 such districts, Rs 495 crore has been allotted to 48 Industrial Training Institutes (ITIs) and 61 skill development centres have been approved.

Q. How effective have these strategies been?

From August 2019 to December 2020, we completed the preparations, and a comprehensive campaign began soon after. We began clearing out states one after the other. Andhra and Telangana *mein toh kam hi bacha tha* (did not have much of an issue left) when I took charge as home minister, but we completely cleared these states. By 2023, we had cleared Odisha, Bihar, Jharkhand and Madhya Pradesh. We have brought down the total Naxal-affected districts in 10 states from 126 in 2014 to 12 now. There has been an over 70 per cent fall in the death of security personnel and civilians in Naxal-affected areas since 2014. The incidents of violence in these areas have decreased by half. I firmly believe that by March 31, 2026, we will ensure India is totally free of the Naxal threat.



“

WE GOT FULL COOPERATION FROM OPPOSITION—RULED STATES, EXCEPT IN CHHATTISGARH WHEN THE CONGRESS WAS IN POWER. THEY WEREN'T TOO ENTHUSIASTIC ABOUT HELPING OUR FORCES”

Q. With so many states involved, how did you ensure coordination between the Centre and these states, and did you face any difficulties?

The Modi government adopted a three-tier system of *samanvay* (coordination). There was coordination at the central and state ministerial levels, then at the state and district levels and the third aspect was coordination between the central agencies and state-level law and order agencies. Since I took charge in 2019, apart from ground visits to the Naxal-affected areas, I held 11 *samiksha* (review) meetings with the chief ministers of the LWE states, which included Union cabinet ministers, and 83 strategy meetings with the agencies. In these, we formulated strategies and provided swift solutions, including deploying central security forces and providing necessary resources like weapons. We got full cooperation from Opposition-ruled states, except in Chhattisgarh when the Congress was ruling, where we had a lot of problems.

Q. What were the issues in Chhattisgarh when the Congress was in power from 2018 to 2023?

I wouldn't say they were against the security forces but they were not very enthusiastic either. The full support that we needed from the state administration, including the *thalathis*, *thanas* (state police), forest and tribal departments, was not forthcoming. After the BJP came to power in Chhattisgarh, we have revived the campaign in the past 15 months. Starting January 2024, I had detailed review meetings with the new

chief minister, the cabinet ministers concerned along with the top central government departments involved and formulated an action plan. We followed it up with detailed reviews in August and December 2024 and I personally visited many of the Naxalite areas. The results speak for themselves. In 2014, there were 18,000 sq. km of area in Chhattisgarh that was Naxal-affected. Today, that is down to 8,500 sq. km and decreasing rapidly every month. We organised a Bastar Olympics last year wherein those affected by Naxal violence participated. I also visited Naxalite-infested Sukma and Gundam areas to send a positive message to the people living there that the Modi government is their trusted compatriot in the battle for development.

Q. While the Maoist footprint may be shrinking for the moment, what are the chances of the movement's revival in these areas?

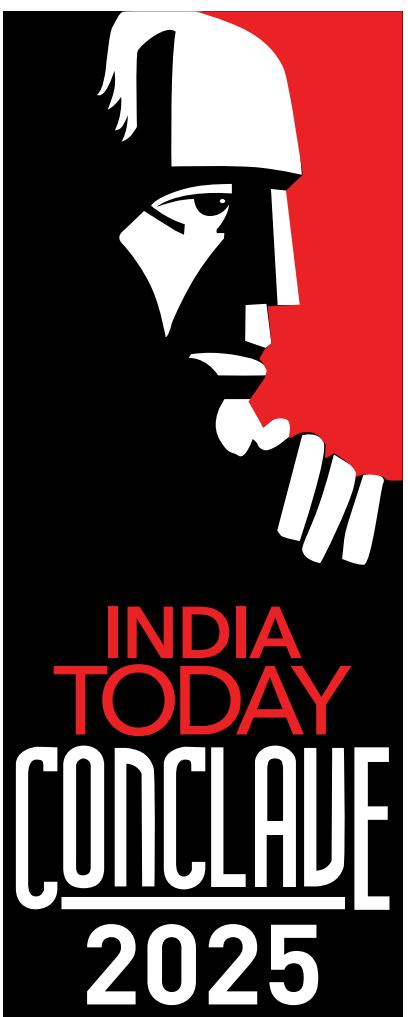
Revival of the movement is only possible if the government fails to provide schools, drinking water, roads and electricity in the villages. These are mostly tribal villages where residents get the benefits of reservation. They have priority in government recruitment and we have also relaxed the norms for physical fitness and education while recruiting them in the police. For instance, a special Bastariya Battalion of the CRPF was formed and we have recruited over 1,143 personnel from four highly Naxal-infected districts of Chhattisgarh. The recruitment process is on to fill around 6,500 posts in the police department in the state. The chances of revival are slim now. The Naxal ecosystem has been hit hard and is rapidly on its way out.

“
WE HAVE BROUGHT DOWN THE MOST NAXAL-AFFECTED DISTRICTS IN 10 STATES FROM 126 IN 2014 TO 12 NOW. THERE'S BEEN A MORE THAN 70% FALL IN SECURITY FORCES' AND CIVILIAN DEATHS”

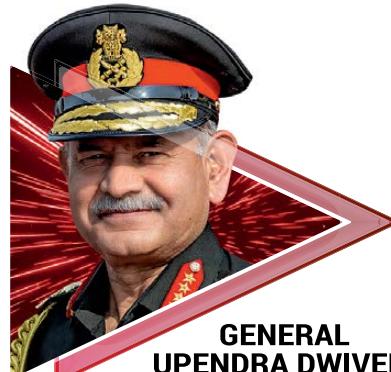
Q. What will be the yardstick to declare an area Naxal-free on March 31, 2026, and how confident are you of meeting the deadline?

If 98 per cent of the police stations in an area do not have a single incidence of Naxalism in the entire year, then the area will be declared Naxal-free. To the second part of your question, confidence by itself does not eliminate Naxals. *Kaafi kaam kar liya* (We have done enough work). I made the statement based on that. ■

THE AGE OF ACCELERATION



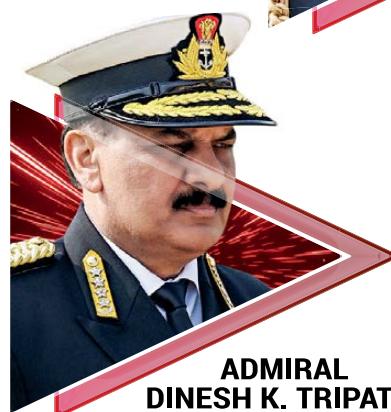
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The North-South DIVIDE

THE SOUTH'S RESISTANCE TO THE DELIMITATION EXERCISE—TO PRESERVE ITS POLITICAL VOICE, FEDERAL AUTONOMY, AND ECONOMIC CONTRIBUTIONS—is at odds with the North's cries of under-representation

By AMARNATH K. MENON and KAUSHIK DEKA

The south of India is drawing a thick red line. At an all-party meeting convened by Tamil Nadu chief minister M.K. Stalin on March 5, leaders from across the state declared war against the upcoming delimitation exercise, calling it a calculated assault on their “political relevance”. Stalin warned that the plan, if executed on raw population figures, would punish the southern states for successfully controlling their birth rates, while rewarding the North that had not. Karnataka CM Siddaramaiah, Telangana’s A. Revanth Reddy, and Kerala’s Pinarayi Vijayan have voiced similar apprehensions, warning that a weaker parliamentary presence for the South would translate into diminished central allocations, further deepening the divisions between the two regions.

A realignment based solely on population would mean that the northern states, with their sheer numbers, would further consolidate their influence over national politics. This, the southern states believe, could alter the country’s federal balance, making it harder for them to safeguard their interests in critical policy matters. Even Andhra Pradesh CM N. Chandrababu Naidu, a BJP ally, has expressed unease, hinting that states might be forced to rethink

population policies just to retain influence.

In Tamil Nadu, opposition to delimitation cuts across party lines. Almost all political parties, except for the BJP, view it as a discriminatory move that undermines the federal spirit of the Constitution. CM Stalin also sees delimitation as part of a larger pattern of the Centre trying to encroach on Tamil Nadu’s autonomy. He has repeatedly accused the Union government of undermining the state’s financial and educational



independence through policies such as the National Education Policy (NEP), 2020 and the National Eligibility-cum-Entrance Test (NEET). A reduction in the share of parliamentary seats, he argues, would exacerbate this trend, leaving Tamil Nadu with proportionately less representatives to advocate for its rights in the Lok Sabha.

In Karnataka, the Congress's Siddaramaiah contends that the Union government's actions—whether the skewed tax revenue distribution, inequities in GST (Goods & Services Tax) and disaster relief, an overbearing education policy, or arbitrary UGC (University Grants Commission) amendments—consistently penalise the state. "Delimitation is yet another attempt to weaken the South's representation in Parliament and stifle our ability to challenge the Centre's injustices," he asserts. Revanth takes it a step further, accusing the BJP of using delimitation as a backdoor strategy to cement its dominance by boosting seats in the BIMARU states while sidelining the South.

**"Our demand is clear...
Do not penalise the
southern states [with
less Lok Sabha seats]
for taking responsible
measures to control
population growth"**

M.K. STALIN
Chief Minister, Tamil Nadu

There are concerns that delimitation could enable parties with significant influence in the North, such as the BJP, to establish new strongholds. "Going by the extraordinary enthusiasm shown by the Narendra Modi government, it appears that the real intent is to punish the people of the South for resisting the BJP," says Siddaramaiah ominously.

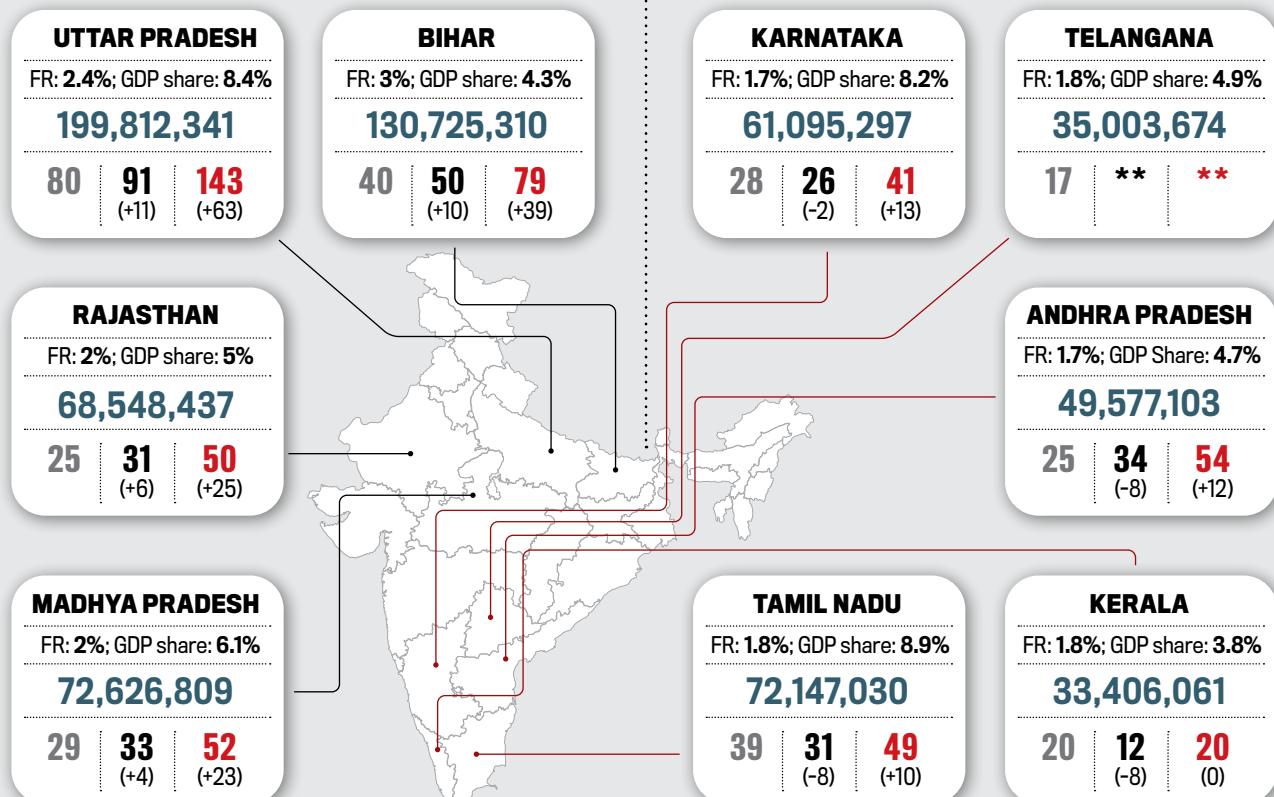
It is in this context that the BJP's move to link the implementation of the Women's Reservation Bill to delimitation takes on added political significance. By making

BIGGEST GAINERS

Four north Indian states, which comprise 39 per cent of the country's population and have fertility rates above 2, are projected to gain 31 Lok Sabha seats. Their representation will rise from 32 per cent to 38 per cent of the total seats, bringing their total to 205. These states currently contribute 24 per cent to India's national GDP. If total Lok Sabha seats are increased to 848, these states will gain 150 seats, an 86 per cent increase compared to national average increase of 56 per cent

BIGGEST LOSERS

The five south Indian states, which currently contribute 31% to India's GDP and account for 21 per cent of the population, will see a reduction of 26 Lok Sabha seats due to their low fertility rates (1.8 or below). Their representation will decrease from 24 per cent to 19 per cent of the total Lok Sabha seats, leaving them with 103 seats. Even if seats are increased to 848, they stand to gain 35 seats, a mere 27 per cent increase compared to the 56 per cent hike in total Lok Sabha seats



■ Total population ■ Current LS seats ■ 2026 projected seats ■ 2026 projected seats if LS seats are increased to 848
Gain/ Loss in (); FR: Fertility rate; GDP share: Share of national GDP; **Telangana projections not available

Sources: Census 2011, NFHS-5, A 2019 study by Milan Vaishnav and Jamie Hinton

Graphics by TANMOY CHAKRABORTY

women's representation contingent on a redrawing of constituencies, the BJP has not only ensured that delimitation becomes inevitable but has also reframed the debate—turning what was once a contentious electoral restructuring into a matter of gender justice. This dual-purpose strategy puts the pressure on Opposition parties, especially those from the South, to accept delimitation while simultaneously deflecting criticism of delaying women's reservation by tying it to constitutional requirements.

Union home minister Amit Shah

has dismissed Stalin's concerns outright, asserting that "Tamil Nadu will not lose a single seat" and saying that PM Modi has assured the southern states that their representation will not be diminished. State BJP chief K. Annamalai has also slammed Stalin for spouting "imaginary fears" and misleading the public. The contradiction between the alarm call by the southern leaders and the BJP's stand has turned delimitation into a new political flashpoint, with Stalin warning that a "sword is hanging over the southern states".

What is delimitation?

The process of delimitation in India is guided by the Constitution, which mandates periodic reallocation of parliamentary and state assembly constituencies based on population changes. Article 82 of the Constitution stipulates that after each Census, the allocation of seats in the Lok Sabha and state legislative assemblies should be readjusted to ensure proportional representation. Similarly, Article 170 governs the division of seats for state assemblies. This process is carried out by the Delimitation Com-

mission, which is mandated to redraw constituency boundaries and determine scheduled caste/ tribe reserved seats based on demographic distribution.

Since Independence, India has conducted four major delimitation exercises. The first three—in 1952, 1963, and 1973—followed the censuses of 1951, 1961 and 1971, respectively. Each exercise adjusted the number of seats in the Lok Sabha and state assemblies in line with the population growth. The number of LS seats rose incrementally—from 494 to 522, and finally 543 after 1971. The exercise also adjusted constituency boundaries to ensure equal representation per voter across states.

However, in 1976, the Indira Gandhi-led government imposed a freeze on the reallocation of seats through the 42nd Constitutional Amendment. The primary rationale was to encourage population control measures—there was a growing concern that states with higher population growth (mainly in the North) would gain more seats at the cost of those that had successfully controlled their population (mainly in the South). To prevent this perceived imbalance, it was decided that the seat distribution would remain based on the 1971 Census. This freeze was originally meant to last until 2001, but it was extended to 2026 through the 84th Constitutional Amendment in 2002.

The 2002 delimitation exercise thus was limited to redrawing constituency boundaries in states based on the 2001 Census data, and also revising the reservation of seats for SC/STs to reflect their population distribution in each state.

Now, as the freeze on seat reallocation nears its 2026 deadline, India faces the challenge of conducting a full-fledged delimitation exercise. The next Census—originally scheduled for 2021 but delayed due to the Covid pandemic—is expected to be the basis for this exercise.

Why the South is worried

With the new Parliament building designed to accommodate 888 MPs, a significant increase in seats is a strong possibility, ensuring that no state loses representation outright. Constitutional expert P.D.T. Achary explains that while



“Mr Stalin, the Modi government has made it clear that after delimitation, on pro rata basis, not a single seat will be reduced in any southern state”

AMIT SHAH, Union Minister of Home

Article 82 mandates the reallocation of Lok Sabha seats after each Census to reflect demographic shifts. Article 81 imposes a cap of 550 seats—530 for states and 20 for Union territories. Consequently, any expansion of the total number of seats would require an amendment to Article 81.

The impending delimitation exercise could significantly alter the political representation of India's northern and southern states. If the number of Lok Sabha seats remains 543, northern states—particularly Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, MP, and Rajasthan—stand to gain 31 seats, while southern states—especially Tamil Nadu, Kerala, and Andhra Pradesh—will lose 26 seats (see *Biggest Gainers/ Biggest Losers*). This shift is due to the North's higher population growth and persistently high fertility rates and could lead to an imbalance in

policy priorities.

However, if the total number of Lok Sabha seats is increased to 848—as calculated in a 2019 study—the changes become even starker. The four northern states would gain 150 seats while the five in the south would see a net gain of only 35 seats. The disproportionate advantage given to the North would further reduce the South's influence in national decision-making. This imbalance is particularly concerning because, while the North accounts for only 24 per cent of India's GDP, the South contributes 31 per cent. A shift in representation without proportional consideration of economic contributions could increase tensions in fiscal federalism.

Southern states already feel under-represented in national financial allocations and argue that representation should account for more than just

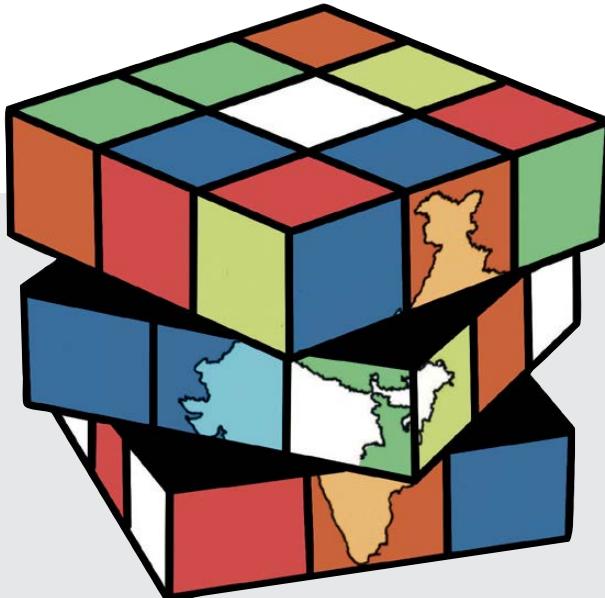
WHY NORTH WANTS IT, SOUTH DOESN'T

► Southern states like Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, and Karnataka successfully controlled population growth but now risk losing parliamentary representation as seats are reallocated based on population. Delimitation could diminish their political influence by giving a greater share to northern states with high population growth

► Southern states contribute significantly to India's GDP

and tax revenue but may see their share of Lok Sabha seats shrink, leading to questions of fiscal federalism. Economic disparity is already growing between southern and northern states. Delimitation could deepen this divide, making governance more centralised in the north

► Some southern leaders argue that if LS seats are reallocated by population, the Rajya Sabha should be reformed



to give states equal representation regardless of population

► Northern states argue that representation must reflect population size, as per the constitutional principle of proportional representation. Voters in southern states currently have

greater representation per MP than in northern states

► States like UP, Bihar and MP have seen exponential population growth but still have the same number of MPs as they did in 1971, leading to severe under-representation

population. Economic output, tax contributions and development indicators, they contend, should also be considered. Bharat Rashtra Samithi (BRS) president K.T. Rama Rao insists that delimitation should reflect the fiscal contributions of states. "Take Telangana—it has just 2.8 per cent of India's population but contributes 5.2 per cent of the nation's GDP."

The flip side to this is that the delimitation freeze contradicts the principle of fair representation outlined in Article 81, which mandates that each Lok Sabha MP should represent between 500,000 and 750,000 people. But with the constitutional freeze on seat redistribution since 1976, the average population per constituency has significantly increased, with some MPs now representing nearly 3 million people, leading to severe malapportionment. The impact of delimitation becomes further nuanced when considering the number of registered voters per MP. Northern states have higher under-18 populations, and hence a lower proportion of registered voters per constitu-

ency compared to their total population. For instance, in Uttar Pradesh, an MP now represents some 3.1 million people, whereas in Tamil Nadu, it is only 1.98 million. But the difference in actual registered voters per MP is much smaller—around 300,000. Many critics argue that the delimitation freeze has weakened the principle of one person, one vote, which assigns equal weight to each citizen's vote.

The delimitation exercise will also significantly impact the allocation of

SC/ST reserved seats in Parliament and state assemblies. Since these seats are allocated in proportion to their population in each state, states with higher SC/ST growth rates, particularly in the North, could gain more reserved constituencies, while southern states with lower population growth may lose some. According to projections based on the 2011 Census, this could result in a net nationwide increase of two SC-reserved seats and one ST-reserved seat, and at least 18 constituencies witnessing a change in their reservation status. This redistribution could reduce the political influence of SC/ST communities in states losing seats, triggering opposition from regional leaders.

Collateral concerns

Stalin has expanded his fight beyond delimitation, framing it as a battle for rights, not just numbers. On his birthday (March 1), he declared, "We were pioneers in the language struggle, setting the course for the nation." He sees the three-language policy under the NEP—which he calls

THE DELIMITATION EXERCISE WILL ALSO IMPACT THE ALLOCATION OF SC AND ST RESERVED SEATS IN PARLIAMENT AND STATE ASSEMBLIES



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"Hindi imposition"—another example of central overreach, which is already costing Tamil Nadu its rightful funds. The combination of delimitation and the NEP's language mandate threatens to deepen the North-South divide.

So, how will Stalin's aggressive campaign unfold? Analysts, led by Christophe Jaffrelot in the study, 'India—The Challenge of Contrasted Regional Dynamics', published by the Paris-based Institut Montaigne, highlight the country's deep regional disparities in infrastructure, industry, and social welfare. Their analysis suggests that the debate will centre on two key issues. First, the widening North-South divide will escalate tensions. Second, Narendra Modi's economic policies—largely modelled on Gujarat's development strategy—will come under increasing scrutiny, especially when contrasted with Tamil

THE DMK'S FOCUS ON THE DELIMITATION DEBATE IS ALSO A STRATEGIC MOVE AHEAD OF THE TAMIL NADU ELECTION, NOW JUST A YEAR AWAY

Nadu's alternative approach, which emphasises inclusivity and human capital development. As economic distress deepens, with rising unemployment and an increasingly vulnerable lower-middle class, Tamil Nadu's success story may gain traction, challenging the dominance of the 'Gujarat model' and reshaping India's economic discourse. "Stalin's ability to rally diverse regional

forces under the banner of federalism strengthens his position as a champion of equitable representation," says B.V. Muralidhar, chairman, Board of Studies, Department of Political Science, Sri Venkateswara University.

An electoral plank?

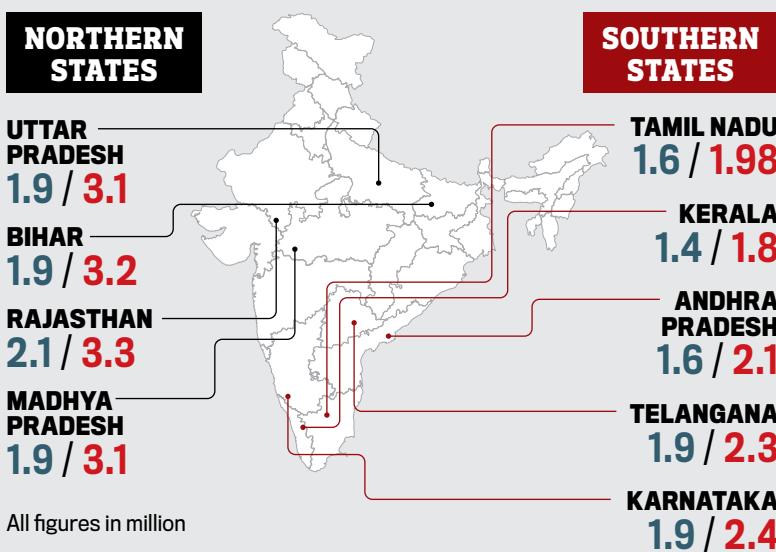
Political analysts argue that the DMK's renewed focus on the delimitation debate is a strategic move ahead of the Tamil Nadu assembly election, now less than a year away. It aligns with a broader political narrative, inadvertently shaped by the BJP-led Centre through issues like NEP-linked funding, the three-language formula, and the NEET. With the all-party meeting, Stalin is signalling that this isn't just a party concern but a matter of state rights and Tamil identity.

The BJP has surely handed the DMK a potent campaign issue. "The BJP has touched a raw nerve as the new generation of Tamil youth has come to see the DMK and AIADMK as stable governments that deliver on social welfare schemes," says political analyst N. Sathia Moorthy. The DMK has already capitalised on ideological battles—over Hindutva and AIADMK's association with the BJP—winning three consecutive elections under Stalin, in 2019 and 2024 (LS), and in 2021 (assembly). This time, the BJP leadership has given Stalin another ideological plank on a silver platter: the 'Dravidian model' narrative, including Centre-state relations and social justice. This comes just as Anna-malai was aggressively framing the BJP campaign around governance failures—corruption, nepotism, and lawlessness—long seen as the DMK's weak points.

As the delimitation debate intensifies, it is evident that the South's resistance isn't just about numbers—it is about preserving its political voice, economic contributions and federal autonomy. However, before any redrawing of constituencies can take place, the long-delayed Census must first be conducted. With no official timeline for its completion, the delimitation process remains speculative. Until then, the political rhetoric around it will continue to serve as a flashpoint, shaping poll strategies and deepening regional divides in the run-up to the 2026 Tamil Nadu election. ■

UNEVEN REPRESENTATION

Voter registration doesn't always align with population size in a constituency. Northern states, with a higher share of under-18 residents, see lower registration rates, while southern states show greater political engagement. This gives rise to representation disparities. In Uttar Pradesh, an MP represents an average of 3.1 million people, compared to almost 2 million in Tamil Nadu—a gap of 1.1 million. However, the difference in registered voters per constituency is just 300,000



Source: Report of the Technical Group On Population Projections 2024-25, ECI



Transforming India's Shipbuilding Industry

A Visionary Journey Towards Global Leadership

Highlighting the significance of giving infrastructure status to large ships, PM Modi said, Due to infrastructure status, the construction of big ships in India will be encouraged, the Atmanirbhar Bharat Abhiyan will get momentum and we all know that ship building is the sector that provides the most employment.

A Maritime Legacy Rekindled

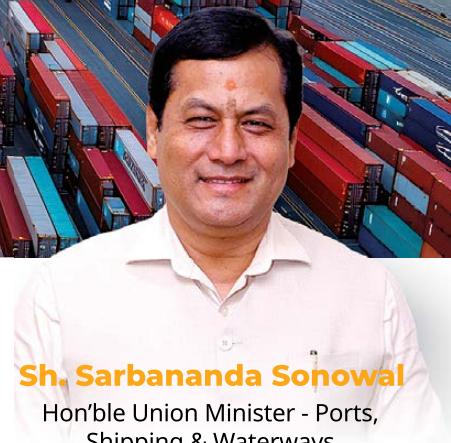
For centuries, India has been a land of maritime excellence, with a rich legacy of shipbuilding and naval innovation. From the ancient dockyards of Lothal—one of the world's earliest known ports—to the mighty fleets of the Chola Empire that dominated Southeast Asian waters, Indian shipbuilders crafted vessels that sailed across global trade routes, linking civilizations and fostering economic prosperity. However, with the advent of colonial rule and changing geopolitical dynamics, India's shipbuilding industry gradually declined, giving way to international competitors.

This trajectory began to shift in 2014, under the visionary leadership of Hon'ble Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Recognizing shipbuilding as a key pillar of India's Blue Economy, the government has undertaken bold reforms to revitalize the sector, positioning India as a global powerhouse in ship construction and repair. The government rolled out the Shipbuilding Financial Assistance Policy in

2016 to address the cost disadvantages faced by Indian Shipbuilders vis-à-vis other leading nations such as South Korea, China, etc. Today, India is among the top emerging shipbuilding nations, with world-class shipyards like Cochin Shipyard, Hindustan Shipyard, and Goa Shipyard leading the way in constructing cutting-edge vessels, including indigenous warships, commercial vessels, and green shipping solutions.

Shipbuilding: A Key Contributor to India's Economic Future

As India aspires to become a USD 32 trillion economy by 2047, the shipbuilding sector will play a crucial role in enhancing maritime infrastructure, boosting employment, and strengthening India's position in global trade. The Ministry of Ports, Shipping, and Waterways (MoPSW), under the leadership of Sh. Sarbananda Sonowal, is spearheading transformative initiatives, such as the Shipbuilding Financial Assistance Policy 2.0, Maritime Development Fund (MDF), and



Sh. Sarbananda Sonowal

Hon'ble Union Minister - Ports,
Shipping & Waterways



India's rich shipbuilding legacy is being revived with strategic reforms and global partnerships. Under the leadership of Hon'ble PM Narendra Modi, we are creating a competitive, self-reliant shipbuilding ecosystem. With financial support, skilled manpower, and modern infrastructure, India is set to become a global leader in ship construction and repair



support for Shipbuilding Clusters, to create a globally competitive and self-reliant shipbuilding ecosystem.

Union Budget 2025: A Strong Push for Shipbuilding

The Union Budget 2025 has laid a strong foundation for the growth of India's shipbuilding ecosystem through key initiatives. The revamped Shipbuilding Financial Assistance Policy (SBFAP 2.0) with a significantly increased corpus will provide financial aid to Indian shipyards, making them more competitive globally. The newly introduced Shipbreaking Credit Note Scheme will offer credit notes on the scrap value of decommissioned ships, which can be used to purchase new ships from Indian yards. This move will promote ship recycling and encourage investments in new ship construction. To further develop the sector, the government will facilitate the establishment of new shipbuilding clusters, which will receive direct capital support for



breakwater construction, capital dredging, and trunk infrastructure. Additionally, modernization and automation of existing shipyards will enhance productivity and efficiency.

Globally, about 89% of shipbuilding happens in China, South Korea and Japan, of which MoPSW has been in deep discussions with the shipbuilders of South Korea and Japan. Leading shipbuilding companies of South Korea and Japan have either already visited India or are in the process of organising this visit to seek opportunities for setting up shipyards in India. Moreover, globally leading shipping players from France, Denmark, etc have also shown keen interest in participating, through various mechanisms, towards boosting domestic shipbuilding & ship repair.

Additionally, the government is putting in focused efforts on skilling and upskilling shipbuilding professionals to ensure a steady supply of trained personnel equipped with modern shipbuilding technologies. The primary goal is to create a self-sufficient maritime industry that caters to both domestic and international demand, reducing India's dependency on foreign-built ships.

Access to Low-Cost, Long-Term Financing: Maritime Development Fund (MDF)

Maritime India Vision 2030 (MIV 2030) and Maritime Amrit Kaal Vision 2047 (MAKV 2047) had proposed the establishment of a dedicated fund to address the long-term financing needs of the maritime sector. The Maritime Development Fund (MDF), recently announced in the Union Budget 2025, will now be operationalized through a structured and phased approach. Key aspects such as the fund's structure, investment strategy, governance, and compliance mechanisms are currently being finalized. MoPSW envisions an initial target corpus of INR 25,000 crore till 2030, with 49% equity investment from the Central Government and 51% from Major Ports, financial institutions, private investors, and sovereign funds.

Additionally, multilateral agencies and international development banks are expected to provide further

funding support. To boost the shipbuilding industry further, the budget proposes the inclusion of large ships above a specified size in the Infrastructure Harmonized Master List (HML). MDF aligns with global priorities such as sustainability, decarbonization, and responsible ship recycling. The fund is expected to attract significant capital through co-financing, concessional funding, and blended finance models, ensuring risk-mitigated, long-term returns. This move will provide shipbuilders with easier access to long-term financing and infrastructure status benefits, helping them secure funding on favorable terms and expand production capacity.

Taxation Benefits for Shipbuilding & Shipping

Recognizing the long gestation period of shipbuilding, the budget introduces key tax incentives. The exemption on Basic Customs Duty (BCD) for raw materials, components, consumables, and parts for ship manufacturing will be extended for another ten years, ensuring cost competitiveness for Indian shipbuilders. Similar tax benefits will be extended to encourage sustainability in ship recycling. The continuation of the BCD exemption on shipbuilding materials is set to reduce input costs, enhancing the profitability and global competitiveness of Indian shipyards and ship recycling businesses. With a focus on progressively increasing the localization of shipbuilding, this initiative will serve as a catalyst for boosting domestic production, enhancing capacity utilization, and enabling Indian players to secure more international contracts.

The benefits of the Tonnage Tax Scheme will now be extended to inland vessels registered under the Indian Vessels Act, 2021. This move will boost Inland Water Transport (IWT) by making operations more cost-effective and sustainable. The initiative is expected to attract significant private investments in vessels, terminals, and logistics infrastructure.

IFSC: Strengthening India's Maritime Finance Hub

The budget outlines several measures to enhance the International Financial Services Centre (IFSC) as a global maritime hub. Tax incentives for ship-

leasing units, insurance offices, and treasury centers will encourage global businesses to establish their maritime financial operations in IFSC. The deadline to commence operations in IFSC for claiming benefits has been extended by five years, until March 31, 2030. Several tax incentives for ship leasing activities have been proposed, including exemption under Section 10(4H) for capital gains on the transfer of equity shares of a ship-leasing domestic company by a non-resident or an IFSC unit. Additionally, exemption under Section 10(34B) has been proposed for dividends paid by a ship-leasing company in IFSC to another IFSC unit engaged in ship leasing.

The Road Ahead: Reclaiming India's Maritime Supremacy

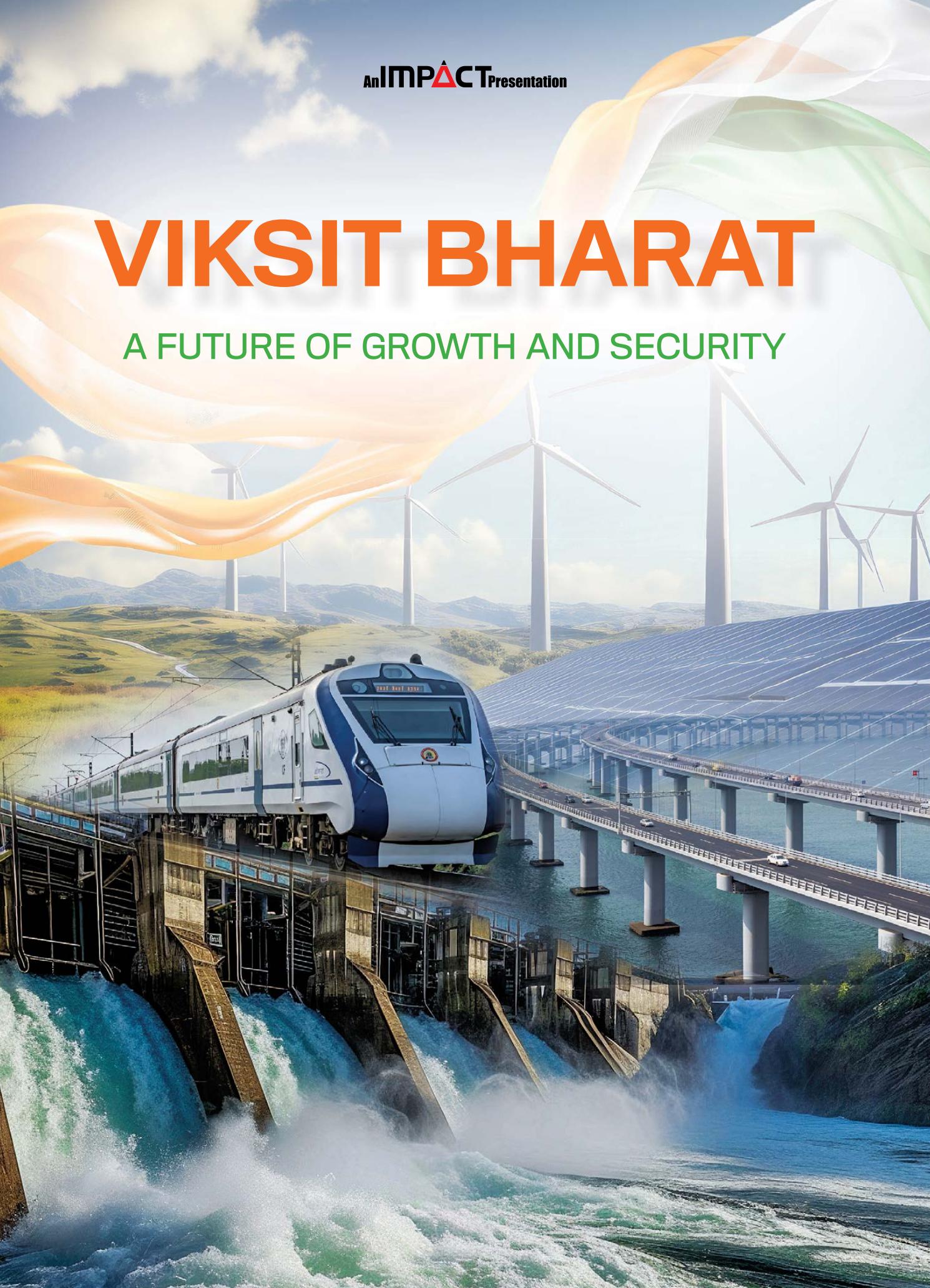
The series of reforms and policy interventions being implemented today are geared towards transforming India into a global shipbuilding and maritime powerhouse. As India marches towards becoming a USD 32 trillion economy, the shipbuilding industry will serve as a key enabler of economic growth, job creation, and technological advancement. Through continued investments, policy support, and infrastructure development, India is poised to reclaim its maritime supremacy and emerge as a leading hub for shipbuilding and maritime innovation.

The Maritime Amrit Kaal Vision 2047, driven by the Ministry of Ports, Shipping, and Waterways, is setting the foundation for a self-reliant, globally competitive, and future-ready maritime sector. With these strategic initiatives, India is not just revitalizing its past maritime glory but also charting a bold and ambitious course for the future of global shipping and trade.



VIKSIT BHARAT

A FUTURE OF GROWTH AND SECURITY





VIKSIT BHARAT

POWERING GROWTH, SECURING THE FUTURE

Over the past decade, India has witnessed an era of unprecedented transformation, driven by bold reforms, strategic investments, and a commitment to self-reliance under the visionary leadership of Hon'ble Prime Minister Narendra Modi. As the nation moves towards Viksit Bharat, its journey is marked by groundbreaking advancements across critical sectors, ensuring sustainable growth, economic resilience, and global leadership. At the heart of this transformation lies a comprehensive approach to infrastructure development, energy security, and resource management, all anchored in innovation, technological excellence, and a strong policy framework. From revolutionizing water conservation and maritime supremacy to reshaping the energy landscape with renewable and clean technologies, Bharat is setting new benchmarks in sustainability and self-sufficiency.

The Union Budget 2025-26 has further reinforced the government's unwavering commitment to long-term progress, with strategic allocations driving investments in water security, shipbuilding, power generation, and clean energy solutions. These initiatives are not just about economic growth but about creating a resilient, future-ready Bharat—one that thrives on efficient resource management, cutting-edge technology, and an unwavering focus on environmental stewardship. With a relentless push for innovation, sustainability, and inclusive development, India is charting a bold course toward becoming a global leader in resource management and infrastructure excellence, shaping a brighter, more prosperous future for generations to come.



Water Revolution: Securing Resources for a Sustainable Future

One of the key pillars of Viksit Bharat is the transformation of India's water resources through visionary policies and technological advancements. Recognizing the critical role of water in economic growth and environmental sustainability, the Government of India has undertaken groundbreaking initiatives to ensure efficient water management, enhance conservation efforts, and promote long-term resource security. At the heart of this mission lies the National Water Mission (NWM), designed to optimize water use efficiency and combat the challenges of climate change. The mission's

ambitious goal of improving water use efficiency by 20% across sectors has driven large-scale interventions, including integrated water resource management (IWRM) at local, regional, and national levels. By leveraging data-driven governance and innovative technology, NWM has ensured real-time monitoring of water availability and distribution, empowering local bodies to make informed decisions on water conservation and allocation. A major breakthrough in this journey has been the rejuvenation of traditional water bodies and reservoirs, significantly increasing India's water storage capacity. Projects under the Atal Bhujal Yojana have revitalized groundwater systems, mitigating over-extraction and ensuring sustainable usage. The government's Har Ghar Jal initiative, under the Jal Jeevan Mission (JJM), has provided over 15 crore rural households with access to potable tap water, setting a new benchmark in last-mile connectivity and public welfare. Furthermore, the integration of satellite-based water mapping, AI-driven irrigation techniques, and IoT-enabled water sensors has revolutionized India's approach to water security. These cutting-edge solutions have minimized wastage, maximized efficiency, and strengthened community participation in conservation efforts.

The Union Budget 2025-26 has reaffirmed the government's commitment by allocating ₹74,226 crore for drinking water and sanitation, ₹25,276 crore for river rejuvenation, and ₹3,400 crore specifically for the Namami Gange Mission-II, ensuring the continued restoration of India's lifeline, the Ganga River. India's Water Revolution is not just about resource management—it is about securing the future. By ensuring equitable distribution, enhancing storage, and integrating technology, Bharat is paving the way for water security, economic prosperity, and environmental resilience,

making it a global leader in sustainable resource management.

Shipbuilding Revolution: Reclaiming Maritime Supremacy

A key pillar of Viksit Bharat is the resurgence of India's shipbuilding industry, a sector with immense potential to drive economic growth, job creation, and self-reliance. With bold reforms and strategic initiatives, the government is reviving India's maritime legacy and positioning the country as a global leader in ship construction and repair. At the forefront of this transformation is the proposed Shipbuilding Financial Assistance Policy 2.0, which has been revamped to enhance the global competitiveness of Indian shipyards. This policy, coupled with the Maritime Development Fund (MDF)—targeting an initial corpus of ₹25,000 crore—ensures low-cost, long-term financing to boost domestic shipbuilding capacity. Leading Indian shipyards, such as Cochin Shipyard, Hindustan Shipyard, and Goa Shipyard, are already producing world-class warships, commercial vessels, and green shipping solutions, further strengthening India's maritime capabilities.



To catalyze investment, the government has engaged in high-level discussions with major shipbuilding nations like South Korea and Japan. Leading global players from France, Denmark, and other maritime giants have also expressed keen interest in participating in India's shipbuilding growth story. Additionally, the newly introduced Shipbreaking Credit Note Scheme will incentivize ship recycling, supporting sustainability and circular economy goals. Recognizing the long gestation period of shipbuilding, the Union Budget 2025 has provided crucial tax incentives, including a 10-year exemption on Basic Customs Duty (BCD) for raw materials and components used in ship manufacturing. Moreover, the extension of tonnage tax benefits to inland vessels will boost Inland Water Transport (IWT), making operations cost-effective and eco-friendly.

The government is also strengthening India's position as a global maritime finance hub through

the International Financial Services Centre (IFSC). Tax incentives for ship leasing and financing will attract global businesses to establish their maritime operations in India, accelerating the growth of the sector. Through these transformative initiatives, India is charting a bold course towards reclaiming its maritime supremacy, driving investment, creating employment, and securing a sustainable future for global shipping. With a strong vision under Maritime Amrit Kaal Vision 2047, India is set to emerge as a shipbuilding powerhouse, reinforcing its role as a key player in global trade and maritime innovation.

Powering Progress: Strengthening Bharat's Energy Backbone

One of the key drivers of Viksit Bharat has been the transformation of India's power sector, ensuring energy security, economic growth, and industrial expansion. With a strong focus on traditional power generation and transmission, the Government of India has undertaken strategic reforms to enhance capacity, modernize infrastructure, and improve nationwide electrification. A major milestone in this journey has been India's remarkable expansion in thermal, hydro, and nuclear power generation. Today, India boasts a total installed power capacity of over 425 GW, making it one of the largest electricity markets in the world. With an unwavering commitment to energy security, the government has reinforced investments in coal and gas-based power plants, ensuring stable and affordable electricity supply, particularly for industrial and rural sectors.

At the core of this progress lies the modernization of power transmission and distribution networks. The Revamped Distribution Sector Scheme (RDSS) has been a game-changer, improving efficiency and reducing losses in electricity distribution. With a focus on smart grids, AI-driven load balancing, and automated substations, the government has significantly enhanced grid resilience and power reliability across the country. Additionally, India has made historic strides in universal electrification through initiatives like Saubhagya Yojana, which has successfully provided electricity to over 2.86 crore households, eliminating energy poverty in rural areas. The push towards smart metering and

digitization of transmission networks has further streamlined power distribution, reducing losses and ensuring transparency in billing and consumption.

The Union Budget 2025-26 has reinforced the government's commitment to the power sector by allocating ₹20,000 crore for nuclear power projects, alongside ₹50,000 crore for upgrading transmission infrastructure under the Green Energy Corridor initiative. These investments will bolster domestic power generation, modernize aging infrastructure, and create a future-ready grid capable of handling rising energy demands. With a clear vision for energy security and reliability, Bharat is strengthening its power sector as the backbone of economic progress. By modernizing traditional power generation, expanding transmission networks, and embracing cutting-edge technology, India is ensuring 24x7 affordable and sustainable electricity for all, paving the way for a self-reliant and empowered future.

Energy Security: Powering Bharat's Future

India's journey towards energy self-sufficiency is a testament to its strategic vision and unwavering commitment to sustainable growth. The Union Budget 2025 reinforces this commitment, with a sharp focus on clean energy investments, infrastructure expansion, and enhanced domestic production. The Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas (MoPNG) has been at the forefront of this transformation, driving initiatives that ensure energy security, affordability, and sustainability. With India emerging as the world's third-largest energy consumer, MoPNG's policies and programs are paving the way for a robust and self-reliant energy ecosystem. The government is making unprecedented strides in increasing domestic oil and gas production, while enhancing infrastructure to meet rising energy demands. A key milestone is the USD 100 billion investment in Exploration & Production (E&P), unlocking India's hydrocarbon potential and reducing import dependency. The Union Budget 2025 has further boosted the sector with additional incentives for deepwater and ultra-deepwater exploration, aiming to increase domestic output. Additionally, the construction of over 33,000 km of gas pipelines under the National Gas Grid





is ensuring last-mile connectivity, making clean energy accessible to every household and industry.

In line with the Hon'ble Prime Minister's vision, India is transitioning towards a gas-based economy. Natural gas, a cleaner alternative to conventional fuels, is poised to play a pivotal role in this shift. The government has set ambitious targets to increase the share of natural gas in the primary energy mix from 6% to 15% by 2030. This transition is being facilitated by initiatives such as the City Gas Distribution (CGD) network, expansion of LNG terminals, and promotion of Compressed Natural Gas (CNG) and Piped Natural Gas (PNG) for consumers and industries alike. To accelerate this shift, Budget 2025 has earmarked USD 5 billion for the expansion of the CGD network, ensuring wider coverage in urban and semi-urban areas. India's commitment to sustainability is evident in its massive push for biofuels and green hydrogen. With an investment of USD 4 billion in Ethanol Blended Petrol (EBP) plants, the country is on track to achieve 20% ethanol blending by 2025, significantly reducing carbon emissions and reliance on fossil fuels. Additionally, the National Green Hydrogen Mission, backed by a USD 2.3 billion investment, is positioning India as a global hub for hydrogen production, driving innovation in clean energy technologies. Budget 2025 has provided further impetus by introducing a Production-Linked Incentive (PLI) scheme for green hydrogen manufacturing, attracting global and domestic investments in the sector.

Moreover, recognizing the importance of international collaboration, India has been actively forging partnerships to attract investments in the oil and gas sector. The country has witnessed USD 30 billion in investments in refining and petrochemicals and an additional USD 25 billion in renewables, showcasing its commitment to a diversified energy mix. MoPNG is also working closely with global energy leaders to drive innovations in carbon capture, utilization, and storage (CCUS), further strengthening India's climate action roadmap. The 2025 Budget has also introduced a USD 1.5 billion fund to support CCUS projects, reinforcing India's leadership in carbon neutrality initiatives. Digital innovation is revolutionizing India's energy sector, enhancing efficiency, transparency, and

accessibility. The government's initiatives, such as the Unified Energy Interface (UEI) and digital monitoring of fuel distribution, have optimized resource allocation, reduced pilferage, and improved consumer services. Moreover, MoPNG's emphasis on digitalized recruitment and operational processes has streamlined workforce management, ensuring efficiency across the sector. In Budget 2025, a special allocation of USD 500 million has been made for AI-driven energy management systems, further modernizing India's energy sector.

As India continues its journey towards energy self-reliance, MoPNG's visionary policies and initiatives, supported by strategic allocations in Union Budget 2025, are playing a crucial role in shaping the nation's energy future. The strides made today will not only ensure economic growth but also establish India as a global leader in the energy sector, empowering every citizen with accessible, affordable, and clean energy.

India's Renewable Energy Surge: A Global Leader in Sustainability

India has emerged as a global leader in renewable energy, demonstrating an unwavering commitment to sustainability and climate action. With bold policy interventions and strategic investments, the country has significantly increased its installed renewable energy capacity, solidifying its position among the top nations harnessing green energy sources. Today, India boasts an installed renewable energy capacity of over 190 GW, with wind and solar energy as key drivers. The Union Budget 2025-26 has reaffirmed the government's commitment to accelerating the green transition by allocating ₹50,000 crore for the expansion of renewable energy infrastructure, with a strong focus on solar, wind, and hybrid energy projects. A significant portion of this investment—₹15,000 crore—has been earmarked for solar manufacturing under the Production-Linked Incentive (PLI) scheme, aiming to strengthen domestic supply chains and reduce dependence on imports.

One of the standout achievements has been the rapid expansion of solar energy. Large-scale solar parks, rooftop solar initiatives, and a push for domestic manufacturing have significantly contributed to capacity addition. The PM Surya Ghar: Muft Bijli Yojana, with an outlay of ₹75,000

crore, aims to provide rooftop solar installations to 1 crore households, reducing electricity costs and promoting decentralized solar adoption. Alongside this, onshore and offshore wind projects have played a crucial role in substantial power generation, further reinforcing India's renewable energy push. India's commitment to sustainability extends beyond generation capacity. The Union Budget 2025 has announced a ₹20,000 crore allocation for battery energy storage systems, ensuring seamless grid integration of renewable energy. Additionally, the government has introduced Viability Gap Funding (VGF) for pumped hydro storage projects, enhancing the reliability and efficiency of India's power sector.

In a major push toward clean energy leadership, the National Green Hydrogen Mission, backed by an investment of ₹2.3 billion (₹19,000 crore), is positioning India as a global hub for hydrogen production, driving innovation in green hydrogen technologies. The Union Budget 2025 has further strengthened this commitment by announcing tax incentives and subsidies to boost the adoption of green hydrogen in industries such as steel, fertilizers, and transportation. Aligning with its global commitments under the Paris Agreement, India remains steadfast in achieving its non-fossil fuel energy capacity targets and is well on track to becoming a net-zero economy by 2070. With renewable energy momentum continuing to accelerate, strategic budgetary allocations, and visionary policy frameworks, Bharat is set to reinforce its role as a global renewable energy powerhouse, driving economic growth, energy security, and environmental sustainability.

With a relentless focus on innovation, self-reliance, and sustainable growth, Bharat is charting a bold course toward global leadership. As the nation accelerates its economic, infrastructural, and energy transformation, Prime Minister Modi's vision of Viksit Bharat stands as a testament to a resilient, future-ready, and self-sufficient India—powering progress, securing prosperity, and shaping a brighter tomorrow for all.



CHARTING NEW WATERS

PARADIP PORT'S RISE AS INDIA'S CARGO LEADER

With unparalleled cargo handling growth, cutting-edge digital solutions, and sustainability-driven expansion, Paradip Port is redefining India's maritime landscape. Sh. P L Haranadh, Chairman of PPA, discusses the port's innovative approach to multimodal logistics, green hydrogen initiatives, and future-ready infrastructure in this insightful Q&A:

Q. What key strategies have made Paradip Port India's top cargo-handling port, and how is technology enhancing its efficiency?

Paradip Port's rise as India's leading cargo-handling port with 145.38 MMT in 2023-24 is driven by infrastructure expansion, multimodal connectivity, operational efficiency, and digital transformation. Moreover, capacity augmentation and enhanced rail-road connectivity have significantly improved Paradip Port's operational metrics, including Output per Ship Berth Day (OSBD), Turnaround Time (TRT), etc. Competitive tariffs and customer-centric policies further strengthen its position. To boost efficiency, PPA is integrating National Logistics Portal (NLP-Marine) for real-time tracking, deploying Enterprise Business System (EBS) for streamlined operations, and automating weighbridges and gates to reduce delays. The Vessel Traffic Management System (VTMIS) enhances real-time monitoring, ensuring faster, safer cargo movement.

Q. How is PPA enhancing its multimodal connectivity to improve cargo movement?

Paradip Port Authority (PPA) is enhancing multimodal connectivity to ensure seamless cargo movement through major investments in rail, road, and inland waterways. The Haridaspur-Paradip second railway line and near-completed auto-signaling on the Cuttack-Paradip route have boosted cargo evacuation. On the road front, NH-53 (Chandikhola-Paradip) is being expanded into an 8-lane highway to ease congestion. PPA has also leveraged inland waterways, moving gypsum via the Mahanadi river mouth and signed an MoU to develop National Waterway 5 (NW-5).

The newly inaugurated Multimodal Logistics Park (MMLP) strengthens container movement, ensuring

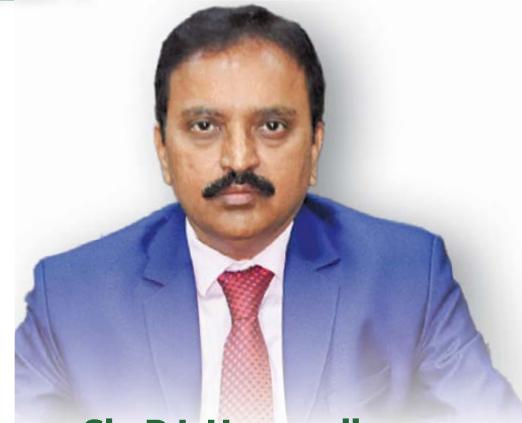
an integrated logistics ecosystem. As India's Coastal Cargo Hub, PPA handled 59.19 MMT of coastal cargo in FY 2023-24, accounting for 30% of major port coastal traffic, including significant thermal coal shipments to the western coast. Additionally, PPA is implementing innovative business strategies to further attract coastal cargo.

Q. How is Paradip Port supporting India's Green Hydrogen and Ammonia initiatives while ensuring sustainability?

Paradip Port Authority (PPA) is actively developing a Green Hydrogen and Ammonia Hub, signing MoUs with four investors committing ₹50,800 crore for production plants near the port. A dedicated green hydrogen and ammonia berth with 5 MTPA capacity is planned and set for award by 2026. To promote sustainability, PPA is undertaking key initiatives, including a Greenification Drive to plant one million trees, a transition to 100% mechanized cargo handling by 2030, and investments in renewable energy projects such as a 10 MW solar plant. Additionally, shore power supply and rail electrification will reduce emissions, reinforcing PPA's commitment to environmental stewardship.

Q. How is Paradip Port leveraging Public-Private Partnerships (PPP) for expansion while strengthening its container handling capabilities?

Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) have been key in modernizing Paradip Port, improving efficiency, and increasing cargo capacity. Last year, PPP operators handled 41 MMT of cargo, achieving 74% berth occupancy. Moving forward, PPA is expanding partnerships for new berths, terminal operations, and digital solutions, aligning with its vision of a 100% landlord model. To boost container handling,



Sh. P L Haranadh

Chairman

Paradip Port Authority

PPA has developed a 5 MTPA Clean Cargo and Container Terminal under PPP. Competitive Vessel Related Charges (VRCs) with up to 75% discounts and direct connectivity to Colombo make PPA a cost-effective container hub. Additionally, PPA has commissioned a Multimodal Logistics Park (MMLP) in coordination with CONCOR and allocated land for two Container Freight Stations (CFSs) near the container berth.

Q. Going forward, what is PPA's long-term vision?

Paradip Port Authority (PPA) aims to surpass 400 MTPA cargo capacity by 2030 through major expansions, including the 25 MTPA Western Dock Project, development of three new berths, mechanization of four existing berths, and a dedicated green hydrogen berth. By 2047, under the Maritime Amrit Kaal Vision, PPA envisions becoming a world-class mega port with 500 MTPA capacity, integrating AI-driven automation, green energy solutions, and smart port technologies. A full transition to the landlord model will enhance efficiency through PPP investments. PPA's focus on sustainability, infrastructure expansion, and digital innovation will position it as a key driver in India's maritime growth.

வ.உ.சிதம்பரனார் துறைமுக ஆணையம்
வ.உ.சிதம்பரனார் பதன பிராதிகரண
V.O. CHIDAMBARANAR PORT AUTHORITY
TUTICORIN

*Experience the Holistic
Seaport Services*

- ❖ Strategically located close to the East West International Sea Route
- ❖ Maximum draft of 14.20 Metres to cater fully loaded Panamax vessels
- ❖ Exclusive Truck Parking Facility with all amenities
- ❖ Web enabled RFID based gate management system
- ❖ 100% online, Faceless filing of Import/Export documents and Assessment of charges, Electronic storage space allotment, Berth allocation, Processing/issuance/Renewal of licenses
- ❖ 5 Harbour Mobile Cranes for discharging Bulk Cargo
- ❖ Bulk carriers upto 95,000 DWT can be berthed at the Port
- ❖ 17 Container Freight Stations and one Inland Container Depot located at the vicinity of the Port
- ❖ Shortest transit time for transhipment containers with only 10 hours of sailing time to Colombo
- ❖ Lowest Terminal Handling Charges amongst all South Indian Ports, including Colombo
- ❖ Upto 85% concession in Vessel Related Charges for mainline vessels calls
- ❖ Digital process control mechanism for filing of EGM in Customs ICEGATE
- ❖ Container Moves/Hour: 30
- ❖ Direct loading facility for time sensitive Cargo / Containers



For further details : E-mail : tm@vocport.gov.in
Phone: +91-461-2352221 Fax : +91-461-2352658

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Ministry of Ports,
Shipping & Waterways
Government of India



VISAKHAPATNAM PORT AUTHORITY



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- State of the Art Technology & Mechanization
- World Class International Cruise Terminal
- Complete transactions through online Digital Platform
- ISPS compliant with CCTV surveillance
- 2nd Gateway Port to Nepal EXIM cargo
- Tailor made service to suit user's requirement.
- Highest Exporter of Sea Food in India in 2023-24
- Green Port operating completely on Solar Power (10 MW Solar Power Plant)
- Port with specialised facilities for handling Multi Commodities - Coal, Ore, Coke Petroleum, Chemicals, Containers , Fertilizers, Food Grains and General cargo
- End to End mechanised facility for Coal, Iron ore, Alumina, Manganese Ore and Liquid Cargo.
- Engine on Load facility (EOL) for Coal that can load a rake in an hour
- Covered Storage sheds in Port area of 40468 Sq.Mtrs to store 3.5 MTPA

The Only Indian Major Port entered in 20th Position Globally and 19th position in CPPI 2023 by World Bank

CLEANE ST MAJOR PORT IN INDIA

Port Area, Visakhapatnam - 530035
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INDIA'S
BEST
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PORT



Less than
20 hrs Turnaround Time.
(among worlds best)

World's
26th largest
Container
Port

India's
First
**Port Based
SEZ**

JNPA

YEARS

First **100%**
Landlord
Indian
Major Port

Developing World Class
Mega Port - Vadhvan Port

JAWAHARLAL NEHRU PORT AUTHORITY
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“Jal Sanchay Jan Bhagidari”

THE WARRIORS OF MODI'S WATER MISSION

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's vision for a water-secure India is being realized through bold reforms, conservation initiatives, and grassroots leadership. While initiatives such as Jal Jeevan Mission, Jal Shakti Abhiyan: Catch The Rain, Namami Gange, and Atal Bhujal Yojana are transforming water access, quality, and management, this water renaissance thrives on its silent soldiers who battle scarcity with resolve. As water warriors, some of whom were recognized with the National Water Awards, these custodians of a precious resource are proving that Jal Samridh Bharat is not just a dream but a movement.

■ By A Special Correspondent ■

Water is India's oldest storyteller. It has shaped civilizations, nurtured livelihoods, and dictated fates. Yet today, it stands at crossroads—with problems of pollution and over extraction. The challenge is immense: a country with 18 per cent of the world's population has access to just 4 per cent of global freshwater. The solution? A seismic shift in how India values and manages water. That shift is happening now. Under Prime Minister Narendra Modi's leadership, India is rewriting its water story—one tap, one river, one village at a time. The vision is bold: Amrit Kaal Viksit Bharat 2047, a future where water is not a crisis but a promise.

The answer to India's water woes is surprisingly simple: Reduce, Reuse, Recharge, Recycle. Every drop matters and this philosophy drives every water mission in the country today. "These guiding principles of Prime Minister Modi determine the demand-side interventions of our ministry. It's about making rainwater work for us, turning wastewater into an asset, and changing habits so that conservation becomes second nature," says C. R. Patil, Union Minister of Jal Shakti.

For millions of Indian women, fetching water was once an exhausting daily ritual—long hours spent walking to wells, balancing heavy pots, and waiting in endless lines. This changed in 2019 with the launch of the **Jal Jeevan Mission (JJM)**, which set out to provide every rural household

with a functional tap connection, ensuring 55 litres of clean water per person per day.

The impact has been remarkable. Rural tap water coverage has surged from just 16 per cent in 2019 to 80 per cent today. Eight states and three Union Territories have achieved 100 per cent tap water access. More than 1.45 lakh villages have been declared 'Har Ghar Jal,' and 9 crore women have been freed from the drudgery of water-fetching, allowing them to engage in more productive activities.

Access to safe drinking water has had profound health and economic benefits. A meta-analysis by Nobel laureate Professor Michael Kremer suggests that it can reduce infant mortality by 30 per cent. The World Health Organization estimates that India could prevent 4 lakh



diarrheal deaths annually and save Rs 8.28 lakh crore (\$101 billion) in healthcare costs. The mission has also saved 5.5 crore hours daily, with 75 per cent of the beneficiaries being women, significantly reducing physical strain.

Beyond health and convenience, JJM has driven substantial employment generation. During its construction phase, it has created 59.93 lakh person-years of direct jobs and 2.22 crore person-years of indirect jobs. Looking ahead, the operation and maintenance phase is expected to generate 11.18 lakh person-years of employment annually, ensuring long-term economic benefits alongside its social impact.

But securing India's water future isn't just about ensuring access—it is also about preserving and replenishing it. Water doesn't wait. It falls, flows, and disappears—unless we capture it. That's the philosophy behind the **Jal Shakti Abhiyan**, launched in 2019 as a 'an Andolan' (people's movement) for water conservation. Since then, millions have joined hands to build rainwater harvesting structures, check dams, recharge defunct wells, and revive ponds and tanks, breathing new life into parched landscapes.

In 2021, Prime Minister Modi launched the "Jal Shakti Abhiyan: Catch the Rain" (JSA: CTR) with the theme "Catch the Rain – Where it Falls When it Falls". In 2024, the theme of the JSA:

India, under the visionary leadership of the Prime Minister Modi, has placed water security at the core of India's development agenda. Through bold reforms, cutting-edge technology, and a renewed focus on conservation, we are reshaping the way water is managed across the country."

C. R. Patil
Union Minister of Jal Shakti

CTR campaign was "*Nari Shakti se Jal Shakti*" (Water Power through Women Power). Through this campaign, the important role of women in water conservation was highlighted. With over 1.69 crore interventions—from reviving traditional water bodies to creating watershed projects—the campaign has reshaped the nation's water map.

Expanding this mission, **Jal Sanchay Jan Bhagidari**, launched in Surat in 2024, pushes for hyper-local solutions, urging citizens, industries, and traders to invest in groundwater recharge. The goal? A million artificial recharge structures. So far, 6.59 lakh have been initiated, with over 5.26 lakh completed.

This movement isn't just about storing water; it's about securing the future. From promoting climate-resilient farming through Sahi Fasal to championing sustainable soil practices, India is crafting a blueprint for long-term water security—one drop, one village, one community at a time.

India's rivers are at the heart of this conservation drive. The **Namami Gange Mission** is India's boldest river revival effort, tackling pollution and restoring the Ganga's lifeblood through a holistic, basin-wide approach. Recognized by the UN as one of the world's top restoration projects, it weaves together sewage treatment, ecological conservation, and community engagement to breathe life back into the sacred river.

With Rs 40,120 crore invested across 492

projects, the mission has built 6,255 MLD of sewage treatment capacity, laid 5,249 km of sewer networks, and restored 289 ghats and ponds. From clearing floating waste to modernizing cremation sites, every intervention is designed to keep the river clean and flowing.

Beyond infrastructure, the movement thrives on public participation—volunteers, known as Ganga Praharis, are its grassroots champions. Their efforts, combined with scientific interventions, have transformed the river's ecosystem. The resurgence of Gangetic dolphins, turtles, and the prized Hilsa fish signals a Ganga on the mend—not just a river, but a living, thriving entity reclaiming its place in India's heart.

A pivotal move in 2019 saw PM Modi merge the Ministry of Water Resources, River Development & Ganga Rejuvenation with the Department of Drinking Water & Sanitation and the National River Conservation Directorate from MoEFCC, accelerating water conservation efforts. Today, the **Swachh Bharat Mission (Gramin)** under the Department of Drinking Water and Sanitation is driving waste management, with 75 per cent of villages declaring themselves ODF Plus and 1,740 rural plastic waste units operational for recycling. Beyond sanitation, the impact is economic and social—households save an estimated Rs 50,000 annually in health costs, and 90 per cent of rural women feel safer with access to household toilets.

A comprehensive approach to water management requires knowing what we have and where. For the first time, India has mapped its water wealth—natural and man-made—through a nationwide Census of Water Bodies. Over 24 lakh ponds, lakes, and tanks have been catalogued, exposing stark contrasts between rural and urban water access and the extent of encroachment. This isn't just data; it's a blueprint for safeguarding the country's most vital resource.

Meanwhile, the **National Hydrology Project (NHP)** is transforming water monitoring with real-time intelligence. A network of 24,000 groundwater and surface water stations now streams live data into a centralized system, offering a pulse check on India's water reserves. In a country where every drop counts, these efforts are setting the stage for smarter water management and resilience against future crises.

Atal Bhujal Yojana is rewriting India's groundwater story—not through extraction, but through conservation. Targeting water-stressed



regions in seven states, this first-of-its-kind initiative shifts the focus to community-driven, demand-side management of groundwater.

Spanning 6.7 lakh hectares, the program promotes efficient irrigation—drip, sprinkler, mulching, and crop diversification—to curb water wastage. Over 70,000 wells are being monitored at the grassroots level, with real-time data shared with local communities. More than 93,000 water conservation and recharge structures have been mapped, and 1,333 Gram Panchayats have already recorded improved groundwater levels.

India's **National Aquifer Mapping Programme (NAQUIM)** complements these efforts by offering the world's largest groundwater mapping initiative. Covering 25 lakh sq. km, it provides the scientific foundation for sustainable groundwater management.

The water conservation drive showcases **seamless inter-ministerial coordination and a whole-of-government approach** to building a *Viksit Bharat*. Under the Rural Development Ministry's MGNREGA programme, the Natural Resource Management (NRM) and Amrit Sarovar initiatives have seen massive execution, with Rs 1.17 lakh crore spent for JSA:CTR water-related structures and over Rs 46,000 crore for Amrit Sarovars. Other ministries—including Ministry of Panchayati Raj, Housing & Urban Affairs, Environment & Climate Change, Education, Women & Child Development, Agriculture and department of land resources—have bolstered the Jal Shakti Ministry's mission with their own initiatives.

From securing drinking water to sustaining agriculture, these efforts form the lifeblood of India's water renaissance. Yet, no revolution thrives without its quiet sentinels. Scattered across the nation, in sun-scorched fields and bustling towns, farmers, engineers, and social workers have become custodians of a vanishing resource, turning despair into renewal. The National Water Awards honor these guardians—those who have battled scarcity not with resignation, but with resolve, proving that a **Jal Samridh Bharat** is not a distant dream but a living movement, a solemn promise, a future etched by hands that refuse to yield to drought and depletion. These awardees and several others are India's water warriors—silent yet steadfast. From remote villages to bustling cities, from forgotten wells to rejuvenated rivers, their stories are testaments of resilience and ingenuity. These 20 water warriors are rewriting India's water story, one drop at a time. ■



HS Lalawmpuii, 51

Sairep, Lunglei, Mizoram

What makes her a water warrior: In the remote village of Sairep, Mizoram, HS Lalawmpuii turned a water crisis into a conservation triumph. As Village Council President, she led afforestation drives, rainwater harvesting, and infrastructure development, doubling **storage capacity to 6.9 lakh litres**. Mobilizing government funds and community efforts, she instilled a culture of conservation, with women playing a key role through *shramdaan*. Her leadership transformed Sairep into a model of sustainability, proving that true change begins at the grassroots. By blending advocacy with action, she didn't just secure water—she empowered her village to safeguard its future.



Basanti Devi, 64

Pithoragarh, Uttarakhand

What makes her a water warrior: Basanti Devi led a grassroots revolution to revive Uttarakhand's Kosi River, once threatened by deforestation and erosion. Mobilizing local women, she formed forest protection groups to replant trees, restoring groundwater recharge and strengthening the river's flow. Her approach was simple yet transformative—**revive the forests, and the river will return**. Without waiting for government intervention, she empowered villagers to reclaim their water resources, ensuring a sustainable future. Through patience and community action, Basanti Devi proved that true conservation is driven by people, not policies—her legacy is a river reborn and a movement that endures.

Ujiaro Bai, 39

Dindori, Madhya Pradesh

What makes her a water warrior: Ujiaro Bai has dedicated her life to conserving water and forests, mobilizing the Baiga community under the motto "**Jal, Jangal, Zameen**." Through the Durga Self-Help Group, she fought reckless deforestation, restoring groundwater recharge and ensuring water security. Her efforts empowered women to join the movement, fostering a culture of sustainability. Taking her mission global, she addressed conservation challenges in South Africa and Finland, showcasing India's environmental ethos. By uniting communities against water scarcity, Ujiaro Bai has turned conservation into a way of life, proving that grassroots leadership is key to a water-secure future.





Ganga Rajpoot, 35

Bhoya, Chhatarpur, Madhya Pradesh

What makes her a water warrior: Ganga Rajpoot defied superstition and led the revival of Baba Talaab, a 12-acre historic pond, securing water for Bhoya village. For decades, villagers feared restoring the dried-up pond, believing it cursed, while its land was lost to farming. Undeterred, she formed a “Jal Saheli” group of 25 women, mobilizing them to desilt and rebuild the pond. When the rains came, the pond filled, replenishing groundwater and enabling irrigation. Expanding her mission, she rejuvenated six more water bodies and spearheaded river basin restoration, proving that breaking myths can reshape realities and secure water for generations.

Parvati Devi, 53

Jarga, Koderma, Jharkhand

What makes her a water warrior: For eight years, Parvati Devi transformed Jarga village, Jharkhand, from a parched land to a thriving oasis. As a Panchayat Samiti member, she tackled erratic rainfall and migration by leading **large-scale afforestation** and water conservation efforts. She planted 450 trees, built six ponds, 675 recharge structures, and a water tower, restoring the village's water security. Her work revived farming, slowed migration, and even improved rainfall. More than just infrastructure, she reimagined an entire landscape, proving that one woman's vision can turn drought into abundance and water into a promise of prosperity.



Dharmo Devi, 49

Dhaura Kuan, Paonta Sahib, Sirmaur, Himachal Pradesh

What makes her a water warrior: In Paonta Sahib, Himachal Pradesh, Dharmo Devi led a watershed revival, constructing 975 trenches, 208 recharge ponds, and 23 check dams, replenishing 109 million litres of groundwater. As **Adhyaksh of the Forest Development Committee**, she mobilized her community while balancing motherhood and farming. With support from Himmotthan Society, she transformed barren land into a thriving ecosystem, raising water tables and reviving springs. Once drought-prone, her village now thrives with reliable water access. Dharmo Devi's leadership proves that true change begins when individuals take responsibility, making her a beacon of grassroots conservation.



Sabeena Farooq, 45

Budgam, Jammu & Kashmir

What makes her a water warrior: Sabeena, a Pani Samiti member, defied patriarchal resistance to ensure clean drinking water for her village. Determined to inspire women, she brought five more women into the mission, working alongside the Sarpanch for the successful implementation of Har Ghar Jal under the Jal Jeevan Mission. She led the **installation of a filtration plant**, ensuring safe drinking water for all households. Engaging the community in monitoring water supply, she oversaw pipeline installation, repairs, and a new water storage tank. Through her persistence, water security became a reality, proving that grassroots leadership can transform villages drop by drop.



Asha Komati, 48

Shivani Khurd, Yavatmal, Maharashtra

What makes her a water warrior: Asha Komati turned water conservation into a community movement, mobilizing four villages to build 148 soak pits, advocate for water quality testing, and push for sanitation reforms. Noticing that her village had water but lacked cleanliness and sufficiency, she partnered with WaterAid and NIWCYD, training in water **budgeting and contamination control**. Her leadership spurred the Gram Panchayat to construct toilets and well-recharge structures, reducing health risks and groundwater depletion. Asha's work proves that water conservation is not just about quantity but quality, securing a cleaner, healthier future for her community.

Chandrika Kisan, 35

Gopalpali, Deogarh, Odisha

What makes her a water warrior: Chandrika Kisan, a farmer, tube-well mechanic, and community leader, has transformed Odisha's Deogarh district through grassroots water conservation. She began with awareness campaigns on sanitation and water hygiene but quickly moved to action—forming a **village water user committee** to oversee conservation efforts. Under her leadership, nine ponds and three check dams were built, replenishing groundwater and ensuring year-round water availability. Beyond infrastructure, she empowered women to take active roles in water governance, proving that conservation is both an environmental and social movement, shaping a sustainable future from the ground up.





Bhagvatiben Ajitsingh Vaghela, 43

Bhesana, Mahesana, Gujarat

What makes her a water warrior: In Bhesana village, Mahesana, Bhagvatiben Ajitsingh Vaghela has pioneered a **data-driven groundwater conservation** model. As a **BhujalJankar**, she meticulously tracks 55 wells, 120 households, and 700 hectares of land, using this data to design water-saving strategies. She identified desilting needs, tackled high TDS levels, and championed artificial recharge measures. Leading 500 villagers, she promoted drip irrigation, alternate furrow techniques, and intercropping, transforming water usage in agriculture. Presenting annual water budgets, she bridges data with action, proving that grassroots leadership and informed planning can make Bhesana water-secure for future generations.

Veena LP, 43

Timmanayakanakote, Chitradurga, Karnataka

What makes her a water warrior: Veena LP, a farmer's daughter turned groundwater crusader, has transformed water management in her village. As a **Community Resource Person** under Atal Bhujal Yojana, she launched door-to-door campaigns, urging farmers to adopt micro-irrigation and groundwater monitoring. Leading by example, she installed a sprinkler system on her farm and convinced 50 farmers to follow suit. She introduced water flow meters, static water level monitoring, and a community data board, making water usage transparent. Once resistant, farmers now seek her advice, proving that one informed voice can inspire a village to secure its water future.



Abhishek Chopra, 43

Niwarsi, Kurukshetra, Haryana

What makes him a water warrior: Abhishek Chopra is revolutionizing paddy farming in Haryana by pioneering the **Direct Seeded Rice (DSR) technique**, drastically cutting water use on his 45-acre farm while maintaining high yields. By eliminating the Puddle Transplanted Rice (PTR) method, he has proven DSR's necessity for groundwater conservation. Using water flow meters, precise irrigation, herbicide control, and strategic fertilization, he has set a benchmark for sustainable agriculture. His success has gained recognition from policymakers, inspiring neighboring farmers to adopt water-efficient methods. In a region plagued by water stress, Chopra's approach ensures every drop counts, securing Haryana's water future.

Amol Appa Katkar, 39

Kiraksal, Man Block, Satara, Maharashtra

What makes him a water warrior: Amol Appa Katkar, known as 'Paaniwala Baba', transformed his drought-prone Maharashtra village into a water-surplus model, conserving 31.37 crore liters through afforestation, voluntary labor, and scientific interventions. As Sarpanch, he banned borewells, built check dams and contour trenches, and mobilized the village for water conservation. His efforts earned him recognition as a 'Bhujal Mitra' under Atal Bhujal Yojana, with his water literacy workshops training 90+ residents. The impact was profound—reverse migration, booming agriculture, rising milk production, and biodiversity revival. Katkar's leadership proves that with vision and persistence, even arid lands can thrive.



Kamini Devi, 48

Begusarai, Bihar

What makes her a water warrior: Kamini Devi has transformed river conservation in Bihar, leading 1,000 women across seven panchayats to revive the Baya River, a Ganga tributary. Through her "One Woman, One Water Pit" initiative, households dug recharge pits, replenishing groundwater while repurposing invasive water hyacinths into organic fertilizer. Supported by Namami Gange and HESCO, her efforts restored river flow, improved soil fertility, and empowered women economically. More than a mission, her movement proves that sustainability thrives when communities take charge, turning everyday actions into collective transformation—where every woman becomes a custodian of water.

Rajendra Kr Tiwari, 53

Uttar Pradesh

What makes him a water warrior: Rajendra Kr Tiwari is a walking **billboard for the Ganga**, using his attire to spread awareness about pollution and conservation. Inspired by Swachh Bharat Mission, he turns everyday encounters into environmental activism, educating people about untreated sewage, industrial waste, and human negligence threatening the river. Beyond symbolism, he actively joins cleanliness drives, engages policymakers, and mobilizes communities to take responsibility. In a world where activism often stays online, Tiwari's relentless, on-the-ground efforts prove that real change happens one conversation at a time, keeping the fight for the Ganga's survival alive and visible.



FOCUS

JAL SHAKTI



Naresh Giri, 54

Haridwar, Uttarakhand

What makes him a water warrior: Naresh Giri turned a newspaper article into action, launching a **one-man cleanup drive** at Har Ki Pauri. Armed with a broom and determination, he refused to wait for authorities, transforming his Maruti into a mobile cleanup force. His relentless efforts inspired locals, turning sporadic cleanups into a sustained movement. Giri's philosophy is simple: don't complain, clean. His dedication became even more evident during COVID-19, when the Ganga's natural revival reinforced his mission. Through sheer perseverance, he has redefined environmental responsibility, proving that monumental change begins with one committed individual.



Sanjay Sajjan, 56

Aurangabad, Bihar

What makes him a water warrior: Sanjay Sajjan transformed Aurangabad's water crisis into a story of revival, restoring 63 water bodies and reviving the Ramrekha Canal, securing water for 70 villages. Refusing to accept scarcity, he mobilized local communities, IIT & IIM experts, and policymakers, turning conservation into a people's movement. His efforts have **revitalized agriculture**, ensuring farmers no longer struggle for irrigation. Aurangabad, once a cautionary tale of mismanagement, is now a model for large-scale water restoration. Sajjan's relentless work proves that when communities take ownership, water security is not just a dream but an achievable reality.



Vijendra Pratap Pandey, 62

Kangri, Haridwar, Uttarakhand

What makes him a water warrior: Vijendra Pratap Pandey has transformed Haridwar's spiritual devotion into environmental action, mobilizing communities for the Namami Gange initiative. As founder of Panth Nyas, he has spent four years leading workshops, awareness drives, and clean-up campaigns, making **water conservation a shared responsibility**. By aligning tradition with sustainability, he has ingrained Ganga protection into cultural practices, ensuring the river is not just worshiped but actively safeguarded. His leadership proves that conservation thrives when rooted in local values, turning devotion into action and community participation into lasting impact.

SK Shakila, 30

Nalgonda, Telangana

What makes her a water warrior: Shakila tackled water scarcity and poor sanitation by leading a desilting initiative to restore Pedda Cheruvu and Chinna Cheruvu irrigation tanks. Silt buildup had reduced the ayacut area from 950 to 380 acres, drying up rain-fed cotton fields. She mobilized villagers to rejuvenate 1,150 acres of farmland, constructing soak pits in 590 households, percolation pits in institutions, and community recharge pits. By using tank silt to revitalize soil and increase water retention, she restored **irrigation capacity** and improved crop yields. Her leadership turned a crisis into a sustainable solution, securing water and livelihoods for the village.



Shaik Rajiya, 39

Nalgonda, Telangana

What makes her a water warrior: For 18 years, Rajiya has championed sustainable water management under MGNREGS, shifting the village's focus to water conservation projects. She led the construction of percolation pits in schools, magic soak pits in households, and community soak pits to improve irrigation, soil moisture, and groundwater recharge. This shift **revitalized rain-fed agriculture** boosted **water availability**, and enhanced sanitation and public health. Her efforts transformed the village into a model of sustainability, proving that community-driven conservation can secure both livelihoods and environmental well-being. Rajiya's leadership turned water scarcity into a story of resilience and renewal.



Veer Savarkar International Airport, Port Blair Airport

Pioneering a New Era of Indian Aviation



As India embarks on its ambitious journey toward becoming a developed nation—Viksit Bharat—the Airports Authority of India (AAI) stands as a formidable architect, orchestrating an unprecedented transformation in the country's aviation landscape.

Through relentless innovation, infrastructural prowess, and sustainable practices, AAI is crafting a future where air travel becomes a seamless, efficient, and accessible reality for everyone.



Donyi Polo Airport, Arunachal Pradesh



Trichy Airport, Tamil Nadu



Kolhapur Airport, Maharashtra

India's aviation sector is soaring to new heights, thanks to AAI's relentless focus on infrastructural expansion. Managing over 134 airports, including 24 international hubs, AAI has championed connectivity like never before. The Regional Connectivity Scheme (RCS) - UDAN (Ude Desh Ka Aam Nagrik) remains a game-changer, ensuring that India's remotest regions are integrated into the national and global economy.

By modernizing runways, expanding terminal capacities, and equipping airports with cutting-edge facilities, AAI is enabling seamless travel experiences that directly contribute to economic growth, trade, and tourism. In alignment with the Viksit Bharat vision, these developments ensure equitable access to air travel, catalyzing regional development and job creation.

Key innovations include:

- **Airport Collaborative Decision Making (A-CDM):** Enhancing coordination among stakeholders for seamless operations.
- **CAT-III Instrument Landing System (ILS):** Facilitating precision landings in adverse weather conditions.
- **DigiYatra:** Revolutionizing passenger experience with paperless, biometric-based boarding.
- **GAGAN (GPS-Aided GEO Augmented Navigation):** Elevating air traffic safety and operational efficiency.

These groundbreaking advancements enhance efficiency, safety, and sustainability, ensuring that India remains at the forefront of global aviation technology.

AAI's Commitment to Green Aviation

In a world where sustainability is paramount, AAI has spearheaded multiple green initiatives to align

with India's environmental commitments. These include:

- **Solar-Powered Airports:** Hubballi and Coimbatore are shining examples of self-sustaining aviation hubs.
- **Eco-Friendly Waste Management:** Innovative strategies for water conservation and waste reduction. 75 airports run with 100% Renewable energy.
- **Carbon Neutrality Goals:** AAI's ongoing initiatives to reduce carbon footprints across major airports. By prioritizing sustainable aviation, AAI is ensuring that India's progress is not only rapid but also responsible, contributing to the long-term success of Viksit Bharat.

Elevating the Travel Experience

The hallmark of AAI's vision is its unwavering commitment to passenger convenience. With AI-powered services, smart baggage handling, and automated check-ins, Indian airports are becoming global benchmarks of efficiency.

Enhanced lounges, expanded duty-free shopping, and world-class amenities further reinforce India's standing as a leading international travel hub.

Charting the Course for a \$5 Trillion Economy

As India accelerates towards becoming a \$5 trillion economy, aviation will play a pivotal role in driving business, trade, and tourism. AAI's investments in new airport developments, airspace optimization, and AI-driven air traffic management underscore its role as a crucial pillar in India's economic aspirations.

By seamlessly integrating infrastructure, innovation, and sustainability, AAI is not just shaping aviation—it is sculpting the future of Viksit Bharat. As the nation ascends toward global leadership, AAI remains its unwavering wingman, ensuring that no dream is too far and no destination beyond reach.



ASSAM

CHIPS IN FOR SEMICONDUCTORS

Once known for tea and oil, Assam is now poised to become India's semiconductor frontier. With Tata's Rs 27,000 crore plant, global partnerships, and massive investment inflows, the state is chipping in to power India's tech future.

■ By A Special Correspondent ■

For three relentless months before the grand unveiling of Advantage Assam 2.0 on February 25, Dr Himanta Biswa Sarma had been running on fumes. The Chief Minister of Assam, known for his kinetic energy, had taken his resolve to another level: three hours of sleep a night, 10 days of globetrotting across Singapore, Japan, and South Korea, and a staggering 90 meetings with prospective investors, political leaders and diplomats. He was a man on a mission, pitching Assam as the next big frontier of India's technological revolution, and in particular, as the country's emerging semiconductor powerhouse. Ask him about it, and he credits his motivation to Prime Minister Narendra Modi: "The Honourable Prime Minister's work ethic and commitment drives

every BJP worker, including me, to go beyond our limits and strive for a stronger, more prosperous India."

That audacious pitch bore fruit. When the dust settled on the business summit, Assam had raked in MoUs worth over Rs 5 lakh crore, but the agreements inked with ten leading semiconductor companies from Singapore, Malaysia, and Japan stood out as a defining moment, marking a pivotal step in Assam's semiconductor journey. These partnerships would catapult Assam into the heart of India's semiconductor ambitions, building on a foundation laid by Tata Electronics with its pioneering plant in Jagiroad. "The Tata Electronics facility will have an investment of Rs 27,000 crore and will produce 48 million chips per day," said Tata Group Chairman N.

Chandrasekaran at the Advantage Assam 2 summit.

So, it was only fitting that Chief Minister Sarma welcomed Prime Minister Modi to the Advantage Assam Summit with a gift as symbolic as it was unique—a one-horned rhino sculpted from semiconductor chips. "It was our way of expressing deep gratitude to the honourable prime minister for his unwavering support to Assam. If the rhino stands for Assamese pride, the semiconductor industry is our gateway to the world," says Dr Sarma.

If someone had told the world a decade ago that Assam would be home to the country's most significant semiconductor projects, the claim would have been met with incredulity. But the region's trajectory changed when Tata Electronics took a calculated bet, setting up

India's first major Outsourced Semiconductor Assembly and Test (OSAT) facility in Jagiroad in 2024. That decision was as much a leap of faith as it was a meticulously planned manoeuvre. Tata's semiconductor packaging unit in Assam was the first of its kind in the Northeast, signalling that the industrial map of the region was no longer confined to tea, petroleum, and tourism. The OSAT plant was a behemoth—spread over two million square feet, powered entirely by green energy, and designed to produce over 15 billion chips annually. In a state where job creation had historically struggled to keep pace with its workforce, the Tata facility alone was projected to employ over 30,000 people directly and thousands more indirectly.

The decision to establish a semiconductor industry in Assam was not without its challenges. Historically, India's semiconductor investments have been clustered in southern and western states, where established ecosystems, supply chains, and infrastructure made manufacturing viable. Assam, with its relative industrial nascentcy, had to carve a path through uncharted territory. The state government, under Sarma's stewardship, rolled out a slew of incentives to make the venture attractive—tax breaks, infrastructure upgrades, and a robust skilling program in collaboration with Indian Institute of Technology, (IIT) Guwahati and National Institute of Electronics & Information Technology (NIELIT).

With the Tata plant operational and Advantage Assam 2.0 adding an influx of international investment, Assam's semiconductor roadmap is now charting an ambitious future. Five semiconductor projects in India with a cumulative investment of Rs 1.5 lakh crore are under construction which will further deepen Assam's integration into the global semiconductor supply chain. Near to the OSAT plants, the state is setting up a Greenfield Electronics Manufacturing Cluster with a focus on mobile phone and telecom component manufacturing. These projects are not just about infrastructure—they are about positioning Assam as a serious contender in India's semiconductor policy, aligning seamlessly with the national India Semiconductor Mission that aims to make the country self-reliant in chip manufacturing.

Beyond its obvious economic implications, Assam's semiconductor ascent is poised to revolutionize the state's job market and academic institutions. The direct employment potential runs into tens of thousands, but the



indirect impact is even more transformative. New suppliers and ancillary industries—precision tooling, cleanroom equipment, packaging materials—will see a boom, while the demand for electrical engineers, material scientists, and chip designers is set to create a new knowledge economy in the region. IIT Guwahati, NIT Silchar, and Gauhati University have already started tailoring their curriculum to align with semiconductor research, with specialized programmes in chip design and fabrication.

THE SEMICONDUCTOR JOURNEY

- Advantage Assam 2.0 secured MoUs worth Rs 5 lakh crore, with 10 signed with leading semiconductor firms from Singapore, Malaysia, and Japan
- Five semiconductor projects worth Rs 1.5 lakh crore under development.
- Rs 27,000 crore investment in Tata Electronics' OSAT facility at Jagiroad, producing 48 million chips daily.
- Direct and indirect employment in semiconductors in tens of thousands, transforming Assam's economy. The Tata plant will employ 30,000+ people.
- Assam's youth trained in Taiwan for advanced chip-packaging skills.
- IIT Guwahati, NIT Silchar, and Gauhati University launching semiconductor-focused programmes to skill the youth
- Assam offering tax breaks, infrastructure upgrades, and policy support for semiconductor investments.

IIT Guwahati and the Assam Government are working on a long-term partnership to skill youth from Assam and its neighboring states in semiconductors, aiming to create adequate manpower to meet industry demands. IIT Guwahati is actively shaping India's semiconductor ecosystem through research, training, and industry collaborations. As an INUP (Indian Nano Users Program) partner, it offers NSQF-certified skilling courses in nanotechnology, semiconductor packaging, and industrial automation, with hands-on training and clean room access. It has 58+ global research collaborations, including 18+ in Japan, and runs joint Ph.D. and Master's programmes in Materials Science, Quantum Mechanics, and Device Fabrication. A tripartite partnership with TATA OSAT and NIELIT is driving workforce development, particularly for women and youth. Additionally, IIT Guwahati is fostering a startup ecosystem in semiconductors while managing the INUP-i2i central web portal for nationwide research access. This fusion of academia and industry will not only ensure that Assam retains its best talent but will also make it a magnet for researchers and professionals from across India. For Assam, the semiconductor industry is not just an economic booster; it is a statement of intent. A state long seen as peripheral to India's industrial ambitions is now defining a new frontier. In a world increasingly dependent on semiconductor technology—where every device, every car, every aspect of modern life hinges on the availability of microchips—Assam's positioning could not be more strategic. And for Dr Sarma, the sleepless nights, the manic schedules, and the relentless lobbying have not just paid off—they have altered the very contours of Assam's future. ■



INDIA'S DEEPSEEK FOR ITS OWN AI

FROM LARGE LANGUAGE MODELS CATERING TO ITS LINGUISTIC DIVERSITY TO SOLUTION-DRIVEN AI AGENTS THAT CAN BE DEPLOYED ACROSS SECTORS, THE NATION LOOKS POISED TO RIDE THE NEXT-GEN INNOVATION WAVE BACKED BY THE GOVERNMENT'S RS 10,300 CRORE 'INDIA AI MISSION'

By Ajay Sukumaran | Illustration by Nilanjan Das



the past five months, both Jensen Huang, CEO of the American computer chipmaker Nvidia, and Sam Altman, who heads OpenAI, have visited India, emphasising the country's growing significance in the tech world, including in the field of Artificial Intelligence (AI). Nvidia reports a tenfold increase in the deployment of its graphics processing units (GPUs)—specialised chips used to train AI models—in India over 18 months, while for OpenAI, India has emerged as the second-largest market, with users tripling in the past year.

During his February 5 visit, Altman said that India should be “one of the leaders of the AI revolution”, an endorsement in stark contrast to his 2023 stance that the country “should not even try” to build foundational AI models. What has changed in between, of course, is the end-January release of industry-disruptive DeepSeek-R1, a large language model (LLM) developed by a Chinese startup based in Hangzhou.

Foundational LLMs are deep learning systems trained on gigantic amounts of data to perform tasks such as natural language processing, question-answering and image classification. They form the foundation on which conversational agents and other Generative

AI (or GenAI) products are built. If prohibitive costs were what prompted some experts to advise caution in committing billions of dollars to the development of LLMs such as OpenAI’s GPT-4, the arrival of DeepSeek has been a game-changer because the Chinese startup claims to have developed its eponymous model at a fraction of the cost incurred by its western forerunners.

“It’s totally breaking the AI monopoly. There’s a realisation that AI innovation is no longer the exclusive domain of a few tech companies,” says Rajesh Nambiar, president of the Indian IT industry association Nasscom. “This whole DeepSeek moment is both an opportunity and a wake-up call for India in some sense. Basically, it reinforces the need for self-reliance in AI infrastructure, talent development and certainly open-source collaboration.”

HOME-GROWN MODELS

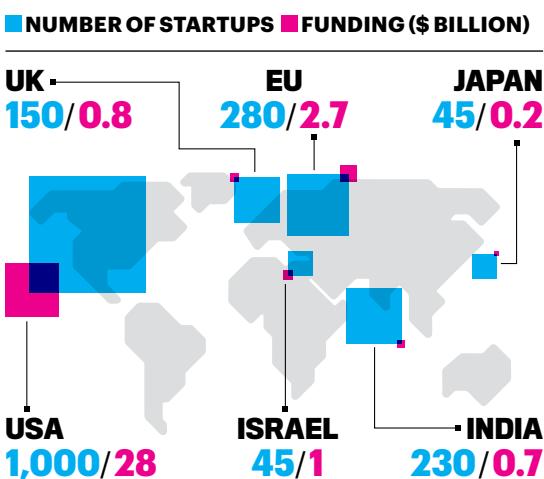
On February 11, at the AI Action Summit in Paris, Prime Minister Narendra Modi touched upon all these developments as he announced India’s plan to develop “its own LLM considering our [linguistic] diversity”. In fact, there are several parallel efforts ongoing in this domain, including a foundational model funded by the Department of Science and Technology (DST). Called BharatGen, this suite of LLMs is being developed by a Technology Innovation Hub at the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) Bombay. “By enabling an ecosystem around its foundational models, BharatGen envisions positioning India as a global leader in Generative AI,” Prof. Abhay Karandikar, secretary, DST, tells INDIA TODAY. “BharatGen will work with the ministry of electronics and information technology (MeitY) and its IndiaAI Mission.”

A six-month-old venture with a funding commitment of around Rs 236 crore over two years, BharatGen has been incorporated as a non-profit organisation. Being built from the ground up, the model spans text-to-speech and automatic speech recognition in multiple Indian languages. In this, it leveraged the work done by Bhashini, a natural language processing project for Indian languages under the MeitY. “We have also been building homegrown datasets. As Indian languages have less than one per cent representation on the internet, we need to curate original datasets,” says Prof. Ganesh Ramakrishnan of IIT Bombay, who leads the BharatGen consortium. “Not only is BharatGen government-funded, it is an academic collaboration by design.”

As of now, BharatGen has developed a text mod-

THE GenAI ECOSYSTEM

India is making its presence felt among the top global Generative AI ecosystems



Figures since 2023, are indicative; Source: India’s Generative AI Startup Landscape 2024, Nasscom

THE EXPANDING AI LANDSCAPE

A global race is intensifying to develop more powerful and efficient Large Language Models (LLMs), deep-learning systems trained on vast data to process language and images. They form the foundation of Generative AI, an innovation that has revolutionised content creation

GLOBAL MODELS

The 2022 launch of ChatGPT, a GenAI chatbot, unveiled the potential of LLMs to a global audience, sparking a rapidly expanding ecosystem



GPT-4
Launched by OpenAI in 2023, the Generative Pre-Trained Transformer-4 was estimated to be trained on 1.7 trillion parameters*—10 times more values than its previous version, GPT-3



DEEPEEK R1
An open-source model released in Jan. 2025 by Chinese startup DeepSeek, which claims the cost of training was less than \$6 million as compared to over \$100 million spent to train GPT-4



LLAMA
A family of models released by Facebook's parent company Meta in 2023,

Llama is 'open weight', which is a midway approach between open source and closed systems in terms of transparency and control



MISTRAL
A French competitor, Mistral has a range of LLMs, the latest being Mistral Large 2, released in 2024, with 123 billion parameters



BERT
An early open-source family of models launched by Google starting 2018, based on pioneering research into transformer architecture for artificial neural networks

MADE IN INDIA

India's first set of native language models emerged in late 2023; now there are 17-plus infrastructure GenAI startups developing various kinds of LLMs



BHARATGEN
An Indian government-led initiative to build high-scale LLMs from ground up; 2 billion parameter text models for Hindi and English have been developed and 5 billion parameter models are being developed for 13 Indian languages



KRUTRIM
Family of LLM models launched in 2023 by Ola founder Bhavish Aggarwal, who recently announced investment of Rs 2,000 crore in the AI startup, also named Krutrim



BHARATGPT
LLM launched in 2023 by Bengaluru-based conversational AI start-up CoRover.ai which develops video bot, voice bot and chat bot solutions



SARVAM 1
An open-source 2-billion parameter LLM launched in 2024 by Bengaluru startup Sarvam AI. It has been trained on 10 Indian languages apart from English



EVEREST
Multilingual LLM launched in 2024 by tech startup Hanooman AI

*Parameters refer to the variables that an LLM is trained on; the more the parameters, the more complex patterns it can learn



“By enabling an ecosystem around its foundational models, BharatGen envisions positioning India as a global leader in Generative AI”

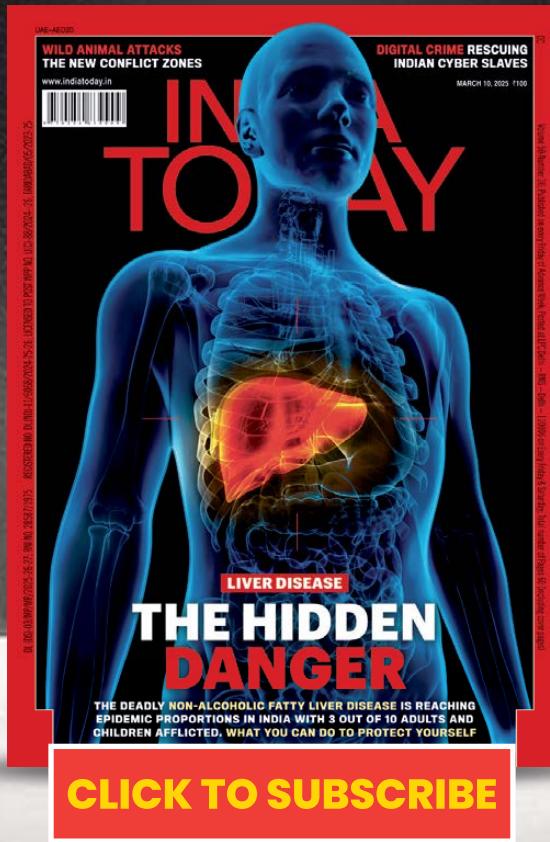
PROF. ABHAY KARANDIKAR, Secretary, Department of Science and Technology

el trained on two billion parameters in Hindi and English while five-billion parameter models are being developed for 13 Indian languages. Parameters refer to the variables on which an AI model is trained; the higher the number of parameters, the bigger the model. In that sense, these are typically small models. For comparison, OpenAI's chatbot ChatGPT was trained on 20 billion parameters while GPT-4 is believed to have had 1.76 trillion parameters.

But that's also where DeepSeek's innovative engineering has turned the world of AI tech on its head—its R1 model not only utilised fewer GPUs but activated only a fraction (37 billion) of its total 671 billion parameters for each token processed. (A token is a basic unit of input processed by an LLM.) This was because DeepSeek made use of a machine learning technique known as a 'mixture of experts'. The analogy that tech specialists point to is how the human brain can carry out complex tasks with very little energy requirement. "This happens because the brain delegates different functionalities and tasks to different parts. For example, vision is processed at the back of the brain, hearing is handled by the temporal lobe...and, amazingly, different parts of the brain can take up another part's job when that part has failed," explains Pushpak Bhattacharyya, a computer scientist at IIT Bombay. "So this idea of delegating tasks and making the models interact with each other goes back to nature itself."

Bhattacharyya too has been pursuing the technique, which he calls the Trinity Model, for the past five years. This method links smaller models for collective intelligence, creating the

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MAKING SENSE OF INDIA

impression of a large LLM. Two ongoing proof-of-concept projects using this technique—a conversational AI agent for submitting consumer grievances to the Department of Consumer Affairs and a customer complaint agent for the Indian Railways—are funded by Facebook's parent company Meta and built on its open-source Llama model.

THE AGE OF AGENTS

According to Nasscom vice-chairperson Srikanth Velamakanni, who has co-founded the AI firm Fractal Analytics, “there are two games that India can play” in this field. “Number one, we can play the foundational model game, because maybe a better answer for training models has not been found yet,” he says. “Or, we can take the native intelligence that’s coming out of a foundational model and do amazing post-training that can be used in all kinds of apps in the world.”

What Velamakanni is pointing to is the emerging market for AI products. Right now, LLMs can do a pretty good job in summarisation, creative writing and search tasks. But there are limitations to what else they can do, simply because they aren’t trained for those tasks. “We can train them to do much more sophisticated tasks like reasoning, planning and generating workflows,” says Velamakanni. “The possibilities are endless. We are just scratching the surface.”

Mumbai-based entrepreneur Rustom Lawyer agrees. Starting with a medical transcription company two decades ago, he ventured into voice-based AI in healthcare in 2020 with his startup Augnito. One of its first products, for which he collaborated with IIT’s Bhattacharyya, was an automatic speech recognition and natural language processing tool to assist radiologists in writing their reports faster—and thereby being able to spend more time on diagnosis.

Lawyer says the firm went a step ahead with its next product. Using ambient listening technology, its AI suite can translate a doctor-patient conversation, summarise and structure it, while also providing financial data that an insurance company may need to extract. It saves doctors the burden of writing reports that take up a lot of their time. “Think of it as an invisible agent who understands and gets the job done,” says Lawyer, adding that the tech has been deployed in 300-plus hospitals in India besides healthcare facilities in the Gulf region and the UK. “Healthcare,” he says,

“is going to be one of the first areas that actually benefit in a huge way from the AI wave.”

The likeliest form in which GenAI would reach consumers across sectors—from finance and legal services to customer support and logistics—is agents. Think of them as the next-gen version of digital assistants such as Apple’s Siri or Amazon’s Alexa, except that they can make decisions, solve problems and act autonomously. “This year, I expect we will see the rise of AI agents,” says Velamakanni, adding that startups are already building online marketplaces where agents performing different tasks will be made available. “Earlier, we used to sell apps. Now you can sell an agent.”

THE WAY AHEAD

The Union government on its part is giving a Rs 10,300 crore push towards reducing the cost of innovation through its IndiaAI Mission. Being implemented by MeitY, it will be working

on all three layers of AI innovation—chip design, foundational models and applications. According to Union minister of electronics and information technology Ashwini Vaishnaw, 18,000 GPUs are being empanelled under a common computing facility to help startups and researchers nationwide. “The global benchmark is \$2.5-3 per GPU hour. The price we have come up with is just above \$1, and we are also giving a 40 per cent subsidy on it,” he said during his visit to Bengaluru on February 15. “So, the cost of innovation should really reduce, and more and more people should get the opportunities for innovation.”

At last count, the country had about 230 startups working on GenAI. “India is still one of the largest AI talent pools globally,” says Nambiar. “So, to maximise the potential, we should have a skills revolution. For, we may have a large population and

talent space, but the number of people who are really skilled in the high-end capabilities required for AI, cybersecurity, quantum computing, etc. is very small.” At the same time, there’s also a bid to woo Indian-origin AI experts—who form a sizeable chunk of the global talent pool—back home to tap this emerging opportunity. But, for that, the investment into AI needs to be ramped up. “It’s not that we are at the 11th hour. This is just the beginning...it’s the first chapter of the book. That’s why this conversation has become so much more alive and kicking now,” notes Velamakanni. There’s clearly a long way to go, and DeepSeek’s emergence has shown that the race is far from over. ■



“We should have a skills revolution. We may have a large population but the number of people really skilled in the high-end capabilities required for AI, etc. is very small”

**RAJESH NAMBIAR
President, Nasscom**



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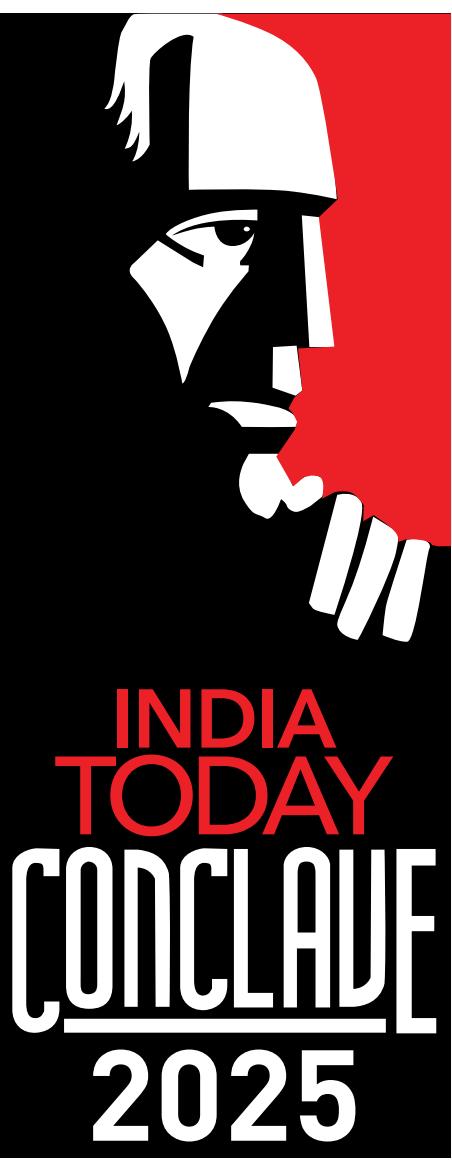


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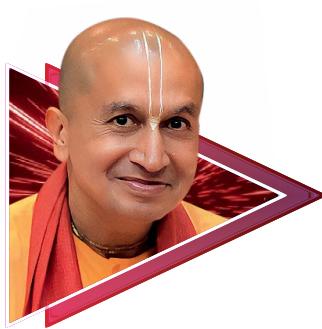
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JYOTIKA
ACTOR



SHIBANI AKHTAR
CREATOR & EXECUTIVE PRODUCER,
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GURU GAURANGA DAS
ISKCON MONK, SPIRITUAL TEACHER
AND MOTIVATIONAL SPEAKER



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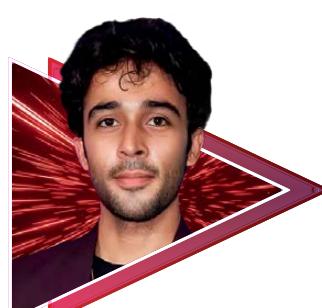
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RISHAB SHARMA
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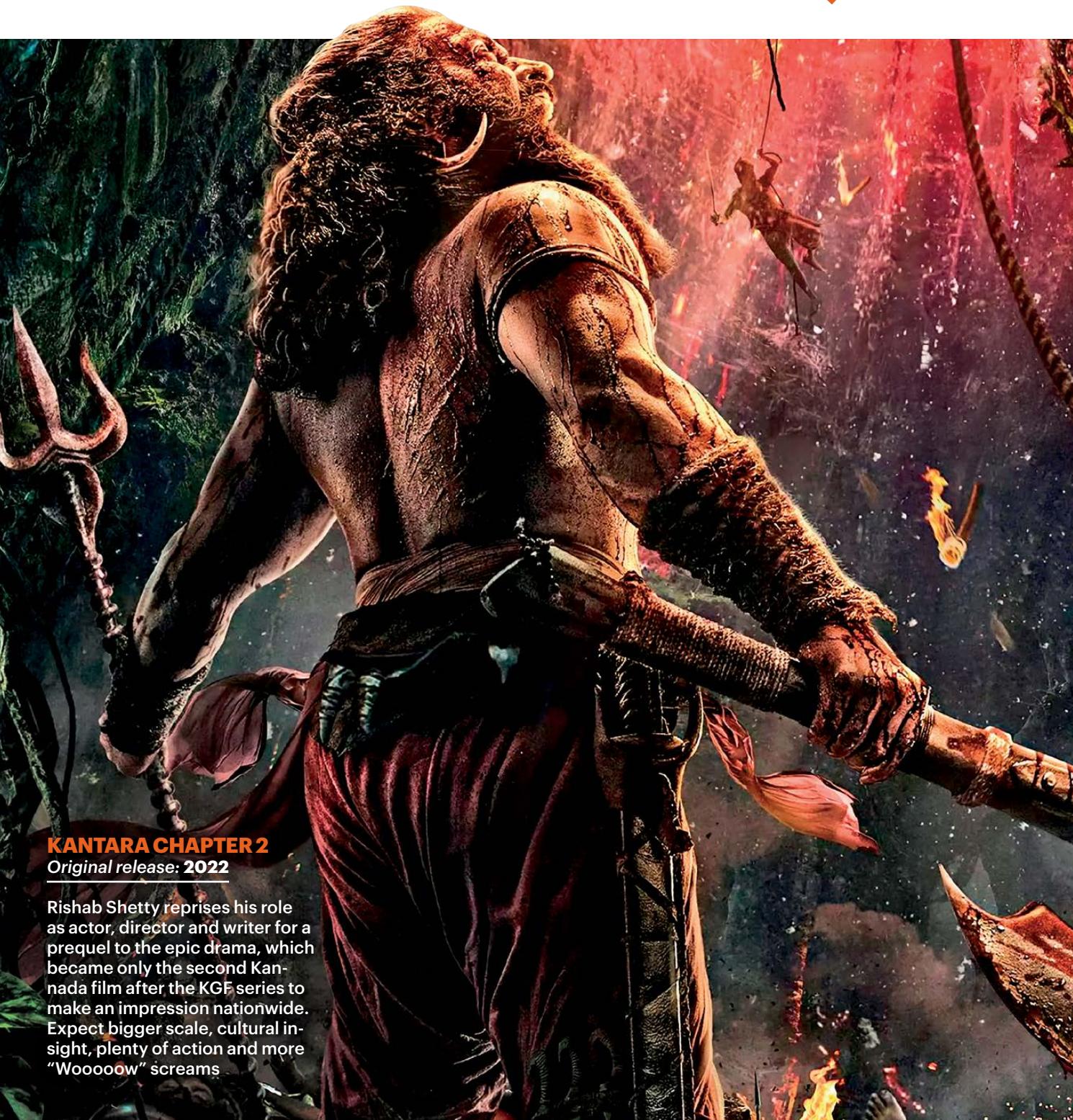


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WHY EVERYONE LOVES A GOOD SEQUEL



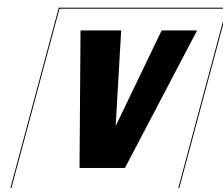
KANTARA CHAPTER 2

Original release: 2022

Rishab Shetty reprises his role as actor, director and writer for a prequel to the epic drama, which became only the second Kannada film after the KGF series to make an impression nationwide. Expect bigger scale, cultural insight, plenty of action and more “Wooooow” screams.

BANKING ON PAST SUCCESS,
BOLLYWOOD STUDIOS ARE MAKING
FOLLOW-UP FEATURES AND ADDING TO
FRANCHISES WITH GUSTO. **BUT**
SUCCESS WITH SEQUELS COMES
ONLY WHEN AUDIENCES ARE
SERVED THEMATIC FRESHNESS

By SUHANI SINGH



Vicky Kaushal's fierce turn as Maratha king Sambhaji Maharaj in *Chhaava* has ensured that, like *Pathaan* in 2023, Hindi cinema is off to a soaring start in 2025. With collections of Rs 450 crore in three weeks, the period action drama, which gives a *Gladiator*-like gritty treatment to its warrior hero, has struck a chord. But *Chhava* may just be a handful of original films to succeed in 2025, for the upcoming roster is all about sequels and franchise-building exercises.

Picture this. Ajay Devgn will star in not one, or two, but three sequels: *Son of Sardaar*, *Raid* and *De De Pyaar De*. Akshay Kumar returns for yet another *Housefull*, the second chapter of *Kesari* and *Jolly LLB 3*. Tiger Shroff is banking on the fourth instalment of *Baaghi* to revive his career, while Hrithik Roshan gets into the shoes of a dapper spy for Yash Raj Films' *War 2*. These are just a handful of Hindi films where audiences will revisit familiar characters and themes.

The follow-up trend is here to stay. If YRF and Maddock are betting on the spy and horror comedy universe, respectively, Dharma Productions has another *Dulhania* movie and one more chapter of *Dhadak* and *Kesari*, all releasing in 2025. Apoorva Mehta, Dharma's CEO, doesn't see it as studios

'playing it safe' but more as a means to engage long term with audiences. "Audiences have evolved," he says. "They form strong emotional con-

**GREENLIGHTING A
SEQUEL MAKES
ECONOMIC SENSE IF
THE FIRST FILM FARED
WELL. A PART II CAN
BE A PREQUEL TOO,
LIKE KANTARA
CHAPTER 1**



BAAGHI 4, Original release: 2016

Tiger Shroff looks to end his poor box office run with a franchise that elevated him as Bollywood's go-to action hero. The fourth instalment is promising viewers a rebel with "a darker spirit", on "a bloodier mission". Giving Tiger a tough fight will be Sanjay Dutt, who is cast as the antagonist

nnections with characters and worlds, and they want to see those stories continue. In a way, sequels allow us to build deeper character arcs, explore new conflicts, and even experiment with different storytelling approaches."

Dharma's upcoming films are more an exercise in exploring a theme further by changing the backdrop, time period and even characters. With *Kesari*, it's patriotism, *Dhadak* focuses on prejudice in love, and *Dulhania* continues with good old romance. A sequel, notes Mehta, has to offer something fresh, "whether it's a new perspective, deeper character exploration, or a unique setting", otherwise "it won't resonate, no matter how strong the brand".

Greenlighting a sequel makes economic sense, especially if the first film fared well at the box office. A part II can well be a prequel too—like the Rishab Shetty-starrer *Kantara: Chapter 1*. Filmmaker Vivek Agnihotri, who pushed the concept by building the 'Files trilogy'—*The Tashkent Files*, followed by the blockbuster *The Kashmir Files*. In 2025, he looks to push more buttons with *The Delhi Files-The Bengal Chapter*.

For Shailesh Kapoor, CEO and founder of Ormax Media, a media and entertainment consulting firm, this enthusiastic embracing of sequels/ franchises stems from them replacing stars as the "new trust drivers". "Post-





HOUSEFULL 5

Original release: 2010

The comedy series is one of the longest-running ones. In its fifth iteration, regulars Akshay Kumar, Riteish Deshmukh and Chunky Pandey return. Producer Sajid Nadiadwala opts for a more-the-merrier approach, with Abhishek Bachchan, Sanjay Dutt, Jackie Shroff, Nana Patekar, Shreyas Talpade joining the joyride (above)



BORDER 2

Original release: 1997

Twenty-eight years is a long time to revisit a beloved war drama, but given the 'josh' for the genre, it makes sense. Sunny Deol is back and joined in battle by Varun Dhawan (above, 2nd from left), Diljit Dosanjh, Ahan Shetty among others

pandemic, the idea that if a film stars a particular actor it must be worth the money, has weakened," says Kapoor, adding that only Shah Rukh Khan and Ranbir Kapoor are exceptions. Amidst the waning influence of actors and a crowded landscape of entertainment choices, a franchise offers familiarity. "They come pre-marketed, via the performance of previous editions," he notes. Case in point being Maddock's horror comedy smash hits *Street 2* and *Munjya*, which, in turn, are expected to benefit other horror comedies like *Thama* and *Shakti Shalini* expected to release this year.

For studios, it's a win-win situation. "They are keen on building franchises because star fees continue to go up despite the box office being unstable," says Kapoor. "This incentivises a producer to invest in long-term IP [intellectual property], allowing

them to make films with lesser stars, and get better return on investment." But Kapoor admits that "trust" alone cannot sustain this model. Sequels "that marry originality" with trust are the ones that "would really work".

THE FLIP SIDE

However, the juggernaut of franchise films has creators concerned about the direction in which Hindi cinema is headed, for cashing in on a hit formula comes at the expense of original ideas being sidelined. "The slow poison we [the industry] have been taking for a while is 'de-risk,'" says writer-director Atul Sabharwal. "Originality means you have to think, take a chance and you don't know [the result]. Sequels, he notes, also come at a time when remakes themselves are dwindling as linguistic boundaries vanish and watching dubbed/ subtitled versions



DHADAK 2

Original release: 2018

National crush Triptii Dimri and *Gully Boy* star Sidhant Chaturvedi feature in part 2 of the Dharma franchise. "It isn't a direct sequel but a new story that carries forward the essence of intense emotions," says Apoorva Mehta, CEO of Dharma

of southern films grows.

Some, though, are pleased with this onslaught. For publicity relation firms, marketing franchise films and sequels is easier. However, "they have to be superior to the previous one", says Prabhat Choudhary, founder of Spice, India's leading entertainment PR and marketing firm. "If not, the franchise value goes down." Even actor-producer Aamir Khan is giving it a shot with his next, *Sitaare Zameen Par*, whose title harks back to his beloved directorial debut, *Taare Zameen Par*. Choudhary, who will handle its marketing, calls it a "spiritual sequel", for there's "a similarity in theme and not at a story or granular level".

Extending an idea is also the need of the hour. "Post Covid, we are going through a crisis of faith about audiences," says Choudhary. "In such a cynical atmosphere, a franchise for which solidarity exists is something both audiences and makers like." He opines that creators should have built IPs much before, like Hollywood has done for decades. "*Chhaava* has succeeded. You can have a universe of Maratha heroes. Till they are interesting, it is okay," he says.

But sustaining interest is anything but a cakewalk. Ask Dharma CEO Apoorva Mehta. "It's about giving the audience what they want, in a way that still feels fresh," he adds. "Sequels challenge us as filmmakers to push boundaries." Even as audiences will see the likes of Ajay Devgn, Akshay Kumar and Hrithik Roshan reprise their roles, Sabharwal equates the current trend to something filmmaker Ram Gopal Varma had once told him. "He said, 'Each time you go out to make a film, you are choosing to be vulnerable. You are putting yourself at the mercy of the public,'" recalls Sabharwal. "Now nobody wants to be vulnerable, it's about being smart." For now, calculated risks are bringing in the moolah. It's the thing that matters most in show business. ■



BARIATRIC SURGERY

A Tailored Approach to Weight Loss and Metabolic Health



DR. VIKAS SINGHAL

Associate Director

GI Surgery, GI Oncology and Bariatric Surgery
Medanta-the Medicity, Gurugram

Bariatric surgery has transformed the lives of many patients struggling with severe obesity and its associated health risks. Over the years, I have treated diverse groups of patients, each requiring a tailored surgical approach based on their medical history, lifestyle, and long-term weight-loss goals.

One common group consists of patients with morbid obesity and acid reflux. For them, gastric bypass is often the preferred procedure, as it not only facilitates significant weight loss but also helps in managing gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD). Many patients in this category have experienced

relief from chronic heartburn and improved digestive health post-surgery.

Another set of patients includes those with moderate obesity but severe metabolic disorders, such as insulin resistance and polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS). For such cases, Sleeve Gastrectomy or Mini Gastric Bypass have been a highly effective choice. By reducing the stomach's size, it promotes better portion control while improving hormonal balance, which can be particularly beneficial for patients struggling with fertility issues due to obesity.

In some cases, patients who have undergone weight-loss procedures may require revision surgeries to achieve their desired results. With the right intervention, anatomical adjustments can be made to optimize outcomes and support sustained weight loss. A thorough evaluation helps determine the most effective approach, ensuring patients continue their journey toward improved health and well-being.

Bariatric surgery is more than a weight-loss tool—it is a medical intervention that restores health and enhances quality of life. However, long-term success depends on patient commitment to lifestyle changes, nutritional adjustments, and ongoing medical support.

As a bariatric surgeon, I have treated a wide range of patients, each requiring a different approach to weight loss and metabolic management. Bariatric surgery is not a one-size-fits-all solution; the choice of procedure depends on several factors, including the patient's BMI, existing medical conditions, and lifestyle adaptability.

DR. PRADEEP JAIN

Principal Director & HOD

Robotic/Laparoscopic Gastro Onco Surgery and Bariatric Surgery

Fortis Hospital, Shalimar Bagh, Delhi

Patients with severe obesity and uncontrolled type 2 diabetes often benefit the most from gastric bypass surgery. This procedure not only helps with substantial weight loss but also improves insulin sensitivity, often leading to reduced or even eliminated dependence on diabetes medications. Many patients in this category have seen significant metabolic improvements within months of surgery.

Another common group includes individuals struggling with obesity-related sleep apnea, hypertension, and joint pain. For such patients, sleeve gastrectomy has been an effective option. By reducing the stomach's size, this surgery promotes controlled eating habits while helping with weight loss and symptom relief. Many patients have reported better sleep quality, improved mobility, and reduced need for hypertension medications.

There are also cases where patients require revision surgeries, either due to insufficient weight loss from a previous procedure or complications such as acid reflux. These cases require careful assessment to determine the most suitable corrective approach.

Each bariatric surgery is a life-changing intervention, but success depends on patient commitment to long-term dietary and lifestyle modifications.

DISCLAIMER: The views/suggestions/opinions expressed in the article are the sole responsibility of the brand concerned this should not be considered a substitute for medical advise. Please consult your treating physician for more details.

इंडिया टुडे

देश की भाषा में देश की धड़कन



सबसे भरोसेमंद खोतों से, सबसे सटीक जानकारी

सब्सक्राइब करें और पाएं 68% तक की छूट

मध्य राज्य को देखते हैं भारी रियायत मिली, अर्थव्यवस्था को स्थापत बढ़ाने की चुनौती
और सामाजिक योग्य कई सुधार भी, लेकिन कंठी पुष्टि दर के लिए भी गरिमा
को इन्हें तेजी से लागू करना होगा, तभी बनेगी वाता

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

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

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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.....



सब्सक्राइब 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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KONERU HUMPY
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ART

URBAN ANGST

Sudhir Patwardhan's new solo is a visual meditation on the organised chaos of the city, and the grinding rites of passage its people must endure

Photograph by RAJWANT RAWAT

A

passing Mumbai local train with two young people standing at the door, lost in thought. Above, a foot overbridge crowded with grey figures rushing to or from work, with a skyscraper looming in the background. 'Aspire' (2024) captures the essence of Maximum City, where in the face of daily drudgery, people dream of a better life. In his just-concluded solo exhibition at Delhi's Vadehra Art Gallery—which will travel to other Indian cities—Sudhir Patwardhan's tremendous empathy for the subaltern middle class is evident. Via *Cities: Built, Broken*, the veteran artist continues to tell stories of his protagonists rooted to their locales through varying intensities of emotion.

Born in Pune in 1949, Patwardhan graduated in medicine from the Armed Forces Medical College in 1972, and practised as a radiologist in Thane from 1975 to 2005. The self-taught art-

ist is recognised as one of India's first postmodern painters, and has been illustrating evocative cityscapes and depictions of Mumbai's working classes since the 1970s. "When I first came to (then) Bombay in the '70s, the working class movement was strong, with many rallies, morthas and strikes, and my work reflected that. Then we moved to Thane, and I saw the expansion of the city margins, how nature was being devoured. My work in the '90s reflected that. Lately, an infrastructure boom is reshaping the city.... To what extent this will improve the life for the ordinary citizen remains to be seen, and this is a subject for exploration in my new work," says Patwardhan.

The exhibition featured about 65 recent works, including large and small canvases as well as drawings across various scales. In the exhibition essay, art critic and curator Gayatri Sinha writes: "Sudhir Patwardhan's vision of Mumbai as spatial metaphor appears to have come full circle. The vast panoramas of the city under construction that he painted in the 1980s and 1990s, of structures rising from acres of muddy land, now return in a Kaf-



kaesque horror of overgrown metal and concrete." The early influences of Cézanne are also evident in Patwardhan's visualisation of the human figure, including its mental distortions and physical vagaries. For example, in 'Under a Clear Blue Sky' (2024), a Muslim man stands before a partially

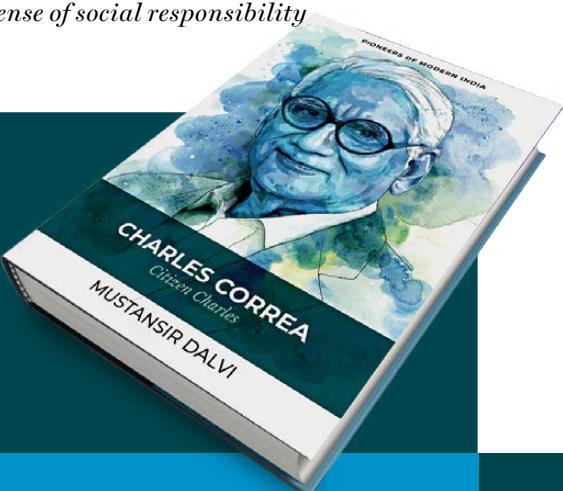
BOOKS

VISIONARY BUILDER

This biography of the eminent architect Charles Correa highlights his penchant for design innovation and a sense of social responsibility

CHARLES CORREA

Citizen Charles
By Mustansir Dalvi
NIYOGI BOOKS
₹299; 204 pages



Charles Correa once wrote that people's desperate demands for daily subsistence ensures there is no place for architects and architecture in India. As a new monograph on the architect explains, architecture in India is largely an expression of middle-class affluence, and the poor have rarely benefitted from the profession. Written by Mustansir Dalvi, himself an architect, the book is a simply presented and thoroughly researched biography that traces Correa's childhood, his growth as an architect, to his extraordinary achievements. Planned as an affordable student production, the book is small-sized, uses cheap paper and carries virtually no illustrations—far too modest a product for a subject as richly textured and complex as Correa.



CITY PRIMAEVAL

'Under a Clear Blue Sky' (oil on canvas, 2024) by Sudhir Patwardhan

metro-lines, housing complexes and expressways. "These aspects of the ultra-modern metropolis are usually projected as a development utopia. This is contrasted, at the centre of the painting, with a vision of cities being destroyed, lives shattered—what we have been seeing over the past few years. Could the swirling expressway in the centre be a path to doom?" asks Patwardhan.

What's striking is that there is hardly any visible nostalgia for the

spiritual and the emotional theatre of community. The slice-of-life scenes offer a moving portrait of the bustling annals of the city. Is this a form of activism or merely social commentary? "I do not see my art as activism. I do not think art changes anything externally. It can only change one's perception of oneself and of how one sees the world. I do not set out to comment on anything. I set out to understand my own perceptions of my surroundings and of myself. This does result in a kind

STRIKINGLY, THERE IS HARDLY ANY NOSTALGIA FOR MUMBAI'S OLD, ELEGANT STRUCTURES HERE. RATHER, SPRAWLING BLOCKS AND SEMI-CONSTRUCTED BUILDINGS MARK SOCIAL CHURN



demolished site. While a bulldozer lurks, apparently to scoop the next pile of debris, he contemplates the pieces of his destroyed home.

In a similar vein is the work 'Built and Broken' (2024). It shows many features of modern cities, like high-rise buildings, flyovers,

elegant structures of the city's past in their Art Deco or Victorian Gothic glory. Rather, the paintings of sprawling blocks and semi-constructed buildings seem to mark a colossal social churn. The visceral realism explores various asymmetries, including class struggles, tension between the material and

of social commentary as I am a social being," says Patwardhan. ■

-Prachi Joshi

Cities: Built, Broken will be shown at **Jehangir Art Gallery** (Mumbai, Mar. 25-31), **TRI Art & Culture** (Kolkata, April 16-June 29) and **Durbar Hall Art Gallery, Ernakulam** (Kochi, Sept. 6-30)

In a half-century long career, Correa built museums, state assembly buildings, apartments, churches as well as ashrams—an architecture exceptionally made, truly experimental, and displaying rare thought and unusual insights. The Gandhi Museum in Ahmedabad is a meticulous transformation of Euclidean geometry into a structure of light and shade; the Kanchanjunga Apartments, an unusual sandwich of a bungalow verandah applied to high-rise living. Both, uniquely

Correa designs.

Yet, whatever he did, there always lurked at the back of his mind the nagging tension that he was working in a poor country with limited resources. Without a clear vision that included the urban poor, the professional could hardly affect real change. Despite this baffling con-

tradiction, Correa's line of thinking and his level of social involvement grew with every project. The daily sight of squalor and destitution in and around the Bombay of his home

and office provided him an opportunity to address urban problems, and as he often did, also raising every task to a level of joyful creation. A proposal for the prime minister's residence conceived as a bamboo and mud courtyard, surrounded by bamboo cells for foreign dignitaries was for Correa an 'introduction to foreign visitors of a simpler way of life' and a true reflection of a poor country.

So keen and clear headed an observer of Indian living conditions, Correa worked at a time when the architect occupied a respectable position in society—a role that not merely involved

design and construction of buildings but drove the architect deep into examining social and cultural ideals. His designs for the homeless for the streets of Mumbai and those for a peaceful resolution to the Babri Masjid demolition—like the PM's residence—remained sadly un-built, as were other proposals on land reclamation. Because all his urban work was filled with design innovation and social responsibility, Correa's disappointments were a real loss for India. His absence has made the profession one dimensional, and the poor poorer. ■

-Gautam Bhatia

The daily sight of squalor in Bombay allowed the socially conscious Correa to address urban problems

ART AND THE CITY

DAG's annual art and heritage festival will debut in Mumbai with a multi-site programme

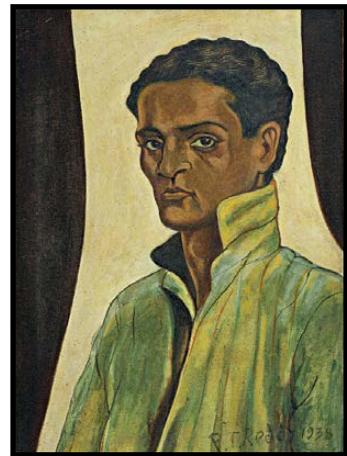
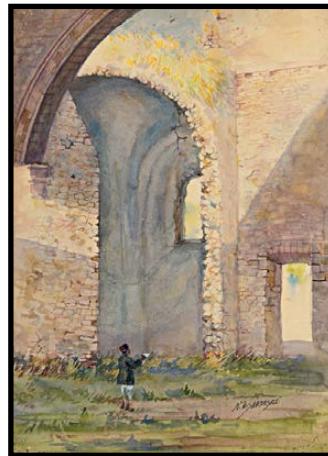
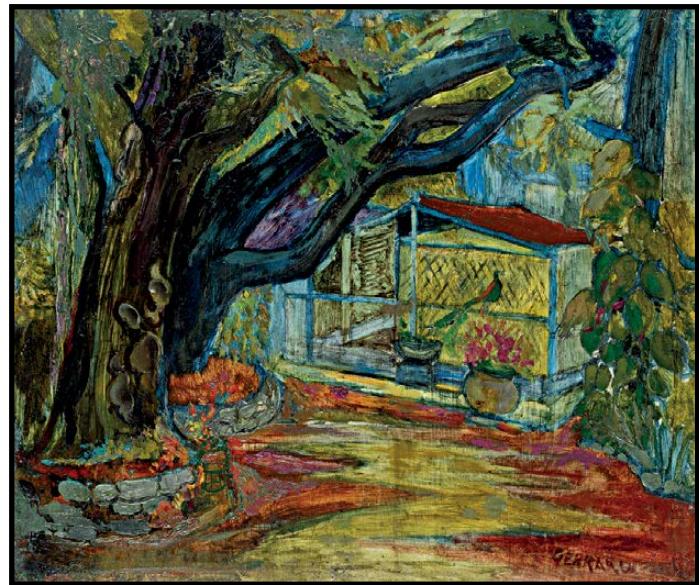
After four editions in Kolkata, DAG's art and heritage festival, The City as a Museum, will open in Mumbai with a lineup of exhibitions, talks, walks, workshops and a final iftaar feast. Held over two weeks, the festival will travel to historic sites and lesser-known spaces such as artists' homes and personal archives and collections.

Ashish Anand, CEO and MD of DAG, says, "With four editions of The City as a Museum in Kolkata behind us, we wanted to explore other cities through the same platform, and Mumbai was the logical choice given its extraordinary heritage sites and diverse and vibrant communities and cultures. Even from a purely pedagogical exercise, Kolkata and Mumbai are the two cities most closely linked with the development of pre-modern and modern Indian art."

The inaugural exhibition in collaboration with Sir JJ School of Art titled *Shifting Visions: Teaching Modern Art at the Bombay School* is a groundbreaking exercise in bringing together never-before-seen material from the School as well as DAG. It features artworks as well as photographs, documents and letters to highlight how methods for teaching evolved through the years and explores the impetus for the shift in focus from craft and industry towards the cultivation of fine arts.

Other highlights include a walkthrough of the extraordinary murals at the School with artist and head of the painting department, Dr Douglas John, to explore the central role of mural painting in the formation of modern art in the city; a visit to the Elephanta

Art, photos, documents and letters show how methods of teaching art evolved over the years



IN A DREAM TOWN (clockwise from top) 'The Garden of the Director's Residence, Sir J.J. School of Art' by Charles Gerrard; P.T. Reddy's self portrait; an untitled work by N.R. Sardesai

Caves with art historian Dr Giles Tillotson to understand how artists drew inspiration from it and its influence on modern art; and a workshop rethinking the practice of drawing through colonial-era art with artists Snehal Pradhan and Soumava Das. "A major challenge was the research, where we had to identify objects, spaces, people and dig deeper into their stories, as we wanted to focus on spaces and narratives that have not been publicly showcased before," says Anand. The festival will also include a talk by art scholar Dr Saryu Doshi on the transformative impact of teaching and

learning Indian art, a round-table discussion on research and its role in artistic practice, and a talk and workshop at the Dr Bhau Daji Lad Mumbai City Museum by Tasneem Zakaria Mehta and Kaiwan Mehta. "The penultimate event at the iconic painting studio Alfred Talkies—with which the Progressive artists M.F. Husain and Tyeb Mehta were associated—also promises to be special and will reveal lesser-known aspects of these artists," adds Anand. ■

-Prachi Joshi

The City as a Museum will be held across various venues in Mumbai from March 7 to 23

Magic of Modernism

In its inaugural exhibition, *Celebrating the Modernists of Indian Art*, Thapar Gallery in Delhi honours several pioneers

M

F. Husain, F.N. Souza, S.H. Raza and many other distinguished artists feature in *Celebrating the Modernists of Indian Art*, the first exhibition at the new Thapar Gallery in Delhi. "It offers an exceptional opportunity to budding art enthusiasts and collectors to experience the genius of these iconic artists," says Ashish Thapar, founder, Thapar Gallery.

On view are 32 paintings and six sculptures that honour the legacy of the artists. "The curated collection, spanning decades of innovation, explores diverse themes and styles, creating a visual dialogue between the celebrated works of India's modernist masters," adds Thapar.

Divided into four sections, the show takes visitors through different genres. While the first section highlights the contribution of early modernists, including Progressives, the second introduces them to tantric and figurative abstractionists and still-life and landscapes. The third section focuses on figurative style with

folk and tribal art, while the final section is dedicated to sculptures.

Thapar highlights some works that are not to be missed. For instance, Raza's 'OM' highlights the 'bindu' which is central to the pictorial language of the artist. "The dot is not only a visual tool but also a representation of the origin of life, the cosmos, and spiritual energy. It symbolises unity, creation, and the source of all existence," explains Thapar.

Another artwork, part of Krishen Khanna's 'Bandwala' series, features a blue bandwala as opposed to the often-seen iconic red attire. "The shift to blue tones deepens the sense of isolation, emphasising the transient nature of celebration and the musicians' perpetual anonymity," says Thapar.

There's also a painting by G.R. Santosh—a stunning neo-tantric interpretation of goddess Kali, where traditional iconography is transformed into a spiritual, geometric abstraction. ■

-Geetika Sachdev

'Celebrating the Modernists of Indian Art' is on till March 22 at Thapar Gallery, Khasra No. 30, Crossing on NH-8, Kapashera Estate, Rajokri, New Delhi

Divided into four sections, the show takes visitors through different phases of Indian modernism



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Period Drama

Ram Madhvani's SonyLIV series **The Waking of a Nation** uses the courtroom drama and investigative procedural tropes to depict the lead up to the Jallianwala Bagh massacre

In

2017, INDIA TODAY roped in Ram Madhvani to direct a short, *This Bloody Line*, for its 'India Tomorrow' series. Premiered at the India Today Conclave in Mumbai, it instantly struck a chord for its subtle, affecting reminder of how the Radcliffe Line ripped the Indian subcontinent apart and sowed seeds of discord from which people still reel.

Seated in his office in Famous Studios, Madhvani says the experience of making the short lit a spark to relook at seminal moments from the British colonisation of India. "It was the most personal thing somebody had asked me to make," he recalls. "Since then, I have

been trying to figure out how to speak about all that bothers us—racism and prejudice, cultural colonialism and the white man's burden." The result is the SonyLIV series *The Waking of a Nation*, which through the prism of a courtroom drama and an investigative procedural follows the sequence of events that led to the Jallianwala Bagh massacre in 1919.

More than the tragedy itself, Madhvani focuses on the lesser-known Hunter Commission a.k.a. the Punjab Disorders Committee—comprising five Britishers and three Indians—which was set up to investigate the event that shook the nation and provided fresh ammo to the independence movement.

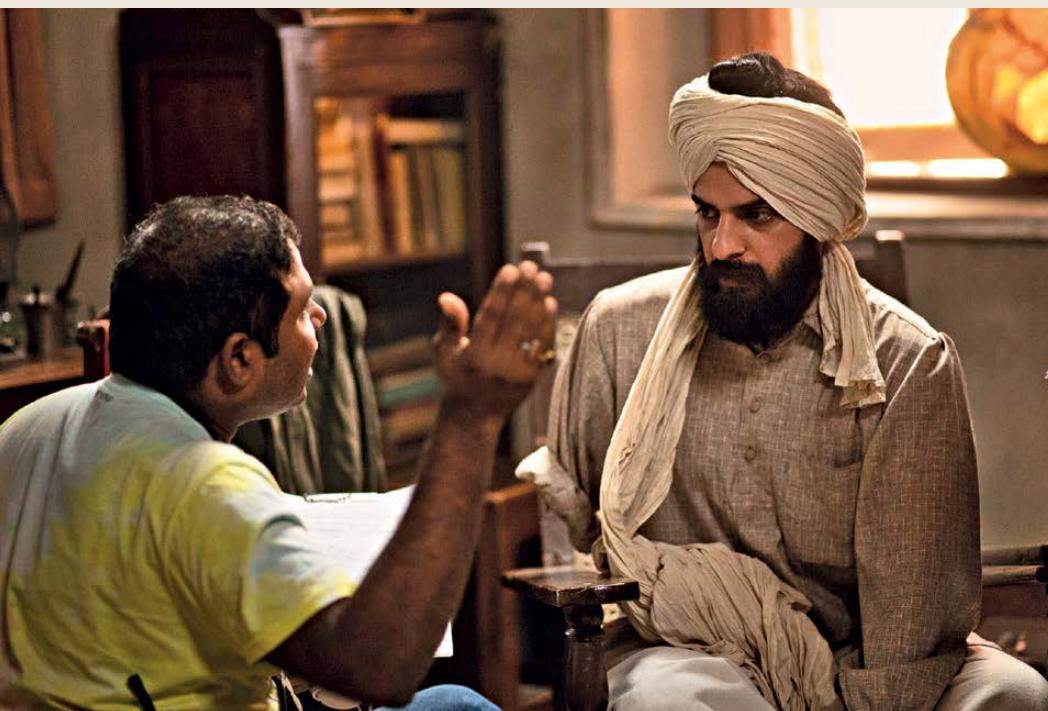
More than the tragedy itself,
MADHVANI focuses
on the lesser-known
Hunter Commission set
up to investigate
the event that shook
the nation

Research entailed relying on the commission's findings documented in bulky reports and turning to the work of researchers in Amritsar, New Delhi, Ludhiana and London to paint an authentic portrait. Madhvani deploys a found-footage feel by way of black-and-white portraits and identification documents and freezing frames of the action.

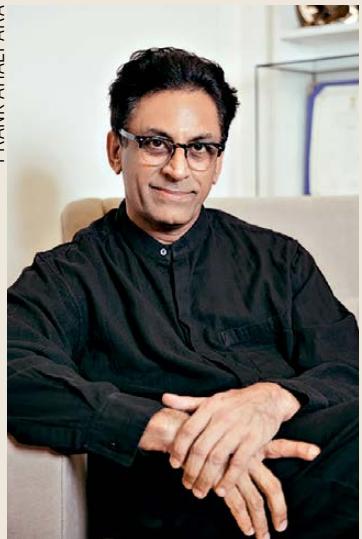
Even as Madhvani aims for "a certain realism", he speaks of his fondness for "faction" and practitioners of new journalism like Hunter S. Thompson and Tom Wolfe. For the show, Madhvani along with his two co-writers revolves the story around three friends—Hari, Allahbaksh and Kanti—and "a strong woman", a vital component of his work, to spike up

RETELLING HISTORY

A still from *The Waking of a Nation*; (below) show creator & director Ram Madhvani



FRANK AHALPARA



the emotional quotient. "Otherwise, it is becoming a history lesson," he adds. "They are the soul of it." Leading the proceedings is Kanti, a London-educated lawyer who finds his conscience shaken as he unravels the truth. Madhvani sums up his transformative arc from that of "a suit to a dhoti".

The Waking of a Nation goes for a no-holds-barred approach in showing how the occupiers perceived the occupied, referring to them as "uncivilised natives" and "savages", and focusing on the British antagonists in Punjab's then Lt Governor Michael O'Dwyer and General Reginald Dyer, who ordered the firing on innocent civilians. While Dyer, Madhvani adds, became "the fall guy", O'Dwyer was the "ring-leader" who orchestrated the mayhem.

For Madhvani, it's important that the show begins a cultural conversation about how Indians were "whitewashed" and also to not just inform but engage the youth. Says Madhvani, "The idea you cannot actually rule yourself, how did we believe that? How did this happen? How did we become who we are? Why were we not made aware about it?" If the show gets the reception that Madhvani and SonyLIV desire, the filmmaker says he already has another episode from pre-independent India which lends itself to a long format treatment—the revolt of 1857. ■

—Suhani Singh



WOMAN POWER

Season 2 of the Tamil crime thriller series **Suzhal**, set against the backdrop of a vibrant local festival, features strong female characters



mall town, big crime, set against a festival. It's Pushkar-Gayatri's succinct one-line description for the Amazon Prime Video series *Suzhal: The Vortex*. In season two, the setting shifts to the seaside town of Kulasekharapatnam in Tamil Nadu, the festival in focus is Ashtakali and the whodunit expands to include more characters. "Our team went hunting for myths, many of which were not documented, and interviewed a bunch of people, especially older ones," says Pushkar. "Few people outside the town know of the festival, so there's something to discover for everyone." As writers they use the age-old myth as "a metaphor" to reflect on a social issue in contemporary times.

It's this sense of wonderment, rootedness and relevance that made season one of the crime thriller one of the best series in 2022. That it happened to be in Tamil and came from one of the industry's popular directors of *Vikram Vedha* fame only enhanced its views. The husband-wife duo's

director peers in Chennai are baffled that they continue to embrace the streaming medium when they can easily mount theatrical spectacles in a market that loves its cinema big and worships its stars. "The question of why keeps coming up even now?" says Gayatri. But it's not just the soft corner they both have for the long-format medium that draws them, it's also about the "little more leeway" OTT gives creators.

Created by the husband-wife director duo Pushkar-Gayatri, the show is streaming on Prime Video



"In films there is commerce...budget tied to it," says Gayatri. "Streaming gives us a lot more scope to explore characters." In this case, it is eight women who are all suspects. In fact, Pushkar-Gayatri take great pride in how season two enhances the feminist streak. "A lot of female-centric movies or series get into the relationship

thing...there's a personal angst or they are trying to grow up or figure a relationship. That frustrates me," says Gayatri. "The eight women here are not in that cute space but are super strong characters who take things head on." Adds Pushkar, "For us the agency for a character is important, they shouldn't need to seek validation from elsewhere."

Suzhal, for Pushkar and Gayatri, is less small-screen entertainment and more "cinematic television". Their hope is that it gets more Tamil audiences to invest their time in it. "It's not there yet but we are seeing the shift happening and a larger understanding that the space exists," says Pushkar. At their end, they are already developing other projects including a season two of crime thriller *Vadhanidhi*, have another female-centric series shooting, in addition to having finished a script for a film. "These days our team asks us how many pages have you written today?" says Pushkar. Given the quick turnaround time for season two of *Suzhal*, it looks like they are delivering. ■

—Suhani Singh

THEATRE

Playing In The Capital

The **Mahindra Excellence in Theatre Awards** have announced their top 10 nominated plays which will be staged in New Delhi



FIRST ACT Scenes from *Chanda Bedni* and (inset) *Be-Loved...*

T

The NCPA Soulful Blues Festival is set to return in 2025, bigger and better than ever. Expanding to three electrifying nights, the festival brings internationally acclaimed blues legends, some of whom are making their India debut, to Mumbai's National Centre for the Performing Arts (NCPA) from March 14 to 16.

"The blues, although a familiar genre, was still relatively new territory for the NCPA," says Farrahnaz Irani, general manager- international music at NCPA. "We started on a smaller scale, but after curating two

powerhouse vocalists who had audiences on their feet, we knew we had gotten it right. We were confident about growing the festival and tapping the right artistes."

Opening the festival is Alvon Johnson. A dynamic performer, he blends powerful guitar work with an infectious stage presence. "Alvon will have audiences dancing in no time," says Irani. "He brings pure joy and unbridled emotion, and will set the perfect tone for the festival."

Day two features Thornetta Davis, a 10-time Blues Music Awards nominee and winner of the 2023 Best Soul/Blues Artist Female award. With gospel-infused storytelling and a voice filled with raw emotion, she

MUSIC

GOT THE BLUES

The Soulful Blues Festival at the NCPA, Mumbai, is bringing major international performers to India



Just like every year for the past two decades, the Mahindra Excellence in Theatre Awards (META) has selected the top 10 plays from across India. The task was far from easy—META received almost 367 entries from 20 states across the country. Inclusivity and diversity have always been a keystone of the awards, so the submitted plays were in 32 Indian languages and dialects.

Admitting that it was an arduous task, Jay Shah, vice-president, head, cultural outreach, Mahindra & Mahindra Ltd, is all praise for the selection committee which included film and theatre actor Kuljeet Singh, film and television actor Divya Seth Shah, theatre and film casting director Dilip Shankar, theatre director Sankar Venkateswaran and director of puppet theatre Anurupa Roy. “They had the responsibility of selecting which plays demonstrate excellence in theatre. To see them work as a team, argue and vouch for the theatre they believe in, is truly heartening,” he says.

The 10 plays selected have been nominated across 13 categories and will

be staged in New Delhi from March 13 to 20, culminating in a glittering awards night. The plays include *Be-Loved: Theatre, Music, Queerness, and Ishq!* (Hindi/English); *Chandaa Bedni* (Hindi); *Bob Marley from Kodihalli, Dashanana Swapnasiddhi and Mattiah 22:39* (Kannada); *Jeevantey Maalakha* (Life's Angel) and *Kando Ningal Ente Kuttiye Kando?* (Have You Seen My Son?) (Malayalam), *Nihsango Ishwar* (Bangla & Sanskrit), *Portal Waiting* (English), and *Swangi—Jas ki Tas* (Hindi and Bundeli).

For Jay, it has been a pleasant surprise to see three Kannada plays in the list. “We’ve had Kannada plays in the past as well but never so many in one year,” he states. As always, he says, the intent of META is to promote the theatre fraternity and, particularly, regional theatre. “The entire idea has been to give place of pride to theatre as an art form and also the theatre communities and companies that operate at the

margins by getting them centrestage in the national capital,” he adds.

Venkateswaran seconds this opinion, “What excites me most is how this festival brings unheard stories to the forefront. It’s not just about showcasing India’s theatre landscape—it actively engages with the world, sparking conversations that transcend borders.”



Director Sapan Saran, whose play *Be-Loved...* is a kaleidoscopic exploration of queer love through theatre, music, poetry and movement, has been nominated in six categories including Best Sound & Music, Best Costume, Best Play, Best Director, Best Script and Best Ensemble, says, “Festival shows are always special, primarily because of the audience they are able to attract.” She adds that a national-level festival brings the community closer. “Theatre proponents get to watch each other’s work. META has consistently done this for 20 years. It is a valuable contribution to the theatre ecosystem,” she concludes. ■

—Deepali Dhingra



SINGALONG
(clockwise from left) Thornetta Davis; Alvon Johnson; and Tia Carroll

OPENING THE FESTIVAL WILL BE ALVON JOHNSON, A DYNAMIC PERFORMER WITH AN INFECTIOUS STAGE PRESENCE



promises a soul-stirring experience. “Her honesty and restrained emotion create a compelling storytelling atmosphere,” says Irani. “Her vocals will leave audiences with goosebumps.”

Closing the festival is Tia Carroll, an award-winning artiste known for her raspy, powerful

voice and high-energy performances. A staple of the West Coast blues scene, she effortlessly blends traditional blues with modern soul. “Tia’s ability to fuse traditional blues with contemporary energy ensures the audience will leave feeling both joyful and deeply moved,” notes Irani.

With its expansion, the festival is poised to become an exciting event on Mumbai’s music calendar. “I see it evolving to be as big as our Jazz Festival, of course, with its own identity—something synonymous with blues music,” says Irani. The NCPA Soulful Blues Festival should be an unmissable celebration of music, storytelling, and emotion. ■

—Nikhil Sardana



Q+A

MASTERLY MOVES

Women's World Rapid Chess champion KONERU HUMPY on her win and what lies ahead

Q. How did the year pan out for you before the World Rapid Chess Championship?

I had a bad start to the Candidates in April 2024, but bounced back to finish second. But then I didn't do well at the Norway Chess and wanted to quit professional chess. The Tata Steel Chess tournament in November wasn't any better. But I had come really close to winning gold in

the World Rapid Chess in 2023, losing only in the tie-break. So I felt I should give it one more shot.

Q. How did you prepare for the World Rapid Chess?

I don't use chess engines as much, nor do I prepare for openings. I play online games and solve a lot of puzzles, while also following videos of previous world champions to memorise the tech-

niques. And I work on my mental attitude as well.

Q. What does your daughter, Ahana, think of you travelling extensively to play tournaments?

She misses me a lot and the first question when I get back is whether I am going for any other tournament. And if I am, she won't go to anyone else for a few days. But she also understands what I do.

Once I went as a guest at her school's annual day and she asked me, 'They invited you because you play chess, right?'

Q. Your next tournament and goals for 2025?

I will be playing the FIDE Women's Grand Prix from April 13 in Pune and, later, the Norway Chess in May. My goal this year is to improve my classical rating.

-with Shail Desai

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