Secular
Hindustan
English Daily

Editor In Chief : Mir Amjad Ali Khan

RNI:APENG/2002/09014

Vol : 2 Issue No:300 TUESDAY,24,NOVEMER,2026 Hyderabad Pages :8 Rs 2/-

India unveils Rs 15,000 crore Nepal aid package as Modi, Shah push to reset bilateral ties



NEW DELHI: India on Monday announced a $1.62-billion (approximately Rs 15,120 crore or 24,000 crore Nepalese rupees) economic development package for Nepal, as Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Nepalese counterpart Balendra Shah unveiled an ambitious roadmap to revitalise bilateral relations through stronger economic cooperation, cross-border connectivity, energy partnerships and trade.The announcement, made during Shah's first bilateral visit to India since assuming office, lends a vital push to strengthen ties after a period of diplomatic strain over the longstanding boundary dispute involving Kalapani, Lipulekh and Limpiyadhura.PM Modi also expressed India's deep condolences over the loss of lives caused by the devastating floods in Nepal in August."And today, to give renewed strength to Nepal's reconstruction and long-term development, we announced a development cooperation package of 24,000 crore Nepalese rupees," he said.The package is intended to support Nepal's reconstruction and long-term development. It includes 5,600 crore Nepalese rupees in grant assistance for post-earthquake reconstruction and infrastructure projects, along with a credit line for energy-sector development.India will establish an offshore Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) campus in Nepal, expanding its overseas higher education footprint.The proposed campus will be the third international IIT campus, following IIT Madras' Zanzibar campus, inaugurated in 2023, and IIT Delhi's Abu Dhabi campus, established in 2024.Emphasising the historical and strategic significance of the relationship, Modi described India and Nepal as more than neighbouring countries."The relationship between India and Nepal is not just one of neighbourhood, but it is about closeness and unwavering trust," Modi said after talks with Shah at Hyderabad House."We share our joys, and so do our challenges. We are partners in each other's progress and also support each other in difficult times," he added.Shah, who arrived in India on Sunday, said "mutual respect, steadfast trust and unbroken goodwill" are the bedrock of Nepal-India relations."At the heart of this incomparable bond are the peoples of our two countries. The ties between Nepal and India stand as firm as the Himalayas and as vast as oceans, a closeness so profound that words alone can scarcely capture it," he said.The two leaders adopted a joint vision document titled Viksit Bharat and Samunnat Nepal: Re-imagining the Partnership, outlining cooperation across infrastructure, energy, water resources, climate resilience, digital services, healthcare, technology and innovation.They also signed eight agreements covering areas including forensic sciences, healthcare, sustainable urban development, fisheries and other sectors. Cooperation in satellite technology, governance, traditional medicine and cross-border digital payments also featured in the discussions. The two sides agreed to strengthen academic collaboration through a Nalanda Centre at Lumbini Buddhist University.Connectivity was a key pillar of the renewed partnership. The leaders virtually flagged off the Saryu-Kamala Express, linking Ayodhya in Uttar Pradesh with Janakpur Dham in Nepal, strengthening religious tourism along the Ramayana Circuit.Shah described the railway link as an extension of the countries' shared civilisational heritage. The two prime ministers also inaugurated a cross-border motorable bridge between Dharchula in India and Darchula in Nepal, and laid the foundation for a new Integrated Check Post at Banbasa.On energy cooperation, they dedicated Phase II of the Motihari-Amlekhgunj petroleum pipeline and laid the foundation stone for the 669-megawatt Lower Arun hydropower project. Plans for a petroleum terminal in Jhapa and a pipeline connecting Siliguri with Jhapa were also advanced.

SC seeks Centre, ECI response on PIL to curb resignations by legislators to evade anti-defection law



NEW DELHI: The Supreme Court on Monday sought responses from the Union government and the Election Commission of India (ECI) on a PIL seeking to prevent MPs and MLAs from using resignations to evade disqualification under the anti-defection law.A bench headed by Chief Justice Surya Kant and comprising Justices Joymalya Bagchi and V Mohana issued notices to the ECI, the Law Commission of India, the Ministry of Law and Justice and the Ministry of Parliamentary Affairs on a petition filed by A Sethu.The plea seeks safeguards against legislators facing disqualification proceedings resigning from their posts to escape action under the Tenth Schedule of the Constitution, which deals with anti-defection.It contends that strategically timed resignations, coupled with delays in deciding disqualification petitions, allow legislators to evade consequences, secure by-elections or ministerial positions, and undermine the electoral mandate."By the time a petition is decided, or a Court is approached, the term of the House may have run, the by-election may have been held, and the Government may have fallen or survived," the petition stated.The petitioner has sought a declaration that resignations tendered by MPs and MLAs when disqualification proceedings are pending or reasonably imminent should not, by themselves, terminate such proceedings or render them infructuous.The plea also seeks to bar legislators facing anti-defection proceedings from being appointed ministers or holding remunerative political posts after resigning until the disqualification question is finally resolved in their favour or they are re-elected.It further seeks directions to Speakers and Chairpersons to pass reasoned orders based on objective material on whether resignations are voluntary and genuine, while also deciding disqualification petitions.The petition calls for a statutory deadline, ordinarily not exceeding three months, for deciding disqualification petitions, with narrowly defined exceptions supported by recorded reasons. It also seeks a time-bound review of the Speaker-led mechanism, including consideration of an independent, permanent tribunal to adjudicate disqualification disputes.The petitioner has also sought directions to Parliament and state legislatures to ensure public disclosure of resignation letters, notices and replies in disqualification proceedings, hearing dates, interim orders and final orders under the Tenth Schedule until Parliament enacts a law on the matter.Additionally, the plea seeks a declaration that in a hung Assembly, a claimant seeking to form the government must demonstrate majority support on the floor of the House after elected members have taken oath or affirmation under Article 188 of the Constitution, to prevent pre-oath manoeuvres.

CJP's Abhijeet Dipke accuses Goa administration of tribal land grab

Cockroach Janta Party (CJP) founder Abhijeet Dipke raised concerns over tribal issues in Goa, alleging that the government was taking away land belonging to tribal communities.Speaking to ANI, Dipke said, "The tribal issues, we can clearly see what the government is trying to do here. They are not just trying to take away their rights; they are also taking away their lands. In Karapur, the land of the villages has been taken away for the friends of the ministers who are supposed to be builders."He demanded immediate police protection for local activist Gaurish Gadi, who got seriously injured while trying to fight for the people. He stressed that if another attack takes place on Gadi, the State will be responsible for failing to provide him safety."I went to Karapur; there, the people have to travel one and a half hours to get to GMC. The hero of that village, Gaurish Gadi, who has been brutally assaulted, for what? He was just trying to fight for the people. He was beaten up by the land mafia so brutally that he is still in the hospital with eight stitches on his head and with a hand that is fractured. He must be provided immediate security. If there is another assault or attack on Gaurish Gadi, it will be the responsibility of the state, which has failed to provide him safety," he said.CJP leader Ashutosh Ranka condemned the alleged transfer of Goan land to private capitalists. CJP Goa announced that, in collaboration with local residents, will draft a Citizens' Manifesto ahead of the upcoming elections, placing the scrapping of Section 39A, a contentious provision governing land-zone conversions, at the top of its agenda."It is a matter of shame that the land of Goans is being taken away and given to the capitalists. CJP Goa, along with the citizens, will draft a citizen manifesto and, in the upcoming elections, will appeal to all the citizens of Goa to only vote for those parties that agree to your demands and your manifesto, and the first agenda of that manifesto will be to scrap 39A. Any politician who doesn't agree to that, we appeal to all Goankars to not vote for that politician," he said.CJP's Saurav Das emphasised that the rights of Goa's indigenous tribal communities have long been violated, adding that the manifesto will cover the issue of 39A as well as violations faced by the tribal community."The rights of our tribal communities, our indigenous people, have been violated for a long time. Goa is no exception; the tribal communities here are also facing numerous problems. The issue of 39A has become a major concern for all of Goa. We have heard about these issues and are committed to addressing them," he said.He reiterated, "Within the next two months, the CJP Goa team will release a Citizens' Manifesto. This manifesto will cover the issue of 39A as well as the violations faced by tribal communities. Any political party seeking votes in Goa must accept the demands outlined in this Citizens' Manifesto; that is our resolve."Earlier on Sunday, Abhijit Dipke, Saurabh Das, Ashutosh Ranka and Ajinkya Shinde attended the launch of the 'Kya Bolti Public' campaign in Goa, where they raised concerns over land rights, employment opportunities and the preservation of the state's cultural identity.

Rijiju credits Modi's leadership as India improves its score in Asia Power Index

Union Minister Kiren Rijiju on Monday said India's improved ranking in the Asia Power Index reflected how far the country has changed, risen and moved ahead under Prime Minister Narendra Modi's leadership.His remarks came after the Lowy Institute's Asia Power Index 2026 said India has consolidated its position as the third-most powerful country and a "major powerhouse" in Asia."Not just Lowy, several global rating agencies have ranked India quite high in the economy, military, and financial sectors," Rijiju told reporters in Delhi.He said that 12 years ago, the country used to have much lower rankings, but now, India has risen and moved far ahead."Today, we remain in the top three or four, right at the top. We are definitely in the top 10 and top five. India has changed now; our leadership is strong," he added.Rijiju said the opposition will say various things because, obviously, the opposition cannot praise the government."But if the opposition doesn't praise us, it doesn't mean they are right. They have their right to speak, but the country has changed. India has moved far ahead," he said.India consolidated its major power status this year, growing more influential in Asia. Greater regional defence engagement and BrahMos missile sales to Southeast Asia strengthened its defence networks, while stable trade and investment ties made it one of the few countries whose economic relationships did not weaken, according to the Index."Its diplomatic influence held up as experts rated Prime Minister Narendra Modi the second-most effective regional leader after Xi Jinping, though India's low profile during the Gulf conflict weighed on views of his global leadership," the Asia Power Index 2026 said.

US panel recommends India channel for Dalai Lama succession planning, warns of China challenge

A US Congressional panel has recommended establishing a senior-level channel with India to coordinate contingency planning for the succession of the 14th Dalai Lama, warning that China could turn the process into an international contest over legitimacy.The US-China Economic and Security Review Commission, in a report to the US Congress, made a strong pitch to recognise the Gaden Phodrang Trust as the sole legitimate authority to identify and recognise the successor to the 14th Dalai Lama.The report by the bipartisan Commission said China was likely to use coercive tools to shape the outcome of the succession process.It said that the US Congress should make it a policy not to recognise any successor to the Dalai Lama selected or installed by China."To carry out this policy and ensure US government readiness for the Dalai Lama's succession, Congress should direct the Secretary of State to...establish a senior-level channel with the Government of India for succession contingency planning, including intelligence sharing on Chinese influence operations," the report said.It also asked the US Secretary of State to lead an internal interagency tabletop exercise on succession scenarios, with participation by the National Security Advisor, the Director of National Intelligence, and the Secretary of Defence.The commission also asked the US secretary of state to conduct Track 1.5 and Track 2 dialogues and tabletop exercises with Indian counterparts on the political and security implications of succession scenarios. The Commission also wanted the US to coordinate with allies and partners on a diplomatic response that denies international legitimacy to any successor selected by China.It also wanted the US to Counter succession-related influence operations by strengthening the Central Tibetan Administration's cybersecurity and resilience against China's cyber and artificial intelligence (AI)-enabled disinformation campaigns.

Is this the Pakistani sunset?

It's not Pakistan, but the North Koreans who are garnering all the global attention, these days. The testing of a whole family of missiles, topped up by a Hydrogen bomb has grabbed all the eye balls. But, nearer home for south and south Asian countries, another scene of an old play continues to be enacted. Pakistan continues to calibrate terrorism in Afghanistan and India. A state has been reached where most of the world has begun to hyphenate 'Pakistan & North Korea' together as rogue states.

In the case of North Korea, at least their internal situation is very much under control, be it by means fair or foul. However, in Pakistan's case the internal situation is in turmoil. For too long have they harboured too many terrorist organisations. Now, these establishments have found firm anchorage and challenge the authorities. Their leadership roams at will, often makes statements to the press and seem to be unaffected by the law enforcement agencies or the honourable legal institutions that can otherwise get a Pakistani prime minister to resign.

Parallel with the tanzeems finding firm anchorage in Pakistan, has gone on this business of exporting terror to neighbours. The Afghans are fed up. India has been informing the whole world. The Americans have off late stated it loud and clear. Even its all-weather friend China joined the chorus in the BRICS summit on September 4 to name the terrorist organisations that operate from its soil. The American President's speech on the new Afghan policy chastised Pakistan unequivocally. His stark statement conveyed that at least 20 organisations, in the American list of terrorist groups, operate from Pakistan.

Trump also promised to cut off aid that has so long been used to target American service personnel in Afghanistan. Pakistan, a nation living on doles even after seven decades of independence, has been justifiably shaken. Pakistan has reacted to Trump's threat with varying tones, tenors and pitches. While the foreign minister talked about distancing themselves from terrorists, the defence minister reiterated the old parody; these organisations are the strategic partners of Pakistani Army. The new prime minister has kept his own counsel.

Perhaps an equally harsh blow was delivered in the BRICS meet in Beijing, when the joint statement of the participating countries named terrorist outfits operating out of Pakistan by name. The role of honour included Lashkar-e-Tayiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed. The fact of even China, Pakistan's sole all-weather friend, teaming up with the rest, surely causes enough consternation at Islamabad. In the recent past, the Russians have seemingly gone soft on Pakistan. The Indians leaning the American way may have been one of the primers. It surely is also driven by the desire to make Afghanistan more costly for the Americans.

However, it's doubtful whether the correct payback time is now for all that the Americans did to them when they ran Afghanistan in the 1980s. The reasons are simple. The USSR broke up in part due to its overreach, with Afghanistan being the biggest bleeding wound. No one knows why not to get into Afghanistan, better than the Russians. While relating with Pakistan, Russians will surely understand the losses it will incur in terms of its most lucrative arms market and a long history of a robust relationship. Pakistan has been a frontline state in the US lead Global War Against Terror. For the frontline state to lose its pole position and being identified as being part of the problem, is a huge shift.

An equally big issue is the tap being closed for funds to flow. Pakistan received US $3.5 bn in 2011 as compared to less than US $1 bn in 2016. Other than West Asians donors, there is only China left to fund. There are sound reasons for the Pakistani GDP growth rate to tumble. If the new American approach gathers momentum in the days ahead, Pakistan could be headed for sanctions that might just hasten the process. If they do try and stage another major attack in India, the sanctions may not be too far away.

In the interim, with American funding on the wane, Pakistan has opted for the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) bandwagon. The China-Pakistan-Economic-Corridor (CPEC) is the crown jewel of BRI. It passes through Gilgit-Baltistan, a territory that's disputed between India and Pakistan, and then traverses across the length of Pakistan to terminate at the Chinese funded Gwadar Port on the Arabian Sea that's been leased to a state run Chinese company for 40 years. The Pakistani government has not been able to sell the CPEC concept to its people. Pakistanis are not inclined to believe that CPEC will prove to be a high octane growth driver for their economy.

On the contrary, they are worried about landing in a debt trap, losing their strategic autonomy, detrimental impact on social cohesion and aggravation of insurgent/violent movements in Baluchistan and other regions that the CPEC arteries will pass through. Of all CPEC's impacts, the affect on an already fragile social cohesion is the most worrisome. As CPEC progresses, attacks on the assets being created will only increase, thus prompting the Pakistani state to respond in a heavy handed manner. It will, sooner or later, initiate a vicious cycle of violence between government forces and Islamist tanzeems.

The Americans have apparently distanced themselves from Pakistan, for good. The Chinese are feeling the heat with the gradual rise in the number of nations viewing Pakistan as the nursery of global terror.

Disability rights over time



In 1992, the United Nations announced that December 3 would be observed every year as International Day of Persons with Disabilities. While disabled persons continue to struggle to secure employment and navigate their way around with poor infrastruture, and are still treated as "others", it is worth recalling the advances in legislation on disability over the years.

The disability rights movement gained momentum in the 1970s when disability was started to be seen as a human rights issue. This is when the UN General Assembly proclaimed in 1976 that 1981 would be the International Year of Disabled Persons. Later, 1983-1992 was marked as the United Nations Decade of Disabled Persons. The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), 2006 was a big step towards viewing persons as "subjects with rights" and not "objects of charity". (India is a signatory to the UNCRPD and ratified it in 2007.) Further, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development pledges to "leave no one behind". It states that persons with disabilities must be both "beneficiaries and agents of change". However, attitudinal, institutional, and infrastructural barriers remain, with the World Bank stating that 15% of the world's population experience some form of disability and that they "on average, as a group, are more likely to experience adverse socioeconomic outcomes than persons without disabilities".

In 2011, the World Health Organisation came up with a world report on disability for the first time. Its introduction showed how disabled persons aren't "other people", but that all of us at some point will be "temporarily or permanently impaired" and those "who survive to old age will experience increasing difficulties in functioning." In India, according to the 2011 Census, 2.21% of the population has one or multiple types of disabilities, making the country home to one of the largest disabled populations in the world. World Bank data suggest that the numbers are nearly four-five times higher. Legislation moved forward last year in India when the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act was passed, replacing the Persons with Disabilities Act, 1995. The 2016 Act recognises 21 kinds of disabilities compared to the previous seven, including dwarfism, speech and language disability, and three blood disorders.

The new Act also increased the quota for disability reservation in higher educational institutions from 3% to 5% and in government jobs from 3% to 4%, for a more inclusive society. However, legislation alone is not enough; implementation remains abysmal. For instance, data from the National Centre for Promotion of Employment for Disabled People show that 84% of seats for persons with disabilities lie vacant in top universities. While we have a long way to go in implementing these laws, we must also keep in mind that a one-size-fits-all approach is unhelpful for disabled persons. Levels and types of disabilities differ and so do needs.

Financial inclusion in rising India



"I dream of a digital India where mobile & e-banking ensures Financial Inclusion" "Financial Inclusion" is the way the Governments strive to take the common man along by bringing them into the formal channel of economy thereby ensuring that even the person standing in the last is not left out from the benefits of the economic growth and is added in the mainstream economy thereby encouraging the poor person to save, safely invest in various financial products and to borrow from the formal channel when he need to borrow. Lack of financial inclusion is costly to society and the individual.

As far as the individual is concerned, lack of financial inclusion forces the unbanked into informal banking sectors where interest rates are higher and the amount of available funds much smaller. Because the informal banking structure is outside any legislative framework, any dispute between lenders and borrowers cannot be settled legally. As far as the social benefits are concerned, financial inclusion increases the amount of available savings, increases efficiency of financial intermediation, and allows for tapping new business opportunities. State sponsored universal banking has therefore contributed to greater economic diversification in rural areas than is the case in more competitive banking environments.

With structural adjustment programs being introduced in the 1980s and 1990s, financial market reforms swept over many developing countries. At the beginning of 20th century, India had insurance companies (both life and general) and a functional stock exchange. Scope of the financial inclusion is not limited to only banking services but it extends to other financial services as well like insurance, equity products & pension products etc. Thus, financial inclusion is not just about opening a simple bank account with a branch in an unbanked area. Adding the common man into the mainstream economy has other advantages as well as on the one hand it helps inculcate the vulnerable section of the society to save money for its future and the rainy days, take benefits of the economic activities of the country by participating in various financial products like, banking services, insurance & pension products etc., on the other hand, it helps the country to increase the rate of 'capital formation' which in turn, give a push to the economic activities in the economy by channelizing the money from every nook & corner of the country.

In the absence of people of a country financially included in the mainstream, they often tend to park their savings/ invest in the non-productive assets like land, buildings & bullion etc. While, financially included people can easily avail the credit facilities, whether they are sitting in the organised or unorganised sector, urban or rural sector. Micro Finance Institutions (MFIs) are the classic examples for providing easy & affordable credit to poor people and have got written innumerable success stories. This phenomenon of financial inclusion also helps government plug gaps & leakages in pubic subsidies & welfare programmes as government can directly transfer the subsidy amount into the account of the beneficiary rather than to subsidise the product.

In fact, the Government has even saved by around more than Rs. 57,000 crores in its subsidy bill and has ensured that the benefit of the subsidy reaches to the real beneficiary directly to him/ her. The NDA government led by Prime Minister Sh.Narendra Modi made itself committed, since beginning of its term, to give special emphasis on the financial inclusion of every person of the country. One of the most crucial of the several steps taken by this government is JAM- Jan Dhan, Aadhar & Mobile. Jan Dhan Yojna - with a view to increase the penetration of banking services and to ensure that all households have at least one bank account, a National Mission on Financial Inclusion named as Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojna was announced by Prime Minister Sh. Narendra Modi in his independence speech on 15th August, 2014 & the scheme was formally launched on 28th August, 2014. Within a fortnight of its launch, the scheme entered into the Guinness Book of records for opening a record number of bank accounts.

Large scale achievement was made by opening 29.48 crores accounts by Mid-August, 2017 out of which 17.61 crores accounts were in rural/semi-urban areas and the rest 11.87 crores in urban areas. The additional benefits on opening an account under Jan Dhan Scheme is the customer is issued a RuPay Debit Card having inbuilt insurance cover of Rs 1 Lakh. Besides, an overdraft (OD) facility of Rs 5,000/- is granted to the customer for satisfactory operation of account for 6 months. A life cover of Rs 30,000/- has also been granted to customers for opening the accounts up to a certain time period.

The scheme has been a great success and the 99.99% households out of the 21.22 crores households surveyed have been covered under this scheme by December, 2016. More than 44 lakh accounts have been sanctioned OD facility of which more than 23 lakh account holders have availed the facility involving an amount around 300 crores. Insurance & Pension schemes—In order to provide social security system for all citizens and especially to the poor and under-privileged people, the present government launched Pradhan Mantri Suraksha Bima Yojna and Pradhan Mantri Jeevan Jyoti Bima Yojna.

The former scheme i.e., Pradhan Mantri Suraksha Bima Yojna (PMSBY) covers the persons within the age slab of 18 to 70 years and a risk coverage of Rs 2 lakhs is provided at an affordable premium of Rs 12 per annum only. As per the date 12th April, 2017, around 10 crore people were enrolled under Pradhan Mantri Suraksha BimaYojana (PMSBY). The later scheme, i.e., Pradhan Mantri Jeevan Jyoti Bima Yojna covers the persons within an age slab of 18 to 50 years having a bank account. The life cover of Rs 2 lakhs is provided to the insured payable in case of death of the insured due to any reason. As on 12th April 2017 3.10 cr person were enrolled under PMJJBY.

Atal Pension Yojna – A scheme launched in 2015 is open to all bank account holders in the age group of 18 to 40 years and they can choose different contributions based on the pension amount. Under this scheme monthly pension is guaranteed to the subscriber and after him to his spouse and after their death, pension corpus as accumulated till the age of 60 years is returned to the nominee of subscriber. Central Government also contributes 50% of the contribution subject to a maximum of Rs 1000 per annum. As on 31st March 2017 a total of 46.80 lakh subscribers have been enrolled from Atal Pension yojana with a total pension worth of Rs1713.214cr. Varishtta Pension Bima Yojana: All those who subscribe to the VPBY from 15th August 2014 to 14th August 2015 will receive an assured guaranteed return of 9% under the Policy. Pradhan Mantri Mudra Yojna – Scheme launched in April, 2015 to provide formal access of financial facilities to Non Corporate Small Business Sector.

Swachhta Hi Seva Campaign

The President administered the Swachhta Hi Seva Pledge whereby the Nation resolved to create a clean healthy and new India. Addressing the gathering the President said "India is fighting a decisive battle for cleanliness and hygiene. Cleanliness is not the responsibility of only sanitation personnel and government departments; it is a multi-stakeholder national movement." Mahatma Gandhi had once famously said "sanitation is more important than political freedom."

This statement underscored the criticality of sanitation in society. Inspired by these words, on August 15, 2014, the Prime Minister gave a clarion call to the Nation from the ramparts of Red Fort to fight filth and open defacation, change old habits and achieve a Swachh Bharat by 2019, to mark the 150th birth anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi. He further said that "women's pride is an important issue in our villages today. The practice of open defacation must be stopped. Toilets must be built and used." The aim of the Swachh Bharat Mission is to achieve a clean and open defacation free India by October 2, 2019.

The objectives are generating demand for toilets leading to their construction and sustained use by all household members, promoting better hygiene behavior amongst the population and improving cleanliness by initiating solid and liquid waste management projects. The financial allocations under the Swachh Bharat Mission increased from Rs.2850 crores in 2014-15 to Rs.6525 crores in 2015-16, to Rs.10,500 crores in 2016-17, to Rs. 14000 crores in 2017-18. In the last 3 years, under the Swachh Bharat Mission, 48,264,304 toilets were constructed. Open Defacation Free Villages reached 2,38,966. Individual toilet coverage increased from 42 percent in 2014 to 64 percent in 2017. 5 States have declared themselves open defecation free.

The Ministry of Drinking Water and Sanitation has said that the progress achieved is encouraging to reach the goal of an Open Defacation Free India by October 2, 2019. The Swachh Bharat Mission sought to reform the sanitation sector with the primary focus being on behavioral changes as the fundamental tool for achievement of Open Defacation Free outcomes. Inclusiveness under the Swachh Bharat Mission was achieved by designing public and community toilets keeping in mind the special needs of menstruating women, the elderly, the specially abled and small children. Further the Mission sought to promote gender sensitive information, education and communication/ behavioral changes. The Mission issued Gender guidelines in 2017 and Menstrual management guidelines in 2015. An innovative monitoring and evaluation system was put in place. The Swachh Sarvekshan was conducted for rural India and revealed that Mandi (Himachal Pradesh) and Sidhudurg (Maharashtra) were the cleanest districts in India. The Swachh Sarvekshan assessed 22 Hill districts and 53 Plain areas. National level monitors were hired to carry out sample-based checks of sanitation coverage and open defacation free status across the country.

A massive survey covering 92000 households in 4626 villages across the country is being conducted. An additional 200 villages located on the banks of Ganga are being surveyed. Eminent personalities like Amitabh Bacchan was nominated as the Brand Ambassador for Swachh Bharat Mission and celebrities like Sachin Tendulkar and Akshay Kumar attended champion collector conclaves for motivational purposes. The Swachh Bharat Mission maintained a significant social media engagement for enhancing awareness levels and a newsletter Swachhta Samachar Patrika was published on a regular basis. A recent Bollywood film titled "Toilet – Ek Prem Katha" based on the Swachh Bharat Mission witnessed considerable box office success.

From owning a home to feeling at home

S. Indira Gandhi owns a brand-new house now. She is one of the first few from Sri Lanka's hill country Tamil community – that has a two century-history in the island – who can call this home, and the piece of land beneath it, her own. A full-time worker in a tea estate, the 33-year-old, along with her husband, is busy giving finishing touches to her cement-walled home in Dayagama, in Nuwara Eliya district in the Central Province. They have recently cut a path leading to the entrance of their home, where saplings bearing sprightly pink flowers pop up from either side. For the young couple, the home is much more than a secure place of residence, or a permanent dwelling.



From the time the British brought down hundreds of thousands of Tamils from south India in the 19th century to Sri Lanka, successive generations have been toiling in the country's plantations. Even today, most of them live in colonial-era line rooms — closely packed match-box like dwellings on the hills and many still work in the estates in difficult working conditions and with poor wages. Their story is better known as the global rise of the famed Ceylon Tea, a product that fetches precious foreign revenue, about $1.2 billion in 2016.

Following the transition from being stateless to becoming citizens in 2003, the ongoing change from being landless to owning a modest house on a small plot marks another significant shift for the community. Neither was an outcome of state benevolence. In fact, both followed persistent struggles by the nearly million-strong community and larger political dynamics. Houses such as Indira Gandhi's have been built by the Indian government as part of an initiative to construct 14,000 dwellings for Hill Country Tamils, to supplement the Sri Lankan government's own efforts towards providing housing in the region. In an earlier project, India built 46,000 homes in the island's Tamil-majority North and East for the war-displaced.

Malayaha (Hill Country) Tamils are quick to appreciate India's attention to their community. As Tamils of most recent Indian origin here, they have been invisible not just to the Sri Lankan state, but also to New Delhi and Tamil Nadu for most part. Without doubt, they feel some affinity towards Tamil Nadu and India, through ancestral and cultural links. "My father gave me that name because I was born the day Indira Gandhi died," says her namesake, smiling brightly.

All the same, many in her generation feel that the oft-used "Indian-origin" tag is both dated and distant. "Even my national ID defines me as a 'Sri Lankan estate worker'," says her husband, K. Vijayakumar. "We are people of this country." That is how they would like to frame their demands to the state – in the unmistakable voice of a rightful citizens, without tags that bear the baggage of uneasy histories.

In an apparent recognition of that emphatic voice, the Maithripala Sirisena-Ranil Wickremesinghe government put out an ambitious National Plan of Action for the social development of the plantation community, spanning five years beginning 2016. Among other initiatives, the plan envisions building 1,60,000 homes, financed partly with a government grant and the remaining with a 7.5% interest-loan. About 30,000 homes have been constructed so far.

For pensioner E. Sellappan, his new home in Hauteville Puram, built by the Minister of Upcountry New Villages, Estate Infrastructure and Community Development, is the only asset for his children. "This sonda veedu (own home) is the first recognition of my labour for my 36 years' work at the estate," he says. The government points to its share of challenges. Despite a widespread campaign from workers for 20 perches land each, the government could manage only seven (about 2,000 square ft). "Finding land is our main challenge. The plantation companies are rather reluctant to part with productive land, or end up giving land that has no easy access to the main road," says M. Vamadevan, an adviser to the Minister.

The gap between required resources and the actual allocations is also glaring. While the national action plan points to an estimated 15 billion Sri Lankan rupees investment in 2018 needed for the project – it will cost 70 billion rupees over five years – the annual allocation in the recent budget is only 2 billion rupees. Housing is only one of the many long-ignored demands of the workers, who face historic neglect and exploitation. From education, to health to fair wages, many of their concerns remain unaddressed.

"Even if wasps attack us, we have to put in our own money and get treated. Our struggle for a minimum wage of 1,000 (Sri Lankan) rupees earlier this year also failed after our political leaders signed a collective agreement with the companies. We are now stuck with 630 rupees a day," says estate worker R. Pushparani, squinting her eyes against the glaring sun, while she rapidly plucks tea leaves with both hands. In pointing out their current reality, she highlights the difference between a few workers owning homes, and all of them feeling at home.

'The government is perceived with fear'

It is the people, the party and the state I represent. There is no turnaround story on the politics of development that belongs to me as I am from a progressive party and one of the most developed states in the country. Our story is that of a developed state working towards being a hyper developed state. My government believes in keeping politics off of development and focusing on the betterment of people in every sphere. A government that delays development stands in the way of the people's right to a better tomorrow.

We live in a time when the government is perceived with fear. No government should be viewed as authoritarian, rather as a collective institution of people. No state can achieve fast paced development without its government being the best service provider. I'm sure textbooks, news articles or social media platforms have told you at some point about our high standards of living, HDI, male female ratio, life expectancy rates, literacy rates, low infant and maternal mortality rates and other such indices along with our exemplary palliative care far ahead of most developed countries. We are extremely proud of achieving them, but are not hung up on them. There is no point in repeating them here, instead I would like to tell you where we are headed.

This is not something to bring up only in election manifestos or while seeking votes. At the end of every day, we have to have served the people of our state and country. A way that we have brought accountability to our work is by issuing the first annual progress reports to show that our promises weren't empty. This also helps keep people in the loop. Our Navakerala action plan which was started a year ago has been our answer to the bottom-up approach. Its ideology is simple, your birth should not determine your future. For development to take place we must ensure that people are able to contribute. We are focusing on providing opportunities to those most dependent on the government. Those who access public healthcare, education and housing.

While shifting the lens onto these spheres along with waste management we want to build people up so that they can reach their potential without having to worry about their basic necessities. The housing scheme provides every individual with a right to a house and includes those currently living in poor housing conditions. Education standards shouldn't be reduced to be accessible.

Instead we are bettering public education to be at par with international standards. As far as healthcare goes, government hospitals are the last resort for many people and private hospitals are becoming more expensive every day. It is surprising that a sector that produced many like Florence Nightingale in the past is producing millionaires and billionaires today.

We are changing that by providing more beds, better facilities and cheaper life-saving medication. Our lifestyle disease screening which will be available to every individual of the state prevents health problems such as cholesterol, diabetes and blood pressure, from taking away the future of many families. Waste management is essential for every citizen. Without which soil, air and water quality will deplete drastically. This is why we believe in handling waste management to create a safer environment for the people of Kerala. One area that we have not performed up to the mark in the past is water conservation. Water has become a scarce commodity.

It is scary that inter-state disputes are taking place over water.

We can compete amongst our sister states, but not fight. We are serious about water conservation and are going to adopt more preservation mechanisms in the coming years. We have started to conserve our rivers and water bodies but more investment is required in this area. Even though it is a part of the Navakerala action plan, I would like to specifically speak about this just to emphasise its importance. Speaking of basic necessities, I'm sure nobody here will disagree that an accident victims chances of survival should not be dependent on their bank balance. Yet it has always been this way.

To fight this inequality we introduced the special trauma care scheme. The 48 hours after an accident is called the critical period. The treatment one receives during that time determines their survival rate. Our policy is that the victim should not be taken to the hospital based on their ability to pay the bill, but the one closest to the accident site. The government will use insurance to pay the hospital directly. This is in line with our belief that a human life's value is not something expressed in monetary terms. There have been many debates on whether corruption should be attacked from the bottom or the top. We believe in attacking it from both sides and crushing it.

At all levels there should be zero tolerance towards corruption. This is only possible if the government, judiciary and the media work with a much higher vigilance. It is not just about checking corruption that has already taken place, but preventing it from happening at all. You may think that it's easy for us to talk about corruption when we are one of the least corrupt states in the country. For us this is not a matter of pride. The word 'least' implies that we still have corruption and our goal of being corruption-free hasn't been achieved yet. Corruption is something that reduces efficiency, productivity and takes away from development. Without which resource mobilisation would increase tremendously.

People often let corruption and bribery demand go unreported out of fear that the corrupt flock together and protect each other. We will put an end to this. We are going to apply modern technology, algorithms, etc. to achieve this. Under this government, the only people who should fear are the corrupt themselves. We have seen the numbers and percentage points of those living in poverty reduce over the years. This may help a lot of people sleep at night in peace, but not us. Human beings aren't statistic points. Even one person left to suffer is a failure at every level. The idea of putting growth and development into percentage over actual changes in the standard of living is an outdated idea.

We have not achieved any success until the last hungry person is fed, the last sick person treated, the last child educated and the last homeless person has shelter. We want to make Kerala one of the most liveable place on earth. Safety of women and children, awareness, speedy correction of all types of crimes need to be included. Police modernisation is an integral part of that as criminals are getting more technology savvy. Governments need to out pace them. Credibility of the police force also needs to be improved drastically. We are modernising the police force not only in terms of equipment. We believe in bringing the best technology, awareness and most importantly humanity to the field.

Singing carols can make you happy, boost mental health

Love to be part of the choir singing Christmas carols? Singing in groups could not only make you happier, but also help improve mental health conditions like anxiety and depression, according to new research. The finding showed that people who took part in a community singing group maintained or improved their mental health. Community singing had positive effects on people's mental health, while for some it was a key to their recovery or maintenance of health, for others it induced fun and happiness.

Moreover, the combination of singing and socialising was an essential part of recovery because it promoted an ongoing feeling of belonging and well-being that often lasted a day or more as well as improved social skills and confidence. "We found that singing as part of a group contributes to people's recovery from mental health problems," said lead researcher Tom Shakespeare, Professor at the University of East Anglia (UEA).

For the study, published in the BMJ journal Medical Humanities, the team analysed participants who took part in the Sing Your Heart Out (SYHO) project -- an initiative which runs weekly singing workshops, aimed at people with mental health conditions as well as the general public. The research project followed the group for six months and undertook interviews and focus groups with participants, organisers, and workshop leaders.

Taking part on a weekly basis provided structure, support and contact that helped people improve their mood, feel good, and function better in day-to-day life. "We heard the participants calling the initiative a 'life saver' and that it 'saved their sanity'. Others said they simply wouldn't be here without it, they wouldn't have managed - so we quickly began to see the massive impact it was having," Shakespeare said.

This treatment can extend life of people with Parkinson's disease

According to a study, a treatment called deep brain stimulation (DBS) is linked to longer survival for Parkinson's patients. Researchers at the Edward Hines, Jr. VA Hospital in Illinois found that patients who received stimulation via an implanted device had a modest survival advantage compared with those treated with medication only. Parkinson's disease is a neurodegenerative disorder. It affects neurons in the brain that produce dopamine. Its cause is currently unknown, and so far there is no cure. Parkinson's itself is not fatal, but complications related to the disease often lead to death.

Common symptoms of Parkinson's disease include tremor, slowness of movement, limb rigidity, and walking and balance problems. People with Parkinson's disease have a shorter life expectancy than those without the disease. Previous studies have shown that DBS can improve motor function in people with Parkinson's disease. The treatment involves electrodes surgically inserted into specific areas of the brain. An impulse generator battery--similar to what is used in pacemakers--is also implanted, under the collarbone or in the abdomen. The battery creates electrical impulses that the electrodes deliver to the brain tissue.

Dr. Frances Weaver, lead author on the study, explained the benefit of DBS: "Overall, DBS surgery has been viewed quite positively by both patients and providers. There is an immediate effect on patients who have DBS on their motor function--the dyskinesia [involuntary muscle movements] is either gone or greatly reduced. The patient can move around and do things they hadn't been able to." While deep brain stimulation may improve function compared with those who do not receive it, little evidence exists on whether the treatment has any benefits to life expectancy.

To answer that question, the researchers looked at data for 611 Veterans with Parkinson's disease who had a deep brain stimulation device implanted. They compared this with data on 611 Veterans with Parkinson's but without the device. The data came from VA and Medicare administrative files from between 2007 and 2013. The researchers found that patients treated with deep brain stimulation survived an average of 6.3 years after the surgery, versus 5.7 years for the non-DBS patients after the date they might have gotten surgery based on their match to a surgery patient--a difference of eight months.

The researchers had paired each DBS patient with a clinically and demographically similar non-DBS patient--for example, in terms of age and symptom severity--and tracked survival from the date when surgery either took place, for the DBS group; or might have theoretically taken place, for the non-DBS group. The average age of veterans in the study was 69, reflecting the higher prevalence of Parkinson's among older people. The older age of the study group could have led to more deaths from age-related conditions, but the researchers point out that a majority of the causes of death for those who died during the study period were related to Parkinson's disease.

Making Chennai a water-wise

The public discourse on Chennai's ongoing water crisis has been along predictable lines. Source augmentation, deepening of waterbodies and giving rainwater harvesting a renewed emphasis are among the suggestions being made, apart from demand-side management. But these ideas, however well-meaning they may be, have their limitations. There is a compelling need for a paradigm shift in the way the water crisis is being viewed. When it comes to source augmentation, in the last 40 years, a couple of major projects were taken up for Chennai to tap both fresh water and sea water.

The Krishna Water Supply Scheme or Telugu Ganga Project (1996) and the New Veeranam Project (2004) were implemented using two important inter-State rivers — the Krishna and the Cauvery, both of which depend on the southwest monsoon (June-September). Though the Krishna Water Supply Scheme, if realised fully, can take care of at least half of the Chennai Metropolitan Area (CMA)'s projected water demand of 1,721 million litres a day (MLD) for 2020, Tamil Nadu has not received the assured quantum from Andhra Pradesh even once in the last 20+ years. As regards the Cauvery project, the 'upper-riparian attitude' of Karnataka determines the flow to Tamil Nadu. In effect, realisation of water by Chennai hinges on nature and inter-State ties, both of which are, more often than not, unpredictable.

Another source since 2017 for the city has been the abandoned stone quarries located on the outskirts, from where water is drawn for public water supply after treatment. Further, two desalination plants of 100 MLD each were commissioned in 2010 and 2013. Work has begun on another desalination plant of 150 MLD while steps are on to set up another 400 MLD unit. However, given the costs and environmental concerns, it is unlikely that Chennai can afford to stretch this option beyond a point.

Deepening of tanks and lakes, a popular option, is easier said than done. Issues such as the costs involved in removing and transporting the silt and inadequate disposal arrangements have bothered the authorities to such an extent that nothing much has been done. As regards rainwater harvesting (RWH), it cannot be a panacea and site-specific requirements will have to be kept in mind while putting up RWH structures. The model of storing rainwater and reusing it may demonstrate the efficacy of RWH.

Many of the options being suggested to overcome the distress situation faced by Chennai have been tried out in the past. Yet, just one bad monsoon has pushed the city to yet another water crisis. This scenario may get repeated in the future too. Even if there are bountiful monsoon years, the prospects of Chennai becoming a water-surplus city are remote. An official document prepared a few years ago estimated that the CMA, which covers not only Chennai Corporation but also nearby municipalities, town panchayats and village panchayats, will have a shortfall of 1,089 MLD in 2020. Even assuming that the southern peninsula experiences good southwest and northeast monsoons this year, the gap can come down only by a maximum of 400 MLD.

A note available on the website of The Energy and Resources Institute states, quoting the Central Public Health and Environmental Engineering Organisation, that the average water supply in urban local bodies of the country is 69.25 litres per capita per day (LPCD) against the service level benchmark of 135 LPCD. For a metropolitan city like Chennai, the benchmark goes up to 150 LPCD. If one were to go by the admission of Chennai Metrowater, the service level achieved in March 2018 was 112 LPCD. This is why the need for a paradigm shift becomes all the more important.

Just as in many other Indian cities, the concept of waste-water recycling and re-use has not yet caught the imagination of either the authorities or the public in a big way. The demand-supply gap will be a permanent feature of urban India unless society realises the critical importance of recycling and re-use of water. It needs to be noted here that on an average, 85 litres of water goes waste for every 100 litres utilised.

There is also another reason why the concept ought to be popularised. According to information furnished by the Centre, while urban areas of the country generate 61,948 MLD of sewage on a daily basis, the installed capacity of sewage treatment plants (STPs) is just 23,277 MLD. This means that only 37.5% of sewage generated can be treated. As per a conservative estimate, Chennai generates about 930 MLD of sewage, whereas its STPs can handle 727 MLD. With rapid urbanisation, the space for new plants is hardly available in peri-urban areas of Chennai, a scenario applicable to any other city in India. As a result, the city's rivers and canals have been reduced to carriers of raw sewage. Over and above these reasons, one of the targets set under the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted by UN member-countries in 2015, is to halve the proportion of untreated waste water.

Fame has changed how I live: Elizabeth Hurley

Fame has altered English actress Elizabeth Hurley's life in a big way. She says she prefers to stay at home a lot more to avoid "being stared at and bothered in public". Her personal life has seen her through many ups and downs. She dated actor Hugh Grant, married Indian businessman Arun Nayar, and after her split from him, had a relationship with cricketer Shane Warne. She has raised her son from Steve Bing as a single mother while making a career in showbiz -- and her broken relationships have grabbed headlines.

Now living life in the public eye seems to have taken a toll on her. "You get accustomed to being in the public eye; I've learnt ways of coping. It's certainly changed the way I live my life on an everyday basis. No human being enjoys being a prey, and I never get used to being followed and chased," Hurley told. "We all like to have private time, and I now stay at home a lot to avoid being stared at and bothered in public. However, when you're well known, you can use fame for good causes and finding a cure for breast cancer is the cause closest to my heart," she added.

Hurley walked into the world of glamour as a model, but caught everyone's eye when she started dating Grant, especially her appearance with him at a film premiere in a Versace safety-pin dress. Starting with her stint in "Aria" back in 1987, Hurley has featured in "Austin Powers: International Man of Mystery", "Bedazzled", "Bad Boy" and "Gossip Girl". Currently, she is enjoying all the appreciation coming her way for her portrayal as Queen Helena in "The Royals", which airs in India on Colors Infinity.

The fourth season of the show premiered in the US on March 11, and will soon find its way on the Indian small screen as well. She has built an impressive career. But she says finding a balance between the personal and the professional is not easy. "I get very tired. Having a great circle of family and friends has been my salvation. My mother and sister helped me raise my son Damian and were always there for him if I had to travel for work.



"My biggest treat is leaving London and escaping to my country house, where I can spend time with my son and just do easy things, like walking the dogs, gardening and cooking," she added. Hurley's son is following in her footsteps, and has already made his debut with a small role in "The Royals", which is based on the lives of a fictional British royal family. The 52-year-old loves the "ambitious" streak in her teenaged son.

"I've really enjoyed working with him on the last two seasons of 'The Royals'. My advice to him was 'learn your lines and don't be annoying', both of which he managed with aplomb." At the moment, Hurley is busy with the show. "I love my character, Queen Helena, and I get a kick from acting out all the insane things she gets up to. I wish my life was half as salacious," she said. The show was in the news last year when its creator and showrunner Mark Schwahn was fired from the series after colleagues accused him of sexual harassment. So, the show's future -- a green light for a fifth season -- remains uncertain.

Industry has started looking at me differently: Nushrat

Actress Nushrat Bharucha, who is basking in the success of her last release "Sonu Ke Titu Ki Sweety", says people in the film industry have started looking at her differently. "Industry has already started looking at me differently. And that difference is of belief. I can feel a sense of belief in me," Nushrat said in a statement.

On her success, the "Pyaar Ka Punchnama" fame actress said: "When you have been persistent for as long as I have been, you have to exercise a certain amount of caution, but I want to do everything. I wish there were 48 hours in a day and 14 days in a week." "Sonu Ke Titu Ki Sweety", a new-age love triangle set with a 'bromance' twist, released on February 23, and has crossed the Rs 100 crore mark.

Film expert Taran Adarsh tweeted: "Truly unstoppable. 'Sonu Ke Titu Ki Sweety' marches into Rs. 100 crore club... Second film to cross Rs 100 crore mark in 2018, after 'Padmaavat'."



Concept of supermodel has disappeared from India: Atul Kasbekar

Celebrated photographer and film producer Atul Kasbekar says the concept of supermodel has disappeared from India, and he wants to revive it. "I have watched through my career how the concept of supermodel essentially has disappeared from our country. And there is a whole bunch of different factors which has resulted in killing the concept," Kasbekar told. He is part of the Colors Infinity show "Top Model India".

"If I can be a part of the process to revive it to whatever extent, then I will be a part of it. People like Sheetal Mallar and Mehr Jessia are supermodels in their own right. Even Arjun Rampal, before him Rahul Dev and Marc Robinson -- they were huge stars. "In every advanced country that has a visual communication and advertising, you will find digital stars, model stars. We had that and we managed to kill it."

But what killed the concept?

"One of the main out of the bunch of factors is there are foreign models who are inherently a bit gypsies and nomadic in attitude. "They travel here, they travel to Bangkok, Dubai, Cape Town and essentially they are transitioning through unless something big happens to them. They have no interest in hanging around in the country. "They get to sign at any kind of rate more importantly there is little paper work..." "Top Model India" sees male and female contestants up against each other. And Kasbekar says along with a good face, he is looking for the 'x factor' in the contestant.

Movies are great to get people's attention on a topic: Katrina

Actress Katrina Kaif believes movies can be effective in putting out a message that can bring about a change in society. Katrina interacted with the media when she joined the international award-winning non-profit organisation 'Educate Girls' as their ambassador here on Monday.

Asked what she thinks about having a movie based on 'educating girls' in Bollywood, she said: "I don't believe you need to have a movie to take this cause further or spread the awareness about this cause. There are many ways we can do it, although with a movie on it, sometimes a message comes across in a non-judgmental, non-forceful or organic entertaining form.

"A movie is an amazing way to get the message across. Someone making a movie on this would be outstanding."

Katrina cited the example of "Secret Superstar".

"That movie had that message. That was definitely the message that got across. A young talented girl who is being stopped from fulfilling her dreams because the society and world around her are not allowing her to do that... So for me, there are movies being made like that. You don't necessarily need a movie just about the classroom.

"This messaging coming into our movies is a great way to take the message further in our society. We all love movies and that is a great way to get people's attention on the topic."

The "Tiger Zinda Hai" actor said women have to be more encouraging towards other women for creating a healthy environment.

Besides education, what are the other initiatives that need to be taken in order to empower girls all around the world?



Katrina said: "I think a lot of steps have been taken all over the world... Whether it is equality at the workplace, whether it is the attitude we have towards each other, even for that matter the attitude that women have towards each other.

"Lately, I have become aware of it myself. Sometimes, I honestly feel that do we really support our contemporaries? Do I really support the women as much as I can, the women who are around me and in my work area?

"Sometimes the competitive mindset can actually stop you from being cooperative and encouraging towards others and I myself have become more aware of that. Am I lifting up the women around me? Am I doing what I can to support them and encourage them or to help them grow?".

Katrina said she is trying to encourage the women around her to make them better professionals.

"Rather than just seeing what they (women) can do for me, I am trying to encourage them to become better in their profession, whatever it may be. So for me, that is very important. A lot of things start with mindset. We all can address our mindset and make sure as to what are we doing for the women around us."

I don't like most TV content anymore: Mona Singh

Well-known television actress Mona Singh, who will feature in a web series "Kehne Ko Humsafar Hain", says she does not relate to most of the television content these days. "Honestly, I do not like most of the television content anymore. Every channel is filled with mythological shows and rest of the content is not that interesting like earlier days. In the 1990s and even when I started, the content of TV shows was much better. "These days I cannot relate to most of the TV shows," Mona, who shot to popularity as the bespectacled protagonist of "Jassi Jaisi Koi Nahin", told.

Mona prefers the digital platform now. "I am also teaching my mother to watch shows on apps and smart TV. This is a good change. Do we really get to watch a show like 'The Test Case' on TV? No. It is not happening there and that should happen," she added. In "Kehne Ko Humsafar Hain", Mona plays an independent single woman named Ananya. She says her character has been projected in a very graceful manner rather than a vamp or negative character, which usually happens in a story which revolves around infidelity.

"Playing the character of 'the other woman' was quite tricky because Ekta Kapoor (the show's producer) was very sure from the beginning that she will not project her as a vamp. She is not one. "She is a modern woman like all of us who happens to fall in love with a married man. "Unfortunately in our society, if a girl falls in love with a married man, people call her a 'home-breaker', but they do not question the man.

They do not talk about how the marriage failed and the man has come out of it and fell in love with another one. This show addresses those issues," Mona said.

In her maiden show "Jassi Jaisi Koi Nahin", a desi version of "Ugly Betty", Mona sported a de-glam look. Asked if she feels looks matter in showbiz in a big way, Mona said: "I think these days cinema and each character is more focused on the real look and real stories. I do not know if I look unconventional and did not face any rejection. "But I want to say that acting is not about good looks. It is about talent. These days people are busy going to the gym and try their luck (in showbiz). The fact is acting is an art, one needs the talent. If you do not have it, people will not watch you.

"For me, Nawazuddin Siddiqui is a much handsome man than others because he is a talented versatile actor." The 14-episode web series "Kehne Ko Humsafar Hain", which also features Ronit Roy and Gurdeep Kohli, is streaming on ALTBalaji.



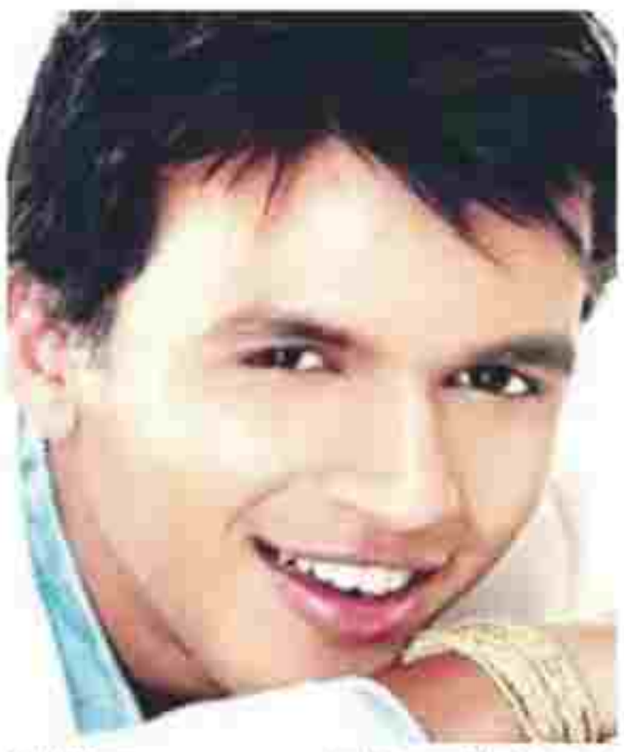
'Indian Idol' Abhijeet Sawant plans to start a reality show

Abhijeet Sawant burst onto the music scene in 2005 when he clinched the "Indian Idol" title. He went on to finish second and third in reality shows "Jo Jeeta Wohi Superstar" and "Asian Idol", respectively. Tired of battling it out against other contestants, he is now planning to start his own reality show. "It's been a while since I participated in a reality show. 'Nach Baliye' (2008) was the last one for me as a contestant. That time I realised that I have to move on. I also co-hosted 'Indian Idol 5'. It was one of the biggest, (most) successful seasons of the show," Abhijeet told.

What about starting his own reality show?

"I am working on it. It's too early to talk about it. It will happen on the digital platform. It will take some time to execute it," he said.

But there was a time when the "Mohabbatein lutaaunga" hitmaker was not a big fan of clicks, likes and comments on the digital platform.



"Earlier, I just wanted to release an album and not launch singles online. I didn't think of making songs viral. I wasn't keen on doing it," he said.

The digital market has become "really big" now and he wants to be a part of it. After unveiling his YouTube channel in 2017, he is set to relaunch his 2014 album "Farida" online.

"'Farida' has five songs. I am going to release three of them with videos," he said.

But why relaunch it after four years?

"It didn't do well back then as it didn't reach out to people. The time wasn't so good. The entire album was kept just like that. I thought now is a good time to release it," he said about the album, which was earlier released by Universal Music India.

He is first unveiling "Fakira" on Tuesday.

"It is a Sufi song mixed with jazz music. It will be followed by a heavy metal song which again has a Sufi feel to it. The third one, a romantic song, is about broken hearts. It is a fusion of Indian pop and Sufi," said Abhijeet.

He has also promised to release more original non-film music.

"I will release my own compositions and compilations with other singers on my YouTube channel. It will take at least four to five months to release them. I haven't thought of collaborating with rappers as my music doesn't allow me to use a rapper in my songs," said the singer, who is mostly associated with Indian pop genre.

His focus is only on music now. Does that mean he will no longer act in movies?

"Most probably, unless something good comes my way. Maybe, I will do playback singing. But not too much of acting or television shows. There are celebrity reality shows, but I don't want to get into that," said Abhijeet, who starred in the film "Lottery" in 2009.

In the same year, he joined the Shiv Sena.

"I am happily part of the party, but I am not actively working there. I joined in the starting days of my career. There was nobody to tell me what was right or wrong for my profile. "Now that I have realised, I am managing my life in the correct way. I have a good relationship with them (Shiv Sena members) but I don't want to get involved in politics. My focus is on music."

Published By : Mir Amjad Ali Khan 16-9-407/A, , Old Malakpet, Hyderabad -36 Contact No : + 9885106759. R.N.I.APENG/2002/09014,
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