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When Age Is Just A Number



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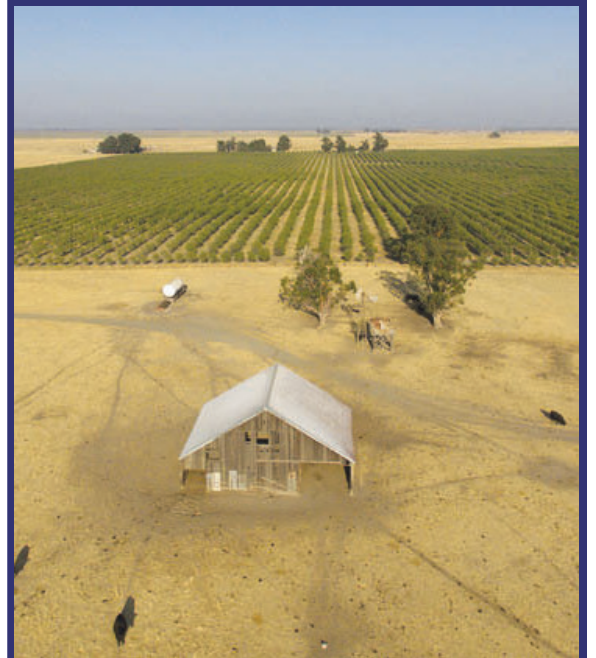
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*Jamie Dimon warns 'all these very powerful forces' will impact U.S. economy in 2024 and 2025*

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# 'VP, VP' chants for Vivek Ramaswamy, Donald Trump says 'he's going to work with us'

**After Vivek Ramaswamy delivered a passionate speech endorsing Donald Trump, the crowd chanted "VP, VP," and Trump stated that Ramaswamy would be working with them "for a long time."**

(Sai Bureau)- Vivek Ramaswamy, who pulled out of the US Presidential race on Tuesday, was greeted by crowds with "VP, VP (Vice President)" chants when he shared the stage with the Republican candidate and former President Donald Trump in New Hampshire as he delivered a fiery speech endorsing Trump. As Ramaswamy concluded, Trump praised him, saying, "He's going to be working with us for a long time." At the campaign event in Atkinson in New Hampshire, Ramaswamy asserted, "This man is going to be the next President to revive them. E pluribus unum, from many, one [Motto of US]."

"You know how we are going to do it? We are going to do it by speaking the truth at every step of the way. There are two genders in this country. Period. That is the truth. Fossil fuels are a requirement for human prosperity. Drill, frack, burn coal, and embrace nuclear energy. Reverse racism isn't racism, and



an open border is not a border. Parents determine the education of their children. The nuclear family is the greatest form of governance known to humankind. Capitalism lifts us up from poverty. There are three branches of government in the United States, not four. The US Constitution is the strongest and greatest guarantor of freedom in human history. That is the truth; we fight for the

truth," Ramaswamy said amid loud cheers. After his speech, the Republican supporters started chanting "VP, VP," endorsing him for the post of Vice President while the duo whispered and launched on stage.

Trump then said, "Pretty good, isn't it? He is a fantastic guy, and he really got something that is very special." The former president added, "I was actually surprised when he called up because he was doing really good" and said, "He is going to be working with us, and he will be working with us for a long time," and the crowd welcomed the comments with cheers. Later, sharing the video of him with Trump on the stage, Ramaswamy tweeted, "America-First. One movement. Indivisible."

The 38-year-old entrepreneur Ramaswamy made the announcement to suspend his 2024 US Presidential bid on Tuesday after Donald Trump won the Iowa caucus.

## Canada university sees Indian students protesting in sub-zero temperature

***Around 80 international students from India and their supporters are protesting at Algoma University's campus in Brampton, Canada, in freezing temperatures. The protest has brought into focus Canada's international students programmes.***

(Sai Bureau)- Amid freezing temperatures in Canada, Indian international students are protesting in front of Algoma University. They are demanding an external investigation into "unfair enrolment and grading practices". The international students, who are facing charges of cheating, failed their course exams. The protest, which was started by a group of IT students, drew support from people from three other classes, bringing to focus larger issues with Canada's international student policy. Despite sub-zero weather conditions, around 80 students and their supporters took to the streets, carrying posters and placards with powerful messages such as "Students Justice Now", "Stop Scamming Students" and "Education is not for sale". They paraded around the university buildings at the northeast corner of Main and Queen streets. Their collective voice echoed demands for fair reassessment, transparency, and accountability from Algoma University officials.

"We are not doing this just to pass the



exam. We are not liking it. We are not having fun outside in this weather," one of the protesting students, Simran Kaur, told the Canadian news portal The Star. Simran Kaur is enrolled in Algoma's two-year postgraduate certificate programme in human resources and business management and has failed a management course. "We are not forcing this university to randomly pass us

overnight. We just demand a transparent, a fair grading system," she said.

**FOCUS ON CANADA'S INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS PROGRAMME**

With an increase in foreign student enrolment in recent years, the protest has focused attention on Canada's international student programme and raised concerns about its effectiveness.

The demand for justice highlights the difficulties faced by international students in the Canadian educational system.

The protest originated with information technology students who complained of mass failures in an online class without explanation.

In response, Algoma University conducted an urgent review, implementing a "standard bell curve" that allowed 61 additional students in the class of 230 students to surpass a 50% passing grade. The remaining 32 failing students were offered a makeup exam, study materials, and free tutorial sessions, all administered by a different faculty member with no additional fees.

Algoma University maintains its commitment to academic integrity.

"As a public university, Algoma University deeply values academic integrity. While we provide all students a range of resources to support their success, it is up to them to do the work and pass their exam," The Star quoted a statement by the university.

## Delhi's Rs 75 lakh robbery solved, 5 arrested including victim's driver

(News Agency) Five men, including a driver of the victim, were arrested for robbing Rs 75 lakh in Delhi's Shalimar Garden area at gunpoint, police said on Thursday. The accused were identified as Vicky Kumar, 33, Robin a.k.a Rasoo, Sudhanshu, 23, Mukesh a.k.a Bobby, 50, and Abhishek, 21.

According to police, on January 13, a police control room (PCR) call reporting a robbery of Rs 75 lakh was received at Shalimar Bagh police station.

The complainant told police that he had dispatched his employee to collect Rs 75 lakh in cash from someone he knew, near Mata Channo Devi Hospital in Janakpuri area of west Delhi.

The employee, accompanied by a driver, reached the spot where a man in a car handed over a bag containing the money and they put in the car's boot and returned to their office at Govind Mohalla in Haidarpur area.

As they parked the car outside the office, the employee took the bag and was entering the office, two men approached



from behind, brandished weapons, and robbed the bag containing cash from him, Special Commissioner of Police, Law & Order, Ravindra Singh Yadav said.

During the investigation, the police team scrutinised CCTV footage from cameras installed in and around the spot and thoroughly checking the route taken by the victim's vehicle.

"Due to the incident occurring at night,

locating the culprits proved challenging despite the assistance of CCTV cameras. Dense fog and low visibility further hindered the investigation. Nonetheless, the team persistently worked on the case, narrowing down their investigation to the Kirari Suleman Nagar area," the Special CP said. Local informers were activated, and technical surveillance was deployed. Police successfully identified the accused persons,

leading to their arrest and the recovery of the case property.

Interrogation revealed that the accused Vicky was the complainant's employee facing financial hardship. He shared information about the money transaction with his brother-in-law Robin, who, in turn, informed his friend Sudhanshu.

"Sudhanshu, along with his father Mukesh, and friends Abhishek and Rohit, executed the plan. Mukesh, with a history of involvement in four robbery cases, provided vehicles and weapons. The five accused persons have been arrested, and the case property, amounting to Rs 60,70,000, along with the vehicle and weapons used in the crime, have been recovered," said the Special CP. "Efforts are ongoing to apprehend the remaining accused, Rohit, and recover the remaining balance," he said. "Vicky is an employee of complainant Nitesh Goyal and has been working as a driver for the last eight years," the official added.

## India will need 2,840 new aircraft in 20 years, says Airbus

(News Agency) India will need 2,840 new aircraft over the next two decades to serve the needs of its growing civil aviation market, Airbus India and South Asia President and Managing Director Remi Maillard said on Thursday. Addressing a press conference on the sidelines of 'Wings India 2024' here, he said India would also require 41,000 pilots as well as 47,000 technical staff during the same period.

The aircraft manufacturer has revised upwards its projection for aircraft required by India. In 2022, it had put the demand at 2,210 aircraft.

"Global aviation is pivoting to India and we are only seeing the tip of the iceberg given the potential of the Indian aviation industry," he said, adding that India is a force that will power global aviation.

Maillard mentioned that India's economic fundamentals are strong with solid growth



drivers such as the demographic dividend and urbanisation. Despite the significant

growth for the last few years, per capita air travel remains low in India at a mere 0.13 to be compared to 0.5 in China. He said India will remain the fastest growing civil aviation market in the world over the next two decades with a growth rate of 6.2 per cent as against the global average of 3.6 per cent.

He said Airbus was seeing good demand for aircraft orders from India. In 2023, it received a record 750 aircraft orders including 500 jets from IndiGo and 250 from Air India.

Last year, Airbus delivered 75 units to Indian carriers - 41 to Indigo, 19 to Air India, 14 to Vistara and one to Go First. He also stated that India will be investing close to \$12 billion in building new airports and refurbishing existing ones. The country has set a target of around 200 airports within the next five years, up from the current 150. He expects to double the company's sourcing from India to \$1.5 billion. Currently, Airbus sources goods worth \$750 million from the country. The company is collaborating with over 40 suppliers, both public and private. They contribute to various aspects of Airbus's operations, including engineering, manufacturing, digital solutions, innovation, and customer services.

## Punjab moves Supreme Court against bail to Sukhpal Singh Khaira

(News Agency) The Punjab Government has moved the Supreme Court challenging the Punjab and Haryana High Court's order granting bail to Congress MLA Sukhpal Singh Khaira in a case registered against him under the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (NDPS) Act. A Bench, led by Justice Bela M Trivedi — which briefly took up the Punjab Government's petition against the January 4 order of the high court on Wednesday — posted it for hearing Thursday.

Senior advocate PS Patwalia, representing Khaira, questioned the urgency in the matter and said it was mentioned on Tuesday evening and got listed the very next day. The state government had malice against Khaira, he alleged. On behalf of the Punjab Government, senior counsel Siddharth Luthra submitted it was listed following



proper approval by the Registry. As Patwalia said he had not been supplied a copy of the petition and that he needed time to make his submissions, Luthra submitted that the petition's copy had been circulated.

Luthra contended that the bail order completely ignored Section 37 of NDPS Act which required the court to be satisfied that there were reasonable grounds for believing that the accused was not guilty of such offence and that he was not likely to commit any offence while on bail.

Before he could be released following the high court's order granting him bail in the NDPS case, Khaira was arrested by the Punjab Police in a fresh case registered at Subhanpur police station on a complaint filed by the wife of a key witness in the 2015 drugs case, accusing him of criminal intimidation. However, he was granted bail by a Kapurthala court in the second case on January 15.

# Pharma Live Expo & Summit: Alluring booths outpour latest pharmaceutical marvels



By Susmita Ghosh

Where cutting-edge science meets boundless ambition, the Pharma Live Expo & Summit, organized by the Indian Drug Manufacturers' Association, ignites the future of pharma industry. This electrifying event promises three days of inspiration, collaboration, and limitless potential at the Bombay Exhibition Centre, Nesco Mumbai, from January 17th to 19th.

A kaleidoscope of vibrant booths showcasing the latest pharmaceutical aces, from potent APIs to sleek packaging machineries. The air crackles with excitement as 20,000 pharma professionals, representing every facet of the industry – from eagle-eyed QA specialists to meticulous production engineers – mingle and forge connections that will shape the future of healthcare. This is the vibrant tapestry of the Pharma Live Expo & Summit, blessed by the Dept. of Pharmaceuticals, Govt. of India.

The inaugural ceremony of the Pharma Live Expo & Summit shone under the illustrious presence of key industry leaders and dignitaries. The Summit was



inaugurated by Dr Arunish Chawla, IAS – Dept. of Pharmaceuticals, Govt. of India.

It also includes Shri Ajit Singh, Chairman, Associated Capsules Group Worldwide, Shri Abhimanyu Kale, IAS, Commissioner, FDA, Maharashtra, Mr. Daara Patel, Secretary General IDMA, Dr. H G Koshia, Commissioner, Food & Drugs Control Administration, Gujarat, Dr Viranchi Shah, National President, IDMA and Director, Saga Lifesciences, Shri Chirag Doshi, Chairman, Pharma Live Expo, Shri Shobhit Deputy Drugs Controller, FDA, Madhya Pradesh, Shri Jayant Kumar, Dy. Drugs Controller, CDSCO, Shri Ashish Chauhan, Director,

Bluetech Media, Shri Eddy Wardoyo, Consul General, Republic of Indonesia, Shri Raj Kumar Sharma, Founder President & CEO, Indo Latin American Chamber of Commerce, Shri Shereef Rahuman Managing Director Icxpo Consults Pvt Ltd., Dubai and Dr George A Patani, Vice President (Western Region), IDMA & Director, INGA Labs Ltd. "India's pharma and med-tech industries are on a powerful trajectory, fuelled by the government's two-pronged approach: targeted financial incentives and strategic policy frameworks," mentioned Dr. Arunish Chawla, IAS, Secretary, Department of Pharmaceuticals, Govt. of India. He highlighted initiatives like bulk

drug and medical device perk schemes, common facility support, and a dedicated policy framework presently mapping the value chain across tariffs and GST to optimize tax structures and incentivize domestic value addition. He further emphasized on the ongoing reform of existing schemes to ensure their effectiveness in meeting industry needs.

"Knowledge is power, and IDMA is committed to empower the Indian pharma industry," declared Mr. Daara Patel, Secretary General IDMA. He pointed to their strong network of "national and international speakers, including partners like The United States Pharmacopeia (USP)". These partnerships not only bring "expert voices to the table" but also facilitate "regular seminars and workshops" on cutting-edge advancements.

"This summit is not a congregation, it's a celebration of relentless pursuit of excellence in pharmaceuticals. We are here not merely as spectators but as an active participants in the symphony of innovations. In these next three days, let us carry forward the spirit of innovation and collaboration that define Pharma Live 2023. Together we intend to make this event the greatest event of Pharma in Mumbai," he concluded.

The delegates from countries like Malaysia, Indonesia, Taiwan, Ghana, Uganda, Angola, Sri Lanka, Ethiopia, Swaziland, Slovak Republic, Australia, Madagascar, Chile, Somalia, Nepal, Rwanda, UK, USA, Saudi Arabia, Azerbaijan, Brazil, Philippines, Nigeria, Barbados, Myanmar, Germany, UAE and many others joined this business extravaganza.

## 88% Indian professionals considering new job in 2024: Report

(News Agency) Nearly nine in 10 (88 per cent) professionals in India are considering a new job in 2024 despite economic uncertainty, a new report revealed on Wednesday. The numbers are up by four per cent (year-on-year) compared to 2023, according to the professional networking platform LinkedIn.

"This signals a shift in attitudes where professionals are no longer willing to stick it out, instead, they're taking ownership of their careers and want to make up for lost time by focusing on productivity and career growth," the report said.

The report surveyed 1,097 professionals in full-time or part-time employment across India



between November 24, 2023, to December 12, 2023.

"To be successful in their job hunt, it's essential for professionals to stand out by

dedicating time to spruce up their profiles, highlighting their skills,

and staying informed about industry developments," said Nirajita Banerjee, Career Expert

and Sr. Managing Editor for LinkedIn India.

"This will help increase their chances of finding the job they want and develop skills needed

to build a career with staying power," she added.

The biggest motivators for changing jobs for professionals in this challenging economic environment include -- better work-life balance (42 per cent) and the need for higher wages (37 per cent). They are also willing to explore new career paths, with 79 per cent saying they are looking for opportunities outside of their industry or role. Moreover, the report noted that nearly half (45 per cent) of professionals do not know how to match their skills to the job they want, making the job search process more difficult. As per the data, skills for jobs have changed by 30 per cent since 2015 in India.

# CM Mann holds meetings to bring Investment in Punjab with Foreign Diplomats

(JAG MOHAN THAKEN)

Chandigarh Punjab Chief Minister Bhagwant Singh Mann held talks with the Ambassadors of the various countries on Wednesday to convince them for making huge investments in the state. During the meetings with the Ambassadors, the Chief Minister showcased Punjab as a land of opportunities and invited them to encourage the companies of their respective countries to invest in the state. He said that companies will be immensely benefited by investing in the state, which is rapidly emerging as the industrial hub of the country. Bhagwant Mann said that Punjab has complete communal harmony, peace and amity, which are mainly responsible for overall development and prosperity in the state.

The Chief Minister said that the foreign companies should make optimum use of this congenial atmosphere backed by excellent infrastructure, power, skilled human resources, and best industrial and work culture to spread their business. Extending a red-carpet welcome to the companies, he said that the state government was always open for new ideas and innovations to boost up the industrial growth in Punjab. Mann said that the day is not far away when Punjab will emerge



as the industrial hub of the country. In a meeting with Australian Ambassador Phillip Green, the Chief Minister underlined the need for mutual cooperation in varied fields to further boost economy of Australia as well as that of Punjab. He said that there is a huge potential of investment in agriculture, sports industry, cattle feed, education, and others in Punjab. Bhagwant Mann invited the Australian companies to invest in the state adding that it will be mutually beneficial for Australia and Punjab.

During meeting with Ambassador of United Kingdom Alex Ellis, the Chief Minister said

that there was a huge scope of mutual growth between Punjab and UK in Agri-Food Processing sector in terms of Processing for poultry, pork, value added dairy products, fruit Juice concentrate manufacturing, potato Processing, food Packaging and ready to Eat/Confectionary Items. Likewise, he said that both UK and Punjab can also be benefitted from strategic tie ups in Pharmaceuticals, Engineering, Information Technology and Chemical sectors adding he invited the UK universities to set up their campuses in Punjab. Bhagwant Singh Mann also reminded the Ambassador about the pivotal role being played by

Punjabis in socio-economic development of United Kingdom adding he also flagged the issue of providing Direct flight connectivity between UK and Punjab to facilitate the passengers. In a meeting with Ambassador of Brazil Kenneth H. da Nobrega, the Chief Minister said that there was a huge scope of investment by the Brazilian companies especially in sectors like Agro Food Processing, New and Renewable Source of Energy, Logistics, Information and Technology and Chemicals. He said that Brazilian companies can be immensely benefitted by investing in the state as apart

from fertile land the state has a pool of skilled and hard-working manpower which can be of immense use for them. Bhagwant Mann assured that the state will provide fulsome support and cooperation to the Brazilian companies desirous of investing in the state.

During deliberations with Ambassador of Spain José María Ridaó, the Chief Minister apprised him that Punjab exports major products like basmati rice, bulk drugs, products of steel and iron, auto components, agro-chemicals, cotton fabrics, madeups and others to Spain and the total value of these exports was Rs 510.35 crores.

## Ram Lalla's 'neighbours' exult in their new status

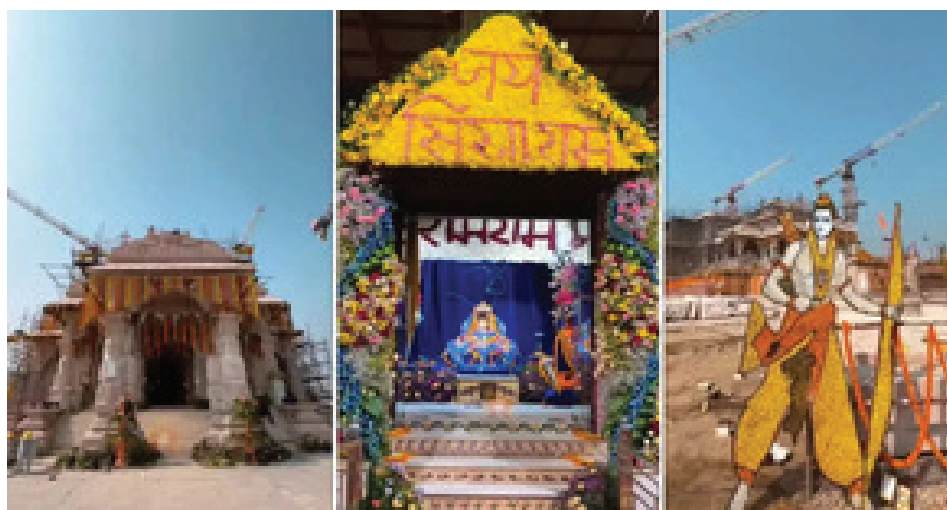
(News Agency)-The neighbouring temples in the Ram Janmabhoomi complex have been accorded the status of 'padosi' (neighbour) of Ram Lalla. The Mahants of these temples have been invited for the Pran Pratishtha ceremony on January 22 while their disciples would be deputed as volunteers in the ceremony.

As the majority of the land around the temple has been acquired by the Trust, the few temples situated next door have attained special status as padosis of Ram Lalla.

The Amawa Ram temple, known for round the year open kitchen service, is the new selfie spot for the visitors looking to click themselves with Ram temple in the background.

The increased interest in religious tourism is evident as one steps inside Amawa Ram temple, established in 1919, which remains crowded through the day. It has been serving free food to the visitors for the past four years (since the court case was decided in favour of Ram Lalla).

"It is the only accessible place where one can click a selfie with Ram temple in the



background," said a devotee.

Since carrying mobile phones or electronic items is not allowed inside the makeshift temple, devotees climb up on the first floor of the Amawa temple to take photographs of the under-construction Ram temple complex.

The Rang Mahal temple has planned 41-day-long celebrations. "Our social status has been elevated. Our property is the first one and we share our boundary wall with Ram Lalla's temple.

We launched a

41-day-long kirtan on Tuesday and will hold bhandara (community kitchen service) till February 28. Our followers from all over the country are keen to visit Ayodhya from January 23 and we are making arrangements to host them in batches at present," said Ram Sharan Das, mahant of the historical Rang Mahal that is dedicated to Sita.

In-charge of Ram Rasoi, Chandra Mohan, who is from Tirupati, said, "The count of

Ram bhakts who come to our community kitchen has been going up steadily over the past five-six months. We operate an open kitchen from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. on a daily basis and have been serving food to about 4,000 devotees every day. We are contemplating serving food in two shifts post the Pran Pratishtha ceremony."

While Rang Mahal and Amawa are situated just opposite the Ram temple, Sri Aurobindo Ashram is situated on the other end, next to the existing makeshift temple site. Dharmendra Singh, who manages the property said, "From Tuesday, we have started organising havan twice a day and will distribute prasad among the devotees. We are extremely attached to Ram Lalla as we have been staying next to him for decades."

The mahants and chiefs of all the three establishments have been invited to the ceremony by the trust.

The trust has also promised to facilitate darshan for followers of the padosis January 27 onwards.

## PM Modi pays tribute to MGR on his birth anniversary



(News Agency)- Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Wednesday paid tributes to late Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M.G. Ramachandran (MGR) on the latter's 107th birth anniversary. MGR, the matinee idol who later forayed into politics, was born on this day in 1917. He passed away on December 24, 1987. He was the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu from 1977 until his death in 1987. In post on X written in Tamil, the Prime Minister said: "Today we commemorate the great MGR on his birthday and celebrate his life. He was a true icon of Tamil cinema and a visionary leader. The

social justice and compassion that permeated his films won hearts beyond the silver screen.

"As a leader and Chief Minister, he worked tirelessly for the welfare of the people and had a lasting impact on the growth and development of Tamil Nadu. His work continues to inspire us."

MGR, who was a highly popular Tamil actor, entered politics by becoming a member of the C.N. Annadurai-led DMK. After differences cropped up with M.Karunanidhi, he walked out of the DMK and in January 1972 launched the AIADMK.

## Child killed as car runs over migrants sleeping on roadside in Punjab



(News Agency)- A child was killed and two other migrants were injured when a speeding car ran over them early Wednesday when they were sleeping on the roadside in Punjab's Bathinda town, police said. Prima facie the cause of the accident is believed to be low visibility owing to dense fog, a police official said. He added an investigation is on and the

injured have been hospitalised.

In another accident, four policemen were killed and several injured after a Punjab Police bus in which they were travelling met with an accident in Mukerian town.

The bus, coming from PAP Jalandhar, the headquarters for Punjab Armed Police men, crashed into a tractor-trolley parked on roadside, the police said.

## Adani Group to invest Rs 12,400 crore in Telangana

(News Agency) Adani Group has announced an investment worth Rs 12,400 crore in Telangana across multiple businesses, the Telangana government said on Wednesday. Chief Minister A. Revanth Reddy met with Adani Group Chairman, Gautam Adani at the World Economic Forum (WEF) in Davos.

The Adani Group exchanged four MOUs with the state government for investments in Telangana over the next few years.

According to an official release in Hyderabad, Adani Green Energy will invest Rs 5,000 crore for setting up two Pumped Storage Projects of 1350 MW.

AdaniConneX Data Center will invest Rs 5,000 crore to set up a Data Center campus in Chandanvelly. Ambuja Cements Ltd. will invest Rs 1,400 crore in a Cement Grinding unit in Telangana with a capacity of 6 million tonnes per annum (MTPA). Adani Aerospace and Defence will invest Rs 1,000 crore in Counter Drone Systems and Missile Development and Manufacturing



Centers at the Adani Aerospace and Defence Park in Hyderabad. The chief minister has assured Gautam Adani that the state government will provide required amenities, infrastructure, and support for the projects. "The new Government in Telangana has been extremely investor

friendly and with the new planned policies, should attract more investments. Adani group will continue growing in Telangana at high pace with the provided," the statement quoted Gautam Adani as saying.

The Chief Minister was accompanied by information technology and industries minister

D. Sridhar Babu. President and CEO of Adani Aerospace and Defence, Ashish Rajvanshi, Principal Secretary ITE&C, I&C Jayesh Ranjan, and Special Secretary, Investment Promotion, Vishnu Vardhan Reddy were also present during the meeting.

## Two die of suffocation in guard room in Varanasi

(News Agency) A 64-year-old security guard, Prem Singh, and his 51-year-old friend Sachau Pal were found dead in the guard room of a sari factory in the Maheshpur area of Uttar Pradesh's Varanasi. The bodies were found on Tuesday. Deputy Commissioner Of Police (DCP), Varuna zone, Amit Kumar revealed that the cause of death was

asphyxiation triggered by a coal brazier kept inside the guard room.

The bodies have been sent for autopsy, with the police confirming that there were no unauthorised entries into the guard room after scanning CCTV footage from the factory compound.

DCP Kumar urged the family to file a complaint. However, the bereaved kin have not submitted any complaint as



yet.

The guard's son, Raghvendra said his father was not responding to his call. When he visited the factory, the door was locked. Raghvendra alerted the police.

Investigations revealed that the victims had lit a coal brazier in the guard room to combat the cold, which probably led to the suffocation.

## Iran's Strikes In Pak Reveal Islamabad's Strategic Collapse

In the middle of December last year, Jaish ul-Adl (also known as Jaish al-Zolm, translated to "Army of Justice" in English and formerly known as 'Jundullah'), a Sunni militant group operating around the Baluch insurgency across Pakistan's Balochistan region and Iran's Sistan and Baluchestan province, attacked a police post in the small Iranian city of Rusk. 12 Iranian police personnel were killed in a gun battle that lasted hours. The attack on Rusk was one of many attributed to Jaish ul-Adl over the years.

Yesterday's Iranian missile strikes inside Pakistan brought to the forefront long standing differences between the two countries over Baluch militancy and the ethnic tensions that revolve around it. The missile attacks come at a moment of fragility in not just a regional but also the global security order. Pakistan responded by condemning Iranian actions and summoning their charge d'affaires. According to Iranian press, Jaish ul-Adl have confirmed the strikes on their positions in Balochistan's remote mountains. Interestingly, Iran's Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian and Pakistan's caretaker Prime Minister Anwaar Ul Haq Kakar had met hours before at the Davos economic summit in Switzerland while Iran's Special Representative for Afghanistan, Hassan Kazemo Qami, visited Pakistan for consultations. During his visit, Qami was quoted by the Afghan press as saying that "Islamabad and Tehran have reached an agreement on interaction with Kabul". This has spurred a wave of rumors on whether Tehran sounded out Islamabad about the strike against Jaish ul-Adl before it took place. With Pakistan already facing serious security challenges from the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), Islamic State Khorasan (ISKP) and its deteriorating relationship with the Afghan Taliban - a group it sheltered for decades - direct aggression by Iran is another front Pakistani military may be unable to afford. The tri-nexus between Iran, Pakistan and the Taliban on Baloch militancy is very complicated. The Afghan Taliban is often blamed for both privately supporting and more publicly decrying groups such as Jaish ul-Adl. The complexities do not stop within these impoverished geographies. The founding leader of Jaish, Salahuddin Farooqui, has also previously opposed Iranian support for Syria's president Bashar Al-Assad. Tensions between Pakistan and Iran over Jaish's activities around their borders go back to 2011-12. Iran, since then, has blamed Pakistan for being soft regarding its concerns over these entities, and has blamed its other foes such as Israel, US and even Saudi Arabia and the UAE for offering their support.

While some analysts are looking at the Iranian action in Pakistan from the lens of its ongoing strategic play in the Middle East, this hypothesis may be a bit of a stretch. The issue of groups such as Jaish and tensions between Iran and Pakistan over Baluch militancy pre-date the ongoing war in Gaza or the deteriorating security situation in the Red Sea. Iran has often reiterated that it would target Jaish safe spaces inside Pakistan over the years, and the exchange of fire between troops at the border between the two countries has been a regular occurrence. This incident is uniquely a bilateral and border management matter between the two countries, which is today further complicated with the Afghan Taliban seizing power in Kabul in 2021. The ideological nature of Jaish makes it difficult for the likes of the Taliban to shun them or their cause, in exchange for political and geopolitical upmanship, considering they are an Islamist ideological movement first, and a political entity later (as showcased by the continuing logjam within the Taliban regarding girls' education in the country). For Pakistan, this new theatre is another gash on a rapid disintegration of its now institutionally failed policies of promoting state-sponsored extremism and terrorism. As the country's economy collapses further and it fails to control its own strategic assets from turning against its rule, other countries and interests seem to be looking at this time in history as the most opportune to target these ecosystems unilaterally as well. With only caretakers managing the madhouse, political will seems limited, and the military has been too busy undermining its parallel civilian challenges from figures such as Imran Khan who got too big for the military's comfort level.

A significantly disconcerting fact around events such as the Iranian missile strike is that Pakistan, in fact, is a nuclear power. Nuclear deterrence was clearly not in play as Tehran planned its targeting of Jaish ecosystems in Baluchistan, which begs the question on what kind of strategic thinking, if at all, is taking hold in the corridors of power when it comes to its position as one of the very few nuclear powers in the world. The fact that Pakistan's all-powerful army chief reportedly requested American help to take on the TTP threat as part of a counter-terrorism narrative went unsold in Washington. The only other good use Pakistan could make of its nukes today is to create a fear of the weapons landing in hands of militants. As noted scholar Stephen P Cohen had once said, Pakistan negotiates with the world by pointing a gun to its own head.

By Kabir Taneja

## Iranian Strikes Prove Pakistan is Officially a Banana Republic

The geopolitical temperature in West Asia is refusing to come down. Not only the Israeli retaliation against Hamas has completed 100 days, but the events in the Red Sea have proved to be a new flare up bringing a lot of global attention to the region. Even as all this is going on, Iran has sprung a surprise by conducting a surgical strike against Pakistan in the wee hours of Wednesday. Iranian missiles hit a village in the Iran-Pakistan border region that falls in Pakistan's Balochistan province. According to Tehran, the strike was aimed at Jaish al-Adl, a Sunni Balochi terrorist group which it accuses of being under the patronage of Iran's rivals in the region.

Interestingly Iran's surgical strike on Pakistan comes on a day when its foreign minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian and Pakistan's caretaker Prime Minister Anwaar Ul Haq Kakar had a meeting on the sidelines of the World Economic Forum at Davos, Switzerland. Not just this, the navies of the two countries were also conducting a joint naval exercise in the Strait of Hormuz and the Persian Gulf on the same day. It also comes at a time when the Pakistani air force has been very active on the social media platform X boasting about its air defence capabilities, but the Iranian strike has exposed the hollowness of its claims. Meanwhile, Pakistan has responded to the strike by saying it is a violation of its sovereignty and Iran has done it despite several communication channels being open between the two countries.

Jaish al-Adl, the terrorist group which was on Iran's radar during the strike was founded in 2012, operates both in Iran as well as Pakistan. It is notorious for conducting terror activities

in Iran which includes an attack on a police station in December 2023 in the southeastern part of Iran that claimed the lives of more than 11 policemen. At that time, Iranian Interior Minister Ahmad Vahidi had accused Pakistan of failing to take adequate security measures thus enabling terrorists to cross-over in Iranian territory and conduct the attack.

Iran shares a 909 km long border with Pakistan which divides the Iranian province of Sistan-Baluchestan from the Pakistani province of Balochistan. The Sistan-Baluchestan province is the only Sunni-dominated province of Iran where almost 2 million of its total 85 million population resides. Jaish has a stated goal of liberating the Iranian province of Sistan-Baluchestan from Iran which it alleges to be facing discrimination and repression in a Shia-dominated country. It is a relatively new terrorist group, but it has posed as a significant challenge to Iran by conducting various attacks including a 2019 suicide attack that killed 27 troops of Iran. It has an Indian connection as well. It was Jaish al-Adl that had kidnapped Kulbhushun Jadhav, an Indian businessman from Iran and traded him with Pakistan's intelligence agency the ISI for a monetary reward. Later Pakistan had claimed that Jadhav was a former Indian Navy officer and a spy. Iranian surgical strikes have sent a wave of shock in Pakistan with their top leadership caught completely unaware of Iran's plan. But people in Pakistan's neighbouring countries including Afghanistan and India seem to have thoroughly relished Iran's actions because they themselves are a victim of Pakistan-sponsored terrorism.

**INSIDER**

ISSN No. 1554 06X

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**A Publication of Media Partners Capital, Inc.**

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# Trump's Iowa win shows the Republican nomination is no contest

By Daniel McCarthy

Former President Donald Trump's easy win in Iowa on Monday confirms that there really is no race for the Republican nomination this year. With a deep freeze discouraging turnout, the caucuses provided a hard test of voter enthusiasm. Trump's rivals failed it. A measure of the former president's insurmountable strength within the party is that he not only beat Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis, former South Carolina Gov. Nikki Haley and Vivek Ramaswamy, he also overcame all of the institutional powers backing them — some of the most formidable interests in the GOP.

The well-funded libertarian-leaning donor network assembled by billionaire Charles Koch put its money and muscle behind Haley. Evangelical leader Bob Vander Plaats and Iowa's Republican governor, Kim Reynolds, put their considerable influence to work for DeSantis. The forces arrayed against Trump are significant not only for their funding and their grassroots networks, but for the ideological commitments they represent. Voters faced a



philosophical choice, not just a pick of personalities.

They were also called upon to deliver a verdict of their own on the criminal cases against Trump.

The former president argues that these prosecutions are political, and Iowa Republicans showed that they agree. The 2024 election is shaping up to be a referendum on politics in the legal system as well as on Trump and President Joe Biden. If Trump's primary opponents (with the exception of former New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie, who dropped out of the race last week) have preferred to talk about almost anything else,

Trump has never been shy about discussing his legal travails on the campaign circuit. Voters, starting with Iowa's Republicans, are now having their say.

Iowa is a solid red state that gives a good sense of where the Republican Party as a whole stands today. If it's more red than the nation at large, it's the just right hue to predict what's coming in most other Republican contests. There are cycles when Iowa is an outlier, but all evidence says this isn't one of them. It's hard to think of any place where DeSantis could do better than Iowa. This was a state that Sen. Ted Cruz won in

2016, though even then he finished only 3 points ahead of Trump. The DeSantis campaign and its outside allies spent \$35 million in the state between January 1, 2023, and January 12 of this year. Trump's side, by contrast, spent just \$18.3 million. Even with an almost 2:1 spending advantage over Trump, DeSantis couldn't mount an effective challenge — not even with the backing of Reynolds and Vander Plaats.

A sign of just how little dissension there is in the Republican Party about Trump's nomination could be seen ahead of the caucuses, as everyone from North Dakota Gov. (and former 2024 presidential hopeful) Doug Burgum to Sens. Mike Lee and Marco Rubio stepped up to endorse Trump. DeSantis had a year to make his case for the nomination to the party's elected leaders nationwide, as well as to Iowa voters. They heard his offer and turned him down. His moment, for this cycle, is over. Haley's campaign and deep-pocketed backers spent even more in Iowa than DeSantis's team did: \$37 million as of Friday.

But if polling before the caucuses is any indication, Haley's donor dollars are largely buying support from non-Republicans: A Des Moines Register/NBC News/Mediacom poll found that Independents and Democrats make up half of her support. Haley's hopes for a strong showing in the New Hampshire primary on January 23 rest on the possibility of significant crossover voting from those outside the GOP. But while that strategy, if successful, might keep her campaign afloat until her home state of South Carolina votes on February 24, it's not a viable path to the Republican nomination. Iowa has tested Haley's support among Republicans and found it wanting. DeSantis and Haley were well-financed and politically experienced opponents: No one can say that Trump's victory over his rivals doesn't count because the anti-Trump vote was split or the candidate field was weak. DeSantis and Haley were not weak opponents — but as Iowa shows, even strong rivals can't touch Trump.

## Managing Ram Temple Push with Five Trillion-Dollar Economy Quest

By Dinesh Narayanan

Congress leader Rahul Gandhi set off on Sunday from conflict-ridden Manipur on his Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra, a two-month, East-to-West political journey that will end in Mumbai. Unlike the first phase where Gandhi walked from Kanyakumari in the South to Srinagar in the North to feel the grassroots, this one will largely be on wheels. He will demand social, economic and political justice for people and also reveal his own plan to deliver it, the party says.

While the roadshow comes ahead of the upcoming general elections, the party says it is political but not an "electoral rally". That is as true as the timing of the consecration of the Ram Temple in Ayodhya on January 22 not being a political event with an eye on elections. In fact, the Shri Ram Janmabhoomi Teerth Kshetra Trust's invitation to Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge, and leaders Sonia Gandhi and Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury, to attend the ceremony that will be presided over by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, was nothing short of an election-eve trap.

They rejected the invitation saying it was a political project of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The BJP lost no time in painting the rejection of

the invite as an affront to Hindus, the majority community in India. The Congress statement said that Lord Ram is worshipped by millions of people in the country and religion is a personal matter. Its ally, Samajwadi Party's leader Akhilesh Yadav, made the same point with elan. Yadav declined the invitation to attend the consecration ceremony but said he and his family would visit the temple later as devotees, ensuring the spotlight would unwaveringly stay on him. During Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi's reign, the Congress ran with the hare and hunted with the hounds on the mosque-temple issue, but the Sangh Parivar was miles ahead in setting the emotion-tugging, Hindu nationalist narrative. Ultimately the Babri mosque was demolished under the Congress' watch in 1992. The previous year, the party had presided over another demolition where the Narasimha Rao government smashed India's socialist mould of economic organisation and governance to pursue a free markets-driven national life.

The two back-to-back events created the opportunity for two compelling and competing political narratives: one of economic development and another of religious nationalism.

The Parivar did not have a ready response to economic liberalisation. Within

months of Manmohan Singh throwing open the Indian economy to wider private and foreign participation, the Swadeshi Jagran Manch was formed. It was the first Parivar organisation to focus on broad national economic policy. Former Sarsanghachalak of the RSS, Madhukar Dattatraya (Balasaheb) Deoras, who was the principal architect of the Ram Temple movement, had once told journalists that the Sangh never really gave serious thought to economic issues. Its labour and farmer organisations were narrow-focused. Bereft of viable original ideas, it joined the left parties to oppose foreign investments, multinational corporations and computerisation.

The Congress had a firm grip on the reins of the economic development narrative. The country's elite jumped on to the bandwagon too as levies fell and doing business became easier. The National Democratic Front government led by BJP stalwart Atal Behari Vajpayee briefly managed to seize it from the Congress with its highway building and business-friendly policies luring away industrialists and big capital, local and foreign. Vajpayee, however, completely misread the widening social fissures and economic inequality in the country. The BJP's "India Shining" campaign seemed like a slap on the face of the millions

struggling for livelihoods. Although the Congress wrested back power and the original architect of liberalisation Manmohan Singh was heading the government, it swung the other way, alienating businesses and the rising middle class of the country for its welfarist bent. The Parivar still did not have a viable answer. That is, until Narendra Modi, then Gujarat's helmsman and a favourite of industrialists, demonstrated how to seamlessly combine ideology with big business.

The consecration of the Ram Temple is the crowning glory of the strategy of merging unabashed Hindutva with business success. According to Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath, over 100 chartered planes are expected to land on January 22. The city's spanking new international airport will not have space to accommodate the private planes of the business leaders and movie stars arriving at the invitation of the temple trust. It would almost be remiss if the Sensex and Nifty do not set a new record that day. For the moment, the Parivar has control over the narratives of India's economic growth and establishment of a muscular Hindu nation. The gathering at Ayodhya will be testimony of the Indian elite's buy-in into the Parivar's cause.





## Why The 'Rebel' Shankaracharyas May Not Be Taken Seriously

By Sandhya Ravishankar

The Shankaracharyas of Puri and Badrinath have controversially termed the Ayodhya Ram temple consecration ceremony as a breach of the Shastras and are likely to skip the January 22 event. Swami Nischalananda Saraswati of Puri and Swami Avimuktshvaranand Saraswati of Badrinath are the key players in a raging debate that has sharpened political positions and criticism of the ruling BJP.

The seers also say the consecration must not happen until the entire temple structure is completed and have hinted that January 22 has been chosen for political purposes. Adi Shankara had, in the 8th century, founded the four holy shrines in Puri, Badrinath, Dwarka and Shringeri to propagate Vedic and religious knowledge.

The 'rebel' seers are not likely to find any serious support because of their own fractious legacies and the war for power that they have waged for decades.

The Jyotirmath Problem

The problem began with the Jyotirmath Peeth at Badrinath, which remained without a pontiff for 165 years until 1941. That year, the other three Shankaracharyas formed a committee of monks and scholars to search for a suitable Dandi Sanyasi to take charge of the Badrinath math. A Dandi Sanyasi is an ascetic who has renounced worldly ways and has studied the Vedas thoroughly.

Adi Shankara, who founded the four peeths, had set down clear guidelines on how to select a pontiff, in his books Mathamanya and Mahanushasan. In essence, the pontiff must be a Dandi Sanyasi, must have good knowledge of Sanskrit, must be well versed in the Vedas, Upanishads, Puranas and other ancient texts, and must be a Brahmin. After intense consultations, Swami Brahmanand was chosen to head the Badrinath peeth and appointed Shankaracharya in 1941.

When Swami Brahmanand died in 1953, a tussle erupted over his succession. It was found that Swami Brahmanand had left a will naming Swami Shantanand Saraswati as his successor. The will included two more names as Shantanand's successors. As a result, Shantanand Saraswati was anointed as the seer of the Jyotirmath in June 1953.

A furore broke out among a section of monks led by Karpatri Maharaj and Swaroopanand Maharaj. They claimed that the late pontiff Brahmanand Saraswati was of "unsound mind" and incapable of writing a will, so the document was "fake".

About two weeks after Shantanand Saraswati's appointment, Karpatri Maharaj's group propped up

Swami Krishna Bodhashram as the next seer of Jyotirmath.

The dispute went to court and Karpatri Maharaj's team argued that Shantanand Saraswati was not qualified to be pontiff "since he had not previously taken any education and until a few years back, had been a Book Binder at Geeta Press, Gorakhpur." Since he did not have the requisite Sanskrit education, they argued, he was not a Dandi Sanyasi, hence unfit for the position of pontiff.

In January 1970, a civil judge in Allahabad (now Prayagraj) held that Shantanand Saraswati's appointment as pontiff was valid and that Krishna Bodhashram's anointment was illegal and invalid. Krishna Bodhashram challenged the order. However, he died in September 1973, and the case abated. Shantanand Saraswati resigned as Shankaracharya, and appointed as his successor Vishnudev Anand Saraswati, who, in turn, appointed Vasudevanand Saraswati as the next Shankaracharya of Badrinath in 1989.

After Krishna Bodhashram's death, it was Swaroopanand Saraswati's turn to take charge as Shankaracharya of the Badrinath mutt. So powerful was he that by 1982, he was pontiff of both the Badrinath and Dwarka mutts.

However, in a landmark 2017 judgment, the Allahabad High Court struck down the

appointment of these Shankaracharyas as illegal and invalid. To sum up, the anointment of Krishna Bodhashram, Swaroopanand Saraswati and Vasudevanand Saraswati as Shankaracharyas was deemed illegal and invalid. The court held that only late Shantanand Saraswati's anointment was legal and that a committee must be set up to search for a new pontiff for Badrinath peeth within three months.

The Political Swamis

Shankaracharyas are expected to remain apolitical and engage only in the task of spreading religious knowledge. But Karpatri Maharaj and his disciples have repeatedly dabbled in political affairs.

In 1948, Karpatri Maharaj started a political party, the Akhil Bharatiya Ram Rajya Parishad. He appointed his disciple Swaroopanand Saraswati as the president of the party.

The Parishad won three Lok Sabha seats in Rajasthan in the 1952 elections and won one seat each in Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan in the 1962 elections. Karpatri Maharaj was a firebrand swami, raising his voice against the Hindu Code Bills and cow slaughter, in the years just after Indian independence.

After initially flirting with the Congress party, Karpatri Maharaj went on to lead sadhus on a protest against cow slaughter in

1966, resulting in Delhi police opening fire and killing eight Naga sadhus. With this, relations between Karpatri Maharaj and Indira Gandhi soured. The party eventually merged into the Jana Sangh, which later became the BJP. Karpatri Maharaj's disciple, Swaroopanand Saraswati was known to be close to Congress leaders, especially Digvijay Singh. He was also a vociferous opponent of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, having announced that he would campaign against him in 2014 in Varanasi.

Avimuktshvaranand Saraswati succeeded Swaroopanand Saraswati after his death in September 2022. However, this too went to court with the Supreme Court staying his coronation in October 2022 after two cases were filed against the succession, claiming that the Swami did not fulfil the conditions to become a Shankaracharya. Karpatri Maharaj's other disciple, Nischalananda Saraswati, was appointed Shankaracharya of the Govardhan mutt in Puri.

In effect, the disciples of Karpatri Maharaj now head the Badrinath and the Puri mutts and they have turned against the Pran Pratishtha ceremony.

The long and protracted power struggle within the Shankaracharya mutts has finally come home to roost and some pontiffs, with their hunger for power, now stand exposed.

The Head Priest Clarifies

The Shankaracharyas of Badrinath and Puri however, have not cited a single text to qualify their arguments that the Pran Pratishtha must not take place until the temple is completed.

But in a letter to a disciple, Ganeshwar Shastri David, the head priest of the Pran Pratishtha rituals along with Lakshmikant Mathuranath Dikshit, explained why the ceremony is legitimate even without the temple's completion. In his reply, he said the consecration can proceed once the sanctum sanctorum (garba griha) of the temple is completed and cited various puranas like the Narada Purana to bolster his point.

Comparisons between the apolitical head priests and the 'rebel' Shankaracharyas are now unavoidable. The chequered political track record of the disciples of Karpatri Maharaj makes it only natural for the average Hindu to take their words with a pinch of salt.

# Iran's Strikes In Pak Reveal Islamabad's Strategic Collapse

By Kabir Taneja

In the middle of December last year, Jaish ul-Adl (also known as Jaish al-Zolm, translated to "Army of Justice" in English and formerly known as 'Jundullah'), a Sunni militant group operating around the Baluch insurgency across Pakistan's Balochistan region and Iran's Sistan and Baluchestan province, attacked a police post in the small Iranian city of Rusk. 12 Iranian police personnel were killed in a gun battle that lasted hours. The attack on Rusk was one of many attributed to Jaish ul-Adl over the years.

Yesterday's Iranian missile strikes inside Pakistan brought to the forefront long standing differences between the two countries over Baluch militancy and the ethnic tensions that revolve around it. The missile attacks come at a moment of fragility in not just a regional but also the global security order. Pakistan responded by condemning Iranian actions and summoning their charge d'affaires. According to Iranian press, Jaish ul-Adl have confirmed the strikes on their positions in Balochistan's remote mountains.

Interestingly, Iran's Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian and Pakistan's caretaker Prime Minister Anwaar Ul-Haq Kakar had met hours before at the Davos economic summit in Switzerland



while Iran's Special Representative for Afghanistan, Hassan Kazemo Qami, visited Pakistan for consultations. During his visit, Qami was quoted by the Afghan press as saying that "Islamabad and Tehran have reached an agreement on interaction with Kabul". This has spurred a wave of rumors on whether Tehran sounded out Islamabad about the strike against Jaish ul-Adl before it took place. With Pakistan already facing serious security challenges from the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), Islamic State Khorasan (ISKP) and its deteriorating

relationship with the Afghan Taliban - a group it sheltered for decades - direct aggression by Iran is another front Pakistani military may be unable to afford. The tri-nexus between Iran, Pakistan and the Taliban on Baloch militancy is very complicated. The Afghan Taliban is often blamed for both privately supporting and more publicly decrying groups such as Jaish ul-Adl. The complexities do not stop within these impoverished geographies. The founding leader of Jaish, Salahuddin Farooqui, has also previously opposed Iranian support for Syria's president

Bashar Al-Assad. Tensions between Pakistan and Iran over Jaish's activities around their borders go back to 2011-12. Iran, since then, has blamed Pakistan for being soft regarding its concerns over these entities, and has blamed its other foes such as Israel, US and even Saudi Arabia and the UAE for offering their support. While some analysts are looking at the Iranian action in Pakistan from the lens of its ongoing strategic play in the Middle East, this hypothesis may be a bit of a stretch. The issue of groups such as Jaish and tensions between Iran and Pakistan over

Baluch militancy pre-date the ongoing war in Gaza or the deteriorating security situation in the Red Sea. Iran has often reiterated that it would target Jaish safe spaces inside Pakistan over the years, and the exchange of fire between troops at the border between the two countries has been a regular occurrence. This incident is uniquely a bilateral and border management matter between the two countries, which is today further complicated with the Afghan Taliban seizing power in Kabul in 2021. The ideological nature of Jaish makes it difficult for the likes of the Taliban to shun them or their cause, in exchange for political and geopolitical upmanship, considering they are an Islamist ideological movement first, and a political entity later (as showcased by the continuing logjam within the Taliban regarding girls' education in the country). For Pakistan, this new theatre is another gash on a rapid disintegration of its now institutionally failed policies of promoting state-sponsored extremism and terrorism. As the country's economy collapses further and it fails to control its own strategic assets from turning against its rule, other countries and interests seem to be looking at this time in history as the most opportune to target these ecosystems unilaterally as well.

## How did we get to this point in Yemen?

By Peter Bergen

President Joe Biden has launched arguably the most consequential military attack of this administration, striking multiple Houthi targets in Yemen and widening the conflict in the Middle East — something his administration has tried to avoid since Hamas attacked Israel on October 7. So how did we get here? The immediate reason, of course, is that the Houthis have launched 27 attacks on commercial shipping in the Red Sea in the approaches to the Suez Canal, one of the busiest shipping lanes in the world, in nominal support of Hamas. (Not a great time to have had an initially incommunicado, and still-hospitalized, US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin, who authorized the strikes in Yemen from his hospital bed on Thursday.)

The Houthis, who were once a ragtag militia with the purely local aim of trying to overthrow the Yemen government, are now projecting Iranian power, not only in the Red Sea but across the region. In other words, just as Hezbollah in Lebanon, 1,500 miles to the north of Yemen, is effectively an arm of the Iranian government, so too now are the Houthis.

The Houthis practice a form of Zaydi Shiism that is theologically distinct from the orthodox Shia clerics who run Iran, and while the Houthis have been sympathetic to Iran in the past, it is only in recent years that they have become close allies.

Here is how that happened: In 2015, in what would turn out to be a spectacular act of strategic folly, the de facto ruler of Saudi Arabia, Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman, then the

Saudi minister of defense, launched a war in neighboring Yemen to prevent the rebel Houthis from taking over the country. The Saudis used considerable airpower in Yemen, killing an estimated 24,000 people, including 9,000 civilians, and leveling schools and hospitals with US intelligence and support, causing what the United Nations at the time called "the world's worst humanitarian crisis." Sound familiar? It was particularly ironic then that the Saudi crown prince convened a conference of Arab leaders last November in Riyadh who issued public statements condemning Israel's actions in Gaza. (Of course, a key difference in the conflicts is that the war in Gaza was touched off by Hamas' attack on Israel.)

During the Saudi war in Yemen, Iran, which views Saudi Arabia as a critical regional enemy, supplied

the Houthis with a steady supply of armed drones and advanced ballistic missiles, the same weapons that the Houthis are now deploying against commercial shipping in the Red Sea. Those weapons have also been used to attack oil facilities in Saudi Arabia and Abu Dhabi, the capital of the Saudi-allied United Arab Emirates, and, more recently, have targeted Israel as well.

After more than seven years of war and not achieving its aim of halting the Houthis from controlling much of Yemen, the Saudis are now trying to negotiate a peace deal with the Houthis, so Saudi Arabia was not one of the named participants on Thursday night's strikes on Houthi targets. Yet, Saudi Arabia is a key reason that the Houthis are now so closely allied to Iran and so well armed. In a richly ironic statement, Saudi Arabia expressed concern over

the US-led strikes against the Houthi targets, saying, "While the Kingdom stresses the importance of maintaining the security and stability of the Red Sea region, in which freedom of navigation is an international demand because it harms the interests of the entire world, it calls for restraint and avoiding escalation in light of the events the region is witnessing."

Let's hope that the US-led strikes restore deterrence against the Houthis launching more strikes in the Red Sea. But already the regional conflict that the Biden administration was hoping to contain has spread to Yemen, to Israel's northern border with Hezbollah and to Iraq, where a recent US strike on the leader of an Iranian-backed militia has amplified calls for the removal of all US troops that remain in Iraq.

# China's Recent Praise for India And Its Maldives Dive Are Geopolitical Optics

By: Santosh Chaubey

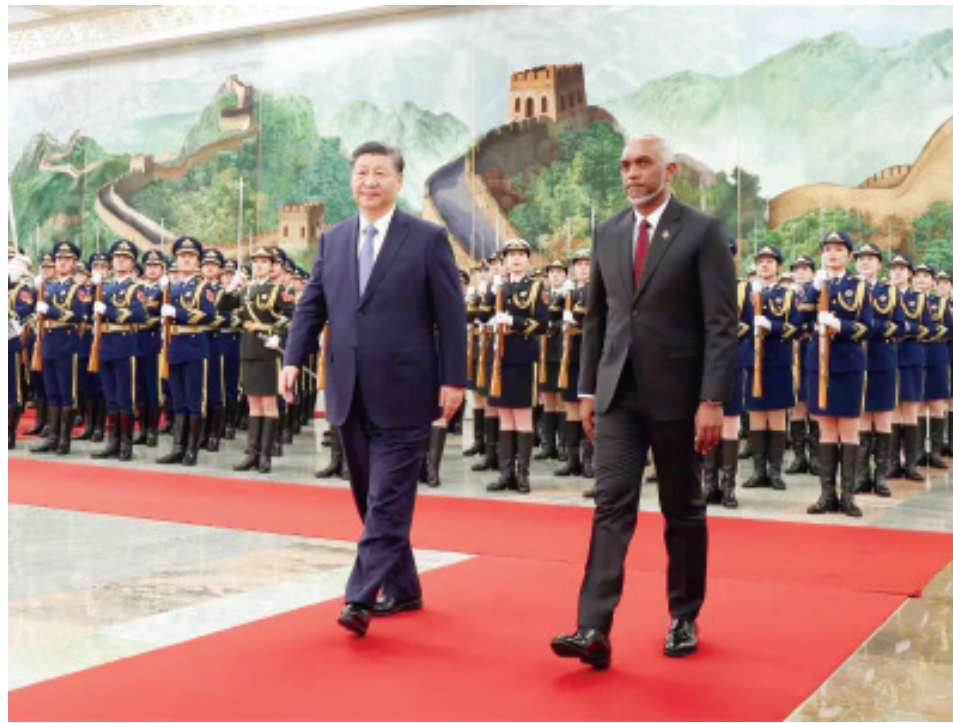
With a pro-Chinese, anti-India government in the Maldives, China has done what was expected from it, fuelling further the hostility against New Delhi of the current president, Mohamed Muizzu. China has asserted its support for the sovereignty rights of India's tiny neighbour. Muizzu was given a red-carpet welcome and China and the Maldives agreed to elevate ties to a strategic level of cooperation. Geopolitically known as Pakistan's big brother, China is now attempting to play a similar role in the Maldives. China assures Malé (and indirectly conveys to India) that it firmly opposes any external interference in the Maldives' internal affairs.

The result? Maldivian President Muizzu has escalated his anti-India stand after returning from China, issuing a March 15 ultimatum to New Delhi to recall its military personnel stationed there. This is very high anti-India rhetoric, considering it has only 77 unarmed military personnel deployed in the Maldives, engaged in humanitarian aid and medical evacuations through two helicopters and one Dornier aircraft provided by India. China is also behind the Maldives' financial struggles. Most of the loans were given to the nation during the reign of the previous pro-China president, Abdulla Yameen. China holds 60% of the Maldivian sovereign debt. Despite being only a USD 5.5 billion strong economy, the World Bank predicts that by 2026, the country will have to service a record USD 1 billion in external debt. The IMF also adds that the country is at high risk of external debt distress.

The Maldives' current problems trace their origin to a growing dependence on Chinese debt and a deepening Maldivian handicap is a perfect fit in China's designs to encircle India. China follows a 'string of pearls' policy in the Indian Ocean region to surround India, aiming to create commercial bases in the countries around, which could be converted into military ones in the future through Beijing's debt trap and coercive diplomacy.

## STRAINED RELATIONSHIP

India and China have been known to share strained ties for the past seven decades. In 1950, China captured India's Aksai Chin area, measuring 38,000 sq km. India was caught off guard when it became an unprepared nation in a war in 1962. In 1963, China obtained another 5,800 sq km of area in the Shaksgam



Valley, which is Indian territory but illegally occupied by Pakistan during the 1947 partition. China has never recognised Arunachal Pradesh and Ladakh as parts of India. The country issues stapled visas for Arunachal Pradesh and J&K residents, considering these China's parts, calling Arunachal Pradesh South Tibet. India considers China the main hurdle in obtaining memberships in the UNSC and NSG. China pushes Pakistan's anti-India policy further by supporting it with weapons and economic aid and backing anti-India terrorists based in Pakistan. China has been a prominent voice opposing UN efforts to label them as globally designated terrorists. Along with Pakistan, it opposed the revocation of Article 370 sections from J&K. China's flagship CPEC passes through India's land in Pakistan-occupied Jammu & Kashmir. The country has supported many terrorists active in N/northeast India in the past. Therefore, the approach taken to praise India in one of its official publications, Global Times, seems contrary to China's hostile policy so far. An opinion piece in the publication, praising India, was aimed at portraying New Delhi as a "world mentor" free from "Western clutches". India is currently the fastest-growing economy globally and is set to become the third-largest soon. As the most populous nation with a thriving market base and the largest working-age population, India is in the driving stage for the world economy and stability. Its rapid economic growth indicates it is on a trajectory of commercial and military advancement, similar to what China achieved in the recent past.

So, the rare positive word from China

seems to have an honest appreciation of India's growing stature in the world, but here, we cannot ignore the fact that the realpolitik behind it could also be a 'Chinese reservation'.

**CHINA'S GRUDGES AND LIMITATIONS** China's President Xi Jinping envisions a multipolar world, not dominated solely by the Western bloc but also by nations of the Global South, with many emerging as possible global poles in the future. China wants a shift in the global geopolitical direction from the developed to the developing world and sees itself in a leadership position in that change. This is unlike in the past when China aspired to replace the US as the sole global superpower but realpolitik dictated otherwise.

China's economic growth is slowing down, and projections show that it is not expected to retain the high growth rates, an annual average of 10%, seen in the past. Coupled with an ageing workforce and declining population, this signals a shift from rapid economic growth to a different policy approach now: create blocs and try to make them centred on China like SCO or BRICS or force own geopolitical interests through the Chinese debt trap.

China aspires to lead the Global South as well. It befriends nations like Syria and Venezuela, calls ties with their dictators a strategic partnership, and increases its stake in West Asia politics.

China, run by Xi Jinping, would never want India to share close ties with Western nations. The country despises initiatives like Quad or IPEF, or deepening India-US ties. Beijing knows that India is the key to the Western

nations' anti-China plans. India's future economic and military might, tied with the Western nations, will be a big challenge for China if this materialises. So, when the country saw some points of contention between India and the Western world, it just tried to read 'in between the lines' by praising India on the stand taken.

## NO FRIEND, NO FOE

Geopolitics is often called a game with no permanent friends or foes. Former United States Representative William Clay once said, "This is quite a game, politics. There are no permanent enemies and no permanent friends, only permanent interests."

Prime Minister Narendra Modi, in a recent interview with the Financial Times, reinforced this fact. India is actively working on information provided by the United States on the alleged murder plot of a Khalistani terrorist involving some Indians, but these incidents are not expected to derail India-US ties driven by mutual interests. Also, India's stand on the Russia-Ukraine war dates back to February 2022, and PM Modi went on a landmark state visit to the US in June 2023.

India has taken a neutral approach to the Russia-Ukraine war, calling for dialogues and discussions, and has decided not to join the trade pillar of the IPEF until further discussions. Khalistan terrorism and a plot to murder a Khalistani terrorist in the US are other points of discord between India, the US, and Canada. India demands Western nations to respect its sovereignty and not allow anti-India terror elements to be active there.

But this doesn't mean the blocs led by the Western nations and India will have strained ties because of these incidents. It is not in their geopolitical interests. The Tiananmen Massacre incident serves as an example. Apart from criticisms and temporary restrictions, nothing more was done by Western nations and many other influential countries globally. The world then needed a Chinese factory. Going back further, it was a Cold War necessity that brought the US and isolated Communist China together.

Also, unlike China, India is the world's largest democracy working spectacularly for the past seven decades, much like the Western nations. This makes them a better fit when they need each other. Also, the world always needs at least one rapidly growing major economy, something that China was in the past and that India is today.



## With Modi at Helm, India Shines as a Model for Poverty Alleviation Globally

By: Sanbeer Singh Ranhotra

India was seen as a poor nation where uplifting crores of people was considered an incredibly difficult, if not an impossible task. Turns out, all that was needed was a determined leadership to intervene on this front and deliver rapid results. Since 2014, the share of India's population living in multidimensional poverty is estimated to have fallen to 11.28 per cent. In 2014, that figure stood at 29.17 per cent. This means India lifted a staggering 24.82 crore people out of multidimensional poverty in just nine years.

What changed in 2014? The people of India, for the first time in 30 years, elected a majority government. Led by Narendra Modi, the BJP stormed to power. A decade since, it has become evident that the poor have emerged as the biggest beneficiaries of the electoral choice India made first in 2014, and then in 2019.

That is what the NITI Aayog's discussion paper released on Monday has revealed. According to the think tank, which is principally tasked with devising new policies and improving upon existing ones, India will achieve single-digit poverty levels this year itself. For a country whose hallmark around the world not very long ago was poverty, this is indeed a landmark achievement. The paper also said India is likely to achieve Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) or reduce multidimensional poverty by at least half, much ahead of 2030.

States like Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha and Rajasthan recorded the sharpest decline in the number of people classified as poor based on the Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI). Here's some perspective: In 2005-06, the share of MPI poor in India's total population was 55.34 per cent. Today, only about 11.82 per cent of the

population can still be considered to be living in multidimensional poverty. Of course, the fact that the share of MPI poor people dropped from 55.35 per cent in 2005-06 to 29.17 per cent in 2014 cannot be ignored. This coincides with the tenure of the UPA 1 and 2 governments.

The NITI Aayog is not the only body extolling the strides India has taken towards poverty reduction. In fact, the World Bank had earlier noted that the share of India's population living in extreme poverty had fallen from 18.7 per cent in 2015 to 12 per cent in 2021. In 2022, the United Nations said 415 million people exited multidimensional poverty in the country in 15 years between 2005-06 and 2019-21. According to UNDP estimates, the number of people who lived below the \$2.15 per day poverty line had declined to 10 per cent in India in 2021. World Bank data also shows that the poverty headcount ratio in India, at \$2.15 a day, decreased from 18.73 per cent in 2015 to 11.9 per cent in 2021. That India has lifted crores of people out of multidimensional poverty can become a case study for the developing and underdeveloped world. For the Global South, India can serve as an example of how to deliver development to people who need it the most, while also reducing poverty through a slew of government interventions. India has started acting on this front already, as is evident from the growing interest of various countries in India's massive digital public infrastructure (DPI), or even its physical infrastructure facilitator – the Gati Shakti Masterplan. The world is also stunned by the penetration that digital payments have achieved in India, which is why there is a global admiration for the United Payments Interface (UPI) today.

'GARIBI HATAO' NOT JUST A SLOGAN ANYMORE

For the present government, "Garibi Hatao" is not just a political slogan meant to paint a sense of hope for the country's poor and underprivileged. In recent times, Narendra Modi has sought to project the poor as his core constituency. Ensuring their development and uplifting them, therefore, has become the biggest policy objective of the Modi government. This objective is backed by a slew of initiatives and schemes, such as the Swachh Bharat Mission, Jal Jeevan Mission, Poshan Abhiyan, Samagra Shiksha, Pradhan Mantri Sahaj Bijli Har Ghar Yojana (Saubhagya), Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana, Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana, Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana – to name a few. All such initiatives are meant to benefit the most underprivileged and marginalised people in India. The most intriguing part is that they all have very strong interlinkages. Whether it be building toilets and ensuring hygienic sanitation through the Swachh Bharat Mission, or providing tapped water connections to crores of households under the Jal Jeevan Mission – the end goal has been to provide the poor with all the basic amenities that they had been deprived of since independence.

Similarly, ensuring that everyone has a pucca house, and that such houses have electricity and LPG cylinder connections, while those who live in the said house have bank accounts and are connected to the digital world, is all being taken up on a mission mode at the Central governmental level. The goal is simple: lifting Indians out of poverty and giving them what they need to lead respectable lives.

At the same time, initiatives like Poshan Abhiyan and Anaemia Mukta Bharat have significantly enhanced access to healthcare facilities, leading to a substantial decrease in deprivation. Infant

mortality has also fallen steadily, and as of 2020, India's infant mortality rate was lower than South Africa's. The Modi government also runs the world's biggest food security program, providing 81.35 crore beneficiaries free food grains across rural and urban India. Similarly, direct benefit transfers are now made straight into the bank accounts of beneficiaries. Therefore, corruption-related leakage has been minimised, and this has been made possible due to the creation of over 500 million new bank accounts since 2014 which are linked to Aadhaar.

Infrastructure is expected to become the biggest contributor to India's economic growth in the coming years. The Centre plans to invest Rs 143 lakh crore on infrastructure between 2024 and 2030. That is double of what India has spent on infrastructure in the past seven years. Obviously, this has led to more jobs for Indians. Importantly, job demand in rural India under the MGNREGA initiative remains high, and is largely in sync with the increase in budgetary allocation for the scheme from Rs 32,992 crore in 2013-14 to Rs 60,000 crore in 2023-24. This has a lot to do with infrastructure now reaching rural India.

Similarly, as a result of the proactive efforts towards 'Make in India' and India's aim to become a global manufacturing hub, Indian manufacturers posted a 36 per cent increase in job postings over the past year. Meanwhile, the Modi government has been transferring a sum of Rs 6,000 to farmers every year. If the whispers in the corridors of power are to be believed, this amount could be doubled in the interim budget presented by Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman next month.

This direct transfer has acted as a cushion for farmers, further enabling poverty reduction, especially among those who have small land holdings and crop yields. Meanwhile, with the e-National Agricultural Market (eNAM), farmers can now sell their produce to the highest bidder, thereby improving income levels.

Speaking about incomes, the weighted mean income in India rose from Rs 4.4 lakh in 2014 to Rs 13 lakh in FY23. In the same period, India's per capita income in nominal terms almost doubled to Rs 1.72 lakh in 2022-23 as compared to Rs 86,647 in 2014-15. The State Bank of India has predicted that India's per capita income is expected to increase from Rs 2 lakh (\$2500) in FY23 to Rs 14.9 lakh (\$12,400) in FY47.

More and more people are entering the middle class, which is a glowing testament to poverty reduction in India. Compared to 2011, 13.6 per cent of the population has left the lower-income strata and migrated upwards. The bottom line is this: India is reducing multidimensional poverty fast. The 'India Model' can help other countries achieve the same.

# Trump's behavior in E. Jean Carroll trial is a chilling trigger for sexual assault survivors

By Danielle Campoamor

After E. Jean Carroll took a seat inside a Manhattan courtroom in her ongoing defamation lawsuit against former President Donald Trump, one legal commentator described her posture as “not comfortably settled.” She was described as “perched” on the edge of her seat, “her back ruler straight, willing herself as far away from her assaulter, who was sitting two rows behind her, as she could ... the seated embodiment of a fight-or-flight response.” I know that posture all too well. Inside a small, nondescript room tucked away in the corner of a police department, I also sat perched on the edge of my seat, stiff and rigid as if the sexual assault I had endured days earlier killed a part of me and my body had entered a phase of rigor mortis.

On Thursday, Carroll took the stand while the man who was found liable for sexually assaulting her in a luxury department store dressing room in 1996 sat nearby. (In May, 2023, Carroll was awarded \$5 million for battery and defamation. She is now seeking at least \$10 million in additional damages.)

Carroll found herself facing down not only a man found liable for assaulting her, but also a former



president and current presidential frontrunner — an unprecedented example of the power dynamics survivors face. While a victim of sexual assault receives death threats, her assailant receives endorsements and secures the Iowa caucus.

During Carroll's testimony, Trump repeatedly shook his head, according to CNN reporters inside the courtroom, and could be heard “loudly saying things” such as “it's false,” “she's gotten her memory back,” and, according to Carroll's lawyer Shawn Crowley, that the lawsuit is “a witch hunt” and a “con job.” At one point, Trump slammed

the table in anger. Judge Lewis Kaplan eventually threatened to throw Trump out of the courtroom. The GOP 2024 presidential frontrunner threw his hands up in the air before responding, “I would love it.” I have seen that type of anger in person. I have felt the painful sting of my abuser's toxic, sinisterly childish denial. In my own futile attempt to seek justice, I endured what is known as a pretext phone call — I was asked to call my alleged attacker as a detective listened in and recorded the conversation. I was told I was a liar. I was being hysterical. He was sorry for what happened ...

but nothing happened.

Like so many sexual assault victims and survivors, Carroll's ongoing pursuit of justice, the court proceedings and the response of her alleged abuser have been re-traumatizing. When the former columnist first came forward with her allegations, calls to the National Sexual Assault Hotline increased by 53% in just three days, according to the Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network (RAINN).

And while my case never made it to criminal trial — out of 1,000 instances, only 13 cases will be referred to a prosecutor, according

to RAINN — and I declined to take any civil action, I see my pain in Carroll's posture during her pursuit of civil justice. I also see a stark reminder of how this country and its judicial system purposefully treats rape victims. One in six women, and one in 10 men, will be victims of sexual assault at some point in their lives, according to RAINN. The US Department of Veterans reports that one in three victims of sexual assault will experience post-traumatic stress disorder sometime during their lives.

Like so many survivors, Carroll likely knew what was coming when she chose to bring a case against the former president not once but twice. She was likely advised as to how difficult the court proceedings would be, especially if she went through them again and if her alleged assaulter was present.

But that knowledge does not protect Carroll — or any of us — from how the justice system's design inherently retraumatizes victims. Studies have shown that many victims do not come forward because they don't trust the process, don't think the authorities will believe them and do not want to be revictimized by the process as it exists today.

## Iranian Strikes Prove Pakistan is Officially a Banana Republic

By: Monica Verma

The geopolitical temperature in West Asia is refusing to come down. Not only the Israeli retaliation against Hamas has completed 100 days, but the events in the Red Sea have proved to be a new flare up bringing a lot of global attention to the region. Even as all this is going on, Iran has sprung a surprise by conducting a surgical strike against Pakistan in the wee hours of Wednesday. Iranian missiles hit a village in the Iran-Pakistan border region that falls in Pakistan's Balochistan province. According to Tehran, the strike was aimed at Jaish al-Adl, a Sunni Balochi terrorist group which it accuses of being under the patronage of Iran's rivals in the region.

Interestingly Iran's surgical strike on Pakistan comes on a day when its foreign minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian and Pakistan's

caretaker Prime Minister Anwaar Ul Haq Kakar had a meeting on the sidelines of the World Economic Forum at Davos, Switzerland. Not just this, the navies of the two countries were



also conducting a joint naval exercise in the Strait of Hormuz and the Persian Gulf on the same day. It also comes at a time when the Pakistani air force has been very active on the social media platform X boasting about its air defence capabilities, but the

Iranian strike has exposed the hollowness of its claims. Meanwhile, Pakistan has responded to the strike by saying it is a violation of its sovereignty and Iran has done it despite

several communication channels being open between the two countries. Jaish al-Adl, the terrorist group which was on Iran's radar during the strike was founded in 2012, operates both in Iran as well as Pakistan. It is notorious for conducting terror

activities in Iran which includes an attack on a police station in December 2023 in the southeastern part of Iran that claimed the lives of more than 11 policemen. At that time, Iranian Interior Minister Ahmad Vahidi had accused Pakistan of failing to take adequate security measures thus enabling terrorists to cross-over in Iranian territory and conduct the attack.

Iran shares a 909 km long border with Pakistan which divides the Iranian province of Sistan-Baluchestan from the Pakistani province of Balochistan. The Sistan-Baluchestan province is the only Sunni-dominated province of Iran where almost 2 million of its total 85 million population resides. Jaish has a stated goal of liberating the Iranian province of Sistan-Baluchestan from Iran which it alleges to be facing discrimination and repression in a Shia-

dominated country. It is a relatively new terrorist group, but it has posed as a significant challenge to Iran by conducting various attacks including a 2019 suicide attack that killed 27 troops of Iran. It has an Indian connection as well. It was Jaish al-Adl that had kidnapped Kulbhushun Jadhav, an Indian businessman from Iran and traded him with Pakistan's intelligence agency the ISI for a monetary reward. Later Pakistan had claimed that Jadhav was a former Indian Navy officer and a spy. Iranian surgical strikes have sent a wave of shock in Pakistan with their top leadership caught completely unaware of Iran's plan. But people in Pakistan's neighbouring countries including Afghanistan and India seem to have thoroughly relished Iran's actions because they themselves are a victim of Pakistan-sponsored terrorism.

# India and the Opaque Credit Rating Metrics

By: Bibek Debroy

In December 2023, the office of the CEA (Chief Economic Advisor) brought out a collection of essays titled 'Re-Examining Narratives'. This has five heads or chapters — credit ratings, the inequality debate, India's export basket, financing climate action and India's G20 presidency. Narratives about India are often negative, unnecessarily so, and not based on facts. An instance is disbelief, among some vocal critics, that India can break out of a 5-5.5 per cent real growth trajectory.

The point about biased narratives has often been made, typically in piece-meal and ad hoc fashion. This is the first time anyone within the government has articulated it systematically. The essays have been reported in the media. I find it surprising that beyond the mechanical reportage, no one has commented on the issues.

Take the case of credit rating agencies (CRAs) and their sovereign ratings. The market is dominated and controlled by the big three — Fitch, Moody's and Standard and Poor's (S&P). It's not that CRAs only do sovereign ratings. For the others (corporate



ratings), they haven't always covered themselves with glory (Enron, sub-prime mortgage crisis). There have been allegations of deliberate malfeasance and non-transparency (Greece, Portugal, Ireland), not to speak of biases against developing economies. Sovereign ratings matter, though access to funds is determined by other factors too.

For a developing economy, an unnecessarily unfavourable sovereign credit rating makes access to long-term finance and also increases the costs of such finance.

Given the importance of CRAs and the big three, the methodology should be transparent and not

arbitrary and subjective. That's the objective hallmark of any rating. But this is not what happens.

While I could have rephrased and stated it in my own words, it is best to quote from the CEA paper. "Our review of the credit rating methodologies reveals that there is considerable reliance on qualitative variables to capture 'willingness to pay'. The enormous degree of opaqueness in the methodology makes it challenging to quantify the impact of qualitative factors on credit ratings. The significant presence of qualitative factors in credit rating methodologies also gives rise to bandwagon effects and cognitive biases amply

reflected in various studies, generating concerns about the credibility of credit ratings," it said. "From our quantitative analysis, we find that over half the credit rating is determined by the qualitative component. Institutional Quality, proxied mostly by the World Bank's Worldwide Governance Indicators (WGIs), emerges as the foremost determinant of a developing economy's credit rating, which presents a problem since these metrics tend to be non-transparent, perception-based, and derived from a small group of experts, and cannot represent the 'willingness to pay' of the sovereign. Their effect on the ratings is non-trivial since it implies that to earn a credit rating upgrade, developing economies must demonstrate progress along arbitrary indicators while simultaneously contending with the discriminations the ratings tend to carry," it stated.

These are strong words, but they are not without justification.

Worldwide Governance Indicators (WGIs) have often been bandied around as the last word on

measuring governance, an expression that is, at best, difficult to pin down. WGI is based on six aggregate governance indicators: (1) voice and accountability; (2) political stability and absence of violence/terrorism; (3) government effectiveness; (4) regulatory quality; (5) rule of law; and (6) control of corruption. Take, for example, voice and accountability. To quote the World Bank, "Voice and accountability captures perceptions of the extent to which a country's citizens are able to participate in selecting their government, as well as freedom of expression, freedom of association, and a free media." Assuming voice and accountability can be measured, and is being measured, what does it have to do with a sovereign credit rating?

Ditto for something like control of corruption. To quote the World Bank again, "Control of corruption captures perceptions of the extent to which public power is exercised for private gain, including both petty and grand forms of corruption, as well as 'capture' of the state by elites and private interests."

## Congress Commits Political Hara-kiri, Disowns Ram Again

By: Utpal Kumar

The Congress leadership will boycott the Ram Mandir's 'Pran Pratishtha' ceremony in Ayodhya on January 22. The Ram Janmabhoomi Teerth Kshetra Trust had invited Congress leaders Sonia Gandhi, Mallikarjun Kharge and Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury for the event. The party leadership, after deliberating over the issue for over a week, has finally decided to officially give it a miss.

The Congress leadership believes that while "religion is a personal matter", the January 22 ceremony is a "BJP-RSS event".

Interestingly, when one looks at the Congress' history, its stand on matters of religion has largely been opportunistic, if not dubious. From overturning the Supreme Court's Shah Bano judgement to providing Haj subsidy, disbursing monthly salaries to Muslim clerics, and legitimising the Islamist endeavour to turn the entire country into a Waqf land through the Waqf Act of 1995, the party has often been seen to be hand in glove with fundamentalist elements. The grand old party's role in controlling and misappropriating Hindu temples in the name of their management too calls its 'secular' bluff. Though other political parties have hardly fared any better on the issue, the role of Congress, being in power for the longest time, gets magnified the most. If Anand Ranganathan's book *Hindus in Hindu Rashtra* is to be believed, "Governments of just 10 states control more than 1,10,000 temples." Of these, the DMK-led Tamil Nadu government, of which the Congress is an alliance partner in the state, alone controls 36,425 temples and 56 mutts. For Karnataka, a state again run by the Congress, the figure is 34,563! So much for the Congress' "religion is personal" remark!



One could still have forgiven the party for its endeavour to take away temple freedom, had it helped the cause of the nation. According to TR Ramesh, who has been fighting for temple liberation in Tamil Nadu for decades now, the Tamil Nadu government, which should be earning "a minimum of Rs 6,000 crore per annum from the 2.44 crore square feet of temple land it controls, earns a mere Rs 58 crore". This is not even 1 per cent of the income it should be earning from the acquired temple land in Tamil Nadu! As for the January 22 ceremony being a "BJP-RSS event", it is far from true. The Ram Janmabhoomi Teerth Kshetra Trust, which is organising the Pran Pratishtha event, was set up by the Union government on the orders of the Supreme Court. The grand temple is also being constructed on donations from Hindus, and not public funds.

This brings us to the larger question: Why is the Congress leadership uncomfortable with the idea of visiting the Ram temple in Ayodhya? Here, it needs to be reiterated that it's not the party per se but its dynastic leadership, the

Gandhi-Nehru to be precise, that has been uncomfortable with the Ram Mandir. Today, when Sonia Gandhi and her son, Rahul, showcase their distrust for the Ram temple, they simply betray the Nehruvian misgivings about temples in general, and the Ram temple in particular.

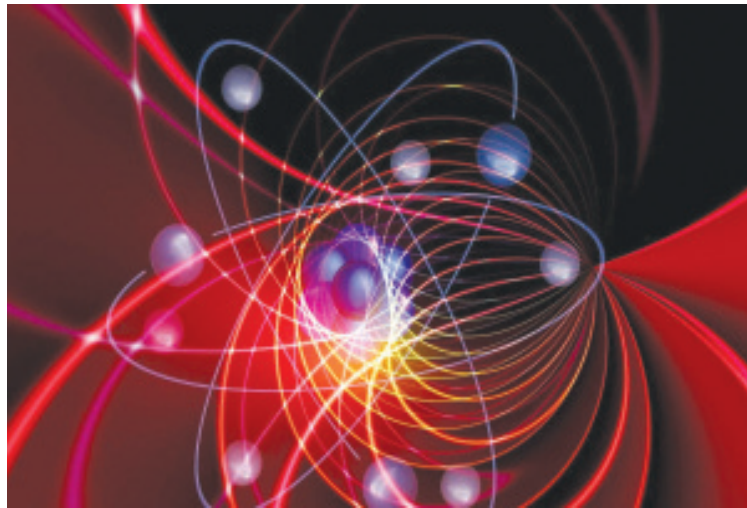
On December 26, 1949, three days after when an idol of Ram Lalla had mysteriously appeared at the then disputed Ramjanmabhoomi site, Nehru sent a telegram to then chief minister GB Pant, saying he was "disturbed at developments at Ayodhya". He also sent a letter a few months later, accusing the "District Officer in Fyzabad" of taking "no steps to prevent this happening". However, it is the Somnath saga that truly exposes the anti-temple Nehruvian mindset. It's well-known how Nehru had accused KM Munshi of stocking "Hindu revivalism" when the latter pushed for the reconstruction-cum-renovation of the Somnath temple. What is not quite known is that the idea to reconstruct the Somnath temple had the Cabinet approval; Nehru, in fact, had presided over the cabinet meeting in which this decision was taken. He, however, took a U-turn after the death of Sardar Patel on 15 December 1950. Mahatma Gandhi, the other votary of Somnath temple, was already dead by then.

After Patel's death, Nehru became increasingly hostile not just to the temple project, but also to cabinet colleagues, especially Munshi and VN Gadgil, who were associated with the Somnath temple project. It was at that moment that Nehru wrote the 'Hindu revivalism' letter to munshi, saying: "I don't like your trying to restore Somnath. It is Hindu revivalism." To this Munshi replied, on April 24, 1951, strongly rebutting Nehru's claims.

# Hinduism and Quantum Physics: How Vedas Inspired Western Scientists

By: Sean Bradrick

Hinduism is the only spiritual tradition which accurately estimates the age of the universe as per modern science. Sanatana Dharma is also an intellectual and multi-cultural tradition attached to sophisticated schools of philosophy, its own system of medicine and psychology, architecture, astronomy, cosmology, metaphysics, metrology, mathematics, and various art forms. Sacred geometry, trigonometry, calculus, the concept of zero and negative numerals, the decimal system, pi, sine and cosine, the idea of multiple big bangs and an inter-dimensional multiverse, can all be traced back to the great minds of Vedic sages. The very notion of this relationship was unknown and laughable to many in the scientific communities of the West. It was even unknown and laughable to many Indian scientists during and after the colonial rule. It wasn't until 1989 and 1993, when author Deepak Chopra's books, 'Quantum Healing' and 'Ageless Body, Timeless Mind' became popular that the idea that any religion could have much of anything to do with the field of modern science was at all acceptable in any level of academia. Even karma and



reincarnation, the basics of Hinduism, are scientific. As many ways as karma, literally meaning 'action' can take place, is fundamental physics. Every action has a certain reaction, no matter if we comprehend it or not. No matter our particular belief system, every cause has an effect. This is true with astronomy, physics, biology, psychology, and neuroscience. Reincarnation: All of nature is a part of an observable cycle that returns to itself upon its death where growth begins again, and we are a part of that nature and growth. Part of that cycle.

The ideas we see in quantum physics are not new, however. Some are indeed many thousands of years old, stemming from elemental darshana (philosophy).

The concepts that thought has mass, and that the universe would be static and contain no life without universal intelligence and consciousness, originated in Bharat or ancient India. The idea of time having mass or being made up of what modern physics call chronon, did as well. As did the idea that gravity and time relate. Modern-day physics has discovered that inert subatomic particles are latent until they are exposed to human thought and intention. These particles come alive or active when awareness is applied. The idea that thought controls matter, and that matter is a crystallisation of thought, can be found in the Samkhyakarika and other Hindu shastra(s) (scriptures).

The very nature of Hindu worship

is scientific. Yoga or union between the atma (divine self) and the murti or embodiment of the divine, mirrors the idea of connected consciousness. It mirrors the idea of one animate or inanimate thing, being affected by the mere intention of the worshipper. When the worshipper offers a flower to the murti, he/she says 'swaha', meaning 'what is being offered' and 'swadha' which is the intention behind the offering. Even the Sanskrit word for 'worship' is 'upasana', which does not mean to glorify the deity, but to simply sit or be near the deity.

As with the quantum principle of one thing being affected by another's thoughts, proximity counts while the vastness of creation is recognised in the quantum idea of a multiverse. This is a reflection of the Vedic idea of fourteen realms of the universe called 'lokas'.

"When something vibrates, the electrons of the entire universe resonate with it. Everything is connected. The greatest tragedy of human existence is the illusion of separateness." ~ Einstein

The '60s saw the advent of the String theory. This postulates that particles are not singular points but that what we perceive as such, are actually vibrations in loops of

strings. Each with its own characteristics or frequencies. In Vedanta, everything in the universe is seen as interconnected, just as our arms and legs are connected to the rest of the body. In quantum mechanics, there is no respite or gap between the observer and the observed. Particles are described as existing in a state of entanglement, where the behaviour of one particle is dependent on the behaviour of another, even if large distances separate them. "The Brahman forms everything that is living or non-living ... the wise man knows that all beings are identical with his self, and his self is the self of all beings." ~ Isha Upanishad In Vedanta, the space throughout our universe is multidimensional. There are 64 foremost dimensions. Each is divided into multiple sub-dimensions. We on Earth can only experience three dimensions. Our senses simply do not have the means to experience other aspects of universal reality. Within quantum mechanics, we can find similar ideas. Physicists speak of reality in terms of particles and waves. What the Vedas call Paramanu, literally meaning 'universal atom' and vrittis, literally meaning 'mind waves.'

## The Absurdity of Static Public Policy in Dynamic, Digital 'Dark Patterns'

By: K Yatish Rajawat

We are all victims of dark patterns every single time we enter the digital domain. Every stroke of the keypad is monitored, managed and massaged to manipulate us into compliance behaviour by digital platforms. We don't realise the ubiquity of this manipulation but neither do the policymakers. There are moments when the path of public policymaking vacillates towards the absurd, particularly when charting courses in areas as rapidly changing as digital platforms. Static policymaking coupled with intermittent implementation simply fails in this swiftly evolving arena. 'Dark patterns'—platforms' clever and manipulative techniques designed to skew behaviour in favour of the platform, typically— underscore the urgency of facing this issue. Guidelines have been introduced to counter this manipulation, perceived as harmful to consumer interests. Nevertheless, how efficacious is this traditional



approach in the face of a fast-paced digital environment? Take a typical dark pattern that shows an artificial scarcity of a product. Even after the guidelines came out, it is still not being followed as it cannot be monitored. The most important dark pattern that was in the booking space was algorithmic pricing, which increased the pricing for it, or even if you refreshed the screen on booking. This has not even been addressed or prohibited but it was the biggest challenge for consumers as it manipulates

pricing. To challenge manipulation, India's Department of Consumer Affairs (DCA) launched a preliminary response on June 28, 2023. The department commenced a line of communication with prominent online platforms across the country, counselling against the use of dark patterns. An official from the government shared, "Our initial approach, on June 13, softly warned e-commerce businesses to steer clear of using dark patterns. Yet, on June 28, we adopted a sterner tone, issuing a

clear warning of consequences should these practices persist." This series of developments firmly underscores that within a rapidly changing digital sphere, the route of rigid policymaking and irregular implementation is ill-suited. A more precise, explicit, and flexible approach is now essential in the interests of consumer protection in the digital age.

The approach of warning 'gentle and sterner' regarding anti-consumer behaviour is frequently observed in the domain of digital platforms. There's a prevalent assumption that these platforms solely bear the torch of innovation, thereby significantly contributing to economic output, even as mounting research is beginning to challenge this notion. To tackle this issue more effectively, the Department of Consumer Affairs (DCA) constituted a 17-member task force in August 2023 with a mandate to draft guidelines within the subsequent two months. This task force featured representatives

from well-known bodies such as software industry associations like Nasscom, the Advertising Standards Council of India, and the National Law University, in addition to venture capital funds and leading e-commerce platform operators like Google, Flipkart, Amazon, and MakeMyTrip among others. A closer look at the composition of this 'scientific-expert' task force indicates an intriguing skew. It predominantly comprises platform companies and an industry association representing these same entities, alongside a solitary academician with a legal specialisation.

Remarkably, there are no representatives from regular consumers or independent experts, creating a significant lacuna in achieving an optimal policy balance. The absence of diverse representation in policy task forces is not an isolated occurrence but typifies agency capture—either by design or inadvertently.

# Billionaire-backed plan for new California city gets its debut

After enduring months of criticism, a company backed by billionaire tech moguls has pulled back the shroud of secrecy on their proposal to build a new California city — outlining a plan to transform farmland northeast of San Francisco into a pedestrian-friendly community that could grow to 400,000 in the coming decades.

California Forever, which quietly bought 60,000 rural acres in Solano County, says now it hopes to build on about a third of that land — with a mix of apartments and townhouses that would stand apart from traditional suburban developments. “It’s medium density,” said Gabriel Metcalf, the group’s head of planning. “It’s not traditional suburbia, it’s not Manhattan, it’s in the middle.” First, however, they need to get through the voters — and that may not be easy. The project, which would be located on

what is now largely windswept farmland just west of the small city of Rio Vista, violates the county’s decades-old Orderly Growth Initiative and General Plan and would require voter approval to go forward.

California Forever — which has not yet released a proposed name for its new city — is preparing a campaign for a November ballot initiative to secure that approval. At a series of town halls in recent weeks, the public reaction has been overwhelmingly negative, with many people insisting that new development stay within existing cities as the orderly growth initiative requires. Documents shown by the company to POLITICO ahead of the launch aim to address some of the criticism levels at the town halls, with California Forever pledging to set aside thousands of acres around nearby Travis Air Force Base,

the largest employer in the county, to ensure their project doesn’t interfere with operations there or raise concerns for the military.

The company also plans to offer what it says is a legally binding agreement that the project will create at least 15,000 jobs that pay at least 125 percent of the county average weekly wage by the time the new city reaches its first 50,000 residents.

California Forever also says it will be able to buy sufficient water for the project and pay its required share to widen the state highways that provide the only access to the area. The city itself will feature dense, “walkable” streets. Homes will either be apartments or townhomes, most of which will be attached. There will be no large-lot single family homes.

Organizers estimate they’ll need to

submit about 14,000 valid signatures by late April in order to put the measure on Solano County ballots in November. They haven’t disclosed their campaign budget but it could be substantial. California Forever CEO Jan Sramek is a former Goldman Sachs trader who has created online social media and education companies. Project backers include uber-wealthy Silicon Valley investors, including Michael Moritz, chair of Sequoia Capital; Reid Hoffman, co-founder of LinkedIn; Laurene Powell Jobs, founder of the Emerson Collective and widow of the late Apple CEO Steve Jobs; Stripe co-founders Patrick and John Collison; and Marc Andreessen, an investor and co-founder of Netscape.

If voters approve the measure in November, organizers estimate they could start building basic infrastructure — like roads, sewers and gutters — by 2026.

## Jamie Dimon warns ‘all these very powerful forces’ will impact U.S. economy in 2024 and 2025

JPMorgan Chase

CEO Jamie Dimon said he remains cautious on the U.S. economy over the next two years because of a combination of financial and geopolitical risks.

“You have all these very powerful forces that are going to be affecting us in ’24 and ’25,” Dimon told Andrew Ross Sorkin on Wednesday in a CNBC interview at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland. “Ukraine, the terrorist activity in Israel [and] the Red Sea, quantitative tightening, which I still question if we understand exactly how that works,” Dimon said. Quantitative tightening refers to moves by the

Federal Reserve to reduce its balance sheet and rein in previous efforts including bond-purchasing programs.

Dimon has advocated caution over the past few years, despite record profits at JPMorgan, the nation’s largest bank, and a U.S. economy that has defied expectations. Despite the corrosive impact of inflation, the American consumer has mostly remained healthy because of good employment levels and pandemic-era savings.

In Dimon’s view, the relatively buoyant stock market of recent months has lulled investors on the potential risks ahead. The S&P 500

market index rose 19% in the past year

and isn’t far from peak levels.

“I think it’s a mistake to assume that everything’s hunky-dory,” Dimon said. “When stock markets are up, it’s kind of like this little drug we all feel like it’s just great. But remember, we’ve had so much fiscal monetary stimulation, so I’m a little more on the cautious side.” Goldman Sachs

CEO David Solomon said Wednesday that while the market environment excluding geopolitical issues “feels better today” than a year ago, he was troubled by soaring U.S. debt levels.

“I’m very concerned about the growing debt,” Solomon said. “It’s a big risk issue that we’re going to have to deal

with and reckon with, it just might not happen in the next six months.”

Dimon is no stranger to dire predictions: In 2022, he warned investors of an economic “hurricane” ahead because of quantitative tightening and the Ukraine conflict.

In Wednesday’s wide-ranging interview, Dimon discussed his views on Ukraine, former President Donald Trump, immigration, commercial real estate and bitcoin.

“We have to teach the American public that this is about freedom and democracy for the free world, and that’s why the battle is being fought,” Dimon said about the Ukraine conflict.

## United Kingdom Citizen Extradited to Face Charges in \$99 Million Wine Fraud

Stephen Burton, a citizen of the United Kingdom, will be arraigned in federal court in Brooklyn this morning before United States Magistrate Judge Taryn A. Merkl on an indictment charging him with wire fraud conspiracy, wire fraud and money laundering conspiracy in connection with a scheme perpetrated through Bordeaux Cellars, a company that he operated. Burton was extradited yesterday to the Eastern District of New York from Morocco where he was arrested in 2022 after entering the country using a false Zimbabwean passport. Burton’s co-defendant, James Wellesley, remains in extradition proceedings in the United Kingdom.

Breon Peace, United States Attorney for the Eastern District of New York,

and James Smith, Assistant Director-in-Charge, Federal Bureau of Investigation, New York Field Office (FBI), announced the extradition and arraignment.

“With the successful extradition of Burton to the Eastern District of New York, he will now taste justice for the fine wines scheme alleged in the indictment,” stated United States Attorney Peace. “This prosecution sends a message to all perpetrators of global fraud that you can run from law enforcement, but not forever.”

Mr. Peace thanked Moroccan authorities for their assistance. The Justice Department’s Office of International Affairs also provided significant assistance in securing the arrest and extradition from Morocco of the defendant.

The indictment alleges that from at least June 2017 and continuing through February 2019, the investors posed as executives at a company called Bordeaux Cellars. The defendants solicited investors, including residents of the Eastern District of New York, at, among other places, investor conferences held in the United States and overseas. The defendants claimed to investors that Bordeaux Cellars brokered loans between investors and high-net-worth wine collectors that would be fully collateralized by high-value collections of wine. The defendants promised that investors would receive regular interest payments from the borrowers, and that Bordeaux Cellars would keep custody of the wine securing the loans while the loans were outstanding. As alleged, these

representations were lies, the “high-net-worth wine collectors” did not actually exist and Bordeaux Cellars did not maintain custody of the wine purportedly securing the loans. Instead, the defendants used incoming loan proceeds to make fraudulent interest payments to investors and for their own personal expenses.

The charges in the indictment are allegations, and the defendants are presumed innocent unless and until proven guilty. If convicted, the defendants each face up to 20 years in prison.

The government’s case is being handled by the Office’s Business and Securities Fraud Section. Assistant United States Attorneys Lauren Elbert and Benjamin Weintraub are in charge of the prosecution.



# It's Time for the Government to Regulate AI. Here's How.

Amazon. Google. Facebook. Microsoft. These juggernauts have all found themselves on the receiving end of state and federal antitrust lawsuits alleging that they've used anticompetitive tactics to amass power and stifle budding competition to their core businesses. As a result, these companies wield incredible power over industry, media, politics and our everyday life.

Now, they're poised to control an emerging technology that will be fundamental to the future of the American economy: artificial intelligence. Leaving the development of such a revolutionary technology to a few unregulated mega-corporations is shortsighted at best and dangerous at worst. While AI might be new, the problems that arise from concentration in core technologies are not. To keep Big Tech from becoming an unregulated AI oligopoly, we should turn to the playbook regulators have used to address other industries that offer fundamental services, like electricity, telecommunications and banking services.

As AI becomes an integral part of a wide range of products and services, such regulations would prevent these dominant players from abusing their economic power. They would also facilitate innovation and competition, even bringing new, unexpected players into the market — like a public option for the cloud computing infrastructure that is critical to any AI development. Such a public option could democratize the technology, making AI development more accessible to a range of competitors and researchers. To understand why antimonopoly regulation, and a public option, are so important, we first have to understand the threats posed by an unregulated AI oligopoly. One of the greatest concerns is vertical integration up and down something called the "AI stack." The stack is like the supply chain for AI. It starts with physical hardware and ends with apps, like ChatGPT. Altogether, there are four main layers: chips, cloud infrastructure, models and apps. Vertical integration means that companies are absorbing more power and control at every layer of the stack. It may seem like everyone is developing a new AI-driven application — but a peek at the lower, hidden layers of the stack reveals a staggering amount of concentration. At the bottom are microprocessing chips, the semiconductors that make computing possible. One company, Nvidia, dominates the design of the most advanced and powerful chips; another company, Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Corporation, dominates production. Chips are then sold to

companies that provide cloud infrastructure — the huge server farms that provide the computing power needed to train and operate AI at scale. Amazon Web Services is by far the biggest player, but Google Cloud Platform and Microsoft Azure are also significant.

All that cloud computing power is used to train foundation models by having them "learn" from incomprehensibly huge quantities of data. Unsurprisingly, the entities that own these massive computing resources are also the companies that dominate model development. Google has Bard, Meta has LLaMa. Amazon recently invested \$4 billion into one of OpenAI's leading competitors, Anthropic. And Microsoft has a 49 percent ownership stake in OpenAI — giving it extraordinary influence, as the recent board struggles over Sam Altman's role as CEO showed. Finally, returning to the app layer, the models are fine-tuned to power specific products, such as ChatGPT, or integrated into existing ones like Microsoft's Bing search engine. At the app layer, there's far greater competition, as we might expect. But the big tech companies are major players there too.

All this vertical integration poses a particular concern. The existing Big Tech giants are already entrenched up and down the stack, and companies with power at one layer in the stack could give themselves an advantage, and shut out the competition, at another layer. Imagine trying to run an AI-based legal services company that helps people draft court documents. You might rely on Amazon Web Services for your cloud computing. But what if Amazon decides to get into the legal-services game too? It could charge you higher prices or degrade your service. It would have visibility into your business, which it could use to copy your ideas. Self-preferencing hurts innovation because it means a less vibrant ecosystem of platform users. Why bother investing in a new AI-based idea if you know that another big company might copy you and take all the profit?

Concentration in the cloud and model layers may be the most alarming, because high costs and huge scale make it difficult for new businesses to break into the market. According to some estimates, Microsoft will need 20,000 servers with 8 NVIDIA chips each to operate ChatGPT for all Bing users. At a cost of \$200,000 per 8-chip server, that is an extraordinary expense of \$4 billion — and that's a tiny fraction of what it would cost for Google, which processes around 30 times more search volume than Bing does. These barriers to entry mean that smaller companies don't stand a chance of competing in this market, leaving it to the big, entrenched players. Foundation

models are also built on vast troves of data, which take extraordinary cost and effort to collect and process. Big tech companies have spent years collecting and buying data, giving them a huge head start. So what should we do about this? On the one hand, the risks of concentration are real. The fewer companies there are in a given market, the less pressure they face to innovate in ways that benefit consumers and the more power they have to harm consumers and competition. On the other hand, in the AI economy, cloud and foundation models are what electricity was to the early 20th century: They are essential inputs to dozens of uses, many of which we have yet to imagine. As a result, we might actually want monopolistic scale in some layers in the stack. It takes a lot of computing power (and carbon) to run the most powerful models, and models with a lot of good data are better than ones without. These costs and scale make it hard for small businesses to replicate what the tech giants can do. There is a longstanding American tradition to regulate businesses with similar features using tools from the law of networks, platforms and utilities. We accept that it doesn't make sense to have a dozen competing electricity or telephone providers in the same neighborhood — but also expect government to closely regulate these local monopolies. One form of regulation we could apply to AI is structural separation: not allowing a business to operate at multiple layers in the stack. For example, banks have long been prohibited from running commercial businesses, out of concern that they would use their power over money to favor their enterprises over the competition. In the AI realm, structural separation might mean blocking cloud

providers from also running the businesses that rely on the cloud to reach customers.

A related concept is nondiscrimination: rules that require businesses to offer all users equal service and prices. Just like net neutrality prevents Comcast from favoring Peacock and throttling your access to Netflix, these rules would prevent Amazon from favoring affiliated entities while stifling competitors. Regulation can also include licensing requirements that ensure safety. These and similar rules have governed a range of businesses for generations, including railroads, airlines, telecommunications services, electric utilities, and banks. They could be adapted to tech companies too, as we argue in a new paper. We could also think even bigger. The federal government could offer its own competing service by creating a public option for cloud computing. Imagine a publicly funded, publicly run supercomputer that could serve government agencies and researchers who want to solve public problems, rather than using AI to make tech platforms even more addictive. That public cloud could offer businesses a more affordable alternative to the Big Tech companies. And because it would be free from the profit motive, we could trust that it would not put its own commercial interests ahead of society's or its users'.

Lawmakers have a range of tools at their disposal. The question is whether they will use them. We have spent two decades learning the hard way what happens when tech companies have unchecked, unregulated power to swallow up markets and eliminate competition. The rise of AI offers what might be our last, best chance to get this power under control.

## After Hardeep Singh Nijjar row, 86% fall in Indian students headed to Canada

The last quarter of 2023 saw a precipitous decline in the number of Indian students heading to Canada, Canadian Immigration Minister Marc Miller has said. But that does not worry Ottawa too much, which has said it was time to put a cap on the number of foreign students at least till June this year. The limit on international students could be introduced very soon and will be applicable for the first six months. There will also be curbs on work permits for post-graduate students, hinted the minister. After a diplomatic row broke out between India and Canada over the killing of Khalistan terrorist Hardeep Singh Nijjar, there was 86 per cent drop to 14,910 in study permits issued to Indians in the fourth quarter of last year from the previous quarter's 1,08,940, according to news reports from Canada.

Miller attributed part of the drop to the inability of the Canadians to quickly process applications from Indian students due to a drop in its diplomatic strength in India. Resorting to the principle of parity, New Delhi expelled 41 Canadian diplomats, which the minister suggested led to slow processing of applications.

However, the row over Nijjar's killing has also led to a decline in the number of students from India. The minister was not unduly perturbed over the prospects of fewer Indians coming to Canada for studies if charges were framed against officials connected with the Indian Government over Nijjar's murder in June last year. Miller said Ottawa was overwhelmed by the large number of foreign students and was considering some sort of cap for the short term.

# Seven Individuals Indicted for Violent Kidnappings in Queens

Defendants Allegedly Sexually Assaulted a Victim and Demanded \$20,000 Ransom From His Father

Earlier today, in federal court in Brooklyn, a superseding indictment was unsealed charging Syed Rubel Ahmed, Shahed Alom, Abu Chowdhury, Anzu Khan and Sultana Razia with one count of kidnapping and one count of conspiracy to kidnap John Doe-1; Abu Chowdhury and Iffat Lubna with one count of conspiracy to kidnap John Doe-2. Abu Chowdhury and his wife Lubna were previously charged with kidnapping John Doe-2 in the underlying indictment. The defendants and the victims are members of the same ethnic community in Queens. Ahmed, Alom, Khan and Razia were arrested today and are scheduled to be arraigned this afternoon before United States Magistrate Judge Joseph M. Marutollo. Abu Chowdhury and Lubna were previously arrested and will be arraigned on the superseding indictment at a later date. A seventh defendant remains at large.

Breon Peace, United States Attorney for the Eastern District of New York, James Smith, Assistant Director-in-Charge, Federal Bureau of Investigation, New York Field Office (FBI), and Edward A. Caban, Commissioner, New York City Police Department (NYPD), announced the arrests and charges.

"As alleged, the defendants carried out acts of brutal physical and sexual assault of the victims," stated United

States Attorney Peace. "The defendants allegedly exploited their shared ethnic background with the victims in furtherance of the crimes. I urge anyone who believes they were victims of these defendants to contact the United States Attorney's Office at <https://www.justice.gov/usao-edny/report-crime>."

Mr. Peace thanked the Joint Violent Crimes Task Force, which is comprised of agents from the FBI and detectives from the NYPD, for their assistance with the investigation.

"The violent physical and sexual assaults these defendants allegedly inflicted upon the victims they kidnapped were disturbing beyond measure. Violent crimes of any nature have no place in our society, and those who perpetrate such crimes will find themselves facing the full extent of our justice system--the FBI and the FBI New York Joint Violent Crimes Task Force is here to make sure of it," stated FBI Assistant Director-in-Charge Smith. "The men and women of the NYPD condemn these deeply disturbing allegations," stated NYPD Commissioner Caban. "We and our law enforcement partners take extremely seriously all accusations of violence and abuse and remain dedicated to eradicating such criminal behavior from the streets of New York City."

The March 27, 2023 Kidnapping of John Doe-1 in Jamaica, Queens

As alleged in the superseding

indictment and detailed in court filings, over the course of approximately 13 hours on March 27, 2023, Ahmed, Alom, Chowdhury, Khan, Razia and a co-conspirator, abducted and assaulted a victim ("John Doe-1") off a public street in Jamaica, Queens. John Doe-1 had been walking in the vicinity of 181st Street and Hillside Avenue when Chowdhury allegedly forced him into a Honda SUV. Inside the SUV, Chowdhury began beating John Doe-1 as the co-conspirator drove them around Queens. During the kidnapping, Chowdhury forced John Doe-1 to exit the SUV and filmed the victim standing naked in a residential neighborhood. Ahmed, Alom, Khan and Razia communicated with Abu Chowdhury via cellular telephone during the kidnapping, met Chowdhury at different points throughout the night, and took part in further beating and threats to kill John Doe-1. When John Doe-1 begged for water from the kidnapers, the defendants gave him water laced with a sedative. John Doe-1 later lost consciousness and woke up in a local hospital the day after he had been abducted.

The May 11, 2023 Kidnapping of John Doe-2 in Woodside, Queens

As alleged in the superseding indictment and detailed in court filings, over the course of approximately three days beginning on May 11, 2023, Chowdhury and Lubna abducted and assaulted John Doe-2. John Doe-2 had

been waiting to meet Lubna outside a restaurant in the vicinity of 72nd Street and Broadway in Woodside, Queens, when Chowdhury forced John Doe-2 into a minivan and began beating him. During the kidnapping, Chowdhury, Lubna and a co-conspirator took John Doe-2 to a hotel, where Chowdhury sodomized John Doe-2. Chowdhury also made a ransom call to John Doe-2's father, demanding \$20,000 for the victim's safety. The neighborhood where the abduction occurred is an ethnic community which the defendants exploited in warning the victim that they could easily find him if he cooperated with law enforcement. On the third day of the kidnapping, Chowdhury tied up and blindfolded John Doe-2, leaving him at an abandoned house. John Doe-2 was able to free himself by chewing through his restraints, breaking open a window and asking residents in the neighborhood to call 911.

The charges in the indictment are allegations, and the defendants are presumed innocent unless and until proven guilty. If convicted of all counts, the defendants face a maximum of life imprisonment.

The government's case is being handled by the Office's General Crimes Section. Assistant United States Attorneys Stephanie Pak and Vincent Chiappini are in charge of the prosecution with assistance from Paralegal Specialist Katrina Batista.

## IndiGo fined Rs 1.2 crore, Mumbai airport Rs 90 lakh over passengers eating on apron

IndiGo and Mumbai airport were asked to pay a fine of Rs 1.2 crore and Rs 90 lakh respectively over the incident where passengers sat on the tarmac and ate food.

IndiGo and Mumbai airport were asked to pay a fine of Rs 1.2 crore and Rs 90 lakh respectively over the incident where passengers sat on the tarmac and ate food while waiting for their delayed flight. The penalty imposed on IndiGo is the highest amount the airline has had to pay in recent times.

The fines were imposed on IndiGo and the Mumbai airport by the Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) and the Bureau of Civil Aviation Security (BCAS). BCAS imposed a fine of Rs 1.2 crore on IndiGo and Rs 60 lakh on Mumbai airport, while DGCA asked the airport to pay Rs 30 lakh. The DGCA said the presence of passengers on an "active apron" for a considerable amount of time was against the norms and could have jeopardised the people and the aircraft. The incident involved passengers of an IndiGo flight 6E

2195 from Goa to Delhi. They were already frustrated after their flight got delayed and when it diverted to Mumbai due to fog, the passengers rushed out on the tarmac, the Mumbai Airport had said earlier.



Meanwhile, the DGCA also slapped fines on Air India and SpiceJet for violating norms concerning rostering of pilots trained to fly during low visibility (CAT III trained). Both airlines were asked to pay

Rs 30 lakh by the DGCA.

WHAT DGCA, BCAS SAID ON INDIGO, MUMBAI AIRPORT

The BCAS said IndiGo allowed passengers from flight 6E 2195 to



disembark on the tarmac and have food there while they "intermingled" with others while "making movements to and fro from the adjacent apron control building". Earlier, IndiGo and Mumbai Airport had

received show cause notices from the Ministry of Civil Aviation over the incident which took place on January 15. As per the notice, IndiGo allowed passengers from flight 6E 2195 to disembark and then allowed to board flight 6E 2091 without screening them. The BCAS further pointed out that IndiGo did not report the incident till the bureau sought it. It said IndiGo's reply on the incident showed that the airline was aware of the situation even before the flight left Goa and "did not factor in the growing anger amongst the passengers and the time to be taken for arrival of fresh crew". The airline did not make any request to the airport operator for a contact - stand to ensure better facilitation of the "harassed passengers", said the BCAS in its notice. The DGCA said the Mumbai Airport failed to maintain discipline in the tarmac area and did not take any action to prevent the movement of passengers there. It added that the Mumbai Airport said it treated the incident as "business as usual" which reflected their "casual approach towards the safety" of passengers.

# Read the tea leaves on Maldives—all isn't well with Muizzu govt. A 'what if' moment is near

(News Agency)- Will the 17 March parliamentary election in the Maldives, two days after the Ides of March, be a game-changer in South Asia's smallest nation? The first clue that all is not well with the ruling People's National Congress (PNC), led by President Mohamed Muizzu, came when Adam Azim, the Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP)'s candidate won the election for Male mayor Saturday, defeating PNC candidate Azima Shakoor by more than 2,000 votes. Considering Muizzu was the mayor of Male before he became President last September, defeating a divided MDP as well as The Democrats party—made up of MDP rebels, led by former president Mohamed Nasheed—is significant.

It implies that Muizzu and his PNC may be rapidly losing ground in an area they were until recently so confident about. Now, Muizzu and his party colleagues have been in news since he returned from China a few days ago, his first state visit. Soon after his return, Muizzu told a press conference, "We may be small, but that doesn't give you the licence to bully us." He went on to add that his predecessor Ibrahim Solih's MDP government had sought permission from a foreign country "to get up from one chair and sit on another chair".



It didn't need a rocket scientist to explain that Muizzu was targeting Solih's special relationship with India. Crossing the line

On 14 January, Abdulla Nazim Ibrahim, the public policy secretary in the President's Office, announced that the Muizzu government had told Indian officials that it must withdraw its troops from the island nation by 15 March—the Ides of March. India has, so far, not said one word publicly on the brouhaha that caught the relationship in a tsunami about a fortnight ago, when Indian social media warriors and several TV news presenters trashed the Maldives, its people, and its leaders after three

Maldivian ministers made disparaging remarks against Prime Minister Narendra Modi online.

One thing has led to another. It's hard to believe that the vulgar comments by Indians on social media and anchors on news channels have not been egged on by powerful influencers inside the country. Certainly, they have crossed a line by insulting a foreign nation that is both tiny and hugely dependent on India. Small wonder that Muizzu has flaunted his visit to China, which, he announced, has promised \$130 million to develop his country.

But if you've been reading the tea leaves on the Maldives or watching the

direction in which the wind turns, just like Mary Poppins, you will notice that other developments are already on the horizon. One salvo after another

The first salvo was fired by breakaway MDP leader and former president Nasheed, who condemned the "appalling language" used against Modi by the three junior ministers of the ruling party. He also pointed out that India is "instrumental" to the Maldives' security and asked Muizzu to reassure New Delhi that the statements did not reflect government policy. Nasheed followed up by congratulating Azim, his former MDP compatriot, for winning Male.

Within days, the MDP had seized another opportunity to attack Muizzu. They roundly blamed him for the unwholesome remarks made by former BJP minister Subramanian Swamy against the Maldives on X, implying that if Muizzu had managed the relationship with India better, all this needn't have come to pass.

As for Swamy, he was unleashing one rude cannon after another. "Will Modi with mud on Bharat Mata's face flung by namak haram Maldives, tuck his tail or like Rajiv Gandhi send the India's Army, Airforce and Navy & replace Muizzu?" he asked.

## India says it 'understands' Iran's strikes in Pakistan 'taken in self-defence'

(News Agency)- The Ministry of External Affairs spokesperson on Wednesday distanced from the ongoing rift between Iran and Pakistan, emphasising the Centre's zero-tolerance stance on terrorism and acknowledging a nation's actions in self-defence.



The MEA official's statement holds relevance as Iran fired missiles at Pakistan on Tuesday, claiming attacks on its territory by the militant group Jaish ul-Adl in Pakistan's restive Balochistan. In a media briefing earlier today, Randhir Jaiswal, while responding to queries regarding the recent Iranian air strikes in Pakistan, said, "This is a matter between Iran and Pakistan. Insofar as India is concerned, we have an

uncompromising position of zero tolerance towards terrorism. We understand actions that countries take in self-defence." The MEA official's statement comes hours after a member of Iran's Revolutionary Guards was shot dead in the country's restive southeastern province that borders Pakistan and Afghanistan. This attack followed Iranian strikes at two bases of the militant group Jaish ul-Adl in Balochistan on Tuesday. In now-deleted reports, state-run Iranian media said that "precision missile and drone strikes"

were aimed at two strongholds of the Sunni terrorist group Jaish al-Adl (known as Jaish al-Dhulm in Iran). Iran claimed its missile strikes were aimed at militant groups involved in attacks on its territory, but Pakistan has rejected that explanation and strongly condemned the airstrike while warning of retaliation. Pakistan confirmed the attack, claiming two children were killed, and three others were injured in strikes.

## Pakistan Bans Imran Khan's Name, Party, and Cricket Bat Logo from Election

(News Agency)- The Pakistani government has not been subtle about eliminating any chance that Khan, a radical Islamist, might make a comeback in the February election. The state has already thrown Khan in jail, tossed out his nomination paperwork, and barred the media from saying his name. The logo ban is crucial because in Pakistan, party logos appear on ballot papers alongside the names — and since about 40 percent of the Pakistani population is functionally illiterate, the logos are the only way for parties to run slates of candidates. Pakistani elections include thousands of candidates running under dozens of party umbrellas, plus independent candidates who receive their own logos. PTI's highly recognizable logo has been a major political asset. The logo incorporates a cricket bat, a reference to Khan's career as a star cricket player.

"Three-time prime minister Nawaz Sharif's party uses a tiger, while the party of Bilawal Bhutto Zardari, the son of slain premier Benazir Bhutto, uses an arrow. Symbols available to independents include a donkey cart and an ironing board," the Deccan Herald noted on

Tuesday, making Pakistani elections sound like the world's most depressing game of Monopoly. The leading player in that game has already gone directly to jail without collecting \$200. Khan launched his comeback campaign immediately after he was ousted as prime minister in a landmark vote of no confidence in April 2022. He declared the no-confidence vote to be a U.S.-orchestrated plot to get rid of him and embarked on an Islamist populist barnstorming campaign, during which he was shot in the leg by a would-be assassin. Khan was dogged by over a hundred allegations of corruption from his time as prime minister, including an especially troublesome case in which he was accused of breaking Pakistani ethics laws by improperly keeping expensive gifts from foreigners. Khan and his supporters say all of these charges were fabricated as political hit jobs by his enemies.

Khan developed a habit of skipping court appearances, which he said was justified because the courtrooms were haunted by government assassins who would kill him if he showed up for his hearings.

# Israel, Hamas reach deal on medicines for hostages, aid to Gaza: Qatar

(News Agency)- The Qatar government announced that Israel and Hamas have reached an agreement to provide medicines to the hostages in Gaza, as well to allow the entry of more humanitarian aid to the besieged enclave. In a statement late Tuesday, the Foreign Ministry said the deal was reached in cooperation with France.

Under the agreement, "medicine along with other humanitarian aid will be delivered to civilians in Gaza Strip, in the most affected and vulnerable areas, in exchange for delivering medication needed for Israeli captives in Gaza", Ministry spokesperson Majed bin Mohammed Al-Ansari was quoted as saying in the statement.

Al-Ansari added that the medications and aid will leave



Doha on Wednesday to the Egyptian city of Al-Arish on board two Qatari Armed Forces aircraft, in preparation for their transport into the Gaza Strip.

He also "stressed the continuation of efforts with regional and international partners during, particularly in humanitarian issues and medical evacuation, within the framework

of Qatari efforts to bring about an end to the war in Gaza".

According to Israeli authorities, about 136 people, including foreign nationals, remain in captivity in the Hamas-controlled enclave.

On Tuesday, two of them were pronounced killed in captivity. During the humanitarian pause on November 24-30, 2023, 86

Israeli and 24 foreign national hostages were released.

Israel's Hostages and Missing Families Forum, an advocacy group for the victims' families, has said that at least a third of the abductees have chronic illnesses and require immediate medications, CNN reported.

In a report released last week, the Forum added that "others suffer from illnesses related to the harsh captivity conditions, which include mental and physical torture".

The Qatari announcement came days after the Israeli Prime Minister's Office said Mossad chief David Barnea had reached an agreement with Doha on the delivery of medicines to hostages held by Hamas in Gaza.

Qatar played a key role in brokering an agreement between Hamas and Israel that

led to the temporary truce in November 2023, during which Israel had also released Palestinian prisoners -- a majority of whom were children and women.

After launching its unprecedented attack against Israel on October 7, 2023, the Hamas had taken about 240 hostages.

Over 1,200 Israelis and foreign nationals have been killed as a result of the attack.

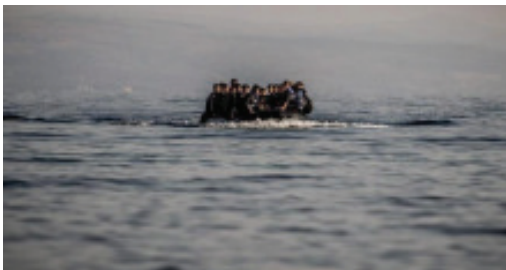
Meanwhile, in the first two weeks of January, humanitarian agencies planned 29 missions to deliver lifesaving supplies to areas to the north of Wadi Gaza, according to the UN.

Only seven of the 29 (24 per cent) were accomplished, either fully or partially.

The remainder of the missions were denied access by the Israeli authorities.

## Irregular crossings at EU borders in 2023 highest in 7 years

(News Agency)-Some 380,000 irregular border crossings were detected at the European Union's (EU) external borders in 2023, a 17-per cent rise from a year earlier and the



highest annual total since 2016, the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex) said. Frontex said 2023 was the third consecutive year that the number of irregular border crossings into EU had grown, reports Xinhua news agency. More than two out of five such

crossings took place across the central Mediterranean route, with most of those departing from Tunisia and Handing in Italy.

The nearly 158,000 arrivals via this route last year represented a 49-per cent increase compared to 2022. The Western Balkan route accounted for 26 per cent of arrivals and the eastern Mediterranean route accounted for 16 per cent last year.

Most arrivals were adult men, Frontex said, whereas women and children took up 10 per cent respectively of the new arrivals. The previous flood of irregular border crossings into the EU was reported in 2016, with nearly 504,000 new arrivals, according to Frontex data.

## Three Men Charged in International Bribery and Money Laundering Scheme

(News Agency)-A five-count indictment was unsealed on Wednesday charging a Georgia businessman, a former Honduran government official, and a former Florida resident for their alleged participation in an international scheme to pay and conceal bribes to Honduran government officials to secure contracts to provide uniforms and other goods to the Honduran National Police.

According to court documents, Carl Alan Zaglin, 68, is the owner of a Georgia-based manufacturer of law enforcement uniforms and accessories, and made his initial appearance in federal court on Wednesday; Francisco Roberto Cosenza Centeno, 65, was the former Executive Director of the Comité Técnico

del Fideicomiso para la Administración del Fondo de Protección y Seguridad Poblacional (TASA), a Honduran governmental entity that procured goods for the Honduran National Police; and Aldo Nestor Marchena, 50, was a resident of Boca Raton, Florida.

Between about March 2015 and continuing until about November 2019, Zaglin, Marchena, and others allegedly agreed to bribe Honduran government officials, including Cosenza, to secure contracts with TASA worth over \$10 million. In exchange for the bribes, Cosenza and other Honduran government officials allegedly assisted Zaglin, Marchena, and others in obtaining contracts for the sale of uniforms and other goods for the Honduran

National Police and securing payment on the contracts. Zaglin, Marchena, and their co-conspirators allegedly used the proceeds from the corrupt Honduran government contracts to make bribe payments to Honduran government officials. To promote the scheme and conceal the bribe payments, Zaglin, Marchena, Cosenza, and others allegedly laundered proceeds of the corrupt scheme through bank accounts and front companies in the United States and Belize. As alleged in the indictment, the conspirators sent over \$166,000 to bank accounts controlled by Cosenza and another Honduran foreign official in furtherance of the scheme. The defendants are all charged with conspiracy to commit money laundering.

## 2 children killed in Pakistan from Iran's airspace violation: Foreign Ministry

(News Agency)-- The Pakistani Foreign Ministry said on Wednesday that two children were killed and three girls were injured in the country due to Iran's violation of Pakistan's airspace. Pakistan strongly condemns the "unprovoked violation" of its airspace by Iran, the ministry said in a statement, adding that this violation of its sovereignty is "completely unacceptable and can have serious consequences", Xinhua news agency reported.

Pakistan's strong protest has already been

lodged with the concerned senior official



in the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Tehran, said the statement.

It is even more concerning that this illegal act has taken place despite the existence of several channels of communication between Pakistan and Iran, it added. Additionally, the Iranian charge d'affaires has been called to the Pakistani Foreign Ministry to convey Pakistan's strongest condemnation of this blatant violation of its sovereignty and that the "responsibility for the consequences will lie squarely with Iran," the statement said.

Pakistan has always said terrorism is a common threat to all countries in the region that requires coordinated action, said the statement.

"Such unilateral acts are not in conformity with good neighbourly relations and can seriously undermine bilateral trust and confidence," the statement said.

Iranian media on Tuesday reported that Iran "obliterated two key strongholds" of a terror group in Pakistan through precision missile and drone strikes.

## Three Individuals Charged for Running Multimillion-Dollar Pyramid Scheme

(News Agency)-An indictment was unsealed yesterday charging a U.S. citizen residing in Canada for orchestrating a multimillion-dollar pyramid scheme under the name 8 Figure Dream Lifestyle LLC (8FDL). Guilty pleas by his co-conspirators, who participated in the same scheme, were unsealed today.

According to court documents, Alex Dee, formerly known as Alex Dowlatshahi, 49, of Maple Ridge, British Columbia, allegedly was the co-founder of 8FDL. Brian Kaplan, 52, of Fort Collins, Colorado, and Jerrold Maurer, 58, of North Bellmore, New York, co-founded 8FDL with Dee and participated in the scheme. From January 2017 through June 2019, Dee allegedly ran 8FDL as a pyramid scheme. Dee and his co-conspirators allegedly recruited participants through emails, robocalls, promotional videos, and webinars. They allegedly told consumers that 8FDL was a legitimate business with real products and lied to prospective members about how much money they

could make, how much others who had joined 8FDL had made, and the ongoing costs associated with the business. For example, Dee allegedly wrote and sent mass-marketing emails claiming that



typical members with no prior skills or experience could easily earn between \$5,000 and \$10,000 in 10 to 14 days after joining the program, and that most members were averaging two to three sales in their first 30-45 days. In fact, the vast majority of people who joined 8FDL never made any money.

Dee was arrested at the U.S.-Canada border on Tuesday while trying to enter Washington state from British Columbia. He made his initial appearance on Wednesday before a magistrate judge in the Western District of Washington.

Dee is charged with one count of conspiracy to commit wire fraud and four counts of wire fraud. If convicted, he faces a maximum penalty of 20 years in prison on each of the charged counts. Kaplan and Maurer were each charged with one count of conspiracy to commit wire fraud and both pleaded guilty. They have yet to be sentenced, and each faces a maximum penalty of five years in prison. A federal district court judge will determine any sentence after considering the U.S. Sentencing Guidelines and other statutory factors.

Acting Assistant Attorney General Nicole

M. Argentieri of the Justice Department's Criminal Division and Inspector in Charge Eric Shen of the U.S. Postal Inspection Service (USPIS) Criminal Investigations Group made the announcement.

USPIS is investigating the case. Trial Attorneys Brandon Burkart and Andrew Jaco and Assistant Chief William Johnston of the Criminal Division's Fraud Section are prosecuting the case. The department received assistance from the Federal Trade Commission.

If you believe you are a victim in this case, please contact the Fraud Section's Victim Witness Unit toll-free at (888) 549-3945 or by email at [victimassistance.fraud@usdoj.gov](mailto:victimassistance.fraud@usdoj.gov). To learn more about victims' rights, please visit [www.justice.gov/criminal/criminal-vns/victim-rights-derechos-de-las-victimas](http://www.justice.gov/criminal/criminal-vns/victim-rights-derechos-de-las-victimas).

An indictment is merely an allegation. All defendants are presumed innocent until proven guilty beyond a reasonable doubt in a court of law.

## New Jersey Laboratory and Its Owner and CEO Agree to Pay Over \$13 Million to Settle Allegations of Kickbacks and Unnecessary Testing

(News Agency)-Clinical laboratory RDx Bioscience Inc. (RDx), of Kenilworth, New Jersey, and its owner and Chief Executive Officer Eric Leykin, of Brooklyn, New York, have agreed to pay to the United States \$10,315,023 to resolve False Claims Act allegations involving illegal kickbacks and medically unnecessary laboratory testing. RDx and Leykin will pay an additional \$2,934,977 to the State of New Jersey, which jointly funded claims paid by the New Jersey Medicaid program. RDx and Leykin have agreed to cooperate with the Justice Department's investigations of, and litigation against, other participants in the alleged schemes.

"Regardless of how they are disguised, kickbacks for laboratory referrals are illegal and can corrupt medical providers' decision making and subject patients to expensive and unnecessary testing," said Principal Deputy Assistant Attorney General Brian M. Boynton, head of the Justice Department's Civil Division. "We will hold accountable individuals and entities who participate in kickback schemes that harm taxpayers and threaten the integrity of federal healthcare programs."

The Anti-Kickback Statute prohibits offering, paying, soliciting or receiving remuneration to induce referrals of items or services covered by Medicare, Medicaid and other federally funded healthcare programs. The Anti-Kickback Statute is intended to ensure that medical providers' judgments are not compromised by improper financial incentives and are instead based on the best interests of their patients. Claims that are knowingly submitted in violation of the Anti-Kickback

Statute are ineligible for payment and can violate the False Claims Act.

The settlement announced today resolves allegations concerning five types of kickbacks paid to induce referrals to RDx for laboratory testing. First, from 2018 to 2022, RDx and Leykin allegedly paid commissions based on the volume and value of Medicare and Medicaid referrals to independent contractor marketers to arrange for and recommend that healthcare providers order RDx laboratory tests. Second, from 2018 to 2022, RDx marketer Corum Group LLC allegedly paid healthcare providers thousands of dollars

in purported management services organization (MSO) payments, which were disguised as investment returns but actually were offered to induce the providers to order RDx laboratory tests. Third, from 2017 to 2023, RDx marketers BeauMed Consultants LLC and Ralston Health Group Inc. allegedly paid thousands of dollars to healthcare providers that were disguised as consulting or medical director fees but were actually offered to induce orders, among other things, for RDx laboratory tests. Fourth, from 2019 to 2020, RDx marketer Seaworthy Recovery Services

Inc. allegedly paid thousands of dollars in kickbacks to one or more principals of certain substance abuse recovery centers to induce their referrals to RDx for laboratory testing. Fifth, RDx and Leykin allegedly paid specimen collection fees to the staff members of referring healthcare providers to induce those providers to order RDx laboratory testing. The settlement resolves allegations that RDx and Leykin billed or caused Medicare and Medicaid to be billed for the tests despite paying or knowing of these kickbacks.

## Two Florida Residents Sentenced for \$93M Health Care Fraud and Money Laundering Scheme

(News Agency)-A Florida man and woman were sentenced for their roles in a wide-ranging conspiracy to defraud Medicare by billing over \$93 million for home health therapy services that were never rendered. Karel Felipe, 42, of Miami Shores, was sentenced to eight years and four months in prison. Tamara Quicutis, 54, of Hialeah, was sentenced to five years and 10 months in prison. The court also ordered forfeiture of fraud proceeds. Both defendants were convicted in October 2023 after a jury found them guilty of conspiring to commit health care fraud and wire fraud and conspiring to commit money laundering. According to court documents and evidence presented at trial, Felipe and Quicutis conspired with others to submit

false bills to Medicare for three home health companies located in Michigan. Their co-conspirators recruited individuals from Cuba to sign Medicare enrollment documents and appear as the owners of the home health agencies to conceal the identities of Felipe, Quicutis, and others involved in the scheme. Felipe, Quicutis, and their co-conspirators used these home health companies to submit claims for services that were not rendered using lists of stolen patient identities. Felipe, Quicutis, and their co-conspirators used dozens of shell companies and hundreds of bank accounts to launder the Medicare fraud proceeds and convert the proceeds into cash at Miami-area ATMs and check cashing stores.

Four additional Florida residents were

previously sentenced in the case. Jesus Trujillo, 52, of Miami, was sentenced to 14 years in prison after pleading guilty to conspiracy to commit health care fraud and wire fraud and conspiracy to commit money laundering. The court also entered a forfeiture money judgment against him for the amount involved in money laundering, \$44,351,817, and ordered forfeiture of two real properties to satisfy that judgment. Didier Arcia, 44, of Davenport, was sentenced to six years and eight months in prison after pleading guilty to conspiracy to commit money laundering. Alexey Gil, 41, of Miami, was sentenced to five years and five months in prison after pleading guilty to conspiracy to commit health care fraud and wire fraud.



# Hrithik Roshan Turns 50: When Age Is Just A Number

January 10, 1974, he does not choose his films in a hurry. He has experienced successes as well as failures, like everyone else. His strengths — his Greek God looks, versatility as an actor, and dancing skills — have contributed to his identity as a superstar unlike anybody else in the industry. A view of modern-day Bollywood tells an interesting story. While female stars start appearing in supporting roles in big-budget films before they turn 50 — that is disappointing but true — male stars over 50 are the highlights of most lavishly mounted productions. A couple of younger male actors have also made a distinct impact with their performances in recent years. After the spectacular success of Sandeep Reddy Vanga's all-time blockbuster *Animal*, the gifted Ranbir Kapoor has shown he has what it takes to compete for the number one spot. Ranveer Singh has regained a part of his lost territory after Karan Johar's reasonably successful *Rocky Aur Rani Kii Prem Kahaani*. Apart from these two actors, the business of big films is dominated by leading

men who have crossed the 50-year bridge.

Aamir Khan (58) debuted as a child actor in his uncle Nassir Hussain's *Yaadon Ki Baaraat* in 1973. Fifteen years later, the actor became the poster boy of romance after the release and success of *Qayamat Se Qayamat* (1988), his debut in a lead role, helmed by his cousin Mansoor Khan. Salman Khan (58) debuted in a small role with JK Bihari's *Biwi Ho To Aisi* (1988), but his performance in the central role of Sooraj Barjatya's *Maine Pyar Kiya* brought him stardom one year later. Shah Rukh Khan's (58) first acting role was in Lt. Colonel Raj Kumar Kapoor's serial *Fauji* on Doordarshan in 1989, but his performances in negative roles in Abbas-Mustan's *Baazigar* and Yash Chopra's *Darr* (both 1993 releases) proved to be the turning point of his career. Ajay Devgn (54) took his first step towards stardom with Kuku Kohli's *Phool Aur Kaante* (1991), his successful debut film. After starting his career with a minor role in Mahesh Bhatt's *Aaj* in 1987, Akshay Kumar delivered his first hit as the hero with Abbas-Mustan's *Khiladi*

in 1992.

Long-term success as a leading man is a rarity in Bollywood, an industry where most dreams die soon after they are born. Yet, the association of these 50-plus actors with central roles in big-budget films gives rise to hype and expectations before their release. Even though Aamir Khan is not making news because of his work, he will reappear in numerous headlines when his upcoming film *Sitaare Zameen Par* nears completion. Cynics who felt that the popularity of Salman Khan was on the decline were silenced after Maneesh Sharma's *Tiger 3* became successful. Akshay Kumar has endured a series of failures, but few will be surprised if he gets back to where he belonged with a couple of hits this year. After all, hasn't he done it in the past? His track record shows he has. Ajay Devgn has a dedicated fan following — and a history of box-office successes. Sunny Deol (66) sprung a surprise with Anil Sharma's *Gadar 2*, an all-time blockbuster sequel to *Gadar: Ek Prem Katha* (2001).

The year 1980 saw the release of J Om Prakash's *Aasha*, a drama starring Jeetendra opposite Reena Roy. 'The film featured an uncredited appearance by a child actor. He was Hrithik Roshan, the director's grandson, who faced the camera for the first time as a young unknown.

Twenty years later, Hrithik's debut film as the leading man, *Kaho Naa... Pyaar Hai* helmed by his father Rakesh Roshan, hit the

marquee. The actor watched the first show of KNPH in Galaxy theatre in Mumbai on January 14, 2000. Instant popularity followed. Young men wanted to look like him. Girls fell in love with him. Critics showered praise on him, too, and he seemed destined to become the next superstar of Bollywood.

As Hrithik fans wait eagerly for the release of his action film *Fighter* directed by Siddharth Anand on January 25, the young star of yesteryear has turned 50. Born on

## Sharad Kelkar shares his inspiration behind playing Ravan in 'The Legend of Hanuman 3'

Actor Sharad Kelkar has added a dash of childhood Ram Leela magic to his Ravan character in 'The Legend of Hanuman 3', and despite the animated dubbing maze, he turned those tiny stage experiences into animated glory. Elaborating on the same, Sharad said: "Throughout my childhood in a small town, we saw Ram Leela happening live every year. It was a great festive environment. It was mesmerising for me to see how these guys portrayed these characters through the 10 days of Ram Leela every day."

"All the 'adhya's being played in such a tiny place without VFX or live action, with just a stage and costumes to express — it was a different feeling altogether. And that shaped my initial perception of the character of Ravan. But when you dub, you don't quite have that ambience of a theatre and that kind of audience. Also, the Ravan from Ram Leela is not multidimensional, as it shows only one as-

pect of his story. But I have tried to bring in awe in the character of Ravan from that experience, even though my portrayal of him in the show is very different," shared the 'Bhoomi' actor.

He said: "As for the ambience, you have to believe that in a particular zone or moment when you are dubbing for the character or enacting, you have to be filled with that kind of invincibility or the ego or the power, so that you can portray it authentically. "I think my childhood played a very important role. I saw actors with big 'mukuts' and costumes being loud enough on stage for the 5,000 people watching to be able to hear you."

"Your voice should reach the last row of people. All this was very attractive for me. Sitting in a studio with a mic, you do have your limitations, but still, you try your voice to reach every viewer watching you on television or a mobile," added Sharad. 'The Legend of Hanuman Season 3' showcases the timeless tales of Ramayana as the saga of Hanuman unfolds.



## Vidya Balan, Pratik Gandhi tease fans with cryptic announcement

Bollywood stars Vidya Balan and Pratik Gandhi have shared a cryptic post on the social media about an upcoming project, leaving the fans buzzing with excitement and speculation.

Vidya and Pratik took to their respective social media handles, and shared an image which seems to be a mathematical equation, with the sum of two and two

equating to a heart.

The post has a simple yet intriguing caption: "Do aur do milenge. Pyaar ke raaz khulenge! Tomorrow at 11 am, wait for it!"

The anticipation is palpable as fans speculate about the possible announcement set to be unveiled on January 17.

Fans wrote: "OMG is it your next film", "so exciting".

Another user said: "can't wait", while one said: "new movie with Vidya Balan". Meanwhile, on the work front, Vidya was last seen in 'Neeyat'. Pratik was last seen in web series 'Scoop', and Gujarati movie 'Vaahlam Jaao Ne'. He has 'Phule', 'Dedh Bigha Zameen', and 'Woh Ladki Hai Kahaan?' in the pipeline.

## Sayli Salunkhe: It's difficult to cut off from a character

Television actress Sayli Salunkhe, who plays the role of Vandana in the show 'Baatein Kuch Ankahee Si',

shared that it is difficult for her to cut off from a character that she plays 15 hrs a day. Talking about cutting off from her character once she is out of the set, Sayli said: "It's difficult to cut off. If you are playing that character for 15 hours then it's difficult to cut off. Even if I take my character home then I don't have any problem as Vandana is a very sweet and innocent girl



and I think that Sayli has been able to control her anger because of Vandana." She shared that Vandana's character has had a positive impact in her life and she has always tried to learn from her character. "I feel good to learn from her and live

with her."

The actress further said that she was quite apprehensive about the show initially.

"At first, I was scared whether people would be able to connect or not. But I am receiving some great responses. The best thing that people tell me is that they could relate to Vandana. If I am playing Vandana and people can relate to it and her journey and her responsibilities at the age of 35 being married, the pressure of the society is what people could relate to. I am really happy that

people are loving my work. "Initially it was very difficult to catch this character as Vandana is a 35-year-old girl. Vandana has suffered a lot after her mother passed away, and she has taken over all the responsibilities.



## Merry Christmas' box office Day 6: Katrina, Vijay's film mints Rs 13 crore in India

Katrina Kaif and Mahesh Babu's 'Merry Christmas' is doing steady business at the box office. The film, helmed by director Sriram Raghavan, has been holding strong in theatres due to positive word of mouth. Going by the trade reports, the film is now marching towards Rs 20 crore net in India. It is to be seen if 'Merry Christmas' will pick up some momentum during the weekend, which will determine the longevity of its theatrical run. 'MERRY CHRISTMAS' HOLDS STEADY AT THE BOX OFFICE

'Merry Christmas, directed by Sriram Raghavan, hit theatres on January 12. The film was simultaneously shot in Tamil and Hindi.

The mystery thriller started on a slow note and has been performing well due to positive word of mouth. On January 17, 'Merry Christmas' is said to have earned



Rs 1.15 crore net in India. As reported earlier, the film has been receiving positive reviews from critics and audiences alike. The six-day total tally now stands up to Rs 13.83 crore net at the domestic box office. On January 17, the Hindi version of the film recorded an occupancy of 9.30 per cent. ABOUT 'MERRY CHRISTMAS'

IndiaToday.in reviewer rated 'Merry Christmas' 3.5 out of 5 stars and wrote, "The film tells the story of two strangers - Albert (Vijay) and Maria (Katrina Kaif) - who unknowingly cross paths and are sucked into a vortex of unfortunate events. You know you are in for a roller-coaster ride when it's a Sriram Raghavan film and 'Merry Christmas' doesn't disappoint. It keeps you on the edge of your seat, guessing and anticipating Albert and Maria's next move."

# Richa Chadha faces 4-hour delay with IndiGo flights, highlights monopoly in aviation sector

Bollywood actress Richa Chadha on Wednesday said that she too had to face delays in two domestic flights of IndiGo airlines. She took to X and said that she took three flights in the last three days, two were with Indigo, and the third, an international flight, which was on time.

Reflecting on the delayed flights issue, she suggested that factors like fog in Delhi and the recent air show in Mumbai might have contributed to IndiGo's challenges.

"On my 3rd flight in 3 days... day 1, @IndiGo6E delayed by over 4 hours. Day 2, @IndiGo6E delayed by 4 hours. But the only direct flights on some routes are often Indigo. Day 3, international flight, no problem," her tweet read.

"On the 14th of Jan, there was an air show in Mumbai, because of which the runway was closed in the morning. And then fog/smog in North India – Delhi runway closed. Ripple effect? Flights delayed all over the country, staff overextended. I am surprised only one person got physically assaulted because tempers were running very high (I don't condone violence)," she added on X.

"Lesson: Monopoly – whether airlines, airport ownership or leadership – creates lack of accountability. Common citizens suffer, with no recourse. Till we don't recognise it, we will be at a disadvantage while paying through our noses. And if we don't wake up, we deserve it," she expressed.

## Jamie Lever to make Telugu film debut with 'Aa Okatti Adakku'



Actress-comedianne, and daughter of actor Johnny Lever, Jamie Lever is set to make her debut in the South Indian film industry with the Telugu film 'Aa Okatti Adakku'.

Expressing her joy about this milestone, Jamie said: "Making my debut in the Telugu industry with 'Aa Okatti Adakku' is a dream come true. This film is not just a professional journey for me, it's a personal homage to my roots."

"Telugu is my mother tongue, and performing in it is a heartfelt tribute to my grandmother, who is more comfortable with her mother tongue."

Jamie is set to play a pivotal role in the film, which is being produced by the acclaimed 'Chota Bheem' producer, Rajiv

Chilaka. The project boasts an ensemble cast including veterans from the South Indian film industry.

Expressing gratitude for the opportunity, Jamie highlighted the significance of performing in her mother tongue, especially for her grandmother. "I feel blessed to have this chance to connect with my roots through cinema. This is not just a film; it's a celebration of language, culture, and family." As excitement builds for Jamie's debut in the Telugu industry, she shared her enthusiasm: "I'm super excited for my South debut. Telugu is not just a language; it's a part of my identity. I hope the audience enjoys seeing me in a new light, celebrating the richness of Telugu cinema."



## Mohit Raina, Roshan Mathew & Sarah Jane Dias to star in Indian remake of Israeli Drama 'Magpie'

Actors Mohit Raina, Roshan Mathew and Sarah Jane Dias will headline the Indian remake of Israeli drama Magpie, which has been titled 'Kan Khajura'.

The show will also star Mahesh Shetty, Ninad Kamat, Trinetra Haldar, Heeba Shah, and Usha Nadkarni, reports deadline.com.

SonyLIV is remaking thriller Magpie in-house after licensing the rights from Israel's Yes Studios. Ajay Rai is producing and Chandan Arora is the director.

The original Israeli series follows a convicted murderer, who gets early release



after 17 years on the condition that he continues to cooperate with the police as an informant. "Being part of a thriller is always exciting yet demanding for any actor," said Mohit. He added: "My character has various shades associated with it and that has been a great responsibility to portray. To get into the skin of the character, we tried on various looks that brought out a well-etched character." "Magpie, a global sensation, was always a story waiting to cross borders and be adapted for the Indian audience."



# Raveena Tandon on 'special' bond with Varun Sood: During breaks we would sit & crack jokes

Actress Raveena Tandon has opened up on her offscreen bond with her 'Karmma Calling' co-star Varun Sood, and shared how during the



offscreen bond is completely the opposite. Calling Varun a really sweet guy, Raveena said: "I met him for the first time when we were doing readings with Ruchi. He was very reserved and quiet. I think he was a little nervous, but eventually he opened up. He is a very dedicated actor and knows his craft well."

"During the breaks, we would all sit together, crack jokes, chat and could not even hold our laughter during shots. We developed a special bond and I wouldn't have anyone else play the role of Ahaan Kothari. He is a very promising actor

and I feel he will go a very long way," she added. Produced by R.A.T Films, adapted for India and directed by Ruchi Narain, the series is releasing on January 26 on Disney+ Hotstar.



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## RBI not thinking of moving towards de-dollarisation: Governor Das

Reserve Bank of India (RBI) Governor Shaktikanta Das said that it is incorrect to say that there was a move towards de-dollarisation as the efforts of the central bank towards internationalisation of the rupee are not aimed at replacing the dollar. "There is no such thinking to move towards de-dollarisation. The dollar will continue to be the dominant currency and whatever we are doing for internationalisation of the rupee, it is not to replace the dollar," Das said on at the World Economic Forum (WEF) Annual Meeting 2024 in Davos late on Tuesday. "India's economy is expanding,



with an increasing role in markets, countries, and international trade. Gradually and steadily, India has entered new services.

"The objective is to offer the rupee as an alternative currency for settling transactions in international trade. It is incorrect to describe the internationalisation of the rupee as an effort towards de-dollarisation.

"Dependence on one currency can be risky as the entire global trade will be subject to the volatility of that particular currency," he added.

Das said the RBI has managed to achieve currency stability, making it ideal for overseas companies to invest in India and domestic companies to tap capital markets abroad.

Inflation in India is moderating and steadily approaching the central bank's 4 per cent target while growth prospects remain robust, the RBI Governor noted.

Das also said that cryptocurrencies pose a huge risk, particularly for emerging market economies because it can impact your financial stability, currency stability and monetary system. "Cryptocurrency as a product is highly speculative and my opinion and Reserve Bank's opinion is that considering the big risk around it, I think countries like India should be very careful," he added.

## Expect more job cuts at Google this year, Sundar Pichai tells employees



San Francisco-Google CEO Sundar Pichai has reportedly warned employees to brace themselves for more job cuts this year. Google, which has let go over a thousand employees across various departments in the last one week or so, is likely to go for more job cuts, reports The Verge, citing an internal memo.

"We have ambitious goals and will be investing in our big priorities this year," Pichai told employees in the memo.

"The reality is that to create the capacity for this investment, we have to make tough choices," he added. In the memo, Pichai said

that latest "role eliminations are

not at the scale of last year's reductions, and will not touch every team". "But I know it's very difficult to see colleagues and teams impacted," the Google CEO added. The layoffs this year are about "removing layers to simplify execution and drive velocity in some areas".

"Many of these changes are already announced, though to be upfront, some teams will continue to make specific resource allocation decisions throughout the year where needed, and some roles may be impacted," Pichai further wrote.

After laying off nearly 1,000 employees last week, Google is

also reportedly slashing "a few hundred" more jobs in its advertising sales team as part of an ongoing restructuring exercise.

Philipp Schindler, Google's chief business officer, told staff in a memo that the fresh job cuts "were the result of changes to how Google's sales team operated", Business Insider reported.

A Google spokesperson also confirmed that "a few hundred roles globally are being eliminated" as part of the restructuring.

In January last year, Google cut its workforce by 12,000 people, or around 6 per cent of its full-time employees.

## Maha nets investments worth Rs 70K-crore on first day in Davos

Marking a record of sorts, the Maharashtra government has signed MoUs worth around Rs 70,000 crore on the first day of Chief Minister Eknath Shinde's visit to the World Economic Forum (WEF) in Davos, officials said here on Wednesday. They include a deal of Rs 41,000 crore with the B. C. Jindal Group, one of the biggest corporations in the country for their proposed plant in the state that will generate 5000 jobs in electronics system design and manufacturing. The state's MAHAPRIET has signed a MoU of Rs 4000 crore with Prediction Co., USA for creating a hub for Artificial Intelligence in the state.



The project will pave the way for launching innovative AI projects in the state and will be the first of its kind for India, said officials. Besides, INOX Air Products for a Green Ammonia plant with an investment of around Rs

25,000 crore.

These investments are nearly half the MoUs worth Rs 1.37 lakh-crores signed during Davos-2023 trip, and this year the state government aims to more than double the previous year.

Besides the Chief Minister, present for these signing events were Industry Minister Uday Samant, top officials like Bhushan Gagrano, Brijesh Singh, Harshadeep Kamble, Vipin Sharma, Amol Shinde and others.

Shinde, currently in Davos on a four-day trip to the WEF, plans to sign MoU's worth over Rs 3.10 lakh-crore across sectors to benefit different regions of the state.

# Samsung gears up to herald 'AI smartphone' era with Galaxy S24 series

San Jose- In a bid to herald a new 'AI smartphone' era, Samsung is all set to unveil its flagship Galaxy S24 series in the US

that will come with industry-leading features. The company is set to launch three models — Galaxy S24 Ultra, S24 and S24+ — with AI taking

a centre-stage for the company. According to rumours, the devices will house new flatter displays, four-camera array and titanium frame.

One AI feature being talked about is the Google-powered 'Circle to Search'.

The 'Circle to Search' feature is described as "Search any image,



video, or text on your screen. Circle, highlight, scribble, or tap to pinpoint what you're curious about, no screenshots necessary".

Reports have also described new features like 'Live Translate' for

phone calls, the use of AI to improve zoom at night, as well as an AI-powered 'Note Assist' feature in Samsung's Notes app.

Moreover, the leaks also revealed some of the smartphone

specifications, which include a 6.8-inch QHD+ display on Galaxy S24 Ultra, a 6.7-inch QHD+ display on S24+, and a 6.2-inch FHD+ display on S24.

According to the company, the next evolution of Galaxy is on its way. Ahead of the upcoming event, Samsung released a teaser video, "Galaxy AI is coming."

This video, shared through Samsung's YouTube channel, depicts the company's history of mobile innovation. From Samsung's first mobile

phone, SH-100, in 1988 and the world's first TV phone in 1999 to the game-changing foldable smartphone in 2020, viewers can

witness the journey that shaped the smartphone market.

The video ends with an elderly couple and a young woman discussing the future of smartphones on a subway, setting the stage for the release of Galaxy AI.

Samsung has also announced the pre-reserve of its Galaxy smartphones in India.

Customers can pre-reserve the flagship Galaxy S24 devices by paying a token amount of Rs 2,000 on Samsung.com, Samsung Exclusive stores, Amazon.in and leading retail outlets across the country.

# Apple opens new office in India, to house up to 1,200 employees

Bengaluru- Apple on Wednesday announced to expand its footprint in India with opening a new office in the heart of Bengaluru, as the iPhone maker cements its position in the country with ramping up local manufacturing. Located at Minsk Square which is the key location in the city, the new office will house up to 1,200 employees.

It comprises of 15 floors and features dedicated lab space, areas for collaboration and wellness, and Caffe Macs.

"Bengaluru is already home to so many of our talented teams, including software engineering and hardware technologies, operations, customer support, and more," an Apple spokesperson told IANS.

"Like everything we do at Apple,



this workspace is created to foster innovation, creativity, and connection. It's an amazing space for our teams to collaborate," the company spokesperson added.

The interiors feature locally-sourced materials, including stone, wood, and fabric in the

walls and flooring, and the office is filled with native plants.

The new office uses best practices in energy conservation, will run on 100 per cent renewable energy, and aims to achieve a Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) Platinum rating — the highest

level of LEED certification. Apple has been carbon neutral for its corporate operations since 2020, and has run all Apple facilities using 100 percent renewable energy since 2018.

The office is the latest addition to the company's corporate office footprint in Bengaluru, Mumbai, Hyderabad, and Gurugram, and represents another important milestone in Apple's more than 25 year history in the country.

Apple has nearly 3,000 employees in India and the work with Indian suppliers of all sizes supports hundreds of thousands of jobs across the country.

The company works with partners across India that are advancing critical work to protect the environment and expand access

to education and employment, including Frank Water, which helps empower communities to protect their own watersheds on the outskirts of Bengaluru.

Apple's teams in Bengaluru work across a wide range of Apple's business — from software, hardware, services, IS&T, operations, customer support, and others. As India doubles down on local manufacturing, Apple assembled iPhones worth more than Rs 1 lakh crore in India in 2023, according to industry data. However, according to industry sources, the actual market value of the iPhones manufactured/assembled in India could be much higher, depending on taxes in other countries.

# Google to lay off 'a few hundreds' employees from ad sales team



"a few hundred" more jobs in its advertising sales team as part of an ongoing restructuring exercise. Philipp Schindler, Google's chief business officer, told staff in a memo that the fresh job cuts "were the result of changes to how Google's sales team operated", reports Business Insider.

A Google spokesperson also confirmed that "a few hundred roles globally are being eliminated" as part of the restructuring.

The layoffs will primarily affect Google's Large Customer Sales (LCS) unit, a team that sells ads to large businesses.

The Google Customer Solutions team (GCS), which sells ads to smaller clients, will now become the "core" ad sales team. Google laid off some employees on its LCS team in October last year.

"Every year we go through a rigorous

process to structure our team to provide the best service to our Ads customers," a company spokesperson was quoted as saying.

"We map customers to the right specialist teams and sales channels to meet their service needs. As part of this, a few hundred roles globally are being eliminated and impacted employees will be able to apply for open roles or elsewhere at Google," the spokesperson added.

Google had recently laid off workers in several departments, including hardware, central engineering teams, and Google Assistant. In January last year, Google cut its workforce by 12,000 people, or around 6 per cent of its full-time employees. The tech giant also made other job cuts to its recruiting and news divisions later in the year.

After laying off nearly 1,000 employees last week, Google is reportedly slashing

# Local newspapers are withering under destructive owners. We should worry



Paul Moore vividly remembers the Baltimore Sun in its heyday, not so long ago. “More than 400 newsroom staff, six foreign bureaus and a 12-person Washington bureau,” Moore recalled. He was the Sun’s deputy managing editor (and, for a time, its public editor) until 2009. “We were a full-service newspaper, covering the country, the region and the world.” And winning multiple Pulitzer prizes for the quality of its aggressive, ambitious journalism. Then came all manner of misfortune – a series of bad owners, the stunning downturn in newspaper economics and – just this week – the paper’s purchase by David D Smith, who runs Sinclair Inc, a Maryland-based media company that made itself infamous a few years ago when it ordered its local journalists in dozens of markets to repeat, word for word, the same rightwing “editorial” about fake news. The identical segments had a hostage-video vibe. This wasn’t news; it was Trump-inspired propaganda, carried out with all the finesse of a bulldozer blasting into a Waterford crystal factory. “Everyone I know who cares about the Sun is aghast,” Moore told me by phone this week after the sale became public.

That’s because they all know the answer to the question posed by

Joshua Benton in Nieman Lab: “Is there something worse for a newspaper than being owned by Alden Global Capital?” Alden, reviled in the industry for strip-mining newspapers all over the country, was the Sun’s most recent owner. The once-robust staff has shrunk to well under 100. But it turns out that Alden has something going for it: its executives don’t care about the content. That’s terrible, on one hand, because they ruthlessly slash the number of journalists in order to maximize profit. But they generally don’t impose their politics on the newsrooms. Now the even-worse alternative has arrived.

In a demoralizing three-hour meeting this week, Smith told Sun staffers he “has only read the paper four times in the past few months, insulted the quality of their journalism and encouraged them to emulate a TV station owned by his broadcast company”, reported the Baltimore Banner, the digital startup that competes with the Sun. Several times he told the journalists he had “no idea what you do”. But they know what he does. For instance, as Benton recalled, Smith met with Donald Trump in 2016 and assured him his reporters stood ready to help: “We are here to deliver your message. Period.” After the election, Sinclair brought in the former Trump aide Boris

Epshteyn as its “chief political analyst” and the TV stations were ordered to broadcast Epshteyn’s rightwing commentaries during their local news segments. As David Simon, the former Sun journalist who created the renowned HBO series *The Wire*, put it: “The Baltimore Sun is now owned by someone who has delivered a news product with a hard ideological premise and then tailors all coverage and editorializing to fit.”

Simon urged Baltimore residents to support the Banner, founded with funding from the Maryland hotel magnate Stewart Bainum, who unsuccessfully tried to buy the Sun from Alden a few years ago. Simon called the Banner “the last, best hope” for civic-minded news coverage in the region. Baltimore is merely a particularly grim point of reference in the depressing trend I wrote about in my 2020 book, *Ghosting the News: Local Journalism and the Crisis of American Democracy*.

For me, there’s a personal sadness. I have mourned as the vibrant regional newspaper where I spent three decades, the Buffalo News, has withered under chain ownership after being sold by longtime owner Warren Buffett; the News somehow still manages to do good work, as has the Sun in recent years. You can see this trend almost

everywhere. Newspapers have faded and the growth of digital news outlets – while encouraging – hasn’t kept up with the losses. There are far fewer reporters now than 15 years ago, and they are much more concentrated in places like Washington DC and New York City. Local newspapers go out of business every week. That turns huge swaths of the US into “news deserts” – places where there is virtually no credible local journalism. Democracy suffers as citizens become less engaged and more polarized, and as government corruption flourishes because the watchdog has gone silent. The irony is that local and regional journalism is more trusted than national reporting. But the old business model has failed as its lifeblood (print advertising) has dried up; digital advertising and subscriptions haven’t come on strong enough, and hedge funds have swooped in to peck out the end-stage profits. Amid this nightmare, one often hears the wish for more local ownership because national vulture-capital chains have done so much damage. But as Baltimore’s situation shows, local ownership can be just as bad. From the early signs – and given Sinclair’s history – it may be even worse. Margaret Sullivan is a Guardian US columnist writing on media, politics and culture

# The US is stretching itself dangerously thin in the Indo-Pacific

China's determination to reunify with Taiwan and the Philippines' desire to favorably resolve disputes in the South China Sea indicate U.S. dominance of the Indo-Pacific region is doing little to preserve peace and stability. While Washington focuses on bolstering its military spending and presence to maintain regional dominance, Chinese President Xi Jinping is achieving diplomatic victories with Vietnam, South Korea, Japan and Bhutan that ultimately advance Chinese interests.

More U.S. hard power in the region will not reverse Beijing's course.

Maintaining regional hegemony in Asia isn't worth the cost. Tens of billions of dollars from the \$875 billion National Defense Authorization Act is slated to support U.S. dominance in the Indo-Pacific, adding to the nearly \$34 trillion national debt. The debt is projected to grow to over \$45 trillion by 2027, with government interest payments on the debt expected to be around \$3 trillion per year. This is almost the same amount spent on Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid. With "higher for longer" interest rates the global norm, the economic growth needed to sustain interest payments is not guaranteed.

A U.S. debt crisis is a greater threat

to the nation than America losing its dominance in the Indo-Pacific. If debt servicing continues to increase its share of the federal budget, Washington will likely be forced to make a catastrophic choice between significantly weakening essential government spending or defaulting on the debt. Both would have drastic consequences for U.S. national security and economic prosperity.

China is already reducing its exposure to U.S. debt, in part to reduce sovereign risk. A U.S. economic meltdown would severely weaken American power.

Even without a hegemonic policy in Asia, the United States would likely maintain its economic benefit — and at a lower cost. A prominent argument for preserving U.S. leadership in the Indo-Pacific is because it provides an economic advantage. However, as reshoring and nearshoring accelerate, Asia will become less important to U.S. economic prosperity. Moreover, the trade rules governing the Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership and, yes, even the Chinese-led Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership are based on Washington's policies. These rules, which will become more difficult to change as more countries

join the trade pacts, will influence regional economics and trade for the foreseeable future.

Setting economic factors aside, U.S. dominance in Asia is unsustainable. Historically, dominance doesn't last. Even more so for maritime empires — see the fall of the 20th century colonial empires. Even China, India and Japan could not sustain their regional hegemonies. China and India's resurgence as great powers further challenges America's ability to remain the dominant power in Asia. Both China and India seek to restore their historical greatness and influence in East and South Asia. They want to protect and advance their respective national interests. Beijing and New Delhi already pursue independent foreign policies, despite those who believe India could become a U.S.-aligned ally. Differences with China aside, India's devotion to national unity, to the extent that it is willing to assassinate or attempt to kill separatist leaders in Canada and the United States, shows that a powerful India will demand a greater say in Asia. Geographically, total dominance of Asia — from Japan to India — is a pipe dream, especially for the United States. Logistically,

U.S. power projection will be limited by the Pacific Ocean and U.S. allies' willingness to support shows of force. U.S. leadership on the continent itself is effectively impossible considering the lack of serious land power presence. But this is the same for the Asian great powers. The Pacific and Indian Oceans will restrict China, India and even Japan's ability to dominate the region. Moreover, India and China must grapple with diverse geographies — such as the Himalayas, the Gobi Desert, and the jungles of Southeast Asia — and distances of thousands of miles, which will limit their abilities to lead the region.

Instead of overreaching, Washington should face reality and shift its Indo-Pacific policy to concentrate on securing America's vital interests. Focus less on building up America's hard power presence and assist U.S. treaty allies in the region in strengthening themselves to reduce risk to U.S. personnel. Increase regional diplomacy and emphasize areas of mutual interest, particularly economic security and prosperity. Avoid symbolic activities, like joint patrols in the South China Sea, that spur regional tensions but provide no gains for the United States.

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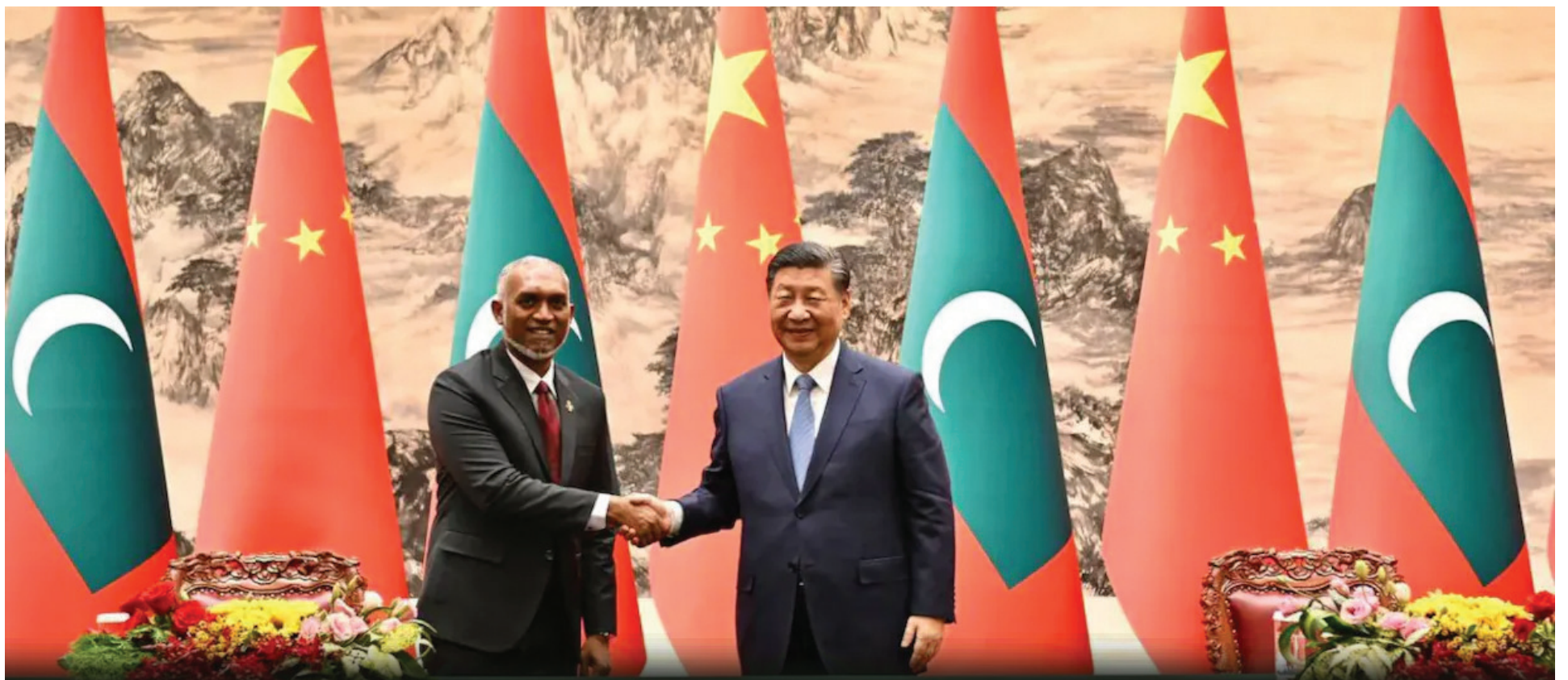
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## Maldives Should Avoid China's Debt Trap

As the furore over Indian tourists cancelling travel plans to Maldives erupted over a photograph of Prime Minister Narendra Modi at a beach in Lakshadweep, Maldivian President Mohamed Muizzu was on his way to China for his meeting with President Xi Jinping. The archipelago faces catastrophic climate change impact and its economy is dependent on China, its largest external creditor, for its economy.

Amid the Indian pushback against the controversial comments by some Maldivian ministers, one of the key agreements that Muizzu signed with China focuses on tourism. Another agreement frontlines infrastructure. However, China has a checkered history of delivering on infrastructural promises, something the Maldives has to tolerate as a pawn in the Asian giant's Belt and Road Initiative. With the unequal relationship defined by escalating Chinese strategic interests in host nations, Maldives can look to other central Asian partners of China to see how their participation in the BRI has progressed at the cost of high debt and low development. Nepal's foreign minister has said despite signing for the BRI in 2017, over six years later not a single project in the mountain country is completed.

Mohamed Muizzu, a candidate supported by jailed former Maldivian President Abdulla Yameen, led the "India Out" campaign, in a reversal of former President Ibu Solih's "India First" policy. Unlike India's approach of development-led lending to partner nations, though, Chinese strategic investment allowed the economically

mighty nation to lease 17 islands prior to a controversial law enacted by Yameen's administration before 2019. The encroachment of land belonging to BRI partners by China is a tested method, and the expansionist power claims much land outside its own borders. In 2022, a leaked report with the Nepal government showed significant encroachment on Nepali territory by China, but the debate lost its sheen quickly since the country's administration is indebted to its creditor, China.

In case of Maldives, however, foreign interference could mean halted infrastructure development, and debt-trap "diplomacy" (the country owes close to \$ 1.3 billion), and a major security threat to India even beyond China's String of Pearls agenda to encircle India in the Indian Ocean Region. The leased island of Feydhoo Finolhu provides an insight into how rapidly China can work at utilising its leases to threaten India. The island, leased by China till 2066, has grown two and a half times its original size to 100,000 square metres, less than 700 km from India.

While allying with China, the country has also remained the hub of radical Islamic terror, sending more Islamic State fighters per capita than any other nation. Some Maldivian survivors are held in camps in Syria, while the country takes in a massive population of foreign workers, often from Bangladesh, which makes up close to 20% of its small population. The country is now host to narco-terror syndicates operated out of Pakistan, another terror-sponsoring

partner to the Chinese, and these syndicates aid in promoting radical Islamic terror to young Maldivian men. Despite former home minister P Chidambaram's intervention in 2010 to extract a promise to not host Lashkar-e-Taiba operatives, Maldives has functioned as a base for terror operations. Intelligence shows that the radicalisation functions in concert with anti-India messaging, along with the drug and trafficking operations, all of which China is happy to turn a blind eye to, and sometimes even tacitly support. It has operated to revive such organizations in Pakistan-Occupied Kashmiri territory despite Chinese citizens being major victims of terrorism in Pakistan.

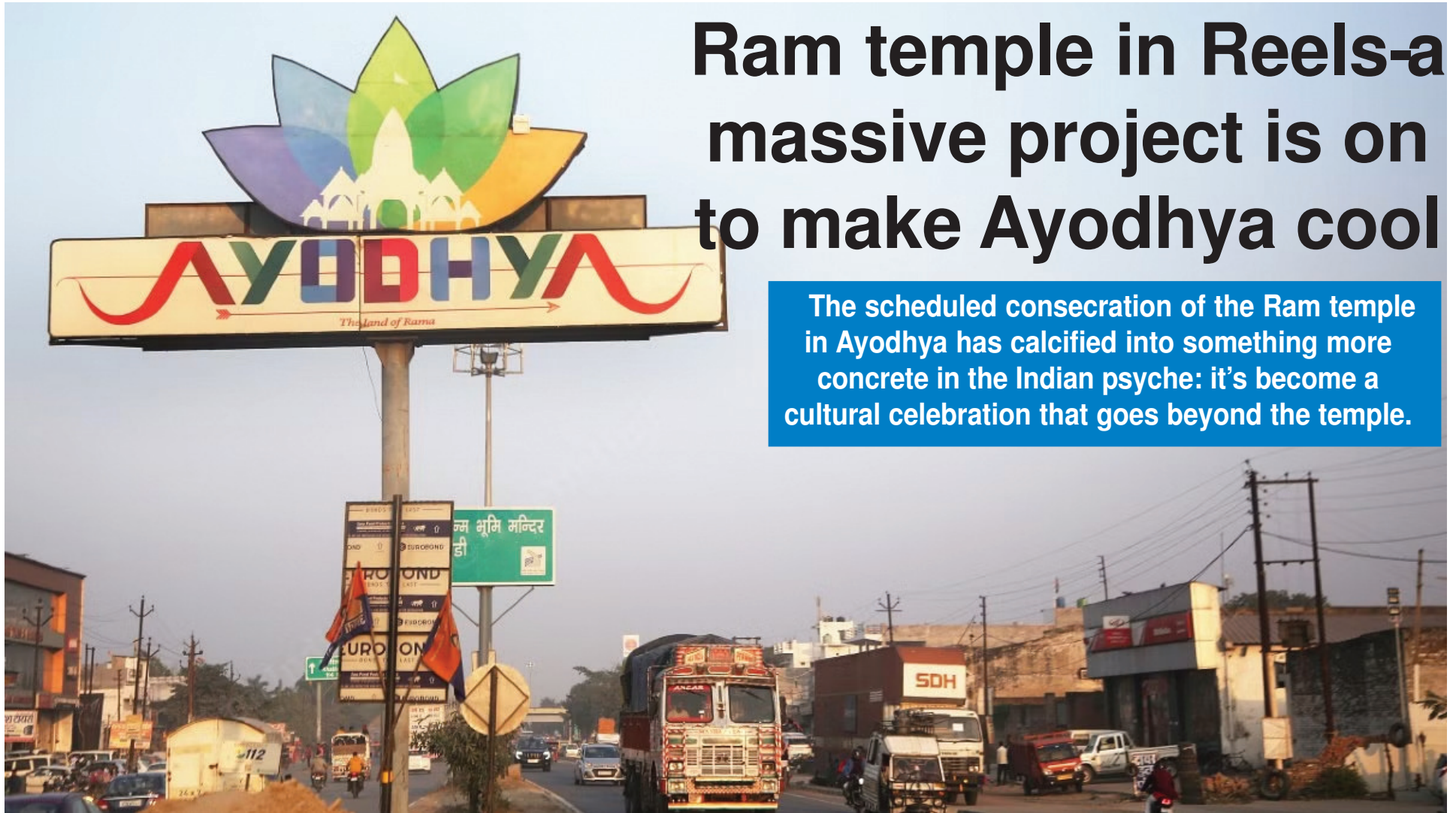
The Maldivian economy exists in a fragile balance between tourism, agriculture, fisheries and Chinese debt. Amidst its row with India and President Muizzu opting for China as his first stop, the island nation wants Chinese tourists to make up for losses due to Indian cancellations. Indian tourists were the largest group of visitors in 2023, making up 11% of the country's tourism market. It is unlikely that China will be able to compensate in this department, considering its own slowing economy due to Covid lockdowns that are showing long-lasting effects. At the same time, the climate-endangered country had discussed renewable power transmission with India under the One Sun, One World and One Grid initiative. In 2022, the Government of India had offered a USD 100 million line of credit for infrastructure projects under

former President Solih. The country's inorganic "India Out" platform that brought Muizzu to power will cause much of the promises to go unrealized unless the President is able to draw a clear balance, which seems more and more unlikely at this stage, despite Maldivian assurances that New Delhi remained a strategic partner. As China hypocritically calls out "external interference" in Maldives, it is significant that its anti-India messaging found root in a country where civil society had already been engaged with radicalization, and its youth embroiled in drug trade. It is to the detriment of India-Maldives ties that there was no equal but positive messaging to counter any of the sentiments, and a simple yoga event conducted by the Indian High Commission in the country was attacked by Islamists, while it had been welcomed in 44 other Islamic nations. Soft messaging and government-to-government ties can hardly be sufficient in protecting Indian interests, despite it being the least interfering and most legitimate means of building ties amongst nations. As the Indian government keeps its doors open to the new Maldivian President, it remains to be seen if Male's belligerence is incited by an openly hostile China, and if it suits the Maldives to remain a pawn in a larger game, or set conditions for Beijing, with more luck than other BRI partners have managed so far.

By Sagorika Sinha

# Ram temple in Reels—a massive project is on to make Ayodhya cool

The scheduled consecration of the Ram temple in Ayodhya has calcified into something more concrete in the Indian psyche: it's become a cultural celebration that goes beyond the temple.



The reel begins with two men hanging out on a terrace—and ends with one strangling the other for not knowing what's happening on 22 January. Social media has been flooded with news reports and content on the consecration of the Ram temple in Ayodhya, a loud buzz that is now clamouring to a cacophonous fever pitch. The moment in India's history is being memorialised in memes.

This particular reel on Instagram—with a million views, 1,40,000 likes, and 1,20,000 shares—is shaming people for not knowing about the upcoming event while celebrating the scheduled consecration of Ram Mandir. "There's no reason for you to be alive [if you don't know]," the reel concludes, with a caption that translates to "if you're Hindu you should at least know this." The comments resound with "Jai Shree Ram."

Another Instagram reel details how people can order free prasad from the Ram temple after 22 January for just Rs 51 — it has 16.9 million views, over 1.1 million likes, and thousands of comments appreciating the initiative.

The consecration of the Ram temple has calcified into something much more

concrete in the Indian psyche: it's become a cultural celebration that goes far beyond the temple itself.

And as always, social media is the litmus test for how deep the impact is.

#RamMandirPranPratistha has been trending on X (Twitter) for weeks. A click through hashtags like

#ayodhyarammandir and #22january on Instagram reveals hundreds of thousands of posts, from devotional songs to acts of worship to the slightly more aggressive comedy of the hanging-out-to-strangling reel. There are AI-generated images of gods, colourfully dressed middle-aged women dancing, young children being paraded around in saffron, selfie challenges in Ayodhya, lip-synced songs. It's all adding to the frenzy around this long-awaited date, seeping into every part of Indian public life—even airline staff are dressing up as Ram and Sita, while those on delayed flights are chanting 'Jai Shree Ram'.

### The influencer effect

Of course, some of the content is being produced by social media influencers invited to the 22 January event.

A few days ago, a group of around 500 influencers set off on a 4,500 km journey to

Ayodhya, retracing Ram's steps after his return from exile. Organised by the Ram Mahotsav Yatra Samiti formed by the All India Influencers Association, the journey will be documented over the next three months. Other influencers have begun travelling to Ayodhya, posting devotional content on their way.

But there has also been a more concerted marketing push.

The Uttar Pradesh government hired social media influencers in December to promote the cultural heritage of Ayodhya and document the construction of the temple—even allocating a budget of Rs 25 lakh.

The official account of the Shri Ram Janmabhoomi Teerth Kshetra, the trust constituted to look after the construction and management of the Ram temple, has nearly five lakh followers on Instagram. One of the latest posts urges social media users to collectively celebrate the return of Ram to his rightful abode with the hashtag #ShriRamHomecoming.

And let's not forget the red carpet rollout for the older content creators, the original influencers—Bollywood celebrities.

Everyone from Rajinikanth to Ranbir Kapoor has been invited, and is expected to attend. Amitabh Bachchan has already bought a plot of land for Rs 14.5 crore in Ayodhya.

All this signals a massive project to make Ayodhya cool. And it might be working, if social media is anything to go by. Content creators have been setting terms and trends online for years now, so roping them in to curate the conversation around the BJP government's biggest ideological project is only natural.

### Less humour, more culture

Some of the content veers towards educational and devotional—not necessarily falling into the entertainment or humorous categories. This is due in part to religious respect, but it is also a symptom of the atmosphere around the event. There's a belligerence in the air, and a feeling of vindictive satisfaction in provocative videos that almost dare viewers to find fault in its content. Such videos are loud and proud avowal of Hindu culture, the ultimate cultural claim for the Hindu identity. And social media is the obvious

soap box. A recent book by journalist Kunal Purohit, *H-Pop: The Secretive World of Hindu Popstars*, outlines this exact phenomenon — how Hindutva has seeped into popular culture through music, books, and videos. It's a cultural project that now subsists entirely by itself, eagerly waiting for moments like the upcoming consecration to rally around.

But this also points to the changing nature of social media content: in this particular socio-religious context, content is meant to declare pride and excitement, not simply entertain the consumer. The worry is that this fever pitch could easily tip over into dangerous territory.

Journalist Ismat Ara recently posted on X addressing Indian Muslims and pointing to all the "online and offline noise" over the Ram temple — "Ignore anything controversial. You don't owe anyone reactions. Ignore all of it. Don't get triggered," she posted. "Don't fall into any unnecessary debates. Your safety comes first." The creative and cultural content is now heading into a countdown towards the consecration. The question is: what will these content creators focus on after 22 January?

# Why the World Is Betting Against American Democracy

Ambassadors to Washington warn that the GOP-Democratic divide is endangering America's national security.



When I asked the European ambassador to talk to me about America's deepening partisan divide, I expected a polite brushoff at best. Foreign diplomats are usually loath to discuss domestic U.S. politics. Instead, the ambassador unloaded for an hour, warning that America's poisonous politics are hurting its security, its economy, its friends and its standing as a pillar of democracy and global stability. The U.S. is a "fat buffalo trying to take a nap" as hungry wolves approach, the envoy mused. "I can hear those Champagne bottle corks popping in Moscow — like it's Christmas every fucking day." As voters cast ballots in the Iowa caucuses Monday, many in the United States see this year's presidential election as a test of American democracy. But, in a series of conversations with a dozen current and former diplomats, I sensed that to many of our friends abroad, the U.S. is already failing that test.

The diplomats are aghast that so many U.S. leaders let their zeal for partisan politics prevent the basic functions of government. It's a major topic of conversations at their private dinners and gatherings. Many of those I talked to were granted anonymity to be as candid with me as they are with each other. For example, one former Arab ambassador who was posted in

the U.S. during both Republican and Democratic administrations told me American politics have become so unhealthy that he'd turn down a chance to return. "I don't know if in the coming years people will be looking at the United States as a model for democracy," a second Arab diplomat warned. Many of these conversations wouldn't have happened a few months ago. There are rules, traditions and pragmatic concerns that discourage foreign diplomats from commenting on the internal politics of another country, even as they closely watch events such as the Iowa caucuses. (One rare exception: some spoke out on America's astonishing 2016 election.) But the contours of this year's presidential campaign, a Congress that can barely choose a House speaker or keep the government open, and, perhaps above all, the U.S. debate on military aid for Ukraine have led some diplomats to drop their inhibitions. And while they were often hesitant to name one party as the bigger culprit, many of the examples they pointed to involved Republican members of Congress.

As they vented their frustrations, I felt as if I was hearing from a group of people wishing they could stage an intervention for a friend hitting rock bottom. Their concerns don't stem from mere altruism;

they're worried because America's state of being affects their countries, too. "When the United States' voice is not as strong, is not as balanced, is not as fair as it should be, then a problem is created for the world," said Ronald Sanders, Antigua and Barbuda's longtime ambassador in Washington. Donald Trump's name came up in my conversations, but not as often as you'd think. Yes, I was told, a Trump win in 2024 would accelerate America's polarization — but a Trump loss is unlikely to significantly slow or reverse the structural forces leading many of its politicians to treat compromise as a sin. The likelihood of a closely split House and Senate following the 2024 vote adds to the worries.

The diplomats focused much of their alarm on the U.S. debate over military aid to Ukraine — I was taken aback by how even some whose nations had little connection to Russia's war raised the topic. In particular, they criticized the decision to connect the issue of Ukrainian aid and Israeli aid to U.S. border security. Not only did the move tangle a foreign policy issue with a largely domestic one, but border security and immigration also are topics about which the partisan fever runs unusually high, making it harder to get a deal. Immigration issues in

particular are a problem many U.S. lawmakers have little incentive to actually solve because it robs them of a rallying cry on the campaign trail. So now, "Ukraine might not get aid, Israel might not get aid, because of pure polarization politics," said Francisco Santos Calderón, a former Colombian ambassador to the United States.

Diplomats from many European countries are especially unhappy. They remember how, when Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, many Republicans downplayed concerns about the far-right fringe in their party that questioned what was then solid, bipartisan support. Now, as the debate over the aid unfolds, it seems the far-right is calling the shots. There's a growing sense among foreign diplomats that moral or national security arguments — about defending a country unjustly invaded, deterring Russia, preventing a bigger war in Europe and safeguarding democracy — don't work on the American far-right. Instead, some are stressing to U.S. lawmakers that funds for Ukraine are largely spent inside the United States, creating jobs and helping rebuild America's defense industrial base (while having the side benefit of degrading the military of a major U.S. foe). "If this doesn't make sense to the politicians,

then what will?" the European ambassador asked. A former Eastern European ambassador to D.C. worried about how some GOP war critics cast the Ukraine crisis as President Joe Biden's war when "in reality, the consideration should be to the national interests of the United States."

Foreign diplomats also are watching in alarm as polarizing abortion politics have delayed the promotions of U.S. military officers and threaten to damage PEPFAR, an anti-AIDS program that has saved millions of lives in Africa. That there are questions about America's commitment to NATO dumbfounds the diplomats I talked to. Then, there are the lengthy delays in Senate confirmations of U.S. ambassadors and other officials — a trend exacerbated by lawmakers from both parties. "There was always a certain courtesy that the other party gave to let the president appoint a Cabinet. What if these courtesies don't hold as they don't seem to hold now?" a former Asian ambassador said. "It is very concerning." When Republicans and Democrats strike deals, they love to say it shows the system works. But simply having a fractious, lengthy and seemingly unnecessary debate about a topic of global security can damage the perception of the U.S. as a reliable partner.