

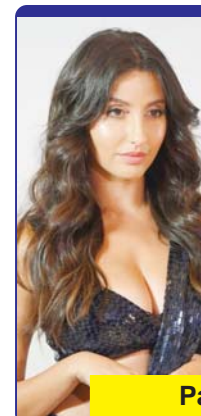


The South Asian



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Nora Fatehi celebrates 'good vibes'

Page 23

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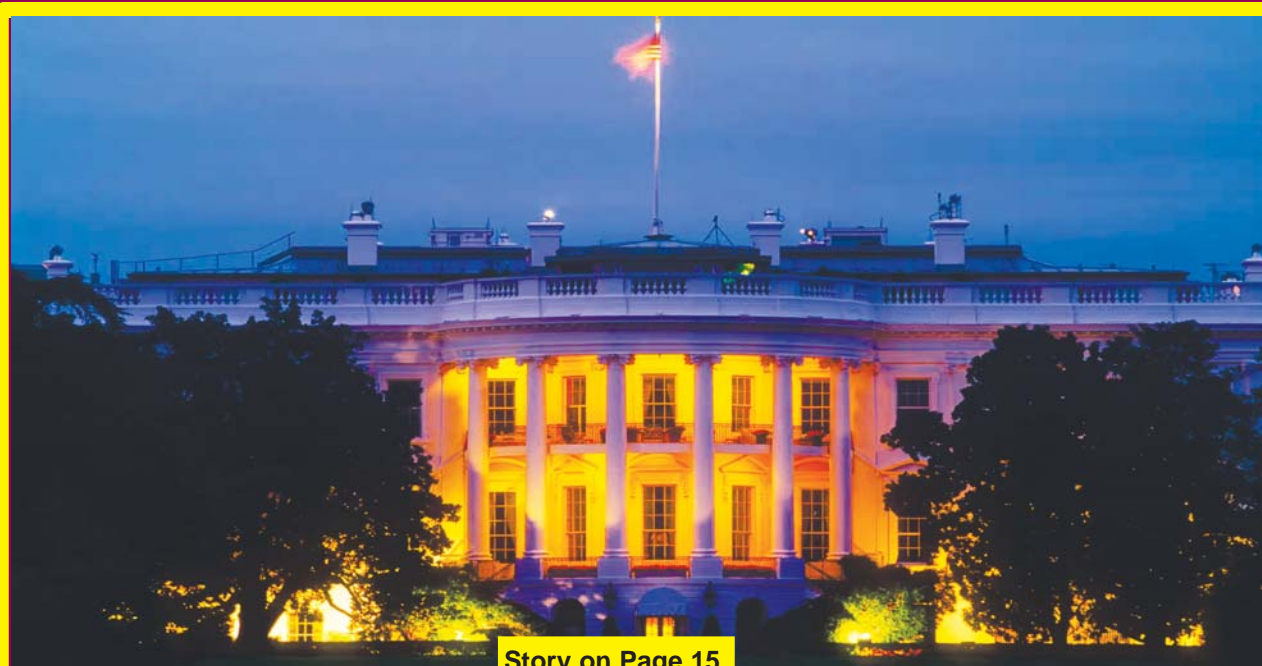
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'Sitting on a powder keg'

US braces for a year, and an election, like no other

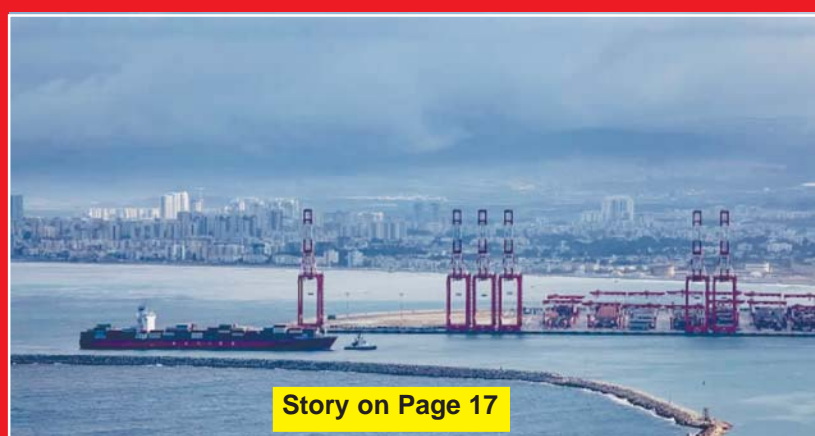


Story on Page 15

The Year's Worst Climate News You Haven't Heard About



Story on Page 16



Story on Page 17

Red Sea Crisis Explained: How Have Houthis Disrupted International Sea Trade, How Serious Is Their Security Threat?

US military's secretive spaceplane launched



Story on Page 17

Anti-Human Trafficking Cell to probe grounding of plane with Indians in France

Story on Page 18



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6 relatives of Andhra Pradesh MLA die in car accident in US



(Sai Bureau)- Six people hailing from Amalapuram town in Andhra Pradesh's Konaseema district, who are relatives of Mummdivaram MLA P Venkata Satish Kumar, died in a car accident in Texas, USA on Tuesday evening local time.

The victims were identified as P Nageshwar Rao, Seetha Mahalakshmi, Naveena, Kruthik, Nishitha and another person, who is also a relative of the family. Seven people were travelling in the car when it collided head-on with a truck having two occupants on Highway 67, a farm-to-market road in Cleburne City in Texas. The sole survivor in the car, Lokesh, has been airlifted to a hospital where he is undergoing treatment, but is said to be critical, the MLA said.

Donald Trump's son doesn't want Nikki Haley as his dad's running mate

Donald Trump Jr has said he would go to "great lengths" to make sure that Nikki Haley is not his father's running mate for the 2024 US elections.

(Sai Bureau)- Donald Trump Jr, the son of former US President Donald Trump, has voiced his opposition to Nikki Haley being his father's running mate for the 2024 US elections, saying that he would go to "great lengths to make sure that doesn't happen".

Trump junior's opposition to Haley comes as the former Carolina governor has inched closer to Donald Trump in the 2024 Republican presidential primary in New Hampshire. The primary, scheduled to be held on January 23 in the new year, sees Haley having 29 per cent support, just behind Trump who has 33 per cent support, according to a poll by American Research Group Inc. Another poll by the Saint Anselm College Survey Center at the New Hampshire Institute of Politics showed that Nikki Haley has emerged as a clear alternate choice to Trump for Republican voters. In a recent interview with Newsmax's Eric Bolling, Donald Trump Jr said, "I wouldn't have her and I would go to great lengths to make sure that that doesn't happen."



"Nikki Haley wants never-ending wars. She's a puppet of the establishment in Washington, DC. She's the new favourite candidate of the billionaire class because they want control—no different than academia and Harvard and using their billions to exercise influence," he added, as quoted by New York Post. Nikki Haley served as the US ambassador to the UN from 2017 to 2018 under Donald Trump's government. Her polling surge has led to speculation about her running for the Vice-President's post, something which has

been endorsed by former House Speaker Kevin McCarthy and Florida Governor Ron DeSantis' campaign. According to a report in CBS, Trump has asked some of his confidants for their thoughts on Haley as his running mate.

However, Nikki Haley has downplayed such speculations, saying she "doesn't want to run for second".

Speaking about these speculations, Trump Jr said, "Ron DeSantis has proven that he doesn't have what it takes to be on that stage. He's embarrassed himself that way."

Sikh taxi driver in Australia returns AUD 8,000 left behind by passenger



(Sai Bureau)- Charanjit Singh Atwal, a Sikh taxi driver in the heart of Melbourne, Australia, has emerged as the living epitome of a modern-day Good Samaritan this festive Christmas season. Atwal returned a staggering 8,000 Australian dollars (over Rs 4.55 lakh) to a passenger who had inadvertently left behind cash in the backseat of his taxi. He told 9 News Melbourne that the cash was everywhere in the backseat and instead of pocketing the money for himself, he took it to the police. When

asked if it crossed his mind to keep the cash, he replied, "No, never." Charanjit Singh also added that he did not need a reward from the owner. His story went viral on the internet with people expressing their admiration for his benevolence. "It's positive stories like this that will encourage others to do good as well," commented a user.

People commented on his honesty and blessed him for his good deed. "May he be blessed abundantly," wrote another user.

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Ram Temple Consecration: Who Is In, Who is Out, Who Will Skip the Grand Event?

(News Agency)-Several celebrities from film and television, industrialists, political leaders, sportspersons as well as seers, scholars, and prominent personalities from different fields have been invited for the consecration ceremony of the Ram temple in Ayodhya on January 22. While Prime Minister Narendra Modi is set to deliver a speech at the grand event, Uttar Pradesh chief minister Yogi Adityanath is overseeing the preparations for the long-awaited inauguration.

According to Ram Temple Trust general secretary Champat Rai, at least 4,000 saints and 2,200 other guests have been invited to the ceremony, including Tibetan spiritual head Dalai Lama, heads of major temples like Kashi Vishwanath, Vaishno Devi and representatives of religious and constitutional institutions.

The guest list will also comprise owners of large media houses and senior journalists, one representative each from 50 foreign countries, families of kar sevaks who died in the Ram Mandir movement. Invitations will also be going to painter Vasudev Kamat, ISRO director Niles Desai among others. The Congress, however, has not divulged its stand on



whether top party leaders will be attending the consecration ceremony, even as it said it was thankful for the invitations. Congress general secretary KC Venugopal said: "You will know about the party's stand. You will know on January 22 about the participation. They have invited us, we are very much thankful to them for inviting us, let us (see)."

THOSE NOT ATTENDING OR LEFT OUT

OF INVITEES' LIST

NCP president Sharad Pawar said he has not been invited to the inauguration of the Ram temple in Ayodhya and targeted the BJP saying it was difficult to understand if the party was using the issue for political or commercial purposes. "Don't know if it (BJP) is using the issue for political or commercial purposes. We are happy that the temple is coming up for which many

have contributed," Pawar said.

While the CPI(M) has been invited, its general secretary Sitaram Yechury declined it while underlining the belief that religion is a personal choice. "Our policy is to respect religious beliefs and the right of each individual to pursue their belief. Religion is a personal choice not to be converted into an instrument for political gain. Comrade Sitaram Yechury will not attend the ceremony despite receiving an invitation to do so," the CPI (Marxist) said in a post on X.

In a statement, the politburo of the Left party said Yechury received an invitation to attend the inauguration ceremony. "The CPI(M) policy has been to respect religious beliefs and safeguard the right of every individual to pursue their belief. It believes that religion is a personal choice not to be converted into an instrument for political gain. Therefore, we will not be attending the ceremony," the party said. It added that it is "most unfortunate" that the BJP and the RSS have converted a religious ceremony into a state-sponsored event directly involving the prime minister, Uttar Pradesh CM and other government functionaries.

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Shrimad Bhagavad Gita has solutions for individual to global challenges: Amit Shah

(By JAG MOHAN THAKEN)

Chandigarh, India- The solution to all the problems of an individual, the country and the entire world lies in the teachings of Geeta, the messages of Geeta should reach every part of the country and the world, exhorted Indian Union Home and Cooperation Minister, Amit Shah, who was in Kurukshetra on Friday to participate in the ongoing International Gita Mahotsav (IGM). He underscored the timeless wisdom embedded in Shrimad Bhagavad Gita as a solution to individual, societal, national, and global challenges.

Amit Shah said that the purpose of spreading the knowledge of the Gita is not merely to prevent wars but to motivate individuals for a righteous cause. He emphasized that Lord Krishna imparted this knowledge to Arjuna for the establishment of religion on earth and the welfare of society.

While addressing the gathering on Friday, during the Sant Sammelan organized as a part of International Gita Mahotsav, Shah not only lauded the Haryana Chief Minister, Manohar Lal Khattar led the government to elevate cultural harmony globally through the IGM since 2016 but also highlighted the historical significance of Kurukshetra, where over 5000 years ago, Lord Shri Krishna delivered the profound message of Gita.

Sharing a personal anecdote, the Union Home Minister, Shah revealed that the teachings of Holy Gita, instilled by his mother since childhood, have been a guiding light, helping him navigate life's challenges without succumbing to disappointment and sorrow.



Acknowledging the efforts of the Haryana Chief Minister, Amit Shah praised him for giving the Gita Mahotsav an international character, expanding its format, and facilitating the global dissemination of Gita's timeless wisdom. The Union Home Minister commended the visionary leadership of Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, stating that from 2014 to 2024, historic decisions have been made to awaken India's self. These decisions include the construction of the Shri Ram temple, the abrogation of Article 370, and transformative developmental projects.

Expressing his belief in the role of such programmes, Amit Shah said that initiatives like the IGM play a pivotal role in spreading the teachings and knowledge of Holy Gita to the masses, contributing to the re-establishment of Gita's profound principles worldwide.

Addressing on the occasion, the Haryana Chief Minister, Mr. Khattar said that like Iron Man, the Prime Minister and Home

Minister are taking decisions for the unity of the country.

The Chief Minister warmly welcomed Union Home and Cooperation Minister, Amit Shah to Kurukshetra on behalf of the state's 2.80 crore residents. The Chief Minister commended the Government of India, operating in alignment with Indian cultural values since 2014, and praised Prime Minister, Narendra Modi and Home Minister, Amit Shah for their effective resolution of complex issues. Notable decisions like the abrogation of Article 370 in Jammu and Kashmir, the construction of Lord Shri Ram's temple in Ayodhya, and the legislation on triple talaq were highlighted as historic milestones under their leadership.

The Chief Minister acknowledged recent legislative developments, with three new laws related to CRPC and IPC passing in the Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha. He applauded the Centre government's efforts to unite the country by dismantling

remnants of colonialism that persisted for 75 years after independence. CM Khattar referred to the Prime Minister and Home Minister as the 'Iron Man' for taking these transformative decisions.

He said that the message of Gita given by Lord Shri Krishna to Arjuna in the Mahabharata war thousands of years ago is not just the reading of a book, but it is eternal, universal, everlasting.

Emphasizing the timeless and universal nature of the Bhagavad Gita's teachings, the Chief Minister recalled Prime Minister, Narendra Modi's acknowledgment of Kurukshetra's special significance in 2014.

"Since then, taking inspiration from the Prime Minister, celebrating Gita Mahotsav at the International level has been initiated since the year 2016. Today every country in the world wants to organize an IGM in their country. Gita Mahotsav has been organized in Mauritius, Canada, UK, and Australia. Just yesterday the Culture Minister of Sri Lanka also inquired from the state government about organizing Gita Mahotsav in Sri Lanka also," said CM Khattar. During the event, Yoga Guru Baba Ramdev and Gita Manishi Swami Gyananand Maharaj addressed the Sant Sammelan, contributing their perspectives on the significance of the Bhagavad Gita. Swami Rajendra Das, Swami Brahmanand, Swami Brahmaswarup, Baba Bhupendra, Swami Shashwatanand and many eminent saints and mahatmas and a large number of people also remained present on this occasion.

Navy deploys Guided Missile Destroyers in Arabian sea Inbox

(News Agency)- Considering the recent spate of attacks in the Arabian sea, Indian Navy has deployed Guided Missile Destroyers INS Mormugao, INS Kochi and INS Kolkata (Guided Missile Destroyers) in various areas to maintain a deterrent presence. The Ministry of Defence (MoD) said that long-range maritime reconnaissance P8I aircraft are also being regularly tasked to maintain domain awareness. Meanwhile, 'MV Chem Pluto' (Liberian Flag Chemical/Oil Tanker) carrying 21 Indian and one Vietnamese crew, earlier reported as attacked by a suspected drone on December 23, reached Mumbai and anchored safely at the Outer Anchorage, officials said.

The MoS said that on its arrival, the Indian Navy Explosive Ordnance Disposal team inspected the vessel to make a preliminary assessment of the type and nature of attack. Analysis of the area of attack and debris found on the ship points towards a drone attack. However, further forensic and technical analysis will be required to establish the vector of attack, including type and amount of explosive used, officials added. A joint investigation by various agencies has commenced on completion of the analysis by the Navy's Explosive Ordnance Team.

Veer Bal Diwas: Shah, Nadda pay tribute to Guru Gobind Singh's sons

(News Agency)-Union Home Minister Amit Shah and BJP national President J.P. Nadda on Tuesday remembered the martyrdom of the Sahibzadas, the sons of Guru Gobind Singh, on Tuesday, which is observed as 'Veer Bal Diwas'. In a post on X, Shah said, "On Veer Bal Diwas, I bow to Guru Gobind Singh Ji's four Sahibzade and Mata Gujri Ji. With supreme courage they stood against the brutal Mughal rule and chose martyrdom, refusing to convert. Their unmatched valor will continue to inspire generations to come."

"Proclaiming their Martyrdom Day as Veer Bal Diwas, Prime Minister Modi Ji has spread the saga of their sacrifice to every corner of the country and the world," the Home Minister said.



Nadda in a post on X said, "I pay my respects to Zorawar Singh Ji and Fateh Singh Ji, the sons of the tenth Guru of Sikhism, Shri Guru Gobind Singh Ji, on 'Veer Bal Diwas' dedicated to their martyrdom. Their patriotism and religious devotion at a very young age is exemplary. It will continue to inspire all the countrymen to protect the nation and culture from age to age," the BJP chief said.

Even if Modi is to contest against me, I will win: Shashi Tharoor

(News Agency)- Congress leader Shashi Tharoor on Tuesday said that he is ready to contest fourth time from the Thiruvananthapuram Lok Sabha seat in 2024, which could be his last, and that he will win in any case, even if he has to fight against Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Tharoor said this while taking part in a TV channel discussion on his future plans. "I am ready to contest again from here, but the final decision will be made by the party and if I am asked, I will. This would be my last contest to the Lok Sabha," said Tharoor.

To a question about speculations that Prime Minister Narendra Modi could contest from



Thiruvananthapuram, Tharoor said, "Even if Modi is to contest against me, I will win."

"I am contesting on my record and the people have all the right to

change me, if they think so, but it would not be based on who I am fighting with," added Tharoor.

"When I contested first, my wish was to be the Union Minister for

External Affairs, which did not happen, now it is for the people to decide."

And, when asked if he is keen to contest for the Kerala Assembly, he said, "At the moment my focus is on the Lok Sabha polls and depending on the circumstances then, at that time, will look into it," added Tharoor. A former undersecretary general at the United Nations, Tharoor was a surprise choice when he flew into India and after meeting the then Congress top brass secured a party ticket to contest the 2009 Lok Sabha polls from Thiruvananthapuram.

Since then he has completed a hat-trick of wins and the only

difficult time he had to face was in 2014 after the untimely death of his wife Sunanda Phuskar at a plush hotel in Delhi.

Tharoor's style of functioning as a Lok Sabha member was totally different from the usual Congress MPs and this appears not to have gone with his adversaries in his own party, but if one looks into his winning margin at the 2019 polls, it shows the average voter has not much of a problem with Tharoor and his style of functioning.

In the 2019 polls he won with a margin of 99,989 votes, while in 2014 the margin was 15,470 and in his debut election in 2009 it was 99,998 votes.

Lok Sabha polls: New Congress leadership starts reassessment in MP



(News Agency)-The new leadership of Madhya Pradesh Congress has started the reassessment of the state organisation in view of the upcoming Lok Sabha elections scheduled in the next six months. Newly appointed state unit chief Jitu Patwari held a series of meetings of the representatives of different segments of the Congress. Meanwhile, the All India Congress Committee (AICC) general secretary Bhanwar Jitendra Singh, who has been recently appointed as in-charge of the party affairs for Madhya Pradesh, arrived in Bhopal on Tuesday. Congress MP from Alwar (Rajasthan) – Singh is supposed to hold a meeting with new state unit chief Jitu Patwari and other leaders. Importantly, after taking charge as state unit head, former minister Jitu Patwari, who lost the assembly election from Indore's Rau constituency, held meetings with

the representatives of the party's student wing NSUI, Mahila and Youth wings and others. During the meetings at party headquarters in Bhopal, Patwari asked the Congress workers to get ready for yet another fight against the BJP in the next few months. Notably, following the loss in the assembly election held recently, the Congress' central leadership has replaced former state unit head Kamal Nath with Jitu Patwari. After losing under the leadership of the leaders -- Kamal Nath and Digvijaya Singh – Congress has made transformation by ushering young leaders, including the Leader of Opposition (LoP) Umang Singh. For Patwari and Bhanwar Jitendra Singh, the first and the foremost task would be rebuilding the confidence of party workers especially at ground level.

Five held for consuming liquor in govt school in Bihar



(News Agency)-After the 'liquor party' at the Darbhanga Medical College and Hospital (DMCH), teachers of a government school in Banka district were allegedly found inside the school premises on Monday evening.

When the excise department learnt about the incident, they raided the school located at Chilkawar village under Rajaun block and arrested five persons including two teachers and a midday meal vender.

"We have learnt that a liquor and mutton party was underway in the government primary school

in Chilkawar village. Accordingly, we conducted raids and arrested the five persons. They were having a liquor party in the kitchen of the school," said Mukesh Kumar Das, Sub-inspector of Banka. The alleged two teachers have been identified as Bajrangi Das, and Amresh Kumar -- both teachers of primary school in Chilkawar village. Besides them, other accused have been identified as Dhananjay Kumar, MDM vender, Kumar Gaurav, a plumber, and Pradeep Kumar.

"We have arrested the accused under the liquor prohibition Act. Legal process is underway," Das added.

Mumbai-bound flight makes emergency landing in Varanasi as elderly woman dies mid-air

(News Agency)- A Darbhanga-Mumbai SpiceJet flight made an emergency landing in Varanasi after an elderly woman died onboard mid-air.

The victim identified as Kalawati Devi (85) was travelling with her grandson from Darbhanga to Mumbai in



SpiceJet flight SG 116. After the flight took off from Darbhanga airport at 5.40 p.m. on Monday and travelled some distance, her health deteriorated. By that time, the plane had reached near the air space of Uttar Pradesh, so the pilot immediately contacted the Air Traffic

Control (ATC) Varanasi for the emergency landing permission. When the plane landed at Lal Bahadur Shastri International Airport, Varanasi at 6 p.m., the victim was taken to a nearby hospital where doctors declared her dead. The flight finally left for Mumbai from Varanasi at 7.30 p.m. on Monday.

Ex-cricketer poses as IPS officer to dupe luxury hotels and even Rishabh Pant

Mrinank Singh cheated the Taj Palace of Rs 5.5 lakh in July 2022 and also duped cricketer Rishabh Pant of Rs 1.63 crore between 2020 and 2021.

(News Agency)-A 25-year-old former cricketer was arrested by the Delhi Police on December 25 for allegedly duping multiple luxury hotels, including the Taj Palace of lakhs of rupees. The accused, identified as Mrinank Singh, cheated the Taj Palace in Delhi of Rs 5.5 lakh in July 2022. Notably, Singh also duped cricketer Rishabh Pant of Rs 1.63 crore between 2020 and 2021. Mrinank Singh played for the Haryana Under-19 team and also claimed that he represented the Mumbai Indians in the India Premier League (IPL). According to police, Singh used to cheat luxury hotels by posing as Karnataka's Additional Director General of Police, Alok Kumar.

HISTORY OF DUPING LUXURY HOTELS
As per a complaint received at the Chanakyapuri Police Station in Delhi by the Taj Palace in July 2022, Mrinank Singh stayed at the hotel for a week in July last year and left without paying his bill amounting to Rs 5,53,362. When asked to pay the bill, Mrinank Singh stated that Adidas, which he claimed was sponsoring him, would make the payment. The staff then shared the hotel's bank details with Mrinank Singh and he gave them a transaction ID saying a payment of Rs 2 lakh had been completed. However, the hotel did not find the transaction on their system. Mrinank and his manager, Gagan Singh, were contacted by phone and the conman told the hotel staff he would send his driver with the cash to clear the outstanding amount. Mrinank

continued to make such false promises and did not make the payment, after which the complaint was filed.

During the investigation, police sent a notice to Mrinank's address, but he could not be reached there either. His father informed the police that they disowned and evicted Mrinank Singh from their properties as they did not have any control over him. Mrinank's location could not be traced by the police as he kept changing it and even his phone was switched off.

Police then issued a non-bailable warrant against Mrinank Singh and a lookout circular was also issued to arrest him in case he attempts to flee the country.

On December 25, Mrinank Singh was detained at the IGI Airport in Delhi by Immigration officers while he was trying to fly to Hong Kong.

POSING AS IPS OFFICER

During his detention at the IGI Airport, Mrinank Singh made another attempt to dupe the immigration officials. He called senior police officials by posing as Alok Kumar, ADGP Karnataka, and sought their assistance in helping his son Mrinank Singh who had been "illegally detained" at the IGI Airport. However, the immigration officials handed him over to the Delhi Police. During interrogation, Mrinank Singh repeatedly tried to mislead police and claimed that his "father", Ashok Kumar Singh, was also an international cricket player and played for the Indian cricket team in the 1980s to late 90s. Mrinank Singh also told the police his "father" was currently



working as a manager of Air India and was posted at the IGI Airport. Mrinank Singh finally revealed that he duped multiple luxury resorts and hotels of lakhs of rupees posing as the Karnataka ADGP. Further, he would claim he was part of the Mumbai Indians from 2014 to 2018 and would use that to leave hotels without paying the bills. As per the police, Mrinank Singh's targets included hotels, bars, restaurants, young girls, cab drivers, small eating outlets, among others.

RISHABH PANT LOSES RS 1.63 CRORE TO CONMAN

Among the people Mrinank Singh duped was Delhi Capitals (DC) skipper Rishabh Pant. In 2022, Pant's lawyer, Eklavya Dwivedi, in an exclusive interview with Sports Tak said Mrinank told the Indian cricketer that he started a new business dealing in luxury items, and he could procure the same items for them at a very reasonable cost. Pant then transferred a sizeable amount of money to Mrinank to procure expensive watches and also gave him certain luxurious items,

including jewellery, thinking the conman would be able to resell them for a huge profit.

When Mrinank was unable to obtain the said items, Pant issued a legal notice and a mutual settlement arrived at Rs 1.63 crore. Mrinank issued a cheque of Rs 1.63 crore but when Pant tried to cash it in, the bank said it bounced due to insufficient funds.

OBJECTIONABLE VIDEOS, PHOTOS OF MODELS

An initial analysis of Mrinank Singh's phone revealed that he had acquainted multiple young women models, and had several videos and photographs of them, including some which the police said were "highly objectionable". He would befriend the models and young girls by posing as an IPL player. Police said Mrinank Singh was obsessed with leading a luxurious lifestyle which involved staying at five-star hotels, partying with models and clicking photos with them, and travelling abroad with his girlfriends.

Conman Sukesh denies sending messages to Jacqueline from jail, demands CBI probe

Conman Sukesh Chandrashekhar has denied sending messages to actor Jacqueline Fernandez from jail, calling them fake. He has also requested a CBI investigation into the same.

(News Agency)-Hours after India Today accessed and revealed the messages sent by conman Sukesh Chandrashekhar to actor Jacqueline Fernandez, the former alleged he did not send any texts or voice notes to Jacqueline from jail and that the messages were "fake".

Further, the conman, the prime accused in a money laundering case, has requested a CBI investigation into the alleged WhatsApp chats, demanding strict action against those creating such messages in his name. On Tuesday, India Today revealed text messages sent by

conman Sukesh to Jacqueline through WhatsApp, using a fake number, while he was in jail. In one of the messages, the conman also asked the actor to appear "in black clothes" during the court hearing. As their differences deepened, conman Sukesh termed the Economic Offences Wing (EOW) "biased" and sought a probe into its investigation in connection with the money laundering case. The development came after Jacqueline moved a Delhi court seeking protection from intimidation from Sukesh. She also moved Delhi High Court seeking quashing of the case against her, saying that she is an innocent victim of



Sukesh Chandrashekhar's targeted attack. In the latest development in the case, Sukesh also said he transferred crores of money to a social media management firm, to buy followers for Jacqueline's Instagram account. The

conman alleged "Jacqueline wanted to compete with actor Katrina Kaif's following count", adding he had WhatsApp chats to support his claims.

He also said a few crores were invested in the firm owned by Jacqueline's father.

Cementing Global South Leadership: India Emerges as Strong Development Partner in Africa, Asia

A big theme of 2023 was India's emergence as 'Vishwa Mitra', hosting the G20 conclave and facilitating the entry of the African Union into the body. 2023 witnessed India's emergence as a champion of the Global South, and a nation which regularly voices the developing world's concerns.

In diplomacy, one must, as a prerequisite, take a long-term view of things. Building inter-continental partnerships that stand the test of time often takes time and money. It is crucial, therefore, for countries to have a great appetite for patience when looking to expand their influence beyond their own borders. India recognises the importance of forging international partnerships with like-minded nations and even entire continents. It is viewed as a player that does not have expansionist proclivities at the centre of its diplomacy.

India is not offering mere lip service. It is backing its talk of aiding the Global South by making significant investments in Africa and Asia. Lines of credit offered by India are having an especially transformative impact on how India is viewed by the collective Global South.

The External Affairs Ministry has informed that India has so far offered 308 lines of credit (LOC), worth about \$32.02 billion, to various partners in Asia and Africa. MoS V. Muraleedharan says that these funds have supported more than 600 development projects in sectors such as infrastructure, power, connectivity and health across countries of the Global South. About \$17.06 billion has gone to countries in Asia, \$12.15 billion to those in Africa and \$2.81 billion to countries elsewhere. In Asia, New Delhi's "Neighbourhood First" policy remains at play, as is evident from the grant assistance projects with countries such as Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Maldives, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Bhutan.

These include the construction of the India-Bangladesh Friendship Pipeline (IBFP), the India-Nepal cross-border Jaynagar-Bardibas rail link, restoration of the Thiruketheeswaram temple in Sri Lanka's Mannar, the Afghan-India Friendship Dam, power substations at Doshi and Charikar in Afghanistan, among others.

The case of Sri Lanka stands out in particular. India rushed to the crisis-hit island nation's rescue when much of the world, including China, remained non-committal to help it. For example, at the height of the financial and economic crisis in Sri Lanka, India swiftly extended a lifeline to the country with assistance of over \$4 billion, surpassing even the International Monetary Fund's 48-month bailout of about \$3 billion.

Military-to-military ties between the two sides also witnessed a fillip, as many Indian naval ships, including the INS Batti Malv, INS Nireekshak, and INS Delhi docked at Sri Lankan ports throughout 2023. In a big win for India, Colombo has also placed a

one-year moratorium on allowing foreign vessels to conduct research in its territorial waters – a move aimed at keeping Chinese surveillance ships out of the region.

Importantly, between 2014 and 2020, India's LOC to its neighbours had increased fourfold, going from \$3.27 billion to \$14.7 billion. The largest concessional credit given by India to a country has been to Bangladesh, worth about \$8 billion.

Apart from its immediate neighbours in the Indian subcontinent, perhaps no continent is as important to New Delhi's growing diplomatic and economic heft like Africa. The highlight of India's G20 presidency will always remain the inclusion of the African Union into the powerful group. Importantly, it was India that did all the diplomatic heavy-lifting to ensure that the African Union be granted membership to G20 in a timeframe that, for the lack of a better word, can be called tight.

Africa now figures most prominently in India's outreach to the Global South. While trade ties between the African Union and India are definitely witnessing an upswing, it is India's developmental push in the continent that is making a lot of difference. India is being viewed as a country that does not seek to burden nations with debt, but actually wishes to be a partner in their upliftment.

The relationship between India and Africa has always been special. Sample this: since the 1960s, India's prime ministers have visited Africa 76 times. No other country in the world, and neither any of Africa's other big partners can boast of such a shining record in high-level engagements. Between 2015 and 2022 alone, India hosted over 100 African leaders.

Today, India is Africa's third largest trading partner after the European Union and China. Trade between both the sides has risen 18 per cent since 2003, and has reached \$103 billion this year. Indian products now represent 6.3 per cent of Africa's total imports. India is also the second largest lender in Africa. 42 African nations received about \$12 billion or 38 per cent of all credit extended by India in the last 10 years. Meanwhile, total Indian investments in Africa stand at about \$70 billion, with the goal being to take the figure past the \$150 billion mark by 2030.

India has emerged as a pioneer in the world of digital public infrastructure. Therefore, it is no surprise that today, Africa's largest digital project, the Pan African e-Network, is connecting 54 African countries to India in order for them to gain expertise in telecommunications, medicine, health, resource mapping and digital governance. Meanwhile, in an important move that will accelerate financial inclusion across Africa, the Indian government this year decided to contribute \$2 million to the Africa Digital Financial Inclusion Facility (ADFI), managed by the African Development Bank.

Kerala and Karnataka face new JN.1 enigma

By Susmita Ghosh

Kerala and Karnataka, champions of past COVID battles, face a new foe – the JN.1 variant. The number of cases ascend, doubling in a week, prompting a cautious attitude. While scientists assess JN.1's true nature, curbing its spread is dominant.

The JN.1 enigma lies in its vagueness. While its transmissibility exceeds previous anxieties, its severity remains covered in assumption. This uncertainty fuels public anxiety, threatening to wear away the hard-won regularity thoroughly rebuilt after years of fighting out the pandemic. The economic and social effects of another lockdown reveal largely, a chilling reminder of the instability of our recovered balance.

However, surrendering to panic would be a strategic mistake.

Kerala and Karnataka, veterans of past viral battles, hold the advantage of experience. Their robust healthcare infrastructure, meticulous contact tracing protocols, and creditable vaccination rates provide a sturdy foundation for the fight ahead. The immediate priority must be increased testing, particularly the gold standard RT-PCR. It is essential to record the extent of JN.1's spread. Genomic sequencing efforts should be ramped up to understand the variant's unique characteristics and inform targeted interventions. Beyond the medical resource, the war against JN.1 requires social unity. Public awareness campaigns, tailored to local languages and demographics, must expose distortion and substitute responsible

actions.

The states themselves must act in performance, effortlessly sharing best practices and data across borders. The JN.1 variant acknowledges no territorial boundaries; joint action is the only actual protection. The Union Government's proactive support, evident in the deployment of medical groups and increased testing facilities, is a welcome support.

But this fight exceeds geographical



limitations. International collaboration is vital for sharing scientific knowledge, vaccine development, and resource utilization. The JN.1 variant is a global challenge, demanding a global response. This, however, is not a story of mere spirit. It is a testament to the human essence's capacity to learn, adapt, and overcome. Kerala and Karnataka, scarred by past battles, stand not with anxiety, but with a tough resolution. They have faced down adversity before, and they will do so again. This variant may be a cause for concern, but it is not an impossible obstacle. This is not a battle against a disease alone; it is a testament to the human spirits determined will to thrive, a spirit that whispers back, "We shall overcome."

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Editor in Chief & Publisher :

Sharanjit Singh Thind

Managing Editor :

Susmita Ghosh

Deputy Managing Editor :

Amaninder Singh Thind

Editor (Political Affairs-India) : Aruna Singh

Special Correspondents: Gagandeep Singh (India)

Editorial Intern: Roubin Singh Thind

Web Coordinator : Harpreet Singh

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REGD & MAILING OFFICE :

P.O Box 7005 Hicksville New York 11801

Phone: 917 612 3158

editor@thesouthasianinsider.com, thesouthasianinsider@gmail.com

www.thesouthasianinsider.com

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The risk of a broader Middle East war is rising

By Christopher S Chivvis

Since 7 October the world has been horrified by the gruesome fighting between Israel and Gaza. But the war could still get much worse. Iran's proxy in Yemen, the Houthis, have been firing missiles and drones at commercial shipping and naval vessels and at southern Israel for weeks now. Global markets are spooked as the danger to shipping through the Bab al-Mandeb strait rises.

Pressure is mounting on the Biden administration to strike back against Iran and its Houthi partner to stop these attacks. Advocates of striking back hard think this will deter a larger war. But if the US goes too far, it could end up entering a war it badly needs to avoid. The horror of the conflict between Israel and Gaza is already bad enough, but a larger conflagration would be a catastrophe for the US, Israel and people throughout the region. A broader war could span Yemen, Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Israel and Iran itself. It would come at an already precarious moment in global security when the US is struggling to supply more aid to Ukraine and manage rising tension in east Asia over Taiwan and the South China Sea. Regional and global effects would be unavoidable and could last decades, plunging the US back into large-scale Middle East conflicts it can ill-afford. Since the 7 October Hamas attack, a regional war has narrowly been avoided. Iran, which has historically provided financial and political support to Hamas, has allowed its proxies in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon to strike US and Israeli targets. The US and



Israel have struck back against Iran's proxies and in at least one instance against Iranian forces themselves.

Thankfully, these low-level attacks have not escalated into a larger conflict among Iran, Israel and the US. The two US aircraft carriers now sitting off Israel's coast appear to have helped deter Hezbollah from large-scale attacks on Israel from the north. The Biden administration has meanwhile restrained Israel itself from full-scale operations in Lebanon. Unfortunately, continued Houthi harassment of shipping through the Red Sea presents a risk of expanding war.

The Houthis are a radical insurgent group that controls a large part of Yemen, including the capital. They are extremely hostile to Israel, Saudi Arabia and the US. Since October, Houthi units have attacked shipping passing through the Red Sea with drones and cruise missiles. In November,

they hijacked a commercial vessel and took the crew hostage. The US navy has shot down dozens of these missiles and drones but cannot expect to intercept everything the Houthis fire indefinitely.

Some analysts point to potential damage to the principle of freedom of navigation. More concerning, however, are the immediate economic costs to global shipping and oil prices, especially at a moment when inflation just seems to have been brought under control.

The precise magnitude of the economic damage is hard to predict, but real damage could occur and will probably increase over time if more and more vessels end up being rerouted. Before the crisis, 12% of global trade and 30% of container shipping passed via the Red Sea route. The Cape of Good Hope is the main alternative route, but it takes much longer and is more expensive. The Houthi attacks have forced a very

difficult choice on the Biden administration. The American right, which has long had Iran in its sights, has been calling for the US to strike back hard at Iran. These experts and former officials argue that a show of force would deter further provocations from Iran and its proxies and help stabilize the region. John Bolton, the former Trump national security adviser, recently charged that Biden was "failing to establish even minimal deterrence" and called for more far-reaching US strikes, including direct attacks on Iran.

This would be a big gamble. Rather than deterring Iran, more far-reaching strikes might well incite Tehran to lash out in an effort to protect its interests and prestige or to warn the US to go no further. If an Iranian counterattack resulted in significant US casualties, Washington would immediately come under pressure to retaliate. This is the path to a broader regional war that would be enormously damaging to US national interests.

The White House has wisely sought to avoid this risk to date, and President Biden might thus choose to continue to tolerate the Houthis' harassment of commercial shipping, despite the economic costs. Washington's most recent response to these attacks was the announcement on 18 December of an international naval coalition to help protect shipping through the Red Sea. Internationalizing the response to Houthi attacks is a good idea, but the coalition is unfortunately small and its capabilities and operational concept are unclear.

India's Rise In World Order - G20 Presidency And Beyond

After two World Wars, the international community set up rules and institutions to ensure that devastation of that scale never took place again. The international system went through a series of changes, with the rise of smaller powers and the replacement of a bipolar world order - as seen during the Cold War - with a multipolar world. Countries beyond the US and the former Soviet Union, like India, China, South Korea, and Japan, have emerged as important voices.

However, in the last three years, a series of events have shaken the foundations of the existing world order. Examples include China's heightened aggression against India, Taiwan, Japan, and the Philippines, the Russia-Ukraine war, and the terrorism unleashed by Hamas on Israel and Israel's response to the attacks. What is also a fact that cannot be ignored is the emergence of regional and multilateral groupings to respond to challenges that global bodies such as the United Nations (UN) have not been able to address adequately. The Group of 20 or the G20 is one such example. India's rise as a leading player in international relations rests significantly on the ways in which it successfully presided over the G20 and navigated several challenges emanating from tectonic shifts in geopolitics. After two World Wars, the international community set up rules and institutions to ensure that devastation of that scale never took place again. The international system went through a series of



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India took over the presidency in December last year, while itself locked in a military conflict with China at the borders since 2020, and as Russian aggression in Ukraine continued unabated. The outcome of India's presidency of the G20 consisted of four big successes - the inclusion of the African Union in what is now G21; a biofuels alliance to expedite the uptake of biofuels through facilitating technology advancements; the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) to facilitate connectivity and trade; and the Delhi Declaration that was endorsed by all member countries. The Delhi Declaration has no footnote or Chair's Summary, and all 83 paragraphs were unanimously supported. It has a huge narrative of the India way to international relations and leaves a big footprint of India on the G20. The India way looks at people as the center of international relations. The inclusion of the African Union, a continent with 55 countries, was spearheaded and accomplished under the Indian presidency. An important continent, with almost 18 per cent of the world's population, was not acknowledged prior to the Indian presidency.



Jaishankar in Moscow: Is All Well on the Western Front?

Written By: Ashok Sajjanhar

The last few days have witnessed a flurry of commentaries in the print and electronic media suggesting that India's relations with the West, particularly the US, have entered a rocky phase. And the reason for that is the allegation of India's involvement in a plot to assassinate an American citizen, a Khalistani separatist declared a terrorist in India, Gurbatwant Singh Pannun. It has been suggested that External Affairs Minister Dr S Jaishankar's visit to Moscow and St Petersburg from 25th to 29th December is somehow linked to this souring of relations between India and the US. Nothing could be further from the truth!

India's relations with the US continue to be strong and robust. This is best illustrated by the comment by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in his interview to the Financial Times on 20 December wherein he said that relations with the US remain on an "upward trajectory", and that the "relationship is broader in engagement, deeper in understanding, warmer in friendship than ever before". He added that the relationship "should not be held hostage to one incident or two".

INDIA-US RELATIONS

Ties between India and the United States have been on an upward trajectory since the visit of President Bill Clinton to India in March 2000. There is bipartisan support for a stronger partnership between the two countries in the US as well as

in India. Relations between the two countries have continued to grow irrespective of the political party that occupied the White House in the US or the Prime Minister's Office in India. Possibly the biggest push to the bilateral partnership was provided by PM Modi's State visit to Washington DC on 22 June 2023, when he also addressed the Joint Session of the US Congress for the second time, becoming the only Indian leader and one of the very few world leaders to address the US Congress on more than one occasion.

The sustained upward trajectory of the bilateral partnership does not mean that there were no differences of views, opinions, or interests between the two countries over the last 23 years since the upward flow of bilateral engagement commenced. Most recently, India and the West were on diametrically opposite sides regarding India's position on the aggression by Russia against Ukraine. India did not criticise or condemn the Russian action although it firmly maintained that the sovereignty and territorial integrity of nations, and principles and Charter of the United Nations should be fully respected. PM Modi told President Putin that "this is not an era of war" and that all differences should be resolved through dialogue and diplomacy.

India also came under considerable pressure from the West about its import of crude from Russia. India was able to clearly and firmly explain to its Western partners that it's an energy-deficient country and imports 85% of its crude oil requirements, and that it has a historical relationship with Russia, particularly in the field of import of defence equipment to the tune of 50-60% of its defence needs.

Just before that, the sudden and chaotic withdrawal by US and NATO ISAF forces from Afghanistan and the capture of Kabul by the Taliban in August 2021 came as a huge shock to India. Moreover, the decision by the US in 2022 to provide a grant of \$450 million to Pakistan for the upgrade of its F-16 fleet was strongly criticised and opposed by India. The US argument that Pakistan would use these fighters for counter-terrorism purposes did not cut any ice with the Indian interlocutors.

The above instances clearly demonstrate that there have been several instances of divergence between the two countries in the past. The two sides have sought to resolve them through discussions with maturity, understanding and mutual respect. In the Pannun case, it would appear that the US administration knew of the alleged plot at least since July and the Indian government knew that the US

knew something at least since August. The US did not go to town with the information. On the contrary, it had discussions with its Indian counterparts behind closed doors. It went public only in end-November 2023 when the indictment against the accused Nikhil Gupta was unsealed. The Indian government set up a committee to investigate the matter as soon as some concrete information was provided to it by the US side.

The two countries have behaved in a responsible and measured manner. The Pannun incident is being seen as a normal law and order issue which will take its own course but will not be allowed to have any adverse repercussions on the burgeoning bilateral ties.

In response to a question by the Financial Times on this allegation, PM Modi stated that US-India bilateral ties are far stronger, resilient and broad-based to be derailed by a "few incidents". Affirming his commitment to the rule of law, PM Modi promised to investigate if any evidence is put forward. He added that India was "deeply concerned about the activities of certain extremist groups based overseas... These elements, under the guise of freedom of expression, have engaged in intimidation and incited violence". This aspect also needs to be taken cognizance of by the Western countries and strict action taken against the anti-

Indian elements.

RELATIONS WITH CANADA

The case of the assassination of Hardeep Singh Nijjar in Canada is quite different from that of Pannun. In a totally unexpected move, Canadian PM Justin Trudeau soon after returning from India after attending the G20 Summit, announced in the Canadian Parliament on 18 September that there were "credible allegations" that the Indian government was involved in the killing of a Canadian citizen, a Khalistani separatist Hardeep Singh Nijjar, on 18 June 2023. Canada expelled a senior Indian official from the Indian High Commission in Ottawa without providing any evidence of his involvement. The Indian Foreign Office termed these charges as "absurd and motivated".

India's External Affairs Minister categorically stated that it is not India's policy to engage in extra-territorial killings. He added that no specific or relevant information had been shared by Canada with India and if any such information was provided, India would be prepared to look at it. India maintains that the real issue is the space provided by Canada to anti-Indian elements to carry out anti-Indian activities within Canada and India.

Till date, Canada has not provided any evidence of India's involvement in Nijjar's killing. PM Trudeau has done a tremendous disservice to Canada's credibility and reputation and to relations with India by his unsubstantiated charges.

It would be a fallacy to equate the US charges on a plot to kill Pannun with the allegations made by Canada. The US has provided some concrete information on the basis of which a committee has been established by India to look into the allegations. Canada has failed to provide any specific information even after six and a half months of Nijjar's killing.

RELATIONS WITH OTHER WESTERN COUNTRIES

India's ties with other Western countries have continued to be dynamic and vigorous. Leaders of all the G7 countries visited India for the G20 Summit and extended full support for the success of India's Presidency. In addition, the Chancellor of Germany and PMs of Japan, Italy and Australia visited India in 2023. President Macron of France is expected to visit India in January 2024 as Chief Guest at India's Republic Day.

In addition to the above, PM Modi travelled on a State visit to the US, as Chief Guest to France's National Day, and to Japan and Australia in 2023.



Modinomics And Rising India

By: Sanju Verma

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) recently called India a star performer, with India projected to contribute 16 per cent to global growth. The IMF report said India is on track to be one of the fastest-growing major economies in the world. India rebounded strongly from the pandemic, with growth surpassing pre-pandemic levels, despite the headwinds major global economies are facing. The net foreign direct investment (FDI) into the country at \$5.9 billion rose to a 21-month high in October 2023, from \$1.54 billion in September 2023 and \$1.16 billion in October 2022. Foreign portfolio investors (FPIs) too have pumped in \$20 billion in 2023, showcasing how investor confidence is touching new highs under the dynamic Modi government. India's forex reserves, in fact, rose to a handsome \$616 billion with foreign currency assets (FCA) at \$545 billion for the week ending December 15, 2023. The earlier high was \$645 billion in October 2021. Nada Choueiri, Assistant Director of IMF said, "What we have been observing for quite some time now is that India has been growing at a very robust rate. It's one of the star performers when it comes to real growth when you look at peer countries. It's one of the fastest growing large emerging markets and it's contributing, in our current projections, more than 16 per cent of global growth this year." Choueiri also highlighted the factors that worked in India's favour, including PM Modi's massive push for investments in infrastructure and logistics, a

growing population, and structural reforms including digitalisation, which Modi has personally been involved in, very passionately.

For instance, the UPI transactions in November 2023 were worth Rs 17.40 lakh crore, marginally higher than Rs 17.16 lakh crore recorded in October 2023. UPI transactions in the country increased at a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 147 per cent from 92 crore in 2017-18 (FY18) to 8375 crore in 2022-23 (FY23), with regards to volume. As a result, banknote circulation declined 7.8 per cent in FY23 and UPI logged 85.72 billion transactions in the current financial year till December 11, 2023. UPI transactions in the country alone accounted for 62 per cent of overall digital payment transactions in FY23. The Year-on-Year growth in the value of banknotes in circulation has decreased from 9.9 per cent in FY22 to 7.8 per cent in FY23, which is good news. India's economy has rebounded strongly from the pandemic, headline retail inflation has moderated to 4.87 per cent in November 2023, with core inflation at barely 4.2 per cent, while wholesale inflation in November was minus 0.52 per cent. Unemployment has hit a record low of 3.2 per cent in FY23. The financial sector has been resilient, the budget deficit has largely eased, and fiscal buffers are in place with tax revenues being very buoyant. Net direct tax collection in the eight months of the current fiscal touched 58.34 per cent of

Budget Estimates (BE) at Rs 10.64 lakh crore. This is 23.4 per cent higher than the corresponding period of last year. Gross collections, before issuing refunds, grew 17.7 per cent to Rs 12.67 lakh crore in the April-November 2023 period. Refunds amounting to Rs 2.03 lakh crore were issued from April to November of the current fiscal. Likewise, the average monthly run rate of GST revenue in the first eight months of FY24 is a sharp Rs 1.67 lakh crore. GST revenue was a phenomenal Rs 1.87 lakh crore in April 2023 followed by the second highest number of Rs 1.72 lakh crore in October 2023. In November, that number was Rs 1.68 lakh crore. The fact that GST revenues are rising despite GST rates coming down dramatically since GST was first introduced in July 2017, showcases the inherent tax buoyancy of the Indian economy. If comprehensive reforms are implemented, India has the potential to experience even higher growth contributed by additional labour and human capital, IMF stated. Choueiri emphasised on education, skilling, and increasing female labour force participation. As if on cue, data from EPFO has been extremely encouraging. Speaking of female labour force participation, the Employees' Provident Fund Organisation (EPFO) added 1.53 million members in October 2023, an increase of 18.22 per cent from a year ago. The data showed that 7.72 lakh members were new joiners, including 2.04 lakh women who were first-time additions to the EPFO. A

significant 58.6 per cent of the new members were young employees between the ages of 18 and 25. The EPFO number in September was even better at 1.72 million subscribers. The limited point is this – jobs are being added with rapidity and those including Rahul Gandhi, alleging that 'Modinomics' is all about jobless growth, are surely barking up the wrong tree.

Another data point lending credence to the fact that the Indian economy is inherently resilient at this stage can be found in the index of eight core industries (ICI), which grew 12.1 per cent year-on-year in October 2023, following a stellar 9.2 per cent growth in September this year. Over the April to October 2023 period, the ICI showed a rock-solid cumulative growth of 8.6 per cent. In October 2023, coal production grew 16.1 per cent, the second highest pace in at least 12 months, while steel and electricity rose 9.6 per cent and 9.3 per cent, respectively. Natural gas output rose 6.5 per cent, while refinery products were up 5.5 per cent. The core sector constitutes 40.27 per cent of the Index of Industrial Production (IIP) and is hence very relevant. India's IIP growth rate rose to an excellent 16-month high of 11.7 per cent in October 2023, driven by the manufacturing sector growing by a steep 10.4 per cent, against a contraction of 5.8 per cent seen in manufacturing in October 2022. Power generation rose by 20.4 per cent in October 2023 compared to 1.2 per cent growth in the year-ago period. Similarly, mining output too rose by a

handsome 13.1 per cent in October this year, against only a 2.6 per cent growth in October 2022. As per use-based classification, the capital goods segment grew 22.6 per cent in October this year compared to a 2.4 per cent contraction in the same month a year ago. Consumer durables output in October this year grew by a very healthy 15.9 per cent against a contraction of 18.1 per cent in the same month, a year back. Within IIP, consumer non-durable goods' output increased by 8.6 per cent compared to a contraction of 13 per cent a year earlier.

Infrastructure/construction goods posted a growth of 11.3 per cent against a 1.7 per cent expansion.

The October 2023 IIP data also showed that the output of primary goods logged an 11.4 per cent growth compared to 2.1 per cent in the year-ago period. The intermediate goods' output in October rose 9.7 per cent against a contraction of 2.3 per cent during the corresponding month last year. Moving beyond IIP, another data point endorsing the strong undercurrent in the economy is data from the OLX Mobility report (previously called the Autonote). Unveiling the transformative trajectory of India's pre-owned car market, the report projects a meteoric rise in value from Rs 2.1 lakh crore in FY23 to Rs 5 lakh crore by FY28 and a volume increase from 4.6 million units in FY23 to 8.5 million units over the next five years, growing at a volume CAGR of 13 per cent and value CAGR of 18 per cent, respectively.

Modi-led NDA vs INDI Alliance: Which Side Has The Upper Hand For 2024 Elections?

By: Bindu Dalmia

We, the people of the largest democracy, need a strong Opposition, one which has eluded us since the ascent of Modi in 2014. Does the INDI Alliance's proposal for pitching Mallikarjun Kharge as the PM candidate against the super-towering two-time incumbent Modi has adequate pan-India appeal? Perhaps the answer lies embedded in my question. Worse still, if the Opposition alliance goes into elections without a pre-poll prime ministerial face, who then, as a voter, am I voting for?

POLITICAL MARKETPLACE IN INDIA SHRINKING SINCE 2014

In the largest and one of the most mature democracies of the world, 76 years after independence, one would have thought that the political marketplace would be highly crowded and competitive, one that offered voters multiple electoral choices for national leadership. After all, the prerequisites of vibrant democracies rest on a free press, conducting free and fair elections, and also require a formidable and strong Opposition to checkmate and constructively critique the ruling dispensation. Why then are we not spoilt for choices in terms of options for an alternative to the Modi-led NDA?

THE 'VARIABLES' FOR 2024

If there is one certainty, it is that the BJP is a front-runner for the 2024 Lok Sabha elections. ANOMALIES OF CHOOSING KHARGE AS PM CONTENDER While the



Congress remains the largest entity and the glue that binds the coalition bloc, it is not Kharge, but the Gandhis centrality within the Congress, and outside of it, that continues to dominate the 'alternate political space' to Modi. Will there be a consensus amongst the allies then to accept the Gandhis as the de facto head of the alliance? In a country where 65 per cent of the population is below 35, a statesman-like figure lacking administrative experience and pan-India recognition cannot enthuse or connect with an aspirational New India. While projecting Kharge as the possible PM face of the alliance will deflect criticism of 'pariwaar-varad', he will always be perceived as a proxy to the writ of the Gandhis.

The BJP will then revert to its tried and tested winning formula to make it a Modi versus Rahul contest.

STATE OF BATTLE-READINESS BETWEEN INDIALLIANCE AND NDA

While Team Modi is in mission mode to micromanage minutiae details from assessing cadre preparedness of 'panna pramukhs' to assessing the extent of saturation of Viksit Bharat schemes, in contrast, a recently coalesced Opposition still struggles to find consensus on leadership, an acceptable formula for seat-sharing, or even arrive at a common minimum program (CMP). As national elections turn more presidential progressively, it is imperative that the coalition alliance pitches a leader whose visual recognition, nationally at least, matches up to a super-towering opponent. Kharge, though an experienced political leader, was an unknown beyond Congress until he became president of the

GOP in 2022. A few months ahead of elections, in marketing terms, my question is – Which Opposition leader emerges as a 'top-of-the-mind recall' for voters? Is it Modi, or Kharge/Rahul/Nitesh?

IS THERE 'ONE BIG WINNABLE IDEA' THAT DIFFERENTIATES INDI ALLIANCE FROM BJP'S MESSAGING?

Electoral competitiveness necessitates that a collective political entity must project a winnable configuration of ideas, ideals, and an economic vision. Four months prior to the elections, the INDI Alliance is still to find consensus on a common minimum program (CMP) and draft a common manifesto. A dipstick into the mind of a potential BJP voter would indicate his clarity and conviction as to why his preferred choice could or would be the Modi-led BJP — India's rising stature on the global stage, the Ram Mandir, deliverables on social sector schemes, India's growing economy etc. EMPIRICALLY, NEGATIVE CAMPAIGNS AGAINST MODI HAVE ALWAYS TURNED INTO VANTAGE MODI "Save the Constitution", "save democracy", "secularism", a re-run of Bharat Jodo Yatras, or a repeat of allegations of crony capitalism etc are fatigued and clichéd attacks that have run out of steam. A campaign around these negatives will not be enough to compel someone who voted for the BJP in 2019 to change his electoral choice next year.

Despite India's Vice-President being a farmer, Why the farmers are to adopt stir path?

By JAG MOHAN THAKEN

While releasing a special Indian Postal Cover on December 27, commemorating the 100th anniversary of the late Justice Konda Madhava Reddy, former Chief Justice of Andhra Pradesh and Bombay High Courts and former Governor of Maharashtra, Vice-President Jagdeep Dhankhar claiming himself a farmer, said, "As a Kisan Putra myself, I am inspired by Justice Reddy's efforts to alleviate rural struggles through his judgements. He gave a voice to those who were believed to be voiceless, he helped those who are the providers of Bharat i.e the Kisans of our Bharat."

Dhankhar added, "It is indeed a momentous occasion that I get to honour another Kisan: a man who truly dedicated his life to the service of Bharat. I deem it a matter of pride, privilege, and pleasure for having been called upon to release the postal cover."

He further said, "I resonate with Justice Reddy on a personal level not only because of his association with the judiciary but also as someone who did not forget his roots. A son of the soil, Justice Reddy remained a cultivator in his native village, Dharmasagar, until the end."

On another occasion, while interacting with the invitee Haryana farmers in his office on October 13, he expressed his gratitude that on his election as Vice-President the Prime Minister Narendra Modi introduced him in the Rajya Sabha as 'Kisan Putra'.

Expressing delight at the visit of the farmers in the Parliament House, he remarked, "Today is a special day as the parliamentarians from around the world & from the G-20 nations are in our country. Your visit to the Parliament coincides with this momentous day. This Parliament stands as the largest Panchayat in the country, and today, the rightful individuals have gathered here. Discussions regarding farmers & farming should take centre stage in this forum."

Here question arises – when the Vice-President, himself a farmer, is so much anxious about the welfare of the farmers, then why the farmers are to adopt the stir path across the country?

Why they have to agitate for MSP? Why they have to demand prosecution of Union Minister of State for Home Affairs Ajay Mishra Teni, allegedly the main conspirator behind the Lakhimpur Kheri massacre of farmers?

It is pertinent to mention that All-India General Body meeting of Samyukta Kisan Morcha (SKM) has called for intensifying struggle of farmers and farmworkers in 2024 to achieve the main demands MSP@C2+50% for all crops and procurement, freedom from debt-trap through loan waiver, halting privatisation of electricity, dismissal and prosecution of Union Minister of State for Home Affairs Ajay Mishra Teni (allegedly the main conspirator behind the Lakhimpur Kheri massacre of farmers) etc.

As per statement of SKM, shared by All India Kisan Sabha Vice-President, Inderjeet Singh, SKM State Units in 20 states shall conduct massive Jana Jagran Campaign from 10th to 20th January 2024 across India through door-to-door visits and distribution of leaflets. The aim of this mass campaign is to expose the pro-corporate economic policies of the BJP led Modi Government, detrimental to the interest of farmers, workers, and people at large, causing large scale unemployment, uncontrolled price rise, poverty, indebtedness and unbridled rural to urban migration. The Campaign is against the Modi Governments' narrative of corporate raj-based development

dependent on GDP rate and India become three trillion-dollar economy that hides the decline in the per capita income, growing income inequality and denial of minimum support price to farmers and minimum wage to workers. The farmer and worker activists will visit households, distribute leaflets, and ensure massive participation of the people in the forthcoming joint and coordinated struggle actions against corporate exploitation under the patronage of RSS-BJP rule. State level coordination committees will meet immediately to prepare for the campaign to target to cover at least 40% of the 30.40 crores households.

Divulging further, the release states that SKM shall hold Tractor Parade on 26th January, Republic Day of 2024 at district level in all the States and Union Territories. It is expected that the parade shall be held in at least 500 districts. SKM appeals to farmers to join the official Republic Day Parade in great numbers and after the conclusion of the formal Parade, the Tractor Parade will be held. The farmers participating in the Tractor Parade will fly-high the National Flag along with the flags of the constituent organisations.



Exploring The Bhagavad Gita From A Different Perspective

By: Sri Anish

'What is Bhagavad Gita' is an age-old evolutionary question and many of us have our own views and interpretations about Gita. But many times, the real answer to a question lies in another evolutionary question. And the answer to this lies in

It is an entertaining tale

To a child Buddhi (someone having the intellectual understanding of a child), Bhagavad Gita is a great tale, an engaging and entertaining story of a war between heroes and villains where, in the end, heroes win.

more mental growth. It is a factual Historical Event

To a researcher's Buddhi (someone who is analytical and logical but low on feelings, emotions and heartfulness), the Bhagavad Gita is a historical event that happened a few thousand years ago at the

answers to many of life's conflicting and complex situations and tells us what is the right thing to do when faced with certain moral and ethical dilemmas. It is a great source of understanding Dharam Niti (righteous policy), behavioural conduct, cunning war (competition) strategies and it even gives insights into leadership traits (yes, many corporate leadership programs have references from Bhagavad Gita on leadership qualities). It is a great text on Human Psychology

To many learners, the Bhagavad Gita is an ancient source of understanding human psychology. Many people believe that Sri Krishna is the first enlightened psychologist on Earth, the way he understands Arjuna's dilemma and the way he takes him out of his mental delusion is really the work of someone who knows human behaviours and mental makeup inside out.

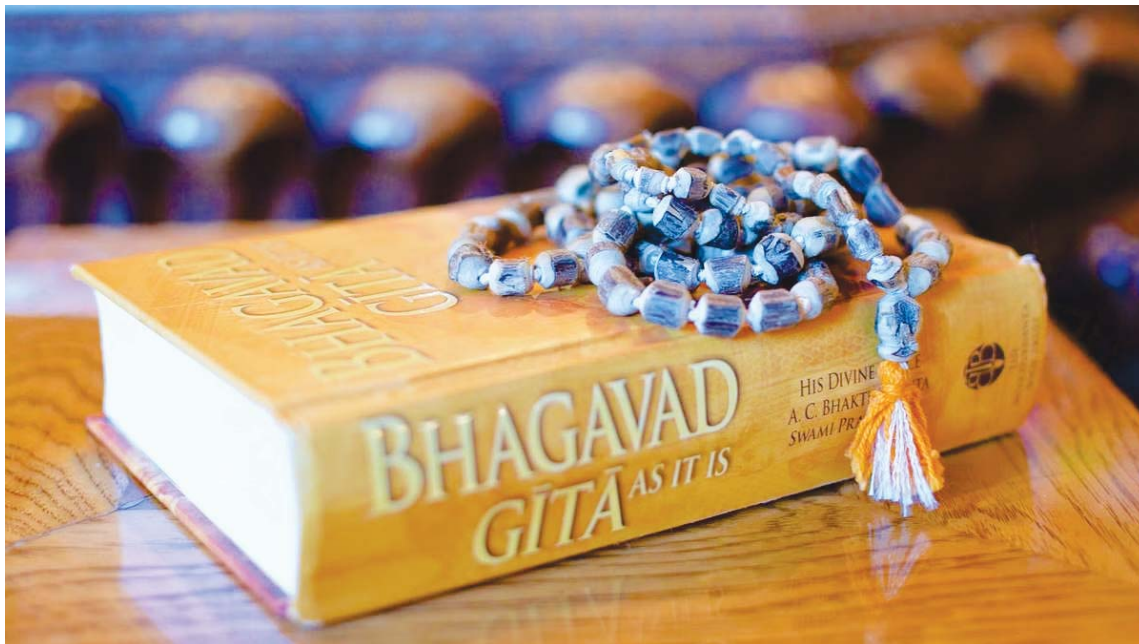
In fact, the very first chapter of the Bhagavad Gita is titled 'Arjuna Vishad Yog' – The despondency of Arjuna. Bhagavad Gita actually starts from the point where Arjuna is on his chariot on the battlefield and Sri Krishna is his charioteer. Arjuna is feeling depressed, his mind is clouded with confusion,

and he wants to run away from the battlefield – he doesn't want to face and fight with his own cousins, uncles and teachers who are on the opposing side with Kauravas's army, led by Duryodhana. He is feeling very drained in body and mind and doesn't know what to do. It is a psychological condition that Arjuna is suffering at that critical moment of war, and Sri Krishna can see and understand this, and very craftily he takes Arjuna out of his mental delusions.

It is an Adhyatam Shastra – teachings for Spiritual Awakening. And finally, there are a few people who feel Bhagavad Gita is a pure Adhyatam Shastra. It has profound insights given by Sri Krishna to awaken one's Buddhi from the outer-gross world of everyday life to the innermost subtle levels of spiritual awakening. At this level of understanding, the meaning of every shloka (verse) and the essence of every character totally transforms.

One of the greatest masters of Bharat, Sri Lahiri Mahasaya, guru of Sri Yukteswar Giri and great guru of Sri Paramhansa Yogananda, explained Bhagavad Gita to his disciples as a very advanced spiritual text. Here, Sri Krishna is considered as our pure divine, inner consciousness, Dhritarashtra and the entire Kaurava clan become the blind mind with all its impure and uncontrolled mental modifications. Pandavas are considered as five chakras (energy centres in human body) and Draupadi is considered as the Kundalini shakti (hidden life force) which once awakened, activates all the five chakras in their perfect balance and helps a human being move from the lower tendencies of uncontrolled mind (manas) to the higher tendencies of awakened intellect (Buddhi).

Yes, the Bhagavad Gita is a literary marvel written by Maharshi Ved Vyas. It has endless layers of mystical knowledge. But what the Bhagavad Gita is to you depends on where you are in your life's evolution. Whichever stage of evolution one is in, he or she will look, read and comprehend Gita from that level only. Great gurus like Sri Lahiri Mahasaya have opened even the most subtle layers of Bhagavad Gita for all of us, and finally, our understanding of Gita depends on two key things:



the question 'Who are you' at this stage of your life's evolution? Today on Gita Jayanti 2023 (the day on which thousands of years ago, the essential knowledge of life was given by Sri Krishna to his friend and disciple Arjuna on the battlefield of Kurukshetra), let us dive deep and explore it from a different perspective.

SO, WHAT IS THE BHAGAVAD GITA?

It is a great Epic Story

To a young adult's Buddhi (someone having the intellectual understanding of a youth), the Bhagavad Gita is an epic story that has certain moral values. Often with the belief that it is just a story that never happened in real life. Psychologists say that the majority of mental growth of humans stops at this age and rest of their lives people just gather more experiences but not

battlefield of Kurukshetra. For the researcher's Buddhi, this can be equitable with any other war in human history between good and bad people.

It is a Dharma Shastra – A Guidebook for Life. To a householder's Buddhi (someone who is totally engaged in his/her personal, professional and social life), Bhagavad Gita is a great guidebook on how to live a life of righteousness. It gives

Pakistan Refuses to Learn from the Past, Nurturing Daesh to Counter Afghan Taliban

Written By: Arun Anand

Ehsanullah Ehsan, a former spokesman of Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), has accused the Pakistani Army and, in particular, its Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) of providing special hospitality to scores of high-profile leaders of the Islamic State of Khorasan extremist group, also called Daesh. This allegation made in an article written by Ehsan comes in the backdrop of Pakistani government's widespread crackdown to deport hundreds of thousands of Afghan refugees from its territory to coerce the Afghan Taliban government in Kabul into taking action against TTP. The latter has emerged as a formidable threat to Pakistan's internal security. Even if Ehsan's allegations are kept aside on account of originating from a spokesperson of an extremist group, there are serious questions about the Pakistani establishment's historical reliance on non-state actors to further its foreign policy goals. It has shaped the country's geopolitical landscape and ensured the Army maintains an upper hand in deciding the regional policy of the country and by extension provides it a means of control over the state institutions. While many argue that Islamabad's adoption of this policy dates to Soviet occupation of Afghanistan starting in 1979, its roots, in essence, extend



back to Pakistan's emergence from British India in 1947. The country's use of non-state actors was intricately linked to its quest for asymmetric methods to counter its larger adversary, India, during its formative years as an independent state. For instance, within three months of its establishment, Pakistan mobilised thousands of tribal militiamen who launched an invasion of Jammu and Kashmir on 22 October 1947. This action was in gross violation of its standstill agreement with Maharaja Hari Singh, the then ruler of the princely state, who was keen on joining India. This explicit use of non-state actors aimed to fulfil the foreign policy objective of annexing Kashmir and change the facts on the ground amidst the redrawing of the Indian subcontinent. Despite the setback of failure in 1948 to accomplish this objective, Pakistan pursued Operation

Gibraltar, discreetly inserting hundreds of its military personnel disguised as militants into Kashmir, aiming to foment what could be construed as an internal insurgency against India. This trend of proxy utilisation persisted over time, gaining momentum particularly in the late 1980s when Pakistan redirected hundreds of fighters who had returned from Afghanistan into Kashmir, resulting in numerous civilian casualties. The strategic use of proxy actors gained prominence during the Afghan-Soviet War in the 1980s, a period deeply entrenched within the broader Cold War dynamics between the US-led capitalist bloc and the Soviet-led Communist bloc. In this war, Pakistan, under General Zia-ul-Haq who Islamised state institutions, assumed a frontline role in organising and training anti-Soviet Mujahideen forces through its powerful Army. The

success of the Afghan campaign brought first dividends to Pakistan and is the reason being considered as the inception of Islamabad's strategic alliance with non-state actors to achieve regional goals.

Non-state actors in essence offer unique advantages to their state sponsors, with their independence from official government structures allowing plausible deniability, enabling the pursuit of objectives without direct attribution or accountability. For Pakistan, these proxy groups served as a potent lever to disrupt regional stability and exert pressure on neighbouring countries, notably Afghanistan, a tactic that endured until the downfall of the Afghan Taliban, supported by Islamabad in August 2021. With Afghan Taliban back in power in Afghanistan, Pakistan appears to have successfully courted the Islamic State Khorasan leadership as a counterweight to Kabul to exert pressure as and when required. This can be demonstrated by gradual decline of the terror acts committed by the Daesh in Pakistan and a surge in their violence inside Afghanistan since the last few years. Interestingly, most of the attacks have been attributed to TTP and Baloch nationalists, with Islamabad accusing the Afghan Taliban of extending their patronage to these groups. This is a classic case of blowback

that Pakistan has suffered with its own patronised group turning against it, symbolising the double-edged sword nature of these relations.

Therefore, the allegations that the hospitality extended to Daesh extremists across Pakistan by the ISI and Army does not come as a surprise. With the return of the Afghan Taliban to power in Afghanistan, it seems Islamabad has strategically and successfully courted the leadership of the Islamic State Khorasan, possibly to exert pressure on Kabul when deemed necessary like the current standoff between the Pakistani government and Afghan Taliban. Notably, there are reports circulating about a covert Dobari Agreement between the Pakistani Army and Daesh, in which the extremist group has purportedly committed to scaling down its violence within Pakistan's borders. More importantly, this agreement outlines an exemption for military entities as Daesh targets within Pakistan, shedding light on why the few attacks that have been attributed to this have predominantly focused on the sectarian targets.

This shift becomes evident through the gradual decrease in Daesh-led terror activities within Pakistan, juxtaposed against a noticeable surge in their violent actions inside Afghanistan over recent years.

Financial Times Joins Legions of Media Houses Feeding into Anti-Growth Biases Against India

By: Sagorika Sinha

In 2014, the Prime Minister of India was interviewed by Fareed Zakaria of CNN. While some of the questions by Zakaria focused on China, and compared the autocracy with India, PM Modi stated that it would make more sense to compare democracies. Just over nine years later, in his latest interview with the Financial Times, the question and the answer were both repeated. Beyond that, there are several other consistencies in tone and approach of the Western media houses that mark these rare dialogues but also represent the larger Anglo gaze on India. They are designed to approach the subject with hostility. Two years before his chance to interview the prime minister in his

first term, Zakaria had stated that Narendra Modi was "unlikely to

against the subject of their interview, which reflects heavily



be a national leader in India" or even a regional leader for much longer, and that Zakaria himself violently disagreed with the then chief minister. Financial Times authors have similarly held outright political prejudices

in their article. John Reed, for example, Financial Times' South Asia bureau chief, based in New Delhi, writes articles in outright support of Indian Opposition leaders, the latest being about Mahua Moitra. Moitra was

apparently disqualified from the lower house of India's Parliament, not due to her cash-for-query activities and for sharing passwords with a Dubai-based businessman, but because of her political views. He makes a mention of how "powerful" Adani is, a statement oft-repeated by Rahul Gandhi, an American favourite, due to his half-European, half-obedient Indian heritage. His article, however, makes a point of ignoring that Adani's business rival, Darshan Hiranandani, who has admitted to collaborating with Moitra and turned witness against her, has been powerful for decades and comes from a family of powerful businessmen. In the same breath, a meaningless line about the lack

of power of Indian women in politics is added to play into anti-woman stereotypes about India to cater to people who prefer the idea over the data.

Financial Times article is more staff commentary than the prime minister's interview, but then, the infantilisation of readers has been common to far-Left commentary for years. The first paragraph of the piece makes a mention of the name change of the street on which Prime Minister Modi's official residence is located. The new name, Lok Kalyan Marg, is in keeping with his party's origin from the social welfare organisation — the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) — from the view of serving the citizenry, not ruling over them like the colonisers once did.

What Makes Modi Unbeatable? So, Is 2024 A Done Deal?

By: Yuvraj Pokharna

'Unity in Diversity' is one of the stamp slogans that we have been incessantly fed since school days when describing our motherland. This, in a way, describes the diversity and disparity reflected by the various states and regions while sharing an uncanny resemblance in having a common civilisation and a common nation. But electoral politics, if someone were to simply put it that way, is nothing but a game of numbers. That is the bane or the boon of a republican democracy. Politicians divide us, but politics unites us emphatically!

Recently, the nation witnessed elections in the five states — Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Telangana and Mizoram — where around 16 crore people voted, 7.8 crore of whom, as per the election commission, were women. It's interesting to analyse and gauge the impact as well as the far-reaching consequences of these polls, given the fact that the nation will now turn its focus to the 2024 general elections. Mizoram is geopolitically a vital state, even though it has a



relatively sparse population in terms of registered voters, i.e., 8.52 lakh. Contrastingly, the states of Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Rajasthan and Telangana have a staggering vote base of 5.6 crore, 2.03 crore, 5.2 crore and 3.17 crore, respectively. The results swayed decisively and indisputably in favour of the Modi-led BJP. The careful analysis of these results unveiled significant micro- and macro-trends, as well as the strategy the BJP is relying on for the upcoming general elections. This is where a newly released book—a highly engrossing and telling read to a student of politics—titled 'Modi and India: 2024 and the Battle for Bharat' discovers itself all along, with a

transcendental and striking relevance. Authored by veteran political journalist Rahul Shivshankar and colleague Siddhartha Talya, the book also focuses on how the BJP has successfully managed to cultivate a following among a large section of OBCs, SCs and STs by meeting their own aspiration to remain in the Hindutva fold. Additionally, the Modi government itself has been emphasising that more than a third of the beneficiaries of several of its welfare schemes are minorities. The results of these states confirm the assertions made in this captivating book by the authors: a detailed analysis and an insightful exploration of the

factors contributing to the growing popularity of the Modi-led saffron party at the grassroots level. The BJP has realised very well that an over-reliance on identity politics alone to win elections cannot be a long-term strategy.

Two, the authors highlight the fact that the BJP has to tailor its strategy according to local considerations, which it has done successfully in the Northeast. For instance, the BJP has successfully tailored its strategy in Mizoram, winning two seats in predominantly Christian constituencies. Third, it has managed to work out a strong strategy to counter caste mobilisation by other parties; for instance, it has cornered a large chunk of the non-Yadav, non-Jatav vote in Uttar Pradesh. Yadav and Jatav votes predominantly go to the SP and BSP, respectively. Even in these elections, it has managed to counter the caste census pitch because, as per reports, a large section of the OBC vote has stayed with the BJP. Fourth, the BJP, under the stewardship of PM Modi, has been able to directly appeal to tribals through the promotion and

celebration of local cultures. In this way, it has appealed to the aspirations of many tribals as well as Dalits who have an inclination towards the larger Hindutva rubric. In addition to this, remembering the contribution of tribals in the freedom struggle—invoking the Mangarh massacre, for instance—has also had an impact.

Fifth, the delivery of welfare initiatives is a key priority, and the focus has been on last-mile delivery, in line with the core ideology of the BJP of "integral humanism" and plugging the gaps.

In their enthralling book, 'Modi and India: 2024 and the Battle for Bharat', the authors also quote their interview with Badri Narayan, a professor of social sciences. "In Uttar Pradesh, most Dalits are Kabirpanthis (a denomination whose members follow the teachings of the fifteenth-century saint Kabir) and Ravidasis (followers of the fifteenth-century saint Ravidas), and very few of them are Buddhists. That's the reason why Kanshi Ram (founder of the Bahujan Samaj Party) did not convert to Buddhism.

Nikki Haley as first female US president? Unlikely but not impossible

By Arwa Mahdawi

Could Nikki Haley become the first female president?

Donald Trump is ending 2023 on quite the low. On Tuesday a Colorado supreme court ruling barred the former president from the state's presidential ballot, which drove him predictably bonkers. Then, to add insult to injury, he got some bad news from New Hampshire: Nikki Haley, the former governor of South Carolina and the woman Trump appointed to be his ambassador to the United Nations, is catching up to him in the polls. A new Saint Anselm College survey shows Haley with 30% support among likely Republican primary voters in the state, 14 points less than Trump.

To be fair, Trump probably isn't quaking in his boots: he still has a sizable lead. But he can't be enjoying Haley's momentum. Business heavyweights have flocked to her; she's landed a coveted endorsement from New Hampshire's Republican governor, Chris Sununu; and her



polling figures have doubled in three months. The 51-year-old is quickly becoming a viable candidate. So could she actually do it? Could Haley become the first female and first Indian-American president of the US? It's unlikely but not impossible. More important, however, it's not anything anyone vaguely to the left should wish for. Haley may be a woman (she's certainly been very happy to lean into her gender and ethnic background when it's convenient) but she's no friend to women or minorities. She's got reactionary views on abortion,

immigrants and LGBTQ+ people. Her politics are just as hate-filled as Trump's are. She's just as opportunistic and self-serving as the former president. She just comes across as less obviously dangerous and extreme.

Partly that's because she's not as mercurial, of course. Chaos doesn't follow her everywhere, like it does Trump. She's frequently described as the "adult in the room" because she acts like more of a grown-up than the other Republican contenders — which, to be honest, isn't saying much. But another reason so many

people seem keen to paint her as a "moderate" — when her politics are very much to the right — might be because she's a woman.

Women are becoming increasingly prominent in the far right. Last year Giorgia Meloni, head of Italy's most rightwing government, became the first female prime minister of Italy. In France, Marine Le Pen, leader of the far-right National Rally party, has gone from strength to strength. In the UK some of the most aggressively anti-immigrant policies have been voiced by brown women like Priti Patel and Suella Braverman. And one of the rising stars of the Conservative party in the UK is Kemi Badenoch, a Black woman who has styled herself as anti-woke culture warrior. The feminization of fascism isn't happenstance — it's highly strategic. "It is a trend Marine Le Pen started about 10 years ago — she softened the image of the party [the former Front National], getting rid of the unappealing aspects and the macho image," Dorit Geva, a

sociologist at Central European University told DW last year.

"I think that women do play a huge, important role in mainstreaming more radical ideas," Seyward Darby, author of the book *Sisters in Hate*, similarly told Vice World News shortly after Meloni was elected. "They are ... crucial to spreading the ideology with a smile and making it seem palatable ... It's about putting a certain veneer on it, a certain gloss on it."

It would be patronizing to say that women are being used by far-right organizations to soften their image, but they're certainly useful. Haley gives a veneer of respectability to an increasingly dysfunctional and dangerous GOP. Beneath her grown-up gloss, however, is the same old rot.

It's 2023 and a woman with short hair is still shocking apparently. Eve Gilles has become the first contestant with short hair ever to win Miss France and the usual suspects are very angry indeed about it.

'Sitting on a powder keg': US braces for a year, and an election, like no other

The 60th US presidential election, which will unfold in 2024, will be quite unlike any that has gone before as the US, and the rest of the world, braces for a contest amid fears of eroding democracy and the looming threat of authoritarianism.

It will be a fight marked by numerous unwanted firsts as the oldest president in the country's history is likely to face the first former US president to stand trial on criminal charges. A once aspirational nation will continue its plunge into anxiety and divisions about crime, immigration, race, foreign wars and the cost of living. Democrat Joe Biden, 81, is preparing for the kind of gruelling campaign he was able to avoid during coronavirus lockdowns in 2020. Republican Donald Trump will spend some of his campaign in a courtroom and has vowed authoritarian-style retribution if he wins. For voters it is a time of stark choices, unique spectacles and simmering danger. "It feels to me as if America is sitting on a powder keg and the fuse has been lit," said Larry Jacobs, the director of the Center for the Study of Politics and Governance at the University of Minnesota. "The protective shield that all democracies and social orders rely on – legitimacy of the governing body, some level of elite responsibility, the willingness of citizens to view their neighbors in a civic way – is in an advanced stage of decline or collapse."

"It's quite possible that the powder keg that America's sitting on will explode over the course of 2024."

US politics entered a new, turbulent era with Trump's shocking victory over Hillary Clinton in 2016. The businessman and reality TV star, tapping into populist rage against the establishment, was the first president with no prior political or military experience. His chaotic four-year presidency was scarred by the Covid-19 pandemic and ended with a bitter defeat by Biden in a 2020 election that was itself billed as an unprecedented stress test of democracy.

Trump never accepted the result and his attempts to overturn it culminated in a deadly riot at the US Capitol on 6 January 2021, and his second impeachment. He has spent three years plotting revenge and describes the 5 November election as "the final battle". But he is running for president under the shadow of 91 criminal charges in four jurisdictions, knowing that regaining the White House might be his best hope of avoiding prison – a calculus that could make him and his supporters more desperate and volatile than ever. Allan Lichtman, a history professor at American University in Washington, said: "This is the most astounding election I have ever seen."

"We have never had an election where a

likely major party nominee is indicted for major felony charges of the most serious nature; this is not shoplifting. He's being charged with an attempt to destroy our democracy and subverting our national security. Both in terms of Trump's personal morality and his incredibly serious crimes, we have never seen



anything remotely like this."

First Trump must win the Republican primary against Ron DeSantis and Nikki Haley, putting the electoral and legal calendars on a collision course. On 16 January, a day after the Iowa caucuses kick off the Republican nomination process, Trump faces a defamation trial brought by the writer E Jean Carroll, who has already won a \$5m judgment against him after a jury found him liable for sexual abuse and defamation.

On 4 March, Trump is due in court in Washington in a federal case accusing him of plotting to overturn the 2020 election result. The following day is Super Tuesday, when more than 15 states are scheduled to hold Republican primaries, the biggest delegate haul of the campaign.

On 25 March, Trump also faces state charges in New York over hush-money payments to an adult film star, although the judge has acknowledged he may postpone that because of the federal trial. On 5 August, prosecutors have asked to start an election fraud trial in Georgia, less than three weeks after Trump is likely to have been nominated by the Republican national convention in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

Trump is hard at work to flip his legal troubles to his political advantage, contending that he is a victim of a Democratic deep state conspiracy. He frequently tells his supporters: "In the end, they're not coming after me. They're coming after you – and I'm just standing in their way." His Georgia mugshot has been slapped on T-shirts and other merchandise like a lucrative badge of honor. It seems to be working, at least according to a series of opinion polls that show Trump leading Biden in a hypothetical matchup. A survey in early

December for the Wall Street Journal newspaper showed Trump ahead by four points, 47% to 43%. When five potential third-party and independent candidates were included, Trump's lead over Biden expanded to six points, 37% to 31%. To Democrats, such figures are bewildering. Biden's defenders point to

his record, including the creation of 14m jobs, strong GDP growth and four major legislative victories on coronavirus relief, infrastructure, domestic production of computer chips and the biggest climate action in history. He has also led the western alliance against Russian aggression in Ukraine. Lichtman added: "He gets credit for nothing. It's just amazing: I've never seen a president do so much and get so little mileage on it. He has more domestic accomplishments than any American president since the 1960s. He's presided over an amazing economic recovery, a far better economy than was under Donald Trump even before the pandemic in terms of jobs, wages, GDP. Inflation has gone down by two-thirds."

"It was Biden who single-handedly put together the coalition of the west that stopped [Vladimir] Putin from quickly overtaking Ukraine. He seems to get no credit for any of this whatsoever and that's partly his own fault and the fault of the Democratic party. The Democratic party has been horrible for some time now – at least 15 years. Republicans are so much better at messaging."

The president's approval rating has been stubbornly low since around the time of the botched withdrawal from Afghanistan in the summer of 2021. He is grappling with record numbers of migrants entering the country – an issue that increasingly aggravates states beyond the US-Mexico border. His refusal to call for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza is costing him some support among progressives and young people.

The latest Democratic messaging salvo – "Bidenomics" – appears to have been a flop at a moment when many voters blame him for rising prices and a cost-of-living crisis. For all the barrage of

positive economic data, Americans are lacking the feelgood factor.

Andra Gillespie, a political scientist at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia, said: "People feel that Biden overpromised and underdelivered and ultimately what it came down to was he didn't make me feel good while he did it and he didn't make it look easy." Biden still holds a potential ace in the hole. Democrats plan to make abortion central to the 2024 campaign, with opinion polls showing most Americans do not favor strict limits on reproductive rights. The party is hoping threats to those rights will encourage millions of women and independents to vote their way next year. It is also seeking to put measures enshrining access to abortion in state constitutions on as many ballots as possible. The issue has flummoxed Republicans, with some concerned the party has gone too far with state-level restrictions since the supreme court overturned the landmark 1973 Roe v Wade ruling last year, ending constitutional protection for abortion. Trump has taken notice and is conspicuously trying to be vague on the issue.

They must make the contrast between a Biden America and a Trump America and ask people which America do they want to live in

Tara Setmayer

The Wall Street Journal poll found Biden leading Trump on abortion and democracy by double digits. But it gave Trump a double-digit lead on the economy, inflation, crime, border security, the wars in Ukraine and Gaza and physical and mental fitness for office. Biden still has time to reshape perceptions but even close allies concede that he is not an inspirational speechmaker like Bill Clinton or Barack Obama. How can he turn it around?

Tara Setmayer, a former Republican communications director on Capitol Hill, said: "My advice would be to be aggressive, go on offence and set the narrative. They must make the contrast between a Biden America and a Trump America and ask people which America do they want to live in."

"A year out, most people are not paying attention so the polls are meaningless in that they are not predictive of what will happen in a year. Where they do have value is what the trend line shows, which is that the American people are not getting the messaging clearly enough now, so it's time to get up off their asses and activate the campaign at level 10 right now."

Setmayer, a senior adviser to the anti-Trump group the Lincoln Project, added: "What Donald Trump is telegraphing, what he plans to do to this country, I don't fully think most Americans understand."

The Year's Worst Climate News You Haven't Heard About

It was a year when the world experienced its hottest 12 months on record. When China connected more new coal plants than ever before. US oil production hit the highest level of any country in history, while shipment volumes for LNG reached an all-time high. The annual United Nations climate meeting in Dubai left fossil fuel producers grinning, and climate campaigners fuming. There's been no shortage of bad climate news in 2023 - but worse still is the amount of troubling information that's been drowned out by the bigger stories. Here are three important issues that have flown below the radar over the past 12 months.

There's Gold in Them Forests One of the busiest dealmakers in the global energy industry this year has been a company that didn't exist 15 months ago. Blue Carbon, set up by a member of Dubai's royal family last October, has been signing agreements over millions of hectares of land in Africa and elsewhere for carbon offsetting projects. Just as industrial equipment pumps carbon dioxide into the atmosphere as a by-product of energy production, vegetation sucks it out as fuel for its own cells. By encouraging more forest growth, polluters can in theory cancel out their environmental debts. In reality, such carbon offsetting is rife with questionable accounting, turning it into a tempting way to avoid the hard work of decarbonization.

There's been a welter of scandals over the past year showing that offsetting projects often overstated their benefits, culminating in a peer-reviewed study finding some 94% of the credits analyzed may be bogus. That's prompted corporate backers in rich countries - including Shell Plc, Nestle SA, easyJet Plc and Fortescue Metals Group Ltd. - to pull out. It's not deterring oil producers.

With early-stage agreements that cover a fifth of Zimbabwe's land mass and 10% of Liberia, Blue Carbon is starting to resemble a "carbon colonialist," akin to mid-20th century imperialist oil majors such as Shell and BP Plc. This month, it used the COP28

meeting in its hometown as an opportunity to recruit more governments. It's helping turn Dubai's oil wealth into a worryingly potent - and corrupting - tool of climate diplomacy soft power.

Carbon offsetting may be full of greenwashing, but it didn't collapse in 2023. If anything, it's just getting started.

Brake In India

Plenty of ink has been spilled about the travails of



wind energy in Europe, where high interest rates, rising costs for materials, and supply-chain bottlenecks led to failed power auctions and plunging share prices. Far less attention has been paid to the growing evidence that India is failing to hit its ambitious targets for clean energy. That may have the bigger impact on global emissions, though. Despite some of the lowest-cost renewable power on the planet, annual connections are stuck around 10GW to 15GW, and solar connections in the nine months through September fell 47% from a year earlier, according to Mercom India Research, a consultancy. The country needs to be adding about 40GW each year to hit its target of 500GW by 2030. Longstanding roadblocks caused by deficient grid infrastructure and land acquisition, plus the perennial financially distressed condition of state-owned electricity distribution companies, don't show much sign of being fixed any time soon. If the world is to prevent India's

development putting further upward pressure on global emissions, the country badly needs to achieve its ambition to enjoy the world's first green industrial revolution. That's looking increasingly out of reach.

Sinking Hopes

You might think all the greenhouse gases spewed out by human society end up in the sky. Not quite.

In fact, about three-fifths of the total is absorbed into oceans, soils, and plants. All the warming we worry about is being caused by the remainder. These terrestrial and oceanic carbon sinks are vast and little-understood, making every piece of emerging scientific research vital to the question of how much we can afford to emit without causing devastating warming. One prominent 2022 paper in the scientific journal *Nature*, which found that the sinks appeared to be taking up all the carbon that human activity was emitting, was retracted in September after queries about the statistical techniques used.

Just a few weeks earlier, the journal *AGU Advances* published further troubling news on the global carbon cycle. Force enough carbon dioxide into a bottle of water with a soda siphon, and at some point the liquid will approach saturation. Something similar may be happening to the world's seas. Rising CO2 concentration is making the oceans more acidic, and the way water circulates is changing, too. As a result, the seas have been taking up a smaller share of our emissions with each passing decade.

That's a worrying sign. If the oceans stop working as carbon dumps - or, worse still, start pushing their dissolved CO2 back into the atmosphere - even declining emissions from human activities might not be enough to halt the rise in global temperatures.

Silver Linings

This sounds like an unmitigatedly depressing way to end the year - but there's been some good news as well, not all of it hitting the headlines. Tomorrow we'll look at three reasons to be cheerful.

'Almost naked' party in Russian nightclub triggers conservative backlash

Footage showing Russian VIPs in lingerie and raunchy costumes led to the arrest of a rapper for wearing nothing but a strategically-placed sock, and calls for boycotts and investigations. The scandal shows the shrinking space for anything deviating from conservative patriotism in Russia since its deadly assault in Ukraine almost two years ago.

Amid the backlash, organiser Anastasia Ivleva published a tearful apology video

I would like to ask you, the people, for a second chance... If the answer is no, then I'm ready for my public execution," she said Wednesday. Over 20 people filed a class lawsuit against her, demanding she pay a billion rubles (\$11 million) to a charity supporting the assault on Ukraine. Her apology left some unmoved, including influential state television presenter Vladimir Solovyov. "You want a second chance? Bring our guys heaters and drones in Tokmak" on the southern Ukrainian frontline, he told

her on Telegram. In an earlier post, Solovyov called the attendees "beasts, scum" and said: "You have no idea how much the people hate you." The arrested rapper, Vasio, had already been sentenced to 15 days in jail for distributing "gay propaganda" and petty hooliganism, state-run news agency TASS said. He was convicted under the "LGBTQ propaganda" law banning positive information on lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender people, which authorities toughened last year.

'Irresponsible in heroic times' Russia's conservative spiral has deepened since the military operation in Ukraine. But until recently liberal high society circles in Moscow had rarely been affected. Apologies from people who attended the December 20 party have been trickling out over the past few days. Russia's flamboyant pop king Filipp Kirkorov asked for forgiveness after footage circulated of him wearing a sparkling lace outfit with futuristic

sunglasses.

"In today's difficult and heroic times, an artist of my calibre... cannot and should not be so irresponsible when participating in various events," he said on camera. Ksenia Sobchak, a media personality and the daughter of Vladimir Putin's mentor, appeared in several photos in a beige dress with barbed wire patterns. She said she understood "showing photos of the party to the whole world was inappropriate" at the moment in a post on social media. And singer Dima Bilan said he "understood the resentment of our people, especially guys who are defending us on the frontline." The Kremlin refused to comment, but foreign ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova addressed the controversy. "Life teaches us painful lessons," she said on Sputnik radio, according to state-run television. "These people need to realise the depth of the problem and become better. For their own sake," she said.

Red Sea Crisis Explained: How Have Houthis Disrupted International Sea Trade, How Serious Is Their Security Threat?

The Yemen-based and Iran-backed Houthi militants have disrupted the maritime trade and security architecture in the Red Sea for the past month.

Shortly after Hamas —also backed by Iran— mounted the worst-ever attack on Israel on October 7, the regional Iran-backed groups like Hezbollah in Lebanon and militias in Iraq and Syria opened hostilities against Israel and its principal ally United States in the region. The Houthis soon joined them and declared war on Israel.

Houthis, who function under the banner of 'Ansar Allah (Partisans of God)', initially launched missiles at Israel, but then switched their attention to attacking cargo and navy ships in the Red Sea, which connects Asia and Europe. Over the past month, Houthis have mounted more than 100 attacks on around 20 ships, which have led to major shipping and energy companies to suspend operations in the region and a rise in oil prices.

The United States and European navies are active in the region and are taking down Houthi drones, which have continued to strike naval as well as commercial ships. The Houthis have also hijacked a Japanese-operated ship, which they continue to hold off the coast of Yemen. In response to the continuing Houthi belligerence, the

United States has announced a 10-nation naval force under the mission 'Operation Prosperity Guardian' to protect shipping in the region. While India is not part of the mission, it has reportedly deployed two warships to the region as stakes are high for India as well.

Here we explain how Houthis have disrupted the maritime trade and have destabilised the security arrangement in the Middle East. Why Are Houthis Attacking Ships In Red Sea?

With their first attacks, Houthis said they were attacking 'Israel-linked' ships, but that has not been the case. They have attacked ships owned and operated by other countries as well. The Houthis are carrying out their attacks out of their opposition to Israel.

Moreover, the ownership, operations, and flagging of a ship is a complex affair as one ship may be owned by one country's national, may fly the flag of another country as it may be registered there, be operated by yet another country-based company, and be staffed by a multinational crew. So, even as the Houthis said they were targeting Israel, that has never been the case.

Much like Hamas, Hezbollah, and other Iran-backed groups in the region, the Houthis also consider Israel and

Jews as enemies and are opposed to the State of Israel. The slogan of Houthis sums up their position: "God is great, death to the US, death to Israel, curse the Jews, and victory for Islam."

The Houthis have said they would continue to attack ships in the Red Sea and Israel until Israel continues to strike the Gaza Strip, which it started bombing on October 7 after the Hamas attack. Gazan authorities say over 20,000 have been killed in Israeli strikes and more than 50,000 have been injured, most of them women and children. Israel has attracted worldwide criticism for its bombing campaign and is under international pressure to scale down its operations and suspend the aerial bombing of Gaza.

Houthis have reportedly set up a 'joint operations room' to plan and execute the war against Israel and its partners. By attacking ships in the region, the Houthis aim to make a dent in the world economy and mount further pressure on Israel. Commentators have also said that the Houthi aggression is also a ploy to regionalise the conflict and challenge American power.

"Iran has used its media to spread claims that the US is involved in Israel's war on Hamas and therefore try to make this a regional conflict with

the US. Turkey has also sought to slam the US as well as Israel. China and Russia have refused to condemn Hamas. This illustrates that this is a much larger war than just Israel fighting Hamas. Iran and Russia see it as a way to challenge the US. Russia believes this is about a multi-polar world order, they see the Hamas war as a kind of larger symbolic proxy war against the West," said Seth J. Frantzman in an article in The Jerusalem Post.

How Have Houthis Affected Trade In Red Sea?

The Red Sea is one of the most crucial waterways in the world. The Suez Canal, which is the egress point in the sea's west, connects Europe and Asia. The Bab el-Mandeb Strait is the eastern point of entry into the sea and separates Africa and Asia.

The Red Sea accounts for 30 per cent of the world's ship container traffic, 12 per cent of all trade, and 10 per cent of total oil trade, according to expert estimates. The stakes are thus high.

Following the Houthi belligerence, global energy major BP and top shipping companies MSC, Maersk, Hapag-Lloyd, and Cosco suspended operations in Red Sea. These companies are taking the much longer route by going around the entire Africa to connect the East and the West.

US military's secretive spaceplane launched on possible higher-orbit mission

CAPE CANAVERAL - The U.S. military's secretive X-37B robot spaceplane blasted off from Florida on Thursday night on its seventh mission, the first launched atop a SpaceX Falcon Heavy rocket capable of delivering it to a higher orbit than ever before.

The Falcon Heavy, composed of three liquid-fueled rocket cores strapped together, roared off its launch pad from NASA's Kennedy Space Center at Cape Canaveral in a spectacular liftoff carried live on a SpaceX webcast. The launch followed more than two weeks of false starts and delays attributed to poor weather and unspecified technical issues, leading ground crews to roll the spacecraft back to its hangar before proceeding with Thursday's flight.

It came two weeks after China's own robot spaceplane, known as the Shenlong, or "Divine Dragon," was launched on its third mission to orbit since 2020, adding a new twist to the growing U.S.-Sino rivalry in space. The Pentagon has disclosed few details about the X-37B mission, conducted by the U.S. Space Force under the military's National Security Space Launch program.

The Boeing-built vehicle, roughly the size of a small bus and resembling a miniature space shuttle, is built to deploy various payloads and conduct technology experiments on years-long orbital flights. At the end of its mission, the craft descends back through the atmosphere to land on a runway much like an airplane. It has flown six previous missions since 2010, the first five of them carried to orbit by Atlas V rockets from United Launch Alliance, a joint venture of Boeing

(BA.N) and Lockheed Martin (LMT.N), and most recently, in May 2020, atop a Falcon 9 booster furnished by Elon Musk's SpaceX.

Thursday's mission marked the first launched aboard SpaceX's more powerful Falcon Heavy rocket, capable of carrying payloads even heavier than the X-37B farther into space, possibly into geosynchronous orbit, more than 22,000 miles (35,000 km) above the Earth.

The X-37B, also called the Orbital Test Vehicle, has previously been confined to flights in low-Earth orbit, at altitudes below 1,200 miles (2,000 km). The Pentagon has not said how high the spaceplane will fly this time out. But in a statement last month, the Air Force Rapid Capabilities Office said the mission, designated by the Space Force as USSF-52, would involve tests of "new orbital regimes, experimenting with future space domain awareness technologies."

Such comments have led industry analysts and amateur space trackers to speculate that the X-37B may be bound for a highly elliptical orbit around Earth or even a path that could swing it out to the vicinity of the moon, a region of space in which the Pentagon has taken an increasing interest.

"Maybe this thing's going go out toward the moon and drop off a payload," said Bob Hall, director of space traffic monitoring firm COMSPOC, who analyzes the trajectories of orbital objects. The closer the spacecraft flies to the moon, the more difficult it could be to safely return to Earth.

Left unclear from Thursday's webcast, which SpaceX said it curtailed at the military's request, was

whether the X-37B reached its intended destination in space. But the company later posted photos of the liftoff on social media platform X with the headline: "Falcon Heavy Launches USSF-52 to orbit."

The X-37B also is carrying a NASA experiment to study how plant seeds are affected by prolonged exposure to the harsh environment of radiation in space. The ability to cultivate crops in space has major implications for keeping astronauts nourished during future long-term missions to the moon and Mars.

China's equally secretive Shenlong was carried to space on Dec. 14 by a Long March 2F rocket, a launch system less powerful than SpaceX's Falcon Heavy and believed to be limited to delivering payloads to low-Earth orbit.

Still, Space Force General B. Chance Saltzman told reporters at an industry conference earlier this month he expected China to launch Shenlong around the same time as the X-37B flight in what he suggested was a competitive move.

"These are two of the most watched objects on orbit while they're on orbit. It's probably no coincidence that they're trying to match us in timing and sequence of this," Saltzman said, according to remarks published in the journal Air & Space Forces Magazine.

The planned duration of the latest X-37B mission was not made public, but it will presumably run until June 2026 or later, given the prevailing pattern of successively longer flights.

Its last mission remained in orbit for well over two years before landing in November 2022.

New York Times sues OpenAI, Microsoft for infringing copyrighted works

The New York Times sued OpenAI and Microsoft on Wednesday, accusing them of using millions of the newspaper's articles without permission to help train artificial intelligence technologies.

The Times said it is the first major US media organization to sue OpenAI and Microsoft, which created ChatGPT and other AI platforms, over copyright issues. It said the defendants were trying to "free-ride on The Times's massive investment

in its journalism by using it to build substitutive products without permission or payment," according to the complaint filed in Manhattan federal court. "There is nothing 'transformative' about using The Times's content without payment to create products that substitute for The Times and steal audiences away from it," the Times said. OpenAI and Microsoft did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

The Times is not seeking a specific amount of damages, but it said OpenAI and Microsoft

have caused "billions of dollars" in damages. It also wants the companies to destroy chatbot models and training sets that incorporate its material.

While OpenAI's parent is a non-profit company, Microsoft has invested \$13 billion in a for-profit subsidiary, for what would be a 49% stake.

Investors have valued OpenAI at more than \$80 billion.

Others have challenged OpenAI's

alleged misuse of their copyright material. Novelists including David Baldacci, Jonathan Franzen, John Grisham and Scott Turow have also sued OpenAI and Microsoft in the Manhattan court, claiming that AI systems might have co-opted tens of thousands of their books. And in July, the comedian Sarah Silverman sued OpenAI and Meta Platforms in San Francisco for having allegedly "ingested" her book "The Bedwetter" to train ChatGPT.

Anti-Human Trafficking Cell to probe grounding of plane with Indians in France

The Anti-Human Trafficking Cell, in collaboration with Mumbai Police, will take up the investigation into the plane which was grounded at a French airport over suspicion of a human trafficking scheme.

The officials have sought a detailed report of airport security personnel's interrogation of Indian passengers who returned on the said flight during the early hours of Tuesday.

An Airbus A340 plane carrying over 300 passengers, mostly Indians, had been bound for Nicaragua, when it was detained on December 21 at Vatry airport,

150 kilometres east of Paris, where it was due for refuelling. The aircraft had arrived from the UAE and was halted by French authorities after an anonymous tip-off that the plane was carrying potential victims of human trafficking. At the time of landing in France, the flight carried 303 Indian passengers, with 11 unaccompanied minors. Of the original 303 people on the passenger list, 276 were on the plane that arrived in Mumbai before dawn on Tuesday.

Now that those passengers have returned, the Anti-Human Trafficking Cell has called for a detailed enquiry into the matter. In a letter addressed to Central Industrial Security

Force (CISF), Maharashtra anti-human trafficking unit head Deepak Pandey sought details of the CISF-led brief interrogation of returnees upon their arrival at Mumbai airport on Tuesday.

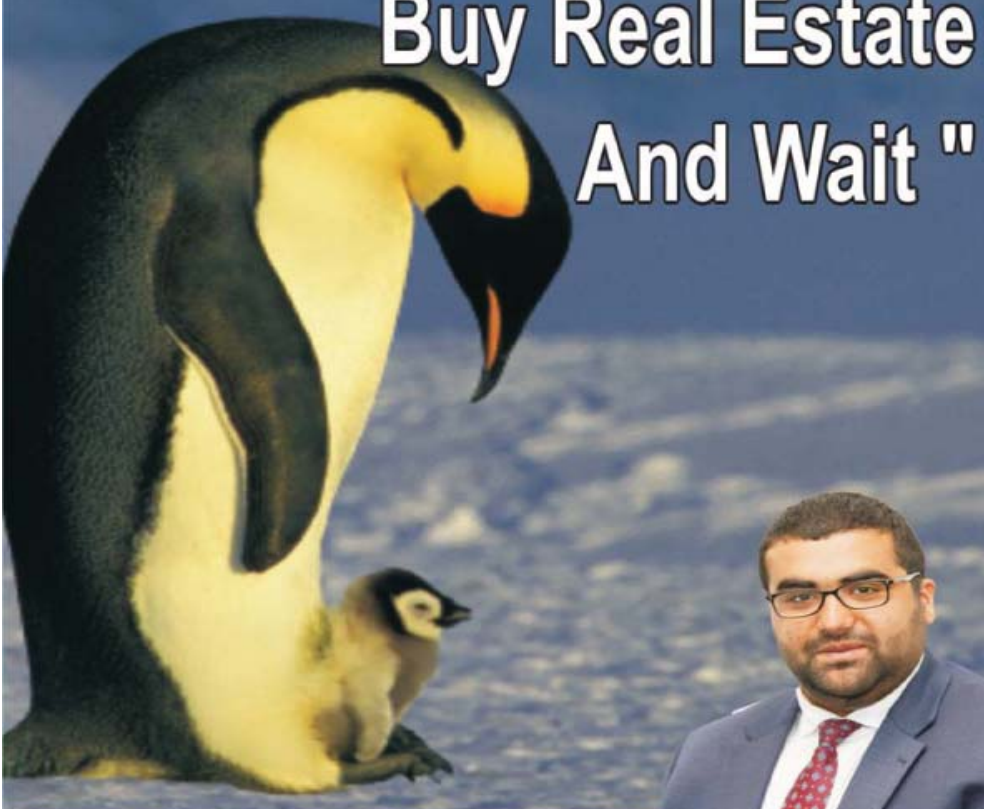
The letter states that upon disembarking from the plane, passengers were subjected to questioning by the CISF and requested a report on the same.

Sources said the focus of the probe will be on scrutinising the passengers and the circumstances surrounding their travel. The plane carried 276

passengers on board when it took off for Mumbai, as 27 persons, including two minors, had expressed the wish to apply for asylum and were still on French soil. The development surfaced as French authorities conducted two days of interviews with passengers regarding suspicions that they might be victims of human trafficking. Upon the flight's landing at Vatry Airport, French authorities launched a judicial investigation into the conditions and purpose of their trip, with a unit specialising in organised crime investigating trafficking claims.

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160 killed in 'well-coordinated' attack by armed groups in Nigeria

Military gangs, locally called "bandits", launched "well-coordinated" attacks in "not fewer than 20 different communities" and torched houses in central Nigeria.

Armed groups have killed at least 160 people in central Nigeria in a series of attacks on villages, local government officials said on Monday. The toll marked a sharp rise from the initial figure reported by the army Sunday evening of just 16 dead in a region plagued for several years by religious and ethnic tensions. "As many as 113 persons have been confirmed killed as Saturday hostilities persisted to early hours of Monday," Monday Kassah, head of the local government in Bokokos, Plateau State, told AFP. Military gangs, locally called "bandits", launched "well-coordinated" attacks in "not fewer than 20 different communities" and torched houses, Kassah said. "We found more than 300 wounded people" who were transferred to hospitals in Bokokos, Jos and Barkin Ladi, he said. A provisional toll by the local Red Cross reported 104 deaths in 18 villages in the

Bokokos region. At least 50 people were also reported dead in several villages in the Barkin Ladi area, according to Dickson Chollom, a member of the state parliament. He condemned the attacks and called on the security forces to act swiftly. "We will not succumb to the tactics of these merchants of death. We are united in our pursuit of justice and lasting peace," Chollom said.

'BARBARIC'

The attacks which started in the Bokokos area spilled into neighbouring Barkin Ladi where 30 people were found dead, according to local chairman Danjuma Dakil. On Sunday, Plateau State governor Caleb Mutfwang condemned the violence, calling it "barbaric, brutal and unjustified". "Proactive measures will be

taken by the government to curb ongoing attacks against innocent civilians," said Gyang



Bere, the governor's spokesperson. Gunfire could still be heard on late Monday afternoon, according to a source from the region, which is on the dividing line between Nigeria's mostly Muslim north and mainly Christian south. Markus Amorudu, a resident of Mushu village, said people were sleeping when shots rang out.

"We were scared because we weren't expecting an attack. People hid, but the assailants

terrorised by bandit militias operating from bases deep in forests and raiding villages to loot and kidnap residents for ransom.

Competition for natural resources between nomadic herders and farmers, intensified by rapid population growth and climate pressures, has also exacerbated social tensions and sparked violence. A jihadist conflict has raged in northeastern Nigeria since 2009, killing tens of thousands of people and displacing around two million, as Boko Haram battles for supremacy with rivals linked to the Islamic State group. President Bola Ahmed Tinubu, a former Lagos governor elected in February in a highly contested ballot, has promised to attract more investment to Africa's largest economy and most populous country in a bid to tackle its persistent security challenges.

22 killed in Congo after torrential rain brings destruction, flooding

A landslide engulfed houses, churches and roads, killing entire families and leaving people homeless in Congo's Kasai region.

At least 22 people died on Tuesday in Congo's Kasai-Central province, where that the rain had started at 1 am local time (12 am GMT) and continued until 4 pm (3 pm GMT). "Most of these deaths were caused by the collapse of the walls of houses built on unsuitable land," Kananga Mayor Rose Muadi Musube said. "I am asking



torrential rains destroyed infrastructure and caused flooding, authorities of the town of Kananga said. A landslide engulfed houses, churches and roads, killing entire families and leaving people homeless. "The commune of Kananga was hardest hit," Governor John Kabeya told Reuters, adding

the prime minister to come to our aid and for the government to provide us with substantial assistance so that we can bury our dead with dignity," Muadi Musube added. At least 14 people died in eastern Congo in early December after torrential rains battered the city of Bukavu

Top Iranian general killed in Israeli airstrike in Syria

Sayyed Reza Mousavi was a senior commander in the Iranian Army and a close companion of Qassem Soleimani, the former head of the Quds Force who was killed in a US drone strike.

Sayyed Reza Mousavi, a senior commander in Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and in-charge of Syria and Lebanon operations, was allegedly killed in an Israeli airstrike in Syria on Monday. According to a report by The Jerusalem Post, explosions were heard in the area of Set Zaynab in the Damascus countryside. Videos on social media showed a cloud of smoke near the Damascus International



Airport, a site Israel targets frequently due to its use by Iran-backed proxies in the region. Iranian state-owned broadcaster Press TV confirmed the death of Mousavi, identifying him as "a senior advisor" in Syria.

According to Press TV, Mousavi was a close companion of Qassem Soleimani, the former head of the Quds Force who was killed in a US drone strike in January 2020. Israeli media has referenced Mousavi as the highest-profile targeted killing since Soleimani. Iran, meanwhile, has vowed retaliation for Mousavi's killing. "Undoubtedly, the usurper and savage Zionist regime will pay for this crime," Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi said in a statement read on Press TV. "This action is another sign of frustration, helplessness, and inability of the occupying Zionist regime," he added.

Drone attack on merchant ship near India's coast: US, Iran trade blame

A cargo ship carrying crude oil from Saudi Arabia, and bound for India, was attacked by a drone near India's west coast. While the US has blamed Iran for the attack, Tehran has called the charges "repetitive accusations".



MV Chem Pluto, a cargo vessel carrying crude oil from Saudi Arabia which was targeted in a drone attack allegedly by Houthi militants, reached Mumbai port on Monday. While the US has claimed that the drone attack originated from Iran, Tehran has denied the charge, calling these "repetitive accusations". The chemical tanker, under Liberian flag, owned by Japan, and operated by the Netherlands, was struck by the drone on December 23, about 200 nautical miles off the Indian coast. It was carrying crude oil from Al Jubail port in Saudi Arabia to New Mangalore port. According to the Indian Navy, 20

Indian and Vietnamese crew were onboard the merchant ship. No one was injured in the attack. The cargo ship reached Mumbai port on Monday under the protection of the Indian Coast Guard ship ICGS Vikram.

WHAT DID THE US CLAIM?

According to a Reuters report quoting a Pentagon spokesperson, the attack on MV Chem Pluto was carried out by a "one-way attack drone fired from Iran". "The motor vessel CHEM PLUTO, a Liberia-flagged, Japanese-owned, and Netherlands-operated chemical tanker was struck at approximately 10 am local time (6 am GMT) today (Saturday) in

the Indian Ocean, 200 nautical miles from the coast of India, by a one-way attack drone fired from Iran," the spokesperson told Reuters. Incidentally, the cargo ship MV Chem Pluto was "Israel-affiliated", according to Ambrey, a maritime security firm, as reported by Times of Israel. The US claims that the attack was carried out by Yemen's Iran-backed Houthi rebels, who are targeting ships in the Red Sea after the October 7 attack on Israel by Hamas and the following retaliatory action by Tel Aviv. On December 22, the Pentagon claimed that Houthis have launched more than 100 drone

and missile attacks, targeting 10 merchant vessels in the Red Sea in solidarity with Palestinians in Gaza. White House National Security Council spokesperson Adrienne Watson said in a statement that Iran is providing weapons, funding, training and "tactical intelligence" to Houthis enabling the strikes in the Red Sea. "Iranian support throughout the Gaza crisis has enabled the Houthis to launch attacks against Israel and maritime targets, though Iran has often deferred operational decision-making authority to the Houthis," Watson was quoted as saying by news agency AP. Watson said that without the Iranian support, "the Houthis would struggle to effectively track and strike commercial vessels". In a separate incident, a Gabon-flagged commercial crude oil tanker, MV SaiBaba, came under a drone attack in the Southern Red Sea. Twenty-five crew members on the ship were Indians. The US Central Command confirmed the drone attack launched by Houthi militants but stated that no injuries were reported.

WHAT DID IRAN SAY?

Iran has denied the US's claim that a drone launched by it struck a chemical tanker near India's west coast in the Arabian Sea. "We reject their (the Americans') worthless claims, which clearly are politically motivated and are a blame game aimed at covering up the US's crimes in Gaza," Iran's foreign ministry spokesperson Nasser Kanaani was quoted as saying by state-owned broadcaster Press TV. "Iran has always ensured security in high seas, acted responsibly, and played an important role in maritime security and international trade through waters. Therefore, the US and no other parties are in a position to accuse Iran," he added.

NAVY PROBING DRONE ATTACK

In a statement on December 24, Sunday, the Navy said it continues to monitor the situation very closely with all stakeholders and remains committed to ensuring the safety of merchant shipping in the region. A joint investigation is being carried out by the Indian Coast Guard, Indian Navy, intelligence agencies and other officials concerned to ascertain how the ship was attacked.

Rwanda Bill 'best bill' to tackle small boat crossings: Cameron

London- The Rwanda Bill is the "best bill" to address the issue of small boat crossings in the English Channel, British Foreign Secretary David Cameron has said in remarks aimed at those unhappy with the legislation.

Prime Minister Rishi Sunak managed to avoid a major rebellion by Right-wing Conservative MPs earlier this month when they abstained on his controversial Rwanda bill, saying it was a "partial and incomplete solution" to the problem of sending back illegal asylum seekers from Britain.

For the moment, they refrained from pulling the rug on Sunak on the basis that he had indicated to them that he was willing to accept amendments that would tighten the Bill.

Asserting that it is "best bill to get the job done," Cameron said that failure to tackle the issue of small boat crossings in the English Channel would be destructive to people's faith in the



government, The Guardian reported.

"It's the best bill to get the job done, and I think it's a mistake to think in terms of 'Ooh, is it full fat or half fat?' It's designed to deliver the policy," he added, referring to some of the terms that some

Conservative MPs used to describe the Bill.

The former Conservative leader, who was brought back into government last month, said he believed the Foreign Office could be more involved in helping to deliver the Bill, which forms the core of Sunak's policy to stop the boats -- one of five key priorities, which he set out at the start of the year.

Cameron said it could "get migration dialogues going with countries where some of their citizens are coming in small boats to Britain, and we should help".

"Having very visible illegal migration is incredibly destructive to a country's legal migration and immigration system, and it's also destructive to people's view of the ability of politicians and governments to act on their behalf," he added. Since Brexit, net immigration has continued to mount, touching a record of 606,000 in 2022.

Last year, a record 45,775 people were

detected arriving without permission in Britain in small boats. So far this year, more than 27,000 have arrived this way. Launched in April 2022 by then Prime Minister Boris Johnson, the Rwanda plan aims to discourage asylum seekers from making the perilous journey of about 20 miles across the Channel from Europe in small boats or inflatable dinghies to England's southern beaches.

Under the plan, anyone who arrived in Britain illegally after January 1 last year faced deportation to Rwanda.

Following a last minute injunction from the European Court of Human Rights, the first deportation flight in June 2022 was blocked.

According to media reports, UK is presently spending more than three billion pounds per year on dealing with asylum applications, and the cost of housing migrants as their claims are processed runs at about six million pounds per day.

Ex-Pakistan minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi re-arrested, dragged to police van

Former Pakistan Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi was re-arrested on Wednesday just as he was being released from Rawalpindi's Adiala Jail in a cipher case for which the Supreme Court recently granted him bail. According to police sources, Qureshi, who is the Vice Chairman of Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), was arrested in the May 9 GHQ protest case.

The PTI party released multiple videos of Qureshi being pushed and re-arrested on Instagram. "I was released on bail by the Supreme Court, this is injustice, I am being punished for serving the nation," Qureshi said while standing on an armoured car.

The videos shared on Instagram showed Qureshi being pushed and dragged all the way to the police van as bystanders are heard asking the officials to be "careful" with the former minister. "Police have re-arrested Vice Chairman Shah Mahmood Qureshi on bail release from Adiala Jail following the Supreme Court's verdict last week. Earlier, the Deputy Commissioner of Rawalpindi had withdrawn the observation order issued under MPO. This treatment of a person with unparalleled service to Pakistan who are internationally respected senior politicians is a sign of



the arrogance of authority. The law has been made a joke and the fundamental constitutional rights of citizens have been openly violated. Pakistani people will never forget this oppression and injustice," the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf wrote on Instagram. The Pakistan Supreme Court had, on December 22, granted Qureshi and former Prime Minister Imran Khan bail in the cipher case. Their immediate release from jail could not be possible owing to their involvement in other cases. On Wednesday, as the 67-year-old Qureshi was being released, a heavy contingent of

police arrested him again in the GHQ protest case, and reportedly shifted him to an unknown location, The Express Tribune reported. A case was filed against Qureshi at the RA Bazar Police Station for attacking the GHQ during the May 9 riots, the report added. Qureshi's arrest came a day after Rawalpindi Deputy Commissioner (DC) Hassan Waqar Cheema issued an order for his 15-day detention under Section 3 of the Maintenance of Public Order (MPO). This law permits the government to arrest an individual if there is a threat of public

disorder.

In his order, Cheema said that the Rawalpindi city police officer (CPO) had informed him that Qureshi was a member of a political party, involved in anti-state activities and caused damage to public and private property in the May 9 protest case. The Rawalpindi DC further said that Qureshi's detention is "necessary and expedient in (the) public interest" to prevent him from acting in any manner prejudicial to public safety or the maintenance of public order, news agency PTI reported. Shah Mahmood Qureshi's detention order was issued shortly before the issuance of his release orders from the Adiala Jail by the Special Court Judge Abul Hasnat Zulqarnain in the cipher case.

Imran Khan and Qureshi were granted bail in the cipher case by the Pakistan Supreme Court on surety bonds worth Rs 1 million each. The case from March 2022 pertains to Imran Khan waving a paper at a public gathering and later naming the US, claiming that the cipher was proof of an "international conspiracy" to overthrow his government. He made the allegations ahead of a confidence vote, which he eventually lost.

Wave of drug-carrying drones flying into India from Pakistan, officials say

Indian border security have said they are battling an unprecedented "drone menace" infiltrating the border with Pakistan, fuelling the drugs crisis in the state of Punjab and raising serious security issues.

Officials from India's border security force (BSF) in the border state of Punjab told the Guardian they had intercepted 90 drones from Pakistan so far in 2023, the highest on record. They said the number was "increasing every month".

Most carried consignments of opium and heroin, likely to have come from Afghanistan, but some have dropped weapons, including pistols and Chinese-made assault rifles.

The drones, some known as hexacopters, which are up to 8ft wide and have high-resolution cameras attached, have been detected as far as 12km inside India's border. The drugs are often carried in small sacks or Coca-Cola bottles. Given the longstanding animosity between the two nuclear-armed neighbours, who have gone to war four times, Indian border officials said the growing number of drones coming over from Pakistan – using increasingly advanced technology – presented a significant security risk.

"Anything which does not have a legitimate entry into India is a security challenge for us," said Atul Fulzele, the inspector general of BSF in Punjab. "Apart from use of drones for drugs, there are instances where drones have been found dropping



weapons and it has potential to cause damage. We have to be really very watchful."

Smuggling between Pakistan and India has gone on for decades, with everything from camels and carrier pigeons to human traffickers and underground pipes being used to ferry drugs and other goods across the heavily guarded border. However, since the first drone was spotted in Punjab in 2019, BSF officials said drones had become "the main modus operandi of trafficking drugs" from Pakistan. In some weeks, five or six drones have been intercepted.

BSF said drones were responsible for about 60% of the drug-smuggling in the state in 2023, driving up trade significantly, as well as adding a "new dimension" to

protecting the security of India's border. "We used just to be focused on land, but this aerial domination is a new domain for us and it is indeed a challenge," said Fulzele. "But I believe we will be able to contain this drone menace by next year. In green rice paddy fields adjacent to Punjabi village of Attari, 2km from the border with Pakistan, BSF officers took the Guardian to the site where a drone carrying 5kg of heroin had been brought down the day before, after a tip-off.

"Most of the drones have been seized from this area," said one BSF officer, pointing to the surrounding farms. "We have found many, many drones here and many, many drugs. They come 24 hours. Of course it's a big concern for us but we are working with police and are successful in catching

these drones when they come."

The officer said they had no communication with their counterparts over the border but given the growing scale of the infiltration, they suspected Pakistan officials were turning a blind eye. As drone technology becomes cheaper and more accessible to procure, the problem is accelerating. BSF said most drones they seized were made in China. Pakistan was contacted for comment.

In another area, backing directly on to the India-Pakistan border fence, an expanse of wheat fields was described by the BSF as a "regular dropping zone".

"It's happening in every village area along the border in Punjab, and also in Rajasthan," said the BSF officer. "We have various methods to keep a check on it. Sometimes we shoot them down, sometimes we use anti-drone technology and we also have sources who give us tip-offs and have helped us identify the main dropping zones." However, they said they were battling increasingly sophisticated technology. Where previously, drones could often be detected through noise or the visibility of their lights, models that fly as high as 1km were being used, as well as near silent mini-drones, they said – both of which are much harder to spot. There was concern that as the winter set in, bringing foggy conditions and poor visibility, the drones were likely to increase further.

Pakistan deported Afghans waiting for US resettlement

Pakistan's huge deportation drive has forcibly repatriated scores of Afghans awaiting resettlement in the United States, an advocacy group and Afghan applicants say, adding that Pakistani authorities often ignored U.S. embassy letters of protection.

That complicates the efforts of such Afghans, as the U.S. has shuttered its embassy in Kabul and they must also grapple with human rights restrictions and stubborn financial and humanitarian crises in their homeland. Islamabad began expelling more than a million undocumented foreigners, mostly Afghans, on Nov. 1, amid a row over accusations that Kabul harbours Pakistani militants, a charge the ruling Taliban deny. More than 450,000 Afghans have returned home, the United Nations says, many now living in difficult winter conditions near the border. At least 130 Afghans being processed for U.S. special immigration visas or refugee resettlement in the United States have been deported, said Shawn



VanDiver, president of #AfghanEvac, the main coalition of groups helping such efforts. He cited data from coalition members and details provided to the U.S. government by its Islamabad embassy, which he has seen. Pakistani police have arrested more than 230 such Afghans, although about 80 have since been released, he added.

Speaking on condition of anonymity, a senior State Department official said the United States had "no formal way to track these kinds of cases", adding that the number of Afghans deported

while awaiting U.S. resettlement was "very small". Pakistan's foreign and interior ministries did not respond to requests for comment.

As the clock ticked down to Nov. 1, the embassy e-mailed protection letters to some 25,000 Afghans to prove to Pakistani authorities they were being processed for resettlement in the United States, after its last troops left Kabul in 2021.

A U.S. State Department spokesperson said Washington had also supplied Pakistan with a list of Afghans "in the U.S.

resettlement pipelines" after it unveiled the deportation plan in October. VanDiver and two Western diplomatic sources, who requested anonymity to discuss the issue, said local authorities had ignored the letters in many instances. "The letters matter in some cases and not in others," said VanDiver. "Not all local officers are abiding by it." The senior State Department official said the United States has examples of Pakistani police respecting the letters, but gave no details. Reuters spoke with two Afghan families whose members were deported after showing police the letter, and an Afghan who was detained despite the letter. The latter said he was released with a warning that he would be arrested again without a visa extension.

Refugee advocates and Afghans say the deportations and arrests underscore the precarious nature of the long wait facing Afghans whom Washington has vowed to protect and resettle, many of them told to travel to a third country for processing.

UNDOCUMENTED

Many Afghans entered Pakistan with visas that expired as the processing of their SIV or refugee resettlement applications languished, facing them with long renewal times and high fees.

One applicant for refugee status, whom Reuters is not naming for security reasons, said he sold almost all he owned in Oct 2022 to move his family to Pakistan from the Afghan capital for processing.

All seven had passports and visas, he said.

But mounting costs ate into his savings, and though he turned to selling street food to earn money, he could barely meet rent and

utilities, putting out of reach the hundreds of dollars in fees needed to renew the one-year visas that expired.

"We had no money for food, how could we apply for visas?" he said. Last month, police knocked on his door, but would not accept the embassy letter - seen by Reuters - that carried his refugee application number.

"They gave us two hours' time to pack our belongings," said the former employee of a U.S.-funded women's advocacy organisation. He tried calling the U.S. embassy, but could not get through. Now, he is lying low with his family in Kabul.

"I have five children, have no house, I'm currently living in the home of one of my relatives," he said. "I can't apply for a job here. I don't know what to do."

U.S. officials say they are trying to keep in touch with the thousands of Afghans in Pakistan through an emergency hotline based on the WhatsApp communications app in the languages of Dari, Pashto and English.

The state department has successfully averted deportations in several cases flagged up on the hotline, the senior State official said.

Ahmadullah, a former U.S. government worker resettled to the United States in 2021, said his stepmother and two sisters had been waiting in Pakistan for the processing of applications for P1 visas, meant for those at risk of persecution, but were deported and living in fear in Kabul.

Police came to his uncle's home in Pakistan's northern city of Peshawar on a mid-November night, saw the expired visas in the women's passports, ignored their embassy letters, drove them to the border and ordered them to leave, Ahmadullah said.

"They didn't even let them pack," said Ahmadullah, who was evacuated with his family from Kabul as the last U.S. troops left in August 2021. Ahmadullah, who wanted his last name withheld to protect his family, said the women had sought extension of their Pakistani visas. Now, they feel at risk because of his work and the Taliban's curbs on women appearing in public unaccompanied by a close male relative. They switch between their Kabul house and relatives' homes to avoid attention, he added.

Bangladesh capital most polluted as toxic smog engulfs South Asian cities

The capitals of both India and Bangladesh are blanketed by a thick layer of toxic smog, as air quality plummets in both New Delhi and Dhaka.

Dhaka briefly emerged as the world's most polluted city on Wednesday, with a "hazardous" index level of 325, according to Swiss climate monitor, IQAir. By midday, however, conditions improved slightly, with the index dropping to 177 - still in the "unhealthy" range.

The air quality in Dhaka, one of the world's most crowded cities with more than 20 million residents, has worsened in recent years as fossil fuels are overused, bringing health problems for the people.

"We often suffer from asthma, fever and allergies while operating rickshaws on the streets," said Rafiq Mondal, who drives a vehicle for a living. "It is often very painful."

While authorities in Dhaka spray the streets with water to help the dust settle, residents want additional steps taken.



"The air pollution is taking its toll," said resident Wasim Akhter.

"With all the mega projects like the metro rail overhead, there is a lot of construction material everywhere ... Measures must be taken more seriously."

The World Bank has urged Bangladesh to coordinate more closely with its South Asian neighbours to clean up the air. Air pollution, which is often a mix of solid particles, liquid droplets and gasses, accounts for one-fifth of deaths in the country each year, it said in a report.

In New Delhi, which often leads the world's most polluted list, the AQI index on Wednesday read 378, according to the Central

Pollution Control Board - a rating of "very poor".

The dense fog in the Indian capital and across northern India led to the delays of more than 100 flights and the disruption of rail services as visibility reduced to barely 50 metres (164 feet) in some areas. Dense fog contains particulate matter and other pollutants, according to the weather department, which warned of the impact this may have on the health of the city's tens of millions of residents.

Other parts of north India, including the states of Punjab, Uttar Pradesh and Haryana reported similar weather conditions.

Nora Fatehi celebrates 'good vibes' with Tabu, Farah & Huma

Mumbai- Actress Nora Fatehi celebrated Christmas with friends from the industry including names such as Farah Khan, Tabu and Huma Qureshi among others. Nora took to Instagram stories, where she shared a selfie with Farah Khan, Tabu, Ishaan Khatter, Sikander Kher and Huma Qureshi.

For the caption, she wrote: "Good vibes last night and a red heart emoji."

Huma shared the same picture and wrote: "What a sexy Xmas photo... Tabu mera pahela pyaar. Ishaan, Nora and Sikander we a good looking lot peeps."

Huma tagged Farah as the "best host and dost." Tabu too posted the image on Instagram and gave a sassy caption. She wrote: "The saviour of the Andheri social life always @farahkhankunder... Clicking the best pictures suitable @ishaankhatter love is @humaqureshi savage Sikander and Nora ka noor." On the work front, Nora is gearing up for the release of 'Crakk' starring Vidyut Jammwal. It is slated to release on February 23.



Samantha Ruth Prabhu reveals her 'instant camera-face'



Mumbai- Actress Samantha Ruth Prabhu on Christmas treated her fans with her "instant camera face." Samantha on December 25, took to Instagram, where she posted a picture of herself looking at the camera and smiling. She is seen sitting on a chair dressed in an ivory dress with yellow light falling upon her. She wrote: "Instant camera face."

The actress then shared another picture having a pouty expression and wrote: "Intermittent

fasting," probably suggesting that she cannot eat outside as she is following a diet regime. Last year, Samantha had announced that she was diagnosed with dermatomyositis and had also talked about taking a break from work. On the acting front, Samantha's latest release included Kushi with Vijay Deverakonda. She will next be seen in the Indian adaptation of 'Citadel' with Varun Dhawan.

Ronit Roy, wife Neelam renew wedding vows on 20 yrs of marital bliss

Mumbai- On the occasion of their 20th wedding anniversary, actor Ronit Roy renewed the marital vows once again with his wife Neelam Roy, in full traditional rituals. Ronit and Neelam had tied the knot on December 25, 2003. The couple have a daughter Aador and a son Agastya. Now, marking a special celebration for their two decades of togetherness, the couple went to Goa and performed the wedding rituals once again. Taking to Instagram, Ronit, who has 1.1 million followers on the photo sharing application, dropped videos from their wedding ceremony. In the video, we can see the 58-year-old actor wearing an off white coloured kurta pyjama with golden motifs on it, and a red dupatta. While actress Neelam is sporting a red salwar suit with golden border on it. She completed the

outfit with golden earrings, choora, and headband. The couple can be seen exchanging garlands, took saat pheras, and bowing down to their parents for the blessings. The video ended with the couple kissing each other adorably. The 'Bandini' actor captioned the videos as: "Mujhse shaadi karogi Phir Se", "Renewing our vows: Part 2", and "Doosri baar toh kya, hazaar baar byaah tujhi Se karunga! Happiest 20th anniversary my love." The comment section was filled with love and blessings for the couple. Actress Manisha Koirala commented: "Congratulations both of you lovely couple". Bhagyashree wrote: "God bless you both". Sanjay Kapoor said: "Mubarak Ho". Meanwhile, on the work front, Ronit was last seen in the movie 'Farrey'.

Ankita couldn't handle Sushant Singh Rajput's intimate scene in 'Shuddh Desi Romance', 'PK'

Mumbai- Actress Ankita Lokhande in the latest episode of "Bigg Boss 17" was seen talking about how she could not handle her former boyfriend and late star Sushant Singh Rajput's intimate scenes in films such as 'Shuddh Desi Romance' and 'PK'.

Ankita said that she was dating Sushant when he featured in Bollywood films like 'Shuddh Desi Romance' and 'PK', where the late actor got intimate with Parineeti Chopra and Vaani Kapoor and also had a kiss with Anushka Sharma in the latter.

While talking to co-contestants Abhishek Kumar and Ayesha Khan in the house, Ankita spoke about the kiss scene with Anushka in the film: "(When I watched PK), mujhe

chakkar aa gaye the."

She also shared that she was upset and broke down when



she saw him having multiple intimate scenes in Shuddh Desi Romance.

"We went to watch the film. He booked the entire theatre hall in Yash Raj Studios. There was nobody except me

and Sushant. Because he couldn't watch it with anyone because he knew I would lose it."

She mentioned that she scratched his hand and added: "He ran away and didn't come. I watched the full film and after watching all the scenes I cried so much after reaching home. Even Sushant cried. He said, 'I am sorry bubu. Abb nahi karunga.'" When Abhishek asked Ankita till which film they were together as a couple, she said 'M S Dhoni'- The Untold Story'. Ankita is now married to Vicky Jain. She shared that her husband cannot watch intimate scenes on the screen.

"Vicky toh bilkul nahi dekh sakta. Vicky ne kuch bhi dekh liya na galat. Vicky ka dimaag. Kuch nahi garam ho raha yaha," she said.



Ranbir, Alia leave for New Year holiday with Raha

Mumbai- As the festive mood sets in for the New Year, Bollywood stars Ranbir Kapoor and Alia Bhatt along with their daughter Raha were spotted at the VIP entrance of the Mumbai airport.

The family arrived at the airport for their morning flight. While Ranbir was dressed in athleisure clothing, Alia was seen more sharply dressed in a white outfit. Raha was spotted sleeping in her mom's arms. Her cute sneakers stole everyone's heart on the Internet. Netizens commented about Raha's sneakers. One user wrote, "Her little sneakers (heart emoji)". Another user

wrote, "Obsessed with Raha." Earlier, Ranbir and Alia revealed Raha's face for the first time at the customary Christmas lunch of the Kapoor family. The moment Raha's pictures and videos dropped on the Internet, they went viral leaving the Netizens in awe.

Raha looks like a mini version of Alia, with pretty blue eyes, and also has strong hints of her grandfather and late actor Rishi Kapoor in her face. For the Christmas lunch, Raha was dressed up in a white Christmas sweater and a pastel pink coloured tulle skirt. Her outfit was completed with red bellies and white socks.



itel forays into open-earbuds category, launches Roar 75 with Titanium Body for Gen-Z at Rs 1,099

New Delhi- itel Mobile India has announced its entry into the open-earbuds category by launching 'ROAR 75' with Titanium Body at Rs 1,099. The unveiling of itel ROAR 75 Open-Ear Buds marks a significant milestone, enriching the brand's collection of cutting-edge smart accessories.

This strategic move underscores itel's commitment to innovation, expanding its dynamic portfolio of Smart Gadgets. "Committed to providing technology that is not only accessible but also innovative and stylish, itel has once again exemplified this commitment with the introduction of the itel ROAR 75 Open-Ear Buds. With a Titanium

Metal Skeleton ensuring durability, and a featherweight design, the itel ROAR 75 doesn't just redefine the running experience; it elevates your entire lifestyle," said Arijeet Talapatra, CEO of itel India. "Designed to effortlessly accompany you through regular chores, these innovative earbuds make a bold statement – delivering not just accessibility and innovation but also a hassle-

free audio companion that seamlessly integrates into your everyday routine," he added. With a Titanium metal body and 14.2 mm large driver, itel ROAR 75 open-ear buds are set to redefine the audio experience for Gen-Z in India.

The ROAR 75 open-ear buds not only flaunt a strong Titanium skeleton design but also feature 14.2mm drivers that deliver crisp and clear sound, ensuring unmatched utility combined with high-quality sound.

These earbuds seamlessly marry style and resilience with their IPX5 water-resistant design, guaranteeing protection against water splashes during the user's outdoor adventures.

It also comes with ultra-low latency and dual pairing, allowing the user

to seamlessly transition between devices easily. Weighing in at just 11gm, the ROAR 75 enables the user to freely move and experience their workout routine without any obstructions. itel's launch of the 'ROAR 75' open-earbuds marks a significant milestone in the realm of smart accessories, specially tailored for the active and health enthusiasts of Bharat.



Cornea launches 110-inch interactive flat panel for Rs 11 lakh in India



New Delhi- Interactive display technology player Cornea on Tuesday unveiled its new 110-inch panel for Rs 1,099,999 which is touted as the largest in India. Powered by Quad Core A55 processor, the interactive flat panel is available for order on Cornea's website, Government e Marketplace (GeM) portal and Amazon, the company said in a statement. "This advanced touchscreen revolutionises presentations and teamwork, fostering innovative collaboration. A game-changer for educators and professionals across India, it's set to redefine the way we share and interact with ideas," said Ankit

Garg, Director at Cornea. The panel can be integrated with smart office systems and comes equipped with voice control functionalities, ensuring ease of use during presentations, conferences, and other professional settings. It offers 4K Ultra HD Display, 8GB RAM and 128GB internal storage a dust-proof display, immersive sound and voice control. The interactive flat panel is designed to enhance educational and corporate environments by providing a premium viewing experience with its ultra-high-definition resolution, vibrant colours, and high contrast ratio, said the company.

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Selfless acts of kindness makes you feel happier

Kindness is good for your brain, may activate reward areas of the brain and make you feel happier, says a new study.

(News Agencies) The glow of kindness is real — even if it has nothing in it for you. Psychologists at the University of Sussex have confirmed the same by undertaking a major analysis of existing research showing the brain scans relating to over 1,000 people making kind decisions.

For the first time, they split the analysis between what happens in the brain when people act out of genuine

altruism — where there's nothing in it for them — and when they act with strategic kindness — when there is something to be gained as a consequence.

Many individual studies have hinted that generosity activates the reward network of the brain but this new study from Sussex is the first that brought these studies together, and then split the results into two types of kindness — altruistic and strategic.

The Sussex scientists found that reward areas of the brain are more active — i.e. use up more oxygen — when people act with strategic kindness when there is an opportunity for others to return the favour. But they also found that acts of altruism, with no hope of personal benefit, activate the reward areas of the brain too, and more than that, that some brain regions were more active during altruistic generosity, indicating that there



is something unique about being altruistic with no hope of gaining something in return.

Lead author Dr Daniel Campbell-Meiklejohn said, "We know that people can choose to be kind because they like feeling like they are a 'good person', but also that people can choose to be kind when they think there might be something 'in it' for them such as a returned

favour or improved reputation." "The finding of different motivations for giving raises all sorts of questions, including what charities and organisations can learn about what motivates their donors. Some museums, for example, choose to operate a membership scheme with real strategic benefits for their customers, such as discounts," said co-author Jo Cutler.

Single and ready to mingle? Here's how to find a date without dating apps

Online dating may seem like the norm with modern relationships, but that's not the case. Here's how some millennials find dates offline. You may be able to relate, or you may get ideas on new places to meet people.

(News Agencies) Like them or not, dating apps have become an acceptable way for younger generations to meet a potential love interest. As of 2016, Tinder, a popular location-based mobile dating app, had a staggering 9.6 million daily active users, accounting for some 1.4 billion swipes per day.

Tinder has been operating in India since 2013. On Wednesday, US-based dating app Bumble, Tinder's fierce rival, said it will foray into the country by the end 2018. The company has roped in actor Priyanka Chopra as an investor, she will also act as an adviser to the app. Yet, no matter how common dating apps and sites have become, they're not necessarily for everyone. Though definitely convenient for busy people, who don't have the time to look for a significant other in

real life (IRL), online dating can be tiring for some.

22-year-old Pritha Ghosh, an engineering student at Jadavpur University, Kolkata, finds the idea of internet dating a "tricky little business" and has no plans of being a part of it. Some of my friends have tried the infamous dating app, Tinder, and have gone on a few first and only dates. They found people very flaky on the apps. I prefer meeting future dates in person, without the help of an app," Pritha says.

After being addicted to them for almost a year, Sourav Chatterjee, 28, deleted all his dating apps and ended up loving it. As efficient as some dating apps are — you can message someone one minute and literally be out on a date with them the next — going to a friend's birthday party and hitting it off with somebody IRL is even

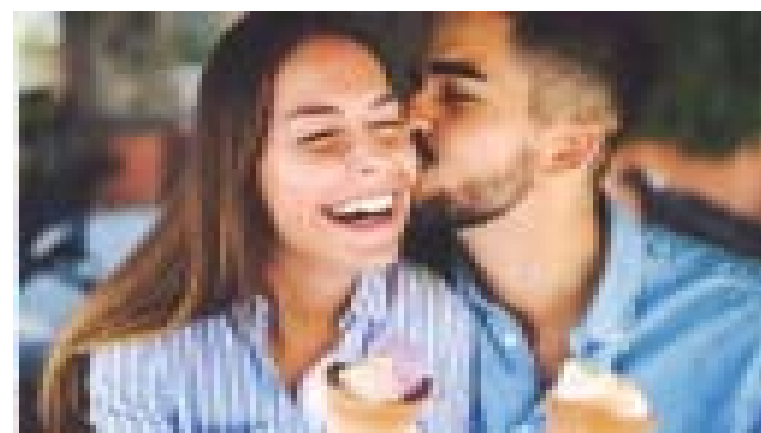
more so, says the IT professional.

The biggest advantage of meeting potential dates in real life, according to him, is getting to experience their vibe right away, which is something no online dating platform can deliver.

"There's no better way to gauge attraction and chemistry than to be physically present with someone," Sourav says.

Kolkata-based psychologist Aparna Sengupta agrees that while meeting people as potential partners is possible on digital applications or social media, meeting people in person tends to yield better results. That's because physicality can help you figure out whether or not there are sparks.

"When meeting someone in real life, you have the benefit of eye contact, viewing nonverbal cues, and judging a connection," Aparna



explains. That's hard to gauge from just a few words on a screen. All the above said, the question is, how do people who don't like online dating actually go about meeting people?

Entrepreneur Abhinav Singh, 30, says he's had the most success while meeting up with friends from years ago. His two most meaningful connections with women he dated happened with old friends; in fact, he is currently dating a girl he knew in college, and it's going really well.

"Different lifestyles causes people to grow apart. After a random, 'What have you been up to?' message, we hung out and something clicked. Dating someone you've known for years has the advantage of skipping over the initial small talk. of meeting people. Since you have been friends for a while, you already have built-in mutual interests. I have found that generally, knowing the person from before can accelerate the relationship. This is good and bad at the same time, but if handled

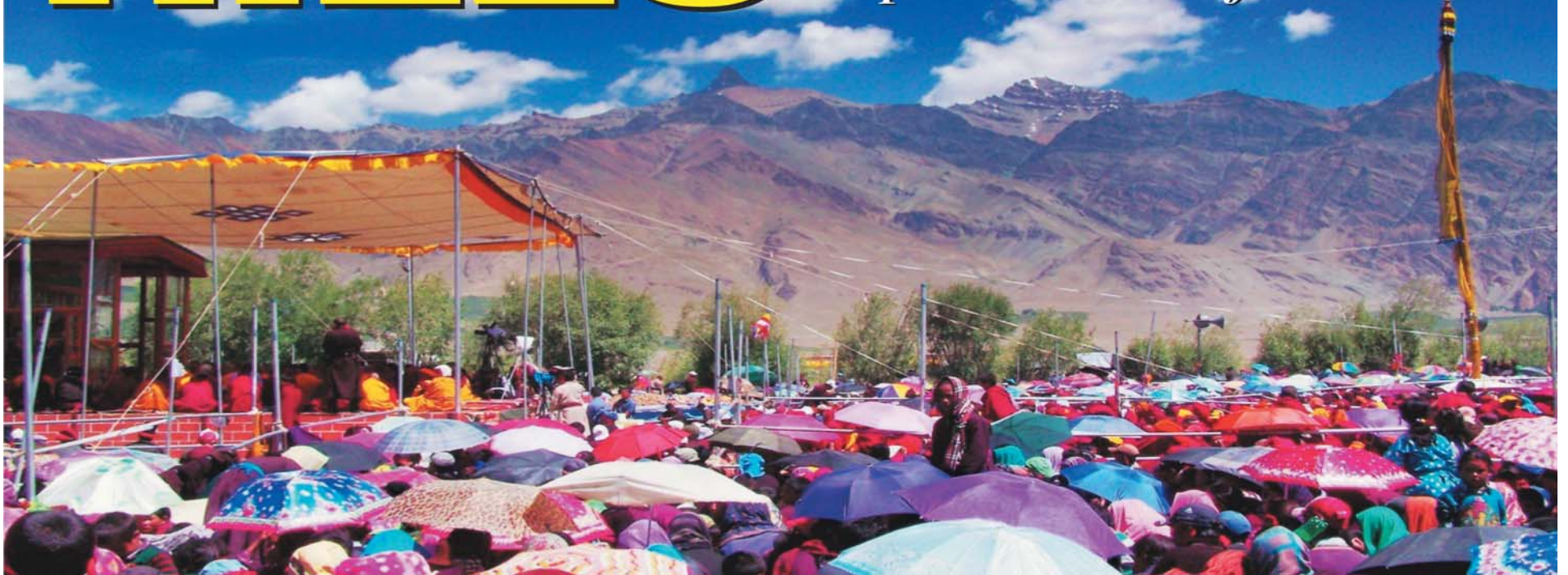
well, it can lead to a good, meaningful relationship," says Abhinav. For Shruti Shah, a 19-year-old college student from St. Xavier's college, Kolkata, online dating sites are appealing because there's not as much stress as talking in person. But she thinks having a good conversation with someone in person, suits her better.

"It's nice to be able to go to a place where I can meet a lot of people I have things in common with. Many of the people I've ended up dating, or having a romantic relationship with, I've met through mutual friends at events. I like going to musical gigs and a lot of the times, I end up meeting people over there. Sometimes, it can be really hard to go out and find people with similar interests, so going to a gig, where we already have something in common makes it easier. Being in a group setting with friends who also share these interests has helped a lot in the past, too, since it makes it a lot easier to talk," says Shruti.



HIGH ON ZANSKAR HILLS

The region will surprise you not just with its breathtaking natural beauty but also innate spirituality seeped into its colourful milieu



THERE is a hue of orange that ought to be named Zanskari Blaze.

Eponymous of the fiery orange that spills the skies at sunset in the isolated valleys of Zaskar. The colour stays with you, emblazoned in your mind, majestic brown peaks framing you on both sides, patchy wheat fields aglow in the beautifully rugged land below. Lying south of Kargil in the southwestern part of Jammu & Kashmir, the Zaskar valley and range are spread over an elevation between 3,500m and 7,000m. One of the most isolated of the trans-Himalayan regions, the valley is accessible only four or five months in a year, remaining insulated by a frozen river Zaskar in the long winter months. It was only in 1979 that a road was built to connect Padum, the tehsil centre, with Kargil and the main road from Srinagar to Ladakh. But for several onths in winter because of heavy snowfall in and around the Panzila Pass, the road remains blocked. Zaskar sunsets might be the stuff of legends, but it was a sunrise on this lone motorable road that knocked the wind out of me. We were on our way to Padum, glum-faced and groggy from having woken up in the middle of the night to start the journey from Parkachik to avoid road



construction sites that had blocked our progress the day before. With stars darting in the velvet blue sky, the landscape was bathed in a silvery sheen and only the peaks of Nun-Kun beamed in the moonlight. And a couple of hours later the first hint of pink hit the sky. As our car snake along the Suru river, the sky turned into a watercolour painting where the pink, orange and blue merged to create a seamless masterpiece. Speechless, we stopped once we reached the valley floor, our definition of beauty altered forever, we watched the rays of sun slowly part the clouds and hit the distant peaks. Isolated, with just the craggy mountains for company and your inner self, Zaskar made the atheist in me a spiritual being. For miles on end the only sign of life were the occasional team of wild horses grazing on the dry tufts of grass and adorable looking

marmots popping out from behind rocks to sniff the air. Only when our car reached Rangdum, the midway point in the Kargil-Padum Quaint, with just a fistful of houses and one old monastery dotting the area, the village caught our attention with its picturesque setting. Tiny yellow and purple blossoms grew with abandon alongside fields of intense green wheat, the sound of the wind filling the air and the mighty river Stod flowing along a wide pebbled riverbank. Nestled amid the mountains of the Zaskar range, it was in this tiny hamlet where I saw nature at its ethereal best. We had just spent a quiet afternoon by the river and were walking through the fields back to our homestay when my friend pointed at clusters of orange clouds on the western horizon. As we paused to marvel at the scene the colours became richer, almost touching a shade of red. The sky was a palette of hues ranging from bright pink, purple, fiery orange with tinges of red and a deep blue on the eastern side. No sunset I had ever seen matched up to the magic unfolding in front of us. I turned to take in the panorama but something else caught my eye: There in the eastern sky behind the dark

shape of the mountain range was a bright white light. My heart beating a wild tune, I turned my friend around to show the moon rise above the jagged peaks. It was her first moonrise in the high mountains. Eyes shining with tears there we stood, speechless. Two friends in the middle of a wheat field washed in golden hue, arms entwined, turning our heads from the fiery blaze in the west to the pale perfection in the east. Overwhelmed, and grateful for the moment, I listened to the sweetest ditty of my heart pumping in rhythm with the blowing wind. Six hours, one flat tyre, kilometres of gravely dirt tracks masquerading as roads, and acres of breathtaking vistas later we reached Padum. What was promised to be a dusty sparsely populated town that simply showed up as 'road-end' on most maps was teeming with Buddhist locals draped in maroon flowing robes and traditional turquoise set silver headdress and rings. Tired and bewildered, we looked at our driver for an explanation: Did we land up in the middle of a local festival? He looked back at us puzzled, turned to read the Tibetan script on the yellow-andred banners

fluttering above us and asked, "Aren't you here to see His Holiness the Dalai Lama?" To our good luck, the Buddhist spiritual leader was in Padum for the next three days. OVER the next couple of days, we learnt that many of the fellow travellers had planned a trip to Zaskar months in advance to pay homage to the Dalai Lama. Our tale of karmic good luck became a great icebreaker with them and locals alike, and the fact that we were a group of girls travelling in these remote areas by ourselves made us instant favourites at any gathering. It was during one such engaging exchange with the savvy, handlebar moustached owner of a local cyber cafe that we learned that the first few outsiders who explored Zaskar after the road was built were Bengali journalists. "Crazy buggers, they are." We grinned, all five of us were journalists, and my friend proclaimed pointing at me, "and here is our version of the crazy Bengali journalist." Charming though it is, Padum tends to disappoint those who seek an uninterrupted dialogue with nature. And so, we headed to a tiny village called Phey, less than an hour away from Padum.

Mahadev app owner 'detained' in Dubai, probe agency ED to file fresh chargesheet

One of the promoters of the Mahadev online betting app, Sourabh Chandrakar, has been detained in Dubai and Indian agencies are working through diplomatic channels to get him deported.



Sourabh Chandrakar, one of the promoters of the Mahadev online betting app, has been put under "house detention" in Dubai while Indian probe agencies, including ED, have been "alerted" and are working through diplomatic channels to get him deported, official sources said on Wednesday. The Enforcement Directorate may also file a fresh charge sheet in this multi-crore money laundering case soon, they said. The development comes weeks after Ravi Uppal, another promoter of the betting and gaming app, was detained

elsewhere, the sources said. The ED is also expected to file a fresh (supplementary) charge sheet in this case against two people arrested by it in November from Chhattisgarh - alleged cash courier Asim Das and police constable Bheem Yadav. The agency, in its first charge sheet filed before a special Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA) court in Raipur, had named Chandrakar and Uppal along with some others. In this charge sheet, it had quoted the statement of Dilip Chandrakar, the uncle of Sourabh Chandrakar, that before Sourabh went to Dubai in 2019 he ran a juice shop named 'juice factory' along with his brother in Bhillai town of Chhattisgarh. The ED claimed Sourabh Chandrakar got married at Ras Al Khaimah, UAE in February 2023 and about Rs 200 crore "in cash" were spent for this event in which private jets were hired to ferry his relatives from India to the UAE and celebrities

were paid to perform. Uppal, 43, was detained last week in Dubai. Both businessmen are being probed by the ED in the money laundering case linked to alleged illegal betting through online apps, apart from investigations by the Chhattisgarh and Mumbai Police Crime Branch. A red notice was issued against the two by Interpol on the basis of the ED's request that was based on a court-issued non-bailable warrant. The projected proceeds of crime in this case are about Rs 6,000 crore, according to the ED. The agency had claimed in November, just before the first phase of Chhattisgarh assembly polls, that forensic analysis and statement made by a 'cash courier' Asim Das have led to "startling allegations" that Mahadev betting app promoters have paid about Rs 508 crore to former Chhattisgarh chief minister and senior Congress leader Bhupesh Baghel, adding that these allegations were

"subject matter of investigation". Das had later submitted before the special court in Raipur that he had been framed as part of a conspiracy and he had never delivered cash to politicians. The ED investigation has shown that the Mahadev Online Book App is run from a central head office in the UAE, officials said. It operates by franchising "Panel/Branches" to their known associates on a 70-30 per cent profit ratio, it had said. Large-scale hawala operations are done to siphon off the proceeds of betting to offshore accounts, it had said. Large expenditure in cash is also being done in India for advertising betting websites to attract new users and franchise (panel) seekers, the ED had said. The company promoters hail from Bhillai in Chhattisgarh and the Mahadev online book betting application is an umbrella syndicate arranging online platforms for enabling illegal betting websites, it is alleged.

Why blinding fog is a worry in Delhi, north India every winter

As the familiar scene of stranded air and train passengers plays out again, we explain the causes behind dense fog and the efficacy of the mitigating systems in place

Travel in north India is once again hostage to low visibility from fog as arrivals of 14 trains and at least 30 flights to national capital New Delhi were delayed on December 26. The cascading effect is expected to continue for days even as delays and disruptions pile up. The first few hours of December 27 saw 110 flights delayed and 25 trains held up. The Delhi airport's advisory, posted on microblogging platform X, stated: "While landing and takeoffs continue at Delhi airport, flights that are not CAT III compliant may get affected. Passengers are requested to contact the airline concerned for updated flight information." The people of Delhi and neighbouring Noida and Gurugram woke up to a blinding fog on December 27, which refused to lift for a good part of the morning. Visibility was down to 50 metres and air pollution, which gets aggravated in foggy conditions, ranged in the very poor/severe categories.

This is all a yearly ritual of sorts when air and rail traffic get severely affected for days as fog engulfs the northern part of the country and near-zero visibility throws operations of trains and flights out

of gear, despite myriad old as well as new technology being used to minimise the impact. With delays, diversions and even cancellations common, train and air travel in and out of Delhi becomes unpredictable from early December until the first week of February. The numbers are often staggering. From December 2022 to January 2023, 20 domestic and three international departures and 31 domestic and three international arrivals were cancelled at the IGI Airport in New Delhi. Thirteen flights were diverted, and 846 domestic and 458 international flights delayed during the period.

The story with trains is similar. Last year, around 400 trains across northern India were delayed due to fog, inflicting a cascading effect on other trains as well. The problem does not have an easy fix as location makes north India, particularly Delhi, susceptible to fog. As winter arrives, the ground cools rapidly at night, especially over the Indo-Gangetic Plain. This causes the air close to the ground to cool down as well. Since cold air can hold less moisture, the water vapour present condenses into tiny water droplets, forming fog.

Winds called the Western Disturbances, originating in the Mediterranean, bring in moisture to Delhi. Moreover, the Himalayas in the north act as a barrier, preventing the eastward movement of the fog over the plains, leading to its concentration over the Indo-Gangetic region. In Delhi's case, air pollutants such as particulate matter add to the load, creating smog (smoke fog). Both the airline and railway sectors have been battling this for years. This year too, the Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) conducted an annual meeting prior to commencement of the fog period with airline operators, aerodrome operators, defence and air navigation service providers, and the weather department to ensure safe and smooth flight operations during fog. The DGCA directed airlines to roster only pilots qualified for CAT-II/III and certified for low visibility take-off for operating flights between 9 pm and 10 am. The CAT III is an instrument landing system that enables pilots to land an aircraft even in poor visibility. It aids pilots with the help of radio signals and high-intensity lighting. Airports have to be fitted with

this system whereas airlines need to get the certification and also get their pilots trained for it. Delhi, Amritsar, Jaipur, Lucknow and Amritsar are among the airports equipped with CAT-III technology. However, not all pilots are trained in this technology. As per government data, 4,804 flight crew qualified for CAT II/III are available with various airlines, including 2,979 captains and 1,825 co-pilots. Traditionally, what has discouraged airlines from investing heavily to equip their planes and crew with CAT-III certification is that the problem is largely restricted to Delhi, and that too for about a month and a half in the year.

While CAT-III, according to some estimates, may cost crores of rupees in installation and around half a lakh a month for maintenance, training in this certification may be around Rs 10 lakh per pilot. Over the past few years, however, the government has been strict about airlines making themselves more and more CAT-III compliant. It also says that the problem of flight disruptions and delays is decreasing over the past two years.



Kamala Harris is not a liability. She may be Democrats' best weapon

In a more normal world, our national split screen displaying a fractious and fragmented Republican conference, with Democrats fairly united by comparison, might have elevated President Joe Biden's 2024 re-election prospects.

Instead, he faces downward spiraling poll numbers amid a fixation over a handful of issues that I consider relatively ancillary, among them, the public hand-wringing over his age. Discussions about whether at 81, Biden is too old to be president, have fed a rancorous debate about the qualifications of his vice president and 2024 running mate Kamala Harris. Biden's second-in-command, a former US senator and California attorney general, is being dragged down by a barrage of tropes, the kinds of chatter that many women and racial minorities frequently confront in politics.

Much of the tiresome chatter within the Washington beltway in recent months has tried to raise doubts about Harris' readiness to lead, should she ever be called upon to step in for Biden.

Sadly, some Democrats may be culpable in allowing those narratives to gather steam. That's especially unfortunate because the nitpicky critiques have only served to obscure the public's appreciation of what has been a highly successful administration.

Some within the party have complained that Harris is endangering the odds for victory at the ballot box next year. As some Republican trolls suggest that a vote for Biden could be a vote for Harris, who is 59, opponents of the president think they can attack him by aiming barbs at her. In reality, Democrats have no reason to soft-peddle their support for Harris. In fact, if they're smart, they'll put Harris out front and center during the 2024 presidential campaign.

Not only is she not a drag on the ticket, but Harris may prove hugely instrumental in helping clinch a victory in next year's presidential race. Happily, the Biden campaign seems to finally be coming around and embracing smart ways to make the best use of Harris' talents and impressive resume. She might just be the party's secret weapon heading into the 2024 election.

Yes, it's true that Harris is underwater broadly with voters, as is Biden. A Los Angeles Times average released this

month showed that 39% of registered voters had a favorable opinion of Harris and 55% had an unfavorable opinion, roughly in line with the president's numbers.

But a New York Times/Siena College polls of battleground states released in November showed that Harris was considerably more popular than Biden among nonwhite voters and voters under the age of 30, segments of the American public whose support is indispensable if the president is to win reelection.

The campaign seems to be fully aware of that: The White House announced this week that Harris will be taking the lead in the administration's messaging on abortion, which many see as one of the issues most likely to motivate women, young people and progressives to the polls.

And a lot has been said about Biden's flagging support among Black and brown voters in recent polling. With Harris campaigning by his side, and out on the stump on her own, Biden will have a somewhat easier challenge getting Black voters and voters of color to come home on election day. At a time when the support of people of color is softer than it has been in some time, Harris' value cannot be overstated. Her appeal to non-White voters, who vote overwhelmingly Democratic, may in fact be her greatest value to the party's 2024 prospects. Harris is a woman with Indian and Jamaican parentage who intentionally rooted herself in the Black community by attending Howard University and joining the first black Greek-letter sorority in the nation. Many voters of color are only too aware of that background — and celebrate it.

In contrast to pundits who seem determined to see her as a liability, I've been saying for some time that she should be given a stronger public platform as a way of highlighting her successes. After all, a veep who is seen as competent, capable and ready to lead can only be a good thing for any presidential ticket.

But it's not just about the competence that she exudes: More Americans than ever view themselves with an intersectionality that will soon no longer need the validation of a White male leader to succeed. Harris has changed the

permission structure within her party and among the electorate. Her outreach will be particularly important among young voters.

Biden won 60% of voters under 30 in the 2020 election and this group will be critically important again to clinching a victory in 2024. In addition to next month's push on abortion, the campaign is ramping up its outreach to Gen Z voters on various fronts.

In September and October, Harris' "Fight for Our Freedoms" tour took her to college campuses across eight states, in a bid to continue the administration's outreach to this vitally important group. Harris' portfolio of reproductive rights, voting rights and discrimination in education is tailor-made to appeal to this cadre of voters. Another issue in her portfolio that young people care deeply about is immigration — a historically thorny topic, but one she can address firsthand. In fact, when confronted at a college campus in Flagstaff, Arizona about America's immigration policies, Harris cited her own "lived experience" as the daughter of an immigrant mother for how she approaches the issue.

Here's another reason for Democrats to celebrate Kamala: She is the very embodiment of what the party aspires to be — the kind of figure who inspired millions of people like me to enter the political arena. Jesse Jackson's prime time exhortation at the 1988 Democratic National Convention for the party to embrace the country's diversity inspired countless GenXers like me to become politically active.

Jackson's speech also gave us a front row seat to a highly impactful phenomenon: the explosion of women candidates and candidates of color running for seats at multiple levels of government accompanied by the coded language and spurious metrics used to judge their qualifications. The echoes of the kinds of criticism Harris is facing is all too familiar to me. Similar threads go back to Shirley Chisholm's race for the White House in 1972, and should have been excised from our national discourse decades ago. It's the kind of pushback that is vexing and unfortunately not all that unusual when a Black woman reaches the pinnacle of political power. For leaders of color in the public and

private sectors, everything from their speech, clothing and mannerisms are scrutinized. Women in particular navigate a male dominated construct of leadership and stereotypical views of femininity. These pressures also force many Black leaders to decide between race-conscious and race-neutral policymaking with a tendency toward incrementalism that drives more skepticism of motives. For Kamala Harris to have risen to historic heights in our nation, any notion of weak political and substantive bona fides should be outright dismissed.

Given what a potentially important asset she is, one can only ask why she has been so underappreciated and underrated? Criticism of Harris by detractors who question her value on the Democratic 2024 ticket has not abated, despite the increasingly prominent role she has played in the Biden re-election campaign in recent months. Republicans, only too happy to exploit this opening, can cause irreparable and long-lasting damage — and that wouldn't just hurt Harris. The Democratic party, and its election prospects in 2024, will suffer if the party doesn't defend her more forcefully. Even as Harris ramps up her outreach to Gen Z voters, it seems more than likely that she will face an enormous challenge: unhappiness from some young voters about the administration's position on Israel. The issue thus far has proven to be a divisive one for the party, as she works to help unify fractious elements of her party, the president's change of tone on the war notwithstanding. Meanwhile, the vice president can offer an aspirational economic message to these young voters whose enthusiasm is blunted by an inability to financially plan for their future. It's not a panacea, but it is an important overture and a lot is riding on her success. The 2020 ticket of Biden and Harris stemmed the reclamation and retribution movement of Trumpism. The president may be equally important as a transitional leader bridging an old and new electoral coalition. And his administration can tout achievements from investments in infrastructure to increased funding for transportation to reductions in prescription drug costs. These have been bolstered in no small part by the vice president's contributions.



Why is Mark Zuckerberg building a private apocalypse bunker in Hawaii?

By Hamilton Nolan

Just below billionaires' charity is an endless well of self-preservation. Their desperate planning for the end betrays everything they spout about equality and progress.

The rich can't buy their way out of death, but they can certainly postpone it for a while. All of the pure food and expensive healthcare and personal trainers that money can buy do indeed keep the wealthy breathing longer, on average, than the rest of us. Yet it is not death itself that is the great equalizer; it is the fear of death. That is the thing that the highest piles of money cannot safeguard against.

The futility of all of those meticulous attempts to maximize lifespan is revealed by death's approach. Much of the behavior of the world's wealthiest people can be understood as a pitiful attempt to stave off something that is unstoppable, like a person throwing their hands up to stop an oncoming freight train. For all of us languishing in the masses of regular-folkdom, this is our consolation: we cannot match the world's greatest fortunes, but we can take solace in the knowledge that they are being wasted on mankind's oldest folly. In 2015, the Facebook founder, Mark Zuckerberg, one of the richest men on Earth, announced that he would be giving away the bulk of his wealth during his lifetime. One of the main goals of his charity, he wrote in a treacly public letter to his daughter, was "promoting equality". "Today we are robbed of the potential so many have to offer," he declared. "The only way to achieve our full potential is to channel the talents, ideas and contributions of every

person in the world."

Now, in homage to this admirable ideal, Zuckerberg is offering the underprivileged residents of the Hawaiian island of Kauai the chance to live up to their full potential, to wit, "building a lavish ultraluxury compound where Mark Zuckerberg can hole up and survive the apocalypse while the hordes of normal people perish".

As the journalist Guthrie Scrimgeour details in a staggering investigative story for *Wired* magazine, Zuckerberg has spent almost a decade buying up land on the island for the construction – now well under way – of a sprawling, 1,400-acre compound of mansions, treehouses and tunnels. The crown jewel of the \$270m project is a 5,000-sq-ft underground shelter with "its own energy and food supplies" and "what appears to be a blast-resistant door". Odd, is it not, that a man whose primary concern is global equality would need a subterranean apocalypse shelter designed to seal him off from all of the (equal) people outside who would be, presumably, burning or starving or being eaten by the zombies? Wouldn't Zuckerberg's powerful passion for enhancing the future of all mankind compel him to fling open the armored doors to his compound and welcome in all of his fellow Hawaiian islanders, for whom he has the deepest concern and respect? Or, even simpler, compelled him to have spent the hundreds of millions of dollars that he spent on this tightly secured elitist fantasyland on something a bit more public-minded? I'm sure that his soaring, scenic parcel of land would make an excellent public

park. A millimeter below every billionaire's charitable spirit lies an endless well of self-preservation.

This sort of desperate planning for the End Times gives the lie to everything that Zuckerberg and his moneyed peers say about the rising tide that lifts all boats. When the tides rise high enough, your rickety boats will sink, while they will float away on their yachts. Every charitable check can be seen as a tranquilizer dart, designed to pacify the public just enough that they won't start wondering why the nice plutocrat who came to their island and bought all the land built such a big wall around it all.

The most fervent quasi-religious hope of every billionaire is that he can have it all; that he can both bask in opulent wealth and be a good person, beloved by one and all. Unfortunately for the rich, this hope will always be revealed as an impossible dream.

Moral philosophers have long pointed out that the mere act of giving away some money does not absolve you from the responsibility of doing something ethical with all the rest of your money. To feed one hungry child and then let a thousand more starve as you build your mansion is not an act that balances the scales of right and wrong.

In a resource-constrained world, there is no escaping the moral imperative for the wealthy to use their stupendous resources to help the needy as much as possible. There is no buying your way out of that situation. The "indulgences" that the Catholic church used to sell to escape the effects of sin were, we all now recognize, a scam. The

charitable foundations of modern billionaires can be understood the same way.

Of all the problems that the existence of billionaires creates, the biggest is simply the fact that having that much money gives individuals too much power. Sure, you, the average person, might get drunk and dream about buying up an entire town's worth of land to build your exclusive treehouse survivalist kingdom, but you don't have the means to actually do it. And that is a good thing. When society allows people to get 10-figure net worths, all of the most idiotic fever dreams of the human mind begin springing into reality.

That is not progress. Capitalism's tendency to grant godlike powers to the sort of people that are sociopathic and tasteless enough to accumulate billions of dollars is one of its most embarrassing flaws.

But, like Ozymandias, Mark Zuckerberg may one day learn the hard way that all of his planning to elevate himself above the risks of the mortal world has been for naught. If the apocalypse does come, hurling us all into a state of nature, the first thing that is going to lose all of its value is money. The security guards that you hired to protect you are going to think more about protecting themselves. The construction workers who built your compound will know where all the food is hidden. The mighty billionaire boss will inevitably find that no pile of gold is high enough to keep away fate. Should have been a socialist, Mark. If the worst happens, then at least you would have had some comrades who you wouldn't need to pay to watch your back.

We want a Digital India. Just not the one we are living in

Citizens are never informed about the leak of their personally identifiable information or educated about any recourse. They are left to their own devices until the next breach happens.

In October, Resecurity, a US company, informed the world about the availability of Indians' personal data on the dark web. It would have been easy to ignore this amid the deluge of bad news filling our news feeds but for the size and sensitivity of data. The seller of the data set was providing verifiable, sensitive information of 55 per cent of the Indian population — roughly around 815 million (81.5 crore) citizens.

This included personally identifiable information like name, phone number, Aadhaar number, passport number and address. All for a paltry sum of \$80,000. On December 18, we learnt that Delhi police had arrested four individuals in this matter.

This is obviously not the first time that Indians' sensitive information has been leaked. Earlier in the summer, multiple reports surfaced about a leak that exposed the personal information of individuals registered on the CoWin website. Last year, in November, Delhi's prestigious AIIMS had to work with pen and paper to register a sea of patients after a ransomware attack. Why does this keep happening? Data breaches are at an all-time high in the world. Yet, some countries are more vulnerable than others. It is easy to dismiss these leaks as they happen every day, but the leaking of sensitive information makes the breach reported in October different. Thieves who have stolen names, Aadhaar numbers and passport information can use that information not only to sign up for new accounts in the victim's name, but also to commit tax identity theft, online-banking theft and other financially motivated scams. We are already seeing a rise in cyber frauds, with people losing their life savings, taking on debt and suffering shame and stigma for having been scammed. As per the World Bank, "India is one of the fastest growing economies of the



world and is poised to continue on this path, with aspirations to reach high middle income status by 2047". Our mobile phone usage, enhanced banking access and the ever-growing market size that generates enormous amounts of data not only makes us attractive to companies but also to bad actors.

No country is safe from data breaches. In fact, the Biden administration has issued multiple Executive Orders to modernise and implement stronger cybersecurity standards in the federal government. When such instances happen, the Computer Emergency Response teams spring into action and impacted users are informed and educated about what steps they can take to reduce the chance that their information will be misused. Basically, a near-term and a long-term plan is devised and executed. This is "Incident Response". These strategies and tactics have been instrumental in reducing the impact of data breaches. In India, all we see are denials, semantic hand waving and some incomprehensible word salads from ministers, rinse and repeat.

Citizens are never informed about the leak of their personally identifiable information or educated about any recourse. They

are left to their own devices until the next breach happens.

If the government of India were a business, it would have seen a sharp decline in its stock value, coupled with a mean market cap loss of billions of dollars resulting in a credit rating downgrade. But because market forces don't apply to governments, the Indian government continues to operate without a long term cyber security strategy.

Some might ask: How can Aadhaar be a problem, it's so great? Despite a crystal-clear prohibition issued by the Supreme Court against making Aadhaar registration mandatory, the central government and enthusiastic parties in both state governments and industry proceeded to adopt Aadhaar-based technology and impose requirements for Aadhaar registration for social services and benefits — from educational scholarships to booking railway tickets to marrying voter ID databases to Aadhaar. By making Aadhaar registration mandatory, the government imposed on every Indian citizen an unmanaged risk of digital environment catastrophe.

When we went to the Supreme Court, some judges recognised that the Aadhaar number is the "bridge" linking all the silos

of information and behavioural data collected through the vehicle of the "smartphone" in contemporary networked society. The Court also recognised that UIDAI's "Verification Log" contains enough data about the activities of citizens that a "leak" would involve an unconstitutional violation of privacy. But it did not do much, saying that UIDAI's computer security will eventually become "foolproof". That was in 2018.

The constant flow of news about data breaches, whether at Comcast or UIDAI, is normalising massive losses of personal data. Despite all the puffery and all the claims about how Aadhaar makes India a world leader, no one has so far intimated how we are managing the obvious harms that are plaguing our society. From Brookings to Moody's to the CAG, everyone has called out UIDAI on its failure to properly regulate its client vendors and address security, lack of transparency and accountability.

The plan cannot be for perfect security, operating flawlessly forever, for Aadhaar. No government can, at present, promise perfect security for even its most critical personnel data.

No "platform" company, with all the immense profits can claim to guarantee perfect security of customer data. No Indian citizen can, or should, trust a story in which Aadhaar data security is never breached because breaches do occur regularly. India's recently introduced Data Protection Act does nothing to address sensitive health information. Under Clause 17(4), in fact, the government is exempt from provisions of data retention and erasure of personal data. Unless that data can make a difference in making a decision about a data principal, right to correction, completion and updation is also not available. Here is some basic advice on what the Government of India should do: Make the prevention, detection, assessment, and remediation of cyber incidents a top priority. Recognise the importance of digital infrastructure as essential to national and economic security of the population. Make the state digital infrastructure trustworthy by increasing transparency and accountability. A cyber security board should be established with government and private sector participants that has the authority to convene, following a significant cyber incident, to analyse what happened and make concrete recommendations for improving cybersecurity. Adopt a zero-trust architecture, and mandate a standardised playbook for responding to cybersecurity vulnerabilities and incidents. Urgently execute a plan for defending and modernising state networks and updating its incident response policy. Finally, put people at the centre of all policies. Informing them immediately, helping them protect themselves and remediate fallout from cyber incidents should be the government's responsibility. We want a Digital India. Just not the Digital India we are living in at the moment.

Happy New Year

2024



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Email : editor@thesouthasianinsider.com www.thesouthasianinsider.com