

H-1B Visas: How to Survive the Blow**DEFENCE: THEATRES OF CONTENTION / TRAVEL PLUS: ROYAL RAJASTHAN**

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**INDIA
TODAY****WHO IS A CITIZEN?**

**A NATIONWIDE SPECIAL INTENSIVE REVISION OF VOTER ROLLS STARTING
FROM BIHAR STIRS CONTROVERSY AROUND IDENTITY AND EXCLUSION**



HERE'S TO
India's
FINEST YET



FROM THE EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Who is an Indian citizen? The question is as old as the Republic itself, and as fraught. For a democracy just 75 years old, born in the trauma of a bloody Partition, the boundaries of belonging have always been both legal and emotional. The latest dotted lines sprang up on June 24, 2025, when the Election Commission of India (ECI) announced its intent to launch a nationwide Special Intensive Revision (SIR) to protect the “integrity of electoral rolls”. With Bihar voting in four months, the ECI declared the process would begin there first. While its objective was laudable, the timing and terms were instantly controversial. Especially its insistence on a paper trail that effectively entailed establishing citizenship first. The Opposition dubbed it a backdoor resurrection of the National Register of Citizens (NRC), a project advocated by the Modi government but which collapsed under its own contradictions. The Opposition also accused the ECI of overstepping its constitutional mandate, since citizenship determination falls outside its purview.

Besides the narrow window the ECI left for Bihar's 76.4 million voters to prove their identity, most problematic was the set of 11 documents it originally prescribed as acceptable. These included birth certificates, passports, matriculation certificates, land-ownership papers, or pre-1987 government employment records. Left out were three vital documents commonly used in the past to determine eligibility, which mattered the most to the poor and underprivileged: Aadhaar, voter identity and ration cards. In a state like Bihar, literacy rates in 2025 are still estimated to be less than 75 per cent, and only 65 per cent for women. By some reckonings, almost half of the population is landless. The coverage of birth certificates has been historically low. So, the ECI's stipulations were bound to fail and, in the first round of the exercise, as many as 6.5 million eligible voters did not find their names on the list, forcing the ECI to extend the filing date to September 30.

Meanwhile, the debarring of Aadhaar, the biometric-based identity card with near-universal coverage, prompted activists and Opposition leaders to seek legal remedy. A Supreme Court ruling on September 8 finally forced the ECI to accept Aadhaar as a legitimising document. Notably, the SC appended an interesting caveat to its order. It ruled that Aadhaar, though applicable to electoral rolls, would not be proof of citizenship. That circles back to the original problem. India does not have a valid identity proof that establishes citizenship. Outside of the passport that is, which at last count only slightly over 12 per cent of Indians possessed. What we have instead are overlapping and confusing documentation processes relating to the people: the Census, the National Population Register, the voter ID card and Aadhaar. None of them proves citizenship.



▲ Jan. 20, 2020

This was the gap the Citizen (Amendment) Act (CAA) of 2003 sought to address when it introduced the category of “illegal migrant” as the threshold for exclusion and authorised the Union government to issue a national identity card to all citizens. The NRC was to be an accessory to that, establishing norms of proof within states by birth and descent. But the controversy related to religious exclusion in the updated CAA of 2019 led to nationwide protests. The NRC, meanwhile, had run into a host of practical problems in Assam. Together, that had the effect of stalling the entire exercise.

The theme of citizenship has now been rekindled. In his Independence Day address, Prime Minister Narendra Modi called for a “high-powered demography mission” to weed out illegal immigrants, casting them as a threat to security and livelihood. This comes in a political context where, after Bihar in late 2025, the key states of West Bengal and Assam will go to the polls in 2026. It is no coincidence that they have a high percentage of Muslims, counted at 34 per cent in Assam and 27 per cent in Bengal in 2011. Critics are projecting the two states as battlegrounds where the definition of citizenship will be redrawn in messy ways. The Opposition views a nationwide SIR as a political tool or ruse to eliminate citizens who are likely to vote against the ruling National Democratic Alliance (NDA), led by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), particularly in these eastern states.

In this week's cover story, Managing Editor Kaushik Deka navigates this complex terrain to distil it down to its essentials. Cross-border flow is a fraught reality. Since identities tend to blur along lines of religion and language, the search for illegal migrants can end up creating fear and uncertainty in entire demographic blocs. Any mass disenfranchisement, even inadvertent, risks igniting social unrest and identity-based political consolidation. Since such a charged atmosphere benefits the BJP, critics allege that this is the actual cause of a nationwide SIR. Having a regime of graded and suspended citizenship, with a new Indian landscape dotted by detention centres for those deemed beyond the pale, could leave a permanent scar on the body politic.

Citizenship is the foundation of democracy. It confers rights, obligations and the power of the vote. To render it uncertain is to imperil the Republic itself. India needs a single, unimpeachable proof of citizenship. Without it, cleansing voter rolls risks creating not clarity, but chaos.

What the country urgently requires is an identity card, not an identity crisis.



(Aroon Purie)

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UP FRONT

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CHANDRADEEP KUMAR

SEASON TRENDS
Will soaring gold
prices dull its
festive sparkle?

► ECONOMY

THE TWIN BULLION BOOM

Gold, silver surge to record highs, reaffirming their old allure and also their value as a safe hedge in rough times for investors, central banks

By M.G. ARUN

ALL THAT GLITTERS IN INDIA THIS FESTIVE SEASON IS NOT JUST GOLD—SILVER TOO IS STEALING SOME OF THE SHINE. Both precious metals have surged in recent weeks, creating ripples across futures markets and retail counters. Gold, the traditional favourite, has crossed the mark of Rs 1 lakh per 10 grams ahead of Dussehra, Dhanteras and Diwali, festivals long associated with auspicious purchases. In fact, nearly a third of India's annual gold sales take place in the October-December quarter.

On September 16, prices for 24-karat gold touched Rs 1.12 lakh per 10 grams in Delhi, driven by global uncertainty and geopolitical tensions that reinforced its status as a safe-haven asset. But on September 18, the US Federal Reserve cut interest rates by 25 basis points, and a stronger dollar alongside a brighter outlook for equities nudged gold prices down to Rs 1.11 lakh per 10 grams the following day. Prices have since risen again, touching Rs 1.13 lakh on September 22. Some analysts predict prices

could reach Rs 1.25 lakh in the first half of 2026.

Silver has also staged a remarkable rally, with domestic prices climbing to Rs 1.38 lakh per kilogram on September 22, buoyed by global cues and rising local demand.

INDIA'S GRAND APPETITE

India is the world's second-largest consumer of gold after China, with annual demand of 700–800 tonnes. Nearly two-thirds is crafted into jewellery, while the rest is held in coins and bars. The country imports about 90 per cent of its requirement, mainly from Australia, Switzerland and the UK.

Silver's demand is even more substantial in tonnage—4,000 to 5,000 tonnes annually. Roughly three-quarters goes into jewellery, silverware and investment, while the rest powers industrial uses, from electronics to solar panels. India imports around 60 per cent of its silver, primarily from the UAE, the UK and China.

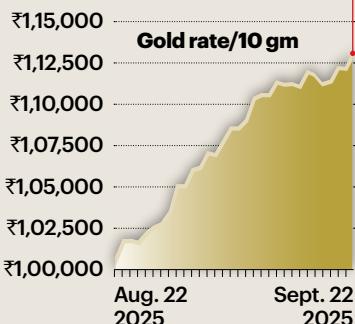
"The biggest reason for the rise in gold prices is the geopolitical tensions coupled with expectations of interest rate cuts in a few countries and the US tariff pressure," explains Bhargav Vaidya of bullion and financial consultancy BN Vaidya & Associates. "These have created a clear uncertainty in the stock markets, resulting in higher demand for gold as an investment option."

Yet soaring prices are dampening physical demand. Vaidya expects the volume of retail jewellery sales to fall by as much as 20 per cent this festive season compared to last year. In value terms, however, sales could remain steady or even grow. In 2024, too, the festive season gold demand dipped 5 per cent, but sales value rose by 31 per cent—all due to higher prices.

Silver, often overshadowed by gold, has gained fresh momentum thanks to its hybrid character. "Silver has a dual nature as both a precious and an industrial metal," notes Sugandha Sachdeva, founder of financial solutions provider SS WealthStreet. Beyond jewellery and investment, it is indispensable for solar

SOARING HIGH

★ Gold touched ₹1.13 lakh per 10 gm on Sept. 22. Some analysts predict it to reach ₹1.25 lakh by mid-2026



★ Silver has also staged a remarkable rally, with domestic prices climbing to ₹1.38 lakh per kg on September 22



Source: goodreturns.in; prices in Delhi

PUSH FACTORS

★ Global uncertainty is pushing investors toward gold as a secure asset

★ Central banks are steadily stockpiling gold to hedge against dollar volatility

★ Silver's rally is underpinned by its dual role as a precious and an industrial metal

panels, 5G networks and electronic devices. "This robust industrial demand, coupled with a silver market facing consistent deficits for the past four years—a trend projected to continue through 2025—creates a compelling supply-demand imbalance," she says.

THE GLOBAL CONTEXT

Global investment flows are amplifying the rally. Gold ETFs (exchange-traded funds)—investment funds that buy physical gold and sell units on the stock exchange, enabling investors to trade them just like shares—have reportedly almost doubled their holdings in a year, and central banks are quietly stockpiling reserves. Gold has returned 50 per cent in rupee terms over the past year, far outpacing equities—the benchmark Sensex slipped 1.2 per cent in the same period.

According to the World Gold Council, central bank holdings rose from 26,000 tonnes in 2009 to 32,000 tonnes in 2024, with the top 10 banks—those of the US, Germany, Italy, France, Switzerland, Japan, Netherlands, China, Russia and India—holding three-quarters of the total. For many central banks, buying gold is a hedge against dollar volatility and a way to reduce reliance on the US currency.

The RBI's preference for keeping more gold in its foreign exchange reserves was evident from data released in early September, showing holdings at 879.98 tonnes on June 27, 2025, up from 840.76 tonnes a year earlier. Gold now accounts for 13 per cent of its \$711 billion (Rs 62.6 lakh crore) reserves, up from less than 10 per cent earlier.

Despite some profit-booking—selling an investment to lock in the gains—after mid-September's record highs, analysts expect precious metals to remain resilient. "Losses were limited amidst weak US jobs data, rate cut expectations and rupee depreciation," observes Manav Modi, a precious metals analyst with Motilal Oswal Financial Services. He adds that geopolitical flashpoints in West Asia and eastern Europe continue to provide a "risk premium" for gold. For investors and consumers alike, the message is clear: volatility in global politics and economics will keep the shine on precious metals for some time to come. ■

▼ GLASSHOUSE

**SAMAJWADI SHOWTIME**

Samajwadi Party chief **Akhilesh Yadav** seems to have realised that if he wants to get heard over all the TV din, he needs to up his press briefings game. Which is perhaps why, lately, they have been doubling up as live mini-cultural performances. The latest 'event' was at the party office in Lucknow, where youth from the backward Vishwakarma community staged a full-on 'nukkad naatak' in the middle of the presser. The act praised the last SP government (2012-17) and ended, predictably, with the message that the people's problems would be solved if Akhilesh returned to power. In recent months, other pressers have seen party workers and performers breaking into *shayari* and even 'Bhagavat Katha' recitals. Akhilesh, too, has been indulgent, handing out cash envelopes as a small prize to those bringing some colour to the proceedings.

Illustrations by **SIDDHANT JUMDE**

▼ GANDHIS IN WAYANAD

ON HER OWN TRIP

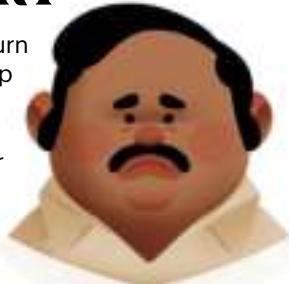
AICC general secretary and Wayanad MP **Priyanka Gandhi Vadra** picked the wrong time in September for her visit to her constituency. Her 10-day stay (September 12-22) proved a political non-event, reportedly leaving workers and voters disenchanted. Reels and social media updates from the trip fell flat, while her meetings with cultural figures like



Kalpetta Narayanan and M.N. Karasserry seemed tokenistic at best. Even the photo-op with tribal farmer and Padma Shri awardee Cheruvayal Raman failed to strike a chord. Most telling was her avoiding a meeting of the families of Congress leaders driven to suicide by party rivalries, an omission that angered many. The visit eventually resembled a family holiday with Sonia and Rahul Gandhi joining her on September 19.

HANKIE-PANKY

Trust Tamil Nadu politics to turn a hankie into a headline. A clip of AIADMK chief **Edappadi K. Palaniswami**, looking sorry and with a kerchief over his face after a meeting with the BJP's Amit Shah, went viral in no time. Social media had a field day. A livid EPS hit back, saying he was merely wiping the sweat off, and even taunted the media for "its new low". His party followed up with a legal notice to a journalist. But the kerchief kerfuffle refused to die quietly, fluttering on through opposition jibes and breaking headlines.



BIRTHDAY BASHING

BJP MP and Rajasthan in-charge **Radha Mohan Das Agrawal** lost his cool recently at the Jaipur workshop to plan the 'Sewa Pakhwada', the fortnight-long celebration of PM Modi's 75th birthday. Angered by the thin turnout, he thundered that "nobody was taking it seriously" and stormed out. A panicked MoS for home, Jawahar Singh Bedam, chased after his car to try

and persuade him to stay till CM Bhajan Lal Sharma arrived. But to no avail. Insiders say Agrawal's impatience reflects a larger unease: ministers complain they are overburdened with party/RSS programmes, while party workers accuse them of ignoring their demands.



WHO PAYS FOR LAST RESPECTS?

Politics doesn't end with life, sometimes it continues even after death. A row has erupted over the Rs 25 lakh spent on former Gujarat chief minister **Vijay Rupani's** farewell procession in Rajkot after he died in the Air India crash in June. Vendors supplying flowers, tents and other services were reportedly turned away by BJP functionaries and told to approach the Rupani family for payment. The party eventually settled the bills, but many saw it as a sign of disrespect to the late leader.



Kaushik Deka with Avaneesh Mishra, Jeemon Jacob, Rohit Parihar, Kavitha Muralidharan and Jumana Shah

ECO WATCH

By **Jumana Shah**

SAVE THE WHALE SHARK CUT NETS, GET A REWARD

On August 30, the Wildlife Trust of India (WTI), in partnership with the Goa forest department, department of fisheries, and Oracle India, launched the Whale Shark Conservation Project in Goa, coinciding with International Whale Shark Day. The initiative, aimed at protecting the endangered whale shark

first dedicated marine conservation vessel will enhance rescue operations and research. Local fisherman Francis Fernandes (Pele) leads efforts to educate Goa's fishing community.

In Gujarat, WTI's 2004 campaign transformed whale sharks from hunted "vhal" to revered "vhal ma" (dear mother). Over 1,000 rescues



(*Rhincodon typus*), builds on WTI's successful models in Gujarat and Kerala, integrating local communities to safeguard India's marine biodiversity.

The Goa project has the highest compensation scheme, offering Rs 75,000 to fishermen who cut nets to free entangled whale sharks or other Schedule I marine species, surpassing Gujarat and Kerala's Rs 50,000 cap. Additionally, India's

have been recorded. Awareness campaigns, photo-identification and satellite tagging have bolstered conservation. In Kerala, similar efforts since 2011 have yielded over 300 saves. In 2017, the project expanded to Lakshadweep, the second-largest aggregation site in India after Gujarat. With help from Cochin Shipyard Ltd, the project has rescued and released 46 whale sharks so far.

► DEFENCE

Farewell to a Supersonic Legend

AFTER SIX DECADES AS THE BACKBONE OF INDIAN AIR DEFENCE, THE MiG-21 TOOK ITS FINAL BOW ON SEPTEMBER 26

Inducted into the Indian Air Force (IAF) in 1963, the Soviet-designed Mikoyan-Gurevich or MiG-21 revolutionised Indian air combat with its supersonic speed. A versatile multirole fighter—originally designed as an interceptor and later adapted for air superiority, ground attack and combat air patrol missions—it eventually gained all-weather capability. From the India-Pakistan War of 1971 to the Kargil conflict in 1999, it proved its mettle and shaped generations of fighter pilots. Yet this storied legacy has also been marred by over 450 crashes over the decades. On September 26, the IAF formally retired this iconic warhorse in Chandigarh, marking the end of an era.

Text by **PRADIP R. SAGAR**

Graphic by **TANMOY CHAKRABORTY**

900+

Total MiG-21s inducted into the IAF since 1963; 840 built in India

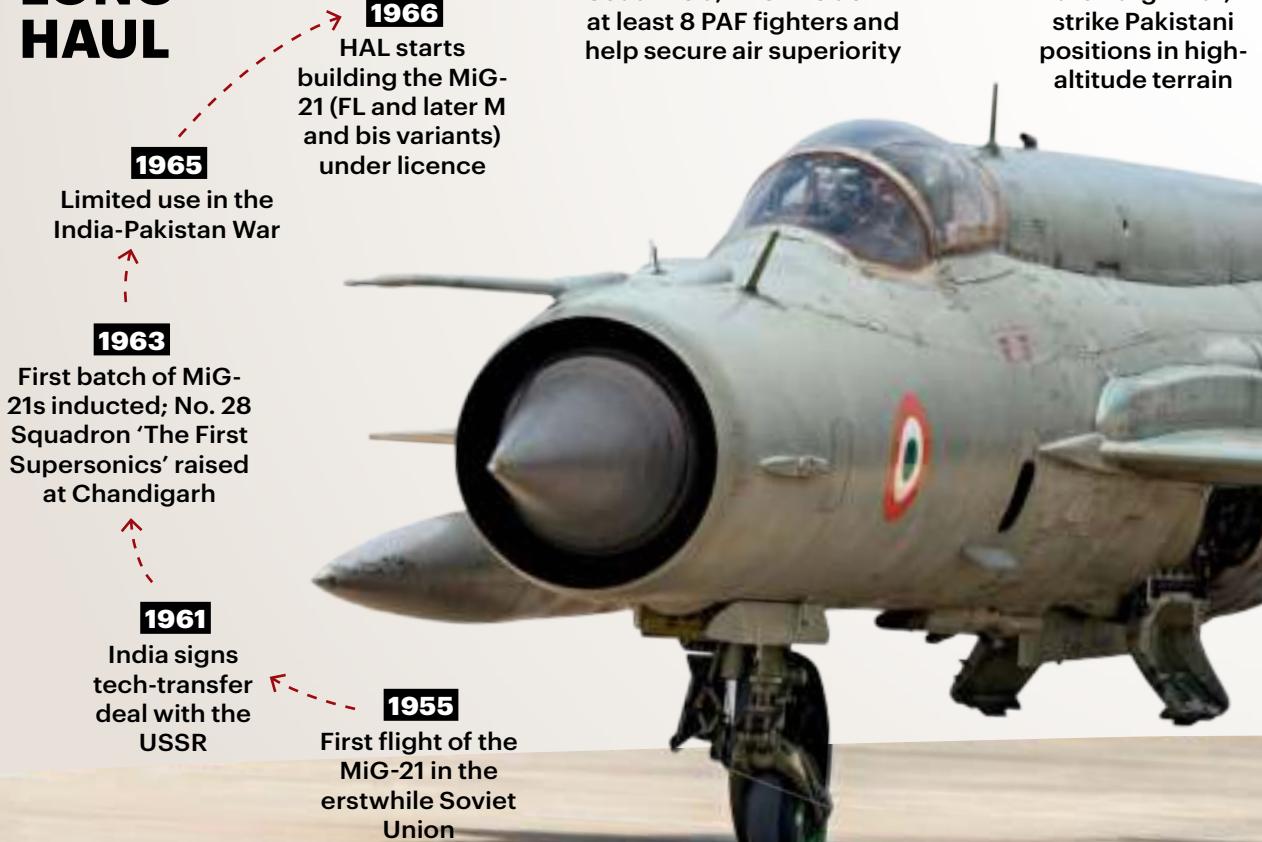
400

Peak fleet strength (approx.), across 19 IAF squadrons, in the 1980s-90s

2,500

KMPH
or Mach 2.05 (supersonic speed at high altitudes)

THE LONG HAUL



VARIANTS OVER THE YEARS

MiG-21FL

Early frontline 2nd-generation variant, capable of high-speed interceptions and basic air-to-air combat for short-range missions



MiG-21M

Optimised for ground-attack missions with a strengthened airframe, increased fuel capacity and improved missile load; marked the entry of 3rd-gen fighters in the IAF in early '70s

MiG-21bis

Mainstay from the 1980s, equipped with a more powerful engine and upgraded flight controls; delivered enhanced speed, climb rate and combat performance

MiG-21 Bison

Modernised version of the bis variant, incorporated 4th-gen avionics and missiles; extended operational life of the fleet into the 21st century

MiG-21U/UM

Twin-seat trainer version; allowed safe transition for pilots from subsonic aircraft to the supersonic MiG-21s

2000s
MiG-21 Bison
(upgraded bis variant) inducted

2010s
Older variants gradually withdrawn



GENERATIONAL LEAP

► MiG-21s are being retired in favour of indigenously developed **Tejas Mk-1A fighters**. HAL has received orders for 83 jets; 97 more in the pipeline

► The Mk-1A is equipped with modern radar, electronic warfare gear and digital cockpit
► This marks a generational shift to modern 4.5-gen jets; first induction likely by 2025 end



2019

A MiG-21 Bison piloted by Wg Cdr Abhinandan Varthaman reportedly downed a PAF F-16 before being hit itself, a day after the IAF's Balakot airstrike

2025

The remaining 36 MiG-21s retire on Sept. 26



▼ VIEWPOINT / SAUDI-PAK PACT

FOR INDIA, CLARITY, NOT PANIC OR DENIAL

We must respond with steady engagement with Riyadh and a calibrated approach to the sabre-rattling



BY SYED
AKBARUDDIN

The Saudi-Pakistan strategic mutual defence agreement signed on September 17 has sparked speculation across two seas and a subcontinent. One line matters: an attack on one is an attack on both. That line has stirred debate from the Gulf to the Himalayas over rewiring strategic playbooks. For India, the choice is clarity and posture, not panic or denial.

Why now? Start with Doha. On September 9, Israeli jets struck a safe house in the Qatari capital where Hamas leaders were weighing a ceasefire proposal. The blast rattled Gulf capitals, but fit a larger pattern of Israeli action this year across seven fronts: Gaza, Lebanon, Syria, Iran, Yemen, Tunisia and, now, Qatar. With little visible restraint from Washington, regional confidence is shaken and has fuelled speculation about the next flashpoint.

That is why layered defence is now doctrine. Houthi strikes from Yemen on Saudi regions Abqaiq and Khurais in 2019 were a hard lesson. Distance and deals do not stop drones or cruise missiles. Gulf states now build redundancy into policy, harden infrastructure and diversify supply chains. Disillusionment with great power protection is no longer theoretical. It is a hard fact.

What should India do? First, breathe. This pact formalises ties dating back to the 1960s. Pakistan's role in the Baghdad Pact and CENTO shows alliances do not automatically drag members into war. In 2015, Pakistan's Parliament vetoed joining the fight in Yemen. Domestic politics constrain Islamabad's commitments. The new agreement is deterrence by design, not an automatic war guarantee, and its operational feasibility is uncertain. That nuance matters for India.



Illustration by RAJ VERMA

INDIA MUST NOT REACT TO GULF SHIFTS. IN GEOPOLITICS, RESTRAINT IS NOT WEAKNESS, IT IS STRATEGY PERFORMED IN SILENCE

New Delhi's first read was right—vigilance without theatre. Now comes the harder part: reassurance without genuflecting. Saudi Arabia is India's vital energy partner and host to a large Indian diaspora. Bilateral relations are strong. The message to capital Riyadh should be delivered quietly. In any future India-Pakistan crisis, Riyadh's incentives to stay neutral remain overwhelming. Energy, investment, technology and a rising Indian market will weigh heavily. Back those incentives with steady engagement, not podium outrage. Such messages land best in private, not in public.

Avoid the echo chamber. Work the quartet. India has close ties with Abu Dhabi, Doha, Tehran and Israel. These regional capitals shape escalation risks and create space for mediation. India's leverage with them is significant as conjecture over Gulf alignments intensifies.

India earned its equity in West Asia as a soft power that straddled divides. If the Gulf is building redundancies, India too must harden its own shield. This would help deter miscalculation or adventurism by an emboldened Pakistan. India should strengthen integrated air and missile defences. Scale counter-drone systems. Expand space-based maritime domain awareness. The best answer to a shadow is light: sharper detection, faster attribution, stronger preparation.

The domestic political din will be loud. Some will declare a diplomatic collapse. Others will sneer that it is theatre. Both miss the plot. This pact neither presages nuclear Armageddon in West Asia nor is it irrelevant. It has prompted analysis about Riyadh's unwillingness to bet the kingdom on a single guarantor.

The arrangement is as much about strategic signalling as it is about Saudi-Pakistan ties. Islamabad will leverage its position within this framework. Beijing is likely to work through Pakistan to deepen military ties with Riyadh. India should see the signals for what they are and respond with calculation, not emotion.

India must heed the changing geometry of its extended neighbourhood. That means not only reacting to Gulf shifts but shaping the order by being present, prepared and diplomatically proactive. Let others gamble. Calibrate, reinforce, and keep the Gulf close while quietly deepening ties. In geopolitics, restraint is not weakness. It is strategy performed in silence. The future will not judge India by how loudly it reacted but by how effectively it made this pact irrelevant to its broader ties. ■

The author was India's permanent representative at the United Nations

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INDIA
TODAY
MAKING SENSE OF INDIA



ADANI POWER'S 2,400 MW BHAGALPUR PROJECT PUTS BIHAR ON INDIA'S ENERGY MAP

As India races to triple its energy capacity by 2047, the Adani Group's \$3 billion greenfield plant at Pirpainti is a strategic milestone for both the state and the nation.

In the hierarchy of India's industrial map, Bihar is fast moving from the margins to the mainstream. Once weighed down by stereotypes of poverty, migration and underdevelopment, the state is today attracting marquee investments that speak of confidence, reform, and resilience. Leading this new wave of transformation is the Adani Group, whose flagship Adani Power Limited (APL)—India's largest private thermal power producer—has secured a landmark 2,400 MW (megawatt) contract from the Bihar State Power Generation Company Limited. (BSPGCL).

The Group's \$3 billion greenfield power project at Pirpainti in Bhagalpur district will be one of India's most significant ultra-supercritical power plants in over a decade. For Bihar, it represents more than an infrastructure milestone; it is a statement of faith from India's most ambitious conglomerate. For the Adani Group, it is another chapter in a long tradition of bold, risk-informed investments that reshape economies and communities.

BIGGEST PRIVATE POWER INVESTMENT

The Bhagalpur project is the largest private-sector power investment in Bihar's history. After a fiercely contested tariff-based bidding process, Adani Power emerged as the lowest bidder with a supply price of ₹6.075/kWh (kilo watt per hours),



The upcoming power project in Bhagalpur is yet another chapter in the Adani Group's long tradition of bold, risk-informed investments that promise to reshape economies and communities.

outpacing rivals JSW Energy, Torrent Power and Bajaj Energy. The project will generate up to 12,000 jobs during construction and 3,000 permanent jobs once operational. More importantly, it will help bridge Bihar's yawning power deficit: peak demand stands at 6,500–7,000 MW, while in-house generation capacity trails at about 2,500 MW.

"This ultra-supercritical plant will provide dependable, low-emission, and cost-efficient power to catalyse Bihar's growth story," said S.B. Khyalia, CEO, APL.

Reliable power supply is the bedrock of industrialisation. From manufacturing and food processing to logistics and IT-enabled services, Bihar's aspirations for the future now have an energy lifeline.

A ₹40,000-CRORE COMMITMENT

The Bhagalpur plant is just the beginning. The Adani Group has mapped cumulative investments of over ₹40,000 crore in Bihar over the next decade. These include a 6 million



PM MODI INAUGURATES ADANI POWER PLANT IN BHAGALPUR DISTRICT

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on September 15 inaugurated Adani Power's 2,400 MW ultra-modern thermal power plant at Pirpainti in Bihar's Bhagalpur district, marking a milestone in the state's energy security. Being built with state-of-the-art technology, the project is expected to generate reliable and affordable power for millions of homes and industries in eastern India.

Speaking at the event, the Prime Minister said, "This project is proof that when government policy, private investment and people's aspirations come together, new lights shine in every home and opportunity knocks at every door."

The Bihar government facilitated the project by providing land on a symbolic lease of ₹1, a policy measure designed to attract transformative investment. Officials clarified that this was not a violation of norms but a deliberate incentive under the state industrial policy, which allows strategic projects of high economic and social impact to receive concessional land support. By retaining ownership while leasing, the state ensures control over the land, while the concession reduces upfront costs for the developer and accelerates implementation. The Pirpainti plant is expected to strengthen Bihar's role in India's power sector.

Bihar's per capita power consumption is among the poorest in the country. As per the latest available data from the Bihar Economic Survey 2024–25, the state's per capita electricity consumption stood at approximately 363 kWh (kilowatt hours) per year during the 2023–24 period.



The Bihar government facilitated the Bhagalpur project by providing land on a symbolic lease of ₹1, a policy measure designed to attract transformative investment, according to officials.

Bihar's power deficit vs Adani's supply pledge

- Peak demand (FY25): 6,500–7,000 MW
- Current in-house capacity: 2,500 MW
- Adani Group's Bhagalpur project: 2,400 MW (ultra-supercritical)
- Potential jobs to be created by the project: 12,000 (construction) + 3,000 (permanent)
- Investment value of the project: \$3 billion (Over ₹26,000 crore)

Impact: Nearly halves Bihar's power deficit, anchors new industrial capacity.

(Source: Adani Group)

tonnes per annum (MTPA) cement grinding unit in Nawada, smart meter rollouts, logistics hubs, rail terminals and food processing infrastructure.

At the Bihar Business Connect 2024 summit last December, Pranav Adani, Director, Adani Enterprises Limited, announced that the Group had already invested ₹850 crore in logistics, agri-logistics and city gas distribution, creating 25,000 jobs. With Bhagalpur, that number could rise to 77,000 jobs—direct and indirect—making the Adani Group one of Bihar's largest private employers.

Such a scale of investment represents a vote of confidence not just in Bihar's reforms, but also in its people, its potential, and its future.

Why did the Adani Group choose Bihar?

The Adani Group has a history of venturing where others hesitate. From reviving conflict-hit Haifa Port in Israel to building Dhamra Port in Odisha long before the state's industrial boom, the Group has consistently shown conviction in regions poised for transformation.

The Bhagalpur project reflects this same instinct. Ultra-supercritical technology ensures higher efficiency and lower emissions than traditional coal plants, while coal linkages under the Union government's SHAKTI policy guarantee fuel security. This makes the project both environmentally responsible and future-ready, aligned with India's evolving energy mix.

Bihar's reform dividend

That APL chose Bihar for its largest private power project in over a decade speaks volumes about the state's changing investment climate.

The Bihar Industrial Promotion Policy & Package (BIPPP)



The Adani Group has mapped cumulative investments of over ₹40,000 crore over the next decade, including a 6 MTPA cement unit in Nawada.

2025 offers capital subsidies, interest rebates, doubled GST (Goods and Services Tax) incentives and faster land dispute resolution. A single-window clearance system has streamlined approvals. At the same time, infrastructure like the Bihta Dry Port, which is located 35 kilometres west of state capital Patna, and the 1,670-acre Integrated Manufacturing Cluster in Gaya are creating plug-and-play ecosystems for investors. Bihar's economic momentum is already visible. The state clocked 13.5 per cent GSDP (Gross State Domestic Product) growth in the financial year (FY) 2024–25, outpacing several industrialised peers. Its economy is diversifying—agriculture contributes 19.9 per cent, industry 21.5 per cent, and services 58.6 per cent—providing a stronger platform for sustained growth.

Changing perceptions

For decades, Bihar's biggest hurdle was not just infrastructure, but perception. Projects such as Lord Karan Bilimoria's proposed Cobra Beer brewery, shelved in 2016 after prohibition, underlined investor concerns about policy unpredictability. That is changing. As Industries Minister Nitish Mishra has observed, the "perception bias is slowly being overcome." Campaigns like "Bihar First, Bihari First" and high-profile investor summits have been crucial in repositioning Bihar as a serious investment destination.

Beyond power: the multiplier effect

The Bhagalpur project is not just a power plant—it is an industrial catalyst. A 2,400 MW base-load capacity can energise food parks in Muzaffarpur, logistics hubs in Patna, information technology (IT) clusters in Gaya and agro-processing units across North Bihar.

Reliable energy also strengthens Bihar's case for data centres

Mega investment push

- Cumulative Investment Plan: ₹40,000 crore over 8–10 years
- Already invested (logistics, agri-logistics, gas): ₹850 crore
- Cement plant (Nawada): 6 MTPA grinding unit
- Employment potential: 77,000+ direct & indirect jobs
- Other focus areas: Smart meters, logistics hubs, rail terminals and food processing

Impact: Adani Group emerges as Bihar's largest private-sector investor.

(Source: Adani Group)

The state's reform dividend and new investments

- **GSDP Growth (FY25):** 13.5% (faster than many industrial states)
- **Sectoral mix:** Agriculture 19.9%
Industry 21.5%
Services 58.6%
- **Policy edge:** Capital subsidies, double GST incentives and single-window clearance
- **Upcoming corporate investments:**
Coca-Cola (SLMG Beverage): ₹3,000 crore
Bharat Petroleum: ₹7,000 crore
Shree Cement & Birla Corp: ₹1,559 crore combined
NHPC Hydropower: ₹5,500 crore
Haldiram: ₹300 crore

(Source: Govt of Bihar)

and artificial intelligence (AI)-linked digital infrastructure, where low operating costs offer a competitive edge.

From "backward" to breakout state

Bihar's transformation is still a work in progress, with infrastructure gaps and skill shortages to be addressed. Yet, the scale of corporate commitments led by Adani's \$3 billion project points to a structural shift. Once an industrial blank spot, Bihar is now positioning itself as the gateway to Eastern India—leveraging its strategic location, affordable workforce, and massive domestic market. The Bhagalpur project could well be the tipping point that defines this new trajectory.

The bigger picture

India's energy demand is expected to rise from 250 GW today to over 700 GW by 2047. Even with renewables surging, thermal power—an additional 100 GW by 2035—remains essential for ensuring energy security.

In that context, Bihar's largest private-sector power project assumes national importance. For APL, it is another feather in its cap, cementing its leadership in India's energy sector. For Bihar, it is a moment of redemption, an emphatic signal that the "backward state" tag belongs to history. If Bihar's story was once defined by missed opportunities, today it is increasingly about bold investments and new possibilities. And with the Adani Group leading from the front, the state's industrial future has never looked brighter.

STATE SCAN

ODISHA: KEEPING A DATE WITH THE LORD PG 18

GUJARAT: GARBA GOES UBER LUXE PG 20



ALL EYES ON ALMATTI

The 20-year-old dam in north Karnataka, near the Maharashtra border

KPN

► KARNATAKA

FOUR-SIDED WAR FOR KRISHNA WATERS

A new conflict looms as Karnataka moves to raise Almatti dam's height. Maharashtra, Telangana, Andhra fume

By Ajay Sukumaran

THERE'S NOTHING LIKE WATER TO DIVIDE LAND—or its territory-minded masters. A mere scan of India's hydrological wars would suffice to nail that axiom. The latest river to come to a boil is the Krishna. It's a quadrangular war, since the 1,400-km-long river—the second longest in south India—flows through Maharashtra, Karnataka, Telangana and Andhra Pradesh. The contentious piece: the Almatti dam in north Karnataka, which hosts the state's largest reservoir. More than 20 years after it was commissioned, the Karnataka cabinet has cleared a proposal to raise the dam's height in order to capture more of the river's flow.

Part of the Upper Krishna Project, begun in the 1960s, the dam is a central piece of infrastructure meant to help irrigate large arid tracts of northern Karnataka. The current plan, Upper Krishna Project (UKP) Stage III, is ambitious in its scope. It entails acquiring up to 133,867 acres of land; compensation alone, including for submerged areas, would cost an estimated Rs 70,000 crore. It has been in the works since 2010, when the second Krishna Water Disputes Tribunal (KWDT) allowed Karnataka to increase Almatti's height from 519.6 metres to 524.2 metres and utilise up to 907 thousand million cubic (tmc) feet of water

from the Krishna.

Both Maharashtra and undivided Andhra Pradesh had then raised objections, which the tribunal addressed. Maharashtra was concerned about land submergence in its border districts; united Andhra, the lower riparian state, was worried over lower water flow downstream. A further report of KWDT-II came in November 2013. But a challenge is pending in the Supreme Court and the award has yet to be notified by the Centre. Karna-

will get water," Karnataka chief minister Siddaramaiah said at a press conference on September 16, after a special cabinet session to decide on compensation for land losers. This is a tricky issue that previous governments have wrestled with: of the envisaged total of 133,867 acres to be acquired, up to 75,563 acres would be submerged; 51,837 acres earmarked for canals; 6,467 acres for rehabilitation.

"Land prices are going up in the area. The previous government had fixed a compensation of Rs 24 lakh per acre for irrigated land and Rs 20 lakh per acre for arid land. But the farmers had not agreed, and so the government was unable to go ahead with it. We have decided to complete the acquisition in one phase," says deputy CM D.K. Shivakumar, who also holds the water resources portfolio. The current government has offered a set of new rates: Rs 40 lakh per acre for irrigated land, Rs 30 lakh per acre for arid land, Rs 25 lakh per acre for land acquired for canals. "We want to complete the process in three fiscal years," says the CM.

Official estimates are that the project will also displace a total of 136,414 people, affecting 20 villages and some urban pockets. Currently, there are roughly 20,000 ongoing cases with regard to land acquisition which the government hopes to settle through arbitration under the Land Acquisition Act, 2013. To smooth out these issues, Shivakumar says a Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Compensation Authority will be set up, to be led by a judge.

In his telling, the award's notification was "postponed due to political pressures" from Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh, and the Union water minister has promised a meeting soon. That one's unlikely to be too placid. ■

Takeaways

➤ **Karnataka moves to execute 2010 tribunal order on dam height**

➤ **Maharashtra fears land submergence; Andhra, Telangana fret over low flow**

➤ **Legal challenge likely**

taka's expansion plan is running smack into fresh opposition from the affected states, now including Telangana. Maharashtra has urged the Centre to halt Karnataka's move; chief minister Devendra Fadnavis promises a fresh challenge in the apex court. In Telangana, Bharat Rashtra Samithi working president K.T. Rama Rao echoed that, adding that the Revanth Reddy-led Congress government would be held responsible if it doesn't effectively thwart the state's potential loss of water legally.

THREE-YEAR TIMELINE

The UKP Stage III is designed to irrigate up to 1.5 million acres of land in the drought-prone regions of northern Karnataka. "This is a big project. Farmers of the region

► UTTARAKHAND

Disaster Managing a Political Landslide

Old foes and rival factions reunited, the Uttarakhand Congress tries to turn over a new leaf for Polls 2027

By Avaneesh Mishra

IN UTTARAKHAND, THE FOCUS THESE DAYS is firmly on matters of survival. Precisely such a spirit has taken hold of what's a natural disaster zone in its own right: the state Congress. Known more for fighting itself than the ruling BJP, old-timers have for long watched bemused as rival camps clashed in public, leaders undercut one another or jumped ship, and the party's vote base splintered. Into this landslide-prone zone comes a new script for soil consolidation. Of late, Congress leaders have begun exuding a more fraternal spirit: sharing podiums at panchayat meets, joining 'peace workshops', leading joint protests on issues as varied as vote *chori*, illegal mining, jobs and disaster relief.

REFORM FROM ABOVE

Sources date this attitudinal shift to June, when party brass Mallikarjun Kharge and Rahul Gandhi summoned state leaders to New Delhi. Old rivals were sat around the same table, roundly upbraided, and handed a blueprint for quake proofing. Not too soon. For, the assembly poll of 2027 isn't far.

The sharpest fault lines here ran between ex-CM Harish Rawat and former minister Harak Singh Rawat.

By **Arkamoy Datta Majumdar**

FOR A DEITY KNOWN AS THE LORD OF THE UNIVERSE, his legions of devotees seem to be struggling with a very earthly problem: scheduling. To be more accurate, narrow that down to the priestly class in charge of his day care and boarding. When exactly should the mighty Jagannath be bathed, wheeled out of his sanctum for his rath yatra, and be brought back home? These seemingly mundane questions have two sets of ecclesiastes trading unholy blows.

On one side stand the traditional custodians ensconced in the Shree Jagannatha Temple Administration (SJTA) of Puri, armed with scriptures, hallowed *tithi* calendars, and the weight of centuries-old ritual authority. On September 6, a press release from them addressed the other side—the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON)—with all the holy rage of a pontiff taking on a newfangled, wayward pretender. It accused the global spiritual organisation of “violating sacred scriptures and tradition” by merrily carting the Lord around on dates of their own convenience.

JUGGERNAUT OF QUERIES

For good measure, it reiterated that non-negotiable tradition: the bathing-related *snana yatra*, commemorating Jagannath’s “birthday”, on Jyestha Poornima; the rath yatra commencing

“ISKCON is committing the blunder of conducting sacred rituals of Lord Jagannath on random dates for 50 years... violating the scriptures (with) weird arguments”

GAJAPATI DIBYASINGHA DEB
Puri maharaja & chief administrator

The bad blood dates back to March 2016, when Harak led a nine-MLA renegade band to the BJP, bringing down the Harish Rawat regime. In 2022, a tearful Harak returned, after being expelled by the BJP for “indiscipline”. Homecoming rites were low-key. Harish came, but was visibly grouchy.

HISS AND MAKE UP

The rivalry soon resurfaced. As recently as June, the two Rawats were still trading barbs over 2016 and the party’s electoral slump thereafter. The Grand Old Party won only 19 seats in the 2022 state polls—the BJP took 47 seats in the 70-seat assembly. It went on to seal that dominance in 2024, when it swept all five Lok Sabha seats in the state.

Cut to now, and Harish finds himself sharing social media posts backing “Dr Harak”. “I am only working to remove the sinful BJP from power. Everyone is welcome to achieve this goal,” he wrote recently.

The focus now is to give the cadre a new centrality. “In

Takeaways

► **Satraps bury the hatchet, new focus on cadre. Result: good outing in local polls**

► **Script for revival written in Delhi. In June, party brass Kharge and Rahul read the riot act to the rival Rawats, Harish and Harak, others**

the BJP, leaders like Advani could be sidelined because of a strong cadre. But we were too dependent on our leaders. That’s changing,” says a party elder. State Congress chief Karan Mahara says things are “95 per cent” fine and “morale is up”. As proof of a turnaround, he cites the recent panchayat poll. Though not fought strictly on party lines, the Congress claimed “138 victories”, versus BJP’s “127”. Right now, even a contested claim of revival counts as a plus. ■



ANI

► ODISHA



KEEPING A DATE WITH THE LORD

The Puri administration upbraids ISKCON for its “flexible” global rath yatra itinerary

on Ashadh Shukla Paksha, et al. Deviating from this, they thundered, was akin to holding Diwali in March or Christmas in June. If Janmashtami, Ramnavami, Ganesh Chaturthi, and even non-Hindu festivals are observed worldwide on ordained dates, what possible excuse is there, SJTA asked, to celebrate Jagannath’s birthday “on any random day of the year”?

The press note bristled with numbers: this year alone, it said, at least 40 ISKCON temples in India and 68 abroad had already violated the scriptural calendar. Worse, ISKCON had apparently promised reform in 2021 but continued with business as usual, especially overseas. Apparently, on December 2, 2024, a meeting was held at Puri in which the Gajapati Maharaja, Puri’s chief administrator, urged upon the ISKCON govern-

ing body commission’s chairman to ensure all ISKCON temples abide by the ritual calendar. On March 20, 2025, the SJTA hurled another piece of admonition. Assembling scholars representing both parties in Bhu-

baneswar for an extended pow-wow, the SJTA luminati declared ISKCON’s arguments to be “completely baseless, incorrect and deserving to be rejected outright as being contrary to scriptures and tradition”.

“Permissions are so challenging even in India, one can imagine the far greater difficulties in foreign countries.... Do we listen to Chaitanya Mahaprabhu or SJTA?”

RADHARAMAN DAS
Vice-president, ISKCON Kolkata

EDICT OF THE SAGES

The press note said “the aforesaid opinion” had been formally approved and despatched to ISKCON authorities at Mayapur, West Bengal. The implication was that it had the weight of an edict and any deviation would be tantamount to courting censure, including from Shankaracharya Nis-chalananda Saraswati of Puri.

ISKCON is responding with plaintive, pragmatic appeals. Radharaman Das, vice-president of ISKCON Kolkata, says they have already started abiding by SJTA’s suggestions within

India, but they run into a different predicament: administrations often won't allow festivals on dates prescribed by Puri. In Lucknow this year, for instance, ISKCON reportedly sought permission to hold the return rath yatra on the prescribed date, but "the authorities expressed difficulty in granting permission" since it wasn't a public holiday or a Sunday. "If permissions become so challenging even in India, the very land of Lord Jagannath, one can imagine the far greater difficulties devotees face in foreign countries," he says.

Takeaways

- Shree Jagannatha Temple Administration upbraids ISKCON for holding rath yatra events on "random days"
- ISKCON says bhakti is more important than blind ritual, cites logistical issues in getting dates in Indian, world cities

According to ISKCON, its adjustments are meant to spread the joy within whatever window is available. In New York, since 1976, ISKCON has been holding the rath yatra on July 18. In Australia, it's shifted to December to dodge the misfortune of dragging chariots through biting July winters. Convenience, not canon, becomes the rule. ISKCON insists this is not sacrilege but strategy—the only way to keep Jagannath's chariot rolling across continents. *Inter alia*, this is a clash of two worldviews: Puri sees authenticity only in fidelity to ritual; ISKCON invokes the bhakti spirit that transcends rigidities. "Do we listen to Chaitanya Mahaprabhu or SJTA?" Das asked pointedly. There's another temporal shadow that falls over the whole episode: the recent rift between Odisha and Bengal over the inauguration of the Jagannath Dham in Digha. ■

► GUJARAT

Garba Goes Uber Luxe

Gujarat's Navratri is a buzzing Rs 15,000 crore industry now—a whirligig of festive consumerism

By Jumana Shah



► SOARING CRESCENDO

People perform Garba on the first night of Navratri in Ahmedabad, Sept. 22

AP

NEVER HAS A spiritual prayer dance elicited such zest, pomp and excitement—among the faithful or otherwise—as the garba does in these parts. The one foolproof meter of the Gujarati soul is where they put their money. And here, the coins rain down in sync with the dance beats. Over the past three years, Navratri

has been a soaring crescendo in Gujarat. An industry of joy that, by 2025, is getting valued above Rs 15,000 crore. That's up by an amazing 33 per cent over 2024, the highest balletic leap yet.

During Navratri, the nine nights of holy festivity, the dancing circles of the garba would light up the chowk of a village or mohalla, equivalent spaces in urban

societies—or, for the very elite, the lawns of private clubs. Essentially a community gathering, the streets were its natural home. Till three years ago, that is.

After the pandemic, when Gujarat stilled its dance steps, the elite began organising private garbas at farmhouses and small party plots in 2022. The fear of big crowds—and infection—was still there. But the experience of curated gigs was appreciated so much, and by an ever-widening garba circle of urban revellers, that commercial garba boomed. From under 100 across Gujarat in 2019, the numbers have breached 300 in each

per person per night. They are sold out pronto, and then sold in black for up to Rs 25,000. Each venue logs average nightly footfalls of 3,000; larger organisers claim nearly 8,000 on all nine nights. The festival itself has gotten longer, extending to nearly 20 nights, beginning a weekend before Navratri and ending a week after Dussehra.

The experience, too, is scaling up—it's now akin to a luxury wedding, starting with an elaborate invite sent a month ahead, to luxurious filmset-like décor, curated food lounges, makeup zones, foot massage, shopping, Gujarati

All this means the boom ricochetting down a whole set of micro and small industries: stage and tent vendors, music and sound, transport, lighting and décor experts, designers and artisans get business equivalent to the peak marriage season. Fine dining and star hotels suffer some, but Dilip Thakkar, who owns a chain of Gujarati thali restaurants in Ahmedabad, says business at casual hangout joints “jumps at least 20 per cent”.

ALL-STAR NITES

A dozen-odd headline artistes command an undisclosed asking price, believed to run into millions per night. Pre-pandemic, artistes used to prefer performing in Mumbai or at diasporic events—the fees would have naturally instilled a greater spring in their step. This year, the popular artistes are alighting on Gujarati cities and towns. Bollywood promos or the fleeting appearance of a starlet as a stage gimmick has made way for young local singers like Aditya Gadhvi, Jigardan Gadhvi, Ishani Dave, Parth Oza, Kinjal Dave, Geeta Rabari, Hardik Dave, Bhoomi Trivedi, Osman Mir, to name a few.

Some celebrate the commercialisation and, indeed, it even feeds into a distinct stated pride in Gujarati culture, rather than being seen as any sort of move away from roots. “Gujaratis have disposable income and they love to spend it on experiences,” says food blogger Esha Shah, who began organising a garba in 2018 with husband Rohan Bhatt.

But the ‘uber consumerism’ has also, perhaps not paradoxically, made the space on the opposite side of the spectrum more attractive. For, the less splashy side of Gujarat lives too. This is quite another flavour of private garba—sans the trappings of luxury, amplifiers and excessive lights—which finds expression on roads leading out of town. In villages and farmhouses surrounding the cities, modestly ticketed events—with the more authentic sound of *dhol* and *shehnai*—find many willing to travel over an hour for just the authenticity. ■



Takeaways

■ **The Navratri industry, with garba events as its centrepiece, has grown 33% over 2024**

■ **From just 100 private garbas across Gujarat in 2019, this year counted 300+ in each big city**

■ **Tickets, priced anywhere from Rs 1,500 to Rs 12,000, get sold out promptly. They sell in black for as high as Rs 25,000**

■ **Stage, set, tent, lighting and decor experts, local designers, artisans, caterers get business equivalent to wedding season**

■ **Gujarati star singers such as Aditya Gadhvi, Jigrra, Ishani dump Mumbai for local gigs**

of its four main cities—Ahmedabad, Surat, Vadodara and Rajkot—by 2025. This year also logs a 20 per cent jump in venues over last year.

The cost of passes, too, has shot up, admits Jaydeep Mehta, a veteran garba organiser for over three decades and president of Event Management Federation Global. Sold on booking platforms now, they range from Rs 12,000 on the higher side to an average of Rs 1,500

star singers and, a level above that, VIP access for the upper crust.

RED & WHITE LOVE

The rage this season is theme garba—sporting names like *safed ishq*, *safed parindey*, *laal ishq* (white love, white bird, red love, et al), naturally calling for coordinated attire and décor, and dotted with multiple photo booths—tailormade for Instafame.

[OBITUARY]

EVERYONE'S OWN

Assam mourns a singer who spoke the language of its soul

By Kaushik Deka

SINGER DROWNS IN FOREIGN WATERS.

AWhen his body returns, a deluge of grief swamps his homeland. Three lakh people join the cortège. Over two days and nights, half a million souls file past his coffin. The elderly weep alongside teenagers; bureaucrats stand shoulder to shoulder with tea vendors; police officers, trained in stoicism, sob openly. The dam had finally burst, and now they were crying a river.

When the news first came, a strange stillness had descended upon Assam. Zubeen Garg, their most cherished cultural icon for three decades, was dead. Shops downed shutters, schools emptied, offices fell silent, food delivery services ceased operations, ride-sharing apps went still. Then, before the official word on state mourning—eventually lasting three days—the people began enacting their own rituals of grief. Candles flickered at street corners, oil lamps burned before portraits, crowds sang the song he had asked them to sing when he departed. The chief minister himself flew to Delhi to receive the body, knelt before the coffin, and sang through tears. Modern India had witnessed nothing quite like this.

To understand why an entire state ground to a halt for a musician requires an empathic feel for what Zubeen represented to Assam: not merely entertainment, but identity itself. In a region that has long felt unheard within India's vast soundscape, where culture and language were held close as life-giving incantations amidst a generations-long spell of political and economic darkness, Zubeen came like a source of light dressed up as sound. A voice that could speak to poor farmers and software engineers with equal authenticity, that could carry Assamese culture to Bollywood without genuflecting to it.

Born in 1972 in Meghalaya's Tura, raised in Jorhat during Assam's tumultuous years, Zubeen's art emerged from soil watered by both tradition and trauma. It was amazing how that travelled like light across the waters. Over three

decades, he would record thousands of songs—in 40 languages. In a way, this duplet rhythm came naturally to him. Beginning with his 1992 debut album *Anamika*, he had not only embodied a generational shift but one that was borne along on a twin axis: a new universality, but from a rooted place. His was music that honoured the sacred *borgeets* of Srimanta Sankardev while embracing electric guitars, that could pivot from a sprightly folk tune to film pop, that lent as much soul to a devotional hymn as to a rebellious anthem.

The last was no pretension. During the anti-CAA protests in 2019, Zubeen wasn't issuing statements from comfortable studios. He stood among the crowds at Latasil field. He possessed that rarest of qualities in modern celebhood: genuine accessibility. Tea-stall conversations, impromptu street gigs, unguarded appearances...he moved through Assamese society not as a visitor from fame's stratosphere but as a permanent resident of its everyday struggles.

His contradictions and stubbornness were legendary and, paradoxically, enhanced rather than diminished his stature. He could arrive at concerts hours late, sometimes intoxicated, yet audiences forgave what they

would condemn in others. A Brahmin himself, he publicly challenged Brahminical orthodoxy, faced FIRs for perceived slights to tradition, defied an ULFA diktat against Hindi songs at Bihu festivals, yet remained unscathed. In his defiance, people perhaps realised their own suppressed rebellions; in his excesses, their own human frailties.

Urban youth, the farmer in the outback, the diasporic Assamese, he could speak to them all—as if he was all of them. His Bollywood outings, beginning from a Rahman song in *Dil Se* to the 2016 hit 'Ya Ali', earned him national recognition. But unlike those who drowned in Mumbai's glitter, he always returned to Guwahati, to Assamese cinema, to the local recording studio where it all began. A flowing river, he always curled back to Assam's inner sea. ■

ZUBEEN GARG (1972-2025)



BUBORO



**KLE ACADEMY OF HIGHER
EDUCATION AND RESEARCH
(KAHER), Belagavi, Karnataka**
(DEEMED-TO-BE-UNIVERSITY)
www.kaher.edu.in

Dr. Prabhakar B Kore

Chairman, KLE Society & Chancellor, KAHER, Belagavi

The KLE Academy of Higher Education and Research (KAHER), Deemed-to-be-University established on 13th April 2006 is one of the premier Health Science Universities in the country, imparting high quality health profession education at Under-Graduate, Post-Graduate and Post-doctoral levels. Based on the excellent infrastructure, faculty base, research, contemporary teaching & training practices and overall academic environment, the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD), Government of India, on the recommendations of the University Grants Commission (UGC), granted Deemed-to-be-University status to nine colleges of KLE Society (sponsoring society) and thus the KLE Deemed-to-be-University came into existence.

The University has been accredited with 'A+' Grade by NAAC (3rd Cycle) & has received 12B status from the University Grants Commission (UGC), it is placed in Category 'A' University by MoE, GOI. & recognised as Scientific and Industrial Research Organization (SIRO) by the department of Scientific and Industrial Research (DSIR), Ministry of Science and Technology, Government of India.

Sponsoring Society (KLE Society):

The sponsoring of KAHER viz. KLE Society, was established in 1916 has over the years established itself as a rising star in the field of education and healthcare. The KLE Society celebrated its centenary year in 2015-16. The KLE Society is unique in its character as it was formed by seven visionary and dedicated teachers "Saptarshis" with philanthropic support from three generous Patrons. It is also unique in its association and governance, as it runs purely on democratic values and principles with a charitable objective.

The Society, however, has undergone rapid metamorphosis under the able leadership of Chairman **Dr. Prabhakar Kore** more than last 40 years has bloomed and blossomed and today it encompasses **310 institutions** all over the country which in itself is an inspirational achievement.

Research:

The University right from its inception has been promoting research and the faculty development which has resulted into a number of funded research projects/ publications and developing expertise of the faculty. The Maternal and New Born Research Unit of the University is known globally for its research in mother and new born health. Its transformative research not only has resulted in high quality publications in journals like Lancet, New England Journal of Medicine, etc. but also helped save hundreds and thousands of mothers and their babies. Because of the good work of this research unit, it has been recognized as one of the premier research sites globally. It has been successfully able to get 4th cycle of NIH (USA) funding. This centre also generates funding from WHO, Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, USAID, NIHCD and various other international foundations. The researchers from this unit are invited nationally and internationally for presentation of their work and / or as experts to deliver guest lectures and participate in symposia. The researchers of the University also generate grants and funding from Indian agencies like ICMR, DBT, Department of AYUSH, CCIM, AICTE, VGST, Department of Atomic Energy, etc. So far, in the last four years, grants of more than Rs.65.00 crores have been generated for various funded projects. Recently, this unit has received unique distinction as 'WHO Collaborating Centre' in Maternal and Perinatal Health for a period of four years, the first of its kind for a private University in South India. The research unit of the University has won the prestigious first ever Newton Babha Award in the year 2017.



Recognitions and Appreciation:

In recognition and appreciation of the quality parameters achieved in the field of education, research, academics, health-care services, etc., the University has achieved the following unique distinctions:

- KAHER is accredited by NAAC with A+ in 3rd Cycle (CGPA:3.39: February 2022).
- KAHER has been placed in Category A by MoE (Ministry of Education).
- The KAHER has been recognized by DSIR and SIRO, Department of Scientific and Industrial Research, Ministry of Science and Technology, Government of India.
- The Association of Indian Universities (AIU) has approved establishment of Academic and Administrative Development Centre (AIU-AADC) at KAHER, Belagavi.
- Accredited by National Accreditation Board for Hospitals and Healthcare (NABH). KLE Dr. Prabhakar Kore Hospital & MRC, VKIDS & BMK.
- Dr. S. G. Desai Library, KAHER, Belagavi has been awarded the ISO 9001:2015 Certification by SUD South Asia on 04/07/2024. The award is based on a number of quality management principles and commitment to continuous improvement.
- The KAHER has been recognized as 'Center of Excellence' by THE NETWORK: Towards Unity for Health (TUFH).
- JNMC Women and Children's Health Research Unit is recognized as ICMR-Collaborating Centre of Excellence (ICMR-CCoE).
- JNMC Women and Children's Health Research Unit is one of the eight global network sites of NICHD, USA for research on Women and Child Health.
- JNMC Women and Children's Health Research Unit is Recognized as WHO Collaboration Center for Research in Maternal and Perinatal Health.

RECOGNITION, ACCREDITATION & MEMBERSHIP



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Hollywood REPORTER



ROLL CALL

An official collecting data
for the electoral roll revision
in Bhojpur, Bihar, Jul. 5





COVER STORY | VOTER ROLLS

WHO IS A CITIZEN?

A NATIONWIDE SPECIAL INTENSIVE
REVISION OF VOTER ROLLS STARTING
FROM BIHAR STIRS CONTROVERSY
AROUND IDENTITY AND EXCLUSION

By KAUSHIK DEKA | Photograph by RANJAN RAHI

ION

September 10, the Election Commission of India (ECI) convened chief electoral officers from across the country to discuss the preparation of a nationwide Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls, a bureaucratic exercise it insists is about “cleaning up” voter lists, but which critics say cuts to the core question: who counts as a citizen in India? The ECI had announced this initiative in June, and is already implementing it in poll-bound Bihar. Now it is beginning to move its levers to extend the exercise across India, before assembly elections scheduled early next year in five states. “The ECI is afraid the poll process would be misled by fake votes in the name of dead voters, permanently migrated voters, duplicate voters, fake and foreign voters,” Chief Election Commissioner Gyanesh Kumar had declared following the launch of the SIR in Bihar. “That is why this revision has been launched in Bihar and will be taken to the entire country. Should the Election Commission not weed out such voters?”

The Opposition sees this entire spell of electoral roll revision as a political weapon to eliminate citizens likely to vote against the ruling National Democratic Alliance (NDA) led by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), especially in Bihar this year, and West Bengal and Assam next year. That feeling of unease grew when Prime Minister Narendra Modi, in his Independence Day address, declared he would launch a “high-powered demography mission” to weed out illegal immigrants. “Infiltrators are snatching away the livelihood of our youth [and] targeting the sisters and daughters of our country, misleading innocent tribals and capturing their land,” he said from the ramparts of the Red Fort this August 15. The Opposition criticised Modi’s latest mission as a ploy to cloak the electoral revision exercise in nationalistic rhetoric to quell voters’ growing concerns about its true purpose. The Congress cleverly dovetailed Rahul Gandhi’s ‘vote chori’ campaign into its wider attack on the omissions of the Commission, accusing the ECI of allegedly fixing electoral rolls to favour the ruling BJP.

The focal point of the Opposition’s criticism is the ECI’s document requirements for a citizen to prove he or she is an eligible voter in Bihar. The ECI is also executing such a detailed SIR in three months when in the past such revisions took close

to two years and were never timed to meet an election deadline. On June 24 this year, the ECI gave 76.7 million eligible voters in Bihar a month to submit proof of Indian citizenship from a list of 11 acceptable documents. These included birth certificates, passports, matriculation certificates, land ownership papers, ID cards of a PSU employee, ID issued by a government body pre-July 1987, forest rights certificate, caste certificates, permanent resident certificates, family register or NRC where it exists. The list deliberately excluded the three forms of identification most commonly held by India’s poor and marginalised populations: Aadhaar cards, voter ID cards issued by the ECI itself and ration cards. On September 8, the Supreme Court did order the inclusion of Aadhaar as a 12th acceptable document in Bihar, but it came with a catch: the ECI reserves the right to demand additional documentation to verify Aadhaar authenticity. Already, ECI sources report discrepancies in the documents of nearly 300,000 electors. The number of voters who may ultimately be removed from the rolls will not be known until the final list is released on September 30. Petitioners challenging the SIR in the Supreme Court accuse the ECI of procedural violations, lack of transparency and failure to follow its own rulebook. Yet they are not sure if they will find redress, since the courts have indicated the exercise will be quashed only if outright illegality is proven. Final arguments are scheduled for October 7.

Opposition parties allege that the ECI is exceeding its constitutional mandate, since citizenship determination is not within its purview. They characterise the revision as a calculated political strategy to benefit the BJP, particularly in Bihar, Assam and West Bengal, states with high Muslim populations of 17 per cent, 34 per cent and 27 per cent, respectively. Critics see these states as the immediate battleground where the definition of citizen-

“It’s a deliberate conspiracy, the country’s demography is being altered. It threatens the unity, integrity and progress of the country. The demography mission will deal with this severe crisis in a time-bound manner”

— NARENDRA MODI, Prime Minister



SETTING THE AGENDA
PM Modi addresses the nation from Red Fort on Independence Day, Aug. 15

PTI

ship is being redrawn through voter suppression disguised as reform. "By sharpening the demographic debate," says Jairam Ramesh, Congress general secretary in-charge communications, "the Modi government is clearly positioning itself with an eye on the upcoming assembly elections in Bihar, Assam and West Bengal. It is, unmistakably, an electoral strategy aimed at the eastern states."

The Opposition's charge draws strength from precedent. After the Pahalgam terror attack in April this year, several BJP-ruled states rounded up Bengali-speaking Muslims, many of them Indian citizens, and branded them 'illegal Bangladeshis'. In West Bengal, the episode left a deep scar, prompting chief minister Mamata Banerjee to accuse the BJP of conflating Bengali identity with Bangladeshi nationality, weaponising language itself. "The courts have repeatedly exposed the BJP's misplaced

MISSION PURGE

In a multi-pronged offensive, the Union government tightens laws and enforcement in its campaign against 'illegal' immigrants

► PM Modi announces high-powered 'demography mission' to target 'infiltration', says it is a demographic threat

► Four colonial-era immigration laws merged into the Immigration and Foreigners Act, 2025; Bureau of Immigration gets unprecedented powers

► MHA directs states/UTs to set up holding centres/ detention camps for suspected illegal foreigners pending removal

► Upgrades Assam's Foreigners Tribunals to first-class judicial magistrate status, empowers them to issue arrest warrants

► Big shift from slow, formal deportations to large-scale 'push-backs'; detainees moved to outposts and pushed across no man's land at the Bangladesh border

► BJP-ruled states like Rajasthan, Haryana, Delhi and Maharashtra start rounding up Bengali-speaking Muslims and deporting them as 'illegal Bangladeshis'. Many later prove to be Indian citizens from West Bengal

► Pushes a Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls (Bihar first; to extend to poll-bound states) to verify electors and weed out suspected non-citizens

claims," says Trinamool Congress Rajya Sabha MP Sushmita Dev. "Several Bengali-speaking Muslims, pushed into Bangladesh forcibly or harassed in BJP-ruled states, were later found to be Indian citizens. The real reason is clear to everyone...documents and divisive politics cannot substitute for fairness and constitutional due process."

A New Demographic Reorder

For the moment, the demography mission exists more as an idea than an institution, without a structure, budget or timeline. Yet PM Modi and his colleagues are amping up the rhetoric and linking the mission to the anxieties of border states around immigration. On a three-day swing-by through Mizoram, Manipur, Assam, West Bengal and Bihar in September, the PM tailored his message to local grievances, from invoking cross-border in-

"The ECI is afraid the poll process would be misled by fake votes in the name of dead, duplicate, fake and foreign voters. That is why this revision has been launched in Bihar and will be taken to the entire country"

GYANESH KUMAR

Chief Election
Commissioner



"By sharpening the demographic debate, the Modi government is clearly eyeing the upcoming assembly elections in Bihar, Assam and West Bengal"

JAIRAM RAMESH

General Secretary
in-charge
Communications,
Congress

Photographs: ANI

filtration in strife-torn Manipur to praising Assam's eviction drives against "encroachers". In Bihar's eastern Seemanchal belt, where Muslims constitute over 60 per cent of the population in some districts, he sharpened the BJP's allegation of demographic change driven by infiltration.

RSS ideologue and India Foundation founder Ram Madhav had echoed the intent behind the demography mission when he framed the project in historical and geopolitical terms. India's first census in 1951, he said, doubled as a de facto citizens' register. Eight decades later, with an unsettled neighbourhood dominated by theocratic regimes, tracking demographic changes driven by illegal immigration has become a pressing need. Whether this takes the form of another nationwide NRC (National Register of Citizens) or a different mechanism, Madhav suggests, will be decided by the demography mission.

Meanwhile, there have been other quiet developments. Five months earlier, Parliament passed the Immigration and Foreigners Bill, 2025, which merged four colonial-era laws into a single statute. The new framework gives sweeping powers to the Bureau of Immigration to identify and deport illegal migrants. The law came into force on September 1. The next day, the Union ministry of home affairs (MHA) directed all states and Union Territories to set up holding centres or detention camps to confine suspected illegal foreigners until deportation.

Seen in the context of these developments, the plan for the national SIR signals the BJP's return to core themes that have defined its national project since 2014: hardening citizenship boundaries and aligning legal frameworks with a political narrative that views demographic change as an existential threat to the Republic. For more than a decade, the BJP's most consistent refrain has been 'infiltration', the claim that undocumented migrants, largely from Bangladesh (and Rohingya entering through it), have crossed in such numbers that they are reshaping the religious, linguistic

and electoral character of large parts of India.

In 2019, the NRC in Assam had become the movement's administrative showcase. Union home minister Amit Shah sharpened the rhetoric further, first describing infiltrators as "termites" and later unveiling the 'chronology'—the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) followed by a nationwide NRC. Together, these declarations crystallised fears among India's 200 million Muslims that they were being systematically singled out. The SIR, critics claim, is the repackaged NRC. "There is a definite element of the NRC in the SIR exercise, given the EC's insistence on checking citizenship and its extreme reluctance to accept Aadhaar," says political activist Yogendra Yadav. Others strongly contest this view. "Verification exercises conducted by legitimate authorities are both justified and necessary," says Prof. Vandana Mishra, Centre for Political Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University. "Under the Representation of the People Act, 1950, the Election Commission has clear powers to carry out such verification while preparing electoral rolls. Moreover, the very inclusion of a person's name in the electoral roll presupposes that they possess the requisite documents to establish nationality."

Who is a Citizen?

Citizenship in India has always been a layered question, both legal and personal. The Constitution, when it came into force on January 26, 1950, drew the first boundaries of belonging. Anyone domiciled in India at that moment could be a citizen if they were born in the territory, had a parent born there, or had lived there continuously for five years. The framers had to deal with the turbulent backdrop of Partition, and so they crafted rules for those who migrated from Pakistan—granting citizenship to those who crossed before July 19, 1948, while making registration mandatory for those who arrived after that date.

DEFINITION OF A CITIZEN

How the Indian Constitution determines citizenship

When the Constitution was promulgated (Jan. 26, 1950)

Any person domiciled in India was a citizen if

- ↳ He was born in India or had a parent born in India
- ↳ Resident in India for at least 5 years prior

Migrants from Pakistan

- ↳ Those who came before Jul. 19, 1948, became citizens if resident in India since migration
- ↳ Those who came after had to register as citizens
- ↳ Persons migrating to Pakistan after Mar. 1, 1947, were not citizens unless they returned with a resettlement permit

Persons of Indian origin residing abroad

- ↳ Could be registered as citizens by Indian diplomatic authorities. But no dual citizenship allowed



Overseas Citizenship of India (OCI)

- ↳ OCI is not full citizenship but provides long-term visa and residency rights (Sec. 7A of the Citizenship Act, 1955)
- ↳ Does not grant political rights like voting, contesting elections or holding constitutional posts

Loss of Citizenship

- ↳ Renunciation (Sec. 8): Voluntary
- ↳ Termination (Sec. 9): Automatic if one acquires foreign citizenship
- ↳ Deprivation (Sec. 10): If obtained by fraud, disloyalty, unlawful trade with enemy, or on imprisonment abroad

Under the Citizenship Act, 1955

Citizenship can be acquired in the following ways...

By birth (Sec. 3)

- ↳ Born in India between Jan. 26, 1950 and Jul. 1, 1987
- ↳ Born between Jul. 1, 1987 and Dec. 3, 2004: citizen if either parent was Indian citizen (added through Citizenship Amendment Act, or CAA, 1986)
- ↳ Born on/after Dec. 3, 2004: citizen only if both parents are Indians, or one parent is Indian and

the other is not an illegal migrant (CAA 2003)

By descent (Sec. 4)

- ↳ Born outside India between Jan. 26, 1950 and Dec. 10, 1992: citizen if father is Indian citizen
- ↳ Born after Dec. 10, 1992: citizen if either parent is Indian citizen (CAA 1992)
- ↳ Registration of birth at Indian consulate within one year required; child must not hold foreign passport (CAA 2003)

By registration (Sec. 5)

- ↳ Person of Indian Origin (PIO) living in India for 7 yrs
- ↳ PIO residing abroad

↳ Spouse of Indian citizen, ordinarily resident in India for 7 years

- ↳ Minor children of Indian citizens
- ↳ Other categories like persons who were earlier Indian citizens or Overseas Citizenship of India (OCI) cardholders

By naturalisation (Sec. 6)

- ↳ Foreigners can apply if residing in India for 12 yrs
- ↳ Relaxed to 5 years for Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, Parsis, Christians from Afghanistan, Bangladesh or Pakistan (through CAA 2019)

By incorporation of Territory (Sec. 7)

- ↳ If a new territory becomes part of India, the govt specifies who can become an Indian citizen

Special Provisions

- ↳ Assam Accord: PIO who entered Assam before Jan. 1, 1966, deemed citizens. Those entering between 1966–71 registered but no voting rights for 10 years
- ↳ CAA 2019: Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, Parsis, Christians from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Pakistan who entered before Dec. 31, 2024 (without valid documents) can get citizenship

Migrants who went the other way, from India to Pakistan, were not deemed citizens unless they returned with a permit for permanent resettlement.

Over time, Parliament gave sharper contours to these principles through the Citizenship Act, 1955, which remains the foundation of India's citizenship law. The Act allows citizenship by birth, descent, registration, naturalisation and incorporation of new territory. Each category has been revised over decades, narrowing the scope of birthright citizenship and tightening requirements for descent. For instance, a child born in India after December 3, 2004, is a citizen only if both parents are Indian, or if one parent is Indian and the other is not an illegal migrant. The law also carries within it special provisions: the Assam Accord, which recognised certain migrants who entered before 1971, and the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019, which opened a fast track for Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, Parsis and Christians wishing to migrate from Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan.

But recognition on paper needs proof. In India, there is no single universal document that conclusively establishes citizenship. Instead, it is demonstrated through a patchwork of records, some primary, others supportive. A birth certificate or an Indian passport is considered the most direct evidence. Citizenship or naturalisation certificates, issued by the government, carry unambiguous authority. For those applying under the 2019 amendment, proof of religion, country of origin and entry into India before the cut-off date of December 31, 2014 (modified recently to December 31, 2024), is required. Naturalisation applicants, meanwhile, must demonstrate long years of residence, with documents ranging from utility bills to tax records.

Yet the vast majority of population rely on what are technically supporting documents—voter ID cards, entries in the electoral roll, Aadhaar, PAN, school records, land or tenancy papers, ration cards. These were never designed as citizenship papers but, in practice, they often become the instruments through which belonging is tested. The SIR exercise has now challenged this practice.

Perils of a Paper Trail

In India, citizenship tests based on documents have rarely worked well. Assam's NRC is a cautionary tale of administrative overreach, exposing the limits of paper trails. Supervised by the Supreme Court, it required 33 million residents to prove descent from someone living in Assam before midnight of March 24, 1971, the cut-off under the Assam Accord. People submitted 66 million documents to 2,500 service centres, which were then scrutinised by 52,000 officials sifting through records half a century old. The result: 1.9 million people excluded at a cost of Rs 1,600 crore—five times the original budget—with no final conclusive outcome.

More than five years later, not a single person has lost citizenship because the list remains unnotified and each exclusion would still face review by Foreigners' Tribunals

PROOF OF CITIZENSHIP

In India, citizenship is not proved by a single universal document but through a combination of primary records such as passports, birth or citizenship certificates, and supporting documents like voter ID, Aadhaar or land records, depending on the legal or administrative context

PRIMARY DOCUMENTS

These directly establish Indian citizenship

- » **Birth certificate**
- » **Indian passport**
- » **Certificate of registration or naturalisation**
- » **Citizenship certificate**
- » **Overseas Citizenship of India (OCI)**

- card:** not full citizenship but shows earlier citizenship/Indian origin
- » **Domicile certificate:** especially for those recognised as citizens at the commencement of the Constitution

and potential appeals up to the Supreme Court. Politically, the exercise backfired. Even the BJP, which championed a nationwide NRC, disowned Assam's version after its own leaders admitted that "so many genuine Indians" had been left out. Assam's NRC exposed a blunt truth: paper trails cannot capture belonging, especially for the poor and mobile. Women were especially disadvantaged, as records often failed to track name changes after marriage.

Bihar's ongoing SIR exposes the pitfalls of document-based citizenship tests. In a state where fewer than 40 per cent of births were registered before 2005, the exercise risks excluding the poor, displaced and women. Critics argue that without a long-standing civil registration system, formal documentation reflects wealth and privilege, not citizenship.

Faced with these charges, the ECI has steadily diluted its plan under Supreme Court scrutiny. Its June 24 order required every voter to file forms with one of the 11 approved documents by July 25. But as complaints mounted, officials allowed forms without proof, extended the deadline to August 30, and ensured bulk inclusion in the August 1 draft roll. The Commission also softened its stand on deadlines, permitting corrections until the nomination stage under "continuous updation". The trajectory is clear: after initial rigidity, the ECI has been forced into greater flexibility by ground realities and judicial pressure.

SUPPORTING DOCUMENTS

These do not themselves confer citizenship but are often accepted as evidence of citizenship

► Voter ID

Electoral roll entry

► Aadhaar card

Not a citizenship document but often used as supporting proof of residence and identity

PAN card / Driving licence

Not proof on their own, but corroborative

School leaving certificate

Or other government-issued identity cards mentioning place/date of birth

Land or tenancy records

These must show residence before cut-off dates (especially in Assam NRC/Accord contexts)

Ration card: Historically used as supporting proof of residency and family linkage



SPECIAL SITUATIONS

Assam Accord (Citizenship Act, Section 6A): Documents such as inclusion in 1966/1971 electoral rolls, refugee registration or residency records are used to prove citizenship

CAA 2019 beneficiaries: Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains,

Parsis, Christians from Pakistan, Afghanistan, Bangladesh to show proof of religion, country of origin and entry before Dec. 31, 2024

Naturalisation applicants

Must provide proof of residence in India (ration cards, rent agreements, utility bills, tax records)



"A regular exercise, conducted many times in the past to remove ineligible voters, is now being misrepresented as a conspiracy against certain sections of society. That perception is completely unfounded"

— RAM MADHAV

RSS ideologue; Founder, India Foundation



"Documents and divisive politics cannot substitute for fairness and constitutional due process"

— SUSHMITA DEV, Rajya Sabha MP, TMC

The Long Pursuit of a Register

Even though it has taken centre stage in the past decade, citizenship verification predates the Modi era. The idea of a nationwide NRC was first mooted in 2003, under the BJP-led NDA government of Atal Bihari Vajpayee. Acting on the recommendations of a Group of Ministers (GoM) set up after the Kargil War, the Citizenship Act, 1955, was amended to mandate identity cards for every citizen, especially in border states. In 2004, the Congress-led UPA went further, inserting Section 14A into the Citizenship Act, making registration of every citizen compulsory, and providing for an NRC.

Linked to the NRC is the National Population Register (NPR), a record not of citizens but of all "usual residents", defined as those living in an area for at least six months or intending to stay another six. Under the 2003 amendment, NPR data serves as the base for preparing the NRC. The NPR collects basic personal and household details—such as name, age, gender, occupation, parents' and spouse's details, education and addresses. Unlike the Census, where individual particulars remain confidential under the Census Act, 1948, NPR data can be used for welfare schemes targeted at individuals or households.

The first countrywide NPR was rolled out in 2010 and updated in 2015 (Assam and Meghalaya were left out). The

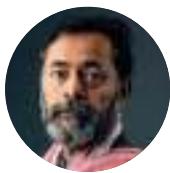
2010 round collected biometrics. Later seeded into Aadhaar, the biometric requirement was subsequently dropped. The questionnaire itself expanded from 14 queries in 2010 to 21 in later rounds. In 2020, the Modi government announced another NPR update, but widespread protests and the COVID pandemic stalled it. Critics focused on two new questions—date and place of birth of parents—arguing that this was a veiled attempt to trace ancestry and target certain communities under the guise of citizenship verification.

Experts, however, caution that uninformed resistance should not be used to dilute the larger issue of illegal immigration. Prof. Mishra says any attempt to link illegal immigration with national security must be seen in a historical context, particularly against the backdrop of terrorism and India's vulnerable borders with hostile neighbours. Rami Niranjani Desai, an anthropologist specialising in northeast India, argues that the Assam experience should not be grounds to abandon the NRC altogether. Instead, she says, the process needs refinement, less dependence on documents, more layers of verification, stronger checks and balances and multiple opportunities for appeal. Though time-consuming, such safeguards are essential to make the exercise both fair and effective.

A Picture in Numbers

The debate over illegal immigration is built on numbers that shift wildly depending on the source. In 1997, home minister Indrajit Gupta, a Left politician, put the figure at 10 million; by 2001, a task force on border management raised it to 15 million. In 2004, Sriprakash Jaiswal, who was minister of state for home affairs then, told Parliament there were 12 million Bangladeshis in India. By 2016, the then MoS for home affairs Kiren Rijiju claimed “around 20 million”, though he admitted that clandestine entry made reliable estimates impossible.

Experts are wary about attributing such changes solely to illegal immigration, as fertility differentials, though narrowing, account for much of the growth gap. The rise in Muslim population in a non-border state like, say, Madhya Pradesh fortifies that analysis, showing that immigration alone cannot explain the pattern. “There has been no fresh data on de-



“There is a definite element of the NRC in the SIR exercise, given the EC’s insistence on checking citizenship and its extreme reluctance to accept Aadhaar”

— YOGENDRA YADAV, Political activist



DEBAJYOTTI CHAKRABORTY

WHAT IS SIR?

Bihar’s Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls stands out for its tight deadline and voter-specific documentation rules, marking a departure from earlier nationwide exercises

While the ECI has conducted at least nine such revisions between 1952 and 2004—some involving house-to-house verification or even a complete *de novo* (anew) roll—Bihar’s exercise is exceptional

For the first time, a full-state intensive revision has been conducted just four to six months ahead of assembly elections, combining a hybrid approach with a com-

pressed schedule

Bihar’s last intensive revision happened in 2002-03, part of a larger nationwide effort. While the enumeration phase ran for 31 days in mid-2002—the same as this year—the revision was completed a full three years before the assembly polls in October 2005, allowing ample time for corrections, appeals, etc.



DEEP SCRUTINY People queue at a block office to update voter ID cards amid SIR fears, North 24 Parganas, West Bengal, Sept. 9

Also, the 2002-03 revision was done from scratch, but the 2025 exercise discriminates between voters based on when they were enrolled, creating different documentary requirements for different cohorts

Those who appeared on the 2003 rolls, roughly 49.6 million people, need to submit only an enumeration form with an extract from that old list, which has been made available online

But the remaining 29.3 million face steeper requirements. Voters aged above 40 and missing from the 2003 list have to provide doc-

umentary proof of their citizenship, identity and residence. Those born between Jul. 1, 1987, and Dec. 2, 2004, must provide proof of their date and place of birth plus similar documentation for one parent. Those born after December 2004 need proof for themselves and both parents

The ECI initially specified 11 acceptable documents, excluding Aadhaar, PAN and voter ID because, as officials explained, they did not prove citizenship. After an SC directive, Aadhaar was accepted as the 12th document, but additional documentation may be asked for, in order to authenticate it

THE COUNT OF ILLEGALS

1997: Home minister Indrajit Gupta estimates 10 million illegal immigrants

2001: A task force on Border Management (during BJP rule) raises count it to 15 million

2004: Congress minister Sriprakash Jaiswal tells Parliament

there are 12 million Bangladeshis in India

2016: MoS for home affairs Kiren Rijiju makes a claim of "around 20 million" illegal immigrants in India

2019: Assam's NRC excludes 1.9 million who could not prove their citizenship

ographic change since the 2011 Census," says Prof. Saswati Choudhury, director of the OKD Institute of Social Change and Development, Guwahati. "In the absence of such data, it is impossible to draw firm conclusions about how much of the population increase is due to births, recorded migration or other unexplained factors. The politics of demography will remain a contentious fault line in India, given the polarised socio-political landscape and the salience of religious identities. The immediate priority, therefore, is to conduct the next Census to provide a reliable picture."

The Mandate of a Mission

Population experts stress that the proposed demography mission must acknowledge development as the strongest safeguard of national security. Ram B. Bhagat, author of *Population & the Political Imagination: Census, Register & Citizenship in India* and former professor at the International Institute for Population Sciences, says the mission should not limit itself to infiltration but also examine the out-migration of citizens from border states and districts. "Understanding demographic change requires more than counting heads," he says. "It demands systematic data on birth and death rates, health conditions, employment opportunities and access to basic amenities." Prof. Choudhury agrees, arguing that the mission must go beyond raw numbers and place population growth and shifts in religious composition within the larger socioeconomic realities, particularly in regions where growth is most pronounced.

In the end, Modi's demography mission is less a settled policy than an unsettled question: is citizenship in India to be anchored in fairness and inclusion, or in suspicion and exclusion? The government has armed itself with sweeping new laws, but history, from Assam's failed NRC to Bihar's contested roll revision, shows the dangers of reducing identity to documents and politics. Whether this mission steadies the Republic or further fractures it will depend on whether it treats demography as data to be weaponised, or as a reality to be governed with fairness, nuance and humanity. ■

HOW TO SURVIVE THE BLOW

A STEEP HIKE IN H-1B VISA FEE IMPOSED BY THE UNITED STATES RATTLES THE IT SECTOR, THREATENING JOBS AND GROWTH, AND FORCING COMPANIES TO RETHINK BUSINESS MODELS

By AJAY SUKUMARAN

The weekend brought thunder from across the Atlantic, shaking India's IT industry to its core. The US—its biggest market, accounting for more than half of \$224 billion (Rs 19.9 lakh crore) in tech exports—moved to shut the door on foreign software engineers with a prohibitive H-1B visa fee hike. Announced on September 19 by US president Donald Trump, the new fee for each H-1B visa application filed from September 21 would be \$100,000 (around Rs 88.6 lakh), nearly 70 times higher than the previous fee, which ranged from \$1,500-4,000 (Rs 1.3-3.5 lakh). While the H-1B visa has long been in the crosshairs of the Trump administration, which wants to curb visa 'abuses' that allegedly 'displace US workers and undermine national security', the confusion that accompanied the proclamation has sent the industry into a tizzy.

This is because Indians have so far been the biggest beneficiaries of H-1B visas, accounting for 71 per cent of approved ones in FY24. Among the large Indian IT companies, Infosys sponsored 8,137 H-1B visas in FY24, followed by Tata Consultancy Services (7,566), HCL America (2,952), LTIMindtree (2,136) and Wipro (1,636). Top American firms also rely heavily on H-1B visas. In FY24, eight of the top 10 sponsors were US companies and by June 2025, that number had risen to nine. Amazon.com Services LLC sponsored 10,044 visas, Microsoft Corp. 5,189, Meta 5,123 and Apple 4,202.

The stocks of IT firms took a beating on Indian bourses on September 23, dragging down the benchmark Sensex as well. Infosys, TCS and Wipro fell between 2 and 3 per cent, while smaller IT firms saw a steeper decline. Tech firms went into a huddle with their legal and immigration experts to understand the implications, while advising their employees in the US to stay put and asking those travelling overseas to return immediately, fearing that re-entry into the US could be impacted. In San Francisco, reports said a Dubai-bound Emirates flight was stuck on the tarmac for three hours as



AP

\$100,000
(₹88.6 lakh)

NEW ONE-TIME PAYMENT
for H-1B visa effective 2026.
Previously, it ranged from
\$1,500 to \$4,000
(₹1.3 lakh-3.5 lakh)

71%

INDIA'S SHARE IN H-1B VISAS approved in FY24

9

AMERICAN FIRMS
in the list of top 10 H-1B sponsors in 2025



panic-stricken H-1B visa-holders tried to de-board. India's ministry of external affairs pointed to the 'humanitarian consequences' for families from the disruption. "The government hopes that these disruptions can be addressed suitably by the US authorities," it said.

CLARIFICATION AND AFTER

Amid the panic unleashed over the weekend, the US authorities issued a hasty clarification. The \$100,000 fee was a one-time payment on submission of a new H-1B petition made after the cut-off date of September 21, not an annually recurring one as initially feared. It also did not change any payments or fees required for H-1B renewals; nor did it prevent any current H-1B holder from travelling in and out of the US. While this clarification brought immediate relief, India's IT industry is on a wait-and-watch mode.

WHAT IS AN H-1B VISA?
A temporary employment visa for skilled workers in specialised fields like technology and medicine in the US. It requires the employer to sponsor the applicant

For them, the move comes as an added challenge. Ongoing geopolitical uncertainties, including a US tariff reset, have already prompted clients to pause their IT budgets, putting pressure on the margins of software firms. On the tech front, new artificial intelligence (AI) tools are also forcing firms and IT employees to quickly adapt to new ways of working.

However, according to estimates by

industry body Nasscom, H-1B workers account for less than 1 per cent of the entire employee base of the top 10 Indian and India-centric companies. "Given this trajectory, we anticipate only a marginal impact for the sector," it said, adding that the US clarification alleviates concerns on business continuity and uncertainty for H-1B holders outside the US. Moreover, since the new visa fees will apply only from 2026 onwards, Nasscom believes companies have time to further step up skilling programmes in the US and enhance local hiring.

"Services exports have finally been dragged into the ongoing global trade and tech war. After all the initial confusion, we understand now that the recent hike in H-1B visa fees is applicable for new visas and does not impact existing holders/visa renewals," Madhavi Arora, chief economist of Emkay Global Financial Services Ltd, said in a research note.

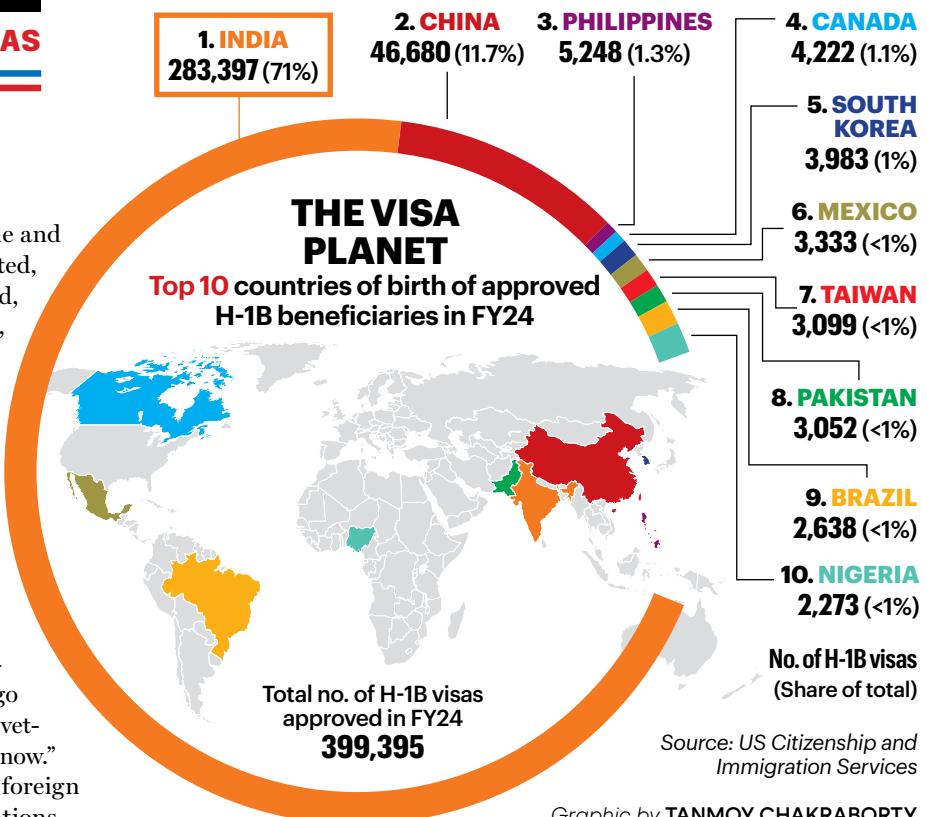
The near-term impact on revenue and margins of IT firms could be limited, she reckons. "However, if sustained, it could disturb Indian IT exports, companies' traditional models, pressurise project margins and disrupt Indian IT supply chains and onsite projects."

A CAREER PATHWAY

For the Indian techie, the H-1B has long been a coveted route to success. "People joined the industry, worked for a few years, tried to get an H-1B assignment and a green card, and go long in the US," says an IT industry veteran. "That aspiration stands hurt now."

The H-1B visa allows skilled foreign professionals in specialty occupations—from technology to medicine to education—to work in the US on short-term contracts for an initial period of three years, extendable by another three years. In FY24, Indian-origin professionals accounted for 71 per cent of the 399,395 H-1B visas approved. Typically, computer-related jobs form the largest share of H-1B visas, as both Indian firms and multinational ones rely on it to deploy employees in the US on projects that complement their offshoring model.

The anxiety among new visa applicants, therefore, is palpable. A US-based software engineer, whose H-1B visa application was picked in a lottery in May and is under process, says he was fortunate to beat the September 21 cut-off. But some of his colleagues whose applications didn't get picked this year will have to wait to reapply in the next cycle, when the fee hike will apply. "Everyone was shocked when the news came," says the techie. "The first thing is, the employer has to sponsor that much amount for them. Even with the old fee, many companies were rejecting applications since they had to sponsor them." They had all got jobs in IT firms this year after completing a two-year master's degree and are currently on a work authorisation permit called optional practical training or OPT, which is linked to the F-1 student visa. Their hope now is that the new fee regulation will be struck down in court.



Graphic by TANMOY CHAKRABORTY

"Offshoring will increase because of the visa restrictions. So, overall, it will be positive...Whether this [H-1B restriction] is the first step or there will be a series of steps is what we have to watch for"

V. BALAKRISHNAN
Former board member, Infosys

The US argument for the clampdown is that unemployment among its computer science and engineering graduates, at 6.1 per cent and 7.5 per cent, respectively, is more than double the rates for biology or art history majors. Meanwhile, the share of IT workers with H-1B visas has risen to over 65 per cent from 32 per cent in FY2003. "Information technology firms in particular have prominently manipulated the H-1B system, significantly harming American workers in computer-related

fields," said the US proclamation. "In addition, some of the most prolific H-1B employers are now consistently IT outsourcing companies. Using these H-1B-reliant IT outsourcing companies provides significant savings for employers: one study of tech workers showed a 36 per cent discount for H-1B 'entry-level' positions as compared to full-time, traditional workers. To take advantage of artificially low labour costs incentivized by the program, companies close their IT divisions, fire their American staff, and outsource IT jobs to lower-paid foreign workers."

According to the US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), further steps that will be taken to reform the H-1B programme include making rules 'to revise and raise the prevailing wage levels' to ensure it is used to hire 'only the best of the best temporary foreign workers'.

The Indian industry has often countered as a misconception the claim that low-paid foreign IT workers are displacing American jobs. As proof, industry watchers point to existing USCIS rules that require employers to pay H-1B visa-holders wages

WHO HIRES H-1B HOLDERS

A look at top employers of skilled overseas talent in the US

EMPLOYERS WITH MOST H-1B VISA STAFF

(Data for 2025, till June 30)

Amazon.com Services LLC	10,044
Tata Consultancy Services Ltd	5,505
Microsoft Corporation	5,189
Meta Platforms	5,123
Apple Inc.	4,202
Google LLC	4,181
Cognizant Technology Solution	2,493
JPMorgan Chase and Co.	2,440
Walmart Associates Inc	2,390
Deloitte Consulting LLP	2,353



INDIAN COMPANIES WITH MOST H-1B VISA STAFF (FY24)

Infosys	8,137
Tata Consultancy Services	7,566
HCL America	2,952
LTI Mindtree	2,136
Wipro	1,636
Tech Mahindra Americas	1,199
L&T Technology Services	351

Source: US DHS, US Citizenship and Immigration Services, Bloomberg, Emkay Research

comparable to US workers. While the median wage for an IT worker in the US is \$122,000, they argue that the added costs for visas, various compliances and filing fees further increase the overall cost of H-1B visa-holders, making them just as expensive as a local recruit.

"Salaries are at par with local hires. Moreover, H-1B workers are a mere decimal point of the overall US workforce," Nasscom said in a statement. "Over the years, Indian and India-centric companies operating in the US have significantly reduced their dependencies on H-1B visas and steadily increased their local hiring. As per available data, H-1B issued to the leading India and India-centric companies has decreased from 14,792 in 2015 to 10,162 in 2024." Indian firms are also spending over \$1 billion on local upskilling and hiring in the US, it added. Till then, the H-1B visa bridges a critical skills gap in the US.

Regarding the immediate effects of the US move, Aditya Narayan Mishra, MD and CEO of staffing firm CIEL HR Services, says, "While Indian IT firms will adapt their business models to manage costs, in the short term, project timelines for US clients may be stretched due

to limited onsite availability." He, however, expects a stronger shift toward alternative talent models, remote contracting, offshore delivery and gig-based work.

A NEW NORMAL?

That argument finds favour with most experts. The COVID-19 pandemic, while being a major disruptor, also convincingly demonstrated that work could be accomplished from anywhere. Alongside, there has also been an increase in the number of global capability centres (GCCs), or offshore units MNCs have set up in India to perform strategic, technical and operational functions. They have been the bright spot in the Indian IT landscape of late even as traditional IT services companies are struggling with global uncertainty over trade tariffs that have affected IT spend by customers. "GCCs demonstrated that a lot of research and development, and high value work can also be done anywhere globally. That has changed the tone of global sourcing in the Indian services category," says an industry expert.

The number of GCCs in the country has risen from 1,285 in FY19 to 1,750 in FY25. While India is home to large GCCs

whose staff run into thousands, this recent spell of growth is largely driven by mid-market GCCs employing up to 1,000 employees which are established by parent organisations with annual revenues between \$100 million and \$1 billion. "If anything, offshoring will increase because of the visa restrictions," says former Infosys board member V. Balakrishnan. "So, overall, it will be positive. The only challenge is the unemployment rate in the US is high. So whether this [H-1B restriction] is the first step or there will be a series of steps is what we have to watch for." That uncertainty likely also extends to offshoring tech jobs, given how the Trump-led administration has frowned on taking manufacturing jobs elsewhere. Case in point: Trump's objection to Apple making its phones in India.

The bigger challenge the IT sector is facing, however, isn't so much about restrictive policies. "The industry is today quite mature. It has seen multiple structural shifts earlier and will probably find ways to thrive under the newer constraints," says the expert cited earlier. But the key question many are bracing for is whether the H-1B visa restriction is only the first salvo from the US. ■

DIVISION IN COMMAND

Rajnath Singh with, from left, Gen. Anil Chopra, Gen. Upendra Dwivedi, Adm. D.K. Tripathi and Air Chief Marshal A.P. Singh in Delhi, June 2025



DEFENCE | INTEGRATED COMMANDS

THEATRES OF CONTENTION

THE GOVERNMENT IS KEEN ON THE THEATRISATION OF INDIA'S ARMED FORCES, BUT DOUBTS EXPRESSED BY THE IAF CHIEF REFLECT CONCERN ABOUT THE PREPARATION FOR AND ROLLING OUT OF JOINT SERVICE COMMANDS

BY PRADIP R. SAGAR



“WE CAN START WITH A JOINT PLANNING AND COORDINATION CENTRE AND SEE HOW IT PANS OUT. BUT DISRUPTING EVERYTHING AND MAKING ONE STRUCTURE NOW, I DO NOT THINK IT IS A VERY GOOD IDEA”

— AIR CHIEF MARSHAL A.P. SINGH, *Chief of Air Staff*



“THE NAVY IS COMMITTED TO ‘THEATRISATION’ AS THE ULTIMATE GOAL, AND SYNERGISING ITS COMMUNICATIONS AND COMBAT CAPABILITY WITH THE ARMY AND IAF”

— ADMIRAL D.K. TRIPATHI, *Chief of Naval Staff*

Security Advisor Ajit Doval, Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) General Anil Chauhan and the three service chiefs underscored the significance of the event. For many, the stage was set for a grand announcement of the creation of Integrated Theatre Commands (ITCs)—that holy grail of transformative reform in the Indian military.

Events had built up to this point satisfactorily. In April 2024, Gen. Chauhan had submitted a proposal to the defence minister, laying out the plan to roll out the theatre commands, claiming that all three service chiefs had reached a consensus following months of dialogue. In September 2024, India had hosted its first Joint Commanders' Conference, where the army, navy and air force all appeared to rally behind the vision of a unified war-fighting structure in line with the One Border, One Force concept. A momentum seemed to have built up...till the Indian Air Force chief, Air Chief Marshal A.P. Singh, voiced his opposition to theatrisation in a public forum late last month.

Though the Kolkata conference took place against the backdrop of this apparent lack of cohesion, jointness got a firm vote of confidence from both PM Modi and Rajnath Singh. Modi directed the ministry

of defence to “swiftly implement concrete steps to achieve greater jointness, *aatmanirbharta*, and innovation to meet future challenges”. This was interpreted as a message to push forward the theatre command model despite internal disagreements. The conference also took firm steps towards theatrisation: a decision to form three joint military stations—with combined army, navy and IAF assets—each under the command of one of the three services. It can be seen as a dress rehearsal for the larger plan, or a glimpse of integrated tri-services units on a smaller scale. A decision was also taken to merge education branches of the three services into a single tri-services education corps.

WHAT IS A THEATRE COMMAND?

In a theatre command, units and assets of the army, navy and air force will be integrated over a certain geographic area, or theatre, under a single commander, with logistics, training and support services all woven into this single unit for optimum utilisation of resources and operational efficiency. With the commander having control over all warfighting assets across the three forces, including aircraft, helicopters, tanks,

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INDIA'S TOP MILITARY LEADERSHIP CAME TOGETHER for the first Combined Commanders' Conference since Operation Sindoora from September 15-17 at Fort William (now Vijay Durg), the Indian Army's Eastern Command headquarters in Kolkata. The presence of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh, National

RINGS OF PROTECTION

The three proposed theatre commands cover our northern flanks, as well as the Indian Ocean Region

CHINA-CENTRIC NORTHERN THEATRE COMMAND

Covers the entire 3,488 kilometres of Line of Actual Control, starting from the Karakoram Pass in Ladakh to Kibithu in Arunachal Pradesh

HQ in Lucknow

PAKISTAN-CENTRIC WESTERN THEATRE COMMAND

From Indira Col on Saltoro Ridge in the Siachen Glacier to Gujarat

HQ in Jaipur

MARITIME COMMAND

Responsible for India's coastline of 7,516 km, as well as the Indian Ocean Region

HQ in Thiruvananthapuram

EXISTING COMMANDS

- ✖ Army
- Air force
- ↓ Navy
- ★ Joint commands

artillery, ships, missiles, equipment and personnel, each ITC is envisioned as a self-contained, integrated formation.

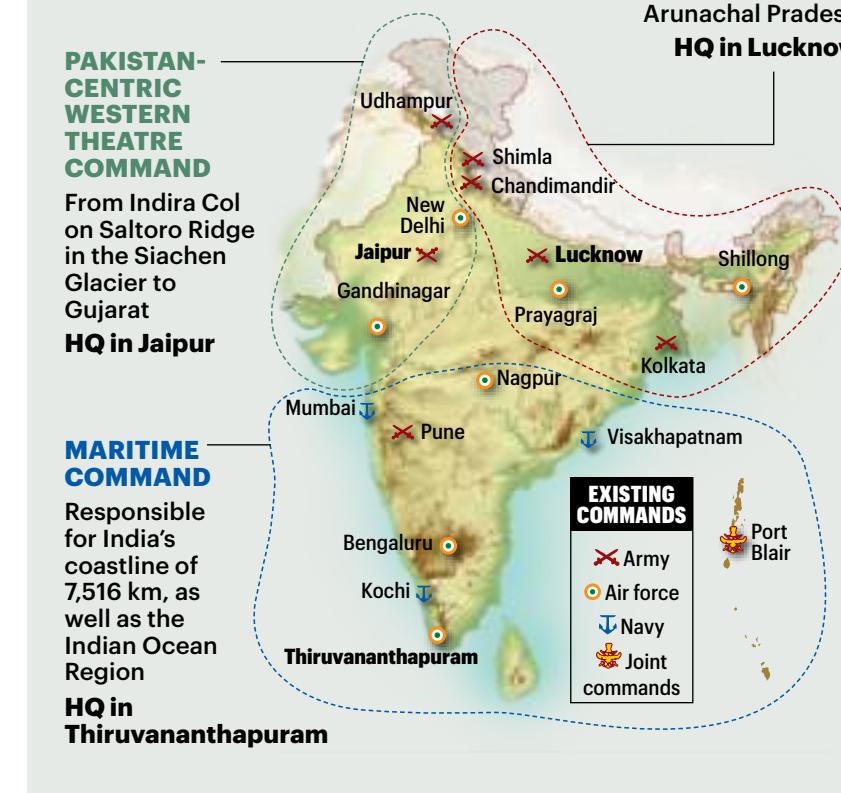
The Indian government has acknowledged that in the era of high-technology, multi-domain warfare, a conflict situation with nuclear-armed adversaries on India's northeastern and northwestern borders—China and Pakistan—would require deft management of military resources that only such jointness could provide. The first debates and plans on theatrisation took place under India's first CDS Gen. Bipin Rawat, and have been firmed up under Gen. Chauhan after he took over as CDS in September 2022.

THE BROAD CONTOURS

After various misgivings from military circles, a broadly accepted plan has evolved. A Western Theatre Command will extend from the Indira Col on Saltoro Ridge of the Siachen Glacier till Gujarat, with its expected headquarters in Jaipur. The Northern Theatre Command will cover the entire 3,488 km of the Line of Actual Control, India's de facto border with China, starting from Karakoram Pass in Ladakh and extending to Kibithu in Arunachal Pradesh. Its headquarters are expected to be in Lucknow. The Maritime Command, based in Thiruvananthapuram, will be responsible for India's 11,098km-long coastline.

Currently, the three services have 17 independent commands: the army and the IAF have seven each and the navy three. India does have unified, tri-services commands—the Port Blair-based Andaman and Nicobar Command, created in 2001, and the Strategic Forces Command in charge of the country's nuclear forces.

Not everyone, however, is in agreement. On August 26, at a seminar at the Army War College in Mhow in Madhya Pradesh, the IAF chief spoke of his reservations about theatre commands, saying it was "not a very good idea". "We, for now, don't need any new structure," he said, warning against disrupting the existing structure and



suggesting instead the establishment of a joint planning and coordination centre to oversee integrated operations. According to insiders, the remarks effectively derailed the CDS's efforts that had included over 20 high-level meetings with the three services over the past two years to iron out differences.

The IAF has long expressed concerns that theatre commands could diminish its operational autonomy, divide and render ineffective its already depleted fighter squadrons and relegate it to a supporting role.

Backing the air chief, a serving air marshal says that theatre command in India will only "cause theatrics" without any advantage to national security. Indicating that the current system works just fine, he says: "CAS (chief of air staff) stated a fact. Was any jointness issue faced during Operation Sindoora, post the Balakot airstrike, or augmenting the army in the northern

sector post the Galwan clashes?" Maj. Gen. Shashi Asthana (retd), director of the United Service Institution (USI), also questions drastic structural reforms, asking, "Since 1962, we haven't lost a war—so how can one claim the existing system is flawed?"

However, the air chief's doubts stood in stark contrast to the unified front presented by the army and navy. Army chief Gen. Upendra Dwivedi emphasised that theatre commands were essential for "executing all tasks during conflict". During the same seminar in Mhow, navy chief Admiral D.K. Tripathi stated that the navy remained fully committed to "theatrisation as the ultimate goal".

Some are frustrated that despite the government's announcement in 2019 to create ITCs and the appointment of two chiefs of defence staff to oversee it, little tangible progress has been made. "We've spent years in meetings, drafting

A TUG OF WAR

The factors favouring theatre commands for the Indian military, and ones that go against it

PLUSES

► One war, one commander—ensures all three services fight as one

► Better use of assets, as scarce fighter jets, ships, drones come under unified command, not service silos

► Faster response—shortens decision chain in crises like a China–Pakistan two-front war

► The best way to fight future wars across land, air, sea, cyber and space domains

MINUSES

► No clarity on command and control systems

► With an inadequate number of squadrons, the IAF fears loss of flexibility due to division of assets

► Inadequate integration of communication networks, still-maturing defence industry bode ill for theatrisation

► Risk of reduced utilisation—integration could dilute current branch-specific expertise

DEFENCE INTEGRATED COMMANDS

non-availability of commanders and staff trained in joint services environments and a still-maturing defence industry, full-scale theatrisation could strain an already stretched force.

WAY FORWARD

Military experts emphasise that there must be focus on establishing the organisational structure, including clearly defined headquarters, command hierarchies and control mechanisms. Without such structural clarity, integration could result in inefficiency during crises. Training officers in jointness is a priority. As one defence official asks, “How can an army officer, trained in ground warfare, be expected to direct complex air operations with the same competence?”

Though they performed admirably together during Op. Sindoora, further integration of army and IAF air defence assets is another priority. “The current siloed structure not only leads to duplication but also limits operational effectiveness, especially in fast-moving, high-threat air environments,” says Lt Gen. Anil Ahuja (retd), former deputy chief, Integrated Defence Staff. He adds there is a strong case for the rationalisation of helicopters and medium-lift air assets between the two, as joint ownership or centralised coordination would enhance flexibility, responsiveness and asset utilisation.

The Indian military has already taken some initial steps towards tri-services integration. The CDS has identified several tasks to enhance jointness across the services and those focusing on improving operational efficiency and administrative effectiveness, like cross-posting of junior officers and appointing aide-de-camps (ADCs) from sister services. A joint division at the Defence Services Staff College in Wellington to foster inter-services understanding and cooperation has been set up.

Experts say that before a full-scale roll-out of ICTs, the revised organisational structures should undergo rigorous wargaming at top war colleges, followed by field testing in a selected theatre or command. This approach would provide insights and ensure refinements. Only then can the Indian armed forces be fighting ready for a nationwide adoption of theatre commands. ■

EARLY STEPS TOWARDS JOINTNESS HAVE STARTED, LIKE CROSS-POSTING JUNIOR OFFICERS AND SETTING UP A JOINT DIVISION AT THE DEFENCE SERVICES STAFF COLLEGE

plans, ironing out disagreements. If we still can't act, when shall we?” asks a senior defence official. With threats from China and Pakistan intensifying, he believes the consequences of inaction could be dire.

GOALS AND SHORTCOMINGS

Officials at the CDS office believe that theatre commands would prepare the Indian military for future wars, where synergy and joint operations across land, sea, air, cyber, and space domains will determine results. Without this shift, they say, India's war-fighting ability risks remaining fragmented and outdated.

In June 2025, CDS Gen. Chauhan, in the preface to his newly released book *Ready, Relevant and Resurgent: A Blueprint for the Transformation of India's Military*,

stated that theatrisation would seek to create two parallel and complementary streams: one for ‘force application’ and another for ‘force generation’. Force application, or military operations, will be managed by theatre commanders reporting to the CDS, while the service chiefs will focus on preparing, training and maintaining the forces. However, some experts say this command and control model, with reduced operational roles for the chiefs, would foster confusion and a command vacuum.

Most military planners say that the proposed theatre command model draws from US and Chinese doctrines. But India, they point out, faces a different reality, with unique threat perceptions. With equipment shortages, an ageing air fleet, inadequate inter-service integration of communication networks,

AI ROCKS THE CRADLE

From egg and sperm selection to embryo grading, AI is enhancing IVF success rates and bringing joy to hundreds of childless couples. All it needs now are better datasets and new regulatory laws

By SONALI ACHARJEE

Illustration by NILANJAN DAS / AI

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THE SPREAD OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE ACROSS OUR PROFESSIONAL AND DOMESTIC LIVES PREPARES us for a future that must be in lockstep with the rhythms of algorithms. Now, its nimble, knowing fingers are touching the origins of life. Several months ago, a couple from Dehradun walked into the Birla Fertility Clinic in Gurugram. The woman had endured two molar pregnancies—a complication in which abnormal tissue and not a foetus grows in the uterus—each ending with a painful dilation and curettage (D&C), a procedure to clear the uterine lining. The trauma caused Asherman's syndrome, where scar tissues form inside the uterus, impeding pregnancy. Doctors recommended In-vitro Fertilisation (IVF), where a woman's egg is fertilised in a lab with sperm, and the resultant embryo transferred

to her uterus to achieve pregnancy. But first the woman needed to be healed. Obligatory genetic tests were done, followed by a hysteroscopy to remove the scar tissues and sessions of PRP therapy, where platelet-rich plasma were drawn from her own blood for tissue repair. Slowly, her uterine lining strengthened and a genetically normal embryo was transferred. Months later, she held a baby girl in her arms. Each procedure in this happy IVF story was perfected through a powerful new ally: artificial intelligence.

As fertility clinics across India strive to improve success rates, they are turning to algorithms to tilt the odds of conception in patients' favour. From analysing embryo quality with more precision than the human eye to predicting ovarian response and tailoring stimulation protocols (personalised fertility medication), AI is sharpening IVF procedures. "The efficiency of IVF treatment is continuously improving, and one of the most promising advancements is the integration of AI at various stages," says Dr Manjunath, deputy medical director, Birla Fertility and IVF, Bengaluru.

Once disparaged for creating 'artificial babies', IVF has become a lifeline for Indian couples facing difficulty in conceiving. The In-





“AI is being used to support different stages of IVF. It brings in precision, consistency and additional insights that help doctors and embryologists make better decisions”

DR PRACHI BENARA
Fertility specialist, Birla Fertility & IVF, Gurugram

idian IVF services market, estimated at \$2.35 billion (around Rs 21,000 crore) in 2025, according to market research firm Nova Firm Advisor, is projected to grow at double-digit rates this decade. Growing awareness and rising infertility are fuelling demand. “As fertility rates drop, we will see more couples choosing IVF. This will drive the next phase of IVF in India on the back of technology adoption,” says A.R. Ghatak, vice president, Hanahealth’s IVF division. “Clinics are increasingly embracing AI-assisted tools and solutions, digital imaging and time-lapse incubators (that continuously capture images of developing em-

bryos) to select embryos and enhance success rates.”

Until recently, IVF success rates remained modest, particularly for women in their mid to late 30s. Standard protocols produced live birth rates of 20–35 per cent, with rates being around 27 per cent for women aged 37, according to the journal Human Reproduction. AI is beginning to change that. A 2023 review in Diagnostics reported that AI systems predicted embryo morphology—their size, shape and development pattern—with up to 94 per cent accuracy and clinical pregnancy outcomes with a median accuracy of 77.8 per cent.

SMART FERTILITY TOOLS

A 2025 *Nature Scientific Reports* study found the MAIA (Morphological Artificial Intelligence Assistance) platform—an AI model designed to assist embryologists in assessing and selecting an embryo from several for plantation during IVF—achieved successful implantation prediction rates of 70.1 per cent, outperforming traditional assessments by around five percentage points. Such grading of embryos by MAIA and ERICA (Embryo Ranking Intelligent Classification Algorithm), deep-learning systems that provide real-time embryo rankings based on predicted implantation potential, allows clinicians to transfer embryos with greater confidence.

“AI is being used to support different stages of IVF. It brings in precision, consistency and additional insights that help doctors and embryologists make better decisions,” says Dr Prachi Benara, fertility specialist at Birla Fertility & IVF, Gurugram. AI-assisted tools, she explains, can examine embryo images and growth patterns, identifying the ones that hold the best chance of successful implants. “It adds an extra layer of accuracy to the traditional selection process, which is usually based on visual observation.”

At Nova IVF fertility clinics across India, the introduction of Vita Embryo—Kai Health’s AI-powered embryo assessment tool—has added precision. “It identifies subtle details in embryo health that the human eye may miss. Clinical data shows AI-powered embryo selection can increase precision by 12 per cent compared to human evaluation,” says Dr Sujatha Ramakrishnan, head of embryology at Nova. Vita Embryo tools are being deployed at many clinics, including DSS Imagetech’s IVF vertical Hanahealth.

Indeed, AI is making a difference right at the beginning—in the selection of oocytes, or egg cells, the quality of which strongly influences fertilisation success. Embryologists usually rely on visual assessment of an egg’s size, symmetry and surface structure. But these judgements are subjective. Computer vi-



“ We need more published data comparing AI-based outcomes with those from embryologists. Right now, there are discrepancies. High costs, patchy regulation and limited evidence are holding AI back ”

A.R. GHATAK
Vice president, IVF division, Hanahealth

sion systems using AI can detect subtle features that escape the eye, improving outcomes. A 2024 study in *Human Reproduction* showed fertilisation rates rising from 83.2 per cent under manual evaluation to 92.6 per cent with AI-assisted scoring.

Sperm screening is the other introductory process. “AI tools can evaluate sperm motility, shape and overall health more precisely than the human eye,” says Benara. “By identifying the healthiest sperm for fertilisation, it improves the chances of creating strong embryos.” Dr Gauri Agarwal, founder of Seeds of Innocence, a chain of IVF centres, adds that AI-powered microscopes can automatically measure sperm count and morphology.

Researchers are also developing non-invasive AI tools that detect chromosomal abnormalities such as

aneuploidy—a genetic disorder resulting in extra or missing chromosomes, a significant cause of miscarriages—by analysing embryo images. “Traditionally, pre-implantation genetic testing for aneuploidy has been invasive. With AI, embryologists can now assess embryos non-invasively and often with greater precision,” says Manjunath.

Even the timing of oocyte retrieval—the optimal period of retrieving eggs after ovulation for fertilisation—is being refined. ILETIA, an AI model, predicts the optimal interval between the ovulation trigger injection (a hormone shot that triggers the release of eggs in IVF) and egg collection.

The impact of these advances is best understood through lived experience. Navjot Kaur, a 37-year-old homemaker from Mumbai, was long sceptical about IVF. When she chose a clinic using AI for oocyte selection, embryo grading, sperm analysis and optimised retrieval timing, her outlook shifted. Each stage was explained with data. AI amplified—not replaced—the human care she received, and she was recently blessed with a daughter. Indeed, doctors stress that AI is not a replacement for human experience. Embryologists’ contextual judgement remains crucial, particularly in complex or borderline cases.

PROMISE AND REALITY

For Indian couples, IVF is an expensive path. A standard cycle (the entire treatment lasts for 3–6 cycles) costs between Rs 1 lakh and Rs 4 lakh. With AI tools—specialised imaging systems, data platforms, licensing and training—the bill rises by another 20–50 per cent. That can push treatment to nearly Rs 6 lakh per cycle.

With her modest savings, Aisha Singh, a 33-year-old schoolteacher from Mumbai, could barely afford one IVF attempt. Paying extra for AI-aided treatment seemed impossible. “Our polluted environment makes infertility a public health issue,” she says. Her frustration reflects a growing demand for policies that see IVF as essential care, not an elective choice.

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AN INTELLIGENT ARM FOR IVF

In in-vitro fertilisation, a woman's egg is fertilised in a lab with a sperm, and the resultant embryo transferred to her uterus. Now, AI is being used to sharpen the process

THE COSTS OF IVF WITH AI

1. BLOOD WORK & COUNSELLING

Bloods, egg, semen analysis; scans; treatment plan
Starts at: ₹10,000 at standard clinics/ ₹50,000 at AI-aided clinics*

2. OVARIAN STIMULATION

Injectable hormones for ovaries to mature eggs + scans
From ₹50,000/ ₹1 lakh for AI-aided

3. TRIGGER & EGG RETRIEVAL

Hormone injection for ovulation and ovum pick-up (OPU)
From ₹30,000/ ₹60,000 for AI-aided

4. FERTILISATION & EMBRYO CULTURE

Growing the embryo in a lab for 5-6 days (blastocyst)
From ₹30,000/ ₹60,000 for AI-aided

5. FRESH EMBRYO TRANSFER (ET)

Single or double embryo placed in uterus
From ₹15,000/ ₹5,000 for AI-aided

**Clinics do not charge extra for AI-aided IVF, but premium IVF chains use them, thus making costs higher*

AI ACROSS THE IVF PROCESS

1. PRE-IVF CONSULTATION

AI analyses medical history, and age and prior treatment data to estimate fertility chances and guide couples on whether IVF is the right next step

2. OVARIAN STIMULATION

Machine learning models predict how each patient will respond to hormone injections, helping doctors personalise drug doses



3. EGG & SPERM ANALYSIS

Computer vision systems assess sperm motility, check egg quality with more precision than manual microscopy

4. FERTILISATION & CULTURE

AI-powered incubators monitor embryo development, detecting subtle changes invisible to the human eye; robotic systems ensure precise handling

5. EMBRYO SELECTION

Algorithms scan time-lapse images to rank embryos by their implantation potential, helping doctors choose the strongest embryo

6. IMPLANTATION

Predictive models estimate likelihood of embryo implantation. AI chatbots, virtual assistants offer reminders, emotional support

Yet money is only one barrier. AI in IVF has scientific and practical limitations. They rely heavily on data for accuracy and poor or biased datasets can distort predictions. Even when results are reliable, the interpretability gap remains: AI may suggest one embryo over another without saying why.

"We need more published data comparing AI-based outcomes with those from embryologists. Right now, there are some discrepancies," says Ghatak. He also points to the regulatory lag: privacy, transparency and data-sharing rules are evolving too slowly compared to the pace of technology. Integration is a challenge too—uniform training, standardised lab practices and trust-building all take time. As Ghatak notes,

"High costs, patchy regulation and limited evidence are holding AI back."

FUTURE PROSPECTS

Despite the current drawbacks, the direction is clear. With stronger datasets, AI can move from a promising add-on to an integral part of IVF. For patients like Aisha, each advance brings the possibility of making treatment not only more precise but also more affordable and accessible.

Looking ahead, experts see AI moving beyond embryo selection into IVF counselling and personalised treatment. "AI may play a supporting role in counselling—providing credible information, reminders and guidance—but empathy and emotional support will always re-

main at the heart of IVF," says Benara.

Agarwal agrees. "IVF is not just a medical procedure, it is often the last hope for couples who have faced years of infertility struggles," she says. Global success rates hover at 40-50 per cent, meaning many couples endure multiple cycles. Studies show failed cycles often cause depression and anxiety for months. "Improving IVF success rates is about more than data. Even incremental gains spare families the pain of repeated loss."

From smarter embryo imaging to digital assistants that track well-being, AI will keep reshaping fertility care. While genetically engineered 'designer babies' are perhaps an impossible dream, hope has never looked so real outside of science fiction. ■

MAKING SENSE OF NEW REALITIES



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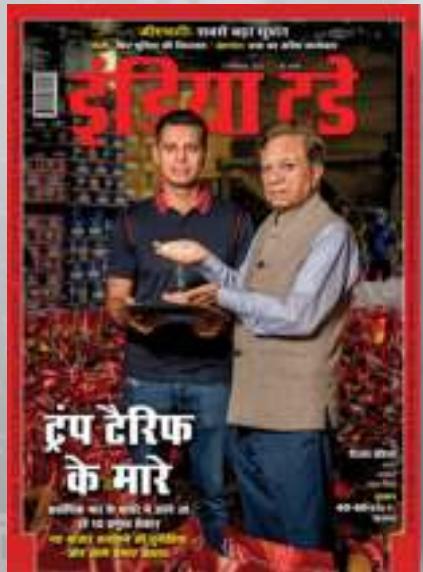


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..... शहर..... राज्य..... पिन.....

मोबाइल..... ईमेल.....



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Sariska National Park



Tourists enjoying a picnic near the Sariska Lodge in Alwar, Rajasthan

WHAT'S NEW
IN JAIPUR

NEHA DHUPIA'S
TRAVEL TALES



Elevating the Icon

Nestled in the scenic hills of Ekta Nagar, the Statue of Unity (SOU), the world's tallest statue, which honours Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, is set to become an even more captivating destination, with new facilities on the horizon. A scenic trekking trail winding through the lush hills surrounding the SOU is in the works. Announced as part of a major tourism upgrade in August 2025, these new paths aim to weave adventure seamlessly into the site's iconic landscape.

Designed for both thrill-seekers and casual hikers, the paths will feature well-marked tracks with moderate inclines, panoramic viewpoints of the Sardar Sarovar Dam, and interpretive signs highlighting local flora, fauna, and Sardar Patel's legacy. Adding to the allure, a replica of the Sardar Sarovar Dam will soon grace the entrance of the SOU campus. This miniature marvel will offer a glimpse into the engineering feat that powers the region, enriching the educational aspect of the visit.

To elevate the SOU as a premier tourist hub, a vibrant hospitality district is being planned. This area will feature a range of accommodations, from cozy lodges to upscale retreats, catering to both domestic and international travellers. The district aims to ensure visitors can extend their stay, soak in the serene ambience and explore the site at their own pace. Plans are also underway to expedite the development of these facilities, ensuring they meet global standards of comfort and convenience.

— Jumana Shah

CHANDRADEEP KUMAR



HERITAGE MEETS HOSPITALITY

A stately art deco mansion in Uttar Pradesh has become the 150th offering of amā Stays & Trails, IHCL's premium homestay vertical. Built in 1929, Anand Bhawan Palace, Tirwa, Kannauj, has been restored beautifully. It now offers six spacious suites, each named after a timeless perfume of Kannauj—the Yasmine Suite, the Patchouli Suite, the Oudh Suite, the Neroli Suite, the Gulaab Suite and the Bakhoor Suite. Highlights include farm-to-table dining, intimate barbecue nights under the stars, a vintage billiards room, birdwatching at the nearby sanctuary and, of course, an exploration of Kannauj's famed attar-making traditions.

From Rs 25,200 per night plus taxes, www.amastaysandtrails.com



NAVRATRI IN VIBRANT GUJARAT

GARBA, DEVOTION, AND FESTIVE JOY COME ALIVE

Gujarat emerges as a vibrant tapestry of culture, music, and joy during Navratri—the legendary nine-night festival dedicated to Goddess Durga. Each year, families and friends seeking a unique festive experience find themselves swept into a realm of dance, devotion, and dazzling celebration that is both spiritual and exhilarating. The entire state comes alive as every lane, Garba ground, and city square reverberates with rhythm and revelry, turning Gujarat into India's beating festive heart.



Navratri in Gujarat: A Spellbinding Spectacle

What makes Navratri truly magical in Gujarat is the way devotion takes the form of performance. Each swirl of the Garba and every beat of the Dandiya sticks tells the ancient story of Goddess Durga's triumph over Mahishasur—a tale symbolizing the victory of good over evil. The legend flows seamlessly into celebration, inspiring nine nights of rhythmic devotion where faith and festivity blend in one mesmerizing spectacle.

Garba: Dance Across Centuries

At the centre of it all lies Garba—a tradition that has journeyed across centuries and continents. Derived from the Sanskrit word Garbhadeep, symbolizing creation and life, Garba was once performed around a lamp but has now

evolved into the world's longest dance festival. With more than thirty-six energetic styles, from soulful betha to lively ubha Garba, playful dandiya raas, or the high-spirited sanedo, the dance floor becomes a cultural mosaic. Adding to this vibrancy is bhavai folk theatre, transforming cityscapes into nightly pageantry where drama, devotion, and joy intertwine.

This dance has long crossed borders, lighting up communities in the US, UK, Canada, Australia, and Europe. Its global recognition reached a new height in 2023 when UNESCO inscribed Garba as an Intangible Cultural Heritage, positioning Gujarat as a global epicentre of living traditions.

Safe, Welcoming Nights for All

But Navratri in Gujarat is not just about colour and rhythm—it is about belonging. The festival is celebrated in an atmosphere of safety and inclusivity, making it one of the most welcoming destinations for families and women travellers. Long after midnight, one finds women dancing freely, laughter echoing across grounds, and communities coming together in a spirit of mutual respect. This culture of trust and security ensures that the joy of Navratri is shared equally by all.

Gujarat's Many Wonders Beyond Navratri

When the Garba beats subside with the dawn, Gujarat continues to enchant. Festival-goers often extend their journeys to explore the state's many wonders—from the surreal white sands of the Rann of Kutch to the temple towns of Dwarka and Somnath, steeped in spiritual resonance. History lovers find treasures in Bhuj, Junagadh, and Palitana, while wildlife seekers marvel at the Asiatic lions of Gir. For those drawn to serene landscapes, Saputara's lush hills and tranquil lakes provide the perfect counterpoint to Navratri's energetic nights.

Threads of Craft and Taste

Every step through Gujarat also reveals artistry. Local bazaars dazzle with bandhani textiles, hand-embroidered chaniya cholis, ornate woodwork, and delicate silver jewellery—souvenirs

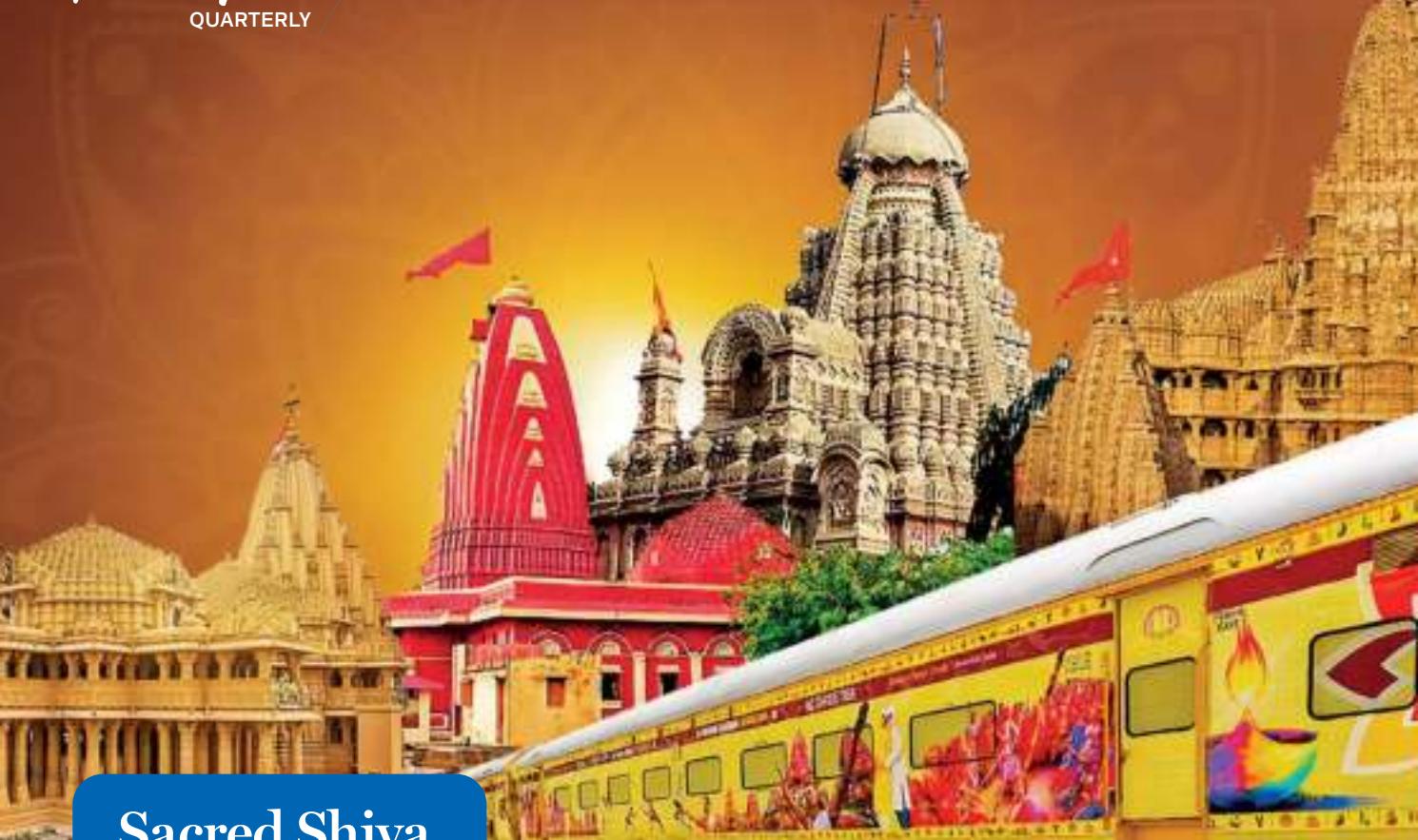


crafted with centuries of skill. And as the eyes feast on colours, the palate rejoices in flavours. Navratri's vegetarian traditions highlight Gujarat's culinary gems—spicy dhokla, tangy khandvi, sweet ghari, and crunchy jalebi. In every bite, visitors savour not just food but stories of heritage passed down through kitchens.

Embrace Gujarat's Living Festival

Ultimately, Navratri in Gujarat is more than a festival—it is an experience of empowerment, devotion, and cultural pride. Women often lead the dances, communities come together in harmony, and the entire state pulsates with an energy that is both ancient and contemporary. From Ahmedabad's bustling boulevards to the festive grounds of Vadodara, Rajkot, Surat, and beyond, every corner invites participation in this grand symphony of joy. This Navratri, Gujarat extends an open invitation: celebrate safely, explore deeply, and immerse yourself in a living tradition that belongs to the world yet feels most magical here. Step into Gujarat—step into the very heart of Navratri, where devotion meets dance, and joy becomes everlasting.





Sacred Shiva Yatra

Indian Railways has announced a special Bharat Gaurav train package for devotees of Lord Shiva, offering an 11-night/12-day pilgrimage to seven sacred Jyotirlingas. Starting November 18 from Yoga City Rishikesh, the journey will cover Omkareshwar, Mahakaleshwar, Nageshwar, Somnath, Trimbakeshwar, Bhimashankar and Grishneshwar, along with visits to Dwarkadish and Bet Dwarka. The package, priced at Rs 24,100 in Sleeper class, Rs 40,890 in 3AC, and Rs 54,390 in 2AC, includes train travel, accommodation in budget hotels, vegetarian meals, insurance and services of tour managers. With up to 33 per cent discount under the Bharat Gaurav Yojana, this pilgrimage ensures comfort, devotion and heritage on the move. Bookings can be made via IRCTC's website or authorised outlets.

ROLLING IN LUXURY

A new luxury train in Thailand, The Blue Jasmine, promises an unforgettable nine-day journey through the country's cultural heartlands. Launching on November 16, the boutique-style train will carry just 37 guests in plush cabins, with wraparound windows and refined interiors. Starting in Bangkok, it will take in Ayutthaya, Uthai Thani, Chiang Mai and Sukhothai, blending temple

Image courtesy of DTH TRAVEL THAILAND



tours, farm-to-table dining and artisan workshops.

Prices begin at 195,000 baht (Rs 541,575) per person. See thebluejasmine.dth.travel

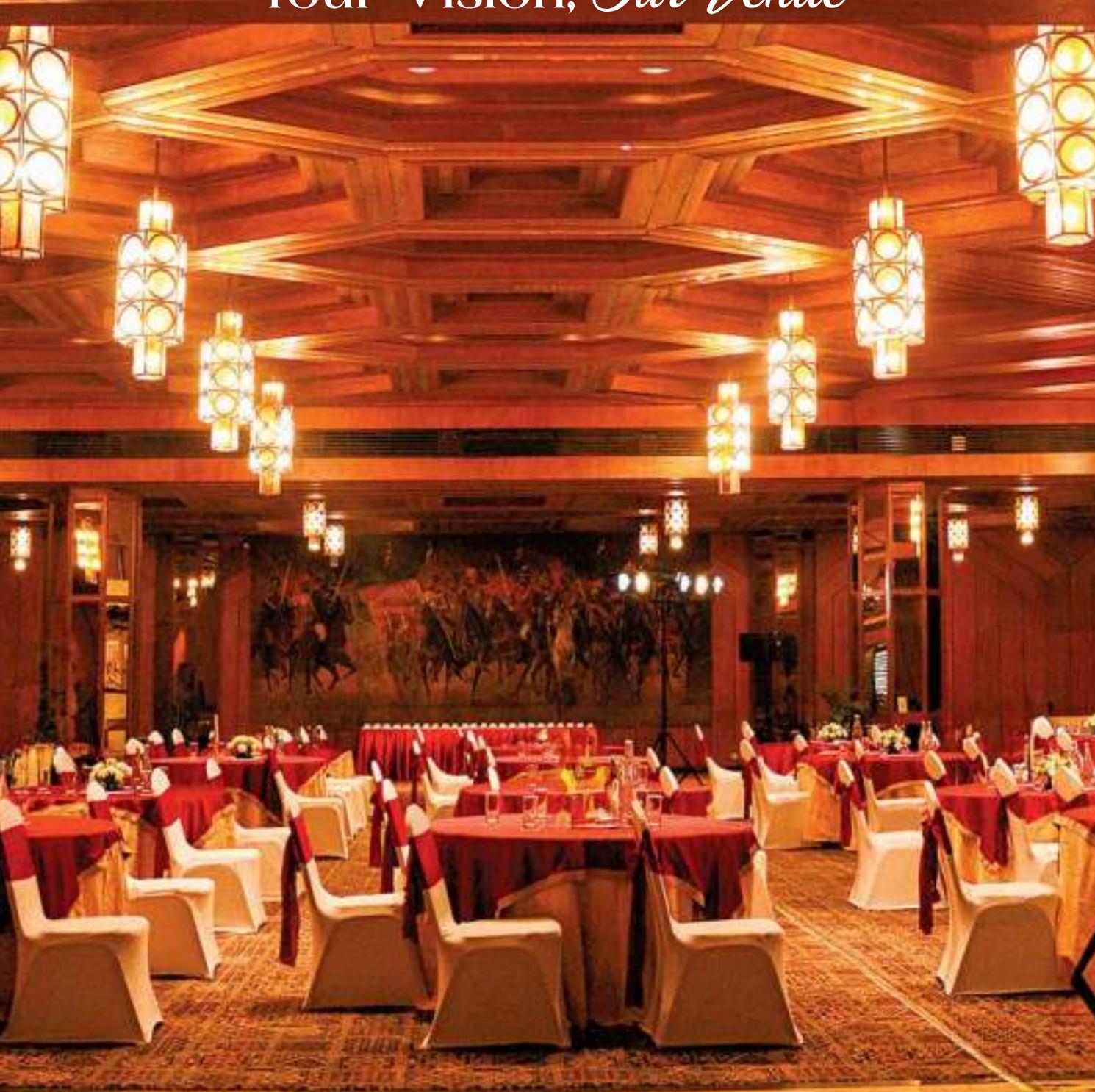
Train Tales and Tails



Two new books celebrate the romance and adventure of train travel in delightfully different ways. In *Midnight Express*, travel writer Monisha Rajesh takes readers aboard some of the world's most enchanting night trains, from the Orient Express to the Andean Explorer, reveling in moonlit landscapes and eccentric encounters. Meanwhile, Divya Dugar's *Chaos in a Coupe* offers a witty account of journeys across India with her partner, child and three rescue dogs in tow.



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Delhi Tourism

DEKHO MERI DILLI

A FUSION OF HISTORY, CULTURE, AND MODERN CHARM

Delhi, the heart of India, is a city where the past meets the present, and history seamlessly blends with modernity. The capital is a treasure trove of heritage, culture, and unforgettable experiences. Whether it's exploring centuries-old architectural marvels, savouring the tantalizing street food, or witnessing the vibrant cultural scene, Delhi never ceases to amaze. With a vision to promote tourism and enhance the city's travel experience, the Delhi Tourism and Transportation Development Corporation Limited (DTTDC LTD) plays a crucial role in making Delhi more accessible, engaging, and enjoyable for visitors. Through a series of curated events, unique sightseeing tours, and innovative travel packages, DTTDC ensures that both locals and tourists get to experience Delhi like never before. The corporation also operates the popular Dilli Haats, where visitors can immerse themselves in India's diverse handicrafts, culinary delights, and artistic heritage. Let's take a journey through the vibrant streets of Delhi with DTTDC, discovering its many wonders along the way.



Dilli Haat: A Celebration of Culture and Craft

One of DTTDC's most cherished initiatives is Dilli Haat, an open-air marketplace that brings together artisans, craftsmen, and food vendors from all over India. DTTDC has 3 haats, located in INA, Pitampura, and Janakpuri, which offer an authentic glimpse into the country's diverse heritage. Designed around the three pillars of craft, cuisine, and culture, Dilli Haat is much more than just a shopping destination. It serves as a platform where traditional artisans showcase their skills, where food lovers indulge in regional delicacies, and where cultural performances breathe life into the atmosphere. Whether you're looking for intricate handicrafts, savoring delectable flavors, or simply soaking in the festive ambiance, Dilli Haat promises an unforgettable experience.

Guru Tegh Bahadur Memorial

The Guru Tegh Bahadur Memorial, with its striking 24-metre-high obelisk, stands as a tribute to the revered Sikh guru. This monument is not just a historical landmark but also a place of reflection

and reverence, honouring Guru Tegh Bahadur's sacrifice and teachings.

Delhi Film Policy 2022: A New Era for Filmmakers

With its rich heritage and modern skyline, Delhi provides a breathtaking backdrop for filmmakers. The Delhi Film Policy 2022 simplifies the process of obtaining permissions for film shoots, making it easier for production houses to bring their creative visions to life. The E-Film Clearance Portal streamlines approvals through an Online Single Window Clearance System, eliminating bureaucratic hurdles and offering financial incentives such as subsidies and the Delhi Film Fund.

By supporting filmmakers, the policy aims to put Delhi on the global map as a prime filming destination. It also fosters local talent, enhances infrastructure, and creates employment opportunities in the entertainment sector. With this initiative, Delhi is set to become a hub of creativity and cinematic storytelling.

Garden of Five Senses: A Tranquil Retreat in the City

Among Delhi's many green spaces, the Garden of Five Senses stands out as a true oasis. Located in South Delhi, this beautifully landscaped park is designed to engage all five senses—sight, sound, taste, touch, and smell. The garden features sculptures, fountains, lush greenery, and vibrant flower beds, making it a paradise for nature lovers. It also hosts cultural events, art installations, and food festivals, creating a perfect blend of nature and creativity. Other famous parks in Delhi include the Lodhi Gardens, Mughal Gardens, and Nehru Park, each offering a refreshing escape from the hustle and bustle of city life.

Azad Hind Gram and Coffee Home: A Blend of History and Hospitality

For history enthusiasts, Azad Hind Gram in Tikri Kalan is a must-visit. This museum and memorial complex is dedicated to Netaji Subhas Chandra



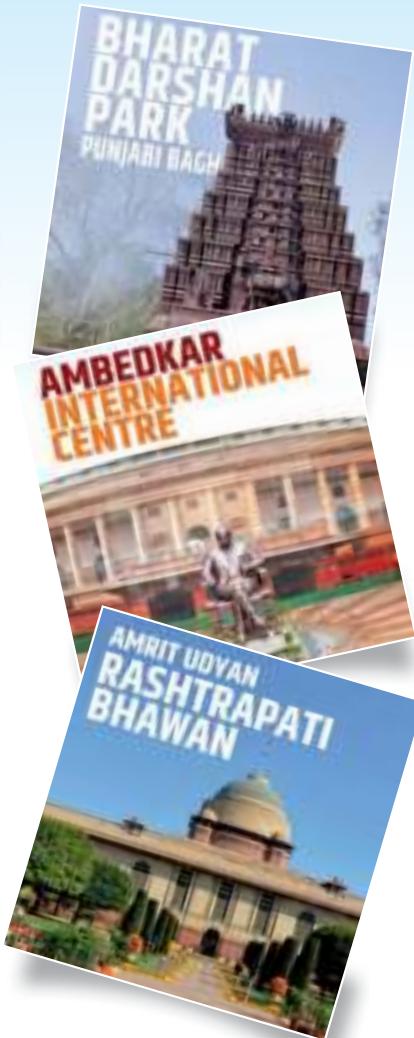
Bose, celebrating his contributions to India's freedom movement. It provides an insightful journey into the life and struggles of one of India's most influential leaders.

On the other hand, Coffee Home in Connaught Place is a cozy retreat where visitors can enjoy delicious and affordable South Indian cuisine. A favorite among locals and tourists alike, it's the perfect spot to relax and savor some of the best filter coffee and dosas in the city.

Dekho Meri Dilli App: Your Personal Tour Guide

Planning your trip to Delhi has never been easier, thanks to the 'Dekho Meri Dilli' mobile app. This innovative application serves as a one-stop destination for all tourism-related information, including monuments, markets, eateries, and entertainment hubs. Whether you're interested in a half-day city tour or a six-day itinerary, the app provides tailored recommendations along with Google Maps integration for easy navigation.

A unique feature of the app allows users to explore places within a 5-km radius, helping them discover nearby attractions, restaurants, and even public conveniences. This first-of-its-kind initiative aims to enhance the tourism experience while boosting the local economy by promoting the food, hospitality, and entertainment sectors.



Kalam Memorial

Delhi is home to several landmarks that pay homage to India's great leaders. The Kalam Memorial, dedicated to Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam, showcases personal artifacts and a multimedia exhibition celebrating his remarkable contributions to science and society. Kalam Memorial is an inspiration for young minds, offering insight into the life of one of India's most beloved Presidents.

Festivals and Cultural Celebrations in Delhi

Delhi comes alive with fairs and festivals that celebrate its vibrant heritage. DTTDC organizes various cultural extravaganzas, including the Garden Tourism Festival, Mango Festival, and Food Festival, each offering a unique blend of entertainment,

tradition, and gastronomical delights. These festivals attract visitors from across India and beyond, making them a significant highlight of Delhi's cultural calendar.

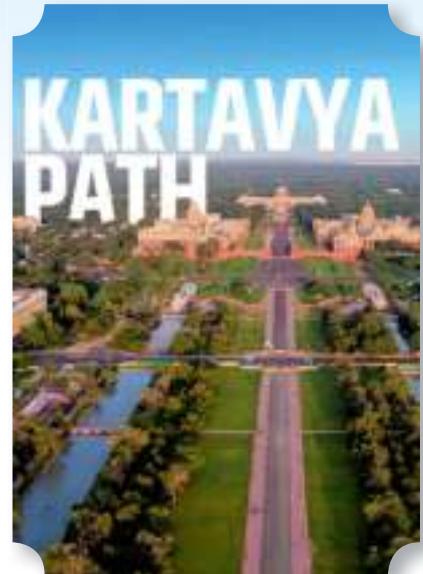
Hidden Gems: Exploring Unexplored Delhi

Beyond its famous landmarks, Delhi hides many unexplored wonders that are worth discovering. Some of these include:

- **Moth Ki Masjid** – A stunning 15th-century mosque with intricate carvings.
- **Mirza Ghalib Ki Haveli** – The former residence of India's greatest Urdu poet.
- **Chor Minar** – A mysterious medieval tower with an eerie past.
- **Isa Khan's Tomb** – A lesser-known Mughal-era architectural marvel.
- **Agrasen Ki Baoli** – A historic stepwell with a mesmerizing atmosphere.
- **Bijay Mandal Fort** – A hidden gem that offers breathtaking views.

Discovering Delhi through Heritage and Haunted Walks

One of the best ways to immerse yourself in Delhi's history is by joining DTTDC's heritage walks. These



guided tours take visitors through some of the most iconic historical sites, such as Chandni Chowk, Mehrauli Archaeological Park, Hauz Khas etc. revealing fascinating stories and hidden secrets of the past. Haunted Walks at **Malcha Mahal** and **Feroz Shah Kotla**, where ghost stories come to life.

DTTDC also offers a range of specially curated tours, including:

- Sightseeing tour of **Delhi**.
- Same-day **Agra** tour.
- 3-days **Agra-Jaipur** tour.
- 2-days **Haridwar-Rishikesh** tour.
- 2-days **Mathura-Vrindavan-Agra Fatehpur Sikri** tour.

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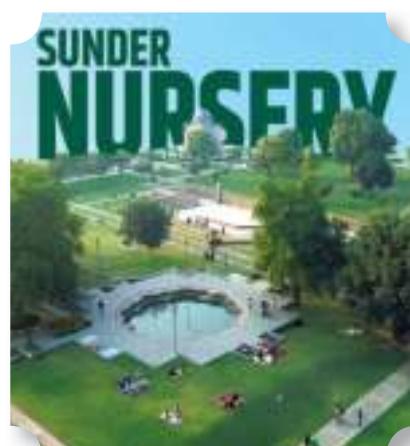
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BEYOND THE TIGER

A monsoon escape to Sariska Lodge reveals pilgrim trails, hidden temples and the quiet joys of Rajasthan's countryside

By Amita Baviskar

After weeks of dealing with seeping walls, car repairs and dental work, I am longing for a break. Anything to get away from daily chores and domestic crises. So, I gladly seize the weekend invitation from Sariska Lodge and off we drive at dawn from Delhi towards Alwar, Rajasthan. Past the purgatory of Gurugram's traffic snarls, we bowl along the Delhi-Mumbai expressway before turning off onto a small road that winds its way between villages and fields full of bajra, climbing into the forested Aravalli hills. The cacophony of city life falls away. Here is a slower pace, serenity, and space to breathe.





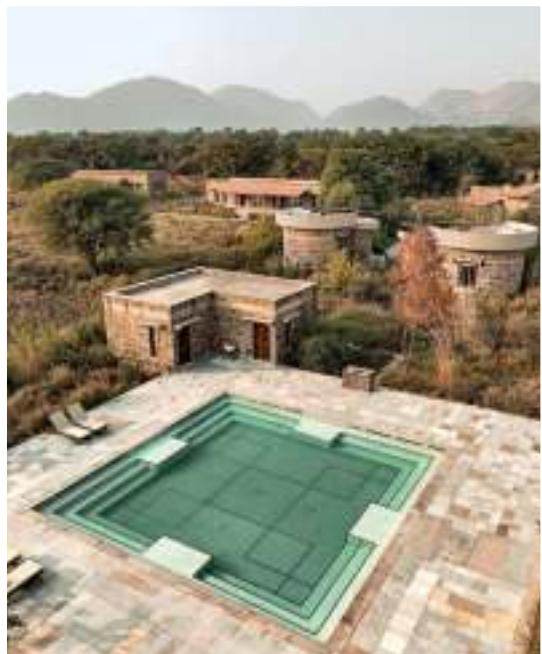
**DRIVING INTO
THE SUNSET**

On an evening safari
organised by the
Sariska Lodge

*Images Courtesy
SARISKA LODGE, SYED ALI HUSAIN*

EMBEDDED IN NATURE

Top left and right, the Sariska Lodge melds with its environs; below, a statue of Jain Tirthankara Shantinath at the temple complex near Sariska



Like me, the countryside is on holiday. Walking along the road are pilgrims on their way to the mela at the Baba Bhartrihari temple in the forest. We pass groups of women, red and yellow *odhnis* over their heads and sturdy backpacks behind. The driver explains that, during this lull



in the labour of farming, villagers take time off to visit the temple of the king-turned-ascetic. The trek is tough, but charitable villagers along the way organise community kitchens to feed the pilgrims. Indeed, we soon come across a roadside clearing where turbanned men are stirring a giant pan of *aloo sabzi* and frying *pooris* in a huge *karhai*. Everyone, including passers-by like us, are lovingly urged to eat. So, we go on, snacking our way through *kachori*, *jalebi* and *moong vade*, surprised and pleased at this unexpected treat.

We are still burping away happily, when the car deposits us at Sariska Lodge, right by the Sariska Tiger Reserve entrance at Tehla. The sound



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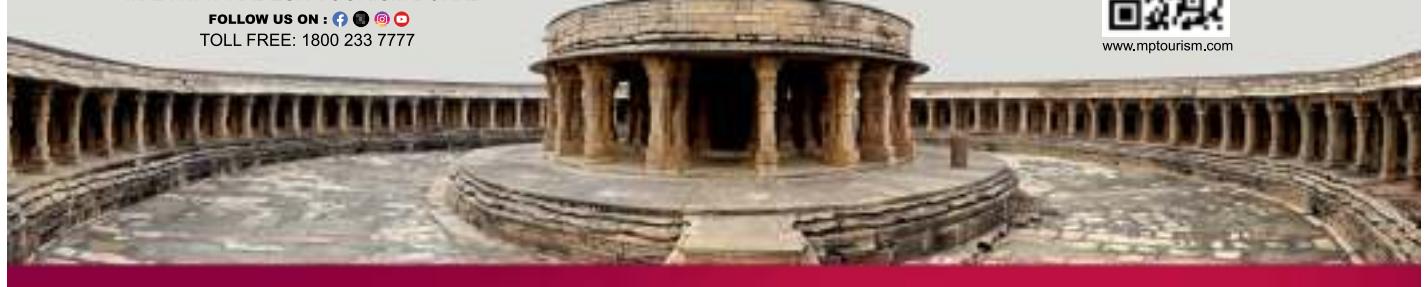


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A PLACID SURFACE

Early morning mist lifts from the Siliserh Lake in Sariska



of DJs blaring bhajans fades away as the gate swings shut. Instead, peafowl call to each other and water splashes from a fountain. A horse whickers softly behind a bamboo thicket. We step onto a tree-shaded pavilion with gleaming flagstones. A white-clad attendant comes forward with cool scented towels and glasses of tart lemonade. Welcome to luxury resort land.

Having checked out the website, we know what to expect: palatial rooms and private pools to lounge around in; personal butlers and spa therapies to pamper us; “curated” meals and “experiences” to make every moment Insta-worthy and memorable. All for a hefty price tag. But even the jaded palate can’t help but be refreshed by the Lodge’s tangled greenery, its youthful staff and the thoughtful care that has gone into its making.

Sariska Lodge has been started by Anand and Rie Shekhawat who spent years working for Aman Resorts before opening their own place. Anand’s father was a forest

officer, and he grew up in wild places all over Rajasthan. Settling down outside Sariska enabled him to marry his love for the jungle with his vocation in the hospitality industry. Eleven stone-built suites are dotted about amidst dense groves of grasses, trees and flowering shrubs. Winding paths connect them to the dining room, spa, pool and stables. The rooms are a cool haven from the muggy monsoon heat, their elegance lightened by whimsical tiger and leopard motifs on the blinds, bedside lamps, cushions and pictures.

Big cats are, indeed, the chief reason why people visit Sariska. But while the Tiger Reserve is closed during the rains, I soon discover that there is plenty to see and do in the surrounding countryside. We drive out in the late afternoon to Mangalsar lake, passing below the picturesque Tehla fort perched on a hilltop above. A herd of camels browses through the babul trees, the bells around their necks tinkling desultorily. I can’t help but exclaim

THE INFORMATION**GETTING THERE**

Sariska National Park is a 3-hr drive from Delhi (218 km) and 2hr 25min from Jaipur (107km)

LOCATION

Sariska Lodge is next to the park’s Tehla Gate, 50km from Alwar

ACCOMMODATION

11 private suites, ranging from Fort Suites to Mountain Suites, Pool Suites and the Family Pool Suite

TARIFF

From ₹ 20,700 plus taxes for two, including breakfast and wi-fi

WHAT TO DO

Experiences at Sariska Lodge include private dinners with live folk music, barbecue grill bush dinner, breakfast at the fort ruins. Further afield, morning and evening safaris to Sariska Tiger Reserve; boulder trail safaris to track leopards

CONTACT DETAILS

Sariska Lodge

Tehla Gate at Sariska Tiger Reserve, Rajgarh, Rajasthan, 301410

Tel: +91 94611 14100

Email: sales@sariskalodge.com

www.sariskalodge.com

ELECTRIC ROAD TRIPS

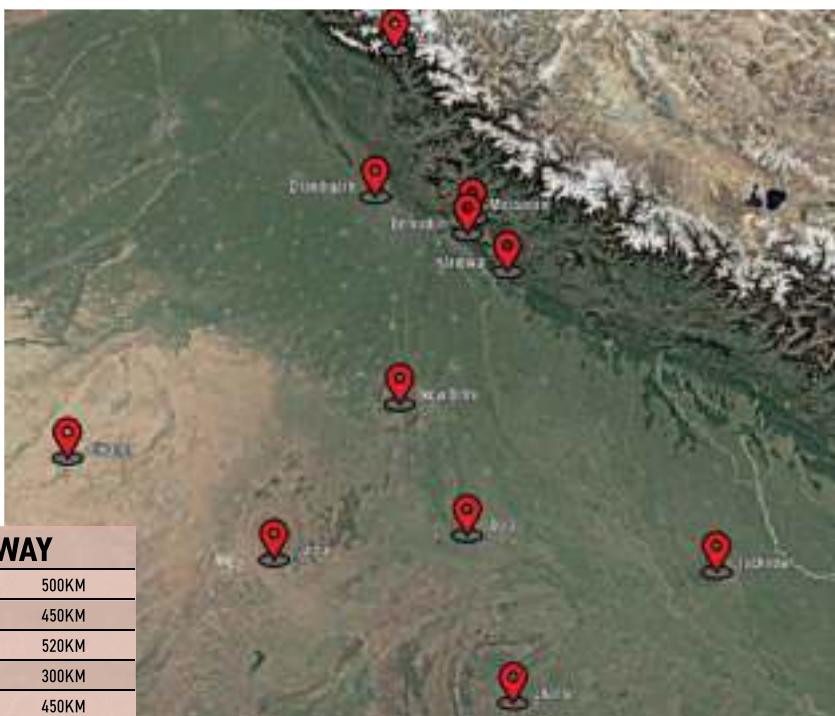
With a 70.8kWh battery under the skin that offers over 500km of range the VinFast VF 7 isn't just a city focussed electric vehicle but it's the perfect companion for a weekend getaway

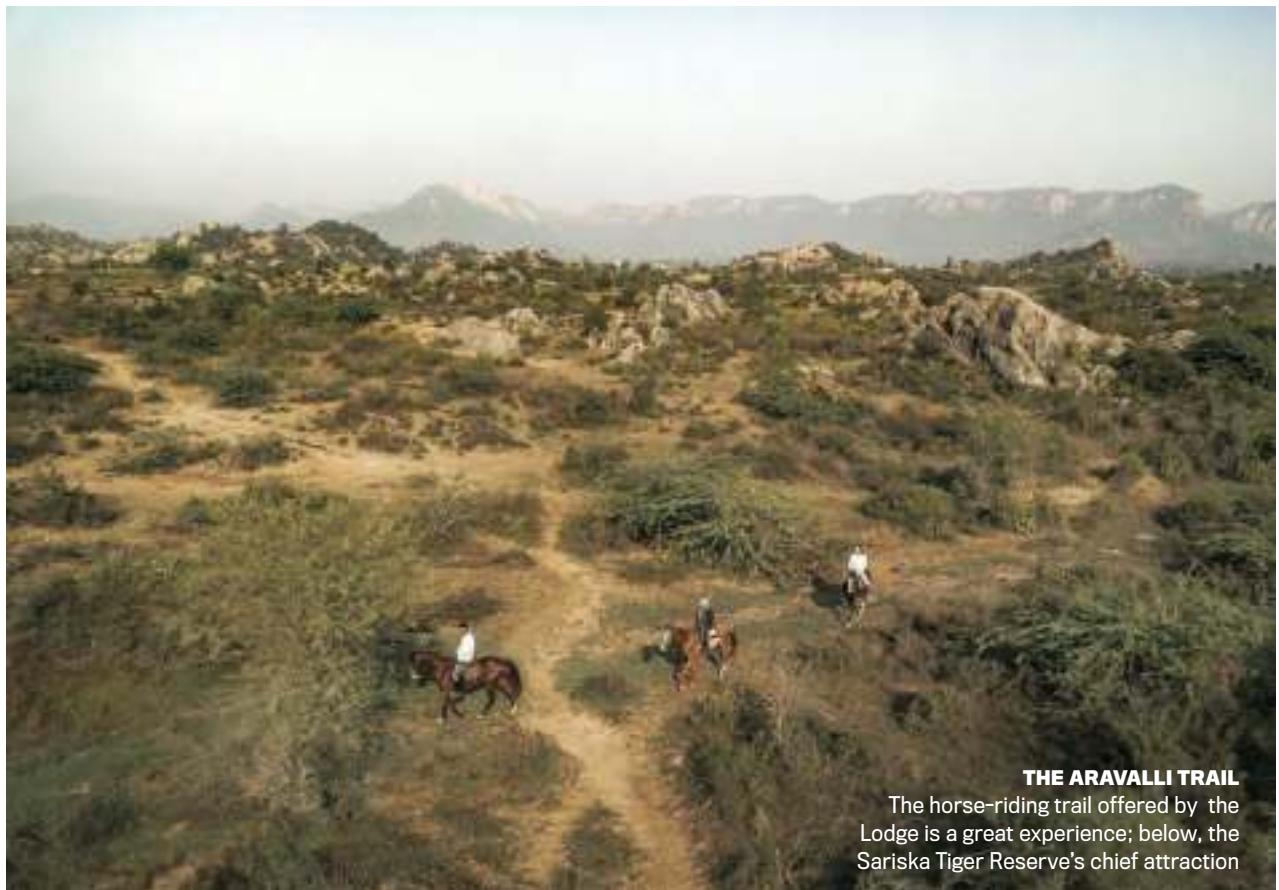


Mobility is taking a leap forward with electric vehicles, and the newly-launched VinFast VF 7 is a vehicle that truly embodies the benefits of electric mobility. Built on a dedicated platform, the VF 7 blends aerospace-inspired design with state-of-the-art engineering, for an SUV that looks absolutely unique, and offers incredible road presence with its expansive dimensions. The cabin is a true living space, ensuring that occupants spend each second in comfort, just like a tastefully curated living room. But India is a country that rewards real world practicality, and for electric vehicles there is no greater claim than to offer a real-world intercity capable powertrain, and that is exactly what VinFast has ensured with the VF 7. The SUV has a 70.8kWh battery pack, that gives it a claimed range of over 500km on a single charge, and this means that if you are a frequent road-tripper, then the VF 7 is the perfect companion for you. From the National Capital, the VinFast VF 7 is capable of driving to Agra, exploring the monuments, and then some and returning back

home, with five people onboard. If one wants to go farther, the SUV can reach Lucknow in a single charge or drive to Chandigarh, attend a business meeting and drive back by the evening. One can drive to Manali

and enjoy the fresh mountain air, or head to Bikaner to experience the rich heritage. These are only some examples of the countless destinations that one can explore with the VF 7 and its impressive electric range.



**THE ARAVALLI TRAIL**

The horse-riding trail offered by the Lodge is a great experience; below, the Sariska Tiger Reserve's chief attraction



each time I spot flame lilies; their crimson and gold flowers look so exotic in this wild terrain. It is almost dusk when we reach the lake. Waves lap gently against the shore as cattle egrets wing past the green hills to their roosts. We alight from the jeep to find out that the Lodge team is waiting for us with masala chai and *garma-garam pakore*, conjured up in the middle of the wilderness. Savouring the contrast between the crisp paneer *pakore* and piquant coriander chutney, the moist breeze from the lake wafting over us, the overcast sky pregnant with rain: the deliciousness of the monsoons comes together all at once.

In semi-arid Rajasthan, there is a special joy to the rains. When we set out the next morning, the whole countryside seems to be smiling. In the fields, bajra stands tall and proud, enclosed by walls of rough-hewn stone. Vines of wild gourds run riot over thorn hedgerows. Buffaloes wallow lazily in muddy ponds. In the courtyard of a village home, a mother bathes her young son, briskly scrubbing him for school. Our jeep leaves the valley for a road into the encircling hills. As it climbs through the forest, I'm in naturalist heaven. The *dhau* trees have put out sage-silver new leaves, each one trembling with tiny drops of water. *Khair, ronjh, kullu, salai*: each tree is budding with new foliage, spreading to embrace the rain.

Plunging through this verdure, we descend into another valley, charmingly secluded, where the bucolic landscape reveals a hidden treasure. Scattered among the bajra fields are the remains of 10th-

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century temples, intricately carved plinths and pillars reaching up to the open sky. Amidst placid rurality, the place bursts with energy. Warrior men and women battle *vyala*, magical beasts with leonine heads and horse-bodies. Kirtimukha gargoyles keep evil at bay. Door lintels that now lead nowhere are crowded with apsaras singing and dancing around deities. And each deity contains multitudes: Surya, Vishnu, Shiva, Brahma with their distinct iconography combined in a single figure. There is a Devi temple. All are abandoned except the almost intact Neelkanth Mahadev with its shikhara of weathered sandstone, and a stepwell beside it. Peafowl pick their way through wildflowers and grasses growing among the ruins. An eight-metre-high statue of the Jain Tirthankar Shantinath keeps solitary watch over this fallen splendour.

It is all quite marvellous. My mind is full of conjecture, but the

Archaeological Survey of India which protects the temples has forgotten to provide any information for visitors. I learn later from an art historian friend that these temples were built more than a thousand years ago when this region was a part of Paranagar, a Pratihara dynasty principality. Within a hundred or so years, the community that worshipped and maintained them had vanished. We may never know why. As we sip tea and munch biscuits on worn steps overlooking an old pond, I'm struck by how much more there is to wonder at if one looks beyond tigers at the natural and cultural landscape they inhabit. If it wasn't for the closed Tiger Reserve, I may never have discovered this tucked-away jewel.

Brunch, back at the Lodge, consists of fruit, home-baked bread, fluffy omelettes, and good coffee. The menu is eclectic. The gazpacho and Caprese salad sparkle with the flavour of freshly picked tomatoes. At dinner,

the Rajasthani dishes include garlic-sautéed *chaulai*, a seasonal green. The service is solicitous, sometimes to excess, but the young staff will soon learn that not every guest wants to be escorted everywhere. Or that not everyone wants that a towel used to dry hands once should be instantly replaced. They mean well, but it goes against the eco-friendly ethos the Lodge seeks to build.

After a blissful massage, part of the Tibetan healing therapies that the spa offers, I doze on the large swing by my pool, imagining how delighted my four-year-old nieces would be to paddle here, chasing dragonflies and giant toads. Or sitting astride a horse, gently clip-clopping around the paddock. There is tonnes to do at the Sariska Lodge. Even if the only large cat you see is embroidered on your window blind. ■

PIZZA AL FRESCO

An open air, brick and woodfire pizza oven at the Lodge dishes out moreish varieties

आज तक

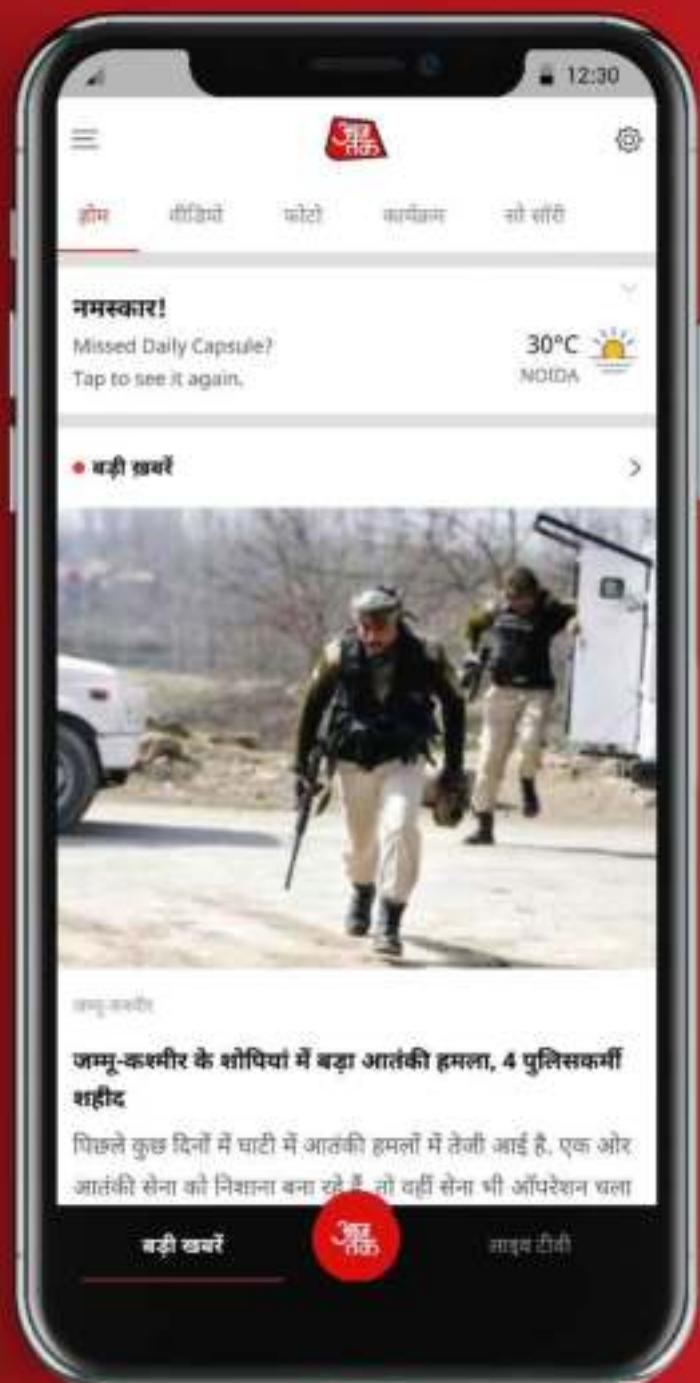
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PUNAURA DHAM

BIHAR'S MONUMENT TO DIVINITY AND CULTURAL RENAISSANCE

"Janaki, the daughter of the earth, emerged pure and radiant from the furrow—her birth sanctified by the gods, her virtues destined to uplift the world."

— Ramayana

Rekindling an Epic: The Birthplace of Mata Sita
In the serene plains of Sitamarhi, northern Bihar, where the earth resonates itself with ancient tales, a transformation of profound significance is underway. This is the sacred land where Mata Sita, daughter of the Earth first emerged: a symbol of virtue, courage, and devotion. Punaura Dham, her revered birthplace, has long drawn pilgrims, scholars, and devotees. Today, it is being meticulously revived, evolving not merely into a temple, but into a living testament of faith, culture, and national pride. It is a place where history, spirituality, and art converge—a space where stone and story unite to narrate Sita's life, trials, and triumphs. The initiative underscores Bihar's commitment to honoring its mythic heritage and presenting it on a stage deserving of national and global recognition.

Laying the Cornerstone: A Historic Ceremony

On August 8th, a historic milestone marked the dawn of this ambitious vision. The foundation stone for Punaura Dham's grand temple complex was laid in a ceremony attended by Home Minister and Co-operative Minister Amit Shah and Chief Minister Nitish Kumar, whose presence emphasized the temple's importance as a spiritual landmark and cultural emblem for India. The event stirred excitement across the country and beyond, signaling that Sitamarhi's sacred ground would soon become a hub of global pilgrimage, scholarship, and cultural dialogue. The laying of the cornerstone was not

only the start of construction but also a symbolic affirmation of Bihar's aspiration to revive its spiritual and cultural legacy.

Vision and Scale: A Dream Forged in Stone

The temple complex is being developed over a 67-acre sacred site in Sitamarhi district, with a total investment of \$100 million (₹882 crore) and a targeted completion within 42 months. Bihar's Department of Tourism, in collaboration with renowned temple architects and cultural scholars, is ensuring that every detail—architectural, artistic, and spiritual—reflects the divine journey of Sita. The project aims to offer visitors an immersive experience that marries devotion, education, and cultural pride, presenting Sita's life in a manner both monumental and deeply personal.

Architectural Grandeur

Modeled on the magnificence of Ayodhya's Ram Mandir, the Central Grand Temple will form the heart of the complex, narrating Mata Sita's journey in stone, sculpture, and mural. Exquisitely carved reliefs, monumental statues, and murals depicting key events from the Ramayana will offer pilgrims a profoundly immersive spiritual experience. Surrounding the central sanctum, six shrine pavilions will portray critical moments from Sita's life—from her birth and marriage to her exile and trials—creating a narrative journey that highlights her courage, virtue, and resilience. Every element



has been carefully designed, reflecting Sita's dignity and the cultural ethos of Mithila and northern India. The temple serves as a custodian of heritage, bridging myth, history, and devotion in one living monument.

A Living Centerpiece: Celebrating Sita's Legacy

Punaura Dham is envisioned as more than a spiritual destination; it is a cultural and educational hub. The Ramayana Gallery and Museum will house rare manuscripts, digital archives, and 3D exhibits, offering scholars, devotees, and students interactive experiences that explore the epic's history and philosophy. Immersive storytelling zones



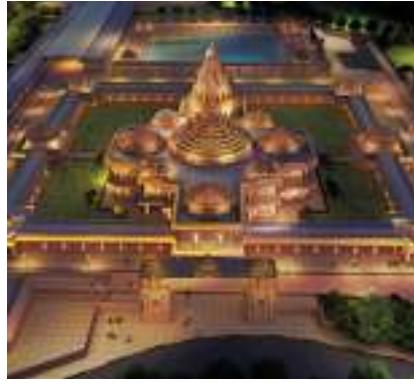
and audio-visual displays will bring the Ramayana to life for visitors, from local pilgrims to international scholars. Complementing these spaces are the yagya shala, meditation center, and open-air amphitheater, which will host rituals, spiritual discourses, and cultural performances, ensuring the continuity of Bihar's rich traditions. Purna Dham thus becomes a living repository of devotion, knowledge, and cultural continuity, allowing visitors to experience the story of Sita, rather than merely read it.

Bridging Tradition and Modernity: World-Class Infrastructure

The planners of Purna Dham have prioritized world-class infrastructure, ensuring visitors experience convenience, comfort, and immersion. The complex will include spacious parking facilities for private vehicles, buses, and tour coaches, integrated thoughtfully into the landscape. Comfortable rest houses will allow pilgrims to rejuvenate and engage fully with the spiritual environment. The Mithila Haat, a cultural marketplace, will feature multi-cuisine food courts, showcasing Bihar's culinary heritage alongside local artisanal crafts. Modern sanitation blocks will provide hygienic facilities for all visitors.

Digital integration further enhances the experience. Online booking systems will allow devotees to schedule visits or guided tours, while audio-visual tours in multiple languages will offer immersive insight into Sita's life and the temple's artistic and architectural features. Through this blend of tradition and technology, Purna Dham becomes a globally accessible spiritual destination, harmonizing heritage with contemporary convenience.

Eco-Conscious Design



Sustainability is central to the temple's design. Tranquil gardens, reflective ponds, and serene walking trails evoke Sita's grace and serenity, while native flora lines the pathways, creating a sanctuary for meditation and reflection. Every detail—from seating to landscaping—is crafted to inspire peace, reverence, and pride, resulting in a spiritually and environmentally balanced environment.

National Awakening: Reclaiming India's Feminine Divine

Purna Dham represents a revival of India's spiritual and cultural identity. By celebrating the feminine divine, the project honours the values Sita embodies—courage, dignity, and dharma. It is part of the broader Ramayana Circuit, supported by central and state governments, which aims to integrate sacred sites, enhance connectivity, and promote spiritual tourism. The initiative reaffirms Sita as a timeless symbol of strength and virtue, and ensures that her legacy continues to inspire devotion and scholarship for generations.

A Torchbearer of Heritage for Spiritual Tourism and Global Pilgrimage

Strategically located, Purna Dham elevates Bihar's standing on the global spiritual tourism map. Linked to sacred sites like Ayodhya, Janakpur, Chitrakoot, and Rameshwaram, it forms part of a network attracting pilgrims from across India and the diaspora. The Ramayana resonates globally, from Southeast Asia to the Caribbean, with nations such as Indonesia, Thailand, Cambodia, Mauritius, Sri Lanka, Trinidad, and Fiji maintaining vibrant Ramayana traditions. The temple will serve as a beacon of heritage, fostering international cultural exchange, academic research, and spiritual tourism, solidifying Bihar as a cultural and spiritual epicenter.

Economic Impact: Transforming the Local Landscape

The temple complex will have a transformative impact on the local economy. Projected to welcome millions of visitors annually, it will generate thousands of direct jobs in construction, hospitality, transport, guiding services, and local arts and crafts. Indirect employment will expand in street vending, eateries, homestays, heritage accommodations, transport operations, and artisan communities. This influx is expected to encourage private investment in eco-tourism, wellness retreats, and heritage hotels, creating a positive ripple effect that revitalizes the regional economy while supporting inclusive growth.

Heritage Revival: Connecting Circuits and Communities

Bihar's government envisions Purna Dham as part of a larger integrated tourism and cultural strategy. Enhanced road and rail connectivity will link nearby sacred sites, while thematic guided trails and cultural festivals will enrich the visitor experience. International spiritual exchanges and conferences will encourage dialogue among scholars, devotees, and cultural ambassadors. These measures demonstrate Bihar's commitment to reviving spiritual heritage while fostering socio-economic growth, ensuring that local communities benefit alongside pilgrims. Purna Dham is thus



more than a temple—it is a living emblem of progress, culture, and devotion.

Where Divinity Meets Development

In a world yearning for roots and meaning, Purna Dham stands as a pillar of heritage, where spirituality fuels dignity, culture, and development. By combining architectural grandeur, digital innovation, cultural curation, and eco-conscious design, the complex exemplifies how tradition and modernity can coexist. The life of Mata Sita will resonate not only through sacred texts but in the hearts of pilgrims, scholars, and visitors worldwide. As sunlight glimmers across its gardens and the central temple rises in solemn splendour, Purna Dham will stand as a sentinel of India's epic legacy, guiding spiritual revival, cultural renaissance, and national pride. Here, Sita's story will not just be remembered—it will be lived, experienced, and celebrated across generations and continents.

The Government of Bihar's visionary initiative affirms with unwavering conviction: our epics are eternal, and Purna Dham will shine as a monument of heritage, devotion, and national pride, inspiring generations yet unborn.

For More Information Please visit:
<https://tourism.bihar.gov.in/>

PROJECT AT A GLANCE

Aspect	Details
Location	Sitamarhi, Bihar
Project Area	67 acres
Investment	\$100 million (\$882 crore)
Completion Timeline	42 months
Temple Model	Inspired by Ayodhya's Ram Mandir
Major Facilities	Grand Temple, Six Shrines, Ramayana Gallery & Museum, Yagya Shala, Meditation Centre, Amphitheater, Food Courts, Rest Houses, Digital Services, Eco-Landscaping
Employment Effects	Thousands of direct and indirect jobs, growth of allied sectors
Positioning	Part of the Ramayana Circuit, national and global spiritual tourism

WHAT'S NEW IN JAIPUR

**DISCOVER THESE FRESH WAYS TO
ENJOY THE AGE-OLD CITY**

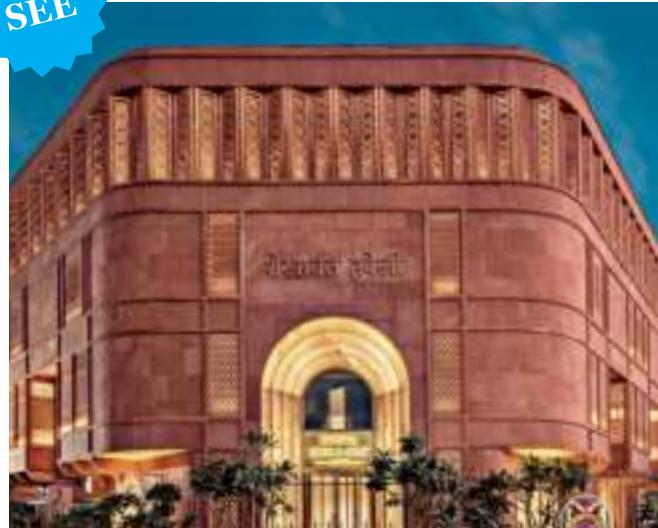
By Priya Pathiyan

J aipur. The name evokes grand images of royal palaces, gleaming gems and a rich cultural heritage. But what's best about Jaipur is that although there's a deep respect for its history, nothing is frozen in time. It's a dynamic city that stylishly straddles the past even as it looks to a future full of contemporary cachet. Here are experiences that have come up in the last year that will add a wealth of value to your next Jaipur jaunt...



**REGAL VISTA**

A panoramic view of the Aravallis from the rooftop infinity pool at Raffles Jaipur

**Museum of Meenakari Heritage**

It may be the experience centre for Sunita Shekhawat's eponymous luxury jewellery label, but it's also India's first museum dedicated to meenakari enamelling art, curated by jewellery historian and author Dr Usha R. Balakrishnan. The Museum of Meenakari Heritage's Jodhpur sandstone façade draws from the region's multi-faceted architecture; cutting-edge interiors by Studio Lotus give it the heft of an international museum. Celebrating the designs and artisans of meenakari art, it features over a 100 images sourced from museums and private collections from all around the world and more than 300 reproductions of stunning historical pieces that encompass several different techniques, styles, and eras of enamelling expertise.

ACCESS: By appointment

**Jaipur Centre for Art**

HH Maharaja Sawai Padmanabh Singh of Jaipur (fondly known as Pacho to those close to him) has collaborated with contemporary art specialist Noelle Kadar to create the Jaipur Centre for Art (JCA) inside the City Palace. Kadar, with her Rhode Island School of Design background and leading role in India's contemporary art scene, is the perfect choice to curate excellent exhibitions for the JCA. Thanks to his international education and connections, the Maharaja can foster a truly creative environment by inviting the global artistic community to participate in residencies here.



ACCESS: An entry ticket (Rs 350) along with one to the City Palace

STAY



Mementos by ITC Hotels Jaipur

Bringing true ITC splendour, this property boasts 64 suites and villas spread over 12 acres. Not only are the interiors rich in Rajasthani art and handicraft, but even the gorgeous Mughal-inspired gardens are filled with indigenous trees and colourful peacocks. Two restaurants—Amber Pavilion and Mayur—serve up global cuisines and regional favourites with a blend of the finest beverages.

COST: From Rs 18,000/night



Anantara Jewel Bagh Jaipur

The first of Anantara Hotels & Resorts' properties in India, this one is indeed one of Jaipur's newest gems, with an Anantara Spa and two swimming pools. Its Amrit Mahal restaurant has an international menu, Sheesh Mahal is a sumptuous cocktail bar, and Rajputana Chowk offers all-day snacks and beverages.

The pet-friendly resort's 150 rooms and suites are opulent and well-appointed, some including private terraces and outdoor jacuzzis. It's also perfect for weddings, with seven banqueting venues, and a team set on making every occasion memorable.

COST: From Rs 25,000/night



Raffles Jaipur

The Accor Group property brought its design-forward deliciousness along with other staples such as its brilliant butler service to Jaipur recently. The reimagined palace boasts 50 handcrafted rooms and suites, plus a full-service Raffles Spa, besides the Arkaa restaurant serving elevated North Indian fare, a tea and Champagne lounge (for that iconic Raffles Afternoon Tea), the iconic Writers Bar ensconced in what is probably one of the most glamorous libraries you've seen, and a rooftop restaurant and cocktail bar.

COST: From Rs 53,000/night



Fairfield by Marriott Jaipur Tonk Road

The brand-new business hotel has everything you need for a comfortable stay. Think 115 guest rooms, fitness centre, an Indian restaurant named Falak and an all-day dining space with a view aptly called Vista 20.

COST: From Rs 5,000/night



IMBIBE

Merlot & Co

This one's a great date spot. Think sophisticated European aesthetics and a robust menu that brings you flavour favourites from all over India, some parts of Asia, and Italy.

SPEND: Rs 5,000 + taxes for two, with drinks



Wunderland by Townsend

We liked the OG name Wün.der.bar better, but this carnival-themed spot is just as popular. A brewery, a bar, a bistro...it's a bit of everything. But with upside-down horses hanging from the ceiling, striped hot-air balloons, and spotted squid tentacles to add to the whimsy, it's all part of the fun.

SPEND: Rs 4,000 + taxes for two, with drinks



Taffeta Coffee

They say they are 'North India's largest specialty coffee house'. We love that they've brought the Modbar experience to Jaipur, with custom grind settings, precision temperature control and an interactive brewing experience with an expert barista. Coffee snobs in Jaipur are visibly thrilled.

SPEND: Rs 1,600 + taxes for two, with coffee



Mirove Artisanal Kitchen

This one captures the imagination with its unique brutalist exterior in concrete leading into décor that lets the eye trail along curves, rest on interesting arches and feel calmed by the soft lighting. The island bar is a focal point where you can see and be seen, but it's the nuanced flavours and ingredients on the F&B menu that are appealing to more evolved diners.

SPEND: Rs 3,000 + taxes for two, with sober drinks

Nouba Kitchen & Bar

It's everything you want for a night out on the town—a posh restaurant, a rooftop lounge and the longest bar in Jaipur (almost 40 feet) which serves up Asian-inspired cocktails that complement the pan-Asian menu perfectly. There's even a spa and poolside space if you want to mix leisure with pleasure.

SPEND: Rs 5,000 + taxes for two, with drinks



Primitive Jaipur

First came Native Cocktail Room, turning the way Jaipur consumed cocktails on its head. Now, the owners have Chef Mohib, with Le Cordon Bleu DUX awards and stints in Michelin-starred kitchens to his credit, dishing out a dishy 11-course 'Progressive Indian' menu that blends refined and rustic in unimaginable ways.

SPEND: Rs 3,500 + taxes for vegetarian and RS 4,000 + taxes for non-veg 11-course tasting menu. Plus drinks

BROWSE

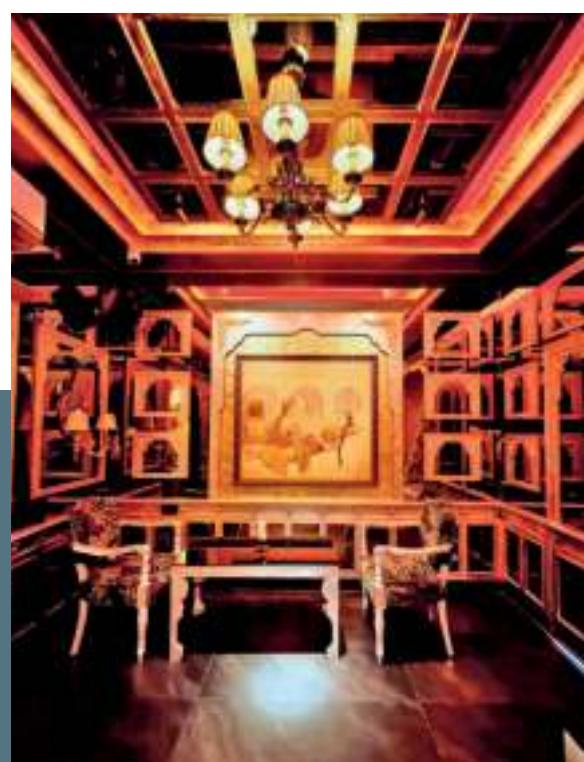


Ethos Watch Boutique

This new establishment at World Trade Park boasts one of the largest watch collections in Jaipur, featuring more than 6,000 timepieces from 60 luxury and haute horlogerie brands.

ICONIC India

The latest premium multi-brand store to entice Jaipur is also located at the World Trade Tower, featuring labels such as Just Cavalli and DKNY. Perfect for those who believe shopping is a true religion.



Rajasthan Reimagined for Tourists

In an interview with **India Today**, **DIYA KUMARI**, Deputy Chief Minister, Rajasthan, speaks about diversifying the traveller's experience with festivals, off-beat destinations and year-round events

Q.

Two decades ago, Rajasthan ranked among the top three destinations for tourists, but then the state began to slide in the rankings. What is the situation now?

That slide has stopped. Last year, we had some 230 million tourists, and our biggest achievement has been that our domestic tourists, who began coming to us in big numbers post-COVID, are continuing.

Q. How can you further increase the tourist numbers?

Half of the year is off-season for Rajasthan, but during the season, we have hotels running at full occupancy and we get a lot of international travellers too. But we are working to attract more conferences during the off-season.

Q. Any other initiatives you are planning?

Concert tourism. This can do very well during the off-season. The weather is pleasant in the late evenings, and hotels are cheaper. Fans come from other states as well as districts within Rajasthan for concerts. Then we have some festivals during such months, like Teej and Gangaur, which evoke a lot of interest in other states and countries. We intend to market such festivals.

Q. Rajasthan's major tourist destinations attract a lot of tourists. What about the less-visited ones?

There are many places which have ancient temples, monuments, palaces, havelis and beautiful scenery. Just pick any place like Alwar, Barmer, Dungar-

"We need a calendar with multiple events so that tourists can plan their visits well. The Maharana Pratap Circuit will take them through beautiful topography and rich history"

ANI



pur, Banswara, Bikaner, Bundi, Rajsamand, Kota.... We are looking into ways to market them. Then we have the upcoming Maharana Pratap Circuit that will take tourists through beautiful topography and rich history.

Q. A problem with Rajasthan is that tourists do not extend their stay or make repeat visits. How can you address this? This is not true. Our wildlife sanctuaries attract tourists again and again. The Jaipur Literature Festival has visitors coming year after year. We only need to have an annual calendar with multiple events so that tourists can plan their visits well.

Q. Is Shekhawati on the agenda too?

That is a priority. The chief minister held a meeting on how to conserve havelis and other monuments. We are offering incentives to haveli owners to stop them from pulling these down. Our approach is to have a cluster of havelis with restaurants and hotels in or around them. ■

— with Rohit Parihar

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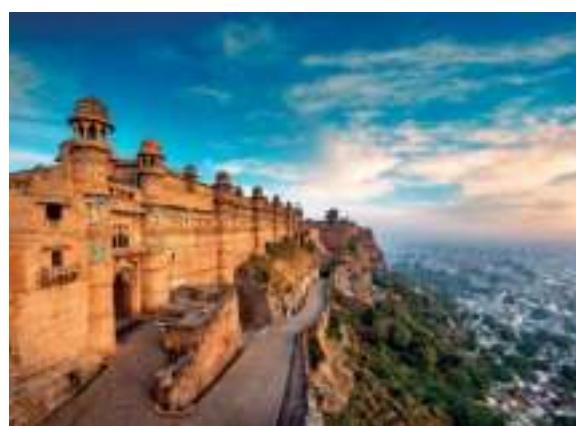
MAGIC A model clad in a Chand-
eri sari poses at
Chanderi Fort;
(below, L-R) the
Gwalior Fort; Devi
Jagdamba Temple,
Khajuraho; sunset
behind the *chha-*
tris (cenotaphs) in
Orchha

BANDEEP SINGH

Heritage Comes Alive

Madhya Pradesh is reinventing tourism in the Gwalior-Chambal and Bundelkhand belts with fresh experiences, homestays and cultural immersion

By Rahul Noronha



Photographs: SHUTTERSTOCK

The historically rich landscapes of Gwalior, Chambal and Bundelkhand, dotted with forts, temples, palaces and museums, along with distinctive local arts, crafts and weaves, have long drawn tourists from India and abroad. To sustain this appeal, reinvention and repackaging are seen as crucial. The Madhya Pradesh Tourism Board is now working to add new dimensions, aiming to make the visitor experience more immersive and contemporary.

With this objective, a regional tourism conclave was organised at Gwalior on August 29-30 where MP chief minister Mohan Yadav pitched the region to investors. The response was positive, and work has begun to prepare the ground for scaling up tourism in the region. “The idea is to marry culture with tourism,” says Ilayaraja T., managing director, MP State Tourism Development Corporation (MPSTDC), adding

that most assistance from the Union government is also aimed towards that. “We want to bring out the cultural significance of this historically rich region for tourists.”

So, what additions are being made to the tourist’s itinerary? Besides the majestic Gwalior Fort, the Chausath Yogini Temple at Mitaoli—said to have inspired the old Parliament building—along with the nearby temples at Padavali and Bateshwar are also worth a visit. Within

the fort premises stand the Sas Bahu ka Mandir, Teli ka Mandir and Man Mandir—all stellar examples of architecture. A comprehensive conservation project of the fort, led by the Aga Khan Trust and IndiGo, is now being launched to restore the monument. In the city, the Jai Vilas Palace and Museum showcase the splendour of the Scindias, Gwalior’s last ruling family before Independence.

One dimension being revived is wildlife tourism. The erstwhile Gwalior state had vast forests in present-day Shivpuri and Sheopur districts, once rich in wildlife. Over time, some apex species disappeared, but with cheetahs reintroduced at Kuno Palpur National Park and tigers at the Madhav Tiger Reserve in

Shivpuri, the region is all set to capitalise on this aspect of tourism.

The MPSTDC has begun constructing a lodge on a rural ethnic theme at the Tiktoli gate, an entry point for the Kuno park. “We are putting in place an ecosystem for promot-

ing safaris. Kuno is presently the only habitat in the country where a visitor can see a cheetah in the wild,” says Ilayaraja. There is word that a major hotel chain is also putting up a property in Shivpuri, which would serve visitors to both Madhav Tiger Reserve and Kuno.

Orchha, one of the most prominent tourist spots in Bundelkhand, is also teeming with action. The Centre has provided financial assistance to develop the Rama Raja Temple Complex—in-

cidentally the only temple where Lord Ram is worshipped as a king—and a museum to honour freedom fighter Chandrashekhar Azad. The sound and light show at the Orchha Fort is being redesigned as well. The Betwa river offers rafting opportunities, while the Orchha sanctuary, with the Jamni river flowing through it, allows visitors to walk along sandy beaches dotted with jamun trees. Orchha has also seen a number of homestays come up in recent years, offering tourists a local flavour in terms of language and cuisine.

Khajuraho, with its renowned temples from the Chandela dynasty, is set to get an international convention centre. Panna, the town with an active diamond mine, will get a diamond museum. The Panna Tiger Reserve clubbed with the Rani Durgawati Tiger Reserve add the wildlife element to tourism in Bundelkhand.

Specific demands from industry and stakeholders still need to be addressed. “Travel agents are key to making itineraries for foreign tourists. We need to work with them to put Gwalior, Orchha, Khajuraho and Chanderi on the itinerary,” says Orchha-based hotelier and MLA Nitendra Singh Rathore. In the past few years, Orchha had emerged as a popular wedding destination. But earlier this year, the state government banned the serving of alcohol in towns and cities with religious significance. Orchha was among them, and the wedding business has taken a massive hit. “The government should consider going back to the old system,” Rathore demands. ■

The Panna and Rani Durgawati tiger reserves add the wildlife element to tourism in Bundelkhand



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Some journeys are meant for the bold—for those who seek out dirt tracks over highways, and wilderness camps over plush resorts. Woodburns Contemporary Indian Whisky is crafted for exactly this kind of explorer. Smooth yet robust, it is a whisky that matches the grit and thrill of outdoor adventures, making it the



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ideal companion for road trips, off-road drives, or camping nights under star-studded skies.

Woodburns embodies the untamed spirit of India's modern traveller. Picture driving a 4x4 into Ladakh's stark valleys, the bottle packed securely in the gear for the evening ahead. When the sun dips, and the campfire crackles, a dram of Woodburns feels just right—its bold character echoing the rugged terrain around you. For bikers tracing the legendary Manali-Leh route, the whisky becomes an evening ritual, a way to toast the day's ride across high-altitude passes and winding mountain roads. The warmth of Woodburns is the perfect reward after hours in the saddle, cutting through wind and dust. It's not a spirit for sitting back in leisure resorts; instead, it pairs with journeys that demand curiosity, courage and stamina.

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If Arthaus is for the gourmet traveller and Woodburns for the adventurer, Zoya Special Batch Gin is for the



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Zoya is best enjoyed in easy, unhurried settings. Imagine reclining in a sarong on a Goan beach as the sky turns amber, a G&T in hand, the gin's botanical freshness in sync with the salty sea breeze. Or picture an evening by a seaside villa, laughter echoing as friends share stories, each sip of Zoya adding to the mood of carefree

togetherness. Its versatility shines through—whether in a classic gin and tonic, a modern tea-infused cocktail, or something indulgent like a Vanilla Gintini.

Carrying the tagline "Live, Love, Rejoice," Zoya is not about high-octane energy but about slowing down and soaking in the moment. It is travel distilled into spirit—easygoing, spirited, and joyous. For women and men who prefer their journeys to be more about connections than conquests, Zoya is the perfect companion. It celebrates life's smaller pleasures: a sundowner, a hammock, and the company of those who matter. ■

MALVAN, THE NEW MUST-DO

Why the coastal delights of Sindhudurg should be on your travel radar

By Priya Pathiyam



The sea before me is a shimmering sheen of water, the sunlight dancing merrily across its surface, as the tide rides in on gentle waves. As the water pulls away from the shore, every shell and pebble on the shallow ocean floor is visible in sharp focus. On the beach, the sand is impossibly pristine. This is Sindhudurg, in the Malvan taluka of coastal Maharashtra, a beach-and-fort destination that is still relatively undiscovered. Expat Giles Knapton had been charmed by Goa way before it changed its character from laidback to LV, and built his first Coco Shambhala property there. But when he (more recently) discovered Sindhudurg, he felt it was like reclaiming paradise, the Goa that was gone, and decided to

create a plush new four-villa resort in tune with nature right opposite the Blue Flag beach at Bhogwe.

Having travelled to Sindhudurg several times by train (the Konkan Railway makes it very accessible from Mumbai), it was exciting when Chipli airport was built to develop this as a new tourist destination. But, thanks to its limited flight schedule, I have since found that it actually makes more sense to fly into Mopa Airport in Goa and drive the 60 km to Sindhudurg. The region has a number of beaches where you can visit and stay, each one offering different experiences. I've tried everything from a homestay in Achre, a cosy houseboat in the Karli river backwaters at Tarkarli, to the stunning bespoke luxury property

SHUTTERSTOCK



LAP IT UP Sindhudurg fort is surrounded by water on all sides; (below) the new Shivaji statue at Rajkot fort



SHUTTERSTOCK



STAY

Coco Shambhala (2-bedroom villa with private pool starts at Rs 55,000 per night in the low season for a minimum stay of three nights), Sawantwadi Palace Boutique Art Hotel (deluxe suite with private pool starts at Rs 18,880 per night), Parisa Beach Resort (seaview room with a balcony starts at Rs 6,090 per night); MTDC-approved home stays are very affordable

MONSOON GETAWAYS



GETTY IMAGES

at Bhogwe, and each has been a really enriching experience.

Sea Link

Tarkarli, despite being so unspoilt and gorgeous, is perhaps the most developed in terms of catering to tourists. The Indian Institute of Scuba Diving and Aquatic Sports (IISDA) here offers watersports such as snorkelling, scuba diving (excellent training as well), jet skiing and parasailing. On the main road near the beach are a fair number of local eateries and little souvenir shops. Another fascinating spot to visit is Tsunami Island, a sandbar that came up after the 2004 tsunami. Of the other beaches in the neighbourhood, you can enjoy time at Chivla, Devbagh, Bhogwe, Achre, Shiroda, Kunkeshwar, Nivati, Sagarshwar, Talashil Tondavali and Vengurla. The sea is magnificent and, barring a few carts, these beaches are pure paradise. Dolphin safaris are big here, and you are almost assured of getting a glimpse of the lively Indo-Pacific humpback dolphins. After all, it's all part of the magnificent Malvan Marine Sanctuary. Snorkelling, too, is very rewarding, with beautiful schools of fish, and coral.

Fort'ify Yourself

It's not just sand and surf, the coastal forts here are equally spectacular, the most famous being Sindhudurg Fort, after which the region is named. Built at the behest of Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj between 1664 and 1667 AD, it sits

in well-fortified splendour on Khurte Island. To get there, I settle into a big boat that takes me across the sea to the slippery stone steps leading up to the fort. The 48-acre expanse encompasses sprawling ramparts, three sweet water wells, a temple dedicated to Shivaji himself, and a museum celebrating the fort and its founder. Folklore has it that the hand and footprints preserved near the top of the ramparts belong to the Maratha king. There's also a 'fake temple', which is supposed to hide an undersea tunnel via which people trapped on the island by the enemy could escape to the mainland! If forts are your thing, you can also explore the older Vijaydurg, Sarjekot and Padmagarh as well as the 17th century fort of Rajkot, where the new 91-foot-tall statue of Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj was installed in May.

Culture it Up

A nice change of pace is Sawantwadi, rich with history. Not only can you visit the palace and attached museum that once belonged to the Sawant-Bhonsle rulers, you can even opt to stay in this restored building dating back to 1755 AD (or have a sumptuous meal there!) Of the many shore temples that abound in this area (of note are the Sateri Devi Jal Mandir and Shri Bhadrakali Temple), I was most interested in the Shri Wagheshwar Temple, dedicated to Lord Shiva, which is said to have once had peace-loving tigers visiting it regularly! ■

Follow the Trail

From the Kaziranga wilds to Melbourne's cosmopolitan charms, actress Neha Dhupia shares her favourite journeys

Favourite destinations in India?

I love the Northeast. It's very raw and has so much to offer. I did a show called *MTV Roadies* which took me all over—Assam, Meghalaya, Arunachal... I really loved Kaziranga and Ziro. My father was in the Navy and I was born and raised in Kerala, so I keep going back there. I also love Rajasthan. It's very cultural—and the heat doesn't bother me!

You visited Melbourne for the Boxing Day Test. What were the top highlights for you?

The MCG for sure. I did a tour where I walked around the boundary wall. The Puffing Billy Railway was a great family attraction. The Ballarat Wildlife Park was absolutely fantastic. Rayners Orchard in the Yarra Valley.... Also the little stuff, like the AC/DC lane, named for the iconic band.

What is Melbourne like as a city?

It's cosmopolitan, cultural, deep-rooted and knows where it belongs.

At the same time, it's very global. Everyone is there for the same stuff. If there's a cricket match, they're all going to the stadium. As a city, I feel it has many stories to tell.

Is it challenging travelling with children?

Well, my children—three and six currently—are really good travellers. When I plan my itinerary, I like to do as many things I can with them. It's challenging sometimes, but it's also fun.

Three things you can't travel without?

In my case, it's three different types of bags.

So, my fanny pack—I want to be hands-free with my children, right? But I need more space, so there's a handbag as well. Then there's a high chance I will go and shop my heart out—for that I have a folding flexi-bag.

-with Amit Dixit

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