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AN UNFAIR BIAS

**THE DARK VERSUS FAIR DEBATE
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Abureaucrat's competence, dedication or leadership has nothing to do with the shade of their skin. Yet, India's deeply rooted bias around skin colour doesn't spare anyone, not even those at the very top of the administrative ladder. Take the case of Sarada Muraleedharan, a respected Indian Administrative Service (IAS) officer from the 1990 batch. In September 2024, she took charge as Kerala's Chief Secretary, stepping into the role after her husband and fellow officer V. Venu. While comparisons between the two might have been expected, the kind she encountered revealed something far more insidious. In a heartfelt Facebook post on March 25, she recounted a comment someone made about her work: "It is as black as my husband's was white." Her response wasn't defensive. It was reflective and deeply moving. "I need to own my blackness," she wrote, going on to share her lifelong journey of dealing with colour-based bias. She gave a poignant description of how, as a four-year-old, she once asked her mother if she could be born again, "white and pretty". Her post went viral, sparking a flood of emotions and discussions across the country. It touched a raw nerve because far too many Indians, especially women, have lived similar experiences.

This bias isn't new. It begins in school playgrounds and seeps in everywhere—from boardrooms to the choice of life partners. The market for skin lightening products, expected to reach Rs 20,500 crore by 2030, reflects how pervasive and profitable this prejudice has become. The bias doesn't stop at beauty standards. It affects how people are treated in classrooms, offices, and media spaces. A 2018 study found that 70 per cent of matrimonial ads from women or their families highlighted fairness as a desirable trait. Among men, over 60 per cent actively sought fair-skinned brides. Even popular platforms like shaadi.com featured a skin tone scale until they were called out and were forced to take it down.

The irony is that many of our revered deities, like Krishna, Shiva and Ram, are described as dark-skinned in the epics. So is Draupadi, the radiant queen of the Mahabharata. But somewhere along the way, through colonial legacies and warped ideals, we started equating light skin with beauty, worth and success.

The media and entertainment industry hasn't helped. Fair-skinned actors are favoured, and many

others have their appearances altered, digitally or in the old days through make-up, to fit the ideal mould. And when someone like model and actress Poulomi Das, gorgeous and talented, loses out on a leading role in a television show just because of her skin tone, it reminds us that not much has changed.

Worse still, this pressure weighs heaviest on women. As if managing professional excellence wasn't enough, they are often judged on how well they fit a visual stereotype.

Why is this bias so hard to shake off? Because it is embedded in our history. Sociologist Vivek Kumar points to the ancient encounter between the Aryans and the Dravidians and later our colonial subjugation. Radhika Parameswaran, a professor at The Media School, Indiana University, says the obsession has only intensified with social media. She argues that real change must begin early, in schools, before children absorb these harmful standards.

This week's cover story explores colourism from many angles, data, lived experiences, history, and science. Executive Editor Manisha Saroop threads together multiple bureau inputs on stories that are raw, real and hopeful. Stories like that of assistant director Snigdha Nair, who fought back against internalised shame by making a short film titled *You*. Her words stay with you: "It's not a deformity, it's normal."

Because yes, this is our normal. Dark skin is not an aberration. It is our origin. Our ancestors evolved dark skin to survive the sun. Fairness, biologically, is more vulnerable. In fact, light-skinned individuals are up to 70 times more likely to develop skin cancer.

The truth is simple. The problem isn't skin colour. It's how we perceive it. If we want to move forward as a society, we need to stop letting our biases speak louder than our values.

Because in the end, the real ugliness isn't in someone's complexion. It's in the eye that refuses to see their humanity.

It is better to kill your bias than be killed by it. The ugliness lies in the mind of the beholder.




(Aroon Purie)

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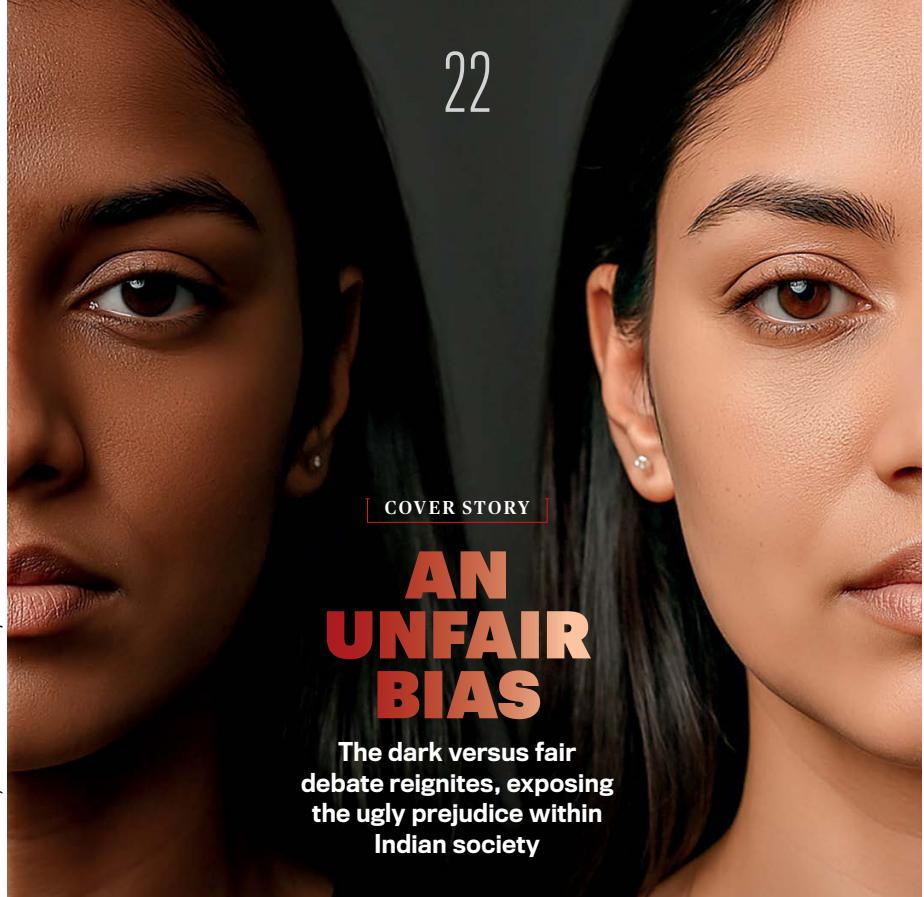


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AN UNFAIR BIAS

The dark versus fair debate reignites, exposing the ugly prejudice within Indian society

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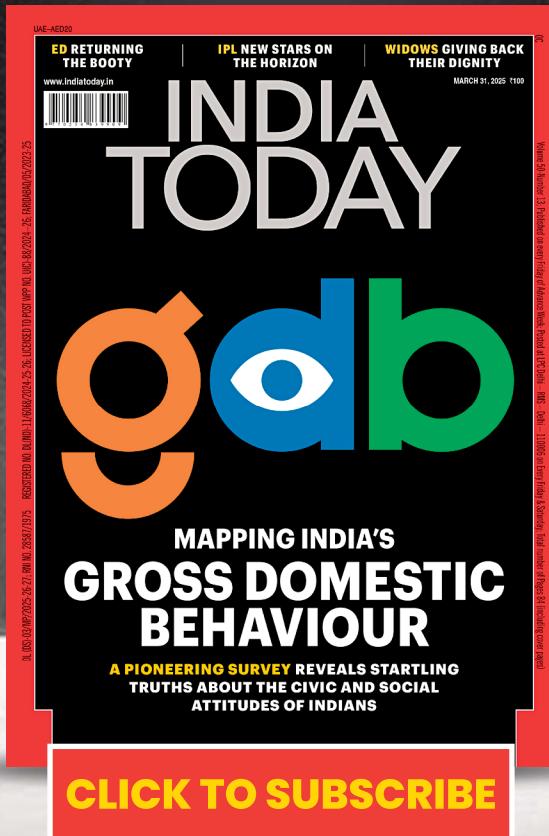
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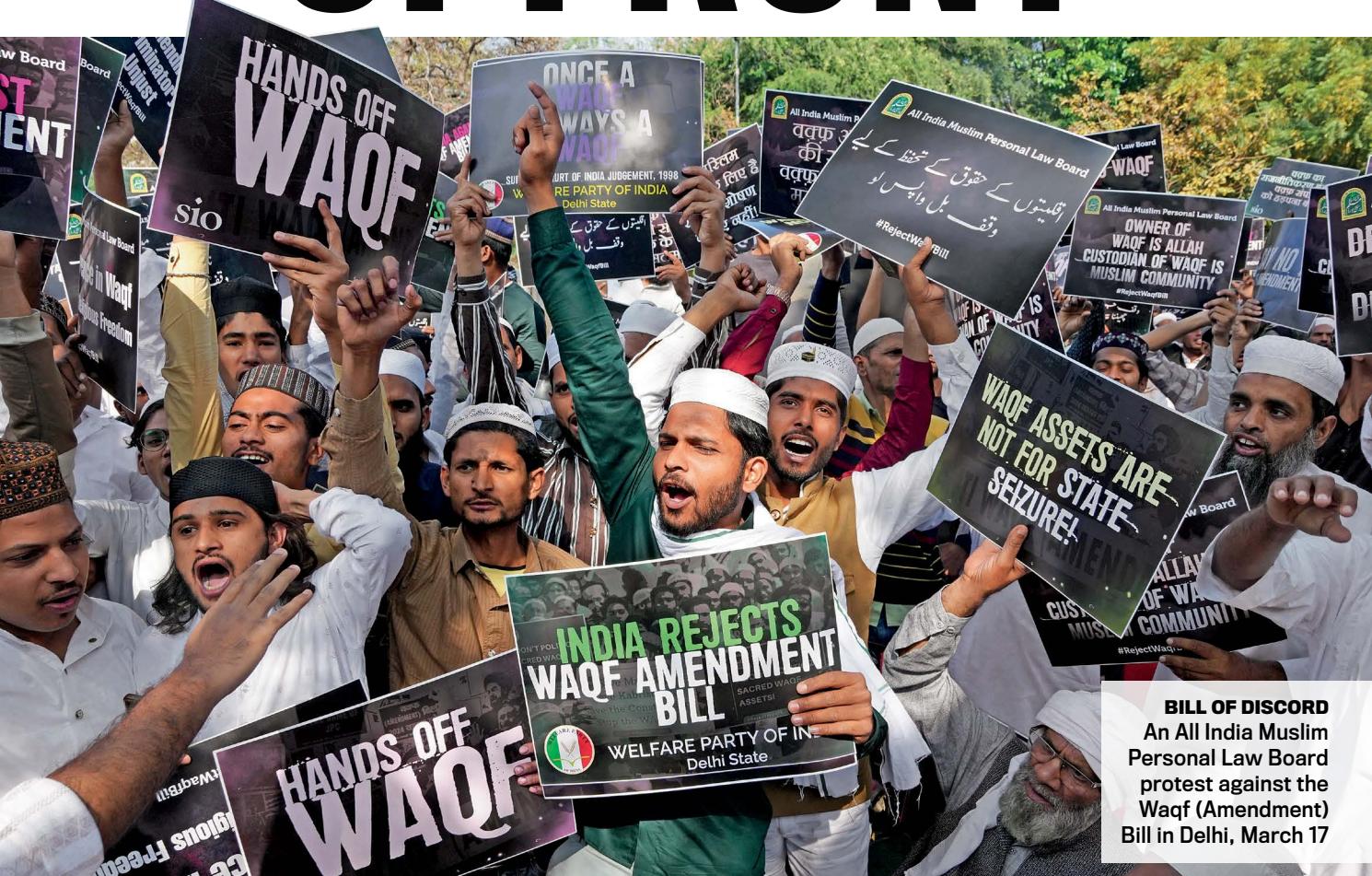


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MUSLIM PROPERTIES

BILL OF DISCORD
An All India Muslim Personal Law Board protest against the Waqf (Amendment) Bill in Delhi, March 17

WAR OVER WAQF

By Kaushik Deka

The passage of the Waqf (Amendment) Bill in Parliament this week signifies a watershed moment in the governance of religious endowments in India, fundamentally altering the administrative structure that has overseen Islamic charitable properties for decades. The legislation, now renamed the 'Unified Waqf Management, Empowerment, Efficiency and Development Act (UMEED), 1995,' has ignited

fierce debate about religious autonomy and property rights. For supporters, the amendments promise transparency and accountability; for critics, they threaten nothing less than state appropriation of religious heritage.

The reforms target longstanding challenges in waqf administration. Waqf boards, established as statutory bodies under the Waqf Act, administer these properties at the state level. Each board includes government nomi-

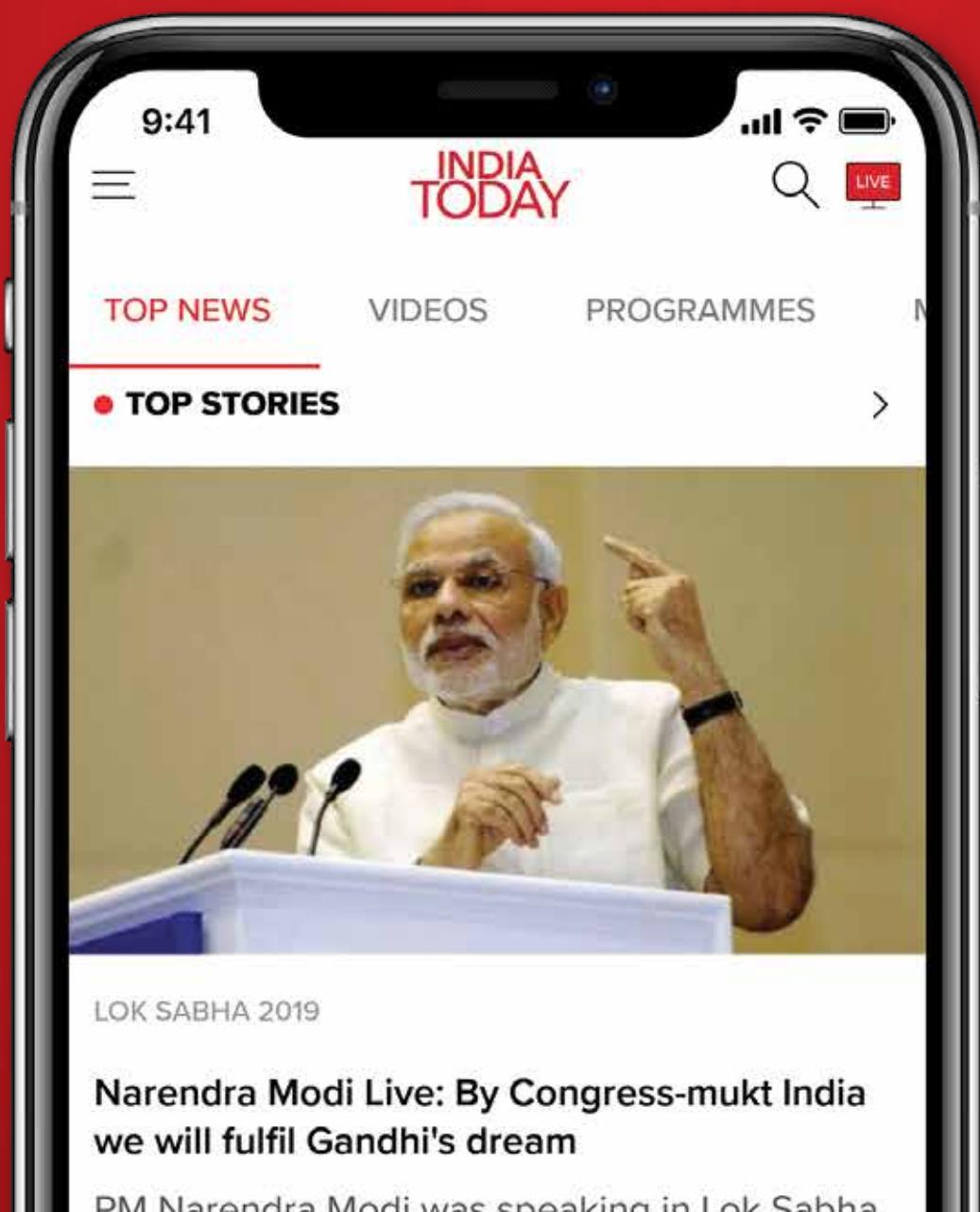
nees, Muslim legislators, Bar Council members, Islamic scholars and property managers. The Central Waqf Council, established in 1964, provides national oversight (see *What's Waqf?*).

However, encroachments remain a concern, with messy documentation problems across the country. Several states, including Gujarat and Uttarakhand, have not even begun surveying waqf properties; others like Uttar Pradesh continue to struggle with

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incomplete records years after surveys were ordered.

The bill's journey through Parliament reflected India's polarised political landscape. Opposition parties under the INDIA bloc unanimously rejected the legislation, arguing it violates constitutional guarantees of religious autonomy under Articles 25 and 26. The parliamentary process itself became contentious when Opposition members accused Joint Parliamentary Committee chairman Jagdambika Pal of "bulldozing" proceedings and removing their dissent notes without consent. Six Opposition MPs formally protested to the Lok Sabha Speaker, describing the committee's handling as "an atrocious onslaught on constitutional religion and Parliament".

Muslim organisations mobilised unprecedented opposition, with the All India Muslim Personal Law Board (AIMPLB) reportedly facilitating over 50 million emails to the committee. Their fundamental concern centred on the bill's elimination of "waqf by user"—a provision recognising properties as waqf based on long-term religious use rather than formal documentation. Many historic religious sites exist without formal deeds, instead relying on community recognition and continuous religious practice spanning generations. While the final legislation applies this change only prospectively, many fear that numerous properties without proper documentation remain vulnerable to competing claims.

The amendments substantially alter the institutional architecture of waqf governance (see *What has Changed?*). Two non-Muslim members will now serve on both central and state waqf boards, alongside representation from various Muslim communities including Shia, Sunni, Backward-class Muslims, Bohra and Agakhani. The legislation also strengthens women's representation, requiring at least two Muslim women on each board. However, critics question why similar religious diversity is not mandated in Hindu temple administrations, with AIMIM leader Asaduddin Owaisi asking, "If no non-Hindu

WHAT'S WAQF?

A waqf is established when an individual voluntarily dedicates property for religious, charitable or pious purposes in accordance with Islamic law. This dedication permanently transfers ownership from the individual to God, making the property inalienable and managed by an appointed supervisor (mutawalli). Waqf properties include mosques, prayer grounds, shrines, Sufi centres, graveyards, educational institutions and shelter homes. Waqf boards—statutory bodies under the Waqf Act—administer these properties at the state level. The Central Waqf Council, established in 1964, provides national oversight

872,000

No. of properties

Waqf boards manage, covering over 9.4 lakh acres

59,000

properties face encroachment

by private individuals, businesses and even government entities

30

waqf boards functioning across the country

₹12,000 cr.

Annual revenue

waqf properties could potentially generate. Actual collection is around Rs 200 crore (Sachar Committee Report, 2006)

WHAT HAS CHANGED?

The key changes that the amendments have brought in:

➤ Two non-Muslim members will now serve on both central and state waqf boards, alongside representation from various Muslim communities

➤ At least two Muslim women will be on each board

➤ Anyone creating a waqf needs to demonstrate five years of Islamic practice

➤ The authority to determine a waqf property is trans-

ferred from waqf boards to government officials above the district collector rank

➤ When disputes arise between government and waqf claims, the property will be presumed to belong to the former until the designated officer determines otherwise

➤ No requirement for a Muslim law expert on waqf tribunals; instead it would comprise a district court judge as chair-

man alongside a joint secretary from the state

➤ Tribunal decisions can now be appealed to the high court within 90 days

➤ The mandatory annual contribution from waqf institutions to boards reduced from 7 per cent to 5 per cent

➤ Institutions earning over Rs 1 lakh annually will now be audited by state government-appointed auditors

can become a member of Hindu endowment boards, then why are you making a non-Muslim one here?" Union home minister Amit Shah refuted claims that the inclusion of non-Muslims amounts to interference in Waqf matters. Their job, as he put it, is not to interfere in the religious matters of Muslims but to monitor whether its administration is running in conformity with the law, and whether the donations are being used for their intended purposes—i.e. for Islam,

for the development of the poor etc.

Significantly, the amendments transfer the authority to determine whether a property qualifies as waqf from waqf boards to government officials above the district collector rank. Under Section 40 of the 1995 Act, waqf boards had the power to decide whether a property was waqf or not, with their decisions final unless modified by a waqf tribunal. While affected parties could challenge the decision in a tribunal, the burden of proof

Electoral Expediency

By Amarnath K. Menon

was typically on the existing landowner, leading to allegations of overreach. The government highlighted several examples of disputed claims across states like Karnataka, Bihar, Kerala and Tamil Nadu, where entire villages or thousands of acres were unilaterally declared as waqf properties, creating hardships for non-Muslim landowners and farmers.

Union minister for parliamentary affairs and minority affairs Kiren Rijiju stated that Section 40 was being exploited by a small group for personal gain. "That is why waqf property increased by lakhs," he said. Under the new law, when disputes arise between government claims and waqf claims, the property will be presumed to belong to the government until the designated officer determines otherwise. This fundamental shift in decision-making power has fuelled accusations of state overreach into religious affairs.

Legal scholars highlight the amendment's removal of waqf boards' exemption from the Limitation Act. Previously, these boards could reclaim encroached properties regardless of time elapsed; now, they must file claims within the standard 12-year window—a change that may benefit long-term encroachers. Financial governance also receives substantial attention in the amendments. The mandatory annual contribution from waqf institutions to waqf boards has been reduced from 7 per cent to 5 per cent, allowing more funds to remain available for charitable purposes. Institutions earning over Rs 1 lakh annually must now undergo audits by state government-appointed auditors. The legislation also separates Muslim-created trusts from the definition of waqf, ensuring that trusts established under other laws aren't automatically considered waqf properties. For women, the amendments introduce stronger inheritance protections in family waqf arrangements, with special provisions for widows, divorced women and orphans.

The legislation has a digitisation timeline—all waqf properties are to be registered on a central portal within six months. As implementation begins, it will be plunged into a plethora of immediate challenges with properties that have complex or incomplete documentation. Legal challenges appear inevitable—the AIMPLB has already announced plans to contest the amendments in court. The Delhi High Court is already considering a challenge to the constitutional validity of the Waqf Act itself. Challenges notwithstanding, the government frames the amendments as necessary reforms addressing widespread mismanagement and corruption. ■

The bitter break-up from September 2023 is past, the BJP and the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) are coming together again in Tamil Nadu. The imperative: to try and dislodge the DMK-led Secular Progressive Alliance in the 2026 assembly election. BJP leader and Union home minister Amit Shah's March 25 meeting with AIADMK general secretary Edappadi K. Palaniswami (EPS) laid the contours for the tie-up. The hope is the NDA will be able to do what it did in Andhra Pradesh when the BJP aligned with the Telugu Desam Party and swept the poll last summer.

The two sides, though, will

have to get past the nastiness of the past one-and-a-half years. State BJP chief K. Annamalai's barbs about the late CM C.N. Annadurai, one of the founding fathers of the Dravidian movement, and his comments such as the AIADMK under EPS being a "betting agent party" will be hard to live down, so too the latter's comment about the saffron party being "waste luggage". But both sides know that it's a now-or-never situation with the DMK getting more entrenched by the day.

Signs of a possible rapprochement surfaced in recent weeks when Annamalai suddenly referred to Palaniswamy as "brother" in an interaction

WELCOME BACK Union home minister Amit Shah with AIADMK chief E.K. Palaniswami (right) in Chennai, Mar. 25



with the media. To a query on the BJP's stand on the AIADMK, he accused the media of twisting facts "contrary to what my brother Edappadi and I had actually said".

The alliance has a daunting task ahead. Electoral arithmetic, say analysts, suggests that it is a tough challenge unless they are able to get superstar Vijay's newly formed Tamilaga Vettri Kazhagam (TVK) on board. Indeed, the younger leadership in the AIADMK is for the party going with the TVK instead of the BJP considering the former's Dravidian leanings and, as of now, staunch opposition to the saffron party.

Vijay himself seems inclined to gauge how far his individual foray will take him. Current estimates are that the TVK may manage up to five per cent of the vote in his first assembly election—made up mostly by the youth and other members of his fan club—and that they could play spoiler for the Opposition. Vijay's reluctance to campaign till he completes a film that is still in the works could affect these numbers too.

The TVK joining the alliance also appears a difficult task as its demands will be stiff—at least a deputy CM post for the superstar and a specific number of seats. In all likelihood, the NDA will comprise the BJP, AIADMK, DMDK, PMK, Tamil Maanila Congress, Puthiya Tamizhagam and a few other small parties, with Palaniswami projected as the CM candidate. "The alliance will need a carefully balanced narrative, addressing regional concerns without compromising the BJP's broader national agenda if it is to be a winner," says B.V. Muralidhar of the department of political science, Sri Venkateswara University. The 2021 election showed the AIADMK's weakness without BJP support, and this time the party is determined to rebuild its rural base, especially among the Vanniyars and other castes who are traditionally their base.



CURRENT ESTIMATES SUGGEST THAT SUPERSTAR VIJAY'S TVK MAY MANAGE UP TO 5 PER CENT OF THE VOTE IN HIS FIRST ASSEMBLY ELECTION

Since 2019, the BJP-AIADMK alliance had floundered after Annamalai began targeting EPS and other leaders. The BJP was ready to risk the alliance, if only to test its own strength in the Lok Sabha polls of 2024. Together in 2019, and separately five years later, the two parties have learnt that the DMK alliance is too big to defeat if they contest separately. In the 2024 Lok Sabha election, which the DMK-led alliance swept, the BJP succeeded in increasing its vote share, while the AIADMK faced the ignominy of losing its deposit in seven constituencies—a

historic low for the party that has governed the state for 30 years.

For the AIADMK, especially EPS, it is a now-or-never battle. Having lost three elections in a row to the DMK, the former CM urgently needs to arrest further erosion in the party's vote and seat share. "Going by polling performances and vote share, there is little or no chance for the AIADMK to win in 2026 even in a three- or four-cornered contest," says political commentator N. Sathiya Moorthy. By reuniting with the BJP, the AIADMK might be opting for short-term gains to strengthen its position though it runs the risk of ceding some of its base to the national party. For the BJP, it opens up another opportunity to grow in the state which has largely proved unreceptive to its overtures so far.

DMK chief and CM M.K. Stalin will be concerned by the alliance firming up, and is already making the right anti-BJP noises, including over delimitation, the New Education Policy, with its opposition to the Waqf Amendment Bill and by reigniting the anti-Hindi sentiment that had first catapulted the party to power back in 1967. A matter of concern will be anti-incumbency. "While the DMK's welfare programmes have bolstered its appeal among marginalised groups, the widening unemployment crisis among the youth could push voters towards other alternatives," cautions Muralidhar.

As elections in the past have proved, the stronger the alliance with identified vote-shares of individual partners, greater are the chances of electoral success. Here, analysts say the DMK holds all the cards in a multi-cornered contest with its dedicated cadre. For the AIADMK and EPS, it's a desperate battle to avoid oblivion. As for the BJP, post-election there is no doubt that it will be in a better place in Tamil Nadu, whatever the outcome. ■

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TROUBLES MOUNT
Bhupesh Baghel outside
his Bhilai home, March 26

PTI

[CHHATTISGARH]

STORM AT BAGHEL'S DOOR

By **Rahul Noronha**

Former Chhattisgarh chief minister and Congress leader Bhupesh Baghel finds himself in the eye of a political storm, as two central agencies target him with investigations that have set Chhattisgarh's political temperature rising—despite elections still being far off.

First, on March 10, the Enforcement Directorate (ED) commenced searches at his premises in Durg, where Baghel and his son Chaitanya live, as well as at 13 other locations across the state. The searches were related to a case concerning what is known as the 'liquor scam'. The operation concluded later in the evening, with the ED not officially disclosing its findings. However, the visuals of ED staff bringing in a currency note-counting machine in the afternoon, followed by Baghel loyalists pelting

stones at ED personnel as they exited the premises, added to the drama.

A little more than two weeks later, on March 26, the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) came knocking in connection with its probe into the Mahadev betting scam. A total of 60 locations across Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Delhi and West Bengal were searched, in addition to the premises of three IPS officers—Anand Chhabra, Abhishek

VARIOUS THEORIES ARE CIRCULATING ABOUT THE TIMING OF THE SEARCHES, WITH SOME LINKING THEM TO THE UPCOMING BIHAR POLLS

Pallav and Arif Sheikh—and Baghel's two former OSDs (officers on special duty), including Saumya Chaurasia.

Both probes have been proceeding at the usual pace for years, so why is the heat being turned up on Baghel now? Various theories are circulating about the timing, with some linking them to the upcoming Bihar polls. Baghel hails from the Kurmi community, which has a sizeable vote base in Bihar and is also the community to which Bihar chief minister Nitish Kumar belongs.

What is the liquor scam, and what does the ED have on it so far? Similarly, what is the Mahadev betting racket, and why is the CBI investigating it? The ED claims that between 2019 and 2023, as much as Rs 2,161 crore was siphoned off through the sale of liquor, evading the payment of excise. To date, the ED has charged former IAS officer Anil Tuteja, legislator Lakhma, Indian Telecom Service officer Arun Pati Tripathi and Anwar Dhebar—brother of former Raipur mayor and Congress leader Ajaz Dhebar—among others. Lakhma, an MLA from the Bastar region, was arrested in January and is in jail, as are Anwar and Tuteja. The ED claims Lakhma received Rs 72 crore from the proceeds of the scam, which



देश का नं. 1 हिंदी न्यूज ऐप

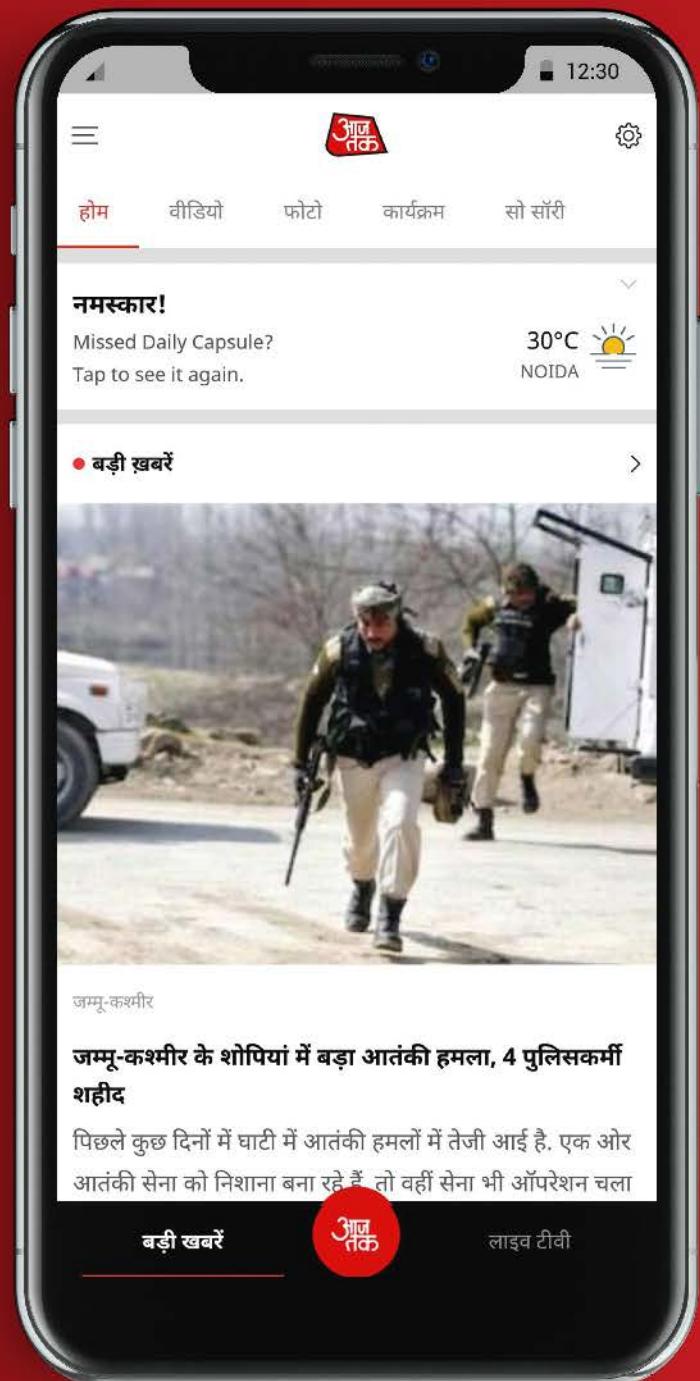
जुड़े रहिए हर खबर से,
कहीं भी, कभी भी

अभी डाउनलोड करें

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उपलब्ध है



he used to build the party office and his son's residence. Tripathi has secured conditional bail, effective at a later date.

On the evening of March 10, after the ED sleuths had left, Baghel told the media that the agency had found Rs 33 lakh in cash, which they took with them. He stated that his family owns 140 acres of land, where they practise modern agriculture and that the money would be accounted for. He then added a twist, claiming the ED had found a pen drive containing incriminating conversations between BJP ex-CM Raman Singh's son-in-law, Dr Punit Gupta, and one Manturam. He said the ED had confiscated other evidence of corruption related to Raman, but did not take those papers.

The CBI's case in the Mahadev scam involves probing the payment of protection money to sustain the racket. The Mahadev app, an online betting platform, has been operational for several years, its promoters being Saurabh Chandra-kar and Ravi Uppal, originally from Bhilai town but now reportedly based in Dubai. The CBI claims it has incriminating digital and documentary evidence linking government and public servants to the payment of protection money in what is estimated to be a Rs 6,000 crore scam. "Just when Bhupesh Baghel was appointed general secretary in charge of Punjab and took a meeting there, the ED landed up. Two weeks later, when he raised the issue of corruption in ration supply in the assembly, the CBI landed up. This shows the BJP's frustration," says Congress spokesperson Sushil Anand Shukla.

Investigative agencies are covering a gamut of allegations against leaders and officials from the previous Congress regime. "I have listed the money trail in the liquor scam and the Mahadev betting racket, besides also sending detailed letters of the modus operandi in scams pertaining to PSC recruitment, medical supplies and the DMF (District Mineral Foundation) matter," says senior lawyer and BJP state office in-charge Naresh Gupta. "The recoveries from the search are the subject matter of investigation. (They are) being analysed and the findings will be the basis for further questioning," says special public prosecutor of the ED, Saurabh Pandey. With the powder dry on both sides, the political storm is far from over. ■

THE CHARM OFFENSIVE

By Arkamoy Datta Majumdar

Mamata Banerjee arrived in London on March 23, her flight 10 hours behind schedule. Undeterred, the West Bengal chief minister was in Hyde Park next morning, fitting in her signature morning exercises before embarking on her packed six-day itinerary. She met business leaders to pitch her state as an investment destination, pushed for the revival of a Kolkata-London direct flight and attended a reception hosted by India's high commissioner. The centrepiece of her visit was a speech at Oxford's Kellogg College. It was not the usual pugnacity on show. Instead, a softer elocution flowed—keywords like "women-focused initiatives", and its Bengal exemplar, "Kanyakshree".

For her supporters, it was a triumphant tour. A Trinamool Congress (TMC) MLA, eager to dramatise its significance, compared it to Sourav Ganguly's famous celebration at Lord's after India's 2002 NatWest Trophy win. The leader, who wished to remain anonymous, claimed that, for many Bengalis, Didi's visit—where she supposedly "won the hearts of the people she encountered"—would be as iconic an image of a Bengali "creating history" as that of an exultant Ganguly waving his jersey above his head.

That may have actually misrepresented the nature of her win. The visit largely hit

the right chords, barring a few hiccups. It allowed Mamata to position herself as a formidable national figure in Indian politics, just as state elections loom next year. Kunal Ghosh, a journalist-turned-TMC leader who accompanied her, claimed the trip was a success. "Industrialists from Bengal who were part of our delegation, as well as representatives of British companies with operations in the state, acknowledged that the problem of labour unrest has been eliminated—there are no lost man-days. Most importantly, the chief minister is just a WhatsApp message away, and if her office is informed of an issue, they ensure swift resolution."

A standout moment was Mamata's reception at the Indian high commission. Earlier, the Union ministry of

“INDUSTRIALISTS FROM BENGAL AS WELL AS REPRESENTATIVES OF BRITISH COMPANIES WITH OPERATIONS IN THE STATE ACKNOWLEDGED THAT THE PROBLEM OF LABOUR UNREST HAS BEEN ELIMINATED”

KUNAL GHOSH

TMC leader and journalist



BENGAL ABROAD CM
Mamata Banerjee in
London, March 24

ed Students' Federation of India protested her presence, raising concerns about political violence, women's safety and campus elections in Bengal. Mamata dismissed them, urging them to strengthen their party in the state instead. Protesters also raised concerns about attacks on Hindus, which she sidestepped. BJP's Amit Malviya criticised Mamata, accusing her of failing to protect Hindus and women. He also condemned her disagreement with India's projected economic rise. Mamata responded with sarcasm and tact, asserting that the protesters were disrespecting their institution rather than confronting her. "Mamatadi didn't lose her cool at all. She even wanted the protesters to continue because she believes in their democratic right to protest, but it was the general public who drove them out," Ghosh, who was present at the event, remarks.

X@AITCOFFICIAL

external affairs had denied her permission to travel abroad on multiple occasions. In 2021, her trip to Rome was cancelled after her approval was withheld. However, her warm welcome in London by the high commissioner marked a stark shift in stance. A post on Mamata's official X handle acknowledged it in genteel diplomaticese, saying, "it was a privilege to be hosted by Shri Vikram K. Doraiswami at India House, London, for a high tea reception. The gather-

ing brought together a diverse spectrum of voices united in their commitment to strengthening Bengal-Britain ties. As we navigate a changing world, meaningful partnerships driven by trust are more vital than ever." Images from the event portrayed the bonhomie. She presented Doraiswami with one of her books and paintings, while the envoy also attended her business meetings the following day. "The stance our foreign office has taken regard-

ing her visit this time is a complete reversal of its previous approach," a TMC source notes. "There could be a couple of reasons for this. First, Bengal is now among the Indian states that can be promoted as an investment destination abroad. Second, Didi's political influence at home has grown considerably in recent years."

Not everything went smoothly though. At Kellogg College, left-wing student activists from the UK wing of the CPI(M)-affiliat-

MOHAN YADAV'S BIG GREEN PUSH

By Rahul Noronha

On March 13, the Madhya Pradesh State Wildlife Advisory Board approved the creation of a 614 sq. km Omkareshwar sanctuary spread across Dewas and Khandwa districts—marking the state's first major Protected Area (PA) expansion in nearly 45 years. Unlike his predecessors, Chief Minister Mohan Yadav has actively pursued conservation, previously announcing two new tiger reserves, Ratapani and Madhav, with at least three more sanctuaries besides crucial wildlife corridors in the pipeline.

Madhya Pradesh currently leads the country with nine tiger reserves, and also has 25 wildlife sanctuaries and 11 national parks covering 11,200 sq. km, or 12 per cent of the state's forest area. However, most of these were established in the 1980s, largely driven by then prime minister Indira Gandhi's conservation focus. Since then, PA expansion has slowed, with only small additions in recent decades.

In 2019, the then state forest minister, Umang Singh of the Congress, proposed 10 new sanctuaries spanning 15,000 sq. km to bolster tiger corridors, but faced resistance even from his own party legislators. The opposition stemmed from concerns that PA designations restrict land sales, alter land-use rights and limit access to forest resources under the Wild Life (Protection) Act, 1972. "The moment communities oppose

the creation of a PA, politicians also join in. It is incumbent on the forest department then to convince the community to support the creation of a sanctuary or national park by highlighting the benefits that can be derived from them," says J.S. Chauhan, former chief wildlife warden, Madhya Pradesh.

So, how has Mohan Yadav succeeded where others hesitated? The Omkareshwar sanctuary's origins date back to 1987 when the Union government mandated its creation as ecological compensation for the Sardar Sarovar and Indira Sagar dam projects. The proposal languished for decades, repeatedly stalled by political and bureaucratic hurdles. Yadav, who hails from western MP, saw the sanctuary as a catalyst for tourism and wildlife conservation in a region lacking such reserves. To make the project viable, say top sources, the administration redrew boundaries, excluding 10 villages besides 117 hectares of water bodies to safeguard fishing rights. Additional land reductions accommodated dam construction and infrastructure projects.

"Conservation and development have to move ahead simultaneously," says Yadav. "The proposed Omkareshwar sanctuary will not just be a safe habitat [for tigers] in western MP but also emerge as a tourism destination given the availability of water and heritage in the form of Omkareshwar temple." For a state with the highest tiger population in India, it's crucial that Yadav maintains this conservation momentum. ▀

WILDLIFE BOON



► Spread over 614 sq. km, Omkareshwar is to become MP's 26th wildlife sanctuary

► The biggest addition to the state's Protected Areas in nearly 45 years, it will give a big boost to tiger conservation efforts in western MP

► Located in a region rich in water resources and close to the revered Omkareshwar temple, it also has huge tourism potential, according to CM Mohan Yadav



UPFRONT

By Jeemon Jacob

In the past few years, Malayalam cinema has been basking in the praise for its treatment of unusual subjects and themes, but even the big kahunas there probably didn't see this one coming. *Empuraan* (Overlord), a Rs 180 crore 'mega action thriller' that released on March 27, has kicked off so much political controversy that less than a week after release, the creators themselves 'offered' to make cuts to smooth things out.

It all started with a superheated online campaign by the right-wing voices who were livid over the movie portraying the ruling BJP government as being responsible for the 2002 Gujarat riots. RSS mouthpiece *Organiser* singled out the film's actor-director-producer Prithviraj for their attack, saying he was the 'voice of the anti-nationals' and labelled the film 'anti-Bharat and anti-Hindu'. Other minor players like Major Ravi, a BJP state vice-president and filmmaker who claimed the Indian Army was upset with the film, predicted that superstar Mohanlal, who plays the lead role, would offer an apology as he was "unaware of the divisive content of the film".

Right on cue, Mohanlal offered an unconditional apology in an FB post the next day (March 30), saying he sincerely "regretted the mental pain caused to my loved ones...and with the realisation that the responsibility lies with all of us who worked behind



DOUBLE TROUBLE
Mohanlal (left) and
Prithviraj in
a still from
Empuraan

[EMPURAAN CONTROVERSY]

KERALA'S REEL LIFE HAZARDS

the film, we have decided together to compulsorily remove such parts from the movie". Director Prithviraj shared the post without comment while scriptwriter Murali Gopy preferred to mute his responses.

But, by then, all sides were firing away. The Congress berated the BJP for arm-twisting the filmmakers and trying to "suppress a world-class Malayalam movie" while they had given "tax-free status to a C-grade propaganda film like *The Kerala Story*". The Left, in turn, turned champion of "artists' rights", with even Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan and his wife Kamala rushing to watch the film on March 30 before it was pulled and the 're-censored' version was put out.

Veteran journalist Jose Kavi told INDIA TODAY that he had watched *Empuraan* on the day it released and "would watch it again to see which

scenes were deleted. It has never happened in Kerala...producers bowing down to fundamentalists".

Former CPI(M) member of Parliament and social commentator Sebastian Paul, though, views the entire drama as a "marketing strategy". "Did anyone demand the re-censorship? The producers voluntarily deleted some portions, and the lead actor, who is also a co-producer, offered an unconditional apology for stating facts 'as it hurt his loved ones' who are pro-RSS. If he was so full of regret, he should

THE SANGH'S OUTRAGE OVER THE 'ANTI-NATIONAL CONTENT' HAS BEEN MATCHED BY THE OPPOSITION'S DEFENCE OF THE FILM

have withdrawn the film and offered an apology to save his name," says Paul. According to him, both Mohanlal and co-producer Gokulam Gopalan wanted to keep the "RSS and BJP bosses in good humour for business gains". He alleges the film worked so well that it also got the support of the Left government while director Prithviraj has been left holding the bag.

But even after 24 cuts and an apology, *Empuraan*, a sequel to the 2019 monster hit *Lucifer*, continues to court controversy. A section of Tamil Nadu farmers are the latest to take umbrage, apparently over an alleged defamatory portrayal of the Mullaperiyar dam issue.

In all this, what has become evident is that the film fraternity is not a worthy ally on any side. Mohanlal was earlier thought to sway on the pro-saffron side while keeping good relations with the Left and Congress leaders in the state. Prithvi's mother and veteran actress Malika Sukumaran had been vocal for Prime Minister Narendra Modi in the last Lok Sabha election and publicly supported Rajeev Chandrasekhar for the Thiruvananthapuram Lok Sabha seat. She's now in a tit-for-tat daily scrimmage with the state BJP leaders for targeting her son and his family. Murali Gopy had scripted 'anti-Left' films earlier and was considered "soft on Hindutva". A BJP source bitterly says they now "realise there are few permanent allies" for the party in Kerala.

Meanwhile, the anti-*Empuraan* campaign has helped the ruling Left Front government in Kerala by diverting attention from the striking ASHA workers issue, which had been hogging the headlines. The film's producers won't be complaining too much either: *Empuraan* has collected Rs 250 crore worldwide till April 3 and, despite what one newspaper critic called an 'identity crisis...and a confused mess of a script', is still screening in some 750 halls to packed audiences. ■



GLASSHOUSE

UNOFFICIALLY OFFICIAL

Nearly six months and two assembly sessions are over since the new Haryana government took over, but the state Congress still seems to be in such shock over its poll defeat that it has yet to elect a legislative leader. The 77-year-old ex-CM, **Bhupinder Singh Hooda**, has been shouldering the responsibility till now, bearing the regular taunts of the ruling BJP, including from CM Nayab Saini, about his “unofficial” status. Following back-to-back defeats in three assembly elections and two Lok Sabha contests, a team of senior Congress leaders—Ashok Gehlot, Partap Singh Bajwa, and Ajay Maken—was sent as observers to the state. Their report is with the party high command but no decision has been taken on the leader of the Opposition. For, the Haryana Congress is a divided house, with Hooda loyalists in one corner and his detractors in another.

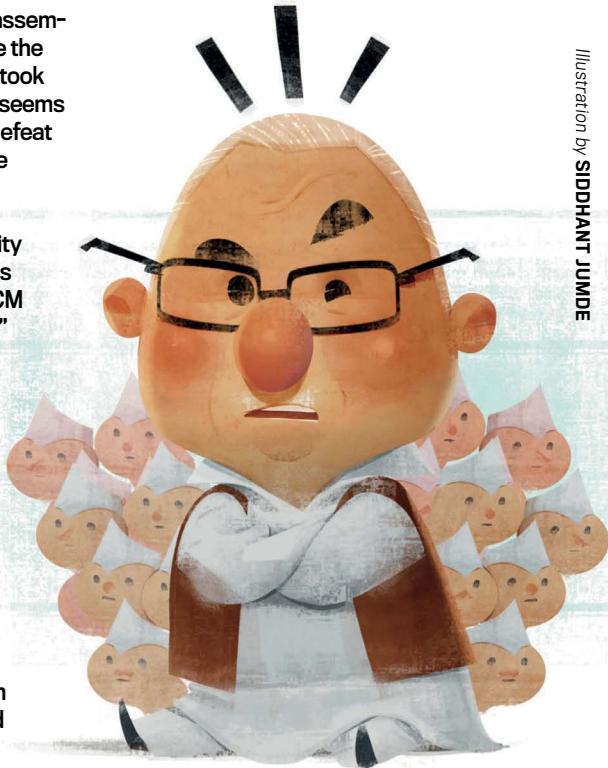


Illustration by SIDDHANT JUMDE

INSIDER QUESTION



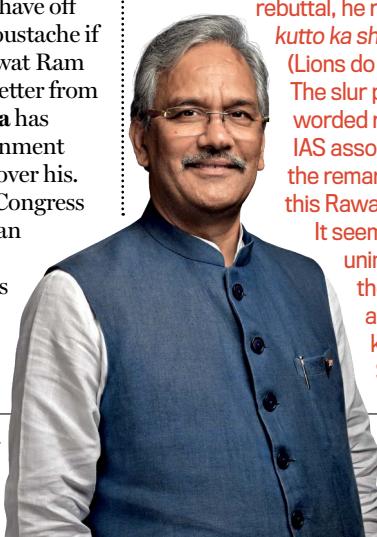
The BJP reclaimed the Khinwsar assembly seat—long dominated by Hanuman Beniwal’s Rashtriya Loktantrik Party—in Rajasthan’s Jat belt after 20 years in a November 2024 bypoll, helped along by a dramatic vow by health minister Gajendra Singh Khimsar that he’d shave off his Rajput pride moustache if party candidate Rewat Ram Danga lost. Now a letter from Danga to CM **Bhajan Lal Sharma** has surfaced, accusing his own government of favouring Beniwal’s demands over his. BJP state vice-president and ex-Congress leader **Jyoti Mirdha** has blamed an “insider” for the leak (hinting at Khimsar). In response, Khimsar’s son Dhananjay tweeted that a “female newcomer leader” must learn the BJP’s discipline.

Digging up a Storm

Haridwar MP and ex-Uttarakhand CM **Trivendra Singh Rawat** possibly thought he was making a bold point, but he has lit a fuse under his own BJP state government with the illegal mining allegations in the Lok Sabha. The state government tried to douse the flames with a video of mining secretary Brijesh Sant (a Dalit IAS officer) denying Rawat’s charges, but the latter isn’t backing down. Asked about Sant’s rebuttal, he responded, “Sher kutto ka shikaar nahin karte (Lions do not hunt dogs).”

The slur prompted a strongly worded reply by the state IAS association condemning the remark. But what ignited this Rawat tirade, you ask?

It seems babus are the unintended casualty in the tussle between him and current Uttarakhand CM Pushkar Singh Dhami.



Wake up and Smell the...

On March 25, an initiative to introduce MPs to the fruity, floral notes of Araku Coffee turned bitter for all concerned. The launch function at the Parliament complex apparently forgot to invite Araku MP **Gumma Tanuja Rani**. The GI-tagged organic coffee, cultivated by some 150,000 tribal farmers in Andhra Pradesh’s Araku Valley, was hailed by Union commerce minister Piyush Goyal as “a tribal treasure”, but that didn’t quite cut it with the MP who questioned whether she was left out because she was a tribal or a YSRCP member.



Hyperlocal Pitch

BJP MLA Amit Thaker (centre in pix) from Gujarat’s Vejalpur is taking the party’s ‘Viksit Bharat’ mission to new levels. He recently hosted the second edition of a start-up festival tailored for his assembly constituency in Ahmedabad. While many in the BJP were sceptical about replicating such large-scale events at a micro level, praise from CM Bhupendra Patel and Union commerce minister **Piyush Goyal** has turned heads. The event saw some 1,000 local start-ups, and featured pitching sessions, investor meets and mentorship programmes.

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AN UGLY PREJUDICE

THE 'DARK VERSUS FAIR' DEBATE REIGNITES, EXPOSING THE PERSISTENT BIAS AGAINST DARKER SKIN AMONG INDIANS

By MANISHA SAROOP, JUMANA SHAH & SONALI ACHARJEE

Illustration by NILANJAN DAS / AI

COLOUR OF DISCRIMINATION

Sarada Muraleedharan, who succeeded her husband V. Venu as the Chief Secretary of Kerala, recently found herself at the receiving end of a sexist, colourist remark, provoking her to take to Facebook to call out the injustice. Excerpts from her post...

“ Heard an interesting comment yesterday on my stewardship as chief secretary – that it is as black as my husband's was white. Hmm. I need to own my blackness”

“Why did I want to call this particular one out? It was about being labelled black (with that quiet subtext of being woman)”

“ Why should black be vilified? Black is the all-pervasive truth of the universe. Black is that which can absorb anything, the most powerful pulse of energy known to humankind. It is the colour that works on everyone, the dress code for office, the lustre of evening wear, the essence of kajol, the promise of rain”



H RAJENDRAN

“As a four year old I apparently asked my mother whether she could put me back in her womb and bring me out again, all white and pretty”

IN

21st century India, it does not matter that you are a woman who has broken the glass ceiling. Just a stray, unfeeling comment can transport you back to a place of insecurity that you thought you had left far behind. A time when the darker shade of your skin put you in the shadows, unseen, unheard and unwanted. Sarada Muralidharan was in that place recently. Courtesy a careless remark thrown at her about her tenure as Kerala chief secretary being as black as her husband's was white, the black labelling bearing "the quiet subtext of being a woman". Long inured to the casual colourism she had encountered all her life, Sarada decided to "call this one out" on a Facebook post simply because of the speaker's implied equivalence of black with "the ne'er do good, black the malaise, the cold despotism, the heart of darkness".

The eloquent post reopened an old wound as it were and reignited the debate about the ugly, unfair prejudice Indians continue to harbour against someone dark of skin. A whole sea of condemnation erupted on mainstream and social media in response to Sarada's post, with hashtags like #Unfair&Lovely beginning to trend widely, challenging the norm, and celebrating darker skin tones. The actress Kani Kusruti, who left a lasting impression with her performance in Payal Kapadia's *All We Imagine as Light*, the first Indian film to win a Grand Prix award at Cannes, wrote an impassioned column in a leading daily, talking of how, even as a child, her relatives asked her to wear only light-coloured clothes because "if you wear black or any other dark shade, we can't see you". There is a hierarchy of colour, she went on to

Photographs by HARDIK CHHABRA



NANDITA DAS | 55 |
Actress and director

"Why describe me by the colour of my skin?"

When I am written about, I am often described as 'dark and dusky'. I don't object at all. I am all for calling a spade a spade. In fact, dark doesn't need to be even softened to dusky! All I wonder is why there is a need to describe me through the colour of my skin, as I hope there is more to me! Or is it simply because it is rather rare

for a female actor to be dark and therefore it becomes imperative to make a point about it.

Any person's complexion is only one of their many features or characteristics and therefore to give it undue importance would be to do injustice to the person. That's all.



MASABA GUPTA | 35 |

Entrepreneur

“People say *kaali* as a way to put you down”

It happened to me, where somebody coming for my prenatal [massage] said that you must eat a rasgulla every day, because your kid has to turn out lighter than you. Certain things are not politically correct to say but they will still be spoken of.... You will be shocked at how many educated,

wealthy, well read and well educated people also feel this way.

The number of times people think calling someone *kaali* (dark) is a way of putting them down, I find that just so absurd. And I am witness to it till today.

(in an interview to Faye D'Souza on YouTube)



GETTY IMAGES

KANI KUSRUTI | 39 |

Actress

“There is a hierarchy of colour, and of beauty”

It is understood by everyone even today, but especially women and girls, that there is a hierarchy of colour, and therefore of beauty. So deeply is this colourism embedded in our consciousness that upon entering any room, an automatic appraisal kicks in: Am I the darkest person in this room? Am I the fairest? Or am I some-

where in the middle?

.....
There is an acknowledgement today of colourism in our society, and I do come across people who say that darker skin tones are beautiful. But is this mere political correctness or do they truly appreciate beauty in all its diversity?

(excerpts from a column in The Indian Express)

add, especially for women and girls, and therefore of beauty. Model-actress Poulomi Das recounted how she was on the verge of bagging a lead role in a television show only to learn that the channel rejected her on grounds of skin colour.

Ironically, five years ago, Das was the face of Glow & Lovely, the new name for India's most famous skin-whitening cream brand, after worldwide protests, including the #BlackLivesMatter movement, saw Hindustan Unilever replace the word 'fair' with 'glow' in 2020. That change proved to be, well, cosmetic. The skin lightening business is a booming one in India, worth \$1.3-1.5 billion (Rs 11,100-12,800 crore) currently, with a projected compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of around 6.5-7.2 per cent over the next decade, according to a report on the subject by the Pune-based market research firm Future Market Insights. Fairness continues to be the ideal of beauty, with few dark-skinned role models in mainstream media or Hindi films, while social media is replete with visual representations of fairness as a marker of success and happiness.

Meanwhile, despite growing awareness, matrimonial advertisements continue to exhibit a preference for "light-skinned" brides. A 2018 survey of such ads showed that over 60 per cent of the men wanted fair-skinned women. "Women's bodies are their currency in the marriage market. For a dark-skinned man who is doing well financially, marrying a light-skinned normatively beautiful woman can be a trophy to further signal his status and power," says Radhika Parameswaran, professor at The Media School, Indiana University, US, who has done extensive research on colourism in India. "And as is the case in many different countries where physical appearance becomes an insidious factor in workplace success and mobility, it is not surprising that Indians, and especially women, worry that all things



THE SCIENCE OF SKIN

Or how homo sapiens got their skin colour

➤ Studies indicate that we were all born black two million years ago. Out of the jungle, it's because the body produced melanin to protect skin against sunlight that the species survived

➤ Among migrants to the northern

latitudes, positive selection favoured those with reduced melanin levels: to get Vitamin D in scarce sunlight

➤ Modern humans derive their colour from the melanocortin 1 receptor or MC1R gene

➤ The colour of

our skin is derived from our biological parents. Our melanocytes produce two types of melanin—eumelanin, a pigment that is responsible for darker skin tones and hair colours, and pheomelanin, which gives lighter skin tones and red hair

CASE STUDY**POULOMI DAS | 29 | Model-actress**

“Women’s empowerment on TV is garbage”

Two months ago, Poulomi Das was on the verge of bagging a lead role in a TV show only to learn that the channel rejected her on grounds of her skin colour. “I got to know from friends at the channel that they didn’t take me because ‘she is too dark, she should look like an MD’ (Managing Director),” Poulomi recounts. “These channels which show women empowerment, they are bullsh***ing. If you look into their minds, it’s full

of garbage and outdated ideas. In India, none of us is white. It’s 200 years of British colonisation and the prejudiced mindset which still persists.”

Naysayers and bullies don’t deter Poulomi who proudly goes as ‘The Brown Queen’ on Instagram. She has learned to give it back to colourists, be it on Bigg Boss OTT (2024), where a fellow contestant made a derogatory remark on her complexion, or online trolls. “They can’t tamp down my aura

“They can’t tamp down my aura because they think I am not good enough”

because they think I am not good enough. When they said you don’t look like a lead, I was like ‘In my life story, I am the lead,’ she says, having appeared in shows like Suhani Si Ek Ladki and Kartik Purnima.

In 2020–21, Poulomi would become the face of Hindustan Lever’s

Glow & Lovely, a feat she’s proud of since it involved the brand changing its strategy from being a fairness to a BB cream. “If they are owning their mistake and changing their motive and doing justice to my skin tone, then why shouldn’t I support them? We all need to evolve,” she says. Enjoying a vacation in Kerala, she says she was going to come back 10 times darker than she is. “I’m loving it.”

—Suhani Singh

being equal, a light-skinned person could end up being favoured for work opportunities.”

INDIANS AND COLOURISM

Colourism, a term coined by the celebrated Black writer Alice Walker in 1982 to describe the prejudicial or preferential treatment meted out to people of the same race on the basis of colour, is an open secret in our country. Some scholars like Dr Vivek Kumar, a sociologist at the School of Social Sciences in Jawaharlal Nehru University in Delhi, trace its origin to when the first fair-skinned Indo-Aryans encountered the dark-skinned Dravidians, original inhabitants of the land, and then began to rule over the people and designated themselves as nobility. “Racial theory was constructed in sociological terms with the advent of the Aryans,” says Kumar. He, however, stops short of attributing colour discrimination to the caste



“Women’s bodies are their currency in the marriage market. For a dark-skinned man who is doing well financially, marrying a light-skinned woman is a trophy”

RADHIKA PARAMESWARAN, Professor,
The Media School, Indiana University, US

system, saying it was in its infancy when skin colour began to be assigned value. It was organised more around the professions individuals practised than by birth, and became hereditary only much later, he hypothesises.

Kumar instead attributes the modern-day obsession with skin colour to the colonialists—the Portuguese, the French, the Dutch and, eventually, the British, who stayed the longest. “Our gods—Vishnu, Shiva, Ram, Krishna—are all portrayed as dark-skinned. Draupadi—the beauti-

ful queen of the Mahabharata—is explicitly dark-skinned,” he says. “The association of beauty and aspiration with white skin is a gift of European colonial rulers.” British ethnographer Herbert Hope Risley, in fact, classified Indians into broad racial types in 1915, identifying Dravidians as dark-complexioned and the Indo-Aryans as fairer. This classification hewed close to India’s own colour associations with caste, wherein Brahmins were regarded to be generally fair-skinned and lower castes and tribals believed

to have darker skin, ideas that have survived well into the modern age.

By the time the British left, colourism had taken firm root in the Indian psyche. Women came to bear a disproportionate brunt of this unfair burden, as caste, patriarchy and economic status colluded to bestow a sense of inferiority on the less fair. Dark skin was seen as an abomination, from the time relatives in a family set eyes upon a child born dark. Names like Kali or Kaalia were perhaps as common and accepted as euphemisms like Shyam or Shyamolie. Taunts followed into childhood, none more familiar than “*Kaali kaluti, baingan looti*”, the colour purple, robbed off an aubergine. The prejudice was perpetuated in school and college, not just by other children but often even by the teachers. Worse was the “internalised racism”, or, as Parameswaran says, “people at the receiving end of such discrimination turning around and denigrating

those with darker skins”. There would be solicitous advice to use home-made remedies such as a *haldi-malai ubatan* or off-the-shelf salves like Vicco Turmeric or Fair & Lovely that promised to make the skin colour lighter.

A 2023 study by researchers at the Institute of Cognitive Science, Osnabrück University, Germany, on colourism in the Indian subcontinent, confirmed these trends. It concluded that the “various skin colour discriminating structures from birth and in all social settings invade the minds of anybody involved and thus structure the ways through which people affectively experience themselves and others. They work as affective scaffolds and tools that lead people to internalise norms and values that conform to superior-inferior parameters of the colour hierarchy. Eventually, people develop an orientation which prefers whiteness against their own best interests.”



“Our gods—Vishnu, Shiva, Ram, Krishna—are all portrayed as dark-skinned. The association of beauty and aspiration with white skin is a gift of European colonial rulers”

DR VIVEK KUMAR
Professor of Sociology, JNU

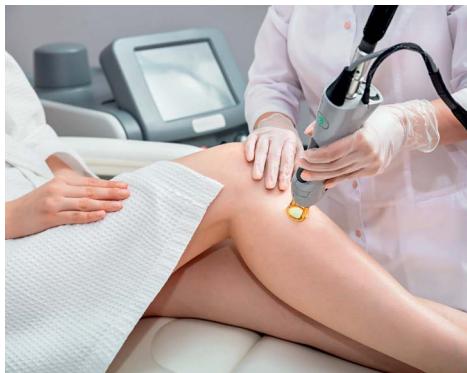
THE BEAUTY BAZAAR

The Indian skin lightening market is worth Rs 11,100-12,800 crore today. Here are some of the products that are behind the beauty boom

■ HELIOS LASER TREATMENT

It involves targeting and breaking down pigment clusters, particularly melanin, to reduce the appearance of dark spots and making the skin tone even

Cost: Rs 4,000 to Rs 35,000 per session



■ GLUTATHIONE INJECTIONS

A naturally occurring antioxidant in the body, a dose of glutathione helps reduce melanin production and hyperpigmentation, thus making skin tone lighter

Cost: Rs 10,000 to Rs 40,000 per shot

■ GLYCOLIC PEELS

These use a variety of acids to break down dark spots. However, the results are variable and not as long-lasting as other treatments

Cost: Rs 900 upwards



■ FACIALS/ BLEACH

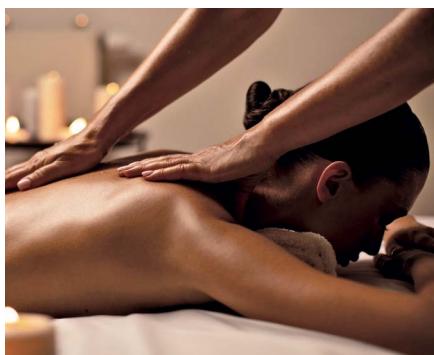
The facials could either be lab-made (glycolic acid, kojic acid, niacinamide) or use natural chemicals (haldi, soy, licorice extract) to ‘bleach’ the skin to a lighter tone. Some facials even use the blood from your own body to boost collagen and cell growth, promising lighter, younger skin

Cost: Varies

THE CONSEQUENCES OF COLOURISM

Little wonder, entire generations of young children grow up believing they are not good enough because of the colour of their skin, buying into the narrative whole-heartedly. Everywhere they look—on cinema screens, covers of magazines, advertisements—they have fair faces staring back at them. Hema Malini, Shabana Azmi, Rekha or Smita Patil were the exceptions, not the rule. The Hindi film hero serenaded the fair maiden with songs that went ‘*Yeh kaali kaali aankhein, yeh gore gore gaal*’ (these black eyes, fair cheeks) or ‘*Gore gore mukhde pe kala kala chashma*’ (dark glasses on a fair face). If there was any consolation, it was in the words ‘*Hum kaale hain toh kya hua, dilwale hain*’ (so what if we are dark, we are big of heart). It was in the world of ramp modelling that dusky beauty found

MANJAR DEODHAR



■ BODY POLISHING

Certain products promise lighter skin by scrubbing out deep-seated grime and dirt from the skin pores

Cost: Rs 900 upwards

■ CREAMS

Common ingredients in bleaching creams include hydroquinone, kojic acid and certain corticosteroids. These work to suppress the production of melanin in the skin

Cost: Varies

Photographs: Shutterstock



CASE STUDY

SNIGDHA NAIR | 25 | Assistant film director

“WHEN KICKED OUT OF DANCE GROUP, I THOUGHT I WAS UGLY”

She was just two and a half years old when she had come home from play-school and put her hand next to her mother's and pronounced: “Kikka (Snigdha's pet name) kaali, mama gori”—I'm black, mamma is fair. “My mother was heartbroken,” she recalls, “and went to the nursery that very day to ask what was said in school.” For Snigdha, the episode demonstrates how discrimination against dark skin begins early, even before a child can string a sentence together.

In school, she'd be called “kaali saand” (black bull), and in Class 10 she would find herself kicked out of the dance group because her complexion did not suit the composition of the

rest of the group. “That's when it struck me hard, that may be I'm ugly,” recounts Snigdha. By the time Covid-19 kicked in, holed up at home, her insecurities peaked to a degree that she began seeking brightening products to “fix” herself. The experience compelled her to shoot a short titled ‘You’, documenting the melancholia of a young insecure woman.

Now a part of the film industry, Snigdha says it's routine to see “fair-skinned” as a requisite for female parts in casting calls. But she has now evolved enough to realise that her skin tone is not something that needs “acceptance”. “It's not a deformity, it's normal.”

-Suhani Singh

recognition and a Laxmi Menon became a standard of beauty in her own right. It did little though for the dark-skinned girl in the marriage market. Wedding website shaadi.com even had a Fitzpatrick scale of sorts for Indian skin tones, till universal outrage forced them to take it down.

Marriage is not the end of that discrimination. A 2021 study in Sage Journals by Reena Kukreja of Queens University in Canada surveyed 57 villages across four Indian states—Haryana, Rajasthan, Odisha and West Bengal—to find out if the skin tone affected the married life of people from ‘darker’ states who married those from the ‘fairer’ northern states. Of the 100-plus women who were interviewed, half reported colourism, or frequently being called ‘*kala kauwa*’ (black crow) or ‘*kaali nagin*’ (black serpent). The families they married into attributed their skin colour to being from the ‘inferior’ castes, even impure. Some of them even reported being barred from eating with the family, or even cooking for them.



“With the pressure to conform to a certain ‘idea’ of what is beautiful, young children really struggle to fit in and socialise, with those who don’t conform getting subjected to typecasting”

UPASANA CHADDHA

Psychologist

Colourism spilled into work spaces too, the bias most visible in appearance-focused industries such as tourism and hospitality, aviation, retail, media and entertainment. Indian films are replete with examples of dark-skinned women being cast in tertiary, stereotypical roles, seldom the leads (see *Fifty Shades of Prejudice*). The world of classical

arts is not immune to the malaise either. Last year, classical dancer Kalamandalam Sathyabham drew widespread criticism for making derogatory remarks against Mohiniyattam dancer R.L.V. Ramakrishnan, who was from a Dalit background. Comparing his complexion to that of a crow, she deemed him unfit for that graceful genre of dance saying only “fair-skinned, good-looking men” are eligible to perform it. Ramakrishnan was later appointed assistant professor at the Kerala Kalamandalam.

People who experience colourism or racism, a 2019 study in the journal *Perspectives on Psychological Science* points out, are more likely to develop hypertension, psychological distress and are more prone to health-related issues. Consistent negative messaging and incidents in their life lead to their internalising shame, anxiety and fear, which may manifest in cognitive or physical stress. “With so much pressure to conform to a certain ‘idea’ of what is beautiful, young children really struggle to fit in and socialise, with those who don’t conform getting subjected to type-

CASE STUDY

PREETI DAS | 48 |
Actor, stand-up performer
and story-teller



“I was told though you’re dark, you’re beautiful inside”

My dark skin has always been a source of curiosity and a lot of resentment. As a teenager, I was turned down by two elite boutiques saying we don’t have clothes that will suit your skin colour, please try elsewhere. The jibes cut as deep today. As an actor, only a few stereotyped roles come your way. But the terminology that industry employs is even more shocking: make-up artists are often briefed to apply ‘Dalit’ or ‘tribal’ make-up—both insinuating ‘burn her skin’. Once, after a stand-up performance, amidst applause, a light-skinned lady came up to me and said, “Brilliant...though you are dark-skinned, you are beautiful inside.”

There are many jokes I laugh at, though they are not funny. My husband happens to be light-skinned and the ‘joke’ at the time of our marriage was our children will be like a chess-board. In my interactions with children, I see a perpetuation of those biases. Dark-skinned girls have tears in their eyes when I talk of discrimination in my stories; yet, an evil or negative character will only always be dark.

—as told to Jumana Shah

CASE STUDY

RITIKA ANIL KUMAR | 28 |
*Communications manager,
Creatnet Education, Delhi*

“I was called Blackie, African”

When Ritika speaks about the prejudice she endured due to her dark skin, her amused chuckle masks years of navigating societal biases that began in early childhood. During her formative years at a Christian school in Tiruvalla, Kerala, classmates taunted her with derogatory nicknames like “Blackie”, “Black Beauty” and “African”.

Even at the tender age of six, Ritika sensed something was “not right” about her skin tone, a perception reinforced by relatives who frequently compared her to her lighter-skinned brother. Well-intentioned but harmful “treatments” suggested by her grandmother further cemented the notion that her dark complexion was somehow undesirable.

The unwavering support from her physician parents helped Ritika develop resilience against colourist remarks. Her mother’s wisdom—“your outside does not determine what is inside you”—became Ritika’s emotional armour, making her thick-skinned to cope with the bias.

—Bandeep Singh

Photograph by BANDEEP SINGH

casting, ostracisation and bullying for being different,” says psychologist Upasana Chaddha.

Biases that have only intensified in the past two decades, according to Parameswaran. Blame it on social media, whose algorithm-laden bubbles prioritise glossy images that exude perfection. Many a young, impressionistic mind thinks nothing of using a filter or an AI tool to project a picture of how they would wish to look rather than how they actually are. And no one has

profited more from this insecurity than the beauty industry.

THE FAIRNESS BOOM

You may not call them fairness creams any more in these politically-correct times, but the ‘skin lightening’ business has not gone anywhere. It is expected to cross \$2.4 billion (Rs 20,500 crore, at current exchange rates) by 2030, propelled primarily by urban and semi-urban areas, lured as they are by the spread of online beauty

retail, an increased availability of brands and the massive social media buzz around skin health.

And it’s not just women who are buying into the spiel, men are too. “I have been doing facials and blackhead removals for a few years now. I see nothing wrong with it,” says 17-year-old Arjun Mehta (*name changed*) from a prominent Delhi school. A 2020 research paper in the journal *Open Linguistics* traced how television commercials at the turn of the 21st century

Fifty Shades of Prejudice

The Indian film industry is still no place for the darker-skinned actors

By SUHANI SINGH

It's not just actresses who face colourism in the film industry. Actor Nawazuddin Siddiqui has spoken up about how "more than nepotism", the industry is afflicted by "racism", as a result of which talented actors are overlooked for meaty parts and offered tertiary roles instead. Casting calls seeking "fair-skinned" actors, particularly for the female parts, are still too frequent. Bollywood actors may have learned their lesson in not endorsing fairness products after sizeable backlash, but the industry's portrayal of dark-skinned char-

acters continues to be narrow-minded and stereotypical. Even its attempt to advocate against discrimination of dark-skinned people misfired as happened in *Bala* (2019) when actress Bhumi Pednekar was brownfaced for the part.

In her paper, 'The Brownfaced Bollywood: An Analysis on the Presentation of Dark-Skinned Characters in Bollywood Films', Riya Varghese, a student at the School of Media Studies at Chennai's Loyola College, looked at three 2019 Hindi films—*Bala*, *Gully Boy* and *Super 30*—to conclude that dark-skinned people

Photograph by BANDEEP SINGH



ACTOR NAWAZUDDIN SIDDIQUI (ABOVE) HAS SPOKEN UP ABOUT HOW "MORE THAN NEPOTISM", THE INDIAN FILM INDUSTRY IS AFFLICTED BY "RACISM"

"are often depicted as a weak, malnourished, subaltern class". Varghese also pointed to the 'gendered colourism' in cinema, which leads to

dark-skinned women faring worse than dark-skinned men. And while a dark-skinned actor could well be paired with a light-skinned female

began to push male skin lightening products. In a departure from the 'tall, dark and handsome' trope of the West, Fair and Handsome, as a male fairness cream was called, was promoted as a desirable attribute, a fundamental trait for male attractiveness.

Fairness creams of yore are passe, a whole range of specialised serums, masks and body products now promise an even skin tone, reduction of hyperpigmentation, even reversing your age. Beauty parlours now offer not just plain fruit facials and bleaches, they have become 'clinics' now, offering laser and chemical solutions to your skin 'problems' (see *The Beauty Bazaar*). Fairness is also no longer about the face, there are also whitening options for even the armpits and the vagina.

TOWARDS SKIN POSITIVITY

So where do we go from here? The needle may be moving, even if ever so slightly. "Certainly, activism around beauty norms and how they stigmatise people and damage them psychologically has resulted in a welcome expansion of beauty-related products and services globally," says Parameswaran. Inclusion has become a buzzword in the beauty lexicon, the catwalks have become exemplars of diversity. Barbie now has darker-skinned versions in an attempt to normalise dark skin, while theatre and cinema are finding roles and a place for Black and brown actors. Dark is now divine and brown is beautiful. Pivoting to the new reality, companies have come up with exclusive

make-up for the darker Indian skin tone. Ghazal Alagh, co-founder & Chief Innovation Officer of Honasa Consumer, which has brands like Mamaearth, The Derma Co. and Bblunt as part of its portfolio, says, "When we started Mamaearth, we made a conscious decision to not create or market products that promise fairness. Instead, we focused on healthy, well-nourished skin. Inclusivity also meant challenging the visual representation in beauty advertising. From day one, we ensured we featured real, diverse Indian skin tones in our campaigns." At FAE Beauty, there is a strict policy against filters and Photoshop. "We don't want to propagate unrealistic body standards and want consumers to see things just as they are. Our content is raw, unfiltered," says



A DARK REALITY
(Clockwise from left)
Hrithik Roshan in *Super 30*, Komal Kushwaha in *Dupahiya* and Bhumi Pednekar in *Bala*

one of the earliest to showcase the societal pressures and prejudices against darker people, making a star out of its lead actress, Rajashree Thakur. This, in turn, would lead to Star Plus launching a show of their own—*Sapna Baabul Ka... Bidaai* (2007–2010)—on the same subject. One of Dangal TV channel's most popular shows, *Mann Sundar* (2021–), started off featuring its protagonist not caring a whit about her dark skin.

Though slow, change is coming to the film industry too. Casting director Tess Joseph, for instance, pushes back when film production houses want to cast on colourist lines. "Change is a decision you make and push for," she says. Others hope to realisti-

cally portray what it's like to deal with the insecurities of darker-skinned people. In the Amazon Prime series *Dupahiya* (2025), an educated woman (newcomer Komal Kushwaha) in a fictional village is eager to get a brightening treatment to improve her prospects. For Chirag Garg, the show's co-writer, it was an opportunity to discuss how the desire for fair skin continues to play on the minds of India's brightest. "In the villages, people are more in-your-face about it; in cities, it could be a subtext," says Garg. Having witnessed first-hand the industry's obsession with fair skin colour during auditions, Garg feels change will be a gradual process. "Ultimately, it should be your talent and skill set, not colour or caste or creed, which get you far."

lead, the opposite does not happen. Southern cinema, particularly Tamil and Telugu films, have seen an influx of light-skinned actresses, some of them even imported from outside the country, who are cast opposite the dark-skinned leading men.

Think Amy Jackson. Television, on the other hand, has been better at creating and casting for narratives that touch upon the issue. So much so that it has become a playbook of sorts. ZEE TV show *Saat Phere-Saloni Ka Safar* (2005–2009) was



“Inclusivity meant challenging the visual representation in beauty advertising. From Day 1, we ensured we featured real, diverse Indian skin tones in our campaigns”

GHAZAL ALAGH, Co-founder, Honasa Consumer

their founder Karishma Kewalramani.

There is still some way to go, though. "Campaigns by celebrities can only be on the surface and a start," says Parameswaran, "they have not gone deep into the caste and class consciousness of the Indian psyche." She believes sensitisation to social and workplace discrimination based on colourism and sexism

needs to start early, in elementary school perhaps, "not in a chance workshop after you are an adult and have weathered much trauma." Brands, says an expert from the beauty and personal care industry who does not want to be named, need to do more than just pay lip service to inclusion. They may have a model with a dark skin tone in their promotions, but

that inclusion is not visible in their product range. Even today, they may launch 15 light to medium foundations but have just four in the deep to tan skin tones.

Others are even advocating 'skin neutrality', or treating the skin as just another organ and not drawing attention to it at all. Many celebrities, from Selena Gomez to Shanaya Kapoor and Alia Bhatt, have been posting selfies free of make-up, filters and touch-ups to show that they too have blemishes and not so perfect skins. Of course one can still have negative thoughts about their skin colour, particularly if they have been subjected to colourism. But it is a step towards not hating yourself for your skin colour, rather making your peace with it, and celebrating it. ■

-with Sonal Khetarpal



THE BIG STORY / BJP-RSS

THE NEW STRATEGIC SYNERGY

PM MODI'S FIRST VISIT TO THE RSS HEADQUARTERS IN A DECADE ENDED TALK OF THE BJP'S RIFT WITH ITS MENTOR AND SHOWCASED A RENEWED MARCH TOWARDS SHARED GOALS

By ANILESH S. MAHAJAN

On March 30, Prime Minister Narendra Modi was in Nagpur, visiting the headquarters of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), his first visit since he took over as the prime minister of India in 2014. Visuals of him and sarsanghchalak Mohan Bhagwat paying homage at the Dr Hedgewar Smruti Mandir in Nagpur dominated the news, which was significant as it laid to rest any speculation of a rift between the BJP and its ideological parent.

The last detail had been hanging fire since BJP president J.P. Nadda's comment last May that seemed to suggest that the party had outgrown the RSS. The consequences of that, the reverses in the general election, the patch-up efforts, the



TWICE AS NICE PM Modi and RSS chief Bhagwat at the Hedgewar Smriti Mandir in Nagpur, Mar. 30

victories in the states afterwards, all is now water under the bridge. Sources in the RSS and BJP say the PM's visit was to underline how important both sides are to each other. When PM Modi talked about how the RSS's *tapasya* (penance)—with its *sangathan* (organisation) and *samarpan* (dedication) in the past 100 years—had borne fruit, he was only reiterating the message.

To the outer world, the PM himself is a prime example of the Sangh's swayamsevaks. Modi had already articulated the '*panch pran*' or the five fundamentals of 'Amrit Kaal' as the country approaches its target of 'Viksit Bharat' in 2047. At the core of the Sangh's ideology of cultural nationalism and revival as well, these include the goal of a developed India, eliminat-

ing all traces of the colonial mindset, honour and pride in our roots, our unity and the realisation of a sense of duty among citizens.

In his 11-year tenure so far, PM Modi has popularised many of the RSS's ideas, including taking yoga to the world, articulating the worldview of *vasudaiva kutumbakam* (world as a family) as a mainstay of foreign policy, evolved the swadeshi economic philosophy with a call for self-reliance, along with resolving key issues like the abrogation of Article 370 in Jammu and Kashmir, construction of the Ram temple in Ayodhya, pushing for the uniform civil code and, lately, accelerating the reforms for the Waqf Board.

The Vijayadashami celebrations this year will be special, for the

on this. Today, if, at the centre, an erstwhile *pracharak* is the country's prime minister, nearly half his cabinet too has been part of the RSS or its affiliates at some point. Indeed, 12 of the Sangh's former swayamsevaks (11 from the BJP and one even from the Congress) lead governments in their respective states.

As an organisation, the Sangh and its affiliates have a presence in every aspect of Indian society. American academic, author and long-time RSS watcher Walter K. Andersen says the organisation "stands out vis-a-vis its counterparts in other parts of the world". He argues that the political victories are often credited to aggressive campaigns, mass rallies and media

TODAY, NOT ONLY IS AN ERSTWHILE PRACHARAK INDIA'S PRIME MINISTER, NEARLY HALF HIS CABINET TOO HAS BEEN PART OF THE SANGH OR ITS AFFILIATES

Sangh is completing 100 years of its existence. Formed in 1925, it was modelled on the structure of the Boy's Scouts in England, with aspirations for a Hindu cultural revival. But unlike many similar outfits which sprung up around the world at the time but shrunk to the margins over the years, the RSS thrived. This is because the RSS has a unique structure, replicating some aspects of organisations like the ultranationalist Nippon Kaigi in Japan, or the ONF (All-Russian People's front) in Russia.

Yet there is no organisation that can compare to the RSS. During its 100-year celebrations, Sangh sources say, they would like to showcase some of these unique qualities, adding that they hope the state will back them

narratives, yet beneath the spectacle, the real build-up is shaped by quiet groundwork. This is what makes the Sangh indispensable for the BJP.

In the past year, as the assembly polls in Haryana, Maharashtra and recently in Delhi showed, RSS swayamsevaks on the ground during election time are a game-changer for the BJP. The Sangh has also benefited from the popularity of PM Modi while the BJP's political might has opened up new geographies and demographies. The Sangh's 'mass outfits', such as the Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh, the Kisan Sangh, the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad along with the Adhivakta Parishad and the Sewa Bharati, have all seen their numbers more than double in the past decade.

Those who understand the dynamics of the Sangh Parivar believe the tussle between the leadership of the two outfits was nothing but a “lover’s tiff”. Sources in the Sangh also vouch for the bond between PM Modi and sarsanghchalak Bhagwat, saying it is one of shared ideology and deep mutual respect. Their commitment towards this is reflected in the work their respective offices have done in the past decade.

Long Road to Nagpur

Before reaching Nagpur, PM Modi had ensured that the party and his government had made some course corrections to appease the Sangh leadership. Sangh leaders had been uncomfortable for some time now with the “large-scale import” of politicians from other parties, some of them with a known anti-RSS past. Unlike the Atal Bihari Vajpayee era, when the Sangh affiliates had frequent fights with the government, Modi has ensured that regular consultations and *samanvay* (coordination) meetings happened with them.

But political expediency being the byword, there had been little discussion before importing some of the aforementioned leaders and giving them key assignments. Now, as part of the course correction, regular consultations are taking place with local Sangh units for the ongoing organisational elections in the state, which, in turn, will build the electoral college to find the next national party president (Nadda’s term is over and he’s on an extension). The RSS is also in on the discussions for the appointments of governors and other political offices.

The organisation’s demand for the distribution of more powers to its men at the central level has also been accepted. This included more work allocation to cabinet ministers such as Rajnath Singh, Manohar Lal Khattar and Shivraj Singh Chouhan. So, Khattar now leads the ministerial group recommending the appointments of independent directors on PSU boards, while Chouhan oversees the



implementation of many schemes the prime minister has announced, along with crucial infrastructure projects.

State of Play

Meanwhile, the party is also going through a period of transition. A new BJP national president will be elected soon, a rejigging of the national team and several state units is under way, a cabinet reshuffle is a real possibility, and plans for the ‘new territories’ are also being reworked. Sources say the party is also ‘realigning its forma-

tions’ for the forthcoming assembly polls in Bihar, West Bengal, Tamil Nadu and Kerala. All four are difficult states for the BJP, and will require all the support the Sangh and its affiliates can offer.

In Kerala, for instance, the Lok Sabha polls showed that the NDA vote share had increased to 19.2 per cent; actor Suresh Gopi also won the Thrissur seat, a first for the party. Now, a big gamble has been taken with the elevation of businessman-turned-politician Rajeev Chandrasekhar—who



had contested and lost narrowly to Shashi Tharoor in the Thiruvananthapuram LS seat—as state unit chief. Sources say the move to bring in an outsider was done in consultation with the local as well as national Sangh leadership in a bid to resolve differences in the faction-ridden state unit and widen the voter base. The Sangh is also helping the BJP in its outreach efforts among the Catholic groups in the state.

In Bihar, the BJP will possibly

go without a chief ministerial face, as it had done in Maharashtra. This should also help curtail the anti-incumbency against chief minister Nitish Kumar. Meanwhile, the Sangh's footsoldiers are working with the BJP to balance the caste equations. Here, as in Maharashtra, the Sangh hopes to tweak the Hindutva model so that it is not just associated with a party but with a larger cultural and social movement—one that remains stable even if political alignments change. This had helped the Sangh undercut the Shiv Sena (Uddhav Balasaheb Thackeray) in Maharashtra, where the Sena is considered the most vocal proponent of Hindutva. Sangh sources stress that “ideological alignment is not the same as ideological ownership”, which is why when Uddhav Thackeray shifted alliances, there was a quiet realignment of loyalties. In Bihar,

The Epiphany

Sangh sources point out that all these corrections came after the jolt the BJP received in the 2024 Lok Sabha election, when it fell short of a majority mark on its own and had to depend on allies like Nitish’s Janata Dal (United) and N. Chandrababu Naidu’s Telugu Desam Party to form the government. At the various post-poll introspection meetings, the BJP leadership admitted that the Hindutva consciousness prevalent among middle-class voters today wasn’t built overnight. It took years of conversations, ideological shaping and careful cultivation of opinion leaders to create an environment where political shifts become inevitable rather than orchestrated. BJP sources admit the Sangh has played a crucial role in this. This was boosted, of course, by

THE BJP LEADERSHIP SAYS THEY REALISE THE HINDUTVA CONSCIOUSNESS NOW PREVALENT AMONG MIDDLE-CLASS VOTERS WASN’T BUILT OVERNIGHT. THE SANGH PLAYED A CRUCIAL ROLE IN IT

the Sangh and its affiliates are apparently working on the plan of a “subtle but overarching Hindutva, with *samrasta* (harmony) as the agenda”.

Similarly, in West Bengal, all the Sangh affiliates have been activated, right from the Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram to the Bharatiya Kisan Sangh and the student units of the ABVP. The BJP’s prospects had suffered a jolt here in 2024, the Sangh’s hands-off approach being one of them. Now reconciled, the party is looking at ways to add 6-7 per cent to its 2021 assembly poll vote share of 38 per cent. A part of the plan is to use the Sangh network to mobilise a ‘Sant Pravas’, an outreach initiative to rope in religious and spiritual leaders from across Bengal. Religious groups don’t campaign directly, but they could build the narrative among their respective communities. ■

Modi’s popularity and his unapologetic Hindutva, which went down well with many sections of society.

The same was true of the assembly elections in Haryana, Maharashtra and Delhi where there was no wave in favour of the BJP. The electoral wins were the result of a steady undercurrent, a methodical effort that made certain ideas part of the cultural default. The Sangh played a role on the ground and the BJP was the ultimate beneficiary. After a run where the party was breaking speed records routinely, it was inevitable that a time would come when they had to take the foot off the pedal, slow down and acknowledge the engineers who made it all possible. For the BJP, that would be the Sangh Parivar. PM Modi’s visit to Nagpur was a grateful acknowledgement of the same. ■



DEFENCE / FIGHTER JETS

CLOSING THE ST

AFTER THE US UNVEILS ITS SIXTH-GEN F-47 AND CHINA PUSHES AHEAD WITH PROTOTYPES TO REDEFINE AERIAL WARFARE, **INDIA IS RACING AGAINST TIME TO FIELD A FIFTH-GEN STEALTH FIGHTER AND MODERNISE ITS AIR FORCE**

By Pradip R. Sagar

ON MARCH 21, THE UNITED STATES UNVEILED ITS SIXTH-GENERATION FIGHTER JET, the Boeing F-47, under the Next Generation Air Dominance (NGAD) programme. Announced by President Donald Trump from the Oval Office, this milestone positions the US as the first nation to field a sixth-gen fighter, with deployment targeted by the end of this decade. Designed to replace the fifth-gen F-22 Raptor, the F-47 features cutting-edge technologies, including a more efficient and high-thrust engine for supercruise, stealth enhancements and integration with Artificial Intelligence

(AI). With plans for 200 jets paired with 1,000 combat drones, the NGAD programme reflects a shift toward a “system of systems” approach, prioritising long-range engagement and battlefield adaptability over traditional dogfighting.

For India, this development couldn’t have come at a more precarious moment. While the world’s major powers prepare for sixth-generation aerial warfare, New Delhi remains locked in a desperate struggle to field its first fifth-gen fighter, the Advanced Medium Combat Aircraft (AMCA). The Aeronautical Development Agency (ADA)—the nodal body for the AMCA’s develop-

WAITING TO TAKE WING A model of India's planned fifth-generation stealth fighter, Advanced Medium Combat Aircraft (AMCA), on display at Aero India 2025 in Bengaluru, Feb. 11



PTI



“INDIA NEEDS TO CATCH UP WITH THE LATEST TECHNOLOGY AND ACCELERATE ITS FIFTH-GENERATION FIGHTER JET PROGRAMME”

AIR CHIEF MARSHAL A.P. SINGH
Chief of the Air Staff, at the India Today Conclave

ment—maintains that the first flight will take place by 2028-29, with induction in the 2030s. But military aviation experts believe this timeline might already be too delayed. That's because China is busy mass-producing its fifth-gen J-20 fighters, having deployed a few along the Line of Actual Control, and is experimenting with its sixth-gen J-36 prototypes, unveiled in December 2024. What's more, even Pakistan is looking to procure a fleet of 40 J-35As—China's second fifth-gen fighters—from Beijing.

In a surprise move, Trump did offer India the F-35 stealth fighter—so far restricted to some NATO members and other key allies—during Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to the US in February. This came soon after Russia—the only other country besides the US and

China with fifth-gen capabilities—offered to co-produce in India its top-of-the-line Su-57E fighter. Amid these costly propositions, a high-level committee, led by defence secretary Rajesh Kumar Singh, is racing to finalise a viable production model to accelerate the AMCA's induction into the Indian Air Force (IAF). The committee, which includes IAF Vice-Chief Air Marshal S.P. Dharkar and secretary, defence production, Sanjeev Kumar besides top minds from the ADA and the Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO), is expected to submit its report by the end of April.

PLAYING CATCH-UP

The evolution of fighter generations tells a story of key advancements in aerial warfare. Fourth-gen fighters like

Russia's Su-30MKI and the US's F-16 dominated late 20th-century conflicts with manoeuvrability and heavy weapons load. The emergence of fifth-gen fighters—such as the F-35 and J-20—ushered in a new era, where stealth and sensor fusion rendered traditional air combat nearly obsolete. Their 'first look, first kill' capability allows pilots to shoot down enemy fighters or neutralise their air defences without giving them any

chance to react. Now, sixth-gen fighters like the F-47 and J-36 promise another leap forward, incorporating AI, drone wingmen and hypersonic weaponry. The implications are stark: by the time India's AMCA becomes operational, its technological edge may already be blunted against more advanced adversaries.

Speaking at the India Today Conclave on March 8, Air Chief Marshal A.P. Singh highlighted the competitive pressure from China's advancements and the necessity to expedite India's own fighter jet development, particularly the AMCA. "India needs to catch up with the latest technology and accelerate its fifth-gen fighter jet programme at a time when China has showcased its sixth-gen combat aircraft," he said. The Chief of the Air Staff also talked of stepping up production, emphasising the "need to add 35-40 fighter jets every year to fill the shortage".

At a time the world is focusing on air dominance, the IAF is struggling to fill the numbers of its sanctioned fleet. It is left with barely 30 squadrons, against the sanctioned strength of 42, with at least eight more set to retire over the next decade. Each squadron typically comprises 18-20 jets, which means the IAF presently has a fleet of around 540-600 fighters. To address the dwindling numbers and modernise the air force, a previous defence secretary-led committee had handed over a detailed roadmap to Union defence minister Rajnath Singh on March 3. The immediate goal is to reach the sanctioned strength and then scale it up to 60 squadrons by 2047. The AMCA is a crucial part of this vision (see *Roadmap 2047: IAF's Expansion Plan*).

THE FIFTH-GEN CHALLENGE

The AMCA project, so far, has been marred by delays. It was in 2009 that the Union government commissioned a feasibility study, but it was only in March 2024 that the project got the Union cabinet's go-ahead, with an initial allocation of Rs 15,000 crore for the development of five prototypes. A 10-year development roadmap has been finalised for their rollout for rigorous flight tests. Even the IAF's modernisation roadmap envisions inducting around seven AMCA squadrons beginning in 2035.

While approving the project, the Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS) made it clear that any cost overruns and delays should be directly addressed to it instead of the defence ministry. While some experts highlight the high cost, the AMCA remains significantly more affordable than other stealth jet programmes. The NGAD, which includes the F-47 and its next-gen engine,

ROADMAP 2047 IAF'S EXPANSION PLAN

With just 31 squadrons against a sanctioned 42, the IAF faces a dire shortfall. Ageing MiG-21s, Jaguars and Mirage 2000s will phase out by 2030, outpacing new inductions. The goal: 42 squadrons ASAP, scaling to 60 (i.e. 1,080-1,200 fighter jets) by 2047

2025-30: PLUGGING THE GAPS

► **TEJAS MARK-1A:** With more than 40 improvements over the Mark-1 variant, 180 of these 4.5-gen Light Combat Aircraft to replace MiG-21s (9-10 squadrons). GE F404 engine supply delays push deliveries to late 2025 or 2026



RAFALE EXPANSION

The IAF has 36 of these 4.5-gen fighters procured from France. Reports of a follow-on order for 26 naval variants surfaced in 2023. If greenlit, deliveries could begin by 2028

► **SUKHOI SU-30MKI UPDATES:** In the fleet of 272 Russian-origin 4.5-gen fighters manufactured in India under licence, 84 to get advanced AESA radar, Astra missiles from 2026. HAL is delivering new AL-31FP engines too

GENERATIONAL LEAP

The evolution of fighter jets

► The first three generations of fighter jets evolved from the pioneering 1st-gen Me 262 (Germany) during the WW-II and the Korean War's F-86 (US) and MiG-15 (Soviet Union) to supersonic MiG-21 and

F-4 Phantom (2nd/ 3rd gen) engaged in the Vietnam war—each leap bringing faster speeds, advanced missiles and multirole capabilities

► 4th-gen fighters like Russia's Su-27 and the US's F-16 dominated late 20th-century conflicts with

is projected to exceed \$40 billion (Rs 3.4 lakh crore). Similarly, the UK-Italy-Japan Global Combat Air Programme (GCAP) is expected to cost \$43.2 billion (Rs 3.7 lakh crore). In contrast, India's combined Light Combat Aircraft (LCA) Mk2, Twin Engine Deck-Based Fighter (TEDBF) and AMCA programmes are estimated at \$4.6 billion (Rs 40,000 crore).

2030-35: SCALING UP

► **TEJAS MARK-2:** A beefier Tejas with first flight eyed for 2026, induction by 2032-33. Planned fighters: 120-200 (6-10 squadrons)

► **MRFA DEAL:** Plan for 114 twin-engine 4.5-gen Multi-Role Fighter Aircraft (MRFA) still in play; potential induction by 2030-32 if deal with foreign partners gets fast-tracked

► **AMCA MARK-1**
Five prototypes in development for India's first fifth-gen stealth Advanced Medium Combat Aircraft. Induction by 2035—two



manoeuvrability and even heavier weapon load. Rafale, the most advanced jet the IAF has, is a French 4.5-gen multirole fighter

► The 21st century saw the emergence of 5th-gen fighters—such as the US's F-35 and China's J-20—which

squadrons (40 jets) to use GE F414 engines initially

2035-47: THE NEXT-GEN PUSH

► **AMCA MARK-2**
Enhanced stealth jet with powerful 110-120 kN engines. IAF wants 160-200 jets (7-10 squadrons) by 2047. Total AMCA count could hit 240-300

► **TEDBF:** Twin-Engine Deck-Based Fighter, a naval offshoot of AMCA. About 45-60 jets planned for carriers like INS Vikrant, with induction from 2035-2040, potentially doubling as the IAF assets

► **NEXT-GEN WILD-CARD:** By 2040, the IAF aims to leap into sixth-gen tech—optionally manned jets, swarm drones, hypersonics—either via AMCA upgrades or a new platform. No firm orders yet, but the intent's clear

ushered in a new era, in which stealth and sensor fusion have rendered traditional dog-fights nearly obsolete

► Now, 6th-gen fighters like the F-47 and J-36 promise another leap forward, incorporating AI, drone wingmen and hypersonic weaponry

As the high-powered committee works toward a solution, a critical debate revolves around the AMCA's production partner—whether to entrust state-owned Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL) or bring in private industry. HAL has proposed a consortium, in which it will hold 50 per cent of the stake and rope in four private firms with 12.5 per cent stake each to oversee

specific tasks. But the government seems inclined toward an industry partnership approach. Sources in the ADA indicate that HAL may have to compete with other private firms separately, pointing to its poor track record when it comes to joint ventures. This signals a potential shift in India's defence manufacturing, with several top-tier private players vying for a greater role in military aviation projects.

However, scepticism persists over private sector involvement. A senior air marshal points to the massive investment required to establish a fighter jet manufacturing facility, including land acquisition, infrastructure, skilled workforce recruitment and training. "It's a humongous task with huge investments," he tells INDIA TODAY, emphasising the need for a viable business model before private firms can take the plunge. Key concerns include control over the ADA's R&D, cost implications and the division of responsibilities between HAL and private manufacturers. Another air marshal expresses doubts about the ability of both HAL and Indian private players to deliver, calling it a choice "between the devil and the deep blue sea". "None of our private sector stalwarts in aviation have any experience in the final assembly and delivery of small or midsize aircraft. Maybe we need handholding from a foreign player to attain expertise in this complex task," he adds.

HAL, already burdened with multiple projects, faces mounting challenges of its own. It is producing 83 Tejas Light Combat Aircraft (LCA) Mk-1A—with deliveries already delayed due to engine shortages—and has received clearance for an additional 97. Simultaneously, it is tasked with developing four prototypes of the Tejas Mk-2, expected to make its maiden flight by 2026. On March 25, GE Aerospace finally delivered the first of 99 F404-IN20 engines to HAL for the Mk-1A. To avoid similar setbacks with the AMCA, the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) is stepping in to directly monitor the jet's engine development. While the AMCA Mk-1 will initially take off with the GE F414 (98 kN) engines, a more powerful 110-120 kN engine, crucial for the enhanced AMCA Mk-2 fighter, is being developed by the DRDO's Gas Turbine Research Establishment (GTRE). Plans are afoot for foreign collaboration, with companies from France, the UK, the US and Russia showing interest in co-developing the engine.

But the question about who will manufacture the AMCA still looms. "At least, there is clarity that HAL will produce the Tejas Mk-1A and Mk-2 fighters. But no one knows yet as to who will make the AMCA," says Air Marshal S.B.P. Sinha (retd), a former IAF deputy chief. Still, he defends the AMCA's relevance, clarifying that it was never designed to compete with the F-47 or J-36 but to provide India with a "very capable fifth-gen fighter". But the unveiling of these sixth-gen fighters underscores that the window for the AMCA to remain relevant is rapidly shrinking, and India has to turbocharge its production. ■

FRESH AIR FOR SALE

AS AIR POLLUTION WORSENS, A WAVE OF INNOVATIONS EMERGE TO PROMISE CLEANER, HEALTHIER BREATHING SPACES. SOME ARE BACKED BY SCIENCE, OTHERS HAVE FAILED TO CONVINCE DOCTORS

BY SONALI ACHARJEE

Sometimes, it's just the thought that counts. That's what Mitali Banerjee, a 28-year-old designer from Noida, says when anyone asks her if the oxygen therapy sessions she treats herself to actually benefit her. "The air is so bad all around me. I just want to do something to feel that I am not breathing only toxins," she tells INDIA TODAY. At Oxypure, Delhi's largest chain of oxygen bars, Mitali sits back in an oversized lounge chair and treats herself to 15 minutes of near-pure oxygen once every week. "I feel good about it," she adds.

A 2024 study published in the journal, *Lancet Planetary Health*, found that long-term exposure to air pollution increased deaths by 1.5 million per year in India between 2009 and 2019, compared to conditions if the country had met the World Health Organization's recommendations for safe exposure. From cardiovascular ailments to chronic bronchitis, lung cancer, asthma and even eye issues—pollution is wreaking havoc on public health. Disheartened and alarmed, Indians are hungry for quick, convenient fixes to the problem.

BREATHE EASY
A woman taking hyperbaric oxygen therapy at The Wellness Co. in New Delhi



1.5 MILLION
Estimated rise in yearly deaths
in India due to air pollution
between 2009 and 2019

But it isn't just oxygen bars that have become a fad—for a problem as large and concerning as air pollution, an entire market of solutions is now available and, in fact, thriving. According to Research and Markets, a global market research platform, India's anti-pollution control systems market was valued at \$10.5 billion (Rs 90,000 crore, at the current exchange rate) in 2024 and is expected to reach \$18.2 billion (Rs 1.6 lakh crore) by 2030. That's a



50.6 MICROGRAMS

Average PM2.5* concentration
in India in 2024, 10 times the WHO's
recommended limit

*fine particulate pollutants, likely to penetrate deep into the lungs

\$10.5 BILLION

India's air pollution control systems
market in 2024; expected to reach
\$18.2 billion by 2030

compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 9.4 per cent. But doctors and health experts remain sceptical about many of these solutions, suggesting a holistic and long-term approach instead. "As air pollution continues to rise, people are looking for ways to protect themselves from its harmful effects. It is claimed that the new technologies can revive the air and minimise pollution's toll on health. But can they really bring back what long-term exposure to pollution

destroys?" asks Dr Ravi Dosi, consultant, pulmonary medicine, Kokilaben Dhirubhai Ambani Hospital, Indore.

THE LATEST FADS

The sheer variety of anti-pollution products and therapies available is staggering. Solutions range from canned air sourced from the Swiss Alps, Italy's Lake Como, or the upper Himalayas closer home to anti-pollution paints and wearable air purifiers (see *Quick*

Fixes). Air purifiers now come in various forms, including watches, keychains and necklaces. Lightweight and portable, these purifiers employ a range of technologies, from ionisation devices that use electrical charges to capture pollutants to components that mimic anti-smog guns, releasing fine nebulised water droplets that bind with airborne dust and particles, pulling them to the ground. "Air purifiers may work in some situations, especially where there

QUICK FIXES

From advanced filtration systems to canned air, the market is flooded with solutions promising to help people breathe cleaner air

PORTABLE AIR PURIFIER

Small, at times wearable, purifiers using ionisation technology (electrical charges to remove pollutants)

₹3,000–5,000

Impact: Not enough power to counter extremely high levels of toxic air



is a closed environment and the resident is elderly or bed-bound. However, if there are open windows/ doors, their effect is negated,” cautions Dr Puneet Khanna, head of the department and consultant, pulmonology, Manipal Hospital, Dwarka, Delhi.

Doctors say the only purifier to trust is one with a high-efficiency particulate air (HEPA) filter, which efficiently removes pollutants. High-end establishments, too, have capitalised on clean air, turning it into a luxury amenity. The Taj Palace Hotel in New Delhi, for example, offers guests air quality index (AQI) levels below 50 while the city's AQI outside often soars past 400 in winter. Shopping malls and even restaurants have begun installing sophisticated air purification systems with HEPA filters and ionisers

wood furniture, disinfectants, glue and insulation materials. These products continuously release formaldehyde as a colourless gas, contaminating indoor air for years. To counter this, homeowners are increasingly turning to low-VOC paints, air-purifying paints, anti-formaldehyde coatings, anti-bacterial finishes and photocatalytic paints that use sunlight and organic compounds to break down pollutants. “Anti-pollution paint is a new technology. It contains titanium dioxide, which breaks down pollutants like nitrogen oxides into less harmful compounds when exposed to sunlight.... Indoors, it works best where light exposure is higher,” explains Dr Dosi. Though the technology has potential, he adds, its cumulative effect is under research.

Homeowners are also investing



“IT’S BEING CLAIMED THAT THE NEW TECHNOLOGIES CAN REVIVE THE AIR AND MINIMISE POLLUTION’S TOLL ON HEALTH. BUT CAN THEY REALLY BRING BACK WHAT LONG-TERM EXPOSURE TO POLLUTION DESTROYS?”

DR RAVI DOSI, Consultant, Pulmonary Medicine, Kokilaben Dhirubhai Ambani Hospital, Indore

as part of their branding. But doctors are not entirely convinced by this trend. “Although air purifiers may enhance indoor air quality, their value in areas with high pollution levels is questionable,” says Dr Dosi. “The air outside remains toxic, and individuals are still exposed to dangerous pollutants upon leaving these establishments.”

Beyond air purifiers, people have turned to products marketed as air-purifying paints and even plants to keep their homes pollution-free. One of the most persistent indoor pollutants is formaldehyde—a volatile organic compound (VOC), that is, carbon-based chemicals emitted as gases from certain solids or liquids—found in

in air-purifying plants, which are believed to absorb toxins and improve indoor air quality. Varieties like areca palm, spider plant, peace lily and aloe vera are particularly popular for their reported ability to filter formaldehyde and carbon monoxide. Though doctors say these plants have a negligible impact, they do serve as a natural and aesthetically pleasing addition to pollution-control efforts.

Then there are those who have taken their commitment to cleaner air even further by adopting smog-harvesting devices that capture airborne pollutants and convert them into ink. “I read about large-scale industrial devices being used to turn air carbon into

ink and decided to purchase a smaller version for my home from the US. I’ve placed it near our generator to absorb emissions—now we can run it guilt-free during the summer months,” says Manik Sharma, a 48-year-old financial consultant from Delhi.

By far, the most widely known anti-pollution trend remains oxygen bars, like the one Mitali visits every week. Each session costs about Rs 1,000–2,000. Some establishments, like Mumbai’s Oxybank, even provide flavoured oxygen: lavender, orange, cinnamon, peppermint and so on. They work on a simple principle: ‘breathe in pure oxygen to remain healthy’. That’s also the principle behind hyperbaric oxygen therapy (HBOT), a medical treatment that involves breathing 100 per cent oxygen in a pressurised chamber. When pure oxygen is administered at high pressures, it dissolves in the plasma, and not the haemoglobin, thus boosting oxygen levels in the blood. This aids healing and reduces side effects of chemotherapy, radiation and other medical conditions for which it is approved. Now, various spas and non-medically certified centres have also started offering recreational HBOT,



ADVANCED HEPA FILTER AIR PURIFIER

New-gen purifiers with three-layer filtering—pre-filter, H13 HEPA filter and activated carbon filter—removing 99.9% of airborne particles

₹20,000–50,000

Impact: Expensive but keeps indoor air clean



CLEAN AIR IN A CAN

Bottled air from regions known for pristine air quality—Switzerland, Norway or Lake Como—now sold in cans

₹2,000–4,000

Impact: No proven effect on human health

SMART HELMET

Companies like Shellios Technolabs manufacture helmets that claim to cut pollutants by 80%

₹4,500

Impact: Effective in cutting exposure of bikers to pollutants



OXYGEN BAR

Companies like Oxypure and Oxybank allow customers to breathe pure oxygen for a fixed period



₹1,000–2,000

Impact: No proven benefit in countering air pollution effects

ANTI-POLLUTION PAINT

Some firms promote toxin-free indoor paints that eliminate harmful chemicals like formaldehyde

Price:
Varies

Impact:
Expensive but helps reduce indoor pollutants



HYPERBARIC OXYGEN THERAPY

HBOT is a medical treatment where patients breathe 100% oxygen in a pressurised chamber

Price:
Varies

Impact:
Only recommended for specific medical conditions

with claims that it counteracts pollution, improves sleep and boosts energy.

Dr Tarun Sahni, a senior consultant of internal medicine at Apollo Hospitals in Delhi and a pioneer in modern hyperbaric medicine in India, remains critical of the trend. “High-pressure oxygen is being touted for wellness and pollution relief, but these claims lack scientific backing,” he says. “For any impact, you need medical-grade HBOT, which must be used for only 14 globally accepted treatments. Now, we have an entire [market of] off-label HBOT with un-certified equipment and doctors, [which could] do more harm than good...can cause respiratory distress to consumers and lead to explosions at the facility.”

SO WHAT'S THE SOLUTION?

According to Dr Khanna of Manipal Hospital, pollution can affect an individual's health in two key ways: either high exposure for a short period or long-term low exposure. “It is impossible to quantify if breathing good-quality air for five per cent of your day is enough to counter the damage done the rest of the time. The best approach is to invest in a good mask and air purifier so that for as long as possible, you



“ANTI-POLLUTION TREATMENTS ARE BENEFICIAL AT AN INDIVIDUAL LEVEL TO SOME EXTENT ONLY. THEY SHOULD BE SEEN AS COMPLEMENTARY RATHER THAN PRIMARY SOLUTIONS”

DR ASHISH JAIN, Director & Head, Respiratory Medicine, Pulmonology, Max Smart Super Speciality Hospital, Saket, Delhi

are breathing clean air,” he says.

Ultimately, the right to breathe clean air is a public health crisis that requires more than just individual solutions. “Pollution is not just a winter

problem but a year-round hazard. Smog may be more visible in winter due to temperature inversion and seasonal emissions, but pollutants like nitrogen oxides, sulphur dioxide and fine particulate matter linger throughout the year,” says Dr Ashish Jain, director and head, respiratory medicine, pulmonology, Max Smart Super Speciality Hospital, Saket, Delhi. The real solution, he argues, lies in systemic change. “Anti-pollution treatments are beneficial at an individual level to some extent only. They should be seen as complementary, rather than primary, solutions,” he says.

That's because, while anti-pollution treatments may provide some relief, they cannot fully undo the damage caused by prolonged exposure to polluted air. Vulnerable groups, including those with lung conditions, children and the elderly, remain at risk even when air quality appears better. “Governments, communities and individuals must work together to eliminate pollution at its source by adopting clean energy, lowering emissions and promoting green spaces,” says Dr Dosi. Only by addressing pollution at its root can we create a healthier environment for future generations. ■



**INDIA
TODAY** 
Tourism
SURVEY & AWARDS 2024-25

STATES OF GLORY Union Minister for Tourism and Culture Gajendra Singh Shekhawat (middle) with representatives of the winning states

TRANSFORMING THE TRAVEL TRADE

The India Today Tourism Survey & Awards 2025 celebrates the country's evolving tourism scene, highlighting innovation, sustainability and standout destinations

BY AMIT DIXIT

I

India's travel landscape is undergoing a remarkable transformation, driven by evolving traveller preferences, digital advancements and a renewed focus on sustainability. Indians are recognising the potential of the local and embracing it like never before. It is no longer about visiting the iconic landmarks but about discovering hidden gems, exploring offbeat destinations, and experiencing cultural richness beyond the usual tourist trails. All this and more was revealed at the India Today Tourism Survey & Awards 2025, held at The Oberoi, New Delhi, on March 28—a sunny spring morning brimming with hope.



and India Today Group Editorial Director Raj Chengappa (10th from right) along



"In terms of tourism, India is standing at the cusp of immense possibilities. The rise of dispensable incomes will translate into a huge boost to tourism in the near future"

GAJENDRA SINGH SHEKHAWAT
Union Minister for Tourism and Culture

WINNING WONDERS

Category	Winner	Editor's Choice
Best Adventure Destination	RISHIKESH, UTTARAKHAND	Bir-Billing, Himachal Pradesh Nameri, Assam
Best Beach Destination	MORJIM BEACH, GOA	Blue Flag Beach, Puri, Odisha
Best Heritage Destination	AMER FORT, RAJASTHAN	Chettinad, Tamil Nadu
Best Mountain Destination	DHARAMSHALA, HIMACHAL PRADESH	Mechuka, Arunachal Pradesh
	KUMBHALGARH, RAJASTHAN	
Best Wildlife Destination	GIR NATIONAL PARK & WILDLIFE SANCTUARY, GUJARAT	Nagarhole National Park, Karnataka
Most Instagrammable Landscape	ROAD TO HEAVEN, DHOLAVIRA, GUJARAT	Gulmarg, Jammu & Kashmir
Best Spiritual Destination	AMBaji SHAKTIPITH, GUJARAT	Shikharji Teerth, Parasnath Hill, Jharkhand
Most Scenic Road Destination	OLD SILK ROUTE - ZULUK, SIKKIM	Munnar to Thekkady, Kerala
Best Culinary Destination	BIKANER, RAJASTHAN	Kolkata, West Bengal
Best Festival Destination	NAVRATRI, GUJARAT	Bastar Dussehra, Jagdalpur, Chhattisgarh
		Shillong Cherry Blossom Festival, Meghalaya

The awards—presented by the Tourism & Civil Aviation Department, Government of Sikkim, along with Gujarat Tourism as State Partner and Meghalaya Tourism, Uttarakhand Tourism, Government of Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan Tourism, Tamil Nadu Tourism and Delhi Tourism as Associate Sponsors—brought together industry leaders, policymakers and influencers to discuss India's evolving tourism sector. The event featured insightful sessions on heritage tourism, digital branding and strategic state-level initiatives. Key highlights included:

- » A fireside chat with Union minister for tourism and culture Gajendra Singh Shekhawat, the event's chief guest.
- » Panel discussions on state-level tourism strategies, featuring representatives from Rajasthan, Goa, Sikkim and Uttarakhand.
- » Heritage tourism insights from experts like Aman Nath (Neemrana Hotels) and Sohail Hashmi (Delhi Heritage Walks).
- » Social media's role in tourism branding, with influencers and content creators sharing trends in destination marketing.
- » A focus on Assam's conservation and tourism initiatives, led by Padmapani Bora and conservationist Dr Purnima Devi Barman.
- » A fireside chat with Mugdha Sinha, director general, ministry of tourism, on India's global appeal and evolving tourist expectations.

India Today Group Editorial Director Raj Chengappa, in his keynote address, mentioned how tourism has been a key driver of India's GDP and how it has bounced back after the pandemic. He also emphasised minister Shekhawat's innovative initiatives like Chalo India 2025, Adopt a Heritage 2.0 and the focus on sustainability in tourism. During a fireside chat, Shekhawat emphasised the importance of spiritual tourism and how the middle class is giving a fillip to tourism by travelling to popular destinations across India in droves.

The event also served as a platform to recognise excellence in tourism. The awards tracked 10 categories for which we received some 77 nominations from the states and UTs. Our market research partners MDRA then conducted on-ground and online surveys in which 4,764 participants' responses were logged to reveal the winners. In addition to this, the INDIA TODAY editorial team deliberated to arrive at a consensus on the Editor's Choice Awards across the same 10 categories. ■

REORIENTING TOURISM STRATEGY IN



SACHIN KURVE

*Secretary, Tourism, and
CEO, Uttarakhand Tourism
Development Board*

**“To counter overtourism,
we are promoting a new
concept of creating nodes
around a magnet, that is,
hidden gems around a
popular destination”**

C.S. RAO

*Principal Secretary,
Tourism and Civil Aviation
Department, Sikkim*

**“We are conserving
our biodiversity. Although
Sikkim occupies only 0.2 per
cent of India's geographical
area, it is home to 25 per
cent of its biodiversity”**

PECHA KUCHA—HERITAGE AND TOURISM:

AMAN NATH

*Co-founder and Chairman,
Neemrana Hotels*

**“Heritage in
India is like a river.
Everything flows
from the past, and
the ancient, medieval
and modern co-exist”**



MADHAVI KUCKREJA

Director, Sanatkada

**“We looked at
Lucknow through past
and present, not only
for tourists but also
for its residents to
discover their own city”**



THE STATES: VOICES FROM THE STATES



SANJEEV AHUJA

Secretary, Tourism, Goa

“We have started promoting hinterland tourism away from the beaches. This serves two purposes. One, people should visit other places apart from beaches. Two, it helps increase the number of days they stay”

RAVI JAIN

Principal Secretary,
Tourism, Rajasthan

“We have seen domestic tourist arrivals in Rajasthan increase manifold. Also, the tourists now come more for leisure and relaxation than to just see the monuments”

FIRESIDE CHAT

THE CHANGING DEMANDS OF THE INDIAN TOURIST



MUGDHA SINHA

Director General,
Ministry of Tourism

“Today, we need to invest in new forms of marketing, like emotional, anamorphic and quantum. Data-driven insights are equally important, which is why we tell states to focus on market research a lot”

THE PAST IS AN INCREDIBLE COUNTRY TOO!



SOHAIL HASHMI

Historian, Delhi Heritage
Walks

“We need to clean up our act—provide clean toilets, clean surroundings and clean drinking water at heritage sites”



RATISH NANDA

Projects Director,
Aga Khan Trust

“Each penny invested in the restoration of heritage monuments continues to pay back in a long-term sustainable manner”

GRACE IN MOTION

Odissi dancer and choreographer Arushi Mudgal puts up a stunning performance enthralling the audience



SOCIAL MEDIA, DESTINATIONS AND LOCAL BRANDING: THE INFLUENCER REVOLUTION



NIKHIL CHAWLA

Content Creator @nikhilchawla

“You have to work with the latest tools and evolve with the times—I went from long-form journalism to 15-second Insta stories—but you have to be authentic to yourself and honest with your audience”

PREETHI PARTHASARATHY

Content Creator,
Peppy Travel Girl

“If I was travelling, I would prefer a recommendation from a real person over something that came from an aggregator. That credibility sets a content creator or influencer apart”

ARCHANA SINGH

Marketing Director,
Onlyone Travel; Founder,
Travel See Write

“Technologies and trends will keep coming and going, but if you know what you’re trying to tell and it’s useful for the consumers, they will continue to consume it”

ANUPRIYA KAPUR

Travel and Lifestyle Influencer

“A trend I’ve noticed is the increase in the number of women travelling solo. They’re stepping out of the house on their own, even if it’s for a short trip”

TOURISM MEETS TENACITY: ENCHANTING ASSAM, ENDURING EFFORTS



PADMAPANI BORA

Commissioner and
Secretary, Tourism
Department, Assam

“There has been a positive change in the perception of Assam as a tourist destination, thanks to the efforts of the state government with support from the Centre”



DR PURNIMA DEVI BARMAN

Conservationist

“Assam is a biodiversity hotspot and we have a number of new national parks which we need to market. We should also promote community tourism”



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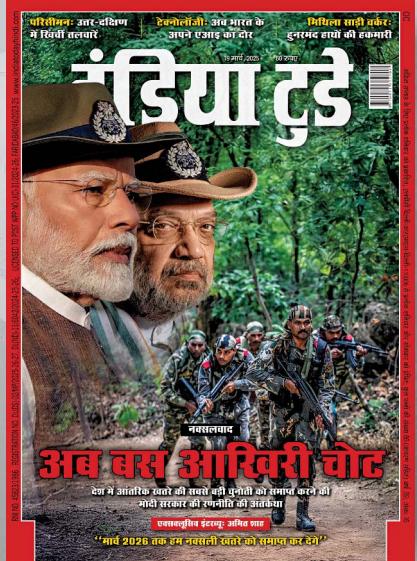
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“मार्च 2026 तक हम नवाचली खातों को उत्पाद कर देंगे”

XX

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

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..... शहर..... राज्य..... पिन.....

मोबाइल..... ईमेल.....



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SHOVANA NARAYAN
PG 60

LEISURE

BOOKS

A Master Storyteller

Namita Gokhale's new collection of short stories—*Life on Mars*—is peopled with an interesting set of characters



T

The titular story in Namita Gokhale's *Life on Mars: Collected Stories* follows a woman who befriends an unusual young man the same age as her emotionally distant sons. The story derives its name from a passage where Gokhale makes a poignant connection between the stereotypical imagery of Martians as 'little green men', and a group of doctors in their green-hued scrubs, huddled around the woman as she enters the hospital.

"Before I knew it, I was in hospital, being wheeled around on a rattling trolley—well, not a trolley but a stretcher, and there were arc lights and men in green overalls wearing masks. As the anaesthesia got to me, I discovered that I was on Mars, there were masked men in green overalls everywhere, and life on Mars wasn't really so different from life in Delhi. It was difficult, tedious and painful."

It's a particularly clever narrative gambit also because the woman's new friend, Udit Narain, is a "genuine crank", a conspiracy theorist who would no doubt chuckle at his friend invoking Martians in a relatively mundane medical situation. *Life on Mars* contains stories Gokhale wrote through the 1990s and the 2000s, as well as several new stories written in the last few years.

"The story 'Life on Mars' was written in the late 1990s," says Gokhale, who is also co-founder of the Jaipur Literature Festival. "It was written at a time when I was getting back to writing fiction after a while. I had been commissioned for a short story and when I started writing with a blank slate in my mind, the character of Udit

Narain just came to me. He was based on someone I knew and was fond of. But most people thought of him as a crank."

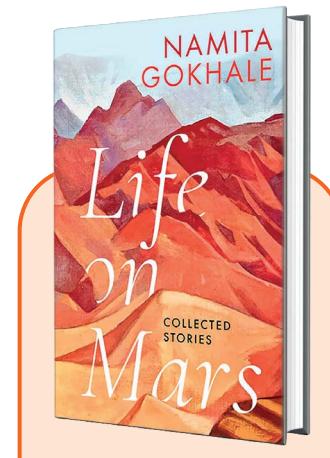
In fact, a number of stories here feature characters inspired by people Gokhale knew down the years. As the opening line of 'GIGALIBB' (God is Great and Love is Bloody Blind) states, these stories "tread the slushy terrain between memory and fiction". For a writer, it's often tricky to calibrate just how much of real life you want in a fictional character sketch. To her credit, Gokhale does a fantastic job in this context. Virtually every

line, every bit of dialogue or description tells us something unique and interesting about the character—or advances the plot along.

"The main character in the story 'Savithri and the Squirrels' was based on a woman who I was very fond of, and who was very fond of me," says Gokhale. "Similarly, with 'GIGALIBB', anybody who is from Nainital will identify who the story is about, the moment they read the line 'God is Great and Love is Bloody Blind'. But fiction cannot operate like an inside joke, I think. You have to make the character's motivations and their actions speak for themselves, without relying on any previous knowledge on the reader's part."

In one way or another, several stories here are studies in grief. Both 'Savithri and the Squirrels'—about an enigmatic woman working for a matchmaker—and 'GIGALIBB' fit this mould in a straightforward way. But there are other, subtler expressions of the same emotion, like 'The Day Princess Diana Died', my favourite story from the book. In this story, we see a kind of reverse Butterly Effect—a truly 'big news' incident (in this case, the death of Lady Diana) having smaller, local consequences; the end of the protagonist's romantic relationship with a married man. Does every 'good' person have to mourn every death, even the death of a complete stranger on the other side of the world? Are all expressions of grief equally valid, or are some more equal than others, so to speak? This is a story that puts these complex questions before the reader in an artful and yet deceptively simple way.

Life on Mars ends with three Mahabharata stories, in a section called 'The Mirror of the Mahabharata'. Here she inhabits the voices of characters like Gandhari and Kunti, as they ponder the motives behind the main players' actions—and the consequences of



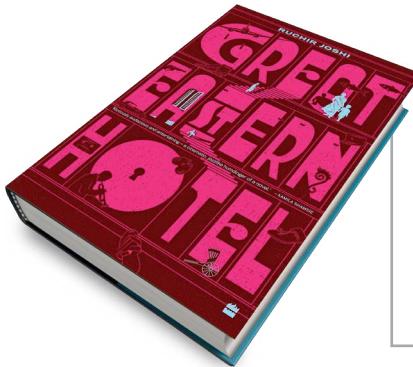
LIFE ON MARS
Collected Stories
By Namita Gokhale
SPEAKING TIGER
₹499; 200 pages

The book is a great introduction to the style and philosophical preoccupations of one of our pre-eminent English-language writers



OH! CALCUTTA

Ruchir Joshi's Great Eastern Hotel is a sweeping historical saga which interleaves several strands of narrative within shifting layers of time



GREAT EASTERN HOTEL
By Ruchir Joshi
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₹1,499; 920
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those actions, of course. Gokhale's own previous work *The Puffin Mahabharata* (2009) has been acclaimed as a rare young readers' version that does not seek to sanitise the events of the epic. Even now, she considers it her finest work ("I was overwhelmed by all the hurt, all the inequity, all the greatness in this epic").

"The things that transform you... when you begin those enterprises, you never realise that they are going to transform you," says Gokhale. "Through the 2000s, David Davidar, then with Penguin, commissioned me to write *The Book of Shiva* and then *The Puffin Mahabharata* for young readers. For the latter he told me, it's going to be 40,000 words and you'll give it to me in six months; I foolishly said yes. But the abbreviated timeline made me read so much, everything on the Mahabharata, it was the most important literary experience of my life."

Life on Mars is a great introduction to the style and the philosophical preoccupations of one of India's pre-eminent English-language writers. These 15 stories display an impressive range in terms of both form and content, and connoisseurs of short fiction would be well advised to pick it up. ■

-Aditya Mani Jha

The novel takes the shape of a vast luxury hotel, situated in Calcutta towards the end of World War II. The characters function like doors into the building. Through them, the sights, sounds and especially the scents of a bygone era flicker to life with the intimacy of dreams.

The main doors into the edifice are the young revolutionary Nirupama "Niru" Majumdar, Imogen Snell, the adventurous Englishwoman and Kedar Lahiri, the artist-playboy affectionately nicknamed "Zamindar". There are two types of secret entrance. On one floor, there are the British intelligence officers struggling to predict where, how and, especially, if the Japanese will launch an attack on Calcutta's port. On another corridor altogether and along all manner of back stairs is Gopal, the ambitious young pickpocket who will pick not only our pockets but our hearts too.

The interleaving of many strands of narrative within shifting layers of time is managed with a film-maker's ease. The opening scene is set in 1951, jump-cuts to the river of grieving humanity that attended Rabindranath Tagore's death, bounces forward to mid-seventies London where a young man is documenting the final months of a famous Indian artist's life, then back to the funeral.

I read the novel out of sequence, attempting to second-guess the plot, while wallowing in the Cinerama-style descriptions, 360° through all the senses. The absolute immersion in an ethos unfamiliar to most modern readers is, it seems to me, the true purpose of the novel, rather than what happens and to whom. There's a playful edge to

Two British officers flying at night over the giant city in wartime black-out garb spot the dome of the Victoria Memorial glittering like an immense marble egg, a beacon to any would-be Japanese bombers

the writing as if the author is constantly whispering in the reader's ear, "Stop being stuffy! Just enjoy the ride!"

I loved the great Railway Station spectacles best. The chaos, the crush of bodies, the clothes, the smells and the social drama of Indian royalty being herded into a coach, while liveried bodies hold back the common masses! Another fabulous scene is the one in which Dayton and Lambert, two British officers flying at night over the giant city in wartime black-out garb, spot the dome of the Victoria Memorial glittering like an immense marble egg, a beacon to any would-be Japanese bombers.

As for Gopal-of-the-many-aliases, his sensitivity to so many levels of delight and horror makes him a type of creature-cam for the carnival of humanity within which he makes a living. He plunges in where the rest of us would rather shy away, returning with jewel-like insights and wisdom.

As a non-Bengali with a mere tourist-level fondness for Calcutta, I found the Bangla-inflected dialogue annoying. For me, Imogen came across as the most relatable character. All the other non-browns were too Central Casting to take seriously. One of them develops a forbidden passion for spicy street food—and survives!—while I passed out from the sheer unlikelihood.

Reading *Great Eastern Hotel* is like being plugged into multiple levels of consciousness through all available orifices. A wild romp that ends with the scent of river water in your nose and the breath of a flute in your ears. ■

-Manjula Padmanabhan

A Writer's World

ACHAL MISHRA'S *CHAAR PHOOL HAIN AUR DUNIYA HAI* IS AN INTIMATE PORTRAIT OF THE NOTED HINDI WRITER VINOD KUMAR SHUKLA

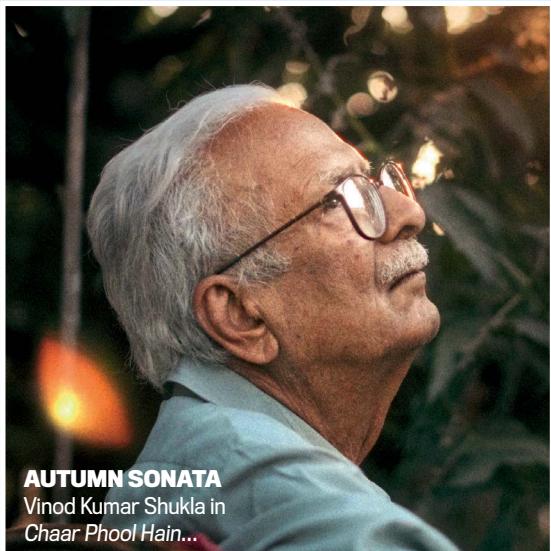
Back in 2022, when actor Manav Kaul asked Achal Mishra to tag along for his meeting with renowned author Vinod Kumar Shukla at his home in Raipur, he knew a film could come out of it. "I went over-prepared," Mishra tells INDIA TODAY. The filmmaker carried two cameras, tripods and an entire lot of sound-recording

recipient of the PEN/ Nabokov Award for International Literature.

As it turned out, a film did emerge from the two afternoons that Mishra and Kaul spent with the writer. In the gentle *Chaar Phool Hain Aur Duniya Hai*, Mishra, who also shot, edited, and produced the film, paints an intimate portrait of Shukla as an artist whose art consumes and nourishes him. The

India, attempts something similar in his first documentary, drawing a connection between Shukla's home and his artistry.

In the two years that it took to edit the film, Mishra was certain about one thing: he didn't want it to end up as a career highlight reel of the writer. "The idea was a viewer could find something new in the film, even if you had followed Shukla's work closely or knew nothing about him." The filmmaker's



AUTUMN SONATA

Vinod Kumar Shukla in
Chaar Phool Hain...



AN AWESTRUCK MISHRA SAYS FOR LONG PERIODS OF THEIR MEETING, HE COULD NOT SHOOT. "I ENDED UP JUST LISTENING"

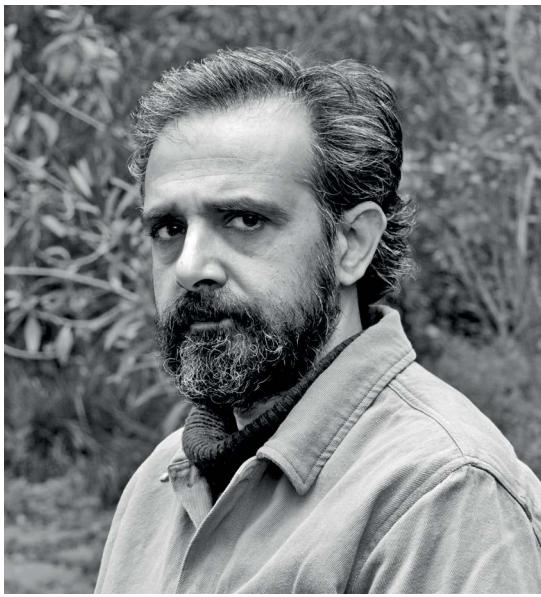


equipment. But fate had other plans. For a significant portion of the day, he found himself unable to shoot anything as he turned into a starstruck fan whenever Shukla, the 2024 Jnanpith award winner and now 88, started speaking. "I ended up just listening," he says. Mishra couldn't believe his luck—that he was in the same room as one of Hindi's greatest living writers and, incidentally, also the only Indian re-

54-minute documentary is built largely around conversations and anecdotes—right from Shukla's middle-aged son offering perspective on Shukla's fertile imagination to Kaul prodding the 88-year-old writer about the length and breadth of his creative imagination. Mishra, who previously found acclaim helming *Gamak Ghar* (2019) and *Dhuin* (2022), films that wrestled with the spaces and faces of small-town

decision to release *Chaar Phool Hain...* on MUBI—after premiering the film at the Dharamshala International Film Festival last year—stemmed from a similar desire for accessibility. "I wanted this film to reach as many people as possible." Still, aware of the limitations presented by an online streaming platform, Mishra has figured a foolproof way to ensure anyone can watch the film: make it available on YouTube at some point. ■

— Poulomi Das



CLEAR NOTES Amit Dutta and a still from the animated biopic, *Rhythm of a Flower*



CINEMA

THE TEXTURE OF THOUGHT

Amit Dutta's animated documentary on the life of classical singer **Kumar Gandharva** eschews a conventional narrative structure



Experimental filmmaker Amit Dutta is a work-horse. His new film, *Rhythm of a Flower*, an 81-minute animated biopic of singing legend Kumar Gandharva, was part of the International Film Festival Rotterdam in February, after winning the Golden Gateway Award at the Mumbai Film Festival last year. In March, *Stream-Story*, Dutta's documentary on the streams of the Kangra Valley in Himachal Pradesh, and how they sustain the life and culture of the locals,

premiered at the Cinéma du Réel in Paris. The same month, a book of Dutta's Dogri-language poems, translated into English, was published. A book of letters on filmmaking for children in Hindi and an English-language children's book are on the way.

Categorisations of Dutta as the country's best filmmaker Indians are not aware of, with their myth-making of a reclusive genius, belie his rigorous work ethic. "I love working—it's what keeps me going," says the 47-year-old filmmaker. "I don't think I've taken a single break in years. I work quickly, but some projects, like books, require slow, sustained

effort. For example, these books were conceived at different times over 5–6 years ago, yet, by coincidence, they are all arriving in the same year."

Dutta's films, revered internationally, but unreleased in India, eschew narrative or plot. Instead, they rely on "rhythm, structure, and the texture of thought—things that are often associated with literature". *Rhythm of a Flower* unfolds with seemingly disconnected and dreamlike imagery depicting

Besides
RHYTHM OF A FLOWER, Amit Dutta has another documentary,
Stream-Story, that premiered at the Cinéma du Réel

ing Gandharva's life in an impressionistic manner, while Dutta's narration runs in the background like a prose poem.

Not that Dutta does not want to make a film with narrative. "To give you the most honest answer, I've never been able to find a

producer or secure funding for a narrative film in the way I would like to make one," he says.

But alongside this desire, Dutta is fascinated with film as a language in itself, and doesn't see it as just a tool to turn words into images. "I want to probe the mystery of cinema, to understand how images and sounds create meaning beyond just storytelling," he says. "This second impulse often disrupts conventional narrative, leading me to reconfigure it in search of something more elusive."

Dutta's films are famously inaccessible in India, unless they are made available online for a short while (as MUBI did five years ago) or eager cinephiles decide to get resourceful. "I've always believed that the kind of films I make, and the subjects I choose, will naturally find their audience," he says. "Especially with the arrival of the internet, I've felt that anyone who is truly interested in such films will somehow find a way to see them." ■

—Devarsi Ghosh

[MUSIC]

KEYNOTES

With his upcoming EP, Canadian-Punjabi music producer **Gminxr** is getting ready to face the spotlight

“I

thought, maybe people have forgotten me,” says Gminxr, about his appearance at the Mumbai leg of the multi-city Zomaland festival in February this year. “But I was definitely wrong. They have not, and they’re excited for what’s next.” The Canadian-Punjabi music producer tells INDIA TODAY exactly what’s next: his debut EP *Hit List*, which will be released this month by Warner Music’s South Asian music-focused sub-label 91 North Records.

The five-song *Hit List*, a collaborative effort made with singer and rapper Tegi Pannu and the pop duo Zehr Vibe, is the first collection as a lead artist from

Gminxr, who is best known as the beatmaker behind A.P. Dhillon, Gurinder Gill and Shinda Kahlon’s breakthrough hits ‘Brown Munde’ and ‘Insane’. Much like his work with Dhillon and his former crew, Gminxr’s tunes on *Hit List* are infused with elements of R&B and hip-hop, with the Afrobeats-influenced ‘Celine’ likely to be a favourite. He made the track especially for fans in Mumbai, which he believes is a “rhythm city” where the crowds are “a little louder and the stage shakes a little bit more”.

While he thrives on the energy of the audience—like he did at Zomaland—Gminxr has mostly stayed away from the spotlight, not even revealing his real name, Gagundep Singh Randhawa, until recently. He adopted the moniker Gminxr because the majority of his hits are in the key of G minor.



[MUSIC]

SINGING FROM EXPERIENCE

Singer-songwriter Ditty’s second solo album—KALI—covers themes with contemporary relevance

The personal is never far from the political in the music of folk singer/songwriter Ditty. “My experiences are a starting point to speak about larger issues,” says the Delhi-raised, Berlin-based artist whose recently released second solo album *KALI* covers themes such as colourism (“Kali”), consumerism (“Money”), ecological conservation (“Azadi”) and global conflict (“Duniya”).



“I really enjoy singing about topics like capitalism or the climate because they are things you can’t always speak about and have conversations about,” says Ditty, among the handful of Indian musicians to have staged carbon-neutral tours. In 2021, she put out the album *Rain Is Coming* as part of the trio Faraway Friends, a project that emerged out of her work with the German water rights NGO Viva con Agua.



YASH PARDESHI

**GMINXR'S TUNES
ON HIT LIST ARE
INFUSED WITH
ELEMENTS OF R&B
AND HIP-HOP, WITH
THE AFROBEATS-
INFLUENCED
'CELINE' LIKELY TO
BE A FAVOURITE**



he hopes to put out this year. The others include Jassa Dhillon, Jordan Sandhu, Sukha and Sultaan, besides Pannu and Zehr Vibe, who he vibed with so well in the studio that he decided to share *Hit List* first.

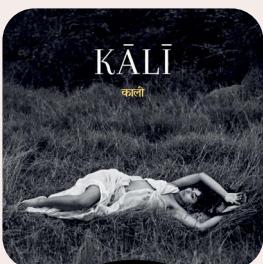
The trio dished out the entire EP over a single 10-hour recording session. "Instantaneously, I was playing a melody, Grewal [from Zehr Vibe] was writing a verse, and Teji was composing something," says Gminxr, who realised things were going well when he got goosebumps. "Even back in the day with AP, I knew we had a hit when the hairs on my arm stood up. That's what happened with this EP." ■

-Amit Gurbaxani

Most of *KALI*, which includes the five songs that comprised her 2024 EP *Skin*, was made after she went through a particularly "intense" period in her life. Within the span of a year, she had immigrated to Germany; got married; and dealt with a serious illness. She sought comfort in the familiar. "Once I moved here, I [started] missing everything [about India] so much [that] I found solace in my language," says Ditty, who wrote the lyrics for three

of *KALI*'s tunes either partially or entirely in Hindi.

The album's most striking song is the title track on which she addresses the systemic racism she's faced in both her birth and adopted homelands. "Hoon main Kali," she sings on the chorus before repeating the word "Kali" by stretching it out and then following it with a series of "la la la" vocables. As a result, the line simultaneously sounds like a statement of fact and a declaration of resilience.



The album's title track addresses the systemic racism Ditty faced in both her birth and adopted homelands

"I've worked really hard on undoing the violence done to me," says Ditty, recalling how, when she was a child, she would frequently hear her grandmothers say that it would be difficult for her to find a husband because of her complexion. "The word 'kali' has such a profound meaning. It's also the name of a goddess. That one would use it so frivolously and as a kind of bad word... I wanted to turn that around and say, I am Kali." ■

-Amit Gurbaxani

Danseuse with a Difference

KATHAK MAESTRO AND PADMA SHRI
RECIPIENT **SHOVANA NARAYAN**
ON HER NEW DANCE PRODUCTION,
ANUTTAR, AND MORE

Q. What is the thought behind your dance production *Anuttar*?

Through its three acts—'Akhir Kyon', 'Shakuni' and 'Toota Yeh Vishwas Kyon'—*Anuttar* subtly stirs the collective consciousness of society. It highlights the struggles faced by women, the girl child and marginalised LGBTQ+ sections of society, especially the trans community.

Q. Haven't social themes been central to your dance productions from the beginning of your career?

In 1982, I presented a dance on environmental degradation when nobody even discussed the issue. I have also covered themes like bonded labour and abuse of women in my work. The approach isn't sermonising, yet it sends a strong message to the audience.

Q. What's your take on the representation of kathak in Indian cinema?

It pains me to see the Techno Kathak of today. The reach of Bollywood is much more and it's quicker too. When you show them something repeatedly, people will believe it. For instance, kathak in Indian films has always been shown to happen in kothas (pleasure houses). Even in its most traditional format, it's a living temple dance form.



Q. What will be your next steps?

Kathak has been my language of expression since I was three years old. I don't follow trends but take up things that affect me deeply. Besides my production *Anuttar*, I have a packed calendar with shows in multiple cities. *Ramayana in World Art and Thought*, an anthology edited by me with contributions by 16 eminent writers, was published in February.

—with Geetika Sachdev

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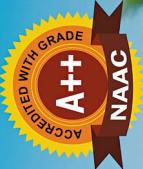
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