

NEWSMAKERS OF THE YEAR 2025

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INDIA
TODAY

PM Narendra
Modi and
US president
Donald Trump

THE MOVER & THE SHAKER

BOLSTERED BY ELECTORAL WINS, MODI PUSHED FULL STEAM
AHEAD WITH HIS REFORM EXPRESS IN 2025 EVEN AS HE
COUNTERED THE DISRUPTIONS UNLEASHED BY DONALD TRUMP



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FROM THE EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

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**Newsmakers
of the Year**

Two men whose actions directly impact the lives of nearly two billion people. With that baseline, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and US president Donald Trump could have been in the elite shortlist for Newsmaker of the Year 2025 individually. Why choose them as a double bill? Because, as 2025 rolled past all its twists and forks, on some of which their paths crossed, the duo played out an intense diplomatic duel. Modi conducted it deftly, keeping ties equable if tense—not adversarial, but not quite a bromance either. More fascinating was how Modi turned it into an occasion to create space for a pivot to his policy persona.

Having won a historic third term in 2024, albeit with a reduced mandate, Modi was perfectly positioned to play this moment adroitly. He had begun soldering his base with massive electoral wins in Haryana and Maharashtra in 2024. As 2025 dawned, he firmed it up with Delhi, then sealed the dominance of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) beyond all doubt with a landslide win in Bihar.

Crucially, Modi used the renewed mandate to turn boldly towards economic reform. Budget 2025 eased personal income tax brackets, leaving more money in the hands of the common Indian. In September, he cleared the cobwebs around indirect taxes by launching GST 2.0, rationalising slabs wholesale, enabling goods to become cheaper. Together, they created a consumption spike, marking a shift from chasing supply side economics to demand-led growth. GDP growth for Q2FY26 showed an upsurge of 8.2 per cent, even before the true impact of the GST reform was felt. India was signalling its momentum and durability as the world's fastest growing major economy.

That macro narrative gained much internal sinew in 2025. The new Labour Codes, though subject to improvement, were the showpiece in a series of moves to enhance ease of doing business: 7,000 compliances cut, 288 minor offences decriminalised, and a deregulation committee set up to further trim red tape. Big-bang reforms continued in December, with insurance opened to 100 per cent foreign direct investment. In December, the SHANTI Act paved the way for ending state monopoly on nuclear power, opening it entirely to private players. It also made the civil liability clause friendlier to foreign investors, especially American ones. This initiative followed a commitment in Budget 2025 as a bargaining chip ahead of the Modi-Trump bilateral meeting in Washington DC in February, weeks after the US president began his second term.

Initially, the two leaders renewed their bonhomie. India was among the first to negotiate a trade deal with the US, intending to sign it by the Fall of 2025. Trump, though, proved short on patience and big on brinkman-

ship. On April 2, his tariff shock saw India hit with a 25 per cent rate, set to come into effect from August 1. While the rest of the world keeled over to strike deals with Trump, India appeared as an unyielding outlier. Relations turned frostier in the summer, with the Pahalgam attack and India's retaliatory strikes on Pakistan. The Modi-Trump tango, already complex, hit a wobble here. Trump repeatedly and heedlessly claimed credit for stopping the conflict; Modi insisted Pakistan had capitulated.

Relations went further south when Trump hectored India on its oil purchases from Russia, accusing it of bankrolling the Ukraine invasion. On August 1, he imposed an additional 25 per cent tariff on India, the combined 50 per cent putting India in the same bracket as Brazil. Its trade with the US amounting to 2 per cent of GDP, this could have been a serious setback to growth. But Modi played a deft hand in response. Neither supplicating nor vengeful, he chose innovations. Exporters were guided towards fresh pastures, with India signing a series of free trade pacts, including with the UK, Oman and New Zealand.

Modi also leveraged the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation summit in Tianjin, China. Standing alongside BRICS partners Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin, India signalled to Trump that it was more a powerful rook than a pawn. By year-end, the US president was still holding out on a trade deal, though negotiators on both sides said they had finalised it. Together, Modi and Trump dominated India's domestic and foreign policy discourse over the year, making them a worthy choice as our Newsmakers of the Year 2025.

We also feature eight other Newsmakers. In a busy year, Union home minister Amit Shah brought the decades-old Maoist insurgency close to its demise. RSS sarsanghchalak Mohan Bhagwat became a figure of quiet authority, nudging the BJP towards a political reset. Bihar's Nitish Kumar underlined his centrality in India's polity with a historic 10th term. Chief Election Commissioner Gyanesh Kumar's Special Intensive Revision of voter rolls stays in focus with a clutch of upcoming assembly polls. With Operation Sindoora, India drew new lines of control over its security. Aviation saw a couple of traumatic crash landings: Air India's tragic Flight 171, and IndiGo's reputation. Redemption came from elsewhere, from the World Cup-winning women's cricket team and astronaut Shubhanshu Shukla, who reminded us that ambitions still lift nations.

Best wishes for a Rising India and a Peaceful World in 2026.



(Aroon Purie)



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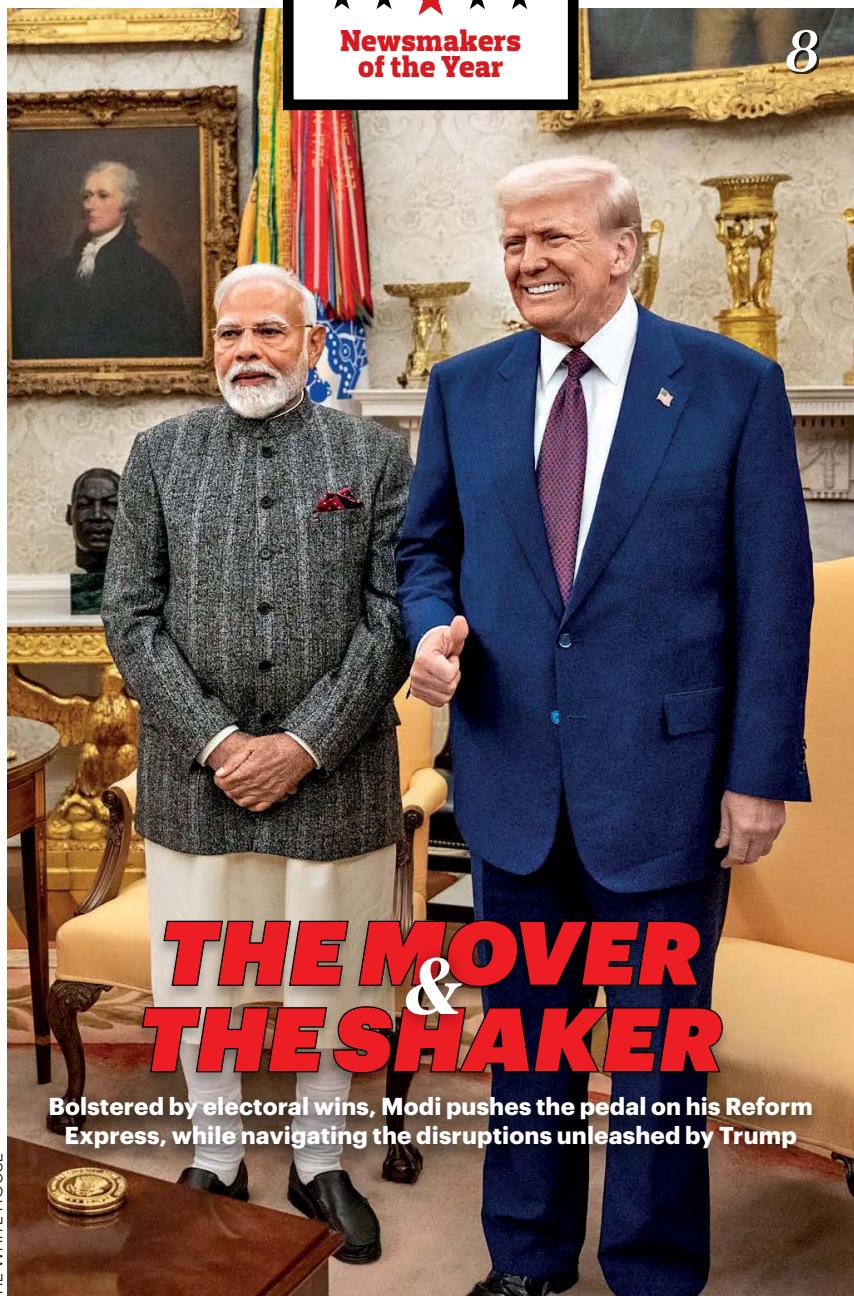
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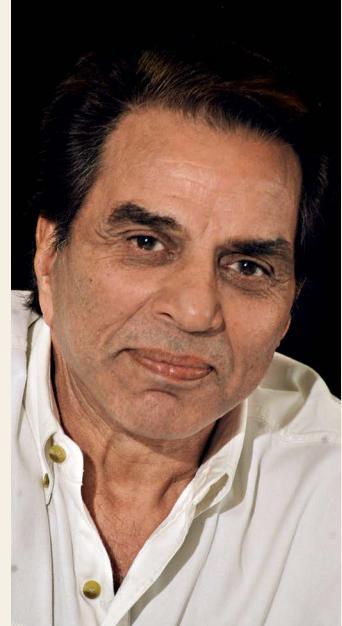
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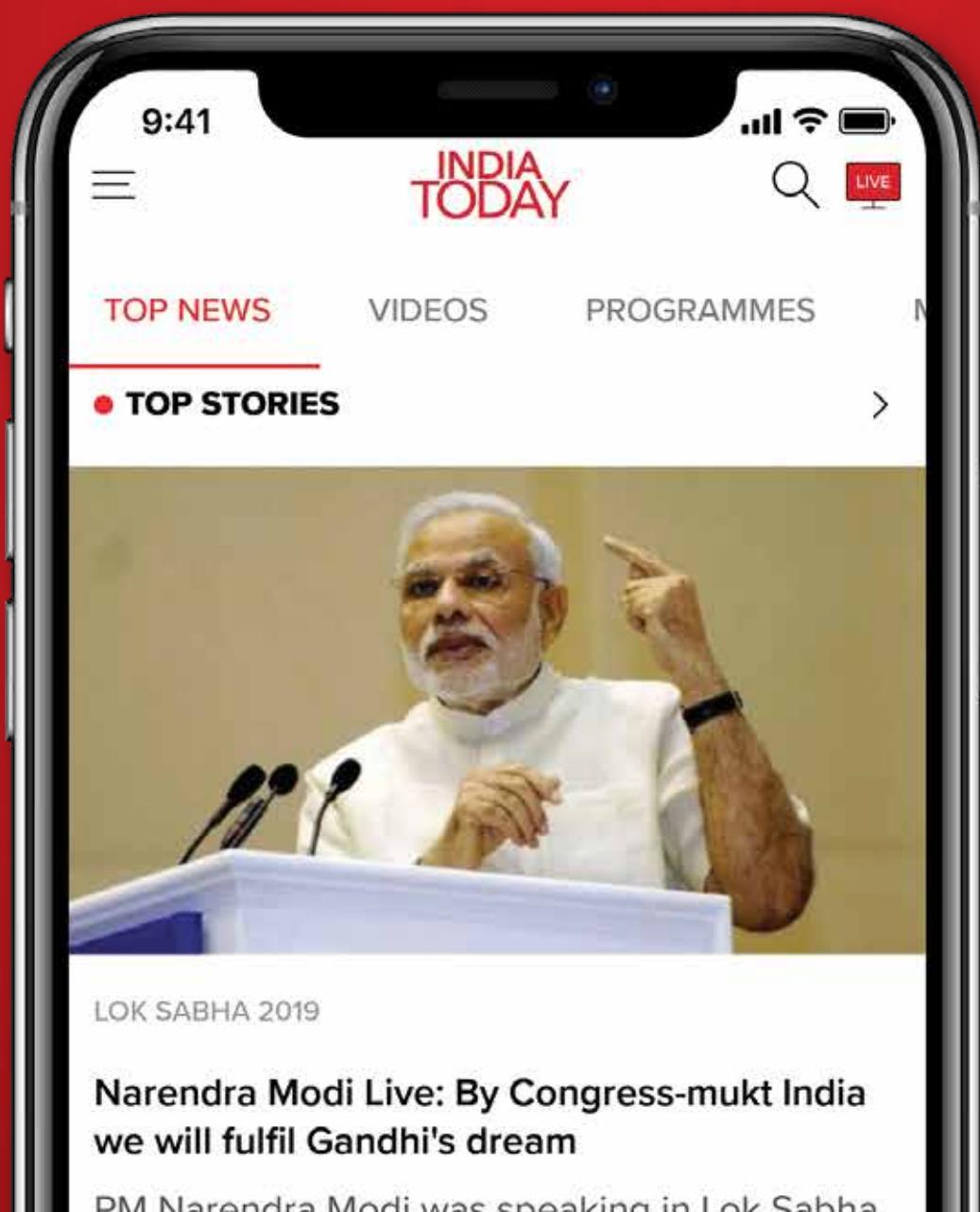


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**Newsmaker
of the Year**

NARENDRA

MODI 75

Prime Minister
of India



THE MOVER &

BOLSTERED BY ELECTORAL WINS, PM MODI PUSHED THE PEDAL ON THE REFOR



**Newsmaker
of the Year**

**DONALD
TRUMP 79**
US President



AFP

& THE SHAKER

MS EXPRESS DESPITE DISRUPTIONS UNLEASHED BY TRUMP

By RAJ CHENGAPPA

A

At the start of 2025, the compulsions that drove Narendra Modi and Donald Trump were similar. Both were seen as strongmen who had entered uncharted political territory in their respective countries. With both over 70 years old, the quest for them was less about political survival and more about establishing a lasting and impactful legacy.

Modi, 75, created electoral history when he won a third consecutive term in the 2024 general election, equalling the record set by India's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru. With one difference, though. Unlike the Congress under Nehru, the Modi-led Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in its third term failed to secure a simple majority on its own in the Lok Sabha, winning only 240 out of 543 seats, 32 short of the requisite target of 272. For the first time in his decade-long premiership, Modi had to depend on key allies—Chandrababu Naidu's Telugu Desam Party and Nitish Kumar's Janata Dal (United)—of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) to form the government. It could have cramped his ability to undertake bold and decisive reform. But Modi did not allow that setback to deter him in 2025, embarking on reforms that would put India firmly on the trajectory of a Viksit Bharat, joining the exclusive league of developed countries by 2047, the 100th year of its Independence.

In the United States, the then 78-year-old Donald Trump made a remarkable comeback in the November 2024 presidential election when he became the first American president in 132 years to win non-consecutive terms. And he did so emphatically, cornering 312 of the 538 electoral votes, way ahead of the 270 needed to be President. His victory was seen as part of the deep demographic and cultural backlash of White Christian nationalists against what they perceived as the rapid establishment of a multi-racial, multi-religious America under the tenures of Democratic presidents like Barack Obama and Joe Biden. Apart from carrying 31 of the 50 states, the Trump-led Republican Party won majorities in both the powerful



FIRST OFF THE MARK Modi with Trump at the Oval Office, Feb. 13, 2025

Senate and the House of Representatives, arming him with enough political ballast to execute his controversial vision of how to Make America Great Again (MAGA) in his second term.

As the world entered the final year of the first quarter of this century, the paths taken by Modi and Trump to achieve their respective goals would not just cross each other but end up being at cross-purposes with each other in more ways than one. By the end of the year, the friction would fray the Indo-US relationship that had in the past two decades overcome the hesitations of history to become stronger. That said, despite the obvious tensions in Indo-US ties, both Trump and Modi would maintain the façade that they remained, in the US president's words, "good friends". That fraught 'friendship' would dominate India's domestic and foreign policy discourse throughout 2025, even if it did not bring any obvious benefit to either country.

Modi's Reform Express

When 2025 dawned, it didn't appear that things would go so wrong between the two leaders, with both hard-focused on domestic economic reform. The BJP's massive victory in Maharashtra in the November 2024 assembly election had helped Modi regain his mojo and push the throttle on what he called his 'Reform Express'. Its first indication came on February 1, when finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman in her budget gave middle-class taxpay-



THE WHITE HOUSE

“When dealing with Trump, you can throw out all the grand international relations theories we teach in universities and explain US policy through only one variable: Trump’s personality. Everything is transactional: You scratch my back and I scratch yours”

— Prof. Sumit Ganguly
Senior Fellow, Hoover Foundation, Stanford University

ers major concessions by raising the nil-tax liability ceiling from Rs 7 lakh to Rs 12.75 lakh per annum. Nearly 10 million individuals, or over a third of India's taxpayers, stood to benefit from that move, as they found more money in their hands to spend on goods and services.

The Budget also indicated a big shift in the economic priorities of the Modi government. While in the past it had focused largely on supply side economics by pumping vast amounts of public money into building infrastructure for energy and transport, 2025 saw it take significant measures to boost demand and consumption. The hope was that it would stimulate private investment in manufacturing and services and create more jobs. As an expert who wished to remain anonymous explained, “The diagnosis of why the BJP didn't win a parliamentary majority on its own was jobs, jobs, jobs. Reforms then became the cure, and the urgency to implement became an imperative in 2025. It was now or never for the Reform Express.”

Another major step came in September when the Modi government pushed through the long-awaited and much-needed rationalisation of the Goods and Services Tax (GST). By simplifying the process and pruning slabs from five to three, the government made it clear that it was willing to forgo revenue to stimulate consumption. The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) backed the government's intentions, significantly

lowering its repo (repurchase) rate for lending short-term funds to commercial banks by as much as 1.25 basis points in 2025 alone, bringing it down from 6.50 per cent to 5.25 per cent, enabling banks to lower their lending rates to both businesses and homes. The second quarter of the financial year saw a sharp upswing in the GDP figure, with India clocking an impressive 8.2 per cent growth, making it the world's fastest growing major economy. RBI governor Sanjay Malhotra termed it India's Goldilocks moment, a rare phenomenon when growth is high and inflation low.

Pushing the Throttle

The big win for the BJP and JD(U) in Bihar in November saw Modi press even harder on the reform pedal. Soon after, the government announced it would implement the long-pending Labour Codes, which had consolidated 29 outdated labour laws into four new, uniform codes that simplified and redefined wages, industrial relations, social security and working conditions. The focus again was on job-creation while simultaneously ensuring workers' security.

The Lok Sabha session at the end of the year saw another flurry of economic reforms. The government opened up the insurance sector to 100 per cent Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), signalling that India was ready to trust global capital



Newsmakers of the Year

with its long-term financial architecture. The government also enacted the Sustainable Harnessing and Advancement of Nuclear Energy for Transforming India (SHANTI) Bill that overhauled decades-old nuclear laws. It ended state monopoly in the nuclear power sector by allowing full private sector participation and sorted out civil liability issues that had dissuaded foreign investors from coming in.

On the welfare front, the Modi government boldly rebranded the Manmohan-era Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MNREGA) as VB-G-RAM G (Viksit Bharat-Guarantee for Rozgar and Ajeevika Mission Gramin). Showcasing it as NDA's all-new employment scheme, it increased the guarantee of work from 100 to 125 days, but raised the contribution of states from the earlier 10 per cent to 40 per cent. The Opposition saw in the acronym an explicit attempt by the Modi government to recast welfare as part of its larger Hindutva politics and criticised it for increasing the burden on states. In its defence, the government pointed out that the scheme was two decades old and needed a revamp to ensure greater accountability, plug leakages and create meaningful assets.

By the end of year, it was clear that Modi would not allow political compulsions to come in the way of economic

“Though they needed political will and carried risks, PM Modi was prepared to carry out these landmark reforms because they are necessary for growth”

— Pramod Mishra, Principal Secretary to the PM

ambitions. As Dr Pramod Mishra, principal secretary to the prime minister, elaborates, “These are landmark reforms that need political will and carry risks, but the prime minister is prepared to do them because they are necessary for growth. It is full speed ahead for the Reform Express that the PM mentions.” What about the fresh focus on boosting demand through various measures? Mishra is clear: “It’s not about either supply or demand. We continue to back the supply side with measures such as infrastructure spending and performance-linked incentives while also taking measures to boost demand and these have already shown

Modi: The Mover

REFORM EXPRESS

- Budget 2025 lifts effective tax-free income to Rs 12.75 lakh, benefiting the salaried middle class
- GST tax slabs are restructured, compliance procedures streamlined
- FDI cap for insurance sector increased to 100 per cent, opening the way for full foreign ownership
- The SHANTI Bill, 2025 opens up the atomic energy sector to private and foreign participation

CAPTAIN COOL

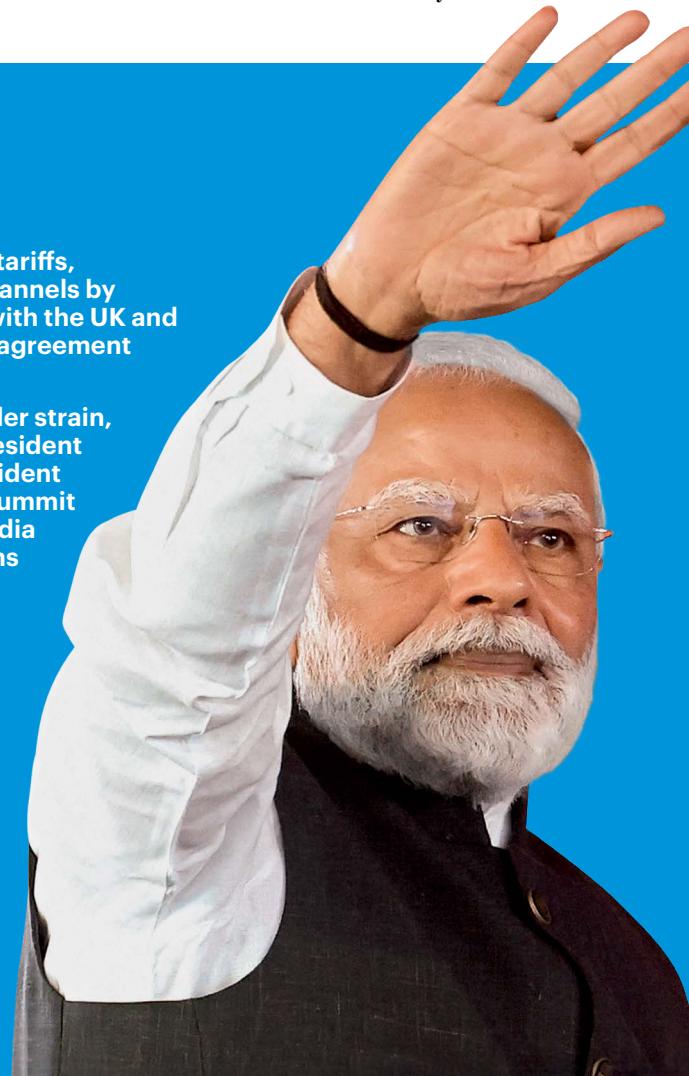
- Under pressure from US tariffs, diversifies India's export channels by signing trade agreements with the UK and Oman, finalising free trade agreement with New Zealand
- As ties with US come under strain, PM Modi meets Chinese president Xi Jinping and Russian president Vladimir Putin at the SCO Summit in August, signalling that India had other diplomatic options

POLITICAL STRENGTH

- Though the BJP has to depend on allies after the 2024 LS polls, Modi pursues politically risky reforms, like rebranding the MNREGA rural employment scheme as the VB-G-RAM G scheme
- In 2025, after winning the Bihar assembly polls, the Centre reorganises 29 outdated labour laws into four new uniform codes

THE WARRIOR

- India's retaliation to the Pahalgam attack, Operation Sindoora, draws a new red line, with PM Modi saying: “If there is a terrorist attack on India, a fitting reply will be given”



results. We are confident that with the focus on both the demand and supply side, the economy will continue to grow at an even faster pace."

Cleaning Regulatory Cholesterol

Nripendra Misra, former principal secretary to the PM, believes Modi is aware that his third term is all about crafting a legacy and that "history will judge a prime minister on not just what he builds but also by what he dismantles". In 2025, removing the regulatory cholesterol that had either choked or considerably slowed down economic growth became a major aspect of the prime minister's reform agenda, for which he set up a raft of high-powered committees. They were told that the prime minister didn't want voluminous reports but a focus on process change and rapid implementation. Modi's goal, insiders reveal, was simple: get the government out of people's hair.

Among these committees was one on non-financial regulatory reforms, set up in August. Headed by former cabinet secretary Rajiv Gauba and having industry representatives included as members, much of its focus was to ensure ease-of-doing-business for Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs), which complained about having to

observe 1,400 compliances annually and monitor around 40 regulatory ones daily. Since then, the committee has worked round-the-clock on the nitty-gritty of regulation, especially the ground-level friction for obtaining licences, renewals, inspections and municipal hassles that are the real pain points in the operational interface with the state.

That meant enabling businesses to move away from licensing to registration and from inspector-driven checks to what they called risk-based, IT-enabled enforcement. As Gauba explains, "We tend to confuse regulation with enforcement. What we need is not more regulation but more enforcement, where any government oversight should be randomised and risk-based." Much like the way software-determined random checks have become the norm in the new income tax regime.

The other issue before the committee was the frequent certification small businesses were required to get. These became an invitation for a new kind of Inspector Raj, where renewals were discretionary and thus prone to corruption. To circumvent this, the committee has come up with the idea to make licences of much longer validity, including a 'once-given-is-given' approach, and focusing on registration rather than licensing for smaller businesses like food

Trump: The Shaker

TARIFF TERROR

- The US under President Donald Trump first imposes a 25 per cent tariff on 55 Indian export categories, citing high trade deficit in India's favour and trade barriers
- Then it imposes a further 25 per cent tariff on Indian goods—a penalty for India's purchase of cheap Russian crude oil

VISA & IMMIGRATION BARRIERS

- Most H1B visas, a primary route for skilled professionals to live and work in the US, are granted to Indians
- The US imposes a hefty \$100,000 fee for each new H1B application. Reason: the claim that they "take away American jobs"
- With around 400,000 illegal Indian immigrants in the US, it has deported over 3,000 since January 2025, with handcuffed and chained deportees sent back on chartered aircraft

DIPLOMATIC DISSONANCE

- India pointedly denies Trump's declaration on May 10 that he brokered the ceasefire between India and Pakistan. Over the following months, Trump repeats his claim around 60 times
- Trump meets with Pakistan's Field Marshal Asim Munir in the White House twice post Op. Sindo. This sudden 'reset' in ties with Pakistan results in a period of downturn in ties with India
- Despite China buying more Russian oil, India is singled out for the extra 25 per cent tariff. Trump also targets India by saying its economy is a 'dead' one



★ ★ ★ ★ ★
**Newsmakers
of the Year**

vendors. Inspections, such as for safety, could be given to accredited third-party private institutions.

Reducing Everyday Friction

The interim 38-point agenda that the committee came up with and is already implementing works on a trust-based regulatory framework. As Gauba explains, “The PM’s governance philosophy is one of shifting from suspicion-based rules, a colonial hangover, to trust-based regulation, where you regard the citizen as honest. Our goal is to reduce the government-in-your-face approach to one where the state should be present where needed as a safety net and absent where not needed, especially in the conduct of daily business operations.” These

included simplifying filing GST returns and increasing exemption thresholds, raising the turnover ceiling for a “small company” from Rs 40 crore to Rs 100 crore and reducing mandatory board meetings and audit burdens for smaller firms. For agencies like the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) and the Bureau of Indian Standards (BIS), it has recommended moving complex licence-and-inspection regimes to simpler two-tier standards systems.

The impact of these reforms is being felt most in the dismantling of the wide range of Quality Control Orders (QCOs) that have slowed both import and export growth. Over the past eight years, the government had introduced mandatory product standards seemingly to ensure quality and regulate imports across 1,300 goods. These, according to experts, included standards for every nut, bolt and coil rather than the finished product, such as a fan or heater, becoming a whole new source of harassment and corruption. Producers and consumers across sectors were hit; MSMEs more so. In November, the government reduced these QCOs to around 750.

Meanwhile, the Modi government pushed the second

“The PM’s governance philosophy is one of shifting from suspicion-based rules to trust-based regulation. Our goal is to reduce the government-in-your-face approach to one where the state should be present only where needed”

— Rajiv Gauba
Former Cabinet Secretary

ing felt most in the dismantling of the wide range of Quality Control Orders (QCOs) that have slowed both import and export growth. Over the past eight years, the government had introduced mandatory product standards seemingly to ensure quality and regulate imports across 1,300 goods. These, according to experts, included standards for every nut, bolt and coil rather than the finished product, such as a fan or heater, becoming a whole new source of harassment and corruption. Producers and consumers across sectors were hit; MSMEs more so. In November, the government reduced these QCOs to around 750.

Meanwhile, the Modi government pushed the second

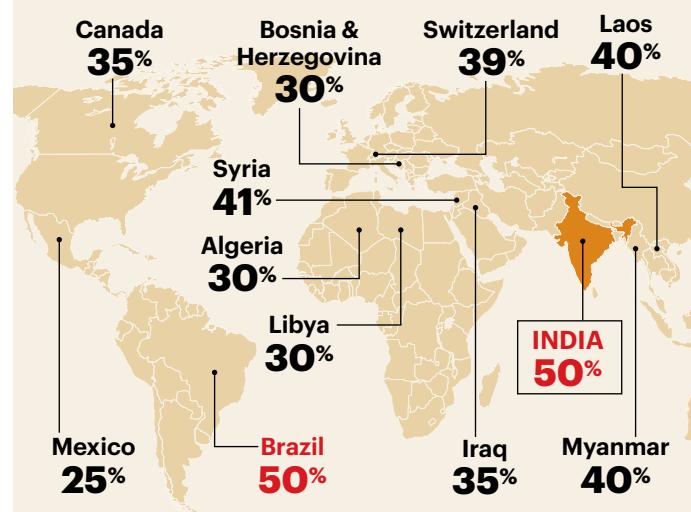
INDIA-US RELATIONS

Friends Without Benefits

A deal to relax American tariffs remains elusive, hurting key Indian sectors

► President Trump’s 50 per cent tariffs continue to be imposed on Indian goods entering American shores. Half of this tax was slapped solely due to continuing oil and military dealings with Russia

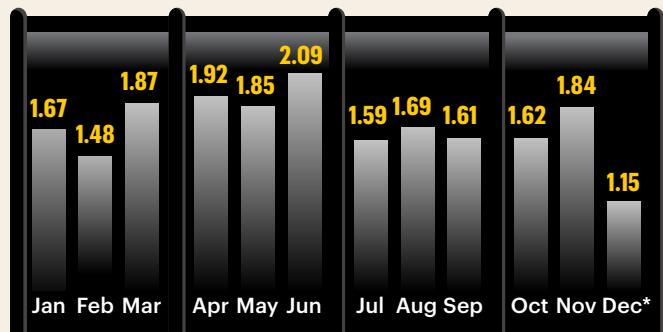
Trump’s global tariff war



► While products crucial for the US—like pharmaceuticals, semiconductors and minerals—are still shipped from India without this duty, other sectors like textiles, gems, jewellery and leather have had to divert exports to other nations

INDIA’S OIL & PETROLEUM PRODUCTS IMPORTS FROM RUSSIA

Million Barrels per day in 2025



*Provisional (till Dec. 30, 2025); Source: Kpler

► A trade deal between India and the US remains up in the air even as oil imports from Russia fell continuously through July, August and September

► November’s imports, however, saw a six-month high at 1.84 million barrels per day. A high-level meeting last month yielded no indication from the White House on tariff relaxation, while the graph dipped

TARIFF SHOCK
Trump announces his plan for reciprocal tariffs, Apr. 2, 2025



GETTY IMAGES

“The real damage in relations is psychological—the perception is that the US is coercive and unreliable. That shouldn’t prevent India from deepening its partnership, but it should hedge”

— Arun Singh, Former Ambassador to the US

phase of the Jan Vishwas programme overseen by the Department of Promotion of Industrial Investment and Trade (DPIIT). That saw the amendment of 17 more laws, including decriminalising a range of offences across sectors in municipal governance, motor vehicle regulation and export-related activities. These are in addition to the 183 provisions across 42 laws the DPIIT decriimnalised in the first phase beginning 2023. “Overall,” says Pramod Mishra, “these reforms are designed to improve productivity, encourage entrepreneurship and strengthen India’s competitiveness by lowering the everyday friction of economic participation.” However, with Trump upending the world order, specifically Indo-US ties, Modi would face the biggest foreign policy challenge of his premiership.

The Trump Factor

Ironically, till May 2025, the Indo-US relationship had been at its strongest in years. Modi had enjoyed good relations with Trump in his first presidency, the only sore point being the nearly \$41 billion trade imbalance in Delhi’s favour. The signals from Washington DC remained positive early in Trump 2.0, with external affairs minister S. Jaishankar given a front-row seat at the oath-taking ceremony on January 20. The next day, Jaishankar, along with the foreign ministers of the other Quad countries such as Australia and Japan, met with the new US secretary of state Marco Rubio, indicating that India and the grouping were a priority for the new administration.

Modi was among the first leaders Trump hosted at the White House during an Official Working Visit on February 13, which saw the two leaders signing a clutch of forward-leaning initiatives. India had smartly paved the way for the positive outcome two weeks earlier, when in its Budget it announced a substantial lowering of tariffs for US products like bourbon, iconic motorcycle brands, ICT products and medical devices, besides allowing market access for agricultural products like duck meat and alfalfa hay. It also included a commitment to open up India’s nuclear power sector to private players, including foreign investors, and modify the contentious civil liability provisions that had prevented American companies from investing in India after the US-India nuclear deal of 2008.



Newsmakers of the Year

Importantly, the Modi-Trump meeting saw the signing of the US-India COMPACT (Catalyzing Opportunities for Military Partnership, Accelerated Commerce & Technology), with a results-driven agenda. It included negotiating a new Bilateral Trade Agreement (BTA) by the fall of 2025 with a “bold new goal” for Mission 500 that aimed to double total bilateral trade to \$500 billion by 2030. They agreed on a framework for a defence partnership for the US to sell the state-of-the-art ‘Javelin’ Anti-Tank Guided Missiles and ‘Stryker’ Infantry Combat Vehicles to India in a new co-production arrangement. Trump even offered the US Air Force’s top-of-the-line F-35 fighter jets at the joint press conference. The two countries had all bases covered when they inked a strategic technology agreement to collaborate on critical and emerging technologies in areas like AI, semiconductors and quantum computing and be part of the global supply chain for rare earth minerals needed for hi-tech.

The MAGA Influence

However, despite the promising start, Indo-US ties began going downhill soon after the summit. This was due to several reasons, some having to do with India’s assumptions based on its dealings with Trump 1.0, and others concerning Trump himself. Professor Sumit Ganguly, senior fellow at the Hoover Foundation at Stanford University, says, “When it comes to dealing with Trump, you can throw out all the grand international relations theories we teach in universities and explain US policy through only one variable: Trump’s personality. Everything is transactional: You scratch my back and I scratch yours.”

Experts like India’s former national security advisor Shivshankar Menon are dismissive of the view in some circles that India is dealing with two Washingtons: one driven by a fickle Trump who blows hot and cold frequently, and the other by the Establishment that stands steadfastly with India. His perception: “There is no meaningful divide between, say, the Pentagon and the White House. The world has accepted that it is now living in Trump’s world, whether it likes it or not. We are dealing with a fundamentally different United States, where protectionism and isolationism are no longer deviations, but the norm.” Interestingly, Menon believes the shift reflects the longer-term movement away from liberal globalism that began before Trump.

Many experts agree with Menon, but argue that Trump has merely weaponised the political and cultural anxieties of his MAGA base, which largely comprises White Christian nationalists who perceive a loss of dominance and identity. Columnist and author Tom Friedman believes that America may be headed toward a third civil war—one distinct from the first, which pitted North against South, and the second,



“The world has accepted that it is now living in Trump’s world. We are dealing with a fundamentally different United States, where protectionism and isolationism are no longer deviations, but the norm”

— **Shivshankar Menon, Former NSA**

which centred on racial rights. This time, he argues, conflict would be driven by disputes over identity, belonging, nationalism and fundamental cultural values.

Trump is also unconstrained in unprecedented ways compared to his first term. He is not hemmed in by the establishment or by legislators, has presidential immunity from prosecution and urgently wants to get things done before the next round of Congressional elections. An American expert cautions against over-reading Trump’s perceived personal friendship with Modi, saying, “Though



BEFRIENDING INDIA'S FOE Modi at the Adampur air base post Op Sindoor, May 13; (below) Trump with Pakistan PM Shehbaz Sharif and Field Marshal Asim Munir at the White House, Sept. 26, 2025





NEW EQUATIONS Modi in conversation with Russian president Vladimir Putin and his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping at the SCO Summit, Sept. 1, 2025

AFP

the two leaders enjoy warm ties, the Indo-US relationship is governed by hard campaign commitments, especially on issues such as immigration, trade and inflation.” The first shock came on April 2, when Trump announced tariffs against several countries, including India, even as Indian trade negotiators began engaging with their US counterparts. To New Delhi’s disappointment, he pegged tariffs at a high 25 per cent for Indian exporters, effective August 1.

US Ties Go Downhill

Trade, though, would not be the only friction point. Immigration, both illegal and legal, were at the heart of Trump’s election campaign, and India began to bear the brunt. Trump initiated the process of deporting illegal immigrants, and the estimated 400,000 Indians living illegally in the US did not escape the clutches of America’s Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agency. When photographs of the first batch of illegal Indians being deported on chartered aircraft appeared, their legs chained and wearing handcuffs, it created an uproar in Indian political circles. That led to ICE officials assuring their Indian counterparts that women and children will not be leg-chained, but the deportation has proceeded quietly and steadily. An estimated 3,000 people have been sent back since Trump’s return, the highest in recent years. But more was in store, as Trump tightened the rules for H1B visas, impacting nearly 750,000 Indians working in the US and

“Prime Minister Modi knows his third term is all about crafting a legacy and that history will judge him not just by what he builds but also by what he dismantles”

— Nripendra Misra

Former Principal Secretary to the PM

triggering another trail of returnees.

Yet the main rupture between Trump and Modi would occur because of unexpected circumstances. After the terror attack in Pahalgam on April 22, PM Modi ordered Indian armed forces to launch aerial strikes on nine sites, mostly in the heart of Pakistan, on May 7. Operation Sindoora, as the mission was called, triggered the sixth Indo-Pak war that would last four days before the two sides agreed to a ceasefire on May 10. While India maintained that it was Pakistan that begged for a ceasefire, embarrassingly for Modi, a Trump post on Truth Social claimed he had brokered the peace.

It is a claim Trump has made an estimated 60 times since then, undermining India’s carefully-constructed narrative and exposing New Delhi’s limits in shaping global percep-



Newsmakers of the Year

tion. Worse, Trump invited Pakistan's self-appointed Field Marshal Asim Munir to a meeting at the White House on June 18, signifying a deepening of their ties, much to India's discomfort. Around the same time, Trump, in a telephonic conversation with Modi, invited him to the White House on his way back from the G7 visit to Canada. The Indian PM declined, saying he was otherwise committed, but not before making the point that India has not accepted third-party mediation in its dispute with Pakistan in the past and would not do so in the future either. This, reportedly, piqued Trump. According to experts, Operation Sindoor became an inflection point not because of differences in policy between the two countries but because India refused to validate Trump's personal narrative and dashed his hopes of winning a Nobel Peace Prize for the many wars he claimed to have stopped. In hindsight, policy experts argue, India could have worked out a via media for acknowledging US role in brokering the ceasefire, which could have satisfied its domestic audience and pleased Trump.

Indo-US ties fell to another low in August when Trump imposed an additional 25 per cent tariff on India for importing oil from Russia, accusing it of funding Moscow's war on Ukraine as well as profiteering from sale to other countries. The resulting 50 per cent tariff saw India joining Brazil among the nations paying the highest tariffs. According to Arun Singh, former Indian ambassador to the US, "The real damage in relations is psychological—the perception is that the US is coercive and unreliable. That shouldn't prevent India from deepening its partnership, but it should hedge. We can do more defence cooperation with the US, but never become security-dependent. The first step must be the US lifting the Russia-related tariffs. Only after that can we realistically talk about rebuilding the momentum." The process of repair is expected to begin once the new US ambassador, Sergio Gor—a Trump confidant—takes charge in mid-January.

Lessons from 2025

Experts view Modi's decision not to react to every Trump taunt and to draw red lines not just on third-party mediation but also to protect farmers' interests in trade negotiations, as sagacious and mature. The Indian PM's engagements with Russian president Vladimir Putin and Chinese president Xi Jinping at the SCO meet in China in September are seen as a clear message to Trump that India has other players in the game.

The Modi government's move to expand and diversify trade relations by signing deals with the UK, New Zealand and Oman, besides negotiating one with the European Union, should mitigate the impact of the draconian American tariffs on Indian exports.

The lessons from 2025 are clear and will be the priority for Modi and his government in 2026. It was evident at Modi's meeting with the chief secretaries at the end of the year, in which shoring up human resources and skill development emerged as a key area of focus. The prime minister, his aides say, is aware that in an ageing western world, India has to cash in on its demographic dividend. As an expert remarked, India should not become old before it becomes rich.

**Experts view
Modi's decision
not to react to
every Trump
taunt and to draw
red lines not just
on third-party
mediation but
also to protect
farmers' interests
in trade
negotiations as
sagacious and
mature**

Trump's return has also forced Modi to reconfigure India's foreign policy calculus, as the US no longer seems to conceive of India as a strategic counterweight to China. The swagger of the past has given way to sobering realism that the US regards India as economically smaller, technologically lagging and strategically ambiguous. India's aspiration for multipolarity must contend with this hard geopolitical reality. Trump didn't change India. What he did was expose Delhi's assumptions about itself. Like an oyster needs a foreign organism as an irritant to secrete layers of nacre in self-defence that eventually form a beautiful pearl, Trump's interventionist approach may push India to explore better possibilities.

It is for Modi and India in 2026 to bring about the necessary recalibration in the country's foreign policy and decide what kind of superpower we want to be. Whether we want to compete with China, or with Pakistan. Whether our states measure themselves against each other for ease of doing business, or with high-flying trade countries like Vietnam and South Korea. Whether we allow our cities, including the national capital, to become hellholes of pollution and corruption, or engineer a civic revolution that facilitates both ease of living and ease of doing business in a harmonious, growth-oriented manner.

Modi is one of the rare leaders who are endowed with a long-horizon vision, which he has demonstrated in the past two decades as prime minister, and who has the wherewithal to steer India through these turbulent times. It is the raft of economic reforms he initiated in 2025 and the resilience he displayed amid an adverse environment, along with Trump's role in the global churn that impacted India over the year, which has made INDIA TODAY hail them as Newsmakers of the Year 2025. ■



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★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Other
Newsmakers

MOHAN BHAGWAT 75
Sarsanghchalak, RSS

The Quiet Authority

From nudging the BJP into a political course-correction to being a moral evangelist at large, 2025 saw Bhagwat shape outcomes without overtly occupying centre stage

By **ANILESH S. MAHAJAN**

IN

Nagpur's Reshimbagh ground, under the mellow October sun, Mohan Bhagwat walked to the dais with his familiar unhurried stride. Saffron flags fluttered, thousands of uniformed cadre stood in formation, and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) anthem filled the air. The ritual was a familiar one, but this particular enactment of it marked a special milestone. The RSS, born in 1925, was ringing in a full centenary. If the weight of the moment needed a figure

with a natural, unforced air of authority to embody it and project it outward—without shouting—the sarsanghchalak, himself now 75, answered to that description perfectly.

It's not just tradition that vests him with that authority. The year 2025 demonstrated its currency value in the political sphere, sealing beyond all doubt signs of the street power visible in 2024. Across five elections, it was made abundantly clear that when the RSS recuses itself from electoral groundwork, its political progeny suffers. On the other hand, when the vast infantry of the Sangh fans out to till the field ahead of voting, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) reaps the harvest. Juxtapose the scare the BJP received in the 2024 Lok Sabha election, especially in Uttar Pradesh, against its subsequent landslide wins in Haryana, Maharashtra, Delhi and Bihar, and the axiom meets its QED.

That's why Bhagwat is often described as the most influential Indian after Prime Minister Narendra Modi. That's also why, when he speaks, the political class listens. To his credit, he wears this power lightly and with sobriety, not venturing overmuch into everyday policymaking, nor creating rancour, but speaking just enough to perform his essential role: being the ideological compass of the larger

In a year when the RSS turned 100 and he 75, Bhagwat embodied authority rooted in continuity



A FIRM HAND
Bhagwat speaking
at a cultural event
in Nagpur, Sept. 12



Steady Anchor

- › Led the RSS through its 100th year, reframing it as a mission for India's future, not a relic of the past
- › Emerged as a key ideological anchor after the BJP's 2024 setback, shaping its strategic recalibration
- › Projected *bandhutva*, balance and moral renewal as counterweights to polarisation and excess

brotherhood, including being a moral guardian to the BJP, exerting a subtle, paternalistic sway. Both his influence and his leaning towards resolution rather than conflict were visible in 2025. In March, Modi made a rare visit to the RSS's Nagpur headquarters, his first in nearly a decade. On August 15, speaking from the Red Fort, he acknowledged the RSS's role in nation-building. The government and the Sangh seemed aligned again—a convergence of interests and intent.

In this climate, Bhagwat's speeches carried renewed weight. When he remarked in early 2025 that "pracharaks retire at 75", it invited close reading: both he and Modi were to cross that milestone in September. Bhagwat had to clarify it was not a coded message, signalling continuity and reverting to larger messaging. At the RSS centenary, he spoke in the tones of an evangelist: "The RSS enters its second century not as a movement of the past, but as a mission for India's future."

Sixteen years into his tenure, Bhagwat has presided over an expansion of the Sangh's institutional footprint. He has also sought to expand its vocabulary: speaking of *bandhutva* (fraternity), opening conversations with Dalit collectives, interfaith groups, even sections of the Left intelligentsia. In his personal austerity, he is a throwback to the renunciatory tradition of his forebears. Standing vigil, as it were, against the modern corruptions of power. Deeper within, there also lurks a moral reformist. ■

Naxalism Meets Its Nemesis

Even in the midst of a busy year politically, the Union home minister's crowning achievement was dealing a decisive blow to the Maoist insurgency

By **RAHUL NORONHA**



★ ★ ★ ★ ★
**Other
Newsmakers**

AMIT SHAH 61
Home Minister

W

ay back in 2006, then prime minister Dr Manmohan Singh had identified Maoism as “the single biggest internal security challenge faced by the country”. Two decades had to pass before its end was in sight, and it was Union home minister Amit Shah who made it his remit to preside over its dismantling. A movement that once held sway over 160 districts in the country has now been worn down to 11. Only three contiguous districts in Chhattisgarh—Sukma, Bijapur and Narayanpur—remain in the ‘most affected’ list, according to the October 2025 assessment by the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA). Clearly, cutting the legs off the Maoist movement has been Shah’s crowning achievement in 2025, though political analysts will also point to how the BJP’s master election strategist shepherded the party to wins in the two big states to go to elections in the year—Delhi and Bihar.

Early in 2024, Shah had declared that Maoism would be wiped out in India by March 31, 2026, setting a deadline for the security agencies. On cue, around then, the security forces launched aggressive operations against the Maoists in Chhattisgarh, the state that remained their citadel after the movement had weakened in the contiguous states of Odisha, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra. Shah has dedicated a lot of time and effort to the issue. “I held 85 meetings in the last six years solely on the Maoism issue...some of them went on from morning to evening,” he told INDIA TODAY earlier in an interview. It clearly sent a message to the rank and file, that this was a fight to the finish, that there would be no backing out. The strategising was backed by more boots on the ground and added resources in the form of weapons, drones, armoured vehicles, as well as investment in tech and human intelligence-gathering. The number of fortified police stations in Maoist areas went up from 66 in 2014 to 612 in 2024. Most importantly, force commanders were given a free hand to take risks and launch operations. The change of government in Chhattisgarh in December 2023—the Bhupesh Baghel-led Congress regime making way for a Centre-friendly saffron dispensation—was also a big factor in the success, say intelligence sources.

The scale of the anti-Maoist operations was massive—in Chhattisgarh alone, the rebels held 18,000 sq. km in 2014; it’s now some 3,000 sq. km. Likewise, the number of security personnel (509) and civilians (1,495) killed has come down by over 70 per cent decade on decade.

The coordinated efforts began to show results by 2024, with the security forces ‘neutralising’ 217 Maoists in Chhattisgarh that year. In 2025, by November-end, this number stood at 234.

Shah had said earlier that he had held “85 meetings on the Maoist issue”.... It clearly sent a message to the rank and file—that this was a fight to the finish

Safe and Secure

› Amit Shah had set Mar. 31, 2026 as deadline to “make India Naxal-free”; indications are that he has largely succeeded

› Multi-Agency Centre (MAC) set up for seamless inter-agency responses to terrorism, organised crime, cyber threats

› Security lapses led to the attacks on tourists in Pahalgam in April, Red Fort car bomb explosion in November

Those eliminated include many of the CPI (Maoist) top leadership, including general secretary Basavaraju and four other central committee members. Meanwhile, Madvi Hidma, one of the most adept field commanders on the Maoist side, was killed by the Andhra Pradesh police in an encounter. With the movement suddenly rudderless, there were many surrenders, including by a group led by senior leader Bhupathi in Maharashtra, and another one led by Rupesh in Chhattisgarh. Over 800 Maoists surrendered in Chhattisgarh in 2024, with the number almost doubling (1,500-plus) in 2025, suggesting the purge has had an effect.

With the Maoist movement on the slide, the country’s longest-serving home minister (Shah has held the post since May 30, 2019) should get a satisfactory rating from most quarters. There were a couple of blips, from the security lapses that led to the attacks on tourists in Pahalgam in April 2025 to the car bomb explosion near the Red Fort in November, but overall, it was a year of incremental pluses for the man considered the second most powerful BJP leader in the country. ■

O

Over the past decade, Indians have been lulled into thinking that terrorist attacks targeting tourists/ pilgrims in Kashmir—occurrences that once happened with horrific regularity—were a thing of the past. That sense of smug satisfaction was shattered on the rolling glades in picturesque Pahalgam on April 22, 2025, when a brutal attack claimed the lives of 26 male tourists. The assault, linked to groups associated with Lashkar-e-Toiba (LeT) and Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM), was an attempt by Pakistan to disrupt the hard-fought peace in J&K. As indignation and anger surged across the country, many expected a decisive response, such as the 2016 surgical strikes after the Uri terror attack and the 2019 Balakot airstrike following the Pulwama attack.

On May 7, 2025, India launched Operation Sindoor—a series of precision strikes by the Indian Air Force's Rafales and the army's long-range artillery targeting nine Jaish and Lashkar terrorist launchpads inside Pakistan and Pakistan-occupied Kashmir. Satellite images indicated that over a hundred terrorists were eliminated and key command centres destroyed. As Pakistan retaliated, for four intense, dramatic days, the theatre of war was the skies on either side of the Line of Control and the international border. This was modern air warfare at its cutting edge—electronic warfare and smart coordination between aircraft, ground radars and Airborne Warning and Control System aircraft. Hundreds of Pakistani drones and missiles were hurled at Indian airbases, military assets and residential areas, but India's



Enough Is Enough

Operation Sindoor demonstrated India's willingness and resolve to use military might if necessary in response to terrorist attacks orchestrated by the enemy on its soil

By **PRADIP R. SAGAR**

AFTER THE STORM
PM Narendra Modi meeting
Indian Air Force personnel at
the Adampur airbase,
May 13, 2025



Fire from the Skies

- › On May 7, Indian missiles, bombs, long-range artillery destroyed nine Jaish-e-Mohammed and Lashkar-e-Toiba camps in Pakistan
- › India's layered air defence networks shot down most Pakistani drones/ missiles
- › After Pakistani defence radars were neutralised, Indian BrahMos and SCALP missiles wreaked havoc on eight Pakistani air bases
- › Op. Sindoos ushered in a new security threshold: any terrorist attack will now be treated as an act of war. It boosted confidence in indigenous defence technology

multi-layered air defence (AD) system, bolstered by such weapons as indigenous Akash surface to air missiles (SAM) and the Russian origin S-400 long-range SAM, destroyed them mid-flight. The effectiveness of the IAF's Integrated Air Command and Control System (IACCS) and the Army's Akashtee was a positive emerging from the conflict. Though after the assault on the terror bases Pakistani fighter jets posed a threat, they were driven from the skies after Indian missile strikes took out Pakistani air defence radars on May 8 and 10. Thereafter, Pakistan was helpless before India's barrage of SCALP and BrahMos missiles on eight Pakistani air bases. Thus chastened, Pakistan called for a ceasefire. Pakistan claimed to have shot down several Indian fighter jets, and the Chief of Defence Staff Gen Anil Chauhan later acknowledged "initial losses". IAF chief Air Chief Marshal A.P. Singh has stated that five Pakistani fighters and one large

aircraft were downed by Indian attacks.

Op. Sindoos gained powerful emotional significance when two senior female officers—Colonel Sofiya Qureshi and Wing Commander Vyomika Singh—led media briefings, embodying national pride and unity. The operation reinforced India's zero-tolerance stance against terrorism and highlighted Pakistan's continued sheltering of militant networks. Unlike the single-day Bal-

kot strike, this mission unfolded over 87 hours, and showcased India's ability to conduct operations without provoking full-scale war. The Army, IAF and Navy operated in seamlessly coordinated roles. The success of the mission boosted confidence in indigenous defence technology and accelerated investment in drones, artificial intelligence and hypersonic systems critical for future warfare.

The operation has established a new security threshold: any terrorist attack on India will now be treated as an act of war and will be met with calculated and punitive force. Indeed, as India's political and military leaders have said, Op. Sindoos is not over. Since Sindoos, infiltration across the LoC has declined, raising hopes for the revival of tourism in regions like Pahalgam.

Op. Sindoos now stands as a milestone in the country's military history—an assertion of strength, sovereignty and unwavering national resolve. ■

Operation Sindoos highlighted the need for future-ready tech in warfare, and led to accelerated investment in AI and hypersonic systems



Other
Newsmakers

GYANESH KUMAR, 61
Chief Election Commissioner

Special Intensive Role

Efforts to clean voter rolls through the Special Intensive Revision made Gyanesh Kumar a constant political target, as reform collided with mistrust and Opposition resistance

By KAUSHIK DEKA

G

Gyanesh Kumar's arrival at Nirvachan Sadan in February 2025 came with an institutional redesign. As the first chief election commissioner appointed under the reworked 2023 law, one that quietly clipped judicial influence from the selection panel, his elevation itself became a political flashpoint. The Opposition saw in the new system a tilt toward executive dominance. The government described it as a rationalisation. Kumar—a veteran bureaucrat who had long mastered the art of surviving shifting constitutional weather—insisted that the Election Commission remained independent. However, it was clear that his tenure would be measured less by proclamations and more by whether he could rebuild trust in a political climate allergic to consensus.

Kumar began by moving fast. Within his first 100 days in office, he unveiled a sprawling 21-point reform agenda that included capping voter load per

booth at 1,200 to reduce crowding, redesigning voter slips to make them clearer, expanding polling stations into dense urban enclaves, acknowledging the changing geography of India's electorate. Alongside technical fixes, Kumar initiated the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) in Bihar, a sweeping exercise to purge outdated, duplicate and fraudulent entries. It became the template for a clean-up that he intends to replicate across the country. For Kumar, the rolls were the bedrock. If they were unreliable, every other reform risked becoming cosmetic. For the Opposition, it appeared as another tactic to help the ruling BJP win, this time by tweaking the rolls. In mid-year, Rahul Gandhi unleashed a fusillade of allegations, claiming the 2024 general election had been tainted by "vote theft" and padded rolls. For weeks, Indian politics descended into a familiar theatre

PTI

The voter roll clean-up Kumar initiated in Bihar appeared to the Opposition as yet another tactic to advantage the ruling BJP in the state polls



The Past Master

› As Union home secretary, Kumar helped draft the law that paved the way for the abrogation of Article 370 and J&K's reorganisation in 2019

› He also steered the government's legal and administrative preparations during the Ram Temple litigation, later playing a central role in setting up the trust that oversaw the temple's construction

of accusation and counter-accusation. Rahul demanded machine-readable voter lists for independent audits. Kumar retorted that the claims were "false and misleading" and that the commission would not publish editable data at the expense of voter privacy. He challenged the Opposition to file affidavits proving fraud or apologise. Through it all, Kumar's public persona hardened: authoritative, dismissive of questions on the integrity of the commission.

It was the Bihar assembly election, however, that offered his administration a more empirical verdict. In a sharp departure from India's multi-phase elections, Kumar compressed the Bihar polls into just two phases, citing better logistics and security. The gamble paid

off. Turnout crossed 67 per cent, women voted in record numbers; no party or candidate demanded any repoll, a rare achievement.

By year's end, Kumar's arc extended well beyond India's electoral calendar. In December, he took charge as Chair of International IDEA, the Stockholm-based intergovernmental body devoted to strengthening democratic institutions worldwide. His role served as a soft-power validation of India's election management prowess. Yet his work at home remains unfinished. Having piloted the SIR in Bihar, Kumar now faces the more complex task of completing similar revisions across other states, an undertaking that becomes politically combustible before elections. ■



Star Trekker

Becoming only the second Indian after Rakesh Sharma to transcend Earth's boundaries and reach space, Shubhanshu Shukla marked an important milestone in India's space mission

By AJAY SUKUMARAN

L

egions of wide-eyed kids sat glued to their living room TVs in 1984 as Punjab boy Rakesh Sharma made a call to Indian prime minister Indira Gandhi from space and, training his gaze on the nation, said it was “Saare jahan se accha” (the best of them all). Though future Indian Air Force (IAF) pilot and only the second Indian in space Shubhanshu Shukla was not one of those kids, born a full year later, Sharma had already spelled the trajectory of his life.

Over a four-decade-long journey that would involve chance, grit, ambition and unerring talent, this boy from Lucknow would follow Sharma and become Astronaut 634, climbing aboard the International Space Station (ISS) in July last year and making history for Indian spaceflight.

“Pursuing a dream is in itself a huge accomplishment,” Shukla said at the India Today Conclave in Mumbai in September. He was 17 years old when a classmate left behind an empty application for the National Defence Academy on a desk. Shukla picked it up, filled it and blasted off, not even telling his parents his plans at first. Four years later, he was commissioned into the IAF as a fighter pilot. The next big step came more than a decade later, when the Gaganyaan programme, India’s first manned spaceflight mission, was in full swing and Shukla began training as an astronaut.

The year 2024 was busy. He was elevated to the rank of Group Captain and recruited by Axiom-4, a NASA-supported private astronaut mission, to represent one of only four nations headed to the ISS. It was historic for multiple reasons, marking as it did a return to space after more than 40 years for India, Poland and Hungary, and with Shukla in the cockpit of the space capsule. “There’s a saying in the spaceflight community,” he said.

How He Made it to Space

› A seasoned Indian Air Force test pilot, Shukla has 2,000 hours of flight experience

› His spaceflight training began in 2020 when India’s first manned spaceflight programme, Gaganyaan, took off in full swing

› The trip that made him the first Indian on the International Space Station was a multinational effort

“You are ready for a spaceflight mission when you finish one.” In June 2025, he was strapped into a rocket designed by SpaceX and zoomed off to a dizzying 28,500 km/h during which, he said, “all anticipation goes right out of the window”.

Shukla’s first glimpse of Earth from orbit was overwhelming. “My first thought was that of oneness with the Earth. There



were no boundary lines or borders of countries,” he said. “The second was when I saw India. It looked very big and grand, not like the 2D paper maps of it.” He would spend 18 days on the ISS and carry out experiments proposed by Indian scientists from R&D labs across the country on the effects of microgravity, a state of lightness that allows astronauts and objects to float about. He would study its effects on (highly nutritious) microalgae, food crop seeds and metabolic supplements. Microgravity degenerates human muscle—Shukla would lose 4.2 kilos of weight over the course of the mission—and astronauts are required to exercise vigorously daily. He would also gain a few centi-

“When I first saw India from orbit, it looked very big and grand,” says Shukla. “It wasn’t like the 2D maps of it”

metres in height due to the elongation of his spine—a common microgravity effect—but that would be reversed back on Earth.

Shukla’s trip was a stepping stone for India because “with a human space mission, you learn things you would otherwise not know... You’re launching a space capsule with human lives on board. It changes the scale and the magnitude of work that is involved,” he said. In his three interactions with children from the ISS through video-conferencing and ham radio, the one query that was most popular was, “How do I become an astronaut?” That, according to the Indian astronaut, was “the biggest win of this mission”. ■



Other Newsmakers

NITISH KUMAR 74
Bihar Chief Minister

The Perfect Ten

With a massive assembly poll win, the '10-time CM' not only cocked a snook at critics, but recentred himself as the main architect of Bihar's next act

By **AMITABH SRIVASTAVA**

For two decades, politics in Bihar has been riven by tempests, many seemingly designed to write him off. Yet Nitish Kumar has had an uncanny gift of inveigling himself back to the seat of power—and invariably on his own terms. But when he took the chief minister's oath for the 10th time in 2025, it was not on account of any crafty pivot between allies. Instead, what left everyone astounded this time was a bonafide piece of electoral magic: he led his party, the Janata Dal (United), and its NDA allies to 202 seats out of 243, a victory that was near-imperial in its sweep.

Amazingly, this was a tsunami that came against the tide, as it were. As the race began, his chief ally, the BJP, was hesitant to name him the CM candidate, even as adversaries—



from Tejashwi Yadav's Rashtriya Janata Dal to Prashant Kishor's Jan Suraaj—cast aspersions on his health and dismissed him as a relic. Yet he returned with a bang, and the JD(U) is now only second to ally BJP in the assembly (85 to the latter's 89 seats).

The triumph reaffirmed Nitish's standing in Indian politics. He is arguably the only prominent socialist leader who has steadfastly refused to usher his son into public life, despite pressure from party colleagues and allies alike. His political creed endures too; many cite his presence in cultivating women as a caste-neutral electoral bloc in a state where one's surname remains the bedrock of political identity. A Rs 10,000 handout just in time for elections did no harm to the cause either.



PTI

The Patna Punter

› From being 'down and out' when the Bihar poll was announced to leading the NDA to victory, Nitish Kumar has been the comeback king of the year

› Voters wanted a government that gets things done, and the CM's record—both substantive and perceived—offered that reassurance

› The poll win also highlighted Nitish's prescience in cultivating women as a faithful, caste-neutral electoral bloc

That nimble integration of ideology with pragmatic politics is what has conferred on him a wide variety of descriptors: from 'Sushaasan Babu' to 'Paltu Ram', one pointing to good governance, the other to how good he is at remaining in government! Indeed, Nitish has maintained his authority by practising what some analysts call 'strategic mutability', the ability to shift political alignments. That he manages to do so while retaining his loyal cohort of depressed caste voters is what invests it with legitimacy, making him a political constant in a state not short of variables.

For two decades, this self-portrait has proved remarkably durable. It appeals to those who crave a semblance of orderly governance and is also useful to those who would borrow the legitimacy. Still, there is a paradox at the heart of such political longevity. It demands a public language of scruples and a private eye on

the main chance. Nitish has honed both. In public, he speaks of roads, electricity, law and order; in private, he negotiates alliances with a cool arithmetic that can appear disconcerting to the uninitiated. A decade ago, he was lauded as the man who ended communal tumult and ushered in "good governance". In more recent years, the same manoeuvres have been recast by critics as opportunism. The truth can perhaps be backdated, but Nitish's cheque remains valid into the future.

That steadiness is a balm in a state where caste rhythms and local patronage networks continue to shape political choice. Nitish has, with mixed success, converted administrative competence into electoral capital. This mattered in 2025 when, amid national narratives and local anxieties, many voters told pollsters they wanted a government that would simply get things done. Nitish's record offered that reassurance.

If the 10th-time CM status is historic in scale, it is also a reminder that political durability in contemporary India demands a hybrid skillset: narrative credibility, administrative competence and alliance-making agility. Nitish has spent 20 years perfecting this craft. That he remains at the epicentre of Bihar's politics is an argument for a polities that privileges predictability and delivery over maximalist rhetoric. ■

► **GROUNDED NATION** The wreckage of the Air India plane after the crash in Ahmedabad, Jun. 12; below, a sea of luggage at Terminal 1 of Delhi airport amid IndiGo flight disruptions, Dec. 8



ANI

On a Wing and a Long Prayer

An Air India flight's crash in June and IndiGo's meltdown in December laid bare how India's aviation sector is becoming a victim of escalating ambition, weak oversight and regulatory lapse

By M.G. ARUN

W

When the Tata Group acquired Air India in 2022 as part of the government's divestment effort, hope had soared that the national airline would now see a professional hand. But those expectations dashed to the ground along with Flight 171 on June 12, when a London Gatwick-bound Boeing 787-8 Dreamliner crashed shortly after take-off from Ahmedabad airport, killing 241 people on board and 19 on the ground.

An interim report, to be published mandatorily within a month of a disaster, did not blame anyone. The 15-page document released by the Aircraft Accident Investigation Bureau in July referred to a last-minute exchange between the captain and first officer, captured on the flight recorder. According to the report, the fuel switches of both engines were in the 'cut-off' position, with one pilot heard asking the other why he had cut them off, and the other responding that he had not.

The conversation sparked fresh conspiracy theories around the incident. But it did not deflect the sharp public scruti-

ny the legacy problems at the country's second-largest airline came under. The Tatas' acquisition of the airline has not obviated the need to modernise its fleet, gaps in aircraft maintenance, technical oversight and a shortage of pilots. N. Chandrasekaran, chairman of Tata Sons and Air India, told employees soon after the tragedy that the incident was a "catalyst" to create "a safer airline"—a promise that is expected to test the airline for years.

But Air India was not the only airline to have faced turbulence this year. Disruption engulfed IndiGo as well in December. India's largest airline with more than 60 per cent share of the domestic market, IndiGo operated more than 400 aircraft, ran around 2,300 flights a day, flew to over 90 domestic

Year of Turbulence

› **On June 12, Air India flight 171 crashed shortly after take-off from Ahmedabad, killing 241 people on board and 19 on the ground**

› **In December, IndiGo, India's largest airline, cancelled nearly 3,000 flights over three days after failing to comply with new pilot duty-time rules, stranding tens of thousands of passengers and triggering government intervention**

and 45 international destinations, and carried an average of half a million passengers daily. But between December 4 and 6, the airlines had to cancel an unprecedented 2,948 domestic flights, 1,588 on December 5 alone, after failing to comply with new Flight Duty Time Limitations (FDTL) rules laid down by the Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA), which govern how long pilots can work, the rest they must take and the number of night landings they are permitted to perform.

Tens of thousands of passengers were stranded, airport lounges overflowed with people and the terminals with baggage even as air fares spiked sharply, prompting the DGCA to step in to rein in prices. IndiGo's shares slid on the bourses. Even as the airline's leadership issued apologies, the Union civil aviation ministry promised punitive action and cut IndiGo's winter schedule by 10 per cent in an effort to stabilise operations.

Together, the crises did not bode well for an aviation sector that is one of the world's fastest-growing and the third-largest domestic market globally, with passenger traffic growing annually at 10-12 per cent. But if there was one lesson 2025 left us with, it was that growth cannot come at the cost of safety and airlines cannot forgo rules in their relentless pursuit of profit. ■



ARUN KUMAR



Other
Newsmakers

WOMEN'S
CRICKET TEAM



On Top of the World

Each of the women cricketers in the team crowned world champions has won battles on and off the field. Coming from the depths of a developing India, their journeys held the nation in thrall

By SUHANI SINGH



PASSION, PRIDE AND JOY Members of the Indian women's cricket team hold aloft the ICC World Cup trophy at the DY Patil stadium in Navi Mumbai, Nov. 2

GETTY IMAGES

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For long, the women in blue lived under the imposing shadow of the men's national cricket team. International matches were few, visibility negligible. Ever since their ODI World Cup final appearance in 2017 and the start of the Women's Premier League in 2023, they were on the verge of breaking through to the other side—recognition, adulation

Cricket's New Sheroes

› As champions in 2025, the Indian women's cricket team won Rs 40 crore from the ICC and Rs 51 cr from the BCCI

› The team's first World Cup final in 2005 fetched each player Rs 8,000

› Next target for Harmanpreet & Co: the T20 World Cup in June-July in England & Wales

and big bucks. It was the sheer tenacity, chutzpah and cricketing calibre with which Harmanpreet Kaur's girls passed through the mirror that sealed them a spot in Indian cricket's hall of fame. At the finish line, on November 2, 2025, the team was crowned world ODI champions. No one had foreseen this eventuality after the team suffered three consecutive losses in the group stages of a home tournament. But after being written off, they defeated New Zealand in a must-win tie, following it up with a victory over seven-time world champions Australia in the semis. Then, outplaying South Africa in the finals, the team gave a fitting reply to detractors. "Trolls wanted Indian women to cook. So they cooked," said a widely shared comment on social media.

And what a delectable feast it was, involving a galaxy of chefs—pacer Kranti Goud, just five months old in the national side, vexed opening batters with her swing; Richa Ghosh was dependable with the gloves and a pistol with the bat; vice captain Smriti Mandhana played crucial knocks, like the century against New Zealand; Jemimah Rodrigues overcame the setback of being dropped for a match to play the innings of the tournament against Australia; Deepti Sharma blazed a trail of consistency (215 runs and 22 wickets) all through to emerge player of the tournament; Shafali Ver-

ma, called up at the nth hour, saved her best—with both bat (87) and ball (two wickets)—for the finals, and there was the inspirational Kaur, who exorcised ghosts of past failures to script the sweetest redemption song.

The 'sheroics' at DY Patil Stadium in Navi Mumbai didn't come out of the blue. All the new poster girls have a lifetime of winning against the odds behind them. Their back stories are uniformly inspiring and emblematic of a developing India. Family members didn't just have to ignore sexist taunts to let girls pursue their dreams. The moment was also built on a foundation of sacrifices—Deepti's brother forsook his own career to practise with her; Kranti's mother sold off her jewellery so she could travel for tournaments; Radha Yadav's sister Sonee even gave up the sport as the family could af-

The sheroics of the women's cricket team was built on sacrifices by family members and battles fought by past generations of women cricketers

ford to support only one. Most of them are also from India's villages and small towns. That's how life-changing sports can be for young girls if they are given a level-playing field.

It has taken nearly five decades for the women's game in India to experience this euphoric high. Kaur's side is aware of battles that their precursors fought. For this young band who don't shy away from talking about mental struggles in the face of adversity, share their bonhomie on social media, even get matching tattoos, the journey to raise the profile of the women's game is a continuing endeavour. May they breach more boundaries. ■



Obituaries

Passages 2025

A few of the eminences that departed from our midst in the year gone by, having left an indelible mark in their respective spheres of influence



HEMANT CHAWLA

Jayant Vishnu Narlikar married theoretical audacity with a life-long devotion to building India's scientific culture. Trained at Cambridge, he co-developed the Hoyle-Narlikar theory of gravity with Fred Hoyle, a heterodox alternative to the Big Bang model. His rigour as theorist as well as his anti-dogmatic streak, both showed through there—as well as in his writings. In fiction and essays, both in English and Marathi, the ever-smiling and accessible Narlikar

JAYANT NARLIKAR
| b. 1938 |
Astrophysicist and science educator

was a gentle apostle of popular science. Awarded the Padma Bhushan at 26, he also founded the Inter-University Centre for Astronomy and Astrophysics.

K. KASTURIRANGAN | b. 1940 |

Former chairman, ISRO

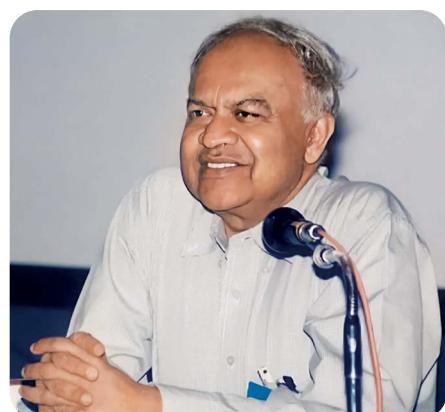
Dr Kasturirangan not only led the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) and the Space Commission through an era of high accomplishments, but played key roles in shaping policy in India's science ecosystem in his later career as a Rajya Sabha member, Planning Commission member, and head of various academic institutions. He was the architect of the National Education Policy 2020 and led the national curriculum framework steering committee. An astrophysicist by training, it was during Kasturirangan's nine-year tenure as chairman of ISRO (1994–2003) that the space agency developed the Indian National Satellite System (INSAT-2), the Indian Remote Sensing satellites (IRS-1A and -1B), and operationalised what would become its workhorse, the Polar Satellite Launch Vehicle (PSLV).

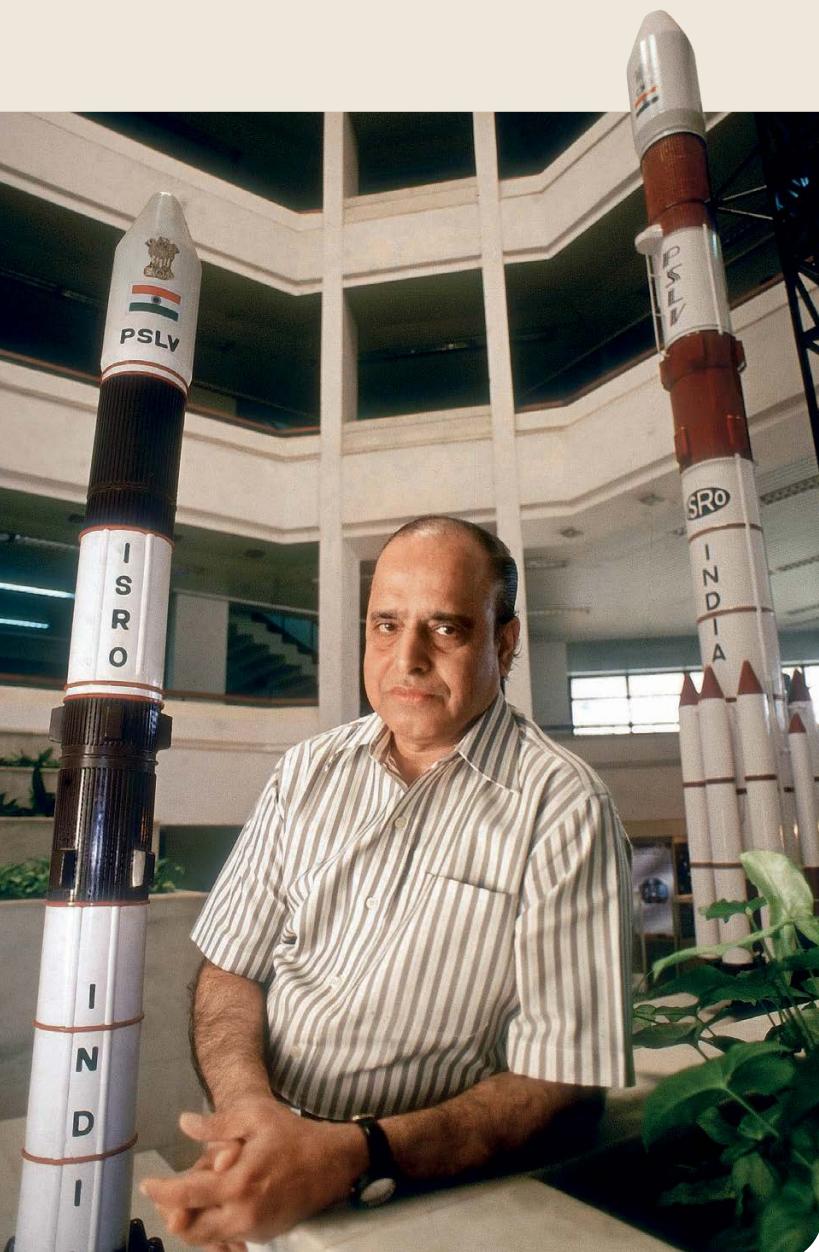
V.S. ACHUTHANANDAN
| b. 1923 |

CPI(M), Ex-Kerala CM

The legendary Communist leader was a ripe old 101 when he passed away in July last year. An old-school 'Lal salaam' hardliner, he was the state's most popular leader across party lines. VS, or 'Achumama' as the young generation called him, joined the Reds when he was just 14, and was one of the founding members of the Communist Party of

India (Marxist) in 1964, when it broke away from the parent Communist Party of India (CPI). VS, who always ended up second-best in the CM race, finally got the chair when he was 82 (2006–2011). His outspoken, uncompromising stand against corruption, land-grabbing and such endeared him to the public, but in later years the party cast him adrift.





C RAMESH



R. CHIDAMBARAM | b. 1936 |

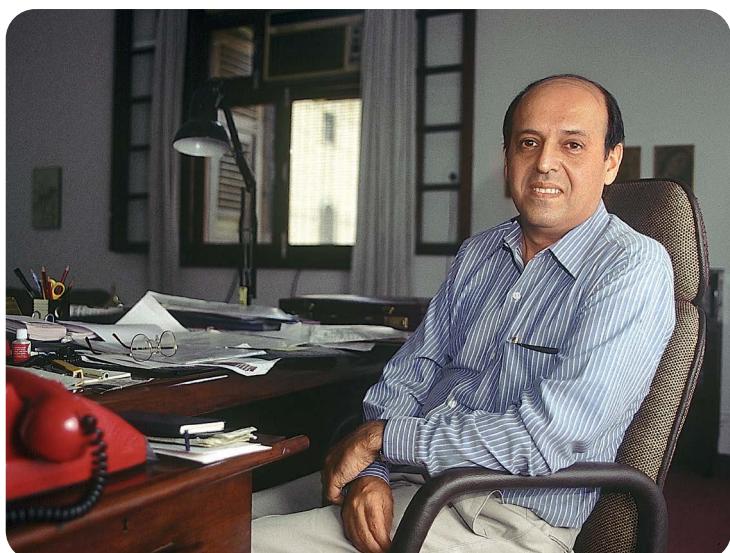
Nuclear scientist

Rajagopala Chidambaram stood at the quiet centre of India's nuclear story, a physicist trusted with its most consequential secrets. He helped shape the country's first nuclear test in 1974, codenamed Smiling Buddha, and oversaw Pokhran-II, or Operation Shakti, in 1998, at the helm of the Department of Atomic Energy. A former BARC director, where he initiated the supercomputer programme, and a long-serving Principal Scientific Advisor to the GoI, he exercised authority with a genteel manner and believed deeply in scientific self-reliance to drive national development.

NAVIN CHAWLA | b. 1945 |

Former Chief Election Commissioner of India

After a copybook elite educational trajectory—Sanawar, Stephen's, SOAS, LSE, Oxford—Navin Chawla segued smoothly to the bureaucratic life, where he finally rose to high constitutional office, that of Chief Election Commissioner. In the 1990s, as a joint secretary in the I&B ministry, his were the hands that parted the curtains for India's open-skies policies. His tenure as CEC was a more contested one, with questions about institutional neutrality. Chawla, who in response insisted on strict adherence to legality over perceived perfection, was influenced by Mother Teresa and wrote a biography on her.



SOUMITRA GHOSH



Obituaries



DR DEBENDRA PRADHAN | b. 1941 |

BJP leader and former Union minister

For decades, Pradhan was the organisational backbone of the BJP in Odisha. Often described as the party's 'Bhishma Pitamah' in the state, the doctor-turned-politician left government service for public life, joining the BJP in 1983. He went on to serve three terms as state president and was twice

elected to the Lok Sabha. A Union minister of state in the Atal Bihari Vajpayee-led NDA government, he handled portfolios such as surface transport and agriculture. Pradhan—father of Union minister Dharmendra Pradhan—remained a guiding light for the state BJP long after he left active politics.

PRITISH NANDY | b. 1951 |

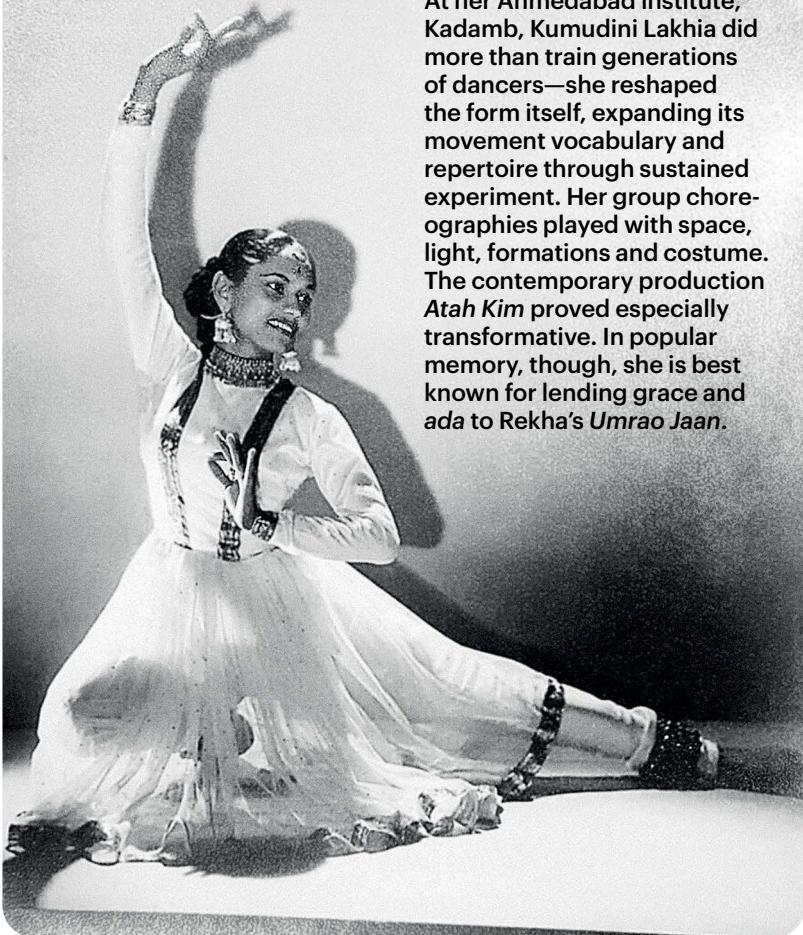
Journalist and film producer



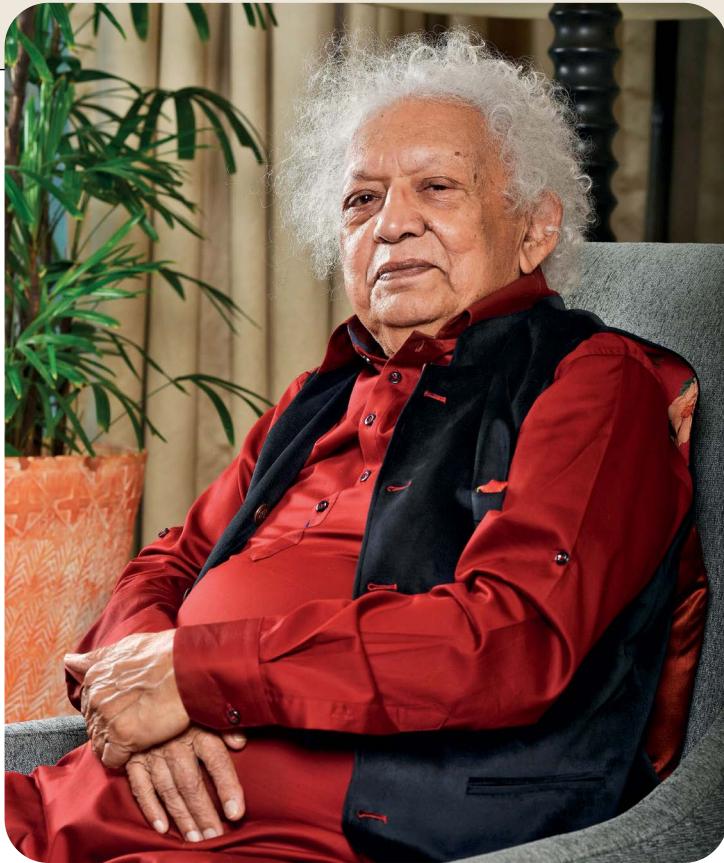
Provocateur, but with a sheen of polish and pizzazz, he was not afraid of controversy—and courted it with relish and, often, barbed wit. The most celebrated product of that was *The Illustrated Weekly* when it was under his charge in the 1980s. He also went from editor—and later a much-watched interview host on DD—to being a publisher, cultural impresario, film production honcho and other walk-on parts that wouldn't seem to have a lot in common. For instance, he was a failed dabbler in Shiv Sena politics but also a decent exponent of verse in English. Critics accused him of excess, but may have secretly admired the phenomenon that was Pritish Nandy.

KUMUDINI LAKHIA | b. 1930 |

Kathak dancer



Kumi behn, as she was fondly known in the dance world, was a pioneer who revealed the vast physical possibilities of Kathak. At her Ahmedabad institute, Kadamb, Kumudini Lakhia did more than train generations of dancers—she reshaped the form itself, expanding its movement vocabulary and repertoire through sustained experiment. Her group choreographies played with space, light, formations and costume. The contemporary production *Atah Kim* proved especially transformative. In popular memory, though, she is best known for lending grace and *ada* to Rekha's *Umrao Jaan*.



MANDAR DEODHAR

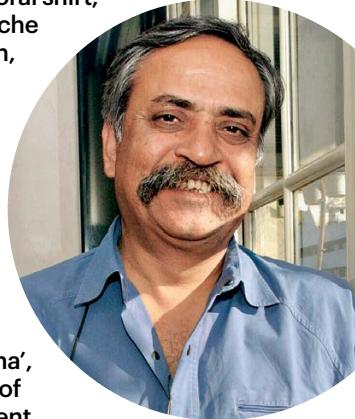
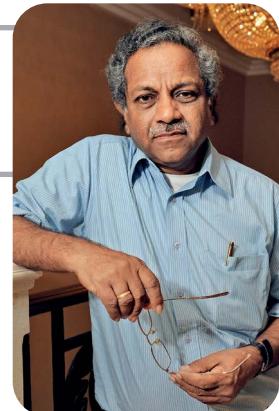
MEGHNAD DESAI | b. 1940 |**Economist and author**

An economist by training and a contrarian by instinct, Desai's academic work ranged from Marx to markets, but his public life, especially in Britain's House of Lords, revealed a sharper pleasure in puncturing moral complacency. He relished being misunderstood, often defending unpopular positions simply because they were insufficiently examined. In an era of tidy answers, Meghnad Desai thrived on productive discomfort.

Among those who emerged from training in its precursor form, Gotipua, and went on to shape the contours of modern Odissi, Mayadhar Raut's name ranks high. Immersed in both theatre and dance since childhood, he was one of the first few Odissi practitioners to study at Kalakshetra in what was then Madras. Back in Cuttack, he infused new ideas into Odissi. But it was in New Delhi that Raut would strengthen his legacy, moulding a new generation of artistes at the Shriram Bharatiya Kala Kendra.

**MAYADHAR RAUT****| b. 1930 |****Odissi dancer****PIYUSH PANDEY | b. 1955 |****Advertising professional**

As a state-level cricket player for Rajasthan, Piyush Pandey loved playing on the front foot. He adopted the same principle in advertising too. An industry colossus who sported a floral shirt, a big, bushy moustache and a booming laugh, he loved looking the part as an A-lister in Indian advertising. From Cadbury's joyous cricket field jaunt to Asian Paints' 'Har Ghar Kuch Kehta Hai' commercials, from 'Fevicol ka majboot jod' to 'Chal meri Luna', Pandey was at helm of campaigns which went viral before social media. Pandey was the brains behind two seismic slogans: 'Do Boond Zindagi Ki' and 'Ab ki baar Modi sarkaar'. One helped eradicate polio in India, the other boosted the electoral appeal of Narendra Modi in 2014.

**SHAJIN N. KARUN****| b. 1952 |****Filmmaker**

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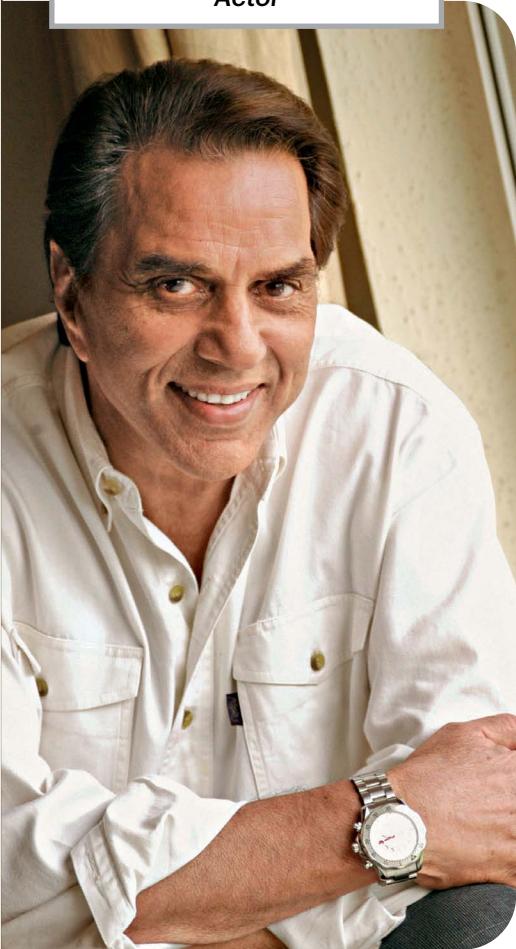
Agold medallist in cinematography from FTII, Pune, Shaji was a favourite of Malayalam auteurs such as Aravindan, K.G. George and Padmarajan in the 1970s and '80s. His debut film as director, *Piravi* (The Birth), which turned an infamous police atrocity case from the Emergency period in Kerala into a piece of tragic poetry, won a Camera d'Or Special Mention at the 1988 Cannes festival. Shaji's other movies include *Vanaprastham* and *Swaham*. The director was also a mainstay in bringing international cinema to Kerala audiences, starting with the International Film Festival of Kerala, which he handheld in its first few years (1998-'01).



Obituaries

DHARMENDRA | b. 1935 |

Actor



BANDEEP SINGH

Seething anger, impish fun, romance, machismo, just being handsome—all of it came naturally to Dharmendra. Unlike those who leaned towards method acting, he was a naturalistic performer who wore his heart on his sleeves. A mere listing of his standout hits—even as varied as *Phool Aur Patthar* (1966), *Sholay* (1975), *Chupke Chupke* (1975) or *Dharam Veer* (1977)—wouldn’t capture what he achieved in a career that spanned six decades. Born in a village near Ludhiana, what he attained was an unparalleled iconicity as the ultimate male hero figure in popular film. Gossip didn’t evade him, but the *joie de vivre* and authenticity with which he rode through it kept the original ‘He-Man’ beloved of audiences as well as peers.

GOVARDHAN ASRANI | b. 1941 |

Actor-comedian



PTI

In the 1970s and '80s, if audiences went to the movies seeking laughter, Asrani was often the answer. Trained at the FTII, he commanded the screen with precise comic timing, becoming a familiar presence as Rajesh Khanna’s loyal friend across numerous films. He perfected the art of the supporting role, making brief appearances feel indispensable. Some became indelible—most famously his Hitler-inflected jailor in *Sholay*. Asrani’s ambitions as a leading man found fuller expression in Gujarati cinema, which he consistently championed.



SOMNATH SEN

SHIBU SOREN | b. 1944 |

Former Jharkhand CM

They called him ‘Dishom Guru’—translate that Santhali phrase into something like Pathfinder of the Nation, and you know what he meant to the Adivasis. ‘Nation’ here means the ‘people’, a group kept disenfranchised by colonial policy that bled seamlessly into modern India. As Jharkhand Mukti Morcha founder, Soren turned their demand for rights and dignity into a state. Even if an imperfect wielder of formal power in later years, he had performed his role in history by then.



MANOJ KUMAR | b. 1937 |

Actor-director

Among the many who washed up in Bombay with clean-cut good looks and big dreams back in the '50s, Manoj Kumar was one who managed to endure and thrive—partly by transitioning to a role beyond the mannered tragic romance staples of the B&W era. An early turn in *Shaheed* (1965) showed the path, and he never looked back from a patriot act that was all his. Drafted, legislated, directed by—and starring—'Mr Bharat', as he came to be called. Of course, *Upkar*, *Roti Kapda aur Makaan*, *Kranti* et al were as Bollywood in design and intent as his smoke-filled hits like *Woh Kaun Thi*, *Gumnaam* and *Dus Numbri*.



NIRAV DAVE



GETTY IMAGES

GOPICHAND HINDUJA | b. 1940 |

Chairman, Hinduja Group

When Gopichand Hinduja died in November at 85, he was listed as Britain's richest man. The second eldest of the four Hinduja brothers, he helped transform a family enterprise into a sprawling global conglomerate employing about 200,000 people, with a combined net worth of \$45 billion as of

May 2025. Following the death of the eldest brother Srichand Hinduja in 2023, Gopichand took over as chairman of the Hinduja Group, whose footprints spanned automotive major Ashok Leyland, IndusInd Bank, Gulf Oil, Hinduja Global Solutions, and interests across power, healthcare and real estate.



ZUBEEN GARG | b. 1972 |

Singer

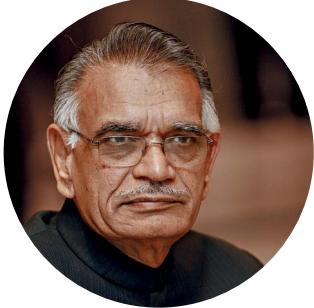
Zubeen Garg was never merely a singer. He was a temperament. Rooted in Assam, restlessly global in influence, he fused folk memory with rock, blues and political conscience. His voice carried both rebellion and tenderness, often in the same breath, giving dignity to linguistic and regional margins at a time when popular culture preferred uniformity. He was stubbornly independent and frequently at odds with institutions and expectations, which only deepened his bond with listeners. In an age of manufactured celebrity, Garg remained defiantly human.



Obituaries

SHIVRAJ PATIL
| b. 1935 |

Ex-Union home minister, LS speaker

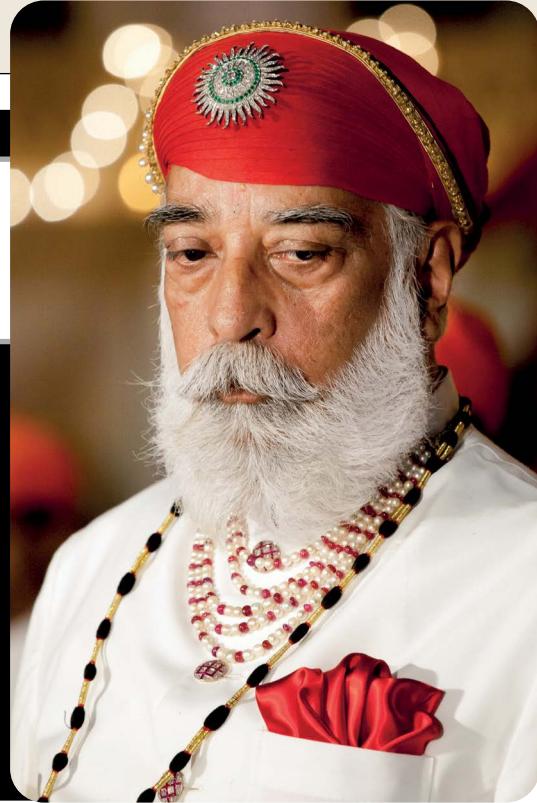


A seven-time MP from Latur (Maharashtra), Union home minister (2004-08), Lok Sabha speaker (1991-96), the veteran Congress leader had an illustrious political career marred by one blot. It was during his time at the helm of India's internal security that the 26/11 terror attacks happened. Patil resigned after the incident, taking moral responsibility for the attacks. An exemplary parliamentarian known for his grasp of constitutional matters, his last innings was as Punjab governor till 2015.

ARVIND SINGH MEWAR | b. 1944 |

Chairman, HRH Group of Hotels, Mewar royalty

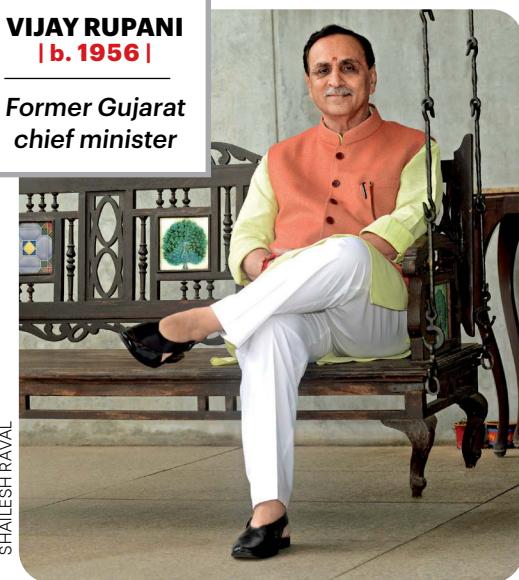
A prominent member of the Mewar royal family and chairman of the HRH Group of Hotels, he was widely admired for building a hotel empire that became synonymous with destination tourism and royal weddings. Flagship properties included Shiv Niwas Palace and the Lake Palace, Udaipur. A fine sportsman in his younger years, Mewar also played Ranji Trophy cricket for Rajasthan.



GETTY IMAGES

VIJAY RUPANI
| b. 1956 |

Former Gujarat chief minister



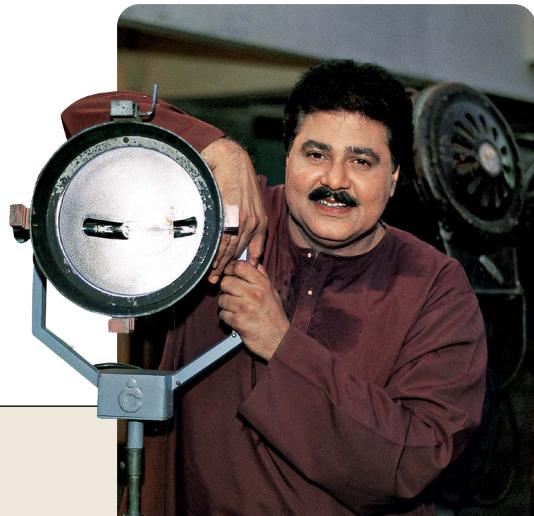
SHAILESH RAVVAL

Only 32 seconds after taking off from Ahmedabad in an Air India flight bound for London, former Gujarat CM Vijay Rupani, 68, met a tragic end on June 12 when the plane crashed and killed all but one passenger. He was a veteran Bharatiya Janata Party leader who had his beginnings in the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and Jan Sangh, serving as a Rajkot municipal councillor and mayor, as well as Rajya Sabha MP. He held various ministerial portfolios in the Gujarat government and his tenure as CM was noted for its stability after the abrupt departure of predecessor Anandiben Patel.

SATISH SHAH | b. 1951 | Actor

Few actors can make playing dead funny. Satish Shah was among the rare ones who could, as he did in Kundan Shah's cult classic *Jaane Bhi Do Yaaro* where he played Municipal

Commissioner D'Mello who gets driven around in a coffin. The actor was a reliable bet for laughs even on the small screen in beloved shows like *Yeh Jo Hai Zindagi* and *Sarabhai vs Sarabhai*.



FAWZAN HUSSIAN



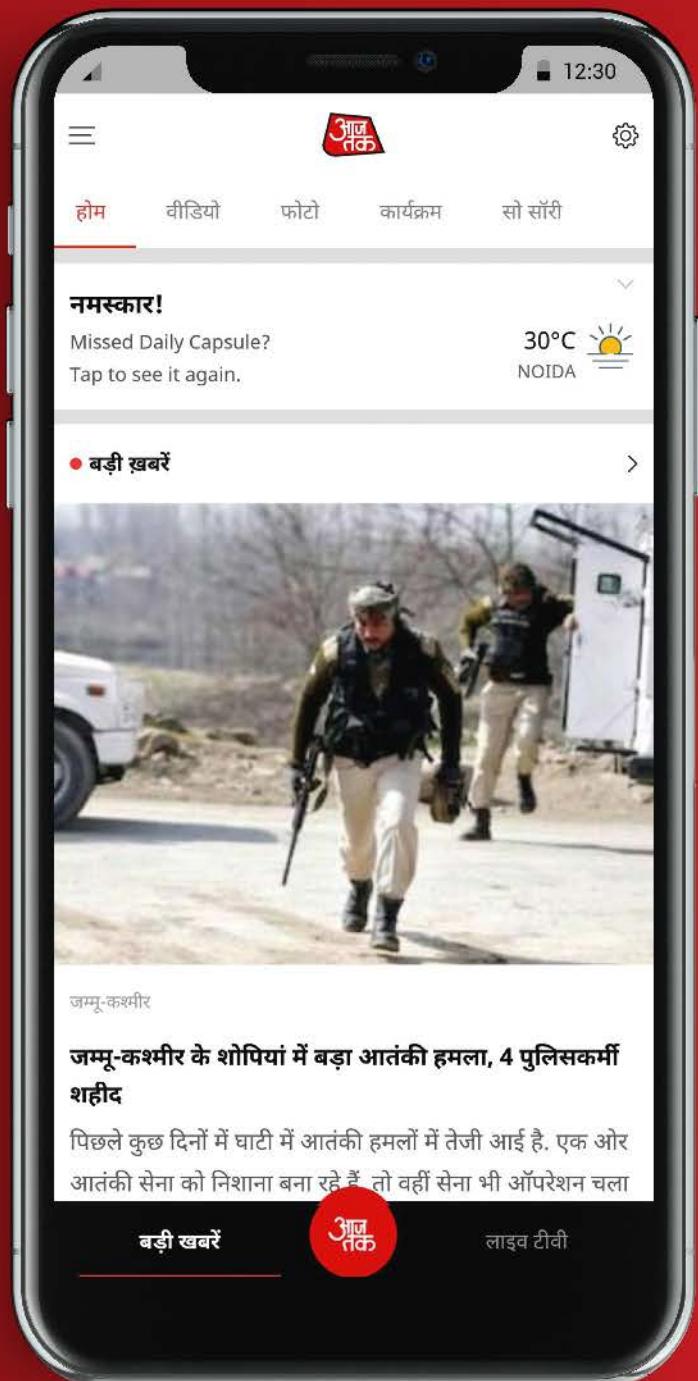
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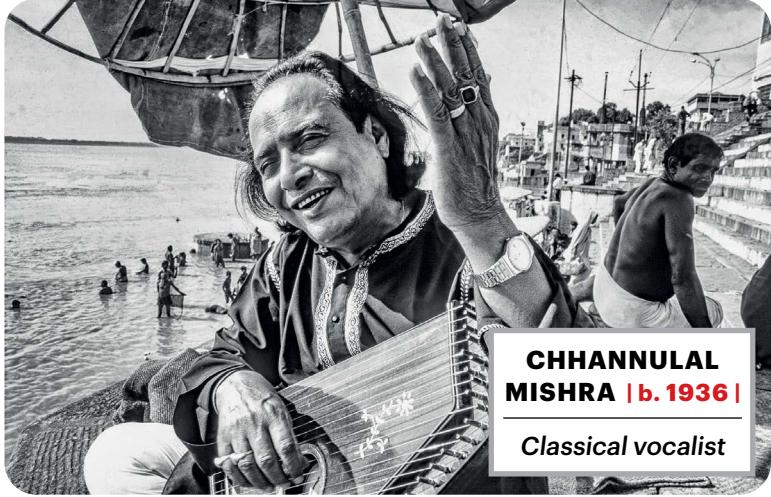
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उपलब्ध है



Obituaries



CHHANNULAL MISHRA | b. 1936 |

Classical vocalist

Pandit Chhannulal Mishra's voice resonated with earthiness and sheer joy—the way one imagines Hindustani classical has every right to. At ease with dhrupad and khayal, the Kirana style overlaid on his native Benarasi, he had an infectious, child-like enthusiasm for the Gangetic species of song, the Dadra, the Thumri, the Chaiti, Kajri, Sawani and Holi. That spilled over in concerts, where he would converse with the audience, explaining the meaning, style and context of his music.



SWRAJ PAUL | b. 1931 |

NRI business baron

Indian-born British steel magnate Lord Swraj Paul, who died in London in August at 94, was widely known for his philanthropy in India, the US and Britain. A Labour peer from 1996, he left the party in 2010 to sit as a crossbencher. He was appointed deputy speaker of the House of Lords in 2008 and joined the Privy Council in 2009. The Caparo Group, which he founded in 1968, grew into one of the UK's largest steel conversion and distribution businesses.

RATAN THIYAM | b. 1948 |

Playwright & theatre director

Such was the impact of the Manipuri theatre auteur Ratan Thiyam that Indian theatre is almost unimaginable without the worlds he brought to the stage. A leading figure of the post-Independence 'Theatre of Roots' movement, he redefined decolonised performance through his Chorus Repertory Theatre. Blending the sculptural grace of Manipuri dance, the percussive ferocity of pung cholom, the ritualised combat of



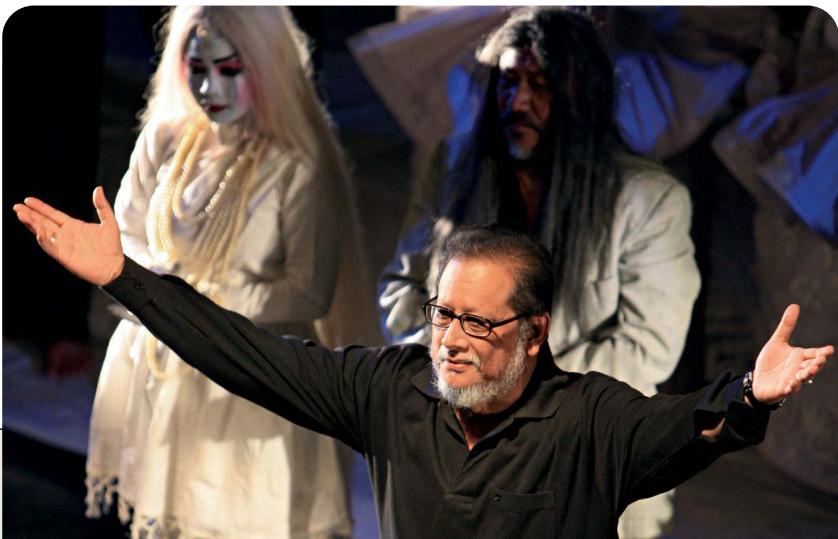
HEMANT PITHWA

SIMONE TATA | b. 1930 |

Former chairperson, Lakme; founder, Trent

Simone Tata, who died in December at 95, played a decisive role in shaping modern Indian consumer culture. Born in Geneva, she steered Lakme—set up by the Tata Group in 1952—into a national cosmetics brand, becoming its chairperson in the early 1980s, before founding the group's retail arm, Trent. Her association with India began with a tourist visit in 1953, when she met Naval Tata, Ratan Tata's father, who was divorced by then. They married in 1955, after which Mumbai became her home. Her son, Noel Tata, now chairs Tata Trusts and Trent.

thang-ta, elemental song and disciplined drama, Thiyam forged visual spectacles that transcended language. His *Mahabharata* trilogy remains a gold standard, while his interpretation of Kalidasa's *Ritusamhara* was akin to witnessing magic on stage.

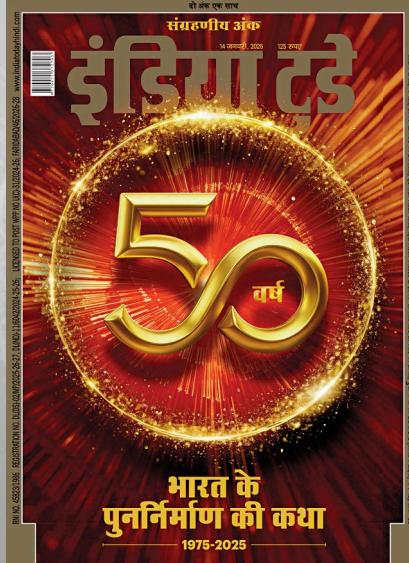


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सबसे भरोसेमंद स्रोतों से, सबसे सटीक जानकारी

सब्सक्राइब करें और पाएं 68% तक की छूट

1975-2025

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

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

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

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

नाम..... पता.....

..... शहर..... राज्य..... पिन.....

मोबाइल..... ईमेल.....



सब्सक्राइब करने के लिए यहाँ स्कैन करें।

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

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LE! SURE

FICTION: THE WINDING RAILWAYS PG 52

LISTICLE: NEW BOOKS TO LOOK OUT FOR PG 58

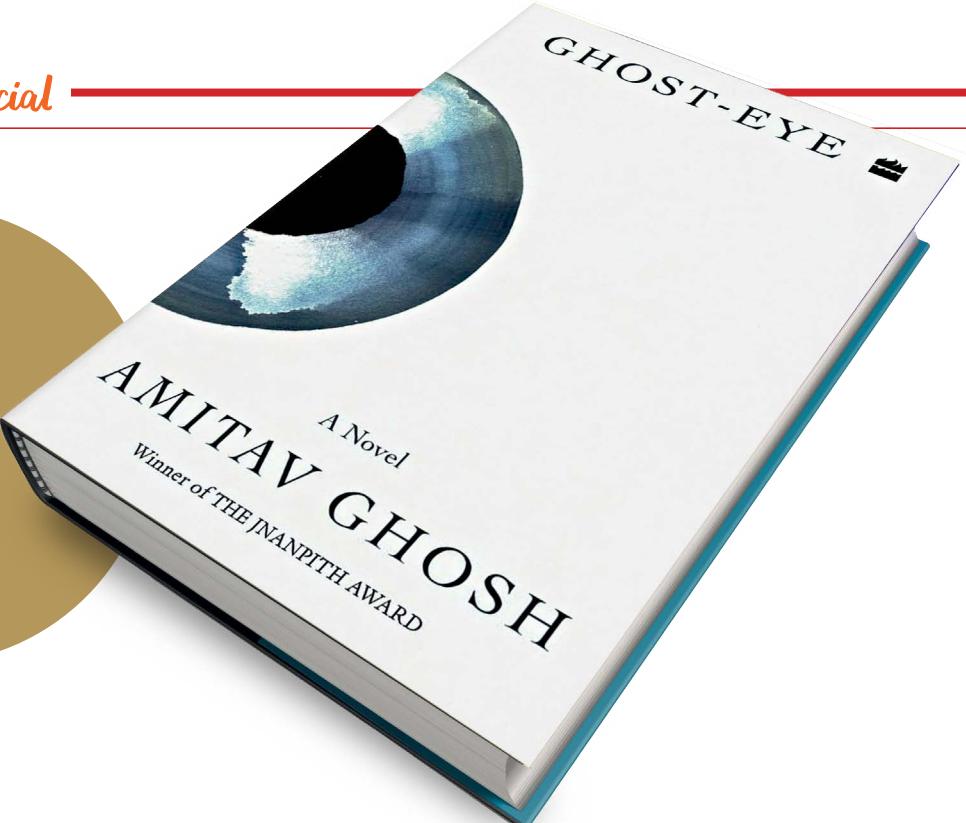
A black and white portrait of Amitav Ghosh, an elderly man with grey hair and a beard, wearing dark-rimmed glasses and a dark green zip-up sweater over a light blue shirt. He is looking directly at the camera with a neutral expression. The background is dark and textured.

IN THE PRESENT
Several characters from Amitav Ghosh's past novels have supporting roles in *Ghost-eye*

FICTION ▾

Past Meets Present

AMITAV GHOSH'S GHOST-EYE WEAVES PAST LIVES, CLIMATE CHANGE AND FAMILIAR CHARACTERS INTO A GRIPPING TALE THAT MOVES BETWEEN 1960s CALCUTTA AND THE PANDEMIC-ERA SUNDARBANS



A

AMITAV GHOSH'S LATEST NOVEL GHOST-EYE BEGINS IN 1969 WITH THE GUPTAS, a vegetarian Marwari family in Calcutta, at their wits' end. Out of the blue, their three-year-old daughter Varsha demands fish and rice for lunch, claiming moreover that she has memories of a previous life, with her 'real' mother (in a little Bengali village in the Sundarbans) who taught her how to catch and cook a great many varieties of fish. Dr Shoma Bose, a psychologist and therapist specialising in children who claim to remember past lives, is intrigued by Varsha, especially after the girl clears a blind test designed to test her knowledge of fish. Half a century later, during the COVID-19 pandemic, Shoma's nephew Dinu, an antiquarian with a curious mind and a soft spot for her, decides to find out what happened when Shoma eventually took little Varsha to Lusibari, the Sundarbans village (first encountered in *The Hungry Tide*).

Talking about the novel's genesis, Ghosh says, "A friend of mine commented after reading the book that in India we grow up knowing about children with past life memories. And yet, we don't read about them in contemporary literature.... A close friend of mine grew up with vivid past life memories. He would often talk about them to his parents. One day getting off a bus in Mumbai, he actually pointed to a house and said that that was where he had lived in his last life."

Having set up this dual timeline in the late 1960s and the early 2020s, Ghosh moves back and forth between them and opens up the novel's thematic ballgame, unlocking an array of connections with his previous novels and their key motifs: climate change (*Gun Island*), ecological strife (*The Hungry Tide*), science vs the paranormal (*The Calcutta Chromosome*) and, of course, the role of the

nation-state (*The Glass Palace*, *The Shadow Lines*) in all of this. Through the dynamic between Shoma and her strictly rationalist husband Monty, we get to see how a conventional, by-the-book intellect can actually be a disadvantage while processing 'cases of the reincarnation type'. A similar contrast can be seen in the two previous Ghosh characters who appear as supporting players here: marine biologist Piyali Roy (from *The Hungry Tide* and *Gun Island*) and her adoptive nephew, the globetrotting, entrepreneurial hustler Tipu whose injured eye (from a fateful encounter with a snake in *Gun Island*) is, in fact, the titular 'ghost-eye' here. Also, Tarun, Dini's best friend growing up in Calcutta, is revealed as the great-grandson of Rajkumar Raha, the central character of *The Glass Palace*.

"One of the most difficult things for a writer is to let go of their characters at the end of a novel," says Ghosh. "In the course of writing a book these characters become so alive that they are like friends...so yes, I do often refer back to my earlier books when my characters return."

INSTEAD OF LETTING 'ACTION-HEAVY' BITS DOMINATE, GHOSH AMPS UP THE SYMBOLISM AND SUPERNATURAL IMAGERY IN THE PLOT

Its obvious scale and ambition aside, *Ghost-eye* is a propulsive read, with the plot accelerating in the second half. And it would have been the easiest thing to let the ‘action-heavy’ bits dominate, with the science and the mysticism taking a backseat. But Ghosh goes the other way and amps up the symbolism and the supernatural imagery in pace with the plot. Tipu’s enquiries, Dinu’s trips down memory lane, and the Lusibari flashback sequences converge in an explosive finish. Without revealing too much, we can say that the denouement revolves around ‘super-adapters’, prodigies who have a greatly enhanced ability to adapt to their ecosystem.

“The phrase ‘ecosystem people’, which I actually associate with the work of Ramachandra Guha, refers to entire communities,” says Ghosh. “A prodigy on the other hand is by definition a kind of singularity, an exceptional child or person. But I do think there are people who are exceptionally finely attuned to their surroundings, and often these are the very people who become shamans. This is certainly true of the ‘bauley’ of the Sundarbans.”

For Amitav Ghosh fans, *Ghost-eye* is an expansive, impeccably crafted five-course meal. For everybody else, especially Ghosh newbies, it acts as the alluring entrée that will inevitably lead you to explore his large and increasingly interconnected body of work. ■

—Aditya Mani Jha

Compulsive Storyteller

Defiantly prolific, **SALMAN RUSHDIE** is back with *The Eleventh Hour*, a collection of short stories

How do you write about Salman Rushdie? He has transcended literature—a terrible fate for any writer—and become a symbol, a standard-bearer for free speech. Except when his speech irritates, as it recently did Hindu nationalists outraged by him

fight back.” *Knife* (2024) was Rushdie’s account of being stabbed onstage in 2022 by Hadi Matar who claimed to dislike the writer because he “attacked Islam”. Rushdie lost sight in one eye and suffered severe nerve and organ damage.

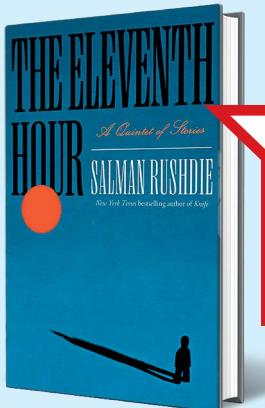
But Rushdie has prevailed. He has

used to greater effect in his best work. It is like stepping into a comforting, if tepid, bath. “Kahani,” he writes of his sentimental recreation of a Bombay that might never have existed, “is here to stay, at least it is for me.” And, frankly, that alone is cause for celebration.

Rushdie is in what he called in *Knife* his “second-chance life” and every word is a rebuke of those who would have him silenced. It may be true that the stories in *The Eleventh Hour* read like outtakes, left with good reason on the cutting room floor, from Rushdie’s magnum opuses, but that he continues to put pen to paper is, for this reader at least, enough. The optimist’s view is that this is not an inferior coda to a brilliant career, but a series of throat-clearing exercises as he builds to a second-chance crescendo.

Every word Rushdie writes should be imbued with, as he puts it in the opening story in *The Eleventh Hour*, the gleeful “scorn of life for death”. ■

—Shouyat Dasgupta



THE ELEVENTH HOUR
A Quintet of Stories
By Salman Rushdie
PENGUIN/HAMISH HAMILTON
₹899, 264 pages

expressing concern for the “attack on freedoms of journalists, of writers, of intellectuals”. And yet, the magnificent thing about Rushdie is that he perseveres, he refuses to stop telling stories.

In *Knife*, he writes: “Language was my knife. If I had unexpectedly been caught in an unwanted knife fight, maybe this was the knife I could use to

continued to wield his knife. Three of his books have been published since he was stabbed (though the manuscript for *Victory City* was completed before the attack), the latest of which is *The Eleventh Hour*, a collection of five longish short stories.

The stories, like Woody Allen’s later films, are, for fans, a reprise of techniques and themes he has

FICTION ▼

A TRAIN CHUGS THROUGH IT

Rahul Bhattacharya's *Railsong* is the coming-of-age story of a woman and a nation, interwoven with the world of the Indian Railways

Before he began work on his second novel, Rahul Bhattacharya knew this much: it would feature an individual, and that individual would be located in a “vast enterprise that gestured at Indian complexity and scale”. “But I didn’t have anything beyond that,” he says on a video call. “I didn’t have a time period, I didn’t have a tone. I didn’t even have the enterprise I would be looking at. And, most crucially, I didn’t have the character. That process of discovery became the entire novel.”

That novel, *Railsong*, is writer and editor Bhattacharya’s third book,

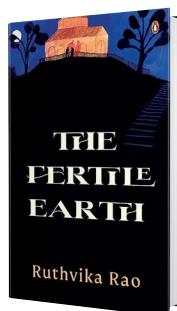
a compelling, often funny bildungsroman of a woman and a nation in the making, set largely in the world of the Indian Railways.

The novel is anchored by Charulata Chitol, a motherless girl who grows up in a fictional railway township in the 1960s before making a life in Bombay and later joining the public sector undertaking herself. “I find the railways fascinating, both as something to travel by, and as a bureaucratic entity and a labour force. With its employees drawn from all classes, all castes and all regions, it gives us a pretty representative idea of Indian life.”

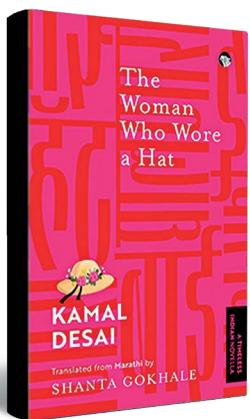
ARUN KUMAR



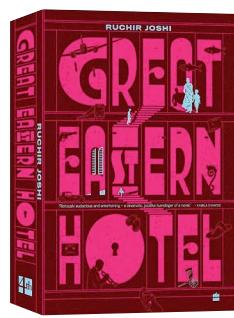
RAILSONG
By **Rahul Bhattacharya**
BLOOMSBURY
₹799; 416 pages



THE FERTILE EARTH
By **Ruthvika Rao**
PENGUIN
₹699; 384 pages



THE WOMAN WHO WORE A HAT
By **Kamal Desai**
Translated by
Shanta Gokhale
SPEAKING TIGER
₹399; 128 pages



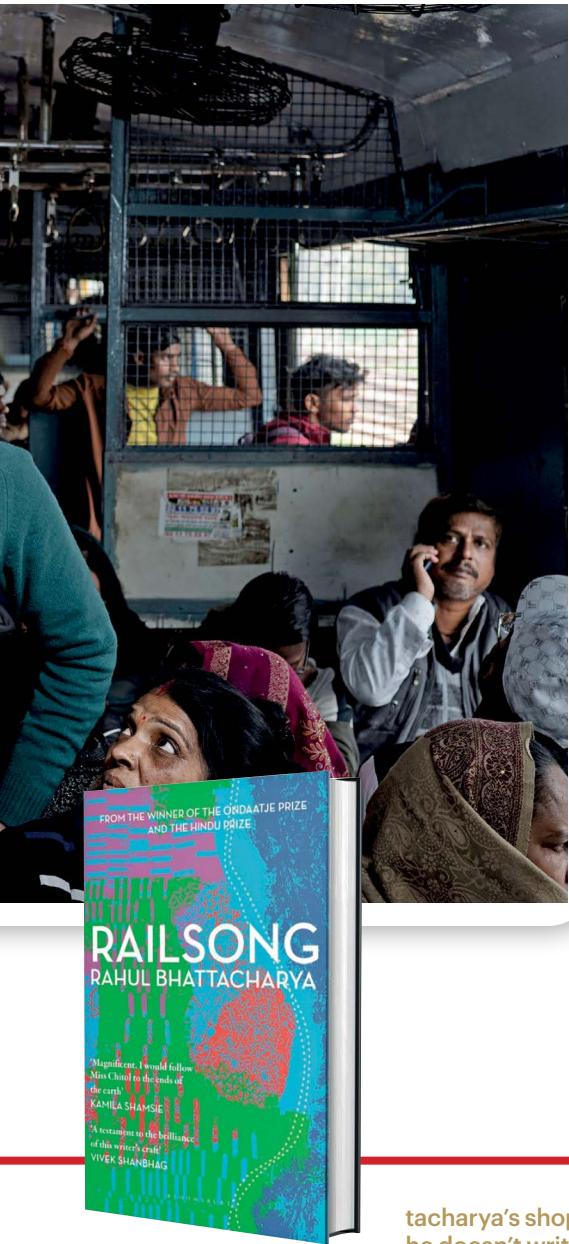
GREAT EASTERN HOTEL
By **Ruchir Joshi**
HARPERCOLLINS/
FOURTH ESTATE
₹1,499; 920 pages

RIVER OF STORIES

WRITER AND TRANSLATOR ARUNAVA SINHA PICKS HIS FAVOURITE FICTION READS OF THE YEAR GONE BY

If fiction is the art of making the unexpected feel extraordinary, more than one book—or three—by Indian writers lived up to that expectation. Ruchir Joshi’s *Great Eastern Hotel* push-

es back resolutely against short attention spans with effervescent prose and a vast storyline that takes Calcutta out of the aftermath of World War II and projects it on our mental screens



with cinematic clarity and luxurious detail.

In Ruthvika Rao's debut, *The Fertile Earth*, caste politics is played out intersectionally with a generational conflict between the women of a family in rural Andhra Pradesh, even as the Naxalite movement becomes a character of its own. It's that rare book that makes you feel you're reading a land and a people rather than just a set of characters.

I will read Rahul Bhat-

tacharya's shopping list if he doesn't write anything else, but fortunately, 2025 wasn't one of those years. In *Railsong*, his heroine Charu takes a train—not once but many times. A history and a geography of the country seeps out of the crazily readable novel directly into the part of the brain where memorable novels live. Indeed, this is the book we could well remember this year for.

Shanta Gokhale, the irrepressible writer and translator, brings to us from the Marathi the utterly unpredictable

It's a neat metaphor and a perfect platform to paint an emerging post-colonial India in the background; from Nehruvian socialism to the Emergency to nascent Hindutva politics. Ms Chitol herself is sui generis; the daughter of a railwayman, a teenage runaway, a college drop-out, a young working woman. "I didn't have any anxiety at the start about writing a female character. I was just following my instincts," says Bhattacharya. "But as I went deeper I had to familiarise myself with experiences that are not natural to me as a man. I did a lot more committed reading around various things...to give myself the confidence to undertake female articulation."

Creating the very specific world of the railways—including union politics, station codes and byzantine employee regulations—also meant considerable research. He spent a decade

Creating the very specific **WORLD OF THE RAILWAYS** involved a decade of research

poring through circulars, government documents and maps, undertaking travel and chatting with ex-employees. "One thing is trying to be on top of the material, the other hard part is to then let that material evaporate off this block of information into something that permeates the world of the novel, so that the granular detail becomes part of the text rather than something that sits on top of it."

Across four decades, multiple train journeys and dozens of minor characters, Bhattacharya sutures together a riveting portrait of a young republic cleaved by caste and religion. The dialogue often sparkles, and the world of the bureaucracy offers many moments of absurdity. "What can I say?" he says. "India is a funny place, life is funny." ■

—Bhavya Dore

FICTION RECCOS

THE BOOKS THAT SHOULD BE ON YOUR READING LIST

The Woman Who Wore a Hat, by Kamal Desai, where a woman who has lost her memory breaks into a gathering of men in search of resources to make an animated film. What follows is an enquiry into what it means for a woman to be free.

We should need no reminder that 'there are more things in heaven and earth...than are dreamt of in your philosophy'. And yet Amitav Ghosh's *Ghost-eye* does just that, melding a 'case of the reincarnation type' being studied by a psychiatrist in the 1960s

with climate investigations in the present day. With a trademark narrative that moves seamlessly between different periods of time, the novel brings out the uncanny truths that stories can reveal. ■

THE REVOLUTIONISTS
The Story of the Extremists Who Hijacked the 1970s
By Jason Burke
PENGUIN/THE BODLEY HEAD
₹1,099; 448 pages



NON-FICTION ▼

The Age of Terror

JASON BURKE'S *THE REVOLUTIONISTS* CHARTS THE DARK JOURNEY OF GLOBAL TERRORISM WITH THE PACE OF A THRILLER AND THE DEPTH OF SERIOUS HISTORY

Jason Burke begins his story in an age of innocence, when terrorists simply walked across the tarmac to board commercial flights unchecked, with guns and bombs in their hand baggage. *The Revolutionists* then traces the evolution of increasingly sanguinary terrorism into the early 1980s, with the transformation of 'secular, leftist' terrorists into the movements of jihad that dominate terrorism even today. Drawing on three decades of front-line reporting, declassified files, and interviews with hijackers, counter-terrorism agents, spies and survivors, Burke crafts a narrative that is as compulsive as a thriller, even as he retains exceptional rigour in argument and documentation.

The Revolutionists is no mere chronicle, as Burke refuses to flatten his subjects into stereotypes. He probes the human frailties behind revolutionary and radical postures: the functional illiteracy of some 'ideologues', paranoia, love and betrayal, the thrill of camaraderie amid carnage, idiosyncrasies of personality, the thirst for adventure, and outsize egos. We meet the 'grenade girl' Leila Khaled; Carlos 'the Jackal', the 'Leftist mastermind' with a taste for luxurious living, whose reputation far exceeds his actual exploits; shadowy double agents who navigate the treacherous alliances between Baader-Meinhof militants and PLO factions; "strikingly beautiful

with her fine features and long dark hair" Fusako Shigenobu, plotting mass murder; the fireball assassination of Fatah's top killer, Ali Hasan Salameh; and the early years of a trepidatious Osama bin Laden...

Burke handles the rise of Islamism with nuance, neither demonising the faith nor excusing its weaponisation, a balance that is especially vital in the polarised discourse of our age. The book also reconstructs decisive terrorist and counter-terrorist operations, with which we believe ourselves familiar, but rediscover in startling detail. The spectacular Entebbe Raid that forced terrorists and supporting states to rewrite the entire hijacking playbook; the Munich Massacre, which grabbed spectacular global attention and provoked a relentless Israeli campaign of vengeance;

the Beirut Bombings, which became the base of future jihadi movements; the farcical and bloody Iranian Embassy Siege in London, which ends badly for a group of inept terrorists, in a "spectacular denouement" covered live by BBC; and many more.

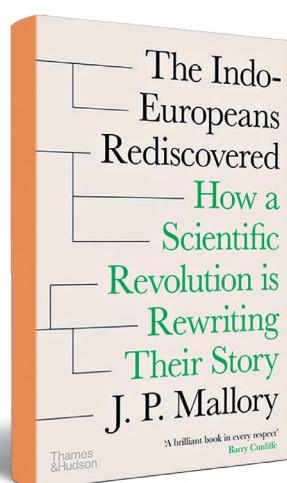
At around 450 pages, *The Revolutionists* initially appears daunting, but its riveting narrative and compelling subject quickly draw you in, and forward. A great read for anyone interested in the origins of the radicalism and globalised violence that plague us today. ■

BURKE HANDLES THE RISE OF ISLAMISM WITH NUANCE, NEITHER DEMONISING THE FAITH NOR EXCUSING ITS WEAPONISATION

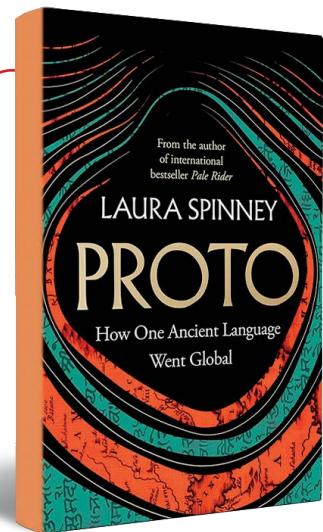
—Ajai Sahni

I want to reflect on four books that made a major impact on me in 2025; what all four share is a focus on the history of people, their practices and their folkways, not the dry recitation of battles and the rise and fall of kings.

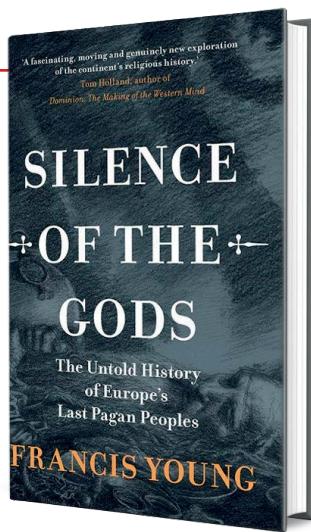
Laura Spinney's *Proto* is about the reconstruction of a lost language, the common ancestor of all Indo-European languages, spoken by about half of the world's people, but in the course of the narrative you survey fields as disparate as comparative linguistics, archaeology and the politics of



**THE INDO-EUROPEANS
REDISCOVERED** How a Scientific Revolution is Rewriting Their Story
By J.P. Mallory
THAMES & HUDSON
₹35; 448 pages



PROTO How One Ancient Language Went Global
By **Laura Spinney**
WILLIAM COLLINS
₹599; 352 pages



SILENCE OF THE GODS The Untold Story of Europe's Last Pagan Peoples
By **Francis Young**
CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
£25; 432 pages

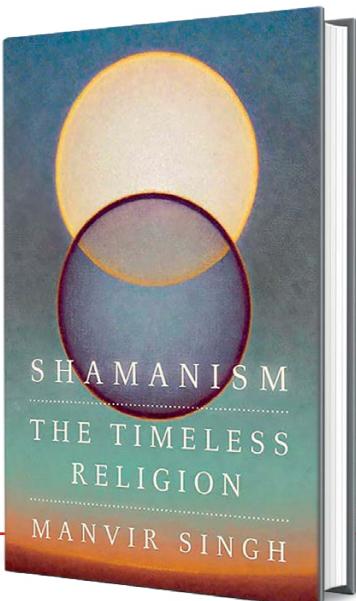
Manvir Singh's *Shamanism* is arguably the most ambitious of the four books here because it tries to explain a pattern that appears across many, even all, societies. The narrative is a blend of anthropology, history, archaeology, and even reportage, drawing on Singh's fieldwork, all presented as a serious attempt to answer why shaman-like figures keep emerging across all cultures. After all, as we read in *Silence of the Gods* too, the old gods and shamans of the Estonians were there for them when the night was more than 18 hours long in the midst of winter; the preachers of Christianity, a religion of a desert god far to the south, offered little.

HISTORY ▼

BEYOND DRY FACTS

Podcaster and geneticist **Razib Khan** picks four recent books on ancient cultures

SHAMANISM The Timeless Religion
By **Manvir Singh**
PENGUIN/KNOOP
\$30; 304 pages



identity. *Proto* hints at the toxicity that has been associated with the 'Indo-European question', but moves the reader over and over back to the scientific issues at hand and the latest results. Less emotion. More analysis.

Francis Young's *Silence of the Gods* tackles a very different subject, the long twilight of paganism in Europe, and the late conversion of some of the continent's peoples. But, like *Proto*, the project is to probe beneath the surface of what we know and expose deeper threads. The book argues that "Europe's last pagan peoples" persisted later than most assume based on simple histories, especially in the Baltic. The story in *Silence of the Gods* looks less like an abrupt shift to silence and more like a gradual fading out of the old voices.

What all four share is a focus on the history of people, their practices and their folkways, not the dry recitation of facts

Moving beyond ancient rituals that linger into the present, J.P. Mallory's *The Indo-Europeans Rediscovered* is an eminent scholar's attempt to stab back into the dark prehistoric path more than 40 years after his initial foray into the topic. His book is much more focused on the intellectual history of the past than *Proto*, with its relative presentism. The point is not to hand you a satisfying ancestral epic; it is to show you what the evidence can and cannot bear, and how easily we overfit a story to the scraps we have.

Despite differences of place and time, human experience seems quite universal. The challenge of the modern world is the same as the ancient: we face real uncertainties, but we also face political, cultural and digital systems that profit from keeping us perpetually scanning for the next catastrophe, or the next ancestor, or the next god. ■

LIFE STORY ▼

NOT JUST

VIR DAS's memoir reveals the person behind the smiling mask of a stand-up comic

Comedian-actor and now author Vir Das admits it feels strange to be writing a memoir this early in his career. This reader was surprised, too, given he is in his 40s and is still very active in both industries. The book's release is fitting, as it coincides with Das making his big-screen return, that too in the director's chair with *Happy Patel*, a spy comedy produced by Aamir Khan. The biggest sell for *The Outsider* is that the comic finally opens up on the impact his YouTube special 'Two Indias' had on him emotionally and professionally. Labelled a traitor, he lost shows and eventually had to shut down his com-



Remembrance of Things Past

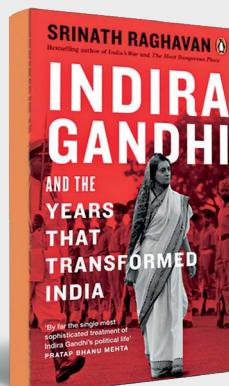
AUTHOR AND FORMER AMBASSADOR T.C.A. RAGHAVAN ON HIS FAVOURITE MEMOIRS AND BIOGRAPHIES OF 2025

Saima Hashmi's two-volume memoir, *Waiting in the Wings*, and *Enter Stage Left*, is about her father, the great Faiz Ahmed Faiz, and her life. It also illuminates post-1947 Lahore and Pakistan, and is a thoughtful addition to the annals of our always interesting subcontinent.

Gopalkrishna Gandhi's *The Undying Light* stands out for its unusual candour and riveting exploration of the legacy of his grandfathers—C. Rajagopalachari and Mahatma

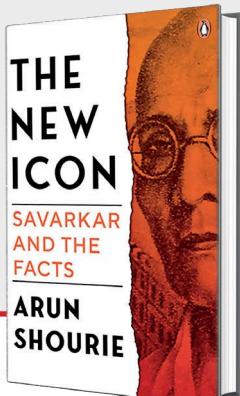
Gandhi. It is also a story of modern India since 1947, and Gandhi's perspective—as a former governor and ambassador, plus a senior aide to more than one President—is a valuable one. Much slimmer and more offbeat is *Rajwati and Her Times*, Madhu Bhaduri's moving memoir of her courageous grandmother's response to Partition's ravages.

Srinath Raghavan's *Indira Gandhi and the Years That Transformed India* provides a valuable perspective



INDIRA GANDHI AND THE YEARS THAT TRANSFORMED INDIA
By Srinath Raghavan
PENGUIN/ALLEN LANE
₹899; 384 pages

THE NEW ICON
Savarkar and the Facts
By Arun Shourie
PENGUIN/VIKING
₹999; 560 pages



FOR LAUGHS

pany, Weirdass Comedy. "Once politicians started coming for me, it kind of proved what I'd been saying; India is a country that does not want to air its dirty laundry," he writes.

As an author, he is not afraid to share some of his gaffes, particularly his attempt at being a VJ, doing films like *Mastizaade* and a US show, *Whisky Cavalier*, which didn't propel his career in Hollywood as hoped. *The Outsider* works best when Das dwells on the personal, especially when recalling the time spent living with his grandparents in New Delhi or the succinct chapter about his childhood in Lagos, where he lived till the age of nine.

Das traverses through

his life, ticking off life-changing experiences (many unfold in the US), accomplishments, relationships and ambitions. There's not much insight about his creative process, particularly as a stand-up

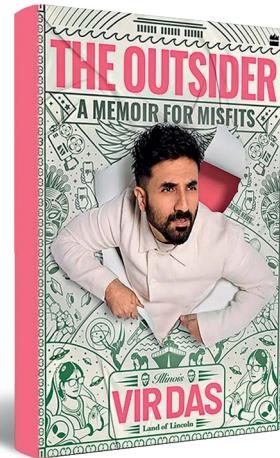
title. There's some humble-bragging, especially when it comes to adventures in comedy clubs in the US and some truth bombs ("... the benchmark of a truly secure leader is their ability to tolerate satire"). That's as

THE COMIC FINALLY OPENS UP ON THE IMPACT HIS YOUTUBE SPECIAL 'TWO INDIAS' HAD ON HIM EMOTIONALLY AND PROFESSIONALLY

artist, but there's some reflection on being an English-speaking comedian and trying to find an audience in that limited landscape, as well as an actor in Bollywood. Hence, the book

political as the book gets.

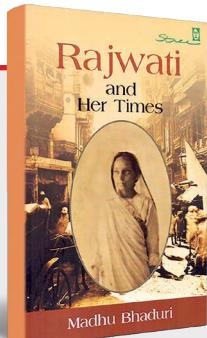
If you are going into this book expecting laughs as you do from Das's specials, then this may not be what you're looking for. Perhaps the funniest bit



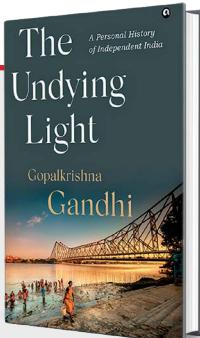
THE OUTSIDER
A MEMOIR FOR MISFITS
By Vir Das
HARPERCOLLINS
₹699; 288 pages

here is when he equates his *Delhi Belly* co-actor Imran Khan, who makes a comeback with *Happy Patel*, to Ryan Gosling, not once but at least four times. Instead, tears are more likely to flow as Das devotes a chapter to his deceased British bulldog Watson and the impact he had on him. It's Das at his most vulnerable and honest as he speaks of how the doggo saved his marriage. ■

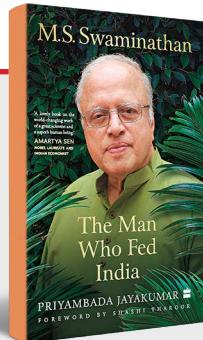
—Suhani Singh



RAJWATI AND HER TIMES
By Madhu Bhaduri
STREE BOOKS
₹500; 105 pages



THE UNDYING LIGHT
A Personal History of Independent India
By Gopal Krishna Gandhi ALEPH
₹999; 624 pages



M.S. SWAMINATHAN
The Man Who Fed India
By Priyambada Jayakumar
HARPERCOLLINS
₹799; 324 pages

trope of famous colonial-era DGs—Cunningham, Marshall and Wheeler—and reveals much about the ASI and archaeology in India and the substantial impress Ghosh left on them.

Narayani Basu's *A Man for All Seasons*, a biography of K.M. Panikkar, is an admirable, very comprehensive account of the many different avatars Panikkar had—teacher and historian, journalist, courtier, diplomat and finally his role in the States Reorganisation Commission.

I also enjoyed Arun Shourie's icon-busting account of V.D. Savarkar in *The New Icon*, and Priyambada Jayakumar's *M.S. Swaminathan: The Man Who Fed India* very accessibly fills the gap in knowledge about a scientist who played a transformative role. It also restores some balance in favour of scientists who are often overlooked in preference to politicians and civil servants. ■

on her premiership despite covering well-trodden terrain. *Mohan and Muhammad*, Meghnad Desai's posthumously published study of Mahatma Gandhi and M.A. Jinnah, is a slim volume but full of insights about the how and whys of Partition.

Himanshu Prabha Ray and Ajay Yadav's *Indian Archaeology after Independence* is a study of Amalananda Ghosh, the ASI's longest-serving Indian director general. This gives a different perspective to the more familiar

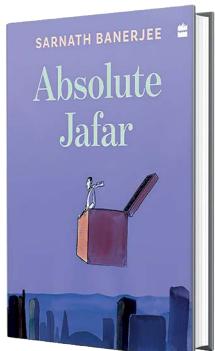
BOOKS TO LOOK FORWARD TO IN 2026

AFTER NATIONS The Making and Unmaking of a World Order
By Rana Dasgupta
Penguin/ Allen Lane
Non-fiction

Rana Dasgupta's last book, *Capital* (2014), was an astute mapping of New Delhi's socio-economic trajectories in the 21st century. His new work of nonfiction is even more ambitious, unpacking the historic origins of the nation-state itself. As democracies around the world approach a tipping point, and autocracies like Russia and China grow more ascendant every year, Dasgupta sketches the likely political end-game of the nation-state system.

ONCE ELEPHANTS LIVED HERE
By Geetanjali Shree
Translated by Daisy Rockwell
Penguin/ Hamish Hamilton
Fiction

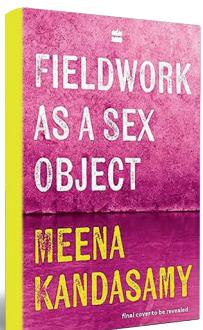
The International Booker-winning combination of Hindi writer Geetanjali Shree and translator Daisy Rockwell returns with *Once Elephants Lived Here*, a collection of short fiction. The titular story is an elegiac portrayal of communal violence, while other entries in the collection are sophisticated depictions of the conflicts that modernity inevitably sparks in a rapidly changing society.



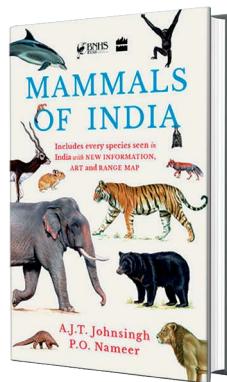
ABSOLUTE JAFAR
By Sarnath Banerjee
HarperCollins India
Fiction

Sarnath Banerjee's *Corridor* (2004) and *The Barn-Owl's Wondrous Capers* (2007) are among the pioneering English-language graphic novels to come out of India. His new book *Absolute Jafar* is perhaps his most personal work yet. Bhrigu, the hunter of obscure collectibles who Banerjee described as a 'post-modern Ibn Batuta' in *Corridor*, returns here with a tale about his son Jafar—a tale of displacement, exile and identity.

FIELDWORK AS A SEX OBJECT
By Meena Kandasamy
HarperCollins India
Fiction

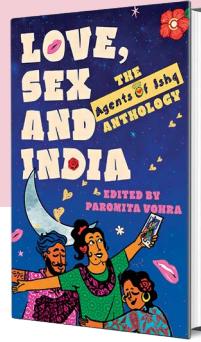


Meena Kandasamy, author of *The Gypsy Goddess* and *When I Hit You*, is known for her politically charged and formally inventive novels. In *Fieldwork as a Sex Object*, Kandasamy tells us the story of a young Indian woman living in London, who becomes the target of a vicious online harassment campaign triggered by a sex scandal.



MAMMALS OF INDIA
By A.J.T. Johnsingh and P.O. Nameer
HarperCollins India
Nonfiction

Two renowned professors of wildlife science have compiled the first comprehensive field guide to the 450-plus species of Indian mammals currently recognised. A must-have for wildlife enthusiasts, *Mammals of India* has been published in collaboration with BNHS (Bombay Natural History Society) and contains over 400 distribution maps and 50-plus full-colour illustrations.



LOVE SEX INDIA
By Paromita Vohra
Westland/ Context
Non-fiction

Documentary filmmaker and columnist Paromita Vohra co-founded the Agents of Ishq website in 2014, designed to be a platform about love, sexuality and desire. In the anthology *Love Sex India*, Vohra compiles real-life accounts of Indians from all walks of life, as they discuss their desires, their expectations and, occasionally, their kinks.

THE APPARITION
By M.G. Vassanji
Westland/ Tranquebar
Fiction

Born in Kenya to Indian immigrant parents, M.G. Vassanji is known for novels like *The In-Between world of Vikram Lall* (2003) and *The Assassin's Song* (2007), elegant dissections of diasporic and religious identity, respectively. In his latest novel, he follows the Mughal emperor Alauddin Khilji as he



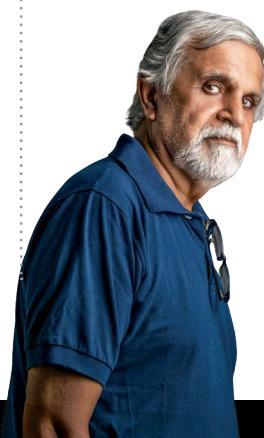
MARIA BOYADGIS

contemplates handing over power to his wily vizier Malik Kafur, a decision that could shake the very foundations of his empire.

HOMETOWN
A Personal History of Shillong
By Anjum Hasan
Bloomsbury India
Non-fiction

Through complex, thoughtfully constructed novels like *The Cosmopolitans* (2015) and *History's Angels* (2022), Anjum Hasan has established herself as one of the most versatile English-language writers in the country. Her latest work is a personal history of Shillong, the town she grew up in and the setting of her celebrated debut novel *Lunatic in My Head* (2007).

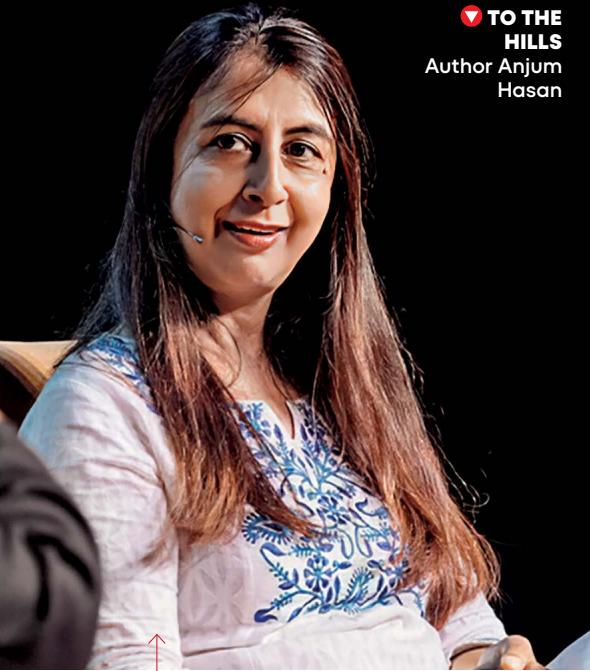
THE BENGAL READER: The Finest Fiction, Nonfiction, Poetry and Plays from the Bengali



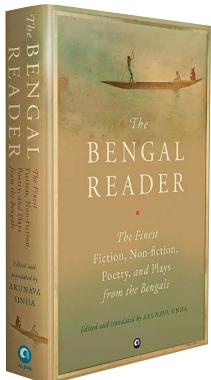
BANDEEP SINGH

▼ TO THE
HILLS

Author Anjum
Hasan



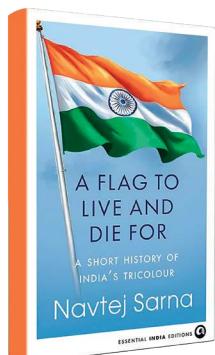
Edited and translated
by Arunava Sinha
Aleph
Fiction and
Non-fiction



A prolific translator of fiction, non-fiction and poetry, Arunava Sinha has brought together the finest Bengali works across genres in one volume, his 100th work of translation. The speeches of Rammo-hun Roy, the poetry of Rabindranath Tagore and the novels of Ban-kim Chattopadhyay; you will find them all in *The Bengal Reader*, the ideal volume for aficionados of Bengali culture and language.

**A FLAG TO LIVE AND
DIE FOR**
A Short History of
India's Tricolour
By Navtej Sarna
Aleph
Non-fiction

Draped across the arms of jubilant Olympians, covering the shrouds of martyred soldiers, or fluttering away in anonymous corners of the country, the Indian flag is central to the average citizen's ideas about nationhood and political identity. In *A Flag to Live and Die For*, the writer and former diplomat Navtej Sarna traces the extraordinary history of the tricolour.



THE BUCKET

By Arnab Ray
Hachette India
Fiction

Arnab Ray, the blogger and pop culture commentator known as 'Greatbong' online, returns with a cold case murder mystery set in Kolkata. In 1994, Pramila Chatterjee is drowned, followed by a hasty investigation wherein her neighbour is convicted and locked up. Thirty years later, a

The 2016 Keeladi excavation has emerged as one of modern India's most hotly contested digs. Some cite it as incontrovertible proof of a thriving urban civilisation in Southern India while others dismiss it as political opportunism and mythmaking. Sowmiya Ashok traces the archaeological, political and socio-economic implications of the Keeladi dig, with some old-fashioned, on-ground journalism.

the half-sister of Humayun and the subject of Lal's previous book *Vagabond Princess: The Great Adventures of Gulbadan* (2024).

BREAKING THE BAR

The Early Women
Lawyers of India
By Jhuma Sen
Pan Macmillan India
Non-fiction

In this series of profiles of pioneering female lawyers, advocate and law



▼ BY THE
MUGHALS
Historian Ruby
Lal

formerly inseparable group of friends are engulfed afresh in the Chatterjee case, as a true-crime documentary challenges everything they thought they knew.

THE DIG
Keeladi and the
Politics of India's
Past
By Sowmiya Ashok
Hachette India
Non-fiction

HUMAYUNAMA
By Ruby Lal
Juggernaut
Non-fiction

The historian Ruby Lal revives 'Humayunama', an unofficial history of the Mughal Empire written by Gulbadan Begum, considered a rare account of the times written from a woman's point of view. Gulbadan Begum was

professor Jhuma Sen introduces us to fascinating characters like Regina Guha and Cornelia Sorabji, who fought both discriminatory laws (like the 1879 Legal Practitioners Act, which Guha challenged in court) and societal attitudes to pave the ground for future generations.

Compiled by
Aditya Mani Jha

BECOMING VISIBLE

In his memoir—Tell My Mother I Like Boys—Chef Suvir Saran opens up about queerness, courage and the long journey from quiet shame to living truthfully

Q. What compelled you to tell your story? Why now?

This story had been living inside me for decades, quietly asking to be heard. I felt ready now—emotionally, physically, spiritually—to offer it not as confession, but as companionship to others navigating silence, difference and love.

Q. Was it difficult coming to terms with your sexuality?

I knew very early that I was different—by the age of three I sensed my oddness, and by five I knew I didn't fit the expected mould. The language came much later, in adolescence; the awareness, unease and quiet shame were always already there.

Q. What role has food played in your awakening?

Food became my first safe language—long before words felt possible. It allowed me to give love, receive acceptance and feel worthy in spaces where I couldn't yet speak my truth.

Q. Chef, author, anchor, educator... you wear many hats. What do you identify most as?

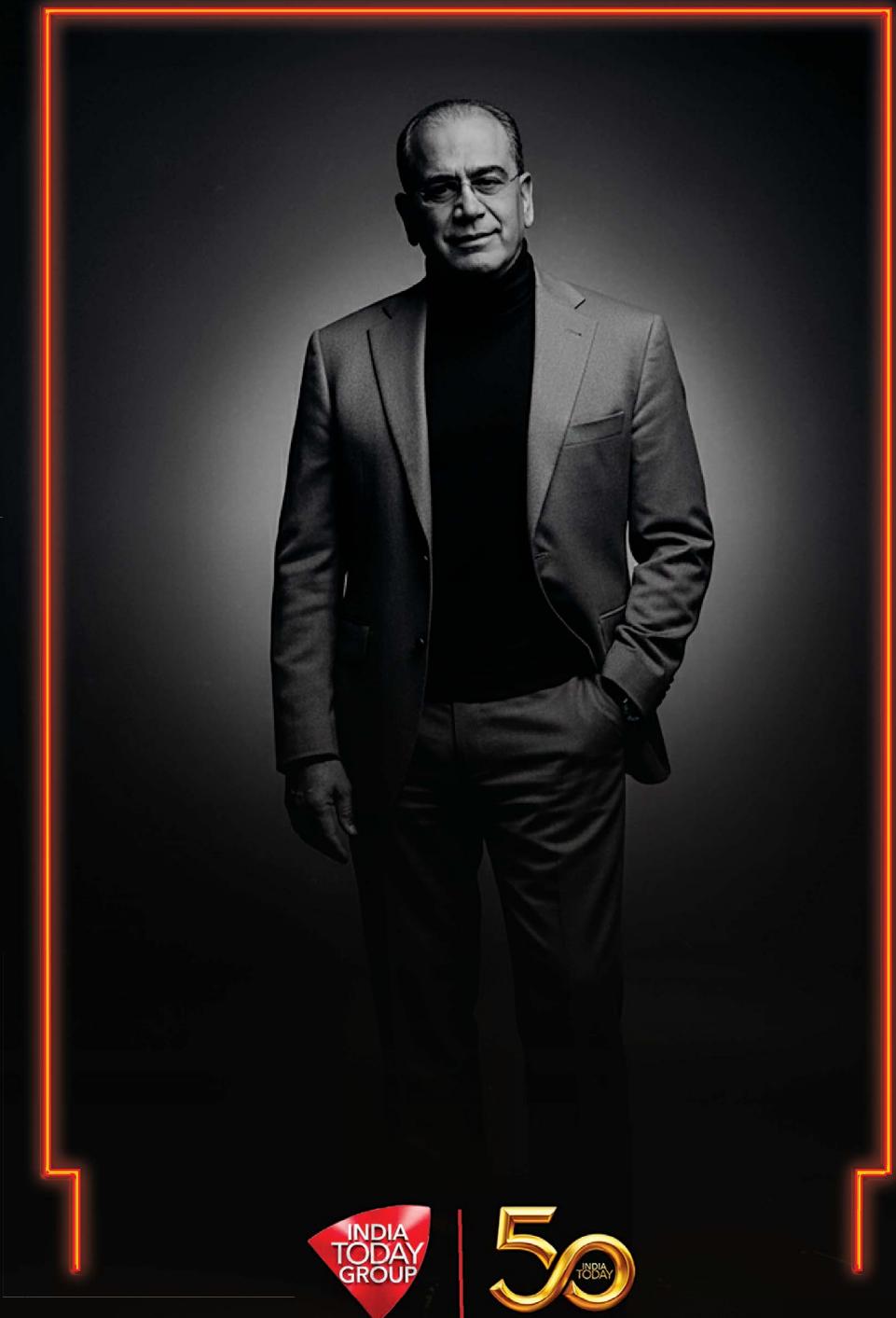
I identify most as a storyteller—sometimes through food, sometimes through words, sometimes through presence. The roles change, but the intent remains the same: to connect, to nourish, to tell the truth gently.

—with Amit Dixit

TELL MY MOTHER I LIKE BOYS
By Suvir Saran
PENGUIN/VIKING
₹699; 240 pages



Photograph by CHANDRADEEP KUMAR



INDIA TODAY@50

FIVE DECADES ONE MAGAZINE

(2015 - 2025)
EPISODE 5



JAN 10 | 8 PM

**WHEN SPEED IS
YOUR DEFAULT**



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