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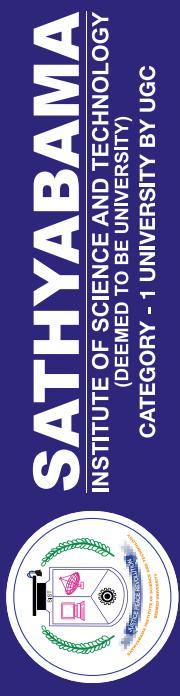
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**SHUBHANSU SHUKLA'S VOYAGE SIGNALS INDIA'S AMBITION
TO JOIN THE TITANS OF HUMAN SPACE EXPLORATION**



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FROM THE EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Group Captain Shubhanshu Shukla may be the second Indian astronaut to go into space, 41 years after Wing Commander Rakesh Sharma's feat in 1984. But Shukla's voyage on board the American spaceflight Axiom Mission 4 also marks a historic first step. He has become the first Indian to visit the International Space Station (ISS) and experience first-hand its 28,000 kmph orbit around the Earth. But there's more to it than just that. His ticket may have cost Rs 500 crore. Still, Shukla's planned two-week 'workation' aboard the ISS will yield primary data of inestimable value, for he is among the four Indian astronauts picked for the Gaganyaan Mission, India's ambitious human spaceflight programme. The experiential richness Shukla brings back from his hitchhike to the galaxy will go right into an all-Indian spaceflight manual. Future relevance is what gilds his feat: each step here is a launch pad for the next flight. What this heralds is a New Space Odyssey for India as it joins the heavyweights of human space exploration.

First, a tip of the hat to the real protagonist here: the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO), an excellent body that has made pioneering initiatives at a fraction of the cost borne by other nations. While ISRO spent the past decades focused on achieving self-sufficiency in launch vehicles and satellites for India's developmental needs, it is now expanding its orbit towards scientific exploration of our solar system. The next step on ISRO's programme itinerary is a three-member crewed flight in 2027, on a rocket made in India, as part of Gaganyaan. Its logistical and safety modalities will be ironed out with three uncrewed flights before we get to the human stage. The crewed flight, in its turn, is envisaged as an occasion to test, experiment and gain experience for the future.

Humans in space need a big reboot to their physiological and psychological selves. From bare essentials like oxygen, pressure and temperature to complex functions, all facets of living call for adjustment. Everything about our cognitive, metabolic and motor apparatus is made for normal gravity. How we can keep ticking in its virtual absence is a huge part of orienting ourselves to outer space. As Shukla pointed out when he reached space, even basic human functions like having food have to be relearnt; the body has to master how to navigate the microgravity within a spacecraft before being able to manage the spacecraft's navigation systems. No amount of theory works without practice; there's no such thing as transferred wisdom. India will have to build its own first-hand knowledge base. The value that Shukla's inputs will have can be seen right here.

Gaganyaan's next step up the pyramid is an even

more ambitious one. This is the project to build India's very own home in space, Bharatiya Antariksh Station (BAS), a low-orbit platform like the ISS. This is a complex task, set out in several stages. A space station is built out of distinct modules that go up separately over the years and get hitched to each other like wagons. The ISS took from 1998 to 2011 before all the components were fully assembled. ISRO's first BAS module is slated for a 2028 launch; its final piece will be in place by 2035. All the Indians who pitch tent on this little ledge in outer space will also be voyaging into pure science, continuing the experiments Shukla (a.k.a. 'Shux') is presently undertaking, testing the effects living in microgravity has on humans, vis-à-vis muscle atrophy, bone density loss, endurance et al.

After firing up young minds with the successful moon landing of Chandrayaan-3 in 2023, India has big plans for lunar exploration. Chandrayaan-4, scheduled for launch in 2027-28, will not just land on the moon—the spaceship will bring back lunar samples for our scientists to research on. India is also catching its breath for the big one. No human has been on the moon since 1972. Space ambitions had long diverted elsewhere; NASA plans to fill that blank by 2027. Russia is back in the race and China is making big strides too. All the space experience that lies ahead will prove invaluable, for India aims to join the club with a manned lunar mission by 2040.

Experience is exactly what Group Editorial Director Raj Chengappa brings to the subject of space. As a young journalist, he covered Rakesh Sharma's 1984 space voyage for INDIA TODAY. This week, he telescopes all of India's long space walk, its past and glittering future, and sets it in context. Our soaring space ambitions come at a time when there's a renewed global buzz about outer space. Human colonisation and habitation, Mars missions, all are on the radar. Private investment is peaking: Shux's ride was on a NASA-SpaceX joint venture. While ISRO is the rare PSU that actually works brilliantly, the private Indian ecosystem too is picking up, readying for a stage when private players can build, own and operate in space. Luckily, space also sees international cooperation on a scale invisible on earth. The ISS, a five-sided collaboration between the US, Russia, Europe, Canada and Japan, is a case in point. From the ISS vantage point, 400 km above the Earth, Shukla gets to see 16 sunrises and sunsets in a day. Here's wishing India many more sunrises.



▲ April 30, 1984

(Aroon Purie)

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► JUDICIARY

44 Judge in the Dock

Justice Yashwant Varma, the former Delhi High Court judge, could become the first to be impeached in the country



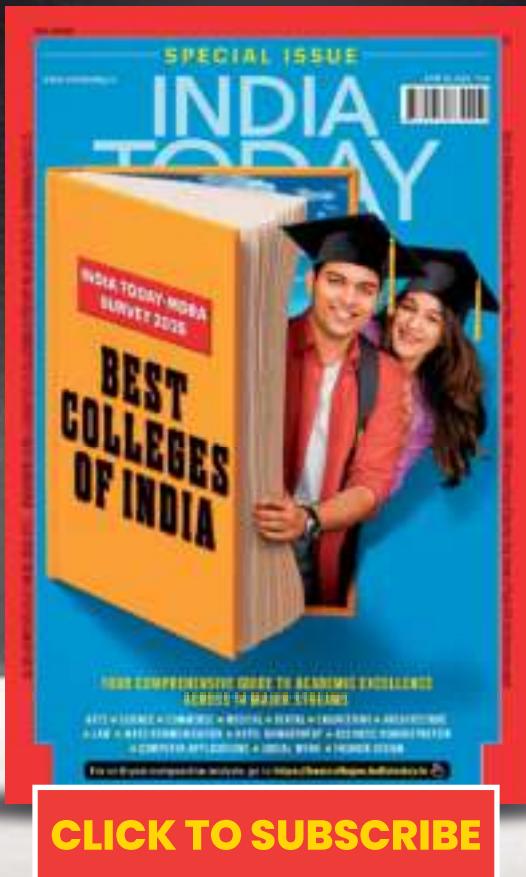
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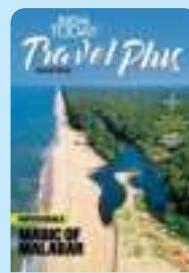
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CPR IN SCHOOLS

A National Need for a Viksit Bharat by 2047

Dr. V.K. Jain, often called the 'CPR Doctor of India', is a senior physician and public health advocate who has dedicated his life to a transformative mission: ensuring that every Indian citizen, especially students, is equipped with life-saving CPR (Cardiopulmonary Resuscitation) skills by 2047. With over 45 years of medical experience and having trained more than 2 lakh individuals across India, Dr. Jain envisions a nation where CPR is as fundamental as fire safety and as accessible as school education. In this exclusive interview, he speaks about the gaps in India's emergency response system, the role of CPR in saving lives, and the path to a truly Viksit Bharat.



Dr. V.K. Jain
MBBS MD Physician,
Founder CPR India Movement

■ **Dr. Jain, you're often referred to as the 'CPR Doctor of India.' Can you tell us what led you to take up this mission so passionately?**

The title was never something I sought—it came organically through my work. Over the years, I saw far too many lives lost due to delays in basic response. Most of these people could have been saved if only someone nearby had known how to administer CPR. That realisation changed my life. I decided that I wouldn't just treat patients—I would empower citizens to become life-savers.

■ **For those unfamiliar, what exactly is CPR—and why is it such a critical life-saving skill, especially in India?**

CPR is a simple hands-on emergency procedure performed on someone who has collapsed due to cardiac arrest. Chest compressions are given at a depth of 5–6 cm and a rate of 100–120 per minute to pump blood from the heart to the brain and other vital organs, ensuring oxygen supply.

■ **You've often spoken about a major policy and awareness gap in India's emergency response system. What does that gap look like today?**

India's bystander CPR rate is dangerously low—between 1.3% to 9.8%. Ambulance response times are inconsistent, and public awareness is poor. What makes this worse is that CPR training is not part of

our national education system. We're losing lives every day, not due to lack of medical facilities—but due to inaction in the golden minutes.

■ **We lose over 7 lakh lives every year to sudden cardiac arrest. In your view, how can this be reduced at scale?**

The first and most effective step is to integrate CPR training in secondary schools across all boards. A single 45-minute session can create lifelong awareness. Imagine the scale if every child in India graduates school already CPR-trained—we would create a new generation of first responders.

Why do you believe schools are the ideal starting point for your vision of Viksit Bharat 2047?

Schools are the heart of any societal change. Children learn fast, and they carry those values home. If we start now, by 2047, India will have at least one CPR-trained person in every household. That alone can reduce cardiac-related fatalities dramatically.

■ **What role should the government, schools, and the general public play to make CPR a national movement?**

The Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Health must work together to mandate CPR training in the curriculum. Schools must prioritise safety, just as they do for fire drills. And citizens must realise

that knowing CPR is not optional—it's a moral responsibility.

■ **You've had international exposure too. How are other countries handling this?**

Countries like Japan, the US, and Australia have made CPR training and AED availability mandatory in schools and public places. Their survival rates from cardiac arrest are double or triple compared to India. These policies work—we just need to adapt them.

■ **You've trained over 2 lakh people already. Could you share a story that shows the power of CPR?**

Just a day after attending our CPR session at the Rajasthan High Court, Mr. Nagar, a dedicated advocate, saved the life of a passerby. His quick action and presence of mind turned knowledge into a lifesaving moment—a true example of how timely training can make a difference.

■ **What is your vision for 2047, and how do CPR and AEDs fit into India's future?**

By 2047, I envision an India where CPR is part of every school's curriculum, and AEDs—Automated External Defibrillators—are installed in every institution just like fire extinguishers. CPR is the first step, and AED is the next. With both in place, we can create a culture where no heart stops without a fight.

UPFRONT

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► CINEMA/POLITICS

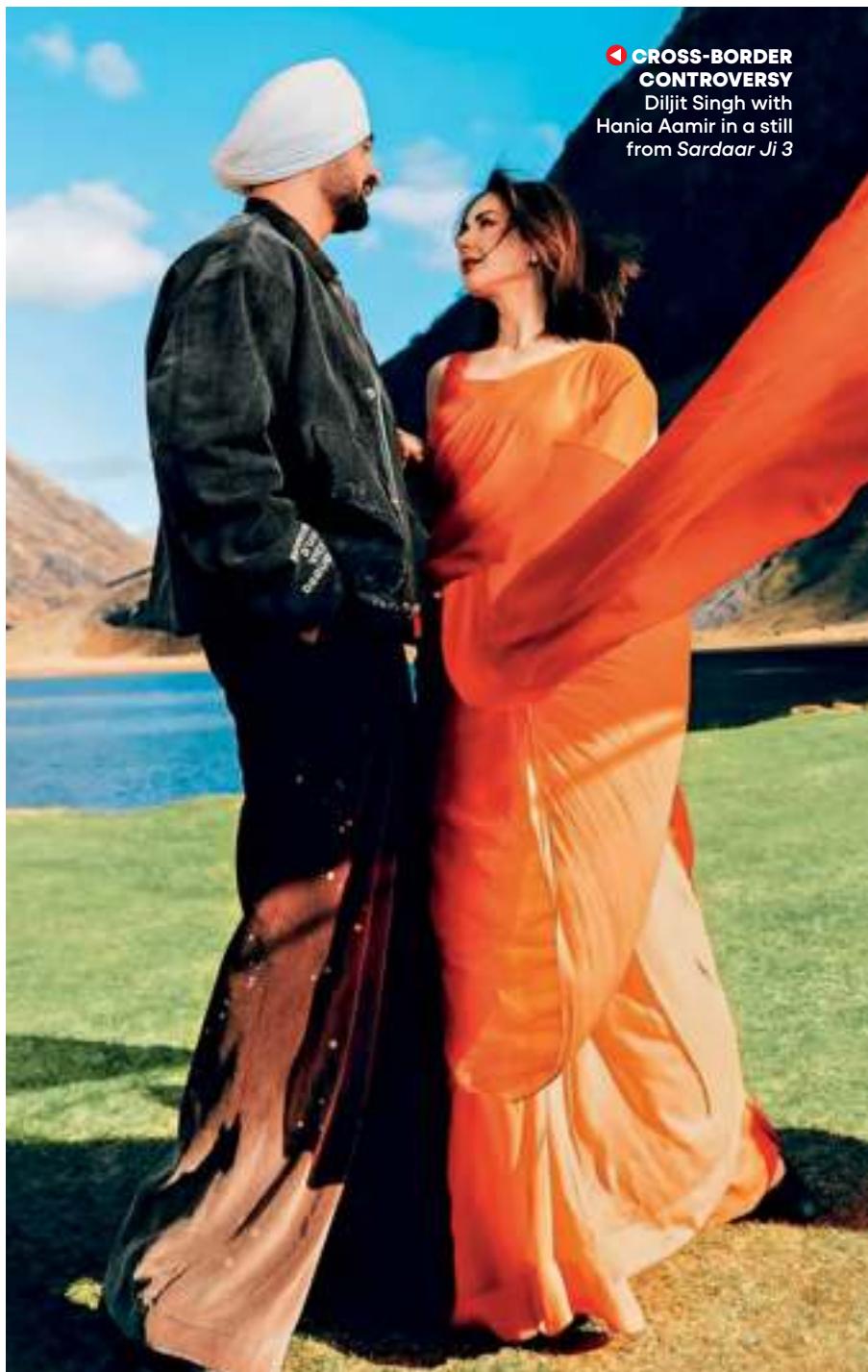
CAUGHT IN THE MUDDLE

A global box-office success, Diljit Dosanjh's *Sardaar Ji 3* remains unreleased in India—a self-imposed restraint by its producers despite surprise backing from the BJP

By SUHANI SINGH &
ANILESH S. MAHAJAN

On the last weekend of June, a Punjabi horror-comedy film featuring a cross-border cast quietly shattered box-office records abroad. *Sardaar Ji 3*, starring Diljit Dosanjh, Neeru Bajwa and Pakistani actress Hania Aamir, grossed over \$1.1 million (Rs 9.43 crore) in North America during its opening weekend. In the UK, it became the highest-grossing Punjabi film of the year, turning in £450,000 (Rs 5.29 crore) in just five days. It also saw sold-out shows in Pakistani cities like Lahore and Karachi, earning an estimated \$500,000 (Rs 4.28 crore) on the first day itself. In doing so, the film beat Salman Khan-starrer *Sultan* to register the highest opening for an Indian film in Pakistan.

In India, though, *Sardaar Ji 3* was nowhere to be seen. Its producers had pulled the domestic release, well aware of the heightened sensitivities following the



◀ CROSS-BORDER
CONTROVERSY
Diljit Singh with
Hania Aamir in a still
from *Sardaar Ji 3*

April 22 terror attack in Pahalgam and the retaliatory Operation Sindoor. The hyper-nationalist climate had already seen *Abir Gulaal*, starring Pakistani actor Fawad Khan with Vaani Kapoor, cancel its release in India in May. But Diljit, one of India's most popular cultural icons, sharing screen space with a Pakistani actress, even if the movie was shot much before the Pahalgam attack, irked a section of the film fraternity—the volatile social media commentariat.

After the Uri (2016) and Pulwama (2019) terror attacks, Bollywood effectively imposed a blanket ban on collaborations with Pakistani artists. Thus, the Federation of Western India Cine Employees (FWICE) sent off letters to T-Series, filmmaker Imtiaz Ali et al, urging them to reconsider ongoing projects with Diljit. Its chief advisor Ashoke Pandit even warned of a “non-cooperation call” if the appeal was ignored—meaning daily-wage workers and technicians would refuse to report to Diljit’s film sets. “For us, the nation comes first. Nothing is bigger,” Pandit told INDIA TODAY, lambasting Diljit for being “arrogant” and ignoring Hania’s now-deleted Instagram story that had criticised India’s air strikes. Punjabi singers also joined the chorus. Mika Singh labelled Diljit a “fake singer” while B Praak made a cryptic post about artists who “sell their conscience”.

THE SURPRISE DEFENCE

As hashtags like #BoycottDiljit began trending, the biggest twist in the saga came when the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)—known for its hardline stance after Uri and Pulwama—decided to back the actor. The party’s Punjab unit held a press conference in Chandigarh to defend Diljit. “You can’t conflate a film made in a different context with current geopolitics,” said party leader and Punjabi actor Hobby Dhaliwal. Even BJP national spokesperson R.P. Singh rallied behind Diljit. “Diljit is a global ambassador of Indian culture,” he said. “He can’t be held hostage



“For us, the nation comes first. Nothing is bigger. When a country is responsible for massacre after massacre, you cannot work with those people”

ASHOKE PANDIT

Chief Advisor, Federation of Western India Cine Employees



“Diljit is a global ambassador of Indian culture. You can’t hold him hostage to the actions or words of a co-star, especially when the context predates recent hostilities”

R.P. SINGH

National Spokesperson, BJP

to the actions or words of a co-star.” Support also came from Sikh leaders across party lines—AAP’s Rajya Sabha MP Vikramjit Singh Sahney, Congress veteran Partap Singh Bajwa and Akali Dal leader Manjit Singh GK. But it was the BJP’s defence that stood out for its calibrated contrast to the hardliners.

That’s perhaps because Diljit is no ordinary celebrity. A Coachella performer with Billboard hits and one of the few Punjabi entertainers with truly global appeal, he continues to maintain deep emotional ties to his roots. “Main Hoon Punjab” (I am Punjab)—a resonant slogan from his blockbuster 2024 *Dil-Luminati* tour—captured that connection perfectly. For the BJP, still trying to regain its footing in Punjab after the 2020–21 farmers’ protest, alienating someone like him would be politically shortsighted. In fact, in the first week of January, amid media glare, Diljit had met Prime Minister Narendra Modi at his residence. For the party, it was a way to preserve support among Punjab’s moderate Sikhs and counter any radical narratives amplified by Pakistan-backed overseas groups.

THE INCONVENIENT TRUTH

Despite backing from the ruling party, the inconvenient truth is that Diljit’s fans in India may have to rely on piracy to watch *Sardaar Ji 3*, with OTT platforms likely to steer clear of the film for fear of hyper-nationalist backlash. Amid this atmosphere of self-censorship, the bigger question now is whether Diljit’s future projects will be quietly cancelled at home.

So far, T-Series is standing firm and sticking with him for its highly-anticipated *Border 2*. “We’ve already shot 50 per cent of the film. The announcement of his casting was made almost nine months ago. The news of his replacement is not true,” a company source says. Imtiaz Ali, who worked with Diljit on *Amar Singh Chamkila* and is reuniting with him for a romantic drama, referred to him as “the son of the soil” during a recent event. As for Diljit, he remains unfazed. Team Dosanjh, an official Instagram handle, proudly declared *Sardaar Ji 3* to be “one Punjabi film standing tall among all the Hollywood films”. The film may have conquered global charts, but in India, it’s caught between borders. ■



THE GREAT CLEANSING

Is there a difference between party and principle? It was the general secretary of BJP's ideological fountainhead RSS, Dattatreya Hosabale, who stirred the pot with his demand for removing the words 'socialist' and 'secular' from the Preamble of the Constitution. But Vice-President Jagdeep Dhankhar, Union ministers Shivraj Singh Chouhan and Jitendra Singh as well as Assam CM Himanta Biswa Sarma have also been voicing similar sentiments, asking for a "cleansing" of what they see as insertions imposed during the Emergency. The catch? The BJP's own constitution pledges allegiance to "the principles of socialism, secularism and democracy". So, a Congress wag asks: will the BJP amend its own constitution before demanding changes in the one Ambedkar drafted and Indira Gandhi amended?

Illustrations by **SIDDHANT JUMDE**

▼ FOOT NOTE

IN PA'S FOOTSTEPS

Bihar chief minister **Nitish Kumar** was once known for jokingly diving for officers' feet to get work done, saying, "Kahiye to aapke payr chhu loon." Son **Nishant Kumar** did the same on June 28 as he respectfully tried to touch Patna DM Thiyagarajan S.M.'s feet during an



official event in Bakhtiyarpur. The officer, caught off-guard, quickly held Nishant's hands to stop him, as cameras captured the moment. Kumar Jr's political plans are still unclear, but the gesture may have struck the right chord with the public. In an election year, a touch of humility, real or rehearsed, never hurts.

BACK TO BASE



Gujarat Congress president **Shaktisinh Gohil's** resignation after the party lost the assembly bypolls for two seats was on the anvil following an equally abysmal performance in the municipality polls in February this year. Gohil's Rajya Sabha term ends in 2026, which allows him the opportunity to try his luck in electoral politics in the 2027 state assembly election or make a move to the party headquarters in Delhi. He's aiming for the latter, it is reliably learnt.

Black Magic

The pursuit of power takes one down some strange dark alleys. Maharashtra minister **Bharat Gogawale** of the Shiv Sena (Eknath Shinde faction) has been accused of performing Aghori rituals to get the post of Raigad district's guardian minister. Suraj Chavan, a spokesperson of Mahayuti ally Nationalist Congress Party, shared a video of him with Aghori sadhus. Gogawale is locked in a fierce contest with NCP's Aditi Tatkare for the post. Meanwhile, Shiv Sena UBT's Bhaskar Jadhav and Shinde Sena's Ramdas Kadam are also accusing each other of using black magic to harm the other. Guess the dark clouds hovering over Mumbai are affecting its netas too.



REBELS AND REMINDERS



July marks five years since Sachin Pilot's alleged rebellion, and Rajasthan ex-CM **Ashok Gehlot** isn't ready to lay the matter to rest. He recalled how he had "saved" his Congress government from a "BJP-backed, money-powered plot". Gehlot also took a jab at current CM **Bhajan Lal Sharma**. "The BJP chose a first-time MLA as CM, but he needs to connect with the people and workers," the veteran leader said. Sharma fired back, claiming his 18-month report card outshines Gehlot's. "In three months, 5,000 villages will be poverty-free. Modi erases poverty, Congress only talks," he declared.



Kaushik Deka with Amitabh Srivastava, Jumana Shah, Dhaval S. Kulkarni and Rohit Parihar

ECO WATCH

By **Rahul Noronha and Sonali Acharjee**

THE TIGER IN THE ROOM

Recognising that wildlife conservation cannot be restricted to 'protected areas' (PAs), the Centre has sanctioned a project to mitigate man-tiger conflict in 80 most-affected forest divisions across 10 states. Funded by the Compensatory Afforestation Fund Management and Planning Authority (Rs 88 crore for 2025-27), the project will utilise technology to monitor tigers and their prey base, and also involve civil society to prevent man-animal conflict. The 2022 tiger census says that



around a third of India's 3,682 tigers live outside the PAs (national parks and sanctuaries). Some 400 people were killed by the big cats between 2020 and 2024. Conflict hot-spots are mostly in UP, MP, Maharashtra, Kerala and Uttarakhand.

A SPIDERY COMEBACK

Indian arachnophiles have four reasons to celebrate. Four new spider species were recorded in the country in June, and there has been first sightings of two species. A new species, *Psechrus chizami*, was discovered in the forests of Nagaland; *Psechrus nathanael* was found in



Meghalaya; and *Pidelaxia falciformis* sp. nov. and *Epidelaxia palustris* sp. nov. in Kerala. In addition, scientists from the Zoological Survey of India also made the first official sightings of *Pardosa tuberosa* and *Thiania abdominalis* in Meghalaya. The discoveries in Kerala are the first time the genus *Epidelaxia* has been found in any other country outside of Sri Lanka. The research, which involved the University of Kerala, was published in *Zootaxa*, a peer-reviewed journal.

► DEMOGRAPHY

INDIA'S FERTILITY PARADOX

Text by SONALI ACHARJEE

1.46 bn

India's population, making it the most populous country in the world

1.7 bn

Peak population projected in the early 2060s, before gradually declining

68%

Working-age population (15-64 years)

PROJECTED LIFE EXPECTANCY

MEN

71

years

WOMEN

74

years



1.9

INDIA'S FERTILITY RATE*

(*A measure of the average number of children a woman is expected to have in her lifetime)

2.1

REPLACEMENT FERTILITY RATE#

(#Average number of children a woman needs to have to maintain a stable population size)

WHAT IT INDICATES
Stabilisation in population growth and eventually a decline

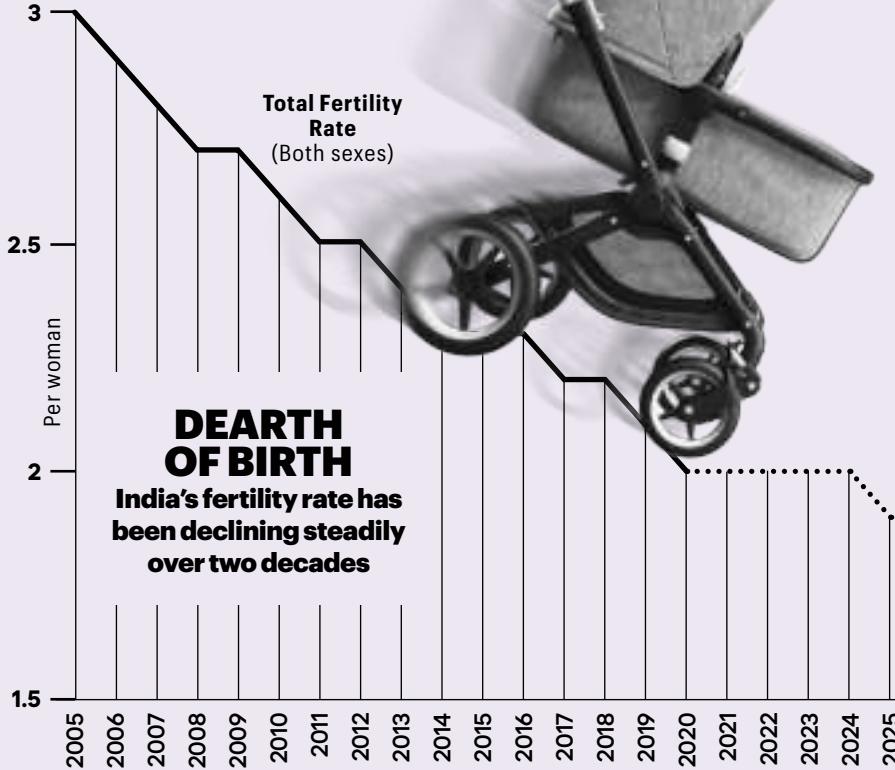
1960

One woman had an average of 6 kids



2025

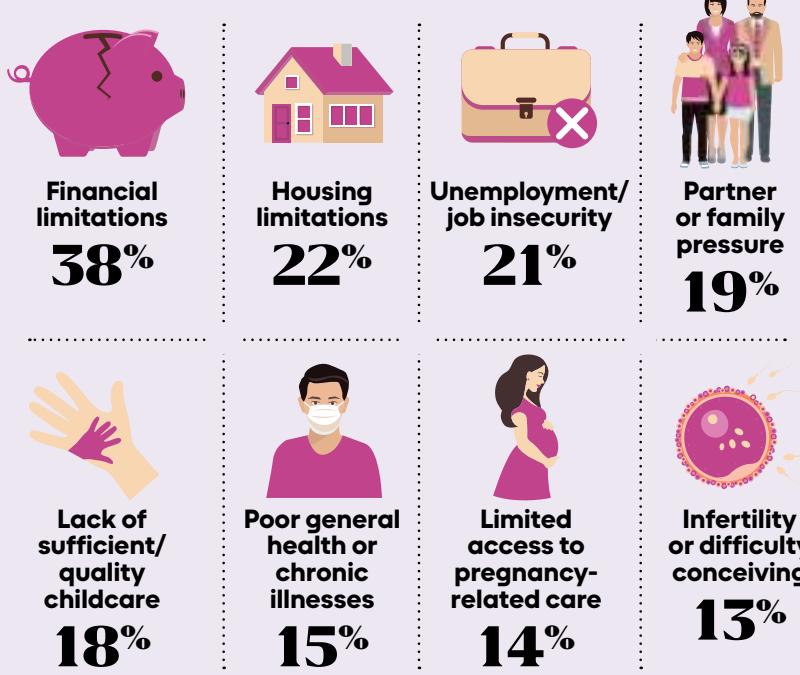
One woman has an average of 2 kids



Source: UN, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2024), 'World Population Prospects: The 2024 Revision'

— Interpolation
..... Projection

WHY AREN'T INDIANS HAVING KIDS?

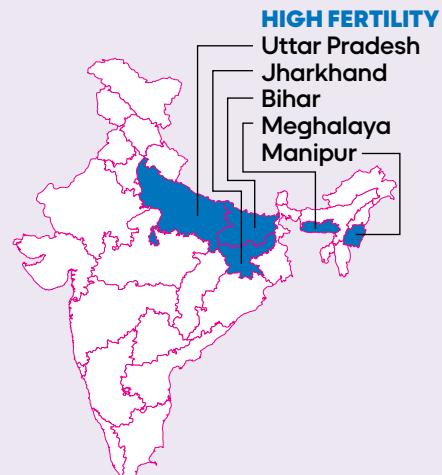


MANY CITE GROWING ANXIETY ABOUT THE FUTURE—
FROM CLIMATE CHANGE (16%) TO POLITICAL AND
SOCIAL INSTABILITY (14%)—AS THE REASONS

*Based on responses to a survey by UNFPA-YouGov

'HIGH FERTILITY AND LOW FERTILITY DUALITY'

Fertility has fallen below the replacement level (2.1) in 31 states/UTs, but remains high in 5 states, says the UNFPA report



REASONS FOR DISPARITIES

Differences in economic opportunities, access to healthcare, education levels, and gender and social norms

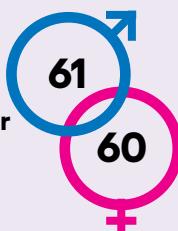
LACK OF REPRODUCTIVE AGENCY

● Men ● Women (%)

Couldn't use a contraceptive of their choice, one of the highest figures in the world



Faced some limitation or the other in their reproductive rights and agency



Forced to use contraceptives when they wanted to have a baby, the highest in the countries surveyed



Forced to keep a baby they did not want, the highest in the countries surveyed



Could not access medical advice or services regarding contraception



THE SOLUTIONS

- More contraceptive choices for men beyond vasectomy and condoms
- Universal access to sexual and reproductive healthcare services
- High-quality, accessible and affordable childcare through government-subsidised facilities
- More equitable family leave policies—paternity leave in amounts similar to maternity leave
- Efforts to end gender-based violence
- Gender-friendly regional, subnational and employer-level policies
- Focus on fertility should not be rooted in ethnonationalism, where the state's goal is not simply to facilitate certain birth rates but to apply these to certain groups

GROUNDWATER OF THE CONSTITUTION



BY SANJAY HEGDE

On June 26, RSS general secretary Dattatreya Hosabale said the quiet part out loud. He wanted a discussion on whether the words 'secular' and 'socialist' "should remain" in the Constitution's Preamble. He said Ambedkar never used these words and argued that they were smuggled in during the Emergency. The 50th anniversary of the Emergency was seemingly a good occasion to discuss deleting them altogether.

Hosabale does not seek reform; what he wants is a regression. The Constitution is not an à la carte menu. You cannot pick what you like and discard the rest. The Preamble reflects our national purpose. To alter its core is not debate. It is demolition.

Yes, the 42nd Amendment added those words in 1976. But the idea behind them was always there. Secularism and Socialism flow through the Constitution like groundwater. You won't find secularism on every page. But dig, and it's there. Article 14 promises equality before law. Articles 15 and 16 prohibit discrimination. Article 25 guarantees freedom of religion. Articles 27 and 28 keep religion out of state institutions. Articles 29 and 30 protect cultural and educational rights of minorities. None of these need the word 'secular' to work. But the word ties them together conceptually. Secularism in India is not about hostility to religion. It means the state keeps an equal distance from all religions. It does not bow before temple, mosque or church. It protects belief. And the right not to believe. That's not alien. That's constitutional.

Socialism, too, is not an alien transplant. It means social justice. It means the state must look after the weak. It means wealth cannot be the only source of power. Ambedkar didn't oppose the idea. He only warned against locking in an economic model. But the Directive Principles say enough: reduce inequality, ensure fair wages, protect the dignity of labour. These are socialist values, Indian in spirit.

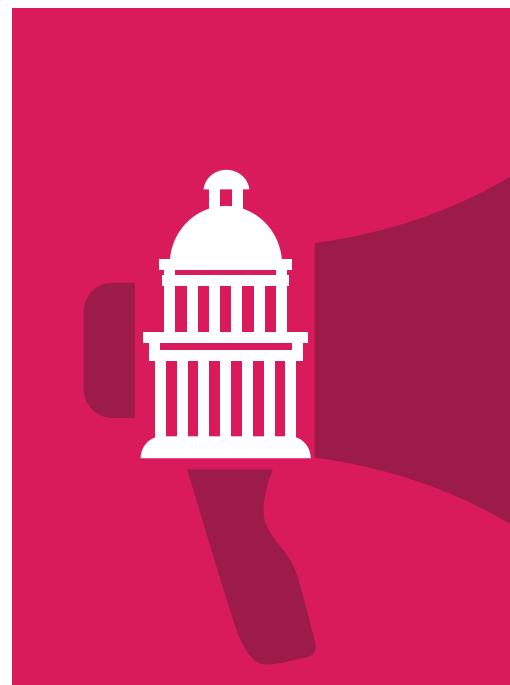
Hosabale says the amendment came during dark times. True. But a bad moment doesn't make every act bad.

HOSABALE'S DEMAND IS NOT ABOUT SEMANTICS. IT IS ABOUT RESHAPING THE STATE. IT IS ABOUT SHIFTING INDIA FROM A SECULAR REPUBLIC TO A MAJORITARIAN DEMOCRACY

Courts didn't strike down that part of the amendment. Even the Janata government, which reversed much of the Emergency's excesses, retained those words, and Atal Bihari Vajpayee and L.K. Advani, as important ministers in that government, raised no objection to the continuation of those words.

The Supreme Court has settled this. In *Kesavananda Bharati vs State of Kerala* (1973), secularism was enumerated among the Constitution's basic features. In *S.R. Bommai vs Union of India* (1994), the court said secularism is part of the Constitution's basic features. These are not footnotes. These are judgments of large constitution benches.

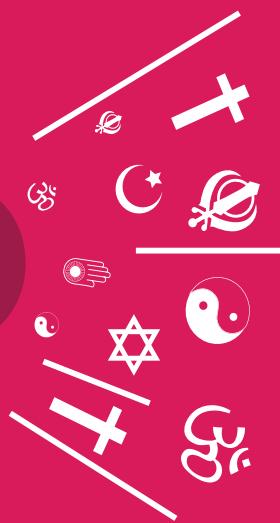
You cannot amend the basic structure. You cannot touch the



foundation without breaking the house. Parliament is powerful, but not absolute. Hosabale's demand is not about semantics. It is about reshaping the state. It is about shifting India from a secular republic to a majoritarian democracy. That's not just a constitutional problem. It's a national one.

India is not one colour, one language, one faith. It is a complex, layered society. Secularism is how we manage that diversity. Not by denial. But by respect and neutrality. You don't need the word 'secular' to act secular. But once you drop the word, you make space for its opposite. That is the risk. Words matter. That's why the RSS wants to drop them. To clear the path for something else. They want a Hindu Rashtra, not a secular republic. Let us not pretend otherwise. This is not about constitutional clarity. It's about political ambition. The Preamble is not a draft. It is a declaration. It says who we are. It says what we aspire to be. We may not always live up to it. But we do not give up on it or allow our national covenant to be rewritten by those who never believed in its words to begin with. ■

The author is a senior advocate at the Supreme Court



THE ANTITHESIS OF FUNDAMENTAL RIGHTS



BY JUSTICE
SHIV NARAYAN
DHINGRA
(RETD)

Socialist countries do not give their citizens freedom of speech, freedom to do work of one's liking, nor to utilise their earnings according to their own wishes. In democracy, fundamental rights and human rights are sacrosanct. But in socialism, the Heads of

the government to the idea of socialism. The fate of fundamental rights in the two prominent socialist countries of the time, China and the Soviet Union, was and is known to everyone.

The word 'secular' has no history in India. We in India believe in 'Sarva Dharma Sama Bhava', which means respect for every religion, every way of life and respect for all thoughts that the human mind can develop in respect of his upliftment, which do not impact society in a negative manner. In India, history shows that the State has only believed in dharma, i.e. subscribing to the rule of law and the people. Dharma cannot be equated to religion; there is no equivalent word for dharma in any other language. Dharma actually means the overall duties of the State towards its subjects and the duties of a man towards the dharma. Religion is faith, while dharma is about duties. The word secular, therefore, should have no place in the Indian Constitution. Different provisions give enough liberty to the people of this country to follow their own faith and religion. The dharma of the State has been given in various articles of the Constitution. The translation of secular as 'Dharma Nirpeksh' is not only faulty but strikes at the very root of the Indian nation. No nation can be Dharma Nirpeksh, i.e. indifferent to its duties. 'Sarva Dharma Sama Bhava' compels you to have respect for every faith and religion.

I consider the introduction of the words 'socialist' and 'secular' into the Preamble of the Constitution a deadly sin committed through the 42nd Amendment, to show that it was not the Constitution, but the will of the ruler, which was supreme. ■

The author is a former judge of the Delhi High Court

In 1976, the Swaran Singh Committee was appointed to recommend constitutional amendments. It submitted its report the same year itself, and the Preamble of the Constitution was amended based on this report through the 42nd Amendment. The two words 'socialist' and 'secular' were added in the Constitution and, instead of 'sovereign democratic republic', we became a 'sovereign socialist secular democratic republic'. In an article published in the *Illustrated Weekly of India* (July 4, 1976), eminent jurist N.A. Palkhivala argued that the Preamble was a part of the Constitution statute, not of the Constitution. Article 368 deals only with an amendment of the Constitution, but not of the Constitution statute. The Preamble cannot be amended under Article 368. It refers to the most momentous event in India's history and sets out, as a matter of historical fact, what the people of India in 1949 resolved to do for their unfolding future. No parliament can amend or alter the historical past.

Socialism is the antithesis of the fundamental rights granted to the people of this country by the Constitution.

THE INTRODUCTION OF THE WORDS 'SOCIALIST' AND 'SECULAR' INTO THE PREAMBLE OF THE CONSTITUTION IS A DEADLY SIN COMMITTED THROUGH THE 42ND AMENDMENT

State and State Assemblies become supreme. In our Constitution, there are various provisions for the upliftment of the poor and they are followed by the State. But inserting the word 'socialism' gives the State the right to interpret the Constitution and its provisions, to curb the fundamental rights of the people. In this effort, the government had nationalised banks and other industries, and can still use the socialist pattern to nationalise private industries. It is not that the framers of the Constitution did not know this: there were debates in the constituent assembly on the word 'socialism' and, after the debate, it was decided not to include it in the Preamble, and to have the necessary provisions for the upliftment of the downtrodden and poor in the Constitution itself, without binding

STATE SCAN



UTTAR PRADESH: NETA VS BABU TOURNAMENT PG 18

KARNATAKA: A RICH LATHER PG 22



ACCUSED NO. 1

► **MONOJIT MISHRA**, 31, prime accused in the Kasba rape, is an ex-student of South Calutta Law College and informally headed its TMC student unit

► He has been in numerous scraps with the law. In the last 12 years 11 cases were registered against him; he was arrested five times

► In 2017, he was arrested for violence in Kalighat. In 2019, he faced a theft charge and was accused of assaulting a woman inside the

same union room where the present assault began. In 2022 came a molestation case. In 2024, he was reported for assaulting a guard

► Shockingly, he was appointed as a casual staffer after a governing body recommendation

► Trinamool MLA Ashok Kumar Deb, who chairs the governing body, denies direct involvement. But Monojit's social media accounts are filled with photographs with senior TMC leaders

► WEST BENGAL

A NEW SHAME FOR TMC

Another horrible rape rocks Kolkata. That the prime accused is with the TMC surprises no one, fuelling protests across the city

By Arkamoy Datta Majumdar

ANOTHER VIOLENT MALE predator, another victim. A symbolic pairing, but also a very real one, it restores to Kolkata the dark shadows cast over it by the chilling rape-cum-murder at R.G. Kar Medical College and Hospital last August. On June 25, the South Calcutta Law College at Kasba saw a near-replay. Talk is again about the links of the accused to power. Outraged Kolkatans are again protesting. The state assembly election is a year closer, so the air is again thick with politics. The lucky piece of divergence: the victim lives to tell the tale.

It had unfolded like any other term-day for the 24-year-old—deceptively ordinary. She reached campus past noon, filled up her first-sem exam forms, went to the common room for a spot of rest. That's when

Monojit Mishra entered. All of 31, ex-student and omnipresent lout, with a history of sexual bullying and all-purpose goonery but immune to disciplining or banishment because, as the girl's complaint letter described it, he's officially part of the college and, "unofficially", the head of its TMCP (Trinamool Chhatra Parishad) unit—so he "holds much power...everyone listens to him".

THE MALEFACTOR

That day, he was distributing student portfolios—she was anointed the new "girls' secretary". Later, as classes emptied and corridors thinned around 4 pm, the outgoing girls' secretary headed her off with a trail of desultory small talk that led back to the common room. Here, Monojit and his retinue joined in. It was a web of subtle menace, which

► ANGRY WORDS

Law students demand justice for the Kasba rape victim in Kolkata, Jun. 30



ANI

he broke by asking to speak with her alone. In a quiet passageway, he professed “love” and proposed marriage. She demurred gently, explaining she already had a boyfriend. Back in the hub, the unspoken siege deepened. After 6 pm, Monojit stopped a few kids who tried to exit. At 7:30 pm, the outgoing secretary excused herself. The victim’s path was blocked, the door locked.

At Monojit’s first assault, she had a panic attack and “shortness of breath”. She pleaded to be taken to a hospital. Denied. Asked for her inhaler. Reluctantly given. In the confusion, she came out, but found the main gate locked.

Monojit finally raped her in the guard’s room, trying to hit her with a hockey stick, warning her boyfriend would be killed and parents jailed if she dared to tell anyone. The guard stood outside, along with two hench boys—Pramit, 20, and Zaib, 19—who also

took videos and photos. At 10:50 pm, battered and broken, she was finally released into the humid Kolkata night.

Once out of danger, she chose courage and registered a complaint. Bitter irony in her words, she says: “A law student, I am the victim now. I want justice.” The trio was arrested on June 26. Medical tests and surveillance footage corroborated much of her story.

Monojit’s sordid past and political links are no secret—nor the impunity that came with it (see *Accused No. 1*). His social media pages are filled with

pictures of him with TMC biggies like Firhad Hakim, Chandrima Bhattacharya, Abhishek Banerjee. That was enough to create echoes of R.G. Kar.

As students, lawyers and political parties protest, the college is closed indefinitely—but accusations and counters swarm about. A BJP fact-finding team accused the state of trying to silence the survivor’s family. The TMC, in turn, cited the rising sexual crime graph in Madhya Pradesh: 7,294 cases in 2024, 20 rapes a day. Only silence, and security, it seems, are in short supply. ■

► BIHAR

DOLE DRUMS

Nitish Kumar unveils a cornucopia of promises for the youth, women, devotees, pensioners, village heads

By Amitabh Srivastava

IT'S THE TIME TO PLEASE ALL THE PEOPLE, at least this one time. As assembly election nears, Bihar chief minister Nitish Kumar has set off a volley of welfare steps, each tailored to a distinct vote bloc. The big one came on June 24, as his cabinet nearly trebled monthly social security pensions: from Rs 400 to Rs 1,100. Ordinarily a stickler for protocol, Nitish didn't wait this time. On June 21, he announced the enhanced pension would start getting credited to over 10.9 million beneficiary accounts by July.

Opposition leader Tejashwi Yadav was quick to decry the idea as a poor copy, pointing out that he had promised a pension hike to Rs 1,500 in December. But



ANI

► POPULAR MOVE Bihar CM Nitish Kumar hands an appointment letter to a police constable in Patna, Jun. 28

NITISH SPREADSHEET

► **TRIPLED SOCIAL SECURITY:** From Rs 400 to Rs 1,100 per month for elderly, disabled, and widowed

► **DEARNESS ALLOWANCE HIKE:** Raised for over 1.1 million government employees and pensioners

► **JOB DRIVE:** Appointment letters

distributed to 21,391 police constables on June 18

► **JEEVIKA EMPOWERMENT:** Honorarium doubled for 140,000 SHG workers; loan interest above Rs 3 lakh reduced from 10% to 7%

► **MAHILA SAMVAD:** Outreach targeting 37.25

million women voters across Bihar

► **RELIGIOUS INFRASTRUCTURE:** Grand redevelopment of Sita's birthplace at Sitamarhi under a government trust

► **PANCHAYAT PAY HIKE:** Allowances raised for mukhiyas, sarpanches, ward members

that's not likely to stop the salvos from Nitish. Patna is awash with his pledges, a blitz as variegated as Bihar itself: jobs for youth, temples for the devout, hiked dearness allowance for over 1.1 million public employees and pensioners, doubled pay for rural women in the Jeevika workforce, higher stipend for panchayat leaders, besides the fattened pension cheques for senior citizens.

Nitish knows jobs are the biggest pain point for young voters, who fill out one-third of Bihar's electorate. His promised cornucopia projects 3.4 million new jobs, formal and informal, by next year—a rosy prognosis meant to soften any anger on the street. Over 500,000 government posts have been filled, he says, with recruitment ongoing for another 200,000. Besides, a new internship scheme, aimed at skilling youth aged 18–28, offers monthly stipends of Rs 4,000 to Rs 6,000.

The mukhiya and sarpanch form another force-multiplying cohort. In Bihar's intricate web of local power, winning them over often means securing the support of dozens of families. Their honorariums have been raised by 150 per cent, with an annual budget of Rs 548 crore earmarked for it. To top up, the panchayat head's sanction limit



► **CROWNED OPPONENT** RJD leader Tejashwi Yadav in Patna, Jun. 29

under NREGA was upped from Rs 500,000 to Rs 1 million in June.

WOMEN FIRST

Bihar's 37 million women form 47.8 per cent of its electorate. It's Nitish's old piggy bank, but Tejashwi has promised Rs 2,500 for girls' education this time. So, a new cupid's arrow had to be fashioned. Ergo the hiked honorariums and cheaper loans for the Jeevika self-help workforce, and the paternalistic offer of new marriage halls in all 8,053 gram panchayats. A grand temple at Sitamarhi rounds off the vision. As Bihar chooses its groom by *swayamvar*, Nitish aims to be the handsome victor. ■

By Avaneesh Mishra

IN KANPUR, A TOP OFFICIAL IS THROWN OUT of a meeting hall by another, then caught on tape hurling abuses. In Banda, a ruling party MLA allegedly slaps a babu who dared to seize trucks linked to illegal mining. In Lucknow, a minister from BJP ally Apna Dal (Sonelal), Ashish Patel, accuses senior officials of conspiring to damage his political career—as also that of his wife, Union minister Anupriya Patel—and dares the state's Special Task Force to "shoot him in the chest".

What exactly is happening in Uttar Pradesh, with this flurry of public clashes between its netas and bureaucrats, spilling over into viral videos, FIRs and noisy social media battles? An unlikely monsoon shower of contretemps for the BJP, that too in a showpiece state, it points to deeper strains that are all but bursting through the subsoil.

PUBLIC SQUABBLE

Kanpur was the latest flashpoint. Here, Chief Medical Officer (CMO) Hari Dutt Nemi was suspended on June 20 after a prolonged and very public feud with District Magistrate (DM) Jitendra Pratap Singh. The suspended CMO called a press conference to accuse the DM of pressurising him to carry out "illegal work". The DM, in turn, wrote to the government accusing Nemi of corruption, misconduct and manipulating transfers. Audio clips surfaced where Nemi is allegedly heard mocking the DM's long speeches; he later claimed the clips were AI-generated.

The administrative spat soon spiralled into a political slugfest; BJP leaders openly took sides. Speaker Satish Mahana, BJP



► UTTAR PRADESH

NETA VS BABU TOURNAMENT

Top officials, MLAs, ministers spar in the open, even the Speaker has a go. The spree of public showdowns in Yogi's UP points to deeper strains within the polity

MLC Arun Pathak and Govindnagar MLA Surendra Maithani wrote to deputy CM Brajesh Pathak, who is also the state health minister, defending Nemi, praising his “people-friendly” approach. On the other side, BJP MLA Abhijeet Singh Sanga demanded that the CM sack Nemi. Former BJP MLA Neeraj Chaturvedi joined in, taking digs at the Speaker for “trying to protect Nemi”.

The Samajwadi Party was quick to seize the moment. Amitabh Bajpai, SP MLA from Kanpur Nagar, alleged “the dispute shows the government is involved in corruption, while it talks of zero tolerance”. In a video statement, he

Takeaways

■ **Kanpur saw two top babus face off in a spat that saw big netas joining to take sides**

■ **As the latest in a series of such squabbles, Opposition calls it proof of camp rivalry**

said: “This fight is not between the DM and the CMO. It’s between the CM and Deputy CM.” MLAs taking sides only reflects camp loyalties, he said. Talk of strained relations at the highest ech-

elons of UP’s power pyramid is not new, and is often framed within the broader context of the BJP’s internal politics and CM Yogi Adityanath’s relationship with the central leadership.

Since his 2017 ascension, Yogi has consolidated his position with a strong, centralised style that has discomfited some. After his triumphant return for a second term in 2022, Keshav Prasad Maurya was retained as a deputy CM despite having lost his seat. And Pathak, a 2017-vintage BSP import and the one in the frame this time, came in lieu of Dinesh Sharma. An OBC and Brahmin face, respectively, they represent the BJP’s keenness to project a broad caste base. The decision to have two deputy CMs is also often read as New Delhi’s bid to curb all-out hegemony.

THREE-WHEELED CHARIOT

That structural trichotomy is finding expression in local turf wars. Take the brawl in Banda. BJP MLA Prakash Dwivedi, surrounded by a retinue, allegedly slapped sub-divisional Magistrate (SDM) Amit Shukla during a row over trucks seized for illegal sand mining. Police say the MLA tried to bamboozle officials into releasing two overloaded vehicles impounded at Paigambarpur crossing, but failed. Rage got physical, and the petty spat turned political. The Congress and the SP flagged the “gundagardi” and accused Dwivedi of shielding the local mining mafia.

The ‘Delhi vs Lucknow’ theme came through even in the long feud between Ashish Patel, state technical education minister, and his sister-in-law Pallavi Patel, who accuses him of corruption in promotions. He says top state bureaucrats conspired to damage him through leaks. An irked Yogi reportedly told him to stop airing grievances in the public realm. For now, that’s exactly where all the soiled linen seems to be in UP. ■

► MAHARASHTRA

THE DEVIL WEARS KOLHAPURI

A global backlash put Prada on the backfoot, but what of the Maharashtrian craftsmen who craft the signature footwear?

By Dhaval S. Kulkarni

PRADA. KOLHAPURI. NEVER THE TWAIN SHALL MATCH? Well, the Italian brand has a knack for turning ‘inverse snobbery’ into high fashion, but it went an extra dusty mile this time. Late June, Kolhapuri-styled sandals catwalked at the Milan Fashion Week. But Prada, er, forgot to tag its humble, Third World provenance. And priced them at Rs 1.2 lakh—in India, you can score a decent pair for one-hundredth of that. A global backlash about ‘cultural appropriation’ forced Prada on the back foot. Its belated chagrin also put the spotlight back where it belongs: on the Maharashtrian craftsmen who braid centuries of design heritage into each



► **BORROWED SOLES** Models wear Prada sandals at the Milano Fashion Week Men's, Jun. 22

X/@Prada

► RAJASTHAN

MEENA'S CRUSADE

Combative agriculture minister Kirodi Lal Meena has unearthed a major farm inputs scam, leaving many jittery

By Rohit Parihar

Rajasthan agriculture minister Kirodi Lal Meena is on a mission. Since the unearthing of a massive adulteration scam at a fertiliser factory in Ajmer in May (a week after it was given a clean chit by officials), the minister has been personally leading surprise inspections at factories and retail outlets across the state. What he has found

stunned even seasoned bureaucrats and agriculture experts: of the 57 samples tested in his presence, 56 failed. The department has now sent 4,772 fertiliser, 4,301 seed, and 283 pesticide samples for testing. The crackdown has led to 28 FIRs and the sealing of 36 locations. “Some of our officials were failing in their duties,” Meena told INDIA TODAY. “Fourteen officials

have been suspended so far.”

The scale of the scandal is causing much jitters. In Rajasthan itself, annual estimated agriculture inputs of fertilisers, pesticides and seeds add up to Rs 56,000 crore. Meena has also found evidence of large-scale collusion by officials with fertiliser manufacturers.

On June 24, Meena sent a letter to Union agriculture minister

► **A HARD LOOK**
Rajasthan agriculture minister Kirodi Lal Meena inspects a fertiliser factory in Ajmer, May 30



piece they make. Hand-crafted from leather, vegetable-dyed, ubiquitous but unique, these artefacts come from the hammers and awls of artisans in Karvir, Shirol, Kagal and Hatkanangale in Maharashtra's Kolhapur district. A heritage with a distinct socio-economic footprint.

THE DALIT DESIGNER

Kolhapuri's origin story is linked to caste reform: from Basavanna, the 12th century Lingayat poet-philosopher, up to Shahu Maharaj of Kolhapur at the turn of the 20th century, who set up 29 tanning centres to help uplift the Dalit communities involved in its production. From that cultural web came the issue of protecting the genuine article, and its authors, in the modern marketplace.

Prada hadn't yet stepped onto the stage. Cheaper local lookalikes were the first threat. In 2019, four districts each in Maharashtra and Karnataka—Kolhapur, Sangli, Solapur and Satara; and Belgaum, Dharwad, Bagalkot and Bijapur—were

granted the Geographical Indication (GI) tag for the Kolhapuri brand. It isn't nearly enough. Sachin Satpute, a fourth-gen wielder of the craft, says cheaper versions made in places like Athani in Karnataka or Agra in UP pose a long-term danger to the

durable. Machine-made fakes that use cardboard pose a different challenge. "They can make 10-15 pairs a day. We design and stitch by hand, say, one pair in three days."

With an anarchic domestic market not yet sorted out, global ripoffs add a layer of complication that India seems not yet ready for. Could Prada have done the same with, say, France's Champagne? Very unlikely. In 2023, the French police destroyed 35,000 sparkling wine bottles wrongfully labelled as champagne. Parmesan, Feta, British Stilton blue cheese—all have similar protection. They have to originate in their regions to earn the label.

Even the Japanese kimono, not a GI, exercises a level of cultural sovereignty that foreign brands can't dare violate—as Kim Kardashian realised in 2019. But here, in remarks redolent with irony in the light of Pradagate, third-generation Kolhapuri maker Shivaji Satpute says traditional artisans like him are still "unable to command a premium". ■

—with Sonal Khetarpal

Takeaways

► **Prada's Rs 1.2 lakh Kolhapuri style sandals gets flak for 'cultural appropriation'**

► **Kolhapuri sandals has GI tag, but little done to market it, improve lot of craftsmen**

20,000-odd traditional artisans in Kolhapur. "There's a vast difference in quality. Counterfeit Kolhapuris use artificial leather or goat and sheep skin. They wear out soon, eroding the brand name and demand," he says. Real Kolhapuris use buffalo or bullock hide: more expensive but



Takeaways

► **Surprise inspection at fertiliser factory in Ajmer shows large-scale adulteration**

► **Statewide drive shows rot is pervasive—fertilisers, pesticides, seeds. Of 57 tests in Meena's presence, 56 failed**

Shivraj Singh Chouhan, listing his findings. In it, he flagged the fact that it was a nationwide issue, citing the absence of raw seed source records, batch-wise pesticide analysis and evidence of banned and illegally imported products from China. He has also put on record that "low-quality inputs are being sold in 16-20 states in India".

RUFFLING FEATHERS

Known for his combative style, the former MP and six-time MLA has long thrived as a street-smart grassroots leader, often critical of governments while being part of them. Meena had stayed away from office for nearly 10 months during the BJP's current term, protesting his alleged sidelining. Cajoled by the party high command, he resumed office in April.

His activism has ruffled many feathers. Ex-CM Ashok Gehlot of the Congress, in a sly jab, said: "If ministers are conducting raids themselves, why do we need officers? And if the BJP finds it acceptable, maybe the CM and all the ministers should do this. It could be a new governance model." Meena, though, shrugs off the criticism: "I don't want to play politics. I'm just doing my duty, acting on corruption plaints." ■

► KARNATAKA

SOAP OPERA

In hot water? Hardly. Mysore Sandal Soap's aroma is spreading, giving an all-India glow to a state brand

By Ajay Sukumaran

IN MID-MAY, ONE OF Karnataka's best-known cultural brands, Mysore Sandal Soap, found itself in a bit of lather. Pro-Kannada activists were upset that Karnataka Soaps & Detergents Ltd (KS&DL), the state-owned company that manufactures the iconic 109-year-old soap, had chosen actor Tamannaah Bhatia as its brand ambassador instead of a Kannadiga celebrity. But even as it hastened to defuse the row, KS&DL had much to thank the controversy for. The firm clocked its best-ever sales for the month of May at Rs 186 crore, a 24 per cent bump from the target of Rs 150 crore.

The soap maker has been on a winning streak in the past few years, with annual sales almost doubling since 2020-21 to Rs 1,780 crore in 2024-25; net profit grew almost four-fold from Rs 113 crore to Rs 415 crore in the same period. Ramping up production and online marketing played a big role in this, says its MD, Prashanth P.K.M.

South India accounts for over

80 per cent of the sales for KS&DL, with Andhra Pradesh the biggest market. Hence, the push into other regions, especially the north. It's also why "pan-India star" Tamannaah was signed up.

KS&DL has set itself a target of Rs 5,000 crore in annual turnover by 2028. It is investing Rs 250 crore

Takeaways

- **KS&DL profits up almost four-fold, govt dividend in FY25: Rs 120 cr (highest ever)**
- **Now makes 1.8 mn soaps a day, exports to 25 countries**

in a new plant at Vijayapura in north Karnataka and also eyeing diversification into new products. "We are taking it national...and even international in the future," says M.B. Patil, Karnataka's minister of large and medium industries. "Then perhaps we'll need a Hollywood celebrity to endorse us," he quipped. ▀



CELEB ROW
Tamannaah and
Mysore sandal
soap



ANI

By Anilesh S. Mahajan

THERE WERE DRAMATIC SCENES outside the Mohali district court on July 2 as senior Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) leader and former minister Bikramjit Singh Majithia arrived, escorted by Vigilance Bureau (VB) officials. Slogans rang out and SAD workers jostled with the police at the barricades as a defiant Majithia paused with hands folded, before the officers hurried him inside.

Picked up from his Amritsar residence on June 25, the SAD leader is being investigated in a Rs 540 crore disproportionate assets case where he is accused of laundering 'drug money'. Majithia claims the charges are a rehash of old allegations. "I have faced the ED (Enforcement Directorate) and the previous Congress regime too... this too shall pass," he told aides shortly after his arrest. The SAD leader has been one of the fiercest critics of Chief Minister Bhagwant



► THE TARGET
Majithia speaks
on the raids at his
house, Jun. 25

► PUNJAB

MANN CHASES A FIX ON MAJITHIA

The war on drugs sees a dramatic political twist, as push comes to shove for ‘tainted’ SAD man

Mann as well as the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) government in the state and there is criticism that this is payback.

The case is not new. Majithia was booked in 2021 under the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (NDPS) Act by the then Congress government led by Charanjit Channi based on an ED report going back to 2018. The case has had little legs, but now the VB is claiming progress in a fresh FIR.

The manner of his arrest—pre-dawn raids started with a dozen sleuths descending on his farmhouse—has not gone down well with the SAD leadership. Party president and Majithia's brother-in-law Sukhbir Singh Badal declared it a “cowardly act of vendetta”.

Regular Mann baiters like ex-CM Channi, BJP state unit chief Sunil Jakhar and others have also criticised the regime's heavy-handed handling of the arrest. But they haven't been too convincing since many of these leaders have been pointing fingers at Majithia's

Takeaways

► **SAD leaders up in arms over arrest of Majithia. Oppn flays heavy-handed approach**

► **AAP framing it as turning point in war on drugs mafia-gangster nexus**

‘drugs connection’ for ages (indeed, he first went to jail in 2022 when Channi was the CM). The case is not all that clear-cut either—some of those who made drugs allegations, including AAP chief Arvind Kejriwal, had to issue public apologies later after the SAD leader took them to court.

But Majithia's arrest is not just about the SAD versus AAP. It comes in the backdrop of CM Mann's renewed campaign against Punjab's entrenched drugs-and-gangsters ecosystem. Since March 1 this year, the AAP government has taken a leaf out of Uttar Pradesh CM Yogi Adityanath's “bulldozer model”—razing illegal constructions of alleged traffickers and ganglords. From Moga to Malerkotla, over a hundred such structures have been targeted across Punjab in recent weeks.

BIG FISH, BIG TASK

Majithia's arrest, then, is being framed by the Mann government as a turning point—an effort at going after the “big fish”. In press briefings, AAP leaders have been positioning it as a show of political will to tackle powerful figures long involved in the drug trafficking business and considered untouchable. But this will be a test of intent and capacity. The sleuths have recorded the statements of former Akali Dal MLA, Amarpal Singh Bonny Ajnala, and former long term Majithia aide Talbir Singh Gill. Ajnala is now with the BJP, while Gill moved to AAP in 2024. Vigilance sleuths have also recorded the statements of former ED deputy director Niranjan Singh and controversial ex-DGP Siddharth Chattopadhyaya, who had both led earlier investigations against Majithia.

Punjab has seen drug crackdowns before—often headline-grabbing, but rarely sustained. Whether this latest chapter delivers justice or merely adds to the archive of performative politics depends on Mann's resolve. The results could alter the political future of both AAP and the SAD in Punjab. ■



OUR MAN IN SPACE

Group Captain
Shubhanshu Shukla
speaking with PM
Narendra Modi from
ISS, Jun. 28

“

The first thought was the feeling of oneness of the Earth—there were no boundary lines or borders of countries. The second was when I saw India for the first time. It looked very big and grand, not like the 2-D paper maps of it.”

—SHUBHANSHU SHUKLA

Indian astronaut

THE NEW SPACE ODYSSEY

ASTRONAUT SHUBHANSU SHUKLA'S VOYAGE
SIGNALS INDIA'S AMBITION TO JOIN THE BIG
LEAGUE OF HUMAN SPACE EXPLORATION

BY RAJ CHENGAPPA

W

hen Group Captain Shubhanshu Shukla floated into the International Space Station (ISS) from the Crew Dragon capsule that had docked with it on June 26, he wasn't feeling too good. Despite being a test pilot in the Indian Air Force, like most astronauts on their maiden flight into orbit, Shukla admitted that his head felt heavy and he was slightly disoriented. That's because he was still adjusting to the near-zero gravity conditions he endured during the 28-hour space flight that brought him and his three compatriots to the ISS, which orbits the earth at a height of 400 km. Dr Brigitte Godard, a former spaceflight surgeon at the Cologne-based European Astronaut Centre who was in Delhi recently, describes the effect this way: "Despite the lack of gravity, the heart continues to pump at the same rate as it does on earth and blood tends to rush to the head, and the face and tongue swell up. All these are symptoms of motion sickness. The body takes anything between 24 and 36 hours to adjust to zero gravity."

Soon after lift-off from the Kennedy Space Center in Florida, USA, Shukla also experienced the tremendous gravitational force or G-force that Rakesh Sharma, India's first astronaut, talked about when his Soviet Soyuz T-11 spacecraft took him to space in April 1984. Sharma recalled, "Because you are seated in the spacecraft looking upwards for lift-off, the G-force that you feel on your rib cage is four times the amount you feel on your waist. It presses against the spine, leaving very little space for the lungs to expand. So, breathing becomes difficult."

By launch day on June 25, Shukla was only too eager to get off the ground. He had waited a month in quarantine and then faced several postponements of the Crew Dragon's launch for technical reasons. "When I was sitting in the capsule on the launch pad," he says, "the only thought on my mind was: let's just go this time. When the ride started, I kept getting pushed back strongly in the seat. Then, suddenly, I felt nothing. There was silence and we were floating in vacuum. What a ride—it was amazing." Far below, in the computer-lined control room of Launch Complex 39A, his mother, Asha Shukla, who anxiously watched the spacecraft's ascent on a screen, wiped the tears from her eyes and broke out into a huge smile of joy and relief.

When he reached the ISS, Shukla brushed aside the motion sickness and smiled a lot. Along with his three team members on Axiom Mission 4, he hugged the seven astronauts who had come to the space station earlier. Shukla joked, "I am learning like a baby, how to walk, speak and eat in space." Ax-4 mission commander Peggy Whitson fixed a silver pin on the lapel of his deep blue overalls, designating Shukla as astronaut number 634—the 634th human to have orbited in space. The ISS is a multinational collaborative effort, involving the US, Russia, Europe, Japan and Canada, and was built in phases from 1998 to 2011. It is now an orbiting space laboratory the size of four tennis courts. So far, 280 astronauts from 23 countries had spent time at the ISS. Shukla is the first Indian astronaut to live on the ISS and only the second Indian to go into orbit after Rakesh Sharma's historic feat 41 years ago. Aware of the weight of the moment, Shukla said, "It is a privilege to be among the few who have had the chance to see Earth from this vantage point."

Two days later, when Prime Minister Narendra Modi spoke to him, Shukla had to strap his legs to the ground to stop bobbing around. How was the view from ISS, Modi asked. Shukla's words were as resonant as Sharma's in 1984. "The first thought was the feeling of oneness of the Earth—there were no boundary lines or borders of countries," he said. "The second was when I saw India for the first time. It looked very big and grand, not like the 2-D paper maps of it." A smiling Modi then told Shukla that he is giving him some homework, saying, "We have to take Mission Gaganyaan (India's indigenous human space exploration programme) forward, we must build our own

MEN ON A MISSION

From left, Wearing dark suits, members of the Ax-4 Mission relax after reaching the ISS: Slawosz Uznanski-Wisniewski (Poland), Peggy Whitson (US), Shukla and Tibor Kapu (Hungary), Jun. 26



Shukla's trip to ISS cost Rs 500 crore, but it will give India the exposure and experience needed for human interface processes in its own crewed spaceflight missions

+++

space station and also have to land Indian astronauts on the moon. Your experiences will be very helpful for these missions."

NO FREE RIDE

Modi was also disarmingly telling the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO), which sponsored Shukla's Rs 500 crore trip, that there were no free lunches or, in this case, space rides. Not that ISRO needed much goading. In



“We have to take Mission Gaganyaan forward, build our own space station and also land Indians on the moon. Your experiences will be very helpful”

—NARENDRA MODI
Prime Minister of India,
talking to Shubhanshu
Shukla in space

the past five decades, it has fulfilled its objectives of indigenously building rocket launchers and satellites for development purposes at reasonable cost. These include satellites for telecommunication, remote sensing, navigation and even defence. Now, the prime minister wants India to venture to the final frontier by joining the big league, putting crewed missions in space.

Since Yuri Gagarin's historic first spaceflight on April 12, 1961, in a Soviet Vostok 1, only three countries—US, Russia and China—have had their own crewed spacecraft. While the US and Russia are veterans, China joined this exclusive club on October 15, 2003, when it launched Shenzhou-5, its first crewed spacecraft. Since then, China has launched 13 other crewed missions and established the Tiangong-1 space station, a permanently crewed research platform, in 2011. When it completed its three modules in 2022, the new Chinese space station, also called Tiangong, measured about half the length of the ISS. The country has also set an ambitious goal to land its astronauts on the moon by 2030.

India, on its part, had initially focused on sending unmanned missions to the Moon and Mars. However, in his first term, Modi decided India must make the big leap towards human spaceflight and exploration. He sanctioned

the Gaganyaan project in December 2018 to send up a crewed orbital mission by the first quarter of 2027. Simultaneously, Modi cleared the building of the first module of the Indian orbiting space station—Bharatiya Antariksh Station or BAS-1—by 2028. The combined cost of Rs 20,193 crore is among the single largest budgets set aside for an ISRO programme.

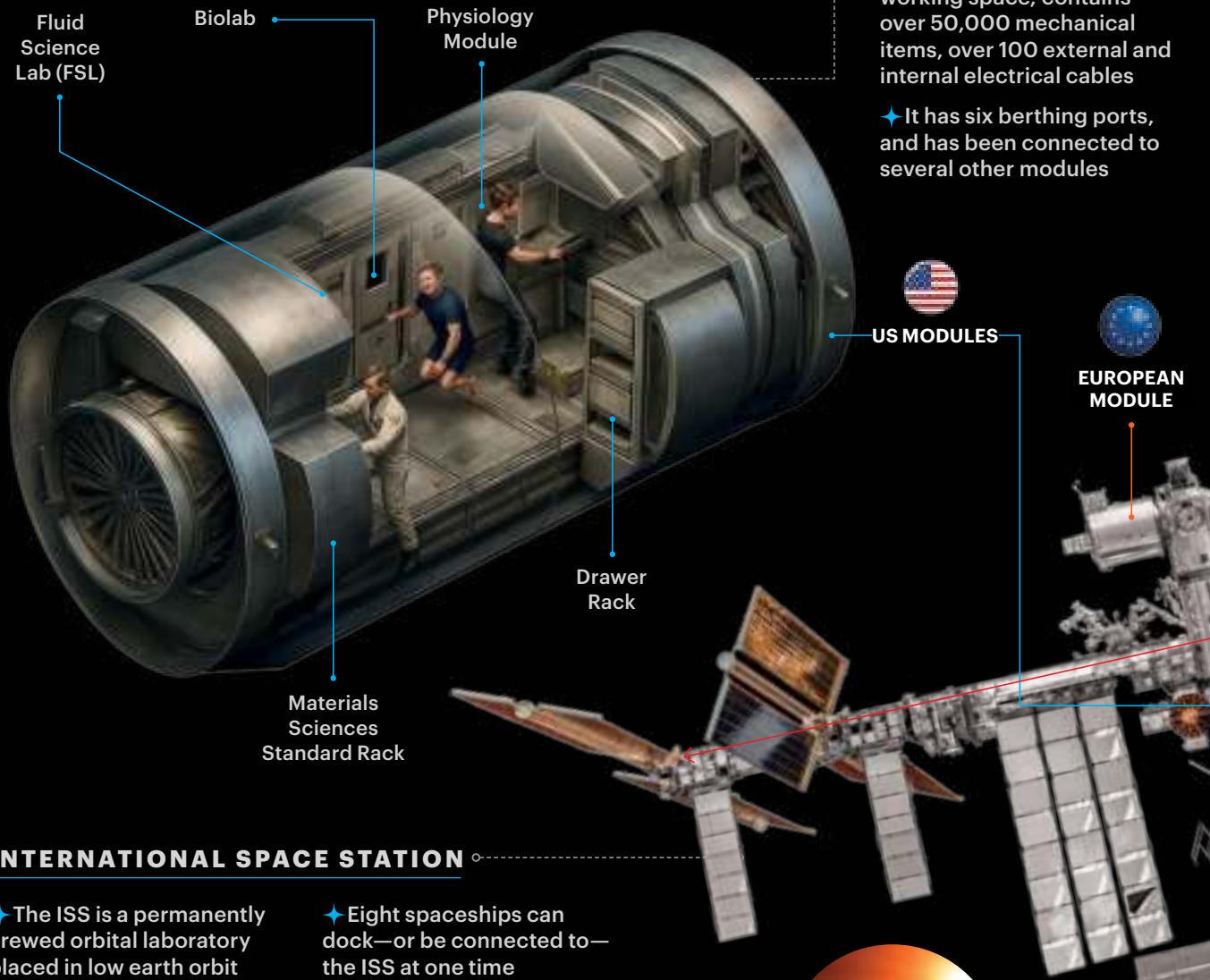
The prime minister didn't stop at that and enunciated a longer-term vision for a project that will facilitate the landing of Indian astronauts on the moon by 2040. Shukla, in that sense, is the first Gaganyatri in India's new space odyssey. As Modi told Shukla, “Today, I can say with confidence that yours is the first chapter of success of India's Gaganyaan mission. India is opening the doors of new possibilities of space for the world. India will not just fly, but will prepare the platform for new flights in the future.”

Conscious of the nation's enormous expectations of ISRO, Dr V. Narayanan, its chairman, who had just returned to the space headquarters in Bengaluru after participating in the launch of the Ax-4 mission, told INDIA TODAY, “Gaganyaan is a national project that not only involves ISRO but also the Indian navy and air force, apart from a whole host of industries in the public and private sector.”

Wonders of an Orbiting Lab

Indian astronaut Shubhanshu Shukla's two-week sojourn in the International Space Station is full of new learnings and experiments

Graphic by NILANJAN DAS



INTERNATIONAL SPACE STATION

- The ISS is a permanently crewed orbital laboratory placed in low earth orbit (Avg altitude: 400 km)

- Orbits the Earth at a speed of 7.66 km/sec, completing an orbit in 90 minutes or around 16 orbits a day

- The space station was set up between 1998 and 2011 after an initial US-Russia agreement in 1993

- It is a collaboration of 5 space agencies: NASA (US), Roscosmos (Russia), ESA (Europe), JAXA (Japan) and CSA (Canada)

- Eight spaceships can dock—or be connected to—the ISS at one time

- Continuously occupied since November 2000; counting Shukla et al, has hosted 280 astronauts from 23 nations

- ISS is composed of 16 pressurised modules: six Russian, eight American, one European and one Japanese

- Each module has diverse functions—scientific research, crew habitation, storage and spacecraft control

16
NUMBER OF
SUNRISES AND SUNSETS
VIEWED DAILY FROM THE ISS
With its velocity, it completes 16 orbits of the Earth in 24 hours

THE UNITY MODULE

- Second module in ISS, delivered to orbit by US space shuttle Endeavour in December 1998

- Provides living and working space; contains over 50,000 mechanical items, over 100 external and internal electrical cables

- It has six berthing ports, and has been connected to several other modules

28,000

KMPH

APPROXIMATE SPEED OF THE ISS
AS IT COMPLETES AN ORBIT OF
THE EARTH IN ABOUT 90 MINUTES

400

KM

ALTITUDE OF THE ORBIT OF
ISS ABOVE EARTH



CANADIAN
MODULE

358

FEET

TOTAL LENGTH OF THE
ISS—ROUGHLY THE SAME
AS A FOOTBALL FIELD



RUSSIAN
MODULES

INDIAN EXPERIMENTS IN ISS

Group Captain Shubhanshu Shukla travelled to the ISS with three other astronauts in the Ax-4 mission on June 25. He is assisting in these microgravity research experiments proposed by Indian scientists in R&D laboratories across the country



◆ Impact of
microgravity
radiation in
ISS on edible
microalgae



◆ Sprouting
salad seeds
in space—
relevant for
crew nutrition



◆ Impact of
microgravity
on food
crop seeds



◆ Analysing
human interac-
tion with elec-
tronic displays
in microgravity



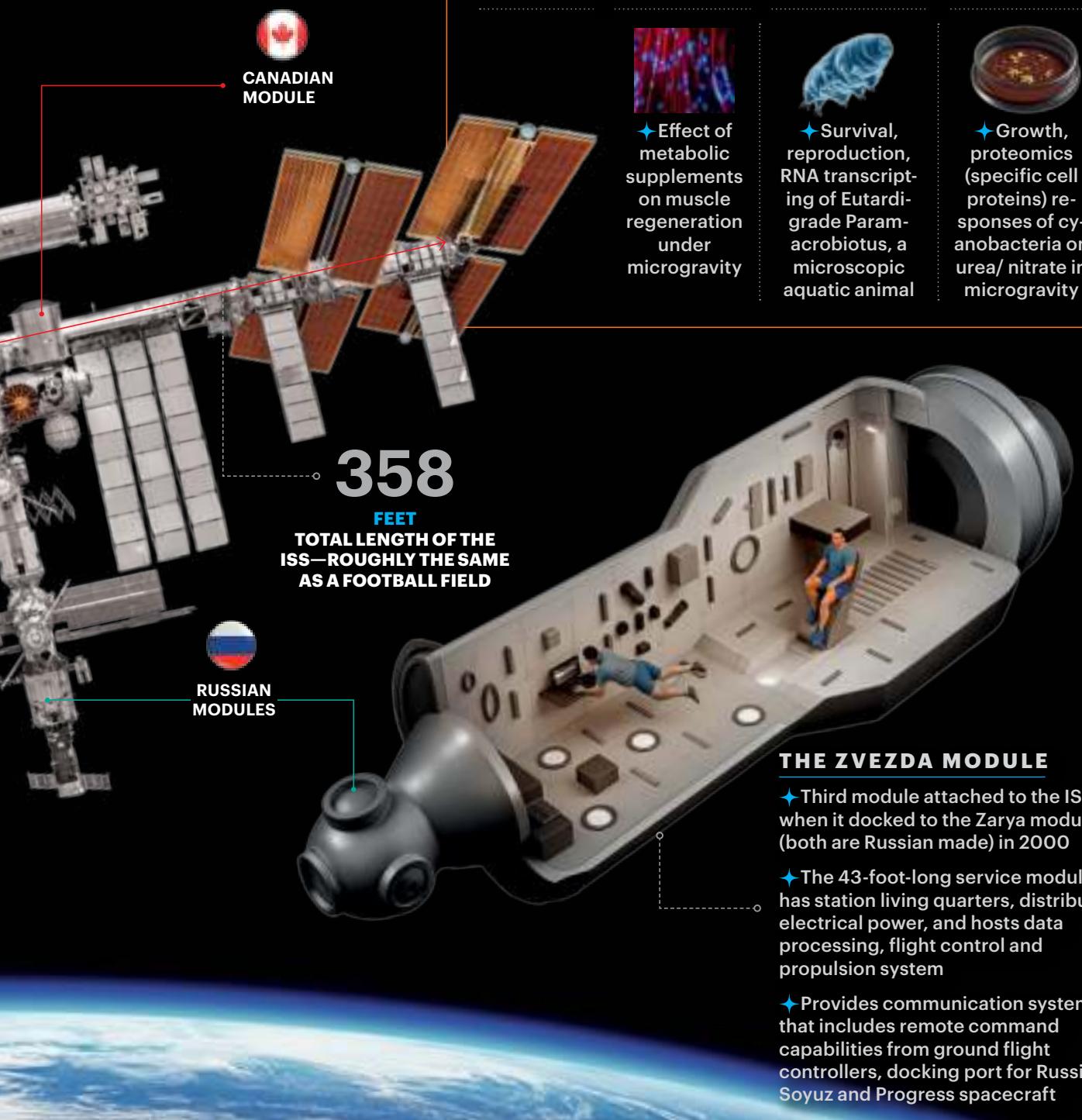
◆ Effect of
metabolic
supplements
on muscle
regeneration
under
microgravity



◆ Survival,
reproduction,
RNA transcrip-
ting of Eutardi-
grade Param-
acrobiotus, a
microscopic
aquatic animal



◆ Growth,
proteomics
(specific cell
proteins) re-
sponses of cy-
anobacteria on
urea/ nitrate in
microgravity



THE ZVEZDA MODULE

◆ Third module attached to the ISS when it docked to the Zarya module (both are Russian made) in 2000

◆ The 43-foot-long service module has station living quarters, distributes electrical power, and hosts data processing, flight control and propulsion system

◆ Provides communication system that includes remote command capabilities from ground flight controllers, docking port for Russian Soyuz and Progress spacecraft

THE BIG TASKS BEFORE ISRO

With Shukla going up in space, what India gains is the good exposure and experience needed for human interface processes, which is important, but only one part of the entire programme. India not only has to build and validate a suitable launch vehicle but also orbital and crew modules. This is in addition to training astronauts and ensuring their safety at launch, in space and on their return to earth. "It's a whole new and challenging game for us, but our scientists and collaborating institutions are up to it," says Narayanan.

Among the first things ISRO did was to build Launch Vehicle Mark3, or LVM3, which would be capable of lifting heavy payloads of 10 tonnes to low earth orbit. To make these launch vehicles human-rated, numerous test firings will be needed. The redundancies, too, have been trebled so that if one system fails, there are enough back-ups to prevent a catastrophe. Narayanan says, "When there is human life involved, we have to be thrice as careful. We have to score 100 out of 100 when it comes to safety protocols." In fact, at the Ax-4 mission involving Shukla, it was Narayanan who refused to give his clearance for launch after mission control reported a slight glitch. His insistence saw the Axiom technicians discover a hairline crack in one of the engines that could have proved disastrous on flight. Only after it was rectified did Narayanan give his consent.

Back home, on its own projects, what ISRO had to do from scratch was build a crew module that can carry three or four astronauts with adequate Environmental Control and Life Support Systems (ECLSS). These maintain comfortable room temperatures, the right cabin pressure and adequate oxygen levels, apart from food, living quarters and waste disposal. Former ISRO chairman S. Somanath points out, "These are essentially 'do it yourself' or DIY technologies. Initially we thought we could just buy these and then later develop them. But they didn't materialise because they came at a high cost and were unable to meet our schedules." ISRO also had to develop the technologies for the re-entry of the crew vehicle, then the soft landing at sea using parachutes, and recovery by the armed forces. It has also tested the crew escape system where the crew module is ejected at a safe distance in case of rocket failure on the launchpad or during lift-off.

The other systems ISRO has to perfect are communications, navigation and a high degree of automation. As important is the selection and training of astronauts. The first four astronauts for Gaganyaan, including Shukla who went up in Axiom, are all Indian Air Force pilots selected after a range of tough tests. Besides developing an astronaut training centre in Bengaluru that currently focuses on physical and mental fitness, the astronauts have been sent to the cosmodrome in Moscow for rigorous tests, including a sub-orbital flight to experience zero gravity briefly. The test is called vomit-comet because, invariably, the trainees throw up on their first attempt.

INDIA'S BIG LEAP

Two missions, each a stepping stone for the next, symbolise India's grand bid to be a spacefaring nation

GAGANYAAN

AIM: Launch a crew of three Indian astronauts into space and bring them back safely

TARGET: 2027

PRECURSORS

- ◆ Three uncrewed missions, beginning by the end of 2025
- ◆ The first will have Vyommitra, a female humanoid robot, on board



LESSONS FROM SHUKLA'S TRIP

Rakesh Sharma recalls that no amount of training on the ground helps you prepare for all that happens in orbit, including withstanding G-force or motion sickness. Shukla himself revealed that he found "drinking water, walking, sleeping a big challenge—you can sleep on the roof, or the walls and on the ground". Aboard the ISS, astronauts sleep in compartments the size of a phone booth and equipped with sleeping bags that are secured to the walls of the spacecraft, so that they don't float away. They cannot use showers to bathe as water doesn't flow in microgravity. Instead, as Sharma did 40 years ago, they use wet wipes, rinseless shampoo and liquid soap. Shukla seemed to have dispensed with shaving as well, sporting a thick stubble within days of arrival. Going to the toilet, as Sharma recalls, "is a well-practised art because even your bodily effluents are weightless just as you are. So, you have to make sure that they are captured effectively. It does take some practice." Space food, though, has evolved and moved beyond the food tubes that Sharma snacked on. Shukla can choose between vacuum-packed, freeze-dried, dehydrated or canned items. He has also carried some *gajar ka halwa*, *moong dal halwa* and

BHARATIYA ANTARIKSH STATION

AIM: Establish India's space station for microgravity research

TARGET: 2035

PRECURSORS

- ◆ Sending five modules by as many launchers; first in orbit by 2028
- ◆ Docking of the modules to build the space station



From a follower, India intends to be a frontliner in space. India is now an equal partner in global space endeavours

—JITENDRA SINGH

Union MoS for science & technology, earth sciences and space

aamras to share with fellow astronauts. Fortunately, as Godard points out, microgravity has no bearing on the peristaltic movement (muscle contraction and relaxation) of food down the digestive tract. Meanwhile, Shukla is busy absorbing the celestial joy of witnessing 16 sunrises and sunsets daily at the ISS as the spacecraft's speed of 28,000

CREWED LUNAR MISSION

AIM: Land first Indian astronaut on the moon

TARGET: 2040

PRECURSORS

- ◆ Chandrayaan-4, with expected launch in 2027-28, to bring back lunar samples
- ◆ Chandrayaan-5, a joint mission with Japan, to study the moon's potential to host humans



kmph means it orbits the Earth once every 90 minutes.

Shukla's observations, therefore, will prove valuable not only in understanding some of the challenges faced aboard the ISS but also the rigorous protocols to be observed for a human spaceflight. ISRO is taking no chances with its first crew spaceflight: it is planning three unmanned tests that will fully validate all the critical systems (including a robot called Vyommitra on board as a substitute) and ensure they are all error-free before it attempts one with the selected astronauts aboard.

Shukla's experience will also be crucial in the construction of India's first space station, the BAS-1. While the first module of BAS-1 was sanctioned along with the Gaganyaan project, the ultimate aim is to have five modules in space, including the living quarters for astronauts and orbiting laboratories. Already, the technology for docking spacecraft with BAS-1 has been validated with the Space Docking Experiment (SpaDeX) earlier this year, using two satellites as a demonstration. Autonomous rendezvous apart from docking and undocking capabilities were validated and these would be used for future space endeavours, including in BAS-1. Of course, the technology needs to be human-rated and would require many more SpaDeX tests. "It will not be like a five-star hotel," says

GAGANYAAN MISSION

TOWARD INDIA'S FIRST HUMAN SPACEFLIGHT

All that has been done and what more needs to be done

LAUNCH VEHICLE

Human-rated LVM-3: For delivery of the Orbital Module into a 400 km low-earth orbit (LEO)

- ◆ Height: **43.4 m**
- ◆ Mass: **640 tonnes**
- ◆ Stages: **3 (solid, liquid, cryogenic)**
- ◆ Payload capacity: **10 tonnes**

STATUS: Human-rating completed for all propulsion systems (i.e. certifying the vehicle is capable of safely transporting humans)

CREW MODULE

Houses astronauts in Earth-like environment

Environmental Control & Life Support System (ECLSS)

- ◆ Maintains cabin pressure, humidity, temperature etc. in the module
- ◆ Maintains oxygen level, and removes carbon dioxide and trace contaminants

Cabin pressure: **98-116 kPa**

Humidity: **60-70%**

Temperature: **23±3°C**

Humancentric products

- ◆ Indigenous space suit
- ◆ Customised space food
- ◆ Ergonomically designed seating

STATUS: Development/ testing in advanced stages

CREW ESCAPE SYSTEM

Purpose

Rapid astronaut evacuation during launch emergencies

Components

- ◆ Solid motors for quick pull-away
- ◆ Autonomous activation for crew safety

STATUS: Successful demonstration using test vehicle

ORBITAL MODULE

It comprises two main parts

Crew Module (CM): Houses astronauts in Earth-like environment

Mass: **5.3 tonnes**

Service Module (SM): Supplies propulsion, power and thermal control to CM

Mass: **2.9 tonnes**

STATUS: Development/ testing in advanced stages



CREW SELECTION & TRAINING



On Feb. 27, 2024, India got its four designated 'Gaganyaatris'—all Group Captains in the IAF

- ◆ Shubhanshu Shukla
- ◆ Prasanth Nair
- ◆ Ajit Krishnan
- ◆ Angad Pratap

Only three will be part of the first crewed mission

STATUS:
Physical, psychological and generic training completed; Shukla travels to the ISS on Axiom-4 mission

CREW RECOVERY OPERATIONS

Recovery Team

ISRO + Indian Navy

Post-landing in sea

- ◆ Divers retrieve crew and module
- ◆ Medical checkups onboard recovery vessels
- ◆ Transport to mainland for debriefing

STATUS:
Validation of CS deceleration, flotation system, parachute drop tests completed



COVER STORY SPACE

Narayanan. "Within the minimum space, we aim to provide maximum comfort and utility so that it will be cost-effective."

India is keen to use its own upcoming space station for many cutting-edge experiments, some of which Shukla is already conducting in his two-week sojourn aboard the ISS. These include examining human interaction with electronic displays in microgravity and identifying any musculoskeletal dysfunctions in Zero-G as well as the effects of metabolic supplements. There are many studies designed for Shukla to analyse the impact of microgravity on cultivating food crops like moong dal, methi sprouts and on edible microalgae. There is also an indepth experiment on tardigrades—microscopic



‘Gaganyaan is a national project that not only involves ISRO but also the Indian navy and air force, apart from a whole host of industries in the public and private sector’

—DR V. NARAYANAN
Chairman, ISRO

aquatic animals—and their functioning in such harsh conditions. All these experiments have been devised by key scientific institutions across the country and many more would be done when BAS-1 comes up. The idea is to prepare for the exploitation of lunar resources and possibly Mars in the near future.

JOINING THE TITANS

All these programmes segue neatly into the long-term strategy of India becoming a major player in the lunar race. After ISRO successfully demonstrated its capability of landing a spacecraft on the moon surface and operating a rover in August 2023, the Modi government sanctioned the ambitious Chandrayaan-4 project in September 2024. It involves the development of technology to land a spacecraft on the moon, collect rock samples and then fly them back to Earth for analysis. Estimated to cost upward of Rs 2,000 crore, Chandrayaan-4 is expected to be launched in 2027-28, and will demonstrate foundational technological capabilities for an Indian astronaut landing on the moon by 2040 and returning safely to the earth. It will be followed by Chandrayaan-5, a joint mission with Japan that will have a

AN ADVENTURE BECKONS
Shubhanshu Shukla (2nd from left) and fellow crew members aboard the SpaceX Dragon spacecraft before lift-off, Jun. 25



powerful, long-lasting rover to explore resources for human sustenance on the lunar surface.

In doing so, India will join the global Moon Rush, with the US sanctioning the Artemis projects, which will mark American astronauts' return to the moon after a hiatus of over 50 years. China has been actively exploring the Moon, even robotically collecting lunar samples and flying them back for analysis. Half a dozen other countries, including Russia, Japan and South Korea, have joined the lunar bandwagon with ambitious flights. This coincides with the increasing interest within countries to establish space stations of their own. Russia has announced its withdrawal from the ISS and plans to develop its own Russian Orbital Service Station (ROSS). Apart from India and China, there are three major private players who are keen to develop commercial space stations. These include Orbital Reef, a joint project by Blue Origin and Sierra Space; Starlab by Voyager Space and Airbus; and Axiom. Jitendra Singh, the Union minister of state for science and technology, earth sciences and space, says, "From a follower, India intends to be a frontrunner in space. India is now an equal global partner in space endeavours."

To trigger an unprecedented boost in private participation in Indian space, the Modi government in June 2020, in the thick of the Covid pandemic, ended ISRO's monopoly to build and launch rockets and satellites. It not only allowed entry to private players but also opened up ISRO facilities for them to use on payment. Subsequently, it also allowed 100 per cent FDI in the space sector. Close to 200 space start-ups

India's space market was worth \$8.4 bn (Rs 71,800 cr.) in 2024, just 2% of the global market. The Modi government plans to grow it to \$44 bn (Rs 3.75 lakh cr) by 2033, or 8% of global share

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have come up in the past four years, and many of them have been extremely successful. This is in keeping with the international trend of private giants like Elon Musk's Space-X and Jeff Bezos's Blue Origin, competing with established giants like Boeing and Lockheed Martin.

India's space market was worth \$8.4 billion (Rs 71,800 crore) in 2024, just 2 per cent of the global space market, way below its potential. The Modi government is pushing for an aggressive target of reaching \$44 billion (Rs 3.75 lakh crore) by 2033, accounting for 8 per cent of the global share, with its ambitious human space exploration mission being a major driver. Up in space, Shukla's advice to youngsters is, "There is no one path to success, but there is one common thing—Never Stop Trying." That is something India, too, can follow in its giant ambitions for human spaceflight in the wake of Shukla's sojourn. ■

UNDERSTANDING THE MIND BETTER

DR. SONIA LAL GUPTA ON NEUROLOGY, EMPATHY, AND THE METRO VISION

Despite medical advances, neurological health remains widely misunderstood—often delayed in diagnosis and clouded by stigma. In this conversation, Dr. Sonia Lal Gupta unpacks key concerns in the field, from shifting disease patterns to the role of empathy in care. A senior neurologist and Director at Metro Group of Hospitals, Dr. Sonia brings both clinical depth and administrative insight to the conversation, shaped by years of global experience and a leadership role in one of North India's leading healthcare networks.

Q. We have seen a significant shift in how neurological health is understood, even among otherwise well-informed individuals. What, in your view, are the key gaps that still need addressing?

The brain remains one of the least understood organs. Despite medical progress, neurological conditions still carry stigma, hence patients delay seeking treatment. Though rooted in similar chemical imbalances as conditions like diabetes or hypertension, brain disorders are often seen differently. Yet many are treatable with medication—awareness, however, remains low.

Stroke, in particular, is an area where timely action can make a life-altering difference. If patients reach a hospital within 4.5 hours of symptom onset—such as sudden weakness in the face or limbs—they can be given clot-busting medication or transferred to a tertiary centre for intervention. But due to limited awareness, few in India get timely care.

Q. Over the years, what changes have you observed in terms of diagnosis or presentation of neurological disorders? Are patterns shifting?

Diagnosis rates have improved with greater awareness. However, lifestyle changes like prolonged screen time, sedentary routines, and rising stress have contributed to a surge in anxiety, depression, and posture-related issues, particularly among younger people. Conditions once seen in older adults, such as strokes and memory disorders, are now occurring earlier. Chronic stress disrupts hormonal balance, compounding neurological challenges. So while more patients are seeking help, we're also witnessing a real rise in incidence.

Q. Building on what you mentioned earlier, how can early diagnosis be approached in real-world situations?

Each disorder presents differently. Take

headaches—there are over 300 types. Migraines, often mistaken for sinus issues, are typically marked by sensitivity to light or sound. Tremors, especially those in one hand at rest, should be clinically evaluated, not ignored or Googled.

Even common complaints like tingling hands may indicate carpal tunnel syndrome, especially in those using computers extensively. The real red flags, though, are sudden-onset symptoms: severe headaches, weakness, or speech issues. Most neurological symptoms develop gradually. Anything sudden is an emergency and needs urgent hospital care.

Q. Could you take us back to the origins of Metro Hospital?

Metro Group of Hospitals was founded in 1997 by Dr. Purshotam Lal, a Padma Bhushan awardee and renowned interventional cardiologist. Coming from a modest background, he studied and worked abroad before returning to India with a vision: to offer high-quality, affordable healthcare.

Starting with a single hospital in Noida, Metro has since expanded across North India, Faridabad, Meerut, Haridwar, Rewari, and more, with dedicated centres for oncology and multispecialty care. We're also developing teleconsultation platforms to serve Tier 2 and 3 regions.

Q. How is Metro Hospitals reimagining neurological care? What steps are being taken to improve accessibility and patient experience?

At Metro, clinical care is complemented by compassion. As someone involved in both treatment and administration, I believe patient experience



Dr. Sonia Lal Gupta

Director, Metro Group of Hospitals

starts with empathy. A kind word or a reassuring tone can ease anxiety even before medication begins.

We also place great emphasis on training paramedical and nursing staff, as they are integral to the overall experience. Empathy, communication, and cultural sensitivity are key, more so in the context of medical tourism.

Q. Speaking of which, with India emerging as a hub for medical tourism, how is your group contributing to this space?

India provides quality healthcare at affordable prices, something many patients from developed countries struggle to access quickly. At Metro, we offer advanced treatments across specialities like oncology, neurology, cardiology, and gastroenterology.

We have also expanded internationally with a polyclinic in Oman and a 250-bed hospital underway. To support international patients, our teams are trained to provide culturally sensitive care and build trust from the first interaction.

Q. You now operate at the intersection of clinical practice, communication, and leadership. How has this multifaceted role shaped your journey?

It is both a privilege and a responsibility. Being the daughter of the founders means inheriting a legacy, but also helping evolve it. After nearly a decade abroad, choosing to return wasn't easy, but it felt necessary.

Today, Metro is poised for its next phase of growth. While I continue to practise as a neurologist, I also look forward to shaping the institution alongside my husband, Dr. Sameer Gupta, my brother, Dr. Sahil Lal, and the larger leadership team.



DOCTOR'S

THE HEALING TOUCH
SALUTING INDIA'S

Doctors





PSRI HOSPITAL

WHERE ETHICS AND TRANSPARENCY FORM THE CORE OF CARE

In an era where trust in healthcare is paramount, Pushpawati Singhania Research Institute (PSRI Hospital) stands tall as a beacon of ethical medical practice and transparent patient care. Located in the heart of New Delhi, PSRI has built a stellar reputation not only for its clinical excellence but also for its unwavering commitment to integrity, a value deeply embedded in every facet of its operations.

Ethical Commitment in Every Interaction

At PSRI, ethics isn't a checkbox — it's a culture. From the moment a patient walks through the door, they encounter a system designed to protect their dignity, privacy, and right to informed decision-making. Doctors are encouraged to adhere to the highest standards of medical ethics, ensuring that every recommendation is grounded in patient welfare, not financial gain.

The hospital's ethics committee, comprising senior clinicians, bioethics experts, and legal advisors, regularly reviews protocols and treatment plans to ensure alignment with both international ethical

standards and local sensitivities. Whether it's organ transplant procedures, clinical trials, or end-of-life decisions, PSRI's moral compass remains steady.

Transparency That Builds Trust

Transparency is often a buzzword in healthcare, but at PSRI, it is a tangible reality. Patients are provided with clear, upfront information about diagnoses, treatment options, and costs. Medical reports and records are shared freely with patients and their families, and billing systems are designed to be simple, itemised, and comprehensible.

This open approach not only reduces anxiety for patients but also fosters a collaborative atmosphere between caregivers and families. Patients are empowered to make informed choices, and second opinions are welcomed rather than discouraged — a rare stance that speaks volumes about PSRI's confidence in its care protocols.

Technology with Accountability

PSRI embraces cutting-edge technologies, from advanced imaging systems to robotic surgeries, all while maintaining a human-first philosophy. Each innovation is implemented only after rigorous

ethical evaluation, ensuring it enhances rather than complicates the patient experience.

Digital transparency is also emphasised — PSRI's online patient portals allow access to lab results, doctor's notes, and follow-up schedules, enhancing accountability and minimising errors.

Training the Next Generation in Ethics

True to its research and academic roots, PSRI places strong emphasis on training future medical professionals in ethics. Medical students, residents, and nursing staff are not only taught clinical skills but are sensitised to ethical dilemmas and the importance of empathy in healing. Regular workshops and ethics rounds ensure that conversations about right and wrong remain active in the corridors of care.

Conclusion: A Model for Modern Healthcare

In a healthcare landscape often marred by mistrust and commercial pressures, PSRI Hospital emerges as a model of how ethics and transparency can coexist with clinical excellence. By putting patients first and maintaining an unflinching commitment to doing what's right, PSRI not only heals bodies — it rebuilds trust in medicine itself.



DR. ROHIT MODY

A CALL FOR PREVENTIVE VIGILANCE



Every year, July 1st marks a day of reverence – a moment when a nation turns its gaze toward the doctors who hold its pulse in their hands. This year, as we celebrate Doctor's Day 2025, we spotlight not just a healer but a visionary.

Dr. Rohit Mody, Senior Director of Cardiovascular Sciences at the Mody Harvard Cardiac Institute - Park Group, brings a message that is both timely and transformative. His appeal is simple, yet profound: let us move from illness to wellness, from reactive care to preventive vigilance.

With decades of experience and a global footprint in cardiovascular medicine, Dr. Mody has witnessed firsthand the changing face of heart disease in India. Once considered a condition of the elderly, cardiovascular disease is now creeping into the lives of the young — often silently, often fatally. The trend is alarming, but for Dr. Mody, it also presents an opportunity. "Prevention," he says, "is not just a medical strategy. It is a national responsibility."

India, he believes, stands at a unique crossroads. As the country advances in areas

like defense, digital infrastructure, and space exploration, the time has come to apply that same ambition to healthcare. Dr. Mody envisions a future where India becomes a global leader not only in treating illness but in extending healthspan — the number of years a person lives in good health, free from disease and dependency.

"We are seeing younger individuals, often in their 30s and 40s, arrive without symptoms but with significant heart disease already in progress. This must change. It can change," he says. And the path forward, he believes, begins with awareness.

Traditionally, cardiovascular risk factors have included high blood pressure, diabetes, cholesterol disorders, tobacco use, and sedentary habits. These remain deeply relevant. But today, the conversation must expand. Dr. Mody highlights lesser-known but equally serious threats — chronic inflammation, genetic predispositions, environmental pollution, sleep disorders, and the mental health challenges of modern life. These emerging risks call for a broader, more informed approach to screening and early intervention.

"The signs are there. The tools are there. What we need now is a national will to act early," he says with clarity and conviction.

Dr. Mody's vision aligns closely with the goals of Vision 2047 (Aatmnirbhar Bharat) — India's blueprint for a healthier, more self-reliant nation. As part of this, he advocates for preventive cardiology to be recognized as a national priority — not an afterthought. Hospitals, he suggests, must evolve into centers not just for treatment but for prevention, research, and wellness.

He speaks with great enthusiasm about the potential of integrating modern technology into healthcare. Artificial intelligence, advanced imaging, genomics, robotics, and digital health can revolutionize how we diagnose and manage heart disease. His institute is already pioneering efforts in these directions — developing new interventional strategies, pushing forward precision medicine, and training the next



generation of doctors to think beyond the stethoscope.

Yet for all the science, Dr. Mody remains grounded in the simple, sacred truth of medicine: the human connection between a doctor and a patient. "In the fast-paced world we live in, it is easy to lose sight of the basics — empathy, listening, trust," he reflects. "But ultimately, it is these very things that heal."

He calls upon his fellow doctors to pause and remember why they chose this path in the first place. It wasn't for accolades or algorithms. It was to serve — with humility, with integrity, and with a sense of purpose. His message is a quiet but powerful reminder to stay anchored to the values that make medicine a noble calling.

"Listen more. Connect more. Let your care extend beyond prescriptions. Stay curious, stay compassionate. We owe it to our patients, and to ourselves."

Dr. Mody's journey in medicine has taken him across continents and into some of the most advanced

laboratories and cath labs in the world. He holds prestigious fellowships from several global institutions and is a respected voice in international forums on cardiovascular innovation. Whether mentoring young doctors, delivering keynote lectures, or working on the cath lab floor, Dr. Mody continues to blend clinical excellence with a forward-looking vision of healthcare. His leadership at Mody Harvard Cardiac Institute and as Academic Head at Pan Park reflects a rare combination of medical mastery and moral clarity.

As Doctor's Day arrives, his message is one of hope — and responsibility. "The next generation deserves more than what we inherited. They deserve a healthcare system that is not just reactive, but proactive. One that empowers people to live better, longer, and fuller lives."

In his words, "Let us renew our vows — to serve selflessly, to innovate fearlessly, and to prevent diligently." It is not just a message for doctors. It is a message for all of us.





IN SERVICE OF CARE THE ROLE AND RESOLVE OF INDIAN Doctors

A quiet strength runs through India's healthcare system, rooted not in buildings or machines, but in the people who wear the white coat. As India observed National Doctors' Day on July 1, it marked more than just a commemorative date. Instituted in 1991 to honour Dr. Bidhan Chandra Roy—an iconic physician, a nation builder and former Chief Minister of West Bengal—Doctors' Day is a reminder to reflect on the role of doctors across India, and how their quiet presence continues to shape what care truly means.

DOSE OF EMPATHY

It's often said that a doctor is not just a professional, but a source of comfort for those in pain. Beyond medication and procedures, it's the listening ear, the reassuring glance, and the gentle explanation that bring clarity in moments of uncertainty. From city hospitals to single-doctor clinics in remote corners, India's doctors carry out this task every day, with little fanfare but a deep impact.

General practitioners, surgeons, pediatricians, and specialists form the backbone of public and private care alike. In remote belts, a lone MBBS graduate might be the only medical contact for miles. In maternity wards or oncology units, doctors form lasting emotional bonds with patients and families, often becoming their most trusted counsel. This "healing touch" is not metaphorical; it is lived reality in every Indian district.

DEDICATION AND DAILY SACRIFICE

Few professions demand the kind of personal investment that medicine does. Long hours, missed festivals, and sleepless nights are routine. During the COVID-19 pandemic, this commitment became visible on a national scale, with over 1,600 Indian doctors reportedly losing their lives in the line of duty, according to the Indian Medical Association.

Yet the sacrifices stretch far beyond pandemics. Doctors routinely take on 36-hour shifts, operate

through the night, or travel to far-flung health camps. Stories of physicians swimming across rivers to vaccinate children, or staying back after retirement to mentor young interns in underserved districts, aren't uncommon; they just aren't always told. It's not just physical endurance that's tested, but emotional resilience. The theme for Doctor's Day in 2025—"Who Heals the Healers?"—serves as a timely reminder of what

often goes unspoken. Burnout is not merely a personal issue; it's a systemic threat to healthcare delivery. Delivering bad news, managing grief, or constantly being exposed to suffering leaves invisible scars.

While a few private institutions have introduced counselling cells or peer support groups, systemic solutions remain minimal. In the overstretched public system, especially, the mental health of doctors remains largely



HEART OF THE MATTER

DR. SAMEER GUPTA ON CARDIAC TRENDS, TECHNOLOGY, AND TIMELY PREVENTION

In this interview, Dr. Sameer Gupta unpacks pressing concerns in heart health, from rising lifestyle-related risks to the role of early intervention, and patient communication.

A senior interventional cardiologist and Director at Metro Group of Hospitals with global training across three fellowships, Dr. Gupta offers a grounded perspective shaped by years of hands-on expertise and system-level leadership.

Q. Over the years, cardiology has evolved significantly. In your view, what has been one of the most defining shifts shaping the field today?

Absolutely. The evolution of cardiology has been multi-dimensional. First, we've seen massive advances in diagnosis and treatment. Our ability to detect and manage various forms of heart disease has vastly improved. Procedures like TAVI (Transcatheter Aortic Valve Implantation) and interventions for pulmonary embolism were unthinkable a few decades ago.

Secondly, wearable technology and AI are game changers. Devices like smartwatches now detect arrhythmias and track vital patterns in real-time. These tools enable early intervention in ways that weren't possible before.

Lastly, accessibility has improved. With government health schemes and insurance coverage expanding, especially for patients from lower socio-economic backgrounds, more people now have access to quality cardiac care.

Q. There's increasing public concern around sudden cardiac deaths, especially among younger individuals. Is this concern justified?

Cardiovascular disease remains the leading cause of death globally. Whether incidents among the young have truly increased or are just more visible now is debatable. However, lifestyle certainly plays a role. Many people lead sedentary lives, manage inconsistent diets, and experience chronic stress. The problem is that cardiovascular issues develop over time. A few years of healthy living can't undo decades of neglect. Awareness has risen, partly due to media attention, but lifestyle correction remains key.

Q. There are also discussions about links between COVID-19, vaccines, and heart conditions. What's your view on that?

COVID, like any viral infection, can cause inflammation of the heart, conditions like myocarditis or pericarditis. But connecting a heart attack occurring years later solely to a COVID vaccine is problematic. Lifestyle factors like smoking, poor diet, or lack of exercise are more likely culprits. It's crucial not to overlook those in favor of unproven theories.

Q. Many believe cardiac issues are preventable. What steps can people take to reduce their risk?

Cardiac disease is largely preventable. The issue isn't ignorance; people know the basics, but inertia. I have seen young people ignore hypertension, believing heart attacks only happen to their elders. Early intervention is crucial. Prevention fails when patients don't follow up or discontinue medication prematurely.

A heart-healthy lifestyle includes a balanced diet rich in vegetables and fruits, regular physical activity (30 minutes, 4–5 times a week), sufficient sleep, and effective stress management. And of course, avoiding smoking and excessive alcohol consumption. Those with a family history must be especially proactive with screening.

Q. How is Metro Hospital reimagining cardiac care, from admission to recovery?

We are working on multiple fronts. Through a hub-and-spoke model, we have enhanced reach to tier-2 and tier-3 cities. We deploy ECG machines and basic diagnostic setups in these areas and use telemedicine for quicker consultations.



Dr. Sameer Gupta

Senior Interventional Cardiologist,
Metro Group of Hospitals

In terms of treatment, we stay at the forefront of technology, be it in structural heart procedures, complex angioplasties, or AI-enabled cath labs. We also follow a multidisciplinary approach. Our teams huddle daily to discuss complex cases and align on personalised treatment plans.

Q. Given the emergency nature of cardiac events, how do you approach patient and family communication in high-pressure situations?

These are deeply vulnerable moments. We follow a structured 'HEAR' model: Hear, Explain, Agree, Decide. First, we listen to the patient and family. Then we explain the condition in simple, relatable terms. We encourage shared decision-making, using accessible language, like saying "5 in 100" instead of "5% risk." Clear, compassionate communication builds trust and helps families make informed choices, even under pressure.

Q. You have trained and practised across geographies. How has global exposure shaped your clinical and leadership approach?

Training in the US across three fellowships gave me exposure to advanced technology, diverse patient populations, and structured clinical protocols. I brought back lessons on checklists, data-driven decision-making, and research emphasis. At Metro, we have developed our own patient registry, enabling us to analyse patterns in Indian patients and contribute to global research.

India's healthcare system offers accessibility and immediacy, which many countries lack. Our challenge is to pair that with global best practices, and that's a priority for us.



unaddressed. And yet, most continue. The Hippocratic oath, for many, is not just a ceremonial promise, it becomes a way of life.

THE WEIGHT THEY CARRY

Alongside the emotional demands of care, doctors often work within conditions that quietly test their endurance. While the country's doctor-patient ratio appears strong on paper, around 1:834, better than WHO's 1:1000 guideline, the urban-rural divide skews the reality. Rural India often sees a single doctor serving over 10,000 people, and in some blocks, the number is far worse. Infrastructure gaps, shortage of trained staff, and poor working conditions make retention in rural postings difficult. Young medical graduates cite a lack of support, safety, and growth opportunities as reasons for opting out of government service. Compounding the strain is a growing distrust between doctors and patients. According to an IMA report nearly 75% of Indian doctors have faced violence or abuse at some point in their careers. Emergency ward assaults, mob attacks, and verbal threats have become distressingly common. Doctors report hesitating before taking on high-risk cases, fearing legal or physical backlash, an untenable position for any caregiver.

TECH AT THE FRONTLINES

And yet, there is room for optimism. India's medical landscape is undergoing visible transformation, led by both innovation and policy. The eSanjeevani telemedicine platform, launched by the Government of India, has facilitated over 14 crore consultations as of mid-2023, helping remote populations access medical advice without travel. Meanwhile, AI-assisted diagnostics are no longer futuristic concepts. Startups like Qure.ai are using machine learning to interpret X-rays and CT scans in seconds, allowing overburdened doctors to focus on treatment rather than screening. Robotics, too, has entered the operating room, with indigenous platforms enabling minimally invasive procedures in metros and, increasingly, smaller cities. Many doctors are now being trained to adopt these tools as part of continuing medical education, helping to mainstream tech-enabled care. Importantly, these aren't technologies replacing the doctor, they are empowering them. A well-supported physician using AI tools or remote monitoring can serve more patients with greater accuracy, while also protecting their own well-

being. In time, such innovations could help bridge the quality gap between urban and rural healthcare systems.

BUILDING THE FUTURE, ONE SEAT AT A TIME

India's push to expand its healthcare workforce has been significant. Between 2014 and 2023, the number of medical colleges grew from 387 to over 700, while MBBS seats more than doubled, from around 51,000 to over 1,12,000. It's a necessary step, especially to correct the urban-rural imbalance. But education reform isn't just about quantity, it's about mindset. Today's doctors need more than clinical proficiency. They must be equipped to handle digital tools, collaborate across systems, and communicate with empathy in multilingual, multi-cultural environments. Curriculum changes are now reflecting this shift. Some institutions have introduced modules on ethics, stress management, patient communication, and even AI literacy. The National Medical Commission has also recommended greater focus on community-based learning, where students rotate through primary care settings to understand local challenges firsthand.

By strengthening both the scientific and social dimensions of training, India can prepare a generation of doctors ready for the complexities of 21st-century care.

A SHARED RESPONSIBILITY

The theme "The Healing Touch" is not just about what doctors do, it's also a reflection of what society owes in return. Respect, yes. But also systemic support. Safety protocols. Adequate rest. Opportunities for growth. And spaces where doctors can be vulnerable without fear of judgment.

Because the future of Indian healthcare won't be shaped by technology or infrastructure alone—it will depend just as much on the people who bring it to life. And the better we care for our doctors, the better they can care for us.



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**Dr. P N Arora
(Chairman)**

Yashoda Medicity, Indirapuram

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JUDGE IN THE DOCK



ALL ABLAZE
Justice Yashwant Varma; screengrab of the burnt notes from a video presented as evidence

The former Delhi High Court judge could become the first to be impeached in the country, but lapses in due process and the Centre's eagerness to take it forward are not welcome signs

By KAUSHIK DEKA

IN

the complex world of Indian politics, where decisions are often made behind closed doors, parliamentary affairs minister Kiren Rijiju is on a sensitive mission. He is working to gather support from leaders across party lines for what could be a landmark moment in India's judicial history—the first impeachment of a high court judge, Justice Yashwant Varma.

The story that began with a fire in the judge's outhouse now transcends a simple corruption scandal. It lays bare the fault lines between India's judiciary and executive, exposing tensions that have simmered since the nation's founding. Dark clouds are gathering over the capital in more ways than one, and as the monsoon session of Parliament approaches, the case raises profound questions about evidence, process and power. Who watches the watchers when the watchers themselves stand accused? And what happens when the machinery of accountability becomes a weapon in institutional warfare?

THE FIRE THAT LIT A THOUSAND QUESTIONS

March 14, 2025, began as an ordinary Friday for the residents of Tughlaq Crescent, Delhi's tree-lined avenue housing judges and diplomats. Justice Varma, then serving on the Delhi High Court, was away in Bhopal with his wife. His daughter Diya remained at the No. 30 official residence, a sprawling bungalow. The household staff went about their routines, the CRPF (Central Reserve Police Force) guards maintained their posts, and nothing suggested that this night would alter the trajectory of Indian jurisprudence.

At approximately 11:35 pm, Diya heard what she later described as an explosion. Racing toward the sound with household staff, she discovered flames erupting from a locked storeroom situated near the servants' quarters, separated from the main residence by a boundary wall. Neither the CRPF personnel nor the guards stationed at the main gate initially responded, a detail that would later fuel conspiracy theories.

When the Delhi Fire Services arrived, breaking open the padlocked door with the help of security personnel, they encountered a scene that defied explanation. Station officer Manoj Mehlawat's spontaneous exclamation, captured on a firefighter's phone video, gave the case its most memorable soundbite: "*Mahatma Gandhi mein aag lag rahi hai* (Mahatma Gandhi is on fire)". The reference was unmistakable: stacks of 500-rupee notes bearing Gandhi's image lay burning on the floor, some charred, others half-consumed by flames.

The fire brigade's divisional officer, Suman Kumar, would later testify that he had "never seen anything like it" in his

career. Multiple witnesses, including firefighters and police personnel, described currency notes piled up to one and a half feet high. Yet what happened next, or rather, what didn't happen, would prove equally significant. The Delhi Police took no action to secure evidence. No seizure memo was prepared, no *panchnama* drawn up. Not a single currency note was preserved for forensic examination. By dawn, the burnt cash had vanished, reportedly removed by persons unknown while the crime scene lay unguarded. News of the midnight fire might have remained buried in routine police logs had not someone—the identity remains unknown—leaked the information to the media days later. The story exploded across news channels as the image of currency burning at a judge's residence struck at something fundamental in public consciousness.

The Supreme Court's institutional machinery responded with uncharacteristic speed. Within days, then Chief Justice of India, Sanjiv Khanna, requested a preliminary report from Delhi High Court chief justice D.K. Upadhyaya, who said that

JUSTICE VARMA'S POST-FIRE ACTIONS, OR LACK THEREOF, HAVE BECOME CENTRAL TO THE CASE AGAINST HIM. HE FILED NO POLICE COMPLAINT, ACCEPTED HIS TRANSFER...

"the entire matter warrants a deeper probe". The SC collegium, in an extraordinary meeting, proposed Varma's immediate transfer to his parent high court in Allahabad, a clear signal the judiciary was distancing itself from potential scandal.

Justice Varma's actions, or lack thereof, on his return to Delhi on March 15 would later become central to the case against him. He did not visit the burnt storeroom immediately. He filed no police complaint about what he would later claim was a conspiracy to frame him. He accepted his transfer to the Allahabad HC without protest. To his critics, this behaviour suggested guilt. To his defenders, it reflected the shock and confusion of a man blindsided by events beyond his control.

On March 22, CJI Khanna constituted a three-member committee including Justices Sheel Nagu (Chief Justice of Punjab and Haryana HC), G.S. Sandhawalia (Chief Justice of Himachal Pradesh HC) and Anu Sivaraman of the Karnataka HC to conduct an "inhouse inquiry". Their 64-page report, submitted on May 3, reads like a judicial indictment. The committee found that 'cash/money was found in the storeroom' based on 'direct and electronic evidence'. More

damningly, they concluded that access to this room was under the ‘covert or active control of Justice Varma and his family members’. Through what they termed ‘strong inferential evidence’, they determined that Varma’s most trusted staff, private secretary Rajinder Singh Karki and domestic helpers, had removed the burnt cash in the early hours of March 15.

Karki allegedly instructed firefighters not to mention currency in their reports. The storeroom was cleaned the next day, destroying potential evidence. When questioned, household staff claimed ignorance but the committee found these denials unconvincing when weighed against the independent testimony of fire and police personnel.

Most significantly, the committee addressed Justice Varma’s defence, or lack thereof. His claim that the store-room was accessible to outsiders was contradicted by security personnel who testified that the area was always locked and monitored. His failure to report a conspiracy, if he truly believed one existed, struck the committee as inexplicable.

On the other side, Justice Varma’s objections went beyond mere procedure. The committee, he noted, had already framed its inquiry around three presumptive questions: How does he account for the money in the room? What was its source? Who removed it? These questions, Varma argued, assumed that the money he claimed never belonged to him was his. Also, the committee’s fact-finding mandate meant it operated without the safeguards of a proper judicial inquiry, no examination of witnesses on oath, no rules of evidence, no formal procedures to check the testimony’s veracity.

QUESTIONS OVER THE INVESTIGATION

When CJI Khanna, acting on the committee’s report, advised Varma to resign within 48 hours, the judge’s response was unequivocal. His letter of June 6 rejecting this advice struck notes of both defiance and despair. “To accept such advice would imply my acquiescence to a process and outcome that I respectfully consider to be fundamentally unjust,” he wrote.

Perhaps nothing illustrates the case’s irregularities more starkly than what investigators chose not to investigate. Former law minister Kapil Sibal, reviewing the case, identifies gaps that seem less like oversights and more deliberate omissions. No forensic examination determined the fire’s cause. Justice Varma’s claim of an explosion was dismissed without investigation. The CCTV cameras monitoring the storeroom, potentially the most crucial evidence, had mysteriously stopped working, their data irretrievably lost by the time investigators sought it. The committee noted this failure but drew no adverse inference, instead blaming Justice Varma for not preserving footage even though he had 10 days to do so and prove his innocence.

The Delhi Police’s conduct raised even more questions. Here were law enforcement officers witnessing evidence of a serious crime, yet they took no action. When questioned later, the officers claimed that they were told by superiors that “higher-ups



Illustrations by RAAJ VERMA

GUILTY AS CHARGED?

Why the CJI-appointed inquiry panel found Justice Varma guilty

► Panel took stock of 55 witness testimonies, forensic examination of videos/photos, as well as triangulation of electronic and call records to come to

its findings

► Multiple visuals of charred currency retrieved. In one video, a fire officer is heard saying, “Mahatma

are involved” and they should take no further action. This investigative paralysis extended to the committee itself. While acknowledging police conduct as “slipshod”, they declined to probe deeper, stating it was “not part of their remit”. They made no attempt to trace where the cash originated, whether it was genuine or counterfeit, or how it came to be in the storeroom. The amount itself remained a matter of speculation; media reports suggested Rs 15 crore, but no official count was ever made.

THE IMPEACHMENT PUZZLE

As Parliament prepares for Justice Varma’s impeachment, the process itself has become contentious. Under the Judges (Inquiry) Act, 1968, impeachment follows a prescribed route: MPs submit a motion, the speaker or chairman admits it, a three-judge panel investigates, and only if found guilty does Parliament debate and vote. This statutory process includes crucial safeguards, including right to legal representation and evidence taken on oath.

Yet minister Rijiju has suggested the government views this case as “slightly different”, hinting they might bypass the statutory inquiry since an inhouse committee has already submitted a report. This approach has alarmed constitutional experts. As Indira Jaising, who participated

Gandhi mein aag lag rahi hai bhai, referring to the image on the Rs 500 notes

↳ **Varma's private secretary** **Rajinder Karki** led clean-up after the blaze, raising concerns about deliberate tampering. Karki talked to Justice Varma at 1:23 am on March 15, the window when evidence may have been removed

↳ **Varma's daughter Diya** initially admitted knowing about the burnt cash on March 15, later attempted to retract statement

↳ **Hard disk of CCTV camera** monitoring storeroom is missing. Panel concluded that if footage supported his claims, Varma had ample time to produce it to prove his innocence

↳ **When questioned by the CJI**, Justice Varma could not account for the origin/ownership of the cash allegedly found at his premises

JUSTICE VARMA'S DEFENCE

THE JUDGE HAS NOT ADMITTED GUILT AND HAS REFUSED TO RESIGN

↳ Denied keeping cash in the storeroom, stated that it was freely accessible via a rear gate

↳ Claimed his daughter and staff inspected the storeroom after the fire, found no trace of currency

↳ Argued that CCTV footage could have exonerated him, but the footage mysteriously disappeared



↳ Stressed that neither the fire brigade nor police documented or seized any cash from the site

↳ Cited his unblemished judicial career, argued that he had no motive/ history for wrongdoing

↳ Claimed he was being targeted, pointing to a coordinated social media smear campaign against him since Dec. '24

IF THE GOVT BYPASSES THE STATUTORY SAFEGUARDS FOR IMPEACHMENT, IT MAY SET PRECEDENTS THAT FUNDAMENTALLY ALTER JUDICIAL INDEPENDENCE

in India's first (unsuccessful) impeachment proceedings against an SC judge in 1991, warned, conflating the inhouse procedure with statutory requirements "undermines Justice Varma's right to a fair procedure" and violates the law itself.

The government's selective urgency becomes more apparent when contrasted with another pending impeachment. Since December 2024, 55 Rajya Sabha MPs have sought action against Justice Shekhar Kumar Yadav of the Allahabad HC for alleged inflammatory communal remarks at a Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP) event. Six months later, Vice-President and RS chairman Jagdeep Dhankhar claims he's still

verifying signatures. Meanwhile, Dhankhar wrote to the CJI asking him not to proceed with an inhouse inquiry against Justice Yadav, yet he now champions swift action against Justice Varma based solely on such an inquiry.

THE DEEPER GAME

The impeachment drama is also set to become a test case in the ongoing struggle between India's judiciary and the Modi government. Since the SC struck down the National Judicial Appointments Commission (NJAC) in 2015, declaring it unconstitutional for giving the executive too much power over judicial appointments, tensions have escalated. The government has chafed at the collegium system, where judges appoint judges, viewing it as unaccountable. Various ministers and even V-P Dhankhar have publicly criticised judicial overreach and called for greater executive oversight. The Varma case provides potent ammunition. Here's a judge with unexplained cash, and the judiciary's own investigation found him guilty. What better argument for external oversight?

Yet the implications run deeper. Some experts say that by accepting an inhouse report as grounds for impeachment, by bypassing statutory safeguards, the government could set precedents that fundamentally alter judicial independence. Today's weapon against allegedly corrupt judges could be-

HOW A JUDGE IS IMPEACHED

In India, a judge of the Supreme Court or a high court can be removed through impeachment, which involves a specific process outlined in the Constitution and the Judges (Inquiry) Act, 1968. Here's a breakdown of the process:



1 INITIATION: A motion for impeachment can be initiated in either the Lok Sabha (at least 100 members must sign) or the Rajya Sabha (at least 50 members must sign). In case of Justice Varma, the motion has already been admitted in Parliament

2 INVESTIGATION: The presiding officer (speaker of the Lok Sabha or chairman of Rajya Sabha) can refer the motion to a three-member committee for investigation. This committee typically includes the Chief Justice of India or a Supreme Court judge, a High Court Chief Justice,

and a distinguished jurist. In case of Justice Varma, the Supreme Court's three-member inquiry committee has already recommended his impeachment. There is no clarity if Parliament will go by this recommendation or form a committee of its own to probe the allegations against Justice Varma

3 PARLIAMENTARY APPROVAL: If the commit-

THE PARLIAMENT'S MONSOON SESSION IS LIKELY TO SEE DEBATE AND VOTING ON JUSTICE VARMA'S IMPEACHMENT

tee finds the judge guilty, the report is presented to the respective House. For the motion to be successful, it must be passed by a special majority (two-thirds of those present and voting, and a majority of the total membership) in both the Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha. The monsoon session of Parliament is likely to see debate and voting on Justice Varma's impeachment.

4 PRESIDENTIAL ORDER: If both Houses pass the motion with the required majority, it is sent to the President, who then issues an order for the judge's removal

come tomorrow's tool for removing inconvenient ones.

Justice Varma himself represents a puzzling target. Colleagues describe him as brilliant, particularly in tax law. No whispers of impropriety marked his career. His judgments have reflected careful reasoning rather than ideological bias. Meanwhile, the fundamental mysteries remain unresolved. Whose money was burning that night? How did it arrive in a locked storeroom? The fire's cause stays unexplained. The judge mentioned an explosion while fire officers doubted the short-circuit theory. Yet no forensic examination occurred. The missing CCTV footage that might have shown who accessed the storeroom has also vanished.

These gaps matter because they transform what should

be a search for truth into an exercise in presumption. The committee's logic that Varma must be guilty because he couldn't prove his innocence, inverts fundamental principles of justice. As Sibal observed, "Under which principle of criminal law can you find somebody guilty on a presumption?"

Justice Yashwant Varma will likely enter history as India's first successfully impeached judge. But his removal may prove a pyrrhic victory for those seeking judicial accountability. Also, more fundamental questions of systemic judicial corruption remain unanswered. The case underscores the urgent need for structural judicial reforms that eliminate the possibility of unaccounted cash lying hidden in a judge's storehouse. ■

ADVOCATING WELLNESS THROUGH PHYSICAL FITNESS

Human bipedalism is a cherished feature. Starting from a toddler's first steps, human beings look forward to their exceptional abilities of being on their feet. However, ill health and diseases sometimes leads to deprivation of this most important physical function that promotes human mobility. This spectrum of decline can be associated with aging or may result from a wide variety of diseases. Just like any other human function, when mobility is derailed individuals face enormous challenges including falls and sharp decrease in quality of life. An important repertoire of providers who works silently behind the scene in restoring physical mobility involve physical therapists. Abhijit Sahoo caught up with Dr. Venkata Amar Kumar Nuthalapati to discuss the clinical significance of his practice. He has special interests in multiple sclerosis and was involved with Woodlands Care Center in York, UK.

"My goal is to help individuals regain independence and maintain a high quality of life through personalized treatment plans and continuous physical rehabilitation", stated Dr. Nuthalapati. Dr. Nuthalapati, currently associated with Amedisys Health Care at Maryland in the United States has been instrumental with his relentless efforts in motivating and improving home healthcare. Excerpts of the discussion are below.

■ What are your responsibilities as a physical therapist in a home based care scenario?

The most significant role that I perform is providing optimal care to patients. It is important for personalized treatment plans tailored to each patient's specific needs and goals. I foster a collaborative relationship with the patients and their relatives, empowering them to actively participate in their care

erroneously or sleeping in awkward positions can cause pain, but physiotherapy helps improve balance.

■ What strategies do you use to support the physical, emotional, and cognitive well-being of elderly patients in a home care setting?

Although exercise is beneficial for everyone, it can present certain risks—particularly for elderly adults with medical conditions such as heart disease, high blood pressure, osteoporosis, or previous injuries. Physical therapy allows these individuals to engage in physical activity safely, with proper guidance, which helps minimize the risk of exercise-related injuries over time. Unexpected slips and falls can occur at any time. Research indicates that falls among elderly frequently lead to serious health complications. Tai-chi and core strengthening are of great help.

■ How do you collaborate with patients to establish and reach practical therapy goals?

Collaborating with patients to set and achieve realistic therapy goals is a key aspect of home-based physical therapy. I track progress regularly and make necessary adjustments to the plan to keep the patient aligned with their goals and motivated throughout the recovery process.

■ How significant is patient education for your care?

Patient education plays a vital role in physiotherapy by equipping individuals with the knowledge and confidence needed to take an active role in their own recovery process.

■ How physiotherapy supports overall wellness for all ages?

Everyday activities like lifting groceries, sitting



Dr. Venkata Amar Kumar Nuthalapati
Home Health Physical Therapist

especially when working with aging or home-bound patients?

Physical therapy doesn't stop when a client leaves the session—it's just the starting point. To be truly effective, we need to understand how each patient's views on health and wellness influence their behaviors and lifestyle choices. This means recognizing both the broader connection between wellness and physical therapy, as well as the unique factors that shape each individual's experience. Wellness provides the purpose behind our work. My goal is to enhance our clients' quality of life by helping them move with greater freedom and live more fully.

■ What are some of the most common health disparities that impact access to physical therapy services?

In a landmark report in 2003, the Institute of Medicine (National Academy of Medicine) published *Unequal Treatment: Confronting Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Healthcare*. This is often an unacknowledged problem and pervasive even in the realm of my practice area of physical medicine. The opportunities for home visits is a great ameliorative step in providing access to care for all individuals.

■ What is your final advice Dr. Nuthalapati?

We have a lot of lessons to learn from people who live in the "Blue zone". The moto should be to lead a comfortably uncomfortable life.

CRACKING THE CHEAT CODE

AS BIHAR'S PAPER LEAK INDUSTRY UNRAVELS, A DETERMINED CRACKDOWN BY THE ECONOMIC OFFENCES UNIT REVEALS ITS MASSIVE SCALE AND THE DAUNTING TASK OF REBUILDING TRUST IN PUBLIC EXAMS

By Amitabh Srivastava



TESTING TIMES

Aspirants protest against a string of paper leaks in Patna, Feb. 19



THE PREDAWN HUSH OF APRIL 25, A TEAM OF BIHAR POLICE'S Economic Offences Unit (EOU) converged on a rented flat in Patna's Saguna More neighbourhood. Months of covert surveillance had led them to one of their most wanted targets: Sanjeev Kumar Mukhiya, the alleged mastermind behind a string of question paper leaks that have plagued public examinations in the state.

Mukhiya had gone underground after the medical entrance paper—National Eligibility cum Entrance Test (Undergraduate), or NEET-UG—was leaked in May 2024, a scandal so brazen that the Supreme Court itself had stepped in to confirm the breach. The Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) eventually filed charges against more than 30 people, but Mukhiya managed to dodge multiple statewide manhunts—until that April morning.

Just a couple of weeks earlier, the EOU had arrested Ravi Bhushan, the alleged architect of a high-tech cheating racket in Patna's online test centres. The two arrests spotlight a chilling reality: competitive exams in Bihar have been hijacked by a syndicate that commodifies ambition. In a state with a burgeoning population, one of India's lowest per capita incomes and scant private sector opportunities, a government job is more than just employment—it's a passport to

stability and status. But, for a price, candidates can buy their way in. "These leaks are not isolated events," says a senior EOU officer. "They're part of a parallel economy, and every successful scam fuels the next." This illicit enterprise is estimated to be worth at least Rs 500 crore, though the true scale may be far greater, with many paper leaks likely executed undetected.

The EOU has become the state's nerve centre for exposing the exam mafia, currently leading investigations into 10 high-profile paper leak cases that have rocked the state since 2012, six of them between 2022 and 2024, affecting an estimated 2.5 million candidates. At the unit's helm, additional director general (ADG) Naiyyar Hasnain Khan and deputy inspector general (DIG) M.S. Dhillon have led from the front, sifting through fragmented intelligence and chasing elusive leads to unravel both the scale and systemic nature of the scam. Their efforts have resulted in 545 arrests and charge-sheets against 249 individuals in just these 10 cases. The unit has also taken over more than 70 additional cases registered at local police stations, pointing to a statewide racket that transcends jurisdictions and exam boards—from the Bihar Combined Competitive Preliminary Examination to the recruitment of police constables, community health officers and school teachers. What emerges is a disturbing nexus of middlemen, coaching cartels, paid 'solvers' and, in some instances, official complicity.

A MULTILAYERED OPERATION

Mukhiya was no ordinary middleman. Once a technical assistant at a college in Nalanda, he had long harboured political ambitions. In 2020, his wife, Mamta Devi—formerly a village head—contested the Harnaut assembly seat, drawing over 38,000 votes as a Lok Janshakti Party candidate. "He always saw politics as a shield," another EOU officer tells INDIA TODAY. With the assembly election around the corner, police suspected that "he couldn't resist the pull of the election season" to reboot his wife's political career. Sure enough, he did resurface and was tracked to the densely packed Saguna More locality, where he had been living under a false identity.

What followed was the unspooling of a multi-layered scam. At its peak, Mukhiya's syndicate ran like an enterprise: his henchmen infiltrated printing presses to access sealed exam papers, which were then passed on to the second tier—MBBS graduates and the like—for real-time solving. Answer keys were then disseminated via a network of coaching centres or WhatsApp groups to the candidates, some of whom paid upwards of Rs 30-40 lakh.

THE GREAT EXAM SCAM

₹500 cr.

**Estimated worth
of the illicit en-
terprise in Bihar**

10

**Public examinations
currently being
investigated**

70

**FIRs filed across
various jurisdic-
tions that EOU
has taken over**

545

**Individuals arrest-
ed in these cases to
date, charge-sheet
filed against 249**

In the NEET-UG 2024 case, police say, Panjaj Kumar, a civil engineering graduate from NIT Jamshedpur, slipped into the强room at Oasis School in Jharkhand's Hazaribagh—one of the designated exam centres—along with those tasked with securing the question papers on the morning of the exam on May 5. Security footage showed him arriving at 8:02 am and exiting at 9:23 am with digital photos of the paper. By 11:30 am, questions were solved and transmitted to candidates, well before the 2 pm start. Acting on a tip-off, Patna Police raided a safe house—a school where candidates had apparently memorised the answers—and found scraps of burnt paper.

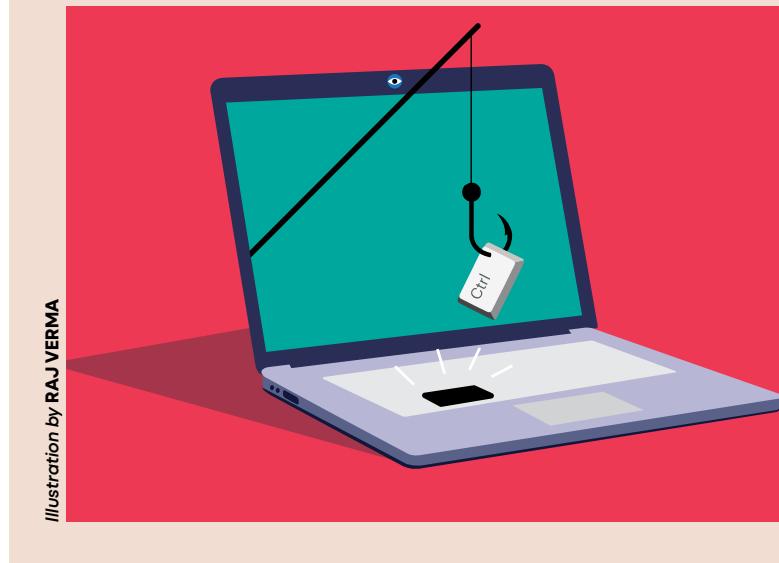
Probate was already underway after Mukhiya's son, Dr Shiv Kumar, a.k.a. Bittu, an MBBS graduate from Patna Medical College, was arrested from Ujjain with four others on April 20 in connection with another leak—one that extended far beyond the test centres. Just two months before NEET-UG, in March 2024, Mukhiya's gang had successfully compromised the Teacher Recruitment Examination (TRE 3.0), meant to fill 87,000 primary and middle school posts in Bihar. This time, they infiltrated the logistics chain. The gang managed to lure Srinivas Chaudhary, a private contractor routinely hired by courier firms to transport sealed question papers. On March 12—just three days before the exam—a vehicle carrying papers to Nawada district made an unscheduled halt at a roadside eatery near Nagarnasa, about 50 km from Patna. There, Mukhiya, his son and their aides pried open the sealed boxes, scanned the contents and swiftly relayed them to their network.

Phase two followed with military precision. Dozens of candidates—each having paid Rs 10-12 lakh—were ferried across the Bihar border in hired SUVs to Hazaribagh, placing them beyond the immediate reach of state authorities. They were lodged in hotels and marriage halls, handed both the questions and model answers, and instructed to memorise them before the test. As many as 270 candidates were caught red-handed with the leaked material. With assistance from Jharkhand Police, the EOU eventually apprehended the entire cohort. The audacity and scale of the operation reignited urgent calls for tighter controls on examination logistics, including stricter vetting of courier partners.

On June 19, the Enforcement Directorate raided 11 locations across five cities—Patna, Nalanda, Ranchi, Lucknow and Kolkata—in connection with

HOW COMPUTER-BASED TESTS ARE RIGGED

A SOPHISTICATED SCAM EXPLOITS LOOPHOLES IN DIGITAL INFRASTRUCTURE AND INSIDER COLLUSION TO SUBVERT EVEN THE MOST SECURE EXAMS



the 2023 Bihar constable recruitment scam. The raids uncovered handwritten candidate lists tied to OMR (optical mark recognition) numbers, forged degrees, blank cheques from aspirants and handwritten question sheets matched to specific candidates. The Central Selection Board of Constables had awarded the printing contract to Caltex Multiventures Pvt Ltd—set up in 2021 without a press—which had an undisclosed link to blacklisted Blessing Secured Press Pvt Ltd through director Kaushik Kumar Kar. Even in this case, Mukhiya and his associates had allegedly lifted sealed question paper bundles in transit and leaked them via social media.

TO PREVENT FUTURE BREACHES, THE EOU HAS SCALED UP ITS SURVEILLANCE MACHINERY AND IS CONTINUOUSLY SHARING LEADS WITH NEIGHBOURING STATES

If Mukhiya built his empire on physical breaches, Ravi Bhushan exploited the digital frontier. Active in Patna since 2017, Bhushan was arrested from Kankarbagh locality on April 7 for orchestrating a proxy server-based fraud that led to the cancellation of an online exam for 4,500 Community Health Officer (CHO) posts in December 2024. With help from the firm contracted to conduct the exam, he allegedly installed remote-access software during mock tests two days before the actual test, effectively opening a backdoor for his 'solver guild' to write the exams in real time (see *How Computer-based Tests are Rigged*). Candidates sat blankly at computers while answers were typed in from afar. Each paid around Rs 5 lakh for the privilege.

NETWORK INFILTRATION

► The contracted company installs proxy servers in the exam centre's local network, creating secret backdoors

► Remote-access tools loaded onto the computer systems, allowing off-site operatives full control during the exam

REAL-TIME DELIVERY

► The 'solver guild' tracks the test feed, solves questions remotely and relays answers instantly

► Pre-selected candidates receive

these answers mid-test—via subtle on-screen prompts or whispered cues from co-opted invigilators

ON-GROUND COORDINATION

► Invigilators stay linked with solvers through encrypted apps or coded messages to confirm delivery. In case of any slips, they correct them on the fly

SEAMLESS ERASURE

► Post exam, all digital footprints vanish—servers shut down, access tools are wiped, logs cleared. The illusion of integrity is maintained

THE CLASSIC OFFLINE HEIST

THE PAPER-LEAK CHAIN THAT SANJEEV KUMAR MUKHIYA HAD BUILT OVER THE PAST DECADE



► Gangs infiltrated printing presses, strongrooms or logistics chain to access sealed exam papers



► Leaked papers were solved by hired experts, such as MBBS and engineering graduates



► Answer keys were circulated via coaching centres, WhatsApp groups or handed directly to candidates, who paid as much as Rs 10–40 lakh

According to an EOU officer, Bhushan originally supplied personnel to test centres in Patna, and later expanded operations to Mumbai and Delhi through a firm called Bramcize Technology Pvt Ltd. He and his brother Bharat even secured the contract for the AIIMS Mangalagiri recruitment exam—later postponed after the CHO leak was exposed.

CLOSING THE NET

The fallout has prompted sweeping action. The March 2024 TRE 3.0 conducted by the Bihar Public Service Commission (BPSC) was cancelled and rescheduled for July. Similarly, of the other five exams compromised since 2022, three were cancelled outright while two were partially scrapped. Crucially, the Bihar Public Examinations (Prevention of Unfair Means) Act was passed in July 2024—one of the most stringent in the country. Offenders now face up to five years in prison and fines up to Rs 10 lakh. Service providers involved in leaks can be blacklisted for four years and fined up to Rs 1 crore. Candidates caught buying leaked papers or 'cheat sheets' risk disqualification and ineligibility for government jobs. The BPSC website lists at least 22 such debarments, though many continue to contest them.

To prevent future breaches, the EOU has scaled up its surveillance machinery. Operational reforms include unbreakable seals for physical papers, mandatory CCTV surveillance at printing and dispatch sites, real-time monitoring for online tests and audits of logistics partners. "We have established a consolidated database of organised gangs involved in leaks and other irregularities, which we continu-

ously monitor and share with the neighbouring states of Uttar Pradesh and Jharkhand as well as Odisha to coordinate our actions," says DIG Dhillon. "Ahead of every exam, we deploy both technical and physical surveillance, and we are now compiling a comprehensive register of all online testing centres in Bihar." After the CHO exam was breached via proxy servers, the EOU has also expanded efforts to monitor educational consultancies and social media groups.

But the real test lies ahead. For every arrest, dozens of small-time operatives remain at large. Convictions are rare, and the racket evolves faster than the rules. "To fortify examination integrity, authorities must adopt the Supreme Court's NEET-UG safeguards introduced last year," says Sanjeev Kumar, an advocate at the Patna High Court. "These include rigorous SOPs for question paper handling and storage, biometric authentication for invigilators and candidates, stringent centre allocation reviews, independent audits and a robust grievance redressal mechanism. Most importantly, breaches must be met with prompt prosecution—with interim suspension of officials under investigation."

Still, the arrests of Mukhiya and Bhushan have struck a nerve. For a state gearing up for election, it's not just a law-and-order issue but a moral one—whether the promise of merit can be restored in a system bent under the weight of exam breaches. Until Bihar moves from reactive clean-ups to preventive deterrence—through both justice and structural reform—every exam will remain suspect and every deserving candidate a potential victim of the next scam. ■



The Risks of Sugar-Free

Sugar-free goodies and sugar substitutes seem like the answer for diabetics, for whom sugar is poison.

But even as the industry booms, many are questioning its promise of safe sweetness

By SONALI ACHARJEE

Illustration by NILANJAN DAS

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SUGAR-FREE SWEETS CAME AS A GODSEND FOR SHANTA BOSE, a 51-year-old homemaker in Gurugram, who was diagnosed as diabetic when she was 47. “Everywhere I went, there were desserts I could not eat,” says Bose. Then, she discovered the sugar-free shelf in her local department store, laden with cookies, cakes, candy, soft drinks and ice cream. She also read up on the low glycaemic index (GI)—a scale that ranks foods based on how quickly they raise blood sugar (glucose) levels post ingestion and where foods like fruits, millets, leafy vegetables and beans, which are digested slowly and therefore cause glucose levels to rise gradually, are considered good for diabetics. This prompted Bose to buy brown rice, millets, whole wheat and natural sweeteners like syrups from agave, tapioca, dates, yacon, coconut and monk fruit. For three months, she ended her meals with these, until one day she woke up with blurry vision. Tests showed her blood sugar to be abnormally high. It is a rude shock that greets many in India.

The vilification of sugar as the source of all ill health has seen a surge in demand for sugar-free products, with companies rising to the occasion with gusto. In 2019, a study by market research firm Mintel discovered that almost three in five Indians wish to consume less sugar for a healthier lifestyle, and a 2025 survey found a third of Indian parents seeking less sugar candy for kids. The fears associated with sugar are not unfounded. India is the diabetes capital of the world. A study published in *Lancet* in 2023 found over 100 million Indians to be

diabetic and another 136 million as pre-diabetic. Today, sugar is associated with disorders of practically every part of the body: be it the feet or the eyes, the brain or one's bones. “Clamping down on sugar has become a known narrative. Every obese, pre-diabetic, diabetic and non-diabetic/ non-obese person wants sugar-free products,” says nutritionist Ishi Khosla.

Following global trends, the Indian food industry is investing heavily in low calorie, low GI products. From mithai, ice cream, jams, sauces, bread, to alternative sweeteners like stevia, erythritol and xylitol, all come in ‘sugar-free’ avatars. According to market analysis by the IMARC Group, the Indian sugar-free market, comprising sugar-free and diabetic-friendly foods and beverages, was worth Rs 9,586

₹9,586 cr

Size of the Indian sugar-free market in 2024, according to a market analysis by the IMARC Group

crore in 2024, and is projected to reach Rs 22,082 crore by 2033. But just as the fat-free health fad of the 1990s, when despite painting fat as the villain, obesity rates continued to soar, the obsession with sugar-free foods can have an unexpected effect, experts warn.

“The only things without sugar are air and water,” says Dr Jasjeet Wasir, head of endocrinology and diabetology at Medanta Gurugram. “Good health requires balance; you can’t focus on one aspect of nutrition.”

SUGAR AND DIABETES

Everything we consume contains some or the other chemical form of sugar (whose structure comprises a molecule each of fructose and glucose), which is broken down into its components in the body. To function normally, humans

need glucose. When the intestines extract glucose from food and release it in the blood, it is known as blood sugar. If what one eats is broken down quickly, it spikes blood sugar, which puts pressure on the beta cells of the pancreas that create insulin—the hormone that moves glucose into cells to create life-giving energy. Such pressure eventually results in the cells in the muscles, fats and liver not responding to insulin, with the extra glucose staying in the bloodstream, leading to diabetes.

Hence the pivot to sugar-free products. But just because something is labelled ‘sugar free’ does not mean it won’t be broken down into sugar. “All food gets broken down into blood glucose,” says Dr Wasir. A sugar-free cake may lack refined sugar, but the wholewheat flour, eggs, chocolate and butter get converted into lactose and glucose during digestion. That is why experts recommend looking beyond the ‘added sugar’ figure on a label and check the ‘total sugar’ and ‘calorie’ numbers too. Calories represent the energy content in food and consuming more than needed leads to weight gain. “Some sugar-free products can be very calorific, leading to weight gain, which is also a risk factor for diabetes and other diseases,” adds Dr Wasir.

Sugar substitutes, and even natural sweeteners like honey, jaggery, dates, monkfruit and agave nectar should be counted as part of our daily glucose intake despite the low calories. “They are better than pure sugar, of course, but it is not a ticket to consuming them in vast quantities,” says Khosla. Natural sweeteners may also increase the craving for calorie-dense and sweet foods. As for artificial sugars, the zero GI may seem like a panacea, but they, too, can cause sugar cravings, as a 2010 study in the *Yale Journal of Biology and Medicine* showed. Many sugar alcohols have been linked to cancer. There is also strong medical belief that

excessive use of artificial sweeteners can ruin gut and, eventually, metabolic health. "Chemical sweeteners worsen insulin resistance and are very damaging for your gut health, which is linked to our overall wellbeing," says Khosla.

'SUGAR-FREE' BIAS

Many endocrinologists and nutritionists worry about the overconsumption of sugar-free products, which contain high fat and calories, chemical sweeteners and/or natural sugar substitutes. "When did an ice cream become okay for a diabetic to eat daily because it is high protein and low sugar? The marketing of products that should be eaten sporadically has eclipsed common sense," says Pune-based dietitian Rupal Sachdeva.

Indeed, a 2016 study in the journal *Nutrients* has shown that a health claim may lead a consumer to have positive attitudes towards a food regardless of its actual health benefit. This is known as the 'halo effect'. There is also 'positivity bias', where specific nutrient information makes the consumer assume the product has other attributes (a low sugar product must also be low in fat, for example). Gorging on food marketed as 'sugar-free', therefore, is not really an option for diabetics—moderation is important, and they have to be as watchful with these as with other foods.

A small sample size study in 2023 published in *Measurement: Food* journal examined the presence of such claims and the extent of compliance with the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) guidelines on 230 food packages marketed in India. These included baked goods, confectionery, cereals, dairy, soup, salad and protein products. It found that a large number of claims printed could not be verified due to the lack of clear FSSAI definitions.

Many businesses, however, have begun to invest in 'clean labels' instead of ambiguous claims. For example, Brooklyn Creamery, which claims to have only 4.5 per cent fat in its ice

SUGAR-FREE RULES

Diabetics can eat low calorie desserts but ought to mind the following, says Ritika Samaddar, regional head, nutrition and dietetics, Max Healthcare, Delhi



► Low calorie, low GI desserts use artificial sweeteners, which can spike blood sugar, cause digestive issues and gut dysbiosis

► Many desserts marketed as 'sugar-free' are high on fats from ghee, cream etc.

and increase calories. They may be unsafe for the heart

► Even low-sugar foods when taken in excess can cause the sugar to rise. Hence portion control is important

► Frequency of consumption

is important. Eating desserts daily increases the intake over a period

► Nuts, seeds, dates, figs and dark chocolates are a healthy option for diabetics. Greek yoghurts with fruits are a healthy dessert option

While sugar-free foods must be eaten only in moderation, natural sweeteners like jaggery may increase craving for high-calorie, sweet foods

creams and 0-2 calories per gram without added sugar, is clear that it uses sweeteners, but safe ones. Similarly, products of The Cinnamon Kitchen, which sells "refined sugar free" snacks, come with simple, clean labels. "We select each ingredient that goes into our products and there are

no hidden ingredients," says founder Priyasha Saluja.

However, even if a product is transparent, restraint must be exercised, say experts. "Glucose from a no-sugar oatmeal cookie may take longer to be released into blood versus a spoon of pure sugar. But something is used to make that cookie taste sweet, and all cookies contain some form of fat," says Dr Ritika Samaddar, nutritionist and head of dietics at Max Healthcare, Delhi.

The trick, then, is to not just focus on one aspect of nutrition. Even a low fat, low sugar, low calorie cookie can lead to increased sugar cravings. One must aim for an overall balance of nutrients, control portions and have correct information. Then, the occasional cookie won't hurt either. ■

INDIA
TODAY

BREAKING NEWS

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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 रुपये अतिरिक्त जोड़, समान मूल्य के चेक मान्य नहीं होंगे) के लिए बनवाया गया है।

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..... शहर..... राज्य..... पिन.....

मोबाइल..... ईमेल.....



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INDIA
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QUARTERLY



The beachfront
of Neeleshwar
Hermitage in
north Kerala

NORTH KERALA

**MAGIC OF
MALABAR**

**HERITAGE
HOTELS IN THE
HIMALAYAS**

**BIHAR'S
BUDDHIST
TRAIL**



■ Wildly Luxurious

AMIT MEHRA

The Oberoi Vindhya Vilas Wildlife Resort brings fine dining and luxury living into the heart of the forest. Just minutes by car from the Bandhavgarh National Park, the resort offers indulgent stays in either air-conditioned luxury tents with a private garden or in luxury villas with a private pool. Everything from jungle safaris to nature walks, bird-watching, bush dining and malt appreciation is on offer. International and regional cuisines are served alongside lake views across multiple dining venues. And, of course, there's a spa. From ₹40,500 per night; see www.oberoihotels.com. (Special offer: reserve a stay for two or more nights and receive a complimentary third night's stay; offer applicable for stays till July 31, 2025.)



■ Jungle Express

India's first Jungle Safari Vista-dome train is now chugging between Katarniaghata Wildlife Sanctuary and the Dudhwa Tiger Reserve in Uttar Pradesh. Covering a distance of 107 km over a leisurely 4.5-hour journey, the trip is priced at a reasonable ₹275 per

person. The train currently runs on weekends between Bichia and Mailani stations, but will eventually become a daily service. The large glass windows offer guests uninterrupted views of scenic forests and wetlands, and—if they're lucky—wildlife as well.

THE SWEET LIFE

Italy has a new luxury train. The stunning La Dolce Vita Orient Express draws inspiration from mid-century modern Italian design and offers itineraries based around wine, heritage, cuisine and golf, with dreamy names like 'The Truffle Route' and 'Tastes of Tuscan Vineyards'. Most departures are from Rome and take in major Italian destinations, including Sicily, which is accessed via a passenger rail ferry. From 4,160 euros per passenger per night; see www.orient-express.com/la-dolce-vita.



FREEDOM PASS

On June 18, Union road transport and roadways minister Nitin Gadkari announced a FASTag-based Annual Pass for hassle-free highway travel. Set for launch on August 15, 2025, the pass is priced at ₹3,000, and is valid for one year from the date of activation or up to 200 trips—whichever comes first. This is exclusively for non-commercial private vehicles such as cars, jeeps and vans, and aims to reduce wait times, ease congestion, and minimise disputes at toll plazas.



Niraamaya has launched 'sleep retreats' at its properties in Kovalam and Kumarakom. Check in for 7 nights at Niraamaya Retreats Surya Samudra, Kovalam, or Niraamaya Retreats Backwaters

& Beyond, Kumarakom, to escape the stress of daily life and experience unparalleled relaxation. The rejuvenating programme combines Ayurvedic

therapies, yoga and mindfulness to improve sleep quality and restore balance, and includes daily treatments like Abhyangam, Shirodhara and Udwarthanam, along with nourishing Ayurvedic meals. Now might be a good time, given the month of Karkidakam (mid-July to mid-August)—supposed to be excellent for getting the maximum benefits from Ayurveda treatments—is almost upon us. From Rs 1.75 lakh plus taxes for 7 nights on single occupancy; see www.niraamaya.com.


SHUTTERSTOCK





Hall of Fame

Following the extensive restoration that began in July 2024, Sabha Niwas, the historic Hall of Public Audience at the City Palace, Jaipur, has reopened to the public. The restoration process has uncovered aspects of the hall's original features, including its open arches, intricately carved marble columns, and ceilings richly adorned with vibrant colours and gold detailing—testaments to the craftsmanship of Jaipur's artists. The architectural landmark was once the setting for royal darbars and ceremonial receptions. Revived as a gallery experience, it now presents an exhibition that offers a window into the rituals, proceedings and symbolism of the royal court. Drawing from 'Pratap Prakasha', a historical source chronicling an idealised day in the life of Maharaja Sawai Pratap Singh of Jaipur, the Sabha Niwas has been brought to life through immersive storytelling and integrated technology. Several artefacts and objects are on public display for the first time, like howdahs from the 19th century, the carefully conserved central canopy, and a series of lifesize court portraits by master painter Sahibram dating from the 18th century. The Sabha Niwas is now open to visitors from 9:30 am to 6:30 pm every day.





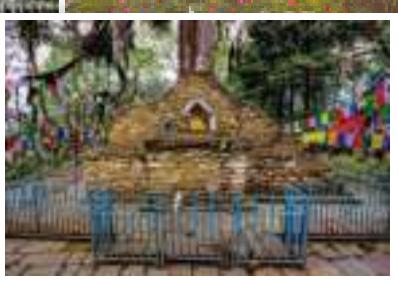
TOURISM & CIVIL AVIATION DEPARTMENT
GOVERNMENT OF SIKKIM



Sikkim
Where nature smiles..

Temi Tea Garden, Namchi District

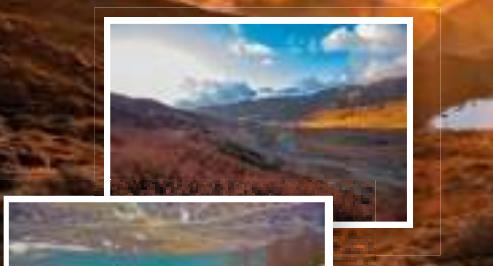
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BEYOND THE CLOUDS

DISCOVERING INDIA'S GREENEST CROWN JEWEL

In an age of over tourism and environmental crisis, Sikkim emerges as travel's most compelling paradox—a destination so pristine it makes you question everything you thought you knew about responsible wandering.

There are places on Earth that exist beyond the reach of Instagram filters and travel clichés, where nature's raw magnificence renders even the most eloquent traveler speechless. Sikkim is one such realm—a sliver of paradise wedged between Nepal, Bhutan, and Tibet, where the very air seems charged with something ineffable, something sacred.

Nestled in the lap of the Eastern Himalayas, this Indian state unfolds like a love letter written by the gods themselves. Here, emerald valleys breathe beneath snow-crowned peaks, prayer flags flutter like captured rainbows against impossible blue skies, and every winding trail whispers stories of resilience, spirit, and untamed beauty. This isn't merely a destination; it's a pilgrimage to what our world could be.

THE SACRED SUMMIT

Dominating Sikkim's skyline and consciousness stands Mount Khangchendzonga, the world's third-highest peak at 8,586 meters. But to call it simply a mountain would be like calling the Mona Lisa simply a portrait. For the people of Sikkim, Khangchendzonga is a living deity—a benevolent guardian whose icy presence ensures the land's peace and prosperity. This reverence for the natural world permeates every aspect of Sikkimese life, creating a harmony that's become increasingly rare in our fractured world.

The mountain's watchful presence sets the tone for a state where elevations dance from dense forests at 300 meters to the rarified air of high-altitude glaciers. It's this dramatic topography that creates Sikkim's extraordinary biodiversity, earning it recognition as one of the world's 32 global biodiversity hotspots—a naturalist's dream realized in just 7,096 square kilometers.

A LIVING LABORATORY OF WONDER

Step into Sikkim's forests, and you enter a living

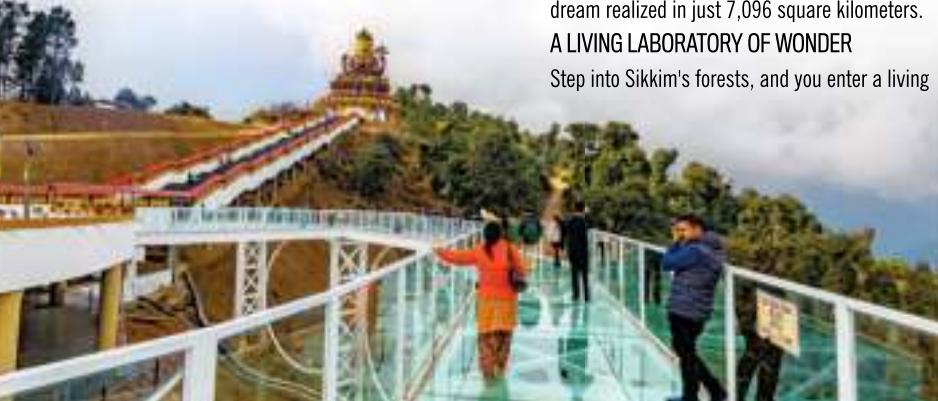
cathedral where more than 5,500 species of flowering plants create nature's most spectacular light show. The state harbors 557 varieties of orchids—each bloom a masterpiece of evolution's artistry—while 568 bird species paint the sky with impossible colors. Thousands of butterflies and moths swarm across highland meadows like scattered gems, creating moments of beauty so pure they border on the mystical.

With 47% forest coverage and over 30% of its territory designated as protected land, Sikkim has achieved what most destinations only aspire to—true conservation success. In a world where wilderness shrinks daily, this small state has chosen to expand its wild heart.

ADVENTURES BEYOND IMAGINATION

For the intrepid traveler, Sikkim offers adventures that redefine the meaning of breathtaking. Trek ancient mountain passes where each step reveals panoramic vistas that challenge the limits of photography. Traverse trails flanked by

For the people of Sikkim, Khangchendzonga is a living deity—a benevolent guardian whose icy presence ensures the land's peace and prosperity. This reverence for the natural world permeates every aspect of Sikkimese life, creating a harmony that's become increasingly rare in our fractured world.





alpine forests and glacial lakes so pristine they mirror the sky like nature's own infinity pools. Birdwatching here transcends hobby to become spiritual practice—every outing promises a kaleidoscope of species that transform quiet mornings into symphonies of sight and sound. Mountain biking through terraced hillsides, rock climbing on ancient granite faces, or paragliding over Gangtok's emerald valleys—each activity opens new dimensions of the state's splendor. For those seeking spiritual renewal, Sikkim's monastery trails offer more than mere



Local handicrafts, woven textiles, and aromatic cuisines offer visitors tactile connections to this living heritage, creating souvenirs that carry the essence of place.

sightseeing. Ancient gompas perched on impossible clifftops create spaces where time seems suspended, while newer spiritual landmarks blend traditional reverence with modern architectural grandeur. Here, the sacred isn't just preserved—it's reimagined for contemporary seekers.

A TAPESTRY OF CULTURES

Sikkim's true beauty lies not just in its landscapes but in its people. The Lepchas, Bhutias, and Nepalis weave their distinct cultural threads into a tapestry of harmonious coexistence. Their festivals explode with color and joy, their music carries the soul of the mountains, and their cuisine tells stories of trade routes and ancient wisdom.

The Sikkimese embody "Atithi Devo Bhava"—the guest is god—with a warmth that transforms strangers into family. Local handicrafts, woven textiles, and aromatic cuisines offer visitors tactile connections to this living heritage, creating souvenirs that carry the essence of place.

THE SUSTAINABILITY REVOLUTION

Long before "sustainable tourism" became a buzzword, Sikkim was quietly revolutionizing what it means to travel responsibly. As India's first 100% organic state, it has banned chemical fertilizers and pesticides, choosing

instead to honor traditional, earth-friendly practices that have sustained these communities for generations.

Under Chief Minister P.S. Tamang's visionary leadership, initiatives like "Mero Rukh Mero Santati" (My Tree, My Legacy) plant 108 trees for every child born, creating living legacies that connect families to the land. Plastic bags, single-use plastics, styrofoam, and even firecrackers are banned statewide, while creative campaigns like "A Day for Mother Earth" pause traffic for seven symbolic minutes of environmental reflection.

This isn't performative environmentalism—it's a lived ethic. From zero-waste villages in the north to solar-lit homestays throughout the state, Sikkim demonstrates that luxury and sustainability aren't opposing forces but natural partners in creating meaningful travel experiences.

THE FUTURE OF TRAVEL

Despite its modest population, Sikkim welcomes over three times its residents in annual visitors—a testament to its global appeal. Yet what's remarkable isn't the numbers but the quality of experience. Travelers consistently praise not just the stunning beauty but the thoughtful infrastructure that makes adventure accessible without compromising ecological values.

Well-maintained roads wind through impossible terrain, connecting charming homestays with elegant eco-resorts and upscale luxury hotels. Every accommodation option reflects Sikkim's commitment to treading lightly while providing comfort that enhances rather than diminishes the natural experience.

In Sikkim, you discover that the most profound journeys aren't about collecting destinations but about connecting with a place that changes you. Here, amidst prayer flags and glacial peaks, surrounded by the warmth of mountain hospitality and the wisdom of sustainable living, you don't just visit—you witness a vision of what travel could become.

This is Sikkim: not merely a place on the map, but a destination for the heart, a blueprint for the future, and perhaps most importantly, a reminder that paradise isn't lost—it's simply waiting to be approached with the reverence it deserves.





FEAST FOR THE SENSES

A performance of
Theyyam, a ritual art
form predominant in
North Kerala

SHUTTERSTOCK



THROUGH TIME, TASTE AND TRANQUILITY

From spice-scented markets and sea-facing sanctuaries to misty hill trails and ancient rituals, North Kerala reveals a soulful, lesser-known side of God's Own Country

By Ishani Nandi

It all begins, as it often does in Kerala, with people around a table, conversation and food. At Hotel Jineesh, a small, bare-bones eatery in Chaliyam, my order arrives on a steel plate filled to the brim and placed on a rough-hewn, wooden table. Three men, already seated, see mid-chat that there's no room elsewhere, and wave us over to settle next to them. I slide my plastic stool forward to this Malabar classic: *kallumakkaya*—freshly harvested mussels simmering in a light gravy mix of its own juices, coconut slivers and fragrant spices—and a thick slice of pathri, a golden-fried, rice-flour roundel. I dig in as a fresh batch of batter-fried bananas are carried out by a sari-clad woman, whose face brightens into a smile as hungry locals trickle in, eager to start the day right.

If Kerala's south were a monsoon downpour, the north would be its petrichor. Unlike its well-publicised southern sibling, North Kerala remains largely untouched by the stampede of mass tourism, inviting you in with the promise of raw landscapes, languid rhythms and a storied history.



THE INFORMATION



KOZHIKODE

Getting there: Calicut International Airport (CCJ) is around 25km (30min) from the main Kozhikode town, while Kannur Airport is 1hr40min away. Kozhikode railway station is connected to all major cities via express trains

Stay: The Raviz, Kadavu, next to the Chaliyar river. From ₹9,000 + taxes; www.theraviz.com

Dining: All-day multi-cuisine restaurant, grilled-food speciality restaurant, bar

Activities: Yoga, river cruise, Ayurveda spa



WAYANAD

Getting there: By air to Calicut International Airport, then 3hr by road

Stay: Pepper Trail Heritage Plantation Retreat. From ₹12,000+ taxes; peppertrail.in

Dining: Inhouse restaurant. No set menu, all meals pre-ordered

Activities: Guided plantation drive and birdwatching, evening tea tasting



NILESHWAR

Getting there: Nearest airports in Kannur (2hr) and Mangaluru (2hr15min).

Stay: Neeleshwar Hermitage. From Rs 11,900 + taxes. Lotus Houseboat: starting from ₹24,600 for one-night stay, ₹44,095 for two nights. Two-night journeys span a distance of 25km one way

Dining: Indian cuisine restaurant, speciality seafood restaurant

Activities: Guided village walk, seaside yoga sessions,

THE LAND OF LEGENDS

It's a warm, sticky June morning, and I am on the hunt for some of those stories with Rajeesh Raghavan, a travel professional and local-history expert, who is guiding me through Kozhikode. Within minutes into our half-hour drive to the city, he recounts tales from Kozhikode's long and complex past. Along the way, he points to landmarks that reflect its continued presence—a century-old British-built iron bridge still in daily use; the Commonwealth Tile Factory in Feroke, built in 1864, and still operating; the Wadiaji Parsi Anjuman Baug, an 18th-century fire temple, managed and maintained by the Marshalls, a four-member family that is all that remains of Kozhikode's once significant Parsi community.

Two centuries before their arrival, Vasco da Gama reached India by sea in 1498 and opened up trade with Europe, bypassing overland Arab routes. His landing point on Kappad beach, 30 minutes away, is a popular tourist spot. The Portuguese explorer was warmly welcomed by the Zamorins, the erstwhile rulers of Kozhikode, whose keen nose for business turned the city into a major spice and silk emporium.

The Zamorin of Calicut once ruled these streets. Today, their palace is a hospital and the throne room a maternity ward, but their impact is still felt, not least in the city's modern marketplaces. Valiyangadi Market, once the bustling heart of the city's spice and grain trade, remains active today with wholesale dealers in rice, areca nut, and coconut oil. Silk Street, and SM Street (Sweet Meat Street), one of the city's oldest commercial roads, are busy retail hubs

where traditional halwa stalls sit comfortably beside mobile stores and branded outlets.

I sample a variety of the famous "sweet meat" that gives the street its name at the 92-year-old Shankaran Bakery. "Our halwa is originally an Arabian delicacy," Rajeesh says, as I am handed a slice from the jewel-like, soft, candied bricks made of refined flour, sugar, and oil or ghee. My visit coincides with Eid al-Adha, so the shopping hub is deserted: today is all about prayer, family and feasts. In Kozhikode, faith doesn't stand apart—it leans in, like neighbours over a shared wall. The 600-year-old Thali Temple, the 700-year-old Mishkal Mosque, once charred by the Portuguese in 1510, and then rebuilt, ("with wood from the Zamorin's own fort," Rajeesh notes), and the Mother of God cathedral, built on land gifted by the same Hindu ruler, are all a stone's throw away from each other.

As we head to Paragon, the city's iconic restaurant, known for their impeccable food, Sunday lunch crowds and must-have tender-coconut custard, Rajeesh advises caution: "Famous personalities are snuck in through the back," he says with a smile, "We'll have to wait." Indeed, the place is packed, despite it being a holiday, so we grab our custards and savour spicy prawn fry, Malabar biryani, and a raw mango-and-mint mocktail at Adaminte Chayakada (Adam's Tea Shop). Between bites, Rajeesh tells me about a vegetarian crocodile named

Babiya in Kasaragod who, until his recent demise, lived in a temple pond and ate *prasadam*. You just can't make this up. But in "city of truth" Kozhikode, you don't have to.

OPEN TO THE FAITHFUL
The 14th century Mishkal mosque in Kozhikode

INDIA PICTURE

Ayurveda health and wellness centre, cooking classes (charges apply), visits to experience Theyyam performances

The trip logistics were handled by Discovery Journeys India, who have been offering tailor-made holidays in India for over 30 years

Contact: enquiry@discoveryjourneysindia.com, www.discoveryjourneysindia.com





ON TO THE HIGHLANDS

ARBOREAL LUXURY

Top, the Woodpecker Tree House in the Pepper Trail estate; below, the bedroom in the tree house

My ride to Wayanad curves north-eastward into forested hills, where hairpin bends and misty slopes make for a scenic drive. The sun hangs low as our wheels roll into the lush haven that is Pepper Trail estate. Set deep within a former colonial plantation, Pepper Trail feels less like a resort and more like a secret camp.

Over breakfast in the main pavilion, I meet owner Anand Jayan, whose grandfather P. Balram Kurup bought the 200-acre coffee, spice and tea estate in 1932 from a Scotsman. Anand's is the hand behind the retreat's thoughtful, sustainable and immersive soul. Perfectly balancing the wilderness experience with elevated comfort, the 150-year-old two-suite colonial bungalow with its back-to-roots aesthetic delivers on its promise of nostalgia. Two treehouses, built 40 feet high on sturdy jackfruit trees, feel like something out of a fantasy fiction film, and the rooms themselves, while arboreal,

make no compromises on either space or the high-end feel. For the more down-to-earth, the villas boast grande-sized quarters, a front garden, and a forest-facing private infinity pool.

At Wayanad, there's something for everyone: its wildlife sanctuary has bird-watching and safaris, while Soochipara and Meenmutty waterfalls are magnificent after the rains. Further west, Banasura Sagar Dam, Asia's largest earthen dam, tempts with boat rides and viewpoints. Thrill-seekers can hike to Chembra Peak, climb up to the Edakkal Caves where stone-age petroglyphs line the walls, or go zip-lining. History buffs will find the Wayanad Heritage Museum an unassuming gem while retail-hounds can peruse the local markets at Sultan Bathery just 20 minutes away.

It's hard to imagine a more perfect getaway, but the forces of nature tend to follow a different policy from "customer is king". North Kerala tourism faced a trifecta of setbacks with Covid-19, the 2024 floods and recent landslides. Though the tragedy struck a limited geography, the entire district's tourism bookings collapsed. Since then, however, recovery efforts spell hope. Altaf Chapri, who runs Neeleshwar Hermitage, my next and final stop in North Kerala, is enthused by the boom: "Southern Kerala has overgrown. Concrete, crowds... but here, the beaches still breathe. Between on-season swimming, dolphins and migratory birds in the winter, backwaters and treks, or restorative wellness therapies—northern Kerala has it all," he adds.





LIVE LIKE A ZAMORIN

Top, A bountiful thali at the restaurant of Neeleshwar Hermitage; right, the houseboat Lotus on a cruise; below, an infinity pool at the resort overlooking the beach



DOWN BY THE SEA

From the highlands to the Arabian Sea, I roll into Neeleshwar Hermitage where I am welcomed into 12 acres of a dream-like sprawl on which 18 standalone cottages wait invitingly for weary heads. I walk into my sea-facing room, built in the traditional style but with plush comforts, a plunge pool and porch sit-outs. Though fresh off a five-hour drive, I find it hard to stop myself from leaving my bags and trotting across the measly 200 metres of pathways that cut through grass, on to the unspoiled Ozhinavalappu beach, and right into the sea.

Healing and rejuvenation form the pillars of the Hermitage's credo: the Priya Spa offers holistic treatments based on consultations with the inhouse Ayurveda practitioner, while the dawn echoes with expert-led pranayam and asanas at the seaside yoga centre. Meals are served in open restaurants flooded with ocean breeze. Sustainability flows through every detail—from composting to no-plastic policies and thoughtfully sourced cuisine.

The highlight, however, is a sojourn aboard The Lotus—the retreat's 100-foot houseboat—for one- to two-night journeys through rabble-free backwaters. And then there is the transformative experience of witnessing Theyyam—a ritual dance form native to North Kerala. Rooted in the worship of ancestral and local deities, Theyyam is both an act of devotion and resistance. For centuries, it has been performed by members of lower castes who, during these rituals, embody the spirit of divine figures. I find the paradox striking: a Brahmin priest bowing before a Dalit man possessed by the spirit of the divine Muthappan. In that fire-lit moment, caste, class and creed collapse into shared awe.

North Kerala rewards the slow traveller—with stories that unfold gently, landscapes that linger, and moments that stay long after you've left. ■



TRACING THE SACRED STEPS

Exploring Bihar's Ramayan Tourist Circuit

From Sitamarhi, the legendary birthplace of Goddess Sita, to Valmiki Nagar's serene ashram where the epic was penned, Bihar's Ramayan Tourist Circuit invites pilgrims and travelers alike to walk in the footsteps of the divine.

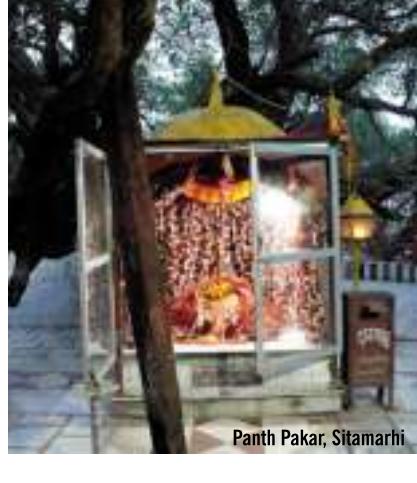
Bihar, the land of ancient wisdom and spiritual heritage, is embarking on an ambitious journey to transform its sacred Ramayan Circuit into a world-class pilgrimage and cultural tourism destination. At the heart of this initiative lies Punaura Dham in Sitamarhi, revered as the birthplace of Goddess Sita. The state's vision is to elevate this site to a stature comparable to Ayodhya's Ram Janmabhoomi, thereby placing Bihar prominently on the global spiritual tourism map.

Reviving Sacred Geography: The Ramayan Circuit

The Ramayan Circuit in Bihar encompasses a series of sites intricately linked to the epic narrative of Lord

Ram and Goddess Sita. From Sitamarhi's Punaura Dham, where Sita is believed to have emerged from the earth, to Valmiki Nagar in West Champaran, where Sage Valmiki composed the Ramayan and Sita took refuge, these locations are imbued with profound spiritual significance.

Recognizing the potential of these sites to attract pilgrims and tourists, the Bihar government has initiated comprehensive development plans to enhance infrastructure, preserve cultural heritage, and promote sustainable tourism. Hon'ble Chief Minister Nitish Kumar, during his pragati yatra emphasized the importance of restoring Punaura Dham.



Panth Pakar, Sitamarhi



Punaura Dham, Sitamarhi

Punaura Dham: The Epicenter of Devotion

Punaura Dham, situated approximately 2 kilometers from Sitamarhi town, holds immense religious importance as the birthplace of Goddess Sita. To transform this sacred site into a major pilgrimage destination, the Bihar government has sanctioned a redevelopment project. This project involves the acquisition of 50.50 acres of land to expand the existing temple complex, which currently spans 17 acres. The development plan includes modern amenities, improved accessibility, and enhanced facilities for pilgrims and tourists.

Panthpakar, Sitamarhi:

Plans for temple expansion, ghat restoration, new access paths, thematic entry gates, lighting, and parking facilities, with a 24-month project timeline.

Girijasthan Temple, Phulhar, Madhubani:

Development into a tourist destination with modern amenities such as laser fountains, toilet blocks, ghat development, and dedicated parking.

Ahilya Sthan, Darbhanga:

A significant budget allocated for rejuvenation, including a boundary wall, meditation pond, guesthouse, cafeteria, and pavilions.

These projects aim to enhance the spiritual and cultural experience for visitors while preserving the sanctity and historical significance of each site.



Girijasthan Temple, Phulhar, Madhubani

Integration with National Tourism Initiatives

The development of the Ramayan Circuit in Bihar aligns with national tourism initiatives such as the Swadesh Darshan Scheme and the PRASHAD Scheme. These programs aim to develop theme-based tourist circuits and pilgrimage sites across India, enhancing infrastructure and promoting cultural heritage.

Under the Swadesh Darshan Scheme, Sitamarhi, Buxar, and Darbhanga have been identified for development as part of the Ramayan Circuit. Additionally, Punaura Dham has been included under the PRASHAD Scheme, focusing on the development of pilgrimage sites.

Our aim is to develop Punaura Dham on the lines of Ayodhya's Ram Janmabhoomi, making it a focal point for spiritual tourism and cultural heritage.

- Shri Raju Kumar Singh
Hon'ble Tourism Minister, Bihar

Strategic Development of Key Sites

Beyond Punaura Dham, the Bihar government has identified and initiated development projects at several other sites associated with the Ramayan:

• Sitakund, East Champaran:

A substantial budget has been allocated for beautification, including the construction of an entrance gate, boundary wall, sanitation facilities, shops, and a cafeteria.



Panth Pakar, Sitamarhi

Haleswar Sthan, Sitamarhi



Policy Reforms and Investment Incentives

To support the development of the Ramayan Circuit and other tourism initiatives, the Bihar government has introduced several policy reforms:

• Bihar Tourism Policy 2023:

Revised to attract investments in the hotel and hospitality sector, with provisions such as SGST reimbursement extended up to seven years for new establishments.

• Investment Threshold Adjustments:

Minimum investment requirements for star-category hotels have been reduced, encouraging smaller investors to participate in the tourism sector.



We envision Sitamarhi as a world-class tourism destination, equipped with world class infrastructure. Our goal is to establish it as one of the most important destinations of the larger Ramayan Circuit—not just in Bihar, but across the entire country

- Shri Lokesh Kumar Singh
Secretary,
Department of Tourism, Bihar



Ahilya Sthan, Darbhanga



Ahilya Sthan, Darbhanga

A Sacred Circuit Reborn

As construction begins at these storied sites, the land of Sita prepares to retell its age-old tales with renewed splendour.

Punaura Dham, Sitamarhi

Located about 2 kilometers from the heart of Sitamarhi town, Punaura Dham is revered as the birthplace of Goddess Sita, also known as Janaki. According to legend, it was here that King Janaka's plough struck a golden casket during a sacred yagna, from which the infant Sita emerged—making the land profoundly sacred in the Ramayan tradition.

At the heart of this revered site is the Punaura Dham Mandir, a major pilgrimage destination in Mithila. The temple houses idols of Lord Ram and Sita, alongside those of their divine siblings—Lakshman and Urmila, and Bharat and Mandavi. The presence of shrines dedicated to Lord Hanuman and Lord Shiva within the temple complex adds to its spiritual magnetism.

Nearby lies another significant site, Janaki Kund—a tank said to have been excavated by King Janaka at the very spot where Sita was discovered. It is located just south of the famed Janaki Mandir and remains a symbol of the divine origins of Sita in local tradition and worship.

HaleshwariSthan, Sitamarhi

Situated around 4 kilometers west of Sitamarhi town, HaleshwariSthan is steeped in mythological lore and is an essential stop on the Ramayan Circuit. According to legend, it is the site where King Siradhwaia Janaka performed the sacred Haleshti Yajna, praying for a child. Following this ritual, he began to till the land with his plough—a moment that led to the miraculous discovery of Sita. To commemorate this divine event, King Janaka is believed to have consecrated the Haleshwarnath Temple at this very location. The temple, dedicated to Lord Shiva, enshrines an ancient stone Shivalinga in its sanctum, which is widely believed to be the original lingam worshipped by the king during the

yajna. It continues to attract devotees, especially during festivals like Shivaratri and Ram Navami.

PanthPakar, Sitamarhi

Nestled near Sitamarhi, PanthPakar marks a gentle yet emotionally rich pause in the divine journey of Sita. According to local lore, this was the first halting point of Goddess Sita after her wedding to Lord Ram in Janakpur. On the way back to Ayodhya, Sita alighted from her palanquin to rest beneath the shade of a large banyan tree, locally known as Pakar—a tree that still stands tall, enveloped in centuries of devotion and legend.



Phulhar



Ram Rekha Ghat, Buxar

Girijasthan Temple Phulhar, Madhubani

In the picturesque village of Phulhar near Madhubani lies Girijasthan Temple, a revered temple dedicated to Goddess Girija (a form of Parvati). It was here, amidst fields of fragrant blossoms, that Maa Sita used to offer flowers to the deity, accompanied by her close companions.

Legend has it that this is the site of the first divine meeting between Sita and Lord Ram. Set in idyllic surroundings, Girijasthan Temple Phulhar today offers a spiritual retreat into the romance and destiny of the Ramayan, where nature, devotion, and divinity converge.



Giddheshwar, Jamui

Shivling and riverbank. Today, Ram Rekha Ghat is a revered site of devotion, where devotees come for blessings and spiritual cleansing.

Ahirauli, Buxar

Just 5 kilometers northeast of Buxar lies AHIRauli, a quiet village that holds echoes of the miraculous redemption of Ahilya. It is believed that it was here that Sage Gautama's wife, cursed into a stone form, was restored when Lord Ram's foot touched the stone, awakening her from her long penance.

Though a smaller site compared to AhilyaSthan in Darbhanga, AHIRauli carries the same essence of divine grace and is venerated by pilgrims retracing the journey of Lord Ram. The simple landscape of the village belies the spiritual depth of the transformation that occurred here.

Giddheshwar, Jamui

Tucked in the Khaira block of Jamui district, around 15 kilometers from the town, Giddheshwar (also spelled Giddeshwar) is believed to be the site where the vulture king Jatayu valiantly confronted Ravana. As Ravana fled southward with the kidnapped Sita, Jatayu attacked him in an attempt to rescue her, engaging in a fierce aerial battle over these very hills. Though mortally wounded, Jatayu's heroic sacrifice became an immortal chapter in the Ramayan. The Giddheshwar Mahadev Temple, located atop the hill, stands as a solemn reminder of his devotion and bravery. The site remains a powerful symbol of courage, loyalty, and sacrifice, drawing both devotees and travelers seeking inspiration from the epic's timeless values.



Janaki Temple, Sitamarhi



Ramchaura, Vaishali

Ramchaura, Vaishali

Located in Hajipur, Vaishali district, Ramchaura is a sacred site where Lord Ram is believed to have stopped and bathed before continuing to Janakpur for his wedding. The temple here honors Lord Ram and attracts devotees retracing his divine journey. The name "Ramchaura" combines "Ram" and "Chaura" (footprint), referring to Lord Ram's footprints etched on a stone slab about 15 feet high. An inscription above reads, "The soil of the forest path once traversed by Lord Ram has been enshrined here. Worship of this sacred earth bestows virtue upon the faithful." This spot remains a vital spiritual halt on the Ramayan trail.

Village of Tar, Bhojpur

The village of Tar, located 10 kilometers northwest of Piro in Bihar's Bhojpur district, is steeped in dramatic mythological history. According to tradition, this is the place where Lord Ram vanquished the fearsome demoness Tarka, who had been terrorizing sages and disrupting yajnas (sacrificial rituals).

Local legend speaks of an ancient water tank, believed to be the former wrestling arena of Tarka, where the battle took place. The village today remains quiet and unassuming, yet it echoes with the memory of that epic confrontation—a moment where divine valour triumphed over chaos. For ardent devotees of Ramayan and pilgrims, village of Tar offers a raw, unembellished connection to the valour of Lord Ram.

Sita Kund, Gayaji

Located on the banks of the Falgu River in sacred Gayaji, Sita Kund lies opposite the Vishnupad Temple

AhilyaSthan, Darbhanga

Ahilya Sthan in Darbhanga is a deeply sacred site on Bihar's Ramayan Circuit. It is where Lord Ram, Lakshman, and Sage Vishwamitra found Ahilya, turned to stone by a curse. Moved by her story, Ram's touch restored her to human form, symbolizing divine forgiveness and redemption.

Today, the Ahilya Sthan Temple stands as a beacon of spiritual renewal and compassion. Pilgrims visit to honor this powerful episode of the Ramayan and to seek inspiration from its timeless message of grace, transformation, and the triumph of righteousness.

Ram Rekha Ghat, Buxar

Ram Rekha Ghat in Buxar, situated on the sacred banks of the Ganga, holds profound mythological importance. After defeating the demoness Tadaka, Lord Ram performed purification rituals here to atone for killing a woman. He crafted a Shivling from clay and worshipped it, but as the river water began to erode it, Lord Ram protected the Shivling with his hand during the abhishekam. Legend says his handprint and footprints remain etched on the



Sita Kund, Gayaji

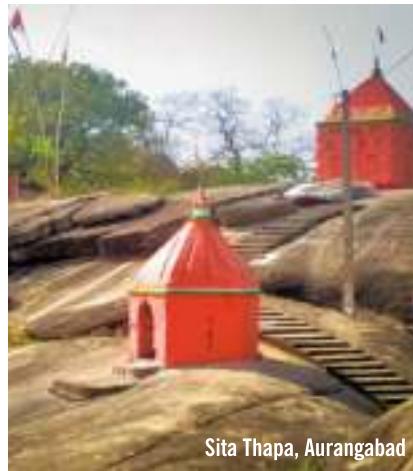
and holds profound spiritual significance. It is believed to be the site where Mata Sita performed Pind Daan (ancestral offerings) for her father-in-law, King Dasharatha, embodying devotion and dharma. Another tradition links it to the exile years when Sita bathed here, giving the kund its name. Today, Sita Kund draws pilgrims seeking to honor their ancestors and connect with the sacred geography of the Ramayan.

Sita Kund, Munger

In historic Munger, Sita Kund is linked to the Agni Pariksha episode, where Maa Sita bathed after proving her purity by fire. The pool, now a naturally warm spring, is revered as a symbol of her unwavering purity. During Magh's full moon, the kund attracts numerous devotees, blending faith and natural wonder.

Sita Thapa, Aurangabad

In Nima village, Aurangabad district, Sita Thapa marks the sacred spot where Lord Ram, Sita, and Lakshman rested on their way to Gayaji. A small temple encloses Sita's handprints, believed to be where they built a kutir to rest. Nearby, a rock bears her footprints, beside a serene lake flanked by ancient temples dedicated to Shiva and the ten avatars of Vishnu.



Sita Thapa, Aurangabad



Valmiki Nagar, West Champaran

Valmiki Nagar, West Champaran

Valmiki Nagar, home to Sage Valmiki's ashram, is where Sita sought refuge after returning from Lanka, giving birth to twins Lav and Kush. Valmiki raised them while composing the Ramayan. When Lord Ram asked Sita to return, she called upon the earth to reclaim her, symbolizing her return to her origins.

Other notable sites in Bihar include ChankiGarh, Gautam Kund, Ramshilla, and Kako—each rich with mythological significance tied to the Ramayan.

Conclusion

Bihar's initiative to develop the Ramayan Circuit represents a significant step toward preserving and promoting its rich cultural and spiritual heritage. By transforming sacred sites like Punaura Dham into world-class pilgrimage destinations, the state not only honors its historical legacy but also paves the way for economic growth and community development.

As these projects unfold, Bihar invites pilgrims, tourists, and cultural enthusiasts to embark on a journey through the sacred landscapes of the Ramayan, experiencing the timeless tales of devotion, duty, and divine love that continue to inspire generations.



Sita Kund, Gayaji

KEY RAMAYAN CIRCUIT SITES

Distances, Access, and Highlights

1. Punaura Dham, Sitamarhi

- **Distance from Patna:** ~137 km by road (approx.)
- **How to Reach:** Approximately 3.5–4.5 hours by road or train.
- **Highlights:** Believed to be Sita's birthplace; features Janaki Kund and shrines to Lord Ram, Sita, Lakshman, Urmila, Bharat, Mandavi, Hanuman, and Shiva.

2. Haleshwari Sthan, Sitamarhi

- **Distance from Patna:** ~140 km (3 km northwest of Sitamarhi) (approx.)
- **How to Reach:** Accessible via Sitamarhi by road or local transport.
- **Highlights:** Site of King Janaka's Haleshti Yajna; houses an ancient Shiva temple.

3. Panth Pakar, Sitamarhi

- **Distance from Patna:** ~145 km (8 km from Sitamarhi) (approx.)
- **How to Reach:** Reach Sitamarhi by road/train; local transport to Panth Pakar.
- **Highlights:** Believed to be Sita's first stop after marriage; features an ancient banyan tree.

4. Girijasthan Temple, Phulhar (Madhubani)

- **Distance from Patna:** ~195 km (approx.)
- **How to Reach:** Approximately 5 hours by road; nearest railhead at Madhubani.
- **Highlights:** Site of Lord Ram and Sita's first meeting; home to the Girijasthan temple.

5. Ahilya Sthan, Darbhanga

- **Distance from Patna:** ~123 km (approx.)
- **How to Reach:** Approximately 3 hours by road or train to Darbhanga; local transport to Ahilya Sthan.
- **Highlights:** Site where Lord Ram liberated Ahilya; features a temple commemorating the event.

6. Ram Rekha Ghat, Buxar

- **Distance from Patna:** ~124 km (approx.)
- **How to Reach:** Approximately 2 hours by train or road.
- **Highlights:** Site where Lord Ram performed rituals after defeating Tadaka; features a revered Shivling.

7. Ahirauli, Buxar

- **Distance from Patna:** ~131 km (approx.)
- **How to Reach:** Approximately 3 hours by road; local transport from Buxar.
- **Highlights:** Associated with the redemption of Ahilya; holds spiritual significance.

8. Giddheshwar, Jamui

- **Distance from Patna:** ~151 km (approx.)
- **How to Reach:** Approximately 3.5 hours by road or train to Jamui; local transport to Giddheshwar.
- **Highlights:** Believed to be the site where Jatayu confronted Ravana; features the Giddheshwar Mahadev Temple.

9. Ramchaura, Vaishali

- **Distance from Patna:** ~35 km (approx.)
- **How to Reach:** Approximately 1 hour by road.
- **Highlights:** Site where Lord Ram is believed to have bathed before proceeding to Janakpur; features a temple with Lord Ram's footprints.

10. Village of Tar, Bhojpur

- **Distance from Patna:** ~70 km (approx.)
- **How to Reach:** Approximately 2 hours by road.
- **Highlights:** Believed to be the site where Lord Ram killed the demoness Tarka; features an ancient water tank.

11. Sita Kund, Gayaji

- **Distance from Patna:** ~100 km (approx.)
- **How to Reach:** Approximately 2.5 hours by road or train to Gayaji; local transport to Sita Kund.
- **Highlights:** Site where Sita performed Pind Daan for King Dasharatha; features a sacred kund.

12. Sita Kund, Munger

- **Distance from Patna:** ~180 km (approx.)
- **How to Reach:** Approximately 4.5 hours by road or train to Munger; local transport to Sita Kund.
- **Highlights:** Associated with Sita's Agni Pariksha; features a naturally hot spring.

13. Sita Thapa, Aurangabad

- **Distance from Patna:** ~140 km (approx.)
- **How to Reach:** Approximately 3.5 hours by road..
- **Highlights:** Believed to be a resting place for Lord Ram, Sita, and Lakshman during their exile; features Sita's handprints.

14. Valmiki Nagar, West Champaran

- **Distance from Patna:** ~290 km (approx.)
- **How to Reach:** Approximately 7 hours by road or train to Narkatiaganj; local transport to Valmiki Nagar.
- **Highlights:** Site of Sage Valmiki's ashram; where Sita took refuge and gave birth to Lava and Kusha.



Timeless Hideaways

Escape to these heritage hill retreats in the Himalaya that are steeped in character and surrounded by calm

By Prachi Joshi

Picture a cottage in the hills, with wooden beams, an ivy-clad verandah, an old fireplace and warm lamps glowing against the mountain mist. You can find all this and more at these heritage stays across the Himalayan foothills. Once family homes or summer retreats, they have been thoughtfully restored without losing their original charm. From the forests of Binsar to the tea estates of Darjeeling, these are not just hotels but old homes with a new life—and a story to tell





⬅ BLUE BOOK AT GETHIA, NAINITAL

An 18-km (about 45 mins) winding uphill drive from Nainital brings you to Blue Book by Gethia, a quaint 1890s bungalow with eight rooms all done up in Victorian style with floral upholstery. Four additional Mediterranean-style rooms are in the new wing, a late 20th-century addition. Meals range from North Indian and Kumaoni to pan-Asian and Continental, served either in the cosy dining room or around the property or further afield, like a picnic in the surrounding wilderness or a riverside high tea. Other experiences include scenic hikes, birding and visits to nearby temples like Kasar Devi and Chitai Golu Devta.

Doubles from ₹13,000;
bluebookhotels.com

↑ The Elgin, Darjeeling

Built in 1887, The Elgin was once the summer residence of the Maharajah of Cooch Behar. The sprawling green-roofed manor house practically oozes old-world charm with its oak wood panelling, period Burma teak furniture, crackling fireplaces and a grand piano. In all, 25 well-equipped rooms are done up in charming Victorian décor and come with a sitting area and a working fireplace. Most rooms look out over the landscaped garden and the mountains (no Kanchenjunga views though). An inhouse spa offers a range of massages and beauty treatments. The hotel is located within walking distance of the Darjeeling Mall (High Street) lined with cafes, restaurants and bars.

Doubles from ₹13,000; elginhotels.com





INDIA PICTURE

① The Judge's Court, Pragpur (Kangra)

Located in the foothills of Kangra valley, The Judge's Court is a historic country manor house dating to the early 1900s. Beautifully restored to maintain the ambience of a bygone era, the hotel offers 30 well-appointed and individually decorated rooms spread over three structures in the orchard complex of the estate. The dining room serves a mix of Indian, Continental and Himachali cuisine, while the Whiskey Priest Bar offers libations of all kinds. Visit the charming heritage village of Pragpur to admire its mud-plastered and slate-roofed houses, cobbled streets and the ornamental village tank. Other activities include visiting local artisans, bird-watching and day trips to Dharamshala and its Norbulingka Institute, which is dedicated to preservation of the Tibetan arts.

Doubles from ₹13,500; judgescourt.com



Chapslee, Shimla ↗

In the erstwhile summer capital of the Raj, Chapslee is a charming heritage building that's just a short walk from Mall Road. Built in 1830, and owned by the family of the former king of Kapurthala, the home was turned into a small heritage hotel in 1976. Since then, it's been known for 'The Chapslee Experience'—warm, personalised service and preservation of traditions like silver service, sit-down meals and high tea. Decked out in chintz, silver and crystal, each of the five suites is uniquely designed and full of bygone charm. While a summer holiday at Chapslee is wonderful, Christmas is particularly special with a traditional dinner; keep your fingers crossed for snow.

Doubles from ₹16,500; chapslee.co.in



➡ ROSASTAYS JEOLIKOTE BUNGALOW, JEOLIKOTE (NAINITAL)

Formerly known simply as The Cottage, this 150-year-old red-roofed heritage bungalow with ivy-draped walls is a charming homestay with stunning mountain views. It offers six spacious en suite rooms that come with queen-sized takhat beds, cosy fireplaces and handmade wardrobes, while chintz lamps, cotton durries and patch-work quilts add to the homey vibe. The common living area, sun terrace and lush garden are perfect to curl up with a book or to just be. Meals are homestyle and include local Kumaoni dishes as well as North Indian and international fare.

 Doubles from ₹7,500; rosastays.com



↑ Khali Estate, Binsar

Built in 1875, and home to everyone from distinguished British administrator Sir Henry Ramsay to the Nehru family, Khali Estate is located in the heart of Binsar Wildlife Sanctuary. The heritage hotel is set amidst 25 acres of orchards and wilderness, and comes with a panoramic view of the snow-clad Himalaya. Rooms—spread across the main bungalow and in stone-and-mud-walled cottages dotted around it—are cosy and have a rustic charm. The spacious library with over 5,000 books is heaven for book lovers; for the active sort, there is badminton, tennis and other games to keep busy, as well as jungle walks, treks, bird-watching etc.

 Doubles from ₹9,000; khaliestate.com



↑ Abbotsford Prasada Bhavan, Nainital

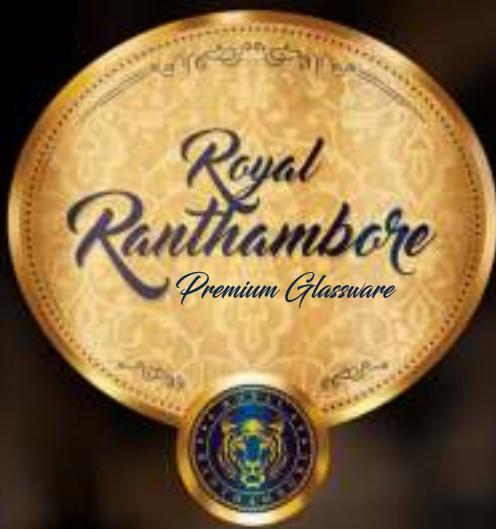
Located away from Nainital's touristy bustle, Abbotsford Prasada Bhavan dates to 1876 and offers two separate accommodations—the three-room Wordsworth Cottage and the five-bedroom Apsley House. With their white façades, red roofs (with chimneys) and pine wood flooring, both cottages look straight out of an Enid Blyton book. Rooms are fitted out with colonial furniture, art and artefacts. Head out on forest trails or go birding with the inhouse naturalists and return to sumptuous Kumaoni dishes and international favourites at Café Chica.

Doubles from ₹9,000; abbotsfordnainital.com

GLENBURN TEA ESTATE, DARJEELING

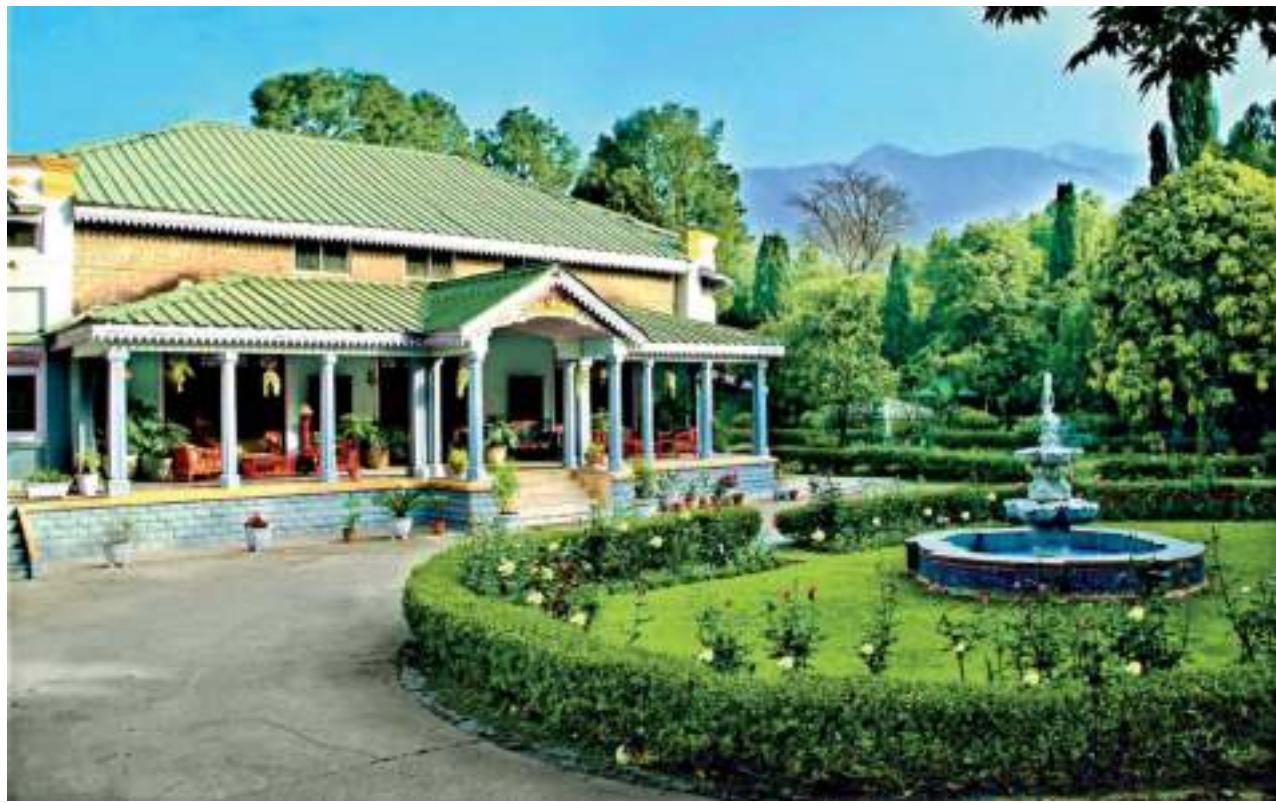
A beautifully restored colonial tea plantation house established in 1860, Glenburn Tea Estate is nestled amidst a 1,600-acre working tea plantation in Darjeeling. The two cottages—Burra Bungalow and Water Lily Bungalow—feature four themed suites each, with a four-poster bed, hand-embroidered bed linens, a fireplace and a verandah or terrace that offers views of the tea gardens and Darjeeling city. The Burra Bungalow suites have the most spectacular views of Kanchenjunga (weather permitting). Sign up for the Glenburn Tea Experience, which includes a walk through the plantation, a guided tour of the tea factory, a riverside picnic or lunch and more.

Doubles from ₹50,000; glenburnteaestate.com



HERE'S TO
India's
FINEST YET





① Taragarh Palace, Palampur

Located in the foothills of the magnificent Dhauladhar mountains, Taragarh Palace was built in 1951 as a summer resort for the royal family of Jammu and Kashmir, and was developed as a heritage hotel in 1971. Its European-inspired architecture with colonnaded patio, pavilions and landscaped gardens makes a pretty picture fringed by 15 acres of woodland and manicured tea estates. The palace's 26 rooms and suites feature vintage furnishing and tiled floors, and come with garden or polo grounds views. The Imperial dining hall offers a mix of Indian, Continental and Chinese fare as well as the traditional Himachali Dham (ceremonial multi-dish vegetarian meal).

🛏️ Doubles from ₹7,000;
taragarhpalace.com

WELCOMHOTEL BY ITC HOTELS, THE SAVOY, MUSSOORIE

Built in the Gothic style, The Savoy opened in 1902 and was a favourite retreat for the British. This luxury hotel has been managed by ITC Hotels since 2009. After extensive interior refurbishment in 2013, the hotel's 80 rooms and suites offer a mix of classic charm and modern conveniences; expect high ceilings, wooden furniture and vintage décor, not to mention views of the Himalaya from most rooms. Take your pick between three dining options, including the multicuisine Grand Dining Hall, The Royal Afghan serving North-West Frontier cuisine and the colonial-style Writer's Bar.

🛏️ Doubles from ₹28,000; itchotels.com





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To know more about Jaisalmer, write to us at jaisalmer@radico.co.in

In the Footsteps of the Buddha

Rich in history and places associated with the life of the enlightened soul, Bihar is a treasure trove for those who want an immersive journey into Buddhism

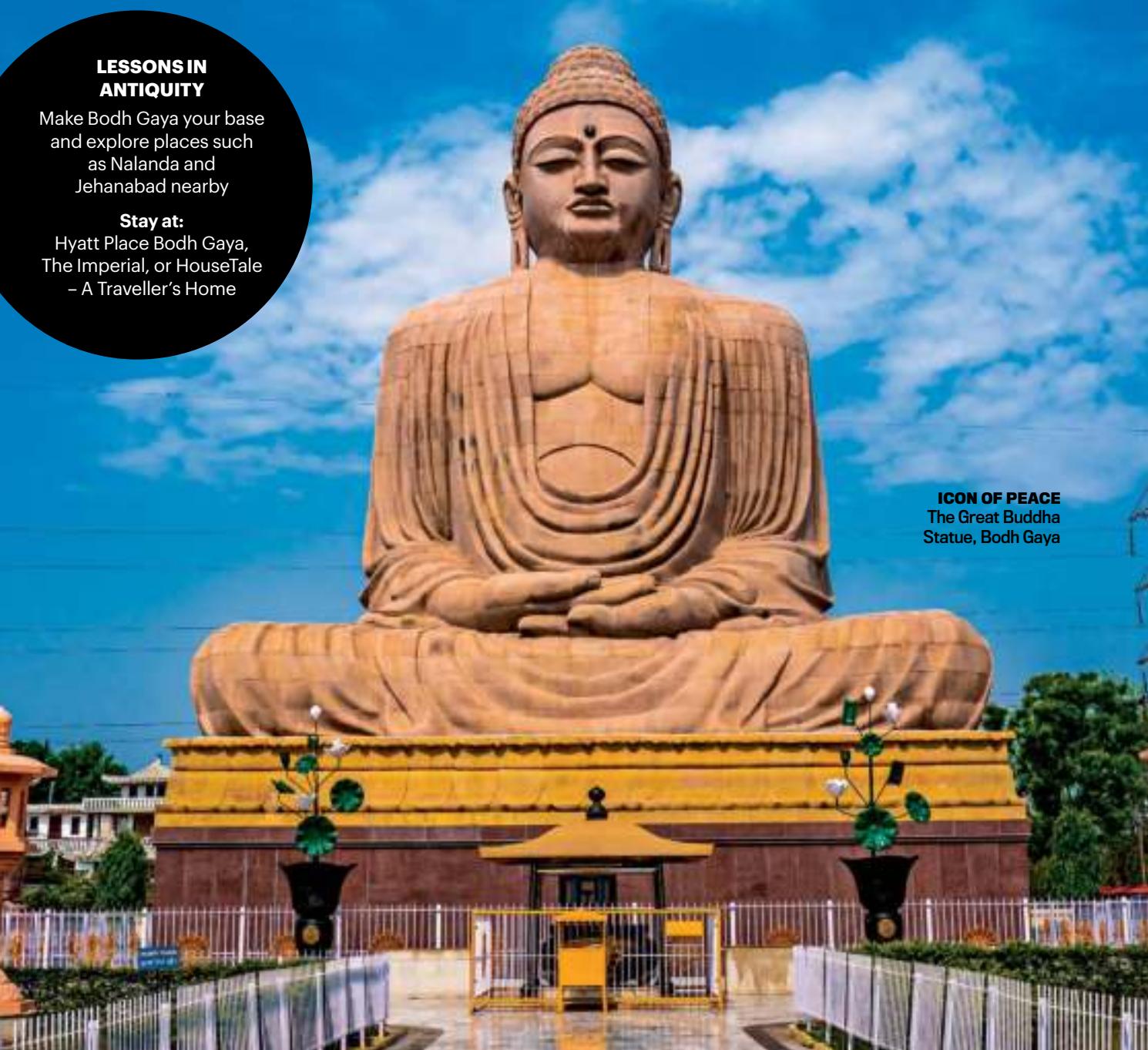
By Priya Pathiyan

LESSONS IN ANTIQUITY

Make Bodh Gaya your base and explore places such as Nalanda and Jehanabad nearby

Stay at:
Hyatt Place Bodh Gaya,
The Imperial, or HouseTale
– A Traveller's Home

ICON OF PEACE
The Great Buddha Statue, Bodh Gaya



Bihar has long been known as the focal point for all things Buddhism. For pilgrims and history buffs, there are many wonderful sites to explore in the state. Here is our pick of the most fascinating ones that avid travellers must add to their Bihar itinerary...

Jehanabad: The incredibly well-preserved **Barabar hill caves** here are said to be India's oldest surviving rock-cut caves. Dating back to the third century BC to the times of Emperor Ashoka, they are carved from granite, and the interiors are a great example of 'Mauryan polish', said to have been the influence of Alexander the Great's presence. Ancient sculptures and inscriptions can be seen in the four caves named Karan Chaupar, Lomas Rishi, Sudama and Visvakarma. If you'd like to explore more, there's another clutch of caves that come under the Nagarjuni hill cluster, built slightly later and called Gopika, Vedathika and Vapiya.



Photographs by SHUTTERSTOCK



Bodh Gaya: This is perhaps the most important place on Bihar's Buddhist circuit. The spot where Gautama is said to have attained enlightenment under the Bodhi Tree to become Lord Buddha, is here. As is the imposing Gupta-era **Mahabodhi Temple** with a 170-foot-tall shikhara and evidence of pilgrims visiting between the seventh and tenth century from countries such as Sri Lanka, Myanmar and China. It is now a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Other locations linked to the Buddha's meditation, several stupas and monasteries built by various Buddhist kingdoms are all worth visiting. If size matters, then you'll love the Buddha statue, all of 80 feet tall, dating back to 1989.



Nalanda: The ruins of what was once one of the world's greatest universities in the fifth century are impressive even by modern standards, making it a must-see UNESCO World Heritage Site. When you take in the massive buildings constructed of red brick, you can imagine the 2,000 teachers who once taught more than 10,000 students here. The prime seat of Buddhist teachings at the time, it attracted scholars from across the world. Don't miss the archaeological museum, brimming with stunning statues and interesting items from daily life in Nalanda. Just 15 km away is Rajgir, as the ancient city of Rajgriha is now known. The capital of several dynasties of rulers, it was also where Lord Buddha, as well as Lord Mahavir, spent several years. Don't miss the remnants of the 40-km-long Cyclopean Wall made of limestone boulders, which was built 2,500 years ago to protect the ancient city from invaders.



CAPITAL REWARDS

Make Patna your base and explore the Bihar Museum and destinations like Vaishali from here

Stay at:

Lemon Tree Premier, Taj City Centre, The Royal, The Mantra, or The Zen Stays



Vaishali: History swirls around the excavations at Vaishali, whispering of its beginnings as a democratic republic in the sixth century BCE. If you're following in the footsteps of Lord Buddha, come here to see where he preached. In fact, Kolhua nearby is where he last spoke publicly. And even after him, it was where Emperor Ashoka had one of his lion pillars installed, where you can see it even today—all polished red sandstone and lofty inscriptions. If you're devout, don't miss stopping by the two ancient stupas that once held Buddha's relics.



**STONE
TESTAMENT**
The Ashoka Pillar,
Vaishali



Patna: One of the world's oldest continuing capital cities, it has the serene **Buddha Smriti Park** and Karuna Stupa, and the trees that grew from two saplings planted by the Dalai Lama, one from Bodh Gaya, and the other from the Bodhi Tree in Sri Lanka's Anuradhapura. Don't miss the brilliance of the Bihar Museum, a beautifully mounted collection of artefacts ranging from prehistoric times through the various ruling dynasties, as well as the older Patna Museum.

BUDDHIST BIHAR BEYOND THE HUBS

Legend has it that **Rampurva**, on the banks of the river Anoma (now called the Harbora) in western Champaran, was where Prince Siddhartha turned to asceticism. While you may not see the huge Ashoka pillars with their edicts that were excavated at Rampurva and Lauria Nandangarh today, they are both places that are considered important in the story of Lord Buddha.

The uniquely styled **Kesariya Stupa** in eastern Champaran is possibly the world's tallest. The magnificent 104-foot-tall structure with a circumference of 1,400 feet and six terraces dates back to 200 CE.



Wickets to Wanderlust

Former cricketer **Yuvraj Singh** lets us in on the places that bring him peace, play and the perfect meal

Q Your work takes you places. Which is one destination that you've given your heart to?

Queenstown in New Zealand is hands down the most beautiful city I've ever seen. It feels like someone set it up for a movie. Every frame is cinematic, with the mountains, the lake and the stillness. There's a calm there, a quiet energy that stays with you long after you've left.

Q What's your take on travelling in the monsoon?

Monsoon travel has a special charm. I would love to head to Coorg or experience the drive to Glenorchy in New Zealand in light rain. That route is already stunning and I can only imagine how magical it must look with the clouds rolling in. It's the kind of weather that makes you want to sit by a window, sip something warm, and just watch the world go by.

Q Your idea of an ideal getaway.

Someplace where I can breathe easy—a quiet beach, a hillside town, or just a small city with character. Good weather, great food, a nice walk and no stress. That's ideal. And, of course, if there's a place that surprises me with food, that's a bonus.

Q Does this mean you enjoy experimenting with food on your travels?

Absolutely. Some of my favourite memories come from small food joints or local street food stalls. From pan-Asian flavours in Singapore to coastal curries in India, I've picked up ideas everywhere. A lot of those experiences have found their way into my restaurant KOCA located in Gurugram. We took comfort food and gave it a global edge, while keeping the soul intact. Travel taught me that food isn't just about taste, it's about how it makes you feel.

Q A destination in India that you can always go back to.

Goa, without a doubt. It's where I go to unwind. No pressure, no schedule. The food, the beaches and the relaxed pace—it just works for me. Whether I want a quiet break or some quality time with family and friends, Goa always delivers.

-With Geetika Sachdev



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