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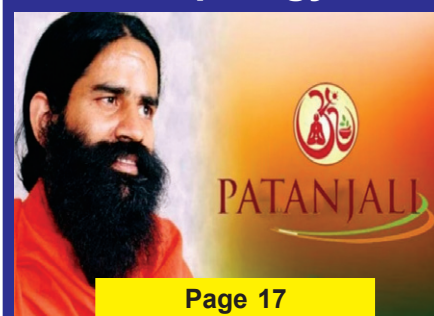
Issue 6

Friday 12 April to 18 April 2024

\$1

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Supreme Court
rejects Patanjali's
Apology



Page 17

UPA's Scams and Crony Capitalism Cannot Be Glossed Over by Attacking Modi Government



Story on Page 19

What is killing Indian-origin students in US



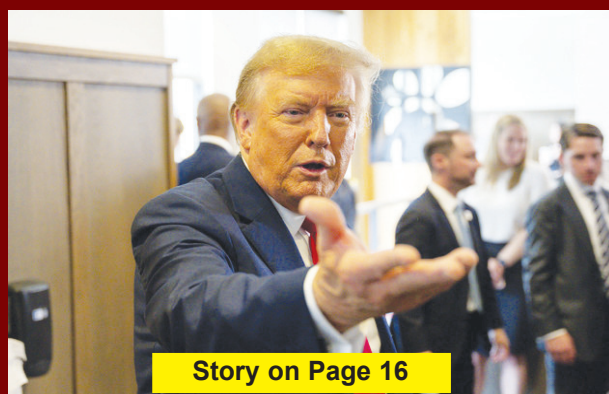
Story on Page 17

From Lord Rama to Swami Vivekananda: Bharat's Ten Greatest Minds and Their Global Impact



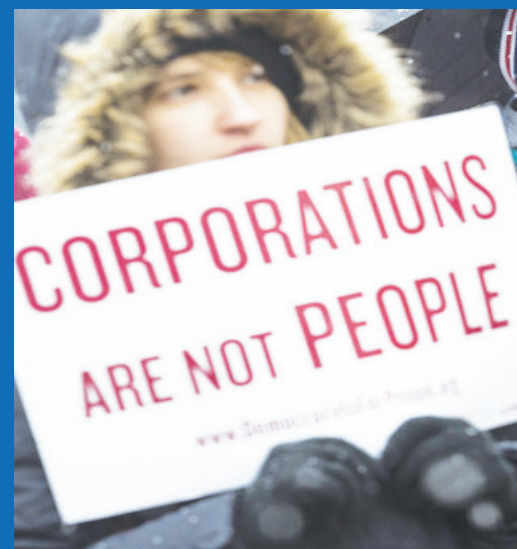
Story on Page 19

Republicans scramble to contain abortion 'earthquake'



Story on Page 16

Super PACs keep testing the limits of campaign finance law



Story on Page 18

What Liberals Get Wrong About 'White Rural Rage' - Almost Everything

Story on Page 15

NYC investigators probing city's migrant spending for fraud, waste and abuse

Story on Page 18

Why that deep-orange Gobi Manchurian is being red-flagged



Story on Page 18

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US announces indefinite validity of medical proof for some immigration applicants

†(Sai Bureau)-The U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) has declared that any Form I-693, Report of Immigration Medical Examination and Vaccination Record, properly completed and signed by a civil surgeon on or after November 1, 2023, will no longer expire and can be indefinitely used as evidence to



demonstrate that the applicant is not inadmissible on health-related grounds. If you are applying for adjustment status to become a lawful permanent resident, Form I-693 will help to establish that you are not inadmissible to the United States on public health grounds. "In consultation with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), and based on advances in public health electronic notification, USCIS has determined that a Form I-693 is

evidentiary value should no longer be limited to a certain period if it is properly completed and was signed by a civil surgeon on or after Nov. 1, 2023," the USCIS said in a statement. USCIS officers now have the discretion to request additional evidence or a new Form I-693 if they suspect changes in the applicant's medical condition since the civil surgeon's signature, or if they doubt the accuracy of the submitted Form I-693 and suspect potential inadmissibility on health-related grounds. For applicants whose immigration medical examinations were conducted before November 1, 2023, the prior policy remains in effect. Before this date, civil surgeons were not required to electronically share or report certain information to the CDC. USCIS has determined, in consultation with the CDC, that a properly completed Form I-693 signed by a civil surgeon before November 1, 2023, retains evidentiary value for a period of two years from the date of the civil surgeon's signature. However, this policy does not extend to Forms I-693 filed by Operation Allies Welcome parolees. For these individuals, their Forms I-693 maintain evidentiary value for three years from the date of the civil surgeon's signature, as per policy and consultation with the CDC.

Canada to hike fees of some permanent residency programs, starting April 30

†(Sai Bureau)-Getting as published by Statistics Canada, for the permanent residency in Canada is about two previous years (2022 and 2023), rounded to the nearest five dollars. Applicants falling under certain categories are exempt from paying the Right of Citizenship Canada (IRCC) has announced an increase in certain permanent residence (PR) fees, effective as of 9am Eastern Time on April 30, 2024. This fee adjustment is in accordance with Canada's Immigrant and Refugee Protection Regulations (IRPR), based on the cumulative percentage increase to the Consumer Price Index for Canada, published by Statistics Canada.

Here are the details of the fee changes applicable for the period between April 2024 and March 2026: The IRCC said that the new rate has been determined based on the cumulative percentage increase to the Consumer Price Index for Canada, published by Statistics Canada. Additionally, members of the "Permit holder" class are not permitted to include accompanying family members in their applications for permanent residence. Instead, individuals within this category must submit their own applications as principal applicants.



Permanent Residence Fee, which is typically required from all permanent resident applicants except dependent children and protected persons. However, principal applicants in the "Humanitarian and compassionate" and "Public policy" categories are exempt from paying the Right of Permanent Residence Fee only under specific circumstances.

Principal applicants.

Indian-origin man uses fake gun to rob London post office on April Fool's day



†(Sai Bureau)-A 41-year-old Indian-origin man robbed a London post office after threatening the staff with a fake gun. The crime was committed on April 1. Rajvinder Kahlon threatened two employees at a post office in Hounslow in West London with what they believed was a firearm before making off with a large quantity of cash. The gun later turned out to be fake. He has been charged with robbery of £136,000 and possession of a fake firearm. "On April 1, around 1800hrs, a man entered the Post Office in Brabazon Road, Hounslow. The man threatened two staff members with what they believed was a firearm before fleeing

with a significant amount of cash," stated the Met Police in a statement. Rajvinder Kahlon was arrested by the Met police from his residence in Hounslow three days after the robbery with the fake gun. "On Thursday, April 4, Rajvinder Kahlon, 41, was arrested at his home address in Hounslow. He appeared at Uxbridge Magistrates' Court on Saturday, April 6, charged with robbery and possession of an imitation firearm," said police in a statement. Kahlon remains in custody and will next appear at Isleworth Crown Court on May 6.



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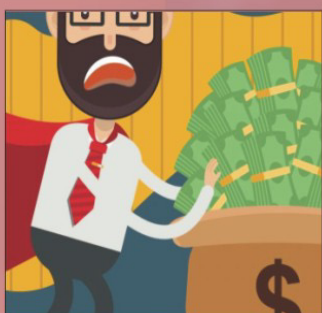
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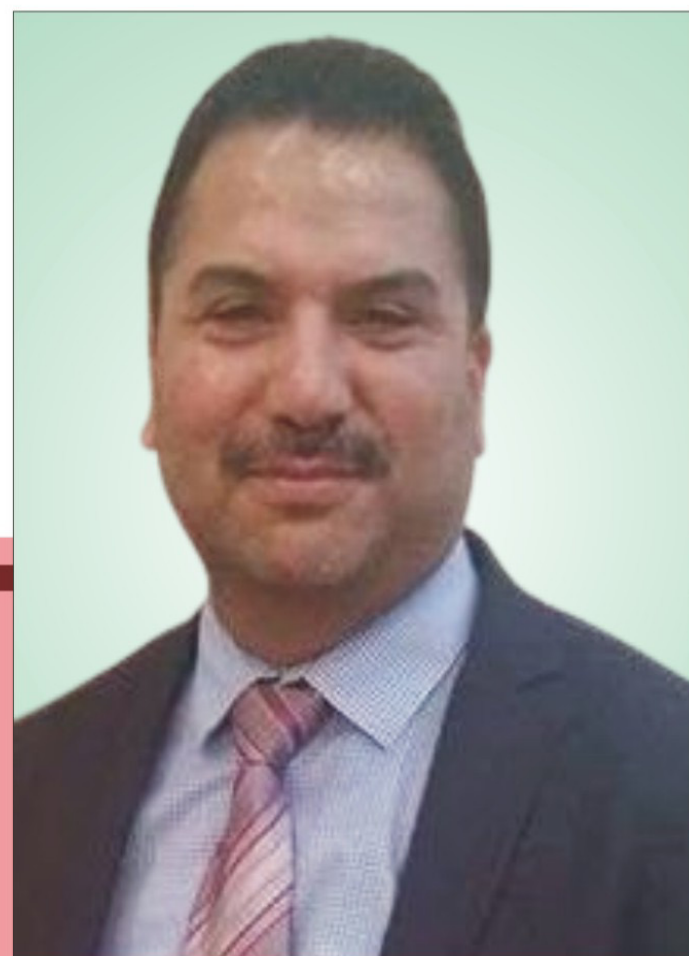
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Uttarakhand gurdwara chief's shooter killed in police encounter

The man who shot the dera kar seva chief of the Nanakmatta Sahib Gurdwara in Uttarakhand's Udham Singh Nagar was killed by the Uttarakhand STF and Haridwar Police in an encounter.

†(News Agency)-The man who shot the dera kar seva chief of the Nanakmatta Sahib Gurdwara in Uttarakhand's Udham Singh Nagar was killed by the Uttarakhand STF and Haridwar Police in an encounter, the state's top cop told ANI news agency on Tuesday.

Baba Tarsem Singh was shot dead on March 28 on the shrine's premises by Sarabjit Singh and Amarjit Singh, who came on a bike. The dera kar seva chief of the Nanakmatta Sahib Gurdwara was sitting in a chair when he was shot with a rifle by the shooter who was riding pillion. While announcing Amarjit Singh's death, Uttarakhand DGP Abhinav Kumar told ANI that his accomplice has fled and the authorities are searching for him. "Uttarakhand Police had taken Baba's murder as a challenge and the



STF and police were constantly looking for both the killers. The police will deal strictly with criminals if they commit such heinous crimes in Uttarakhand," said the

DGP.

Haridwar Senior Superintendent of Police Parminder Doval said the encounter took place between Kaliyar Road and

Bhagwanpur in Haridwar. He added that more than 16 cases are registered against Amarjit Singh.

Five people were booked in connection with the murder of Baba Tarsem Singh. Those named in the FIR include the two assailants -- Sarabjit Singh and Amarjit Singh -- IAS officer Harbans Singh Chugh who heads the Nanakmatta Gurudwara Prabandhak Committee, Baba Anup Singh and Pritam Singh Sandhu, the vice-president of a regional Sikh outfit. Sources had told India Today TV Sarabjit Singh had a criminal record and was earlier arrested for cutting off the hand of a person who allegedly touched Guru Granth Sahib with unwashed hands. A special investigation team (SIT) comprising personnel of the Special Task Force and local police was formed to probe the case.

'Brought public discourse to a low level': Court on Mahua Moitra, her ex-partner

The Delhi High Court admonished TMC leader Mahua Moitra and her ex-partner Jai Anant Dehadrai over their public feud and said both of them "have brought the public discourse to a fairly low level on both sides".

†(News Agency)-The Delhi High Court on Monday remarked that both Trinamool Congress leader Mahua Moitra and her ex-partner Jai Anant Dehadrai, a Supreme Court lawyer, brought down the public discourse over their allegations against each other to a "fairly low" level. A bench led by Justice Prateek Jalan was hearing a defamation case filed by Jai Anant Dehadrai against Mahua Moitra, saying that after he levelled the allegations against her that she received cash and gifts from a businessman to ask questions in Lok Sabha, she made "false, abusive, and defamatory statements" about him. Dehadrai's plea said Moitra portrayed him as a "person who has become bitter due to a failed personal relationship and is now filing false complaints to take revenge". He is seeking an interim injunction to stop the expelled Lok Sabha MP from making "defamatory" statements against him and demanding Rs 2 crore as damages.

The court clarified that the idea is not to injunct someone and asked the lawyers of both parties to advise their clients to be careful. It added that the "public warfare" between Mahua Moitra and Jai Anant Dehadrai doesn't show either of them in a good light.

The court warned Mahua Moitra's counsel, saying she has to be careful and it will have to impose an injunction on her if she made objectively false

statements. However, the court added that Mahua Moitra has the right to defend herself in public if the allegations against her are made in the public domain.

"You faced trouble getting an injunction because you have made public statements which made her get the scope to defend herself," the court told Dehadrai's lawyer. The court also warned Dehadrai's counsel that if he is a plaintiff in a defamation case before the court, it will balance the equities while granting any injunction. It said it will have to give room to Moitra to defend herself if he continues making allegations against her in the public domain despite filing the case.

"Mr (Raghav) Awasthi, you will also advise your client to be very careful. If he is going to be a plaintiff in my suit... equities will be balanced in granting an injunction. It is because you are making statements against her in the public domain, it requires her to be given scope to defend," the court was quoted as saying by news agency PTI. The court questioned why Mahua Moitra cannot state that Jai Anant Dehadrai made the allegations against her due to their relationship and added, "That is her perception." "Whether your allegations are true or untrue, that will have its own consequences. But when you've made those allegations, she is entitled to give her side on it," it added.

The court observed that it will decide during the course of the trial the damage that the



alleged defamatory statements have done to Dehadrai's reputation and professional standing.

The court adjourned the hearing and allowed written statements to be filed on behalf of Mahua Moitra. It noted that the

suspended MP intends to take the defence of justification and fair comment regarding some or all allegations claimed as defamatory by Dehadrai.

It listed the matter for further hearing on April 25.

Raj Thackeray may join NDA ahead of polls, all eyes on party's Gudi Padwa rally

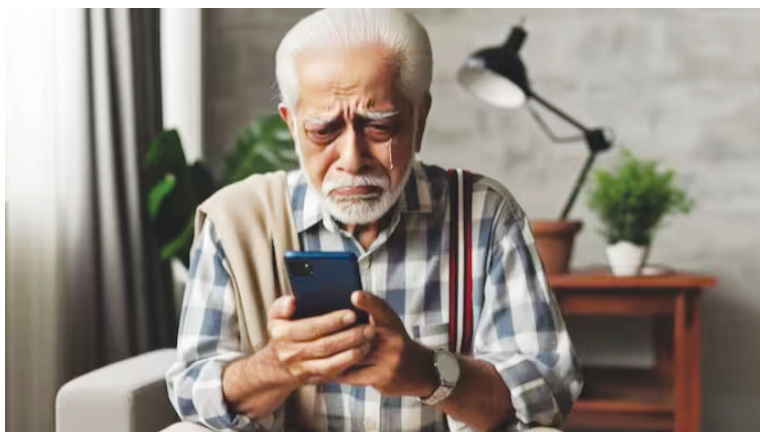
Amid suspense over the Maharashtra Navnirman Sena (MNS) chief Raj Thackeray's likelihood of joining hands with the BJP-led NDA alliance ahead of Lok Sabha polls, Maharashtra Deputy Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis has urged him to openly support Prime Minister Narendra Modi's work on nation-building and the agenda of Hindutva.

Devendra Fadnavis on Monday spoke to the media in Nagpur while preparations were in full swing at Chhatrapati Shivaji Park in Dadar, where Raj Thackeray is scheduled to address a rally on the occasion of the traditional Marathi new year festival 'Gudi Padwa' on April 9. Interestingly,

the teaser released by the MNS also hinted at answering all the questions raised by the media after Raj Thackeray's meeting with Union Home Minister Amit Shah in Delhi on March 19. Commenting on Raj Thackeray's likely alliance with the NDA, MNS leader Sandip Deshpande stressed that the party does not work only for electoral politics but for the interests of 'Maharashtra and Hindutva' as well. As per sources, MNS had demanded three Lok Sabha seats, namely South Mumbai, Shirdi, and Nashik from the Mahayuti alliance of the BJP, Shiv Sena (Shinde faction) and NCP (Ajit Pawar faction).

Man loses Rs 16 lakh after opening gas bill payment link, money debited from bank without approval

†(News Agency)-A 66-year-old resident of Pune was defrauded of Rs 16 lakh by online scammers under the guise of settling a trivial Maharashtra Natural Gas Limited (MNGL) bill. The victim, whose identity remains undisclosed, was targeted by fraudsters posing as MNGL personnel. Some unauthorised transactions were made via the victim's bank. Here is what happened and how you can be safe. According to a report by Indian Express, the fraudsters, masquerading as MNGL employee Rahul Sharma, contacted the victim via mobile phone on March 27, urging him to clear his alleged pending MNGL bill amounting to a mere Rs 514. Under the pretense of urgency, the scammer pressured



the victim into making an immediate payment. The modus operandi involved the fraudster sending a link to the victim, purportedly for processing the payment for the said bill. Following the instructions relayed by the scammer, the victim unwittingly used his debit card to

execute the transaction.

Later, the victim received a few messages from his bank account about an unapproved money transfer of Rs 49,850 and more to the scammer's account. When the man reached out to his bank to double-check, he also found out about a new personal loan of

Rs 16,22,310 taken by the scammer, which the victim never approved. Realising the deceitful nature of the interaction, the victim subsequently lodged a formal complaint with the authorities, culminating in the filing of a First Information Report (FIR) at the Shivajinagar police station. In response to the complaint, law enforcement officials have initiated an investigation into the matter. Senior Police Inspector Arvind Mane of the Shivajinagar police station is spearheading the probe. The case has been registered under pertinent sections of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) pertaining to fraud (sections 419 and 420) and in accordance with provisions of the

Information Technology (IT) Act. To safeguard against such online scams, it is better to take some precautionary measures. One should verify the legitimacy of communication channels and never disclose personal or financial details to unsolicited contacts. It is advisable to exercise scepticism towards urgent requests for payments or sensitive information, especially via unfamiliar links or phone calls. One should utilise secure payment gateways and avoid sharing OTPs or passwords. Users should also try to monitor financial transactions for any unauthorised activity and promptly report suspicious incidents to relevant authorities.

2022 Bhupatinagar blast case: TMC leaders summoned by NIA approach Calcutta HC



†(News Agency)-The Trinamool Congress leaders from West Bengal's East Midnapore district, who were issued notices by the National Investigation Agency (NIA) for interrogation in connection with the 2022 Bhupatinagar blast case, on Wednesday approached the Calcutta High Court challenging the summons. Of the eight ruling party leaders, who are under the scanner of the NIA sleuths in the blast case, two namely Balai Charan Patra and Monobrata Jana, are already under NIA custody. Three others namely Manab Kumar Parua, Subir Maity and Nobo Kumar Panda have been issued notices by the central agency for interrogation. The counsel for the three Trinamool Congress leaders on Wednesday approached the single-judge bench of Justice Tirthankar Ghosh seeking a

shield against any coercive action by NIA against their clients. However, instead of passing any order on the matter, Justice Ghosh sought the case diary of the NIA. The next hearing on the matter is scheduled for April 17. A total of eight Trinamool Congress leaders have been under the NIA scanner for quite some time in the Bhupatinagar blast. Besides the two already arrested and the three being issued notices for interrogation, the other three ruling party leaders under the scanner are Uttam Maity, Milan Burman and Shiboprasad Gayen. Since NIA took over the investigation in June 2023 following an order of the Calcutta High Court, they have issued summons of interrogation to each of these eight local ruling party leaders while all have ignored these summons.

Fight primarily between INDIA bloc partners in Kerala LS polls

With April 26, the date for voting in the Lok Sabha polls getting closer in Kerala, it is getting clearer by the day that the battle is primarily between key INDIA bloc partners the Congress-led UDF and the ruling CPI(M)-led Left, with the BJP-led NDA in for a triangular fight in two constituencies. In the 2019 General Elections, barring the Thiruvananthapuram Lok Sabha seat, the NDA candidates finished a distant third and managed a 15.64 per cent vote share.

On the other hand, the UDF which won 19 seats secured a vote share of 47.48 per cent and the Left Front which bagged just one seat got 36.29 per cent votes. An analysis of the 20 Lok Sabha constituencies reveals that, while the BJP led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and others claims that this time big surprises are in store, figures tell a different story. Things may not be as easy as the BJP leadership thinks. In the 2019 polls, only in the Thiruvananthapuram constituency did the BJP candidate get above three lakh votes and finish in second place.

The BJP candidates could manage above two lakh votes in just four constituencies, namely Pathanamthitta, Thrissur, Palakkad and Attingal. In nine constituencies the NDA



candidates mustered above one lakh votes and in six constituencies their candidates could not even manage one lakh votes. Out of the 20 constituencies, NDA candidates got the least votes in Kannur (68,509) and the highest votes in Thiruvananthapuram (3,16,142). As things stand now, a very clear triangular fight has emerged in Thiruvananthapuram where the BJP candidate, Union Minister of State Rajeev Chandrasekhar is facing off against the sitting Congress MP, Shashi Tharoor and the CPI candidate Panniyar Ravindran.

At Thrissur actor-turned-politician Suresh Gopi is fighting the INDIA bloc partners. The other constituencies where the BJP appears to be putting all its energy into is at Attingal, where Union Minister of State for External Affairs,

V Muraleedharan is facing off against sitting Congress MP Adoor Prakash and CPI(M) candidate V Joy and at Palakkad where their candidate is local BJP veteran Krishnakumar who is facing off against the CPI(M) is A Vijayaraghavan and the Congress VK Sreekandan.

At Pathanamthitta also the BJP is expecting to put up a stiff triangular battle as it has managed to rope in Anil Antony, son of Congress veteran, AK Antony. However, Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan and AK Antony have already said in public that the NDA will not even finish second in any of the constituencies and AK Antony went a step further to say that the best days of the BJP were in 2019 when the Sabarimala temple issue was at its peak and this time they will only create noise and settle for third place.

India wins key posts in UN poll

†(News Agency)-India has won a major victory with the country's candidates being elected to several key positions in UN bodies including a prestigious five-year term at the International Narcotics Control Board. India's Jagjit Padvia, a former Indian Revenue Service officer, was re-elected for a third term to the International Narcotics Control Board after garnering the highest number of votes.

Today, a significant triumph for India at the UN, clinching a prestigious re-election to the International Narcotics Control Board for 2025-2030 and earning seats across several key UN bodies, the Permanent Mission of India to the UN said on X.

The UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) held elections to fill vacancies in 17 of its subsidiary bodies on Tuesday. These vacancies were filled through election by acclamation, secret ballot and nomination.



India was also elected by acclamation to the Commission on the Status of Women for the term 2025-2029; Executive Board of the United Nations Children's Fund for the term 2025-2027; Executive Board of the United Nations Development

Empowerment of Women for the 2025-2027 term and the Executive Board of the World Food Programme for the 2025-2027 term.

India remains steadfast in its commitment to actively engage in the discourse within these UN bodies, upholding the principle of 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam' (the world is one family), India's Permanent Representative to the UN Ambassador Ruchira Kamboj said in a post on X.

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External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar in a post on X lauded the 'good work' of the Permanent Mission of India to the UN and the team at the Ministry of External Affairs.

Amit Shah to campaign for NDA candidates in Bihar's Gaya



†(News Agency)-Union Home Minister Amit Shah will be in Bihar's Gaya district on Wednesday to address a rally. He will campaign for NDA candidates Sushil Kumar Singh, Jitan Ram Manjhi and Vivek Thakur. They are respectively contesting from Aurangabad, Gaya and Nawada Lok Sabha constituencies.

The rally will be held in Guraru block of Gaya district at 3 p.m. Guraru block comes under the Aurangabad Lok Sabha constituency after delimitation.

Samrat Choudhary, the Deputy Chief Minister and BJP state president of Bihar appealed to the people of Gaya, Nawada and Aurangabad to come to

the rally venue and support the NDA. I am appealing to the people of the region to come to the rally venue and support our Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Home Minister Amit Shah. Our prime minister has taken the resolution to cross the 400 seats in the Lok Sabha and I want to appeal to the people to support him and NDA, Choudhary said.

Earlier, PM Narendra Modi was in Bihar's Jamui district on April 4 and Nawada on April 7 for the election rallies. He has a scheduled plan to address a rally in Gaya on April 16. The first phase of polling will be held in Gaya, Nawada, Aurangabad and Jamui on April 19.

CM Kejriwal seeks urgent hearing in SC against ED arrest



†(News Agency) Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal on Wednesday sought an urgent hearing on his plea filed before the Supreme Court against his arrest by the Enforcement Directorate (ED) in the excise policy case. Please send an email, a Bench presided over by Chief Justice of India (CJI) D.Y. Chandrachud told senior advocate Abhishek Manu Singhvi, who appeared on behalf of CM Kejriwal and mentioned the matter for urgent hearing.

On Tuesday, the Delhi High Court dismissed CM Kejriwal's petition challenging his arrest and the trial court order remanding him to the federal anti-money laundering agency's custody. A bench of Justice Swarana Kanta Sharma took note of the ED's submission that the agency had enough material, including

statements from approvers and allegations of involvement in the formulation of the excise policy, which had led them to arrest him.

The Delhi High Court had said, 'The files and material placed before us reveal that the mandate of law was followed by the ED. The trial court order is not a two-line order. The statements with ED are of hawala dealers as well as AAP candidates in Goa elections.'

Immediately after he was taken into custody by the ED on March 21, CM Kejriwal moved the apex court seeking an urgent late-night hearing on his petition. On the very next day, before a special Bench of the Supreme Court could commence hearing the matter, he withdrew his plea and decided to contest remand proceedings before the trial court.

How to Protect Americans From the Many Growing Threats of AI

Just over 10 months ago, the U.S. Senate started considering what the nation should do about the rise of artificial intelligence. I was there, testifying in front of the Senate hearing that kicked off months of frenzied AI focus on Capitol Hill, alongside OpenAI CEO Sam Altman and IBM's Christina Montgomery. We answered question after question on how to regulate AI and what was at stake. The overwhelming, bipartisan sense of the room was that the United States needed to address AI policy, urgently. Yet so far not one major piece of AI legislation has reached the floor. At the time, Democrats and Republicans agreed that the Senate had been too slow to act on the explosive rise of social media, and the clear consensus was that no one wanted to repeat the same mistake with AI. The desire to do something united politicians from left, right and center: Democrats including Sens. Richard Blumenthal, Amy Klobuchar, Dick Durbin and Cory Booker agreed with Republicans such as Sens. Josh Hawley, Lindsey Graham

and John Kennedy. Everyone also agreed that America needs a legislative approach that fosters innovation, rather than stifles it, because the long-term potential of AI for good is by advancing science, medicine and technology and remains strong.

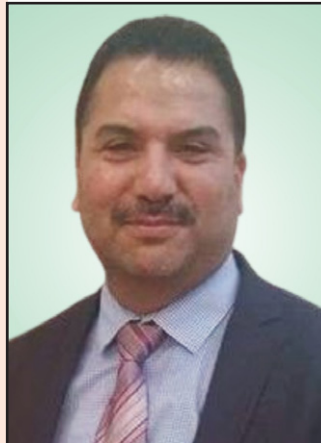
Fast forward 10 months: The House has been consumed by internal struggles and saber-rattling about TikTok; several members have put proposals forward, but nothing has come to a vote. In the Senate, Majority Leader Chuck Schumer identified AI as a priority and spent much of the fall holding closed-door information sessions with an impressively wide range of thinkers, advocates and executives.

But as yet, nothing has been brought to the floor. In many ways the situation with AI has gotten worse. Many of the things

that I merely speculated about in the hearing last May have already come to pass. Just a week after I warned that AI might be used to manipulate markets, a deepfaked photo of the Pentagon on fire circulated on X, briefly driving down the stock market. In September, a deepfaked video may have been the first to influence the outcome of an election, in Slovakia. Nonconsensual deepfake porn wasn't even mentioned at the hearing, but by fall, some teen girls in New Jersey faced nonconsensual deepfake porn made by classmates. More recently, Taylor Swift was subjected to the same. Cybercrime has become more brazen, too. A Hong Kong bank was recently scammed out of

\$25 million, in a series of transactions in which a key employee sought transaction approval in a video call. In hindsight, every

other employee on the call appears to have been a deepfake. Reports of AI-generated voice impersonation for kidnapping scams are increasing, too. A flood of bogus AI content also threatens to turn whole sections of the Internet into the equivalent of your email spam folder. Amazon is now flooded with fake books. And it has become clear that generative AI has a plagiarism problem. As The New York Times versus OpenAI lawsuit demonstrated, GenAI systems (such as ChatGPT) sometimes reproduce large chunks of someone else's text and present it as their own work. And as my own research with the artist Reid Southen has shown, image programs produce trademark characters unbidden, threatening the livelihoods of artists, actors, movie studios and video game studios. Other jobs could be next. New flaws have been exposed. In one case, AI-generated code routinely hallucinated nonexistent software packages, which gave bad actors a new vector for introducing malware.



By Sharanjit Singh Thind
Editor in Chief

Fragmented Opposition Is Modi's Advantage: The Drama of India's General Elections

The upcoming Indian general elections, scheduled to commence on April 19, present a bizarre scenario. Prime Minister Narendra Modi, leading the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) as its prime ministerial candidate, faces a fragmented opposition that has failed to project a unified front to challenge him. The opposition, cognizant of the need to present a formidable challenge to Modi, initiated discussions on collaboration nearly three years ago. However, despite their efforts, they find themselves more fractured than ever as the crucial polls approach. Dubbed as the Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance (I.N.D.I.A.), the opposition's attempts at cohesion faltered primarily over two major issues: seat allocation in various states and the selection of a prime ministerial candidate.

This highlights the inherent contradictions and individual ambitions within the opposition. Leaders such as Mamata Banerjee and Nitish Kumar harbored aspirations of leading the opposition, a proposition deemed unacceptable to the Congress party, which traditionally prefers a Gandhi as its face. Rahul Gandhi, the scion of the Nehru-Gandhi family, was the Congress's favored choice despite his previous electoral setbacks in 2014 and 2019 where he was summarily rejected by the voters with the Congress party coming up with its two worst-ever

performances.

The situation has descended into a farce. Instead of presenting a united front against the BJP, opposition parties find themselves at loggerheads in several states. For instance, while the Congress and Left Front are allied in West Bengal, they are competitors in Kerala, where the Left currently holds power.

Similarly, while the Congress aligns with the Aam Aadmi Party in Delhi, Gujarat, and Goa, it contests against it in Punjab. In West Bengal, the Congress-Left Front alliance poses a threat to the ruling Trinamool Congress, led by Mamata Banerjee who is facing a serious challenge from a resurgent BJP to hold her suzerainty. Nitish Kumar, Bihar's chief minister and leader of the Janata Dal (United), who was one of the architects of the opposition unity talks, abandoned the alliance to join forces with the BJP.

The disarray is such that the Left Front even declined to offer Rahul Gandhi a safe passage to Parliament from his Wayanad seat in Kerala, where he currently represents. It has become a possibility that Rahul Gandhi might not be seen in the new Lok Sabha, the lower chamber of India's bicameral parliament.

Consequently, the INDI Alliance has started to resemble a cart where each horse pulls in a different direction, even

before the first vote is cast. Their disunity has handed the BJP, already riding high, an additional advantage in pursuing a third consecutive victory under Modi's leadership.

The opposition's failure to present a coherent challenge highlights their lack of confidence in their ability to dislodge the

BJP from power. As the nation gears up for the elections, the spectacle of a fragmented opposition stands as a stark reminder of the challenges inherent in Indian politics. Only time will tell whether this disarray will pave the way for yet another victory for the BJP or if the opposition can rally against heavy odds to offer a credible and convincing alternative to the electorate.

Susmita Ghosh



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A new flashpoint in the Gaza war

Israel draws global ire for the attack on convoy of aid organisation distributing food

By Manoj Joshi

THE founder of the World Central Kitchen (WCK), Jose Andres, has alleged that the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) systematically targeted the three-car convoy of its personnel, killing seven volunteers last Monday. He pointed out that all three vehicles were clearly marked as WCK vehicles and the Israelis were aware of their itinerary, route and humanitarian mission. The WCK is one of the main institutions that has been delivering food to the people of the devastated enclave.

Confronted with the surge of anger across the world, the Israelis quickly completed an internal investigation and acknowledged on Friday that the strike was a 'serious violation of the IDF's rules and operating procedures'. Israel said it had dismissed two senior officers and three others were reprimanded.

Earlier, the IDF chief of staff, Lt Gen Herzi Halevi, apologised for the strike and described it as 'a mistake that followed a misidentification' and that it should not have happened.



Not surprisingly, the Israeli findings came a day after US President Joe Biden spoke on the phone to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and warned him that if Israel did not change its course in Gaza, 'we won't be able to support you'.

Can one accept the claim that this tragic incident violated the IDF's operating procedures? The Israeli mea culpa does not mean much because the IDF has a history of strikes on hospitals, ambulances and journalists clearly identified as such. Even now, they have not quite said that the attack was not

deliberate.

As the horrendous campaign in Gaza has shown, the IDF has displayed little concern for the humanitarian considerations relating to war. Besides denying food and water to non-combatants, they have used massive unguided bombs to destroy buildings to target Hamas leaders without bothering about the huge collateral destruction and casualties. Their operating procedure seems to suggest that killing a Hamas leader justifies collateral casualties and destruction regardless of their

size. We can speculate that they may have assumed, falsely perhaps, that somehow top Hamas leaders were using the WCK convoy as a cover to move around.

The Hamas probably do use civilian cover and have possibly sheltered in hospitals and used ambulances to camouflage their movements. But surely, the IDF needs to be held to a higher standard than the Hamas. It does claim that it operates within international humanitarian law to avoid collateral casualties. Associated with this is the question of proportional counter-force in an insurgency situation. Wiping out an entire block of flats and killing innocent men, women and children to target a Hamas cadre is certainly a grossly disproportionate use of force.

A perspective on Israeli counter-insurgency tactics comes ironically from renowned Israeli war historian Martin van Creveld. In a 2005 essay, he examined two ways of defeating an insurgency. The first was used by

Syrian President Hafez al-Assad to defeat the Muslim Brotherhood that threatened his rule in the early 1980s.

When the 'traditional' tactics of arrest, torture and execution did not work, Assad decided to go after the 'head of the snake' of the city of Hama. The Syrian army surrounded the city and used heavy artillery to reduce it to ruins, thereby killing around 20,000 civilians, followed by the detention of another 15,000 and the deportation of 100,000. Around two-thirds of the city was demolished and the Muslim Brotherhood movement crushed. The brutality served to deter the Islamist opponents of the Assad family, though in 2011-12 a democratic revolution resulted in an insurgency which has torn the country apart.

Van Creveld contrasts this with the tactics used by the British to successfully overcome the Irish Republican Army (IRA) insurgency in Northern Ireland. The insurgency intensified in the early 1970s as the IRA went on a bombing spree.

ED case against Arvind Kejriwal is the biggest political conspiracy after independence: Sanjay Singh

By Jag Mohan Thakern

Chandigarh (India): Slamming the arrest of Delhi Chief Minister Kejriwal by ED, the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) national leader and Rajya Sabha MP Sanjay Singh said that the excise policy case against Arvind Kejriwal and the AAP leaders is the biggest political conspiracy after independence.

Addressing a press conference in Chandigarh, on Tuesday, Sanjay Singh said this case has been registered under a conspiracy and there is no intention of investigating any scam. The motive is to topple the Aam Aadmi Party governments in Delhi and Punjab, both the governments of thumping majority. It is an attempt to stop the growing popularity of the Aam Aadmi Party and its achievement of getting national party status in 10 years. He said that if anyone committed any scam it was the BJP and a 60-crore money trail that has been found against them.



Everyone knows that.

Divulging the details of the press conference, a release by AAP states that Mr. Sanjay Singh has said that in the case of Arvind Kejriwal ji, false witnesses were prepared, baseless allegations were made. He said that 10-10 statements were recorded but only 2 were produced in the court. Rest is hidden because they do not match their propaganda and don't include needed lies.

Magunta Reddy gave 10 statements, in the last two statements as soon as they mentioned Kejriwal ji's name, immediately his son Raghav Reddy got bail. Magunta, against whom the BJP actually started this investigation, is now asking for votes under the BJP's banner and putting Modi's picture everywhere. But when he named Arvind Kejriwal in his statement, he got bail for his back pain.

Sanjay Singh said that Chandan Reddy, another witness, his ear was injured, they tore his eardrum, he even appealed against it to the High Court. Sameer Mahendru and Arun Pellu were pressurized and intimidated to name Arvind Kejriwal because they wanted to make this whole case against him. He said that I want to ask the most corrupt party and their government after the independence of India that when the money trail of 60 crore rupees was found directly against you, why are your leaders not being interrogated by ED and CBI, why not AG wrote a letter now? What is the reason that the company whose profit is zero, that company is giving hundreds of crores of funds to you people? There are fake firms and companies donating hundreds of crores to the BJP, why ED and CBI are not investigating that? Which have become fake companies and are donating to the BJP for elections. Why don't

BJP leaders get questioned and arrested? Why aren't they raided? He reiterated that this entire case is fake, it is only a political conspiracy against Arvind Kejriwal. The statements that did not mention the name of Arvind Kejriwal are deliberately being left out of the proceedings and are not being put in front of the court. If all the facts are not presented before the court, then how will justice be done? Arvind Kejriwal's lawyers are doing their work, the lawyers are constantly inspecting the documents. He hoped that soon Arvind Kejriwal will get justice from the Court. He continued that there is a process of the justice system and many times there is a lapse in the judicial process. There are many irregularities in PMLA in which the provisions of getting bail are very difficult when you do not present the whole truth before the court and the whole matter is not coming before the court.

Striking a Balance between State Power and Citizen Rights

By: Pavan K Varma

As a student of law, there were certain fundamentals that I internalised as non-negotiable features of modern Indian jurisprudence, and indeed, of jurisprudence in all democratic nations. The first is that a person is assumed innocent unless proven guilty. The second is that bail is the rule and jail is the exception. The third is that due process of law will be followed in all prosecution proceedings to eliminate the arbitrary use of state power. The fourth is that no person shall be forced to incriminate himself or herself in a crime. The fifth is that there must be a reasonable nexus between crime and punishment. And, the sixth is that justice delayed is justice denied.

These principles apply to all governments, and are, therefore, beyond the realm of partisan politics. They are in the interests of citizens, to ensure that every person—rich and powerful, or poor and helpless—gets a fair and impartial trial. Very often, people think that somebody else, not them, will be the victim of the infringement of these principles. But the truth is that once infringements become the norm, nobody is safe. The first two jurisprudential principles enumerated above—a person is presumed innocent unless proven guilty, and bail is the rule and jail the exception—have been upended by the draconian provision of Article 45 of the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA) 2002, as amended in 2018. This article states that: "Notwithstanding anything contained in the Code of Criminal Procedure 1973, no person accused of a crime (under this Act) shall be released on bail on his own bond unless (i) the Public Prosecutor has been given an opportunity to oppose the application for such release, and (ii) when the Public Prosecutor opposes the application, the court is satisfied that there are reasonable grounds for believing that he is not guilty of such offence."

In practical terms, what this provision ensures is that bail is almost impossible. The accused has to provide to the court, at the stage of the bail itself, before the case is argued or sometimes even a charge sheet is filed, that he or she is not guilty, while the

prosecuting authority can oppose the bail on any grounds based on material whose veracity has not yet been tested through a judicial process. Which judge, therefore, will grant bail on the assumption that even before the trial has begun, the accused is prima facie not guilty?

The first two jurisprudential principles enumerated above—a person is presumed innocent unless proven guilty, and bail is the rule and jail the exception—have been upended by the draconian provision of Article 45 of the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA) 2002, as amended in 2018. This article states that: "Notwithstanding anything contained in the Code of Criminal Procedure 1973, no person accused of a crime (under this Act) shall be released on bail on his own bond unless (i) the Public Prosecutor has been given an opportunity to oppose the application for such release, and (ii) when the Public

Prosecutor opposes the application, the court is satisfied that there are reasonable grounds for believing that he is not guilty of such offence. In practical terms, what this provision ensures is that bail is almost impossible.

The accused has to provide to the court, at the stage of the bail itself, before the case is argued or sometimes even a charge sheet is filed, that he or she is not guilty, while the prosecuting authority can oppose the bail on any grounds based on material whose veracity has not yet been tested through a judicial process. Which judge, therefore, will grant bail on the assumption that even before the trial has begun, the accused is prima facie not guilty? Money laundering is a serious offence and deserves strong and stringent punishment. The Enforcement Directorate (ED) has an important role to play in identifying and penalising the guilty, but the conviction rate is low, and the ambit of the mandate seems to have been widened to include many other

scheduled crimes. Article 45 was struck down by a two-judge Supreme Court (SC) bench of Justice Sanjay Kaul and Justice Rohinton Mistry in March 2022, but was restored a year later by a three-judge SC bench. However, a review petition has been admitted, and in March this year, Justice Sanjiv Khanna observed that bail can be granted under this article if there is a delay in the trial or the period of incarceration is too long. Kerala High Court (HC) judge, Justice Badharudeen also recently said that the reversal of the proof of innocence is a very dangerous thing. In 2022, then Chief Justice N.V. Ramanna too, while admitting the review petition, expressed serious concern about this article. We have to await the results of the review petition, but in the opinion of many eminent jurists, it violates due process of law and creates a situation by which the process itself becomes the punishment.

The violation of the principle of justice delayed is justice denied, is evident by the lakhs of undertrial prisoners languishing in jail for over a year, since their cases have not come up for hearing or disposed

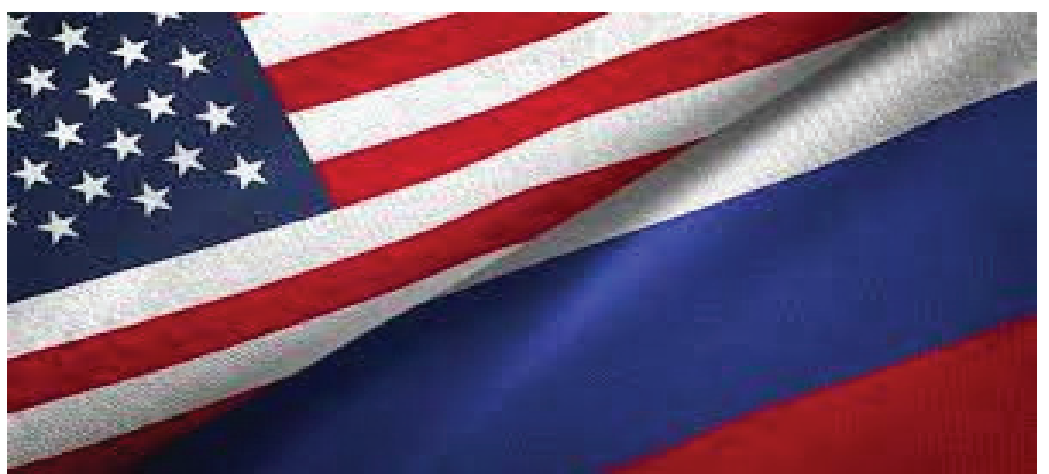
of. In 2023, there were 59,78,714 cases pending in the HCs, and 69,598 in the SC. Shockingly, at the same time, against the sanctioned strength of 1114 judges in the HCs, 329 posts were lying vacant. Is it any surprise then that delay in justice is inevitable?

All democracies, irrespective of the government in power, must keep a balance between the powers of the state as against the remedies available to citizens. This balance is critical, because those in power today, may well be in the Opposition tomorrow. CJI DY Chandrachud, while delivering the 20th D.P. Kohli Memorial Lecture in memory of the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI)'s first director, said a few days ago: "In the realm of criminal justice, the delicate balance between search and seizure powers of agencies like the CBI and individual privacy rights stands at the cornerstone of a fair and just society. At the heart of this balance lies the need to uphold due process while ensuring the effective functioning of law enforcement agencies."

Indian students in peril

America must prioritise their safety

THE spike in the deaths of Indian or Indian-origin students in the US this year indicates that the Joe Biden administration is not doing enough to halt the alarming attacks. Earlier this week, Mohammed Abdul Arfath, a 25-year-old student from Hyderabad, was found dead in Cleveland; he had been missing since last month. His family had received a ransom call on March 17. It is unfortunate that the student could not be rescued, even though the Indian consulate had claimed that it was working with local law enforcement agencies to find him. The death of an Indian student, Uma Satya Sai Gadde, was reported in Ohio last week, while a trained classical dancer, Amarnath Ghosh, was shot dead in St Louis, Missouri, in March. A succession of unnatural deaths in January-February had prompted White House communications officer John Kirby to assert that there was no excuse for violence based on race, gender, religion or



any other factor. In a bid to reassure the Indian diaspora, he had said that the Biden administration was working "every, very hard" to try to thwart the attacks. US Ambassador to India Eric Garcetti had said that his government was "every committed" to making Indians realise that America was a safe and wonderful place to study. However, the situation on the ground seems to be worsening.

The US-based Foundation for India and Indian Diaspora Studies has identified the main causes of these incidents, which include violent

crimes, suspicious accidents and mental issues triggering suicide. It has urged the authorities to raise awareness about various risks and provide mental health support. There is speculation that negative propaganda against the community is fuelling hate crime. With Indians accounting for about 25 per cent of the foreign students in the US, it is imperative for America to prioritise their safety and crack down on the hate-mongers. The prevailing laxity can damage America's reputation as a popular destination for Indian students.

How success of 'Crew' is a boost for female-fronted cinema

The warm audience response should see more studios and actresses open up to stories with women at the forefront

By Suhani Singh

Multi-starrers are a rarity in Hindi cinema; female-driven ones more so. In such a scenario, the fact that Hindi film *Crew*, released on March 29, is likely to net Rs 70 crore domestically by the end of the ongoing week is an impressive feat and one worth celebrating.

Starring Tabu, Kareena Kapoor Khan and Kriti Sanon as flight attendants, the film follows their quest to end the turbulence in their careers albeit through questionable means. *Crew* is committed in its mission to give its three sheroes a canvas to showcase their comic credentials.

There's no one up(wo)manship here, just three actresses letting their hair down and exacting revenge for their brethren. So much so that the men here—Diljit Dosanjh and Kapil Sharma—are allotted limited screen-time and exist in service to them. Dosanjh plays a customs official who has



his heart set on Kriti's character while Sharma is a husband who runs a food delivery from home after his restaurant has gone bust. Kareena's character doesn't have a love interest and neither is she shown lamenting on the lack of one in her life. Refreshingly, professional pursuits and

ambitions are prioritised over love. Produced by Rhea Kapoor and Ekta Kapoor, whose earlier credits include *Veere Di Wedding* and *Thank You for Coming*, *Crew* delivers laughs and fashionable clothes as it celebrates women who are anything but perfect. That it has found an audience who are

invested in them and their hapless circumstances is proof that female ensembles do work. The past few years have seen a few of them albeit not enough. Alankrita Shrivastava's *Lipstick Under My Burkha*, also distributed by Ekta's ALT Entertainment, presented vivid portraits of women from different

cultural milieu. Last year's *Dhak Dhak* centered on Dia Mirza, Ratna Pathak Shah, Sanjana Sanghi and Fatima Sana Shaikh embarking on a bike trip.

There was also *Mission Mangal*, about the women scientists behind India's Mars Orbiter Mission. Audiences were eagerly looking forward to seeing Alia Bhatt, Katrina Kaif and Priyanka Chopra Jonas come together for the women's road trip film *Jee Lee Zaraa*, written by Zoya Akhtar, Farhan Akhtar and Reema Kagti. But the fate of that project is up in the air as the actresses pursue other projects, with Priyanka focusing on her efforts abroad.

One is hopeful that the warm reception to *Crew* will see both studios and actresses open up to more stories that put many women at the forefront. OTT platforms have already proven that it is a viable formula—*Four More Shots Please!*, *Masaba Masaba*, *Saas Bahu Aur Flamingo*.

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Congress Manifesto: A New Vision

By Ashutosh

There is a camp that believes that the Congress has little chance of improving its 2019 tally. However, others contend that the party may be able to cross the 100 mark. But one thing is certain: the Congress is in no position to form a government at the Centre by itself. This was the Congress that had dominated the political scene in the country for more than 50 years. Even when it ceased to be a formidable player, it ran a coalition government led by Manmohan Singh for 10 years. However, such is the dominance of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) under the dynamic and exceptional leadership of Narendra Modi that the Congress forming a government on its own looks like a dream.

A Glimmer Of Hope

At present, the Congress is truly fighting a near-existential crisis despite having governments in three states and a 19% vote share. To regain its past glory, the Congress needs major surgery, with clear vision and a gladiatorial instinct. Today, it looks like a mirage, but a glimmer of hope cannot be ruled out when one peeps through its manifesto for the 2024 elections. It seems the party has finally attained clarity about the direction in which it is planning to move to regain its new social base. I can see traces of a new Congress. The decline of the old Congress started after the 1989 election. Three events sealed the party's fate: the campaign around Bofors, the implementation of the Mandal Commission by the V.P. Singh government, and the Ram Mandir movement led by the BJP. The Congress, which had won 404 seats after the tragic assassination of Indira Gandhi, was reduced to its pale shadow in 1989. It won 197 seats with 39.53% of the votes. After the demise of Rajiv Gandhi, the Congress formed the government twice: once in 1991, with P.V. Narasimha Rao as the Prime Minister, and in 2004, when Rao's

Finance Minister, Manmohan Singh, led the cabinet for 10 years. Due to the Bofors scam during Rajiv's regime, the urban middle class became disillusioned and started deserting the Congress, shifting towards the BJP.

Past Mistakes

The Congress's inability to take a clear stand on the Mandal Commission report mandating 27% reservation in government jobs not only alienated the upper castes but also Dalits and Other Backward Castes (OBC), particularly in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. The decline of the Congress was caused by the rise of OBC and Dalit leadership in these states. Mulayam Singh Yadav, Kanshi Ram, Mayawati, Lalu Yadav, Nitish Kumar, and Ram Vilas Paswan dominated the next two decades in these two North Indian states. The demolition of Babri Masjid resulted in the alienation of Muslims too.

The Ram Mandir movement created a new Hindu voter base, especially in North India. Under the leadership of L.K. Advani, the BJP accused the Congress of pursuing pseudo-secularism and appeasing Muslims at the expense of Hindus. Due to the rise of aggressive OBC/Dalit leadership, upper caste hegemony was threatened, and in states like Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, powerful upper caste groups found themselves marginalised due to the numerical strength of the former. The BJP was there at the right time to offer its support to the upper castes. The lack of a charismatic leader further weakened the Congress. Sonia Gandhi was a stopgap arrangement, but once the Congress suffered a major defeat in 2014, it appeared very vulnerable.

2019 Was A Wake-Up Call

The 2019 defeat served as a wake-up call for the party. It slowly realised that the BJP had become too dominant, and for the party to reclaim its lost ground, something

spectacular had to be done. Rahul's two Bharat Jodo Yatras were the result of this realisation. They energised party workers at the grassroots level and attracted Muslim voters to the Congress as well. The victories in Karnataka and Telangana followed. However, North India remained the real battleground, where the BJP commanded more than 50% of the vote share in parliamentary elections. Here, the hegemonic upper caste had largely shifted to the BJP. According to a Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) survey, more than 80% of the upper caste voters, including Brahmins, Thakurs, and Baniyas, voted for the BJP. The BJP had also made inroads among OBCs and Dalits. The Congress realised that it needed to reinvent its social base. It understood that only a politics of social justice could counter the rise of Hindutva.

Focus On Social Justice

The Congress took a calculated risk to focus on voters other than the upper castes, who make up roughly 20% of the population, and instead tailored its politics to the remaining 80%. Taking a cue from Nitish Kumar, Rahul Gandhi began advocating for a caste census. During a rally in Kolar, Karnataka, Rahul vocally demanded that census. Even before that, the party had initiated social engineering within its ranks. It appointed Charan Singh Channi, a Dalit, as the chief minister of Punjab. The party took pride in the fact that before the results of the December assembly elections, three of its chief ministers belonged to backward castes: Ashok Gehlot, Bhupesh Baghel, and Siddaramaiah. Mallikarjun Kharge, a Dalit, became the party president. However, the real game-changer has been the recently released manifesto for the general elections, which focuses on three major promises aimed at social justice:

The Congress has announced the

extension of the 50% limit for reservations for OBCs, SCs, and STs

It has pledged to extend reservations for these groups to jobs in private institutions. The party has also promised to conduct a caste census if given the opportunity to form the government.

The party has attempted to forge a strong coalition of social justice groups with another marginalised group, the women voters, who have emerged as an important category in recent elections.

It took a revolutionary step by promising to provide 50% reservation for women in government jobs.

It has also pledged to implement 33% reservation for women in assembly and parliamentary elections.

Under the Nari Nyay initiative, it has vowed to provide ₹1 lakh annually to women from poor families.

Undoubtedly, these are bold steps, but there is still a long way to go. The Congress organisationally remains very weak. Senior leaders are still entrenched in the past, unwilling to cede space to the new generation. These senior leaders have flourished under the shadow of charismatic figures. They are accustomed to leading comfortable lives with immense power and feel disoriented in situations of powerlessness. These armchair leaders struggle to keep pace with Rahul Gandhi, and instead of wholeheartedly supporting him, they often find faults in his leadership. However, reinventing a party is never easy. The BJP currently holds the pole position, but it took many decades to reach this point, enduring numerous failures and experiments. The Congress manifesto indicates that after ten years of uncertainty and confusion, the party has finally chosen a clear path with a defined vision. But there is still a long journey ahead. The emergence of the New Congress will not happen overnight or in a single election.

BJP's 44 Years: How Strong Is Its Fort Going Into 2024 Polls?

By Amitabh Tiwari

On April 6, as the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) marked its 44th anniversary, the theme of its Foundation Day was "Phir Ek Baar Modi Sarkar" (once again, Modi government). It thus is an apt time to assess the party's prospects for the 2024 general elections and to see how strong its fort is going into the Lok Sabha polls.

In 2014, the BJP comprehensively defeated the Congress as it won 282 seats, and a 31% vote share. In the next Lok Sabha election, it surpassed this record with 303 seats and an even bigger vote share of 37%. **1. The Biggest Party Across All Regions**

It is generally believed that the BJP is strong in the North and the West but weak in the East and the South zones. While that is true, the BJP is still the single largest party in all the four regions. It's because the latter two have many regional parties that have pockets of influence but are not united under a common banner.

The North and the West are strongholds of the BJP, where it won 155 out of 191 seats (81% strike rate) and 51 out of 78 seats (65% strike rate), respectively. However, in the East and South, the BJP's performance was



weaker. It won less than 50% of the seats-67 out of 142- in the former, and only 25% seats-30 out of 132-in the latter. These two regions, especially states like West Bengal, Odisha, Tamil Nadu, and Kerala, are the focus areas of the BJP in 2024.

2. Wide Winning Margins In 2019

In the 2019 elections, there were 224 seats that the BJP won with an over 50% vote share. Effectively, that means the party won around 75% of the total seats emphatically. In four states - Delhi, Uttarakhand, Himachal Pradesh, and Gujarat - the party won all its seats with a 50% or more vote share, while in six other states - Bihar, Karnataka, Assam, Rajasthan, Haryana, and Madhya Pradesh - three-fourths of its seats were won with more than half the total votes. In states like

Uttar Pradesh and Maharashtra too, nearly two-thirds of constituencies were like that, while in West Bengal, there were only a quarter. In Odisha, in contrast, which saw a triangular contest, there were no such seats where the BJP won with more than 50% votes.

The BJP secured victory margins of more than 1 lakh votes in 226 out of the total 303 seats it won. In 105 of these in fact, the victory margin exceeded 3 lakh votes. There were only 40 seats where the party's winning edge was less than 50,000 votes, and these are the seats that could be considered vulnerable or closely contested.

Also, out of the 224 seats that the BJP won with a 50% or more vote share, 153 were those where the main rival was Congress. In all, of the 190 direct contests in

2019 between the BJP and the Congress, the BJP won 175, and the Congress only 15. And 153 of these 175 seats were such where the BJP got more than half the votes. For another set of 185 seats where the BJP fought against regional parties, it won 128 seats.

That's not all. Even of the 101 seats where the BJP recorded 40%-50% votes, 79 went on to deliver a victory to the BJP, demonstrating that even a 40% vote share can guarantee a win in a multi-party contest under the first-past-the-post system. In contrast, the main challenger, the Congress, had just 19 seats that it could claim it won with over half the votes, and another 76 where it was led to victory with a 40-50% vote share.

3. A Large Pool Of 'Strong' Seats

There are 247 seats that the BJP won in both 2014 and 2019, and these can be classified as strong. Based on historical trends, there are 95 seats that the BJP has won on the trot in the three last elections, and 167 that have been won twice in the last three polls. Thus, in total, the BJP faces good prospects in 262 seats. That's just 10 less than the magic mark of 272.

Further, the party was the runner-up in 72 seats in 2019, and in 17

of those, it had lost by a less than 5% margin. In 2019, the BJP lost 35 seats that it had won in the previous election; 20 of these were in its strongholds of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar.

4. Stronger Alliances Compared To 2019

This year, the BJP has tried to stitch up several alliances and has added partners like the Janata Dal (Secular) (JD-S) in Karnataka, the Telugu Desam Party (TDP) in Andhra Pradesh, the Rashtriya Lok Dal (RLD) in Uttar Pradesh and the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) in Maharashtra. As a whole, it seems the party's alliances this year in the four states - which cover 181 seats, a third of the Lok Sabha's strength - are stronger than those in 2019. '

5. Modi Card

Finally, with elections becoming increasingly presidential in style, Narendra Modi enjoys a big lead over Rahul Gandhi, who is not the official prime ministerial face of the INDIA bloc. Modi enjoys immense public trust and credibility going into his third term and many consider him the difference between victory and defeat for his party.

The numbers underscore the almost invincible nature of the BJP this election. Can the opposition upset that position?

Modi's Minority Engagement: A Key Factor in the Lok Sabha Polls

By: Adarsh Kuniyillam

Respecting and supporting minorities is an integral part of Indian culture. Our ideology, Hindutva, treats all religions equally and with utmost respect, following the principle of 'Sarva Mata Sama Bhava'. We believe that truth is one, but it can be perceived in different forms, as stated in 'Ekam Sad Viprah Bahudha Vadanti'. This principle forms the foundation of our government's functioning. Prime Minister Modi guarantees the social and economic upliftment of India's minorities, drawing strength from the centuries of dedication and heritage that Bharat embodies.

The minority groups in India, including Jains, Parsis, Buddhists, Sikhs, Christians, and Muslims, make up approximately 20 per cent of the country's population. Among these, Muslims and Christians are the largest minority groups in India. Since the beginning of his first term in office, Prime Minister Modi has implemented various outreach initiatives to connect with minority communities. While Muslims account for around 14.23



per cent of India's population, Christians make up 2.30 per cent. Modi's efforts to engage with the Bohras and Sufi Muslim communities have included delivering a keynote address at the 2016 World Islamic Sufi Conference in Delhi and visiting a Dawoodi Bohra mosque in Indore, where he met with community leaders during an Ashura commemoration. The government has consistently reached out to the Pasmanda Muslim community, particularly

in Uttar Pradesh, where 35 per cent of PMAY beneficiaries, 37 per cent of PM Ujjwala Yojana beneficiaries, and 30 per cent of PM Mudra Yojana beneficiaries belong to this community. Prime Minister Modi has been honoured by many Islamic republics around the world in recognition of his efforts to strengthen collaborations with

Islamic nations and to propagate world peace through mutual collaborations.

He has made regular visits to churches and celebrated Christmas with the Christian community last year. Nagaland has more than 85 per cent Christian population and Meghalaya has more than 75 per cent Christian population and these two states have openly embraced Prime Minister Modi's vision of inclusive India. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) today has

the largest number of legislators belonging to the Christian community than any other political party of Kerala. Modi's visit to the Holy See in October 2021 was taken well with Christian believers across the world. Continuous outreach programs have also been initiated for Sikh, Buddhist, Parsi, and Jain communities, including events like Veer Bal Diwas, the retrieval of the holy Guru Granth Sahib from war-torn Afghanistan, and the Kartarpur Corridor. The abolition of Triple Talaq has empowered women in Muslim minorities, while the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) has provided Indian citizenship to persecuted minorities from Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan. Through a series of policies and legislations over the past decade, the government has ensured the protection of minority rights in India. The Pradhan Mantri Jan Vikas Karyakram, a Centrally Sponsored Scheme (CSS), focuses on improving the socio-economic condition of identified minority concentration areas. It provides infrastructure in various sectors such as education, health, skill development, and women empowerment.

BJP is Not Taking Turncoats to Establish Hegemony by Emptying the Opposition, Its Project is Long-Term

By: Rahul Shivshankar

Self-appointed guardians of India's political morality are lathered up about what they believe is a BJP plot to rid India of the Opposition. This dark augury has been apparently triggered by the migration of political leaders or defectors to the BJP.

Now, no election has ever been complete without this poll season floor crossing. The switcheroo of netas is about as guaranteed as the annual febrile Wildebeest river-crossing in the Serengeti. And therefore, almost no dark undertones are usually ascribed to promiscuous party hoppers. At least not until now.

This election however, the Opposition and some of its cheerleaders have begun referring to opportunists as political hostages: The veritable hijack of allegedly under duress Opposition leaders corralled into the BJP's pen by the menacing Enforcement Directorate.

One peripatetic academic from the Opposition ecosystem has noted this phenomenon with unrestrained fascination.

A sort of study in the NDA's



commander-in-chief's obsession of asserting power to allegedly realise his goal of an Opposition mukt Bharat by relying on despotic means. To underline the point, the academic has undertaken some research to total up the number of turncoats fielded by the BJP. His labours have led him to claim that ED-harried defectors ostensibly make up almost 30 per cent of the BJP's candidates.

A closer examination of this so-called data-driven conclusion exposes infirmities. The research, it turns out, isn't painstaking after

all. Some of the defectors in the list of the 30 per cent that are contesting on the BJP ticket have crossed over well before the 2019 Lok Sabha elections and are already established BJP notables. Others have done so with no other inducement than the assurance of a ticket. At worst, these political migrants are guilty of being turncoats. Only a handful, it could be conjectured, joined the BJP because the Orwellian ED is bearing down on them.

It is true that Prime Minister Modi has set the NDA's election

managers the stiff target of winning 400 Lok Sabha seats. That means the NDA will have to win approximately 3 out of 4 seats in the fray. But as one BJP MP pointed out, this desire to break the 400-mark barrier isn't borne out of a hegemonic impulse or an undemocratic machination conceived to marginalise the Opposition. The idea, apparently, is part of an ongoing project to expand the party's social base and extend its ideological frontiers. An election is not just about numbers. To achieve the target set by Prime Minister Modi, the BJP will have to ensure that its ideology appeals to locals in regions where it has had almost no presence and therefore no prospects. The east and large swathes of the south have remained frustratingly indifferent to the BJP's Hindutva nationalism. Naturally, the BJP is in the electoral market, as it were, shopping around for recruits who wield influence across unisaffronised shores. The summary characterisation of the BJP's strategy to enlist new talent as a hijack of the Opposition does a disservice to

the idea of democratic free will and assertion.

Throughout Bharat's political history, parties have split, merged, and emerged renewed to keep pace with the changing aspirations of voters. Their founders and constituents have crossed the aisle to transcend seemingly immutable caste and ideological fault lines to stay relevant. So many before the BJP have socially engineered themselves to become greater or more niche than when they started out.

As the BJP grows and becomes (if it isn't already) the default party of governance, it will have to embrace a wider array of cultural philosophies and social identities to stay in the electoral hunt. Its message will also have to be tweaked. India's principal Opposition party, the Congress, is floundering on this score. Its centre is not holding up because it isn't bound by a credible leader with mass appeal or an electorally marketable idea. Parties that have failed to diversify their message and their morphology have atrophied. Defectors are quite often the first to know.

America's Democracy Beacon Fades as Challenges Mount

By Syed Zubair Ahmed

Last month in Ohio, former President Donald Trump stood at a campaign rally and solemnly saluted as a recorded national anthem played to the crowd's loud cheers. The chorus was recorded by prisoners jailed for their roles in the January 6 attack in 2021 on the US Capitol Hill.

Trump hailed the rioters as "unbelievable patriots", having previously pledged to pardon them on his "first day in office". Over three years ago, a violent mob of Trump supporters stormed the US Capitol in an attempt to halt the certification of the 2020 presidential election, resulting in five deaths. More than 1,300 people were charged in the riot, with two-thirds of them already sentenced, facing penalties ranging from a few days in jail to 22 years. While most Americans view the January 6 attack as a direct assault on democracy, Trump has launched his election campaign, making the violent siege and its failed attempt to overturn the 2020



election a cornerstone of his bid to return to the White House. Trump and his campaign team seem emboldened by several surveys indicating that two-thirds of Republicans believe the election was rigged and that Joe Biden was not legitimately elected. They continue to endorse allegations of widespread voter fraud in the 2020 election.

The persistence of a significant number of lawmakers and individuals propagating the baseless claim that the 2020 election was tainted by widespread fraud underscores

how partisan interests can undermine faith in the electoral process.

Double Standards of Preachers

For years, the United States has presented itself as a global champion of democracy and human rights, often issuing official reports and statements criticising the democratic processes of other nations, including India. However, it is now time to conduct a thorough assessment of American democracy.

India is preparing for polls later

this month, confident in the integrity of its electoral processes. In contrast, the US faces an erosion of voter confidence in its electoral system as it gears up for the presidential election in November.

The events of January 6, 2021, and the subsequent erosion of trust in the electoral system highlight a stark reality: American democracy itself is under significant threat. The deep partisan divide within the country poses a formidable challenge to the integrity of democratic institutions and the legitimacy of electoral outcomes.

As the American presidential election approaches, the fault lines in American democracy become more pronounced, with allegations of democracy backsliding increasingly prevalent in recent years, sparking debates and concerns in democratic societies worldwide.

Evidence of Democracy Backsliding

Erosion of democratic norms: There is a growing perception that democratic norms and

institutions in the US are being undermined. Instances such as the Capitol insurrection on January 6 raised alarm bells about the fragility of democratic institutions and the potential for violence to disrupt the democratic process.

Voting rights restrictions: Laws passed in several states imposing restrictions on voting rights, particularly targeting marginalised communities, have been viewed as a setback for democracy. Critics argue that such measures disproportionately disenfranchise certain groups, undermining the principle of equal participation in the democratic process.

Polarisation and gridlock: Political polarisation and gridlock have reached unprecedented levels, impeding the functioning of democratic institutions. This polarisation has led to a breakdown in constructive dialogue and compromise, hindering the government's ability to address pressing issues and undermining public trust in democratic governance.

Congress' Attack on Aishwarya Rai and Kangana Ranaut Reflects a Larger Problem

By: Advaita Kala

Women in cinema have been objectified for years. For this, the film industry should be taken to task, as should the audience whose tastes the industry caters to, however, there has been a shift in the characters essayed by women on the silver screen. Undoubtedly, female actors have managed to create an audience of their own and are also producing films, apart from investing in other businesses. A certain savvy has been embraced by them, given the fickle nature of the business. However, whilst the audience's taste and the film industry have evolved, in some measure, politics seems to be stuck in the item girl iteration of female actors, paired with the assumptions that follow. In the past few weeks the Grand Old Party of India, which claims to be the protector of liberal values, has seen its senior leaders utter such despicable statements about female actors that it has been revelatory. Commenting on the Pran Pratishtha ceremony, the scion of the Congress party, 54-year-old Rahul Gandhi made a point of highlighting the presence of Aishwarya Rai at the function. Never mind that the fifty-year-old icon was not there, but this didn't stop Rahul Gandhi from mentioning her repeatedly and embellishing his statement with a



condescending comment about her dancing for the audience.

The statement, dripping with sexist innuendo and condescension, completely negated the illustrious and dignified presence Aishwarya Rai has held in the public domain over the last three decades. It is also an understood fact that she will not respond to such public jibes, making her an easy target for crude attacks. It is unclear if Rahul Gandhi, given the contentious past of the relationship between the Bachchans and the Gandhis, has a personal axe to grind or not, given his repeated targeting of Aishwarya Rai, now the Bachchan bahu. She certainly has not been the recipient of any largesse from the present government, even finding herself amid an ED investigation. But the

complete lack of respect that Gandhi displayed for her and her profession indicates a deep-seated resentment and anger, towards not only her but the acting profession. Whilst that commentary was somewhat obtuse, Supriya Shrinete, a former journalist and Congress spokesperson, who runs the party's social media operation, went a step further and in under 24 hours of Kangana Ranaut joining the BJP and being declared its candidate from Mandi in Himachal Pradesh, made a disgusting comment likening Mandi to a market place, where wares were sold and bought at a preferential rate. The implication was clear. Joining her in this distasteful conjecture was

senior journalist Mrinal Pande, who once called out for her cheap commentary, and tried to backpedal.

Shrinete, realising the utter crassness and misogyny of the comment posted from her social media account, passed the buck on to some nameless member of her team, an explanation that no one bought. Kangana, not one to back down from a fight, replied in a calm and measured manner, knowing there was no need to be overly defensive. Shrinete dug herself a hole that she would have trouble climbing out of.

The dust had barely settled on this controversy when Randeep Surjewala, a senior member of the Congress, jumped in with a tasteless and frankly sleazy comment on septuagenarian actress Hema Malini, a multiple-time MP from Mathura. It is not possible to even quote what he said since it was so disgustingly inappropriate. It is alarming that the Congress continues to spout such misogyny about women from the film industry but faces no backlash from their illiberal supporters.

The film industry is a male bastion and women who work in the field, be it in front of or behind the camera, have a career of struggle and often exploitation. Whilst things are improving, being an unregulated industry, there is still

a long way to go. Women who achieve success in this business, do it after much struggle and personal challenges. When they transition to the world of politics, as two of the women mentioned in this article have, they bring with them a celebrity and connect with the public which can take years to build. For others, it puts them at an advantage, but that doesn't mean it has been easy for them to get to this point in their career. We often have discussions about more women joining politics, but the open character assassination that follows an entry into the political arena is daunting. Our actresses are used to the gossip media and have had more exposure to conjecture and cheap innuendo, however, the ordinary woman, who views this interaction from the sidelines, feels intimidated and is discouraged from entering politics. The public shaming and humiliation are just not worth it for her and her family. It is indeed tragic that not only men but women also are indulging in creating an environment that is toxic for other women. Female actors are role models, whilst the audience has matured enough not to ascribe them divine qualities, their achievements and struggles are acknowledged by the public, as is their talent, and with this comes a certain amount of respect.

Congress, Wayanad And Rahul: Flags of Discontent

By Shubhabrata Bhattacharya

Three days after 27 constituents of the INDIA bloc congregated at Delhi's Ramlila Maidan to protest against the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government, the leaders of both parties held parallel road shows at the picturesque Kalpetta, the district headquarters of Wayanad, and filed nominations opposing each other in the Lok Sabha poll. Fissures and fissures within fissures mar the INDIA bloc. In West Bengal, the Trinamool Congress has opted to go solo, without the Congress and the Left parties. And in turn, the Congress and the Left, which are united in Bengal and presumably elsewhere too, stand apart in Kerala, as part of different coalitions.

Complex Equations



Reacting to Rahul Gandhi's candidature in Wayanad, Communist Party of India (CPI) general secretary D. Raja, whose wife Annie Raja - also president of the National Federation of Indian Women - is fighting the Gandhi scion, wondered why Rahul, whose Yatras and campaigns were aimed at combating the BJP, chose not to

contest a seat where the party would have been his main challenger.

The BJP's Kerala state chief, K. Surendran, is also contesting from Wayanad. In 2014, his party had polled less than one lakh votes, and in 2019, it stayed away from the contest. The fight in Wayanad, a seat held by the

Congress since 2009, is primarily influenced by his proximity to Yechury. Despite this friendliness, Kerala Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan, perhaps reflecting fissures within the CPI(M) itself, minced no words when he recently termed Rahul's Wayanad candidature "inappropriate". He echoed D. Raja's views, asking "Has he come here to contest against the NDA, or is the Left his target?" Vijayan went a step further. "The Congress played a key role in levelling corruption allegations linked to the Aam Aadmi Party's (AAP) liquor policy in Delhi, which led the Enforcement Directorate (ED) to go after Arvind Kejriwal. When Manish Sisodia was arrested, Congress complained why Kejriwal was not being taken into custody," he noted at a campaign rally for Annie Raja.

Pinarayi Questions Rahul's Candidature

Rahul's bonhomie with Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI-M) General Secretary, Sitaram Yechury, is visible in all INDIA bloc meetings. The Congress leader's diatribes against wealth creators and his Left-leaning stance on most issues are perceived to be

What Liberals Get Wrong About 'White Rural Rage' ó Almost Everything

If you've been watching television or tracking trending topics over the last few weeks, you've probably seen or read something about 'white rural rage.' This is owed to the publication of a new book, *White Rural Rage*, by Tom Schaller and Paul Waldman, whose thesis is that white rural Americans, despite representing just 16 percent of the American electorate, are a threat to the world's oldest constitutional democracy.

In an interview on MSNBC's Morning Joe, Schaller gave this unvarnished assessment of the rage he sees overflowing in the heartland. Rural whites, he said, are 'the most racist, xenophobic, anti-immigrant, anti-gay geo-demographic group in the country.' He called them, 'the most conspiracist group,' 'anti-democratic,' 'white nationalist and white Christian nationalists.' On top of that, rural whites are also 'most likely to excuse or justify violence as an acceptable alternative to peaceful public discourse.'

This premise has triggered a backlash towards rural voters from some on the left. Amanda Marcotte, writing for Salon, said she's tired of handling rural voters 'with kid gloves,' and time has come to pop the 'racist, homophobic, sexist bubble' they all live in. Daily Beast columnist Michael Cohen agreed, writing that 'these aren't hurtful, elitist stereotypes by Acela Corridor denizens and bubble-dwelling liberals' — they're facts. David Corn, the D.C. bureau chief at Mother Jones, piled on, agreeing that 'white rural voters [are] the slice of the public that endangers the constitutional future of the republic.'

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This latest obsession with rural rage is nothing new. After 2016, when rural voters in Michigan, Wisconsin and Pennsylvania put former President Donald Trump over the top, Democrats tried to figure out why they had gone so sour on the Democratic Party. Some liberal thinkers called out the left's reflexive condescension and dismissal of rural voters that escalated during the George W. Bush administration and peaked with Hillary Clinton's campaign and her dismissal of Trump supporters as a 'basket of deplorables.' Some said the party should increase attention to rural issues and nearby rural communities.

But don't be misled. The publication and widespread celebration of *White Rural Rage* among progressive circles is doing something different than those post-2016 post-mortems. It is not an attempt to understand the needs and concerns of rural America. Instead, it's an outpouring of frustration with rural America that might feel cathartic for liberals, but will only serve to further marginalize and demonize a segment of the American population that already feels forgotten and dismissed by the experts and elites.

The people doing the work of protecting democracy in rural America recognized this immediately. The morning of the MSNBC interview, I woke up to a mountain of messages and threads from rural organizers, community activists and local officials from across the country. Each one was distressed over what they considered the authors' harsh and hurtful accusations about the communities they cherish and strive to uplift.

What seemingly set apart this book is that the authors claimed to have data backing up their assertions. 'We provide the receipts,' Schaller said in the interview. What is their data, my friends and colleagues asked, and why do they get it so wrong? Imagine my surprise when I picked up the book and saw that some of that research was mine.

I'm an academic who studies rural Americans and lives in rural Maine. My job and passion is to pore over reams of data, including some of the largest surveys of rural voters ever conducted. Sitting on my computer are detailed responses from over 25,000 rural voters that I have conducted over the last decade and used to publish a range of peer-reviewed and widely cited research. And I've done it all largely to make sense of why rural voters are continually drawn to the Republican Party.

But the thing about rage ó I've never found it.

The problem with this 'rage' thesis is much larger than the fact that my research, and that of others, is being misinterpreted and misunderstood. What the authors are getting wrong about rural America is exactly what many Democrats have been getting wrong for decades ó and appear to be doing so again in this critical presidential election year. Beyond the weaknesses of this one book, and the prospects of another deeply divisive election, this new rage thesis worries me.

Academics can and do disagree on what is motivating non-college-educated whites to vote for Donald Trump. I don't pretend that we have settled on a single answer. I do know that there is something particular about Trump's appeal in rural America and that demographics alone do not explain it. In rural America, women are more likely to vote for Trump; so are young people; so are poor as well as rich. Place matters. But ruralness is not reducible to rage. And to say so is to overlook the nuanced ways in which rural Americans engage in politics. They are driven by a sense of place, community and often, a desire for recognition and respect. This, as I have recently argued in a new book, is the defining aspect of the rural-urban divide ó a sense of shared fate among rural voters, what academics call a 'politics of place,' that is expressed as a belief in self-reliance, rooted in local community and concerned that rural ways of living will soon be forced to disappear.

In recent years, that rural political identity has morphed into resentment ó a collective

grievance against experts, bureaucrats, intellectuals and the political party that seeks to empower them, Democrats.

Yes, such resentment is a real phenomenon in rural areas. But words matter; rage and resentment are not interchangeable terms. Rage implies irrationality, anger that is unjustified and out of proportion. You can't talk to someone who is enraged. Resentment is rational, a reaction based on some sort of negative experience. You may not agree that someone has been treated unfairly, but there is room to empathize. Research both by me and by others has illuminated how resentment is driven by the complex rural identity that, while occasionally intersecting with national political currents, is rooted in the unique context of rural life. Rage, both as a soundbite and as presented in the book, oversimplifies and misrepresents these debates. And so does the assumption that all the holders of these views are white, and that this rage is motivated by racism. Racism exists in all parts of the country and is embedded in American politics. But what the research shows is that while there are deep and persistent racial resentments in rural communities, despite a slight correlation between the two, rural resentment is an attitude distinct from racial prejudice. So far, Republicans are the political party that has figured out how to speak to that rural identity effectively. I sympathize with the idea that, as Schaller and Waldman and many other commentators have pointed out, in terms of policies, Democrats arguably do more for rural areas and rural residents than Republicans do. After Democrats passed Obamacare, rural residents stood to gain the most in states that expanded Medicaid, but two-thirds of uninsured rural residents missed out because they lived in states that refused to expand coverage ó and those states were almost exclusively governed by Republicans. Paul Krugman is often quick to point out that 'because rural America is poorer than urban America, it pays much less per person in federal taxes, so in practice major metropolitan areas hugely subsidize the countryside.' And it is true that the Biden administration is currently overseeing billions in new federal spending that is disproportionately going to rural communities across America.

So, the problem Democrats haven't been able to solve isn't policy; it's politics. And Democrats who give in to the simplistic rage thesis are essentially letting themselves off the hook on the politics, suggesting that rural Americans are irrational and beyond any effort to engage them. That would be a massive mistake, one that does truly threaten democracy. Democrats have an opportunity to do better in rural America. We need them to do better, not because Democrats' policy fixes are always the solution, but because

our political system only works when competitive elections hold officials accountable. One-party dominance throws the system off-center, misrepresents interests, sows distrust.

The first step for Democrats is to start thinking ó and talking ó about rural America right. Reading *White Rural Rage* won't help with that. The authors have no expertise in rural issues and conducted no original research for the book. They approached the topic as journalists and committed the same errors countless reporters have made when they share with the outside world what they saw from a few days traversing some small town in 'flyover country' ó an occurrence all the more routine as local newspapers in rural America shutter. The authors of *White Rural Rage* make two persistent types of error in analyzing the data on rural Americans.

First, they routinely fall victim to the logical fallacy of composition when they attribute group characteristics to individuals. For example, they suggest that since authoritarianism predicted support for Donald Trump in the 2016 Republican primaries, and rural residents support Trump, rural residents are the most likely to be authoritarian. (That's like concluding that because Massachusetts tends to vote Democratic, and Massachusetts is a wealthy state, wealthy people must vote Democratic — but the opposite is true.) As it happens, the opposite seems to be true in this case as well; leading authoritarian experts find no geographic dimension to growing authoritarianism in the U.S., and the study the authors cite early in the book to 'prove' that rural residents are 'more likely to favor violence over democratic deliberation' says nothing about violence, or deliberation or authoritarianism. Work by scholars they cite actually shows the opposite, too: Rural residents are less, not more, likely to support political violence.

This same logical fallacy comes into play when they weave together a string of facts about Christian nationalists: Because white evangelicals are most likely to support Christian nationalist beliefs, and because 43 percent of rural residents identify as evangelical, they assert that the hotbed of Christian nationalism is in rural communities. The same goes for their assertions about QAnon. Perhaps the worst guilt-by-association error is found right in the title; even in the reddest of rural counties, 20 to 30 percent of voters ó still largely white ó routinely support Democrats. One might ask why, given all the supposed rage, are some rural Americans still voting for Democrats, election after election? You wouldn't know it from the title or press tour, but Schaller and Waldman must frequently hedge their bets in the text, acknowledging that just a minority of rural residents often believe the most headline-grabbing factoid.

Republicans scramble to contain abortion 'earthquake'

First came the Florida state Supreme Court decision allowing a six-week abortion ban to go forward. Then, it was Arizona's state Supreme Court bombshell decision restoring an 1864 law effectively banning all abortions, with exceptions only for the life of the mother. Not long after Donald Trump said the issue should be left to the states, the GOP was reeling Wednesday from the fallout of acknowledging vulnerabilities on the twin issues of abortion and in vitro fertilization virtually all across the map. Even Trump conceded Wednesday the two rulings posed problems for the party, telling reporters in Atlanta that the Arizona decision went too far.

"Florida is probably going to change," he said. "Arizona is definitely going to change, everybody wants that to happen." Later, at a Chick-fil-A, Trump would not take a definitive position when asked whether physicians should be punished for administering abortions.

"Let that be to the states," he said. "Everything we're doing now is states, and states' rights."

The one-two punch of both Sun Belt decisions will have seismic implications for campaigns up and down the ballot in the run-up to November, and Republicans were scrambling to contain the fallout by distancing themselves from an issue that still animates whole swaths of the GOP.

"Republicans were on offense, they won constantly on this," said Doug Heye, a veteran Republican strategist. "Now, post-Dobbs, the situation is reversed. Republicans are having to react, and they don't know where they're going to have to

react." They're constantly responding, and the conversation is going to revolve around those places where the restrictions are the strictest. "The issue shows no signs of fading and not just in Arizona. In Florida, voters will have a chance to overturn a six-week ban this fall with a ballot initiative. In Nevada and Montana, home to other competitive Senate seats, activists are actively trying to get similar measures in front of voters for November, driving turnout that could help Democrats at the top of the ticket. That all is putting abortion rights as a winning issue for Democrats in the 2022 midterms as front-and-center in a handful of battleground states that are poised to have initiatives protecting access to the procedure on the ballot. That includes Arizona, where organizers said they have collected well above the necessary signatures to qualify for the ballot, giving voters the opportunity to override the ban. And the problem for Republicans doesn't stop at abortion, but extends to the possible curtailment of IVF. A constellation of right-leaning groups, from former Vice President Mike Pence's Advancing American Freedom to the Heritage Foundation, have mounted efforts to restrict the widely popular procedure.

"Republicans," said Christine Matthews, a Republican pollster, "are going to have to not be on the other side of IVF or I mean, we're looking at an issue that is 90 percent supported by Americans."

In Florida, the court also triggered a six-week abortion ban that will become law on May 1, just six months before the general election.

Justin Sayfie, a Miami-based partner at the

lobbying firm Ballard Partners who was the top policy adviser for former Republican Gov. Jeb Bush, said the ballot question and abortion laws in Florida will make the issue dominant for voters and require Republicans to run a flawless and perfect campaign in order to succeed in November up and down the ballot in Florida.

"It will require more effort and more resources to achieve the same outcome than would have been the case without the abortion amendment and without the six-week ban in effect," he said, noting that Florida Republicans have a large voter-registration advantage.

Sayfie recommended that Republicans turn the abortion question around to Democrats to specify which gestational limits they support on the procedure, but also added that November's outcome would greatly hinge on whether an outside group or individual launched a well-funded campaign to get people to vote against the amendment.

"If you're the Democratic Party, you want to lean in as hard as you can into reproductive rights," Sayfie said, "and for the Republican Party you want to lean in as hard as you can on immigration and the economy." Republican leaders, for their part, know there isn't much of an advantage in avoiding the topic, and are urging candidates to lean into talking about abortion. Last month, the National Republican Campaign Committee issued guidance urging candidates not to shy away from talking about their position. And Montana Sen. Steve Daines, who leads the National Republican Senatorial Committee, praised Trump's position of leaving it up to

the states.

But if Republicans are talking about abortion, they are also moving swiftly to distance themselves from the hardest-line positions on the issue, with those running for Senate in political battlegrounds, including Dave McCormick of Pennsylvania and Sam Brown of Nevada, aligning themselves with Trump's message that abortion will be left up to the states. Former Republican Rep. Mike Rogers, who is running for the open seat in Michigan, told POLITICO in a statement that a national ban is "at odds with the Michigan Constitution," referring to the 2022 ballot initiative that enshrined abortion protections in the state.

Rep. John Duarte, a vulnerable Republican from California, said that he is happy that the top of our ticket is in step with the American voters. "It's what we've been looking for," Duarte said. "In California, there's gonna be plenty of access to abortion as it's left to the states."

In Florida, vulnerable incumbent Rep. Anna Paulina Luna (R-Fla.) introduced legislation that would cut off federal maternal grants from states that ban IVF. Likewise, Sen. Rick Scott (R-Fla.), who is up for reelection in November, introduced a resolution with Florida Republican Rep. Kat Cammack last month that says Congress supports IVF. But while Florida has raced away from Democrats in recent years, Arizona has emerged as a new battleground. It's a major prize for the party and one that they are desperate to retain after it went for President Joe Biden in 2020. Democrats have also captured Senate seats there in 2022 and 2018.

Arizona's abortion ban is a political nightmare for Republicans in the 2024 election

When the US supreme court overturned Roe v Wade in 2022, Republicans across the country cheered. Freed from Roe's regulations, GOP lawmakers promptly blanketed the US south and midwest in near-total abortion bans.

But today, after a string of electoral losses, stories of women being denied abortions and polls that confirm abortion bans remain wildly unpopular, the political calculus has changed. Republicans are now trying to slow down the car whose brakes they cut off and to convince voters that, if the car crashes, they had nothing to do with it anyway. Nowhere encapsulates the GOP's backpedal on abortion better than Arizona, whose state supreme court on Tuesday ruled to let an 1864 near-total abortion ban go into effect. That ban, which outlaws abortion in all cases except to save the life of a woman, was passed before Arizona became a state, before the end of the civil war and before women gained the right to vote. Kari Lake, a Republican running to represent Arizona in the US Senate and a diehard ally of Donald Trump, once called that ban "a great law". But on Tuesday, the inflammatory politician became one of

several GOP officials to denounce the ruling, urging the state legislature to come up with an immediate commonsense solution that Arizonans can support. On Wednesday, Trump also indicated that he thought Arizona's near-total ban "whose revival was enabled by a US supreme court ruling he has repeatedly taken credit for" had gone too far. "It'll be straightened out and, as you know, it's all about states' rights," he said. Republican state lawmakers denounced the decision, but halted an effort by Democrats on Wednesday to repeal the law, instead voting to move to a recess to prevent a vote on the matter.

Abortion remains banned past 15 weeks in Arizona, since the 1864 ban is being held up by legal delays. But Arizona is expected to be a key battleground state in the 2024 elections, and abortion-rights supporters have gathered more than half a million signatures in support of a ballot measure to enshrine abortion rights in the state constitution. Democrats are hoping that measure will boost turnout and bring their candidates "including Joe Biden" to victory. In other words, this ban threatens

to become a political nightmare for Republicans come November.

Lake and Trump are caught in the quandary that is now facing Republicans in Arizona and beyond its borders. For 50 years, the GOP became increasingly wedded to the anti-abortion movement, passing restrictions that cut off access to the procedure and littering the courts with lawsuits to overturn Roe. These restrictions won them votes from anti-abortion advocates, as well as cash from influential advocacy groups. But because Roe stopped many of these restrictions from taking effect, it shielded Republicans from reckoning with the real-world consequences of anti-abortion policies "or with the outrage of voters. Since Roe was overturned, and those real-world consequences have come into focus, abortion rights-related ballot measures have succeeded in several Republican strongholds, including Kansas and Kentucky.

Lake didn't say what that "commonsense solution" might be, but other Republicans have tried to take a stab at it. Juan Ciscomani, who represents Arizona in the

US House, called the decision no less than "a disaster" and claimed he was a "strong supporter of empowering women to make their own healthcare choices". He also, in the same statement, said the 15-week ban "protected the rights of women and new life". This seems to be the party line that many Arizona Republicans are now congealing around: they will support a 15-week ban, which the state legislature first passed in 2022, but not a near-total ban. This, too, is a gamble. Last year, when Virginia Republicans tried to take control of the state legislature by proposing to "compromise" and ban abortion past 15 weeks of pregnancy, they fell short.

Yet the post-Roe electoral firepower of abortion has never been tested in a presidential election. Biden has spent months trying to blame abortion bans on Trump, since Trump appointed three of the justices who overturned Roe. Trump, meanwhile, alternates between congratulating himself for overturning Roe, both rebuking and flirting with the idea of a national ban, and claiming, as he did earlier this week, that abortion access should now be left up to the states.

What is killing Indian-origin students in US

Many Indian students dream of studying in the United States. It represents a chance to gain world-class education and career opportunities. However, there are factors that could turn the American Dream into a nightmare for Indian students. The spike in deaths of Indian and Indian-origin students in the US highlights these risks.

The body of an Indian-origin student, who was missing for a month, was found in Ohio on Tuesday (April 9). This takes the number of deaths of Indian and Indian-origin students in the US in 2024 to 11. And we are just in the fourth month of the year. There is a desire among Indians for education abroad, especially in the US. This has also become a blessing for American universities. Nowadays, Indian students are increasingly choosing to study at US universities, creating a boom for American Universities.

The number of Indian students in the US has skyrocketed, with a staggering 35% increase in enrolment for the academic year 2022-23 compared to the previous year.

In the US, Indian-origin students are around 275,000 and make 25% of total foreign students and bringing in \$9 billion per year in terms of fees and expenses, according to the Open Doors Report.

A yearning for better career prospects drives this trend.

EDUCATION IN THE US AT WHAT COST?

Indian students believe that a US degree unlocks doors to higher-paying jobs, but at what cost? Recent deaths of Indian students in the US have raised safety concerns.

Since the beginning of the year 2024, the Indian students' news of death has been becoming louder. The Indian students became the victim of violent attacks, whether the attacks were for money or personal reasons.

In a very recent case, Mohammad Abdul Arfath, a 25-year-old Indian-origin student, missing for a month, was found dead in Cleveland, Ohio, on Tuesday.

This took the number of deaths of Indian and Indian-origin students in the US this year to 11, a stunning number.

REASONS BEHIND DEATHS OF INDIAN STUDENTS IN US

A prominent diaspora body has found out the reasons behind the deaths and has asked various agencies of the US government, universities and student associations to work towards addressing the spike in the deaths of Indian-origin students in the US in recent months.

Lakshmi Thalanki from Boston, who collected data on the deaths of more than 10 students, noted, "The sudden surge of deaths among Indian students is alarming and suspicious," reported news agency PTI.

An analysis by the Foundation for India

and Indian Diaspora Studies (FIIDS) found the causes of these incidents range from suspicious shootings/kidnapping, environmental deaths due to lack of safety knowledge (monoxide poisoning, hypothermia), mental issues triggering suicides, and even suspicious accidents to violent crimes. Since the sudden rise in suspicious deaths, rumours have been circulating around the Indian American community about potential hate crimes, especially as many deaths are clustered around East and Midwest universities, especially in Cleveland in Ohio, Illinois and Indiana.

Days before the body of Mohammad Abdul Arfath was found, another Indian-origin student was found dead.

Uma Satya Sai Gadde, an Indian student, died in Ohio's Cleveland in April. A police investigation into the death is underway. Before Gadde's case, there had been several similar incidents that deeply affected communities in the US and in India.

NOTABLE CASES OF INDIAN STUDENTS' DEATH IN THE US

In 2024, students of Indian-American descent met with untimely deaths under various circumstances.

All students were 25 years old and under. A student from Andhra Pradesh who was studying engineering at Boston University was down to death by some unidentified assailants.

The body of Paruchuri Abhijit, 20, was found in a car in a campus forest. It is believed that the attacker had attacked him for his money and laptop.

Vivek Saini (25), an Indian student, was

tragically killed in Georgia on January 3. Saini, a master's student in computer science at the University of West Georgia, was working at a convenience store when a drug addict attacked him. The attacker, Julian Faulkner, attacked Saini with a hammer 50 times. Two Indian students named Gattu Dinesh and Nikesh, both in their early twenties, were found dead at their home in Connecticut on January 14. They had arrived in the US on January 21 to pursue further studies. According to media accounts, their deaths were attributed to a gas leak.

A Purdue University student named Neel Acharya, 22, was found dead on January 17. He studied mechanical engineering. His mother reported him missing, but sadly he was found dead a few hours later. The cause of death was not disclosed. Akul Dhawan, a 21-year-old Indian-American student, was found dead near the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign on January 20. He was in his third year of studying computer engineering. The coroner's report from the autopsy indicated that he likely passed away due to hypothermia as the Night Club denied entry.

Shreyas Reddy Benigeri, a 19-year-old Indian-American student, was found dead in his dormitory at the Lindner School of Business in Ohio on February 1. He was a first-year student studying finance.

Another Indian-American student from Purdue University, Sameer Kamath, 25, was found dead in a nature preserve on February 5. He was pursuing a doctorate in mechanical engineering. He had completed his master's degree in the

same field from Purdue University in August 2023.

CONCERNS OVER SAFETY AND WELL-BEING OF STUDENTS

The spate of deaths has cast a spotlight on the safety and well-being of Indian students in the US, who often face high expectations from their families and themselves.

Beyond these deaths, Indian students may face bias-motivated incidents too. Hate crimes and acts of discrimination, including racial slurs and vandalism, can be a concern. Gun violence, a complex issue in the US, can also be a source of anxiety for students.

A 23-year-old Indian student named Syed Mazahir Ali was attacked by four armed robbers close to his residence in Chicago on February 4. He sustained severe injuries and was admitted to the hospital. Ali was pursuing a degree in computer science at the Illinois Institute of Technology.

Though the deaths can't be attributed right away to racial or religious discrimination, they come amid a rise in Hinduphobia, which has been flagged by Indian-origin lawmakers in the US.

Recently, in a meeting held in the US Capitol where Shri Thanedar spoke about the rising concern of Hinduphobia.

Other leaders in the meeting also spoke about Hinduphobia. Suhag Shukla, representing the Hindu American Foundation, highlighted the prevalence of anti-Hindu bias, particularly on college campuses. She pointed to a recent rise in hate crimes and a lack of familiarity with Hinduism among law enforcement.

Supreme Court rejects Patanjali's apology, says wilful disobedience of order

The Supreme Court on Wednesday rejected the second apology by Patanjali in the case of misleading advertisements, asking them to be "ready to face action".

The Supreme Court on Wednesday dismissed Baba Ramdev and Acharya Balkrishna's "unconditional apology" in connection with the misleading advertisements of Patanjali's medicinal products. A bench of Justices Hima Kohli and Ahsanuddin Amanullah came down heavily on Patanjali, saying their actions were "wilful, deliberate and repeated violations" of the top court's orders.

Senior Advocate Mukul Rohatgi, appearing for the Patanjali founders, said to the bench that people make mistakes in life. However, the top court rebuked the lawyer, responding that in such cases, individuals need to suffer. "We are not blinded... We don't want to be generous in this case," the bench noted. During today's hearing, when advocate Rohatgi read out two affidavits submitted by Patanjali and its MD - Acharya Balkrishna - and another

by Baba Ramdev. "The apology is on paper. Their back is against the wall. We decline to accept this, we consider it a deliberate violation of undertaking. Be ready for something next to rejection of the affidavit," The Supreme Court said. The bench also pulled up Baba Ramdev, mentioning his seeking exemption from court appearance, citing overseas travel plans, and then filing a backdated ticket in the affidavit. "In contempt matter, when you seek exemption saying I have a ticket to travel abroad, then you are saying I don't have it? You're taking the process very lightly," the bench warned, calling the incident "perjury" in court.

The bench also rapped Patanjali for releasing their apology affidavit first to the public instead of submitting to the court. "They sent it to the media first, till 7.30 pm yesterday it was not uploaded for us. They believe in publicity clearly," Justice Kohli said. The Supreme Court also slammed the Uttarakhand government for providing licence for Patanjali products, and said three drug licencing officers

should be suspended immediately.

"When they (Patanjali) violated the statement made to you, what did you do? Sit and wiggle your thumbs? You waited for us to prod you?" Justice Kohli asked. Addressing senior advocate Dhruv Mehta, who argued for Uttarakhand State Licensing Authority, Justice Amanullah warned that he the authorities won't be let free. "We have strong objection to use of word 'bonafide' for officers. We are not going to take lightly. We will rip you apart," Justice Amanullah said.

The bench rebuked the licensing authority saying that the Supreme Court has become a "mockery now". "People think we sit in ivory towers. Your officers should be hauled up. You are in hands-in gloves with Patanjali," the top court added.

Uttarakhand Joint director Mithilesh Kumar of the Uttarakhand State Licensing Authority assured of action going forward. The next hearing in the case is on April 16, and the Supreme Court has asked Baba Ramdev and Acharya Balkrishna to appear before it.

NYC investigators probing city's migrant spending for fraud, waste and abuse'

The New York City Department of Investigation is probing billions of dollars the Adams administration has spent to manage the migrant crisis, and is bringing in one of the world's biggest accounting firms to look at the city's books, according to officials and records.

The previously unreported audit kicked off in July 2023 and is set to run through December under a \$6.9 million emergency contract between the DOI — a key watchdog agency — and accounting giant KPMG, which is serving as an outside integrity monitor of the city's migrant services, including shelters and medical care. The goal is to ferret out any potential fraud, waste or abuse and protect taxpayer dollars.

The city has come under fire for a variety of questionable practices around the migrant influx that began in spring 2022 and has brought more than 180,000 people to the five boroughs. Much of the city's

spending on migrants has been cited for a lack of transparency as more than \$7.6 billion in contracts are already in place and certain vendors face particular scrutiny over their prices and treatment of migrants. About 64,000 migrants are now in the city's care, according to official data, and most of them are families with children.

The monitorship, which DOI mentioned in City Council testimony and a press release last month, is meant to add independent oversight of the city's expenditures. It's one of about a dozen the department is currently supervising and is part of DOI's efforts to limit misuse of public funds, including around large-scale projects and initiatives.

Under the department's supervision, KPMG is responsible for reviewing hundreds of city contracts with private vendors, visiting sites weekly to identify issues and reporting any problems to

officials. The firm's duties include auditing roughly 30% of vendor invoices, interviewing shelter residents and staff and reviewing payrolls, a copy of its contract with DOI shows.

The contract requires KPMG to submit ad hoc and monthly reports to DOI, but spokespeople for the firm and department declined to comment on any findings. Gothamist obtained the contract through a public records request with the city comptroller's office, which is also monitoring migrant spending by the Adams administration. Comptroller Brad Lander has found millions of dollars in overpayments to contractors due to poor coordination among city agencies; is investigating the costs of the city's 60-day shelter limits for migrant families; and is auditing the performance of a controversial major contractor.

City officials confirmed DOI is not coordinating with the comptroller's or

mayor's offices on the KPMG audit. Department spokesperson Diane Struzzi said it used its emergency procurement powers to hire a monitor quickly and selected KPMG because it made the best offer out of five firms that submitted bids for the job. Since this is an ongoing monitorship, it would be premature to share real-time observations/findings from KPMG, she wrote in an email to Gothamist. A spokesperson for Mayor Eric Adams' office did not comment on the audit. KPMG's contract includes up to two one-year renewal options, according to the document. The firm is responsible for auditing many newly constructed shelter facilities to ensure contractor(s)' compliance with contract terms and conditions and cross-referencing rosters of the residents among the various facilities to ensure that the city is not providing (and paying for) unnecessary or duplicative services.

Why that deep-orange Gobi Manchurian is being red-flagged

Rhodamine B, a chemical dye often used commercially to give bright pink colour to wool, does something interesting when added to the popular Indo-Chinese dish Gobi Manchurian. It turns the deep-fried gobi florets into the deep orange colour that customers are all too familiar with.

We used to originally add a little bit of orange food-grade colour because it just made the dish appear nice. Otherwise, gobi dipped in cornflour and deep-fried has only a light golden colour. Today, if the dish is not orange, then people ironically think it is fake or not well-cooked, explains a Hyderabad-based restaurant chef, who did not wish to be named. The consumer expectation of certain foods being of a certain colour runs the risk of low-budget food joints and stalls resorting to use of cheap dyes as colouring agents. Food-grade colours or plant-based food colours can cost upwards of Rs 150 for as little as 15 ml. In comparison, Rhodamine B, among the most popular substitutes to colour food, costs Rs 1,000 for an entire kilo.

But the trouble is that the substance, even in minute quantities, is harmful not just to humans but also plants and animals. It causes damage to cells and brainstem tissue, and has even been red-flagged as carcinogenic. In many states in the US, such as California, products that contain Rhodamine B carry a warning on the label. Rhodamine B is also banned for use in food. In India too, the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) prohibits its use. In fact, only upon FSSAI clearance can a product use non-permitted artificial colours in food. And yet, the substance remains in rampant use. It is not only popular in Gobi Manchurian but has also been found in

candy floss (with Tamil Nadu banning use last month), red chilli powder, pink sweets and cakes, curry powder and some sauces. In 2017, a study published in the International Journal of Current Microbiology and Applied Sciences found the presence of Rhodamine B dye in close to 69 per cent of samples of chilli powder and curry obtained from Mumbai. Recently, Karnataka banned the use of this chemical and also directed strict consequences for violation of the directive — imprisonment for up to seven years and a fine of up to Rs 10 lakh. The new rule and rising awareness should see people become more alert about Rhodamine B when consuming items like Gobi Manchurian, but the danger still lurks.

Super PACs keep testing the limits of campaign finance law

Super PACs keep pushing the boundaries of campaign finance law this cycle.

They're using novel financial arrangements, like taking bridge funding in the form of undisclosed de facto loans from major donors or receiving ad revenue from a candidate's podcast. They're also continuing to take advantage of long standing loopholes in anti-coordination guidelines. The willingness to push the boundaries suggests that U.S. politics has entered the Wild West campaign financing system that many observers predicted would come in the wake of the court's weakening campaign finance laws.

It comes as super PACs are taking a more prominent role in campaigning. Total spending on independent expenditures so far this cycle is nearly 2.5 times what it was at this point in 2020. And because candidates are having more and more trouble with small-dollar fundraising, super

Adulteration remains an issue in India. As someone who has worked in a low-cost kitchen, I rarely eat outside food. The only restaurants I go to are those with ethical and transparent food philosophies, but these are very expensive and not practical to visit regularly, says the Hyderabad-based chef. He adds that most restaurant chefs are aware of the amount of colour, chemicals, salt, sugar and fat that go into making food tasty, but few will speak out because it could jeopardise their careers. The chef cautions that the unhealthiest thing to ever eat at a low-cost restaurant is mayonnaise or cheese sauce as these are made with heavy cornstarch, hydrogenated oil and sodium citrate,

which gives a nice silky texture. Sodium citrate is lethal to those with kidney disease, and on its own can cause increased thirst, muscle weakness and fatigue if eaten in large quantities. There is never any cheese in cheese sauce, he confesses.

Growing lifestyle diseases and poor health have officials concerned. A 2021 study in a diabetes journal had showed that India suffered an average GDP loss of over Rs 39 lakh per diabetic person over their working lifetime. Diseases also exert a huge burden in terms of state insurance and out-of-pocket expenditure. Thus, steps to ascertain the presence of harmful chemicals like Rhodamine B and curb their use couldn't be emphasised more.

PAC money could be even more important as the cycle continues.

As long as super PACs remain relatively under regulated in the way that they have been, the consultants who work for them and for various campaigns are going to continue trying to push the envelope using them in creative ways, said Saurav Ghosh, director for federal campaign finance reform at the nonprofit Campaign Legal Center. Because there seems to be very little risk in pushing against the supposed legal limits. The 2010 Citizens United decision opened the door for corporations, labor unions and other organizations to spend without limits as long as they don't coordinate with campaigns. And advocates say the little enforcement since then has empowered groups to take advantage of loopholes. Super PACs can raise unlimited money. That means a wealthy donor who can give only \$6,600 to a federal candidate

can give millions to an outside group backing them. Importantly, super PACs can also accept contributions from corporations and other entities that are barred from giving directly to candidates. They face few restrictions on spending, other than the coordination prohibition.

And outside spending continues to increase dramatically. Across all federal races, super PACs have spent more than \$430 million on independent expenditures already this cycle, according to FEC data, up from \$176 million at this point in 2020. The expanded role for outside groups has been accompanied by new fundraising tactics and financial relationships.

A super PAC supporting Robert F. Kennedy Jr.'s independent presidential bid has repeatedly accepted million-dollar donations from a security consultant who is also the Kennedy campaign's largest vendor, only to refund most of them months later.

From Lord Rama to Swami Vivekananda: Bharat's Ten Greatest Minds and Their Global Impact

The 10 greatest souls in India are historical and spiritual individual souls who have had a profound impact on Bharat's culture and philosophy. Their impact on the world's philosophy, tradition and culture is profound, immense and indelible. Lord Rama, hailed as an avatar of Lord Vishnu, holds a central place in the Sanatani-Hindu tradition of Bharat. He is revered for his unwavering commitment to dharma and is known as Maryada Purushottam and Adrish Purush. Rama's character epitomises righteous conduct, setting universal and timeless moral standards. His reign, referred to as Ram Rajya, symbolises an ideal society, state, government, and citizenry. Rama's name is synonymous with truth, making him the epitome of truthfulness. He willingly sacrifices personal comforts and desires for the greater good, demonstrating selflessness and a readiness to make sacrifices for the welfare of others. Rama leads by example, emphasising the importance of high moral standards, humility, and compassion in leadership and interactions with others. Another avatar of Lord Vishnu, Krishna's life and teachings are documented in the Mahabharata and the Bhagavad Gita. He is a beloved deity and philosopher. Following your destined duty without seeking the reward of your work is his core creed which has enchanted the world, particularly the modern world, where the only way to seek success is through reward. The philosophy of a human being existing as a witnessing

self is his contribution to the world of ideas and culture. Mahavira, the 24th Tirthankara of Jainism, is renowned for his teachings on non-violence, truth, and self-discipline. His philosophy centres around several fundamental principles. At its core is ahimsa, or non-violence, wherein Mahavira preached absolute non-violence towards all living beings, underlining the sanctity of every soul and the impediment to spiritual progress caused by harming any form of life. Aparigraha, or non-possessiveness, advocates minimising material possessions and attachments, believing that attachment to wealth inhibits spiritual growth. This philosophy has influenced the concept of minimalism in Western thought. Mahavira also stressed the importance of truthfulness in one's life.

Gautam Buddha

Gautam Buddha, the founder of Buddhism, is renowned for his enlightenment and teachings on the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path. Central to Buddhism is the practice of meditation, which aims to cultivate mindfulness and concentration to gain insight into reality and attain enlightenment, known as nirvana. Buddha's advocacy of the Middle Way, a balanced approach to life avoiding extremes, underscores the importance of moderation and mindfulness. Nirvana, the ultimate goal, symbolises liberation from suffering, rebirth, and attachments, representing perfect peace and spiritual enlightenment. A philosopher, theologian,

and revivalist, Adi Shankaracharya played a significant role in the revival of Advaita Vedanta and the consolidation of non-dualism doctrine. He revitalised various sects and traditions within Hinduism, promoting Advaita Vedanta as a unifying philosophical system. Shankaracharya's teachings emphasised the non-dual nature of reality and the oneness of the individual soul (Atman) with the ultimate reality (Brahman). His extensive travels and discourses contributed to a deeper understanding of spirituality in Indian society. He established monastic centres (mathas) across India, serving as hubs for preserving and disseminating Vedic knowledge and spiritual wisdom. Top of Form

TOP OF FORM

Guru Nanak

The founder of Sikhism, Guru Nanak emphasised the importance of one god, equality, and social justice. His teachings are enshrined in the Guru Granth Sahib. Guru Nanak emphasised the belief in one, formless, and omnipresent God (Ik Onkar), transcending religious boundaries. He preached the equality of all individuals, regardless of their caste, creed, or social status, promoting a society based on unity and brotherhood. Guru Nanak advocated selfless service (seva) and living an honest, righteous life as a means to connect with god. He criticised empty rituals and emphasised inner spirituality and devotion to god as the true path to salvation.

Chaitanya Mahaprabhu

A 16th-century saint and proponent of the Bhakti movement, Chaitanya Mahaprabhu is known for his devotion to Lord Krishna and the spread of the Hare Krishna mantra. He emphasised devotion (bhakti) as the path to connect with the divine and attain spiritual realisation. Chaitanya popularised the practice of chanting the Hare Krishna mantra as a means to purify the mind and soul. He encouraged complete surrender to the will of god and believed that genuine devotion arises from the heart. Chaitanya advocated universal love and saw the presence of the divine in every living being, promoting compassion and equality. His teachings often involved experiencing divine ecstasy through devotion and chanting, leading to a deep spiritual connection with Krishna.

Kabir

Monotheism: He emphasised the worship of one formless, timeless, and omnipresent god, rejecting idol worship and religious divisions. 2. Inner spirituality: Kabir taught that god resides within every individual, and one can experience the divine through inner spirituality rather than rituals. 3. Universal brotherhood: He promoted unity among all people, transcending caste and religious boundaries, and advocating for equality and love for all. 4. Simple living: Kabir emphasised a life of simplicity and renunciation of worldly desires as a path to spiritual growth. 5. Detachment and devotion: He encouraged detachment from material possessions and devotion to god

UPA's Scams and Crony Capitalism Cannot Be Glossed Over by Attacking Modi Government

The Opposition propagating false accusations against the Modi government through various social media influencers is hogwash and is politically maleficent to cover up the UPA's scam-ridden financial imprudence. The UPA's corruption is way beyond the figures of any imaginable bribes and scammed money which crippled the economy. The 10-year stint of the UPA government (2004-14) can be considered a lost decade in terms of potential, opportunities, economic growth and inclusive development, leading the economy to slip deep with an abysmal report. This period is characterised by various policies that hurt growth, increased corruption on the conflict over land, rent-seeking, unprecedented corruption in the infrastructure and mining sectors, the inability of public education to keep up with increased demands and rising aspirations and the poor delivery of public welfare schemes. The fact which is indefensible by the Congress as well, the UPA inherited an economy that was growing at 7 per cent in 2004-05, and what it bequeathed to the Modi government: (1) a growth slowdown, a growth rate that is below 5 per cent, (2) perilous state of public finances with very

high levels of fiscal deficit, much higher than what was shown as pointed out by Vijay Kelkar, for which subsequently the UPA government ended up borrowing 27 per cent more from the market than what it had estimated in the Budget of FY 2011-12, (3) depreciating currency and (4) high rate of inflation. The Opposition which is slamming the present dispensation on the electoral bonds, calling it the biggest scam and incorporate-political nexus, has forgotten the UPA era financial impropriety, wherein bad loans during the UPA regime jumped by 132 per cent as the Congress granted a whopping Rs 36 lakh crore to corporates during their tenure by waiving their loans. Vijay Mallya besides defaulting on a Rs 14,50,000 crore loan was again granted Rs 15,00,000 crore of loan, which logically was lost. In September 2013, the Gross Non-Performing Asset (GNPA) ratio to Public Sector Banks (PSB) including restructured loans was as high as 12.3 per cent, amounting to a whopping Rs 39 trillion by March 2012, largely due to political interference by the UPA government on the lending decisions of the PSBs. Thus, crony capitalism, the nexus between the government and the

crony corporates created a compromised banking eco-system. The GNPA to GDP ratio stood at 4.4 per cent at the end of September 2023, indicating a stable and healthier credit ecosystem by comprehensive measures taken by the Central government and the RBI, leading to an aggregate recovery of Rs 10.16 lakh crore by July 2023. During FY 2004-14 (two stints of the UPA regime), India's external vulnerability increased by multiples because of over-dependence on external commercial borrowing (ECB), with a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 21.1 per cent. On the other hand, under the NDA, during the 9-year period ended FY23, ECB grew at an annual rate of 4.5 per cent. During FY 2004-14, India's Current Account Deficit (CAD) was as high as 2.3 per cent which has been significantly brought down by the Modi government in the past decade to an all-time low of 1.1 per cent. In the past decade, the Modi government has made India a 4.1+ trillion USD economy against 1.8 trillion USD at the end of the UPA 2. The total value of pending oil bonds by the end of 2013-14, when the Modi government took over, was Rs 1,34,423 crore. The UPA government has

failed to check the rise in the prices of essential commodities, particularly food and fuel prices. It failed to strengthen the TPDS. Insufficient procurement of wheat led to higher costs of wheat and the private traders were given free rein to buy foodgrains from farmers by putting restraints on the FCI, and along with this, a fair MSP was not offered. The UPA regime also put a cut in the allocations of food grains to the states. UPA government encouraged Futures, trading in 25 essential commodities, which resulted in speculations and high price rise of such commodities recording a Retail Inflation Rate as high as 25 per cent. Despite fierce opposition from the BJP, then in the Opposition, the UPA government continued with that. The principled and methodical approach, with a political will to achieve, is at the core of the success of the Modi dispensation. On the other hand, UPA 1&2 can be considered as the entitlement regime, propagating euphemisms, like rural job guarantee, Universal Right to Education for children between 6-14, Right to Information, food security et al, which failed to fulfil aspirations of most of the Indians.

WE HAVE all been there. The latest 'quick fix' diet, and all good intentions are well and truly out the window, as you sit amid a sea of chocolate wrappers, guilt ridden.

With so many different diets offering quick results and dramatic weight loss, it can be difficult to see the wood for the trees. The main thing to realise is research has shown time and again that 'quick fix' diets barely last a couple of weeks, and seldom keep the weight off long-term.

So, what are the pros and cons of four popular approaches to weight loss, and what should you do?

Mediterranean

WHAT'S THE DEAL?

The Mediterranean diet is one of the best ways of eating out there, as proven by many scientific studies of the health benefits it provides.

The principles of the Mediterranean diet include eating lots of fruits, vegetables, cutting out processed foods and salt and limiting red meat intake.

In essence, eating real food in sensible portions. However, don't think that you can eat pizza and pasta to your heart's content – we aren't talking about that sort of Mediterranean diet!

PROS

Contains a good balance of carbs, whilst being low in processed foods and high in healthy fats like olive oil, as well as nuts and fish. This diet can be cheap and easy to keep up as it is full of basic ingredients.

CONS

The only minor downside to this diet is that it generally means you need to cook meals yourself. However, cooking for this diet is quite straightforward, and most restaurants should provide some healthier options that adhere to the principles.

LOW-FAT DIET

WHAT'S THE DEAL?

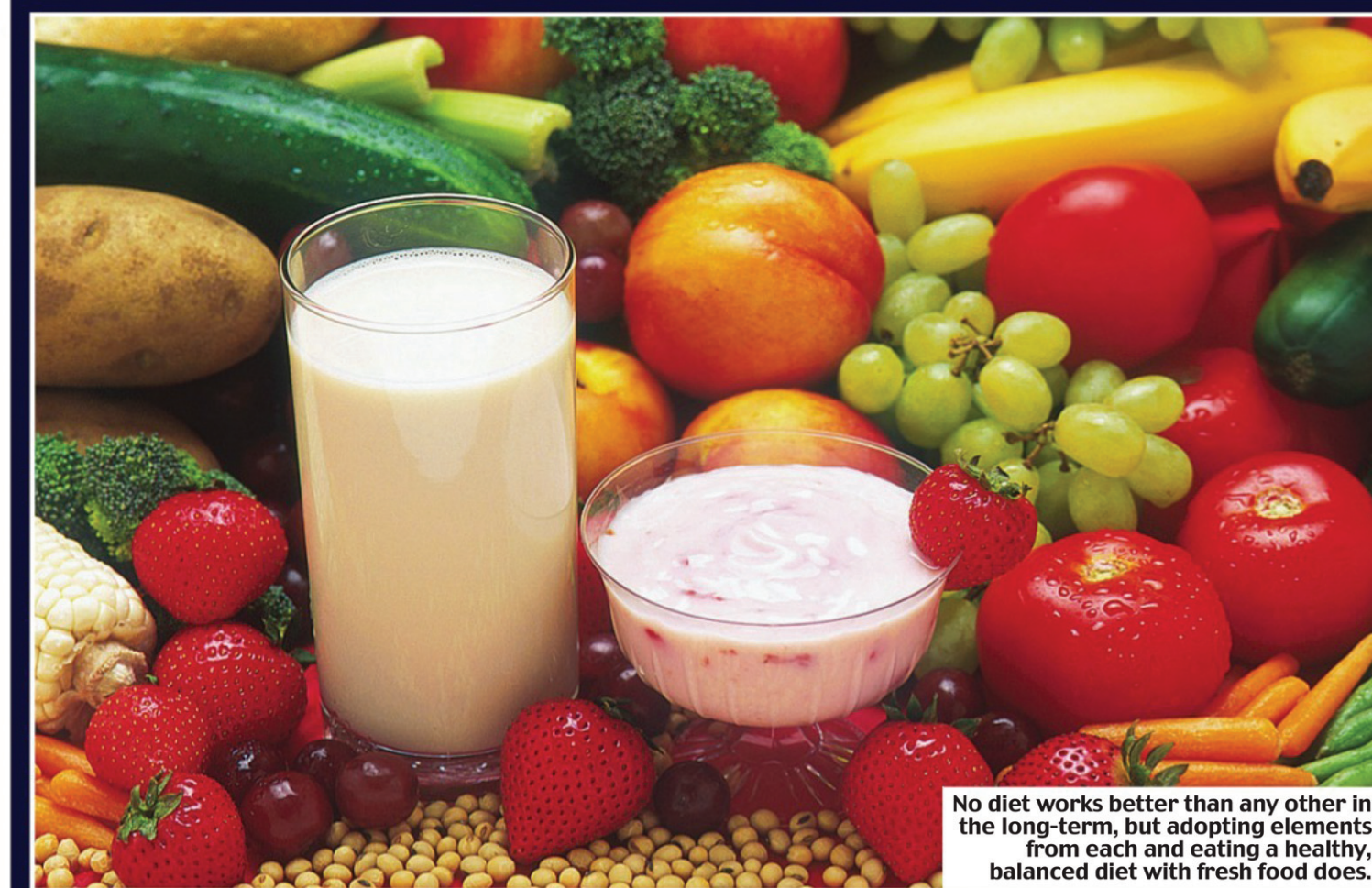
Traditionally one of the most common diets in the industry – most of us will have tried a low fat diet at some point. The low fat diet is pretty much what it says on the tin. The rest of your diet tends to remain the same, with fats replaced with more carbs and sugar.

PROS

The mass of food choices available in most supermarkets make it an easy option for many.

CONS

While the low-fat diet has been recommended to us for years, it is actually based on flawed science as fat is essential for



No diet works better than any other in the long-term, but adopting elements from each and eating a healthy, balanced diet with fresh food does.

Diet that suits you the best

healthy brain and body development. In fact, it may have done us more harm than good as it has pushed us into eating more carbs and sugar to replace the fats we aren't consuming.

Has this medical advice actually made things worse?

LOW-CARB DIET

WHAT'S THE DEAL?

Low carb diets include the Atkins diet, Dukan diet and Banting diet. These diets have become very popular in recent years as a backlash to the low-fat diet. While this diet is okay in principle – cutting out certain

carbs can mean cutting out the sugars and processed grains that many carb-rich foods are comprised of. The problem is that most people just think of white bread, pasta, biscuits and cakes instead of good carbs such as vegetables and whole-grains.

PROS

Cutting out carbs can be good for weight loss because for most people that means cutting out the high-sugar, high-fat processed products that go hand in hand with certain carbs.

CONS

Difficult to maintain as many of

the foods we eat contain carbs. Good carbs are fine and help keep you full, and they also add fibre, which is essential to help keep us healthy.

LOW-GI DIET

WHAT'S THE DEAL?

Originally designed for people with diabetes, Low GI diets aim to encourage low glycemic index foods. Low GI foods break down more slowly in the body, which means we don't get the peaks in blood sugar that lead to high levels of insulin, and a rapid

drop in blood sugar – which leads us to reaching for more sugar as a result.

PROS

Many of the Low GI foods have better health benefits. Low GI foods have also been found to help you metabolise fat more efficiently.

CONS

May cause you to make unhealthy food choices as, for example, fat lowers the GI of food so crisps have lower GI than normal potatoes. You are far better just sticking to an eating plan that reduces processed food as much as possible.

Cutting out carbs can be good for weight loss

Secret to feeling young is superb fitness

PICTURE FOR REPRESENTATION



Scientists have discovered that elderly people who were elite athletes in their youth have much healthier muscles at the cellular level than those of non-athletes.

WE'VE long searched for the key to staying 'forever young.'

Serums promise to keep our skin from aging, diets keep us looking trim and supplements help keep our bodies healthy.

Yet, the true secret to remaining youthful has been right under our nose the whole time – exercise.

Scientists say it is 'superb' fitness that keeps people young.

Experts from University of Guelph, in Canada, revealed elderly people who were elite athletes in their youth – or later in life – have much 'younger muscles.'

The elderly people at the heart of the study still compete as master athletes in their old age, and have much healthier muscles at the cellular level than those of non-athletes.

The study, published in the

Journal of Applied Physiology, compared world-class track and field athletes in their 80s with people the same age who were living independently.

There has been little research of aging and muscle weakening in master athletes in this age group – until now.

Exercise is the key to remain forever young

Lead study author Dr Geoff Power said: 'One of the most unique and novel aspects of this study is the exceptional participants.'

'These are people in their 80s and 90s who actively compete in world masters track and field championships.'

'We have seven world cham-

pions. These individuals are the crème de la crème of aging.'

The elderly athletes' legs were found to be 25 per cent stronger on average than their non-athlete counterparts.

Furthermore, the athletes also had nearly 14 per cent more total muscle mass.

They also were determined to have nearly one-third more motor units in their leg muscles than non-athletes.

More motor units – which consist of nerve and muscle fibers – mean more muscle mass and greater strength, the study noted.

With normal aging processes, the nervous system loses motor neurons – which leads to a loss of motor units, reduced muscle mass and less strength, speed and power.

When to stop drinking caffeine to get a good night's sleep



You may want to say, "Well, let's try to cut down caffeine and not drink it after a certain time in the afternoon and see if that improves my sleeping habits." So it's really something every individual has to experiment with for themselves -- how much caffeine they drink and when they drink it.

CNN: What factors affect how we react to caffeine?

Van Dam: Your lifestyle makes a difference. For example, people who smoke metabolize caffeine in the liver about twice as fast. If you're a smoker, likely you can drink caffeine up to a later time and still be OK in terms of sleeping.

But there are other factors, like if you use oral contraceptives as a woman, it takes twice as long to metabolize caffeine. It may be that you were able to drink caffeine in the evening and still sleep well, and then you start using oral contraceptives and you may see that you can't sleep as well anymore.

Genetics also plays a role, since some people have variants in their genetic code that affects

enzymes in the liver that metabolize and get rid of the caffeine. This can make you metabolize it slower or faster, too.

CNN: How much caffeine is too much?

Van Dam: In general, it's recommended by associations like the U.S. Food & Drug Administration to keep caffeine at 400 milligrams per day or less. If you look at a normal 8-ounce cup of coffee, that has about 100 milligrams of caffeine, so that would be up to four cups of coffee per day.

Another recommendation is to keep it to no more than 200 milligrams per sitting. Even though you may drink four cups a day, you don't want to drink four cups in one go -- that will be too much for the body to metabolize, for most people at least.

CNN: Is caffeine for everyone?

Van Dam: Caffeine does truly pick you up a little bit and make you even more alert. So particularly for people with routine tasks, it can be beneficial. For example, if you

must drive a lot at nighttime, or if you're in the military and you're on duty to monitor, but nothing is really happening for hours on end.

But not everybody will need it. You may have enough energy or get good enough sleep that you can go through the day without any caffeine.

And there's no reason to drink it if you don't want to. Because even if you like the taste of coffee, you can always drink decaffeinated coffee, and there's nothing wrong with that either.

CNN: Is caffeine safe?

Van Dam: Recently, people have been very concerned about caffeine in relation to cancer risk, cardiovascular risk or other health outcomes. And the research on that has actually been very reassuring. By now, coffee is probably one of the most studied beverages.

So, if you're enjoying coffee, you're enjoying caffeine, and you can consume it in moderation and you don't have any detrimental effects -- you don't really have to worry too much about the health effects of coffee or caffeine.

Many of us start our days the same way: with a cup of coffee or tea. Caffeine is as much a part of our routine as brushing our teeth or getting dressed for the day.

Maybe your habit extends to a cup of coffee in the afternoon, or you have a soda with your dinner. And maybe as a result, you laid in bed awake later thinking of where you went wrong instead of getting needed sleep.

Rob M. van Dam, a researcher in epidemiology and nutrition from the National University of Singapore, explains when to wisely consume caffeine, what qualifies as too much and what to know about why it affects each of us differently.

This interview has been condensed and edited for clarity.

CNN: How do we know when it's time to stop drinking coffee during the day so we can still get a good night's sleep?

Rob van Dam: That sounds like a simple question, but unfortunately there's not one answer to it. And that's because different people react very differently to caffeine.

If you're getting tremors, feeling suddenly nervous, or your heart rate is changing, it could well be that you're drinking too much caffeine. And similarly, it can interfere with a good night's sleep.

Americans are not getting the mental health treatment they need, report says

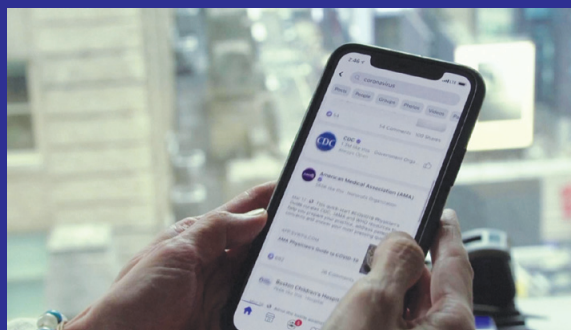
Americans are not getting the mental health assistance they need during the worst pandemic of the last century, according to the inaugural State of the Nation's Mental Health report released Monday by Anthem, the largest for-profit managed health care company in the Blue Cross Blue Shield Association. That is especially true for the youngest, oldest and most impoverished -- the very groups often hardest hit by the sickness, death and economic uncertainty brought on by Covid-19, the report said. "Rates of anxiety and depression reported by patients went up and yet the ability to access mental health services actually went down," said Dr. Shantanu Agrawal, Anthem's chief health officer. The Anthem publication follows a report released Friday by the US Government

Accountability Office exploring the country's ability to access mental and behavioral health services during the pandemic. The GAO reported that 68% of nearly 3,400 community clinics that serve low-income people with mental health and substance abuse conditions had to cancel, reschedule or turn away patients over the past three months due to lack of staff or funds.

"Our community health clinics were already underfunded before the pandemic, so if you then have any reduction in revenue that has an immediate effect," said Chuck Ingoglia, the president and CEO of the National Council for Behavioral Health, which represents many of the nation's community clinics.

"Covid has disproportionately impacted low-income

individuals, and these are the same individuals that are served by our member agencies," Ingoglia said. "Yet at the same time it has been harder for them to continue to access their necessary mental health or substance abuse treatment."



'A perfect storm for mental health needs'

For over a year now, the pandemic has shaken the United States to its core, delivering one devastating blow after another and cracking the very foundations of our lives -- mentally, physically,

emotionally. Add to that the stress of "a burgeoning alcohol and drug crisis ... deep structural problems related to social injustice in our country" and we have "a kind of perfect storm for mental health needs," said Dr. Charles Marmar, the chairman of the department of psychiatry at NYU Langone Medical Center. "There is a profound increase in the need for high quality, accessible, equitable mental health care for all Americans. There is

no question about that," said Marmar, who also directs the Center for Alcohol Use disorder and PTSD at NYU. Warning signs of what Marmar calls a "wave of devastation" due to the mental health consequences of Covid-19 have been mounting for some time. Within two months

of lockdown in 2020, a Kaiser Family Foundation poll found worry or stress had led 56% of US adults to experience at least "one negative effect on their mental health and well-being, such as problems with sleeping or eating, increased alcohol use or worsening chronic conditions." Almost 41% of Americans were struggling with mental health issues stemming from the pandemic, including depression, anxiety and suicidal thoughts, according to a US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention survey conducted in June 2020. In August of last year, the Commonwealth Fund looked at mental health concerns around the world and found the US ranked first among nine nations, including Australia, Canada, France, Germany, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Sweden and the UK.

A perfect spot for a languid weekend, just 13 km from Shimla

PICTURES: KALYANI PRASHEF

The stunning
route to
Tattapani

LOSING ONESELF IN CHHARABRA

SHIMLA may be overcrowded and an increasingly boring option for many of us, however, the great thing about Shimla is that there are several wonderful holiday spots within an hour or so. These towns offer you a quieter, greener, escape while keeping you close enough to the city, in case you want to venture out for an evening drink or visit the famous Mall. One such less known gem is the village of Chharabra, about 13 km out of Shimla. You may know its twin town Mashobra better, as Chharabra is often considered part of Mashobra, but is in fact a separate village adjacent to the well known suburb of Shimla.

Languid and green, away from the buzz of Shimla, Chharabra is where you can spend a wonderful long weekend. Depending on what you are looking for, you can spend your days sightseeing, trekking, rafting, or doing nothing at all. Many popular treks start at Chharabra, the longest one taking you up to Kufri. If you are a beginner, however, you could opt for the shorter trek to Mashobra, going through pine forests and apple orchards. This trek is mostly level with only a few tough patches and easily doable by even those who have spent their days back in the city

sitting in the office staring into their computers. Through the route, if the day is clear, you will be treated to stunning views of the Himalayas. On one part of the trek, you can also branch off and take the route to the Presidential Re-

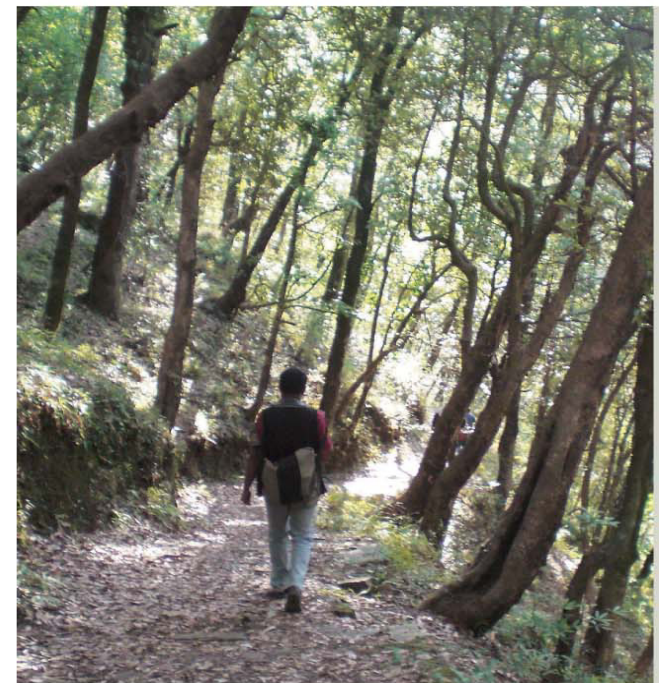
create, the summer home of the President, a charming oldworld structure originally built in the mid 19th century. This trek will be like balm for the soul, as total greenery surrounds you in the forest, with only birdsong punctuating the complete silence. Relaxing and rejuvenating at once, a trek around the forests in Chharabra is highly recommended but do take a guide, or a local friend along. If you are not rewarded with views of the Himalayas on the trek, you can venture out the next day to my namesake helipad ó

the Kalyani Helipad nearby offers 360- degree views of the mountains and of Shimla. For another kind of treat, book a lunch at the Wildflower Hall, undoubtedly the best fare in the region, and remember to ask for a table out on the terrace for a meal with a view. A different adventure awaits you at Tattapani, hot springs, as the name suggests, where you can frolic on a beach in the middle of the mountains. The journey to Tattapani is reason enough to visit, as you go up and down green mountains ó the drive, about an

hour and a half, is surely one of the most scenic you would have taken. As you wind your way down through misty Himalayas to the hot springs, you will be greeted by the silvery fast flowing Sutlej, icy cold on the hottest day. All along the beach you can find little streams of the hot spring water flowing out to join the cold Sutlej, so you can actually feel three temperature of the water ó at the hot spring, where it joins the river and of the river itself.

■ GETTING THERE: You can take the Shatabdi from Delhi to Kalka and hire a cab at the Kalka Railway Station; the drive is about three hours. Alternately, you can drive from Delhi, the route is clear and the new bypass means you can reach Chharabra in about 7 hours.

■ STAY: Cedar Hill Lodge, Chharabra; <http://cedarhillshimla.com>





Sonakshi opens up on 'Tilasmī Bahein': Never done a one-take song in my career

Actress Sonakshi Sinha talked about how she nailed the number 'Tilasmī Bahein' from the Sanjay Leela Bhansali series 'Heeramandi: The Diamond Bazaar' in one shot.

The actress said she had never done a one-take song in her career and that it was the filmmaker who pushed her to give her absolute best.

Talking about shooting for 'Tilasmī Bahein' at the trailer launch, Sonakshi said: 'I can't tell you how difficult it was because I still can't believe that it happened first of all and how quickly it happened. We had rehearsed for the song, which we had to shoot in a span of four days.'

'I went on set, and we shot till about 3 p.m., and then Sanjay just got up and decided that 'nahi mujhe yeh nahi karna, mujhe kuch aur karna hai'.'

The actress shared an anecdote from the set.

'He decided to sit down with the ADs, call them one by one, and make them dance to the song. We just thought he was having a good time, entertaining himself by doing all of this on set and at 7

p.m. Do something like what this guy did over here and get on the table and do that 'jungle dance', which you are so good at doing anyway. Then chair ke saath yeh karna, woh log haath-pair dabayengay. Fir tum hookstep pakad lena', she revealed.

'So, this is how that whole song is designed. Then I said cut karke loge na? He had set up the camera by then, and he said nahi nahi this is one shot,' said Sonakshi.

'I have never done a one-take song in my career, and the first time it was supposed to happen, it was going to be for a Sanjay Leela Bhansali song. I needed to rehearse a couple of times before I was able to pull this off,' the actress added.

However, it was the filmmaker's confidence in her that made her ace the shot.

'He was really confident, encouraging, and he believed in me that I could do it. I think that really pushed me to give my absolute best shot and it was 'Okayed' in the first take itself,' she said.

Manisha Koirala: Being away from industry helped me look at life in a different way

Actress Manisha Koirala said that being away from the film industry helped her to look at life in a different way.

She tagged being in front of the camera and moving away as 'enriching'. Manisha, who is making her series debut with 'Heeramandi: The Diamond Bazaar', was in the national capital for its trailer launch.

Talking about how staying away from the industry affected her as a person and if the break made her a different person, Manisha, who was last seen in 'Shehzada' in 2023, said: 'You know definitely when I was younger I was really different but with years and many experiences that you have had you evolve and hope to evolve.'

'So, yeah, being away from the industry also has helped me to look at life in a different way because as an actor we see ourselves in a different way, we see the world in a different way because the spotlight is always on us.' She added that moving away from the spotlight can be a 'great spiritual experience.' 'But when you are no longer in the centre of attention and are at the periphery of the attention, that is a great spiritual experience and a great awareness happens. It was an enriching experience when I was an actor as well as when I was away from it. Both were important for me,' she said. On playing Mallikajaan, Manisha said: 'To play Mallikajaan it was really really different. I can only say that it was possible because of a genius behind the camera, who directs so minutely and so much in detail that we as actors look so good on screen. We don't know what we have done. He just takes that out from us.'



'Spider-Man' producer didn't know who Zendaya was when she auditioned for MJ

Amy Pascal, who served as a producer for 'Spider-Man: Homecoming', admitted that neither she nor Marvel Studios president Kevin Feige knew who Zendaya was when she auditioned for the character of MJ. 'She was wearing no make-up, and she was just dressed like a regular girl, and we were like, 'Oh my God, she's amazing. She has to be in the movie', Pascal told Vogue, reports deadline.com. Pascal added: 'And then we found out she was a totally famous person and felt really stupid.'

Zendaya stepped into acting at a young age in the Disney Channel show 'Shake It Up'. In an interview with Vogue, Zendaya reflected on her childhood as an adult. 'I don't know how much of a choice I had,' she told the magazine. 'I have complicated feelings about kids and fame and being in the public eye, or being a child actor.'

Zendaya added: 'We've seen a lot of cases of it being detrimental. I think only now, as an adult, am I starting to go, Oh, okay, wait a minute - I've only ever done what I've known, and this is all I've known.'

Janhvi confirms relationship with Shikhar Pahariya, wears neckpiece with 'Shikhu' written on it



Actress Janhvi Kapoor has finally confirmed her relationship with Shikhar Pahariya at the 'Maidani' screening. The actress, who looked every inch beautiful in a cream-coloured pantsuit, completed her look with a custom-made neckpiece adorned with the inscription 'Shikhu,' which caught the attention of many. At the screening, the actress was seen posing with her father, Boney Kapoor, who has produced the project, and her brother, Arjun Kapoor, at the red carpet of the event.

'Maidani' is a biographical sports drama film written and directed by Amit Ravindernath Sharma. It stars Ajay Devgn, Priyamani and Gajraj Rao. The film talks about the life and journey of the esteemed football coach Syed Abdul Rahim. Rahim revolutionised the sport in the country, and it was because of Rahim that the Indian football team, which played in the 4-2-4 combination, was once called the 'Brazil of Asia'.



Fardeen Khan makes a comeback after 14 years with 'Heeramandi'; it was the perfect role

Mumbai-- Bollywood actor Fardeen Khan is all set to make his comeback into acting with 'Heeramandi: The Diamond Bazaar'. He will be seen playing Wali Mohammed, a nawab, after 14 years. He says he couldn't hope for a better return to the screens and said it was the 'perfect role' for him.

Fardeen, who was last seen on the screen in 'Dulha Mil Gaya' in 2010, said: 'Firstly, there has been a long gap. It has been about 14 years. I am extremely grateful to work with this stellar star cast. I couldn't have hoped for a better opportunity to return to the screen.'

He added: 'For me, something I has a knack for writing characters, which are very intricate and complex' and added that 'there is nobody like him who writes characters.'

The actor added: 'He goes across the spectrum of human emotions which he has an intuitive understanding of. It's daunting to work with him but at the same time to see it all together it all makes sense.'

'Heeramandi: The Diamond Bazaar' will be released on Netflix on May 1.



Saudi Arabia echoes India's stand on Kashmir in joint statement with Pak

(News Agency)-Saudi Arabia seemed to support India's stand on Jammu and Kashmir in a joint statement signed with Pakistan, asking both countries to resolve their "outstanding issues" bilaterally. The joint statement was issued a day after Pakistan's Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif and Saudi de-facto ruler Prince Mohammed bin Salman held an official meeting on April 7 at Al-Safa Palace in Mecca. "The two sides stressed the importance of dialogue between Pakistan and India to resolve the outstanding issues between the two countries, especially the Jammu and Kashmir dispute to ensure peace and stability in the region," the statement read. India's long-held position on Kashmir has been that it was a bilateral issue between



the two countries and there is no question of any mediation or intervention by any third party. While both India and Pakistan have longstanding friendly relations with Arab countries,

including Saudi Arabia, the ties between New Delhi and Riyadh have significantly improved under Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Saudi Arabia has maintained a balanced

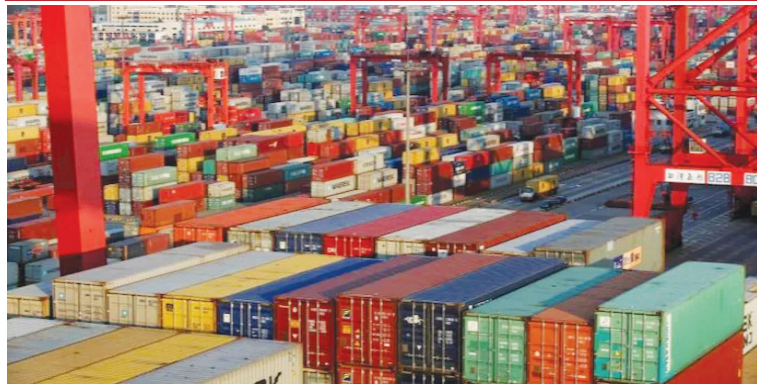
approach over Jammu and Kashmir. While the Kingdom expressed concern over India's abrogation of Article 370 in August 2019, it did not explicitly condemn the actions, instead

referring to it as New Delhi's internal matter. In 2019, Pakistan urged the US to "persuade" India to start talks on the peaceful resolution of the Kashmir issue. This came after then US President Donald Trump offered to mediate between the two nations on the Kashmir issue.

However, External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar had made it clear that "any discussion on the issue, if at all warranted, will only be with Pakistan and only bilaterally".

India has repeatedly told Pakistan that Jammu and Kashmir is, and shall forever remain an integral part of the country. New Delhi has said it desires normal neighbourly relations with Pakistan in an environment free of terror, hostility and violence.

India permits limited essential exports to Maldives amid tensions



China's assertive presence in the Indian Ocean raising concerns in India. The Maldives, strategically located along key maritime routes, is a focal point in the broader India-China rivalry in the region.

By bolstering its support for the Maldives, India aims to reinforce its role as a dependable partner, countering Beijing's overtures and the internal anti-India sentiment fuelled by the 'India Out' campaign. Last year as well, India continued the export of rice, sugar and onions to the Maldives in spite of a worldwide ban on export of these items from India. India remains strongly committed to supporting human centric development in the Maldives, as part of its 'Neighbourhood First' policy, said the statement by the Indian High Commission. Human-centric approach and future prospects India's continued support, even during global restrictions on exports, illustrates its commitment to a human-centric developmental approach in its foreign relations, particularly with neighbouring countries. By ensuring the Maldives' access to essential commodities, India reinforces its image as a benevolent neighbour, keen on fostering regional stability and prosperity.

(News Agency)-The central government has agreed to increase the export of essential supplies to the Maldives for the fiscal year 2024-25, underscoring its 'Neighbourhood First' policy. This decision comes amidst a backdrop of rising geopolitical tensions in the Indian Ocean region, particularly concerning China's growing influence and the 'India Out' campaign led by the Muizzu administration in the Maldives. A statement released by the Indian High Commission in the Maldives detailing the Centre's decision to increase the export of crucial goods says, "Upon the request of the Government of Maldives, the Government of India has allowed for export of certain quantities of essential commodities for the year 2024-25 under a unique bilateral mechanism, wherein, the quotas for each of these items have been

revised upwards. The approved quantities are the highest since this arrangement came into effect in 1981." Enhanced exports amid diplomatic strains The revised export quotas mark a notable increase in the supply of critical commodities such as river sand and stone aggregates which are vital for the Maldives' construction sector by 25 per cent to 1,000,000 metric tonnes. Additionally, there's a 5 per cent increase in the export limits for essential food items like eggs, potatoes, onions, sugar, rice, wheat flour, and pulses. This escalation in quotas is the largest since the bilateral mechanism's inception in 1981, showcasing India's commitment to the Maldives' development and stability. This gesture by the central government is set against a complex geopolitical canvas, with

Why India and the West Should Be Concerned About New Ruling Alliance in Nepal

(News Agency)-Nepal is witnessing yet another round of political acrobatics with its prime minister shifting allegiance from the Nepal Congress to the Communist Party of Nepal (United Marxist Leninist), headed by former Prime Minister KP



Sharma Oli. This has resulted in the formation of a new coalition government dominated by major Left parties. This move indicates a deeper trend of opportunism and self-interest among political elites, where individual gains consistently override ideological principles. The political landscape, marred by revolving alliances and shifting allegiances, reflects a stark reality where governance takes a back seat to personal ambitions. Past alliances between the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoists) and the Nepal Congress, as well as the CPN (UML), highlight the transactional

nature of Nepali politics, undermining the credibility of democratic processes. As Nepal embarks on another phase under a new coalition, the potential impacts on governance, stability, and socio-economic progress remain uncertain, raising questions about whether this government will prioritise the needs of the people or perpetuate the cycle of political instability and governance failure. DOMESTIC IMPACTS OF THE NEW LEFT ALLIANCE In the intricate dance of democracy in Nepalese

politics, the recent manoeuvres surrounding Prime Minister Prachanda's shifting alliances reveal a disturbing pattern of self-interest and political expediency. From cosyng up to the Nepal Congress during the elections to seeking refuge in KP Sharma Oli's party CMN (UML) for his premiership, Prachanda's allegiances have been nothing short of opportunistic. The backdoor negotiations for key positions like the president and speaker, marred by Oli's authoritative interference, highlight the fragility of political alliances in Nepal.

Michigan restaurant customer shoots employee over guacamole dip

†(News Agency)-A customer at a restaurant in Michigan, US, shot and injured an employee over guacamole, an avocado-based dip.

The incident, captured on video, shows the suspect, a 32-year-old individual, flashing a gun as the 21-year-old employee of Chipotle Mexican Grill attempted to prevent him from leaving the store by grabbing his sweatshirt. When the employee briefly went to the back of the restaurant, the customer walked around the counter, tried to grab his food and put it in the bag, a witness told Fox News. The fight started as the employee returned, and, soon a gunshot was heard. Michigan police have not given a motive for the shooting, only saying it stemmed from a dispute over guacamole.

"I was just eating a bowl and I heard shouting. And then I looked over, they were arguing. One of the workers went to the back, I don't know why, and then when he was in the back, the customer walked around the counter, tried to



grab his food and put it in a bag," the New York Post quoted an eyewitness as saying.

"Then the employee came back, and they started fighting, and then we heard a gunshot and just ran out as quickly as we could," added the eyewitness.

The employee sustained a gunshot wound to the leg and was taken to a nearby hospital, where he remains in

stable condition, according to Southfield police, as reported by the Post.

Despite the violence, the suspect, identified as a Detroit resident, calmly left the scene without haste.

Witness Micahel Beales, who captured the bizarre incident, said, "He took his time getting out, 'I probably 30 seconds after (the shot was fired). I was in my car and I saw

him just walk out to his car, close the door, and just drive off 'n he didn't speed off or anything, it was weird to see."

The police quickly located and arrested the gunman from a nearby location.

The nature of the charges he may face for the shooting remains unclear at this time, according to the Post.

The chipotle restaurant responded to the incident with a statement from Laurie Schalow, the chief corporate affairs officer, expressing sympathy for the injured employee and cooperation with authorities.

"Our thoughts and prayers go out to our team member who was injured by the senseless act of violence that occurred inside our Evergreen Road restaurant in Southfield, Michigan," Schalow stated.

"We are working cooperatively with the authorities handling this investigation and hope justice will be served for the individual responsible for this crime," Schalow added.

Total Solar Eclipse wows people as Mexico, US, Canada plunge into darkness



(News Agency)-Cities across Mexico, the US and Canada were plunged into darkness as a total solar eclipse crossed North America on Monday. The solar eclipse made landfall on Mexico's Pacific coast at 11:37 pm IST in Mazatlan. It was North America's first total eclipse since 2017. The celestial event, where the moon passes directly between the Earth and the sun, casting a shadow that completely obscures the sun, was seen from across North America. The period of totality lasted up to four minutes depending on the observer's location. A partial eclipse, in which the moon obscures only a portion of the sun, unfolded across most of the continental US, outside the path of totality. An estimated 44 million people live within the path of totality. This total solar

eclipse held significant interest due to its path crossing more densely populated areas compared to previous occurrences, allowing an estimated 31.6 million people to witness the event without leaving their cities. Torreon in Mexico emerged as the eclipse enthusiast's prime location, offering the longest duration of totality. People travelled from far and wide to catch a glimpse of the phenomenon somewhere along the "path of totality" stretching 4,000 km from Mexico's Pacific Coast through Texas and across 14 other US states into Canada. The celestial phenomenon was not visible from the Indian subcontinent. Celestial enthusiasts in India will have to wait until May 21, 2031, to observe a "ring of fire" solar eclipse, which will be visible from many cities across the country, especially in Kerala and Tamil Nadu.

Rat bite causes severe bacterial infection, kidney failure in Canadian man



(News Agency)-A 76-year-old man from Canada was hospitalised with a severe bacterial infection after he was bitten by a rat in his bathroom.

He found the rodent in his toilet bowl and while trying to remove it, it bit two of his fingers, according to a case study published in the Canadian Medical Association Journal.

He consulted the emergency department of a hospital in Montreal, Quebec, where he received wound care and a booster dose of tetanus vaccine before getting discharged. About 18 days later, the man was back in the hospital after experiencing fever for three days, headache and abdominal pain.

During this time, although the wound was healed, the man's blood pressure was low while his heart was beating fast. Initial blood tests showed that his kidneys were damaged and his blood platelet count was very low, a condition

called thrombocytopenia.

The doctors immediately admitted him to the Intensive Care Unit (ICU) as he began showing signs of multiple organ dysfunction and sepsis, a dangerous condition in which an infection triggers multiple organ failure.

After the doctors took blood and urine samples to understand the condition, it was revealed that the man had an infectious disease called leptospirosis. Leptospirosis is a bacterial disease that affects humans and animals. In humans, it can cause a wide range of symptoms which can overlap with various other diseases. But some people may have no symptoms at all.

This disease is caused by the spiral-shaped bacteria *Leptospira*.

According to the report, "Leptospirosis is a zoonosis present in every country, but more prevalent in tropical regions, caused by spirochetes of the genus *Leptospira*.

Rishi Sunak: Up The Creek Without A Paddle

It doesn't happen very often, but now and again the political tide turns so decisively against an incumbent government that there's little the ruling party can do beyond damage limitation.

Think back a decade ago. After ten years of Congress rule, the public mood had turned decisively against the party. Manmohan Singh was seen as a good man leading a bad government – personally admirable but politically inept and paralysed by the competing forces within his own party. Narendra Modi was the coming man, offering an energy and vision that the governing party simply couldn't match. The result: Congress was swept from power and lost more than three-quarters of its seats in the Lok Sabha.

Going Down The Congress Way?

Something similar is now happening in British politics. Rishi Sunak is on the brink of a catastrophic election defeat. The Conservatives have been in power for fourteen years, but fresh opinion polls suggest they will be humbled in the coming election, losing up to two-thirds of their seats in the UK Parliament.



Rishi Sunak continues to put a brave face on his appalling polling, but his party has just about given up. Conservatives know they are about to be evicted from power, and many of their MPs are either scouting for new jobs or feuding viciously about who should lead the party after Sunak's almost inevitable departure.

In Britain's peculiar, and distinctly dilapidated, political system, the prime minister has a lot of discretion about when a general election is held. The last possible date is in January next

year; the expectation is that the election will be in October or November this year. So, a note of caution – a lot can happen in that time: wars, scandals, crises and all kinds of unexpected events. Nothing is certain in politics. But if you look at the odds that betting companies are offering on the election outcome – often a very reliable indicator, as they lose a lot of money if they get it wrong – they are putting the odds on the Labour opposition becoming the largest party in Parliament at more than 90%.

What Really Went Wrong For Sunak

So what has gone wrong for Rishi Sunak in the eighteen months since he became prime minister? He had a lot going for him. He's seen as young, earnest and honest; in his time in office, inflation has fallen sharply and real wages have begun to grow; after the chaos of Boris Johnson's years in power, he has restored a measure of stability and competence.

But Sunak does not offer a political vision; he is indecisive, he presides over a deeply divided party, he has made a few appallingly bad decisions, and, above all, his political instincts are poor. When a prime minister makes public pledges and fails to deliver them, that really damages his standing. Rishi Sunak promised to cut the huge waiting lists for treatment in the publicly-funded health service; those waiting lists have continued to lengthen. He pledged to 'stop the boats' that

surreptitiously carry illegal immigrants across the Channel to England's south coast; those deeply hazardous sea crossings are still happening.

Sunak has tried to appease the populist right-wing of the Conservative Party by backing out of some key targets to tackle climate change and abandoning an expensive high-speed rail link from London to the north of England. Those decisions were not popular with the voters and didn't satisfy Sunak's critics within the party. In political terms, it's a lose-lose.

A Resurgent Opposition And A Threat From The Right

His biggest problem is that the opposition has been reborn. The Labour Party, which spent several years heading so far left that it barely appeared on the political spectrum, has been refashioned as a pragmatic, centre-left party with a conspicuously competent and cautious leader, Keir Starmer. The Labour Party is once again seen as fit to govern.

\$90,000 colleges, the toolbelt generation, and why high schools need a three-track system

We need to expose our youth to real career opportunities in America the day they hit high school

By Ted Jenkin

Some Vanderbilt students will have \$100,000 in total expenses for the 2024-2025 school year. And the price tag without travel will be more than \$90,000 for four New England universities starting this fall.

More Generation Z workers are going into trades as disenchantment with the college track increases and rising pay in plumbing and welding compete with a parallel generation of students graduating with degrees and no real direction of what they want to do in life.

This, all coupled with the Biden administration desperately retooling another plan to buy votes by promising people they will wipe away student debt, only to have student debt mold itself back into shape like the villain in "Terminator 2: Judgment Day." Where did we go wrong? How did we get to a point where we have \$1.7 trillion of student debt, \$1.1 trillion of credit card debt, and \$1.6 trillion of auto loan debt? Didn't high school teach us that if you keep on piling



on debt the inevitability of bankruptcy is just on the other side of the horizon?

There may be another option.

How about a "three-track system" for high school education?

All students take two years of general education, including math, science, history, English, language, etc. Then, you choose two potential career tracks in your junior year, followed by a singular

focus in your senior year.

Track 1: College

For those students who can identify a specific field or area of study that they want to pursue for a career. America needs doctors, lawyers, engineers and a litany of other professions where a college degree is truly necessary to get the basic education to begin your overall career.

For some students, college is more than just a degree. It's an opportunity to learn how to "grow up" and become responsible for grocery shopping, laundry, schedule management and taking care of an apartment. However, so many kids are graduating college now with a degree that doesn't lead them to a real career path and they still call mom or dad for every single decision.

Track 2: Vocational

Having taken a major back seat to the college preparatory track for the past 30 years because high school funding concentrated on getting students to do well on standardized tests and prepping for a four-year degree, career tech education is making a major comeback in high school.

I took shop in high school. I took auto in high school. I took home economics in high school. I learned that I was bad at all of them, but it opened my eyes to other potential future job opportunities besides going to college.

Google is working on Truecaller-like Lookup button to help users identify unknown callers

Google has added a useful feature to its Google Phone app that promises to simplify the way we handle unfamiliar phone numbers. Now, users can easily search for information about incoming calls directly from their recent call list. However, one will find the new update in the beta version of the Google Phone app. The discovery of this feature came from a tipster AssembleDebug who informed PiunikaWeb about the new "Lookup" button. Here is everything we know about it. This feature aims to reduce the pain of identifying unknown callers by initiating a Google search with the number automatically entered. This comes as a relief to many smartphone users who have long been plagued by spam calls and fake numbers.

While the Google Phone app is primarily used on Pixel phones, users with various Android devices can access it by downloading the app. The addition of the Lookup button alongside existing options like "Block" and "History" is expected to enhance user experience and simplify call management. "It almost feels like the feature is about five years too late," expressed one user, reflecting the sentiments of many who have



Google has added a useful feature to its Google Phone app that promises to simplify the way we handle unfamiliar phone numbers. However, one won't be able to access the new feature right now unless they are using the beta version of the Google Phone app.

struggled with manually searching unknown numbers for years.

In other updates, Google is also working on integrating Gemini email summaries into the Android version of the Gmail app. Although this feature is still in its early stages, it is anticipated to provide users with concise email summaries with just a tap. This feature will likely make Gmail even better and help save people's time checking a bunch of emails. While the Gemini app currently offers email summaries for Google

Workspace accounts, the integration into Gmail directly is expected to further streamline email management on Android devices. It is currently unknown when both the above-mentioned features will arrive for everyone.

Besides, it is being reported that Google is exploring the possibility of charging users for access to enhanced search features powered by generative AI. During Google I/O

last year, the Sundar Pichai-led tech giant unveiled several AI features for Search, including summarised responses, AI-powered suggestions, and so on. The features were introduced to be a part of Search Labs, and those who opted in could use these features in their day-to-day lives. If you have been extensively using Google's AI-powered features for its search engine, there's news for you. The company might start charging you for using these AI features.

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Time to Remember the Good Aspects of British Rule

It is not very often that an Indian politician says nice words about the British conquest of India and the Raj. This makes the comments by the Bharatiya Janata Party's Krishnagar (West Bengal) Lok Sabha candidate ĆRajmataĳ Amrita Roy conspicuous. While she was trying to defend her ancestor's action during the Battle of Plassey in 1757, the upshot was also the condonation of British rule.

Roy asserted that Krishnachandra Roy, a feudal lord, sided with the British during the Battle of Plassey because Nawab Siraj-ud-Daulah was a tyrant. ĳThe allegation is Maharaja Krishnachandra Roy had sided with the British. The question is why did he do that? It's because of the tyranny of Siraj ud-Daulah. If Maharaja Krishnachandra Roy had not done that, Hinduism and the Bengali language would not have survived in Bengal,ĳ Amrita Roy said, adding, ĳThe Sanatan Dharma was under threat because of Siraj ud-Daulah's tyranny.

Maharaja Krishnachandra Roy saved Bengal and Hinduism.ĳWhile politicians and intellectuals are busy analysing the veracity of her claims, the point that needs to be emphasised here is that perhaps for the first time, a BJP leader is of the view that British rule had some beneficial aspect. This is important against the backdrop of a shrill decolonisation drive by the ruling dispensation and a shriller campaign by the Left-liberal intellectual class to blame everything bad on the West.

While the Narendra Modi government removes some symbols of Ćcolonial legacyĳ or others all the time, its ideological and political opponents behave no differently on this issue. Shashi Tharoor's ĆAn Era of Darkness: The British Empire in Indiaĳ indulges in a most reprehensible exercise of lie-peddling: it blames the British for, among other things, promoting the caste system, asserting that the Raj exacerbated the worst features of caste. In the words of Tharoor,



ĳthe caste system became more rigid under the British than it had been in pre-colonial Indiaĳ (Page 113). To buttress his case, he cited Ćpostcolonialĳ scholars who infest the academic world.

This is not to say that the British did nothing wrong in India; their economic policy cost us a great deal; racial arrogance is widely documented; and there were atrocities, the worst being the Jallianwala Bagh massacre (1919). Yet, the Raj was not an unmixed evil. The India that we and the world know today was made by the British. It is grudgingly accepted by everyone that the British did build institutions: civil service, police service, a standing army, modern judiciary and justice system, rudiments of democracy, representative government, the central bank, the Comptroller & Auditor General, a good and inclusive education system, Railways, etc. But these are often dismissed as the instruments to produce lowly-paid clerks, further imperial designs, and perpetuate exploitation.

Our textbooks teach us how conceited, selfish, and exploitative the British imperialists were. Thomas Macaulay's famous statement is especially mentioned: ĳWe must at present do our best to

form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect.ĳ The quote seems to expose the nefarious plot of creating, in the communist lingo, Ća comprador class,ĳ the quislings and Jaichands who kowtowed to their imperial masters. Hindu nationalists also hate this class; they have even coined terms like Macaulay-putra and Macaulay-putri. But neither jingoistic and doctrinal miasma nor semantic innovations can alter the fact that

Macaulay was among those Britons who prepared the template of modern India. It was the education system he conceived that is predominant not just in India but also in Pakistan and Bangladesh. The political, literary, and scientific elites Ćindeed the entire intelligentsiaĳ of the three countries are steeped in the Macaulayan system. Ditto with our justice system. Almost single-handedly, Macaulay created the Indian Penal Code over a century and a half ago. In Pakistan, it became, section by section, the Pakistan Penal Code and in Bangladesh the

Bangladesh Penal Code. Of course, it was not perfect; the sedition section was an example, as also was the one on adultery (now abrogated). But the fact that the substantive part of the penal code has been accepted by three nations following different faiths is a testimony to the fact that the great imperialist had the perspicacity to delineate laws which were in consonance with the local requirements and the modern imperative, the imperative that a lot of Indians embraced. If democracy has survived in India for so long, it is because of the institutions that the Raj built and nurtured; British rule also birthed modern literature and free press which continue to strengthen democracy. Most importantly, the British brought enlightenment ideas to the Indian shores, though this was mostly involuntary. They came here for profits; witnessing a political vacuum during the decline of the Mughal Empire, they became politically ambitious; thanks to their superior organisation, they ended up ruling the country. The upshot, at any rate, was that they sowed the seeds of modernity in India. Therefore, the vitriolic hatred for British rule can only be called irrational, and somewhat racist. Thankfully, there is at least one BJP leader who is not afraid to call the Raj good.





Security Crisis Deepens in Pakistan as Terror Groups Groomed by Military Wreak Havoc

Pakistan finds itself entangled in a complex web of security dilemmas, with militant factions freely executing operations across the contentious terrains of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) and Balochistan. Most of these assaults have been attributed to Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) and the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP). Pakistan has been holding external forces, notably the Afghan Taliban, responsible for these attacks. However, for a more realistic assessment, Pakistan officials need to introspect and tackle the domestic issues fueling this surge in violence. More critically, it demands of Islamabad an urgent recalibration of its regional diplomacy. Pakistan needs to move away from using terrorism as an instrument of statecraft as it is coming back to bite the hand that has fed it for so long. Over the last three weeks, Pakistan has been rocked by a wave of terror incidents, with four significant attacks occurring in quick succession across KPK and Balochistan. On March 16, an assault orchestrated by militants from the Hafiz Gul Bahadur faction of TTP targeted a military outpost in North Waziristan's Mir Ali area, claiming the lives of seven members of the Pakistan military, among them a Lieutenant Colonel and a Captain. This act of violence ignited widespread condemnation and a clamour for retribution among Pakistanis, drawing vows of vengeance from the nation's highest echelons, ranging from the president to the prime minister and top military officials.

President Asif Ali Zardari, while paying his respects at the funeral of Lt Col Syed Kashif Ali, stated, "Pakistan would not hesitate to retaliate against any aggression, whether from across its

borders or within its own lands." In the midst of this fervent response, and just as the Pakistan Army's Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) disclosed the neutralisation of the attack's architects in a North Waziristan confrontation, Pakistan launched airstrikes on March 18 against militant strongholds in Afghanistan's Paktika and Khost provinces, believed to be bastions of Hafiz Bahadur's faction.

Subsequent to these events, Baloch nationalist insurgents struck at the heavily guarded Gwadar Port Authority Complex, a facility under Chinese operation, on March 20. This attack was swiftly followed by a severe offensive against the Pakistan Naval Station (PNS) Siddique in Turbat, Balochistan. Additionally, on the same day, a suicide bombing targeted a convoy escorting Chinese engineers, culminating in the tragic demise of five Chinese individuals in the northwest region of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The nature of these security lapses points to a diminishing control of the Pakistani military over the nation's security framework, casting shadows over its capability to plug these breaches effectively. Particularly telling is the assault on the Gwadar Port, which stands as a stark illustration of the perilous fallout from Pakistan's long-standing use of terrorism as a state instrument.

This is further highlighted by the involvement of Hafiz Gul Bahadur's faction in the Mir Ali incident. Hafiz Gul Bahadur, who once served as a significant military collaborator with the Pakistan Army in North Waziristan, has now aligned with the Taliban, his faction now representing a formidable component of the TTP's operational strength.

Within the Taliban ranks, Gul Bahadur held a distinctive status in the eyes of Pakistan's military elite, being deemed a "good" Taliban term attributed to militants who abstained from assaulting Pakistani forces, thereby being nurtured as strategic assets to advance the nation's regional ambitions. Originating from the student faction of Jamiat Ulema-i-Islam Fazal (JUI-F) and a veteran of the Afghan conflict in the 1980s, Gul Bahadur ascended within the Taliban hierarchy during the early 2000s, a trajectory largely facilitated by his reciprocal alliance with the Pakistan Army. Notably, in 2006, he reached an accord with Pakistani officials, consenting to eject foreign militants from North Waziristan, notwithstanding the ongoing military offensive against the wider TTP network. In return for his cooperation, the Pakistani state offered Gul Bahadur unparalleled autonomy within his territory, allowing him to form a "Shura" council to administer the area, including the imposition of taxes and fines. This maneuver not only elevated Bahadur as the leading Taliban figure in North Waziristan but it was also designed to drive a rift within the wider militant framework of the TTP.

Pakistan was aware of the inherent dangers of aligning with extremist elements from the start. This uneasy alliance ultimately backfired, as the very militants nurtured by Pakistan began to turn their weapons on the state itself, leading to a dramatic escalation in violence that resulted in the deaths of thousands of civilians and military personnel. Consequently, when Pakistan initiated Operation Zarb-e-Azb in 2014, targeting the TTP, Hafiz Gul Bahadur and his faction were compelled to seek refuge across the Durand Line in Afghanistan,

under the auspices of the Afghan Taliban's group that, in a twist of fate, depended on the logistical support of the Pakistan Army.

Ignoring the clear drawbacks of fostering terrorism, Pakistan overlooked the vital lessons stemming from its affiliation with terror factions. Instead, it played a crucial role in aiding the Afghan Taliban's overthrow of the Afghan Republic, culminating in their capture of Kabul in August 2021. Key figures within Pakistan's military command, including the then-chief of its Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), Lt Gen Faiz Hameed, lauded this calamitous manoeuvre as a testament to Islamabad's foreign policy triumphs. This move was celebrated as a strategic victory purported to secure Pakistan's tumultuous frontier with Afghanistan and position it advantageously against India.

Pakistan's encounter with the repercussions of its own strategies was not a matter of "if" but rather "when". The nation has a protracted history of leveraging terrorism and terrorist organisations as tactical tools within its regional strategy, a practice dating back to the 1980s with its support for the anti-Soviet Afghan Mujahideen, and continuing with its proxy warfare in Jammu and Kashmir against India. The Afghan Taliban, having been driven by the Pakistan Army for more than two decades as a proxy against the Afghan administration, is well-versed in the tactical employment of proxies in its dealings with Islamabad. This reality is particularly poignant as the group grapples with governance woes, further aggravated by the international community's refusal to recognise its regime, thus isolating it and exacerbating its economic plight.

How India is gearing up for a third revolution in military affairs

The initiative is aimed at achieving strategic convergence in diverse domains of modern warfare

In an era of disturbed geopolitical situation, where the world is witnessing wars and conflicts, India is heading for a third revolution in military affairs aimed at achieving strategic convergence in diverse domains of modern warfare.

The third revolution in military affairs refers to the use of autonomous weapons, or killer robots, that can search, engage and destroy human lives without human involvement. The first revolution was of gunpowder and the second of nuclear weapons. Military experts believe the Russia-Ukraine war has become a testing ground for new technology, in particular those demonstrating how artificial intelligence (AI) can be used to great effect. While these technologies offer potential advantages in terms of precision, speed and reduced risk to human soldiers, they also raise significant ethical and strategic concerns. Balancing the benefits and risks of such technologies is crucial for ensuring stability and security in the evolving global landscape.

Though the Indian military has started using AI-enabled devices to improve decision-making, surveillance, logistics and autonomous vehicles, many believe it is all still at a very nascent stage.

The senior leadership of the Indian Army early this week brainstormed on a wide array of



security-related issues, including ongoing transformation initiatives, leveraging technology and innovation for capability development, enhancing operational preparedness and addressing emerging security. The biannual Army Commanders' Conference is a pivotal forum for the apex leadership of the Indian Army to brainstorm on conceptual issues and review the overall security situation. It is also aimed at ensuring that the Indian Army remains progressive, adaptive and future-ready.

However, the primary focus of the conference this year was towards developing a trained and motivated workforce that can handle the challenges of contemporary combat while

being adept at futuristic war engagement.

The Indian military is lagging way behind countries like the United States and China in adopting AI-enabled weapons platforms. However, in the recent past, it has started working on autonomous weapons, including AI-enabled drones and robots, to patrol borders, improve night-fighting capabilities, and enhance communication. The army has also introduced new artillery platforms and terrain-specific electronic warfare systems.

In 2022, defence minister Rajnath Singh had unveiled 75 AI technologies at the IAI in Defence (AI/Def) symposium and exhibition in New Delhi, in which he emphasised on the significance of incorporating

advanced technologies, such as AI and Big Data, into the defence sector, and ensuring that the country remains up to date with technical advancements.

So, during the Army Commanders' Conference, Chief of Defence Staff General Anil Chauhan exhorted the senior leadership to embrace the aspects of jointness, integration and technological absorption, synced to the call of a Third Revolution in Military Affairs.

Army chief General Manoj Pande called upon the army hierarchy to continue pursuing the process of transformation and technology absorption besides adopting the best practices of sister services and modern armies around the world. He felt the need to ensure seamless situational awareness between

commanders at all levels and troops on the ground while highlighting that there is a constant need to undertake doctrinal and structural reforms by embracing change and being open to ideas to meet future operational challenges.

As a key takeaway, an officer highlights that organisational and procedural transformation will be undertaken to ensure induction or absorption of niche technology towards futuristic capability development with a focus on atmanirbharta (self-reliance). Towards this, the innovation potential of the Army Design Bureau will be upscaled, besides Army Design Bureau cells being established at the Command Headquarters. This is aimed at empowering the Command Headquarters, formations and unit commanders in facilitating greater outreach to the industry and identification/ trials of niche technology.

To further bolster the initiative, the option of creating a separate fund head will be explored. In addition, test bed brigades or formations will be nominated to ensure greater efficiency and continuity in trials and finalisation of trial reports. Moreover, to ensure lifetime support, future procurements will include aspects catering for holistic sustenance requirements during the contract finalisation stage.



Katchatheevu row storm in a teacup

India can hope for no better friend as Sri Lanka's President than incumbent Wickremesinghe

By K. P. Nayar
Strategic Analyst

WHEN Katchatheevu burst upon the Indian election scene a week ago, my mind went back three decades to evenings spent with JN Dixit, who had just retired as Foreign Secretary in January 1994. Dixit, who earned the moniker 'Viceroy' during his stay in Colombo as India's High Commissioner from 1985 to 1989, was a pioneer of sorts. He was the first Indian Foreign Secretary to start a regular political column in the national media on diplomacy at a time when most of his colleagues took external affairs secrets to their graves.

I spent time in Dixit's Gurgaon study because he wanted to write a book on his years in Sri Lanka. His tenure was the most explosive period, both literally and figuratively, in the India-Sri Lanka relations. It was nothing like the current storm in a teacup over the uninhabited Katchatheevu island.

Those were the years of the ill-fated Indian Peace-Keeping Force (IPKF) in Sri Lanka, marked by rapid ups and downs in bilateral relations. Such volatility in ties eventually led to the tragic assassination of former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and then President Ranasinghe Premadasa within a two-year period. Dixit was unsure of writing for the public and he gathered many journalists like me to bounce off his ideas about stepping into an author's shoes. Dixit's revelatory book on Sri Lanka, titled *Assignment Colombo*, took four years because he wanted to write it from memory to avoid getting entangled in the stipulations of the Official Secrets Act. Meanwhile, he published three other books, which were far less controversial.

One evening, he told me about a reception he hosted for a high-level visiting Indian delegation at which the world's first woman Prime Minister, Sirimavo Bandaranaike, was the High Commissioner's special guest. The mood was light and one of the Indian visitors, slightly inebriated, asked Bandaranaike the cheeky question what she would have done about LTTE



supremo Velupillai Prabhakaran if the island's civil war had erupted when she was in power. Without even a moment's hesitation, Bandaranaike shot back: 'I would have called my sister in New Delhi and asked her to look the other way while I sort out this Prabhakaran fellow and his kind of solution to our Tamil problem.' The sister she was referring to was Indira Gandhi.

Unsurprisingly, Nirupama Rao, whose life was at risk during a posting as India's First Secretary in Colombo during Sri Lanka's ethnic strife, went on X (previously Twitter) within hours of the Katchatheevu controversy breaking out on April 1. Rao had to be evacuated from Sri Lanka in 1983. Quoting historians and researchers on the Katchatheevu settlement to buttress her argument, Rao wrote that 'the personal equation between Indira Gandhi and Sirimavo Bandaranaike played a decisive role in the conclusion of the 1974 Agreement.' She said Bandaranaike made a personal appeal to Indira to come to her rescue in the Katchatheevu negotiations, as it would otherwise spell political disaster for her — just as Dixit recounted decades later, in a completely different context. Rao later served in Colombo as High

Commissioner from 2004 to 2006.

Prof Partha Ghosh of Jawaharlal Nehru University has pursued this story in his research. He wrote: 'Indira Gandhi appreciated Bandaranaike's predicament and manipulated the situation in such a way that it became a fait accompli even before the Indian delegation could react. Bandaranaike remembered this gesture as late as 1990 with immense gratitude.' Ghosh ought to have written the year 2000 instead, i.e. till Bandaranaike completed her final term as Prime Minister. Her daughter, Chandrika Kumaratunga, Sri Lanka's only woman President for over a decade, did not forget India's 1974 gesture either.

In South Asia, with the exception of Pakistan because of the historic baggage, personal equations among leaders have guided policy. This brought peace and tranquillity, settled disputes amicably and ensured that the region remained in India's sphere of influence since Independence. This is truer of Sri Lanka compared to other nations in India's neighbourhood.

The BJP's Lok Sabha poll candidate from Amritsar, Taranjit Singh Sandhu, can attest, as the Katchatheevu controversy rages, to the reality that little has changed in this regard from

the time of his predecessors in Colombo — Dixit and Rao. Sandhu is a Sri Lanka veteran of Indian diplomacy as Counsellor at the Mission from 2000 to 2004 and later as a laser-focused, result-obsessed High Commissioner in Colombo.

When Sandhu took charge of the Indian High Commission in 2017, Sri Lanka had fallen to Beijing's charms and had ceased to be in India's sphere of influence. Notwithstanding Mahinda Rajapaksa's pro-China policies as President, Sandhu argued for an invitation to Rajapaksa to visit India, not once but twice, when he was the Leader of the Opposition. The chemistry between PM Narendra Modi and Mahinda during the first of those two visits turned Sri Lanka's tallest politician at that time into an India supporter. Two years after that first visit, when Mahinda became Prime Minister, as India calculated, his first external engagement was a virtual summit with Modi. His brother, Gotabaya Rajapaksa, made India his destination of choice for his first state visit after being elected President.

There is a lesson in all this for those who may want to prolong the recent resurrection of Katchatheevu as a bilateral

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issue even after its limited political shelf life beyond voting in Tamil Nadu on April 19. The India-Sri Lanka ties are now excellent, even though the Rajapaksa family is in the political wilderness. These relations are not a zero-sum game for Colombo vis-a-vis China. India can hope for no better friend as Sri Lanka's President than the incumbent Ranil Wickremesinghe. This is equally true of the present PM, Dinesh Gunawardena. Few Indians are aware that his father Philip Gunawardena was imprisoned by the British in Bombay for joining India's freedom struggle after coming under the influence of Jayaprakash Narayan, his classmate in the US. India must make the most of these favourable conditions. According to Rao, who later became Foreign Secretary, 'India cannot unilaterally rescind the (Katchatheevu) Treaty under the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties. The abrogation of the Treaty... will ensure the country loses face in international politics when it is staking its claim as a rising power.'