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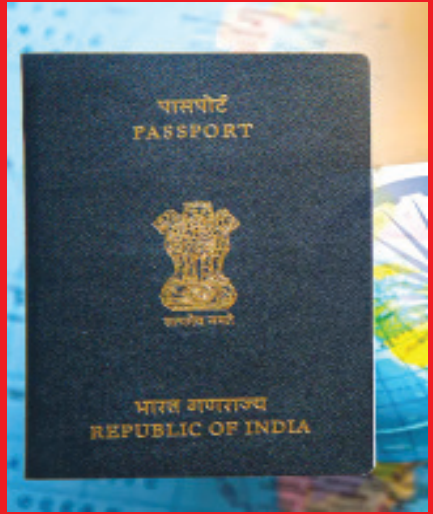
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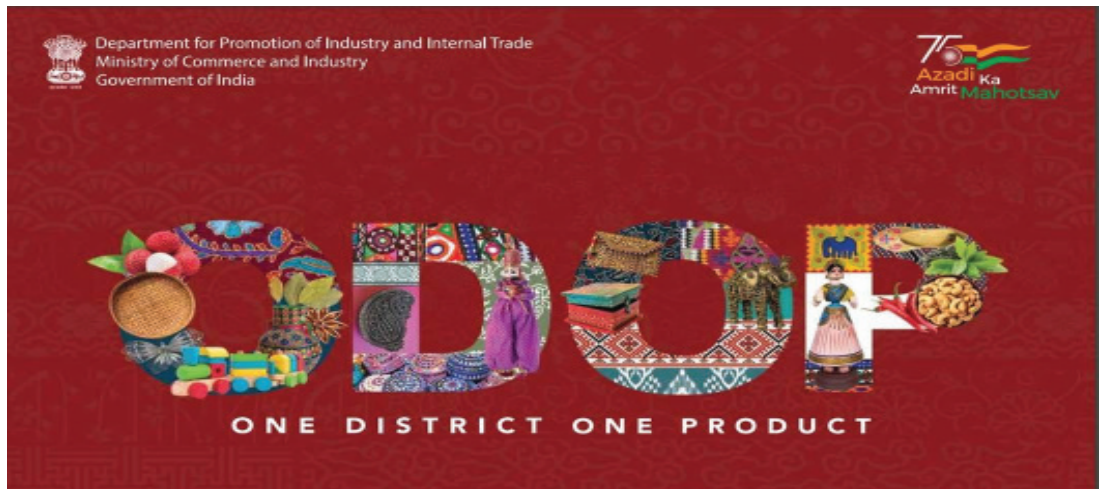
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Consulate General of India in New York receive the prestigious ODOP Award 2023

(News Agency)- 'One District One Product' is among the several initiatives of the Government of India in line with Prime Minister Modi's vision of "Aatma Nirbhar Bharat", a self-reliant India. The idea is to select, brand, and promote One Product from each District of the country, harnessing traditional strengths and technology for holistic development. The prestigious ODOP Awards were conferred upon Indian Districts, States and Indian Missions abroad by EAM Dr. S. Jaishankar and Commerce and Industry Minister Mr. Piyush Goyal on January 3 as part of the 'Aatma Nirbhar Bharat Utsav'. The Awards aim to recognize and honor those who have demonstrated exceptional accomplishments in furthering economic development through the ODOP approach.

Consulate General of India in New York was among the three Indian Missions to receive the prestigious ODOP Award 2023. It was declared the runners-up in the category of India's Foreign Missions for its contribution in promoting ODOP items in the world.

India's Consulate General in New York,



with active guidance and support of MEA and Department of Commerce, has undertaken major campaign to showcase and promote One District One Product items of India in the United States. Some of the popular products include Araku Coffee, Assam and Darjeeling Tea, ittar (perfume) from Kannauj, Lakadong turmeric, jute and textiles products, millet-based food items, Dhokra metal

handicrafts and Longpi pottery, among others. In 2022, Consulate organized an ODOP float at the iconic 'India Day Parade' in Manhattan and also put up ODOP stall at Times Square on the occasion of International Yoga Day which created widespread awareness in New York and around about ODOP items. Besides these, numerous trade shows, product launches and other events have

been hosted and organized by the Consulate to promote and popularize these distinctive expressions of India's diversity, heritage, culture and economic potential. The ODOP initiative stands as a testament to the Government of India's commitment to promoting the country's unique products globally, paving the way for a self-reliant India on the global stage.

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Punjab to organize 'NRI Punjabian Nal Milni' Programs

JAG MOHAN THAKEN

Chandigarh: Aiming to promptly address the issues and grievances of NRI Punjabis, the Punjab government is organizing four 'NRI Punjabian Nal Milni' programs across the state.

Punjab NRI Affairs Minister S. Kuldeep Singh Dhaliwal said on NRI Day that the 'NRI Punjabian Nal Milni' programs will commence on February 3 in Pathankot. This event will focus on resolving the concerns and complaints of migrant Punjabis from districts such as Pathankot, Amritsar, Gurdaspur, Hoshiarpur, etc.

The minister outlined the schedule, while holding a meeting that meeting on February 9 will encompass SBS Nagar, Rupnagar, Jalandhar, Kapurthala, and SAS Nagar. On February 16, issues related to NRI Punjabis from Sangrur, Patiala, Barnala, Fatehgarh Sahib, Malerkotla, Bathinda, Ludhiana, and Mansa districts will be addressed in Sangrur. February 22 will address issues of NRI concerns in Ferozepur, Faridkot, Fazilka, Tarn Taran, Moga and Sri Muktsar Sahib at Ferozepur.

S. Dhaliwal said that NRI Punjabis can register their complaints on the department's website: nri.punjab.gov.in and WhatsApp number 9056009884 from



January 11 to January 30, 2024.

Mr. Dhaliwal urged NRI Punjabis to attend these gatherings in large numbers, highlighting the success of five meetings organized in December 2022, during which 605 different complaints were lodged and resolved. He also mentioned the efficient resolution of online complaints received by the NRIs police wing at 15 NRI police stations, district, and state levels.

It is also pertinent to mention that Punjab Chief Minister Bhagwant Singh Mann, on December 29, had launched a new website nri.punjab.gov.in of the NRI affairs department.

Launching the website here the Chief Minister described it as a path breaking initiative aimed at ensuring the well-being of the NRIs on one hand and helping them to stay connected with their roots on the other. He said that the ultra-modern website has been created by the Governance Reforms department along with the help of NIC. CM Mann said that the website has detailed information pertaining to NRI Police wing, Punjab State Commission for NRIs and NRI Sabha.

Likewise, the Chief Minister said that the website will also provide slew of facilities offered by the state government to the

NRI brethren on single click. He said that the website will also help the NRIs to get their documents attested along with ensuring the benefit of other schemes to them. Bhagwant Singh Mann said that the website will also provide helpline number, email addresses and WhatsApp complaint numbers to the visitors.

The Chief Minister added that the website also has detailed information regarding the registered travel agents/ agencies with the Punjab government and registered immigration agents/ agencies with the Ministry of External Affairs. He said that the website also has links to the centralized online complaint portal of Punjab viz. www.connect.punjab.gov.in wherein NRIs and other people can register their complaint. Mr. Mann envisioned that this website would act as a catalyst in resolving the issues faced by the NRI brethren thereby facilitating them in a big way.

The Chief Minister further said that in a landmark initiative the state government will also set up a "Facilitation Center" at the Arrival Hall of International Terminal. Bhagwant Singh Mann said that the centre will help in giving assistance regarding arrival flights, connecting flights, taxi services, lost luggage facilities and others at the airport.

PM Modi Meets Mozambique President In Gujarat, Defence, Trade Talks In Focus

(News Agency)-Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Tuesday met President Filipe Nyusi of Mozambique as the latter arrived in Gandhinagar to attend the Vibrant Gujarat Summit.

The encounter, laden with significance, was heightened by President Nyusi's previous association with the state, having pursued a course at the prestigious Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad.

PM Modi expressed his delight at the meeting, highlighting the special nature of the meeting due to President Nyusi's ties with Gujarat. PM Modi took to X to share the memorable occasion, saying, "Glad to have met President Filipe Nyusi of Mozambique in Gujarat. The meeting was made special by the fact that he has an old association with the state, having studied a course at @IIMAhmedabad. Our talks focused on defence, trade, energy, cultural linkages and more." "The discussions between the two leaders delved into a comprehensive range of subjects, underscoring the depth and breadth of the bilateral relationship. Key focal points included defence collaboration, trade partnerships, energy cooperation, and the rich tapestry of cultural linkages that bind India and Mozambique.

Mozambique President Filipe Nyusi arrived in Gujarat

on Tuesday morning and was received by Gujarat Chief Minister Bhupendrabhai Patel at Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel International Airport in Ahmedabad.

In a post shared on X, Ministry of External Affairs official spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal stated, "A warm welcome to President Filipe Nyusi of Mozambique as he arrives in Ahmedabad for the 10th @VibrantGujarat Summit. CM @Bhupendrabjp of Gujarat received President Nyusi at the airport." "PM Modi arrived in Ahmedabad on Monday for a two-day visit to inaugurate the 10th edition of Vibrant Gujarat Global Summit 2024 at Gujarat's Mahatma Mandir.

The theme of the summit, held from January 10 to 12, is 'Gateway to the Future' to celebrate "20 Years of Vibrant Gujarat as the Summit of Success".

Several world leaders, including UAE President Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan and Timor Leste President Jose Ramos-Horta will attend the Vibrant Gujarat Summit. Upon arrival in Gujarat, PM Modi in a post shared on X stated, "Landed in Ahmedabad a short while ago. Over the next two days, will be taking part in the Vibrant Gujarat Summit and related programmes. It is a matter of immense joy that various world leaders will be joining us during this summit.

The coming of my brother, Mohamed Bin Zayed, is very special. I have a very close association with the Vibrant Gujarat Summit and I am glad to see how this platform has contributed to Gujarat's growth and created opportunities for several people." The Vibrant Gujarat Global Summit was started in 2003 under the leadership of Narendra Modi when he was the state chief minister. The tenth edition of the Vibrant Gujarat Global Summit is being held from January 10-12 in Gandhinagar.

There are 34 partner countries and 16 partner organisations for this year's Summit. Further, the Ministry of Development of the North-Eastern Region will utilise the Vibrant Gujarat platform to showcase investment opportunities in the North-Eastern regions. The Summit will host various events including seminars and conferences on globally relevant topics such as Industry 4.0, Technology and Innovation, Sustainable Manufacturing, Green Hydrogen, Electric Mobility and Renewable Energy and Transition towards Sustainability. In the Vibrant Gujarat Global Trade Show, companies will display products made from world-class state-of-the-art technology. E-mobility, startups, MSMEs, Blue Economy, Green Energy & Smart Infrastructure are some of the focus sectors of the Trade Show.

Rajasthan Sends Cooking Oil for 'Sita Rasoi', Kejriwal Asked To Block Dates for 22nd: Latest on Ram Mandir

The devotional fervour is at its peak across the nation as Ayodhya is gearing up to mark the momentous occasion of the inauguration ceremony of the Ram Mandir in Ayodhya on January 22. While many devotees from across the country are travelling to Ayodhya to offer their prayers to Lord Rama, some are donating money to contribute in the construction of the temple. Meanwhile, the face-off between the BJP-led central government and the

Opposition over the invitations being extended for the Pran Pratishtha of the grand Ram temple is continuously escalating with each passing day. Notably, the guest list for the inaugural function is being decided by a team nominated by the Sri Ram Janmbhoomi Teerth Kshetra Trust, which is dominated by the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) and the Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh (RSS) leaders. Prime Minister Narendra Modi will be the

chief guest for the inauguration ceremony. RAJASTHAN CM TO SEND 2,100 COOKING OIL DRUMS FOR SITA RASOI IN AYODHYA

Rajasthan Chief Minister Bhajan Lal Sharma on Wednesday flagged off 2,100 cooking oil drums and a 'Ram Durbar' procession, heading to 'Sita Rasoi' (Sita's kitchen) in Ayodhya. The oil will be used for cooking the food to be served to the devotees attending the inauguration ceremony of the

Ram temple in Ayodhya on January 22 and afterwards.

ARVIND KEJRIWAL RECEIVED LETTER TO BLOCK DATES FOR RAM TEMPLE EVENT- With a couple of weeks left for the Pran Pratishtha of Ram Lalla at the Ayodhya temple, Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal received a letter a few days ago saying he should block his dates as a formal invite for the ceremony, along with details will follow.

Kite flyers from 16 countries to take part in Hyderabad Kite Festival



(News Agency)-Kite flyers from various parts of India and 16 countries are expected to participate in the International Kite and Sweet festival to be held in Hyderabad from January 13. The three-day event at Parade

Grounds Secunderabad will see international kite flyers flying kites of various shapes and colours.

Participants from different parts of Telangana and various states will also bring to the event 400 types of home-made sweets. The event will also showcase the rich culture of Telangana. Telangana's tourism Minister Jupally Krishna Rao said the festival would be organised to further enhance the brand image of Hyderabad.

He expects 15 lakh visitors to the festival. Stating that the entry to the festival will be free, he called for making the festival a huge success.

The minister held a meeting with top officials of the tourism department and delegates from various states and countries to discuss the arrangements for the festival. Krishna Rao asked officials to make sure that the

participants coming for the event from different states and countries do not face any problem during their stay.

He asked delegates to give their suggestions to organise the annual festival in a grander manner in future.

Terming Hyderabad a 'Mini India', the minister mentioned that the city is truly cosmopolitan with people from various states and regions and even from living here in harmony. He said Hyderabad is home to people of all religions.

Krishna Rao said the International Kite and Sweet Festival will be expanded to other towns and rural areas in the coming day. He vowed to restore the glory of Telangana culture, arts and traditions.

Shailaja Ramayier, Principal Secretary, Tourism, Culture and Youth Services, K. Nikhila, Director, Tourism and other officials were present.

Ayodhya to have longest line of solar-powered street lights

(News Agency)- The Yogi Adityanath government is planning to set a world record by installing the longest line of 470 solar-powered street lights in Ayodhya. Currently, the record is held by Malham,

Saudi Arabia, which was created in December 2021 after 468 solar lights

Once the lights are installed, the state government will approach the Guinness World Records for inspection before declaring the stretch as the longest solar-powered street in the world.

Officials are confident that the lights on the stretch would become operational before January 22, the day of 'pran pratishtha'.

Presently, 310 out of 470 lights are functional and the last leg of the stretch between Guptar Ghat and Nirmali Kund has to be covered.

"The road between Guptar Ghat and Laxman Ghat, which is 8.35-km long, already has solar lights. It will be extended by 1.85 km up to Nirmali Kund

within a week," an officer said. The 4.4-watt LED-based solar lights are equipped with smart technology (can sense daylight and switch off automatically) and are linked to the grid created to supply renewable energy to Ayodhya. The government is setting up a solar city to provide renewable and green energy to the public.



were lined up in a series over a stretch of 9.7 km. Determined to increase the use of renewable and green energy resources in Ayodhya, UPNEDA (Uttar Pradesh New and Renewable Energy Development Agency) will install 470 solar-powered lights covering a stretch of 10.2 km connecting Guptar Ghat to Laxman Ghat.

Ayodhya to resonate with sound of 1,111 conch shells



(News Agency)-Ayodhya will resonate with the sound of 1,111 conch shells during the Pran Pratishtha ceremony on January 22. According to the information provided by the culture department of Uttar Pradesh, conch shells in such huge numbers have never been blown simultaneously in any event.

There are plans to blow the conch shells at 12.20 p.m. as soon as the ceremony begins, and it will continue till the end of the mahurat. The sound of conch shells will be heard far off.

"As per Ramayana, the birth of Sri Ram

was celebrated in a grand way. Everyone expressed happiness by blowing conch shells. We, too, will try to create the same atmosphere during 'Pran Pratishtha'," the officials said, adding that in the main event, there is a plan to express happiness by blowing conch shells together so that the happiness of Treta yug appears alive. Meanwhile, ahead of the January 22 Pran Pratishtha ceremony of Ram temple, 21,000 priests will perform a grand yagna from January 14 to January 25.

India reports 605 new Covid cases, four deaths

(News Agency)- India has logged 605 new Covid-19 cases and four deaths in the past 24 hours, the Union Ministry of Health and Family Welfare said on Wednesday. The four new fatalities were reported from Kerala and Karnataka, two each, according to the ministry data. On Tuesday, six deaths were reported in total -- from Karnataka, Chhattisgarh and Assam.

Meanwhile, the total number of active cases further fell to 3,643 from Monday's 3,919.

As of now, the total number of coronavirus cases in India, since the initial outbreak in January 2020, has reached 4,50,19,819, while the overall death toll has risen to 5,33,406.

The new JN.1 sub-variant is a descendent of the Omicron subvariant known as BA.2.86 or



Pirola, with Kerala being the first state to report a case.

In a concerning development, the JN.1 subvariant of the Omicron strain has swiftly become the dominant variant in the state of Maharashtra.

Recent genetic studies on coronavirus samples from January reveal that the JN.1 subvariant accounts for nearly all cases in the state.

Out of the 21 samples from the city that underwent genetic

sequencing, all were found positive for the JN.1 subvariant. This discovery has raised the count of JN.1 cases in Maharashtra to over 200.

A total of 682 cases of the JN.1 have been reported from 12

states across the country till January 6, according to sources. Kerala and Karnataka witnessed JN.1 variant cases, while Delhi, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Rajasthan, Telangana, Odisha and Haryana were also affected, as per the Indian SARS-CoV-2 Genomics Consortium (INSACOG).

INSACOG's data revealed that 239 Covid cases in December 2023, and 24 in November 2023, were identified with the presence of the JN.1 variant.

The overall recovery from Covid has reached over 4.4 crore individuals, reflecting a national recovery rate of 98.81 per cent. The country has administered a total of 220.67 crore doses of Covid vaccines, as per the available data.

Indian-origin armyman pleads guilty to sex attempt on minor in Singapore

(News Agency)- A 50-year-old Indian-origin warrant officer with the Singapore Armed Forces has pleaded guilty to one charge of penetrating a minor below 16 in 2021. Subramaniam Thaburan Rangasamy, who had helped the minor after she had a fall on stairs in a carpark, is likely to face two more charges during his sentencing on February 1, The Straits Times newspaper reported on Tuesday. Deputy Public Prosecutor Sunil Nair said the incident happened on December 6, 2021, when the victim was supposed to have an online meeting with her school counsellor in the morning.

The Secondary 3 student, who is now 17-years-old, was walking down from the fifth floor of the carpark when she fell and hit a door, and Subramaniam helped her to her feet.

She thanked him and after chatting for about an hour in one of the floors of the carpark, they became intimate.



Subramaniam tried to have sex with her, but failed, following which they parted ways and exchanged numbers, the news report said.

The court heard that they remained in

contact via WhatsApp, but the messages were not of a sexual nature. Two days after the incident made a police report because she felt that Subramaniam had taken advantage of

her.

The prosecutor noted that the accused was not at any time misled by the victim's age, and added that he did not force or coerce the victim to be intimate. In response to queries from The Straits Times, a Ministry of Defence spokeswoman said they have suspended Subramaniam from all duties following his arrest.

"The SAF will initiate further actions upon the conclusion of court hearings, which may include discharging him from service," she added. She said the SAF holds its servicemen to high standards of discipline and integrity, and that those who commit offences will be dealt with in accordance with the law. For penetrating a minor below 16, Subramaniam could be jailed for up to 10 years, fined or both.

Cold day conditions continue as Delhi records minimum temperature of 7.1

(News Agency)-- The national capital woke up to a minimum temperature of 7.1 degrees Celsius, which is the seasonal average, according to India Meteorological Department (IMD), adding that the maximum temperature is likely to hover around 16 degrees making Wednesday a cold day. On Tuesday the city recorded a maximum temperature of 13.4 degree Celsius, six notches below the seasonal average. The city, on Wednesday morning, recorded lowest



visibility of 700 m at Safdarjung at 7:30 a.m. while the Palam recorded 800 m at 8:30 a.m. The IMD classifies fog intensity into four types: shallow, moderate, dense and very dense fog.

The visibility ranges from 999 m to 500 m, 499 m to 200 m, 199 m to 50 m and less than 50 m, respectively.

According to Indian Railways, a total of 18 trains were running late by hours due to fog and cold wave.

The Air quality continued to

remain in the 'very poor' category at several stations across the city. At the Anand Vihar area, PM2.5 levels remained into the 'very poor' category standing at 307 and PM10 reached 181 or 'moderate'. The CO was at 135 or 'moderate', according to the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB). The Air Quality Index (AQI) between zero and 50 is considered 'good'; 51 and 100 'satisfactory'; 101 and 200 'moderate'; 201 and 300 'poor'; 301 and 400 'very poor'; and 401 and 500 'severe'.

Telangana CM hosts dinner for consulate representatives of 13 countries

Hyderabad- Telangana Chief Minister A. Revanth Reddy hosted dinner for the consulate representatives of 13 countries at Qutub Shahi Tombs in Hyderabad. Consulate representatives of the US, Iran, Turkey, UAE, the UK, Japan, Thailand, Germany, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Australia, France and Finland attended the dinner.

It was the first such event hosted by the new Congress government after coming to power last month. It was aimed at fostering international collaboration.

Revanth Reddy explained to the consulate representatives the state government's most important considerations. He told them that the government is committed to the welfare and upliftment of all sections under Abhaya Hastam. Transparency and equality are being given top priority in the government by taking the aspirations of freedom fighters



Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel and inspiration from former Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, he said. The Chief Minister said that the

government is making efforts to promote Telangana as the best welfare state in the country by implementing six guarantees. The government will also give equal priority to development and is committed to the welfare of the youth and industrial growth. CM Revanth Reddy appealed to the respective countries to come forward to invest in Telangana by exploring the opportunities extended by the government. The government will maintain cordial relations with all countries, the CM said and appealed to the countries to make appropriate suggestions for the industrial development of the state. Deputy Chief Minister Bhatti Vikramarka, Ministers Damodara Raja Narasimha, Sridhar Babu, Chief Secretary Santhi Kumari, Jayesh Ranjan, Hyderabad Regional Passport Officer Snehaja and other officials participated in the programme.

EET Hydrogen's plans for UK's largest hydrogen production hub given green light



(News Agency)-Cheshire West & Chester Council has approved groundbreaking plans by EET Hydrogen for the first large-scale, low carbon hydrogen production plant (HPP1) in the UK located at the Stanlow Manufacturing Complex in Ellesmere Port, Cheshire.

Consisting of two plants (HPP1 and HPP2), the hydrogen hub will enable local industrial and power generation businesses to switch from fossil fuels to low carbon energy. This will help to reduce the North West's carbon emissions by 2.5 million tonnes every year -- the

equivalent of taking 1.1 million cars off the roads.

The hydrogen will be used locally by the Essar refinery and other major manufacturers in the region, including Tata Chemicals, Encirc and Pilkington to create the first low carbon refining operations, glass and chemicals manufacturing sites in the world.

The EET Hydrogen hub will help to secure and grow vital industries, create jobs and unlock billions of pounds of related investment.

EET will develop the hydrogen hub in phases with the first plant (HPP1) at 350MW capacity, the second (HPP2) at 1,000MW capacity and an overall target capacity of 4,000MW+ by 2030. These plants are critical to meet the UK's hydrogen and industrial decarbonisation targets and enable the critical hydrogen infrastructure.

The development is a key pillar of HyNet -- the UK's leading industrial decarbonisation cluster. Construction is anticipated to start on HPP1 in 2024 with low carbon hydrogen produced at the site by 2027.

Richard Holden, HPP1 Project Manager at EET Hydrogen, said, "This is the largest low carbon hydrogen project in the UK and one of the most advanced in the world. It is a vital piece of the North West's journey to net zero, underpinning HyNet and providing the opportunity for manufacturers in the region to decarbonise their processes and support UK jobs.

"We have worked closely with regional stakeholders and are delighted to obtain this important approval for the project as we move from ambition to action."

Delhi records minimum temperature at 5.8°C; dense fog affects visibility, delays trains

(News Agency)-The national capital woke up to a minimum temperature of 5.8 degrees Celsius, which is the seasonal average, according to India Meteorological Department (IMD). It added that the maximum temperature is likely to hover around 15 degrees, making Thursday a cold day. The city, on Thursday morning, was blanketed by dense fog with lowest visibility of 500 m at Safdarjung at 8:30 a.m. while the Palam recorded 100 m at 5:00 a.m., which improved later. The IMD classifies fog intensity into four types: shallow, moderate, dense and very dense fog. The visibility ranges from 999 m to 500 m, 499 m to 200 m, 199 m to 50 m and less than 50

m, respectively. According to Indian Railways, 24 trains were running late by hours due to fog and cold wave. The Air quality continued to remain in the 'very poor' category at several stations across the city. At the Anand Vihar area, PM2.5 levels remained into the 'very poor' category standing at 355 and PM10 reached 253 or 'poor'. The Air Quality Index (AQI) between zero and 50 is considered 'good'; 51 and 100 'satisfactory'; 101 and 200 'moderate'; 201 and 300 'poor'; 301 and 400 'very poor'; and 401 and 500 'severe'. The Dwarka Sector 8 also witnessed PM2.5 levels at 332, the 'very poor' category while the PM10 was at 222, falling under the 'poor' category, again.



A lot is riding on Taiwan poll outcome- including whether China will 'invade'

As Taiwan gets ready for the presidential and legislative elections on 13 January, the substantial influence of China looms large. Chinese interference significantly affects the country's electoral proceedings. It is evident that the outcome of Taiwan's presidential election will profoundly shape China's actions, the trajectory of cross-Strait relations, and the dynamics between China and the United States. War vs peace narrative

During President Tsai Ing-wen's tenure, cross-Strait relations saw a significant deterioration, with Taiwan emerging as a point of contention in China-US relations. Since 2016, when the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) assumed power, China has halted cross-Strait dialogue due to the DPP's reluctance to embrace the 1992 consensus as the basis for dialogue. This divergence in viewpoints between the DPP, perceived by China as inclining towards advocating Taiwan independence, and Beijing's position, has strained relations. China considers DPP politicians as separatists supporting Taiwan's independence, resulting in significant discord, which is evident in derogatory references towards the DPP on Chinese social media. For example, a prominent Weibo account labeled the DPP as "a criminal organisation involved in adultery and corruption". The evolving dynamics in the Taiwan Strait, compounded by the growing interests of major powers in Taiwan, have further complicated the situation. China leveraged former US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan in August 2022 as grounds to conduct live-fire drills, underscoring the persistent spectre of invasion in Beijing's strategic calculations. Taiwan's opposition party, Kuomintang (KMT), has accused the ruling DPP of instigating strain in cross-Strait relations, presenting the upcoming vote as a decisive choice between war and peace. Former president Ma Ying-jeou, who met with Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2015, remarked, "Vote for the DPP, youth will go to the battlefield. Vote for the Kuomintang, and there will be no war on both sides of the Taiwan Strait." The KMT presidential candidate, incumbent New Taipei City Mayor Hou You-yi, has pledged that, "if elected, efforts will prioritise initiating limited exchanges between Taiwan and China in less contentious areas such as education, religion, culture, and economics before formal interactions are established." His running mate Jaw Shaw-kong also furthered the war vs peace narrative by asking, "What road are they [DPP] taking? The road to war. The road that leads Taiwan into danger, the road that leads to uncertainty."

Lai ching-te, DPP's presidential candidate and the current vice president, responded

by saying that "framing the election as a choice between peace and war is China's external propaganda". At an election rally, he also said that "We will not bow our heads to intimidation from China... This is not a choice between the DPP and KMT, this is a choice between Taiwan and China, between democracy and autocracy."

However, there appears to be misconstrued discourse surrounding this matter. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leadership's agenda does not simply emphasise reinitiating dialogue; instead, their objective is to set and enforce the terms and conditions of any dialogue, firmly advocating for the 1992 consensus and the One China principle as uncompromising foundations. Chinese interference

While Chinese interference in Taiwanese elections is not a novel occurrence, the current instances are notably more widespread and multifaceted, encompassing tactics from economic coercion to psychological warfare. Taiwan's Ministry of Defence has reported numerous Chinese balloons sighted over the Taiwan Strait. Moreover, on 21 December, the Customs Tariff Commission of the State Council unilaterally declared tariff reductions on certain chemicals from Taiwan, which were previously agreed upon in the Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement. The proliferation of deep fakes and fake accounts spreading disinformation is rampant across various social media platforms.

These measures aim to sway the election in favour of China that wants the 1992 consensus to be reinstated. The Tsai administration's emphasis has been on prioritising the will of the Taiwanese people in determining Taiwan's future. The shifting identity of Taiwanese poses a significant concern for the CCP leadership, as it complicates the prospects for peaceful reunification. Xi Jinping has notably shifted from advocating peaceful reunification to implying the potential use of force.

Will China invade Taiwan?

The lingering question remains: will China invade Taiwan? Predicting this outcome is challenging, but the results of Taiwan's elections may offer insights. In his New Year's Eve message, Xi reiterated his determination to reunify Taiwan with China. However, a recent report suggested that such an invasion could cost up to \$10 trillion. The prospect of such a monumental cost for a war with uncertain outcomes, combined with China's already sluggish economy, diminishes the likelihood of an imminent conflict. Nonetheless, Taiwan faces a significant threat from China.

By SANA HASHMI

Could the Israel-Gaza war spark a wider conflict involving the US, Iran or others?

Soon after Hamas's 7 October attack and Israel's retaliatory bombing campaign in Gaza, pundits began debating the odds of escalation. For its part, the Biden administration has tried to prevent the fighting between Hamas and the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) from spreading to other areas of the Middle East, if only to spare the roughly 45,000 US troops based there from another ill-fated war. "Escalation" lacks a singular meaning. For some, it connotes a vast increase in death and destruction after at least one warring party starts using weapons that are far more powerful than it had employed previously. For others, escalation refers to wars that spread because additional countries or armed groups decide to join the fighting. Israel's war in Gaza has already escalated in both these respects, albeit only to a limited extent.

The magnitude and scale of the firepower that the IDF has used in Gaza has increased substantially, even before its ground invasion began at the end of October. According to a recent estimate, 70% of Gaza's homes and half of all other buildings are damaged or demolished. More than 22,000 residents have been killed and 85% have been displaced from their homes – and within 90 days. The magnitude of the devastation has prompted comparisons to the Allied bombing of Dresden and Hamburg during the second world war.

The Israel-Hamas war has also expanded to other places. There are daily skirmishes along the Israel-Lebanon border between Israel and the Iran-aligned Shia militia Hezbollah. Approximately 150,000 people have fled northern Israel and southern Lebanon, and, despite American attempts at mediating a solution that would push

Hezbollah further away from the border, the firefights continue.

The region's major powers have not entered the fray. But there are plausible scenarios in which they could

Furthermore, the IDF has been attacking Iranian proxies in Syrian-controlled territory, targeting air defense systems, weapons depots and even senior Iranian generals. In Yemen, the Houthis, another Iranian-linked militia, have attacked Red Sea shipping lanes more than two dozen times, prompting the US to create an international maritime coalition to maintain freedom of navigation and, along with 11 other nations, to issue a warning: cease or face the consequences.

Still, the region's major powers have not entered the fray. But there are plausible scenarios in which they could.

One involves an Iranian attack on Israel, perhaps in response to increasing IDF strikes against Hezbollah or an Israeli military strike in Syria that kills numerous advisers or officers from Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). Israel has already killed several IRGC officers since the war in Gaza began, including, on Christmas Day, Sayyed Razi Mousavi, a general overseeing the supply of Iranian weapons to Hezbollah.

Another pathway to escalation is Iranian retaliation for an American attack on the Iran-backed, Yemen-based Houthis, an option that the Biden administration has reportedly considered. Indeed, on 31 December, an American destroyer downed Houthi missiles that targeted a cargo ship in the Red Sea and then fired on Houthi boats that attacked the same vessel, killing the Houthi fighters onboard.

By Rajan Menon and Daniel R DePetris

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Managing Editor :

Susmita Ghosh

Deputy Managing Editor :

Amaninder Singh Thind

Editor (Political Affairs-India) : Aruna Singh

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Editorial Intern: Roubin Singh Thind

Web Coordinator : Harpreet Singh

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REGD & MAILING OFFICE :

P.O Box 7005 Hicksville New York 11801

Phone: 917 612 3158

editor@thesouthasianinsider.com, thesouthasianinsider@gmail.com

www.thesouthasianinsider.com

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The climate costs of war and militaries can no longer be ignored

By Doug Weir

In early 2022, journalists began to ask us how Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine was affecting the climate crisis. While we could point to landscape fires, burning oil refineries and the thirst of diesel-hungry military vehicles, the emissions data they sought just wasn't available. When it came to the reverberating consequences of Russia's manipulation of Europe's fossil fuel insecurity, or to the weakening of the international cooperation necessary for coordinated global climate action, our guesses were no better than theirs.

Two decades of international analysis and debate over the relationship between climate change and security has focused on how our rapidly destabilising climate could undermine the security of states. But it has largely ignored how national security choices, such as military spending or warfighting, can have an impact on the climate, and so undermine our collective security. With climate breakdown under way and accelerating, it is imperative that we are able to understand and minimise the emissions from all societal activities, whether in peacetime or at war. But when it comes to military or conflict



emissions, this remains a distant goal.

Russia's war in Ukraine has seen the first attempt to comprehensively document the emissions from any conflict, and researchers have had to develop their methodologies from scratch. Their latest estimate puts the total as equivalent to the annual emissions of a country like Belgium. Ukraine is not a one-off, with a similar clamour for emissions data around Israel's war against Hamas. While the devastating ongoing conflicts in Sudan or Myanmar are yet to see

attention on their emissions, the trend is clear: the carbon cost of conflict needs to be understood, just as the humanitarian, economic or wider environmental costs do. A proportion of those carbon costs come from military activities. For these, understanding is hampered by the longstanding culture of domestic environmental exceptionalism enjoyed by militaries, and how at the US's insistence, this was translated into UN climate agreements. An exclusion to the 1997 Kyoto protocol became voluntary reporting under the 2015

Paris agreement. But when we began to collate and publish the emissions data that militaries report to the UNFCCC (United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change), we found that only a handful of countries publish even the bare minimum required by UN reporting guidelines. Many countries with large militaries publish nothing at all.

The best estimate we have is that militaries are responsible for 5.5% of global greenhouse gas emissions. If the global military were a country, this would place it fourth in terms of its emissions,

between India and Russia. Militaries are highly fossil fuel dependent and, while net zero targets have opened up debates around military decarbonisation, effective decarbonisation is impossible without understanding the scale of emissions, and without the domestic and international policy frameworks to encourage it. At present, we have neither, while carbon-intensive global military spending has reached record levels.

Ultimately, the international policy framework means the UNFCCC. While some militaries have set vague emissions reduction goals, they are often short on scope and detail, and on accountability. For example, while Nato has drafted a methodology for counting emissions, it does not apply to its members, and it explicitly excludes emissions from Nato-led operations and missions, training and exercises. Amplified by the ongoing destruction of Gaza, Cop28 saw unprecedented attention on the relationship between the climate crisis, peace and security. But while visible in side events and protests, military and conflict emissions were again absent from the formal agenda.

Trump spreads birther lie about Nikki Haley

By John Avlon

It was only a matter of time before former President Donald Trump went birther on Nikki Haley.

After all, the former South Carolina governor and UN Ambassador is a pioneering candidate, the daughter of immigrants from India, and she's rising in the polls. It's not only concern about his electoral prospects that's driving him; Trump's massive yet fragile ego also feels threatened. So he reached for the most reflexive slur he could find via the far-right news site Gateway Pundit, reposting on Truth Social the false claim that Haley is not constitutionally eligible to be president because her parents were not US citizens when she was born in South Carolina. The Gateway Pundit post cited a legal analysis piece on the American Greatness site.

This specious claim flies in the face of the 14th amendment,



which says people born in the US are automatically citizens. The requirement to be a "natural born" citizen to be eligible to run for president means being a citizen at birth rather than through naturalization later.

The claim about Haley is a lazy and xenophobic rehash of the so-called birther attacks Trump baselessly directed at President Barack Obama's supposed ineligibility for office.

This isn't a dog whistle; it's a bullhorn. In 2016, Trump also raised a phony birther issue

about Ted Cruz. In 2020, he questioned whether Kamala Harris was eligible to run for office on similar but equally false grounds. See a pattern?

Now he's trafficking in the same desperate play against Haley. No one who's ever described themselves as "Iowa nice" ought to fall for this desperate cut-and-paste bigotry.

But Trump's mind hits rewind whenever he feels backed into a corner, repeating the same old attacks at higher volume. There's another relevant — and revealing

— example of this dynamic. Think back to 2016 Iowa caucus. Polls showed that Trump was narrowly ahead. But Iowa voters are open to last-minute persuasion and when caucus day came, Cruz beat Trump.

What did Trump do? He reflexively cried that Ted Cruz had "stolen" the Iowa caucus through unspecified "fraud," tweeting that "either a new election should take place or Cruz results nullified." Lying and threats are the only way Trump can react to losing. Trump's tantrum was so absurd that it didn't get much traction at the time. Trump went on to legitimately win New Hampshire and ultimately the Republican nomination. Cruz went from warning about Trump's fundamental unfitness for office to eagerly lining up to spit-shine his shoes, like so many of his Republican congressional colleagues. But the 2016 Iowa caucuses aren't the first example of Trump trying out

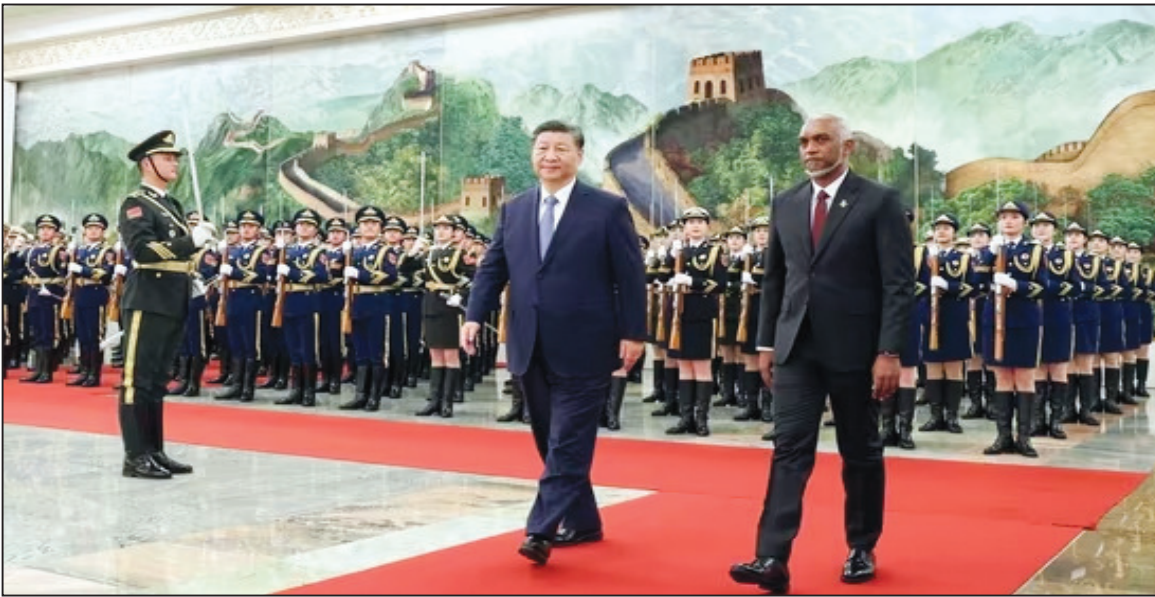
the "stolen election" script. As McKay Coppins' excellent book "Romney: A Reckoning" reminded me, Trump first tried out this vile bile duct release on our democracy back in 2012. On election night, as President Obama pulled ahead of then-GOP candidate Mitt Romney, Trump rage-tweeted some of the same language he would later use to spread the election lie that led to the January 6 attack on the US Capitol by his supporters.

"We can't let this happen. We should march on Washington and stop this travesty. Our nation is totally divided!"

"Let's fight like hell and stop this great and disgusting injustice! The world is laughing at us."

"This election is a total sham and a travesty. We are not a democracy!"

The ugly echoes are direct evidence of the fraud Trump tried to pull on the American people after losing the 2020 election.



Maldives, China and the Elephant in the Room

By: Tara Kartha

Maldives is in the news for all the wrong reasons. It's not just the public insults by its sitting ministers against India and its prime minister. It's also that President Mohamed Muizzu made a deliberate decision to prioritise ties with Beijing and its camp followers in the region, rather than the traditional courtesy extended of visiting India first. The latter is a free choice of a sovereign country, however unwise. The former was completely unacceptable. Both are symptoms of a larger malaise. It's time to take note.

MUIZZU'S BENT OF MIND

That visit to China was a foregone event given the heavily anti-India posture of Muizzu during elections, not to mention his quick action to publicly announce that his government would end the minuscule presence of Indian service personnel on the island. On a personal note, he was the construction minister under the Presidency of Abdullah Yameen. In that post, he had more than \$1 billion to play around with in terms of Chinese assistance to build housing projects and other massive infrastructure. He's comfortable with the Chinese, just as his boss Yameen was. There are unpleasant allegations of the slowness of Indian projects. For instance, the Indian-funded Greater Male connectivity project for a 6.74-km-long bridge and causeway link to connect Male with the adjoining islands of Villingli, Gulhifalhu and Thilafushi, was assessed by the present government as being only 29 per cent complete in November last

year as against the required 81 per cent. But look closer.

At least a part of that delay was not only due to the pandemic, but also to land not being transferred for the project. China doesn't seem to face that problem. Its Sinamalé bridge was built in a reported 33 months.

Lesson 1: China works its way into the bureaucracy of a country it befriends.

Call it corruption or not, it's a reality. Anyway, there is no indication at all that Muizzu will stop Indian projects (as he clearly said) which come with grants (e.g. \$100 million for the Greater Male project) and soft loans, unlike the expensive loans that China provides (almost all \$1.2 billion of it). So, no, Indian development projects will still be welcomed. But quietly.

SECURITY ANGLE

What he is doing, however, is targeting security. It's not just the small group of 77 military personnel, stationed there to keep two helicopters and a Dornier in service, mainly for casualty evacuation in the 1,000 islands that make up Maldives. His administration has not sent representations to the recent Colombo Security Conclave (CSC), a meeting of national security advisors and senior security. The CSC grew out of bilateral bi-annual Maldives-India Coast Guard exercises starting in 1995. It became a trilateral after Sri Lanka joined in 2011. In 2021, it was formalised as CSC,

based out of Colombo, with Mauritius joining as a member-state and Seychelles and Bangladesh as Observers.

It is unclear whether Maldives skipped the sixth meeting of the CSC due to a new government taking over just about two weeks earlier. But it still sent Vice President Latheef to China for the China-Indian Ocean Region Forum organised almost simultaneously in December 2023. Even worse, a significant plank of the CSC has also been set aside. Male has chosen not to renew the hydrography agreement, which permitted India to survey its territorial waters, mapping underwater surfaces and studying reefs, lagoons, and coastlines. Its officials indicated that this was part of its overview of some 100 agreements, that "put the country's sovereignty in danger". That is strange because that data is shared with the host country for its own benefit. Meanwhile, India has provided the two Dhruv helicopters (supplied in 2013 and 2019) and a Dornier in 2020, and more recently a Fast Patrol boat, and a landing craft assault ship this year, in total there isn't a lot of equipment. More potent is the setting up of a Composite Training Centre, a military hospital, and 10 coastal radar systems that feed into the International Fusion Centre.

If Male decides to remove that, it would strongly harm not just India, but the information bank that is at the heart of India's 'Indo-Pacific' vision together with its

other partner. But the truth is, as a sovereign nation, it has every right to do so. Lesson 2: Dependencies are on both sides.

THE BEIJING TRIP

Which brings the whole to the Beijing visit. Unsurprisingly, the media in India picked up President Muizzu's call for more Chinese tourists to visit his country, which he would have done anyway, given that tourism is the single major source of income. While the economy is projected to grow at a hefty growth of 6.5 per cent, it is also heavily in debt. Total public debt rose to \$7.0 billion (113.5 per cent of GDP) at the end of 2022, as against \$5.9 billion in the previous year. Muizzu is also facing an internal crisis as former President Yameen, who wants to control issues from the sidelines, is taking potshots at him.

Muizzu, who is on a five-day state visit to China, met President Xi Jinping on January 10 and signed 20 'key' agreements, including one on tourism cooperation. On Thursday, he met Chinese Premier Li Qiang and discussed ways to increase the number of tourists from China to his tourism-dependent country. His first day was devoted to meeting businessmen and encouraging investment with a visit to Fuzhou, the gateway to the Maritime Silk Road.

Maldives joined the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2017, but had backed off on major projects under former President Solih. China's ability to greatly increase its investments is in some doubt

as its economy is under considerable stress; that will also apply to tourist arrivals. So far, the largest segments were from India and Russia (upwards of 2 lakh each) and China's lower at about 1.8 lakh, according to the Maldives tourism ministry.

That's a nice leverage to get what you really want, which is not sunbathing on the beach. That's lesson three.

THE AID MAP IS CHANGING

As the Global Times waspishly blamed India for playing a 'regional boss', there are other players who matter to the Maldives. The US sent a resident Ambassador only recently, and the visits of USAID officials and senior officials of the National Security Council dealing with climate change — a key issue for the Maldives — signifies that Washington is engaged, committing another \$7.2 million in aid to a total of some \$36 million. Australia's budgeted a mere \$2.8 million, and Japan's overseas aid is reducing.

In this light is Muizzu's search for new friends like Turkey who has committed to increasing defence ties with Male and the UAE who has provided budget support (\$50 million) and recently \$80 million for a much delayed airport project. None of these are anti-India, though Turkey has its issues on Kashmir. It is also in line with the President's commitment to diversify not from just India, but also China, in line with his 'Maldives first' campaign. Given that China Development Bank, Industrial and Commercial Bank of China and Export-Import Bank of China hold more than 60 per cent of the Maldives' sovereign debt, Muizzu's desire to seek other sources is logical.

Our Indo-Pacific diplomacy needs to also factor in that the Ukraine and Gaza wars have changed that aid map. Lesson four.

A rather deliberate story is now around suggesting that the President's office had already asked India for a visit in December 2023. That seems like damage control. Male knows well that while an 'India Out' campaign may gain some votes — though it did not seem to elicit any nationalistic fervour — it can hardly move away from its nearest neighbour from where it gets all its daily necessities. Besides, Solih's party still has a majority in Parliament, thus limiting any drastic moves in foreign policy.

Lord Ram is the Essence of Bharat. Congress Boycott of Pran Pratishtha Places it on Wrong Side of Our Civilisational History

By: **Rahul Shivshankar**

The Congress party has decided to boycott the much-vaunted Pran Pratishtha ceremony on January 22. The Ram Janmabhoomi Teerth Kshetra Trust had invited Congress supremo Sonia Gandhi, party President Mallikarjun Kharge and Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury, the party's leader in the Lok Sabha some weeks ago. After long deliberations, the party has declined the invitation.

Of the several reasons cited by the Congress, two stand out.

First, the Congress believes the Pran Pratishtha is a "BJP-RSS event" while "religion is a personal matter" and Lord Ram is "revered by millions" in the party. Second, the Congress objects to the BJP turning the Ram Mandir into a "political project".

The first charge is the easiest to debunk.

The event is not a "BJP-RSS event". The Ram Janmabhoomi Teerth Kshetra Trust is organising the Pran Pratishtha event. This trust was set up by the Modi government on orders of the Supreme Court. The construction of the Ram Mandir that has been



undertaken by the trust relies on donations from Hindus, not public funds. It is the trust that is sending out the invites for the January 22 event and not the BJP-RSS as being alleged by the Congress party. It makes no sense for the Congress to reject an invitation from a trust set up on the apex court's orders. Unless of course, it has little faith in the wisdom and impartiality of the topmost court in the land. And if this is the case, will the Congress also snub an invite from the Indo-Islamic Cultural Foundation Trust to inaugurate

the mosque which it has been tasked to build in Ayodhya by the Supreme Court?

Remember, the apex court has granted five acres of land to the Muslim community to build a mosque. The SC felt that it needed to compensate the Muslim community for the demolition of the Babri Masjid.

Moreover, the Congress has claimed that the party reveres Ram who lives within the hearts of millions of its workers. But by rejecting the invitation to attend the Pran Pratishtha, the Congress runs the risk of contradicting

itself. It may be recalled that in a 2007 affidavit before the Supreme Court, the UPA stated that there is "no historical proof of Lord Ram or any events in Ramayana". Why would a party that reveres the quintessence of Bharat has submitted an affidavit questioning his existence? Even some of the subcontinent's Muslim icons have never gone as far as doubting Ram's existence. For the poet laureate Iqbal, Ram was "Nizam-e-Hind" and others like Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai, even eulogised Hinglaj, a cave in Balochistan, where Lord Ram meditated. The Guru Granth Sahib has more than five hundred reverential mentions of Lord Ram. None of these holies or worthies have ever questioned Ram's existence, perhaps aware that doing so would be considered an act of contempt by most Hindus.

So, then why did the Congress go so far as to hurt Hindu sentiments when it was in power at the Centre? Perhaps, the Congress party's dismissal of Lord Ram is a direct consequence of the trouble it is having in shedding the ideological baggage of the past.

Remember, in 1949, then Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru had asked then United Provinces (the name Uttar Pradesh was referred to by them) Chief Minister Govind Ballabh Pant to remove the idol of Ram Lalla from Ram Janmabhoomi. This idol was mysteriously placed there on the intervening night of Dec 22-23, 1949.

Court records suggest that Nehru was deeply upset with this happenstance. The then DM of Ayodhya, KKK Nayar, who refused to comply with the orders was even shown the door. The hounding of Nayar and Nehru's antipathy towards the placing of the idols is always talked of as an example of the Congress party's disregard for not just Lord Ram but the sentiments of his bhakts. The Congress must urgently reconsider its stand on boycotting the Pran Pratishtha of Bharat's Maryada Purush. And if it needs some inspiration, it can look to another guiding light from its past, Mahatma Gandhi — one of India's greatest sons — who exhaled the essence of Ram as life drained from his body.

Smriti Irani's visit to Madinah dispels both extremes—Islamists and Hindu nationalists

By **AMANA BEGAM**

Minority affairs minister Smriti Irani's visit to Saudi Arabia with minister of state for external and parliamentary affairs V Muraleedharan is groundbreaking in several ways. For one, they visited Madinah, which not only marks a pivotal moment in the diplomatic ties between India and Saudi Arabia but also resonates with a myriad of crucial messages. As an Indian Muslim woman relishing the liberty to choose my attire, whether it's burqa or jeans, witnessing Irani in Madinah in her cultural attire was profoundly uplifting. It echoed a meaningful celebration of personal choice. Beyond Madinah, her visit extended to the sacred sites of Uhud Mountain and the periphery of Quba Mosque, significant in Islamic history. This pilgrimage, accompanied by the minister's presence in her chosen attire, resonates with the transformative winds blowing across Saudi Arabia. Crown Prince Mohammed bin

Salman Al Saud's heroic decisions, going beyond the realms of entertainment, include the lifting of mandatory burqa and granting women the liberty to fashion their

of religion. A crucial takeaway from Irani's visit resonates deeply with me—the dispelling of extremes from both sides of the spectrum. On the one



attire in accordance with their preferences. The decision allowing women to drive serves as a powerful stride toward gender equality, redefining societal norms. The embrace of co-educational classrooms signifies a departure from austere traditions, emphasising the ever-evolving interpretation shaping the practice

hand, we witness the discontent among Islamists and traditionalists who vehemently oppose the minister's visit, deeming it incompatible with their interpretation of Islam. They direct their ire at the Crown Prince, claiming the visit deviates from their understanding of the faith. Simultaneously, some Hindu

nationalists persistently argue that Islam and its followers cannot peacefully coexist with other faiths. This stems from the belief that Islam's teachings inherently reject the idea of harmonious coexistence. However, this visit challenges these notions.

The significance of it The fact that Irani chose to wear attire representing Hindu culture—such as the bindi and sari—during her visit to Madinah sends a powerful message. It demonstrates a willingness to foster an atmosphere of mutual respect for diverse faiths. Intellectual arguments asserting that Islam cannot coexist peacefully with other faiths are contradicted by this visit, especially given the sacred significance of Madinah to Muslims worldwide. There are valuable lessons for Indian Muslims here. While many ordinary Indian Muslims already lead lives characterised by shared coexistence, the trend towards

radicalisation or an inclination to adopt a more stringent form of Islam, surpassing even Arab Muslims, can generate a sense of repulsion towards people of other faiths. This moment serves as a cue to reconsider such divisive attitudes. Another profoundly significant and uplifting aspect that emerges for me, particularly as an Indian Pasmanda Muslim, is the augmentation of the Haj quota for Indian Muslims. A pivotal outcome of minister Irani's diplomatic mission was the formalisation of the Bilateral Haj Agreement 2024 between India and Saudi Arabia. This crucial agreement delineated an increased total quota of 1,75,025 pilgrims from India for the Haj pilgrimage in 2024. Within this allocation, 1,40,020 seats were specifically earmarked for pilgrims under the auspices of the Haj Committee of India, while an additional 35,005 pilgrims were granted permission to proceed through Haj Group Operators.

Elections in Pakistan resemble thriller films with non-stop twists. No party wants to campaign

Each political party in Pakistan is busy dealing with internal politics and managing its critical relationship with the saas, who was never, ever the bahu.



Elections in Pakistan have become a thriller film, where the clichéd twists just never stop, and those watching do not know whether to be scared or to laugh at the predictability. On Sunday, barely had the palpitations over the Senate resolution asking for a delay in elections subsided when news arrived of yet another press conference. This time around, no one turned up to denounce May 9 and/or announce retirement from politics (or shake hands with leaders of the Istehkam-i-Pakistan Party). Instead, it was Ijazul Haq, who recently had his papers rejected and then accepted, announcing yet another save-the-nation front. Haq — who can be described as,

at best, a less-entertaining version of Sheikh Rashid (before the latter discovered the magic of chillas and found inner peace and outer silence) — appeared out of the blue to announce that no one (among his ilk) cared for the people and how he and his companions were now going to be their saviours.

He was flanked by (surprise, surprise) Usman Buzdar, the man for whom the powers that be had had their hearts broken by Imran Khan. There was also Amin Aslam, but he did not really cause any hearts to flutter, either earlier or with his Sunday appearance. The PTI now has as many breakaway factions as there are sequels to Mission Impossible. One can only guess why this latest faction or group has come to the fore, even though it was packaged as a group of independents.

And while Haq may have convinced



some about his concern for the hapless people of Pakistan, one can only assume this new alliance had also been dreamt up around the same conference table where the brainstorming for the IPP and PTI-Parliamentarians took place. For why else would Buzzy come out of his self-isolation? This was his 'press conference', for sure.

The only party which should be worrying about this new political contraption is the PML-N, as it means another lot of Punjabi politicians with some backing are going to be aspiring to win some seats from the province. The sweeping majority the PML-N could have counted on in the absence of the PTI seems to be at risk from these new claimants.

But then, these real-world events would only be worrying the party if it emerged from the conference room it entered some moons ago to decide party tickets.

party's candidate for prime minister. He must have reassured his father that he will continue to be diplomatic once he is made PM for this decision to have been made. That the son is no longer speaking so loudly about a level playing field may also indicate he has been schooled appropriately.

PTI can barely be bothered about the appearance of Buzzy and Amin Aslam. It doesn't just have its hands full with court cases, but also with new and newer members as the older ones depart quick and fast. It is hard to tell who is running the party and who is just an enthusiastic, newly appointed member.

Is the mild-mannered Clark Kent, aka Barrister Gohar, the man of the moment, or is it Sher Afzal Marwat, who seems to be the product of the DNA of Amitabh Bachchan and Charles Bronson combined? If TikTok were the political stage, there would be no question about who is in charge. Politics is now the name we give to slo-mo videos of lawyers walking to and fro.

Last but not least comes the Maulana, who says he doesn't know who is targeting him or causing unrest in KP, but he wants elections delayed. Who is targeting him? He doesn't know. How long does he want elections delayed? He doesn't know.

But he does know that he could move around in 2008 and 2013, and hence 2024 is just worse because he now can't, he argued in a recent interview. And so worried is he that he is now willing to support a Senate resolution passed by a dozen men from BAP. Like them, perhaps, he has also received an offer he can't refuse.

But what is more worrying are accounts that some in the government have advised him to go sort out his problems with the government in Kabul; a tacit admission that the state can no longer ensure his safety and he should figure it out himself. Once all of this is put together, it doesn't just resemble a Ramsay brothers' horror film, but a conclusion that there is hardly any party out there worried about campaigning just a month before the election. Each one of them is busy dealing with internal politics and managing their critical relationship with the saas (who was never, ever the bahu). And if there is any politics taking place, it is via television interviews, Senate resolutions and court cases. It's a right horror show, and we are not just the audience but the unsuspecting cheerleader about to be chased through the woods.

It is hard to tell when its Rip Van Winkle-like leaders will wake up, open the doors and step out into the fog of elections. Campaigning seems to be far from the party's mind. Interestingly, it is Shehbaz and Hamza (hardly the party's crowd pullers) who are addressing election campaign events, lending credence to rumours that the powers that be are concerned about the PML-N's absence from the ground. Whether this lack of action is Nawaz's plan of action is hard to say. After all, he has always kept his cards close to his chest.

The PPP is quite active in comparison, but its activity is being led by Bilawal, who just recently was locked in a teeny, tiny confrontation with his father for being a bit too critical of the choosers and shakers.

Those days seem to have passed, because he has now been anointed the

Netanyahu's judicial review agenda has failed in Israel.

And Hamas isn't easy to defeat



In a historic decision, the Israeli Supreme Court asserted that it will continue to have the right of judicial review over government laws, legislative bills, and ministerial decisions.

By KHINVRAJ JANGID

In the middle of the war, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his government faced significant defeat in the Supreme Court of Israel when the latter overruled the highly disputed reasonableness limitation law on 1 January. It was a historic decision and unprecedented intervention by the Israeli judiciary to assert that it will continue to have the right of judicial review over government laws, legislative bills, and ministerial decisions. Netanyahu's government, particularly Minister of Justice Yariv Levin, brought a bill against the judicial review system (called the reasonableness clause in the Israeli polity), which barred all courts of Israel from reviewing any law passed in parliament as well as all ministerial decisions of the government in July 2023. The opposition and the popular protest movement in Israel deeply contested the reasonableness limitation law since it would have effectively ended all checks and balances, granting complete powers to the executive and legislature. Simply put, the Israeli government did not want to be under legal scrutiny. The simple majority in parliament could decide on any matter, and the courts could not overrule it. This law was part of the larger judicial reform agenda that the government of Netanyahu intended to bring into force from 4 January. A nationwide protest

Netanyahu's divisive ideas of judicial reform — which included having a say in the appointment of judges, challenging the appointment and legal counsel of the Attorney General, granting legal immunity to the Prime Minister, and narrowing the judicial review system — caused strong opposition among most people in Israel. The year-long protest marches and weekly demonstrations took place throughout Israel in 2023. Such was the intensity and spread of the protest that the country went through a national strike, shutting down



its only international airport near Tel Aviv on 27 March.

Netanyahu had to suspend the overall judicial reform due to the national strike and widespread mass protests. Yet, one law to curtail the court's powers was enacted on 24 July. Israel came to a standstill during that time; thousands of people marched from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem and camped overnight in front of parliament; hundreds of high-ranking security heads, lawyers, doctors, soldiers, bureaucrats, businesspersons, and intellectuals stood against the idea of limiting the Supreme Court's powers. Israel was facing a civil war-type of situation; however, the government managed to pass the law.

The protest movement took the matters to court even when the government passed the law as Basic Law — structural law akin to a constitutional amendment that the Israeli judiciary never overruled in the past. There was a historic hearing, with the full bench of 15 judges convening to decide whether the courts could have

the power to overrule a Basic Law passed by parliament without precedent.

On 1 January, the court ruled that it does have the power of judicial review of basic laws and it can also intervene in exceptional and extreme cases like this one where the government intends to alter the checks and balances of the system. Out of 15 judges, 12 supported overruling the law, which will have far-reaching consequences. A celebration gone quiet. Moreover, the Supreme Court of Israel decided that the law passed on 24 July stands cancelled as it violates the core characteristics of the State of Israel as a democratic state, particularly the principles of separation of powers and the rule of law. The reasonableness clause is a mechanism that holds equality and a sense of justice for all in the context of Israel's fragile, unwritten constitutional realities. Only eight out of 15 judges agreed with this decision, but this was a good enough majority to quash the bill. Netanyahu's government almost sacrificed stability and peace for months.

For the year-long democratic protest movement, the court's verdict was revolutionary and worthy of celebrations on 1 January. Sadly, the 7 October Hamas attack and the ongoing war in Gaza have altered the immediate concerns and priorities of all Israelis. Hence, the victors embraced their success in silence with dignity. The people's movement and the court's endorsement of the protesters have renewed Israeli society's desire for greater collective responsibility, awareness about institutional strengths, and democratic participation of all.

Netanyahu had to maintain silence while watching the whole agenda of his government wither away. At the moment, he is in a greater fix as it is increasingly difficult for Israel to claim any victory against Hamas or find a way to rescue more than 120 captives in Gaza. The State of Israel, under Netanyahu's watch, has been through one of its most difficult moments internally as well as externally.

Rama as a descendent of Adam? Inside Indonesia's Muslim Ramayanas

By ANIRUDH KANISSETTI

The story of Rama stands out as one of medieval Asia's best-known, adapted and spun by rulers and poets from Central Asia, throughout the Indian subcontinent, and into the endless archipelago of Southeast Asia. Wherever it went, it was enriched by new cultures, new languages. In the islands of present-day Indonesia, the Rama legend evolved into its most creative and striking versions, developed by Sufi preachers and devout Muslims, both at royal courts and in lively popular theatre.

The Ramayana in the vernacular on the island of Java in the 9th or 10th century, an unknown poet completed his masterpiece: the Ramayana Kakawin. He lived in a world that had been 'globalised' for many centuries. The courts of Java were intimately connected to

those of Bengal, and merchants and monks from as far as present-day Gujarat and Sri Lanka lived on the island. This poet was well



aware of Sanskrit texts circulating in the Indian Ocean world, including the Bhattikavya, a retelling of the Ramayana in polished contemporary Sanskrit, making full use of the language's grammatical features.

As his medieval Indian contemporaries did, this poet

used the Ramayana for his own political and cultural purposes. Rather than Sanskrit, he wrote in Old Javanese, a significant

departure from the intellectual culture of his time.

As historian Malini Saran and diplomat Vinod Khanna write in *The Ramayana in Indonesia*, the poet followed the Bhattikavya for the first portion of his narrative but made significant developments in characterisation, emotional

depth, and dialogue. He also grounded it securely in Javanese cultural ideas, summarised by Saran in her paper 'The Ramayana in Indonesia: alternate tellings'. In the 9th century, the placenta was believed to have magical powers; as such, the bow won at Sita's wedding is a magical reincarnation of her birthplacenta. Trijata, the daughter of Vibhishana, is a major character in the Kakawin. She serves as Sita's loyal companion—so loyal that she does not hesitate to chastise Rama when he questions his wife's loyalty. In Valmiki's Ramayana, Rama has little to say to Vibhishana when he grants him the throne of Lanka. The Kakawin, however, Rama delivers a powerful discourse on kingship, which would be quoted and repeated in Java for centuries after. The body of the king,

declares Rama, contains eight deities, each representing a virtue which he must follow: generosity, like Indra's rains; punishing the wicked, like Yama; delighting the good, like the glow of the moon. This was a powerful snapshot of how Javanese litterateurs imagined kingship in the 9th century. But it was only one among many circulating strands of the Rama legend, which wandering medieval bards and singers also took to with relish. Their embellishments have not survived from this early time. It would be a few more centuries before they were compiled, in a very different politico-religious culture. Muslim Ramayanas West Asian traders and sailors were active in Java even before the birth of Muhammad in the 7th century, but Islam only arrived there many centuries later, in the 13th century.

A snowless Gulmarg rings alarm bells for us Kashmiris. We can only sing 'let it snow'

We experience 'Chillai Kalan' with the knowledge that spring will be sweet. But with no snow, I don't know what it would feel like.

By ZENAIRA BAKHSH

Kangris filled with hot coal under the pheran, steaming cups of pink salty noon-chai with Kashmiri bread, snow fights and power cuts. In Kashmir, snowfall is a celebration of winter. But this year, alarm bells are ringing—it hasn't snowed anywhere in the valley. Gulmarg, Kashmir's most prized winter destination that is known all over the world for its steep skiing slopes, now only sports mushy patches of brown sludge—remnants of last year's snow. The images are being widely shared on X, Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp with warnings of doom and gloom. Compared to last year's photos, where the snow was five-six feet deep, Gulmarg now looks like a post-apocalyptic nightmare brought on by climate change. I visited Gulmarg last year to sledge and simply enjoy the snow. It's part of the Chillai Kalan experience (Kashmiris call the harshest 40-day period of winter beginning December 21 Chillai Kalan). It can be brutal. Water freezes in the pipes and cold cuts through bones. But we revel in it. It's part of being Kashmiri.



Snow has abandoned us this winter, but there's a sliver of hope. The Indian Meteorological Department (IMD) has announced that Gulmarg is likely to get snowfall on or after 15 January. Meanwhile, other higher reaches such as Gurez, which used to remain closed from October till the next summer on account of harsh winter, remain open. The entire Himalayan belt has received below-average snowfall this season, with even Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand experiencing a snowless winter.

The El Nino effect

This severe lack of snow has serious implications for residents who worry about a harsher

summer ahead without much water. The snow that accumulates in Kashmir over the winter melts into a steady flow of water over the summer, which is even used to generate electricity.

According to India Today, "Kashmir has witnessed a staggering 79 per cent rainfall deficit throughout December and the much-anticipated snowfall is yet to happen."

Weather experts have warned that this reduction in snowfall might lead to water scarcity that can, in turn, cause a food crisis in Kashmir. Mukhtar Ahmad, Director of IMD, Kashmir, told ANI that no major snowfall spell is in sight due to global weather

vagaries. "El Nino has persisted since November and may continue till next month," he said. Climate experts suggest that the El Nino effect, which warms Pacific Ocean waters and disrupts global weather patterns, is the culprit. The warming causes a shift in atmospheric circulation, resulting in reduced rainfalls over Indonesia, India, and northern Australia and enhanced rainfall and tropical cyclone formation over the Pacific Ocean.

"The Indian subcontinent currently lacks a strong western disturbance that brings moisture from the Arabian Sea and causes snowfall in the mountains. It turns feeble while approaching the subcontinent. El Nino is a very significant factor behind this phenomenon," IMD scientist Soma Sen Roy told India Today. No sign of spring. If winter is a desert under the cover of snow, spring heralds new life. As the snow melts, fresh grass starts growing, rivers are renewed with fresh water. Everything is cleaner—it is a privilege to be a part of this, and we experience Chillai

Kalan with the knowledge that spring will be sweet.

But with no snow, I don't know what spring in Kashmir would feel like. Perhaps we should have seen this coming. After all, persistent dry spells have brought Gulmarg to this stage today.

The lack of snow is a major disappointment for winter sports enthusiasts, too, who visit the valley to ski, snowboard and experience the joy of winter sports. This could be a massive blow to the valley's tourism industry.

The government has, in recent years, intensified 'winter festivals' that cater to non-local tourists rather than the local populace. But this year, people fear that the absence of snow will leave Gulmarg desolate.

If this situation persists, the Khelo India Winter Games, scheduled for 2 February and featuring about 400 athletes from various states, Union territories, and even the Indian Army, could also be adversely impacted. The competition will take place at Kongdoori and the main bowl of Gulmarg.

Elise Stefanik wants to be Trump's running mate. That's unfortunate

By Margaret Sullivan

Elise Stefanik is having a moment. If she were a song on the Billboard chart, she'd have a bullet next to her name to show the speed of her trajectory.

In recent weeks, the New York congresswoman has claimed credit for the demise of two major university presidents (those at Harvard and the University of Pennsylvania), after she led the bullying about campus antisemitism during a congressional hearing.

"Two down," she gloated on X, formerly Twitter, after Harvard's Claudine Gay stepped down.

Last weekend, Stefanik had a star turn on NBC's Meet the Press, in which she provided one of those quotes that goes 'round the world for its sheer outrageousness. She echoed Donald Trump's sympathetic characterization of those who are being prosecuted for storming the US Capitol, in some cases assaulting police officers. "I have concerns about the treatment of the January 6 hostages," she told Kristen Welker.

And when asked whether she'd like to be Donald Trump's running



mate – and potentially the next vice-president of the United States – Stefanik didn't exactly turn away in disgust.

"I've said for a year now I'd be honored to serve in the next Trump administration," was her less-than-coy response.

The conservative Washington Examiner found all of this a winning formula.

"Elise Stefanik is running for VP and she's winning," read its recent headline. The writer enthused: "She was poised, confident and well-prepared. Most importantly, she didn't give an inch when defending Trump on any issue."

And that quality is what really wins points with the former president,

as with every mob boss: vociferous, unquestioning loyalty. Being willing to do what's necessary.

Compare Stefanik's situation to that of former Republican congresswoman: Liz Cheney of Wyoming – not long ago a leading figure in the House of Representatives. In fact, she was the chairwoman of the House Republican Conference, succeeded by none other than Stefanik. Defeated in her 2022 primary by a Trump-endorsed candidate, Cheney has left politics for now, though she hasn't ruled out a third-party bid for president this year.

For the past few years, Cheney

has made it her business to try to hold Trump accountable. As the vice-chair of the House January 6 committee, she told the hard truths about how he tried to overturn the 2020 presidential election and encouraged the Capitol insurrection. In doing so, she alienated most of her party – and earned the eternal hatred of its de facto leader.

Whatever one may think of her staunchly conservative positions on important issues, including abortion rights (she celebrated the US supreme court's decision to overturn Roe v Wade), it's hard not to respect Cheney when it comes to Trump. She's been brave, dignified and relentless in standing up for American democracy and for the foundational idea of governmental checks and balances.

Most recently, Cheney has been clear in public statements that she thinks the former president – whom she says she voted for twice – should be barred from the ballot in November.

"There's no question in my mind that his action clearly constituted an offense that is within the language of the 14th amendment,"

she said at a recent event at Dartmouth College. No surprise that Cheney's words and actions have earned Trump's ire, and brought out the nastiness that's never far from the surface.

"I mean, Liz Cheney's a sick person," Trump has said, calling her and former Illinois congressman Adam Kinzinger "far worse than any Democrat that ever lived". A Trump spokesman told the New York Times she is "a loser", interested only in promoting her book, which he said "should be repurposed as toilet paper".

Yes, it sure is a classy gang that Stefanik hopes to help lead. Is she up to the task?

It looks that way. "Can anyone name a more noxious politician?" asked Columbia University journalism professor Bill Grueskin, after Stefanik's all-caps "two down" tweet about the college presidents.

There are a couple of contenders for the title, but she may have it nailed.

That Stefanik is a rising star – and Liz Cheney a pariah – says it all about Republican politics today.

In Row With Maldives, Lessons For India

By Bharti Mishra Nath

The India-Maldives relationship has dived after three junior Maldivian ministers made derogatory remarks against Prime Minister Narendra Modi following his recent visit to the Lakshadweep islands.

PM Modi explored Lakshadweep's pristine beaches and posted the images on social media, raising massive interest in Lakshadweep among travel enthusiasts. Stung by the response to PM Modi's posts, the Maldivian ministers mocked them and said India could never compete with Maldives.

Furious Indians are cancelling trips to Maldives amid an escalating diplomatic row. Comments on social media indicate that many Indians have shelved their Maldives holiday plans after the anti-Modi rant. Lakshadweep has become a talking point globally since PM Modi's visit and posts. There is a steep surge in worldwide search interest in the archipelago, travel companies claim.

Focus on Lakshadweep

One of the world's most spectacular tropical island systems, Lakshadweep is around 220-440 km off the Kerala coast and spans 36 islands spread over an area of 32 square km. The islands are distinctive because of coral reefs and a rich marine wealth and ecology. The Lakshadweep islands are linked to mainland India by ship, helicopter and a lone Allianz Airlines flight from Kerala's Kochi. More flights will start operating to Lakshadweep as the demand increases. The route is covered under the Regional Connective Scheme – Ude Desh Ka Aam Naagrik (RCS-UDAN) – for underserved routes.

The visuals shared by PM Modi highlight the island's



beauty and breathtaking underwater sights. Like an ace tourist ambassador, PM Modi is seen walking on a white beach and diving or snorkelling in pictures.

"PM Modi's one-day stay in Lakshadweep has put the place on India's tourism map. That's what every citizen of Lakshadweep has wanted for a long time. If tourism develops, it will create employment for locals. Infrastructure needs to be developed. There are no private hotels. One hotel is almost 95 per cent ready," Mohammad Faizal, Lakshadweep MP, says.

"The demand for tourism is directly proportional to air connectivity. If the infrastructure is built, Lakshadweep can be developed as a wedding destination," Mr Faizal adds. Develop and boost to India's tourism economy The Indian coastline is one of the longest in the world, adding up to 7,516 km including the mainland, the islands of Andaman and Nicobar, and Lakshadweep. This vast coastline is dotted with beach destinations both popular and unknown. Popular destinations like Goa, Kerala, and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands

come to mind when we think about coastal locations in India. It is time to discover and develop the potential of undisclosed and unknown treasures of India's coastline. Describing the hidden potential of domestic tourism, Rajiv Mehra, president, Indian Association of Tour Operators, says, "Beach tourism exists in Goa, Kerala, Andaman in our country but it can be improved at other places on the Indian coastline, along Bengal, Odisha, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka, by improvising and building hotels, developing air connectivity and water sports."

Flights within India are not cheap. Last summer, a round trip from Mumbai to Srinagar in mid-June cost upwards of ₹ 26,000, when flights to the Maldives and Dubai were relatively economical at ₹ 18,000 and ₹ 22,000. Anxious about the high domestic air ticket prices, tour operators have often requested the government to step in and cap domestic travel fare. Similarly, hotels across destinations have hiked tariffs by 15 to 20 per cent in the past year. This has driven many Indian tourists to destinations that are closer, like Thailand, Dubai and Maldives.

Maldives was considered an expensive destination by Indians earlier. During the pandemic and after it, when Maldives' tourism was badly hit, the country opened up its mid-market hotels and resorts to Indians at low rates. Bollywood influencers and stars were offered junkets to the Maldives on the condition that they would post photos. That did wonders for the tourism there. Comparing Lakshadweep with the Maldives, Mr Mehra says, "Lakshadweep has poor infrastructure and connectivity. A lot needs to be developed there to match Maldives."



Ayodhya: Lessons for Bharat from the Land of Lord Ram

By: **Akhileshwar Sahay**

India is precisely 12 days away from the Pran Pratishtha (consecration) ceremony of Lord Ram in his new abode at Ayodhya. And the whole nation is already agog to the tune of 'Ram Dhun' and 'Ram Aayenge, Aayenge, Aayenge'. Indubitably, on January 22, all trains, buses, cars, and planes will lead to Ayodhya and those left out will be glued to the TV sets either in their living rooms or community places. It will include me, a devout Ram bhakt. There has been no moment as big as this in my 65 years of life.

Nonetheless, this piece is not about the temple. That story is done and dusted, and the celebration has already begun. It is time for all Indians, irrespective of their faith, to join the once-in-

centuries occasion. The central theme of this piece is about a very special, consequential great awakening moment of India. I will return to it a bit later. Before that, a caveat.

SEcularly SECULAR

The caveat is, I am a devout Ram bhakt as well as secularly secular. And there is no contradiction here. An event in my professional life settles this. In the early 1990s, in the aftermath of the Harshad Mehta Securities Scam, when the arduous task to raise Rs 3400 crore to complete India's signature Konkan Railway project fell on my tiny shoulders, for four long years, every day before hitting streets of India's financial capital — Nariman Point and Cuffe Parade in Bombay (now Mumbai) — to

beg and borrow (but not steal) Rs 5 crore daily (a lot then), I first paid obeisance to Mount Mary Church, Siddhivinayak Temple, Prabha Devi and Dargah of Pir Haji Ali Shah.

On a day when money eluded me, I would silently pray near Zoroastrian Heritage, the Bhikha Behram Well, Churchgate. And if money did not come for a week, I would take a bus to Shirdi Dham. I never returned empty-handed. And the Konkan Railway work never got stalled for the lack of money.

LESSONS THAT AYODHYA GIVES

I wrote ab initio, this piece is not about the temple. It is about the newfound confidence of Bharat, it is about a different lesson that Ayodhya gives, that must be celebrated across the nation from Kashmir to Kanyakumari. The central lesson is — the Ayodhya way. It is about a new ethos of infrastructure creation, a speed of execution not experienced in the country before, the one which should be the new mantra to make India a developed nation by 2047.

1535 DAYS

When on November 9, 2019, a five-judge bench of the Supreme Court of India comprising then Chief Justice Ranjan Gogoi and Justices SA Bobde, DY Chandrachud, Ashok Bhushan and Justice S. Abdul Nazeer pronounced the landmark judgement on Ayodhya to build a temple at Ram Janmbhoomi along with a mosque on a separate five-acre land, they decided on another first. It was a rare anonymous judgement of the apex court which decided not to have an author ascribed to the judgement. That day was 1535 days away from January 22,

2024. And neither yours truly nor possibly any Indian would have believed that in a mere 1535 days from the judgement day and 1265 days from the Bhumi Pujan day, despite the curse of Covid-19, there would be the consecration of Lord Ram in his new abode. And in parallel, the design of a grand mosque to be built on 40,000 square feet is getting ready, where 2,000 people would offer Namaz at a time, to be constructed by the Indo-Islamic Cultural Foundation Trust, at Ayodhya's Dhannipur.

UNIQUE FUNDING

The biggest lesson from Ayodhya is the unique financing of the temple's construction. Though the exact amount collected differs, it is somewhere in the range of Rs 3000-5000 crore, uniquely 'atmanirbhar', being constructed without any recourse to the exchequer. Construction of the mosque which is facing a funds crunch apart from design delay issues too must be financed in the same way as a national endeavour. The above financing model also provides a new pathway for the creation of nationally important infrastructure projects.

THE AYODHYA WAY

As one can see, the central message of Ayodhya is 24 hours a day, 7 days a week creation par excellence. It indeed is the central message for the creation of all infrastructure in India — the 'Ayodhya' way. On December 30, Prime Minister Modi dedicated (and laid the foundation stone of) infrastructure projects worth more than Rs 11,500 crore. Ayodhya, once the full temple (G+2) is completed in December 2024, is expected to bring three lakh domestic and international tourists per day.

Such is going to be the impact of enormous religious and spiritual tourism that Lord Ram brings in his train at Ayodhya.

660 DAYS MARVEL

Among the critical infrastructure projects dedicated to the nation by PM Modi on December 30 is a world-class brand-new Maharishi Valmiki International Airport, with a 2250-metre-long and 45-metre-wide runway, with the airport being constructed across an 821-acre area.

Phase I has been operationalised in less than 660 days from the date of the commencement of the construction in February 2022 and its 2250-metre-long runway will be able to handle bigger aircraft like Boeing 737, Airbus 319, and Airbus 320 in addition to smaller aircraft. In the second phase, the airport's terminal building will be spread over 5 lakh square feet. Its runway will be increased from 2,200 metres to 3700 metres. This will help all international flights land directly in Ayodhya, including Boeing 787 and Boeing 777.

AYODHYA DHAM IS A DREAM COME TRUE

The second infrastructure project inaugurated by PM Modi is the airport-style modern Ayodhya Dham Junction Railway Station, which has the largest concourse (set up on the first floor and spans 7200 square metres) in the country and a central dome inspired by Lord Ram's crown. The new station building has a footprint of 140mx32.6m. An additional front porch of 140mx12m is also provided over the drop-off zone to protect the passengers from adverse weather conditions. It has separate entry and exit facilities for the passengers and is within walking distance from the temple complex.



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Majority of debtors to US hospitals now people with health insurance

People with health insurance may now represent the majority of debtors American hospitals struggle to collect from, according to medical billing analysts. This marks a sea change from just a few years ago, when people with health insurance represented only about one in 10 bills hospitals considered "bad debt", analysts said. "We always used to consider bad debt, especially bad debt write-offs from a hospital perspective, those [patients] that have the ability to pay but don't," said Colleen Hall, senior vice-president for Kodiak Solutions, a billing, accounting and consulting firm that works closely with hospitals and performed the analysis. "Now, it's not as if these patients across the board are even able to pay, because [out-of-pocket costs are] such an astronomical amount related to what their general income might be."

Although "bad debt" can be a controversial metric in its own right, those who work in the hospital billing industry say it shows how complex health insurance products with large out-of-pocket costs have proliferated.

"What we noticed was a breaking point right around the 2018-2019 timeframe," said Matt Szaflarski, director of revenue cycle intelligence at Kodiak Solutions. The trend has since stabilized, but remains at more than half of all "bad debt". In 2018, just 11.1% of hospitals' bad debt came from insured "self-pay" accounts, or from patients whose insurance required out-of-pocket payments, according to Kodiak. By 2022, the proportion who did (or could) not pay their bills soared to 57.6% of all hospitals' bad debt. Kodiak receives every billing transaction for more than 1,800 hospitals across the US, a little less



than one-third of all hospitals in the country. It was able to perform the analysis by looking at this in-house database. The cost of healthcare in the US is a perennial political concern – it eats up more than 18% of gross domestic product, far more, and often for worse health outcomes, than in other peer democracies. As much as 31% of the cost of US healthcare is probably driven by the administration of complex bills that now beset the public. Now, medical debt and its impact on Americans' lives is an issue of increasing political perseverance. A recent investigation by KFF Health News and NPR found more than 100 million Americans have medical debt

of some kind, debt which often forces families to make heart-wrenching sacrifices. In part, those sacrifices are driven by hospitals' extraordinary collection practices. Hospitals refer patients to aggressive debt collectors, use state courts to garnish wages, place liens on people's homes and report debt to credit agencies, which can drastically worsen future job and housing prospects. Although there are some attempts to rein in these practices, billing analysts like Szaflarski say they do not address the core issue – health plans designed by insurers which force hospitals to become debt collectors. "These stories really grind my gears," said Szaflarski. "The

idea of patient responsibility" – those deductibles and coinsurance requirements – "was not an idea created by healthcare providers. They were vehicles created by payers," referring to insurers. Ariel Levin, the director of coverage policy for the American Hospital Association, says the organization is discussing multiple solutions – such as removing hospitals from the billing equation entirely – to challenges they say are created by insurer decisions.

"Something else we're exploring recently is how to remove providers from the cost-sharing altogether and require health insurers to collect it," Levin said.

Knife, Towel, Pillow: Chues Bengaluru CEO Accused Of Killing Son Left Behind In Goa'

A knife, towel and pillow - these seemingly simple items could help the police solve an intriguing murder case where a mother - the CEO of a Bengaluru startup - has been accused of killing her son.

The police have recovered the three items from the service apartment she had stayed at in Goa. Suchana Seth checked into the apartment in Candolim on January 6 and stayed there till January 8. She allegedly killed her son in the apartment and stuffed the body in a bag before taking it to neighbouring Karnataka in a taxi on Monday, police said.

When the apartment staff went to clean the room, they found blood stains on a towel. The staff immediately informed the police and told them that she carried an unusually heavy bag, and her son was not seen with her.

The four-year-old child was smothered to death either with a piece of cloth or a pillow, the post-mortem revealed.

The accused may have tried to die by suicide by slashing her wrist and later used the towel to stop the bleeding, the police said earlier.

"The recovery list from the crime scene includes a knife, a distinctive red bag, a towel, and a pillow," the police said. When police officials called up Ms Seth, who was then in the cab in Bengaluru Bengaluru - to explain the blood stains, she said they were due to her monthly periods.

She told them that he was at a friend's place and even gave the officials a fake address. The officials then spoke to the cab driver in Konkani to avoid suspicion by Ms Seth and asked him to take the vehicle to the nearest police station.

That's when the 39-year-old was caught with the red bag that she used to carry his son's body. She was arrested from Chitradurga in Karnataka on Monday night and brought to Goa on Tuesday.

The police who are yet to find the motive behind the murder took Ms Seth for a

routine checkup today. She was also given a psychological examination, police sources said.

Ms Seth shows "no remorse" over her son's death, the sources told NDTV last night. In fact, sources said Ms Seth, in police custody till next week, has been "non-cooperative" so far.

The woman has denied her involvement in the crime during the interrogation and claimed the child was already dead when she got up from sleep.

Investigators are examining Suchana Seth's Call Detail Records (CDR) to unravel her contacts and conversations in the three days surrounding the incident, aiming to shed light on any potential collaborators, the sources said, adding the taxi she travelled by is still in police custody.

Ms Seth has also told interrogators about her troubled marriage and as per sources, she allegedly killed her son reportedly over a custody battle with her estranged husband.

According to the couple's divorce documents, Ms Seth had filed a domestic violence case in August 2022 against her estranged husband Venkat Raman. She had accused him of physically abusing her and her son, a charge Venkat Raman has denied in court.

Venkat Raman reached Hiriyyur in Chitradurga district on Tuesday night and took possession of his son's body after the post-mortem.

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The Goa police would take Suchana Seth to the service apartment where she had stayed to recreate the crime scene later today, a senior official said.

Ms Seth is the CEO of 'The Mindful AI Lab', and according to her LinkedIn profile, she is an AI ethics expert and data scientist with over 12 years of experience in mentoring data science teams, and scaling machine learning solutions at start-ups and industry research labs.

Sheikh Hasina's Win In Bangladesh And What It Means For India

Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's party Awami League has won a fourth consecutive term in general elections. This is Sheikh Hasina's fifth term as Prime Minister.

The main Opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) led by former PM Khaleda Zia boycotted the elections. Zia was arrested for "anti-national" activities just before the elections after she demanded that Hasina step down to make way for a neutral caretaker government. The low voter turnout is also controversial. The official figure is 40 per cent but reports suggest it could be less than 28 per cent. The turnout on the dashboard at the election body headquarters, hours after the press briefing, was 28 per cent according to a widely shared screenshot on social media. The BNP has rejected the elections as 'dummy polls'. Though voting day passed off peacefully, the run-up to the elections saw violent protests and deadly arson. The government accused the BNP of inciting violence to sabotage the election.

Many countries, including the US, have alleged that the January 7 elections were not free and fair and riddled with irregularities. Critics have also cautioned against the virtual one-party rule of Sheikh Hasina's party in the absence of any Opposition.

"The decision of the BNP to abstain from elections is their party's strategic choice. The BNP has been involved in political violence and arson since October 28. A democratic government can't just sit and watch. It is the responsibility of the government to protect the lives and property of the people. The government had no other option but to take action against such terrorism," says Syed Borhan Kabir, chief editor, Bangla Insider. He added: "It is true that if the BNP had participated in elections, democracy would be complete, and the election would have been competitive. In such a scenario, voter turnout is always low. Nevertheless, 41 per cent of voters have cast their votes, which is not bad. A weak constitutional government is much better than an unconstitutional government."

Burgeoning India-Bangladesh Partnership Bangladesh has always accepted India's role in its independence in 1971. The two countries share a common history and heritage, linguistic and cultural ties. They share a unique geographical feature - not only is Bangladesh surrounded by India on all sides, but they share 54 rivers between them, which flow from the Himalayas to the Bay of Bengal. With so many similarities, people-to-people ties and development cooperation have taken precedence.

Yet, there have been periods of mutual distrust.

Mr Kabir explains that after 1975, due to emerging anti-India sentiments and a shift towards Pakistan-centric politics in



Bangladesh, there was a period of strained relations, and Bangladesh's territory was sometimes used to target India. "In 2009, Sheikh Hasina adopted a zero-tolerance policy against terrorism. The rise of separatist elements is not something India desires. Concurrently, the mutual trust and confidence between the two countries have strengthened over the last 15 years," he says.

There is resentment in Bangladesh against the failed agreement to share Teesta River water, which was to be signed in September 2011. The anxiety over transboundary effects of the proposed National Register of Citizens and the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, as well as sporadic incidents of Bangladeshi infiltrators being shot at on the border, are issues that rankle with Bangladesh.

On the economic front, a balance of trade skewed in favour of India, the large volume of informal trade, again dominated by India, has resulted in a trade deficit and Bangladesh expects Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government to resolve these

matters. According to data from the Ministry of Commerce, Indian exports to Bangladesh between April and October 2023 declined by 13.32 per cent, while imports saw a smaller 2.3 per cent dip. This has been attributed to Bangladesh's forex shortages and liquidity crunch and maybe election-related slowdown there.

For India, which is looking at stronger momentum in bilateral partnership, there can't be better news than PM Hasina's win. To iron out concerns, India and Bangladesh have had foreign secretary-level talks on key areas such as security, trade and regional connectivity. The two sides also discussed the river Teesta dispute and other water-sharing treaties last November.

India values Bangladesh, and this was demonstrated when PM Hasina was the only South Asian leader invited to the G20 Leaders' Summit under India's presidency. To promote ties, PM Modi and Sheikh Hasina recently inaugurated three projects, the Akhaura- Agartala Cross-Border Rail Link, Khulna-Mongla

Port Rail Line, and Unit-II of the Maitree Super Critical Thermal Power Plant in Rampal, Bangladesh. These projects are aimed at strengthening connectivity and energy security in the region. The Bangladesh government has also allowed the transit and trans-shipment of cargo from West Bengal to the northeastern states via Chattogram and Mongla ports.

There are ongoing talks between India and Bangladesh for a free trade agreement between the two countries to promote economic ties. Under CEPA (Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement), the two trading partners will be able to reduce or eliminate customs duties on the maximum number of goods traded between them. Last year, India and Bangladesh initiated trade transactions in rupees to reduce dependence on the US dollar and strengthen the regional currency trade.

"Bilateral relations between the two countries are at their peak. In the short term, there will be business as usual but in the long run, if no concrete agreements are signed, people will see through it. Water sharing has always been an emotive issue for the common people," says Sreeradha Datta, professor of International Affairs, Jindal Global University.

"The people of Bangladesh feel that they have supported India in opening their trade corridor and facilitating cross-border bilateral engagement. It's high time for India to reciprocate," says Ms Datta.

India and Bangladesh need each other to survive and thrive. Radicalisation is a common enemy and only a joint fight will help. Lessons in geopolitics point towards countries forging mutually beneficial relationships. There is no guideline for that.



If China Invades Taiwan, It Would Cost World Economy \$10 Trillion

War over Taiwan would have a cost in blood and treasure so vast that even those unhappiest with the status quo have reason not to risk it. Bloomberg Economics estimate the price tag at around \$10 trillion, equal to about 10% of global GDP - dwarfing the blow from the war in Ukraine, Covid pandemic and Global Financial Crisis.

China's rising economic and military heft, Taiwan's burgeoning sense of national identity, and fractious relations between Beijing and Washington mean the conditions for a crisis are in place. With cross-Strait relations on the ballot, Taiwan's Jan. 13 election is a potential flashpoint. Few put a high probability on an imminent Chinese invasion. The People's Liberation Army isn't massing troops on the coast. Reports of corruption in China's military cast doubts on President Xi Jinping's ability to wage a successful campaign. US officials say tensions eased somewhat at the November summit between President Joe Biden and Xi, who pledged "heart-warming" measures to woo foreign investors. Still, the outbreak of war in Ukraine and Gaza are reminders of how long-simmering tensions



can erupt into conflict. Everyone from Wall Street investors to military planners and the swathe of businesses that rely on Taiwan's semiconductors are already moving to hedge against the risk. National security experts in the Pentagon, think tanks in the US and Japan, and global consulting firms are gaming out scenarios from a Chinese maritime "quarantine" of Taiwan, to the seizure of Taiwan's outlying islands, and a full-scale Chinese invasion. Jude Blanchette, a China expert at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, says interest in a Taiwan crisis from

multinational firms he advises has "exploded" since Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine. The subject comes up in 95% of conversations, he said. Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and the semiconductor shortage as the world reopened from Covid lockdowns, provide a small glimpse of what's at stake for the global economy. The impact of war in the Taiwan Strait would be far bigger. Taiwan makes most of the world's advanced logic semiconductors, and a lot of lagging edge chips as well. Globally, 5.6% of total value added comes from sectors using chips as

direct inputs - nearly \$6 trillion. Total market cap for the top 20 customers of chip giant Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Co. is around \$7.4 trillion. The Taiwan Strait is one of the world's busiest shipping lanes.

Modeling the Cost of a Crisis Bloomberg Economics has modeled two scenarios: a Chinese invasion drawing the US into a local conflict, and a blockade cutting Taiwan off from trade with the rest of the world. A suite of models is used to estimate the impact on GDP, taking account of the blow to semiconductor supply, disruption to shipping in the region, trade sanctions and tariffs, and the impact on financial markets.

For the main protagonists, other major economies, and the world as a whole, the biggest hit comes from the missing semiconductors. Factory lines producing laptops, tablets and smartphones - where Taiwan's high-end chips are the irreplaceable "golden screw" - would stall. Autos and other sectors that use lower-end chips would also take a significant hit.

Barriers to trade and a significant risk-off shock in financial markets add to the costs.

'Incomplete Construction': Why All Four Shankaracharyas Not Attending Ram Lalla's 'Pran Pratishtha'

All four 'Shankaracharyas' (pontiffs of major Hindu shrines) will not attend the consecration ceremony of the Ram Temple in Uttar Pradesh's Ayodhya on January 22, said Swami Avimukteshwaranand Saraswati, the Shankaracharya of Jyotish Peeth in Uttarakhand.

Who are Shankaracharyas?



The Shankaracharyas are the heads of the four major shrines called 'peeths' situated in Joshimath in Uttarakhand, Dwarka in Gujarat, Puri in Odisha and Sringeri in Karnataka.

Swami Avimukteshwaranand Saraswati said the Hindu religious gurus will not attend the grand ceremony as it violates the rules of Sanatan Dharma, reported The Telegraph. He explained that the installation of the idols of Lord Ram without the completion of the construction of the temple was against the Hindu religion. "There was no need of such hurry," he said.

Swami Avimukteshwaranand stressed there was enough time for the construction of the Ram Temple and then complete 'Pran Pratishtha' or the consecration ceremony. He said it was a bad idea to inaugurate an incomplete temple. Swami Avimukteshwaranand further said they could be called anti-Modi for the decision but the religious reverends don't hold any ill-will against anyone.

"We are not anti-Modi but at the same time we also can't go against our Dharma Shastra," said Avimukteshwaranand, according to The Telegraph.

Earlier this week, the Shankaracharya of Puri Gowardhanpeeth, Swami Nishchalanand Saraswati, had also said he would not attend the event because it was against the scriptures. Celebrities from film and television, industrialists, political leaders, sportspersons as well as seers, scholars, and prominent personalities from different fields have been invited to the consecration ceremony of the Ram temple in Ayodhya on January 22. While Prime Minister Narendra Modi is set to deliver a speech at the grand event, UP Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath is overseeing the preparations for the long-awaited inauguration.

World's Most Powerful Passports: 6 Countries In Top Spot, India Ranks...

France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Singapore, and Spain start 2024 with the world's most powerful passport, allowing visa-free entry to 194 global destinations, according to the latest Henley Passport Index. The ranking is based on data from the International Air Transport Association

countries without a visa, including popular tourist destinations like Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand. India shares its current rank with Uzbekistan while neighboring Pakistan is positioned at 101st. Christian H Kaelin, chairman of Henley & Partners and the creator of the

passport index highlighted the widening global mobility gap between countries. Despite an overall trend toward increased travel freedom over the past two decades, the disparity between the top and bottom of the index has reached



(IATA).

For the past five years, Japan and Singapore have consistently dominated the No. 1 spot. However, this quarter's ranking showcases European nations jumping up the tanks. Finland and Sweden tied with South Korea in second place, offering visa-free access to 193 destinations. Austria, Denmark, Ireland, and the Netherlands secure the third position, providing passport holders access to 192 destinations.

India's passport ranked 80th spot in the list, with citizens allowed to travel to 62

an all-time high. Mr Kaelin said, "The average number of destinations travelers are able to access visa-free has nearly doubled from 58 in 2006 to 111 in 2024." He emphasized that the top-ranked countries now enjoy the privilege of traveling to an astonishing 166 more destinations visa-free than Afghanistan, which occupies the bottom spot on the list, with access to just 28 countries without a visa. Syria, with visa-free access to only 29 destinations, holds the second-lowest position, followed by Iraq with 31 and Pakistan with 34.

Israel reports new cases of monkeypox, measles

(News Agency)- The Israeli Health Ministry has reported the detection of new cases of monkeypox and measles in the country. The Ministry did not specify the exact number of new monkeypox cases, but the Israel



Medical Association said on Tuesday that there were five new cases alongside two suspected cases, news agency reported. The Ministry urged anyone who develops a fever and a blistering rash or has been in close contact with a person suspected of having monkeypox to contact a doctor.

Last year, only one case of monkeypox was detected in Israel, after 262 cases were reported in the country in 2022. Regarding measles infections, the Ministry reported two new cases, of a child and an adult, adding that the infection source was not identified, and neither of the two had been abroad recently. Measles has been infrequently reported in Israel over the past few decades, except for an unusual outbreak in March 2018 when more than 4,250 cases were detected.

In 2023, the Ministry reported 11 cases, nine of them from an outbreak of the virus in a kindergarten in the coastal city of Tel Aviv in October.

Measles, a highly contagious disease characterised by symptoms such as fever and rash, can, in severe instances, result in life-threatening complications.

ICRC urges protection for medical facilities, staff in Gaza

(News Agency)- The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has urged protection for medical facilities and workers in the Gaza Strip, as they were facing a severe lack of security amid persistent Israeli attacks.

The ICRC emphasised on Tuesday in a statement that the whole medical system in Gaza has been affected by the Israeli attacks, with medical professionals even being killed and detained, news agency reported.

In the statement, William Schomburg, head of the ICRC sub-delegation in Gaza, highlighted that the shortage of equipment and essential supplies due to the ongoing Israeli hostilities has led to the complete shutdown of most



hospitals in the enclave. He stressed the necessity of respecting healthcare facilities and workers, calling for protecting them under international humanitarian law, so as to provide life-saving treatment to those in need. According to the Gaza-based government media office, 326 medical personnel and 45 civil defence members have been killed in Israeli attacks on the

enclave since October 7 last year. As of January 3, only 13 out of Gaza's 36 hospitals have been partially functional, with nine in the south and four in the north, reported the World Health Organisation. The Gaza-based Health Ministry said the occupancy rates reached 206 per cent in internal medicine departments of hospitals and 250 per cent in intensive care units.

International Criminal Court to probe crime against journalists in Gaza

(News Agency)- International non-profit, Reporters Without Borders (RSF) has said that it received assurances from the a prosecutor's office at the International Criminal Court (ICC) that it will probe crimes and atrocities against journalists in Gaza amid the raging Israel-Hamas war. In a statement on Tuesday, the RSF said that "the office of prosecutor Karim Khan has assured that crimes against journalists are included in its investigation".

It is to be noted that Khan is already investigating the atrocities that occurred after Hamas launched its unprecedented attack on southern Israel on October 7, 2023.



With the killing of independent videographer journalist working for Agence France Presse (AFP) Moustafa Thuraya and Al Jazeera journalist Hamza Wael Dahdouh, the total number of journalists killed in the past three months has now increased to at least 79, the Paris-based media rights group

said. Since the day of the Hamas assault, "Khan had never spoken publicly about the fate of journalists. In a message sent to RSF on January 5, 2024, his office stated for the first time that crimes against journalists were included in its

investigation", the RSF said in its statement.

In its statement, the ICC prosecutor's office assures that "crimes against journalists are being examined by the prosecutor's office, among other potential crimes, as part of the ongoing investigation into the situation in Palestine, and RSF's objectives and actions must be supported and are of crucial importance in Gaza and elsewhere".

"Journalists are protected by international humanitarian law and the Rome Statute and must not under any circumstances be targeted in the exercise of their important mission."

Confirming the development,

Christophe Deloire --Secretary General of RSF -- said that the "massacre" of journalists in Gaza "demands a determined response from the ICC".

"We have found to date that at least 18 of them were killed in the course of, or because of, their duties as journalists, but only a thorough investigation will establish the immense extent of the war crimes against media professionals.

"The announcement by the ICC prosecutor's office to RSF is good news, which we welcome. We hope that its investigation moves forward quickly and leads to concrete action: it is necessary and long overdue," Deloire was quoted as saying in the statement.

Gunmen take over live TV broadcast in Ecuador, Prez declares 'internal armed conflict'

(News Agency)-A group of gunmen broke into a live television studio in Ecuador and threatened the terrified staff, prompting President Daniel Noboa to declare an "internal armed conflict" and mobilise the army to "neutralise" several criminal groups accused of spreading extreme violence. On Tuesday, hooded and armed suspects broke into the local "TC Television" station in the southwest coastal city of Guayaquil and terrorised the staff while they were on the air, sending

shock waves through the country, reports Xinhua news agency.

Viewers watched as the events unfolded live, witnessing the gunmen point their weapons at the station employees as they remained lying on the floor, visibly shaken by what was happening. Amid the chaos, a series of gunshots rang out as employees pleaded for the shooting to stop. After a burst of gunfire, the broadcast abruptly went off the air.

The National Police posted to social

media platform X that "given the



entry of criminals into the facilities

of a media outlet in Guayaquil, our specialized units are being deployed at the scene to address this emergency".

Later, the police said the armed men freed all the staff and made 13 arrests, and also recovered at least four firearms, two grenades, and "explosive material".

Hours after the incident, President Daniel Noboa announced that he "signed the executive decree declaring Internal Armed

Conflict". According to a document posted on social media, Noboa called on the armed forces to carry out military operations, under international humanitarian law and with respect for human rights, to fight transnational criminal organisations operating in Ecuador. He ordered the deployment of troops and police officers throughout the country to guarantee sovereignty and territorial integrity against transnational organized crime.

Trump all set for Iowa caucus, but rivals DeSantis, Haley seek to close ranks and spring surprise

(News Agency)- With less a week to go for the Iowa caucus and New Hampshire to follow to decide the GOP nomination for the 2024 presidential election, former President Donald Trump is brimming with confidence while rivals Ron DeSantis and Nikki Haley are betting their odds to at least close the distance with Trump so that they have an outside chance with voters to get past him. Poll predictions are that even if Trump closed with high leads in Iowa and New Hampshire, voters would do a double take if both Nikki and DeSantis coming very close to Trump and think if the latter are better than Trump who carries a huge legal burden with him into 2024, media reports said. Ted Cruz from Texas upped New Yorker Trump in Iowa in 2016 though Trump was ahead of him in polls and points. There's less than a week until the GOP Iowa Caucus next Monday night, and Trump is the one to beat, media reports said..



He is dominating polls with a 20-30 point lead and it now looks like a battle for the 2nd place, with DeSantis and Haley are positioning themselves as the best Republican Trump alternative. Trump didn't win the Iowa caucuses back in 2016. But this time, his campaign in the Red state is very well organised. Though Haley and DeSantis have

begun attacking Trump directly for the chaos he creates with his errant rhetoric without going into the merits of the legal cases against him, they end up ultimately going at each other's throats. Businessman Vivek Ramaswamy has crossed every county in the state — twice — but is still struggling to overcome the rest of his opponents. Former

New Jersey Governor Chris Christie, meanwhile, isn't even putting energy into Iowa, and is instead focusing on New Hampshire's contest later this month (January 23). While Iowa only makes up 1.6 per cent of delegates at the Republican convention — and 49 more states will vote — it commands a lot of media attention

because it goes first. A great result (or one that surpasses media & party expectations) can help a contender gain momentum or kill a campaign that doesn't meet expectations, MO News, a podcast and aggregator of news from various sections of the media said. . Trump is polling over 60 per cent nationally in the contest for the GOP nomination, leading by nearly 40+ points. The lead is historic for a primary without an incumbent President, and no candidate has rallied from such a deficit to win the nomination in the modern primary era, the Washington Post reports. But, the challenges he faces around his name appearing on November's ballot are more than political. A number of legal questions remain. The US Supreme Court agreed to hear Colorado's 14th Amendment case on February 8 over Trump's 2024 ballot eligibility, after the state booted him from the ballot.

New Jersey Township gets its first Indian-American Sikh Mayor

(News Agency)- Neena Singh has become the first Sikh and Indian-American woman to be sworn in as Mayor of Montgomery Township in the US state of New Jersey. She was administered the oath of office by Congresswoman Bonnie Watson Coleman at the Montgomery Township Reorganisation Meeting on January 4. Singh, who has lived in Montgomery for 24 years, was unanimously selected to serve as Mayor by her fellow Township Committee members. "It's an enormous privilege to be sworn in by trailblazer Congresswoman Bonnie Watson Coleman as the first elected Sikh woman Mayor in New Jersey and



the first Indian-American woman Mayor," said Mayor Neena Singh. "What energises and motivates me

is the spirit of service. I strongly believe we all have a responsibility to give back, and I

am blessed to do so in a town that reflects America's diversity," said Singh, whose priorities for 2024 are public safety and health. Having previously served as Deputy Mayor and Township Committeewoman, Singh was nominated to the position by outgoing Mayor Devra Keenan and committee-woman Patricia Taylor Todd. As an executive officer at STAND Central NJ, a grassroots non-profit, she worked not only on engaging and educating voters but also on empowering them to participate in the democratic process. "Neena Singh embodies commitment to public service. She has made her life's work fighting for social justice, economic

opportunity, and human rights for all. I'm confident she'll bring her experience and passion for the township to her term as Mayor," Watson Coleman said in a statement. In her new role, Singh will preside at meetings of the Township Committee and will have the power to appoint subcommittees with the Committee's consent. In addition, she will also have the power to make proclamations concerning holidays and events of interest in the township, and to exercise the ceremonial power of the township. Indian-American New Jersey State Senator Vin Gopal sent a congratulatory video, calling Singh a "role model" for South Asian girls across the state, My Central Jersey news outlet reported. "For every young South Asian girl growing up not just in Montgomery but across New Jersey, they're going to have a true role model to look up to," Gopal said. Vincent P Barragan, who was named as the Deputy Mayor, said he was "proud and humbled to be able to serve with such a diverse team of individuals."

Paytm to invest Rs 100 cr in GIFT City, to offer AI-driven cross border remittance

(News Agency)- One97 Communications Limited (OCL) that owns India's leading payments and financial services company Paytm, on Wednesday announced an investment of Rs 100 crore in Gujarat International Finance Tec-City (GIFT City) to build a global financial ecosystem, ahead of the 'Vibrant Gujarat Global Summit 2024'. The company will make the investment over a period of time and will seek requisite approvals for the

same. With GIFT city as an ideal innovation hub for cross-border activity, Paytm will use its proven capability to innovate and build new tech for users across the globe looking to invest in India. As the pioneer of real-time payments and settlements in India, the company said it will replicate its success to now reduce friction in cross-border remittances with faster and cost-effective solutions, driven by Artificial

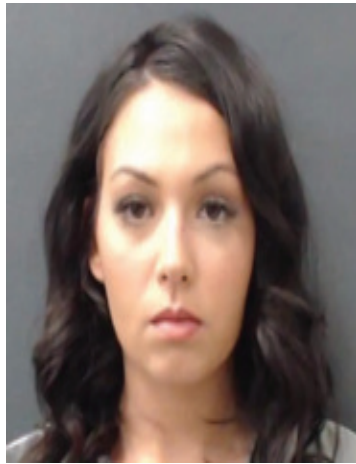
Intelligence. Leveraging its leadership as a tech innovator, Paytm will also set up a development centre in GIFT City to build the above solutions and provide a technology backbone. This centre will create jobs and house engineers to develop a suite of world-class financial products and services. "GIFT City is set to become a global financial hub, further putting India on the world map for innovation.

US Teacher Had Sex With Teen, Asked Students To Act As "Lookouts": Police

A high school teacher in Missouri, United States, has been arrested after she allegedly had sex with a teenager on school grounds and asked other students to act as "lookouts", as per a report in the Independent.

Hailey Clifton-Carmack, a mathematics teacher at Laquey High School in Pulaski County, was arrested on January 5 on charges of endangering the welfare of a child, statutory rape, sexual contact with a student and child molestation, the outlet said. The arrest was made in Texas and her bond has been set at \$2,500,000. The police officers are working out her extradition back to Missouri.

A student alerted the cops about the relationship. The 16-year-old student involved in the relationship allegedly showed them pictures of scratches on



his back, which he said were caused by his contact with Ms Clifton-Carmack. She was characterised by the student

as being "too close with students." Court records showed that both the school principal and the superintendent of Laquey Schools were aware of the teacher's actions before them being brought to attention. Further, the officers obtained a warrant to check the teacher's phone in December. Ms Clifton-Carmack "handed over her phone with no issues and did not have the normal behaviour of someone facing the same accusations," as per an officer and denied any wrongdoing.

However, the officials said that Ms Clifton-Carmack refused to provide them with her password on the advice of her lawyer when they wanted to check the contents of the device. After breaking through the electronic surveillance system, investigators found a chat between the student and Ms Clifton-

Carmack discussing their relationship. Listen to the latest songs, only on JioSaavn.com

The school district said, "The employee has not been in the district since 8 December 2023 and we do not anticipate her return."

The 16-year-old's father knew of the relationship and told a witness that other students acted as "lookouts" while they engaged in sexual activities at the school. According to the Independent, the father said that the teacher had visited his family home just before she went to Texas to visit her family. He told the witness, "They are going to do it behind my back so I may as well let it happen." The father was arrested by the police and he pleaded not guilty to a charge of first-degree child endangerment.

UNSC condemns Houthi attacks on Red Sea shipping, demands immediate end

United Nations.- The UN Security Council (UNSC) has condemned the attacks on ships by Houthi rebels and demanded that they immediately end the assaults in the Red Sea region vital to commerce for India. The resolution proposed by the US and Japan was adopted on Wednesday after China and Russia abstained on the resolution rather than vetoing it after three amendments introduced by Moscow failed to pass. The resolution received 11 votes in the 15-member Council, with Algeria and Mozambique joining in the abstentions. The Council action came after three days of intense backstage negotiations while the situation in the Red Sea region was heating up.

Hours before the resolution was passed, the US and Britain said that a joint operation neutralised one of the biggest attacks by the Houthis using missiles and drones.

US Permanent Representative Linda Thomas-Greenfield said: "There have been dozens of attacks since November on shipping in the Red Sea, which have affected more than 40 different countries." "If the Houthi attacks continue, there will be consequences," she warned.

The resolution said that the Houthi militia's attacks "undermine navigational rights and freedoms, as well as regional peace and security", and it should "immediately cease all attacks, which impede global commerce and navigational rights and freedoms as well as regional peace".

Taking aim at Iran, but without naming it,



the resolution also condemned the arming of the Houthis in contravention of Council embargo.

It also called for the immediate release of the ship *Galaxy Leader*, which was seized by Houthi commandos in November last year.

The ship's ownership is linked to an Israeli, but is operated by a Japanese company with an international crew under Bahama's flag.

The resolution did not attach any penalties for disobeying the Council's demand. Russia and China abstaining on the resolution rather than sinking, it shows the universal concern about the shipping route leading to and from the Suez Canal, forming the shorter route to and from Asia, the East Coast of Africa and the Gulf region to Europe and the Americas. To avoid the Red Sea and the Suez Canal, ships would have to make a 3,000-

nautical-mile detour around the Cape of Good Hope at Africa's Southern tip adding more than a week to the journey. Thomas-Greenfield said the attacks "are an economic threat, increasing the prices people pay for food, medicine, and energy".

Echoing Washington's concerns, China's Permanent Representative Zhang Jun said that unimpeded access to the Red Sea is essential for "a stable and smooth global supply chain and international trade order".

The Houthi militia that is backed by Iran has asserted that it was disrupting shipping in the region in protest against Israel's attacks on Gaza.

One of Russia's amendments wanted the resolution to mention the link to the Gaza conflict. Although Britain and the US voted against the amendments, their actions did not become vetoes because with

most countries abstaining the drafts did not meet the threshold of nine votes required to pass in which case a veto would have taken effect.

Thomas-Greenfield said that the Houthis, who were "intoxicated" with power did not really care about Gaza and were only using it as a pretext for their attacks on ships few of which have anything to do with Israel.

Russia's Permanent Representative Vassily Nebenzia said that the "real goals" of the resolution were not to ensure the security of navigation in the Red Sea but "to legitimise existing actions of this coalition" of the US and its allies and get the Council's "open-ended blessing" for them.

He was referring to 'Operation Prosperity Guardian' launched by the US and its allies to protect ships in the region.

Although India is not a part of the operation, its navy is also involved in safeguarding ships in the Red Sea region.

The Indian Navy said it was reinforcing its presence in the North/Central Arabian Sea region close to the mouth of the Red Sea, "surging ships and aircraft to deter attacks on international shipping in the Western Indian Ocean Region".

"Indian Navy is closely monitoring overall situation in coordination with national maritime agencies and remains committed towards ensuring safety of merchant shipping and seafarers in the region," it said in a statement last week. Last week INS Chennai was involved in an operation to secure a ship that came under attack.



Kangana roots for Ankita Lokhande: Hope my friend wins but not at the cost of her marriage

Kangana Ranaut has come out in support of her 'Manikarnika: The Queen Of Jhansi' co-star Ankita Lokhande, who is a contestant in 'Bigg Boss 17' and shared that the media is attempting to break their family by creating a false story. Kangana took to her Instagram stories, where she shared a snippet from the interview of Ankita's mother-in-law, where she is seen talking about why she should lift the trophy.

The 'Dhakad' actress wrote: "Media doing their best to break their family, they won't show @lokhandeankita's saasumaa rooting for her, also love that chuckle in the end... Ha ha .. too cute aunty, reality shows come and go but family is forever, I hope my friend @lokhandeankita wins but not at the cost of her marriage." In the 'Bigg Boss 17' house, Ankita and her husband have often been seen quarreling and fighting. The couple were seen even talking about divorce.

Raveena Tandon: I am experimenting with my characters

Actress Raveena Tandon, who will be seen laying Indrani Kothari in the upcoming show 'Karmma Calling', shared how this character has helped her explore a very different aspect of herself as an artist, adding that it is unlike any roles she has played before. Talking about her character in this series, the actress known for her work in 'Aks', said: "Playing Indrani helped me explore a very different aspect of myself as an actor, it is unlike any characters I have played before. I am experimenting with my

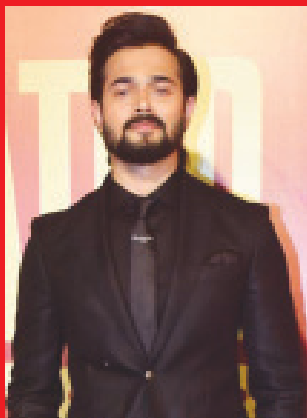
characters." Raveena further decoded her character: "Indrani is powerful, strong-headed and wants to maintain her position in the elitist society. She has secrets to hide but her life is altered in many ways as Karma Talwar enters the picture but she is not a woman to give in to her Karma that easily." The actress added that 'Karmma Calling' is a tale of the glamorous, powerful Indrani Kothari and the enigmatic Karma Talwar and it'll surely keep the

audiences hooked. The guilty pleasure series 'Karmma Calling' features reigning queen of Alibaug, Indrani Kothari (Raveena), who is ready to take on Karma Talwar (Namrata Sheth) as secrets are dark and stakes are high. Produced by R.A.T films, adapted for India and directed by Ruchi Narain, the series is helmed by Raveena Tandon, Namrata Sheth, Varun Sood along with Gaurav Sharma, Waluscha D'souza, Amy Aela, Viraf Patel, Piyush Khati in pivotal roles.



Bhuvan Bam talks about how his connect with Hindi paid off as a creator, actor

On World Hindi Day on January 10, content creator and actor Bhuvan Bam spoke about how creating content in Hindi language helped him reach across the spectrums. He finds it heartening to see how content in Hindi can bridge connections and create a shared experience. In a statement, Bhuvan expressed gratitude for the immense support he has received, stating: "I've always believed in the power of storytelling in our own language. The love and response from the audience have been overwhelming. It's heartening to see how content in Hindi can bridge connections



and create a shared experience." He added: "On World Hindi Day, it's important we throw light on this language we have grown up speaking, consuming and relating to. It's the language that truly got me closer to millions of people through both the digital and the real world. My decision to connect with audiences that speak the language I speak, and giving them content they all can relate to truly paid off." A popular personality on Youtube, Bhuvan created his Youtube channel in 2015, which is known as BB Ki Vines. A year later he released a music video 'Teri Meri Kahani'. It was in 2023 when he made his OTT debut with Taaza Khabar.

Akshay, Tiger all set for 'Bade Miyan Chote Miyan' release on Eid



Action heroes Akshay Kumar and Tiger Shroff are all set for the release of their upcoming film 'Bade Miyan Chote Miyan' and have given a countdown till Eid. Akshay and Tiger took to their respective Instagram accounts, where they shared a new picture posing in army green T-shirts paired with camouflage pants posing in front of a chopper. For the caption they wrote: "Bade aur Chote se milne ka samay ho gaya hai aur kam... Just #3months toBadeMiyan ChoteMiyan." Produced by Pooja Entertainment and AAZ Films, and is guided by the blockbuster director Ali Abbas Zafar. The film, which also stars Prithviraj Sukumaran, is about two men with their contrasting personalities and maverick methods, Bade Miyan and Chote Miyan need to overcome their differences and labor together to transport the offenders to impartiality and preserve the day.

Ayushmann Khurrana: Going to experiment with a lot of genres in 2024



Bollywood star Ayushmann Khurrana said that he will experiment with a "lot of genres" and consolidate his status as a theatrical hero for his audience in 2024. Ayushmann said: "I'm going to experiment with a lot of genres in 2024. My slate of films will be extremely diverse as always and it will focus solely on delivering quality theatrical experience to the audience. I'm currently locking some interesting films that one will love watching with the entire family in theatres." He added: "Delivering a shared community watching experience has always been my priority as an entertainer. My next set of films will reflect my theatrical content choices as an audience. I have always chosen my films keeping in mind the movies I would like to watch in cinemas." Ayushmann has multiple projects in the bag already but has not revealed the details as there is a plan to announce these films individually. He said: "In 2024, I'm going to follow my gut even more. I'm thrilled to share my line up with all of you and the reveal will happen in due course of time because each one of these films deserves a big announcement."

Manoj Bajpayee calls Abhishek Chaubey 'one of the best directors of all time'

Actor Manoj Bajpayee, who is gearing up for the release of his upcoming streaming series 'Killer Soup', has heaped praise on the director of the series, Abhishek Chaubey. The actor feels that Abhishek is one of the best directors of all time. "Abhishek Chaubey in my opinion, is one of the best directors of all time with whom I have had the pleasure of working. His approach is so simple and straightforward that working with him becomes effortless." He further mentioned, "He doesn't just direct you but even guides and nurtures you. He has given me a lot

of hope and encouragement as an actor." Konkona Sensharma lauded Chaubey for his patience and vision, as she said: "I have known Abhishek for many years, ever since we worked on 'Omikara' together. I have known him very closely and have always been very inspired by his work and wanted to work with him. He has a calm, composed demeanour with an astuteness, which usually is a rare sight since set environments are usually very stressful, especially for the directors shuffling between tasks."



Rakul Preet celebrates a decade in Bollywood, looks back at 10 yrs of 'hard work'

Actress Rakul Preet Singh, who made her Hindi film debut in 2014 with romantic film 'Yaariyan' on Wednesday reflected upon her journey of 10 years in Bollywood, and said that it took hard work, perseverance, and consistency to reach where she is today. After making her acting debut in 2009 in Kannada movie 'Gilli', Rakul Preet has featured in movies like 'Keratom', 'Yuvan', 'Puthagam', before making her Bollywood debut with 'Yaariyan', alongside Himansh Kohli. She played Saloni in the Divya Khosla Kumar directorial movie. Now, on 10 years of the film's theatrical release, Rakul took to her Instagram, where

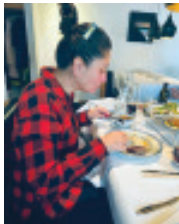
she enjoys 23.5 million followers, and shared snippets from the movie 'Yaariyan'. Along with the pictures, she penned a note, which read: "10 years ago, when I had first stepped in Bollywood, I was just a young girl with big dreams. It took me a decade of hard work, perseverance, consistency to reach where I am today." "While there is so much more to achieve, I have a ton of gratitude in my heart for the work that I have done as it still feels like a dream for the younger version of me," shared the 'Runway 34' actress. Rakul Preet extended gratitude to her fans and admirers, and added: "I

want to extend my love to all of you who helped me achieve my dreams and turn them into a reality.... 10 years of living this reality and a lifetime to go... #pictureabh ibaakihaimeredost." Her other Hindi projects include 'Aiyaary', 'De De Pyaar De', 'Marjaavaan', 'Doctor G', 'Thank God', 'Chhatriwali' among few others. She next has 'Ayalaan', 'Meri Patni Ka Remake', and 'Indian 2' in the pipeline.



Kareena: No one ever come between me, my Chinese food

Actress Kareena Kapoor Khan, who is an ardent social media user, on Wednesday expressed her fondness for Chinese food, and has called herself a 'foodie for life'. The actress, who enjoys 11.4 million followers on Instagram, shared a picture of herself, wherein she can be seen seriously eating yummy food. She is wearing a red and black checkered shirt, and her hair is tied in a bun.



The location of the picture is not known, but it seems like she is sitting in a fine-dine restaurant. The post was captioned as: "No one ever come between me and my Chinese food...I take it very seriously...#Foodie for life #Kapoors and their food." Ace fashion designer and Kareena's best friend Manish Malhotra dropped red heart emojis.

Kriti shares picture with Mahesh Babu, celebrates 10 years of her Telugu debut '1: Nenokkadine'



Actress Kriti Sanon, who was last seen in 'Ganapath: A Hero is Born', completed a decade in the South Indian film industry as her film '1: Nenokkadine' clocked 10 years of its release on Wednesday. '1: Nenokkadine' starred Kriti opposite Telugu superstar Mahesh Babu. Adding a touch of nostalgia to her journey, the actress recently reunited with Mahesh Babu, evoking memories from their past collaborations. Their on-screen chemistry and camaraderie have left a lasting impression on fans, and the reunion stirred emotions among both the actors and their admirers. The meeting celebrated Kriti's 10-year milestone. The actress shared the picture from her meeting on the Stories section of her Instagram. She wrote on the picture: "Its been 10 years since my first ever film. My first telugu film with my first

ever co-star @urstrulymahesh sir!! So many memories and so much #Gratitude in my heart! How lovely and nostalgic was it to meet you again after ages! so much has changed but its still the same (sic)." She uploaded another picture with Mahesh and his wife, and wrote: "Happy 10 years! #1Nenokkadine. Can't believe its been a decade!! @urstrulymahesh @namratashirodkar. Miss you @aryasukku sir! Thank you for the best debut and the best memories ever. Aww Tuzo Mogh Korta." On the work front Kriti has an exciting line up with an untitled film opposite Shahid Kapoor, the announcement for which she will make on Wednesday. She also has 'The Crew' in the pipeline in which she will be seen with Kareena Kapoor and Tabu, and her production house's first movie 'Do Patti'.





Hasleen Kaur of 'CAT' to essay cold-blooded assassin in international production 'Ruthless Bastards'

Actress Hasleen Kaur, who is known for her work in the streaming series 'CAT' and 'Tu Jhoothi Main Makkar', has started working on her international project titled 'Ruthless Bastards'. The film is an American-Canadian indie production and stars her in the role of a cold blooded assassin.

The actress will be seen in the role of Ishanna Sidhu in the film representing an Indian gang. Talking about the same, the actress said: "The director, who has worked primarily on action-drama films most of which were with Jackie Chan, had seen me and liked my work in 'CAT'.

The fact that it was a gritty Drama series and my character in 'Ruthless Bastards' required a sense of intensity, helped him visualise me as Ishana."

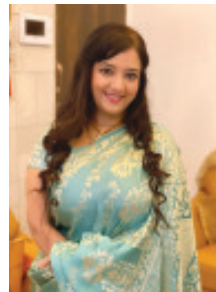
Describing her character, Hasleen said: "She has grey shades and is cold hearted, blood and gore doesn't affect her and the director felt like my role in 'CAT' justified me playing Ishana Siddhu in this film. He was very confident of casting me in the role when I asked him if he's sure I could carry the action scenes well."

The film is scheduled for a tentative release in April or May this year.

Sheela Sharma: Television is no less than any other medium

Senior actress Sheela Sharma, who is known for her work in shows like 'Mahabharat', 'Junoon', and others, has opened up on the rising demand of OTT projects, and shared how she thinks television is still in demand, and it is no less than any other medium.

The TV industry is going through a transition phase for the last few years due to stiff competition given by OTT



platforms. Sharing her views on the same, Sheela, who portrayed Devaki in the 1988 B. R. Chopra's 'Mahabharat', said that television as a medium is still very close to audiences and it touches and reaches every household in rural and urban areas. "OTT platforms are coming up with really good concepts. Their budget is also good and everything is nice about it.

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Catastrophizing About Rheumatoid Arthritis Pain Can Make It Worse

There's no denying that for many people with rheumatoid arthritis (RA), pain is a part of life. This can be true even when joints aren't flaring or there are no objective signs that the disease is worsening.

Yet how much pain people experience and how they view it is an individual thing. For some, thinking the worst becomes the default. The problem is that this can actually make your rheumatoid condition worse.

In a study presented in early June at the annual congress of the European Alliance of Associations for Rheumatology (EULAR), a forum to present the latest in advancements in rheumatology care, this extreme negative thinking was shown to impact a person's course of the disease.

What Is Pain Catastrophizing? The study focused on the concept of pain catastrophizing, defined as the "tendency to report pain experience in exaggerated terms, to ruminate about it more, or to feel helpless about it," study coauthor Mateusz Wilk, MD, a physician in the division of rheumatology and immunology at University Hospital in Krakow, Poland, told conference attendees.

This is not about experiencing

actual pain but rather the cognitive and emotional processes of thinking your pain is worse than it is, he says.

In some ways, catastrophizing is the opposite of coping or having resilience in the face of a painful disease.

Catastrophizing About Pain Makes Many Conditions Worse Prior research on catastrophizing about pain has shown how problematic this can be. For one, it increases the risk of experiencing additional pain, according to a report on people with various pain conditions published in November 2017 in

The Journal of Pain.

And in a study in Arthritis Care & Research published in December 2017, which evaluated 200 people with RA who were beginning biological therapy, catastrophizing over the course of the year correlated with the person's own assessment of higher levels of disease activity, even though objective measurements of inflammation and disease activity did not concur.

RELATED: How to Relieve Rheumatoid Arthritis Foot Pain Assessing Pain and Rheumatoid Arthritis Symptoms



The EULAR study followed primarily women who had their disease for more than a decade and were taking disease-modifying medication. Those with RA who participated were

Obese Men May Have Better Survival With Advanced Prostate Cancer

When men have advanced prostate cancer, obesity might offer something of a survival advantage, a preliminary study suggests. Researchers in Italy found that among men with prostate cancer that had spread throughout the body, those who were obese were less likely to die over the next few years. Roughly 30% were still alive after three years, versus 20% of normal-weight and overweight men, the study found.

The researchers stressed that

no one is advising men to pack on pounds as a defense against prostate cancer: Obesity is associated with a higher risk of developing and dying from various chronic ills, including a number of cancers. But over the years, some studies have found that cancer patients with a higher body mass index (BMI) tend to survive longer -- a phenomenon sometimes called the "obesity paradox." The new findings hint that the paradox might also apply to advanced prostate cancer.

However, one expert not involved

in the study urged caution in drawing conclusions. Critically, the reasons for the study patients' obesity, or thinness, are not clear, explained Dr. Vinayak Wagaskar, a urologist at Mount Sinai's Icahn School of Medicine in New York City. He noted that BMI was measured only after the men had developed advanced cancer that was no longer responding to hormonal therapy -- and not right after their prostate cancer diagnosis. That's important, in part, because certain treatments for prostate cancer

-- including hormonal therapy and steroid medications -- can cause weight gain. Plus, Wagaskar said, patients' weight could have been affected by additional medical conditions they had. He said the study brings up an "interesting concept," but he stressed the need for more research -- with men's BMI measured at the time of diagnosis. For the study, Dr. Nicola Fossati and colleagues at San Raffaele University in Milan looked at data on almost 1,600 men who'd been involved in previous clinical trials.

Ayurvedic practitioner shares effective tips for prediabetics



A chronic condition, diabetes is caused when the body either does not produce enough insulin, or when it is unable to effectively use the insulin produced by the pancreas. According to the World Health Organisation, diabetes is a growing challenge in India with "estimated 8.7% diabetic population in the age group of 20 and 70 years." But in addition to the those already having diabetes, many

young Indians are also on the verge of having diabetes. As such, doctors suggest that the best way to manage the condition is by making lifestyle tweaks that include changes to ones diet and fitness routine.

"Prediabetes is a menace of modern-day sedentary lifestyle. If left unattended, the person might become diabetic," said ayurvedic practitioner Dr Shyam VL.

What is pre-diabetes?

Prediabetes is a condition in which your blood sugar level is higher than normal, but not high enough to be classified as type 2 diabetes.

Causes

As per Ayurveda, 'eating at will' is considered the main cause of diabetes.

"Sitting in front of the TV for long hours, no physical activities, and sleeping during day time should be avoided by pre-diabetics," Dr Shyam mentioned.

According to him, just like all other ailments, pre-diabetes can also be managed with lifestyle changes. "With healthy lifestyle changes, such as eating healthy foods, physical activity in your daily routine and maintaining a healthy weight - you may be able to bring your blood sugar level back to normal," he advised.

What can be done?

One should cut down on excessive sweets, junk foods, and oily foods. "Sweets, ice-creams, fruit sugar, cakes, pastries, sweet biscuits, chocolates, soft drinks, condensed milk, cream, jaggery, yogurt should be avoided," shared Dr Shyam.

Boost your intake of vegetables and fruit with a low glycemic index and low glycemic load. "Try low-fat dairy products and beans.

Choose whole grains more often. Choose poultry, and lean meat instead of fatty red meat or processed meat," mentioned Dr Shyam.

Ayurvedic herbs that help manage pre-diabetes Turmeric and amla - While turmeric helps in preventing insulin resistance among cells and acts as a channel opener for glucose, amla helps prevent cataracts.

Take ¼ cup fresh amla juice with half a teaspoon of turmeric powder every day or a teaspoon of amla powder with half teaspoon of turmeric powder mixed with warm water.

Fenugreek seeds

Fenugreek seeds are also known to help control blood sugar and decrease insulin resistance in mild type 2 diabetic patients.

Take 2-3 grams of soaked fenugreek seeds with your meals, a couple of times a day.

Tech Mahindra appoints ex-Infosys veteran Richard Lobo as chief people officer



New Delhi- Tech Mahindra on Wednesday announced the appointment of Richard Lobo, former Infosys executive vice-president and head of human resources, as its chief people officer. Lobo's appointment comes as part of Tech Mahindra's ongoing leadership restructuring under Managing Director and CEO Mohit Joshi.

"With over 25 years of experience in HR transformation, employee experience, diversity, and inclusion, Lobo is set to lead the HR charter at Tech_Mahindra," the IT and digital transformation major posted on X. "Together, we'll continue to scale people processes, drive sustainable growth, and create an unparalleled working environment based on our

people-first principles," Tech Mahindra added. Lobo worked with Infosys for nearly 23 years. He quit Infosys in August to work as an HR consultant and strategic advisor at edtech unicorn Byju's. Byju's had appointed Lobo as an exclusive advisor to help transform its human resources function. At Infosys, Lobo held various leadership roles, most recently

serving as its EVP and Head of Human Resources. An active contributor to publications and a frequent speaker at industry events, Lobo also advises academia on trends in business and human resources. Tech Mahindra recently appointed former LTI chief marketing officer (CMO) Peeyush Dubey as its CMO.

Samsung's dual-folding display gives glimpse of next Galaxy Z Flip



Las Vegas- Foldable smartphones, first launched by Samsung Electronics about five years ago, have undergone remarkable developments and innovations in both performance and technology to meet consumer demands for more

functionality and convenience. The Galaxy Z Flip 5 is the latest clamshell-style foldable released last summer. Boasting a wider front cover display and a lighter, slimmer hinge, the Z Flip 5 makes it easier for users to fold flat compared to its predecessor

Galaxy Z Flip 4. At CES 2024, which kicked off a four-day run in Las Vegas this week, Samsung Display, the exclusive supplier of foldable screens to its brother Samsung Electronics, introduced groundbreaking concepts that push the boundaries of foldable smartphone design and provided a glimpse at where foldable smartphones are heading. One of the standout innovations showcased at CES is the new Flex In&Out Flip concept, reports Yonhap news agency. This foldable smartphone display boasts a 360-degree folding capability, allowing users to fold the device completely backward.

This unique feature enables users to utilise the phone's full screen even when closed, facilitating activities such as taking selfies with the main high-definition camera.



several icons in the phone's quick setting menu, media playback controls, and displays the battery level and time. A staff member at Samsung Display's showroom at Encore hotel in Las Vegas described it as "a new foldable display with an edge panel." While Samsung Display did not comment on plans to supply the new dual-folding display to Samsung Electronics, these innovative concepts showcased at CES 2024 offer a glimpse into the world's largest smartphone maker's vision to create a more versatile and useful lineup for future foldable smartphones.



San Francisco- Amazon-owned live game streaming platform Twitch is reportedly laying off 35 per cent of its workforce, about 500

employees, this week. Twitch laid off dozens of employees last year, and has shut down its service in South Korea due to "prohibitively expensive" costs.

According to a Bloomberg report, the fresh job cuts, "which could be announced as soon as Wednesday", come amid concerns over losses at Twitch.

Live game streaming platform Twitch to lay off 500 employees

Earlier, when Twitch co-founder and CEO Emmett Shear paved the way for new CEO Dan Clancy, the company laid off 400 employees. Amazon cut another 180 jobs late last year when it shut down its Crown channel, the Amazon-run Twitch programming, and shut down its Game Growth group. Last month, Twitch said it plans to shut down its South Korean service in February this year due to high network usage fees in the country. Clancy said the company "made

the difficult decision to shut down the Twitch business in Korea on February 27, 2024." The cost to operate Twitch in South Korea was "prohibitively expensive" and the company spent significant effort, such as adjusting the video quality on the service, to reduce business costs. In November last year, the platform suspended its video-on-demand service in South Korea, seen as a protest against the country's controversial network usage fee.

SEC greenlights bitcoin ETFs even as hack sets off Washington alarms

With the approval, the bitcoin ETFs — which are similar to mutual funds — could start trading on Thursday.

The Securities and Exchange Commission on Wednesday signed off on a landmark set of products that will open up the \$900 billion bitcoin market to everyday investors, a day after the crypto industry was rocked by the hack of the regulator's account.

The hack on Tuesday faked out cryptocurrency investors with an errant post on the SEC's X account, saying that the agency had approved about a dozen applications from BlackRock, Grayscale and other firms to launch the first-ever bitcoin exchange-traded funds in the U.S. The SEC later rebutted the post's authenticity and is investigating along with the FBI and an internal watchdog, according to a spokesperson for the regulator. With the approvals, the bitcoin ETFs — which are similar to mutual funds — could start trading Thursday.

The two-day stretch of chaos encapsulated both the promise and peril of crypto at once. Bitcoin ETFs have long been touted by supporters as a defining event for the industry that could usher in a wave of new investors. But industry critics in Washington and beyond say the hack underscores their concern about the market's lingering dangers for investors and companies.

"I'm concerned that unauthorized access to SEC accounts could undermine our markets and the agency's mission," Senate Banking Chair Sherrod Brown (D-Ohio) said, while calling for the SEC's Inspector General to



investigate. SEC Chair Gary Gensler, who has long warned of the risks posed by crypto, said in a statement that the approvals don't represent an endorsement of bitcoin. The agency has denied more than 20 attempts to list similar products in the past, Gensler said. But circumstances "have changed," he said, pointing to a federal court ruling last year that rejected the SEC's prior dismissal of one of the products.

"Investors should remain cautious about the myriad risks associated with bitcoin and products whose value is tied to crypto," said Gensler, who was appointed to lead the SEC

by President Joe Biden. ETFs are pooled investment products designed to track the price of an underlying asset. Critics have expressed fears that the agency is unleashing a risky and speculative product onto everyday investors by approving the bitcoin ETFs.

"There's no doubt that the SEC made the wrong decision here," Sen. Elizabeth Warren (D-Mass.), one of Congress's fiercest crypto critics, said in a statement. "There are still plenty of unanswered questions on how we'll protect everyday investors from losing their hard-earned savings and keep our financial stability intact." There was dissension among

the five SEC commissioners themselves. Commissioner Caroline Crenshaw called the decision "unsound" and "ahistorical." In a statement, Crenshaw expressed concern that the bitcoin markets underpinning the ETFs are "marred by fraud and manipulation." She added that she worries the approvals will create a false "imprimatur" that there is oversight in bitcoin markets around the world. "I am concerned about what comes next — when new, potentially more speculative products bearing greater risks of investor harm seek to list, we will hear a chorus of well-heeled voices saying that the SEC's hands are tied by the new standards that we have set," Crenshaw said. "I fear that today we are setting ourselves up for tomorrow's failure, and it will be the investors that we have a duty to protect who will ultimately pay the price."

Crenshaw voted against the approvals along with fellow Democratic Commissioner Jaime Lizárraga, as Gensler joined with the panel's two Republican members — Commissioners Hester Peirce and Mark Uyeda — to approve. Established 15 years ago, bitcoin is a cornerstone in the broader crypto universe — accounting for a mammoth share of trading and investor interest. But the cryptocurrency, known for wild price moves, has stayed out of reach for many investors due to technical and other issues — a problem that bitcoin ETF supporters argue their products can easily fix.

US SEC's X account hacked to post about fake nod to Bitcoin ETFs



Washington- The US Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) saw its X account hacked for a brief time, with a post claiming it has approved listings for Bitcoin exchange-traded funds (ETFs). SEC Chair Gary Gensler later clarified in a post on his X account that the agency's account was "compromised, and an unauthorised tweet was posted". The post from the SEC's hacked account, with an image of Gensler, read: "Today the SEC grants approval for #Bitcoin ETFs for listing on all registered national securities. The approved Bitcoin ETFs will be subject to ongoing surveillance and compliance measures to

ensure continued investor protection."

The price of Bitcoin increased to \$48,000 after the fake SEC post but then quickly slid below \$46,000.

The SEC said late on Tuesday that the post about Bitcoin exchange-traded funds was incorrect.

"The SEC's @SECGov X/ Twitter account has been compromised. The unauthorised tweet regarding bitcoin ETFs was not made by the SEC or its staff," an SEC spokesperson said in a statement.

The hackers who compromised the SEC's account also started liking posts from crypto-focused accounts that were excited about the SEC's false approval of Bitcoin ETFs. Exchange-traded funds are assets that work like mutual funds, with shares of the ETFs trading on exchanges as stocks do.

Ready to think bigger? PMS Today is now live on BusinessToday.in. Dive in

It's here. Business Today on Thursday launched PMS Today, the most comprehensive guide to all that is happening in Portfolio Management Services (PMS), how star fund managers think and work, topped with insightful interviews and tools

Exchange Board of India (Sebi). Investors need a minimum corpus of Rs 50 lakh for investment in PMS. Until 2019, this amount was restricted to Rs 25 lakh. This product is not for retail or small investors. Three types of fees



For services rendered, portfolio managers charge three types of fees - fixed only, profit-sharing only and hybrid. Between the three fee options,

that can help investors like you think bigger. PMS Today details data of over 350 schemes with assets under management (AUM) of more than Rs 1.50 lakh crore as of December 31, 2023. Give yourself the PMS edge PMS universe has been regulated by the market regulator Securities and

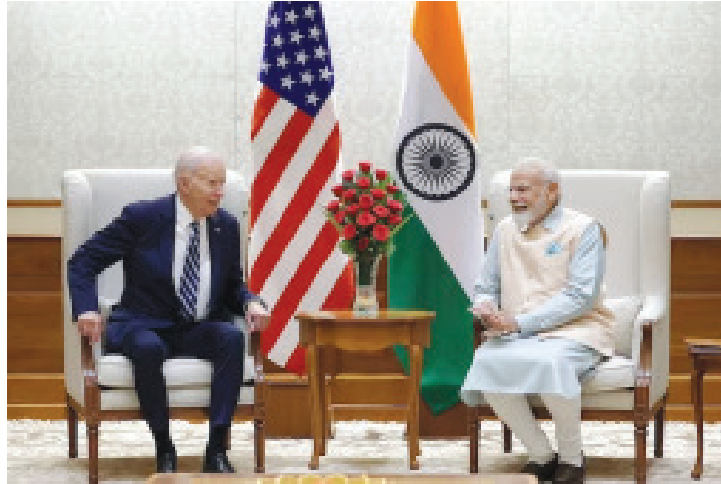
the fixed fees are levied either quarterly or monthly on the average value of the portfolio. Performance fees are charged yearly, if the portfolio outperforms the hurdle rate. In the case of hybrid fee option, the portfolio managers charge both fixed and profit-sharing fees. What else do I get?

Fast Forward 2024: Challenges and Opportunities for Indian Diplomacy

By: Kanwal Sibal

Global developments or foreign policies of countries do not follow calendar years. The transition from 2023 to 2024 has no meaning really in geopolitics. Countries do not make New Year resolutions to usher in a more peaceful world. Which is why the issues and problems that faced the world in 2023 will seamlessly spill over into 2024. What can be attempted at best is to follow the gamut of issues and challenges of 2023 into 2024, and how they may affect India.

The US will hold the presidential election in 2024. The run up to it is a long process within the two parties, and this will occupy the country politically at the domestic level, though of course foreign policy decisions will continue to be made, but with more of an eye on how they may affect popular support in a highly polarised and tight election. The growing instability of US domestic politics affects the rest of the world given the global role of the US. If Biden is considered too old and is seen as suffering from some cognitive issues and Trump is considered unpredictable and erratic, and the prospect of the latter's re-election sends shivers down the spine of Europe, the Americans and the world can do nothing but to wait and watch. The forward momentum of India's relations with the US continued in 2023, barring the



Pannun hiccup. Biden could not eventually accept India's invitation to be chief guest on R-Day 2024, and the envisaged Quad summit had to be postponed. The next G7 summit in Fasano in Italy in June could be used to hold the Quad summit as Australia does get invited to G7 meetings. The UNGA session in 2024 could be another occasion to hold the summit.

At the bilateral level the agenda of India-US ties in various domains has been set, the stakes on both sides to build a stronger relationship in the political, economic and military domains have grown, and the US

has shown a degree of pragmatism in dealing with issues on which the two sides are not in agreement. India has also widened its value as a partner by its more assured and self-confident diplomacy. Progress in India-US ties should continue in 2024, more so as the bi-partisan consensus in the US in favour of stronger India-US ties remains. The Biden administration would ideally like to notch up some foreign policy success in 2024, but the outlook does not seem too bright. The US continues to send conflicting signals on Ukraine, both stating the limits

of its weapons and financial support to Ukraine, and, at the same time, assuring that support will continue, with additional sanctions announced on Russia. The US has put itself in a position in which it cannot defeat Russia on the ground and cannot let Ukraine be defeated either.

Russia, which has weathered the sanctions at considerable cost, should be better placed in 2024 to deal with NATO's proxy war against it in Ukraine. A war of attrition favours it, as Ukraine has suffered enormous losses in men and material and support for it in the West is waning. India-Russia ties will continue their trajectory in 2024, as an expression of India's determination to foster them as part of a re-balancing of international relations. External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar visited Russia end-December 2023, with a meeting with President Putin as an exceptional gesture. This reflects Russia's own interest to keep India anchored in multilateral organisations like BRICS and the SCO seen as building blocks of a multipolar world, besides a more explicit recognition that India's growing economic profile increases its attractiveness as a partner. The annual India-Russia summit is slated to be held in 2024 in Russia. The Israel-Hamas conflict has also put the US in a difficult position.

Is it OK to speculate about Taylor Swift's sexuality?

By Arwa Mahdawi

For about 18 months there was incredibly disruptive construction going on next door to me. It drove me mad. Like verging-on-a-nervous-breakdown mad. I became obsessed with the history of construction-related legislation in Philadelphia and pitched one of my editors a 10,000-word piece on planning permission and party walls. They looked at me kindly and said "no".

All of which to say: sometimes you need an editor to rein you in. Sometimes you need an editor to tell you that while it's OK for you to be weirdly obsessed about something, it might be best if you didn't go down a rabbit hole on the opinion pages of a national newspaper. So I mean this in the nicest possible way when I say that perhaps Anna Marks's editor at the New York Times should have done her a similar favour. Perhaps someone should have told her that it might not be advisable to write a 5,000-word opinion piece advancing the theory that Taylor Swift – who is currently in a relationship with the NFL player Travis Kelce – is secretly a lesbian or bisexual and communicating this fact to the LGBTQ+ community via coded messages in her music. These codes range from the in-your-face (rainbow artwork on albums) to rather more esoteric references to midcentury

lesbian magazines in the Eras Tour visuals. Anyway, it's too late for warnings now, isn't it? The piece (titled Look What We Made Taylor Swift Do) has come out and it's causing all the backlash and uproar and clicks and conversation that I imagine whoever greenlit it anticipated it would.

To be clear: the uproar isn't because this is the first time in history that someone has suggested that Swift might be gay. On the contrary: theories that the pop star might not be 100% straight have been circulating for years, and there are Reddit forums where people obsess over the idea, scrutinizing every song lyric and social media post for shades of gay. (These Swifties are called "Gaylors", because of course they are.)

Last year there was even a festival, Camp Gaylor, dedicated to all things Swiftie and queer. Still, while the theory isn't new, this is the first time – as far as I can tell – that it has been advanced to such a detailed degree in a serious newspaper.

Swift, for her part, has said she isn't part of the LGBTQ+ community and asked people not to sexualise her female friendships. Was the Times unethical to gloss over all of this and give rumours about her sexuality so much airtime? Swift's inner circle reportedly thinks so.

According to CNN, Swift's associates (a vague term which could mean anyone from Swift's PR person to someone who once sat in the same restaurant as her) were disgusted by the article, and accused the Times of sexism. "Because of her massive success, in this moment there is a Taylor-shaped hole in people's ethics," a source told the outlet in response to the Times piece. "This article wouldn't have been allowed to be written about Shawn Mendes or any male artist whose sexuality has been questioned by fans."

Let's not go overboard here, eh? Yes, much of the discourse surrounding Swift is steeped in sexism and double standards. But I'm not sure that charge can be levelled at this particular piece. Marks has, after all, written a similar sort of article (albeit much shorter) about Harry Styles – who has been accused of queerbaiting and whose sexuality is constantly being questioned by fans.

Further, while I think Marks's piece was highly inadvisable, I wouldn't go as far as to say it was unethical. Outing someone against their wishes is clearly morally wrong, but that's very different from overanalysing a bunch of song lyrics. Particularly when those lyrics are set up to be overanalysed in the first place.



How India Plans to Break West's Monopoly Over Global Shipping Insurance

By: Sanbeer Singh Ranhotra

In a move that will have significant global ramifications in the future, India is looking to set up its own protection and indemnity (P&I) insurance entity. This will allow shipowners, especially those based out of India, the option to purchase insurance that dominant Western players are generally reluctant to provide. At a time when an inland waterways revolution is underway in India, having a domestic shipping insurance entity will work wonders for India's logistics sector. Officials at the Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways say discussions around setting up a P&I entity have already begun.

For starters, India is looking to have this P&I entity cater to coastal shipping and inland waterways. Gradually, India will expand the entity's reach, and provide an alternative to the West's shipping insurance ecosystem. India too, like much of the world, presently depends on the International Group of P&I Clubs for shipping insurance.

Global supply chains depend primarily on maritime shipping. To ensure smooth shipping, it is essential for vessels to be covered by insurance that is recognised around the world. This is called the protection and indemnity (P&I) insurance. Currently, 13 P&I clubs have a stranglehold over global shipping insurance. Together, they form the International Group of P&I Clubs, which is based in London, United Kingdom. Without such insurance, ships are not



allowed to dock at ports.

This international group of shipping insurers was weaponised by the West to impose sanctions on Russia, and it played an especially pivotal role in imposing the G7 and European Union's price cap on Russian crude oil. The G7 and EU declared that any ships carrying Russian oil over and above the price cap would be deprived of P&I insurance, making docking for such ships impossible (at least in theory). That the oil price cap against Russia fell flat on its face from the very outset is a separate matter altogether.

However, the episode provided an opportunity for the world, especially the Global South, to witness how the West's monopoly over international shipping

insurance could be turned into a threat to supply chains. Essentially, the West has the power to deny insurance to any ship, and thereby, control global maritime shipping.

A new, resurgent and 'Atmanirbhar' India does not like the sound of that. Why should a club based out of London, with a knack for obeying the orders of Western governments, decide which ships can operate on the seas? The fact that in recent times, the international group of P&I clubs has been used to impose sanctions on entities the West deems hostile to it is all the more concerning not just for India, but the collective Global South.

Therefore, true to its character of providing solutions to the developing and

underdeveloped world, India has taken the mantle of challenging the West's dominance in this area.

Such a move allows Indian ships to operate without hindrance and circumvent sanctions. Having its own system of insuring ships will allow India to not be dependent on the West for the stability of its supply chains, while also allowing Global South countries to not be beholden to the "developed world". This is in line with India's own push for "Atmanirbharta" and also helps its "Vishwamitra", or 'friend of the world' image. In October last year, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman had said India should have a full-fledged protection and indemnity entity in order to reduce the country's vulnerability to international sanctions and pressures. She added that such an entity would provide "greater strategic flexibility" to India's shipping operations and provide the country "a foothold into the specialised segments of protection and indemnity (P&I) business". WHY DOES INDIA WANT TO BE "ATMANIRBHAR" IN SHIPPING INSURANCE?

India has had the chance to experience first-hand how the West's monopoly can have a debilitating impact on international shipping and even Indian vessels. In April last year, the International Group of P&I Clubs members withdrew insurance from a large chunk of tankers operated by Mumbai-based Gatik Ship Management. Gatik was briefly one of the world's fastest-growing shipping companies.

Maldives, Lakshadweep and India's Poor Tourism Record

By: Pavan K Varma

My first visit to the Maldives was in 1988 in rather dramatic circumstances. A coup d'etat had been made against the government of the President of Maldives, Maumoon Abdul Gayoom. It was led by businessman Abdullah Luthufi with the help of armed mercenaries of a Tamil secessionist organisation from Sri Lanka, the People's Liberation Organisation of Tamil Eelam. The mercenaries had taken control of Male, the capital, the airport, port, television and radio stations. On the request of the Maldives government, India intervened, and its armed forces, in an operation codenamed Operation Cactus, defeated the attempted coup.

I was then posted at HQs, in the Ministry of External Affairs, and was asked to escort a large media party to Male. I recall we went on a military plane, landing in a country still in turmoil, but recovering. It was my only visit abroad, thus far, where in the confusion, my diplomatic passport had an entry stamp of 6 November, and an exit one of 4 November!

India has been a friend of Maldives for

decades. But there is an old Chinese proverb that says: 'Why do you hate me? I have not helped you!' This often happens when smaller countries whom India has gone out of its way to help, begin to resent the presence of a much larger and



powerful neighbour. Something of that nature seems to be unfolding in Maldives now.

The fact is that Indo-Maldives relations have been close. This is not surprising considering the two countries share a common maritime border, which has been duly demarcated. India has always stood

by Maldives in moments of need and was the first country to recognise its independence from British rule in 1966. Apart from Operation Cactus, India came to the help of Maldives when a serious water crisis hit it in 2014, after the collapse of the island's only water treatment plant. India sent heavy-lift transporter planes, like the C-17 Globemaster and the IL-76 with bottled water, and also sent ships which could produce fresh water through their onboard desalination plants. India and Maldives signed a

Comprehensive Trade Agreement as far back as 1948. A substantial percentage of Maldives' imports come from India, which is also building the \$500 million Greater Male Project that connects Male with three adjacent islands through a 6.74 km long sea bridge. India has built the landmark Indira Gandhi

Memorial Hospital, gifted a Fast Attack Naval Craft, provided concessional loans including grants and is working to set up 26 radars on Maldives' 26 atolls for coverage of approaching aircraft and vessels. Above all, during the Covid-19 pandemic, India airlifted 6.2 tonnes of essential medicines and hospital consumables to Maldives under Operation Sanjeevani.

This is only a glimpse of the kind of neighbour India has been. Why then did President Mohamed Muizzu come to power in November 2023, based on an 'India Out' campaign? An objective assessment does not reveal that we were overbearing, as we have been accused of being with some of our other neighbours. There is, of course, the perennial China factor, which like India, recognises the strategic importance of the location of Maldives, and as part of conscious design meddles in our relations with neighbouring countries. Approximately, 70 per cent of the Maldives total external debt is owed to China, which is 10 per cent of the country's national budget.

What is the UK's Post Office IT scandal about and who is involved?

Prosecution of thousands of people has been called one of the greatest miscarriages of justice in British history

It is a scandal that has rumbled for years, and yet it is suddenly dominating UK politics. Here is a guide to the saga of the Post Office and its Horizon IT system.

What is it all about?

It has been described without exaggeration by the British prime minister, Rishi Sunak, as one of the greatest miscarriages of justice in UK history: the hounding and prosecution of thousands of people who owned and ran smaller post offices for alleged fraud between 1999 and 2015, the overwhelming majority of whom were falsely accused. The initial fault was with Horizon, a digital accounting system installed by the IT multinational Fujitsu, which wrongly said post office branches had cash shortfalls. This was then compounded by the Post Office, the company behind the network, which rejected any fault with Horizon and insisted operators must have taken the money, to the extent of covering up the real problem.

Overall, 3,500 branch owner-operators were wrongly accused and more than 900 prosecuted, with many of these jailed and ruined. Some suffered significant ill health, local ostracism and family breakup,



and in a handful of cases, suicide.

Who were the people wrongly accused?

These were, in the traditional job description, subpostmasters and postmistresses, who owned and ran smaller post offices as franchises. While they were independent, often owning the building where the business was based, they were part of the Post Office system, which handles not just letters and parcels but services including banking, bill payments, money transfers and applications for documents.

The Post Office, which has about 11,500 branches across the UK, was formerly part of Royal Mail, but was split off in 2012 when the mail service was privatised.

How could the injustice last so long?

This is one of the key questions for a public inquiry into the scandal that began in 2021 and

is still hearing evidence, but the main driver was seemingly a toxic and secretive management culture in the Post Office, with the victims marginalised, dismissed and disbelieved.

Numerous owner-operators accused of theft were told they were the only people facing such claims, only to find out later that hundreds of others had been similarly targeted when some of those wrongly targeted raised the alarm. Notable among these was Alan Bates, a post office operator accused of stealing thousands of pounds from his branch, who set up a campaign group.

Aware something could be wrong, the Post Office even commissioned a company of forensic accountants to look into the fraud claims, but after these found possible fault with Horizon, their contract was terminated.

The Post Office was also subject

to government and official oversight, and there is much debate about whether ministers and civil servants could have addressed the scandal sooner. When was the injustice acknowledged and redressed? It took a long time. It was only in 2019 that a group of post office operators won a high court case ruling that their convictions were wrongful, with Horizon at fault. This decision was upheld on appeal in 2021, quashing the convictions of some workers and beginning the road to compensation.

Between these two court decisions, in October 2020, the Post Office formally apologised for what it called "historical failings".

However, the process of clearing those affected had been slow: by December, 142 appeal case reviews had been completed out of 900-plus people convicted. Why is the story suddenly in the headlines now?

For one reason: Mr Bates vs the Post Office. The four-part drama broadcast in the first week of January by ITV, the UK's main commercial TV station, starred the actor Toby Jones as Alan Bates. It powerfully brought home the human consequences of the saga, bringing an immediate reaction from the media and politicians.

What happened in response to the drama?

Less than a week after the final episode was aired, Sunak announced an unprecedented plan to pass a law that would overturn the convictions of all those accused over Horizon-related fraud or theft, and offer them swift compensation – either an agreed lump sum of up to £600,000 or an amount to be agreed. The plan is for this to be completed by the summer.

Is this the end of the story?

No. Some politicians connected to the scandal have faced calls to apologise, and there are suggestions that Fujitsu should cover the costs of the compensation. All this is likely to have to wait until the public inquiry reaches its conclusions, at a date as yet unknown. The Post Office is now itself under criminal investigation over potential fraud offences.

Paula Vennells, the former Post Office chief executive, has already said she will return an official honour she received.

Some MPs from Sunak's Conservative party have focused criticism on Ed Davey, calling for him to quit as leader of the smaller opposition Liberal Democrats for, they say, not taking the scandal seriously when he was the business minister responsible for the Post Office from 2010-12. The Lib Dems call the attacks partisan and unfair.

Bill Ackman 'losing it' over plagiarism allegations against wife, Axel Springer says

The billionaire investor Bill Ackman, who helped oust Claudine Gay as Harvard president in a scandal over alleged plagiarism and campus antisemitism, is "completely losing it" over stories in which Business Insider said his wife, the academic Neri Oxman, "plagiarised some passages" in her own dissertation. So said Adib Sisani, communications director for Axel Springer, the German company that owns Insider, in comments to the news website Puck.

Responding to Ackman's claim that the Insider stories about Oxman were motivated by antisemitism, Sisani said:

"That's a very hard red line. In reality, most people



underestimated the way that Bill Ackman is completely losing it." Axel Springer previously

announced an internal review of the stories about Oxman, reportedly stirring anger among employees of Insider.

Sisani told Puck: "The outcome of the review is pretty clear. We believe in our own editorial standards. Of course there's not a bias in the sense that his wife is Jewish – that's so far out there. What remains is: did we give him and his wife enough time to comment? I'm sure there's an email trail that's easily reviewed. Could there be an outcome where maybe we give them an hour extra?"

Ackman did not comment. His comments about Gay are widely seen to have played a

central role in forcing her resignation, which came weeks after a hearing on Capitol Hill in which Republicans aggressively questioned four college presidents about alleged antisemitism among students protesting the Israel-Hamas war. The president of the University of Pennsylvania, Elizabeth Magill, resigned shortly after the hearing. Hit with plagiarism accusations, Gay was at first supported by Harvard but eventually quit too, though she remains on faculty.

Ackman, who went to Harvard, mounted his campaign to oust Gay largely through social media.



Here's the path for a Nikki Haley upset.

According to the most recent UNH/CNN Granite State Poll, she leads Trump by a wide margin among these undeclared voters. In New Hampshire, this isn't a small slice of the electorate. There are more undeclared voters than Republicans or Democrats; 39 percent of the state's registered voters are undeclared. And without a competitive Democratic primary, the action is on the GOP side, incentivizing undeclared voters to pull a Republican ballot. The last time there wasn't a competitive Democratic contest, in 2012, independents cast nearly half the GOP primary vote.

Chris Christie's departure from the race Wednesday was the necessary first step. With the most vocal anti-Trump Republican gone, now there is a possibility she can consolidate the vote against the frontrunner; together, their support surpassed Trump's in the latest Granite State Poll. And two-thirds of Christie's supporters indicated Haley is their second choice. A Haley victory in New Hampshire isn't out of the question; the Granite State Poll shows her within 7 points of Trump.

Then comes her home state, South Carolina, which is scheduled to vote almost exactly a month later. Technically, Nevada looms in-between but the confusing details — a non-binding state-run Feb. 6 primary that the Trump-dominated local GOP refuses to acknowledge, followed by a state-party-run caucus two days later — makes it likely that, for momentum purposes, the results of both will be a wash.

In South Carolina, Haley trails Trump by a wide margin in the polls. And the state's rapid growth — and Trump's grip on the party — means it's a different state than when Haley first won the governorship in 2010. But no candidate who's won statewide twice can be easily dismissed, especially if she's riding the tiger out of Manchester.

Contrary to conventional wisdom, Haley doesn't have to win New Hampshire, or even South Carolina — she just has

to keep it close enough to keep donors and voters convinced there might be a real nomination fight and move forward. Keep in mind that through the end of February, only 142 of the 2,429 delegates will have been allocated, just under 6 percent. Which means Super Tuesday on March 5 looms as Haley's moment of truth, the proving ground when the GOP learns once and for all if she's the viable Trump alternative DeSantis was supposed to be. Roughly two-thirds of all GOP delegates will be allocated in March, the bulk of them on March 5. Among the 15 states up for grabs that day: California, North Carolina, Texas and Virginia.

A number of Southern Trump strongholds will vote that day — including Alabama, Arkansas and Tennessee — and the demographics of the new Republican Party with its working-class base will work against her. Even as a daughter of the South, she will struggle to expand her footprint beyond the upscale suburbs where GOP support has eroded during the Trump era. But if she's held her own — and can hold him to under 50 percent in certain states, a critical threshold for delegate allocation purposes — she could scoop up a large swath of delegates.

There's still a good chance this is where the ride ends. After Super Tuesday, primary season transitions from a momentum play to a delegate slog, and Trump is well-prepared for that, having learned from his 2016 experience.

To go farther, Haley will need a few surprise finishes accompanied by strong performances in some traditionally blue states where beaten-down Republicans might welcome the prospect of a Haley-led ticket and the prospect of diminished down-ticket losses. She'd also probably need a big-state win in a place like California. If she were to accomplish such a feat — and continued to hold her margins over Joe Biden in head-to-head polling matchups — she could justify remaining in the race, especially with Trump's legal troubles looming in the background.

Don't Be So Certain Trump Has the Nomination Locked Up

Sure, at the moment, it looks like Donald Trump will win the 2024 Republican nomination.

But it smells a bit like 2016, when there was near unanimity in the press and the political class that he didn't have a shot in hell against Hillary Clinton. In an unstable, unconventional time, it's not inconceivable to imagine a scenario in which the bottom suddenly falls out for the former president and a rival ambushes him on his way to the GOP convention in Milwaukee. Like Nikki Haley.

Let's review the last quarter-century of presidential elections. The GOP's Electoral College lock has been picked. The Democratic Blue Wall has been breached. Ohio, a longtime bellwether, has gone red. Georgia and Arizona, longtime GOP stalwarts, have gone blue. Jeb Bush, a GOP juggernaut, lost to a reality TV star. Joe Biden, a dead letter after the first 2020 primaries, is now president.

If we've learned anything, it's that the laws of political gravity or axioms about elected politics don't always apply anymore. Traditional voting habits have been thrown out the window. Polling has proved unreliable. And yet here we are, again, operating with utter certainty that the GOP primary is already cooked.

This isn't a prediction or a guarantee that Haley will beat Trump. But if it happens, here's how it would work.

Her uphill climb begins next

Monday in the Iowa caucuses, where Haley needs a solid second- or third-place finish. In her best-case scenario, the former U.N. ambassador finishes a strong second — which sounds the death knell for Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis — and holds Trump to under 50 percent.

While she hasn't concentrated on Iowa like DeSantis, who shows signs of having a formidable ground game there, there is an outline for Haley to follow in the state. In 2016, Marco Rubio won just 5 of Iowa's 99 counties but he won nearly a quarter of the vote. He delivered a strong third-place showing — less than 2,500 votes behind Trump — by running best in the more populous parts of the state, particularly in the Des Moines suburbs and in counties with high levels of educational attainment.

For better and for worse, Haley and Rubio share a political profile: roughly the same age, the children of immigrants and forged in the GOP's tea party era. As South Carolina governor in 2016, Haley endorsed Rubio before the South Carolina primary, a coup for the Florida senator at the time since she was wildly popular at home. Haley "exemplifies what I want the Republican Party to be known for in the 21st century — vibrant, reform-oriented, optimistic, upwardly mobile," Rubio told reporters at the time. As long as Haley places or

shows in Iowa — virtually no one in the state, and not even the campaigns themselves, think Trump will lose — she is in the hunt. In fact, she could join Ronald Reagan, George H.W. Bush, John McCain, Mitt Romney and Trump in the pantheon of GOP nominees who lost in Iowa.

After Iowa, it's on to New Hampshire, where expectations will be higher. She's already nipping at Trump's heels in the latest polls, so anything less than a second-place finish could prove fatal to Haley's campaign. But New Hampshire is also uniquely suited for her. Polls suggest it is the early state where Trump is weakest. She has spent time and directed resources there and it shows — she has doubled her support over the past two months. Her efforts have been bolstered by popular GOP Gov. Chris Sununu, who is pulling out all the stops on her behalf. (At 13 years old, Sununu saw the power of a New Hampshire governor to sway the state results when his father, then-Gov. John Sununu, helped lift George H.W. Bush to victory in 1988.)

This is where she needs to bleed Trump and show Republicans in the states to come — most notably in her home state, which votes a month later — that there is a viable alternative.

New Hampshire election rules work to Haley's advantage since independent voters can take part in the GOP primary.