



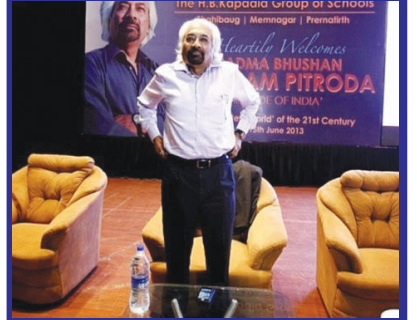
The South Asian



INSIDER

Voice of South Asian Community Since March 2002

Sam Pitroda out as chairman of Indian Overseas Congress



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A maharaja, a tawaif, and an area with a reputation: The story of Heera Mandi



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The dark side of being a young and popular food influencer



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Geopolitical Tensions on Rise as China Recklessly Targets Taiwan



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Indian-Mexican UmaSofia Srivastava gives up Miss Teen USA title



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Wouldn't have voted for you as you are Indian, US author tells Vivek Ramaswamy

Millionaire entrepreneur Vivek Ramaswamy, who generated a lot of interest with his anti-Woke presidential campaign, was in for a racial shock delivered by none other than American commentator and author Ann Coulter, whom he had invited to his podcast. She said she agreed with many things that Vivek Ramaswamy said but she wouldn't have still voted for him because he was "Indian". Ramaswamy was born to Indian-American parents who moved from Kerala to the US. Only a person born in the US, not an "Indian", can contest the US presidential election.

Ramaswamy quit the presidential race after the defeat in the Iowa Caucus in January, and pledged support to Republican lead candidate Donald Trump. Starting as an outsider to American politics, Vivek Ramaswamy's campaign made people sit back and take note, especially because of his hard-hitting speeches and arguments.

People saw Ann Coulter's comments on Ramaswamy's podcast 'The Truth' as racially biased and slammed her.

"Thanks for having me, that was a fantastic opening monologue. I too am a fan of yours, so

I'm going to make a point of disagreeing with you so it will be fun. You are so bright and articulate, and I guess I can call you articulate since you're not an American Black. Can't say that about them, that's derogatory," said Coulter. "I agreed with





many, many things you said during – in fact, probably more than most other candidates when you were running for president, but I still would not have voted for you because you're an Indian. We'll get back to that," she added.

Despite the racial comments, Ramaswamy responded politely, stating that his skin colour doesn't determine his loyalty to his country, the US. He explained that immigrants or their children

might have stronger loyalty than a seventh-generation American who hates their own country. Coulter defended her remark after realising its racial tone. "There is a core national identity that is the identity of the WASP and that doesn't mean we can't take anyone else in, a Sri Lankan, or a Japanese, or an Indian, but the core around which the nation's values are formed is the White Anglo-Saxon Protestants (WASP)," said Coulter. After the podcast, Ramaswamy posted on X, praising Coulter for her honesty but mentioning he disagreed with her views. "AnnCoulter told me flat-out to my face that she couldn't vote for me 'because you're an Indian', even though she agreed with me more than most other candidates. I disagree with her but respect she had the guts to speak her mind. It was a riveting hour. The TRUTH podcast is back," Ramaswamy posted on X. After Ramaswamy's post, his comment box was filled with comments of support for him. "Vivek maintained composure and worked to find any common ground with Coulter. Masterclass on how to be unoffendable," a user wrote on X. "We all support you Vivek and hope to see you as Vice President or in some other position," wrote another on X praising Ramaswamy.



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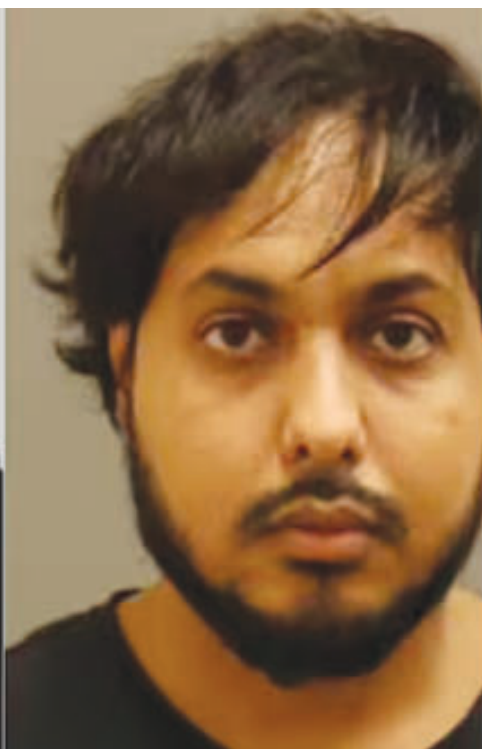
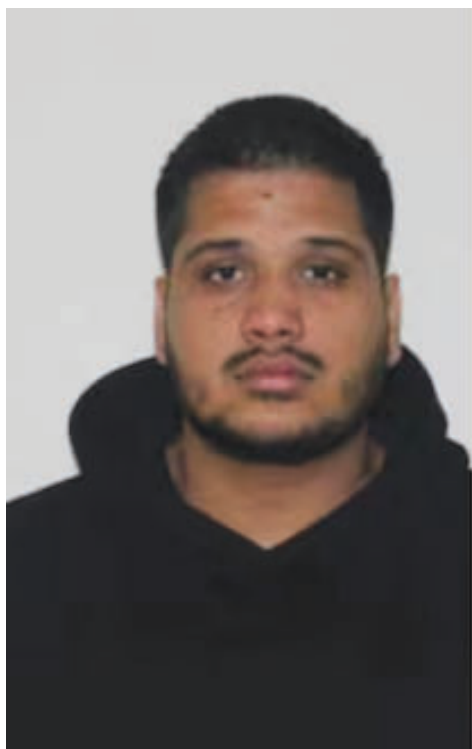
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'No Relevant Evidence Or Info': MEA Reiterates After Canada Arrests 3 Indians In Sikh Separatist's Killing



(Sai Bureau)-The Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) reiterated on Thursday that India has not received any "specific or relevant evidence" from Canada regarding the killing of Sikh separatist Hardeep Singh Nijjar, for which three Indian nationals have been arrested.

Nijjar, who was designated as a terrorist by India, was killed in Surrey last June. Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau claimed in September that Indian govern-

ment agents were involved in Nijjar's shooting. However, India strongly rejected these allegations and asked Canada to furnish proof. It also urged Ottawa to take measures to curb the increasing anti-Indian activities of Khalistani groups operating in the country with immunity.

'NO SPECIFIC OR RELEVANT EVIDENCE'

"Let me first make it clear that no specific or relevant evidence or information has

been shared by the Canadian authorities till date. You will therefore understand our view that the matter is being pre-judged. Obviously, there are political interests at work. We have long maintained that separatists, extremists, and those advocating violence have been given political space in Canada," External Affairs Ministry Spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal said during a weekly press conference.

"Our diplomats have been threatened with

impunity and obstructed in their performance of duties. We have also pointed to the Canadian authorities that figures associated with organized crime with links with India have been allowed entry and residency in Canada. Many of our extradition requests are pending. We are having discussions at the diplomatic level on all these matters," he added.

'KILLED ON CANADIAN SOIL'

These remarks come as Canadian Foreign Minister Melanie Joly this week reiterated Ottawa's stance on the allegation that Indian agents were involved in the killing of Nijjar. "Canada's position has always been clear. Our job is to protect Canadians and we stand by the allegations that a Canadian was killed on Canadian soil by Indian agents," Joly told the media on Tuesday.

Joly's statement follows Canada's arrest of three Indian nationals, accused of being part of an alleged hit squad responsible for Nijjar's murder in British Columbia last year. Karanpreet Singh, 28, Kamalpreet Singh, 22 and Karan Brar, 22, all Indian nationals, face charges of first-degree murder and conspiracy to commit murder. The Canadian foreign minister further said that the investigation into Nijjar's killing is being conducted by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP).

'Was It The Right Choice?': The American Dream, Now A Nightmare For Many

(Sai Bureau)-"I spent ~\$100k on a STEM degree in the U.S., and now I have only one chance left for H-1B. Where does this leave me?" asks Shreya Mishra in a viral LinkedIn post that has reached over 2 million people. Shreya is one among over 3.5 lakh immigrants whose names did not figure in America's FY25 H-1B cap lottery season. The H-1B needs little introduction: it's the lightning rod for political football in the U.S., caught in a gridlock for more than two decades now. The last significant revision to the H-1B happened in 2004 when the Bush administration allocated 85,000 H-1B visas each year. While 65,000 were for those with a bachelor's degree, 20,000 were set aside for those with a master's degree or a higher one. Since 2011, the cap of 85,000 has been reached every year. The visa is thus more a lottery ticket now than a stable option to work in America. But the struggles don't end at winning this lottery. "I came to the U.S. in 2001," says Saurav Mitra, a mechanical engineer employed at an electronics company. "I graduated from one of the top schools in Mechanical Engineering in 2008 and got the H-1B. Since then, I've been stuck in the EB-2 retrogression, with no hope of get-

ting a green card even if I wait till 2030. That makes it close to 30 years in this country, caught in limbo, with promotions and job changes taking place at a much slower pace. All of my colleagues, including from China, who graduated much later than me, already have their green cards." Due to 'country caps' introduced in 1990, a country can get only 7% of the 140,000 green cards issued every year. This has unfairly affected immigrants from China and India, the top two countries sending students to the US.

A Wide Knowledge Gap

When I moved to the US in 2017 for my master's degree at Columbia University, I wasn't aware of the pitfalls of the immigration system. I vaguely knew of the H-1B being a lottery, but didn't care to learn more until I decided to quit my job and become a solopreneur. After a two-and-a-half-year journey with the immigration system, I obtained my O-1A extraordinary visa in October last year as the CEO of The Curious Maverick LLC, an educational venture focused on promoting talent mobility in the US and the world. As part of this, I published Unshackled, my second book, to help high-skilled immigrants in America.

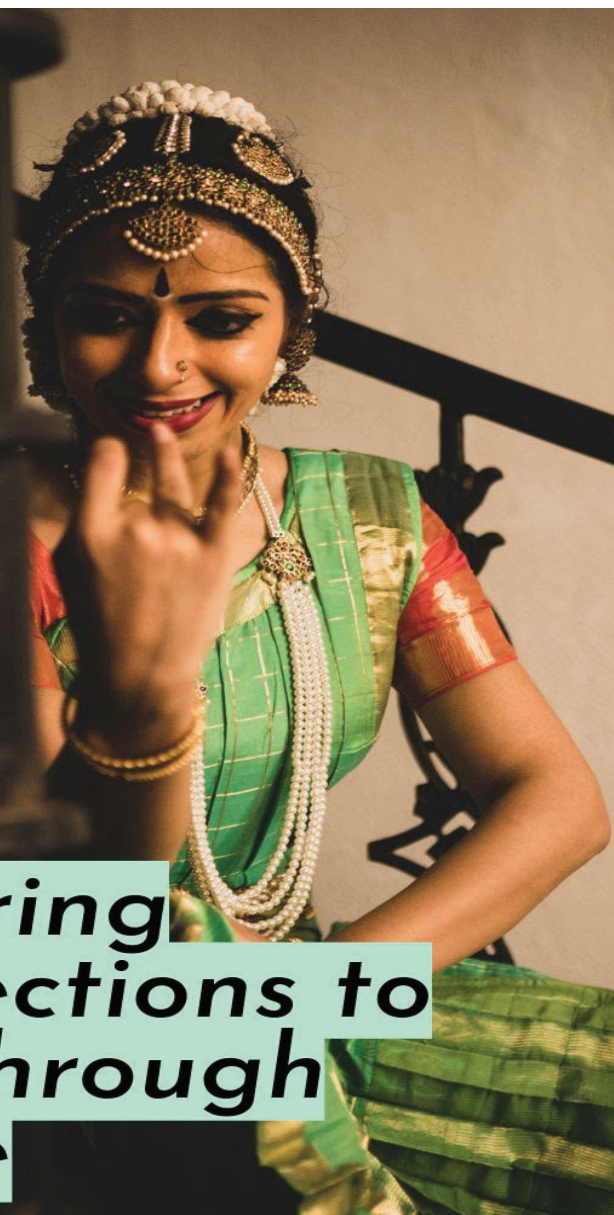
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SAREE GOES GLOBAL: CELEBRATING CULTURAL DIVERSITY IN THE HEART OF TIMES SQUARE, NEW YORK CITY

By our staff reporter (New York) – Saturday, in the bustling heart of Times Square, New York City, cultural diversity took center stage as British Women in Sarees partnered with Uma to host the iconic Saree Goes Global event. This celebration, held at Father Duffy Square, Times Square, showcased the timeless elegance of the saree through music, dance, and a vibrant Saree Walkathon. This event was supported by the Consulate General of India in New York, Mr. Binaya Srikanta Pradhan.

Building on the success



of internationally acclaimed events like the Royal Ascot La-

dies' Day and the historic Saree Walkathon at Trafalgar Square

in London, the Saree Goes Global event brought together over 500 participants from at least nine different saree-wearing countries. This spectacle was not just a celebration of cultural diversity but also a platform to support artisans in rural India, preserving traditional craftsmanship.

Speaking at the pre-event press briefing hosted by the Consul General of India in New York, Deputy Commissioner Dilip Chauhan of the Mayor's Office of International Affairs expressed his gratitude to Dr. Rita Kakati-Shah and Dr. Dipti Jain

for their dedication and leadership in organizing this magnificent event. He emphasized the significance of the saree in promoting heritage and cultural exchange, echoing the city's commitment to inclusivity and economic growth, particularly for Minority and Women-Owned Businesses (MWBEs). Dr. Dipti Jain, Chairperson of British Women in Sarees, and Dr. Rita Kakati-Shah, President of Uma Global, also provided remarks, highlighting the importance of the saree as a symbol of unity and the empowerment of women worldwide.

First-of-its-kind Ram Lalla Music Concert in the USA

By our staff reporter-(California) In a press release shared by Deepti Mahajan, Coordinator, SF Bay Area, World Hindu Council of America (VHPA), it's claimed that Hindus of Northern California are celebrating Shri Ram Lalla's (Baby Shree Rama's) homecoming with the largest Music concert for Shri Rama. The concert, like the VHPA Ram Rath Yatra, the monumental journey of Ram Rath visiting around 850 temples in North America, will bring Akshath and Prasad from January 22nd. Pran Pratishthan (consecration ceremony) held in Ayodhya.

This will be a first-of-its-kind music concert on the Shri Ram

theme. The chants of Hanuman Chalisa and Ram ji songs will reverberate through the Bay Area. World-renowned religious troupe 'Kirtaniyas', will add a divine touch to the celebrations. The echoes of Shri Ram's glory will resonate, filling the audience's soul with peace, love, and reverence.

Deepti Mahajan, the coordinator of VHPA in the SF Bay Area, member of the National Governing Council, and co-convenor of HinduPACT, expressed, "This enchanting evening of musical devotion to our beloved Shri Rama is a unique opportunity for all Hindus of North California to come together, celebrate, and partake in a truly transcendental experience. This 'RELIGIOUS MUSIC



CONCERT' is not just a musical event, but a small step towards fostering unity and celebrating the spirit of Ram Janma Bhumi within the Bay area Hindu community."

The organizers, Deepti Mahajan, Daipayan Deb, Bimal Bhagwat, Deepak Bajaj, Param Desai and Rohit Sharma- are thrilled to bring this event to California, aiming to further strengthen the Hindu community. This same group had orchestrated the bay area car rally on January 22nd, a resounding success that drew over 2000 Hindus and 1000 cars. Many dedicated volunteers like Raj Nanduri, Atul Shah, Chinmayi Vyas, Pankaj Kushwaha, Rupal Asodaria, Sangeetha Shankar, Mukul Sinval, Adhiraj Lahiri, Himanshu Sharma and Srinivasan Venkataraman are also working tirelessly to ensure the event is a memorable and successful one.

INDIAN AMERICANS FOR TRUMP URGE HIM TO GIVE PROPER COURTESY TO JUDGE JUAN MERCHAN

By our staff reporter- (WARREN – NJ – In a press release shared with South Asian Insider by A. D. Amar, President of Indian Americans for Trump 2024, Indian Americans for Trump 2024 has requested President Trump to give proper courtesies to Acting Justice Juan Merchan because he has openly reflected a change in his style and language in the court. They believe that the judge, from his statement made today, is being genuine in his appeal because he acknowledged President Trump as a former president who could become the next president. Indian Americans for Trump 2024 believe that this courtesy shown to the judge, at this time when he has pivoted, will help change or firm up many

minds in electing Trump to be the next president. This is the goal of the Indian Americans for Trump 2024.

The Indian Americans for Trump 2024 urges all Americans, irrespective of their nationality, race, color, gender, or creed, etc., to join us in our effort by supporting Donald J. Trump in his endeavor to make America great again by reelecting him to be the President of the USA. They encourage all Americans to volunteer or become members of this all-volunteer organization or ask for more detail by contacting Vice President Aparna Virmani at av01319@gmail.com or Vice President Anura Rupasinghe at Anura@Rukyshipping.com. There is no membership fee or financial obligation to join the committee.

(Sai Bureau)-The United States on Thursday dismissed the Russian allegations of the US interfering in the ongoing Indian elections.

"No, of course, we don't involve ourselves in elections in India as we don't involve ourselves in elections anywhere in the world. Those are decisions for the people of India to make," State Department Spokesperson Matthew Miller told reporters at his daily news conference.

He was responding to a question on Russian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova statement in Moscow in this regard when asked about a recent Washington Post article alleging that a Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) officer was involved in an alleged plot to kill Khalistani terrorist Gurpatwant Singh Pannun on American soil last

year."Regular unfounded accusations by the United States against New Delhi... we see that they groundlessly accuse not only In-



dia but also many other states...of violating religious freedoms are a reflection of the United States' misunderstanding of the national mentality, the historical context of the development of the Indian state and disrespect for India as a state," Zakharova told reporters

in Moscow. She described it as a colonial mentality of the United States. "The reason is that they try to unbalance the internal political situation in India in order to complicate the (ongoing) general parliamentary elections. That is part of meddling into India's internal affairs," RT news quoted her as saying. "The Washington Post, it seems to me, should use the term 'repressive regime' and everything you quoted in relation to Washington. It is difficult to imagine a more repressive regime than Washington, both in domestic and international affairs," she said. In Washington, Miller refrained from responding to the question on the alleged plot. "There is a publicly returned indictment that contains alleged facts. They are allegations until they're proven before a jury that anyone can go and read.

US Dismisses Russian Allegations Of Interference In Indian Elections

Congress neither divides people, nor doles out 'jumlas': Raja Warring PPCC Chief

By Jag Mohan Thaken

Chandigarh: Punjab Congress president and party's candidate from Ludhiana parliamentary constituency Amarinder Singh Raja Warring on Wednesday said that the Congress neither divides people in the name of religion or caste, nor does it dole out 'jumlas' to mislead people at the time of elections.

He said, Congress only promises and delivers things, which directly touch people's lives. He said, the Congress government will bring in a scheme for guaranteed employment, under 'pehli naukri pakki' under which all fresh graduates and diploma holders will get one year apprenticeship with a guaranteed income of Rs one lakhs for one year.

Addressing a series of public meetings during his campaign, Warring claimed that there were seventy crore unemployed people in the country right now. He said that unemployment in the country right now was the highest in the last 45 years.

He pointed out Punjab was no exception; rather it was the worst hit as lakhs of youth from here were migrating to different countries after selling off their precious possessions here.

The PCC president reminded the BJP leaders that Prime Minister Narendra Modi had promised two crore jobs every year, which should have made it 20 crore jobs by now.

What to speak of providing those many jobs, the Modi government kept 30 lakh vacancies in various government departments pending, he pointed out.

Besides, Warring added, by bringing in the Agniveer scheme, under which youth will now be allowed to serve the defence services for just five years, the Modi government had shattered the dreams of millions of youths across the country, who were keen to join the defence services. He said, the worst hit was the Punjabi youth who love to work in defence services but are now feeling betrayed and demoralized as joining as Agniveers risks their career.

Appealing to people to vote for the Congress, the PCC president said, only his party was in a position to defeat the BJP and provide a government, which is



people friendly and does not divide or discriminate between people and only works for their welfare.

Leader of Opposition, congress party, Sardar Partap Singh Bajwa also organized campaign programs in Gurdaspur constituency and urged the voters to support party's candidate Sukhjinder Singh Randhawa in the forthcoming Lok Sabha elections on June 1.

LoP Bajwa addressed the gatherings in Dhariwal, Bhaini Mian Khan, Kahnuwan and Qadian. Bajwa launched a scathing attack on the Modi-led Union government and Bhagwant Mann on his home turf. Criticizing Modi for neglecting the woes of farmers, Bajwa said that Manmohan Singh government waived off loans of 70,000 crores of millions of farmers, while Modi waived loans of Rs 19 lakh crores of his billionaires' friends.

While turning his attack towards Bhagwant Mann, Bajwa said that Mann and MLAs of AAP used to state that they will give MSP to farmers within days after forming the government and now dragging their feet in giving any relief to farmers. He added that Congress has given a guarantee in its manifesto that MSP will be ensured and GST will be levied on agricultural implements and other input used for farming.

Bajwa said that Gurdaspur is known for sending its brave sons to safeguard the country's borders and Agniveer scheme launched by BJP is an insult to the warriors and their families. He said that Con-

gress will scrap the Agniveer scheme which demoralizes the youth of the country and reintroduce the old recruitment scheme.

Bajwa told the voter of his state assembly constituency that outgoing MP Sunny Deol never bothered to visit the place and was merely a dummy of Modi and Shah. He urged voters to support Randhawa who is a seasoned politician and will be available for the electorate.

During the gatherings, Bajwa and other leaders of the Congress apprised the people of the guarantees made by Congress in the manifesto. They emphasized on making MSP a legal guarantee, giving Rs 1 lakh per annum to women of poor households, scrapping the

Agni veer scheme, Rs 400 per day for MNREGA workers and

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What's Xi Jinping doing in Europe? His goal is more strategic than economic

In 1964, when French President Charles De Gaulle visited Beijing to formalise the West's first diplomatic ties with China, he made a profound statement about Parisian weltanschauung – "France simply recognises the world as it is."

Decades later, and amid waves of geopolitical turbulence, Chinese President Xi Jinping has embarked on his first visit to Europe in five years since 2019, cherry-picking three countries – France, Serbia and Hungary. At the outset, the selection seems emphatically aimed at driving wedges in the Western alliance. It also confirms that the objective of his visit is not economic but strategic. He chose Paris because it conveniently coincided with marking 60 years of China-France diplomatic relations. That said, the real reason was to appeal to Paris' strategic autonomy at a time when the European bloc has undertaken an uneven but ambitious project to de-risk its grossly imbalanced trade with China. This includes addressing the burning issue of Chinese EVs flooding the European market, outperforming their European counterparts due to unfair trade practices.

The other two countries that Xi visited were Serbia and Hungary.

What's Xi's objective?

Xi's strategic signalling is basic. In the case of France, he wishes to capitalise on the country's strategic autonomy – which is most susceptible to being misread due to Macron's mixed statements – to distance it from the United States and NATO. Although there is no real evidence to suggest so, Macron's outlandish statements are enough to create and sustain this confusion.

Xi's Serbia visit coincided with the 25th anniversary of the bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade; an incident that had occurred during NATO intervention in the bloody breakdown of the former Yugoslavia in May 1999.

Serbia is witnessing the unending war that has engulfed core supporter Russia and is looking at European Union accession afresh. In a strategic shift, it has inked a deal on French Rafale jets in its largest military procurement in history. Despite the winds of change, Serbia remains a Russia supporter and mistrustful of the Western bloc.

However, Xi has spent the greatest amount of time in Hungary saying the two countries will enjoy a "golden voyage" in relations. Budapest remains the most Eurosceptic in the European bloc, maintaining close ties with Russia and China.

China's influence ops, espionage, interference

On a strategic level, with increasing demand from Brussels to stop China's sup-

port to Russia in its unending war with Ukraine, there is also growing unease in mainland Europe due to instances involving Chinese espionage. Just a day after German Chancellor Olaf Scholz concluded his recent visit to Beijing, three Germans were arrested on the charges of spying for China.

In France, too, there have been instances of how China leverages its growing influence through information ops in Europe. It was the main theme of a recently commissioned study by the Institute for Strategic Research (IRSEM), the official think tank of the French armed forces. In 2022, IRSEM's then-director, Jean Baptiste, had shared its findings with India's strategic community at the Manohar Parrikar Institute of Defence Studies and Analyses. The report was meant to be one of the most ambitious and systematic inquiries of how China's influence ops operate in Europe and enable interference by the Chinese Communist Party.

Paris understands that it has limited leverage against Beijing and must align its China policy with the larger European approach. His scintillating statements aside, Macron's collective approach in his encounters with Xi has been rather consistent, ensuring alignment with the European framework. When Xi visited Europe in 2019, Macron received him along with former EU Commission president and German Chancellor Angela Merkel. After the event, a joint, not bilateral, statement, was released.

Later that year, when Macron decided to visit Shanghai, he was accompanied by trade chiefs from the EU and Germany. In 2023, European Commission chief Ursula Von der Leyen accompanied Macron during his state visit to China, ensuring that the discussions with Xi operated in a trilateral format.

This fine print reading tends to get misread in New Delhi where the majority buy Macron's strategic autonomy at face value, missing inherent pragmatism.

It is Berlin that has mostly gone solo in its overtures to China. The flamboyant Macron, despite controversial statements asserting an independent view, has been consistently ensuring that the larger European framework prevails when it comes to China.

This very observation shows an inherent vulnerability too. From Xi's perspective, there is little value in France signalling to go with the EU and Germany. Not unless it is reciprocated by other major drivers of the European project such as Berlin, whose economy is far too entwined with Beijing than Paris'. This situation oozes a noticeable mismatch in the prime drivers of the European project in their vision for Europe.

Interpreting Indian Elections: Prospects of Political Parties

By Susmita Ghosh

Being the world's largest democracy, India witnesses a vision every few years that charms the attention of millions – its general elections. With over 900 million eligible voters, the Indian electoral process is not only massive but also exceedingly varied and dynamic. As political parties geared up for the next electoral battle, the prospects of each party are under scrutiny. Let's delve into the current landscape and prospects of the major political parties in India.

Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP): The Bharatiya Janata Party, led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, has dominated the Indian political scene in recent years. The BJP secured a landslide victory in the 2014 elections and retained power in 2019 riding on the wave of nationalism and promises of development. However, challenges such as economic slowdown, agrarian distress, and social unrest have emerged, putting pressure on the party's stronghold. Despite this, the BJP remains a formidable force, banking on its organizational strength, magnetic leadership, and vigorous electoral machinery. Its prospects in the upcoming elections largely hinge on its ability to address key issues and maintain its support base.

Indian National Congress (INC): The Indian National Congress, once the distinguished political force in India, has seen a decline in its fortunes in recent years. Internal rifts, leadership crises, and electoral setbacks have plagued the party. However, the Congress still commands a significant presence, especially in certain regions of the country. Its prospects depend on its ability to refresh its leadership, connect with the masses, and offer a credible alternative to the ruling BJP. Coalition politics and strategic pacts may also play a vital role in determining the Congress's performance in the upcoming elections.

Regional Parties: India's political landscape is characterized by the presence of numerous regional parties. Each has its own distinct identity and support base. Parties like the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) in Tamil Nadu, Trinamool Congress (TMC) in West Bengal, and Shiv Sena in Maharashtra wield considerable influence in their own states. The prospects of these parties depend on their ability to direct local dynamics, forge alliances, and address regional issues. With the rise of regionalism and federalism, these parties play a crucial role in shaping the national political discourse.

Emerging Players: Besides the established parties, there is a growing presence of emerging players and new political formations in India. Regional satraps, social activists, and youth leaders are increasingly challenging the traditional political hierarchy. Parties like the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) in Delhi and the Janata Dal (United) in Bihar have disrupted the current situation and gathered significant support. The prospects of these parties pivot on their ability to offer advanced solutions, organise grassroots support, and capitalize on dissatisfaction with established political forces.

As India braces itself for another round of democratic exercise, the prospects of political parties remain indefinite yet enthralling. While established players like the BJP and the Congress continue to dominate the narrative, regional parties and emerging players are increasingly proclaiming their guidance. The outcome of the elections will not only shape the future course of Indian politics but also have extensive effects for the country's social, economic, and cultural fabric. In this vibrant democracy, the only constant is change, and the electoral battleground promises to be as mesmerizing as ever.



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The federal student loan program is unraveling

Opinion by Beth Akers, Preston Cooper and Joe Pitts

The Biden administration recently announced its most ambitious attempt yet at student debt forgiveness. Taken together with the series of initiatives the administration has already pushed forward, the new plans promise to reduce or eliminate student debt for more than 30 million borrowers. Unfortunately, the debt-cancellation campaign fails to address the underlying problems with student lending — and such efforts at mass forgiveness only accelerate the unraveling of our federal student loan program. President Joe Biden and his Republican critics agree that the loan program is broken. Democrats argue that the program has buried students under mounds of unmanageable debt, and Republicans believe that the program's status as a loan program — instead of an entitlement program — has been jeopardized by Biden's mass-forgiveness efforts. But while this administration charges ahead with mass loan cancellation — all the while doing little to fix student loans going forward — many conservatives argue that it's time for the government to get out of the student loan business entirely. Privatizing federal student loans — that is, having the government pull back and allowing the private sector to lend instead — is an idea worth taking seriously. Millions of students pursue college degrees that leave them no better off financially. Students can do this because the federal government happily stumps up the money with little regard for program quality or projected earnings. Institutions of higher learning have few incentives to improve their return on investment and every reason to prop up programs of dubious value, capturing ever more federal dollars by creating new programs and raising tuition.

A larger role for the private sector could fix this problem. When lenders use their own money to make loans, they enjoy the rewards when students repay those loans but must bear the costs when students default. They have skin in the game, meaning

they will lose money if they make loans that aren't paid back partially or in full.

To convince private lenders that their students will repay their loans, colleges will need to keep prices competitive and be much more attentive to students' postgraduate economic outcomes — both wins from the student perspective. Thus, privatization creates an incentive for colleges to steer students toward degrees that offer sufficient value for money spent. This should come as welcome news in today's higher education landscape, where more than one-quarter of bachelor's degrees leave students worse off financially than when they started.

The federal government is slated to lend a trillion dollars in new student loans over the coming decade, and the Congressional Budget Office expects the government to lose around 25 cents on every dollar it lends over the next decade. Student loan privatization could therefore save taxpayers at least a quarter of a trillion dollars over a decade.

In practice, the savings will be even greater because an end to federal



lending will remove future administrations' ability to essentially buy votes by promising loan cancellation. Lawmakers could use those savings for deficit reduction, or to expand financial aid for truly needy students.

But lawmakers who want to pursue privatization must avoid several traps. They should avoid any form of federal guarantees for private student loans, as these transfer the risk of default from the lender to the taxpayer. A return to the Federal Family Education Loan (FFEL) program, for instance — when the federal government guaranteed private loans — should be discouraged. Such arrangements enable lenders to

reap all the rewards but bear none of the consequences of making bad loans. That removes most of the incentive for lenders to ensure loan dollars only flow to quality education.

Scaling back federal lending alone is not enough to create a thriving private student loan market. Leaning against financial innovation, hostile regulators often threaten to block the private sector from using factors correlated with each college's financial value — like projected earnings or program return on investment — to make lending decisions, forcing them to fall back on less relevant but grandfathered-in metrics like FICO scores. The Consumer Financial

Protection Bureau has even argued using a college's default rate could run afoul of fair lending laws. Without legal protections for lenders who make decisions based on colleges' outcomes, overzealous regulators can throttle the private market. Finally, proponents of privatization should not dismiss the accessibility issues that the end of federal lending could create. Around half of four-year college students rely on federal loans to help pay for college, including many with limited family resources. Some could undoubtedly secure private loans instead, but others will be left without adequate access to credit.

India-Canada friction

Ottawa must rein in separatists

DAYS after the Canadian police arrested three Indian nationals in the Hardeep Singh Nijjar murder case, India's High Commissioner to Canada Sanjay Kumar Verma has stated that Sikh separatist groups in that country are crossing 'a big red line'. He said this matter was a cause for concern for New Delhi as it pertained to its territorial integrity and national security. The India-Canada relations have been facing rough weather ever since Canadian PM Justin Trudeau announced in September last year that the alleged role of Indian government agents in the Nijjar case was being probed.

The two countries are trying to resolve the current issue, Verma said, but he hastened to add that



Canada's misunderstanding of 'decades-old issues' was to blame for the deeper problems underlying the recent 'negative' developments. The latest provocation was the chanting of anti-India slogans by Khalistan supporters during a Sikh parade in Ontario last week. Late last

month, pro-Khalistan slogans had been raised at a public event attended by Trudeau and other leaders in Toronto, prompting India to reiterate that Canada was giving political space to 'separatism, extremism and violence'. New Delhi is worried not only about the use of Canadian

territory for anti-India propaganda but also the security of its diplomatic representatives in the Maple Country. The Ministry of External Affairs has stated that it expects the Trudeau government to ensure that the diplomats are able to carry out their responsibilities without fear. The ball is in Canada's court. Being a democratic country which respects the rule of law, Ottawa needs to crack down on rabble-rousers who glorify and incite violence. It should not allow itself to be intimidated by radical elements which are misusing freedom of expression. Antagonising an old ally like India, the fastest-growing major economy in the world, will be detrimental to Canada's geopolitical and economic interests.

Sowing Seeds of Division: Pitroda's Racist Rant Threatens India's Cosmopolitan Dream

Written By: Rahul Shivshankar

From atop his ivory tower in a tony quarter of America's "first city", Sam Pitroda has made it a habit of commenting on all things Indian. This time in a video interview to an iconic, but now down on its luck, Indian newspaper, Pitroda thought it necessary to elaborate on his idea of India. He broke out into a rapturous ode to India's diverse cultures that have defied the odds and miraculously melted into one another to create a nation.

To be sure, there's nothing original about these emotional peans to India's "unity in diversity". These homilies are done to death and are the usual recourse of self-proclaimed mealy-mouthed liberals who want to contrast so-called Nehruvian inclusivity with the Modi establishment's alleged saffron exceptionalism.

And this interview by Pitroda would have also gone unnoticed but for his use of racist analogies to characterise the diversity in India. Pitroda gushed to his interviewer, "We have survived 75 years in a very happy environment where people could live together, leaving aside a few fights here and there. We could hold a country together as diverse as India, where people on the east look like Chinese, people on the West look like Arab, people on the North look like white and maybe people on the South look like Africans." It is obvious that the analogy is an odious nod to racism. Only the worst chauvinists in history have relied on skin colour, the shape of an ethnic grouping's eyes, or the broadness of noses and other physical markers to classify citizens of any nation-state. And in a country like India, which is a microcosm of the world, this insidious racial profiling is nothing short of an abject attempt at sowing the seeds of otherness.

Following his remarks, Pitroda resigned from his position as the Congress Overseas President. His words reopen the fault lines that Indians are now increasingly looking to paper over. As miscegenation, music, films, food, movies, jobs and tourism are enjoining our disparate selves to embrace each other's ways, a new cosmopolitan Indian is being birthed.

Pitroda's opinions are inflammatory and prejudicial, carrying the weight

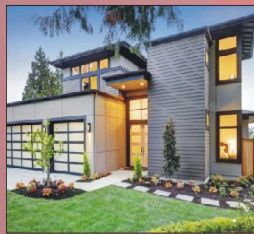
of his past authority within the Congress party, particularly his proximity to the Gandhi family and his leadership of the Overseas Congress. While his resignation may be seen as a step

towards damage control, it does little to address the underlying concerns about the party's commitment to inclusivity and its understanding of India's diverse population. The Congress party now

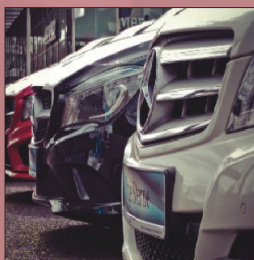
faces a critical juncture. It must go beyond distancing itself from Pitroda's bigoted theory and actively demonstrate a commitment to representing the aspirations of a new generation of cosmopolitan Indians,

both within the country and across the global diaspora. Failure to do so could further alienate potential supporters and hinder the party's efforts to regain relevance on the national and international stage.

Insurance



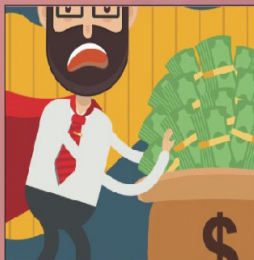
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Air India mess

Protests by disgruntled crew hit operations

THE Air India Express, a subsidiary of the Tata Group, is facing turbulence, with over 90 international and domestic flights cancelled or delayed due to a sudden shortage of staff caused by cabin crew going on 'sick leave' in protest against management policies. The Civil Aviation Ministry seeking a report from the airline underscores the seriousness of the matter. With passengers left in the lurch and chaos reigning at airports, swift action is required to address the grievances of the crew hit by changes in human resources policies and the alleged mismanagement within the airline. These disruptions have coincided with the onset of the merger of Air India Express with AIX Connect.

The unrest comes on the heels of last month's scale-down of operations by Vistara, the Tata group's other carrier, after a number of pilots called in sick,



purportedly to voice concerns over a new pay structure and the impending merger with Air India.

The airline had to drop 25-30 flights per day, leading to airfares on key routes soaring by nearly 25 per

cent.

These developments are symptomatic of the challenges

facing India's aviation sector, which is grappling with capacity constraints and heightened demand for flights. With major carriers like IndiGo and Go First contending with grounded aircraft and supply chain issues, the industry is under pressure to meet the needs of travellers. These challenges necessitate comprehensive solutions that prioritise both employee welfare and passenger experience. As Air India Express works to resolve its problems, the industry must strike a balance between addressing the current disruptions and implementing long-term strategies for sustainable growth. In a landscape fraught with uncertainty, collaboration between airlines, regulatory authorities and stakeholders is essential for charting a course towards stability and resilience.

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Who'll win the mega battle in Maharashtra?

By Dhaval S. Kulkarni

Jamlelya deshbhakta bandhawano, bhaginino aani maataanoâ•æ” The words ring out from a stage in Solapur, the textile town once known as the Manchester of Maharashtra. Rendered in English—“All my patriotic brothers, sisters and mothers gathered here”—it has all the grandiose air of one who has come to bury a Caesar, albeit in a different way. The speaker is a tall, lanky, bespectacled man—rather more bookish-looking than his flamboyant father. Uddhav Thackeray’s chosen form of address too is a departure from what orators from his stable have deployed over the years: the usual Shiv Sena invocation is to ‘Hindus’. It’s not just that Solapur has a significant Muslim population. The adjustment in vocabulary is in sync with the 180-degree turn Maharashtra’s politics has undergone over the past five years. Here, in the state’s southeastern interior, 430 km away from the city where the party’s writ was once law, the soft-spoken Uddhav is campaigning for a Congress candidate. The Solapur Lok Sabha seat is reserved for the Scheduled Castes, and Uddhav warns of the rumoured danger to the Constitution. Bal Thackeray’s son is defending a legacy, but decidedly from the other side. Days earlier, in Pune, another legacy politician synonymous with Maharashtra was on the mic. Sharad Pawar, 83, has cultivated all the subtleties of power since his student days in the 1950s. All those 66 years of guile are now in the service of what may be the battle of a lifetime. “Those in power are showing arrogance and hubris,” Pawar intoned, and went on to a full arraignment: Opposition leaders being thrown in jail, the weaponisation of central agencies, inflation, unemployment, gender atrocitiesâ•æ. Like Uddhav, and like a centuries-long line of potentates in these parts, Pawar Sr had donned his armour because, even if the local power was a hostile one, it seemed as if a formidable army from Delhi was at the gates. The fight was existential. Between glory and the political graveyard.

Broken Fortresses

Maratha forts are usually set atop steep cliffs immune to invasion, but here were two that had developed cracks in the ramparts—both Uddhav and Sharad Pawar have sustained grievous injury to their political estates. The source of their torment has been stalking the countryside too. Pune, Solapur, Karad, Malshiras, Osmanabad, Laturâ•æPrime Minister Narendra Modi’s compressed six rallies in just two days in the run-up to the third phase on May 7. In all, he has addressed 12 since campaigning began. The verbal artillery has gone through all



the shades. On April 29, in Pune, Modi chose to describe Pawar Sr as a “bhatakti aatma”, or a wandering spectre that has haunted Maharashtra politics for decades. The veteran retorted that the same Modi had once called him his guru, others speculated on which side such pointed rhetoric would benefit. The reasons for the special attention Modi is bestowing on Maharashtra are clear: with its 48 Lok Sabha seats, it may well be the state that makes or breaks his quest for a comfortable majority. The National Democratic Alliance (NDA) had won 41 of those seats in 2019. But most political thrillers pale before what happened next: the story started with a twist. The Shiv Sena, the oldest and most natural Hindutva ally of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), split off from it and formed a government at the head of an unlikely coalition with ‘secular’ parties. But it was a corkscrew of a plot that could only move forward in twists: in an infamous sequence of events, first the Sena was split in June 2022. A year later, the BJP’s anxiety that Eknath Shinde would not be able to deliver the goods in the Lok Sabha election drove another split, this time in Pawar’s Nationalist Congress Party (NCP). Both the breakaway factions, sanctified with the party name and symbol, are now with the BJP, ruling Maharashtra in another unlikely coalition. Now the knife awaits its final twist.

This convoluted history means the two battle formations are eclectic collages woven out of expediency, not simple tribal loyalties. There’s an uncle versus nephew pairing in Pawar Sr and the renegade Ajit Pawar, now deputy chief minister and part of Modi’s phalanx on stage. There are cousins ranged against each other—Ajit versus his uncle’s daughter and heir apparent Supriya Sule; even Uddhav versus Raj Thackeray, who

honours the family tradition of not participating in elections but is backing the NDA. Sisters-in-law Supriya and Ajit’s wife Sunetra are facing off in a fight for the old Pawar pocket borough Baramati. Not just kinsfolk, old fellow travellers too are on opposite sides: a lifelong Bal Thackeray devout like Shinde has technically won the patent to his legacy, but in service of the BJP-led ruling coalition, of which he’s the chief minister. A Pawar Sr acolyte like Praful Patel is now against him. Former foes like Ajit Pawar and the other deputy CM, BJP leader Devendra Fadnavis, now confer in the same corner. With a kingdom too at stake, no one would think it hyperbole to call this a Mahabharata. In fact, with a Mahayuti alliance up against a Maha Vikas Aghadi, the prefix ‘Maha’ (grand) applies across the board in Maharashtra. How the sundry players in these two formations fare will determine the fate of the even grander alliances they are faces of—the NDA and the Opposition’s Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance, or INDIA. For all the seeming contradictions, this perhaps represents an interim stage in an evolving polity. It was in 2014 that the state’s traditional Congress-oriented dominance was shattered when the BJP-Sena combine swept 42 seats, and several veterans from the Congress and NCP bit the dust. The saffron alliance also came to power in the assembly election held a few months later, and then pulled off a near-repeat of its Lok Sabha show in 2019, before the twister hit. But amidst all the play of numbers, a subtle realignment of ideologies was also unfolding. Uddhav, leading the Sena since the death of his father in 2012, was made of a perceptibly different persuasion. A photography enthusiast with a taste for nature, he was gentler of speech and thought. While never abandoning the centrality of Maharashtrian pride to Sena

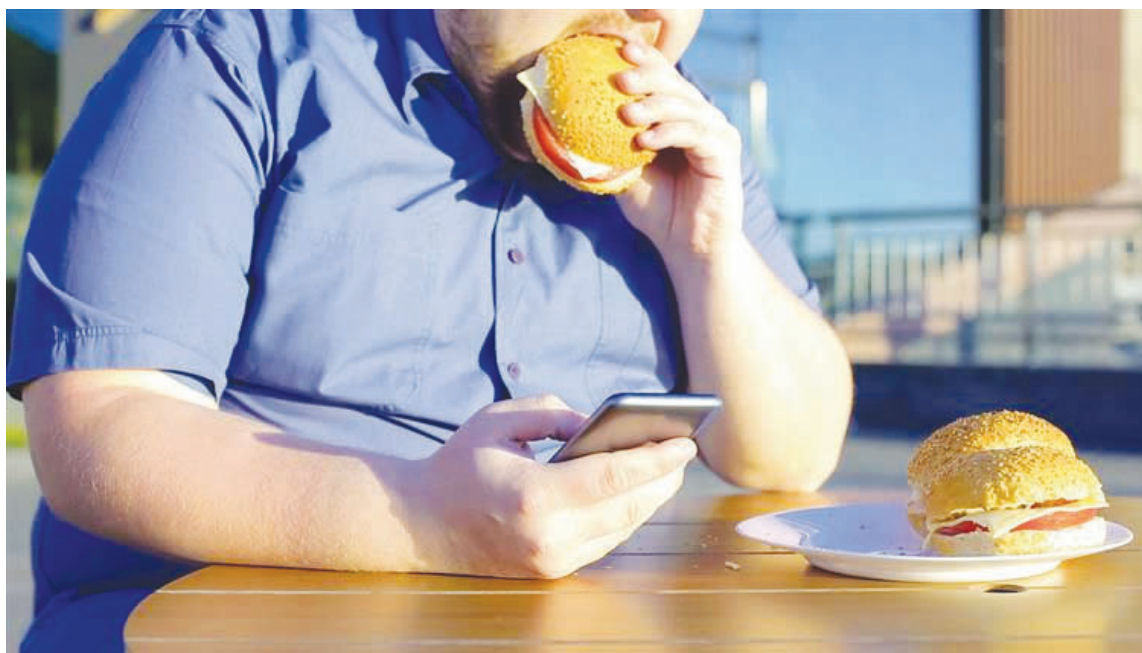
politics, the bristling Hindutva demagoguery slowly receded from the main stage. This face became more apparent post-2019, after his split with the BJP, when he ran a fairly equitable regime for over two and a half years. Rather than a contradiction within a secular alliance, he seemed a comfortable fit. But he still drew his popular legitimacy from the old Sena legacy, and that’s what was threatened with the BJP-sponsored Eknath Shinde rebellion of June 2022.

But the biggest question in Maharashtra is, has the BJP unwittingly bolstered Uddhav’s legitimacy? Observers unfailingly speak of popular sympathy for a rightful inheritor who had been wronged—that too of a party central to Maharashtrian identity politics for decades. The 2023 split in the NCP only appeared to sharpen that perception. And the Mahayuti seems to be aware that, most of all, it’s on that turf of popular psychology that it has to wage its battle. At a Pune rally on a sweltering April afternoon, its leaders took comfort in numbers. On stage was that salad bowl leadership recent events had produced: Fadnavis, Ajit, former minister Harshvardhan Patil who had switched from the Congress to the BJP, and the NCP’s Dattatray Bharane who had defeated Patil twice, in 2014 and 2019, from the Indapur assembly seat in Pune. Pointing to the multitude of leaders on the stage, Fadnavis thundered: “While it takes around seven to eight lakh votes to winâ•æ those on this stage have the ability to bring in 12 to 15 lakh votes.” And yet, despite the brave words, those from the Mahayuti ranks admit two plus two is not always four in the byzantine world of politics. The splits in the two traditional parties are an emotive issue. The spectre of defections brings no moral sheen.

India's dietary crisis

Disease burden linked to unhealthy habits

INDIA is facing a health crisis, with 56.4 per cent of the total disease burden attributed to unhealthy dietary practices, according to the latest report of the Indian Council of Medical Research-National Institute of Nutrition (ICMR-NIN). Unhealthy eating habits, including the consumption of processed foods high in salt, sugar and fats, have become alarmingly prevalent, with the proliferation of fast food chains and the easy availability of packaged snacks enabling a culture of convenience at the expense of health. A sedentary lifestyle, along with excessive mobile phone use, has exacerbated the problem, leading to a rise in obesity, diabetes and other non-communicable diseases (NCDs). The consequences of these dietary trends are staggering.



Obesity rates are soaring, with about 25 per cent of the Indians now classified as overweight or obese; children and adolescents are also increasingly falling victim

to unhealthy eating habits. The ICMR-NIN guidelines call for a return to traditional, nutrient-rich foods and emphasise the importance of regular physical

activity. Consuming fruits, vegetables, legumes and whole grains while shunning the intake of processed foods is essential to reshaping dietary behaviour.

However, concerted efforts are a must to facilitate access to nutritious foods. Policies that promote food security, regulate food advertising and incentivise the production and consumption of healthy foods are needed. Nutrition literacy programmes should be integrated into school curricula so that children focus on their health from an early age. A collective effort from policymakers, healthcare professionals, educators and communities can help combat the problem. By prioritising the promotion of healthy eating habits and addressing the socioeconomic factors driving poor dietary choices, we can stem the tide of NCDs and build a healthier future for all Indians. The time to act is now.

Congress Manifesto Promises Are Vague And Costly; The Party Clearly Expects Public To Foot The Bill

By: Rahul Shivshankar

Congress party's proclaimed "mentors" Messrs Sam Pitroda and Kaushik Basu know more than they are letting on. Their flurry of financially retrograde statements advocating for "bolshewokeist" taxes are not mere musings. These statements, made around the time the Congress released its 2024 vision statement, betray real compulsions that originate from the grand old party's manifesto. Pitroda and Basu realise money will have to be raised by the bucketfuls to fund the promises made by the Congress in its electoral mission statement. Let's take the Mahalakshmi scheme which offers to provide Rs 1 lakh per year to every poor Indian family as an unconditional cash transfer. The amount will be directly transferred to the bank account of the oldest woman of the poorest households. This is a Sisyphean undertaking. Tellingly the manifesto doesn't reveal the exact number of poor families the Congress seeks to reach under its Mahalakshmi welfare scheme. Is this because it doesn't want anyone to estimate how much such a megalithic scheme will cost? Unfortunately, in India, data



has become weaponised. It is a subset of politics. Poverty estimates vary wildly. NITI Aayog's Multidimensional Poverty Index pegs the poverty ratio at around 11 per cent. But it could also be as low as 5 per cent if one considers the latest data from the Government of India's consumption expenditure survey. Then again, the Tendulkar Committee estimates that 25.7 per cent of the rural population and 13.7 per cent of the urban population live in poverty.

But despite these shifting poverty baselines, it is yet possible to estimate how much the Mahalakshmi scheme will cost. Essentially the scheme is an

upgraded version of the Nyuntam Aay Yojana (NYAY) scheme that the Congress had vowed to implement in 2019 if voted to power. At the time, the Congress was considering an unconditional cash transfer of Rs 72,000 a year to the poorest 20 per cent of all Indian families (roughly 5 crore households). So, if the Congress party decides to dole out Rs 1 lakh per year to the eldest woman member of every household in the bottom 20 per cent of the Indian population, then implementing the Mahalakshmi scheme will cost taxpayers Rs 6 lakh crore per annum. To give you an idea, this massive recurring yearly expense

is more than India's current total expenditure on PDS and Farm subsidies taken together. Talking about handing out cash, the Congress manifesto additionally proposes to "double wages" under MNREGA to Rs 400 per day for a minimum of 100 days. At present, the average allowance under MNREGA to each recipient is set at Rs 289 per day. "Doubling" the payout will push up the total budgetary allocation for MNREGA to about 1.80 lakh crore. An allocation of Rs 1.80 lakh crore at around 1 per cent of GDP is almost double of India's annual health expenditure for 2025.

Now, let's consider the Congress promise of passing a legislation guaranteeing Minimum Support Price (MSP) fixed at C2 (actual cost) + 50 per cent. This is in line with the Swaminathan Committee's recommendation that the Congress wholeheartedly backs. The Union government has estimated that such a law guaranteeing MSP fixed to C2 + 50 per cent would force the government to buy all crops produced in the country at a prohibitive Rs 10 lakh crore per annum. Some have however rubbished this number rejecting the notion that the Centre will

be obliged to purchase all crops produced across the country. But legal experts disagree. Creating a reasonable classification, excluding certain crops, could spell legal problems. How, for instance, can the government justify excluding subsistence farmers growing vegetables from the ambit of the MSP law? To put things in perspective, an annual expenditure of Rs 10 lakh crore is more than the annual average expenditure the government has undertaken in infrastructure in the last seven fiscal years (Rs 67 lakh crore, between 2016 and 2023). High on the Congress party's list of manifesto priorities is the Right To Apprenticeship Act. This is touted as the world's first-of-its-kind skilling programme. The law guarantees a one-year apprenticeship to graduates and diploma holders in a private or PSU company. Under the Act, each apprentice will be mandatorily paid a Rs 1 lakh stipend annually. Such a scheme calculated on the number of graduates and diploma holders completing their course each year will cost the taxpayer approximately 1 lakh crore. This number is around a sixth of India's total budgetary defence outlay for FY 2025.

Will Modi's attempt to ride on 'RR' be an electoral blockbuster in Telangana?

With the BJP looking at Telangana as a low-hanging fruit where it aims to double its tally of four Lok Sabha seats it won in 2019, Modi needs to take the fight to the Revanth Reddy camp. That's where the 'RR Tax' jibe comes from.



By TS Sudhir

SS Rajamouli's 'RRR' was a blockbuster and, according to industry estimates, collected over Rs 1300 crore worldwide. Prime Minister Narendra Modi says that now 'RRR' has been bested by a Telangana Congress production titled 'RR'. His allegation is that a commission is collected on every project "from the R in Telangana and sent to the R in Delhi". This, Modi claims, is the 'RR' Tax. Who he means by 'RR' is quite obvious.

Cut to Flashback. In March, Telangana chief minister Revanth Reddy during a government function had called Modi his "elder brother" to say that as Prime Minister, he is like the elder brother of every state. Smiling pictures of the duo made it to the front pages of every newspaper. The beaming chemistry was contrasted with the ill-will that had brewed between Modi and former chief minister K Chandrasekhar Rao for the better part of the latter's second term as chief minister of Telangana. KCR would avoid

receiving Modi at the airport despite the dictates of protocol and did not share stage with him at any official function when the Prime Minister came visiting. The consummate politician that he is, what Modi is doing is to ensure he does not mix up protocol and politics. With the BJP looking at Telangana as a low-hanging fruit where it aims to double its tally of four Lok Sabha seats it won in 2019, Modi needs to take the fight to the Revanth Reddy camp. That's where the 'RR Tax' jibe comes from. It is also to shut up the BRS propaganda of Modi and Reddy doing a 'Naatu-Naatu'. Ever since the brotherly vibe, the BRS has claimed that it was a matter of time before Reddy jumped ship to join the BJP. At just about every public meeting, KCR and BRS Working president KT Rama Rao have repeated the prediction with an eye to create confusion within the Congress rank and file. Second-rung BRS leaders have also spoken of the possibility of Revanth Reddy following in the footsteps of Himanta Biswa Sarma or becoming an Eknath

Shinde for the Congress. To add spice to the political biryani, BJP leaders like Dharmapuri Arvind have claimed that Reddy would be welcome if he wished to join.

So, by accusing the Telangana chief minister of corruption by using a rather unsubtle acronym, Modi is trying to dispel notions of a bromance brewing between him and Revanth Reddy. More importantly, this is part of his strategy to localise the election campaign by aiming directly at the regional satrap. The BJP was at the receiving end of the effective 'PayCM' campaign against Basavaraj Bommai in the Karnataka assembly election last year and Modi's 'RR Tax' is a Telugu remake with a similar script. Modi had similarly levelled allegations of corruption against the DMK top brass and Pinarayi Vijayan before Tamil Nadu and Kerala went to polls. Making Reddy the target also reduces the focus on KCR. Congress strategists believe that the more KCR campaigns, he would prevent the flight of the BRS vote to the BJP. By making Telangana seem like a straight fight between the

BJP and the Congress, Modi wants to compel the BRS voter to choose between the two national parties in a Lok Sabha election. Last year, during the Telangana assembly election campaign, Modi had raked up alleged corruption in the Kaleshwaram irrigation project in a big way, but with BRS no longer in power, he knows the issue has passed its expiry date.

Accusing Revanth Reddy of corruption is also an attempt to push him on the back foot. Particularly since Reddy has been crying foul over lack of support from the Centre to Telangana. At every public meeting, Reddy displays a Gadida Guddu (donkey's egg) to allege that Modi's government has only delivered a donkey's egg in the past decade. The attempt to ridicule the Centre with this rustic Telangana wit is finding takers and Modi's 'RR Tax' taunt is an attempt to pay back in kind. However, overdoing the 'RR Tax' allegation also comes with a risk. Modi is being asked why he is turning a blind eye if he is aware of commissions being collected forcefully. The BRS has

asked why the Enforcement Directorate has not been pressed into action against Revanth Reddy. KCR has reason to be piqued because ED arrested his daughter K Kavitha in the Delhi liquor case, and she is now in Tihar jail in Delhi. Modi's shoot and scoot campaign reinforces that he and Reddy are indeed brothers in arms, claims the BRS.

When he took over as Telangana Congress president in 2021, Revanth Reddy had said his strategy is always to pitch himself against a political adversary who is higher than in stature and hierarchy. At that time, no one dared to match up to KCR since he had the halo of having achieved Telangana after a protracted struggle. Reddy punched above his weight, forcing KCR to refute his allegations and gradually emerged as the principal challenger to the then chief minister. His strategy of pitching himself against Narendra Modi shows signs of the same strategy being put to practice.

Agnipath and Agniveers: PM Modi's Transformational Initiative

By: Sanju Verma

Defence and military reforms always run the risk of early triumphalism, undermining long-term change. But with Agnipath, like with OROP or the decision to go ahead with the Rafale deal, despite scathing pressure to back off, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has shown he is made of far sterner stuff than what he is credited with. Modi's agnipariksha started in 2014 and continues to date, but each time he has only emerged much stronger, because 'India First' has always been his guiding ethos.

The Indian military is currently undergoing a fundamental transformation. These changes were made possible primarily due to the creation, in December 2019, of the post of Chief of Defence (CDS) staff by the Modi government, with the late General Bipin Rawat who was at that time appointed as the first CDS, also making him the head of a newly created Department of Military Affairs. General Rawat, who died in a chopper crash in 2021, was given an ambitious mandate to create joint theatre commands. This pleasantly surprised military reformists, with Admiral Arun Prakash calling it "the most significant development in the national security domain since independence." The Department of Military Affairs, perhaps without parallel among democracies, was created to address longstanding complaints against the civilian bureaucracy. Accordingly, 23 sections along with 160 civilian staff were transferred to this office, empowering the CDS on issues pertaining to officer promotions, defence planning, and inter-services prioritisation, among others. Theaterisation refers to placing units from the Army, Navy and/or Air Force under one commander. Again, the exact contours of joint theatres and their command arrangement would only be clear in a couple of years, but these debates indicate a potentially massive restructuring, which only a fearlessly progressive leader like PM Modi had the gumption to undertake.

Last year, the Indian Army rebutted the falsehoods peddled by Rahul Gandhi, post the martyrdom of Agniveer Gawate



Akshay Laxman, who tragically lost his life while serving in Siachen. This rebuttal by the Army came in response to a controversy started by the inept Gandhi scion when he recklessly alleged that no financial assistance was provided to the martyr's soldier's next of kin under the Agnipath scheme. The Indian Army clarified that the emoluments offered to the family included the soldier's pay for the remaining tenure from the date of his demise until the completion of four years, which, in this case, amounted to more than Rs 13 lakh. Furthermore, an additional contribution of Rs 8 lakh from the Armed Forces Battle Casualty Fund was provided to the next of kin. For immediate relief, the Army Wives Welfare Association (AWWA) offered financial assistance of Rs 30,000. The finances provided to the martyr's next of kin also included the non-contributory insurance of Rs 48 lakh, ex-gratia of Rs 44 lakh and Seva Nidhi of Rs 11.71 lakh, among other things. A martyr's contribution is priceless and no amount of money can ever compensate for a soldier's life. But for Rahul Gandhi to irresponsibly run down our Agniveers under the garb of false sympathy, is symptomatic of how the Congress has never cared about the dignity of our men in uniform. The Agnipath scheme is a transformational reform for the Army and the nation that was long overdue. The Kargil War Commission had way back in 1999 recommended the need to drastically reduce the overall average age of the armed forces and Agnipath seeks to do precisely that, besides of course bringing a paradigm shift in the human resource management of

the Indian Army.

The 'Agnipath' allows patriotic and motivated youth to serve in the armed forces for a period of 4 years. A youthful profile of the Army will provide a fresh lease of 'josh and jazba' while bringing about a transformational shift towards more technically savvy armed forces, which is the need of the hour. There will not be any compromise on the standards that the armed forces apply in ensuring the minimum physical, medical and professional parameters for new recruits. During the implementation and stabilisation of the scheme, the Army's operational capabilities and preparedness will be fully maintained. The Army will continue to retain its rich legacy, history, traditions, military values and culture, based on the principles of cohesiveness, camaraderie, Esprit-de-Corps and the core ethos of "Naam, Namak and Nishan". It is envisaged that the average age profile of the Indian Armed Forces would come down from 32 years to 26 years, by implementation of this scheme. The dividends of a short military service to the nation, society and the youth of the nation are immense. This includes the inculcation of patriotism, teamwork, enhancement of physical fitness, ingrained loyalty to the country and availability of trained personnel to boost national security in times of external threats, internal threats and natural disasters. After the end of the term, they will be able to apply for permanent jobs in the armed forces, and 25 per cent of them will be inducted. After the four-year service period, Agniveers who are not absorbed in regular commission will be paid a one-

time 'Seva Nidhi' package amounting to Rs 11.71 lakh. They will also get preference in PSUs, state governments' jobs, and state and Central police forces. While the Opposition parties and even some Army veterans have criticised the scheme, the fact is that such short service for soldiers was suggested over two decades ago, in the Kargil Review Committee report. Besides the Kargil Committee, Arun Singh had also recommended lowering the age limit of soldiers way back in 1989 and the 6th Pay Commission too had suggested as much, in 2006.

The Committee formed after the Kargil War suggested that after the end of the service period, they could be absorbed in regular police forces or in a "National Service Corps (or a National Conservation Corps), as provided for under Article 5 IA(d) of the Constitution, to spearhead a range of land and water conservation and physical and social infrastructure development." The committee had observed that this would reduce the age profile of the Army and the paramilitary forces and also reduce pension costs and other entitlements such as married quarters and educational facilities. In last year's budget, for instance, Rs 5.25 lakh crore was allocated for defence, out of which roughly Rs 1.2 lakh crore was allocated for pensions, which means almost 23 per cent of the defence budget was spent on retirement benefits alone.

The Army pension has gone up sharply after the implementation of the One Rank One Pension (OROP) scheme. While cost reduction is just a byproduct of the

Agnipath scheme, why should anyone have a problem with cost cutting, as long as the quality of our forces is not compromised? Also, spending disproportionately on pension means that very little is left for modernisation including the procurement of modern arms and equipment systems. Under the Agnipath scheme, candidates between the age of 17.5 years and 21 years will be recruited as Agniveers, and as they will serve for only 4 years, the maximum age of an Agniveer will be 25 years. Thus, our soldiers will remain young and fit during their entire term of service.

While 25 per cent of the Agniveers recruited under the Agnipath scheme will be absorbed into regular commission and promoted to higher ranks based on merit and service criteria, the remaining 75 per cent will be given preference in government and PSU jobs. Apart from state and Central police forces, the retired Agniveers will also be valuable manpower in Central and state disaster response forces and similar jobs requiring physical fitness. Those who wish to work will be given priority in CAPFs, police, Assam Rifles and allied forces in several states.

So while 75 per cent of the youth will no longer be with the Army after 4 years of service, they will certainly find gainful employment in various spheres in the government and private sector. Around 45000 to 50000 Agniveers will be recruited every year, which means substantial savings in pensions under the Agnipath scheme. The amount saved could in turn be used for enhancing capital expenditure in the defence sector, rather than spending on revenue expenditure alone.

Not just the Kargil Committee, the Indian Army had also proposed a recruitment scheme similar to Agnipath to save on manpower cost. In 2020, the Army had proposed a "tour of duty" (TOD) scheme to recruit youth for 3 years, instead of 17 years currently. 10 per cent reservation of jobs for Agniveers in Indian Coast Guard, Defence Civilian posts & 16 DPSUs for those meeting requisite eligibility criteria has been announced.

The 16 Defence Public Sector

Modi And Media: Why It's Wrong to Say Press Freedom Is Under Attack

By: Sandip Ghose

A common refrain of Opposition leaders and some sections of civil society is the apparent capture of democratic institutions and mainstream media (MSM) by the present dispensation. These allegations have been regurgitated by academics of Indian origin at Ivy League colleges sympathetic to the Congress and merrily lapped up by their friends in the Western media. From there flows the narrative of democracy under threat in India, the rise of fascism, Prime Minister Narendra Modi being an autocrat and comparisons with the likes of Vladimir Putin, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Donald Trump and the likes.

A few days ago, I received a forward on WhatsApp of a long social media post written purportedly by an intellectual from the world of art and cinema. The author believes "the mainstream media has been comprehensively sold out" and is not trusted by the silent majority. Hence, the person recommends turning to a new band of "independent" YouTube journalists rather than relying on the fakery of the "sold-out



entities". Going by the assessment of this motley crowd of media whiz kids, the individual concludes the BJP is in serious trouble already and the third phase of voting, concluded on May 7th, would "render the election a formality". So far behind the BJP will fall it will be difficult for it to garner even 200 seats let alone "400++". But the clincher comes

at the end when the writer makes a diabolical prediction — actually suggesting that seeing the election slipping out of his hand, Narendra Modi may try to engineer communal riots. This is not influencing but borders on sinister fear-mongering. One can, perhaps, discount the preposterous conclusion considering that the intellectual

hails from the film fraternity and, therefore, may be prone to fantasy. However, more interesting are the names of journalists and analysts mentioned in the piece. Naming them would make one guilty of the same folly. After all, they have garnered a sizable following for their channels. But can numbers alone

be the proof of credibility? If that was so mainstream outlets would still outdo them on eyeball count. But does their track record in forecasting results of previous elections justify such faith?

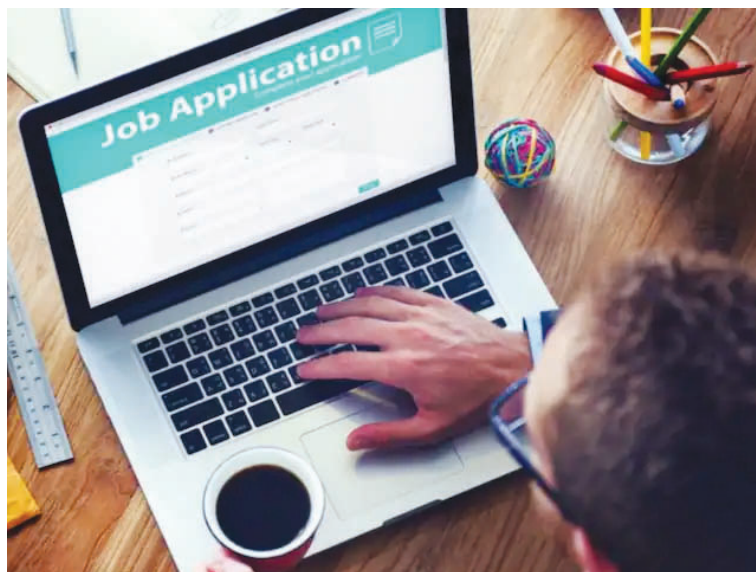
To be fair, none of these personalities make any secret of their bias. Therefore, even without getting into the definition of 'independent' it would be a stretch to put the tag of 'objective' on them. The most important question to my mind is what is the basis of their assessment. From all accounts, none of them have been trawling the country for first-hand research. Most of them appear to operate from their home studios. So, are they privy to exit poll results from their psephologist friends, the intelligence agencies or sources inside political parties, who must be doing their own surveys? Do they have or are their views based on hearsay and grapevine? Or, is it simply uneducated guesswork being passed off as analyses and inside data? Contrast this with what is happening in the TV studios. News Television in India has been reduced to WWF entertainment with 365 days "Noora Kusthi" on prime time.

From Degrees to Gigs: Why Market-Relevant Skills Matter More Than Ever

By: Dinesh Sood

In today's fast-paced and ever-evolving job market, employers are not just interested in hiring candidates with degrees from prestigious institutions like the Indian Institutes of Technology (IIT) or the Indian Institutes of Management (IIM), they now prioritise hiring candidates with specific skill sets.

Despite the widespread recognition of IITs for academic excellence and coveted placement opportunities, recent worrisome reports have revealed that they are not delivering as per their ranking and perception. Thousands of students dream of attending IITs every year, but only 20-25 per cent are fortunate enough to pass the JEE Advanced exam. Those who secure admission pursue academic excellence and eagerly



await the placement season, with an eye on big-ticket jobs. However, the 2024 placement season has been described as "lacklustre" by IIT students. This is a worrying situation in IIT-Bombay, which is ranked third among

engineering institutes in India by NIRF. According to the Global IIT Alumni Support Group, nearly 36 per cent of students were unable to secure jobs for the 2024 placements. Although IIT-Bombay contested this report, stating that

only 6.1 per cent of students remained unplaced, the situation is still concerning. The Global IIT Alumni Support Group data shows that nearly 30-40 per cent of IIT students are still unplaced in the top-ranked eight older IITs like Bombay, Delhi, Kanpur, and others, while around 50-60 per cent of students are still unplaced in the 15 newer IITs like BHU (Varanasi), Ropar, and others.

The unemployment crisis in India is particularly acute among educated youth. The cost of an engineering degree remains at Rs 8-10 lakh, yet the placement rate remains around 30 per cent. Furthermore, there is an influx of MBA degree holders entering the market, even though the demand has dropped by 55 per cent this year. This raises the question of the value of a college/university

degree.

Being highly educated is no guarantee of employment in India, as the International Labor Organisation (ILO) report reveals. Nearly 83 per cent of those unemployed in India are young, and among these unemployed young Indians, nearly 66 per cent are educated. According to the ILO report, the "youth unemployment rate has increased with the level of education, with the highest rates among those with a graduate degree or higher." On the other hand, those without university degrees or even school dropouts have a higher employment rate. Several highly educated youths have set an example by choosing the path of niche entrepreneurship, proudly titling it MBA Chaiwalas and Chatwalas.

Biden's Rafah warning sends immediate shockwaves through US and global politics

US-Israel relations have reached a critical crossroads that shows that even President Joe Biden's staunch support can reach its limits when it starts to conflict with wider American national security and moral interests — and his own dicey political position.

Biden's warning in an interview with CNN's Erin Burnett that he'd halt some weapons shipments to Israel if it invades the Gazan city of Rafah marks the most direct US attempt to rein in its ally in a national security crisis since the Reagan administration, and the first significant conditioning of American military assistance since the start of the war.

Biden's statement of his ultimate red line takes his trial of strength with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to its most intense level yet and sent immediate shockwaves through US and Israeli politics and around the world.

Washington fears a full-scale Israeli incursion into densely populated Rafah would cause civilian casualties on a level even greater than the 34,000 Palestinians the Gaza Health Ministry reports have already been killed in the Israeli war on Hamas. The city is already "hanging on the edge of a precipice," a senior United Nations official told CNN Thursday. Hospitals are overstretched as Palestinians die in Israeli attacks on the suburbs and tens of thousands of people have already fled.

The civilian carnage in the Gaza war has caused outrage globally and generated extreme pressure on Biden at home that threatens to splinter his Democratic coalition as he wages a neck-and-neck reelection campaign against Donald Trump. Republicans are already accusing the president of appeasing terrorists following his comments.

Despite US concerns, Netanyahu's government says it has no choice but to finish its assault on Hamas, which embeds itself in civilian areas — including in Rafah — where key leaders are hunkered down in tunnels. For Netanyahu, the eradication of the group that carried out the October 7 attacks may be a matter of political survival.

The major questions now after this tectonic shift in the US-Israel relationship are:

- Will Biden's move affect Israel's decision-making as it stages air and ground operations in Rafah that could be seen as the precursor to a full offensive?
- Can Israel — as Netanyahu vows — go ahead alone in an operation even the US has disowned?
- Longer-term, will Biden's move be a temporary blip in his relations with the Jewish state's hard-right government or a full-scale rupture between Israel and the US?

- How would a full-scale offensive in Rafah further hamper already faltering attempts to secure a ceasefire between Israel and Hamas? Would it rupture US hopes of a regional compact between Israel and Arab states? And could an operation that kills hundreds of civilians set the regional temperature boiling again and raise fresh fears of a regional war?

- In the US, will Biden's belated attempt to impose direct pressure on Netanyahu over his defiance towards US concerns do anything to alleviate the president's vulnerable political stranding in his own party as Republicans pummel him with exaggerated claims that he's turning his back on Israel?

Biden's comments send political reverberations around the world. Alon Pinkas, a former Israeli consul general in New York, told CNN's Becky Anderson that the public estrangement between Biden and Netanyahu over Rafah represented one of the difficult moments ever in US-Israel relations.

"I do think this is a very low point — could the relationship survive this? Yes. Could it do so while Netanyahu is in power? No," Pinkas said.

Initially, Biden's warning, delivered in an interview with CNN's Erin Burnett in the swing state of Wisconsin on Wednesday, looks like a case of political whiplash.

On Tuesday, during a speech memorializing the Holocaust, Biden said that his "commitment to the safety of the Jewish people, the security of Israel, and its right to exist as an independent Jewish state is ironclad. Even when we disagree." Yet a day later, the president seemed to be sending a contradictory message. The two statements however need to be considered together, and the key phrase is "even when we disagree." The president is apparently seeking to create political space where he can alleviate fierce electoral pressure within his party and internationally, satisfy moral aspirations to shield civilians, head off a wider Middle East war while also honoring his long-term commitment to Israeli security.

But given the treacherous entanglement of the worst attack on Israel's security in decades and international and domestic politics, many of these goals may be irreconcilable.

Biden's biggest break with Netanyahu is a moment that was always coming — even if it took months to arrive and was engineered reluctantly on the US president's part. The critical political interests of the US and Israeli leaders — both of whose hold on office is threatened by the war — are diverging.

The president and top officials repeatedly warned his counterpart against a Rafah offensive. And his authority and credibility

as a global leader depends on Biden standing behind his warnings after Netanyahu has repeatedly ignored US calls to temper the intensity of the Gaza war.

Biden's statement also implies a judgement that US national interests now depend on not being seen as an accessory to the worsening of an already epochal humanitarian disaster in Gaza that has put the United States at odds with many allies in Europe and the Middle East and erode its pretension to global leadership.

The president also has massive political problems. While the Israel-Gaza war is far from the top issue preoccupying American voters, the likely tight race with Trump means that the race could be decided by a few thousands votes in the pivotal swing states among tens of millions cast nationally. And the demographic groups most exercised by the civilian cost of the war and the plight of Palestinians are young, progressive and Arab Americans voters in Michigan — a state that could decide the election. These are exactly the people that the president can least afford to lose. Biden has already been called "Genocide Joe" at campaign events that are frequently interrupted by protests. The wave of pro-Palestinian demonstrations at college campuses are playing into Trump's claims that the US is beset by left-wing extremism and chaos that Biden can't control.

And any mass protests at the Democratic convention in Chicago in August would conjure painful omens for Biden, even if the unrest and anti-Vietnam war fury around the same event in the same venue in 1968 that helped propel a Republican to the White House that year aren't an exact historical analogy.

Israel's next move

Israel's war cabinet was due to meet Thursday in a session that will offer members of Netanyahu's right-wing coalition an opportunity to vent over Biden's decision. Militarily, and given its reserves of weaponry and ammunition, the government may have all the materiel that it needs to go into Rafah. Even so, Israel's ambassador to the UN, Gilad Erdan, said Thursday that the US move could impair his country's moves to reach its objectives.

Israel must also consider whether an invasion of Rafah absent US cover would further fracture the global sympathy it received after the October 7 terror attacks. Such a step could shatter already long-shot negotiations for a ceasefire with Hamas and the return of remaining Israeli hostages and its wider geopolitical aspirations. But Netanyahu's mindset

has long been that the Hamas attacks represent an attempt to wipe Israel off the map and he sees an existential threat to Judaism, even if the rest of the world does not share his view.

Israel has so far given no indication that it will change its plans. For instance, Defense Minister Yoav Gallant warned Thursday: "I turn to Israel's enemies as well as to our best of friends and say — the state of Israel cannot be subdued, not the IDF, not the defense establishment." But if any large-scale invasion of Rafah creates the humanitarian catastrophe that the United States fears, Israel will be left on its own to take the heat after ignoring concerns of the administration and publicly and repeatedly dissing Biden.

A GOP backlash reflects Netanyahu's politicking

The immediate and angry reaction to Biden's comments to CNN from Republicans underscored Netanyahu's years of playing politics in Washington and his allying of his Likud Party with fellow travelers in the GOP.

House Speaker Mike Johnson accused Biden on CNBC of defying the will of Congress by threatening to halt weapons shipments and of "trying to dictate ... and micromanage the war, the defense effort in Israel, as a condition of supplying the weapons that we all know that they desperately need." Trump, the presumptive Republican nominee, charged Biden in a Truth Social post of "taking the side of these terrorists, just like he has sided with the Radical Mobs taking over our college campuses, because his donors are funding them."

As he arrived for another day of his hush money trial in New York, Trump added that any American Jews who voted for Biden should be ashamed, repeating a trope that is offensive to many in the community who have deep bonds with Israel but do not support Netanyahu's hardline government.

The charge that Biden is harming Israeli security is tough to stand up, given his half century of support for the Jewish state and his forbearance of Netanyahu's frequent public rebukes and attempts to undermine him — and previous Democratic presidents Bill Clinton and Barack Obama in Washington.

Just last month, Biden ordered a massive US and allied air operation to shield Israel from a wave of drones and cruise and ballistic missiles sent from Iran in response to its assassination of senior Iranian military intelligence officers in a diplomatic compound in Damascus. And Biden recently signed a multi-billion-dollar arms and ammunition package for Israel that he requested from Congress.

Geopolitical Tensions on Rise as China Recklessly Targets Taiwan

China has been relentlessly pursuing its expansive territorial claims, asserting its sovereignty through a slew of policies and legislation. At the heart of these territorial ambitions lies Taiwan, officially the Republic of China, a solitary island cleaved from the mainland by the Taiwan Strait. Here, the narrative of expansionism unfolds starkly, as Beijing lays claim to territories beyond its sovereign reach.

In 1949, following a seismic shift in power, Mao Zedong's Communist forces usurped the reins of governance, compelling the nationalist government under Chiang Kai-shek and his adherents to seek refuge in Taiwan. There, amidst the azure stretches of the Pacific, they erected a new bastion of rule. Since the 1990s, following decades of martial governance under the aegis of Chiang's Kuomintang (KMT) from 1949 to 1987, Taiwan has blossomed into a beacon of democracy.

Yet, the People's Republic of China (PRC), under the Communist cloak, persists in its portrayal of Taiwan as a wayward fragment of its historical expanse. The rhetoric of "peaceful reunification with Taiwan" has echoed since the 1970s, yet it has gained a sharper, more urgent tone under Xi Jinping's leadership. Xi's vision of expansionism mischievously termed as 'unification' diverges markedly from the paths tread by his predecessors. Xi's stance on Taiwan is steeped in a rigorously assertive and militaristic strategy that has heightened the geopolitical tension across the South China Sea. Since 2016, the Cross-Strait relations have been marked by growing acrimony, beginning with Tsai Ing-wen's ascent to the presidency of Taiwan under the banner of the Democratic People's Party (DPP). This party, historically allied with the call for Taiwan's formal independence, currently holds a stance of maintaining the 'status quo' in its interactions with China. This stands in stark contrast to the Kuomintang, which has preserved a pro-China orientation, favouring amicable relations without pushing for unification.

In response to President Tsai's refusal to affirm the 'One China' policy, Beijing severed all diplomatic dialogues with Taipei, casting a shadow of isolation over Taiwan by opposing its participation in international forums and pressuring countries that recognise or maintain formal interactions with Taiwan's self-governing body. The strengthening of Taiwan's ties with the United States during Tsai Ing-wen's tenure has further fuelled China's aggression.

In 2019, Xi Jinping put forth the "One Country, Two Systems" model, mirroring Hong Kong's framework, as a blueprint for Taiwan's integration. This proposal forms a cornerstone of Xi's vision for a rejuvenated China by 2049. Yet, this

proposal was met with strong resistance in Taipei, outrightly rejected by Ing-wen herself. Beijing's response has been a ramp-up in its intimidation tactics, notably through an unprecedented number of incursions by Chinese military aircraft into Taiwan's Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) starting from 2020. This has been perceived by Taiwan as a threat. But Beijing wrongfully defends these frequent military incursions as exercises of its sovereign rights.

The year 2021 marked the centenary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), during which Xi reiterated the "peaceful reunification" with Taiwan as a "historic mission" of the CCP, though he stopped short of specifying a timeline. The intensity of aircraft incursions doubled the following year, with 1,727 warplanes, including nuclear-capable bombers, entering the ADIZ. The year 2022 saw the publication of Xi Jinping's White Paper on "The Taiwan Question and China's Reunification in the New Era," which not only intensified but also codified China's coercive strategies. Unlike its predecessors issued in 1993 and 2000, this document ties the reunification with Taiwan to the broader goal of Chinese rejuvenation by 2049, aiming to rectify the historic error of foreign encroachment.

Moving away from the prior commitment to purely peaceful means, the paper still prioritises peaceful reunification but does not dismiss the use of force, if necessary. Additionally, it labels any separatist movements as criminal acts of secession. This evolving stance on Taiwan

increases the likelihood of military escalation in Beijing's efforts for territorial annexation. Many experts now believe Beijing might resort to military action to achieve reunification, although the timeline remains a subject of debate. Following US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan in 2022, tensions escalated towards potential military conflict. Beijing's reaction included "precision missile strikes" near Taiwanese waters, declared as part of a military drill—a first in the history of these confrontations.

A series of Chinese military exercises have been observed near Taiwan, serving a dual purpose of military readiness and strategic intimidation. These acts have become normalised components of China's grey-zone tactics aimed at pressuring Taiwan. Moreover, economic levers have also been employed, with China halting over 2,000 Taiwanese imports and cutting exports, tightening the noose around Taiwan's economy.

Beijing's military endeavours near Taiwan have intensified, signalling a hardening of its stand to reunify the island with the mainland through force. In the shadow of the January 2024 elections, China's intrusive manoeuvres manifested in cyber-attacks and a disinformation campaign aimed at sowing discord within Taipei. This propaganda framed the electoral choice as a stark dichotomy: align with Beijing or face war. Lai Ching-te, the former Vice President and now the president-elect from the Democratic People's Party (DPP), was labelled a "separatist" by

Beijing in an effort to erode his popular support. Despite these machinations, Lai secured the mandate of Taipei's population, reflecting a resounding rejection of Beijing's tactics.

This year, Beijing's military budget surged by 7.2 per cent, indicating an increase in aggression towards Taiwan. During the National People's Congress (NPC) meeting in March, Premier Li Qiang's report conspicuously omitted any mention of "peaceful" reunification, hinting at a gravitation towards more forceful reunification strategies. The persistent military incursions near Taiwan over the last four years mirror this shift, marking a departure from previous approaches to reunification, now veering towards military confrontation.

This year, Beijing's shadowy manoeuvres extend across the sky and sea around Taiwan, manifesting in the launch of 'spy' balloon arrays over Taiwanese airspace and the regular patrol of aircraft and warships. These acts, together with the encroachment of dual-use surveillance vessels, are now part of the frequent efforts to push back Taiwan's ruling establishment. According to a recent report from Taiwan's defence ministry, these actions are emblematic of China's irregular grey-zone tactics designed to wear the island nation. Just in April 2024, Chinese military aircraft and naval vessels were detected near Taiwan 207 and 144 times respectively. Furthermore, China has unilaterally opened new air routes close to Taiwanese islands, jeopardising flight safety.

The dark side of being a young and popular food influencer

Becoming a food influencer was 21-year-old Aparna's (name changed) teenage dream. She started her Instagram account two years ago and has gained a following of over 100,000 through posts on different food items and restaurants across Delhi-NCR.

Initially, it was easy, she recalls. But as competition and demand for more content began to grow, Aparna now finds herself doing things for likes and followers that are anything but pleasant. Eating less-than-enjoyable food combinations which might be trending online, such as gulab jamun, idli, spring onion coffee, sushi paratha and fanta Maggi. "People enjoy something different. These days everyone is reviewing pizzas, momos and cakes. So I have to force myself to try other things to go viral," she adds. The daily consumption of fat and sugar and roughly 4,000 calories has taken a severe toll on her wellbeing. Aparna is obese, pre-diabetic and has grade 2 fatty liver. She also has migraines and back pain. "Between visiting places, setting up a shoot and editing videos, I get zero time to cook for myself or exercise. I must have gained close to 25 kilos in the last two years, and it has taken a huge toll on my confidence," she confides.

It also seems to have impacted the number of new people who follow her. "I don't look as good as I used to. I think that has impacted how many people want to see me eat food. There is constant stress to produce content, and it has to be great content because if someone doesn't like what you rec-

ommend or review, then you can also get trolled," says Aparna. Unlike food reviewers of the past, she feels digital food reviewers have a completely different life. "The internet is a hungry monster. Someone reviewing for a newspaper or magazine might do so once a week. I have to do 1-2 posts daily," she says.

Initially, it had been easy money and she began to receive small amounts to sponsor and endorse products and meals from various people. Now, she has 3-4 deals still pending with clients and has no choice but to continue eating and keeping a minimum number of followers on her account. "My friends have all applied for jobs. I didn't focus on that because I thought I would get paid to eat. Now I want to leave this profession, but I still have six months of contracts to close for eating various things. I will have to pay penalty charges if I drop out now," says Aparna.

Therapy sessions are helping the young girl cope with the emotional stress as well as gather the courage to quit for good eventually. When Aparna is finally able to delete her account, she hopes she can get funding to start a mental health support programme for other food influencers. "I think we need to strengthen ourselves to ask followers and sponsors for a break every now and then. It is impossible to eat like this. This is not just a mental health issue but one of harming your physical health severely. I think if something is making you sick, then you need support to walk away from it."

Will Mayawati play disruptor in Uttar Pradesh?

Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) supremo Mayawati may have been late to the election jamboree in Uttar Pradesh, but that hasn't stopped her from creating a stir in the electoral battlefield of 2024. What till now appeared to be a direct fight between the Bharatiya Janata Party-led National Democratic Alliance and the Samajwadi Party-led Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance suddenly acquired a new twist after the BSP announced its candidates. Bucking the perception of being the BJP's 'B' team, the party seems bent on spoiling their prospects, not just in the west but also in Purvanchal (eastern UP). The BSP's latest shocker has been giving the Jaunpur LS ticket to Srikala Reddy, wife of mafia don-turned-politician Dhananjay Singh. The contest in this eastern UP constituency had looked like a straight fight between the BJP's Kripa Shankar Singh, a former Maharashtra home minister but a native, and the Samajwadi Party's Babu Singh Kushwaha after Dhananjay had been taken out of the equation (the ex-MP was convicted—for the first time ever—in a four-year-old kidnapping and extortion case) just days after he announced his intention to contest, but Srikala's entry has made it a three-cornered contest. The BSP candidate is currently the zila parishad chairman of Jaunpur and has an edge—even in the 2019 Modi wave, Jaunpur had voted for the elephant (the party symbol). The Thakur disaffection against Dhananjay's arrest and the 22 per cent Dalit and 11 per cent Muslim vote make the contest even more interesting. Indeed, the Thakur/ Rajput anger against the BJP and the Muslim discontent with the SP are the twin weapons in the

Bahujan party's arsenal this election. Mayawati has lost no occasion to rub it in, as she did in the Moradabad LS seat. "The SP has given the ticket to a Hindu candidate in a seat where the Muslims are in a majority while the BJP has ignored the Rajputs in west UP. The BSP is the only party fielding candidates taking in the community's strength and local interests," she said at a rally here. The BSP's selection of candidates may indeed upset calculations in several seats. The BJP may feel the pinch the most. In the past two elections, the saffron party's social engineering moves had led to a consolidation of the non-Yadav OBC and non-Jatav Dalit vote, which, along with its traditional forward caste base, had made it unstoppable in UP. This phalanx could see cracks this election.

To cash in on the Thakur/ Rajput resentment against the BJP, Mayawati has fielded Rajendra Singh Solanki from Gautam Buddh Nagar, Sripal Singh from Kairana, Kuldeep Bhadouria from Kanpur and Nandkishore Pundhir from the Ghaziabad seat. Meanwhile, setting off a few tremors in the SP's Muslim base, it has fielded almost a dozen candidates from the community, including Majid Ali from Saharanpur, Dr Mujahid Husain in Amroha, Mohammad Irfan Saifi in Moradabad and Zeeshan Khan in Rampur. The BSP has also caused a flutter in

Badaun, where senior SP leader Shivpal Yadav is planning to send son Aditya to the Lok Sabha, by fielding former MLA Muslim Khan. For good measure, the BSP has also announced full support to building the "new Babri Masjid" whenever it comes up. Mayawati and the BSP had been written off after the party's disastrous showing in the 2022 assembly election (it got just 12 per cent of the vote and has



just one MLA, Umashankar Singh from Rasara, Ballia). Reinventing the party strategy has hence been crucial, the focus being on rebuilding the confidence among the core Dalit voters, leveraging the discontent among the other communities, and hoping that Muslims will come onboard again. The party also seems to have changed its motto, from 'Sarvajan hitai, sarvajan sukhai' (Everyone's welfare, everyone's happiness) to 'Bahujan hitai, bahujan sukhai', indicating a return to its core values. "Both the BJP and SP are now wary, for the BSP ticket-holders are hurting them in several seats," says Shilp Shikha Singh, political analyst and assistant professor at Lucknow's Giri Institute of Development Studies, adding

that the party was on the brink. "The BSP can't afford another forgettable election...they had to send a strong message to the cadre and party ideologues that the game isn't over yet." The Brahmin community has also been co-opted in this "disruptive move", many of them BJP turncoats. So, in Aligarh, Hitendra Kumar a.k.a. Bunty Upadhyay, takes on Satish Gautam, the two-time MP who is facing anti-incumbency and the ire of the family of the late CM and Lodh leader Kalyan Singh. Similarly, in Dhaurahara, Shyam Kishor Awasthi gets the ticket, while Sachidanand Pandey holds the elephant symbol aloft in the Ayodhya Lok Sabha seat. Former BJP district unit president, Dayashankar Mishra, has been fielded from Basti. Meanwhile, in SP bastion Mainpuri, party chief Akhilesh Yadav's wife Dimple Yadav suddenly finds herself in a tough battle after the BSP replaced its candidate, Gulshan Dev Shakya, with ex-MLA Shiv Prasad Yadav. Mayawati's nephew and BSP national coordinator Akash Anand has been the campaign face across the state, addressing rallies alone. As the poll battle heats up, he has been in the thick of things, accusing the BJP-ruled Centre of being a "government of terrorists" and getting booked in the bargain. BSP state president Vishwanath Pal claims the party's "unexpected results" will shock everyone on June 4 when the results are announced. Other party functionaries, who didn't want to come on record, were not so confident about the numbers, but one thing they were sure of—"everyone will realise the power of Behenji" in UP politics again.

Indian-Mexican UmaSofia Srivastava gives up Miss Teen USA title

Indian-Mexican origin UmaSofia Srivastava, who was crowned Miss Teen USA last year, gave up the title on Wednesday.

Srivastava said that her "personal values no longer fully align with the direction of the organisation". Responding to her decision, Miss Teen USA thanked her for her services in a post on Instagram and said, "We respect and support UmaSofia's decision to step down from her duties. The well-being of our titleholders is a top priority." "We are currently reviewing plans for the transition of responsibilities to a successor, and we will soon announce the crowning of a new Miss Teen USA," the organisation added.

Srivastava's decision to resign comes just days after Noelia Voigt resigned as Miss USA, citing mental health issues.

Srivastava said in a post on Instagram that she had been "grappling with the decision" for many months and thanked her family and well-wish-



ers for supporting her. She said in the post that "it was certainly not how she saw her reign com-

ing to a close". "I will always look back on my time as Miss NJ Teen USA fondly, and the experience of representing my state as a first generation, Mexican-Indian American at the national level was fulfilling in itself. After careful consideration, I've de-

cided to resign as I find that my personal values no longer fully align with the direction of the organisation," she said in the post. UmaSofia Srivastava said that she would continue her advocacy for "education and acceptance", with her multi-lingual children's book *The White Jaguar* and with the organisations she worked with before being crowned Miss Teen USA, namely The Lotus Petal Foundation and the Bridge of Books Foundation. "Ultimately, working with these incredible non-profits and seeing the first-hand impact that *The White Jaguar* has had on the kids and adults I've read it to is what has forged my legacy. This work has always been my TRUE purpose," she said. "I look forward to the rest of the year as I finish 11th grade as part

of the National Honor Society and start the college application process, knowing that my academic career has been defined by my hard work, and my hard work alone," UmaSofia Srivastava said in the post, adding that she would also pursue a new writing project.

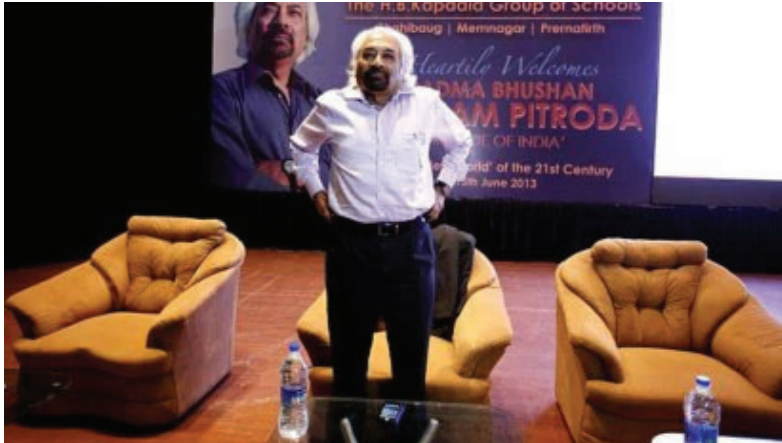
Amid row over controversial remarks, Sam Pitroda steps down as chairman of Indian Overseas Congress

SAM PITRODA, one of the closest associates of the Gandhi family, stepped down as chairman of the Indian Overseas Congress on Wednesday after his politically incorrect remarks to underline India's diversity triggered a firestorm, drawing sharp reactions from Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the BJP's chief ministers in the Northeast.

Emphasising the diversity of India, Pitroda in an interview to *The Statesman*, said: "People in the East look like the Chinese, people in the West look like the Arabs, people in the North look like, maybe, White, and people in the South look like Africans," adding, "It does not matter. All of us are brothers and sisters."

His remarks put the Congress in a difficult spot in the middle of elections. While the party initially distanced itself from Pitroda's comments, it had to take steps to control the damage. With Pitroda's resignation, the party hopes to put a lid on the controversy and not let the row derail its campaign. "Mr Sam Pitroda has decided to step down as chairman of the Indian Overseas Congress of his own accord. The Congress president has accepted his decision," Congress communication head Jairam Ramesh said. Earlier in the day, distancing the party from Pitroda's comments, Ramesh said: "The analogies drawn by Mr Sam Pitroda in a podcast to illustrate India's diversity are most unfortunate and unacceptable. The Indian National Congress completely dissociates itself from these analogies." Seizing on Pitroda's remarks, Modi, while addressing a rally in Telangana, said: "I am very angry today. I don't get angry when someone abuses me. I will tolerate it. But today the Shehzada's (a reference to Rahul Gandhi) philosopher has hurled such a big abuse, which has filled me with anger. Can people's ability be decided on the basis of their skin colour? Yeh chamadi ki rang ka khel Shehzade ko kisne ijazat di hai. Samvidhan sar pe lekarke nachne wale log.. (Who gave him permission for this game on skin colour. Those who dance around with the Constitution on their head) are insulting the people of my country on the basis of skin colour. Shehzade... you will have to answer. The nation will not tolerate

insulting our citizens on the basis of skin colour and Modi will never tolerate it," he said. Assam Chief Minister and chairman of the BJP-led North East Democratic Alliance, Himanta Biswa Sarma, said:



"Sam bhai. I am from the Northeast and I look like an Indian. We are a diverse country — we may look different but we are all one. Hamare desh ke baare mein thoda to samajh lo (learn about our country a bit)." Manipur Chief Minister N Biren Singh took a more aggressive stand. "I condemn Congress leader Sam Pitroda's racist comment against the people of Northeast. The Congress has always tried to divide India with their divide and rule policy. But they must know that the Northeast has been a part of India and always will be. Such a mockery of India's diversity is highly unacceptable," he said, demanding a public apology from Pitroda and the Congress.

Meghalaya Chief Minister Conrad Sangma also condemned the remarks.

Tripura Chief Minister Manik Saha said: "The idea of unity in the midst of diversity is the main mantra of the Indian spirit. Although we live in the Northeast, our thinking is completely Indian. Similarly, from Kashmir to Kanyakumari, from Ahmedabad to Arunachal, all the citizens of the country have one identity, as Indian. But, blinded by the greed of power, Congress leader

Rahul Gandhi's mentor Sam Pitroda and the discriminatory INDI Alliance mentality has gone so low that they are now judging the people of India by their skin color and face. I strongly condemn this disgusting mentality."

Pitroda had stoked a controversy last month too, when he said the inheritance tax in the United States was an interesting law and could be among the issues for debate in India. The BJP turned this into an electoral issue, with Modi claiming that the Congress would impose an inheritance tax and "snatch" people's inheritance for "re-distribution". While Rahul remained silent on Pitroda's latest remarks, his sister and senior leader Priyanka Gandhi Vadra hit back at Modi. Asked by ANI whether Pitroda had given Modi a full toss, Priyanka, who is in Rae Bareilly, said: "Pradhan Mantri inhin fisool baaton pe full toss khelte hain (The PM wastes time

on full tosses like these). I challenge him, play full toss on employment, price rise, atrocities on women... You are saving those who are committing atrocities against women..." With Modi leading the BJP offensive, citing such "racist" comments as proof of the Congress's attempts to divide the country on the lines of race, religion and caste, the Opposition party leaders admitted growing disquiet over Pitroda, seen as a "habitual offender". Sources said a "stern message" should be sent to people like him, adding that the signal has to come from the Gandhi family. "The Gandhis should realise that this man is giving the BJP talking points on a platter... We know that the BJP, especially Modi, is going to town, but our hands are tied. We could only disassociate the party from his remarks... that is why Ramesh promptly issued a clarification," said a Congress leader.

"I still don't know what he brings to the Congress table apart from the fact that he coordinates and manages Rahul's speaking engagements, including at various universities abroad," said another.

By evening, Pitroda resigned, and the party underlined that he did it of his own accord.

For \$90,000 A Year, Your Child Learns To Wear A Hamas Keffiyeh In A US College

The ugly farce that has been unfolding on the US and European campuses lately in the name of anti-Israel protests has achieved little, but it has made parents around the world sit up and re-read the recording slips of their chequebooks. Just how much are they paying for their child's education? Rather, how much are they paying for their child to learn how to wear the Arabian keffiyeh, hold up placards in support of a terror organisation like Hamas, play the Indian daffi, and shout 'azaadi' to perfect poetic metre (the last two being JNU exports to Western campuses)? Turns out, it can go up to \$90,000 a year in premier institutions like Columbia, Stanford or UCLA. In a new episode of his show *Real Time With Bill Maher*, the writer-comedian asked the same question, not on behalf of parents but American taxpayers. "I'm so incensed about some of this stuff because when I read about the college loans, the Biden administration's student debt cancellation will cost a combined \$870 million to \$1.4 trillion. That's a lot of debt forgiveness... so, my tax dollars are supporting this Jew-hating?" Maher asked. It most definitely is, and in a brainless, unquestioning way, as writer Douglas Murray points out in a recent column.

"This one is for the morons. For the students busily cosplaying at being terrorists on our city's campuses.

The automatons whose new radical-chic uniform is an Arab keffiyeh. Specifically to the ones who have decided to chant for 'Intifada' and unveil a vast banner down the side of Hamilton Hall at Columbia this week," he writes. Murray goes on to cite the doom that the Palestinian clerics' call for 'intifada' caused. On June 1, 2001, terrorists blew up The Dolphinarium in Tel Aviv, killing 21 youngsters milling around the nightclub, the youngest of them being 14-year-old Maria Tagilchev. On July 31, 2002, Hamas bombed the cafeteria of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, killing five American students among nine in total. One of those killed was 20-year-old student George Khoury, an Arab. It is unlikely that the American students watch Bill Maher or read Douglas Murray. But they definitely scroll TikTok posts and Instagram reels, hundreds of which tell them far-Left ideology and Communism are cool, it is 'resistance' to side with Hamas and Hezbollah, and Jew hate or anti-white, anti-Hindu racism is a legitimate expression of anger. In part, it is the success of the Left, and in particular, forces like China, which have insidiously infiltrated campuses either through funding or setting up Confucius Institutes on more than 500 college campuses worldwide, with over 100 in the US alone, including at the George Washington University, the University of Michigan

and the University of Iowa. These institutes are overseen by a branch of the Chinese Ministry of Education known as Hanban. They are part of the Chinese government's broader \$10-billion-a-year propaganda initiative. To top it, there are predatory globalists like George Soros, Klaus Schwab and the Rothschild family and Islamists like the Muslim Brotherhood and Jamaat-i Islami which reportedly inject billions into anarchic, violent, far-Left movements like Antifa, Black Lives Matter and the pro-mamas protests. Their aim is to weaken not just governments but society at large so that they can exploit nations like parasites.

They are succeeding.

One of the main reasons is that parents have outsourced parenting to the internet and sometimes morally compromised and psychologically derailed teachers. A parent's duty does not end with paying for the child's education. It begins there. An estimated 1.5 million Indian students study abroad. In 2022-23, nearly 269,000 students from India enrolled in American colleges. It is important to question, before it is too late and all wrapped up in a keffiyeh, what that admission fee or tax is buying for the child's and nation's future. Is education getting our children knowledge and values, or setting a bomb timer in their hearts?

A maharaja, a tawaif, and an area with a reputation: The story of Heera Mandi

Lahore's Heera Mandi, which Sanjay Leela Bhansali presents in his 'Heeramandi', had a rich culture of the arts due to Mughal patronage. Maharaja Ranjit Singh fell in love with a dancer from Heera Mandi and married her. He bravely embraced backlash and whiplash for his love. Here's the epic story of love from Heera Mandi.

Director Sanjay Leela Bhansali debuted on Netflix with his eight-episode drama series 'Heeramandi', based on the life and times of the courtesans of the walled city of Lahore before the Partition. While the series is a period drama based in the 1920s, when the lavish lanes of Heera Mandi were going through a difficult phase, the locality has a fascinating history written in royalty through the times of the Mughals to the Sikh empire. Long before the Sikhs led by Maharaja Ranjit Singh arrived in Lahore at the end of the 18th century, Heera Mandi was the centre of culture, arts, and trade besides its association with the courtesans and performers who entertained the elite of society. During the time of the Mughals, Heera Mandi was called Shahi Mohallah.

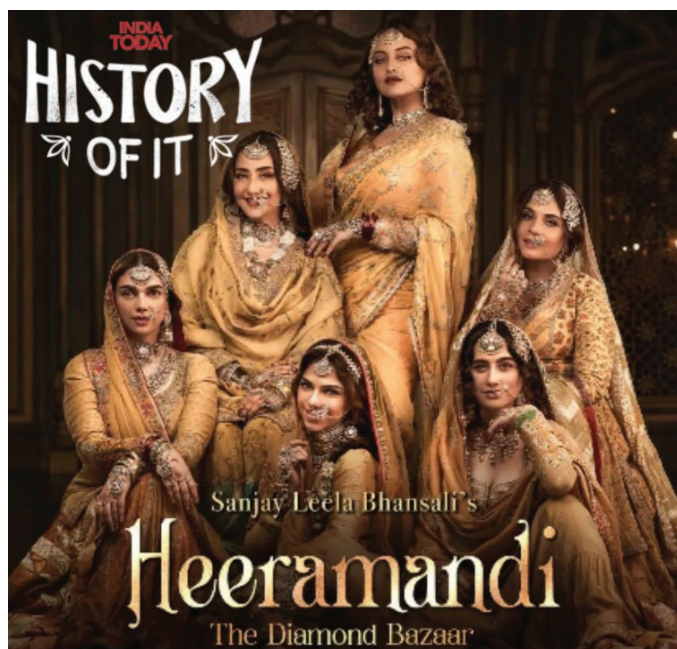
There are different versions of how the locality got its current name. While some accounts state that it got its name due to the diamond (hira) trade in the area during the Mughals, it was under the Sikh empire that the locality was christened Heera Mandi.

When the Sikhs conquered Lahore in 1799 under Maharaja Ranjit Singh, the empire's capital was Gujranwala. Both Lahore and Gujranwala are now in Pakistan.

While there were strategic reasons why Maharaja Ranjit Singh shifted his capital to Lahore, he stayed and operated from the area till his death, partly because of his love for a courtesan -- Moran Sarkar. Here's the story of Heera Mandi, how it evolved under the rule of the Sikh Maharaja and how it got its current name.

THE SHAHI MOHALLAH OF MUGHALS

Heera Mandi's history goes back to the 17th Century. It was first called the 'Shahi Mohallah' or royal neighbourhood, and visited by princes and nobles.



During the Mughal period, women from Afghanistan and Uzbekistan were brought to Heera Mandi to entertain the royal court.

These women were trained in various arts, including classical kathak, mujra, thumri, ghazal, and dadra, and became tawaifs upon mastering classical dance and singing.

Tawaifs were highly skilled in music, dance, and other arts and were influential, refined and valued. They were financially independent and possessed agency over their lives and choices.

Though prostitution is forbidden in Islam, Shahi Mohallah continued to thrive under the patronage of Mughal rulers. Lahore was among the three power centres under the Mughal rule, the other two being Delhi and Agra. Its opulence shone bright, and it was reflected in Shahi Mohallah as well.

The area reached its financial and cultural heights during the Mughal rule. But during the early 18th century, after the death of Aurangzeb, the Mughal empire started to wane. After Ahmad Shah Durrani and the Afghan forces entered Lahore on January 12, 1748, Shahi Mohallah was reduced to a hub of prostitution. The situation remained the same until Maharaja Ranjit Singh's conquest of Lahore in 1799.

MAHARAJA RANJIT SINGH AND HIS LOVE FOR MORAN Ranjit Singh, the young chieftain of Shukerchakias, a Sikh group, seized Lahore at the age of 17 and proclaimed himself the Maharaja of Punjab in 1801. While the Maharaja was known for his military

prowess, he was also a great lover of beauty and art. Shahi Mohallah attracted his attention.

It was in March 1802, a few days before Holi, that Ranjit Singh came to know about Moran Sarkar, a 12-year-old Muslim dancer from Shahi Mohallah, considered a "perfect model of beauty" and well-versed in the arts of singing and dancing. The Maharaja sent word to her guardians that he would visit them in the evening.

In the evening, a thin, tall girl, dressed in a tight churidar pajama and a long white shirt received Ranjit Singh. Then she offered him a betel leaf containing some grains of saffron.

Accompanied by six musicians on instruments, Moran began singing and dancing for Ranjit Singh. Her steps in dancing, the grace, the rhythm, her slow and steady movements of hands, arms, head, body and feet were mesmerising. The 21-year-old Maharaja was smitten.

In 'History Of The Sikhs, Vol. V The Sikh Lion of Lahore', author Hari Ram Gupta mentions how Ranjit Singh started spending most of his time in the "house of his beloved Moran".

"He spent nights in the house of his beloved Moran, the dancing girl. His meals and other things were supplied to him there. During his morning exercise, Moran was seated on the same horse and off he went riding with her. No followers were permitted to accompany him. He generally had a full gallop in the level plain between the fort and the river. Ranjit



Singh must have enjoyed the greatest glee when Moran feared a fall and cried to the utmost pleasure of the rider," notes Gupta, citing the Persian language text Ibrat Namah written by the contemporary Ali-ud-din.

However, their proximity infuriated the Maharaja's elite and religious companions, who scoffed at Moran's social standing and religion.

But Ranjit Singh's love for Moran knew no bounds. The Maharaja married her and elevated her from being just a royal concubine.

Shortly after, he was summoned to Amritsar before the Akal Takht, the highest temporal body of the Sikh faith. The Maharaja obeyed. Akali Phula Singh denounced him in the open assembly for violating the social rules of the Khalsa. "The Maharaja listened to his accusation in a spirit of humility, and stood penitent before the congregation. He begged forgiveness with folded hands again and again. Phula Singh declared that he must be given one hundred lashes on his bare back before the Panth. The Maharaja at once took off his shirt. He was tied to the trunk of a tamarind tree which stood in a wing of the Akal Takht with his hands bound on his back," notes Hari Ram Gupta.

However, the audience could not see their beloved Maharaja go through the punishment and intensely burst into tears. The Akalis accepted the public sentiment and the Maharaja was let go with just one leash on his back.

Ranjit Singh never asked Moran to convert to Sikhism. He also

built a mosque in her honour at Pappar Mandi, near Shahi Mohallah, where Moran lived and ran her own court.

Gold and silver coins were struck in her name. She was referred to as 'Moran Sarkar' in these coins.

HOW LAHORE'S SHAHI MOHALLAH BECAME HEERA MANDI

Ranjit Singh's conquest of Lahore revived the cultural and social status of Shahi Mohallah.

Later, the Maharaja's Prime Minister, Hira Singh Dogra, envisioned using Shahi Mohallah as an economic hub, a food market, situated in the heart of Lahore.

The grain market that Hira Singh Dogra established came to be known as 'Hira Singh di Mandi' (Hira Singh's market), and gradually, as 'Hira Mandi'. However, many believed that the name resonated with the women of the place, in admiration of their unparalleled beauty.

However, after the death of Maharaja Ranjit Singh and the British colonisation of Punjab in 1849, the cultural aspects of traditional dance performances in Heera Mandi came to an end.

The British, influenced by Victorian-era conservatism, made no distinction between cultured tawaifs (courtesans) and common prostitutes, dubbing both as fallen women. This, in turn, led to the elimination of the dance aspect from the livelihoods of the courtesans, confining them to sex work under a cloak of secrecy instead.

Despite these challenges, Heera Mandi continued to produce some of the most famous stars of Pakistani cinema, with entertainers such as Noor Jahan, Mumtaz Shanti, and Khurshid Begum all hailing from the now infamous neighbourhood.

Today, Heera Mandi is a husk of what it used to be. While in the daytime it operates like a normal market, in the nighttime, it turns into a red-light district that sees women indulging in the flesh trade. Rare romantic stories might still be emerging from those dark bylanes of Heera Mandi, but none that matches the tale of a maharajah's love for a courtesan that made him marry her.

14-year-old girl gang-raped by 10 minors in Belgium

A 14-year-old girl was gang-raped and abused by 10 minors, including her 14-year-old boyfriend, in Belgium. Her boyfriend attacked her before allegedly allowing others minors to sexually assault her as well. The suspects, all minors aged between 11 and 16, are reportedly immigrants.



(News Agency)-A teenage girl 'loaned out' by her 14-year-old boyfriend was gang-raped by 10 minors in Belgium. The girl, who is only 14 years old, was taken to a wooded area in Kortrijk, West Flanders, a spot popular with mountain bikers and near to a highway, where she was raped and abused by her 14-year-old 'lover boy' boyfriend and his friends.

In many European countries, 'lover boys' is a term used for traffickers who manipulate young girls by pretending to be in love with them. The abuse took place on three separate occasions between April 2 and April 6, reported

the Daily Mail. The 14-year-old boyfriend had attacked the girl before allegedly allowing several others to sexually assault her as well.

The suspects, all minors aged between 11 and 16, who are reportedly of immigrant origin, filmed the attacks on their smartphones and shared the clips on social media, reportedly over Snapchat -- an instant messaging and photo-sharing application.

The youngest of the boys, an 11-year-old, was used as a lookout, reported the Daily Mail.

The investigation into the case has been conducted in secrecy

to avoid any leaks of the suspects' identities.

The girl took several days to come forward out of fear of telling her parents and the police. The police were able to arrest ten boys, six of whom were placed in a closed institution, while the other four were placed under house arrest. The suspects have given contradictory statements during interrogation, with some blaming each other.

Some of the six minors placed in the institution appeared in juvenile court on Wednesday afternoon. It was reported that two were released on conditions.

Four more young people, includ-

ing her 14-year-old boyfriend, are now in custody. He's believed to be the main suspect.

The investigation is ongoing, and prosecutors are working to establish the extent of each suspect's involvement in the assault.

The case has sparked debate in Belgium about the country's juvenile delinquency laws and the minimum penalty for sexual of-

fences.

The criminal age of responsibility in Belgium is 18, meaning the suspected sexual abusers were sent before a juvenile judge and are likely to have been placed into a personal rehabilitation programme in youth facilities, reported the Daily Mail.

The survivor is receiving specialist guidance following her ordeal.

US refutes Russia's meddling charge: 'Don't involve ourselves in Indian polls'

(News Agency)-"No, of course, we don't involve ourselves in elections in India," US State Department Spokesperson Matthew Miller said, refuting Russian allegations accusing America of meddling in the Lok Sabha polls.

A day ago, Russia had claimed that the United States was trying to interfere in India's parliamentary elections and "unbalance" the internal political situation in the country.

In a media briefing, Russian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova also said the US was yet to provide "reliable evidence" of the involvement of Indian citizens in the foiled murder plot against Khalistani separatist Gurpatwant Singh Pannun. "No, of course, we don't involve ourselves in elections in India as we don't involve ourselves in elections anywhere in the world. Those are decisions for the people of India to make," Miller said in a press conference.

Speaking to reporters in Moscow, Zakharova called it 'Regular unfounded accusations by the United States against New Delhi.'

"We see that they ground-



lessly accuse not only India but also many other states of violating religious freedoms, which are a reflection of the United States' misunderstanding of the national mentality, the historical context of the development of the Indian state and disrespect for India as a state," Zakharov added.

However, refusing to comment on the alleged plot to kill Pannun, Miller said "There is a publicly returned indictment that contains alleged facts. They are allegations until they're proven before a jury that anyone can go and read. I won't speak to them here because, of course, it's an ongoing legal matter, and I'll leave it at that."

Hillary Clinton terms US campus protests 'propaganda', 'lack of knowledge'

(News Agency)-Former US States Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, has slammed campus protests across the country, over the Gaza war, saying the young people (students) do not know much about the history of the Middle East.

Clinton also termed students ignorant and alleged they were being misinformed by propaganda on social media.

In an interview with MSNBC, Hillary Clinton agreed with host Charles Joseph Scarborough, who said, "mainstream students were getting propagandised whether it's from their professors, or whether it's from the

communist Chinese government, through TikTok, calling the President of the United States 'genocide Joe'."

In response, Clinton said, "I have had many conversations, as you've had, with a lot of young people over the last many months now, and... they don't know very much at all about the history of the Middle East, or frankly about history in many areas of the world, including in our own country."

"Propaganda is not education," she said, adding, "propaganda...

whether it's TikTok, or in the classroom, is actually the opposite of education."

"Anybody who is teaching in a university or anyone who is putting content on social media should be held responsible for what they include and what they exclude. So much of what we're seeing, particularly on TikTok, about what's going on in the Middle East is wilfully false, but it's also incredibly slanted, pro-Hamas, anti-Israel," Hillary Clinton



said. "With respect to the Middle East, they don't know that under the bringing together for the Israelis and the Palestinians by my husband (former US President Bill Clinton), then-Israeli prime minister Ehud Barak, the then-head of the Palestinian Liberation Organisation Yasser Arafat — an offer was made to the Palestinians for a state on 96 per cent of the existing territory occupied by the Palestinians with 4 per cent of Israel to be given to reach 100 per cent of the amount of territory that was hoped for," Clinton said. "This offer was made and if Yasser Arafat had accepted it there would have been a Palestinian state now for about 24 years."

Lack of self control in teenage not unique to humans

According to the study published in the journal Trends in Neurosciences, taking risks and having thrilling adventures during this period isn't necessarily a bad thing.



Impulsiveness during adolescence is not unique to us, which suggests that the brains of human and other primates go through very similar changes, particularly in the areas that affect self-control. "As is widely known, adolescence is a time of heightened impulsivity and sensation seeking, leading to questionable choices," said Beatriz Luna of the University of Pittsburgh in the US. "However, this behavioral

tendency is based on an adaptive neurobiological process that is crucial for molding the brain based on gaining new experiences," Luna said. Structural, functional, and neurophysiological comparisons between us and macaque monkeys show that this difficulty in stopping reactive responses is similar in our primate counterparts -- who during puberty, also show limitations in tests where they have to stop a

reactive response.

"The monkey is really the most powerful animal model that comes closest to the human condition," said Christos Constantinidis of Wake Forest School of Medicine in the US. "They have a developed prefrontal cortex and follow a similar trajectory with the same patterns of maturation between adolescence and adulthood," Constantinidis said. Taking risks and having thrilling

adventures during this period isn't necessarily a bad thing, published in the journal Trends in Neurosciences.

"You don't have this perfect inhibitory control system in adolescence, but that's happening for a reason," Luns said.

"It has survived evolution because it's actually allowing for new experiences to provide information about the environment that is critical for optimal specialisation of the brain to occur," she said.

Understanding the neural mechanisms that underlie this transitional period in our primate counterparts is critical to informing us about this period of brain and cognitive maturation, said Luna.

Researchers said that human neurological development during this time is characterised by changes in structural anatomy. There is an active pruning of redundant and unused neural connections and a strengthening of white matter tracts throughout the brain that will determine the template for how the adult brain will operate.

Specifically, by adolescence all foundational aspects of brain organisation are in place and

during this time they undergo refinements that will enable the most optimal way to operate to deal with the demands of their specific environment, researchers said.

The development of neural activity patterns that allow for the preparation of a response seems to be a key element of this phase of development -- and essential to successful performance on self-control tasks.

This all suggests that self-control isn't just about the ability, in the moment, to inhibit a behaviour.

"Executive function involves not only reflexive responses but actually being prepared ahead of time to create an appropriate plan.

"This is the change between the adolescent and adult brain and it is strikingly clear both in the human data and in the animal data," said Constantinidis.

The researchers believe that this phase of development is essential to shaping the adult brain.

"It is important for there to be a period where the animal or the human is actively encouraged to explore because gaining these new experiences will help mold what the adult trajectories are going to be," said Luna.

Thailand extends visa exemption for Indians. Here's what all you can see beyond Bangkok

Thailand's popularity amongst Indians can be attributed to various factors, including its affordable food, accommodation, vibrant nightlife, and serene landscapes.

In 2024, Indians are travelling more than ever before. In fact, several surveys project our total travel expenditures to reach \$410 billion by 2030.

Talking about travelling, if there's one country that has been receiving a lot of attention lately and is on the bucket list of many Indians, it is this Southeast Asian destination, Thailand, and it's back in the news.

So popular, but why?

Thailand's popularity amongst Indians can be attributed to various factors, including its affordable food, accommodation, vibrant nightlife, and serene landscapes, all just a four-and-a-half-hour flight from the national capital, Delhi (that too at low prices).

Another reason is the hype that has been created on social media by Indians and Indian travel influencers that has

showcased Thailand as the ultimate "party heaven".

This has also drawn a lot of people to Thailand who want to rejuvenate themselves from their daily life. Visa-free for Indians

Out of all the reasons that we have told you, Thailand's popularity further surged when, last year, it declared a visa-free entry policy for Indian citizens.

This policy, which was introduced on November 10, 2023, and was initially set to expire on May 10, 2024, further bolstered Thailand's appeal.

For those who have yet to plan their trip or wish to visit Thailand again, we've got some good news for you: the Thai government has extended the visa-free entry period until November 11, 2024.

The news was announced by the Thai Embassy on their X (formerly Twitter) handle.



"The Royal Thai Cabinet has approved the extension of the temporary tourist visa exemption for Indian and Taiwan ordinary passport holders to enter Thailand and stay for not exceeding 30 days, effective from 11 May - 11 Nov 2024", the post read.

This extension comes in response to a significant increase in the number of tourists from India since the implementation of the visa-free policy.

Let's look at some numbers:

Between November 2022 and April 2023, the number of visitors to Thailand from India was 7,55,066.

This figure rose to 9,68,000 between November 2023 and April 2024, indicating a substantial increase in tourist arrivals from India. A recent study by MakeMyTrip showed that Thailand is the top country with the highest number of booked holiday packages by Indians.

Restrict sugar, salt, avoid protein supplements: ICMR's new dietary guidelines

ICMR has released a new set of dietary guidelines, saying that around 56.4% of the total disease burden in India is because of unhealthy diet habits.

The Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) released a set of dietary guidelines for Indians on Wednesday.

According to the guidelines to meet the requirements of essential nutrients and prevent noncommunicable diseases in the country, around 56.4% of the total disease burden in India is because of unhealthy diet habits.

The National Institute of Nutrition (NIN) under the apex health research body, that revised the guidelines after 13 years, said that healthy diets and physical activity can reduce a substantial proportion of coronary heart disease (CHD) and hypertension (high blood pressure) and prevent up to 80% of type 2 diabetes. "A significant proportion of premature deaths can be averted by following a healthy lifestyle," it said.

The 148-page report, which contains 17 guidelines, recommends decreasing the use of cooking oil and instead getting fatty acids through nuts, oil-

seeds and seafood.

The institute added that the high consumption of highly processed foods that contain sugars and fats, along with a lack of physical activity and limited access to diverse foods, have led to micronutrient deficiencies and overweight issues in the country.

Among the many guidelines, the body recommended restricting salt intake, consuming oils and fat in moderation, doing proper exercise and minimising sugar and ultra-processed foods. It said that Indians should consume 20-25 grams of sugar a day, since it comes from natural carbohydrates. The Dietary Guidelines for Indians (DGIs), led by Dr Hemalatha R, Director, ICMR-NIN has undergone several scientific reviews.

Dr Rajiv Bahl, Director General, ICMR, said, "I am pleased that these guidelines have been made very relevant to the changing food scenario in India with addition of practicable messages and suggestions on handling food safety choosing minimally processed foods, importance of food labels and physical



activity." The NIN has also urged people to "avoid protein supplements" for building body mass as well. It stated that prolonged intake of large amounts of protein powders or consumption of high protein concentrate has been associated with potential dangers such as bone mineral loss and kidney damage. Research findings indicate dietary protein supplementation is associated with only a small increase in muscle strength and size during prolonged resistance exercise training (RET) in healthy adults.

Protein intake levels greater than 1.6g/kg body weight/day do not contribute further to RET-induced gains.

It also stated that sugar should be less than 5% of total energy intake and a balanced diet should provide not more than 45% calories from cereals, and millets and up to 15% of calories from pulses, beans and meat.

The rest of the calories should come from nuts, vegetables, fruits and milk. Total fat intake should be less than or equal to 30% energy, the guidelines said.

Take up gardening as a hobby. It has surprising health benefits



You would agree when we say that parents are obsessed with gardening. On many occasions, you will find your mother talking to her beloved plants or your dad adding more greenery to the already lush garden. The smile on their faces when a new flower blooms or when they are finally able to grow a vegetable is unmatched.

While you might often look at them and crib, it's time for you to take over this obsession from your parents, as gardening (a hobby that many youngsters ignore) has many surprising health benefits. This hobby offers a lot more than just pretty

flowers and fresh veggies. "According to most people who do gardening, it helps in boosting the mood and reducing anxiety," Dr P Venkata Krishnan, senior consultant, internal medicine, Artemis Hospital, Gurugram, tells India Today.

The doctor adds that people who do gardening on a regular basis start feeling less depressed. Additionally, this activity also releases endorphins, the hormone that helps to make you feel satisfied and relaxed.

Strengthens the immune system

Explaining how gardening helps enhance the immune system, Dr Krishnan says

Next time someone asks you to water the plants, don't make a face, as gardening is very beneficial for your health.

that when you come in direct contact with sunlight while gardening, you get Vitamin D which helps in absorbing calcium, thus strengthening the immune system and making the bones stronger.

A good workout

Yes, gardening helps in burning calories as well.

"Just doing gardening for an hour or so can help in burning approximately 330 calories. For someone who prefers low-intensity exercises, gardening is the perfect workout," shares Dr Krishnan.

And, if you do things like moving the plants around, pushing a lawnmower, carrying bags of mulch and soil, gardening can actually provide a moderate full-body workout. Further, if you wish to keep a check on your weight, gardening should be your go-to. Reader's Digest (September 2022) mentions a 2013 study published in the American Journal of Public Health, and according to the research, people who do gardening have a significantly lower body mass index, as

well as lower odds of being overweight or obese, than those who don't.

Keeps your heart healthy

Because gardening acts as a low-intensity workout, it helps in reducing cholesterol levels and keeps the heart healthy. And the fact that the more time you spend with plants, the more you are likely to feel less anxious and relaxed also helps. According to a Swedish study, published in 2013, gardening can reduce the risk of a heart attack or stroke and prolong life by 30 per cent.

May help with brain protection

"Regular gardening has been shown to improve the nerve growth factors in the brain. It has also been suggested as a part of the treatment plan for people suffering from dementia," mentions Dr Krishnan.

RD also mentions that this activity provides a workout for your brain, according to a 2019 study in the International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health.

Aditi Rao Hydari feels fashion should be effortless

Actress Aditi Rao Hydari, who oozes elegance in every outfit that she wears, feels that fashion should be effortless and there shouldn't be any burden. With 10.9 million followers on Instagram, Aditi's social media feed is full of pictures of her wearing Indian outfits, traditional wear, gowns, co-ord sets, pantsuits and floral dresses.

Speaking about what fashion means to her, Aditi told VOICE: "Fashion is something that comes from within you. You can play with fashion, but I believe fashion can be created from my cupboard, your cupboard, my sister's cupboard or my brother's cupboard also. Fashion is fun. And sometimes fashion ends up costing a lot, but sometimes you can create from your own thing. It's about being creative."

She went on to say, "When I started in 2011-12, that time I didn't care, but after a few years it became a burden for me that I have to look glamorous, wear heels, put on makeup. But I was always like I don't want to do all these things. I used to say that I will do this on screen but not in real life."

"But in the last 4-5 years I feel like I am what I am, I am who I am. I will sit for an interview without makeup, with my hair all tied up. I feel

my heart has to connect to you. And if this connects everything else works. Fashion, face, skin everything else also falls into place. And, I think fashion should be effortless. There shouldn't be any burden. Maybe some people will like it, some will not. If you feel good, then do it," shared Aditi, who is most recently seen as Bibbojaan in Sanjay Leela Bhansali's debut web series 'Heeramandi: The Diamond Bazaar'. If she follow any Gen-Z trends? Aditi said she doesn't know about any trends but wears whatever she feels like.

"Sometimes things that are in trend are 'behuda'. If I don't like things which are in trend I don't wear them. But in my everyday clothes, I decide it myself. I take it out from my cupboard and wear it. For me, fashion should be effortless, and it should be authentically you. If you are going for an event, then you can do all the 'taam jhaam'," she said.

Aditi added: "For me, it's important to be effortless. Even if I wear a maang tikka, I should feel like I woke up like this."

'Heeramandi' also stars Manisha Koirala, Sonakshi Sinha, Richa Chadha, Sharmin Segal and Sanjeeda Sheikh.

The series is streaming on Netflix.

Rashmika Mandanna will now be seen with Salman Khan in 'Sikandar'

Actress Rashmika Mandanna, who is currently experiencing a dream run in the movies, will be portraying the female lead in the upcoming Salman Khan-starrer film 'Sikandar'.

This marks the first collaboration between Salman and Rashmika.

'Sikandar' is directed by A.R. Murugadoss, who is known for films like 'Ghajini' and 'Holiday: A Soldier Is Never Off Duty'.

On Thursday, the makers of the film made the announcement about Rashmika joining the cast.

They posted on X: "Welcoming the fabulous @rashmika_mandanna to star opposite @beingsalmankhan in #Sikandar! Can't wait for their on-screen magic to unfold on EID 2025! #SajidNadiadwala's #Sikandar Directed by @a.r.murugadoss Releasing in cinemas EID 2025."

The film is produced by Sajid Nadiadwala of Nadiadwala Grandson Entertainment, marking the reunion of Salman with Sajid after 'Kick', which was released in 2014.

The film, which is currently in pre-production, will soon go on floors and is scheduled for release on Eid 2025.

Meanwhile, Rashmika, who last appeared in the blockbuster 'Animal' alongside Ranbir Kapoor, also has the Allu Arjun-starrer 'Pushpa 2: The Rule' in which she will reprise her role of Srivalli.



Ranveer 'deletes' wedding pics with Deepika? Fans say 'shadi ki album jalaa di'



The fans of Ranveer Singh on Tuesday were left disappointed after they noticed that the superstar 'deleted' the wedding pictures with Deepika Padukone from his Instagram account.

However, there is no confirmation whether the 'Rocky Aur Rani Kii Prem Kahaani' actor has deleted the photos or has archived them. Ranveer, who has 47.3 million followers on the photo-sharing application, has 133 posts.

The first post dates back to January 24, 2023, which is a Reel video shot for a sportswear brand. The last post appearing on his account is an advertisement with actress Alia Bhatt, which was posted on April 26. However, his account still features some photographs of the couple.

Bollywood's power couple Ranveer and Deepika, who tied the knot in November 2018, in both traditional Konkani and Sindhi ceremonies in Italy had shared love-filled wedding pictures on their respective handles. For the unversed, a few years ago, Deepika had also archived the wedding pictures on her Instagram account.

Meanwhile, some fans took to the comment section of Ranveer's latest post and said: "mene suna shadi ki album jalaa dii?"

Another user said: "kon kon wedding photo delete dekhne aaya hai".

The couple is currently expecting their first baby together.

On the professional front, Ranveer next has action drama 'Singham Again' in the pipeline directed by Rohit Shetty.

Ali Fazal on how it's humbling to work with Kamal Haasan and Mani Ratnam



Actor Ali Fazal, who is making his debut in the South Indian film industry with Mani Ratnam's 'Thug Life' starring Kamal Haasan, said that working with two stalwarts of Indian cinema is a humbling experience for him.

Ali said: "I am genuinely thrilled to be a part of Mani's vision for 'Thug Life.' I hope to bring something of significance to this canvas. It's an honour to collaborate with Kamal Haasan and exchange ideas with him."

"Working with two stalwarts of Indian cinema is a humbling experience. I am deeply grateful to Mani for entrusting me with this role, and I am eagerly looking forward to bringing it to life on screen."

The film will be shot by Ravi K. Chandran, and the music will be composed by the legendary A. R. Rahman. Details about Ali's character are being kept under wraps. Production for 'Thug Life' has officially commenced in New Delhi.

TV star Sara Khan finds it a challenge to play someone 10 years younger on 'Guilt 3'



TV star Sara Khan, who became popular with 'Sapna Babul Ka ... Bidaai', is all set for the release of her upcoming film 'Guilt 3'. And she revealed that it was challenging to play someone 10 years younger to her in the film.

In a conversation with the media, Sara said the storyline of 'Guilt 3' revolves around the relationship of a father, daughter and stepmother. "It is

about how their smooth life goes for a toss when a huge mishap happens in their life," she said.

Talking about her role, Sara noted, "It is challenging to play someone who is 10 years younger to you. But It was exciting too. I was always keen on doing something like that."

Sarah, who was also in the spotlight because of the Kangana Ranaut-hosted reality show 'Lock Upp', said

she was just doing "what I love and like". She added, "I do not think I have to channelise my profile in a certain direction. I am doing whatever is coming my way and I am enjoying every bit of it."

Sharing details of her future work, she said, "I have developed a concept that I am going to produce through my own production house. One of my films will be out very soon. So I am very excited about that."

For Sanjeeda Shaikh, playing Waheeda in *'Heeramandi'* was 'challenging but fun'

Sanjeeda Shaikh, who plays Waheeda in Sanjay Leela Bhansali's debut OTT series 'Heeramandi: The Diamond Bazaar', shared that it has been challenging but an extremely fun character to play as a performer.

Sanjeeda is one of Bhansali's most complicated characters — a tawaif who is betrayed by humans and fate alike, makes peace with life to be part of a larger cause.

Talking about the same, she said: "Waheeda was a pretty challenging character to embody. Sanjay sir has crafted this very complicated but well-rounded character. She has so many layers to her, it's almost like she exists at odds with her own self most times.

It's hard to explain what's exactly going on in her head but if you observe closely and if my performance resonates the way I intended, then I think the audience will be able to get a grasp of what she feels like."

"So she's been challenging but an extremely fun character to play as a performer. It helped that I had Sanjay sir as a guide, and with him around you won't just give 100 per cent to your character, you'll have to give 200 per cent in every scene. It made my experience playing her even better," added Sanjeeda.

'Heeramandi' also stars Manisha Koirala, Sonakshi Sinha, Richa Chadha, Sharmin Segal and Sanjeeda Sheikh.

The series is streaming on Netflix.

What made Madhuri Dixit take a break from acting to start her



Actress Madhuri Dixit Nene has spoken about her decision of taking a break professionally to start a family with her husband Shriram Nene. While having a conversation on 'Kiska Brand Bajega', Madhuri spoke about her decision and said: "For me, it was one of the dreams I had for myself." Madhuri got married in 1999 with Shriram, a cardiovascular surgeon from Los Angeles. They welcomed their first born named Arin, in 2003. It was two years later, when they had

their second son Ryan. Madhuri shared that having a family and having children was always something she looked forward to.

Talking about whether she was worried about her time off, the actress shared her thoughts: "I am going to have kids, and this is going to be fun." Madhuri, who made her comeback in acting in 2022 with 'The Fame Game', emphasised the fact that choosing to have a family was a no-brainer for her.



Akshay Kumar and Arshad Warsi Join Forces for 'Jolly LLB 3'

International megastar Akshay Kumar is all set to dazzle audiences in the upcoming film, Jolly LLB 3. Directed by Subhash Kapoor, this third installment in the successful franchise promises to be a laugh riot.

Akshay Kumar took to his social media platform to announce the 'Jolly LLB 3' filming, through a hilarious video. Akshay captioned the video, "Ab original kaun aur duplicate kaun, yeh toh pata nahi. But this sure is going to be a jolly good ride !! Stay with us. Jai Mahakaal"

In Jolly LLB 3, Akshay Kumar steps into the shoes of the quirky lawyer Jolly, known for his unorthodox methods and witty comebacks. The film pits him against another Jolly, portrayed by the talented Arshad Warsi. Their courtroom battles promise to be both hilarious and thought-provoking.

Saurabh Shukla reprises his role as the no-nonsense judge, adding to the film's star-studded cast. The chemistry between Akshay Kumar



and Arshad Warsi is expected to be a highlight, as they spar over legal cases and engage in comical confrontations. Akshay

Kumar has a stellar line-up of diverse and promising films including "Sarfire", "Singham Again", "Sky

Force," "Welcome 3," "Shankara," the threequel to Hera Pheri, Housefull 5 and more.

Kareena Kapoor on 'Crew's' success: Women can break box office rules



Bollywood star Kareena Kapoor recently opened up about the success of her latest release, the con comedy, Crew. The film has earned over Rs 150 crore at the ticket counter, shattering any perception of gender bias in cinema. Kareena said that she is happy the film has broken barriers and proved that 'women can also break box office rules.'

Speaking about the same, Kareena told PTI, "Films are a form of entertainment and if you have a powerful message in the form of entertainment like 'Crew'... It had three women leading (a film) coming into theatres. We have done a business of over Rs 150 crore. That in itself is a validation that today there is no gender bias. We are trying to break those norms." "It's not about whether it's a hero or a heroine taking on a film. It's a person and (their) performance that takes the film and content (forward). We are going to keep trying to do that. I will always choose roles that are interesting but in the form of entertainment. I'm happy Crew has broken barriers. It started the conversation that women also can break box office rules," said the actor. Kareena is now awaiting the release of Hansal Mehta's Buckingham Murders, and Rohit Shetty's Singham Again. In other news, Kareena was named UNICEF India's brand ambassador on Saturday.



As China begins sea trials of its biggest aircraft carrier, Indian Navy's next awaits nod

Experts feel India will need a bigger carrier than its planned 45,000-tonne warship to counter China's increasing presence in the Indian Ocean Region

By Pradip R. Sagar

Last week, when the China Central Television showed live the People's Liberation Army Navy's (PLAN) third aircraft carrier Fujian leaving the Jiangnan Shipyard in Shanghai, the message to the world was loud and clear. The 80,000 metric tonne mammoth, Type 003 class warship, which was on its maiden sea trial, has put PLAN way ahead of many other navies.

Only the Nimitz class (87,000 metric tonnes) and Gerald R. Ford class (100,000 metric tonnes) aircraft carriers of the US Navy are bigger than the Fujian. The Chinese carrier underscores Beijing's ambition to assert itself as a major maritime force on the global stage.

Around 42 aircraft carriers are in operation by 13 navies around the world. But it is PLAN's pace of expansion on



this front that naval observers find impressive. In 2012, China commissioned its first aircraft carrier Liaoning; the second carrier, Shandong, was launched in 2019. While Shandong is the first indigenous Chinese carrier, Liaoning was rebuilt on a gutted, unfinished Ukrainian aircraft carrier hull.

PLAN has an ambitious goal of building a fleet of over 10 aircraft carriers by 2050. As

China eyes greater dominance in the Indian Ocean Region, the Indian Navy, still awaiting its third aircraft carrier, has some catching up to do. Interestingly, India became the first Asian country in 1961 to acquire an aircraft carrier—the HMS Hercules from the UK. It now operates two aircraft carriers—INS Vikramaditya, acquired from Russia, and INS Vikrant, the country's first Indigenous Aircraft

Carrier (IAC-1). INS Vikrant has 14 decks and 2,300 compartments, and can accommodate a crew of 1,700. A comparison of China's rapid aircraft carrier development and India's slow progress in this points to strategic considerations in naval development. While China is swiftly advancing its capabilities with Fujian, India's plans for a third aircraft carrier, the IAC-2, are pending approval. The debate within the Indian military establishment, over the comparative importance of aircraft carriers and submarines, has delayed the third aircraft carrier programme to some extent. As China aims for over 10 aircraft carriers by 2050, there's growing pressure on India to accelerate its naval modernisation to maintain the balance of power in the Indian Ocean Region.

Last November, to get a third

aircraft carrier as early as possible, the Defence Procurement Board moved the proposal before the government, but it is still awaiting a go-ahead from the defence ministry. Moreover, the naval headquarters is working on plans for larger aircraft carriers.

The IAC-2 is expected to have a displacement of 45,000 tonnes and cost around Rs 40,000 crore. It will be built by Cochin Shipyard Limited and modelled on INS Vikrant, which was commissioned in September 2022.

It is notable that India's aircraft carrier project has hit delays amid the carrier vs submarine debate. Naval experts argue that both submarines and aircraft carriers are critical. While submarines are best for sea denial, aircraft carriers are needed for sea control and power projection.

Ask NAPCA

In this month's column, we selected general questions about Medicare and other social benefits from the calls and letters we received and would like to share the information. If you have additional questions about Medicare, Medicaid, Affordable Care Act Health Insurance Marketplace, Social Security Retirement Benefit, Supplemental Security Income, Social Benefits for Seniors, or COVID/Flu vaccination, there are 3 ways you can reach us today: Call our Senior Assistance Center at: (English) 1-800-336-2722, Email: askNAPCA@napca.org, Mail: 1511 3rd Avenue, Suite 914, Seattle, WA 98101

<Q1> I just turned 65. Can I sign up for Medicare? Yes. Medicare is a health insurance program for people 65 or older.

If you have been receiving Social Security benefits for at least 4 months prior to turning 65, you'll get Medicare automatically. If not, you must actively sign up. When you first sign up for Medicare during your 7 month-IEP (Initial Enrollment Period), you will have Medicare Part A (hospital/inpatient coverage) and Part B (medical/outpatient coverage), which is known as Original Medicare or Traditional Medicare.

You must pay a monthly premium for Part B and/or Part A (almost all beneficiaries don't have to pay a Part A monthly premium if they or their spouse have at least 40 Social Security work credits). You still have to pay 20% coinsurance and deductible. If you want to fill this expense gap, you can choose to purchase either Medicare Part C (Medicare Advantage plan) or Medigap (also called Medicare Supplement Insurance).

Lastly, there is Medicare Part D, prescription drug coverage. Part D covers prescription drugs. If you have Original Medicare and want prescription drug coverage, you should purchase a stand-alone drug plan; however, many Medicare Advantage plans include prescription drug coverage.

<Q2> What are Medicare Advantage Plans and Medigap?

If you have Part A and Part B, you can join a Medicare Advantage Plan, sometimes called "Part C" or an "MA plan." MA plans must offer, at minimum, the same benefits as Original Medicare. Unlike Original Medicare, MA plans can offer additional benefits such as dental or vision coverage and have annual out-of-pocket maximum limits. Many MA plans provide Part D coverage as part of their benefits package. You have to pay a monthly premium for MA, but some MA plans have \$0 monthly premiums. So, you can save significantly on your health care costs. However, MA plans typically have network restrictions, meaning that you will likely be more limited in your choice of doctors, hospitals, and service areas. Plans may require a referral for specialist visits or prior authorization from your plan. If cost is your prior concern or you live in an urban area, MA plan may be a good option.

Medigap (also called Medicare Supplement Insurance) is a private health insurance policy to fill cost-sharing gaps such as 20% coinsurance in Medicare Parts A & B and only those enrolled in Original Medicare can purchase a Medigap plan. Medigap offers neither prescription drugs nor additional benefits such as dental or vision. If you want additional coverage, you'll

need to purchase the plan you want to add separately. You will need to pay monthly premiums for Part B and Medigap plan (and if applicable, additional coverage plans), totaling about \$400 or more per month. Original Medicare supported by Medigap (with/without a prescription drug plan) would be a good choice for those who need recurring care for a chronic condition, travel a lot, or live in rural areas.

<Q3> Do you know that you may also be eligible for energy cost assistance?

LIHEAP (Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program) is a federally funded program that helps low-income households to meet their immediate home energy needs. This program provides your household with an annual cash grant to help you pay for your home heating and cooling costs. The grants are paid either directly to you or to your energy company. To be eligible a household must have an income that does not exceed the greater of 150% of the federal poverty guideline (e.g., \$2,555 for a two-person household) or 60% of the state median income level. Enrollment periods may not be year-round, and the open period depends on the state. The application processes and agencies vary depending on the area where you live. Please call us to see if you are eligible.

National Asian Pacific Center on Aging (NAPCA) is a non-profit organization dedicated to improving the quality of life of AANHPI older adults and their families. We operate a NAPCA Senior Assistance Center for Older Adults and Caregivers and is available in 5 different languages.

When power gets into the bed: US Presidents and their many sex scandals

Power works like an aphrodisiac. And just imagine what that can do to the world's most powerful man -- the US President? From Thomas Jefferson to Woodrow Wilson, from JFK and Bush to Bill Clinton, the White House has had its fair share of seduction, sex and satin.

This is what happens when power gets into the bed.

By Sushim Mukul

As Former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger once said, "Power is the ultimate aphrodisiac". The high from power has, time and again, resulted in sex scandals involving top leaders.

Kissinger's homeland, the United States, is no exception.

The US President is considered to be the most powerful person on earth, and therefore, is most susceptible to the aphrodisiac of power. That's the reason why allegations of sexual misconduct and scandals have rocked the Oval Office, the seat of the United States presidency.

Donald Trump's Stormy affair is hogging all the headlines. It reached a crescendo with the testimony of adult star Stormy Daniels, where she described her encounter with Trump vividly.

The sexual affair with Stormy Daniels was before Donald Trump became the President.

It all started in the early days of the republic with the third American president, Thomas Jefferson. From Jefferson to Woodrow Wil-

son, to John F Kennedy and George Bush to Bill Clinton, the White House has regularly been embroiled in allegations of sex scandals and has a long history of seduction, sex and satin.

In her book Sex with Presidents, Eleanor Herman explores the sex scandals of US presidents and what they reveal about male leadership in the White House.

Even fiction can't imagine the White House without sex scandals. The House of Cards, a popular fictional TV series now streaming on Netflix, portrays this marriage of power and sex.

DONALD TRUMP'S SCANDALS (SO FAR)

Donald Trump, whose life and presidency has been marked by a barrage of controversies, has also been named in some of the most serious allegations of sexual misconduct and some salacious scandals, involving over a couple of dozen women.

At least 26 women have accused Donald Trump of sexual misconduct since the 1970s, said a Business Insider report.

Long before his political entry,

heavy on a persona of wealth and machismo, Trump got himself surrounded by sexual harassment allegations, first by his former wife Ivana. Their divorce came after Donald Trump's highly publicised affair with actress Marla Maples. Trump later married Maples.

Trump's relationships with women and his conduct came under intense scrutiny during his time in office, after the victims opened up. Jill Harth, a former business associate of Trump, alleged in a lawsuit filed in the 1990s that Trump had sexually harassed her, including unwanted advances and groping. Harth claimed these incidents occurred during their business dealings related to beauty pageants and a potential business venture. The most infamous among them was the revelation of a decade-old recording in 2016, released by The Washington Post, wherein Trump boasted about groping and kissing women without their consent.

The row saw a firestorm of condemnations, which Trump vehemently denied. Much like his stand on the allegations of adult star



Stormy Daniels, which Trump has denied.

Recalling her sexual encounter with Trump, the adult star testified that Trump was in satin pyjamas when he welcomed her.

Stormy Daniels went on to describe their encounter at a hotel during her testimony on May 8 in the hush money trial.

She said her clothes and shoes were off as they lay "in a missionary position". Daniels also testified Trump was not wearing a condom, but she did not ask him to stop. Daniels maintained that there was consent, but said the encounter had left her disoriented.

TEXAS WOMAN CLAIMED GEORGE W BUSH RAPED HER

George W Bush, who had been married to his wife Laura since 1977, faced charges of rape by

a woman.

A year after Bush became the president in 2001, a Texas woman named Margie Schoedinger claimed he raped her in 2000. A year later, Schoedinger died by suicide, according to a Newsweek report. Bush was accused of "race-based harassment and individual sex crimes committed against her and her husband", reported a local Texas newspaper.

The lawsuit she filed received minimal attention from the American media then.

A few years down the line, the case was dismissed.

BILL CLINTON, 'LEWINSKYGATE' AND MORE
The Monica Lewinsky scandal, which came to light in 1998, rocked the Clinton presidency, which later came to be known as the 'Lewinskygate'.

From the India Today archives (1985) | The 'terror confessions' of Virsa Singh Valtoha

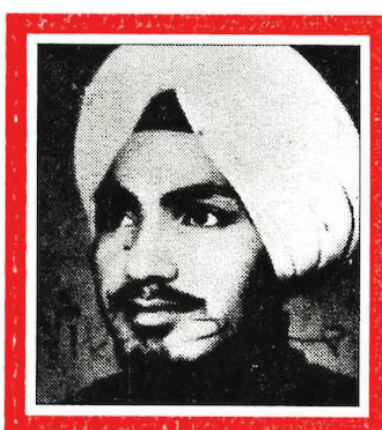
By Raju Santhanam

Even one year after the army flushed out Bhindranwale's band of extremists from the Golden Temple complex in Amritsar, the real mechanics of extremism in Punjab have remained a more or less grey area. For every little bit of fact there are many fables and for every claim there are many disclaimers. But now intelligence agencies claim to have worked the problem out to some extent. They have been studiously poring over the long list of "confessions" made by suspects arrested from the Golden Temple and elsewhere, trying to determine the motivations of the extremists and the strategy employed by them.

A key "confession" on this list comes from Virsa Singh Valtoha, who was wanted in connection with numerous incidents of murder, robbery and

terrorism. INDIA TODAY's Raju Santhanam obtained a copy of the 63-page report of his interrogation and, on its basis, filed this story: The world over, soldiers, scribes, scholars and sleuths have tried for decades to fathom the complex chemistry of an extremists' mind. Yet no one has been able to say just what turns a perfectly normal young man into a terrorist or guerrilla, readily willing to sacrifice his life for a usually unattainable cause he does not know much about.

This is also true of the Punjab terrorist. The large number of veterans in the Indian security network scanning the records of hundreds of suspected Sikh extremists, arrested, dead or at large have yet to come up with a credible answer to that question. But they lay great store by the long list of "confessions" they have collected over the months, and one of these is attributed to Virsa



Singh Valtoha.

At 23, Virsa Singh, considered to be one of Bhindranwale's main hit men and blamed for the murder of Delhi Gurudwara Prabandhak Committee leader Harbans Singh Manchanda, besides scores of bombings and robberies, is a typical representative of the Bhindranwale band. One of the six sons of Sohan Singh, a small-time farmer from Valtoha village in Amritsar district bordering Pakistan, he comes from the very heart

of the Amritsar-Gurdaspur-Tarn Taran-Patti belt from where Bhindranwale got the bulk of his recruits. He was arrested by the army from the Golden Temple complex during Operation Bluestar last June.

More than that, he had the kind of upbringing that, curiously, went into the mental make-up of a lot of Bhindranwale men. After passing his higher secondary examination in the first division, he was trained as a granthi in Gurudwara Baba Budha Bir Sahib in Amritsar. But he soon strayed from the spiritual path. In the B.A. first year examination, which he took in 1981, he could not pass in English and then failed in the supplementary examination in September that year. Frustrated, he joined the Communist Party of India (Marxist)'s Students Federation of India. But, as the Bhindranwale wave

began to sweep the Punjab countryside, he shifted allegiance to the All India Sikh Students Federation (AISSF). Very soon he came in contact with Kewal Singh, a cousin of AISSF President Amrik Singh who took him to the Golden Temple. Meanwhile he failed yet again to clear his English examination. What followed was almost pre-ordained. As Virsa Singh told his interrogators: "Since I had spare time, I started visiting the AISSF office in the Golden Temple and began to work voluntarily there."

It was during this period that he had his baptism in terrorism. In November, 1982, he says, AISSF general secretary Harminder Singh Sandhu asked him to join a group of youngsters in throwing bombs at the house of Punjab education minister Harcharan Singh Ajnala.

Here are the ultraprocessed foods you most need to avoid, according to a 30-year study

By Madeline Holcombe

Eating ultraprocessed foods is associated with an early risk of death, according to a 30-year study — but different foods have different impacts.

Ultraprocessed foods are those that contain ingredients “never or rarely used in kitchens, or classes of additives whose function is to make the final product palatable or more appealing,” according to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations.

Those ingredients — found in things such as sodas, chips, packaged soups, nuggets and ice cream — can include preservatives against mold or bacteria, artificial coloring, emulsifiers to stop separation, and added or altered sugar, salt and fats to make food more appealing.

The study analyzed data from more than 100,000 health professionals in the United States with no history of cancer, cardiovascular disease or diabetes. From 1986 to 2018, the participants provided information on their health and lifestyle habits every two years.

Every four years, they completed a detailed food questionnaire.

The group eating the least



ultraprocessed food ate about three servings a day on average, while the highest averaged seven servings a day, according to the study published Wednesday in The BMJ journal.

Those who ate the most had a 4% higher risk of deaths by any cause, including a 9% increased risk of neurodegenerative deaths, the data showed. Song described the correlation as “moderate,” noting that the connection was not equally strong among all kinds of ultraprocessed foods.

“The positive association is mainly driven by a few subgroups

including processed meat and sugar sweetened or artificially sweetened beverages,” he said. Findings in this study were consistent with hundreds of others in the field, but what makes this one unique is its parsing out of different subgroups within the ultraprocessed food category, said Dr. Marion Nestle, the Paulette Goddard professor emerita of nutrition, food studies and public health at New York University. Do we need to get rid of all ultraprocessed foods?

Song wouldn’t necessarily advise a complete rejection of all

ultraprocessed foods because it is a diverse category, he said.

“Cereals, whole grain breads, for example, they are also considered ultraprocessed food, but they contain various beneficial nutrients like fiber, vitamins and minerals,” he said. “On the other hand, I do think people should try to avoid or limit the consumption of certain ultraprocessed foods, such as processed meat, sugar-sweetened beverages and also potentially artificially sweetened beverages.” There are also more questions that need to be an-

swered when it comes to ultraprocessed foods.

First, the recent study is strong because of the length of time covered, but it is an observational study. That means that while researchers can observe a correlation, they can’t say that the foods were the cause of the deaths, said Dr. Peter Wilde, emeritus fellow at Quadram Institute Bioscience in the United Kingdom. Researchers also need to look more at the components of ultraprocessed foods that might be affecting health — whether they be food additives, emulsifiers or flavors — to advise governments and institutions on how to regulate foods, Song said.

Overall diet matters most. Researchers also found that the most important factor to reducing risk of death is the quality of a person’s overall diet, Song said. “If people maintain a generally healthy diet, I don’t think they need to be like scared or be freaked out,” he said. “The overall dietary pattern is still the predominant factor determining the health outcomes.”

A healthy diet is varied, with as many colorful fruits and vegetables and whole grains as possible, Wilde said.

How Congress finds itself cornered by its own allies in Maharashtra

By Dhaval S. Kulkarni

In 1885, the Indian National Congress—the fountain-head of the present-day Congress—was launched at the Gokuldas Tejpal Sanskrit College in south Mumbai. Almost a century-and-a-half later, the Congress is finding itself marginalised in the state and the city where it was born, with the party being forced to concede its strongholds and political space to allies Shiv Sena (Uddhav Balasaheb Thackeray) and the NCP (Sharadchandra Pawar). While senior leaders claim that the fortunes of the party are on an upswing in the Lok Sabha elections in Maharashtra, it is finding itself being increasingly cornered by its two demanding allies who have wrested its strongholds, such as Sangli and Mumbai South Central by the Shiv Sena (UBT) and Bhiwandi and Wardha by the NCP (SCP). In a far cry from 2009, when the Congress had won five



of Mumbai’s six Lok Sabha seats—the undivided NCP picking up the other seat—it has been given just two in the Maharashtra Vikas Aghadi (MVA) coalition. One of them—Mumbai North—is seen as a BJP stronghold due to the presence of a significant number of Gujarati, Marwari, Jain and North Indian voters.

The party, which once occupied the commanding heights of the state’s polity, has seen high-profile exits of senior leaders, such as former chief minister Ashok Chavan to the BJP, former Union

minister Milind Deora and former MP Sanjay Nirupam to the Shiv Sena, and former minister Baba Siddiqui and former legislator Mushtaq Antulay to the NCP. These compromises have seen growing unease in the ranks. Vishal Patil, the grandson of former chief minister Vasantdada Patil, had thrown his hat into the ring as an independent candidate from Sangli, while Congress leader Nilesch Sambre has rebelled in Bhiwandi. In Wardha, which went to the polls on April 26, the NCP (SCP),

which wrested the seat from the Congress, nominated a former Congress MLA, Amar Kale, as its candidate. In Mumbai, the Congress was forced to concede the Mumbai South Central seat to the Shiv Sena (UBT) and was given the Mumbai North Central constituency in return, where it nominated former minister and Mumbai Regional Congress Committee (MRCC) president Varsha Gaikwad. An MLA from Dharavi, Gaikwad was eager to contest from South Central, which her father Eknath Gaikwad had represented in Parliament. The Shiv Sena (UBT), however, made it into a prestige issue as the party’s headquarters Shiv Sena Bhavan and the Shivaji Park grounds, where it was born in 1966, are part of this constituency.

The wrangling has led to a war of words between the Congress and the Shiv Sena (UBT). In a public meeting on May 2, organised by the MVA in Sangli, where Uddhav Thackeray was present, former

minister Vishwajeet Kadam, who is seen as among those backing Vishal Patil, took potshots at wrestler Chandraraj Patil, who is the Sena (UBT) nominee, and reminded him that “the wrestling arena was different from the political one”. “Like you are tigers, we are also tigers in Sangli,” said Kadam, in a reference to the tiger imagery used by the Shiv Sena. Sanjay Raut, Rajya Sabha MP and spokesperson of the Shiv Sena (UBT), said that the June 4 Lok Sabha election results would determine whether Kadam was a tiger or not. Senior Congress leaders said that they are upset at the Sena’s move to unilaterally announce its nominees on contentious seats. They noted that the Shiv Sena (UBT), which has been given a new symbol (flaming torch or mashaal) after the June 2022 split in the party, wanted to take it to most regions across the state in view of the assembly elections due later this year.

The Debate Gaffe That Changed American History

And cost Gerald Ford the presidency.

By JEFF GREENFIELD

On Oct. 6, 1976, President Gerald Ford had reason to be optimistic heading into the second debate of a hotly contested campaign against Jimmy Carter. Foreign policy was on the agenda, and the Ford team saw a major opportunity to brush back the former Georgia peanut farmer. The biggest issue of the day was the Helsinki Accords, which cemented the post-World War II borders and were intended to ease tensions with the Soviet Union. Ford had come in for criticism that he had ceded too much to the Soviets and was ready when one of the moderators, the New York Times' Max Frankel, raised the charge. The Pope endorsed Helsinki, Ford responded (in a bow to the campaign's conviction that the Catholic vote was key). The whole of the West was behind it. And then, in a rhetorical flourish, he added: "There is no Soviet domination of Eastern Europe, and there never will be under a Ford administration."

The Ford campaign staff collectively blanched — National Security Advisor Brent Scowcroft literally turned white — but Frankel threw the president a potential lifeline. "Did I understand you to say, sir, that the Russians are not using Eastern Europe as their own sphere of influence in occupying most of the countries there...?" After asserting, correctly, that Yugoslavia and Romania did not consider themselves dominated, he added, "I don't believe that the Poles consider themselves dominated by the Soviet Union." That was a bridge too far — a comment that made the president look delusional and soured key voters in communities filled with Europeans whose families had fled Soviet brutality. It was a debate gaffe that arguably cost Ford the election and changed American history. Indeed, not only would there have been no President Jimmy Carter, there might have been no President Ronald Reagan or the conservative revolution he unleashed. How did the election get to that point, where such a

misstep could tip the balance? Blame Watergate. The candidates might have bristled at the description, but the 1976 presidential campaign was arguably a race between two accidental nominees, both shaped by the fallout from Richard

offered a pro football contract — was portrayed as a bumbling fool, especially on a new late night TV show, "Saturday Night Live." The cover of New York Magazine portrayed him, literally, as a clown. More importantly, oil price hikes imposed by the OPEC cartel led

hometown paper headlined: "Jimmy Who Is Running for What!?" But after Nixon's scandal, Carter's bugs turned out to be features. "I'm not from Washington," he'd proclaimed. For the last four campaigns, every Democratic

break with precedent, challenged his rival to debate.

One of the Ford campaign's overriding goals was to turn Carter's sudden emergence from obscurity into a liability, by asking again and again: "Do you really know what he believes in?" As attacks go, it was mild fare. (It was in fact a highly civil campaign, in which the charges of inconsistency were met by Carter calling Ford "a good and decent man" who had not accomplished anything of note in his tenure, though that did not stop journalist Barbara Walters from asking the candidates about "the low moral tone of the campaign.") But the argument began to cut, and at that first debate, Ford's critique of an inconsistent, vague candidate hit home; when the two met for their second debate at the Palace of Fine Arts in San



Nixon's downfall. When Ford became president on Aug. 8, 1974, after Nixon resigned, he had never been elected to national or even statewide office. He was the well-liked minority leader of the House when Nixon picked him to replace Spiro Agnew, who'd resigned from the vice presidency one step ahead of the sheriff. The House and Senate confirmed the choice, but the only voters who'd ever chosen him were those of his Grand Rapids, Michigan, congressional district.

Still, he'd entered the presidency on a wave of good feeling — exuding modesty ("I'm a Ford, not a Lincoln"), fixing his own breakfast and promising cooperation with the big Democratic majorities in Congress. Then things went sideways when he pardoned Nixon in an effort to spare the nation the prospect of an ex-president on trial. His press secretary resigned, his approval ratings sank and then came the more personal assaults. After a few spills, the most athletic president in history — he'd been

to rising inflation and painful contractions in the auto industry, as customers sought out more fuel-efficient cars from Japan and Europe. The Ford administration's lame PR effort — "a Whip Inflation Now" campaign — was met with ridicule. Then came the word from California: Former Gov. Ronald Reagan was going to challenge Ford for the Republican nomination, and Reagan ultimately came within a whisper of making Ford the first president since Chester Arthur to be denied his party's nomination. When Ford invited Reagan to speak to the convention after his acceptance speech, it was clear who had the firmer grip on the heart and soul of the party. It was Watergate that made Jimmy Carter, that most unlikely of candidates, the nominee of his party as well. Under ordinary circumstances, a former one-term governor from a Southern state who could go unrecognized by 9 out of 10 citizens would be laughed off the political stage (When he announced for president, his

nominee for president and vice president was or had been a senator. But in this year, to be from somewhere else was to be free from the taint of scandal. (Reagan had the same advantage). Moreover, he was, in demeanor and background, without any trace of privilege or power: a peanut farmer from the ridiculously on-the-mark town of... Plains.

His campaign had no money, so he stayed at the homes of supporters, carrying his own bags, traveling with an entourage of two. His campaign themes were intensely personal: "I'll never lie to you," said the man who called for "a government as good as its people." After the party's internecine blood baths of 1968 and 1972, Democrats had united, with everyone from Black politicians like Julian Bond and Rep. Andrew Young to the one-time segregationist George Wallace backing him. When the conventions were over, Carter had a 33-point lead over Ford. No wonder the sitting president, in a

Francisco, Carter's lead had dropped to single digits.

And then Ford stepped in it with his flippant remark about Poland and the Soviet Union.

In that pre-social media era, the backlash built over a couple days until the outrage was widespread, particularly among families of immigrants who loathed the Soviets. It took a week for Ford to find his footing on the matter, including by offering an apologetic call to Aloysius Mazewski, president of the Polish-American Congress — a week that broke the steady improvement in the campaign's standing.

How critical was this setback? As Ford pollster Bob Teeter later said, "The controversy used up valuable campaign days when there were all too few left, when a steady climb had to be sustained."

Even if it had a marginal impact, that margin would have been enough to change the outcome. Look at the results. Carter beat Ford by 1.7 million popular votes, but the Electoral College couldn't have been closer.