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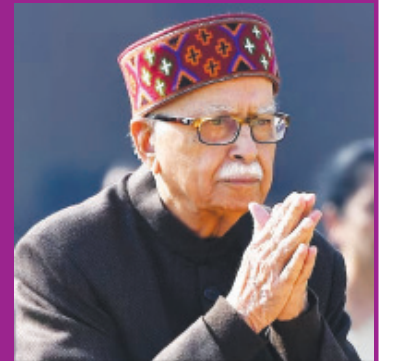
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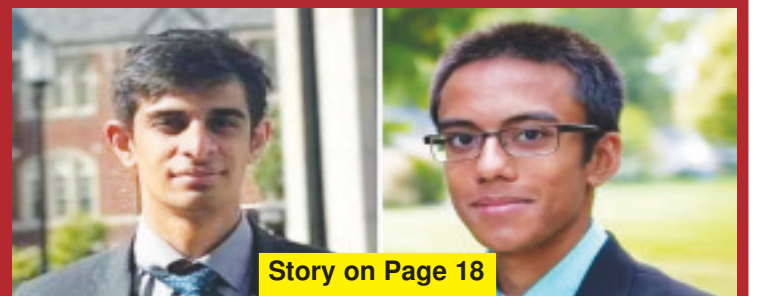
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75th Republic Day of India Organized in Long Island



(By our staff reporter) Recently the 75th Republic Day of India was organized at the Theodore Roosevelt Executive and Legislative Building in Mineola, Long Island, New York. January 26 celebrates India's adoption of a republic constitution, after gaining independence from British rule.

At this auspicious occasion, present were Honorees, New York State Senator Steve Rhoads, Town Board Official's Nassau County Controller Elaine Philips, Town of North Hempstead Supervisor Supervisor Jennifer DeSena. Other presiding officials present were Nassau County Deputy Executive Anissa Moore, NY State Assemblyman John Mikulin, Town of North Hempstead Clerk Ragini Srivastava, Nassau County Chief Deputy Executive Mr. Arthur Walsh, Nassau County Parks Commissioner Ms. Darcy Maccarone Belyea and Harry Malhotra who represented TOOB Supervisor



Joseph Saladino among others. A group sang the Indian National Anthem and the deliberations of the Republic Day Parade celebrations marking the day's

spectacular military and cultural pageantry as armed forces personnel marched along the Kartavya Path up to Vijay Chowk in New Delhi India on this

auspicious day was shown in the background on TV screens.

Esteemed community leaders were honored with several Citations and awards. Honorees were Chintu Patel co-founder of Amneal Pharmaceuticals and Irada International Foundation which supports health, education, and community outreach projects in India and the United States – Harry Singh Chairman, President and CEO of Bolla Management Corp and a billionaire who owns a chain of gas stations and chair of the county's Cricket Hospitality Committee - Dr. Narinder M Kukar an Endocrinologist specializing in diabetes and metabolism - Dr. Shefali Karkare, a Pediatrician and Neurologist – Dr Nakul Karkare, Orthopedic Surgeon, Harshad Patel President of Gujarat Samaj of New York, Manu Patel Senior Citizen, Pritpal Kaur of Preetnama TV - Mukesh Modi a film entrepreneur and Satinder Lovely Kaur, Director of Hum Hindustani.

Special thanks given by Jasbir Jay Singh to NHCC Bard Director Dr Bobby K Kalotee for celebrating India Republic Day at NHCC with a ceremony and lighting of the Dynamic building in India's Tri Colors Jau Hind. Students of Shilpa Mithaiwala presented patriotic songs and dances. Event was organized under the leadership of Dr. Bobby K Kalotee, Chairman of the Nassau County Human Rights Commission, Vimal Goyal and Deepak Bansal, President IDPUSA, Indu Jaiswal Chairperson of Indian American Forum and the Indian Community leadership,

Hyderabad student chased, attacked in Chicago, wife writes to Jaishankar for help

An Indian student was attacked and robbed of his phone by armed men in the US's Chicago. His family has appealed to the Indian government to intervene and ensure he gets proper medical treatment. Syed Mazahir Ali, who hails from Hyderabad, is pursuing a master's degree at Indiana Wesleyan University in Chicago. On February 4, he was attacked by armed robbers near his West Ridge apartment, according to a report in ABC7Chicago.

In a viral video, Ali can be heard saying that four people attacked him while he was going home. "I was carrying food back home when four people cornered me, kicked and punched me, and ran away with my phone. Please help me," Ali said in the video.

The attack left Ali with several cuts and bruises.

Another video shows the attackers following Ali as he runs to save himself.



"There were punches on my eye, and they were hitting me with their legs on my face, on my ribs, on my back," the report quoted Ali as saying.

The robbers took his cellphone and wallet before fleeing the scene.

Ali's family in Hyderabad, including his wife and three minor children, are deeply concerned about his well-being.

His wife has reached out to External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar, requesting assistance to travel to the US.

The Indian consulate in Chicago on Tuesday said that it is in touch with Ali and his wife and has assured them all possible assistance in the matter.

In a post on X, a statement by the Indian consulate in Chicago read, "Consulate is in touch with Syed Mazahir Ali and his wife in India Syeda Ruquiya Fatima Razvi and assured all possible assistance. Consulate has also contacted the local authorities who are investigating the case."

Abdul Wahab Mohammed, Ali's cousin, said, "Sometimes, I feel I should discontinue my master's and go back to my home country. Thinking about it and seeing such incidents, there is no proper security over here."

Ali expressed shock and trauma over the incident, saying, "America is my dream country. I came here to fulfill my dreams and do my master's, but yesterday's incident gave me trauma."

Five Indian-origin people arrested in Canada on extortion charges

Canadian police have arrested five Indian-origin people in connection with a series of extortions, threats, and frauds aimed at the South Asian business community in the Greater Toronto area.

(Sai Bureau)-The Canadian police have arrested five people, including two women, of Indian origin in connection with extortion threats targeting business owners of the South Asian community in the Greater Toronto area.

On January 24, Peel Police arrested four people from Brampton for offences including property damage, threats, and firearms-related violations.

The suspects have been identified as Gagan Ajit Singh, 23, from Brampton, Anmoldeep Singh, 23, from Mississauga, Hashmeet Kaur, 25, and Iymanjot Kaur, 21, both from Brampton. They face multiple charges including extortion, uttering threats to cause death, unauthorised firearm possession and related offences, stated Peel Police in a press release on Wednesday. The police said that Gagan Ajit and



Anmoldeep have already been produced before the Ontario Court of Justice in Brampton while Iymanjot and Hashmeet will attend the court at a later date.

On January 26, a 32-year-old reported receiving threatening messages

demanding money via phone and WhatsApp.

The fifth suspect, Arundeeep Thind, 39, was separately charged with extortion in connection with this incident.

Thind was held for a bail hearing and

attended the Ontario Court of Justice in Brampton, the Canadian police press release said.

The Peel Regional Police launched the Extortion Investigative Task Force (EITF) in December last year in response to a wave of South Asian business owners reporting threats of violence against them and their families if they didn't pay money, according to a CBC News report.

Superintendent Shelley Thompson, who heads the unit, said at a news conference on Wednesday that a total of 24 charges have been laid in connection to the 29 extortion attempts under investigation. Thompson said in nine of those instances, guns were fired at unoccupied businesses, according to the Toronto Star newspaper.

However, no injuries were reported in connection with the shootings.

\$20K Intercepted As Man Helped Scam Elderly Of Thousands: Suffolk PD



A Queens man stole thousands of dollars from two elderly people during a computer scam, Suffolk police said. Jarnail Singh, 21, of Queens, was arrested Friday in East Islip, police said. A 77-year-old Amityville man received an email, purportedly from the Geek Squad, reporting a charge of \$399, police said. The man called the phone number provided in the email to dispute the charge, police said. The person who answered the call told him to log into his bank account from his computer so the funds could be returned, police said. Once the man logged on, the caller gained access to the man's bank accounts and transferred \$40K from one of the man's accounts to the other, without the man realizing what had been

done, police said.

The caller convinced the man that the additional funds were transferred in error and the man was to provide him with the cash, police said. Singh picked up \$20K in cash at the man's home on Jan. 29, police said. The following day, the man provided \$5K in gift cards by phone, police said. On Jan. 31, an additional \$20K was withdrawn from the man's account, police said.

The man lost \$45K overall, police said. A 74-year-old Bay Shore woman also fell victim to the scam on Jan. 31, police said. She met Singh in a parking lot, where she gave him \$13K, police said. She was contacted again the next day and told to withdraw an additional \$20K, police said. Bank officials became concerned during the second withdrawal and contacted police, the department said.

Financial Crimes detectives, Third Precinct officers and Canine Section officers responded to the pickup location, a parking lot on East Main Street in East Islip, and Singh was arrested, police said. Police say they intercepted the \$20K. Singh was charged with third-degree grand larceny and third-degree attempted grand larceny. He is scheduled to be arraigned Friday at First District Court in Central Islip. The investigation is continuing. Anyone who believes they are a victim of this scam were asked to contact Financial Crimes at 631-852-6821 or Crime Stoppers 1-800-220-TIPS.

Indian-origin company director jailed in Singapore for dereliction of duty

(Sai Bureau)- A 60-year-old Indian-origin director of a company in Singapore was sentenced to four weeks in prison over dereliction of duty. The director, Thilagaratnam Rajaratnam, was also disqualified from acting as a director in any company for five years.

Rajaratnam was the sole director of Strategic Corporate Investments Pte Ltd (Strategic), and was convicted on October 30, 2023, for failing to use reasonable diligence in the discharge of the duties of

his office. On Wednesday (February 7), he was sentenced to four weeks imprisonment, and disqualified from acting as a director for five years. Thilagaratnam's brother is R Shanmugaratnam, a director of Citadelle Corporate Services Pte Ltd (Citadelle). The company provided corporate secretarial services, and its clients included companies owned by one James Henry O'Sullivan. He is the beneficial owner of Strategic.

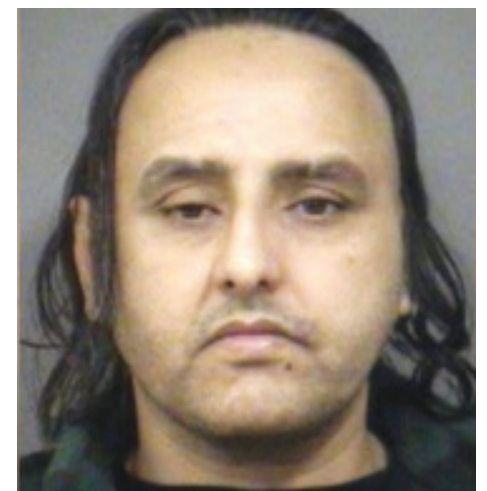
Indian-origin man charged for stealing donations from Canada temples

A Canadian of Indian-origin, Jagdish Pandher, from Brampton has been apprehended and charged in connection with a string of break-and-enter incidents targeting temples and commercial establishments across Peel Region.

Between March and August 2023, authorities received reports of multiple break-ins spanning Brampton, Mississauga, and Caledon. Surveillance footage obtained from three places of worship revealed the suspect, 41-year-old Pandher, forcibly entering temples and making off with cash from donation boxes.

Additionally, Pandher was captured on camera committing similar acts of theft at other commercial locations within the region.

Following a thorough and coordinated investigation involving law enforcement agencies throughout the Greater Toronto Area, Pandher emerged as the primary



suspect.

Already in custody for related offenses, Pandher now faces additional charges, including five counts of breaking into temples and businesses and stealing money.

"Investigators are confident that these were crimes of opportunity to steal cash and not motivated by hate", stated Peel Police in a press release.

Harsimrat K Badal demands to reopen trade with Pak on the international border

(By JAG MOHAN THAKEN) Chandigarh, India- Former union minister and Shiromani Akali Dal leader Harsimrat Kaur Badal has demanded to reopen trade with Pak on the international border. On Wednesday she called for reopening trade through the international border with Pakistan to rejuvenate the economy of the State even as she urged for applying a 'balm' on the wounds of Punjabis by awarding Chandigarh to Punjab and giving the State complete control over its River waters.

Participating in the debate on the budget in parliament, Mrs. Harsimrat Badal said, "It is of utmost importance to correct the historic wrongs committed against Punjab". She said Chandigarh was an inalienable part of Punjab and that the union territory should be transferred to the State at the earliest. She said it was unfortunate that this was not done despite a clear stipulation in this regard in the Rajiv - Longowal accord. Mrs. Badal said in the meantime Punjabi should be declared the official language of the UT and all postings in the UT should be done in the 60:40 ratio from Punjab and Haryana respectively.

Speaking on the issue of River waters, the Bathinda MP said Congress governments discriminated against the State by first giving away half of the State's River waters to Rajasthan and then creating the Sutlej Yamuna Link (SYL) canal to give additional water to Haryana. She said as per the riparian principle Punjab should be given complete control over all its river waters. "Let us decide what we want to do with this water, including selling it". She also called for restoring Punjab's rights in the management of the Bhakra Beas Management Board (BBMB).

Speaking about the problems being faced by farmers in the border belt who had farmland across the barbed wire fence in Indian territory along the international border, Mrs. Badal said "these farmers face severe restrictions while attending their fields". She said even though former Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee had given compensation to farmers tilling 21,000 acres of land beyond the barbed wire, they had not been paid the compensation for the last two years. She also urged that education and health facilities be augmented in the border belt with a PGI Satellite Centre being established at Khadoor Sahib besides designating border districts as backward districts and to make them eligible for special grants. She also called for raising the capacity of the AIIMS, Bathinda to 300 beds.

The Bathinda MP also demanded that the Maharashtra government withdraw its decision to reconstitute the Sri Hazur Sahib management board, saying the role of Sikh institutions like the SGPC and

the Chief Khalsa Diwan had been marginalized. She also called for restoring the Gian Godri gurdwara in Uttarakhand, Dongmar Sahib in Sikkim and Mangu Math in Orissa to the Sikh community. These days, Mrs. Badal raises the issues of the state as and when she gets the chance. On Monday also, while raising the issues of farmers and unemployment, she said the union government had failed to double farmer income, increase employment, control inflation and improve the lot of the poor and downtrodden.

Speaking on the President's Address in parliament, Mrs. Harsimrat Badal said, "Even though the President had stressed that improving the lot of farmers, poor and youth was the focus of the union government, the same has not been supported with data".

Asserting that the data was to the contrary, the Bathinda MP said even though the union government had promised to double farmer income by 2022, this promise remained elusive. "As per the data of the National Statistical Office (NSO) the average income of agriculture households increased from Rs 8,000 per month in 2015 to only Rs 10,000 per month in 2019". She said in stark contrast the NSO data revealed that the average debt of farmers had increased by 58 per cent in the same period. "As many as 10,880 farmers also committed

suicide in 2021 as per the Centre for Science and Environment", she added. Stating that farmers were most indebted in Punjab with small farmers in the State incurring a debt of Rs 3 lakh per farmer, Mrs. Badal said the issues of farmers were also not being addressed. "Despite



a clear-cut undertaking by the central government that a sub-committee would be formed to make minimum support price (MSP) a legal right of farmers, the same was not done". She said even as there was an 80 per cent increase in agriculture inputs, the increase in the MSP was increased by 30 per cent only. She also disclosed how there was a 26 per cent decrease in the Kisan Samman Nidhi beneficiaries in Punjab which was contributing the most to the national food kitty. She said similarly even though crop insurance companies had earned Rs 57,000 crore, farmers in Punjab did not get any compensation for successive crop losses even though its chief minister – Bhagwant Mann had promised to release compensation for crop losses even before the conduct of the girdawari.

Speaking about the state of the youth, the former union minister said as per the World Bank Data the unemployment rate was 23 per cent in India. She said 43,000 professionals were recorded to have

committed suicide even as there was a 68 per cent increase in the rate of students going abroad. She said in Punjab itself, the enrolment of youth in higher education courses had reduced by 50 per cent due to massive frauds in the SC Scholarship scheme during the tenure of the previous Congress government.

Talking about the menace of drugs in the country, Mrs Badal said the situation was precarious in Punjab with drones from Pakistan flying in drugs into the State. "A demographic disaster is taking place but the central government is yet to come out with a concrete policy to stop the influx of drugs into Punjab from across the border".

Speaking about the state of the poor, Mrs. Badal said as per data as many as 74 per cent of Indians were not able to afford healthy food. She said correspondingly since 2012 there had been a 40 per cent increase in petrol prices, 60 per cent increase in diesel prices, 70 per cent increase in pulses and a 77 per cent increase in milk prices. She also disclosed how the RBI had disclosed that there had been a 5.1 per cent decrease in annual household savings in 2023 even as the annual financial liabilities of households increased by 5.8 per cent of GDP during the same period. "This is surely not Achchhe din", Mrs. Badal added. The Bathinda MP also spoke on how the National Crimes Records Bureau (NCRB) had disclosed that there was a ten per cent increase in crime against women in 2023. She also asked when the women reservation law would be implemented, saying this was the need of the hour.

Show proof of BSF issuing ID cards: BJP legislator writes to Mamata

(News Agency)- BJP MLA from Siliguri Assembly constituency in Darjeeling district, Shankar Ghosh, has written to West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee, asking her to provide concrete evidence in support of her recent claim that Border Security Force (BSF) personnel are distributing identity cards to the villagers residing near the India-Bangladesh bordering areas of the state. In the letter, Ghosh claimed that since the BSF authorities have already denied the charge, there is confusion in the minds of the residents in the bordering villages, especially those in North Bengal, where the Chief Minister made the allegation. Ghosh claimed that given the evolving situation, it is the duty of the Chief Minister to bring clarity in the matter.

Ghosh also said that he has forwarded a copy of the letter to Union Home Minister Amit Shah, considering that the BSF comes under the jurisdiction of the Home

Ministry.

To recall, at a recent administrative review meeting in Cooch Behar district, which



borders Bangladesh, Banerjee had asked the residents of villages close to the India-Bangladesh border not to accept identity cards provided by the BSF.

She had also cautioned that those accepting ID cards from the BSF might come under the purview of the National Register of Citizens (NRC).

"I have got information that the BSF is trying to provide identity cards to the residents in the bordering villages. Do not accept these cards. If you do, you might come under the ambit of NRC. Everyone understands who is actually steering the movement against the NRC," she had said.

On the very next day, BSF authorities had issued a rejoinder to the allegation, stating that their personnel are only engaged in ensuring the security of India's borders and are not associated with the distribution of identity cards since the agency does not have the authority for doing such a thing.

GEF Council allocates \$916 million for biodiversity, pollution control

(News Agency)-The Global Environment Facility (GEF)'s 186 member governments have allocated \$916 million for international action on biodiversity, climate change, nature renewal, and pollution control, and advanced five Integrated Programs designed to tackle complex challenges in their entirety.

The GEF Council, in a meeting in Washington on Monday, approved funding for 45 projects and programs, including four blended finance initiatives involving the private sector.

The support will directly help more than 12 million people, including indigenous peoples and local communities.

The work program — the second-largest in the GEF's history — includes \$530 million for Integrated Programs for the ocean, food systems, transportation infrastructure, wildlife conservation, and critical forest biomes that have been designed to break down silos and advance holistic action across sectors and borders.

"To achieve impact that lasts, we need to work in an integrated and inclusive way," said Carlos Manuel Rodríguez, GEF CEO and Chairperson. "The GEF is moving quickly and efficiently to target donor contributions to urgent needs. We also recognize that financing alone cannot



reverse environmental degradation for the long term. This work program therefore stands out not only for its size but also for its focus on a whole-of-society approach to phasing out harmful practices."

The GEF Trust Fund work program is set to mobilize \$7.5 billion in co-financing, including from bilateral governments and multilateral development banks. It spans 77 countries, including 22 Least Developed Countries and 14 Small Island Developing States, with the largest regional shares of the funding package going to Africa and Asia. The total GEF Family of Funds financing

package is expected to exceed \$1 billion this week when the Council considers another \$203 million from the Least Developed Countries Fund (LDCF) and Special Climate Change Fund (SCCF). The new Global Biodiversity Framework Fund Council will also meet for the first time this week.

The GEF Trust Fund programming will contribute to global environment benefits across the board, with boosts for protected areas, landscape management, greenhouse gas emissions reduction, and terrestrial and marine ecosystems. It is

also set to advance 21 of the 23 targets in the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework.

With the Council's decision, the GEF has deployed nearly half of the record \$5.3 billion eighth replenishment for the 2022-2026 period.

While most of the GEF-8 support approved on Monday will be provided as grants, the work program also includes \$81 million for four blended finance projects that are set to mobilize \$1.36 billion in outside investment — a co-financing ratio of 17 to 1. This includes innovative initiatives related to biodiversity, climate change mitigation, land restoration, and chemicals and waste, and a particular focus on innovative capital market solutions and small- and medium-sized enterprises. GEF-funded projects and programs are implemented by selected international organizations in partnership with national and local institutions. In this work program, the largest shares of the funding will be managed by the UN Food and Agriculture Organization, the UN Development Program, the International Fund for Agriculture Development, the World Bank, the World Wildlife Fund-US, and the International Union for the Conservation of Nature.

ED attaches UP bizman's property worth Rs 2.15 cr



(News Agency)-The Enforcement Directorate (ED) has provisionally attached two immovable properties, worth Rs 2.15 crore, belonging to businessman Pawan Kumar Sharma under the provisions of the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA), 2002, in a bank fraud case. The action was carried out on Wednesday. The attached properties, situated in Delhi, consist of commercial and residential buildings registered in the name of Pawan Kumar Sharma, who serves as the controller/ manager/ loan guarantor/ ultimate beneficial owner of the business of M/s Govinda International. The ED in Lucknow had initiated an investigation based on various FIRs registered by the CBI,

Dehradun, under sections of the IPC, 1860, and the Prevention of Corruption Act, 1988, related to cheating and forgery against Pawan Kumar Sharma and one of his relatives, Keshav Joshi, proprietor of M/s Govinda International. The ED investigation, according to official sources, revealed that M/s Govinda International availed cash credit of Rs 15 crore from a government bank in Ghaziabad since March 2017. To secure the credit facility, the firm hypothecated its stock and provided collateral. According to the ED, the accused persons breached trust by selling the hypothecated goods without the bank's knowledge, misappropriating the funds and diverting the sale proceeds for personal gain.

NHRC notice to Bihar government over Bagaha midday meal incident



(News Agency)-The National Human Right Commission (NHRC) has issued notice to the Bihar government and asked it to file an action taken report pertaining to the case of 184 children who fell ill after consuming adulterated midday meals in Bagaha subdivision of the state's West Champaran district a couple of days ago. The apex human rights body asked the state Chief Secretary to reply, within four weeks, about the preventive measures it has taken so that no such incident would occur in future.

The NHRC officials have claimed that the students complained about the smell of kerosene oil in the midday meals served

to them but the school administration ignored them.

The incident occurred in a government middle school located at Bansaon Parsauni village in Bagaha subdivision on Monday. Soon after the meal, many students started vomiting and complained of stomach ache.

The news spread soon in the village and the parents of the students reached there and took their children to the Ramnagar common health centre and later to the sub-divisional hospital Bagaha.

Meanwhile, the Bihar Education Department has suspended the Principal and cook of the school

Chandrababu Naidu meets Amit Shah, Nadda to discuss alliance



(News Agency) Telugu Desam Party (TDP) President N. Chandrababu Naidu met Union Home Minister Amit Shah and BJP President J. P. Nadda in the national capital late on Wednesday night to discuss a tripartite electoral alliance for forthcoming simultaneous elections to the Andhra Pradesh Assembly and the Lok Sabha. Naidu, who arrived in the national capital in the

evening, drove to Amit Shah's residence for the crucial meeting.

The talks are likely to give some clarity over the TDP-Jana Sena-BJP alliance to take on ruling YSR Congress Party.

The TDP and Jana Sena headed by actor-politician Pawan Kalyan have already announced an electoral alliance. Jana Sena, which is a constituent of the BJP-led NDA, has long been trying to rope in the saffron party to join hands with them to defeat the Jagan Mohan Reddy-led YSRCP.

Naidu and Pawan Kalyan already had a few rounds of talks for seat-sharing and reported to have reached a broad consensus. The TDP, which had snapped ties with the BJP in 2018, evinced interest in reviving the alliance after suffering crushing defeat in the 2019 elections.

However, the BJP had been cold to Naidu's overtures as the YSRCP had

maintained friendly ties with the Modi government and extended support to it in the Parliament in passing several key bills.

With only a couple of months to go for the elections, the pressure was mounting on the BJP leadership to take a decision on the alliance.

Most of the state BJP leaders are in favour of alliance with the TDP-Jana Sena combine. BJP state President D. Purandeswari, who is sister-in-law of Naidu, had recently submitted a report to the party's central leadership on the feedback gathered from members of the party's state executive on the alliance. Chandrababu Naidu had met Amit Shah and Nadda in June last year. The meeting had triggered speculations of the two parties reviving their alliance as it was Naidu's first meeting with Amit Shah since 2018 when the TDP pulled out of the NDA.

Will stay here in NDA and 'not go here and there' from now on: Nitish Kumar



(News Agency)- Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar, who met Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Union Home Minister Amit Shah and BJP President J.P. Nadda in the national capital on Wednesday, said that from now on, he will stay put in the NDA and "not go here or there" anymore. Interacting with

media persons in New Delhi after the meetings, Nitish Kumar said: "I met PM Narendra Modi, HM Amit Shah and BJP national President JP Nadda. When the discussion of joining the NDA was underway, all discussion was done from Bihar. Today, I met with them and it was very satisfactory.

"We (BJP and JD-U) have been in one alliance since 1995. However, I went twice here and there (Grand Alliance) in between but now I will stay on this side (NDA) and I will not go here and there in future."

During the meeting with PM Modi, as per sources, he, on a lighter note, asked Nitish Kumar about where he had gone and Nitish Kumar responded that he will not go anywhere from now.

The Modi-Nitish Kumar meeting lasted around half an hour and the two discussed various political issues including the alliance partners of NDA in Bihar like Chirag Paswan, Jitan Ram Manjhi and Upendra Kushwaha.

Nitish Kumar met the PM after 5 months. These two leaders had last met during the dinner party of President Droupadi Murmu during the G20 Summit held in New Delhi last year, when he was still part of the Mahagatbandhan.

Nitish Kumar changed the alliance on January 28 and rejoined the NDA.

SP MLAs to visit Ayodhya on their own



(News Agency) Samajwadi Party MLAs will visit Ram temple in Ayodhya later this month and arrangements for the same will be made by their party. The SP MLAs will not accompany their counterparts who are scheduled to visit Ayodhya on Sunday, led by Speaker Satish Mahana. "There is no point in going to Ayodhya for Ram Lalla's Darshan on Feb 11. We had expressed our desire to attend the Jan 22 ceremony of Ram Lalla, but our party president Akhilesh Yadav was not given the invite in time. We will now urge the leader of opposition (Akhilesh) to make separate arrangements for us to visit the temple," said senior SP leader Shivpal Yadav. Akhilesh Yadav, meanwhile, said: "I have said it earlier as well.

Keeladi excavation: Madras HC serves notice to Centre on plea to publish

(News Agency) The Madurai Bench of the Madras High Court has ordered a notice to the Centre directing the ASI to publish the report submitted to it after the first two phases of Keeladi archaeological excavations in Tamil Nadu's Sivaganga district. A Division Bench of Justices D. Krishnakumar and R. Vijayakumar on Wednesday issued notice to the Centre on the petition filed by P. Prabhakar

Pandian of Madurai. It may be noted that Superintending Archaeologist of the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), Amarnath K. Ramakrishnan, had submitted a 982-page report on the findings of the first two phases of excavations to the then Director General of ASI in 2023. Prabhakar Pandian, who filed the Public Interest Litigation (PIL), said that about 5,800 artefacts were unearthed in

Keeladi during the Phase I and Phase II of the archaeological excavations.

The ASI also stated that there were no significant findings in the Phase III of the excavations and the Tamil Nadu State Department of Archaeology has carried out the excavations from the fourth phase and so far nine phases have been completed.

The PIL said that several significant findings have been made at Keeladi and

that this would throw light on the rich culture that prevailed in the area during the Sangam period. The petitioner also said that people from all hues in Tamil Nadu, including political leaders, historians, academicians, researchers, archaeological and Tamil enthusiasts, are demanding the reason for the delay in the publication of the 982-page report. He also sought direction to the ASI to publish the report in the public domain.

Taiwan's historic elections are over — what happens now? Larger conflict looms over West Asia

The outcome of the recent election for president of Taiwan represents both a rebuff and a challenge to China.

Voters in Taiwan, formally the Republic of China and home to about 24 million people, solidly rejected threats from the People's Republic of China, which has a population of nearly 1.5 billion and rules the island with an iron fist. "Michael" Lai Ching-te won the presidency of the ROC by a plurality in a hard-fought three-way race in which the opposition Kuomintang, the nationalist party that once controlled the mainland, gained a slim grip over the legislative yuan. Close as it was, the election of Lai Ching-te may be seen as a victory for democracy in the face of threats from Beijing to invade the island, as well as a referendum on how to approach China's claims in the restive region. Lai, who previously served as vice president under the outgoing president, Tsai Ing-wen, has made clear he will govern Taiwan as a sovereign, independent entity. Like Tsai, however, he will avoid challenging Beijing by declaring Taiwan's "independence" as a separate nation.

Lai's leading opponent, the candidate of the Kuomintang (KMT), Hou Yu-ih, has called for moderation and dialogue with the mainland. At the same time, Hou rejected a scheme for national "unity" that President Xi seeks as a step on the way to Beijing rule. Lai realized, reluctantly, there was no point in rocking the boat while KMT business interests, among others, were making enormous profits from investment in China as well as from trade, notably in semiconductors and other electronic items.

The repercussions of the Taiwan election extend across the region. In Pyongyang, North Korean leader Kim Jong Un has got to be worried about the stubborn insistence of such a capitalist enclave supporting a president-elect who would like to cast off all pretense of the island's existence as a PRC province and declare independence. He's not going to do that, but if Beijing tries to take over Taiwan by force, we may be sure that Kim would offer whole-hearted support to Beijing just as he's supporting the Russians in Ukraine with arms and missiles.

Just as worrisome, Kim could seize the moment to stage his long-feared assault on South Korea, firing missiles as he has long threatened against American and South Korean bases. He might even tip his missiles with nuclear warheads, waging the first nuclear war since the American atom-bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945. The pretext could be that he has to wage war against American and South Korean forces that might support Taiwan in a clash with China. At the least, the threat of North Korean attack could be enough for American forces not to leave their bases

in South Korea. President Biden has repeatedly promised America's "commitment" to defense of the island, but he might have to deploy forces from elsewhere in the region.

Might Kim also seize the moment of a Chinese invasion of Taiwan to attack Japan? Certainly he sees Japan as an enemy, along with the U.S. and South Korea. That prospect, however, is unlikely. The Japanese could well attack North Korea with the support of Americans on major bases, the navy at Yokosuka and the air force and marines on Okinawa. The Japanese, along with the Americans, would rise to Taiwan's defense, while the South Koreans, reluctant to offend Beijing, by far the South's biggest trading partner, might well hold back. For Kim, however, the temptation to invade the South, after years of tests of sophisticated missiles and artillery pieces and fabrication of as many as 100 nuclear warheads, might be overwhelming.

Before war breaks out, however, surely Beijing will try to exploit the serious divisions inside Taiwan. Chinese planes and ships have already staged massive exercises around the island; that's to be expected. Beijing may not live up to its rhetorical nonsense about the election as a choice between war or peace, but we may expect Xi to order periodic intimidation by air and naval exercises. One goal will be to deepen divisions between Lai's Democratic Progressive Party and Hou's Kuomintang, which won a slim majority over the DPP in Taiwan's legislative yuan, or parliament.

Beijing will also count on the failure of Lai to win a majority of the votes for president. Let us not forget that Hou might have won had a third-party candidate, Ko Wen-je, not insisted on campaigning as leader of his own Taiwan People's Party. The final tally shows Lai with 40.1 percent of the votes versus 33.5 percent for Hou and 26.5 percent for Ko, who's all for dialogue with Beijing but not at the expense of Taiwan's "autonomy."

The vote count for both the presidency and the legislative yuan means Lai will have to be extremely careful in dealing with political foes at home as well as with Beijing. In his quest for popularity, he may prefer to give an appearance, at least, of prioritizing domestic issues, including wages, rising prices and youth unemployment. Those issues count for more among Taiwan voters than vague threats from the mainland. They're accustomed to the din of rhetoric put out by Xi's propaganda machine, and they're able to shrug it off. It's as though Beijing has cried "wolf" so often that it's easy not to take the latest exercises too seriously. If push does come to shove with Beijing, Lai will have one advantage, in the form of his running mate, Hsiao Bi-khim.

BY DONALD KIRK

THE US Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, is on his fifth round of visits to West Asia with stops in Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Qatar and Israel. He plans to head to the West Bank thereafter to meet the Palestinian Liberation Organisation leadership. His previous four visits to capitals in the region since the breakout of the Israel-Hamas war in October last year failed to achieve any result beyond a meagre delivery of urgently needed food and medical supplies to the hapless people of Gaza, whose lives have descended into a veritable hell of continuing slaughter, deprivation, hunger and disease. The US, in being seen as complicit with Israel's barbaric assault against innocent men, women and children in the Gaza strip and now extending to the West Bank, may be losing its international credibility and claim to high moral credentials. Even the American people are divided with a spreading sense of outrage against Israel and anger at the Joe Biden administration's unwillingness to call out Israel's blatant violation of international law and human rights of the people of Palestine. This may affect President Biden's chances of re-election. Squaring the circle of supporting Israel unconditionally and preventing the escalation of the war spawned by its increasingly brutal military operations is a bridge too far and the contradiction is not lost on the countries in the region. Despite its profession of wanting to prevent escalation, the US has been reluctantly forced into becoming a participant in the escalation process by having to launch attacks against the Houthis in Yemen and targets in Syria and Iraq in retaliation for missile attacks against its bases and forces located in the region. It is difficult to see what another round of high-level visits to the region's capitals may achieve.

It is unlikely that Israel will agree to a ceasefire or wind down its operations significantly. PM Netanyahu's political survival and the opportunities that Israel's right-wing forces see in this conflict to expand Israel's territory and settlements indicate otherwise. Netanyahu believes, and perhaps rightly so, that as long as the war continues, his position as Prime Minister is safe. By the same token, an escalation of the war into the wider region would deflect attention from what Israel is doing in Gaza and the West Bank. Its provocative attacks against Iranian targets and the Hezbollah leadership in Lebanon are aimed at drawing them into a larger conflict in which the US may be unable to stay uninvolved. Netanyahu is playing a dangerous game. Not only the US but the rest of the world, too, may end up paying a huge price. Unless the US uses its significant leverage with Israel and compels it to halt all its operations in Gaza immediately and lift its virtual siege of the strip, it may be impossible to halt the escalation of the war and its catastrophic consequences both for the region and the world. Before October 7, 2023, the day of the horrific terror attack by Hamas against Israeli settlements, it had seemed as if the Palestinian issue had been successfully pushed to the margins. The US strategy for the region appeared to be working. It could dispense with active engagement in the region so as to focus on the Indo-Pacific as the main theatre of contention with its peer rival, China. The Ukraine war, which erupted in February 2022, already took away some of that focus, which made it all the more necessary to create and sustain a coalition of regional partners which could manage and uphold regional security in West Asia.

By Shyam Saran



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Hinduphobia in Western Media: A Parody of Truth

By: Sean Bradrick

Hinduphobic false narratives abound throughout Western media. Among the worst are Leftist outlets like the BBC, The Guardian, Time Magazine, and Reuters. They grasp onto these narratives and attempt to create a mirage of the oh-so-dangerous and scary Hindu nationalist boogeyman.

UK Member of Parliament (MP) Bob Blackman was daring enough to recently speak on the phenomena of anti-Hindu sentiment, saying “Last week in Ayodhya in Uttar Pradesh, the Ram Mandir was consecrated. This was of great joy to Hindus across the world as being the birthplace of Lord Ram. Very sadly, the BBC, in their coverage reported, of course, that this was the site of the destruction of a mosque forgetting the fact that it had been a temple for more than 2000 years before that happened



and that the Muslims had been allocated a five-acre site on which to erect a mosque adjacent to the town.”

The opening of the Ram temple in Ayodhya, devoted to the Indic hero and much-loved Hindu deity of the Ramayana, has brought back much joy and pride for many in India, and not just the country's Hindu population and diaspora. If we were to believe the Western

media, this new temple, dare I say ‘old mandir’, is “purely political, divisive, controversial, contested, a monument to Hindu supremacy, a spectacle” and “built on the site of a historic mosque.” They will print that “Indian Hindus have a war on mosques”, but certainly will not mention that five acres of land and funds have been provided for building a new mosque. They will not mention that Indian Hindus

were suppressed by centuries of invasions, Mughal rule, and British colonialism. This Hindu temple wasn't built on a mosque. It was rebuilt on the rubble of a mosque that was itself built on a historic Hindu temple, destroyed by invaders. Invaders built such mosques on many thousands of destroyed Hindu temples, schools, and libraries. Do people in the West really think all these mosques were built by peaceful means? It took 500 years to get this temple back in the location thought by many to be the place of Ram's birth. The process was done legally and voted on by India's Supreme Court, which has had at least one Muslim seat since the 1930s. It involved deliberate long legal proceedings with many arguments and documentation from all sides.

We know that on December 6, 1992, this 16th-century mosque in question was taken apart by

Hindu activists. This led to riots and cultural clashes involving up to 200,000 Hindus and Muslims. This resulted in an estimated 900 deaths, including 575 Muslims and 275 Hindus. India has come a long way since then. Let us in the US remember that we have mega-churches standing on the sacred sites of our indigenous peoples. Let the Anglos know that hundreds of churches in Greece and Eastern Europe were built on the ruins of mosques and Pagan religious monuments.

The typical American or European is unaware of Indian society and culture, which involves both Hindus and Muslims, along with many other religious and ethnic groups. The typical Westerner is most often very unaware of India's history. The liberal Western media seems to think that Indian Hindus and Muslims are fighting a religious civil war.

American diplomats should stay out of Afghanistan

BY ANNIE PFORZHEIMER & M. ASHRAF HAIDARI

While the world has paid close attention to wars and atrocities elsewhere, Afghanistan's people have been ruled by a sanctioned extremist group since 2021 that keeps public order through force and coercion. The depth of Taliban depravity includes extrajudicial killings, silencing free speech and even kidnapping teenaged girls on the grounds that they are “improperly” covered and holding them in prison, where they are subject to torture and rape.

On Feb. 18-19, UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres will meet in Qatar with special envoys for Afghanistan from over 20 countries, plus the European Union and Organization of Islamic Cooperation. This is the second time such a format is being employed in an attempt to bring unified international pressure to mitigate the human rights and security disaster that is Taliban rule in Afghanistan. The Secretary General also is trying to advance the nomination of a new special envoy for Afghanistan, as authorized by the UN Security Council in late December. This miracle-worker-to-be must focus world attention on how to support a united non-Taliban Afghanistan



populace to take part in intra-Afghan talks, while withholding formal recognition from the Taliban until it tangibly implements the international human rights obligations of the Afghan state. Kathy Gannon, a journalist versed on Afghanistan and the region, wrote recently that the U.S. should “go back to Afghanistan” by reopening an embassy. She argued that this would lead to a deeper understanding of the Taliban and therefore improve our foreign policy. Deep understanding certainly is a policymaking asset. But one must balance that against the strongly negative impact that

American “wingtips on the ground” would have on our wider strategic policy goals.

Having an American embassy may appear to be a neutral act — after all, they exist in countries with hostile governments — but sending U.S. diplomats back to Afghanistan without any Taliban concessions would not be neutral. After all, an embassy is not a newspaper bureau of independent foreign correspondents; it is an ecosystem of diplomats whose presence would confer an unearned legitimacy on the Taliban and require a strengthening of ties.

Given ongoing security threats, U.S. diplomats would need Taliban guards on the compound and armed Taliban escorts to move around; those diplomats' meetings with Afghans would be as honest as a visit to a Soviet-era Potemkin village. Normalization of an inexcusable gender-apartheid regime could follow. A reopened U.S. embassy would lead to other countries opening their missions, serving as an endorsement of the Taliban, which inspires terror groups around the world, thus giving those groups all the blueprint they need to imagine holding their own territory. So much has been lost since the ill-fated Doha Agreement

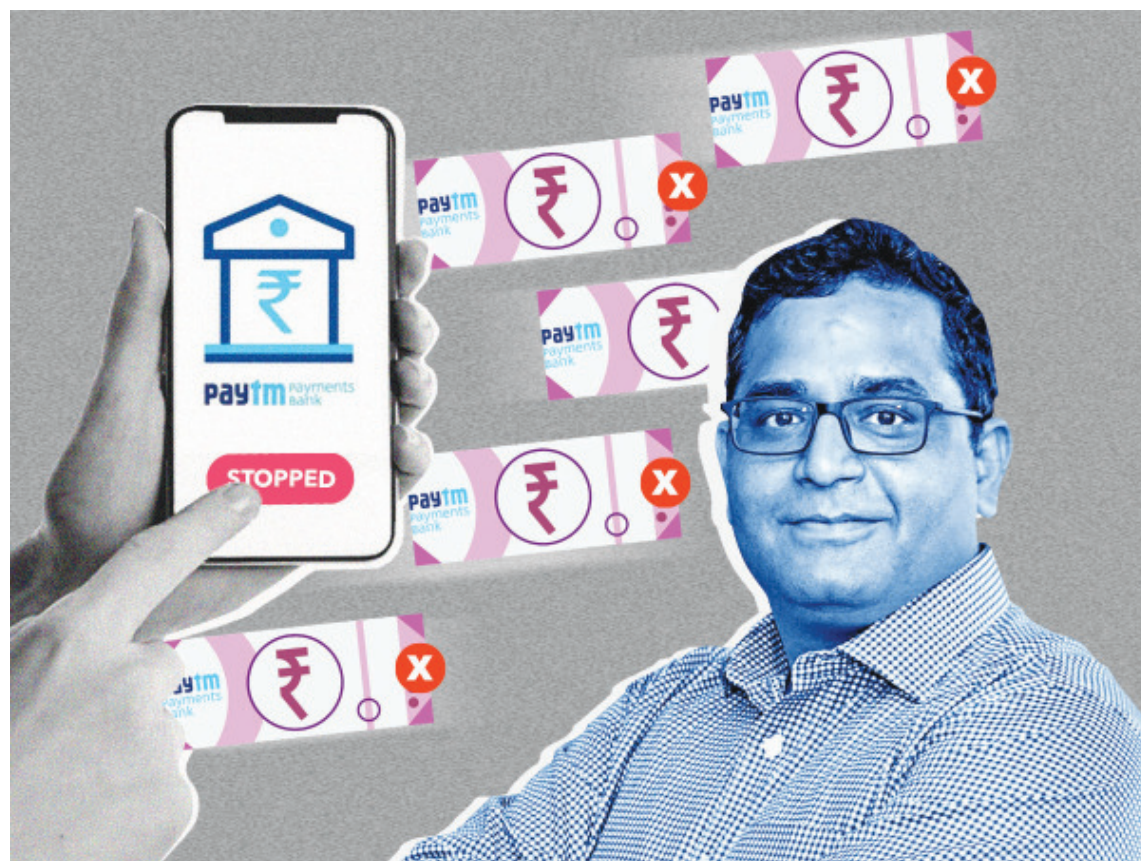
was signed four years ago. The only lever of international suasion remaining rests with diplomatic recognition and paths to power and money, which the Taliban want to possess without changing their ideology or repression.

Rather than concede to the Taliban, the U.S. and like-minded countries should strengthen their commitment to the Afghan people. For example, in September, during the UN General Assembly High-level Week, foreign ministers should meet with prominent Afghan human rights defenders representing multiple political and ethnic groups. Diplomats should meet, and publicize those encounters, with various Afghan constituencies, particularly women (photographed from the back for safety), business and professional sectors and the youth. Contact with the Taliban should be downgraded to the lowest possible technical level, without allowing photographs in official settings. UN travel sanctions against specific Taliban officials should be strengthened, and more officials should be listed under the current sanctions regime for harboring terror groups and creating new jihadi-based madrassas for the purpose of indoctrinating Afghan youth, not educating them.

Paytm Fiasco Shows the RBI Doesn't Understand Payments

BY Andy Mukherjee

When the Indian monetary authority began giving out restricted banking licenses to a new category of payment facilitators about eight years ago, it should have spared a thought to their orderly resolution — just in case it had to shutter any of them. As the deepening crisis at Paytm Payments Bank Ltd. shows, the regulator didn't do its homework. Last week, the Reserve Bank of India barred the institution from any further deposit or credit transaction in customer accounts, wallets or cards after February 29. The logical next step is that the bank's license will be scrapped, maybe as early as next month.



This is just unnecessary chaos for 50 million merchants, most of whom are too small to afford credit-card fees and infrastructure. For a majority of them, online payments are synonymous with the Paytm app, connected to a Paytm Payments Bank account. No wonder then that when it comes to receiving funds over the country's wildly popular smartphone-based money transfer protocol, this small, six-year-old bank has a near-24% share of transactions, more than any other deposit-taking institution. Ever since the 2008 Global Financial Crisis, regulators have been leaning on lenders to write their "living wills", or plans to honour liabilities in case trouble on the asset side of the balance sheet leads to distress or failure. But a payments bank in India isn't

permitted to lend, and can take only ₹ 2,00,000 rupees (\$2,400) in deposits, well within the ₹ 5,00,000 covered by insurance. It's less a bank and more a utility designed to grease the wheels of commerce. If one spoke drops off, there will be no financial hole to fill, only a commercial void that can be made whole by redistributing the business load. It is here that the Reserve Bank has botched things up. The RBI's press release detailed all the ways in which it was restricting Paytm Payments Bank. The statement didn't have a word about what customers are supposed to do. In RBI's mind, it's shielding them: they have the freedom to take their balances out while being barred

from bringing new money in. This hasn't always been possible. For instance, the resolution of Yes Bank Ltd., which had a full-fledged banking license, was done four years ago by trapping funds while a rescue was mounted. But depositor protection wasn't the point here. The concern in the industry is from retailers: how are they to accept non-cash payments if credit transactions into their accounts are forbidden? The regulator ended up ignoring the very reason why it has allowed this category of banks to exist in the first place: facilitation of transfers. The RBI's unhappiness isn't new. It stopped Paytm Payments Bank from onboarding fresh customers nearly two years ago. Last year, while imposing a fine

of \$650,000 on the bank, the regulator highlighted a number of violations, including failure to identify beneficial account owners and a video-based customer identification that allowed connections from IP addresses outside India.

Onboarding of new online business has also been problematic at mainstream lenders. In October, the regulator stopped Bank of Baroda, the country's fifth-largest deposit-taking institution, from signing up new customers for its mobile app. In that instance, bank executives across at least 10 cities had linked existing accounts without cell phone numbers to unrelated numbers to show new customers. To whom did these phones belong? Bank staff, family and friends, according to a report in Al Jazeera.

Let's give the RBI the benefit of the doubt. Maybe the Paytm Payments Bank violations were really so egregious as to warrant a pack-up notice that will never be sent to regular lenders for operational or technological failures. (To be shut down, they have to blow up serious money on bad loans.) A CNBC report said that the RBI had discovered instances where thousands of accounts were linked to a single tax identification number.

The question is, who exactly is being punished here for alleged non-compliance? The bank has two shareholders: One97 Communications Ltd., better known as Paytm, owns 49%. Vijay Shekhar Sharma, the founder, controls the remaining 51%. One 97 has lost \$2.5 billion in market value in three days. It's

unclear if its stake in the bank was worth more than 40% of the firm, but the RBI's move has triggered a crisis of confidence in Paytm itself. The wallet business, now housed within the bank, is up for sale, the Hindu Business Line reported. Shares of Mukesh Ambani-controlled Jio Financial Services Ltd., named in the report as a potential buyer, jumped almost 14% on Monday. But Paytm is its wallets. That's the business Sharma built as India's fintech pioneer. A distress sale — perhaps to Ambani, the country's richest tycoon — will be demoralising for the country's startup community. To think that it's the RBI's action that could end up engineering such an outcome would smack of regulatory overkill. Especially since Paytm says that neither the fintech nor the bank is being investigated for violating India's foreign-exchange controls.

There was a better way to handle this. The franchise value of the bank could have been cut to zero without hurting One97's shareholders disproportionately or its customers at all. The confusion in the wider payment industry would have been avoided. All that the RBI had to do was to return the wallets (along with a payment-processing license) to One97 and find a new home for the bank accounts. It could all have been done in consultation with the bank's board, which has been sleepwalking through the entire crisis. If the existing directors are too much in Sharma's control, the regulator could have inserted its own representative to steer the board. It wouldn't have been terribly difficult to reassure payers and payees: "From March 1, your account balance will move to XYZ Bank, and you'll get three more months to complete a fresh know-your-customer check. Meanwhile, you can top-up your wallets and accept payments as usual." Instead, the RBI's communication last week was only about crime and punishment. It's obvious that the RBI doesn't really get payments banks. So while it's considering whether to kill Paytm Payments Bank's license, it should ask itself if it shouldn't just scrap the category and go back to something it understands reasonably better: deposit protection.

Is INDIA Bloc Missing Sonia Gandhi's Touch?

By Shubhabrata
Bhattacharya

Two statements last week by prime leaders of the parties that, to date, pass off as INDIA bloc members, provide pointers towards the outcome of the 2024 general elections.

In Kolkata, deriding Rahul Gandhi's Yatra 2.0 as an event for "photo shoots", Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee declared that the Congress was not capable of crossing even 40 seats in the Lok Sabha polls. Speaking in Rajya Sabha, Congress President Mallikarjun Kharge, in an attempt to mock the BJP, repeated the ruling party's clarion, 'aabki baar 400 paar', to the amusement of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Pre-poll rhetoric? Perhaps. But the chasm between the figures cited by two INDIA leaders reflects perception of the poll prospects of the two principal national parties. Nitish Kumar, the man who had accoucheured the idea of an anti-BJP front, with the Congress as its pivot since September 2022, has preferred to return to the BJP-led NDA rather than remaining in INDIA. The 'midwife' has aborted the birth of the new bloc.

Nitish Kumar's departure may be the precursor to more attrition in the opposition. INDIA bloc talks are still on in some states. Seat adjustments may emerge. The bid to pit one common candidate against the BJP in 400 seats is now a pipe dream.

The very idea of including the Congress in the anti-BJP front provoked resistance from most regional parties initially. A Third Front sans the BJP and Congress was the preferred theme of leaders like Mamata Banerjee, Arvind Kejriwal, Akhilesh Yadav and K Chandrasekhara Rao (KCR), who favoured a 'Federal Front'. The recent demeanour of Mamata Banerjee, Akhilesh Yadav, Arvind Kejriwal and, to some extent, Uddhav Thackrey, shows that they prefer to treat the Congress as a pariah. (Even micro parties like the Rashtriya Lok Dal of Uttar Pradesh and the Vanchit Bahuja Aghadi of Maharashtra are flexing their muscles at Congress).

Nitish Kumar had countered the excommunication of the



Congress. He had echoed Sharad Pawar, who had always advocated including the Congress. The Left parties also favour keeping the Congress on board.

In September 2022, a large number of opposition stalwarts converged in Haryana's Hisar to observe the birth anniversary of Chaudhary Devi Lal, who had been the force behind the emergence of the anti-Rajiv Gandhi front in 1989. Nitish Kumar took the Hisar platform to rope in these parties in favour of inclusiveness rather than the exclusion of Congress.

Later, he was joined by Lalu Yadav, who was then on his way to Singapore for his kidney transplant surgery. The two leaders called on Sonia Gandhi. Nitish Kumar followed this up with a meeting with Mallikarjun Kharge and Rahul Gandhi in early 2023. The Patna conclave of June 23 followed.

Less than a month later, when Patna's host Nitish Kumar went to attend the Congress-hosted second meeting in Bengaluru on July 16-17, he was chagrined to find himself sidelined. Rahul Gandhi, closely aided by Sitaram

Yachury of CPI (M), had taken centre stage. With his penchant for the 'Idea of India' to counter Modi, Rahul Gandhi suggested that the bloc be named 'INDIA' so that it would become a fight between Modi and 'INDIA'.

The etymology of INDIA reflected the quixotic approach of Narendra Modi's opponents. Rahul Gandhi's favoured abbreviation INDIA was expanded and the name "Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance" emerged. Normally, first comes a name, then the abbreviation. Here, the cart was placed before the horse.

Nitish Kumar had reservations on the bloc's name. When he found the discourse meandering, he, accompanied by Lalu Yadav and Tejashwi Yadav, left Bengaluru before the customary photo-op. The next meeting in Mumbai in August-end saw Mamata leave the meeting in a huff. No meeting of the bloc so far has seen full attendance till the very end.

Last month, Mallikarjun Kharge held a virtual meet on Zoom but only 10 of 28 parties joined the call. The disparate group was in no rush to find a common programme to counter the BJP.

Or to prepare the ground for seat-sharing across the 400 seats where they wanted to challenge the BJP jointly.

The INDIA bloc has not held a single public meeting in seven months of intense behind-the-door confabulations.

The Congress, the only pan-India party in the group, would normally have been expected to act as the binder. However, the Congress's reluctance to start seat sharing talks and its preoccupation with the projection of Rahul Gandhi made it lose the initiative.

As Rahul Yatra 2.0 reached West Bengal, Mamata Banerjee's administration denied it basic facilities like night parking slots for vehicles and permission to hold meetings in public venues. Chagrined, Rahul Gandhi left the yatra for two days and flew off to Delhi. When he returned, he completed the north Bengal phase by curtailing his route and entered Bihar.

When he re-entered Bengal, yet another round of Trinamool hostilities ensued. Rahul Gandhi's statements to mollify Mamata Banerjee did not work. She held rallies in the very districts where the Yatra was scheduled. Her barrage of statements belittling the Congress continued.

While the Trinamool stayed away, district-level CPI(M) cadre joined in. However, CPI (M) too did not field its fiery petrel, youth leader Minakshi Mukherjee, who in recent weeks has made waves with her state-wide Insaaf Yatra (justice march), which culminated in a mammoth show of strength at Kolkata's Maidan on January 7.

Rahul Gandhi is accompanied in

his yatra by the Congress's two most important general secretaries, KC Venugopal (in charge of party organisation) and Jairam Ramesh (Communications). Effectively, the Congress brass is in transit while the Lok Sabha polls loom large. Rahul Gandhi's travels have accentuated Congress's travails.

The Congress's pathetic state was exposed the day Nitish Kumar decided to switch. Kharge, who was in Karnataka's Kalburgi, said he had no information and would be returning to Delhi the next day and see what was happening. Apparently, Kharge made several calls to Nitish Kumar's mobile, which were not answered. When the landline in Patna was reached, he was informed that Nitish Kumar was not available.

On Saturday, Kharge kicked off the Congress's election campaign by addressing a rally in Delhi where his comparison of loyal party workers to barking dogs left the cadre both amused and confused.

Advising the party's local leaders to be diligent while appointing booth agents, he said, "When we buy a dog or an animal we are careful. If the dog is incapable of barking, we reject it. Similarly, a booth agent ought to be like a dog which is capable of barking" (a rough translation of his original gem in Hindi, which some party men posted on Instagram.)

Clearly a case of barking up the wrong tree - pardon the pun - while the BJP, with steady additions to its list of allies, is fully in poll mode.

Tailpiece: Sonia Gandhi's behaviour during the President's address to Parliament last week showed that she perhaps does not share Rahul Gandhi or Kharge's abrasiveness. Congress secretary Rajiv Shukla told media persons, "When the Rashtrapati mentioned Ram temple, we thumped the desk. Soniaji also thumped the desk and welcomed it." Sonia Gandhi was the binder of the United Progressive Alliance. Perhaps the inability of the present Congress dispensation to get the INDIA bloc going is embarrassing for her.



Protests in POJK and Gilgit-Baltistan Expose Pakistan's Fake Narrative on Kashmir

Written By: Arun Anand

February 5 is a national holiday in Pakistan, observed as Kashmir Solidarity Day to mark its so-called solidarity with Kashmiri people. The 2024 solidarity day has, however, taken an unexpected turn as, paradoxically, the very region that is traditionally meant to serve as the epicentre of this solidarity campaign — Pakistan-Occupied Jammu and Kashmir (POJK), including Gilgit-Baltistan — has emerged as a hotbed of dissent. These regions have witnessed widespread protests in recent months, signalling a growing discontent among the populace against what they perceive as imperialistic policies imposed by Islamabad. The unrest has reached a point where a massive region-wide shutdown has been scheduled, coinciding with the government's Kashmir Solidarity Day façade.

Most significantly, POJK activists based out of Scotland have given a call for setting up the POJK government in exile. Mirza told this writer in a telephonic conversation that Kashmiris refuse to be at the receiving end of the Pak establishment any more. "Pak establishment has done nothing but exploited and ruined us. There are no basic amenities and political freedom for common people," says Mirza who is spearheading the campaign to set up the government in exile for POJK. For long, the Pakistani establishment, led by its powerful military, has milked Kashmir for its power consolidation as well as to hide its internal as well as external failures. Observed since 1991 to commemorate what essentially has been its sponsored insurgency in Jammu and Kashmir, multiple actors in Pakistan. This includes the Pakistan Army and political groups along with terror outfits such as Jamaat-ud-Dawa (the civilian face of terrorist

Lashkar-e-Taiba), Hizbul Mujahideen and Jaish-e-Mohammed.

What distinguishes 2024 is how the very territories of Kashmir that have been illegally occupied by Pakistan since its creation in 1947, such as the POJK, including Gilgit-Baltistan (GB), are witnessing sustained protests against the policies of the Pakistani government towards these regions. Interestingly, Pakistan refers to a part of this occupied territory as 'Azad' J&K, even as in reality it has maintained a strong military grip over these areas, with overwhelming powers vested in Pakistani Army corps commanders deployed in these regions. Both these regions of POJK and GB lack political representation and autonomy in local governance, with locals often lamenting that the decisions affecting their lives are often made in Islamabad without considering their needs and aspirations. This has resulted in overwhelming systematic discrimination and economic marginalisation. Mirza cites an interesting example in this regard as he explained, "Pakistan government buys electricity from the occupied territory (POJK) at the rate of Rs 2.60 per unit and sells it for Rs 53 per unit in the rest of Pakistan."

"The situation on the ground is so bad that this region can't be compared with even the poorest city of Pakistan. We have been pushed down so much that we can only compare POJK with some of the least developed African nations. Its sheer oppression and exploitation of our human and natural resources that has become unbearable now," he adds.

The Pakistani government has also been accused of undertaking a systematic demographic alteration campaign, especially in the Shia-dominated Gilgit-Baltistan. The military dominated Pakistani establishment has encouraged

the influx of outsiders, mostly Punjabi Sunnis, to alter the demographics and dilute the distinct cultural identity of these regions. At the time of GB occupation in 1947 by Pakistan, Shias constituted 80 per cent of the region's population, which has been significantly reduced below 50 per cent by 2020, as per local organisations. It has sustained made the region ripe for sectarian tensions. The resultant sectarian tensions have offered an alibi to the Pakistani government to maintain a tight security control in the region. It has targeted the religious leaders of the Shia community over trivial pretexts, as evidenced by the detention of prominent cleric Agha Baqir al-Hussaini in September 2023.

Furthermore, the government of Pakistan has engaged in a systematic land grab in POJK and GB over the last decade under the garb of China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Apart from acquiring limited private lands, the Pakistani government has engaged in appropriating community lands under the controversial "Khalsa Sarkari" laws, which empowers the state to take over the "ownership of barren or uncultivated land", leaving locals without any rights over their lands. For instance, Senator Farhatullah Babar of Pakistan People's Party (PPP) in one of his speeches a few years back laments that Pakistan has denied GB people any rights over their lands. "Gilgit-Baltistan is the only region where people do not own their lands, where people have been denied the right over their lands because giving them land rights would inevitably give locals rights over their resources."

For months, the people in POJK and GB have been protesting against the draconian tax regime of Islamabad, which has wreaked havoc on the already

miserable lives of locals amidst high inflation. As such, this demonstrates a deep-seated dissatisfaction amongst the residents of POJK, including those in GB, who have grown increasingly disillusioned with the imperialistic policies imposed by Islamabad be it their political disenfranchisement, economic marginalisation, and concerns about demographic changes.

It may be recalled that Pakistan introduced Gilgit-Baltistan Revenue Authority Bill 2022 in August 2022 through which a several new taxes were imposed on 135 items. This had invoked widespread protests across the region bringing life to halt in this Pakistan occupied impoverished region of Jammu and Kashmir.

Another issue that has invited protests from people is the gradual increase in the wheat prices by the government. Amidst its economic downturn that has worsened in recent years with billions of dollars of accumulated external debt, Pakistan asked the local GB administration in March 2023 to rationalise the wheat prices with the aim of withdrawing the subsidies over the commodity over time. Given that wheat is a staple food of the region, the increasing prices increasingly burdened the locals amidst the rising retail inflation even as the economic conditions worsened further in this impoverished region. This rescinding of this policy has emerged as one the main demands of the people during the ongoing protests. Likewise, the other main issue that has constitutively drawn widespread criticism and discontent among the people of POJK and GB is the growing electricity charges with increasing load shedding. For instance, the government imposes 13 types of taxes on an electricity bill including fuel (tax). This defies rationality given that the electricity generated within the territorial limits of the POJK is based on hydropower.

POJK and GB generate over 2500 MWs of electricity, mostly contributed by Mangla Dam power project (1000 MWs) and Neelum Jhelum Hydroelectric Project (969 MWs). Against this production, the cumulative peak electricity demands of POJK and AJK are 700-800 MWs. However, most of the electricity is transmitted to the Pakistan Grid in Punjab province by the government of Pakistan, from where POJK and GB governments are forced to buy the electricity at commercial rates. Despite this, the residents of these occupied regions are subjected to extended hours of power outages round the year. Grotesquely, the Pakistani government charges fuel tax (fossil tax usually charged for thermal electricity) from the electricity consumers of POJK and GB even as it generates surplus electricity from its water resources, defying any logic for its draconian yet imperial attitude towards the people of occupied Jammu and Kashmir.

Why We Need to Redefine Our Secularism

By: Abhijeet Sriwastava

We are living in a time when the very idea of 'Bharat' as a modern nation-state has come under intense scrutiny. Newspaper columns are brimming with arguments and counter-arguments, each vying to establish a 'specific' narrative. With the 'Pran Pratishtha' (consecration) of Ram Mandir in Ayodhya, this debate has reached its crescendo. A section of intelligentsia, both in India and abroad, outraged by the prospect of Hindu resurgence, has gone to extremes to proclaim the demise of secular ideals in the country's polity.

There is no gainsaying the fact that India, under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, has seen a marked departure from the Nehruvian idea of secularism, demonstrating a palpable desire to embrace its ancient roots which Nehru once disparagingly referred to as the "deadwood of the past." The question emerges: does the fall of 'Nehru's secular temple' inherently signify the fall of India as a pluralist society? The question necessitates a detailed and nuanced response.

Nehru, who called himself "the last Englishman to rule India," viewed the country through a Westernised lens and consistently failed to appreciate India's civilisational strength. The type of secularism he attempted to impose on India ran counter to the dharmic character of the land. After all, India is known to be the land where 'dharma' forms an integral part of the individual and collective existence of its people; even our identity as a modern nation-state has intricately been shaped by ideals enshrined in our dharmic texts.

Terms like Satyameva Jayate (the national motto), Dharmo Rakshati Rakshitah (ideal of the Research and Analysis Wing), Yato Dharmastato Jayah (Supreme Court's baseline), Bahujan Hitaya, Bahujan Sukhaya (All India Radio), Satyam Shivam Sundaram (Doordarshan), Seva Asmakam Dharmah (Indian Army), Nabhah Sparsham Deeptam (Indian Air Force), Kosh Mulo Dand (Income Tax) and



Yogakshemam Vahamyaham (LIC) have all been borrowed from our ancient scriptures.

The original copy of the Constitution document had 22 illustrations to record India's 5,000-year-old cultural history – from epic heroes like Rama and Krishna to Hanuman, Buddha and Mahavira, and further to Akbar, Shivaji, Guru Gobind Singh and Rani Laxmibai. Interestingly, part III on Fundamental Rights carries an illustration of Rama, Sita and Lakshman – an implicit acknowledgement of Ram's revered status as the supreme guardian of people's rights. In another intriguing example of the substantial influence wielded by 'dharma' on a state's functioning, the Gujarat High Court, in 2011, ruled that the performance of a Hindu ritual known as 'Bhoomi Pujan' to mark the laying of the foundation stone for the court's new building, at which Brahmin priests recited Sanskrit slokas, did not conflict with India's secular Constitution. While dismissing the Rajesh Himmatlal Solanki versus Union of India case, the court held that "secularism is not the antithesis of religious devoutness", and that since the prayer ceremony was "noble" and meant to benefit everyone who used the court's building regardless of their religion, it was secular. Most recently, Prime Minister Narendra Modi presided over the Bhoomi Pujan ceremony of the new Parliament building which was conducted almost exclusively according to Hindu rituals, in the presence of representatives of other

religions. Despite concerted efforts by those opposing Hindu values to erode their indelible imprint on India's national character, it remains undeniable that our foundational identity is firmly rooted in the essence of 'dharma'. India cannot truly embody secularism as conceived in the Western worldview, as this concept is fundamentally alien to the cultural fabric of this land. Secularism was not originally a part of the Constitution; it was inserted through the 42nd constitutional amendment in 1976 during the period of Emergency when the entire Opposition was in jail. The question arises: why did our founding fathers and mothers opt not to include this word in the Constitution? It is important to note that secularism, as a 'statecraft principle,' is a relatively recent concept marked by a lack of consensus on its precise definition. The interpretation of the idea appears to vary, based on the social, cultural, and political practices inherent in each country. For instance, European societies may exhibit high secular values, and many European countries, such as the United Kingdom, Denmark, Finland, Greece, and Sweden, maintain established churches. Federal states like the Netherlands, Germany, and Austria allow local communities to determine the role of religion in education, some having a church tax until recently. In contrast, France staunchly advocates for the formal separation of State and Church, emphasising the removal of

religious values from the public sphere, replaced by secular principles like liberty, equality, and fraternity. The American Constitution remains somewhat ambiguous on the matter, with the term 'secular' absent in the text. However, the First Amendment (1791) prohibits Congress from establishing a religion and guarantees the free exercise thereof, often interpreted as the establishment clause and the free exercise clause, described as a 'wall of separation' by Thomas Jefferson. In the Indian context, secularism was introduced during the colonial period, when religious identity became essential markers to secure privileges. In his book 'Republic of Religion', Abhinav Chandrachud argues that "secularism was artificially imposed by the British colonial government in India even though it did not fully exist in England". The British rulers adopted a policy of secularism in India to safeguard colonial interests while deepening the religious schism in the country that helped them to rule over the country for an extended period of time. They saw the 'diversity of races in India, and the presence of a powerful Mohammedan community as circumstances favourable to the maintenance of their rule'. Undeniably, the colonial rulers used secularism as a tool to exploit existing religious fault lines in Indian society. The deleterious impact of skewed secularism practised by the British resulted in the partition of India in 1947 which was the direct consequence of

the grant of a separate electorate for the Muslims. Prior to delving into the constituent assembly debates on secularism, it is important to remember that in the West, secularism gained ground as a movement against a theocratic state that was unjust and oppressive. The idea found little resonance in India, a historically pluralist society with robust religious foundations. However, in the constituent assembly debates, we see fervent arguments both in favour of and against secularism as a guiding principle for India as a modern nation-state. Interestingly, both Dr BR Ambedkar and Pandit Nehru were averse to the idea of including the word secularism (and socialism) in the text of the Constitution. When Prof. K.T. Shah, a constituent assembly member from Bihar, tried to move an amendment to include the words "secular, federal, socialist" in the Constitution, Dr Ambedkar rejected it. In his response to Shah's argument, Dr Ambedkar said that there was no need to include the term secular as the entire Constitution embodied the concept of a secular state, which meant non-discrimination on grounds of religion and equal rights and status to all citizens. Another senior member of the assembly, K.M. Munshi argued that the state must take into account the religiosity of Indians; underlining the tolerance inherent in the Hindu belief system, he said, "We are a people with deeply religious moorings. At the same time, we have a living tradition of religious tolerance – the result of the broad outlook of Hinduism that all religions lead to the same god." He passionately argued that the non-establishment clause of the American Constitution was "inappropriate to Indian conditions and we had to evolve a characteristically Indian secularism, and the Indian state could not possibly have a state religion, nor could a rigid line be drawn between the state and church as in the US". He added, "A secular state is not a Godless State. It is not a state which is pledged to eradicate or ignore religion. It is not a state which refuses to take notice of religious belief in this country."

India's High-Stakes Geopolitical Chess in The Midst of Israel-Hamas Conflict



Written By: Group Capt MJ Augustine Vinod VSM (Retd) & Vineet Maliakal

MARITIME SECURITY

India has got its hands full with protecting its ships in the Indian Ocean. Trouble in these waters spells trouble for India's energy needs and its wallet. Next, we're talking oil – India's lifeline. As one of the top oil importers, India is keeping a nervous eye on those rising oil prices. If the conflict heats up, it could mean even higher prices and a bigger dent in India's budget.

India has been actively moving towards green energy, reflecting a strong commitment to sustainable development and environmental responsibility. To offset this dependability, in recent years, India has made significant strides in harnessing renewable energy sources, notably solar, wind, and hydroelectric power. The government has launched various initiatives, including ambitious solar energy projects, to increase the share of renewables in its energy mix. These efforts are driven by India's goals to reduce its carbon footprint, combat climate change, and ensure energy security. The transition to green energy also aligns with India's international commitments under the Paris Agreement, showcasing its leadership in global environmental efforts. This shift not only contributes to global sustainability but also opens up new economic opportunities and job creation in the renewable energy sector. For now, will it be enough is the moot question.

BIG CHESS GAME OF TRADE AND ECONOMICS

The India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor is like India's golden ticket to less dependence on China. But with the conflict, this plan could hit a major

roadblock, potentially shaking up India's strategy.

And the cherry on top? The Indian Rupee feeling the pinch, thanks in part to those pesky oil prices. A weaker Rupee could mean everything gets more expensive and slow down India's economic engine. The depreciation of the Indian Rupee can have significant implications for the country's national elections. A falling rupee often reflects concerns about the nation's economic health, potentially leading to increased inflation and a higher cost of imports. This situation can result

in public discontent, particularly among those affected by rising prices and economic instability. In the context of elections, political parties may leverage these economic challenges to criticise the incumbent government's policies and propose alternative strategies. The government in power might face increased scrutiny over its economic management, influencing voter sentiment. Additionally, Opposition parties might use the falling rupee as a focal point for their campaigns, promising economic reforms and stabilisation measures. Therefore, the state of the currency can become a barometer of public opinion and a decisive factor in the electoral outcomes, shaping the political discourse and voter priorities.

ENERGY DIVERSIFICATION

As said earlier, India might need to play a quick game of musical chairs with its energy sources. This means looking beyond the Middle East for oil and gas, maybe eyeing other regions or

even ramping up renewable energy efforts. It's like suddenly realising you can't always rely on your favourite takeout place and starting to cook at home.

DIPLOMATIC BALANCING ACT

India's got a tightrope to walk diplomatically. They've got to manage relationships in the Middle East while also keeping an eye on global opinions and alliances. It's like trying to be the popular kid in school who's friends with everyone, but it's a lot trickier.

STRATEGIC ECONOMIC ADJUSTMENTS

India may have to shuffle its economic deck, potentially seeking new trade agreements or bolstering existing ones to mitigate any trade disruptions caused by the conflict. This means diversifying not just in terms of suppliers, but also markets for its goods, to ensure that its economic growth doesn't miss a beat. It's akin to a business that, upon losing its prime location, quickly sets up

shop in multiple areas to not only recover but possibly expand its customer base.

MILITARY PREPAREDNESS

With maritime security concerns, India might boost its naval presence or up its surveillance game in the Indian Ocean. It's kind of like installing extra security cameras when your neighbourhood gets a bit sketchy.

HUMANITARIAN DIPLOMACY

India's response to maritime security threats often extends beyond its own interests, showcasing its capability and willingness to conduct humanitarian operations. Recently, the Indian Navy stepped up as a regional guardian, conducting rescue operations for Iranian and Pakistani mariners in distress. This not only emphasises India's commitment to peace and safety on the high seas but also serves as a strategic display of soft power, positioning India as a benevolent force in a region riddled with tensions.

Trump's immunity defeat isn't the setback it seems to be

By Michael Conway

The federal appeals court ruling Tuesday that former President Donald Trump is not immune from prosecution for alleged crimes he committed during his presidency is a historic decision that allows for the case being made against him for his role in the January 6 insurrection to move forward. However, it would be wrong to mistake the decision as a clear-cut victory for efforts to try Trump before Election Day. In fact, the timing of the ruling only increases the likelihood that Trump's strategy of delaying the outcome of this criminal trial beyond November will succeed.

The Circuit Court of Appeals in DC took 28 days since hearing oral argument to issue its unanimous decision rejecting Trump's immunity claim, a timeframe that could have been much shorter if the court had acted faster. Now, when combined with the methods Trump can employ to further appeal the case, dragging the proceedings out past the fall is highly likely. (Trump has denied any wrongdoing.)

However, even greater responsibility for allowing Trump's strategy the prospect of success lies at the doorstep of the US Supreme Court rather than at the appellate court. In December, special counsel Jack

Smith petitioned the Supreme Court for a direct review of Trump's claim of absolute immunity from prosecution to avoid the delay of an appellate review.

The court rejected the request, putting its heavy thumb on the scales of justice: By ducking an immediate ruling on Trump's sketchy immunity claim, as well as his



shaky double jeopardy defenses, the high court has provided detours that will make it hard to complete Trump's criminal trial in DC by Election Day and give voters clarity on his actions before they enter the voting booth.

No crystal ball is needed to reach this conclusion.

The federal appellate panel rejected Trump's defense that he is immune from prosecution for his actions while president, writing, "We cannot accept former President Trump's claim that a President

has unbounded authority to commit crimes that would neutralize the most fundamental check on executive power — the recognition and implementation of election results." Yet following Trump's appellate loss, his lawyers can ask the three-judge panel to rehear the appeal or to have their ruling reviewed by all authorized judges in that court — known as a rehearing en banc. While these longshot tactics have scant prospect of overturning the immunity ruling, they will engender additional delay.

Yet that delay could be trivial compared to what comes next. The law permits Trump's lawyers to stall up to 90 days before filing a petition asking the Supreme Court to overturn his loss in the court of appeals. If Trump's lawyers take advantage of the full 90 days, that petition would be filed in mid-May or later.

To put pressure on Trump's lawyers to act more quickly than that, the appeals court on Tuesday ordered Trump's team to ask the Supreme Court for a stay of the case's proceedings by February 12. Still, if the Supreme Court plans to take up his appeal, it's likely it will grant the stay and give Trump additional time to file his Supreme Court petition, even if the stay is not for the complete 90-day period.

Pakistan Elections and the Big Legitimacy Question Mark

By: Rana Banerji

An air of the surreal dominates the discourse in Pakistan's February 8 elections. The campaign has been lacklustre, with the absence of a level playing field and expectations of a pre-determined outcome, favouring a weak PML-N coalition. This impression was strengthened with three quick judgments in succession by courts last week, imposing long incarcerations against former prime minister Imran Khan. This seemed a brazen message from the powerful military establishment to the latter's die-hard fan club that he would not be allowed to play any political role in the foreseeable future.

The electorate comprises 128.5 million registered voters, out of a total population of 241.5 million. This includes almost 57 million young voters between the ages of 18 and 35, comprising 47 percent of the electorate. The strength of the national assembly (NA) is now 336, comprising 266 general seats. Sixty seats are reserved for women and 10 for non-Muslims. These are allotted to political parties based on proportional representation. The magic numbers for forming the government are 134 and 169,



after the addition of reserved seats. Of the 266 general seats, Punjab has 141, Sindh 61, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) 45, Balochistan 16 and the Federal Capital area of Islamabad three seats. Punjab has more seats than the other three provinces combined. The party, which controls Punjab, controls Pakistan. Provincial assemblies (PA) will also be elected simultaneously. Punjab has 371 members (MPA), Sindh 168, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa 145 and Balochistan 65 seats. A total of 5,113 candidates are contesting the NA elections while 12,638 candidates are in the fray for the PA elections. After the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) was denied the 'bat' symbol, it will not be in a position to claim its proportion

of reserved seats for women and minorities. At least 63 percent of Independent candidates are contesting the NA elections and 66 percent remain in the PA field. After the army blessed thrice elected former prime minister Nawaz Sharif's return from almost four years of exile in the UK and the judiciary followed suit, giving quick relief in cases against him, reducing also a life disqualification to five years, the PML-N seems poised to recover lost ground in its main bastion, Punjab. Despite this boost, Nawaz seemed rather listless in the election campaign, obsessing mainly on past injustices against him. He did not attack the military establishment. His dilemma has been to search for a

counternarrative to offset Khan's persisting popularity. He also has to decide who should inherit his mantle, whether charismatic daughter Maryam or docile brother, Shehbaz Sharif, who remains more acceptable to the army. The People's Party of Pakistan (PPP) retains its main political base in Sindh, depending on support from rural landlords. It has lesser control in urban areas of Karachi and Hyderabad. After performing creditably as foreign minister in the last coalition, Bilawal Bhutto Zardari has been trying hard to enhance his acceptability to the army as a young, articulate and balanced leader. Choosing to contest from Lahore, he has also tried to wrest back an erstwhile vote bank in Punjab. His father, Asif Zardari is a more experienced and wily political leader. These two have been playing good cop and bad cop, occasionally criticising past allies. The latter has tried hard to stitch support from motley feudal in Balochistan and South Punjab. This may stand him in good stead in the presidential election stakes, which must follow the senate elections in March 2024. The present president, Arif Alvi, who was elected with PTI

support is holding on to his post. His term ran out in August 2023. The PTI has its main stronghold in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. It has held government reins there since 2013. It made sizable inroads in Punjab after Khan was thrown out of power by a vote of no confidence in the NA in April 2022 by launching a narrative of "foreign conspiracy", "unfair martyrdom" and "desertion by the military establishment", as reasons for his ouster. After the Punjab bypoll in 2022, he seemed electorally invincible. In a series of public meetings, senior military officers were disparaged by name. Though later exposed as false, this narrative has been fanned by an army of besotted, young social media trollers, who have now become a headache for army censors! Despite several derogatory audio and video disclosures, Khan's popularity has not been affected by attempts to besmirch his character. This is a new phenomenon, emerging as a political idea, especially with unemployed youth and women voters in urban areas, which reflects growing distaste for the reality of the army's extra-constitutional control of power in Pakistan, instead of elected politicians or Parliament.

Impeach Mayorkas for gross mismanagement

By W. James Antle III

The situation at the southern border has been one of the biggest problems facing President Joe Biden's administration throughout almost the entirety of his term. Migrants have been coming in record numbers, stretching already strained resources. In fiscal year 2023, there were 2.4 million encounters — the federal government's term for the total number of people apprehended and processed for removal — at the southwest border and some 3.2 million nationwide. There were more than 300,000 at the southwest border in December alone. Voters would like to see something done about it since the ramifications are felt far beyond the Rio Grande. Elected officials, including Democrats, have been calling for action. Among the answers House Republicans have proposed: the impeachment of Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas. Mayorkas is the Cabinet official with jurisdiction



over the border. He oversees the federal agencies responsible for its security. House Republicans last week unveiled articles of impeachment against Mayorkas that the House planned a vote for on Tuesday. Some point to the bipartisan border crisis legislation proposed in the Senate — which House Republicans oppose — as a better solution than impeachment. But Mayorkas' lack of credibility on border security is part of the reason many view the bill as a nonstarter. Many GOP lawmakers also reject

the contention that the Biden administration lacks the authority or resources to secure the border without passing a new law. And House Republicans have opposed this basic approach to handling the issue since George W. Bush, a member of their own party, was president. The Constitution gives the House "the sole power of impeachment" and the Senate "the sole power to try all impeachments." Under Article II, Section 4, the possibility of impeachment for "treason, bribery, or other high crimes and

misdemeanors" applies to "all civil officers of the United States" in addition to the president and the vice president. The Constitution does not define high crimes and misdemeanors. Those are ultimately political, rather than purely legal, judgments. Congress could determine that a border failure of this magnitude is a dereliction of duty, an unacceptable abdication of a core constitutional responsibility. Mayorkas' defenders argue that his conduct doesn't approach the high crimes and misdemeanors outlined in the Constitution. These are policy differences, they claim, rather than something approaching bribery or treason. But in Federalist No. 65, Alexander Hamilton wrote that impeachment could stem from "the abuse or violation of some public trust." The mismanagement at the border could certainly be so described. In fact, the loose language of "high crimes and misdemeanors" had a history in the British legal tradition

that specifically went beyond indictable offenses. And while there is continuing legal argument about what constitutes impeachable offenses, in practice then-Rep. Gerald Ford had it right when he said in 1970, "An impeachable offense is whatever a majority of the House of Representatives considers it to be at a given moment in history." The situation at the border is unsustainable. If the current team managing border security cannot get it under control, it needs to be replaced with people who can. If the president refuses to appoint a team that will do the job better, the voters need to see this clearly ahead of the election in November. Indeed, what Mayorkas and his subordinates are doing is not working. A vote against Mayorkas in the House of Representatives, which would culminate in his removal from office if the Senate agrees, is one way to attempt to force a course correction.

2024 US elections are set to be a referendum on Trump. Biden will only gain from it

This is turning out to be a most unusual presidential election for the United States, with former President Donald Trump clearly on path to becoming the Republican Party nominee for the third straight time. While it is very early to predict the outcome of this election, there is little doubt that it will be close.

Losing presidential candidates from the two major parties usually fade into historical footnotes. While there have been cases where such candidates try again, at least in recent American political history, no sitting president who has lost the election has been renominated. But Trump could prove to be an exception. Republican Party candidate Nikki Haley, former US Ambassador to the United Nations and Governor of South Carolina, is his sole contender. Haley, however, lost the nomination contest in both Iowa and New Hampshire and is on track to lose even her home state of South Carolina, which



once been reluctant to target Trump directly.

Haley unlikely to beat Trump Haley's end game is unclear since she is highly unlikely to be able to defeat Trump. Currently, having tasted defeat in both Iowa and New Hampshire, she is running about 30 points behind Trump in polling averages in South Carolina, the next primary. Much of the South Carolina Republican Party has endorsed

Trump's opponents have had to fight him without criticising him, despite his sketchy personal, moral and ethical values, his role in trying to overthrow the 2020 election, his mounting legal troubles, and his sheer crassness, lest they lose these voters.

Haley only has a chance if some health issue undermines Trump's candidacy – he is, after all, 77 years old. But this is a thin reed on which to hang a primary

identifying themselves as independents rather than as Democrats or Republicans will be the key deciding factor. Self-identified Democrats have dropped to a record low of 27 per cent, matching self-identified Republicans, while independents now account for 43 per cent of American voters, according to recent opinion polls. Independents, thus, are a key target of both parties, though Republicans appear to have a slight edge. This could change as the general election campaign ramps up in the coming months.

Part of the problem that Biden faces is that factions within the Democratic Party are at war, and even the prospect of a second Trump presidency is not yet uniting them. On issues such as illegal immigration, control of the southern border and the war in Gaza, the progressive wing of the Democrats is deeply disappointed with Biden. It is possible that they'll go back to supporting him as the prospect of Trump's election win inches closer later in the year. But it marks one more headache for the Biden campaign.

Another issue is the US economy, which shows good numbers in both growth and job creation but has not translated into support for Biden. It is possible that his perception as an economic manager will change over time. It would, actually, be very good news for Biden's campaign if positive sentiments about economic well-being begin to shift later in the year, closer to the polls and

in line with these stellar growth numbers. A referendum on Trump The other factor that is in Biden's favour is that this election is increasingly becoming a referendum on Trump. Though the various prosecutions of the former president appear to have boosted his support, he is also a deeply divisive figure, including with traditional Republicans. Trump is still leading slightly in the opinion polls. This includes not only the national polls but also key 'battleground' states. This is important because the US presidential election is decided state by state rather than by the national popular vote. In the key battleground states that will likely decide the election, Biden is leading only in Pennsylvania, while Trump is leading in Wisconsin, Nevada, Georgia, Arizona and Michigan, according to the latest poll averages.

However, even in the Iowa and New Hampshire victories, there were warning signs for Trump. A good number of independents and even Republicans who voted for Haley told pollsters that they would rather vote for Biden than Trump in the general election in November. Thus, though Trump is likely to coast easily to nomination by the Republican Party, it becomes much more difficult in the general election, as independents and some Republicans will vote against him.

This presidential election is also somewhat peculiar in that, with candidates from the two parties already set, the poll campaign will be much longer than usual. Given Trump's propensity for controversy, his general attitude, language, and continuing court cases, more of the independents are likely to vote for Biden simply because they do not want another Trump presidency. Whatever their lack of enthusiasm for Biden, which most Democrats also share, their dislike for Trump and fear of another chaotic presidency could make them swing to Biden. That is why the focus on Trump and an election that is a referendum on him is likely to benefit Biden.



will hold its nomination exercise in the last week of February. How long she'll continue in the race, if it can even be called that, is unclear, but she appears to have sufficient funding to continue for a while, with the conservative Koch network being a major supporter.

While other prominent Republican challengers like Ron DeSantis, the Governor of Florida, has dropped out and endorsed Trump, Haley has stepped up her attacks on the former president. This is a change because, like other Trump challengers, Haley had

Trump, though Haley is a former governor. But it is also indicative of a key issue in the 2024 election cycle: Trump's personality but also his stranglehold over Republican voters.

In 2016, Trump boasted that his supporters were so loyal that he could shoot someone in the middle of Fifth Avenue and not lose voters. Eight years later, much to the frustration of his opponents across the American political spectrum, this blind loyalty continues to define a majority of Republican voters. Thus,

she is also likely to bow out. Democrats reluctantly support Biden

On the Democratic side, despite significant unhappiness with incumbent US President Joe Biden's performance, the party appears to be sticking with him. There were some early efforts last year to get Biden to step down, but at this stage, there is little likelihood of that happening. Unlike the deep loyalty of core Trump voters, there is, at best, a reluctant acceptance of Biden among even his supporters.

Beyond the two parties, voters

A colossal failure, decades in the making

On January 28, 1948, a plane chartered by the US Immigration Service caught fire and crashed west of Coalinga, California. On board were 28 migrants, including farm workers with expired work permits, being taken to the Mexican border. All 32 people on the DC-3 plane were killed. But songwriter Woody Guthrie was struck by the fact that some news reports named only the three crew members and an immigration officer on board while describing everyone else simply as “deportees.” In words later set to music by Martin Hoffman, Guthrie wrote, “Goodbye to my Juan, goodbye, Rosalita, Adios mis amigos, Jesus y Maria; You won’t have your names when you ride the big airplane, All they will call you will be ‘deportees’” The song, which has been covered by many artists, including Judy Collins, Bruce Springsteen, Bob Dylan and Dolly Parton, shows how little has changed in the American immigration debate. Seventy-six years later, the issue of immigration still revolves around politics, with scant attention to the real people involved.

“A broken immigration system has become too politically profitable for both parties to solve,” SE Cupp observed. “If you solve it, you can’t run on it, fundraise off of it, fearmonger on it...”

“Amidst all of the politics, immigrants become mere props to score political wins. Nothing gets fixed, nothing changes.”

While President Joe Biden promised “to end Trump’s harsh practices,” the border problem has grown, Cupp noted. “The number of immigrants crossing into the US has more than doubled from the Trump years.”

“Now, the asylum system, which allows migrants fleeing dangerous countries to enter the US and then apply for asylum status, instead of the other way around, is inarguably a failure, something Democrats are increasingly acknowledging.”

“Republicans, for their part, are also playing politics, with many of them intent on tanking a bipartisan border deal that would help tackle the problem, in part because Trump wants to use the issue to win election.”

Instead of showing a willingness to accept a Senate-brokered bipartisan compromise, the GOP House leadership is moving to impeach Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas.

“There is no legitimate basis for impeaching Mayorkas,” wrote Raul A. Reyes, “and House Republicans have not presented any evidence that he has violated the law. Instead, they are on the verge of abusing one of the most powerful mechanisms of government to score political points, potentially setting a dangerous precedent.”

When Donald Trump descended the Trump Tower escalator in 2015 to announce his run for the presidency, he declared that migrants crossing the Mexico border are “bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists. And some, I assume, are good people.” Last weekend, Trump, the likely

GOP nominee for president, posted on Truth Social that terrorists are “POURING IN, UNCHECKED, FROM ALL OVER THE WORLD” and there is a “100% chance that there will be MAJOR TERROR ATTACKS IN THE USA” as a result.

Peter Bergen wrote that there’s little evidence to back up Trump’s claim. “The scaremongering about terrorists pouring across the southern border,” Bergen noted, “misstates where the terrorist threat in the US largely emanates from. Since 9/11, there has only been one lethal terrorist attack in



the US by a foreign national with ties to a terrorist group: In 2019, a Saudi military officer who had been communicating with an al Qaeda affiliate in Yemen killed three US sailors at the Pensacola Naval Air Station in Florida. This Saudi officer had not crossed the dangerous Darien Gap in Panama and then traveled all the way across Mexico to cross the southern border; he had arrived legally in the US two years earlier...”

“The biggest terrorist threat in the US in recent years has not been from jihadist terrorists ... but from extremist right-wing terrorists motivated by racial or ethnic hatred or anti-government sentiments, according to a US Government Accountability Office report last year. These terrorists are US citizenFor months, Nikki Haley tiptoed around criticism of former President Donald Trump, in whose administration she served as UN Ambassador. But increasingly she’s taken the gloves off, labeling Trump “toxic,” saying he lacked “moral clarity” and is unelectable, partly because of the massive amount of campaign money that is going to pay his legal bills.

Haley is trying to keep her campaign alive after losing to Trump in Iowa and New Hampshire. “Haley must also realize that the risk of angering Trump voters has become less pertinent than the potential gain from solidifying and energizing those in the party who want a different choice,” wrote Julian Zelizer. “Under current conditions, Haley needs support from those factions of donors and voters who can sustain her run as long as possible, perhaps anticipating the potential for a legal conviction to render his candidacy untenable.”

“With this mindset, the goal is not to defeat Trump in the next few rounds of competition, but to remain credible enough with those

who dislike him to survive for another day. The only way to do this is to distinguish what she offers from what Trump has promised — avoiding the trap DeSantis fell into of thinking that being ‘Trump-lite’ could have appeal when the real Trump was already on the ballot.”

Middle East

Ten countries and four major terrorist groups are now enmeshed in the Mideast conflict stemming from the Hamas attack on Israel on October 7, wrote Peter Bergen. Three US soldiers died in a drone attack in Jordan

last week, the first time US troops have been killed in the conflict. On Friday, the US struck back against 85 targets it said were connected to militia groups in Iraq and Syria.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.” Ukraine’s military chief speaks out Valerii Zaluzhnyi, the popular Ukraine military chief, has drawn attention internationally for his frankness in admitting to the major challenges his country faces in fighting off the Russian invasion.

Amid reports that he might be dismissed by President Volodymyr Zelensky, Zaluzhnyi wrote for CNN Opinion that “we must contend with a reduction in military support from key allies, grappling with their own political tensions. ... We must acknowledge the significant advantage enjoyed by the enemy in mobilizing human resources and how that compares with the inability of state institutions in Ukraine to improve the manpower levels of our armed forces without the use of unpopular measures.”

Part of the strategy for Ukraine should be maximizing its capability to use “unmanned vehicles” such as drones, he noted. “Our goal must be to seize the moment — to maximize our accumulation of the latest combat capabilities, which will allow us to commit fewer resources to inflicting maximum damage on the enemy, to end the aggression and protect Ukraine from it in the future.”

Zuckerberg’s apology

Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg stood up at a congressional hearing Wednesday and

turned to face the parents of children who said they lost their lives due to the malign use of social media. “I’m sorry for everything you have all been through,” he said.

The apology was “not enough,” wrote Kara Alaimo. “Lawmakers and tech companies need to do much more to protect our kids...” Alaimo added that tech executives “need to create and enforce better standards for content shown to kids, along with more human moderators, mental health resources, lessons for kids and disclosures when content has been manipulated. And lawmakers need to pass legislation to crack down on online sexual exploitation. These kinds of solutions would give parents something to actually like.”

The NFL, preparing for next Sunday’s Super Bowl, is riding high, thanks partly to Taylor Swift’s fervent support for her beau, Travis Kelce of the Kansas City Chiefs.

“Due to her in-person game day attendance alone, NFL viewership has skyrocketed — the playoff game between the Chiefs and the Buffalo Bills was the most-watched divisional playoff game in history according to CBS, raking in a whopping 50 million viewers,” Danielle Campoamor wrote. “In total, this year’s NFL divisional playoff round averaged 40 million viewers, the highest since 1988, and Swift has brought in the highest regular-season viewership among women since tracking began in 2000...”

“The largest pop star has introduced an entirely new demographic to professional football — one the league would have otherwise had a difficult, if not impossible, time trying to reach. But for an organization with a nefarious history when it comes to violence against women, does the NFL really deserve Taylor Swift?”

Black History Month begins

Khalil Gibran Muhammad teaches history, race and public policy at Harvard University, the epicenter of the many debates raging around US higher education.

“Black History Month, which gets underway this week,” he wrote Thursday, “is a chance to give Americans the timely reminder that you can’t teach our history honestly without understanding Black struggle and triumph.” “Many academics who teach about the history of race and racism in America, as I do, are being unjustifiably blamed for the rise in antisemitism on campus and falsely accused of creating racial divisions in the country. This has had the undesirable effect of putting us in the crosshairs of some of the most powerful people in the country, including Republican politicians, conservative activists and billionaire donors...” Muhammad criticized Harvard for what he described as its “failure to push back sufficiently against broader political attacks. ... Silence is a failure of leadership in times like these. Harvard, with its motto ‘Veritas’ — truth — owes it to all of us on the frontlines of these false attacks to defend us for teaching and practicing the very values it claims to uphold.”

How Bharat Ratna for L.K. Advani, Karpoori Thakur indicates a new thinking in BJP

For Lal Krishna Advani, being chosen for the Bharat Ratna, India's highest civilian honour, couldn't have been more timely, coinciding as it does with the inaugural of the Ram temple in Ayodhya, the movement for which was spearheaded by the BJP patriarch in the 1990s and that laid the foundations for the electoral behemoth that the party has come to be. February 3 would have been just another Saturday for the 96-year-old Advani but for the surprise communication from the Prime Minister's Office about the decision. Prime Minister Narendra Modi too made the announcement on social media. Advani will be the 50th recipient of the award and the third from the BJP/ Bharatiya Jana Sangh, after former prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee (in 2015) and social activist Nanaji Deshmukh (2019). A fortnight ago, the Modi government had also declared the name of the late Bihar chief minister and socialist icon Karpoori Thakur for the honour. As per norms, the government can recommend up to three names a year for the Bharat Ratna. In the Bharat Ratna choices for 2024, political observers see the BJP's well-thought-out messaging on two of its key Lok Sabha election planks: Hindutva and social justice. Advani, who in late 1990 led a 'rath yatra' from Somnath in Gujarat to Ayodhya in Uttar Pradesh and mobilised Hindu sentiment in favour of a Ram temple at the then disputed Ram Janmabhoomi site, is seen as the BJP's original poster boy of muscular Hindutva.

His rath yatra had come in the face of strident reservation politics in the country over the B.P. Mandal Commission's recommendation of 27 per cent quota for Other Backward Classes (OBCs) in government jobs and higher education.

Thakur is hailed as a champion of the uplift of backward classes. As Bihar chief minister, he, in 1978, paved the way for a separate reservation for the state's 'extremely backward classes' in government services.

In the past decade, the BJP has attempted political appropriation of the legacy of B.R. Ambedkar, architect of the Indian Constitution and a strong proponent of empowerment through reservation. The impact of the BJP's strategy has been witnessed on the ground in the form of the diminishing clout of political forces claiming to represent the causes of Dalits, such as Mayawati's Bahujan Samaj Party and the splinter groups of the Republican Party of India. Many of their leaders have joined the BJP.

In the 10 years of the Modi government, an estimated 480 million poor and underprivileged people have been able to open Jan Dhan bank accounts, where social welfare benefits are being directly transferred, cutting middlemen out. The

benefits cover electricity, pucca homes, drinking water, toilets, cooking gas, insurance, financial inclusion and trade-related access to collateral-free finance. "Most of the beneficiaries are from the backward communities—OBCs or Dalits—and they acknowledge this," says a top BJP leader.

The Bharat Ratna for Thakur and Advani is the BJP's way of underlining that 'Mandal' (reservation politics) and 'Kamandal' (Hindutva politics) can coexist without threatening one another. The honour for Thakur comes 36 years after his death in 1988. Advani has retired from active politics. Headlining the politics of Thakur and Advani three-odd months before a general election, in which Modi is seeking a third straight term in power, may well turn out to be the BJP's success mantra. Over the past 10 years, the BJP, helped by its ideological mentor Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), has been expanding its influence among Dalits, tribal communities and OBCs without piping down on Hindutva, thus gradually shedding its image of a Brahmin-Baniya party of upper castes. The party has breached OBC vote-banks by picking up their socio-economic issues. In the process, the BJP has eaten into the political space of socialist parties like the Samajwadi Party in Uttar Pradesh and the Janata Dal (United) and Rashtriya Janata Dal in Bihar.

Over three decades ago, the then V.P. Singh government at the Centre took to implementing the Mandal Commission's

report on reservation. This was done to strengthen the turfs of socialist movement leaders, who had come together with the Congress's splinter group led by Singh to form the Janata Dal in the late 1980s. They were inspired by Thakur's implementation of a similar reservation in Bihar, one based on the Mungeri Lal Commission's report.

The Singh government's decision to implement the Mandal Commission report triggered violent protests around the country. Advani's rath yatra pumped up the political movement for a Ram temple in Ayodhya as a counter to the narrative of caste-based reservation—'Kamandal' vs 'Mandal'. Now, with the consecration of the Ayodhya Ram temple on January 22, the decades-long and turbulent Ram Janmabhoomi movement has come a full circle, while threatening to open up to debate some other major 'mandir-masjid' rows in the country, as indicated by the recent developments at Gyanvapi in Modi's Lok Sabha constituency of Varanasi.

The BJP and the RSS firmly believe that the Hindutva ideology has solutions for all communities, not just the upper castes. The BJP has been pursuing its game plan of fitting OBCs, Dalits and tribals communities within a wider Hindutva umbrella by highlighting how the Modi government's social welfare schemes have the poorest of the poor as key beneficiaries (labharthis) and also how the party has been providing these segments greater political representation.

The BJP has also chosen not to react to

the Opposition's demands for a nationwide caste census. While Congress leader Rahul Gandhi has been making statements in support of such an enumeration, the BJP is confident that his party won't get any dividend out of it—the recent assembly election results in the heartland states of Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh, two of which were ruled by the Congress, being a pointer. Moreover, BJP leaders believe that with the realignment of Nitish Kumar, whose government in Bihar completed a caste count and released the results last year, with their party, the demand for a nationwide caste survey will lose steam. The BJP leadership believes social justice politics based on reservation has its limitations. The party's counter to it is 'Samagra Samajik Nyay' (holistic social justice), the broad contours of which relate to what Modi put across, in his post-Interim Budget 2024 address, as his commitment to work for the poorest of the poor.

Back in 1989, the number of OBC MPs of the BJP in the Lok Sabha had suddenly shot up to 21 per cent from 11 per cent in 1984. The surge peaked at 26 per cent in 2004, before dipping to 18 per cent in 2009. In 2019, more than a third of the BJP MPs (113 of 301) were from OBC communities. For the BJP, this is an endorsement of the belief that Hindutva has wide and growing appeal among all sections of the Indian electorate—one that arguably takes it that much closer to returning to power in 2024.

Taylor Swift sends legal warning to Florida college student who tracks her jet travels

A Florida college student who runs social media accounts that monitor the private jet travels of celebrities and public figures, including Taylor Swift, is facing legal action from the pop star's attorneys. The student, Jack Sweeney, told CNN on Tuesday that he received a cease-and-desist letter from Swift's lawyers, demanding that he stop publishing information about Swift's flights on his accounts. The Washington Post first broke the news. Sweeney is no stranger to controversy, as he also tracked the jet movements of billionaire Elon Musk. Musk shut down Sweeney's account "@ElonJet" in December 2022, claiming that it was a "security risk" for him and his family. Sweeney, who was allowed back on X (formerly Twitter), also has accounts that follow the private jets of Mark Zuckerberg, Bill Gates, and other famous people. He uses publicly-available data from the Federal Aviation Administration and flight signals from aviation enthusiasts to track the flights, and he also estimates the carbon

emissions of each flight in his posts. Swift's attorneys, led by Katie Morrone of Venable LLP, sent Sweeney a letter in December, accusing him of "stalking and harassing behavior, including consistently publishing real-time and precise information about our client's location and future whereabouts to the public on social media."

'Imminent threat to the safety' of Taylor Swift

The letter said that this posed an "imminent threat to the safety and wellbeing" of Swift, who has been dealing with stalkers and people who want to harm her since she was a teenager. The letter said that there were "many public cases" of people who came to Swift's homes, some with weapons and ammunition, and "attempted to harm her." The letter argued that sharing her location information gave these bad actors "a roadmap to carry out their plans." The letter also mentioned Musk offering Sweeney \$5,000 to delete the Twitter account that tracked his jet.

Sweeney rejected this offer and asked for \$50,000, saying he could use the money for college or maybe to buy a Tesla.

The letter said that it was a "life-or-death matter" for Swift, and that if Sweeney continued to publish information about Swift's jet travels, "She will have no choice but to pursue any and all legal remedies available to her." The Florida college student said that he got the letter from Swift's attorneys after some non-profit organizations and media outlets criticized the singer's carbon footprint. Sweeney also said that he did not mean any harm by his actions, and that he was using "public information." "I actually think Swift has some good songs," Sweeney said. However, he said, "I believe in transparency and public information." Sweeney also said that Swift's fans were very interested in his accounts, and that she should have "a decent expectation" that her jet would be tracked "whether or not I do it."

US university shaken by 2 deaths in less than 2 years, students say it's 'deeply unsettling'

In less than two years, two student deaths have sent shockwaves across Purdue University in West Lafayette, Indiana. The recent demise of Neel Acharya has put the focus back on the safety and security of students on campuses. Some even feel the management's attitude is adding to their uneasiness. Acharya, an Indian student who went missing days ago, was later found dead on the Purdue campus. An autopsy conducted on January 29 has revealed that there were no signs of trauma on his body, coroner Carrie Costello said. The cause and manner of death are under investigation. Back in 2022, an Indian-origin student studying at Purdue, Varun Manish Chheda, 20, was murdered by his 22-year-old Korean student Ji Min 'Jimmy' Sha. Sha, a junior cybersecurity major and international student, was arrested on murder charges. Chheda, studying data science at the university, succumbed to "multiple sharp force traumatic injuries." 'Such tragedies on our own campus are deeply unsettling' In the aftermath of the two deaths, students of Purdue University have opened up about safety on campuses. "The news of the two deaths sent a wave of disbelief and concern among the

Indian student community. Learning about such tragedies on our own campus is deeply unsettling," a student of Purdue told Hindustan Times in an interview, on the condition of anonymity. "Acharya's death has definitely heightened my sense of concern about safety on campus. It makes me question the overall security measures and prompts us to consider what more can be done to ensure the well-being of students," he added. The student also stressed that these incidents do not necessarily mean Indian students in the US are more threatened than others. "The perception could be influenced by sampling bias, where the focus is on specific incidents involving Indian students, potentially overshadowing cases involving students from other backgrounds. It's crucial to consider a broader perspective and comprehensive data to accurately assess the safety concerns of all students, regardless of their nationality," he said, adding that one concern as a student in the US "is the general lack of awareness about personal safety measures and the need for universities to enhance security protocols." He added that "there is also a need for universities to continually evaluate and

enhance safety measures for all students, fostering an environment where everyone feels secure and supported." Koustuv Saha from the Department of Agricultural Economics at Purdue University said, "My own experience at Purdue has been good, although I have heard from friends and family who have had bad experiences. These usually do not occur on campuses though." "I haven't encountered anything on campus that has made me think that Indian students as a community are at risk maybe. I spend most of my time on campus and it feels very safe. I think these were isolated events," he added 'I don't think they showed a lot of concern' A student who wished to remain anonymous said he feels "uneasy" about the administration's "attitude" after the deaths. "I don't think they showed a lot of concern about the recent tragedy," he said. It's obvious for students in the US to feel unsafe," he added. "The cost of freedom is not free. There are guns everywhere." Speaking of Chheda's murder, the student said, "That may have been an isolated incident but personally, even I feel uncomfortable because my roommate is noisy and messy. I have to

be strategic to have a polite conversation with him without triggering him." 'I would generally advise people to avoid travelling alone' Speaking of security measures needed to stay safe, Saunok Chakrabarty from the Economics department said, "I don't feel an increased concern about my safety in Purdue. But I would generally advise people to avoid travelling alone during the late hours of the night." The first student who spoke anonymously echoed Saunok's thoughts, saying, "Being aware of my surroundings, avoiding isolated areas during odd hours, and staying connected with friends are some of the measures I take".

Meanwhile, Senior Director of Media and Public Relations at Purdue, Tim Doty, told Hindustan Times in an email, "Our university president held a moment of silence for Neel Acharya last Friday during a Board of Trustees meeting. Please note that the family is asking for privacy in this time." Acharya and Chheda are not the only Indian students to have died in the US. Among other recent incidents are the deaths of Akul Dhawan and Jaahnavi Kandula, and the brutal murder of Vivek Saini.

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What does King Charles III actually do as Britain's head of state?

The news of King Charles III's cancer diagnosis has refocused attention on the responsibilities of Britain's monarch and revived a central question about the country's centuries-old system of government: What does the king actually do? Under Britain's constitutional monarchy, the king is head of state but must remain politically neutral and leave policy-making to the elected Parliament. He is obliged to follow the government's advice and not act on his own opinions. But even in his largely ceremonial job, Charles performs a number of duties integral to the running of the U.K. His most visible role is at the annual State Opening of Parliament, where the monarch sets out the government's agenda in a formal address. The speech is written by the government and contains a summary of the legislation proposed for the forthcoming parliamentary session. Charles, 75, first delivered the King's Speech in November, although he delivered the last Queen's Speech of his mother's reign on her behalf in 2022 when she dropped out due to health issues. The monarch also gives royal assent to bills passed by Parliament,

meaning that all legislation must receive his sign-off to become law. He or she plays a similar part in appointing new prime ministers and Cabinet members. The sovereign dissolves Parliament



before a general election and invites the leader of the party that won to become prime minister and to form a government. Two days before her death on Sept. 8, 2022, Charles' mother, Queen Elizabeth II, appointed Liz Truss to what turned out to be only a six-week term as prime minister. The monarch also holds a

weekly private audience with the prime minister and can express political opinions during it, but what is said must remain behind closed doors. The meetings, which usually take place on

Wednesdays at Buckingham Palace, are expected to continue during Charles' outpatient cancer treatment, although they may take place remotely. The palace has said the king will also continue receiving stacks of important government documents, which are traditionally delivered daily in a red leather

box, and chairing monthly meetings of the Privy Council.

The council, which served as the original executive arm of the government in England, today advises the king on giving his formal approval of orders that were vetted by government officials, including on matters such as issuing coins and setting up new government departments. Palace officials say that while the king plans to continue with state business and official paperwork during his treatment, he is stepping back from the hundreds of public engagements he carries out each year. If the monarch cannot perform the sovereign's duties because of illness, two or more "Counsellors of State" can be appointed to act on his behalf.

Those who can stand in for Charles include his wife, Queen Camilla, his eldest son, Prince William, his sister, Princess Anne, and his youngest brother, Prince Edward.

Prince Andrew, the king's other brother, and Prince Harry, Charles' younger son, are technically on the list as well, but not expected to take up any royal duties, though Harry flew to London on Tuesday from California to see his father.

How the US and Iran Could End Up in a War They Don't Want

Can two nations that don't really want a full-scale war — in fact believe it could be disastrous — find themselves slip-sliding toward one anyway as events escalate inevitably beyond their ability to stop it?

Absolutely. It's a problem that goes back at least to the Peloponnesian War 2,500 years ago — when the Athenians hurtled toward their doom — and now it's an issue that both President Joe Biden and Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, are openly grappling with in the Middle East

On Friday, Biden launched a broad series of military strikes in retaliation for the Jan. 28 drone attack by an Iranian-aligned militant group that killed three U.S. soldiers and wounded more than 40 others. But the president also clearly said that he's trying to deter Tehran without provoking a full-scale war, and it was notable that the retaliatory strikes were aimed at the facilities of proxy groups outside of Iran, in Iraq and Syria. Asked by reporters Tuesday how directly Iran was involved in the Jan. 28 attack, Biden replied, "We'll have that discussion," and he clarified, "I do hold them responsible in the sense that they're supplying the weapons to the people who did it." Biden also added: "I don't think we need a wider war in the Middle East. That's not what I'm looking for." Neither is Iran, by most accounts. Many Iran experts believe that Khamenei, Iran's aging supreme leader, wants to avoid an all-out war and is mainly focused on maintaining political control at home rather than attacking the U.S. In a swift response after Sunday's attack, Nasser Kanaani, Iran's foreign ministry spokesperson, insisted Tehran was "not involved in the decision making of resistance groups."

Iran and the U.S. are already embroiled in a low-level war, despite Tehran's dubious claim that the militants it supplies and trains — who are currently attacking American, Israeli and Western targets from Yemen to Syria to Lebanon — are acting entirely on their own.

Yet both the U.S. and Iran have left themselves open to a wider conflict that neither side wants. For America, the Jan. 28 drone strike at an obscure outpost in Jordan — a base few Americans knew existed — is yet another tragic illustration of the risks of leaving forces forward-deployed around the world, sometimes with no obvious mission. Currently the U.S. has about 2,500 troops in Iraq training the Iraqi military, another 900 in Syria, and a few hundred in Jordan ostensibly to ward off the return of ISIS. Every one of these military personnel is a potential victim who could trigger a future conflict. For Iran, the U.S. retaliation underway is an illustration of the dangers of running proxy militias on multiple fronts that Tehran may no longer

be able to fully direct, if it ever did. While Iran seems to have averted an attack inside its borders for the moment, Biden says he'll continue striking back, and Tehran may find that its ultimate fate could be determined by an Iraqi or Syrian militia leader if more Americans die.

For both countries, in other words, events are on a permanent hair trigger that is constantly threatening to explode at the slightest pressure. Biden's secretary of state, Antony Blinken, appeared to acknowledge this this week when he suggested "that we've not seen a situation as dangerous as the one we're facing now across the region since at least 1973, and arguably even before that." The problem for Washington goes well beyond Iran and the Middle East. It is whether by pledging to remain the world's "indispensable nation" — as Biden did in his Oct. 19 Oval Office address — the United States is putting itself in jeopardy of imminent war on several fronts at once with no obvious way out. According to Stephen Wertheim, author of the noted 2020 book, *Tomorrow, the World: The Birth of U.S. Global Supremacy*, the United States has fecklessly overextended itself in the Middle East, Europe and the Indo-Pacific with no clear strategy at a time when its defense industrial base is ill-prepared and its domestic politics are polarized and often paralyzed. This is causing dissension in both political parties — both President Donald Trump's MAGA Republicans and progressive Democrats have raised questions about an overcommitment of U.S. aid abroad.

Wertheim believes that since the end of the Cold War the United States has been far too casual about continuing the role of global policeman, failing to fully appreciate the dangers to U.S. forces as well as the costs, which helped give rise to a populist reaction at home. "The United States decided when the costs and risks were low, to scatter its forces all across the world, naively thinking it was the End of History and projecting American power wasn't going to inspire violent reactions," he said.

But such reactions began to erupt, he says, after successive U.S. administrations, both Republican and Democratic, grew overconfident in pressing for NATO expansion toward Russia's borders and seeking to remake the Middle East by invading Iraq two decades ago, thus discrediting America as a reliable peacekeeper and helping to provoke Russia and China to go their own ways.

Nothing illustrates this state of strategic confusion more than the outpost that was attacked on Sunday, called Tower 22, which even some experts in national security say they didn't know existed. "The several thousand troops collectively

stationed in Iraq, Jordan and Syria were left there as remnants of the campaign to defeat ISIS," says Wertheim. But even though ISIS was defeated years ago, "and with its defeat came the end of the only verifiably complete mission this troop deployment could have had," the troops remained there as little more than sitting ducks.

Wertheim also warned about the dangers of keeping troops in a region that isn't a focus of administration policy. "The Biden administration came into office seeking to deprioritize the Middle East without attempting to disentangle the United States from its extensive security relationships and military positions in the region," he said.

The question of whether the U.S. is overexposed in the region goes back to the disastrous bombing of a Marine barracks in Lebanon in 1983, which killed 241 Americans, in what was considered the first act of terrorism by Hezbollah against the United States. The U.S. forces were deployed at the time as part of a peacekeeping presence to end the Lebanese civil war. But some U.S. leaders, including a newly sworn-in congress member named John McCain, raised questions at the time about whether the troops had no clear mission and were just exposing themselves as targets.

Ryan Crocker, the former U.S. ambassador to Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan, among other places — who was political attaché in Beirut at the time — says the U.S. has recently done a much better job of ensuring U.S. forces are kept to a minimum and deployed for a reason. In the case of Tower 22, he says, that mission is to avoid a repetition of what happened after the U.S. withdrawal from Iraq in 2011, which led to the rise of ISIS.

"In terms of the U.S. posture in the region, this is not Beirut 1983," he says. "I think we actually did learn from that." Charles Kupchan, a former official in the Clinton and Obama administrations who teaches at Georgetown University, also argues that the president has already achieved the desired goal of reducing the U.S. footprint in the Middle East — all without too much cost.

"The United States is no longer fighting land wars in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria, and that's a good thing," he said. "I'm not someone who believes we should pack up and go home and leave our air bases and naval bases in the region. That having been said, I'm not convinced we also need these forward operating bases in Syria and Jordan. They do expose American forces to these kinds of sporadic attacks."

It's not just the number of troops or where they're stationed that has added to the tensions. After the Iraq War, America's strategic exposure in the region grew to

enormous proportions: The 2003 invasion revealed U.S. vulnerabilities on the ground to IEDs and now drones, tutoring potential enemies in how to outmaneuver what was once considered an unassailable superpower.

The Iraq invasion also engendered a spate of anti-U.S. militant proxy groups under Iran's wing — including Kata'ib Hezbollah, which U.S. officials have named as suspect in the Jan. 28 attack. (The umbrella group it's a part of, the Islamic Resistance in Iraq, claimed responsibility.) For years, these groups have been attacking U.S. troops in the region, especially in Iraq. In 2016, a U.S. Army study found that "an emboldened and expansionist Iran appears to be the only victor" of the Iraq war.

These tensions have grown far greater since the Oct. 7, 2023, Hamas attack on Israel that left more than 1,200 Israelis dead, along with an estimated 25,000 Palestinians (according to the Palestinian Health Ministry) in the Israeli retaliation since then. This has triggered almost daily hostilities between Iranian-backed military groups and Western and Israeli forces all over the region, including scores of attacks on U.S. troops in Syria, Iraq and Jordan, albeit without any U.S. deaths until Jan. 28. Meanwhile Houthi rebels in Yemen, who are also supported by Tehran, have been shelling Western shipping in the Red Sea, provoking U.S. retaliation on Houthi command posts.

One big question hanging over this conflict is just how much control Iran exercises over these militant groups. Some, including hawks who think Biden needs to be more aggressive with Tehran, believe Iran is an active leader of their proxies. "Right now, and most likely in the future, it's advantage Tehran," Reuel Marc Gerecht, a former CIA official and a Farsi-speaking scholar at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, said before Friday's retaliation began. "They are willing to encourage and direct their proxies to kill us; we won't kill Iranians in response. This is why the Iranian theocracy's proxy-war strategy is so successful: The proxies attack but we never attack Iran directly. A losing hand." Others, though, like Crocker, the former U.S. ambassador, say the hawks in Washington are constantly overstating Iran's control over the various militant groups it aligns itself with.

"I think you've got to differentiate between Iran's allies; they're not all proxies," Crocker says. "The Houthis have been around as long as Yemen has. And Hamas is about as much an Iranian proxy as the Islamic State is. They're Sunni extremists, while the Iranian regime is Shi'ite. At the same time the Iranians must have assumed that sooner or later some Americans were going to get killed."

NYC staffer who sold gun, ammo to men planning shul attack gets 27 months

The sentence “sends a clear message to those who would recklessly arm others with weapons that may be used to commit acts of mass violence,” said Damian Williams, a U.S. attorney.

(News Agency)—Jamil Hakime, a former employee of the New York City Administration for Children’s Services, was sentenced to 27 months in prison and three years of supervised release on Feb. 6 for selling a gun and 19 rounds of ammunition to two men planning to attack a synagogue, the U.S. Attorney’s Office for the Southern District of New York stated.

Hakime, 59, sold the weapons to Christopher Brown and Matthew Mahrer on Nov. 18, 2022. He pleaded guilty on March 14, 2023.

“Jamil Hakime, a city employee who was supposed to be protecting youths, instead decided to arm two men—one of whom had just declared on Twitter his plan to ‘shoot up a synagogue’—with a

powerful firearm and ammunition,” stated Damian Williams, U.S. attorney for the southern district of New York.

Williams credited the “swift action” of law enforcement with preventing “a monumental tragedy on New York’s Jewish community” that “could have devastated the lives of many people who were targeted solely for their religious beliefs and their desire to worship.”

“The sentence imposed today sends a clear message to those who would recklessly arm others with weapons that may be used to commit acts of mass violence that such conduct will not be tolerated,” the U.S. attorney added.

In 2022, an attorney for Mahrer—one of the two people who purchased the weapon—said, “My client is of Jewish



heritage. He resides with his parents and his grandfather is actually a 93-year-old Holocaust survivor—and my client is his part-time caretaker.”

When Mahrer and his friend Brown were detained, Brown had a Nazi armband.

On Nov. 18, 2022, Brown posted on Twitter that he aimed “to shoot up a synagogue,” adding, “This time I’m really

gonna do it,” according to the complaint. Hakime taught the two young men, both in their early 20s, how to use the gun and “instructed the men to wipe off the firearm to remove Hakime’s fingerprints,” per the U.S. attorney’s office. “Brown and Mahrer paid Hakime approximately \$650 for the firearm and ammunition.”

Bronx Man Arrested For Sweepstakes Fraud Scheme

(News Agency)- Damian Williams, the United States Attorney for the Southern District of New York, and James Smith, the Assistant Director in Charge of the New York Field Office of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (“FBI”), announced the arrest of DONALD DILLION on wire fraud and money laundering charges arising out of a scheme to defraud victims by convincing them that they had won prizes in a sweepstakes sponsored by a well-known marketing and sweepstakes company (the “Sweepstakes Company”). DILLION was arrested on February 3, 2024, at John F. Kennedy International Airport while attempting to enter the United States from Jamaica. DILLION was presented before U.S. Magistrate Judge Barbara Moses yesterday. FBI Assistant Director in Charge James Smith said: “Winning a significant amount of cash or a luxury car through a sweepstakes often represents a dream to many Americans. Donald Dillion turned his victims’ dream into a nightmare when he allegedly stole tens of thousands of dollars through his fraudulent scheme. The FBI will continue to investigate and bring to justice anyone attempting defraud innocent people.”

According to the allegations in the Complaint:[1]

At least in or about 2021, DILLION, working with others, perpetrated a scheme in which victims were contacted by individuals claiming to work for the Sweepstakes Company, who convinced the victims that they had won a large cash prize and a luxury car as part of the Sweepstakes



Company’s sweepstakes. The perpetrators of the scheme told the victims that their prizes would be released to them upon the Sweepstakes Company’s receipt

of, among other things, the taxes and fees purportedly owed on the prizes. In this way, numerous victims were induced to wire tens of thousands of dollars to bank

accounts held in the name of DD Metro Solutions LLC (“DD Metro”) and controlled by DILLION. DILLION wired a significant proportion of these victim funds to a Chinese bank, including memoranda with some of these wires suggesting no connection to the Sweepstakes Company. None of the victims received the cash prizes or luxury cars promised to them. DILLION, 57, of the Bronx, New York, has been charged with conspiracy to commit wire fraud, which carries a maximum sentence of 20 years in prison; wire fraud, which carries a maximum sentence of 20 years in prison; and conspiracy to commit money laundering, which carries a maximum sentence of 20 years in prison.

Had to hold back my ‘Irish temper’ when Trump called fallen soldiers ‘suckers & losers’: Biden

Washington- US President Joe Biden, known to be soft-spoken, went raging and stated he had to hold back his “Irish temper” when his predecessor Donald Trump reportedly described fallen soldiers in unseemly words.

Hitting out at Trump for purportedly calling fallen soldiers “suckers and losers”, Biden told a wealthy donors fundraising dinner at Las Vegas in Nevada that he did not know what he would have done if he had been around Trump in Washington that day. Biden had lost his son in the war against Iraq. “I have to hold my Irish temper. I’m glad I wasn’t with him. I’m not sure what

I would’ve done. He had said they’re



all suckers and losers,” Biden said addressing wealthy donors at the

fundraiser in Las Vegas on Sunday ahead of the Nevada primaries. Mentioning his son Beau, who served in the Delaware National Guard in Iraq before he died in 2015, the President got animated: “My son was not a sucker nor were any of yours. Who does this guy think he is talking about Americans?” During a rally in Las Vegas’ Historic Westside, Biden repeated a similar version of the speech, telling the crowd: “This is the guy, when he was in France; they asked him to go to an American cemetery in France for World War II, where Americans were buried.

70 Current And Former NYCHA Employees Charged With Bribery And Extortion Offenses

(News Agency)-In the Largest Number of Federal Bribery Charges on a Single Day in DOJ History, 70 Current and Former Employees of the NYCHA Have Been Charged with Allegedly Accepting Cash Payments from Contractors in Exchange for Awarding NYCHA Contracts

Damian Williams, the United States Attorney for the Southern District of New York; Merrick B. Garland, the Attorney General of the United States; Jocelyn E. Strauber, the Commissioner of the New York City Department of Investigation (“DOI”); Ivan J. Arvelo, the Special Agent in Charge of the New York Field Office of Homeland Security Investigations (“HSI”); Rae Oliver Davis, the Inspector General of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, Office of Inspector General (“HUD OIG”); and Jonathan Mellone, the Special Agent in Charge of the Northeast Region of the U.S. Department of Labor, Office of Inspector General (“DOL-OIG”), announced the unsealing of bribery and extortion charges against 70 current and former employees of the New York City Housing Authority (“NYCHA”). 66 of the 70 defendants were arrested this morning in New York, New Jersey, Connecticut, and North Carolina. Defendants who were arrested in the New York area are scheduled to appear before U.S. Magistrate Judges Stewart D. Aaron, Sarah L. Cave, Valerie Figueredo, Sarah Netburn, Katharine H. Parker, Gary Stein, and Ona T. Wang in Manhattan federal court later today. Attorney General Merrick B. Garland said: “The Justice Department will prosecute to the fullest extent of the law those who abuse their positions in public service in order to enrich themselves. The crimes alleged in this case are serious violations of the public trust, and I am grateful to the agents and our partners across government who worked on this case, and to the prosecutors in the Southern District of New York for their tireless efforts to root out corruption.”

DOI Commissioner Jocelyn E. Strauber said: “As charged, these 70 current and former NYCHA supervisors and other staff used



their positions of public trust and responsibility to pocket bribes in exchange for doling out no-bid contracts. The extensive bribery and extortion alleged here calls for significant reforms to NYCHA’s no-bid contracting process, which DOI has recommended and NYCHA has accepted. I thank the U.S. Attorney’s Office for the Southern District of New York and our federal law enforcement partners for their commitment to protect scarce public resources intended to maintain public housing, and to hold accountable public servants who abuse their authority, and NYCHA’s senior leadership for its cooperation in this important investigation.”

HSI Special Agent in Charge Ivan J. Arvelo said: “These 70 defendants are accused of demanding kickbacks and bribes for access to no-bid contracts and lucrative, under-the-table deals. Make no mistake, this alleged pervasive corruption had the biggest impact on NYCHA residents themselves, who may have been cheated out of better services and programs. I commend the outstanding work of HSI New York’s Document and Benefit Fraud Task Force for today’s historic operation. As one of the largest investigative agencies, the public can rest assured: Homeland Security Investigations will pursue all avenues of justice for the people of this great city.”

HUD OIG Inspector General Rae Oliver Davis said: “The pay-to-play bribery schemes alleged in the complaints unsealed today

waste millions of dollars and risk residents staying in unacceptable living conditions. The alleged conduct identified during this investigation harms the effectiveness of housing programs that support more than 200,000 residents. It also poses a significant risk to the integrity of the HUD rental assistance programs that support housing assistance in New York City and erodes the trust of NYCHA residents in HUD’s programs. We will continue our work with the U.S. Attorney’s Office and our law enforcement partners to prevent and detect these and other schemes.”

DOL-OIG Special Agent in Charge Jonathan Mellone said: “An important part of our mission is to investigate corruption and fraud involving matters within the jurisdiction of the Office of Inspector General. We are committed to working closely with our law enforcement partners to investigate those who exploit governmental programs and the American workers.”

According to the allegations in the Complaints and publicly filed documents in these cases:[1] NYCHA is the largest public housing authority in the country, providing housing to 1 in 17 New Yorkers in 335 developments across the City and receiving over \$1.5 billion in federal funding from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development every year. When repairs or construction work require the use of outside contractors,

services must typically be purchased via a bidding process. However, at all times relevant to the Complaints, when the value of a contract was under a certain threshold (up to \$10,000), designated staff at NYCHA developments could hire a contractor of their choosing without soliciting multiple bids. This “no-bid” process was faster than the general NYCHA procurement process, and selection of the contractor required approval of only the designated staff at the development where the work was to be performed.

The defendants, all of whom were NYCHA employees during the time of the relevant conduct, demanded and received cash in exchange for NYCHA contracts by either requiring contractors to pay up front in order to be awarded the contracts or requiring payment after the contractor finished the work and needed a NYCHA employee to sign off on the completed job so the contractor could receive payment from NYCHA. As alleged, the defendants typically demanded approximately 10% to 20% of the contract value—between \$500 and \$2,000 depending on the size of the contract—but some defendants demanded even higher amounts. In total, these defendants demanded over \$2 million in corrupt payments from contractors in exchange for awarding over \$13 million worth of no-bid contracts. The map below shows the

developments affected by the alleged conduct:

If you believe you have information related to bribery, extortion, or any other illegal conduct by NYCHA employees, please contact OIGNYCHA@doi.nyc.gov or (212) 306-3356. If you were involved in such conduct, please consider self-disclosing through the SDNY Whistleblower Pilot Program at USANYS.WBP@usdoj.gov.

The names of the defendants, the charges against them, their ages, and their cities and states of residence are set forth below.

The maximum potential sentences are prescribed by Congress and are provided here for informational purposes only, as any sentencing of the defendants will be determined by a judge.

Mr. Williams praised the outstanding investigative work of DOI, HSI, HUD OIG, and DOL-OIG, which work together collaboratively as part of the HSI Document and Benefit Fraud Task Force, as well as the special agents and task force officers of the U.S. Attorney’s Office for the Southern District of New York. Mr. Williams thanked the New York City Police Department and the U.S. Marshals Service for their assistance with today’s arrest operations. Mr. Williams also expressed appreciation for the cooperation and support of NYCHA’s senior executive leadership and thanked NYCHA Federal Monitor Bart Schwartz for his assistance with the investigation.

These prosecutions are part of an Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Forces (“OCDETF”) operation. OCDETF identifies, disrupts, and dismantles criminal organizations using a prosecutor-led, intelligence-driven, multi-agency approach. Additional information about the OCDETF Program can be found at <https://www.justice.gov/OCDETF>.

These cases are being handled by the Office’s Public Corruption Unit. Assistant U.S. Attorneys Jerry J. Fang, Jacob R. Fiddelman, Meredith Foster, Catherine Ghosh, and Sheb Swett are in charge of the prosecutions.

The charges contained in the Complaints are merely accusations, and the defendants are presumed innocent unless and until proven guilty.

Kangana subtly refuses to work with 'Animal' director Sandeep Reddy Vanga

Bollywood actress Kangana Ranaut, who is gearing up for her upcoming directorial 'Emergency', has reacted to director Sandeep Reddy Vanga's statement about working with her. While she accepted the compliments given to her by the 'Animal' director, she quietly refused to work with him. Recently, Sandeep expressed his wish to work with the 'Queen' actress as he said he is open to work with her, in an interview.

Kangana had criticised Sandeep's film 'Animal', which stars Ranbir Kapoor in the titular role, talking about which the filmmaker said he doesn't mind her remark.

Reacting to the director's statement, Kangana took to X and penned a note. She wrote, "Review and criticism are not the same, every kind of art should be reviewed and discussed, it is a normal thing. The way Sandeep ji showed respect towards me by smiling at my

review, it can be said that he not only makes manly films, his attitude is also manly, thank you sir."

She further mentioned, "But please don't ever give me any role otherwise your alpha male heroes will become feminist and then your films will also be beaten, you make blockbusters, the film industry needs you."

Kangana had previously criticised 'Animal' in a post on X.

Reposting a fan's tweet, she had said, "Paid negativity for my films is overwhelming, I have been fighting hard so far but even audiences are encouraging women beating films where they are treated like sex objects and asked to lick shoes. This is deeply discouraging for someone who has been dedicating her life to women empowerment films, might shift careers in coming years, and want to give the best years of my life to something worthwhile."

Sudipto Sen on 'The Kerala Story': Translating sensitive topic into a film is no small feat



As the Adah Sharma-starrer 'The Kerala Story' is set for the OTT release, director Sudipto Sen shared that tackling such a sensitive topic and translating it into a film is no small feat. Inspired by real events, 'The Kerala Story' which has created quite a buzz during its theatrical release, delves into the sensitive and complex issue of the alleged radicalisation and conversion of young Hindu women to another religion in Kerala, forcing them into joining terrorist groups.

Talking about the film, Sudipto said: "Tackling such a sensitive topic and translating it into a film is no small feat; it's a challenge we willingly embraced. However, every filmmaker wants an assurance about his work and 'The Kerala Story's' box office performance was my assurance and gratification to continue to have faith in myself."

"Many are living in the dark about the reality of the situation and for those, this film will lift that darkness and show them the naked truth as the stories in the film are real. The faces in the film are real. The fates and consequences of the characters in the film are real," he shared. "The film is a unique cinematic experience for the viewers of the film," added Sudipto. Adah, who plays Shalini Unnikrishnan shared: "The courageous makers of 'The Kerala Story', Vipul Shah and Sudipto Sen deserve to be applauded for having put in immense hard work to bring this film to life."

Producer Vipul Amrutlal Shah, commented: "There are so many moments where you want to rewind and rewatch or watch the film again and again. This is a very important film for the entire family to see together."

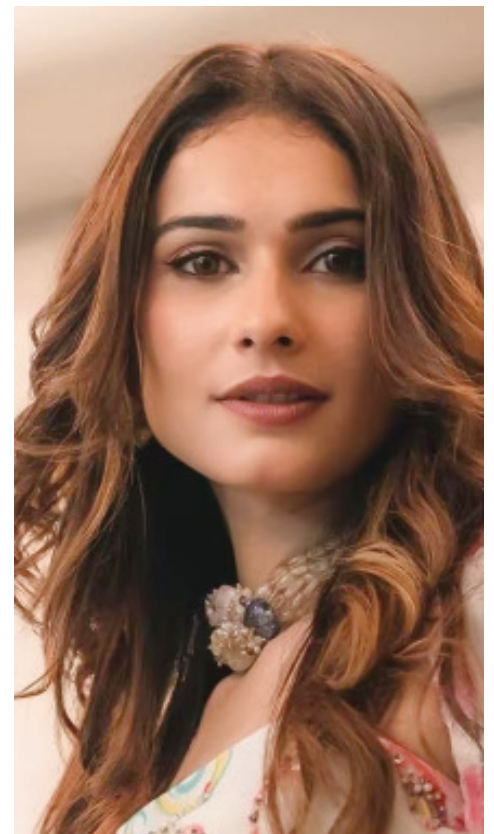
Manish Kalra, Chief Business Officer



Aneri Vajani: Was hesitant about taking 'Baaghin' role as I haven't done any supernatural shows

- Television actress Aneri Vajani, who is all set to be seen in the fantasy drama 'Baaghin', said she was initially a little hesitant about taking the role as she hasn't done any supernatural shows before. Aneri, who has featured in the shows such as 'Anupamaa' and 'Beyhadh', said that it has been a roller-coaster journey for her. "Initially, I was a little hesitant about taking on this role because I haven't done any supernatural shows before and I couldn't gather the confidence to do something of this magnitude. However, I chose to perceive it as a divine sign, turning 'Baaghin' into an adventure."

"Viewing it as an opportunity to embrace challenges, I welcomed the chance to step into a role I never imagined I'd undertake, given its considerable complexity for me as an actor," said the actress, who made her debut in the world of small screen in 2012 'Kaali - Ek Punar Avatar'.



Bobby Deol looks suave in leather jacket, brother Sunny showers love



Fans were treated to a visual delight as actor Bobby Deol shared fresh captures from his recent photoshoot, and it has garnered heartwarming admiration from his brother Sunny Deol. Bobby, who enjoys 3.1 million followers on Instagram, shared a series of pictures, wherein he can be seen wearing a tan coloured leather jacket. He is sporting a beard and tied his hair in a bun.

In the captivating snapshots, the 'Soldier' fame, exudes charisma,

dressed impeccably and radiating a sense of suave elegance, the actor effortlessly captures attention with his poised demeanour.

The subtle yet powerful expression on his face adds an intriguing depth to the photos. The post is captioned: "Last glance and ready to go."

His brother Sunny Deol dropped several red heart emojis in the comment section. Vikrant Massey posted fire emojis.

On the professional front, Bobby was last seen in the action drama 'Animal', directed by Sandeep Reddy The movie stars Ranbir

Kapoor in the lead, while Anil Kapoor, Bobby, and Rashmika Mandanna play pivotal roles.

On the professional front, Bobby was last seen in the action drama 'Animal', directed by Sandeep Reddy The movie stars Ranbir Kapoor in the lead, while Anil Kapoor, Bobby, and Rashmika Mandanna play pivotal roles.

Bobby next has 'Kanguva', and 'NBK 109' in the pipeline.

'Thrilled' Jamie Lever announces her first one-woman stand-up live show



Comedian and actress Jamie Lever is set to feature in a one-woman stand-up live show titled 'The Jamie Lever Show', where she will be showcasing her observations to spot-on impersonations, and even flaunting her singing and dancing skills seamlessly woven into her set.

Jamie, daughter of veteran comedian Johnny Lever, said: "The 'Jamie Lever Show' is a labor of love, bringing together all facets of my comedic and artistic abilities."

"It's a unique blend of laughter, impersonations, and entertainment, giving the audience a glimpse into my world. I'm thrilled to bring this one-woman show to my hometown, Mumbai, and can't wait to connect with the audience in a more intimate setting."

The live show marks a significant milestone as it is Jamie's first solo venture in her home city, Mumbai. The Nehru Auditorium, Mumbai and the Kashinath Ghanekar Hall in Thane are the chosen venues, promising packed houses for the laughter-filled evenings.

19 years of 'Black': Rani Mukerji says it taught her a lot about life, being grateful

Bollywood actress Rani Mukerji is celebrating the 19th anniversary of her critically acclaimed film 'Black' in which she co-starred with veteran Bollywood megastar Amitabh Bachchan. Reflecting back on the film, the actress said that the film taught her a lot about life and about being grateful. The film, directed by Sanjay Leela Bhansali, narrates the story of Michelle (played by Rani), a deaf-and-blind woman, and her relationship with her teacher Debraj (played by Big B), an elderly alcoholic teacher who later develops Alzheimer's disease. Walking down the memory lane, Rani Mukerji said: "'Black' had a profound impact on my life as an actor and as an individual. The challenges of using sign language for even the simplest tasks was a huge learning experience and a very humbling one too. 'Black'

will always remain very special to me, because it taught me a lot about life and about being grateful."

The film is set to be released on Netflix to commemorate 19 years of its release.

The actress further mentioned: "Working with Amit uncle was of course one of the most memorable moments of my life to be able to share screen space with him and getting an opportunity to watch him delivering his best performance was in itself like a masterclass for me. And of course, working with my favourite director Sanjay Leela Bhansali. 'Black', I believe, is one of Sanjay's greatest works as a filmmaker! What he did with Black, is something that generations of actors, film enthusiasts, and audiences will be able to witness his brilliance for years to come."

She added: "Black has remained one of the tent pole films for me, that will always be attached to my name forever.



Sandeep Reddy Vanga reveals he showed *Animal* to his son, here's how he reacted

Sandeep Reddy Vanga's *Animal* was one of the highest-grossing films of last year. The Ranbir Kapoor-starrer also became the highest-grossing A-rated Indian film. In a new interview with Siddharth Kannan, Sandeep has now revealed how his wife Manisha and son Arjun Reddy reacted to *Animal*.

Sandeep Reddy Vanga's son reaction to *Animal*

Speaking with Siddharth Kannan, when Sandeep Reddy Vanga was asked about whether his 7 year-old son has been following the buzz around his film being a superhit, and if at all he has shown the film to him, the director said in Hindi: "We made a hard disc of those scenes which could not be shown, and cut it out. Then we showed a different edit of the film during New Year's. He saw the film but I have chopped all those A-rated scenes."



He further added that his son liked the underwear action scene was very funny film, and said: "He was saying that the (laughs)." The director also revealed

that although his wife said that there was a lot of bloodshed in the film, she did not say anything about misogyny. Sandeep also revealed that his brother gives honest feedback, which he takes seriously as a filmmaker. He also credited his family for the existence of his film Arjun Reddy.

Animal

Animal stars Ranbir Kapoor alongside Anil Kapoor, Bobby Deol, Rashmika Mandanna, Triptii Dimri, Suresh Oberoi, Shakti Kapoor, and Prem Chopra. It tells the story of a man who returns from the US post an assassination attempt on his emotionally distant father. In a bid to win his validation, the man goes on a rampage to take revenge on those who tried to kill his father. The film was criticised for glorifying toxic masculinity and violence. Many filmmakers and actors have called out the film for promoting misogyny.

Akshay Kumar: I have been a Shiva bhakt for the longest time

Akshay Kumar is all set to showcase a powerful experience with his music video 'Shambhu' and said that for the longest time, he has been a Shiva bhakt.

Akshay, who played Lord Shiva in the 2023 film 'OMG 2', said: "Shambhu comes from a deep place in my heart that has only been beating with the name Jai Shri Mahakaal! For the longest time I have been a Shiva bhakt but lately my connection with him and devotion towards him has only become deeper." The action star says that Lord Shiva is the power, love and is the help when needed.

Akshay added: "He is the saviour, he is the surrender we all look to surrender to, he is the be-all and end-all. With this



song, I just offer a droplet that I am to the infinite consciousness that Shiva is! Jai Shri Mahakaal."

The Shiva anthem is sung by the versatile Akshay along with Sudhir Yaduvanshi and Vikram Montrose.

The song is releasing on February 5, and it aims to resonate with devotees seeking a spiritual and uplifting musical experience during this divine celebration. 'Shambhu' will be available exclusively on Times Music.

Mandar Thakur, CEO of Times Music shared: "We are thrilled to collaborate with Akshay Kumar on this divine musical venture. 'Shambhu' is not just a song; it's an extraordinary blend of audio and cinematic visual experience." 202402053114864

Ayushmann Khurrana hails wife Tahira's strength on World Cancer Day



Bollywood actor Ayushmann Khurrana, who was last seen in the theatrical film 'Dream Girl 2', lauded his wife Tahira Kashyap on Sunday on the occasion of World Cancer Day. Tahira has successfully battled breast cancer and has been very open about her fight with the disease. In 2019, Tahira bravely faced a diagnosis of "stage 0" breast cancer, undergoing a mastectomy procedure and triumphing over the disease.

The 'Vicky Donor' actor took to his Instagram on Sunday, and shared an array of pictures featuring his wife commending his wife's battle and shared how the two fell in love. The first shows

the actor and his wife posing for a mirror selfie. The second picture has Tahira with her back facing the camera. The scar from her medical procedure can be seen on her back. The other pictures in the carousel show her all charged up having defeated the disease.

The actor wrote in the caption: "The girl I pulled by having samosa and chai at hut number 14 in Panjab University. All the best for your debut at the @spokenfest today. In love with your heart and spirit." Ayushmann and Tahira began dating in college. They got married in 2008 and have two children together: son Virajveer, born in 2012 and daughter, Varushka, born in 2014.

Why 'Fighter' Has Not Soared Higher

By: Biswadeep Ghosh

Siddharth Anand's aerial action drama Fighter's rollercoaster ride at the box office continues. Theatrical attendance on the first day, a Thursday, was unimpressive. Following a far better performance on Republic Day, its second day, a fall on Saturday and Sunday suggested the possibility of a tough battle ahead. There was a steep decline in attendance from Monday, but the collections went up dramatically on its second Saturday in the theatres. Sunday promises to be reasonable, too, but there is no doubt that the lavishly mounted action entertainer made with a reported budget of around Rs 250 crore has failed to meet the sky-high expectations within the industry before its release.

Could Fighter have performed any better? It should have because it has not missed its target of offering an entertaining experience to the average viewer of commercial cinema. Moreover, it is a Hrithik Roshan vehicle in which the superstar has unleashed his appeal in the most alluring way possible. It has been made in an era in which the director's name has become a significant consideration for many viewers. Anand has emerged as the most successful maker




of actioners in recent years. Pathaan, his last directorial, had catalysed the resurgence of Bollywood with its lifetime collections of more than Rs 1,000 crore last year. Before Fighter's release, most industry observers believed that the film might become a blockbuster. That much-desired verdict is beyond reach, which has disappointed those hoping for some dazzling magic at the start of the year. Fighter's poor marketing strategy — some would say it did not have any — could not generate enough interest among viewers before its release. Speaking to Galatta Plus, Anand had an explanation for the lukewarm initial response. Apart

from mentioning the fact that the day of release was a working day, which prevented audiences from going to the theatres in large numbers, he said: "There is a huge percentage of our country, I would say, 90 percent, who have not flown in planes, who have not been to an airport, so how would they know what's happening in the movie? This is my dissection. They felt this was a little alien." The maker added, "They did not understand what kind of exhilaration they are supposed to feel in the air action, so there is a certain initial disconnect. But once you enter the theatre, you realise this is such a basic film." A part of his

statement — possibly 90 percent of Indians have not flown in planes, which led to the initial disconnect — resulted in a volley of online humour. One social media user said Welcome was a hit because 90 percent of Indians paint, while another quipped that Chak De! India worked because 90 percent of Indians play hockey. The criticism was inevitable because most viewers watch films to indulge in experiences, which are often detached from reality as we know it in our day-to-day lives. If a masala film like Fighter headlined by its good-looking leading superstars Roshan and Deepika Padukone started slowly, in other words, that was primarily because the film was not promoted sufficiently well and the trailer impressed fewer potential moviegoers than it could have.

Fighter has some obvious strengths, such as cinematography, action choreography, background music and special effects. As fighter pilot Shamsher 'Patty' Pathania, Roshan steals the show with a towering performance. Patty is cocky, and there is a reason why his relationship with his senior (Anil Kapoor, good as usual) is far from ideal. The female protagonist Minal 'Minni' Rathore (Padukone, solid), Patty's colleague, holds her own in a man's world.

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Combine mindfulness, exercise to boost mental health: Study

Want to start 2024 with a new workout routine to feel fitter and happier? A new study suggests combining mindfulness with exercise. The study, published in the journal *Mental Health and Physical Activity*, suggests that life changes which combine both physical activity and mindfulness are most effective at lifting mood and improving health and well-being.

Both physical activity and mindfulness practice have well-established psychological benefits.

However, by reviewing existing research studies, this is one of the first to show how the positive effects can be increased when the

two are combined, said researchers at the University of Bath in the UK.

The findings suggest that mindfulness can help to unlock exercise by helping to motivate people to start in the first place, while overcoming minor pain, discomfort or feelings of failure when exercising gets hard.

"Starting 2024 with a resolution to exercise more can have really positive physical and mental health benefits. But we know that starting out can be tough and that it can also be hard to stick with it over time," said Masha Remskar, an expert in behaviour change, mindfulness

and exercise at the University's Department of Health.

Mindfulness is an approach that can help us 'train up' the psychological strengths we need to exercise and be more in tune with our bodies, as well as make exercising more interesting and help us

recognise its benefits. Remskar explained that "becoming more mindful prompts us to think differently about our lifestyle, makes us more accepting and less judgmental of our own shortcomings, which can help to build healthy habits".

"There is a huge potential to use mindfulness to unlock the positive



benefits exercise can bring," she noted.

The team now aims to start conducting a larger trial to

determine the effectiveness and optimal intervention moments for combining exercise and mindfulness.



Here's a tasty, nutritious veg salad for long-term male space travellers

A tasty and nutritious vegetarian salad made up of soybeans, poppy seeds, barley, kale, peanuts, sweet potato and/or sunflower seeds could be the optimal "space meal", suggests a study. As space agencies plan for longer missions, they're grappling with the challenge of how to best feed people.

Researchers at the University of Adelaide designed the

vegetarian salad with fresh ingredients that meet male astronauts' specialised nutritional needs and can be grown in space.

Astronauts in space burn more calories than humans on Earth and require extra micronutrients, such as calcium, to stay healthy during extended exposure to microgravity. Additionally, future long-term missions will require

growing food in a sustainable, circular way within the spacecraft or space colonies. While researchers have explored methods of growing food in space and what nutrients astronauts require to stay healthy, specific fresh meals have not been developed.

In the study, detailed in the journal *ACS Food Science & Technology*, Volker Hessel and his team from the varsity wanted to optimise a space meal that meets those unique requirements of spaceflight and tastes good. First, the researchers assessed combinations of fresh ingredients, using a method

called linear programming, which computationally balances different variables to meet a specific goal.

In this case, their model identified how well the combinations of different foods could meet a male astronaut's daily nutritional needs while minimising the water required to grow the foods. The team was also concerned about the sustainability of the foods in space, selecting ingredients that needed little fertiliser, time and area to grow and whether inedible portions could be recycled.

Of the 10 scenarios the researchers examined, they

found that a vegetarian meal made up of soybeans, poppy seeds, barley, kale, peanuts, sweet potato and/or sunflower seeds provided the most efficient balance of maximal nutrients and minimal farming inputs.

While this combination couldn't quite provide all the micronutrients an astronaut needs, those missing could be added in a supplement, the researchers suggest.

To make sure that the identified combination was tasty, the team whipped up the ideal space meal as a salad for four people to taste test here on Earth.

Study finds new gene mutation that protects against Parkinson's

A team of US researchers have identified a previously unknown genetic mutation in a small protein that provides significant protection against Parkinson's disease. The study, led by the team at the University of Southern California (USC) offers a new direction for exploring potential treatments.

The variant, located in a mitochondrial microprotein dubbed SHLP2, was found to be highly protective against Parkinson's disease; individuals with this mutation are half as likely to develop the disease as those who do not carry it.

The variant form of the protein is relatively rare and is found

primarily in people of European descent, reveals the study, appearing in the journal *Molecular Psychiatry*.

"This study advances our understanding of why people might get Parkinson's and how we might develop new therapies for this devastating disease," said Pinchas Cohen, Professor of gerontology,

medicine and biological sciences at the USC Leonard Davis School.

"Also, because most research is done on well-established protein-coding genes in the nucleus, it underscores the relevance of exploring mitochondrial-derived microproteins as a new approach

to the prevention and treatment of diseases of ageing," Cohen said.

For the study, the team led a series of experiments where they compared genetic variants in the mitochondrial DNA in patients with Parkinson's disease and in controls. The researchers found a highly protective variant found in 1 per cent of Europeans, that reduced risk of Parkinson's disease by twofold, to 50 per cent of average.

Next, they demonstrated that this naturally occurring variant results in a change to the amino acid sequence and protein structure of SHLP2.

The mutation -- a single

nucleotide polymorphism (SNP), or a change to a single letter of the protein's genetic code -- is essentially a "gain-of-function" variant that is associated with higher expression of SHLP2 and also makes the microprotein more stable.

According to their findings, the SHLP2 variant has high stability compared to the more common type and provides enhanced protection against mitochondrial dysfunction.

The research team was able to use targeted mass spectrometry techniques to identify the tiny peptide's presence in neurons and found that SHLP2 specifically binds to an enzyme in

mitochondria called mitochondrial complex 1.

This enzyme is essential for life, and declines in its function have been linked not only to Parkinson's disease but also to strokes and heart attacks.

The increased stability of the SHLP2 variant means that the microprotein binds to mitochondrial complex 1 more stably, prevents the decline of the enzyme's activity, and thus reduces mitochondrial dysfunction. The benefits of the mutant form of SHLP2 were observed in both in vitro experiments in human tissue samples as well as in mouse models of Parkinson's disease.

People wear Apple Vision Pro on streets, inside trains & more



experience, like it is “nice to be able to use my MacBook keyboard with the display mostly closed, with drinks on my tray table. feels less crowded”.

“Nice to have this ‘private’ screen. No one peeking over my shoulder, mirrored display looks a lot bigger in actual use than in this video,” he posted.

There were people working as they walked on the streets, as well as having lunch together, while their Vision Pro headsets on.

The Vision Pro boasts transformative spatial experiences, converting any space into a personal theatre for immersive entertainment, facilitating novel modes of collaboration, content creation, and offering exhilarating gaming escapades.

The Vision Pro is equipped with ultra-high-resolution displays, surpassing the pixel density of a 4K TV for each eye, providing users with an unparalleled viewing experience akin to a 100-foot screen.

From people wearing it on the streets, during the flight, inside the trains, at the gym and even while having lunch together, Apple’s mixed reality (MR) headset Vision Pro has taken the internet by storm. YouTuber Casey Neistat’s Apple Vision Pro video was a wild ride where he wore the headset through the streets of New York City, onto the subway, and into the heart of Times Square.

He was even seen responding to a text message in the middle of

the subway staircase.

The sight of people wearing the Apple Vision Pro has sparked a wave of memes and humorous videos and made it a trending topic on X.

Amit Gupta, founder of Sudowrite, took to X to narrate his experience after he used it on a five-hour flight.

“Just boarded a 5-hour flight with Apple Vision Pro. Will I be brave enough to strap it to my face?” Gupta posted on X.

He listed pointers about his

Apple plans to buy AI startup to strengthen its Vision Pro: Report

Apple is planning to acquire a German AI startup — Brighter AI, specialising in anonymising face and licence plate data, a media report has said. According to 9to5Mac, citing sources, the tech giant aims to use this acquisition to improve privacy features on its



mixed reality (MR) headset Vision Pro.

Apple is reportedly considering using Brighter AI’s technology to minimise the risk of Apple Vision Pro capturing identifiable information in public photos or videos.

These concerns are usually not present while using an iPhone to capture footage. However, Apple Vision Pro may raise concerns because it can shoot video more

discreetly than smartphones.

This technology could also be useful in future devices that make photo and video capture less noticeable. When capturing media with Vision Pro, a subtle visual cue appears on the front panel, the report mentioned.

Brighter AI offers sophisticated AI technology that can remove all traces of data without obscuring it, making the acquisition of the company of particular interest. The method used by Brighter AI keeps subjects’ natural appearance while maintaining their

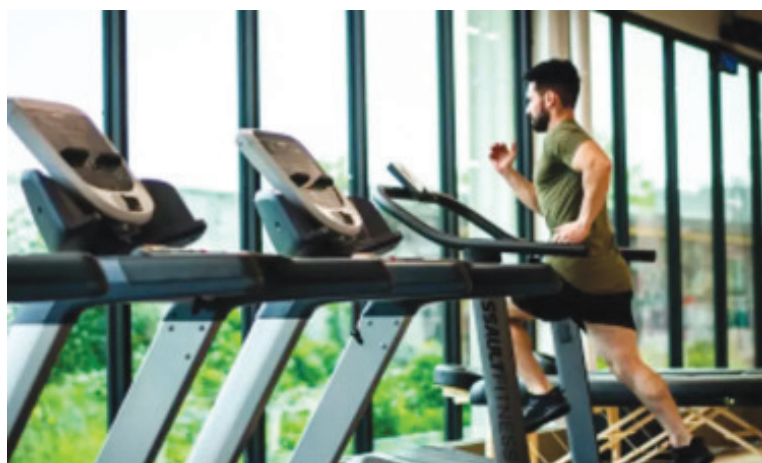
unrecognisability, according to the report. Instead, Brighter AI can alter images so that subjects are no longer identifiable. It accomplishes this while maintaining natural appearances. Meanwhile, Apple officially launched Vision Pro in the US on February 2. It starts at \$3,500.

The tech giant has announced more than 600 apps and games designed for the Apple Vision Pro headset.

Living near fitness centers may influence people in physical activity after stroke

People may be more likely to engage in physical activity after stroke if they live in a neighbourhood with more recreational and fitness facilities, a new study has discovered. The study published in the journal American Stroke Association found that people in New York City in the US who survived a mild stroke were more likely to maintain the same level of physical activity as they did prior to the stroke, or even increase that activity if they lived in areas with more recreational centres and fitness resources nearby.

“Our findings suggest that it’s important to have a conversation with stroke patients about physical activity resources available in their area so they are able to continue their recovery after hospital discharge,” said lead study author Jeffrey Wing, PhD, MPH, an assistant professor of epidemiology at The Ohio State University in Columbus.



In this study, researchers investigated the potential link between available fitness/

exercise centres, pools and gyms and physical activity among 333 people living in New

York City who had a mild stroke. The researchers found that about 17 per cent of participants reported being more physically active one year after the stroke, and 48 per cent reported having about the same level of physical activity as before the stroke. The odds of being more active were 57 per cent higher among participants who lived in areas with more recreational and fitness resources compared to those with fewer or no fitness resources. Similarly, the odds of reporting the same level of physical activity one year after

stroke were 47 per cent higher in participants who lived in areas with more recreational centres and fitness resources compared to those with fewer or no resources available, according to the study. “The takeaway from this analysis is that it’s not that people should move to a location where there are more resources to engage in physical activity, but to urge people to find ways to be active in their own neighbourhood,” said study co-author Julie Strominger, a PhD student of epidemiology at The Ohio State University.

Deepfake video meeting with fake CFO costs company \$25.6 mn

Hong Kong- A deepfake video conference call where a digitally recreated avatar of the chief financial officer (CFO) ordered money transfers has cost a multinational company \$25.6 million in a first-such scam. Employees at the company’s Hong Kong office were fooled by scammers who created digitally-altered versions of the company’s CFO and others in a video call where “everyone looked real”.

Everyone present on the video calls except the victim was a fake representation of real people, South China Morning Post reported.

“The scammers applied deepfake technology to turn publicly available video and other footage into convincing versions of the meeting’s participants,” said the report.

Police say the case is the first known

instance of scammers using deepfakes to deceive financial agencies.

“This time, in a multi-person video conference, it turns out that everyone you see is fake,” acting senior superintendent Baron Chan Shun-ching was quoted as saying.

The company employees in the call looked and sounded like real people the targeted employee recognised.

Paytm CEO Vijay Shekhar Sharma meets FM Nirmala Sitharaman amid crisis

Paytm founder and chief executive officer Vijay Shekhar Sharma met Union finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman on Tuesday to discuss the ongoing challenges faced by his fintech firm following the Reserve Bank of India curbs, ANI reported. The high-level meeting took place hours after Sharma and few Paytm officials had met the RBI to discuss regulatory concerns. According to a Reuters report, the central bank heard the fintech giant without making any commitments. "Discussions are on about addressing the regulatory concerns and compliance issues with both the RBI and the ministry," a source told Reuters. Last week, the RBI had asked Paytm to stop accepting new



deposits in its accounts and popular digital wallets from February 29. The company has sought an extension of the deadline from the RBI and has also been seeking clarity from the central bank on the transfer of its licence for

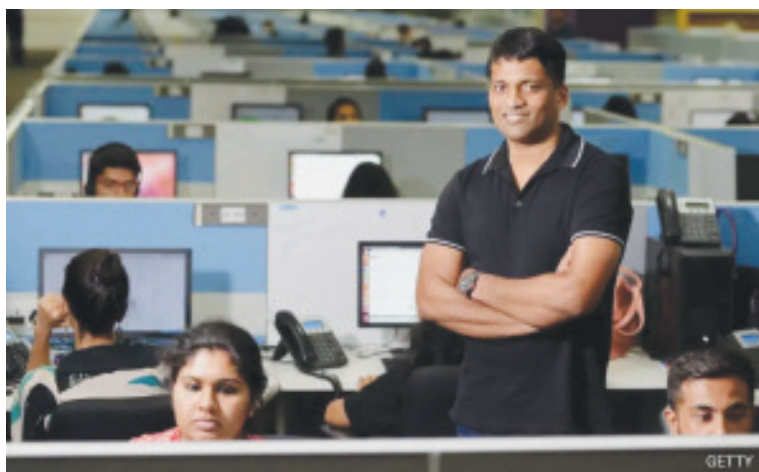
the wallets business and FASTag. Paytm has rejected reports of either the company or its founder Sharma being probed by the Enforcement Directorate. "Categorically deny any investigation by the Enforcement Directorate on OCL, our associates, and/or its Founder and CEO for anti-money laundering activities. Neither the company nor its founder and CEO are being investigated by the Enforcement Directorate regarding, inter alia, money laundering", the company statement said. "We would like to set the record straight and deny any involvement in anti-money laundering activities. We have and continue to abide by Indian laws and take regulatory orders with utmost seriousness," the company added.

What Went Wrong With Byju's, Which Was Once Valued At \$22 Billion

Byju's, run by billionaire CEO Byju Raveendran, was the poster child of India's startup ecosystem and was expected to herald a change in pedagogy at schools and colleges. It reached a valuation of \$22 billion in 2022 as its popularity rose by offering online and offline education courses. But in the last year, the company's popularity and valuation have seen a sharp decline with several of its investors now calling for leadership change at the ed-tech firm.

How Byju's Started

Byju Raveendran was happily working as a service engineer at a shipping firm. A visit to his hometown in Kerala in 2003, where he helped some friends crack the MBA entrance exam CAT, was when he first realised that he had a penchant for teaching. He appeared for the competitive exam and aced it with a perfect score. He though rejected all MBA offers and returned to his job, only to score a 100 percentile in the exam again two years later. This led to several people approaching him to help them crack the exam. The demand



for his teaching skills grew rapidly, leading to the formal launch of Byju's classes for the CAT exam in 2006.

Meteoric Rise Of Byju's

Byju's soon expanded its reach to undergraduate students, eventually forming Think and Learn Pvt Ltd. in 2011. The company then ventured into the school curriculum, breaking down chapters into interactive videos and using real-life examples to make students understand fundamental concepts. In 2015, the company launched Byju's learning app, which catered to students from kindergarten to class 12. By 2019, Byju's had become India's first ed-tech unicorn,

a startup that is valued at over \$1 billion. Byju's became the darling of India's startup ecosystem, captivating the nation with its innovative approach to education. The use of interactive videos and technology, coupled with celebrity endorsements from the likes of Shah Rukh Khan and Virat Kohli, propelled Byju's valuation to an unprecedented \$22 billion, making it the world's most expensive ed-tech startup. The Fall

The meteoric rise of Byju's eventually gave way to a tumultuous fall. After a rapid expansion during the Covid pandemic, Byju's has been struggling with cash-flow problems and is embroiled in a dispute with

creditors over a \$1.2 billion loan.

The company's rapid expansion also led to allegations of a toxic work culture and immense pressure on employees to acquire more customers.

In June 2023, tech investor Prosus cut Byju's valuation by 75%, leading to layoffs and allegations of financial mismanagement. Byju's parent company, Think &

Learn Pvt Ltd., faced scrutiny for not paying PF money to employees and was also suspended by Google and Facebook for non-payment of ad dues.

Reasons For Downfall

When the Covid pandemic hit, Byju's saw an opportunity to promote online and went all out with marketing. Their business boomed between Mar 2020 to Oct 2020. It acquired several ed-tech startups, not just in India but also in the US, as it tried to expand rapidly.

During COVID-19, the company sponsored the Indian cricket team, the Football World Cup, and even signed football star Lionel Messi as a global ambassador.

But growth has slowed since classes resumed, and the company's challenges have been exacerbated by the months-long legal dispute that's only showing signs of intensifying.

Byju's revenue has remained steady, but its losses jumped from ₹ 252 crore to 4,564 crore in just one year between 2019-20 and 2020-21.

Aggressive marketing tactics and financial mismanagement have also played a significant role in the company's downfall. Sponsorship of major events and celebrity endorsements strained its financial standings, leading to a \$1.2 billion loan default in 2021.

The company's failure to file timely financial reports also raised questions about its stability. Byju's delayed the filing of its 2021/22 financial results by nearly a year, prompting auditor Deloitte and three board members to quit. Its chief financial officer and chief technology officer also quit in November 2023. By November 2023, Byju's founder had to mortgage personal properties to secure a loan for employee salaries. The current valuation of \$1 billion marks a drastic decline from its all-time high, signaling a troubling period for the once-thriving ed-tech giant.

What Next For Byju's?

The latest blow to Byju's comes in the form of shareholders moving a resolution seeking the ouster of the founders from top leadership roles, including CEO Byju Raveendran. Some of Byju's investors say the company's valuation has fallen to between \$1 billion and \$3 billion.

"The company and our employees are paying the price for a stand-off triggered by some investors," Byju's said.

Byju's, which is currently raising \$200 million through a rights issue of shares, said such capital is "pivotal for a successful turnaround" and it has received support for the capital raising from multiple shareholders.

The Messenger's Brutal Demise Didn't Have To Be This Cruel'

Jimmy Finkelstein hastily built a rocket ship he named The Messenger, boarded a staff of 300 promising the moon, lit the fuse and then slunk away when it didn't even reach orbit. The wreckage is considerable. Finkelstein and team, which had recruited experienced journalists from jobs at POLITICO, the New York Post, the Los Angeles Times, NBC News, Reuters and elsewhere, made no effort to rescue or aid the crew. No severance offered after their short-notice layoffs. No last rites. The only trace of the site that remains is a dead page reading "TheMessenger." and an email address. Reporters learned they were being thrown into unemployment by reading the New York Times rather than a note from management.



Finkelstein is being drawn as a villain in the disaster. Former staffers have already shaken off the reentry dust and filed a class action suit against the busted publication for failing to provide notice of dismissal. Critics like S. Mitra Kalita of URL media have succinctly accused Finkelstein of erecting The Messenger on the "expertise of an internet that no longer exists," as she told the New York Times, adding, "Facebook was not going to surface its links no matter how clickable those headlines were." Coming as it did

with a recent wave of news business layoffs and cutbacks, the crash of The Messenger amplified the pessimism now sweeping through newsrooms. But it would be a mistake to blend The Messenger's dark story into the ongoing drama without making a few amendments. The first would be that owing to self-interest, the news business over-reports layoffs and collapses in its own sector and underreports job losses elsewhere. On Thursday, the Washington Post and the rest of the press filed stories about the Wall Street Journal laying off

20 staffers in its D.C. bureau. We all sympathize, but would this have made the news if similarly sized businesses cut 20 people? Not all layoffs portend the end of the world. Sometimes layoffs arrive when a new editor — the Wall Street Journal just got one — makes decisions her predecessor wouldn't. Nobody, not even experienced and talented journalists who have mortgages and medical bills, is owed a job.

The news business faces a dire future. But the industry contraction we've read so much about recently wasn't a direct

cause of The Messenger's demise. And while Finkelstein's treatment of his employees may have been brutal at the end, he was arguably just as callous at the start by making promises he could never fulfill. The Messenger's fall has so many causes beyond the one cited by Kalita that we need a more wide-ranging post-mortem if we hope to learn anything about it.

First and foremost, Finkelstein committed an act of business daredevilry when he entered a market already clogged with competitors — including but not limited to POLITICO, The Hill, Roll Call, Axios, Punchbowl News, Bloomberg News, the dailies, the networks, opinion magazines like The New Republic, newsletters and the various trade press outlets. Naysayers asserted that The Messenger couldn't clear that logjam to be heard, but that view was common coin when The Hill challenged Roll Call, when POLITICO challenged the two of them, when POLITICO honchos broke away to form Axios, when POLITICO stalwarts launched Punchbowl News and as former POLITICO owner Robert Allbritton has just started NOTUS. The Messenger's death indicates that absent some editor inventing a major new wrinkle, Washington news has peaked. There are no discernable vacancies.

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AI-generated Biden robocall linked to Texas companies, officials say

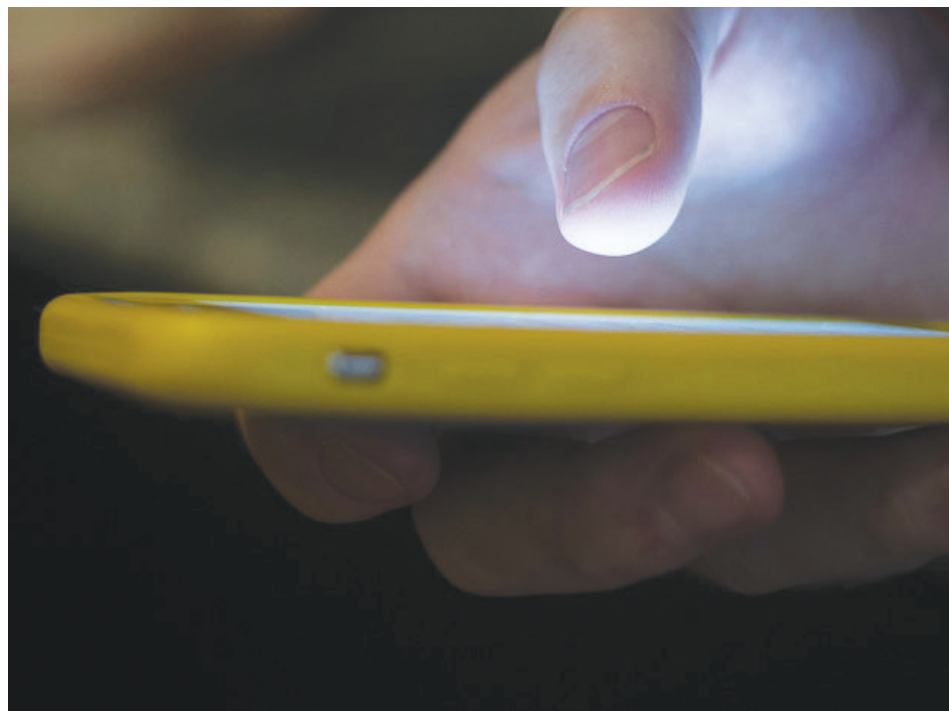
The New Hampshire attorney general named the apparent sources of a mysterious fake Joe Biden robocall last month, and the Federal Communications Commission sent a cease-and-desist letter to a Texas telecom company seeking to halt future bogus calls.

The incident is the highest-profile controversy to use AI during the 2024 campaign, and comes as the technology faces growing scrutiny over its ability to create realistic deepfakes and spread misinformation. The FCC issued a cease-and-desist order Tuesday to Lingo Telecom, a Texas entity that carried the robocalls on its phone network.

The FCC partnered with the New Hampshire State Attorney General's Office, which separately issued a cease-and-desist order to Life Corporation, a Texas entity that allegedly made the robocalls. New Hampshire officials accused Life of violating the state's voter suppression laws, and also identified Walter Monk as a source of these calls. Monk and Life didn't immediately respond to a request for comment.

Lingo suspended services to Life after being informed of the investigation, according to New Hampshire officials.

"The FCC's partnership and fast action in this matter sends a clear message that law enforcement and regulatory agencies are staying vigilant and are working closely together to monitor and investigate any signs of AI being used



maliciously to threaten our democratic process," New Hampshire Attorney General John Formella said in a statement.

In a statement to POLITICO, Lingo Telecom said it took quick action to help investigators. "Upon receiving an inquiry on this matter, Lingo acted immediately by conducting an investigation into the calls at issue in order to aid in the Anti-Robocall Litigation Task Force's efforts," Lingo said. "On the same day we were contacted by the Task Force, we quickly identified and suspended the involved account, and will continue to cooperate

with federal and state investigators to bring a resolution to this matter. Lingo remains committed to upholding the highest standards of customer care in compliance with all its regulatory obligations." FCC officials also asked other telecom providers to beware of suspicious phone traffic carried by Lingo and said they may begin blocking calls from Lingo if they notify the agency of their decision to do so. The commission said it could order other providers to block Lingo's traffic if the illegal robocalls continue. Enforcers noted that both Lingo and Life have been accused of robocall

violations in the past.

Enforcement officials said they're increasingly concerned about how AI technology can be used to meddle in elections.

"The increasing reliance on AI-generated voices to deceive the public, including as part of election disinformation campaigns, is a rapidly growing problem," Loyaan Egal, who heads the FCC's Enforcement Bureau, said in a statement. "We will utilize every tool available to ensure that U.S. communications networks are not used to facilitate the harmful misuse of AI technologies."

New Hampshire households began receiving the robocalls on Jan. 21, two days before the primary. The calls included an artificial voice recording of Biden that told voters to stay home and save their vote for the November presidential election.

The impersonation of Biden's voice conveyed the following message: "Republicans have been trying to push nonpartisan and democratic voters to participate in their primary. What a bunch of malarkey. We know the value of voting democratic when our votes count. It's important that you save your vote for the November election. ... Voting this Tuesday only enables the Republicans in their quest to elect Donald Trump again. Your vote makes a difference in November, not this Tuesday."

The far right is scaring away Washington's private hacker army

By JOHN SAKELLARIADIS

Some of the country's top cybersecurity experts who've been helping protect critical networks say they're quietly retreating from a highly touted government partnership, citing frustrations with its management and pressure from conservative critics.

The Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency launched the initiative — known as the Joint Cyber Defense Collaborative — in 2021 to enlist outside tech pros in the fight against cybercrime gangs and state-backed hacking outfits following a series of high-profile breaches. The threat-sharing hub allows elite corporate hackers to quickly exchange signs of suspicious activity with the U.S. government and IT workers defending key parts of the economy, including schools, water facilities, hospitals and pipelines, to respond to or prevent hacks. Participants hail from tech giants like Microsoft, Amazon and Google, as well as infrastructure operators, foreign governments, nonprofits and midsize security firms. But five external computer security professionals involved in the JCDC told

POLITICO they and many colleagues have stopped contributing or have significantly pared back their involvement. The JCDC "has been dead for a while now," said Juan Andres Guerrero-Saade, a senior technical analyst at SentinelOne, a billion-dollar security firm that participates in the program. While many of their complaints stem from how the program is organized, the discontent also represents another indirect impact of Donald Trump's 2020 election fraud claims, now threatening to hamper largely apolitical cybersecurity work: CISA's efforts to combat disinformation ahead of the 2020 election has made it a favorite target of conservatives, who accuse it of trying to censor their views online. Even though the JCDC plays no role in online content moderation, the amped-up scrutiny of CISA has increasingly ensnared the agency's external partners, making JCDC participants fearful they could be caught in the crosshairs. There is a huge chilling effect going on," said Marc Rogers, the founder of a nonprofit cyber defense group, the CTI-League, that worked with the agency before the formation of the

JCDC. "There is a big worry now in the cybersecurity industry that there is a witch hunt going on against us. The pullback spells particular trouble for the government because most U.S. networks run on hardware and software that is privately owned. That means CISA often has to lean on tech firms and external cyber specialists to fulfill its core mandate: protecting sensitive government data and critical U.S. infrastructure from hacks. It also comes at a critical moment for the country's digital defenses. Four of Washington's top cybersecurity officials warned lawmakers Wednesday that Chinese hackers are aggressively burrowing into American infrastructure in preparation for a conflict — and that public-private cooperation, the JCDC specifically, was essential to combating it.

Traditionally, concerns about regulation have made industry hesitant about sharing threat data with the government. Federal agencies have likewise struggled to relay timely information outside their walls due to sensitivities around classified information. CISA, which sits outside the intelligence community and has no

regulatory authority, has touted its JCDC as a breakthrough solution to those long-standing problems.

But a growing conservative backlash to CISA's separate work has participants in JCDC worried. A case before the Supreme Court initiated by Republican attorneys general accuses CISA of First Amendment violations for its efforts to fight disinformation largely during the Covid-19 pandemic and the 2020 election, when it forwarded tips about hoaxes it received from state and local election authorities to companies such as Facebook and X.

Three Stanford University researchers who helped CISA address disinformation have faced legal challenges and online harassment. In December, the CTI-League's founders, including Rogers, received death threats after media reports claimed they helped hone CISA's alleged censorship strategy — a charge the group denies.

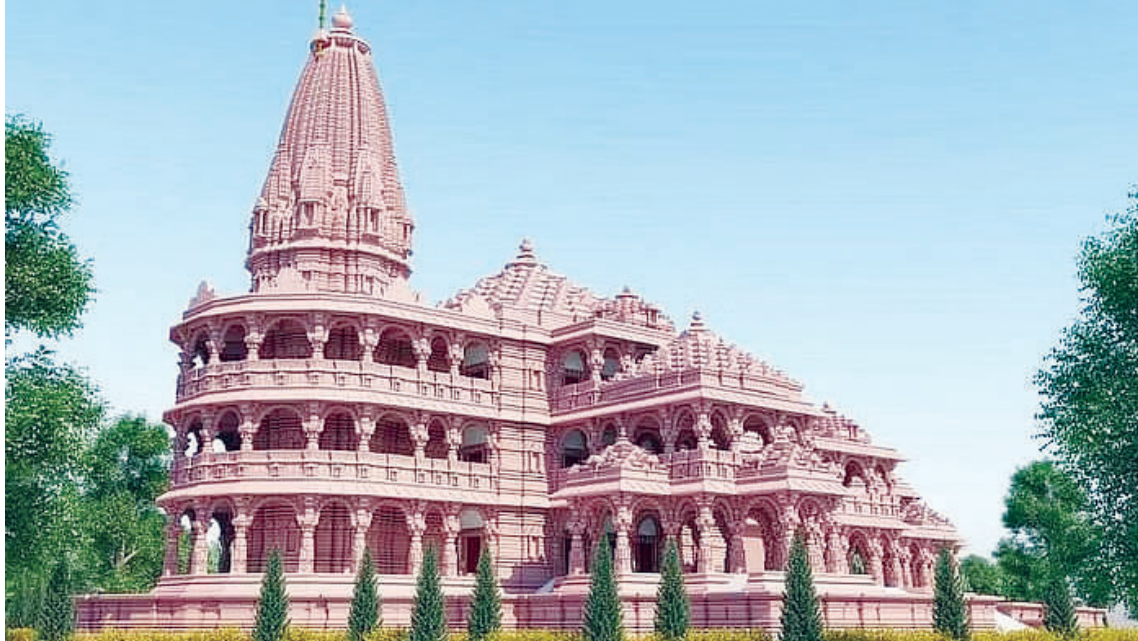
The reports prompted a pair of hearings in the conservative-led House and a wave of harassing emails, texts and social media posts against the group's founders and volunteers.

Gyanvapi: Truth, Reconciliation and the Way Forward

By: Omer Ghazi

Recently, the pristine land of Ayodhya saw the Pran Pratishtha ceremony and the returning of Ram Lalla to the temple built at the historical site. While the event was rightfully celebrated by all, irrespective of faith and politics, it also led to many sharing the Preamble to the Indian Constitution on social media as a mark of protest to the 'injustice' committed on the Indian soil. The possible connotations ranged from 'India subverting its Constitution' to 'a nation polarised by communalism' against a particular section of the society. This needs to be understood that neither the Preamble nor the Constitution exists in a vacuum, the progressive values embedded in the Constitution are themselves a culmination of thousands of years old tradition of learning and re-learning. The laws and the Constitution are meant for the people and not the vice versa. The truth and reconciliation within any society should always be supreme.

The Gyanvapi Mosque-Kashi Vishwanath temple issue is another instance where we, as a society, need to move towards better sense and better communal harmony. In a pivotal development in the legal dispute over Varanasi's Gyanvapi Masjid, a district court



has granted permission for members of a family of priests to offer prayers in one of the cellars within the mosque complex. This particular cellar, known as Vyasji ka Tehkhana, was unsealed last night, and a puja ceremony took place around 3 am.

The Gyanvapi mosque, constructed in the 17th century, features four cellars, with 'Vyasji ka Tehkhana' being one of them. Situated in the southern area of the mosque's fortified complex, it stands opposite a statue of the Nandi bull within the adjacent Kashi Vishwanath temple premises. The cellar, measuring about 7 feet in height and covering an area of 40 square feet, allegedly

contains idols that were worshipped before its sealing in 1993, as claimed by petitioner Shailendra Pathak Vyas. The Muslim side refuted this assertion in court, stating that the petitioner failed to provide evidence of prayers being conducted there and denying the presence of any idol in the cellar. Following the demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992, President's Rule was imposed in the state, and the following year, a government led by Mulayam Singh Yadav assumed office. Citing concerns about law and order, Yadav prohibited prayers within the cellar temple. The petitioner contends that regular prayers were

conducted by Somnath Vyas before the cellar was sealed.

The mosque committee has expressed its intention to challenge the court's decision in the high court. Lawyer Akhlaq Ahmed asserted that the order overlooked the Advocate Commissioner's 2022 report, the ASI's report, and a 1937 decision favouring their stance. He argued that the Hindu side failed to provide evidence of prayers before 1993 and that there is no idol in the designated place.

Advocate Merajuddin Siddiqui accused district officials of colluding with the district magistrate, suggesting a political agenda. He drew parallels to the

Babri Masjid case, claiming that the Commissioner's and ASI's reports previously confirmed the absence of any contents inside the cellar. While it requires nothing more than a pair of eyes to establish that a temple existed at the site where the structure of the mosque today stands, there is ample architectural and textual evidence to back up this claim as well.

According to Yugeshwar Kaushal, a PhD scholar specialising in South Asian Studies, Maharaja Jayachandra erected an elaborate temple at the site following his coronation around 1170-89 AD. During Maharaja Jai Singh I's reign, Aurangzeb, motivated by religious zealotry, demolished the Kashi Vishweshwar temple in 1669.

He then constructed the present-day Gyanvapi mosque on the remains, as stated by Kaushal. Subsequently, control of Varanasi shifted to the Nawabs of Awadh, who ensured that the disputed structure was never reconstructed as a temple. "Later, control of Varanasi passed to the Nawabs of Awadh. Saadat Khan, the then Nawab of Awadh, appointed a Raja of Benaras and ensured that the disputed structure was never reconstructed as a temple. Subsequently, the British took control of Awadh from the Nawabs and maintained the status quo of the contested structure," explained historian Professor (Retd) RS Khangarot. The Varanasi court's recent request for a "scientific investigation" by the ASI, involving ground-penetrating radar surveys and excavation, faced a temporary pause from the Supreme Court. The ASI initiated the survey in August 2023, with several extensions granted for the final report. One needs to look no further than the texts as primary as Maasir-i-Alamgiri, a Persian-language chronicle written shortly after Aurangzeb's death in 1707. The ASI report refers to historian Jadunath Sarkar's 1947 translation of the text. According to the Maasir-i-Alamgiri, "His Majesty [Aurangzeb], eager to establish Islam, issued orders to the governors of all the provinces to demolish the schools and temples of the infidels, and with the utmost urgency put down the teaching and the public practice of the religion of these disbelievers."

The spectacular collapse of the Messenger is a lesson on how not to do journalism

By Margaret Sullivan

The new journalism outlet began less than a year ago to considerable fanfare. Claiming it would be unbiased and indispensable, the Messenger recruited hundreds of journalists, paid its executives lavishly and confidently forecast \$100m in annual revenue this year.

It would be like the good old days when the media was beloved, its founder predicted. "I remember an era where you'd sit by the TV, when I was a kid with my family, and we'd all watch '60 Minutes' together," the Messenger's CEO, Jimmy Finkelstein, told the New York Times last year.

It sounded unlikely, at best, especially given its dubious business model – free, with revenue based on digital advertising. This week, the whole

thing came crashing down.

The all-digital outlet abruptly shut down its website and fired its staff without severance or extending healthcare benefits. Reports circulated quickly that staffers couldn't even retrieve their belongings or even get access to the work they had done.

"On a human level, it was soul-crushing," Messenger reporter Stephen Neukam, who covered Congress, told me by phone on Thursday. The 24-year-old was reporting on Capitol Hill when a Times story broke that the Messenger was toast. That story was immediately posted in the company's internal messaging channel, and within minutes, an email came from Finkelstein that said he was terribly sorry but he couldn't help it since the whole industry was

tanking.

Neukam said he was proud of his Congress reporting and experienced no real editorial interference, but others described much of the Messenger's fare as journalistic swill.

"This company worked its news and audience reporters to the bone," tweeted Eli Walsh, who said he wrote an astonishing 630 stories over an eight-month period – and "most of them were just copying and pasting work" from other news organizations. Walsh said that because of this strategy, he doesn't have a single story to market himself for his next job. Finkelstein tried to blame his brainchild's demise on the "headwinds" that all media organizations are experiencing these days. And it's obvious that those forces are

real. Ad revenue has cratered, traffic is down and sustainability looks like a mirage.

But the Messenger was actually not a typical but an exceptional case – exceptionally poor, that is, in both concept and execution.

"I was pissed the moment I heard about this dumb idea. It was business malpractice and human cruelty at an epic scale," Jim VandeHei, the co-founder of both Politico and Axios, told Puck's Dylan Byers.

It was a mess from the start. Aram Zucker-Scharff, a data engineer and my former Washington Post colleague, put it this way: "Remember, they intended to grab traffic from social and search without a working sitemap and incredibly broken ad tech."

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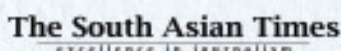


Sandeep Saxena
CEO, Blitz India

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