

The South Asian

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Jacqueline Fernandez knowingly used, enjoyed conman's proceeds of crime



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Indian-origin teen arrested in Canada over murder of another; manhunt for killer

An 18-year-old Indian-origin teenager was arrested for aiding the murder of another 18-year-old Indian-origin man in Brampton, Canada. A 16-year-old boy believed to have pulled the trigger is at large. A warrant has been issued, and a Canada-wide hunt is on.



(Sai Bureau)- An Indian-origin

teenager, Preetpaul Singh, has been arrested in Canada for aiding the murder of another Indian-origin teen in Brampton. Another 16-year-old suspect, who is believed to have shot the person dead, is on the run.

Detectives from the Peel Regional Police Homicide Bureau have taken action in connection with the death of 18-year-old Nishan Thind.

On Tuesday, December 19, 2023, around 5:45 pm, the police received information from a local hospital about a young man who had been admitted and subsequently died. The man was later identified as Nishan Thind from Brampton city in Canada.

Investigations revealed that Thind had

been shot, but the details of where and when the crime took place were not known. Someone dropped him off at the hospital.

On January 9, 2024, police executed a search warrant at a Brampton residence and subsequently arrested another 18-year-old, Preetpaul Singh, also of Indian origin. Singh is charged with Accessory After the Fact to Commit an Indictable Offence (someone who knowingly assists or supports a person who has committed a crime after the crime has been committed).

Currently, he is in custody and will appear before the Ontario Court of

Justice in Brampton.

The person believed to have carried out the shooting is a 16-year-old boy from Brampton. There is a Canada-wide warrant for manslaughter issued for him. However, due to the Youth Criminal Justice Act (YCJA), the young person's identity is protected, and the name cannot be released to the public.

"Our investigation into this tragedy remains active," said a Peel Police spokesperson. "Anyone with information or video footage (dashcam or otherwise) is urged to contact Homicide."

The police are working to find and understand more about what led to Thind being shot dead.

US Announces Fresh Selection Criteria For H-1B Visa, New Rules From October

(Sai Bureau)- In a move to fortify the integrity of the H-1B registration process and mitigate fraud risks, the US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) has announced a final rule for the fiscal year 2025 (FY 2025) H-1B cap.

The rule introduces a beneficiary-centric selection process, ensuring fairness and equal opportunities for all beneficiaries, regardless of the number of registrations submitted on their behalf.

Registrations will now be selected based on unique beneficiaries, reducing the potential for fraud and ensuring equal chances of selection. Beginning with the FY 2025 initial registration period, USCIS will mandate registrants to provide valid passport information or valid travel document information for each beneficiary. The final rule clarifies requirements regarding the requested employment start date on certain petitions subject to the H-1B cap, allowing filing with requested start dates after October 1 of the relevant fiscal year. The rule codifies USCIS' ability to deny or revoke H-1B petitions if the registration contains false attestation or is otherwise invalid.

USCIS has also announced a Fee Schedule final rule, effective after the initial registration period for FY 2025 H-1B cap.

The initial registration period for the FY



2025 H-1B cap will open on March 6, 2024, and run through March 22, 2024. USCIS will launch organisational accounts on February 28, 2024,

allowing collaboration on H-1B registrations, petitions, and associated forms. Online filing of Form I-129 and Form I-907 for non-cap H-1B petitions will also commence on the same date.

While petitioners can continue to file paper Form I-129 H-1B petitions, online filing options will be available starting April 1, 2024.

USCIS Director Ur M Ja0ddou stated, "The improvements in these areas should make H-1B selections more equitable for petitioners and beneficiaries and will allow for the H-1B process to be fully electronic from registration until final decision." These reforms aim to enhance the overall H-1B programme, making it more transparent, efficient, and resistant to fraudulent activities.

Indian national gets 9-year jail term in US for \$2.8 million healthcare fraud

(Sai Bureau)- A 43-year-old Indian national was sentenced to nine years of imprisonment in the US for a USD 2.8 million health care fraud, the US Department of Justice said.

According to court documents, Yogesh K Pancholi, the Indian national who owns a healthcare company called Shring Home Care Inc, purchased it using the names, signatures, and personal identifying information of others to conceal his ownership of the company, despite being excluded from billing Medicare, news agency PTI reported. Over a span

of two months, Pancholi, a Michigan resident, and his accomplices submitted fraudulent claims, securing nearly USD 2.8 million in payments from Medicare for services never rendered, the federal prosecutors alleged. Pancholi allegedly funnelled these illicitly obtained funds through bank accounts associated with shell corporations, ultimately redirecting them into accounts located in India, PTI reported, citing the Department of Justice.

Upon indictment and just before the trial, Pancholi, adopting a pseudonym,

composed false and defamatory emails. These emails were sent to various federal government agencies, accusing a government witness of multiple crimes. The intention was to impede the witness from testifying, according to statements from the Department of Justice.

The jury had convicted Pancholi in September last year of conspiracy to commit health care and wire fraud, two counts of substantive health care fraud, two counts of money laundering, two counts of aggravated identity theft, and one count of witness tampering.

India, Oman ink MoU on procurement of defence material, equipment

(News Agency)- India and Oman on Wednesday signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) pertaining to procurement of defence material and equipment which would provide a framework for a new area of defence collaboration.

The agreement was signed during the 12th Joint Military Cooperation Committee (JMCC) meeting in Muscat.

India's Defence Secretary Giridhar Aramane and Oman's Defence Ministry's Secretary General Mohammed Bin Naseer Bin Ali Al Zaabi co-chaired the meeting, during which the two countries reviewed and appreciated the "robust defence cooperation" between India and Oman, the Defence Ministry (MoD) said in a statement. According to the MoD, the meeting delved into many new areas of cooperation in the fields of training, joint exercise, information sharing, oceanography, and ship building, that would build mutual trust and interoperability between militaries of both nations. They



also exchanged views on regional and global issues of shared interest.

Both sides discussed "effective and practical" initiatives to further boost bilateral defence engagements with focus

on defence industries collaboration.

Last month, India and Oman had adopted the India-Oman joint vision document titled 'A Partnership for the Future' the visit of Oman's Head of State Sultan Haitham Bin

Tarik. The MoU signed on Wednesday was towards implementing the same.

The MoD said that during the two day (January 30-31) visit to Oman, the Defence Secretary also held bilateral talks with the Secretary General. Aramane highlighted the potential of domestic defence industry with capacity, capability and looked forward to a fruitful partnership with the Armed Forces of Oman. Oman expressed confidence in the capability of Indian defence industry. The Defence Secretary also invited the Secretary General and his delegation to visit India to witness the defence industrial capability, especially in aerospace and maritime sectors.

Oman is one of India's closest defence partners in Gulf region and defence cooperation has emerged as a key pillar of the strategic partnership between India and Oman. The two countries are committed to

work under the vision of strategic partnership, the MoD said.

45 IPS officers transferred in Bengal ahead of Lok Sabha polls



(News Agency)- The West Bengal government on Wednesday announced a major reshuffle of IPS officers in the state by transferring as many as 45 officers in one go, with months to go before the Lok Sabha polls. The most significant transfer was in the rank of Additional Director General (Law & Order), where veteran IPS officer and the current ADG (Intelligence Branch), Manoj Kumar Verma, replaced Javed Shamim, as the latter took over as ADG (Intelligence Branch).

Another significant transfer was in the rank of Superintendent of Basirhat District Police, J. Thomas, who has been transferred as police superintendent of Islampur. Thomas has been replaced by the erstwhile superintendent of the counter insurgency force of the state police.

There is a buzz that Thomas' transfer has some links with the recent attack on ED and CAPF personnel at Sandeshkhali, which comes under the jurisdiction of Basirhat District Police.

However, state government officials have described the transfers as routine transfers.

Sources in the state administration said that most of them had been in their earlier postings for a period of three years or more. As per the rules, before any election, be it Lok Sabha or that of state Assembly, the transfer of officers completing three years or more in a particular posting is mandatory.

Amit Shah cancels Bengal visit amid political crisis in Bihar



(News Agency)- Home Minister Amit Shah has cancelled his two-day visit to West Bengal amid growing political uncertainty in the neighbouring Bihar. "We have now been informed from New Delhi that the Home Minister will not be able to visit Bengal this time," a BJP state committee member said. The BJP state committee member said that Shah was supposed to arrive in Kolkata on Sunday, with a packed schedule for two days. He was scheduled to have an organisational meeting at Barasat in North 24 Parganas district to discuss the organisation affairs in the four Lok Sabha

constituencies in the district. In Kolkata, he was scheduled to hold an organisation meeting with the top state BJP leadership to take stock of the preparations of forthcoming Lok Sabha polls. During the tour he also was scheduled to hold a public rally at Mecheda in East Midnapore, which is the native district of Leader of the Opposition Suwendu Adhikari. JD-U Chief Nitish Kumar is likely to take oath as Bihar Chief Minister for the 9th time on Sunday. Bihar had a coalition government head by Nitish Kumar and supported by RJD along with other alliance parties. Nitish Kumar's JD-U was also an ally of Congress-led INDIA bloc.

ED confiscates assets worth Rs 2.5 mn of Cong legislator in Kerala

(News Agency)-The Enforcement Directorate has confiscated assets worth Rs 2.5 million of former Congress minister and present legislator K. Babu. Babu was the excise minister in the cabinet of Oommen Chandy (2011-16) and the ED probe pertained to the period from 2007 to 2017.

Babu was kept on tenterhooks after the

state vigilance department registered a case when the Chandy government came under attack from the then CPI-M led Left opposition over the bar scam, but later vigilance gave him a clean chit.

The ED stepped into this case soon after the vigilance department had registered a case. It was on Wednesday that the ED after a probe found that Babu had

acquired assets which were found to be disproportionate to his known sources of income.

Babu in 2016 lost the Tripunithura assembly constituency that he was representing since 1991 and this was largely due to the allegations that surfaced, but in 2021, he regained the seat.

Melodious: PM Modi praises patriotic song by Egyptian girl on 75th R-Day

(News Agency)- Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Monday praised a patriotic song rendered by an Egyptian girl at India's 75th Republic Day celebrations in Cairo. Dressed in traditional Indian attire, Kariman sang the 'Desh Rangeela' song at the India House, leaving a large gathering of Indians and Egyptians impressed.

"This rendition by Kariman from Egypt is melodious! I congratulate her for this effort and wish her the very best for her future endeavours," PM Modi wrote as he shared the video of the song on X.

The video was originally shared by the Indian Embassy in Egypt on Sunday, which praised Kariman's "melodious singing" and "intonation".

"A young Egyptian girl Kariman presented a patriotic song 'Desh Rangeela' during 75th #RepublicDay celebrations at 'India House'. Her melodious singing and correct intonation



impressed the large gathering of Indians and Egyptians," the Embassy said.

It further stated in successive posts that young Egyptians showcased their love for Indian classical dance and music, with cultural programmes at the India

House in the Egyptian capital.

Women from the Indian community performed Garba after Ambassador Ajit V Gupte unfurled the Tricolour and read the address of President Droupadi Murmu to the Indian diaspora and friends

of India in the country.

According to the Indian Embassy in Cairo, the Indian community in Egypt numbers around 3,200, most of whom are concentrated in the country's capital. There are also a small number of families in Alexandria, Port Said, and Ismailia. A majority of the Indians are either employed with Indian companies or are professionals with various multinationals.

About 400 Indian students are studying in Egypt, mainly in Al Azhar University with around 275 students, and the rest in Ain Shams Medical University (around 80 students) and Cairo University, the Embassy website said.

External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar visited the country in October 2022 where he thanked the diaspora for advancing India's national interests and shaping the country's image in the region.

16 AIIMS, 315 medical colleges established in last 10 years: President Murmu

(News Agency)- President Droupadi Murmu on Wednesday said that as many as 16 AIIMS and 315 medical colleges have been established in the last decade while the number of MBBS seats has more than doubled during the period.

President Murmu made the remarks while addressing the joint sitting of both Houses of the Parliament.

In her address, the President said that in the National Education Policy, emphasis has been laid on education in mother tongue and Indian languages.

"Teaching of subjects like engineering, medical, law has been started in Indian languages. To provide quality education to school students, my government is working on more than 14,000 'PM Shri Vidyalayas'. Out of these, more than 6000 schools have started functioning," she added.

"The school dropout rate in the country has reduced due to efforts of my government. The enrolment of girls in higher education has increased. Enrolment of Scheduled Caste students has increased by about 44 per cent, that of Scheduled Tribe students by more than 65 per cent and that of OBC by more than 44 per cent. Under Atal Innovation Mission, 10,000



Atal Tinkering Labs have been established to promote innovation. More than 1 crore students are involved in it," she added.

President Murmu further said that in the last 10 years, the government has done "unprecedented" work in the field of tourism. "Along with the number of domestic tourists in India, the number of foreign tourists coming to India has also increased... The reason for the growth in the tourism sector is owed to India's growing stature. Today the world wants to explore and know India."

"Apart from this, the scope of tourism has also increased due

to excellent connectivity. Building of airports at various places is also advantageous. Now, North East is witnessing record tourist arrivals. Now there is heightened excitement about Andaman-

Nicobar and Lakshadweep islands," she said.

About development of pilgrimage destinations and historical sites across the country, she said that the government has made

pilgrimage in India easier now. "In the last one year 8.5 crores of people have visited Kashi. More than 5 crores of people have visited Mahakaal. More than 19 lakh people have visited Kedar Dham. In the 5 days of "Pran Pratishtha", 13 lakh devotees have visited Ayodhya Dham itself."

President Murmu said that there is "unprecedented expansion" of facilities at pilgrimage sites in every part of the country.

The government "also wants to make India a leading destination for meetings and exhibitions related sectors. For this, facilities like Bharat Mandapam, Yashobhoomi have been created. In near future, tourism will become a major source of employment", she added.

Man stabbed multiple times by minor over liquor in South Delhi

(News Agency)- A 30-year-old man was allegedly stabbed to death by a juvenile over liquor in south Delhi, an official said on Wednesday, adding that they have nabbed the accused. The deceased was identified as Ajruddin, a native of Bulandshahr District in Uttar Pradesh, who was currently residing at Sangam

Vihar. According to police, on Wednesday at 6.15 a.m., a PCR call regarding an injured person lying near a house at Ekta Chowk, Asthal Mandir Road, Sangam Vihar was received at the Neb Sarai police station. "The injured was taken to the hospital and was declared brought dead at the hospital. He had suffered four stab wounds,"

said a senior police official.

During the probe, several CCTVs were checked and it was found that a juvenile, also a resident of the same locality, had committed the crime.

"It was found that the deceased and the juvenile were drinking together and a quarrel took place between them over liquor."

Gujarat's Surat Airport now an 'international airport': Govt notification

(News Agency)-The Surat Airport in Gujarat has officially been elevated to international status, according to a notification on Wednesday by the Central government. The move, initially approved by the Union Cabinet on December 15, represents a monumental step in enhancing the economic and aviation stature of the region, an official said.

The decision, taken under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, is set to catalyze Surat's transformation into a pivotal hub within the international aviation sector, a statement noted. "The transition of Surat Airport to an international facility is a game-changer, set to spur economic development, attract global investments, and strengthen



diplomatic relations," it added.

The upgrade to international status aligns with a noticeable uptick in passenger and cargo traffic at Surat Airport, indicating a

burgeoning demand for enhanced aviation services.

Officials anticipate that the airport's new status will catalyze regional growth, propelling Surat into a new epoch of prosperity.

Adding to the airport's capabilities, a new integrated terminal building was inaugurated in December 2023. The facility is designed to accommodate 1,200 domestic and 600 international passengers during peak hours, with provisions to expand capacity to 3,000 passengers. The annual handling capacity of the airport is also set to soar, reaching 55 lakh passengers, underscoring Surat Airport's readiness to embrace its new international identity and the myriad opportunities it brings, an official said.

Parliament security breach: Judicial custody of all 6 extended till March 1

(News Agency)- Delhi's Patiala House Court has extended the judicial custody of all the six accused in the December 13, 2023 Parliament security breach case till March 1. Additional Sessions Judge Hardeep Kaur, who presided over the proceedings, noted the presence of all the accused -- Manoranjan D, Sagar Sharma, Amol Dhanraj Shinde, Neelam Devi Azad, Lalit Jha and Mahesh Kumawat -- in the courtroom. Five of the six individuals -- Manoranjan, Sharma, Shinde, Jha and Kumawat -- told the court that they are allegedly being tortured by Delhi Police to admit their association with opposition parties. They claimed they were coerced into signing about 70 blank papers and forced to confess their involvement with national political parties.

In a joint petition, the accused



stated: "Accused persons were tortured/given electric shocks to sign and confess (to) the commission of crime under the UAPA and their association with national political parties." The joint petition further revealed that during polygraph, narco, and brain mapping tests, the individuals were pressurised to name a political party or leader.

They were also compelled to provide social media account, email, and phone passwords during the alleged illegal

procedures.

The court has scheduled a hearing on February 17 to address the application filed by these arrested individuals.

The court has also sought a response from Delhi Police regarding this application.

The judge granted a further 30-day extension to their judicial custody.

Last time, the court had allowed Delhi Police's application seeking production warrant for all the six accused. Judge Sudhanshu Kaushik had issued a production warrant

and directed the jail authorities to produce the accused on January 31. On January 18, the judge had denied bail to Azad. Neelam Azad, the sixth accused, had previously alleged that police forced her to sign several blank papers.

Azad's application is currently pending before the court.

Azad had alleged that a woman officer forcibly made her sign over 50 blank papers.

Special public prosecutor Akhand Pratap Singh had objected to the allegation, as the court recorded the submissions from both sides. Earlier, except Azad, the five others gave their consent before the court to undergo polygraph test, as sought by the Delhi Police which had moved an application seeking permission for the same, saying the investigators need to get more details to

make the case strong and gather more evidence to unearth the entire conspiracy. The police had also sought permission to conduct brain mapping and narco test on Manoranjan and Sagar.

The duo had burst yellow smoke canisters inside the Lok Sabha chamber on December 13, the 22nd anniversary of the 2001 Parliament attack, after jumping from the visitors' gallery before they were overpowered by the MPs present in the House.

Two others -- Azad and Shinde -- also burst smoke canisters and raised slogans outside the Parliament.

Jha is believed to be the mastermind of the entire plan, who reportedly fled with the mobile phones of the four other accused persons.

AAP, Congress protest over 'rigging' in Chandigarh mayoral polls

(News Agency)-Leaders of the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) and the Congress protested outside the Sector 17 police station here on Wednesday against the alleged rigging in the Chandigarh Municipal Corporation's mayoral elections. They demanded the police to register a case against Anil Masih, the presiding officer appointed for the elections.

In their statement, the



councillors and leaders of both the parties accused the BJP of rigging the elections, saying Masih deliberately cancelled the votes of eight councillors so that the BJP could make their mayor.

AAP leader Sunny Ahluwalia met the SHO, demanding to register a case against the presiding officer, handed him video clips and other materials

related to 'rigging' in the elections. Later, he met the Senior Superintendent of Police and demanded immediate action against Masih. Ahluwalia told the media that the BJP "is the biggest threat to our country's democracy", adding that as per the strategy, the BJP managed all officials related to the elections and made its mayor by rigging the polls.

'Severe' air quality chokes Delhi most of the days in January

(News Agency)- Throughout January, Delhi grappled with persistent air pollution, exacerbating a crisis that had already been worsening since the previous year. Unfavourable weather conditions, including fog, calm winds, and low temperatures, contributed to the deterioration of air quality.

According to information from the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB), the average monthly Air Quality Index (AQI) exceeded 350. In comparison, the AQI for January 2023 was measured at 311.

The AQI serves as a gauge for the concentration of harmful particulate matter PM2.5, known to induce cardiovascular and respiratory ailments such as lung cancer, within a cubic metre of air.

The categorisation of AQI ranges from 0-50 as 'good,' 51-100 as 'satisfactory,' 101-200 as 'moderate,' 201-300 as 'poor,' 301-400 as 'very poor,' and 401-500 as 'severe.' Any value surpassing 500 falls into the 'severe-plus or emergency' category.

However, the weather experts said that with two Western Disturbances in quick succession, the air quality is likely to improve in the coming days.

On the last day of the month, the air quality at Anand Vihar continued to be



in the 'severe' category with PM2.5 at 407 and PM10 at 349, or 'very poor' while NO2 reached at 108 or 'moderate', as per the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB).

The AQI monitoring station at Dwarka sector 8 recorded PM2.5 at 403, in the severe levels and PM 10 at 269, in the 'poor' category.

The AQI at Jahangirpuri was also in 'severe' levels with PM 10 reaching at 413 and PM 2.5 at 402. The CO was recorded at 110 or 'moderate'.

The PM2.5 at Punjabi Bagh also reached 404, in the 'severe' category while PM10 was at 357, or 'very poor' and CO was at 126 or 'moderate'.

The PM2.5 at Okhla Phase-II was recorded at 496 and PM10 at 486 -- both in the 'severe' category. The NO2 was at 119 and CO was at 60, in the 'satisfactory' levels.

At Jawaharlal Nehru stadium station, in last 24 hours, the average AQI was recorded in severe levels with PM 2.5 at 405 while PM 10 at 362 or 'very poor'

and CO was at 114 or moderate.

The average air quality at Mandir Marg station in the last 24 hours was also in 'severe' category with PM 2.5 at 404 and PM 10 at 330 or 'very poor'. The NO2 was recorded at 113. At Mundka around 9 a.m., the AQI remained in the 'severe' category with PM2.5 at 423 and PM10 at 408.

However, at IGI airport station, the PM 2.5 was at 332, or 'very poor' while PM 10 was at 228, in the 'poor' category and CO was at 118 or moderate.

This winter season, for the third time, GRAP Stage III measures were implemented. Initially enforced from November 2 to 28, and then again from December 22 to January 1, these restrictions were reintroduced on January 14 following a deterioration in Delhi's Air Quality Index (AQI) to 447, categorising it as "severe" but revoked on January 22.

The decision to lift GRAP Stage III was made by the CAQM due to the disruptive impact of these restrictions on a significant number of stakeholders and the general public. The move also considered the improvement observed in the average AQI in Delhi, according to the Commission for Air Quality Management (CAQM) official.

India's demand for gold dips amid soaring prices: WGC report



(News Agency)- India's gold demand fell 3% in 2023 to 747.5 tonnes, which is the lowest since 2020, as soaring prices reduced the demand for jewellery, according to a World Gold Council report released on

Wednesday. Indian gold consumption in the October-December quarter fell 4% to 266.2 tons, as a drop in jewellery demand eclipsed higher sales of coins and bars for investment purposes, the WGC said.

The January-March quarter, demand is expected to stay low due to fewer auspicious wedding days, the WGC said.

The Government has also imposed high Customs duty on gold to restrict imports as it leads to an outgo of precious foreign exchange which is required for essential imports such as crude oil.

Switzerland and the United Arab Emirates are the leading gold suppliers to India.

The report also states that the global jewellery market proved to be remarkably resilient amidst record-high prices as demand inched up by 3 tonnes year-on-year. China played an important role, recording a 17% increase in demand for gold, offsetting a 9% decrease in India.

Mine production of gold was relatively flat in 2023, up 1%. Recycling increased by 9%, which was lower than expected given the high gold price and drove total supply up 3%, the report added.

Tipu Sultan's statue garlanded with slippers; Karnataka town tense

(News Agency)- Karnataka's Sirwar town in Raichur District is tense following the violation of the statue of the erstwhile ruler of Mysuru, Tipu Sultan on Wednesday. Some miscreants garlanded the statue of Tipu Sultan with slippers in the wee hours of Wednesday and the people came to know about it in the morning, leading to widespread anger.

A large number of people have come out in the open condemning the incident and are staging a protest at the Tipu Circle.

They have also blocked the road and torched tyres at the protest site, demanding immediate arrest of the people behind the vandalism.

Police have rushed to the spot and are checking CCTV footage to get clues about the miscreants.

More details are yet to emerge regarding the incident.

The Real Reason We're Stuck with Trump v. Biden

Even though the November presidential election is more than nine months away, only two states have voted and less than 1 percent of the electorate has cast a ballot, the presidential primary process in both parties is all but over. Joe Biden is virtually certain to represent the Democratic Party, and despite Nikki Haley's persistence, Donald Trump is virtually certain to be the Republican Party's nominee.

This may seem to make little sense in many ways. The Iowa caucuses and New Hampshire primary have chosen just 61 of the roughly 2,400 delegates who will officially vote for the GOP nominee at the party's convention six months from now. None of the more than 4,000 delegates have so far been chosen for the Democratic Party's convention. What's more, these candidates do not reflect the preferences of a majority of Americans. An Associated Press-NORC Research Center poll published last month found that 56 percent of U.S. adults would be "very" or "somewhat" dissatisfied with Biden as the Democratic presidential nominee and about 58 percent would be unhappy with Trump as the GOP nominee. A recent Reuters/Ipsos poll found that 67 percent of respondents were "tired of seeing the same candidates in presidential elections and want someone new." "Trump vs. Biden: No Thanks," read a recent USA Today headline.

But the problem isn't just that a small number of states can have an outsized influence over our politics or that the primary system locks in unpopular candidate choices so far in advance of the election. It is also that the system locks out alternatives: Thanks to changes in party rules over the years, it has become almost impossible for people to launch a campaign after the start of the calendar year of the election. This problem has been growing for some time, but it has become particularly obvious this year. Moreover, an aspect of the delegate selection process known as "frontloading" also makes the process less democratic than the public expects. Thanks to the effort to have maximum impact on the process, states now hold their primaries as early in the election year as possible. In addition, most states have now adopted rules requiring candidates who want to run in a party's primary to register by the first week of the year of the presidential election. That's not how the people who wrote the delegate selection rules expected the process to work.

More than five decades ago, I had a role in drafting important aspects of the process that, with some adjustments, still governs how both parties choose their presidential nominees. The goal of the reform commission led the Democratic Party to eliminate the "smoke-filled rooms"

that had enabled party leaders (or "bosses") to pick the presidential nominee without input from voters. The new rules, adopted in a close vote by the delegates at the Democratic convention in Chicago in 1968, said that nominees should be chosen by convention delegates and that "all delegates ... must be selected through a process open to full public participation in the calendar year of the convention." The rule had two aims: to create an open process such as a primary or caucus, and also make sure that the selection took place in the calendar year of the election. That second part of the rule — choosing candidates in the same calendar year of the election — was equally important in our view at the time. The goal was to make sure that current events could be taken into account by the voters. We did not want the parties to lock in their choices too early.

The events of 1968 help to explain why. In late 1967, President Lyndon Johnson seemed headed to a decisive victory. On December 31, the New York Times ran a story with the headline: "Johnson Popularity on Upswing" quoting from a Gallup poll showing him with a 46 percent end-of-year approval rating, an increase of 5 percent from November and 8 percent from October. Part of his growing popularity was based on Johnson's promise that there would be an early end to the war in Vietnam.

But Johnson's support melted in early February 1968, due to the so-called "Tet Offensive," a massive military operation launched by the Vietcong on January 30, 1968. The Tet Offensive made people feel that America was far less likely to win what was already an unpopular war. In January, before the Tet Offensive, the Gallup poll showed Johnson leading former President Richard Nixon, his likely Republican opponent, by 12 points — by 51 percent to 39 percent. But by late February they were tied at 42 percent. Tet also helped Johnson's Democratic challenger, former Sen. Eugene McCarthy, win 42 percent of the vote in the New Hampshire primary, which was held on March 12. Although McCarthy had decided to challenge Johnson by January, it was the impact of the Tet Offensive that led Sen. Robert Kennedy to jump in. He did not announce his campaign until March 16. Two weeks later, recognizing that his campaign was in deep jeopardy, Johnson announced that he would not run for president. Even with a mid-March entry, Kennedy was able to enter primaries in six states including California, where he won the primary on June 6. Had he not been assassinated that same night, Kennedy might well have been the party's nominee.

By **GEOFFREY COWAN**

India's new possibilities amid China's relative economic decline

Writing in the Financial Times a few weeks ago, well-known investor and fund manager Ruchir Sharma highlighted the irreversible decline of China's share of the global GDP. Sharma represents a growing body of opinion that believes that China has peaked economically. Many China hands, of course, don't agree with the notion that we are in a "post-China world". They point to the enduring strengths of the Chinese economy, its growing technological prowess and expanding military power.

Is China's continuing rise ineluctable, or is its incipient decline irreversible?

If the world has struggled to come to terms with the dramatic expansion of China's power in the early 21st century, what might be the consequences of China's slowdown in the coming decades? How should India, which has been feeling the heat of China's rise on its Himalayan frontier, in the regional politics of the Subcontinent, and the waters of the Indian Ocean adapt to the unfolding shift in China's trajectory? As Sharma points out, China's share in the world's GDP rose from about two per cent in 1990 (after a decade of economic reform and opening up) to about 18.4 per cent in 2021. It is now down to 17 per cent. Sharma estimates that China's share will continue to decline because of several factors, including demographic decline. China's share of the world's working-age population has been falling for a decade and is about 19 per cent. In the next three decades, it will likely come down to 10 per cent. Chinese leader Xi Jinping's anti-market interventions, high levels of debt and declining worker productivity are seen as other reasons for China's relative decline. If China's share of the global GDP is falling, who is gaining? According to Sharma, several emerging

markets like India, Indonesia, Mexico, Brazil, and Poland contributed to nearly half of the expansion of the global economy last year. The US has grown at an impressive rate and made up most of the other half. Last year, the US added \$1.6 trillion to its GDP, about the size of the South Korean economy (which is the 13th largest in the world). Two important immediate implications for the world order stand out. One is the growing gap between the comprehensive national power of the US and China. Until recently, it was conventional wisdom that China would soon overtake the US GDP. It now looks unlikely to take place in the near term; some would say it is unlikely to happen ever. The latest numbers on the world economy put the US economy in 2023 at \$28 trillion and the Chinese at 18 trillion. In 2020, the Chinese economy was inching towards 80 per cent of America's. It is now drifting down towards 60 per cent. If the present trends continue, China's relative weight vis-a-vis the US is likely to go down further.

The changing economic fortunes of China and the US mean we are unlikely to be a bipolar or the G2 world that never stops animating India. The notion of parity or symmetry between the US and China was always unrealistic given the wide coalition of Western partners that the US leads. America's allies in Europe and Asia weigh far heavier than China's friends, including Russia. What about Asia? Until recently, the notion of a China-centred Asia seemed inevitable. While many Asian countries have had impressive economic performances in the last few decades, China's rise has been faster than most of its neighbours.

By **C Raja Mohan**



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The Guardian view on escalation in the Middle East: the region is inching towards the abyss

Earlier this month, Joe Biden was asked if the airstrikes on Yemen were working. "Are they stopping the Houthis? No," replied the president. "Are they going to continue? Yes."

There is an obvious logic to the US approach. If it – and its allies – do not show the Houthis and their Iranian backers that there is a price for attacks on vessels in the Red Sea, then there is no reason for its adversaries to halt. That is even more clearly the case when it comes to the attack that killed three US soldiers and injured dozens more in Jordan on Sunday. It has been claimed by Islamic Resistance in Iraq, a loose coalition of Iranian-backed militias; though Tehran denied involvement, Mr Biden blamed "Iran-backed" groups and vowed to respond.

He could hardly do otherwise, especially as an unpopular president in an election year – though for the same reason, he will want to avoid the kind of escalation that will see gas prices soar, still more a direct clash with Tehran. But that does not mean that tit-for-tat will take the US or the region where Mr Biden wants



it to go. For the same logic also pertains to Iran's thinking. If the US hits it hard, it will feel obliged to retaliate – almost certainly via proxies – to shore up or advance its position and undermine America's. Both Washington and Tehran say they are not looking for war. But calibration is an art and not a science. However carefully chosen the target, the damage caused is unpredictable – though the deaths of US personnel were probably a matter

of time given the scores of rocket and drone attacks by Iranian-backed groups in recent months. The other side's assessment is also uncertain. Domestic pressures weight the response. The Houthis and Islamic Resistance in Iraq pursue their own interests as well as Iran's. Most worryingly, a gradual and apparently containable escalation can suddenly gather pace.

The regional war that the White

House hoped to stave off is already happening. Jordan is only the latest to be drawn in. This spiralling crisis will not end while the conflict at its heart rages. More than 26,600 have been killed in Gaza, according to the health ministry, and survivors are in desperate need. Yet the US, UK and eight other countries have withdrawn funding from the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees following Israel's allegations that 12

employees participated in the Hamas atrocities of 7 October. The UN is right to urgently investigate these horrifying claims, and anyone responsible must be held fully accountable. The withdrawal of support, however, is wrong. The agency employs 13,000 people in Gaza – itself testament to how bleak things were already – and is supporting almost 2 million. The UN special rapporteur on food has warned that famine is now "imminent" and "inevitable". For many in the region and beyond, the suspension of funding over as yet unproven allegations against individuals stands in glaring contrast to the dismissive reaction to the international court of justice's finding on Friday that there is a plausible case for Israel to answer on allegations of genocide in Gaza.

The restoration of support, freeing of hostages and a ceasefire in Gaza are essential for the region as a whole and those involved in it. With the broader conflict increasingly developing a life and momentum of its own, there is no time to lose.

Israel's Day of Reckoning

By: John J Mearsheimer

The International Court of Justice (ICJ) issued its Order yesterday (26 January 2024) on the South African case against Israel involving possible genocide in Gaza.

Predictably, the coverage of the Order in the mainstream media in the West aims to spin the story in ways that are most favorable to Israel, which means minimizing or omitting those elements of the story that make Israel look bad and emphasizing that the ICJ did not order Israel to cease all military operations in Gaza.

Hardly anyone expected the ICJ to rule that Israel would have to stop all military operations in Gaza, since it is at war with Hamas, and the court cannot order Hamas to cease its military operations against Israel. What the ICJ did tell Israel, however, is that it must focus its offensive on

Hamas, and not target the civilian population. After all, the genocide charge revolves around what Israel is doing to the civilian population in Gaza, not Hamas.



What really matters in the Order is what it says about Israel committing genocide. How could it be otherwise? Genocide is the

crime of all crimes.

The Order clearly states that there is: 1) plausible evidence that Israel has the intent to commit genocide; and 2) there

is committing genocide.

In response to that dire situation the court ordered Israel to stop committing those acts that

appear to be genocidal, and to preserve any evidence that bears on this matter, obviously for the trial ahead.

In short, the ICJ did not make a decision on the charge of genocide against Israel, but said there is sufficient evidence at this point to believe there is a "real and imminent risk" of genocide, and therefore Israel must fundamentally alter its conduct of the war in Gaza.

I think this is a stunning outcome, especially when you consider the votes among the 17 members of the ICJ.

Four of the votes were 15-2.

Two of the votes were 16-1.

Amazingly, the Israeli judge — who was recently appointed by

Prime Minister Netanyahu — voted in favor of two of the measures.

The American judge, who is also the head of the ICJ, voted in favor of all 6 of the measures.

The only judge who voted against all six measures is from Uganda. I watched the ICJ proceedings on 11-12 January 2024, and they were conducted in a professional and fair-minded manner.

Both the Israelis and the South Africans sent their "A" teams to the proceedings, and each took over three hours to lay out its arguments systematically and comprehensively.

Finally, I have read the ICJ's 27-page Order, and it is an impressive document, which is not to say one must agree with all its conclusions. It seems clear that yesterday was a black day for Israel, as the ICJ Order will leave a deep and lasting stain on its reputation.

I.N.D.I.A. Alliance Looks Like 2019's UPA

By Amitabh Tiwari

The opposition I.N.D.I.A. bloc is facing internal turmoil, gradually unraveling. TMC leader and West Bengal chief minister Mamata Banerjee has adopted an "ekla chalo re" approach in West Bengal, distancing herself from the alliance. The AAP has decided to go solo in Punjab, ending months of indecisive dialogue with the Congress. Nitish Kumar, once a strong contender for the position of I.N.D.I.A. Convenor, has gone back to the NDA fold yet again. Even the Shiv Sena (UBT) is demanding 23 seats in Maharashtra, despite facing a split within its ranks. Meanwhile, talks between the Congress and the Samajwadi Party have hit some sort roadblock in Uttar Pradesh, with the Congress demanding 20 seats while Akhilesh Yadav has offered 11 seats.

These developments will likely impact the outcome in Bihar, Punjab, West Bengal, UP, and Maharashtra, where the opposition's hopes were pinned to make inroads into the BJP's vote share and its tally of 303 seats. These states collectively account for 223 seats, with the BJP having won more than half (122) in 2019, constituting 41% of the Lok Sabha's strength.

The TMC, which initially agreed to concede only 2 out of 42 seats to the Congress in West Bengal, has now decided to contest all 42 seats independently. Had Congress and TMC formed an alliance in 2019, TMC might have secured 6 more seats than its actual tally of 22, and the BJP's count would have been reduced by 6 seats. This shift is a setback to the prospects of the I.N.D.I.A. bloc in West Bengal.

In Punjab, the AAP and the Congress will likely contest on 13 seats. Any alliance was never on the table here, given that the AAP had defeated the Congress in the 2022 state elections, and a significant portion of its vote share is anti-Congress. Had they joined forces, it could have pushed anti-Congress voters towards the Akalis or the BJP.

In Bihar, Nitish Kumar has abandoned the RJD-Left-Congress alliance to rejoin the NDA. This move strengthens the NDA's position in the state, which it swept in 2019 by winning 39 of the 40 seats. Without Nitish, the NDA's tally would have likely dwindled in



the face of a combined opposition consisting of JDU, RJD, INC, and Left Parties.

In Maharashtra, the Congress contested 25 seats, and the NCP contested 19, leaving 4 seats for smaller parties. However, complications have arisen with the involvement of a Shiv Sena faction in seat-sharing negotiations. With 13 of its 18 MPs now under Eknath Shinde's leadership, the Shiv Sena Uddhav faction's status has diminished. Despite this, it is demanding 23 seats, the same number it used to contest with the BJP as part of an alliance. Additionally, the NCP has experienced a split, increasing the Congress party's bargaining power within the

MVA in the state, though negotiations with the Uddhav Sena faction have yielded very little.

In UP, the SP has allotted 7 seats to the RLD, while the Congress is demanding 20 seats. In 2014, when all opposition parties contested separately, the Congress won 2 seats and was the runner-up in 6, indicating its standalone strength.

The I.N.D.I.A. bloc, formed with much fanfare six months ago, saw 26 opposition parties unite to challenge the BJP in the upcoming 2024 Lok Sabha elections. The UPA was rebranded as I.N.D.I.A. in the July meeting of opposition parties. The UPA originally included parties like the RJD,

DMK, JMM, NCP, and the IUML. It gained strength with the addition of the JD(U), Shiv Sena (Uddhav faction), TMC, SP, and the AAP, broadening its base and reach.

Initially, the I.N.D.I.A. bloc generated optimism among opposition supporters, with many commentators and experts predicting a strong challenge to the BJP-led NDA in the upcoming general elections scheduled for April-May. The alliance garnered media attention and seemed to set the agenda in the initial months, up until mid-September. However, the Congress shifted its focus to state elections after the initial trends suggested it might win three out of the five states. This gave the Congress a false

sense of confidence, and it hoped to leverage these victories as a bargaining chip against regional parties. However, when the election results came in, with the Congress winning just one state, Telangana, out of the five, it backtracked. By then, the allies were growing increasingly discontent with Congress's attitude, sowing the seeds of discord.

In 2019, the Congress had contested 422 seats. Regional forces, including the TMC, had requested the grand old party to contest 300 seats, meaning they wanted the Congress to contest fewer seats in UP and West Bengal, among others. With Bengal and Punjab now out of consideration, all eyes are on UP. If an alliance there does not materialize, which seems likely at this point, the I.N.D.I.A. bloc may effectively become defunct. In such a scenario, the alliance would revert to the old UPA, which was already in place in 2019 in states like Bihar, Jharkhand, Maharashtra, Kerala, and Tamil Nadu, accounting for just 161 seats (30% of the Lok Sabha's strength).

The I.N.D.I.A. bloc currently appears to be in complete disarray, and with the highly charged emotional atmosphere in the country following the inauguration of the Ram Mandir, the BJP seems to hold a significant advantage at this moment.

The US is in the midst of a Middle East regional war

By Peter Bergen

The Biden administration has a regional war on its hands in the Middle East and needs to change its strategy fast.

Three US soldiers were killed and more than 30 injured in a drone attack in Jordan this weekend, the first lethal attack on American targets in the Middle East since the October 7 assault on Israel by Hamas. Since the war in Gaza began, Biden's administration officials have been saying multiple versions of "we got this," and have been working hard to contain any wider conflict.

Yet, in the past four months, we have also seen:

- Routine Houthi drone and missile strikes in the Red Sea

- against commercial shipping and American warships, followed by retaliatory US and UK strikes in Yemen against Houthi targets.

- Almost daily Israeli strikes against Hezbollah targets in Lebanon and almost daily Hezbollah strikes against Israeli targets.

- More than 150 drone and missile attacks on US troops in Iraq and Syria, and in response, US airstrikes against Iran-backed militias in Iraq and Syria.

- Multiple Israeli strikes against Iran-linked Syrian targets.

- An ISIS-launched major terrorist attack in Iran.

- Pakistan strike against Iranian targets, and Iran strike against Pakistani targets. A full-scale war in Gaza with no end in sight, while a vocal lobby in Israel pushes for

a wider war with Hezbollah after tens of thousands of Israelis fled their homes to avoid becoming targets of the Iranian proxy's rockets. The burgeoning regional conflict now involves 10 countries: Jordan, Iran, Israel, Syria, Pakistan, the US, the UK; Iran's proxies in Iraq, Lebanon and Yemen; and four major terrorist groups: Hamas, Hezbollah, the Houthis and ISIS. Meanwhile, the Iraqi government, which Iran heavily influences, is pushing for all remaining US troops to pull out of Iraq. To bring some order to the region, the US government must use its vast (largely unused, at least as far as the public can see) leverage with the Israeli government to agree to a deal to initiate a ceasefire in Gaza and return the remaining Israeli and American

hostages to their loved ones.

Then, the Biden administration must use all its leverage to ensure a two-state solution, which is the only way forward for peace. It must be supported both politically and financially by America's Arab allies who have long talked a good game about supporting the Palestinians, but other than the Qataris this has almost entirely been lip service for many years now. This will require some US diplomatic heavy lifting, but it's worth recalling that President Jimmy Carter expended significant political capital and, through his own sheer force of will, brought Egypt and Israel to the negotiating table at Camp David after they had fought three major wars against each other to make a peace that has lasted for more than half a century.

'Wed In India' - A New Growth Propeller

By Bharti Mishra Nath

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has again urged couples to 'wed in India' so that the wealth remains within the country. The PM had said at the Uttarakhand Global Investors Summit in December that it had become fashionable among millionaire and billionaire business families to go abroad for destination weddings. He had urged industrialists to organise at least one wedding in the family in Uttarakhand each year, saying it would help push the hill state as a wedding destination. The Prime Minister introduced the concept of "Wed in India" during his 'Mann Ki Baat' broadcast on November 26.

After Make in India, Travel in India, the PM feels that 'marry in India' will help boost the economy. Unofficial estimates suggest that around 5,000 destination weddings are held abroad every year, with the total spending ranging from ₹ 75,000 crore to ₹ 1 lakh crore.

India's big budget weddings have become exorbitant theme-based affairs at stunning locales. Weddings are extended festivities over a weekend or stretching to a week, with Bollywood-style functions, feasting and revelry and a calendar of events in the



run-up to the big day.

Big Indian wedding market

According to real estate agency Knight Frank's 'The Wealth Report 2023', the high net-worth individual (HNI) population, with \$1 million in assets and more, will more than double from 7.9 lakh people (2022) to 16.5 lakh. The population will grow 107 per cent by 2027-28, the report suggests. This bodes well not only for destination weddings but also related markets like jewellery, costumes, travel, hotels, retail and other luxury expenditures.

In the last wedding season, around ₹ 4.25 lakh crore, involved

in six lakh weddings, circulated in the market through wedding purchases, according to the Confederation of All India Traders (CAIT). That is a 26 per cent jump from the previous year. The trend is expected to continue in the ongoing wedding season, from now to July. After the PM's advice, the Union Tourism Ministry is set to launch its new campaign, "India says I do", on a large scale, not only to encourage affluent families to host weddings within the country but also to convince foreign couples to pick India for their special day. The ministry has started discussions with key

stakeholders in the wedding industry, including hotel operators, to outline the details of the campaign.

BC Bhartia, president of CAIT, feels that for a section, destination weddings in foreign countries are a matter of pride, so big business and revenue from India is transferred to those countries. "In India there are many places where destination weddings can be held. If the rich start destination weddings in Indian states, others will follow them, keeping the wedding business within the country," says Mr Bhartia.

Domestic wedding destination

Marriages are also a key revenue generator for the hospitality industry. Since the blockbuster 'Dilwale Dulhania Le Jaayenge' caught the nation's imagination in the 1990s, the wedding business and wedding-related goods and services have been a significant economic contributor.

Hotels in the country offer wedding packages worth several crores. A number of companies or groups provide general to specialised services and arrangements. Popular "I do" destinations within the country include Rajasthan, particularly Udaipur, Jodhpur, Goa, and Kerala, to name a few.

"There are more than 2,000 such places in and around about 100 major cities in different states of India, where destination weddings can be held with great fanfare. All these places are fully capable of organising destination weddings ranging from medium budget to any big budget," says Mr Bhartia.

States like Rajasthan, Kerala, Uttarakhand and Goa, realising the potential, have come up with state-specific wedding tourism policies and incentives. Special packages are on offer, tailored for couples and their families.

Young, Independent American Voters Will Be Kingmakers This Time

By: Vishnu Prakash

Democracy is considered the best form of governance, and rightly so. However, it could also be a tricky, unpredictable, and frustrating business.

Consider the following: You are the citizen of the world's most powerful country, which is going to the polls to choose its next leader for four years. There is so much riding on your choice, not just domestically but across the globe. You are expected to choose wisely. But you have a problem. You are being called upon to choose between a near-octogenarian demagogue who is feared and disliked except by his die-hard followers and an octogenarian who is uninspiring and unpopular. What do you do? There are no easy answers.

The average voter is disillusioned. She so wishes to see a different slate of contenders who are younger, capable of rising above partisan politics, and relatable.

A few American analysts have already begun speculating about such an outcome on the premise that Trump would be disqualified by the courts and Biden would eventually respect the public mood. But that is more of a pipedream than a possibility as of now. Back to the voter. His default reaction is to distance himself from most politicians and political parties, but not necessarily from politics. That is why a growing number of people, predominantly young, are refusing affiliation with either of the two major parties to maintain their independence.

They prefer to vote not along party lines but on merit. They are also choosing to make themselves heard through the ballot box rather than moping on the margins.

The findings of the monthly Gallup polls are instructive. In the preceding few months, 43 to 49 per cent of American adults have described themselves as independent,

compared to 39 per cent in 2020.

Meanwhile, the ranks of voters identifying themselves with one party or the other have dwindled. Of late, between 25 and 27 per cent of the voters style themselves as Democrats, compared to 30 per cent in 2020.

The Republicans fare only slightly better. It is important to flag that these numbers are approximations and are subject to regular fluctuation. All the same, this phenomenon has far-reaching implications and played out in the New Hampshire primaries (held on January 23), stealing Trump's thunder even though he managed an 11 per cent lead over Nikki Haley. In the Iowa primaries held just a week earlier, he had commanded a 32 per cent lead over Nikki Haley, securing 51 per cent of the vote. In New Hampshire, he polled 3 points higher at 54.3 per cent, but Haley's vote swelled by 24 per cent points to 43.3 per cent. Reason? Size of



independent voters and dissimilar electoral rules.

According to ABC News, less than a quarter of the electorate considers itself independent in Iowa, compared to at least 43 per cent in New Hampshire. Again, 52 per cent of Iowans are very conservative compared to 25 per cent in New Hampshire.

The die-hard Republicans overwhelmingly voted for Trump, while some 65 per cent of independents favoured Haley. A

larger section of the New Hampshire population is better educated and not so enamoured of Trump. Significantly big states like California, Florida, New York and North Carolina, are home to sizeable numbers of independent voters. It is noteworthy that the US does not have uniform electoral rules across the nation, either for the primaries or the main polls. Each state has its own rules and practices, which could vary widely from one another.

Why do America's liberal hawks attack Russia while giving Israel a free pass?

By Peter Beinart

On 7 January, Anne Applebaum, a historian and a staff writer at the Atlantic, retweeted a video of Russian missiles striking a Ukrainian hospital. Three days later, former US ambassador Michael McFaul, a Stanford professor and contributing columnist at the Washington Post, approvingly tweeted a sign demanding that Vladimir Putin be sent to The Hague. On 15 January, Post columnist Max Boot reminded readers that, according to the United Nations, Russia has killed more than 10,000 civilians in Ukraine.

These expressions of outrage were entirely justified. What makes them odd is that more than three months into the war in Gaza, Applebaum has still not acknowledged on X (formerly known as Twitter), where she comments frequently, that Israel has attacked hospitals there. She has not done so despite a Washington Post investigation in December that found that Israel has “conducted repeated and widespread airstrikes in proximity to hospitals”, thus contributing to a public health catastrophe in which, according to the World Health Organization, only 15 of Gaza’s 36 hospitals remain even partly functional. Nor would a reader know from following McFaul on X that Israel is currently on trial at The Hague, accused by South Africa of committing genocide in Gaza. Boot has addressed Israel’s war more forthrightly: he largely defends it. One of the conflict’s lessons, he argued on 20 December, “is the need for a robust defense-industrial capacity, because high-intensity conflicts always consume vast quantities of ammunition”.

Applebaum, McFaul and Boot are liberal hawks. They claim to support a foreign policy devoted to defending democracy and human rights whenever possible, sometimes even at the point of a gun. (The line between liberal hawks and neoconservatives can grow fuzzy, but liberal hawks are more sympathetic to diplomacy and international institutions, and generally favor Democrats, not Republicans.) Not long ago, liberal hawks were considered a casualty of America’s military interventions in Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya, wars advertised as bringing freedom to long-suffering populations, which brought chaos and destruction instead. (I myself identified as a liberal hawk until those wars forced me to alter my worldview.)

But in recent years, liberal hawks have regained much of their respectability and power. Their resurgence has been fueled by Washington’s turn away from the “war on terror”, which for many Americans ended when the US withdrew troops from



Afghanistan in 2021, and its focus on a new cold war. Because dictatorships rule Russia and China, and because Moscow and Beijing menace vulnerable democracies on their border, liberal hawks argue that preserving freedom requires deterring America’s great power adversaries. Their argument has gained particular force since Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine, which they see as a test case for the global struggle to come. “Liberals who once protested the Iraq War now urge Washington to dispatch more rocket launchers to defeat Russian imperialism,” the Atlantic declared in a September 2022 essay entitled *The Rise of the Liberal Hawks*. Last February, Britain’s *the Critic* argued that the “Russian invasion of Ukraine has sealed liberal hawk ascendancy”. Liberal hawks enjoy particular influence in Washington because their worldview closely aligns with the Biden administration’s. It’s no surprise that both Applebaum and McFaul have been invited to private, off-the-record discussions with the president. Biden and his top foreign policy advisers share Applebaum’s belief that today’s great power contest pits the “democratic world” against the “autocratic world”. As Biden put it in a 2022 speech about Ukraine, the United States and its allies must “put the strength of democracies into action to thwart the designs of autocracy”.

This worldview contains important truths. Russia and China are far more authoritarian than the United States and many of its key European and Asian allies. They’re also far more authoritarian than Ukraine and Taiwan, imperiled democracies that deserve to chart their own path free from imperialistic aggression. Whether or not one agrees with the policies that Applebaum, Boot and McFaul advocate in eastern Europe and east Asia, they’re aimed at defending liberal democracy – a commitment that extends to the United States, where all three writers staunchly

oppose Donald Trump.

But liberal hawks have a problem: the borderlands of Russia and China are not the entire world. In the global south, especially, the geopolitical boundaries between the US and its adversaries don’t map easily on to the moral boundaries between freedom and tyranny. When discussing countries outside Europe or east Asia, liberal hawks often strain to shoehorn them into a worldview that associates America and its allies with democracy’s cause.

In March 2022, for instance, when Applebaum delivered Senate testimony about what she called “the new autocratic alliance”, she included in its ranks China, Russia, Belarus, Venezuela and Cuba, all US adversaries, along with Turkey, an American frenemy. She never mentioned Saudi Arabia, a critical US ally that – awkwardly – scores lower in Freedom House’s most recent freedom rankings than all of the autocracies she denounced except Belarus, with whom it ties.

Never have these ideological contortions been as conspicuous as during Israel’s war in Gaza. Liberal hawks often profess their commitment to human rights. Yet they haven’t called for ending a war that is killing more people per day than any conflict this century. They haven’t done so because, like their allies in the Biden administration, they are wedded to a narrative about the moral superiority of American power that this war defies. Liberal hawks want to preserve American primacy, which they associate with human progress. But Israel-Palestine reveals a harsher truth: that in much of the world, for many decades, the US has used its power not to defend freedom but to deny it. That’s why liberal hawks can’t face the true horror of this war. Doing so would require them to reconsider their deepest assumptions about America’s role in the world. Since 7 October, liberal hawks have labored to analogize Israel’s war in Gaza

to Ukraine’s defense against Russian invasion – a template that renders Israel an innocent victim of external aggression and places America on the side of human rights and international law. In his 19 October speech from the Oval Office, President Biden declared that “ Hamas and Putin represent different threats, but they share this in common. They both want to completely annihilate a neighboring democracy.”

Liberal hawks in the media have offered similar comparisons. In a column on 9 October, Applebaum suggested that “The Russian invasion of Ukraine and Hamas’s surprise attack on Israeli civilians are both blatant rejections” of a “rules-based world order”. On 3 November, McFaul described Hamas and Russia as part of an “Illiberal International” – which also includes Iran, Hezbollah and sometimes China – that “has come together again to attack democratic Israel”. Boot added on 20 December that “the wars in both Gaza and Ukraine should remind complacent western leaders that our adversaries do not share our liberal values”. Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International say Israel practices apartheid and has for more than 15 years held millions of Palestinians in Gaza in what both organizations call an “open-air prison”.

When Applebaum, McFaul and Boot call Hamas an illiberal movement that does not respect international law, they are correct. Its Islamist ideology is incompatible with individual freedom and equality under the law, and it blatantly violated the rules of war when it murdered civilians on 7 October. But to depict Israel’s war as another battle between a democratic, rules-abiding west and a lawless, illiberal axis that runs from Beijing to Moscow to Tehran to Gaza City, liberal hawks must ignore elementary facts about the Jewish state.

When detailing Russia’s crimes, Applebaum and Boot are fond of citing Human Rights Watch; McFaul boosts the work of Amnesty International. When it comes to Israel, however, the findings of the world’s leading human rights organizations become irrelevant. Israel is “democratic”, respects the “rules-based world order” and embodies “liberal values” – even though Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International say it practices apartheid and has for more than 15 years held millions of Palestinians in Gaza in what both organizations call an “open-air prison”. When discussing America’s adversaries, liberal hawks often warn Americans not to let their ideological preconceptions blind them to the harsh realities on the ground.

INDIA to UN-INDIA Slope:

Nitish Kumar's Departure A Death Knell?

By: Santosh Chaubey

Seven months down the line, the INDIA bloc of anti-BJP political parties in India looks to unwind. The first meeting of the alliance was held in Patna. Hosted by Nitish Kumar on June 23, 2023, 15 parties from across India decided to contest together the 2024 Lok Sabha elections. The bloc increased to 26 parties during its second meeting in Bengaluru, on July 18, when its collective name INDIA was announced.

Now, 219 days after the first meeting and 194 days after its name announcement, Nitish Kumar, the first leader to mobilise rival parties across India for an anti-BJP front and one of the key architects, has decided to move out of it, criticising it as non-event entity. The move or a possible final death knell has come immediately after recent significant blows.

Its two biggest partners — the TMC in West Bengal and the AAP in Punjab and Haryana — have decided to go solo in the respective states. West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee says she coined the name INDIA for the coalition, yet she felt she was left out by the events happening in the bloc with the Left front looking to control it. Punjab Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann, after months of controversy on seat sharing, has also decided to go solo, deciding to contest all 13 seats in the state. Mann said AAP Punjab has nothing to do with the Congress in the state. Haryana AAP chief Sushil Gupta has conveyed to the party's central unit that it will contest solo on all 90 seats in assembly elections and the state unit is also capable of going solo in the Lok Sabha elections. Arvind Kejriwal has supported the state unit's demand to go solo in assembly elections but there will be seat-sharing possible in Lok Sabha polls. The alliance was a non-starter from day one and its brief journey to nowhere so far tells why. Differences among the alliance members only got aggravated as time passed.



NO PM FACE

The alliance has had very few meetings, just four when the proposed target is huge — taking on the BJP in the 2024 Lok Sabha elections. These meetings and formal and informal discussions have failed to agree on a PM face for the alliance. Nitish wanted to be its PM nominee or convenor but the INDIA bloc internal rivalry denied it. Now the party alleges that the Congress wanted to control the alliance leadership. The real problem is that the alliance has many PM faces — Rahul Gandhi, Arvind Kejriwal, Nitish Kumar, Mamata Banerjee, to name a few — and finalising a single name needs big political sacrifice for their political future but INDIA parties have failed to bridge the gap when they had to face a possible Narendra Modi wave in the Lok Sabha election as was the case in 2014 and 2019.

Mamata Banerjee and Arvind

Kejriwal proposed Congress' Mallikarjun Kharge's name as PM contender in the INDIA meeting in Delhi on December 19, 2023, but a day before that, Mamata had also come out to say that the alliance could decide on a PM contender face after poll results. Kharge said no to it as Rahul Gandhi is seen as the only PM nominee from Congress that many in INDIA including Mamata and Kejriwal are not comfortable with. The seven-month-old alliance got its convenor or chairperson in January only. It was offered to Nitish, but he refused the alliance proposal. The JDU wanted a consensus on Nitish's name but there was no mutual agreement between parties on the delayed proposal earlier this month. First, weight for being declared as the PM face, then weight for the alliance's convenor post, the JDU was shown negative indications multiple times. Finally, Kharge

emerged as the consensus candidate for the INDIA alliance chairperson on January 13, 2024, but the outcome can be termed too little, too late. Ideally, a convenor should have been selected in July or August last year only, but the alliance failed to reach a consensus on this.

NO IDEOLOGY

Seven months down the line, the INDIA bloc has only reinforced the feeling that it was only a desperate last-moment aimless anti-Narendra Modi attempt and not a concrete alliance bound by similar ideology and poll agenda. The alliance called itself to be a secular one against BJP's nationalistic policy, yet most parties tried to run a Hindutva campaign. The soft Hindutva approach on the day of the Ram Temple Pran Pratishtha in Ayodhya on January 22 is a visible example. The Ram Temple and Ayodhya promises were in the BJP's manifesto and the political call was accordingly taken. The INDIA bloc on it was in dilemma seeing its massive Hindu appeal. Congress' central leadership decided not to attend the ceremony, but leaders of its state units attended the event. Collectively, all major leaders and parties decided not to attend it but spoke in vague, pro-Hindutva voices. Kejriwal reiterated that Pran Pratishtha was a matter of pride for

everyone. Some INDIA leaders appreciated it, while some criticised the event. There was no single collective version.

NO SEAT SHARING

Is the INDIA bloc a miscalculated political decision? Most of the INDIA alliance partners are hardened rivals in state politics. The Congress and the AAP in Punjab and Delhi. The Congress and the TMC in West Bengal. The Congress and the Left Front in Kerala. The AAP has made Congress non-existent in Delhi and Punjab. Once India's grand old party, now it has no vote share and seats in Delhi and just a declined vote share in Punjab. In West Bengal, it is again a non-starter on seats and vote share, like in UP. Yet it is demanding higher seats in all these states.

THE RESULT

The TMC and The AAP have already announced that there will be no coalition with the Congress in West Bengal and Punjab in Lok Sabha polls. Apart from the Congress, the INDIA bloc is a collection of regional parties with influence only limited to states. If there is no alliance state-wise, a national alliance doesn't make any sense. The bloc makes sense only when major parties are allied state-wise.

NO UNITY

In the recent assembly polls, Congress felt it was good enough to go solo and there was a bitter fallout between the SP and the Congress in Madhya Pradesh with this stand taken. Now the SP is not ready to give the Congress seats it is demanding in Uttar Pradesh. We have seen the allies going away in Punjab, West Bengal, Kerala, and Haryana. Delhi and other states may follow next. All the foundation blocks needed for a joint anti-BJP platform — an INDIA bloc convening body with a PM face against Narendra Modi, a common agenda, state-wise Lok Sabha seat sharing, and a unified appeal of togetherness to approach to voters — look critically absent in the alliance's brief and non-happening journey so far.

Is INDIA Bloc's Fight Over Before It Started?

By Nilanjan Mukhopadhyay

Most people in cricket-crazy India probably know the familiar drill preceding a cluster of hastily cobbled-up and half-witted cricket teams, joining hands to challenge the champion team in nondescript kasbas or urban hamlets during annual jamborees or 'fetes'.

Minutes before the final eleven and the 'captain' is to be selected, fierce arguments erupt. The din created by three or four amateur wicketkeepers arguing who was better than others, at times, is drowned by similar quarrels between spinners and a smaller number of those fashioning themselves as 'fast' bowlers. Not to speak of others staking claim to every position in the team.

Squabbles like these are rarely settled amicably. Invariably, it is merely a matter of time before the most 'resourceful' team, but not with the best players necessarily, uses strongarm tactics and forces out some, many among them worthy of a place. At times, if unable to have their way, this team with the biggest playing kit even leaves



the field. This virtually ends the contest, as not all players who eventually take the field are included for cricketing skills. This spectre hovers over opposition parties who, barely months ago, formed the I.N.D.I.A. alliance. They not only stirred the emotions of a large number of Indians but also got the ruling BJP and Prime Minister Narendra Modi a tad anxious. However, after holding out the promise of maximizing one-on-one contests against the BJP across the country to raise the Index of Opposition Unity, these parties have once again been shown up as those who have perfected the art of belying hopes of the faithful.

In mofussil and quasi-urban cricket matches, regardless of the shenanigans before the game, the result is known - the champ retains the position. With distressing regularity, this is being repeated in electoral politics too, with the BJP's victory being considered a given. Only the pattern of the opposition's burnout follows a different trajectory.

Of course, there were a few famous victories over the BJP. These, however, were not only few and far between, but also only in state polls, at least since 2014. Again for 2024, opposition parties are preparing to go through the motions of a contest, with the exception of a few states.

For several years, Nitish Kumar has been a perennially 'developing' story, although not in the manner of his sometime bete noire, sometime fellow traveler, PM Modi. It is probably poetic justice that although the inception of a combined opposition front for the 2024 election was at the instance of Nitish Kumar, who hosted the first meeting of the bloc in Patna in June 2023, its demise or bare survival too, is virtually dependent on his moves.

Will the Bihar Chief Minister change his political shade once again? For the nth time, to speak colloquially, Nitish Kumar may once again switch camps and also trigger the burial of a combined opposition front or alliance.

In several ways, Nitish Kumar's frequent change of political alliances throughout his career, especially since 2013, is not surprising. He, after all, was the protegee; of George Fernandes, who in 1979 famously spoke in support of the Morarji Desai government inside Lok Sabha and after stepping out of the House, declared his intention to part ways with the Janata Party and hitched his wagon to Charan Singh's outfit.

Speaking of George Fernandes, ties between Nitish Kumar and his one-time mentor turned bitter and they parted ways before age and disease took over, taking the former's life a few years ago.

But, even if Nitish Kumar eventually chooses to not join hands with the BJP, questions loom on the effectiveness of the I.N.D.I.A. alliance and its capacity to pose a serious challenge to the BJP.

This stems from Mamata Banerjee's decision to contest the polls without any alliance in West Bengal and possibly other states too, including Assam. Uncertainty also prevails due to the Aam Aadmi Party's ambivalence towards pacts with the Congress in Delhi, Punjab, and Gujarat, where the party registered a promising performance in the 2022 assembly elections.

The I.N.D.I.A. alliance faces a bleak future at this stage because of the intransigence of the Congress and its leadership, which continues to include Rahul Gandhi even though Mallikarjun Kharge is party president. After enthusiastically participating in

If anyone can get the US government to take deepfake porn seriously, it's Swifties

By Arwa Mahdawi

Can Swifties be the force that finally stops deepfake porn? Sexually explicit photographs of Taylor Swift are all over the internet. Except they are not actually pictures of Swift: they are deepfakes created with AI technology. Still, the fact they are computer generated doesn't mean the photos don't look horrifyingly realistic – and it certainly hasn't stopped people from gawking at them. One of the images shared by a user on X (Twitter) was viewed more than 45m times in the 17 hours before it was taken down.

If this story sounds familiar it's because you've probably heard a variation of it before. Deepfake pornography is everywhere – according to Danielle Citron, a professor at the University of Virginia School of Law, there are over more than 9,500 sites "devoted to non-consensual intimate imagery". It used to take hundreds of images of someone and an immense amount of computer processing power to create a convincing deepfake. Now you just need a couple of a photos of someone's face and a phone app. While Swift may be one of the most recent, and most high-profile, victims of the technology, it has upended an enormous number of lives. More specifically, it's upended the lives of girls and women. While men aren't immune to being victims of other forms of AI-generated imagery, deepfake porn overwhelmingly targets women. A 2019 report by cybersecurity company Deeptrace labs, for example, found that non-consensual deepfake pornography accounted for 96% of the total deepfake videos online and concluded that the phenomenon "exclusively targets and harms women". In the years since the Deeptrace report came out that harm has only increased. There has also been an uptick in cases involving deepfakes of minors.



Last year, for example, boys at a New Jersey high school created and shared sexually explicit AI-generated imagery of more than 30 teenage girls.

Deepfake porn, it can't be stressed enough, isn't meant to titillate – it's often meant to humiliate. Being a woman with any sort of public platform means dealing with harassment online: deepfake porn is yet another tool that troll armies and misogynists are weaponizing to punish women who behave in ways they don't like. It's meant to shut women up, to drive them offline. When high-profile figures like Swift are targeted with deepfake porn, it sends a message to young girls: put your head above the parapet and you will be punished for it. It doesn't matter how successful you are, how many billions you have in the bank, the world will still find a way to objectify and humiliate you.

Girls, by the way, are hearing this message loud and clear. A 2022 study in the UK found that girls aged nine-to-18 ranked "being a leader" the lowest priority in a list of 17 attributes for future work. Why would they want to be leaders, why would they want to be in the public eye,

when they see what sort of abuse those women receive? Swift, for her part, hasn't released an official statement about the fake nude images that have been circulating, but, according to the Daily Mail, she is furious about the pictures and is considering taking legal action. Swift's devoted fans are also furious and they have been taking more immediate action. Swift fans mass-reported accounts sharing the deepfakes and also posted thousands of images tagged with phrases like "Taylor Swift AI" to make the deepfakes hard to find.

If there is a silver lining to this sordid situation it is this: angry Swifties are a force to be reckoned with. If anyone can get the government to take deepfake porn seriously, if anyone can get social media platforms to pay attention, it is Swift's enormous and extremely motivated fan base. Let's not forget the Great Ticketmaster Fiasco of 2022, shall we? After Ticketmaster made a mess of presale tickets for Swift's Eras Tour, lawmakers in the US started making a lot of noise about anti-competitive practices in the music industry. Swift's fans managed to make antitrust law a mainstream talking point. Now their collective anger may help spur changes to federal law when it comes to deepfake porn.

And that change can't come soon enough. While some individual US states have passed laws aimed at curtailing the sharing of deepfake porn without consent, there is no federal law which criminalizes the creation or sharing of fake pornographic images. Victims have very little recourse. And as lawmakers drag their feet, use of this technology is growing rapidly. While the imagery may be fake, the harm it is causing is very, very real.

The Strong Political Message Behind Macron's India Visit

By Kanwal Sibal

President Emmanuel Macron's visit to India as chief guest at our Republic Day celebrations had a ceremonial aspect, no doubt, but in relations between states ceremonial gestures convey a message at many levels - of an honour deserved, importance of the relationship, an investment into the future, expected benefits, a signal to others, and the like. When Prime Minister Modi was fêted by President Joe Biden during his visit to the US in June 2023, it conveyed a strong political message at the bilateral and international levels, of the US wooing India for larger strategic goals. Ceremony is part of diplomacy and is not without substance.

Modi himself was Guest of Honour on Bastille Day (July 14) in Paris in 2023. That honour was to convey France's desire to build stronger all-round ties with India. It was an investment in the future in view of India's growing economy, its diplomatic prowess, and shared strategic interests in the Indo-Pacific in particular. Building more common ground with India on climate change issues, which is a prime area of debate and concern in French society (Modi and Macron



reaffirmed in the joint statement their commitment to come forward in their next nationally determined contributions with ambitious targets, with France commending India's offer to host COP 33 in 2028) is an important French objective. So is leveraging French capabilities to foster links with increasing Indian capabilities in the areas of defence, advanced technologies and the digital domain, using India as a springboard for reaching out more to the Global South, which is becoming more vocal and demanding with regard to its interests in the hitherto west-dominated global system. With India drawing closer to the US and its Quad membership, France, which has major interests in the Indo-Pacific, seeks to carve out

an independent role for itself and not let itself be subsumed under US-led structures. This, to mark its attachment to "strategic autonomy". In pursuing this, India is an obvious partner. For India too, a closer strategic partnership with France in the Indo-Pacific is diplomatically important as it conveys the message that security concerns in this region are also shared by a major European power, and not US, Australia and Japan alone. In the joint statement, the Indo-Pacific region's significance for the respective sovereign and strategic interests of France and India has been emphasised.

The joint statement says explicitly, "Defense and security partnership has been the cornerstone of the India-France

partnership in the Indo-Pacific region". This is meaningful, as the security threat in this region emanates from China. In fact, in his banquet speech, Macron referred to the activities of "some hegemonic powers" in the Indo-Pacific. The two sides have also agreed to intensify their cooperation in the Southwest Indian Ocean, building on the joint surveillance missions carried out from La Reunion in 2020 and 2022. Significantly, they plan to extend those interactions in India's maritime neighbourhood to contribute positively to the securitisation of strategic sea lanes of communication. The two sides have also committed to revitalizing the trilateral cooperation with Australia, deepen the one with UAE, and explore new ones in the region. They have agreed to explore opportunities for coordinating economic projects and programmes in the Pacific, which marks an extension of India's role in the Indo-Pacific.

The joint statement notes that "since the declaration of the Strategic Partnership in 1998, India and France have developed a partnership of exceptional trust and confidence, consistency and strength". The word "exceptional"

is noteworthy. The references to "strategic autonomy" and "a shared commitment to a multipolar world" may seem predictable phrases, but they do convey the desire of both sides to exercise some independence at the strategic level, consonant with their national interests. Macron, for instance, is of the view that US policy on Taiwan is needlessly provocative and that France does not want to be a camp follower of the US in such questionable policies. This implies that France understands India's decision to protect its strategic ties with Russia even though France itself is increasingly at loggerheads with Moscow over the Ukraine conflict. The wording on the Ukraine conflict in the joint statement is careful and does not depart from the established Indian position. The commitment to a multipolar world has been expressed by India and France over the years. For France it means a world that is not dominated entirely by the US and one in which Europe plays a strategic role, separate from the US based on its own priorities and interests, even if it is in partnership with the US when required.

The ICJ ruling could implicate the US in war crimes. Will Biden finally rein in Israel?

Mohamad Bazzi

The international court of justice on Friday ordered Israel to prevent acts of genocide by its troops in Gaza, and to allow more aid into the besieged territory. The court, which is the UN's highest judicial body, stopped short of calling for an immediate ceasefire. But it was a victory for the Palestinians, and for the global south in general, in that Israel is being held accountable for its military actions for the first time, and by one of the world's most important courts.

By allowing the case brought by South Africa to go forward and calling on Israel to comply with the genocide convention – and to report back to the court within a month – the ruling raises the stakes on Israel's western backers to pressure Benjamin Netanyahu's government to rein in its devastating invasion and bombardment of Gaza. The ruling is embarrassing to Joe Biden and his top aides, especially the US



secretary of state, Antony Blinken, who described South Africa's case as "meritless" a few weeks ago. While it could take years for the court to rule on whether Israel has committed genocide, the interim measures are intended to prevent conditions in Gaza from getting worse while the case makes its way through the tribunal's process. The US, Britain and other western powers that have backed Israel unconditionally since it launched its assault on Gaza, after Hamas's 7 October attacks, will

presumably want to avoid being implicated in supporting a genocide – and that is incentive for these world powers to finally push for a ceasefire.

The Biden administration is particularly vulnerable to charges of hypocrisy if it decides to ignore the court's findings, which are binding on its member states. But the court does not have an enforcement mechanism, aside from referring matters to the UN security council, where Washington has already used its veto power multiple times to

shield Israel from demands for a ceasefire. Over the past few years, the US and Britain have urged adversaries, especially Russia and Myanmar, to abide by the international court's rulings. In November, the US president issued a statement supporting the candidacy of a US law professor, Sarah Cleveland, to join the international court, saying it "remains one of humanity's most critical institutions to advance peace around the world". With such a strong endorsement, the US would look duplicitous if it continues to insist that South Africa's case is baseless, or that the court's nearly unanimous ruling on Friday somehow should not apply to Israel. With their unwavering support of Israel, Biden and Blinken also failed to live up to a highly touted promise, made a month after their administration took office in 2021, to put human rights at the center of US foreign policy. The administration said it is

"committed to a world in which human rights are protected, their defenders are celebrated, and those who commit human rights abuses are held accountable".

That pledge faltered even before the Gaza war, when Biden continued the decades-long US policy of providing military aid and diplomatic support to repressive regimes like Saudi Arabia and Egypt, while ignoring their human rights violations and suppression of dissent. Like previous US presidents, including George W Bush and Barack Obama, who waged or supported foreign wars while dispensing lofty rhetoric about respect for human rights and democracy, Biden's façade fell apart thanks to his support of Israel's brutal assault on Gaza. Israel's war has killed more than 26,000 Palestinians – a majority of them women and children. According to Oxfam, the daily death toll, averaging 250 per day, has surpassed any other major conflict in the 21st century.

Eric Adam's loses high-profile fight over policing legislation

Eric Adams adamantly opposed bills ending solitary confinement and requiring more reporting from police officers. The City Council passed them anyway.

New York City Mayor Eric Adams — a former police officer focused on combating crime — found himself in a feud Tuesday with the more progressive City Council over two criminal justice reform bills.

And in this rare instance, Adams lost. Led by a relatively moderate Democrat aligned with the body's progressive members, the Council delivered a striking rebuke to Adams by overriding two of his vetoes by an overwhelming margin. The votes capped weeks of lobbying and media appearances from officials on both sides of the debate — a flurry of activity exacerbated over the weekend when police pulled over a Council member who'd spent seven years in jail after being wrongly convicted as part of the "Central Park Five."

With Tuesday's vote, the Council punctuated the most significant clash yet between the two Democratic-led branches of city government and potentially complicated the mayor's 2025 reelection bid. One bill would require police officers to report demographic data on low-level interactions with civilians, which supporters say is necessary to hold the NYPD accountable after its history of racially motivated stops. The other limits the amount of time a detainee spends in isolation in the city's jail system — a policy criticized by a federal monitor who oversees the notoriously violent Rikers Island facility.

"Today we are standing together as a united front: Council members, advocates and directly impacted families, to send a clear message that New Yorkers need and deserve transparency, and that as a city we can and will do better," Council Speaker Adrienne Adams said at a City Hall rally before the vote. The Council voted 42-9 to override the mayor's vetoes on the two bills. The nays came from Republicans and Democrats who make up the body's conservative Common Sense Caucus.

"We're asking fewer police officers to do a lot more," said Council member Robert Holden, who belongs to the caucus. "That makes no sense." But his views

were far outweighed by those of most of his colleagues.

"The numbers don't lie. We see that our communities are most impacted and policed based on the color of our skin," Council Member Chi Ossé, who is Black, said before voting for the override. The administration has set precedent for simply ignoring Council legislation it does not like: Last month, City Hall admitted it did not plan to implement a series of housing voucher bills Adams had vetoed after the Council overrode him.

Ahead of Tuesday's vote, however, Adams pledged to implement the police reporting bill as written, while suggesting lawmakers could make amendments to the law, just as state legislators revisited bail reform statutes after they had already been enacted.

"We don't have to implement this law until July," he said during a television interview Tuesday morning. "I would hope that ... after the determination to override the veto, we will have an opportunity to sit down, talk and look at the aspect of the bill that is troublesome to us."

Tension over the legislation delayed the Council's proceedings Tuesday when Kalman Yeger, a conservative Democrat who opposed the bills, repeatedly raised technical objections. He argued that the vote did not adhere to parliamentary procedure and that the meeting itself violated city laws requiring an agenda to be posted online 36 hours in advance.

Yeger's complaints could lay the groundwork for a lawsuit against the override, he told POLITICO after the vote, though he said he himself wouldn't file a suit.

Separately, the measure being billed as a solitary confinement ban may face a legal challenge from the federal monitor or the union for guards on Rikers, which says the bill makes them less safe, Correction Officers' Benevolent Association President Benny Boscio told POLITICO.

As Council members stood to explain their votes, Harlem's Yusef Salaam, who served a prison sen-

tence — including time in solitary confinement — after his now-vacated conviction in the Central Park Five case, delivered emotional remarks. Police stopped Salaam while he was driving a car with what appeared to be illegally tinted windows over the weekend. When he asked the officer why he was being stopped and identified himself, the cop quickly sent him on his way without a verbal warning or ticket, according to footage from his body-worn camera. The NYPD later issued a statement citing the tinted windows as the rationale for the stop.

While the bill wouldn't apply to vehicle stops, Salaam argued the incident underscored the need for transparency in all interactions with police.

The laws "would bring generational change in our criminal justice system," he said. "If these laws were in place in 1989" — he paused, with tears in his eyes, in reflection on the year he was arrested. "I vote aye."

While Mayor Adams was relatively quiet on the bills before they initially passed in December — he

said his team was negotiating with the Council behind the scenes — he's waged a highly visible campaign against them since.

Adams hosted a ride-along with police officers Saturday night, hoping seeing stops firsthand would change lawmakers' minds. He has been a fixture on radio and television and has railed against the bills at even seemingly irrelevant public appearances, including a Queens bar mitzvah. Adams' former chief of staff, Frank Carone, even got in on the action, calling members to support the mayor's position. The mayor has argued the reporting bill would distract NYPD officers from solving crimes and that the jail legislation would put correction officers and other detainees at risk of violence.

Meanwhile, both the Council speaker and New York City Public Advocate Jumaane Williams, who was the lead sponsor of both bills, repeatedly accused the mayor of spreading misinformation by overstating

how much of a burden the reporting bill would be on cops and understating the negative impact of isolating detainees.

Mayoral vetoes, in recent history, have always been reversed, as legislation is rarely passed in the heavily Democratic City Council without veto-proof margins. But Mayor Adams' failure to flip even a single member — in fact, Tuesday's margin was wider than the original vote last month — underscored his administration's weakness in intergovernmental affairs, where he's struggled to win allies at other levels of government.

It also poses an electoral problem: If the bills actually drive up crime, as Mayor Adams has warned, they would play a role in tarnishing his reelection message of improving public safety. If they have no impact at all, his credibility on the issue stands to be diminished. "Public safety is my life's work," the mayor said ahead of the vote. "So this is not about: 'Am I looking for the platform for my reelection?' That platform is already there."

If Elon Musk, Jeff Bezos Spend \$1 Million Daily, Their Wealth Will Be Exhausted In 476 Years: Report

The Oxfam report released earlier this month highlighted the inequality that exists in the world and how the rich have doubled their fortunes since 2020. Titled 'Inequality Inc', the report said that Elon Musk, Bernard Arnault, Jeff Bezos, Larry Ellison and Mark Zuckerberg grew their wealth at an alarming



rate of \$14 million per hour in the said timeframe and are now worth a combined \$869 billion. It also said that despite the growth in the fortunes of the world's richest men, five billion people have plunged into poverty.

Another interesting fact revealed by the Oxfam report was that if each of the five wealthiest men were to spend a million US dollars daily, they would take

476 years (on an average) to exhaust their combined wealth.

According to the calculation (though official methodology is not given), if Mr Musk were to spend \$1 million every day, it would take an astonishing 673 years for him to exhaust his wealth.

On the other hand, Jeff Bezos will exhaust his fortune in 459 years if he spends at same rate. Oxfam further said that men globally own \$105 trillion more wealth than women, and raised concern that the world's richest one per cent own 43 per cent of all global financial assets. The Oxfam analysis also revealed that the world could see its first trillionaire within the next decade. The charity added that ending poverty - the target for which is 2030 under the UN Sustainable Development Goals - may not be possible for another 229 years. Listen to the latest songs, only on JioSaavn.com When the report was released, the Tesla CEO was the world's richest man with a wealth of \$226.6 billion. But earlier this week, he was dethroned from the top spot by Bernard Arnault, chairman and CEO of Moët Hennessy Louis Vuitton (LVMH). As per Forbes, the net worth of the French billionaire and his family grew to \$207.6 billion after a \$23.6 billion increase.

US airstrikes hit 'more than 85 targets' in Iraq and Syria Officials say US will not strike inside Iran

The United States carried out retaliatory airstrikes on Friday in Iraq and Syria against more than 85 targets linked to Iran's Revolutionary Guard (IRGC) and the militias it backs, the US military said, after a deadly attack in Jordan that killed three US troops and injured some 40 others.

The strikes are believed to be just the first in a multi-tiered response by President Joe Biden's administration to the attack last weekend carried out by Iran-backed militants. While the US strikes did not target any locations inside Iran, they are likely to increase concern about tensions escalating in the

Middle East amid a widening fallout from Israel's more than three-month-old war with Palestinian Hamas militants in Gaza. The US military said in a statement that the strikes hit targets including command and control centres, rockets, missiles and drone storage facilities, as well as logistics and munition supply chain facilities. The strikes hit more than 85 targets spanning seven locations, four in Syria and three in Iraq, and included the use of long-range B-1 bombers that flew from the United States, the military said. They targeted the Quds Force - the foreign espionage and paramilitary arm of the IRGC that heavily influences

its allied militia across the Middle East, from Lebanon to Iraq and Yemen to Syria. US Lieutenant General Douglas Sims, the director of the Joint Staff, said it appeared the strikes were successful, triggering large secondary explosions as the bombings hit militant weaponry, though it was not clear if any militants were killed. But Sims added that the strikes were taken knowing that there would likely be casualties among those in the facilities. Syrian state media said on Friday that an "American aggression" on sites in its desert areas and at the Syrian-Iraqi border resulted in a number of casualties and injuries.

The Pollster Getting Under Democrats' Skin'

One of the biggest threats to Joe Biden's reelection is a third party candidate — viable or not.

It wouldn't take much for a third party or independent contender to tip the election in Donald Trump's favor. In 2020, the presidency was decided by less than 40,000 votes in three swing states. And in 2024, third party fever seems to be on the rise. Already, Cornel West, Robert F. Kennedy Jr. and Jill Stein are running.

Then there's the quixotic movement known as No Labels, which has cited a stream of polling data arguing that a large majority of Americans are crying out for an alternative to Trump and Biden. The man producing those polls is Mark Penn, best known for two things: his devotion to centrist politics and his longtime role as the top pollster and strategist for Bill and Hillary Clinton.

Penn's wife Nancy Jacobson runs No Labels and frequently uses Penn's data to support her project, though he says he has no role in the organization. Penn reports that 64 percent of voters say "the country needs another choice" if it's a Biden-Trump rematch and that most voters would consider a moderate, independent candidate as an alternative to the current president and former president.

Not surprisingly, the couple's work has infuriated Democrats — who are spending money to discredit them, sue No Labels, thwart the group's voter registration efforts and pressure its affiliates.

So what does Mark Penn think about all of this? We decided to ask him.

I caught up with Penn on this week's Playbook Deep Dive podcast. We talked about his controversial polls, his real relationship with No Labels and why he thinks that Nikki Haley may still have a big role to play in this year's election. I had a question that I did maybe a year and a half ago: If it's Biden vs. Trump, would you consider a moderate independent? Now, I know that question. I did John Anderson's polling [in 1980], if you remember him. I did Ross Perot's polling — his benchmark [ahead of 1992] — his very first poll. There was maybe 30, 35 percent who were really interested and could go for a third party. He got up to 39 percent in June [1992], right before he pulled out.

But I look at the conditions today, and about 60 percent say they would consider a moderate independent. Two-thirds are unhappy

with the economy, half say their life is getting worse, 70 percent say they don't like the choice that they have. So is there an opportunity? Certainly there's an opportunity, whether or not the right person comes up and does it.

But third parties, when they come along, attract attention because they are addressing an issue that the two major parties are ignoring. Then, usually, the two parties kind of realize they've ignored something and co-opt that issue, and the third party dies. What is the issue that a third party could actually run on that Trump and Biden aren't addressing?

The very issue of national unity and solving problems like immigration. Comprehensive immigration reform has been favored by 65 or 70 percent of the population for the last 10 years.

Most issues have solutions that, in the current polarized environment, aren't getting implemented. The opening here would be for a third party to come in and say: "Look,



we're going to actually fix the problems because we're going to be divorced from the partisanship that the Republicans and Democrats have just dug themselves into." Never forget that Abraham Lincoln was, in effect, a third-party [candidate], one with 39 percent [of the vote in 1860].

There's an entity called No Labels that seems to want to be the vessel for this third-party movement. And all of their presentations cite your surveys. So tell us a little bit about No Labels, and your involvement or non-involvement in that.

Well, let's just be very clear: My wife, Nancy Jacobson, founded No Labels when I was busy with the Hillary campaign. She runs it and makes the decisions. I have no formal or informal role other than that I occasion-

ally look at some polling and I support my wife. And she tries to make clear that she's just getting ballot access [for a potential ticket] — she's just creating an opportunity if somebody were to come along and be the right person. I can assure you: She's not someone who ever would even consider voting for Trump. Somehow, the Democrats don't fully understand that fact. I have a very full-time job at the moment running a company that's got 12,000 people. People don't quite realize that I left all this behind having spent about 30 years in the trenches.

I've got to push you on this a little bit. Larry Hogan, in the fall, was at this event at the Hay-Adams hotel in Washington. He said, "Mark and Nancy came to talk to me about their big third-party idea." So I feel like you've got to take a little bit of responsibility, if you have some of these candidates running out there, using your name.

I'm surprised. I maybe spoke to him, in my entire life, once for 10 minutes. I didn't catch that. But I can assure you that my wife re-

ally is running this effort. And I am off running a company that I delight in.

Fair enough. Who else do you think is on the list for No Labels?

You're going to have to ask Nancy. I don't know whether there's going to be a person who emerges. Who would have thought Ross Perot? [Jacobson told POLITICO last year that the group hadn't formally identified potential recruits but that it would choose someone in the mold of Perot.]

A lot of Democrats, as you know, are very mad at you guys about this.

And I always say that what they should have done is just have a steak with her, and they'd realize what a mistake they've made and how much time they have wasted barking up the wrong tree.

She's approached this thing in a very sensible way, and she has no intention whatsoever of being a spoiler in any concept, in any concept. That's a very important value to her. I think they've wasted a lot of effort by not just sitting down with her and understanding that.

If I am a voter who doesn't want to elect Donald Trump, but I also don't like Biden, what's the analysis I can do — with No Labels or any third-party candidate — to make sure that I'm not supporting a spoiler that's going to elect Trump?

The first thing I'd say is go out, find out what your candidate is doing. Encourage them to take the center of the country so that in fact, there's no room for anybody else. If Trump doesn't get the center, he's going to lose. If Biden doesn't get the center, he's going to lose. That's the most important thing for both sides, and that closes the window for anybody coming in here. If people would stop pandering to the bases and move to the center, that of course, is the single most important thing.

Let's talk about what just happened in New Hampshire with Haley and Trump. What did we learn Tuesday night about the Republican race?

Haley had a credible candidacy, really drawing from the independent voters. We knew that the real feature of the primary was that there wasn't going to be much of a contest on the Democratic side, so there'd be a healthy population of independent voters that would give her a chance. But we really learned that Donald Trump has a commanding hold on the Republican base, getting 70, 75 percent of registered Republicans in New Hampshire.

Now, most people don't realize that there are 23 states that take independent voters in the Republican primary, which is why the most conservative candidate actually typically doesn't win. But Donald Trump now is the conservative candidate of the Republican base. Nikki Haley is the independent candidate, drawing primarily from what would be general election swing voters or softer Republicans. And there were not enough of them to put her over the top in New Hampshire. If you're only winning 25 percent of Republicans, does that data on Tuesday night mean that she's got no path, even in those remaining states that take independent voters in the GOP primary?

Why is Joe Biden dragging the US into another potential war?

As a presidential candidate, Joe Biden made a forceful case for restraining US military intervention and ending the wars that America had unleashed after the September 11 attacks. "The use of force should be our last resort, not our first," he said in a July 2019 speech, adding that military power should be "used only to defend our vital interests, when the objective is clear and achievable ... It's past time to end the forever wars, which have cost us untold blood and treasure." Yet Biden is now dragging the US into another potential war, one which doesn't meet many of the standards he set out as a candidate. The Biden administration is risking a wider conflict with the Houthis in Yemen, amid reports that the Pentagon is preparing a "sustained military campaign", after nearly two weeks of air and missile strikes failed to stop them from attacking shipping vessels in the Red Sea. On 18 January, when reporters in Washington DC asked Biden if US attacks on Houthi targets were working, he was remarkably candid. "Are they stopping the Houthis? No," he said. "Are they gonna continue? Yes."

Biden and his administration are practically sleepwalking the US into another war – this time in Yemen, where Washington has already helped provoke one of the world's worst humanitarian crises thanks to its support of Saudi Arabia in a years-long conflict against the Houthis.

Remarkably, Biden and his aides have consistently said that one of their top priorities is to prevent Israel's devastating invasion of Gaza, which began after the 7 October attacks by Hamas, from spreading into a regional conflict that could spiral out of control. But the Gaza invasion has already spilled into clashes in Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, Yemen and the Red Sea. For months, Biden has avoided the most clear-cut solution to avert a wider conflagration: pressuring the Israeli government to end its assault on Gaza and negotiate a ceasefire with Hamas. The US administration has multiple options to lean on the Israeli prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu. It could threaten to withhold billions of dollars in military aid, which allow Israel to continue its assault, or it could stop using Washington's veto power on the UN security council to quash resolutions calling for a ceasefire. Instead, Biden and his aides have gone out of their way to deal with the regional conflict as somehow separate from the war in Gaza – a kind of wishful thinking motivated by treating symptoms rather than finding the cure for an underlying illness. By getting more deeply involved in Yemen, Biden is acting against his own interests – as well as larger US security priorities – during a presidential election campaign when he's likely to face Donald Trump once again. Netanyahu, on the other hand, has the most to gain by prolonging the Gaza conflict, so that he can avoid a political reckoning in Israel over multiple corruption charges and an investigation into whether his administration could have prevented the 7 October at-

tacks.

The Houthis began the Red Sea attacks in late October, when they started firing missiles and drones at – and, in some cases, trying to hijack – commercial vessels sailing through the area. The Houthis claimed they were acting in support of the Palestinians and said they would stop targeting ships once Israel ends its invasion of Gaza.

The attacks prompted the world's largest shipping companies to reroute vessels around South Africa, which can add thousands of miles to a freighter's journey between Asia and Europe. With global companies facing skyrocketing fuel,

labor and insurance costs, the Biden administration last month assembled an international coalition to protect commercial ships in the region.

When the Houthis would not back down, the US and Britain launched air and missile strikes against dozens of targets in Yemen on 12 January. Since then, the US military has struck Yemen eight times, most recently on Monday night. But Houthi leaders are undaunted and they've promised to exact revenge against the US and Britain.

The Houthis are portraying themselves as one of the few forces in the Middle East willing to stand against Israel and

its western allies in defense of the Palestinian cause. At a rally in Yemen's capital, Sana'a, after the first wave of US strikes, thousands of people chanted, "We don't care – make it a world war." Houthi leaders are also using the global attention to enhance their reputation throughout the Middle East and raise their standing within the "axis of resistance", a network of regional militias supported by Iran. Aside from the Houthis and Hamas, the alliance also includes several Shia militias in Iraq and Syria, and the powerful Lebanese militant group Hezbollah. Since 7 October, this alliance has tried to increase the stakes of the

Harendra Singh, key witness in Mangano corruption trial, won't begin prison sentence until May

Harendra Singh, the former restaurateur who was the key government witness in the corruption trials against ex-Nassau County Executive Edward Mangano and his wife, Linda, and was sentenced last year to four years in prison for committing a slew of financial crimes, won't begin his prison sentence until at least May, officials said Thursday. U.S. District Judge Joan Azrack last July sentenced Singh, whose trial testimony "exposed the corrupt culture that was business as usual in Nassau County," the judge said, and ordered him to begin serving his sentence on Jan. 24. But his attorney, Anthony La Pinta, filed a motion in early January requesting a new surrender date. The document is sealed, and the reason the later start date was requested has not been disclosed publicly.

Singh, 65, of Laurel Hollow, has now been ordered to report to prison on May 24, said John Marzulli, a spokesman for the U.S. Attorney's Office, which prosecuted both Singh and the Manganos. La Pinta confirmed his client's surrender date was pushed back until May, but declined to comment further.

Singh testified that he bribed Ed Mangano with a \$450,000 "no-show" job for his wife, two luxury chairs, flooring for his and his wife's Bethpage bedroom, free meals and vacations and a \$7,300 watch for one of his sons in exchange for Mangano influencing Oyster Bay Town officials to authorize the town to serve as an indirect guarantor for what amounted to \$20 million in loans for Singh, who wanted the funds to make improvements to several seaside eateries he operated in the town.

Edward Mangano is serving a 12-year prison sentence in Massachusetts and is slated to be released on May 7, 2032, according to the federal Bureau of Prisons. He was convicted

in 2019 of conspiracy to commit federal program bribery, federal program bribery, conspiracy to commit honest services wire fraud, honest services wire fraud and conspiracy to obstruct justice. Linda Mangano served five months in prison of a 15-month sentence for her conviction of conspiracy to obstruct justice, obstruction of justice and two counts of lying to the FBI as part of the scheme.

Singh pleaded guilty as part of a cooperation agreement with the government in 2016 to charges including conspiracy to commit federal program bribery and honest services wire fraud related to the Town of Oyster Bay loan scheme and a nearly \$1 million fraudulent claim to FEMA that the Water's Edge, a Queens catering hall he owned, was damaged during Superstorm Sandy. He also pleaded guilty to obstructing and impeding the due administration of Internal Revenue Service laws. In addition to bribing Mangano and then-New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio, who was not accused of any wrongdoing, Singh admitted bribing several other Oyster Bay Town officials, including former deputy town attorney Frederick Mei, who was sentenced to two years in prison on corruption-related charges on the same day that Singh was sentenced. Singh bribed Mei with \$70,000 in cash and gifts between 2010 and 2012, according to prosecutors, to ensure that the town guaranteed Singh's loans. Singh also paid Mei's \$36,000 lease for his BMW and for several vacations, including to South Korea. Mei, 64, is currently housed in USP Lewisburg, a medium-security federal prison in Pennsylvania, according to the Bureau of Prisons.

(As reported by Newsday.com)

Jacqueline Fernandez knowingly used, enjoyed conman's proceeds of crime, court told

The Enforcement Directorate (ED) has told the Delhi High Court that Bollywood actor Jacqueline Fernandez, accused in a Rs 200 crore money laundering case, was knowingly involved in the possession and use of proceeds of crime of alleged conman Sukesh Chandrasekhar, news agency PTI reported. The probe agency alleged that evidence showed that the actor "had been enjoying, using and was in possession of the proceeds of crime" of Sukesh Chandrasekhar. This contention by the ED was made in an affidavit filed in response to Jacqueline Fernandez's plea that sought the cancellation of an FIR lodged against her in the money laundering case. The matter was listed before Justice Manoj Kumar Ohri and Jacqueline Fernandez's counsel sought time to file a reply in response to the ED's contention. The matter will be next heard by the High Court on April 15. In its reply, the ED claimed that Jacqueline Fernandez "held back the truth till date" regarding the financial transactions with Sukesh Chandrasekhar and concealed facts until confronted with evidence, PTI reported. "She continues to hold back the truth even till date. It is also

a fact that Fernandez wiped out the entire data from her mobile phone after the arrest of Sukesh Chandrasekhar, thereby tampering with the evidence. She also asked her colleagues to destroy the evidence. Evidence proves beyond doubt that she had been enjoying, using and is in possession of the proceeds of crime," the probe agency said.

Thus, it is proved that Fernandez was knowingly involved in the possession and use of proceeds of crime of accused Chandrasekhar," it claimed.

The actor, the ED alleged, attempted to cover up her conduct by stating she was a victim of Sukesh Chandrasekhar, but was not able to furnish any substantial evidence to establish her claim. Jacqueline Fernandez was aware of the conman's criminal intentions but still, she continued to receive, enjoy and possess proceeds of crime for herself and her family members, the ED said. It further claimed that the actor did not initially admit to receiving huge amounts of money and valuable gifts for her family by Sukesh Chandrasekhar. The agency stated that these luxury gifts were proceeds of crime being generated out of criminal activity.

"Not A Picnic Spot": Court Says Non-Hindus Can't Enter Tamil Nadu Temples

The Madras High Court on Tuesday directed the Tamil Nadu HR&CE department to install boards in all Hindu temples stating non-Hindus were not permitted beyond the 'Kodimaram' (flagpole) area in the respective shrines and said Hindus also have fundamental right to profess and practice their religion.

Justice S Srimathy of the HC's Madurai Bench gave the judgement while hearing a plea from D Senthilkumar, who sought directions to the respondents to permit Hindus alone to the Arulmigu Palani Dhandayuthapani Swamy temple and its sub temples. He also wanted that display boards to that effect in all entrances be set up.

The famous Lord Murugan temple is located in Palani in Dindigul district. The respondents were the Tamil Nadu government, represented by Principal Secretary, Department of Tourism, Culture and Religious Endowments, The Commissioner, Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments Department (HR&CE) and the Executive Officer of the Palani temple.

The HR&CE department administers Hindu temples in Tamil Nadu.

Admitting the petition, the court directed the respondents to install boards indicating "non-Hindus are not allowed inside temple after Kodimaram" in the entrance of the temples, near the flagpole and at prominent places in the shrine.

"The respondents are directed not to allow the non-Hindus who do not believe in Hindu religion. If any Non-Hindu claims to visit particular deity in the temple, then the respondents shall obtain undertaking from the said non-Hindu that he is having faith in the deity and he would follow the customs and practices of Hindu religion



and also abide by the temple customs and on such undertaking the said non-Hindu may be allowed to visit the temple," the court ruled.

Further, whenever a such a person is allowed based on the undertaking the same shall be entered in the register which shall be maintained by the temple.

"The respondents shall maintain the temple premises by strictly following the agamas (temple rules), customs and practices of the temple," the judge said. The respondents submitted the said writ petition was filed only for the Palani temple and the order may be restricted to it alone. "But the issue raised is larger issue and the same ought to be applicable to all Hindu temples, hence the plea of the respondents is rejected. As stated supra these restrictions would ensure communal harmony among different religions and ensure peace in the society. Therefore the State Government, the

HR&CE department, the respondents and all persons who are involved in temple administration are directed to follow the directions to all Hindu temples," the court said.

The people belonging to Hindu religion have right to profess and practice the faith.

"Likewise, people belonging to other religions have right to profess and practice their religion. But the customs and practice of their respective religion cannot be interfering with and any interference ought to be curtailed. The temple is not (a) picnic spot or tourist spot. Even in Arulmighu Brahadeeswarar Temple, Thanjavur the other religion people are allowed to admire and appreciate the architectural monuments of the temple, but not after Kodimaram." "While admiring the architectural monuments the people cannot use the premises as picnic spot or tourist spot and the temples premises ought to be maintained with reverence and as per

agamas. Therefore, the rights guaranteed under the Articles is not granting any right to the respondents to allow the other religion people if they do not have any faith and belief in the Hindu religion. Moreover, the rights are guaranteed to all religions and there cannot be any bias in applying such right," the court added.

The High Court also referred to certain incidents of non-Hindus allegedly entering temples.

"It was also reported that in Arulmighu Brahadeeswarar Temple a group of persons belonging to other religion had treated the temple premises as picnic spot and had non vegetarian food inside the temple premises. Likewise, recently on 11.01.2024 a newspaper had reported that a group of persons belonging to the other religion had entered the Arulmighu Meenakshi Sundareswarar Temple, Madurai with "their sacred book" near sanctum and sanctorum and was attempting to do their prayers" there.

These incidents are absolutely interfering with the fundamental rights guaranteed to the Hindus under the Constitution, the judge said.

"The Hindus also have fundamental right to profess and practice their religion freely and propagate their religion without interfering in their way of practice. Therefore, the Hindus have right to maintain their temples as per their customs, practices and Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowment Department is having duty to protect the temples from such unwanted incidents." "In fact, in the above narrated incidents the Department had failed to protect the fundamental rights guaranteed under the constitution," the court added.

Indian-origin couple convicted in UK, had smuggled 514kg of cocaine to Australia

A married British couple of Indian origin, Arti Dhir, 59, and Kavaljitsinh Rajjada, 35, were found guilty of leading a drug-smuggling operation and exporting more than half a tonne of cocaine from the United Kingdom to Australia.

The illegal operation was exposed by the UK's National Crime Agency (NCA).

Officers traced the consignment back to Dhir and Rajjada, who had set up a company, Viefly Freight Services, as a front for smuggling drugs. Both defendants had been directors of the company at different points since its incorporation in June 2015.

The NCA investigation showed that the 514 kg of drugs, valued at £57 million, were transported via a commercial flight from the UK to Sydney in May 2021 in six metal toolboxes.

In the UK, a kilo of cocaine at wholesale is priced at around £26,000 per kilo but in Australia, the same amount sells for £110,000. Cocaine prices in Australia are substantially greater than in the United

Kingdom, making illicit shipment even more profitable for Dhir and Rajjada.

Rajjada's fingerprints on the plastic wrappings of the metal toolboxes, along with receipts for the purchase of the toolboxes, were crucial pieces of evidence linking the couple to the crime. **BRITISH-INDIAN COUPLE HAD OVER £3 MILLION IN CASH**

The UK's NCA said that the couple had used their knowledge of airport freight procedures, gained from their previous employment at a Heathrow flight services company, to facilitate their illegal activities. During the trial at Southwark Crown Court, London, Dhir and Rajjada denied the charges of exporting cocaine and money laundering.

However, the jury convicted them on 12 counts of exportation and 18 counts of money laundering.

The couple is scheduled to be sentenced, following the conviction, at Southwark Crown Court, on Tuesday (January 30).

The couple were found in possession of

gold-plated silver bars, £13,000 at their home, and £60,000 in a safe deposit box. Subsequent investigations uncovered nearly £3 million in cash hidden in a storage unit in Hanwell (UK), rented by Rajjada in his mother's name.

BRITISH-INDIAN COUPLE BOUGHT £8,00,000 FLAT, LAND ROVER

Financial enquiries disclosed that the couple had purchased a flat in Ealing, London, for £8,00,000 and a Land Rover for £62,000, despite declaring minimal profits to His Majesty's Revenue & Customs (HMRC).

The NCA is set to initiate Proceeds of Crime proceedings to seize the couple's assets.

"Arti Dhir and Kavaljitsinh Rajjada used their insider knowledge of the air freight industry to traffic cocaine worth tens of millions of pounds from the UK to Australia, where they knew they could maximise their revenue," said Piers Phillips, a Senior Investigating Officer at the NCA. "They kept their illicit profits in

cash at their home and in storage units, as well as purchasing property, gold and silver in an attempt to hide their wealth. These defendants may have thought they were removed from the misery caused by the drugs trade, but their greed was fuelling it," Investigating Officer Phillips added.

"The NCA worked closely with our partners in Australia and UK Border Force to dismantle the supply chain created by Dhir and Rajjada and bring them to justice," Investigating Officer Phillips further added to outline the collaborative effort between British and Australian agencies. Detective Superintendent Peter Faux, Commander of the New South Wales Police Force Organised Crime Squad (Australia), commended the international collaboration, noting, "Serious and organised criminal networks often have no borders, which is why working collaboratively with our international counterparts is so important to tackle what is a global issue."

Four, including 3 members of Imran Khan's party, killed in Pakistan bomb blast

Four people, including three members of former Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan's party, Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) were killed in a bomb blast in the Balochistan region.

(News Agency) - Four people including three members of former Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan's party Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) were killed on Tuesday, in a bomb blast in the Balochistan region. The blast occurred during a rally organised by the party hours after Imran Khan was sentenced to 10 years in jail. "Three workers of Tehreek-e-Insaf are martyred and 7 are injured," Provincial General Secretary Balochistan for PTI, Salar Khan Kakar, said in a video message shared on PTI's X account. However, the medical superintendent of the District Headquarters Hospital in Sibi, Dr Babar,

told Pakistan's Dawn newspaper that five people were injured in the blast. According to the report, the injured people were taken to a hospital and officials said the condition of most of them was critical, and the death toll could rise. The moment the bomb blast occurred in the Sibi area of Balochistan was caught on camera and shows the PTI members scrambling after a loud noise was heard. PTI leader Salar Khan Kakar said the blast occurred at an election rally organised by party-backed candidate Saddam Tareen. "We strongly condemn this heartbreaking incident and demand that attention should be given to



suppressing terrorists instead of PTI workers," he added. The blast occurred just nine days before the February 8 general elections. The Election Commission of

Pakistan said it has taken notice of the incident and sought an "immediate report" from Balochistan's chief secretary and police chief.

"Apologise To PM Modi": Maldives Opposition Leader To President Muizzu

(News Agency) - A Maldives Jumhooree Party (JP) leader, Qasim Ibrahim, has urged Maldivian President Mohamed Muizzu to formally apologise to Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the people of India.

This comes as the country's main opposition MDP, which holds a majority in the Maldivian Parliament, said it plans to submit a motion to impeach their President - a development that followed clashes that broke out in the House between pro-government MPs and opposition lawmakers following differences over the approval of four members of his cabinet.

"Regarding any country, especially a neighbouring one, we shouldn't speak in a way that affects the relationship. We have an obligation to our state that must be considered. President Solih did consider this obligation and issued a Presidential Decree banning the 'India Out' campaign. Now, Yameen (former president Abdulla Yameen) is questioning why Muizzu, who participated with him in the India Out Campaign, has not nullified the Presidential Decree," he said. He added, "The Decree should not be nullified, as it would only result in a loss to the nation. That cannot be done. I would tell Muizzu that it shouldn't be done. Also, I call on President Muizzu to formally apologise to the Indian government and Prime Minister Modi regarding his remarks after the China trip."

Earlier last year, then Maldives President Ibrahim Solih signed a decree stating that the opposition's 'India Out' campaign is a "threat to national security". This allows security agencies to take down campaign banners and provides constitutional cover

The removal of Indian troops in the Maldives was the main campaign plank of Muizzu's party during the presidential elections.



to take action against opposition parties. The opposition, led by former president Abdulla Yameen of the Progressive Party of Maldives (PPM) was spearheading an 'India Out' campaign for over the last year propagating the unproven claim that Indian military officers stationed in the Indian Ocean island nation are a violation of Maldives' sovereignty.

The campaign's implicit target was then Maldivian President Solih and the Maldivian Democratic Party, both perceived as close to India. Notably, Solih was one of the prominent Maldives leader to condemn the derogatory remarks made by some junior ministers which led to a diplomatic standoff between the two nations. India and the Maldives on January 14 "agreed to fast-track the withdrawal of Indian military personnel" from the island nation,

according to the Maldives' Ministry of

Imran Khan, Bushra Bibi sentenced to 14-year imprisonment in Toshakhana case

(News Agency) - An accountability court on Wednesday sentenced former Pakistan premier Imran Khan and his wife Bushra Bibi to 14 years imprisonment in the Toshakhana case, local media reported. The verdict comes a day after the PTI founder was sentenced to 10 years imprisonment in the cipher case by a special court established under the Official Secrets Act. Accountability court judge Mohammad Bashir presided over the hearing at Rawalpindi's Adiala jail, where the former Khan is incarcerated, The Express Tribune reported.

Foreign Affairs.

The removal of Indian troops in the Maldives was the main campaign plank of Muizzu's party during the presidential elections. Currently, there are around 70 Indian troops, along with Dornier 228 maritime patrol aircraft and two HAL Dhruv helicopters, stationed On the second day of assuming office, Muizzu officially requested the Indian government to withdraw its military personnel from the Maldives. Apart from the call for the withdrawal of Indian military personnel, a massive row erupted after a Maldivian deputy minister, along with other cabinet members and government officials, made disparaging and unsavoury references to Primer Minister Narendra Modi's recent Lakshadweep visit and call to development the Indian archipelago as a global retreat for beach tourism.

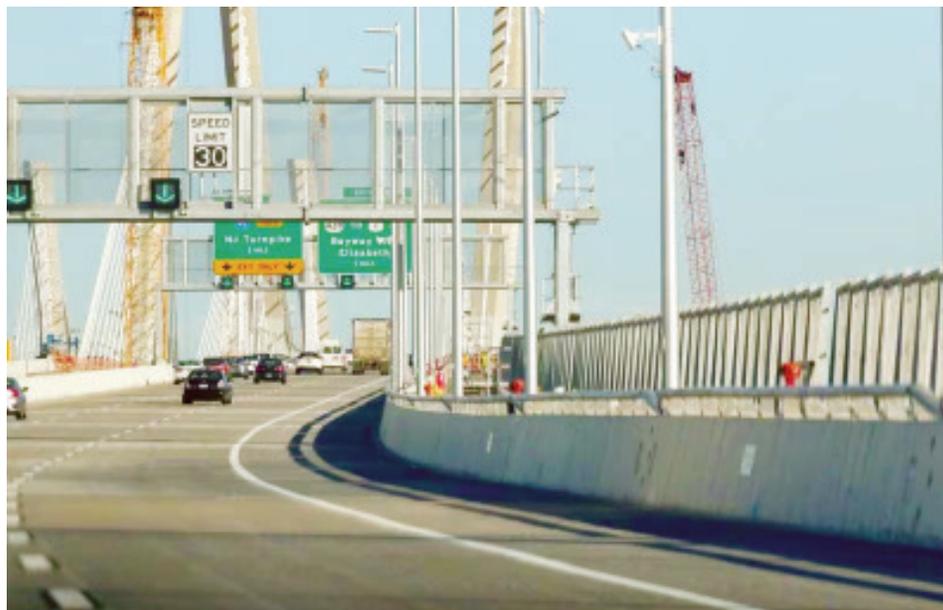
Imran and Bushra were also barred from holding any public office for the next 10 years and were fined around Rs1,574 million, The Express Tribune reported. The judge also asked the two to record their statements under Section 342 of the Code of Criminal Procedure and closed the right of cross-examination of the prosecution witnesses. The couple were indicted in the reference on January 9. Reacting strongly to the verdict, the PTI termed it as "complete destruction of every law" and claimed the former premier and first lady have faced "yet another kangaroo trial".

Port Authority recovers \$25M from toll evaders in 2023: Here's a look at the top offenders

(News Agency)-The crackdown on toll evasion continued last year, with some of the region's top offenders ordered to pay more than \$100,000 in 2023.

The Port Authority of New York and New Jersey has announced that the agency's police department issued nearly 5,900 summonses related to toll evasion last year, recovering more than \$25 million in unpaid tolls and associated fines.

"With increased patrols and the deployment of more technology across our infrastructure, we will catch toll violators and they will pay what they owe," said Port Authority Chairman Kevin O'Toole. "Tolls fund the critical infrastructure that stitch our region together, and drivers will not be able to skate by and steal." The 5,861 summonses represent a 28% increase from the amount issued in 2022, while the roughly \$25 million recovered represents a 14% increase from last year. Nearly 4,500 of the toll evasion-related summonses were issued for obstructed, missing or fictitious license plates, which have become a point of



emphasis for the agency in recent years. "Evading tolls or obstructing license plates is illegal – and robs our facilities of the resources needed to keep them running safely and efficiently," said Port Authority Executive Director Rick Cotton. "It is both unfair and illegal for toll cheats to try to dodge their share of the cost of maintaining

the safety of our bridges and tunnels, and we are committed to thwarting this criminal behavior."

Officials urged all motorists to sign up for E-ZPass, which offers discounted toll rates on bridges and provides a more seamless payment experience to ensure all tolls are paid in a timely manner.

The Port Authority released the following list of the toll evaders ordered to pay the largest civil judgments in 2023 due to their unpaid tolls and fees.

EM Padilla Trucking Corp (Weehawken, N.J.)

Amount owed: \$201,358.53

JRK Xpress Corp (Reading, Pa.)

Amount owed: \$185,045.90

Do 1 Do Right Services LLC (Lodi, N.J.)

Amount owed: \$141,077.06

Garth Virgil (Englewood, N.J.)

Amount owed: \$135,867.70

Maria Rodriguez (Teaneck, N.J.)

Amount owed: \$134,801.69

JLL 1 Logistics Inc. (Belleville, N.J.)

Amount owed: \$132,288.55

Emily Courier Corp (Elizabeth, N.J.)

Amount owed: \$93,228.76

New Generation Transport (Bronx, N.Y.)

Amount owed: \$86,257.50

Salsam Transport LLC (South Hackensack, N.J.)

Amount owed: \$85,290.50

Richard Sullivan (Hackensack, N.J.)

Amount owed: \$78,632.80

NY considering relaxing work qualifications for thousands of jobs to hire migrants



(News Agency)-The Empire State is considering relaxing qualifications for thousands of jobs to hire migrants who have legal work status in the US.

New York officials are looking to create "transitional titles" to allow migrants who have received federal work authorization to work in the state workforce, according to a memo being circulated by the state Civil Service Commission and obtained by The Post.

State agencies have identified 4,000 state jobs that could be filled by migrants, according to the memo first reported by Bloomberg News.

Most are "hard-to-recruit, entry-level titles" — and the plan would allow the migrants to

skirt requirements like English proficiency or proof of education and previous employment, according to the memo.

"Governor Hochul has prioritized modernizing our State workforce and eliminating red tape, and she has instituted a series of reforms to achieve that goal," a spokesperson for Hochul wrote in a statement. "This initiative, which has not yet been implemented, would offer temporary employment opportunities that are available for anyone who can legally work in the United States." State Department of Civil Service Commissioner Timothy Hogue emphasized that the proposed requirements for migrants were similar to those of existing apprenticeship programs,



and that the relaxed rules would apply to all New Yorkers if adopted. We are excited about this," Hogue said as he was questioned about the memo by Long Island Assemblyman Ed Ra during a budget hearing Tuesday.

"This is no different from our traineeships and apprenticeships that we have that allow individuals to up-skill or get the time on the job to be able to meet the qualifications," he said. "This is just a bigger part of our holistic approach to opening up government and making these jobs available and reducing the barriers."

The fields of work for the proposed temporary transitional jobs include care for intellectually

and developmentally disabled individuals, custodial work, food service, facilities repair and clerical positions. The creation of these transitional titles is a win-win way for the State and its agencies to connect qualified and motivated individuals with meaningful jobs and opportunity; help solve the migrant crisis; and rebuild the State workforce," the memo concludes. Gov. Kathy Hochul has touted identifying over 40,000 open positions by employers in the state willing to hire migrants, though the federal process for approving work authorization has been slow. As of November, 2,850 of the nearly 47,000 migrants being sheltered statewide had been approved for work.

Australian Sam Lee charged with conspiracy to commit fraud in US for role in \$1.89bn 'Ponzi scheme'

The Australian blockchain entrepreneur Sam Lee has been charged with conspiracy to commit fraud in the US for his alleged role in operating the HyperVerse crypto investment schemes, described in court documents as a "pyramid and Ponzi scheme" alleged to have defrauded investors of US\$1.89bn (A\$2.86bn).

The US attorney for the district of Maryland, Erek L Barron said the Department of Justice would "hold perpetrators accountable for these and other fraud schemes", with Lee facing up to five years in jail if convicted.

"The level of alleged fraud here is staggering," Barron said.

The criminal complaint lodged in the district court of Maryland charges Lee with conspiracy to commit securities and wire fraud, while a separate civil complaint brought by the US Securities Exchange Commission charges Lee with fraud and with the unregistered sale of securities in breach of the US Securities Act. The charges against Lee, once dubbed the "crown prince of bitcoin" in Australia, come



alongside the charge and arrest of another US promoter of the HyperVerse and HyperFund crypto schemes, Brenda Chunga, who has pleaded guilty to conspiracy to commit securities and wire fraud for her role.

The criminal complaint alleges that Lee and his co-conspirators operated the Hyper schemes to "unjustly enrich themselves" by inducing investors into the scheme. "It was further part of the conspiracy that Lee and his co-conspirators knowingly devised and intended to devise a scheme and artifice to defraud and to obtain money and property by means of false and fraudulent pretences,

representations and promises," the complaint alleges. It orders that if found guilty, Lee is to "disgorge all ill-gotten gains" received directly or indirectly as a result of the schemes. The court documents refer to crypto schemes run by the HyperTech group collectively as HyperFund but the funds operated under various names, including HyperCapital, HyperFund, HyperVerse and HyperNation. Lee was chairman of the HyperTech group, which was co-founded with his business partner, Ryan Xu. Xu is not named in the court documents. The charges come after a Guardian Australia investigation revealed details of the

scheme's operation, including widespread investor losses, the use of a fake chief executive officer for the launch of the HyperVerse scheme and HyperVerse's links to the collapsed Australian crypto company Blockchain Global, of which Lee was a director.

The SEC complaint, which is lodged against both Lee and Chunga, alleges that its case "involves a global, crypto asset-related, multi-level marketing pyramid and Ponzi scheme that raised over \$1.7 billion from victims worldwide, including millions from U.S. investors". The criminal complaint estimates that the losses were higher, alleging that HyperFund was a "global securities fraud and wire fraud scheme that obtained approximately US\$1.89 billion from victim-investors world-wide". The SEC's division of enforcement director, Gurbir S Grewal, alleges that Lee and Chunga attracted investors with the allure of profits from crypto asset mining – "but the only thing that HyperFund mined was its investors' pockets".

"This case illustrates yet again

how noncompliance in the crypto space facilitates schemes where promoters capitalize on the promise of easy money, without providing the detailed investor protection disclosures required by the registration provisions of the federal securities laws."

The SEC complaint outlines Lee's alleged role in operating the HyperFund schemes, claiming that he was "centrally involved with HyperFund throughout its lifecycle". "On information and belief, Lee was not only a co-founder of HyperFund, but he maintained control over HyperFund throughout its existence," the SEC alleges. It alleges that from approximately June 2020 to approximately November 2022, Lee and Chunga sold memberships in HyperFund and "made materially false and misleading statements about the investments and knowingly or recklessly engaged in a scheme to defraud investors – bilking the investors out of over \$1.7 billion – by enticing them with the false promise of guaranteed, high returns from investments in securities.

'I finally figured out what these guys do': Man shares 'unethical' hack for getting out car loan payments. But does it work?

In a clip with over 554,000 views, TikTok user Cheese (@thankucheese) describes how he claims some people use services like Facebook Marketplace to get rid of vehicles—and, in the process, end their loan payments.

"I finally figured out what these guys do, man," he says in the video. "They literally will go and post a car for sale, something really cheap, \$8,500. Then they'll report the car stolen. And then you get in trouble for buying it like a dumba** when you shouldn't have even gotten the car in the first place." The trick, he says, is that the car is being sold without a title. To prove his point, he shows a listing for a 2021 BMW X5 being sold for just \$8,500. The description notes that it is being sold without a title while also saying that he requires a deposit—a move that the TikToker says is indicative of a different scheme.

"He's trying to get the deposit and



then he's going to block you. [You'll] never hear from him again," the TikToker says. "These guys are smart."

Seeing this, one naturally must wonder: no matter the legality, does this method actually work? The outlook is not promising. First, having your car stolen does not mean that you no longer have to

make payments on it. Per Zuto, once someone has reported their car stolen to the police, they must contact their insurer and financier to explain the situation. During this process, the person will "need to keep paying your finance installments while your claim is being settled by the insurance company." Second, the TikToker

says in the video that one can get in trouble for owning a stolen car. This is true, though the situation is a little more complicated than the TikToker makes it seem.

To start, it is legal in many states to buy a car without a title. That said, it is often a bad idea given the fact that the car could be stolen—and if one purchases a

stolen vehicle, they are at risk of a host of penalties.

However, in the situation the TikToker is describing, the car has not been stolen; the seller is fraudulently claiming that the car has been stolen to get out of car payments. Provided that the buyer has substantial documentation about the sale of the car, including the seller's name and signature, it would be difficult for the seller to make an effective case that their car was stolen. In the comments section, users shared their own methods for getting out of car payments.

"Don't pay it for 3 months and they'll come pick it up for free," wrote a user.

"Nah just leave it unlocked and running on the bad side of town," added another. "It will get stolen and just report it."

"Just get full coverage and total it out," claimed a third.

The Daily Dot reached out to Cheese via Instagram direct message.

Adele is working out 'three times a day' in gruelling weight loss bid



Los Angeles-Singer-songwriter Adele has revealed that she is now working out two or three times a day after losing a whopping 44 kgs.

The 'Someone Like You' singer, 35, has shared an insight into her gruelling workout routine as she aims to maintain a "rock solid" derrière after completely overhauling her lifestyle and diet a number of years ago and transforming her appearance, reports 'Mirror.co.uk'.

While she remains strict with her routine six days a week, the British singer allows herself to indulge on Sundays when she orders her favourite takeaway and insists on not stepping foot in the gym to make the most of her rest day.

However, from Monday to Saturday, Adele doesn't sway from her strict diet and exercise schedule as she aims to look and feel the best she ever has. Having previously gone teetotal, Adele now drinks on occasion – and makes the most of it when she does after admitting that she loves nothing more than getting "hammered" on her favourite alcoholic beverage – white wine. As per 'Mirror.co.uk', Adele has another six months to look forward to in Las Vegas

as she finishes off her residency, but the singer is allowing herself to indulge in more fun when it comes to her lifestyle outside of work.

Opening up about her new routine, the 'Hello' hitmaker revealed, "I have done absolutely nothing since last weekend. I am back at my gym grind like nobody's business, I am doing two or three sessions a day. My a*** is getting rock solid again. I can move mountains with my bottom. That is all I have done".

It's all about balance for the singer though, as she enjoys nothing more than pigging out on Sundays.

She told Desert Island Discs: "I gave up drinking, coffee and all the fun things being an adult allows you to do. I was so boring. So on my last break I was like, 'I will have a glass of wine and four espressos'. So now I am back on shows, I am only allowing myself to drink on Sundays."

"But it is okay. Four or five white wine spritzers get me absolutely hammered and also I order McDonalds and forget the next day so it doesn't really count," she added.

A. R. Rahman clarifies using AI to recreate voices of late singers Bamba Bakya, Shahul Hameed

Mumbai, -Oscar-winning music composer A. R. Rahman, who used the artificial intelligence for recreating the voices of late playback singers Bamba Bakya and Shahul Hameed for the song titled 'Thimiri Yezhuda' from the Rajinikanth-starrer 'Lal Salaam' has issued a clarification with regards to the usage of the AI tool and the compensation to the singer's families.

The 'Rang De Basanti' composer took to

his X, erstwhile Twitter and penned a note for his followers who questioned the dependence on AI for recreation of the voices of the departed singers.

He shared Sony Music South's post highlighting how an AI tool was used to recreate the late singers' voices. He wrote, "We took permission from their families and sent deserving remuneration for using their voice algorithms...technology is not a threat and a nuisance if we use it right."



Vidyut Jammwal, MC Square bring first-ever



Action star Vidyut Jammwal and rapper MC Square have joined hands to reimagine the viral song 'Rom Rom' for the upcoming film, 'Crakk: Jeetega Toh Jiyegaa'.

With the dance choreographed by Ganesh Acharya, the collaboration promises to be an electrifying fusion. 'Rom Rom' first featured in MTV Hustle season 2 by Mc Square, whose real name is Abhishek Bensla.

Aged 23, MC Square, hails from Bhawana, Palwal in Haryana. He is a rapper, poet, and dancer. The rapper got his inspiration from his hometown's

folk song "Ragini" and started his journey in rapping in 2016.

MC Square entered the rap game in 2018 with his song called 'Hip Hop Mazhab'.

Since then, he has made music that motivates, inspires, and, more importantly, allows listeners to relate to the heartbreak and dreams of the common man. Produced by Vidyut Jammwal and Action Hero Films, written and directed by Aditya Datt, 'Crakk: Jeetega Toh Jiyegaa' is all set to hit theaters on February 23, 2024.

Tamannaah Bhatia to headline a yet-to-be-titled tipsy dramedy webseries

Mumbai- Actress Tamannaah Bhatia, who was recently seen in 'Jailer' and 'Bhola Shankar', has come onboard for an untitled tipsy dramedy. The series will be a streaming project and is currently in the pre-production stage.

As per a well-placed source, the series will feature two actresses, the casting for the second leading lady is currently underway. The shooting for the same is slated to begin in mid-March or early April.

The fans and followers will have to wait a bit for the title of Tamannaah's

upcoming project to be unveiled. However, it is being said that the light-hearted series will be helmed by director Archit Kumar.

The project is being helmed under the digital wing of Dharma Productions' Dharmatic Entertainment in association with Prime Video.

This marks her fourth project in the digital realm. Apart from this, the actress has an impressive lineup of projects in her way. Tamannaah Bhatia will be seen in 'Vedaa' alongside John Abraham and also in a Tamil project titled 'Arnamanai 4'.

Randeep Hooda: Savarkar was always ahead of time

Mumbai- Actor Randeep Hooda, who makes his directorial debut with the upcoming biopic 'Swatantrya Veer Savarkar', has said that VD Savarkar was always ahead of time and that today he has become more relevant than ever before.

'Swatantrya Veer Savarkar', which has booked its release for March 22, this year, presents a compelling odyssey, bringing to life the tale of VD Savarkar.

Randeep, who has helmed the film, also essays the titular character. His portrayal promises to be a tour de force. It also stars Ankita Lokhande, and Amit Sial.

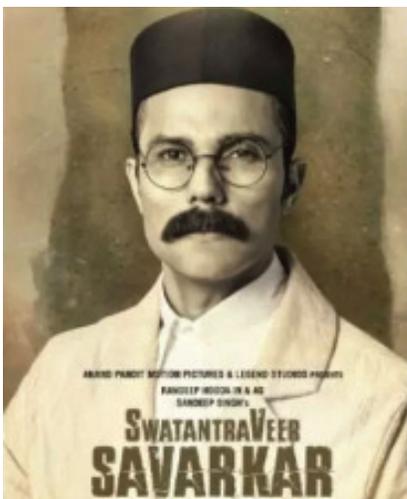
Randeep said: "After almost two years in Kalapani with Mr Savarkar, it's finally time

for him to step out to freedom. The journey has been tough but it has made me go beyond myself as an actor into being a filmmaker and much more."

"It's about time the country came to know about the contribution of the armed revolution in our freedom struggle. Mr Savarkar was always ahead of time and is today more relevant than ever before."

The film has been produced by Zee Studios, Anand

Pandit, Randeep Hooda, Sandeep Singh & Yogesh Rahar, and co-produced by Roopa Pandit, Sam Khan, Anwar Ali, Panchali Chakraborty, the film is slated to release on March 22 in Hindi and Marathi.



Cher denied conservatorship over son Elijah Allman



Music legend Cher has been denied putting her son in a conservatorship once again despite airing her concerns.

The iconic singer, 77, told courts she believed it would be best for her son, but he was against the suggestion, reports Mirror.co.uk.

And now, it appears a judge has once again sided with son Elijah Allman and rejected Cher's request to lock him down. Elijah appeared at a temporary appointment hearing on Monday, and didn't look impressed by the situation.

As per Mirror.co.uk, it's said to be the second time this month the star has failed in a bid to control her son's assets. Earlier this month, the court sided with Elijah's attorneys who had stated they hadn't been

given enough time to create a case against Cher's request.

In December of last year, the songstress filed documents to the Los Angeles Superior Court. The documents, obtained by People magazine, claimed Cher is looking to be the sole conservator of her son's estate.

The documents are reported to state that he is "substantially unable to manage his financial resources," hence Cher calling for a conservatorship. Elsewhere in the documents came allegations that Elijah's estranged wife, Marieangela King, is not fit to be his conservator as the couple have a "tumultuous relationship" which has been "marked by a cycle of drug addiction and mental health crises". It's said the documents

stated that Cher's son is "entitled to regular distributions from the Trust" but because of his mental health issues and alleged "substance abuse issues", his mother is "concerned that any funds distributed to Elijah will be immediately spent on drugs, leaving Elijah with no assets to provide for himself and putting Elijah's life at risk." According to TMZ, the judge at the hearing today (Monday) is said to have heard how Elijah has proven in paperwork that he has remained clean and sober lately and is proving to be fine with handling his own money. Another date was set for a future trial that is likely to firmly make a decision for both parties. It's thought that only Elijah, his wife and the lawyers were in court today. Cher is said to have remotely been present.

Vicky Kaushal calls Rashmika Mandanna 'major inspiration' as she wraps up new film

Mumbai- Bollywood star Vicky Kaushal, who was recently seen in the biopic 'Sam Bahadur', has called his 'Chhava' actress Rashmika Mandanna a "major inspiration." The actor recently took to the Stories section of his Instagram and reposted a Story by Rashmika where she expressed her gratitude to the cast and crew of the film after she wrapped up the film.

Rashmika said in jest that Vicky has been very warm and kind to her during the filming except for the last day of the shoot.

In her next story, the actress praised her co-star Vicky Kaushal and wrote: Calling him a "Maharaj", she wrote: "It's been such a pleasure working with you. You are just toooooo warm and kind (except for the last day where you were just taking my case) but most days you were amazing. I am kidding..you are such a gem. I will always wish the best for you man. Was such a pleasure. mom has told me to convey regards to you (sic)."

Responding to the same, Vicky wrote: "@rashmika_mandanna... neen yennane ullia? The whole set is missing your warmth and energy immensely. People don't know that the smile you have on your worst days is bigger and better than the smile most have on their best days."

He further mentioned: "Major inspiration! Thank you for being our Yesubai and my regards to Auntie as well. Oh and btw what are you thinking now?"



Farah Khan shares 'Jhalak ki dawat' made by 'chef' Arshad Warsi

Mumbai- Director-choreographer Farah Khan judge's better after a feast, going by her post on social media.

Farah took to Instagram, where she shared a video from the sets of the reality show 'Jhalak Dikhlai Jaa'.

In the clip, Farah is seen giving a glimpse of what it looks like in a meal from the sets of the show in her vanity van. The video showed delicacies prepared from her own home and the "chef of the day" was Arshad Warsi, who got biryani.

Farah captioned the clip: "Jhalak ki daawat. Monday binge. We judge better after a feast. Arshad Warsi cooks for us! Malaika Arora and I eat." Farah's friends from the industry couldn't stop themselves to comment on the video.

Actress Gauahar Khan wrote: "Miss you guys."

"Damn," said actress Huma Qureshi.



Geraldine Viswanathan replaces Emmy-winning actress Ayo Edebiri in 'Thunderbolts'

Los Angeles- Actress Geraldine Viswanathan has joined the cast of 'Thunderbolts', replacing Ayo Edebiri in an undisclosed role after the Emmy-winning 'The Bear' star dropped out of the project due to scheduling.

Geraldine Viswanathan joins a massive ensemble cast of actors playing some of the Marvel Cinematic Universe's best known anti-heroes, including Sebastian Stan as Bucky Barnes, Florence Pugh, David Harbour, Wyatt Russell, Hannah John-Kamen, Olga Kurylenko and Julia Louis-Dreyfus, reports 'Variety'.

Although specific plot details

remain top secret, the movie will effectively serve as Marvel's version of the DC's anti-hero team the 'Suicide Squad', with the characters brought together to do the dirty jobs the Avengers can't do.

As per 'Variety', Jake Schreier is directing from a script by Eric Pearson. Since Geraldine Viswanathan's career launched in the 2018 teen-comedy 'Blockers', she's appeared opposite Hugh Jackman and Allison Janney in 'Bad Education', opposite Dacre Montgomery in the 2020

romcom 'The Broken Hearts Gallery' and opposite Zach Galifianakis, Elizabeth Banks and Sarah Snook in 'The Beanie Bubble'.

She also starred in the comedy anthology series 'Miracle Workers' with Daniel Radcliffe, Steve Buscemi and Karan Soni. Edebiri is the second star to depart 'Thunderbolts' in recent months; Steven Yeun left in January, telling 'Variety' that "time passing and things shifting kind of pulled me out of it."

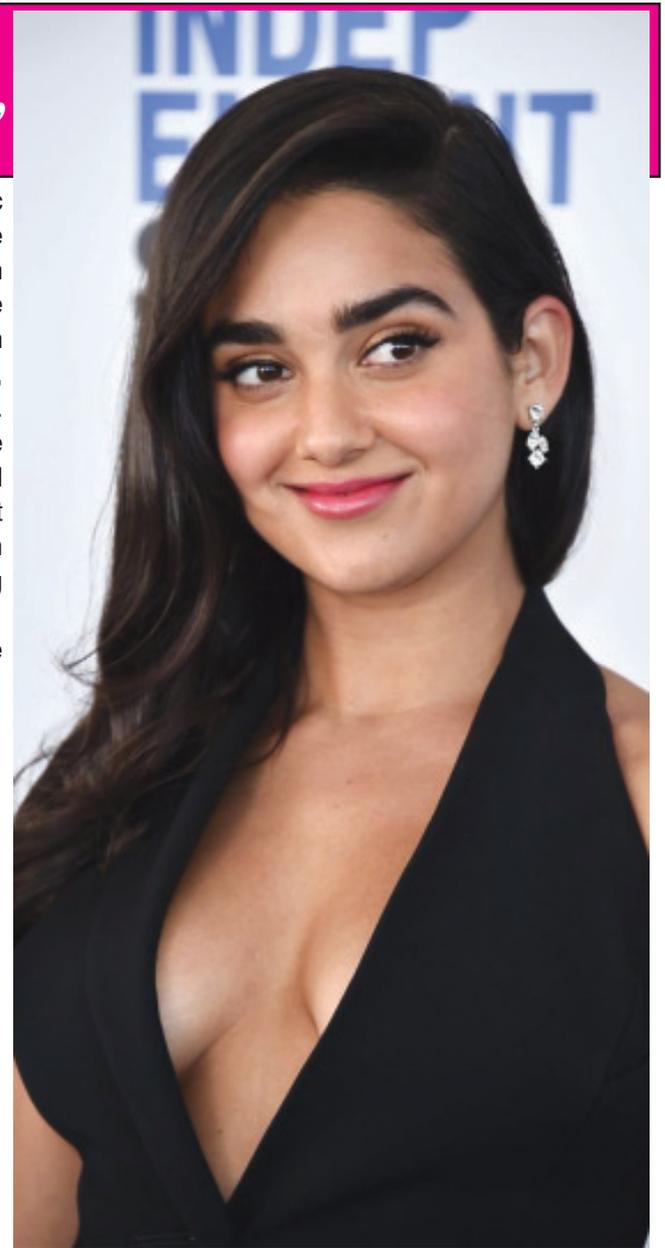
Lewis Pullman ('Top Gun: Maverick') stepped in to replace him in the role, which is also undisclosed.



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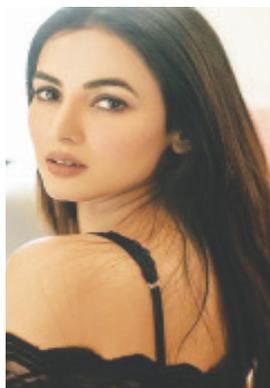
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Sonal Chauhan, Taha Shah to showcase nomadic musical tale of love in 'Zeher Mohabbat'

Mumbai- Actress Sonal Chauhan and Taha Shah's upcoming music video 'Zeher Mohabbat'. The actress says her character in it is all about raw emotion and intense love. Talking about her role in the song Sonal shared: "My character in 'Zeher Mohabbat' is all about raw emotion and intense love. I play this complex character who's deeply entangled in the highs and lows of a passionate relationship." "Throughout the song, you'll see my character navigating



through the complicated journey of love, dealing with its irresistible allure and struggling with its overwhelming impact." Sonal says her character portrayal adds depth to the storyline, showcasing the vulnerability and strength that comes with the complexities of love. Speaking about the same, Taha Shah shared: "In the storyline, my character is a nomad, a Saudagar, traveling to buy and sell goods.

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AIIMS doctor summoned in rape case; evidence deemed 'prima facie sufficient' by court

A Delhi court has summoned a doctor from the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) accused of raping another doctor on the pretext of marriage. Metropolitan Magistrate

Vijayshree Rathore of Saket Courts, however, deemed the evidence on record "prima facie sufficient" to proceed with the case against Dr. Deepak Gupta. The Hauz Khas police station registered the case under Indian Penal Code sections 376 (rape), 377 (unnatural offences), 313 (causing miscarriage without a woman's consent), and 506 (criminal intimidation).

Having examined a few crucial paper, the magistrate stated: "Accordingly, I take cognisance of the offence under sections 376, 377, 313, and 506 of the IPC against the accused.

"I have gone through the challan u/s 173 Cr.P.C. and statements and documents annexed alongwith it. Perusal of the same

reveals that the allegations levelled against the accused and the material on record is prima facie sufficient to proceed with the case," the judge said.



The court directed the summoning of Dr. Deepak Gupta on February 26 through the station house officer (SHO) concerned.

However, the court did not summon the accused's two sisters and brother, citing that the marriage between Gupta and the complainant was not

solemnised.

"Perusal of the record shows that there is no specific allegations against suspected persons placed in column no. 12 i.e. Mohan Lal Gupta, Uma Gupta and Baby Gupta as the marriage ceremony between the complainant and accused Dr. Deepak Gupta was never solemnised," the court said. It said that there were no specific allegations against them, and there appeared to be no role of the trio in the commission of the alleged offences.

According to the FIR, Dr. Gupta, a professor of neurosurgery at AIIMS, allegedly raped the complainant, also a doctor, on several occasions under the pretext of marriage.

Following a "sham marriage," he has been accused of compelling the complainant to undergo an abortion.

US bill proposes to let victims sue over digitally fake sexual images

As AI-generated explicit images of Taylor Swift create massive debate among the policy makers, US lawmakers have proposed a bill that would let victims sue over digitally faked sexual images. The 'Disrupt Explicit Forged Images and Non-Consensual Edits' (DEFIANCE) Act would add a civil right of action for intimate "digital forgeries" depicting an identifiable person without their consent, letting victims collect financial damages from anyone who "knowingly produced or possessed" the image with the intent to spread it.

The bill has been introduced by Senate Majority Whip Dick Durbin (D-IL), joined by Senators Lindsey Graham (R-SC), Amy Klobuchar (D-MN), and Josh Hawley (R-MO), reports The Verge.

"An identifiable individual who is the subject of a digital forgery may bring a civil action in an appropriate district court of the United States for relief against any person that knowingly

produced or possessed the digital forgery with intent to disclose it, or knowingly disclosed or solicited the digital forgery," read the bill.

The term 'digital forgery' means any intimate visual depiction of an identifiable individual created through the use of software, machine learning, artificial intelligence, or any other computer-generated or technological means, including by adapting, modifying, manipulating, or altering an authentic visual depiction, to appear to a reasonable person to be indistinguishable from an authentic visual depiction of the individual.

Pornographic AI-manipulated images, frequently referred to as deepfakes, have grown in popularity and sophistication since the term was coined in 2017. Meanwhile, Microsoft has also introduced more protections to its AI text-to-image generation tool Designer that users were utilising to create nonconsensual sexual images of celebrities.

Severe cognitive slowing key factor in long Covid symptoms: Study

A key common deficit in people with long Covid might be generalised to cognitive slowing, according to a research. Covid-19 survivors may experience a wide range of chronic cognitive symptoms for months or years as part of post-Covid-19 conditions (PCC) or long Covid.

To date, there is no definitive objective cognitive marker for PCC. The study "identified pronounced cognitive slowing in patients with PCC, which distinguished them from age-matched healthy individuals who previously had symptomatic Covid-19 but did not manifest PCC", said researchers from the University of Oxford. "This might be an important factor



contributing to some of the cognitive impairments reported in patients with PCC," they added.

To examine cognitive slowing, patients with PCC completed two short web-based cognitive tasks,

Simple Reaction Time (SRT) and Number Vigilance Test (NVT).

About 270 patients diagnosed with PCC at two different clinics in the UK and Germany were

compared to two control groups -- individuals who contracted Covid-19 before but did not experience PCC after recovery (No-PCC group) and uninfected individuals (No-Covid group). The results, published in the journal eClinicalMedicine, showed cognitive slowing was evident even on a 30-sec task measuring SRT, with patients with PCC responding to stimuli about 3 standard

deviations slower than healthy controls. About 54 per cent of patients with PCC's response speed was slower than 2 standard deviations from the control mean, indicating a high prevalence of cognitive slowing in PCC. Comorbidities such as fatigue, depression, anxiety, sleep

disturbance, and post-traumatic stress disorder did not account for the extent of cognitive slowing in patients with PCC.

Furthermore, cognitive slowing on the SRT was highly correlated with the poor performance of patients with PCC on the NVT measure of sustained attention.

There was not a significant correlation between the severity of mental health symptoms and chronic post-Covid cognitive deficit. "The present study reported a significant psychomotor slowing in individuals diagnosed with PCC," the authors said.

"This might be an important factor contributing to some of the cognitive impairments reported in patients with PCC."

Focus on drug price controls, preventive care can curb healthcare inflation

While there are several options for taming inflation in healthcare, prioritising prescription drug price control and placing a strong emphasis on preventive care emerge as key solutions, according to a report on Wednesday. Inflation in healthcare refers to the persistent increase in the cost of medical goods and services over time. This phenomenon is driven by a

combination of factors, including advancements in medical technology, rising labour costs, pharmaceutical innovations, and the complex interplay of supply and demand within the healthcare market. The report by GlobalData, a data and analytics company, reveals that healthcare professionals (HCPs) believe that enforcing prescription drug price controls and giving greater priority

to preventive care stand out as the top two solutions that could effectively mitigate healthcare inflation. Similar results were observed in previous survey waves that were launched to capture the H1 2023 and 2022 outlook. "Inflation in healthcare often results in increased expenses for medical services, medications, and equipment. This can burden both patients and

healthcare providers, potentially limiting access to essential treatments and straining the financial stability of healthcare institutions. Additionally, it may contribute to disparities in healthcare access and quality," said Sachin Gharat, Associate Project Manager at GlobalData, in a statement. The 2023 H2 physician survey includes 682 respondents across the US,

France, Germany, Italy, Spain, UK and Japan. In H2 2023, more than half of the surveyed HCPs expressed a preference for incorporating preventive methods into patient care. This inclination toward prevention underscores a growing recognition of its dual benefit: improving health outcomes while simultaneously contributing to a more cost-effective healthcare system.

PhonePe's Indus Appstore, Startup India join hands to launch Indus Appstore Emerging Startup Awards

New Delhi- PhonePe's Indus Appstore, in collaboration with Startup India, on Wednesday announced the launch of the Indus Appstore Emerging Startup Awards. This initiative, set to run from January 16 to March 30, 2024, will identify and celebrate the most innovative and impactful startups across various key sectors, including fintech, e-commerce, social impact, healthtech, agritech, and gaming.

The Indus Appstore Emerging Startup Awards, are designed to provide a level playing field for emerging startups in India, thereby positioning them to compete with global players. This aligns with the overarching goal of bringing Indian entrepreneurship to the forefront of the global stage.

"We are thrilled to collaborate with Startup India for the Indus Appstore Emerging Startup



Awards. Our goal is to foster a vibrant ecosystem where Indian entrepreneurs can thrive and create solutions that cater to our unique market," said Akash Dongre, Co-founder/CPO of Indus Appstore.

"The awards are not just about recognising talent; they are a testament to our commitment to

empowering startups to build for India. We believe that these awards will ignite the spirit of innovation and contribute significantly to the Indian startup landscape," he added.

The awards are aimed at identifying and applauding startups that demonstrate exceptional innovation, potential

for growth, and a positive impact on the market. Startups registered under the Startup India initiative, operational for at least one year, and having their applications listed on the Indus Appstore Developer Platform, are eligible to participate.

This initiative features a prize pool of Rs 12 lakh, with Rs 2 lakh allocated to the winner in each category.

"Startups that embrace innovation are better equipped to adapt to market volatility, identify new trends, and seize emerging business opportunities. They are agile, flexible, and quick to respond to market needs, giving them a significant advantage over their counterparts," said Aastha Grover, Head - Startup India.

"Through this programme, PhonePe's Indus Appstore is recognising some of the finest and most talented innovators who hold the potential to transform the

startup landscape," she added. Beyond the financial rewards, winners will secure direct entry into the Indus Accelerate Programme -- which brings an opportunity for developers to cut the clutter and make their apps stand out amongst the crowded app markets, by providing them higher visibility, optimised user acquisition avenues within the store and ability to market and build their identity within the entrepreneurial community.

The awards are a testament to Indus Appstore's commitment to encouraging Indian startups to build applications and solutions that cater to both local needs and global aspirations.

Interested startups can apply by uploading their app on the Indus Appstore and completing the required questionnaire on the Startup India website. The winners will be announced on March 30.

Meta's Threads reaches top 10 as its downloads tripled in Dec, X drops to No. 36



Meta's X rival Threads has witnessed growth in the top 10 most downloaded apps December last year, with

Store and Google Play. According to data from app intelligence firm Appfigures, Threads recorded 12 million new downloads in December, earning it the number four spot in the Top Charts by downloads on Apple's App Store.

The app also witnessed 16 million downloads on Google Play, putting it at number eight spot. It was the sixth-most popular app in terms of new installations across both stores. Threads had an impressive launch, with 100 million people registering within its first five

days.

However, the app experienced a decline in daily downloads from last September until the end of the year. But in December, Threads once again began to grow. While Threads was among the top 10 apps in terms of downloads last month, it did not make it to the top 5. However, its parent company did.

Instagram became the most downloaded app in December, with a combined 54 million installs from the App Store and Google Play, surpassing TikTok. As for Threads' direct rival, X, the

micro-blogging site is still experiencing the effects of its rebranding.

According to Appfigures, the app had just about 8.5 million installations in December. It was the 29th-most downloaded app on the App Store and the 46th on Google Play.

Last month, Meta founder and CEO Mark Zuckerberg announced that Threads is finally available to users in the European Union.

The move will give Threads an opportunity to tap more than 448 million citizens in Europe.

'Made in India' Samsung Galaxy S24 series goes on sale

Samsung on Wednesday announced that its recently launched flagship smartphone series -- Galaxy S24, is now available to buy in India.

The 'Made in India' Galaxy S24 series comes with Live Translate, Interpreter, Chat Assist, Note Assist and Transcript Assist features. AI built into Samsung Keyboard can also translate messages in real-time in 13 languages, including Hindi.

Samsung Galaxy S24 Ultra in Titanium Gray, Titanium Violet and Titanium Black colours starts from Rs 129,999 (12GB+256GB variant).



The Galaxy S24+ in Cobalt Violet and Onyx Black colours starts from Rs 99,999 for the 12GB+256GB variant and the 12GB+512GB variant will come for Rs 109,999. The Galaxy S24

in Amber Yellow, Cobalt Violet and Onyx Black colours begins from Rs 79,999 for the 8GB+256GB variant and Rs 89,999 for the 8GB+512GB model.

Consumers purchasing Galaxy S24 Ultra and Galaxy S24+ will get benefits worth Rs 12,000, while those buying Galaxy S24 can avail benefits worth Rs 10,000, the company said. The Galaxy S24 series is being manufactured at Samsung's Noida factory in India. Samsung has secured record pre-bookings for the Galaxy S24 series, making it the most successful S series ever in India.

Bollywood actor Ranveer Singh invests in boAt

Homegrown consumer electronics brand boAt has announced that Bollywood actor Ranveer Singh invested an undisclosed amount in the company, becoming a key stakeholder in its future. As part of the deal, he has been signed on as the official face of boAt's audio products and will be the star of their immersive new campaign, 'Lost in Nirvana'. "His investment and strategic involvement validate our mission to revolutionise the audio experience in India. Together, we'll push boundaries, redefine sound, and create a community that thrives on passion and innovation," Aman Gupta, Co-

founder, and CMO of boAt, said in a statement.

According to the company, this partnership sets the stage for Singh's pivotal role in boAt's upcoming campaign for 'Nirvana series' boAt's sub-brand offering premium & superior audio products, which includes TWS and headphones crafted for the ultimate listening experience.

"boAt's commitment to best-in-class sound and youth connect resonates deeply with me. Investing in their journey is more than just a financial decision; it's about co-creating a revolution. Get ready for boAt to amplify the sound of India like never before!" said Singh.

1.14 lakh startups generate more than 12 lakh jobs in India: FinMin

New Delhi- More than 1.14 lakh startups in India have created over 12 lakh jobs so far, the Finance Ministry said in its latest review of the Indian economy. In the report titled, 'The Indian Economy: A Review January 2024', the Department of Economic Affairs said that the 1.14 lakh startups recognised by the government under the 'Startup India initiative' created more than 12 lakh jobs (as of October 2023). The state-owned e-commerce platform Open Network for Digital Commerce (ONDC) clocked more than 63 lakh transactions till November 2023, the document read. Despite facing global



challenges in 2023 like valuation issues, few IPOs, regulatory changes and macroeconomic and geopolitical trends, India remains the third largest tech start-up ecosystem globally, with over 950 tech startups founded last year. The

cumulative funding for more than 31,000 tech start ups has exceeded \$70 billion (from 2019 to 2023), according to a recent report by Nasscom in collaboration with Zinnov.

"In 2023, despite facing global economic and regulatory challenges, Indian tech startups have prioritised the imperative of enhancing their business fundamentals, driving profitability and growth," said Debjani Ghosh, President, Nasscom.

"The proliferation of tech startups in tier 2 and 3 cities marks the ecosystem's resilience," she added.

Navigating 2024, tech startup founders expect to continue

the revenue growth path with measured steps focusing on optimising expenditure and maximising profitability for B2B tech startups.

Investments in deeptech will continue an upward trend in 2024. With generative AI (GenAI) acceleration, 70 per cent of start-up founders are embedding artificial intelligence (AI) in their solutions. As funding becomes scarce for the Indian startup ecosystem in general, the explosion of Artificial Intelligence (AI) has given a new lease of life to entrepreneurs and founders in the country, as the Centre extends support to the sector.

Apple App Store changes 'a step in the wrong direction': Microsoft



After Epic Games CEO Tim Sweeney and Spotify CEO Daniel Ek, Microsoft has also criticised Apple App Store changes in the EU, calling those "a step in the wrong direction." The new App Store changes, announced ahead of

annual app install after 1 million downloads.

Apple will also still take a 17 per cent commission from the developers who choose to use third-party payment processors.

"We believe constructive conversations drive change and progress towards open platforms and greater competition," said Microsoft Xbox president Sarah Bond in a post on X.

"Apple's new policy is a step in the wrong direction. We hope they listen to feedback on their proposed plan and work towards a more inclusive future for all," she added.

Bond is responsible for overseeing all of Microsoft's Xbox platform and hardware work. Epic CEO Sweeney has

labeled Apple's App Store changes as "hot garbage," and said that "Apple's plan to thwart Europe's new Digital Markets Act law is a devious new instance of Malicious Compliance."

X owner Elon Musk said these changes are "very concerning". Spotify CEO Daniel Ek earlier posted on X that Apple's DMA announcement is, "at best vague and misleading".

In a blog post, the Spotify CEO alleged that under the false pretence of compliance and concessions, Apple has put forward a new plan "that is a complete and total farce".

"Essentially, the old tax was rendered unacceptable under the DMA, so they created a new one masquerading as compliance with the law," he argued.

Microsoft introduces more protections to AI tool that created Taylor Swift deepfakes

Microsoft has introduced more protections to its AI text-to-image generation tool Designer that users were utilising to create nonconsensual sexual images of celebrities. The changes come after AI-generated nude images of American singer-songwriter Taylor Swift that went viral on X last week came from 4chan and a Telegram channel where people were using Designer to create AI-generated images of celebrities, reports 404 Media.

"We are investigating these reports and are taking appropriate



action to address them," a Microsoft spokesperson was quoted as saying. "Our Code of Conduct prohibits the



use of our tools for the creation of adult or non-consensual intimate

content, and any repeated attempts to produce content that goes against our policies may result in loss of access to the service. We have large teams working on the development of guardrails and other safety systems in line with our responsible AI principles," it added. Microsoft stated that an ongoing investigation was unable to confirm whether the images of Swift on X were created using Designer. However, the company is continuing to strengthen its text filtering prompts and address the misuse of its services, the report mentioned.

Why Nitish Kumar has switched sides again

The Bihar CM joining hands with the BJP has not only given the saffron party and the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) a shot in the arm before the Lok Sabha polls, it has also strengthened the narrative about the Opposition INDIA bloc's disintegration

By Amitabh Srivastava

Bihar chief minister Nitish Kumar, on January 28, submitted his resignation after days of intense speculation about his Janata Dal (United) once again joining hands with the BJP. "I have resigned as things were not working and the state of affairs within the ruling alliance [in Bihar] was not good. The government has also been dissolved," Nitish announced.

Nitish has also staked claim to form the next government, with the BJP as the new alliance partner. This will be the ninth chief ministerial tenure for Nitish. Last time, Nitish resigned on August 9, 2022 and took over as chief minister a day later. That government survived for 537 days. The new government that Nitish is set to form will be the third in the tenure of the current Bihar legislative assembly, which was constituted after the November 2020 assembly polls. Though the writing had been on the wall about the parting of ways of Nitish's JD(U) and the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) for over a week, the chasm between the two parties came to fore at the Republic Day state function in Patna's Gandhi Maidan on January 26, where Bihar governor Rajendra Vishwanath Arlekar

unfurled the national flag. Though chief minister Nitish and his deputy Tejashwi Yadav shared the stage—their chairs separated by a few feet—for close to 90 minutes, the silence between them was deafening.

There was no mutual acknowledgement—not even a nod or a smile. All this conveyed how the 17-month-old ruling Janata Dal (United)-RJD-Congress-Left alliance in Bihar was teetering on the brink, with strong speculation about yet another change of guard, just ahead of the Lok Sabha elections. Though there have not been any formal statements, a top JD(U) leader told INDIA TODAY that the party was alarmed by a confidential internal survey indicating that the committed support groups of his party and the RJD remained antagonistic to each other at the ground level. "Also, 12 Lok Sabha MPs of our party have been telling Nitish Kumar about their better electoral prospects should they contest the Lok Sabha polls as NDA (National Democratic Alliance) candidates," said the JD(U) leader. Besides, Nitish is said to be extremely unhappy with both the Congress and the RJD, as he believes he was denied his due in the Opposition INDIA bloc. He thinks RJD

boss Lalu Prasad Yadav did not back his case properly. There is also realisation in the JD(U) that the BJP-led NDA perhaps stands a better chance in the Lok Sabha polls.

"It's an open secret that Nitish had joined the Opposition bench in August 2022 for a foray into national politics. But he was denied any opening at the national level," said another JD(U) leader.

Some BJP leaders told INDIA TODAY that their central leadership had veered towards the possibility of Nitish and the BJP joining hands once again, as the combined vote-bank could give them an unassailable lead in Bihar. This is why the BJP central leadership has prevailed upon the party's state leaders and made them fall in line. Bihar, with its 40 Lok Sabha seats, is crucial for the BJP as it seeks a third consecutive term at the Centre in 2024. In the 2014 general election, the NDA won 31 Lok Sabha seats in the state; in 2019, the tally rose to 39 seats. Now, the BJP won't mind some additional boost in the form of Nitish in the run-up to the Lok Sabha polls. There have been broad hints about the growing



differences in the ruling mahagathbandhan in Bihar. Nitish had held a meeting with governor Arlekar on January 23 amidst buzz of a rift between the alliance partners. Nitish is believed to have spoken to a top BJP leader on phone and was promised support for an alternative government. The same evening, Prime Minister Narendra Modi tweeted to share his delight about former Bihar chief minister and socialist icon Karpoori Thakur being posthumously awarded the Bharat Ratna, India's highest civilian honour.

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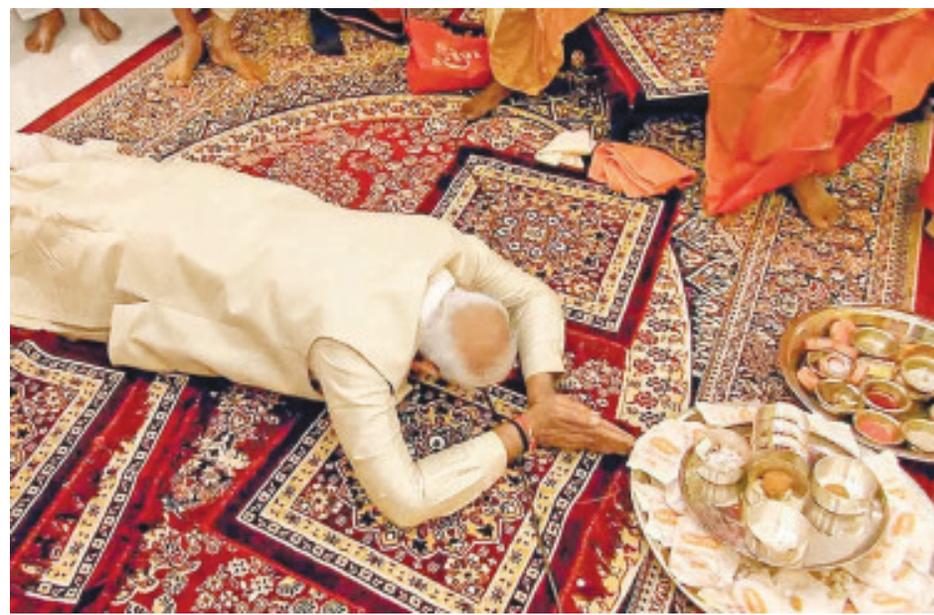
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The great Hindu revival

How will it change India and can it lead to Ram Rajya?'



By Raj Chengappa

A single sentence from Narendra Modi's address at the consecration ceremony of the Balak Ram idol at the brand-new Ram Mandir in Ayodhya summed up the epochal nature of the event. Choking with emotion, the prime minister said, "Our Ram Lalla will no longer live in a tent, he will now reside in his divine mandir." The imagery those words evoked—from a forlorn tent to a grand temple—encapsulated the century-old bloody struggle to build a mandir at what is believed to be the birthplace of one of the most revered deities of the Hindu pantheon. It was also emblematic of the cultural renaissance that the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) led by Modi and its mentor, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), hope to foster in India in the months and years ahead. Not to mention the emotional connect the event generated among India's Hindu majority, which experts say will boost the BJP's bid to win a third consecutive term with a clear majority in the general election to be held in the summer of 2024. Modi, though, will remain the prime mover, conductor and main yajman (patron) of this spectacular demonstration of Hindu revival and resurgence. As is his wont, everything about this moment was choreographed to perfection. In his first term, the prime minister resisted immense pressure from RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat and the Sangh Parivar to issue an ordinance to build the temple without waiting for the Supreme Court judgment on the matter. The Supreme Court had been hearing the Ayodhya land title case filed by its appellants since 2010. These litigants had appealed against the Allahabad High Court verdict the same year to divide the 2.77 acres of disputed land three ways—two parts to Hindu organisations and one part to the Muslim organisation involved. But Modi made it clear to the RSS that a solution would be found under the ambit of the Indian Constitution—that is, only after the judicial process was over. THE BUILD-UP



The prime minister's perseverance and patience paid off when, in his second term, the Supreme Court in a landmark judgment on November 9, 2019, concluded that the Babri Masjid was built on top of a "pre-Islamic structure" and acknowledged the Hindu side's claim on the land. The court ordered the disputed 2.77 acres to be handed over entirely to a trust to be created by the government of India to build the Ram Janmabhoomi temple. While condemning the demolition of the Babri Masjid on December 6, 1992 as "an egregious violation of the rule of law", the apex court of the country ruled that the wrong committed must be remedied. It ordered the Uttar Pradesh government to give an alternative five acres of land in Ayodhya to the Muslim organisation to build a mosque to replace the demolished one. Soon after the court's order, the prime minister appointed his former principal secretary, Nripendra Misra, one of his most trusted aides, as chairman of the Ayodhya Ram Mandir Construction Committee, which would coordinate with the Shri Ram Janmabhoomi Teerth Kshetra (SRJBTK) trust that had been formed. A nonsense retired IAS officer from the UP cadre, Misra, despite delays and setbacks

on account of Covid, ensured that much of the three-storey-high temple—set to have five shikharas—was completed in time for the consecration ceremony. Especially the ground floor where the garbha griha or the sanctum sanctorum would be housed. The Opposition accused Modi and the BJP of rushing through with the ceremony even before construction of the temple was complete to garner votes for the general election. But BJP sources say that the date and timing of the consecration ceremony were chosen by the SRJBTK trust based on Vedic astrology, according to which the most auspicious period for the pran pratishtha, the ceremony to bestow divinity on the newly sculpted Balak Ram idol, would be January 22. In the run-up to the ceremony, Modi undertook a rigorous 11-day yama-niyama-anushtan fast, including sleeping on the ground, to perform his duties as the yajman. To dispel the notion that Ram was a calling only for those living in the North, the prime minister went on a temple run in both the West and the South, visiting famous shrines in Maharashtra, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu before heading to Ayodhya. The intent was clearly to reassure those who worshipped other gods that this

was not a ploy to ram Ram down their throats—it was not a 'one nation, one God' theme. On the day of the ceremony, Ayodhya was transformed into a Vatican-like city with the road leading to the temple lined with performers from across the country singing bhajans devoted to Ram and dancing to them in celebration. Over 7,000 special guests from all walks of life, including celebrities from business, sports, cinema and media, descended on the temple town with a long cavalcade of SUVs transporting them to the mandir. UP chief minister Yogi Adityanath had spent considerable effort in the past four years to massively revamp the city's infrastructure. This included the widening of roads, modernising the airport and railway station and cleaning up the bathing ghats along the holy Sarayu river that flows not far from the temple complex. PROPRIETY AND PROPITIATION Modi ensured that the ceremony itself struck the right balance between propriety and propitiation. So, while the prime minister, dressed in a gold kurta with a cream dhoti and patka, remained the cynosure of all eyes, he made sure that RSS chief Bhagwat, CM Adityanath and state governor Anandiben Patel remained an integral part of the ceremony, as also the high priests of the temple. Even as the prime minister participated in the ceremonies, the celebrities assembled in the larger temple complex cheered wildly as they watched the proceedings on giant TV screens set up for them. Indian Air Force helicopters showered petals over them. Modi then offered dandavat pranam (prostrating on the ground) to the deified idol. When the time came for speaking on the occasion, Modi shared the dais with Bhagwat, Adityanath and Anandiben, apart from Mahant Nriyaya Gopal Das and Govind Dev Giri Maharaj, the president and the treasurer, respectively, of the SRJBTK trust. Both were given a chance to address the gathering.

A Man, A Temple, A Nation: Bharat's Story Has Just Begun

By: Radhika Bhattacharyya Shah

For how long can a falsehood be glorified and sold as truth? For how long can history be made to wear a burkha? For how long can the cap of deceit be worn to prevent India from its Bharatiya identity? The idea of India, coined by past historians and felicitated by the Congress party after the Partition, is a 'con' job of great magnitude. It was the lie that was thrust into our mindsets to make us glorify an invaded past by foreign plunderers and looters, who came to reign, destroy, bully, hurt, convert and try their best to erode our ancient culture. Sadly, in our schools, we were only taught about those people and their ancestors.

To make that false narrative of brotherhood and the notion of a truly blended culture saleable, a term was coined and it began to be called the 'Ganga Jamuna Tehzeeb'. This new term gave the impression that India was the land of a synchronised culture of sorts, where a foreign, forced and indoctrinated religion that arrived with our invaders, blended seamlessly with our centuries-old traditions and culture, resulting in a cultural ecosystem that has thrived for centuries in its bi-religious environment. Shall I call this a lie, a misconception or merely a narrative to diminish the strength, depth, reality and existence of the age-old Hindu religion and culture in its original land and geography?

The lies even extended to our language. Urdu, a blended language, was given legitimacy as though it was a twin to Hindi, and above Sanskrit. Akbar, the Badshah was given precedence over the Maharana Prataps and Shivajis of Bharat. The Taj Mahal and not the beautiful Dilwara Jain Temples, exquisitely carved in pure white marble and an architectural wonder, became known as a wonder of the world. The Taj Mahal became synonymous with India and our splendid temples of the south of India were put aside from mention. The post-independence political appeasement extended to our Hindu Bhajans too where Ishwar and Allah took the context of Ram and Shyam. The ridiculous and absurd idea and theory of India, a gimmick was sold and proliferated by the Congress party to dilute the pride of the Hindus only to appease the Muslims. The Hindu elite of New Delhi, mostly those from Lutyens' neighbourhood, got so swayed by the falsehood and narrative the Congress was creating about the idea of India that those from Lutyens' Delhi became



ambassadors of the idea. Most still hold their faith in that lie till now. Some Congress politicians have even gone to the extent of glorifying the Mughals by saying that they were not conquerors but one of us since they did not plunder and leave, but stayed in India for generations together! Which sensible invader would ever want to leave a land that promised every goodness on Earth? Which plunderer would let the golden goose fly away? Which conqueror would ever want to give up land where they could forcibly convert masses of people to follow their Islam through force, torture, fear and reprimand?

In recent decades, Delhi's Khan Market became the Burra Bazaar of the most distorted thoughts and beliefs which India's students, particularly Hindus from elite urban backgrounds, easily gobbled up like chaat. They were the lot who were brainwashed into loving the so-called idea of the combined tehzeeb to the extent that removing Aurangzeb's name from an elite road in Lutyens' Delhi and replacing it with the name of a much respected and loved President, APJ Abdul Kalam, irked them no end. Such a mentality became rampant since it was promoted and encouraged by the Congress who had more love for the Mughals than for India and more respect for evil conquerors like Khilji, Babur and Aurangzeb, than Indian Hindu sentiments. It was only the BJP, a nation-loving, nationalistic political party which made it their mission to undo the past and return India to its lost glory. The only reason Aurangzeb's name was not removed by the Congress party was because they believed that their exercise to make the Indian

Muslims feel a special affinity towards the Mughals, the gifters of Islam to them had been so successful that removing the name of that terrible man would hamper their Muslim votes and negate their covert initiative to influence the Indian Muslims into believing that the Mughals were 'their people'. Their hopeless mindset was so putrid that they, the Congress, wanted to ensure that the Mughals were continuously glorified at any cost. Even if our once Hindu Muslim converts felt no affinity towards the Mughals, the Congress party did all to somehow make them feel as if they were from Mughal blood and Aurangzeb was their beloved king as was Babur, the ruler who gave them their most important mosque! It is ironical that for the Lutyens' lot and pseudo-secular Indians, it was okay that our Ram temple had been destroyed by Babur, but it was not okay when the Babri masjid was demolished. The act of the destruction of the Babri masjid, for them, was a crime and a shame for India; a moment that would tarnish the reputation of Hindu-majority India, forever. India that is Bharat, fully emerged as Bharat on January 22, 2024. That ridiculous idea of India once sold as India's social and cultural foundation has finally been buried. January 22 was a day for the Indian civilisation to rejoice and revel, party and pray, holiday and heal. When people ask what Narendra Modi and the BJP's biggest contribution to India has been, one can proudly say that they have given to India what was once beyond our dreams or expectations – the return of our Ram Temple in Shri Ram's own Janmabhoomi. PM Modi has ensured the strong

return of Bharat's Hindu identity, Hindu values, Hindu sense of nationalism, Hindu religious comfort, Hindu sense of brotherhood and so much more. He has cleared our heads and eradicated forever any confusion about who we are and what our identity is.

India, instead of being known for its Hindu identity, was presented as a secular nation, as if secularism was equal to a singular national identity and secularism preceded the Ramayana and Mahabharata. As if 'secularism' denoted the religious and cultural genetics of India and was our tradition and history. Look how secularism was sold to overshadow India's identity as the world's only Hindu-majority nation or its Hindu character. Instead of being a Hindu nation, we took on a multi-religious identity. Instead of being defined by Sanskrit or Hindi, we became a multi-lingual democracy where Urdu became more significant at a national level than many other Indian languages. This led to repercussions. It caused a rift between the states and the Indian nation where some states vociferously began to reject the national language, Hindi, on the pretext that recognition of Hindi as Bharat's common language would diminish the value and significance of their own languages.

Everything was tried by the Congress under Nehru to devalue, diminish and desecrate the Hindu civilisation and its vintage identity, from day one of India's independence. The purpose was to create an environment which made India appear as if it was only born in 1947 and was a gift from the

Moghuls to the Congress. The Congress then sold the notion that Bharat and Moghul India were an inseparable partnership since time immemorial, hence their proximity could never be separated.

On January 22, 2024, India, that is Bharat proudly defined itself in a manner befitting its greatness. We can now proudly say that we are Bharat, the land of Hinduism and Lord Ram, without worries about what anyone will think, because it is the whole truth, our original identity and our permanent introduction.

When an identity is returned, any fear or complexity from the past gets removed. Thank you, dear Prime Minister, for unburdening us of our centuries-old and post-independence complex of 'if we wear our Hindu identity with pride then we might not appear secular or that we cannot pride in our religion and culture since it might make the minorities feel inadequate and unequal Indians' thought.

Prime Minister Modi has returned to us everything we were nearly forgetting. We are back to recognising our ancestry and antecedents and are unfearful of saying 'Jai Shree Ram, Jai Jai Shree Ram', a call that once echoed on Bharat's soil and would escape into the skies above Ayodhya.

Today, if you ask an Indian about his culture, his answer will not be confused as it was before. Earlier, he thought India's culture could not be separated from India's Mohammedan and Mughal history and this knowledge came from the biased and politically pleasing education curriculum, set by the Congress, which was more bothered about the inclusiveness of Mughal history rather than the memory and glory of our great kings and warriors. It was more important to teach us the ancestry of the Mughals than to acquaint us with our famous temples, our historical structures and our discoveries and contributions in the fields of medicine, math, astrology and science. Akbar was made an icon and Maharaja Ranjit Singh was forgotten. This was the irony we have now overcome. The books that we read as students were specially commissioned so that they would ensure that the glory and importance of Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj was relegated to the space of a region and not the entire India, which he had protected from the north to the south against the very same Mughals that the Congress revers till today.

How Lutyens' Delhi Derailed Nitish Kumar's Political Career — And Bihar's Growth Prospect

By: Utpal Kumar

In 1991, American economist Robert Reich wrote an article highlighting the growing social divide in the US. He called it the “secession of the successful”. A year later, he expanded the idea into a book, *The Work of Nations*, wherein he wrote how the “new elite is linked by jet, modem, fax, satellite and fibre-optic cable to the great commercial and recreational centres of the world, but it is not particularly connected to the rest of the nation”.

These ‘successful’ ones tend to ‘secede’ from society as they get richer and more successful. They tend to retreat into a reclusive, private world. Former diplomat and writer Pavan K. Varma highlights this “aggressive, selfish, insular” lifestyle of the Indian elite in his book, *The Great Indian Middle Class*, where he points out how they live in their bungalows surrounded by high walls, with secured water from personal borewells and electricity from diesel-powered gensets. When they need to socialise, they go to private clubs, use private transport, and have for all practical purposes cut themselves off from the larger Indian realities. They have not just seceded from their surroundings but are also eager to migrate abroad. The most popular alternative homes of Indian business families outside India can be found in the UK, Singapore, Dubai, and Switzerland. The traditional Lutyens’ elites owe their existence and sustenance largely to the Nehru–Gandhi family that has been in power, directly or indirectly, till 2014. In fact, as author-journalist Sanjaya Baru writes in *India’s Power Elite: Class, Caste and a Cultural Revolution*, “(N)o one represented this elite better than the country’s first political family, the Nehru–Gandhis, and the many families cutting across professions that benefited from serving the family’s successive generations.”

Baru continues, “From Motilal to Jawaharlal, on to Indira and Rajiv, and then Rajiv’s widow Sonia and her children, the Nehru–Gandhi family symbolised this continuity in pre-Independence and post-Independence power elite. Nehru, with his Allahabad Brahmin origins and upbringing, British education and his circle of friends from the British upper class — including the



last British Viceroy and his family — was the quintessential representative of the pre-Independence upper class.”

Till 2014, this power elite—disdainfully called Lutyens’ Club or Khan Market Gang by those on the other side of the ideological divide—retained power and pelf irrespective of which party was running the country. Even when Atal Bihari Vajpayee formed the first BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government at the Centre in the late 1990s, the Lutyens’ elite still called the shots. Baru writes, “Vajpayee ... was himself a long-standing member of the Lutyens’ elite and indeed belonged to what Modi and his groupies would dub the ‘Khan Market Gang’, so to speak. For, my own first glimpse of Vajpayee in the early 1980s was in, of all places, Khan Market. He was carrying a Pomeranian in his arms and walking into a veterinarian’s, simply smiled and walked on, as if he was running an errand in a familiar neighbourhood.” He continues, “The ease with which senior BJP leaders, including Jaswant Singh, Arun Jaitley and Brajesh Mishra, interacted with a range of the (India International Centre’s) IIC’s usual suspects and then went on to become powerful members of the Vajpayee government further reassured Lutyens’ Delhi. Lal Krishna Advani and wife were frequent diners at the IIC dining room, and Arun Jaitley loved his walks around the Lodhi Garden and the long chat sessions with friends over tea and snacks at the IIC lounge. Jaswant

Singh was a regular in the IIC’s seminar circuit. Even after Vajpayee became [prime minister], one could find many [Prime Minister’s Office] PMO officials at the watering holes of the Gymkhana Club and the IIC.” Nothing had changed for India’s traditional power elite. If anything, the Vajpayee regime had only reinforced a sense of invincibility in this class: That the more things change, the more they remain the same... But it’s not that Lutyens’ Delhi got everything on a platter. It took a lot of planning and plotting and intense negotiations and lobbying sessions to get the ‘right person’ for the job. N.K. Singh is a classic example. The son of an ICS officer, NK or Nandu as he would fondly be called by his close friends, worked closely with different Congress regimes, but it was under Vajpayee that he arrived with a flourish. Baru writes, “When Vajpayee was defeated and Manmohan Singh took over, there was a shake-up in the bureaucracy and many Vajpayee loyalists were moved out of important positions, but the Lutyens’ elite very quickly adjusted itself to the new dispensation, with ‘our friend Nandu’ (as N.K. Singh was called by his friends) replaced by a ‘our friend Montek’.”

But the NK story doesn’t end there. In 2013, it was he who, in order to stop the Modi juggernaut in the following year’s Lok Sabha elections, pulled up the Nitish Kumar card. In his book, *Single Man: The Life and Times of Nitish Kumar of Bihar*, senior journalist Sankarshan Thakur recalls how

“three nights before” Nitish Kumar parted ways with the BJP for the first time in 2013, N.K. Singh, by then a Janata Dal (United) (JDU) MP, was hosting a dinner at Cambridge. As the party was in full swing, NK asked Amartya Sen: “What, Sir, do you think are the options before Nitish Kumar?” The Nobel laureate “reflected a moment” and then said, “Well, Nitish Kumar has several options, but only one honourable one”. That one message — the honourable one, of course — changed the mind of Nitish Kumar and with it the course of the BJP-JD(U) alliance. Kumar suddenly began to see himself as the rightful inheritor of Lutyens’ tradition. The traditional power elite propped up Nitish, and under normal circumstances it would have been a masterstroke.

But then a ‘Black Swan’ event hit India in 2014. And the Lutyens’ design fell apart. In May that year, Modi became India’s fifteenth prime minister. Five years later, he retained power with a bigger mandate. Narendra Modi isn’t the first prime minister to have hailed from the non-Lutyens’ zone. Even Manmohan Singh, Modi’s predecessor, and Atal Bihari Vajpayee before him, were outsiders. So was P.V. Narasimha Rao. But they all worked overtime to be part of the Lutyens’ club. Rao, in fact, was so smitten by the idea of the Lutyens that he innately saw himself as an ‘insider’, which was the name of his fictionalised memoir too.

The same bug seemed to have bitten Manmohan Singh, who

“wanted to be remembered more for his Oxbridge connection than by his Punjabi roots”, as Baru writes. In fact, Simon Denyer, former Indian bureau chief for the *Washington Post*, told this writer way back in 2014, at the launch of his book, *Rogue Elephant: Harnessing the Power of India’s Unruly Democracy*, how Manmohan Singh was deeply upset over the publication of an article, “India’s ‘silent’ prime minister becomes a tragic figure”, in the *Washington Post* on 4 September 2012. That was the time when Prime Minister Singh was viciously criticised for his silence over a series of high-profile scams and other financial irregularities surrounding his government. Such was the outrage that he began to be ridiculed in the social media as ‘Maunmohan’ Singh. Denyer, thus, thought Singh was more sensitive about how the Americans saw him rather than how he was looked at back home. In this backdrop, when Modi came to power in Delhi, the elites of the Lutyens expected things to be as usual after the initial strain and stiffness. But Modi was starkly different from other prime ministers of the past. Unlike Vajpayee, who was often criticised for seeking legitimacy from the old Lutyens’ club, Modi sought to build his own elite system. Vajpayee was prepared to operate within the larger Left-‘liberal’ framework; he brought in changes but never aimed to cause any drastic, seismic transformation. Instead, he took an indulgent approach and himself sought to be accommodated among the Left-‘liberal’ pantheon of gods too. Modi, in that way, is the first prime minister to have self-consciously distanced himself from India’s post-Independence “Nehruvian elite”. What further annoys and unsettles the traditional elites is the fact that Modi has often made a virtue of it. In a TV interview during the run-up to the 2019 Lok Sabha elections he emphasised how he kept himself away from the elitist ecosystem. Modi said, “Lutyens dunia jise mante hein, usko naa to mein apne me la saka hoon, na apna bana saka hoon (I could neither make the Lutyens’ world part of me nor become a part of it).”