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PARIS OLYMPICS 2024

THE GOLD QUEST

**INDIA'S BRIGHTEST
PROSPECTS**

**NIKHAT
ZAREEN, 28**
Two-time boxing
world champion

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Sports lovers across the globe are agog as the Olympics return to France's beautiful capital after precisely one century. This promises to be a unique Olympics, with the opening ceremony at the Gardens of Trocadero, the Eiffel Tower forming part of the backdrop, and the participants sailing down the river Seine. The lucky ones will witness charming events like dressage—think of it as the equestrian equivalent of ballet—against the backdrop of the Palace of Versailles. It will feature India's first-ever participant, Anush Agarwalla. His horse, Sir Caramello Old, will be prancing to “*Jai Ho*”! Will that exuberant victory chant rub off on the whole contingent? We will know soon. This week, we celebrate India's Quest for Gold with a curtain-raiser. After the Tokyo Olympics, India's Olympic ambitions have begun to soar. Tokyo 2020 was a watershed moment. We got our highest-ever tally of seven medals and also marked a distinct change in trajectory—Neeraj Chopra's javelin gold was the first by an Indian in a track and field event.

India's Tokyo contingent was the largest ever: over 120 athletes across disciplines. At 117, the Paris-bound ensemble is actually a tad smaller—it also looks puny compared to the US (592) and China (388). Yet, India boasts a good crop of athletes who are really in the medal hunt; the optimists are counting the final tally in the double digits. You will find all the candidates, veterans as well as fresh arrivals in our gallery of profiles curated and written by Deputy Editor Suhani Singh. It has lavish, exclusive photographs by our Photo Editor, Bandeeep Singh, that capture all their outward flair and inner drama. Along with an event calendar, this is your guidebook to help you zero in on everyone with a realisable chance of getting up onto an Olympic podium with the Indian anthem playing.

Neeraj Chopra leads the order of precedence. When it comes to all-conquering performance, he has been there, done that—and stayed there. He's both the Olympic champion and the World champion. But some of his competitors have breached the 90-metre barrier—his best was only whisperingly close, at 89.94 m. He also came second in the Doha Diamond League in May. But the country lad from Haryana knows how to keep it cool and let it rip on the big day. Next is ‘SatChi’—the flamboyant badminton doubles pair of Satwiksairaj Rankireddy and Chirag Shetty, who were World No. 1 in October 2023. In the past two years, the Danish coach Mathias Boe, Olympic silver medallist and husband of actress Taapsee Pannu, has honed their single-gear all-out attack game into a complete demolition system with more range and durability, without slowing them down. Satwik still owns the Guinness record for the fastest hit in badminton, a 565 kmph smash.

Next is our galaxy of female stars from the ‘power’ games: plenty of grit and guts hold up their potential for glory. Nikhat Zareen, the tough girl from Nizamabad who graces our cover, is not getting kid-glove treatment in Paris despite being a two-time world champion in flyweight/light flyweight (2022, 2023) categories—the boxer is going unseeded and so faces a tough draw. But missing out on Tokyo has only whetted her appetite.

Nor has a bronze at Tokyo sated the appetite of fellow pugilist Lovlina Borgohain—a World Championship gold in 2023 proves the Assamese has it in her to go for more. Mirabai Chanu, the silver medalist at Tokyo, has long made pain her best friend. The Meitei weightlifter came out of a career-threatening hip injury to lift well over three times her body weight of 49 kg to qualify again. Among wrestlers, no one would blame Vinesh Phogat for being unable to fully focus on training. The former World No. 1 was kept busy wrestling entities outside the mat, way beyond her weight category. Now, she has changed hers to have a shot at her first Olympic medal, even if the 50 kg draw will be more challenging for her. Last but not least, there's Antim Panghal, 19, the next Haryana wrestling sensation that Vinesh had to make way for in 53 kg.

Among team events, the men's hockey team, which brought in a medal at Tokyo after a gap of 41 years, is in the hunt again—with 11 of that same squad. But our overall medal tally could hinge on another posse. India has 21 shooters lining up for 27 events at Châteauroux in central France, three hours away from all the noise in Paris. In a game of probabilities, the more chances you get, the higher the chances of a medal. The one to watch out for is Sift Kaur Samra, the 22-year-old world record holder from Faridkot whose ‘chill’ attitude leans towards the Punjabi pop of Diljit Dosanjh and camping in her Scorpio.

It was Antwerp 1920 that hosted the first proper Indian Olympic team. Dorabji Tata was its moving spirit and chief sponsor; he repeated the role in Paris in 1924. Looking back a century later, we count only 35 medals in 24 editions of the Olympics. Official institutional support has been feeble historically. The Modi government's Target Olympic Podium Scheme (TOPS) does support around 300 athletes now, but the total outlay for the Paris cycle was Rs 400 crore. That's over three years and across numerous

sports. At Paris, India is competing in 16 disciplines out of 45. Compare that to cricket. By some reported estimates, the taxes the BCCI paid in 2022-23 were 10 times that! Training facilities still need to be world-class. Neeraj Chopra trains mainly abroad. So does Nethra Kumanan, the sailor whose dinghy will be on view off the Marseille coast. Bhajan Kaur, an 18-year-old wunderkind, grew up training in a makeshift archery range set up by her farmer-father near their wheat fields in Haryana, reminiscent of shooter Abhinav Bindra, who had to pave his own path to an Olympic gold. Political grandees with little knowledge or interest in sports still monopolise sporting federations. We need the Dorabji Tatas of today if India has to do justice to its human potential. India now boasts 200 billionaires. It's time more stepped up to add to our sporting glory.

When our athletes win, it is against heavy odds. Kudos to them. Meanwhile, we wish them the best of luck.

(Aron Purie)



July 19, 2021

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Sift Kaur Samra, Shooting



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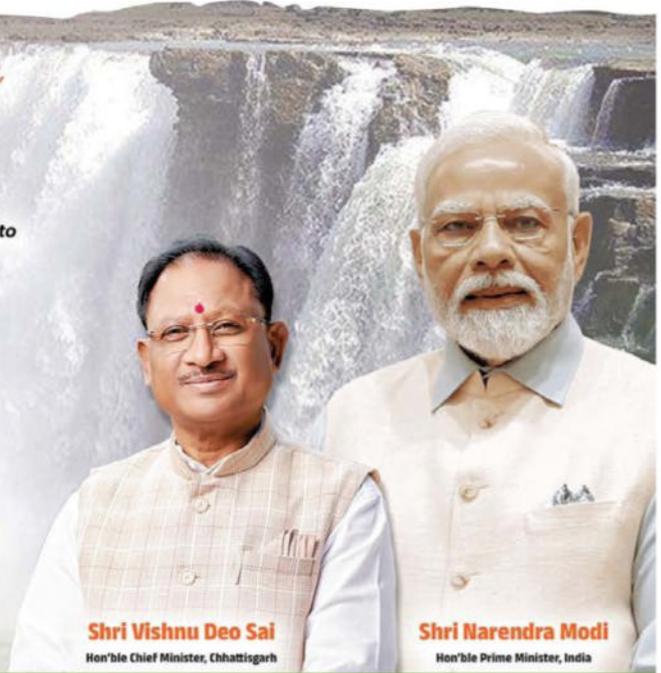


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THE LAND OF OPPORTUNITIES

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- ✓ Farmers prospering with **"KRISHAK UNNATI YOJANA"**, Paddy Procurement at **Rs.3100** per quintal
- ✓ Financial assistance of **Rs. 12,000** annually, through **MAHTARI VANDAN YOJANA** for Empowerment of Women
- ✓ Increase in honorarium to **TENDUPATTA COLLECTORS** to **Rs.5500**, Tribals now actually reap green gold
- ✓ **FREE GRAINS** for welfare of the Poor , over **73 lac families** receive free ration for 5 years
- ✓ **AGE RELAXATION** of **5 years** for Youth in Government Vacancies
- ✓ **Over 18 lakh families** are getting pucca house under **PM AWAS YOJANA**
- ✓ Under **Mukhyamantri Aawas Yojana (Rural)**, **47,090** surveyed homeless families in Chhattisgarh will receive housing



Shri Vishnu Deo Sai
Hon'ble Chief Minister, Chhattisgarh

Shri Narendra Modi
Hon'ble Prime Minister, India

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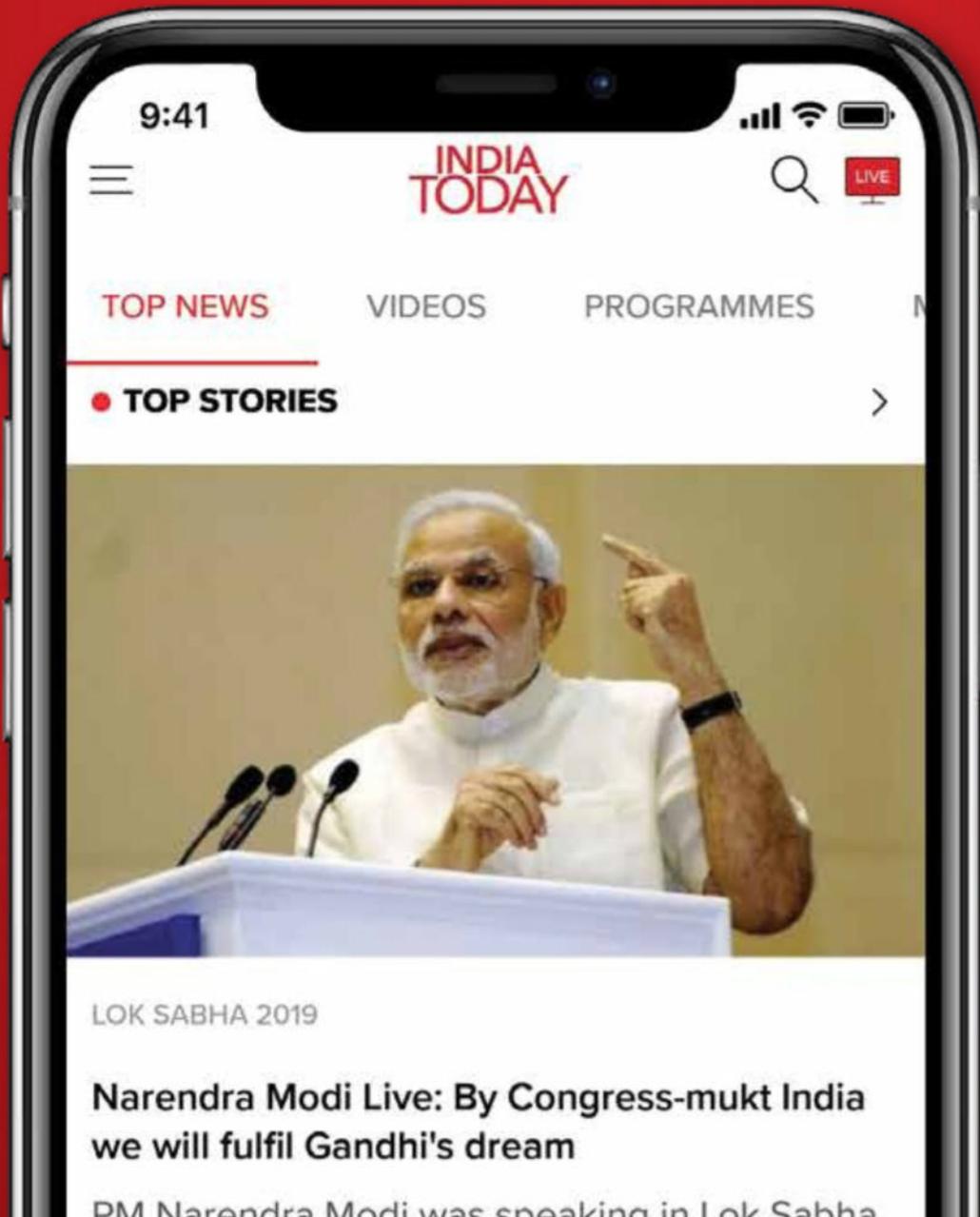
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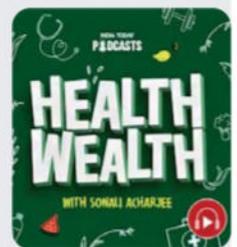
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UPFRONT



GOING UNDER

Video grab of a bridge collapsing into the Bakra River in the Sikti block of Araria district, June 18

BIHAR

UNABRIDGED DISASTERS

By Amitabh Srivastava

Politicians are always careful not to burn bridges with their electorate, but Bihar's collapsing bridges are making that unavoidable—one by one. Like a video playing in reverse, these structural failures capture setbacks to the state's infrastructure, undoing years of progress in just a matter of moments.

Since Nitish Kumar assumed office as chief minister in November 2005, Bihar has built over 6,200 bridges, small and big, symbolising a significant

leap forward in infrastructure. But the past month has unveiled a disconcerting reality—between June 18 and July 4, at least 12 bridges crumbled across the districts of Kishanganj, Araria, Madhubani, East Champaran, Siwan and Saran. Many of these bridges are fairly new or were under construction. Initial investigations in Siwan and Saran suggest deeper systemic flaws, with some cases possibly exacerbated by the actions of inept departments.

Sources in the state water resources department (WRD) acknowledge that

the unprofessional execution of the river-linking project under the Jal-Jeevan-Hariyali initiative may have contributed to some bridge collapses. Desilting operations as part of the initiative inadvertently damaged structures due to technical oversights and inadequate coordination. For example, before the monsoon, the WRD initiated embankment-strengthening efforts to mitigate the impact of the Chhoti Gandak river's overflow in the Gopalganj, Siwan and Saran districts. This involved desilting approximately

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170 km. However, sources say the execution of the dredging compromised bridge stability near the foundations and pillars. Poor inter-agency coordination, along with increased water flow resulting from the dredging, compounded the issue.

Incidentally, the collapse of the Aguwani-Sultanganj bridge in June last year, where a 575-metre portion of the structure crumbled into the Ganga flowing under, should have served as a wake-up call. Yet, it failed to trigger any stringent monitoring practices among engineers to prevent further incidents. Monitoring and maintenance lapses may not be the only culprit. A section of engineers tells INDIA TODAY that structural failures often stem from alterations to bridge designs and the

The collapse of the Aguwani-Sultanganj bridge in June last year has failed to serve as a wake-up call

use of substandard materials, including low-strength cement, sand and concrete, and steel rods thinner than the approved specifications. Instances of construction violations and collusive monitoring negligence have also been reported (see *Why They Crumble So Often* in accompanying graphic).

Now in damage-control mode, the government has suspended 15 engineers, including 11 from the WRD and four from the rural works department, for dereliction of duty. Show-cause notices have been issued to the construction companies concerned. The chief minister has ordered the immediate implementation of a monitoring mechanism with clearly defined roles and responsibilities for all involved, aiming for both remedial action and proactive measures through a new bridge maintenance policy (see *What the State Has Done*). But mitigating the damage to the government's image? That seems to be a bridge too far right now. ■

PILLAR TO PERIL

In under a month, 12 bridges have collapsed in Bihar. It's all down to technical ineptness, bad material and collusion

Text by **AMITABH SRIVASTAVA**

Graphic by **TANMOY CHAKRABORTY**

JULY 3-4, SARAN

A portion of a 15-year-old bridge built over the Gandak river in Baniyapur block falls

Cost: Rs 7.5 lakh

Portions of a bridge made in 2004 near Janta Bazar in Lahladpur block collapse

Cost: Rs 20 lakh

A colonial-era bridge crumbles in Dandasapur Jangalvilas Tola

Current cost: Rs 10 lakh

JULY 3, SIWAN

Three small bridges/culverts collapse in the district within 24 hours, the first over a Gandak river stream in Deoria panchayat, the second over the Dhamahi river at Nautan and the third in Tewatha

Total cost: Rs 26 lakh

Reasons: Technical oversight during desilting near the foundations of old bridges and culverts under the Jal-Jeevan-Hariyali campaign's river linkage project

JUNE 30, KISHANGANJ

A pillar of a bridge over the Boond river, built with MPLAD funds in 2009-10, crumbles, causing two spans to subside by a foot

Cost: Rs 35 lakh

Reason: Non-maintenance, overloading, and illegal sand mining

JUNE 28, MADHUBANI

A 75-metre-long bridge over the Bhuthi Balan river in Madhepur, being built by the rural works department under PMGSY, comes apart

Cost: Rs 3.21 crore

Reason: A girder disintegrates



JUNE 26, KISHANGANJ

A portion of the 70-metre-long, 12-metre-wide bridge, built in 2011 under the Mukhyamantri Gram Sadak Yojana, gives way. The bridge over the Mariya river connects the Bahadurganj and Dighalbank blocks

Cost: Rs 25 lakh

Reason: Heavy rains in Nepal's catchment areas cause a sudden rise in water levels, a pillar fails to withstand the strong currents

JUNE 23, EAST CHAMPARAN

A span of a 16-metre-long under-construction bridge, built over a canal by the rural works department in the Ghorasahan block in Motihari, crumbles

Cost: Rs 1.6 crore

Reason: Unknown miscreants are alleged to have damaged the structure

JUNE 22, SIWAN

Part of a 100-metre-long, 40-year-old bridge over a canal in Ramgarha panchayat of Daraundha block falls down at one end

Cost: Rs 10 lakh

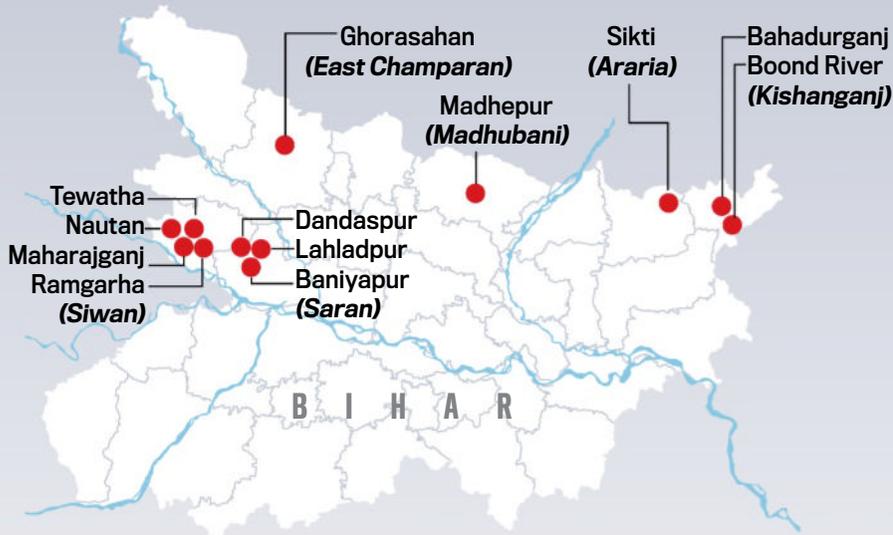
Reason: The brick wall and pillars connecting the bridge to the approach road weakened after the canal was dredged for desilting

JUNE 18, ARARIA

A major portion of a reinforced cement concrete bridge over the Bakra river in Sikti block collapses. The bridge was being rebuilt under the PM Gramin Sadak Yojana after a change in the river's course

Cost: Rs 12 crore

Reason: Excavation to allow the smooth flow of water is said to have weakened the pillars



WHAT THE STATE HAS DONE



➤ On July 5, the Bihar government suspended 15 engineers

from the water resources and rural works departments for alleged negligence. It introduced a bridge maintenance policy designed to guide engineers in the maintenance, construction and repair of bridges



➤ The new policy mandates that departments such as

road construction, water resources and building construction issue "health cards" with detailed records of inspection and maintenance. This requirement also applies to bridges constructed with MPLAD and MLALAD funds



➤ The policy stipulates two routine inspections per year,

one of which must occur before the monsoon. If any desilting exercises are planned, the bridge must be inspected under the supervision of experts and a senior engineer from the relevant department



➤ Additionally, each department will be allocated a dedicated fund for the maintenance of its bridges

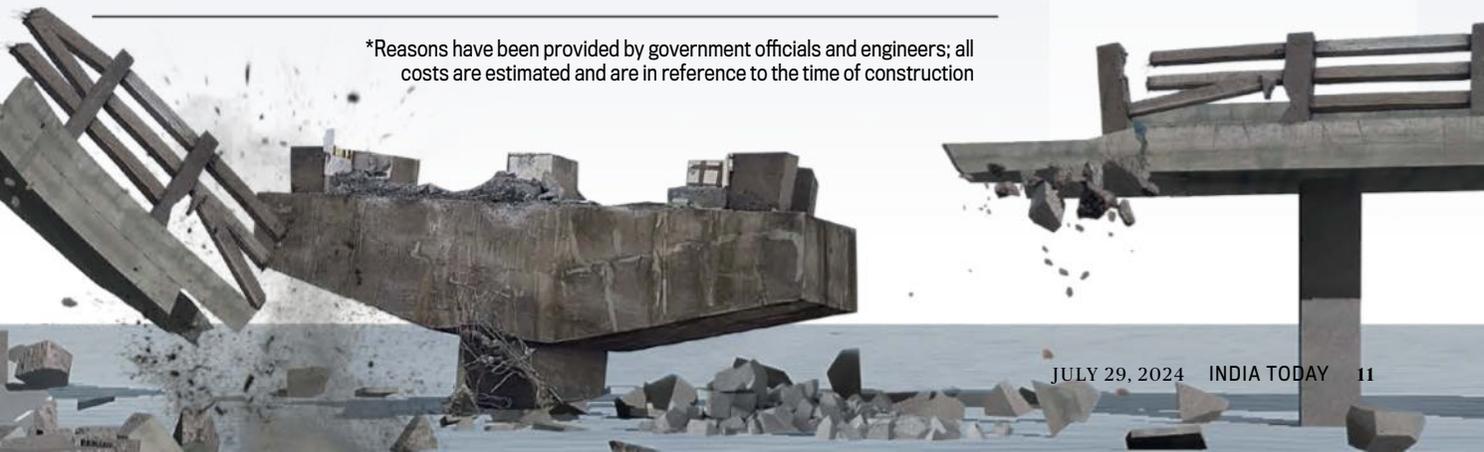
WHY THEY CRUMBLE SO OFTEN

➤ Structural failures, often due to **alterations in the design and use of sub-standard materials**—low-strength cement, sand, concrete and steel rods etc.

➤ In many cases, those in charge of construction **violate norms and those tasked with monitoring collude** to ignore the lapses

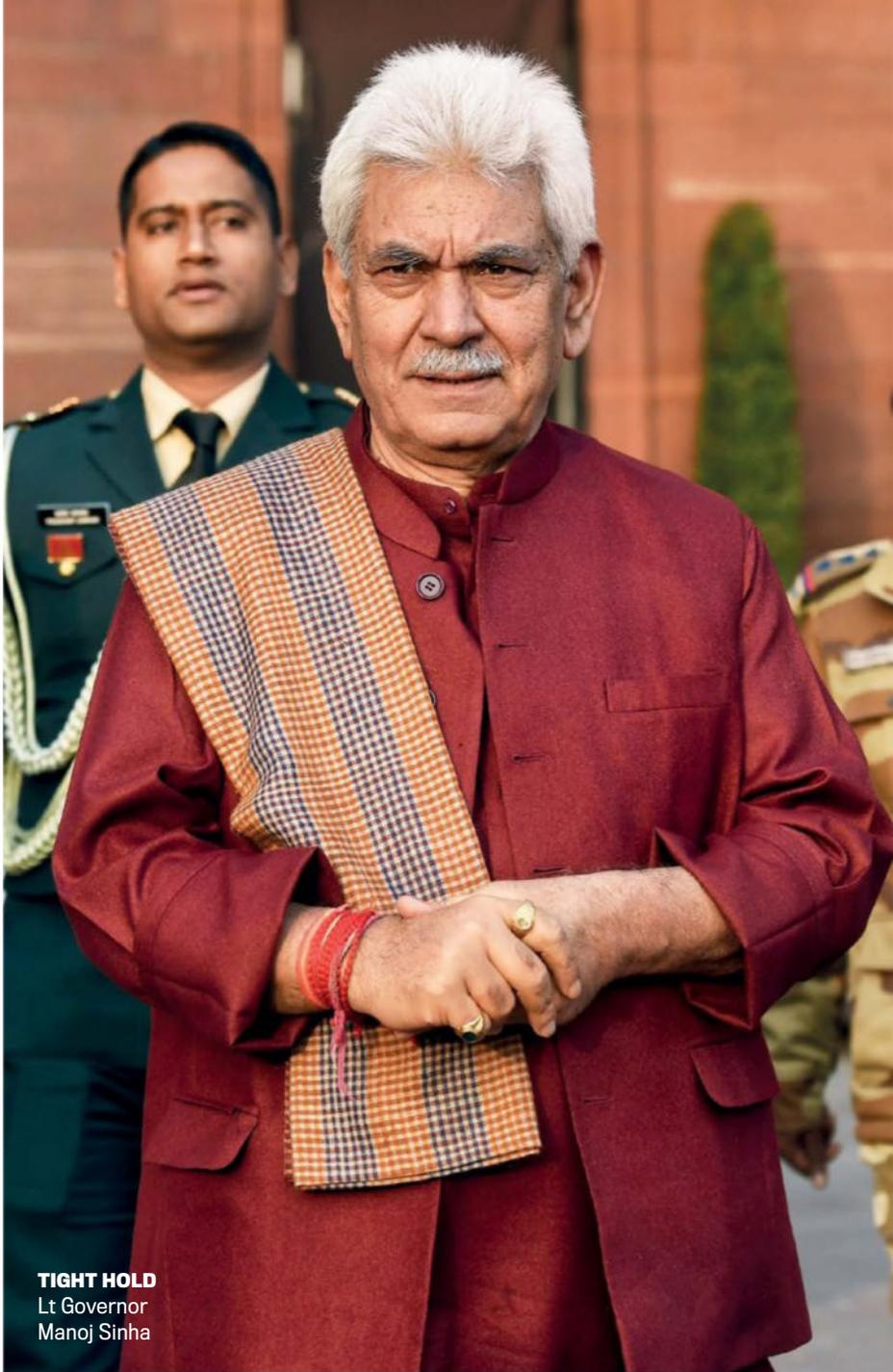
➤ **Desilting and dredging operations** carried out to prepare for the monsoon at times compromise the stability of the foundations

*Reasons have been provided by government officials and engineers; all costs are estimated and are in reference to the time of construction



The Centre has widened the powers of the Lieutenant-Governor (L-G) in Jammu and Kashmir, empowering the incumbent in matters that earlier needed concurrence from the state finance department. This came through changes in the 'transaction of business' rules that increases the L-G's powers over key administrative and legal matters and will come into effect once an elected government is in place. These include decisions on public order as well as on transfers and postings of all-India service officers (IAS/IPS), the J&K Police and the appointment of judicial officers, including the advocate-general. A gubernatorial sanction—and veto—will also loom large over the anti-graft body, prisons and even the prosecution/filing of appeals. Central government sources too claimed that these were not 'amendments' to the controversial J&K Reorganisation Act, 2019, and was issued to avoid all ambiguities. The chief concern, experts say, was to ensure that posting of officers of the all-India cadre—including the police—was controlled by the Centre in the event of an elected government, and later statehood, being restored to J&K.

On July 12, a notification issued by the Union home ministry said President Droupadi Murmu had made changes under Section 55 of the Act, introducing three new 'amendments' to widen the ambit of the L-G's powers. This is the second instance of such changes since the Act came into being after the erstwhile state was divested of its special status under Article 370 and bifurcated into Union territories. Earlier, the power to appoint the J&K home secretary, a key person in the administration, was vested with the state government. That had changed on February 28, when Clause B of Sub-Rule 3 of Rule 50 of the Act, which called on the L-G to make a 'prior reference' to the Union home ministry on the appointment of the chief secretary and the J&K director-general of police (DGP), was amended through a notification to allow the Centre's nod in the appoint-



TIGHT HOLD
Lt Governor
Manoj Sinha

ANI

J&K

A PRE-POLL UNDERCUT

By **Moazum Mohammad**

ment of the home secretary as well.

As expected, the changes have not gone down well with any of the political parties—except for the BJP. Even parties alleged to be allies/proxies of the saffron party are up in arms, calling for a “united strategy” to oppose the diminished state being envisaged. Syed Altaf Bukhari, chief of the Apni Party, for instance, is said to have New Delhi’s blessings, having been the first to launch a political outfit post-370, in 2021. But the businessman-turned-neta is livid. “They want the chief minister to be a toothless tiger and fool the people,” he says, urging his rivals to shun political differences and prepare for a joint struggle. “If we can’t stand united today, then we will never be able to. We should ensure that the statehood we get is not hollow.”

National Conference leader Hasnain Masoodi, a former MP and J&K High Court judge, also questions the Modi-led government’s intentions. “The change in business rules is less legal and more

THE NEW RULES

➤ **MHA amends ‘transaction of business’ rules pertaining to the J&K Reorganisation Act, 2019**

➤ **Transfer/posting of IAS/IPS officers, rules regarding police, public order, land no longer need concurrence from state finance department, L-G’s discretion final**

➤ **Elected J&K govt also loses powers to appoint advocate-general**

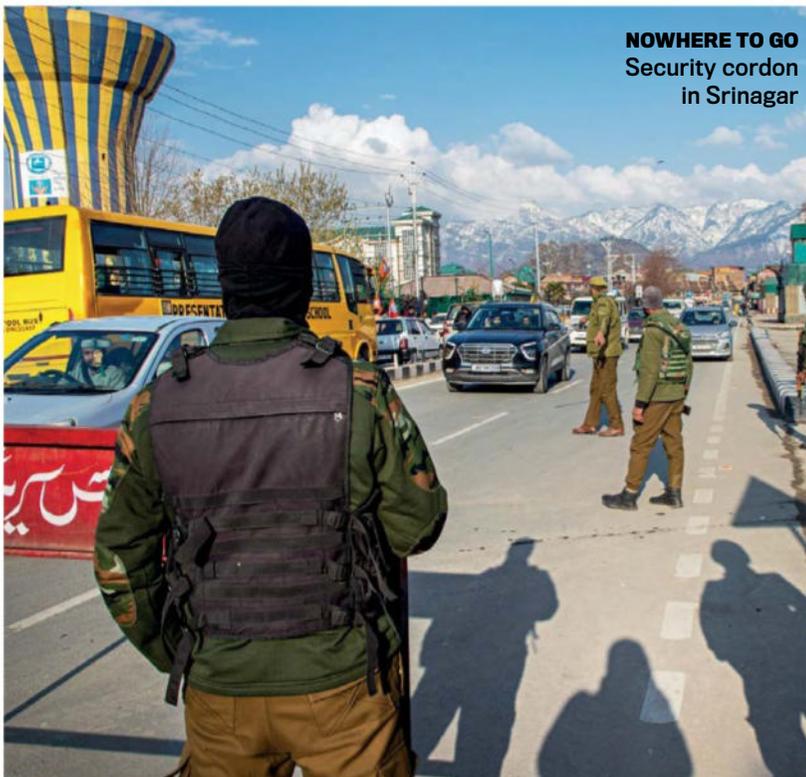
➤ **All matters related to prisons, directorate of prosecution, forensic science lab with L-G**

➤ **L-G to have say on grant of prosecution sanction**

political,” says Masoodi. “It tells us that the Centre intends to prolong its rule by proxy. With no public mandate, the L-G will have the power to make all the decisions. This is against the spirit of democracy.” Party leader and former chief minister Omar Abdullah tweeted that “the people deserve better than a powerless, rubber stamp CM who will have to beg the L-G to get his/her peon appointed”. Back in Delhi, Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge called it “another example of the ‘samvidhan hatya (murder of the Constitution)’ happening daily under the Modi government”.

The amendments have indeed cast a long shadow, especially since they come less than a month after the announcements Prime Minister Narendra Modi made during his visit to Srinagar. The PM had raised hopes by promising the restoration of statehood and holding of the long-overdue assembly election. Former J&K law secretary Ashraf Mir, though, is not surprised. “The amendments align with the J&K Reorganisation Act,” he says. “They (the Centre) have clearly delineated powers before installation of an elected government. The new business rules are meant to bring clarity to some grey areas.” The expansion of the L-G’s powers in the appointment of the advocate-general and law officers leaves little leeway for the elected government, he points out. “The legislative assembly anyway was vested with little powers over the police and law and order as per the Reorganisation Act. By further empowering the L-G, it has ensured that the chief minister and the cabinet will be without any powers.”

Section 55 of the 2019 Act, which governed the conduct of business, allowed the L-G to make rules on the ‘advice of the council of ministers’, and ‘more convenient transaction of business with the ministers’, while laying out the procedure to be adopted in case of a difference of opinion. But with J&K without a legislative assembly or an elected government, the Union government brought a proclamation on October 31, 2019, under which the



NOWHERE TO GO
Security cordon
in Srinagar

AP

President assumed all the powers and suspended the provisions of Section 55, allowing him/her to frame and amend the business rules.

In other Union territories, such as in Delhi, the conflict over authority between the elected government and the L-G has been a major wrangling point, especially after 2014. The National Capital Territory (NCT) of Delhi has in the past decade seen endless clashes over legal authority in administration and

THE AMENDMENT HAS CAST A SHADOW OVER THE CENTRE'S POST-POLL MOVES, AS IT COMES AFTER PM MODI'S POSITIVE COMMENTS ON HIS SRINAGAR VISIT

appointments, spurring acrimony and affecting governance. The controversy has yet to find closure even after the intervention of the Supreme Court. "In J&K, the Reorganisation Act gives wide discretionary powers to the L-G and they will be subject to misinterpretation," says the former law secretary. "It will trigger conflict with an elected government. We are not like the Delhi UT but more like Puducherry. Unless we have full-fledged statehood, this conflict will continue." Unlike in Delhi, the Constitution does not mention specific restrictions for the Puducherry UT on passing laws on land, public order and policing.

Those opposing the new rules say it will undermine the authority of any elected government in J&K, as and when the long overdue polls are held, raising questions over the democratic process. Preparations for the assembly election will have to start soon as the Supreme Court's deadline for it is just a handful of weeks away (September 30). The last assembly poll was held in 2014; Jammu and Kashmir has been without an elected government since 2018. The direct central rule that followed seems to be finding ways to entrench itself. ■



MAHARASHTRA

A Reality Check for the MVA

By Dhaval S. Kulkarni

After a swashbuckling performance in the Lok Sabha election, the results in the Maharashtra legislative council polls have come as a setback to the Opposition Maha Vikas Aghadi (MVA) comprising the Congress, Shiv Sena (Uddhav Balasaheb Thackeray) and the Nationalist Congress Party (Sharadchandra Pawar). The ruling Mahayuti composed of the other trio—BJP, Eknath Shinde's Shiv Sena and the Ajit Pawar-led NCP—won nine out of the 11 seats that went to the polls. What's

more, Jayant Patil of the Peasants and Workers Party (PWP), who was backed by the MVA, bit the dust amidst massive cross-voting, especially by Congress MLAs. While these legislators are expected to defect to the Mahayuti in the assembly polls due in October-November, their rebellion was only a part of the fault lines the defeat exposed within the MVA.

The electoral college for the polls consists of MLAs. Though the election take place by secret ballot, groups of MLAs are asked to mark their preference in a



MANDAR DEODHAR

BACK TO WINNING WAYS

Newly elected MLC Pankaja Munde, Maharashtra CM Eknath Shinde and deputy CM Devendra Fadnavis after the legislative council polls, July 12; inset, Maharashtra Congress chief Nana Patole

his party had 42 votes, but secured 47, meaning five more MLAs had voted for them. A senior BJP leader said what swung things for the party was the way in which the Mahayuti allocated their preference votes.

From the MVA, Pradnya Satav of the Congress secured a second term and Milind Narvekar of the Sena (UBT), a personal assistant of Uddhav, won his maiden election to the upper house. Uddhav was reportedly upset at MVA partner Patil of the PWP—who was being backed by Sharad Pawar’s NCP—for not working for Sena candidates Sanjog Waghare and Anant Geete. So, Thackeray fielded Narvekar, who has friends across party lines, as a candidate. His presence put paid to Patil’s hopes of becoming an MLC.

A day before the election, senior Congress MLA Kailash Gorantyal had indicated that three to four party votes could go the other way. Though

he didn’t take names, Gorantyal hinted that the recalcitrant MLAs could be Zeeshan Siddiqui (Vandre East), whose father and former minister Baba Siddiqui quit the Congress and joined Ajit’s NCP; Sulabha Khodke (Amravati), whose husband Sanjay Khodke is an NCP strategist; Hiranman Khoskar (Igatpuri) and Jitesh Antapurkar (Degloor), who is close to former CM Ashok Chavan, now with the BJP. A Congress MLA said that three other MLAs who cross-voted included “surprising” names. He claimed the legislators had been coerced to switch sides.

There were reported differences of opinion between the SS(UBT) and the Congress over the allocation of votes to Narvekar. Later, sharp words were reportedly exchanged between Patil’s nephew and a senior Sena leader. A displeased Thackeray apparently told a Congress leader that if his candidate met with resistance from within the alliance, there was no point in his staying on. Much of the friction was over Patil’s defeat. Patil alleged that one vote of the NCP (SP) had also gone elsewhere and that the sole Communist Party of India (Marxist) MLA had voted elsewhere—a charge denied by both. Patil also cited rumours that the errant MLAs were bribed. Ashish Shelar of the BJP claimed that two SS(UBT) MLAs had cross-voted.

State Congress chief Nana Patole has vowed to take action against those breaching party discipline, and Jitendra Awhad of the NCP(SP) called on voters to teach a lesson to turncoats. The choice of Satav upset some Congress leaders, who wanted a Muslim leader to be nominated, considering that the community voted en masse for the party in the LS polls.

The events evoke a sense of *deja vu*. In June 2022, a similarly rancorous election to the legislative council—where massive horse-trading led to the defeat of Dalit leader Chandrakant Handore of the Congress—had set off a chain of events that led to the fall of the Uddhav Thackeray-led MVA government. ■

certain manner on the ballot paper, which helps reveal cross-voters. The effective strength of the 288-member Maharashtra assembly is down to 274 and, to win, each candidate needed around 23 first preference votes. The 78-member state council has 27 vacancies, including 12 seats nominated from the governor’s quota.

The MLCs the BJP got elected include former minister and OBC leader Pankaja Munde, daughter of late party veteran Gopinath Munde; former Pune MLA Yogesh Tilekar; former minister Parinay Fuke, a close aide of deputy chief minister Devendra Fadnavis; Dalit leader Amit Gorkhe; and former minister Sadabhau Khot, who heads the Rayat Kranti organisation. Shinde’s Shiv Sena saw former Lok Sabha MPs Bhavana Gawali Patil and Krupal Tumane going past the post. Ajit Pawar’s NCP faction also got its two candidates, Rajesh Vitekar and Shivajirao Garje, elected. Speaking to the media after the results, Ajit said

THE SETBACK TO THE MVA IN THE LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL POLLS SHOWS THE DISCORD WITHIN. CROSS-VOTING CONGRESS MLAs MAY DEFECT TOO



SHOW OF UNITY

Himachal Pradesh CM Sukhvinder Singh Sukhu (centre) with Congress leaders Vikramaditya and Pratibha Singh in Shimla, July 13

Ashish Sharma and K.L. Thakur (Nalagarh)—all supporters of the Congress government—had shifted loyalties, voted for the BJP in the Rajya Sabha polls in late February and resigned thereafter. They all joined the BJP later. But they were only the outer eddies of the whirlpool that had threatened to suck in the Sukhu regime. At its centre were six Congress MLAs who cross-voted for the BJP's Harsh Mahajan to defeat party candidate Abhishek Manu Singhvi. They were disqualified speedily and the Congress avenged itself by retaining four of those six seats, bypolls for which were held along with the Lok Sabha polls. Of the six rebel Congressmen, only Sudhir Sharma (Dharamshala) and Inder Dutt Lakhanpal (Barsar) could win back their seats on BJP tickets. What has come now is near-total recovery of honour.

The victory at Dehra is special for Sukhu as it marks the entry of his wife in politics. While the BJP argues that the CM deployed the entire government machinery to achieve victory, the Congress did benefit from internal feuds in the BJP. Notably, former CM Prem Kumar Dhamal has struck a critical note—saying he was not consulted in the entire February episode and that the BJP meddled in the Congress's affairs too soon.

The declaration of results for all nine bypolls brings a tame end to the Himachal edition of the BJP's 'Operation Lotus', which had aimed at toppling the fledgling Sukhu regime. The stock of his principal rival in the Himachal

HIMACHAL PRADESH

SUKHU COMES OUT STRONGER

By Anilesh S. Mahajan

In mountainous Himachal Pradesh, dark monsoon clouds may have resulted in torrential rains, but the political clouds surrounding the chair of Chief Minister Sukhvinder Singh Sukhu appear to have been dispelled for now. In the recent bypolls held in three seats on July 10—Dehra, Nalagarh and Hamirpur—the Congress won two, and increased its tally once again to 40 seats in the 68-member assem-

bly. Kamlesh Thakur, Sukhu's wife, won from Dehra and Hardeep Singh Bawa won from Nalagarh for the Grand Old Party. The BJP managed to retain Hamirpur, with Ashish Sharma, the former independent MLA who joined the saffron party, holding on by 1,571 votes. The BJP's assembly numbers have risen to 28.

The bypolls had become necessary because three independent MLAs, Hoshiyar Singh (Dehra),

MALADIES GALORE

By Jeemon Jacob

THE BYPOLL RESULTS SHOW THAT A CULTURE OF DEFECTION WILL NOT WORK IN HIMACHAL PRADESH

Congress, Vikramaditya Singh, had already plummeted after his defeat in the Lok Sabha polls from Mandi when out of the 17 assembly segments, he could muster leads in only Lahaul & Spiti, Karsog, Rampur and Kinnaur. During the February crisis, Vikramaditya had resigned from the cabinet, but was persuaded to stay on by the Congress high command.

This in no way offers a carte blanche to Sukhu—it was his working style that first engendered widespread defection within the Congress, offering scope to engineer mutiny. Yet the bypolls hold out one lesson—a culture of defections won't work in Himachal. It also exposed a tactical flaw in the BJP—they ought to have waited for the fate of the six rebels before inducting the independents. Now, with a strengthened Sukhu, disgruntled Congress legislators are being extra cautious.

But Sukhu can't rest easy. If the Shimla High Court disqualifies the six Congress MLAs who were appointed chief parliamentary secretaries in 2023—in an 'office of profit' case pending before it—the Congress is in for another convulsion. The BJP would certainly pray for that to happen. ■

A 'brain-eating' amoeba, which thrives in warm freshwater bodies, has claimed the lives of three children while infecting at least one more over the past two months in Kerala. All of them, aged between five and 14 years, were diagnosed with primary amoebic meningoencephalitis (PAM), a rare disease spread through the pathogenic *Naegleria fowleri*. The infection destroys brain tissue, causing death in most cases.

Be it the outbreaks of Nipah and Zika viruses in recent years or the high incidence of other vector-borne and zoonotic diseases like dengue and rat fever, Kerala's public healthcare system—despite its wide network of 1,278 government and 2,062 private hospitals—seems to get overstretched every monsoon. According to data released by the health department, communicable diseases have claimed 144 lives till mid-July this year; 121 of those have been recorded since June 1. Leptospirosis, or rat fever, a bacterial infection transmitted by contact with the urine of rodents and farm animals, leads with a death toll of 67. On July 13 alone, 12,204 people with fever were admitted to various government hospitals. Of them, 438 were diagnosed with dengue.

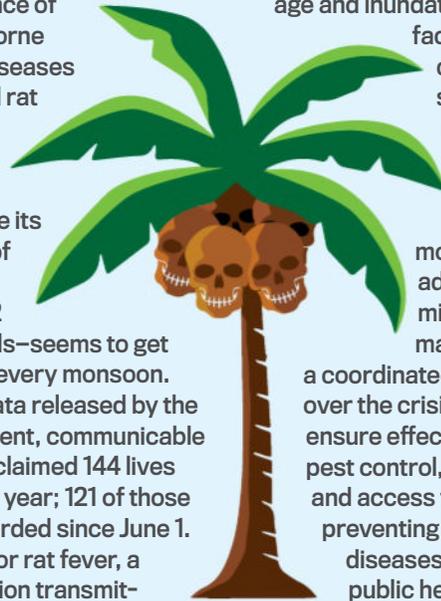
Health minister Veena George acknowledges the gravity of the situation, while claiming the health department is "fully geared" for it. "Normally, the state witnesses a higher incidence of communicable diseases during monsoon. But, this time, more infections are being reported. We have alerted the local bodies to conduct health audits and alert the public," she told INDIA TODAY.

Dengue, spread via the bite of

Aedes mosquitoes, surfaced in Kerala in 1998. Once confined to a few districts, it has now spread across the state. Similarly, leptospirosis—listed as a rare disease in the 1980s—has become a major public health hazard in the past decade. "Since 2020, leptospirosis has killed over 1,000 people," says Opposition leader V.D. Satheeshan. "It's a shame for a government that claims to have India's best health management system."

Changes in patterns of land use, polluted rivers, poor drainage and inundated paddy fields—factors that have contributed to the spread of communicable diseases over the past two decades—get accentuated during monsoon. Dr B. Ekbal, advisor to the chief minister on health management, calls for a coordinated action plan to tide over the crisis. "It is essential to ensure effective mosquito and pest control, proper sanitation, and access to clean water for preventing communicable diseases," he says. "Tailored public health measures are necessary to control the

recurring diseases." Dr V. Ramanakutty, a public health activist, concurs. "Prevention is the best way to check infectious diseases. That's lacking at present," he says. That deficit has disproportionately affected the poor, with their immunity levels seen to be considerably weaker, notes Dr Vinodkumar T.G. Nair, a scientist at the Jawaharlal Nehru Tropical Botanic Garden and Research Institute, Thiruvananthapuram. The state's response to this ever-evolving challenge will be crucial in saving its populace from a disease burden that can overwhelm even Kerala's much-vaunted public health system. ■



◀ IN THE HOT SEAT

CM Siddaramaiah faces a noisy barrage of corruption charges as his regime completes one year

moral responsibility in the case, since he is also the state's finance minister. Speaking in the assembly, R. Ashoka, the leader of the Opposition in the House, alleged, "The government is party to this scam... Didn't the transactions come to the notice of the Finance Department?" Congress ministers, meanwhile, have accused the BJP of involving the Enforcement Directorate in the case to "destabilise" the Siddaramaiah government, though two separate probes—by the CBI and state police—are underway.

The KMVSTDC scandal is not the only front on which the Siddaramaiah government has been fighting fire. Earlier this month, Opposition parties started putting pressure on the CM over alleged irregularities in the Mysore Urban Development Authority's (MUDA) 50:50 scheme, which had been scrapped by the Congress government after coming to power in Karnataka last year. The scheme had been introduced in 2020 to compensate those who lost their land for the development of housing layouts, by giving them 50 per cent of the developed land. It has been alleged, however, that the compensations were often disproportionate to the loss, and that the allocation of compensatory plots continued even after the scheme was scrapped by the government. What's landed Siddaramaiah on a particularly sticky wicket is the claim that his wife Parvathi has been a "beneficiary" under the scheme. The Congress has refuted the allegation, saying she had only been compensated for land seized by the MUDA. While the CM has said the allocation to his wife was made in 2021, when the BJP was in power in Karnataka, the state government on July 14 also appointed a commission of inquiry to look into allegations against MUDA.

Over the past year, the Congress has prided itself on its work in Karnataka, especially owing to the successful roll-out of big-ticket welfare schemes. These scandals have, however, given the Opposition an opportunity to corner it. ■



ANI

KARNATAKA SCANDALS

SIDDARAMAIAH ON THE BACK FOOT

By Ajay Sukumaran

The new carved rosewood door at the west entrance to the Vidhana Soudha, which greeted members when the House convened for the first day of the monsoon session on July 15, could offer no protection against the storm that was brewing within. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), and its ally Janata Dal (Secular), Karnataka's two Opposition parties, had already been targeting the Siddaramaiah-led Congress government for weeks over issues of alleged corruption. The newly renovated assembly building was sure to get some ceremonial fire to heat up its inauguration. Among the scandals facing the Siddaramaiah government is the alleged embezzlement of funds to the tune of Rs 89.63 crore in the Karnataka Maharshi Valmiki Scheduled Tribes Development Corporation Ltd (KMVSTDC).

The KMVSTDC is the state government's implementing agency for schemes meant for the upliftment of communities listed as Scheduled Tribes (ST), and the BJP has alleged that the funds were siphoned off by the state's ruling Congress to use in the recent Lok Sabha election. The Congress has voiced protest against this. Allegations of fund

embezzlement in the KMVSTDC were first raised in May, following the alleged death by suicide of P. Chandrasekharan, who had worked as an accountant at the corporation. A purported suicide note alleged the KMVSTDC's savings bank account with the Union Bank of India had been transferred to another branch of the bank on February 21 and cash siphoned off. The note added that Chandrasekharan had been "forced" by senior officials to open the new account and that he himself had no role in the misappropriation of funds. Since then, KMVSTDC managing director J.G. Padmanabh and accounts officer Parashuram G. Durgannanavar, both suspended after being named in the note, and former minister of ST welfare B. Nagendra, have been arrested by different probe agencies. Nagendra resigned from his post following the scandal. The BJP demands that Siddaramaiah accept

BJP has alleged ST corporation money was siphoned off by the state's ruling Congress as funds for the Lok Sabha polls



GLASSHOUSE

LESSONS IN PODIATRY

Errant officials in Bihar are having to watch their feet. Displeased with the slow pace of work in sundry projects, Bihar chief minister Nitish Kumar is now going for their feet to shame them into action. So, on July 10, it was a manager of a project in the road construction department who was pulled up for the snail's pace of progress and asked, "Kahiye to aapke pair chhu lun (Allow me to touch your feet)," even as the Bihar chief minister mock dived for the hapless official's feet. A week earlier, on July 3, Nitish, frustrated by the slow pace of land survey in the state, had quipped, "Main haath jodta hun, kahiye to pair bhi chhu lun (I fold my hands, should I touch your feet too)?" But it is not always sarcasm that has Nitish seeking people's feet. On June 7, it was to pay his respects that Nitish tried to touch PM Narendra Modi's feet after promising support to his government. It's a handy skill, touching feet, for humiliation, and humility.

UNJUSTIFIED FEAR

When Parliament passed the Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA) in December 2019, Assam had erupted in violent protests, resulting in five deaths. Fear surged that the CAA would flood the state with illegal Hindu immigrants from Bangladesh, changing Assam's demographics. Assam CM Himanta Biswa Sarma, a staunch CAA advocate, had dismissed these concerns. Now, the BJP stalwart may have the last laugh. Since the CAA rules were framed in February, only eight individuals in Assam have applied for citizenship under the Act—a number hardly capable of causing a demographic upheaval.



The Hex of Six

Bharat Rashtra Samithi (BRS) supremo **K. Chandrashekar Rao** had laid great store by the number six. Now, it seems to be turning against him. Six MLAs deserted the party on July 4 amid apprehensions of a meltdown, triggered by the string of switches by BRS MLAs to the Grand Old Party. Things haven't been quite the same for KCR ever since the Congress's six guarantees helped it wrest power from the regional party in the assembly polls last November, a humiliation compounded by its 0/17 score in the Lok Sabha election. Already, 10 of the BRS's 38 MLAs have switched sides. Now, the Congress is predicting July 24, which adds up to six, as the date for the BRS's complete downfall.

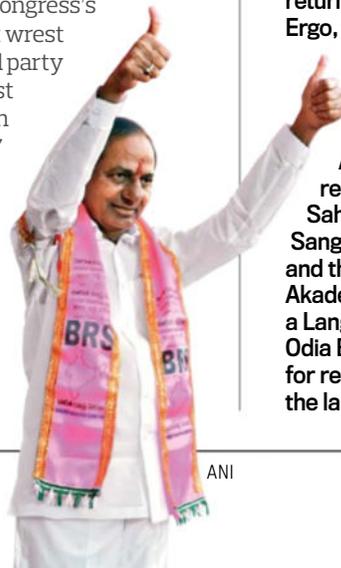


Illustration by SIDDHANT JUMDE



War Against Wires

You may not even notice them now, the hanging wires that have become a part of the Chandni Chowk landscape. Monkeys even use them for their daily commute. But loose live wires have also caused innumerable deaths by electrocution over the years, and are "a ticking time bomb, a constant threat to life and property", as the area's new MP **Praveen Khandelwal** pointed out. And so, right after taking oath, Khandelwal set about meeting Delhi government officials, outlining his plans to untangle the unsightly and dangerous mess of electric wires. The solution is to send them underground. But in the narrow bylanes of Purani Dilli, that is a task easier said than done.



NATIVE ASSERTIONS

It was only a matter of time before the new BJP government in Odisha amped up its Odia pride campaign, one that had delivered successful returns in the state election. Ergo, the **Mohan Charan Majhi** government has now mandated Odia be used as language of official communication. Also on the cards are a restructuring of the Odisha Sahitya Akademi, the Odisha Sangeet Natak Akademi and the Odisha Lalit Kala Akademi, and the setting up of a Language Commission. The Odia Bhasa Pratisthan too is up for reconstitution to promote the language in the state.

MAINTAINING A DISTANCE

Yogi Adityanath and Keshav Prasad Maurya (second from left) at the BJP state executive meeting in Lucknow, Jul. 14

प्रदेश कार्यसमिति बैठक

दिनांक - 14 जुलाई, 2024 | दिन - रविवार

स्थान - डॉ. भीमराव अम्बेडकर सभागार
(डॉ. राममनोहर लोहिया राष्ट्रीय विधि विश्वविद्यालय)
आशियाना, लखनऊ

गरीब कल्याण - हमारा



THE BIG STORY **UTTAR PRADESH**

A HOUSE DIVIDED

Who was to blame for the BJP's loss of ground in UP? After a bruising round of self-interrogation, the party is roiled by a rift that puts even Yogi's future at stake

By **Prashant Srivastava**



On July 14, in a packed hall in Lucknow, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) held its first state executive meeting since the 2024 Lok Sabha election results yanked away half the ground under its feet in Uttar Pradesh. Soil subsidence on that scale was bound to set off an inquisition. Who was to blame? The answer depends entirely on who's doing the asking, with self-exoneration built into that act itself.



VOICES AT ODDS

What the CM and his deputy said in their address to the party cadre



MANEESH AGNIHOTRI

“While good morning messages can be sent on smartphones, why wasn’t the Opposition’s spread of lies countered?”

-YOGI ADITYANATH
Chief Minister, UP

“Sangathan sarkar se bada tha, bada hai aur bada rahega (The party organisation was larger than the government, is larger and will remain so)”

-KESHAV PRASAD MAURYA
Deputy Chief Minister, UP

As suggestion and innuendo filled the air, deputy chief minister Keshav Prasad Maurya made the opening verbal salvo: “*Sangathan sarkar se bada tha, bada hai aur bada rahega* (the party organisation was larger than the government, is larger and will continue to remain larger).”

Maurya’s words, met with cheers from the assembled BJP members, came as the first clear location signal of where the crack would appear—and how it would grow. He went on to say, “Your pain and my pain is similar,” suggesting that there existed a brotherhood of the aggrieved within Yogi Adityanath’s regime. It may be partisans on one side who are eager to pin responsibility for the BJP’s poor performance on its most iconic

chief minister. And Lucknow’s apparent acts of omission can at best only be a partial explanation, since it entirely papers over New Delhi’s strategic missteps. But that also seems to have created a synergy of purpose. For, the impact of Maurya’s speech was swift. Within 48 hours, he was summoned to New Delhi to meet BJP national president J.P. Nadda, who in fact was present at the state executive meeting. As Maurya and state unit chief Bhupendra Chaudhary left for the national capital on July 16, there were murmurs about an impending “big decision” regarding a change in UP’s leadership. Nothing came of it presently, but Maurya’s supporters claim he would soon receive a “return gift” for voicing the party workers’ concerns.

Such is the gravity of the situation—a measure of how deep the divisions have become after the party saw its Lok Sabha seat tally nearly halving from 62 to 33. Several unsuccessful BJP candidates have dropped angry hints of local betrayal; others point fingers at officials for allegedly aiding the Opposition. The schism between *sangathan* and *sarkar* is only becoming more conspicuous with each passing day. Sources say Maurya and other senior leaders had previously expressed their dissatisfaction with Yogi Adityanath’s leadership style to the central party command. It was too big a mountain to move then, but that power struggle has bled right

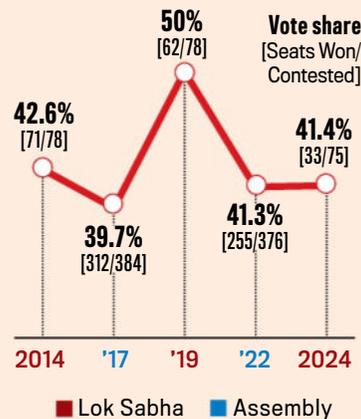
into the present mess—with ambitions finding the accusatory air a conducive climate to grow in.

Pretty much in sync, an orchestra of voices from the party picked up the cue, striking dire notes. Ramesh Chandra Mishra, who represents Badlapur in the assembly, claimed in a video message that the BJP was in a “very bad state” in UP, and if remedial measures weren’t taken, it was not likely to come back to power in 2027. Around the same time, former state minister Moti Singh alleged that corruption had increased manifold under the present UP government. Both later claimed to have been misquoted, but the signals had gone out to the high command: the state BJP didn’t lack in potentially mutinous segments willing to challenge Yogi’s leadership.

Yogi Adityanath, for his part, has a different perspective on the party’s recent setback. His aides point out that the CM had little say in candidate selection, with tickets being decided by the central leadership and state organisation. Yogi himself talked of “overconfidence”. In his address to the state executive, he said, “The party has been successful in getting the same vote share in 2024 as it had got in 2014. But our overconfidence ended up hurting us....” It’s true that the BJP’s vote share, at 41.4 per cent, has shown just a slight dip from the 2014 numbers (42.6 per cent) and is in fact marginally higher than the 41.3 per cent recorded in the 2022 assembly hustings, but that’s

FROM ZENITH TO SETBACK

How the BJP's fortunes in Uttar Pradesh soared and then faltered over the past decade



a steep drop from the peak of 50 per cent it had achieved in the 2019 Lok Sabha election. There of course exists a perfectly plausible explanation for that deficit, since it's precisely the extra buoyancy brought by the Modi factor that went AWOL in this election. However, party audits tend to be sterner in their pursuit of alternative explanations and it was a mark of the times that Yogi's speech did not seem to resonate with party workers as strongly as Maurya's did. The narrative of cadre dissatisfaction with the state government, thus, came to be the focus.

IT'S ORGANISATION VERSUS GOVERNMENT

The disconnect between the party organisation and the government was palpable through the various speeches. Maurya and Chaudhary spoke as if exclusively on behalf of the organisation, and the CM countered by questioning why workers couldn't respond to the Opposition's "negativity". "While good morning messages can be sent on smartphones, why wasn't the Opposition's spread of lies countered?" Yogi asked at the meet.

This divergence in messaging only amplified the rumblings of discontent on the ground. As a senior UP BJP leader told INDIA TODAY, "The statements of the CM and deputy CM were going in different directions. It set tongues wagging within the party. Many MLAs and party functionaries have claimed that officials of their own government did not listen to them but the chief minister did not take their concerns seriously. If things remain the same, we will have to pay for it. The Opposition is happy seeing our divided house."

The voting patterns seen in the Lok Sabha poll are also shaping the debate, says the veteran. The rationale for the Maurya camp's push for a leadership change in UP comes from how a major chunk of the OBC and Dalit electorate moved away from the BJP. To reach out to them again, this section within the party feels that the BJP should appoint

an OBC or a Dalit CM. Does the contention carry weight? Well, the BJP's rise in UP was made possible by an umbrella coalition of forward castes, non-Jatav Dalits and non-Yadav OBCs. And according to a Lokniti-CSDS (Centre for the Study of Developing Societies) post-poll survey, even as forward castes continue to back the BJP overwhelmingly, the saffron party and its allies managed to retain only 29 per cent of the non-Jatav Dalit vote and 61 per cent and 59 per cent of the Kurmi-Koeri and other non-Yadav OBC vote, respectively. This is in stark contrast to the 2019 figures: 48 per cent, 80 per cent and 72 per cent, respectively.

But Yogi's supporters insist that his popularity remains high. They argue that his image as a tough CM and 'bulldozer baba' has helped the BJP create a narrative of improved law and order in the state. A senior functionary claims, "To challenge the Samajwadi Party (SP), the BJP needs a law and order narrative and only Yogi can deliver that. He still has a great connection with the masses. After taking feedback from various party MLAs, he has also transferred more than a dozen district magistrates and police superintendents, and a further rejig is likely, to assuage the anger of party cadre and workers." He also added that the central leadership should review

the working of the state unit, right up from the booth level, and take action against those who "worked against the interests of the party".

RUMBLINGS AMONG THE ALLIES TOO

The internal strife within the BJP has not gone unnoticed by its allies. Union minister of state Anupriya Patel, who leads the Apna Dal (Soneylal), recently stated in an interview that she knew from the third phase of elections that the going was not smooth. She even claimed to have tried to communicate it to the BJP leadership, more or less implying that it failed to understand her concerns. Sources close to her claim a deeper concern about the shift in Dalit and OBC votes to the SP-Congress combine.

Similarly, NISHAD party chief and cabinet minister Sanjay Nishad criticised the government's use of bulldozers against the poor instead of the mafia and warned that "*garib ko ujadenge to wo hamein rajneeti mein ujadega* (Uproot the poor, and they will uproot us in politics)". While BJP functionaries claim these statements are merely "pressure tactics", they underscore the growing unease among the allies.

J.P.S. Rathore, a minister in the UP government, attempted to downplay the divisions: "A wrong narrative has been propagated by the Opposition that we are divided. It happens in every party when results are not in one's favour, but we are hopeful of bouncing back." With assembly bypolls to 10 seats on the horizon, the ruling party's internal rifts have given new hope to an already upbeat Opposition. As for Yogi, he has largely kept a monk-like silence through this crisis, a silence that speaks volumes in the current political climate. As a leader once marked out for the future, it may not be too easy to relegate him to the past—as the BJP often does with more lightweight CMs. Moreover, there's the question of his proximity to the RSS. It may be in the best interests of all sides to find a middle ground before it's too late. ■



COVER STORY : PARIS OLYMPICS 2024

THE GOLD QUEST —

By SUHANI SINGH

‘Citius, Altius, Fortius—Communitur’ says the updated Olympic motto which translates to faster, higher, stronger—together. Another Latin word can be considered here—‘fortuna’. Luck, or as Satwiksairaj Rankireddy, one half of the Asian Games gold medal-winning badminton duo, says, “destiny”, plays a pertinent role. For a fortnight, a nation will be hoping some of it showers on our athletes, some of whom are celebrities, like Neeraj Chopra and P.V. Sindhu, while others quietly go about representing the nation in little-known disciplines. Take Kolkata-born, Germany-trained Anush Agarwalla, the first Indian to compete in dressage, an equestrian event akin to a choreographed fancy footwork routine. The Olympics is also that time of the year when all nations indulge in their favourite pastime: the how-many-medals guessing game. India’s medal tally “will all depend on shooting”, says Manisha Malhotra, head of sports, excellence and scouting at JSW Sports, which backs Paris-bound athletes like Neeraj Chopra, wrestler Antim Panghal and runner Avinash Sable. “I do believe that if shooting clicks in the first two days, it’s a whole different Olympics.” With 21 of our 117-member contingent made up of shooters, India will be praying that assessment comes true. This issue, we are profiling 17 champions across 13 disciplines. Some are debutants while there are some making a commendable fourth appearance, like hockey players P.R. Sreejesh and Manpreet Singh. Ultimately, the Olympics is two weeks of guaranteed exhilarating action featuring the best athletes across the world. In a media interaction in April, Chopra said he hoped people would watch the Olympics with the same enthusiasm as they do the IPL. “That’s how our sporting culture will change,” he said. And maybe that’s how a child will be inspired to pick up the javelin or the hockey stick and go on to win an Olympic medal. ■



INDIA@PARIS 2024



CHASING A HIGHER GOAL

MEN'S TEAM

Sport: HOCKEY

Achievement: Bronze at Tokyo 2020 Games

How they qualified: Won the gold medal at the 2022 Asian Games

O

On August 5, 2021, a nation rejoiced and heaved a sigh of relief. The 41-year wait for an Olympic medal in hockey was finally over. Generations had grown up hearing of the heroics and dominance of India—the historic eight Olympic gold medals won, a record still unbroken. “Until Tokyo, we heard about the victories but,

in the present, we were nowhere on top... we never saw a medal in hand,” says goalkeeper P.R. Sreejesh, 36. That morning in Tokyo changed it all. “We saw the love and respect hockey got,” notes Harmanpreet Singh, 28, the current captain and part of the bronze-winning team. Eleven members of that squad are headed to Paris and they don’t intend to return empty-handed. Says Sreejesh, “Once you taste success, you know what to do to make it happen again and achieve the target.” Adds Harmanpreet, “There is pressure to do well and come back with a medal. You want to do better. You have to keep achieving.”

What the Tokyo Games did was



Photographs by BANDEEP SINGH

PUSH FOR PARIS

Members of the Indian Hockey Team at the Sports Authority of India's facility in Bengaluru





revive the average sports fan's relationship with the national sport. For those who have followed the story, the result wasn't a flash in the pan but a milestone years in the making. A new patron helped—the Odisha government began taking an active role in supporting the sport. More investment in grassroots development, stadiums with the latest facilities, more international competitions hosted and the inclusion of scientific and technical support like video analysis—all of it helped the sport grow. A member of Team India for 22 years now, Sreejesh has seen that evolution up close. "The equipment changed, rules changed, venues and audiences changed, how fast the game is played changed," he says.

At the Sports Authority of India's facility in Bengaluru, the team's base camp before they left for Europe in early July for a team-bonding activity in Switzerland and then for a training camp in the Netherlands, the mood was upbeat, the competition healthy and the training intense. "*Khana kha ke bed hi dikhta hai* (We only see the bed after a meal)," says Harmanpreet. "*Harek player ek doosre ko push kar raha hai* (We all are pushing each other), be it conditioning, recovery, in gym... Everyone is taking an initiative. Even if we are tired, we know that once we have a medal, all this pain will be accounted for." Sreejesh revealed that he was saving Harmanpreet's much-feared drag flicks, which was boosting his confidence, while the captain spoke about how he was getting a few past the two-time FIH Goalkeeper of the Year. The decorated duo often carries the weight of expectations. Says Harmanpreet, "There's so much trust and belief invested in you, you have to set an example both on and off the field and improve on a day-to-day basis."

For Paris, coach Craig Fulton has assembled a squad where players are expected to be flexible enough to cover



Harmanpreet Singh



P.R. Sreejesh

two positions when needed. It means the experienced Manpreet Singh, a centre-half in midfield traditionally, serves in defence; Harmanpreet defends and is the central drag-flicker, and vice-captain Hardik Singh, also FIH Men's Player of the Year in 2023, can be seen in all positions barring goalkeeper. Competing in his fourth Olympics, Sreejesh is the lynchpin, the opposing team's worst nightmare come true. His ability to hold his

position for two decades is noteworthy. "If a goalkeeper makes one mistake, it is visible. Win or lose is in his hands and feet," notes Sreejesh. "I always try to become better than yesterday. I take responsibility for my team. I always feel that because of my mistake, my team and the country shouldn't suffer." He hasn't given much to complain about in the past few years.

After the Men in Blue ended a 13-year drought for an ICC World Cup trophy, a viral message touched on the coincidence of how each World Cup win featured a "Mallu" in the squad; Sanju Samson, in this case. Sreejesh, the lone "Mallu" for four editions now, saw the message, and the nail-biting final too. "We always try to learn from other sports. It taught us that one over, one moment [is enough], we snatched the victory from them," he says. The Men in Blue at the Olympics will be hoping for a like moment. ■



"THERE IS PRESSURE TO DO WELL AND COME BACK WITH A MEDAL. YOU WANT TO DO BETTER. YOU HAVE TO KEEP ACHIEVING"

— HARMANPREET SINGH
Captain, Men's Hockey Team

—Suhani Singh



A ONE OF A KIND MARINE RESEARCH FACILITY LAUNCHED AT SATHYABAMA UNIVERSITY

National Facility for Coastal and Marine Research, a centralized hub established in Sathyabama Institute of Science and Technology is a pioneering initiative and a first of its kind in the country for advancing the blue biotechnology research, fosters interdisciplinary collaborations. This facility was dedicated by the Hon'ble Chancellor Dr. MARIAZEENA JOHNSON to the students and young researchers with the technical support of the Ministry of Earth Sciences (MoES).

As a mark of the beginning, the National Facility organizes the National Workshop on Blue Biotechnology on 5-6th July 2024, sponsored by MoES which would pave the way for innovative solutions and sustainable practices in blue biotechnology. The Programme is presided by Dr. MARIAZEENA JOHNSON, Hon'ble Chancellor, Dr. MARIE JOHNSON, President, Ms. MARIA BERNADETTE TAMILARASI, Mr. J. ARUL SELVAN and Ms. MARIA CATHERINE JOHNSON, Vice Presidents. Prof. Dr. M. Ravichandran, Hon'ble Secretary of the Ministry of Earth Sciences (MoES). Dr. G.A. Ramadass, Former Director, NIOT. Dr. M.V. Ramana Murthy, Director, NCCR. Dr. T. Srinivasa Kumar, Director, INCOIS, Dr. G.V.M. Gupta, Director, CMLRE, MOES officials Dr. Gopal Iyengar, Scientist G. Dr. Jagvir Singh. Scientist G and other Officials visited the National Facility to explore the state-of-the-art research infrastructure and gain valuable insights.

Hon'ble Secretary declared the facility established at the University with National

Recognition by signing the MoU and exchanging it with the Hon'ble Chancellor of Sathyabama Institute of Science and Technology. Collaborations were earmarked by signing of MoUs with INCOIS, BoBP-IGO and various other industries towards Consultancy and Sponsored research projects which were showcased by releasing the sanction orders and work orders.

National Facility for Coastal and Marine Research (NFCMR) is a state-of-the-art facility spanning around 10,000 square feet, equipped with cutting-edge instrumentation and laboratories in marine research and conservation in India. The primary objective includes monitoring marine biodiversity, assessing the impact of pollutants on marine ecosystems, mapping and analysing marine habitats, studying ocean acidification and the effects of climate change, and fostering interdisciplinary collaboration among scientists, researchers, industrialists, and experts.

NFCMR hosts a pivotal National Workshop on Blue

➤ SOME SIGNIFICANT RESEARCH WORK DONE IN PAST 2 YEARS BY UNIVERSITY

- Biodiesel from waste cooking oil, Improved the efficiency of Super capacitors and fuel cells
- Conducted ecosystem restoration studies for Balkbay and gulf of Mannar region,
- Novel materials development
- Drug molecules developed for Alzheimer's disease, TB and HIV and Cardiac disorders

➤ TOP2% MOST INFLUENTIAL SCIENTIST IN 2023 , STANFORD UNIVERSITY LIST : ANALYSIS OF INDIAN RESEARCHERS

- Dr. Murugadoss G- Center for Nano Science And Nanotechnology
- Dr. Prem Jacob T- CSE
- Dr. Sekar Manigandan – Dept Of Aeronautical Engineering
- Dr. Govindaraju K – Center for Ocean Research
- Dr. Jayaseelan C- Center for Ocean Research

➤ ARCTIC TO INDIAN OCEAN OUR SCIENTISTS

- 2 Scientists in Arctic and Antarctic regions to explore the microbes that withstand extreme low temperature.
- 17+ Scientists are exploring the Indian Ocean Region living and non-living resources in the area of Marine Biology, Remote Sensing and Earth Sciences.

➤ SPECIES OF FISHES REPORTED- ON THE WHOLE BY OUR UNIVERSITY

- A New Species of the Genus Dendronephthya Kükenthal 1905 (Octocorallia: Alcyonacea: Nephtheidae) and Associated Crustaceans From Covelong,
- 12+ of new species (sea urchin, demersal fishes, polychaete worms and biofilm bacteria) has been reported by Ocean Research.

➤ Numbers of patents- 324

➤ Total number of research facility in university- 50+ Major facilities

➤ How many 1st of its kind facility in the university- 9 FACS Multi omics core facility, HRTEM, XPS, Confocal RF sputtering, EBeam etc

➤ 56% women scientists

➤ %age of total women faculty- 60%

➤ %age of women in leadership -75%

Biotechnology, addressing the critical need for innovative marine biotechnology solutions in India. With its vast coastline and rich marine biodiversity, India has immense potential to lead in this field, driving sustainable development through environmental conservation, enhanced marine resources, and economic growth. The workshop highlights the latest advancements and opportunities in blue biotechnology. Aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals and the objectives of the UN Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development, NFCMR, in collaboration with the Ministry of Earth Sciences, reaffirms its commitment to advancing marine research and fostering innovative solutions for sustainable ocean resource management.



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Soon after the Tokyo Games, Mohammad Jameel Ahmed presented his daughter Nikhat Zareen a silver ring with five Olympic rings, a reminder of her next goal—a medal in Paris. Ahmed’s WhatsApp profile photo features a smiling Nikhat pumping her fist wearing that special gift. It was Ahmed, a national-level football player himself, who had decided to direct the energy of his ‘*shararti*’ (naughty) third child into sport and took her to the Collector Ground in Nizamabad, Telangana. Left to herself, the young Nikhat skirted the basketball court and track and was soon absorbed with the happenings in the boxing gym. The rest, of course, is legend.

Paris had been on Nikhat’s mind ever since she missed out on a ticket to Tokyo, losing to Mary C. Kom in a heated 2019 trial that was held at her behest, which she insists was about “fair play”. “Every day I’d cry. But the people in my



“I WASN’T HAPPY WITH THE ASIAN GAMES BRONZE. I RESOLVED TO TAKE IT AS A LESSON, WORK ON MY MISTAKES AND COME BACK STRONGER”

— NIKHAT ZAREEN



A RING OF DETERMINATION

NIKHAT ZAREEN, 28

Sport: BOXING 50 kg

Achievements: Two-time World champion, Istanbul 2022 and New Delhi 2023; Gold at Birmingham Commonwealth Games, 2022

How she qualified: Won an Olympic quota after reaching the semis and clinching a bronze at Asian Games, Hangzhou

life—seniors, sponsors, friends and family—never let me down and kept me motivated,” Nikhat told INDIA TODAY late last year. “Hunger *badhta gaya* (my hunger grew) thinking about the goal.” Expectations are high for India’s female-heavy boxing contingent, with many experts considering Nikhat as a solid bet to add to our medal tally. “*Kabhi socha nahi tha ek ladki* who was once a challenger would become the face of Indian boxing... I feel blessed and grateful,” she said during a media interaction weeks before the Games.

Such are the expectations from Nikhat that the bronze she won at the Asian Games last year was seen as an “underperformance”. “Even I wasn’t satisfied with the bronze,” she says. “I took it as a lesson—worked on my mistakes to come back stronger.” After a break, she resumed training at the national camp in Patiala. At the Strandja Memorial tournament, she bagged a silver, following it up with a gold

in the Elorda Cup in Astana in May, showcasing the steel that has made her a fiery contender.

She will need all of it in Paris. There are nerves, she admits, for it is her first Games, but it’s also a source to get her to focus and perform. In a surprising move by the Paris Games boxing unit, Zareen isn’t seeded, making her quest for gold one filled with tough fights. But it didn’t stop her from winning a world championship last year, and it won’t faze her in Paris. “Whenever I get a tough draw, I perform better,” she says. “There’s no scope for an easy draw at the Olympics. I have to give 100 per cent in every bout.” It’s what Ahmed wants too. Father to four daughters, he’s heard his share of taunts. Today, the Zareen girls are flying high—one’s a neurologist, another an orthopaedic, and the youngest a badminton player. “Now we are known as the Zareen family,” says Ahmed proudly. ■

—Suhani Singh

Photograph by BANDEEP SINGH; Hair and make-up: SUNIL MADHUKAR SAWANT





INDIA@PARIS 2024



DOUBLE DESIRE

NEERAJ CHOPRA, 26

Sport: JAVELIN THROW

Achievements: Olympic champion, World Champion, Asian Games gold medalist

How he qualified: With an 88.77 metre effort in the 2023 World Athletics men's javelin throw final qualification round (85.5 metres is the qualification mark)

W

inning has become such second nature to Neeraj Chopra since Tokyo 2020 that when one talks of a sure-shot medal in Paris, the question asked is, "*Neeraj nahin, toh kaun* (If not Neeraj, then who)?" Indeed, it's a testament to his dominance in the sport that the medal's hue under discussion is always yellow. "The target is to defend my title,"

Chopra had said during a media interaction in April. "Whatever I can do to make that happen, I am concentrating on it."

If you've followed Chopra's exploits with the javelin, you know he doesn't follow its trajectory to know he's put in a winning throw. Like many supreme athletes, Neeraj just knows it. A brisk run with the spear, his powerful right arm stretched to its fullest, the emphatic throw, the swift recovery from a choreographed fall, the turn to the audience, a scream with both his hands in the air. The seconds-long routine, much like Sachin's immaculate cover drive, never gets old.

India has seen its share of great sports stars, and the attributes that unite them are consistency and hunger. Luckily for us, Chopra isn't the





GETTY IMAGES

sort to rest on his laurels. “*Jab tak mujhe nahin lagega ki haan 100 per cent ho gaya hai*, I cannot improve more than this. Until then, I will keep working hard and be passionate about the sport,” says the 26-year-old in *The Road Less Taken*, a three-part INDIA TODAY documentary on the javelin-thrower’s journey.

That meticulousness has paid rich dividends on field. Since he became Olympic champion, Chopra has added more firsts to his name—first Indian to be a world champion in athletics (2023) and first to win the prestigious Diamond League final (2022). Each conversation around his stupendous form, though, ultimately ends with “When will he enter the elite 90-metre club?” For Chopra, it’s a desirable target but not something

he loses sleep over. “Many of my challengers have crossed 90 metres, but it all depends on the distance you

are covering on the given day,” he told the media. “Who handles the pressure of the competition on that day? That’s the biggest challenge.” This year, 13 athletes have already crossed the 85-metre mark, so Chopra’s defence of his title will be anything but easy.

Achievements are one thing but what makes a great athlete into a legend is their impact. In the three years since Chopra became India’s second Olympic individual gold medalist and, indeed, its first medalist in athletics, the nation has become a powerhouse in javelin throw. It showed on the Asian Games podium in Hangzhou where Kishore Jena joined Chopra, and at the World Championships where the top six had three Indians, including D.P. Manu. In Paris, Chopra won’t be alone, he will have Jena for company.

Neeraj heads to Paris with the



“JAB TAK MUJHE NAHIN LAGEGA KI 100% HO GAYA HAI (TILL I FEEL I’VE ACHIEVED 100%) AND CAN’T IMPROVE MORE THAN THIS, TILL THEN, I’LL KEEP WORKING HARD AND BE PASSIONATE ABOUT THE SPORT”

— NEERAJ CHOPRA

same team he had in Tokyo—coach Dr Klaus Bartoneitz and physiotherapist Ishan Marwaha. Since Tokyo, he has spent a big chunk of his time training abroad. It’s not a cushy life, he will have you know. “*Kaafi logon ko lagta hai ki inke toh maze hain, baahar hi rehte hain. Badi boring life hoti hai* (Many think he’s living the high life abroad. In fact, it’s very boring),” he says. It’s evident in the daily routine: eat, train, rest, train, eat, sleep. “The hostel and dining hall are our boundary, the track is our world.”

Expecting a redux of a herculean feat is akin to

asking for the moon. The likes of Usain Bolt, Elaine Thompson Herah and Mo Farah have proven that it’s possible—by doing double on track in back-to-back Olympics. Like the top athletes, Chopra, too, exhibits fearlessness, self-belief and motivation. It’s why Adille Sumariwalla, president of the Athletics Federation of India, heralds him as “the man who changed Indian sport for ever”. It’s why 1.4 billion people believe that if anybody can do it twice, it’s Neeraj. ■

—Suhani Singh





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INDIA'S SHUTTLE DUOPOLY

**CHIRAG SHETTY, 27
& SATWIKSAIRAJ RANKIREDDY, 23**

Sport: BADMINTON MEN'S DOUBLES

Achievements: Gold at Asian Games, bronze at 2022 World Championships, part of the Thomas Cup-winning squad of 2022

How they qualified: On Badminton World Federation (BWF) rankings

Photographs by BANDEEP SINGH

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atwik bares it all,” teases Chirag Shetty as his younger partner Satwiksairaj Rankireddy reluctantly removes his T-shirt at the request of the photographer. For Chirag, the act is a trademark move now, it’s how he celebrates most tournament wins. Satwik prefers a spontaneous jig, often with racket in tow. In a discipline not known for its exuberance—2016 Olympic champion Carolina Marin being a noisy exception—SatChi, as they have been christened by fans, are proudly so. Chirag’s the chatty city slicker, Mumbai *cha mulga*; Satwik’s the shy guy from Amalapuram in Andhra Pradesh who moved to Hyderabad in his early teens. Put them on the court and they are, as the ’90s pop hit goes, ‘MFEO’ (Made for each other).



aren't taking their foot off the gas. What would be different if Boe was on court, we ask. "You'd have heard a lot of abuse," says Chirag, as Satwik nods and grins, "in English, Danish, and Hindi too, but in a very funny way. If someone is not ready for a stroke, he goes mad." Boe's planning and strategies have turned the spirited boys into sturdy men. Always seen as shuttlers with abundant talent, they have grown to become a formidable pair under his mentorship. "With him, it doesn't matter how long you are playing [on court], what really matters is the quality and effort you are putting in. You have to be 100 per cent on court," notes Chirag. For Satwik, it's Boe's emphasis on the "small things". "We have become more consistent. Now, even on a bad day, we can win a few matches," he adds.

They are now known for their variety and smart play. Equally adept at quick, flat exchanges at the net as at their powerful smashes, there's an all-roundedness to their game. The flick serve's one weapon in their arsenal, the returns often point winners. "Earlier, our only game was attack, there was no plan B as such," says Shetty. "Now, we make opponents play at our pace. That's how you dictate terms on court."

It shows in the results too. In 2024, they include the Thailand Open and French Open titles, the latter held at the same venue where the Olympic matches will be held. For SatChi, it's truly *Paris je t'aime*, having won the title twice and finished runners-up once. This time, when they head to the city of love, all eyes will be on them. "Obviously, we like the limelight, but we don't dwell too much on it," says Shetty. "We want to go there and enjoy. Whenever we have been positive, however bad or good the circumstances are, it has turned out really well for us." Badminton has given India three Olympic medals, but all in women's singles. If the shirts come off and there are dance moves on the court, know the number will be four. ■

We are at the second level at the Pullela Gopichand Academy, and the former world No. 1 pair is in the middle of a gruelling two-hour training session, first sparring with duo Dhruv Kapila and M.R. Arjun and then retrieving hard smashes from players acting as 'feeders'. SatChi play an aggressive, fast and attractive brand of badminton. It's been working wonders, especially in the past two years since Mathias Boe, a former Olympic silver medalist in doubles, took charge. (The Dane is married to actress Taapsee Pannu. SatChi were guests at their very private wedding.)

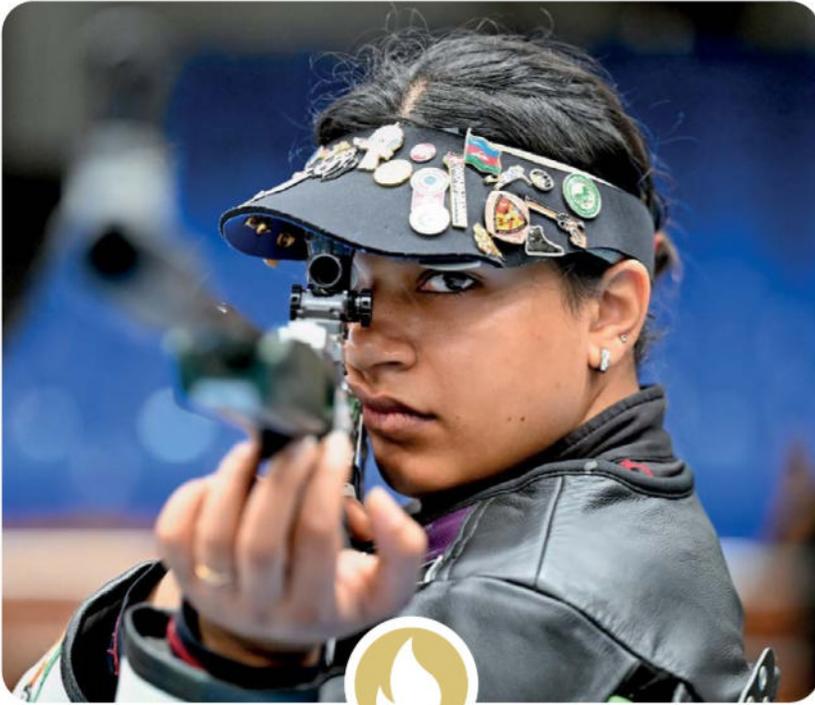
It's Boe's week off, but the shuttlers



“EARLIER OUR ONLY GAME WAS ATTACK, THERE WAS NO PLAN B AS SUCH. NOW WE MAKE OPPONENTS PLAY AT OUR PACE. THAT’S HOW YOU DICTATE TERMS ON COURT”

—CHIRAG SHETTY

—Suhani Singh



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AIMING TO BE THE FIRST

SIFT KAUR SAMRA, 22

Sport: SHOOTING 50M RIFLE 3 POSITIONS

Achievement: World-record holder—won a gold medal at the Asian Games last year

How she qualified: Won the Olympic quota at the ISSF World Shooting Championships in 2023, topped the NRAI trials in April-May 2024

In his quest for Olympic gold, Abhinav Bindra drank imported yak milk to improve focus and went to South Africa to get his brain mapped to find ways to reduce stress. Ask Sift Kaur Samra what she does to “keep calm and carry on”, as Gen Z-ers would say, and she replies, “*Kuchh bhi nahin karti ma’am* (I don’t do anything).”

This is no exercise in modesty, just a young woman, who cleared NEET and set her MBBS dream aside to pursue shooting, speaking her mind. “*Main baatein bahut karti hoon* (I talk a lot),” says Samra. “I’m a really chill person. That only helps me. I don’t go that deep. *Khush raho, game achchhi rahegi* (Stay happy and the game will be good).” *Khush* in Sift’s world means spending

time with friends, dancing, listening to Punjabi artists like Diljit Dosanjh, Amrinder Gill, Arjan Dhillon and Karan Aujla, sleeping and driving around in her Scorpio as she did from Punjab to Bhopal for the national trials in April. This easygoing approach is also why most believe she could well breeze her way to Olympic glory to become India’s first female shooter to win a medal.

In many ways, Sift is living up to her name, which in Punjabi means “praise”, of which she has been earning a lot. She took to the rifle at 16 in Faridkot, Punjab, starting with 10m before switching to 50m a few years later. It wasn’t long before she was hitting targets and rising up the ranks. “The podium, the feeling of a medal is what made me stick to shooting,” says Samra. That, and the desire “to roam the world”.

The triathlon of shooting competitions, the 50m event sees shooters aim for targets in three positions—prone, kneeling and standing. Longer than other events, it is taxing with a change in uniform after rounds, and demands consistency and mental fortitude of a higher level. Under such challenging circumstances, Samra differs from many by keeping tabs on the scores after each shot. “I need to know where I am standing,” she says. “If you don’t know where you have to reach, then there’s no point in working so hard. For me, it works.”

Come Paris and she doesn’t intend to change her tactics. Her way of approaching a grand stage like the Olympics is to treat it like any other competition and do what she does in training, which is to shoot well. “My mother said ‘now you don’t have to play for us because people have expectations of me but for the country,’” she says. “I don’t keep expectations as a person.”

Shooting has been India’s Achilles heel in the past few Olympics. With the country sending its biggest contingent with 21 shooters, there are 27 medals up for grabs. At least a handful of them are expected to deliver. Talking on Olympic-bound pistol shooter Vijayveer Sidhu’s phone at a camp in Europe, Sift hopes that not only she but also her teammates break the medal drought in shooting since the 2012 London Olympics. ■

—Suhani Singh



INDIA@PARIS 2024



HOPING TO MAKE A SPLASH

SRIHARI NATARAJ, 23

Sport: **SWIMMING** Men's 100m Backstroke

Achievement: Broke three national records, including the 200m freestyle mark, at the Asian Games in Hangzhou last year

How he qualified: Through the Universality quota that is handed out to National Olympic Committees when they don't have any qualified athletes or relay teams

T

Through most of June 23, Srihari Nataraj had one eye glued to a computer screen. Over in Canada, another Indian swimmer, Aryan Nehra, was participating at the Mel Zajac Jr International. By the end of it, Aryan had clinched two silver medals, but failed to collect adequate points to get past Srihari's tally of the Olympic

qualification cycle from March 2023 to June 2024. Two days later, Srihari had the confirmation that he was going to his second consecutive Olympic Games.

The Bengaluru athlete's best swim came at the Asian Games in Hangzhou, China, last September, where he lost out on a medal in the 100-metre backstroke final by a few milliseconds. More significantly, he got within touching distance of the Olympic qualification timing, missing it by an even smaller margin. Yet, there were a lot of positives he returned home with. "It's not the first time I got so close to a medal—it happened at the World Junior Championships in 2019 and then the Commonwealth Games in 2022. The Asian Games taught me to manage myself better amid a busy schedule," he

SELVAPRAKASH LAKSHMANAN



“IT DOESN'T REALLY MATTER HOW I GOT THERE. I'M IN THE BEST SHAPE.... THE OLYMPICS IS JUST ANOTHER MEET WHERE THE GOAL IS TO SWIM THE BEST RACE I CAN”

— SRIHARI NATARAJ

says. “I was part of four individual events, where I made two finals, and four relays, so I had 10 races where I put in my best effort. Of course, it would have been great to be a lot quicker.”

That mark of 54.48 seconds at the Asian Games would be his fastest time on the 100-metre backstroke during the Olympic qualification period. Consistent performances ensured that he eventually made it to the Games, this time around through the Universality quota. Tokyo, though, was a lot different, where he made the ‘A’ standard qualification timing during an out-of-competition trial to ensure a direct entry. “It doesn’t really matter how I got there. I’m in the best shape that I’ve ever been and it’s all a matter of clicking on that day and executing things well,” he adds. “The Olympics is just another meet where the goal is to swim the best race I can.”

Srihari comes from a family of cricketers and started playing multiple sports while growing up in Bengaluru. Swimming became a priority once he turned 16 and he has represented India at the World Championships besides other multi-sport events. He capped off the National Games last year with 10 medals (eight gold, a silver and a bronze) across backstroke and freestyle events, earning the ‘Best Male Athlete’ title.

However, he will not be the lone Indian representative in the pool in Paris.

Dhinidhi Desinghu, all of 14, also made the cut through the Universality quota in the 200-metre freestyle event. A two-member contingent in an Olympic discipline that doles out as many as 35 medals demonstrates how far behind India is in this sport dominated by the US, Australia, China, Canada, Great Britain and France. “Swimming is growing on the whole. But we cannot expect things to change overnight,” says Srihari. Over the past few weeks, he has been fine-tuning his skills under coach Nihar Ameen in Bengaluru to save those precious milliseconds that he’s now all too familiar with. The target is to get a personal best, which he believes will be good enough to get him a spot in the semis. That alone will be a massive first for Indian swimming. ■

—Shail Desai



INDIA@PARIS 2024



LIFTING A NATION'S HOPES

MIRABAI CHANU, 29

Sport: WEIGHTLIFTING 49 KG

Achievement: Silver at the 2020 Olympics

How she qualified: Lifted 184 kg at the IWF World Cup in Phuket in April



GETTY IMAGES

IN

2021, battling menstrual cramps, she had lifted the burden of an entire nation's expectations at the Tokyo Olympics and given the medal-parched country a silver. A year later, though, she had trouble lifting her own body weight of 49 kg. As Mirabai stared at a wheelchair-bound future, the country moved on to pin its hopes on other medal prospects for the 2024 Paris Games. But Mirabai is having none of it, as she prepares to change the script by the dint of sheer will and determination.

Pain has been a constant companion in Mirabai's decade-long career, be it injury in the lower back, shoulder or wrist. Days before the 2022 World Championships in Bogota, Mirabai

injured her wrist, but went on to win a silver (her second World medal) despite the pain, looking well on course for Paris. However, at the 2023 Hangzhou Asian Games, she hurt her hip during the competition. "The pain was excruciating. I couldn't even do free squats. I wasn't sure if the pain would subside with rest. My mind was clouded with so many questions," Mirabai Chanu told INDIA TODAY from Paris where she has moved to acclimatise to the conditions. Out of action for five months, she made yet another comeback at the World Cup in Phuket in April, lifting a total of 184 kg for a third place and a berth in Paris.

Just weeks ahead of the Olympics, Mirabai is yet to go full throttle with her training but says coach Vijay Sharma has it all planned. "I am at my 100 per cent. In Patiala (Olympics camp), I pushed myself to 80-85 per cent of my usual load...here in Paris, we will go all-out," says the diminutive



"I am at my 100 per cent. In Patiala (Olympics camp), I pushed myself to 80-85 per cent of my usual load... in Paris, we will go all out"

— MIRABAI CHANU

weightlifter. That means lifting more than 200 kg for a medal in the midst of a tough field where at least four lifters will be vying to do the same.

In Tokyo, Mirabai had flaunted her customised Olympic earrings. After the silver, she rewarded herself with a tattoo. "In Manipuri, we refer to our mother as 'Eema'. I got it tattooed on my forearm," she says. As she prepares for her third Olympic and second medal, the nation can't wait to see what the girl with the Eema tattoo will do. ■

—Rahul Rawat



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SET TO TAKE A BOW

BHAJAN KAUR, 18

Sport: ARCHERY Individual, Women's Team

Achievements: Bronze at World Archery Youth Championships, 2023; team bronze at 2023 Asian Games; mixed team bronze at Archery World Cup in Antalya, 2024

How she qualified: Clinched her first senior international gold at the final Olympic qualifier in Antalya, Turkey



MANDAR DEODHAR

Bhajan Kaur first picked up a bow at the age of 12—simply because there was no other girl to represent the school in the under-14 category at a district level championship in Haryana. Though she tried her hand at shot put as well, she found an instant connect with the focus that archery demanded. Six years later, Bhajan was taking aim at the final qualifier in Antalya, looking to make the cut for the Paris Olympics. The form was evident after she finished third in qualification. “Though this was a big competition, I just wanted to approach it the way I do things at training. And I was fortunate to have our coach, Purnima Mahato, and sports psychologist, Gayatri Vartak Madkekar, by my side during the crucial moments,” says Bhajan. She continued her fine run to set up a final against Mobina Fallah, the top seed. Bhajan eventually out-shot the Iranian 6-2 to take her first senior gold in an international competition. “I took it one round at a time, to forget the last arrow and focus on the next. There was nothing else running in my head,” she says.

When she first began, Bhajan's father Bhagwan Singh, a farmer, would drive her from their home in Ellenabad to Sirsa to train under coach R.S. Nehra. But the 80 km round-trip was punishing, and lasted just six months. Instead, Bhagwan Singh set up a makeshift archery range in the wheat fields behind their home where Bhajan honed her skills. “He keenly observed my training under Nehra sir... he would watch videos to improve his understanding of archery. Twice a month, we would drive 200 km to train with Manjeet Malik sir. Otherwise, my father was my only coach till I joined the Tata Archery Academy in Jamshedpur,” recalls Bhajan. The duo would put in two practice sessions each day around her school schedule.

Bhajan's idol through all those years was Deepika Kumari, the former World No. 1 recurve archer. Last year in March, she met her at last at the National Championship. In Paris, in addition to the individual competition, the teen will also get to shoot alongside Deepika as part of the women's team squad. “Back in the day, I would watch Deepika Di's videos for hours to work on my skills. It feels really nice to train and compete alongside her today,” says Bhajan. “The seniors on the team are really patient when I make mistakes and guide me all the time. And they also have a good laugh at my expense, since there are moments when I don't really think before I speak.” It should hardly matter in Paris, where Bhajan will let her shooting skills do all the talking. ■

—Shail Desai



“Everyone is telling me there will be a different kind of pressure that I have never experienced before. I feel I am well prepared for it. I want to give my best to make some big upsets”

— SREEJA AKULA



AP

Among the many wonders of Hyderabad is the Charminar, a monument that gets its name from its four minarets. It is, thus, befitting that four wonder sportswomen in India’s Paris contingent are from this historical city: two-time Olympic medalist P.V. Sindhu, world champion boxer Nikhat Zareen, shooting prodigy Esha Singh and the nation’s highest ranked paddler (World No. 25) Sreeja Akula. What is it in the city’s air that’s made it a nursery for sporting talent? Sreeja gives the credit to its many academies including the Global Table Tennis Academy of Somnath Ghosh, her coach of 14 years. On her last day in the city before she jets off to Germany for a national camp and eventually Paris, Sreeja talks of the relief knowing that Ghosh will join her in what’s to be a significant journey. “The confidence I carry when he is there is another level,” she says. “We share a good bond. He’s like an elder brother. I wouldn’t have reached this level without him.”

The level in question here has seen Sreeja peak at the opportune time. She began 2024 on a winning note claiming the WTT Feeder Corpus Christi singles title in Texas, before adding another title in Beirut. Then came one of the career-defining moments in June when she became



TOPSPIN WHIZ

SREEJA AKULA, 25

Sport: TABLE TENNIS
Individual and Women’s Team

Achievement: Became the first Indian paddler to win a World Table Tennis Contender singles title in Lagos in June

How she qualified: On the basis of individual and team world rankings

the first Indian paddler to win a WTT Contender singles title in Lagos. Along with that, she also clinched the doubles title with Paris-bound teammate Archana Kamath. “It’s a confidence-booster just before the Olympics. I should maintain this [form] in Paris,” she says. In her Olympics debut, she is aware the stakes are higher. “Everyone is telling me there’ll be a different kind of pressure that I have never experienced before,” she says. “I feel I am well prepared for it. I want to give my best to make some big upsets there.” She already has one major upset to show off this year, defeating then World No. 2 Chinese paddler Wang Yidi at the World Team Championships.

“Earlier there was this belief that a win against China is impossible,” she says. “But other nations are developing fast. They believe anything can happen on a given day....” India is one of them. For the first time, it has five women in the top 100, with Sreeja and Paris teammate Manika Batra ranked under 30. On her part, Sreeja has been fine-tuning her attacking game, working on her forehand and using the topspin to land winners and take the opponent by surprise. Now, to see what aces she has up her sleeve for Paris. ■

—Suhani Singh



INDIA@PARIS 2024



WIND IN HER SAILS

NETHRA KUMANAN, 26

Sport: SAILING

Achievement: Gold at the Asian Championships in 2022

How she qualified: Got a quota under the Emerging Nations Programme at Last Chance Regatta, an Olympic qualifier event



“Sailing is a mental sport. A lot of components are not under our control. It is not about doing the best but making the least mistakes as you go around the course ”

— NETHRA KUMANAN

Can you stop, please?” Nethra pleads with her father as he teases her about how she spends as much time on her phone as on sailing. It’s May 2024 and Kumanan is home in Chennai—a rare occasion, since she has spent most of the past five years training in Spain. As we conduct the interview over Zoom, her father listens in on his daughter reflecting on her journey. Nethra talks of how a sports psychologist, provided by Dream Sports Foundation, has helped her navigate pressure. “Sailing is a mental sport,” she says. “A lot of components are not under our control. It’s still something I struggle with.” Nethra’s event in the Olympics is the women’s Laser Radial, named after the single-sail, single-handed dinghy.

If Nethra’s qualification for the Tokyo Olympics was a landmark event—she was the first Indian woman sailor to qualify—making the cut in Paris is morale-boosting too. “We were expecting to do it last year at the Asian Games,” says Nethra. “I came really close, but underperformed when it counted.”

The first thing to understand about sailing, Nethra tells us, is the scoring system: the one who scores the least, wins. “It’s not about doing the best, but making the least mistakes as you go around the course,” she says. “We don’t race against forces of nature [wind, current] but against others. It’s a lot of decision-making.”

Sailing isn’t that inaccessible a pursuit in India as many tend to think, reveals Nethra. She dabbled with tennis, badminton and basketball before discovering a love of sailing after a summer sailing camp. “It’s unlike anything else,” she says. “It is exhilarating being on the ocean, sometimes you get to see marine life. You learn the simple physics of it to get the extra metre of advantage.” Though sailing has gained some traction in India with more sailing clubs and government support, an ocean worth of effort is still required. “To bridge the gap with European sailors, we have to train there,” she says. In comparison to Tokyo, Nethra feels better prepared in Paris as she will have coach Tamas Eszes by her side as she negotiates the winds and tides of the Mediterranean at the Marseille Marina. Nethra and Vishnu Saravanan, India’s two sailing athletes, are already prepping in Marseille. Says Nethra, “I know what to expect, what can throw me off. Now I can focus on what I have to do.” ■

—Suhani Singh

LOVLINA BORGHAIN, 26

Boxing 75kg

Agar sahenge to hi to champion ban payenge (Only if you suffer will you become a champion)," says Lovlina Borgohain in *The Dreamers*, a short documentary series on JioCinema, which will be streaming the Games. It's a work ethic Lovlina perhaps inherited from her father, a tea estate worker. Initially trained in martial arts, Lovlina for long was the perennial bronze medallist—including the one won at the Tokyo Olympics—that is until she decided to switch her weight category to 75kg from 69kg post Tokyo. Better results soon followed, beginning with winning gold in the Asian Boxing Championship in 2022 and a world championship title and an Asian Games silver medal last year. Being the only Indian pugilist to be seeded at the Olympics means Lovlina needs just two wins to confirm another bronze. Though, going by the three-time world championship medalist's pre-Paris talk, she wants a change of colour. A shinier hue of yellow. ■



INDIA@PARIS 2024



THE OTHER CHARGERS

ON THEIR DAY, ALL OF THESE INDIAN ATHLETES CAN ADD TO THE LUSTRE OF PARIS WITH THEIR SHOTS, STROKES, TAKEDOWNS AND PUNCHES

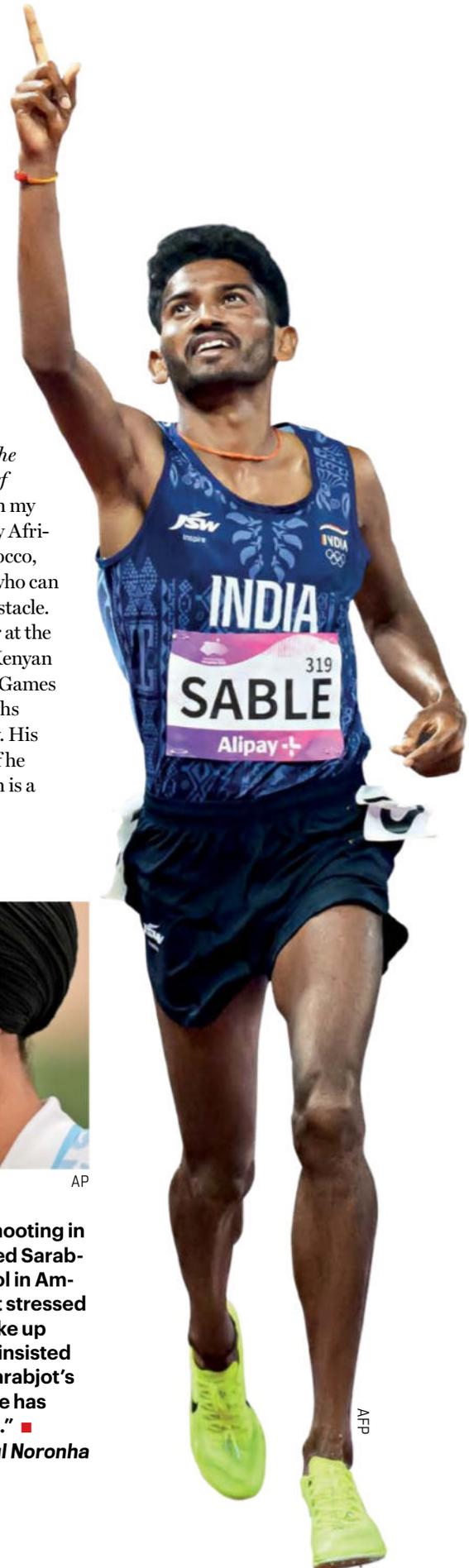
By Suhani Singh



ANI

AVINASH SABLE, 29 > Steeplechase 3,000m

What do you call an athlete who beats his personal best—and the national record—in every second race? Sable, Avinash Sable. Son of a farmer from Beed in Maharashtra, Sable made headlines when he broke the 37-year-old national record in steeplechase back in 2018. Since then, he has slashed 20 seconds off it, with the recent one coming on July 7 at the Paris Diamond League where he finished sixth in a top-notch field with a time of eight minutes and 9.91 seconds. His declaration in Jio Cinema's *The Dreamers* is simple: "Mera competition sirf meri timing se hai (My competition is with my own timing)". In a discipline dominated by African nations like Kenya, Ethiopia and Morocco, Sable has shaken up the field as an Asian who can match them lap for lap and obstacle for obstacle. He lived up to the hype when he won silver at the Commonwealth Games in 2022, ending Kenyan domination, followed by gold at the Asian Games last year. In a race of endurance, time weighs heavily on the subedar in the Indian Army. His ultimate aim: clock a sub-8-minute run. If he does manage that in Paris, a podium finish is a definite possibility. ■



AFP

SARABJOT SINGH, 22 > Shooting 10m Air Pistol

Sarabjot's breakthrough came at the 2023 Hangzhou Asian Games when he clinched the team gold in the 10-metre air pistol event, defeating the rampant Chinese. At the same Games, he won silver in the mixed team event with Divya T.S. Sarabjot's star has risen ever since and his gun sights are fixed on the Paris Olympics. Earlier, in 2023, Singh had blasted his way to the 10m air pistol gold at the Bhopal ISSF World Cup and later at Baku, where he won the air pistol mixed team gold at yet another ISSF World Cup. But the greatest fillip to his Olympic dreams came last month, when he won gold at his favourite event at the ISSF World Cup in Munich. Born in a family of farmers in



AP

Haryana, Sarabjot took up shooting in school. "In 2012-13, we moved Sarabjot to Bhagirath Public School in Ambala where the management stressed on sports. I wanted him to take up volleyball, but the chairman insisted he take up shooting," says Sarabjot's father, Jitender Singh. "There has been no looking back after it." ■

—Rahul Noronha

**ANTIM ▼
PANGHAL, 19**
Wrestling 53kg

All of 11, Antim had just begun going to the *akhada* when her mother showed her “Sakshi Di” [Sakshi Malik] receiving a bronze medal at the Rio Olympics on TV. Eight years later, the two-time under-20 world champion, winner of the Rising Star of the Year by United World Wrestling in 2023, is a favourite to emulate Malik. “It feels great that people expect

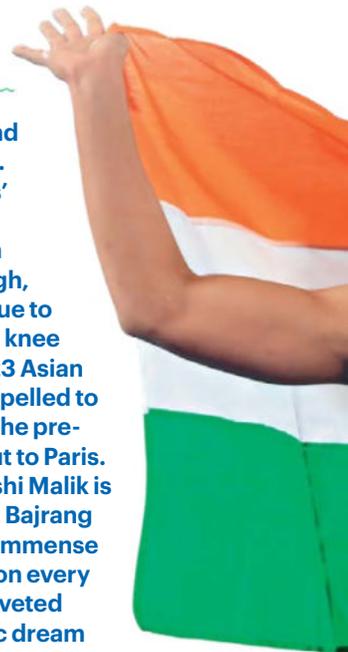
me to win a medal,” she says. At the SAI centre in Hisar, she’s working to achieve the goal. “Everyone trains, but one who does it properly stands out. You have to respect everyone and conduct yourself well,” she says, sounding wise beyond her years. Seeded fourth in the 53 kg category, Antim appeared thrilled with her draw, one that ensures she avoids a duel with the favoured Japanese wrestler Akari Fujinami, 20, until the finals. Much like her name, Antim intends to be the last woman standing. ■

GETTY IMAGES



VINESH PHOGAT, 29 >
Wrestling 50kg

Phogat has been through hell and back in the past year and a half. As one of the faces of the wrestlers’ protest against politician and erstwhile Wrestling Federation of India president Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh, she lost valuable time on the mat due to her fight for justice. She then had a knee injury which led to missing the 2023 Asian Games, and on her return was compelled to change her weight category from the preferred 53kg to 50kg to make the cut to Paris. That she is still in contention—Sakshi Malik is retired and Tokyo bronze medallist Bajrang Punia failed to qualify—shows her immense resilience as a grappler who has won every honour in wrestling, barring the coveted Olympic medal. In Rio, her Olympic dream was cut short in heartbreaking fashion, after she sustained a knee injury in a bout, and in Tokyo she was the reigning world No. 1 and top seed in her weight class, only to lose in the quarters. In Paris, Phogat intends to write the final chapter of a decorated career. ■



UNITED WORLD WRESTLING

< ADITI ASHOK, 26

Golf

The grand stage of the Olympics brings the best out of Aditi Ashok. In Rio 2016, as the youngest in the field, the then 18-year-old was 41st among the world's best golfers. Five years later in Tokyo, ranked 200 in the world, Aditi had the cricket-crazy nation glued to their screens in the early hours to follow the strokes, swings and putts on the greens as she dominated the first three rounds, only to relinquish her lead on the final day. She'd miss the podium by one birdie. Could this third time be lucky? Yet, Paris will be different. Unlike other editions where she was the underdog, Aditi comes in ranked higher (#60) and with valuable LPGA experience. "I'm looking forward to that week, hopefully I can do better than I did in Tokyo," Aditi told INDIA TODAY magazine last year. A position better and she'll make history—the first Indian golfer to win a medal. ■



ROHAN BOPANNA, 44 ^ SRIRAM BALAJI, 34 v

Tennis Men's Doubles

Results in the past few months are anything to go by, clay is not Rohan Bopanna's surface of choice. The rallies are long and Bopanna, with worn-out cartilages in both knees, cannot chase down balls like before. But that proved no deterrent when early this year, at the ripe old sporting age of 43, he won his first men's doubles Grand Slam title, winning the Australian Open with partner Matthew Ebden. For what's likely to be his swan song at the Olympics, the World No. 4

in doubles has chosen Sriram Balaji (ranked 64) as his partner. The big servers will be hoping to put on a stellar show in the iconic stade Roland Garros, home to the French Open. Bopanna is the epitome of the never-say-die mentality. Could he join Leander Paes (bronze medallist at the 1996 Atlanta Games) and crown his career with an Olympic medal? Bopanna is surely in with a chance, for fortune favours the brave in tennis results at the Olympics. ■



WHO TO WATCH WHEN

THE BIG DAYS FOR THE INDIAN CONTINGENT AND OTHER TOP EVENTS

Illustrations by SIDDHANT JUMDE



JUL. 25

Archery: Bhajan Kaur, Dhiraj Bommadevara, Deepika Kumari and others compete in qualifying round

JUL. 27

Hockey: India vs New Zealand

Shooting: Sandeep Singh-Elavenil Valarivan and Arjun Babuta-Ramita Jindal in contention for 10-metre air rifle mixed team medals; Manu Bhaker, Sarabjot Singh, Rhythm Sangwan and Arjun Cheema look to finish in top 8 of 10-metre air pistol team qualification

Badminton: P.V. Sindhu, Lakshya Sen, H.S. Prannoy, Chirag Shetty-Satwiksairaj Rankireddy (Sat-Chi) and Ashwini Ponnappa-Tanisha Crasto begin their campaign

JUL. 28

Archery: Bhajan Kaur, Deepika Kumari and Ankita Bhakat compete in women's team event



Shooting: 10-metre air pistol men's and women's finals

Boxing: Nikhat Zareen begins her Olympic campaign. 50 kg semis: Aug. 6, finals: Aug. 9



Table tennis: Sharath Kamal, Sreeja Akula, Manika Batra, Harmeet Desai hit the table

JUL. 29

Archery: Dhiraj Bommadevara, Tarundeep Rai and Pravin Jadhav line up for men's team event

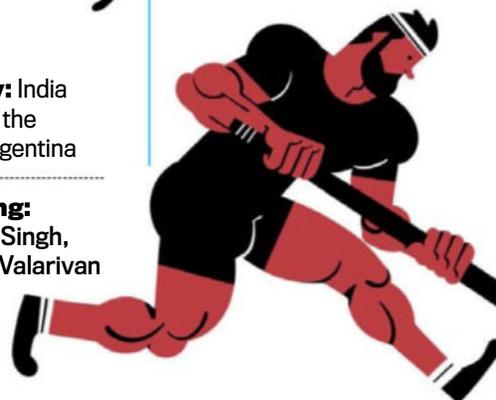
Hockey: India takes on the tricky Argentina

Shooting: Babuta, Singh, Elavenil Valarivan

and Ramita Jindal look to make the cut for 10-metre air rifle men's and women's final; Bhaker-Singh and Sangwan-Cheema team up for 10-metre air pistol mixed team qualification. Finals: July 30

JUL. 30

Archery: Men's and women's individual elimination rounds



Hockey: India vs Ireland

Equestrian:

Anshu Agarwalla makes history as the first Indian to compete in dressage

JUL. 31

Boxing: Tokyo bronze medalist Lovlina Borgohain enters the ring. Finals on Aug. 10

Shooting:

Aishwary Pratap Tomar, Swapnil Kusale in 50-metre rifle three positions qualification. Finals: Aug. 1

AUG. 1

Hockey: Team India takes on 2020 Olympic champions Belgium

in 50-metre rifle three position qualification. Finals: Aug. 2

AUG. 2

Archery: It's mixed team medals day

Hockey: India vs 2023-24 Pro League winners Australia



Shooting: Manu Bhaker, Esha Singh in 25-metre pistol women's qualification. Finals: Aug. 3

AUG. 3

Archery: Crowning of women's Olympic champion

Athletics: Women's 100 metre finals

AUG. 4

Archery: Medal day in men's individual event

Athletics: Men's 100 metre finals

Badminton: Men's doubles medal matches

Hockey: Elimination time as men's quarter-finals begin

Shooting: Skeet women's final; Anish Bhanwal and Vijayveer Sidhu in men's 25 metre rapidfire men's pistol qualification. Finals: Aug. 5

AUG. 5

Badminton: Women's and men's singles bronze and gold medal matches

Table tennis: Men's and women's team matches kick off



Athletics: Avinash Sable looks to make it to 3,000 metre steeplechase finals

AUG. 6

Athletics: Neeraj Chopra, Kishore Jena in javelin throw qualification



Wrestling: Vinesh Phogat's quest for the elusive Olympic medal begins. Repechage, finals: Aug. 7

AUG. 7

Golf: Aditi Ashok and Diksha Dagar hit the course as round 1 begins

Weightlifting: Mirabai Chanu's day to do all the heavy lifting

Wrestling: Under-20 world champion Antim Panghal makes her Olympic debut. Repechage, finals: Aug. 8

AUG. 8

Athletics: Neeraj Chopra's time to defend his title

Breaking: aka break dancing makes Olympics debut

Wrestling: Aman Sehrawat, India's sole male representative, in action in 57 kg freestyle

AUG. 10

Golf: Final day of women's rounds

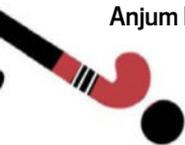
TELECAST TIMINGS

The Olympics can be seen live on Sports 18 channels and Jio Cinema, the official broadcasters, as well as on DD1 Sports. Events start daily at 11.30 am IST and end at 2.30 am IST



Sailing: Nethra Kumanan and her dinghy set off in first two of 10 races

Shooting: Sift Kaur Samra and Anjum Moudgil



THE NEW DUNKI ROUTES

Despite the horror stories surrounding the 'dunki' or illegal migrant route to the West, the lure of a better life for young men in Gujarat, Punjab and other states has seen them pursue newer ways and routes to cross international borders. **INDIA TODAY** speaks to families in Gujarat to find out what fuels the growing human trafficking economy and who is behind it

By **JUMANA SHAH** in *Mehsana*



ABORTED DREAMS
Passengers of a Nicaragua-bound flight arrive in Mumbai after being deported from France over human trafficking concerns, Dec. 26, 2023

IT

is an old story, with a fresh chapter being written into it every so often. This May, it was a German charter flight of 253 Indians that was sent back from Jamaican capital Kingston to Dubai on suspicion of human trafficking. A few of the passengers were scheduled to travel to Nicaragua and others to Canada after a supposed week-long stay in Jamaica, although

only one day was accounted for. Officers of the Criminal Investigation Department (Crime) of Gujarat suspect that around 75 passengers from the state and a few from Punjab were attempting to migrate to the US illegally.

How does it feel to be sent back? It has been over seven months since Raman Thakor, 32, was deported from Vetry in France last year. Back now in Mehsana, a city in agrarian north Gujarat, there is not a single day when he does not think of going back. "This was his third

failed attempt [at illegal immigration]," his wife Alpita, 30, tells us between sobs, even as her three-year-old daughter tries to wipe her tears while playing with a balloon. "Earlier, he had to return from Vietnam and Indonesia after agents duped him." He is raring to go again, a thought that distresses Alpita no end, although Thakor's parents are unperturbed. "They are confident that he will reach the US somehow and, once there, all our financial troubles will be over," says Alpita. "But what about me and our children?"

Thakor was one of the 303 Indian passengers aboard a Nicaragua-bound Romanian charter plane that was grounded for four days at Vetry on suspicion of human trafficking. Although all passengers possessed valid travel documents, some of them confessed to wanting to unlawfully cross into the US via Mexico. Twenty-seven applied for asylum in France, while the remaining 276, including 96 from Gujarat and others from Punjab and Haryana, were repatriated. Later, upon their return to their native places in Mehsana, Gandhinagar and Patan in the north and Anand in central Gujarat, the CID (Crime) arrested 15 agents.

With incidents like these getting reported frequently statewide, investigators have been chasing visa agents, middlemen and facilitators ('donkers' in human trafficking circles) who operate within sophisticated cartels across multiple nations. Data from the United States Customs and Border Protection (USCBP) for September 2023 shows a fivefold surge in Indian illegal immigrants since 2019-20—96,917 people were apprehended between October 2022 and September 2023, compared to 19,883 in 2019-20.

But hard statistics cannot reflect the actual hardships these desperate men and women endure. Cinema, like the Shah Rukh Khan-starrer *Dunki* (the Punjabi word for the act of moving from one location to another), a tale of friends from a Punjab village aiming to reach England released last November, offers only a slice of life. But it takes a tragedy like the one that befell Praveen Chaudhary and his family of four in March 2023 to stir humanity's collective soul. The boat that the Chaudharys were in capsized on the St Lawrence River during their illegal attempt to enter the US from the Quebec-New York border in Canada. In January 2022, another family of four—including Jagdish Patel's three-year-old child—from Dingucha village in Mehsana died in a blizzard while trying to cross into the US from Canada. Two persons, including Gujarati-origin Harshkumar Patel a.k.a. 'Dirty Harry', were indicted for their deaths by a

*Names of immigrants and their family members have been changed



FATAL ATTRACTION

INDIANS DETAINED FOR ILLEGAL BORDER CROSSING IN THE US

19,883 (2019-20) **96,917*** (Oct.'22-Sept.'23)

Caught on the Canada border ***30,010**
on Mexico border ***41,770**

Source: US Customs and Border Protection, Sept. 2023

725,000 Illegal Indian immigrants in the US, third largest after Mexico and El Salvador
4.4-5.4% of all US workers are unauthorised immigrants since 2003

Source: Pew Research Center report, Nov. 2023

"EARLIER, WE FLEW DIRECTLY TO MEXICO, BUT THE OFFICIALS THERE HAVE BECOME GREEDY... NOW, WE FLY INTO MEXICO FROM DIFFERENT COUNTRIES TO AVOID THEIR ATTENTION. WE KNOW IT IS A MATTER OF TIME BEFORE THIS GETS BUSTED. WE WILL CROSS THAT BRIDGE SOON"

-AN AGENT, 35, Mehsana

IN PURSUIT OF A DEADLY GOAL

The potential rewards such as better pay and improved living conditions in the US outweigh life-threatening risks of illegal immigration



WHY DO THEY GO?

Based on the interrogation of around 70 individuals who returned from Vatry, Sanjay

Kharat, SP, CID, says:

- As families expand, farm land gets split into smaller parcels, making livelihoods unsustainable
- Families can't afford to employ farm labourers, so they have to do the laborious work themselves
- Depending on education and skills, they get jobs here, but a job in the US is more remunerative
- In 200-300 villages/towns in north and central Gujarat, almost every house has at least one member settled there. It keeps the door always half open
- Patel girls prefer boys settled in the US for a comfortable life, also independent of in-laws



WHO FUNDS IT?

- Aspirants—mostly from middle class or lower middle class backgrounds—do not bear the cost of travel at all
- Expenses are borne by US-based potential high-net worth employers from the community who promise to pay the agent only after the aspirant reaches
- The lenders start getting a reasonable return on their 'investment' within three years
- These well-oiled syndicates work on trust within the Gujarati communities, dominated by Patidars but not limited to them
- The homes and farmlands of the aspirants are treated as collateral
- Agents are paid through an opaque Hawala system

FAVOURED 'DUNKI' ROUTES



VIA LATIN AMERICAN AND AFRICAN COUNTRIES

- Agents fly the immigrant to Dubai, Indonesia or Malaysia as a springboard on a valid tourist visa
- Some even fly them to African countries where they cool off for a few months. From there, they charter flights to Latin American

countries such as Bolivia, Guyana, Ecuador, Nicaragua. These countries allow on-arrival visas

- The person traverses harsh terrains to reach Mexico on foot through forests or water routes

Duration: Average six months before they reach the US

Cost: ₹70-75 lakh

THE PLAN

MARRIAGE

- The agents facilitate a marriage with an individual in India who is a US citizen
- It's done with an understanding that both the parties will be on their own after reaching the US

Cost
₹1.5 cr.-1.9 cr.



EDUCATIONAL

- Visa agents connive with foreign educational institutions for fake admission offers
- In India, they fake marksheets, financial status, work experience documents etc. to get a genuine visa to send the aspirants off to the intended destination



VIA TURKEY

- Agents obtain a UK visa on a work permit, basis which the traveller enters Turkey with an e-visa and lives there for 90 days
- In this period, they fly into a safe Central American country, where they stay for a week to a year
- At an opportune time, the agents move them into the US

Cost: ₹80-90 lakh



VIA CANADA

- Agents acquire a valid visa for Canada on forged university admission or work permit
- The donkey stays in cold border areas of Canada for a few months
- At an opportune time, the agent sends them across the border—barely a kilometre walk

Cost: ₹80 lakh

CULTURAL/TOURISM

- Agents take the travellers to Dubai with a valid visa
- From there, a charter plane flies them to Central American or European Union countries having on-arrival visa facility
- They are shown as part of a cultural troupe or tourists to reach a suitable destination from where they go to Mexico and enter the US by jumping over the wall

Cost: ₹50-80 lakh

THE EVER-AFTER PHASE



At the end of the long-drawn travel begins with the immigrant's detention by the Customs and Border Protection in the US



In the odd instance, they go unnoticed. Then, they seek out an official and surrender. They are kept at a detention centre for about two months



An immigration lawyer, supplied by the agent whose services could be included in the package, reaches out to the immigrant



In court, they present their story, at times claiming threat to life in their country, and seek asylum



The immigrant is released as a case under consideration with a GPS tracker



Meanwhile, a job and a place to stay at an Indian family's home, restaurant or shop wait for them



Families with children are viewed more favourably and given access to basic healthcare facilities and school education



The asylum case can go on for a few months or a few years, while their life in America falls into gear



Meanwhile, several gimmicks are adopted to make their case stronger, the most prominent being marriage to a citizen

THE GREAT EXPLOITATION

- Survivors and entrepreneurs in the US reveal that these immigrants are paid \$10-12 (Rs 830-Rs 1,000) per hour or less. They work odd hours, straight through weekends and keep to their place of work for the fear of being apprehended
- Employers keep their passports, making them open-air prisoners

WHAT HAPPENS TO THE DEPORTEES

- Those deported en route to the US return to Gujarat
- The deportation cost, including air fare, is borne by their families
- They remain under close observation of the police, who seek to crack the local agents' illegal network
- They lie low for a while and, in most cases, attempt the 'dunki' route again or finally give up

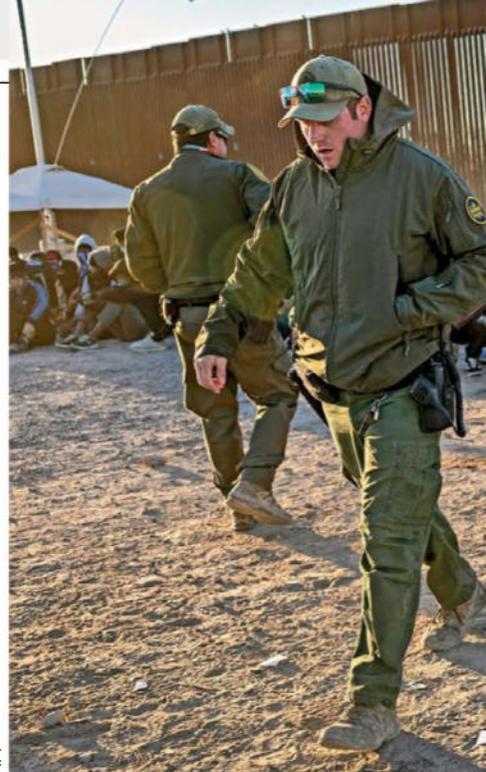
US district court in March this year.

However, such accidents, arrests or indictments are no deterrent to the perilous aspirations of individuals from states such as Gujarat, Punjab and Haryana. Indeed, days after the Vatry incident, charter flights had been taking off almost every week from Dubai to destinations that allow visa-on-arrival for Indians, says Sanjay Kharat, superintendent of police, CID, who is heading the Vatry probe. “We understand the risks involved,” says Rannaben, whose two sons and husband have embarked on the donkey or *‘dunki’* route—a roundabout journey crafted to dodge border controls—multiple times in their lives. “Jagdishbhai’s family’s case was unfortunate, but for every such incident, thousands have successfully crossed over and become wealthy,” she adds.

A pivotal motivation driving this mad rush is the transformation of family fortunes. No one exemplifies this better than Rannaben and her family. Her husband P.V. Patel reached the US in the mid-’90s with an alleged fake passport for Rs 35 lakh. He toiled for a decade at a 7-Eleven shop in New Jersey, followed by another seven years in the kitchens of various takeaway food joints. Rannaben and her sons moved out of their flat into a two-storey tenement within a gated community in Mehsana’s city centre within five years of Patel’s move to the US. Five years ago, as his return approached after he turned 60, the couple sent their elder son Rashesh to the US via the Canada border, at a cost of Rs 60 lakh. However, Rashesh did not have the same luck as his father; he spent 17 months in jail before being deported in 2022, with the family spending Rs 25 lakh on legal fees. In 2021, they managed to successfully send their younger son Ronak to Chicago via Africa and Mexico after three attempts spanning over four months. He is now “settled” in Chicago. Meanwhile, the family is preparing to send Rashesh back into the US again. “He will depart for Turkey next week,” Rannaben says breezily, as she shifts the conversation to the

heart of the matter—how she is busy shortlisting brides for her sons “settled” abroad. As is Radhaben, in her sixties, mother of 21-year-old Punit Patel who returned from Vatry. “We will find another agent soon. We are in a hurry as he is nearing marriageable age.” Her elder son had ventured down the path of ‘bey number’ (illegal route) five years ago and has since attained legal status abroad. Radhaben hasn’t given up hope for her second-born.

For a young immigrant, the hallmark of an elevated lifestyle is securing a Patidar bride followed by lavish weddings and a well-appointed home. Dozens of villages in north Gujarat are dotted with modern two- or three-sto-



AFP

“GUJARATI ENTREPRENEURS FACILITATE CHEAP LABOUR. A GROUP OF THEM PAY IN ADVANCE TO HUMAN TRAFFICKERS FOR A FLIGHTLOAD OF LABOUR. THEY WORK IN MOTELS, EXPRESS STORES, CAFES ETC. UP TO 18 HOURS DAILY AND GET PAID 50 PER CENT OF THEIR DUE”

—**RAJKUMAR PANDIAN** ADGP, CID-Crime and Railways

rey bungalows, run by distant relatives or hired assistance. The landscape includes concrete streets and amenities such as schools and hospitals, though these resources remain largely underutilised due to the mass exodus. These settlements only burst with activity during the four winter months when the NRIs visit. The Rs 1-1.5 lakh per month that each member remits through covert Angadia and Hawala networks fuels purchases of expensive bikes, cars and gold ornaments, along with indulgences like cricket betting.

THE PRICE OF THE ‘PRIZE’

During the interrogation of around a dozen Vatry-returned passengers, the CID officers were astounded by a baffling revelation—the cost per person for a months-long one-way trip to enter the US via Canada or Mexico was Rs 70 lakh. Who funds these risky trips? “Local wealthy individuals invest in an aspirant with an expectation of getting

a return on their investment in three years at a reasonable rate of interest,” says Babubhai Patel, a veteran US citizen with business interests in India and the US. “They work for 10-12 hours a day for less than the minimum hourly labour rates. They share accommodation or sleep on the shop floor, incurring minimum costs, paying off loans and sending money home.”

These well-oiled syndicates work on trust within the Gujarati communities, dominated by Patidars but not restricted to them. All payments are made to the agents through an opaque Hawala system. Many call it modern-day bonded labour, when, ironically, the labourers willingly offer to get trafficked and exploited by their employers. “Gujarati entrepreneurs facilitate cheap labour. A group of employers pay in advance to human traffickers for a flightload of labour,” says Rajkumar Pandian, additional director general, CID-Crime and Railways. Survivors and entrepreneurs in the US reveal that



NO ENTRY A US Border Patrol agent leads a group of Indian immigrants from the US-Mexico border in Arizona, Dec. 8, 2023

these immigrants are paid \$10-12 (Rs 830 to Rs 1,000) per hour or less, and no overtime charges. They work odd hours, through weekends and keep to their place of work for fear of being apprehended. Employers keep their passports, making them open-air prisoners. Despite these ordeals, “there is an inexplicable craze in these villages for a life in the US, which is unfortunately only spreading,” says Kharat.

The life-threatening risks of being trafficked through countries and encounters through forests, drug cartels and wildlife, with the dangers of dodging law enforcers, have turned into a medal of sorts that these families back home recount to their children as modern-day parables of valour. No surprise then that they grow up romanticising these adventures and dream of becoming heroes by entering the US as illegal immigrants.

At the heart of this blind craze are several deep-rooted social evils that have plagued the villages of Gandhinagar, Mehsana and Anand districts for generations now. The most striking being the case of the missing daughters. The desire for a son has meant female foeticide. Gujarat has the third-lowest sex ratio at birth in the country with 909 girls per 1,000 boys, lower than the national average of 940. “Patel boys do not find brides in

their community. Many marry tribal girls, which means a difficult cultural adjustment for the family as well as the girl, and such unions struggle. Patel girls are at a premium, who prefer boys settled in the US so that they can have a comfortable life, independent of in-laws,” says Rannaben.

BY HOOK OR BY CROOK

Pandian says there are mainly two ways illegal immigration takes place. First, visa agents connive with foreign educational institutions for fake admission offers and get a genuine visa for the intended destination. Second, they take the travellers to Dubai with a valid visa. For the onward journey, they are shown as part of a cultural troupe or tourists. Agents from Delhi, Haryana and Gujarat control this nexus through local contacts at every stopover.

“Earlier, they used to fly directly to Mexico and escape before immigration or during transit from the airport, but that was a serious security hazard that seems to have been fixed by the country,” says Pandian. “Now, they use multiple country stopovers, with the average cost ranging between Rs 50 lakh and Rs 80 lakh. The higher end of the package includes food packets and lawyer fees for asylum. The USCBP treats them as victims of human traf-

ficking.” After a headline-hitting event, the agents slow down for a while, but restart soon enough. “We are focusing on cracking the local agent network, the first point of contact for the victims,” says Pandian. “We also need more data from other stakeholders like embassies, travel agents, the Intelligence Bureau, International Air Transport Association.”

Operations in plain sight are par for the course on the streets of Mehsana city and its surrounding villages. A 35-year-old agent spills the beans on several modes of transit. “Earlier, we used to fly directly to Mexico, but the administration there has become greedy. They track our travellers and smoke them out. Oiling their greedy machinery was financially untenable,” he says. “Now, we fly into Mexico from different countries to avoid the attention of their immigration officers. However, we know it is a matter of time before this track gets busted, but we will cross that bridge when we come to it.”

Of late, the long-winding legal ways to become a US green-card holder through investment or skilled work permits are losing popularity in India. Ahmedabad-based veteran visa consultant Lalit Advani, who specialises in EB5 (employment-based, fifth preference) visas that grant permanent resident status, attributes the massive rise in illegal immigration to one extremely significant change that is no longer illegal. “You get an EB5 green card after spending nearly a million dollars and a few years in the queue,” he says. “That you can actually walk across the border in the US and get a social security number and facilities that permanent residents get plus a work permit for a fraction of that amount negates the basis of visa processes for a legal work permit.”

Wisened by years of travel between India and the US, Babubhai claims that the governments of both countries are aware of the goings-on and exactly how to curb it, but want it to continue. “Why are you wasting your time on the issue? There are no victims here,” he says. Only an intricate combination of ambition and adversity. ■



DR. MALAY SHARMA REVOLUTIONIZING GASTROENTEROLOGY AND HEALTHCARE IN INDIA

Our gut governs the state of our health, yet we often end up overlooking gut-related diseases. It was to address this neglect that Dr. Malay Sharma, a pioneer in medical and interventional gastroenterology, founded Aryavart Hospital in 2019 after 25 years of distinguished clinical practice. As the Medical Director of Aryavart Hospital, Meerut, UP, he has established

a facility that provides world class services and patient-oriented care to those suffering from Gastrointestinal diseases. The multi-speciality hospital located in Meerut, serves patients from the neighboring NCR who are seeking the best healthcare at affordable prices.

Dr. Sharma has performed over 80,000 ERCP (Endoscopic Retrograde Cholangiopancreatography) procedures, 20,000 EUS procedures, and more than two lakh endoscopic procedures to date. His colleague envy and patients appreciate him for his lightning quick diagnosis and sense of humor. He has rightfully earned the title of the 'Wizard of Endoscopy.' The state-of-the-art services and cutting-edge healthcare technology provided at Aryavart Hospital for all patients, irrespective of their economic background, enable the fulfillment of Dr. Malay Sharma's vision to deliver excellent and affordable healthcare.

Hailing from the small town of Mawana in western UP, Dr. Malay Sharma grew up in a modest background to achieve remarkable success rooted in the principles of humility, service, and dedication. He earned his MBBS degree from Lala Lajpat Rai Memorial Medical College, UP. Driven by a relentless passion for gastroenterology, he pursued his

Dr. Malay Sharma himself heads the department of gastroenterology at Aryavrat Hospital where around 2500 young doctors have received his valuable training and mentorship to become highly skilled and compassionate professionals.

master's in Internal Medicine from the same institution. His competency and thirst for excellence in the field of interventional Gastroenterology then took him to Christian Medical College, Vellore, where he earned his Post- Doctoral degree, DM in Medical Gastroenterology.

Dr. Malay Sharma heads the department of gastroenterology at Aryavart Hospital where around 2500 young doctors have received his valuable training and mentorship to become highly skilled and compassionate professionals. He has revolutionized the space of Gastroenterology and is looked upon as a real master with his technical prowess and commendable academic contributions. He has published around 250 research articles in national and international peer-reviewed journals



containing 1027 citations and 7286 reads. Dr. Malay Sharma is a pioneer and world leader in the advanced modalities of medical imaging like Endoscopic ultrasound. His influential book, 'Endoscopic Ultrasound: How to do', published in 2007, has become a foundational text for aspiring doctors and seasoned practitioners alike, showcasing his expertise and knowledge.

His academic achievements are noteworthy, including his role as an international visiting faculty for over thirty endoscopy workshops worldwide and his service as a task member for the Forum for Asia Pacific. Dr. Malay Sharma's positions on editorial boards of prestigious journals such as 'Endoscopic Ultrasound' and 'Journal of Bronchoscopy and Interventional Pulmonology', along with his organization of numerous workshops and research initiatives in endoscopy and lung cancer, underscore his significant influence in the field of gastroenterology. The annual international conference organized at Aryavart Hospital by Dr. Malay Sharma is widely perceived as one of the most esteemed in the medical community. Attended by scholars and doctors from around the world, the conference features live demonstrations of complex procedures broadcasted on national and international channels, significantly benefiting the global endoscopy and EUS community. This has solidified the hospital's reputation as a premier center for advanced research and training, alongside its provision of exceptional healthcare services.

Dr. Sharma is a dynamic teacher and an excellent orator, always eager to share his



Having established advanced gastrointestinal medicine at Aryavart Hospital, we wish to bring the same precision of healthcare to other specialities. Our aim is to serve the masses with compassion and provide world class medical care at affordable cost.

– Dr Mridula Sharma (PhD), CMD

The hospital staff, under his guidance and mentorship, is highly skilled and competent, performing various complex endoscopic interventions such as ERCP, EUS-guided biopsies, and procedures like POEM, ESG, endoscopic cysto-gastrostomy, and gastro-jejunostomy.

knowledge, which helps his students significantly advance their potential. He embodies unprecedented sincerity, zeal, and passion for his profession, tirelessly working for the welfare of his patients. The consultants under his mentorship have developed skills and competency to perform various complex endoscopic interventions such as ERCP, EUS-guided diagnostic and therapeutic procedures, POEM, ESG, Endoscopic Cysto-Gastrostomy and Gastro-Jejunostomy.

His relentless pursuit of excellence in the field of GI has garnered prestigious awards, such as the esteemed American Society for Gastrointestinal Endoscopy (ASGE) 'Audio Visual Crystal Award,' which he has received four times for his contributions to ERCP management and EUS in lung cancer. In recognition of his significant achievements, he has been elected Secretary of the Society of Gastrointestinal Endoscopy of India (SGEI) for 2024-2027. Dr. Sharma also achieved another milestone by establishing the Post DM Advanced Endoscopic program at Aryavart Hospital, aimed at addressing the need for structured

advanced endoscopy training. This is one of the most coveted and sought out programs by Post DM junior consultants in India. GI fellows from across the globe throng to get enrolled in the 'Observership Program' under Dr. Sharma. He has played a pivotal role in shaping career of over 2500 young doctors in gastroenterology.

Aryavart Multispeciality Hospital is establishing itself as a center of excellence in the field of Gastroenterology, Interventional Radiology and Chest Medicine. It is also rapidly advancing its footprints in other allied medical specialities like Nephrology, Women and Child care, Urology and Oncology. This vision has been supported by Dr. Sharma's own commitment towards patient care performed with the utmost compassion, empathy, and humility. It has led to the hospital emerging as a center for one stop solution for delivering affordable and reliable healthcare and has earned Dr. Sharma the title of being the "poor man's doctor."

The Aryavart Hospital in the successful leadership of its exemplar, Dr. Malay Sharma, is destined to reach new heights and fulfill its motto of providing the highest end of new-age healthcare delivery to its patients. Its pro-patient policies themselves serve as a reminder of the remarkable humanitarianism and medical professionalism that Dr. Malay Sharma epitomizes.

The journey of Dr. Malay Sharma is truly inspirational for anyone striving to achieve excellence through ethical and humanitarian means. It underscores the message that perseverance, dedication, and determination inevitably lead to success. With his zeal and devotion to deliver modern and effective healthcare, and a mindset that promotes critical research, outstanding training, and patient welfare, Dr. Malay Sharma at Aryavart Hospital is poised to revolutionize the future of both gastroenterology and healthcare in India.



A NEW WORLD OF WORK

Digital innovations have prompted employers to seek a balance between the human and technological workforces to maximise potential. The second chapter of the INDIA TODAY HR Insights in Chennai was aimed at charting the course towards this modern workplace

By Sonal Khetarpal

Modern workplaces have transformed substantially, led by digital technologies that are changing the way employees work, create and collaborate. The advent of Artificial Intelligence, on the other hand, has prompted employers to realign their talent strategies with technology at the centre of their organisations. This shift is causing substantial changes in job roles and the skills required to fulfil them.

According to the ManpowerGroup's Employment Outlook Survey 2024, India

ranks seventh among nations facing a talent shortage, with 81 per cent of businesses surveyed reporting difficulty in finding skilled employees. It is critical for businesses to maximise their workforce's potential, while maintaining employee well-being.

The second chapter of the 'INDIA TODAY HR Insights: The Future of Work' summit in Chennai on July 5 brought together a diverse array of HR leaders from the automobile, manufacturing and IT sectors, HR service providers, digital companies and more, to deliberate on the workplaces of the future.

▼ MAKING ORGANISATIONS FUTURE-READY: THE PEOPLE FACTOR



Raja Radhakrishnan
President & CHRO,
Ashok Leyland

"Businesses will have to become much more responsible. It is not going to be about profit and growth but about sustainability, where we can create a better and safer future for all of us...Profit and growth will be replaced by people, planet, purpose and prosperity"

TAKEAWAYS

- Businesses are currently in the most difficult phase, as it is a transition phase, wherein they are looking to make humans and technological work together
- Artificial Intelligence will eliminate jobs that are routine, and humans will do jobs that require more thinking, feelings and that cannot be codified

TAKEAWAYS

- Clarity on top work priorities is important to ensure where to put your time and energy
- Ensure all meetings have a clear agenda, as time is of utmost importance
- There needs to be a balance between productivity and employee well-being, with a sharp focus on privacy
- Ensure employees have adequate subject matter knowledge and are continuously engaging with academia, even for entry-level workforce
- There is no one-size-fits-all approach to measure productivity



Dr John Bruce
Dean, Placements & Corporate Affairs, Sathyabama Institute of Science and Technology

▼ EMPOWERING FUTURE-READY WORKFORCES

“In the past three or four years, corporations have moved from generic hiring towards skill-based hiring... not limited to technology roles but also for larger, volume hiring by recruiters”

TAKEAWAYS

- Reskilling the current workforce is the topmost priority for companies
- Companies are ready to offer a differential pay package based on skills

▼ THE PRODUCTIVITY DEBATE: GETTING THE BEST FROM YOUR WORKFORCE



“Everyone wants employees to be at the highest levels of productivity, but it comes at a cost, with increased levels of stress. There is a fine line, and once it is crossed, it turns into distress”

BALAJI ETHIRAJAN
Global CHRO, TVS Supply Chain Solutions Ltd

“People who enjoy their jobs score higher on work-life balance, though they spend the same amount of time as others... Think of business as a game; and strive to make it enjoyable”

ARUN LESLIE GEORGE
President & CHRO, Coromandel International Ltd

“You need to understand where the human stops and the resources begin, and where the resources stop and the human begins...I don't believe in skill development; I believe in capability development”

BHARATHAN PRAHALAD
Vice-President, Human Resources, MSys Technologies

“On certain productivity parameters with regard to people, we may not be as competitive as an European country, but in efficiencies in many other areas, we may be on par with or even better than other countries”

P. PADMAKUMAR
Executive Director, Human Resources, Saint-Gobain India

▼ **CLOSING THE SKILL GAP**



“I think corporates should engage more with colleges and ensure they offer courses that align specifically with what corporates need”

LULU KHANDESHI
CHRO, ManpowerGroup India

“In our industry, skill or skill gap is not the issue.... accurate planning and agile planning is the most critical thing”

SRIRAM V.
CHRO, BankBazaar.com

“To develop talent, we have a one-year programme for freshers that includes a four-month on-campus, two-month internship and six-month on-the-job training”

SHAILEN MERCHANT
Head HR, Chola MS
General Insurance Co. Ltd

“Finding people with the right combination of functional and leadership skills is a struggle in many organisations. The intent and aspiration are to hire individuals with the right combination of skills”

ANJU G. PARVATHY
Vice President, Research & Solutions, Avtar Group

▼ **ALIGNING PEOPLE STRATEGIES AMIDST RAPID GROWTH**



Usha Subramaniam
Country President,
Grundfos Pumps India

“As a leader, you do not always have to be an expert... It is about recognising the experts and ensuring that as a leader, you help them thrive and bring out their full potential”

TAKEAWAYS

➤ As an HR leader, much of the role involves influencing stakeholders and integrating diverse viewpoints to drive business results. However, as a Country President, the focus shifts to addressing each of the business priorities directly

TAKEAWAYS

➤ To manage skill gaps, companies can look internally and build their employees' skills

➤ Industry-academia partnerships are important to ensure employees are well-versed with the skills of the future

➤ It is important to develop plans for

the company's skill requirements, as businesses, especially startups, can grow very fast and regulations can change

➤ Skills involving analytical thinking, creative thinking, resilience, flexibility and digital literacy are going to be the top priority for organisations



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KEY PARAMETERS

College performance rated according to...

- Academic Excellence
- Intake Quality & Governance
- Infrastructure & Living Experience
- Personality and Leadership Development
- Career Progression and Placement

KNOW YOUR COLLEGE

The details available on each college...

- Brief profile
- Rankings in past 6 years
- Courses, seats and fee
- Admission—selection criteria and cut-offs
- Placements—domestic and international
- Faculty—strength, research record and patents granted
- Infra—campus size/labs/library/hostels
- Industry connect—seminars/consultancy projects/competitions
- Global exposure—foreign exchange programmes, tie-ups
- Contact details

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- 6-year results (2018-2023)
- National rankings
- By state
- By city
- Government vs private
- Best emerging colleges



BONUS THE JOBS IN DEMAND...
Positions available, salary information

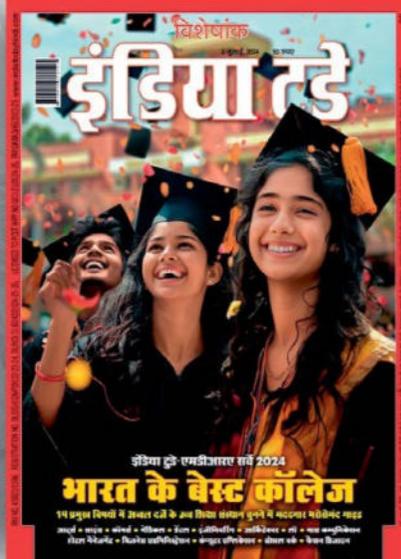
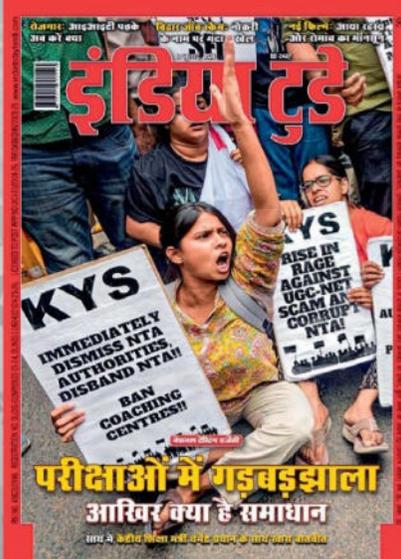


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सबसे भरोसेमंद स्रोतों से, सबसे सटीक जानकारी

सब्सक्राइब करें और पाएं 21% तक की छूट

इंडिया टुडे-एमडीआरए सर्वे 2024

14 प्रमुख विषयों में जम्बल टर्जे के अवधि विशाल संस्थान चुनने में मददगार भरोसेमंद साइड

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

अपनी पसंद के सब्सक्रिप्शन को टिक करें और फॉर्म को इस पते पर भेज दें- वी केअर, लिविंग मीडिया इंडिया लि. सी-9, सेक्टर-10, नोएडा 201301 (भारत)

टिक करें	अवधि	कुल अंक	कवर प्राइस (₹)	ऑफर प्राइस (₹)	डिस्काउंट
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कृपया फॉर्म को ब्लॉक्लेटर 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).....रुपये
 की धनराशि (दिल्ली से बाहर के चेक के लिए ₹ 50 रुपये अतिरिक्त जोड़ें, समान मूल्य के
 चेक मान्य नहीं होंगे) के लिए बनवाया गया है.
 नाम..... पता.....
 शहर..... राज्य..... पिन.....
 मोबाइल..... ईमेल.....



सब्सक्राइब करने के लिए यहां स्कैन करें.

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

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Island Express

YOU CAN NOW REACH Lakshadweep by sea from the mainland in just seven hours! A new high-speed ferry service named 'Parali' was launched in May to connect mainland India to the island, significantly reducing travel time from the customary 13 hours. This modern vessel promises a smoother journey compared to the older, modified cargo ferries in use. The Lakshadweep Islands Tourism Development Authority is also enhancing services and facilities at Kadmat, the primary port for travellers arriving from the mainland, to ensure a more comfortable travel experience. The new service plies between Mangaluru and Lakshadweep, with tickets priced at around Rs 5,000 per person. This initiative is expected to boost tourism to Lakshadweep, an archipelago of 36 islands famed for its pristine beaches, coral reefs, and peaceful environment. ■

Satarupa Paul



SHUTTERSTOCK

Golden Milestone

Bhutan celebrates 50 years of tourism with a range of special events

Since Bhutan's tourism journey began in 1974, the scenic Himalayan kingdom has presented strong examples of keeping overtourism at bay. Its policy of 'high value, low volume' established the foundation of mindful tourism, much before it became a buzzword. Bhutan is the world's only country to implement a \$100 Sustainable Development Fee (SDF) per adult, per night, for all its visitors. For Indians, it's Rs 1,200. These funds are utilised for the upkeep of cultural heritage and for providing free healthcare and education to the Bhutanese.

The idea has always been to generate revenue through tourism by showcasing Bhutan's strengths, without causing harm to the environment. This year marks five decades of that commitment. Bhutan's Department of Tourism launched a campaign on June 2, to celebrate this landmark occasion. The festivities will extend until December 17, Bhutan's National Day.

In August, the country will host its first tourism awards to recognise excellence and innovation. Besides, there will be TedX talks by public figures from Bhutan, who will discuss pertinent tourism-related subjects. A jewellery showcase and fashion show to highlight the craftsmanship are also on the cards. There will also be events at Bhutanese embassies worldwide, besides industry initiatives, including the launch of new itineraries, introduction of a loyalty programme, etc. ■

Geetika Sachdev



Satarupa Paul

A Spiritual Sojourn

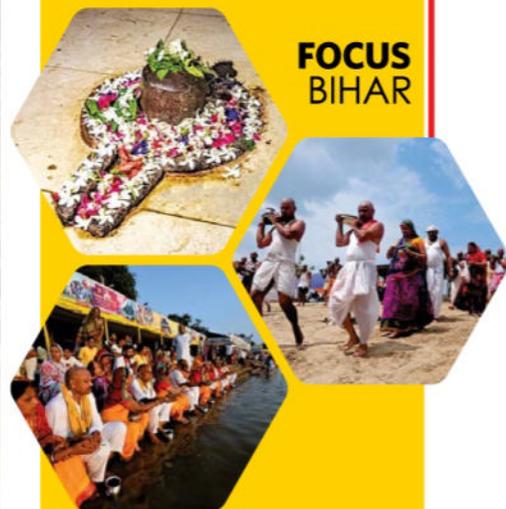
Bihar is an ancient land suffused with the deep aura of spirituality. Besides being the birthplace of Buddhism, it is also home to ancient fairs and rituals associated with Hinduism since time immemorial.

One of the most popular fairs is the annual Shravani Mela which draws thousands of devout to Deoghar in the month of Shraavan. This year, this month-long celebration, said to be one of the world's longest religious fairs, will be observed from 22 July to 19 August. The mela sees lakhs of kanwariyas collect holy water from the Uttarvahini Ganga (north-flowing Ganga) in Sultanganj and walk 105 kilometres to Baidyanath Dham in Deoghar where they offer it to Baba Baidyanath or Lord Shiva. The entire route has an air of celebration about it, with the administration making excellent arrangements for the comfort and safety of the pilgrims. While there is a much-revered and established route between Sultanganj and Deoghar, to deal with the huge influx of devotees, the Government of Bihar has developed two more routes, via

Munger and Baanka.

Sultanganj, the starting point for the Shravani Mela, is situated in the Bhagalpur district, 25 km west of Bhagalpur city on the Ganga's south bank. Pilgrims from all over the world converge on this sacred site to begin their journey to Baidyanath Dham. Situated next to the Ganga in Sultanganj, the Ajgavainath Temple is a deeply revered temple dedicated to Lord Shiva. The northward flow of the Ganga here is considered auspicious, and legend says that one of the great sages of antiquity, Jahnudwelt here. Millions of people visit the ancient Shiva temple in Sultanganj, perched on a hill near the Ganga River.

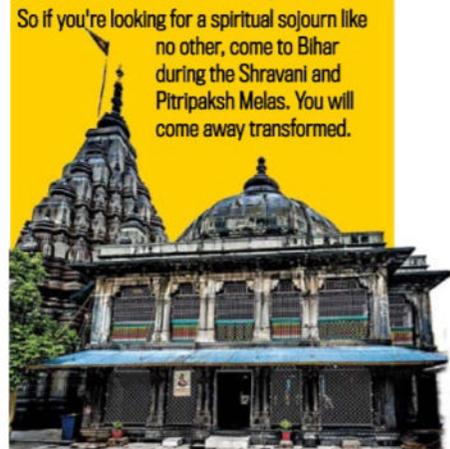
As the devout walk the holy path, carrying sacred Ganga water on their shoulders while wearing their kanwars, the route resounds with cries of "Bol Bam". The human chain of pilgrims clothed in saffron proceeds steadfastly towards their destination. At Baba Dham, the kanwariyas bathe in the Shivaganga to purify themselves before going into the Baba Baidyanath temple, where the Jyotirlingam is offered the holy Ganga water. Other holy spots that are visited here include the Ramniwas Ashram of Saint Balanand Brahmachari, Mohan Mandir of Mohananand Swami, Kailash Pahar Ashram-Jasidih of Swami Hansdev Avadhoot, as well as the Rikhiya Ashram.



Another holy fair to look forward to a little later in the year is the Pitripaksh Mela held in Punpun and Gaya. This year the mela is being held from 17 September to 2 October. Of course, devout Hindus have been travelling to Gaya to pay obeisance to their ancestors since time immemorial. However, the most propitious time to do so is during Pitripaksh, a time of year dedicated to assuaging the departed souls of ancestors, asking for their forgiveness, and ridding oneself of Pitra Dosha (curse of ancestors). During this period rituals like Shraddh, Tarpan, and Pind Daan are performed to release the departed soul from the cycle of birth, life, and death. Such rituals are performed at the Falgu River in Gaya, after offering special prayers at the Vishnupad Temple.

Another holy location to observe Pitripaksh is the Punpun Ghat near Patna, which is significant for its historical and natural beauty, and for its association with the first Pind Daan, or Shraddh, performed in Hindu Dharma. The Vayu and Padma Puranas also mention the Punpun River in connection with Gaya Mahatmya, and interpret the word "punah-punah" (again and again) in a spiritual sense. They say that offering oblations to ancestors in this river removes all sins.

So if you're looking for a spiritual sojourn like no other, come to Bihar during the Shravani and Pitripaksh Melas. You will come away transformed.



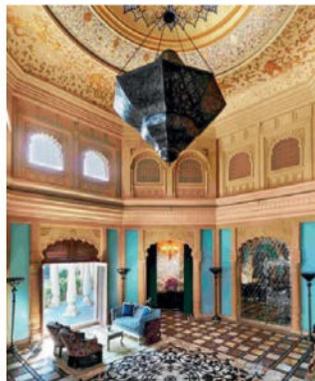
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CHIC STAYS

THE HOTTEST NEW HOTEL OPENINGS IN INDIA



Raffles Jaipur

Elevating the luxury quotient of Jaipur is Raffles' new outpost near the magnificent Amer Fort. The brand's second property in India, after Udaipur, is a modern recreation of a palace. Hand-carved from white marble, it is a testament to Rajasthan's fine craftsmanship. The hotel features 50 opulent rooms and themed luxurious suites.

Doubles from Rs 40,000++; raffles.com/jaipur

Ronil Goa

The first 'JdV by Hyatt' hotel in India and southwest Asia embodies the *joie de vivre* philosophy of the brand. The 135-room boutique resort is located on the Calangute-Baga Road, making it accessible from both the Dabolim and Mopa airports. With tastefully furnished rooms, the hotel invites visitors to experience the susegad way of life with two pools, an on-site DJ host, wellness services, and a variety of dining options. Doubles from Rs 6,086 ++; hyatt.com



MOHSIN TAHHA



Kinwani House, Narendra Nagar

Experience a blend of old-world charm and modern luxury in Kinwani House in Uttarakhand's Narendra Nagar, above Rishikesh and Haridwar. Once the home of a

member of the erstwhile Tehri-Garhwal royal family, it has been painstakingly restored to its original grandeur and opened by the Aalia Collection by JPL Group. This estate has six luxurious suites affording scenic mountain views, besides lush gardens, a conservatory, and a temperature-controlled swimming pool.

Doubles from Rs 37,999++; aaliacollection.com

Geetika Sachdev

JOURNEYS INTO THE PAST

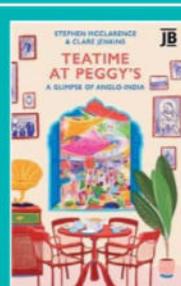
Two books that offer travel inspiration and unique cultural insights



Destination India: Foreign Artists in India 1857-1947
DAG
₹4,500; 175 pages

Published as a collector's edition catalogue for a new exhibition at DAG in Delhi, *Destination India* showcases the works of foreign artists who visited India from the Uprising of 1857 to Independence in 1947, highlighting a late phase of Orientalist art. Unlike earlier artists like William Hodges and the Daniells, who focused on picturesque landscapes

and architecture, these later artists—Charles W. Bartlett, Edwin Lord Weeks, John Griffiths and Mary Anne Blyth among others—were more diverse and interested in depicting everyday life and society. They came from various countries, including Germany, France, Japan and Britain. With a Foreword by Shashi Tharoor and an Introduction by Pheroza Godrej, the book offers a personal and intimate view of India through the eyes of these foreign artists. ■



Teatime at Peggy's: A Glimpse of Anglo-India
By Stephen McClarence & Clare Jenkins
Journey Books
₹9.99; 296 pages

Over 15 years, Stephen McClarence, an award-winning travel writer, and Clare Jenkins, a BBC Radio journalist, embarked on multiple journeys to the railway town of Jhansi in India to document the lives and traditions of its Anglo-Indian community. Their experiences culminated in this book that spotlights two memorable figures: 'Aunty' Peggy, a dedicated community leader and custodian of the European cemetery, and Captain Roy Abbott, the last British landowner in India, known

as 'The Rajah of Jhansi'. Through their stories, the authors provide a warm and humorous portrayal of the Anglo-Indian way of life, which is rapidly disappearing. The book captures the essence of a fading culture framed within the vibrant chaos of 21st-century India. ■

Satarupa Paul

Banswara

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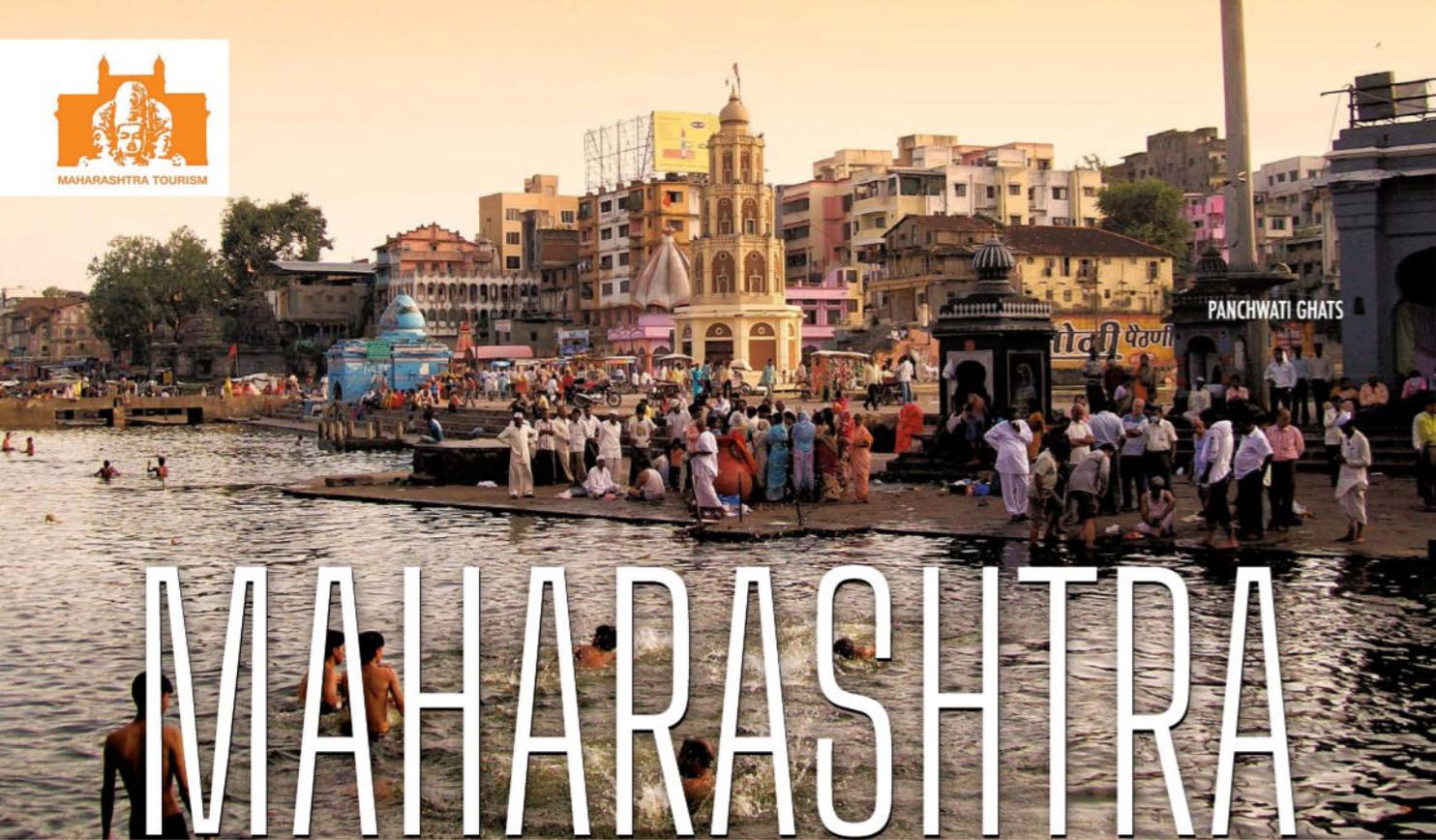


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PANCHWATI GHATS

MAHARASHTRA

THE LAND WHERE THE GODS MEET THEIR DEVOTEES

Maharashtra is not just a land of illustrious temples and holy rivers. It is a place where religion gets simplified as bhakti, enabling the most common of us to experience the kind of divine presence, about which the most exalted ones rave about. Every deity has a presence here, bestowing their benign grace and blessings to the hoi polloi. A journey through the state is nothing short of a pilgrimage.

An ancient adage states that gods reside where they are celebrated. Guided by a hallowed lineage of saints who simplified religion for the common man, Maharashtra has evolved into a place where gods have preferred to rub shoulders with the faithful, enjoy the pampering of their devotees. In Maharashtra, you can still witness the hallowed traditions that have held strong for centuries, spawning countless stories and experiences.

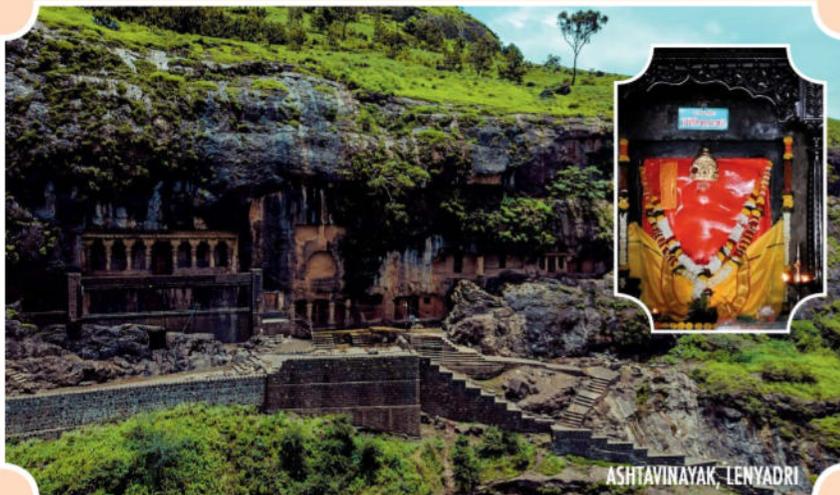
Lord Vitthal and his consort Rukhmai, the presiding deities of Maharashtra, evoke strong emotions. The month of Aashadhi sees Varkaris, devotees who have dedicated their lives to the god, walking and trekking in groups carrying palanquins of saints and singing bhajans called abhangs, to the shrine in **Pandharpur** from across the state in a journey that might take upto 21 days. It is something that needs to be experienced once in a lifetime. It stands out as the ultimate definition of bhakti or devotion.



Tourism is pivotal in realizing PM Narendra Modi's vision of a 5 trillion economy by 2030. Furthermore, it emphasizes the need for green and sustainable tourism, urging collective efforts to make Maharashtra the best global destination. Spiritual tourism is set to be a major growth driver for the development of several temple towns in the state, thanks to government policy support and infrastructure developments. The improvements in infrastructure, such as upgraded roads, flagship trains, and new airports, are expected to attract national and international tourists to these spiritual destinations.

GIRISH MAHAJAN

Minister Of Tourism, Government Of Maharashtra



ASHTAVINAYAK, LENYADRI

Maharashtra plays a defining role in the life of Ram. Panchavati on the banks of the river Godavari, in the present day Nashik, is where Ram stayed before Sita got abducted. The Ramayana circuit would be incomplete without



MAHALAKSHMI MANDIR, KOLHAPUR



GRISHNESHWAR TEMPLE, LEFT SIDE VIEW

a visit to Panchavati and the ancient **Kalaram Mandir** located there.

Close by **Trimbakeshwar** is the site of one of the holiest Jyotirling. The Shivalinga here has three faces representing the triumvirate of Brahma, Vishnu and Maheshwara. A must visit for all Shiva devotees, it is believed that people can rid themselves of Kalasarpa and Pitru doshas or curses afflicting them, by performing pooja here. The holy Godavari originates from the hills surrounding Trimbakeshwar.

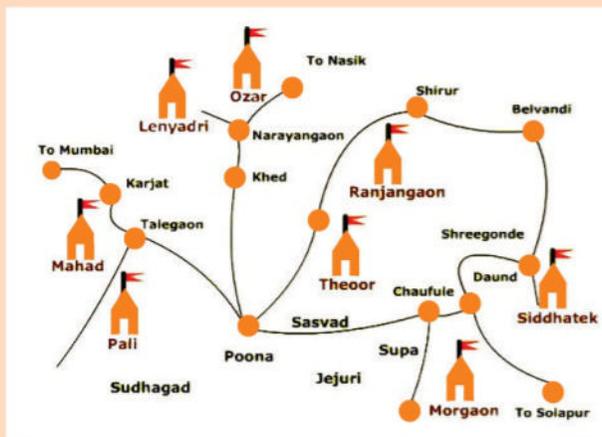
Bhimashankar, near to Pune, hosts another Jyotirlinga. Devotees take a dip in the Bhima river and worship him as Ardhanariswara. The site of his battle and subsequent victory over Tripurasura, the river is believed to have its origins from the lord's sweat. Hence, bathing in it, rids one of their sins.

Grishneshwar, nearer to Chhatrapati Sambhaji Nagar, brings up the last of the Jyotirlingas. However, it is believed that having darshan here bestows one of the blessings of all the Jyotirlingas.

The pilgrimage to the Shivakshetras in Maharashtra is complete only with a visit to the ancient temples of **Aundha Naganath**, believed to be constructed by Yudhisthira and the legendary Parli Vajjnath, where the Shivalinga has great healing powers. At Jejuri, Shiva transforms into a local deity to enjoy the devotion of the faithful. Khandoba is a clan god for many Maharashtrian castes and communities, beloved as a god who grants wishes.

Shri Jyotiba Temple on the hills at Wadi Ratnagiri near Kolhapur celebrates the hindu triumvirate of Bramha, Vishnu, Mahesh who incarnated together as the deity Jyotiba to destroyed the evil Ratnasura.

With celebrations spanning across Eleven days, the Ganesha Festival erupts into a huge revelry across the state. It is a great time to visit the state to witness the perfect blend of fervor, pomp, pageantry and public bonhomie. The



entire state host its favorite deity across households and public sarvajanik pandals. It is no wonder then that the most auspicious temples of Ganesh are present in the state. The famed **Ashtavinayak Pilgrimage** takes one through the districts of Raigad, Pune and Ahmednagar. Covering eight temples in 3 days and 2 nights, it starts at the temple of **Morgaon**, the abode of Lord Mayureshwar in Pune District and ends there. The next stop is at **Siddhatek** in Ahmednagar.

Present as Siddhivinayak, he bestows spiritual powers to his devotees. The journey next winds its way to **Pali** in Raigad District. Lording over it as Ballaleshwar, the morning rays of the sun pay their homage to the idol. The next shrine is 38kms away in Mahad. The Varadvinayak fulfills the wishes of the devotees who chant his name. The Nandadeep that fills the temple by its glow, adds lustre to his sentient presence.

Theur in Pune District houses Chintamani, promising peace and freedom from worries. The next stop is at **Lenyadri**. Finding mention in the Ganesha Purana, the entire temple is carved out of a single stone. The Girijatmaja faces the east and has his trunk turned to the left. At **Ozar**, the Vighneshwar Vinayak presides over as the destroyer of the demon Vighneshwar. **Ranjangaon** bring up the rear of this spiritual journey. The Mahaganapati here is believed to have aided his father in combating and killing the evil Tripurasura. The rays of the sun fall on the idol here, adding to his aura.

Apart from these Mumbai boasts of the much revered **Siddhivinayak Temple**, while Pune claims its quota of spirituality with the **DagaduSheth Halwai Mandir**. Both of them are considered to be amongst the richest temples of India. Moving a bit down south, on the shores of the Arabian sea, the svayambhu idol of Ganesha rules over **Ganpatipule**, firmly nailing its place on the spiritual map of Maharashtra.

Maharashtra is home to **Shakti-peeths** too. The manifestation of power from which creation ensures, it is always celebrated in the form of the mother. The **Mahalakshmi Temple** at Kolhapur, The **Renuka Devi Temple** at Mahurgad, The **Bhavani Temple** in Tuljapur and the **Saptashrungi Temple** at Wani make up this cluster.

A spiritual journey across Maharashtra will not be complete without paying homage to the religious gurus who have instilled the bhakti movement in the state. Foremost amongst them is Sant Dnyaneshwar, a 13th-century Indian Marathi saint, poet, philosopher and yogi. His Dnyaneshwari, a commentary on the Bhagavad Gita and Amrutanubhav are the oldest surviving literary works in the Marathi language.

He undertook samadhi at **Alandi** in 1296 by entombing himself in an underground chamber. **Akkalkot** is a Holy place of ShriSwami Samarth Maharaj, believed to be the reincarnation of Lord Dattatraya. The Samadhi of this Saint is worshipped by the devotees. **Shegaon** houses the samadhi of the revered spiritual teacher Shri Gajanan Maharaj. The temple complex has emerged as an important pilgrimage place. Shirdi is home to Shri Sai Baba's samadhi mandir. Every day, over 60,000 tourists and devotees from all faiths and religions throng to the temple.

We invite you to embark on pilgrimage across Maharashtra. It could well turn out to be the journey of self-discovery!

STARRY NIGHTS

High in the Himalayas, when the night skies are clear, the heavens can feel close enough to touch. The Uttarakhand Tourism Development Board, in association with Starscapes, has launched 'Nakshatra Sabha', a year-long campaign devoted exclusively to promoting astrotourism in the state. The first event, held on the grounds of George Everest House in Mussoorie in early June, saw expert talks, 3D shows and, of course, lots of stargazing. Promoting niche tourism activities like astrotourism is Uttarakhand's way to combat overtourism and reduce pressure on popular hill stations, since the best stargazing is done in remote 'dark sky' locations, and which the Nakshatra Sabha campaign is also identifying and mapping. The next Nakshatra Sabha is slated to be held from October 4-6 in Jageshwar. Happy stargazing! ■





UTTARAKHAND TOURISM POLICY 2023-30

A Vision for Sustainable Growth and International Appeal

Uttarakhand is venturing on a transformative path with the unveiling of its Tourism Policy 2023-30. This ambitious approach, guided by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chief Minister Pushkar Singh Dhami, aims to harness Uttarakhand's myriad possibilities while ensuring sustainable development and inclusive growth. This policy sets the stage for Uttarakhand to become a destination that offers a vast collection of authentic experiences.

VISIONARY LEADERSHIP AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Following the vision of PM Narendra Modi, CM Pushkar Singh Dhami is transforming Uttarakhand's tourism sector. The policy emphasizes the empowerment of all stakeholders, ensuring that the benefits of tourism development are widely shared. By aligning the objectives and interests of different stakeholders, the policy provides a cohesive framework for holistic tourism growth, moving beyond the conventional notion of Uttarakhand as merely a spiritual and wellness destination.

The Uttarakhand Tourism Policy 2023-30 strives to unlock the state's latent potential, promoting a blend of legacy, theology, wilderness, nature, health, and wellness tourism. This comprehensive approach

seeks to offer memorable experiences for every kind of visitor and establish Uttarakhand as an all-weather destination. Winter and Alpine tourism are emphasized to attract tourists year-round.

PRESERVING ENVIRONMENTAL AND CULTURAL HERITAGE

Sustainability is a pivotal priority of the policy, with measures to maintain Uttarakhand's environmental and cultural assets. The policy highlights the preservation of natural resources, wilderness, and intangible heritage. It also includes the revitalization of lost natural and cultural assets, ensuring the state remains a secure and stunning destination for the future.

In the digital age, the policy emphasizes the use of technology to meet dynamic

visitor expectations. This involves leveraging online platforms for advertising, bookings, and information dissemination, enhancing tourists' overall experience from the comfort of their homes.

ENCOURAGING PRIVATE SECTOR INVESTMENT

The policy facilitates private sector investment in hospitality and tourism projects, seeking to reduce government involvement in areas where private participation can be more effective. Streamlined approval processes will promote ease of doing business, stimulating innovation and growth.

To achieve balanced regional development, the policy introduces the "Hub and Spoke" model, addressing carrying capacity issues in popular destinations. Improvements in basic amenities and infrastructure are designed to enhance the visitor experience and ensure resilience to natural disasters. The ambitious goals of the Uttarakhand Tourism Policy 2023-30 include contributing USD 10 billion annually to the state's economy and attracting substantial private investments. By generating job opportunities and focusing on skill development and inclusivity, the policy aims to increase the average length of stay and boost foreign tourist visits.

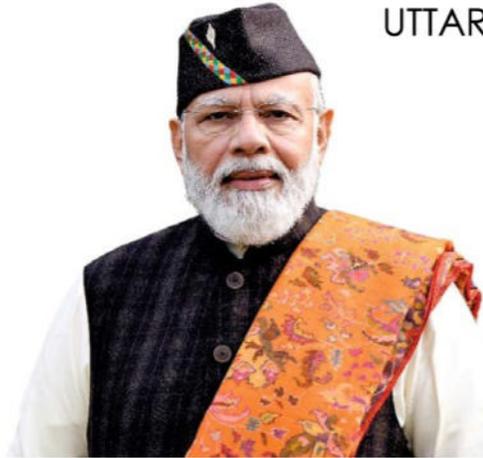
EMBRACING UTTARAKHAND'S NATURAL AND CULTURAL WEALTH

Uttarakhand, also known as Devbhoomi or "Land of the Gods," is renowned for its majestic Himalayan landscapes, sacred pilgrimage sites, and rich cultural heritage. The state offers a remarkable blend of untouched beauty, adventure, spirituality, and traditional hospitality, making it an ideal destination for visitors seeking diverse experiences.

THE MANASKHAND EXPRESS: A SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

In an innovative step by the CM Dharami-led government to highlight Uttarakhand's cultural and spiritual significance, the Indian Railways has introduced the Manaskhand Express-Bharat Gaurav Tourist Train. This train, operated by the Indian Railway Catering and Tourism Corporation (IRCTC) in collaboration with the Uttarakhand Tourism Development Board, offers a curated journey through the Kumaon region, also known as Manaskhand in ancient Indian scriptures.

The inaugural voyage of the Manaskhand Express began from Pune on April 22, 2024, carrying 280 enthusiastic tourists. The train, adorned with depictions of Uttarakhand's rich heritage, travels to destinations including Nainital, Bhimtal, Almora, Chaukori, Puragiri Temple, and more. The travel package includes comfortable train journeys, hotel stays, homestays, guided tours, meals, and travel insurance. Upon arriving at



“ I congratulate the Uttarakhand government on the remarkable progress achieved in the last few years. This has been made possible by sustained policy push and focus on key sectors such as tourism and renewable energy. Alongside, the state has made significant strides in infrastructure development, setting new benchmark for sustainable growth. Uttarakhand's commitment to harnessing its natural resources and promoting tourism has not only bolstered its economy but also showcased its potential on the global stage. I applaud the state's dedication to inclusive development and look forward to its continued success in the years ahead.

– **Shri Narendra Modi**, Prime Minister, Government of India

Tanakpur Railway Station, tourists are welcomed in traditional Indian style with aarti, tikka, and flower petals. The journey includes visits to various temples, scenic spots, and cultural sites, providing a comprehensive experience of Uttarakhand's lesser-known treasures. The train's pantry car serves a variety of dishes, including Uttarakhandi cuisine, enriching the cultural immersion for tourists.

TEHRI: TRANSFORMING INTO A PRIME WEDDING DESTINATION AND ADVENTURE HUB

The scenic Tehri district in Uttarakhand is undergoing a transformative journey to emerge as a premier destination for weddings and adventure sports. With strategic development initiatives and the enthusiastic support of stakeholders, Tehri is poised to attract couples seeking a unique and memorable location for their special day.

A notable highlight is the evolution of Tehri as a tent city. This enterprise, functioning on a Public-Private-Partnership (PPP) model, strives to provide an immaculate and close-knit

wedding experience. The tranquil setting of Tehri Lake, complemented by lavish tent and contemporary conveniences, pledges to create special memories for wedding receptions. The Uttarakhand government's emphasis on fostering Tehri as a wedding destination aligns with PM Narendra Modi's special appeal to promote domestic tourism by means of destination weddings. This endeavour is a component of wider campaign to maintain the financial advantage of such occasions within India, thus supporting local residents and enterprises.

A chopper services to Triyuginarayan temple will soon be introduced to improve Tehri's charm and appeal. This service will cater to visitors, especially couples desiring to get married at this holy temple, traditionally considered the venue of Lord Shiva and Parvati's marriage. After the marriage rituals, the wedding celebrations can continue in the picturesque surroundings of Tehri, offering a seamless combination of spirituality and festivity.



OM PARVAT: THE SACRED MOUNTAIN

Located in the Pithoragarh district of Uttarakhand, Om Parvat is a revered mountain known for its unique rock formation that resembles the sacred Hindu symbol 'Om'. This natural wonder is considered holy by both Hindus and Buddhists and is believed to be the abode of Lord Shiva. Pilgrims visiting Om Parvat as part of the Kailash Mansarovar Yatra experience spiritual solace and a deep connection to their faith. The peak's remarkable symbol, visible from Nabidhang Camp, is a testament to the area's mystical charm and spiritual significance. Om Parvat's growing popularity among devotees worldwide underscores its importance as a pilgrimage site and a symbol of nature's sacred artistry.

STRENGTHENING TOURISM AND LOCAL ECONOMY: DEEN DAYAL UPADHYAYA HOMESTAY SCHEME

The Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Griha Awaas Vikas Yojana is a key initiative undertaken by the Uttarakhand government to enhance tourism infrastructure and support local economies. This scheme aims to offer hygienic, affordable lodging while providing a memorable cultural experience for visitors. The main objective is to

STARGAZING: CELESTIAL WONDERS IN UTTARAKHAND

Uttarakhand's clear night skies and minimal light pollution make it an excellent location for stargazing. Numerous places across the state offer spectacular views of star-studded skies, creating unforgettable experiences for astronomy enthusiasts and nature lovers. Some of these spots include:

- Mukteshwar: A small town known for its stunning night skies, attracting astrophotographers and stargazers.
- Deoria Tal in Ukhimath: A serene lake with a backdrop of Himalayan peaks, perfect for night camping and stargazing.
- Majkhali in Ranikhet: Known for its scenic landscapes and zero light pollution, Majkhali is ideal for stargazing.
- Kedarkantha in Uttarkashi: The Kedarkantha trek, renowned as a winter trek, offers clear stargazing spots.
- George Everest Peak in Mussoorie: Provides panoramic views of Dehradun city and the Milky Way on clear nights.
- Munsiari in Pithoragarh: This Himalayan town offers dark skies and breathtaking views of the Panchachuli Peaks.



Under the able leadership of PM Narendra Modi, Uttarakhand is seeing transformative growth over the course of time. The undertaking of state-of-the-art ropeway projects and advancements in railways, roadways, and air connectivity is deemed to revolutionise travel and tourism in Uttarakhand. These endeavours not only assure eco-friendly and efficient conveyance but also strengthen our regional economy and generate new prospects for our locals. Uttarakhand's impressive mix of spiritual, adventure, and culture experience makes it a preferred destination for visitors from around the globe. We remain committed to sustainable development, conserving our natural and cultural legacy while making way for thriving tomorrow.

— **Pushkar Singh Dhani,**
Chief Minister, Uttarakhand

foster an authentic experience of the state for both Indian and global travelers. By staying in local homes, visitors get the opportunity to immerse themselves in the region's rich culture, customs, and cuisine. This not only enhances the traveler experience but also helps preserve and promote the regional heritage.

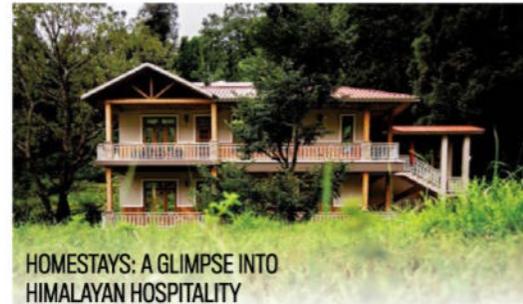
A significant aspect of the scheme is the financial assistance provided to homeowners who wish to convert their properties into homestays. For houses in hill regions, the government offers a capital subsidy of 33% or up to Rs 10 lakh, whichever is higher. Additionally, there is an interest subsidy for the first five years, amounting to 50% of the interest or Rs 1.50 lakh per year, whichever is lower. In the plains, the capital subsidy is 25% or up to

Rs 7.50 lakh, with an interest subsidy of up to Rs 1 lakh per year for the first five years.

The scheme also provides support beyond financial aid, including exemption from the State Goods and Services Tax (SGST) for the first three years and hospitality training for homestay operators. There is also a provision for reimbursing the interest on loans up to Rs 30 lakh for necessary renovations and new constructions. Notably, no land conversion is required for upgrading buildings and constructing new washrooms, with a limit of Rs 2 lakh.

Eligibility standards ensure quality and authenticity. The homeowners must reside in the same establishment with their family and can offer 1 to 6 rooms for travelers. The scheme is implemented statewide, except in municipal areas, and registration under the Homestay Scheme is mandatory.

The broader objectives of the scheme include improving the financial condition of locals by providing self-employment opportunities, familiarizing travelers with Uttarakhand's culture, cuisine, and heritage, and generating local employment.



HOMESTAYS: A GLIMPSE INTO HIMALAYAN HOSPITALITY

Staying in a homestay is one of the best ways to experience the Himalayan hospitality of Uttarakhand. Homestays offer budget-friendly accommodation and services provided by local households in picturesque settings. The residents of Uttarakhand are known for their warmth and hospitality, following the age-old Vedic practice of "Atithi Devo Bhava" meaning "Guests are God".

Homestays are available across several districts in Uttarakhand, offering guests the opportunity to explore rustic locations, enjoy local food, and discover hidden gems with the help of local hosts. Options range from traditional wooden havelis and rustic cottages to modern homes.

#ExploreUttarakhand



@DIPR_UK

HOUSE OF HIMALAYAS

ELEVATING UTTARAKHAND'S ORGANIC HERITAGE AND EMPOWERING WOMEN ENTREPRENEURS



In a groundbreaking move to promote sustainable development and empower local communities, the House of Himalayas was launched by the Honourable Prime Minister, Shri Narendra Modi, on December 8th, 2023. This visionary initiative aims to bolster Himalayan livelihoods, with a particular focus on cultivating women entrepreneurs and fostering an entrepreneurial spirit within the state of Uttarakhand.

A NEW IDENTITY FOR UTTARAKHAND'S ORGANIC TREASURES

Uttarakhand is blessed with a treasure trove of organic products that are not only nutritionally rich but also have a minimal chemical footprint. Despite their exceptional quality, many consumers remain unaware of these hidden gems. To bridge this gap, various state government departments launched brands such as Hilans, HIMADRI, Himanya, Havepure, Gramyashree, and Organic Uttarakhand. These brands aim to increase sales of products developed by individual self-help groups (SHGs), artisans, entrepreneurs, and community-based organizations, helping them achieve self-sufficiency.

Due to limited access to a broader customer base, lack of quality assurance, insufficient guidance on business operations, and significant overlap in product offerings among these mini-brands (created by the departments), these smaller initiatives did not achieve the anticipated success.

THE UMBRELLA BRAND: HOUSE OF HIMALAYAS

The House of Himalayas serves as an umbrella brand for all products made in Uttarakhand, embodying the spirit of 'Vocal for Local' and

WHAT SETS HOUSE OF HIMALAYAS APART?

PREMIUM QUALITY

The House of Himalayas guarantees uncompromising quality and superior craftsmanship, distinguishing its products from mass-produced alternatives.

AUTHENTICITY GUARANTEE

Emphasizing traditional techniques, these products offer a genuine experience that generic items cannot replicate.

EMBRACING DIVERSITY

The brand celebrates the rich diversity of the Himalayan region, showcasing a tapestry of cultures, traditions, and perspectives.

TRANSPARENT SOURCING

Complete transparency in material sourcing and production processes ensures consumer trust in the integrity of the products.

SUSTAINABILITY FOCUS

Prioritizing sustainable sourcing and production practices, the brand appeals to consumers who value ethical consumption.

extending it to 'Local for Global.' By leveraging existing brands, the House of Himalayas aims to enhance sales, improve product quality, and elevate branding and packaging. This initiative is set to create a line of premium products for both national and international markets, ensuring that Uttarakhand's local treasures reach a global audience.

KEY IMPACTS AND VISION

The House of Himalayas aligns with the Honourable Prime Minister's vision of "Vocal for Local, Local to Global," targeting the transformation of 500,000 households and 50,000 SHGs into economically independent entities by 2030. Beyond quantitative goals, the brand aims to achieve several qualitative impacts:

- Boosting the state's Gross Domestic Product (GDP).
- Strengthening women's livelihoods, particularly in rural areas.
- Promoting a circular economy.
- Contributing to Sustainable Development Goals.
- Uplifting the socio-economic situation of rural families by eradicating multi-dimensional poverty.
- Providing access to quality and decent jobs through the brand's supply chain across the state.

PREMIUM PRODUCT PORTFOLIO

The House of Himalayas offers a diverse range of premium, location-specific products from across Uttarakhand, including:

PULSES: Munsyari Rajma, Gahat Dal, Chakrata Rajma, and more.

MILLETS: Barnyard Millet, Finger Millet, Amaranthus, etc.

BAKERY: Millet-based bakery products.

PERSONAL CARE: Chyura oil soaps

HANDICRAFTS: Exquisite handmade items reflecting the rich cultural heritage of Uttarakhand.

CHASING THE MONSOON

**FROM MUNNAR TO KOCHI AND ONWARDS TO WAYANAD,
MAKING THE MOST OF KERALA'S WET SEASON**

Anurag Mallick & Priya Ganapathy

Green is the colour of life, renewal, energy and nature. Of all the myriad hues, it is the most soothing colour to the human eye. And no place offers a meditative calm with a magical healing touch as Kerala in the rains. As the southwest monsoon sweeps up the Western Ghats and across the country, it drenches the vegetation, cloaking it in unimaginable shades of green. According to Ayurveda, it is the best season for replenishment and rejuvenation for nature and man. Flying into Kochi, the rivers ran full, the waters turbid and olive, snaking through dense jade tapestry. Everywhere, a magical world of upside-down

landscapes was reflected in streams, backwaters and puddles. In the open grounds, enthusiastic youngsters played football, unmindful of the slush and tumbles. Dove-grey clouds loomed over the hills and rumbled their delicate sound of thunder. What better place to start our monsoon sojourn than the highlands of Munnar? Fed by recent rains, the waterfalls en route—Cheeyaparra, Vallara and Kallar—roared as gushing torrents. Munnar, named after the 'moonu aaru' or three rivers that meet here, is a busy town and we slipped past Signal Point and disappearing phone networks to the vast open tea estates of Devikulam.



(From right clockwise) Lockhart Bungalow, Munnar; Beach Gate Bungalows in Fort Kochi; a sumptuous lunch spread at Lockhart

At Lockhart Bungalow, a three-room British tea plantation bungalow wrapped by a pristine lawn, 1,500 acres seemed a large enough tract to lose oneself in. Colonial-era drawings of local flora and avifauna lined the walls. It felt a lot like home, for the only mealtime discussion was about what the next meal would be. Chef Arockyadoss would appear like a genie out of a tea kettle and gently announce that the consommé of the day would be Roast Cauliflower and Corn Bisque, or that luncheon featured Black Pepper Chicken Railway Curry. Jaisingh, our liveried butler, would arrange meals in the quaint dining room prettied by painted crockery, or a lovely English breakfast on the lawns, weather permitting. We were living the enchanted life of a planter on furlough...even the weather was quite sombre and English. It all made sense except for one bewildering thing—what sort of a Malayali name was Jaisingh? “Sir, I’m a local from Munnar. I was delivered by a Marwari doctor, who gave the name Jaisingh!” And then everything clicked back into place.

Manager Nizam suggested a 4-km plantation hike to acquaint us with the planters’ life. Leech guards were strapped on as a precautionary measure, and it merited an introduction to local leech varieties—*kolay atta* (pond leech), *nool atta* (thread leech) and the gargantuan *aney atta* (elephant leech). The tea plantation stretched for miles and, ironically, one needed to watch out for the tinier creatures. The scourge of these hills, Arikomban, a rogue tusker who loved rice (*ari* in Malayalam), raided rice shops and killed 17 people, was relocated to Periyar last year. His replacement, Chakka Komban, loved jackfruit (*chakka*) while Padayappa, the long-tusked star named after the Rajinikanth movie, was not really harmful, but just ate his fill as he ambled from village to village. Elephants were a recurrent theme in these hills. Craig Lockhart, the estate we were exploring, was





Azerbaijan: The Hidden Gem waiting to be discovered by Indian Travellers

Azerbaijan, the 'Land of Fire,' is a captivating country at the crossroads of Europe and Asia. As part of the ancient Silk Route, it blends cultures seamlessly, offering travellers architectural marvels and rich traditions.

Start in **Baku**, where futuristic Flame Towers and historic sites like Icherisheher's Maiden Tower and Palace of the Shirvanshahs coexist. Enjoy views from Seaside Boulevard and Highland Park, and stroll along Baku Boulevard for charming tea houses, souvenir shops, and Azerbaijani cuisine. The Carpet Museum and Heydar Aliyev Center showcase the nation's rich heritage and modern spirit.

A short drive from **Baku**, **Gobustan National Park** features ancient petroglyphs and mud-volcanoes, offering a time capsule of human history.

In the Greater Caucasus foothills, **Sheki** boasts old-world charm. Visit Sheki Khan's Palace with its stained-glass windows and frescoes, and explore caravanserais and vibrant markets.

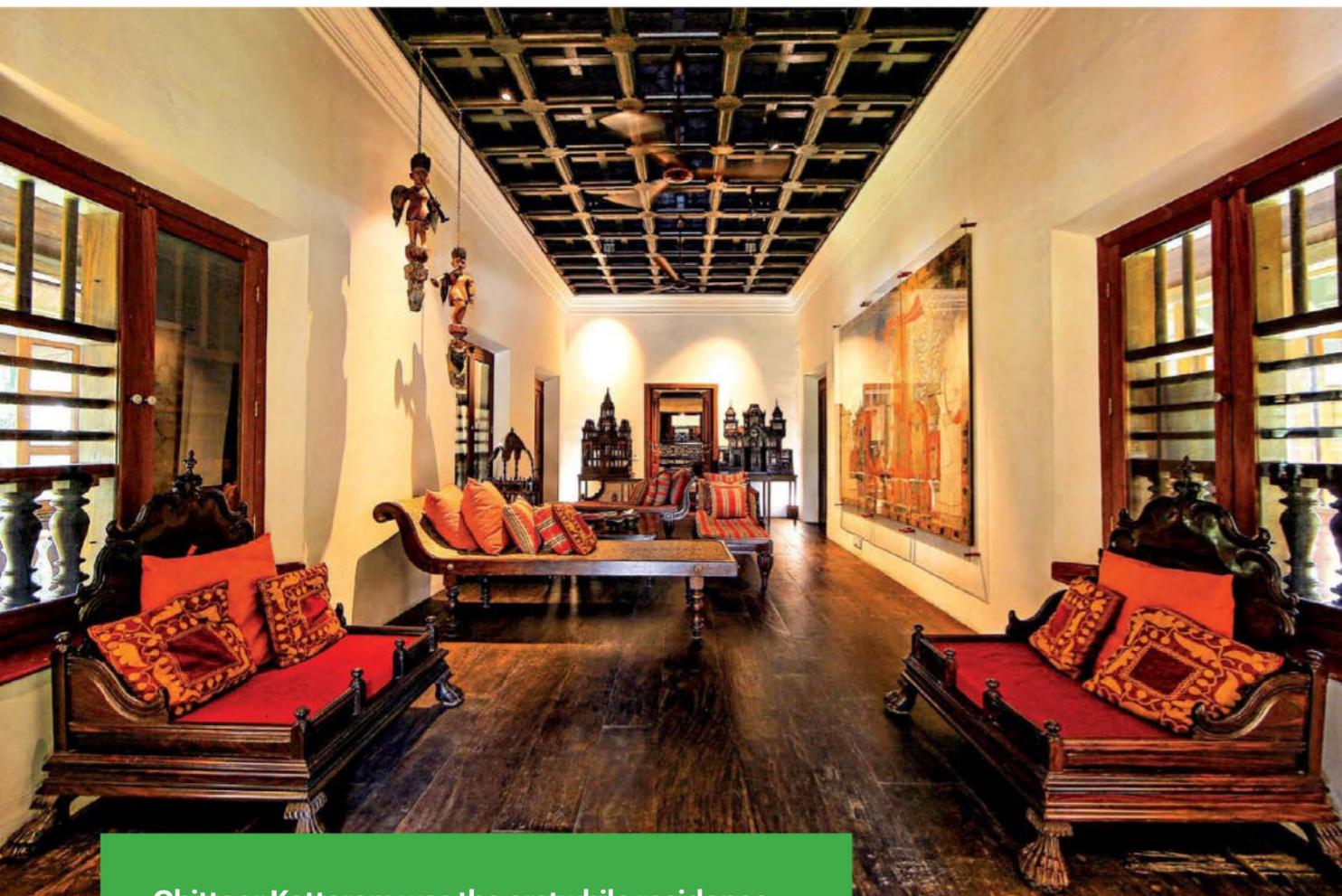
Head north to Guba and **Gusar** for stunning peaks, traditional villages, and the Shahdag Mountain Resort for skiing and winter sports. These regions offer excellent hiking and ecotourism opportunities.

Gabala's lush forests, lakes, and mountains make it a paradise for adventure enthusiasts. Activities include hiking, skiing, and zip-lining. The Tufandag Mountain Resort offers winter sports, and Nohur Lake provides a tranquil retreat.

In Azerbaijani experience is incomplete without food. Savour plov, dolma, kebabs, pakhlava, and shekerbura, and enjoy Azerbaijani tea with jams. Try the unique pomegranate wine.

Azerbaijan Airlines operates direct flights from Delhi and Mumbai to Baku. Indigo, Flydubai, and other airlines offer convenient routes. Indian travellers can easily secure a visa online for \$25.





Chittoor Kottaram was the erstwhile residence of the Maharaja of Cochin whenever he visited the Chittoor Krishna Temple. It's been renovated by the Helen Hamlyn Trust with museum-grade antiques and ceiling-to-floor artworks

named Anaikadavu Estate because it was a haunt for pachyderms. Anaimudi, the highest peak in South India, was tagged after its resemblance to an elephant's head.

Chokramudi towered high at 7,200 ft, apparently resembling Lord Shiva's head. While hikes to Chokramudi and Letchmi Hills in Tata Tea's plantation through grassland and shola forests were not suited for the rains because of the slippery trails, there was plenty else to do. Lockhart was the first tea factory built by the British in 1936 and one of

the oldest orthodox tea manufacturing facilities in India. Our romantic notions of an English planter called 'Craig Lockhart' were dashed as we learnt that the name was linked to Munnar's cool climes. Craig is Scottish for stone and the place was so cold, it 'locks your heart'. Temperatures in winter can plummet to a frosty -5°C , with only a hot cuppa to revive you. A guided tour of Lockhart Tea Factory revealed how orthodox tea is made, ending in a tea-tasting session.

The tea bushes and adjoining forests

are perfect for the nocturnal pastime of 'herping'. No, nothing venerable...it's derived from herpetology and entails searching for amphibians and reptiles. Nearly 40 frog and 30 reptile species have been recorded in Munnar. Guided by Senthil Kumar of Kestrel Adventures, we used torches to scout for frogs on trees and branches! A Beddome's Bush Frog lay perfectly camouflaged on an embankment. The call of the Mewing Night Frog was feline, hence its scientific name *Nyctibatrachus poocha* (*poocha* is Malayalam for cat). The next morning, a slight drizzle stirred the birds into frenzied activity as we spotted the endemic Palani Hills Laughingthrush, Grey-headed Canary Flycatcher, Scimitar Babbler and the rare endemic Dusky Palm Squirrel in the garden.



DRIVE GREEN

Love road trips but worried about tailpipe emissions hurting the environment? We have the perfect solution for eco-conscious travellers

Electric vehicles are increasingly figuring in the shortlist of car buyers in India and rightly so, considering the lower running costs and zero localised tailpipe emissions associated with them. A common misconception is that EVs are primarily for urban use and those who love their road trips often look the other way citing range and restrictive charging infrastructure as deterrents. The reality though, couldn't be more different. Munnar in Kerala, a popular road trip destination, is within a 200km radius of major cities in the region. An electric vehicle like the MG ZS EV which does 461km* on a single charge can easily handle a weekend trip to this monsoon-draped paradise. It fits perfectly into the world of those making a conscious effort to be kinder to the environment and protect the natural beauty of tourist hotspots like Munnar by eliminating tailpipe emissions.

Another myth is that EVs are significantly more expensive to buy than their internal combustion engine (ICE) counterparts and one has to compromise on space and features as well. The MG ZS EV is at par with ICE alternative in terms of size and price. That means it has ample space in the cabin for its occupants and their luggage, and promises significantly lower running costs, over five times lower than a comparable petrol vehicle. Additionally, thanks to the smooth all-electric powertrain the refinement offered by an EV is impossible to match for fossil fuel powered alternatives and the instantaneous torque ensures unparalleled performance, a boon on the winding roads leading up

to hill stations like Munnar. With the Kinetic Energy Recovery System (KERS) toggle letting the driver choose from three levels of intensity, a downhill drive doesn't just conserve charge but the energy recovered via regenerative braking helps enhance overall range. In terms of features, electric offerings like the MG ZS EV ensure a long list of comfort and convenience features. Bolstered by a comprehensive safety net of Advanced Driver Assistance Systems (ADAS), this tech-enabled army of sorts keeps potential risks at bay, protecting you and your loved ones from potential hazards. Premium interiors complemented by tech-rich features like the large infotainment touchscreen and digital driver's display supported by advanced connectivity and voice command features ensure a seamless experience, while the panoramic sunroof enables passengers to take in breathtaking landscapes. And if distances longer than the 461km* range on offer are a cause for concern, then

those worries should be put to rest given the extensive public charging network already in place. JSW MG Motor India is also working tirelessly to expand charging support thanks to tie-ups with leading service providers in India making long road trips worry-free.

Making the switch to an EV isn't just a way to reduce running costs, but also a bold statement of one's efforts towards being easier on nature, helping preserve the natural beauty of our incredible country.



7kW AC home charging and 50kW DC fast charging support keep range anxiety at bay. MG ZS EV offers a premium in-cabin experience



Blind Spot Detection, part of the ADAS suite, enables enhanced safety for occupants



* certified range

This was a historic nook where the first tea plantations came up in Munnar. John Daniel Munro, British Resident of Travancore, leased vast tracts of land in the Kannan Devan Hills from the Raja of Poonjar and formed the North Travancore Land Planting & Agricultural Society in 1879. The High Ranges of Travancore attracted pioneering planters like A.H. Sharp, Henry Gribble Turner and A.W. Turner. Baron George Otto Von Rosenburg of Dresden started Manale division while his son Baron John Michael added a tennis court! Harrisons Malayalam has leased Lockhart Bungalow to CGH Earth and plans are afoot to hand over the historic Manale Bungalow as well. As forests were cleared for tea, the British set up a hydroelectric project, monorail, ropeway and railways. The changing topography suffered immensely during the great flood of 1924; the centenary celebrations in 2024 hope to raise awareness about the region's fragile ecology.



At Lockhart Bungalow, a three-room British tea plantation bungalow wrapped by a pristine lawn, 1,500 acres seemed a large enough tract to lose oneself in



Chittoor Kottaram looks onto the backwaters



Polo Forest

A Rendezvous With Nature

Just 160 km away from Ahmedabad, Polo Forest is a tranquil getaway for soaking in nature and refreshing your soul. With the soft hum of the flowing Harnav river, birds chirping on flat-leaved deciduous trees, ample trekking and hiking sites, Polo Forest is every nature lover's dream come true. Also worth a visit are several Hindu and Jain temples, with several historical sites nearby. Escape to this beautiful sanctuary and feel Nature's embrace.

Activities

- Nature Walk
- Trekking
- Bird Watching
- Exploring
- Excursion

How to Reach

38 km
from Idar

66 km
from Himmatnagar

160 km
from Ahmedabad



Toll Free number - 1800 203 1111 | www.gujarattourism.com

Disclaimer: The details and pictures contained here are for information and could be indicative. Some of the activities listed may be unavailable due to seasonal and technical reasons.

Beautiful Hills & Rivers | Rich Heritage & Religious Sites | Packed with Adventure



FACT FILE

GETTING THERE

Fly to Cochin International Airport at Nedumbassery and drive 3.5–4 hrs to Munnar, 115 km away

From Kochi, drive 238 km to Wayanad or fly to Kozhikode for the 62 km/2-hr drive to Lakkidi on the eastern flank of Wayanad

DO

Lockhart Tea Factory

8 am–5 pm, Entry: ₹250/head

Srishti Centre for the Differently Aabled, Munnar

Handmade eco-paper, hand dyed fabric

9 am–5 pm, Entry: ₹60

Ph 04868-255398, 9497473397

www.srishti-trust.org

Herping/Birding Trails

Munnar/Wayanad

STAY

Lockhart Bungalow

Harrisons Malayalam Estate, Devikulam

Rs 21,192 + taxes

Chittoor Kottaram

Near Chittoor Krishna Temple

₹28,813 + taxes

Beach Gate Bungalows

Fort Kochi

₹18,008 + taxes

Wayanad Wild

Lakkidi, Wayanad

Tariff ₹9,336 upwards + taxes

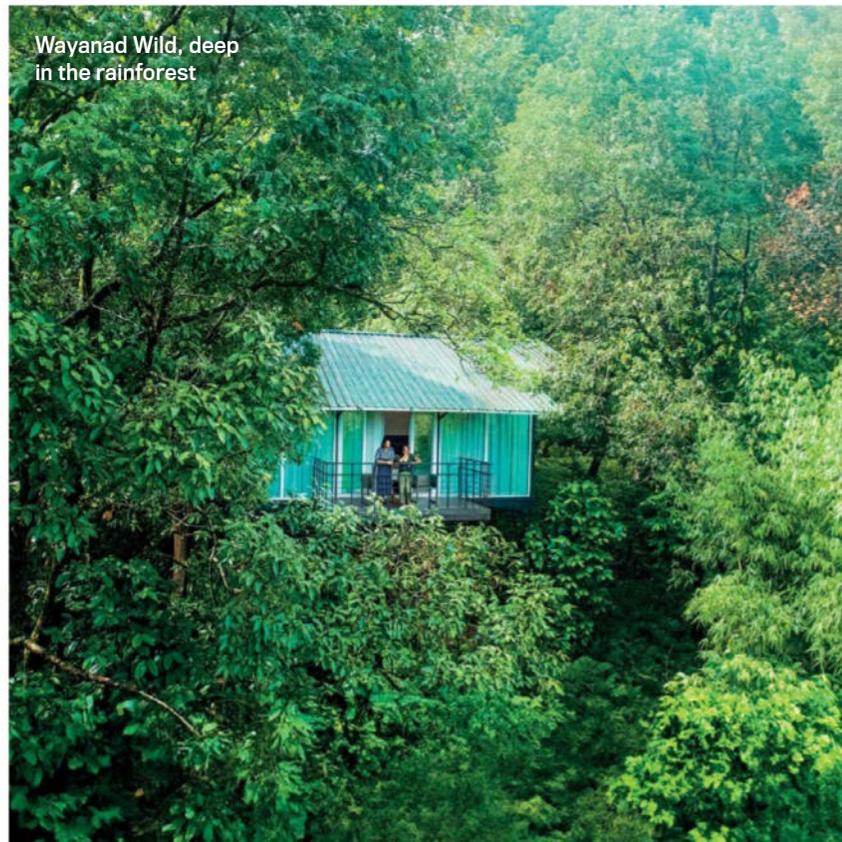
Contact: 0484-4261711/2,

080-69807579,

www.cghearth.com

From the high ranges, we descended to the backwaters for a royal retreat by the waterfront. Chittoor Kottaram was the erstwhile residence of the Maharaja of Cochin whenever he visited the Chittoor Krishna Temple with his entourage. Befittingly, caretaker Milton welcomes guests warmly with garlands and caparisoned parasols. The single-key hotel has three rooms overlooking a lush garden patch with an idyllic pool and private jetty. After a *sadya* (a lush spread on a banana leaf), we set out with Antony on a leisurely boat ride through the canals of the Periyar river. With fresh rainwater inundating the backwaters, the Chinese fishing nets were idle due to the lull in fishing. But the aquatic birds patrolled the waters for a good catch. Darters, cormorants, kingfishers and herons perched patiently by the edge and on wooden stumps, swooping down in a flash to break the still reflections into a thousand ripples. Dinner that night was a sensational Kerala meal of veg pulao, chicken curry and karimeen pollichathu stirred up by chef Sajida.

The recently launched heritage Beach Gate Bungalows in Fort Kochi is a great base in town for a self-reliant holiday. The independent European-style twin bungalows were built in the 1950s for the Sterling Companies in Cochin. Each bungalow has three rooms, a sunken dining room by the pool, a fully equipped kitchen, and balconies overlooking a tropical garden shaded by massive jackfruit and rain trees. A dedicated butler is on call to bring food from CGH Earth's colonial hotel Eighth Bastion, a five-minute stroll away. We uncovered Fort Kochi's secrets on a heritage walk—Petercelli Street was named after the Dutch word for 'parsley'! Then we checked out the local sights on a tuk-tuk tour—St Francis Church, the oldest European church in India where Vasco Da Gama was laid to rest in 1524, Santa Cruz Cathedral Basilica, Indian Naval Maritime Museum, Bastion Bungalow Museum and Mattancherry Palace. ■



Wayanad Wild, deep in the rainforest



Poolside at
Wayanad Wild

The monsoon drama is at its peak in the cloud forests of Wayanad. The scenic inner route via Chalakudy, Thrissur and Perinthalmanna climbs the Thamarassery Churam (ghat) up nine hairpin bends to the misty pass Lakkidi (2,300 ft), the gateway to Wayanad. In the past, local tribes were the custodians of the ghats and forests. The British were looking for a route to connect the lucrative coastal trade to Mysore. Around 1750, Karinthandan, a local Paniya chief living at the foothills of Lakkidi, disclosed a safe path to a British engineer, who killed him. The story goes that Karinthandan's spirit lurked along the stretch, haunting travellers and causing a slew of accidents until a puja was performed to pacify him, and his restless soul was chained to a tree.

Leaving our vehicle at the CGH parking lot near Chain Tree, we hopped into a jeep for a 4-km offroad ascent to Wayanad Wild. Deep in the rainforest, the wilderness camp is the perfect perch to experience the rains from the comfort of your balcony or trails in the vicinity. Music filled the air in the soft pitter-patter of raindrops, silvery leaves shimmering in the breeze and the constant sonata of frogs, cicadas, crickets and birdsong. The misty, dark woods are

livened up by a flash of orange—is it a Black and Orange Flycatcher? Scarlet Minivet? No, it's the Malabar Trogon! The daily schedule of activities overseen by naturalist, photographer and author David Raju and his young team, keeps guests enthralled—a morning bird-watching trail, creek explorations, a 5-km hike to the nearby hillock in the afternoon, eco-talks in the evening and a night walk around the property to look for elusive frogs and reptiles.

Our nocturnal guide Daimler, a naturalist from Mumbai, was named by his uncle after the car—he has a cousin called Chrysler! In a short span of a few hundred metres lay a hidden world lurking in the shadows—Malabar Flying Frogs and Nilgiri Forest Lizard perched on branches, a Golden Backed Frog blending into the leaf litter, the riveting Green Vine Snake, a Malabar Pit Viper lying in wait motionless for unsuspecting prey, and an Ochlandra Reed Frog that lays eggs in the hollows of the Ochlandra reed bamboo. A battery of macro photographers in ponchos headed into the dark. Life for them was an endless cycle of Eat Sleep Herp Retreat. It started to drizzle...the croaks grew louder...another busy monsoon night unfolded in Kerala. ■

The Leela Palace, Udaipur, decked up for a wedding; (below right) the colourful old French quarter of Puducherry



PICTURE-PERFECT WEDDINGS

We sure love our big fat weddings. Here are India's best wedding destinations, with suggestions for where to stay and get the most stunning shots



Courtesy THE LEELA PALACE UDAIPUR

By Priya Pathiyan

Destination wedding, did you say? One where you have all your family and friends with you, where you can host a clutch of happy events that live up to that clever couple hashtag, and also offer some spectacular sights to add excitement to those reels. Whether you're looking to make some wow vows, cueing the cutest *qubul*, or taking the seven *pheras* together, here's our pick of seven perfect locations that are guaranteed to take you to seventh heaven.

BEST PALACE DESTINATION

Udaipur, Rajasthan

Lake Pichola and the royal architecture of Udaipur have been the backdrop for many a fabulously romantic wedding. Think palace venues where you arrive by boat, stunning floating lamps, lavish hospitality, and some of the most delectable Rajasthani cuisine.

Stay: The Leela Palace Udaipur

Click: Champagne-laced sunset boat rides on the lake, folk dancers and Rajasthani puppet shows, beautifully decorated camels on the streets... they're all perfect to add colour and culture to your wedding album.



SHUTTERSTOCK

BEST CULTURAL DESTINATION

Puducherry, Tamil Nadu

For those seeking a more intimate and meaningful wedding, the French quarter of Puducherry offers plenty of sophistication and colonial splendour. Think classy rooftop nuptials and fun events at beaches in Auroville.

Stay: Grand Hotel D'Europe

Click: The gorgeous villas and brightly painted walls of the erstwhile White Town are the best eye candy for you and your invitees, as is the mesmerising Bay of Bengal from the promenade by the sea.

Tulips in bloom in a Kashmir garden; (below) W Goa, Vagator



BEST SCENIC DESTINATION

Srinagar, Kashmir

This glittering jewel makes for a truly dreamy wedding destination. Think a floating engagement on shikaras gliding on the Dal Lake, the *sangeet* in a flower-bedecked garden and the main wedding ceremony on the lawns of a royal palace. Warm *Kashmiriyat* and delicious *wazwan* [Kashmiri feast], a bonus.

Stay: The LaLit Grand Palace Srinagar

Click: Depending on when you're getting married, you can pick between photo shoots in tulip gardens (spring), in the Mughal Gardens filled with fountains and flowers (summer), with Chinar trees in their fall foliage (autumn), or when the winter snows give Srinagar that silver-white sheen.

BEST BEACH DESTINATION

Vagator, Goa

Beautiful beaches, superb restaurants, bars and avenues for fun, an international vibe... Goa is a gift that keeps on giving. And a wedding in one of India's most lively and lovely destinations will certainly win you more blessings than you had thought possible!

Stay: W Goa

Click: Apart from that dream wedding on the beach that you've seen in so many rom-coms, you can plan excursions to Chapora Fort or go kayaking in the backwaters to make some photo-worthy memories.



Courtesy W GOA



A 3.5-hour flight from India, Shangri-La Muscat is a dual-resort property with a 500-metre private beach. It offers an unforgettable experience for families, couples, and solo travelers, blending adventure, relaxation, culture, and cuisine.

From March to September, guests can witness turtle nesting and hatching. The Turtle Ranger provides private tours to see hatchlings make their way to the sea.

Cultural enthusiasts can explore Oman's heritage through the **Sensory Journey**, experiencing architectural gems, art, Arabic coffee, and Omani cooking classes.

With 14 restaurants, Shangri-La Muscat is a culinary destination. **Shangri-La Al Husn**, the adults-only property, features Aangan by Michelin-starred chef Rohit Ghai. Seafood lovers will enjoy **Bait Al Bahr**, while **Capri Court** offers Italian cuisine, and **Chow Mee** serves Southeast Asian flavors. **Dine by Design** provides bespoke meals in enchanting locations.

Oman's only lazy river winds between Al Waha and Al Bandar wings. Six temperature-controlled pools, including a kids' pool, offer a refreshing escape. The Cool Zone Kids Club, Splash Pad, and mini-golf course keep young adventurers entertained. Evening camel rides along the beach add to the fun.

Guests can enjoy dolphin-watching, kayaking, paddleboarding, and whale shark expeditions. Diving and snorkeling reveal vibrant coral gardens and marine life. Luxurious yacht excursions and romantic evening cruises are also available.

Chi, The Spa, and Luban Spa offer modern and ancient healing treatments, including Frankincense-based therapies.



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A PIONEER IN BRIDEGROOM SILK COLLECTIONS



For over four decades, Ramraj Cotton has been a beacon of tradition, quality, and innovation in the textile industry. Our journey began with a vision to uphold and promote the rich cultural heritage of India through our meticulously crafted garments. Today, Ramraj Cotton stands as a symbol of elegance, providing an exclusive range of wedding attire for men that harmoniously blends tradition with contemporary style.

Indian weddings are renowned for their grandeur, reflecting a beautiful tapestry of cultural traditions, regional diversity, and personal preferences. Today, these affairs have evolved into theme-based celebrations, blending culture, traditions, regional diversity, and personal preferences. The selection of a wedding theme is a pivotal step in crafting the narrative and setting the tone for the celebration. The Traditional/Ethnic theme, popular in South India, features traditional decor, sarees, and dhotis, celebrating age-old customs while the Royal Heritage theme draws from India's regal past, with palace venues, vintage cars, and opulent attire, making couples feel like royalty.

Among our offerings, Ramraj Lagnaa—a pioneer in bridegroom silk collections—stands apart. For centuries, brides have traditionally had various unique premium silk saree offerings, but premium silk options have been very limited for bridegrooms. Understanding the consumer needs and insights, Shri K.R. Nagarajan, Chairman, Ramraj Group, came up with the Ramraj Lagnaa pure silk collection which is a handcrafted, limited-edition series with pure gold zari offerings, woven by the master weavers of India.

There are six different offerings in the Ramraj Lagnaa Pure Silk collection:

- GenXT Adjustable Dhotis with pocket: (easy to wear, convenient, comfortable, anywhere anytime can be easily worn)
- Readymade Silk Panchakacham: Many people are keen to wear these traditional items but don't know how to use them. This readymade is just for them.

- Readymade Silk Shirt, Dhoti and Towel Sets: A premium shirt, dhoti and towel in one set, these are excellent for gifting during weddings.
- Kurtas, Dhoti and towel Sets: Similar to the set above, these come in a silk kurta option instead of a shirt.
- Color shirts and Matching Dhotis Sets: This set consists of colored silk shirts with dhotis in the same matching color. There is a wide variety of color offerings in this range.
- Wedding customizable Bridegroom collections: In this most prestigious option silk kurtas or shirts with matching dhotis for the bridegroom can be designed to match the color of the bride's unique wedding saree. No other brand has this unique offering.

As per a recent survey, Ramraj Dhoti is India's most attractive and trusted dhoti brand. Also, Ramraj Lagnaa features the Government of India's authorized Silk Mark label, which is a guarantee of the authenticity and purity of the silk used in Ramraj Lagnaa. Our ultra-comfortable pure silk fabric is like a second skin which can be worn in any climatic conditions—in summer it is very cool to wear while in the cold season it maintains a comfortable body temperature.

Ramraj Lagnaa offers a premium collection of silk dhotis and shirts, made from highly coveted silk with rustic and unique designs. Our luxurious silk dhoti range includes premium products priced at Rs. 1 Lakh and above, showcasing elegance and tradition. To accommodate varying budgets, we

offer dhotis priced from Rs. 15,000 to Rs. 1,50,000, ensuring exceptional quality at every price point. For the true connoisseur, Ramraj Cotton is a promise of elegance. Our premium range features meticulously hand-woven dhotis reflecting the dedication of our skilled artisans and a flawless finish achieved in 5-7 days.

Ramraj Lagnaa isn't just about wedding attire; it's the first chapter in your happily ever after. Our exquisite range of dhotis caters to every wedding theme, ensuring the groom and his closest companions show off unparalleled style. Inspired by India's vibrant tapestry of cultures, our dhotis transcend regional boundaries, adapting to each region's customs and traditions. We offer customization to create a visually stunning entrance that matches the bride's saree perfectly. Our elegant zari border patterns add vibrancy and sophistication, ensuring you stand out on your wedding day.

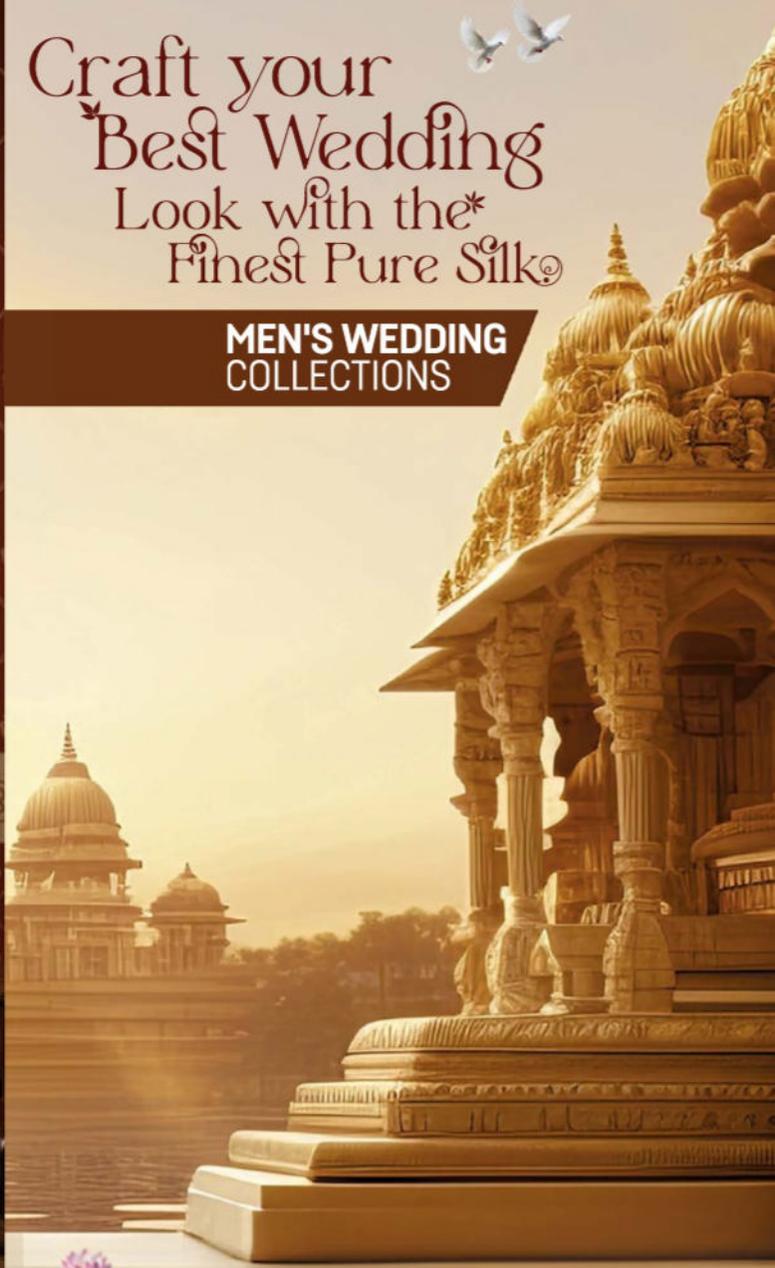




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Welcomhotel The Savoy,
Mussoorie; (below right)
A view of the royal
cenotaphs across the
Betwa River in Orchha



Courtesy WELCOMHOTEL THE SAVOY

**BEST MOUNTAIN
DESTINATION**

**Mussoorie,
Uttarakhand**

Panoramic mountain vistas, fabulous weather, beautiful British-era buildings. The charming hill station has a lot to offer. You could have all your events in the hotel or plan celebrations in adjacent Landour, or nearby Dhanaulti, and Kanatal.

Stay: Welcomhotel The Savoy

Click: There are photo-ops galore along the mountain roads, with stunning scenery, lovely look-out points to pose in, furry dogs to cuddle with, goodies at the Landour Bakehouse or Hotel Rokeby to use as props, or local celebs like writer Ruskin Bond and actor Victor Banerjee to bump into and request selfies with.

SHUTTERSTOCK



**BEST HERITAGE DESTINATION
Orchha, Madhya Pradesh**

Central India's exotic heritage is yet to be fully discovered and properly appreciated by travellers. Give your guests a chance to enjoy your ceremony with Bundelkhandi grandeur even as they explore the palaces, temples, and riverside monuments of this ancient town.

Stay: Amar Mahal Orchha

Click: The Betwa River runs through Orchha, making for a lovely way to plan an evening of fun and photos. The palaces of Orchha and Datia nearby are fantastic locales for the most magnificent wedding photos.

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The Taj Kumarakom Resort & Spa; (below) a view of the Kerala backwaters



Courtesy THE TAJ KUMARAKOM RESORT & SPA



SHUTTERSTOCK

BEST LAKESIDE DESTINATION

Kumarakom, Kerala

Lake Vembanad in the backwaters of Kerala has long been known for its lush environs, genuine hospitality, colourful culture, and holistic wellness. If you're looking for a wedding destination that is as spiritual and serene as it is sumptuous and celebratory, this is the perfect place.

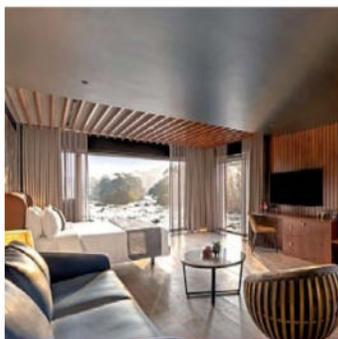
Stay: Taj Kumarakom Resort & Spa

Click: From the gorgeous masks and costumes of Kathakali dancers to the grace of the traditional wooden kettuvallam boats and the serenity of nature in this idyllic spot, you'll have so many great ways to memorialise this momentous occasion.



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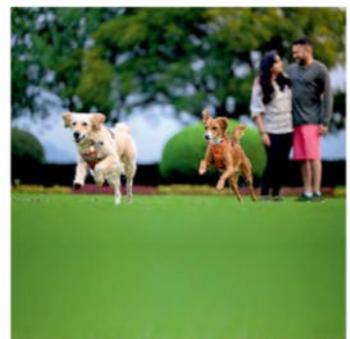
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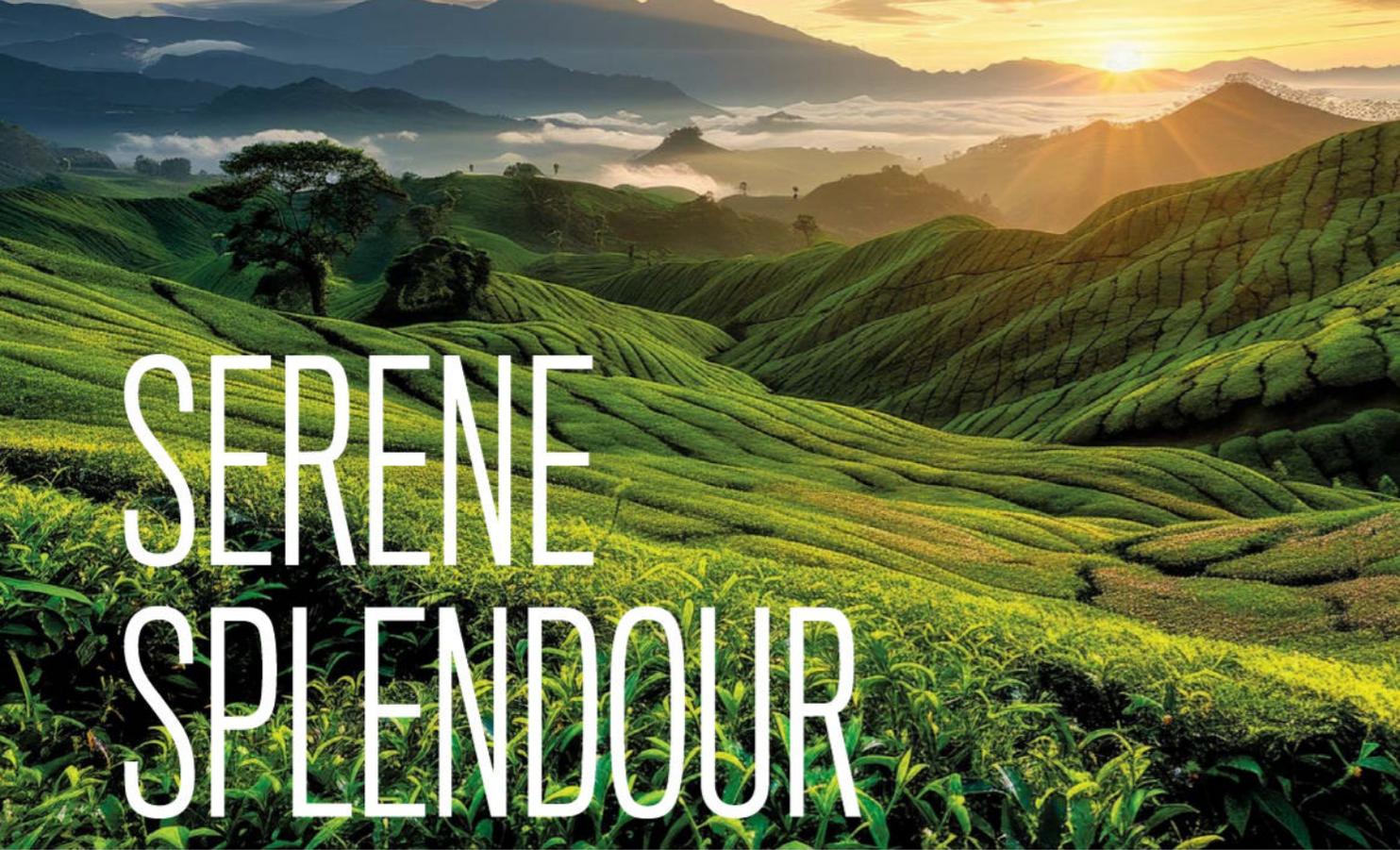
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SERENE SPLENDOUR

Assam, with its natural beauty, rich cultural heritage, and diverse wildlife, is emerging as a prime tourism destination, supported by government initiatives like industry status and promotion of homestays and tea tourism. The roadmap is to attract investment, enhance visitor experiences, and stimulate economic growth through sustainable tourism practices.

■ By a special correspondent ■

Assam is a treasure trove of natural beauty, rich cultural heritage, and diverse wildlife, making it a burgeoning hub for tourism. Known for its picturesque landscapes, the northeastern state boasts the mighty Brahmaputra River, lush tea gardens, and the pristine hills of the Eastern Himalayas. The state's rich biodiversity is showcased in its numerous national parks and wildlife sanctuaries, including Kaziranga National Park, a UNESCO World Heritage site, and Manas National Park, both famous for their populations of the Indian one-horned rhinoceros and other rare species. Assam's cultural vibrancy is evident in its festivals including Bihu, celebrated by everyone irrespective of caste, creed and beliefs, and the state's rich traditions of handloom and handicrafts, which draw in both domestic and international tourists. In recent years, the Assam government has taken significant steps to boost tourism and make the state a more attractive destination for

travellers. A significant move by the Assam government to boost tourism has been granting industry status to the tourism sector. This landmark decision is expected to attract more investment into the sector by providing various incentives and benefits typically available to industries. These incentives include subsidies, tax concessions, and simplified regulatory procedures, which will make it easier for businesses to invest in and develop tourism-related infrastructure and services. By

recognizing tourism as an industry, the government aims to stimulate growth, create employment opportunities, and enhance the overall economic development of the state. Another major initiative is the development of tourism infrastructure, including improved road connectivity, better accommodation facilities, and the modernization of tourist sites. The government has also focused on promoting eco-tourism and rural tourism, which aim to provide a sustainable and authentic experience for

103% Growth in the footfall of domestic tourists in Assam in 2023

523% Growth in the footfall of international tourists in Assam in 2023

3,27,493

Total number of tourists visiting Kaziranga National Park and Tiger Reserve in 2023-24, the highest since the establishment of the national park. Of these, 3,13,574 are Indian tourists and 13,919 are international visitors.



Tea Trails

Assam's tea gardens, with their rich history and scenic beauty, have immense untapped tourism potential, prompting the state government to launch a scheme in 2022-23 to develop 50 selected tea gardens into major tourist destinations.

visitors while benefiting local communities. Initiatives like the "Amar Alohi" scheme, which encourages locals to open their homes to tourists, offer a unique cultural experience and help in promoting the state's rich heritage. "Led by our honourable chief minister, the primary driving force behind all these initiatives is to offer an unparalleled and unforgettable experience about every aspect of Assam. Ensuring the comfort and safety of our guests is central to our tourism policy," says Padmapani Bora, Managing Director, Assam Tourism Development Corporation.

The state government has launched a Customised Mega Incentives Scheme for investments over Rs 100 crore, which can create 200 direct jobs. This scheme includes tourism, offering tailored incentives under the state Industrial Policy. The Assam Government has partnered with Hyatt Hotels to develop a hotel in Kaziranga and with Taj Hotels for a resort at Hathikuli Tea Garden, also in Kaziranga.

By recognizing tourism as an industry, the government aims to stimulate growth, create employment opportunities, and enhance the overall economic development of the state.



Since tea's discovery in 1823, tea gardens have been integral to Assam's landscape. With over 800 tea estates, Assam tea and its estates hold immense tourism potential. However, this potential remains largely untapped. Assam's tea gardens, with their lush greenery, iconic bungalows, and vibrant ethnic communities with distinct rhythmic music and dance, offer significant appeal to both domestic and international tourists, presenting a lucrative revenue opportunity for the state. Recognizing this, the Assam state government launched the "Promotion and Development of Tea Tourism Infrastructure in Assam" scheme in 2022-23, aiming to develop 50 selected tea gardens into prime tourist destinations.

PHASE I

- 37 applications were received of which 25 applications got selected after proper scrutiny and approval of the authority.
- Honourable Chief Minister Dr Himanta Biswa Sarma distributed sanction letters to the selected tea gardens on August 16 August 2023.

Phase II

- Total 38 applications were received of which 36 were fresh applications while two were deferred cases from Phase I.



The “Awesome Assam” campaign, launched to highlight the state’s diverse attractions, has been instrumental in raising awareness about Assam as a tourist destination.

Additionally, two more 5-star hotel projects in Guwahati have been granted similar customised incentives.

Moreover, the Assam government has been actively participating in national and international tourism fairs and exhibitions to showcase the state's potential and attract more visitors. The “Awesome Assam” campaign, launched to highlight the state's diverse attractions, has been instrumental in raising awareness about Assam as a tourist destination. This campaign leverages various media platforms, including digital marketing, to reach a wider audience and showcase the unique experiences that Assam has to offer.

In addition to these initiatives, the government has also been working on developing niche tourism segments such as tea tourism, adventure tourism and river tourism. Tea tourism offers visitors a chance to explore the scenic tea gardens, stay in heritage bungalows, and learn about the tea-making process. A Tea Museum at Dibrugarh has also been completed. Adventure tourism includes activities like trekking, river rafting, and wildlife safaris, which are gaining popularity among young travellers. River tourism, centred around the Brahmaputra, includes river cruises that offer a unique perspective of Assam's landscapes and culture.

To ensure a holistic development of the tourism sector, the Assam government has also been focusing on skill development and capacity building. Training programs for local guides, hospitality staff, and entrepreneurs are being conducted to enhance the quality of services provided to tourists. The government is also encouraging private investment in the tourism sector to further boost infrastructure and services.

Overall, Assam's tourism potential is immense, and with the proactive measures taken by the state government, the future looks promising. The combination of natural beauty, rich cultural heritage, strategic initiatives, and the newly granted industry status is set to place Assam on the global tourism map, attracting more visitors and contributing to the state's economic growth. ■

Homestay Harmony

The Amar Alohi Scheme aims at promoting tourism and cultural exchanges by helping locals to build local homestays

The Amar Alohi Scheme is an initiative by the Assam Tourism Department aimed at boosting the tourism sector in the state by promoting local homestays. The scheme focuses on providing tourists with authentic Assamese cultural experiences through their stays with local families. The primary goal is to offer tourists a unique, immersive experience while simultaneously generating additional income for locals, helping to preserve Assamese culture and traditions by allowing visitors to experience them first-hand. It aims to generate self-employment opportunities for educated youths in rural and semi-rural areas of tourism potential and importance.

Under the Amar Alohi Scheme, local homeowners are encouraged to register their homes as homestays, which are then listed on the Assam Tourism website and other promotional platforms, making it easier for tourists to find and book authentic Assamese accommodations. The Assam Tourism Department provides necessary support and training to homeowners, including guidance on hospitality, hygiene standards, and marketing techniques to ensure a pleasant and memorable experience for guests. By promoting homestays, the scheme aims to distribute the economic benefits of tourism more widely across the state, especially to rural and less developed areas, leading to community development and improved living standards for residents.

The scheme encourages cultural exchange between tourists and local hosts, allowing tourists to participate in local customs, festivals, and daily life activities, while hosts gain exposure to different cultures and perspectives. The Amar Alohi Scheme aligns with the principles of sustainable tourism by minimizing the environmental impact of tourism through utilizing existing infrastructure and promoting conservation of cultural heritage and natural resources.

Phase I

- Launch year: 2017-18
- 96 applications were received of which 29 got selected after proper scrutiny and approval of the authority.
- All 29 homestays are running commercially

Phase II

- Launch year: 2018-19.
- 81 applications were received of which 34 got selected after proper scrutiny and approval of the authority.
- All 34 homestays are running commercially

Phase III

- Launch year 2022-23
- In the third phase the objective was to help create a group/cluster of minimum 10 homestays, as part of “Community Based Organizations” near a tourist spot
- 34 applications were received of which five got selected after proper scrutiny and approval of the authority.
- Honourable Minister of Tourism Jayanta Malla Baruah distributed five sanction letters on February 29, 2024.
- Work is in progress in all five Community Based Organizations



The Road Less TRAVELLED

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AT ONE WITH NATURE
Sundowners at the Sumur Sand Dunes in Nubra

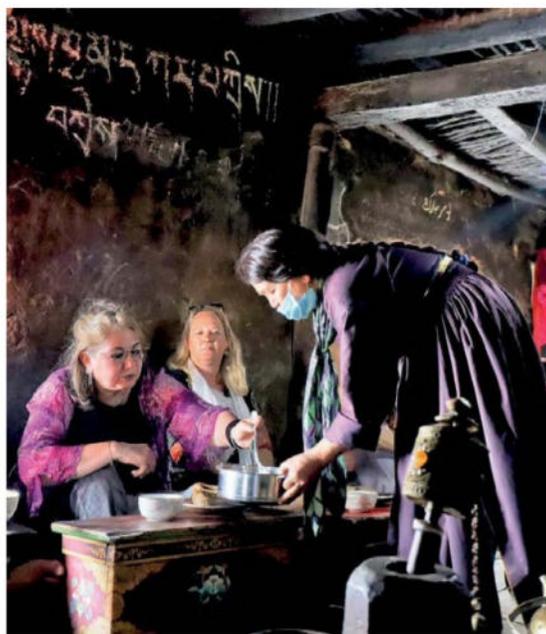
It took me a long time to get to Nubra. By the time I made my way here, it was reeling under the weight of over-tourism, the once-storied road across the Khardung La to the 'Valley of Flowers', a non-stop traffic jam of wannabe Hell's Angels and tourists in balaclavas who dropped like flies in the rarefied air of one of the highest motorable passes in the world.

Luckily, I had been tipped off; so, instead of turning left at the fork where the Nubra and Shyok rivers meet and heading into the tourist

traps of Diskit and Hunder, I took a right. The road less travelled took me to the village of Teggur, lying on the banks of the Nubra River, where Rigzin Wangtak Kalon—whose prominent land-owning family has historical ties to Nubra stretching back several generations—has created the Lchang Nang Retreat, an eco-conscious boutique property that walks the talk when it comes to sustainable tourism practices. The solar-powered retreat with spacious and tastefully appointed cottages—and running hot water—has been created with low-impact, local construction materials like

mud and rock for the walls and willow and poplar for the roofs.

Nubra's bleak and surreal landscape of scattered rock and towering crag can be unsettling at first. The light at 10,000 feet hits different too. Staying at Lchang Nang softened the blow and the valley grew on me. Next morning, I had a sumptuous breakfast by the river, its summer flow heavy with silt. A tributary of the Shyok, it's also called the Siachen River and originates from that glacier. The road that runs along it goes all the way to the Siachen Base Camp, now open to tourists. On the way lies the leafy village of Panamik,



MAKING MEMORIES (Clockwise from top) Meditating in the serene surroundings of Ensa Gumpa; one of the rooms at Lchang Nang Retreat; enjoying a Central Asian meal at an old farmhouse

famed for its hot sulphur springs and supposed curative properties. Past Panamik, I crossed a bridge on the river and made my way to the remote Ensa Gumpa—with fading frescoes and jolly novices—the kind that’s not really on any tourist map.

On the way back, I made a detour to the Sumur sand dunes. This pristine spot with not a soul in sight is in stark contrast to the dunes at Hunder where Bactrian camels—a remnant of Nubra’s past as a prominent pit stop on the Silk Route—give joyrides to tourists in the droves. Let’s not forget that just past

Siachen, across the Karakoram Pass lies Yarkand in the Xinjiang autonomous region of China.

While Lchang Nang offers many curated experiences, ranging from stargazing expeditions to private yoga sessions focused on breathing, the one that stood out for me was a simple meal quickly rustled up one evening by womenfolk back from working their fields at a centuries-old farmhouse with a stone hearth. Nubra is something of a Shangri-La, but you must know where to look. ■

Amit Dixit

You’ll need to get a permit and pay an environmental fee of Rs 400 per person at www.lahdehlehpermit.in to enter Nubra. At the checkpoint, you will also have to show you’ve acclimatised in Leh for at least two nights before travelling further, for which the boarding pass of your flight into Leh should work. Cottages at Lchang Nang Retreat start at Rs 25,500 plus taxes per night (www.lchangnang.com).



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HIT BY WANDERLUST

Everyone's favourite Heeramandi heartthrob, **Taha Shah Badussha** shares his enchanting travel experiences—from Cannes to monsoon getaways

You made your debut at Cannes this year? Goosebumps?

My experience at Cannes was truly remarkable; a dream come true. Even with all the incredible connections I made, it still feels like I only touched one per cent of it. I envision opening my own film at Cannes at some point.

Favourite monsoon destination in India and why?

Kerala springs to mind. The serene beauty of its countryside and its cascading waterfalls make Kerala a perfect destination for a tranquil and rejuvenating monsoon getaway amidst nature's splendour.

Favourite country to travel to?

Japan has captured my imagination, and it's a place I long to visit. But for now, I am drawn to the vibrant city vibes of London and the energetic pulse of New York. London has regal allure while New York's appeal is in its dynamic cultural mix.

What are your travel must-haves?

Some of my workout gear, a hair dryer and my backpack containing all accessories that are an essential part of my routine. They help me stay fit, groomed and ready for any adventure, reflecting my active lifestyle and love for both self-care and exploration.

Which was your favourite location while shooting for Heeramandi?

Lucknow. We had gone to the outskirts of the city to shoot, and I really enjoyed the old-world feel, the architecture and the palaces that we shot in.

-with Rupali Dean

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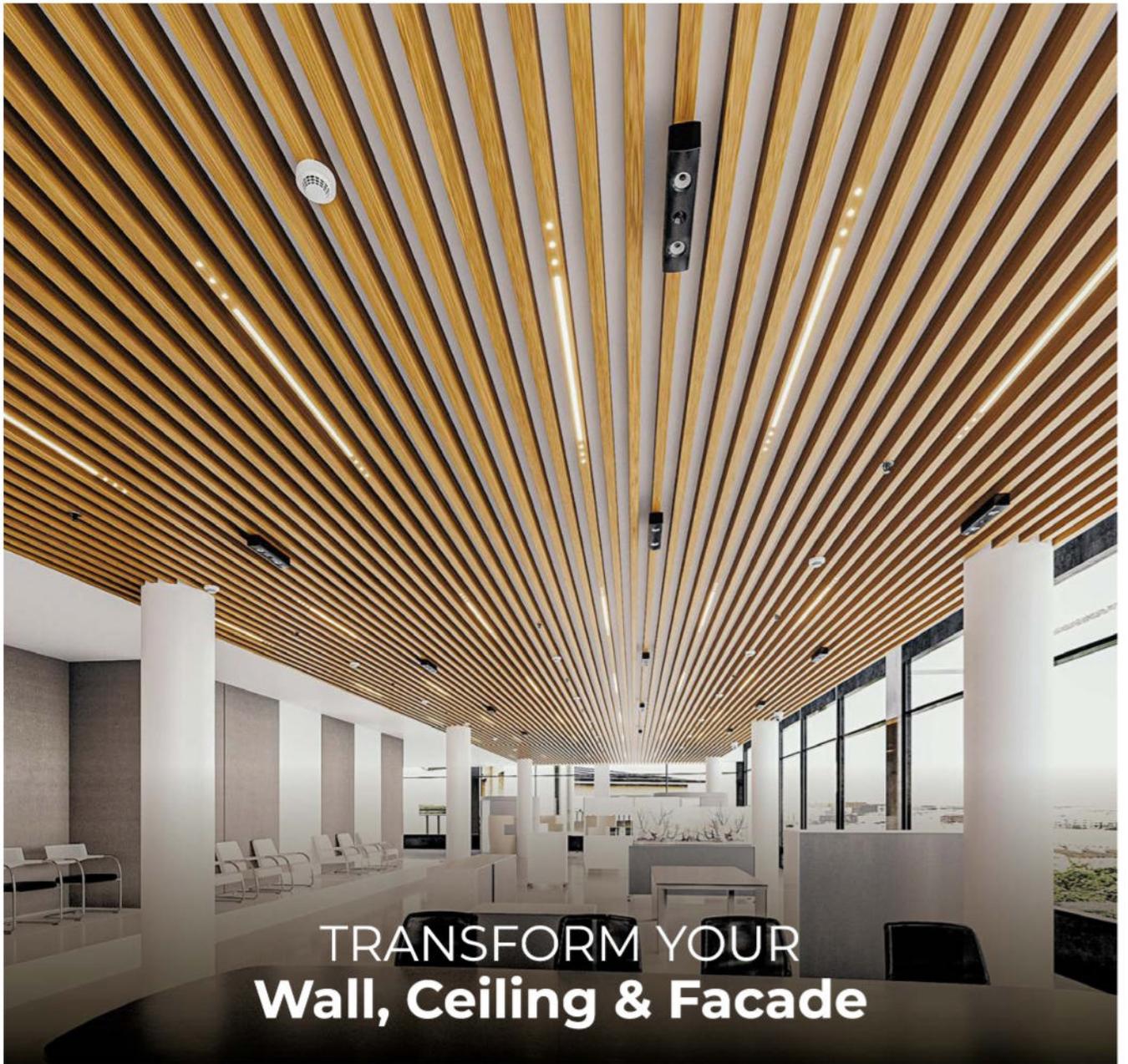
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16

KITCHEN SPECIAL

If the fastest way to the heart is through the stomach, where you cook is the most important room at home. Here's your guide to cool kitchens

COVER PHOTOGRAPH BY VISHESH KANANI
COURTESY DESIGNHEX

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CONTEMPORARY CHIC

Actor Sonakshi Sinha's apartment in Mumbai is a multi-functional space with impactful hues

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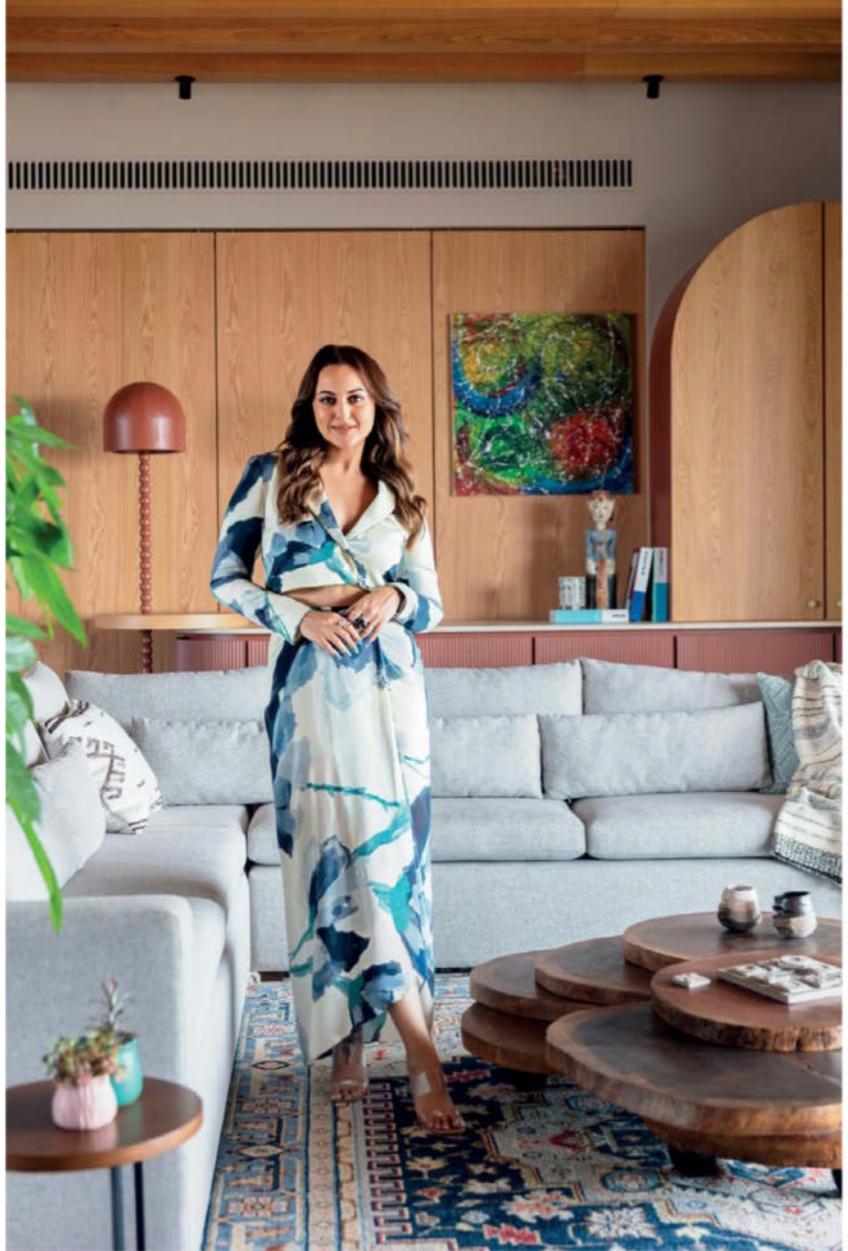
IN CONVERSATION WITH

Architects Rahul Bansal and Amit Aurora the force behind Delhi-based group DCA



Photograph by RAJWANT RAWAT

Photograph by PANKAJ ANAND; Courtesy RED ARCHITECTS



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Architecture

DESERT ROSE

Using traditional techniques and an eco-friendly approach this home in Rajasthan is a sight for sore eyes



Photographs by VINAY PANJWANI; Courtesy SANJAY PURI ARCHITECTS



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news Launches

iSpy

Your guide to the hottest
new stores and products

By RIDHI KALE

DINE A DOZEN

The Bauhaus movement is the central theme of SPIN's new tableware collection by the same name. Eat off dinner plates with their geometric motifs or sip on a slow roasted brew in a coffee mug with bold pops of colour, each ceramic piece adds dollops of fun indoors. The range also has glassware with sleek lines and delicate curves, as well as serveware that blends wood and metal. PRICE ₹400 to ₹1,500 AT www.madewithspin.com



HAUTE SEAT

Bangalore-based furniture design and craft studio Tusker Katha has launched a new collection of handcrafted wooden chairs. Featured here is a reading chair, called Temple Tree from the collection. Its USP is the perfect seating angle and optimal cushion firmness.

PRICE ₹27,000 to ₹40,000 AT www.tuskerkatha.in



SCIENCE OF SLEEP

Sweet dreams are made of these. Magnigeo from Magniflex is a mattress made using regenerated foams, which are free from harmful expanding agents. The mattress also offers firm support for spine alignment, while the memoform padding adjusts to body shape. The breathable fibres enhance comfort, while the 'no waste' fabric ensures a soft touch.

PRICE ₹2.20 lakh (72x78) AT www.magniflexindia.com





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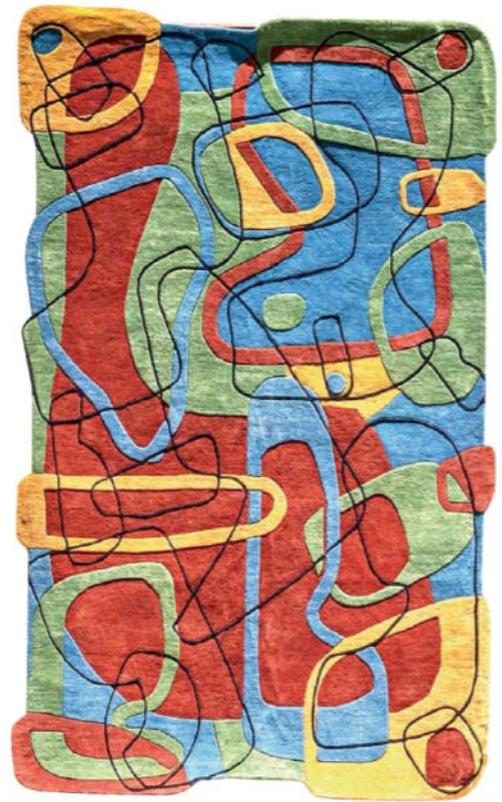
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ON THE BENCH

Nature-inspired printed upholstered fabric, acacia hardwood frame and hidden storage beneath the seat are just some of the reasons why the Vivada Bench from Studio by Agni stands out. It also marks an anticipated furniture line from the brand and effortlessly fuses art with functionality.

PRICE ₹15,000 onwards
AT www.studiobyagni.com



CALL OF THE CARPET

Creating products that score high on innovation and craft seems to be Design ni Dukaan's calling card. The latest collection Modernist Rhapsody, a range of handcrafted carpets does not disappoint. It marks a collaboration between architect Veeram Shah with Fatima Warsi and Zoheb Khan of FAZO Project (a carpet brand). Featured here is Femme, inspired by the bold and voluptuous forms of the feminine figure. Wool and cotton come together using luxury tuft weaving techniques.

PRICE ₹1.20 lakh to ₹3.60 lakh
AT [@design.ni.dukaan](https://www.instagram.com/design.ni.dukaan) (Instagram)



FANCY FABRICS

Life n Colors' new collection called Prasanaakshi blends Indian-inspired prints with Western influences. The range features fabrics for sofas and chairs, cushions, curtains, and table linen. The prints take their design cues from traditional styles such as kantha, ikat, madhubani, pichwai, and Mughal traditions; and classic English-style such as stripes.

PRICE on request
AT www.lifencolors.in

NEW BEGINNINGS

Asian Paints' Beautiful Homes Studio in Guwahati; Amit Syngle with Jaichand Bothra, owner, Vinayak Furnishings (below right)



A VISUAL DELIGHT

Here's why this new home decor studio in Guwahati is your gateway to affordable opulence

By TANU KAPOOR

Spanning 16,000 sq ft, over two floors, Asian Paints' new Beautiful Homes Studio in Guwahati is a welcome sight. The expansive showroom features over 2,700 curated products, including furniture, fabrics, rugs, bedding, wallpapers, blinds, wardrobes, artefacts, and lighting, in short, everything you will ever need to transform your home.

"The Beautiful Homes Studio in Guwahati exemplifies Asian Paints'

dedication to innovation and quality in luxury home décor. We aim to cater to the evolving tastes of North-east India's residents and provide exceptional shopping experiences," says Amit Syngle, CEO and MD, Asian Paints.

This studio not only promises to elevate home decor standards but also underscores Asian Paints commitment to transforming houses into personalised, luxurious homes across the region.

OUR QUICK TAKE

- **Comprehensive Offering** The studio presents a diverse range of luxury home decor items, blending contemporary and classic designs to create elegant living spaces.
- **Technological Integration** Customers can enjoy personalised digital journeys using tablets, control lighting via a centralised system, and preview bedding through QR codes, enhancing convenience and shopping efficiency.
- **Designer Collaborations** Exclusive partnerships with renowned designers such as Sabyasachi, Sarita Handa and Jaipur Rugs bring prestigious and unique décor pieces to discerning customers.
- **Strategic Location** Situated on NH37, Lokhra, Guwahati, the studio strategically targets Northeast India's growing demand for sophisticated home décor solutions.

news

Book Review

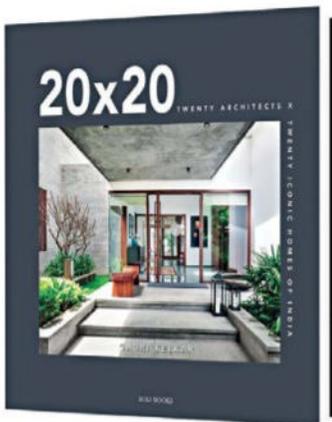
Photograph by DINESH MEHTA



Photograph by TIMS JOSE KUNNATH

PICTURE PERFECT

(clockwise from above) Homes by Stapati Architects; Sanjay Puri Architects; Sketch Design Studio; Studio Lotus; and Stapati Architects



**20x20: Twenty Architects X
Twenty Iconic Homes of India**
By Gauri Kelkar
Lustre Press/Roli Books
₹3,995; 362pages



The Homing Instinct

The avant-garde homes featured in this slickly produced volume show that architectural practice is alive and well in India

By AMIT DIXIT



If, like me, you take a vicarious interest in other people's houses, then this book will provide the perfect eye candy for you, and satisfy your peeping tom instincts in the politest possible way. A gamut of fine homes is showcased here, from hillside holiday residences to contemporary city apartments and sprawling villas with a view, all splendidly photographed. As for the text, this is not a collection of your average breezy magazine pieces, but rather a deep dive into each architect's practice, with accompanying sketches, work-in-progress photographs and blueprints. Usefully, detailed introductions to the architects and their studios precede each of the showcased homes.

Goethe famously said that "architecture is frozen music". Looming somewhere in the backdrop of these exclusive private residences are sensitive clients who allowed the featured architects to express themselves. So, above all, this is a book of hope and it's a privilege to bear witness to this wellspring of Indian architectural talent.

As Gauri Kelkar writes in the 'Introduction', this book is also about "how architects working in India have perceived, crafted, created and shaped, in a variety of diverse geographies, [homes] into spaces of stunning recall value." The hallmarks of these homes are the novel use of building materials, a nuanced understanding of space, and sensitivity to the setting. Think a home at the edge of a cliff or a quasi-treehouse that melds into its surroundings.

Some homes stood out for me: Abin Chaudhuri's Macha, a bamboo Noah's Ark which floats above a guava orchard in West Bengal; Riparian House by Brio in the Western

Ghats of Maharashtra, reminiscent of Frank Lloyd Wright's Fallingwater in the way it blends in with the landscape; the Thinlars Residence by Field Architects in Ladakh with its strong sense of place; and The Ledge by Wallmakers which seems to break all the rules. I also adored the nod to vernacular building traditions in the Mud Kothi by Sketch in Alwar, Rajasthan and, thanks to the detailed introduction to their practice, I'm now also familiar with their charming Gol Ghar in Gorakhpur, Uttar Pradesh. Perhaps, more challenging are the city homes, and Romi Khosla's Tower House is a beacon of hope in the architectural morass of Delhi.

All in all, it's a thoughtful selection which showcases the rich variety of architectural styles being practiced in India today, and, honestly, each and every one of the 20 homes featured here is striking in its own way. And my ever-optimistic radar tells me they are just the tip of the iceberg.



Photograph by TIMS JOSE KUNINATH



Photograph by NIVEDITA GUPTA

HOMIE SAFE HOMIE

Is it time to level up your security game with 360° indoor cameras? Our expert finds out.

By SALONI VAID

The trend of investing in home security cameras is swiftly gaining momentum. A mother of a toddler, I can confidently say security cameras are worth their weight in gold—not just for catching burglars but for monitoring my little mischief-maker. From hide-and-seek to impromptu dance recitals, I get to witness every adorable moment.

When the new Philips 5000 series Indoor 360° camera landed on my test bench I knew right away that this would be interesting. This sleek, modern marvel doesn't just look good—it's built tough enough to handle a few inevitable toddler tantrums.

Setting it up? Easy as pie. You don't need to channel your inner tech wizard. With simple instructions and a user-friendly app, you'll have it up and running in a breeze. With its crystal-clear high definition footage, this camera captures every detail with precision. Plus, its night vision capabilities ensure you'll see every corner of the room, even in the dark. Thanks

FANTASTIC FEATURES

- Panoramic vision
- Smart integration
- Motion detection and alerts
- Overall rating 4 / 5

to its infrared sensors and 360-degree vision, there are no blind spots.

The two-way audio elevates this system beyond mere monitoring. It allows you to communicate directly with your family, offering the ability to reassure them or even calm a restless toddler from a distance. Equipped with advanced motion and sound detection capabilities, this device doesn't just observe—it analyses. And that's truly impressive. With

customisable sensitivity settings, you can fine-tune the system to ensure precise real-time alerts tailored to your specific needs. It's a high-tech babysitter that never sleeps.

Sure, the live feed can sometimes lag, especially on a slower internet connection. It offers limited local storage, but you have an option to purchase cloud storage. Compared to its counterparts, it comes with a premium price tag. It's an investment in peace of mind but might be a stretch for budget-conscious buyers.

However, these minor hiccups pale in comparison to its reliable, top-notch features. Bottom line: this camera brings unbeatable convenience and security to your home.

PRICE ₹8,995

IT CLICKS

If you're a busy parent, this indoor camera is a must-have



KITCHEN CONFIDENTIAL

It's a both a gourmet's delight and a home chef's dream, this new houseware brand will change the way you cook

By RIDHI KALE

Knives that are smooth and stylish, cookware that looks good, meets your needs and has a lot of thought and care put behind it—ask any home chef and they will tell you, dream kitchens are made of these. Turning this dream into a reality is a globally-trusted houseware brand Tramontina that has recently celebrated its grand launch in India. Backed with a 113-year legacy of quality and innovation, Eduardo Scomazzon, global chairman and Marcelo Borges, CEO, Tramontina US, and Aruni Mishra, CEO of Tramontina India shared their vision for the brand

The brand prides itself for having been built on the pillars of quality, innovation, and a deep respect for tradition, over the past century. They are also confident that their products have found their perfect new home and are eager to become a trusted household name in India. “Obviously, Tramontina starts from quality, craftsmanship, technology and innovation—all that is going to be there. But, in India, we wanted the first thing that would differentiate us too be the fact that

we are healthy and safe. All our products are 100 per cent guaranteed non-toxic and safe,” explains Scomazzon.

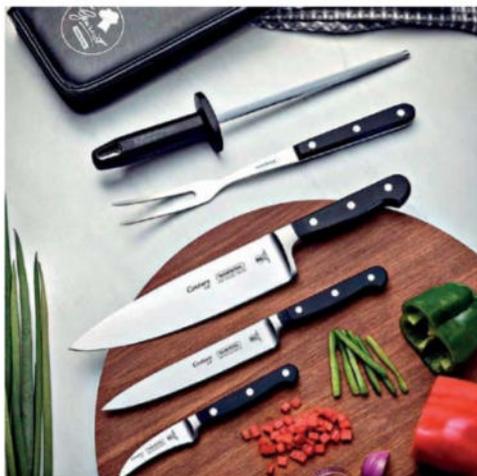
A worry and toxin free environment is just what homeowners need. “After two years of extensive research, we are now for the first time launching our product for the Indian market,” adds Mishra. Their retail strategy in India will be omni-channel, encompassing general trade, modern trade, e-commerce platforms, and the Tramontina India website.

Envisioned as a brand that brings in cooking solutions, their aim is to ensure it is great value for money. They are launching three cookware ranges including two triply ranges—Aeion, a professional-grade triply range, and Fusão, India's first triply ceramic-coated range. The third range features super-smooth cast iron products redesigned for easier cooking. That's not all, Tramontina is also releasing its world-renowned knives, in five standout ranges. These include Century, the professional NSF-certified range, and Polywood, a Tramontina-patented treated wood handle knife that is heat-resistant and durable.



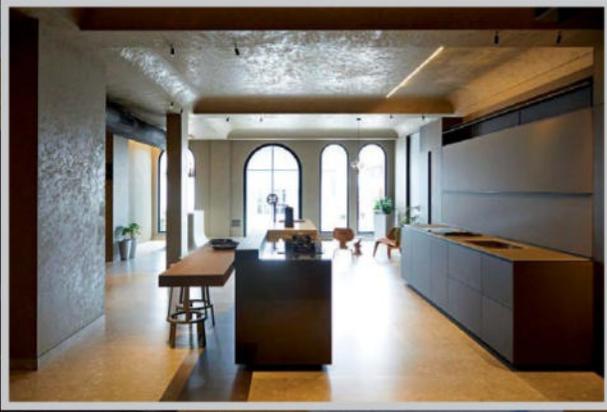
One look at their products and you know instantly that while being an international brand, the products have been designed keeping Indian eating habits in mind. One such interesting innovation is the lack of rivets for Jain food eaters, who wished to avoid having food stuck around the rivets for hygiene and safety.

So what's next? Tramontina has announced its plans to bring its cutting-edge manufacturing excellence to India. It's clear that the brand is ready to redefine the country's culinary experience. AT www.tramontina.in



cover story

Expert Kitchens



OPEN AND SHUT CASE

You can hide away appliances and utensils in this kitchen to give it a clean and minimal look (above)



Cook up a Storm

The culinary journey starts in the kitchen. Seven firms share their favourite designs and great ideas from across the country.

By RIDHI KALE



Rudraksh Charan and Priyanka Khanna

FOUNDERS AND ARCHITECTS
42MM ARCHITECTURE
www.42mm.co.in

Minimal, Magical

Sometimes, less is more makes cooking a dream. This 270 sq ft kitchen in Magnolia, Gurgaon, where functionality merges seamlessly with aesthetics, is a case in point. "Concealed storage blends discreetly into the sleek wall finishes, the central counter doubles as a dining space and it features Logica Celata bars, which conceals as a wall art. It functions both as kitchen innovation and wall art,"

says Rudraksh Charan. However, one of the biggest challenges they faced was transporting an 8 ft long bar. "The bar was cleverly designed in two parts, each 4 ft long. This division made handling and transportation much more manageable and manoeuvrable," says Priyanka Khanna. The best part? The kitchen has such precision that the lines of the overall unit appear seamlessly integrated.

TOP TIP

"Integrate smart storage solutions in your minimalist kitchen to maintain functionality and enhance family bonding during meals. Concealed compartments and versatile counters not only streamline daily tasks but also elevate the kitchen into a space of indulgence and shared experiences, making every meal a cherished family moment."



Photographs by GOKULL RAO KADAM

Sarah Sham

PRINCIPAL DESIGNER
ESSAJEES ATELIER

 @essajeessatelier



Spectacular Space

TOP TIP

“Here we actually had another back kitchen for all the heavy cooking happening, this was simply used for primary home users.”

When interior designer Sarah Sham was designing a home in Bangalore, her clients told her that they wanted a stunning kitchen which would seamlessly merge into the interiors of the rest of the home. And stunning it is. “We created an open kitchen with a stain-free full bodies tile top and black and white chequered flooring. The island centres the space and allows for all requirements to get accommodated within it,” says Sham. The 350 sq ft space has a smart sink, stain proof countertops, built-in appliances and storage in every spot.



Photographs by TURTLE ARTS PHOTOGRAPHY



Courtyards on either side of the kitchen was essential to their core concept of a well-ventilated home. “This created a complex circulation pattern, and resolving it to benefit the entire design was a challenge,” shares Reny Lijo.

TOP TIP

“To maximise the benefits of cross ventilation in a kitchen with courtyards on either side, keep the courtyard doors and windows open as much as possible.

This will enhance airflow, reduce cooking odours, and maintain a fresh and pleasant environment in the kitchen. Additionally, consider adding plants in the courtyards to further improve air quality.”

Reny Lijo and Lijo Jos

ARCHITECTS
LIJO.RENY.architects
www.ljorennyarchitects.com

Courting Good Design

What sets this 240 sq ft kitchen in Kadirur, Kerala, apart is that it has courtyards on both sides allowing wonderful cross ventilation. “It also becomes part of an interesting circulation pattern, providing direct access to the exteriors while maintaining an efficient connection with the rest of the house,” adds Lijo Jos.



cover story

Expert Kitchens



Photographs by /SHITA SITWALA

Kumpal Vaid

FOUNDER
PURPLE BACKYARD
@purplebackyard

Divide and Conquer

Designed for a family of three, the Kanso House in Mumbai celebrates family and togetherness. Something that is also evident in their 315 sq ft kitchen. “The standout feature of this space is its spacious layout, which is divided into distinct areas—a front section, a rear area, and a utility

space,” says Kumpal Vaid. There’s even a cosy kitchen library nook besides the refrigerator. “One of our challenges has been ensuring ample space for movement in every area. We focused on providing sufficient room in the staff and utility areas, ensuring that closing the central shutter of the kitchen would not restrict services or movement inside, outside, or around the staff area. This was achieved by maintaining fluidity and functionality throughout the kitchen,” says Vaid.

TOP TIP

“Adopt a mindful approach to surface selection, prioritising utility over mere aesthetics. At the Kanso House, our choice of original black granite exemplifies this philosophy.”



Disha Bhavsar and Shivani Ajmera

CO-FOUNDER AND
PRINCIPAL DESIGNER
QUIRK STUDIO
www.quirkstudio.in

Marvel in Marble

If you like neoclassical design then this 250 sq ft kitchen in Ballygunge, Kolkata, by interior designers Disha Bhavsar and Shivani Ajmera is worth looking at. “The kitchen is bathed in a dynamic marble cladding with a discreet colour for the flooring and shutters,” says Bhavsar. The strategically placed kitchen island also stands out here. “It significantly enhances the workspace, making the kitchen much more functional,” adds Ajmera.



Photographs by KUBER SHAH



TOP TIP

“Prioritise functionality and practicality alongside aesthetics. This kitchen exemplifies this balance beautifully. We’ve created a classic design that complements the rest of the home, with striking and dramatic elements in the splashback and countertop. Additionally, our planning and storage solutions have successfully met all of the client’s needs.”



Photographs by KUBER SHAH

Shabnam Gupta

FOUNDER AND PRINCIPAL DESIGNER
THE ORANGE LANE AND PEACOCK LIFE
www.shabnamgupta.com

Natural Instinct

Warm, earthy yet sophisticated, the 165 sq ft kitchen at Beach House, Mumbai, is a great example of modern modular aesthetics.

“Balancing the kitchen with the earthy tones of the veneer along with classic black and white flooring, we introduced modern design elements in the minimalist cabinetry detail. This unique fusion creates a welcoming space that is both timeless and contemporary,” says Shabnam Gupta. One

of the most interesting features is a unique passage where the kitchen seamlessly merges with the kitchen garden. “This open-concept area features no walls, allowing for a continuous flow between the cooking space and the garden. As a result, the kitchen is surrounded by greenery, providing easy access to fresh produce while preparing meals,” says Gupta.

TOP TIP

“Kitchens should be vibrant and enjoyable spaces. By incorporating thoughtful design elements, playful accents, and user-friendly features, we can transform kitchens into dynamic hubs of culinary inspiration and social interaction.”



Photographs by PANKAJANAND

Sona Reddy

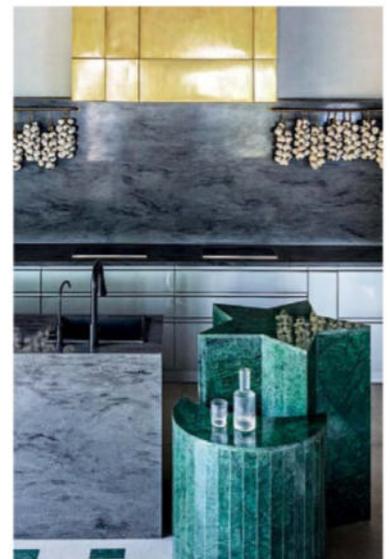
PRINCIPAL ARCHITECT
SONA REDDY STUDIO
www.sonareddystudio.com

In the Stars

Titled Clay, this home in Jubilee Hills, Hyderabad, is designed to straddle old-world charm and modern design elements. The 200 sq ft kitchen is an extension of that thought. “This pantry kitchen’s design is minimalistic, aimed at meeting basic needs in a guest gathering space. It allows the host to enjoy cooking and entertain guests simultaneously. It includes an oven, microwave, refrigerator, hob, and sink,” says Sona Reddy, adding, “The client requested a pedestal shaped like a star and moon. A brass cover for the exhaust enhances the space. The floor, counter, backsplash, and exhaust are designed to complement each other. Despite the minimalistic appearance, the garlic decor piece and wall light add a point of interest to the kitchen.”

TOP TIP

“While an open kitchen is not ideal for Indian cooking, take a tip or two from this pantry kitchen that celebrates cooking and allows for entertaining guests while you cook.”





SHOW VS STAFF KITCHENS

When the square footage is not an issue, one space to cook is not enough. Our expert decodes this growing need.

By **DIPEN GADA**

In modern residential design, the concept of separate show kitchens and staff kitchens has become increasingly popular, catering to both functionality and aesthetics while meeting diverse user requirements.

The show kitchen, often positioned as the focal point of the living space, emphasises aesthetics and entertainment. Its design is meticulously crafted to showcase stylish appliances, luxurious countertops, and seamless integration with the dining and living areas. Functionally, it serves as a space for hosting guests, preparing light meals, and socialising during gatherings. Aesthetically, show kitchens prioritise sleek finishes, state-of-the-art equipment, and often feature open layouts that enhance the sense of space



Dipen Gada is the founder and principal designer at Vadodra-based Dipen Gada & Associates (DGA), an interior design, civil and architectural planning firm. www.dipengada.com





A GOURMET'S DELIGHT

Several show kitchens designed by Gada and his team for projects across the country

and interaction.

Contrastingly, the staff kitchen operates as the functional powerhouse of culinary activities. Tucked away from public view, its design revolves around practicality, efficiency, and ease of maintenance. Equipped with heavy-duty appliances, ample storage for ingredients and utensils, and durable countertops, the staff kitchen supports intensive cooking, meal preparation, and cleanup processes. Its layout is optimised for work flow, ensuring cooks can move seamlessly between tasks without interruption. User requirements in this space typically include ventilation systems, water-resistant surfaces, and sufficient space for multiple cooks or helpers during busy times.

The segregation of these spaces addresses varying user needs: the show kitchen enhances the social dimension of cooking and entertaining, while the staff kitchen prioritises functionality and practicality. This division not only streamlines operations but also enhances the overall aesthetic appeal of the residence by maintaining a clutter-free, organised appearance in the main living areas.

Furthermore, customisation plays a crucial role in aligning these kitchens with specific user preferences and lifestyle choices. Some homeowners may opt for integrated smart technologies in their show kitchen for enhanced convenience, while others might focus on energy-efficient appliances or sustainable materials in both spaces.

Ultimately, the integration of show kitchens and staff kitchens in modern residences underscores a harmonious blend of functionality, usage flexibility, aesthetic appeal, and personalised user requirements, catering to the diverse needs and aspirations of homeowners in today's dynamic living environments.



“We don’t take up work that doesn’t excite us”

From camaraderie and clever designs to smart aesthetics and stylish spaces, Delhi-based architects Rahul Bansal and Amit Aurora walk us through their journey

By RIDHI KALE



Photograph by JEETIN SHARMA





Photograph by RAJWANT RAWAT

DOUBLE THE FUN

Amit Aurora and Rahul Bansal at their new office in Gurgaon (left); in this home in Moti Nagar, Delhi, the dining table contrasts well with McClaren beige and brown Mandana flooring (far left)

We could go on about the many awards, the multi-disciplinary nature of the firm; or that they have widely acclaimed projects across residences, retail, hospitality and offices. However, that would all fall short when you actually meet the brains and perhaps even brawn behind groupDCA—architects Rahul Bansal and Amit Aurora. The two make for an interesting pair, having shaped the Indian landscape one building at a time. If Bansal is serious, Aurora is playful; if the former is all about going by the book, the latter believes in rule breaking; if one is prim and proper, the other is playful and carefree. While it does make them as different as chalk and cheese, but it also leads to amazing designs, a thoughtful approach and spaces built to last.

But how did it all start? When they walked into School of Planning and Architecture (SPA), New Delhi. “Destiny intervened and we walked in a few minutes of each other. A senior called us and made us the net and the ball (part of ragging). The bonding just happened,” recalls Aurora, who still has a picture of that from a college magazine. They also worked together during this time and supported one another. Once they graduated, they went their own way doing internships and then jobs, yet remained connected. It was in 1993 when they decided to start a practice together and formally set up groupDCA, three years later.

“The first job comes from within the family and friends, and that helps you build your portfolio,” shares Bansal. One of their first projects was for Ritu Wears, and that led them to take on several retail projects from Haldiram outlets to Rolex stores. “Retail has been our focus but we don’t

this & that

Architects of the Month

specialise in retail, we can call it extended retail with restaurants and salons,” explains Bansal. But beyond that, they are doing some very interesting projects. “Some lovely corporate spaces, a few luxury skyscrapers including in Kolkata, villas and farmhouses in the wilderness,” adds Bansal.

“Typically, we don’t work on large projects. Our projects are always very boutique-ish. Very fast,” says Aurora, adding, “We came across this very interesting article which said, 50 is a family and beyond 50 is chaos. And we always

wanted a family even at work.” This is also, why both of them are very hands-on and involved in every detail.

But that makes you wonder how does this partnership work. “Initially, there were lesser projects, so, we did it together. Nevertheless, over the last 25 plus years, a captive clientele was established, and a lot more work came our way. Therefore, we had to divide the projects. That said, however, we are always aware of each other’s projects. There’s a whole lot of interaction and exchange of ideas which happen, even if our thoughts don’t always

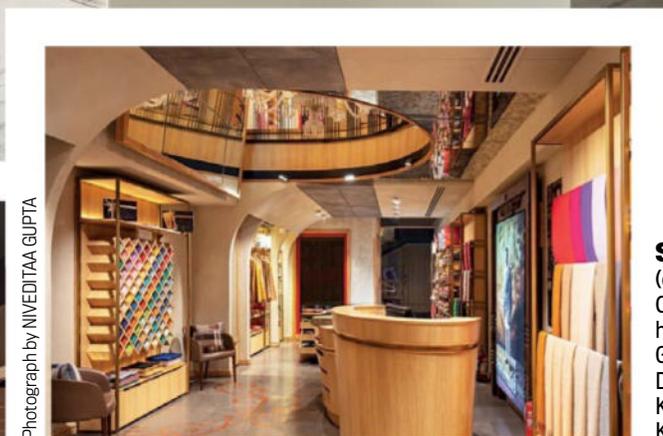


Photograph by NIVEDITA GUPTA





Photograph by EKANSH GOYAL



Photograph by NIVEDITAA GUPTA



Photograph by NIVEDITAA GUPTA

SPACE CRAFTED

(clockwise from above)
Citadines Paras Square
hotel apartment in
Gurgaon; Ahujasons store,
Delhi; Primarc Office in
Kolkata; Khi Khi Bar +
Kitchen in Delhi

match,” says Bansal.

So, what does a typical day look like for them? “We eat, drink, sleep and in between, you work a bit,” shares Aurora, adding, “We like to work in a very relaxed manner. There are no elongated hours. What we pack in during these hours is actually three days work for normal studios.” From day one, they were very sure that they wanted quality and not quantity and that’s what their firm aspires for.

This way of working has also allowed them to ensure that their projects are both contextual and sensible. In fact, their new office space in Gurgaon is clearly an example of this unique approach. “We could

have built bigger structures, used fancier finishes, imported marble for the floors, with glossy panelling and marble-clad walls. But it would not have looked nice in the context of its surroundings,” explains Aurora. This is also the reason why no two projects look alike. Another example is 1,000 sq ft bookstore they recently did in Kolkata with a lot of room to move and experience the space. Equally engaging are the large offices they are doing and the dream homes they are building.

One thing is clear if Bansal and Aurora are involved no matter what the project, innovation will meet functionality.
AT www.groupdca.in



Modern Milieu

Sonakshi Sinha's apartment in Mumbai courts contemporary aesthetics, smart design and beautiful use of colour, with flair

By **EKTA PAREKH AND RAJIV PAREKH**



Ekta Parekh and Rajiv Parekh are the founding partners at Mumbai-based reD Architects, a practice that has a process-oriented approach to design.
www.redarchitects.in

When we were approached to design Sonakshi Sinha's home, we initially had the pre-conceived notion of creating a lavish celebrity abode with all its extravagant features. However, shortly after our initial interaction, we realised the need to recalibrate our approach, as her requirements and personality were refreshingly straightforward and minimalistic.

Our focus shifted towards designing a layout that could adapt to her needs throughout the day. At reD, we believe that planning a space creatively and innovatively is the most crucial first step in the design process. We strongly believe that a space designed to evolve with the time of day and the inhabitant's lifestyle offers an exceptional user experience.

The living area is the core space of transformation that also serves as an artist's studio, a refined bar, a cosy breakfast nook, a functional home office, and an inviting coffee bar, all

LIVED IN

The comfort of a modest, inviting home precedes the need for conspicuous luxury (left); Sonakshi Sinha in her living room (right)



Photographs by PANKAJ ANAND



FACT FILE

Project Name

Sonakshi Sinha's Home

Location

Mumbai

Design Firm

reD Architects

Principal Designers

Ekta Parekh and Rajiv Parekh

Design Team

Shweta Hegde and Minnati Jiwani

Sanitary fittings

Kohler

Marble

CMC

Furniture

Aesthetics

Carpet ceiling

India carpets, Jaipur Rugs

Upholstery

Warwick fabrics

Drapes

Kanchi Designs

Wood Floor

FCML

Wardrobes

ColoreD

Kitchen

Wurfel



BIG REVEAL

A massive moving wall spanning 15 ft divides the bedroom and the dressing room (above); Murphy bed in multipurpose room (left)

this & that

Celeb space



DESIGNER DEN

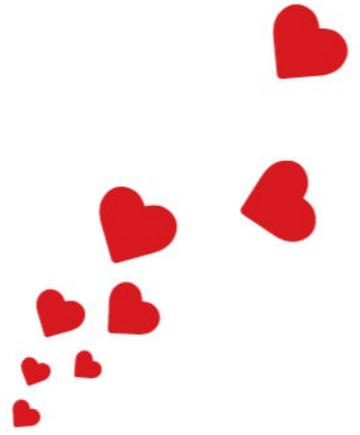
(clockwise from left) The dining has a raw elegance; live edge wooden dining table; dressing room



while doubling as an entertainment hub for friends. Additionally, we designed a dedicated space for outfit trials, make-up sessions, and styling, which cleverly converts into a workout area or a guest room as required.

In our studio, we are currently trying to be a little more adventurous in our choice of colours; hence, the bold use of deep blue, warm terracotta, and peachy beige hues becomes the choice that connects various spaces that influence the mood.

Her home is a testament to minimalistic versatility and artistic expression. It's a canvas for creating memories, where versatility meets design and every corner adapts to life's rhythm, truly reflecting the actor's essence.



Decor Drama for your Feed

We're spilling the tea on three fabulous and influential Insta-icons who share their secret of success, decor ideas and more

By TANU KAPOOR

In the wild, visually stunning world of Instagram, home decor isn't just about pretty rooms—it's an art form. Telling us what's haute on and off the gram are architect Navneet Sandhu Singh, interior designer Rohina Anand Khira, and blogger-turned-designer Rukmini Ray Kadam. These trendsetters have turned their feeds into jaw-dropping showcases of style, innovation, and pure decor magic. Buckle up for some serious Insta-drama as we dive into the secrets and stories behind those double-tap-worthy posts.

Rohina Anand Khira @rohina

“What works for me is maintaining a macro umbrella of immediate content, core content, home improvement content, and DIY content, while touching upon smaller subjects within that umbrella,” explains Khira. As for her strategy for keeping her Instagram feed fresh and engaging? It's emphasising the role of authentic, relatable content in building a strong community.

“With almost 7 lakh followers, it's challenging to answer every DM. I hold 'Ask Me Anything' sessions on stories to address common questions,” shares Khira. What sets her apart is that she delves into her interaction techniques, using automation to manage inquiries while maintaining personal connections with her audience. “Natural light is key. Whether it's the golden hour or broad daylight, lighting can make or break a post,” advises Khira.





Rukmini Ray Kadam

@trumatter

"I'll be honest with you, I do not have a content calendar. The whole task of trying to keep people engaged is not the idea. The idea is to share good work with people who are like-minded," says Kadam. So, she emphasises on authenticity and genuine connections over follower numbers, highlighting her personal engagement with her community. "However, I always communicate. I see my DMs at the end of the day and reply to almost every query," explains Kadam.

So, her strategy for connecting with her Insta-fam involves underscoring the importance of personal interaction in building trust and loyalty. "I generally take photos with my digital SLR and most of them are with the 35 prime. That alone is 75 per cent responsible for the eye candy-ness," says Kadam. Rukmini also reveals that focusing on lighting and composition for photographs captivates her audience.



Navneet Sandhu Singh

@designdecortravel

"There is no secret sauce; simply being myself has worked for me. This has allowed me to create a lovely Instagram community and some beautiful virtual relationships. Over the years, I have focused on quality over quantity and shared content that adds value to my audience, keeping abreast with seasonal trends and themes," says Singh. She also shares insights into her approach to content creation, emphasising her passion for DIY and the integration of historic elements into modern decor. Her engagement strategies include personal interactions and behind-the-scenes glimpses, ensuring a loyal and engaged following.

"Transforming home decor posts into Instagram eye candy involves a good mix of styling, lighting, and composition. The audience should be able to relate to the content," she adds. Singh also discusses her approach to brand partnerships, highlighting the importance of maintaining her aesthetic integrity while collaborating creatively.

Sounds Good

Here are things you need to know to get acoustics right for your space

By KUNTAL VYAS AGGARWAL

Acoustics play a crucial role in shaping the ambience and functionality of any space, whether it's a recording studio, a home theatre, or an office. Achieving optimal acoustics requires a thoughtful approach that considers both the technical aspects of sound isolation and the aesthetic elements of design. Ten key factors to consider.

- 1. Sound Isolation** Incorporate sound-isolated flooring and ceilings insulated with sound insulation foam sheets to prevent sound bleeding and maintain privacy.
- 2. External Sound Insulation** Use double-layered windows and cavity walls to create a thick shield against external vibrations and noise.
- 3. Internal Sound Insulation** Implement cavity walls, glass wool framing, perforated ply sheet, and fabric quilting to create multiple layers of sound insulation within the space.
- 4. Flooring** Consider using raised floorboards with sandbags and specially insulated materials to enhance the sound insulation.



5. Ceiling Insulation Use materials like PU sound insulation foam to guard against external disturbances from the ceiling.

6. Zoning and Layout Create informal zoning within the space, marked by specific flooring and ceiling designs, to organise the

HEAR THIS
TwinStrings studio in Ghaziabad blends cutting edge audio tech, vibrant design, charcoal hues, and wooden accents



Kuntal Vyas Aggarwal is the founder and design head at Noida-based Resaiki Interiors and Architecture Design Studio. www.resaiki.com



space effectively and eliminate the chaos of wires during use.

7. Lighting Use diffused profile lighting to illuminate the space and add an ethereal quality, serving as a dynamic backdrop for various activities.

8. Privacy Features Install features like bifold sliding doors and sheer curtains to separate zones within the space and offer privacy when needed.

9. Aesthetics Incorporate decor and artwork that align with the space's purpose and

style, adding a personalised touch while maintaining acoustic integrity.

10. Furniture and Equipment Integration Choose furniture and equipment that not only enhance functionality but also integrate seamlessly into the overall design, enhancing both aesthetics and acoustics.

These design considerations can be incorporated into any space to achieve acoustics that not only meet technical requirements but also enhance the overall ambiance and functionality, creating a space that sounds as good as it looks.

Photographs by PRAAKET CHOPDE

NATURAL SELECTION

Modern biophilia blurs the boundaries between the inside and outside, bringing in wellness, beauty and clever spatial planning

By NATASHA KUMAR AND ABHIJIT SAWANT



NATURE MEETS NURTURE
(clockwise from above) The live edge dining table against the backdrop of tropical foliage; light flooded living room; plants take centre stage in this living space

this & that

Design

Biophilia was first introduced by psychoanalyst Eric Fromm who defined it as the passionate love of life and of all that is alive. In today's context, it transcends aesthetics, integrating natural elements into built environments to enhance overall well-being. This approach incorporates large open spaces, natural light, ventilation, greenery and organic materials to create harmonious spaces that blend with nature, enhance the quality of living and boost productivity. Our Goan home combines contemporary biophilic design with traditional elements, giving us the perfect happy, tranquil retreat.



Natasha Kumar and Abhijit Sawant are the co-founders and principal architects at Goa-based, Studio Tilt, an architectural and interior design studio focussing on mindful design. www.studiotilt.in



Let there be Light

Flooded with natural light, we fell in love with the space at first sight. Large windows in the living room opening into a balcony and the material palette largely comprises natural materials such as wood, cane, wicker, bamboo and jute.

Art of Living

The large living and dining areas are dressed with tropical foliage. Both spaces exude a warm, earthy feel and have a minimal layout, with jute rugs tying the space together, against flooring that mimics the grains of natural stone. The balcony even has plants growing in a hydroponic environment. A live-edge wooden dining table dominates the dining area, against a backdrop of tall, dense plants. The *pièce de résistance* in the space though, is the central, custom-made wicker chandelier.

Private Paradise

The bedrooms are an extension of the tropical mood, designed as idyllic, earthy oasis that are aesthetically pleasing as well as in sync with the surroundings.



Photographs by MANTHAN YADAV

GREY AREA

(clockwise from left) Shades of grey dominate this bedroom; the balcony has plants grown using hydroponics; in the corridor, organic materials steal the spotlight



GRAND DESIGNS

This duplex in Mumbai is a lesson in how dimly lit and banal spaces can be transformed into a bright, light and bespoke home

By CHERAG AND ROOZMEHR BARDOLIVALA

The first meeting we held with the client on site was two years prior to the commencement of the project. The client being old acquaintances wanted our opinion whether they should invest in the property or not. The space was one empty shell with nothing but bare concrete walls and exposed plumbing lines. The light was very poor being on the ground floor. Yet something told us that this can work.

Simple but Sophisticated

The design process was very interactive with lot of feedback and back and forth of design ideas. The idea was simple. To keep a neutral and white palette for the walls and ceilings to enhance the light quality which was lacking in the apartment. The main door was shifted from its original position and a foyer was created. To add drama to this zone, a red travertine stone was used to clad the wall and the rest was kept understated with a gold bench from white domus being the only piece of furniture in the space. The main striking difference in this space is the dark black marble flooring. The decision was a big risk as it could make the space look dark. However, the contrast with the lighter walls lifted the space to an entirely different level.

Formal Fare

The main living space on the ground level is one uninterrupted space

Photographs by K SURYAN AND DANG





FACT FILE

Project Name
THE TOWNHOUSE

Project Type
RESIDENTIAL DUPLEX

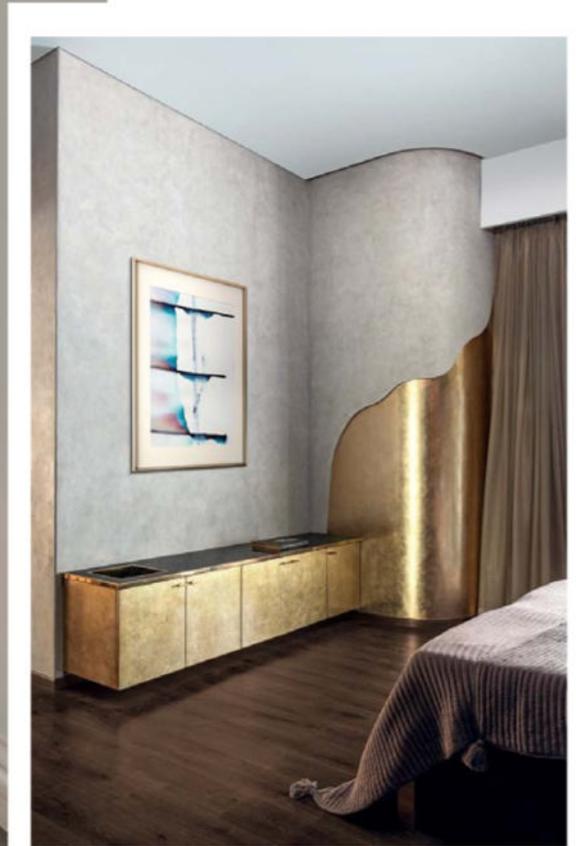
Location
WADALA, MUMBAI

Project Size
4,500 Sq ft

Design
RC DESIGN STUDIO

Principal Architects
Cherag and Roozmehr Bardolivala

Styling
Jasmine Jhaveri



THROW A CURVE BALL

From the curved staircase to the wallpaper the double height living room is stunning (left); gold adds drama in the bedroom (above)



Cherag and Roozmehr Bardolivala are architects and designers at Mumbai-based RC Design Studio that specialises in architecture and interior solutions. www.rcdesignstudio.in



MAKING ROOM

The den in deep and dark shades adds an air of mystery (above); the bright and beautiful dining room (left)

with flow of movement leading one to the dining and formal living. A drop projector was opted instead of normal TV and the projection was the white wall of the living space. The open kitchen in black was also a conscious decision on our part to keep the kitchen as a part of the main living and yet to blend in and not stand out as striking. On the contrary though, the kitchen is a stunning creation which draws all the visitors to it. A small cooking pantry is attached to the main kitchen for heavy duty cooking and storage. A compact home office for the work for home husband was created on the lines of an English study with deep wood undertones.

Step by Step

The staircase connecting the lower and upper levels was fabricated from scratch and designed with solid wood steps and a simple yet striking black MS railing. The wall of the staircase was treated as a canvas with a stunning wall mural designed and customised specifically for the project.

The crowning glory of this double height space is the bespoke chandelier. While the carefully curated furniture adds to the overall look of the room. The upper level has three-bedroom suites with their en suite bathrooms and walk-in wardrobe spaces.



Get Floored

The flooring is a deep oak wood flooring and a lot a dark tone was created with the use of wood panelling and customised wall paper design. A bold and quirky addition was a gold leafed column, which was created in the master bedroom suite to add drama to the space.

MIXED BAG

(clockwise from above) Informal living space; one of the bedrooms; a cosy nook above the living room; the kitchen



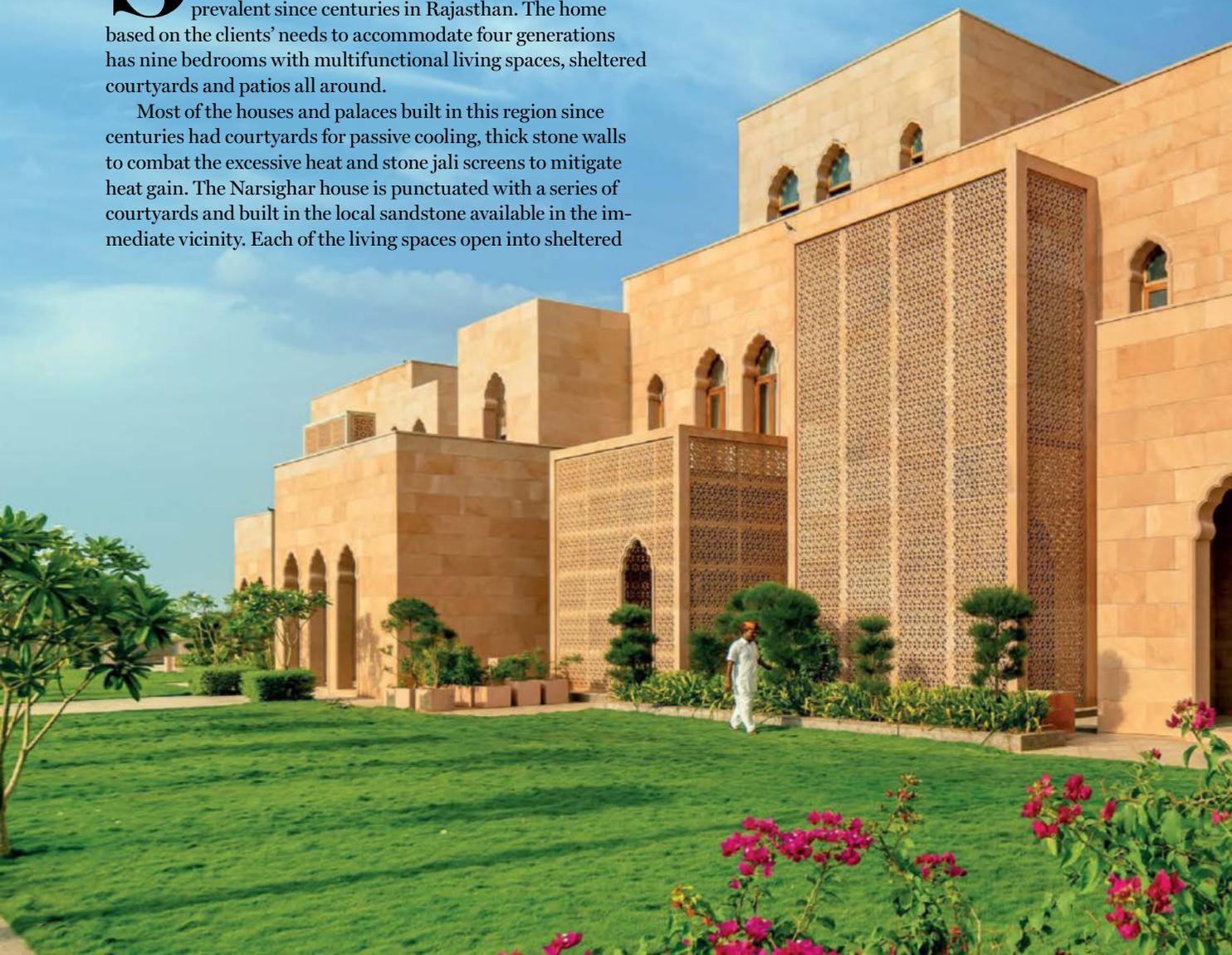
REVIVING HERITAGE

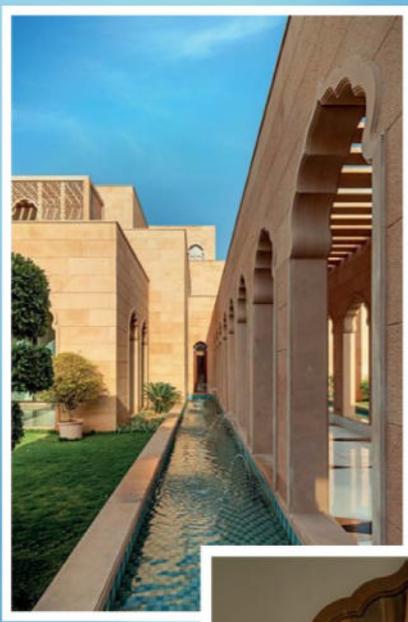
Taking traditional techniques and turning them on their head is this nine-bedroom home in Rajasthan that houses four generations

By SANJAY PURI

Situated in the arid desert region of Nokhain Rajasthan, the Narsighar house imbibes the traditional planning principles of the regional architecture prevalent since centuries in Rajasthan. The home based on the clients' needs to accommodate four generations has nine bedrooms with multifunctional living spaces, sheltered courtyards and patios all around.

Most of the houses and palaces built in this region since centuries had courtyards for passive cooling, thick stone walls to combat the excessive heat and stone jali screens to mitigate heat gain. The Narsighar house is punctuated with a series of courtyards and built in the local sandstone available in the immediate vicinity. Each of the living spaces open into sheltered





STANDING TALL
The green of the rear lawn contrasts well with the structure of the home; water body along the corridor that connects the front with the rest of the home (left); an arched doorway (below)



Photographs by VINAY PANJWANI

FACT FILE

Project Name

NARSIGHAR

Location

NOKHA, RAJASTHAN

Gross Floor

Area 3,344.67 SQ M

Site Area

77,071 SQ M

Firm

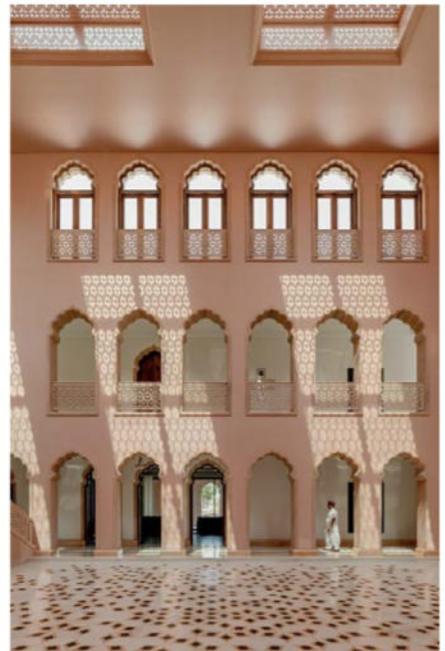
SANJAY PURI ARCHITECTS

Lead Architects

SANJAY PURI AND NINA PURI

Design Team

POOJA SAMPAT, AYESHA PURI, TANYA PURI, ASHWINI MOGAVEERA, NILESH PATEL, SARIKA KADAM



outdoor spaces screened with perforated stone panels. These screens in addition to reducing heat gain, also protect the inner spaces from the sandstorms that are prevalent in the region.

In addition to the traditional planning principles, elements of traditional Rajasthan architecture including multifoil arched windows, patterned stone screens, stone pergolas, inlay work and carving work accentuate the spaces. Rajasthan in India is home to many craftsmen with crafts including stone carving, marble inlay, carpentry work, mirror work inlay, lime plaster and more. The entire house was executed and worked upon by these local craftsmen reviving many of the wonderful traditional techniques.

Although the house appears

large, over 40 per cent of the area is in the form of open courtyards, circulation spaces and sheltered outdoor patios. Each volume is articulated individually with the home being perceived as a composition of varying volumes.

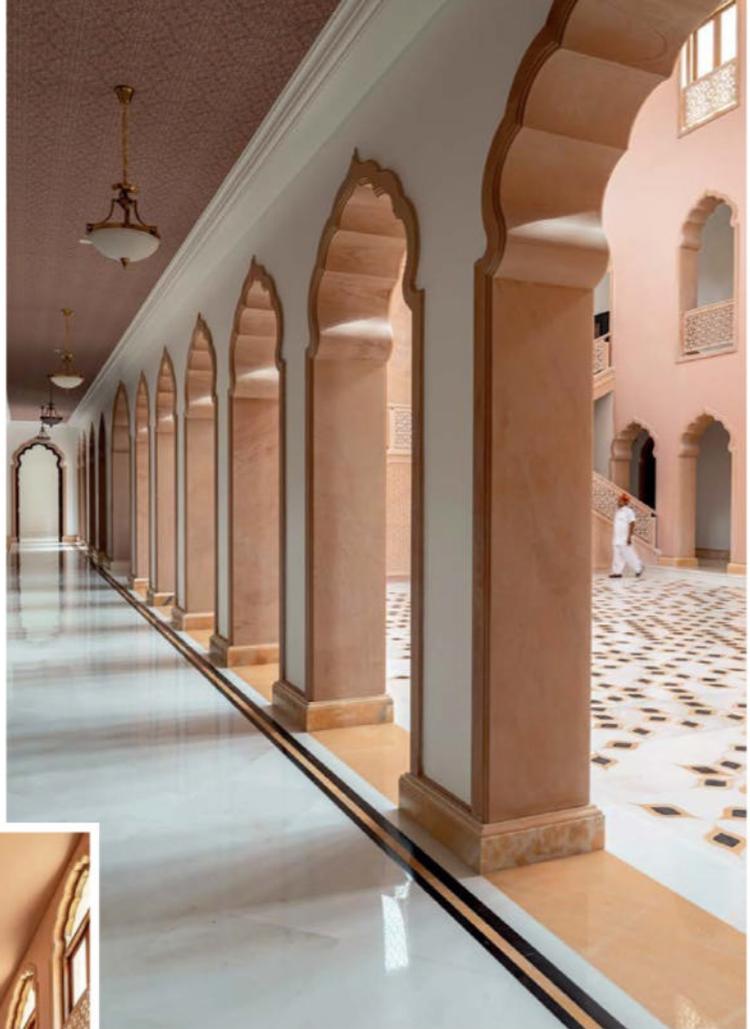
An entry car porch opens into a sunlit courtyard that leads to a sheltered stone arcade flanked by water troughs and gardens for passive cooling before one en-

ters the house. The sky lit entrance lobby within the house is flanked by a living room and an open seating area that leads one into a large central courtyard.

The main courtyard punctuating the house is naturally ventilated through clear storey windows with the circulation skirting its perimeter. Sectionally, there is a flow of different volumes within. Most of the rooms are 4m high with the



Sanjay Puri is the principal architect at Mumbai-based Sanjay Puri Architects, an award-winning interior and architecture studio. @sanjay_puri_architects (Instagram)



GRAND SCHEME

The central courtyard (above and left); the porch (top left); one of the many water bodies (extreme left); arched doorways add drama (left, middle)

main living room 6.5m high, the central courtyard 12m high, the north and south courtyards are 8m high and the outdoor patios 3.6m high. Every living space and bedroom in the house open into sheltered outdoor spaces creating transitional volumes between the inside and the outside to mitigate heat gain.

Indirect sunlight permeates all the spaces filtered through arches or stone screens creating different shadow patterns throughout the day.

This house was designed with traditional principles and materials for passive cooling with contract labor from the nearby villages, stone from the vicinity, craftsmen from the region and all material sourced locally. The marble, stone, wood, lime plaster and furniture are all procured from Rajasthan.

Designed contextual to the climate, location and heritage of the region Narsighar revives the Indian traditional planning principles and revives traditional crafts, creating an energy efficient home built to last for centuries, for future generations.

Last look Kitchen



Whet your Appetite

This groundbreaking, future-forward concept for the heart of your home scores high on functionality and style

By RIDHI KALE



Forget straight lines; this curved kitchen concept from Kuche7 takes luxury living to the next level. The kitchen features an invisible cooktop that is cool to the touch but heats up the utensil effectively. This sleek and modern kitchen is truly a stunner. Made of stainless steel, it's modern for today but timeless enough to last for generations. Clearly, this is the future of cooking.

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AT www.kuche7.com

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