

GST: Rising Cost of Compliance
HEALTH: THE NEW DNA DIETS / RAJASTHAN: SHAMEFUL WASTE

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JUNE 16, 2025 ₹100



INDIA TODAY

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END OF THE DREAM

HOW THE TRUMP CLAMPDOWN SLAMS THE DOOR ON ASPIRING INDIAN STUDENTS



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FROM THE EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

For about half a century, the aspiring Indian classes have dreamt of a degree from a US university as the passport to a bright future. Those in hot pursuit of that goal had burgeoned in recent years. In 2023-24, India topped international student charts on US campuses, overtaking China for the first time since 2009. Of the all-time high of over 1.1 million foreign students, Indian students accounted for 331,602, or close to 30 per cent. Now, that dream may be coming to an end, with their life's plans being ambushed just as they were about to take off. The Donald Trump administration is yanking away the welcome mat for incoming international students at US universities. It has paused all new student visa appointments at its embassies worldwide till more stringent norms are put into place. That includes vetting the social media posts of applicants. There are proposals to cap foreign student enrolment at Harvard University at 15 per cent, down from the current 31 per cent. Worse, the Optional Practical Training (OPT) programme, which had enabled 97,556 Indian students in 2023-24 to gain US work experience, may be shut down or severely curtailed. Indian students also make up nearly 50 per cent of those who have had their visas cancelled and face deportation.

Countless young scholars globally are plunged into a state of anxious limbo; a significant majority are here in India. Nervousness is the predominant sentiment. Most students this magazine reached out to, whether in the US or those who hope to get there, preferred to speak only if anonymity was guaranteed, for fear of adverse consequences on their visa status. The case of a 24-year-old female student typifies the experience. Admitted into a US university for a master's in Computer Science, with specialisation in AI, her visa application was rejected for no apparent reason. She has applied again, and has her fingers tightly crossed. If the process does not pan out favourably for those like her, it would represent a considerable investment of time, money and effort gone waste. University applications cost Rs 10,000-15,000 per institution, while education consultants typically charge Rs 5-6 lakh. Also, many students have already paid tuition fees or booked housing, sums that may not be recoverable if a visa does not materialise. As B.K. Shukla of college application consultancy The Ivy League Edge says, the real blow is the opportunity cost. What's worse, for those crushed thus, direct legal avenues appear severely limited. The US State Department is immune from lawsuits abroad over visa denial.

At the heart of this clampdown is a blend of politics, racial and economic paranoias. Trump's America

First' vision casts overseas students as job stealers, no different from tariffs taking American jobs. His trade tariffs blitz rolled back global commerce. Now, his attack on universities represents a setback for the one area in which America led the world without challenge. While Chinese scholars may have been the primary target because of the belief that they pilfer high-end technological knowhow, perhaps Indian students are collateral damage.

Mixed in with this is an internal project, what the American conservative right calls "cleaning the system". This entails cutting off vital research funding to universities. Elite institutions like Harvard, which valued liberal arts and open thought, are now cast as adversaries. To the Trumpian mind, they appear as hostile, defiant islands that provoke inherent distrust, hubs of an ideology they despise. This is reflected most acutely in the new component added to visa rules: the intense scrutiny of social media accounts. Cyberspace is the frontline where much of the global ideological battles over hot-button issues like Gaza are being fought. Washington does not want dissent entering its classrooms. But fear is irrational and indiscriminate. Prof. Pablo S. Bose of the University of Vermont says the crackdown has "already had disastrous consequences". His Columbia peer Elora Mukherjee says the policy "seems driven by cruelty, white nationalism, and racism", with visa decisions now vulnerable to prejudice.

Our cover story lays out an exhaustive synopsis of this evolving tragedy, covering all angles with multiple bureau inputs. A companion piece by Aashish Khullar, a Carr-Ryan Center Fellow at Harvard, tells the story from inside the trenches, as it were, as one of the world's premier institutions slips into a "survival state". Our conversations with educators, counsellors and students also reveal slivers of hope. Vibha Kagzi, a Harvard alumna and founder of consultancy Reachivy.com, is not alone in believing the "American dream" is merely being recalibrated, not extinguished. "Historically, policy shifts in international education have corrected themselves," she says. Others are looking at safer (and cheaper) pastures like Germany, which witnessed a 68 per cent increase in uptake between 2022 and 2024. We give you a blow-by-blow rundown of Trump's policy changes, historical trends, the exact things to look out for in the new visa regime, as well as an overview of alternatives.

A word to students: one dream ending is not a permanent nightmare. The world is still your oyster.



▲ July 17, 2023

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

(Aroon Purie)

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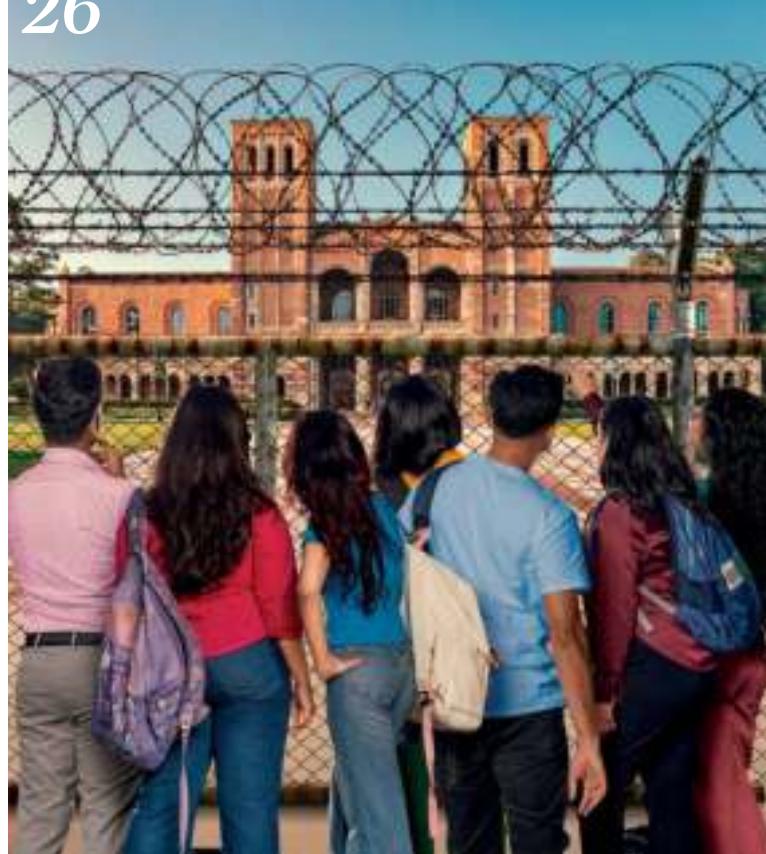


Photo Montage by **BANDEEP SINGH**

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STUDYING IN THE USA

END OF THE DREAM

HOW THE TRUMP CLAMPDOWN SLAMS THE DOOR ON ASPIRING INDIAN STUDENTS

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Cover by **BANDEEP SINGH**

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STORY OF THE DAY

Why Pakistan-fired PL-15E missile's debris in India is China's worry

By Pradip R. Sagar

The remnants, while proving China's role in the India-Pakistan conflict, open up reverse-engineering potential for New Delhi to bolster its own missile programmes

<https://shorturl.at/XGOBI>



IN FOCUS: GAYA TO GAYAJI

Why Nitish Kumar is playing the name game

By Amitabh Srivastava

The Bihar chief minister hasn't changed places with the BJP, yet. But his yielding maps an ongoing erosion

<https://shorturl.at/GMCba>

IN REMEMBRANCE: VALMIK THAPAR

How Valmik Thapar earned his tiger stripes

By Rahul Noroha

One of India's foremost tiger experts, Thapar stood out not only because of his conservation foresight but his frankness of opinion even with the powers-that-be

<https://shorturl.at/Z1ZRQ>

BUSINESS

Are you wearing cancerous chemicals in branded clothes?

By Sonal Khetarpal

A new research has flagged latent health risks to men, women and children from wide-ranging use of deadly Nonylphenol and Nonylphenol Ethoxylates in garment production



<https://shorturl.at/OUES7>

HEALTH: ACUPUNCTURE

Needle posture pain out with acupuncture

By Sonali Acharjee

From neck and sciatic nerve issues to joint arthritis, acupuncture offers lasting solutions that can save patients the stress and expense of surgery, making it the last option

<https://shorturl.at/zyw6P>

UPFRONT

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► BUSINESS

CHINA'S RARE EARTH THREAT

India's automotive sector braces for production cuts, as China stalls exports of rare earth magnets

By M.G. ARUN

THE US-CHINA TARIFF WAR may have ostensibly eased into a softer phase of negotiations, but one stealth missile fired by China in its early days has only hit home now. The potential fallout is global, and India is very much within range. On April 4, two days after President Donald Trump's tariff blitz, Beijing had hit back by calling halt to its export of rare earth magnets. China controls over 90 per cent of the global processing capacity for this key component, used in everything from automobiles and fighter jets to robotics and home appliances. As it leverages this monopoly by slow-rolling licences, stockpiles everywhere are falling as rapidly as alarm is rising.

India imported 870 tonnes of these magnets worth over Rs 300 crore in FY25, mostly from China, as domestic production capacity remains negligible. Now, though, Chinese exporters must themselves obtain government licences, furnishing detailed end-use certificates from Indian buyers, before shipping. The certificates need to be signed by India's foreign ministry and the Chinese embassy, apparently to ensure the end-use is not military. This knot has held up clearances and shipments. Industry sources say over 30 applications approved in India are already pending final clearance in China.

AUTO SECTOR IN A BIND

It has been a month since China put this squeeze on exports, and whatever inventory Indian auto companies had as a buffer is fast getting depleted and may dry up by June-end. Rare earth magnets, particularly neodymium-iron-boron ones, are essential in electric as well as conventional vehicles—they go into motors, steering, brakes, wipers and audio equipment. With no clarity on normalisation of imports, manufacturers are staring at a significant cut in production.

Industry groups are in some panic. A joint delegation compris-

ing representatives from the Society of Indian Automobile Manufacturers and the Automotive Component Manufacturers Association is set to meet senior Chinese government officials to accelerate approvals and restore supply.

"For some of these EV components, the whole supply chain resides in China...if this doesn't change, the entire Indian EV industry will grind to a halt," Rajiv Bajaj, chairman, Bajaj Auto, had warned in late April. On June 4, Rajan Wadhera, former president of Mahindra

Rare earth metals aren't 'rare' as such, and are relatively abundant in the Earth's crust. However, they aren't found in pure concentrations, making it economically challenging to mine them.

CHINESE DOMINANCE

China produces 140,000 tonnes of rare earth metals annually, with the US a distant second, at 38,000 tonnes. In comparison, India's rare earths production capacity, mostly through state-owned IREL (formerly Indian Rare

**870
TONNES**

INDIA'S IMPORTS OF RARE EARTH MAGNETS IN FY25, MOSTLY FROM CHINA



What are rare earth magnets?

These industrial magnets, made from rare earth elements, are used in everything from automobiles and fighter jets to home appliances. In the automotive sector, they power systems in both electric and conventional vehicles—from motors and steering to brakes, wipers and audio equipment.

90%

CHINA'S SHARE IN GLOBAL PROCESSING CAPACITY FOR RARE EARTH MAGNETS



What are the new norms?

Chinese exporters must apply for licences, furnishing certificates from Indian buyers, signed by MEA and Chinese embassy, to show end-use is non-military. The bottleneck may begin to hit car production by June as many shipments are stranded and inventories are running out.

& Mahindra auto and of industry body SIAM, wrote to Union heavy industries minister H.D. Kumaraswamy about the need to "...adopt a diversified, multi-pathway approach" since these magnets are "indispensable to EVs", nearly 3 kg being needed per vehicle, against 100 grams in a conventional vehicle. "The ban will begin to impact production by June-July," says Sudarshan Venu, MD, TVS Motor. "We're actively exploring ways to de-risk the situation, but there could be cost increases down the line."

A rare earth magnet, made from one of the 17 rare earth elements (lanthanide series, scandium, yttrium), is far superior to other industrial magnets.

Earths Ltd), is just over 5,000 tonnes.

With the new restrictions, several consignments are reportedly stranded at Chinese ports. Gaurav Vaangal, principal analyst with S&P Global in India, says the impact of China's clampdown can be mitigated by "optimising the product mix to ensure production lines remain operational". That said, continuous monitoring is essential, as the production line could experience significant disruptions—initially affecting EV components and later extending to ICE (internal combustion engine) parts, potentially leading to serious production challenges, he concedes. That challenge may hit the accelerator before solutions catch up. ■

► CHENAB RAIL BRIDGE

STANDING TALL

Soaring above the Chenab river, the world's highest railway arch bridge—inaugurated by PM Narendra Modi on June 6—finally links the Kashmir valley to the rest of India by rail. A feat of engineering, the bridge stands as a symbol of precision and human resilience

Text by AVISHEK G. DASTIDAR



₹1,486 CR.

Estimated cost

21 YEARS

Construction period

22,660

TONNES
Steel used

66,000

CUBIC METRES
Concrete used

1 MILLION

CUBIC METRES
Earthwork volume

100 KMPH

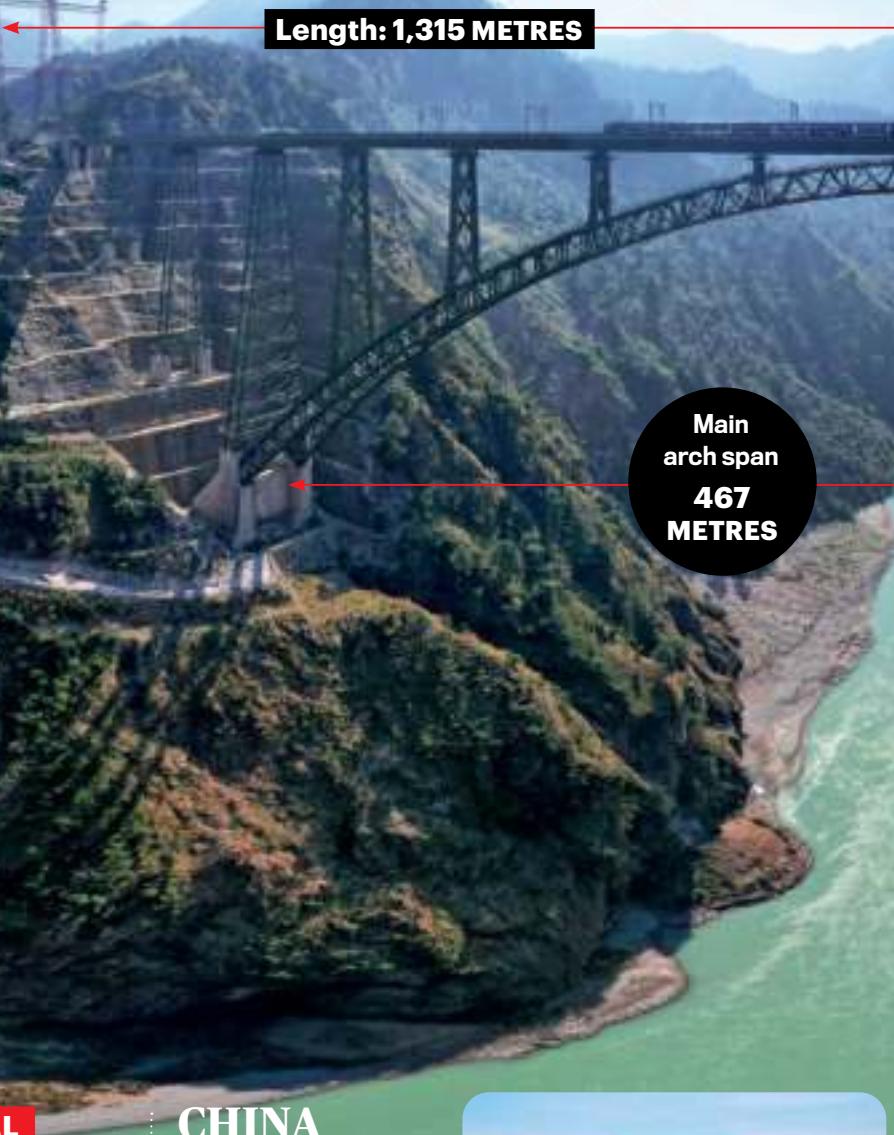
Maximum train speed

120 YEARS

Design life

Length: 1,315 METRES

Main arch span
467 METRES



GLOBAL COMPARISON

The Chenab Rail Bridge eclipses the highest arch bridges in China and the US

CHINA
NAJIEHE RAILWAY BRIDGE
Wu River, Guizhou
Height: 310 m
Opened: 2016
Use: Railway

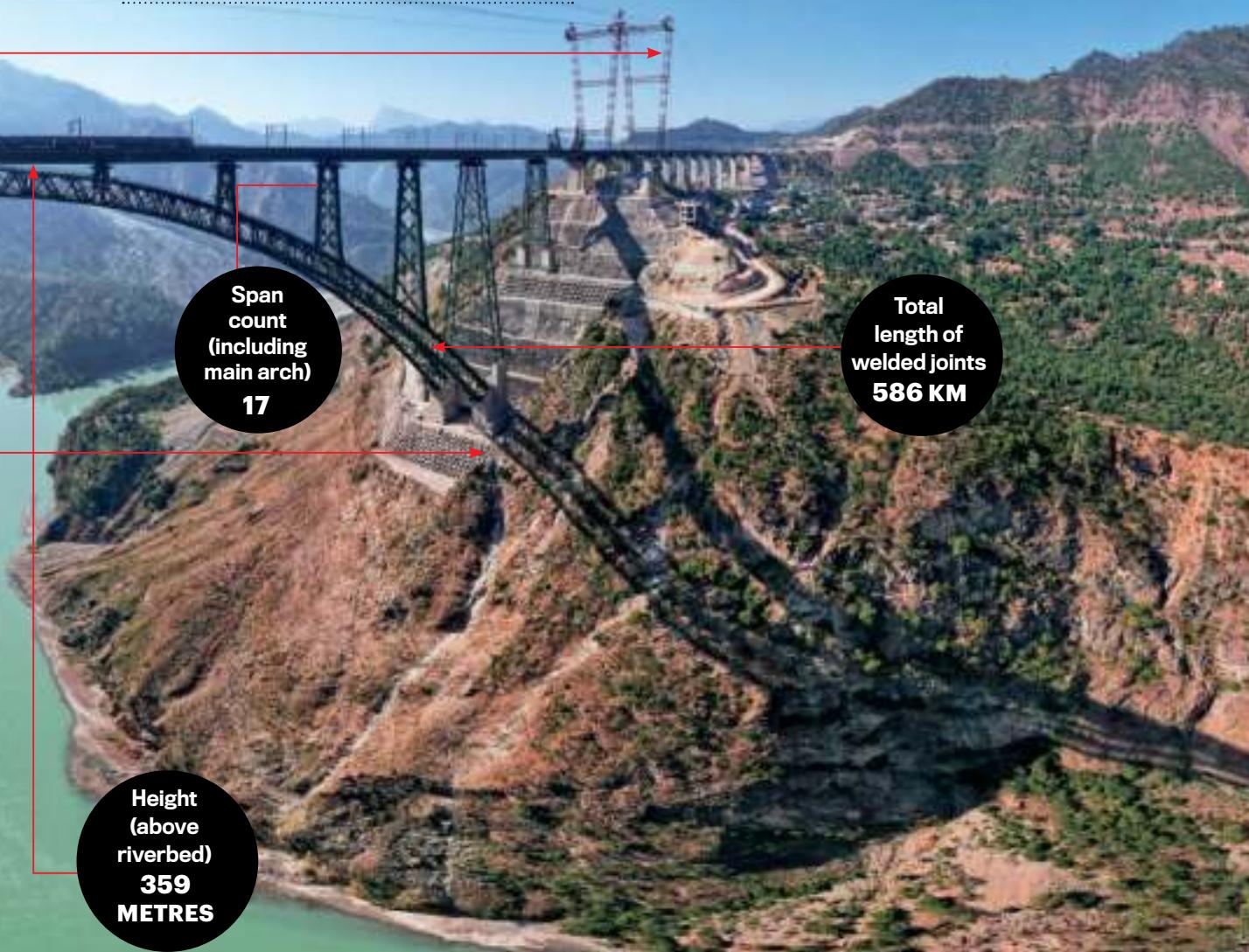


WHY THE BRIDGE WAS NEEDED

- It is crucial to the 272-km Udhampur-Srinagar-Baramulla Railway Link project
- The two pairs of Vande Bharat Express flagged off on this stretch reduce travel time between Jammu and Srinagar to 4.40 hrs from 6 hrs by road right now. There are plans to add trains from Delhi after assessing demand for some time
- The new Jammu railway division is exploring the use of this all-weather mode of transport to move saffron, apples, walnut, handicrafts and other goods from the Valley; will save costs and time

WHY IT IS AN ENGINEERING MARVEL

- Located in the highest-risk seismic Zone V, it is designed to withstand major quakes
- Can also resist wind speeds of up to 266 km per hour
- Has a temperature range tolerance from -10°C to +40°C
- The construction took over 3 million man hours of labour and engineering effort



USA

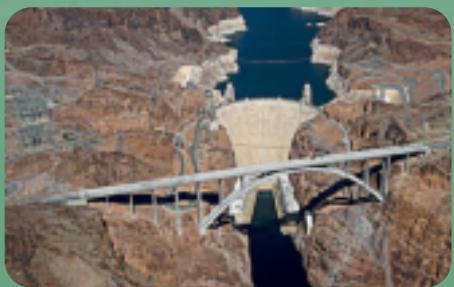
MIKE O'CALLAGHAN-PAT TILLMAN MEMORIAL BRIDGE

Colorado River, Arizona/Nevada

Height: 270 m

Opened: 2010

Use: Road





▼ GLASSHOUSE



SPIRITUAL BALLAST

War, spirituality and geopolitics. **Army chief Gen. Upendra Dwivedi** got a taste of all three during a post-Operation Sindoor visit to the Rambhadracharya ashram in Chitrakoot, MP, in late May. The Army chief and wife Sunita had driven down from Prayagraj, where he had spent time with the crack Red Eagle Infantry division, to seek the blessings of Jagadguru Rambhadracharya. The seer compared the army chief's mission to that of Lord Hanuman's to Lanka, suggesting that he had received the same deeksha (initiation) through the Ram Mantra. And as a symbolic "guru dakshina", Rambhadracharya asked that he "get back PoK" for India.

Illustrations by **SIDDHANT JUMDE**

▼ ROYAL EDIT

QUICK REWRITE

The old barbs about Rajasthan deputy CM **Diya Kumari's** ancestors are seeing a seasonal revival, with special mentions going to Raja Bharmal, who is said to have married his daughter off to Akbar, and Raja Man Singh, who fought on the side of the Mughal emperor against Maharana Pratap at the Battle of Haldighati. But that's in the past and when democracy had its say



in 2019, the lady was elected as MP from Rajsamand, the Rajput heartland seat that includes Haldighati and Pratap's birthplace, Kumbhalgarh. But though she has won elections since, the jibes never went away. Finally, the princess decided it was time for retort. At an event marking the 485th birth anniversary of Maharana Pratap, she said: "I don't speak much, but when I do, it carries weight. I had the ASI inscription changed from 'Pratap retreated...' to saying 'he won the battle.' Guess that's enough history lessons for this week."



DIDI HITS A HIGH NOTE

Trust West Bengal CM **Mamata Banerjee** to keep the meme economy booming. On May 26, during a solemn tribute to rebel poet Kazi Nazrul

Islam, cabinet colleague Indranil Sen was singing a usual Nazrul song. But Didi, never one to let a wrong note slide, abruptly stopped him mid-performance. "You're off tune," she declared and belted out "*Nayana bhara jal go tomar*" herself. Soon, the duo was doing an impromptu duet. The internet, of course, exploded. Sure, music experts might wince at her pitch, but Didi's confidence? Unshakeable.

Ajit, Power-that-be Not

After being dropped from the Devendra Fadnavis-led cabinet in Maharashtra last year, NCP veteran and OBC leader **Chhagan Bhujbal**

had made no bones about his frustration and anger. But with the local polls looming, the man is back as minister. What has got political circles buzzing, though, is that Bhujbal has chosen to thank the BJP leadership rather than his party chief and deputy CM Ajit Pawar for his rehabilitation.



JUICY CARGO



As summer ripens across the Indian subcontinent, Air India has, in one of its first forays, assumed a juicy mission: ferrying nearly 1,000 tonnes of mangoes to markets in North America, Europe, West Asia and other global destinations.

From Alphonso to Dussehris, the fruit gets transported cold-chain-style from Indian orchards to global shelves, packed in certified facilities. With loads going to 43 destinations in 31 countries, mangoes have turned into one of Air India's most adored cargo categories, a testament to India's summer obsession going global, one heady box at a time.

Kaushik Deka with Pradip R. Sagar,
Arkamoy Datta Majumdar, Rohit Parihar,
Dhaval S. Kulkarni and Avishek G. Dastidar



By Jumana Shah & Arkamoy Datta Majumdar

A 45,000-ACRE LOSS OF FOREST

The woods may be dark and deep, but India is losing it at an alarming rate. In 2024, the country lost 18,200 hectares (about 45,000 acres) of primary forest cover, a jump of 2.8 percentage point from 2023. The data, released recently by the World Research Institute's Global Forest Watch platform, says the country also lost 126,000 ha. of tree cover. From 2002 to 2024, India has lost 348,000 ha. of humid primary forest, making up



15 per cent of its total tree cover. The primary driver (60.9 per cent) is 'shifting agriculture', or slash-and-burn farming where forests are cleared for a short while for cultivation and then abandoned; followed by 27.2 per cent lost to permanent agriculture.

AIR POLLUTION KOLKATA BREATHES EASY

The City gets some Joy back, having earned the third-highest performance-based incentive of Rs 184.5 crore from the Union ministry of environment, forest and climate change for reducing air pollution. Kolkata was in the top 10 most polluted cities

list in 2019, with the city recording average PM10 levels of 100 μg per cubic metre and AQI of 343 at Fort William—categorised as 'very poor'. As of May 2025, PM10 levels had dropped to 47–50 μg per cu.m., with AQI improving to a healthy 73. A multi-pronged strategy of stricter solid waste management, widespread use of water sprinklers and mist cannons, enforcing scaffolding nets at construction sites, phasing out old vehicles et al helped. Kolkata also committed to planting 10 million saplings.



▼ VIEWPOINT

ROAD TO REALISM

Bringing global pressure on Pakistan, alongside calibrated covert punitive measures in response to terrorism, is the way forward



BY SHARAT
SABHARWAL

Operation Sindoar has been a brilliant tactical success as a just payback for Pakistan's brazen terrorist acts against India. However, Pakistan's terror machine remains largely intact. Our larger Pakistan problem--the single minded hostility of its army-led establishment--also remains unresolved. The bilateral relationship, such as it was, has completely broken down. It is too early to attempt putting it together. But going forward, it may be opportune to reflect on our approach towards this difficult neighbour.

First, cessation of military action has held, but the current equilibrium is unstable. The position of the two countries on substantive issues remains widely divergent. In spite of India's stern message, there is a surreal atmosphere of triumphalism in Pakistan. The army has consolidated its position, at least for now. The Pakistanis seem encouraged by the relatively neutral stance of the US, for reasons not yet fully clear, during the recent crisis. Therefore, we need to keep a close eye on Pakistan over the coming weeks and months, while using the communication channel between the DGMOs to impart greater stability to the situation.

Second, our political and media discourse has generated unrealistic expectations regarding our goals vis-a-vis



Illustration by RAJ VERMA

COERCION, THOUGH INDISPENSABLE IN MANAGING PAKISTAN, SHOULD BE A MEANS TO AN END, LEVERAGED THROUGH DIALOGUE

Pakistan. This was evident in the widespread disappointment at our government's rational decision to cease military action on May 10 after Pakistan came around to doing so. Let us be clear that Pakistan is not about to collapse or disintegrate, is not a pushover militarily, and a fight to the finish with a nuclear armed country is an extremely dangerous proposition. The intended message having been delivered through Operation Sindoar, we need to eschew jingoism and bring realism in our public discourse on Pakistan.

Third, Pakistani terror against us has gone down significantly from its heyday. Nevertheless, there is no sign of the Pakistani establishment giving up its hostility towards India or its

corollary—the instrument of terror. Therefore, our terror grid must remain in top gear. However, a goal of zero terrorism is unrealistic because in spite of their best efforts, security forces cannot prevent the enemy from slipping through our defences occasionally.

Fourth, our experience during the recent crisis has shown yet again that the policy of isolating Pakistan has its limitations. The international community is well aware of Pakistan's deep involvement in terrorism, but is wary of a military escalation under the nuclear overhang. While our concerns on terrorism are much better appreciated today than till the turn of the century, other major countries, including Pakistan's partners

in the Islamic world, go by their own interests and are not about to abandon it. This should not prevent us from using our growing clout to bring as much international pressure as possible to bear on Pakistan. An obvious area is to work with our partners to bring Pakistan again under greater scrutiny from the Financial Action Task Force.

Fifth, calibrated covert punitive activity and grey-zone tactics, with less chance of an escalation, should in general be our preferred response to Pakistani terror. However, for obvious reasons, chest-thumping about such activity is counterproductive. Further, coercion, though indispensable in managing Pakistan, should be a means to an end, with its impact being leveraged at an appropriate stage through dialogue and diplomacy to nudge the adversary to a more reasonable posture. Coercion as an end in itself is prone to heightened violence and volatility.

Lastly, though China was not directly a party to the military skirmish with Pakistan, the China-Pakistan nexus was palpable through the crisis. This growing nexus demands an increase in allocation of resources to our armed forces. ■

Sharat Sabharwal
is a former High Commissioner to Pakistan

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**INDIA
TODAY**
MAKING SENSE OF INDIA



THE CHANGING FACE OF BASTAR

A NEW CHAPTER OF GROWTH, OPPORTUNITY, AND TRUST

Once synonymous with naxalism and underdevelopment, Bastar is now steadily emerging as a beacon of inclusive growth. Rich in cultural heritage, natural beauty, and tribal traditions, this region is being steered toward a future rooted in agriculture, industry, education, and tourism.

With a clearly defined strategy, firm administrative will, and the effective execution of ground-level policies, the Chhattisgarh Government has repositioned Bastar on the national development map.

Under the leadership of Chief Minister Vishnu Deo

Sai, the state is actively pursuing a two-pronged approach: a time-bound mission to eradicate naxalism through decisive action, and the implementation of a comprehensive development roadmap for Bastar. These structured efforts are visibly transforming the socio-economic landscape. Local communities are witnessing an improved standard of living, and the region is poised for a golden era of prosperity.

A Multi-Dimensional Development Blueprint

The government has drawn up a comprehensive 19-point development agenda specifically for Bastar. The roadmap emphasizes transforming conflict-affected areas into hubs of industry, basic infrastructure, and tourism. It includes setting up processing units for bamboo, minor forest produce, and other natural resources, expanding ITIs and polytechnic institutes, and delivering technical training to local youth.

Innovations in Agriculture and a Path to Self-Reliance

Agriculture remains the backbone of Bastar's economy. The government's 'Millet Mission'

promotes the cultivation of coarse grains like kodo, kutki, and ragi—benefiting both nutrition and farmer income. Each block is being equipped with custom hiring centers, making modern agricultural tools accessible to small-scale farmers. Under the innovative 'Drone Didi' initiative, tribal women are being trained to use drones for crop spraying and other precision agriculture practices.

A Changing Future Driven by Education and Skills

In today's Bastar, it is not naxal groups but skill development centers that are drawing young people. The state has set ambitious targets: skill training



for 90,000 youth and employment opportunities for 40,000. The establishment of 32 new training centers is already taking shape. In districts like Kanker and Kondagaon, government schools have introduced courses in robotics and artificial intelligence—marking the first time such advanced curricula have reached tribal belts.

Emerging Tourism Destinations on the Global Map

From elevating Bastar Dussehra to the international stage to developing transparent glass bridges at Tirathgarh waterfalls and transforming Chitrakote into a world-class tourist destination, Bastar's tourism sector is being reimagined. Notably, Dhudmaras village recently earned recognition from the United Nations as one of the world's best tourism villages.

Plans to develop tourism circuits, promote homestays, camping, and eco-tourism initiatives are simultaneously generating employment, boosting local investment, and preserving cultural heritage. The Kosarteda irrigation Project is being developed as an eco-tourism hub, offering new opportunities for rural youth and women's self-help groups.

Law and Humanity: A Balanced Approach to Rehabilitation

The state's Naxalite surrender/Victim Relief and Rehabilitation Policy-2025 provides a structured framework for reintegrating surrendered naxals and victims of violence into society. This includes housing, vocational training, and a monthly stipend. Under this policy, 15,000 homes will be built, and each beneficiary will receive ₹10,000 per month. The effort is already bearing fruit, with increasing numbers of former insurgents returning to the mainstream.



Bastar is moving toward peace. The government's next priority is to ensure dignified livelihoods.

Our focus will be on skill development and enabling self-reliance through local resources.

We want Bastar's youth to not only become self-sufficient but also recognized for their talents across the nation and the world.

Vishnu Deo Sai

Chief Minister, Chhattisgarh

Empowering Local Entrepreneurship

The New Industrial Policy incentivizes local youth, women entrepreneurs, and rehabilitated naxals of Bastar to establish businesses. Steel industries will receive royalty reimbursements for up to 15 years, and companies that employ former naxals will be eligible for wage subsidies of 40% for five years. These measures are not only strengthening the region's social fabric but are also encouraging the private sector to embrace social responsibility.

Conclusion: Development with Dignity

Bastar's transformation is no longer confined to policy declarations—it is now a visible, measurable reality. The region is fast evolving into a model of tribal heritage fused with education, self-reliance, and sustainable growth. The new Bastar is not only healing from the wounds of its past but also stepping confidently into a future full of possibilities.

Socio-Economic Transition in Motion

Bastar is a land of immense natural beauty—yet, for decades, it remained shadowed by conflict, unemployment, and migration. Now, under the leadership of Chief Minister Vishnu Deo Sai, a comprehensive initiative titled "Viksit Bastar" is reshaping the region's trajectory. This is more than a policy package—it reflects a fresh vision that intertwines security, culture, and human dignity with sustainable development.



STATE SCAN

GOA: A GOAN RECIPE FOR TROUBLE PG 18

TAMIL NADU: NEW ROLE FOR HAASAN PG 20



THE TRIUMVIRATE

Eknath Shinde with Devendra Fadnavis and Ajit Pawar at a press conference, October 2024

MILIND SHELTE

► MAHARASHTRA

SHINDE LOSES SHINE

The ex-CM is besieged within the Mahayuti—Ajit snipes at his Sena, as BJP offers cover fire. Will they fight polls separately?

By Dhaval S. Kulkarni

IF YOU'VE SEEN THOSE animated ‘bar chart races’ rankings that keep shifting to capture a competition across time, it’s a perfect fit for Maharashtra’s ruling trinity. Devendra Fadnavis ahead till mid-2022, Eknath Shinde shooting up, then Ajit Pawar threatening to crash the party, and so on. Except that, after the first pocketed the CM’s post last December, Shinde’s bar has been a bit sluggish and angry.

Fadnavis had once called Shinde a “natural ally”, and Ajit a mere “political ally”, implying the NCP (Nationalist Congress Party) was an unpleasant necessity. But of late, the BJP’s affections have turned. The ideological buddy, who resaffronised a chunk of the Shiv Sena, seems marginalised in

the Mahayuti. Ajit is executing a slow demolition job on his fellow deputy CM, digging in a jack here, dangling a counterweight there, all with the BJP watching from the sidelines.

SNIP, SNIP

For one, as FM, Ajit is merrily trimming allocations to Sena ministries. Moreover, the political defections he’s been effecting from his parent party, the NCP(SCP), seem engineered to corner Sena biggies on their home turf—from Jalgaon in the north, Kolhapur in the south to Mahad on the coast.

Shinde’s been returning the compliment, lassoing in worthies from Congress, BJP, Sena (UBT) and NCP(SCP): one meant to harass NCP veteran Chhagan Bhujbal in Nashik,

another to shore up home base Thane, which he's trying to bolt up against an interested BJP.

Verbal shelling is intense. Sanjay Shirat, the Sena's social justice minister, is crying foul over Rs 425 crore of his outlay being diverted to Ladki Bahin. In a stinging reproof, he's calling out "Shakunis" in the finance department, a veiled reference to Ajit, saying the pre-poll promise of a hike in the scheme's payout will be chimeric. The most intense sniping is in Raigad, where the Sena called state NCP chief and Lok Sabha MP Sunil Tatkare a "cheat", blocked his daughter's path to being guardian minister; Tatkare publicly mimicked a Shinde minister.

Is there a method to all this? A tentative strategy looms vis-a-vis a key event on the calendar: urban and local body polls. Will the trio at all contest together? An NCP senior hints at separate battlefield presences, rather than a coalition of the unwilling. A BJP elder seconds this, saying it makes sense for the Mahayuti to split

Takeaways

► **Ajit, Shinde have both been inducting defectors so as to cut each other down to size**

► **BJP, NCP hint at Mahayuti trio fighting crucial local body polls separately to max gains**

the pro-incumbency and opposition spaces between themselves to edge out an already-weakened Maha Vikas Aghadi. It's just that Shinde's diminution seems part of the plan. Even if, as a loyalist says, he shares good vibes with the BJP top tiers and the tussle is only local. "Here, the BJP is signalling it's Big Brother. Ajit has adjusted but Shinde is in no mood to," says analyst Sandeep Pradhan. For now, Mahayuti optics are being set by not-so-friendly fire between alliance partners. ▀

► BIHAR

MODI SUNRISE, NITISH ECLIPSE

The BJP wants to retain all the goodwill Brand Nitish will bring it for the Bihar poll—but not much more

By Amitabh Srivastava

PAHALGAM TO PATNA. As political horizons, they are over a thousand miles apart. But Prime Minister Narendra Modi had collapsed the distance on April 24, when he chose Madhubani as the unlikely stage from where to promise retribution against Pakistan. When he returned to Bihar at the end of May, the public sphere still sizzled with the acrid residues of Operation Sindoor. The right atmospherics, then, for him to talk of mission accomplished—yoking Bihar to the spinning wheels of a larger narrative.

Not that it was all abstract. Modi's 32-minute elocution at

Bikramganj, Rohtas district, wove the local and national together like warp and woof, holding forth on growth, welfare, the end of Maoism et al, lobbing in barbs at the Opposition to spice things up. Something was conspicuous by its absence too: a clear endorsement of Nitish Kumar as a chief ministerial face.

NO MORE THE GROOM?

The Janata Dal (United) was hoping a de facto coronation would come, since only months are left for the Bihar assembly election. The PM did praise Nitish, but stopped right there on that intriguing edge. Maybe because it was an official vis-



► **FOR THE CAMERAS** Modi greets Nitish during a function at Karakat in Bihar, May 30

► **PATNA IN FLIGHT** The new airport terminal in Bihar's capital city



it, one where Modi inaugurated Patna's new airport terminal on May 29 and unveiled development projects valued at Rs 50,000 crore. But then, he also clearly hugged the political turf with a roadshow in Patna. As JD(U) leaders concede ruefully, even his Bikramganj speech spent enough time on shelling the Rashtriya Janata Dal-Congress, so it was hardly as if politics was off the plate. A marked omission, then.

This marked Modi's third visit here in 2025. Congress leader Rahul Gandhi too has made four visits. The stakes are clearly high. The RJD had topped the 2020 charts with 75 seats, one more than the BJP, but defections and bypolls have altered the tally. The BJP enters the fray as the single largest party, with 84 of 243 seats. The RJD holds 73; the JD(U) is in third place with 48 MLAs.

Bihar is the sole heartland state the BJP has never ruled on its own, and saffron strategists know they stand on the brink of rewriting that bit of history. Its 2020 vote share of 19.46 per cent, robust in itself, hides a deeper popularity: a 42.56 per cent vote share in the 110 seats it contested. A sizeable edge over the JD(U)'s 32.83 per cent across its 115, this is what validates the BJP's unspoken claim to the big prize: the CM's chair.

That profile gathers more weight if another fact is taken on board. See 2015 as an aberration on a pattern where the BJP and JD(U) had always contested in alliance. Each time, their vote share

percentages in seats contested were nearly identical: 24.91/26.41 in February 2005, 35.64/37.14 in October 2005 and 39.56/38.77 in 2010. Discount the 2015 poll, where the JD(U)'s alliance with the RJD and the BJP's oppositionality would have skewed the numbers, and leap to 2020. The yawning gap of 9.73 percentage points that year, when Nitish was still at the top of his game, represented a real disruption of that equilibrium. The future that flashed in the tarot cards then is now within reach.

PLAN B COMES FIRST

The plan seems to be to play up the halo around Modi post Op. Sindoora, offsetting the perceptible erosion in Nitish's heft while not letting go of the bridge he offers to a core constituency of EBC, women and OBC voters. A BJP senior admits as much, saying

Takeaways

■ **Modi has pointedly avoided declaring Nitish as the NDA's chief ministerial face again**

■ **That seems in sync with its plan to remove a big gap in its resume: solo power in Bihar**

his party is "unlikely to discard" Nitish before the polls owing to his loyal vote base, but may stake claim to the CM's post if the results favour saffron.

The faces one may see in the race in that event? Deputy CM Samrat Choudhary, a Koeri; and Union MoS Nityanand Rai, a Yadav, are seen as probables. There's also LJP scion Chirag Paswan: more a trojan horse than a dark horse. His push for more seats (and implicit self-projection as CM candidate) is being used to curtail Nitish's seat share, possibly to around 100. The real twist may be post-poll: if the BJP and its non-JD(U) pals alone secure a simple majority, or close. ■

By Dhaval S. Kulkarni

ITS 3,702 SQ. KM and 1.6 million residents form just 0.1 per cent each of India's land area and population. But Goa punches way above its weight in terms of political pot-boiler action. The latest: the acute mortification facing the Pramod Sawant government after one of its own ministers—a member of the ruling BJP at that—charged it with graft and malfeasance. What's worse, the impugned department, tribal welfare, is held by Sawant himself. Enough to speculate that something more than probity may be at stake.

A LITTLE FRIENDLY FIRE

The accuser—state arts and culture minister Govind Gaude—has held on for over a week in the cabinet after a public censure of his own government. That likely owes to his background: the MLA from Priol, north Goa, is from the Hindu Gauda community, a Scheduled Tribe. It's in that capacity that he was speaking at

ANI



A GOAN RECIPE FOR TROUBLE

A tribal minister leaves the Pramod Sawant regime red-faced with allegations of graft. What simmers beneath the surface is an unmet Adivasi manifesto

an event organised by the tribal welfare department and the United Tribal Association Alliance (UTAA) on May 25, when he veered off the script.

The department is getting “a large amount of taxpayer money” but not utilising it properly, he said. More scathingly, Gaude alleged, files of contractors were handled at the Shram Shakti Bhavan, and “something was taken” from them before they were processed.

A livid Sawant has vowed “appropriate action”, and BJP state unit chief Damodar Naik confirmed this. But this isn’t the first time the Sawant regime is getting hot Goan egg curry on

Takeaways

■ **BJP minister Govind Gaude says files move only after “something is taken”**

■ **A tribal face, he has the support of pressure group UTAA, as also the Congress**

■ **Ahead of 2027 assembly polls, BJP has to negotiate on demand for Scheduled Areas, political reservation**

its face. In March, ex-minister and BJP veteran Pandurang Madkaikar claimed he had to pay Rs 15-20 lakh to a minister to get his work done and that everyone was “busy counting money”. Madkaikar, also a Hindu Gauda, recanted later. Gaude, too, is trying to, insisting that he has not said anything against Sawant. But punters are betting on his job lasting only till an imminent cabinet reshuffle.

Thereby hangs a tale that can twist and turn. The UTAA, led by former MLA Prakash Velip, is openly backing Gaude. A tribal advocacy group, it has been pro-BJP for over a decade—but conditional to its demands being met. It’s an old Adivasi manifesto that has tilted Goa politics: passage of the ST Political Reservation Bill, notification of Scheduled Areas, and a tribal advisory council.

Gaude’s speech came at a tribute to two tribal youth slain in mob violence on May 25, 2011, while agitating for these demands. The tribal backlash had cost the Congress dear in the 2012 election, returning the BJP to power.

ADIVASI MANIFESTO

Not a segment to be trifled with, then, yet not big enough. Counting Hindus and Christians, tribals are about 10.23 per cent of Goa’s population. North Goa has 56,606 tribals, South 92,669—or 7 and 14.5 per cent of local populations. That does not warrant Scheduled Areas, says Sawant. This live wish list feeds a script of unfulfilment, rife with characters encashing it. Gaude, seen to be close to CM aspirant and health minister Vishwajit Rane, has also faced fire for alleged graft in the Kala Academy. Retaining him would be a sign of weakness, but dropping him is dicey. Speaker Ramesh Tawadkar is handy as a rival tribal leader, close to Sawant. Await the next act. ■



AT ODDS Goa CM Pramod Sawant (left) and minister Govind Gaude

► KERALA

FIGHT TO THE FINISH

The Nilambur bypoll, a multi-cornered contest, has become a prestige battle for all players concerned

By Jeemon Jacob

THE NILAMBUR BYPOLL on June 19 will see some political fireworks with a heavyweight four-cornered fight. The election was forced on Kerala after CPI(M)-backed independent MLA and controversial businessman P.V. Anvar resigned after levelling serious corruption charges against the Chief Minister's Office. The bypoll has become a pres-

The Marxists have fielded Nilambur native, ex-MLA and firebrand leader M. Swaraj, while the Congress has named Aryadan Shoukath, Anvar's arch rival and son of the late Aryadan Muhammed who represented the seat for 34 years. Shoukath's candidature has infuriated Anvar further, especially since his rapprochement efforts had been rebuffed. Incidentally, both come from



Takeaways

Controversial MLA P.V. Anvar quits after making allegations against CMO

Nilambur is the heartland of Muslim politics in Kerala, that could affect results

tive issue for CM Pinarayi Vijayan of the CPI(M), former bastion claimant Congress, and Anvar himself, who is curiously now in the fray for the Trinamool Congress. The BJP has fielded Mohan George, a senior leader of the Kerala Congress (Joseph faction), who only joined the saffron side after it announced him as their candidate.

▲ **BATTLE READY** (From left) Anvar, Swaraj and Shoukath

Malabar's top Congress families. Inaugurating the poll campaign on June 1, Pinarayi recalled how Mapillah rebellion hero Variyankunnamath Kunjahammad Haji was betrayed, an oblique reference to Anvar. The latter, though, is unfazed. "I'm no traitor. Nilambur knows who is the traitor. I will teach both Pinarayi and the Congress a lesson," he told INDIA TODAY.

Nilambur has 40 per cent Hindu and Muslim voters each. The CPI(M) has fielded a Hindu, hoping the Muslim votes will get split between Anvar and Shoukath. But the Malabaris are a canny lot, and polling day is sure to bring some surprises. ■

By Kavitha Muralidharan

N 2008, KAMAL HAAS-AN ASTONISHED

India with *Dasavatharam*, a film in which he played 10 roles. But few then could have foreseen that versatility extending to a role in politics. Nor, by a long shot, that Kamal would one day be walking into the halls of Parliament. And given his usually genteel, restrained demeanour in public, certainly not that such a stage entry would be accompanied by a surround sound of a bitter language debate, with chauvinism in full flow on all sides.

Yet, here he is, days away from the portals of the Rajya Sabha, but also simultaneously battling a ban called by Kannada activists on his latest release *Thug Life*, complete with irate rebuttals, erudite takedowns and court interventions. All for an off-the-cuff remark on stage, that "Kannada is born out of Tamil".

Though spoken in the fond tones of filial bonding, it stretched the bounds of accuracy and, in retrospect, was the best way to wade fool-hardily into a minefield. Even Karnataka CM Siddaramaiah berated him—not quite the script Kamal would have had in mind. He was all dressed up to be the voice of the South in New Delhi.

STYLE SOUTH, UP NORTH

Once the dust settles, even if traces of toxicity linger, that larger role is what the plot will move to after the interval. Kamal's arrival in Parliament marks a turning point—not just for him, but for how Tamil Nadu's concerns are articulated nationally. His path till now had been shorn of drama, proceeding instead with precision. His peer Rajinikanth, the one with the high-voltage line to the street, had always appeared much the likelier candidate to renew Tamil cinema's organic links to politics. He toyed with it, teased the public, but finally never made



Takeaways

- Tamil superstar Kamal Haasan is entering the Rajya Sabha via the DMK
- With a crossover appeal that works nationally, he can be a voice for Tamil Nadu and the South
- His blunderous remark on the birth of Kannada has set off a controversy
- Thug Life, facing threats now, shows he hasn't left films

Illustration by SIDDHANT JUMDE

► TAMIL NADU

A NEW ROLE FOR HAASAN

A noisy entry was not on his plan, but the actor has the savvy to be a voice for the South—and DMK—in Delhi

the final crossing. Kamal never made such noises; he gave little away. But it was he who made the decisive move.

In 2018, months after the deaths of J. Jayalalithaa and M. Karunanidhi, he launched Makkal Needhi Maiyam (MNM). As it made an unremarkable debut in the 2019 Lok Sabha election, and stayed a hitless wonder even in the 2021 assembly poll, Kamal likely rationed

his expectations. Wisely, he adjusted. Ahead of the 2024 Lok Sabha election, he allied with the DMK—a party he considered himself ideologically closer to, and one that recognised his appeal and ability to campaign as a star campaigner. The understanding was clear: Kamal would campaign for the DMK-led alliance and, in return, the party would send him to the Rajya Sabha.

It was a pragmatic

choice for both sides. With his voice, articulacy, stature and ideological leanings, Kamal could be a valuable national presence for the DMK. Indeed, in today's mediatised politics, he's a kind of twin asset. He has a profile that works pan-India because of his past Bollywood dalliances, with a crossover appeal none of its other voices in New Delhi have. At the same time, any success at that level

will bleed backwards to the DMK's own realms, where he lends a star counterweight to the emerging threat from actor-turned-neta Vijay.

With this nomination, the actor steps into perhaps his most demanding role yet—how demanding is something he has realised early, burning his fingers with the Tamil-Kannada imbroglio. It's not a complete transition either. With *Thug Life*, a reunion with director Mani Ratnam decades after the iconic *Nayagan*, Kamal has signalled that he hasn't left cinema. He seems, for now, committed to straddling both worlds. It was, in fact, at the audio launch for *Thug Life* that he intoned those words, affectionately directing them at actor-producer Shiva Rajkumar, son of Kannada icon Rajkumar. It was meant to connote family bonding, but turned out horribly wrong.

"What I said was out of love," he pronounced later, mixing remorse with a touch of defiance, and tiptoeing around an apology. "I didn't mean anything. Politicians are not qualified to talk about language. They don't have the education to talk about it. That includes me."

Tamil literary great Perumal Murugan, speaking to INDIA TODAY, offered a coda: "What he said is not new. Tamil nationalists say it all the time. They don't stop with claiming paternity to Dravidian languages. They claim all the world's languages were born from Tamil. This is driven by desire more than reason, and is rooted in linguistic chauvinism." That said, he adds, "the correct way to counter an idea is with another idea". Maybe Kamal will get one. ■

► GUJARAT

A SOLUTION FLOWS PAST THE PROBLEM

Ahmedabad's citizens and officials toil hard at cleaning the Sabarmati, but what plagues the river is a deep rot

By Jumana Shah

IT'S A SEWAGE DRAIN, IT'S A GARBAGE BIN, no, it's a riverbed! The 11.5 km stretch of Sabarmati along the much-feted Riverfront in Ahmedabad has been emptied of water. How and why? The first is easily answered. The Sabarmati doesn't exactly fit the classic prototype of a flowing river, much less a perennial one. Narmada water is diverted into it from a canal 20 km upstream from the Riverfront, and a barrage holds it in at the other end—so it's functionally closer to a long lake under human control. Ergo, it can be emptied.

TONNES OF MUCK

'Why' yields a rather more intriguing answer. In what's possibly an exercise that's never been seen before in the world, an emptied river is being cleaned—manually. Good samaritans and tireless squads of the Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation (AMC) are physically picking up filth from the riverbed. The Sabarmati Riverfront has been projected as an urban marvel, but there's one fact that never made it to tourism brochures.

This hallowed water body, whose very name evokes the self-cleansing ethos of a Mahatma, has entire riv-



▲ **FOR SABARMATI**
Municipal staff, volunteers do the spade work

Takeaways

■ **Thousands of citizens join in as Sabarmati is emptied for some vigorous manual cleaning of its riverbed**

■ **But with 786 million litres of sewage flowing in daily, the issue stays unresolved**

ers of untreated sewage flowing into through 43 outfalls within city limits. The AMC estimates the volumes of vile sludge at some 786.49 million litres per day (MLD). Add plastic garbage, discarded clothes and religious flags,

and you can see why 251 tonnes of garbage was removed from the riverbed in just the first four days of the month-long drive.

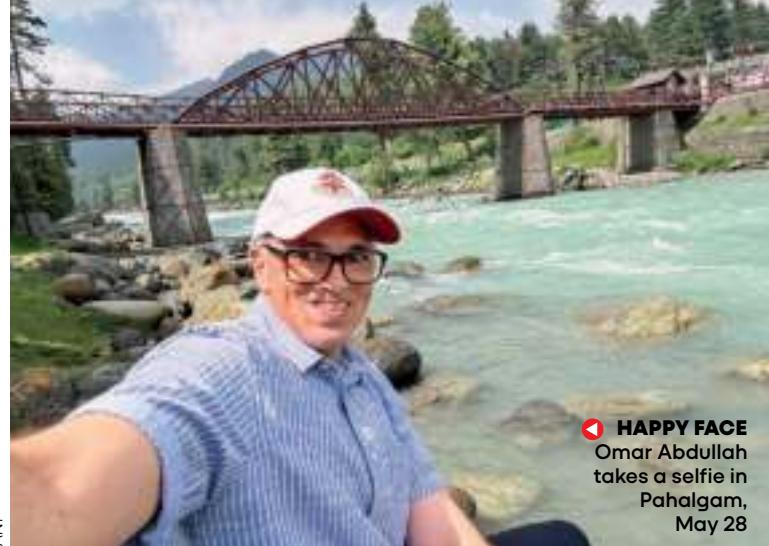
Summer brought the chance for spring cleaning. If the Karai Dam controls the water inflow, the Vasna barrage keeps the water within the city. "One barrage door had to be repaired, so water had to be drained for a month. I turned adversity into opportunity and invited volunteers to help clean the riverbed," says AMC commissioner Bancha Nidhi Pani. "On average, 2,500 volunteers turn up every morning, with the number reaching 10,000 on a Sunday." So it has genuinely resonated

with the local community. Some say this is quixotic repair work that leaves the original problem intact. What plagues the river is a deep rot, literally: take outfalls for allegedly ‘treated’ sewage, untreated industrial effluents with no allegations of purity, and thousands of illegal connections plugged into the AMC’s stormwater network.

The city generates some 1,693 MLD of sewage. Its 14 sewage treatment plants (STPs) have a capacity of 1,252 MLD. Not more than 1,080 MLD is treated every day: the STPs go periodically into spells of dysfunctionality and maintenance mode. A 27 km mega pipeline is meant to route 120.8 MLD treated effluents from Narol, Naroda, Vatva and Odhav industrial estates, but the five Common Effluent Treatment Plants either do not function or fall short in capacity. Studies show high concentrations of organic pollutants and not enough oxygen for aquatic life. The effluents also seep into the groundwater, used to draw drinking water for nearly 500,000 homes.

“The unaccounted sewage isn’t even routed through STPs,” says environmental engineer Mahesh Pandya, who runs the NGO Paryavarjan Mitra. Ahmedabad’s urban sprawl is the issue: its population has doubled to 9 million since 2000, including the lakhs in the unserved ghettos. “But the trunk infrastructure has not caught up. It’s a socio-political problem.”

A 2021 suo motu PIL by the Gujarat High Court spurred some action. The AMC has introduced bioremediation—partially treating sewage using bacterial consortia—but missed its first deadline of March 1. Why all the new urgency? Put it down to the city’s ambition is to emerge as a global sporting capital. The 2036 Olympics is on its mind. The river will be the cynosure of all eyes. ■



◀ **HAPPY FACE**
Omar Abdullah takes a selfie in Pahalgam, May 28

► KASHMIR

OMAR ON A SLED

The chief minister tries to revive Kashmir’s tourism, as central forces secure Amarnath Yatra routes

By Kaleem Geelani

IT TOOK YEARS OF efforts. The Centre’s push for better infrastructure, incentives to local industry and the sedulous dissemination of a feelgood narrative, helped by a dip in terrorism—it was an entire conspiracy of virtues that revived Jammu and Kashmir as a tourism hub. The Pahalgam terror attack ripped apart that patchwork quilt woven since 2019. The urgent question now is, how to revive that revival?

It’s an unenviable task. As scared tourists stay away, summer hotel bookings are mostly cancelled, and large-scale layoffs in the hospitality sector are spreading misery.

Takeaways

► **As Kashmir faces a tourism chill, CM Omar Abdullah visits Pahalgam, asks for central compensation**

► **Union home minister Amit Shah visits Kashmir, holds security review for ongoing Amarnath yatra**

Chief Minister Omar Abdullah has clearly deemed the situation grim enough to lead a full counter-charge, but he is seeking to do it with a touch of sunshine.

On May 27, he chose to hold a cabinet meeting right there on ground zero: Pahalgam. In the evening, he went on a cycle ride through its streets with sons Zahir and Zamir. Next day, cabinet in tow, the CM visited ski-resort Gulmarg, then took a cable car ride before the cameras. After Eid on June 7, the government will organise a Walkathon around Dal Lake in Srinagar and a water sports event on the lake.

A record 3.5 million tourists visited J&K in 2024; the sector adds 7 per cent to its GDP. Enthused locals, who invested in hotels and homestays, are unable to repay loans. The J&K government has petitioned the Centre to help these stakeholders.

Home minister Amit Shah, too, visited J&K on May 29-31. Agenda: to secure the Amarnath yatra that begins on July 3. A 50,000-strong detail will guard the routes to the cave, via Pahalgam and Ganderbal. There’s zero tolerance for error. ■

MAHARASHTRA'S GREEN MANDATE: A FUTURE ROOTED IN ACTION

Every year on June 5th, the world pauses to reflect on our relationship with the environment. But for those of us in Maharashtra—and particularly for the youth who will inherit this planet—this day isn't just about reflection. It's about action. It's about owning our future.

By **SIDDHESH KADAM**, Chairman, Maharashtra Pollution Control Board & Secretary, Shiv Sena.

Last month, during one of my college visits, a student in Pune asked me directly: "Sir, why should we believe that this generation of leaders will solve climate change when previous generations created this mess?" Her question was blunt, honest, but fair. It's the kind of straight talk I respect, and frankly, it's the kind of accountability every leader needs to face.

Here's my answer to her, and to every young Maharashtrian reading this: We won't solve this crisis for you. We'll solve it with you.

Maharashtra's Environmental DNA

Maharashtra has always been a pioneer. In 1969, before India had a national water pollution law, Maharashtra enacted its own Water Prevention Act. In 2018, while other states debated, we banned single-use plastics. Three years later, the entire country followed our lead. This isn't political chest-thumping. This is about understanding Maharashtra's character. We are a state that believes in action over words and results over rhetoric. From Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj's forward-thinking governance to the industrial revolution that shaped modern India, Maharashtra has never shied away from bold decisions.

But here's what's different about today's environmental challenge: it's the first crisis in human history that can only be solved by the next generation taking charge now, not later.

The Youth Revolution We Need

I've spent considerable time visiting colleges across Maharashtra, from engineering institutions in Pune to agricultural universities in Marathwada. What I've discovered is extraordinary: young Maharashtrians aren't just concerned about the environment; they're frustrated by the pace of change and hungry for real responsibility.

Today's youth possess something my generation

didn't have at their age, access to information, technology, and global networks that can accelerate environmental solutions. They're digital natives who think in terms of systems, not silos. They understand that environmental challenges are interconnected with economic opportunity, social justice, and technological innovation.

But here's what concerns me: we're still treating them as beneficiaries of our policies rather than architects of solutions. We invite them to seminars to listen, not to board rooms to decide. We ask them to implement our ideas, not to challenge our assumptions.

The innovation is happening. The passion is real. What's missing is the platform to scale these ideas and the political will to empower young leaders with real decision-making authority. As someone who represents both environmental governance and political leadership, I have a responsibility to bridge this gap. The Shiv Sena has always believed in empowering people at the grassroots level. Today, that empowerment must extend to environmental action, with youth not just participating, but leading the charge.

Beyond Compliance: A Movement

MPCB launched our "100 Days Program"—focused interventions including inventorying e-waste, cleaning polluted river stretches, upgrading solid waste management, enhancing public awareness, and strengthening complaint redressal.

Our Mahaparyavar App isn't just a complaint portal—it's a platform where citizens can register complaints and suggestions while receiving pollution alerts. This digital bridge empowers communities to contribute meaningfully to environmental protection.



WORLD ENVIRONMENT DAY
JUNE 5

The Namami Gange initiative focuses on river rejuvenation through improved sewage treatment, real-time water quality monitoring, and community-based water management. The Chandrabhaga River Action Plan follows a similar holistic approach—mapping pollution sources, assessing STPs, examining

industrial discharge, and emphasising citizen awareness.

During our urban pollution strategy consultations in Nagpur, Nashik, Kolhapur, and Chhatrapati Sambhaji Nagar, we've involved NGOs, industries, and educational institutions to understand site-specific challenges.

This isn't tokenism. This is transformation.

The Circular Economy Opportunity

Our district-wise circular economy directory maps over 1,200 units across the state managing battery waste, tyre waste, plastics, e-waste, used oil, solvents, and metal scraps. We're promoting industries to think beyond disposal through waste-to-wealth solutions and co-processing in cement kilns.

Our strategic partnerships with colleges aim to foster environmental innovation among students and faculty, leading to practical solutions for air, water, and waste management challenges.

As a Shiv Sena leader, I see this as fulfilling our core promise: creating opportunities for Maharashtrians, by Maharashtrians. When young entrepreneurs develop innovative recycling solutions, they're building Maharashtra's next economic boom.

Technology as an Enabler, Not a Crutch

MPCB is implementing AI-enabled compliance monitoring systems across highly polluting



industries and Common Effluent Treatment Plants. These systems will detect anomalies and help shift from reactive enforcement to predictive governance.

We've expanded real-time monitoring systems and hired additional technical staff. Through YASHADA, we trained 450 staff members in 2024, focusing on technical updates, managerial skills, and legal knowledge.

Our strategic tie-up with colleges fosters environmental innovation among students. We've modernised regulations with a new Ready-Mix Concrete Policy for MMR and improved Ease of Doing Business through streamlined application processing.

This is "practical idealism" using technology to solve real problems, with young people contributing fresh perspectives to governance challenges.

The Political Imperative

Environmental action is often seen as separate from political leadership. That's a mistake. Climate change doesn't respect party lines, and neither should environmental solutions. As a Shiv Sena member, I believe our responsibility to Maharashtra extends beyond electoral cycles. We're custodians of a state that has given India its commercial capital and entrepreneurial spirit. We cannot be the generation that hands over polluted rivers and toxic air to our children.

This isn't about being pro-business or pro-environment. It's about being pro-Maharashtra. It's about ensuring our industries thrive without compromising people's health, and that Mumbai remains a city where young professionals want to build careers.

But political commitment means more than policy statements. It means changing how we do politics. For too long, environmental issues have been treated as technical problems to be solved by experts behind closed doors. The reality is that environmental challenges are fundamentally about choices—choices about

what kind of future we want, what trade-offs we're willing to make, and whose voices get heard in decision-making processes.

That's why I've made youth engagement a non-negotiable part of MPCB's governance approach. When young people bring environmental concerns to political leaders, they're not asking for charity—they're demanding accountability. They're asking us to govern with their future in mind, not just the next election cycle. This is where political leadership and environmental stewardship must converge. True political success in the 21st century will be measured not just by economic growth or electoral victories, but by whether we've created sustainable systems that serve future generations.

The Road Ahead

Our priorities are clear: launching the Mahaparyavar app statewide, establishing Environmental Resource Cells at divisional levels, scaling real-time monitoring systems, and developing our Real-Time Water Quality Monitoring network.

We're expanding capacity-building programs through YASHADA and rolling out formal partnerships with academic institutions. But more than programs and policies, we need a mindset shift. Young Maharashtrians must see environmental action not as an obligation, but as an opportunity to innovate, lead, build businesses, and create the Maharashtra they want to live in.

A Personal Commitment

As someone who believes actions speak louder than words, let me end with specific commitments: every major environmental decision at MPCB will include youth perspectives. Every policy will incorporate student feedback. Every program will create opportunities for young environmental leaders.

But I'm going further than consultation. Starting this year, MPCB will reserve seats

for youth representatives on our technical advisory committees. Young professionals and students will have voting rights, not just speaking opportunities. We're establishing mentorship programs where experienced environmentalists work alongside young innovators, creating knowledge exchange that flows both ways.

Our college partnerships won't be limited to seminars and workshops. Student teams will be embedded in our field operations, our policy development processes, and our technology implementations. When we design air quality monitoring systems, computer science students will be part of the development team. When we plan river rejuvenation projects, environmental science students will help shape the implementation strategy.

This isn't political posturing. This is practical governance that recognises a simple truth: the people who will live longest with our environmental decisions should have the strongest voice in making them.

Young Maharashtrians have been talking about environmental solutions for years. Now it's time for them to implement those solutions with the full backing of government infrastructure and political support.

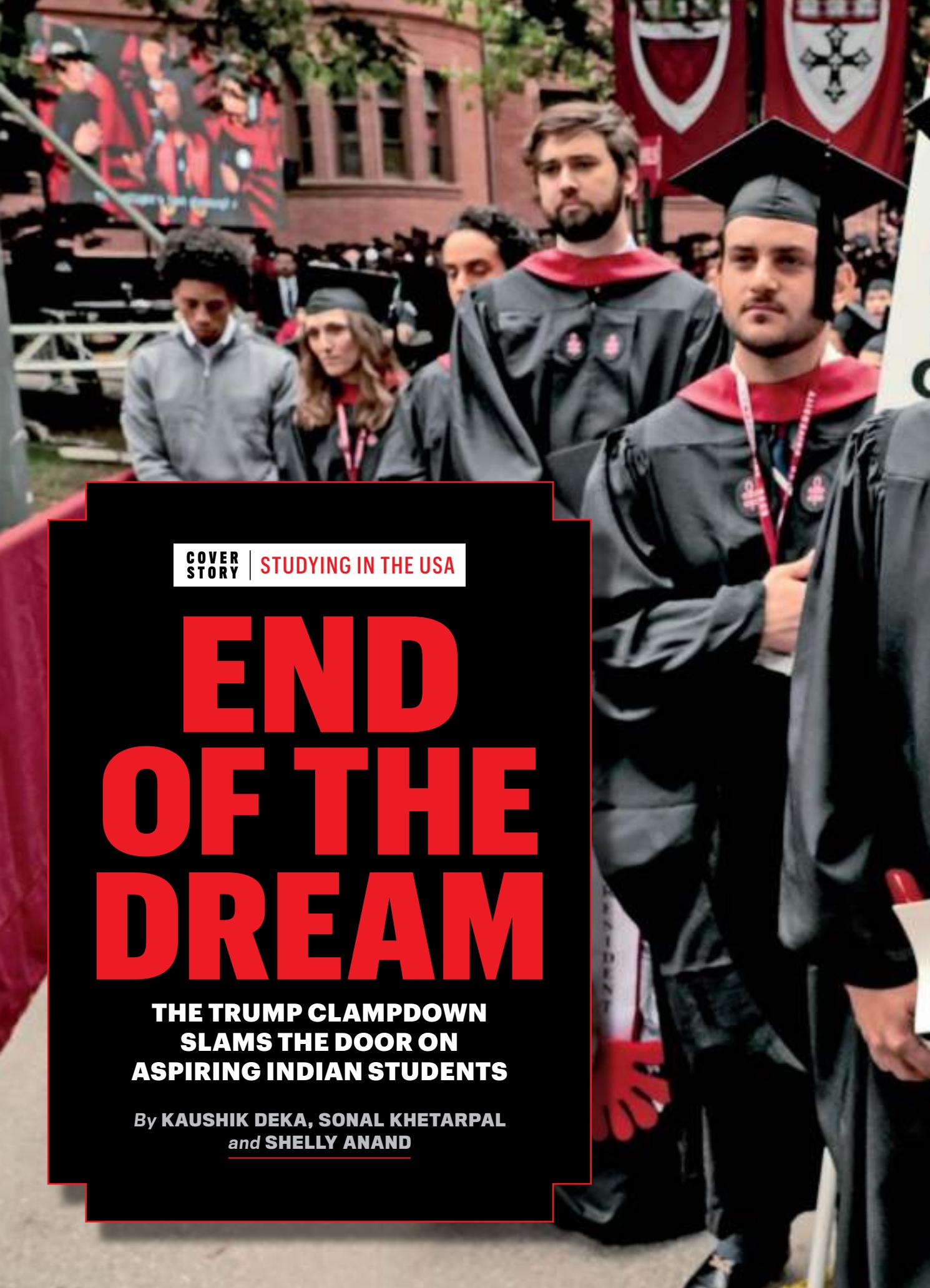
The student in Pune who questioned me about climate action represents the kind of youth leadership we need—young people who aren't waiting for permission but taking charge of their environmental future.

That's the Maharashtra I believe in. That's the future we're building together.

- For a cleaner Maharashtra.
- For a greener Maharashtra.
- For a youth-powered Maharashtra.

Siddhesh Kadam is Chairman of the Maharashtra Pollution Control Board and Mumbai Chapter In-charge of Shiv Sena. He can be reached at connect@siddheshkadam.in





A black and white photograph showing a group of Indian students in graduation gowns and caps walking in a procession. They are wearing grey gowns with red stoles and caps. In the background, there are large red banners with white emblems and a red brick building. The scene is outdoors, likely on a university campus.

COVER STORY | STUDYING IN THE USA

END OF THE DREAM

**THE TRUMP CLAMPDOWN
SLAMS THE DOOR ON
ASPIRING INDIAN STUDENTS**

By KAUSHIK DEKA, SONAL KHETARPAL
and SHELLY ANAND



GETTY IMAGES

A

CHILL WIND IS BLOWING THROUGH THE HALLOWED HALLS OF AMERICAN ACADEMIA, a wind carrying uncertainty and dashing the hopes of aspiring international students, particularly tens of thousands from India. The Trump administration, in a series of abrupt and unsettling moves, has begun to dismantle the welcome mat for global talent. The decision to pause new student visa appointments at US embassies worldwide on May 27, including in India, has plunged countless young scholars into a state of anxious limbo. This pause, officially justified by the need to expand the scrutiny of applicants' social media activity, is no mere procedural tweak; it signals a profound shift.

For Indian students who have meticulously planned their futures around the promise of an American education, the dream now seems to teeter precariously on the edge of an opaque and shifting policy landscape, forcing many to question if the United States remains a safe or stable choice for their ambitions. One only has to look at the numbers to understand the implications of what is unfolding. In the 2023-24 academic year, the US hosted a record 1.13 million international students. Indian students accounted for 331,602, or around 30 per cent, of them, up by 23 per cent from the year before, while Chinese enrolment fell 4 per cent amid political tensions. A majority of the Indians choose STEM (scitech, engineering, mathematics) fields—42.9 per cent opted for maths and computer science, 24.5 per cent engineering that year. This is the talent that has helped fuel America's robust start-up ecosystem. While there is no nationality-wise break-up, estimates are that one in four US billion-dollar start-ups was founded by a former international student; immigrants have also co-founded nearly two-thirds of America's top AI (artificial intelligence) companies.

What makes the Trump administration's decision even more confounding is that the US risks losing the big bucks Indian students bring. According to the Indian Student Mobility Report, 2023-24 by global student housing marketplace University Living, Indian students were projected to spend \$17.4 billion in the US in 2025, \$10.1 billion on academic expenses alone, another \$4 billion on accommodation, and the remaining \$3.3 billion on other living costs. This is up from the \$10.5 billion spent in

INDIA'S FOOTPRINT ON AMERICAN CAMPUSES

Beyond their economic impact, international students bring academic diversity and cultural enrichment to US campuses. India leads this pack

UNIV. OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

Los Angeles, California

1,650-1,750

MBA, MS in Comp. Science/ Applied Data Science

\$73,260



THE UNIV. OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN

Austin, Texas

1,150-1,200

Comp. Science, Engineering, Business, Basic Sciences

\$40,582-48,712

- No. of Indian students
- Top programmes
- Avg. tuition fee (annual)

TOTAL ENROLMENTS

► In 2023-24, the number of international students in the US reached a record high of **1,126,690**, accounting for 5.9% of its higher education enrolments

► With **331,602** students, India surpassed China as the leading source for the first time in 15 years

INDIA

29.4%

25.4%

269

2022-23

332

2023-24

CHINA

27.4%

24.6%

290

2022-23

277

2023-24

No. of students from the source nation (in '000)

Share in the total international students in the US

UNIV. OF ILLINOIS URBANA-CHAMPAIGN

Champaign, Illinois

1,300-1,400

Engineering, Business/
Mgmt, Basic & Social Sciences;
Comp. & Info. Sciences

\$34,501-42,868

PURDUE UNIV.

West Lafayette, Indiana

2,900-3,000

Engineering, Business/
Mgmt, Comp. & Info.
Sciences, Biological &
Biomedical Sciences

\$14,711-43,200

CARNEGIE MELLON UNIV.

Pittsburgh,
Pennsylvania

1,900-2,000

Comp. Science,
Engg, Public Policy

\$63,829-67,020

HARVARD UNIV.

Cambridge,
Massachusetts

500-800

Social/ Biological
Sciences, Engineering,
Maths, Comp. Science

\$55,000-65,000

COLUMBIA UNIV.

New York

1,200-1,300

Computer Science,
Economics, Political
Science, Engineering

\$68,400-70,628

NEW YORK UNIV.

New York

1,950-2,000

MBA, MS in Comp.
Science/ Data Science

\$62,796

JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY

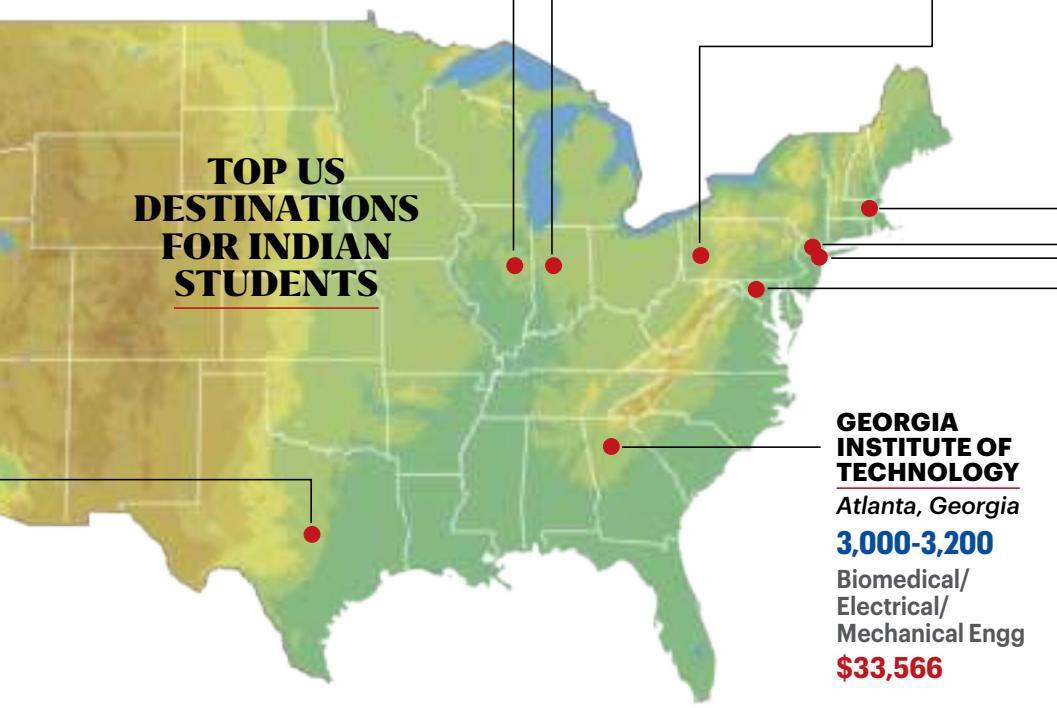
Baltimore, Maryland

600-700

Public Health,
Biomedical Engg

\$68,592

TOP US DESTINATIONS FOR INDIAN STUDENTS

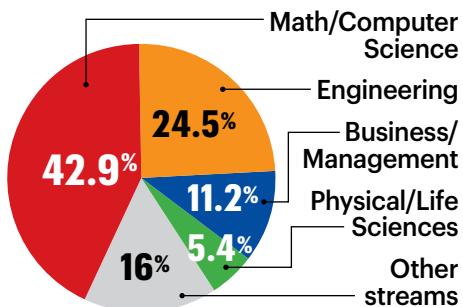


POPULAR PROGRAMMES

► Indian students in the US gravitate toward Computer Science and Engineering, fields that align with the robust STEM foundation back home and strong career prospects globally

► MBA and Public Health programmes being offered in the US are also gaining traction

Streams Indians opted for in 2023-24



ECONOMIC CONTRIBUTION

► In 2025, Indian students are projected to spend **\$17.4 billion** (Rs 1.5 lakh crore) in the US, a significant uptick from \$10.5 billion (Rs 90,000 crore) in 2022

Projected contribution of Indian students to the US economy in 2025



► Many Indian students also utilise the Optional Practical Training (OPT) programme to work in the US after graduation, contributing further to its economy

OPT enrolments in 2023-24

242,782

Total international students

97,556

Indian students (40% of total)



Sources: EduShine; Open Doors 2024; Indian Student Mobility Report, 2023-24

2022. "International students fund American universities and enrich their intellectual climate," says Timothy Gibson, president of the Virginia Conference of the American Association of University Professors. "If the administration continues to view them through a xenophobic lens, the US risks losing its standing as a global leader in science and research."

The Trump administration has also put a freeze on several federal grants and funding programmes that facilitate international scholarships and student exchanges, the Fulbright and Gilman scholarship programmes among them. Another area of concern is the potential restrictions on the Optional Practical Training (OPT) programme, which currently allows international STEM graduates to work in the US for up to three years. If the administration decides to limit or dismantle OPT, it would drastically reduce the opportunities for foreign graduates to gain practical work experience, jeopardising their career prospects and deterring future enrolment.

HIGH ANXIETY

Mary Gogoi, head of admissions at Delhi-based education counselling firm eduVelocity Global, says, "All these developments have bred anxiety in international students, as well as among American universities that rely on this cohort for cultural diversity and financial sustainability." Nothing illustrates this better than the case of a 24-year-old girl student, who does not wish to be named. Admitted into a US university for a master's in computer science with specialisation in

AI, her visa application was rejected for no clear reason, forcing her to reapply. Keen on only the US as she finds it the best for research and innovation, she is thinking of deferring her course by a year if visas are not scheduled soon.

The Trump administration's latest directive—to vet social media accounts before sanctioning a student visa—is also adding to the consternation. Of course, as Rohin Kapoor, partner, education and skilling at global consultancy firm BDO India, points out, social media vetting is not unique to the US; Australia and Canada, too, screen the social media posts of applicants. The current US policy also builds on social media checks introduced in 2019. Now, however, the State Department has said it will use "all available information" to identify "antisemitic activity", "pro-jihadist" views or "anti-American" sentiments. Charles H. Kuck, founding partner of Atlanta-based law firm Kuck Baxter, which specialises in immigration laws, explains what this means. "Social media vetting has existed for years," he says. "But now artificial intelligence reviews all postings. This violates the core American values of free speech and personal liberty; yet, the administration shows little concern for those principles when it comes to foreigners." Poorvi Chothani, managing partner at immigration

THE TRUMP CLAMPDOWN

The Trump administration has introduced barriers for foreign students seeking education in the US. The policies have a range of targets, from visa processes to the stability of top institutions. Here are the main features of the clampdown looming before Indian students:

SUSPENSION OF STUDENT VISA INTERVIEWS

The Trump administration has halted the scheduling of new student visa (F-1) appointments at US embassies, including in India, though previously scheduled interviews are proceeding. The delays have caused

uncertainty for Indians about to commence studies in the US

ENHANCED SOCIAL MEDIA VETTING

There are directives for an expansion of social media scrutiny for student visa applicants, ostensibly to "enhance national security".



Anything "radical/anti-American" would reduce chances for a visa, raising concerns about privacy

VISA REVOCATIONS BASED ON POLITICAL ACTIVITY

The Trump administration has revoked 300+ student visas for

foreign students, targeting those involved in "pro-Palestinian activism". This has already led to deportation in some cases. Further, on June 4, Trump suspended for six months the entry of foreign students in Harvard University due to "security risks"

law firm LawQuest, also sees a stark departure from earlier policy. "Previously, checks were random or suspicion-based," she says. "Now they're mandatory for all student visas."

However, things aren't easy even for those who manage to secure visas. They face constant scrutiny: US agency Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) now wants students to show proof of full-time enrolment and perfect attendance, with deportation a looming consequence for any slip. Pablo S. Bose, professor of Geography and Geosciences and associate dean of research and graduate education at the University of Vermont, points out how Trump's crackdown is not restricted to new enrolments. The administration has revoked more than 300 visas, with Secretary of State Marco Rubio claiming the real figure may be in the thousands. Many of the students are targeted for presumed links to pro-Palestinian activism or alleged online support for 'terrorism'. Another 5,000 students have been expelled for minor infractions, ranging from underage drinking to traffic violations.

"All these measures affect who universities can host, whether current students can stay, and if graduates can work," says Bose. "The confusion and anxiety created have already had

disastrous consequences." The mood of many Indian students enrolled in the US is one of fear and extreme caution, with most keeping a low profile and staying informed. Lubaina Kapasi, 19, a sophomore at the Savannah College of Arts, a private university in Georgia, has so far not felt the full brunt of the clampdown on international students compared to those studying in some public universities in the US. Yet, she says,

"It doesn't mean we are fully in the clear. International students, especially from India, give up a lot financially and personally to study here. To then be faced with policy uncertainty and visa complications feels like a nightmare."

Legal recourse is limited as the US State Department is immune to visa denial lawsuits under the doctrine of consular non-reviewability

THE POLITICS OF IT

The Trump administration's clampdown on international students has been cast as a matter of national security, yet it reeks of a very different, cul-

tural, battlefield. It stems from a desire to police campus discourse, with the administration viewing many universities as excessively "left-wing" and failing to curb pro-Palestinian activism, which it flatly equates with antisemitism or support for terrorism. Officially, the White House insists the heightened vetting is a "commonsense measure" to ensure newcomers pose no threat. "It's a privilege, not a right, to study in the United States," says White House spokesperson Anna Kelly.

ADVISORIES ON COMPLIANCE

The US embassy in India has issued advisories warning that students who skip classes, withdraw from programmes, or leave their studies without proper notification risk visa revocation. Indian students who fall afoul of these face deportation

REVOCATION OF SEVP CERTIFICATION

In May, Harvard's SEVP (Student and Exchange Visitor Program) certification that enables it to host foreign students was revoked for "fostering antisemitism and violence". A federal judge blocked this. Upheld and expanded elsewhere, Indians will be affected

DEMANDS FOR STUDENT INFORMATION

The administration has demanded that Harvard provide records of its foreign students, including disciplinary actions and coursework. Again, if expanded, students would be affected by this breach of academic freedom

CLOSING THE OPT

In March, a bill was introduced in the US Congress to eliminate the Optional Practical Training (OPT) programme, which allows foreign students to work temporarily in the US after completing their studies. With a known OPT critic like Joseph Edlow being nominated as director of the US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), many students fear missing out on work experience. As a result, some are considering alternative destinations too. French business schools, for instance, are fast-tracking admissions for students who have been affected by US visa restrictions

PROPOSED CAP ON FOREIGN STUDENTS

President Trump has suggested capping foreign student enrolment at Harvard to 15 per cent, down from the current 31 per cent, arguing that they occupy seats wanted by Americans. If applied across varsities, the number of seats for Indians will fall steeply

FREEZING FEDERAL FUNDING

The US aims to leverage billions of dollars in federal grants to force US universities to bow to the agenda. For instance, it froze over \$2.3 billion in research funding to Harvard. Quite a few Indians will be without funds if many top universities face funding cuts

TARGETING TECH STUDENTS

The administration wants to "aggressively revoke" visas of Chinese students, especially those linked to Communists or studying sensitive fields like AI and chip technology. This can lead to loss of talent in critical areas. If the net widens, Indians, too, can come under it

The State Department says every visa decision is “a national security decision”. Trump has suggested that foreign student enrolment at Harvard be capped at 15 per cent from the current 31 per cent, claiming that Americans are losing out. J.D. Vance, his vice president, shares the sentiment, arguing that foreign students “take spots from American kids”.

It is not fooling anyone. Gibson says this is less about immigration, more about tightening controls on universities. “Trump views colleges with suspicion. The knowledge they produce challenges his worldview,” he says. Issues like climate change and Covid-19 exemplify this, where scientific findings trump Trump’s claims. Prof. Rajiv Sethi of Barnard College, Columbia University, recalls how Vance once declared that American conservatism would triumph only by capturing or dismantling elite universities.

Elora Mukherjee, Jerome L. Greene clinical professor of law, and director, Immigrants’ Rights Clinic, Columbia Law School, says the policy “seems driven by cruelty, white nationalism and racism”, with visa decisions now vulnerable to prejudice arising out of race, religion and political views. This security narrative has expanded to include counter-terrorism and antisemitism. The Department of Homeland Security warns that “antisemitic activity on social media” and “harassment of Jewish individuals” may affect migrant visas. Visa eligibility is now linked to the administration’s stance on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It is also part of a wider ideological assault on universities deemed too liberal. Harvard, for instance, is accused by the Trump administration of fostering antisemitism and promoting diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) policies, which it sees as racist (see column *Anatomy of a Standoff*). Columbia University, on the other hand, risks losing its accreditation over claims it violated the civil rights of its Jewish students.

LIMITED LEGAL RE COURSE

As international students, particularly from India, navigate the uncertainties thrown up by the Trump administration’s new visa policies, they are exploring the legal avenues available to them, the specifics of the expanded social media vetting, and support structures. For individual students, the financial stakes are steep. B.K. Shukla of The Ivy League Edge, a college application consultancy, notes that university applications alone cost Rs 10,000-15,000 per institution, while education consultants typically charge Rs 5-6 lakh. Many students have already paid tuition fees or booked housing, sums that may not be refundable. The real blow, though, Shukla says, is in the opportunity cost. “Losing a year means forgoing a degree, work experience and an early start to a career.” The risk is not just in the money, but also the momentum.

For Indian students whose visa applications have been put on indefinite hold, direct legal avenues seem severely limited. The US Supreme Court has ruled that the State Department is immune from lawsuits over the denial of a visa abroad under what is called the consular non-reviewability

LEARNING AND EARNING

Indian students in the US have till now had unfettered pathways to gain practical work experience after graduation through programmes like Optional Practical Training (OPT) and the H-1B visa. Here’s the existing status quo, now imperilled, on these options:

OPTIONAL PRACTICAL TRAINING

► OPT has till now allowed F-1 visa students, who studied at an accredited US college or university or English at an English language institute, to work in the US for up to 12 months after graduation

► Those with degrees in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) fields may qualify for a 24-month extension, bringing the total work authorisation period to 36 months

THE STATUS NOW

► The Fairness for High-Skilled Americans Act, 2025, proposes to eliminate the OPT programme

► It argues that the programme gives international graduates an unfair advantage over domestic students



doctrine. “When a person requests a visa for a country, it is a request to that government, not a right,” says BDO’s Kapoor. “A case filed in an Indian court will have no locus standi to direct a foreign government. The only recourse for students is to send a petition to the US embassy in India requesting an update on their visa status or seeking expedited processing.” Kuck offers some practical advice: “Students can better prepare for an interview, ascertain the underlying reason for the denial, and bring evidence and verbal description of how to overcome that initial decision.” Indian consultants also recommend students erase even mild political posts or join “safe” groups on social media.

And though the Trump administration’s new student visa measures will primarily affect individuals and institutions, they may also have diplomatic reverberations. The Indian ministry of external affairs (MEA) has publicly urged the US to “ensure timely issuance of student visas based on merit”. MEA spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal, while acknowledging that “a visa is a sovereign right of a country”, emphasised this appeal and reiterated that “the welfare of Indian students abroad remains a top priority for the Government of India”.

H-1B VISA

The H-1B visa allows US employers to hire foreign workers in specialty occupations.

Many Indian students transition from OPT to H-1B status.

VISA CAP

85,000 visas annually, including 65,000 for general applicants and an additional 20,000 for those with advanced degrees from US institutions.

Despite the master's cap advantage, the chances of securing a visa remain low due to high demand.

WHERE ELSE THEY CAN GO

Over the decades, an American education has gained favour among Indians. While the UK has been another traditional destination, other countries like Canada, Australia, Singapore and Germany have been attracting more Indian students.

NUMBER OF STUDENTS
2024
2023
↓↑Change

UK

98,890

136,921

↓28%

CANADA*

137,608

427,085

↓41%

GERMANY

34,702

23,296

↑49%

FRANCE

8,536

7,484

↑14%

RUSSIA

31,444

23,503

↑34%

France aims to increase numbers to 30,000 by 2030

SINGAPORE

17,000 (2022) ↑25%

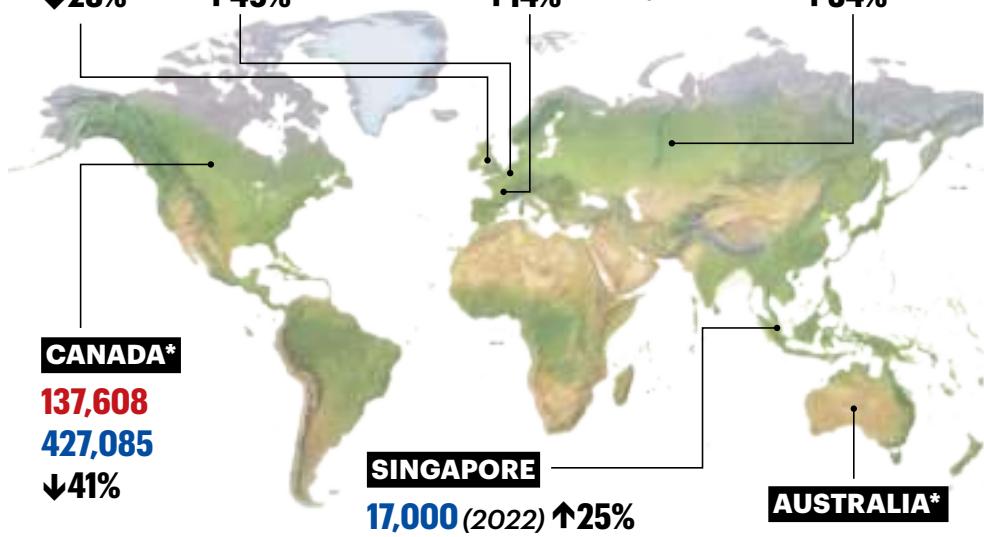
There has been a significant uptick in Indian student enrolments, with a reported 25% year-on-year growth.

AUSTRALIA*

68,572

78,093

↓12%



Source: Union Ministry of Education

A GLIMMER OF HOPE

Even as the clouds of uncertainty hover, many see it as a temporary reset rather than a permanent barrier for the world's best and brightest. Vibha Kagzi, a Harvard alumna and founder of foreign education consultancy Reachivy.com, believes the "American dream" is merely being recalibrated, not extinguished. "Historically, policy shifts in international education have corrected themselves, especially with strong pushback from universities, industry leaders and lawmakers who value global talent," she says. She also believes the US still offers unmatched advantages in scale, research funding, alumni networks and global reputation.

Akshay Chaturvedi of study abroad platform Leverage Edu, thinks likewise. "This isn't a shutdown," he says, "but a systemic reset in how the US engages with global talent. America has always bounced back, and these cyclical shifts often create more inclusive and outcome-focused systems."

Many see the current policy as a reset, not a permanent barrier to the best talent entering the US, which it will still need for highly skilled jobs like data analysis

Shukla believes top-tier universities will remain largely unaffected. "The crackdown seems aimed at filtering those who misuse admissions at obscure institutions just to settle in the US," he says. "For highly skilled roles, like data analysis or cybersecurity, US still needs international talent."

There are also those who think the new vetting process of international student visas will improve immigration screening. University Living founder and CEO Saurabh Arora says, "Scrutiny of social media handles, email addresses and phone numbers from applicants over the past five years will better verify identities, prevent fraud and ensure a safe environment for living in the US." Aman Singh of GradRight, an agency that guides students on finding suitable colleges and funding, believes legitimate applications will continue to be processed. "Students actively stoking anti-US sentiment may face trouble, and new vetting steps could slow decisions," he

HARVARD AND TRUMP ANATOMY OF A STANDOFF

As Harvard University wards off an unprecedented assault on its freedom, academic work suffers amidst a 'survival state'. The situation may force Indians aspiring to study in the US to rethink their plans

By AASHISH KHULLAR

H

Harvard University, a global symbol of academic excellence, is now ground zero of a political and cultural standoff with the US government.

Students, faculty, alumni and the administration all currently seem to be dipping in and out of moods of unity, defiance, fear and hope. While they express a range of views, they converge on feeling a greater sense of community and common cause in what they see as a fight for freedom of speech, inquiry and thought.

International students constitute 27 per cent of the student body across Harvard's undergraduate college and 12 graduate schools. Nearly 800 are from India. These students and recent graduates on OPT (Optional Practical Training—a post-graduation work permit linked to the student visa) are in disarray. The legality of their presence in the country hangs in question. The risks include,

maximally, deportations, or being forced to transfer schools, both entailing the loss of years of academic effort and research.

For those conducting research in labs, the impact is already being felt as they linger in a 'survival state'. "It is difficult to overestimate the level of waste and disruption this is causing," says a faculty member. "Years of work could vanish. It's not abstract. These are

comes as no surprise. Over the past few months, Republicans have proposed direct and indirect curbs on institutions of higher education that they see as ideologically misaligned.

Tensions escalated after a letter from the US government, reportedly sent in error on April 11, outlined expanded demands beyond an earlier April 3 communication. The letter asked for an overhaul of university



what private universities can teach, whom they can admit and hire, and which areas of study and inquiry they can pursue." In response, the federal government withheld \$2.2 billion in research funding, including grants for research in cancer, Alzheimer's, vaccines etc., and threatened to revoke Harvard's tax-exempt status and ability to host international students.

The situation further spiralled when Harvard sued the government over the funding freeze. On May 22, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) accused the university of "fostering violence, anti-Semitism, and coordinating with the Chinese Communist Party", and moved to revoke its SEVP (Student and Exchange Visitor Program) certification—jeopardising the legal status of nearly 7,000 foreign students and thousands on OPT work permits. Harvard challenged the DHS in court and won temporary relief the following day, with further relief granted on May 29. However, on June 4, the Trump administration

Academic freedom is struggling, with consequences for intellectual inquiry, the perception of US higher education and even its soft power

real people, real cures, real consequences," says a young researcher working on potentially life-saving therapies. Another asks, "How can we be expected to apply our hearts and minds to intellectual pursuit and social good if we live in fear of being picked from the street?"

Temporary relief from the court is a sign of hope, but everyone seems to have accepted that this will be a long battle. To some, the situation with the Trump administration

governance structures, elimination of its diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) initiatives, stricter screening of the views of international students, changes to admission criteria and stricter disciplinary actions for student protests.

Harvard declined to comply, citing First Amendment protections and academic independence. University president Alan Garber stated, "No government—regardless of which party is in power—should dictate



REUTERS

suspended for six months the entry into the US of all foreign students seeking to study in Harvard due to "security concerns". Harvard has vowed to "protect its international students". Previously, Secretary of State Marco Rubio ordered a global pause on all new student visa interviews.

Harvard is now engaged in two legal battles with the US government: one over research funding and the other over its ability to host international students. It has taken a firm public stance in defence of academic freedom, in contrast to Columbia University, which has almost fully complied with federal demands. Even so, the administration has stated that Columbia failed to meet accreditation criteria due to inadequate protection of Jewish students.

The situation casts a shadow on the future of Indian students aspiring to study in the US—especially at Harvard and other targeted institutions. Even if courts continue to favour Harvard, uncertainty may force students to rethink their plans. The tension

also resonates with India's own challenges. Incidents at JNU, TISS and Ashoka raise similar questions about the interplay between academic freedom and state control.

Amidst the chaos, one thing is certain—academic freedom is struggling, with potential consequences for intellectual inquiry, the global perception of US higher education, and America's bilateral relations with countries like India and China, which are the source of the largest contingents of foreign students. It also risks tarnishing the soft power of the US.

Notably, Harvard, which, in fact, is older than the US itself, is in a rare position to resist. The Harvard Corporation, with its over \$50 billion endowment, has allocated \$250 million to address funding cuts. Most institutions in the US and around the world lack such resources or autonomy. Others will learn from this moment, but not all the lessons will be in the public interest.

The author is a Carr-Ryan Center Fellow at Harvard University. Views expressed are personal

notes. "Yet, with sophisticated AI tools parsing global chatter, delays are unlikely to be drastic."

ALTERNATIVES TO AMERICA

In the long run, the Trump administration's visa clampdown threatens not just foreign students, but also the economic lifeblood of higher education in the US and its innovative edge. Many universities, especially those outside the Ivy League, depend on full-paying foreign students to subsidise domestic education. A drop in enrolment would plug this crucial revenue stream. Indian students are already exploring backup plans. They are considering deferring admissions, or looking at alternative countries. Bengaluru-based Nishant (*name changed*), who will complete his BTech in electronics engineering next May, is among those reconsidering their choices. "People who have already finished their master's [in the US] still haven't found jobs," he says.

"Is it worth it then to spend so much in the US when places like Germany offer more subsidised tuition?"

While national security is a legitimate concern for any country, America's xenophobic turn could erode its academic pre-eminence

Enrolment patterns of Indian students reflect the shift. Between 2023 and 2024, Germany saw a 49 per cent rise in Indian students, from 23,296 to 34,702, as per a response by Union minister of state of education Sukanta Majumdar in Parliament. Kalpesh Banker of EduShine Search Partners, an education strategy consulting firm, lists the advantages of other destinations.

"Canada has friendly visa policies and post-study work permits, Australia and the UK offer strong research and shorter courses. Germany, Hong Kong, Singapore and the UAE, too, are rising education hubs, with low fees, cultural diversity and robust facilities."

Meanwhile, the Trump administration's crackdown on international students signals more than just bureaucratic tinkering; it portends a potential reordering of America's relationship with global talent. Cloaked in the garb of national security, a legitimate concern for any country, these policies are sowing confusion and fear, eroding the very advantages that have underpinned American academic and innovative pre-eminence. A recalibration is indeed in order: one balancing security with openness and reaffirming the value of international students. Else the US could squander its role as a magnet for the world's brightest. ■

—with Ajay Sukumaran



THE BIG STORY

GST

RISING COST OF COMPLIANCE

THE GOODS AND SERVICES TAX WAS INTRODUCED TO PROMOTE EASE OF DOING BUSINESS BUT FREQUENT AMENDMENTS AND ESCALATING PROCEDURAL EXPENSES OVER TIME HAVE TURNED IT INTO A GROWING BURDEN FOR ENTREPRENEURS

By SONAL KHETARPAL | Illustration by TANMOY CHAKRABORTY

In

December 2022, Muzaffarnagar-based entrepreneur Neeraj Kedia, managing director of zinc sulphate manufacturing firm Chakradhar Chemicals, received an unexpected notice from the Goods and Services Tax (GST) department, raising a tax demand of around Rs 95 lakh and interest of Rs 1.15 crore for the period from July 2017 to March 2018. It stated that the Input Tax Credit (ITC), which allows businesses to get reimbursement for the taxes they paid on their purchases, should not have been claimed by Kedia, as his supplier had not filed Form GSTR-3B, the monthly return to declare GST liabilities. The notice further alleged that Kedia had failed to file the form back in 2017. He was stunned. Like many small and mid-sized business owners, such

a notice triggered not only a legal alarm but also operational disruption. Kedia responded swiftly, highlighting a key point: the Form GSTR-3B functionality wasn't even available on the GST portal at the time in question. The case was finally settled in September 2024. But addressing a show-cause notice years after is no easy task—it involves combing through old records, rechecking financial data and reconciling accounts. "You have to jog your memory, track down data from years ago and build your case from scratch," Kedia explains.

Paperwork, though, is only part of the ordeal. Other hassles could include multiple visits to the GST office, pleading your case with officials and, finally, succumbing to the one solution that magically gets files cleared—paying a bribe. This is the common reality entrepreneurs encounter routinely, overwhelmed by the growing complexities of GST compliance and notices. However, of the more than 10 entrepreneurs INDIA TODAY spoke to, none wanted to go on record, for fear of retaliation.

GST was undoubtedly a landmark reform in India's taxation system. Founded on the principle of 'one nation, one tax', it was designed to promote ease of doing business. The regime streamlined a host of indirect taxes previously levied separately by the Centre and states, such as sales tax, excise duty, VAT, and central sales tax, thereby significantly reducing the compliance burden. GST also eliminated inter-state barriers, introduced IT-based compliance mechanisms, and minimised tax rate disputes, drawing more businesses into the taxpayer net and accelerating formalisation.

Under the earlier VAT and excise regimes, businesses often resorted to overbilling or underbilling to save on taxes that amounted to 18-20 per cent. Honest businesses found it difficult to compete, as others could sell their products for cash at significantly lower prices. GST changed that by reducing incentives for tax

evasion and creating a level-playing field, says Prashant Patel, director, R.K. Synthetics, an Ahmedabad-based dyes and chemicals manufacturer, and former president of the Federation of Indian Micro and Small & Medium Enterprises. Over time, businesses began to accept GST and saw its benefits. It is no surprise that GST collections have risen year after year, with net revenue touching Rs 19.56 lakh crore in FY25—an 8.6 per cent increase over Rs 18 lakh crore in FY24.

However, now that the system has largely stabilised, the government seems to be adding more rules, creating new challenges and reversing some of the progress made toward ease of doing business. Frequent amendments and increasing compliance requirements have added significant cost and burden, especially for Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs), which are resource-constrained to begin with.

GOOD, NOT SIMPLE, TAX

GST was meant to simplify taxation. However, in its current form, the system has become complex. This is because GST is levied on every transaction for intra-state supply of goods and services by both the Centre and state. The Centre levies what is called Central GST or CGST on intra-state supply of goods and services, while the states impose State GST or SGST. Integrated Goods and Services Tax or



CHANDRADEEP KUMAR

CASE STUDY

NEERAJ KEDIA

MD, Chakradhar Chemicals, Muzaffarnagar, UP

The businessman got a GST notice in Dec. 2022 for Rs 95 lakh in tax and Rs 1.15 crore in interest from July 2017 to March 2018, citing ineligible Input Tax Credit as his supplier hadn't filed GSTR-3B. The notice also said he hadn't filed the form, though it wasn't available on the portal then. The demand was nullified in Sept. 2024, after Kedia submitted his detailed reply.

"You have to jog your memory, track down data from years ago and build your case from scratch"

CASES IN POINT

A few court rulings that lay bare the complex legal tangles of GST implementation

IGST is levied for inter-state supplies.

Further, every company must obtain a separate GST number for each state in which it operates. Each registration in turn requires the company to file two forms (GSTR-1 and GSTR-3B) and reconcile another (GSTR-2B) every month. So, if a company operates in 10 states, it must submit 20 forms monthly, amounting to 240 GST forms annually, according to Mumbai-based chartered accountant Kush Vora, partner at accounting firm SC Vora & Co who specialises in GST for MSMEs. In addition, two annual returns (GSTR-9 and GSTR-9C) must be filed by businesses exceeding a turnover of Rs 2 crore and Rs 5 crore, respectively.

New regulations are added every few months, making it harder for entrepreneurs to keep up. First came e-invoicing, which was made mandatory in August 2023 for businesses with a turnover above Rs 5 crore. Then, in October 2024, the government introduced the Invoice Management System on the GST portal, says Rajat Mohan, senior partner at Delhi-based tax consulting firm AMRG & Associates. “With changes happening every 6–8 months, most business owners no longer feel confident filing GST returns on their own. They’re forced to rely on professionals just to stay compliant.” For example, in 2023, the government issued notices to several MSMEs in Gujarat, demanding 18 per cent GST on the sale of leasehold industrial land with retrospective effect. This meant that any such land sold after July 2017—when GST was implemented—was now subject to the tax. There was no such provision under the previous VAT and Service Tax regimes.

Typically, when such significant amendments are introduced, the government ensures extensive communication through advertisements, circulars and newspapers. Quoting the finance ministry spokesperson, Shashank Priya, member-GST, Central Board of Indirect Taxes and Customs (CBIC), says the

Dinesh Kumar Varma vs Sales Tax Officer, Class II AVATO/Delhi High Court

THE CASE: Varma filed a case in December 2023 after receiving two orders in the same month—both demanding a tax liability of the same amount for the same period—from the same jurisdictional office

STATUS: In April 2024, the HC ordered both to be clubbed and re-adjudicated by one officer

Gujarat Chamber of Commerce & Industry vs Union of India/Gujarat HC

THE CASE: In 2023, the government sent notices to several MSMEs in Gujarat demanding 18% GST on the sale of leasehold industrial land with retrospective effect. They filed a case in July, stating that the sale was excluded from GST

STATUS: The court gave a favourable ruling in January 2025

Chief Commissioner of Central GST vs Safari Retreats/Supreme Court

THE CASE: The Input Tax Credit claim by Safari Retreats was blocked, stating that it was not admissible on construction of buildings. Safari Retreats filed the case first in the Orissa High Court in 2018, arguing that their purpose was to rent—a taxable service—and it should be eligible for ITC

STATUS: In October 2024, SC agreed with the company

Engineering Tools Corporation vs Assistant Commissioner (ST)/Madras HC

THE CASE: Filed in February 2024, because the buyer’s ITC was rejected, citing the supplier’s GST registration cancellation with retrospective effect

STATUS: In the same month, the court directed the authorities to reconsider the ITC claim

GST Council and its subordinate bodies actively engage with industry and trade associations to ensure that recent amendments and clarifications are effectively communicated to MSME stakeholders. However, in the Gujarat case, though the GST provision technically existed, it was not clearly communicated to stakeholders. The Gujarat Chamber of Commerce & Industry moved the state high court, finally securing a favourable judgment in January this year.

Priya, though, defends the multiple changes. GST, he says, is a newer tax system and, like any large-scale reform, is in a continuous process of fine-tuning. “As the government, businesses and tax professionals interact with the system, many new issues, inefficiencies, or unintended consequences come up. Rules are then amended/clarifications issued to fix these gaps,” he adds.

“The government should not be policing entrepreneurs. We need a system that helps improve productivity and clarity—not one that constantly looks for where we went wrong”

PRASHANT PATEL
Director, R.K. Synthetics,
Ahmedabad, and ex-President,
Federation of Indian Micro and Small & Medium Enterprises



SIMPLIFYING GST

What the government, as per experts and business owners, can do to ease the multiple glitches in the taxation system



COSTLY, COMPLEX COMPLIANCE

MSMEs are required to file multiple GST returns for each state they operate in. They also have to invest in software tools for invoicing etc. All of it increases operational cost

SOLUTION Reduce the number of returns, tax slabs, and regularise them to ensure entrepreneurs can file GST themselves



LACK OF CLARITY, DISCRETIONARY POWERS

Tax slabs for goods are categorised as per the HSN codes (e.g., caramel popcorn vs salted), leaving rules open to interpretation

SOLUTION Reduce tax slabs and eliminate provisions requiring officer discretion, as they create opportunities for harassment and exploitation



RETROSPECTIVE NOTICES, LONG AUDIT WINDOWS

With a 6-year-plus audit window, notices are often sent years after the transaction

SOLUTION Reduce the time frame to a more reasonable period of 1-2 years



SCRUTINY BY MULTIPLE DEPARTMENTS

MSMEs can be scrutinised by several verticals—jurisdictional office, audit wing, anti-evasion team—for the same issue

SOLUTION Introduce a centralised, single-window scrutiny system within the GST framework to eliminate overlaps



SUPPLIER-LINKED INPUT TAX CREDIT ISSUES

If a supplier's GST registration is cancelled, the buyer is penalised for wrongly claiming ITC

SOLUTION Introduce a mechanism wherein the buyer doesn't have to bear this liability



LACK OF AWARENESS ABOUT RULES

New GST rules and compliance requirements often lead to confusion

SOLUTION Implement awareness programmes through government and industry bodies

result in significant tax liability for the buyer for no fault of their own. Kedia demands a mechanism for entrepreneurs to report such discrepancies, with the government resolving them.

Citing another example, Kedia points out how if a supplier's GST registration is cancelled, the authorities often issue a notice to the buyer for "wrongly claiming" ITC, calling the transaction a fake deal, instead of pursuing the defaulting supplier. "Why should an entrepreneur be penalised for issues with the supplier's GST registration?" he asks. "The responsibility lies with the government to ensure that GST numbers are issued only to verified and compliant vendors. And if a GST registration is cancelled, such vendors should be barred from making sales altogether," says Rakesh Chhabra of RAI Industries Association, Sonipat, Haryana. He emphasises that this is a common problem for MSMEs—many are accused of falsely claiming ITC. However, not everyone has the resources to challenge it in court.

Another big problem with GST is that it leaves too much room for interpretation. HSN (harmonised system of nomenclature) codes determine how products are classified; often, a single product can fall into multiple categories. Who can forget finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman's popcorn math when, during the 55th GST Council meeting, she revealed that the ready-to-eat salty popcorn is taxed at 12 per cent, while the caramel variety would attract 18 per cent GST. "Even after seven years of GST implementation, so many products are still open to interpretation—with the Centre, the state and the entrepreneur each having their own way of reading the law," says Bhartia. The bigger issue, he adds, is that there is no central authority to conclusively resolve these ambiguities. The government did set up the Authority for Advance Ruling (AAR) to help taxpayers seek clarification on tax matters. However, since each state has its own AAR with differing interpretations, it defeats the very purpose of 'one nation, one tax'.

SYSTEMIC CHALLENGES

Under the current GST regime, businesses are required to file three common returns in a month. The first is GSTR-1, a statement of total sales made, and the second is GSTR-3B, a record of net GST liability. The third, GSTR-2B, is a monthly auto-generated statement that captures the details of all purchases made in a given month. Businesses, essentially, get tax credit on the purchase of raw materials. So, once a seller files their sales return in their respective GSTR-1, the data automatically reflects in the buyer's GSTR-2B, allowing them

to claim ITC on raw material purchases.

Simple as it sounds, the process is far from straightforward. The rigidity in the system makes it difficult for the less tech-savvy entrepreneurs to navigate the returns independently, says B.C. Bhartia, president, Confederation of All India Traders (CAIT), forcing them to hire professional services for the firm, which adds to their costs. "It is a clear case of a good law poorly implemented," he says. For instance, since GSTR-2B form is system-generated and auto-populated based on the supplier's filing of GSTR-1, any error or omission on the supplier's part can

SILOED APPROACH

While GST is a completely digital system, the scrutiny and resolution processes are offline. CA Rajat Mohan points out a glaring issue: “Take the example of Gameskraft, which received a GST notice worth Rs 20,000 crore, or Zomato, which was slapped with a demand for Rs 803 crore in outstanding tax. Even to file an appeal, the company must first deposit 10 per cent of the demand with the government. No entrepreneur has that kind of cash just lying in the bank,” he says. What’s more, any notice above Rs 5 crore carries the risk of compulsory arrest. “Big corporates can hire top lawyers and fight it out in court. But even mid-size firms don’t have that kind of bandwidth or deep pockets to manage prolonged litigation,” he adds.

Adding to the complexity is the fact that there are state and central GST departments. And within each, there are different wings such as the jurisdictional office, the anti-evasion wing and the audit team; they do their scrutiny independently and send notices. “Each vertical follows its own set of parameters, which are not aligned with one another. As a result, businesses often find themselves being assessed by multiple GST departments from the Centre or state or both simultaneously for the same issue,” says CA Kush Vora. Take a recent case in the Delhi High Court: in Dinesh Kumar Varma vs Sales Tax Officer, Class II AVATO, Varma received two orders (December 17 and December 25, 2023), both demanding a tax liability of Rs 15,53,240, and pertaining to the same tax period—July 2017 to March 2018. What is ironic is that two different officers within the same jurisdictional office had raised it.

“Of the 100 companies we handle each year, we’ve dealt with approximately 350 GST notices over the past 3-4 years on their behalf. As a result, our salary costs have risen by 50-70 per

cent in the past three years, primarily due to the workload from GST notices,” says Vora. Naturally, this increase has been passed on to the MSMEs—Vora’s firm has raised its retainer fees for GST clients by 30 per cent.

Several MSMEs confirm that while audits and raids conducted by the CGST department are generally done after due diligence, the same cannot be said of SGST departments,

they threatened to seal the factory. “It was pure extortion. We had no choice but to comply,” he says. At 3 am, the company deposited Rs 75 lakh with the department just to keep the factory operational. “While raids are intended to curb evasion, often they are conducted solely based on preliminary findings. Also, the way they are carried out equates business owners with criminals, which can severely damage a company’s reputation and business,” he rues.

THE ORDEAL OF AUDITS

The GST audit period can extend up to 5-6 years after the end of the financial year. That’s a very long window—accountants change, staff changes and memories fade, says Chhabra. In contrast, he points out customs cases cannot be reopened after three years. Similarly, for taxpayers with annual incomes under Rs 50 lakh, the audit window is limited to three years. “So, why not apply a similar rule here?” he asks. CBIC’s compliance management department didn’t respond to INDIA TODAY’s queries on raids and show-cause notices. Chhabra suggests that the government consider reducing the audit period gradually to four, then to one. “In today’s age of AI and automation, discrepancies can be flagged in real time. There’s no need to leave files open for years—it only leaves room for harassment,” he adds.

Running a business and keeping it profitable in these uncertain times is no mean feat. Despite this, businesses have to constantly fight the system to prove that “entrepreneur *chor nahin hai*”. Sitharaman has reiterated that the government is working towards creating a trust-based compliance system for businesses. But, as Patel says, “The government should be supporting entrepreneurs, not policing them. We need a system that helps improve productivity and clarity—not one that constantly looks for where we went wrong.” The FM needs to heed their plea. ■

“There is too much rigidity, which makes it difficult for non-tech entrepreneurs to navigate the GST returns independently, resulting in the increased cost of professional services for the firm.... Good law with poor implementation”

B.C. BHARTIA
President, Confederation
of All India Traders



where harassment remains common. A company in Uttar Pradesh is currently fighting a case, in which 7-8 officials from the SGST department arrived at its factory, demanding Rs 2 crore in GST liability—without providing any explanation—and even threatening with an FIR and arrest. “Thankfully, our GST consultant knew the law and clarified that an FIR cannot be registered for a GST notice involving less than Rs 5 crore,” says the owner on condition of anonymity. However, the ordeal didn’t end here;

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SHAMEFUL WASTE

A STRING OF EIGHT HIGH-PROFILE PROJECTS UNDER SUCCESSIVE CONGRESS AND BJP REGIMES HAS TURNED INTO CAUTIONARY TALES OF FISCAL SPLURGE AND POOR PLANNING IN JAIPUR AND REST OF THE DESERT STATE

By Rohit Parihar



HEN THE SUPREME COURT, IN MARCH THIS YEAR, ordered the demolition of kitschy replicas of the ‘Seven Wonders’ built along the banks of Ajmer’s 12th-century Ana Sagar Lake—a protected wetland—it wasn’t judicial activism so much as a belated course correction for a folly committed two years ago. Around the same time, Rajasthan chief minister Bhajan Lal Sharma ordered the dismantling of Jaipur’s 16-km-long Bus Rapid Transit System (BRTS), a corridor completed 15 years ago but never brought into use. Blamed for traffic chaos and fatal accidents, the BRTS had become emblematic of the state’s flawed urban planning.

Elsewhere, there are efforts to salvage ailing projects. A sum of Rs 12,000 crore has been proposed for the overhaul of Jaipur’s partially functional and financially bleeding metro rail, originally launched in 2011. Another Rs 50 crore has been allocated for a fresh feasibility study and works for the Dravyavati River rejuvenation project, where an earlier Rs 1,500 crore intervention has only turned the river into a fetid drain. Even a sprawling new Education Hub in Jaipur, built just two years ago but largely unoccupied, is now being reimaged to house branches of national institutions.

When Sharma took office in December 2023,

PARADISE LOST

Once envisioned as an eco-tourism revival project, Jaipur’s 17th-century Man Sagar Lake—home to the iconic Jal Mahal—stands ruined. Launched in 1999 under the Congress, the plan included treated sewage inflow, lakeside walkways and heritage conservation. But commercial interests crept in. By 2004–05, the BJP awarded a 99-year lease for just Rs 2.5 crore annually, handing over Rs 15,000 crore worth assets to a private player. In Gehlot’s second term, the project

1. JAL MAHAL COMPLEX, JAIPUR

LAUNCHED: 1999 (Congress)
COST: Rs 65 crore (government),
 Rs 150 crore (private)
STATUS: Out of bounds for public,
 new works stopped

morphed into a scandal—land was reclaimed for a proposed mall and hotels, shrinking the lake and leading to overflow. Though courts intervened—Rajasthan HC cancelled the contract in 2012, SC cut lease tenure in 2014—the damage was done. In 2015, the BJP government



notified it as a wetland, freezing all activity. Yet violations continued. The NGT fined the civic body Rs 26 lakh in 2024. In February 2025, the SC called out its “unlawful actions” for having “completely destroyed” the lake. The court is now looking into ways to protect what remains. ■





he inherited an administrative quagmire. The legacy includes a long list of grandiose “flagship” projects announced by the CM’s predecessors—his BJP senior Vasundhara Raje and the Congress’s Ashok Gehlot, who alternately helmed the previous five state governments. Marketed as transformative, these initiatives were often timed to electoral cycles and plagued by shifting priorities, bureaucratic inertia and inadequate follow-through. Some of these projects remain unused; others were abandoned midway or are reeling under cost overruns. What unites them is a trail of squandered public funds and shattered public trust.

COLLATERAL DAMAGE

“The damage isn’t just economic, it’s ecological,” says Ajmer-based environmentalist Ashok Malik, who led a campaign against construction on Ana Sagar’s banks. “There must be accountability for such reckless decisions, especially in a desert state where water bodies are sacrosanct.” In Jaipur, activist Rajendra Tiwari has battled the “commercialisation” of eco-sensitive zones around the Na-

hargarh sanctuary, following which both the National Green Tribunal (NGT) and the Supreme Court have rapped the local authorities for ruining the Man Sagar Lake in the name of development.

Yet, the malaise runs deeper. Former chief secretary D.B. Gupta, who was involved in several of the stalled projects, attributes the delays to systemic flaws. “New governments squeeze funds and even abandon projects halfway without putting them to test—a sure recipe for failure, even for the best of plans,” he says. Sharma acknowledges the rot. “We’re trying to retrieve what we can for public good. Our focus is on solutions, not status quo,” he tells INDIA TODAY. A close aide says the CM has sought direct support from Prime Minister Narendra Modi on long-stalled mega projects like the Barmer refinery and Ramjal Setu Link Project (the erstwhile Eastern Rajasthan Canal Project), resulting in clarity on finances and timelines. The challenge ahead is not just to salvage stalled projects but to rebuild a culture of accountability. Featured here are eight projects that symbolise this challenge. ■

2. SEVEN WONDERS PARK, AJMER

LAUNCHED: 2022 (Congress)

COST: Rs 81 crore

STATUS: The Supreme Court has ordered demolition

WRECKED WONDERS

Hailed as a tourist draw under Ajmer’s Smart City Project, the Seven Wonders Park now faces court-ordered demolition. In March, the SC upheld an NGT verdict calling the construction of world monument replicas in the catchment of the 12th-century Ana Sagar Lake an ecological violation. The park’s ‘beautification’ had gone ahead despite protests from environmentalists and local leaders, including current assembly speaker Vasudev Devnani. “We had opposed the damage to the lake, but the then Congress government and some officials were adamant,” he says. A food court and the Statue of Liberty replica have already been torn down. The apex court has extended the deadline to August for clearing the rest. Officials now propose creating two wetlands to spare adjacent parks and works. ■

RAISING A STINK

Pitched as Jaipur's answer to the Sabarmati riverfront, the Rs 1,500 crore project launched under Vasundhara Raje funded walkways, jogging tracks and landscaping. But a pending acquisition of a small land parcel stalled the entire 47-km stretch, while crucial sewage treatment—meant to precede the facelift—was never aligned. Today, the so-called river is a tiled, toxic canal, carrying untreated waste, polluting groundwater and stinking up neighbourhoods. In 2023, the NGT fined the state Rs 100 crore for



PURUSHOTTAM DIWAKAR

3. DRavyavati River Rejuvenation, Jaipur

LAUNCHED: 2016 (BJP)
COST: Rs 1,500 crore
STATUS: Incomplete, leading to groundwater pollution and stink in the neighbourhoods

environmental damage. The executing agency—tasked with 10 years of upkeep—has now demanded Rs 423 crore more from the Jaipur Development Authority (JDA). The CM has sanctioned Rs 50 crore to push the project forward. "We hope to complete it in a year," says Vaibhav Galriya, principal secretary, urban development. But hope alone may not be enough to revive a project lost to poor planning. ■

NOT ON TRACK

Launched in 2011 to rival Delhi's success story, Jaipur Metro was Gehlot's big-ticket project. But 12 years after its first trial run, only 12 km of the planned 23 km are operational, with daily ridership stuck at 50,000—far below the projected 120,000. The

4. JAIPUR METRO

LAUNCHED: 2011 (Cong.)
COST: Rs 3,200 crore initially; additional Rs 12,260 crore proposed for Phase 2
STATUS: Loss-making, failing to ease traffic woes. Phase 2 aims to add 43 km by 2031

result: mounting losses and public indifference. A revised Rs 12,260 crore Detailed Project Report (DPR) cleared in May under Sharma aims to add 43 km by 2031, but its fate hinges on central support. Analysts say the project faltered from the start. The weakest corridor was picked for early political gains ahead of the 2013 election, but missed the deadline. Raje limited funding; Gehlot deprioritised it in 2018, spending Rs 270 crore instead on underpasses that barely eased congestion. Multiple DPRs have drained more public funds, but Jaipur's metro dream remains stuck in the slow lane. ■



PURUSHOTTAM DIWAKAR



5. BRTS CORRIDOR, JAIPUR

LAUNCHED: 2008 (BJP) | **COST:** Rs 170 crore
STATUS: Never put into use, it is being dismantled

ROAD TO NOWHERE

Launched in 2008 as the Raje government's big urban mobility push, Jaipur's Bus Rapid Transit System (BRTS) is now being dismantled. CM Sharma has approved Rs 30 crore to tear down the 16-km stretch—of the originally envisioned 46-km corridor—that cost Rs 170 crore to build, but was never used. Successive governments neither completed the network

nor procured the required buses. Independent audits found the design failed 90 per cent of key parameters, leading to traffic chaos and accidents instead of smoother transit. "We are removing it as per government's orders and will ensure the stretch is developed well for traffic," says JDA commissioner Anandhi. It marks the formal end of a failed mass transit dream. ■



A LESSON IN POOR PLANNING

Envisioned to benefit 70,000 students and earn Rs 450 crore revenue during the previous Congress regime, Jaipur's Coaching Hub has flopped—only 14 of 224 units sold,

where just a few hundred students are enrolled. Curiously, the Rajasthan Housing Board bypassed its usual pre-booking model, rushing ahead without assured takers. Coaching institutes pushed back, citing steep prices and seeking concessions. Sharma now proposes setting up an IIT Jodhpur satellite campus and offering space to other national institutions. ■

6. COACHING HUB, JAIPUR

LAUNCHED: 2023 (Congress)

COST: Rs 221 crore
STATUS: Mostly vacant, alternative use planned

ABANDONED ARENA

During her first tenure, it was Vasundhara Raje's dream to build an international-standard Organised Archery, Shooting & Equestrian Sports (OASES) Complex with a polo arena. Of the Rs 100 crore earmarked, Rs 80 crore was spent. In the end, only the shooting range became operational while the rest of the site stands abandoned—its stables unused and infrastructure rusting. Neither Gehlot in his two terms nor Raje

7. OASES COMPLEX, JAIPUR

LAUNCHED: 2007 (BJP)

COST: Rs 80 crore
STATUS: Only shooting range operational, remaining project abandoned

herself in her second stint took it forward. "We have not thought about it for many years now," admits JDA commissioner Anandhi. A symbol of grand vision left to decay. ■



PURUSHOTTAM DIWAKAR



FOSSILISED VISION

Proposed in 2009, the greenfield refinery has seen two foundation stones—first by the Congress in 2013 and then by the BJP as a petrochemical complex in

2018. Initially pegged at Rs 37,000 crore, the cost has now doubled amid delays and a prolonged equity tussle with HPCL, the project partner. With the global shift toward electric vehicles, experts are questioning the long-term

8. BARMER REFINERY AND PETROCHEMICAL COMPLEX, PACHPADRA

LAUNCHED: 2013 (Congress)

COST: Rs 37,000 crore initially, escalated to Rs 74,000 crore
STATUS: Incomplete

viability of such fossil-fuel infrastructure. Uncertainty also looms over the actual crude and gas reserves available in Barmer and nearby fields to sustain the plant. "We hope to complete it by year-end," claims T. Ravikant, principal secretary, mines & petroleum. Whether it will power the future, or become a relic of the past, remains to be seen. ■

THE NEW DNA DIETS

Roll over nutrition fads. Nutrigenomics now provides hyperpersonalised diets based on one's genetic makeup and offers clues to prevent and treat disease well in advance

By SONALI ACHARJEE / Graphics by TANMOY CHAKRABORTY

IN

THEIR NEVER-ENDING QUEST FOR HEALTHIER FOODS, along with the holy grail of losing weight, humans in the modern era have taken refuge in dieting trends. Fads like the Mediterranean diet, or the Vegan diet, are everywhere, each involving subtracting or adding a nutrient—no fat, more fat, no sugar, fasting, no carb, more carb, no meat.... This approach in recent years has evolved into what is now called ‘bio-hacking’—the mostly DIY practice of using scientific evidence to modify one’s lifestyle for better health.

Now, biohacking has taken a far more serious turn from fancy diets, and it emerges from the depths of biological/medical science. Incredible advancements in genetic diagnostics have opened up a whole new field called nutrigenomics. This discipline focuses on how food interacts with people’s genes, how genes affect the body’s response to food and thus their health. It also seeks to find new avenues to prevent and treat disease. Nutrigenomics allows for hyperpersonalised biohacking, tailoring nutrition plans based on an individual’s genetic profile. A person may thus be

advised to avoid dairy because her genes indicate lactose intolerance. Another can be encouraged to eat rice because there is medical proof to show her body uses the cereal better.

THE WORLD OF NUTRIGENOMICS

The interplay of genes and health outcomes has been theoretically known for over a decade. According to a 2013 study in the journal, *Nature Reviews Genetics*, nutrients can modulate gene expression—the process by which instructions encoded within a gene are used to create proteins crucial for cell function—through mechanisms like DNA methylation (where methyl groups, a fundamental building block molecule, is added to the DNA, thus altering gene expression). The study of these mechanisms and changes in gene expression through nutrients and medicines—without alterations to the underlying DNA sequence—is called

epigenetics. Changes in gene expression influence how genes are read and used by cells, thus affecting biological processes. These changes not only have a bearing on disease susceptibility but also influence the effectiveness of dietary interventions.

Over the past decade, advances in DNA sequencing technologies like next-generation sequencing (NGS) and exome sequencing—where protein-coding regions (exons) of a genome is analysed—have improved the accuracy of nutrigenomic testing. These tests assess gene variants that influence the body’s response to nutrients, metabolism and susceptibility to diseases. They point out allergies and nutrient deficiencies, and also look at how a body absorbs, metabolises and uses a nutrient. It identifies predispositions to conditions like gluten sensitivity or slower caffeine metabolism, not through allergy markers but through genetic traits. According to market re-



“Over 10,000 people have tried EPLIMO (epigenetic lifestyle modification). We have seen amazing improvements in their health markers after three months. This proves that biohacking is measurable”

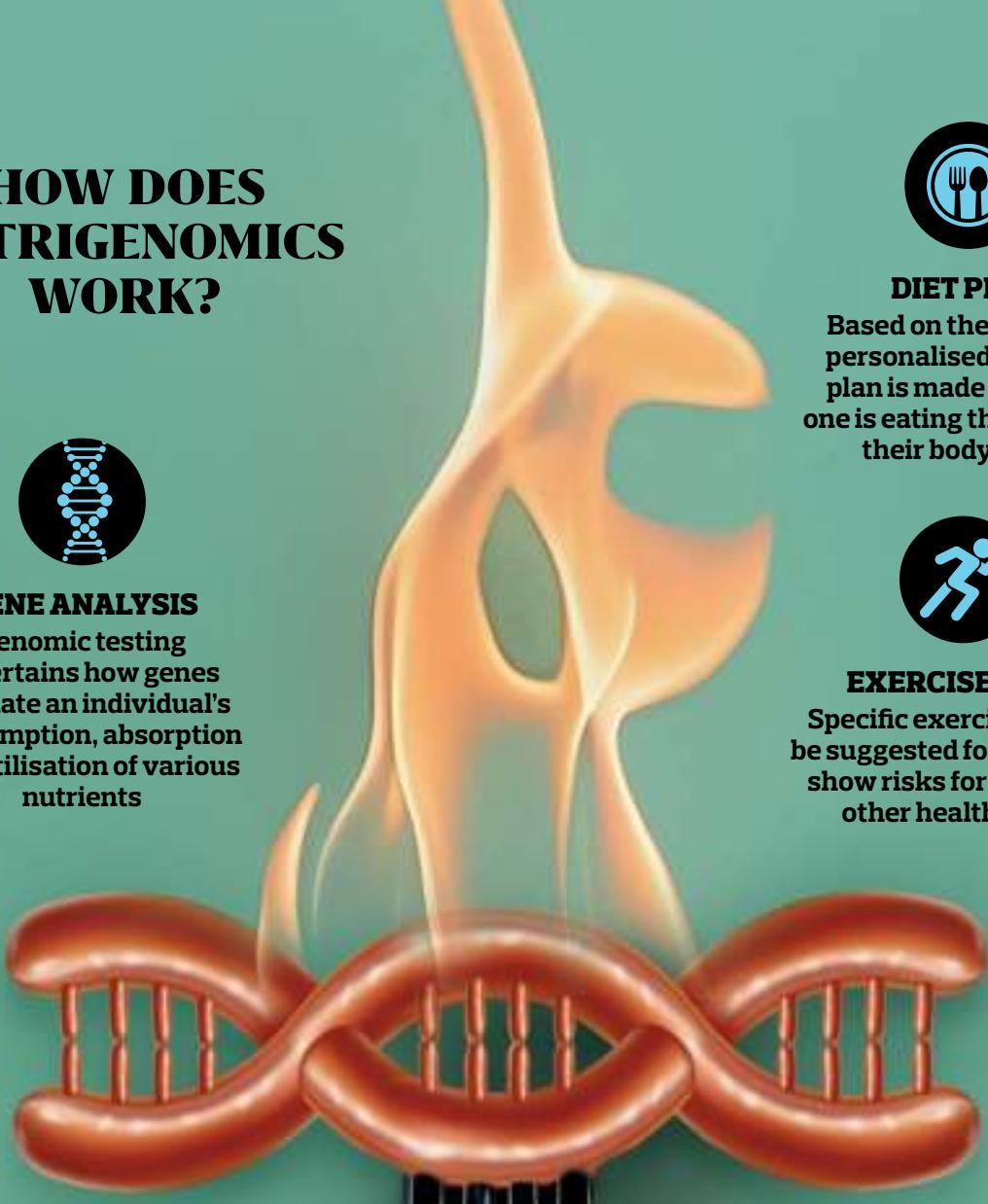
SAJEEV NAIR, Founder and chairman, Vieroots

HOW DOES NUTRIGENOMICS WORK?



GENE ANALYSIS

Genomic testing ascertains how genes regulate an individual's consumption, absorption and utilisation of various nutrients



PERSONALISED RISK ASSESSMENT

The test also notes if there is any risk for future health complications such as diabetes, obesity, bone, heart or liver issue



DIET PLAN

Based on the results, a personalised nutrition plan is made to ensure one is eating the nutrients their body needs



EXERCISE PLAN

Specific exercises might be suggested for those who show risks for obesity or other health issues



MEDICAL PLAN

Medication, health supplements or treatment might also be recommended if one's body is unable to process or is overprocessing some nutrients

NUTRIGENOMIC DIETS: A ROUGH GUIDE

Some genes that impact nutrition and hint at various diseases, and the nutrigenomic diets that can keep them at bay

► **DRB2 (Beta 2 Adrenergic Receptor):** Variants in DRB2 can lead to reduced carbohydrate output in cells, contributing to **Type 2 diabetes** and obesity

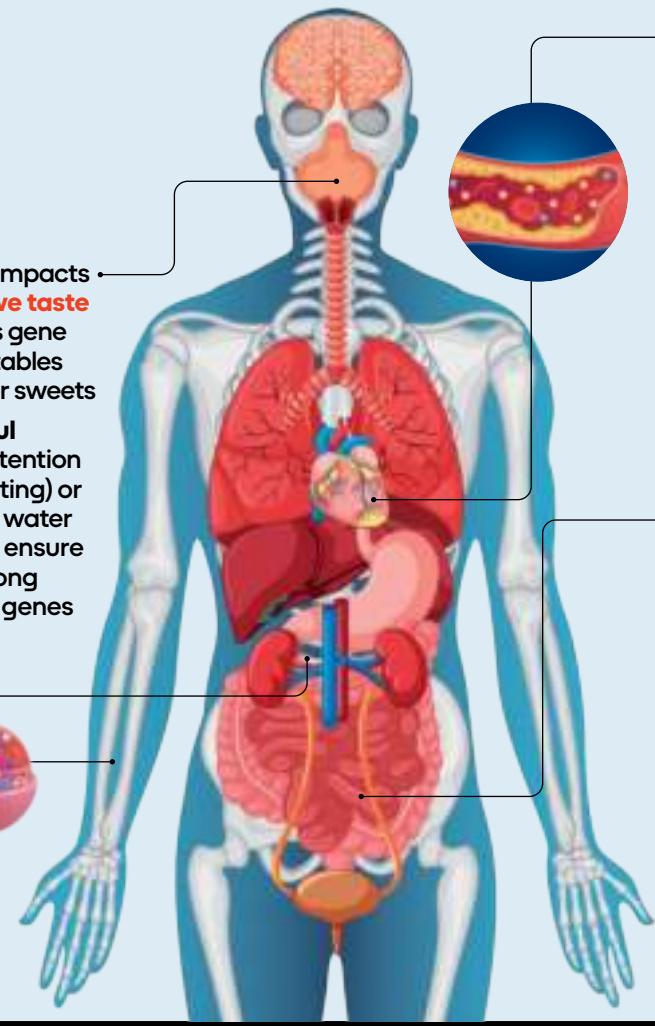
DIETS To avoid diabetes, diets like **Ketogenic Diet** or a **low carbohydrate diet** and fasting are popular. They keep blood sugar low to ensure insulin sensitivity doesn't fall

► **TAS2R38:** This gene impacts how much **bitterness we taste in food**. People with this gene mutation eat less vegetables and have preference for sweets

DIETS Diets like **Mindful Eating** (that calls for attention to the experience of eating) or infusing vegetable into water to dilute bitterness can ensure one doesn't eat the wrong foods goaded by one's genes

► **MTHFR (Methylene Tetrahydrofolate Reductase):** Variations in this gene can affect folate metabolism, which provides crucial one-carbon units for **cellular functions**

DIETS To avoid folate (or Vitamin B9) deficiency that can cause anaemia and neurological issues, one can opt for a **Folate Diet**, which comprises supplements, citrus fruits and leafy vegetables



search firm IMARC, the Indian genetic testing market was valued at over \$1.8 billion (Rs 15,400 crore) in 2024.

However, as Dr Aparna Bhanushali, director, medical genetics, HaystackAnalytics, points out, "While accuracy at the technical level—meaning the ability to detect genetic variants—is very high, the clinical interpretation of these variants in the context of nutrition is still an emerging area." The predictive power of nutrigenomic insights can vary depending on the complexity of gene-nutrient interactions and the strength of scientific evidence backing them, she says.

Knowing the way the body uses a nutrient through nutrigenomic testing is one part. The other half is using this information for better health. This is done not only by targeted nutrients but also by epigenetic medicine, which targets epigenetic mechanisms to modify gene

expression and treat specific diseases.

"Nutrigenomics provides a personalised nutrition model grounded in molecular biology, epigenetics and clinical nutrition," says Dr Bhanushali. "For example, variations (also known as polymorphisms) in the FTO gene (a fat mass and obesity-associated gene) are associated with increased obesity risk, while variants in the MTHFR (Methylene Tetrahydrofolate Reductase) gene can impair folate (a nutrient in Vitamin B complex essential to the body) metabolism, increasing the risk of cardiovascular disease and neural tube defects."

According to market research firm Grand View Research, the Indian epigenetics market generated a revenue of \$479.8 million (Rs 4,150 crore) in 2023. Health tech startup Vieroots, which raised \$136,000 (Rs 1.16 crore) in funding this year and is valued at Rs 106 crore, says it provides an EPLIMO (epigenetic lifestyle modification) programme

based on a geno-metabolic assessment. EPLIMO can detect multiple genetic variants causing over 250 diseases like diabetes, hypertension, cardiovascular diseases, cancers, depression etc. years or decades before they set in, enabling users to change their lifestyles. "Over 10,000 people have tried EPLIMO. We have seen amazing improvements in their health markers after three months, when we do a blood work. This proves that biohacking is measurable," says Sajeev Nair, founder and chairman, Vieroots. Nair follows a 'Sajeev diet' plan. "Once I started following this hyperpersonalised diet plan, I started seeing great results including a stable gut, higher energy levels, proper digestion and better cognitive functions," says Nair.

FUTURE OF NUTRITION

According to experts, relying on the right facts while eating what works for the body is where the future of nutrition

► **PPARG:** This nuclear receptor gene activates genes that protect against **diabetes, heart disease and depression**. Its dysregulation can lead to a risk of some **cancers**

DIETS An antioxidant diet, rich in berries, garlic and tomatoes, negates the risk of cancer. **Plant-based food and rainbow diets** (vegetables of various colours) are also advised in this plan

► **FTO and LEPR:** The FTO gene is linked with **obesity and other metabolic disorders**; LEPR gene gives instructions to make the leptin receptor protein that regulates body weight

DIETS Those with this predisposition can regulate calorie intake through **fasting, 1,200-calorie diets** (a low calorie plan) and **cycle syncing consumption** (adjusting eating throughout the menstrual cycle) to burn more calories

lies. "I see precision nutrition as a step forward," says Dr Suparna Mukherjee, chief nutritionist at Narayana Health City in Bengaluru. "We look into an individual's anthropometry (measurement of the physical properties of a body), biochemical markers, clinical symptoms, dietary habits and their genetic reports. We also consider their activity levels and calorie expenditure, which helps us personalise a food plan," says Dr Mukherjee. It's all about why certain foods work better for individuals based on their unique genetic and lifestyle profiles, she adds.

The right diagnostic tools can uncover details that make a difference. When 38-year-old Rohit, a fitness enthusiast, went for a genomic health assessment at Haystack Analytics in Bengaluru, he wasn't expecting to uncover anything major. The results changed his approach to health. The test flagged a heightened genetic risk

for Graves' disease, an autoimmune condition that affects the thyroid.

Nutrigenomic weight loss programmes have become accessible too. When Sahil Malhotra, 41, a software engineer from Bengaluru, wanted to lose 10 kg, he opted for a personalised diet programme by a city clinic which, after procuring his genetic profile through MapMyGenome, was able to tell him why—despite trying multiple diet plans—he was unable to shed weight. "They found out that I could not digest protein



"Nutrigenomics provides personalised nutrition grounded in molecular biology and epigenetics. While the ability to detect genetic variants is high, their clinical interpretation is an emerging area"

DR APARNA BHANUSHALI
Director, Medical Genetics,
HaystackAnalytics

too well, which is why high-protein diets failed as they left less calories for daily requirements, making me constantly hungry," he says. The results made sense, as his family was originally vegetarian.

While more people are discovering nutrigenomics, most are adherents still of exotic biohacks like mushroom coffee and red light therapy for their nutrition needs. "Eating certain mushrooms, for instance, can have positive health benefits," says Dr Siddhant Bhargava, nutritionist, CEO and co-founder, InnerGize, a Delhi-based firm that makes mental health wearables. "Other biohacks include overloading on caffeine, or foods that improve the body's NAD (a kind of dinucleotide) levels. Nootropics (drugs like creatine and caffeine)

can improve cardiac as well as brain performance." A report by Custom Market Insights, a market research firm, notes that India's health tech market—a fair share of which includes biohacking tools like wearables (such as fitness tracking bands and head-mounted displays) and brain games—is projected to touch \$78.4 billion (Rs 6.7 lakh crore) by 2033.

However, the results have not always been salutary, as Rohini Bedi, 22, a marketing intern in Mumbai, discovered. On an AI-endorsed diet that involved eating in only two hours a day and weekly ice bath plunges to "naturally detox the body", Rohini ended up malnourished within a month and had to undergo clinical treatment to recover. "Individual nutrition needs and health status should take precedence over what is trending on internet search results," says Bharathi Kumar, dietitian, Fortis Hospital, Nagarbhavi, Bengaluru. Experts are also beginning to express doubts about the efficacy of biohacks. "Currently, biohacks range from theories to some proven research," says Dr Bhargava.

WORD OF CAUTION

While there's no denying the power of nutrigenomics, experts advise caution. "Biohacking diets, when done right, are incredibly empowering," says nutritionist Khushboo Jain Tibrewala. "They shift control from healthcare providers to the individual, the one actually living in the body." But she also feels that nutrigenomic biohacking, no matter how personalised, can sometimes create blind spots. This is where things like continuous glucose monitors (CGMs) come in handy. In this instance, they help people understand how their blood sugar responds to different foods. Some epigenetic drugs, on the other hand, while targeting specific diseases, can affect multiple genes, leading to undesirable side-effects on other organ systems.

Nutrigenomics and epigenetic drugs are evolving sciences, and experts like Tibrewala say that, ultimately, it is one's own state of health that should be the guide even while on a hyperpersonalised diet directed by genetic mapping. Till the time when our genes give up more of their secrets, the best data continues to be how you are feeling today. ■

STARS FOR THE FUTURE

This IPL had a number of firsts, the anointment of a fresh champion among them, but even that paled before the heroics of the season's young bloods

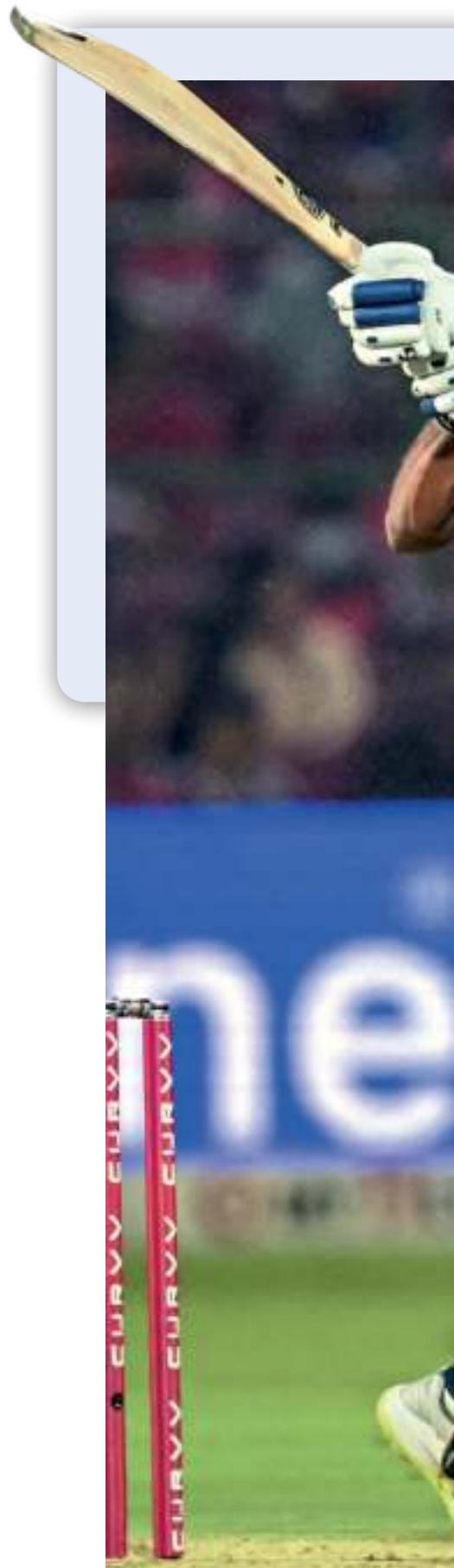
By Suhani Singh

It

was an IPL of many firsts. The first edition to see a player earn a match suspension, the first to see a player, 23-year-old Riyam Parag, hit six consecutive sixes while his still-a-teen teammate Vaibhav Suryavanshi became IPL's youngest centurion. It was of course also the first IPL to be interrupted by war, and to get a tragic post-script. Cricket-wise, two teams, Punjab Kings and Royal Challengers Bengaluru, vied for their first title. Digvish Rathi's on-pitch theatrics entertained as much as irked opponents, and when these went too far, he was benched. And Krunal Pandya became the first to win Player-of-the-Match award in two IPL finals.

It was also an IPL of redemption, especially for Virat Kohli. The former RCB captain finally got his hands on the trophy that had eluded him for 18 long years, the only blip in his storied career. Shreyas Iyer may have finished runner-up, but he, too, etched his name in the history books—as the first to lead three different teams to the final. Meanwhile, the league's most expensive player Rishabh Pant (price tag: Rs 27 crore) had his worst season, averaging only 24.5 with just one hundred and a fifty. Ageing CSK super icon M.S. Dhoni also struggled to make an impact.

After two and a half months, if there was one thing that summed up the tournament, it was that the young blood are more than ready to shine on the big stage, ever hungry to earn their stripes. Take 23-year-old Sai Sudharsan wowing with his consistent performances with the bat and winning not one but three awards, including the coveted orange cap. A deserved call-up for the upcoming England Test was just icing on the cake. The Punjab Kings' opening duo of Priyansh Arya and Prabhjot Singh were standouts of the season, more often than not giving the team blazing starts. Another young batter to make an impact was Abhishek Sharma of Sunrisers Hyderabad, whose 141 off 55 balls against Punjab was one of the defining knocks of the season. Here's a list of 10 shining stars who fans will be hearing a lot more of in the coming years. ■





Photographs: AFP



SAI SUDHARSHAN, 23

Gujarat Titans

**MATCHES: 15 RUNS: 759
AVG: 54.2 STRIKE RATE: 156.2**

Asaintly name, a composed style and an executioner's mindset—Sai Sudharsan emerged as the nemesis of bowlers and the envy of rival franchises this IPL. The elegant left-hander was the backbone of GT's 2025 campaign, finishing as the tournament's highest run-scorer with 759 runs at a strike rate of 156.2 in 15 matches. No surprise then that he picked up the Orange Cap (for most runs scored), was named Emerging Player of the Year, struck the most

fours (88) in the tournament, and walked away with the fan-driven 'Fantasy King of the Season' prize. His crowning moment came on May 18, when he dismantled Delhi Capitals with a sublime 108 n.o. off 61 balls, anchoring a 205-run opening stand with captain Shubman Gill. It wasn't just a century—it was a lesson in timing, temperament and tact, executed with minimal fuss and for maximum impact. In between IPL matches, Sudharsan received another nod of validation: his maiden Test call-up for India's series against England.

—Amitabh Srivastava



DIGVESH RATHI, 25

Lucknow Super Giants

**MATCHES: 13 WICKETS: 14
ECONOMY: 8.2
STRIKE RATE: 22.3**

Controversy's favourite child, enfant terrible of IPL 2025, ultimate entertainer—there are several ways to describe the leg spinner, one of the breakout stars of the Delhi Premier League 2024. Most will agree that Digvesh Rathi made a compelling case for why IPL is prime-time entertainment in the truest sense. He wasn't there to win the fair play award but to unsettle the opposition and win matches (cue the imaginary notebook celebration), even if it involves a failed 'Mankading'. To Rathi goes the (dis)honour of earning enough demerit points to get a one-match suspension. But amidst all the drama, Digvеш also took 14 wickets in 13 matches (best haul for the LSG) and flummoxed batters with a run-up that would perhaps have the legendary leggie Abdul Qadir cheering from the heavens. Simply put, Rathi was every IPL fan's best bad boy this year. —SS



**AYUSH MHATRE, 17**

Chennai Super Kings

MATCHES: 7 RUNS: 240**AVG: 34.3 STRIKE RATE: 189**

Five-time champions Chennai Super Kings had a season to forget, but if there was a lone star who shone bright, it was Ayush Mhatre, the youngest player to don the yellow jersey. After going unsold at the IPL auction, the teenage sensation from Mumbai suburb Nalasopara made the most of the opportunity when he got called in mid-

campaign to fill in for injured captain Ruturaj Gaikwad. And in just seven matches, he cast a spell, hitting 31 fours and 11 sixes in the process. His aggressive approach paid off particularly well in the power play sessions. Few who were there will forget the 94 off 48 balls he struck against RCB at the Chinnaswamy stadium, earn-

SAI KISHORE, 28
MATCHES: 15 WICKETS: 19**ECONOMY: 9.25 STRIKE RATE: 13.4**

Sai Kishore was the ultimate ‘take-one-for-the-team’ man for Gujarat Titans in IPL 2025. GT had used their RTM (right-to-match) card to retain him, but with another great spinner, Rashid Khan, also in the side, the 193 cm tall left arm spinner saw matches fly by with his full quota of overs going unutilised. But Kishore kept to his task, even bowling the final over of the innings on occasion and picking up wickets. He also developed a variation of a carrom ball, an unusual development for a leftie twirler. All the effort seems to have paid off, for with 19 wickets and a fantastic strike rate, he has shown his worth for the first time in a full season. Having previously played only 10 games in two seasons combined, Kishore used all his domestic cricket experience to become GT’s, well, ultimate utility bowler.

—*Siddharth Viswanathan*

ing praise from ‘Thala’ M.S. Dhoni himself who called him a “champion” in the making. Then there was the pounding he gave Mumbai Indians pacer Ashwani Kumar, knocking him back for a four and two sixes off consecutive balls. Any wonder then that Mhatre was named captain of the Under-19 Indian side that will tour England later this month. —SS

PRIYANSH ARYA, 23

Punjab Kings

MATCHES: 17 RUNS: 475**AVG: 27.9 STRIKE RATE: 179.3**

Priyansh Arya made his mark in the Delhi Premier League with six sixes in one over. This earned the southpaw some major attention in the 2025 IPL auction where the Punjab Kings grabbed him for Rs 3.8 crore (base price: Rs 30 lakh). In

hindsight, that looks like money well spent as Arya teamed up with Prabhsimran Singh to become one of the most destructive opening partnerships this IPL. The grapevine has it that his coach took him to Ratapani Tiger Reserve near Bhopal to train “without distract-





tions" for the big stage. If true, it did the job, for Arya was giving the Kings a blistering start in most games. With a strike rate just shy of 180, the top highlight among his knocks was a hundred off 39 balls against Chennai Super Kings, the joint second-fastest century in the history of the IPL. PBKS may have fallen at the final hurdle, but Arya did end up with one more record—his 475 runs was the most by an uncapped India batter in his debut IPL season.

—SV

NAMAN DHIR, 25

Mumbai Indians

MATCHES: 16 RUNS: 252

AVG: 31.5 STRIKE RATE: 182.6

Mumbai Indians needed an 'impact player' in IPL 2025 and they found it in Naman Dhir. The Punjab youngster was their go-to batter in the death overs. Dhir didn't have a single 50, but he had more runs in the death overs—190—than any other batsman and he made them at a stunning strike rate of 195.9. This year, Naman also had four knocks, with a strike rate of over 200 and five more innings with a strike rate of between 150 and 200. Nothing exemplified Dhir's role as a finisher better than the Qualifier 2 semifinal clash against Punjab Kings. Mumbai Indians were in danger of setting a sub-par total before Dhir arrived and played a blinder, hitting 37 runs off 18 balls—including seven boundaries—to help the five-time champions cross the 200-runs mark. In the end, it wasn't enough and MI lost, but the right-hander's knock had at least given Hardik Pandya's team something to fight for.

—SV



NEHAL WADHERA, 25

Punjab Kings

MATCHES: 16 RUNS: 369

AVERAGE: 30.75 STRIKE RATE: 145.85

Nehal Wadhera cut his teeth with MI in 2023, but then had a quiet 2024. After donning the PBKS jersey for IPL 2025, though, the 25-year-old southpaw has been shredding attacks with gusto, unerringly good on the leg side and behind the stumps (for proof, check his 70 off 37 balls versus Rajasthan Royals in Jaipur). Wadhera could play a calm hand too, like in the game against RCB, where he skinned 33 off 24 balls. He might cop some blame for the failure in the final, but he was one of the rockets that propelled PBKS there.

—SV

SPORTS | INDIAN PREMIER LEAGUE



REUTERS

There's something about a raw, left-arm fast-bowling talent that bewitches the eye, and Mumbai Indians' scouts picked a real pistol when they snapped up Ashwani Kumar. Let loose on the Kolkata Knight Riders on his IPL debut, Ashwani broke their batting spine, scalping Ajinkya Rahane, Manish Pandey, Rinku Singh and Andre Russell with a 4/24



ASHWANI KUMAR, 24

Mumbai Indians

MATCHES: 7 WICKETS: 11

ECONOMY: 11.3 S/R: 11.2

effort. A classical bowling action, enough variations and a left-arm-er's unnerving angle have stood him in good stead. In the death overs, he held his nerve, complementing stalwarts Jasprit Bumrah and Trent Boult. Although he went for runs in the second qualifier against Punjab Kings, the pacer from Punjab has shown enough promise to keep the MI grandees interested. Ashwani is still a work in progress, but being part of MI means that his stock will continue to rise. In the galleries at Wankhede, they say that youth backed by MI break through and breach the ranks of the Men in Blue. Ashwani will have to make good his promise if he dreams of joining Bumrah, Hardik and Krunal Pandya.

—SV



आज तक

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ANI

VIPRAJ NIGAM, 20 ➤ Delhi Capitals

**MATCHES: 14 RUNS: 142 AVG: 20.3
STRIKE RATE: 179.7
(BOWLING) ECONOMY: 9.1 WKTS: 11**

Picked up by Delhi Capitals for Rs 50 lakh, Vipraj Nigam found himself playing his debut IPL match against his home team, the Lucknow Super Giants. Nigam had shown promise with his performances at the Syed Mushtaq Ali Trophy last year, prompting Delhi to close the deal with him. Beginning as a batsman who could also bowl leg spin, he's evolved as an all-rounder. And he earned his spurs in the first match itself. Delhi was struggling

The IPL's fairy tales continue to amaze. This year it was a 14-year-old who walked in, took guard, and hit the first ball he faced in the IPL for a six. By the end of his third match, Vaibhav Suryavanshi

delivery soaring over the off-side boundary, cleaved away with an inside out swing of the bat, showed his ominous intent. By the end of it, the schoolboy prodigy had delivered an unforgettable performance—101 off

VAIBHAV SURYAVANSHI, 14 Rajasthan Royals

**MATCHES: 7 RUNS: 252
AVERAGE: 36.00 STRIKE RATE: 206.5**

had done enough to show that this was no flash in the pan. Just ask Gujarat Titans' pace spearhead Mohammed Siraj who likely didn't expect the cherubic man-child to wreak such havoc. But one shot, standing inches outside the leg stump, and sending a good-length

38 balls, the fastest century by an Indian in IPL history. Records were tumbling at every turn; he was already the youngest debutant at 14 years and 23 days, and by the end of the tournament he would also be the Super Striker of the Season.

—AS

at 65/5 chasing LSG's score of 210 when Nigam came in and scored a quickfire 39 off 15 balls. Delhi won the match by one wicket. Nigam has also done enough with the ball,

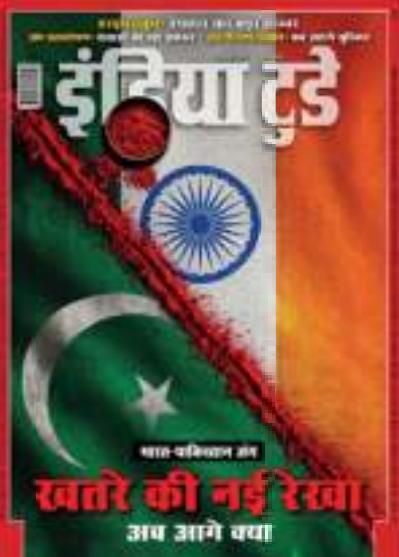
picking up prize scalps like Kohli, Rohit Sharma and the Pandya brothers, among others. Nigam's first season has gone smashingly well, and he's still only 20. —Rahul Noronha



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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।

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Photo courtesy: LAH STUDIOS

MUSICAL: SUMMER OF LOVE **PG 62**

THE LISTICLE: OTT AND THEATRICAL RELEASES **PG 64**



FOOD ▶

Southern Comfort

South Indian micro cuisines are **taking over the US**—with offerings well beyond the idli-dosa-vada triumvirate

CHAD SANTO TOMAS

I

Indian chefs internationally have taken the global spotlight off butter chicken and naan as representative of Indian food, and have rewritten the narrative that the cuisine is only about hitting high notes on the Scoville scale. In the US, South Indian food rules. In 2014, Rasa opened in California, soon winning a Michelin star for its contemporary take on South Indian food, focused on coastal cuisines. It succumbed to the pressures of Covid-19 in 2022, but was resurrected on popular demand in 2024. Godavari, with a focus on Andhra and Telangana food, opened in Boston in 2015, expanding to 22 outlets today in the US alone. Chef Vijay Kumar's Semma opened in New York in 2021 and earned its Michelin star in 2022. Nathai Pirattal (stir-fried snails with mini Kal Dosas) and Chettinad Maan (venison) are among the top sellers here.

Thattu, in Chicago, specialises in Kerala cuisine and grew from a pop-up to a full-fledged restaurant from 2018 to 2023. And then there is Srijith Gopinathan, executive chef and co-owner of Ettan, Eylan, Little Blue Door and Copra, the last being a tribute to his South Indian roots, in San Francisco. He pioneered the Cal-Indian approach—California's seasonal ingredients meet South Indian spices, masalas and techniques. At Copra, a Meen Polichathu is made with black cod. The Winter Vegetable Masala Uthappam has Swiss chard, squash and heirloom carrots.

Chef Srijith attributes the US's growing interest in Indian regional food to several factors. First, the burgeoning Indian population (5.4 million as

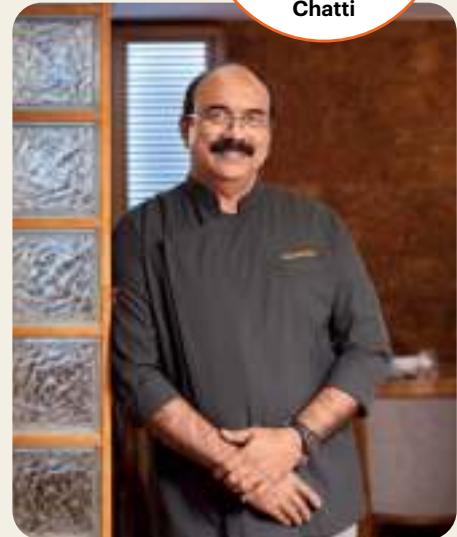


MASTER CREATORS
Top, Srijith Gopinathan of Ettan and Eylan; Regi Mathew of New York's Chatti

BENGALURU'S CELEBRATED 100-YEAR-OLD MAVALLI TIFFIN ROOMS (MTR) BROUGHT KARNATAKA-STYLE FOOD TO BELLEVUE SHINGTTON, IN 2

of June 2024 according to Statistica), has significant spending power. "Indian restaurants initially began out of necessity, by business folk coming in and not finding their cuisine. Today, educated chefs, proud of their ethnicity, are showcasing their food in the US. Restaurants are no longer mom-and-pop set-ups and Indian investors have the money to support such spaces. It is the perfect storm situation for Indian food," he says.

This perfect storm has been ideal for a venture like Chatti by Regi Mathew which opened in New York this February. Founder-partner Chef Regi Mathew is renowned for his India-based Kappa Chakka Kandhari, which, in his words, focuses on the nostalgia of a mother's cooking. Chatti, however, showcases Kerala's toddy shop culture—'touchings' (slang for bar snacks) included. This



ALEX STANILOFF

Kerala culinary experience has been reimagined for the US.

"The toddy shop experience is about food, drink and conversation, and I felt this concept was a great way to reach out to the global market. Besides Malayalis, our South Indian clientele are proud of the cuisine and concept, and bring in native New Yorkers to show them what a taste of their Indian hometown is like. When an Indian in the US takes you to an Indian restaurant, you know that the food will be good," says Chef Regi.

And the toddy shop culture comes to life with local produce. Pomfret, king prawns, lobster and scallops are grilled with Chef Regi's signature

A Sky Full Of (Michelin) Stars

DUBAI'S TRÈSIND STUDIO, HELMED BY
CHEF HIMANSHU SAINI, IS THE FIRST INDIAN RESTAURANT
 TO GET THREE MICHELIN STARS



When Trèsind opened its doors in 2014 in Dubai, opinions wavered between gimmick and gastronomy. With each passing year, the restaurant cemented itself firmly on the culinary map. It wasn't just drama on the plate but about reclaiming pride in a cuisine that had long been boxed into clichés. Four years later, Trèsind Studio launched as its more introspective sibling. Bold plating, molecular gastronomy techniques and reimagined regional flavours became its signature, making it a pioneer in elevating the perception of Indian food internationally.

And this May, it became the first Indian restaurant to receive three Michelin stars. While the weight of that sentence alone is staggering, those following this journey see it more as the natural finale of what Chef Himanshu Saini had been saying all along. "This journey began with a belief that Indian cuisine deserved to be seen not just as nostalgic comfort food, but as a dynamic and innovative force," he maintains. "We've challenged expectations and remained rooted in authenticity. The stars are a symbol of what passion,

discipline and creative freedom can achieve. As Indian restaurants around the world shape the next chapter of our cuisine, we get to be part of this journey forward."

That belief has always run deep at Trèsind Studio,

**FOR THE ONAM SADYA,
 EVERY STAFF MEMBER
 STEPS UP TO THE TABLE
 TO PLATE DIFFERENT
 ELEMENTS IN CHOREO-
 GRAPHED UNISON**



where food serves as emotion, memory and movement. The Onam Sadya course comes to mind, where every staff member steps up to the table to plate different elements in choreographed unison. You see it in the kitchen too, quiet discipline that's more like a dance than a dinner service. Reiterating the feeling, Chef Himanshu adds, "This honour belongs to my entire team, who pour their hearts into every plate, and every detail. Through our food, we tell stories of heritage and evolution."

"Indian food has found its place among the world's great cuisines," he says. "It's not just about global recognition, it's about taking pride in who we are and what we cook." If that's the case, then Trèsind Studio just carved out a place in history. From here on, the only way is up. ■

—Caroline D'Almeida

gooseberry and tender peppercorn masala, a tribute to tribal Kerala culture. The seafood moilee soup is made with local clams, scallops and prawns. And the city's mussels are roasted with shallots and spices to become Calicut Kallummakaya Fry.

South Indian micro-cuisines, too, have made a mark. Bengaluru's celebrated 100-year-old Mavalli Tiffin Rooms (MTR) brought Karnataka-style food to Bellevue, Washington in 2023. Chefs here are trained at the original restaurant in Lalbagh, Bengaluru. Everything, from the rava idli to masala dose to bisi bele bath, is a taste of home.

And missing that very *amma veetu samayal* (mom's home cooking) was why Revathi Manoharan co-founded Thalaiva's Indian Kitchen in Park Ridge, Illinois, with chef-husband Vinoth Raju in 2018. "We stay rooted in our family recipes. We introduced locals to banana leaf meals, Thalappakattu Goat Biryani, Chicken 65, Kothu Parotta, Mutton Kola Urundai and Kollu rasam. Our proudest creations are the Pasi-payaru Kadayal and the Kollu rasam—both made with green gram. We source ingredients locally. We import native spices like stone-ground black pepper and sun-dried red chillies from Tamil Nadu," says Revathi.

The success of South Indian restaurants in the US will encourage others hoping to bring their cuisines to the country. This will be fuelled by more people willing to explore Indian regional cuisine. The Indian food landscape in the US is poised for stellar growth. ■

—Ruth Dsouza
 Prabhu



HIGH TABLE
 Chef Himanshu Saini feels Indian food is now regarded as a global cuisine

MUSICAL ▼

Summer of Love

An English musical adaptation of *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge*, being staged in Manchester currently, is a cross-cultural celebration set to infectious beats

This summer, Opera House Manchester invites audiences on a whirlwind journey of love, laughter and cultural discovery with the UK premiere of *Come Fall in Love*, running from May 29 to June 21. From the co-writer of *Legally Blonde* and lyricist of *Mean Girls*, and adapted from India's most beloved blockbuster *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (*DDLJ*), this joyous new musical promises to sweep you off your feet. Blending the heart of Bollywood with the sparkle of the West End, *Come Fall in Love* stars Jena Pandya (*Mamma Mia!*, *Bhangra Nation*) and Ashley Day (*Dynasty*, *An American in Paris*), in a romcom that bridges continents and cultures.

The story follows Simran, a young British woman poised for an arranged marriage in India, as she embarks on a European summer escape. Enter Roger—a carefree, party-loving traveller—and an unexpected romance blooms. But can

their love withstand tradition, distance and disapproving parents? Directed by Aditya Chopra, the original film's visionary, the musical whisks audiences from Paris and Rome to the golden fields of Punjab. With 18 brand-new English songs, music by Bollywood legends Vishal Dadlani and Sheykar Ravjiani, choreography by the award-winning Rob Ashford, and Indian dance by Shruti Mer-

chant, it's a cross-cultural celebration set to infectious beats and breathtaking staging, with scenic design by Derek McLane.

Opera House Manchester, a majestic venue first opened in 1912, provides the perfect setting for this vibrant spectacle. A former cinema and bingo hall, the theatre was restored to its original glory in the 1980s and has since hosted some of the UK's finest touring productions. With its gilded proscenium and rich theatrical history, it promises a grand stage for this Bollywood-meets-Britain love story. ■

—Nikhil Sardana

Directed by
Aditya Chopra,
the musical
stars Jena
Pandya and
Ashley Day



COMEDY ▶

LAUGHTER IS THE BEST MEDICINE

Sumukhi Suresh's stand-up special *Hormonal* is equal parts catharsis and comedy



THEATRE ▼

IDENTITY CRISIS

Queer-themed play *Cock*, which raises questions about sexuality and love, has been revived by Shweta Tripathi and Manish Gandhi

It was 14 years ago that *Cock* won a number of prestigious awards at the Thespo National Theatre Festival 2011, including Best Actor and Best Actress. The Olivier Award-winning play written by British playwright Mike Bartlett was directed by Manish Gandhi and produced by actor Shweta Tripathi. The latter also debuted her AllMyTea Productions with this show. All

Sumukhi Suresh—stand-up comedian, actor, writer, and producer—is the kind of entertainer whose comic timing always has main character energy, whether she's crafting zingers for a film, stealing scenes on a Netflix show, or holding court on stage. In the last year alone, she's written dialogues for Vikramaditya Motwane's *CTRL*, lit up Netflix's *The Royals* as Keerthana, the charmingly chaotic assistant to Bhumi Pednekar's girlboss Sophia, and taken her stand-up special *Hormonal* on a wildly successful tour across India. And on June 7, she brings the curtain down on her tour, performing the last show at NMACC in Mumbai.

A candid take on hormonal chaos, singlehood and the existential dread that awaits women in their 30s, Sumukhi describes *Hormonal* as

Raw, hilarious and personal, the show is Sumukhi's candid take on hormonal chaos, singlehood and the existential dread

"an emotional breakdown, but with a laugh track". Raw, hilarious, and unmistakably personal, the 37-year-old comedian first started writing the show during the pandemic. But the idea itself was born out of heartbreak—specifically, the demise of a 10-year relationship on her 30th birthday—and grew to encompass

the physical and emotional toll of PCOS, a condition she has battled since adolescence. To Sumukhi, making peace with the chaos of hormonal imbalance felt just as powerful a starting point as dismantling the constant fear society instils in single women about dying alone.

Perhaps that's why *Hormonal* feels equal parts catharsis and comedy and the show's poster goes all in to drive that point home. In it, Sumukhi strikes a Frida Kahlo-inspired pose, complete with floral crown and bold unibrow, a nod to the artist who made pain and beauty inseparable. In many ways, that's also the essence of Sumukhi's show—except in her case, the brushstrokes are punchlines. Pain can be funny. And funny can, after all, be revolutionary. ■

—Poulomi Das



VIVEK VENKATRAMAN

COCK is being staged on June 6 at Max Mueller, New Delhi, and on June 10 at Prithvi Theatre, Mumbai

these years later, the play is being revived by the duo, but with a new cast and a fresh perspective brought on with life's experiences.

The play, written in

2009, centres around John, who while on a break with his boyfriend M, falls in love with a woman W. Torn between these two loves and two identities, he struggles to make a decision. Tripathi, who first heard of the play from Gandhi back when they met at a theatre residency, was

interested in the subject because of its multiple layers and the questions it raises. "The one thing I want to do with the plays I produce is to spark conversations. I want us to be uncomfortable and not shy away from the questions that we should be asking. Why are we so quick to judge people, based on their gender or sexuality or size? We don't talk about feelings. We get stuck in changing others according to how we feel they should be," says Tripathi, who believes that the play speaks to everyone, regardless of who they are.

With growing conversations around sexuality, gender and the pressure to define oneself, the makers felt that the questions raised by the play are even

more relevant today than they were more than a decade ago. "Earlier, I was more interested in the design aspect of the play, but now it is the relationships and how people affect each other with what they say and how they receive that information is what I have focused on more," says Gandhi. Conversations around race, gender and sexuality in popular culture in the past couple of years have also coloured his perspective this time, he adds. Gandhi has not felt the need to adapt it to an Indian setting as he feels that a well-written script is universally accessible. The new cast includes Rytasha Rathore, Tanmay Dhanania, Sahir Mehta and Harssh Singh. ■

—Deepali Dhingra



CINEMA ▼

Just for Laughs

RAJKUMMAR RAO brings his full arsenal of mannerisms to the romcom *Bhool Chuk Maaf*

It isn't just the protagonist of *Bhool Chuk Maaf*, Bollywood as a whole seems to be trapped in a time loop. The cow-belt comedy of manners, of which *Khosla Ka Ghosla* is a distant progenitor and *Bareilly Ki Barfi* the modern instigator, simply won't disappear.

Rajkummar Rao, who headlined *Bareilly...*, leads *Bhool Chuk Maaf* as a man doomed to live out a single day on repeat until he figures out where he went wrong. Like his character Ranjan, Rao is also trapped in the consequences of his actions: being excellent in this sort of broad North Indian comedy.

Seema Pahwa plays Ranjan's mother, while Sanjay Mishra is Bhagwan, the kind of role for

which Pankaj Tripathi is always the first choice, but he was possibly busy with *Criminal Justice*. Wamiqa Gabbi plays Titli, who is perpetually mad at her boyfriend Ranjan. The conflict: a no-good loser Ranjan has to secure a job in two months before he can marry Titli. Using Bhagwan, a fixer, Ranjan lands the job. But he finds himself trapped in the day before his wedding date, initially frustrated and, later, trying to understand what character deficiency led to this. Ergo: *Groundhog Day* set in Varanasi. Rao, an immaculate actor, is the film's prime charm, and his arsenal of mannerisms manages to find new ways to tickle your imagination. ■

—Devarsi Ghosh

In this desi version of *Groundhog Day*, Rao's character is left reliving the same day again and again

June 4



Stolen

Two brothers from the city (Abhishek Banerjee and Shubham Vardhan) are accused of being child kidnappers in this relentless chase thriller with heartstopping action sequences. Karan Tejpal's film is based on a 2018 incident in Assam, where a businessman and a musician were beaten to death by a mob after being wrongly accused of kidnapping children. On Amazon Prime Video ■

JUNE 20

DETECTIVE SHERDIL

Diljit Dosanjh stars in this comedy thriller from director Ravi Chhabria. According to the makers, the Budapest-set film "tells the story of a unique detective tasked with solving a case that is far from ordinary". Coming on Zee5. ■



THE LISTICLE

OTT and theatrical releases to look out for in the coming weeks



JUNE 6

HOUSEFULL 5

The popular Akshay Kumar-led comedy franchise returns to theatres with its fifth instalment. The cast is packed with marquee names: Riteish Deshmukh, Abhishek Bachchan, Sanjay Dutt, Nana Patekar, Jackie Shroff, Johnny Lever, Chunky Pandey and more. As an experiment, the film drops with multiple endings in theatres. ■

June 13



Rana Naidu Season 2

Rana Daggubati and Venkatesh are back playing dapper bad-good guys in the second season of Netflix's hit Hindi crime drama. Arjun Rampal has joined the cast, as has Dino Morea, adding to the list of the series's bloodied handsome men. ■

June 20

Sitare Zameen Par

Aamir Khan is once again urging us to improve our perspective about the world. This time, his subject matter: intellectually disabled people can also excel in sports. Aamir stars as a snarky basketball coach. The remake of the 2018 Spanish hit, *Champions*, has been packaged as a sequel to Aamir's 2007 hit *Taare Zameen Par*. Expect tears. ■



Compiled by Devarsi Ghosh

BOOKS ▾

Of Ties that Bind

THE COMEBACK, set in the overlapping worlds of Indian theatre and film, has a raw and intimate quality to it



THE COMEBACK
A Novel
By Annie Zaidi
ALEPH BOOK
COMPANY
₹599; 192 pages

In a time when even an offhand comment on social media or a public platform can spin wildly out of control, sometimes with life-altering consequences, the incident that kicks off Annie Zaidi's *The Comeback* feels particularly uncanny. For 15 years, Jaun, who calls himself "John K" in his acting career, has been "on the fringes of Bollywood", and when he finally lands a decent film role and acquires a shade of long-awaited fame, things don't go quite as planned. When he reveals too much during a magazine interview, it has devastating consequences for his best friend, Asghar.

Forced out of his bank

DIPLOMATIC BAG

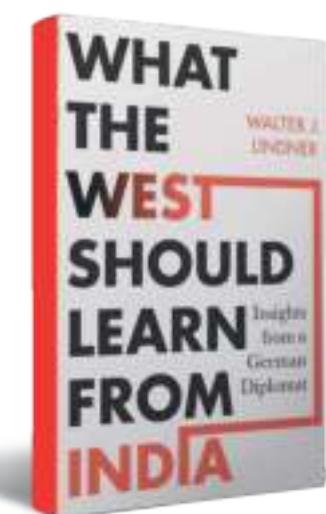
Three noteworthy additions to the genre of embassy literature in Indian publishing

The Wisdom of the East

A mixture of travel memoir, narrative history and socio-political commentary, *What the West Should Learn from India* is our country seen through the eyes of a unique and gifted observer—Walter J. Lindner, the flamboyant ex-German ambassador to India. He first visited India as a young

backpacker and, decades later, fate brought him back to these shores as Germany's ambassador. Lindner does a fine job of assessing India's gains over the past few decades (urban infrastructure, women's education) as well as our lingering weaknesses (casteism, corruption, unchecked population, growth, etc.)

WHAT THE WEST SHOULD LEARN FROM INDIA
By Walter J. Lindner
JUGGERNAUT BOOKS
₹799; 304 pages



job in Lucknow, Asghar returns to the town where Jaun and he grew up and fell in love with theatre as part of the college drama club. In this fictional place of Baansa, that could well be any small town in Uttar Pradesh, Asghar begins to rebuild his career, by going back to theatre, shunning the steady, middle-class life he had embraced to take care of his family.

With the dramatic turn of events comes a new beginning, as Asghar breathes life into the gentle bustle of Baansa, reinventing local theatre and its aspiring actors in a way the town has never seen. It plays out fittingly against the grating hustle of Mumbai, as Jaun's career moves in fits and starts and he scrambles to save what's left of his personal relationships. Wrestling with his ego and self-centredness but drowning in guilt and isolation, Jaun's efforts

ANNIE ZAIDI
populates the novella with a generous slate of characters, but there are no sidekicks here, and they all have a satisfying arc

to win back his best friend are both humorous and moving.

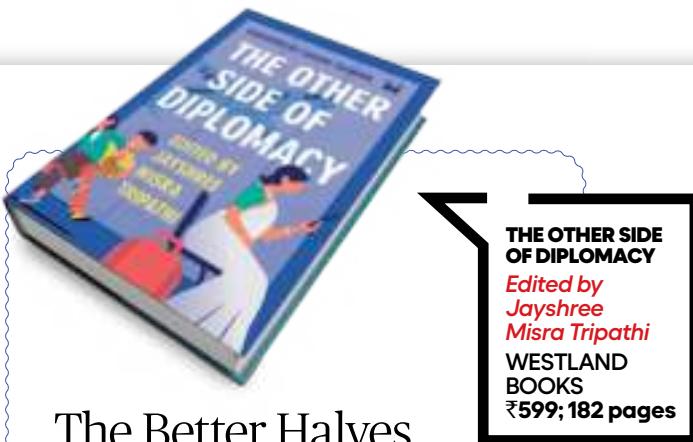
Zaidi populates the novella with a generous slate of characters, but there are no sidekicks here, and they all have a satisfying arc, including Asghar's wife Zubi.

Though slim, *The Comeback* travels a full circle in a consistently engaging story that reads like it could be a lively movie (or a series?). Held up against Zaidi's other books, including the acclaimed *Prelude to a Riot* and her memoir *Bread, Cement, Cactus*,

The Comeback can seem lightweight, but it is warm and large-hearted. Placing the story within the theatre and film world, an ecosystem Zaidi, who is also a playwright, knows well, gives it a raw and intimate quality.

The book examines the power of art and the disillusionment and hubris that come along with it. It also asks whether the compromises we make to cultivate a public image can become our undoing. If something good comes out of a betrayal, does it make it less of a betrayal? *The Comeback*, while stirring many such questions, is ultimately about a return to many things: to old friendships and true love, to the stage and the authenticity of one's art, to lost threads of the past and the warmth of childhood homes. There's a "comeback" in here that stings too, and also surprises. ■

—Neha Bhatt



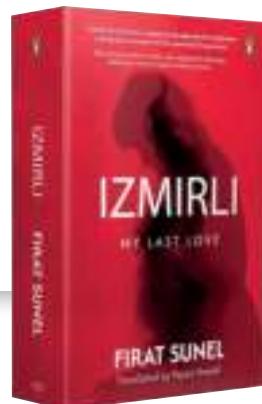
The Better Halves

In this anthology of personal narratives, Jayshree Misra Tripathi compiles the recollections of her fellow diplomatic spouses. From Switzerland to Ethiopia, the stories collected here are windows into foreign cultures and, on occasion, offer a ringside view of historic events, like Kusum Tayal's account of a hearing conducted by then South African president Nelson Mandela's Truth and Reconciliation Committee (TRC) in the mid-1990s.

THE OTHER SIDE OF DIPLOMACY
Edited by
Jayshree
Misra Tripathi
WESTLAND
BOOKS
₹599; 182 pages

TWIST IN THE TALE

Eylül, a determined young woman born into a family of lawyers, moves back to Istanbul from Germany after her beautiful, mysterious mother Yağmur's sudden drowning, leaving her daughter with the family law firm and plenty of unanswered questions—for example, what is Izmirli and what role did it have in her mother's death? Former Turkish ambassador to India, Firat Sunel has written a gripping, cerebral thriller that frequently delves into the mechanisms of memory. *Izmirli* is the perfect read for those who like their mysteries with a slice of philosophical doctrine.



—Aditya Mani Jha

HITTING A HIGH NOTE

Actor, producer and screenwriter Neil Nitin Mukesh recently made his OTT debut with the musical drama series *Hai Junoon! Dream. Dare. Dominate* on JioHotstar.

Q. Tell us about your new musical drama series *Hai Junoon! Dream. Dare. Dominate* on JioHotstar.

The show is a coming-of-age tale set in a Mumbai college, where music and dance clubs compete fiercely. I play Gagan Ahuja, a seasoned musician and mentor to the Super-Sonics, who embody discipline and tradition. The series explores themes of ambition, competition and self-discovery, promising an emotional rollercoaster with thrilling performances and nuanced characters.

Q. As the son of Nitin Mukesh and grandson of Mukesh, did you ever consider a career in music?

Playing Gagan allowed me to tap into this musical heritage, and is my homage to my beloved grandfather. In *Hai Junoon!*..., I've had the opportunity to lip sync his iconic song 'Jeena yahan marna yahan' on screen 55 years after its original release. What could be a better way to feel connected to him and my legacy?

Q. What are you working on next?

My upcoming film is an exciting comic caper thriller that releases in September. Down South, I'm doing a pan-India sci-fi thriller called *MaayaOne* with Sundeep Kishan. It should complete filming sometime soon. As a filmmaker, I continue writing scripts passionately and have an exciting lineup. I'm eager to collaborate with talented creators and bring meaningful stories to audiences.

Q. What are your memories of your grandfather? Which song of his is your favourite?
My grandfather passed away before I was born, but my darling grandmother bridged that gap for us kids. She told us numerous stories of his life and journey, which made us feel connected to him. One of my favourite songs by him is 'Kai baar yun bhi dekha hai' from *Rajnigandha*, for which he won the National Award. His legacy continues to inspire me.



—with Neha Kirpal

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