

# The South Asian INSIDER

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\$1

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The Big Fat  
Indian Wedding



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## Biz2Credit agrees to settle the FTC's charges, and pay \$33 million



FTC Actions Against Companies Making Deceptive Pandemic Loan Promises Lead to Record \$59 Million in Damages. Cases against Biz2Credit and Womply charge companies with falsely promising fast processing of PPP loan applications.

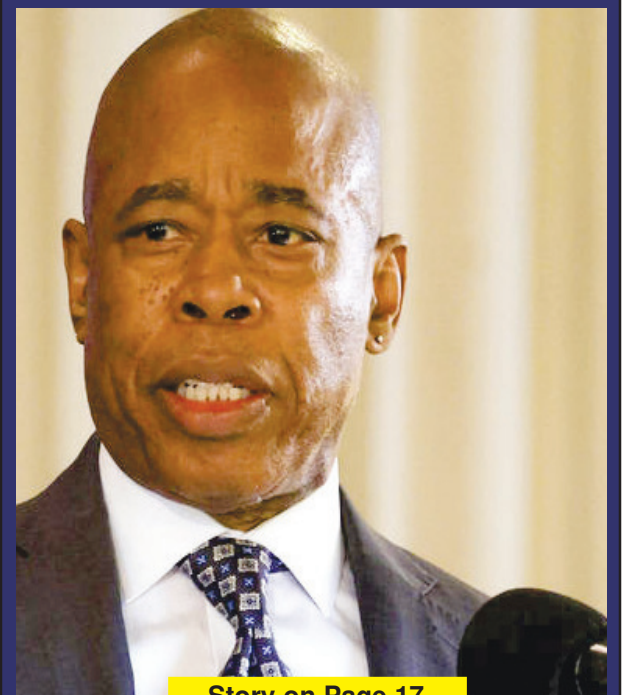
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Protecting  
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## Insurance

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# Gobind Munjal, sworn-in National President for the 2nd term

*The Association of Indians In America held impressive Inauguration ceremony, of its newly elected National Executive Committee*



(By Our Staff Reporter)- Gobind Munjal, the National President of The Association of Indians in America (AIA), was sworn-in once again for the 2nd term 2024 & 2025 along with his National Executive Committee in an exciting Inauguration ceremony arranged at Metropolitan Caterers in Glen Cove, Long Island on Saturday March 16th, 2024. Since AIA is a national organization, its out of State Members attended the ceremony via zoom.

The Association of Indians in America (AIA) is the oldest not-for-profit organization of Asian Indians in America founded on August 20, 1967. It is the grassroots national organization of Asian immigrants in United States. With chapters and membership spread across the United States of America, AIA represents the hopes and aspirations of those immigrants who are united by their common bond of Indian Heritage and American Commitment.

The occasion was graced by the chief guest Honorable Consul General Binaya S. Pradhan. The Inauguration and Oath ceremony

was attended by about one hundred attendees. This included AIA founding members, board of Trustees, AIA National Past Presidents, chapter Presidents, community leaders, AIA members, friends, and the media partners.

Chief Guest Hon. Consul General of India in New York, Binaya S. Pradhan, in his opening



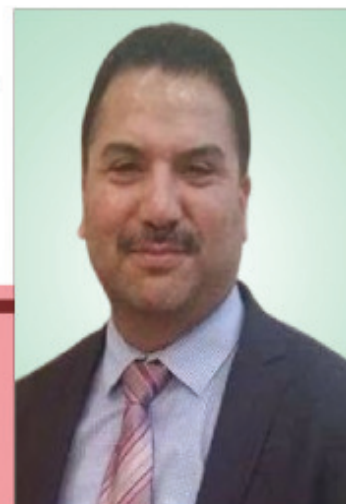
Remarks, praised AIA for all that it has done for the community during its 56 years of history and commended the organization for its various achievements. He also suggested that if AIA could work on supporting the students coming from India to study here in the United States to get them internships and/or jobs, that will be very helpful. Consul General however pledged to work with AIA for outreach to the community.

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# Working with India to hold those behind Pannun murder plot accountable: US

(Sai Bureau)-The United States has said it is working with the government of India to hold accountable those behind a plot to kill Khalistani terrorist Gurbatwant Singh Pannun on American soil, news agency PTI quoted the Joe Biden administration as saying.

The development comes as Nikhil Gupta, an Indian national, was charged by federal prosecutors in November last year, in connection with his involvement in a foiled plot to assassinate Pannun. Recently, a Bloomberg report suggested the involvement by "rogue operatives" rather than sanctioned government action. Recently, a Bloomberg report suggested the involvement by "rogue operatives" rather than sanctioned government action. "This is a serious issue, a serious issue between the United States and India. The Department of Justice has alleged that an Indian citizen at the



behest of someone working in the Indian government has attempted to kill an American citizen on American soil. We take this in the administration incredibly seriously and have raised it at the highest levels with India," Lu had said.

"We are at the moment working with India

to encourage India to hold accountable those responsible for this terrible crime. What we can see is that India itself has announced that they have created a committee of inquiry to look into this matter and we ask them to work quickly and transparently to make sure justice

is done," he added.

Lu's remarks came while he was responding to a question from Congressman Dean Phillips from Minnesota, who asked if sanctions similar to those placed on more than 500 individuals relating to the killing of Lexie Navalny in Russia are being considered for those believed to be behind the plot to kill Pannun.

In February this year, the US State Department told lawmakers that the allegations of India's involvement in the assassination attempts "are very concerning".

Meanwhile, India has described as a "matter of concern" the US linking an Indian official to a man charged with conspiring to kill a Sikh separatist on American soil, and asserted that follow-up action will be taken based on the findings of a panel investigating the allegations.

## 'Working with authorities in US': Indian Consulate on missing Hyderabad student

(Sai Bureau)-The Consulate General of India in New York is working with authorities in the US and local law enforcement agencies to find 25-year-old Mohammad Abdul Arfath, who has been missing for two weeks.

"We are working with local law enforcement agencies to find him at the earliest," the Indian Consulate tweeted on Thursday.

Mohammad Abdul, who is pursuing a Master's degree in Information Technology at Cleveland



University, was last seen on March 7. His father, Mohammad Saleem, said that he last spoke to his son on the same day, and since then, the 25-year-old student has not been in touch with his family and his mobile is switched off. On March 19, Saleem reported receiving a call from an unidentified person, claiming to be part of a gang. The person said

that Mohammad Abdul had been allegedly kidnapped by the gang selling drugs and demanded a ransom of \$1,200 to release him.

The caller also threatened to sell Mohammad Abdul's kidneys if the ransom was not paid, his father said.

Mohammad Abdul's relatives in the US filed a missing persons report with the Cleveland Police on March 8. A lookout notice has been issued for the Hyderabad

student. Hailing from Nacharam in Hyderabad, Mohammad Abdul arrived in the US in May last year to pursue higher education. Speaking to India Today TV, Mohammad Abdul's mother Abeda said she last talked to her son on March 7. She also appealed to the central government to intervene in the matter and ensure her son's safe return.

## Glitch forces H-1B visa registration deadline to be extended by 3 days

(Sai Bureau)-The United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) extended by three days the initial registration period for H-1B visas for fiscal year 2025. This came after a technical glitch prevented users from completing their H-1B application process.

"Currently, some users are not able to complete the H-1B registration process. We apologise for any inconvenience & are working to fix the issue. We will extend

the registration deadline. Stay tuned for more details," the USCIS had said earlier. Reports said that signatures went missing on Form G-28 for H-1B registrations. Form G-28 allows applicants to designate an attorney or accredited representative to handle their immigration-related applications and appeals.



The registration period for the H-1B visa process was set to close on March 22, 2024, but will now remain open until noon Eastern on March 25, 2024.

During this extended period, prospective petitioners and their representatives utilise a USCIS online account to electronically register each beneficiary for the selection

process and pay the associated registration fee.

The USCIS still intends to notify selected registrants by March 31, 2024.

The USCIS introduced new myUSCIS organisational accounts on February 28, 2024. These accounts allow multiple individuals within an organisation, along with their legal representatives, to collaborate on and prepare H-1B registrations, petitions, and associated Form I-907 for Premium Processing Service.

# Australia tightens student visa rules as migration reaches new peak

(Sai Bureau)Australia is tightening the student visa process to reduce the overall inflow of migrants. The stricter rules come as official data reveals record-high migration, putting a strain on the housing market. Australia saw a record number of migrants in 2023, and the inflow was driven by students from India, China and the Philippines.

Australia wants to ensure international students come to the country for genuine studies, not just work.

They'll achieve this by introducing a "genuine student test" and limiting work options for some visitors with "no further

stay" conditions on their visas.

Starting this Saturday, Australia will raise the English language proficiency needed for student and graduate visas.

Additionally, the government will have the authority to suspend education providers who

consistently violate visa regulations when recruiting international students.

"The actions this weekend will continue to drive migration levels down while delivering on our commitments in the migration



strategy to fix the broken system we inherited," Home Affairs Minister Clare O'Neil said in a statement.

These measures follow previous actions to reverse relaxed Covid-era visa rules.

This includes removing unrestricted working hours for international students. The government estimates these changes could halve the migrant intake over two years. Australia previously boosted migration to address worker shortages after the pandemic because strict border

controls kept foreign students and workers out for almost two years. The allure of the US and the UK for Indian students has been undeniable. They offer an irresistible chance to study in premier institutions, engage in industry-driven research, and offer post-study work opportunities.

However, the sudden influx of foreign workers and students has put pressure on a tight rental market in Australia.

**RECORD MIGRATION NUMBERS**

Data released by the Australian Bureau of Statistics on Thursday shows net immigration surged 60% to a record 548,800 in the year to September 2023.

# Hopes run high for BJP in UP's first phase of polls

(News Agency)- Hopes run high for the BJP in the first phase of elections in Uttar Pradesh. With Rashtriya Lok Dal as its ally, the BJP is confident of winning all seats here.

"The BJP-RLD combine will sweep in the first phase. The public mood is in our favour and so are the electoral combinations," said the party functionary.

In 2019 elections, SP-BSP combine had won five seats — Saharanpur, Bijnor, Nagina went to the BSP, and Moradabad and Rampur to the Samajwadi Party (SP).

This time BJP has given Bijnor to ally Rashtriya Lok Dal but is treading cautiously in other three constituencies. RLD has fielded its Meerapur MLA Chandan Chauhan, a Gurjar, against SP candidate Yashveer Singh, a Dalit in Bijnor. The BSP has fielded Bijendra Singh, a Jat, who left RLD to join Mayawati's party. In Rampur, BJP has fielded Ghanshyam Lodhi who had defeated SP's Asim Raja in 2022 bypoll when the seat fell vacant after the disqualification of SP leader Azam Khan who



was convicted in a criminal case. SP, which has tied-up with Congress, is yet to name its candidate for Rampur but the Azam Khan factor will continue to play a role even though his entire family is missing from the elections this time.

The BJP is trying to wrest back Saharanpur where BSP's Haji Fazlur Rehman had defeated its candidate Raghav Lakhan Pal by 24,000 votes in 2019.

In Moradabad, which was won by SP's S.T. Hasan in 2019, is also on BJP's bucket list this time. However, both BJP and SP-Congress combine, are yet

to name the candidates for these two seats.

Kairana is also a keenly watched seat which hit headlines ahead of 2017 UP elections amid reports of exodus by Hindu families. BJP has repeated sitting MP Pradeep Chaudhary, a Gurjar, against SP's Iqra Hasan, sister of SP's Kairana MLA Nahid Hasan. A postgraduate in international law from the school of Oriental and African Studies, London University, Iqra had campaigned extensively for Nahid during the 2022 Assembly polls. Incidentally, it was the

tussle over for MLA Om Kumar, a Jatav, Kairana that instead of Yashwant Singh. He made RLD sever its ties with SP is up against SP's Manoj Kumar. BSP has yet to announce its candidate. Akhilesh Yadav Speculation is rife that Dalit leader and Azad Samaj Party chief Chandrashekhar Azad will also throw his hat in the ring from Nagina and if he does, it will make the contest increasingly interesting. The focus, however, in the first phase, is on the Pilibhit seat because the BJP is yet to decide on fielding its sitting MP Varun Gandhi who has been openly critical of his own party since the farmers' protest against agricultural laws in 2021. The Samajwadi Party has already said that it is 'open' to the idea of fielding Varun Gandhi in Pilibhit if he does not go with BJP. His mother Maneka Gandhi, MP from Sultanpur, too has been keeping a low profile in the party, after the BJP dropped the mother-son from the national executive committee in 2021. Whether or not the BJP names Varun Gandhi as its candidate, there is little doubt that the contest in Pilibhit will remain in public focus.

## Bengal Guv seeks report on Trinamool-BJP clash at Dinhata

(News Agency)-West Bengal Governor C.V. Ananda Bose, on Wednesday, sought a detailed report from the state government on the clashes between the BJP and Trinamool Congress supporters at Dinhata in Cooch Behar district. The clashes took place on Tuesday night. Sources from the Raj Bhavan here said that the matter was being viewed very seriously by the Governor considering that the Union



minister of state for home affairs and the local BJP Lok Sabha member Nisith Pramanik and the West Bengal Minister for north development and local Trinamool Congress MLA Udayan Guha were seen dashing towards each other in the midst of the clashes.

The Governor, Raj Bhavan

insiders said, has sought the report directly from the newly appointed Director General of Police, Sanjoy Mukherjee. He

has also sought a report on the medical conditions of Dhiman Mitra, the local sub-divisional police officer who sustained injuries while making an attempt to stop the clashes. Sources said the Governor's seeking report in the manner is an indication on how serious he is about his claims to be vigilant

this time to ensure peaceful polls in the ensuing Lok Sabha polls.

The Governor has already announced the opening of a portal at Raj Bhavan to address the grievances of the common people. He also said that he will be on the streets from 6 a.m. from the first day of the polls.

"Under any circumstance the voting should be conducted in a festive mood. The higher administrative and police functionaries have been directed to percolate the message to all levels of their subordinates so that all necessary steps are being taken to ensure violence-free polls. If the state administration and police fail to do that, we will make them do it," he said recently.

## Northern Railways slash fare in Kashmir Valley by 50 pc



(News Agency)-As a major relief to commuters, Northern Railways on Wednesday decided to reduce the train fare in the Kashmir Valley.

"Railways have reinstated second class ordinary fare on passenger trains in the Valley," the officials said.

The charges have dropped from 40 to 50 per cent. Before the relief, the fare was Rs 35 from Sadura station (Anantnag district) to Srinagar. It has now come down to Rs 15.

"This relief is applicable across the Valley in Kashmir and travelling by train has become highly affordable and cheap after the relief," officials said. The rail services are presently operating from Baramulla town in the north of the Valley to Sangaldan in Ramban district of the Jammu division. By the end of April, rail service will be operational from Udhampur to Baramulla thereby connecting the Valley with the rest of the country through railway services.

# Cheating in govt exam: Delhi HC denies bail citing grave implications of dishonest practices

(News Agency)-The Delhi High Court recently took a strong stance against cheating in government examinations, citing the grave implications such dishonest practices have on society and the integrity of the public service selection process. Justice Swarana Kanta Sharma stressed on the far-reaching consequences of such acts, noting that they not only compromise the merit-based selection essential for effective governance but also erode public trust in the examination system.

"... cheating during exams not only undermines the merit-based selection process but also erodes public trust in the fair and transparent examination system," she said.

"...cheating in government exams can have far-reaching consequences for society as



a whole. It can lead to the recruitment of incompetent or unqualified individuals in key government positions, which can have detrimental effects on public service delivery, governance, and overall development," the court said.

The court's observations came while denying bail to a bus driver implicated in a scheme to leak

government job examination question papers in Haryana.

The accused argued his innocence, claiming his involvement was limited to transporting students for mock tests. However, the prosecution presented evidence arguing his deeper involvement, including the recovery of documents and mobile phones used to facilitate

the cheating scheme. Justice Sharma stressed the importance of upholding meritocracy and equal opportunity principles, stating that cheating undermines these values by favouring those willing to engage in fraudulent activities over hardworking, deserving candidates.

"It perpetuates inequalities by favoring those who can afford to pay for leaked exam papers or engage in fraudulent activities, while disadvantaging those who rely on their hard work and merit to succeed," the court said.

This not only perpetuates inequality but also risks placing incompetent individuals in critical government roles, affecting public service delivery and governance.

The court pointed out the serious nature of the allegations, including the

recovery of incriminating materials such as mobile phones, blank cheques, and admit cards from the accused. Given these circumstances, and the ongoing investigation to uncover the full extent of the cheating operation, the court deemed it inappropriate to grant bail at this stage.

"The acts of cheating in examinations thus must be dealt with a stern hand, as their effects are not limited to an individual but impact society as a whole," the judge said.

She added: "...the allegations against the accused persons are serious in nature since they have made the prospective candidates believe that they have the leaked question papers for the examination they are sitting for and have sold them the same on payment of lakhs of rupees."

## SP, Cong set up 10-member coordination panel in UP



(News Agency)-A ten-member coordination committee, comprising five members each from Samajwadi party and the Congress, has been set up to improve coordination between the two parties. A senior Congress leader said, "The coordination will start from the state level and extend up to the booth level. There will be a coordination committee each at the district level and also at each of the 80 Lok Sabha constituencies in the state. The district and the LS constituencies committee will have a leader each from both the parties."

"Apart from this, both the parties will depute two members at each other's war rooms at their respective state headquarters",

said C.P. Rai, a UP Congress spokesperson.

This comes a week after Samajwadi Party (SP) chief Akhilesh Yadav and Congress UP in-charge Avinash Pande started a process for state level coordination between the two parties for the Lok Sabha polls 2024.

"Unlike the previous alliance, this time, the coordination will be formal, well-organised and right up to the booth-level for transfer of each others' votes to the respective candidates on each of the 80 constituencies," said an SP leader. There will also be coordination committees for social media, other media and campaigns.

(News Agency)-The ruling DMK on Wednesday announced the list of its candidates for the Lok Sabha polls. The DMK is heading the INDIA bloc in Tamil Nadu. Of the 39 seats in the state, 38 seats were won by the DMK-led Secular Progressive Alliance (SPA) in 2019.

Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M.K. Stalin, who is the president of the DMK, has called upon the cadre to work hard for winning all the seats in the state.

The DMK is contesting in 21 seats while allotting nine seats to the Congress and two seats each to VCK, CPI(M), CPI and one each to MDMK, IUML and KMDK.

DMK has taken Arani, Tiruchi and Theni seats from the Congress after exchanging Cuddalore, Tirunelveli and Mayiladuthurai seats.

The party will also contest Coimbatore where the sitting MP is from the CPI(M) after exchanging it with Dindigul seat. The candidates are: Thoothukudi – Kanimozhi; Tenkasi – Dr. Rani Sreekumar; North Chennai – Dr. Kalanithi Veerasamy; South Chennai –

## DMK announces list of candidates for LS elections



Tamilachi Thangapandian; Central chennai- Dayanidhi Maran; Sriperumbudur- Dr. T.R. Baalu; Kancheepuram – G. Selvam; Arakkonam – S. Jagathratchagan; Thiruvannamalai- C.N. Annadurai; Dharmapuri – A. Mani; Arani – Dharanivendhan; Vellore – Kathir

Anand; Kallakurichi – Malayarasan; Salem – Selvaganapathy; Coimbatore – Ganapathi Rajkumar; Perambalur – Arun Nehru; Nilgiris – A. Raja; Pollachi – Iswarasamy; Thanjavur – Murasoli; Erode – Prakash; and Theni – Thanga Tamilselvan .

## Bengal: One more arrested in Garden Reach building collapse case

(News Agency)-Kolkata Police have arrested another accused on Wednesday in the collapse of a five-storey under-construction building at Garden Reach area in the southern outskirts of Kolkata.

The accused has been identified as Sarafraz Malik a.k.a. Pappu, the owner of the land on which

the building was being constructed.

Earlier, the cops arrested the promoter of the building Md Wasim, who is currently serving 14-day police custody.

He will be presented at the lower court in Kolkata on Wednesday only and the public prosecutor will seek his police custody.

# Fight between Congress' two-time MP and CPI(M)'s film star MLA in Kerala's Kollam

(News Agency)-The Kollam Lok Sabha seat in Kerala will see a fight between two-time sitting MP, who is aiming for a hat-trick and film star-turned-politician Mukesh. Mukesh is a two-time CPI(M) legislator and has acted in many Malayalam films.

The sitting MP, N.K. Premachandran belongs to the Revolutionary Socialist Party and is considered to be an archrival of Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan after he switched from Left to the Congress-led UDF. Premachandran was one of the most popular State Ministers in

the cabinet of CPI(M) leader V.S. Achuthanandan (2006-11), but soon after the Oommen Chandy-led Congress government took over in 2011, a big section of the RSP, including Premachandran, joined as an ally of the Congress which irked CM Vijayan and other CPI(M) leaders.

Premachandran was also a member of the Lok Sabha from Kollam in 1996 and 1998, then as an ally of the Left. In 2014 he was fielded by the Congress from Kollam, and CPI(M) had one of its then stalwarts, state Minister and



present politburo member M.A. Baby. The former won with a margin of over 37,000 votes. In 2019 again CM Vijayan and his close aides tried their best to prevent Premachandran from winning and brought in the then young turk and present State

Finance Minister K.N. Balagopal. But Premachandran again won with a margin of over 1.48 lakh votes.

Now for the third time CM Vijayan and his team will try to defeat him. This time the Left has brought film actor-turned-politician and two-time legislator representing the Kollam Assembly constituency, Mukesh to stop Premachandran from winning again.

Incidentally, the BJP, which is yet to announce their candidate, is eyeing TV star Krishnakumar to add glamour to the Kollam

contest.

The BJP candidate at the 2019 polls managed around 1.03 lakh votes. Hence this time too the main battle is going to be between Premachandran and Mukesh.

Premachandran, through his soft and polite behavior, is a popular MP for the Congress-led opposition. Tongues, however, began to wag, when he was asked to join lunch which was hosted by Prime Minister Narendra Modi along with another eight MPs during the last session of Parliament.

## Jharkhand Guv Radhakrishnan takes oath as Telangana Governor



(News Agency)-Jharkhand Governor C. P. Radhakrishnan took oath as the Governor of Telangana on Wednesday. Chief justice of Telangana High Court Alok Aradhe administered the oath of office to Radhakrishnan at a ceremony held at Raj Bhavan.

Chief Minister A. Revanth Reddy, his Cabinet colleagues and senior officials were present.

Chief Secretary Santhi Kumari read out the warrant of appointment issued by the President of India, appointing Jharkhand Governor to discharge functions of Governor of

Telangana and Lieutenant Governor of Puducherry in addition to his own duties. The Chief Justice handed over the warrant of appointment to the Governor.

Radhakrishnan was given additional charge of Telangana and Puducherry after the resignation of Tamilisai Soundararajan, who plans to contest the Lok Sabha elections in Tamil Nadu. Radhakrishnan is the third Governor of Telangana. A two-time member of parliament from Coimbatore as a BJP candidate, he assumed office of the governor of Jharkhand last year. Interestingly, all three governors of Telangana since the state's formation in 2014 are from Tamil Nadu. ESL Narasimhan and Tamilisai Soundararajan were also from Tamil Nadu.

## Income Tax officials raid residence of Bengal minister's brother

(News Agency)-The Income Tax Department has been conducting massive raids at the residence of Swarup Biswas, the younger brother of West Bengal Power and Housing Minister, Aroop Biswas, since Wednesday

mainly concentrated in South Kolkata.

The officials are tight-lipped about the exact reasons behind their raids at Biswas' residence and at the offices of two real estate development entities Eden Real Estate and Multicon Real Estate.

Sources said that there are complaints of fund defalcation against both these entities but there is no indication from the Income Tax officials if



morning. A team of Income Tax sleuths, escorted by Central Armed Police Force (CAPF) personnel, reached the residence of Swarup Biswas at New Alipore in South Kolkata.

Sources said that besides the residence, raids were also being conducted by the Income Tax department at four other places,

Biswas has any connection with them. As the brother of a minister, Biswas has immense influence on the Bengali film industry operating out of Tollygunge in South Kolkata where Aroop Biswas is the Trinamool legislator.

He also heads an association of technicians from the Bengali film industry.

## LS elections: Filing of nominations for 1st phase of polling begins today

(News Agency)-The nomination process for the first phase of the Lok Sabha elections scheduled on April 19 begins on Wednesday. In the first phase, polling will be held in 102 Lok Sabha seats spread over 17 states and four union territories. The last day of filing nomination for the first phase is March 27. The scrutiny of nomination papers will be done on March 28 and the last date for withdrawal of candidature is March 30. The counting of votes will take place on June 4, the Election Commission has said.

The first phase will be held in 39 seats

of Tamil Nadu, 12 seats of Rajasthan, eight seats of Uttar Pradesh, six seats of Madhya Pradesh, five seats each in Uttarakhand, Assam and Maharashtra, four seats of Bihar, three seats of West Bengal, two seats each in Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya and one seat each in Chhattisgarh, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim, Tripura, Andaman and Nicobar Islands, J&K, Lakshadweep and Puducherry. Eight parliamentary constituencies in Uttar Pradesh — Saharanpur, Kairana, Muzaffarnagar, Bijnor, Nagina (SC), Moradabad, Rampur and Pilibhit — will vote in the first phase.



# How States Can Keep Big Tech from Dominating AI

As policymakers in Washington and in states around the country navigate the challenges posed by artificial intelligence, they are quickly realizing that it is far from the competitive and dynamic industry its proponents have claimed. Instead, a key policy challenge they face is that the AI sector is already dominated by the biggest tech companies in the country.

In other words, AI isn't just a regulatory challenge because its applications are far-reaching, transformative and potentially dangerous. It's also because failures to take policy and regulatory actions now will mean allowing the platforms that already have a stranglehold over the tech sector to entrench their dominance in AI as well. AI applications like ChatGPT exist at the top of what is called the AI "tech stack" — think of it as the supply chain for AI. Under the application layer is the model layer, which includes foundation models that are trained on gigantic datasets at enormous cost (in ChatGPT's case, by OpenAI). These models only work because of extraordinary amounts of computing power, which are provided by cloud infrastructure services. In the cloud layer, three players are dominant — Amazon Web Services, Google Cloud Platform and Microsoft Azure (which has a major investment in OpenAI). Cloud infrastructure itself depends on highly advanced computer chips called semiconductors. In the chip layer, one company, NVIDIA, dominates the design of the most advanced semiconductors; one company, TSMC, manufactures them; and only one company, ASML, produces the machines needed for manufacturing.

In short, as you move down the AI tech stack — from apps, to models, to cloud, to chips — the marketplace gets more and more concentrated, ending up as a pure monopoly at the bottom. Importantly, the biggest tech companies — Amazon, Microsoft and Google — are already extraordinarily powerful at multiple layers up and down the stack, including through their own offerings or close partnerships for cloud, models and applications.

Such a highly concentrated private market carries serious risks, especially for innovation. Unregulated, the biggest tech companies can charge high prices or discriminate against rivals with prices and terms that favor their own products. What's more, private companies are also most likely to pursue new innovations that support their profits, even if they don't serve the public. These challenges mean that governments need to act. At the federal level, the Biden administration has already taken some steps to engage with the problems posed by

concentration in the AI stack, including by pushing agencies to promote competition in their procurement practices. Federal antitrust regulators also have authorities to address some anticompetitive mergers and conduct, and they even prevented "the largest semiconductor chip merger in history." But in the absence of new legislation offering a comprehensive regulatory framework and funding, the Biden administration is limited in what it can do. Congress could act, but given the upcoming election and the difficulties in passing legislation, it is unlikely we will see much progress this year. The states, therefore, have an opportunity to play a role in preventing monopolization in the AI sector. And California, the home of Silicon Valley, and New York, are already taking steps to lead the way in light of federal inaction.

California State Sen. Scott Wiener introduced a proposal in February that would help level the playing field for innovators by requiring cloud services and foundation models to provide equal access to users and charge non-discriminatory prices. This will ensure that entrepreneurs can compete fairly. No special deals or preferences, no picking winners and losers, no allowing the big tech companies to monopolize downstream markets.

The bill also proposes creating a kind of "public option" for cloud computing that the bill's author has named CalCompute. CalCompute would be an alternative to the cloud infrastructure services offered by the big three tech companies, run instead by a consortium of universities and research labs. For researchers, scientists and students this is especially important, as they likely can't pay high commercial prices and might want to focus on deploying AI for the public good, rather than making a profit. Eventually, if CalCompute has sufficient scale and funding, it could add a little competition to the cloud sector, too.

In New York, Gov. Kathy Hochul recently proposed Empire AI, which is another example of a public option for cloud computing. Empire AI would create an AI center in upstate New York operated by a consortium of the state's leading universities and a scientific foundation, and funded by a mix of state and philanthropic funding to the tune of \$400 million.

State-level actions are not perfect, of course, in part because a patchwork of regulation across the country is undesirable. California law, however, has an outsized impact on how tech companies operate since many of them are California-based; some even argue that Sacramento can wield a similar influence to Brussels, the power seat of the EU, when it comes to tech regulation.

By Ganesh Sitaraman and Natalie Foster

# The Gig Economy, turmoil driven by platforms like Uber

With the rise of the gig economy, the traditional model of employment, focussing on full-time, salaried positions with benefits, is facing a significant challenge. This new system rotates around short-term, project-based work. These are often supported by online platforms that join independent workers with customers. The ride-sharing giant companies like Uber are pioneers in this space. Their model is being simulated across various industries. These platforms use technology, mainly mobile apps, to join a freely available group of workers with customers seeking specific services. For instance, Uber connects riders with drivers, while DoorDash connects hungry customers with food couriers. This digital infrastructure permits a dynamic marketplace where supply and demand can vary in real-time.

Flexibility is the key attraction of the gig economy. Workers who choose their work hours and assignments, often referred to as "gig workers". Whether it's a driver logging onto the Uber app during peak traffic hours or a freelance writer accepting projects on Upwork, gig workers command their convenience. This flexibility caters to those seeking a work-life balance, students needing part-time income, or individuals with side shifts.

While flexibility is a major draw, the gig economy presents both benefits and challenges for workers. On the positive side, gig workers have a degree of control over their earnings potential. In some cases, like with delivery services, income is directly tied to the number of jobs completed. This can incentivize hard work and efficiency. Additionally, some platforms allow workers to set their own rates, offering a level of autonomy in determining

pay.

However, the gig economy often comes at the cost of job security and benefits. Gig workers are usually classified as independent contractors, and are not entitled to employee benefits. The responsibility for securing these benefits falls on the individual worker, which can be a significant financial burden. Furthermore, income in the gig economy can be irregular, and workers may face periods with low demand for their services. The rapid growth of the gig economy has ignited debates about worker rights. Concerns over low wages, lack of benefits, and potential exploitation have led to calls for greater regulatory oversight. Some countries have implemented measures to ensure gig workers are classified as employees and receive basic protections. The future of the gig economy remains uncertain, but its influence on the overall work landscape is undeniable.

While Uber has become synonymous with the gig economy, it's important to remember that this system includes a wide range of industries. The additional examples are like **Freelancing platforms**. Websites like Upwork and Fiverr connect businesses with freelance writers, designers, programmers, and other skilled professionals. **Task Rabbit** platform allows individuals to hire independent workers for odd jobs. **Micro tasking** platforms like Amazon Mechanical Turk offer small, bite-sized tasks that can be completed online for micro-payments. **The Sharing Economy** platforms like Airbnb and Turo facilitate peer-to-peer rentals for housing and vehicles, respectively.

By Susmita Ghosh



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# Why Is India's Lok Sabha Election Being Watched By The World?

Taking a short break from the election campaign on Wednesday, Prime Minister Narendra Modi spoke to the Presidents of Russia and Ukraine, Vladimir Putin and Volodymyr Zelenskyy, respectively. Although in his posts on X Modi stated that they discussed strengthening India's partnerships with the two countries, it was clear the calls were mainly aimed at assuring the two leaders that India remained committed to helping Moscow and Kyiv in finding a peaceful resolution to their conflict.

A week before that, Modi had sent his National Security Advisor, Ajit Doval, to Israel to convey to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu that he should not take India's support for granted and must not ignore the growing international outcry over the Israeli military's relentless campaign in Gaza, which has killed more than 32,000 people so far and created famine-like conditions.

## India As A Global Player

By addressing two major global conflicts even while being deeply engaged in a general election campaign at home,



Modi is signalling that he takes India's international responsibility seriously. More importantly, he is signalling that the world takes him seriously and that under his leadership, India is a significant global player.

India is the only major power that has maintained its neutrality since Russia's Ukraine invasion two years ago. But despite the country's close historic ties with Moscow, Modi told Putin firmly last September that it was not the time for war - a comment widely praised by Western powers. Israel also respects Modi's views as he was the first non-Western leader to condemn last September's Hamas attack as terrorism.

## Why India's Elections Are Unique

It is customary during general elections to treat incumbent global leaders as lame ducks. However, with Modi, it seems different. Several world leaders are expecting him to return to power after the polls close. The question is, if Modi is widely expected to win the election, why is this democratic exercise still attracting wide international interest? Firstly, India's huge size, complexity, and multi-party and multi-ethnic character make the general elections unique. How the Election Commission of India (ECI) has been able to successfully conduct election after election has been a mystery to many

international observers. Even Freedom House, a US human rights organisation whose recent annual report was condemned in India for calling the country "partly free", believes elections in India have been largely free and fair. The report also said, "The Election Commission is generally respected and has been thought to function without undue political interference."

But, it added, "In recent years, however, its impartiality and competence have been called into question. International observers will be closely watching if the Election Commission of India (ECI) is able to ensure free and fair polls this time." India has proudly remained a democracy since its independence in 1947 despite many challenges. It's not flawless, but governments at state and central levels are changed by ballots. It's the only non-Western democracy to achieve that repeatedly in all these years. Despite growing criticism, the Constitution in India is still widely respected and its provisions are fiercely guarded by an independent judiciary. But critics, both at

home and abroad, would like the BJP leadership to address perceptions of hate speech by its members, become more tolerant of dissent, and make the party an inclusive organisation. By denying Lok Sabha tickets to some of its controversial members like Pragya Thakur, Ramesh Bidhuri and Parvesh Varma, the BJP has indicated that it is sensitive to the issue of hate speech. But it's yet to be seen whether the party will make any efforts to become more representative of religious minorities.

## Modi's Popularity

The results of these elections may reveal if Modi is really as popular as the current opinion polls suggest. The approval ratings of the leaders of the US and the UK, two major democracies also going to polls this year, are polling at 40% and 25% respectively. In comparison, a February Ipsos IndiaBus survey showed Modi's approval rating has soared to 75%. Modi's popularity with the Indian diaspora has been carefully cultivated through the large meetings he addresses during his foreign trips.

# *The Gaza famine is human-made. And the US is complicit in this catastrophe*

By Mohamad Bazzi

The people of Gaza are enduring "catastrophic" levels of hunger, and famine is imminent in northern Gaza as Israel continues its devastating war and siege of the Palestinian territory. That stark warning came in a report on Monday from a global authority on food security which was set up 20 years ago by UN agencies and humanitarian groups to sound the alarm on famines.

While Israel bears much of the responsibility for this human-made famine, it's not alone. Joe Biden and his administration are also complicit in this unfolding catastrophe: the UN and international relief groups have been warning about the potential for widespread starvation in Gaza since December. The Biden administration could have acted then, pressuring Israel to allow more aid into the territory and enforcing an existing US law that bars weapons shipments to US



allies that obstruct humanitarian aid. Instead, the US president and his aides dithered, as they have done repeatedly since Israel launched its war against Gaza after the 7 October attacks on Israel by Hamas. And it's now too late to prevent a famine. As Martin Griffiths, the UN's top emergency relief official, wrote on Twitter/X: "The international community should hang its head in shame for failing to stop it ... We know that once a famine is declared, it is

way too late."

The aid group Refugees International was even more direct, noting that the "opportunity to avert famine in Gaza has been lost. A famine is now getting underway." The group's president, Jeremy Konyndyk, a former Biden administration official, wrote on X that a formal declaration of famine is retroactive, and often lags behind reality on ground. (For example, about half of the estimated 260,000 people killed

by starvation in Somalia, between 2010 and 2012, had already died by the time a famine was formally declared in 2011.)

The Biden administration and Israel's other supporters in the west can't claim that they did not know the severity of the hunger crisis in Gaza, and the impact of Israel's policy of intentionally starving a population of 2.3 million into submission.

The UN's hunger monitoring group, Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) – which includes the World Food Programme, the World Health Organization and other agencies – warned in a report in December that Gazans were facing widespread starvation within several months. The IPC cautioned that by early February, half of Gaza's population would be in an "emergency" phase – defined as high acute malnutrition and excess mortality, and one level below the highest phase on the

IPC's scale, "catastrophic" conditions.

In its latest report on Monday, the IPC adjusted its projection – saying that 1.1 million people, nearly half of Gaza's population, are now facing the highest level of malnutrition and catastrophic shortages of food. The report declared that famine is imminent in northern Gaza and "projected to occur anytime between mid-March and May 2024". While the world often hears warnings about famine as a result of war, the IPC has only raised this kind of alarm twice before: in Somalia in 2011 and South Sudan in 2017.

In other words, the IPC is fairly conservative in its assessment of food insecurity, and the Biden administration should have listened to its warnings about impending famine months ago. But Biden continued his strategy of unconditional backing for Israel, which he announced soon after the Hamas attacks.

# Has BJP deployed RSS to counter farmers' agitation?



By JAG MOHAN THAKEN

Enraged with the reportedly anti-farmer statement of RSS second-in-

command, the farmers' union have become so furious that they have even rebuked the RSS by stating – 'the betrayer of freedom struggle, RSS has no right to question the patriotism of farmers.'

Vijoo Krishnan General Secretary and Dr Ashok Dhawale President of All India Kisan Sabha (AIKS), on March 18, referred that in the recently concluded Akhil Bharatiya Pratinidhi Sabha of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) at Nagpur, Dattatreya Hosabale, its General Secretary, has denigrated the ongoing farmers' protests in Punjab and Haryana by terming them as anti-national. Citing media reports, wherein Hosabale, the second-in-command of the RSS, in his official General Secretary's report, reportedly placed that "disruptive forces" are behind the farm protests. AIKS alleges that Hosabale also added that there are well orchestrated plans to spread "separatist terrorism" in Punjab under the guise of the farmers' movement. "This canard spread by the betrayers of the freedom struggle is out of vengeance against the incessant SKM-led united movement of farmers which has forced the Narendra Modi-led BJP Government to withdraw the pro-corporate Farm Acts."

Farmer unions unearthing the RSS history Roots

Unearthing the history of RSS, AIKS, a major body of farmers, divulges that various official inquiry commission reports have identified the nefarious role of the RSS in inciting communal riots. "This very reason led to its ban in 1948 after Mahatma Gandhi's assassination and in 1992 after the demolition of the Babri Masjid. The role played by the Sangh Parivar functionaries in the 1984 anti-Sikh pogrom as well as in the 2002 Gujarat genocide are well documented. AIKS calls upon all patriotic forces to isolate and expose fascistic elements led by the RSS who are spreading canards against the farmers' movement."

Criticizing RSS over its reportedly anti-farmer stand and statement, All India Kisan Sabha (AIKS), a part of Samyukta Kisan Morcha (SKM) has commented that it is of the firm opinion that the audacity demonstrated by



Hosabale to demonise the farmers' movement in general and the Punjab movement in particular is a loyal continuum of the RSS' trajectory of collaborating with British imperialism and denigrating the greatest anti-imperialist martyrs like Bhagat Singh. AIKS alleges that when the entire country was on the streets condemning the hanging of Bhagat Singh, Rajguru and Sukhdev, the RSS and other Hindutva outfits were busy denouncing them. The RSS which couldn't produce a single freedom fighter worth the name opted to belittle the immense sacrifices of these revolutionaries as "failure", as clearly demonstrated in Golwalkar's "Bunch of Thoughts".

AIKS has got outraged to note that the RSS has used the term "disruptive forces" to characterise the patriotic farmers of Punjab and Haryana who are fighting against the corporatisation of agriculture. AIKS alleges that the reality is that it is Hindutva terrorism that is acting as the most disruptive internal threat to the unity and diversity of the country. Hindutva fascistic politics is closely aligned with international finance capital and big business which is threatening Indian farmers. AIKS reminds that RSS should not forget its history of collusion

with the imperialist forces and with imperialist agencies like the CIA. CIA Agent J A Curran, who enjoyed unusual access to the top brass of RSS from 1949 to 1951, in his book had identified RSS as a tool that would help the imperialist block led by the USA to contain the militant peasant and workers' movement in independent India. By demonising the farmers' movement against corporatisation, RSS is showing its support for imperialist forces in their project to devour Indian agriculture.

Haryana SKM has also sharply reacted to the RSS stand and criticised this stating the statement as highly disparaging and outrageous remarks by the RSS in Nagpur branding the farmers struggle of Punjab and Haryana of causing disruption.

SKM leader, Dr. Inderjeet Singh sharing a statement stated that the General Secretary of Rashtriya Pratinidhi Sabha of RSS has in his narrative accused that terrorism and separatism were raising their 'ugly head' under the garb of farmers movement in Punjab.

"While taking a very strong view of RSS insinuations in its bid to tarnish the image of the farmers struggle the SKM has recalled the treacherous role of RSS during freedom struggle as a result of that there is not a single freedom fighter in the ranks of BJP and RSS. True to their pro-

British collaborationist historical legacy the BJP is still in alliance with the communal -corporate and corrupt nexus", divulged Dr. Singh.

Haryana SKM has also called upon all farmers organisations and sections fighting for the defence of their livelihood to expose the real face of RSS among people and teach them a lesson to save the country.

Why the RSS in fray to attack on farmers?

It is pertinent to remind that the farmers are on agitational path for not implementing the agreement with SKM dated 9.12.2021 regarding MSP@C2+50% with guaranteed procurement to all crops, Comprehensive Loan Waiver for farmers despite 1,00,474 farmers committed suicide (2014-2022), Rapid Privatisation of Electricity, Protecting the Ajay Mishra Teni, Union (MoS) Home Affairs- the Killer of Farmers at Lakhimpur Kheri, as alleged by farmers.

In its letter of Resolution issued at Ramlila Ground Mahapanchayat, on March 14, SKM has called a country wide mass protest against BJP under its slogan- "EXPOSE, PROTEST, PUNISH BJP / BJP KA POLE KHOLO, VIRODH KARO, SAJAA DO" and Observe 23rd and March 24 as 'Save Democracy Day' in all villages to Protest BJP giving Kheri seat to the alleged killer of Lakhimpur Kheri farmers, Ajay Mishra Teni Union (MoS) Home and expose the Corporate-

Criminal- Corrupt nexus under BJP.

Just after two days of farmers' call, RSS has reportedly denigrated the ongoing farmers' protests in Punjab and Haryana by terming them as anti-national. But BJP leadership is keeping mum over the farmers agitational program. Then why did RSS react so sharply? Doesn't it indicate that BJP has deployed its commanding RSS wing to counter the farmers' attack on the party? Political analysts deduce that as BJP, being a political party, fears that attacking the farmers directly at this crucial junction, when the Lok Sabha election clouds are hovering over the country, may further enrage the farmer community and it can harm its vote share. However, how many votes the BJP will fetch, can't be predicted at this time, because farmers remain farmers till they are in Delhi, as and when they come to their villages they convert into the village groups and vote as per their village politics forgetting what they have undertaken in Delhi. That is why, the farmer unions are keeping the iron hot through their regular agitational programs. How much they will succeed in retaining the farmers as farmers till they press the EVM button, which can oust the BJP from reigning the country. Let us see which way the wind blows.

# Why the congress horses have no fear of whip?

JAG MOHAN THAKEN

In the recent Rajya Sabha elections held in Himachal Pradesh, Congress had to face a shameful defeat despite having majority in the assembly. In a shocking result to the congress, its candidate Abhishek Manu Singhvi lost his battle to BJP's Harsh Mahajan on February 27, despite Congress is in power in the state with 40 MLAs in the 68-member Assembly and also having a support of three independent MLAs.

BJP, which had just 25 MLAs, managed to secure 9 additional votes by luring three Independents and six Congress MLAs for cross-voting for the BJP.

It was not the first time that the congress has to face defeat due to jumping over the stable wall by its horses.

In June 2022, Kartikeya Sharma managed a sensational victory as an independent candidate in the Rajya Sabha elections in Haryana by defeating Congress' heavyweight candidate, Ajay Maken, despite the congress having a required strength in the assembly. The Congress had a total 31 MLAs in Haryana Assembly but since Kuldeep Bishnoi, reportedly regularly being humiliated by the party and especially by Former CM Hooda, didn't vote for the party candidate. Maken got only 30 votes out of which one vote was declared invalid as another anti-Hooda legislator adopted such a path that the vote got rejected without anyone having even an inkling of the same.

In June 2016 also, INLD & Congress supported candidate for Rajya Sabha, R K Anand, despite having a sufficient vote back, lost to BJP-backed independent candidate Subhash Chandra after 14 Congress votes were declared invalid.

Now the question arises – 'Why every time congress gets a jolt despite having sufficient number?' When horses jump out of a stable by crossing over the wall, the main reason is the stable master, being weak and helpless, loses control over his horses, other supporting reasons are – instead of the dry grass being fed in the stable, there is some alluring soft green grass outside, repeated mental and physical torture of the horses in the stable or some vicious dacoit breaking into the stable.



In Just occurred Himachal episode, six congress MLAs, under the vicious plan of some hidden hands, (however, 'Yeh Public Hai, Sab Janti Hai'), who were using these MLAs as scapegoats for their own elevation, revolted against the party - which afforded them to become MLAs, for the allurements of getting some cream. They have no fear of the party whip as they know the High Command is not so strong and it can't take any stern action. "Lethargic policy and passive ride, spare the rod and spoil the child."

In July 2020, Rajasthan Deputy Chief Minister, Sachin Pilot along with 18 MLAs had revolted against Chief Minister Ashok

Gehlot. The plan reportedly was getting oxygen from BJP to topple the Gehlot government. 'Addressing a program in Dholpur, Mr Gehlot had said his government could be saved because of the support of three BJP leaders -- former chief minister Vasundhara Raje, former assembly speaker Kailash Meghwal and MLA Shobharani Kushwah.'

Gehlot had also alleged the involvement of money in this scandal.

The revelations of Gehlot in the Sachin Pilot episode outrightly prove the involvement of all the above stated factors causing instigation to the Rajasthan MLAs under the headship of Pilot.

Sensing the weak and indecisive High Command, under the temptation of green grass outside (Money and Honey -- lucrative and creamy post in the new to be formed government), allured by some vicious dacoits, the humiliated Pilot segment jumped over the wall of stable without any hesitation.

What the defectors get?

The major factor of revolt comes out as the over expectations of the disgruntled, whether it is Himachal Pradesh or Rajasthan or Punjab or Haryana. What did they get? History speaks so.

Ashok Tanwar, a former president of Haryana Pradesh Congress, has again proved the proverb- 'A rolling stone gathers no moss'.

He left congress (2019) seeing that he has no chances of getting enthroned on the CM chair in the congress till Bhupinder Singh Hooda, his main contender, is in congress, established his own outfit, joined TMC(2021), worked for Aam Adami Party (2022-24), smelling the alliance of AAP and Congress party in Haryana and seeing again being dropped in the dust bin in the Hooda dominated alliance, Tanwar joined BJP(2024) just to have a Lok Sabha ticket. His dream of CM chair has again dashed to ground.

In Rajasthan, Sachin Pilot, a first choice of Rahul Gandhi, who became the rebellious leader in congress to gain CM post, not only lost his Rajasthan Pradesh Congress President chair, but also had to lose his Deputy CM post. In Punjab, two times chief minister under congress umbrella, Captain Amarinder Singh, feeling humiliated in the party left the congress and floated his own outfit -- Punjab Lok Congress (PLC) in 2021 and fought assembly election in February 2022 from Patiala as an alliance partner of BJP, but lost. Not only he, the captain of PLC, but all his candidates lost the ground fight. Captain's alliance partner BJP also dashed to ground and could win only 2 seats out of 117 assembly seats.

## Bharat Has Arrived: Indian Navy's Daring Operations Are a Message to the World

By: **Sanbeer Singh Ranhotra**

World Witnesses the Might of Indian Navy

The United States and its Western allies are caught up in the Red Sea with Operation Prosperity Guardian. Their fight is with the Houthis, who are leaving no stone unturned to disrupt international shipping and attack vessels at sea. The West's preoccupation with the Houthis has left a glaring vacuum in another area of critical importance for international shipping – the Gulf of Aden. Importantly, no other major world power has come forward to protect international shipping from pirates. The absence, or rather

the vegetative behaviour of the Chinese navy, for example, comes to mind. Despite deployments in the region, China appears too wary to take the plunge and play a role in protecting international shipping. Fortunately, India has stepped up to the task and is now ensuring that pirates do not assume that tensions in West Asia give them a free pass to attack and hijack any and all ships. Unlike so-called blue water navies that claim they can operate in any part of the world, the Indian Navy is chasing down pirates at a breakneck pace thousands of miles away from its coast. The most recent example of the Indian Navy's proactiveness is the freeing of

the hijacked merchant vessel MV Ruen, which had been under siege since December last year and was being used for piracy. That a ship remained hijacked for three months without any country caring to rescue it is a poignant statement of the times we live in. At a time when the world appears more divided than ever, India is going out of its way to rescue ships irrespective of which country they belong to. That is a statement too, and speaks volumes about India's emergence as a "Vishwamitra" – a friend of the world.

To rescue the ship, India launched "Operation Sankalp", as a part of which a 40-hour-long mission was carried out 2,600 km away from the Indian coast.

The Indian Navy deployed its warship INS Kolkata, long-endurance Sea Guardian drones, P-8I surveillance aircraft and airdropped elite MARCOS commandos from a C-17 plane of the Indian Air Force. The operation ended with India rescuing 17 crew members, including seven from Bulgaria. On social media platform X, Bulgaria's President Rumen Radev applauded India's brave action and thanked Prime Minister Narendra Modi. In turn, PM Modi said, "India is committed to protecting freedom of navigation and combating piracy and terrorism in the Indian Ocean region."

# India's Rise Out of Poverty is Unwelcome: Orientalists Combat to Steady the Ship

By: Sagorika Sinha

The Orientalism eloquently articulated by Edward Said in his works is something that is rapidly being challenged in the Indian context, and the rest of the world is listening. Repartees to commentary that undermines the common citizen of India in order to bat for a West-adjacent elite have become commonplace in international relations, and realpolitik is rarely covered under heaps of euphemism. This cuts across discussions on intelligence, defence, interference in India's internal affairs and the like. The economic front, though, may be the last bastion where the oriental gaze of the West is likely to be challenged by a mere academic defence.

The problem is not that gentlemanly responses are unbecoming; rather, it is that political vendetta cannot be parried by the academic articulation of facts. After all, the offender is rarely uneducated in data analysis, but has a vested interest in misrepresenting it, often through outright lies.

Take, for example, Ashoka Mody's article rebutting the data of India's poverty being reduced at almost three times the rate at which the last decline happened. Apparently, that is not a matter to be discussed over numbers, a matter he most delicately defines with "the numbers stink." Instead, the Indian government's calculation of 2023 GDP using global



standards is somehow tied to the 2011 Census to specify through tonality, not data, that both are inaccurate. After all, if a similar approach is used to tie a few less disparate facts together such as the matter of Project Syndicate publishing Mody's paper also continuously publishing the Soros father-son duo periodically, one may see why the vehement denial of India's all too visible economic growth must be so disingenuously misrepresented. The publication offers a global far-Left platform

to India's political Opposition, by publishing Shashi Tharoor instead of any of India's actually significant politicians, alongside fearmongering articles en masse by openly Indiaphobic commentators whose storied legacies are built on decrying the nation. An arm of the Open Society's many tentacles can hardly be expected to be objective in its analysis. Nonetheless, the malice brought forth in this particular piece by Ashoka Mody makes the rapid eradication of poverty in India seem like

a personal blow to its author.

"In analyzing the recently released consumption-expenditure data, Bhalla and Bhasin seem to have converted the \$1.90 threshold into rupees at the IMF-reported PPP rate of 22.9 rupees per dollar. Consequently, their analysis categorizes people as poor only if they cannot spend 45 rupees a day," he writes. This is an easily spotted inaccuracy in data representation since the methodology of using the World Bank's \$1.90 poverty line of per capita per month consumption of Rs 1454 in rural areas and Rs 1750 in urban areas instead of the IMF-reported PPP method has already been published by Surjit Bhalla and Karan Bhasin. Yet, for those who seek validation in an anti-India story and come without a harder look at facts that may belie their beliefs, this article provides a masterclass in misrepresentation. This false data is the point on which the title of the article hinges – it states that the calculation is akin to wishing away poverty. Instead, his miscalculation wishes away the multidimensional upliftment of millions of Indians who now have access to electricity, running tap water, gas cylinders, a public distribution system without leakage and direct cash transfers from a welfarist government focusing on digital infrastructure to bypass once-entrenched corruption.

## How Taiwan's Poll Result is Fueling Chinese Aggression

By: Arun Anand

Taiwan, officially known as the Republic of China, recently had its presidential election, where the Democratic People's Party (DPP) won for the third consecutive term, a first in the island nation's history. DPP's victory is perceived as an act of defiance and a setback to China's occupational plan towards Taiwan. Post these elections, the world has witnessed an increasingly aggressive stance from China, aspiring for total domination in the South China Sea, starting from Taiwan, the first "island chain".

The contentious China-Taiwan relationship is deeply rooted in the island nation's history and has witnessed a tense situation brewing for the last several years. Separated from China by the Taiwan Strait, Taiwan came to be known as the Republic of China after China's nationalist government under Chiang Kai-shek lost to the Mao Zedong-led Communist group in 1949, who



then fled to Taiwan. The island nation, however, was under martial law from 1949-87 under Kai-shek's Kuomintang Party (KMT) and only in 1992 did Taiwan witness its first democratically elected presidential election. The People's Republic of China, however, has maintained the position that Taiwan is an integral part of China and perceives it to

be a renegade province. The long-term goal of "peaceful reunification of Taiwan" has been the CCP's goal since the 1970s, however, this gained more prominence under Xi Jinping's leadership. Xi's renewed call for a reunification process is evident from his "One Country, Two Systems" model announced in 2019. This model, however, has been

vehemently rejected by the majority Taiwanese population. A look into the political culture in Taiwan reveals that there are two factions viz, the Kuomintang Party (KMT) which largely maintains a pro-China position and endorses China's 1992 consensus, and the DPP, which opposes Communist China completely.

DPP, which has historically been associated with formal independence, maintains a 'status quo'/ democratic position, falling short of declaring formal independence in terms of the island nation's relations with China as opposed to the KMT. This has resulted in the DPP having a contentious relationship with mainland China. The relations took a sour turn after the 2016 presidential election in Taiwan when former president Tsai Ing-wen refused to increase cross-strait relations with Beijing and opted for trade diversification, following which Beijing severed all

diplomatic ties with Taipei. Lai Ching-te, the former Vice President and the new President-elect voiced his support for the 'status quo' position in terms of relations with China and wished to seek a reopened communication with Beijing. However, during the presidential election in Taiwan, the PRC branded Lai as a "separatist" and tried to manipulate these elections as a choice for Taiwanese people between war and China. Xi Jinping reiterated Taiwan's reunification with China as "inevitable" weeks before the presidential election. Beijing's attempts to create political divisions that would undermine popular support for DPP via disinformation campaigns and cyberattacks were rampant. This also indicated China's aggressive interference in internal political matters of Taipei. However, China's attempts, in the end, proved to be futile as reflected in the election mandate.

# Teesri Baar Modi Sarkar

## *Why Modi 3.0 is Inevitable*



**By: Dr Priyam Barooah**

The most critical aspect of inclusive growth is financial inclusion which has been a core agenda and achievement of the Modi government.

Financial inclusion in India was as low as 35 per cent of adults possessing bank accounts till 2011, which is, well below the average of other emerging market economies. Even 12 per cent of adults saved or 8 per cent borrowed from a financial institution. Cash was used extensively, with currency in circulation at about 12 per cent of the GDP, even though holding cash carried a high opportunity cost and the availability of ATMs was just 21 per 100,000 adults (IMF Financial Access Survey).

A major policy turn came in this relation in 2014, with the formation of the Modi government at the Centre. Though India was not the first and only country to adopt a digitally verifiable unique identity system, what set the nation apart was the large scale and low unit costs of operating the program, which enabled its billion-plus population to get enrolled in the program and quickly acquire a national ID that could be used in all aspects of economic life, including faster access to financial services. Financial inclusion is the delivery of financial facilities at affordable costs to individuals belonging to disadvantaged and low-income groups. It opens a universal doorway to a myriad of financial services at a minimal cost. In 2020, the RBI released its National Strategy for Financial Inclusion 2019–24, which laid out

its objectives for financial inclusion policies in India. The strategy aims to provide universal access to financial services—savings, credit, insurance, and pension products—to every eligible adult. It highlights the use of technology and adoption of a multi-stakeholder approach for achieving its financial inclusion goals and notes that the bank-led model of financial inclusion adopted by the RBI through the issuance of differentiated banking licenses (small finance banks and payments banks) is helping bridge the gap in last-mile connectivity.

To enhance the financial inclusion spectrum, the Modi government in the last 10 years has rolled out several schemes. Needless to say, these schemes launched after rigorous planning and research have brought drastic transformations in relation to financial inclusion. Some of the financial inclusion schemes are PMJDY (Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana), APY (Atal Pension Yojana), PMVVY (Pradhan Mantri Vaya Vandana Yojana), PMMY (Pradhan Mantri Mudra Yojana), PMSBY (Pradhan Mantri Suraksha Bima Yojana), Sukanya Samridhi Yojana, Jeevan Suraksha Bandhan Yojana, CEGS (Credit Enhancement Guarantee Scheme) for SCs, venture capital fund for SCs under the social sector initiatives, VPBY (Varishtha Pension Bima Yojana), KCC, so on and so forth. The biggest structural shift in access to finance came with the rollout of the Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana (PMJDY) scheme in August 2014. This was an ambitious financial development policy to provide bank

accounts to all households in India and convenient access to savings accounts through a debit card (called RuPay) and mobile banking. A variety of features distinguished this financial inclusion program from previous and similar programs. These include a no-frills, zero-balance account with a debit card, access to mobile banking for funds transfer, overdraft facilities, and built-in basic life insurance coverage for all account holders. Bank accounts under this scheme could be opened using the Aadhaar ID and subsequently linked to it for the transfer of government benefits.

In just one year after its launch, 180 million Indians, about 15 per cent of the population, had opened accounts as part of the program, and 404 million had accounts by 2020 (30 per cent), with 86 per cent of the accounts still operative and 73 per cent of the account holders using the RuPay debit card. Moreover, about 15 per cent of PMJDY account holders receive direct benefit transfers from the Indian government under various schemes. At present, more than 50 crore beneficiaries bank under PMJDY since its inception. Today, total deposit balances under the PMJDY accounts stand at Rs 2,03,505 crore.

Around 56 per cent of Jan Dhan account holders are women and around 67 per cent of Jan Dhan accounts are in rural and semi-urban areas, thus narrowing the gender gap and rural-urban divide in relation to financial access. 33.98 crore RuPay cards have been issued to PMJDY account holders.

India has already and will benefit much from broadening access to finance while maintaining financial stability. These schemes, in addition to enhancing individual opportunities, have positive macroeconomic effects. The linking of PMJDY bank accounts with Aadhaar and mobile phone numbers, called the JAM trinity, provides the foundational digital infrastructure for increasing digital financial inclusion. Affordability and access to smartphones have improved significantly in recent years. Demonetisation led to the first surge in the use of digital payments, particularly mobile money. On November 8, 2016, the Government of India announced the demonetisation of major bank currencies from circulation, effectively withdrawing 86 per cent of currency from circulation and constraining the use of cash. While demonetisation's major objective was addressing corruption and counterfeit bills and increasing the formal tax base, it effectively resulted in a spike in the use of digital payment instruments. The launch of interoperable payments, through the Unified Payments Interface (UPI) in 2016, played a major role in sustaining the use of digital financial services. The UPI allows instant and real-time interbank transactions through various payment platforms, and enables banks and non-banks to operate with each other, resulting in increased business formalisation and digital acceptance. The GST regime rolled out in 2017 too has its share of these two outcomes. IMF research shows that financial inclusion supports growth and lowers inequality, and provided the financial sector is well regulated, it supports financial stability. A successful rolling out of the GST regime has enabled one nation, one market, and one tax, eliminating the cascading effects of indirect taxes at various levels of production and consumption.

### MODI'S INDIA: A SELF-RELIANT ONE

Atmanirbhar Bharat Abhiyaan is the mission started by the government on May 13, 2020, towards making India self-reliant. Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced an economic package of Rs 20 lakh crore to aid and support the country in times of the pandemic. It is focused on five components – economy, infrastructure, systems, vibrant demography and demand, creating distinctive competitive advantages. The conceptualisation of a developed independent country can be painted on the canvas of Amrit Kaal—the 25 years from 2022 leading up to 2047. An Atmanirbhar Bharat strengthens the foundations of each of these.

The most common way to think about 'Viksit Bharat' is the economic aspect, with international organisations like the World Bank prescribing the per-capita gross national income threshold to cross, to be labelled a developed country.

# Viksit Bharat: Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Vision for a Developed India

By: Aditya Pittie

Ever since assuming office as the Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi's vision has extended far beyond the ordinary realms of governance to an ambitious and grand vision to create a new and developed India. Central to this is the concept of 'Viksit Bharat' or Developed India, a transformative vision aimed at catapulting India into the league of developed nations by 2047, the 100th anniversary of its independence.

Viksit Bharat encapsulates Prime Minister Modi's vision of a prosperous, inclusive, and technologically advanced India. It goes beyond economic development to encompass holistic growth across various sectors, including education, healthcare, infrastructure, agriculture, and industry. At its core, Viksit Bharat seeks to unleash the latent potential of India's billion-plus population, harnessing their creativity, enterprise, and innovation to drive sustainable and equitable development.

Viksit Bharat holds profound significance for India's socio-economic trajectory, offering a roadmap for realising its



aspirations of becoming a global powerhouse. By setting ambitious goals and implementing bold reforms, PM Modi aims to unlock new opportunities for growth and prosperity. At the heart of Viksit Bharat lies the principle of 'Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas' (Collective Efforts, Inclusive Growth), emphasising the importance of inclusive development that leaves no one behind. One of the key pillars of Viksit Bharat is economic transformation, which entails fostering a conducive environment for investment, entrepreneurship, and job

creation. Through initiatives such as Make in India, Digital India, and Startup India, the government aims to catalyse industrial growth, promote innovation, and boost manufacturing capabilities, thereby creating millions of new opportunities for employment and livelihoods.

Moreover, Viksit Bharat recognises the pivotal role of infrastructure development in unlocking India's economic potential. The government's focus on building world-class infrastructure, including highways, railways, airports, and smart cities, enhances

connectivity and mobility and lays the foundation for sustainable urbanisation and regional development. Additionally, investments in renewable energy, clean water, and sanitation contribute to environmental sustainability and enhance the quality of life for millions of Indians.

Another critical aspect of Viksit Bharat is human capital development, which encompasses initiatives to improve education, healthcare, and skills training. By investing in quality education and healthcare infrastructure, the government aims to equip India's youth with the knowledge, skills, and capabilities needed to thrive in the 21st-century economy. Furthermore, schemes such as Ayushman Bharat and Skill India seek to ensure universal access to healthcare and empower individuals with employable skills, thereby fostering social inclusion and economic empowerment. At the heart of Prime Minister Modi's vision for a Developed India (Viksit Bharat) lies a crucial tenet: the recognition that achieving this ambitious goal requires more than just government initiatives. It demands the active

participation and collective responsibility of every Indian citizen.

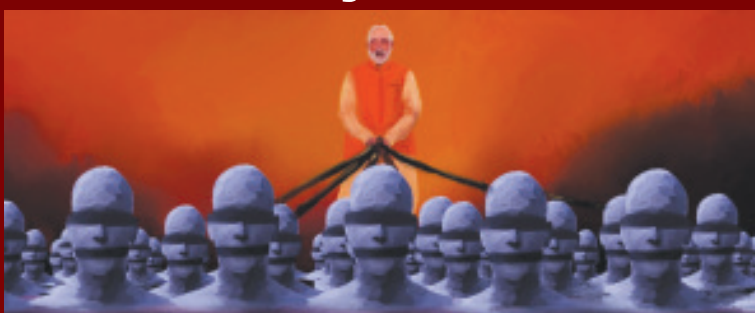
Viksit Bharat is a national endeavour that calls upon every citizen to contribute towards the nation's development. Unlike traditional top-down approaches, Viksit Bharat embodies a bottom-up philosophy, empowering individuals, communities, and institutions to become agents of change in their own right. By fostering a sense of ownership and empowerment, Viksit Bharat transforms development from a passive process to an active and inclusive movement.

The significance of this approach cannot be overstated. By mobilising its citizens' collective energies and talents, India can tap into a vast reservoir of human capital and creativity, driving innovation, entrepreneurship, and social progress. Moreover, by involving diverse stakeholders, including civil society organisations, private sector entities, and grassroots communities, Viksit Bharat ensures that development efforts are responsive to local needs and aspirations, thereby fostering greater sustainability and resilience.

## A Land Where Prejudice Masquerades as History

By Mathew John and Annie Mathew

The supreme iconoclast, Howard Zinn observed that there is no such thing as impartial history. Even the most conscientious historians are partial in two ways; they pick and choose from the bewildering array of happenings from the past and their interpretation is influenced by their world view and the times they live in. Yet no serious historian will disagree that the sanctity of facts is fundamental to any historical endeavour. The first commandment for any student of history is to say it like it is, to distinguish between established fact and fiction. Arguably the greatest historian of our age, Eric Hobsbawm, put it blandly: "Without the distinction of what is and what is not so, there can be no history." The other pitfall to watch out for is what Hobsbawm calls "the politico-ideological abuse of history", the warped nationalist version that is nothing short of a



bastardisation of history based on myth, omission, decontextualisation and lies, with the past serving as handmaid to legitimise and validate extreme right-wing ideologies. Historical research and writing have hitherto worked in the shadows, perceived as relatively benign scholarly activity that was far removed from the hurly-burly of politics. But today the past is being invoked as grist for nationalist and fundamental ideologies just "as poppies are the raw material for heroin addicts". What's being peddled is propaganda, not history. The autocrats of our present-day world seem to draw inspiration from George Orwell's dark hypothesis: "Those who control the present,

control the past and those who control the past, control the future."

There is now direct, unabashed political engagement with historiography. For the cynical fantasy historians of the present regime, their ideology of exclusivity is immutable; history must be recalibrated to correspond with their beliefs and socio-political agenda, and to hell with facts. According to a 2018 Reuters report, this government has appointed a committee of scholars whose mandate is to harness evidence in the form of archaeological evidence and DNA to prove that Hindus are the original inhabitants of this land, that the Hindu scriptures are facts and not

myth, that there is a foundational animus between Hindu and Muslim. The project – mischievous to the extreme – aims to debunk the authenticated hopeful, humane narrative of a multicultural ethos germinated in migrations, invasions and conversions. The frightful objective of the exercise is to justify the ideological fascism of Hindutva that demonises minorities and consigns them to the margins as enemies of the nation. The cultural erasure of minorities is now state policy. Prejudice masquerading as history has a lot of traction today. Orwell who had studied the innards of nationalism and its extreme manifestation – fascism – believed that the nationalist is "haunted by the belief that the past can be altered" and so rewrites history that is "plain forgery". Authoritarian leaders across the world have been presiding over the calculated desecration of history. As US president, Donald Trump who never tired of excoriating academia for highlighting slavery and racism in school texts,

set up a fresh 1776 Commission to "promote patriotic education" with the intent of rewriting history to suit the purposes of his right-wing, racist constituency. The Commission submitted its report – chockfull of falsehoods and partisan politics – two days before the end of Trump's term in 2020 but thankfully, neither the Commission nor its mischievous historical fiction survived his presidency. We have not been so lucky. The jaundiced world view of the hyper-nationalists wielding political power has muscled its way into education and school textbooks, poisoning the minds of the most vulnerable. Adopting the laziest and crudest form of falsification, the NCERT (National Council for Education Research and Training) has vandalised the history syllabus of schools by blanking out large parts of "Muslim history", the Gujarat massacre of 2002 and anything inimical to the Hindutva view of history.

# How Pakistan-China Nexus is Subjugating Balochistan Leading to Widespread Dissent

By: Arun Anand

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) stands as a contentious issue for the indigenous Baloch population in Balochistan, a province strategically positioned at the crossroads of geopolitical significance. Central to this debate is the Gwadar deep-water port, strategically connecting China's Xinjiang region with the Arabian Sea. Despite the purported economic integration goals of CPEC, the Baloch people express profound concerns regarding potential repercussions on their natural resources and the delicate ecological balance of the region. The local population of Balochistan perceive CPEC not merely as an economic corridor but as a project designed to exploit Balochistan's resources, contributing to regional poverty. The intricate relationship between economic development and the preservation of local resources and ecological sustainability becomes a critical concern for the indigenous population in Balochistan. Recent developments suggest a resurgence of activity, notably characterized by the prominent role assumed by the influential



military establishment. The military's pronounced inclination toward fostering stronger relations with China is underscored by its perception of China as a robust ally in countering India. Reports indicate collaborative efforts between the Pakistani and Chinese governments to expand Pakistan's manufacturing capacity for Chinese military aircraft, weaponry, and related infrastructure under a discreetly formulated plan. Concurrently, a nascent institutional entity, the CPEC Authority (CPECA), spearheaded by a retired lieutenant general, actively promotes and defends the

corridor. However, the disclosure of substantive details regarding the corridor remains limited. Official documentation on the cpec.gov.pk website provides only cursory information, making independent verification a challenging task. This opacity is exacerbated by the Chairman's restrained interaction with the media, contributing to a discernible lacuna in publicly accessible project specifics. A recent public awareness session organised by the Baloch Yakjehti Committee (BYC) in Gwadar provided a platform for political and social

activists, BYC leaders, and local residents to voice their concerns. This session unveiled a collective worry over the adverse consequences of CPEC, contending that the development in Gwadar presented a misleading façade, concealing the detrimental effects of Pakistani and Chinese interests in the region. Panelists at the BYC session highlighted the environmental vulnerabilities in Gwadar due to infrastructure development, with recent floods and rains leaving the province in a state of helplessness. The infrastructure projects linked to CPEC have contributed to the degradation of the very region that is expected to play a key role in the economic corridor. A worrying trend of forced displacement, primarily targeting indigenous populations, was highlighted by the BYC panelists. CPEC projects are increasingly perceived as a means to replace locals with foreigners, notably Chinese and Punjabi Muslims, posing a significant threat to the socio-economic fabric of Balochistan, as indigenous communities lose ancestral lands and livelihoods. The collective portrayal of CPEC as a threat to Balochistan

encompasses concerns of environmental degradation, displacement of local populations, and undermining the region's socio-economic stability. Despite Balochistan's abundance of natural resources viz, Gold, Copper, Black Pearls, Oil, Coal, Natural Gas, and various reserves having a worth of more than trillion dollars, the province has the lowest human development index in Pakistan. The absence of hospitals and educational institutions dedicated to the welfare of indigenous people aggravates the situation. Balochistan, with only one university for the entire province, stands in stark contrast to Punjab, where a single city houses seven to eight universities. Faced with a bleak future within Pakistan, the Baloch youth have initiated a movement for freedom, prompting the implementation of a 'kill and dump policy' by Pakistani authorities in response to their mobilisation. Female Baloch students, recognising the precariousness of their prospects in Pakistan, have also joined the call for independence.

## It's Time India's Election Commission Was Given Its Due

By O.P. Rawat

Our founding fathers, working on the Drafting Committee of the Constitution and as members of the Constituent Assembly, were great visionaries. They gifted us a Constitution that has remained steadfast despite occasional oversight by some political leaders, members of the legislature, executive, or judiciary. This has vindicated B.R. Ambedkar's belief that the Constitution's effectiveness depends on those who uphold it. Recently, we celebrated Azadi Ka Amrit Mahotsav, and nearly 77 years after Independence, India seems to be in much better health than most other countries that gained independence around the same time. The founding fathers also laid a solid foundation for an election apparatus necessary for delivering timely, free, fair, and credible elections with utmost

efficiency all these years. Part XV of the Constitution (Articles 324 to 329) was thoughtfully formulated and enacted with this purpose, recognising elections as the cornerstone of democratic renewal. Article 324(1) stipulates that the superintendence, direction, and control of electoral roll preparation and election conduct, including those for Parliament, state assemblies, and offices of the President and Vice-President, shall be vested in the Election Commission (EC). Judicial interpretation of this provision has significantly bolstered the Election Commission's (EC) independence. Particularly, the Supreme Court ruling in the matter of M.S. Gill vs Chief Election Commissioner (1977) empowered the EC to tackle multiple challenges during the electoral

process, ensuring timely completion of elections.

### Making Elections Cost-Effective

This authority was effectively utilised by T.N. Seshan in the early 1990s to further elevate



the EC's stature. In the 2016 Tamil Nadu assembly elections, the poll body invoked the ruling to cancel polls in constituencies where significant cash and gifts were distributed to voters during campaigning. The decision was subsequently upheld in courts. Article 324(6) mandates that the

President or Governor, upon the EC's request, will ensure required staff strength for the institution's functions. This provision enables the EC to mobilise a temporary workforce of over 60 lakh polling personnel and 90 lakh security personnel for general elections to the Lok Sabha, managing nearly 96.8 crore voters across 10.5 lakh polling stations nationwide. After receiving induction training and guidelines from the EC, these personnel return to their regular duties post-election.

### The Expenditure Per Vote

In democracies lacking such enabling provisions, a permanent burden of large manpower results in highly expensive election delivery. The ECI is globally renowned for its cost-efficient

delivery of elections, compared to even neighbours like Pakistan, Bhutan, and Sri Lanka.

A recent report from the Centre for Media Studies revealed that during the 2019 Lok Sabha polls, an average of ₹ 700 was spent for every vote. This amount comprised ₹ 583 spent by candidates/parties on campaigning, etc., while the remaining ₹ 117 per vote constituted the expenditure incurred by the EC in conducting the elections.

Another recent report in newspapers highlighted that the EC's expenditure on elections grew from ₹ 10.5 crore (for 17.5 crore voters) in the general elections of 1952 to ₹ 3,870 crore in the 2014 Lok Sabha elections (for 83.4 crore voters). Comparatively, many developed democracies allocate significantly more funds for conducting elections.

# 'Strongly oppose': US on China's claim over Arunachal Pradesh

A US official said that Washington recognises Arunachal Pradesh as Indian territory after the Chinese military called the state an "inherent part of China's territory". The US also strongly opposes any attempts made to advance territorial claims across the Line of Actual Control (LAC), the official added.

On Wednesday, while addressing his daily conference, the Principal Deputy Spokesperson of the US State Department Vedant Patel said, "The United States recognises Arunachal Pradesh as Indian territory, and we strongly oppose any unilateral attempts to advance territorial claims by incursions or encroachments, military or civilian, across the Line of Actual Control." The US official's statement came three days after Chinese Defence Ministry spokesperson Senior Colonel Zhang Xiaogang said that Beijing "never acknowledges and firmly opposes" the so-called Arunachal Pradesh illegally established by India. China recognises Arunachal Pradesh as 'Zangnan'.

In response, Ministry of External Affairs spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal on Tuesday dismissed China's claim as "absurd" and reiterated that Arunachal Pradesh "was, is, and will always be an




integral and inalienable part of India". "Repeating baseless arguments in this regard does not lend such claims any validity. Arunachal Pradesh was, is and will always be an integral and inalienable part of India. Its people will continue to benefit from our development programmes and infrastructure projects," he said.

Earlier this month, Beijing lodged a protest with New Delhi over Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Arunachal Pradesh during which he inaugurated the Sela tunnel, the world's longest bi-lane tunnel, which will ensure all-weather connectivity to Tawang, which shares a boundary with China in

the north. The tunnel, built at a cost of Rs 825 crore, will lead to better movement of troops and arms to forward locations along the LAC. At the time, China said that it "never recognised the so-called Arunachal Pradesh illegally set up by India and firmly opposes it".

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# End Of The Road For AAP? Seven Questions After Kejriwal's Arrest

The Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) had been claiming for quite some time that its leader, Arvind Kejriwal, would be arrested. The day finally came on March 21, when in a late-night move, the Enforcement Directorate (ED) arrested Kejriwal for his alleged involvement in the Delhi liquor scam. After Jharkhand's Hemant Soren, Kejriwal is now possibly the first chief minister to have been arrested while in office.

Incidentally, for both leaders, skipping the ninth summons by the central agency proved to be dangerous. Upon Kejriwal's arrest, the AAP moved the Supreme Court for a late-night hearing, which was rejected. The party later withdrew its petition and will now approach a trial court. However, under the stringent rules of the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA), 2002, getting relief from courts is not easy.

## A Big Blow

The latest development is a big blow to AAP. Delhi's former deputy chief minister, Manish Sisodia, is already in jail in connection with a corruption case. It's ironic that a party formed out of a movement against corruption is today facing arrest of its top leadership in corruption cases. The case has many angles - legal, political and ethical, moral. While the AAP has accused the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) of using central agencies to finish off the party, the BJP has countered that charge by claiming that the law is taking its due course and the party is paying for its illegal deeds in the liquor case. The AAP questions the timing of the arrest, alleging that the move is aimed at preventing Kejriwal from campaigning for the upcoming Lok Sabha election, but the BJP says that it is, in fact, Kejriwal who timed his actions well to gain sympathy from voters. There are seven unanswered questions that emanate from this arrest.

## 1. Who Will Be The Next CM?

While the AAP has claimed that Kejriwal will continue to be chief minister and run the government from jail, is it legally tenable? He is a chief minister without any portfolio. As he has not yet been convicted, Kejriwal cannot be disqualified as an MLA. And this means that he is eligible to be chief minister, too.

While this may sound fine in theory, does the spirit of law allow this? Will it be morally/ethically right to continue as chief minister? Can the Lieutenant-Governor (L-G), with whom the AAP doesn't enjoy a good rapport, intervene and remove Kejriwal as chief minister or take the reins of the government? This remains to be seen.

## 2. Will The Arrest Create Sympathy For AAP?

This is a million-dollar question. The saga clearly consolidates the AAP's support



amongst its core voters. However, outside of Delhi and Punjab, this factor may not resonate with the electorate as much. Since the AAP has national ambitions, the arrest may hinder the party's expansion plans as the ED action severely dents its "party with a difference" image.

## 3. Will This Sympathy Work In State Or National Polls?

Delhi as a state sees split voting, that is, a large number of voters back AAP in state elections but vote for the BJP in national elections. This means that there is a good number of swing or neutral voters in the capital. How will Kejriwal's arrest impact this segment? Even if a section of voters feels that Kejriwal is being targeted by the BJP through central agencies, will this work to his advantage in state elections due early next year, or even the general elections?

Delhi's poll date, May 25, is still a good

two months away. Has the BJP unknowingly presented the state on a platter to AAP? In 2025, the party completes a decade in office. Can it neutralise anti-incumbency against the Kejriwal government in the 2025 assembly elections?

## 4. Can The Arrest Unite The Opposition?

With key allies exiting before polls and seat-sharing pacts not yet finalised for key states like Maharashtra and Bihar, the Opposition had been in disarray. But today, the Congress, whose Delhi leaders were ironically the ones who had exposed the alleged liquor scam, is now firmly backing the AAP on this issue. All top guns of the INDIA bloc have come out in support of Kejriwal. This arrest has ended up serving as a unifier for the Opposition alliance and has given it a set of muddas-that the

BJP is out to kill competition, that there is no level playing field in the elections, and that democracy is in danger.

## 5. Can It Backfire Against The BJP?

The BJP is clearly in the pole position in general elections according to opinion polls. Often, when a party is in power, it tends to get overconfident and ignore the warning signals. Such actions can spur the opposition and give it ammunition. This could have an impact on voters who want India to have a shashakt opposition.

## 6. Who Will Lead AAP's Lok Sabha Campaign?

The AAP is very much dependent on Kejriwal as he is their star campaigner. Over the years, many founding members of the party have left due to differences with Kejriwal, accusing him of being stubborn and autocratic. With Sisodia also behind bars, the party does not have many leaders with a pan-India appeal. To an extent, the burden may fall upon Punjab Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann. In Delhi, Atishi and Saurav Bhardwaj may hold the fort.

## 7. Is It The End Of The Road For AAP?

The AAP was born from a public movement against corruption. In just a decade, it has acquired a national party status. It is the only party apart from the Congress and the BJP to have a government in more than one state. It has also expanded its presence in Gujarat, Goa and Haryana, and is considered by many as having the potential to take over the mantle from the Congress as the main opposition party.

# Is the US on the brink of another civil war?

Three months into 2024, it seems dire predictions of political violence are now commonly issued both by the country's extreme fringes as well as from the mainstream. Former President Donald Trump has been perhaps the most vociferous prognosticator, warning that there would be "bedlam in the country" should the criminal charges against him lead to a 2024 election loss. Nowadays, even seemingly mundane political procedures can also result in promises of violence. When the US Supreme Court sided with the Biden administration in January, allowing federal border agents to remove concertina wire put in place by the state of Texas, some in elected office said it was a sign of civil war. In its threat assessment for 2024, the Department of Homeland Security forecast that, among other threats, the 2024 election cycle would be a "key event for possible violence..." In her 2022 book, "How Civil Wars Start: And

How to Stop Them," renowned political scientist Barbara F. Walter argues that "we are closer to civil war than any of us would like to believe" because of a toxic mix of political extremism and polarization, social and cultural tribalism, the popular embrace of conspiracy theories, proliferation of guns and well-armed militias and the erosion of faith in government and the liberal, Western democratic state. Among the key factors she cites is accelerationism — which Walter describes as "the apocalyptic belief that modern society is irredeemable and that its end must be hastened, so that a new order can be brought into being." In her 2022 book, "How Civil Wars Start: And How to Stop Them," renowned political scientist Barbara F. Walter argues that "we are closer to civil war than any of us would like to believe" because of a toxic mix of political extremism and polarization, social and cultural tribalism, the popular embrace of conspiracy theories, proliferation of guns

and well-armed militias and the erosion of faith in government and the liberal, Western democratic state. Among the key factors she cites is accelerationism — which Walter describes as "the apocalyptic belief that modern society is irredeemable and that its end must be hastened, so that a new order can be brought into being." With the West supposedly on the precipice of collapse, accelerationism's adherents maintain that violent insurrection is required to push democracy over the edge and into oblivion. Only by hastening its destruction can a White-dominated society and new order emerge, the thinking goes. Fomenting divisiveness and polarization through violent attacks on racial minorities, Jews, liberals, foreign interlopers and power elites, and thus producing a cataclysmic collapse of the existing order and provoking a second civil war, accordingly, is accelerationism's stock-in-trade.

# Mayor Eric Adams responds to sex assault lawsuit, says he's conducted himself with dignity for 40 years in public life

Mayor Eric Adams defended himself Tuesday against claims of sexual assault made in a lawsuit.

The mayor said he has always conducted himself with dignity in his 40 years in public life.

Adams adopted a historical perspective in responding to the bombshell lawsuit brought by a woman who claims she worked with him when he was a transit cop 30 years ago. While he said he was sorry his family, his girlfriend and son had to go through this, he noted that other mayors had told him they endured tough times, too. "Stuff happens, you know? You better be ready to have a motto that you can live by like, 'No

distractions, stay focused and grind.' There's a reason I say that over and over again. The team will tell you that I have a level of discipline that starts early and ends late," Adams said.

The mayor responded to a shocking lawsuit filled with graphic detail, accusing him of sexual assault, infliction of emotional distress, gender discrimination, retaliation, and sexual harassment.

His accuser, a woman who said she worked with him when he was a transit cop three decades ago, charged that the incident happened when she asked Adams for help with a job problem and he demanded oral sex.

It's the kind of charge that could hurt a

mayor who has to seek re-election in November 2025.

"Mr. Mayor, I guess I wonder, given the fact that we're in a sort of me-too environment, how you prevent this incident from becoming a career-ending incident?" CBS New York's Marcia Kramer asked. "New Yorkers will make the decisions on how the move forward when allegations are made, and I'm focused on running the city. I think my legacy is going to be a clear one, is going to be a good one," Adams said. "For almost 40 years now, I have been one of the most public faces in the city and I have always carried myself with the level of dignity that New Yorkers

expect from me."

But when the mayor was asked to respond to the explicitly graphic charges in the lawsuit, Corporation Counsel Sylvia Hinds-Radix jumped in.

"We are currently reviewing the complaint and we would make the appropriate answer and everyone will get that information when we file it with the court," Hinds-Radix said. Reporters questioned why the Corporation counsel, whose salary is paid by taxpayers, is representing the mayor instead of a private attorney, but Hinds-Radix said she had the authority to take the case. The mayor insists he does not remember ever meeting his accuser.

## 'In prison for a decade, is 85 years old': Court fast-tracks Asaram Bapu plea



The Gujarat High Court has decided to prioritise the petition of godman Asaram Bapu against his conviction in a rape case after noting that he was 85-years-old and had served 10 years in prison.

The High Court will start hearing Asaram Bapu's plea to suspend his prison sentence from April 4, a report in Bar and Bench said.

"He has undergone 10 years in prison and is 85-years-old. We will hear the

main appeal itself instead of his plea for suspension of sentence," a division bench of Justices AS Supehia and Vimal Vyas said. "Hearing of the main appeal or the plea to suspend sentence would need a similar amount of time. Thus, we will hear the main appeal from April 4," the court further said.

Last year, Asaram Bapu was convicted by a trial court in Gujarat for raping a woman disciple on several occasions at his Surat ashram in 2013.

He was also convicted by a POCSO court in Jodhpur and sentenced to life imprisonment for raping a teen girl in his ashram. He is serving a life sentence in Central Jail, Jodhpur.

**CHARGES HIGHLY IMPROBABLE, SAYS ASARAM BAPU IN PLEA**

The FIR, which was lodged in Ahmedabad, mentioned that the woman disciple was

allegedly confined by Asaram in his ashram and was raped repeatedly from 2001 to 2006.

In his plea, Asaram Bapu said the allegation of "forceful sexual intercourse" was "highly improbable" as his age at that time was 64 years, while the victim was 21 years.

"Therefore, the said version seems to be highly improbable as the victim could easily overthrow the applicant and run away to save herself," the plea said.

The godman, in his petition challenging the conviction, claimed that the entire case appeared to be "fake, fabricated, concocted" and the result of an afterthought by the prosecution.

The plea also claimed that the case was a "well-planned conspiracy" hatched by the prosecution witnesses who appear to be "dissatisfied and unhappy" with the working of his ashram.

## Probe agency can't keep filing chargesheets to keep person in jail: Supreme Court

The Supreme Court came down heavily on the Enforcement Directorate, stating that the probe agency cannot continue filing additional chargesheets and extending investigations, keeping the accused indefinitely in jail without the provision of default bail.

A chargesheet is filed after the police investigation into a case is complete. A person arrested for an offence is entitled to default bail if the investigating authorities fail to complete the investigation or submit a chargesheet within the specified timeline, typically 60 or 90 days. The Supreme Court slammed the central probe



agency's practice of filing complete. You cannot say trial will not commence unless the investigation is not complete. You cannot keep on filing chargesheet. "The whole object of default bail is that you do not supplementary chargesheet and the person is in jail without trial,"

the bench of Justices Sanjeev Khanna and Dipankar Dutta said. The top court made these oral observations in a case pertaining to one Prem Prakash, allegedly an associate of former Jharkhand Chief Minister Hemant Soren, who is accused of involvement in illegal mining and money laundering activities.

"In this case, the person is behind bars for 18 months. This is bothering us. In some case we will take it up and we are putting you to notice in that. Trial has to be begin when you arrest an accused," the Supreme Court said. "The

incarceration is there in this case and Section 45 does not take away that right to be released on bail. I have already held this in Manish Sisodia and that if there is undue incarceration then court can grant bail and Section 45 does not come in the way because that right to be released flows from article 21 of the constitution," Justice Khanna noted.

The Jharkhand High Court had denied Prem Prakash bail in January 2023, prompting his appeal to the Supreme Court. The court will continue hearing the case on April 29 to determine whether interim bail should be granted.

# Gunmen kill more than 60 in concert attack near Moscow, Islamic State claims responsibility

Camouflage-clad gunmen opened fire at concertgoers with automatic weapons on Friday, killing at least 60 people and injuring 145 more in an attack claimed by Islamic State militants.

In the deadliest attack in Russia since the 2004 Beslan school siege, gunmen sprayed civilians with bullets just before Soviet-era rock group "Picnic" was to perform to a full house at the 6,200-seat the Crocus City Hall just west of Moscow. Verified video showed people taking their seats in the hall, then rushing for the exits as repeated gunfire echoed above screams. Other video showed men shooting at groups of people. Some victims lay motionless in pools of blood. "Suddenly there were bangs behind us - shots. A burst of firing - I do not know what," one witness, who asked not to be identified by name, told Reuters.

"A stampede began. Everyone ran to the escalator," the witness said. "Everyone was screaming; everyone was running." Russian investigators said the

death toll was more than 60. Health officials said about 145 people were wounded, of which about 60 were in critical condition.

In the 2004 Beslan school siege, Islamist militants took more than 1,000 people, including hundreds of children, hostage. Russian President Vladimir Putin was being updated by security chiefs about the situation, including from Alexander Bortnikov, the head of the Federal Security Service (FSB), the Kremlin said. Russian investigators published pictures of a Kalashnikov automatic weapon, vests with multiple spare magazines and bags of spent bullet casings.

## ISLAMIC STATE

Islamic State, the militant group that once sought control over swathes of Iraq and Syria, claimed responsibility for the attack, the group's Amaq agency said on Telegram.

A grainy picture was published by some Russian media of two of the alleged attackers in a white car.

The fate of the attackers was unclear as firefighters battled a massive blaze and emergency services evacuated hundreds of people while parts of the venue's roof collapsed.

Islamic State said its fighters attacked on the outskirts of Moscow, "killing and wounding hundreds and causing great destruction to the place before they withdrew to their bases safely." The statement gave no further detail.

The United States has intelligence confirming Islamic State's claim of responsibility for the shooting, a U.S. official said on Friday. The official said Washington had warned Moscow in recent weeks of the possibility of an attack.

"We did warn the Russians appropriately," said the official, speaking on condition of anonymity, without providing any additional details.

Russia has yet to say who it thinks is responsible. The attack on Crocus City Hall, about 20 km (12 miles) from the Kremlin, comes just two weeks after the U.S. embassy in Russia warned that

"extremists" had imminent plans for an attack in Moscow.

Hours before the embassy warning, the FSB said it had foiled an attack on a Moscow synagogue by Islamic State's affiliate in Afghanistan, known as ISIS-Khorasan or ISIS-K, and seeks a caliphate across Afghanistan, Pakistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Iran.

Putin changed the course of the Syrian civil war by intervening in 2015, supporting President Bashar al-Assad against the opposition and Islamic State.

"ISIS-K has been fixated on Russia for the past two years, frequently criticizing Putin in its propaganda," said Colin Clarke of the Soufan Center.

The broader Islamic State group has claimed deadly attacks across the Middle East, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, Europe, the Philippines and Sri Lanka.

Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said it was a "bloody terrorist attack" that the entire world should condemn.

## Biz2Credit agrees to settle the FTC's charges, and pay \$33 million

For small businesses struggling to stay afloat during COVID, time was of the essence. When help materialized in the form of the emergency Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) administered by the Small Business Administration, businesses owners knew they had to move fast to apply for first-come-first-served funds necessary to keep their doors open and their people employed. A proposed record-setting \$33 million damages settlement with Biz2Credit, Inc., alleges that the small business lender promised to process PPP loan applications quickly, but instead left many small businesses in the lurch by delaying the process and setting up roadblocks that prevented them from applying through other lenders. When the SBA authorized a number of lenders to submit PPP applications on behalf of small businesses, Biz2Credit moved quickly into that line of work. According to the complaint – which also names Itria Ventures, LLC – the defendants lured consumers in with ads promising to process their applications within an average time frame "10-12 business days" or, in some instances, "12-14 business days." But the FTC says that the defendants' application processing was "riddled with delays," resulting in tens of thousands of consumers waiting over two months for a final determination. "The complaint outlines the consequences of the defendants' allegedly illegal conduct. First, for

some small business owners struggling for emergency funds during the worst days of COVID, the promise of fast processing was essential to their ability to survive. As one consumer described the impact of the defendants' alleged misrepresentations: According to the complaint, the defendants

continued to make their "10-12 business days" or "12-14 business days" claims even when they knew they weren't honoring those promises. "Furthermore, once a consumer applied for a PPP loan through a company like Biz2Credit and the SBA had issued what was called an e-tran number, the person

wasn't allowed to apply though another lender unless the first lender withdrew the consumer's application. According to the FTC, "Defendants designed their application process to lock in as many consumers as possible and to block those consumers from applying to other lenders.

## The Big Fat Indian Wedding'

My middle-class family has watched too many clips of the spectacular weddings of celebrities that even have the power to change social media algorithms. My aunts and uncles, nephews and nieces have now started to hire choreographers to train them to dance on stage in locations other than home so they can have a destination wedding tag. That's the trend. In his Mann Ki Baat episode last year, Prime Minister Narendra Modi asked Indians to wed in India. The big fat Indian wedding is now a big soft power export. After all, Beyoncé and Rihanna have been paid enormous amounts of money to perform at the Ambani weddings. That sets us up as people who can get a guest list only comparable to a Davos summit. Never mind the poverty that's often pushed behind giant billboards that advertise schemes and achievements of our country and big weddings that are televised and projected everywhere on social media. We are voyeurs. We want to know who wore what and what it cost. It is all about optics.

And optics is what matters in this day and age of social media. Nobody wants to know that a Dalit man was beaten up when he tried to ride a horse at this wedding. That's not what changes the algorithms across the world.

It was way before these times that writer and artist Susan Sontag wrote "Today everything exists to end in a photograph" in her 1977 book On Photography. At a recent family wedding, there was a lot of that. Everything was inspired by filmi weddings. The mandap overlooked the mountains. The bride and the groom spent most of their time posing for photos which were then processed by an event company and posted with a personalised hashtag. We were in Igatpuri and part of the resort has a Dubai kind of feel. In other spots, it looked like you were in the mountains. There was an emcee (master of ceremonies). There was a dress code for every function. Most Indian weddings are no longer what they used to be but

have become a showcase of social conservatism with the glamourised return to tradition in a way in which ambition and aspiration are cast in a new mould where it is then mostly about class and conspicuous consumption.

I remember when my cousin was getting married in the 1990s, the film Hum Aapke Hain Koun...! had become all the rage. The big fat Indian wedding was glamourised in a way that even our small little neighbourhood in Patna had girls who were inspired by the outfits Madhuri Dixit wore in the film. Designed by Anna Singh who was one of the first costume designers to work in the Indian film industry, the purple sari that Dixit wore cost around Rs 15 lakhs, according to reports. Her green and white lehenga set was duly copied by the girls and they tried to replicate the ceremony of stealing the groom's shoes. I remember it led to massive confusion where the clueless groom just handed over the shoes himself.

# Pakistan's Gwadar Port attacked; 2 soldiers, 8 assailants dead



(News Agency)-At least two Pakistani soldiers and eight assailants were killed after unidentified gunmen opened fire at Pakistan's Gwadar port authority complex in the restive Balochistan province on Wednesday, according to local media reports. The Balochistan

Liberation Army has claimed responsibility for the attack.

According to reports, the attackers carried out blasts before the firing took place between them and security officials. A statement from the Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR), the

military's media wing, said a group of terrorists attempted to enter the Port Authority Colony but were successfully thwarted by security forces personnel on Wednesday, the PTI news agency reported.

"Own troops employed for security responded immediately and effectively engaged the terrorists, and in ensuing fire exchange, all eight terrorists were sent to hell," the statement said late on Wednesday.

Two soldiers were killed in the exchange of fire, the statement said. The Gwadar port is a part of the ambitious China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). China has invested heavily under its Belt and Road Initiative in mineral-rich Balochistan, including developing Gwadar, despite a decades-long separatist insurgency in the area.

The Baluchistan province, despite being rich in natural resources like natural gas,

coal, and minerals, remains Pakistan's most deprived region, with low population density, insufficient water, and human resources, and very poor basic education. The locals view the development of Gwadar as an exploitation of their resources, fearing marginalisation and displacement without equitable benefits. This sentiment has fostered a breeding ground for various ethnic-separatist and radical religious terrorist organisations, including the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), Lashkar e-Tayyiba, Lashkar e-Jhangvi, Daesh, and the Balochistan Liberation Front.

These groups have actively sought to disrupt the CPEC project, posing a significant internal security threat through direct attacks on infrastructure projects and foreign investors, notably targeting Chinese nationals and workers involved in the development of Gwadar.

## 4 Chinese vessels in Indian Ocean region. Is Colombo set to host spy ships again?

(News Agency)-As India gets ready to hold missile testing operations, two Chinese spy vessels are reportedly cruising in its backyard, raising questions about their intentions and destinations. This comes after Sri Lanka revealed it amended its previous stance on research vessels to allow them for replenishment. Given Prime Minister Narendra Modi's request to the Sri Lankan President to consider India's security concerns, it'll be intriguing to observe whether the Chinese surveillance ships halt at Colombo.

Sri Lanka recently also authorised a German research vessel to make a port call in Colombo for replenishment. The move drew criticism from China, highlighting Colombo's staggered

NOTAM spans 3,550 kilometres, leading experts to conjecture that the test might have involved K-4 submarine-launched ballistic missiles. Although the official reason for the postponement of the missile test has not been disclosed, there is speculation that spy ships are trying to monitor India's missile test operations. Subsequently, two new NOTAMs were issued, covering the period from March 26 to 28 and April 3



stance after the country turned down Beijing's request to dock a research vessel, Xiang Yong Hong 03.

Open-source maritime tracking data reveals that there are not one but at least four Chinese research ships meandering in the Indian Ocean. India Today's OSINT team tracked the movement of the spy ships ahead of India's scheduled missile launch tests in the Bay of Bengal. Previously, India cancelled a Notice to Air Missions (NOTAM), signalling the deactivation of a scheduled March 13 missile test over the Bay of Bengal. The area covered by the

and 4, for air exercises within a range of 380 kilometres and 1,680 kilometres near the coast of Bhuvaneshwar and Abdul Kalam Island. People's Liberation Army vessels are notorious for picking up acoustic signatures of submarines as well as peek into the test firing of missiles off the Integrated Test Range at Abdul Kalam island in an attempt to link the coordinates with Chinese spy satellites. Yuan Hong 03, last reported near Jakarta Island in Indonesia as per maritime data, initiated its journey from Kinmen Island on March 15. Earlier, Xiang Hong 03 was also reported snooping into

India's defence activities right in the time of India's test launch of Agni-5 missile with Multiple Independently Targetable Re-entry Vehicle technology. After Sri Lanka refused the vessel permission for a replenishment stop, the Maldives, under its new pro-China government, granted the ship clearance for an operational turnaround. In addition, Xiang Hong 01 is persistently active in the Indian Ocean region, steering near Sri Lanka's coast.

The ship meandered close to Vishakhapatnam off India's Eastern seaboard coinciding with India's declaration of a flight restriction zone over the Bay of Bengal. Consequently, the NOTAM for the missile testing was cancelled. There is widespread speculation that Yuan Hong 03 and Xiang Hong 01 will be making a port call at

Colombo after Sri Lanka lifted its moratorium on research vessels this Wednesday. However, there has been no official confirmation on this as yet. Maritime data shows its listed destination as "Open Sea". Given the upcoming NOTAM set for March 26 and April 3, it would be interesting to see if the ships actually halt at Colombo for operational turnaround before potentially moving close to the eastern board in time for the scheduled missile launch. The stated objectives of these vessels include conducting hydrography and hydrological surveys to support future PLA submarine

## Maldives seeks debt relief from India after insisting on troop withdrawal

(News Agency)-After his anti-India rhetoric, Maldives President Mohamed Muizzu has struck a reconciliatory tone, saying India will continue to remain his country's "closest ally" and urged New Delhi to provide debt relief to the archipelago nation.

The Maldives owed approximately USD 400.9 million to India by the end of last year.

Ever since he took oath as the president in November last year, the pro-China Maldivian leader has pursued a hardline stand towards India and within hours had demanded that Indian military personnel operating three aviation platforms be repatriated from his country by May 10. On Thursday, in his first interview with the local media since assuming office, Muizzu said India was instrumental in providing aid to the Maldives and has implemented the "greatest number" of projects.

India will continue to remain the Maldives' closest ally, he said and emphasised that there was no question about it, Maldives news portal Edition.mv said in a report that carried excerpts of Muizzu's interview to its Dhivehi language sister-publication 'Mihaaru.'

Muizzu's comments praising India came after the first batch of Indian military personnel left the island nation this month as planned. By May 10, Muizzu had demanded that all 88 military personnel, manning the three Indian aviation platforms, should leave the country.

India has been providing humanitarian and medical evacuation services to the people of the Maldives for the last few years using two helicopters and a Dornier aircraft.

## Russia adds 'LGBT movement' to list of extremist and terrorist organisations



(News Agency)-Russia has added what it calls the "LGBT movement" to a list of extremist and terrorist organisations, the state media said on Friday.

The move was in line with a ruling by Russia's Supreme Court last November that LGBT activists should be designated as extremists, a move that representatives of gay and transgender people said they feared would lead to arrests and prosecutions. The list is maintained by an agency called Rosfinmonitoring that has powers to freeze the bank accounts of the more than 14,000 people and entities designated as extremists and terrorists. They range from Al-Qaeda to US tech

giant Meta and associates of late Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny. The new listing refers to the "international LGBT social movement and its structural units", state news agency RIA said.

As part of a shift under President Vladimir Putin towards what he portrays as family values that contrast with decadent Western attitudes, Russia has tightened restrictions over the past decade on expressions of sexual orientation and gender identity.

Among other steps, it has passed laws outlawing the promotion of "non-traditional" sexual relations and banned legal or medical changes of gender.

## Mexico fears discrimination, strained US relations under new Texas immigration law



(News Agency)-Mexico filed a court brief supporting the US Department of Justice's opposition to a Republican-backed Texas law that would empower state authorities to arrest and prosecute people suspected of illegally crossing the US-Mexico border.

The law, known as Senate Bill 4, would make it a state crime to illegally enter or re-enter Texas from a foreign country and would allow state judges to order that violators leave the United States, with prison sentences up to 20 years for those who refuse to comply. It has been blocked by a federal judge and is currently under appeal. "Mexico is deeply concerned that SB 4 will be applied in a discriminatory manner and fears that its enforcement will lead to improper harassment, detention, removal, and criminalisation of Mexican citizens and individuals of Latino appearance," the document said. Critics of the measure point out that migrants who cross the border can already be charged with illegal entry or re-entry under US federal laws, and immigrant

advocates say a state law could fuel racial profiling.

On Thursday, dozens of migrants broke through fencing and razor wire and knocked down some Texas military forces in El Paso, Texas, after waiting on the US side of the Rio Grande, a Reuters witness said.

The group pushed past the forces to a sector of border wall where they could be processed by US Border Patrol, the witness said.

By 3 pm, the migrants had been "moved from the site" and now "the situation is under control," US Customs and Border Protection said in a statement.

About 139,000 migrants have been apprehended in the area around El Paso since October 1, 2023, according to internal CBP statistics, making it one of the busier stretches of the border.

Texas Governor Greg Abbott, a Republican, has taken a range of actions to discourage border crossings, saying Democratic President Joe Biden has not adequately secured the border.

## Canadian Commander of Volunteer Fighter Group Dies in Ukraine

(News Agency)-Jean-Francois Ratelle, a Canadian-born commander of the Norman Brigade, a volunteer fighting group in Ukraine, has tragically passed away. Known by the call sign "Hrulf," Ratelle's death was initially reported through online channels and later confirmed by Russian state-owned outlet Sputnik.

Global Affairs Canada has acknowledged the death of a Canadian in Ukraine but has not disclosed Ratelle's name or the cause of death. Spokesperson Grantly Franklin expressed condolences to Ratelle's family and stated that consular officials are in contact with local authorities to gather further information and



provide assistance to the family during this challenging time.

Ratelle, aged 36, had been serving as the commander of the Norman Brigade, a group composed of international volunteers fighting alongside Ukrainian forces against Russian-backed separatists in Eastern Ukraine. His death marks a significant loss for the brigade and the broader volunteer community supporting Ukraine in its conflict.

Details surrounding the circumstances of Ratelle's death remain unclear. However, his passing underscores the risks faced by volunteers who have joined the fight in Ukraine. Many individuals from various countries

have been drawn to support Ukraine's efforts to defend its sovereignty and territorial integrity against ongoing aggression. The Norman Brigade, named after Canadian Normandy veteran Norman Kirby, has gained attention for its involvement in the conflict. Ratelle's role as a commander highlights the international nature of the volunteer efforts in Ukraine and the dedication of individuals like him to the cause.

As news of Ratelle's death circulates, tributes and condolences pour in from fellow volunteers, supporters, and sympathizers across social media platforms and online forums.

# Rakul Preet shares her look in one-piece dress with intricate patterns



Actress Rakul Preet Singh, who recently tied the knot with producer-actor Jackky Bhagnani, is amping up the glam quotient albeit with a bit of drama.

On Wednesday, the actress took to her Instagram and shared a string of pictures of her latest look in her cream-coloured outfit.

In the picture, she can be seen donning a one-piece dress with intricate patterns. She tied her hair neatly in a bun, wore shimmery stilettos.

She wrote in the caption, "Drama only when we shoot".

The actress tied the knot with Jackky

Bhagnani on February 21 in Goa. It was a two-in-one wedding with two ceremonies — first, the 'Anand Karaj' in the Sikh tradition, and the second, a Sindhi-style ceremony — reflecting both Rakul and Jackky's cultural backgrounds.

The intimate wedding was attended, among others, by her family and close friends, including Shilpa Shetty, Raj Kundra, Aditya Roy Kapoor, Ananya Panday, Arjun Kapoor and Bhumi Pednekar.

Meanwhile, on the work front, the actress will soon be seen in S. Shankar's much-anticipated 'Indian 2' with Kamal Haasan.

## Drew Barrymore shares how she overcame the 'shame' of divorce

Hollywood star Drew Barrymore does not shy away from talking about her past and personal life anymore.

Barrymore was first married to Jeremy Thomas from 1994 to 1995. She then got married to Tom Green from 2001 to 2002.

In 2012, she married Will Kopelman and two welcomed two daughters together before divorcing in 2016.

Divorce became a topic of conversation after discussing Jennifer Lopez's 'Can't Get Enough' music video, in which she "pokes fun at being a four-time bride," reports people.com.

"I had so much shame around divorce and, for some reason, something happened, and I said, 'I'm no longer willing to feel this way.' And it just lifted from me," said Barrymore about her own experience with divorce.

She added that she views divorce as a way to save "the precious commodity we have on this planet, which is only our time."

The actress said: "And when you're truly in a situation that isn't functioning the way that, optimally, it hopes and wishes to be, we accept that, and we improve our quality of



life by moving forward. Divorce now, to me, I don't have shame around it. I'm totally liberated." Barrymore talked about how she felt with guest Marie Osmond, who discussed her own experience with divorce on the 'Never Been Kissed' actress' show. Barrymore heaped praise on Lopez's music video.

"Jlo, I love you. I really appreciate, again, (for) you bringing empowerment to where most people go to shame. We've all been in it. So go Jlo."

## Jimmy Shergill went to Gulzar to become an AD, got his role in 'Maachis' instead

Actor Jimmy Shergill, who is known for films like 'Tanu Weds Manu', 'A Wednesday', 'Special 26' and others, revealed that for his debut film 'Maachis', he had gone to filmmaker Gulzar to get a job as his assistant director. But, as luck would have it, the veteran filmmaker-lyricist offered him a role in the film.

The actor said that during a recent podcast, that his classes with acting coach Roshan Taneja were about to wrap up

and he didn't want to go back to his town. So he was looking for jobs in the film industry as an assistant director as he was aware that getting a break as an actor won't be a cakewalk.

The actor said in the IFP podcast: "I went to him to get a job as an assistant because my classes with Roshan Taneja were coming to an end. I didn't want to go home at that time because I was afraid that if I went home my family would not allow

me to come back. I met someone at a dinner and they were discussing that Gulzar sahab is starting his film. I requested the person to fix my meeting with Gulzar sahab saying that I want to assist him."

"A few days passed and I also forgot about it but, then I received a message that my meeting has been fixed with him. I met Gulzar sahab, we spoke and he offered me a small part in the film," he added.



## Tamannaah remembers the time she was rejected from 'Boogie Woogie'



Actress Tamannaah Bhatia, who was recently seen in the Telugu film 'Bhola Shankar', shared that she was rejected from 'Boogie Woogie', and it has been one hell of a journey for her to get to collaborate with actor Jaaved Jaaferi. The actress on Tuesday attended Prime Video's slate announcement event, 'Prime Video Presents', with the team of her upcoming streaming title 'Daring Partners', which also stars Diana Penty and Jaaved Jaaferi.

Tamannaah told the media: "I was once rejected from 'Boogie Woogie'. Since, then it has been a journey to share the same platform with Javed sir, it all has come full-circle." 'Daring Partners' follows the story of two best-friends, who embark on a daring journey as partners in an alcohol start-up. The series unfolds their audacious journey, where they challenge norms, bend rules, and 'craft' their destiny within a male-dominated industry. 'Daring Partners' will soon drop on Prime Video.

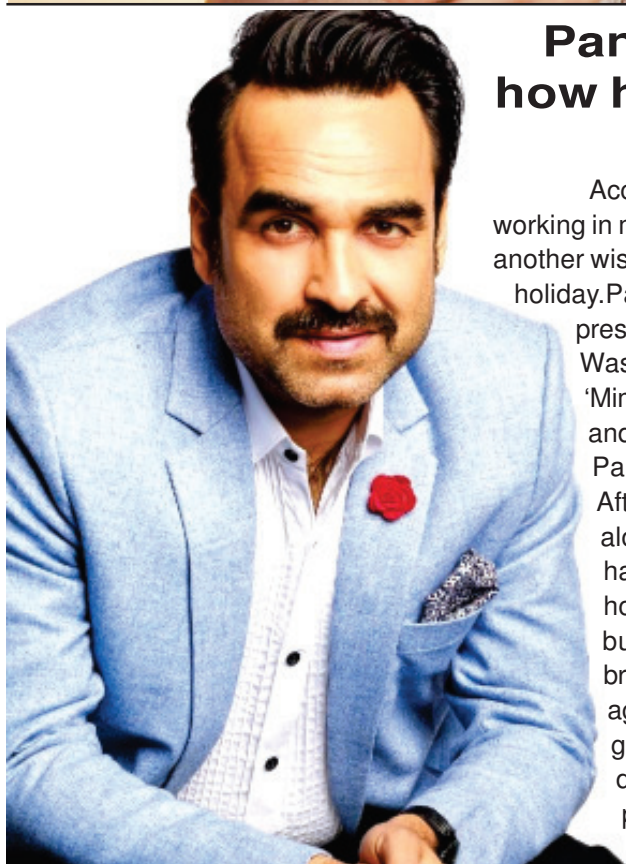
## Cardi B was 'afraid' to live her life, 'lost' herself to negative comments



Grammy-winning rapper Cardi B said that she was "afraid" to live her life after a barrage of negative comments on social media last year. "I just feel like I lost myself with everything," she said. "A lot of music commenters and everything and a lot of people just be like, 'She's afraid to drop an album, she's afraid to drop music,'" Cardi recalled. "Like last year, I barely dropped music. It's just like I was just afraid to do everything," she

told Complex's '360 with Speedy' series reports pagesix.com. It was in 2023, when Cardi B released 'Bongos' with Megan Thee Stallion. Her last album 'Invasion of Privacy' dropped in 2018. But her singles such as 'Up' and 'WAP' kept her in the news. "I was afraid to go live, I was afraid to post a picture, I was afraid to go to the club, and then the next day seeing people, what they going to say about me, and everything," Cardi said.

## Pankaj Tripathi reveals how he forgot his dream of 'taking a break'



Acclaimed actor Pankaj Tripathi said that after working in many good projects he had dreamt of, he has another wish which he completely forgot about – a good holiday. Pankaj, one of the best in Indian cinema at present, has worked in projects such as 'Gangs of Wasseypur', 'Fukrey', 'Newton', 'Bareilly Ki Barfi', 'Mimi', 'Ludo', 'Main Atal Hoon', 'Stree', 'Mirzapur' and 'Murder Mubarak' among many others. Is Pankaj living his dream? He told VOICE: "No. After doing so much work I have realised that along with that dream, I had one more which I had completely forgotten about. It was taking a holiday and doing absolutely nothing. I got so busy that I realised that I am not taking a break." Pankaj, a National School of Drama alum, agreed that he is living his dream of working in good content. He added: "But along with that dream I had another dream to work a little less, pay attention to quality and focus on health as that is also important."

# Priyanka puts activist foot forward, teases doc on violence against women



Actress Priyanka Chopra Jonas, who is spending some quality time with her husband Nick Jonas and their daughter in Mumbai, teased her upcoming documentary on Tuesday.

The documentary, produced by Priyanka is titled 'Women of My Billion'. It showcases the struggles, dreams, rights, and fight against all forms of violence that unite women in India.

The film follows Srishti's journey of 3800 km over 240 days, from Kanyakumari in South India to Kashmir in the North.

It has been told through the lens of the UN SDG Changemaker Award winner and activist and gives a unique

perspective on the group that deserves to be respected, empowered, and protected.

The glimpse of the film was shown at Prime Video's slate announcement event, 'Prime Video Presents' on Tuesday at a 5-star property in the Santa Cruz area of Mumbai. The event saw the announcement of close to 70 titles.

Talking to the media, Priyanka said, "The documentary raises an important question on violence against women which is not just an India issue but a global issue."

The documentary will drop on Prime Video.

## Bhumi to make OTT debut as Vish Dhamija's fictional DCP Rita Ferreira'



Bhumi Pednekar teased her OTT debut as a fiery cop in a tight black much-above-the-knee outfit that complimented her taut figure. Her Instagram post is captioned simply: "Am Ready #Daldal #RitaFerreiraSeries".

Pednekar, who was last seen in the thriller 'Bhakhshak', opens her OTT account with the crime series 'Daldal' on Amazon Prime Video. Written by Priya Saggi, Sreekanth Agneeaswaran, Rohan D'Souza and Hussain Haidry, the series will bring to life Vish Dhamija's fictional detective, DCP Rita Ferreira. Based on Dhamija's second novel, 'Bhendi Bazaar', 'Daldal' follows Ferreira as she sets out to catch a serial killer, even as she grapples with her past

traumas and present demons.

The blurb of the novel has this to say about its plot:

"1982. Three teenage girls planning a flight from the Soviet Union to the West end up being sold in Mumbai's red light area. The murders start a quarter of a century later. "The victims are all men. All of them are killed while waiting for trysts with high-class escorts. DCP Rita Ferreira is quick to recognise the serial-killer strain; the media isn't far behind. The news sends shockwaves through the city. The first serial killer in Mumbai's living memory is out on the streets. "As Rita grapples with the case, the killer gives her 24 hours to stop the next murder. Can she do that before she becomes the next victim?"

# Prime Video Unveils its Biggest Slate to Date with Close to 70 Series and Movies Across Languages and Genres

***Favorites, shows for young adults, original movies, co-productions, post-theatrical releases, reiterating its promise to be the first-choice of entertainment for every Indian, with continued investments in content across languages***

***Details about upcoming titles included separately in the appendix. Click here to access the list of titles, credits, key arts, and event pictures.***

MUMBAI, India— Prime Video, India's most loved entertainment destination, today unveiled its most ambitious and diverse content slate till date in the country at its second Prime Video Presents India showcase, with close to 70 series and movies, with most of them premiering on the service over the next 2 years. With 40 Original series and movies, and 29 of some of India's biggest and most anticipated movies, the new slate promises to bring the best of Indian entertainment to delight and engage customers.

Prime Video's upcoming originals offer something for everyone in the household, featuring a wide array of series and movies spanning several genres in Hindi, Tamil and Telugu. From riveting thrillers and engrossing dramas to rib-tickling comedies and spine-chilling horror, to intriguing unscripted shows, fascinating stories for young adults, high-octane action and alluring musical dramas, the diverse slate brings the best local stories to screen. This is in addition to movies across languages from some of India's most prestigious film studios



that will come to the service after their theatrical premieres.

"At Prime Video, it has been our focus to super-serve Indian customers with the best of entertainment across formats. From clutter-breaking Original series and movies, direct-to-service premieres to post-theatrical launches of some of the biggest hits across languages, our goal is to be the first choice of entertainment for every customer," said Sushant Sreeram, country director, Prime Video, India. "Our content broke

new grounds in 2023, helping India remain a front runner, across international locales, in new customer adoption and Prime member engagement. We are humbled by the love we have received from our customers, and want every story on our service to be someone's favourite show or movie. In sync with this, we are thrilled to unveil our biggest, most diverse slate till date, and are certain that our upcoming series and movies will continue to enthrall audiences, not

just in India but around the world."

"At Prime Video, it has been our ongoing mission to be a global showcase for diverse, authentic and rooted Indian stories, that can transcend linguistic and geographical borders," said Aparna Purohit, head of Originals, India and Southeast Asia, Prime Video. "In just 2023, our content was watched in over 210 countries and territories, in any given week, and trended in the top 10 on Prime Video worldwide for 43 of the last 52 weeks. It has been gratifying to witness the national and global impact of our shows and movies, and this fuels us to further champion Indian content on the global stage. As the home for storytellers and talent, we are also excited to partner with some of the most prolific names in Indian entertainment, and empower dynamic, new voices, to create stories that are fresh, powerful, inspiring and entertaining. We are confident that our upcoming slate of series and movies will pave the way for even more compelling narratives from India to emerge."

## Huma Qureshi showcases what her 'cheeky mornings be like'

Bollywood actress Huma Qureshi gave a glimpse of her "cheeky morning", which was "wrapped in sunshine".

Taking to Instagram, Huma shared a string of pictures from a photoshoot in Indian wear.

The actress is seen flaunting her flawless skin in the closeup pictures, while in others she is seen striking a pose in a yellow hued and embellished anarkali.

Huma took to her Instagram stories, where she tagged the pictures as "Cheeky mornings be like".

The actress captioned the images: "Wrapped in sunshine."

Huma's latest offering is 'Maharani' Season 3. The political series, which is created by Subhash Kapoor, is partly inspired by several incidents that happened in Bihar in the 1990s.

The show also stars Sohum Shah, Amit Sial, Kani Kusruti and Inaamulhaq.

The actress will be seen playing a female auto-rickshaw driver in an upcoming yet-untitled film directed by Vipul Mehta.



# Nvidia CEO Jensen Huang says everything in future will be robotic, unveils new AI chips

**Nvidia CEO Jensen Huang unveiled new AI chips during an event in California. He also said that in future, everything that moves will be robotic.**

Nvidia has been a frontrunner in the world of AI. The tech giant's GPUs have been used in developing tools like OpenAI's ChatGPT. And recently, the company unveiled new AI chips that will add to its dominance in the AI space. During the event, Nvidia CEO Jensen Huang said that the future will be all about robots, and we will get to see more of them in the coming years. This isn't the first time that the Nvidia CEO has talked about the promising future of AI and robotics. Recently, he said that in the next five years, AI could excel in various tests presented by the computer science industry.

Nvidia unveils new AI chips

According to a Bloomberg report, Nvidia introduced a new generation of its AI chips called Blackwell. The Blackwell processor design was unveiled during the GTC conference in San Jose, California. The chips promise significant improvements in processing speed for both training and inference tasks. Equipped with 208 billion transistors, the Blackwell chips are slated to power upcoming computers and products for major data centre operators like Amazon, Microsoft, Google, and Oracle.

Additionally, The initial Blackwell chip, known as the GB200, is set to be released later this year. Nvidia also encouraged its customers to upgrade by offering more potent chips. The report also mentions that many businesses and software developers are still struggling to obtain the current "Hopper" H100s and similar chips. However, during the conference, Nvidia CEO Jensen Huang expressed the need for larger GPUs and said, "Hopper is great, but we require bigger ones." The report also revealed that the new chip design presents manufacturing challenges due to its numerous transistors and relies on innovative techniques for seamless operation. Hence, Nvidia's manufacturing partner, Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Co., will utilise its 4NP technique for production.

Blackwell will also enhance connectivity with other chips and improve AI data processing capabilities, marking the next step in Nvidia's "superchip" lineup. Users will have the option to pair Blackwell with Nvidia's Grace central processing unit and select from networking chips utilising proprietary InfiniBand or Ethernet protocols. Nvidia also plans to update its



HGX server machines with the new chip. Originating as a provider of graphics cards popular amongst gamers, Nvidia's technology has been successful in various fields due to its ability to handle complex tasks in parallel. Blackwell aims to extend its reach beyond simple AI tasks, such as speech recognition, to more complex applications like generating three-dimensional videos.

Nvidia CEO Jensen Huang says robots are the future

Huang, while delivering his keynote, said that AI is the "driving force" as the economy goes through a change and the new Blackwell chips by Nvidia are the "engine to power this new industrial revolution."

He then added that Nvidia is working with

"the most dynamic companies in the world" and will recognise the potential of AI in every industry. Huang also spilled the beans about Project Groot, which consists of a new computer based on Blackwell. He added that Project Groot will be available for humanoid robots manufacturers. It will enable robots to learn human-like movements and understand natural language by observing them. Huang mentioned that tackling these challenges was one of the most exciting tasks in AI at that time.

Huang ended the event on a creative note - asking two robots to join him on the stage. He revealed that these robots were trained using Nvidia's simulation tools and said that in future, "everything that moves will be robotic."

## Mustafa Suleyman is new AI boss at Microsoft and no, he is not Indian

**Microsoft has hired Google DeepMind co-founder Mustafa Suleyman as its new AI division chief. Here is all you need to know about the new Microsoft AI CEO.**

Microsoft has just announced a new boss for its newly-created AI division. Mustafa Suleyman, who was one of the co-founders of Google's DeepMind, has been locked in as the new Microsoft AI CEO. Suleyman had announced the same on his social media handles, expressing excitement over the venture. Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella also welcomed Suleyman to the team, saying that he is "thrilled" to have the former Google executive onboard. So, who is Mustafa Suleyman, is he Indian, and what was he doing before joining Microsoft? Read on as we answer all these questions for you. Growing up and dropping out of Oxford



say that Suleyman enrolled at Oxford University to study philosophy and theology but decided to leave in his second year. He was just 19 when he dropped out of Oxford to team up with his friend and establish the Muslim Youth Helpline, a telephone counselling service that swiftly evolved into one of the UK's foremost mental health support platforms. This UK

charity offers free and confidential support services tailored to the needs of vulnerable young people, providing faith and culturally sensitive assistance. His commitment to social causes continued with engagements at the United Nations, the World Wide Fund for Nature, and the Dutch government, where he tackled issues ranging from conflict resolution to mental health advocacy.

**DeepMind and other projects**

In 2010, Suleyman co-founded DeepMind, an AI startup aimed at pushing the boundaries of machine learning and artificial intelligence. Following Google's acquisition of DeepMind in 2014, Suleyman assumed the role of VP of AI Products and AI Policy, driving innovation and ethical considerations in AI development. In 2022, Suleyman embarked on a new entrepreneurial journey, co-founding Inflection AI with LinkedIn co-founder Reid Hoffman.

Inflection AI quickly gained traction, raising significant funding and garnering support from industry giants like Microsoft and NVIDIA. Suleyman's leadership at Inflection AI underscored his dedication to advancing AI technology and its societal impact.

**Fame and recognition**

Suleyman's pioneering work extends beyond entrepreneurship, as evidenced by his recognition as one of the 100 most influential people in AI by Time Magazine in 2023. His innovative application of AI algorithms, such as reducing energy consumption in Google's data centers, reflects his commitment to leveraging technology for sustainable solutions.

In addition to his entrepreneurial and philanthropic endeavours, Suleyman is an accomplished author, with his book "The Coming Wave: Technology, Power, and the Twenty-first Century's Greatest Dilemma" earning critical acclaim and global recognition.

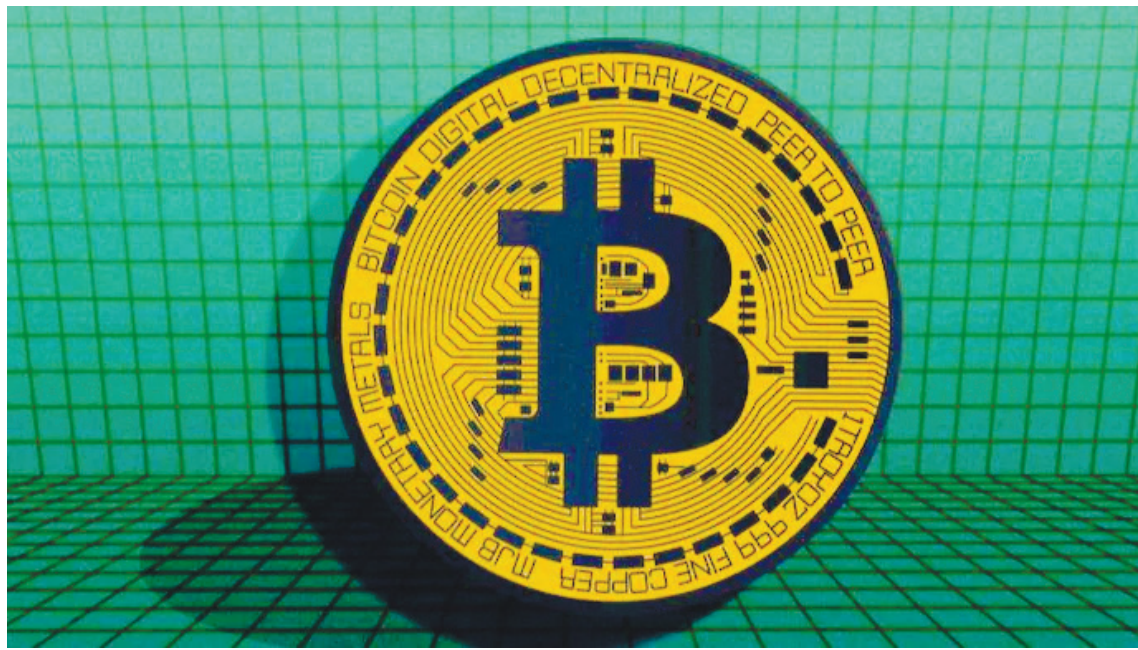
# Uday Kotak questions peso's future as Argentinians flock to Bitcoin

*The inflation rate in Argentina has increased to 276.20 per cent in February from 254.20 per cent in January 2024.*

With inflation soaring in Argentina, residents are turning to Bitcoin as a shield for their savings, with inflation rate increasing to 276.20 per cent in February from 254.20 per cent in January 2024.

Billionaire banker Uday Kotak has raised questions about whether the cryptocurrency might be a better option compared to the Argentinian peso.

"When countries manage macro badly, savers move to protect the value of their savings. Traditionally it was gold. Now bitcoin too! While I am not convinced about bitcoin, would it not be better than the Argentinian peso with 276% inflation?" said Kotak expressing his thoughts on X. Argentina currently grapples with one of the world's highest annual inflation rates, as noted in a report by Bloomberg. This economic scenario has led Argentinians to increasingly embrace Bitcoin as an alternative to the US dollar, as the value of



the peso continues to decline. According to Bloomberg's findings, Bitcoin purchases in Argentina have surged to nearly 20-month highs on the local cryptocurrency exchange Lemon. Lemon reported close to 35,000 Bitcoin purchases in the week ending March 10, which is double the average weekly volume compared to last year.

The growing adoption of Bitcoin among the citizens of Argentina shows their desire to safeguard their wealth amid a recession and escalating inflation, compounded by President Javier Milei's implementation of shock therapy policies to reboot the economy.

As exchanging pesos for dollars, the traditional main safe haven,

becomes less appealing, Bitcoin emerges as a viable alternative. Over the past two months, the black-market exchange rate for the peso has strengthened by 10 per cent against the dollar, while Bitcoin has appreciated by nearly 60 per cent against the greenback, according to Bloomberg. Earlier last week, Uday Kotak also commented on

the cryptocurrency market's resurgence and Bitcoin reaching record highs, suggesting that future competition for equity markets could arise from digital currencies.

"Capital formation in India has a lot to do with development and regulation of local markets. Having seen a revolution in local markets from badla systems to futures and options (F&O), the future competition could be in the form of cryptos," said Kotak. Kotak further pointed out that the legitimisation of virtual currency and its trading by developed nations fuels the momentum of the crypto trend, with investors viewing it as a hedge against other investments.

After a period of volatility, Bitcoin, the world's largest cryptocurrency, recently saw momentum, reaching an all-time high above \$73,500. However, this week, Bitcoin experienced a correction, dropping to the \$61,000 level in today's trading session.

## Reddit may need to ramp up spending on content moderation, analysts say



"dramatic" rise in expenses, Klymochko said. A spokesperson for Reddit said that alongside moderators, it also had robust internal safety teams, which used a combination of artificial intelligence, machine learning and human review to enforce its content policy

, opens new tab. The policy allows a ban on users and communities for harassment, inciting violence and hateful content. The company also invests in safety tools for moderators to help automate their tasks, the spokesperson added. Stamping out offensive content is crucial for social media platforms, which can see an exodus of advertisers keen on preventing ads from appearing next to unsuitable material. Many advertisers have been wary of Elon Musk's X after it loosened moderation policies. Josh White, former economist at the Securities and Exchange Commission and assistant professor of finance at Vanderbilt University, also said that banking on free volunteers is Reddit's biggest risk.

will need to spend heavily on content moderation as it may face greater scrutiny as a public company, analysts said, threatening its longstanding policy of relying on an army of volunteers to maintain order on its platform. The newly listed company warned in its initial public offering (IPO) paperwork that its unique approach to content moderation can sometimes subject it to disruptions like in 2023, when several moderators protested against its decision to charge third-party app developers for access

to its data. Depending on volunteers is not sustainable, given the regulatory scrutiny that the company will now face, said Julian Klymochko, CEO of alternative investment solutions firm Accelerate Financial Technologies. "It's like relying on unpaid labor when the company has nearly a billion dollars in revenue," he added. Reddit reported revenue of \$804 million in 2023, according to an earlier filing. Reddit will need to make substantial investments in trust and safety, which could lead to a

## Investors greenlight Trump's \$5.7 billion Truth Social deal



Former U.S. President (DWAC.O)

Donald Trump came a step closer on Friday to reaping a major windfall from his social media firm after investors in a blank-check acquisition company approved a merger currently worth about \$5.7 billion.

The deal values Trump's majority stake in the company that holds his app Truth Social at about \$3.3 billion. The windfall could prove vital as Trump grapples with the financial fallout of a string of legal cases against him, including a \$454 million judgment in a civil fraud case in New York. Shareholders of Digital World Acquisition Corp (DWAC)

, opens new tab, the special purpose acquisition company (SPAC) that plans to list Trump Media & Technology Group on the stock market through a merger, voted in favor of the deal on Friday. While the next step would be for the deal to be completed next week, its future is fraught with uncertainty. Digital World's former CEO Patrick Orlando and former Trump business associates Andy Litinsky and Wes Moss have separately sued to ask for more shares for their previous work on the deal. It is unclear how and when these cases will be resolved.

# Not following mattress hygiene can cost you dear, changing bed covers doesn't count

*While we change the bed covers regularly, how often do you clean your mattress? Maintaining mattress hygiene is important, and experts are here to tell you why.*

A good night's sleep has a lot to do with the mattress, which is why many of us find it difficult to sleep in a hotel bed.

While choosing a new mattress as well, we put in a lot of effort. It needs to be just right.

But when it comes to mattress hygiene, we often ignore it. We regularly wash the clothes we wear and the dishes we use, but cleaning the mattress where we spend a good 7-8 hours every night never comes to mind. The only cleaning we do is changing the sheets and pillow covers sporadically. But we must tell you that cleaning your mattress is crucial. You may not be able to squeeze it into a washing machine, but there are ways to keep it clean.

## A hub of diseases

"A dirty mattress can exacerbate allergies and respiratory issues due to the accumulation of dust mites, mould, and other allergens," Dr Shuchin Bajaj, founder-director of Ujala Cygnus Group of Hospitals, tells India Today.

Dust mites are microscopic organisms that thrive in warm, humid environments like mattresses. They feed on dead skin cells shed by humans and pets, and their faeces contain allergenic proteins that can trigger allergic reactions in sensitive individuals. The doctor adds that when someone sleeps on a dirty mattress infested with dust mites, they can inhale or come into contact with these



allergens, leading to symptoms such as sneezing, runny or stuffy nose, itchy eyes, coughing, and wheezing.

For individuals with asthma, exposure to dust mite allergens can worsen symptoms and increase the frequency and severity of asthma attacks.

Apart from this, a dirty mattress can attract pests like bed bugs, which can cause skin irritation and disrupt the quality of sleep.

## A hazard to your skin

Adding to this, Dr Andrea Rachel Castelino, consultant dermatologist at DermaZeal Clinic, Bangalore, says that a dirty mattress can be terrible for your skin.

Dust mites can trigger dry, itchy rashes.

This may not happen to every individual, but in particular, individuals with atopic eczema, their symptoms can worsen.

Itchy skin rashes, as seen in scabies, can result from an infestation of the mite *Sarcoptes scabiei*, also referred to as the 'itch mite', which may reside in mattresses. Scabies is caused due to itch mites and spreads from person-to-person transmission.

Although the mite cannot survive outside of the human body for long, it is known to survive on mattresses and clothes for up to 2-3 days. Anand Nichani, managing director of mattress brand Magniflex India, says that over time, accumulated sweat, body oils, and other bodily fluids can lead to unpleasant odours in mattresses.

Maintaining mattress hygiene through regular cleaning and ventilation can minimise odour buildup, ensuring a fresh and comfortable sleep environment.

He adds that good hygiene practices contribute to a healthier sleep environment and help extend your mattress' lifespan. By keeping it clean and free from moisture and allergens, you can prevent premature wear and tear, ensuring that your mattress provides optimal comfort and support for years.

But for how long can one go without changing their mattress?

Nichani explains that the lifespan of a mattress depends on various factors, such as the quality, frequency of use, and personal comfort preferences. Ideally, mattresses should be replaced every 7 to 10 years. However, some high-quality mattresses can last up to 15 years with basic care.

Signs that indicate it's time to replace a mattress include visible sagging, lumps, or if you wake up feeling stiff or sore.

Maintaining hygiene is important, but how?

**Use a mattress protector:** Invest in a waterproof and breathable mattress protector to safeguard your mattress from accidental spills, sweat, dust mites, and other allergens.

**Vacuum the mattress:** Vacuum your mattress every few months to remove dust, dirt, and debris accumulating on the surface and in the seams.

## Break your hunger habit: Why we eat without being hungry and how to stop

You come home after a regular day at work and instantly head to the kitchen to grab something to eat. You weren't even hungry, and neither the food you ate was your dinner meal. You ate it anyway. Out of habit, maybe?

For many, eating out of habit may look like devouring a generous quantity of snacks after dinner, or the urge to eat something now and then. For others, the mere sight of food can lure them into eating it even before they know it. Think of gorging on chips just because you had a packet lying at home. Or, enjoying a plate of pani puri only because you were passing by your favourite chaat vendor. Stress and boredom turn triggers and lead some people to grab something to eat.

This habit of eating even when you are not actually hungry can put your health at risk. Many fall for this mindless way of eating because of different reasons. But the good part is, it can be controlled.



## Why do we eat when we are not even hungry?

The concept of eating out of habit and boredom is influenced by various psychological and environmental factors. "The body sends signals to the brain by the hormones that the stomach is empty and hence we eat food, but eating when one is not hungry is 'hunger habit' which is developed over time," explains Ritika Samaddar, regional head, nutrition and

dietetics, Max Super Speciality Hospital, Saket, New Delhi.

"It can occur for various reasons. For instance, someone may develop a habit of snacking every 2-3 hours, even when not hungry, such as eating a snack post-dinner, which can become routine. Similarly, when the body experiences pain, food can serve as a distraction

from the discomfort. Additionally, stress, boredom, loneliness, or negative thoughts can all trigger feelings of hunger," says the nutritionist.

Nutritionist Deepti Khatuja further explains that when one feels stressed or emotional, a hormone called ghrelin (also known as hunger hormone) is produced. It results in hunger pangs and more eating.

## Impact on health

The harmless-looking habit of mindless eating, of which you are probably not even aware, can become the reason for serious ailments.

"This hunger habit results in excess eating which is normally not measured or counted for calorie intake. It often involves consuming mostly junk foods, such as sweets or fried items, which are high in calories and can lead to overweight or obesity problems," says Deepti Khatuja, chief clinical nutritionist at Fortis Memorial Research Institute, Gurugram.

"Overweight or obesity is the main cause of various degenerative diseases like diabetes, hypertension, cardiovascular diseases, and also certain types of cancers," the nutritionist adds.

According to the experts, eating out of habit and not because of hunger is also a reason behind the increase in childhood obesity and incidences of diabetes and hypertension at a very young age.

# The Source of Hatred in India Is Not a Mystery

**Elections are not just about forming governments, for they are opportune moments for political parties to forge shared public sentiments. Under the BJP rule, it is now about forging a Hindu public sentiment against Muslims.**



By Apoorvanand

"The run-up to the polls used to be packed with campaigns and debates. It was delightful to watch, as it was a celebration. It used to be full of colour, even when there was literally one-party rule for decades. Now, the run-up to polls comprises anything and everything that is foul. There is hardly anything to celebrate or worth cheering for. I just wish – we somehow as a society – sail through this unpalatable bitterness over the next 12 weeks."

I recalled this lament by Yashwant Deshmukh, a political analyst and founder-director of C-Voter, just when the Election Commission was announcing the dates of the much-awaited Lok Sabha elections. Deshmukh anticipates, and with some dread, that the election campaign would produce "unpalatable bitterness". Deshmukh is not counted among those who are known for their anti-government stance. What he is saying is felt by many people in this country, but making it public can earn you the ire of the government supporters who are quite vocal these days. The government, which has the army, police, and everything to defend itself from the people, now has the benefit of this voluntary army of supporters who are also people like us, who immediately get offended by any criticism of the government.

Since Deshmukh is not counted among the anti-government journalists, his words should be given some consideration. Otherwise, just because you are anti-government, anything you say, no matter how factual it is, loses all value. See, for example, the treatment of journalist Ashlin Mathew's question during the Election Commission's press conference, on the eve of the announcement of the Lok Sabha poll schedule. She asked the chief election



commissioner, Rajiv Kumar, that while he quickly reprimanded or censured opposition leaders for their inappropriate language, he seldom put on notice the leaders of the ruling party for their foul speech. These leaders include the Prime Minister or the Home Minister. The Election Commission hardly questions them for their objectionable language. The Election Commissioner did not even consider this question worthy of being answered. But everyone, including people like Deshmukh, would definitely agree that she was asking a legitimate question. Yet her question was ignored and was later trashed by social media users because they found out that she works for the National Herald, which is a newspaper associated with the Congress Party.

Deshmukh is an impartial observer. Not only is he not a critic of the government, but he also has the ability to see the 'positives' in its policies. Therefore, his words should not be ignored like those of Ashlin Mathew.

He also remembers the election campaigns of those times when the country was ruled by only one party, the Congress party. According to him, at that time, there was no cheapness and vulgarity which Deshmukh was complaining about

in the context of today's election campaign. In the last 10 years, the level of language used during election campaigns has fallen so much, that it has been filled with so much bitterness and hatred that it is difficult to tolerate it for even 12 weeks.

How did this happen? A lady politely asked Deshmukh. He answered that it happened because some people wanted to win at any cost and those who got defeated turned into sore losers. According to him, both are equally responsible for this situation.

This 'equivalencing' will make him look impartial, but he knows somewhere deep in his heart that he is evading the truth. Another reader remarked that Deshmukh knows about the forces which keep instilling bitterness among the citizens 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Knowing this, how can one talk about only 12 weeks of foulness or bitterness? It should not remain confined to 12 weeks. The hatred and bitterness that the media has spread will remain among the people of the country for years, he said.

In response to this sarcastic comment, Deshmukh posted a picture of a Rs 2 coin. This is how he wanted to discredit the question. But by retorting thus, Deshmukh

did exactly what he was complaining against. There was sarcasm in the question, but is there no substance in it? Shouldn't he, being a senior public communicator, have answered it despite its sarcasm? But he chose to ridicule it. But the gist of what others wrote in response to Deshmukh's comment is that in the last 10 years, every nook and corner of this country has been filled with hatred and violence. Hardly a day goes by when some such incident does not happen, arousing more bitterness and more hatred. Hatred has been spread day and night through TV and other media.

The fact that TV channels are spreading bitterness and hatred is evident from the fact that the News Broadcasting Standards Authority itself has repeatedly had to impose penalties on major TV channels for spreading hatred. And this is not a matter of any one channel.

Another reader wrote that Deshmukh knew how and why this evil had filled every pore of this society and who was responsible for it. The media is busy praising the man responsible for it.

Deshmukh is rightly worried about enduring these 12 weeks of the election campaign when there will be rain muck and filth. But one has to think that when these 12 weeks are weighing so heavily on nice people like Deshmukh, then what kind of experience it has been for the Muslims and Christians of this country having to spend all 12 months every year for the last 10 years wading through this filth. TV channels and other media platforms propagate hatred against Muslims day and night, and Muslims bear it. Muslims are openly abused on all social media platforms, and hateful comments are made against Islam, and this is justified in the name of free expression. Songs promoting violence against Muslims are openly played in processions during Hindu festivals. Big meetings are held in different cities in which speeches are given and slogans are raised inciting Hindus to kill Muslims. Hindu religious leaders make derogatory remarks against Muslims in their satsangs, and thousands of their devotees clap and laugh at them.

Then there is the Hindi film industry. Movies are being produced which instil hatred against Muslims. Also against those who are considered to be standing with the Muslims. The most recent and most brazen example is the movie JNU: Jahangir National University.

The leaders of the Bharatiya Janata Party, including the Prime Minister and other senior leaders, keep making hateful statements against Muslims, sometimes openly and sometimes covertly. As the elections approach, the number of such speeches increases manifold.

# How to say NO if you are too much of a people pleaser

Whenever someone asks you for a favour, do you have this irresistible urge to help them? Don't blame yourself, this is who you are. But here's how you can say no as a people pleaser.

Taylor Swift is one of the biggest stars on the planet, and yet, she fell into the trap of needing to be liked. The superstar admitted to being a people pleaser in her documentary 'Miss Americana'.

If you resonate with the singer, you would agree that if someone asks you for a favour, you will never say no. You will go out of your way to help them, even if it brings discomfort to you. We know that you would say 'helping people comes naturally to you' and you don't want people to feel that you always prioritise yourself first. But, at times, that is what you need to do to take better care of yourself. For those who don't belong to this category...

People pleasers are those who always focus on pleasing others and prioritise it over their own needs and desires, often to gain approval or avoid conflict.

Now, for those who do...

Dr Rahul Chandhok, head consultant, mental health and behavioral science from Gurugram's Artemis Hospital, tells India Today that most of the time, people pleasers end up sacrificing their well-

being, time, and resources for others, which results in feelings of resentment or burnout.

He says, "They tend to have traits such as excessive agreeableness, difficulty saying no, fear of rejection or criticism, low self-esteem, and a strong desire for validation. People pleasers face difficulty in setting boundaries, asserting themselves, and expressing their true thoughts and feelings, which can impact their relationships and overall mental health."

Why can't you say no?

"People pleasers find it tough to say no due to multiple reasons, which include facing rejection, dislike of disappointing others, and a need for validation," says psychiatrist Dr Austin Fernandes from Mumbai's Dr LH Hiranandini Hospital.

The doctor shares that this behaviour eventually results in the degradation of mental and emotional well-being over time. Regret follows soon after.

When you realise that you have sacrificed your own needs or values for others or when you realise that saying yes to please others has put you in a difficult



situation, you regret your decision.

Dr Chandhok explains, "You may feel resentful or frustrated with yourself for not standing up or prioritising your well-being. Furthermore, you might recognise missed opportunities or moments where you could have asserted yourself but chose not to, causing feelings of disappointment or self-blame."

You are risking your mental health. Continuously saying yes to others' demands can have negative effects on mental health. This can result in increased stress, anxiety, and feelings of resentment or frustration. Over time, these accumulated regrets can erode self-esteem and you may risk developing an irritating nature due to disrespect for your

own choices and desires.

This can contribute to a cycle of seeking external validation and approval to feel worthy or accepted. It may also cause exhaustion as you may get tired of trying to meet unrealistic expectations or please everyone around you.

Furthermore, neglecting your own needs and desires can lead to a lack of fulfilment and satisfaction in life.

Keep yourself first

"Setting boundaries and meeting your own needs are crucial for maintaining physical, emotional, and mental health," says Dr Chandhok.

It's important to realise that putting yourself first is not selfish but necessary for leading a balanced and fulfilling life.

Break this cycle

## SPECIAL FEATURE

# Ask NAPCA

**1. What is the difference between GEP (General Enrollment Period) and MA OEP (Medicare Advantage Open Enrollment Period)?**

GEP and MA OEP take place annually during the same time window but are distinct periods related to Medicare, and they serve different purposes.

GEP is for individuals who were first eligible for Medicare but didn't enroll in Medicare Part A and/or Part B during their Initial Enrollment Period (IEP) and who aren't eligible for a Special Enrollment Period (SEP). For example, if you delayed initial enrollment when you were first eligible for Medicare due to having current job-based health insurance, and later, when you retire or you are no longer covered by your employer insurance, you may be eligible to have 8-months SEP. If you missed the SEP, you should use GEP to enroll in Medicare. Note that MA OEP is specifically only for individuals who are already enrolled in a Medicare Advantage Plan (Part C, MA plan) and want to make changes.

**2. What can I do during GEP (General Enrollment Period)?**

During GEP, individuals can enroll in Medicare Part A and/or Part B for the



first time. Coverage will begin on the first day of the following month after you enroll, and you may face a late enrollment penalty because you missed your Initial Enrollment Period. The penalty could result in higher premiums for as long as you have Medicare. Note that you may not sign up for a stand-alone Medicare Part D prescription drug plan during GEP even if you need drug coverage with Original Medicare as drug coverage is not included. The GEP is specifically for enrolling in Medicare Part A and/or Part B, not for Part D. To have a stand-alone Part D plan, you may have to wait for the upcoming Medicare Open Enrollment Period that occurs between October 15 and December 7 every year.

**3. What can I do during MA OEP (Medicare Advantage Open Enrollment Period)?**

As mentioned in 1, MA OEP is only for those who already are enrolled in

MA plan.

You can switch from one MA plan to another, or you can disenroll from your Medicare Advantage plan and return to Original Medicare (Part A and Part B). If you return to Original Medicare, you have the option to enroll in a stand-alone Medicare Part D prescription drug plan. Note that MA OEP does not apply to Original Medicare beneficiaries, that means you cannot switch from Original Medicare to MA plan, you cannot join a part D prescription drug plan or cannot switch one part D plan to another if you're in Original Medicare.

**4. Can I add a Medigap plan to Original Medicare during GEP or MA OEP?**

Medicare basically covers 80% of the cost for each Medicare-covered service or item after you've paid your deductible. If you decide to stay with Original Medicare (Part A and B) and want to cover the 20% financial gap

that Medicare doesn't pay for, you may want to add a Medigap plan to your Original Medicare. Ideally, the best time to purchase a Medigap policy is during your Medigap OEP, which starts the first day of the month that you're both 65 or older AND enrolled in Medicare Part B. This period lasts for six months. During this period, Medigap companies must sell you a policy at the best available rate regardless of your health status, and they cannot deny you coverage. If you miss your Medigap Open Enrollment Period, you can still apply for a Medigap policy, but you may face underwriting which insurers use to figure out your health status and determine whether to offer you coverage, at what price, and with what exclusions or limits. Based on your pre-existing health conditions, you may have to have a waiting period or insurers may charge you more or deny coverage based on pre-existing conditions.

Be aware that this information only pertains to protections that apply nationwide. Some states have other protections that give their residents additional opportunities to enroll in a Medigap.

# The Rising Church Interference in Indian Politics

By: Rajesh Singh

In a written statement dated 14 March of this year, the Archbishop of Bengaluru, Most Rev. Peter Machado, made a fervent appeal. He called upon the Christian faithful to observe 22 March as a "day of prayer and fasting for peace and harmony in our country." He then went on to underline, in that same appeal, issued on the letterhead of the Archdiocese of Bengaluru, the power of fasting and prayer, and added that it was the "most effective means in our hands who have committed ourselves to pursue truth, non-violence, healing, justice and reconciliation in courageously combating the force of falsehood...conflict and division."

These appear to be inspiring words, indeed. So are the ones from another passage in the written outreach to the faithful: "So, dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ...let us place our petitions before God...especially as we go into the general elections to choose leaders who are secular, non-communal, non-corrupt, committed to the democratic traditions of our country..." But the facade of the 'inspiring' appeals crumbles and the situation becomes suspicious when political allusions are made, which leads one to question: What business is it of the Church to exhort its faithfuls on



matters of politics?

It can be argued that the written circular is general in nature and not for, or against, any particular party. But that argument stands shattered when one peruses the phrases in the second paragraph of the Archbishop's statement. It is here that the real purpose is made evident, and it's here that Rev. Machado exposes the true intent behind his appeal.

Sample the following: "The increasing

impoverishment of the masses, the growing monopoly of the crony capitalists, the growing gap between the rich and the poor, the worsening unemployment among the educated youth...the unhindered multiplication of hate speeches, the systematic attempts at depriving millions of our fellow Indians of their citizenship rights...the unscrupulous dilution of minority rights, the frequent bulldozing

of homes, shops and the places of worship of the minorities on flimsy accusations..." The rant continues.

While the language and context of the accusations can hardly disguise the target of the Archbishop's ire, the more shocking part is the sweep of allegations that come with no evidence to back the claims. When Rev. Machado talks, for example of "increasing impoverishment," he fails to remember that close to 25 crore people in the last nine years have been brought out of poverty. His claim about "crony capitalism" is an echo of the allegations that Opposition parties have been levelling against the current government, without any proof. The Archbishop refers to "unhindered multiplication of hate speech," but forgets that hate-speech givers have been pulled up by our courts.

As for attempts to take away the citizenship of Indians, surely Rev. Machado is referring to the Citizenship Amendment Act. But sadly, he displays a complete lack of understanding of this law, which does not seek to deprive any Indian of his or her citizenship—any Indian, whether it be Hindu, Muslim, Christian, or of any other religious denomination. Why, then, is he fear-mongering by resorting to brazen falsehood?

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that's  
scary?**

Sharks can be terrifying.  
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deadly, is distracted driving.

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Don't drive distracted.**

**NHTSA** **ad**

By Amitabh Tiwari

With the Election Commission announcing the dates for the grand finale of the 2024 Lok Sabha polls, election fervour has seized the nation. By June 16, when the term of the current Lok Sabha concludes, India will have a new government in place.

Both the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Congress have finalised their alliances, a factor that could play a decisive role in determining the ultimate winner. It is worth noting that in the 2019 elections, both parties refrained from contesting over a 100 seats each, relying heavily on allies in these constituencies.

Initial Hiccups For Both

Despite initial setbacks, such as the exodus of parties like the Shiv Sena, the Janata Dal (United) (JD-U), the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD), and the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK), the BJP appears to have regained some ground by forging alliances with the Rashtriya Lok Dal (RLD) and the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP), as well as by the return of the JD(U) and the Telugu Desam Party (TDP). Additionally, the Shiv Sena faction recognised by the EC as the true Sena is now in the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) fold.

Similarly, the Congress campaign commenced on a rocky note with



## BJP vs INDIA Bloc - Both Are Ready, But One Has More Lost Opportunities

the defections of Nitish Kumar and Jayant Chaudhary to the NDA, along with internal splits within the NCP and Shiv Sena, and delays in finalising seat-sharing agreements with Mamata Banerjee. Nevertheless, the Congress has consolidated its position by securing seat-sharing agreements with the Samajwadi Party (SP) in Uttar Pradesh, gaining the support of Uddhav Thackeray's faction of the Shiv Sena, and forming a coalition with the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) in five states, excluding Punjab.

The question arises: which party is better prepared in terms of

alliances? We've categorised Lok Sabha seats into five types based on the strength of party alliances in 2019: (i) similar, (ii) weaker, (iii) stronger, (iv) lost opportunities, and (v) standalone seats.

Alliance Arithmetic In INDIA

Critics have argued that today's INDIA (Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance) bloc is essentially the UPA (United Progressive Alliance) of yesteryears. However, this criticism is no longer valid. The Congress has retained alliances in 98 seats, which constitutes 18% of the Lok Sabha strength. These seats are primarily in Tamil

Nadu, Kerala, Jharkhand, and the Northeastern States. The alliances have been in place for a long time and are considered settled. Hence, there is limited potential for growth from these agreements.

In 28 seats - 5% of the Lok Sabha strength - the Congress has weaker alliances, particularly in Karnataka, where the Janata Dal (Secular) (JD-S), its erstwhile ally, has now aligned with the BJP. Despite winning only one seat in 2019, Congress hopes for significant gains here, banking on the implementation of guarantees by its state government. However,

the departure of the JD(S) could dent its prospects, especially in Southern Karnataka.

The Congress, however, has a stronger alliance in 180 seats compared to 2019. These seats are in Delhi (AAP), Uttar Pradesh (SP), Jammu & Kashmir (National Conference), Maharashtra (Uddhav's faction of Shiv Sena), Goa, Chandigarh, and Gujarat (AAP). With just two seats won in 2019 here, the Congress may expect some gains in these areas with the new alliances.

Then, there is a block of 82 seats spread across Bihar and West Bengal. However, the INDIA front seems to be a weak lot here as key erstwhile allies like the JD(U) and the Trinamool Congress have left the grouping. When the JD(U) was part of the INDIA bloc, opinion polls had predicted substantial gains for the alliance in Bihar. A deal with the Trinamool could have led to some gains for the block in West Bengal based on 2019 numbers.

The Congress is in contest in 155 seats without major allies, which make up 29% of the Lok Sabha strength. It will be fighting alone in states like Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Rajasthan, Uttarakhand, Himachal Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, and Odisha. In five states, it faces a bipolar battle with the BJP, where regional parties play no significant role.

# A Warning for Democrats on the Hur Report

By Ankush Khardori

Believe it or not, Robert Hur was not always a political pariah among Democrats in Washington.

As recently as six weeks ago, he was just a Republican lawyer and former federal prosecutor handling one of the Justice Department's least enviable assignments as the special counsel appointed to oversee the investigation into Joe Biden's possession of classified documents. Then came his findings last month. The 345-page report concluded there was insufficient evidence to bring criminal charges against Biden, but of more import to the political class were the several references to Biden's poor memory. Coming at a time when the president faced concerns about his age and tepid polling in his reelection bid, the report—followed by the president's verbal slip-up at a press conference designed to rebut Hur—was explosive.

Republicans saw an obvious political opportunity, and called Hur to testify before Congress Tuesday at a hearing on the report.



Democrats should tread carefully as they question him.

Put bluntly, going hard after Hur could be a huge mistake. Hur is a potentially crucial witness in this hotly contested election year, and he does not have the resume to make him out to be a GOP activist or a MAGA devotee. He is also uniquely situated to inflict political damage on Biden if he wants to—and to do so in ways that are probably not apparent if you haven't read his report in full. In fact, poking

at Hur's integrity could easily backfire if it prompts him to unleash more fully on Biden.

Holding back may not be easy, particularly if Democrats are trying to play to their base. Liberal pundits loudly complained about media coverage of the episode, and it quickly became a truism among professional Democrats that Hur was a political hack who never should have been trusted with the probe and who was plainly out to hurt Biden in an election year. So

Democrats have a choice to make during the hearing: Do they resurrect the hyperventilating onslaught against Hur to his face—which he will now be able to respond to—or do they try to take the temperature down and perhaps try to show the public that they aren't secretly worried about their own nominee's fitness for a second term?

To Hur's supporters, the reaction to the report has been over the top and needlessly personal.

"One of the benefits of releasing the detailed declination memo is that ad hominem attacks are unnecessary," former deputy Attorney General Rod Rosenstein told me, referring to the kind of report that prosecutors provide when they conclude charges are not warranted against someone following a criminal investigation.

"You can reach your own decision about the merits," he added. "Obviously Merrick Garland did not appoint a political partisan."

Rosenstein is of course no stranger to controversy himself, and he has

known Hur for a long time. Rosenstein hired Hur as a young prosecutor in 2007 when he was the U.S. Attorney in Maryland, a position that Rosenstein held through the Obama administration. After winning the 2016 election, Donald Trump tapped Rosenstein to be his first deputy attorney general, and Rosenstein enlisted Hur to serve as his principal deputy—the same position, as it happens, that also catapulted Garland to national prominence nearly 30 years ago.

Hur was eventually nominated to serve as the U.S. Attorney in Maryland and was confirmed by the Senate in a voice vote in early 2018. While in office, he drew praise for his handling of violent crime and public corruption cases. When he left in early 2021, Maryland's senators—both Democrats—released a statement saying that "Rob should be proud of his legacy to make Marylanders safer, preserve the rule of law, and uphold the civil rights of all of our residents."

# We are about to witness in Gaza the most intense famine since the second world war



By Alex de Waal

Gaza is already the most intense starvation catastrophe of recent decades. The death toll from hunger and disease may soon surpass the body count from bombs and bullets.

The Famine Review Committee reported this week that Gaza is facing "imminent famine".

The Integrated Phase Classification (IPC) system, set up 20 years ago, provides the most authoritative assessments of humanitarian crises. Its figures for Gaza are the worst ever by any metric. It estimates that 677,000 people, or 32% of all Gazans, are in "catastrophic" conditions today and a further 41% are in "emergency" conditions. It expects fully half of Gazans, more than 1 million people, to be in "catastrophe" or "famine" within weeks. A parallel report from the Famine Early Warning System Network of the US Agency for International Development sounds the same alarm. It is the clearest warning that the network has given at any time in its 40-year history. A rule of thumb is that "catastrophe" or "famine" conditions mean a daily death rate from hunger or disease of two people out of 10,000. About half are children under five years old. The arithmetic is simple. For a population of 1 million, that is 200 deaths per day, 6,000 per month. By way of comparison, the worst famine on the IPC record books struck Somalia in 2011, through a combination of war, drought and a shutoff in aid. At its nadir, 490,000 people were in "catastrophe" conditions with a larger number in "emergency" conditions. An estimated 258,000 people perished over 18 months.

The only other occasion when IPC data showed famine was in South

Sudan in 2017. Civil war plunged half the country's 10 million people into a food emergency, with 90,000 suffering famine. About 1,500 people starved to death in the two districts devastated by famine, but four years of wider food



emergency claimed about 190,000 lives.

The "famine" threshold is arbitrary. In the next-worst stage, that of "emergency" conditions, children are already dying of starvation. When experts first drew up a prototype "famine scale", they had a lower bar for declaring famine, roughly equivalent to the IPC's "emergency", and included "severe" and "extreme" famine categories that correspond to the IPC's "famine" conditions. They also included a measure of magnitude – total numbers affected and dying – and later considered duration too. Some food emergencies last years, with the death toll slowly accumulating, without ever crossing the IPC's "famine" threshold. Famine was never declared for Yemen. But food emergency affecting millions over years of war caused as many as 250,000 starvation deaths. In the Tigray region of Ethiopia, the story is similar.

We are about to witness most intense famine since the second

world war. It won't be the biggest, because starvation is confined to the 2.2 million residents of the Gaza Strip.

Our picture of starvation is a stick-thin child wasting away, whose eyes seem swollen as her skin

shrinks to her bones. Some children suffer kwashiorkor, acute malnutrition marked by a tell-tale swollen belly.

As the body starves, its immune system begins to fail. The malnourished fall prey to waterborne infections and suffer diarrhoea, which causes devastating dehydration. Other communicable diseases – which today could include Covid – also ravage communities. The most common cause of death in a famine is disease, not starvation as such.

"Starvation" is defined in international criminal law as depriving people of objects indispensable to survival. That includes not just food but also medicine, clean water, sanitation, shelter, cooking fuel and maternal care for children. When people are driven from their homes into overcrowded camps, when water supplies are scarce or unclean, when toilets are nonexistent or unsanitary, when injuries are left untreated, disease outbreaks

become more common and more deadly.

Lacking shelter and exposed to cold and rain in winter, and heat and dust in summer, people succumb to hunger and disease more quickly. Without electricity or cooking fuel, mothers cannot prepare meals that young children can readily digest.

Epidemiologists in London and Baltimore have generated projections for the likely death toll in Gaza from all causes over the months to August. If epidemics are included, their "status quo" scenario projects a range of 48,210 to 193,180 deaths, while under the "with escalation" scenario those figures range even higher.

Gaza's health crisis has its own dreadful momentum. Even if the shooting ends today and the aid trucks begin to roll, the dying will carry on for some time.

And even when the numbers of people needlessly dying dwindle, the scars of famine will endure. Little children who survive starvation face lifelong deprivation. They tend to grow up to be shorter than their peers and suffer reduced intellectual capacity. The World Health Organization warns of an "inter-generational cycle of malnutrition" whereby infants with low birth weight or undernourished girls grow into smaller and less healthy mothers. The damage caused by the 1944 Dutch hunger winter can still be observed generations on.

Famine is a social trauma too. It tears apart communities and destroys livelihoods. People are forced into the utmost indignities, breaking taboos in what they can eat and how they can get the necessities of life. Mothers have to ration the food they give to their children. They turn away hungry neighbours from their door.

Families sell their most treasured heirlooms for a pittance to buy a meal.

What solace is it to tell parents who have buried their child that it was not their fault? Survivors' anguish lasts a lifetime.

Such is the lingering sense of shame that people cannot speak openly about famine, sometimes for generations. It took almost 150 years before Ireland began publicly to commemorate the great hunger of the 1840s.

All of this is known. And in Gaza there is no margin of doubt.

In most famines, there's a margin of uncertainty in predictions, because people may be able to find unexpected sources of food or money. In parts of rural Africa, grandmothers may know about edible wild roots and berries or migrant workers may find creative ways of sending cash to their families. In Gaza, Israel knows every calorie that's available. In 2008, the coordinator of government activities in the territories calculated every aspect of Gaza's food production and consumption, in minute detail, and extracted the "red lines" needed to keep Palestinians on what it called a "diet", just short of starvation.

Until 7 October 2023, Israel was, according to its own analysis, just on the right side of the international laws prohibiting starvation. About 500 truckloads of essentials entered every day to complement local farms, fisheries and livestock. In recent months, less than one-third of that number has been allowed to enter, while local food production has been reduced to almost zero.

Israel has had ample warning of what will happen if it continues its campaign of destroying everything necessary to sustain life. The IPC's Famine Review Committee report on 21 December authoritatively warned of starvation if Israel did not cease destruction and failed to allow humanitarian aid at scale. Israel's own judge nominated to sit at the international court of justice, Aharon Barak, voted with the court's majority in favour of "immediate and effective measures to enable the provision of urgently needed basic services and humanitarian assistance".