

MAOISM AFTER MADVI HIDMA • THE MODI MAGNET DOES IT AGAIN

THE MUTATION OF TERROR • THE HYROX WAY TO FITNESS

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RNI CODE NO. HARENG/2023/89741
VOLUME 4 ISSUE 48 WEEKLY

1 DECEMBER 2025 / ₹80

BLOODLUST IN BANGLADESH

DEATH SENTENCE FOR SHEIKH HASINA DEEPENS DHAKA'S EXISTENTIAL CRISIS

BETWEEN THE LEGACY OF LIBERATION AND THE RISE OF ISLAMISM BY SWAPAN DASGUPTA

DON'T WRITE OFF THE SECULAR NATIONALISTS BY SYED BADRUL AHSAN

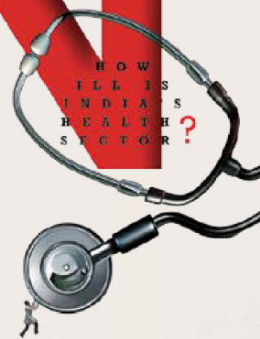
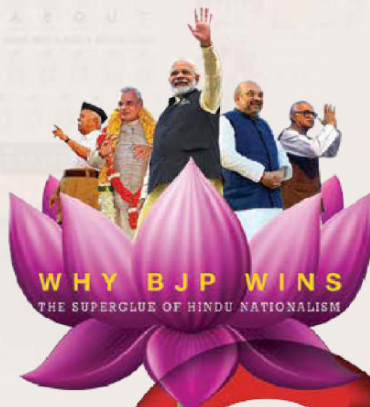
THE MUNIR-YUNUS NEXUS BY MJ AKBAR




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WHEN THE OTHERS GET
CAUGHT IN THE DETAILS.


TURN TO US
FOR THE
BIGGER PICTURE.




[NO ONE MAKES AN ARGUMENT BETTER THAN US]

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T H E B I G P I C T U R E

Patna, November 20, 2025

The Power of Two

Prime Minister Narendra Modi with Nitish Kumar at the latter's swearing-in ceremony as chief minister of Bihar for the tenth time after NDA's massive victory in the Assembly election.



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Printed and published by Raas Taneja
on behalf of Open Media Network Pvt Ltd
Printed at Thomson Press India Ltd,
18-35 Milestone, Delhi Mathura Road,
Faridabad-121007 (Haryana) and

Published in English from 1st Floor,
Tower 3A, DLF Corporate Park,
DLF City, Phase-III, MG Road, Gurugram,
Haryana -122002.
Editor: S Prasannarajan

For subscription and other enquiries:
WhatsApp openmag to 9999800012
or log on to www.openthemagazine.com
or call on our Landline no: (0124) 4561900
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Volume 4 Issue 48, Weekly, ₹80
RNI Code No. HARENG/2023/89741
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OPEN MAIL

editor@openmedianetwork.in



LETTER OF THE WEEK

NDA's massive win in the Bihar elections and Nitish Kumar's return as chief minister show how firmly Prime Minister Narendra Modi's appeal still shapes voter choices ("The Force of One", November 24, 2025). The scale of the victory suggests many voters trusted the combination of Modi's national leadership and Nitish's familiar presence in the state. Reports from the ground pointed to strong support from women voters, who turned out in large numbers. Welfare schemes aimed at them clearly played a role, giving NDA an edge in many seats. The alliance also pushed the idea that only it could keep Bihar stable and safe, a message that seemed to resonate with people who feared a slide back into political uncertainty. The verdict does more than hand Nitish another term—it sends a reminder that Modi's political influence continues to anchor the coalition. It also shows how NDA's organisational strength, especially at the booth level, continues to deliver results where it matters most. The Bihar verdict reinforces the sense that, for many voters, Modi remains the central figure in national and state politics.



Shruthi Ramachandran

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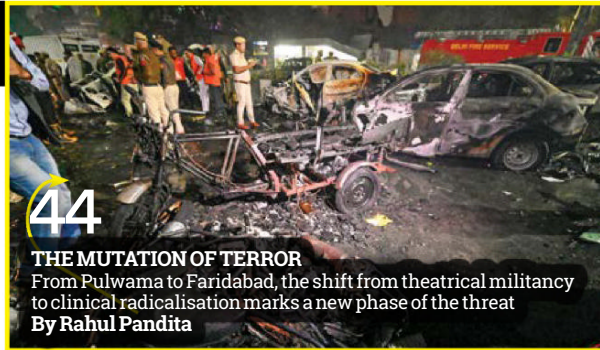
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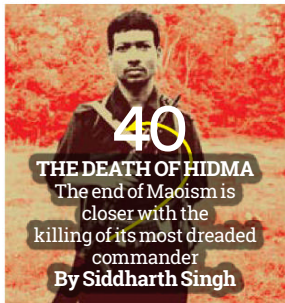
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Cover by SAURABH SINGH

THE NITISH FACTOR

Nitish Kumar's victory shows that he still has a strong grip on Bihar's politics ('Bihar Wants More of Him', November 24, 2025). Many leaders fade after a few terms, but he has managed to stay central to the state's politics through his leadership. His appeal comes from offering a sense of order in a place where politics can often feel unpredictable. His frequent shifts between alliances may draw attention, but they also show how he reads the political landscape and moves before others do. Voters seem to value this ability to navigate tough situations without drama. His continued success suggests that, for many in Bihar, experience and stability matter more than slogans or promises. The results also expose how poorly the Opposition read the mood on the ground.

Pushpa Kumari

FLOP SHOW

Prashant Kishor's poor performance in Bihar has damaged his reputation as a political planner ('The False Whiz', November 24, 2025). He entered the race with confidence, big claims and a long *padyatra*, but none of it turned into real support on the ground. His constant attacks on other leaders got attention, yet voters did not see him as a strong or reliable choice. Many felt his campaign lacked focus and was more talk than real work. His results show that giving advice and actually winning people's trust are two very different things.

KV Krishnaswamy

THE NEW THREAT

The recent blast in Delhi has raised important questions, especially with reports of 'white-collar' involvement ('The Plot Against

India', November 24, 2025). The idea that educated professionals may be drawn into such activities is unusual, but it also gives India a clearer picture of how radicalisation is changing. Understanding this shift can help security agencies respond in smarter and more informed ways. This incident shows that counterterrorism work now needs to look beyond traditional patterns. Rather than creating panic, it offers a chance to improve how institutions track early signs of influence, even in professional spaces. This attack is a reminder that India's security challenges are changing fast. Strong action is necessary, but so is a better understanding of how extremism is spreading quietly through educated spaces. This is a warning Delhi just cannot ignore.

Sumedh Bahl

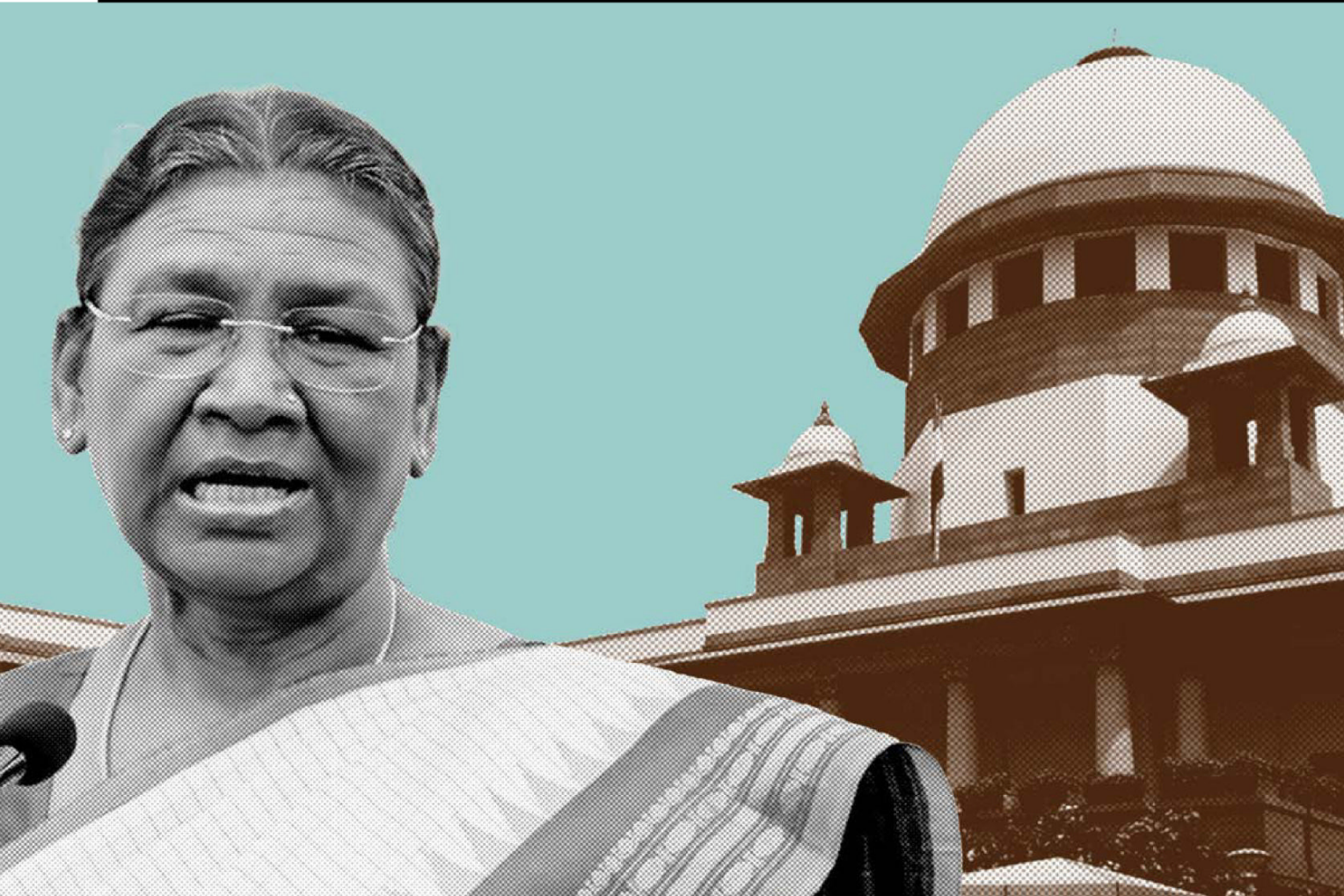


Illustration by SAURABH SINGH

| DICTUM | BY SIDDHARTH SINGH

Restoration of Constitutional Power

DOES THE governor of a state enjoy a measure of discretion in giving assent or withholding it to a Bill passed by a state Assembly? In April this year, a two-judge bench of the Supreme Court delivered a far-reaching verdict in which it eliminated almost any role for a governor in this matter. It, in effect, sought

to efface almost 75 years of a complex, and at times, difficult history. The court went as far as to prescribe time limits on governors to give assent to Bills, ranging from one to three months. It did not rest there; it prescribed time limits for the president of India if the governor reserves a Bill for the president. Even more dubiously, the court suggested that

in case a Bill was suspected to be unconstitutional, the president ought to make a reference to the apex court.

These were extraordinary interpretations of the Constitution that led to howls of protest almost instantaneously. A month later, on May 13, the president used her power to consult the court under Article 143 of the

Constitution.

On November 20, the Supreme Court delivered its advisory opinion and restored a semblance of order on the powers of a governor and the president. The president had an extensive list of 14 questions in the wake of the judgment in April. The court answered 11 questions while declining to answer three that

it said were “too broad” or did not pertain to the issue at hand.

This was a delicate issue for the court to handle. On the one hand, a number of states—ruled by Opposition parties—said the advisory jurisdiction invoked by the president (Article 143) was nothing more than an attempt to overturn the court’s judgment in April. The court does give the chance for a review option, through review petitions, but that is a different process. In any case, the powers of a governor (and the president) cannot remain under a cloud for too long. The risks involved are too great.

The court, led by the Chief Justice of India BR Gavai, acted with dispatch to its credit. In just a little over six months, it clarified the constitutional position once again.

The crux of the court’s verdict is simple: The governor does enjoy a measure of discretion when it comes to giving assent to Bills passed by a state legislature. The governor does not have the discretion to simply veto a Bill. The ordinary wording of Article 200, which deals with the governor’s powers to give assent to Bills, does allow withholding of assent, but this power has been interpreted away by the courts. On November 20, the Supreme Court reiterated this position but crucially restored discretion to the governor to refer Bills to the president or even take time to give assent to Bills. In April, the court had eviscerated these powers of a governor completely. Even if he wanted to refer the Bill to the president, it imposed severe constraints on him to do so. For virtually any step to be taken under Article 200, he

had to listen to his council of ministers.

It goes without saying that was an extraordinarily dangerous proposition for India.

A part of the problem in the courts entering the ‘political thicket’ is that they are not trained to do that. The judicial function is backward-looking: it is meant to correct errors that have occurred at the hands of the executive and, much more sparingly, at the hands of the legislature. In contrast, the legislative function is forward-looking: it channels democratic aspirations of a people into laws that

enable better governance and welfare. The courts are simply not equipped to handle this task. And yet, Indian courts routinely exercise “judicial review” to strike down laws, often based on petitions presented by political parties opposed to the government of the day. This tendency has become much more pronounced in recent years. Judicial review serves its purpose when there is obviously, on the face of it, some patent unconstitutionality in an Act passed by the legislature. Too much intervention on this score has a dangerous fallout: legislatures, including Parliament, become mere permissions offices while courts become the final arbiters of the legislative process.

Now, no court wants to say this openly as that would be too brazen a thing to say.

But nor do they draw a line where it is necessary, say, by declining such petitions at the admission stage. Often, it leads to incongruous situations where ‘activist’ judges end up issuing judgments that have to be reviewed later or, as in the current matter, some other way has to be found to limit the damage.

This process went along a path of logical progression when states began to challenge the actions of their governors. The April judgment was the product of a challenge mounted by the Tamil Nadu government against its gov-

The ordinary wording of Article 200, which deals with the governor’s powers to give assent to Bills, does allow withholding of assent. But this power has been interpreted away by the courts

ernor who, allegedly, did not give his assent to Bills in time. But giving assent to a Bill is as much a constitutional process as it is a political one. A governor, for example, has a duty to prevent Bills that he thinks can be deleterious or dangerous for any number of reasons. He—and not the courts—is the real check on ensuring that a legislature does not err in this matter. The discretion afforded to him by the original, 1950, Constitution, was part and parcel of the package of checks and balances that the Constituent Assembly thought was necessary.

India, no doubt, has a difficult history where governors have abused their power to dismiss duly-elected governments or interfere in other wanton ways. But over time, through judicial disciplining and by a process of learning,

governors and the Centre have come to understand that such actions are unacceptable and have political consequences. Instead, the courts seem to have gone too far in the other direction where it imposed dangerous constraints on governors and the president herself. Juvenal’s line *Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?* applies more to the courts today than to India’s much-maligned politicians.

The court’s attempt to restore the balance is best described in its own words: “...The governor is the sole authority to reserve a Bill for the consideration of the president under Article 200. For a moment, if it is assumed that there is no discretion, then even if advice is tendered contrary to the written text of the Constitution, the governor will be bound by such advice. If that be so, the governor and the president ultimately fail in their duty to protect and defend the Constitution because the president’s power of assent is hinged on the governor’s power to reserve the Bill for the consideration of the president. Viewed from both angles, the Constitution must be read as conferring on the governor this discretion.” (Paragraph 83 of the Supreme Court’s advisory opinion.)

The Supreme Court chose the path of prudence on November 20. It undid the damage that one of its benches inflicted on the Indian polity some months ago. In too diverse a country, there are dangers that lurk, dangers that cannot be anticipated except by the men (and women) in its far-flung districts and provinces. Their choices ought to be respected. ■

| INSIDER | **By RAJEEV DESHPANDE**

DIFFERENT STROKES IN LALU CLAN

The fragile health of the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) patriarch Lalu Prasad has worsened the infighting within his clan with his second daughter Rohini Acharya walking out on the family claiming to have been insulted and abused. The targets of her ire are two aides of her brother Tejashwi who is Lalu's chosen political heir. The magnitude of the RJD-led opposition's debacle in the Bihar election has brought the family feud out in the open. The problem for Lalu is that he needs to secure Tejashwi's leadership from

the fallout of the poll wipeout while ensuring rivalries between his children are reined in. It's a tough ask as Lalu is no longer the force he was and poor health has confined him to his residence. In the past, he could easily work phones and settle matters. Not so any more. Tejashwi hinted that demands within the family influenced ticket distribution. The suggestion that Rohini wrested a Lok Sabha nomination in 2024—she lost the election—only confirms tensions within the family. Speaking at a party meeting where he was elected leader of the legislative party, Tejashwi wondered whether he was to take care of family demands or the party. Lalu's eldest daughter Misa Bharti successfully contested the Pataliputra seat in the Lok Sabha election and has kept her distance from Rohini's criticism of RJD's functioning. Three other daughters, understood to have sided with Rohini, have not gone public. At the peak of his powers as Bihar chief minister, Lalu's word was law. His problem is that RJD's reduced circumstances limits sops like legislative council membership to appease unhappy members of his clan.



BJP HAS A FIGHT IN UP

Uttar Pradesh and Bihar are quite dissimilar even though both states saw the rise of Mandal stalwarts like Mulayam Singh Yadav and Lalu Prasad. For one, while the M-Y (Muslim-Yadav) combination is a significant vote bank for the Samajwadi Party, the demographic distribution is

not as concentrated as in Bihar. This makes the role of non-Yadav Other Backward Classes (OBCs) even more crucial to the electoral results in UP. Akhilesh Yadav delivered an unexpected jolt to BJP in the 2024 Lok Sabha polls with a shrewd selection of candidates that worked the caste matrix in his favour. As compared to Bihar, BJP has a harder task in UP.



Punjab Farm Fires

A dip in farm fires in Punjab is being touted as a major success story that should ease Delhi's pollution problems. The claim that the reduction is to the tune of 90 per cent sounds impressive but a little misleading. Punjab recorded more than 4,500 farm fires from mid-September to mid-November, while the comparable figure for Haryana is in hundreds. It is Haryana that has brought



down the overall incidence of farm fires significantly, while Punjab still has work to do. While commentators are quick to take aim at Diwali fireworks, they find it convenient to skip a comparison of Haryana and Punjab.



Illustrations by SAURABH SINGH

Field Marshal Must Not Miscalculate

ARMY CHIEF GENERAL UPENDRA DWIVEDI'S WARNING TO PAKISTAN THAT OPERATION SINDOOR WAS JUST AN 88-HOUR TRAILER OF WHAT COULD HAPPEN IF PAKISTAN FORGOT THE LESSONS OF THE MAY 7-10 CONFLICT DID NOT NECESSARILY HAVE A CONNECTION WITH THE NOVEMBER 10 TERROR ATTACK AT RED FORT. BUT IT WAS CERTAINLY INTENDED TO REMIND THE NEIGHBOUR THAT INDIA'S DOCTRINE ON TERRORISM HAS CHANGED. PAKISTAN'S FIELD MARSHAL ASIM MUNIR SHOULD NOT COUNT ON HIS IMPROVED RELATIONS WITH THE TRUMP WHITE HOUSE TO ASSUME A LEVEL OF IMMUNITY FROM INDIAN RETALIATION. THAT MIGHT BE A SERIOUS MISCALCULATION.



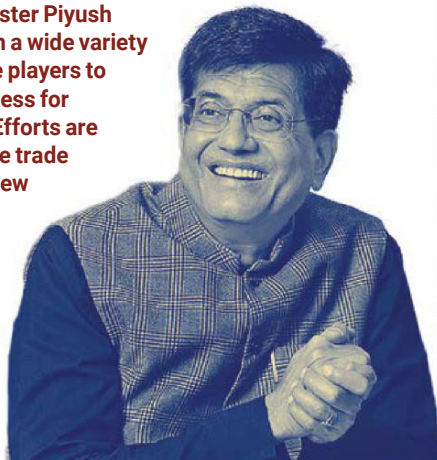
YES, SIR IN CONGRESS

On November 17, Congress held a meeting of party leaders from states where the Election Commission is due to conduct the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of elector rolls. The meeting is evidence, if any were required, that Congress will continue to cling to Rahul Gandhi's "vote chori" campaign even if the Bihar elections demonstrated that the issue does not matter at the ground level. Expect Parliament's Winter Session to be disrupted on the issue just as it was during the Monsoon Session.

NOT TRADING INTERESTS

India's decision to import as much as 10 per cent of its LPG imports from the US in 2026 can be read as an indication of its preparedness to hike energy sourcing from America and reducing Russian imports. But it would be wrong to read it merely in terms of US tariff pressure as Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal engages with a wide variety of private and state players to expand market access for Indian exporters. Efforts are in high gear to close trade agreements with New Zealand and the European Union.

It is apparent that India wants the tariff standoff to end; it is not holding its breath.



Stabilising Ties with China

Meanwhile India's relations with China are stable even if progress is incremental. The recent round of military commander-level talks was marked by commitments on both sides to adhere to patrolling agreements reached in October last year. The challenge of troop reduction remains but both sides are looking to de-emphasise areas of discord, at least for a while till



respective relations with the US settle into some degree of normalcy. The equilibrium with China is important in the context of ties with Pakistan being volatile and unpredictable.



| NEWSMAKER **ANMOL BISHNOI** |

BROTHER IN CRIME

The notorious gangster who has been deported to India thrived on publicity

S OON AFTER THE shooting at Salman Khan's house, Anmol Bishnoi put up a Facebook post claiming responsibility on behalf of the gang that his brother Lawrence Bishnoi led. In filmy style, he directly addressed Khan, "Dawood Ibrahim and Chhota Shakeel are your gods, but we have two dogs by their names." It brought the contrast in how the equations of the underworld were changing. Dawood has maintained a low profile for decades, but the Bishnoi gang thrived on publicity, and Anmol's name featured in their prominent hits. There was the Punjabi rapper Sidhu Moose Wala murder in 2022, the firing at Khan's house in 2024, and, soon after, the roadside murder of Khan's friend, the politician Baba Siddique.

His brother was already in jail, but like Dawood, Anmol had left India to operate from abroad, eventually ending up in the US. He was caught in 2024 for being in the country with fake papers and FBI later found out about his criminal antecedents. Meanwhile, the country's newly elected president, Donald Trump, had upped the ante on curbing illegal migration. Anmol has just been shuttled over to India and is under the custody of the National Investigation Agency. He was not extradited but deported along with other illegal migrants, a far quicker process.

How much his arrest will curb the gang's activities remains to be seen. Lawrence has been incarcerated since 2015, but the scope of their criminal operations or the internationalisation of it has actually increased. Like him, jail might not be the last one hears of Anmol. ■

—MADHAVANKUTTY PILLAI

| NOISEMAKER **KC VENUGOPAL** |

BAD LOSER

Congress leader and Rahul Gandhi confidant KC Venugopal has the unenviable task of articulating the decisions of the Congress Working Committee that are often enough dictated by the party high command. Days after the I.N.D.I.A. bloc and Congress in particular were wiped out in

the Bihar elections, Venugopal told the media that the party was ready to hit the streets against allegations of voter manipulation. The brazenness of the claim after a stinging rejection at the hustings did not deter Venugopal. After all, Congress darbaris have no other choice.

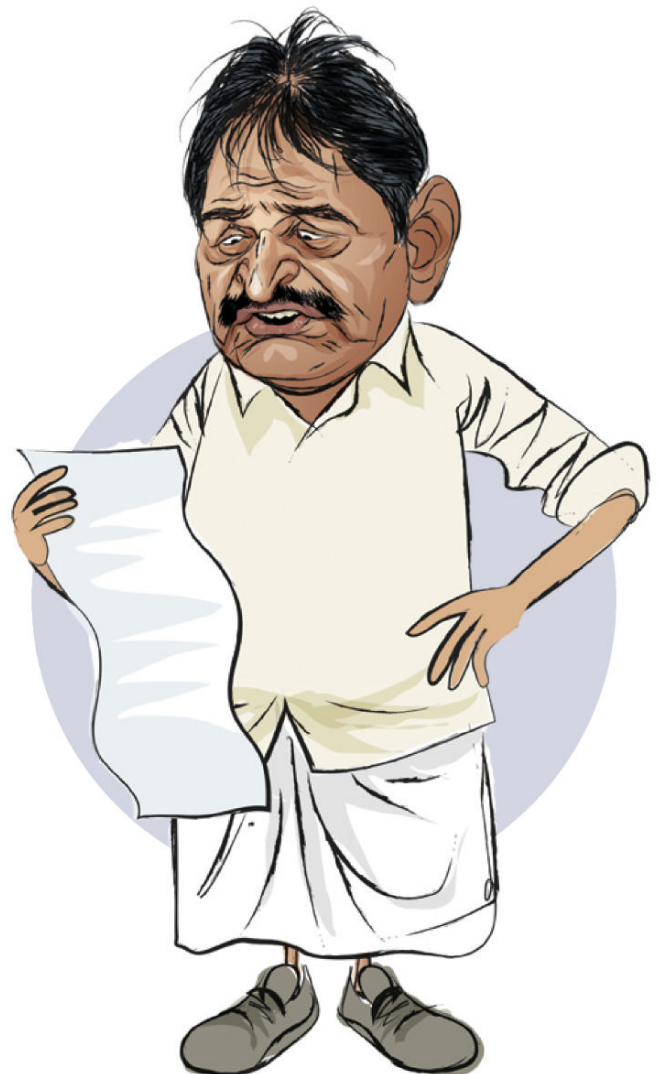


Illustration by SAURABH SINGH



झारखण्ड
25 वर्ष
रजत पर्व
का उत्सव

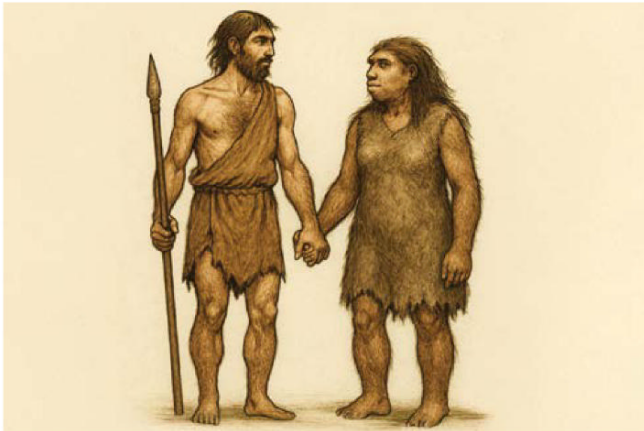
उलगुलान के
महानायक
भगवान
बिरसा मुंडा

की 150वीं जयंती पर 25 वर्ष का
युवा झारखण्ड धरती आबा को नमन करता है



अनंत संभावनाओं की ओर...

Illustration by SAURABH SINGH



| IDEAS |

INTIMACY

The accepted view in human evolutionary history for a long time has been that our species—modern humans or *Homo sapiens*—thrived on the planet at the expense of other human species. That when early modern humans migrated out of Africa and encountered others like Neanderthals, they were ruthless and aggressive enough to lead to the extinction of all others. There's a good reason to hold such a view. All that's left of species like Neanderthal today, after all, are what we dig up at fossil sites. But in recent times, we have also come to learn that our species didn't just fight and compete. DNA studies have found that humans of non-African ancestry also carry bits of Neanderthal DNA, revealing there was interbreeding at play too.

Now, a new study

suggests that Neanderthals and early modern humans were probably intimately acquainted in other ways too. They kissed each other.

An earlier study had found that both our species and Neanderthals carried the same oral microbe for hundreds of thousands of years suggesting some swapping of saliva. This new study, carried out by evolutionary biologists from the University of Oxford, suggests that the two species were probably kissing each other.

The researchers found that kissing is actually a very ancient trait, and that it evolved in an ancestor of large apes somewhere between 21.5 million and 16.9 million years ago. Neanderthals and our ancestors sharing smooches might seem incongruous to our ideas about our evolutionary past. But perhaps that's in need of an update. ■

| WORD'S WORTH |

A kiss is a secret which takes the lips for the ear.

EDMOND ROSTAND
FRENCH PLAYWRIGHT

| ANGLE |

THE FUTURE IS PARASOCIAL

Cambridge Dictionary's word of the year highlights the reality of illusory relationships

Most Tamilians might not be aware of "parasocial", the word of the year chosen by Cambridge Dictionary, but they have been living it since the 1960s when MG Ramachandran became a superstar in the state. His millions of fans felt a personal relationship with him, and when he died, some even committed suicide. This trend, of feeling connected with someone far removed by celebritydom, and with whom they would never come into contact, continued with Rajinikanth and others superstars. It is directly correlated to film stars having such an outsized role in the state's politics.

You might not see such intense parasocial behaviour elsewhere, but it exists in many degrees. Why else do people throng outside the houses of Amitabh Bachchan and Shah Rukh Khan just to get a wave of their hands? It is a one-sided relationship, and that is what makes it an intriguing phenomenon. Adulation and obsession, that in a different era, were reserved for gods, have been transferred to movie stars and entertainers as the medium through which they entered lives widened. If a drama troupe had to painstakingly go from village to village

Adulation and obsession, that in a different era were reserved for gods, have been transferred to movie stars and entertainers as the medium through which they entered lives widened

once upon a time, a movie can captivate the whole country simultaneously, and television comes right into homes.

Cambridge chose the word because of something else that is happening. People are now having such one-sided relationships with artificial intelligence as chatbots speak and respond like real people. They can be given form through image and video generation. Users are developing intimate connections with an entity that exists only as an illusion. At least MGR and Amitabh Bachchan were flesh and blood.

One can only imagine how much the world will change not too far in the future, when virtual reality and brain implants make it possible to see and feel these illusory beings. And they would not be flawed like the usual man or woman. Is there any reason for relationships between human beings to even exist anymore then? You might have it with immediate family, but when there are perfect friends and lovers available easily, why would anyone else be needed? ■

—MADHAVANKUTTY PILLAI



MOHAMMED BIN SALMAN

DONALD TRUMP

REUTERS

THE US-SAUDI RAPPROCHEMENT

The guest was more restrained than his exuberant host. But for all that, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) and Saudi Arabia are back in America's best books. That's not a bad thing geopolitically from the US point of view, as the Saudis had been inching ever closer to China, doing joint military exercises with the PLA and, not long ago, willing to bury the hatchet with Tehran. Turned into a

pariah in DC and the capitals of the West by the Biden administration, with retrospective regret, MBS always held the cards and was clever enough to bide his time. After all, the White House would need help with oil prices, to say nothing of diplomatic navigation. But it is one thing to sell Riyadh F-35 stealth fighters and another to say, even in Trump's apparently unthinking way, that the US would come to

the defence of Saudi Arabia under attack. Such commitment to war is usually thought through. Nevertheless, the rapprochement is good news for Israel despite the fact that MBS is holding out against joining the Abraham Accords without a return to the two-state roadmap. And Trump is not helping Riyadh with civilian nuclear energy yet, given Saudi ambitions of chasing nuclear weapons. ■

Ocean of Spies

The *Yantar* is at it again. The alleged Russian spy ship, owned by the defence ministry, was escorted out of Dutch waters soon after it stopped broadcasting its location north of the Latvian coast in early November. Now, the *Yantar* has used lasers to disrupt RAF pilots in pursuit north of Scotland. Taking serious note of the lasers, UK Defence Secretary John Healey said military options were ready should the vessel change course: "My message to Russia and to Putin is this: we see you. We know what you're doing." Russia says the *Yantar* is a research vessel but NATO believes it maps undersea cables, with a mandate of surveillance in peacetime and sabotage during conflict. ■

GETTY IMAGES



Who's Afraid of Sanae Takaichi?

If China invaded Taiwan, the resulting war, with or without US involvement, would be catastrophic for Japan. Because there would be a blockade disrupting trade, stopping food and energy imports without which Japan cannot function. That's why Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi gave a frank answer to a Diet member's question whether a Chinese attack on Taiwan could constitute

a "survival-threatening" situation envisioned in a 2015 law under which Japan might have to take military action. The Chinese response



was immediate and out of control. Unprintable abuse was heaped on Japan's first woman prime minister from official social media accounts and even by diplomats. The outburst of the wolf warriors was followed by Chinese tourists and professionals being told to stay away, temporary snapping of business ties, and aggressive Chinese coast guard patrols around Japan. Beijing's reaction is usually over-the-top

at any unfavourable mention of its designs on Taiwan but perhaps the CCP is worried that given time, Takaichi, the hawkish protégée of Shinzo Abe, will further harden Japan's evolving military doctrine. Thus it would make sense, as Walter Russell Mead argues in the *Wall Street Journal*, to weaken her by making her political opponents panic. Will Takaichi, with ambitions of being Iron Lady 2.0, yield to bullying? ■

FUNDING A FORTUNE

Time-tested methods to choose mutual funds

FOR MOST INDIAN investors, mutual funds are the bridge between the safety of bank deposits and the excitement of the stock market. But with thousands of schemes jostling for attention, picking the right one can be overwhelming. A little method, however, goes a long way.

Start with your goal, not with the fund. Are you saving for a down-payment in 3-5 years, your child's education in 10-12 years, or retirement 25 years away? Short-term goals usually suit debt or hybrid funds, while long-term goals can afford the ups and downs of equity funds. Matching fund type to time horizon is the first filter.

Next, understand your risk appetite. If a 20-25 per cent temporary



SAURABH SINGH

fall in value will keep you awake at night, a mid-cap or small-cap fund is not for you. Conservative investors might prefer large-cap or balanced advantage funds, while aggressive investors can explore flexi-cap, mid-cap, and sector funds. Use basic risk-profiling tools offered by platforms and advisors; they are not perfect, but they clarify your comfort zone.

Performance matters, but context matters more. Do not chase last year's stars. Instead, evaluate 3-5 year returns across market cycles and compare the fund with its benchmark index and category average. Check consistency: has the fund beaten its benchmark most of the time, or just in 1-2 lucky years?

Cost is another quiet but powerful factor. For most investors, regular plans through distributors are convenient, but direct plans offer lower expense ratios—and higher net return over time. Also compare portfolio turnover—excessively high churn can add hidden costs.

Look closely at the fund house and fund manager. Established AMCs with strong research process and experienced fund managers inspire more confidence.

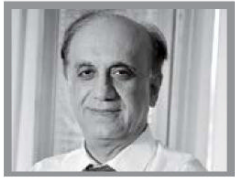
Finally, keep it simple. Two or four well-chosen, diversified funds are enough for most portfolios. Invest via SIPs, review annually, and resist the urge to tinker with every market move. In mutual fund investing, discipline usually matters more than discovery. ■

—MOINAK MITRA



CON ARTIST POSES AS PROFESSOR

A Korean content creator named Walter K is walking around Rajeev Chowk in Delhi when an elderly man with a pleasant disposition approaches him. The man, it turns out, is a professor who offers to show the tourist around. In the viral video that Walter uploaded on Instagram, the two strike up a friendship, as the professor guides him through the city and a number of its locations. But as becomes evident, something is off. The genial senior citizen isn't quite pleasant. He is probably not even a professor. A horrid time ensues as the tourist realises that the person showing him around is actually a scammer trying to con unsuspecting tourists. He struggles to get away and to fend off the individual's attempt to extort money, until he finally screams for help and the scammer flees. "It was a big lesson for me," the tourist would write on Instagram. "I was reminded once again that everywhere, there are both good and bad people." ■



Beware Superintelligence

Will GenAI deliver real transformation?

IS THE ARTIFICIAL Intelligence (AI) bubble about to burst? Not yet, not quite. Is it a bubble at all? Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) has powerful advocates. Elon Musk, the world's richest man, said in a recent podcast that "superintelligence" will run everything by 2030.

What Musk means by superintelligence is a GenAI module trained to be not only more intelligent than any living human but possessing both reasoning power and empathy—two qualities sceptics say GenAI today lacks.

Meta CEO Mark Zuckerberg is even more bullish on AI than Musk. He has created a division within Meta called superintelligence and hired million-dollar AI researchers to work on advanced GenAI models. He is pouring over \$100 billion in building giant datacentres that house supercomputers on which GenAI models can be trained. These datacentres are gluttons for power: many need over 5 gigawatts (GW), enough to power a US city of two million people.

The first warning signs that exuberance over a GenAI-run superintelligent future was overdone came last week. The world's most aggressive venture capital firm, Softbank, sold its entire shareholding of \$5.83 billion in AI chipmaker Nvidia, the world's most valuable company with a market capitalisation of \$5 trillion.

Softbank Founder and CEO Masayoshi Son said the sale was to raise funds for investing in other stocks, including several AI companies. The Japanese venture capitalist already has stakes in AI firms, OpenAI and PerplexityAI, so Son's explanation wore thin. Softbank's CFO Yoshimitsu Goto was circumspect: "I can't say if we're in an AI bubble or not."

For one of the world's largest venture capitalist firms with a net profit in the July-September quarter of \$16.6 billion (₹1.50 lakh crore) and a market capitalisation of \$210 billion (₹18.61 lakh crore), Softbank's explanation for the Nvidia sale raised eyebrows. GenAI is unquestionably a transformative technology. But the narrative built around it by firms like Zuckerberg's Meta, Sam Altman's OpenAI and Musk's Xai is partly aimed at attracting investor funding for AI "use cases" that so far have been underwhelming. Altman has himself often used the word bubble to describe the GenAI boom, calling some

company valuations "insane".

The debate on GenAI has now turned to whether the technology can overtime pose an existential danger to humankind. Some of the alarm is overheated and plain wrong. But the creation of "superintelligence" has drawn warnings from Geoffrey Hinton, the 2024 Nobel Prize winner for physics who is regarded as one of the godfathers of AI.

Hinton told BBC Radio 4 after winning the physics Nobel last year that there was a "10 per cent to 20 per cent chance" that AI would lead to human extinction within the next three decades. That is clearly a case of super-anxiety over the imagined destructive power of superintelligence. Hinton, however, backed his views with action. He resigned last year from Google which is at the vanguard of GenAI development.

Hinton added: "My worry is that just leaving it to the profit motive of large companies is not going to be sufficient to make sure they develop it safely. Most of the experts in the field think that probably within the next 20 years, we're going to develop AIs that are smarter than people. And that's a very scary thought."

It isn't actually. The other godfather of AI, Yann LeCun, chief scientist at Zuckerberg's Meta, feels Hinton worries too much. He says: "AI could actually save humanity from extinction."

As always, the truth lies between the two extremes. The real reason for the drama orchestrated by Altman, Zuckerberg and Musk over the superpower of GenAI is to attract investors to fund their companies' expensive plans to create superintelligence. The huge datacentres being built across America need a tsunami of private equity funding. Without an existential narrative, they won't get it.

But increasingly hard questions are being asked. What are the real-life use cases of GenAI? They have helped medical diagnostics, made coding almost instantaneous, and automated industry processes. So far, GenAI is about speed, not innovation. Humanoid robots in China strut around shopfloors, often colliding with each other and tumbling down. Many remember the excitement over Metaverse, IOT and Web3.0. Most have remained acronyms.

Will GenAI deliver real transformation? Masayoshi Son, for one, is hedging his bets. ■

The real reason for the drama orchestrated by Altman, Zuckerberg and Musk over the superpower of GenAI is to attract investors to fund their companies' expensive plans to create superintelligence

DFCCIL: 20 YEARS OF FAST TRACKING INDIA'S ECONOMIC GROWTH



The Dedicated Freight Corridor Corporation of India Limited (DFCCIL), commemorated a significant milestone- 20th Foundation Day on 31st October, 2025 at Bharat Mandapam, New Delhi. The event was a reflection on two decades of remarkable achievements that have redefined India's freight transportation landscape.

A visionary initiative by the Indian Railway's Ministry, the Dedicated Freight Corridors (DFC) to build a sustainable golden quadrilateral linking the four metropolitan cities of Delhi, Mumbai, Chennai and Howrah, and two diagonals Delhi-Chennai and Mumbai-Howrah. The network has decongested rail traffic and accelerated freight movement.

MILESTONE ACHIEVEMENT

On the landmark occasion of the 20th Foundation Day of DFCCIL, Shri Satish Kumar, Chairman and CEO, Railway Board, in his address to the august audience of senior officials from the fraternity of Indian Railways, DFCCIL and stakeholders, proudly highlighted the schedule 'A' Public Sector Undertaking's tremendous operational growth. He asserted that "in 2024-25 alone, DFCCIL recorded a 48% surge in train operations, achieving over three hundred million NTKM per day." This impressive performance, he added, has significantly capable of boosting Indian Railways' modal share in freight transport while significantly reducing national logistics

costs, a leap towards a more efficient and sustainable logistics ecosystem. On the historic occasion, DFCCIL also launched a colourful history book titled Revolutionizing Freight Transportation in India - Dedicated Freight Corridors - Vision to Reality.

OPERATIONAL EXCELLENCE

By adopting cutting-edge technology and smart strategies, DFCCIL, empowered its operational efficiency and technological prowess, manifold In FY 2024-25, an average of over 357 freight trains were operated per day, totalling 1,30,116

DFCCIL's pivotal role has enhanced India's freight connectivity through the development of Gati Shakti Cargo Terminals (GCTs) and Multimodal Logistics Hubs (MMLHs).



trains running successfully during the review period. The Gross Tonne Kilometre (GTKM) surged to 1,92,146 million, while the Net Tonne Kilometre (NTKM) stood at 1,11,898 million with steady growth in productivity and reliability being the norm.

BUSINESS AND CONNECTIVITY EXPANSION

DFCCIL has played a pivotal role in enhancing India's freight connectivity through the development of Gati Shakti Cargo Terminals (GCTs) and Multimodal Logistics Parks (MMLPs). The inauguration of the Gothangam Gati Shakti Cargo Terminal in March 2025, along with the commissioning of terminals at New Daud Khan and New Ankleshwar gave impetus and improved regional logistics flow.

Innovative initiatives such as the 'Trucks-on-Train' and 'High-Speed Small Cargo Service' have further bolstered first and last-mile connectivity, promoting a shift from road to rail transport. In collaboration with DMIC-IIT-GNL, DFCCIL

is also developing the New Dadri Multimodal Logistics Hub, a transformative project expected to enhance industrial linkages and facilitate seamless trade movement across India.

INFRASTRUCTURE AND ENGINEERING EXCELLENCE

DFCCIL's infrastructure achievements stand as a testament to its engineering excellence. The completion of 37 Road Over Bridges (ROBs), 50 Road Flyovers (RFOs), and 544 Road Under Bridges (RUBs) during FY 2024–



A landmark breakthrough came with the operation of 'Rudrashttra', India's longest freight train, stretching 4.5 kilometres with 354 wagons and seven locomotives.

Participation in Global Rail 2025 in Abu Dhabi, the 16th International Railway Equipment Exhibition (IREE 2025) in New Delhi, and the Tomorrow Mobility World Congress 2025 at Fira Barcelona, Barcelona are events where DFCCIL showcased India's achievements in freight corridor development, multimodal integration, and sustainable logistics, reinforcing its role as a global leader in railway modernization.

A KEY PLAYER IN LOGISTICS REVOLUTION

India's logistics sector, valued at approximately ₹24 lakh crore, has witnessed a paradigm shift due to DFCCIL's contributions. The

25 reflects the organization's commitment to improving logistics mobility and safety.

Among its major engineering triumphs, the Kalamboli Rail Flyover — featuring a 110.5 metre-long Open Web Steel Girder — remains the longest such structure to date, symbolizing DFCCIL's technical expertise. Another highlight was the successful breakthrough of the Kundewal Tunnel, which underscored the corporation's precision in project execution and adherence to deadlines.

Additionally, a recent successful trial run between New Saphale and Indian Railways' Kharbao station marked the operational readiness of the Vaitarna–Kharbao section, further moving towards completion.

TECHNOLOGICAL INNOVATION AND GLOBAL COLLABORATION

DFCCIL led Indian Railways' modernization drive by introducing advanced technologies aimed at enhancing safety, reliability, and performance. Cutting-edge systems such as the Machine Vision Inspection System (MVIS), Hot Axle Box

Detector (HABD), Wheel Impact Load Detector (WILD), Top-of-Rail Lubrication System, Broken Rail Detection System, Drone-based Inspection Systems, Dedicated Freight Inspection System (DFIS), and New DFCCIL's innovation Clip Applicator were deployed across the network. These innovations have transformed DFCCIL into a smart, data-driven freight corridor, capable of real-time monitoring and predictive maintenance. The Global Heavy Haul Seminar 2025 hosted at Bharat Mandapam, New Delhi, saw experts converging from seven heavy-haul railway nations that underscored DFCCIL's growing global prominence.

To foster research and innovation, DFCCIL has also forged strategic partnerships with leading academic and industry institutions, including Gati Shakti University, IIT Roorkee, LORAM, Plasser, L2M (IISc Bengaluru), and Monash University (Australia). These collaborations are driving advancements in freight technology, safety systems, and sustainable rail logistics.

DFCCIL is also a prominent face of India's railway innovation on global platforms.

corporation's corridors have been instrumental in reducing logistics costs from 14% of GDP to around 8–9%, strengthening India's industrial competitiveness and self-reliance.

A cost comparison clearly illustrates this impact: while rail transport costs ₹1.96 per tonne-kilometre, road transport stands at ₹3.78, and water transport at ₹2.30. DFCCIL's operations thus ensure a more cost-effective, high-efficiency, and environmentally sustainable logistics ecosystem, a critical enabler of Viksit Bharat.

FUTURE ROAD MAP

DFCCIL symbolises India's freight transformation— connecting industries, empowering trade, and driving economic growth. With continued focus on innovation, sustainability, and technological integration, the freight giant is not only redefining India's logistics landscape but also propelling the nation toward a more connected, efficient, and sustainable future in freight transportation for a self-reliant India. ■



The Rigmaroles of Bihar

Nobody can win an election without an economic programme

THE LAST DREAM of any politician is the search for a place in national memory. Some British leaders, in the age when they could set a trend, realised that a good quip could make you more memorable than a hundred worthwhile decisions. The quip did not have to be restrained by accuracy, but it had to sound intelligent. Benjamin Disraeli, the 19th-century British prime minister, once remarked that the most successful man in life is the one who has the best information.

By that measure, Congress would never have swept the elections in Bihar. Congress has become dysfunctional because of institutional collapse. A political party should be structured like a pyramid populated by a chain of functionaries who create a two-lane highway of information that connects the pinnacle to the base. Knowledge of ground reality is supplemented by media and other independent sources. Congress leaders were shocked instead of being merely surprised because they had lost touch with their roots in Bihar.

Embitterment is neither a sensible option nor a substitute for policy. The message from Bihar has been consistent. Congress numbers in the Bihar Assembly have declined consistently over the last three decades, from 71 in 1990 to six in 2025. The lowest was four, in 2010. Even the Muslim vote deserted Congress in 2025 where it found an alternative. The hardline All India Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen (AIMIM) got five seats in Seemanchal, the north-eastern region of the state. The reduced representation of Muslims in the Bihar Assembly is some cause for worry. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) does not name Muslim candidates because they do not bring the community vote; parties like the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) and Congress now take the Muslim vote for granted. This has opened space in Bihar for AIMIM.

There is a parallel message: regional parties are now a decisive component in an electoral victory. This election was a battle between allies as much as principals. RJD got 23 per cent of the vote across 161 constituencies;

Illustrations by SAURABH SINGH

Congress has become dysfunctional because of institutional collapse. Knowledge of ground reality is supplemented by media and other independent sources. Congress leaders were shocked instead of being merely surprised because they had lost touch with their roots in Bihar



and BJP 21 per cent from 101. The effective difference lay in the gravitational pull of allies. The Janata Dal (United), or JD(U), matched BJP with 19.25 per cent from 101 seats, but Congress could not deliver more than 8.71 per cent to its senior partner. BJP and JD(U) took out insurance by adding Chirag Paswan to their coalition. This turned victory into a sweep. RJD had the chance of bringing Chirag Paswan into its alliance, but miscalculated.

A strong local identity becomes crucial in regional elections. Bihar has, unusually, two regional behemoths; if they find the right ally they rule. RJD has boxed itself into the defeated corner by rejecting options. It will not look beyond Congress. Nitish Kumar is flexible. In the last 10 years he has switched from BJP to RJD and back again. Nor has this hurt his secular credentials. Voters rely on what you do rather than what you say.

In adjoining Bengal, Mamata Banerjee has, so far, proved that she can outflank allies; but perhaps the time has come when she should begin to worry about the revival of the Left Front, which can easily swallow a chunk of her vote, leaving her a few apples short of a picnic. The Marxists have become a Bengali-centric regional party in Bengal, and are showing a few incipient signs of revival. Congress is comatose.

One of the more astonishing facts of the Congress dilemma is that it worships Indira Gandhi from every pulpit, as indeed it has a right to do since her commitment to nationalism was nonpareil, but it refuses to learn from what she did. She became prime minister in 1966, at the onset of the first Congress decline. In 1967 Congress scraped out a bare majority in Parliament and lost Assembly elections from Punjab to Bengal. Indira Gandhi presided over the rebirth of Congress in 1969 with an economic programme for the poor and the promise to remove poverty, which won her a spectacular victory in March 1971. Who mentions an economic programme now?

This is what allies are telling Congress. Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) leader MK Stalin congratulated Nitish Kumar over his victory, lauded RJD leader Tejashwi Yadav's "tireless campaign", and reminded Congress that only "welfare-driven credibility, social and ideological coalitions, clear political



messaging and dedicated management" win elections. Bihar, he added, was a lesson for everyone. Stalin's statement has implications, not least because it was drafted with some thought. By recognising the legitimacy of Nitish Kumar's re-election, he undermined the vote-theft alibi. Bihar voters made their decision on a logical parameter: governance. Nitish Kumar may not have been ideal, but they found the alternative unacceptable. Stalin urged introspection above accusation. From Maharashtra Supriya Sule got the statistics right but chose to underplay their meaning. If all principal parties retained their vote share, as she pointed out, then there was no anti-incumbency. The first objective of governments in an election is to preserve the winning vote share. It takes a shift of just 2 or 3 per cent to trigger an earthquake.

BJP brought Narendra Modi's vote to its alliance. He has become an electoral magnet; without his leadership, BJP's vote share would plummet. He gets the votes of the poor because of a sustained social welfare programme that has ensured food security to 800 million Indians and raised the aspirations of the underprivileged. The World Bank has confirmed that poverty in India has been reduced to less than 2 per cent. That is what mattered most in Bihar. ■

MK Stalin lauded RJD leader Tejashwi Yadav's 'tireless campaign'. Bihar, he added, was a lesson for everyone. Bihar voters made their decision on a logical parameter: governance. Nitish Kumar may not have been ideal, but they found the alternative unacceptable

The Reign of One

A constitutional subversion in Pakistan to suit the absolute ruler

By HARSH V PANT and SHIVAM SHEKHAWAT

ON NOVEMBER 13, the president of Pakistan, Asif Ali Zardari, signed into law, the 27th amendment to the country's constitution. The signing of the amendment, which was preceded by weeks of internal debates and discussions and the prime minister's attempts at garnering support from his allied parties, has formally redrawn the contract which governed the ties between the civilian government and the military establishment, 'disempowering' the Supreme Court by relegating it as an appellate court and handing over decision-making powers over matters of constitutional importance to the newly established Federal Constitutional Court (FCC). In Pakistan's long history of contestation among major power brokers, the 27th amendment has struck the most stringent blow to the civil-military dynamic, even as the scales have often been in favour of the latter.

What changes will the amendment bring?

The latest amendment to the country's 1973 constitution is related to two overarching aspects—an overhaul in the military's hierarchy and command structure and the subversion of the judiciary in relation to the executive, effectively denting the already fragile balance of power in the country and concentrating powers in the hands of a single individual. For a country like Pakistan, which has been susceptible to the push and pulls of complete military control or a hybrid form of government, oscillating between the two since its inception, the latest changes will formally institutionalise the establishment's dominance on the affairs of the country as well as the activities of the armed forces.

First, the amendment has sought to change certain elements within Article 243, which governs the relationship between the prime minister and the president as it relates to their control of the armed forces. A major undertone of these changes are the concentration of strategic decision-making and command powers in the hands of one person. Thus, the army chief Asim Munir would also serve as the chief of the defence forces, a newly minted post, through which he will exercise control over

all three services. With this, the office of the chairman of the joint chiefs of staff committee will be abolished from November 27, once the incumbent chairman finishes his term. A commander of National Strategic Command will also be appointed from within the army by the prime minister on the army chief's recommendation, taking power away from the National Command Authority. In addition to this, the amendment elevates the status of certain five-star rank officers—field marshal, president, admiral of the fleet, marshal of the air force—who will be the recipient of lifetime immunity and impunity from all civil and criminal charges. They could retain their rank, uniform and privileges for life and can also have positions to hold post-retirement, based on the discretion of the president, with the prime minister's advice. The incorporation of these changes puts into perspective the elevation of Asim Munir as the country's field marshal after the conflict with India in May. The current slew of changes in the structure and hierarchy of the military command is seen as a continuation of Asim Munir's ascendancy as the field marshal and his concerted efforts to ensure that all power is concentrated in his hands. The amendment gives him overarching powers in the country's functioning and also extends them beyond the end of his term as the army chief in 2027.

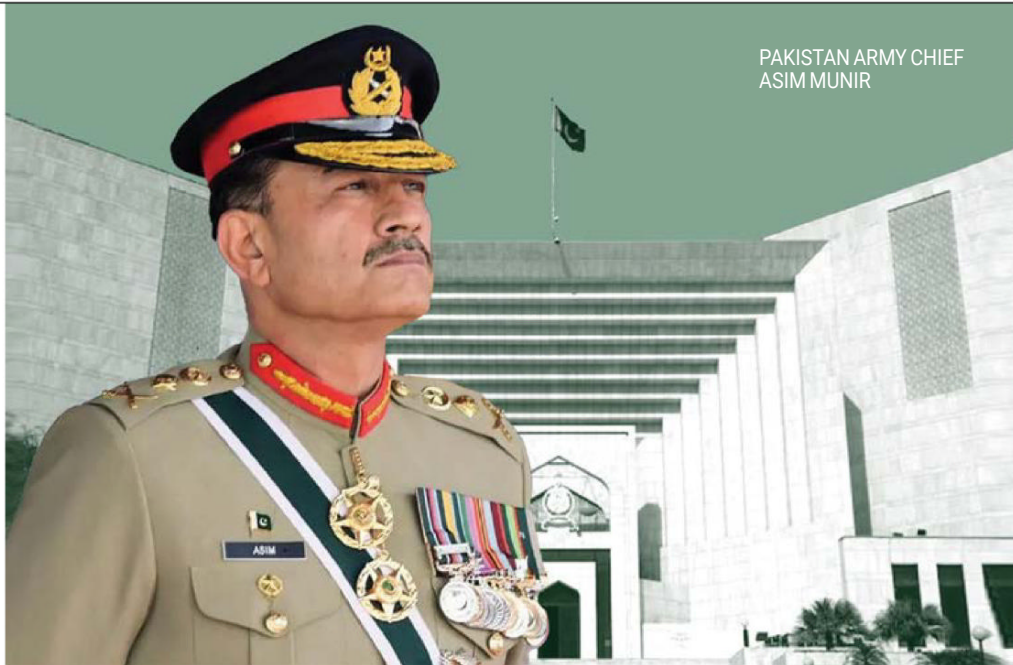
As if to create a safety net for this consolidation of power, the amendment also strikes through the judiciary's autonomy by rendering it ineffective in a situation of constitutional mismanagement or establishment's excesses. This it does through dismantling the power resting with the Supreme Court and turning it into a court of appeals, with constitutional matters to be heard by FCC. The composition of FCC is also shrouded in opaqueness with no criterion to determine judges' elevation, and appointments engineered to ensure the toeing of the establishment's line. None of the appointments made after FCC commenced operations on November 14 are based on seniority or based on their credentials on dispensing justice on constitutional matters, except that of Chief Justice Aminuddin Khan. FCC will also not

The latest amendment to the country's 1973 constitution is related to two overarching aspects—an overhaul in the military's hierarchy and command structure and the subversion of the judiciary in relation to the executive, effectively denting the already fragile balance of power

PAKISTAN ARMY CHIEF
ASIM MUNIR

With powers concentrated in the hands of a single individual, the propensity of the country to dabble in adventurism could increase, raising the risks for India and also undermining stability in the region

Illustration by SAURABH SINGH



be obligated to follow the Supreme Court's old rulings, and a special parliamentary committee will be appointed to select the chief justices and judges of both the Supreme Court and FCC in the future. The judicial commission will also have executive appointees, making the selection of judges a primarily political process. The unilateral control over determining who could be transferred and the initiation of disciplinary proceedings will also undermine the judiciary's ability to take independent decisions.

Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif had been meeting with the leaders of different parties in a bid to garner consensus for the passage of the amendment. Apart from Imran Khan's PTI, which opposed the amendment, all major parties have accepted its provisions in some form or shape. While PPP had reservations about the rollback of the 18th amendment, it welcomed the changes making the military's dominance paramount in the country. Pakistan's institutions have always suffered from a deficit of trust and accountability. Judges have been tortured, hounded and put under surveillance, their families targeted by the intelligence services. Some have called for reforms, while most have caved into the pressure, focusing instead on aggrandising their own power and status. After the passage of the current amendments, two senior-most judges of the Supreme Court tendered their resignations in protest.

The spokesperson of India's External Affairs Ministry defined the current developments as a "military-inspired constitutional subversion and power-grab unfolding within the country." Since the Pahalgam terror attack in April this

year and the consequent conflict in May which saw India's targeted strikes against terror infrastructure in Pakistan and PoK, the ties between the two countries have deteriorated further. While India's objective was to establish its deterrence against Pakistan and raise Pakistan's risks vis-à-vis its support for cross-border terrorism, for a country like Pakistan, which is infested with deeply structural problems and lacks a leadership efficient enough to address them effectively, support for terrorism is seen as a low-risk strategy. With powers concentrated in the hands of a single individual, the propensity of the country to dabble in adventurism could increase, raising the risks for India and also undermining stability in the region. Field Marshal Asim Munir's tendency to invoke religious language in relation to the conflict between India and Pakistan and his provocative statements of late, reflect this adventurism. With the control over strategic decisions related to nuclear command also falling onto one person, and away from a collegiate system of checks and balances, the risk of nuclear sabre-rattling could also increase. But this transition isn't necessarily expected to be completely smooth—the massive overhaul in the military's structure will have trickle-down effects on rivalries within the different services, changing their balance, as well as the power of the chiefs of the other services, which have resisted previous attempts to become subservient to the army. ■



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DON'T WRITE OFF THE SECULAR NATIONALISTS

How to take back control in Bangladesh

By Syed Badrul Ahsan



Celebrations in Dhaka after the International Crimes Tribunal sentenced Sheikh Hasina to death, November 17, 2025

THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC of Bangladesh took yet one more step into an uncertain future through the International Crimes Tribunal (ICT) passing a sentence of death on former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and former Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan Kamal. The judgment, delivered on Monday, November 17, has predictably led to widespread criticism given the public perception, a justified one, that due process was not followed. For one thing, the ICT had been taken over, in the aftermath of the political change of August 5, 2024, by a group known to be close to the Jamaat-e-Islami, a party which openly opposed Bangladesh's independence in 1971. For another, the reconfiguration of the tribunal was a consequence of the mob violence which forced Sheikh Hasina and her government from power 15 months ago. The ICT, which in the period of the Awami League government between 2009 and 2024 tried, convicted and sent a number of the 1971 collaborators of the occupation Pakistan army to the gallows, was weaponised by the Muhammad Yunus regime to convict Sheikh Hasina.

The former prime minister and her followers as well as human rights activists have been critical of the process, arguing that those who came to be associated with the ICT had publicly demonstrated a bias against Sheikh Hasina through their public pronouncements.

In a situation where the media has remained suppressed in Bangladesh—it has been prevented from voicing any criticism of the Yunus regime, besides being warned not to carry any statement by the former prime minister—the case remains controversial. In such circumstances, the manner in which the trial was conducted raised questions that underscore the failings of the regime in ensuring an independent working of the ICT. Sheikh Hasina, who refused to acknowledge the legality of the proceedings, was tried in absentia as she has been staying in New Delhi since the army escorted her to the Indian capital on the day her government fell in Dhaka. The Yunus regime, which lacks a constitutional basis despite assertions by its supporters that it operates by what is a vague interpretation of an article of the constitution, had the tribunal appoint a lawyer to conduct her defence. The lawyer was pictured laughing on November 17 even as he told the media that he had been pained that his efforts to defend his client had not succeeded.

It was a bizarre situation which seized Dhaka on the day the ICT delivered its verdict. The Jamaat welcomed the verdict. In Kishoreganj, the ancestral home of the elderly former president of Bangladesh, Mohammad Abdul Hamid, was vandalised by anti-Awami League elements. In Dhaka, elements intent on destroying whatever remains of the home of Bangladesh's founder Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman turned up in Dhanmondi but were beaten back by the police. Over the past 15 months, a systematic campaign has gone into destroying not only Mujib's home but every symbol of the nation's War of Liberation in 1971. What has shocked the country is the silence of Muhammad Yunus and his advisers on the violence that has been applied to rid Bangladesh of all manifestations of the history which went into its creation through a nine-month war 54 years ago. None of the men and women who today purport to govern Bangladesh ever condemned the destruction of history since August 2024.

The judgment in the case against Sheikh Hasina, who was charged with having committed crimes against humanity, might well be considered the climax of everything that has been happening in Bangladesh since her nearly 16-year rule drew to a close. It might be argued that the country is caught in an existential crisis today, with individuals and political parties either opposed to the liberation or having reservations about Bangladesh's foundational principles (read the Jamaat-e-Islami and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, BNP, here) dominating the political space in the forced absence of the Awami League. The former ruling party, having been put under a ban (though Yunus on his trips abroad but not at home has claimed there has been no ban), is under escalating levels of pressure since August 2024. Its offices have been destroyed all over the country; its grassroots activists have been killed or are on the run. Prisons hold hundreds of Awami League members, including former ministers and lawmakers, most of whom have been clamped with murder charges. Journalists, human rights activists, lawyers, individuals who have either been pro-Awami League or upholding the spirit of the War of Liberation, have languished in jail with no recourse to legal aid. Besides, no inquiry has been conducted into the deaths of scores of policemen, all of whom were lynched following the fall of the Hasina government. Media houses were seized by mobs who demanded that journalists who in their view were supporters of Awami League 'fascism' be dismissed. Many media organisations complied. The dismissed journalists were replaced by individuals Yunus' interim regime as well as the mobs are comfortable with.

Where does Bangladesh go from here? The regime has promised general elections and also a referendum on a so-called July Charter for February next year but is yet to present a clear roadmap. Elections ought to have been the sole priority but when the regime decided to have a whole lot of issues on its plate, it was only to be expected that it would lose its way. The regime formed a number of reform

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commissions whose reports have not had much traction and can or will be considered only by an elected parliament. When it decided that the constitution called for reforms, a responsibility only an elected parliament can carry out, it brought in a Bangladeshi-American whose questionable pronouncements on the subject evoked criticism as well as disbelief.

FIFTEEN MONTHS AFTER it took charge, the Yunus government conveys the disturbing thought that it is in office but not in power. It has been unable to enforce law and order, which has progressively been sliding. News reports speak of the non-recovery of arms looted from police stations by rioters in the days and weeks following August 5, 2024. Worse, as the crisis worsened for the Awami League in the final days of July last year, prison breaks saw scores of lawless elements, including radical Islamists who had either been convicted or awaiting trial, make good their escape. These escapees have remained at large, a factor which has significantly contributed to the insecurity citizens have felt in the last 15 months.

Much though the Yunus regime might argue that it is on top of things, the fact is that with Yunus himself and his advisers not having administered a government earlier, the interim administration is clearly at sea. The state of the economy offers little comfort to citizens whose forays into kitchen markets reveal increasing impoverishment. The job market is shrinking, with scores of garment factories closing down and their workers, most of whom are women struggling to make ends meet for their families, suddenly without any source of earnings. On the street, rickshaw pullers who peddle their three-wheelers all day, loudly complain that where in the Awami League days they could earn no less than 1,500 taka per day, they now confront a condition where they can hardly scrape together a paltry 500 taka on any given day. In education, schools, colleges and universities have all been prey to violence.

For Bangladesh, the present is symbolic of a dark uncertainty. The future is yet to hint at an opening unto light. But let no one be under any illusion that the pass in which the country finds itself today is a sad commentary on its wobbly ride since it emerged as a sovereign state 54 years ago. If the past is any guide to the future, one cannot but take into account all the pitfalls the nation is up against today. Of course, with the Sheikh Hasina government in charge, Bangladesh showed promise in such consequential areas as the economy. Infrastructure building was remarkable and so was the willingness of citizens to be satisfied with the economy. Remittances from Bangladeshis employed in the Middle East and elsewhere were a major contributor to the national economy.

One cannot, though, ignore the many

turns history has taken in Bangladesh. Three years after liberation, a radical change was brought about in politics when the parliamentary form of government was replaced by a presidential system through the fourth amendment to the constitution in January 1975. The move set in place a single-party state structure through what came to be known as the Bangladesh Krishak Sramik Awami League (BAKSAL). Only months later, in a country constituted as a departure from the ugly legacy of coups d'état and absence of democracy in pre-1971 Pakistan, it was precisely the same legacy which seized the country when Mujibur Rahman was assassinated along with most of his family in August 1975. A clutch of majors and colonels, led by Khondokar Mostaq Ahmed, a long-time Mujib associate and at the time minister for commerce in his cabinet, commandeered the state.

The assassinations of August 1975 were a precursor to the increasing violence that would accompany struggles for power. Barely three months after Bangabandhu's assassination, four of the leading figures of the 1971 Bangladesh government, popularly known as the Mujibnagar government, were murdered in jail. Within days of that macabre incident, three senior military officers, all freedom fighters and instrumental in forcing the Mostaq cabal from power, were done to death by renegade soldiers. Power slipped into the hands of General Ziaur Rahman who swiftly moved to have the Collaborators Act put in place by the Mujib government repealed by President Abu Sadat Mohammad Sayem in December 1975. Zia seized the presidency in April 1977 and through elections held in early 1979 had the notorious indemnity ordinance, providing legal protection to Mujib's assassins, incorporated in the fifth amendment to the constitution.

General Zia was assassinated in May 1981. In March 1982, Bangladesh had another military regime foisted on it through the coup d'état by General Hussain Muhammad Ershad, the army chief, against the elected government of President Abdus Sattar. Ershad was forced from power in December 1990 in a mass movement considered a fresh opening for a return to unfettered democracy. Or at least that was the expectation. For the first time, a caretaker administration headed by Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed, chief justice of the Supreme Court, organised parli-

mentary elections in February 1991. The elections brought BNP, at that point led by Begum Khaleda Zia, widow of General Zia, the founder of the party, to power. The Awami League, headed by Sheikh Hasina, daughter of Mujibur Rahman, took its place in parliament, the Jatiya Sangsad, as the opposition. Politics, as citizens saw it, was on its way to restoring democracy in its ideal form.

And then Bangladesh hit a roadblock in 1994 when a by-election in Magura was rigged by the ruling BNP. It was a moment when the opposition Awami League cried foul and by the time the next election came around it successfully compelled

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LAST YEAR**



Protesters storm former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's residence in Dhaka, August 5, 2024

AFP

The future? The destruction since the fall of the Awami League government will take years, perhaps decades, to be rolled back. In the immediate future, it is the issue of elections which exercises the public mind. Sceptics warn that the February elections may not take place given the growing demand at home and abroad for the electoral exercise to be free, fair, and inclusive. The operative word is inclusive and

BNP to agree to a restoration of the caretaker government. In the elections held in June 1996, the Awami League returned to power 21 years after the coup of 1975. In subsequent elections, the vote was supervised by caretaker regimes—in 2001 and 2008. In 2011, however, the Awami League, which had lost the elections of 2001 but was returned to power with a huge majority in 2008, abolished the caretaker system. That move had political observers at home and abroad question the elections held in 2014, 2018, and 2024.

THE CRISIS HOLDING Bangladesh captive today can be attributed to the various changes in the political landscape over the five decades-plus that have gone by since the Awami League led the country to freedom. Should one expect, therefore, that with elections planned by the Yunus regime for February 2026, there is an opportunity for Bangladesh to take the road back to democracy as ordained in the constitution? The response will worry citizens, for the regime currently in place in Dhaka is a sad departure from all earlier governments. The reasons are not too hard to identify. Every effort is being made to yank Bangladesh away from its foundational moorings, with particular emphasis placed on a wholesale obliteration of the legacy of Bangabandhu, of the Mujibnagar government, indeed of the principles which went into the creation of a secular nation for Bengalis in this part of South Asia.

The wounds that have been inflicted on Bangladesh since August last year are horrendous. An unabashed policy geared to an increase in links with Pakistan, a state which has never expressed any contrition for the genocide committed by its military in 1971, is consciously being promoted by the Yunus regime. Senior Pakistani military officers have happily travelled to Dhaka and been effusively welcomed by the interim administration.

Diplomacy on the regime's watch has been tenuous. Ties between Dhaka and Delhi have been plummeting, with the governments of the two countries hardly making any meaningful contact. Relations are not being helped with the Bangladesh authorities stridently demanding that Sheikh Hasina be extradited to Dhaka to answer for her 'crimes'. It is a demand the Indian government will be unlikely to respond to.

And there is also the matter of growing links between Bangladesh and the US. Questions have abounded in these last many months about American designs on such sensitive spots in Bangladesh as St Martin's Island, to which Bangladeshis now find hard to travel despite the place being a well-known tourist destination.

patently points to a scenario where the Awami League is given space to take part. The party holds anywhere between 35 and 40 per cent, perhaps more, of public support at the ballot box. So, it would be futile to rush the country through an election without Sheikh Hasina's party.

The Yunus regime will have much to worry about in the weeks and months ahead. As for the Awami League, which was satisfied with the outcome of a lockdown it called prior to the ICT judgment, it requires a substantive strategy to make a return to the political centre. The problem for the party at this point is that Hasina's presence notwithstanding, it suffers from a leadership gap owing precisely to the failure in the last 16 years for a second tier of leaders to grow around her. When Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was arrested by the Pakistan army in March 1971 and flown to what was then West Pakistan to face trial before a military tribunal, it was his able associates—Tajuddin Ahmad, Syed Nazrul Islam, M Mansoor Ali, AHM Quamruzzaman—who cobbled a government into shape and eventually led Bangladesh to independence. That legacy has not been matched by the Awami League over the past decade-and-a-half, maybe longer.

An unstable Bangladesh, without a government elected through a process of inclusive adult franchise, will be a danger not only to its people but will also be an invitation to outside forces to derive advantage from the anarchy that is a consequence of the chaos unleashed last year.

It is important to underscore the necessity of Bangladesh's people returning to their historical moorings by waging a concerted and consistent campaign to take the country back from the grip of the anti-liberation forces that have commandeered it. That task will necessitate leadership that can galvanise the nation towards launching, and leading to a successful conclusion, a campaign to re-establish secularism, nationalism, socialism, and democracy as enunciated in the constitution.

It will be a long, hard and tortuous campaign, for Bangladesh is today trapped in a web of geopolitical realities. It waits for leadership, for a vision that will link its past with its future. It is in need of leadership that will eschew the mistakes of the past and reach out to all citizens, religious denominations, and ethnic cultures to build a credible, viable, modern, and responsive as well as responsible political framework for itself. ■

Syed Badrul Ahsan is a Bangladeshi journalist and political analyst. He is the author of biographies of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Bangladesh's founder, and Tajuddin Ahmad, the country's wartime prime minister

COVER STORY

DIVIDED AGA

Sheikh Hasina on a visit to Brussels
as prime minister of Bangladesh,
October 25, 2023

1 DECEMBER 2025

INST ITSELF

Bangladesh is torn between the ideals of 1971 and the pull of political Islam.

But it is in India's interest to prevent the re-creation of a quasi-Pakistan along its eastern border

By SWAPAN DASGUPTA

IT WOULD NOT BE NEEDLESSLY DISPARAGING OF THE present interim government of Bangladesh that came to power following an orchestrated insurrection on August 5, 2024 to suggest that the outcome of former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's trial before a so-called international court in Dhaka was known even before the proceedings began. It would also be an acknowledgement of reality—and not an act of mockery—to state that it is extremely unlikely that the present dispensation in Dhaka has the political muscle or determination to implement the farcical death penalty awarded in absentia to the former prime minister. The verdict will, at best, be a convenient handle to prevent Hasina from returning to her country from exile before the Nobel Prize-winning octogenarian usurper packs his bags and, in the company of the other notables who serve as the regime's advisers, leaves Dhaka airport for the country that will become their place of exile.

For a country that was born in spectacular savagery 54 years ago, Bangladesh has been remarkably unsuccessful in transcending the circumstances of its formation. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the charismatic leader who led the way in dismantling the Pakistan he had himself helped create, was gunned down—along with his wife and sons—on the staircase of his own residence at 32 Dhanmondi in Dhaka. Today, only that staircase remains amid the rubble of the place that was once the symbol of the liberation war. Like nearly all the other monuments of the 1971 war, the house was gutted on August 6 last year by a frenzied mob and bulldozed into rubble exactly six months later in the presence of armed policemen and soldiers of the state. On the day the somewhat incoherent judge read out Hasina's death sentence amid thunderous cheering from the rabble in the courtroom, another lot of 'students' sought to finish the job of obliterating all memories of the father of the nation. Bangabandhu's mazhar is still intact in his village in Gopalganj district on the other side of the mighty Padma river. Its sanctity has been preserved thanks to the dogged opposition of the local people to the new vandals.

Since a group of disaffected army officers gunned down Sheikh Mujib in the early hours of August 15, 1975, and installed a ramshackle government led by Khondaker Mostaq Ahmad, a

reluctant Awami League leader who had attempted to cut a deal with the Pakistan authorities with US assistance in 1971, Bangladesh has been witnessing a tug-of-war between conflicting impulses.

Nominally, with the surrender of the Pakistani forces led by Lt General AAK Niazi to India's Lt General JS Aurora on December 16, 1971 in Dhaka, the vivisection of the Pakistan created by Muhammad Ali Jinnah was complete. On that day, the suppressed regional impulses of the local Muslims had prevailed over the attempt by the West Pakistani establishment—both civilian and military—to create an Urdu-speaking copy of itself on the flatlands of Bengal. There had always been two distinct

Muslim societies in existence in undivided Bengal. The first stemmed from the decadent court culture of the Mughal satraps in Murshidabad and Dhaka—bolstered subsequently by the exiled court of the Nawab of Awadh in Kolkata. The other was the rustic culture of the Muslim peasantry of eastern Bengal. The Muslim League that gave Jinnah his East Pakistan was a blend of both these currents: Khawaja Nazimuddin, a scion of the Nawab of Dhaka, representing what can loosely be called the Mughal wing, and AK Fazlul Huq representing the more authentic, Bengali-speaking majority.

After the election of 1954 which was won quite decisively by a coalition led by Fazlul Huq, the Muslim League lost its political

relevance in the eastern wing of Pakistan. However, despite its marginalisation, it retained a tenuous toehold on the political margins, its strength supplemented by the Urdu-speaking Muslims from Bihar who were employed in the jute mills, railways, and the ports. In the election of 1970 that resulted in a landslide win for the Awami League led by Mujib, the pro-Pakistan parties could muster around 25 per cent of the vote and just one seat in the National Assembly.

The old Muslim League and the Jamaat-e-Islami always struggled to find a place for themselves in the new Bangladesh. Their position appeared to have been permanently compromised by association with the pro-Pakistan Razakars—vigilante squads that were established to weed out pro-liberation supporters from April to December 1971. The Razakars—an omnibus term that also incorporated the fanatical Al Badr and Al Shams which systematically targeted Bangladeshi intellectuals—wallowed in their ignominy after liberation. It was Mujib's misplaced generosity that declared an amnesty in 1973 and allowed these elements back into society and public life.

AFTER THE FORMATION of Bangladesh, the pro-Pakistan elements did not persist with any unrealistic scheme of a loose confederation with Pakistan. Instead, all their energies were focused on the gradual Islamisation of Bangladeshi society and state. They found allies in General Ziaur Rahman and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and General HM Ershad. Both these military rulers, who subsequently legitimised their positions through elections, needed a political constituency that could act as a counterweight to the liberal Awami League. Perhaps unwittingly, Ziaur Rahman fulfilled another political function: he split the ranks of Bangladeshi nationalism and injected the anti-Awami League group with a heady dose of Islamism. With its alliance with the Jamaat, BNP began the process of Razakar rehabilitation. The Jamaat has never looked back and its relationship with mainstream political forces gave it the resilience to be able to overcome the trial and punishment of its old leadership by the Hasina government after 2009.

The crafty, behind-the-scenes role of the Jamaat-controlled Chhatra Shibir in the student's movement that led to the ouster of the Awami League has been documented, but patchily. The Jamaat's role was important for several reasons.

First, the Jamaat had a vast network of student supporters in the madrasas and the private universities in and around Dhaka. This reserve army of Islamists could be called out at short notice to replenish the small group of agitators who were being controlled from the US Embassy.

Second, the Jamaat helped replenish and even distribute the funding provided to the anti-Hasina agitation by Europe and US-based bodies. When official US records see the light of day, they will undoubtedly indicate that the role of the Biden administration was no less than the Anglo-American help to the forces that overthrew the Mohammad Mosaddegh government and



The ICT pronounces the death sentence for Sheikh Hasina, Dhaka, November 17, 2025

IT IS EXTREMELY UNLIKELY THAT THE PRESENT DISPENSATION IN DHAKA HAS THE POLITICAL MUSCLE OR DETERMINATION TO IMPLEMENT THE FARCICAL DEATH PENALTY AWARDED IN ABSENTIA TO SHEIKH HASINA. THE VERDICT WILL, AT BEST, BE A HANDLE TO PREVENT HASINA FROM RETURNING



Border Guard Bangladesh soldiers outside the court, Dhaka, November 17, 2025



Pakistan's Lt General AAK Niazi prepares to sign the instrument of surrender in the presence of India's Lt General JS Aurora, Dhaka, December 16, 1971

WITH THE SURRENDER OF THE PAKISTANI FORCES LED BY LT GENERAL AAK NIAZI TO INDIA'S LT GENERAL JS AURORA ON DECEMBER 16, 1971, THE VIVISECTION OF PAKISTAN WAS COMPLETE. ON THAT DAY, THE REGIONAL IMPULSES OF THE LOCAL MUSLIMS HAD PREVAILED OVER THE ATTEMPT BY WEST PAKISTAN TO CREATE A COPY OF ITSELF IN BENGAL

restored the Shah in Iran in 1953.

Finally, the Jamaat unquestionably gave the student movement of 2024 a marked anti-liberation thrust. It was neither coincidence nor mindless acts of vandalism that led to rampaging mobs destroying all the monuments commemorating the Mukti Bahini and the war of liberation in the aftermath of Hasina's departure from Dhaka. Although the anti-1971 pendulum hasn't swung totally to the far reaches of society, it has shaped the mood in two distinct ways. There is, of course, an emerging denial of the positive role of India in the creation of Bangladesh. Instead, the departure of the top rung of the Awami League to India after the August coup has been taken as confirmation of Bangladesh having been transformed into a client state of New Delhi under Hasina. It was even suggested that there were some 26 lakh undocumented Indians working in important positions in Bangladesh. So far, despite Yunus being at the helm for over 15 months, none of them has been detected.

The Jamaat has been instrumental in ensuring the complete rehabilitation of Pakistan in Bangladesh. Today, there is not merely an unending traffic of Pakistani army and intelligence personnel to Bangladesh, sometimes for missions that are inimical to India's national security. These official exchanges are supplemented by the visits of Pakistani clerics and political leaders to Bangladesh. Although it is unlikely that the old

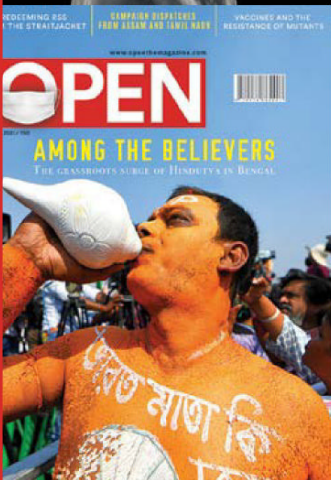
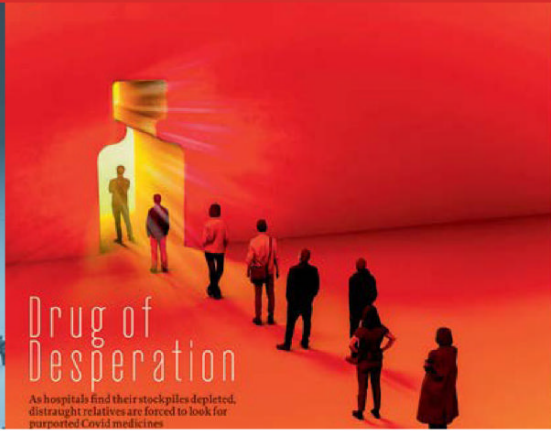
confederation scheme will be revived, Bangladesh has become a new staging post of Pakistan in its never-ending bid to exact revenge for the humiliation it suffered in 1971.

In the coming months, there will be a frenzied bid by the Islamists to change the constitution and political structures of Bangladesh and ensure the permanent exclusion of the Awami League from any meaningful role in the governance of the country. It is, of course, for Sheikh Hasina's supporters to resist this exclusion. If necessary, it may even consider teaming up with that section of BNP that is uneasy with the proposed redefinition of nationhood by the brainless and corrupt student leadership and its Jamaat puppet masters. The proposed election in February is not merely to legitimise a post-Hasina dispensation; it is an attempt to turn Bangladesh upside down.

The government in India must seriously ponder the wisdom of allowing the re-creation of a Bengali-speaking quasi-Pakistan on its eastern borders to go completely unchallenged. The forces unleashed in Bangladesh could seriously affect the peace, stability, and even integrity of West Bengal. It is in India's national interest to ensure the departure of the interlopers next door. ■



Swapan Dasgupta is India's foremost conservative columnist. He is the author of Awakening Bharat Mata



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FAMILY TRAGEDY

While Mujibur Rahman had made things easy for the conspirators, Sheikh Hasina underestimated the plot against her

By SUDEEP PAUL

IT IS SAID BANGLADESH might not have been born when it was but for the tropical cyclone *Bhola*, the deadliest on record, which made landfall on November 12, 1970 and killed an estimated half-a-million people. It was the Pakistan government's deliberately delayed and discriminatory response that created causal and sequential links between a climate disaster, genocide, revolution, war, and liberation. None of the involved parties has rested easy since December 1971 because Bangladesh was always an unfinished business.

Rarely have political and diplomatic conspiracies, or the same conspiracy rekindled, played out as brazenly as what resulted in the assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman on August 15, 1975 and the ouster of Sheikh Hasina on August 5, 2024. While the conspirators had never ceased and desisted, what made Bangladesh fertile ground for their persistence was the duality at the heart of its founding philosophy. Or identity. A duality, or conflict, had characterised the nation's founding father too, whose statues and legacy now lie in ruins. Mujibur Rahman might have survived had he not made a series of serious mistakes. In her darkest hour—which was not the court pronouncing her death sentence on November 17—his daughter, too, made catastrophic errors of judgement.

Is Bangladesh the offspring of Pakistan or India? Is Bangladesh Bengali first or Muslim first? Is Bangladesh secular or Islamic? It could never resolve the dilemma. That's why the Razakar collaborators and their patrons make cyclical returns to power in Dhaka.

Yet the aftermath of Hasina's overthrow is unprecedented since the massacre of Mujibur and most of his family had not resulted in his full-scale delegitimisation or that of the story of liberation. Then, it was not about Bangladesh erasing itself. General Ziaur Rahman, as dictator, did not take the first steps in turning Dhaka back towards Pakistan. Mujib had done that himself.

Bangladesh cannot live with and without India. Nor could Mujib. Without Indian intervention, there would have been no Bangladesh. Nor would Mujibur Rahman have taken over the government run from exile in India by Tajuddin Ahmad. In many ways, the fate of Ahmad after liberation foreshadowed the tragedy of the new nation. And the wedge that was driven between him and Mujib—through the machinations of Pakistan and the US—was a premonition of the course India-Bangladesh relations would take.

No sooner was the country free that Mujib was complaining about Indian dominance. Either that was his old antagonism towards India borne out by his role in Direct Action Day in

Dhaka—as the Great Calcutta Killings were unfolding on August 16, 1946—or he was scared by the anti-India sentiment once the job of liberating Bangladesh was done. Moreover, Mujib had by then become authoritarian, turning the nascent democracy into a one-party state. And he was desperate for diplomatic recognition from Pakistan and China to 'balance' Indian influence, as both he and Ahmad were being called India's stooges.

The ghost was in the machine. Veteran Indian journalist and eyewitness to 1971 Manash Ghosh, in his *Mujib's Blunders: The Power and Plot Behind His Killing*, published this year as a sequel to *Bangladesh War: Report from Ground Zero* (2021), writes: "From the outset of the war, the Awami League's internecine conflict had assumed such menacing proportions that Tajuddin Ahmed, the prime minister of the interim government-in-exile... was almost ousted from power by the pro-Pak and anti-Bangladesh lobby in the party led by Khondokar Mushtaq Ahmed who was totally against the dismemberment of Pakistan. The officer cadre of the *Niyomito Bahini*... too was divided down the middle: one section, led by Major Zia, opposed the Indian Army training the *Mukti Bahini* as it did not want the *muktijoddhas* to be labelled 'made in India,' while the other section, loosely led by Major Khaled Mosharraf, found no harm in it..."

This remains Bangladesh's battle within, over its identity and destiny. After Mujib, the liberation heroes and Awami League were banished through long, Islamised military rule. The return of Sheikh Hasina to power in 2009 for the second time began the process of a course correction, with executions of collaborators and war criminals as well as the first real attempt at secularising the country. On August 5, 2024, the clock swung back, officially. Things were headed that way for a long time but it is doubtful whether Hasina would have been overthrown without Pakistani-American intervention compounded by her own mistakes.

Mujibur Rahman, however, was guilty of egregious errors. To begin with, Mujib filled his government with the very people opposed to the creation of Bangladesh, members of the pro-Pakistan faction, epitomised in Khondokar Mushtaq Ahmed (later president of Bangladesh and the first beneficiary of Mujib's death) being appointed commerce minister in his third administration. He did the same with the military, allowing the people who would be the first to plot against him to get too close and giving them the keys to state security. They would be the chief instruments in Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's hands to avenge Pakistan's defeat and dismemberment.



Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and Sheikh Hasina

TO BE FAIR TO SHEIKH HASINA, SHE NEVER MADE HER FATHER'S MISTAKE OF DELUDING HERSELF THAT COLLABORATORS WOULD HAVE A CHANGE OF HEART. HER ERROR OF JUDGEMENT WAS NOT TAKING THE AMERICAN THREAT SERIOUSLY ENOUGH

On a smaller but almost equally fateful scale, Hasina ignored advice to appoint Waker-uz-Zaman army chief, thinking her relative (Zaman is married to the daughter of Hasina's uncle, former army chief General Muhammad Mustafizur Rahman) wouldn't betray her. While Zaman's disloyalty cannot be proven beyond doubt, he did not lend Hasina the army's backing when she needed it most and forced her to abandon home and office. Perhaps he saved her life in doing so but he has done little to curb either the Islamist thuggery on the street or Muhammad Yunus' vendetta-driven governance. Zaman's apologia for the army's inability to quell the extremist-led violence in August 2024 is highly suspect.

If it was the fear of Pakistani-American machinations that turned Mujib against India, it did not help him in the end. But where he acted to save himself, Hasina seemed to have been too arrogant to realistically assess the threat of the international plot against her, especially when Joe Biden's ambassador in Dhaka, Peter D Haas, was running amok in her country, holding meetings with the

Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and the Jamaat, making it clear that Washington wanted her out. She paid the price of underestimating American power. But that does not explain why she and her senior ministers could not make timely and meaningful overtures to the agitating students, telling them the government was on the same page where quotas for descendants of freedom fighters were concerned, that it was the court which had reinstated the quotas while her government had abolished them in 2018, and that it had got the court to cut back on the quotas again. That mistake made the point of no turning back inevitable.

Mujibur Rahman's dictatorial turn was shorter, sharper, and more tragic. Once he made Bangladesh a one-party state under the Bangladesh Krishak Sramik Awami League (BAKSAL), outlawed all other parties, and suppressed freedom of speech, he effectively legitimised the plot against him. It was Tajuddin Ahmad who had warned Mujib against both becoming a dictator and damaging relations with India but the former prime minister was long out of favour. Mujib accelerated the process of his own downfall by doing the very things he thought would protect him. By the time of his assassination, the collaborators practically had the reins of state in their hands because it was Mujib who had freed them, again against sound advice.

To be fair to Hasina, she never made her father's mistake of deluding herself into believing the collaborators and their inheritors would have a change of heart. Her hubris was thinking she was invincible. Her error of judgement was not taking the American

threat seriously enough. St Martin's island might have been a smaller geopolitical price to pay compared to the political cost of her exit. But in a throwback to her father, Hasina, "while seeking the military's help to restore law and order, had no idea that the mid-level officers of the armed forces had been thoroughly infiltrated by the Jamaatis". The ghost was again in the machine, irrespective of Waker-uz-Zaman's role.

As Arabic calligraphy is scratched into the walls of the Shaheed Minar and the very language and script for which Bangladesh fought to be born may again be under threat, Ghosh asserts that "Sheikh Hasina's Awami League is no political pushover and is far from a vanquished force and will seek to reassert its rightful presence in the country's mainstream politics." A year is a long time in politics and Bangladesh is already unrecognisable. It will take longer for the Awami League to resurrect itself, with or without Hasina. It is unlikely to do so without outside assistance. And if and when it does resurface, which mistake will it choose to undo first? ■

THE MUNIR-YUNUS

The sophisticated professional class should not misjudge the

By MJ AKBAR

VISHNUGUPTA, ALIAS CHANAKYA, alias Kautilya, gets the credit for everything from walking on diplomatic eggshells to the strategy for Armageddon; he might also be the godfather of social media as an instrument of statecraft. There is no treatise on governance as unsentimental as the *Arthashastra* in its prescriptions for the security of the king and sabotage of the enemy. Henry Kissinger, America's National Security Advisor (NSA) in 1971 when Bangladesh was born, bubbles over with praise for the *Arthashastra* in his book *World Order*.

Chanakya advocated the use of "holy ascetics, wandering monks, cart-drivers, wandering minstrels, jugglers, tramps, fortune-tellers" to spread rumours and encourage disaffection with misinformation, exaggeration, and incendiary deceit to subvert enemies.

As the crisis in Bangladesh moves inexorably towards another crescendo, a thought occurs and recurs: Was someone in Pakistan reading Chanakya to better effect than we did in Delhi?

By 2024 there was a visible groundswell against the Awami League in Dhaka because the democratic process had become infructuous. That happened and cannot be denied. There were mistakes made. Did masters of the dark arts in the Rawalpindi cantonment seize the opportunity to finance and foment this simmering anger, with or without the knowledge of those who were being used, through the pseudo-ascetic clerics of the Jamaat-e-Islami and the contemporary avatar of gullible cart-drivers, minstrels and tramps to transform discord into an insurrection that drove Sheikh Hasina out of her country? She would have lost her life if she had not left, perhaps shot dead in some 'accident' which would have never been investigated.

The speed with which the very temporary government of Muhammad Yunus has embraced Pakistan, traduced the nation's history, and pursued a military bridge between the two countries indicates that their working relationship preceded the fall of Sheikh Hasina. Yunus made his money in Bangladesh but has lived in Europe and America for many decades now.

This relationship is being driven from Islamabad by the armed forces which have sidelined civilian authority from foreign policy. There have been more visits by Pakistani generals to Dhaka in the past 50 weeks than in the past 50 years. Bangladesh has seen long spells of non-Awami League governments, but no one trespassed national sentiment and betrayed the memory of millions killed by the Pakistan army in 1971. The Yunus government has not even asked for an apology from Islamabad.

Pakistan's Field Marshal Asim Munir and parties like the Ban



THE SPEED WITH WHICH THE MUHAMMAD YUNUS HAS EMBRACED WORKING RELATIONSHIP PRECE

NEXUS

ideological challenge of Jamaat

Illustration by SAURABH SINGH



Muhammad Yunus

TEMPORARY GOVERNMENT OF PAKISTAN INDICATES THAT THEIR DED THE FALL OF SHEIKH HASINA

gla Jamaat-e-Islami share the supremacist dream of converting secular Bangladesh into a religious state. Jamaat is marginal thus far, but there are reports that the electoral stage is being set to ensure that the Jamaat influences the direction of policy after the February elections, as an interim step before taking full control. The Awami League has been eliminated from elections; the only obstacle is Begum Khaleda Zia's Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), started by her husband General Ziaur Rahman who took over soon after Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's assassination in 1975.

BNP will win the February elections. Those hostile to secularism and democracy will not sabotage its victory too quickly; that would be too flagrant a violation of democracy. But the next government will inevitably suffer from levels of inadequacy and unresolved leadership issues. Governance was never easy in Dhaka, and a fluid street will breed instability. Jamaat and its many international supporters will seek to take advantage of any stumble. It never takes long for disaffection to set in.

ASOPHISTICATED PROFESSIONAL CLASS with a proud cultural inheritance has given Bangladesh a bureaucracy, private sector, and security confidence. It is not fundamentalist in any sense of the term. It is deeply committed to Bengali culture, and Bangla nationalism: both remain powerful fundamental strengths of Bangladesh. They do not want to be in the grip of India but they understand that the plural and secular values of the Indian Constitution represent modernity, and reflect the horizon that they seek for their nation.

They are, at this moment, tired of the Awami League and uncertain about BNP. But they would be making a serious mistake if they underestimated the ideological challenge of the Jamaat. Some, but not many, of them may feel that the Jamaat can be co-opted into the prevalent system. Illusion can extract a heavy price. Jamaat ideologues have an invaluable asset—patience.

The generation that was in its teens in 1970 is now exhausted. Its leaders have passed their sell-by date; time has eroded their talent. The latest beneficiary, Yunus, will disappear quietly and quickly into the comforts of France and the friendship club of New York the moment he leaves office.

Bangladesh has been destabilised by a crisis every so often in its five-decade history, but each time the vacuum was filled by a stable and committed gentry that believed in cultural nationalism, including within the army. The country was troubled but there was no mayhem. The danger now is that history beckons towards the unknown.

Karl Marx, who understood that his aphorisms would survive when his theories had become bankrupt, wrote that history repeats itself first as tragedy and then as farce. The farce is not fun; it might be chaotic. ■



MJ Akbar is the author of, among several titles, Tinderbox: The Past and Future of Pakistan. His latest book is After Me, Chaos: Astrology in the Mughal Empire

ARC OF INSTABILITY

Bangladesh reflects the uncertainties in India's neighbourhood and calls for discreet action to protect the national interest

By RAJEEV DESHPANDE

AS A STATEMENT that said very little but meant a lot, the Indian reaction to the Bangladesh International Crimes Tribunal (ICT) verdict handing out a death sent to deposed former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina could be considered compulsory reading for students of international relations. It offered no direct view on the sentence but promised to “engage constructively” with all stakeholders. “As a close neighbour, India remains committed to the best interests of the people of Bangladesh, including in peace, democracy, inclusion and stability in that country,” the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) said on November 17 and has since offered no further observations or elaborations of the bland five-line reaction to the ICT ruling.

India did not reject the ICT order outright, nor did it criticise flaws in the tribunal's conduct that included denying Hasina a lawyer of her choice, but it ignored demands that the Awami League leader be repatriated. The statement's elliptical references to peace, democracy and stability offer sufficient hints that India does not feel that the politically coloured conclusions of a tribunal suffering from procedural and legal infirmities advance the interests of Bangladesh. The careful choice of words is a reflection of India's unwillingness to endorse the actions of the interim government headed by Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus. India's frigid approach towards Yunus has seen him repeatedly lash out against Indian interests but his angry flailing has failed to move New Delhi which has kept him at arm's length. Without passing an overt comment on the tribunal or its guilty verdict—being mindful that any remark might provide incitement for attacks on Bangladesh's Hindu and Buddhist minorities—India has made it apparent that it feels the tribunal's actions lack credibility.

The ICT's proceedings against Hasina were no doubt laced with irony. The tribunal was set up by the Awami League government to try and punish Jamaat leaders involved in atrocities during the country's struggle for independence in 1971. The same tribunal was tweaked to try Hasina and close aides for alleged crimes against student protesters who overthrew

her government in August 2024. The tribunal's previous proceedings led to death sentences, some of which were executed, against Jamaat leaders held complicit in partnering the Pakistan army in war crimes during its bid to crush the independence movement. But the composition of the three-member tribunal, the constitutional lacunae in referring Hasina's cases, and the inert conduct of the 'defence' lawyer—who showed no interest in questioning the 50-odd witnesses—might have created an unintended problem for Yunus. Although he was quick to hail the ruling as evidence that even the high and mighty are not immune, most world capitals are likely to view the ruling with reservations. According to the website *reporterpost.in*, five European rights and advocacy organisations strongly criticised the verdict, calling it a “politically motivated” ruling and urged urgent international intervention. The coalition says the ICT has “strayed from its foundational principles” and condemned the trials held in absentia as having compromised judicial independence and human rights norms. Human Rights Watch (HRW), while noting “enduring anger and anguish” in Bangladesh over Hasina's repressive rule, said all criminal proceedings need to meet international fair trial standards. Meenakshi Ganguly, deputy Asia director at HRW, said, “Those responsible for horrific abuses under the Hasina administration should be held to account after impartial investigations and credible trials.” The United Nations (UN) also regretted trials being conducted in absentia and the award of death sentences to Hasina and former Home Minister Asaduzzaman Kamal.

The frosty reception to the ICT order puts Yunus in a spot as the criticism comes from the international NGO-civil rights circuit that has celebrated him in the past. But Yunus would need to keep in mind that the death sentence is strongly supported by student protesters who brought down the Hasina government. “The students want the sentence to be carried out and there are other implications too. The Awami League was to be banned till the trial was being conducted. But will the ban continue and keep the Awami League out of the elections that are to be held next year



Sheikh Hasina with Prime Minister Narendra Modi at Rashtrapati Bhavan, New Delhi, June 22, 2024

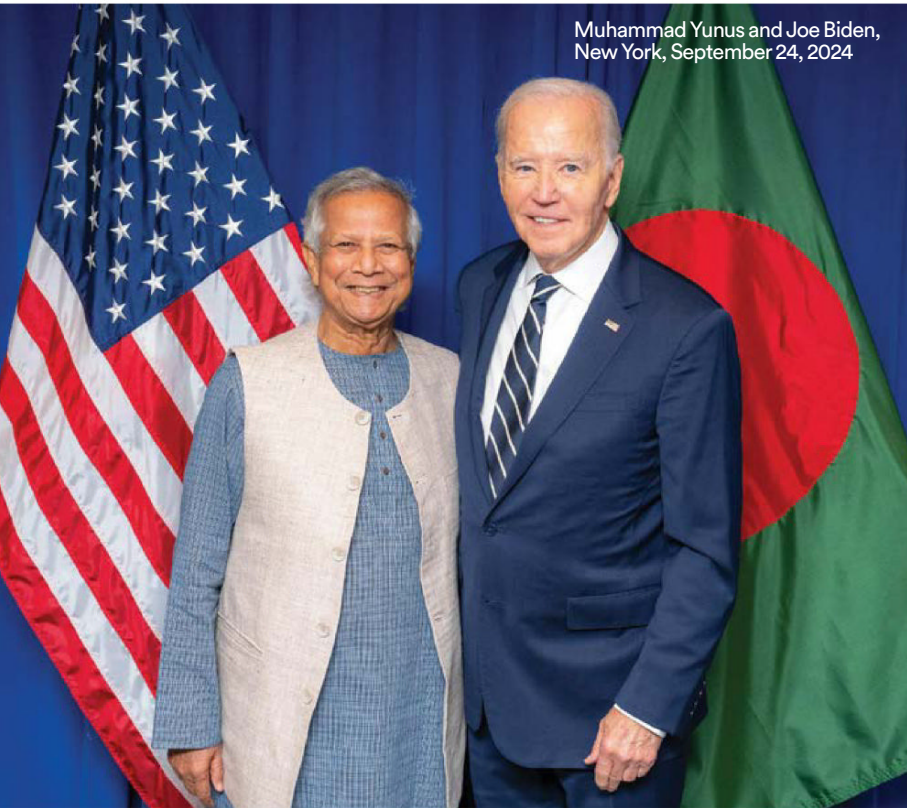
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in February? That is also a relevant question,” Smruti Pattanaik, research fellow at the Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (MP-IDSA) told *Open*.

The problem is that the absence of the Awami League from the election can further rob the electoral process of credibility in a situation where supporters of the former prime minister and those who oppose radicalisation of Bangladeshi politics by the Jamaat-e-Islami’s resurgence are keeping quiet due to the fear of reprisals. Conventional wisdom has led analysts to conclude that the verdict and the demand for Hasina’s return places

India in a tight spot. India’s ties with Bangladesh no doubt remain fraught but the death sentence has done nothing to enhance Yunus’ credibility. In fact, though he has joined the chorus for the verdict to be executed, Hasina’s return to Bangladesh—if it were to be considered—can only complicate matters and be a highly unwanted complication. As far as India is concerned, there is no question of giving up Hasina and Delhi will remind Bangladesh that authorities had found it expedient to facilitate her exit from Dhaka in the first place.

India’s carefully ambiguous articulation does not preclude



Muhammad Yunus and Joe Biden,
New York, September 24, 2024

THE TRUE EXTENT OF US INTERFERENCE IN BANGLADESH WILL BE HARD TO ASSESS BUT THERE IS LITTLE DOUBT THAT HASINA'S ABDICATION WAS WELCOMED BY THE BIDEN ADMINISTRATION AND YUNUS WAS ACCORDED A WARM RECEPTION IN AMERICA

deeper behind-the-scenes engagement with Bangladesh. The meeting of the Colombo Security Conclave in New Delhi days after the ICT ruling provided an opportunity for National Security Advisor (NSA) Ajit Doval to exchange views with his Bangladesh counterpart Khalilur Rahman. India did not issue a statement and Bangladesh said key bilateral issues were discussed. The discussion could have provided an opportunity to point out India's red lines over reports of increased access of Pakistani agencies in Bangladesh and the negative impact of ill-considered statements on India's Northeast. A book Yunus gifted to a visiting Pakistani general in October showed a distorted map that placed India's Northeast as part of Bangladesh. The security scrutiny for Pakistani visitors to Bangladesh has been done away with and while the actual implications of the move are unclear, it is nonetheless a signal. Providing Pakistan the opportunity to run anti-India operations from Bangladesh will be considered a serious violation of neighbourly relations. India retains leverage with

important sections in Bangladesh, such as the army which does not appear to support the radical agendas of the student movement. The Bangladesh army has its factions but its lines with the Indian Army remain open. It will also be useful, feel some defence and security analysts, to keep Yunus and others off-balance by not refuting the possibility of covert counter-measures in case India's point is lost on the current administration.

The unfolding situation in Bangladesh is a part of the wider arc of instability in India's neighbourhood. The internal situations in Nepal and Sri Lanka remain fragile despite a semblance of normalcy with regard to relations with India. Relations with the Maldives have significantly improved, but an undercurrent of volatility is never far from the surface in the archipelago. There is a relative stability in ties with China while hostilities with Pakistan can flare up any time. The situation demands more action away from the public gaze with a diverse range of stakeholders within the fractured societies in these nations. An assertion of India's right to act in the event of its interests being violated needs to be made in a manner that is credible and forthright. The challenge is rendered more complicated by the meddling of other powers like China and interventions by the US as in Bangladesh. The true extent of US interference in Bangladesh will be hard to assess but there is little doubt that Hasina's abdication was welcomed by the Biden administration and Yunus was accorded a warm reception in Washington.

The next act in Bangladesh will revolve around the forthcoming elections though they are not a certainty. The absence of the Awami League from the fray may, paradoxically enough, not suit the rival Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) of Begum Khaleda Zia. BNP might have hoped to be the natural beneficiary of Hasina's ouster but the ground situation is complex and shifting. "The Jamaat could contest the election on its own rather than as an ally of BNP as in the past. It is unclear how Awami League voters, with the party excluded from elections, will behave. Some may vote for Jamaat and this can be unsettling for BNP," says Pattanaik.

The wary relations between the Bangladesh army and Yunus, the inchoate agenda of the student protesters, and a vacuum caused by the Awami League's exclusion from public life and Yunus' own tenuous hold on office make predictions a mug's game. Seen in totality, India is the only force with the ability to influence the actions of key players, a message that might become more apparent in the days ahead. ■

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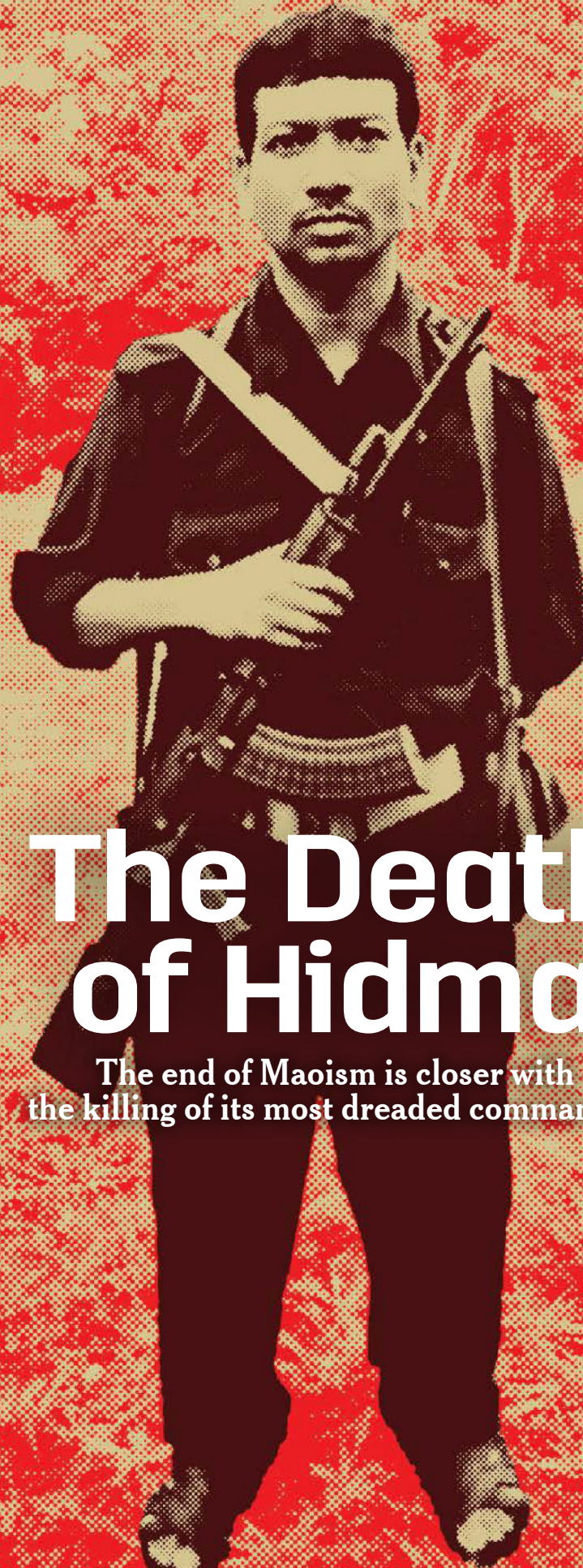
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The Death of Hidma

The end of Maoism is closer with the killing of its most dreaded commander

By **SIDDHARTH SINGH**

WHEN THE END came, it was not far-off from home. Madvi Hidma, the ruthless and elusive Maoist commander who was responsible for hundreds of deaths in the South Bastar region of Chhattisgarh, was finally gunned down along with his wife Rajakka—also in the Maoist ranks—in the dense forests near Maredumilli village, just across the border in Andhra Pradesh. There is, of course, no direct road from Puwarti, Hidma's home in Sukma district, to Maredumilli. But that was never an impediment for his reign of terror in this huge swath of territory that covered multiple states and districts. With his death, one of the last pegs anchoring Maoism has come unstuck.

Hidma was killed in an encounter with the Greyhounds, the specialised unit of the Andhra Pradesh police for tackling the Maoist insurgency. But it was an operation with a difference. Unlike the usual 'fierce' encounters between the Maoists and security forces, Hidma did not have enough ammunition to wage a sustained gun-fight. It has been reported that he barely had 25 to 50 rounds of ammunition for his weapon. This was highly unusual for the Maoist commander who had multiple layers of security around him and had proved impossible to catch even after sustained efforts by police forces across states in this region. He was, clearly, on the run.

One reason a myth began to accumulate around Hidma, that of his invincibility and his shrewdness, owed to non-existent efforts to create the necessary security apparatus and physical infrastructure in South Bastar over the past many decades. It is interesting to note that Hidma's last murderous operation was on April 3, 2021, the killing of 22 CRPF troopers, at Tekulagudem in Sukma district. After that, his ability to carry out major operations was degraded continuously until the morning of November 18 when he was hunted down. The slow but steady collapse of the insurgent ecosystem in Chhattisgarh left him with no option but to run for safety. He did not make it.

The story can be told from the events that have transpired since late March this year. At that time, the first appeals for ceasefire began to be made by the CPI (Maoist) and their intellectual supporters in New Delhi and elsewhere. These "overtures for peace" were welcomed and on April 5, Union Home Minister Amit Shah, while speaking on the occasion of "Bastar Pandum" in Dantewada, said, "Even today, I have come to request all Naxalite brothers, those who have arms in their hands and those who don't, that you lay down arms, join the mainstream. You are our own. No one is happy when a Naxalite is killed, but this region wants development..."

But that moment came and passed. The Maoists did not lay down arms, the gesture necessary for halting operations, and nor did intellectuals urge them to do so. This was necessary given the

loss of territory and the rapid elimination of Maoist cadres since 2024. A realistic appreciation of the situation should have forced Maoists and their intellectual backers to understand that peace was the only option they had unless they wanted annihilation in continuing with armed conflict. Unsurprisingly, they chose the latter path.

Then came the rapid onslaught against the Maoists. On May 21, the general secretary of the Maoist party, Nambala Kesava Rao alias Basavaraju, was killed in a remote area of the Indravati National Park that straddles Narayanpur and Bijapur districts of Chhattisgarh. Then, less than four months later, Mallojula Venugopal Rao, a CPI (Maoist) Politburo member, gave up arms before Maharashtra Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis on October 15. In these months and later as well, hundreds of Maoists have surrendered across Maharashtra, Chhattisgarh, Telangana, Odisha and Andhra Pradesh. A generalised collapse of sorts had begun.

It is interesting to compare the data on the number of Maoists and civilians who have been killed between May 21 this year (when Basavaraju was killed) and November 18 (when Hidma

was gunned down) with the data for the same period last year. Any statistical regularity or causal inference requires a longer and more sophisticated treatment. But it is an interesting quirk that almost the same number of Maoists were killed during this period last year (143) and this year (144) while the number of civilians killed fell from 49 last year to 27 this year during the same period. (The data used here has been reported on the South Asia Terrorism Portal). A careful look at the data shows that most civilians now being killed by Maoists are either for local-level 'score-settling' or on suspicion of being government in-

formers. This is a classic, late-insurgency pattern that has been seen in places as different as Punjab and Assam. In all likelihood, with the military wing of the Maoists being decimated, this trend should continue: the number of civilians being killed will fall further even as Maoist surrenders and deaths go up.

It is interesting to look at the dynamics of how Maoists went about controlling this area for so long. If one goes by the mythology of the 'Maoist Movement' written by authors like Jan Myrdal and Gautam Navlakha, "Maoists fought for justice" and their "governance structures" enabled people to engage in better agricultural practices and gave them healthcare. In reality, their strategy to control people and the territory under their grip was simple: instilling fear among people who lived in these far-flung territories and ensuring that security forces could not reach these areas and deliver basic services like healthcare and education that the government was committed to provide. Precious years were lost in not doing anything to build security camps, roads and bridges that could help counter the Maoists. This is evident from Hidma's

IN HIS LONG CAREER OF VIOLENCE, HIDMA INFLICTED SEVERE LOSSES ON SECURITY FORCES AND CIVILIANS. HOWEVER, THOSE EVENTS ARE NOW JUST BAD MEMORIES. WITH THE ELIMINATION OF THE TOP RANKS OF THE MAOISTS, ONLY A HANDFUL OF TOP LEADERS ARE LEFT

bloody career in violence. As Maoists began losing territory, they should have adopted a different strategy. That did not happen. The reason is not hard to find: in spite of all the myth-making by intellectuals, the reality is that Maoists had no non-violent political programme unlike, for example, the CPI (ML) (Liberation) in Bihar. Violence had become an end in itself. When security forces began to reclaim territorial control, the game was up.

AS ONE LEAVES Puwarti on the dirt track towards the state highway from Awapalli to Jagargonda, some five kilometres on the path lies Tekulagudem. Otherwise a nondescript village, similar to any other hamlet in South Bastar, Tekulagudem is infamous for the April 3, 2021 massacre of 22 CRPF troopers. Hidma led that infamous massacre.

At that time, there was information that he was in the vicinity of the area. Troopers from different directions—from Usoor in Bijapur, from Minpa in Sukma and from other locations as well—coalesced to Tekulagudem. What they found was an empty cluster of homes. The locals had been tipped off by the Maoists and a trap had been laid for the security forces. Ultimately, in the ensuing gunfight, they perished. Incidentally, another Maoist commander who provided cover to Hidma during that operation, Chandranna—a Central Committee member of the Maoist party—escaped Hidma's fate: he surrendered before Telangana police in late October. At that time (in 2021), he was present in that general area with 100-odd Maoists to give cover to Hidma.

Today, Tekulagudem boasts a security camp that was opened early last year as well as a helipad. The track to Puwarti passes through Tekulagudem. As one looks from the helipad, one can see forest cover starting barely 300 metres away. Another 300 metres beyond lie thickly forested hills that provide the high ground from where no target can escape in the low-lying area. This was the location where Hidma had his last 'victory'. After 2021, he was never able to mount any worthwhile operation against the security forces operating in this remote area.

Two days after the attack, Home Minister Amit Shah visited the nearby CRPF camp at Basaguda (at that time, there was no camp at Tekulagudem or in its adjoining areas). There, he told a gathering of CRPF men that the Maoist menace would be tackled. He said, "When this battle has reached its final stage, without losing any courage, we have to continue this fight with the same valour with which you have fought for years until victory is achieved."

The topography of the area has changed beyond belief since those grim days. Now, there is an array of camps not just in



CRPF commandos at the Puwarti camp in Bijapur, Chhattisgarh, March 2, 2025

GETTY IMAGES

Puwarti and its adjoining areas but as far deep as Gunjaparti, the base of Karregutta Hills on the Telangana border. Transport and road infrastructure has grown rapidly. Earlier this year, a major operation was launched at that location. Hidma was believed to be present there at that time but he escaped.

In his long and infamous career of violence, Hidma inflicted grievous losses on security forces and civilians alike. Two other deadly incidents bear his name. Tadmelta in Sukma district, incidentally not far from Puwarti, where 76 CRPF men were killed and later, on May 25, 2013 when virtually the entire brass of Congress' Chhattisgarh unit was killed near Darbha Valley in Sukma district. Apart from Mahendra Karma—the Congress leader from Dantewada who was the target of the Maoists—senior Congress leaders like Nand Kumar Patel, Vidya Charan Shukla and Patel's son, were killed in a grisly manner on the slopes of the Darbha Hills.

Those events are now just bad memories. With the rapid elimination of the top ranks of the Maoists, only a handful of top leaders are left. These include the new general secretary of the party, Thippiri Tirupathi alias Devuji, who took over soon after Nambala Keshava Rao was killed and Misir Besra, a Politburo member who is holed up somewhere in Jharkhand. There is speculation that security forces are closing in on Devuji. In any case, with the breakdown of the ecosystem that ensured the survival of the Maoist leadership—the petty contractors who provided them with essential supplies, the tendu leaf contractors who gave them financial support and a network of informants in the hamlets and towns in the area—it was just a matter of time before their top ranks were liquidated. That is unfolding virtually on a daily basis. The deadline for finishing off Maoism, set by Amit Shah—March 31, 2026—is now well within the zone achievement. ■

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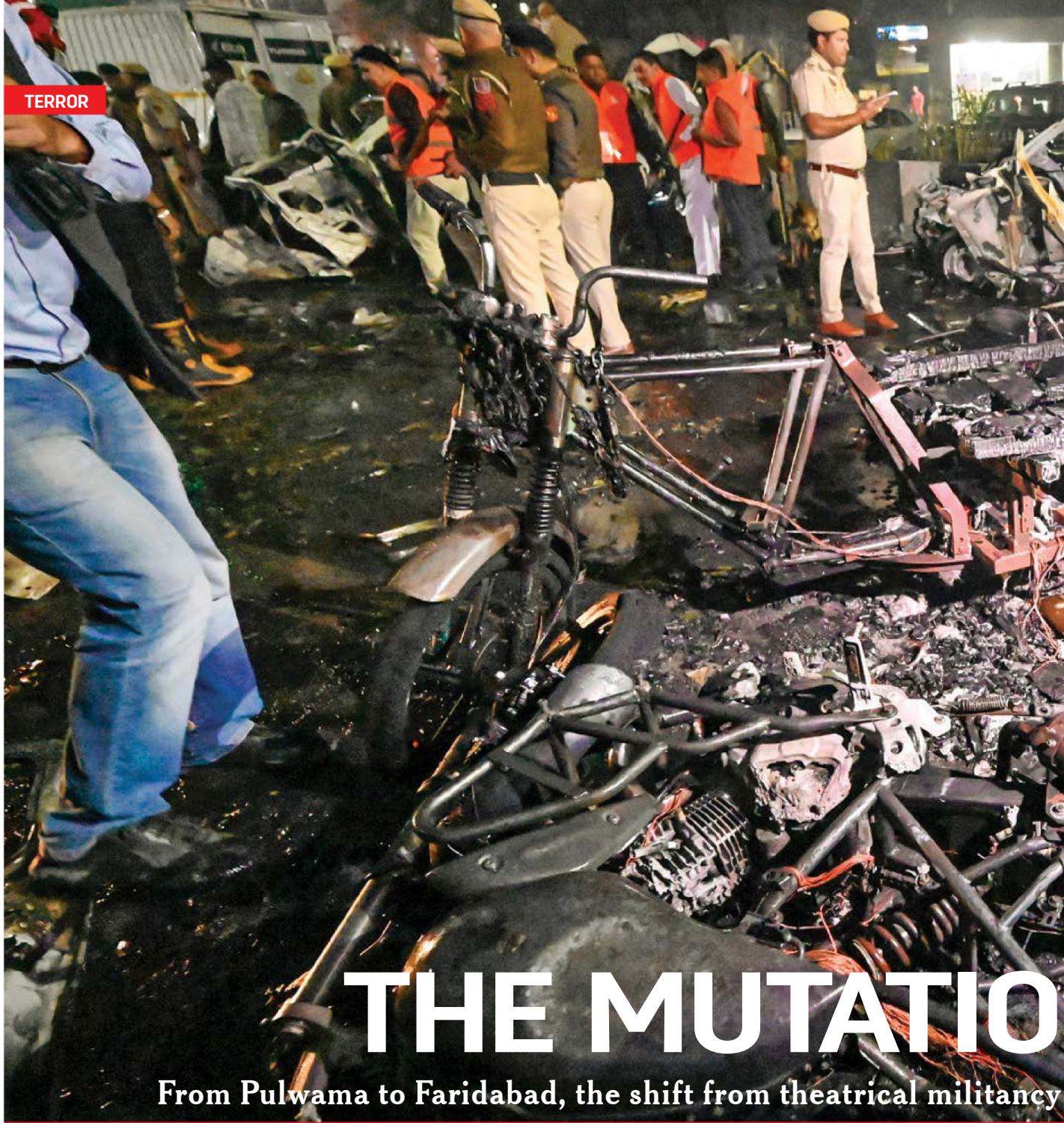
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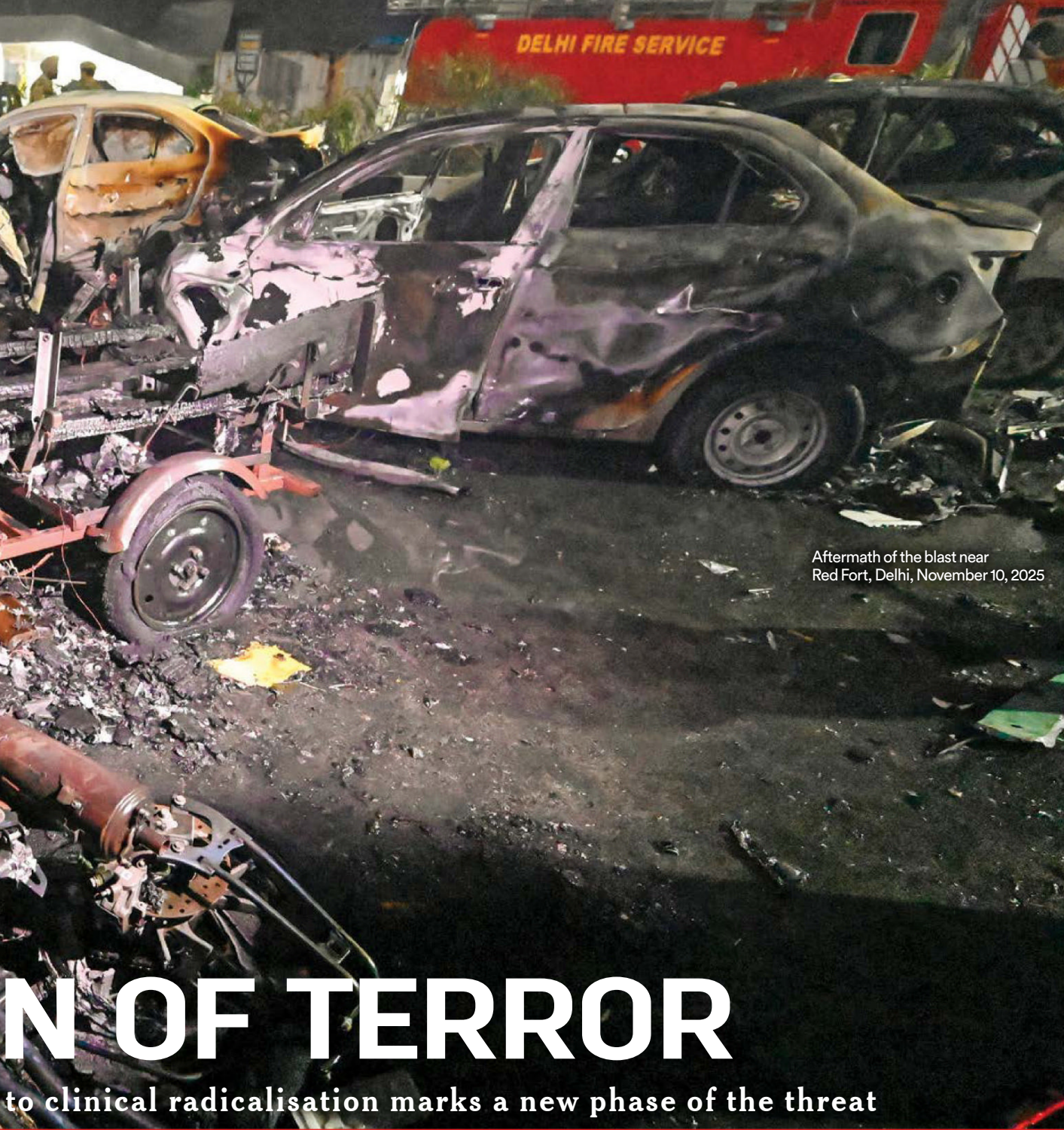
From Pulwama to Faridabad, the shift from theatrical militancy

By **RAHUL PANDITA**

THE TWO VIDEOS, at first invoked in the same breath, could not be more different once you watch them closely. Adil Ahmad Dar, the Pulwama suicide bomber of 2019, appeared before the camera with the raw theatre of a foot soldier: a young man who could not even remember his few lines properly, and hence someone had to dub over his. That monologue was performative, meant to thunder across the Kashmir Valley and into Pakistan-backed propaganda channels. The video of the Red Fort bomber, Umar Nabi, recorded in a cramped room in Faridabad, feels like it belongs to an entirely different universe. There is no flag in the backdrop, no weapons staged for effect,

no swagger. He sits like a philosophy student in a seminar, composed, soft-spoken, as if he is clearing doubts about metaphysics rather than “martyrdom”; he speaks English like some Kashmiris who go abroad and then pronounce Kashmir as Cashmir.

If Dar’s video was meant to rattle India, Nabi’s feels like a message crafted for those who might see themselves in him. It is an attempt, in other words, to normalise his radicalisation and make it seem achievable, even rational. Together, the contrast between the two clips tells a larger story, which is of continuity, but a mutated one. This mutation appears at a jarring confluence of two disturbing developments: the accidental dismantling of the ‘white-collar’ network involving doctors, and the blowing up of a moving bomb in a crowded area in the national capital. It is



Aftermath of the blast near Red Fort, Delhi, November 10, 2025

N OF TERROR

to clinical radicalisation marks a new phase of the threat

a clear warning of how domestic terror modules may be diversifying, professionalising and operating with stealth from inside India's institutions.

The question is no longer whether India may face further attacks; it is how many, how soon, and how well-prepared it is.

"The way he [Nabi] spoke in that video is chilling," says Yashovardhan Jha Azad, former special director, Intelligence Bureau. "It means that the indoctrination of people like him is very successful. Because more than an invitation to kill, this indoctrination is saying that we are inviting you for an elevated puritanical, Islamic existence."

The chain of events began earlier this month when, in a coordinated operation across Kashmir, Haryana (Faridabad) and

Uttar Pradesh, authorities arrested several individuals, among them medical doctors, suspected of involvement in a terror network with alleged links to the Pakistan-based Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) and the Kashmir-based Ansar Ghazwat ul Hind (AGH). This includes a lady doctor from Lucknow, Shaheen Shahid. Investigators believe that she may have been in touch with Afirah Bibi, the widow of the Pulwama attack mastermind, Umar Farooq, who also happened to be Jaish chief Masood Azhar's nephew. One raid in Faridabad turned up about 2,900kg of explosive-making material, including 360kg of suspected ammonium nitrate. It marked a shift in pattern. Rather than the large-scale militant incursions or the infiltrations of previous decades, what is emerging is a more subtle 'insider' model: radicalised individuals embedded in

civilian professions, able to move relatively freely, maintain cover, and perhaps execute strikes when opportunities arise.

“No matter how many modules security agencies bust, there is always a chance of a slip here and there. The system, no matter how hard one tries, is not foolproof,” says Ashok Chand, the former Delhi Police officer who investigated the 2001 Parliament attack. “Earlier, for exposure, one would have to go to a terrorist camp. Now there is no need; much of it is possible online.”

Officials who have spent years tracking insurgency in Kashmir and monitoring jihadist cells across Indian cities admit that the backgrounds of those arrested in Faridabad and Srinagar have surprised them.

One senior investigator described it as discovering “a new species in an old forest.” The spectre of the ‘white-coat radical’ has therefore rattled New Delhi less for the novelty of it than for what it implies, which is that the frontier between normal life and violent ideologies is thinner than the country had assumed. The Red Fort blast, coming so soon after the arrests, appears to confirm that some version of this darker reality is already in motion.

For India’s security establishment, the unease lies not merely in the fact of an attack but in the method. It conveyed a message that even heavily surveilled spaces are permeable, particularly when the perpetrator is not an infiltrator from across the Line of Control but a 30-something

professional who drives a common sedan. The Indian intelligence community had long assumed that the greatest threat lay in Kashmir, or emanated from Pakistan-based groups that historically viewed Delhi and Mumbai as trophies. Terror modules outside Kashmir are not new. But the arrests of doctors in different states have drawn attention to a form of radicalisation less dramatic but more insidious: individuals who grow up in one part of India, study in another, and use the freedoms of modern mobility to operate below the radar of agencies who may still be thinking in terms of region-specific patterns. One investigator involved in the Faridabad case remarked that the men and women they arrested “looked like anyone you would meet on an ordinary day in a hospital corridor.” It is this ordinariness, he said, that worried him.

India has faced internal terror cells before. But those networks were often composed of small-town youth, or individuals already under one or another watchlist. What alarms security officials now is the level of educational attainment and professional integration. A doctor commuting between clinics or laboratories does

not draw attention; a medical intern travelling back to Kashmir for a family visit is unremarkable. In such a large country, the camouflage of normalcy is its own advantage.

“This looks like part of a bigger process,” says Manoj Kumar Lall, who has dealt with critical internal security challenges, including during his almost two-decade stint in the Intelligence Bureau. “The Kashmiri terrorists have now started making their base outside Kashmir and have started acting independently. It is like they want their act to be demonstrative in a way that it will teach the Indian government a lesson.”

Urbanisation has inadvertently helped these networks. The Indian city—loud, anonymising, and porous—is an ideal habitat for individuals who want to move fast without attracting undue curiosity. Large institutions such as universities and hospitals also generate their own steady churn, with new faces appearing

every month; and the Kashmiri doctors wisely chose Faridabad as their base. It is away from the heart of Delhi but close enough to be able to reach in a matter of an hour or so. In such a setting, a radicalised young professional can survive for years without raising suspicion. The revelation that caches of explosives were stored in staff quarters and compact city flats has forced agencies to re-examine the boundaries of what they believed possible.

The Faridabad episode has also exposed in many ways the failure in basic policing. That the doctors could procure cars and gather explosives

and other material over a period of several months without evoking suspicion is worrisome. “There were meetings going on, cars were being sold, explosive material was being gathered and nobody had a clue. That this could go unchecked for two-and-a-half-years points at silent complicity of people around the accused or that they just could not be interested,” says Azad. He recalls the time when he was in active policing, serving in various positions in Madhya Pradesh. “I used to know every pujari, every maulvi, every member of socio-religious organisations and interacted with them frequently. But in this case, some policeman should have known what is happening,” he says.

A former intelligence officer who does not want to be named points at how ignoring common acts of crime leads to bigger acts like terrorism. “False identification, false documents, illegal money transactions, mobile connection on false ID, unchecked car transfers—had these things remained in check, we wouldn’t have a terrorist attack,” he says. “The prevailing sentiment among many in the police is that these things are beneath their dignity.



The three individuals arrested by Gujarat ATS, November 9, 2025

THE SPECTRE OF THE ‘WHITE-COAT RADICAL’ HAS RATTLED NEW DELHI LESS FOR THE NOVELTY OF IT THAN FOR WHAT IT IMPLIES. IT CONVEYED A MESSAGE THAT EVEN HEAVILY SURVEILLED SPACES ARE PERMEABLE



"No matter how many modules security agencies bust, there is always a chance of a slip here and there. The system, no matter how hard one tries, is not foolproof."



ASHOK CHAND
former Delhi Police officer

"Kashmiri terrorists have started making their base outside Kashmir and have started acting independently. It is like they want their act to be demonstrative."



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former Intelligence Bureau officer

"The way Nabi spoke in that video is chilling. More than an invitation to kill, this indoctrination is saying that we are inviting you for an elevated puritanical, Islamic existence."



YASHOVARDHAN JHA AZAD
former special director, IB

Small crimes do not move us any longer."

The timing of these events also adds layers of political and diplomatic complexity. India, already managing tense relations with Pakistan, must now decide how to calibrate its response when the alleged actors are not infiltrators but Indian citizens with professional identities. This hybrid threat requires a posture very different from *Operation Sindoor*: more policing than retaliation, more intelligence work than troop deployment.

Officials acknowledge that several conditions favour the emergence of more such modules. India's law-enforcement architecture remains heavily state-centric; coordination across jurisdictions is still uneven. The Faridabad cell, for instance, straddled three states before its exposure. And while Central agencies have grown more technically sophisticated, the sheer scale of India's digital communication—encrypted apps, decentralised financial flows, social media subcultures—creates oceans in which even well-trained analysts struggle to fish. At the same time, the availability of explosives and chemicals across India's industrial belts remains a recurring challenge, despite attempts at tightening regulation.

Security experts warn that the coming months will be crucial. The discovery of huge quantities of explosives suggests that at least some elements within this network had plans that went beyond a single attack. Whether these plans can be executed now that the network has been partly exposed depends on two factors: how many individuals remain undetected, and how successfully the state can map the command structure behind them.

The Indian government has moved quickly to reassure the public that the situation is under control. Yet, privately, officials concede that the 'insider' nature of the recent cases complicates the calculus. Police can seal borders, fortify cities and disrupt infiltration routes, but there is no equivalent measure that can be applied to the country's hospitals, colleges or transport hubs without alienating millions of ordinary people. As one former intelligence official put it, "The challenge is not only to catch the guilty, but to do so without making the innocent feel watched."

Communities, too, are watching. The arrests of young

Kashmiri doctors have inevitably revived older anxieties about profiling and prejudice. Many in Kashmir fear that these cases could feed an already-growing narrative that paints a whole region's youth with suspicion. Security officials insist that the arrests were based on hard evidence, not conjecture; yet, they also understand that in a conflict-scarred region, perception can be as consequential as fact. How delicately the state manages this tension may determine whether future radicalisation is curbed or fuelled.

But it is not only about Kashmir now. Azad says it is time for the prime minister to call chief ministers of vulnerable states and tell them that they need to engage with members of society on a big scale. "Engagement with the Muslim community, particularly, must take place," he says. Azad points at the dangers of what two doctors, arrested separately as part of a bio-terror module, aimed to achieve. The two doctors, arrested from Gujarat, according to the police, had plans of mixing poisonous ricin in temple prasad to kill people. "Now, imagine what kind of societal tension it would have led to," says Azad.

Lall believes that as part of strategy to prevent such attacks, the police must identify what he calls "terrorist-precursor crimes", which means identifying problem areas which terrorists might exploit in gaining a foothold in a community and establishing their infrastructure. "We must create hostile environment for terrorists, which includes targeting tenant verification, credit card fraud, welfare fraud like procuring a ration card or gaining government employment," he says.

For the moment, the country is left with the sobering image of severed limbs near the ramparts of a monument where the prime minister unfurls the Tricolour each August. It is a reminder that India's vulnerabilities are no longer confined to distant mountains or policing blind spots. They may be nestled in the very places where its citizens heal, study, commute and work. And as investigators sift through evidence from apartments in Faridabad to houses in Kashmir, the uneasy question lingers over Delhi: is this an isolated rupture, or the start of something more ominous stirring from within? ■

GET, SET, RACE

HYROX IS ALL THE RAGE
FOR FITNESS FREAKS



By **SOHINI DEY**

SIKANDAR CHINDHU TADAKHE has been interested in athletics for as long as he can remember. Growing up in a village in Nashik, Maharashtra, he participated in local wrestling matches but found few opportunities to develop his skills. An Armyman since 2014, serving around India and overseas, Tadakhe finally found his platform a few years earlier when a senior official and coach facilitated a three-month training programme for him. “I ran my first marathon after the training, in 2023,” he says. “I completed it in 2 hours 30 minutes to come first. My journey started there.”

His early background in wrestling, coupled with recent training, served well when Tadakhe signed up for his first HYROX race in Mumbai earlier this year. The fitness race hosted its first India event in May this year, followed by two more races in Delhi in July and Mumbai again in September. “In May, I participated in the pro

← PARTICIPANTS
IN A HYROX RACE

CENTR

HYROX
WORLD SERIES OF FITNESS RACING



category. It was mainly for experience, and without setting any targets,” he says. “It took me an hour and eight minutes to complete the race. For the next match, I targeted breaking the one-hour limit.” In September’s edition of the race in Mumbai, Tadakhe completed it in 59 minutes and 14 seconds—the only Indian participant to clock under an hour—and took first place in the podium.

HYROX’s popularity in India is growing in tandem with the breathtaking speed at which athletes like Tadakhe compete. A fitness competition launched by Moritz Fürste and Christian Toetzke, HYROX combines eight kilometres of running with eight functional exercises. Since its first event in 2017, in Hamburg (Germany) which drew 650 participants, the competition has been hosted in 30 countries including India, engaging around 550,000 participants across the globe. Following the three HYROX India races this year, the next edition will take place in Bengaluru in April 2026.

AS FITNESS BECOMES increasingly aspirational in India, endurance tournaments and competitions have found dedicated followers. Marathons have mushroomed around the country, from Mumbai to Ladakh, with runners seeking out clubs and coaches to prepare for races. Hype around long-distance triathlons such as Ironman and Ultraman, which combines swim, bicycle ride and marathon, gained traction over the past decade, partly thanks to celebrity participants like Milind Soman. Now, India hosts its own editions of such races even as homegrown competitive events such as The Yoddha Race gain in popularity. Unlike triathlons, which incorporate endurance disciplines, HYROX is a hybrid fitness event in which running is punctuated by functional modules that bring a workout session to mind. Call it competitive gymming.

Deepak Raj, founder and CEO of Yoska, who initiated the arrival of HYROX to India, observes that the race fills a major market gap. Having brought Ironman to India in the past and

serving as country head for the triathlon as well, Raj has an astute understanding of fitness aspirations among Indians. As a competitive event, HYROX gives them an opportunity to chase fitness goals that go beyond counting the number of bench-presses they can ace in one round or running a 5k race or doing fun fitness challenges and bootcamps. “Gym-goers don’t have quantifiable milestones,” he says. “With HYROX, we have a race to showcase their skills, see where they stand and beat their targets.”

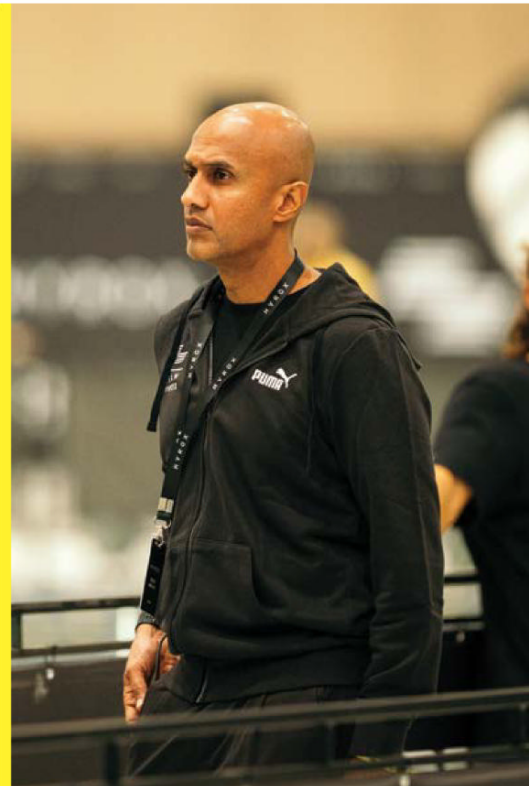
HYROX competitors can enter the open or pro categories and the race makes itself more accessible for its audience with

singles, doubles, mixed doubles and relay divisions. In the three India events hosted so far, the race has drawn over 7,500 participants ranging from 16 to 78 years in age. Every kilometre of run is followed by a different functional workout in a dedicated station, which include SkiErg, sled push and pull, burpee broad jumps, rowing, kettlebell, and wall balls, among others, culminating in an eight-round race for every category.

For Vineet Singh, who has participated in all three HYROX India races, it is akin to an exam that he looks forward to. The 39-year-old Bengaluru resident, who works at Pocket FM, turned his

“WHEN I STARTED MY FITNESS JOURNEY, IT WAS ABOUT LOSING WEIGHT. ONCE I GOT THERE, I WANTED MORE MOTIVATION TO PUSH HARDER AND GET TO ANOTHER LEVEL.” **VINEET SINGH** business executive





“I’D IMAGINED I WOULD ENJOY THE RACE, BUT IT WAS MAGNETIC—THE AMBIENCE, THE LIGHTING, THE ENERGY, THE MUSIC, THE COMBINATION OF STRENGTH AND RUNNING.” KAVITA NAIR corporate professional

“GYM-GOERS DON’T HAVE QUANTIFIABLE MILESTONES. WITH HYROX, WE HAVE A RACE TO SHOWCASE THEIR SKILLS, SEE WHERE THEY STAND AND BEAT THEIR TARGETS.”

DEEPAK RAJ country head, HYROX India

attention to health and fitness four years ago in a bid to lose weight and lower his blood pressure. Starting with walks, he graduated to running and weight training and marathons.

“When I started my fitness journey, it was about losing weight and getting healthier,” he says. “But once I got there, I wanted more motivation to push harder and get to another level. I wanted to see if I could do something like this.” Singh ran his first Mumbai HYROX race in the doubles category with a friend from college, finishing in an hour and 41 minutes. In the next race, in Delhi, the duo improved its timing to an hour and 39 minutes. By the third race, Singh had signed up in the singles category, adding that the races have changed his fitness regimen towards greater endurance.

Though India is still behind countries such as the US, Germany or the UK when it comes to fitness membership, it is a market primed for expansion. According to

Deloitte’s India Fitness Market Report 2025, fitness services in India stood at ₹16,200 crore (\$2 billion) in 2024 and has the potential to grow up to ₹37,700 crore (\$4.5 billion) by 2030. As affluent Indians seek out premium services and experiences, hybrid fitness models are driving the market forward. In such a market, events such as HYROX amplify reach with a community-first strategy. As people from all walks of life gather to participate in the races, they also post and create content about it. Raj notes that user-generated content has sparked a compounding effect on marketing. Every post, be it from the social media handle of a celebrity or an average participant, adds to awareness levels and piques curiosity levels.

Nisha Kumari first heard about HYROX from friends in Europe who were participating in the races. The Gurugram-based UI/UX designer has an active lifestyle, including a strength routine six days a week, swimming and badminton;

she has also trained in Muay Thai and dabbles in boxing. When a friend, Delhi-based Aditi Mahajan who works with JSW Sports, asked if she would like to participate in the HYROX race in Delhi, Kumari was quick to agree. “We trained for almost two-and-a-half months before the event, and that entire phase was one of the most intense and fun periods of my fitness journey,” she says. “Our workouts included strength training, functional movements and running 5-7km twice a week. I think consistent running played a huge role in building our stamina and helping us perform better.”

Entering in the doubles category, the duo finished in third place in the race. “Our podium finish gave us a sense of accomplishment. A lot of fellow athletes also recognised us,” Mahajan adds. “HYROX is much more than just fitness. It’s also about belonging to a community; it’s about self-love and boosting your confidence.”

Conceptualising the race as a spectator sport makes it more appealing. Besides the participants, the public can also purchase tickets to watch and cheer the participants. In India, the races have drawn over 10,000 audience members. Kavita Nair, 44, a Bengaluru-based corporate professional and marathoner, describes the event as electric. “I’ve been running for the past nine years, and it’s part of my routine. I also trip on strength workouts—skipping a training session gives me real FOMO [Fear of Missing Out],” she says. “HYROX is a sweet combination of the two.” Nair participated in the second Mumbai race in the doubles category with a friend who lives in the city. Her experience in long-distance running and strength training gave her endurance, and Nair and her partner worked to supplement each other’s forte during the race, finishing in 82 minutes. “I imagined I would enjoy the race, but it was magnetic—the ambience, the lighting, the energy, the music, the combination of strength and running,” Nair adds, calling it one of her most memorable competitive events.

With an accessible format and engaging presentation, HYROX has transformed into a viral sensation across India in a matter of months. Social media testify to the staggering variety of people training for the races—from veteran marathoners to corporate professionals and fitness enthusiasts spread across the country. Apart from athletes and fitness fanatics (members from 850 gyms across the country have participated in the races), the events have also attracted a fair share of celebrities, including the likes of Zerodha founder and CEO Nithin Kamath. Its popularity has also created marketing opportunities for brands, from global names such as Harley-Davidson, Puma (which has created sportswear capsules in collaboration with HYROX), and Red Bull to homegrown companies like Blue Tokai, PolicyBazaar, and d’you.

WE HAVE HIGHLIGHTED three cities so far, and our goal is to reach out to more cities depending on market demand and venue availability,” says Raj. HYROX races are typi-



“MY TARGET FOR THE COMING YEARS IS TO BECOME A HYROX WORLD CHAMPION.” SIKANDAR CHINDHU TADAKHE armyman

cally hosted indoors, in large convention halls, which can accommodate the large number of participants and audience as well as the expansive setup. This year’s HYROX venues included the NESCO Hall in Mumbai and Yashobhoomi (India International Convention and Expo Centre) in Dwarka, Delhi-NCR. Before each race, Raj and his team of volunteers, race crews, and event producers spend days working out logistics that span everything from transporting and storing equipment to the audio-visual setup.

There is, seemingly, no shortfall in participation—the races so far have drawn not only locals but many who travelled to take part in them. Raj notes that besides competitors from 200 cities, towns, and villages across the country,

they have also seen about 10-20 per cent overseas participation. In keeping with the rising number of HYROX enthusiasts, the race in Bengaluru next year will be a two-day event.

Even as the race finds new followers, future races are also likely to see many returning participants. Singh aims to participate in all HYROX India matches, while Nair hopes that she will take on a solo challenge in the future. Tadakhe anticipates that HYROX becoming one of the most popular events of its kind among Indians over the next few years. Presently aiming to break the 55-minute mark in the next edition of the race, he has his eyes set on the long goal. “My target for the coming years,” he says, “is to become a HYROX world champion.” ■

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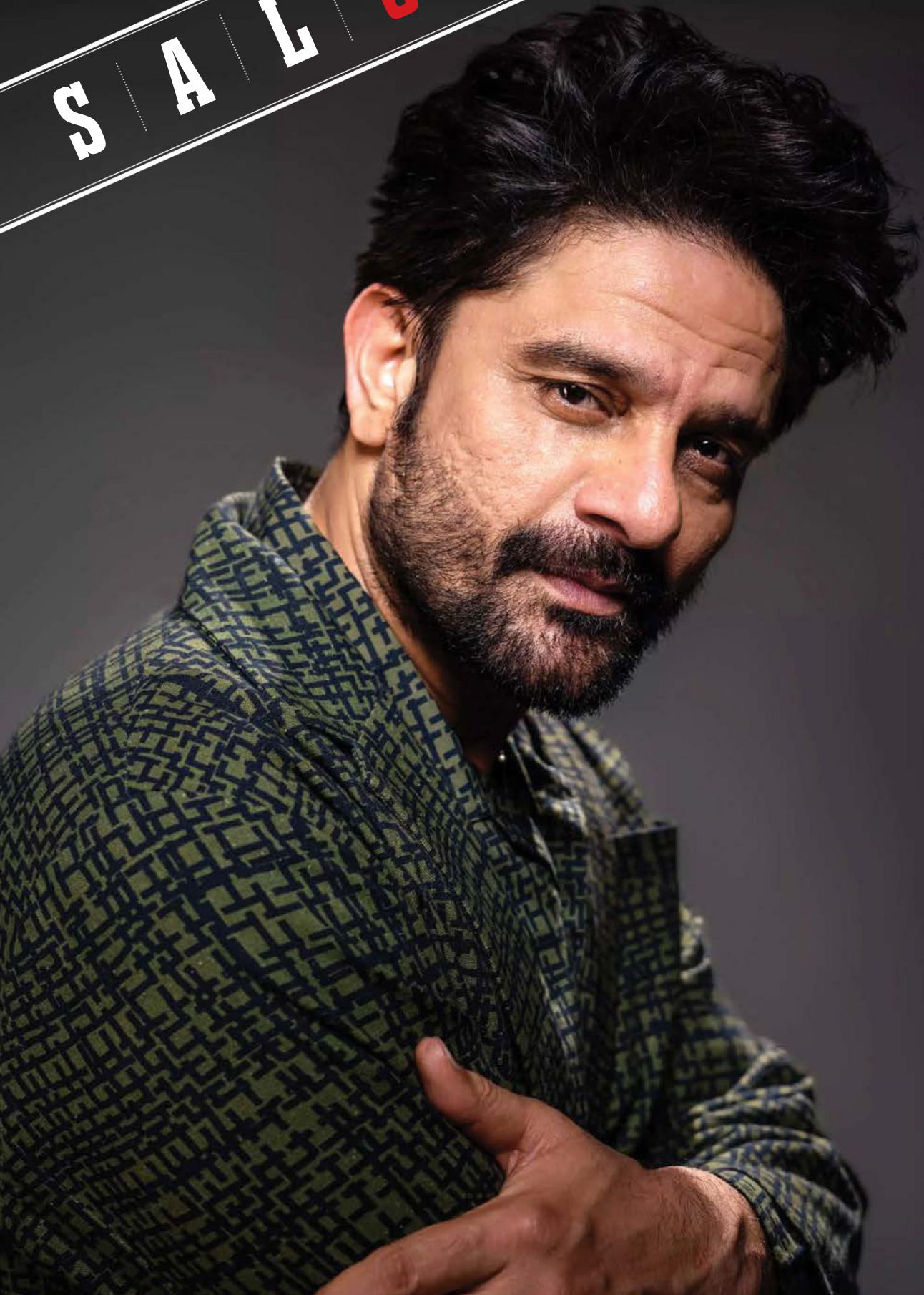
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SALON



The Hungry Anti-Hero

JAIDEEP AHLAWAT IS A DIFFERENT KIND OF ACTION HERO

By Kaveree Bamzai

YOU SHOULD RAISE your status, not forget it," says Jaideep Ahlawat, playing a drug smuggler in the third season of *The Family Man*, up against the formidable and beloved super agent, Srikant Tiwari (Manoj Bajpayee). The words encapsulate Ahlawat's own life. Since the advent of *Paatal Lok* during COVID in 2020, Ahlawat has become a star of streaming and much sought after in cinema, appearing in two-handers with actors from Ayushmann Khurrana in the cheeky *An Action Hero* (2022) to his old classmate Vijay Varma in *Jaane Jaan* (2023). His lanky figure is also a familiar one on the red carpet, but he remains the boy from Kharkhara in Rohtak, Haryana, his accent firmly in place during interviews, announcing his geography with secure pride.

Perhaps because of his long apprenticeship in the shadows, after graduat-

ing from Pune's Film and Television Institute of India (FTII) in 2008, fame does not seem to have seduced him, allowing him to live in the limelight and yet stay out of range of the paparazzi culture. Instead, the focus is on work, the kind that has got him a loyal army of fans who can't wait to see what transformation he undergoes next. If he put on weight to play the bumbling police officer of *Paatal Lok*'s Season 2, he grew his hair long for *The Family Man*, and for the lamentable *Maharaj* (2024) on Netflix, he worked out to be able to bare-chested through the movie.

For Ahlawat, acting has always been a state of mind, a product of teamwork, and a profound understanding of the word, both spoken and unspoken. In Season 3 of *The Family Man*, for instance, he plays a drug smuggler Rukma, a loner who works as an operative for powerful patrons in the Northeast,

Nagaland specifically. He has no morals, no scruples and certainly no notion of patriotism. He lives for himself and his bank balance, operating with his band of boys and staying under the radar. Until, he is persuaded to undertake a foolhardy adventure against the Indian state and seemingly in cahoots

with China.

It is a role that allows him to be able to go head-to-head with one of his idols, Manoj Bajpayee, who plays the eponymous family man. "We're both soldiers," he tells Bajpayee's Srikant Tiwari in a final face-off, while inviting him to sit. "I am nothing like you," snarls Bajpayee, upon which Ahlawat withdraws the offer and keeps him standing. Such sudden cheekiness and moments of levity are now expected tools in Ahlawat's armoury but for the most part he stays away from star-like mannerisms.

Says Ahlawat: "When I was reading the script, I couldn't picture Rukma the way it is now. There was a picture in the minds of Raj and DK (the creators) on how Rukma should look. The character doesn't really care about anything. His detachment often gives out a vibe of him being inhuman, but he actually isn't so. Srikant can be labelled as the socially accepted Family Man, whereas Rukma is quite the opposite of that. He is an unacceptable Family Man."

Ahlawat's career is studded with roles big and small, but always with impact. Whether it is Kubera, the deadbeat traffic policeman with a high-maintenance girlfriend in the SonyLIV miniseries *Tryst With Destiny* (2020) or Sudhir, the adulterous friend caught between an assertive woman and her embarrassed husband in



The struggle is when you know the job and then lend the job. Nobody put a gun to your head and asked you to join the film industry. It's cutthroat. You signed up for it. You have to keep yourself motivated and keep learning your craft."

JAIDEEP AHLAWAT actor

Netflix's *Lust Stories* (2018) in the segment directed by Dibakar Banerjee, Ahlawat is a poet in an athlete's body. His characters surprise, sometimes even shock, as in the Netflix anthology *Ajeeb Daastaans* (2021). As Babloo, he is a tough guy but it turns out it is not his wife he loves but the man she wants.

Is he a hero or villain? It is a question often left hanging, as in Meghna Gulzar's *Raazi* (2018), where he plays Khalid Mir, Alia Bhatt's mentor-spy-master. Ahlawat remains true to his craft, as he has been in the years he was out of work as well, learning, reading, preparing: "The struggle is when you know the job and then land the job. Nobody put a gun to your head and asked you to join the film industry. It's cutthroat. You signed up for it. You have to keep yourself motivated and keep learning your craft. There's nothing that is out of syllabus for an actor," he says.

Like many small town young men who came of age in the '90s, Ahlawat is a product of the VCR culture and his parent's reading choices. His late school teacher father would often rent a TV and VCR so that the family could watch movies such as *Devdas* (1955), *Pyaasa* (1957) and *Mughal-e-Azam* (1960) on demand. He would also bring home books such as Munshi Premchand's collected short stories. In *The Family Man*, his character Rukma is the son of a police constable who earned ₹12,000 a month and stretched it to cover the expenses of his three children—somehow it seems as if Ahlawat is speaking from personal experience.

Ahlawat studied in Kharkara until Class 10 and went to Jat College in Rohtak—where his school teacher sister still lives—for Class 12 and graduation. He then enrolled at Maharshi Dayanand University (MDU) to pursue a Master's degree in English. In college he was a dancer who was popular in competitions. It was while in his first year at MDU, in 2003, that Ahlawat met actor



JAIDEEP AHLAWAT
IN *THE FAMILY MAN*

Sunil Chitkara and decided that acting would be his life. By that time, he had given up the dream of joining the Indian Army, having not been able to clear the exams. "Jaideep had seen me perform *Oedipus* in some inter-college festival and told me, 'Mujhe bhi yeh karna hai (I also want to do this)'. I helped MDU do a play, Shankar Shesh's *Poster*, where Jaideep won the Best Actor award in the inter-zonal competition. Next year, we did another play, *Jalta Hua Rath* by Swadesh Deepak, and he won Best Actor again in the inter-zonal play tournament," recalls Chitkara.

BY THE TIME came for what's next, FTII was a clear destination. Chitkara helped him crack the rigorous entrance exam and that is how he found himself in the acting department with classmates such as fellow Haryanvi Rajkumar Rao, Hyderabad runaway Vijay Varma and Delhi engineer-turned-RJ Gaurav Dwivedi. Ahlawat has often talked fondly of those days. "You understand you have to start from zero, that you don't know anything. But neither do your classmates. So, the solidarity and emotional connect is intense. You realise you've known each other from a time when you were trying to understand this art, and you've seen each and everyone's truth. For them and yourself, you are forever that FTII student," he says.

FTII opened his mind and heart to world cinema and the rest of his

education was with Anurag Kashyap who cast him as Shahid Khan in *Gangs of Wasseypur* (2012) after bit roles that included playing Ranbir Kapoor's brother in Imtiaz Ali's *Rockstar* (2011). "FTII showed me a path to walk on, to realise what is right or what is wrong. I always find a solution in the basics. It's like going back to the NCERT (National Council of Educational Research and Training)

textbooks while preparing for the civil service examination," he says.

The rootedness has stayed with Ahlawat who is married to his FTII junior, Jyoti, who has left acting and now teaches dance and movement therapy with a vital Instagram presence. He has remained close to his origins. For the first 15 years of his life in Mumbai, he lived in a two-bedroom house and has only now bought two fancy apartments, adding to the recently purchased Mercedes SUV.

His life in Mumbai began in a one-bedroom flat with one batchmate, a student from the editing course at FTII. The number of inhabitants slowly grew to three, and then four, he recalled. "At one point, there were six of us in a one-bedroom apartment. But it was not a bad time or a sad time, just a bit difficult, in that we could eat only once a day sometimes."

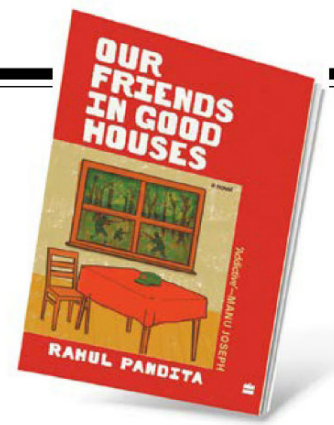
Ahlawat is still a member of the Mazboot Actors Association WhatsApp group, founded when he and his friends were "struggling". He has learnt immense patience over the years. "It has to keep you in the right frame of mind. You know, some things are necessary and have to be done, and some are not. The race is everyone's, there's nothing right or wrong," he says.

"*Insaan ki tarakki uski bhookh main chhipi hoti hai* (A person's progress is linked to his hunger)," Rukma says in *The Family Man*. With forthcoming movies such as Sriram Raghavan's war drama 'Ikkis', Vipul Amrutlal Shah's 'Hisaab', and Siddharth Anand's 'King' with Shah Rukh Khan, Ahlawat's appetite seems insatiable. ■

A Quest Called Home

Rahul Pandita's first novel portrays a nowhere man

By Nandini Nair



WHAT DOES EXILE do to a human? How does it alter the dynamics of family? How does it contort body and mind? How does it handcuff thoughts? How does it bleach relationships? How does it colour behaviours? These are just some of the questions that journalist Rahul Pandita probes in his debut novel *Our Friends in Good Houses*, which follows three works of nonfiction.

Pandita's memoir *Our Moon Has Blood Clots: A Memoir of a Lost Home in Kashmir* (2013) recounted how he (as a 14-year-old), along with his family, was forced to leave home in Srinagar in 1990. They were Kashmiri Pandits—the Hindu minority within a Muslim-majority state. His new book, thinly disguised as fiction, builds on the story of exile with candour and insight.

In *Our Friends in Good Houses*, Neel, a journalist in Delhi, travels to India's interiors (Dandakaranya) to meet "comrades" or Naxalites. He listens when they inform him, "We are telling the Adivasis that they deserve better. And we are teaching them to fight for it." He takes note when they tell him that even death is worth all this, as "The point of all this is dignity, the right to life—a decent life—which has been denied to the poor."

He returns to Delhi from these exertions to an ailing mother and a reticent father, both buffeted by the forces of exile. Neither father nor son has in their "possession idioms that speak of the heart." They

know not a language to commune.

Neel is a man constantly cutting the "belly of destiny's whale". He is a caring son who upends his life for his parents who, since fleeing Kashmir, are in constant flux. For him an unconsidered life is no life at all.

He makes sense of life through literature and philosophy. A description of a tryst is anchored with references to Nietzsche, Aristotle, Erich Fromm, Roland Barthes, Hilary Mantel (and all within a few pages), to give just one illustrative example. In his constant search for firm footing, a home, a "base camp", love provides one mooring. However unsteady. In his relationships he finds succour, but too often it proves fleeting.

The longest interlude of stillness, during this constant search, is the seven

"The German mystic Jakob Bohme had provided him with a word for something he always felt deep within him. The word was 'Ungrund'. It meant non-ground or an absence of ground, the ontological nothingness of being. For forty years, he had struggled to discover a ground, to come out of the void, to find a home."

weeks that Neel spends in Shimla working on a book. This is a time of immersive writing and daily exercise. A schedule that roots him to the page and removes him from doubt.

Our Friends in Good Houses is an

emotional story of a protagonist who lives in different worlds but realises he is a citizen of none. He finds solidarity in distant outposts, friendships in cities, but his greatest comfort is that of books and music, writing and literature.

It is a book of loss—of loved ones, of home. It is a book of longing—for meaning and anchorage. It is a book about memory—what we remember and what we try to forget. It is a book about the ecstasy of connection and the trauma of an unfulfilled relationship. It is ultimately a novel that reminds us: "what are we, if not stories?" ■

Illustration by SAURABH SINGH



OUR FRIENDS IN GOOD HOUSES | Rahul Pandita | Fourth Estate | 225 Pages | ₹599

A SCULPTURE CALLED INSAAF KI DEVI BY NISHANT S KUMBHATIL AT THE CONSTITUTION MUSEUM, SONIPAT



THREE C

A museum where

EVERY UNIVERSITY HAS A library at its core. Around 60km from Delhi, OP Jindal Global University (JGU), in

Sonipat, has a Constitution Museum at its heart. Spread across 1,000 acres and home to over 11,000 students, the campus finds its moral centre in this quiet, sunlit space—one that celebrates the living spirit of India's democracy.

The museum's silence feels deliberate—the kind that allows you to soak in what's around you. As you enter, the words of the Preamble shine faintly on the glass. You stop to read them. You move slowly. The museum makes you pause, think, and feel closer to what the Constitution really means.

At a time when the Constitution has re-entered public conversation—from challenges to secularism, pluralism, and democracy in India to debates on free speech—the museum offers a space for a conversation with the present. "The Constitution is not a book of history," says Vice-Chancellor of OP Jindal Global University (JGU), Professor (Dr) C Raj Kumar. "It continues to question, challenge and inspire every generation."

The idea for the museum was born in 2024, a year heavy with meaning. India was marking 75 years since the adoption of its Constitution, while JGU celebrated its own 15th anniversary. "I was thinking that this year is very special for India," Raj Kumar recalls. "And then it occurred to me; do we have a Constitution museum?"

The answer was surprising. "Quite remarkably, neither the Parliament nor the Supreme Court of India, nor any institution in India had a museum of the Constitution," he says. That realisation set the project in motion. A visit to Philadelphia's National Constitution Center soon followed—and with it, the idea of building one in India.

HEERS FOR DEMOCRACY

the Constitution of India comes alive **By Soumava Haldar**

The museum took shape with five major motivations: to commemorate the 75th anniversary of India adopting a Constitution, to build civic consciousness, to democratise understanding, to pay tribute to the members of the Constituent Assembly, and to trace the nation's constitutional journey. "The Constitution is not only for lawyers and judges," Raj Kumar says. "It is meant for everybody."

That spirit is visible in the Makers' Gallery, a mezzanine lined with portraits of all members of the Constituent Assembly—not just BR Ambedkar and Jawaharlal Nehru, but others whose names rarely make it to textbooks. The 15 founding mothers of the republic, too, find a special mention. "For the first time in post-independent India's history, we have paid tribute to all the 300 members of the Constituent Assembly," Raj Kumar says. "Their family members who come and visit the museum, are in tears when they see it."

Further ahead, a gallery traces the journey from colonial rule to the making of the republic. One section explores voting rights and franchise—representing the decision to give every adult Indian the right to vote, irrespective of caste, religion, gender or wealth. Raj Kumar says, "Switzerland did not give the right to vote for women until the 1950s, but our Constitution decided to give the right to vote for all adult individuals without any form of discrimination."

In that single decision—to trust every citizen equally—lies the museum's most powerful statement. It reminds visitors that the Constitution itself was an act of defiance against inequality, hierarchy and exclusion. The museum urges new generations to see dissent as participation, a principle increasingly tested in today's world of polarised opinions.

The rest of the museum unfolds gradually—digital screens, archival

material. A section called 'This Happens Only in India' uses animations to narrate landmark cases through stories. Some reflect the evolving struggle over freedom, identity, and expression. By revisiting those moments, the museum reopens the conversations that shape India's public life today—from free speech to the meaning of equality.

The museum's most striking presence is a humanoid robot that walks visitors through exhibits. Raj Kumar points out how the "tour guide" robot is the

bank. "Students are privileged to be able to walk into the museum right between classes if they want to," Raj Kumar says. "Civics is no longer a compulsory subject. This is an opportunity to build that awareness and help them develop interest in the making of the nation."

While Civics still exists in classrooms, it often takes a back seat. Here, the Constitution becomes tangible—something students can see, hear, and question, helping them connect with democracy beyond lessons. The museum is open to all.



museum's connect with the future.

And then, in a quiet corner, stands BR Ambedkar—reimagined as a hologram. The moment you ask a question, he responds in his own words, derived from his writings and speeches. "Ambedkar's answers are drawn exactly from his own content. We got a voiceover artist to record the answers in Ambedkar's voice," Raj Kumar says. "It makes the whole experience very real." That small act—of being able to question Ambedkar today—brings the past into conversation with the present.

For students, the museum is a resource

"We don't charge anything," Raj Kumar says. "Anybody can access, you can sign in and come in." Visitors include schoolchildren, professionals, and families, many encountering the Constitution beyond a classroom for the first time. By the end of the tour, the ideas of equality, freedom, and justice feel personal. The words of the Preamble start to appear familiar again. You walk out feeling that the Constitution is something alive and still speaking to us. "The Constitution," as Raj Kumar says, "is not a relic of our past. It's a guide to our future." ■



Seeking the Infinite

From the death of art to the art of death

ON MY FLIGHT back from the Big Apple to Tampa Bay, I thought to myself, “So it’s curtains for yet another IAAC event! This one was fabulous beyond imagination, thanks especially to the crowning sessions with Sadhguru and Yakub Mathew, both so ably and brilliantly moderated...”

But let me back up a bit. IAAC stands for the Indo-American Arts Council. The name sounds grand, but it is really a very small New York-based non-profit, started by the Indian community in what is the world’s most exhaustingly rich, competitive, transactional, vibrant, artistic, and now blatantly socialist, city.

IAAC is, indeed, small but its impact has a multiplier effect. Because it is funded and run by Indian Americans passionate about Indian art, culture, literature, dance, music, and cinema. The best unpaid ambassadors, I am convinced, of India’s soft power.

It was founded in 1998 by the late Gopal Raju (1928-2008), Aroon Shivdasani, and Jonathan Hollander. Raju’s claim to posterity is his startup, now defunct, tabloid, *India Abroad*, the most successful Indian diaspora newspaper ever. Hollander, the American part of its hyphenated identity, dancer and choreographer, was the director of the Battery Dance Studio. Shivdasani, herself a performer, publicist, and socialite, knew everyone there was to know, from Salman Rushdie to Mira Nair.

IAAC organised several memorable events since its inception in 1998, including film festivals, dance and musical recitals, and book launches by the famous. Then it went into a sort of hibernation till it was revived by a new team led by Dr Nirmal Mattoo, a noted and highly successful nephrologist and dialysis tycoon. Mattoo has also endowed the Mattoo Center for India Studies at Stony Brook University.

I was introduced to IAAC by Rakesh Kaul, an IIT-Delhi gold medallist and MBA from the Booth School of Business, University of

Chicago. Kaul, a former CEO of a Fortune 500 company, in addition to being an art, culture, and literature aficionado, is also the author of two striking novels, *The Last Queen of Kashmir* (2016) and *Dawn: The Warrior Princess of Kashmir* (2019).

I’ve been attending the festival since 2023, first as a poet-author, then occasional adviser, reader of submissions, session moderator, but now as a supporter. This year’s festival, on November 15 and 16, was at International House on Riverside Drive, close to Columbia University. Despite the freezing temperatures and biting winds outside, the venue was warm and cosy, swirling with ideas, stories, and an infectious vitality driven by a profound sense of purpose.

Over two days, the audience was treated to Megha Majumdar’s blistering political novel *A Guardian and a Thief*, Padma Venkatraman’s moving poetic composition, *Safe Harbor*, and Amish Tripathi’s new blockbuster, *The Chola Tigers*. Cut to Vasant Dhar’s probing interrogation of AI in *Thinking with Machines* and Devdutt Pattanaik’s contentment-promoting *Escape the Bakasura Trap* after sessions on food, fun, and frolic.

The rich tapestry of poetry was curated by Ravi Shankar, featuring voices like Amit Majmudar, Sunayana Kachroo, Usha Akella, Srinivas Mandavilli, and Yuyutsu Sharma. Priya Doraswamy and Reena Singh explored how Indian tales turn into reels on OTT and the big screen.

But the closing session transformed the literary showcase into a spiritual pilgrimage. Sadhguru’s deeply intimate conversation on ‘Death: A Yogi’s Guide to Living, Dying, and Beyond’, masterfully moderated by Chandrika Tandon, turned what might have been just another literary festival into a site of existential reckoning.

What happened is impossible to encapsulate, but I’ll try. We the living should also understand, without fear or anxiety, that we are also we the dying. So, if we live life fully, we will also die well. The only thing to

IAAC is small but its impact has a multiplier effect. Because it is funded and run by Indian Americans passionate about Indian art, culture, literature, dance, music, and cinema. The best unpaid ambassadors of India’s soft power. Therefore, this was a lit fest to remember



Illustration by SAURABH SINGH

Yakub Mathew launched his Kumbh Mela extravaganza at the event. Yakub told me that the book, based on his trip to the largest fair on earth earlier this year with a score or so select friends, will now be showcased all over the world, from Britain's parliament, to the Vatican, to India's Rashtrapati Bhavan

do is to live consciously. Then we will also die consciously.

Of himself he said, to the shock of his flock, that he was ready to go tomorrow!

Thankfully, to carry on in Sadhguru's own manner, not today. For only today matters. Not yesterday or tomorrow, which are imaginings of the mind. If we can create just a little space between our consciousness on the one hand and our bodies and minds on the other, we would be able to end suffering and anxiety.

The moderator, Chandrika Tandon, an extraordinary business leader and creative artist, even has a Grammy to her credit. She and her husband, investor and hedge fund founder Ranjan Tandon, donated \$100 million to New York University to turn a polytechnic into a full-fledged engineering school, which is now named the NYU Tandon School of Engineering.

Far from being a pushover, Chandrika actually pushed back from time to time, making the interaction vibrant and revealing. She told me later, "He is a guru to millions, so I wanted to respect that." Else, I am sure she'd have pushed back even harder. For the biographically curious, Chandrika is the older sister of Indra Nooyi, the former Pepsi CEO.

Afterwards, Yakub Mathew, a man with a

charmed life if ever there was one, launched his Kumbh Mela extravaganza with a scintillating inter-faith panel moderated or, should I say *immoderate*, by Suhel Seth. Yakub told me that the book, based on his trip to the largest fair on earth earlier this year with a score or so select friends, will now be showcased all over the world, from Britain's parliament, to the Vatican, to India's Rashtrapati Bhavan.

That is why this was a lit fest to remember. To borrow the title of the final session, it was really seeking the infinite. Through art. Even at the very door of death. A door which is never too far from where we stand at this moment.

To finish my own in-flight rumination, I thought to myself: Such an extraordinary conjuncture could not have been pulled off without the enormous *tapasya* and talent of the entire IAAC team.

I recalled how the festival director, the charming and elegant Preethi Urs plus the whole team of high achievers, Anil Bansal, Suman Gollamudi, Matthew Veeton, Keith Tauro, to name some, were all on their feet, from dawn to dusk, often along with their spouses, to ensure that everything went well. They truly lived up to their mission of bringing the very soul and spirit of India to the US. ■



The Flavour of Lucknow

This city turns the simple into the sublime

SOME CITIES TALK, some cities sing—but Lucknow simply smiles. A poised, perennial smile that lingers like a *thumri* at twilight. With UNESCO naming Lucknow a Creative City of Gastronomy, that quiet smile has finally sailed across seas and continents. This honour is not merely for a place, but for a philosophy—an inheritance of grace, a genius for gentleness, a cuisine that whispers, woos and warms rather than shouts.

For me, Lucknow is lineage, not location. My grandmother—my father's Ammi—came from Kurwar, just beyond the saffron-scented halo of the city. In her lullabies and longings, Lucknow rose like steam: neem-filtered sunshine, tamarind chutney cascading over aloo tikkis, and the chorus of “Bhaiyya, aur teekha!” ricocheting through bazaars. Her siblings' homes brimmed with *attar* phials, paan trays lacquered with memory, and silver bowls of *zarda* glowing like golden punctuation marks. Their world was modest yet magnificent—everyday rituals elevated into soft ceremony, subtle splendour and slow-burning sweetness.

That is Lucknow's alchemy—its ability to turn the ordinary into the ornamental, the simple into the sublime.

At my friend Nusrat Durrani's table, the chaat and vegetarian biryani rekindled that truth.

Aloo tikki—humble, unassuming—becomes a crisp couplet here. A golden ghazal that begins on the tongue and ends somewhere near the heart's hidden hinge.

Walk from Aminabad to Chowk and you are not strolling—you are reading. Each lane is a line, each shop a stanza. Rahmatullah's kebabs crackle with ancestral fire; Tunday Kababi's *tawa* exhales centuries of refinement. Beneath Rumi Darwaza, *bakarkhani* scents braid themselves with architecture, turning history into inhalation. Time here isn't linear—it's layered, lacquered, lush, lingering.

I have wandered these lanes with Askari Naqvi and Madhavi Kukreja on their Sanatkada trail—a tour that feels less like movement and more like memory inhaled. When I brought my friend Anandita De here, she paused mid-bite and said, “This wasn't a tour...this was a poem you could taste.” Lucknow does that—it permeates rather than performs, breathes rather than boasts.

The city also holds my personal elegies. My aunt, Aruna Lakhwara—Lucknow-born, America-bred—returns to me each time I think of kulfi falooda's cooling caress or sheer khurma's soft sweep of sweetness. In Lucknow, joy and grief sit side-by-side like respectful neighbours, each granting the other its quiet corner. Even sorrow tastes different here—softened by civility, seasoned with dignity, stirred with tenderness.

UNESCO's honour merely affirms what Lucknow has long taught: Indian cuisine is not cacophony; it is craft. Dum is discipline. Patience is poetry. Here, biryani is a love letter—every grain a heartbeat, every aroma an afterthought of devotion. *Malai paan* melts like a benediction; *nimish* floats like a morning hymn. *Kofta*, *korma*, *sheermal* stand elegantly beside *kadhi*, *arbi*, *lauki*. This is the Ganga-Jamuni grammar of grace, where vegetarian and non-vegetarian don't collide—they converse, collaborate and coalesce.

And the sweets—*rabri* thick as reverie, *peda* soft as prayer, saffron *gajar halwa* glowing like winter dusk, *khasta gujiya* cracking into celebration—are not desserts but deliberate couplets, crafted with calm, carried with care.

This is Lucknow's syncretic splendour: temple bells and *azaan* in the same breeze, craftsmen and *qawwals* and cooks humming in harmonic unison. A city where culture is not curated but carried, not displayed but distilled—where even the air feels embroidered with etiquette and emotion.

Lucknow may now belong in UNESCO's list, but many of us inscribed it long ago in a more intimate archive—the map of memory, the manuscript of affection, the atlas of taste.

Where flavour meets finesse, where tenderness turns into tradition, where the past and present clasp hands gently—that is Lucknow. ■

UNESCO's honour merely affirms what Lucknow has long taught: Indian cuisine is not cacophony; it is craft. Dum is discipline. Patience is poetry. Here, biryani is a love letter



Gemini Takes a Leap

Google upgrades AI with advanced reasoning

Artificial Intelligence got a little more intelligent with the launch of Gemini 3, the latest upgrade to Google's AI model. The company claimed it to be a major leap because of "state-of-the-art reasoning". Another aspect being highlighted is its multimodal capabilities, which means it can take in as input documents, images, videos, etc, and process them into what the user wants. An example Google gave in its blog announcing the launch was that you could upload handwritten recipes in different languages and it would come out with a cookbook that can be shared among members of a family. Or you could just upload a video of a pickleball match and it would tell you areas where you could improve and even come out with a training plan. Google CEO Sundar Pichai wrote, "Gemini 3 is also much better at figuring out the context and intent behind your request, so you get what you need with less prompting." There is also a Deep Think mode in the model with even more reasoning power but only accessible to high-end subscribers. Gemini 3 is available while using AI Mode in Search at present. It will soon also be in the Gemini App and other Google products.



Illustrations by SAURABH SINGH

APPLE'S SATELLITE CONNECT



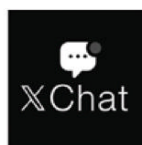
Apple is said to be working on expanding its satellite-powered features, which are currently limited mostly to emergency calling

and texting services. This new expanded suite will allow users to leverage satellite connectivity to use

Apple Maps without an internet connection, and also to do things like sending photos in messaging. These features will reportedly be free to use.

MUSK'S X CHAT

Elon Musk has introduced X Chat, a new messaging service that rivals apps like WhatsApp. This feature allows users to send messages, make voice and video calls, and share files, while also offering them more control and privacy. For instance, it allows for screenshot alerts, and for messages to be edited or set for disappearance after a specified time. Musk also hinted at a new financial feature launched soon.



TALKING MAPS

Google Maps is acquiring new AI updates, especially around route planning in India.

Expected to be rolled out across Indian cities, it will allow users to tap into Gemini's conversational AI capabilities to directly ask questions such as the location of the nearest petrol pump without the need to tap the device. It is also adding other features like notifying users about accident-prone spots or speed limits.



| FILMREVIEW |

The Ultimate Male Fantasy



AJAY DEVGN AND
RAKUL PREET SINGH
IN DE DE PYAAR DE 2

JOKES ABOUT *DDLJ*, about Kajol being Ajay Devgn's wife, and *Hum Dil De Chuke Sanam*. Wink, wink, nudge, nudge. If this was a sitcom with a laughter track, the response would be muted laughs. But this film is written by Luv Ranjan, so it is seemingly progressive while ensuring it stays within the realm of the ultimate male fantasy: that you can begin life again at 50 with a younger version of your first wife. So we have a seemingly modern and educated father, played by R Madhavan, who accepts his daughter's boyfriend, who is 18 months younger than he is. His wife (Gautami Kapoor) echoes what her husband says while plotting her

DE DE PYAAR DE 2
Director: Anshul Sharma
Cast: Ajay Devgn, R Madhavan,
 Rakul Preet Singh



daughter's potential romance with a childhood friend. And there is Rakul Preet Singh, who is besotted with Ajay Devgn, playing her much older boyfriend. Jaaved Jaaferi and his son, Meezan have memorable roles. There are lots of jokes about Jaaferi and son, and their dancing abilities, which are related to a senior's stint on a popular dance show. It's supposed to be meta, but mostly falls flat. Devgn looks odd, his face frozen by either Botox or VFX. Madhavan, all natural, steals every scene he is in, even though he has poor material to play with. The movie ends just before the wedding, which seems to suggest another sequel. Woe is us.

| TRAILER OF THE WEEK |

PRITHVIRAJ'S POISE

Prithviraj plays the villain in SS Rajamouli's forthcoming 'Varanasi' and by all accounts, he is a disabled billionaire looking for the Sanjeevani cure, racing against the hero Rudra (Mahesh Babu) who is looking for its antidote. Prithviraj was the star of the trailer launch, which is not surprising given his ease on stage.





You thought *Animal* was extinct? Nope. Toxic love is the trend of the season.



▶ **Tere Ishk Mein (Hindi)**
The film has Dhanush playing a man who will destroy everything he loves, especially the woman (Kriti Sanon) he is obsessed with. Hmm, where have we seen that before?

▶ **Ek Deewane ki Deewaniyat (Hindi)**
In the film, released earlier this month, Harshvardhan Rane plays a stalker pretending to be a lover while Sonam Bajwa, despite being the object of his attention, finds time to perform provocatively on stage.

▶ **The Girlfriend (Telugu)**
Rashmika Mandanna has been stalked in *Pushpa*, she's been treated like a baby doll in *Animal*, so no surprise that she bears the brunt of her co-star's unwelcome attention in *The Girlfriend*.



STREAMING SMART

The Secret Lives of Others

Homeland's Carrie is back and so is her quivering lower lip and unkempt hair. But as always it is difficult to look away from Claire Danes, as she plays Aggie, an author suffering from writer's block. Matthew Rhys, always inscrutable, plays her neighbour Nile who may or may not have murdered his first wife. She is grieving her son's death in a car accident and is plotting revenge on the boy she believes is responsible. Nile is more than interested in her rage. When the boy turns up dead, naturally Aggie is an obvious suspect. Could it be that Nile killed the boy? As a whodunit, it is quite obvious, especially when Nile is given to saying things like, 'we have sharp teeth and eyes in the front, we were made to be predators'. Like most pulpy novels made into prestige television, *The Beast in Me* has a great cast given to saying profound things like "vengeance birthing vengeance is just a wound that never heals", and "karma is the seeds we plant, karma is our inheritance and birthright". What separates the human from the inhuman, the good from evil and kind from cruel is essentially what *The Beast in Me* explores. If Danes is a compelling survivor, Rhys is a powerful villain, the madman next door.

THE BEAST IN ME
Creator: Gabe Rotter
Cast: Claire Danes and Matthew Rhys
Netflix | English



WALK OF THE WEEK

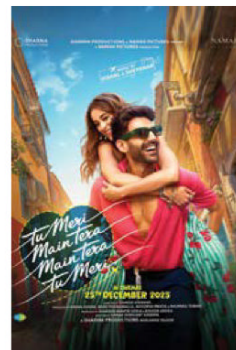
TABU'S SWAG

Tabu is not often seen on the fashion runway. So when she walked as a showstopper for Abu Jani and Sandeep Khosla in Mumbai last week, looking fierce and fabulous in black, many heartbeats stopped for a second.

FAIL OF THE WEEK

FAKE POSTER

An AI generated poster for the forthcoming romance 'Tu Meri Main Tera Main Tera Tu Meri' starring Kartik Aaryan and Ananya Panday? Surely Bollywood can do better.



Screen Presence

She was the star of the recently released *Haq*, and before that *Article 370* (2024), showing her serious side. She equally added fun to *Dhoom Dhaam* on Netflix in February as Pratik Gandhi's enigmatic bride. **Yami Gautam Dhar**, who became a mother in 2024, is a throwback to old-fashioned actors who kept out of the spotlight and let their work speak for them. After a big-screen debut in *Vicky Donor* in 2012, Yami has played a variety of roles across genres, from drama to comedy, before settling on movies that showcase her versatility and unique screen presence.



Kanu's Conundrum

The struggle for indie cinema doesn't end. Even if films do get a theatrical release, they usually don't get enough screens, the right timings, or even adequate pre-release publicity. So 46 filmmakers have got together to reiterate this point and ask for better treatment for **Kanu Behl's** *Agra*, which premiered at the Cannes Film Festival two years ago, and which had a limited theatrical release in India recently. Meanwhile, for those who can find Behl's *Agra* playing at a theatre in your city, it is a must watch.



The Big Break

He's been seen on the big and small screens, but **Shazad Latif** may finally get his biggest break playing Edgar Linton in Emerald Fennell's over-the-top upcoming adaptation of Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*. It stars Margot Robbie as Catherine Earnshaw and Jacob Elordi as Heathcliff. The London-bred actor is of Pakistani origin.

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*subject to location and availability



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Hemant Soren
Chief Minister, Jharkhand

