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Kareena talks about her characters  
Khushi, Sanjana & Tina



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## *Biden-Modi Bonhomie Overshadowed as American Political Hostility Towards India Takes Centre Stage*



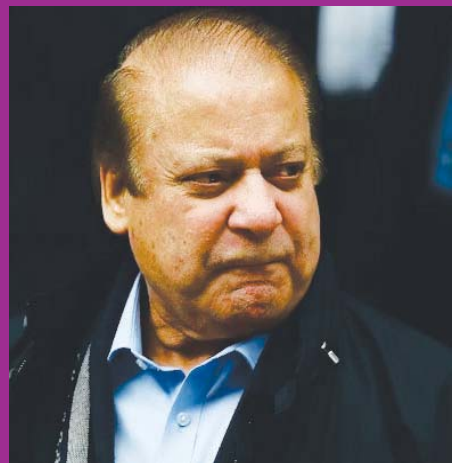
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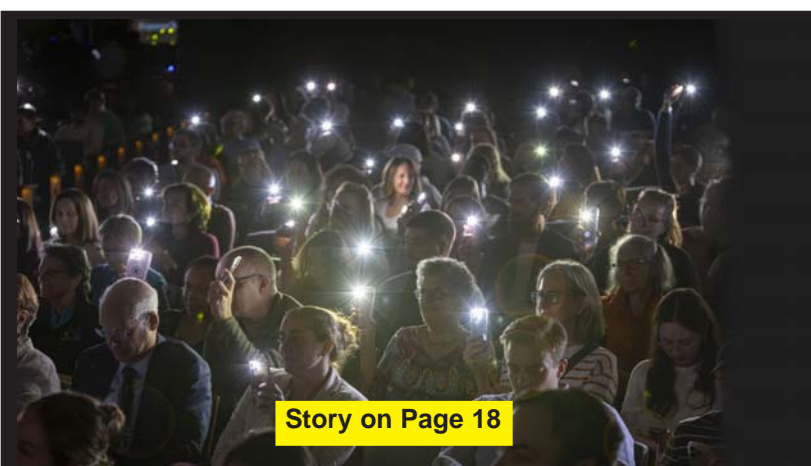


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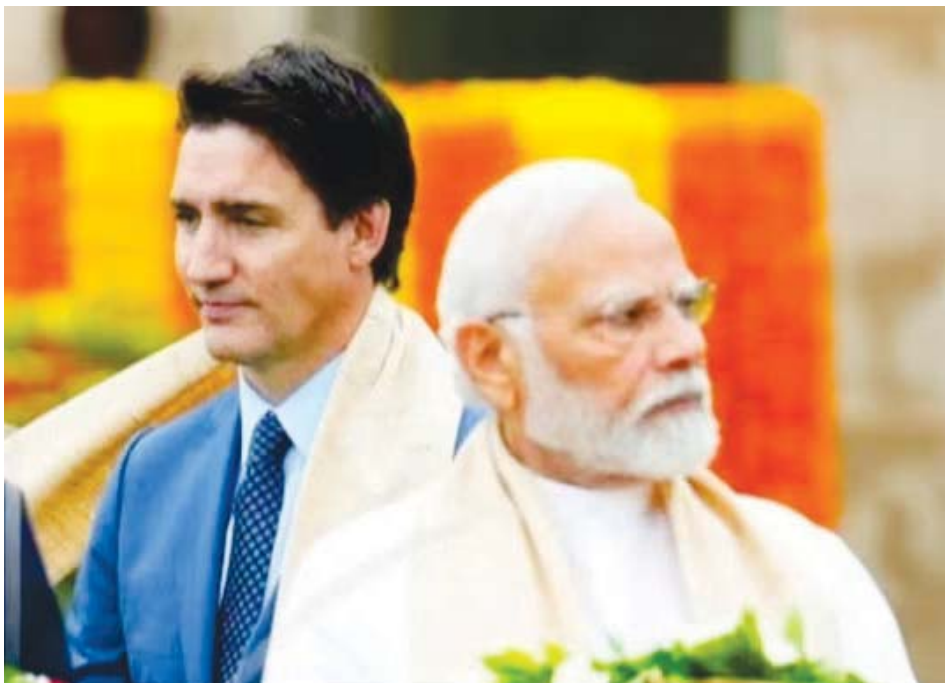
# Trudeau says 'tonal shift' from India after US allegation of Pannun murder plot

**Justin Trudeau mentioned he has sensed a 'tonal shift' from India towards Canada since US authorities indicted an Indian national for a foiled plot to kill a Khalistani terrorist.**

(Sai Bureau)- Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau on Wednesday (local time) said that he feels there is "a tonal shift" in India-Canada relations since the United States warned New Delhi about the involvement of an Indian national in an alleged plot to kill Khalistani terrorist Gurpatwant Singh Pannun, Canadian broadcaster CBC reported.

Trudeau stated India may realise now that "they can't bluster their way through this". "I think there is a beginning of an understanding that they can't bluster their way through this and there is an openness to collaborating in a way that perhaps they were less open before," the CBC quoted the Canadian Prime Minister.

Trudeau added, "There's an understanding that maybe, maybe just churning out attacks against Canada isn't going to make this problem go away." He also emphasised that Canada



does not want to engage in a "fight with India right now over this" and stressed the importance of "standing up for people's safety and the rule of law".

"We want to be working on that trade deal. We want to be advancing the Indo-Pacific strategy. But it is foundational for Canada to stand up for people's

rights, for people's safety, and for the rule of law. And that's what we're going to do," Trudeau said. On November 29, the US Justice Department charged a 52-year-old Indian national, Nikhil Gupta, with involvement in an alleged murder plot against Gurpatwant Singh Pannun, who is an American citizen.

India responded swiftly stating that any such act is "contrary to government policy" and announced a high-level probe into the matter.

In September of this year, Trudeau informed the Canadian parliament that the country's agencies were investigating the involvement of Indian agents in the murder of Khalistani terrorist Hardeep Singh Nijjar, who was a Canadian citizen.

India dismissed the allegations as "absurd" and "motivated", leading to an unprecedented diplomatic crisis between the two countries.

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# US Congresspeople announces creation of Hindu caucus

**Embodying a diverse coalition, the caucus represents Hindus from various countries including India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Pakistan, Afghanistan, the UK and the Netherlands.**

(Sai Bureau)- Republican lawmakers Pete Sessions and Elise Stefanik on Tuesday (local time) announced the inauguration of a Congressional Hindu Caucus to protect the interests of the religious minority and raise their issues in the US Congress.

Originally established during the 115th Congress, the caucus continues its pivotal role in forging a vital connection between the Hindu-American community and policymakers, a media release said on Tuesday. "The inauguration of the Congressional Hindu Caucus marks a significant step towards recognising and amplifying the voice of the Hindu-American community in our nation's capitol. We are committed to addressing their concerns, celebrating their contributions, and ensuring their perspectives are heard at the highest levels of government," Sessions said. The Congressional Hindu Caucus,

under the chairmanship of Congressman Sessions and Chairwoman Stefanik, is dedicated to representing the values that are significant to the Hindu-American community, it said. Embodying a diverse coalition, the caucus represents Hindus from various countries including India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Pakistan, Afghanistan, the UK and the Netherlands.

It also includes members of other faiths with Indian origins, such as Sikhs, Jains and Buddhists, the statement said.

According to the lawmakers, the Congressional Hindu Caucus advocates for free enterprise, limited government, fiscal discipline, strong family values and a robust foreign policy stance against authoritarian regimes.

This proactive approach not only strengthens the Hindu-American presence in Washington but also enhances its influence in shaping a more representative and diverse nation.



In addition to Congressman Sessions and Chairwoman Stefanik, the caucus includes members like Congressman Andy Biggs, among others, it said.

## Vivek Ramaswamy's ultimatum after Colorado court ruling: 'Reinstate Trump or...'



(Sai Bureau)- Republican presidential aspirant Vivek Ramaswamy has vowed to pull out of the Colorado primary ballot unless former US President Donald Trump is reinstated following the state's historic Supreme Court ruling on Tuesday declaring him ineligible for office for his role in the US Capitol attack, reported Fox News. Calling the Colorado Supreme Court ruling 'un-American', 'unconstitutional', and 'unprecedented', Ramaswamy took to microblogging site X and wrote, "I pledge to \*withdraw\* from the Colorado GOP primary unless Trump is also allowed to be on the state's ballot, and I demand that Ron DeSantis, Chris Christie, and Nikki Haley to do the same immediately - or else they are tacitly endorsing this illegal maneuver which will have disastrous consequences for our country." The Colorado Supreme Court's disqualification, which was made under the 14th Amendment of the US Constitution, cited Trump's conduct during the Capitol riots on January 6, 2021. The 4-3 ruling from the Colorado Supreme Court made Trump the first presidential candidate in US history to be deemed ineligible for the White House under a rarely used provision of the US Constitution that bars

officials who have engaged in "insurrection or rebellion" from holding office. However, the 4-3 ruling was stayed until January 4 because of likely appeals.

"The 14th Amendment was part of the 'Reconstruction Amendments' that were ratified following the Civil War. It was passed to prohibit former Confederate military and political leaders from holding high federal or state office. These men had clearly taken part in a rebellion against the United States: the Civil War. That makes it all the more absurd that a left-wing group in Colorado is asking a federal court to disqualify the 45th President on the same grounds, equating his speech to rebellion against the United States," Ramaswamy wrote. "And there's another legal problem: Trump is not a former 'officer of the United States,' as that term is used in the Constitution, meaning Section 3 does not apply. As the Supreme Court explained in *Free Enterprise Fund v. Public Company Accounting Oversight Board* (2010), an 'officer of the United States' is someone appointed by the President to aid him in his duties under Article II, Section 2. The term does not apply to elected officials, and certainly not to the President himself," he explained.

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# PM's first comments on US's charge on Indian's alleged role in Pannun murder plot

( News Agency)- Prime Minister Narendra Modi gave his first response to the US's claims of an Indian national's alleged role in a plot to kill Khalistani terrorist Gurpatwant Singh Pannun, saying the government will "look into" any evidence.

In an interview with the UK-based The Financial Times, PM Modi also said the relations between India and the US would not be derailed by "few incidents". On November 29, Nikhil Gupta, a 52-year-old Indian national, was charged by federal prosecutors in the US in connection with his alleged participation in a foiled plot to kill Pannun. According to US authorities, Gupta colluded with an Indian government agency employee in the alleged plot.

During the interview, PM Modi highlighted his deep concern about the activities of extremist groups overseas, saying they were engaged in intimidation and incited violence "under the guise of freedom of expression". He underlined that security and counter-terrorism cooperation has

**Prime Minister Narendra Modi has reacted for the first time to the US's claims of an Indian national's alleged involvement in the murder of Khalistani terrorist Gurpatwant Singh Pannun.**



been a key component of the ties between India and the US.

"I don't think it is appropriate to link a few incidents with diplomatic relations between the two countries," he was quoted by The Financial Times as

saying.

"There is strong bipartisan support for the strengthening of this relationship, which is a clear indicator of a mature and stable partnership," the Prime Minister said.

Last month, The Financial Times, citing unnamed officials, reported that the US "thwarted a conspiracy to assassinate" Pannun on American soil. The newspaper also reported that the US government had "issued a warning" to India over concerns that New Delhi was "involved in the plot" to eliminate Pannun.

Nikhil Gupta was charged with murder-for-hire, which carries a maximum sentence of 10 years in prison, and conspiracy to commit murder-for-hire, which carries a maximum sentence of a 10-year jail term.

US authorities had said Gupta agreed to pay an assassin \$100,000 to kill Pannun living in New York City.

The prosecutors had said Czech authorities arrested and detained Gupta on June 30, pursuant to the bilateral extradition treaty between the US and the Czech Republic. Gupta was arrested in the Czech Republic at the request of the US in connection with his alleged participation in the plot to kill Pannun.

## Three criminal law bills passed in Lok Sabha in absence of 97 suspended MPs

**The Lok Sabha on Wednesday passed three criminal law bills that aim to overhaul the criminal justice system in the country.**

( News Agency)- The Lok Sabha on Wednesday passed three revised criminal law bills aiming to overhaul the criminal justice system in the country and establish a "justice system based on Indian thinking".

The bills Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita proposes to

were reflective of the colonial mindset with the intention of punishing and not imparting justice. "The motive of the Indian Penal Code was to give punishment, not justice; in place of that Bharatiya Nyaya (Second) Sanhita, 2023 will come into effect in the country after the passage from the House," Amit Shah said.

The Home Minister added that new criminal law bills are in "consonance with the spirit of the Constitution".

"The three new bills seek to establish a justice system based on Indian thinking... The three proposed criminal laws will free people from the colonial mindset and its symbols," Shah said,



replace the Indian Penal Code, Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita seeks to replace the Code of Criminal Procedure, and Bharatiya Sakshya Sanhita replaces the Indian Evidence Act. The contentious bills were passed by the Lower House in the absence of 97 MPs, who were suspended this week.

Introducing the Bills in Lok Sabha, Union Home Minister Amit Shah said the existing criminal laws

before the Lok Sabha passed the bills by voice vote. He added, "For poor, the biggest challenge to get justice is the financial challenge... For years 'Tareekh pe tareekh' keep going. Police hold the judicial system responsible. The government holds the police and judiciary responsible. The police and judiciary hold the government responsible for the delay. Now, we have made many things clear in the new laws".

## Kejriwal fears probe agency, has taken 'political refuge' in Punjab: Akali Dal

( News Agency)- New Delhi Chief Minister and AAP president Arvind Kejriwal came under a direct attack from the Shiromani Akali Dal and BJP for skipping the Enforcement Directorate's summons and joining a vipassana camp in Punjab.

Speaking to India Today TV, Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) leader

Daljit Cheema alleged that Arvind Kejriwal was seeking "political asylum" in the name of vipassana to avoid the probe agency's action. Arvind Kejriwal is not coming to attend the 10-day vipassana camp. He fears the ED after getting summon. He has taken a political refuge in the state where his party is ruling," Daljit Cheema said. "Mr Kejriwal should have delayed his vipassana camp by a day by appearing before



the Enforcement Directorate. He might have requested the authorities to get time for yoga. He fears that he might be arrested. There is also a need to keep an eye on him as he can escape from here as well," Cheema said. Taking a dig at Kejriwal over his Punjab visit, BJP spokesperson SS Channy said he was trying to divert the public attention by taking a vow of silence (maun-vrat). "He is trying to divert public attention from the embarrassment that the party faced in recent assembly elections in five states. Now, he will slip into a maun vrat. The whole of Punjab state machinery will be put at his service. He is wasting public time as he is seen now and then in Punjab," SS Channy said. Reacting to the SAD and BJP's remarks, Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) spokesperson Malwinder Singh Kang said Arvind Kejriwal's vipassana camp was already scheduled and was part of his health activity.

# War of words between BRS and Karnataka Congress leaders continues

( News Agency)- Hyderabad- The war of words between leaders of Bharat Rashtra Samithi (BRS) and Karnataka Congress over an alleged fake video of Karnataka Chief Minister Siddaramaiah continued on Wednesday with Karnataka minister Priyank Kharge joining the issue, evoking a strong counter from K. T. Rama Rao. Karnataka's Information Technology and Biotechnology Minister Kharge took to 'X' to slam the BRS working president for sharing a fake video clip of Siddaramaiah's speech in Karnataka Assembly. He said that KTR has taken BJP's bait of lies and manipulation.

"I am sure such fake narratives will now be a daily affair since BRS & BJP are thick as thieves. FYI, have a look at the brief & complete video," wrote Kharge while sharing the link to Siddaramaiah's full speech.

"This is why Govt of Karnataka is coming up with a cell to combat misinformation and fake news," Kharge added.

KTR, in his counter to Kharge's attack, posted some newspaper clippings and asked, "Are these statements from your leader

Rahul Gandhi about employment to 2 lakh Karnataka youth and from Deputy CM on empty treasury also Fake?"

"Buddy, we defeated all the BJP bigwigs in Telangana including all three of their MPs, Not the Congress party. Better be careful/prepared before you get carried away by propaganda of Sunil & team," added the BRS leader. On Tuesday, KTR and Siddaramaiah were engaged in a war of words after the BRS leader shared a video of the Karnataka Chief Minister's speech and wrote, "No money to deliver poll promises/guarantees says Karnataka CM!"

"Is this the future template for Telangana too after successfully hoodwinking the people in elections? Aren't you supposed to do basic research and planning before making outlandish statements?," asked KTR whose party lost power in Telangana to the Congress party in the recent elections. Siddaramaiah hit back at KTR for what he called circulating fake video. "Do you know why your party lost power in the Telangana Elections? Because you don't even know how to verify what is fake and edited and what is truth," the Karnataka Chief Minister told the BRS leader.



## Air India Express to commence flights from Ayodhya airport starting Dec 30

( News Agency)- Air India Express on Wednesday announced the commencement of services from the Ayodhya International Airport from December 30. "The inaugural flight IX 2789 on December 30, 2023, is scheduled to depart from Delhi at 11 a.m. and land in Ayodhya at 12.20 p.m. From Ayodhya, IX



1769 is scheduled to depart for Delhi at 12.50 p.m. and arrive at 14.10 p.m.," an airline spokesperson said. Commenting on the launch, Alok Singh, Managing Director of Air India Express, said: "Air India Express is excited to commence operations from Ayodhya right after the airport opens. This underlines our commitment to enhancing connectivity from Tier 2 and Tier 3 cities across the country. We're enthusiastic about Ayodhya's anticipated growth, attracting pilgrims and travellers from near and far and take pride in being part of this exciting growth story." Air India Express will also provide convenient one-stop itineraries connecting Ayodhya to destinations such as Bhubaneswar, Bengaluru, Kochi, Guwahati, Goa, Gwalior, Jaipur, Pune, Surat, Srinagar and Sharjah.

## Indian-origin doc accused of molesting woman acquitted in Singapore

( News Agency)- A 35-year-old Indian-origin doctor accused of molesting a woman in Singapore earlier this year has been acquitted after paying compensation to the victim. Dheeraj Prem Khatani was given a discharge amounting to an acquittal after he had the matter compounded in a district court on December 18, The Straits Times newspaper reported.

Compounding an offence means an alleged victim and the accused are allowed to settle the matter without entering a conviction.

Usually, the accused issues a public apology and pays a



monetary compensation to the victim. Causing hurt, outrage of modesty are some of the offences that can be compounded under Singapore law. Khatani now cannot be charged again over the same offence, but before agreeing to the terms, the public prosecutor will need to consider the public interest, circumstances of the offence and whether there are any aggravating factors.

In a statement to The Straits Times on Monday, the Attorney-General's Chambers (AGC) said Khatani had sought to compound the offence, in lieu of prosecution.

## Why is discussion centred on caste not efficiency: Priyank on Kharge's name for PM's

( News Agency)- Karnataka Minister, Priyank Kharge, commented on the name of AICC President Mallikarjun Kharge being proposed as the prime ministerial candidate by many parties of the INDIA bloc, questioning why discussions always revolve around community and whether efficiency in Dalits is not considered. He made this statement on Wednesday in response to questions being asked if the senior Dalit leader Mallikarjun Kharge's name had been put up to give an advantage to the INDIA bloc in the forthcoming Lok Sabha elections in 2024. Priyank, who is Mallikarjun Kharge's son, rued that every time there



are discussions about a chief ministerial or prime ministerial candidate, they tend to focus on communities.

"Won't you see efficiency in these communities that you are mentioning? Will they only get elected in the name of the communities they belong to?" he asked.

Priyank Kharge emphasised that Prime Minister Modi's caste

was not questioned when he assumed power.

Priyank Kharge said, "You say he is efficient. We have seen how efficient he is for 10 years."

He added, "Mallikarjun Kharge has given an appropriate answer regarding the development in the INDIA bloc. The main objective is to get the highest number of MPs elected, and the question of who becomes PM and Deputy PM is not the primary concern." The Congress will have to win 200 to 250 seats and see to it that candidates of the parties that make up the INDIA bloc win more seats. "That is the major goal," Priyank Kharge stated.

# SP asks Cong to clarify stand on BSP in INDIA bloc meet

New Delhi- During the fourth meeting of the Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance (INDIA), the Samajwadi Party urged the Congress to avoid the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) in Uttar Pradesh. According to sources, Samajwadi Party leader Ram Gopal Yadav during the meeting on Tuesday made it clear to the Congress that it is ready for the alliance in the state.

However, the source said the Samajwadi party leaders during the meeting told the Congress leaders that it does not want the BSP as part of the alliance in the state and also asked if it was holding talks with the BSP or was



in touch with it for an alliance.

To the questions of the Samajwadi Party leaders, Congress President Mallikarjun Kharge assured them that it will contest

elections in alliance with it and the RLD in the state. Kharge also said that many things appear in the media and they do not need to be believed.

The apprehensions were raised during the fourth meeting of the INDIA bloc on Tuesday where every party leader spoke one by one. On Tuesday, even West

Bengal Chief Minister and Trinamool Congress chief Mamata Banerjee proposed the idea of projecting Mallikarjun Kharge as the prime ministerial candidate of the INDIA bloc. The idea was also endorsed by Delhi Chief Minister and AAP leader Arvind Kejriwal.

Meanwhile, during the meeting, it has been decided to finalise the seat sharing talks by December end and also hold a nationwide protest over the suspension of 141 MPs on December 22. The INDIA bloc parties also decided to hold eight to ten public meetings across the country in the coming days ahead of the Lok Sabha polls.

## Jaishankar to visit Nepal in Jan 2024



Kathmandu- External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar will embark on a visit to Kathmandu on January 4-5, 2024 to attend the seventh meeting of the India-Nepal Joint Commission. Jaishankar, who is visiting the Himalayan nation at

the invitation of his Nepalese counterpart N.P. Saud, will take part in the highest bilateral mechanism between the two neighbouring countries to review and smoothen Nepal-India ties. "The visit is almost confirmed. We have already started

groundwork for the visit," Saud told IANS on Wednesday. Few MoUs are likely to be signed during the visit as both sides prepare for the meeting taking place after a hiatus of nearly three years. "Not certain yet but we are preparing to reach some agreements during the visit," Saud told IANS.

According to the Foreign Minister, discussions are underway between various ministries to finalise the meeting's agenda and he has also sought a schedule of the visit and status of the India-funded projects in Nepal.

According to a Nepal government official, Jaishankar will land in Kathmandu on January 4, will lead the Indian delegation at the Joint

Commission meet and hold talks with top party leaders, including President Ram Chandra Poudel and Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal, among others.

During the visit, an agreement on exporting 10,000 megawatts of energy to India from Nepal will be signed, government officials said. Meanwhile, deals related to digital payments are also in cards. Jaishankar will also inaugurate the new central library built by Indian assistance at Tribhuvan University, Kathmandu. During a recent media interaction, Prime Minister Dahal revealed

that the deal to export 10,000MW electricity to India within 10 years will be signed during Jaishankar's visit. In the previous Joint Commission meeting that took place in New Delhi in January 2021, the two sides had reviewed the entire spectrum of bilateral relations including the supply of Covid-19 vaccine, boundary and border management, connectivity and economic cooperation, trade and transit, power and water resources, as well as culture and education. The Joint Commission was constituted during the Nepal visit of then Indian Prime Minister Chandra Shekhar in February 1991.

## India's road infrastructure to rival US in next five years: Gadkari

Thiruvananthapuram, - India has set an ambitious goal of making its road infrastructure equal to the US in the next five years besides decongesting metros and considerably reducing travel time and road mishaps, said Minister of Road Transport and Highways, Nitin Gadkari. In the last nine years, Gadkari, in a mission mode to make the country's roads safer and smarter, said his ministry had awarded work for projects worth more than Rs 50 lakh crore and also eased the procedure for sanctioning contracts by improving the existing policies.

"No contractor needs to come to me for sanctioning the contract. We are transparent, time-bound, result-oriented and



quality conscious and fast in decision-making. We consider the ministry, contractors and bankers as one family. We encourage good work, and that is why we have seven world records. This is the great achievement of the ministry," he said in an interview published in the Manorama Yearbook 2024.

"I am confident that after five years, our road infrastructure will be equal to the US".

Asserting that he 'never gives false promises', the minister stressed that futuristic development of infrastructure is the need of the country. India needs robust infrastructure for attracting capital investment from

both domestic and foreign sources, which would remove poverty and generate employment. Determined to make India number one in the automobile sector, he said India's automobile industry had recently surpassed Japan to become the third behind China and the US.

"Our industry is worth Rs 7.5 lakh crore and the maximum GST to the states and Central government is generated from this sector. Till now, 4.5 crore jobs have been created by this industry. My dream is to double the size of our automobile industry to Rs 15 lakh crore in the next five years. This is the way in which we are progressing in every sector. We are already the fastest

growing economy and people are more interested in dealing with India,". He also strongly pitched for introducing electric and flex fuel vehicles to reduce consumption of fossil fuel, whose import bill is Rs 16 lakh crore. Some vehicles, with flex engines, are now being powered by ethanol instead of petrol. It will bring the average cost of fuel to Rs 15 as ethanol's rate is only Rs 60 and it would also generate electricity. "We are now opening ethanol pumps," he informed. Gadkari said it would also empower Indian farmers to double up as 'urjadaata' (energy producer) while being 'anndaata' (food producer) as ethanol fuel can be produced from crops like sugarcane and rice stalk.

## US must prepare for a long battle with Houthi rebels. Remember Iraq-Iran Tanker War in 1980s?

Like a sea predator from medieval tales, the Sablan would emerge from the darkness, cutting off the bows of merchant ships headed for Kuwait. The crew knew what would come next. The imposing frigate, built at Britain's Vickers shipyards, would bare its fangs, and rake the crew quarters with fire from its 35 millimetre Oerlikon machine guns. Then, as the frigate sailed away from the burning ship, there was a dark message from the Iranian warship's captain, Abdollah Manavi: "Have a nice day."

This week, in response to anti-shipping missile attacks on merchant ships transiting the Red Sea—the latest in the list of the Panamanian-flagged MSC Clara and the Norwegian-owned Swan Atlantic—the United States has despatched a multinational fleet to protect commercial traffic headed into the Suez Canal against attack. Large container operators are already pulling their ships out of Red Sea's crowded lanes, and asking them to transit around the tip of Africa instead. The multinational fleet is meant to show that insurgents can't shut down the world's maritime trade lanes.

Even though Houthi commanders are threatening to turn the Red Sea into the multinational force's grave, the language probably shouldn't be taken seriously. The Houthi missile threat, though, should. The insurgent movement has used its drones and ballistic missiles to successfully target infrastructure, military bases and even well-defended oil refineries like Abqaiq and Khurais.

Even though Houthi prose is painted in Palestinian commanders, their objectives in this conflict are fundamentally political. Houthi missiles pose a marginal threat to Israel. The Houthis are, however, locked in secret talks with Saudi Arabia—and want to show the world they can ignite brush fires across a volatile region if their demands for control of Yemen are not met. From the Battle of the Tankers, which raged between Iraq and Iran from 1980-1988—and eventually drew in the United States Navy—strategists should be prepared for a long, and bloody, struggle. The Tanker War

Early in the summer of 1984, the small Libyan cargo ship Ghat began its journey to the Eritrean port of Assab, filled with a cargo of crated goods, food—and state-of-the-art Soviet Union-made acoustic mines, capable of detonating when they detected the sound of a ship's propellers. The crew rolled the mines off the back of the Ghat once they had crossed Suez, historian David Crist has recorded, and then quietly back home. Inside weeks, shipping was hitting mines—the explosions too loud not to be heard by the international workers.

Faced with this new threat to global shipping, the United States moved in

minesweeping helicopters, but the work was painfully slow: The Suez canal was littered with decades of debris, and every abandoned oil drum was a potential mine. King Fahd Bin Abdulrehman of Saudi Arabia chose this particular time to make a fortnight's yacht trip, and had to be escorted by American helicopters.

Iran learned the right lessons from Libya's revenge for its global isolation and sanctions. The Iraqi dictator had gone to war against the country in 1981, expecting its revolutionary government to collapse. Instead, his army faced stalemates and reverses. To break the deadlock, Iraq began bombing Iranian shipping in the northern Persian Gulf. Atlas 1, a Turkish oil tanker loading Iranian oil at Kharg Island, became the first international ship caught up in these attacks.

The effort to choke Iranian shipping, military expert Anthony Cordesman has noted, largely failed. Iran moved its oil transshipment hub to Kharg island, and used its own tankers to make the most dangerous part of the journey to Basra. Iranians knew the attacks were intended to force them into attempting a blockade of the Straits of Hormuz, through which much of the world's energy passed. That would invite international intervention, and Tehran was determined not to walk into the trap.

From 1984, though, Iraq acquired combat aircraft with longer ranges, capable of delivering lethal Exocet missiles. Losses surged. Iran, which had not carried out a single attack on international shipping from 1981 to 1983, knew it had to strike back. An inevitable escalation

Advances made in Iran's naval capabilities shaped its response. The country's Navy, trained and equipped by the West, centred around its four British-made Frigates. By 1986, though, the country had begun producing large numbers of anti-ship mines, derived from North Korean and Soviet models. The mines are believed to have been laid around Kuwait—the shipping hub for Iraqi oil—by vessels camouflaged as trading Dhows. Iran also developed fast attack boats, to stage hit-and-run raids on merchant shipping.

The escalation served its purpose. Kuwait desperately pleaded with both superpowers for support, and the United States considered re-flagging the kingdom's ships and sailing them under military escort. Even as escort plans were discussed, though, an Iraqi combat jet accidentally hit one of the ships brought in for convoy duties with an Exocet missile. Thirty-seven sailors were killed. Scholar Norman Friedman notes that the crew aboard the stark were aware of the threat from the Iraqi combat jet, but hesitated to retaliate due to restrictive rules of engagement that permitted force only in self-defence.

By PRAVEEN SWAM

## Organized retail crime is threatening American families

This holiday season, shopping in physical retail stores is becoming so dangerous that maybe it's just as well that online sales are predicted to reach a new high.

An ongoing crime epidemic has made many Americans downright frightened to visit their local shopping centers or grocery stores overrun by organized shoplifting and other forms of lawlessness. Yet many of these reoccurring crimes are simply not being prosecuted.

Congress must act swiftly to combat the chaos plaguing American communities and destroying family businesses.

To address the problem, the House Homeland Security Committee's Subcommittee on Counterterrorism, Law Enforcement, and Intelligence recently held a hearing titled "From Festive Cheer to Retail Fear: Addressing Organized Retail Crime."

During the Dec. 12 congressional hearing, Home Depot's vice president of asset protection Scott Glenn testified regarding the level of organized violence his employees have experienced in stores across the nation. "These individuals are becoming increasingly aggressive," Glenn said. "They are dangerous and often care little about any consequence other than getting out of the store with as much product as possible. Our associates have been threatened with knives, guns, and other physical attacks." His words speak to the undeniable truth that each day, countless store employees put their lives on the line simply to provide for their families. Many of the robberies, however, aren't conducted by the desperate and poor, but by international theft crews who

intend to sell the goods on Amazon or at flea markets. These criminals rewrite expiration dates on goods such as baby formula, for example, to maintain their value for resale. The practice inflicts great personal risk upon consumers unaware that they have purchased expired items through third-party sellers.

Stores faced with shoplifting are inevitably forced to either jack up their prices to remain in business or close their doors from revenue loss. Target retail stores, for example, expect to lose \$1.3 billion to organized crime by the end of this year. The company announced the closure of several of its major retail locations in cities such as Portland, Ore., Seattle and New York City due to theft this fall. Inner-city retail closures are particularly hard on patrons who already struggle to make ends meet. Many people living in major cities are now forced to travel even further to shop for groceries needed to feed their families. And those without the means to travel great distances find themselves in an even more desperate situation. If only prosecutors chose to diligently enforce the law, instead of ignoring our nation's dangerous crime wave as they have done for far too long, Americans might finally be able to safely access the groceries they need to survive at affordable prices. But rogue district attorneys are blatantly refusing to hold criminals accountable for their crimes. New York Gov. Kathy Hochul (D-N.Y.) recently vetoed bipartisan legislation that would have created a task force to study surging retail theft in New York, turning a blind eye to the fact that nearly 95 percent of New York City stores have experienced shoplifting this year.

BY GABRIEL NADALES



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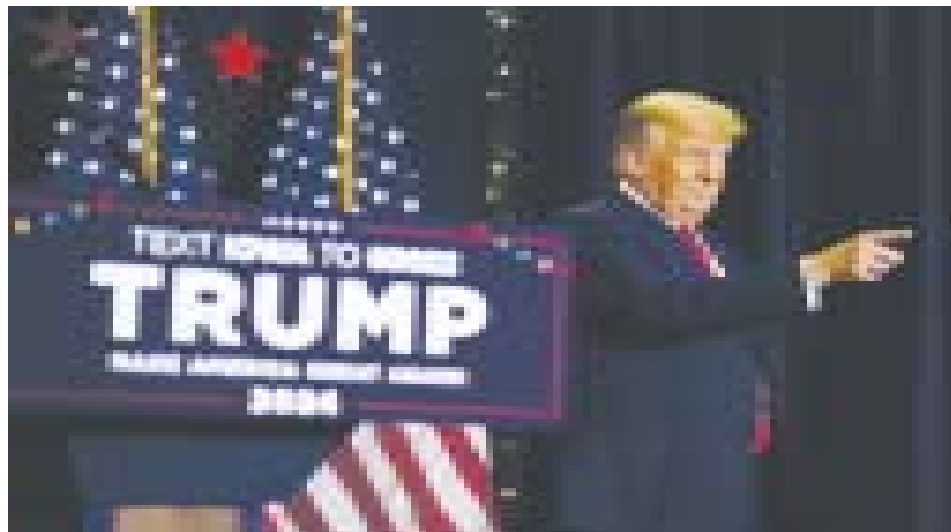
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# Voters Don't Want a Biden-Trump Rematch. This is Why.

For as long as public polling on the 2024 presidential race has been available, it's been clear that most Americans don't want Trump vs. Biden II. This week, though, the pure cavalcade of bad news and missteps from both candidates is reminding them why, underscoring the manifest weaknesses and limitations of the two likely presidential nominees and puncturing the idea that either is on any sort of glide path to victory. There is Donald Trump, who immediately upon seizing the lead against Joe Biden in poll after presidential poll, reached back to the Third Reich for material for his stump speech. In recent weeks, the former president had finally deprived his GOP primary foes of their most potent argument against him — suddenly, the bulk of polling suggested he could defeat Biden. This week, however, Trump's returned to familiar form, fending off allegations that he's paraphrasing Hitler and forcing Republicans to answer for his remarks. Loudly insisting "I never read Mein Kampf" is no recipe for winning back suburban moms. Biden isn't alarming his party with his rhetoric. Rather, it's the seeming lack of response to his diminished political position. For months, he's insisted everything is fine and preached calm. "You're reading the wrong polls," he insisted to reporters on Sunday. But he remains in a nosedive, with no signs of pulling up. Monmouth University polling released Monday has Biden sitting at 34 percent approval — his worst job rating ever from the polling shop. And in head-to-head,



swing-state matchups with Trump, he's consistently behind. Biden's approval rating at this point in his term is the worst of any president at the same point since reputable national polling became available according to FiveThirtyEight, which tracks the stat back to 1945. No incumbent president has come back from such a hole to victory in the modern political era — and the White House doesn't have a convincing message to panicked Democrats about why they shouldn't be sweating. Biden's great fortune appears to be his opponent. Trump's legal troubles have come roaring back after simmering in the background. On Tuesday, the Colorado high court ruled that Trump is ineligible to run again for president — and thus won't appear on the state's ballot — because of his role in stoking an insurrection on Jan. 6, 2021. The ruling is likely to force the Supreme Court to resolve whether he can hold future

public office, adding yet another question for the court to decide, in addition to Special Counsel Jack Smith's request to the Supreme Court last week that they decide on Trump's claim that he's immune to prosecution for charges related to his bid to subvert the 2020 election. But even if the Supreme Court rules in Trump's favor in one or both of the cases that might be before them, his potential legal liabilities remain a black box that could easily sink his chances. Trump is going to spend much of 2024 in court — his first criminal trial is set to begin in March (though appeals could push back that date), right around when he hopes to wrap up the Republican nomination. Primary voters haven't seemed to mind Trump's legal woes, but it's an open question as to how many Americans will respond when they're confronted with potential criminal convictions; some of them

might remember why they soured on him or held their nose and voted for Biden in the first place. If they've forgotten, Trump has provided fresh evidence to the Republican Party of his capriciousness as a leader and his willingness to blow up the party on a whim. Just this week, Trump called for a primary challenge to Rep. Chip Roy (R-Texas), a conservative lawmaker who's supporting Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis. Nevermind that the Texas filing deadline has passed already. And from the man who brought you Doug Mastriano, Herschel Walker and Blake Masters, here's Bernie Moreno: a former car dealer who's never held elected office and is focused on "fighting the Deep State" in his run for Senate in Ohio. Moreno, who secured Trump's official announcement on Tuesday, is locked in a tight primary battle with Ohio state Sen. Matt Dolan and Secretary of State Frank LaRose. A November poll from Emerson College has Sen. Sherrod Brown (D-Ohio) leading Moreno by 11 points, while only beating LaRose by five and Dolan by three. While Biden avoids the wrecking ball approach to his party, he confronts persistent, nagging problems that he hasn't been able to knock down — among them, that he's been an ineffective steward of the economy. Polls report Americans continue to have a grim outlook of the economy — regardless of the actual state of the economy — despite Biden's best efforts. And on Monday, the president discovered the limits of his embrace of industrial policy.

## Supreme Court could hold fate of US democracy in its hands

The Supreme Court has agreed to hear two cases in the coming term that could have a profound effect on the 2024 elections. The first, *Fischer v. United States*, has the potential to overturn scores of prosecutions related to the attack on the Capitol on January 6, 2021. The other, *Food and Drug Administration v. Alliance for Hippocratic Medicine*, could effectively make medication abortion unavailable throughout the United States, regardless of its legal status in individual states. Should the Court rule against the government in both cases, it would have profound consequences: the government's efforts to hold insurrectionists accountable could be effectively erased, and FDA approval of pharmaceuticals could be rendered pointless. These would be monumental rulings that would sharply curtail the core functions of the federal government. Speculation aside about how the high court is likely to rule on these cases, the institution has in recent decades, broadly speaking, been an ally to the efforts to diminish democratic governance in the US. You can trace that to *Bush v. Gore*, which decided the 2000 presidential election, or *Shelby County v. Holder*, which dismantled much of the Voting Rights Act, or *Citizens United*, which opened the floodgates for unregulated corporate spending in elections. In recent years, those trends have only accelerated.

It's important to keep in mind how far back this



trajectory goes, especially because of a certain kind of liberal wish-casting that has been popular in anti-Trump circles since 2017. From the early days of President Donald Trump's administration, Americans concerned about his threat to democracy have soothed themselves with some version of "the courts will save us." From the injunctions that stopped the first travel ban against people from Muslim-majority countries to the polls showing that a conviction in one of his four trials would cost Trump re-election, many Americans have clung to the belief that the law will work where norms have failed. Politicians might lie on the stump without consequences, but under oath they face the penalty of perjury.

Norms may have withered away, but the law remains firm, with set rules and a commitment to impartiality.

And even though plenty of writers have warned that the courts may not act as the magic bastion against illiberalism, as the 2024 election approaches, the impending Trump trials have kept alive the idea of the justice system as the *deus ex machina* that will save democracy. There is certainly evidence to back up some of these hopes. Judges and juries laughed the Trump team's election cases out of court. In the two and a half years between the January 6 insurrection and October 2023, nearly 600 people charged for the Capitol attack pleaded guilty, and more than a hundred others were found guilty at trial. Seditious conspiracy prosecutions demonstrated that domestic terrorism could be successfully prosecuted as more than a series of lone-wolf attacks, and instead as a broader movement that could be dismantled and defanged. At the same time, the Supreme Court's taking these particular cases at this specific moment in America's political history is a stark reminder of what the nation's highest court has done — and not done — since the turn of the 21st century when it comes to elections and the operations of democracy. These cases aren't about abortion and January 6 alone; for this body, with its current conservative supermajority, to hear these arguments puts on the table the question of how government operates: how it protects the functions of democracy and secures basic rights.





# From Heroes To Villains

## The Changing Face Of Startup Founders

By Pankaj Mishra

India's startup ecosystem exposes the harsh reality of the vast wealth gap between founders and their employees, revealing the dark side of entrepreneurial success and shattering dreams.

"Your founder just bought a 12-crore villa, I read in newspapers. I can only imagine the work culture and perks you must be used to," said a laid-off startup employee, recounting a recent job interview. She expressed frustration, "They've slashed our salaries by 30-40%, creating a smokescreen. And with the founders flaunting lavish lifestyles on social media, battling this perception is tough."

During the startup boom, headlines buzzed with stories of startups giving luxuries like Mercedes cars, high-end work-from-home setups, generous ESOPs, and liberal leave policies. Yet, as funding cools and reality checks on business models and product-market fits set in, a tightening of belts is expected. However, my conversations with over a dozen startup executives and employees reveal a painful disillusionment. They are aware of the challenging business conditions, but the lavish lifestyles of some founders expose a tragic contradiction.

In one world, startup founders live

like royalty, showcasing their wealth and success. In another, their employees struggle with tight budgets and job uncertainty, their careers overshadowed by sudden job cuts and late pay or no pay. Echoes of Whitefield

In Bengaluru, the Adarsh Palm Retreat (APR) stands as a symbol of the luxury many startup founders live in. A visit to this gated community by an employee of a SaaS startup revealed a completely different world. "Walking around APR, the extravagance was palpable. Lavish homes, grand parties - it was a display of luxury at its peak," the employee recounted.

This employee, once an executive at one of India's largest e-commerce startups, visited APR to meet the founder to receive instructions on cost cutting.

As he spoke, I remembered my visits to the complex over the years, and I could pick several instances of feeling the harsh contrast between some founders' lifestyles and the employees.

As flagged in my column "Byju's - When Ambition Overrides Good Governance And Ethics" earlier this year, the governance crisis at startups such as Byju's makes this even worse. In 2022, when Byju's announced it was one of the

sponsors for the FIFA World Cup, the company followed it up by laying off around 4,000 employees. The reason? Path to profitability.

While some founders have notably reduced their salaries or stopped taking them, this gesture can sometimes be an eyewash. One employee pointed out, "They've already secured their fortunes from Series A secondary sales; they don't need a monthly salary!" This disparity between the founders' opulent lifestyles and the austere measures their companies face raises critical questions about leadership and responsibility in the startup world.

Disparity in Despair

Another employee from Bengaluru shared a glimpse into her company's Slack group, "The founder invited a select few to his extravagant housewarming. Five-star caterers, private concerts - a week after they fired 100 of us. Some of us, still in the group, find it painful to witness." A third employee, currently on maternity leave, shared her anxiety, "My leave ends next week, and I know I'll be fired. It's a constant worry."

A front-end engineer from Delhi shared a disheartening story. Weeks before her entire team at a luxury services startup was laid off, the founder shared a screenshot of

the company's bank account, assuring enough funds for a year's salaries. "We have the runway!" he claimed. Yet, shockingly, they were all terminated, receiving only a month's salary. "We later heard that the screenshot was photoshopped," she revealed, still reeling from the betrayal as she searches for a new job.

An employee from Dunzo, backed by giants like Google and Reliance Retail, shared his struggles of managing life without a salary for months. "I wish they'd just fire me. It's like a slow, painful bandaid removal," he lamented. His recent job interview at a traditional logistics company became a critique session on startup culture. "The interviewer, a seasoned executive in his fifties, vented his frustration about startups, including Byju's," he recounted, highlighting the growing disillusionment with the startup ecosystem.

These anecdotes capture the disconnect between the founders' opulent lives and the harsh realities faced by their employees, reshaping the narrative around startup culture from one of benevolent demigods to questionable villains.

In Bengaluru's residential areas like Whitefield, voices of discontent can be heard about figures like Byju Raveendran, Bhavish Aggarwal of

Ola, founders of Dunzo, and many others, contrasting sharply with the optimism in cafes where VCs and founders buzz with pitches and interviews. A different reality exists in the apartments, painting a stark picture and reshaping the narrative about startup leaders.

Of Unicorns and the Zombies  
To be sure, the issues plaguing Indian startups and their founders are not unique.

The New York Times article from December 7, 2023, reports on companies like WeWork, Olive AI, Convoy, and Veev, which, despite substantial investments, faced bankruptcy or shutdowns. In India, similar trends have manifested, with startup founders maintaining extravagant lifestyles even as their companies undergo layoffs. This is comparable to instances in Silicon Valley, where founders' personal expenditures often contrast sharply with their companies' financial challenges. For example, Bird, a scooter company, faced delisting from the New York Stock Exchange due to low stock prices, while its founder purchased a multi-million dollar mansion.

However, there are differences in how these trends manifest in India versus regions like Silicon Valley. In India, the startup ecosystem is often characterized by a more pronounced disparity between the founders' wealth and the employees' economic challenges, partly due to the country's socio-economic diversity. In contrast, though facing similar issues, Silicon Valley's ecosystem operates within a different socio-economic context, where such disparities might be less visible.

The tremors shaking the foundations of India's startup landscape in 2023, as reported by Debarghya Sil for Inc42, paint a vivid picture of an ecosystem transforming. This year, a clutch of Indian unicorns, once the darlings of investors, battled severe valuation cuts, a clear sign of the changing tides.

Consider BYJU'S, the edtech behemoth that, as of March 2022, boasted a towering valuation of \$22 billion. Its fortunes precipitated when key investors, including BlackRock and Prosus, slashed the value of their stakes, halving BYJU'S valuation to a mere \$11 billion. The downward trend continued, with Prosus marking down BYJU'S to just below \$3 billion, a stark contrast to its former glory.



# The Parliament Impasse - And The Loser Is...

By Bharti Mishra Nath

In a fierce showdown between the government and the Opposition, 142 MPs have been suspended from parliament. On December 18, 78 MPs - 33 from Lok Sabha and 45 from Rajya Sabha - were suspended. A day later, 50 more MPs were suspended, which left the Opposition benches nearly empty in the ongoing winter session of parliament. The suspended members were protesting against the parliament security breach of December 13. As many as 142 suspended MPs are unprecedented in the history of parliament. The Opposition in both Houses has been demanding Home Minister Amit Shah's statement on the security breach, in which two men broke into Lok Sabha and set off smoke canisters and a woman and a man did the same outside parliament. A majority of the MPs have been suspended for the entire winter session, which ends this week.

The government maintained that security in the parliament complex is the responsibility of the Lok Sabha secretariat and it can only follow the Speaker's orders on the subject. Also, similar breaches have happened

in the past and the Opposition is merely politicising the issue this time.

"The Speaker of the House has written a letter to Secretary Home and has instructed me to get a high-level inquiry (on security breach) done. To increase the security of the new parliament, a committee has



also been constituted under the supervision of DG CRPF. On one hand, there is an investigation going on and on the other hand, the opposition does not want the House to function...Rahul Gandhi has been saying that unemployment is the reason why all this took place. Does Rahul Gandhi support all this? What irresponsible statement is

this? They (the opposition) want to do politics in everything," Parliamentary Affairs Minister Pralhad Joshi said.

However, the Opposition INDIA bloc members accuse the government of browbeating the Opposition and trying to muzzle the voice of democracy.

"There was an attack in

statements outside the House," says Rajeev Gowda, a former member of Rajya Sabha.

The Opposition also feels that it is part of the government's strategy to pass crucial legislation without debate, in the same way it has underutilised the workings of standing and parliamentary committees.

parliament. It was an attack on the security of the members. The Opposition members are merely demanding that the Prime Minister and the Home Minister speak in parliament instead of speaking outside on it. It is a mockery of democracy. When parliament is in session, it is a breach of privilege and against parliamentary conventions to give

Important bills are pending in Lok Sabha. These include three bills to replace colonial-era criminal laws and draft legislation to set up a mechanism to appoint the Chief Election Commissioner and Election Commissioners.

"The government needs to reach out to the Opposition and find a solution as running the House is its responsibility. The government

wants to pass bills without any scrutiny from the Opposition," added Mr Gowda.

There have been mass suspensions in the past but this is a record high. On 15 March 1989, 63 members of Lok Sabha were suspended in a row over the Justice MP Thakkar Committee report on Indira Gandhi's assassination. In 2019, then Lok Sabha Speaker Sumitra Mahajan suspended 45 opposition MPs for disrupting House proceedings. This week's suspensions have slashed the Opposition strength in Rajya Sabha by almost half. The INDIA bloc has 95 MPs in Rajya Sabha, of which 45 are suspended. In Lok Sabha, the INDIA bloc has lost a third of its members - 46 of 133 MPs.

"This government doesn't want to hear any Opposition voice in parliament. Suspension and dismissal are used as tools to attain that objective. Parliament has never seen such blatant use of power against an elected opposition. This is unfortunate for democracy," says Nawal Kishore, RJD national spokesperson.

By suspending MPs, the government is denying people their representation in parliament during important business. The government took up bills as opposition MPs relentlessly shouted slogans. Important bills like one providing for 33 per cent quota for women in Jammu and Kashmir and Puducherry Assemblies were passed within minutes on December 18 in Rajya Sabha. So was the Jammu and Kashmir Reorganisation (Second Amendment) Bill, 2023. In Lok Sabha, the government passed the Post Office Bill, 2023 in the interest of national security and also introduced the Telecommunications Bill, 2023. "Though the suspension of MPs in such a large number is a grave issue, I think harping on one issue at the expense of other important business of the House is not responsible behaviour, considering so many important bills are to be tabled, which require serious deliberation by all members. Some restraint on the part of both the government and the opposition is called for in the interest of democracy," says Ashok Acharya Professor, Department of Political Science, University of Delhi. Both sides have taken extreme positions. The loss of time - intangible - and the loss of public money - tangible - is immeasurable.

# Mamata Banerjee, Arvind Kejriwal Killed 2 Birds With One Stone

By Amitabh Tiwari

Mamata Banerjee and Arvind Kejriwal bowled a googly in the INDIA bloc meeting held on December 19, proposing Congress President Mallikarjun Kharge's name as the Opposition coalition's Prime Ministerial face.

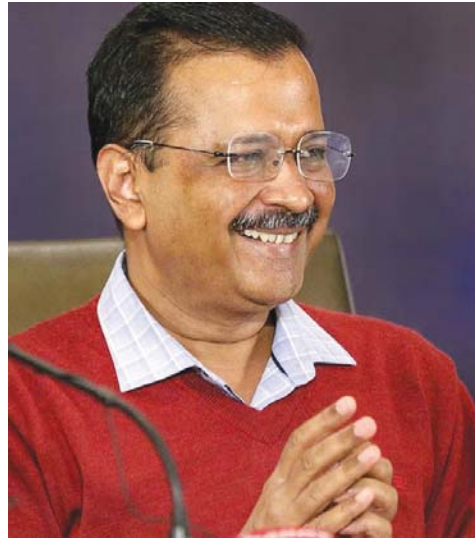
Reports say 12 of the 26 parties supported the move while the rest were less enthusiastic. Kharge himself said the bloc should focus on winning the 2024 elections first; the PM decision can wait until afterwards, he suggested.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has attacked the INDIA bloc many times, commenting that they lack niti, niyati and netritva (policy, intention, leadership). Mamata Banerjee and Kejriwal, who are among the top mass leaders of the alliance, are aware that in an increasingly presidential style of elections, the INDIA bloc will need to project a face.

According to the Axis My India exit poll, the prime ministerial candidate was the most important consideration while voting in the 2019 elections, for 37% of the respondents (the highest). If the INDIA bloc doesn't have a PM face, it risks excluding this big chunk of voters from its target addressable market.

The argument of Mamta Banerjee and Kejriwal in favour of Kharge is that he is the senior-most leader of the alliance and that he belongs to the Dalit community, which accounts for a significant 17% of the population of the country.

His nomination could consolidate the community's votes in favour of the INDIA



bloc, especially denting Mayawati's BSP, which bagged 3.7% votes across India in 2019. Eighty-four seats are reserved for the Scheduled Caste community in Lok Sabha - the BJP-led NDA won 54, the Congress-led UPA 11, and regional parties 19.

While the NDA received the support of 41% of the Scheduled Castes in 2019, the Congress-led UPA won 28%, the lowest lead that the NDA enjoyed over the UPA for any caste group.

That said, one cannot miss the political undertones in Mamata and Kejriwal's decision to propose Kharge's name. They have attempted to kill two birds with one stone.

They have virtually eliminated the chances of the Congress party proposing Rahul Gandhi or Priyanka Gandhi's name as the prime ministerial face of the alliance, while at the same time accepting the



Congress's prime position and natural claim to lead the alliance.

Kejriwal and Mamata Banerjee are not comfortable with Rahul Gandhi as the PM face, as they feel he lacks the charisma to take on Modi. Also, Rahul Gandhi is far junior to the Trinamool Congress chief and Bengal Chief Minister.

Both the Trinamool and Kejriwal's Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) might have apprehended that the Gandhis would prop up Rahul's name citing the increase in his popularity ratings after the Bharat Jodo Yatra.

Mamata Banerjee and Kejriwal have also eliminated the chances of regional peers like Nitish Kumar or Akhilesh Yadav either for the post of convenor of the bloc or as the prime ministerial face.

The INDIA bloc has many PM aspirants of almost equal stature in Nitish Kumar, Akhilesh Yadav, Mamata Banerjee, Arvind

Kejriwal, Uddhav Thackeray, Sharad Pawar, and MK Stalin - all of whom are waiting for their Deve Gowda moment (Deve Gowda became PM in an unexpected turn of events after the 1996 polls). Mamata Banerjee and Kejriwal have literally cancelled each other from the race.

Before the meeting, "Ek Nischay, Ek Nitish (one resolve, one Nitish)" posters came up in Patna. Trinamool workers and leaders have been demanding that their Didi be the presumptive PM. For the Samajwadi Party, the choice is Bhaiyya (Akhilesh Yadav), as Uttar Pradesh sends the maximum number of members to parliament.

After the Congress's disastrous showing in the Hindi heartland in recent state elections, Nitish Kumar, who considers himself the architect of this alliance, may have hoped for a stronger claim to the Convenor's post.

Neither Nitish Kumar nor Lalu Yadav were happy with the Kharge googly and left early, choosing not to stay for the press conference. Lalu Yadav knows that unless Nitish Kumar moves to central politics, his son Tejashwi cannot become Chief Minister of Bihar.

SWOT Of Mallikarjun Kharge  
Kharge is an interesting pick for the INDIA bloc's prime ministerial candidate. He has a wealth of experience (more than 50 years) and understands realpolitik. He belongs to a Scheduled Caste community, thus making it an OBC (Other Backward Classes) battle for 2024.

## Why Raghuram Rajan Is Wrong About India's Economic Path

By: Abhishek Banerjee & Karuna Gopal

It was one morning in December 2022. The two men sat side by side, under the winter sun. India will be "lucky to get 5 per cent growth" next year, Raghuram Rajan told Rahul Gandhi. The next day it was all over the newspapers. Coming from Rajan, it was already as good as true. But this was not the first time that the media had taken either of these two individuals more seriously than it should have. 'If Rajan exits, so will billions in investment' ran one headline in 2016. That was when his term as governor of the Reserve Bank was about to end. Rajan also made headlines in June 2015 when he predicted that a 1930s-style Great Depression was coming. What happened to that?

From 2013 to 2018, Rajan "predicted" doom for the global economy at the rough rate of once a year. Each time, the media covered him. The media never learns. But this time, something new happened. Something that rarely happens to star economists. People followed up. They made clippings of his "lucky to get 5 per cent" speech and began posting it online. Every time India posted its high growth numbers, the videos went viral. A dazzling 7.8 per cent in the first quarter of the 2023-24 fiscal year, and 7.6 per cent for the second. The world is cheering on India. And people online are laughing at Raghuram Rajan.

And so, it is for the first time ever, that a cornered Rajan has been forced to defend himself. In recent



interviews, he said that all these people are trolls. He says it is an organised effort against him. But it is not. It is just common people speaking truth to an economist they now see as more political than academic. For that matter, Rahul Gandhi's Bharat Jodo Yatra, during which Rajan originally made these comments, was also an organised effort. The question is whether the critics are wrong, not whether they are organised.

So here are five ways in which we believe that Raghuram Rajan is wrong about India's economic path. India is not growing faster simply because we are a poor country

That was the first defence from Rajan, in an interview he gave to The Wire. "We are growing faster than other

large economies... Poor countries grow faster because catch-up growth is easier. There is so much more to do, and we know what to do," he said. First of all, when Rajan made his prediction in December last year, did he not know that India is a poor country?

Second, note the obvious flaw in the argument. If India is poor now, it was even poorer during the UPA years. Why then was India the slowest growing BRIC economy between 2004 and 2014? Between 2004 and 2014, China expanded its GDP by an astonishing 430 per cent, Brazil by 266 per cent, and Russia by 222 per cent. In contrast, India could only manage 181 per cent. In fact, Indonesia increased its GDP by 219 per cent. No wonder that by the end of UPA's term, there were calls for Indonesia to replace India as the "I" in BRIC!

Here is another way to look at this. When the UPA decade began in 2004, India's GDP was about 37 per cent that of China. By 2014, it had been reduced to just 19 per cent. In other words, India's economic size relative to China had been cut in half. The lesson is that poor countries do not magically grow faster. You need a good policy. India has grown due to its own strength, not just because of global factors

"We have been lucky," Rajan explained in another interview. He added that after he made his "lucky to get 5 per cent growth" comment, it was not just India but the whole world that grew faster than he expected.



## Why 'Dunki' Can Be The Reason For A Perfect Year-End Celebration For Bollywood

By: Biswadeep Ghosh

Filmgoers nationwide are expecting a mouthwatering clash at the box office soon. Rajkumar Hirani's comedy-drama 'Dunki' starring Shah Rukh Khan will hit the marquee on December 21, followed by Prashanth Neel's action thriller 'Salaar: Part 1 Ceasefire' starring Prabhas which is releasing on the next day. Prabhas' fans believe the Rebel Star's ambitious film will outperform SRK's offering. SRK's followers are sure that nothing can stop 'Dunki' from becoming the third successive Rs 1000 crore film for King Khan.

The contest between these two eagerly awaited films will begin in December, although neither should slow down before next year. Regardless of the race's outcome, one thing is clear. After the brilliant box-office performance of Sandeep Reddy Vanga's action drama 'Animal', Bollywood could not have asked for a more promising release than 'Dunki' in the last month of 2023.

Last year was a nightmare for the Hindi film industry. Rohit Shetty's comedy-drama 'Cirkus', a December 23 release, disappointed critics and also the average viewer in the first few days. The film was a box-office bomb, a verdict few had anticipated before its release. But then, 'Dunki', which is arriving in the movie halls two days before the Shetty film did in the last month of 2022, has given rise to

far greater expectations. It is made by Hirani, who has a reputation for delivering well-made commercial successes. The film is releasing at a time when viewers go to theatres in large numbers – if a film is appreciated by those who watch it during the first weekend. Most importantly,



the film's highlight is SRK, the leading megastar of the modern-day Hindi film industry. SRK fans might insist that he has been instrumental in reviving the average viewer's enthusiasm for watching Hindi films in the theatres. Ayan Mukerji's action-adventure film 'Brahmastra: Part I – Shiva', the highest-grossing film last year, earned an estimated Rs 431 crore worldwide. Because of its reported budget of around Rs 375 crore,

'Brahmastra' was not the sort of commercial success a film made on a relatively small scale would have been. Moreover, it might have had a better box-office score if it had been released at a time when more viewers were stepping out of their homes to watch larger-than-life Hindi films in the theatres

instead of waiting for their release on OTT platforms. The only big surprise of 2022 was Vivek Agnihotri's 'The Kashmir Files', a social drama woven around the exodus of Kashmiri Pandits from their home state in the 1990s. 'The Kashmir Files' gave rise to controversy, which attracted both kinds of filmgoers – those who saw it as a much-needed depiction of a suppressed reality and others who dismissed it as pure fiction. A small-budget

blockbuster, TKF grossed an estimated Rs 340 crore worldwide.

When 2023 began, nobody had imagined that the Hindi film industry would deliver not one but two Rs 1000-crore films starring the same leading man. That happened, starting with Siddharth

Anand's action drama 'Pathaan', a smartly packaged film with a not-so-great story in which SRK returned to the big screen in the protagonist's role after more than four years. The film's phenomenal success was an indication that audiences were prepared to watch larger-than-life entertainers with good music, good-looking stars (SRK, John Abraham and Deepika Padukone) and well-choreographed action

sequences. The undisputed highlight, of course, was SRK, who made an emphatic statement of his undiminished appeal and silenced a handful of doubters who might have believed that audiences would not accept him as an action hero. While 'Pathaan' hit the big screen on January 25, writer-director Atlee's action drama 'Jawan', a September 7 release, was an even bigger success story. Widely popular for his work in commercial Tamil cinema, Atlee proved he could woo Hindi film audiences with the second SRK release of the year. 'Jawan' was loved for several reasons, including music, action sequences, writing and acting led by SRK in the dominant central role. Viewers gravitated to the theatres in large numbers and it eventually went past 'Pathaan' to become the highest-grossing film this year.

The difference between 'Dunki' and the last two SRK films is that 'Dunki' is not an action film. Moreover, the top five highest-grossing films of the year are actioners: 'Jawan', 'Pathaan', 'Animal', Anil Sharma's period action-drama 'Gadar 2' and Maneesh Sharma's action-drama 'Tiger 3'. The trailer suggests that SRK's character in 'Dunki', at least for a significant part of the film, is as relatable as a next-door neighbour one might have known in real life.

# Telecommunications Bill 2023:



## A Better Version of Draft Telecom Bill 2022?

features of the Telecom Bill 2023: The term 'telecommunication' has been defined for the first time, because the existing laws i.e., Telegraph Act, 1885 uses the term 'telegraph'. Given so many decades have passed and how telecom technology has evolved, it was high time to adopt a modern definition which recognises these technical developments.

legislative framework which is expected to bring more certainty for regulated entities. For instance, the bill provides a list of activities (Schedule I) for which spectrum shall be allocated through administrative process (Clause 4).[i] Right of way in public property has remained a major challenge, like, getting permission to install towers, lay cables, etc, in the expansion of telecom networks. The bill for the first time lays down a statutory framework to expedite the process of obtaining the right of way (Clause 10-18). This could help the telecom industry to expand the telecom network/infrastructure, especially to proliferate 5G which requires a greater number of cell towers. A robust telecom network can have a positive impact on the overall ecosystem, like meeting the demand for increased bandwidth/throughput, reduction in latency, better consumer experience over OTTs, spur in edge computing devices, IOTs, etc. The bill authorises the government to lay standards for various matters with respect to telecommunication services, like, identifiers, encryption and data processing, and cyber security (Clause 19). The existing Universal Obligation Fund has been renamed as Digital Bharat Nidhi and the end-use application of the said fund has been clearly laid out (Clause 24 & 25). Given the rise of emerging technologies in telecommunication, the bill sets out a framework for regulatory sandbox and allows the assignment of spectrum through an administrative process for sandboxing any new technology (Clause 27).

### REVISIONS MADE TO TELECOM BILL, 2023

Despite side-stepping set norms of rulemaking, the revised version i.e., Telecom Bill 2023 proposes to introduce some positive changes, or we may call them as corrections made to the previous version. These changes are highlighted below: The definition of 'telecommunication services' in the 2022 Bill meant service of any description (including broadcasting services, electronic mail, voice mail, voice, video and data communication services, audiotex services, videotex services, fixed and mobile services, internet and broadband services, satellite-based communication services, internet-based communication services, in-flight and maritime connectivity services, interpersonal communications services,

machine to machine communication services, OTT communication services) which is made available to users by telecommunication, and includes any other service that the Central government may notify to be telecommunication services.

The phrase used in the above definition is "service of any description which is made available to users by telecommunication." This formulation made the definition too expansive and could have included literally all application services provided to users by telecommunication. The 2022 definition did not consider that a layered approach to application services being provided like OTTs using telecommunication networks should not be construed as telecommunication services.

Additionally, the 2022 definition included a variety of services within its scope, like OTTs, machine-to-machine communication services, email services, broadcasting services, etc.

Another problem was that in the 2022 draft, the definition of a telecom service could have been expanded via notification by the executive i.e., without legislative amendments. This was a grave concern as fundamental changes like altering the definition clause in a law should not sidestep the rigours of parliamentary approval.

### Changes in 2023 Bill

Revised definition – Telecommunication service means any service for telecommunication.

The definition of telecommunication services has been recast as: first, it means any service 'for telecommunication', second, it removes the inclusive list of services; and third, the scope of telecommunication cannot be altered merely through a government notification. The revised definition also excludes broadcasting and instead references the Cable Television Networks Act for regulatory guidance, thereby, Bill 2023 creates a clear distinction between the telecom and broadcasting sector.

However, some are apprehensive that the term 'message' [Clause 2(g)] has been defined in such an expansive way (like, it includes text, image, sound, video, data stream, and information sent through telecommunication), and since the definition of telecommunication includes message, in other words, it could include OTTs.

**By: Sudipto Banerjee**

Amid heightened parliamentary noise, the Union Minister of Telecommunication introduced the Telecommunications Bill, 2023 (Telecom Bill, 2023) into the Lok Sabha on December 18, 2023. Within two days, the lower house passed the bill. Ideally, this law which seeks to replace three existing laws — the Indian Telegraph Act, 1885; the Indian Wireless Telegraphy Act, 1933 and the Telegraph Wire (Unlawful Possession) Act, 1950 deserved to be referred to a Parliamentary Committee for legislative scrutiny. It is highly unlikely that the bill will be referred to any committee given it is headed to the upper house.

Tangibly, the process of overhauling the Indian telecom framework started in 2022, when the Department of Telecommunication (DoT) floated a consultation paper which was immediately followed by a draft telecom bill (Telecom Bill, 2022). The earlier version of the telecom bill created a lot of pushback from the industry, especially for including Over the Top Services (OTTs) as part of telecommunication services. Opposed to a good rule-making process, the stakeholders' feedback on the Telecom Bill 2022 was never made public. Interestingly, unlike the Digital Data Protection Bill (before it was enacted), Broadcasting Regulation Bill and the Digital India Bill, no version of the Telecom Bill was circulated over WhatsApp and straightway made its way to the Parliament.

Before comparing the latest version with the 2022 Bill, let's look at the salient

The bill provides a framework for authorisation of telecommunication services, telecommunication networks, and possession of radio equipment. Further, the rules will spell out the terms and conditions of authorisation (like license or registration) depending on different types of telecom services or network operated (Clause 3). Under the Telegraph Act, 1885, the government had exclusive privilege to operate, maintain and work telegraphs and the power to issue "license" for carrying out these activities. The Telecom Bill moves away from the expression "government's exclusive privilege", and, for the first time, the primary law recognises "authorisation" as a mode of operation against the default "licensing route" in the Telegraph Act. While authorisation could also mean license, but still, this positions the government to adapt more effectively to evolving circumstances in the telecom sector. In other words, we can expect obligations to be contextualised (variation in terms and conditions of authorisations) based on the nature of the activity and the level of risk.

It imposes an obligation on telecom providers to identify the person to whom it provides services through any verifiable biometric-based identification (Clause 3). Subscriber verification is an existing obligation for telecom service providers (under the licensing agreement), and later in 2019, the Telegraph Act was amended to introduce Aadhaar-based KYC verification (voluntary use) of subscribers. For the first time, the assignment of spectrum has been incorporated into a

# Pangs of Unemployment: Why India's Youth is Turning to Bhagat Singh

By Ram Puniyani

The parliament breach on December 13 was the result of a plot hatched between four individuals who were aiming to air their plight because of unemployment in the country. Among the four, there was an e-rickshaw driver, a farmer, a government job aspirant and a daily wage worker. They were given the visitors' pass by Pratap Simha, a Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) MP from Karnataka. The two of them who entered the parliament had hidden the spray bottle used in the break inside their shoes. The breach occurred on the 21st anniversary of the 2001 terror attack on the parliament. Around the same time, a man and a woman – Amol Shinde and Neelam Azad – sprayed coloured gas from canisters while also shouting slogans like “tana

shahi nahi chalegi” outside the parliament premises. Azad is from Haryana's Jind and has many degrees to her credit, M.A, M.Ed, M.Phil and has also



cleared the National Eligibility Test. Yet, she could not get any job. Slogans shouted by them were against dictatorship, for protection of the constitution and rising unemployment. They also shouted ‘Bharat Mata Ki Jai’ and ‘Vande Mataram’.

the founder of Infosys, N.R. Narayana Murthy, advocated for 70-hour work weeks.

A report in the Economic Times pointed out that “the overall rate

(of unemployment) rose to 10.05% in October from 7.09% in September and [it was] the highest since May 2021. Rural unemployment jumped to 10.82% from 6.2%, while the urban rate eased slightly to 8.44%”.

These individuals were part of a social media group, ‘Bhagat Singh Fans Club’, where they came in contact with each other. Their inspiration for these actions stemmed from socialist revolutionary Bhagat Singh's similar actions in the central assembly hall in 1929. Bhagat Singh with his friend Batukeshwar Dutt had thrown a bomb from the visitors' gallery while making sure that nobody was hurt. They also threw leaflets in the assembly against British colonial rule. While the four people have been booked under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA), this incident is the most powerful attempt to bring the issue of rising unemployment to national attention.

As a recall, Bhagat Singh and his comrades had resorted to this method as they knew that

their voice would not be carried by the media. There is an uncanny similarity to the current situation where the ‘mainstream’ media, appropriately called ‘Godi media’, is totally apathetic to the concerns of the common people. The problems of rising prices, poverty and unemployment has not been its concern at all.

When Modi was campaigning in 2014, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) promised that they would be creating 20 million (two crore) jobs per year. The real picture has been the complete opposite. The first major blow to employment came with demonetisation when crores of workers lost their jobs in the small-scale rural sector. In most of the unorganised sectors, working hours have gone up from eight to 12 hours per day. Meanwhile,

By: Dr G Shreekumar Menon

In a major development, Myanmar has overtaken Afghanistan to become the world's largest source of opium. The decades-long uninterrupted reign of Afghanistan as the world's largest supplier of opium has been disrupted by Myanmar. UNODC Bangkok office, on December 18, 2023, disclosed that opium cultivation areas expanded most in Myanmar's border regions in northern Shan state, followed by Chin and Kachin states, as yield expanded by 16 per cent to 22.9 kilogrammes per hectare because of sophisticated farming practices.

Myanmar farmers now earn about 75 per cent more from Opium poppy farming, as average prices of the flower have reached about \$355 per kilogram and the cultivation area has increased by 18 per cent year on year, from 40,100 to 47,000 hectares, boosting the potential yield to its highest level since 2001.

For India, this development should ring an ominous bell. When Afghanistan dominated opium production, despite the presence of a buffer territory like Pakistan, India's Western land borders and maritime borders witnessed a continual bombardment of opium and other narcotic concoctions by every conceivable mode of transportation, from ships to drones. Narco-terrorism remains a big challenge on the Western borders for the defence forces, para-military forces and every



## Myanmar Catapulted as World's Numero Uno in Opium Production: What it Means for India

enforcement agency. The sudden emergence of Myanmar in northeast India's land borders, as the world's largest source of opium, is being felt in the ongoing Manipur tribal drug wars. The Golden Triangle has been in existence simultaneously with the Golden Crescent for several decades, and India was being inundated by opium from both sides, but the alter ego of the narcotics trade is narco-terrorism.

India bore a great impact of the drug trade and narco-terrorism on the Western sector, which is directed and controlled even today by Islamabad. The Afghan-Pakistan drug trade is in the firm grip of Islamic fundamentalists and a wide variety of terror organisations, actively supported and trained by the ISI of Pakistan. Despite decades of unabated and concentrated military efforts by

the Americans and to a limited extent by the Russians, no serious disruption occurred for the opium production and distribution across the globe, from Afghanistan. The present estimated 95 per cent decline in opium cultivation in Afghanistan after a drug ban by the Taliban in 2022 is seen as the reason for the global opium supply chain getting shifted to Myanmar. For decades, northern

Thailand in the Golden Triangle, with Laos and Myanmar sharing the Mekong River, has been one of the biggest drug trafficking corridors in the world. In Shan state, Myanmar, there is not only the major production of heroin and opium, but also that of synthetic drugs like methamphetamine which feeds the whole of the Asia-Pacific region, stretching from Japan all the way down to New Zealand.

# Why India Must Call US Bluff on Pannun

**By: Minhaz Merchant**

Gurpatwant Singh Pannun is a co-founder of Sikhs For Justice (SFJ), a terrorist group banned by India. Yet the United States protects Pannun like one of its own. There is a mountain of evidence of Pannun's crimes: murder of Indians on US soil, incitement of violence against Indian diplomats in the US and Canada, arson attacks against Indian gurdwaras and diplomatic missions, and threats to bomb Air India and Parliament. Instead of prosecuting Pannun, an American citizen, the US Department of Justice (DoJ) has targeted an Indian businessman Nikhil Gupta on charges of "murder-for-hire". The supposed victim of the alleged plot: Pannun.

The evidence is thin and relies largely on phone intercepts of Gupta acting on behalf of an Indian government agent (codenamed CC-1) to assassinate Pannun. Gupta was detained by Czech and US agents at Prague airport and forcibly taken into custody. This happened on June 30, 2023. Six months later Gupta remains in a Czech prison but under US jurisdiction. His kin last week filed a habeas corpus petition in the Supreme Court to seek Gupta's release from "illegal detention" in the Czech Republic. Meanwhile, a group of



five influential US lawmakers of Indian origin have been briefed by US authorities on the outlines of the case. The lawmakers last week issued a joint statement noting the seriousness of the accusations.

Analysts in both India and the US have concluded that the India-US strategic partnership is now under its greatest strain since President Bill Clinton imposed harsh sanctions on India following the Pokhran-2 nuclear test in May 1998.

They are wrong. Washington has no intention of weakening India-US ties. It still needs India to counter China in the Indo-Pacific. But there are caveats.

Under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, India has carved out an independent foreign policy that challenges US hegemonic interests. There are certain premeditated rules India has

violated. For example, America and its Anglophone allies can kill anyone, anywhere, at will. India and others can't.

Three Indian policies have especially upset the US. One, India's continued dalliance with Russia following the Ukraine war. Two, India's leadership of the Global South that has diluted Western sanctions on Russia. Three, rapid indigenisation of military hardware that in the long term will greatly reduce New Delhi's dependence on US weaponry. Since WW2, the US has been paranoid about losing its status as a global hegemon. It targeted the Soviet Union and its Communist satellites as America's principal threat through the 40-year Cold War. After the Soviet collapse in 1990 it ignored China's threat. China's economy and military were a fraction of the US. But by 2010 China had emerged as an

incipient rival. By 2020 it represented a geopolitical and geo-economic threat to the US-led world order that was far more serious than the Soviet Union. Enter India. Till 2000, the US treated India with benign indifference. Since 1947 it had tilted towards Pakistan, most infamously during the 1971 Bangladesh war. But after China's rise became apparent, the Bush administration made the 2005 India-US civil nuclear deal the beginning of a new strategic partnership that secured US national interests in the Indo-Pacific.

India was to be patronised for being an obedient ally, serving the West's overarching interests. There was one problem though. India, on the cusp of becoming the world's third-largest economy by 2029, didn't quite see matters that way. It increasingly looked at the world through its own prism, not through the West's.

## HISTORY MATTERS

India and the US come from different sides of history. The US built its wealth and power on two historical atrocities: the transatlantic slave trade and the occupation of native peoples' land. This gave the US through its foundational years in the 18th and 19th centuries the momentum to create an industrial society. But wars remained.

Until 1965, when the Civil Rights Act was passed under pressure

from Martin Luther King, black Americans were not allowed into restaurants in several southern US states. Their children couldn't study in white schools. The Ku Klux Klan lynched blacks at will.

After WW2 the US has waged more wars, invaded more sovereign nations and assassinated more people on foreign soil than any other country in modern history.

Given this background, the US is sensitive to any changes in the balance of global power. It successfully ended the Soviet threat. It is working hard to neutralise the Chinese threat.

But India? Farsighted US policymakers know that India will in a decade not only be the world's third-largest economy but the largest consumer market with the largest internet audience and the largest pool of software engineers adept in artificial intelligence (AI). It's imperative for the longevity of America's hegemonic status that India does not emerge as an independent-minded, intransigent global power in the next 10 years as China has done in the last 10.

There is a further complication with India. It has the moral high ground. Its rise has not depended on transatlantic slavery (America), colonialism (Britain) or genocide (China).

## The Most Powerful Anti-Trump Argument in the GOP Has Evaporated

Joe Biden has done Donald Trump the enormous favor of collapsing before our eyes.

As the 2024 GOP presidential race heads into the first contests, Biden's abysmal run of polling has boosted Trump and undercut his Republican opponents by hanging a neon sign on our politics reading, "TRUMP CAN WIN." It may be that Trump, such is his hold on GOP voters, didn't need any help establishing a dominant position in the fight for the Republican nomination, but two exogenous events have boosted him.

First, the indictments from the Justice Department and Democratic prosecutors created a predictable rally-around-Trump effect that put him on a

fundamentally higher trajectory in the race, and second, Biden's execrable polling has completely eliminated any possibility of making an electability argument against Trump.

There's picking your opponent through underhanded ads — something Democrats did to help get vulnerable MAGA opponents in 2022 — and then there's picking your opponent through your own incredible weakness that makes him look even more alluring to his partisans.

The most salient doubt about Trump among on-the-fence Republicans has never been his policy priorities, governing effectiveness or conduct after the 2020 election, but his ability to win.

Trump's standing in the party was shaken after the 2022 elections when Republicans underperformed, and he had his



fingerprints on the disappointment. The Ron DeSantis landslide in Florida created a contrast that seemingly opened a vista for an intuitive, winning argument — stick with Trump and lose, or go with the

young, fresh governor and win.

The electability argument also had the advantage of side-stepping any of the issues about Trump that most Republicans don't want to hear. Saying he can't win isn't a critique of him personally or anything he wants to do. It's a practical claim, not a moral one. And it can be offered more in a tone of sorrow than anger. The problem is that the polling hasn't cooperated, thanks to Biden's downward spiral.

In 2016, Trump was often reduced to citing Drudge polls and other dubious sources to try to demonstrate what he's always maintained is his overwhelming

public support. This time around, he can cite the most reputable polls in the business.

The Biden collapse is nearly comprehensive. He is losing in ballot tests to Trump, his approval rating is scraping bottom, he's trailing on almost every top issue, and super-majorities think he's too old to serve again.

He is the weakest incumbent since Jimmy Carter or George H.W. Bush. The latest Wall Street Journal poll has Trump leading Biden by 4 points in a hypothetical two-way race, and 6 in a multi-candidate field. Only 37 percent approve of Biden's job performance, while 61 percent disapprove. Fewer than 30 percent of voters approve of "Bidenomics."

# Biden-Modi Bonhomie Overshadowed as American Political Hostility Towards India Takes Centre Stage

By: Shubhangi Sharma

An alleged murder plot concerning a US-based terrorist at the hands of Indian authorities has powered a strikingly grim disruption in one of the most consequential bilateral relationships in geopolitics in this century. American pro-Democrat media outlets have been bursting with hit pieces, carefully crafted and timed to play up the rift. Meanwhile, Indians' perception of the US as a hypocritical, duplicitous and flatly hostile power is back in the mainstream. As Congressional Democrats storm into the fray amid election season, the Biden administration seems to be orchestrating a controlled implosion of India-US ties, a move directed at altering the perception of rising Modi-Biden bonhomie, or as many left-leaning democrats would view it—remediating it.

US President Joe Biden's recent decision to turn down the Republic Day chief guest invitation from India points to this direction. The visit has been turned down at virtually the last moment, and to top it all, after having made the invitation public for weeks, putting India in a fix. In late September, it was the US ambassador to India, Eric Garcetti, who confirmed to the media that an invitation for January 26 had been made. The US purportedly sat on that invitation until revealing just six weeks prior to the event that the President was busy. This is not just a sloppy job at diplomacy but a deliberate, and perhaps calculated snub. There is no other way to look at this except as a politically hostile move right in the run-up to the crucial parliamentary election in India in 2024. 2024 is an election year in the United States and also in India. However, while Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, a right-leaning political powerhouse, is almost certain to breeze through into a third term, President Joe Biden, the global left's tallest advocate, is just not there yet.

Biden's nomination as the Democratic presidential candidate needs to come through. As it turns out, that is going to be quite an uphill task for the 81-year-old whose political heft is waning with age and was never enough on its own to tightly secure his position in the first place.

Consider this, Biden's approval ratings are trailing behind former President Donald Trump in all of the seven swing states of the US, according to a Bloomberg Poll. Now, with his son, Hunter Biden, on a highly publicised trial, a raging undercurrent in support for former President Donald Trump and talks of manifestations of apparent senility, the American President has his work cut out to make some compromises and get all and sundry of the Democrats to rally behind him. Biden faces veiled opposition from the more radical



sections of the party and may be out to please those who for long have soured over soaring ties with India and would love to see a collapse of the same in a dramatic and public manner.

The US Senate Foreign Relations Committee's recent hearing on 'transnational repression' featured talk of India alongside America's adversaries—China, Russia and Iran. The alleged targeting of Khalistani terrorists on Western soil has been flagrantly



contrived as political repression of the Sikhs. It is all the more questionable when the Khalistanis in question are reported to have received security briefings from the FBI, or that one of their clownish ringleaders—Gurpatwant Singh Pannun, who is the alleged target of the flimsy murder plot—is widely believed by sources in the Indian security establishment to be a CIA agent.

The Democrat senators termed the allegation as "disturbing" and one of them, Senator Chris Van Hollen even suggested putting curbs on arms exports to India, a prospect that would hollow out the defence partnership by a mile.

One cannot help but view this outrage as a forced theatre by a bunch of stakeholders in American politics and the media, who lean heavily towards Pakistan for old times' sake and of course, business purposes. The US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), unprincipled and mendacious as always, made sure to enter the alleged murder plot of known Khalistanis associated with drug trade, criminal activity and terror activities

aspects of economic, defence and security cooperation, seem to have taken a backseat to allow the drama to unfold.

It also does not help that following a limited rapprochement with China last month, Washington spent last week hosting Pakistani Army Chief Asim Munir who is the de facto leader of the country, signalling a thaw in ties and potentially greater economic and military aid for Islamabad. The manufactured furore over the alleged murder plot is playing right into the hands of China—which seeks concessions from India to end the border standoff and Pakistan, which seeks to be back on the USA's payroll.

Further, the discord between India and the US is exacerbated by the sustained American onslaught on Bangladesh's moderate leader, Sheikh Hasina, ahead of the elections. Under the garb of restoring democracy in Bangladesh, the US is using sanctions and other measures to install Hasina's Islamist adversaries into power—all while accepting the military's high-handed dominance of Pakistani politics. All this, including the disaster set loose in Afghanistan and the reckless policy of interventionism against the military junta in Myanmar through support for various rebel militant groups, have run counter to India's security calculus, destabilising its neighbourhood which in turn threatens to spill over across its borders. While part of the differences between the US and India oscillate between good times and bad times, others are deeply ingrained in American policies toward India and its interests. As the other half of a mature partnership, the US must shake off its politically hostile tendencies and respect India's democracy, its sovereignty and its security interests.

in India, as the targeting of Sikhs, a religious minority. It is now "deeply concerned by India's transnational repression against religious minorities". With the case still in court, the USCIRF has acted as a jury on its own. And this is not the first time that the USCIRF spewed deceitfully fact-free rhetoric against India. Congressional politics is casting a shadow over the strides made by the friendlier executive. Those in the Biden administration, who have invested tremendous amounts of resources and time in solidifying a multi-dimensional bond with India, penetrating nearly all



# Haven't read Hitler's 'Mein Kampf': Trump amid backlash on anti-immigrant stance

Donald Trump said on Tuesday he has never read Adolf Hitler's manifesto 'Mein Kampf' and is not quoting the German dictator when he says illegal immigrants inside the US are poisoning and destroying the blood of America.

In a rally in Iowa, Trump - the clear frontrunner for the Republican presidential nomination - repeated language he has used in recent campaign events about illegal immigrants that has been criticised for being xenophobic and similar to language used by Hitler.

"It's true. They are destroying the blood of our country," Trump told a crowd of supporters in Waterloo, Iowa. "They don't like it when I said that. I never read Mein Kampf." Trump said Hitler used language

"in a much different way".

In 'Mein Kampf' (My Struggle), Hitler wrote in 1925: "All great cultures of the past perished only because the original creative race died out from blood poisoning." Hitler was the dictator of Germany between 1933 until his suicide in 1945. He initiated World War II, and instigated the mass murder of many minorities, including the genocide of six million Jews known as the Holocaust.

In a 1990 article in Vanity Fair, Ivana Trump, Donald Trump's first wife, reportedly told her attorney that Trump kept a book of Hitler's speeches in a bedside cabinet. That article has resurfaced in recent days. Trump has promised to crack down on illegal immigration and restrict legal

immigration if elected to a second four-year term in office.

Trump was in Iowa ahead of the first Republican nominating contest, which takes place in the state on Jan. 15.

Railing against illegal immigrants, Trump said: "They're coming from all over the world. They could be healthy, they could be very unhealthy. They could bring in disease that's going to catch on in our country."

In addition to using the "poison" rhetoric in some recent rallies, Trump also used the "poisoning the blood" language during an interview with The National Pulse, a right-leaning website, that was published in September.

It prompted a rebuke from the Anti-Defamation League, whose leader,

Jonathan Greenblatt, called the language "racist, xenophobic and despicable."

Trump, in office between 2017 and 2021, faces a likely rematch with Democratic President Joe Biden in the Nov. 2024 election.

Biden defeated Trump in the 2020 presidential election.

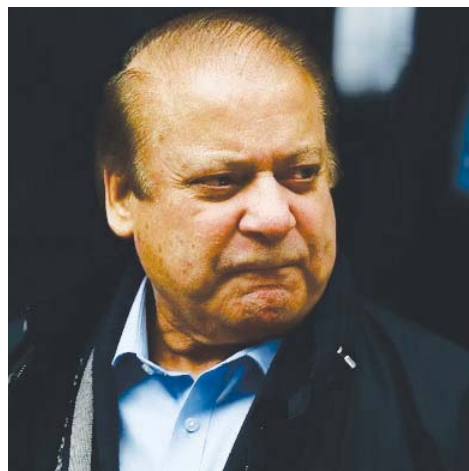
Before Trump's Iowa speech on Tuesday, the Biden campaign blasted out an email citing examples of language used by Trump that echoed Hitler and the Italian dictator Benito Mussolini.

"Donald Trump is parroting autocrats like Hitler and Mussolini, claiming that immigrants are 'poisoning the blood of our country' and calling his political enemies 'vermin', the Biden campaign email said.

## India, US not behind Pakistan's economic crisis, it's our own doing: Nawaz Sharif

Pakistan's former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif on Tuesday said neither India nor the US were behind the cash-strapped country's miseries but "we shot ourselves in our own foot", indirectly referring to the powerful military establishment for its woes.

During a conversation with Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) ticket aspirants, the party supremo, who is eyeing to become Prime Minister for a record fourth time, pointed out that he was ousted from power three times, in 1993, 1999 and 2017. "Today, where Pakistan has reached (in terms of the state of the economy), this is not done by India, the US, or even Afghanistan. In fact, we shot ourselves in our own foot... they (a reference to the military) imposed a selected (government) on this nation by rigging the 2018 polls that led to the sufferings of the people and



downfall of the economy," Sharif said.

The 73-year-old leader castigated the judges for legitimising military dictators. "The judges garland them (military dictators) and legitimise their rule when they break the Constitution. When it comes to a prime minister the judges stamp his ouster. The judges also

approve the act of dissolution of the parliament... why?" he asked.

The Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz supremo lashed out at former ISI chief Gen Faiz Hamid for his role in ousting him from power in 2017. "A case has been opened in the Supreme Court against those (Faiz Hamid and others) who had said that if Nawaz came out of jail their two-year hard work would be wasted," he said. The PML-N leader, who returned to the country from London in October ending a four-year-long self-imposed exile, is the only Pakistani politician who became the prime minister of the coup-prone country for a record three times. On Monday, Nawaz said that in 1999, "I was Prime Minister in the morning and in the evening I was declared a hijacker.

Similarly, in 2017, I was ousted from power for not taking a salary from my

son." "They (military establishment) made this decision as they wanted to bring their selected man into power," he said, referring to his arch-rival Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) supremo Imran Khan. In a televised address to the nation on Thursday last, the three-time former Prime Minister blamed the military establishment of 2014-17 for forcing senior judges to remove him from power. "They (a reference to the military establishment) visited the residences of senior judges and threatened them. They achieved the required court verdicts against me through coercion," he said. Last week, Sharif was acquitted in the Al-Azizia Steel mill corruption case. He has already been acquitted in the Avenfield graft case in which he was convicted in July 2018 and sentenced to ten years in jail. He also got relief in the Flagship corruption case.

## Rudy Giuliani files for bankruptcy

Former New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani filed for bankruptcy in New York Thursday, as legal bills from his failed efforts to overturn the results of the 2020 election for former President Donald Trump pile up.

The filing comes days after Giuliani, 79, was ordered to pay \$148 million in damages to two former Georgia election workers who said their lives were upended after the former Trump lawyer falsely accused them of manipulating ballots during the 2020 election.

"The filing should be a surprise to no one.

No person could have reasonably believed that Mayor Rudy Giuliani would be able to pay such a high punitive amount," Ted Goodman, Giuliani's political adviser, said in a statement. "Chapter 11 will afford Mayor Giuliani the opportunity and time to pursue an appeal, while providing transparency for his finances under the supervision of the bankruptcy court, to ensure all creditors are treated equally and fairly throughout the process." According to the Chapter 11 filing, Giuliani holds debts of about \$153 million, while only claiming up to \$10

million in assets. The former mayor owes close to \$1 million in state and federal taxes and owes millions to several law firms, including \$1.36 million to Davidoff Hatcher & Citron LLP, the law firm where Giuliani's longtime lawyer Robert Costello works. Costello is suing Giuliani for unpaid bills. The vast majority of his debts stem from the decision in the case of the Georgia election workers, Ruby Freeman and her daughter Shaye Moss.

Even before the ruling last week, Giuliani was reportedly in dire financial straits, and he has at times turned to Trump's

political action committee for help paying his legal bills. His extraordinary debts could grow depending on the outcome of several other lawsuits against him that he also listed in his bankruptcy filing. They include defamation cases brought against him by Smartmatic and Dominion Voting Systems and a pending case President Joe Biden's son, Hunter, brought against Giuliani and Costello, alleging they violated federal and California-based computer fraud laws in their efforts to disseminate potentially damaging material.

# The 45-Second Tool to Change Your Life

Americans are burned out, disconnected, isolated and starved for time. Maybe it's post-pandemic blues. Maybe it's our smartphone addiction. Whatever the cause, it's serious enough that Murthy has issued a formal advisory to the nation calling for action to address this "epidemic."

Such advisories are typically reserved for the biggest health problems, and some have changed the course of public health — a seminal 1964 report on cigarettes or the 1986 warning on AIDS. Murthy's made it his mission to place loneliness in that pantheon, with a report citing a growing body of evidence linking loneliness and its cousin isolation to a greater risk of cardiovascular disease, dementia, stroke, depression and anxiety, as well as suicide. The health risks from loneliness are as dangerous as smoking up to 15 cigarettes a day, the report warned. Murthy has also taken his message about the power of friendship on the road with a cross-country tour aimed at a group not often associated with social isolation: college students. In eight states, he has hosted a rollicking festival aimed at pumping up the undergrads, and some older folks, albeit without the kegs.

"This is really one of the defining issues of our time," Murthy said at Brooklyn's Barclays Center on a recent Monday

evening, after dozens of New Yorkers in black puffer coats filtered into the stadium's lobby, with armchairs and a piano nearby. People dressed as dancing unicorns handed out prescriptions for five minutes of social connection. (Quantity: Endless. Refills: Daily.) A drum beat sounded from the direction of the basketball court, and for a moment it seemed like the soft-spoken Murthy might have to compete with band practice. But before long, a drumline of bow-tied gentlemen appeared, threading through the folding chairs and revving up the crowd, who clapped along. Eventually Murthy instructed the crowd to take out their phones. "We're going to use technology for good here," he said, tasking everyone with writing and sending a message to someone they're grateful for in 45 seconds.

The lights dimmed.

Grammy-winning musician Jon Batiste, here to assist Murthy's anti-loneliness campaign, tapped a few gentle notes on the piano, with Murthy still talking in the dark — slowly and softly, as if he's winding down a yoga class.

As the lonely people and their allies hit send, they turn on their phone flashlights

and wave them in the air.

"Imagine that you just dropped a pebble into a pond and there are ripples that are going to go out," Murthy said. "Let's do this for the next five days."

**Surgeon General Vivek Murthy has made it his mission to cure our loneliness, and he's got a prescription you can try at home. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy is worried about our sad social lives.**

Afterward, he sat down with POLITICO Magazine to discuss loneliness, going sugar-free and how technology doesn't have to destroy human connection. We spent months trying to think of something that would be simple, impactful and would also be timed out so people wouldn't feel overwhelmed.

I love challenges. I love them because in my own life, they've made a difference.

I remember seeing an article in the paper about a sugar-free challenge. For a few weeks, people were going to eat food that had no added sugars. Part of the goal was just to increase your awareness about how many products you eat that have added sugar, like pasta sauce or bread. That was very

powerful for me. I'm a believer that short experiences can sometimes open our eyes, by giving us an opportunity to go through something and learn something by experiencing what it's actually like. There's only so much you can say in words. If I have the option of talking for half an hour or giving someone an experience, I'd give them an experience. That's going to be more powerful. I couldn't help but notice that the challenge in New York involved technology, which I think of as contributing to loneliness and social isolation.

**That's very deliberate.**

What we've heard from many students is that social media in its current form has ended up making many of them feel worse about themselves and about their friendships. We also know that during the height of the pandemic, being able to video conference with their friends was actually a blessing and a great way to stay in touch. Part of the reason we have people use their phones to send that message is as a reminder: We can use our technology in positive ways to strengthen connection, but we have to be really intentional about it. If those can be bridges to offline connection, that's even better. It's not about tech being good or bad.

## Four Years After Abrogation Of Article 370, What Has Changed In Jammu & Kashmir?

Nearly four years after the abrogation of Article 370, change is afoot in Srinagar. It is evident on the streets of the capital, in its people and on new signages in the city. Near the Zero Bridge, an Akash Institute hoarding invites students to excel in competitive exams at its Rajbagh branch. The institute-chain was acquired by BYJU's, an edu-tech behemoth with 500 centres in 200 Indian cities. Its offline branch by the Zero Bridge is now part of a pan-India network.

Paramilitary forces stationed in three fortified bunkers continue to patrol near Church Lane by the Bridge. Though the once unsettling routine frisking of passers-by has somewhat lessened, the men in olive green are still there, behind wire-clad posts, suggesting that while some things appear to have changed in Kashmir, they are still the same.

Rajbagh, a posh address in Srinagar, appears to be flourishing with new buildings, new houses, new hotels and tuition centres. The Zero Bridge, which was washed away in the 2016 floods, is now a tourist destination, where tourists spend hours watching the Jhelum jostle by.

There is another pair of eyes on the Bridge: that of a native, Irfan Ahmad, a businessman in his early 50s. He, too, watches the river flow by peacefully. But in his heart there's turmoil. Ahmad has been deeply impacted by the import of the recent

Supreme Court decision upholding the central government's move to abrogate Article 370 of the Indian Constitution.

He is "crestfallen". On the verdict day, Ahmad was at a condolence meeting. He believed the country's top court would rule against abrogation. "I felt (like) someone stabbed my heart. Incidentally, I was at a condolence meeting, a perfect place to mourn," he says. As he tries to elaborate, his friend intervenes, urging him to "avoid" political talk. Ahmad, too, perhaps realises the gravity of his comments and stops the conversation abruptly. Ahmad's caution and unease reflect a widespread fear of discussing the current political situation in the Valley.

On December 11, a five-judge constitution bench headed by Chief Justice D Y Chandrachud upheld the abrogation of Article 370 as "constitutionally valid" in its verdict on a clutch of petitions challenging the abrogation filed by the National Conference (NC), Peoples Conference, CPI(M), the local High Court Bar Association and former bureaucrat-turned politician Shah Faesal.

The petitions were filed days after August 5, 2019, when the BJP government revoked Article 370 and Article 35A of the Indian Constitution, bifurcating Jammu & Kashmir and downgrading the now-former state into two Union Territories, Jammu & Kashmir and Ladakh.

Following the verdict, the only comfort for regional political parties lies in the Apex Court's directive to the Election Commission (EC) to conduct elections by September 2024, also urging the government to promptly restore statehood. The long-drawn legal battle was not without surprises.

Shah Faesal had already withdrawn his petition months before the final hearing, claiming Article 370, for many Kashmiris like him, was a thing of the past. "Jhelum and Ganga have merged in the great Indian Ocean for good," he had proclaimed.

Unlike Faesal's 'change of heart', young singer Jibraan Nasir, who Outlook met by the Bridge, appears to be oblivious to the development, which has the potential to tectonically alter the unique identity of the region.

Unlike the charged atmosphere of the pre-Article 370 era, when artists, poets, rappers and singers were more vocal about the region's politics, Nasir claims he is simply disinterested.

"I am an artist and I will not talk about politics," he says. "Even on the day of the verdict, I was with other friends and didn't take notice of what happened."

According to a human rights lawyer, people now fear that the government might know what they are thinking just by looking at their faces. "It seems bizarre, but it is so true," he humorously chips in.

Where else could people talk? "Dal Lake!" quips a photojournalist, who was within earshot.

At Ghat number 12, 72-year-old Shikrawalla Mohammad Abdullah Sagdu bemoans the tourism slump this season as the temperature in Srinagar during the night drops to minus six, affecting his boat business.

He initially opens up about Article 370. "Article 370 was ingrained in our lives, a part of our identity. Its removal was unwarranted," he says. But Sagdu hesitates to discuss the impact of its abrogation on Kashmir and its people. "We have left everything to God. Let us see what God has in store for us," he says.

Sagdu navigates past flower-laden boats and tourists, halting at Tariq Ahmad Patloo's ambulance boat. Tariq, known for ferrying patients across the water, expresses dissatisfaction over Article 370's removal. But his cousin, Mohammad Yasin, a 45-year-old businessman, who was initially saddened by the move, now supports it. He believes the Valley requires peace and stability. Yasin, who was in Ukraine during the abrogation, now says that Article 370 should have been abrogated earlier.

"There are no stone-throwing incidents, no strikes. There's a semblance of peace in Kashmir. Tourists are arriving in large numbers. What more could you ask for?" he says.

# Taiwan President offers aid to China after deadly earthquake amid tensions

Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen condoled the deaths of people in China's Gansu province after a 6.2 magnitude earthquake hit the region. She also offered aid to China despite the tensions between Taipei and Beijing.

( News Agency)- Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen expressed condolences to China on Tuesday and offered her government's help after an earthquake killed more than 100 people on the northern edge of the Qinghai-Tibetan plateau.

Tensions between Taipei and Beijing, which views the democratically governed island as its own territory, have soared in the past four years, as China seeks to assert its sovereignty claims with political and military pressure. But setting that aside, Tsai offered her "sincere condolences" on X to all those who had lost loved ones. "We pray that all those affected receive the aid they need, and we hope for a swift recovery. Taiwan



stands ready to offer assistance in the disaster response effort," she added,

writing in English and simplified Chinese characters, which are used in China but not Taiwan. Taiwan's fire department said it had assembled a search and rescue team of 160 people, four dogs and 13 tonnes of supplies ready to go to China if requested. China has not said whether it will allow in any overseas rescue teams. Tsai has offered condolences to China before for disasters, including last year after an earthquake in Sichuan province. Taiwan, which frequently suffers its own earthquakes, sent a rescue team to China in 2008 after a massive temblor struck the same province of Sichuan, killing almost 70,000 people and causing extensive damage.

## 116 killed, nearly 400 injured as 6.2 magnitude earthquake strikes China's Gansu

( News Agency)- At least 116 people were killed and nearly 400 others injured when a powerful 6.2-magnitude earthquake struck a remote mountainous region in northwest China just before midnight, the local earthquake relief headquarters said on Tuesday.

A massive earthquake jolted Gansu and Qinghai provinces at 11.59 pm on Monday, with a focal depth of 10 kilometres, according to the China Earthquake Networks Centre (CENC). Preliminary analysis showed that the quake was a thrust-type rupture, one of three above magnitude 6 to have struck within 200km of the epicentre since 1900, state television CCTV said. A second quake struck the neighbouring Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region hours later on Tuesday. A total of nine aftershocks at magnitude 3.0 and above were recorded



before dawn Tuesday, CCTV said. The quake occurred at a depth of 35 km with its epicentre 102 km west-southwest of Gansu's provincial capital city, Lanzhou. Official reports have not stated whether

there are any missing people in the quake's aftermath. The official Xinhua news agency said the epicentre was 5 km from the border between the two northwestern provinces, reporting that

strong tremors were felt in many parts of Qinghai province. As the disaster area is in a high-altitude region where the weather is cold, rescue efforts are working to prevent secondary disasters caused by factors beyond the quake, Xinhua said. Experts said the shallow quake caused heavy damage to transportation, communications and infrastructure. Rescue and relief work is under way and a working group was dispatched to assess the impact of the disaster and to provide guidance for local relief operations, state media said. Chinese President Xi Jinping and Premier Li Qiang have ordered all-out rescue efforts to minimise casualties after the earthquake. Xi asked local authorities to rescue and treat the injured promptly, and closely monitor the earthquake situation and weather changes to prevent secondary disasters.

## FBI hacks big ransomware gang Blackcat, restores victims' systems

( News Agency)-The US Justice Department has announced a disruption campaign against the Blackcat ransomware group -- also known as ALPHV or Noberus -- that targeted computer networks of more than 1,000 victims, including networks that support US critical infrastructure. The FBI developed a decryption tool that allowed its field offices across the country and law enforcement partners around the world to offer over 500 affected victims the capability to restore their systems. To date, the FBI has worked with dozens of victims in the US and internationally to implement this solution, saving multiple victims from ransom demands worth approximately \$68 million. The FBI also gained visibility into the Blackcat ransomware group's computer network as part of the investigation and has seized several websites that the group operated. "In disrupting the BlackCat ransomware group, the Justice Department has once again hacked the hackers," said

Deputy Attorney General Lisa O. Monaco. "With a decryption tool provided by the FBI to



hundreds of ransomware victims worldwide, businesses and schools were able to reopen, and health care and emergency services were able to come back online," Monaco said in a statement. However, a report in Bleeping Computer said that Blackcat claimed to have regained

control of its site and that the FBI only had decryption keys for 400 or so companies, leaving more than 3,000 victims whose data remains encrypted.

The gang also reportedly said that it was no longer restricting affiliates using its ransomware software from attacking critical infrastructure, including hospitals and nuclear power plants. "The FBI continues to be unrelenting in bringing cybercriminals to justice and determined in its efforts to defeat and disrupt ransomware campaigns targeting critical infrastructure, the private sector, and beyond," said FBI Deputy Director Paul Abbate. According to the unsealed warrant, Blackcat actors have compromised computer networks in the US and worldwide. The disruptions caused by the ransomware variant have affected US critical infrastructure -- including government facilities, emergency

# 'Soros-funded scheme backed by crooked Biden': Trump on Colorado court ruling

**Former US President Donald Trump has criticised the Colorado Supreme Court ruling declaring him ineligible for the White House, calling it a 'left-wing group's scheme.'**

(News Agency)- Former US President Donald Trump on Wednesday termed the Colorado Supreme Court ruling 'a scheme backed by crooked (President) Joe Biden to interfere in an election'. The former US President also called Biden 'a threat to democracy'. Trump's remarks came as the ruling disqualified him from serving as US president and stated he cannot appear on the primary ballot in Colorado because of his role in the January 6, 2021 attack on the US Capitol by his supporters. "It's no wonder crooked Joe Biden and the far

left group takes a desperate to stop us by any means necessary. They are willing to violate the US constitutions at levels never seen before, in order to win this election," Trump said, speaking in Iowa. He further said, "Joe Biden is a threat to democracy... he's a threat. They are weaponising law enforcement for a high-level election interference because we are beating them so badly." Trump's campaign also issued a statement on the Colorado Supreme Court ruling, stating they would file an appeal to the United States Supreme Court against the order. Meanwhile,

Republican presidential aspirant Vivek Ramaswamy vowed to pull out of the Colorado primary ballot unless Trump is reinstated.

The verdict set up a likely showdown in the nation's highest court to decide whether the frontrunner for the GOP nomination can remain in the race.

The decision from a court whose justices were all appointed by Democratic governors marks the first time in history that Section 3 of the 14th Amendment has been used to disqualify a presidential candidate.

The Colorado court concluded that the US Constitution bars



Trump, the frontrunner for the Republican nomination in 2024, from appearing on the ballot because of his role in instigating violence at the Capitol as lawmakers met to certify the results of the 2020 election. The court's majority acknowledged the decision was "uncharted territory." "We do not reach these

conclusions lightly," the majority justices wrote. "We are mindful of the magnitude and weight of the questions now before us. We are likewise mindful of our solemn duty to apply the law, without fear or favor, and without being swayed by public reaction to the decisions that the law mandates we reach."

## UN vote on aid delivery to Gaza delayed another day amid talks to avoid US veto

**The draft resolution would demand Israel and Hamas allow and facilitate land, sea and air deliveries of aid to and throughout the Gaza Strip and ask the UN to monitor humanitarian assistance arriving in the Palestinian enclave.**



(News Agency)- A United Nations Security Council vote on a bid to boost aid deliveries to the Gaza Strip has been delayed by another day as talks continue to try and avoid a third US veto of action over the two-month long Israel-Hamas war, diplomats said on Tuesday. The 15-member council was initially going to vote on a resolution - drafted by the United Arab Emirates - on Monday. But it has repeatedly been delayed as diplomats say the UAE and the US struggle to agree on the language, citing a cessation of hostilities and a proposal to set up UN aid monitoring. When asked if they were

getting close to an agreement, US Ambassador to the UN Linda Thomas-Greenfield told reporters on Tuesday: "We're trying, we really are." The draft resolution would demand Israel and Hamas allow and facilitate land, sea and air deliveries of aid to and throughout the Gaza Strip and ask the United Nations to monitor humanitarian assistance arriving in the Palestinian enclave. Diplomats said the United States wants to tone down language that "calls for the urgent suspension of hostilities to allow safe and unhindered humanitarian access, and for urgent steps towards a sustainable cessation of hostilities."

The United States and Israel oppose a ceasefire because they believe it would only benefit Hamas. Washington instead supports pauses in fighting to protect civilians and allow the release of hostages taken by Hamas.

Washington traditionally shields its ally Israel from any Security Council action. It had already twice vetoed Security Council action since an Oct. 7 attack by Hamas that Israel says killed 1,200 people and saw 240 people taken hostage. Israel has retaliated against Hamas by bombarding Gaza from the air, imposing a siege and launching a ground offensive. Nearly 20,000 Palestinians have been killed, according to Gaza health officials. UN officials warn of a humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza with the majority of the coastal Palestinian enclave's 2.3 million people driven from their homes.

### AID MONITORING

Diplomats said that Washington is also unhappy with a proposal in the UAE draft resolution that asks UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres to establish a monitoring mechanism in Gaza "to exclusively monitor all humanitarian relief consignments to Gaza provided through land, sea and air routes of those states that are not parties to the conflict."

## Rare smog puts Sydney on par with New Delhi as bushfires rage

(News Agency)- Air quality in Sydney plummeted on Tuesday to levels among the world's worst as smoke from bushfires in the north blanketed the harbour city, taking large swathes into index ranges on par with New Delhi, one of the world's most crowded capitals.

Although smog is rare in Sydney, better known for its beaches and blue skies, grey clouds hovered over the iconic Opera House and Harbour Bridge, with smoke visible in the air. The air quality index hit 161 in areas just north of the city's downtown after 5 pm (0600 GMT), reaching a level at which people are advised to avoid prolonged outdoor exercise.

But there could be relief in sight, with the Rural Fire Service (RFS) saying southerly winds should begin to dispel the smog by evening. The smoke had drifted hundreds of kilometers south from fires burning across roughly 136,000 hectares (336,000 acres), an area almost the size of Greater London, the RFS said.

Authorities have warned of a high-risk bush fire season in Australia this summer after two quiet seasons, compared with the 2019-2020 "Black Summer" fires that destroyed an area the size of Turkey and killed 33 people. Energy company Santos halted work on a gas project northwest of Sydney as a huge bushfire raged out of control in the Pilliga forest south of Narrabri, a town that is about 420 km (261 miles) away.

# Israel agrees to week-long ceasefire for hostage release: Sources

(News Agency)- Amid increasing pressure from hostage families, Israel has agreed for a week-long ceasefire to secure the release of captives held by the Hamas militant groups in Gaza, according to highly-placed sources. The fresh development comes two days after Mossad chief David Barnea met CIA Director William Burns and Qatari Prime Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani in Warsaw on Monday.

The sources told IANS that Israel has communicated to Qatar --the key mediatory -- that it was agreeable for a one-week ceasefire and demanded the release of 40 hostages. These hostages include women, children and elderly persons above 60 years of age.

Meanwhile, Israel has also agreed to release Palestinian prisoners, including those who have committed more grievous crime than the one who were freed during the previous humanitarian pause between November 24 and December 1. The sources also told IANS that Hamas had demanded for a total backout from the



war which Israel did not agree to.

According to available information, the Israel side said that it would agree for a permanent cessation of war only after the Hamas hands over all those responsible for the October 7 carnage.

But as diplomatic efforts continue, the humanitarian crisis in the besieged enclave worsens with each day. Nearly 20,000 people have been killed by Israeli military action in Gaza since October 7, and more than 52,000 wounded, according to the Hamas-

controlled Ministry of Health.

Meanwhile, much of northern Gaza has been decimated by airstrikes and, according to the UN, almost 1.9 million people -- more than 80 per cent of the enclave's population -- have been displaced.

## Pakistan's jailed Imran Khan uses AI-crafted speech to call for votes



(News Agency)- Pakistan's jailed former prime minister, Imran Khan, used an audio clip generated by artificial intelligence (AI) to address supporters in the first event of its kind in the politics of the South Asian nation, though marred by internet disruptions.

The audio, played over a photograph of Khan during an internet rally of his Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf party, drew more than 1.4 million views streamed on YouTube and attended live by tens of thousands on other social media. "Our party is not allowed to hold public rallies," Khan said in the speech, urging supporters to turn out in large numbers at general elections set for Feb 8. "Our people are being kidnapped and their families are being harassed."

The disruptions to livestreaming fuelled

transparency concerns about the upcoming elections, however, with users nationwide complaining of slow internet speeds and throttling, a technique telecoms regulators use to choke streaming on apps. Pakistan's telecoms regulator said the interruptions were being investigated, but added that internet accessibility overall appeared to be normal.

Khan's speech was generated from a written version he had approved from prison, said officials of his party, which staged the event because it faces a state-backed crackdown on physical gatherings, while its leader is blacked out of media.

Murtaza Solangi, information minister in Pakistan's caretaker government assigned to supervise the elections which has been suspected of favouring Khan's opponents, did not respond to a Reuters request for a comment. Jailed since he was convicted and sentenced to three years on graft charges on Aug. 5, Khan is embroiled in dozens of court cases, with some trials held in prison behind closed doors, which legal experts say infringes the right to fair proceedings.

A political crisis has swirled around the 71-year-old former cricket star since his ouster last year in a vote of confidence in parliament. The party crackdown followed a May assault on military sites by supporters protesting his brief arrest.

## 14 Indian fishermen arrested over alleged poaching in Sri Lankan waters



(News Agency)- The Sri Lanka Navy has arrested 14 Indian fishermen and seized their trawler for allegedly poaching in the island nation's waters, Fisheries Minister Douglas Devananda told Parliament last week that it needs a top-level diplomatic solution between the two countries.

The fishermen issue is a contentious one in the ties between India and Sri Lanka, with Lankan Navy personnel even firing at Indian fishermen in the Palk Strait and seizing their boats in several alleged incidents of illegally entering Sri Lankan territorial waters.

The Palk Strait, which is a narrow strip of water separating India's Tamil Nadu from Sri Lanka is a rich fishing ground for fishermen from both countries.

So far this year, some 240 Indian fishermen, along with 35 trawlers, have been arrested for illegal fishing. Earlier on December 6, at least 21 Indian fishermen were similarly arrested with their four trawlers seized in the northeastern waters off Mannar and Kovilan. While referring to

the recurring problem of "Indian fishermen doing illegal fishing" in Sri Lankan waters, Fisheries Minister Douglas Devananda told Parliament last week that it needs a top-level diplomatic solution between the two countries.

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## Savitri Jindal's wealth grew \$9.6 billion in 2023, most among India's richest

India's richest woman, Savitri Jindal, witnessed an unparalleled surge in her wealth in 2023, outpacing the country's richest individuals such as Mukesh Ambani and Gautam Adani, according to data from the Bloomberg Billionaires Index.

The 73-year-old has seen her net worth skyrocket by a staggering \$9.6 billion in the calendar year 2023. In contrast, Mukesh Ambani, the chairman of Reliance Industries (RIL) and India's richest individual, experienced a comparatively modest increase of around \$5 billion in the same

period. Despite Ambani maintaining his top position among India's wealthiest with a total fortune of \$92.3 billion, Savitri Jindal's meteoric rise has drawn significant attention as she became the fifth-wealthiest Indian with a net worth of \$25.3 billion.

Her conglomerate, the OP Jindal Group, oversees prominent listed companies such as JSW Steel, Jindal Steel & Power, JSW Energy, Jindal Saw, Jindal Stainless, and investment firm JSW Holdings. The OP Jindal Group, which controls 83 per cent of the port operator JSW



Infrastructure, successfully listed the company in October 2023. The Jindal family is now eyeing the potential listing of JSW Cement in the upcoming year.

Following Savitri Jindal in the

list of top wealth gainers in 2023 is Shiv Nadar, founder of HCL Tech, whose net worth surged by approximately \$8 billion to reach around \$32.6 billion. The strong performance of HCL Tech shares, witnessing a 45 per cent rally in 2023, contributed significantly to Nadar's wealth growth.

Meanwhile, real estate tycoon KP Singh of DLF added another \$7 billion to his total wealth, reaching \$15.4 billion during the year, fueled by an 83 per cent rally in DLF stock amid a real estate boom in India.

Industry stalwarts Kumar Mangalam Birla and Shapoor

Mistry both experienced a substantial wealth increase of \$6.3 billion each during 2023. Meanwhile, Mukesh Ambani's wealth recorded an additional \$5.2 billion, and Dilip Shanghvi, Managing Director of Sun Pharma, saw his net worth rise by another \$4.7 billion.

Notably, Gautam Adani remains the only prominent figure on the list whose fortunes went the opposite way in 2023. Despite a partial recovery in share prices, Adani faced a net drop of \$35.4 billion in his wealth, ending the year with an estimated net worth of \$85.1 billion.



### Salesforce acquires automated commission management platform Spiff

Enterprise software major Salesforce has announced plans to acquire Spiff, a provider of a new class of incentive compensation management (ICM) software, for an undisclosed sum. Once the acquisition closes, the Spiff organisation will join Sales Cloud, working to enhance Salesforce's Sales Performance Management solutions by providing customers with a trusted platform to increase visibility, supercharge selling and unlock growth. "Spiff connects what sellers want – transparent compensation – with what sales leaders want – compensation planning built into CRM that aligns behaviours to strategic outcomes," said Ketan Karkhanis, EVP & GM, Sales Cloud.

The addition of Spiff to

Salesforce will empower CROs to better align with financial and sales operations teams to easily self-manage complex incentive compensation plans and understand the factors propelling revenue performance to drive top-line growth. "I'm excited about the future of Spiff and about what this means for the world of SPM and ICM in general," says Jeron Paul, CEO of Spiff. Spiff is available on the Salesforce AppExchange and has partnered with Salesforce for years. More than 70 per cent of Spiff's customers use Sales Cloud as their CRM. Spiff is also a Salesforce Ventures portfolio company. The acquisition is expected to occur in the first quarter of Salesforce's fiscal year 2025, subject to customary closing conditions.



## Mumbai biz couple invests Rs 1,100 cr in SpiceJet for 19% stake

New Delhi- In a strategic move to bolster SpiceJet's financial position and spur growth, Mumbai-based businessman Harihara Mahapatra and his wife Preeti have announced a substantial investment of Rs 1,100 crore in the airline. The acquisition secures the couple a 19 per cent stake in SpiceJet, as revealed in a stock exchange filing by the airline. The investment plan includes participation from Aries Opportunities Fund, holding three per cent, and Elara Capital, securing an eight per cent stake through the conversion of warrants. Earlier, the Board of Directors of SpiceJet unanimously approved the infusion of fresh capital exceeding Rs 2,250 crore. This move involves issuing equity shares to financial institutions, foreign institutional investors (FII's), high net worth individuals (HNI's), and private investors. An official from

SpiceJet said, "The Board's unanimous decision reflects our commitment to strengthening the airline's financial foundation and propelling its growth trajectory. The issuance of equity shares and warrants under private placement is subject to necessary approvals from shareholders and regulatory bodies." The proposed preferential issues encompass a diverse group of investors, including Elara India Opportunities Fund, Aries Opportunities Fund, Mahapatra Universal Limited, Nexus Global Fund, Prabhudas Lilladher, Resonance Opportunities Fund, among others, aiming to raise funds aggregating over Rs 2,250 Crore. The Board of Directors, in a meeting held on December 12 gave the green light for issuing up to 31,83,00,000 equity shares of face value Rs10 each ('Tranche I Issue') and up to 13,00,00,000 warrants, convertible to equity

shares ('Tranche II Issue'), on a preferential basis.

The funds from the Tranche I and Tranche II issues, totaling Rs 15,91,50,00,000 and Rs 6,50,00,00,000, respectively, are earmarked for addressing statutory obligations, settling past dues with creditors, uplifting and ungrounding the fleet, acquiring new aircraft, meeting ATF expenses, employee-related expenses, and general corporate purposes.

Approximately 25 per cent of the funds from each preferential issue will be allocated to these purposes. If approved by shareholders, the investment will result in a reduction of airline promoter Ajay Singh's current shareholding from 56.49 per cent to at least 38.55 per cent. Presently, 37.9 per cent of Singh's stake is pledged with various banks, marking a significant development in SpiceJet's ownership structure.

# Apple brings roadside assistance via satellite on iPhone 14, 15 in US



the experience is different than sending or receiving a message via cellular," it added.

To use this feature, iPhone users need iOS 17 or later to connect to AAA for roadside assistance or iOS 17.2 or later and a Verizon SIM to connect to Verizon for roadside assistance. To request roadside assistance via satellite on your device, go to Messages, tap the New Message button to start a conversation, and then in the address field, type "Roadside".

When you're off the grid with no cellular and Wi-Fi coverage, you'll see the option to request roadside assistance via satellite. Now tap "roadside assistance" and follow the onscreen instructions to connect to a satellite and request help. In addition, the company mentioned that international travellers who visit the US can use the feature while visiting, except if they bought their iPhone in certain countries or regions.

San Francisco- Apple has brought roadside assistance via satellite feature on iPhone 14, iPhone 14 Pro, iPhone 15, or iPhone 15 Pro devices for users in the US. Users can text for roadside assistance when they are off the grid with no cellular and Wi-Fi coverage.

"If you need help with car trouble while off the grid -- for

example, if you're locked out, have a flat tire, or run out of fuel or charge — you can contact a roadside service provider via satellite to request roadside assistance," Apple wrote on its support page.

"To connect to a satellite with your iPhone, you need to be outside with a clear view of the sky and horizon. When you use a satellite connection,

# Nazara Tech joins 4 game studios to publish 5 innovative games

New Delhi- Online gaming major Nazara Technologies on Wednesday said that it partnered with four distinguished game studios to publish five innovative games in the country. This initiative is part of Nazara's new publishing division, focusing on promoting the 'Make in India' vision in the gaming sector.

innovative AI-led tools from the new Nazara SDK, is set to foster the growth and development of game creators," said Nitish Mittersain, Jt. MD & CEO of Nazara. "Along with financial investment, Nazara Publishing offers comprehensive support, including mentorship, user acquisition, and live operations expertise. Since its inception a



The eclectic mix of games selected for publication includes 'Gravity Shooter' by Smash Head Studios, a thrilling 2D action game; 'World Cricket League' from Wandermind Labs, offering a 3D multiplayer cricket experience; 'Hacked: Password Puzzle' by Pixcell Play, a challenging puzzle game; and ATG Studios' 'Laser Tanks' and 'Paperly', both promising unique gaming experiences across varied genres, the company said. "The Nazara Publishing division, enriched with

month ago, the division has received a remarkable response from both Indian and international game developers," he added. With substantial funds allocated for publishing, Nazara aims to publish 20 games within the next 12 to 18 months, investing between Rs 1 crore to Rs 3 crore per game, the company stated. In addition, the company mentioned that game developers and studios with exceptional projects are encouraged to apply for collaboration through Nazara's official website at publishing.nazara.com

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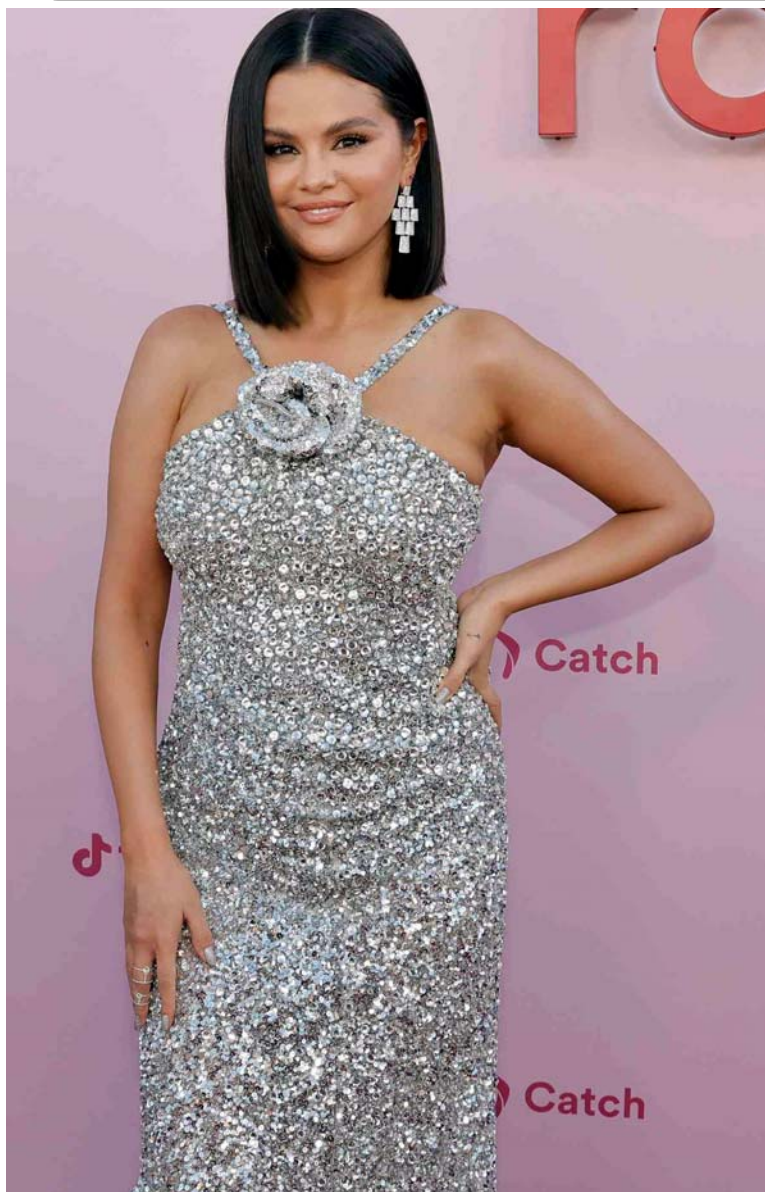
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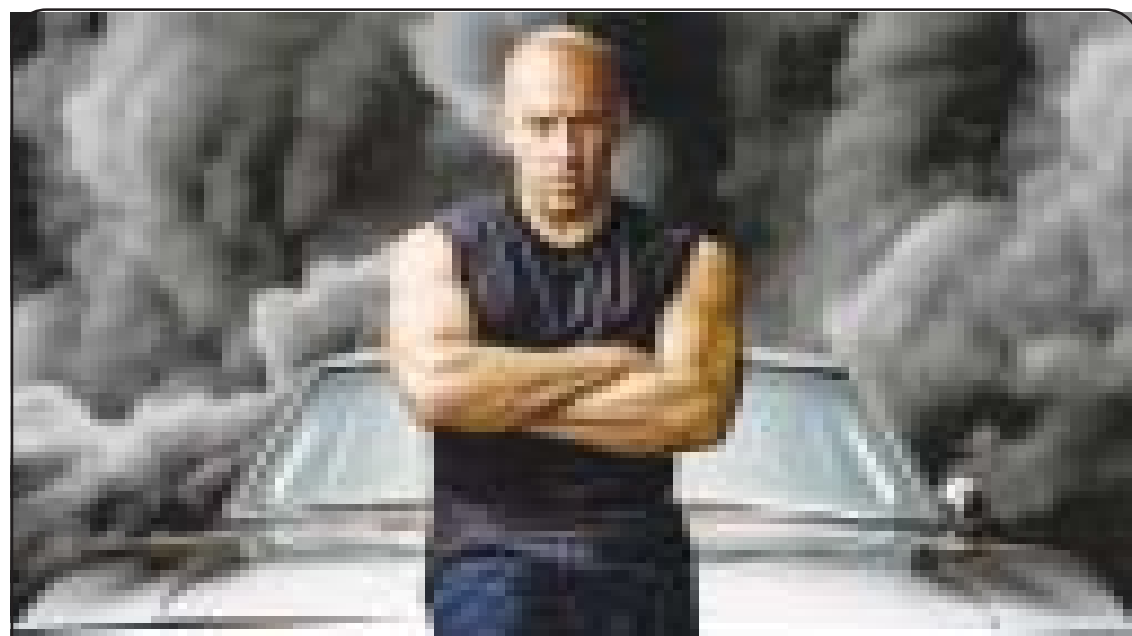
# Selena Gomez reveals her relationship priorities: Self-respect



Los Angeles- Amid her blooming romance with Benny Blanco, singer-actress Selena Gomez spoke about her priorities in a relationship. The 'Only Murders in the Building' actress, 31, who recently went public with music producer Benjamin Joseph Levin (known professionally as Benny Blanco), is opening up about her new romance. Gomez in an interview to Vogue México y Latinoamérica talked about what matters most when trusting someone with her heart, reports

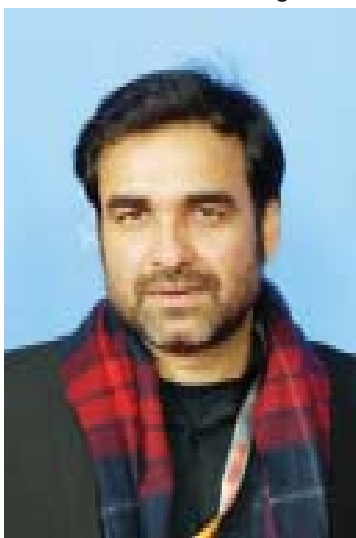
people.com. Without name-dropping her new beau, she said self-respect and holding space for the feelings of others are a top priority on her list for any partner. "Honestly, I have to start being attracted to the right kind of people, because it's a bit of both," the 'Love You Like a Love Song' singer said in the interview. "It's very hard to find someone who can listen to you and care about you, but I know when it happens it will be great and you will want it to be healthy," Gomez

added. Gomez previously revealed that she and Blanco have been dating for about six months, the two have known each other longer than that. In 2019, he worked with her on her single 'I Can't Get Enough'. In addition to producing the song, Blanco also sang the English-Spanish track alongside Gomez, Tainy, and J. Balvin. Earlier this month, the pair went public when the 'Come & Get It' hitmaker used social media for making the announcement.



## Pankaj Tripathi, who plays Atal Bihari Vajpayee

in the upcoming biopic 'Main Atal Hoon', has revealed one quality of the late Prime Minister that resonates with him the most. At the trailer launch of the film in Mumbai, the actor said, "In today's modern language it is called Emotional Quotient. Atal Ji had a very high emotional quotient. He used to write a poem every year on his birthday in December. After reading so much about him, I realised why he wrote those poems and in what context. So I connect with this quality of his the most because



I am also an emotional person. I can cry a lot without any reason." Sharing his view on the genre of biopics, Tripathi said, "A biopic is made so that people can be inspired by an important person who has lived an extraordinary life. I see biopics as an inspiration." 'Main Atal Hoon' chronicles the extraordinary life and political journey of Atal Bihari Vajpayee, India's 10th Prime Minister. Directed by Ravi Jadhav, the film reveals Vajpayee's multifaceted persona as poet, gentleman and statesman. It is scheduled to be released on January 19, 2024.

## Vin Diesel accused of sexually assaulting former assistant

Los Angeles- Hollywood star Vin Diesel has been accused of sexually assaulting his former assistant, who sued the actor on Thursday. The former assistant alleged that in 2010 he pinned her against a wall in a hotel suite and masturbated in front of her, reports Variety. Asta Jonasson reports that she was working for the actor in Atlanta, where he was filming 'Fast Five', when he brought her to his suite at the St. Regis Hotel and forced her onto his bed. According to the suit, she asked him to stop and moved toward the door, but he came over to her and began to grope her breasts and kiss her chest. He tried to pull down her underwear, and she screamed and ran toward the bathroom, the suit alleges. Jonasson alleged that Diesel pressed against the wall and forced her to touch his erect penis, and then began to masturbate. "Ms Jonasson was unable to escape and closed her eyes, scared of angering Vin Diesel by rejecting him further and trying to dissociate, wishing the assault would end," the suit alleges. Hours later, according to the lawsuit, Samantha Vincent, Diesel's sister and the president of his company,

called Jonasson and fired her. "It was clear to her that she was being fired because she was no longer useful — Vin Diesel had used her to fulfill his sexual desires and she had resisted his sexual assaults," the suit alleged. "Ms Jonasson felt like she was a piece of trash to be discarded. Ms Jonasson felt helpless, her self esteem was demolished, and she questioned her own skills and whether a successful career would require her to trade her body for advancement." Bryan Freedman, Diesel's attorney, issued a statement Thursday afternoon denying the allegations. "Let me be very clear: Vin Diesel categorically denies this claim in its entirety," Freedman said. "This is the first he has ever heard about this more than 13-year-old claim made by a purportedly 9-day employee. There is clear evidence which completely refutes these outlandish allegations." Jonasson filed the sexual battery lawsuit under California's Sexual Abuse and Cover Up Accountability Act, a 2022 law that created a one-year window to file certain suits that would otherwise be outside of the statute of limitations.



## Kareena talks about her characters Khushi, Sanjana & Tina

Actress Kareena Kapoor Khan has given several memorable performances in a career spanning 23 years. Poo and Geet are much talked about but there is Khushi from the 2003 film 'Khushi' and Sanjana from 'Main Prem Ki Diwani Hoon' and Tina from 'Mujhse Dosti Karoge', which one can't forget even today.

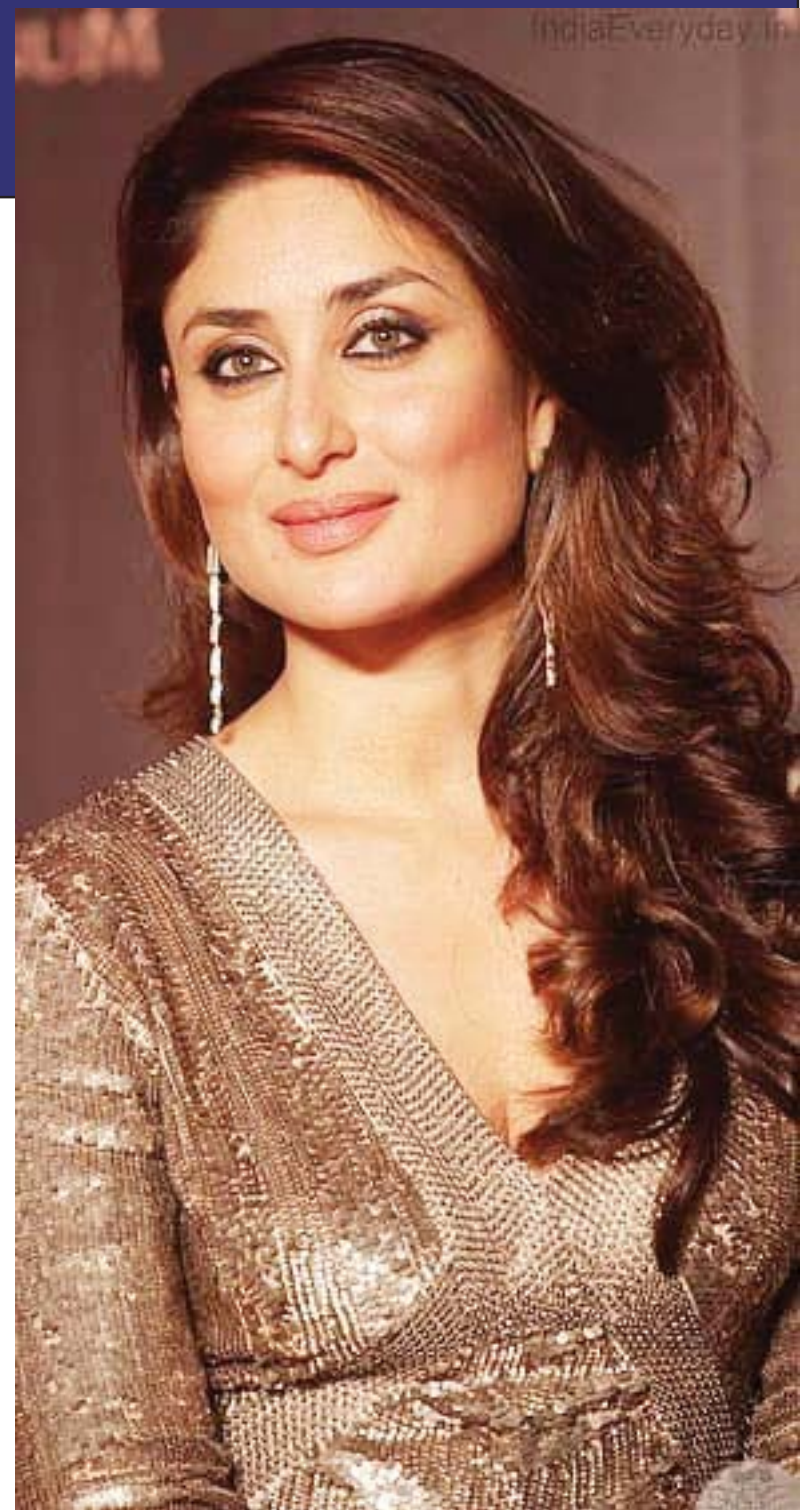
The actress finds it heartening that these roles are still etched in everyone's mind. Kareena's portrayal of Khushi (Khushi), Sanjana ('Main Prem Ki Diwani Hoon'), Preet ('Udta Punjab'), Riana (Ek Main Aur Ekk Tu) and Simrita Rai (Kambhakkt Ishq) among many others keep finding their way back on social media reels — a testimony to the fact that all the characters in her filmography you have

portrayed are unforgettable, despite whatever the film's fate.

Talking about the same, Kareena told VOICE: "Honestly, it's so wonderful to know that these characters refuse to fade away." The actress has given her 100 per cent to each role that has come her way.

"I've always believed in giving my all to each character, and it's incredibly rewarding to see that effort resonate with the audience," she added.

Kareena has lent her voice to Black Widow in 'Marvel Wastelanders: Black Widow', the third instalment of the Hindi Audible podcast series. On the acting front, Kareena will next be seen in 'The Crew' and 'Singham Again'.



## Akshay Oberoi says it was a fun challenge of dancing with Hrithik Roshan

Actor Akshay Oberoi got a chance to groove with star Hrithik Roshan in the song 'Sher Khul Gaye' from 'Fighter' and he called it a "fun challenge". Akshay said: "Matching steps with the ultimate dancing icon of our generation, Hrithik, was a fun challenge for me. Shooting this song was a great experience because we had all our cast grooving and enjoying together on this peppy number." "It was like a carnival -- vibrant, energetic, and filled with enthusiasm. Everyone of course wanted



to make sure their put their best foot forward and their dancing shoes on for a song where one had to match steps with Hrithik." The actor, known for his versatility as an actor and impressive dancing skills, expressed his enthusiasm, said: "We were anxious because we had to match steps with Hrithik, who is an ace dancer. But it turned out to be an amazing experience, and I had a great time shooting the song."

The film, which is slated to release on January 25, also stars Deepika Padukone and Anil Kapoor.

# Out of 220, just 4 hit Malayalam films in 2023; *estimated loss of Rs 300 crore*

Thiruvananthapuram- If Covid took a heavy toll on Malayalam film industry in 2022, 2023 appears to be worse with just four films released in theatres that turned hit, while another 12 films managed to break even, thanks to the OTT release.

As 2023 comes to a close, there will be around 220 Malayalam films released and with just 16 films bringing in the money for the producers, the Producers Association has estimated the total loss will be around Rs 300 crores.

The four films that turned out to be a hit in the theatres are '2018', 'Kannur Squad', 'RDX' and 'Romancham'.

B. Rakesh, Secretary of the Association said things doesn't augur well for Malayalam film industry according to the collections.

"Just four Malayalam films turned hit when running in the theatres, while 12 others managed to break even, thanks



to OTT release," said Rakesh.

Rakesh points out several reasons for the poor performance, the high cost of production being one of them.

"The remunerations are high, then unfavorable policies of the state government as there is a double tax being levied for the film industry which is not

there in other states. The rates for shooting being charged by the state government also has been hiked hugely," Rakesh added.

He further pointed out that 90 per cent of those who ventured into films this time are new people. "We know of films that have not even collected a single rupee.

This time there have been more films and the cost of production ranges from as low as Rs 10 lakh to as high as Rs 10 crore," he said.

The biggest grosser this year turned out to be '2018', a film made on the premise of the worst ever floods seen in the state in 2018. Superstar Mammooty also had an excellent run which saw his film 'Kannur Squad' bringing in huge revenues also did 'Kaathal', while 'Nanpakal Nerathu Mayyakam' won him rare reviews.

While superstar Mohanlal did not shine as expected, now all eyes are on his latest release to hit the screen in few hours is 'Neru'. The year 2023 also saw the passing away of hugely popular legendary actors Innocent, Mamu Koya, Poojapura Ravi and Subi Suresh besides ace director Siddique.

# 'Salaar' vs 'Dunki' intensifies;

## Prabhas film won't release in major South multiplexes

Hombale Productions withdrew the release of 'Salaar' from PVRInox and Miraj cinemas in the Southern states over alleged unfair trade of screenings of 'Dunki' in North India. Read details. Hombale Productions takes a big step with Prabhas' 'Salaar'. Two days before its release, the production house announced that they would be withdrawing the release of their film from PVRInox and Miraj cinemas in the Southern states. The decision has been taken over alleged unfair trade of screenings between 'Salaar' and 'Dunki,' in North India. As per reports, "Hombale Productions, SRK's Red Chillies and multiplexes and single screens have been in talks with each other in the last week. Producers of 'Salaar' even met SRK and a consensus was reached that both the films would take 50-50 screening rights. However, the agreement is allegedly not being followed."

Earlier, producer Vijay Kirgandur confirmed that they didn't want to get



into a war over screenings and agreed on 50-50 screening rights.

A source informs, "Despite the consensus and agreement, a lot of alleged back-and-push and manufactured rumours made single screens in North India favour showcasing 'Dunki' over 'Salaar'."

The trend of 'Salaar' bookings in North India was also quite remarkable. However, now with 'Dunki' getting more

screens than 'Salaar,' in the North, the imbalance is apparent. As per booking details, PVRInox has allotted all of their single screen properties in North India to 'Dunki'. Hence, the producers have decided to withdraw showcasing the film even in the South.

**HOW WILL THIS AFFECT THE EXHIBITORS?**

Out of the estimated 5400 screens in the South, the share of PVRInox makes for

almost 45-50% of the screens in the South. With this move, the exhibitors will see a major drop in footfalls.

'Salaar' also stars Prithviraj Sukumaran and Shruti Haasan in the lead roles. Directed by Prashanth Neel, the film is touted to be one of the biggest films in India this year. The film's advance booking has been positive, with the international market showing remarkable growth.

The Indian advance booking for 'Salaar: Cease Fire- Part 1' has shown an upward trend in India. As per data, the advance bookings in India till Tuesday were more than Rs 13.70 crore, selling over 6 lakh tickets.

'Salaar' Telugu 2D shows sold a total of 4.30 lakh tickets and more, whereas its Malayalam 2D shows sold a total of 87,361 tickets till Tuesday. On the other hand, Salaar's Hindi advance booking is around 63,746 tickets, Tamil is around 34,809 tickets, and Kannada is around 8,216 tickets.

'Salaar' is releasing on December 22, 2023.

## Christmas is one of my favourite times of the year: Alia Bhatt

Actress Alia Bhatt says that Christmas is her favourite time of the year and for her it is all about joy, love, and togetherness.

Alia's film 'Rocky Aur Rani Kii Prem Kahani' is all set to have its television premiere on Colors Cineplex on December 24, and the actress feels it's the best way to celebrate Christmas is to watch it with family and loved ones.

"Christmas is one of my favourite times of the year and I couldn't think of a better way to celebrate this with all my fans. The season is all about joy, love, and togetherness and that's what our film 'Rocky Aur Rani Kii Prem Kahaani' is all about," Alia said, adding that the film "is very close to my heart".

"I hope it adds an extra sparkle and loads of warmth to your celebrations!"

The film's director Karan Johar said: "Rocky Aur Rani Kii Prem Kahaani marked my return to the cinemas after seven years and I was taken aback by all the unanimous love it received in theatres. It proved that this era of love is all about 'love hain toh sab hain'."

Ranveer shared that the film's reception during its theatrical release was overwhelming, and

now, as it reaches the homes of millions with the world television premiere, he is quite thrilled. "This film holds a special place in my heart, as it exalts the strength of love and its ability to bind souls together, weaving a tale of an unbreakable familial bond. May this Christmas be a tapestry of abundant warmth, happiness, and the enchanting magic of 'Rocky aur Rani Kii Prem Kahaani' brings to all hearts," he added.

Produced by Hiroo Yash Johar, Karan Johar and Apoorva Mehta, the romance dramedy 'Rocky Aur Rani Kii Prem Kahaani' also stars Dharmendra, Jaya Bachchan, Shabana Azmi alongside Tota Roy Chowdhury, Churni Ganguly, Aamir Bashir, and Kshitee Jog.

The film is a modern love tale, underpinned by an old-word love story. It traces the journey of Rocky, a spirited Punjabi, and Rani, a sharp Bengali journalist, who fall in love and decide to live with each other's families determined to prove that they're a perfect match.

Rohan Lavsi, Business Head – Hindi Movies Cluster, Viacom18 added: "Rocky Aur Rani Kii Prem Kahaani' is a heartwarming addition to our robust lineup of films, promising viewers a delightful and joyous experience."



## Mariah Carey, Bryan Tanaka seemingly split after 7 years

Singer-songwriter Mariah Carey and Bryan Tanaka seem to have called it quits. Since kicking off her Merry Christmas One and All! tour in mid-November, Tanaka has been absent from Carey's shows, sparking fan speculation that the pop icon has split from her longtime boyfriend.

Mariah Carey, who's mom to 12-year-old twins Moroccan and Monroe (who she shares with ex-husband Nick Cannon), is also celebrating the holidays in Aspen without Tanaka, 40, who has traditionally accompanied her to the snowy getaway, reports People magazine.

This marks the first time the Songbird Supreme and creative director, who have had a professional relationship since 2006, have not travelled together for the holidays in years. As per People, the couple was last publicly seen spending time together back in March when the hitmaker celebrated her birthday, which she prefers to refer to as her "anniversary." At the time, Tanaka shared a photo of himself and Carey

smiling and embracing one another on Instagram and shared a sweet message in the caption. He wrote: "This is one of my favourite pictures. Ever. Happy Anniversary my Beautiful Queen". The couple first connected in 2006 when Tanaka joined the superstar out on the road on her Adventures of Mimi tour. Then after working together for a decade, the 'All I Want For Christmas Is You' singer and the choreographer became romantically involved in 2016."

The 'Obsessed' singer and the dancer, who briefly broke up for a period in spring 2017 before reuniting, have toured and celebrated Christmas together in some capacity since they started dating.

In 2017, Tanaka took the stage with the star during her All I Want for Christmas Is You shows and spent the December holiday with her and her children on their annual Aspen trip. Between hitting the slopes, Carey even took to Instagram to share adorable photos from their festivities together.

## Sonam Kapoor: Whenever represent India, I represent the diversity

Actress Sonam Kapoor said that the West has finally realised how India can now contribute to fashion globally and she is proud to represent our country and its craftsmanship to the world.

Sonam, who was also the only Indian actor at the coronation ceremony of King Charles III, said: "I think the West didn't understand the power of

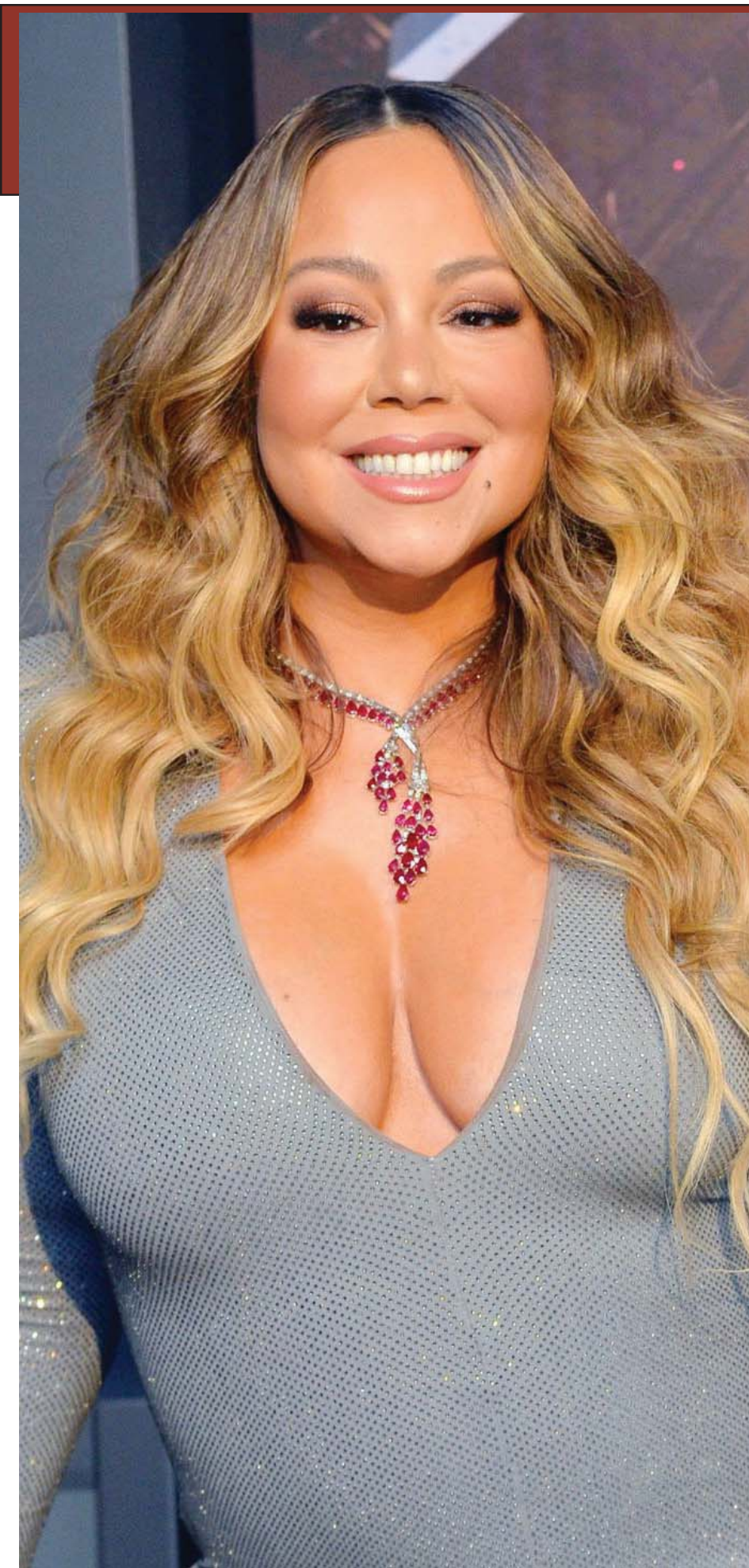
our impact in this part of the world before." "We are developing nations, but that is slowly changing, and we, as people here, have our voices as individuals and spending power as

clients, making it difficult to be ignored anymore. Whenever I am at an international event, I make sure to wear from an Indian or South Asian designer."

She added: "Whenever represent India, I represent the diversity, resilience, and coexistence that the country enjoys." Sonam strongly believes whatever is made in India has great value.

"The fact that we have such a strong cultural heritage and ancient civilisation means

that whatever is made in India has great value. It's a multicultural place where people from many faiths live together in harmony, and representing that is of utmost importance."



## Jason Momoa, Drew pitch '50 First Dates' sequel where she 'meets a Hawaiian man'

Actress Drew Barrymore and Jason Momoa have pitched the sequel for 2004 film '50 First Dates'. Jason asked her if she has a favourite comedy she's ever starred in, reports people.com. Drew replied, "Well, I was thinking particularly '50 First Dates'." The actress then asked Jason if he'd ever venture into the world of romantic comedies.

"If you were to do a romantic comedy, is there a film -- let's just play a game -- is there a rom-com you would ever remake?"

Jason said: "Yeah, maybe '50 More Dates'."

Jason's response led the host to bashfully drop her jaw

and flip her hair, with Jason mimicking her. He was on the The Drew Barrymore Show.

Jason added, "You need to come back to the islands and meet a Hawaiian man." "I would do that. Of course, are you kidding?" she said. Drew asked: "Is there, like, a woman in history, someone out there, you're producing a rom-com you're going to do it, who would you ever cast?" Jason said: "Well, aside from the movie we were just talking about?" Drew then explained she was asking because it's her "favourite genre" and she thinks Jason needs to be a part of it. "





## Diabetes drug may aid women's weight loss after quitting smoking

London- The diabetes drug dulaglutide (Trulicity) may significantly lower a woman's risk of substantial weight gain after she has given up smoking, according to a study. Dulaglutide is known to mimic the effects of the hormone GLP-1 which is naturally produced in the gut in response to food, helping to regulate the amount of glucose in the blood and weight gain. Women seem to be five times as likely as men to put on a lot of

weight after they quit smoking, suggests the data, published in the open access journal BMJ Nutrition Prevention and Health. Women also seem to have higher smoking relapse rates than men. And it's been suggested that one of the possible explanations for this is that they may be more concerned about the risk of major weight gain in the wake of quitting, although there's no solid evidence for this, said researchers from the University

Hospital Basel in Switzerland. "Our data suggest that an adjunct dulaglutide treatment could be particularly useful for patients facing a high risk of substantial weight gain after smoking cessation, such as women," said Fabienne Baur, from the Department of Endocrinology, Diabetology and Metabolism, at the University. "Another target group could be individuals of both genders who failed several cessation attempts

due to weight gain," Baur added. A previously published clinical trial showed that compared with dummy treatment, dulaglutide significantly reduced weight gain in those who had given up smoking. But it's not clear if this weight loss is gender specific. Therefore, the researchers re-analysed the data from this trial to see if there were any gender differences in weight lost or gained in the 12 weeks after trying to quit smoking. The new trial included 255 adults, 155 of whom were women. The average age ranged from 42 to 44 and the number of cigarettes smoked daily averaged 20 for a period of between 19 and 22 years. Trial participants were randomly assigned to receive either once weekly jabs of 1.5 mg/0.5 ml dulaglutide or 0.5 ml dummy treatment, plus the smoking cessation drug varenicline 2 mg/

day and behavioural counselling for a period of 12 weeks. After 12 weeks, women on dulaglutide lost around 1-2 kilos compared with weight gain of around 2-2.5 kilos for women in the dummy treatment group. Men taking dulaglutide shed just over half a kilo compared with weight gain of around 2 kilos among those in the dummy treatment group. But surprisingly, the positive effects of dulaglutide on weight had no impact on short term quit rates in either men or women, which were relatively high in both: 98 (63 per cent) in women and 65 (65 per cent) in men (65 per cent), the researchers said. The risk of weight gain after stopping smoking may change over time or depend on other factors, such as the degree of nicotine dependence or age, the researchers cautioned.

## Beetroot juice supplement beneficial for lung disease patients: Study

London- A 12-week course of daily beetroot juice supplement for people with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) lowered blood pressure and improved how far patients could walk in six minutes, according to a research. COPD -- a serious lung condition affecting around 400 million people worldwide -- includes chronic bronchitis and emphysema, causes breathing difficulties and severely limits people's capacity for physical activity. It also increases the risk of heart attacks and strokes. The new research, published in the European Respiratory Journal, tested a concentrated beetroot juice supplement that is high in nitrate against a beetroot juice placebo that looked and tasted the same but had the nitrate removed.

"There is some evidence that beetroot juice as a source of nitrate supplementation could be used by athletes to improve their

performance, as well as a few short-term studies looking at blood pressure," said Professor Nicholas Hopkinson from Imperial College London, UK. "Higher levels of nitrate in the blood can increase the availability of nitric oxide, a chemical that helps blood vessels relax. It also increases the efficiency of muscles, meaning they need less oxygen to do the same work," Hopkinson said. The study included 81 people with COPD, and whose systolic blood pressure measured higher than 130 millimetres of mercury (mmHg). Systolic blood pressure is the highest level the blood pressure reaches when one's heart beats, and the ideal range is between 90 and 120mmHg. As well as monitoring patients' blood pressure, researchers tested how far patients could walk



taking the nitrate-rich beetroot juice.

"At the end of the study, we found that the blood pressure of people taking the nitrate-rich beetroot juice drink was lower and their blood vessels became less stiff. The juice also increased how far people with COPD could walk in six minutes compared to placebo. This is one of the longest-duration studies in this area so far. The results are very promising, but will need to be confirmed in larger, longer-term studies,"

in six minutes at the beginning and end of the study. Participants were randomly allocated to either receive the 12-month course of nitrate-rich beetroot supplement (70 ml of concentrated beetroot juice containing 400 mg of nitrate once a day) or the placebo. Researchers found that

those taking the nitrate-rich supplement experienced an average reduction in systolic blood pressure of 4.5mm/Hg compared to those taking the placebo. There was also an average increase of around 30 metres in how far patients could walk in six minutes for those

Professor Hopkinson said. "COPD cannot be cured, so there is a pressing need to help patients live as well as they can with the condition and to reduce their risk of cardiovascular disease," said Professor Apostolos Bossios from the Karolinska Institutet in Sweden.

# What's good, what's not in new criminal code bills? Experts weigh in

**While some believe the new bills have good features, many think they may raise concerns over the laws becoming even more draconian. Former ASG Aman Lekhi and advocate Colin Gonsalves spoke to India Today TV on the new bills.**

Three revised criminal law bills were passed in the Lok Sabha on Wednesday. The three bills - Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita and Bharatiya Sakshya Sanhita, seek to replace the Indian Penal Code, the Code of Criminal Procedure, and the Indian Evidence Act, respectively.

While some believe the new bills have good features, many think they may raise concerns over the laws becoming even more draconian.

Former ASG Aman Lekhi and advocate Colin Gonsalves spoke to India Today TV on the passage of the new bills. Here's what they had to say:

**'MORE DRACONIAN THAN BRITISH LAWS'**

Advocate Colin Gonsalves raised strong objections to the three bills passed in Parliament. He said that safety provisions were ignored and that the bills "enable" police torture. "If the British laws were colonial and draconian, I want to show you very quickly how the laws enacted by this government are 10 times more draconian. During the British period, you could keep a person in police custody for a maximum of 15 days. Extending 15 days to 90 days



and more, is a shocking provision enabling police torture," the advocate told India Today. He also criticised the section on sedition, UAPA, false arrests and gay sex in the three new bills. "Gay sex, which is voluntary, non-coercive, is not a crime. And now again, they sneak in the same old section that on gay sex because they can't get over the fact that the Supreme Court declared that section unconstitutional," Gonsalves said. "They're just bluffing the country, fooling the country with their words and their rhetoric and their speeches. But the law remains much more draconian than

the British. This is worse than the British," he concluded.

**'CHANGES THAT ARE POSITIVE'**

While Colin Gonsalves raised strong objections to the three bills, former ASG Aman Lekhi said there are some "positive" changes brought about in the bills. He said this in the context of punishment for private offences. "Particularly in the aspect of the punishment and dealing with those private offences is concerned, there are certain changes which are positive," he said, adding that in the context of a polity, the expansive and wide-ranging consequences

of the law cannot be unreasonably enlarged. He also pointed to some flaws in the bills. He also said that the address of Home Minister Amit Shah is "high on rhetoric and appeals to emotion". He said that the distinction made by Amit Shah between Deshdroh and Rajdroh is "misconceived".

"In law, there is a distinction between treason and sedition. As far as Deshdroh is concerned, that is treason, that is war against the state. Treason remains on the statute book. It was there under the old code. It remains under the new code," Lekhi said.

**BILLS PASSED IN LOK SABHA**

The three contentious bills were passed by the Lower House on Wednesday in the absence of 97 MPs, who were suspended this week.

Introducing the Bills in Lok Sabha, Union Home Minister Amit Shah said the existing criminal laws were reflective of the colonial mindset to punish and not impart justice. "The motive of the Indian Penal Code was to give punishment, not justice; in place of that Bharatiya Nyaya (Second) Sanhita, 2023 will come into effect in the country after the passage from the House," Amit Shah said.

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**The decorations at Rampath, Bhakti Path and Sugriva Fort are in the final stages. The walls are decorated with terracotta and fine clay mural artefacts.**

## ***Ayodhya's Ram temple inauguration prep in final stage, new railway station ready***

The preparations for the inauguration of the Ram Temple and the consecration ceremony on January 22 are in full swing and have entered their final stages. Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath will be among a few dignitaries who will attend the ceremony. The decorations at Rampath, Bhakti Path and Sugriva Fort are in the final stages. The walls are decorated with terracotta and fine clay mural artefacts.

EMBELLISHMENTS  
According to the district administration, walls on the sides of Dharma Path will have murals depicting incidents from

Ramayana. The walls will be adorned with artefacts reminiscent of Tretayuga.

Painting, cleaning and artwork is visible everywhere in the temple premises ahead of the grand inauguration ceremony on January 22. The 13-kilometre-long road leading to Sahadatganj, named Rampath, is now 40 feet wide. The establishments, buildings and shops on both sides of the road are painted.

The main entrance of Ram temple will be called 'Shri Ram Janmabhoomi Path'. Lighting and canopy work is underway on the 90 feet wide road.

According to the district administration, beautification work is also underway at

the Ramkatha Museum located at Nayaghat.

Ram Ki Pauri, which witnessed historical events, has been cleaned. The capacity of pumping stations has been increased. Every evening, Ram Katha is presented through laser show and 37 ancient temples in Ayodhya are also renovated. The construction work of a grand railway station in Ayodhya is also finished. PM Modi will inaugurate the station, which boasts modern architecture and all the facilities. There are plans to start trains from various parts to Ayodhya to this station.

Trains will start operating from January

19, before the inauguration ceremony. After the consecration of the idol of Lord Shri Ram, the temple will be open to the public from January 23.

Ayodhya will be connected to key cities, including Delhi, Mumbai, Chennai, Bengaluru, Pune, Kolkata, Nagpur, Lucknow and Jammu. The station has a food court, an air-conditioned waiting lounge, an escalator, a lift, and Wi-Fi. Besides, IRCTC will provide 24x7 catering service during the pilgrimage.

### **DEVOTEES ARRIVE IN AYODHYA**

Numerous devotees from Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, West Bengal and Bihar have arrived in Ayodhya to see the ongoing work on the Ram temple's complex. While discussing the security arrangements, Ayodhya IG Range Praveen Kumar said that soon a new security plan will be implemented for the Ram temple, under which no person will be able to venture near the temple without security checks.

Checking points will be made at various places. Apart from this, 2,500 CCTV cameras will be installed. In Ayodhya, drones will not be allowed to be flown without permission. Security arrangements will be made along the river bank.

## **Onion prices: No more tears for India, but other Asian countries feel the heat**

**Onion prices have dropped by over 50 per cent in the country after the recent export ban to tackle a sharp rise in rates, but the government's move has already led to a rise in rates across Asia.**

After the government banned exports of onion earlier this month, prices have decreased and are likely to remain stable with the arrival of the kharif onion crops, reported The Economic Times, quoting traders. The report also highlighted that the average wholesale price of onion at Lasalgaon AMPC stands at Rs 20-21 per kg, down from 39-40 per kg before the exports were banned. It may be noted that onion prices started falling immediately after the export ban was announced.

While the move has led to dissatisfaction among some farmers, it has provided much-needed relief to millions of households buying the kitchen staple at elevated rates. India's ban on onion exports did not come without repercussions. The move has driven up



the prices of onions in other Asian countries, which are now on the lookout for cheaper options.

A Reuters report indicates that the Indian government is unlikely to lift the export ban before the general elections next year.

The report went on to indicate that retail consumers from Kathmandu to Colombo

are grappling with soaring onion prices as traditional Asian buyers, including Bangladesh, Malaysia, Nepal, and even the United Arab Emirates, heavily reliant on Indian imports, struggle with domestic shortages. According to traders quoted in the Reuters report, Asian countries depend on India for over 50 per cent of their onion imports, valuing its

quicker shipping times compared to competitors like China or Egypt for preserving the perishable commodity's taste.

In the fiscal year concluding on March 31, India set a record by exporting 2.5 million metric tons of onions, with its largest buyer, neighbouring Bangladesh, importing 671,125 tons of the vegetable. Importing nations are grappling with pricier onion supplies from China, Iran, Pakistan, and Turkey, all of which increased prices in the absence of Indian exports, as highlighted by Ajit Shah, an Indian exporter, in the news agency's report.

If India's export ban persists, these alternative sources could face shortages, warned an exporter based in Mumbai, the financial hub.



# Will alleged Pannun murder plot strain India-US ties?

**PM Modi responded to the US's claims of an Indian national being involved in the alleged plot to kill Khalistani terrorist Gurpatwant Singh Pannun. He also said ties between India and the US would not be derailed by "few incidents".**

India has always shown deep concern over the activities of certain extremist groups based overseas. Prime Minister Narendra Modi also showed deep concern about the activities of extremist groups overseas, saying they were engaged in intimidation and incited violence "under the guise of freedom of expression".

His remarks came during a response to the US's claims of an Indian national's alleged role in a plot to kill Khalistani terrorist Gurpatwant Singh Pannun. PM Modi said the government would "look into" any evidence, adding that such a challenge would not strain the ties between India and the US.

Author Seema Sirohi, former top diplomat Ambassador Veena Sikri and Senior fellow at the Observer Research Foundation Sushant Sareen spoke to India Today TV on PM Modi's remarks and gave their views on how the alleged plot to murder to

Pannun would impact India-US ties. Speaking about PM Modi's remarks on the matter, author Seema Sirohi said, "The US-India relationship is now mature enough to withstand a challenge like this. The US indictment in the New York District Court is a serious problem, but what's important is how both sides have dealt with it." Is India pushing back against West's double standards? Does the Pannu episode have the potential to adversely impact India-US relations? @seemasirohi, @sushantsareen & Veena Sikri discuss it on #IndiaFirst with @Gaurav pic.twitter.com/egwP6O2AOc — IndiaToday (@IndiaToday) December 20, 2023 She also said there is a stark difference between how India handled the claims made by the US and by Canada. She was referring to Canada's allegations of the "potential" involvement of Indian agents in the killing of Khalistani separatist Hardeep Singh Nijjar.

"It is one thing to level this kind of accusation against India in a country that is known to harbour terrorists, that is, Pakistan or some other place, but to have an accusation like this in a friendly country with which India is trying very hard to develop relations, which is a hugely important strategic partner, is another ballgame altogether," she said.

Sushant Sareen, on the other hand said that PM Modi gave out a polite message, but also indicated that India and the US do not have to agree on everything.

"In his own way, the Prime Minister has been very polite and very firm. He has indicated that this issue does not have the capacity to derail the India-US relationship, it is far wider and broader than just simply this particular issue. However, he has also flagged certain other things as far as India is concerned, the fact that we don't have to agree on everything just because we are partners. We will follow our course

where it suits us just as the Americans would do," Sareen said. He also said that PM Modi has indicated that any problem between India and the US would be solved, but not necessarily the "American" way. Veena Sikri also appreciated PM Modi's remarks and called them "well-rounded and balanced". She also said that security and counterterrorism are issues of top priority for India and the US.

"There is a bipartisan support for developing the India-US partnership and we will go ahead and do that. However, we have to take on board the American concerns," she said.

The author also lauded India's initiative to form an enquiry committee to probe the allegations of a plot to assassinate Pannun. India formed a special enquiry committee after the US intensified its legal actions against Indian national Nikhil Gupta for allegedly conspiring to assassinate Pannun.

## How Red Sea blockade impacts global trade as Gaza war spills over

The Israel-Hamas war has escalated into a regional conflict, with pro-Palestinian Yemeni rebels attacking commercial vessels in the critical Suez Canal corridor in the Red Sea, prompting the formation of a US-led security coalition aimed at ensuring safety.

Yemen's Iran-backed Houthi rebels say they were targeting ships heading to or returning from Israel in a bid to force Tel Aviv to suspend its invasion of the Gaza Strip, which has so far killed nearly 20,000 Palestinians following Hamas' October 7 attack on southern Israel. However, owners of many ships claimed their voyages had no links with Israel. International trade under attack

The militants, who control a sizeable territory of Yemen including the capital Sanaa, are using missiles and one-way attack drones or suicide drones to attack their targets. They have targeted at least 8 commercial ships since they



announced support for Hamas – the first victim being the Liberian-flagged cargo ship Galaxy Leader on November 19. The attacks increased dramatically in the last few days as Israel ignored calls for

a ceasefire in the face of a deepening humanitarian crisis in Gaza.

On December 11, a Norwegian-flagged commercial tanker, the Strinda, was targeted by an anti-ship cruise missile

launched from controlled territory in Yemen when it was passing through the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait, which separates the Red Sea from the Gulf of Aden. On December 15, the Houthis fired missiles at two commercial ships and dropped unidentified explosive objects on a cargo vessel.

Three days later, their naval drones attacked the MSC Clara and Swan Atlantic – the latter carrying Indian crews – when they transited the southern Red Sea off the Yemeni coast.

On December 17, US and UK warships shot down 14 drones in the Red Sea.

The attacks have instilled a sense of fear among seafarers. After the December 18 attacks, many ships broadcasted messages declaring they had armed guards onboard as they passed near the coast of Yemen.

On ship tracker Marine Traffic, many ships were seen flashing "ARMED GUARDS" as their destination.



## The Military Geography of Ancient and Medieval India: The Dakshinapatha Saga

By: Sandeep Balakrishna

The southern limit of Aryavarta (or more broadly, the Uttarapatha) is the Vindhya mountain range. The Vindhya (literally meaning, “to obstruct”), like its more imposing and majestic brother-rival Himalaya, has a paramount salience in the annals of Hindu sacred literature. Vindhya is also known as Vindhyaachala, where achala means mountain. The Mahabharata calls it the Vindhyaparvata. The Kaushitaki Upanishad calls it the Dakshinaparvata. Ptolemy, the Greek geographer, called it Vindius or Ouindion.

In our sacred annals, the Vindhya, like the Himalayas, is also a stern but highly accommodative mountainous monarch who places his lofty pedestal obediently at the feet of Devas and Rishis. If Himalaya gave his daughter Parvati—daughter of Parvata or mountain—in marriage to Shiva, Vindhya humbly agreed to dwarf his growth at the command of the Rishi Agastya.

The “modern” Hindu mind unthinkingly discards an ocean of values embedded in such Pauranic stories based on undefined notions of “realism.” One such value—on the “practical” and “realistic” plane—is the fact that for more than a millennium, these tales constituted an entire education that taught the nuances of our geography down to the last unlettered man without the boredom induced by modern geography lessons taught in classrooms. And our people gladly

learnt it without formal education. The medium was the story. The language have occurred more rapidly after independence.



was sanctity. Indeed, the reverence ascribed to our geography was what preserved their beauty and prevented their destruction and transmitted our literature and culture throughout this vast country. Unfortunately, Western scholars of Indology have grasped this fundamental point, which we have forgotten. There’s a reason that Harvard academic Diana Eck titled her book as India: A Sacred Geography, the emphasis is on the word “sacred”. Our cultural amnesia is a big factor for the casual pillage and despoilation of our rivers and mountains and forests that

While the Great Plain of North India is continuously hydrated by a complex web of rivers, the expansive region to the south of the Vindhya is walled by a chain of intimidating mountain ranges and harsh passes and treacherous ravines and arid plateaus and deceptive rivers.

This broad layout of Dakshinapatha (or simply, Dakshina), the original word for “Deccan,” has a continuously recorded history dating back to the third century BCE. To cite a random example, the hoard of Mauryan inscriptions and Ashoka’s edicts especially in and

around the Brahmagiri region near Chitradurga, and near Shravanabelagola reveal an unbroken civilisational and Dharmic continuity. The long-term dangers to the civilisational integrity of Bharatavarsha inherent in the cynical and fraudulent narrative of an alleged north vs south divide will become evident when we study these primary sources. Muslim chronicles pronounce Dakshinapatha as Dakhin and Dakkhan. The word Deccan is the anglicised form of this Islamic linguistic corruption. And finally, we notice the elongated natural fortress of the Western Ghats lying parallel to the Arabian Sea. It safeguards the entire plateaued region of Maharashtra and Karnataka while the Eastern Ghats running parallel to the East Coast affords a similar protection to the Telangana Plateau.

This complex and mind-bending geography of Dakshinapatha is further complicated when we survey its zigzagged riverine networks. All three major rivers, Godavari, Krishna and Kaveri originate as streams in the Western Ghats. As they stretch and sprawl all over, they collect rain from the bordering hills before branching out into scores of diverse-sized tributaries, finally emptying into the Bay of Bengal. From one perspective, the civilisational history of Dakshinapatha is also the history of its riverine cities. Likewise, the mercantile routes that led to and continued in South India from time immemorial followed the course of its rivers.

From a historical standpoint, Jadunath Sarkar again paints a captivating panorama of Dakshinapatha: “Thus Nature has cut the Deccan up into many small isolated compartments, each with poor resources and difficulty of communication with its neighbours... long parallel mountain chains... run west to east, cutting the country up into isolated districts...”

Despite this sort of nature-imposed obstacles, Dakshinapatha was the birthplace of several glorious pan-Indian Hindu Empires. Beginning with the early medieval age, Karnataka alone supplied three pan-Indian empires—Chalukya, Rashtrakuta and Kalyana Chalukya—while Tamil Nadu birthed the grand Chola Empire which stretched its influence all the way up to South-East Asia. The combined timeline of all Hindu Empires that arose and ruled from Dakshinapatha is roughly around 1,500 years. This overall picture of Bharatavarsha’s geography comes alive in a brilliant and often brutal fashion when we regard it as a great military theatre placed on the canvas of time. In a limited sense, in some of its particulars, it has all the dimensions of a cosmic play that Bharatavarsha was both fortunate and ill-fated to participate in.

We will explore this theme in the next episode of this series.