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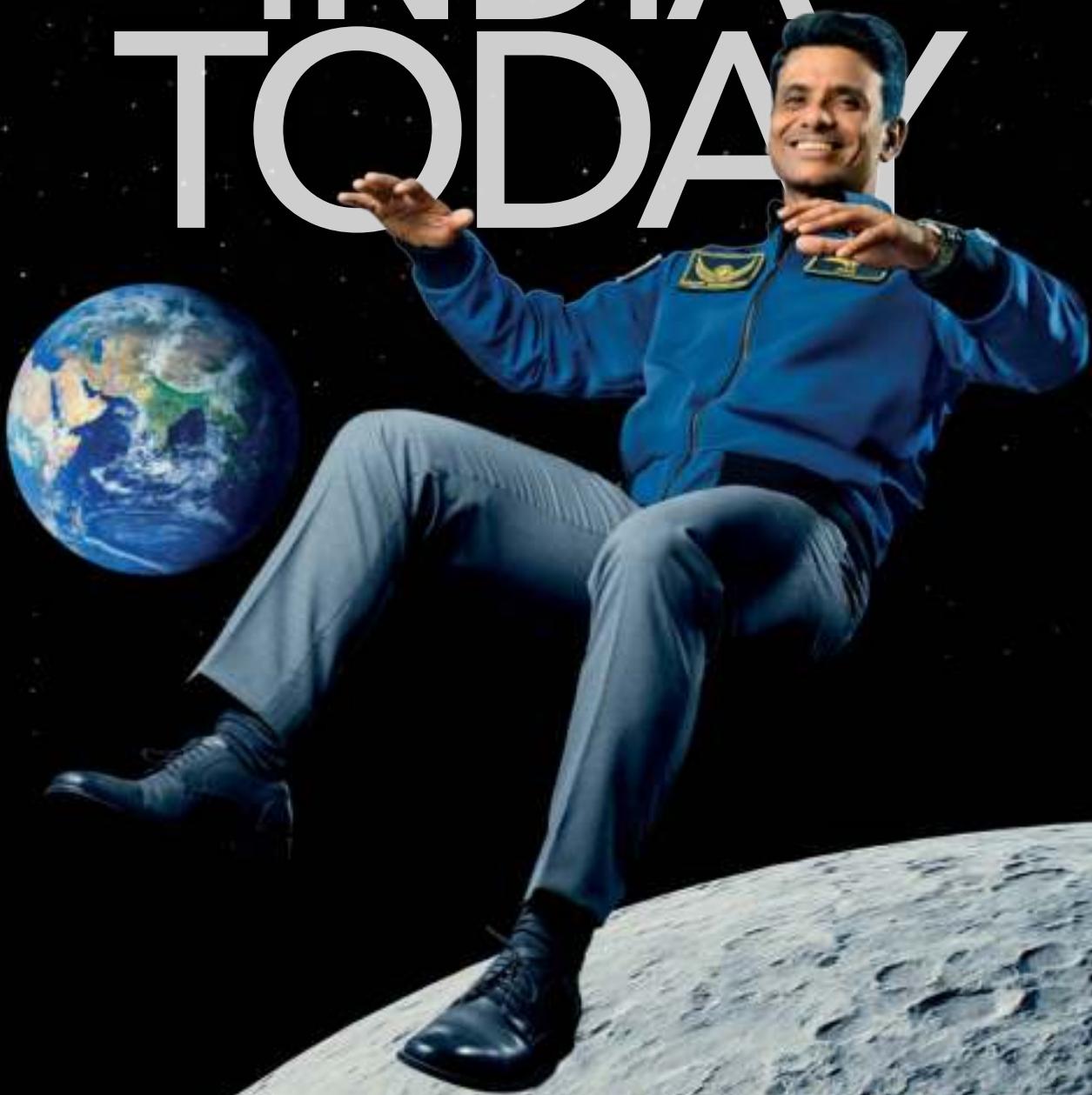
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INDIA TODAY

**EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW**

**“I WOULD LIKE TO
STEP ON THE MOON”**

**ASTRONAUT SHUBHANSHU SHUKLA SPEAKS ABOUT HIS
PATHBREAKING JOURNEY INTO SPACE AND HIS PLANS AHEAD**



INDIA TODAY MAGAZINE ON THE WEB

COVER STORY: SHUBHANSHU SHUKLA

"I WOULD LIKE TO STEP ON THE MOON"

Astronaut Shubhanshu Shukla speaks about his pathbreaking journey into space and his plans ahead

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FROM THE EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

As astronaut Shubhanshu Shukla landed in Delhi back in August after his historic journey in space, there was a flutter of excitement across the country. He met the prime minister and held press conferences. But there is still great curiosity about his experience and many unanswered questions. In this issue, we bring you those answers. Straight from Shux, as he is called, in an exclusive, full-length interview with Group Editorial Director Raj Chengappa, a space chronicler since Rakesh Sharma's 1984 mission. He has also written on Kalpana Chawla and Sunita Williams. Together, they tease out not just the science and the adventure, but the inner transformation an astronaut undergoes while floating in outer space. "I would sit by the window and stare at Earth for hours. No thoughts, no worries, no questions. Time stops," Shux says. "You realise everything, everyone you know, all of history, happened there. You feel your insignificance."

When Shukla floated across the open hatch of SpaceX's Crew Dragon shuttle into the vast interiors of the International Space Station (ISS), he inscribed his own chapter in history. If Rakesh Sharma was the first Indian in space in 1984, Shukla became the second, but with a distinction. He was the first Indian to live and work on the ISS, conducting experiments in an orbiting laboratory that has been humanity's joint venture since 2000. Some 285 astronauts from 23 countries had been there before him, yet Shukla's journey had a special resonance. It was India's first step into a future that promises to be much larger. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has cleared a bold and wholly India-driven space exploration calendar. At the heart of it is Gaganyaan, India's maiden human spaceflight that the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) has scheduled for 2027. Shukla, one of four Indian Air Force test pilots shortlisted for the mission, was in effect on reconnaissance, scouting for a nation.

The next step promises to be even more of a milestone. By 2035, India plans to have its own Bharatiya Antariksh Station, which will be only the third space station in orbit after the ISS and China's ongoing Tiangong programme. By 2040, the target is more

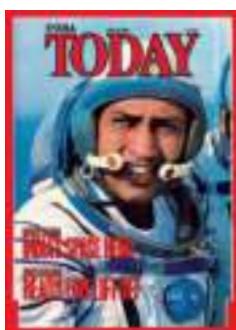
audacious still: to place an Indian on the Moon, on an Indian spacecraft. ISRO picked Shukla for the Axiom-4 mission precisely to gain the first-hand experience that will feed these coming human spaceflights. It cost \$500 million, but what he brought back is priceless. No simulator can replicate what he went through: the compression of sitting atop 400,000 kg of rocket fuel as a Falcon-9 roared skyward, the docking with the ISS, the days in microgravity, the re-entry. Nor the seven experiments he conducted in orbit, including one on stem cells and muscle degeneration, which could reshape medical science here on Earth.



▲ Jul. 14, 2025



▲ Jan. 13, 2003



▲ Apr. 30, 1984

Shukla's voyage lasted 20 days, longer than Sharma's week in space, with 18 days on board the ISS, which he jokingly calls a "6BHK in size". A fighter pilot used to dizzying altitudes, he discovered a new scale of awe. From 400 km above Earth, orbiting at 28,000 kmph and circling the planet 16 times a day, he saw what few ever will: our blue world suspended in the void. His descriptions slake our wonder and curiosity. How does one eat in near-zero gravity? What do you do to stop your lunch from floating? How does the body react to prolonged weightlessness? What does it take to sleep while tethered to a wall? And beyond the practical, the philosophical: what is it like to see all of human history compressed into that orb beneath? How does it feel to gaze at Earth and know that all of civilisation rests on that fragile sphere?

At 40, Shux is already shaping a new generation's imagination. His story urges young Indians to dream of space, science and discovery. He admits he was reluctant to return, his mind already on India's first Moon mission.

"I tell the kids, maybe one of you will

walk on the Moon. But I will be fighting you for it," he laughs. For now, enjoy this sparkling interview with the man who brought outer space a little closer home. And a Happy Diwali!



(Aroon Purie)

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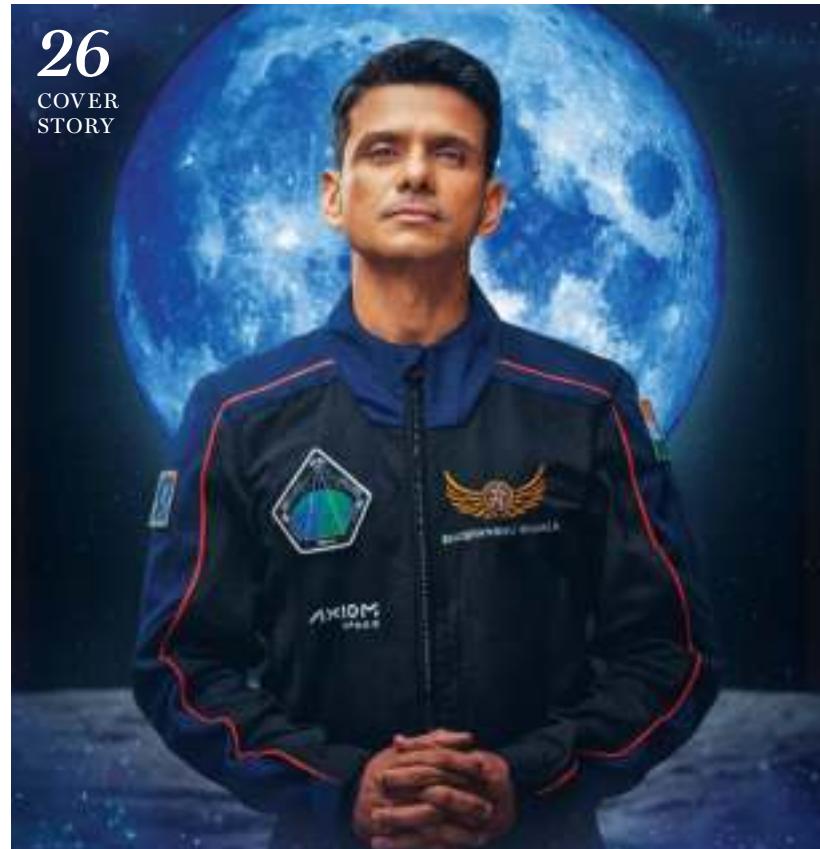
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UPFRONT

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**TESTING
TIMES**
Noel Tata,
Chairman,
Tata Trusts

► TATA TRUSTS

THE TRUST DEFICIT

The Centre has sought to bridge the rift among the trustees, but the discord within Tata Trusts is unlikely to abate anytime soon

By M.G. ARUN

THE MOOD WAS SOMBRE AT THE BOARD MEETING OF TATA TRUSTS ON OCTOBER 10. Just three days earlier, a few key trustees, including chairman Noel Tata, had been summoned to New Delhi—along with Tata Group chairman N. Chandrasekaran—for a meeting with Union home minister Amit Shah and finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman. It was dispute resolution time—at least, a visible attempt had to be made, so as to calm the waters.

Tata Trusts is the philanthropic arm of the Rs 16 lakh crore Tata Group, embodying a century-old legacy. But it also has a key oversight role in corporate governance by virtue of controlling 66 per cent of Tata Sons, the group's holding company. And of late, there had been widening differences among the members of Tata Trusts—over board appointments in Tata Sons, as also its proposed listing. The discord, spilling from the boardroom into the public domain, risked paralysing decision-making across the 157-year-old salt-to-software conglomerate and unnerving investors at home and abroad. Already, the 29 listed Tata companies had lost Rs 6.6 lakh crore in market capitalisation this year, partly due to the US curbs on H1B visas that hit shares of flagship Tata Consultancy Services (TCS) particularly hard.

INSIDE TATA TRUSTS

The Philanthropic Powerhouse Behind The Tata Empire

The October 10 board meeting was far quieter than anticipated, following the Centre's directive to resolve internal disputes amicably and behind closed doors. In a notable departure from routine, the venue shifted from the Trusts' Cuffe Parade headquarters to the Taj Mahal Hotel in Colaba—seen as an effort to escape unnecessary media attention.

Chairman Noel Tata and trustees Venu Srinivasan (chairman emeritus, TVS Motor Company), Mehli Mistry (director, M. Pallonji Group, and cousin of the late Cyrus Mistry, former Tata Group chairman) and Pramit Jhaveri (former Citibank CEO) attended in person. Vijay Singh, former defence secretary and long-time Tata loyalist, and Jehangir H.C. Jehangir, chairman of Jehangir Hospital, Pune, joined virtually. Darius Khambata, another trustee and senior lawyer, was reportedly absent. There was little on the agenda beyond routine matters—the board reviewed and cleared philanthropic projects worth Rs 1,100 crore.

THE RISE OF THE FACTIONS

However, the calm at that meeting belied the turbulence of the preceding days. The 133-year-old Tata Trusts—which usually operates away from the public eye, quietly steering the Tata Group from behind the scenes—had witnessed a string of unprecedented developments barely a year after chairman emeritus Ratan Tata's passing in October 2024. Tensions between two factions of trustees had been simmering for months: one led by Noel, with Srinivasan and Vijay Singh in his corner, and the other by Mistry, backed by Jhaveri, Jehangir and Khambata. The latest flashpoint concerned the reappointment of Singh, 77, also vice-chairman of the Trusts' board, to the board of Tata Sons. According to the Tata Sons Articles of Association (AoA), Tata Trusts has the right to nominate one-third of the company's directors—a coveted privilege, since such nominees hold veto power on key decisions under Article 121.

While Noel and Srinivasan are already nominee directors on the Tata Sons board (alongside Chandrasekaran, Harish Manwani, Anita M. George and



Mehli Mistry
Vijay Singh



RD Tata Trust, JRD and Thelma J. Tata Trust, Sarvajanik Seva Trust etc.

LEADERSHIP: Noel Tata serves as chairman, other trustees are Venu Srinivasan, Vijay Singh, Jimmy N. Tata, Jehangir H.C. Jehangir, Mehli Mistry, Darius Khambata (common to both key trusts) and Pramit Jhaveri (Sir Dorabji only)

KEY DIVIDE: Tensions between the Noel Tata and Mehli Mistry factions over reappointment of Vijay Singh to the Tata Sons board; differences among trustees over the public listing of Tata Sons

ORIGINS: Traced to 1892 with the creation of the JN Tata Endowment for Higher Education by Jamsetji Tata

HOLDINGS: Control a 66% stake in Tata Sons, the holding company of the Rs 16 lakh crore Tata Group

CORE ENTITIES: The two principal trusts are the Sir Dorabji Tata Trust and the Sir Ratan Tata Trust. Together, they disbursed around Rs 700 crore in grants during FY24

ALLIED TRUSTS: Lady Tata Memorial Trust, JRD Tata Trust, Jamsetji Tata Trust, Tata Social Welfare Trust, Tata Education Trust,

Saurabh Agrawal), the Noel faction's effort to reappoint Vijay Singh was blocked by the rival camp in a September 11 meeting, citing Singh's advanced age. Singh has reportedly since resigned from the Tata Sons board.

Tata Sons directors are required to retire at 65, although non-executive directors may continue until 70. This rule was relaxed for Ratan Tata, who stepped down at 75 in 2012, and again for Chandrasekaran, whose second term as chairman, originally set to end in 2027 when he turns 65, has been ex-

tended by five years to ensure "continuity". Following Ratan Tata's death last year, Tata Trusts decided that its nominees on the Tata Sons board who cross 75 would need to seek reappointment annually. Having successfully blocked Singh's reappointment, the rival faction reportedly sought to place Mehli Mistry in his stead—a move opposed by the Noel faction, further deepening the boardroom divide.

The infighting over board positions has left a bitter taste among the trustees. Both factions claim to carry

forward Ratan Tata's legacy, insisting their approach best reflects the group's ethos. In a media interview, Vijay Singh described the very idea of voting at Tata Trusts as "unprecedented". "Ratan Tata was very firm that there should always be consensus and unanimity on issues... and perhaps we are now in a different era," he said, referring to the four trustees, including Mistry, who blocked his reappointment to the Tata Sons board.

The dispute has revived memories of Ratan Tata's own legal battle with Cyrus Mistry, who was ousted as Tata group chairman in a boardroom coup in October 2016. Cyrus had sought legal recourse, but the Supreme Court in 2021 upheld Tata Sons' board decision to remove him. Notably, Noel is married to Cyrus's sister, Aloo Mistry.

Some argue that Mehli Mistry, brought in as a trustee by Ratan Tata in 2018, is the rightful candidate for the Tata Sons board, given his majority support. If that chorus gains strength, tensions within Tata Trusts are likely to simmer for a long time. "When there is a difference of opinion, the majority decision prevails," says H.P. Ranina, a senior Supreme Court advocate. "Mistry has the support of the majority and should be appointed to the Tata Sons board."

Ranina underscores Mistry's dedication: "He is the only trustee devoting substantial time to the various trusts, without taking any commensurate remuneration. These trusts manage thousands of crores in assets." Moreover, Ranina claims, Mistry remains fully aligned with the principles laid down by Ratan Tata for the group. "He is a man of strong principles, forthright and possesses impeccable integrity, honesty and dedication," he adds. By contrast, Noel already juggles multiple responsibilities as chairman of several Tata Group companies, including Trent, Tata International and Voltas.

THE PUBLIC LISTING DIVIDE

Another point of contention is the public listing of Tata Sons. The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) had classified Tata Sons as an upper-layer non-banking financial company (NBFC) in 2022 due to its


The absence of a proper succession plan in the Tata Group is taking its toll.... Noel Tata was parachuted into the system. Others may not care about him

J.N. GUPTA

Founder & MD, Stakeholders Empowerment Services

WHEN THERE IS A DIFFERENCE OF OPINION, THE MAJORITY DECISION PREVAILS.
MEHLI MISTRY HAS THE SUPPORT OF THE MAJORITY...

H.P. RANINA

Supreme Court advocate



heavy borrowings and big investments in group companies. This requires it to go public. It is learnt that some trustees fear that an initial public offering (IPO) could dilute their veto powers and expose the company to takeover risks and stricter governance rules.

The RBI's deadline for Tata Sons to go public ended on September 30. The company had already surrendered its NBFC licence in August 2024 and was awaiting the RBI's final decision to de-register itself, assuring the central bank it would continue as a debt-free holding company. To this end, Tata Sons has already repaid Rs 20,300 crore in debt.

Meanwhile, the Shaporji Pallonji (SP) Group, which holds an 18.37 per cent stake in Tata Sons, spoke up again on October 10 in favour of public listing. The family-owned SP Group is helmed by the late Cyrus Mistry's brother

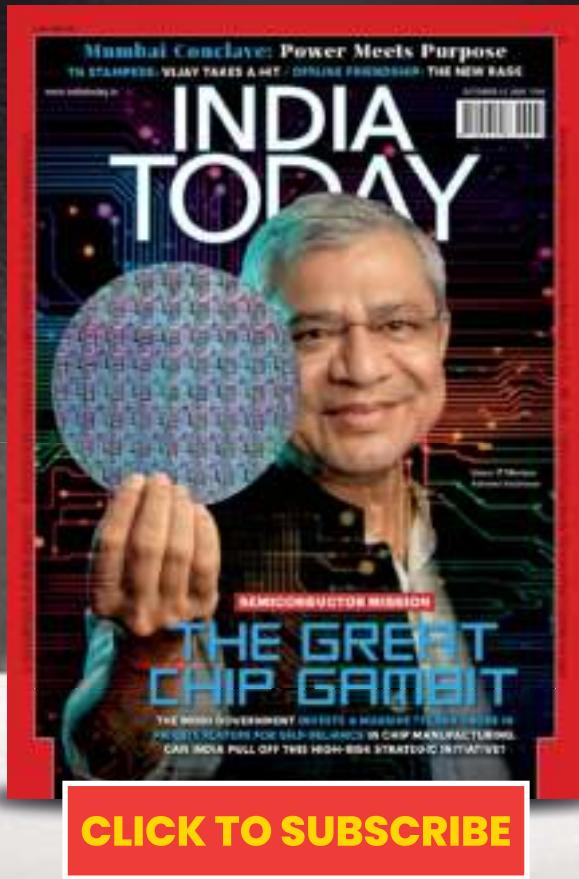
Shapor Mistry. According to them, this move would "not only uphold the spirit of transparency envisioned by its founding father, Shri Jamsetji Tata, but also strengthen trust among all stakeholders—employees, investors and the people of India".

The SP Group added that Tata Trusts stands to benefit significantly from the move. "A transparent and publicly accountable Tata Sons would pave the way for a robust and equitable dividend policy, thereby ensuring sustained inflows to the trusts. These funds can then be dedicated to the welfare of the poor and the service of our great nation," it said in a media statement. For the SP Group, burdened with about Rs 60,000 crore in debt and repayments of Rs 10,645 crore due by December, the Tata Sons' listing is critical. Having reportedly pledged its entire stake as collateral, the group hopes the public offering will unlock value for a future stake sale to ease its debt load.

J.N. Gupta, founder & MD of the corporate governance research and advisory firm Stakeholders Empowerment Services, sees the entire conflict as a symptom of deeper issues. "The absence of a proper succession plan is taking its toll," he says. "The philosophy of the Tatas has always been philanthropy, but they never seemed to anticipate a time when the family hold through the old guard would no longer be there." According to Gupta, Noel was parachuted into the system, and others may not care about him. "Unless the issue of succession is clearly sorted, there would be a struggle for control," he adds. "The trustees have a public duty. The issues at Tata Trusts should be ironed out, else it will begin to harm its beneficiaries, i.e. the downtrodden." Tata Trusts did not reply to questions sent on the matter.

The battle for control has exposed the fault lines in a group long regarded as a model of corporate governance and transparency. Resolving these tensions will require careful effort from the trustees, the Tata Group management and the key families involved to ensure the group upholds its legacy and continues to positively impact the lives of millions of Indians. ■

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THEIR MASTER'S VOICE

Pahlaj Nihalani's *Har Ghar Modi* music video in 2014 did not just make the headlines but later also propelled him to the post of Central Board of Film Certification chairperson. Now, composers **Meet Bros** have decided to do an encore with *Modi Hai Toh Mumkin Hai*, highlighting the prime minister's many achievements. Uploaded on the T-Series' YouTube channel on September 22, the song largely went unnoticed until social media mavens began to call out actors like **Rajkummar Rao, Vikrant Massey, Varun Dhawan** and **Arshad Warsi** in early October for their seemingly sycophantic turns in the video. The comments section has also not been kind with comparisons harking back to a time when actors appeared in public service music videos calling for unity such as '*Mile Sur Mera Tumhara*' and other such.

Illustrations by **SIDDHANT JUMDE**

▼ META ECLIPSE

AKHILESH GAGGED

For a few hours on October 10, Samajwadi Party chief **Akhilesh Yadav** found himself digitally blanked out when his Facebook account, which has over 8.5 million followers, vanished. As expected, it created an uproar, with the party accusing the BJP of using "backdoor pressure to muzzle opposition voices". FB later restored the account, saying the posts were flagged under "adult sexual



exploitation and violence". Akhilesh claims the takedown came after his post on the violent goings-on in Uttar Pradesh, including a journalist's murder and a woman's suspicious death in Ballia. Union minister for IT Ashwini Vaishnav has vehemently denied any government involvement. However, by then, SP workers had gone to town about the "digital censorship" under the BJP, a narrative that, unlike the FB account, will not be taken down so easily.

VASAVA VS VASAVA

Six-term Bharuch MP and BJP veteran **Mansukh Vasava's** envy over the growing clout of a younger Vasava—AAP's Chhota Udepur MLA **Chaitar Vasava**—has finally spilled into the open. At a recent presser, a livid Mansukh accused party colleague and Nandod MLA Darshana Deshmukh of dangling "lollipops" to lure Chaitar into the BJP, a move, he claimed, was aimed at undercutting him on his own turf. Darshana has brushed off the charge, and Chaitar has mocked "the drama", but the spat has laid bare the chaos within the Gujarat BJP's tribal unit.



The Lion in Winter



Four years after falling vacant in February 2021, J&K is set to fill its four Rajya Sabha seats on October 24. A notable absence will be National Conference president **Farooq Abdullah**, 88, whose waning health pushed him to step down. The ruling NC nominated three members, leaving one 'unsafe' seat to ally Congress (which declined the offer). Abdullah Sr, who first entered Parliament in 1980, is still a voice that counts and a cushion for son and J&K CM Omar in his run-ins with New Delhi.

ROYAL FIGHT

Gonda BJP MP and Union minister **Kirti Vardhan Singh** wears many hats. But now the titular raja of Uttar Pradesh's Mankapur also seems keen on managing the Awadh region's internal affairs. Earlier this month, he was elected president of the Anjuman-e-Hind-e-Awadh—an association of former Awadhi aristocrats including 322 taluqdars and erstwhile royal families—succeeding his father Anand Singh, who led it for 28 years. In a closely watched contest held in Lucknow, Kirti defeated Jayendra Pratap Singh of the Balrampur royal family by 130 votes. Guess it's time to take out the silverware for the coronation party.



Kaushik Deka with Suhani Singh, Avaneesh Misra, Jumana Shah, Kaleem Geelani and Rahul Noronha

HEALTH WATCH

By Sonali Acharjee

GUT FEELING CSIR BETS ON MICROBES TO HEAL CHRONIC ILLS

What if your gut could hold the key to curing chronic disease? India's premier science body, the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR), certainly thinks so. In a landmark project, CSIR scientists are

into a diagnostic gold-mine. It's a bold step towards what could be India's own gut-driven revolution in precision medicine.

"Western microbiome data can't explain Indian health patterns; our food, climate and genes are just too dif-



mapping how trillions of microbes living inside us could be used to diagnose and even treat disorders like IBD, acne, liver disease and even Parkinson's—and without a single invasive test.

The project—led by CSIR-IMTECH, Chandigarh—aims to decode the microbial 'signatures' that mark different diseases. Using next-gen sequencing and AI, researchers plan to turn something as simple as a stool sample

ferent," says Dr Rashmi Kumar, who heads the IMTECH team. That's why CSIR is building a vast Indian microbiome database, mapping how diet, pollution and even geography shape gut health. If it works, the outcome could be transformative: personalised probiotics, diet-based therapies, and fewer painful tests. For once, "trust your gut" might be more than a metaphor—it could be the future of Indian healthcare.

▼ VIEWPOINT

PREPARING INDIA FOR AN AI ECONOMY

While millions of job losses are expected, the new tech can enable the creation of many more high-impact jobs



BY B.V.R.
SUBRAHMANYAM
and DEBJANI
GHOSH

AI is already reshaping jobs—coding, testing, customer support and data operations are among the first to feel the shift. Every technological revolution, from the printing press to computerisation, began with fear and ended with greater opportunity. AI will be no different. The real question is not if change will come, but how fast we can prepare for it.

Across India's \$245 billion tech and customer experience (CX) sectors, automation is driving 15-20 per cent of productivity gains today, likely to rise to 50 per cent by 2030. Roles such as Level-1 support staff and junior developers will shrink. If we remain on a business-as-usual path, up to 2 million jobs may be displaced by 2031.

But this is only half the story. A new world of work is emerging—the once-standard categories of 'developer' or 'support engineer' are giving way to a web of hyper-specialised roles across three clusters. Firstly, professionals with Enterprise AI skills, meaning those who can deploy and manage AI systems in organisations. These include AI DevOps engineers, prompt designers and model auditors. The second cluster involves innovators with Frontier AI skills, those who are pushing the boundaries of science and technology, such as quantum-AI engineers, neuro-haptic designers and data ethicists. The third group is the researchers working on AI-for-AI skills, creating the next generation of intelligent systems: foundation-model developers, reinforcement-learning engineers and agentic-AI architects.

A key shift to recognise is that while the roles most at risk of displacement—such as data entry or routine



Illustration by RAJ VERMA

WE MUST RETRAIN TALENT TO USE AI FLUENTLY AND RESPONSIBLY, TO CONNECT DOTS AND NOT JUST MEMORISE THEM

testing—employed millions, each of the new AI-era roles may employ only hundreds or thousands today. However, taken together, they represent a far larger opportunity than the past. This is the inflection point for talent: the strategic pivot from fewer repetitive jobs to many more high-value, high-impact ones.

This shift calls for a fundamental rethinking of how we build talent. The first priority is AI fluency for all: every student and worker must understand how to use AI responsibly. Equally important is interdisciplinary thinking: future roles will sit at the intersection of fields—like biology with data, or economics with ethics. We must train people to connect dots, not just memorise them. Another new reality is that skills now have short shelf lives, so continuous reskilling is the name of the game. Careers will depend on continuous

learning, not one-time degrees. Finally, human-machine complementarity will be critical. As AI takes over logic-based tasks, the uniquely human skills of empathy, creativity and ethical reasoning will become our comparative advantage.

India has 9 million tech professionals—the world's largest digital talent pool—yet readiness for the AI economy remains uneven. Meanwhile, global competitors are not losing time—Saudi Arabia has trained 770,000 people in AI, Singapore funds 100 projects a year and the UAE runs the world's first AI university. India cannot afford delay.

If we act decisively, our tech and CX workforce could expand from 9 million today to 13 million by 2031, making India the global epicentre of AI talent and services. But this requires coherence. Multiple ministries and agencies are currently running isolated initiatives. What's missing is convergence, speed and shared accountability.

That's why NITI Aayog's Roadmap for Job Creation in the AI Economy calls for a unified India AI Talent Mission, which is a whole-of-government effort to equip, retain and empower India's AI workforce through three pillars, namely: embedding AI fluency across schools and universities, building a national AI skilling engine to reskill millions for new-age roles, and becoming a global AI talent magnet through research infrastructure, fellowships and incentives.

In tandem, this must align with the IndiaAI Mission, which provides the enabling layers of computing, datasets and open-source AI resources—turning trained talent into innovators. ■

Subrahmanyam is CEO, and Ghosh a Distinguished Fellow at NITI Aayog



ELLINGTON PROPERTIES UNVEILS SOTO GRANDE, A NEW RESIDENTIAL LANDMARK IN AL HAMRA, RAS AL KHAIMAH



- The development features two residential volumes connected by a distinctive bridge, a bold architectural gesture symbolising balance, connection, and community
- Ras Al Khaimah records AED 700m in FDI in H1 2025, with population set to rise 60% by 2030, driving demand for 45,000 new homes

Ellington Properties, Dubai's leading design-led real estate developer, is preparing to introduce Soto Grande, its newest residential development in Al Hamra, Ras Al Khaimah. This project marks Ellington's expansion into the northern emirates, reinforcing its reputation as a developer redefining lifestyle communities through architecture, design, and curated experiences.

This comes at a time when Ras Al Khaimah is rapidly positioning itself as one of the UAE's fastest-growing real estate destinations. The emirate attracted AED

700 million in foreign direct investment in the first half of 2025 alone, while its population, projected to rise from 400,000 today to 650,000 by 2030, is expected to drive demand for around 45,000 new housing units, reinforcing the appetite for thoughtfully designed residential communities.

Offering a mix of thoughtfully designed studios to spacious four-bedroom apartments and penthouses, Soto Grande introduces a distinctive architectural statement to Al Hamra. Rising as two striking residential volumes connected by a central bridge, the design draws inspiration from the calm of the

sea and the flow of nature. The bridge itself stands as a bold architectural gesture, symbolising balance, belonging, and community, while also providing residents with elevated vantage points across the lagoon, golf course, cityscape, and Arabian Gulf.

Joseph Thomas, Co-Founder of Ellington Properties, said, "With Soto Grande, we wanted to rethink what it means to live in Ras Al Khaimah at a time when the emirate is entering a new phase of growth. For us, architecture is never just about aesthetics; it is about creating a sense of place and identity that people feel proud to call home. The bridge is symbolic of that idea as it is a bold design feature that also represents balance, connection, and belonging. Through this development, we are adding a new chapter to Al Hamra while providing residents a refined living experience rooted in design, community, and the spirit of Ras Al Khaimah."

Soto Grande will offer an elevated living experience through a curated selection of lifestyle amenities. Residents will be welcomed into a hotel-inspired lobby and lounge complemented by concierge services, while a private clubhouse will serve as a hub for dining, entertainment, and social gatherings. Spaces dedicated to wellness include a double-height fitness studio overlooking the pool, a yoga studio with a refreshment bar, and spa-style changing rooms featuring sauna and chromatherapy showers. Leisure extends outdoors with landscaped play zones, a padel court, lap and leisure pools, and an outdoor gym, while families benefit from children's play areas with dedicated facilities. Community life is further enriched by curated art installations and Ellington's signature hospitality fragrance woven throughout public spaces.

Strategically located in Al Hamra, Soto Grande delivers a new benchmark for refined living in Ras Al Khaimah. With its distinctive architecture, curated amenities, and Ellington's design-first ethos, the development introduces a bold new chapter in the emirate's residential landscape.



ART TAKES FLIGHT:

The Soul and Structure of Mumbai Airport's Terminal 2

When Mumbai's Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj International Airport's (CSMIA) Terminal 2 opened on February 12, 2014, it didn't just create infrastructure — it created an experience. Behind its peacock-inspired architecture lies one of the world's largest public art collections, transforming a global gateway into a celebration of India's living heritage and creative future.



For most global travellers, an airport is a pause in motion — a passage between two places. For Mumbai, Terminal 2 (T2) at Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj International Airport is a destination in itself: a stunning blend of design, scale and soul. Spanning 4.7 million square feet and handling up to 55 million passengers annually, T2 stands among the world's most distinctive terminals. Designed by New York's Skidmore, Owings & Merrill (SOM), its architecture draws inspiration from the peacock, India's national bird—with feather motifs subtly reflected in rooflines, columns and lighting. The 11-acre roof, supported by 30 mega-columns, creates a vast, fluid interior. Overhead, 5,698 dichroic lenses and 272 skylights flood the space with prismatic light, turning structure into spectacle.

The Birth of a Cultural Landmark

When India opened its airport sector to private participation in 2006, few imagined a gateway that would also become a gallery. The vision for T2 was to make Mumbai's airport not just efficient, but evocative — not just functional, but emotional.

Stretching 3.2 km, the collection features over 5,500 artefacts and 100+ artworks, making it one of the world's largest public art initiatives.

Curated by Rajeev Sethi, India's pioneering scenographer, the project brings together artisans from across India—from Kanchipuram weavers to West Bengal's terracotta sculptors, Tanjore painters to Kashmiri woodcarvers. Ancient traditions meet modern abstraction; every corridor becomes a canvas of India's creative continuum.

Tune in to the Soul of CSMIA's Terminal 2

The Artbeat of New India Audio Guide App is an immersive audio-visual companion designed to help travellers explore the art treasures displayed across the departure area of T2. Through engaging narration,

the app brings to life the fascinating stories behind each artefact — revealing the creativity, effort and inspiration that shaped this unique museum experience within the vibrant setting of an international airport.



Artists Who Give T2 Its Mojo

The art at CSMIA's T2 brings together some of India's most acclaimed artists across generations. **Anjolie Ela Menon's** iconic figurative style adds emotional depth to the collection, alongside **Nilima Shaikh** and **BV Suresh** landscapes and **G. R. Iranna's** contemplative forms. **Jagannath Panda, Baiju Parthan** and **Mithu Sen** bring bold contemporary voices. Folk and tribal art find equal presence through **Mukul Goyal** with artists **Subhash Vyam, Durgabai Vyam's** Gond motifs and **Shilpa Sangha & Pratik Prabhakar's** Madhubani artform. The breathtaking collection creates a dialogue between classical mastery and modern innovation — transforming T2 into a living museum that mirrors the many Indias of imagination, craft and culture.

A Journey Through India

Moving through T2 is a voyage through time and terrain. The monumental installation "Thresholds of India" showcases carved doors, temple façades and torans — a sculptural archive of architectural diversity. In the arrival corridor, the works of 29 contemporary artists are on display, capturing Mumbai's restless energy. "Recycled Mumbai", made entirely of industrial scrap, maps the city's silhouette — a statement on sustainability.



Every turn reveals a surprise — a folk mask beside a gate, a temple bell suspended mid-air, or 946 lotus chandeliers designed by Sandeep Khosla, symbolising spiritual awakening.

When Design Speaks a Cultural Language

T2's design feels unmistakably Indian yet globally contemporary. Ceiling patterns echo Rangoli, while 78,000 square metres of landscaped gardens and green walls soften its monumental geometry with nature's calm. The result is a seamless synthesis of craft and construction — of memory and modernity.

The Business of Beauty

Globally, airports are cultural markers — from Singapore's Changi to Doha's Hamad International. With T2, India joined that league on its own terms. For the Adani Group, which manages CSMIA, the fusion of art and design aligns perfectly with its vision of nation-building through inspiring infrastructure. Beyond aesthetics, the initiative has revived traditional crafts, empowered hundreds of artisans and positioned Mumbai as a city where commerce meets culture.

A Living Legacy

Maintaining this cultural ecosystem is a complex, continuous effort. Many artefacts are centuries old, preserved by a dedicated conservation team that works tirelessly against time, humidity and footfall.

Where Architecture Becomes Art

- At T2, design and engineering unite seamlessly. The 11-acre mega-roof, held by 30 columns, gives cathedral-like openness. Above, 5,698 dichroic lenses refract light into shifting hues, while 28 major skylights — the largest in Asia — act as natural spotlights for the art below.
- Ceilings echo Rangoli motifs, lotus chandeliers bloom with serenity, and 78,000 sq. m. of gardens host over 100 native plant species. Together, they transform the terminal into a living sculpture — a symphony of structure, light and life.

Highlights You Can't Miss

THRESHOLDS OF INDIA: Monumental carved doors and temple façades embodying India's architectural heritage.

LAYERED NARRATIVES: A 200-metre chronicle of Mumbai's urban rhythm, created by 29 contemporary artists.

RECYCLED MUMBAI: A sustainable sculpture made entirely from repurposed industrial scrap, symbolising rebirth amid chaos.

THE LOTUS CHANDELIERS: A sculpture crafted from industrial scrap, mapping the city's silhouette in metal and wood

Yet the reward is lasting: T2 transforms travel into connection. As sunlight streams through the peacock-feather roof and dances across its sculpted arches, CSMIA's T2 transforms every departure into a moment of arrival — where travel becomes an experience of wonder and renewal. Here, India greets the world not just with glass and steel, but with story, soul and splendour.

STATE SCAN

UP: FREED, KHAN IS ON A POLITICAL HUNT PG 18

KERALA: WHEELS WITHIN DEALS PG 22



ANI

HOME ALONE Cops at the Chandigarh residence of IPS officer Y. Puran Kumar (inset)



► HARYANA

DOUBLE SUICIDE MUDDLE

Two dead cops. Two smoking guns with varying signals. A sordid tale of caste bias and low intrigue unravels among Haryana's top police brass. The stain spreads to society, politics

By Anilesh S. Mahajan

IPS OFFICER Y. PURAN KUMAR wrote his last letter, and sealed it with a bullet—his service pistol turned on himself, on October 7, in his Chandigarh home. That guaranteed his words ricocheted through Haryana's police establishment, bureaucracy and polity, gaining an amplitude his voice was denied while he lived and spoke. In his eight-page 'final note', the Dalit officer detailed years of harassment, humiliation and derailing of his career by seniors.

In short, another iteration of a shockingly familiar tale. At least that's what it looked like till a most bizarre twist was sprung on the plot. On October

14, Sandeep Lather, an Assistant Sub-Inspector in the team probing the suicide, also ended his life, this time with the darkest invective against Kumar!

A COUNTER-SUICIDE

In a video, and in a four-page suicide note, Lather switched around the villains and heroes of Kumar's story—his incriminatory words, alleging corruption and caste bias, were all against the late IPS officer and his IAS officer-wife Amneet

P. Kumar. He claimed to have piles of evidence. But why then would he be driven to suicide, especially since his alleged tormentor was already dead? One line of speculation is that he feared arrest in the case.

Two dead police officers telling tales. Just diametrically opposite ones. Haryana, already struggling

Takeaways



- ➥ Haryana police brass in a flutter as Dalit IPS officer Y. Puran Kumar dies by suicide
- ➥ Amid investigations and heated politics, a second suicide, this time by ASI Sandeep Lather (above), roils the landscape further

to contain the repercussions of the first case, was now reeling. If at all anything came through, it was the sense of a deep rift at the community level—colouring personnel dynamics within the police in violently antagonistic ways, then getting refracted back to society. Lather's agitated Jat village brethren were rushing a cremation, refusing a post-mortem. The politics looked like becoming too hot for any side to handle.

Kumar names his nemesis in his note: Haryana DGP Shatrujeet Singh Kapur, besides Rohtak SP Narendra Bijarniya and 14 others. It also mentions Rajesh Khullar, the CM's chief principal secretary, as an empathetic figure who understood his distress and tried to help. Minus the last, Lather inverts the plot.

Regardless of their variance, what the two suicides lay bare is the rot at the heart of Indian policing. In its inner workings, it comes across as a machine moved mostly by mistrust and malign acts of obstruction.

On October 14, as pressure piled up on the Nayab Saini government, Kapur was sent on leave. Bijarniya had been already transferred, in a first bid to buy peace, but the ante was pitched too high for that to suffice. Kumar's wife, who was on a CM-led delegation to Japan at the time of the incident, was at the fore of the call for justice. A 31-member committee, largely comprising Dalit community members, lent it ballast. The Haryana IAS and IPS associations, too, backed the family.

'BECAUSE, DALIT'

The politics of caste at the centre of it all ensured the aftermath spilled beyond Haryana. Congress leader Rahul Gandhi was among the first to react to Kumar's suicide, accusing the BJP-RSS of fostering a "Manuvadi mindset" in institutions. The case is well aligned to the party's social justice narrative. Days earlier, Rahul had linked the Rae Bareli killing of Dalit youth Hariom Valmiki and the shoe attack on Chief Justice B.R. Gavai to what he called rising caste intolerance.

The BJP pushed back, accusing the Congress of using the tragedy to play "selective politics". Any sense of institutional bias, however, would mar its bid to build a support base among Dalits—especially in the Haryana-Punjab-Rajasthan-western UP belt where the community is in sizeable numbers and the Ambedkarite movement has deep roots.

A defensive stance was evident as Prime Minister Narendra Modi's October 17 rally at Sonipat was cancelled. The Saini regime crossed out its first-year anniversary celebrations too. But it's on the opaque upper echelons of police that the incidents shine a forensic torch. ■

► BIHAR

NITISH MARKS TURF, A FEW FEET LESS

Seat-sharing talks go chaotic on all sides, JD(U) takes lowest share ever

By Amitabh Srivastava



➥ **DIL MAANGE MORE** Supporters of a disappointed BJP aspirant in Patna

ON THE MORNING OF OCTOBER 14, visitors to 1, Anne Marg—CM Nitish Kumar's official residence in Patna—would have met with an unusual sight. Gopal Mandal, Gopalpur MLA of the Janata Dal (United), was sitting outside on a dharna. The word was that his name had been dropped from the candidates' list. Bihar politics is used to poll-time dramas, but this was emblematic of something larger: the disquiet within the ruling National Democratic Alliance (NDA), where the ambitions of its five partners are going increasingly at cross-purposes. "The only difference between Mandal and the JD(U) is that the MLA can stage a protest; the party cannot," quips a party leader.

For the record, the very same day,

BJP leader and Union minister Dharmendra Pradhan was insisting that “99 per cent” of the NDA’s seats had been finalised. This was two days after the alliance announced its seat-sharing deal, allocating 101 seats each to the BJP and JD(U), 29 to Chirag Paswan’s LJP (Ram Vilas), and six each to Jitan Ram Manjhi’s Hindustani Awam Morcha or HAM(S) and Upendra Kushwaha’s Rashtriya Lok Morcha (RLM).

THE SAME BOGEYMAN

Yet things were not that simple. The NDA’s planned joint press conference on October 13 was abruptly postponed. Nitish is believed to have voiced strong reservations over the concessions grant-

101 versus BJP + allies 142. An upbeat saffron party announced 71 candidates by October 14, but there have been ugly scenes at their Patna party office too.

Across the aisle, the Mahagathbandhan, comprising the Rashtriya Janata Dal, Congress, Left parties and smaller regional outfits, is also in a muddle. The RJD, led by Tejashwi Yadav, continues to dominate the bloc, but the Congress is still hesitant to formally declare him as a clear CM candidate for the alliance. That partly stems from the legal troubles of father Lalu Prasad and the recent framing of charges in the IRCTC case. But it once again unsettled the front.

Insiders say ticket distribution meetings have been tense, even acrimonious. The RJD’s effort to project itself as a vehicle for Bihar’s restless youth—built largely around Tejashwi’s promise of government jobs—risks being undercut by the indecision. The Congress seems willing to contest less seats than the 70 last time, but wants constituencies where they stand a chance, not merely the ones the RJD deigns to offer. The delay in candidate confirmations has everyone on edge (nominations close on October 17), which is not helping the Congress cadre who, after years of decline, had appeared energised by Rahul Gandhi’s Jan Adhikar Yatra.

New-kid-on-the-block Prashant Kishor’s Jan Suraaj Party had already announced 165 candidates by the 14th (PK himself may not contest, focusing on campaigning for the party). His message is exact: a rejection of both the “failed rulers” and the “opportunistic Opposition”. The JSP has set up a grassroots presence in parts of Bihar, particularly among first-time voters and sections disillusioned with both major alliances. But, as of now, his campaign threatens to fragment the anti-incumbency vote rather than consolidate it.

The image of Mandal squatting outside his own CM’s gate endures as the perfect metaphor for Bihar’s current political climate: alliances at war with themselves, waiting till the last moment for things to fall in place. ■

Takeaways

► For the first time, JD(U) takes 101 seats, its lowest and on par with the BJP

► Chirag Paswan’s LJP gets 29 seats; Nitish angry about its incursions into JD(U) base

► RJD-Congress talks are equally fraught. No clarity on Tejashwi as CM, Rahul’s yatra momentum at stake for cadre

ed to Chirag’s LJP. Sources in the JD(U) say Paswan Jr is up to his old tricks, eyeing several of their seats. His healthy haul of 29 seats, after all, has to come from somewhere—the formula worked out apparently entailed some friendly scavenging on old JD(U) bases, where it has sitting MLAs. That prompted Nitish to put his foot down, eliciting a round of damage control by the BJP.

This is, incidentally, the first time the JD(U) has had to climb down before an assembly election, agreeing to contest on an equal footing with the BJP. Given Chirag’s open alignment with the latter—and the fact that both Manjhi and Kushwaha depend more on the saffron party than the JD(U)—the seat distribution, in effect, reads thus: JD(U)

FREED, K

Azam’s release from prison

By Avaneesh Mishra

POWER DOES NOT VANISH in politics. It only waits for the right moment to reclaim itself. That moment might have arrived for Azam Khan. In his case, that first axiom applies uniquely: it was not on account of any plunge in his popular stock that he went into oblivion. He was put there by the law, maximally interpreted.

Now, after spending nearly two years in jail on multiple charges, Azam Khan is free, so is his instinct to play for centrality as the main Muslim face of the Samajwadi Party (SP). At least that’s the script till now. Multiple futures and options seem open for him. With no shortage of suitors, he has the chips to extract his bargains—in the SP or outside.

A founding member of the SP and a loyal Mulayam Singh Yadav lieutenant, the ten-time MLA from Rampur had a voice that carried beyond his constituency. Over the years, he was a state cabinet staple and his support base encompassed the ‘PDA’ rainbow in western UP.

That segues well into SP supremo Akhilesh Yadav’s strategic positioning. Trouble is, Khan’s equations with Akhilesh have always been less chummy than those with his father. That lingered through his prison years: Khan apparently felt the SP leadership did little to back him in his

HAN IS ON A POLITICAL HUNT

sets off a storm of speculation—suitors line up before the Muslim satrap, the SP watches edgily



► HIS OWN DURBAR Akhilesh visits Azam; right, from top: Swami Prasad Maurya, Chandrashekhar Azad, Mayawati are among suitors

SUMIT KUMAR

bad times. After stepping out, he seemed to take a veiled swipe at Akhilesh, who did not go to receive him. "If I was truly a big leader, another big leader would have come to meet me," he said, in the tones of a potential mutineer.

OUTWARD HO?

The way Akhilesh has run his party, there isn't much space for such claims of equivalence. So, is Khan planning to leave the SP? "Ask those who are making these assumptions," replies the man. "I couldn't meet anyone in jail and was also not allowed to make phone calls." Cryptic words that ensured his intentions were

open to interpretation.

Thus opens up a political space of much interest. Several political figures have been reaching out to Khan, eager to mend fences or win favour. Many speculate he could part ways with the SP to join the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) or Chandrashekhar Azad's Azad Samaj Party. Azad had met him in jail and later visited his family in Rampur.

Any lateral mobility on his part could unsettle equations in western UP, where his influence has endured through his prison years. The BSP option has drawn particular attention. Though Mayawati trashes all talk of secret meetings,



in welcoming Khan's release, he said the veteran had "fought alongside the party founder against the BJP" and that once the SP was back in power, "all false cases against him will be withdrawn." Over a week later, the two finally met in person, with Akhilesh flying to Rampur for a two-hour closed-door meeting.

MEETING TIME

The optics were well managed. Khan received him; they travelled in one car; Akhilesh claimed all differences had been resolved. But Khan's subsequent remarks—"we have to decide who is mine and who is not, I need some time for that"—left the door ajar.

Joining the flurry of well-wishers, ex-minister and Apni Janta Party president Swami Prasad Maurya, too, made a "courtesy visit" to Rampur. His line was clear. "There was not even a single protest by the SP for Azam Khan. It's as responsible as the BJP for the atrocities against him," Maurya said.

Curiously, after pursuing over 70 criminal cases against Khan, from land grab to hate speech—and taking two cases to conviction to put him out of action—the state government too seems softer. It has restored Khan's Y-category security, a gesture many are trying to parse. It's a thick fog of intrigue that hovers over Rampur. ■

Takeaways

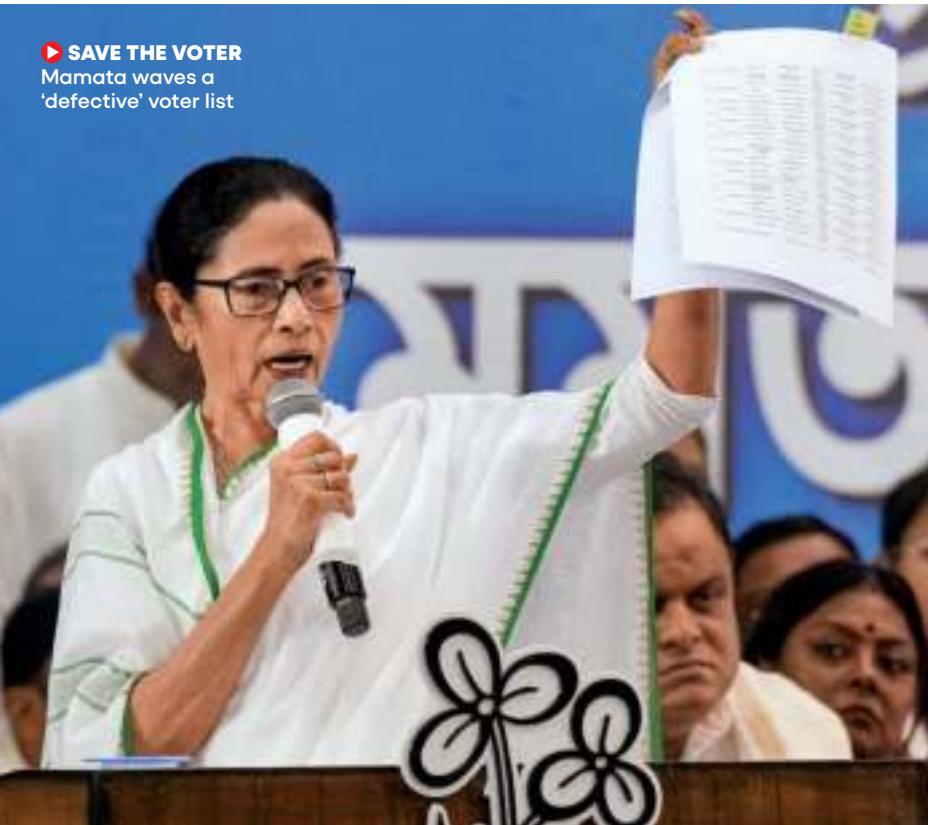
► **After two years in jail, SP's Muslim satrap Azam Khan returns like a twister in UP politics**

► **Uneasy ties with SP chief Akhilesh make him open to options: BSP is a popular bet**

PTI

► **SAVE THE VOTER**

Mamata waves a
'defective' voter list

► **WEST BENGAL**

Mamata Fights SIR With AI

The TMC claims to unearth anomalies in the voter list by marrying technology with ground power

By **Arkamoy Datta Majumdar**

IN INDIA'S DEMOCRACY, the electorate is primary capital. And the means of controlling this resource these days, it seems, is statistical. It was therefore inevitable, in the day and age of big data, that any exercise involving massive statistical sets would also turn technological. The only unlikely element, at first sight, would seem to be the

protagonist: the street-savvy Mamata Banerjee. But the circumstances are compelling enough for her to turn her party, the Trinamool Congress, towards a spot of machine learning.

The West Bengal CM had sounded the alarm around voter lists in her state in early 2025 itself, months before the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of

electoral rolls in Bihar. She warned of large-scale anomalies, alleging genuine voters were being deleted while "outsiders" were being quietly added.

But she didn't stop at red-flagging the issue. The Trinamool soon put spurs on an initiative. 'Banglar Voter Raksha' (BVR), they called it: 'Save Bengal's Voters'. Initially conceived as a defensive measure, it has now evolved into the TMC's technologically most sophisticated campaign, with a key role for Artificial Intelligence (AI). Depending on how it goes, it may even inspire other political actors to follow suit.

Says a senior TMC functionary, "Didi had warned that something was off. The Election Commission denied it, but we used AI and it has zeroed in on about one lakh anomalies." By itself not a big number, it has nevertheless equipped the TMC with a clear and distinct weapon to patrol its territory ahead of the forthcoming SIR, which it sees as a legal ploy to weaken its core vote base. In fact, the party's whole response could be seen as a model of political disaster modelling and preparedness—harnessing the powers of technology, amplified by the sheer strength of boots on the ground.

THE DATA ARMY

Between mid-April and May-end, the TMC launched a massive voter verification drive. Over 80,000 booth-level agents, with 10,000-plus support workers, went door to door across the state, reaching roughly 2-3 million households, cross-checking deletions and duplicate entries. Party sources claim over 98 per cent of its targeted verification had been completed, with 90,000-odd anomalies conclusively identified. The whole process has been designed and executed by TMC's poll advisors, IPAC.

Now, as the EC prepares to roll out Bengal's SIR, the TMC is gearing up for BVR Phase II. This aims to take data vigilance a step further, cross-verify the 2025 rolls with the 2002 voter list. The idea is to detect structural shifts or mass deletions over two decades, offer-

ing a long-term perspective on how Bengal's electorate has changed.

The exercise is proving technically complex. The 2002 list predates the delimitation process that redrew Bengal's assembly and booth boundaries. That would have scrambled voter lists, those listed under one booth or constituency being naturally reallocated to another. The party's data team is trying to overcome this challenge by using AI-based mapping to match names, addresses and demographic patterns.

"The old and new lists don't speak the same language," says a data coordinator working on the project. "In 2002, booth and constituency numbers were different. After delimitation, entire jurisdictions changed. So, we are training the AI model to detect logical voter shifts

Takeaways

► The 'Save Bengal's Voters' campaign by TMC uses AI to claim deletions, additions

► 90,000-odd workers pan out across Bengal in a huge voter verification drive

► In the next AI-led phase, the 2025 voter list will be tested against 2002 data

instead of treating every movement as a deletion." Data accuracy is a good in itself; in this case, it will also lend credence to any complaints.

Credibility is a vital need. Mamata's open accusation that the EC is working "hand in glove" with the BJP needs firepower to back it up. If the party's combat-readiness stands in sharp contrast to the confusion seen in other states, the weaponry needs to be sharp. As a party senior put it, "We cannot afford to lose the democratic ground under our feet because of faulty data." ■

► GUJARAT

NO HANDCUFFS FOR LIGHT SINS

The 'ease of doing business' ethos gets a major fillip as Gujarat decriminalises 516 offences in a new Bill

By Jumana Shah

ANI



AS AN ENTIRE ONE-THIRD OF ITS imprisonment clauses go off the statute, ease of doing business just got easier in Gujarat. Actually, for a lot of the state's business class, life wasn't as easy as legend might have had it. A 2022 study had found that Gujarat's 1,469 imprisonment clauses were the highest in the country. Now, that has been hacked down to 953. The Jan Vishwas (Amendment of Provisions) Bill, passed by the state assembly in September, has decriminalised 516 offences.

To be more precise, the punitive burden they carry has been lightened to more rational levels. Decriminalisation doesn't mean blanket amnesty. Instead, criminal sanctions or conviction-based fines have been dropped for administrative penalties—with these getting tightened to ensure deterrence.

A LIGHER SENTENCE

Of the 516 tweaks, jail has been outright axed in one, and 17 of the modified provisions trade the threat of 'imprisonment or fine' for civil monetary penalties enforced by the relevant administration's officers. In the remaining 498, fines upon conviction—which naturally entail the full judicial process—have been replaced with civic penalties, again with stiffer monetary hits so that there's no laissez faire for offenders.

To enable this shift, nearly

EASY DOES IT CM Bhupendra Patel with agri exporters at a 'Vibrant Gujarat' event in Mehsana, Oct. 9

11 state laws have been amended across six departments: urban development, labour and employment, Narmada and water resources, industries and mines, agriculture and cooperation, and finance.

Long in coming, the Bill is a response to a key industry demand. It sought reforms by painting the picture of a regulatory quicksand that inevitably swallows up the smaller players. "This brings in a new era of doing business in Gujarat," says Premraj Keshyep, chairman, CII's Gujarat State Council. "It is a declaration of trust in the business community and will benefit MSMEs the most. We are no longer burdened with outdated regulations."

For instance, under the APMC Act, imprisonment up to one month for market entry violations has been replaced with a Rs 25,000 penalty. Keshyep recalls particu-

larly bothersome strictures relating to small offences. Removing official boundary markers during construction on an allotted industrial plot constituted a crime under the IPC and could land you in the cooler for a year. Unauthorised procurement of water for industrial use would attract 2-3 months of jail.

The fear of jail, even for inadvertent errors, stifled innovation, particularly among MSMEs and startups, he says, adding: "Allowing officers to settle disputes and offences has created a balance of do's and don'ts."

Industries minister Balvantsinh Rajput says the Bill was drafted after studying the Union Jan Vishwas Act 2023, which tamed 183 provisions in 42 central laws, and its August 2025 upgrade that further decriminalised

Takeaways

- ➔ Gujarat's version of the Jan Vishwas Bill drops the prison clause from 516 offences
- ➔ State had India's highest prison clauses: 1,469
- ➔ Most replaced by fines. MSMEs to benefit most

355 provisions across 16 Acts. Rajput says moving to "trust-based governance" would alleviate the judiciary's crippling load: trivial cases make up much of its 50 million pending cases.

Opposition MLAs say the Bill prioritises ease for offenders over justice for citizens, pointing out that it gives immense powers to officials: they will now be the law, with no judicial oversight. AAP MLA Gopal Italia also cited conflicting provisions where the Bill calls for a fine but the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita stipulates a jail term "for the same crime". But overall, the BJP government has burnished its pro-business credentials. Even skeptics concede that the real win is psychological as businesses now breathe freer. ▀

By Jeemon Jacob

BHUTANESE IS NOT A LANGUAGE you might expect to hear in Kerala. But then, words have wheels. High-end wheels, to take the word of the good people in law enforcement. It was late September when the phrase 'Operation Numkhor' leapt across Kerala's windshield—numkhor means 'vehicle' in Bhutanese. It was the exotic name given by the Customs Preventive Wing for its swoop-down against a cross-border luxury car racket, said to run from the Himalayan kingdom all the way down the tarmac to the deep south. As the sleuths dredged through the swishier parts of Kerala high society, the number of top-end models seized touched 43.

That story had enough fuel to travel continents. But what really set it vrooming was the roster of names it fetched up. A directory of Mollywood A-listers: stars like Dulquer Salmaan and Prithviraj Sukumaran, others like Amith Chakkalakkal. Then, as Kerala swung between shock and schadenfreude, the script turned. A new actor landed on the scene: the Enforcement Directorate.

SHOCK AND AWE

On October 8, the ED conducted raids in 17 locations, ostensibly to probe unauthorised transactions in the racket. Dulquer, Prithviraj and Chakkalakkal figured, of course. So did the NRI owners of Coimbatore-based Shine Motors. The ED's raid parties even reached the residences of superstar Mammootty, Dulquer's father. Dulquer himself was summoned from Chennai to Kochi and interrogated for five hours.

The usual formal statements were outed. Officials spoke of having seized documents related to the purchase of high-end used cars and suspected prima facie violations of foreign exchange rules, hawala transactions, the works. It was the



► **CELEB HUNTING** Dulquer Salmaan and Prithviraj Sukumaran

► **KERALA**

Wheels

Sensation is matched by links Mollywood stars to a

culmination, they said, of months of digging by the Central Board of Indirect Taxes and Customs after a tip-off from the Vehicle Registration Department. The Coimbatore-based network linked to the NRIs was monitored. The stated modus operandi: it would use forged papers with grand-sounding associations—including the Indian army, the US embassy and the MEA—to register cars in Arunachal Pradesh and Himachal Pradesh. This luxury cavalcade would then purr its way to a circuit of celebrities, business magnates and NRIs with a fondness for luxury cars.



Within Deals?

**circumspection as a potboiler-worthy probe
high-end car racket**

GUILTY AS CHARGED

That description could legitimately apply to Dulquer and Mammootty, considered to be among the biggest motorheads in Mollywood with an impressive fleet of luxury cars in their garages. Dulquer's collection includes a Mercedes-Maybach GLS 600, a Mercedes-AMG G63, a Range Rover Defender, a Porsche Panamera, the BMW 7 Series, Porsche 911 GT3, Mercedes-Benz SLS AMG and a Ferrari 458 Spider. He also has an impressive collection of high-end bikes—his road movies presumably entailing a touch of method acting.

Problem is, none of this is in any way illegitimate ipso facto—as Dulquer

has been at pains to point out. All his purchases have been above board, he insists, paid for through legit bank channels and with proper documents—

Takeaways

► **A customs probe imputes links between top Kerala stars and luxury car smuggling**

► **Prithviraj Sukumaran of *Empuraan*, Dulquer Salmaan, his superstar dad Mammootty face raids; critics cry vendetta**

officials, he said, acted with “preconceived bias” in refusing to verify these.

Casual rumour-mongering flowing from the case, linking his name to “gold smuggling, narcotics and even anti-national activities”, had further hurt him, he said. He stated as much in a petition to the Kerala High Court, seeking the release of a seized 2004 Land Rover Defender which he said had originally been shipped by the Red Cross. He found validation as the court accepted his plea and ordered the vehicle to be released.

THE SUB-PLOT THICKENS

In the media, the idea of a stunning investigation with strands reaching from celebrity villas to shady hawala trails still ruled, depending on which outlet you read. If all the juicy tidbits linking Mollywood stars to car smuggling found enough credulous takers, the sceptics saw too many moving parts, in dubious concert. That the targeted megastars and actors are not necessarily aligned to the present political setup is an obvious red flag. Whispers of vendetta didn't take too long coming.

Prithviraj, an outspoken star-turned-producer/director, was last in national news for his film *Empuraan*, which stirred a hornet's nest with its uncommonly bold and candid takes on the Gujarat riots of 2002. Dulquer is for the most part soberly apolitical in public, like his father, but had plumped for secularism and democracy during the anti-CAA protests. As for Mammootty, he may not have been the only one to mark the irony: Mohanlal, his friend and fellow superstar, was receiving the Dadasaheb Phalke award while he was getting visitations from raiding parties.

A senior advocate in the high court outlines that defence. “This case is a classic example of trapping celebrities and putting pressure on their lives. The message is clear: either you yield to us politically or we will use all agencies to hunt you,” he told INDIA TODAY. In the prevailing climate, one's name can be incrimination enough, of course. ■



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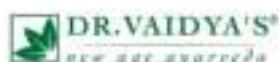
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“MY TRIP IS A CATAPULT FOR INDIA’S SPACE MISSION”

Astronaut Shubhanshu Shukla speaks about his pathbreaking journey into space and his plans ahead

BY RAJ CHENGAPPA

T

here is something about Group Captain Shubhanshu Shukla that reminds you of cricketer Rahul Dravid at his peak. It's not just the handsome, clean-shaven, wavy-haired and weathered look. Or the compact physique, unflappable demeanour and air of quiet assurance. It is also their grit, determination and the rare quality to shoulder huge responsibilities with beguiling nonchalance. Both men have soared to great heights—one figuratively, the other literally—yet they exude the same incredible lightness of being.

When Shukla entered a lift at a Mumbai hotel where he was to address a recent India Today Conclave, a lady inside was glued to her phone. When she did look up and saw Shukla, her eyes lit up, jaw dropped and she promptly requested a selfie. When he gracefully obliged, she told him, “You are our real superhero.”

Shukla truly is, though he is only now getting used to the adulation. It was his wife, Kamna, who first told him about the waves his space odyssey was making when he called her from the International Space Station (ISS), orbiting 400 km above Earth this June-July. With no internet or any other media in space, Shukla was hard-

focused on the objectives of the mission, unaware of the outpouring of admiration back home.

Shux, as he is fondly called, is grateful that he was chosen to represent his 1.4 billion compatriots, becoming only the second Indian to orbit Earth. This was 41 years after Wing Commander Rakesh Sharma spent a week aboard a Soviet Soyuz spacecraft in April 1984. However, Shukla created a record of his own—the first Indian astronaut to live and work aboard the ISS, the orbiting laboratory on which he spent 18 days.

Shukla had trained rigorously for five years alongside three other Indian Air Force pilots chosen by the Indian Space Research Organ-



IN A ZEN SPACE
Shubhanshu in the Cupola Module of the International Space Station, enjoying a panoramic view of Earth, Jul. 5



isation (ISRO) in 2019 for Gaganyaan, India's first human spaceflight mission, scheduled for lift-off in 2027. When India decided to send an astronaut to the ISS to gain first-hand experience ahead of Gaganyaan, it was Shukla they selected.

To fly Shukla to the ISS on the Axiom-4 mission, aboard the Crew Dragon capsule launched by a SpaceX Falcon-9 rocket, ISRO spent \$500 million. But the experience the astronaut gained in those three weeks is likely to prove invaluable for India's space vision.

That vision includes building the Bharatiya Antarksh Station, India's first orbiting space station, by 2035, followed by plans to land an Indian on the Moon using an indigenous spacecraft by 2040. As Shukla put it, "A lot of things are available on the internet, but when you are part of an activity, you learn things that you don't find in books. I have brought back these experiences with me, and we have already formalised the process of putting them back into the system."

Before Shukla, 285 astronauts of 23 other nationalities had been on the ISS. On this mission, he became the 634th astronaut to orbit Earth. There has also been a recent flurry of near-orbit flights by the likes of billionaires Jeff Bezos and Richard Branson, who have flown to the edge of space in craft their companies have built. But since Yuri Gagarin's pioneering flight in 1961, an average of only 10 astronauts a year have ventured into space.

Shukla is acutely aware of this rare privilege. And like every Indian who has flown into space, he too has come back with a unique experience. Rakesh Sharma had famously said "Sare jahaan se achha" when asked how India looked from above. After her first trip to space in 1998, Kalpana Chawla, a US astronaut of Indian origin who tragically died on her second space mission in 2003, had told INDIA TODAY, "More than my Indian-ness, when I looked up at the stars one night in orbit, I felt I was a resident of the Milky Way."

Sunita Williams, another US astronaut of Indian origin, carried a Ganesha idol and a copy of the Bhagavad Gita on her first trip to space. "In a little spacecraft zipping around Earth, maybe you are taking for granted where you are and what you are doing," she told this magazine in 2007. "Then, things like Ganesha and the Gita bring you back home and make you feel grounded. It is nice to read about Arjuna's trials and tribulations up there, as it puts your life in perspective."

Shukla, too, has returned with a fount of engrossing reflections. He first saw India when the ISS was making a night pass over the subcontinent. "We were coming from south to north," he recounts in an exclusive interview to INDIA TODAY, "from the Indian Ocean side. Everything was inky



THE EXPERIENCE SHUKLA GAINED ON THE SPACE EXPEDITION IS ALREADY BEING INTEGRATED INTO THE GAGANYAAN MISSION

black. Then, suddenly, you saw the India peninsula lit up in all its glory. It looked like it was full of sparkling diamonds, with the lights on. It was the most beautiful sight I had ever seen; even now, I get goosebumps just thinking about it."

In an hour-long conversation, Shukla speaks candidly about his rough, risky ride into orbit, the sensation of weightlessness, his space sickness, and how to eat, bathe and use the toilet in near-zero gravity. He recalls the camaraderie he built with his fellow astronauts, the extraordinary thrill of floating around the ISS, the size of which Shukla equates with a 6BHK apartment, conducting scientific experiments and, in his free time, watching through the portals the magnificent sight of Earth below, with multiple sunrises and sunsets in a day, as the ISS circled the planet every 90 minutes.

For Shukla, the overall experience was surreal. "What really hit me was the sheer size of Earth," he says. "You get a very strong sense of your insignificance. I had this peculiar feeling that if everybody on this planet were brought together—all the 8 billion-plus people—we would all probably fit in less than a quarter of Earth. That was a humbling experience." Indeed, his space sojourn has left Shukla with extraordinary insights. He shares them in the exclusive, in-depth interview in the following pages.



FINAL COUNTDOWN

Left, the SpaceX Falcon 9 rocket with the Crew Dragon spacecraft lifts off from Cape Canaveral, Florida, Jun. 25; Shubhanshu with Ax-4 Mission commander Peggy Whitson before the launch

“There are risks, but we accept them before we go on a mission. I was pretty relaxed when the countdown began, because we had just come off the longest unbroken quarantine in the history of human spaceflight. So, I didn’t want to go back to the quarantine for sure”

EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW

“SPACE WAS SO MUCH FUN, I DIDN’T WANT TO COME BACK”



Let’s start from the moment you were in the Falcon-9, ready for lift-off, sitting atop 400 tonnes of rocket fuel—a live bomb if things go wrong. Did you feel any fear?

What we are doing inherently involves risks. To manage them, we have a large team that works on the design, conception, realisation of the rockets and mitigating the risks involved to ensure they are safe enough for people to travel. So, yes, there are risks, but we accept them before we go on a mission.

Q. Was your heart beating faster when you were about to lift off?

No, I was pretty relaxed when the countdown began, because we had just come off the longest unbroken quarantine in the history of human spaceflight. Our mission kept getting delayed for one reason or another. And we ended up staying in quarantine for 32 days compared to the original 14 days. So, I didn’t want to go back to the quarantine for sure.

“The force on your body goes up to over 4G, which means the pressure you feel is four times your body weight. It is as if somebody is pushing you hard against your seat, especially across your chest. Everything, including your lungs, feels compressed, making it difficult to breathe”

Q. What happened when the rockets ignited?

In my head, I had imagined what it would feel like. Having been a fighter pilot most of my life, I do have experience of sitting atop a jet engine. But when the Falcon's Merlin engines ignited, everything I had imagined completely went out the window. It was extremely powerful and very quick. My first thought was—this is something else. Everything shakes because of the engine's vibrations. You feel it inside your body as well—every bone feels shaken when those engines come on.

Q. When watching the spaceship take off, it sounded like 30 jet engines firing simultaneously. What did it sound like inside the spacecraft?

If all that sound were to reach inside the capsule, it would be beyond human endurance. There are a lot of ways in which this sound is subdued. We wear specially moulded earpieces that fit snugly. On top of that, you are wearing a space suit helmet, which also mitigates the sound. And the Dragon Crew capsule itself in which we are sitting is acoustically designed to minimise noise from the outside. So, it is not so loud.

Q. When you lift off, your spacecraft goes from zero to 28,000 kmph, around 22 times the speed of sound. What happens to your body during this rapid acceleration?

When you see a spaceship take off, it appears slow and gradual. But inside, things are happening extremely fast. As pilot of the mission, I was supposed to monitor the displays and the parameters. But when we lifted off, I found myself lagging because I had not imagined it to be that quick. It took me about 20 seconds to catch up with what was happening. The acceleration builds from zero to 28,000 km in just eight and a half minutes and the force on your body goes up to over 4G, which means the pressure you feel is four times your body weight. It is as if somebody is pushing you hard against your seat, especially across your chest. Everything, including your lungs, feels compressed, making it difficult to breathe. But



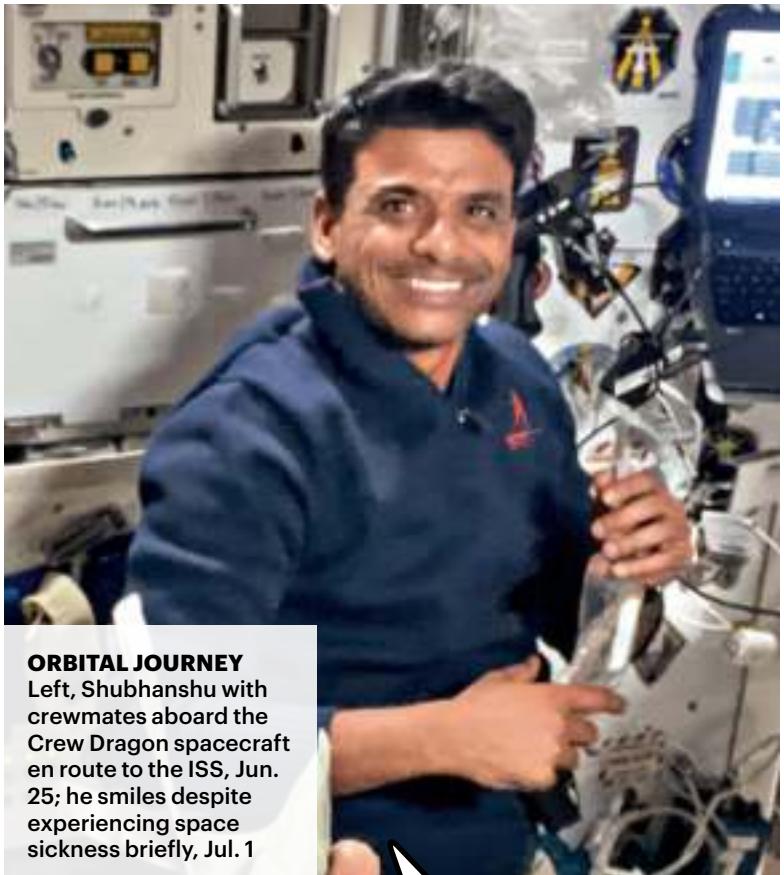
“When we were free from gravity for the first time, we shouted and screamed like kids. Our commander had to tell us to quieten down to listen to ground control. It was a real fun ride”

this was a familiar aspect for me because I have handled excessive G-forces in my career as a fighter pilot.

Q. What did your first experience of near-zero gravity feel like?

It was an incredibly surreal moment. There is all this chaos—the powerful rocket engines igniting, the launch and rapid acceleration, the G-force rising. And then, suddenly, nothing. It is just so peaceful. One moment, you were being pushed into your seat and the next everything stops. Gradually, you start floating, because you are in microgravity. Although you are strapped in, you can feel your body is not touching the seat and your hands are floating upwards. You are experiencing something for the first time, and it is beautiful. Not just for me but for my other two crew-mates too, who were also in space for the first time. We shouted and screamed like kids, so much so that our commander had to tell us to quieten down so that we could listen to ground control. It was a real fun ride. You have left the planet where you have always been and, for the first time, you are looking back at Earth from the outside. It is a feeling unlike any other.





ORBITAL JOURNEY

Left, Shubhanshu with crewmates aboard the Crew Dragon spacecraft en route to the ISS, Jun. 25; he smiles despite experiencing space sickness briefly, Jul. 1

Q. How did Earth look like from up there?

What really hit me was its sheer size. You get a very strong sense of your insignificance. If everybody on this planet were brought together—all 8 billion plus people—we'd all probably occupy less than a quarter of Earth's surface. And we are not even the biggest planet in our solar system, not even the biggest solar system in the galaxy, or even the biggest galaxy in the universe. Realising the insignificance of how, who, where and what we are was a humbling experience for me.

Q. What was the colour of Earth from up there?

Mostly blue and white. It is a deep blue, but it keeps changing, depending on the depth of the water, and the angle of the sun. If you are passing a place close to a coast, you see different shades of green and blue. The other thing that struck me were the white clouds, of different shapes and layers. You could see the shadow a towering cloud cast on the lower layers. It was just awesome.

Q. What about the stars?

In terms of distance, we were not too far in space—around 400 km above Earth. But since there is no atmosphere, everything appears with greater clarity. Not bigger, just sharper. But more than the objects themselves, what fascinated me was how their geometry changes as you move. We saw the Moon rise and set 16 times every day because we were orbiting Earth every 90 minutes. The best part was when the Moon was about to set, and you see it fade partially. You can still see the Moon because it is above Earth and then gradually it slips beyond Earth. That was one of the most exciting sights for me.

“When you are suddenly launched into an environment without gravity, your body rebels. The fluid or blood in your legs, which was earlier flowing down because of gravity, starts going to your head. So, your head starts becoming bigger and your spine elongated”



Q. When did you get to see India from space?

Only when we got to the International Space Station (ISS). That's because you don't pass over India every time you orbit and, in the Crew Dragon, we crossed India when we were getting some sleep before docking with the ISS. Even on the ISS, I did not get to see India for the first few days as we were tied up with work. Days later, when I was working on an experiment, a NASA astronaut came up to me and told me we were likely to pass over India, and if I'd like to see. I said, of course, and went to the window. It was a night pass, I remember, we were coming from south to north, from the Indian Ocean side. Everything was inky black. Then, suddenly, I saw India, lit up like sparkling diamonds. You could clearly see the outline of the peninsula and make out cities like Mumbai, Delhi and

“The Food has to be in a form that is moist, so that it sticks together and does not float around, as surface tension is a primary force acting there. For instance, you cannot have dry basmati rice, as it will explode and go everywhere. That’s a challenge”

Hyderabad. It was the most beautiful sight I have ever seen. It still gives me goosebumps describing it, the pictures and videos just don’t do it justice.

Q. Looking down on Earth and seeing all the continents, rivers and seas, did you turn philosophical?

You are referring to what astronauts call the overview effect. I don’t know what others felt but, for me, there was a shift in perspective. From space, you cannot make out where the different countries or divisions are, in Africa or Europe or elsewhere. The second thing is that the size and scale of Earth make us humans look insignificant. And the third thing is that everything you know, everyone you know, the entire history of humankind, all happened here and you are looking at it from the outside. So, you begin to understand things differently.

Q. How is that?

Like I said before, the biggest realisation is the insignificance of what we do on Earth. Sometimes, our ego takes over, and we become quite big in our heads. I recalled what astronomer Carl Sagan wrote—that everyone you know, every monarch, emperor, ruler, all the big people—lived on this small pale blue dot. They’ve been there, they’ve done everything, and they’ve gone—and the rest of the universe doesn’t even know about it. So, yes, that was an exceptionally powerful feeling.

Q. Did it make you more spiritual or religious?

Being spiritual and being religious are two different things. I am spiritual and do try to do some meditation on the ground because I feel it is important. But I am not good at it. I find it extremely difficult to sit in one place for long without thoughts coming into my mind. In space, when we had time, I’d sit beside the window and look down at Earth. I could sit for hours, meditating, with nothing coming to my mind—no thoughts, no worries, no questions. You just observe what is happening and don’t need anything. It is meditation in a way that’s so easy. Time ceases. You are just in that moment. I think it is also because of the uniqueness of Earth. Because every time you orbit it, even though it’s the same planet and the same space station, it’s a different time of the day—Earth is rotating, the angle of



“You have to learn how to do things. You cannot have a shower because falling water is difficult to catch. You have special hygiene towels instead, which are lined with soap and everything else you use. Basically, it is a wet bath”

the sun is different and so you never see the same thing twice.

Q. After her first trip to space, Kalpana Chawla told me that just before she’d go to sleep, she couldn’t feel her body because of weightlessness but could feel the weight of her thoughts. Did you have a similar experience?

No, I am a good sleeper. I slept well for most of my trip except for the first few days at the space station. And that was because, in space, your spine starts elongating since there is no load on it unlike on Earth. That causes back pain and it bothered me for a couple of nights. After that, I was sleeping peacefully.



GLITTERING OVERVIEW

Left, mealtime on the ISS; grab from a video shot by Shubhanshu showing India and Sri Lanka at night

Q. You have said you were not feeling too good during the first few days in space. Why was that?

That is a normal feeling astronauts get because there is no gravity. We are designed to live in gravity all our lives. So, when suddenly you are launched into an environment without gravity, your body rebels and resists adapting to this new situation. Some major things happen. Initially, your heart keeps pumping with the same force as on Earth, pushing more blood up. Then, all the fluid or blood in your legs, which was earlier flowing down because of gravity, starts going up to your head. So, your head starts becoming bigger. Not because you are an astronaut and travelling to a space station and feeling great but, physiologically. Your spine, as I said earlier, gets elongated. Everything in your stomach also starts floating. So, you do not feel hungry when you are on the station for the first few days. These are big changes and your body gradually gets used to it. But what is marvellous is that, within three or four days, that becomes the new normal. The body adjusts brilliantly and everything becomes perfectly alright.

Q. Are you a foodie? Did you like the food in space?

I am from Lucknow and food is something we are proud of. I do like food, but I've been very disciplined with what I eat. And when you're going up, you know it won't be the same because the food has to be contained in terms of size, weight and volume. Nutrition is important, so it is designed that way. But it's not bad. You do have a food tasting session on ground before you go, and you select your own food, what you like and what you don't. And then you can choose from the options available and those items are packed for you when you go up there.

Q. Does it involve eating a paste squeezed out of a tube?

No, that was the case earlier. Now, the food has to be in moist

“When I First saw India From space it was night and it was lit up like sparkling diamonds. You could clearly see the outline of the peninsula and make out cities like Mumbai, Delhi and Hyderabad. It still gives me goosebumps describing it: the pictures and videos just don't do it justice”

form, so that it sticks together and does not float around since surface tension is a primary force acting in space. For instance, you cannot have dry basmati rice, as it will explode and go everywhere. So, that is a challenge. We do have spoons, as moist foods attach to it. The water is in pouches, and we use straws to drink.

Q. Is it difficult to digest food in microgravity?

Fortunately, our digestive system works on peristalsis, or involuntary muscle contractions that push food down our tracts irrespective of gravity. That is how we are able to eat and digest food in space.

Q. How about taking a bath or shaving? Is that hard?

Yes, everything is, and you have to learn how to do things. For maintaining body hygiene, there are designated places. You cannot have a shower because falling water is difficult to catch. You have special hygiene towels instead, which are

lined with soap and everything else you use. Basically, it is a wet bath, you wipe yourself. For shaving, you use gel and a razor. Everything is light, so it is very effortless moving things around.

Q. I don't know if you get asked this, but is it difficult to use the toilet in space?

Actually, this is the most-asked question, especially when I talk to kids. It is important because it is one of the most complicated or complex engineering solutions provided to compensate for the absence of gravity. The systems are designed to ensure there is always suction, with failsafe mechanisms. It is challenging and I would say your aim needs to be good. But, after the initial few days, you get used to it and learn quickly.

Q. Did you feel confined or claustrophobic on ISS?

No, it is big, equivalent to a 6BHK house. On the ground, you sit only on the sofa and walk on the floor. Though a room is 3D, we use only 2D. However, in space, you could be sitting on the ceiling and talking because you fully utilise all three dimensions. Essentially, the ISS is an orbiting laboratory. You are performing experiments and conducting research. So, there is a lot of equipment on the station and something is always on or moving. There is also a persistent ambient noise, but it is not very high and it becomes your new normal after a few days.

Q. What was your typical workday like in the three weeks that you were on the ISS?

The purpose of my mission, first of all, was to gain experience for our own human space mission, the Gaganyaan, which ISRO is pursuing and which is what we were selected for initially. In addition, we wanted to enable an ecosystem for conducting microgravity research in space. So, ISRO asked Indian institutions to select different research experiments, and I took seven of these with me and performed them on the station. These experiments would be slotted every day and I would carry them out, preserve the samples and bring them back to Earth for Indian scientists to examine. These have already been handed over to the researchers, and the results are likely to come out soon.

Q. Do describe some of these experiments.

The processes we have on Earth evolve in a certain way because of gravity. That changes in space, because of the absence of gravity. For instance, our muscles do not get exercised as much in space because there is no load on them and they degenerate. The stem cell experiment I was doing was looking into this aspect. Can we use any supplement to prevent this degeneration and enhance the rate of recovery from injury? Imagine the advantage if you can prove something like that in space. It has a huge potential for application on Earth itself, helping people with muscle degeneration, or degenerative diseases.

Q. Did you conduct some experiments on nutrition too?

Yes, we conducted experiments that looked at nutrition for long-duration space missions. How do you pack more and more nutrition in less and less space? Essentially, you come up with solutions in that constrained environment, which in turn can help solve problems of food security on Earth. It is not a one-way street—some of the science being done has immediate application on Earth and some has potential in a longer duration.



“On the ground, you sit only on the sofa and walk only on the floor. Though the room is 3D, we use only 2D. However, in space, you could be sitting on the ceiling and talking because you fully utilise all three dimensions”

Q. Did you speak to your wife when you were up there?

Yeah, I did speak to her. You can place a call, depending on satellite coverage. It was mostly audio, as video calls need to be organised. We had two or three chances to speak to family and friends in these entire 20 days. Initially, when I went up in space, we were totally cut off. So, I had no idea what was

“I would sit for hours beside the window and look down at Earth with nothing coming to my mind—no thoughts, no worries, no questions. You are just observing what is happening and you don't need anything. It is meditation in a way that is so easy. Time ceases”



happening here. I didn't know it had become such a huge deal in India, and that people were celebrating this mission, until my wife told me.

Q. Now let's come to when your journey was done. Did you want to return to Earth?

I admit that, at first, I did not want to come back so quickly. You get comfortable in space and, after some time, it is fun. You are doing cutting-edge science designed by the best of researchers. And I was fortunate to be representing my country at the ISS and acting as a bridge between researchers and orbit and doing the science for them, doing stem cell experiments, understanding how physical processes of phenomena change due to the absence of gravity, looking back at Earth and capturing pictures. It was phenomenal. Having said that, obviously, there are challenges. There is a huge ecosystem on Earth—your friends, families and everybody who is missing you. At the same time, the people who were there on

the station had become your friends and it was hard saying goodbye to them. But this is a mission with a plan that has to be executed. And so, there was a slight moment where it was difficult saying goodbye and come back to Earth. But then when you get into the Crew Dragon capsule, you move on.

Q. On your return, as you re-enter Earth's atmosphere, the friction causes the spacecraft to look like a great

fireball. Was that exciting to see? There are also high risks of disintegration. Were you anxious?

No. I think there is a fine line between being excited and being anxious. You can choose. Either way, you don't have control over the outcome, so it's up to you to choose how you feel. Initially, the trip was smooth till we reached Earth's atmosphere. Then, we were really excited to look at the blazing fire from our windows as we re-entered. To see all sorts of colours—orange, blue, purple, red. The temperature inside the capsule also rises by about six to seven degrees. Because you're lying down in the spacecraft, you have to raise your neck to look at the windows and see the fireball around. And I remember feeling a big strain on my neck, a big load. When you were in microgravity, nothing was heavy and you could do anything you wanted. But now, suddenly, I started feeling very heavy. I looked at my display and it was showing 3G force. The shift that happens is so drastic that even the smallest of loads feels very heavy. Then, the fire suddenly stops, and you are in



Earth's atmosphere. This is when the vibrations start because aerodynamic forces begin to act on the capsule and buffeting it around. Then, the drogue chute deploys, and you feel the shock of it. The main chute opens thereafter, and there is an even bigger jerk, before you finally splash down, feeling the huge unmistakable impact of the ship striking water.

Q. What were your thoughts when you splashed down?

I was happy that the parachutes deployed and told myself: well done, I am alive! Also that this was a mission well done. I was proud of the way we were able to conduct it. The science was done, 100 per cent of the objectives were achieved. And, obviously, there had been a huge learning in totality about the mission.

Q. When you got off the spacecraft, were you able to walk?

I thought I could, but I couldn't. That is because your body and mind forget how it is to walk in gravity again. You realise how much of an effort it is just to stand up. The body has to re-learn it. So, you take a step, you fall down. Somebody has to help you walk out. It takes a few days before you become okay with walking, and you are under observation for those few days. And then, gradually, they start your rehabilitation programme, wherein you start running and doing multi-axis activities to build you up. Around the seventh day, you are cleared for driving. But the changes in your body, like the muscle degeneration and the aerobic deconditioning, come back only after a period of time.

Q. Finally, what are your three big takeaways from the mission?

The biggest highlight for me was the sheer scale of collaboration it took to make such a mission happen. We travelled across the globe for our training and thousands of people sitting in different parts of the world came together to make this one mission happen. When you work together as a team for a common objective, you can do wonders.

Q. The second takeaway?

Though I am a trained fighter pilot, training to be an astronaut is very different in that you prepare for it for years together. We started training in 2020 and the mission happened only in 2025. For my colleagues going up in Gaganyaan, it may take longer. The sheer patience it takes to understand that the mundane is important for the exciting and that you need to keep at the grind for you to be doing that.

Q. And the third takeaway?

I would say that I did not imagine India would be so beautiful when you looked at it from space. Like Ricky sir (Rakesh Sharma) said, *Saare jahan se achha*. It is true.



“ Your body and mind forget how it is to walk in gravity again. You realise how much of an effort it is just to stand up. The body has to relearn it. You take a step, you fall down. Somebody has to help you walk out ”



Q. How will your experience help the Gaganyaan project that aims to carry three or four astronauts into orbit in the next couple of years?

Human space missions are extremely complex and challenging. ISRO has been working extensively and very diligently on making this mission happen. But the technologies and confidence levels you need in your systems are of a different magnitude. A lot of things are available on the internet, but when you are part of that activity, you learn things that are not available in books. I have brought these experiences with me; we have already formalised the process by which we are putting them back into the system. We have to tell them that this is what we need to relook at or this is great. All these kinds of discussions have already started. My mission serves very well the grand vision of India sending humans into space. It is a catapult or stepping stone to achieve that. Because when we do, we will have an Indian capsule launched from Indian soil going to space and coming back. It will be a huge accomplishment for us as a nation.

“Initially, when I went up in space, we were totally cut off. So, I had no idea what was happening here. I didn’t know it had become a huge deal in India and that people were celebrating this mission, till my wife told me”



HISTORIC HOMECOMING Clockwise from left, school students in Moradabad celebrate the Ax-4 crew's return; Shubhanshu being assisted out of the Crew Dragon spacecraft, Jul. 15; reuniting with his wife Kamna, Jul. 16

Q. Your space trip has also generated a lot of excitement among youngsters.

Yes. That has been an important outcome. The momentum my mission in space has created seems to have inspired youngsters and should draw them into becoming astronauts or space scientists. Because it is not just Gaganyaan, ISRO is also working on India's space station, the Bharatiya Antriksh Station and then, eventually, landing on the Moon by 2040. It has been laid out in the space policy as part of the grand vision of the Honourable Prime Minister. So, I think this mission has generated good momentum.

Q. What is the next frontier for you, apart from Gaganyaan? Are you looking to be India's first man on the Moon?

Absolutely, yes. I tell the kids, who knows, one of you may be the one to set foot on the Moon when we eventually go there in 2040, but I will be fighting you for that part. I would say that whether I or somebody else goes, the important thing is

we achieve that aim. We are a country of 1.4 billion people. I understand the implication of me being the one who got to represent the country and I feel extremely fortunate.

Q. You are the 634th astronaut to have gone into space and it has been 64 years since Yuri Gagarin did so. This means an average of only 10 astronauts have gone up annually for the past six decades. But now the world is talking of space tourism and you may have plenty of ordinary individuals going into space without any special training. How does that make you feel?

What is happening is something similar to aviation. First there were the pioneers who slogged it out, developed the aircraft and the machines. Then, there were test pilots who tested those machines. Gradually, they opened the envelope and civil aviation started. Now, you don't even think twice; travel by air is the primary means of travel for a lot of people. Something of that kind of transition may be happening in space as well. Right now, it's a very niche activity. Only a very few train and go up into space. They are the ones doing the science, taking the risks and proving systems for everyone else to follow. Eventually, people would be able to travel frequently to space and come back. A space tourist should get the chance to go and do it. Going to space gives you a different perspective. So, the more people experience it, the better it can help all of us back here. ■

WINGED ARMOUR

An Indian soldier operates a drone near the LoC in Uri sector in Kashmir, Aug. 12

**DEFENCE | UAVs**

PTI

BUILDING A DRONE FORCE

The Indian army has ambitious plans to raise specialised drone warfare units equipped with indigenous UAVs. But India's drone industry needs extra support to overcome procedural, financial and technical hurdles

BY PRADIP R. SAGAR**If**

THERE WAS A MAJOR LESSON FOR INDIA FROM OPERATION SINDOOR, it was the need to upgrade its drone power—both in terms of a strike force and in defending itself against enemy Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs). In fact, battlefields have been transformed by drones, which are now indispensable for ISR (Intelligence-Surveillance-Reconnaissance) through medium/ high altitude drones, or for precise strike missions through battlefield support UAVs armed with bombs and missiles. During the short and sharp conflict between India and Pakistan from May 7-10, another form of attack drones gained prominence. Known as loitering munitions or fire-and-forget ‘kamikaze’ UAVs, these are armed with warheads that ‘loiter’ over an area before identifying and swooping down on targets—often used in ‘swarms’ to overwhelm air defences and pulverise enemy assets. The high level of integration of these range

ATTACK AND REPULSE

Pakistan's Chinese/ Turkish drones and India's countermeasures in Op. Sindoar

PAKISTAN'S DRONE ARMOERY

CH-4

Chinese Medium-Altitude Long-Endurance (MALE) armed UAV used in Operation Sindoar

► **COMBAT RADIUS:** 3,500-5,000 km, endurance (time it can remain airborne without recharging) of 12-40 hours

► **WEAPONS:** AR-1 & AR-2 missiles, anti-tank missiles, bombs

► **TACTICAL USE:** Can undertake both ISR (Intelligence-Surveillance-Reconnaissance) and strike missions



BAYRAKTAR TB2

Turkish armed UAV used in Op. Sindoar, supported by Turkish advisors

► **COMBAT RADIUS:** 300 km, endurance of 27 hours

► **WEAPONS:** Payload of 150 kg; laser-guided munition, Kemankes micro cruise missile

► **TACTICAL USE:** Deployed for both ISR and strikes

WING LOONG II

Chinese MALE, armed UAV

► **COMBAT RADIUS:** 1,500 km; endurance of 20 hrs

► **WEAPONS:** Payload of 480 kg; includes FT and GB series guided bombs, air-to-ground missiles like AKD-10

► **TACTICAL USE:** ISR and strikes, used in swarm attacks



ASISGUARD SONGAR

Turkish armed drone

► **COMBAT RADIUS:** 3-5 km

► **WEAPONS:** Grenade launchers, mortar system

► **TACTICAL USE:** Around 300-400 used in swarm attacks on 36 Indian locations; wreckage recovered



BYKER YIHA III

Turkish/ Pakistani kamikaze drone

► **COMBAT RADIUS:** Range of 200-300 km

► **WEAPONS:** Built around an anti-tank guided missile

► **TACTICAL USE:** Operates in swarms, targets military infrastructure; targeted areas in Punjab; most neutralised

INDIA'S HITBACK

INTEGRATED AIR DEFENCE

IAF's Aerial Command and Control System (IACCS) and the Army's Akashter network both integrate radars, sensors and weapons systems to provide unified real-time picture of India's airspace

DURING OP. SINDOOR.

During Op. Sindoar, these two networks synergised to link radars and sensors, relayed drone/ missile data to ground units

COUNTER-UN-MANNED AIRCRAFT SYSTEM (UAS) GRID

A multi-layered integrated air defence system that

carries out multi-sensor fusion (radar, radio frequency, acoustic)

► **DETECTED LOW-FLYING DRONES:** neutralised Pak drone swarms

SURFACE-TO-AIR MISSILES

► **BARAK-8** Long-range SAM (400 km range) developed with Israel, intercepted armed CH4s. Both integrated with IACCS & Akashter

AKASH

Indian-made (30-45 km) medium-range SAM, downed Wing Loong II and TB2



ARTILLERY

► **BOFORS L-70 ANTI-AIRCRAFT GUNS:**

Engaged low-altitude Songar and YIHA swarms

► **ZSU-23-4 SCHILKA GUNS:** Radar-linked low-level air defence gun, repelled 200+ drones in Punjab/Rajasthan



ELECTRONIC WARFARE

EW systems and jammers developed by DRDO/ Bharat Electronics Ltd for counter-drone capability; rendered TB2 and Wing Loong II 'blind'

INDIA'S DRONE CAPABILITY

The various UAVs with the Indian military



HERON MK-II

Israeli medium-altitude long-endurance UAV for ISR. India has 68 units

► **COMBAT RADIUS:** 3,000 km, endurance of 45 hours

► **WEAPONS:** Payload of 470 kg, can carry smaller loitering munitions

► **TACTICAL USE:** Carried out deep surveillance into Pakistani airspace pre Operation Sindoar

HAROP

Israeli kamikaze drone (loitering munition). India has 200 of these

► **COMBAT RADIUS:** Range of 200 km, endurance of 6 hours

► **WEAPONS:** Carries a 16 kg warhead

► **TACTICAL USE:** Targeted Pakistani air defence radars and installations in Op. Sindoar



SKYSTRIKER

Kamikaze drone/ loitering munition co-produced by India's Alpha Design Technologies and Israel's Elbit Systems. Over 100 units in use

► COMBAT RADIUS

100 km

► WEAPONS

5-10 kg warhead

► TACTICAL USE

Used for rapid deployment and precision strikes

HARPY

Israeli kamikaze drone

► **COMBAT RADIUS:** Range of 100 km, endurance of 2 hrs

► **WEAPONS:** Carries a 7 kg warhead

► **TACTICAL USE:** Designed for suppression of enemy air defences (SEAD) role, hit targets in Pakistan

HAWK & SCOUT

Surveillance and early warning drones from Zuppa Geo Navigation Technologies. Over 150 in use

► COMBAT RADIUS

1.5 km-2 km

► **TACTICAL USE:** During Op. Sindoar, provided real-time intel up to 2 km into enemy territory

ALS-50 & JM-1

Kamikaze drones from Tata Advanced Systems Ltd and Johnnette Technologies, respectively

► **COMBAT RADIUS:** 50 km and 5 km

► **WEAPONS:** Both carry anti-personnel and anti-armour warheads

► **TACTICAL USE:** Made combat debut in Op. Sindoar



of drones in modern warfare is now essential to ensure the success of the Indian armed forces. While India acquitted itself well with the limited range but highly precise, expensive and powerful drones, apart from successfully carrying out a range of counter measures to destroy incoming cheap Turkish- and Chinese-made Pakistani UAVs, experts say that there is need for an urgent review of the country's drone warfare capability which was lacking on several fronts. "We can't depend only on expensive platforms. We should fast-track induction of low-cost drones and loitering munitions for mass

deployment, build domestic production lines, adapt air-defence and electronic warfare to counter saturation attacks and develop tactics for combined use of high-end and expendable drones," says former Northern Army commander Lt Gen D.S. Hooda.

Given the importance of UAVs on future battlefields, the Indian army is now pushing to integrate them as core force multipliers. Announcing the creation of dedicated drone units, Chief of Army Staff Gen. Upendra Dwivedi has said that the army is "rapidly advancing as a transformed, modern and future-oriented force". As per the plan,

the army would require 8,000-10,000 UAVs per corps—the emphasis is on indigenous machines—in its quest to dominate a drone-saturated battlespace. To make this possible, infantry battalions are being restructured: up to 70 soldiers per battalion—each battalion has 900-1,000 soldiers—will form drone teams. These units will be trained in using First Person View (FPV) drones, which provide a first-person perspective through a camera, streamed to a soldier's specialised goggles.

Alongside battalion-level drone platoons, the army is raising specialised formations. Bridging elite and regular



NAGASTRA-1

Kamikaze drones made by Solar Industries. Army procured 480 units

► **COMBAT RADIUS:** 30 km

► **WEAPONS:** High explosive fragmenting warhead

► **TACTICAL USE:** Used for short-range precision strikes

NETRA

Tactical ISR drone made by IdeaForge

► **COMBAT RADIUS:** 2.5 km

► **TACTICAL USE:** Used for counter-insurgency operations



infantry, 30 'Bhairav' light commando battalions, each roughly 250-strong and trained in operating drones, are being formed to provide lightning fast strike options. 'Rudra' brigades are another innovation—all-arms formations combining elements of mechanised infantry, special forces, artillery and armed with UAVs ideal for multi-domain operations. Similarly, artillery regiments would have 'Divyastra' batteries—pairing kamikaze drones with long-range guns—intended to provide deep-strike capability. Lastly, 'Shaktibaan' formations are pure drone/loitering munitions strike units.

Reconnaissance platoons will now have surveillance and strike drones and the Corps of Electronics and Mechanical Engineers will also get drone sections for field-level repairs and terrain mapping. And utility drones would resupply forward elements.

However, not all news about India's drone force is positive. Operation Sindoore exposed significant shortcomings in key areas. Cybersecurity was a major concern. Drones are open to cyber threats like denial of service, as well as phishing and spoofing (installation of malware to procure sensitive information). Many indigenous drones were rendered inactive due to Pakistani GPS jamming, which manipulated their navigation systems by emitting false signals. Significantly, the Israeli drones were impervious to this.

The army's grand drone plans could amount to little if these challenges are not overcome.

Ailing Indian Drones

India has 840 drone companies, but it is hobbled by deep structural flaws. Most Indian manufacturers are integrators, and depend on imported components like motors, sensors, flight controllers, batteries and rare-earth magnets—comprising 60-70 per cent of critical components and mostly sourced from China. This reliance on Chinese supply chains presents a strategic vulnerability—it weakens preparedness and results in a shortfall of critical spares. "Capabilities of foreign weapons are known to all, and adversaries can predict our tactics.... If we develop our own systems...that may add an element of surprise," Chief of De-



“The military must first articulate precise requirements, specifying types of indigenous components they seek in Indian drones. They should allow the industry time to develop technologies”

GROUP CAPTAIN R.K. NARANG

Senior fellow, Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses

Another limitation was the inability to operate drones in swarms—a key factor in combat. Each drone operated as an isolated entity, communicating only with its operator. This lack of interoperability severely restricted their effectiveness.

At a recent seminar in Pune, defence secretary R.K. Singh highlighted capability gaps emerging out of Op. Sindoore. "These include electronic warfare, counter-unmanned systems and a stronger manufacturing base for military-grade drones that can survive in GPS-denied and contested environments, and low-level radars," he said.

fence Staff Gen. Anil Chauhan said at a recent seminar.

The absence of domestic production of advanced electronics keeps costs high, while a rigid certification regime for sub-systems (like flight controllers and GPS), and policy uncertainty around BVLOS (Beyond Visual Line of Sight) operations of drones—essential for operations in enemy territory—delay innovation. With small-scale production and imported inputs, Indian drones often end up costlier yet less reliable than foreign models.

"Funding for deep-tech R&D is scarce, and a shortage of skilled

ROADBLOCKS TO SURMOUNT

The challenges before the Indian drone industry faces

engineers, UAV pilots and test facilities leaves prototypes untested for ruggedness or electronic warfare resilience,” says a defence analyst. Many Indian drones, he adds, rely on cheap parts that fail in extreme environments, making them vulnerable to jamming.

While government initiatives such as the Production Linked Incentive (PLI) scheme and iDEX (Innovation of Defence Excellence) provide support, they are deemed insufficient for advanced R&D. “Import dependency, policy inertia, limited talent and high production costs constrain India’s drone ambitions,” says an industry insider.

“The military must first articulate precise requirements, specifying the indigenous components they seek in drones,” says Group Captain R.K. Narang, senior fellow at the Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses. “They should allow the industry sufficient time to develop these technologies.”

According to Major General C.S. Mann, additional director general of the Army Design Bureau (ADB), the challenges that need to be overcome include enemy interception of communication links and hijacking of drones’ navigation control. “The components used in flight controllers, transmitters and receiver units, encryption and authentication systems can have vulnerabilities,” he says. Maj. Gen. Mann is the architect of a framework intended to secure India’s military drone ecosystem from security-compromising foreign intrusions. It will redefine the procurement process of UAVs, but has yet to be approved by the defence ministry.

Lessons and Gaps

One of the key lessons learnt during Op. Sindoar was the jamming of India-made drones. Pakistani forces employed high-energy blanket GPS jamming across a 150 km radius, disrupting L-band signals and hampering drone activity. In response, Indian forces raised drone altitudes to 1.5 km, but the enemy countered with directional jamming, targeting drones with antenna-based interference. With secure

► SUSCEPTIBILITY TO ELECTRONIC WARFARE:

Many Indian drones fell prey to hijacking, spoofing and jamming by Pakistani forces during Op. Sindoar; Israeli drones unaffected

► LACK OF SWARM CAPABILITY

Indigenous UAVs, even from the same firm, were unable to

coordinate with each other effectively in swarm attacks

► POOR TEST RESULTS:

Post the conflict, no Indian drone passed the GPS-denied environment trials in Uttarakhand

► OVER-RELIANCE ON FOREIGN PARTS

Around 70% of critical drone com-

ponents—motors, sensors and flight controllers—are imported, mostly from China, a marker of India’s technical/capability gap

► DELAYED UAVs

Despite generous government grants, indigenous military drones to be developed by DRDO—Nishant, Rustom and Tapas—are still not fielded

After Op. Sindoar, the army asked 46 Indian drone-makers to showcase their ability to perform in a GPS-denied environment in Uttarakhand. None passed the trials

satellite communication indispensable for maintaining encrypted, uninterrupted links between UAVs and control stations, UAVs must incorporate stealth and electronic countermeasure features.

Two months after Op. Sindoar, the Indian army invited 46 Indian drone firms to showcase their capability to perform in a GPS-denied environment in Uttarakhand. None passed the trials.

Indian firms aren’t that interested in advanced R&D, admits a drone manufacturer. Also, the ‘no cost, no commitment’ trials—where producers develop products at their own expense, with no guarantee of purchase—conducted by the military are an expense firms can ill-afford. “Once a drone-maker completes a trial conducted by a military unit, why does he have to compete again for a fresh tender? It costs too much,” says Sai Pattabiram, MD of Chennai-based Zuppa Geo Navigation Technologies, manufacturer of the Hawk and Scout

drones for the Indian military.

India began working on drones in the 1980s, around the same time as countries like Israel. However, the state-owned Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO), which took up the mission, doesn’t still have a single UAV in the military’s inventory. Its ISR drone projects—Lakshay, Nishant, Rustom and Tapas—haven’t gone anywhere. India, to be blunt, faces a massive technological and capability gap.

A senior DRDO scientist says that global advancements in sensor payloads such as electro-optical and intelligence systems—critical to surveillance and data collection—have left them behind. “Modern UAVs demand advanced radars and synthetic aperture variants capable of providing high-resolution imaging,” he says. Another pressing challenge, he adds, is the need for robust multi-sensor data fusion to enable real-time situational awareness. Propulsion technologies also require innovation—advancements in internal combustion and jet engine systems are essential to increase range, endurance and altitude of drones.

Op. Sindoar highlighted the urgent need to both improve the quality of drones and to develop robust counter-drone technologies. The Indian military and drone-makers must take up the challenge to stay ahead in this rapidly evolving domain. ■

INDIA
TODAY

BREAKING NEWS

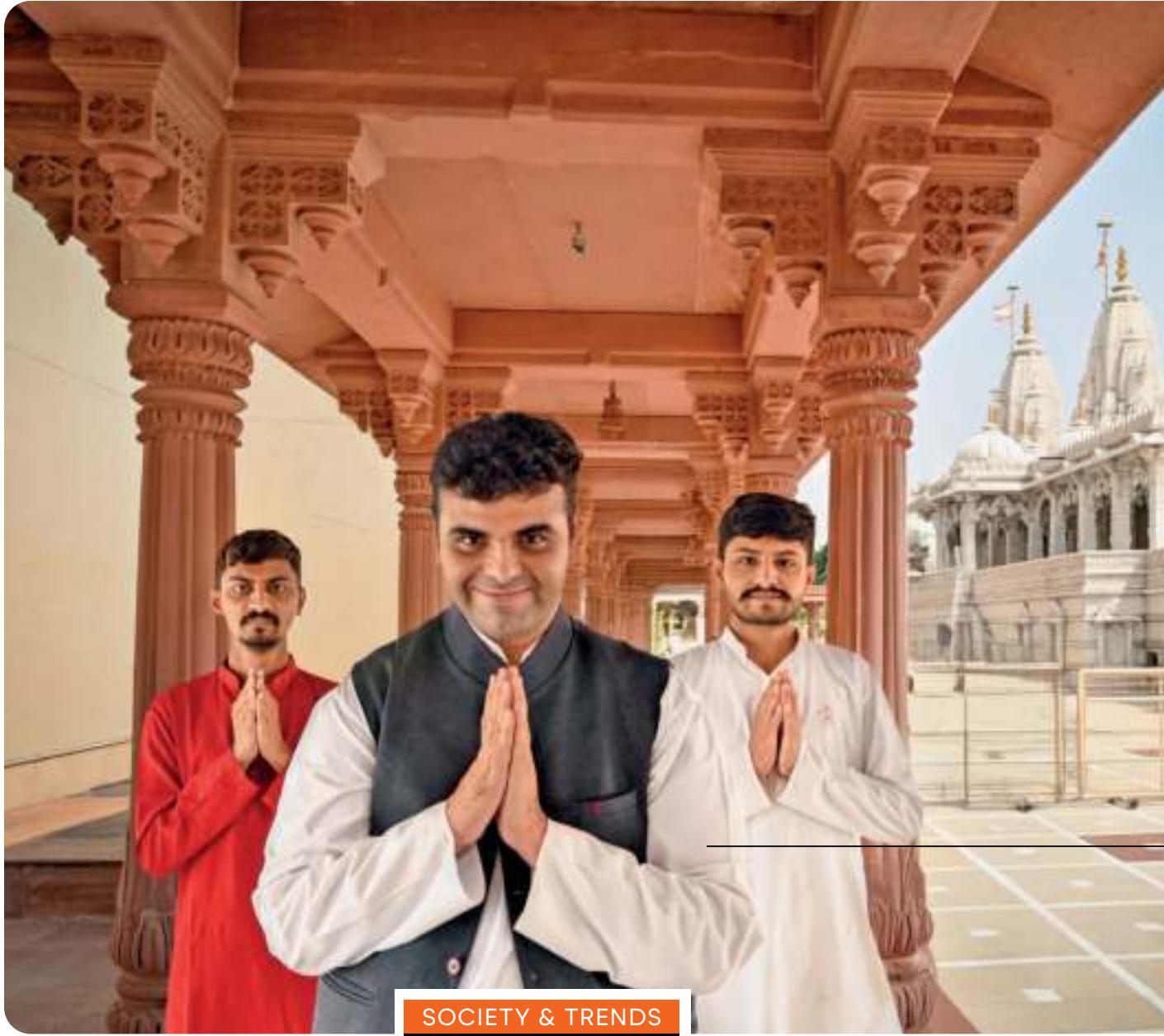
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SOCIETY & TRENDS
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The Young and the Spiritual

BLENDING TRADITION AND TECHNOLOGY, GEN Z IS SETTING OUT ON A VOYAGE OF SPIRITUAL DISCOVERY AT INDIA'S HOLY SHRINES

By SONALI ACHARJEE



A steep, breathless ascent where the air thinned and conversations shrank to a bare minimum. Heels gave way to hiking boots. Buffets became whatever fit in their backpacks. They started before sunrise, ponchos rustling, phones on airplane mode, minds oddly alert. The last zigzags hurt. The bells grew louder. At the shrine, they stood still, eyes wet, palms warm. "We went out of curiosity," says Ira, "but found a kind of peace we didn't know we were missing." Now, they go yearly.

That impulse is spreading. Temples are drawing a surge of Gen Z

Hemkund with the Valley of Flowers, the Char Dham and Adi Kailash in Uttarakhand. "At least a quarter to a third of new queries are from them," he says. Divine India Holidays, a temple-and-heritage tour company, sees the same tilt towards compact trips blending trekking, heritage and food. Founder Vineet Choubey says, "Char Dham and Do Dham with nature add-ons are hot, as are Ramayana circuits and south India temple trails—people want culture, photos and a good thali in the same weekend."

The numbers back it. IXIGO, an

YASH SAMPAT, 33

Advocate, New Delhi

Yash is a regular at Swaminarayan temples—Akshardham in Delhi when home (*in pic*), in other cities when work takes him there. Since 2006, he has attended weekly Bal Sabhas, marked

'Spiritual grounding brings me clarity'

by satsang, seva and a quiet walk past carved pillars. For this young advocate, court diaries can be chaotic, briefs multiplying hourly. The temple, he says, gives him clarity. "My spiritual grounding helps me see

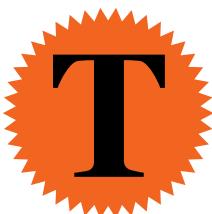
issues more broadly and respond with balance." He values how sabhas weave peers and mentors together through shared service and bonhomie after aarti. The result: sharper focus and a habit of giving back. ■

seekers—driven by belonging, spiritual curiosity and the quiet pull of social currency. This movement is bolstered by tech: Char Dham registration sits on Uttarakhand's 'Tourist Care' app; Tirupati's 'TTD' app manages slot-booked darshan, rooms, sevas and donations; Kashi Vishwanath offers live aarti and e-bookings—replacing middlemen with digital gateways.

Operators feel the shift. Divine Trails, an adventure-led pilgrimage outfit that arranges Himalayan yatras and handles permits, porters and homestays, reports a steady rise in enquiries from younger travellers. Founder Dinesh Rathod says renovated corridors, faster roads and social media are pulling under-35s to popular circuits such as Kedarnath,

online travel company, says half of Mahakumbh Mela attendees in 2025 were under 30, with 26 per cent aged 20–25. Kantar TGI, a comprehensive consumer insights tool that surveyed 63,622 urban and rural Indians, shows that in 2024, one in four Indians travelled to a religious destination, with most travellers aged 25–44. Those aged 25–34 led the count in Haridwar, while the 35–44s predominated in Ayodhya.

Beyond visits, participation is deepening. Bochasanwasi Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha (BAPS), which runs Akshardham temples worldwide, notes teenagers and young adults in weekly satsang sabhas across its network. Yash Sampat, a 33-year-old advocate from New Delhi, is among them (see case study 'Spiritual ground-



THEY ARE THE KIND OF COUPLE WHO BRUNCH AT KHAN MARKET AND SKI IN GULMARG. Ira Kapoor, 26, is a brand manager in Gurugram, while her partner, 27-year-old Karan Malhotra, is an investment analyst. For the first anniversary of their relationship, they chose Kedarnath. Not a hotel. Not a tasting menu.

ing brings me clarity'). Bansal Bhalja, a BAPS spokesperson, says, "Discourses help them stay away from addictions, offer strength, values and a sense of belonging with the community."

FROM PUBS TO PUJAS

Social media has turned darshan into content. Actress Sara Ali Khan's visit to Kamakhya in Guwahati pushed a Northeast shakti peeth into Instagram feeds. Global influencers Kim and Khloé Kardashian's stop at ISKCON Mumbai normalised *seva* as 'experience'. The geography is widening—from Meghalaya's Nartiang Durga, ringed by ancient monoliths, to Ladakh's monastery belts. When travel creators like Tanya Khanijow (1.1 million Instagram followers) and Deepanshu Sangwan aka 'Nomadic Indian' (1.8 million YouTube subscribers) supply enticing pictures and vlogs, audiences follow. The Triyuginarayan temple in Rudraprayag is now a sought-after 'vedic vivah' destination (see case study *'Blessed to have got married...'*).

For many, the effect endures beyond the visit. Anuj Verma, 22, from Doiwala in Dehradun district, trekked to Tungnath and Badrinath with two college friends in 2023. "It was spiritually uplifting," he says. "I am keen to try out more such circuits, especially Kedarnath." Aman Shah, 28, a musician from Tapovan near Rishikesh, rides his bike to Kedarnath yearly. "By the time I reach the shrine, my head has stopped racing." As spiritual traveller Sshivani Durga describes it, "For many young Indians, spirituality is now a personal quest—temples offer beauty, calm and a live link to heritage in a noisy world."

At the Neelkanth Mahadev Temple, perched on a forested ridge near Rishikesh and tied to the 'Samudra Manthan' legend, young trekkers ask sages less about ritual than about anxiety, sleep and fear. "It is the ache of the age," says an elderly sadhu who prefers to remain nameless. "I listen first, then give them a page to read." Not all enter the sanctum, many find peace under the pine shade.



RACHIT ROJHA, 26

YouTuber, Gurugram

‘Blessed to have got married at Lord Vishnu’s feet’

Rachit married fellow YouTuber Sibbu Giri in early 2025 at Triyuginarayan, a Himalayan temple dedicated to Lord Vishnu and famed as Lord Shiva and Parvati's mythic wedding site. "We got married at Vishnu Bhagwan's charan (feet). We are so blessed," says Rachit. Located in Uttarakhand's Rudraprayag district, Triyugi-

narayan is now a sought-after 'vedic vivah' destination, supported by local planners and priests. Before the eternal 'Akhand Dhuni' flame, couples exchange vows beside the Brahma Shila stone, with snow-capped ridges in view. Private ceremonies require coordination with the Tirtha Purohit Samiti and Rs 1,100 for on-site registration. ■



सबसे भरोसेमंद खोतों से, सबसे सटीक जानकारी

सब्सक्राइब करें और पाएं 68% तक की छूट

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

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

टिक करें	अवधि	कुल अंक	कवर प्राइस (₹)	ऑफर प्राइस (₹)	प्लान	डिस्काउंट
<input type="checkbox"/>	1 वर्ष	52	3120	999	डिजिटल	68%
<input type="checkbox"/>	1 वर्ष	52	3120	2699	डिजिटल+प्रिंट	14%

कृपया फॉर्म को ब्लॉकलेटर में भरें

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

नाम..... पता.....

..... शहर..... राज्य..... पिन.....

मोबाइल..... ईमेल.....



सब्सक्राइब करने के लिए यहाँ स्कैन करें।

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



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The impulse can be profoundly therapeutic. A 2024 cross-sectional study of 300 urban adolescents in north India, published on PubMed, found that higher spiritual health scores were linked to better overall wellbeing among youth. Separate 2024 studies of Indian medical undergraduates and urban youth cohorts, published in the *National Journal of Physiology, Pharmacy and Pharmacology*, found measurable levels of spiritual health linked to life satisfaction—indicating that many students use prayers, temple visits and related practices as tools for stress management and “purpose-seeking”. “The need to belong is profoundly regulating,” says Dr Pretty Duggar Gupta, consultant psychiatrist at Aster Whitefield Hospital, Bengaluru. “Shared ritual and rhythm can soothe a stricken nervous system, help breath settle and make people feel safe again.”

QUICK ACCESS, NEW AESTHETICS

Scale and tech makes access easier. With more than 650,000 documented Hindu temples across India alongside countless other sacred sites, young travellers can choose sanctuaries that match their vibe. Slot-booked darshan and stay options on official apps let you plan a weekend like a concert—book, pay, show a pass, even stream the aarti if stuck en route. Case in point: Meera Nair, 27, a product manager from Bengaluru, stitched a Tirupati-Konark weekend between Friday evening and Monday morning, having booked special darshan and a room online. “I never cared for architecture,” she says, “but the AR (augmented reality) guide at Konark made it special.”

Technology is rewriting how heritage is experienced. Virtual tours recreate temples in high-resolution 3D, from the 9th-century rock-cut Maladevi in Madhya Pradesh, backed by the Department of Science and Technology’s SHRI initiative, to Odisha’s Sun Temple, where AR brings the Konark wheel alive. Projection-mapping transforms precincts into open-air theatres—Somnath’s show narrates its restoration with lasers and 3D architectural visuals.

Public money is pushing this along. The PRASHAD scheme—short for Pilgrimage Rejuvenation and Spiritual Heritage Augmentation Drive—launched by the Union ministry of tourism in 2014–15, has so far sanctioned nearly Rs 1,800 crore for 48 projects across 27 states and Union territories. Cleanliness and safety are no longer afterthoughts: since the opening of the Kashi Vishwanath Corridor, Varanasi’s temple precincts have been transformed with upgraded roads, lighting, modern toilets, clearer signage and enhanced riverfront policing. Another marquee

“Char Dham searches are up 35 per cent over last year,” says Rajeev Kale, president, Thomas Cook (India). “Our curated aerial darshan packages offer a faster, yet meaningful, experience for modern travellers.” Even mass pilgrimages are being tailored. This year, Nikhil Bhatia, 31, a logistics entrepreneur from Delhi, did the Neelkanth Mahadev run with cousins in a chauffeur-driven limousine—complete with DJ setup, luxe vegan tiffins and scheduled cool-downs at hygiene-audited camps. But all this comes at a cost. A ‘VVIP’ darshan starts at around Rs 5,000 per person. A ‘hel-

CLICK, GO, PRAY

HOW TECH AND LUXURY ARE TRANSFORMING PILGRIMAGE

► **Plan:** Apps such as Uttarakhand’s ‘Tourist Care’ (Char Dham) and Tirupati’s ‘TTD’ have made booking darshan, rooms and special-entry passes seamless

► **Travel:** Corridor upgrades shrink travel time. The approved Sonprayag-Kedarnath ropeway will cut a 6–9 hour

trek to 36 minutes

► **Experience:** Virtual tours such as Konark Sun Temple AR reveal lost details; projection-mapped light-and-laser shows at Somnath turn façades into living history after dusk

► **Safety & comfort:** Wider plazas, toilets, signage

and lighting make crowds manageable. On-ground policing and cameras keep evenings safe and family-friendly

► **Premium layer:** Chartered chopper, heritage stay and scholar-guides add comfort and depth. Oxygen cans, luggage valets remove friction at altitude

project ahead: a 12.9-km ropeway from Sonprayag to Kedarnath, which will cut a gruelling 6–9 hour trek to just 36 minutes, reshaping access to one of India’s most picturesque shrines.

What’s more, temple tourism has gone couture. Spiritual travel operators now sell pilgrimages the way luxury agents sell safaris: private, paced and designed. Indian Temple Tour and Temple Yatri stitch fast-track darshan with helicopter charters. Holy Voyages and Tirtha Yatra add heritage stays—from restored havelis in Kashi to plantation bungalows down south—with on-call yoga teachers and multilingual scholar-guides.

hop’ package for Char Dham is priced at a minimum Rs 2 lakh per person.

There are other draws. Advira Kohli, 27, a fashion merchandiser from Delhi, plans weekend temple runs purely for prasad. “I go where the food tells the story,” she says. Food has its own fandom: Jagannath’s mahaprasad, Tirupati laddus, Madurai’s ghee pongal and langar-style kadhi-chawal in northern shrines.

So, whether in silence or in selfies, the pull is the same—a call to step away from noise and to seek something that truly matters. ■

—with Jumana Shah

LE ! SURE

ART: MYTH AND MODERNITY PG 52

MUSIC: CONFLUENCE OF SOUNDS PG 55

The Long Wait

BOOKS ▶

NINETEEN YEARS IN THE
MAKING, KIRAN DESAI'S
THE LONELINESS OF SONIA AND SUNNY IS A
SWEEPING, FUNNY AND
DEEPLY FELT PORTRAIT OF
LOVE AND ISOLATION IN A
GLOBALISED WORLD



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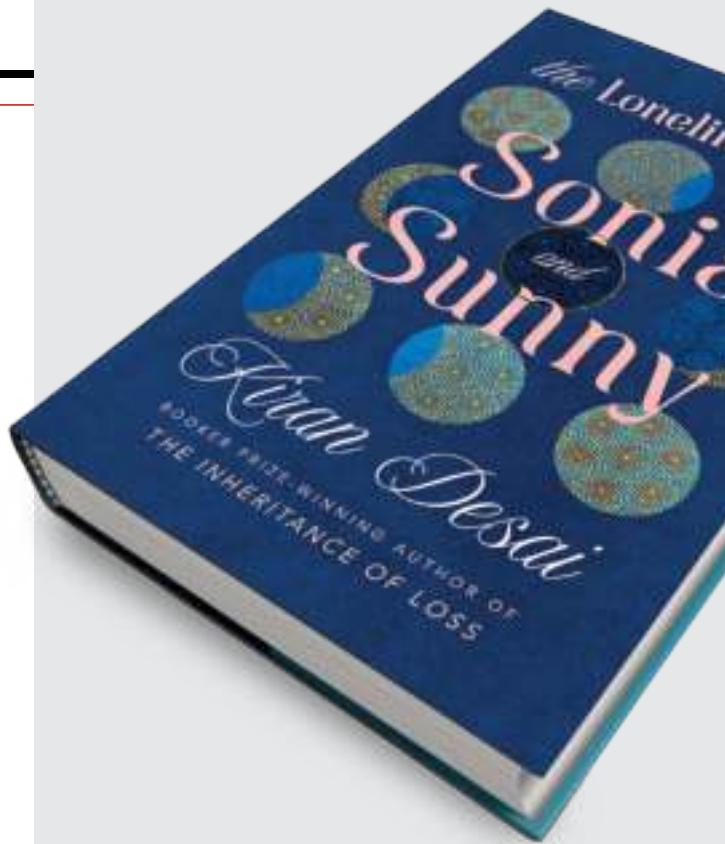
iran Desai scoffs at the word anticipation. "It was completely quiet," she says, laughing, of the 19-year wait for her new novel, *The Loneliness of Sonia and Sunny*. "Maybe some friends would have said, 'Are you ever going to finish?'. But no, I didn't feel anticipation knocking at my door."

Desai is down-to-earth and disarming in a video call from her home in New York. It's her third

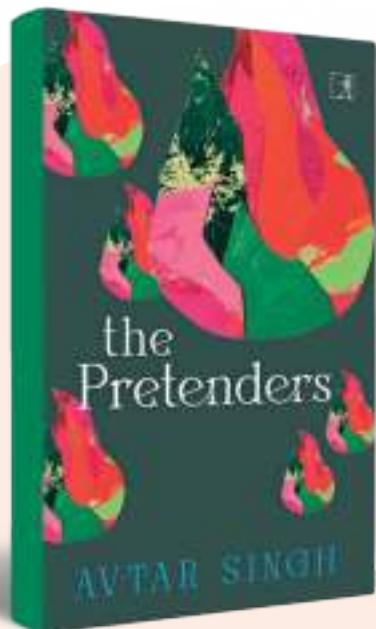
novel and first since *The Inheritance of Loss*, which won the Man Booker Prize in 2006. "It was a wonderful thing," she says, of the win. "It really allowed me to think of myself as a writer and to give myself the time. This time taken perhaps came from that confidence that I now have the time to work."

Desai spent years writing and rewriting *Loneliness...*, excising large chunks and sieving out only the parts that had "sparks of life". Her mother Anita Desai, a three-time Booker Prize nominee and Desai's literary confidante, saw a 1,000-page draft ("still a big mess") once it was down from 5,000 pages, often providing encouragement and critique.

Loneliness..., shortlisted for the 2025 Booker Prize, is a lush, sprawling saga spanning generations and continents. It's anchored by the titular Sunny and Sonia, two young immigrants to the US; both aspiring writers, both grappling with split lives, family dynamics, class equations and racial politics. "I wanted to write about the loneliness of our globalised world and I had the idea of doing that through the lens of an unresolved love



At nearly 700 pages, *Loneliness...* is an immersive read, richly plotted and populated, with an eclectic, memorable cast of family, friends and frenemies



THE PRETENDERS
by Avtar Singh
SIMON & SCHUSTER INDIA
₹599; 320 pages

BOOKS ▼

Masks We Wear

IN THE PRETENDERS, AVTAR SINGH TURNS THE ISOLATION OF THE PANDEMIC INTO A MIRROR FOR HUMAN CONNECTION AND FRACTURE

In perhaps the most stunning first act I have read in a recent Indian novel, Avtar Singh's *The Pretenders* begins with Rahim, a Muslim man, carrying his dead Hindu friend Umakant's corpse around Delhi, looking for a crematorium and a Brahmin to conduct the last rites. Rahim's day takes a dark detour when he stops to catch his breath underneath a tree at a park—and is promptly yelled at, asked to leave immediately, and called a "sister-fucking purbiya" for

good measure (in the derogatory context, 'purbiya' is directed at people from Bihar and eastern UP).

Is there anything more Delhi than rich folks cordoning off their land as though it were a war zone? *The Pretenders*, however, isn't a Delhi novel per se. In fact, in style and treatment it is far closer to the super-ambitious "connection novels" (to borrow a term from the writer-critic Keshava Guha) of the mid-2000s; think Hari Kunzru's *Transmission* or David Mitchell's



**THE
LONELINESS
OF SONIA
AND SUNNY**
By Kiran Desai
**PENGUIN
INDIA/HAMISH
HAMILTON**
₹999;
688 pages

story," says Desai. "I wrote the stories of all the different characters separately, and then tried to see where their stories would intersect."

The novel begins in 1996, when Sonia is a lonely college student in Vermont, and Sunny is starting out as a journalist in New York. The pair is first introduced through their families—Sunny's mother forwards him the marriage proposal by post—before their actual meet-cute on an overnight train. They first exchange words only a third of the way through the book, and from that point on they weave in and out of each other's lives. At nearly 700 pages, it's a fabulous, immersive read, richly plotted and populated. "I wanted to write a book like the books I love, like *Middlemarch*, or [the books of] Tolstoy or Hilary Mantel," says Desai. "I thought, 'Let me write my big fat book now!'"

The big, fat book boasts an eclectic, memorable cast of family, friends and frenemies. There's Sunny's mother, Babita Bhatia, a wealthy widow with myriad domestic troubles and one eye on how to lure away a fantastic kebab cook; Mina Foi, Sonia's sidelined maiden aunt; and Satya, Sunny's best friend, a young immigrant doctor burdened in his search for a wife. "When I read love stories that are set in the US or Europe, the absence of family shocks me," says Desai. "And I wonder how the author can write a story where it's just two people and very little or no presence

of a cast of family members. It strikes me as very hard to do in an Indian story."

Despite the presence of large and boisterous families, loneliness is threaded through the novel—whether in marriage, widowhood, or life abroad. "It is true that as an immigrant, you do, in some ways, make an unknowable creature of yourself," says Desai. "As Sunny says, he doesn't know where his thinking is coming from, he doesn't even trust his own emotions."

Desai left India in her teens. "The diaspora is a wonderful place to write from, but it took me a while to understand that," she says. "I was very worried about losing India in terms of writing landscape... and there's a depth of knowledge that I will never have over here."

The novel makes sly references to diaspora writing of a pandering kind; the eye-catching journalistic profile of the man with the long fingernails, fiction about arranged marriages and boys who turn into monkeys. "Don't write Orientalist nonsense! Don't cheapen your country..." one character says.

Desai is clearly having fun, whether sending up clichéd writing, satirising the elite or dabbling in miniature domestic comedies. "How can you not find the world so ludicrous?" she asks. "We are dealing with completely ridiculous situations every day." ■

—Bhavya Dore

Cloud Atlas. Like those books, *The Pretenders* has characters scattered across the globe, connected by the deadly Delta wave of the Covid pandemic that began in April 2021.

Shamsher Singh ('Sammy'), leading a comfortable life in Delhi, sees the equilibrium in his existence being disturbed in real time, thanks to past traumas being dredged up. His childhood friend lives next door to Sammy and her son Farid is negotiating the vagaries of a long-distance relationship with the 20-something Beijing surfer Mei. In Bangkok, Changz's life

turns on a pin after he is rescued from a xenophobic assault by a kindly woman. And in Jakarta, Mei's mother Nina has to contend with the real-

it would be that things you would never have noticed otherwise are revealed." This describes the novel in a nutshell: Singh uses the isolation necessitated by

featured a kind of convergence caused by Covid—people from around the globe converging upon a nameless German town, their lives growing more and more intertwined, cornered women finding a common purpose and so on. Conversely, *The Pretenders* represents a divergence of sorts—mothers and sons growing apart, lovers second-guessing each other's motivations and so on. Like the best novels, it has both a propulsive story and a distinctive voice, and you finish the third act wanting to stay with these characters for longer. ■

—Aditya Mani Jha

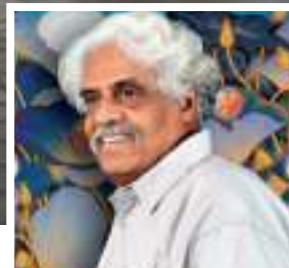
SINGH USES THE ISOLATION DUE TO THE PANDEMIC AS A PLOT DEVICE, SHOWING THE CORNERS OF CHARACTERS' MINDS

ity that her husband's paranoid tendencies are becoming a threat to those around him.

At one point, Singh writes, "If there can be an advantage to a pandemic,

the Delta wave as a versatile plot device, showing us the inside of these characters' homes, as well as the innermost corners of their minds. His previous novel *Into the Forest*

IN MEMORIUM
The Museum of A. Ramachandran in Kollam realises a dream of the late artist (inset)



ART ▶

A HOME FOR HIS ART

A newly inaugurated museum celebrates the late artist **A. Ramachandran's** creative journey—from his Kerala roots to his vibrant explorations of form, myth and modernity

The Museum of A. Ramachandran in Kollam, inaugurated on October 5, realises a dream the artist, who passed away in 2024, cherished for decades—to create a home for his art in Kerala. “Although Ramachandran spent all his working life in Delhi, he remained a Malayali at heart,” says R. Siva Kumar, the museum’s curator. “His sensibilities were formed during his early days in Kerala [Attingal and Thiruvananthapuram], and they shone through his personality and his art.”

Ramachandran’s fascination with art began early: childhood scribbles on walls, oil portraits of ancestors, temple murals and reproductions of Bengal School paintings nurtured his curiosity. A visit to Sri Chithralayam

in Thiruvananthapuram and, years later, the Maruki Gallery in Japan inspired his lifelong wish to build a museum of his own. That wish was realised posthumously through the efforts of his family, CPI(M) general secretary M.A. Baby and the Kerala

while placing them in context through short wall texts, a studio recreation and digital presentations,” explains Siva Kumar. “It lets viewers know the artist at many levels.”

The collection traces Ramachandran’s journey from the dark expres-

The collection traces Ramachandran’s journey from the dark expressionism of the 1960s to the radiant, nature-based imagery of his later years

government. The museum now stands within the Sree Narayana Guru Cultural Complex, symbolising both artistic and cultural belonging.

“The museum allows viewers to experience the works chronologically

sionism of the 1960s to the radiant, nature-based imagery of his later years. “While they are apparently contrary, there is an innate rebelliousness running through both periods,” notes Siva Kumar. “In that sense, he was a critical



insider within Indian modernism."

Paintings, sculptures, drawings, ceramics and children's books appear side by side, revealing how his many pursuits enriched one another. "Our effort has been to offer a comprehensive picture of his practice and help viewers discover how the different areas of his work complement each other," Siva Kumar adds.

Having known the artist for decades, the curator sought to preserve his spirit rather than impose interpretation. "I have tried to let him speak to the viewers and not muffle his voice through heavy-handed curatorial editorialisation," he says.

Beyond the art, the museum displays Ramachandran's collection of post-Ravi Varma portraits and Nathdwara miniatures, with his art library housed separately at the Lalithakala Akademi, Ernakulam. The result is a personal and thoughtful tribute, honouring a lifelong vision and welcoming new generations to explore his unique blend of artistic imagination, wit and humanity. ■

Nikhil Sardana

THE LISTICLE

Art exhibitions to look out for this month



On view at **DHOOMIMAL GALLERY** till Nov. 5

► NEW DELHI LINE DRAMA

Dhoomimal Gallery presents *Liminal Lines*, a retrospective commemorating 50 years of Ashok Bhowmick's art practice. It features everything from early black-and-white drawings of the 1970s to his large-format canvases and recent forays into printmaking/sculpture, including a sculpture made specially for the exhibition.



► KOLKATA PAST IN PORTRAITS

Bhunath Mukherjee: *A Modernist Lineage of Bengali Portraiture* puts the spotlight on one of Bengal's great modernist painters, whose artistic journey began at the Government School of Art, Calcutta, in 1935. On view are 10 portraits of Bengal's leading lights—from Rabindranath Tagore to Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay.

On view at **ART EXPOSURE** till Oct. 31



▲ GURUGRAM Visual Quartet

A travelling edition of Navajivan Trust's National Photography Festival is showing the work of four extraordinary photographers at Museo Camera: Nemai Ghosh, Tarun Bhartiya, Mukesh Parpiani and Sunil Adesara. The festival is dedicated to the memory of filmmaker and photographer Tarun Bhartiya.

At **MUSEO CAMERA** till Oct. 27

▼ NEW DELHI A Journey in Time

Extraordinary Line, curated by Avijna Bhattacharya, is one of three exhibitions showing at KNMA this winter. Tracing transitions in the drawn line from post-Independence India to the post-liberalisation era, it features works by Arpita Singh, Bhupen Khakhar, Paritosh Sen, Jogen Chowdhury, Vivan Sundaram among others.



On view at **KNMA, SAKET** till Jan. 10, 2026

Bittersweet Memories

LAKSHMIPRIYA DEVI ON SHOOTING HER DEBUT FEATURE BOONG IN A BORDER TOWN AND THE IDEA OF 'OTHERNESS'

M

Manipuri filmmaker Lakshmipriya Devi was shooting her recently released debut feature *Boong* in Moreh, a small town on the India-Myanmar border, in late February of 2023. About a week later, the ethnic conflict between the Meiteis and Kukis broke out in the state. "There was a feeling that something was brewing. A bandh had been called, but we couldn't just sit in our hotel rooms. We shot outside the police station there, using their barricades to create a set

and borrowing fruits and vegetables to 'dress' the empty stalls and carts. Just as we were about to start shooting, a Tamilian wedding procession went past, which helped because the streets were otherwise completely empty," she remembers. This border town has a diverse population, including significant Tamil, Gorkha and Marwari communities. And yet, the town, along with the rest of Tengnoupal district, has seen recurring

ethnic violence in the two years since.

The film follows a schoolboy, Boong (Gugun Kipgen), who travels to Moreh to look for his missing father, who is presumed dead. Along with Boong is his best friend, Raju (Angom Sanamatum), who

saying you people from the Northeast eat too much," she recalls. This was followed by years of racist slurs as she went on to study Mass Communication at Jamia Millia Islamia. Every time she returned home in Imphal, she'd notice how the same was happening to people from outside over here. "Wherever there is a majority, they will always try and subjugate the minority."

Lakshmipriya, who has worked as an assistant director on films such as *Luck by Chance*, *Rang De Basanti* and *PK*, describes *Boong* as "my bittersweet memory of Manipur". She wrote this film about eight years ago after the passing of her father, and it was inspired by the legends she had heard about her great-grandfather.

"He was said to be in exile in Myanmar, and everyone had different theories about him. I always wondered if he'd recognise me or even my mother, his granddaughter." The 52-year-old, who wants to tell more stories from her state, is happy that her fellow Manipuris are watching the film. ■

—Karishma Upadhyay

LAKSHMIPRIYA WROTE THE FILM **AFTER THE PASSING OF HER FATHER**, AND IT WAS INSPIRED BY THE LEGENDS SHE HAD HEARD ABOUT HER GREAT-GRANDFATHER

is considered an 'outsider' because he's from Rajasthan. This tender and charming coming-of-age film that also addresses xenophobia and bigotry premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival last year.

The first time Lakshmipriya herself felt 'othered' was when she came to study in Delhi as a 10-year-old. "We had an *ayah* in the hostel and she used to whack us on our thighs with a rod,





DHANUJ ACHU

CINEMA ▲

Celluloid Dreams

Piyush Thakur's National Award-winning *The First Film* is his heartfelt tribute to cinema

In a small town in 1960s India, where cinema is forbidden for women, a 14-year-old embarks on a quest to watch her first film. That is the premise of *The First Film*, a short by filmmaker Piyush Thakur, which went on to win the Golden Lotus for Best Direction and the Silver Lotus for Best Music Direction at the 71st National Film Awards recently. “It took a while to sink in,” says the director. “More than pride, I felt gratitude—for all the people who stood by me through the long years this film took.”

Having resonated with audiences across the world, it was but natural for the movie to create a buzz in India. “At its core, *The First Film* is not just about cinema—it’s

about longing, friendship and the courage to dream. Whether someone is watching it in Moscow, Stuttgart or Texas, they can connect with the feeling of wanting something deeply, and the small acts of bravery it takes to reach for it.”

Having resonated with audiences across the world, it was but natural for the movie to create a buzz in India

With a firm belief that cinema is a “shared love language”, Thakur reflects on how the collective joy of the movie-going experience transcends boundaries. “The smell of popcorn or samosas, the anticipation of watching your favourite star, the shared emotions in a dark hall—these belong to people everywhere. Since *The First Film* celebrates that very spirit, maybe that’s why it has connected so strongly across borders,” he concludes. ■

—Deepa Natarajan Lobo

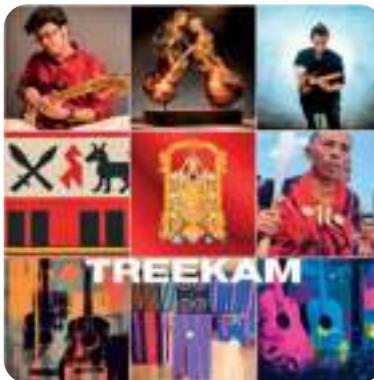
MUSIC ▼

CONFLUENCE OF SOUNDS

Guitarists **Abhay Nayampally** and **Arenlong Longkumer**'s new album *Treekam* blends Carnatic ragas and Naga chants with jazz elements

For music composer and producer Sandeep Chowta, the journey of the new instrumental album *Treekam* started with “a desire to say something that can’t be said within the boundaries of any one genre”. The five-track album released on Chowta’s Namma Music label features Carnatic guitarist Abhay Nayampally and Naga guitarist Arenlong Longkumer. Also on the album are American drummer Jerrod ‘J-rod’ Sullivan, British bassist Seb Read and the legendary keyboardist and member of the jazz band Spyro Gyra, Tom Schuman. Two tracks, composed by Longkumer, also showcase chants by Naga singer-songwriter Mengu Suokhrie and the Nagaland Folkloric Group.

The album name *Treekam* comes from the Sanskrit word *trikam*, meaning the confluence of three. It’s a metaphor for



Chowta’s vision for the album—“Building a new musical lexicon where a *tanam* [rhythmic improvisation in Carnatic] can flow into a jazz walking bass line, and a Naga folk melody can become the head for a jazz standard.” The challenge, of course, was to combine them seamlessly. “I don’t think there has been an album like this before that blends Car-

natic, Naga and jazz sounds. Melodically, it’s not a very complex album and that was a conscious decision,” explains Nayampally. He has composed three tracks on the album—‘Divine Directions’, ‘Swan Song’ and ‘Spunky Town’. ‘Swan Song’, based on raga Hamsadhwani, reunited him with Barcelona-based Schuman. The duo has previously collaborated on the 13-time Grammy-nominated keyboardist’s 2024 solo album, *I Am Schuman*.

Based in Mokokchung, Longkumer describes himself as the ‘odd man’ on the album. “Everyone else is classically oriented and has played a lot of jazz music. I am primarily a rock ‘n’ roll guitarist,” he says. An M.Phil in Linguistics, his compositions blend progressive rock, metal and Naga folk music. Carnatic music was just as new to Longkumer as jazz, but his goal for *Treekam* was to “fuse two distinct sounds into one entity”. Apart from translating traditional Naga music to the guitar, Longkumer’s compositions also feature chants from Ao and Lotha tribes. ■

—Karishma Upadhyay

ICY AMBITIONS

As qualification season gets underway for the Milano Cortina Winter Olympics next year, we take a look at Indian athletes who have made their mark of late



ZUBAIR AHMAD LONE, 27

A silver in the slalom and giant slalom at the F.I.S. Alpine Snowboard event in Kopaonik, Serbia, in January marked a promising start for Zubair Ahmad Lone. He's been on the podium on multiple occasions since then in North Macedonia and Greece. In March, he created history by clinching India's first snowboarding gold at an F.I.S. event in Lebanon.



MEHRAJ UD DIN KHAN, 28

At the F.I.S. Via Stars Cup in Kopaonik, Serbia, in March 2024, Mehraj Ud Din Khan announced his arrival by picking up bronze in the slalom and giant slalom, the first snowboarding medals for India at an international event. Earlier this year, he took gold at the Khelo India Winter Games in the slalom, before his first appearance at the World Championships in Switzerland in March.



WOMEN'S ICE HOCKEY TEAM

The women's ice hockey team has made steady progress over the past few years that culminated in their bronze medal finish at the Asia Cup in June. Tashi Dolkar was the pick of the players, with two goals and three assists. The majority of the team comprises players from Ladakh, who also took gold at the Khelo India Winter Games earlier this year.

BHAVANI T.N., 30

The former instructor took up competitive cross-country skiing only in 2020. After international success in 2023, Bhavani T.N. became the first Indian cross-country skier to pick up a medal at an F.I.S. event in September. She put on a stellar show at the National Cross-Country Skiing Championships in Chile, with a bronze in the 5km interval start and the 1.8km sprint.



ARIF KHAN, 35

The flag-bearer of Indian winter sports, Arif Khan became the first Indian to qualify for two events at the same Winter Games in Beijing in 2022. He took gold and bronze at the F.I.S. Alpine Slalom Race in the United Arab Emirates the following year, while finishing just outside of the podium places in the men's slalom at the F.I.S. Montenegro Cup in March this year.



—Shail Desai

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SWITCHING BATS

BASEBALL UNITED, THE FIRST PROFESSIONAL LEAGUE BRINGING THE SPORT TO SOUTH ASIA AND THE MIDDLE EAST, KICKS OFF NEXT MONTH



Most couldn't wrap their heads around Tushar Lalwani's decision to switch from cricket to baseball in the seventh grade. In baseball, he found a lot of transferable skills and the possibility of someday representing the country. That dream came true when he donned the Indian jersey at the Arab Classic in November last year.

Next month, Lalwani will be one of three Indian players to turn out for Mumbai Cobras in the inaugural edition of Baseball United, besides three other players of Indian origin. The four-team professional league is the brainchild of Kash Shaikh, John Miedreich and Major League Baseball legends like Barry Larkin, Mariano Rivera and Adrian Beltre, and was launched to bring the sport to the Middle East and South Asia.

Baseball United has tied up with the Amateur Baseball Federation of India to scout players from universities and colleges across the country. Over the past few years, prospects like Lalwani have been working remotely with mentors Carlos Mirabal and Vishnu Kalel.

The league gets underway on November 14 with a marquee clash in Dubai between Mumbai Cobras and Karachi Monarchs. Shaikh, chairman, CEO and co-founder, grew up in Houston, well aware of the India-Pakistan cricket rivalry through his Pakistani mother and Indian father. "There is no better environment to bring people together than sport," he says. "And we want to do it through baseball." ■

College players have been scouted from across India and worked with mentors over the years

—Shail Desai

THE ART OF THE CHASE

Konkona Sen Sharma on channelling a complex cop in JioStar's Search: The Naina Murder Case, and why she follows her creative instincts on and off screen

Q. You are an actor, writer and director, also judicious with your roles. How do you juggle it all?

One can always argue that even an actor is a creator. But you are given the character, story, clothes, hair, make-up and lighting. So, in a way, you are a vessel that's just amalgamating all of it. Everything for me is just done on instinct and time. It's, let's do the most interesting things coming my way. Sometimes, they aren't.

Q. You are also said to be writing-directing a show next.

Directing is fun on set. But I am not a very open and collaborative director like my friend Rohan Sippy. I don't think I am fun at all. I find it difficult to own the material if I have not written it.

Q. A crime thriller through the prism of a police procedural is one of the most popular streaming genres. The best ones manage to show what ails society. Is Search: The Naina Murder Case doing the same?

The biggest draw for me was that it was an adaptation of the popular Danish show *The Killing*, one of the OG [original] crime shows with a complex female detective character. The show has been adapted very well to an Indian context. The darker part of human nature really comes out in crime and it is a very acceptable way to access it.

Q. Playing a cop is a rite of passage for an actor. How was it to sink your teeth into such a role?

I didn't have any notion of, I haven't played this or I want to play it. I like the character very much. I am playing somebody my own age, and someone who is complete. We really get into her domestic life. Then at work she's dealing with a slightly upstart kind of a person. So, it's not just one thing. There's enough to do.

—with Suhani Singh



Photograph by CHANDRADEEP KUMAR

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