

The South Asian INSIDER

Voice of South Asian Community Since March 2002

Vol. 22 Issue 41 Friday 15 Decmeber to 21 December, 2023 \$1 www.thesouthasianinsider.com

Pro-Palestinian Posts Come At A Cost, Even To Supermodels Gigi And Bella Hadid



Page 17

Indian Americans Celebrate BJP's State Election Victory



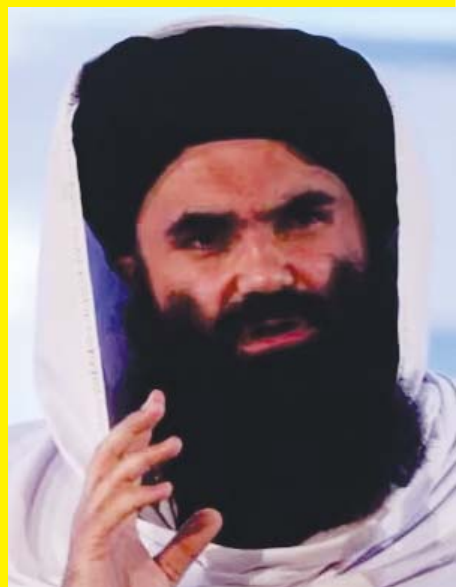
Story on Page 02

The 2 days that salvaged a climate deal
Hopes for a historic climate deal appeared dead.



Story on Page 18

Taliban minister fishes out Pakistani passport at airport



Story on Page 18

Dheeraj Sahu, Congress MP in focus amid record cash haul in tax raid



Story on Page 18

Cybercriminals jump into river to evade arrest

Story on Page 18

Hunter Biden calls Elon Musk 'dumbest smart person ever', X boss reacts



Story on Page 18

Australia Migration to get tougher for low-skilled applicants

Story on Page 16

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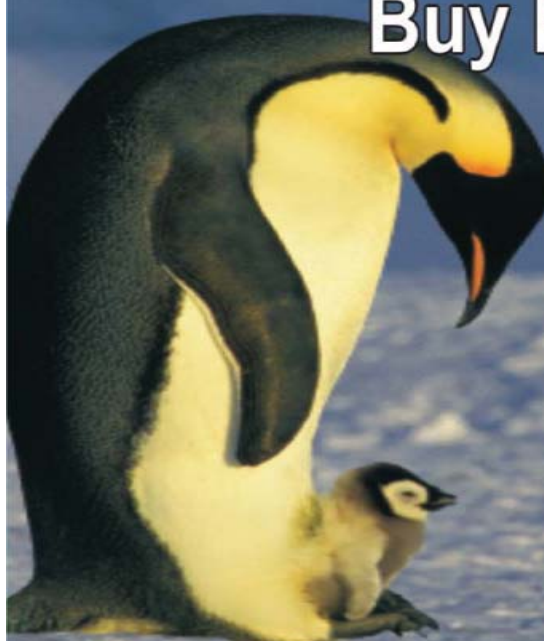

INDIAN AMERICANS CELEBRATE BJP'S STATE ELECTION VICTORY

The results are a “reflection of the country's mood”, said Jagdish Sewhani, president of the American Indian Public Affairs Committee



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(By our staff rep[orter] trust Prime Minister Modi under New York- Following the whose leadership Bharat is Bharatiya Janata Party's growing economically, massive victory in three out of culturally, socially and four states during the recent strategically, “ he added, state elections in India, the expressing hope that under the party's supporters in New York current leadership India will gathered to celebrate the win. be a 40 Trillion economy in The ruling party managed to the next 25 years. “This is a hold on to Madhya Pradesh semi final .Final will be next while also capturing year and I’m confident that Chhattisgarh and Rajasthan. In BJP will again be blessed by the southern state of Telangana, people of Bharat,” he further the main Opposition party, said, referring to the General Congress emerged victorious. elections in 2024 and urged Describing the results as a all the supporters in the “reflection of the country's diaspora to campaign for the mood”, Jagdish Sewhani, BJP and its candidates in the president of the American Indian upcoming elections. Dr Narinder Public Affairs Committee in New Kukar, Chintu Patel, Dr Dipak York, said, “People have voted Nandi , Sunil Hali, Amba Sharma, for good governance and Dr Urmillesh Arya, Satvinder performance. The results are a Satta , Kulbir Singh, Indu Jaiswal, a reflection of the mood of the Anju Sharma, Pinki Jaggi, Dr country. “ “People voted for the Pushp Bhansali , Dr Sanil Sarkar Modi guarantee. It shows they also spoke at the celebrations.

West New York Financial Advisor Convicted on 11 Counts at Trial in Multimillion-Dollar Health Care Fraud Conspiracy

(Sai Bureau)- A West New York financial advisor was found guilty on 11 counts of defrauding public health insurance plans out of more than \$4 million and transacting in the criminal proceeds, U.S. Attorney Philip R. Sellinger announced today.



Kaival Patel, 54, of West New York, New Jersey, was convicted on Dec. 7, 2023, of one count of conspiracy to commit wire fraud and health care fraud, four counts of health care fraud, one count of conspiracy to commit money laundering by transacting in criminal proceeds, and five counts of money laundering by transacting in criminal proceeds following an 11-day trial before U.S. District Judge Robert B. Kugler. Filing false compound medication claims and pocketing the

reimbursements isn't a new scheme," FBI – Newark Special Agent in Charge James E. Dennehy said. "For years now, the FBI Newark and our law enforcement partners have doggedly investigated and brought to justice dozens of others who defrauded healthcare companies, state and federal government agencies, and taxpayers. Yet, these criminals don't seem to learn the lessons of those who tried to steal what isn't theirs and get rich off the backs of the hardworking public. Our hope is anyone thinking of using a similar plan realizes they will get caught, and they will go to federal prison along with Patel."

"The defendant enriched himself by defrauding the New Jersey public health insurance plans out of more than \$4 million," Tammy L. Tomlins, Special Agent in Charge of IRS – Criminal Investigation, Newark Field Office, said. "Today's conviction is the result of the great investigative work of IRS-CI Special Agents and our law enforcement partners and their commitment to protect the integrity of our health care systems."

Man Pleads Guilty to Firebombing Building

(Sai Bureau)- A Wisconsin man pleaded guilty today to the May 2022 firebombing of a Madison office building. According to court documents, Hridindu Sankar Roychowdhury, 29, of Madison, pleaded guilty to attempting to cause damage by means of fire or an explosive. On Sunday, May 8, 2022, at approximately 6:06 a.m., law enforcement responded to an active fire at an office building located in Madison. Once inside the building, police observed a mason jar under a broken window; the jar was broken, and the lid and screw top were burned black. The police also saw a purple disposable lighter near the mason jar. On the opposite wall from the window, the police saw another mason jar with the lid on and a blue cloth tucked into the top; the cloth was singed. The jar was about half full of a clear fluid that smelled like an accelerant. Outside of the building, someone spray painted on one wall, "If abortions aren't safe then you aren't either" and, on another wall, a large "A" with a circle around it and the number "1312." During the investigation, law enforcement



collected DNA from the scene of the attack. In March 2023, law enforcement identified Roychowdhury as a possible suspect. Local police officers observed Roychowdhury dispose of food in a public trash can; the officers recovered the leftover food and related items, and law enforcement collected DNA from the food. On March 17, law enforcement advised that a forensic biologist examined the DNA evidence recovered from the attack scene and compared it to the DNA collected from the food contents. The forensic biologist found the two samples matched and likely were the same individual. In March, Roychowdhury travelled from Madison to Portland, Maine, and he purchased a one-way ticket from Boston to Guatemala City, departing March 28. Law enforcement arrested Roychowdhury at Boston Logan International Airport that day. Roychowdhury faces a mandatory minimum penalty of five years in prison and a maximum penalty of 20 years in prison. A sentencing hearing is scheduled for Feb. 14, 2024. A federal district court judge will determine any sentence after considering the U.S. Sentencing Guidelines and other statutory factors.

Three pro-Khalistan men sentenced in Auckland for bid to kill Sikh radio host

(Sai Bureau)- A New Zealand court has convicted three Khalistani supporters for a brutal attack on a Sikh radio jockey in a case of religious fanaticism and intolerance. "It bears all the hallmarks of religious fanaticism.... Violence of this kind is committed to what is perceived as the

nine-and-a-half years' imprisonment for attempted murder, reported New Zealand Herald newspaper. According to the prosecution, Harnek was followed by three cars full of men and was stabbed "within an inch of his life". He locked the doors of his vehicle and began pressing the horn, which attracted the attention of




neighbours. Sukhpreet Singh (44) was found guilty of being an "accessory to attempted murder" and was sentenced to six months of home detention. An unnamed 48-year-old "devoutly religious Auckland resident" was sentenced to 13-and-a-half years imprisonment for planning the hit. "He harboured resentment against the radio host for his political views and more liberal interpretation of their mutual Sikh faith," the judge noted while sentencing the trio.

Victim suffered 40 stab wounds. The attack occurred on December 23, 2020, when Harnek Singh was ambushed by a group of religious extremists in his driveway. He suffered over 40 stab wounds and required over 350 stitches and multiple surgeries to recover, an Australian website reported.

furtherance of the greater good.... Sentencing in this context requires a different approach. The emphasis must be placed on protecting the community from further violence and it is essential to send a strong message of deterrence to others," observed the judge while sentencing Sarjeet Sidhu to

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Air India unveils new uniforms for cabin crew, pilots designed by Manish Malhotra

(Sai Bureau)- Sarees get a modern touch in Air India's new cabin crew uniform designed by Manish Malhotra.

Air India unveiled the uniforms for cabin crew and pilots designed by Manish Malhotra on December 12. The airline's female cabin crew will wear ombre sarees with a modern touch, while the men will wear bandhgallas. For the cockpit crew, the celebrated couturier has designed classic black suits.

The new uniforms will be introduced in a phased manner over the next few months, debuting with the entry of service of Air India's first Airbus A350. The female cabin crew uniform features ready-to-wear ombre saree with intricate jharokha patterns and the Vista (new Air India logo icon), paired with a blouse and blazer. Neo-traditional, we say. The ready-to-wear sarees can be optionally worn with comfortable pants. The airline, in the press release, said that the move is to provide greater flexibility for female cabin crew to choose the style they most identify with and bring a unique East-meets-West look. The ombre sarees



for the senior female cabin crew will be aubergine-to-burgundy, combined with aubergine blazers. Junior female cabin crew will wear vibrant red-to-purple sarees combined with red blazers.

The cockpit crew's uniform, on the other hand, features a classic black double-breasted suit with a print inspired by the Vista. Manish Malhotra said he aimed to create uniforms that capture the essence

of India's diverse culture and traditions while also embodying a modern and sophisticated look.

"I am honoured to have been given the opportunity to design the uniforms for Air India. It is a privilege to be able to contribute to the national flag-bearer and showcase the elegance and charm of Indian fashion. My aim was to create uniforms that capture the essence

of India's diverse culture and traditions while also embodying a modern and sophisticated look," the designer said. "Air India's crew uniforms are among the world's most storied in aviation history, and we firmly believe that Manish Malhotra's innovative ensemble will script an exciting new chapter for Air India's future narrative. It perfectly captures the essence of our new identity, service principles, and our pursuit of setting new benchmarks in global aviation," Campbell Wilson, Chief Executive Officer and Managing Director, Air India, said.

The designer has also curated footwear to go with the uniforms. While women will wear dual-tone (black and burgundy) block heels, the male cabin crew will wear comfortable black brogues. The uniforms include pearl earrings and sling bags for female cabin crew.

Manish Malhotra has also designed uniforms for Air India's ground staff, engineers, and security personnel. They are yet to be unveiled.

Studying in Canada to cost more now and this is how it will impact Indians

Canada has doubled the cash required by international students to acquire a study permit. Indians, who make the bulk of the international students, will have to have Rs 12 lakh in their bank accounts. This is how the change is going to impact them.

(Sai Bureau)-The Canadian dreams of Indian students will now cost much more. The North American country, a favourite destination for Indians because of its liberal route to permanent resident status and citizenship, has doubled the cost-of-living requirement for international students.

Indians form the bulk of the international students in Canada. The much-needed increase in the cost-of-living requirement is going to increase the burden on an individual by over Rs 6 lakh. Canada's Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship, Marc Miller, announced last week (December 7) that the cost-of-living financial requirement for study permit applicants would be raised to Canadian \$20,635 from Canadian \$10,000 with effect from January 1, 2024.

That is the money international students will need to have in their bank accounts as proof of funds that they can survive in Canada. This will be in addition to their first year tuition and travel costs and will be adjusted every year, a Canadian government statement said.

"This adjustment mirrors the escalating cost of living in Canada in a more realistic way," Manan Gupta, Regulated

Canadian Immigration Consultant, tells IndiaToday.In. "The government has tried to address the gap between previous financial requirements and the actual cost of living in Canada which has increased exponentially over the past couple of years," says Manan, on why Canada increased the minimum financial requirement. "The change comes because it is difficult for international students to sustain themselves in today's Canada," says Gaurav Bhatt, a journalist with The Canadian Press, tells IndiaToday.In. Bhatt, however, believes the move announced for January will leave many students scrambling.

"What's unfortunate and scary is that doubling the proof of funds to \$20,000 may seem cruel, but even that amount may not be enough," says Gaurav Bhatt, who moved to Canada on a student visa last year and remains connected to the Indian student community in Ontario.

Till now, students used to show proof of funds through a guaranteed investment certificate (GIC) worth Canadian dollar (CAD) 10,000 while applying for a study permit. That amount is later credited to a student's account, roughly CAD 650 per month.



"Is that enough if a student pays Canadian dollar 450-500 in monthly rent? That too for a shared room in the tri-city region of Kitchener-Waterloo-Cambridge? Throw in a monthly bus pass worth CAD 90-100," explains Bhatt about how the cost of living has shot up in Canada. The Ontario-based journalist says that the number of job vacancies in Canada is nowhere near the number of students coming in, and most international students have trouble landing a job and are forced to ask for support from their families back home. The situation is so dire that students are forced to line up at food banks in Canada. "To save money, international students are lining up at food banks. The food banks are overrun, running out of supplies, and some have now started

turning away international students," says Bhatt.

The Canadian government said doubling the cost-of-living requirement was needed so that "international students are financially prepared for life in Canada".

Manan Gupta says that students arriving in Canada with higher funds are likely to be less vulnerable to shady landlords and exploitative employers as they struggle to make ends meet.

HOW IT WILL IMPACT INDIAN STUDENTS IN CANADA

"Not all students will be able to meet the new level of savings, and the new announcement is likely to dissuade applicants who cannot really afford to study in Canada in the first place," says Ottawa-based immigration expert Manan Gupta.

Farooq Abdullah's 'Jammu and Kashmir should go to hell' remark sparks row

Farooq Abdullah's remark on Jammu and Kashmir in the backdrop of the Supreme Court's ruling on petitions challenging the abrogation of Article 370, drew a strong reaction from the BJP.

(News Agency)- National Conference leader Farooq Abdullah on Tuesday sparked a row with his remark "Jammu and Kashmir should go to hell", made outside Parliament.

"Jammu Kashmir jahannum me jaye (should go to hell). What else should I say?

comments too."After DMK demanding self determination now Farooq says this! Merely because SC upheld abrogation of 370 which has ended politics of parivarvaad and pathar baazi and pakistan parasti! This is INDI alliance true face! They want 370 back & they

don't care about J&K at all," Poonwalla said in a post on X.BJP IT Cell head Amit Malviya also took a dig at Abdullah over his remark on Jammu and Kashmir.

In another video shared by news agency ANI, the National Conference leader reiterated his remarks and said, "You indeed are taking it (Jammu and Kashmir) to hell. Nothing is being done for 'heaven'...Tell me what is being done for heaven?"He further questioned why elections were not taking place in the state. "You say terrorism has been eliminated, but is that the case?...You (Central Government) are not winning our hearts. I told the PM clearly that you don't trust us and we don't trust you," he said in the video."The Prime Minister replied that "Dil ki doori aur Dilli ki doori ko door karna hai." But has the distance been reduced till date? This is not our fault. We have been standing, and we will stand with this country as long as we are

breathing. We will stand with no other nation. But respect us too, try to win our hearts too," Abdullah said.

The Supreme Court on Monday unanimously upheld the abrogation of Article 370 and ordered assembly elections in Jammu and Kashmir by

September-end and restoration of statehood "at the earliest". The five-judge bench delivered three concurring judgements upholding abrogation of Article 370 that provided a unique status to Jammu and Kashmir when it acceded to the Union of India in 1947.



You (central government) have taken the state there. You want to win people's hearts. How will you win hearts if you do things that draw people further away?" Abdullah could be heard saying in a video. Abdullah's remarks came a day after the Supreme Court upheld the 2019 revocation of Article 370 of the Constitution that gave special status to the erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir.

The National Conference leader's comments drew a sharp response from the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The BJP's Shehzad Poonwalla in a tweet spoke against Abdullah's remarks and demanded that the INDIA bloc condemns the

Khalistani terrorist Lakhbir Singh Rode, nephew of Bhindranwale, dies in Pakistan

(News Agency)- Khalistani terrorist Lakhbir Singh Rode, nephew of Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, died in Pakistan on December 2, sources

said. Rode reportedly suffered a heart attack.

Sources also said Rode's last rites were secretly performed in Pakistan following Sikh customs and traditions.

Bhindranwale was an erstwhile leader of the Khalistan movement. Lakhbir Singh Rode

was involved in terrorist activities against India in Punjab at the behest of Pakistan's intelligence agency ISI, according to signals from Pakistan's secret agency ISI. In October, the

National Investigation Agency (NIA) had confiscated the properties of Rode following a raid by the anti-terror agency.



The raids were carried out in Moga, Punjab.

The anti-terror agency's action came as it was investigating six cases against Rode for his active involvement in terror-related activities between 2021 and 2023.

Rode was the head of the banned outfit International Sikh Youth Federation (ISYF) and was designated as a terrorist by the government.

Parliament security breach: Raids on to nab sixth accused

(News Agency)- Multiple raids were being conducted to nab the sixth accused, Lalit Jha, who is on the run after the breach of Parliament security by his associates, a source privy to the probe said. According to sources, Jha, a resident of Bihar and a teacher by profession, ran with the bag which had mobile phones of the four accused nabbed inside and outside Parliament.

Police suspect either Jha is in Rajasthan or Haryana.

Sources further revealed that there is no connection with any terror group, however, they suspect a mastermind behind the conspiracy, who was guiding the accused.

"We are trying to locate Jha's location through technical and manual surveillance. CCTV footage are being scanned to know the route he took to escape from the security agencies," said the source. The six accused involved in the breach of Parliament security were connected through the "Bhagat Singh Fan



Club page" on social media Facebook, the sources privy to the probe told IANS, adding that the investigators suspect that they were being directed by someone both before and during the act. Several questions have left investigators puzzled. "Why did they not throw the flare canister and instead kept it in their hands in the

Lok Sabha house? They were surely directed to do so by someone," stated the source. "The four accused, apprehended both outside and inside Parliament, had handed over their mobile phones to one Lalit Jha, a resident of Bihar. He was also located outside the Parliament and fled with the bag

containing the phones when his associates were nabbed. It appears that he too received directions to do so from another person to flee from there with phones," added the sources. The youth, who jumped into the well of the Lok Sabha, was shouting, "Kaala Kanoon Nahi Chalega, Tanasahi nahi chalegi" while using smoke flare in the House. The five accused arrested have been identified as Manoranjan D, a resident of Mysuru, Sagar Sharma, a resident of Lucknow, Neelam, a resident of Haryana's Jind, Amol Shinde, a resident of Maharashtra's Latur and Vikram a.k.a Vicky Sharma, a resident of Gurugram sector-7 and native of Hissar. Delhi Police's Special Cell were grilling Vikram and his wife Rakhi as the four accused had stayed at their house in sector-7, Gurugram, a day before the incident. "On the day of the incident, all four accused had left the house at around 8 a.m. Vikram is living in Gurugram for the last 15 years," said the sources.

INDIA bloc to seek Shah statement in Parliament on security breach

(News Agency)- The Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance (INDIA) bloc leaders on Thursday met to discuss the Parliament security breach and decided to raise the issue and also a detailed statement by Union Home Minister Amit Shah. The INDIA bloc floor leaders of both Houses met in the chamber of Congress president and Leader of Opposition in the Rajya Sabha Mallikarjun Kharge to discuss the strategy.

However, soon after the Rajya Sabha and Lok Sabha met on Thursday, both the Houses were adjourned amid uproar by the opposition members demanding a detailed statement by Shah. In Lok Sabha, the opposition members also demanded the



resignation of Shah. Following uproar Speaker Om Birla named three

members and adjourned the House till 2 p.m. Even Rajya Sabha was adjourned till 12 noon amid uproar by the opposition members.

Congress leader Jairam Ramesh took to X and said, "The INDIA parties are demanding -- a detailed statement by the Home Minister in both Houses, followed by a discussion on the very serious and shocking security breach witnessed in the Lok Sabha yesterday and strict action against the BJP MP Pratap Simha who provided the visitor passes to the intruders."

"The Modi government's refusal to accept these perfectly legitimate and reasonable demands has led to the adjournment of the Lok Sabha and the Rajya Sabha today morning," the Rajya Sabha MP added.

Delhi HC rejects plea for postponement of DJS Preliminary Examination '23

(News Agency)- The Delhi High Court on Thursday turned down a plea seeking the postponement of the Delhi Judicial Services (DJS) Preliminary Examination, 2023, slated for December 17. The division bench, led by Acting Chief Justice Manmohan and Justice Mini Pushkarna, dismissed the PIL filed by Vishal Yadav.

The court cited a previous dismissal of a similar writ petition by a coordinate bench, saying: "Keeping in view the aforesaid order (passed by the coordinate bench), the present PIL is dismissed."

The petitioner had argued for the rescheduling of the DJS Prelims Examination 2023, contending that its date clashed with the Combined Recruitment Test conducted by the Union Public Service Commission (UPSC) for various law-related posts. This decision comes on the heels of a December 7 ruling by a division bench led by Justice Yogesh Khanna, which also rejected a similar plea, citing the impracticality of multiple postponements. The coordinate bench had stated: "The present petition has no merit. Accordingly, it is dismissed."

Last month, in an official notice from the high court, the DJS Preliminary Examination-2023, originally slated for December 10, was rescheduled for December 17. Candidates aspiring to participate in the examination were strongly advised to stay updated by regularly checking the official website of



the Delhi High Court for any additional announcements or updates.

The application process for the examination began on November 7 and the deadline for the submission of the application form was November 22.

The first stage of the exam -- DJS Prelims Exam -- will fill a total of 53 vacancies.

Out of the total, 34 vacancies are for General candidates, 14 vacancies for ST candidates, and 5 vacancies for SC candidates.

Delhi CM, LG flag off 500 new electric buses for city's

(News Agency)- Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal and Lieutenant Governor VK Saxena on Thursday inaugurated 500 electric buses, bringing the total count of such buses in the national Capital to 1,300. "CM@ArvindKejriwal gave green signal to 500 new luxurious electric buses for Delhi. With this, Delhi became the only city in India with the highest number of electric buses. Today there are 1,300 electric buses in Delhi, the highest in the country," Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) wrote on X.

"Congratulations to all Delhiites. 500 more electric buses are coming on the roads



buses in Delhi has now reached 1,300," the Chief Minister wrote on X. On the occasion, the LG said that these 500

buses would help reduce the pollution levels in the city. Talking to reporters, Arvind Kejriwal said that the aim was to improve the transport system and with 1,300 electric buses, Delhi was the only city to have this huge electric bus fleet.

Transport Minister Kailash Gahlot said that Delhi now boasts the highest number of electric buses nationwide, with 800 already operational since January 2022. These eco-friendly buses have covered over 42 million kms till now, reducing carbon dioxide emissions by 34,000 tonnes. The city aims to

have 10,480 electric buses by 2025 in order to reduce pollution and make public transport more sustainable.

Will US Ever Reform Immigration to Favor Self-Sufficiency?

When Emma Lazarus wrote her famous line in 1883, "Give me your tired, your poor, / Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free," there was no Medicaid, food stamps, housing vouchers and government-run shelters. Those who came knew they were on their own. Now they arrive with their hands out.

A country can have open borders or a generous social safety net, but not both. President Joe Biden is the poster boy for that mistake, and cities across the U.S. are paying the price.

New York City Mayor Eric Adams has warned that the cost of sheltering, feeding and providing health care and other services to the deluge of migrants will



"destroy" the city. Yet Adams returned empty-handed from a visit with Biden's staff on Dec. 8 to seek federal help. For the second time, New Yorkers are being told by a U.S. president, in so many words, to "drop dead."

Biden is also turning his back on Chicago, Boston, Los Angeles and other cities beleaguered by the busloads of destitute migrants from the southern border. Chicago Alderman Raymond Lopez says the Black community there is "no longer feeling the love from Uncle Joe," as Biden leaves the city to struggle alone with the cost of feeding and sheltering migrants. Windy City Democrats, outraged by the burden thrust on them, are vowing to disrupt the Democratic National Convention next summer and make their voices heard.

Americans everywhere feel the same. Charity is supposed to begin at home. Chicagoans want to take care of their own first, including the 68,000 locals who are homeless. Immigration is spiking to all-time highs, exceeding even the wave of newcomers from Europe in the late 19th century, when Lazarus wrote her poem. About half the spike is due to Biden's open-border policies. A record 12,000 broke through the southern border last Tuesday, the biggest one-day surge ever. Immigration per se is not the problem. The U.S. economy needs more workers. With the birthrate declining and baby boomers retiring, the U.S. has a people-shortage problem that can only be solved by immigration.

But Biden is welcoming destitute migrants, instead of newcomers who are educated, have job skills to succeed in today's economy, speak English and arrive ready to provide for their families. Biden's open border means anyone who wades across the Rio Grande gets in.

Biden's legal immigration policy — introduced into the Senate in 2021 — also prioritizes everything but economic self-sufficiency.

Biden's predecessor, former President Donald Trump, ramped up enforcement of the longstanding "public charge" rule that bars anyone from getting a green card and permanent residence who is likely to depend on Medicaid, food stamps or housing vouchers. Biden reversed this policy. Countries with smart immigration policies — Canada, Australia, New Zealand and the United Kingdom — have point systems giving preference to educated immigrants with language and job skills. In contrast, two-thirds of legal immigrants to the U.S. get a green card based solely on having a family member here, whether they can support themselves or not.

It's no wonder that a staggering 55% of households headed by an immigrant who has not yet attained citizenship use at least one welfare program, according to Census Bureau data.

Biden's proposed immigration "reform" actually loosens the standards for family-based migration even more, never mind the impact on taxpayers and city social services. And here's the wackiest legal immigration program: the diversity lottery. Fifty thousand immigrants from "underrepresented nations" are literally admitted randomly every year. Biden wants to expand that. Canada is recruiting Ph.Ds. Biden is prioritizing diversity. Sens. Kevin Cramer, R-N.D., and John Hickenlooper, D-Colo., introduced a bill Nov. 24 to establish a point system or "skills-based approach" here. Americans tired of supporting the strangers coming to their shores, when their own neighbors need help, should support this bill. That includes New York Democrats such as Sens. Chuck Schumer and Kirsten Gillibrand. House Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries — a New Yorker — charges that Republican reform plans, including deterring illegal migration, are "anchored in xenophobia." Wrong. They're anchored in survival. Unless the U.S. acts to shut down illegal migration and reform legal immigration to favor self-sufficiency, New York and other cities face even tougher days ahead.

By Betsy McCaughey

What Is Holding South Asia Back While Other Asian Economies Flourish?

Last week, I wrote about South Asia remaining poor compared to many nations in Asia, which have done something different from us. The task is to figure out what we are doing wrong or differently and what is undeniably different about us and them. It cannot only be, as is argued, that it is the form of economic system that is to blame. We have tried managing the economy through central planning (India in 1950s and 1960s), through "licence raj" (India till the 1980s), through "liberalisation" (Pakistan from the 1960s and India from 1991). We have returned to the same things we were doing before (import substitution in India in the 1970s and today). We had some success and created sectors where we are leaders (India for a quarter century or so in information technology-enabled services and Bangladesh today in garments).

It cannot be that we do not have, or have not tried to have, hard power. We have developed nuclear weapons and we have spent large sums on our militaries. Pakistan sends 17% of all government spending to the Army, India and Bangladesh send nine per cent. We have tried to be strong — the misguided word used here is "muscular", and run large parts of the subcontinent with the military (Kashmir and the Northeast in India, Balochistan in Pakistan).

We have tried to remain defiant. We have joined Western alliances (Pakistan in 1960s), we have remained non-aligned (India in 1950s) and we have tried a patchwork of things in between.

But the end result is the numbers we looked at in the previous column. The world's GDP per capita per year is an average of \$12,262. China is slightly ahead

of the world average, and Bangladesh, India and Pakistan are one-fifth. We were five times less than the global average in 1960 too, when the global figure was at \$459 and India at \$82. Note that this is per person income and of the world's 7.7 billion people, South Asia contributes a full 23%. Meaning we are a drag on the world's economy and productivity and have been for 60 years, at more or less the same rate. There must be something we are missing. What is it? The World Bank says that intra-regional trade between Bangladesh, India and Pakistan accounts for five percent of our total trade, compared to Southeast Asia, where the number is five times higher. Trade annually here is \$23 billion though it should really be over \$100 billion. Why? The problem is purely man-made. The World Bank says "border challenges mean it is about 20% cheaper for a company in India to trade with Brazil instead of a neighbouring South Asian country", and that the main problem is "a broad trust deficit throughout the region". It adds that South Asia is "one of the least integrated regions in the world in terms of trade and people-to-people contact. Putting aside traditional concerns and taking joint action can develop cross-border solutions to shared issues, strengthen regional institutions, improve infrastructure and connectivity, and advance trade policy".

Why should it take outsiders to tell us what is obvious?

Unfortunately, it does. The World Bank adds that regional cooperation has the potential to produce significant gains across all countries of South Asia because the gap in trade is \$44 billion annually.

By Aakar Patel



ISSN No. 1554 06X

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A Publication of Media Partners Capital, Inc.

REGD & MAILING OFFICE :

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The case against Trump's company is bogus

By Alexander Talel

In mid-1950s New York, business corruption was rife, and mafia families were on the rise. Jacob Javits, who was the New York state attorney general at the time, pushed the state legislature to create a law that would give his office sweeping power to identify and go after repeated fraudsters. From that request, Executive Law 63 (12) was born.

Today, the Executive Law is the centerpiece of current New York Attorney General Letitia James' case against former President Donald Trump. To ignore the injustice of the law as applied to Trump is to welcome its unfair application to us all.

James is attempting to use the Executive Law against Trump in a way it's never been used before, making the case that he defrauded certain financial institutions despite those institutions having actually profited from doing deals with him. That makes little sense, illustrating the law's potential for rough justice, especially in the hands of a highly motivated attorney general. Trump was supposed to testify once again on Monday after appearing on the witness stand last month, but he said online late Sunday that he



would not be testifying again after all. On Tuesday, Trump's defense rested its case.

James' case argues that the financial statements that Trump submitted to various lending institutions were fraudulent because they exaggerated the value of his real estate holdings. That sounds bad. But what the AG doesn't allege is that any of those lenders complained about Trump's valuations or that his valuations violated those lenders' rules or even that Trump defaulted on any of the loans he received — he hasn't.

Can someone be sued by the government for fraud if the supposedly fraudulent conduct hasn't harmed anyone? Under the Executive Law, yes; Trump's case proves it. The commercial consequences of the law are

disturbingly obvious and potentially devastating.

If an individual puts two properties up for sale at double the value assessed by a third-party appraiser, could the AG go after that seller for repeated "fraud" under the Executive Law, despite buyers happily paying the asking prices? Apparently. What about a deli owner claiming in ads to have the "best sandwiches in the world"? Could the AG go after that owner for "fraud" even though customers have only praised and never complained about the quality of those sandwiches? In theory, yes. And does anything in the law allow the court to rein in the AG for overreaching? Far from it — New York courts have ruled that the AG's power to act under the Executive Law is basically

immune from questioning.

Following the guidance of those courts, presiding New York State Supreme Court Justice Arthur Engoron ruled in favor of James in September, finding that Trump had violated the Executive Law. In allowing trial to proceed on the issue of damages, Engoron also ruled that disgorgement — the remedy sought by the attorney general, which compels an individual to return illegally made profits — is "equitable in nature, mandating that the trial be a bench trial, one that a judge alone decides." That ruling makes clear how the Executive Law allows a court to deny an accused individual their constitutional right to a jury trial. Equitable disgorgement usually involves ill-gotten profits — in an insurance scam, for example, in which an individual tricks another into paying premiums for a non-existent policy, disgorgement would require the scammer to pay back whatever profits they illegally collected from the victim. That kind of straightforward calculation might be appropriate for a judge to decide alone. But there are no victims in Trump's case and, therefore, no ill-gotten profits. So when James asks that an "estimated" \$250 million be disgorged from Trump, what

she's really seeking is a massive penalty — not a specified, equitable remedy pegged to a victim's suffering, but the kind of unspecified and punitive money damages typically left for juries to decide. Instead of a jury, however, Trump gets Engoron, who isn't sympathetic to the free-market economic principles underlying his defense. In his September ruling, Engoron ridiculed Trump for "essentially argu[ing] that value is inherently subjective." But value is often subjective, particularly in the real estate market. Engoron's decision obscures this point by mainly citing cases dealing with tax assessment challenges — not decisions implicating contracting business entities like the ones at issue in Trump's case. Engoron similarly mocked Trump for arguing that "no sophisticated counterparty would have considered the [financial statements] and other information provided by [Trump] as material to extend credit ... without doing their own due diligence." But Trump's argument makes business sense — a bank's ultimate decision to lend is based on its own self-informed valuation, not the borrower's.

Bangladesh, Arab Spring and America's Dangerous Obsession with Regime Change

By: Utpal Kumar

When it comes to democracy, the United States often acts like a jilted lover. It is obsessively in love with the notion. And when spurned, it turns crazy. Possessed by the idea, it wants to have it at any cost — even by resorting to undemocratic means. The result has often been catastrophic, to say the least. For both the US and the country bullied into adopting the idea of democracy.

As Bangladesh gears up for elections early next month, the 'democracy-exporting' Americans are on the overdrive again. They are cajoling, coercing and even confronting the Sheikh Hasina government to hold a "free and fair" election where all political parties, irrespective of their ideological moorings, fight for people's mandate. The American move gains significance as Khaleda Zia's Bangladesh National Party (BNP), the country's main Opposition party, has said that it would contest the elections only if a



neutral caretaker government is installed before the elections. For a while now, the West led by the US has been pushing the Bangladesh government to put in place 'credible' machinery to hold 'free and fair' elections. It has categorically expressed its displeasure at the Hasina government for failing to uphold high standards of democracy in the country. Even the street violence resorted to by BNP goons on the Bangladeshi streets on October 28, 2023, seeking the installation of a caretaker government, failed to bring the

West out of its anti-Hasina stupor. A country is well within its rights to wish for the spread of democracy across the world. But it's bizarre to see the American idea of democracy growing out of the barrel of an Islamist gun. This ideological dichotomy was evident when a top US embassy official reportedly met a prominent leader of Jamaat-e-Islami in Dhaka recently while seeking to strengthen democracy there. The Jamaat openly advocates the Islamisation of Bangladesh and seeks the implementation of the Shariah. There is no space for

minority rights in its scheme of things. Incidentally, the Bangladeshi Supreme Court, on November 19, 2023, dismissed the Jamaat appeal seeking to overturn a 2013 ruling that barred the Islamist outfit from participating in elections for violating the constitutional provision of secularism.

The US, instead of respecting the verdict of Bangladesh's apex court and supporting the Sheikh Hasina government, which for all practical purposes is the only hope of democracy and liberalism in Bangladesh right now, is today not just busy in holding talks with Islamist forces, which have hijacked the Opposition space in that country, but also threatened the Awami League government of consequences, including the imposition of visa restrictions on those trying to undermine "free and fair" elections.

The US Ambassador to Bangladesh, Peter Haas, went a step further and met Chief Election

Commissioner Kazi Habibul Awal. Haas said, "Any action that undermines the democratic elections process — including violence, preventing people from exercising their right to peaceful assembly and internet access — calls into question the ability to conduct free and fair elections." What makes the entire Western exercise comical, if not outright tragic, is the governance record of Sheikh Hasina who, during two decades in office as Prime Minister, has "presided over momentous poverty alleviation in her country of 170m, fuelled by average annual GDP growth of 7% for much of that time", if The Economist is to be believed (May 24, 2023). Hasina has also done a remarkable job in marginalising Islamist forces within the country. So much so that one expert on Bangladeshi affairs said during the release of his book recently that the fate of minorities in that country rested primarily on how long Hasina stayed in power.

Pranab Diaries: From His 'Golden Period' Under Indira to 'Trust Deficit' With Rajiv, Sonia

By: Pavan K Varma

Earlier this week, I was in conversation with Sharmishtha Mukherjee, at the launch of her much-discussed and best-selling book, 'Pranab: My Father: A Daughter Remembers', launched on December 11, Pranab Mukherjee's birth anniversary, to an overflowing audience at the India International Centre in New Delhi. Pranab bequeathed the 34 volumes of his diary to Sharmishtha, with the strict instructions that they should be read only after he is no more, since some of the content was both sensitive and explosive.

I want to focus in this column on Pranab's comments on the relationship he had, and his opinion of some of the key people who played a very important part in his life.

Coming from a humble background from a small village in what is now Bangladesh, Pranab owed his meteoric rise to Indira Gandhi. In 1967, he was elected for the first time to the Rajya Sabha from the



Bangla Congress, which later merged with the Congress. A little-known backbencher, it was Indira Gandhi as Prime Minister, who spotted his talent and mastery of facts in a speech he gave in the Rajya Sabha on the nationalisation of banks. Soon he was made a deputy minister in her cabinet, later a minister of state, and finally raised to cabinet rank, first as minister of commerce, and later as one of the youngest finance ministers. For Pranab, Indira was his ultimate benefactor. Given his sense of gratitude

and loyalty, he stood by her during the Emergency, and after she lost the elections in 1977, when many other stalwarts of the Congress deserted her. Her return to power in 1980 was naturally the 'golden period' of Pranab's career, where he enjoyed her fullest confidence and trust and became the de facto number two in the cabinet, even presiding over its meetings in her absence.

Her tragic assassination in 1984 left Pranab bereft. His relationship with her son, Rajiv Gandhi, who succeeded her as PM, was dramatically different.

When news of Indira's assassination came, Rajiv and Pranab were in West Bengal and flew back to Delhi together. The news that she had passed away came during their flight. A canard was spread that Pranab, instead of endorsing Rajiv's succession immediately, displayed his own ambition to become the prime minister. Rajiv was new to politics, surrounded by a coterie of apolitical friends, led by Arun Nehru. They succeeded in convincing Rajiv that Pranab was a threat to him. The consequences were traumatic. Pranab was not included in Rajiv's cabinet, removed from the Congress Working Committee (CWC), and finally expelled from the party. For a man who had been the most trusted lieutenant of Rajiv's mother, he now was summarily humiliated by her son. For seven long years, Pranab went into the political wilderness and was rehabilitated only much later, when P.V. Narasimha Rao became the prime minister. This 'trust deficit' with first Rajiv, and after his tragic

assassination, with Sonia Gandhi, persisted. When Congress returned to power as part of UPA 1, Sonia Gandhi chose Dr Manmohan Singh as the prime minister, when on the basis of sheer experience and seniority, Pranab was the obvious choice. Dr Singh was far junior to Pranab; in fact, in 1982 as finance minister, it was Pranab who appointed him as the Governor of the Reserve Bank of India. Fortunately, Manmohan Singh showed the utmost respect for Pranab, and they got on very well. The 'trust deficit' with the Gandhis showed up again when the time came to choose the next President of India in 2012. It was rumoured that Sonia's first choice was Vice President Hamid Ansari—and Sharmishtha in our interaction—endorsed this perception. It was only when Mulayam Singh Yadav—an alliance partner in the UPA—decisively came out in support of Pranab that she was left with no choice but to support his candidature.

Why Anglo-Indians Have Been Let Down By The Archies Too

By: Reshmi Dasgupta

The Anglo-Indian community has reason to be miffed. It has been taken for granted as much in the 2023 Netflix offering *The Archies* as in the trope-ridden 2004 Anjan Dutta movie *Bow Barracks Forever*. Indians who do not know any Anglo-Indians personally have little go by other than what is portrayed in mass media like movies and TV. Thus, Anglo-Indians seem to be doomed to be either ruthlessly stereotyped or superficially imposed to suit a storyline.

The basic theme of Archie comics lends itself to desi films: the eternal Archie-Ronnie-Betty triangle with Jughead as the loyal wingman. That many hit films from *Bobby* to *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* and more, trace their roots to this Archie triangle template could be the reason for this latest avatar. But none of the earlier ones had gone so far as to transpose all the names and places—from Riverdale High to Pop Tate's—into a fictional Indian (and Anglo-Indian) setting. But *The Archies* is not meant to be a film about Anglo-Indians. That's just a facile device to justify the use of Western character names from the iconic American comic series. The film is meant to be the launchpad for three young Indian 'nepo' actors. And Indian audiences are expected to buy into this grafting because the characters are supposedly Anglo-Indian and hence do not morph into Archisman 'Archie' Androo, Bitiya 'Betty' Kapoor and Varunika 'Ronnie' Loje.

As Anglo-Indians are caricatured in mainstream cinema and indistinguishable from the larger population of Christians of Goan and Mangalorean heritage for most audiences, the only bright spot is that *The Archies* steers clear of one

set of tropes. There are no wastrels and drunks called Tom and Peter or squabbling haridans and sultry sirens named Rosie and Mabel, whose lilting English conversations are peppered with "dat bluddy bugger" and "wot men".

But there is egregious cultural appropriation, nevertheless. The Anglo-Indian community has been commandeered to tell a story that has nothing to do with it; the association is superficial and at times even gratuitous. Do names like Archie and Ronnie, wearing dresses, eating roast chicken and singing along to a standup piano mean only Anglo-Indians? Many Indians without mixed parentage have had such names, worn such clothes, eaten roasts and sung Auld Lang Syne. In effect *The Archies* offers another set of equally inaccurate and unfair tropes about the community, following the hoary tradition of Indian cinema, rather than taking an informed 21st century view given the vast amount of information now at the disposal of anyone who cares to actually research. Which means Indian audiences remain as inadequately informed as ever. Or maybe the game plan was indeed to take advantage of their ignorance to sell an improbable transposition.

Ask Indians to recall a movie about Anglo-Indians, the most cosmopolitan among us will say *Bhowani Junction*, but that was a Hollywood production starring Ava Gardner and Stewart Granger. Among Indian movies, some might (correctly) mention the 1975 hit *Julie*, with the song *My Heart is Beating* sung entirely

in English by Preeti Sagar. Bengalis may also recall *Soptopodi*, in which Suchitra Sen plays Rina Brown. Most will be hard-pressed to name any other. There was, of course, *Junoon*, adapted from the novella *A Flight of Pigeons* by India's most famous Anglo-Indian writer Ruskin Bond, starring Jennifer Kendall and Nafisa Ali as Miriam and Ruth Labadoor but it is set in 1857. Merchant Ivory's *Cotton Mary* starring Madhur Jaffrey as a scheming Anglo-Indian nurse in Kerala scarcely caused a box office ripple. And the protagonist of Pradeep Krishen's *Massey Sahib* is an Indian Christian, not Anglo-Indian.

Violet Stoneham (Jennifer Kendall) in Aparna Sen's *36 Chowringhee Lane* was indeed an Anglo-Indian but the eponymous *Bobby* (Dimple Kapadia) was not. Whether Nancy Pereira (played by Tina Munim) in the film *Baaton Baaton Mein* and her beau Tony Braganza (Amol Palekar) were Anglo-Indian is unclear. And Konkona Sen Sharma's *A Death in the Gunj* was merely set in the Anglo-Indian hill station of McCluskiegunj and does not focus on the community. Despite all these films being available on OTT platforms, Anglo-Indians remain as little understood now by most Indians as they were before, and perhaps even harder to distinguish. Earlier concentrated in the 'Presidency cities' and railway colonies, mass migration after Independence has reduced Anglo-Indian visibility though they once dominated sports—Leslie Claudius, Norman Pritchard and Roger Binny, to name just three—the police, railways and teaching.



Article 370 Verdict: Why Opposition Needs to Shed Hypocrisy, Articulate Clear Stand on Kashmir

By: Sayantan Ghosh

The Supreme Court's landmark verdict affirming the abrogation of Article 370, spearheaded by Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government, marks an irreversible shift in India's political landscape. The decisive move in 2019 initiated a seismic transformation, and whether one stood in support or opposition, it's undeniable that India's politics, especially concerning Kashmir, has undergone a profound metamorphosis. For Kashmiris, this transcended mere political manoeuvring; it was about their lives, livelihoods, dignity, autonomy, development, the right to a peaceful existence, and the pursuit of self-reliance.

With the Supreme Court validating the Central government's decision, the time has come to re-enter the political arena. While a significant portion of India supported the abrogation of Article 370, notable Opposition parties, particularly the Congress, held a contrary stance. Now, as Opposition parties unite under the banner of 'I.N.D.I.A.' for the 2024 general elections, it becomes imperative for them to articulate a clear stance on crucial issues like Kashmir and Article 370 revocation. The onus is on the

Opposition coalition to dispel ambiguity and define their goals transparently as they step into the political battleground. CONGRESS AND ITS HYPOCRITE STAND ON ARTICLE 370

For decades, the Opposition has shamelessly wielded the Kashmir issue as a cynical pawn in their political chess game, manipulating the region's emotional complexities, solely for electoral gains. Their duplicitous conduct, marked by a confrontational facade against the government, while indulging in shady backroom dealings, reeks of hypocrisy.

The Congress party's 2014 alliance with the PDP, which effectively endorsed the repeal of Article 370, serves as an obvious example of double standards. However, in 2019, the BJP made a spectacular U-turn. Suddenly, the Congress donned the cloak of fierce Opposition, accusing the government of democratic erosion and alienating Kashmir. This opportunistic charade has shattered public trust and laid bare the Opposition's callous disregard for the welfare of Kashmiris.

Their erratic and conflicting position has left the public befuddled, questioning the

authenticity of their stance and branding them as insincere political opportunists.

Article 370, which granted special autonomous status to Jammu and Kashmir, has been a hotbed of political debate in India. What makes Congress' position particularly baffling is their history of supporting this provision while they were in power. From emphasising the importance of preserving the unity of the country to highlighting the need to protect the rights and identity of the people in the region, their rhetoric screamed in favour of Article 370.

Congress leaders, in their speeches and public statements, championed the cause of Article 370, arguing that it was a necessary measure to maintain peace and stability in the troubled region. They argued that it provided a unique solution to the complex issues of Jammu and Kashmir, and any attempt to tamper with it would only lead to further unrest. The aftermath of Article 370's abrogation has laid bare the tumultuous landscape of Indian politics, exposing a tapestry of conflicting perspectives and ideological chasms.

Within the Samajwadi Party (SP), internal discord echoes loudly. Akhilesh Yadav's tepid

endorsement, ostensibly driven by potential economic benefits, contrasts sharply with Mulayam Singh Yadav's initial criticism and concern over the impact on Kashmir's autonomy. By endorsing the BJP's position, Arvind Kejriwal's Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) decided to depart early from the Opposition consensus. However, their subsequent alliance with I.N.D.I.A. has diluted their critique.

The National Conference (NC), a vocal Kashmiri player, vehemently condemned the abrogation, interpreting it as an assault on the identity and autonomy of the region. Their consistent plea for restoration and dialogue exposes the profound anxieties within Kashmir. Conversely, the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) launched a vigorous opposition, denouncing the move as a blatant violation of democracy and the Constitution. Tejaswi Yadav's vocal criticism highlighted human rights concerns. The People's Democratic Party (PDP), once opposed, pivoted to a nuanced approach. While expressing apprehensions about long-term consequences, Mehbooba Mufti called for dialogue with the Kashmiri people. Mamata

Banerjee's Trinamool Congress (TMC) consistently castigated the abrogation, deeming it a "black day" for democracy and forewarning of potential violence and instability.

The Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) condemned the abrogation, emphasising the need to respect Kashmiri sentiments and advocating a dialogue-based solution. MK Stalin criticised the government's unilateral approach, demanding a more inclusive process. The Communist Party of India [Marxist] (CPIM) staunchly opposed the move, viewing it as an attack on the federal structure and insisting on a political solution respecting Kashmiri aspirations.

In essence, the varied responses underline the deep-seated ideological rifts within India's political tapestry. Whether seen as a stride towards national integration or decried as an affront to democracy and Kashmiri autonomy, the challenge of reconciling these opposing perspectives looms large over the future of Kashmir and India. **NECESSITY OF ARTICULATING A CLEAR STAND ON KASHMIR**

As the pivotal 2024 elections loom, the Opposition finds itself at a crossroads, demanding a definitive stance on the Kashmir issue that transcends mere rhetoric and embraces substantive solutions. The need of the hour is a strategic plan that not only acknowledges the ground reality in Kashmir but also comprehensively addresses the concerns of its people while emphasising integration with the rest of the nation.

First and foremost, the Opposition must shed any myopic lens and recognise that the abrogation of Article 370 was a crucial step toward breaking the shackles of violence and separatism that have marred the region for decades. By highlighting the positive aspects of this decision—potential economic development, improved governance, and equal rights for all citizens—the Opposition can shape a narrative that aligns with the broader national interest. Moreover, the Opposition's agenda should prioritise the genuine welfare of the people in Jammu and Kashmir over short-term political gains.

China Intensifying its Indian Ocean Push, Time for India to Raise the Stakes



Written By: Shubhangi Sharma

It is time for India to raise the stakes as Beijing uses a recent strategic victory to advance its greater agenda in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). China is celebrating a fresh breakthrough in the IOR since Mohamed Muizzu's ascent to power in the tiny atoll nation of the Maldives. Muizzu campaigned on an anti-India dais, won the election and replaced an India-friendly dispensation from the power corridors of Male. Muizzu's rise to power has come as a shot in the arm for China's bid to expand its influence in Indian Ocean nations.

Riding on this development, China aims to broaden its sway by casting a strategic net across more than 20 nations nestled along the Indian Ocean, with an array of infrastructure development and training programmes, which are expected to emulate a key characteristic of Chinese aid and assistance—crippling debt traps and military force projection.

AN INDIAN OCEAN FORUM WITHOUT INDIA

Last week at the China-Indian Ocean Region Forum on Blue Economy Cooperation in Southwest China's Kunming City, Luo Zhaohui, chairman of the China International Development Cooperation Agency (CIDCA), announced Beijing's plans to launch projects on "poverty alleviation, clean energy and other fields" and conduct training programs in the IOR to enhance cooperation with over 23 dialogue partners. Luo is a former vice foreign minister and Chinese ambassador to India.

Another official of the CIDCA announced that China shall implement 200 small-scale projects in the region. The country also plans a "blue talent"

program to train 20,000 individuals in various fields. He also spoke about the formation of a China-Indian Ocean Region Marine Cooperation and Training Centre to "discuss blue opportunities, build a blue economy, and promote blue development."

Locked in a border standoff with India since 2020, China initiated the forum in 2022 to make deeper inroads in the Indian Ocean Region behind India's



back. The meeting has been held twice since. India, boasting the longest coastline along the Indian Ocean, was conspicuously omitted from the initial forum, and there is no indication of its participation in this year's gathering either.

While the Chinese Communist Party mouthpiece, Global Times reports that over 350 representatives from over 20 countries and international organisations participated in the forum, it is not clear which nations sent their delegations to the event, except the Maldives and Seychelles, whose representations were played up by the tabloid. Maldives' Vice President, Hussain Mohamed Latheef, said all

things right for Beijing's taste. As per Global Times, Latheef stated that China has been crucial to the Maldives' recent development, and President Muizzu and his administration are dedicated to fortifying the long-standing relations between China and the Maldives. Seychelles' President Wavel Ramkalawan reportedly sent a video message where he termed China "an important participant in the region". The crux of China's Indian Ocean strategy is to turn countries in India's regional backyard against it and place its naval vessels and spy stations to keep an eye on India's strategic backwaters. China secured a similar coup in Sri Lanka in 2017 when the Hambantota port was leased to it for 99 years by an indebted Colombo. Earlier this year, India confronted Myanmar, with intelligence signalling China's involvement in the development of a surveillance post on the Coco islands in the Bay of Bengal, the northeastern flank of the Indian Ocean. In fact, the ultimate goal for Beijing is to set up overseas military bases that extend China's naval footprint permanently. With the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Xi Jinping's reign has demonstrated time and again China's ambition to encircle India with what is often touted by strategists as the string of pearls—a set of overseas Chinese military bases and influential economic projects that fortify its interests and deepen its sway at the cost of the sovereignty of regional stakeholders and maritime security.

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) which starts from Kashgar in Xinjiang and ends at Pakistan's port city of Gwadar—which is purportedly well on its way to serve as a military base for the Communist nation—is

another foretaste of China's malicious ingress perilously close to India's shoreline. Expensive investments and a military base in the Red Sea state of Djibouti is another example of China's elaborate ambitions in the IOR. In these circumstances, the setback in Maldives has further complicated India's position, as it puts New Delhi on edge about the possible outcomes of greater Chinese sway over Male's overlords. China's development projects are often laced with unsustainable debt, followed by greater port access along strategically crucial sea routes. This strategic penetration in turn morphs into a hostile takeover of strategic assets or outright military undertaking as indebted nations flounder further in debt. Their descent is usually witnessed gradually and then suddenly.

TWO CAN PLAY THE GAME

China is up against India's status as a prominent security and economic Indian Ocean power with a blue water navy. India has a strong influence in the IOR and an abundance of goodwill among its littoral states. India-backed organisations like the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), which has a membership of 23 countries, Prime Minister Narendra Modi-initiated Security and Growth for All in the Region and the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) have taken strong roots.

Moreover, China risks finding a more assertive India in the South China Sea, the entirety of which Beijing claims as its own waters—a stand divergent from international law, opening a plethora of territorial disputes with 10 Southeast Asian nations. One of these is the Philippines, whose vessels were recently blasted with water cannons by larger Chinese warships, triggering a heated diplomatic spat.

As it continues to bully a long list of its neighbours to the east and southeast while actively poking its nose across the Malacca, Beijing needs to recognise that two can play that game—a fact clear from India's shifting gears in the Indo-Pacific. Military exports are booming and Brahmos missiles are making their way into the region with the Philippines placing an order in 2022 and Vietnam and Indonesia trading in a similar direction. Taiwan and India are deliberating on ways to enhance economic cooperation. And India has also shown a propensity for courting far-off Pacific Island nations. If China seeks to reinvigorate its influence campaign in the Indian Ocean, India is expected to one-up Beijing, as it has done on several occasions in the past. Indian Ocean countries thrive on this competition, especially the politicians in power. However, raising the stakes is a power move that New Delhi should indulge in to send its message across resoundingly.

Congress And Its Fellow Travellers Should Stop Insulting Voters of India

By: Abhishek Banerjee & Karuna Gopal

Why did the Indian team lose the cricket world cup final? Because Australia played better on the day. But if you ask the Congress party and its supporters, there were a number of other explanations. They said Prime Minister Narendra Modi is a “panauti”. He brought bad luck. Then there was the fact that the game was played in Amdavad. In their eyes, the Gujaratis are supposed to be bad people who don’t vote the right way. That is why the team lost. So one explanation is superstition and the other is bigotry. Armed with these two explanations, Congress party supporters set social media on fire. They finally had a winning combination. Or so they thought.

It was not to be. In the recent round of assembly polls, the BJP swept three big states. The party got a comfortable majority in Rajasthan. All the talk of Ashok Gehlot retaining power turned out to be just wishful thinking. The BJP has been in power for nearly twenty years in Madhya Pradesh. The Congress would have expected anti-incumbency to do its job. But the BJP won a remarkable victory. It came back to power with almost two-thirds of the seats. The Congress would have been most confident about Chhattisgarh. Back in 2018, it had swept to power with 68 out of the 90 seats. The gap in vote share was 10 per cent! Even if the gap came down a little, the Congress thought it would still be ahead. Again, it was not to be. The BJP won 54 seats out of 90, with a clear lead of 4 per cent in vote share. The state government, clearly, had failed rather badly to meet the expectations of the people. For the Congress and its

fellow travellers, it was time for Plan B. How would they get over the embarrassment of losing three big states? They seized upon the fact that Telangana, the one state they won, is in the south. The narrative was rolled out almost instantly. Earlier this year, the Congress had won in Karnataka, also in the south. The south, they said, is more literate, better educated, and richer on a per capita basis. That is why the south voted for the Congress.

From top opposition politicians to public intellectuals, everyone appeared to follow this line. ADMK MP said in Parliament that the BJP can only win elections in what he called the “gaumutra states” of the north. So much hatred for our fellow citizens? Even Ramachandra Guha fished out a quote from a long-dead Australian diplomat to suggest that India is fundamentally divided between “north” and “south”. As it turns out, that long-dead Australian diplomat was also a big supporter of the racist “White Australia” policy. Is anyone surprised? Of course, the “north” vs “south” narrative is made up. It falls apart at the slightest touch. First of all, has anyone seen a map of India? In what sense are Gujarat and Maharashtra supposed to be northern states? Don’t forget that these are also two of the richest states in India. Until yesterday, the Congress was in power in Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh. Did these states suddenly shift northwards on December 3 this year? Or did these states get poorer in the last five years under Congress rule? Also, if the north is so backward, what was the Congress doing for nearly sixty years? As many as six members of the Nehru-Gandhi family have represented Uttar

Pradesh in Parliament. Now that Rahul Gandhi has to go to Kerala to find a safe seat, they begin to notice all the problems in Uttar Pradesh. Did you know that no Congress government has been re-elected anywhere in the country since 2011? Clearly, these governments failed to meet the expectations of the people. Why blame the people? Why not look within and try to do better? Then there is the question of what to do with Karnataka. Yes, the BJP lost power in the state this year. But it has ruled Karnataka several times. And it is likely to do so again. In the last four general elections, the BJP has been the largest party in Karnataka. Is Karnataka not southern enough for the Congress and its cheerleaders? Even in the 2023 state elections, the BJP won 16 out of the 28 seats in Bengaluru. In Telangana, the Congress won but did not get a single seat out of the 24 in Hyderabad. What does this do to the narrative of richer, more developed parts of the country voting for the Congress? Here is another curious fact. In the current Lok Sabha, the BJP has more MPs from southern India than any other party. More than the Congress, the DMK, or the YSRCP. There is really only one India and only one national mood. Stop trying to divide us. But they always knew that. In Telangana, the BJP has already doubled its vote share from 7 per cent to 14 per cent. Some of the more intelligent people in the liberal ecosystem already see the upcoming reality. They have started working on a new narrative of “Karnataka and Telangana” vs “rest of the south”. Writing in the Indian Express, Brown University professor Ashutosh Varshney

explains that Hindus in Karnataka and Telangana still resent Muslim rulers of an earlier era. And so, the BJP can go no further in the south, beyond these two states. Wait till these academics find out about the massacre of Hindus by Malabar Muslims in 1921, in present-day Kerala.

Why does it seem like these people have just been looking for a way to divide and rule? A month ago, it was all about dividing people by caste. Now it is by language and region. The issues are being raised so opportunistically and cynically that it seems nobody believes them. Suppose the Congress had won Madhya Pradesh or Rajasthan. Would these liberals still have said all those terrible things about Hindi-speaking people? From Jawaharlal Nehru to Rahul Gandhi, the Congress has been the political party of hereditary privilege. Does anyone believe anymore that they are committed to empowering backward sections of society? But then, the fellow travellers of the Congress party have never had much respect for the intelligence of the common voter. Even more so, now that fewer and fewer people vote for them. On the internet, there is now an army of YouTubers, former journalists turned trolls, who go around trying to prove that common people are stupid. The aim is to catch some BJP supporters off guard and make fun of them. Someone who is unused to speaking on camera. The ecosystem then works hard to make the video viral. But dismissing the voter as “WhatsApp University” does not work. Yes, there are a few myths circulating on the so-called “WhatsApp University.” But the truths heavily outnumber them.

And these narratives get challenged and sorted out. This is much more vigorous than anything that ever happened in closed and corrupt intellectual circles. If anything, the internet made it easier to see how lazy, incompetent, and biased these intellectuals actually were. Everyone knows how myths were created by these people to keep one family in power. Their hypocrisies now have nowhere to hide. Today when a common voter gets a tap water connection, a Mudra loan, or a house under Awas Yojana, it is not a myth. You can ignore the voter at your own peril.

But the Congress and its sympathisers kept building the wall higher between themselves and the common voter. Take the idea that the mainstream media, particularly TV news, has become a lapdog of the BJP. The term “godi media” is now everywhere. It even finds mention in supposedly scholarly reports that claim North Korea is safer for journalists than India. Yes, the latest World Press Freedom Report actually says that. Anyway, the myth of “godi media” should have been shattered on December 3 when the results of the assembly elections came out. As it turns out, the analysts on TV news and their pollsters had been overestimating the Congress, not the BJP!

But the myth will remain. Instead, they are interpreting the election results in creative ways, to show that it was the Congress that actually came out ahead. Apparently, if you pool the votes from the four big states on December 3, the Congress comes out ahead by 10 lakh votes.



SC Verdict on Article 370 Is the First Big Blow To The Politics of Minority Appeasement

By: Rahul Shivshankar

The Supreme Court has unanimously upheld the Modi government's decision to scrap Article 370 in August 2019. Article 370 was contentious because it guaranteed special status to Jammu & Kashmir that insulated it from Constitutional oversight. In other words, very few laws applicable to the rest of India applied to Kashmir.

But even after the highest court in the land has spoken, very few will call out Article 370 for what it really was: naked appeasement. Of the kind that turned the Muslim majority Kashmir valley into a constitutional dystopia that mocked secularism.

Instead of celebrating the dismantling of the architecture of separatism, many on the left are slamming the CJI-led 5 judge bench for lacking "the integrity" to uphold constitutionalism.

In August 2019, the Modi government's move to abrogate Article 370 was challenged because it supposedly paid little heed to "procedural niceties, historical promises or legal complexities."

But those who have cast these loaded aspersions have ignored the facts of history.

Article 370 is the illegitimate product of an 'original sin' – the Nehruvian fetish for secularizing Bharat's encounter with Muslim communalism.

Even the wisest counsels within the Constituent Assembly were appalled at Nehru's embrace of Article 370.

Ambedkar, the chairman of the Constitution's drafting committee, warned that it would "create sovereignty



within sovereign India."

India's first Home Minister and "iron man" Sardar Patel was a reluctant campaigner against granting special status to one class of citizens. On seeing the draft of the Article when it was tabled in the Constituent Assembly Hasrat Mohani, an Urdu poet and member of the communist party, asked aloud, "why this discrimination, please?"

Shyama Prasad Mukherjee, who had quit the Nehru cabinet in 1950, stated incredulously, "Ek desh mein do vishan, do pradhan aur do nishan kaise challenge." (Can in one country, two constitutions, two prime ministers and two flags work?)

In fact, Mukherjee, who went on to establish the Bharatiya Jan Sangh (BJS), the predecessor of the Bharatiya Janta Party (BJP), launched an agitation in 1953 against Article 370 in

Kashmir. The protest irritated Nehru and prompted him to accuse Mukherjee of pursuing a communal agenda.

Mukherjee wrote a rejoinder designed to expose Nehru's hypocrisy: "Is there anything communal or reactionary or anti-national about it? If India's Constitution is good enough for the rest of India, why should it not be acceptable to the state of Jammu and Kashmir? It is amazing how the move for separatism pursued by Sheikh Abdullah and his colleagues is being applauded by you as national and patriotic..."

Twisting the knife further, Mukherjee chided Nehru for appeasing one community at the expense of others: "Think in your cool moments how in your life history your failure to stand against Muslim communalism in India has resulted in disastrous consequences. Perhaps you and others followed a policy of concession and appeasement

with the highest motive but in ultimate the country came to be partitioned against your own repeated declarations to the contrary."

Mukherjee's reservations and those of other members of the Constituent assembly proved prophetic.

Article 370 accelerated Muslim majority Kashmir valley's descent into Islamist supremacism. The outcome spawned the exodus of Kashmiri Hindus in 1990. This remains the biggest communally triggered internal mass migration in Independent India. It birthed a legal super structure that viewed with a jaundiced eye the children of Kashmiri women who married "outsiders".

The products of miscegenation were not only stigmatized but also denied their inheritance. The "ghettoized" valley didn't even have place for persecuted Hindu refugees fleeing the rapacity of religious persecution in Pakistan. Valmiki's who were brought in 1957 (to work as sweepers) from across India were to live eternally shackled to the abomination of 'untouchability'. It suffices to say, 'Insaniyat' was reserved for a privileged creed. The Supreme Court may have taken the wrecking ball to this symbol of asymmetric federalism, but Article 370 is just the first in a long list of other such renderers of the architecture of an asymmetric secularism.

Till the cult of appeasement nurtures the Places of Worship Act, 1991, The Waqf Act, 1995, The HR & CE Act and a plethora of minority personal laws it will be difficult to reclaim secularism in India.

BJP's CM picks

NINE days after recording a resounding victory in the Assembly elections in the Hindi heartland, the BJP has finally completed the exercise of naming the chief ministers of Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan. On Sunday, the party had chosen Vishnu Deo Sai, a prominent tribal leader, as the Chhattisgarh CM. A day later, OBC leader Mohan Yadav's name was announced for the top post in Madhya Pradesh. First-time MLA Bhajan Lal Sharma was picked as the Rajasthan CM on Tuesday.

The BJP's surprise choices signify a generational shift. The party has effected a smooth transfer of power from the old guard to the new leadership in



the states. Senior leader Shivraj Singh Chouhan, who successfully countered anti-incumbency in Madhya Pradesh, served as the chief minister for four

terms. Raman Singh (Chhattisgarh) and Vasundhara Raje (Rajasthan) occupied the CM's chair for three and two terms, respectively. The high command's message to them was rather candid: pass the baton in the best interests of the party. Notably, Chouhan proposed Yadav's name for the CM's post, while Raman Singh did the same in Sai's case and Raje vouched for Sharma. The delay in naming the chief ministers had prompted the Congress, which lost no time in anointing Revanth Reddy as the Telangana CM, to take potshots at the BJP over alleged factionalism. However, the BJP has patiently managed to build consensus on the new CMs, underlining its organisational cohesion. Now it is

Generational shift for party in Hindi heartland

imperative for the top brass to ensure that the regional satraps remain on board, considering that they have a key role to play during campaigning for next year's Lok Sabha elections. The party, which had swept Chhattisgarh, MP and Rajasthan in the 2019 parliamentary polls after losing the three states to the Congress in 2018, will be banking on intra-party unity to do an encore. The veterans' experience of governance can also come in handy for the rookie CMs.

How China Wrecked Myanmar and Pushed it into Civil War

By: Arun Anand

Myanmar is currently going through one the bloodiest civil wars since the military junta swept to power with a coup in 2021. The bordering regions of this southeast nation, especially in Shan and Kachin, have a long history of ethnic insurgencies by various armed militias. This had forced the region into poverty, increase in illicit activities and human rights violations. However, these developments did not spring in isolation. The external forces have played an important role in bringing Myanmar to this situation. What we are witnessing in Myanmar is an outcome of interference by the People's Republic of China (PRC).

The two main reflections of China's dark grip on Myanmar are human trafficking and drug smuggling, both interconnected for its own survival and exploitation. Myanmar is grappling with ethnic insurgencies, a coordinated offensive unleashed by the anti-military alliance. The Three Brotherhood alliance in the country's northern Shan state, and the National Democratic



Alliance Army which are key constituents of the anti-military alliance are known to be funded by the drug trade. Myanmar's northern region bordering China has a long history of ethnic violence with armed militias' involvement in drug trade. Myanmar's Shan state is part of the Golden triangle region (Myanmar, Laos and Thailand) bordering south of China and is known for being world's second largest heroin production region and world's largest producer of synthetic drugs over the past decade. According to the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), the 2021 coup in Myanmar forced a surge in drug

smuggling.

China, in fact, plays a significant role in sustaining this trade. In 2021, 72 tons of propionyl chloride (used to create methamphetamine) was seized in Laos which was found to be shipped from China's Jiangsu province that was intended to reach Myanmar. A report by NGO International Crisis Group (ICG) revealed that armed militias are exploiting China-Myanmar relations to intensify their drug trade. Chemicals used for illicit drug production are crossing China and flowing into Myanmar's border regions.

Moreover, China's BRI ambitions in Myanmar is another key

reason which requires Beijing to maintain cordial relations with the rebel groups to avoid risking its projects being destabilised by them. Taking advantage, these rebel groups make use of the infrastructure established under China's BRI that helped these groups to facilitate (and accelerate) their drug trade.

Along with drug trade, China is also a major player behind Myanmar's human trafficking, especially girls and women. A study by John Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health and the Kachin Women's Association Thailand estimated that from 2013-17, about 21,000 women and girls from Myanmar were forced into marriage in just one province in China. During the same period, out of 160,000 female Myanmar migrants who returned from China, 5,000 were victims of forced marriages; 3,900 were victims of human trafficking and 2,800 were forced to bear children for their Chinese husbands.

Another study by John Hopkins undertaken in 2017-18 reported that about 400 migrant women from Myanmar, aged between 15 and 55, were married to Chinese

men and experienced childbirth during their five-year stay in China. In 2017, the Myanmar government reported 226 cases of trafficking, while the Department of Social Welfare annually assists between 100 to 200 women returning from China, indicating that the actual number of trafficked women is higher than the official estimate. Some of these forced marriages were only intended to sustain till the victim gave birth to a child.

Forced marriages in Myanmar are prevalent among girls and women who belong to rural areas with low education, as seen in Myanmar's Shan and Kachin state. The persistent ethnic insurgencies in these areas, too, have forced thousands of women to fall prey into trafficking, without their knowledge. The main reason for the increase in trafficking cases is attributed to China's 'one-child' policy that paved the way for gender-based abortions in the country due to preference for male children. As a result, China witnessed a peak in gender imbalance in the year 2004 when 120 boys were born for every 100 girls as per Chinese population figures. This led to an eventual crisis of women in China for men to marry and continue their family tree. As a result, these men started importing (or buying) wives from neighbouring countries (such as Myanmar), even by force through what came to be commonly known as 'bride trafficking'.

Let's Talk About Mahua Moitra - Fiercest Critic Or Propped Up By Media?

By Nishtha Gautam

Even after two terms in power, with an exceptional majority, the Bharatiya Janata Party hasn't shed its underdog mentality. They still like to go for the jugular when some blows can do the job. It may not be the smartest thing to do as the curious case of Mahua Moitra has recently demonstrated.

The opposition is calling out the ruling party and its allies for misusing their numbers in the parliament.

The process of Moitra's expulsion, despite going by the rulebook, is a bit problematic in principle. The biggest issue, however, is that of the parliament ascribing itself the power to investigate corruption and misuse of privilege allegations, bypassing the courts or even any form of judicial oversight. Late BJP minister and leader Arun Jaitley had decried this when the BJP was in the

opposition. Besides, the BJP should have learnt a lesson from the embarrassment they faced after the Supreme Court restored Rahul Gandhi's parliamentary membership not so long ago.

Moitra's expulsion from the parliament is a pyrrhic victory for the BJP as she's emerging to be their biggest critic, if media headlines are to be believed. She's now the poster girl of the anti-capitalist, anti-establishment movement in India and the BJP has only itself to congratulate for it.

Mahua Moitra is our newly-minted hero, a self-proclaimed incarnation of Goddess Durga despite the following:

1. Indulging in corporate cat-fight instead of a sustained ideological position against corruption

2. Insulting practically every ethnic/linguistic group (Jharkhandi, Gujju et al)

3. Insulting the majority of Indians

4. Making corruption - a moral and ethical issue - about scale

5. Reducing feminism to narcissism

6. Making all critics of the government or corporate malpractice appear as suspect

7. Taking the Indian voter for granted

Let's discuss each of these points individually in detail. But before that, a clear list of things that do not, should not matter.

- Moitra's drinking
- Moitra's smoking
- Moitra's clothes
- Moitra's partying
- Moitra's love and sex life
- Moitra's irreverence towards religion which has strangely now taken an absolute U-turn

In short, any aspects of Moitra's personal life

1. Indulging in corporate cat-fight instead of a sustained ideological position against corruption

- A legislator going after a corporate

giant's business practices should deserve all credit. That's what people's representatives ought to do: protect people from corporate greed and ensure a corruption-free business environment. However, trying to fight crony capitalism using a sponsored arsenal of a network of industrialists is corporate warfare, another reiteration of capitalism.

In September 2019, the left parties and Congress protested the proposed uranium mining in the Nallamala forest of Telangana. Not only did it threaten the life of Chenchus, a primitive tribe, but also the local socio-economic and environmental makeup of the region. The project was shelved by the Indian government in 2021, owing to the local people's movement. Revanth Reddy, the new CM of Telangana played an active role in the same and part credit for his victory goes to his engagement. When has Moitra

ever been part of a people's movement? Including those against her declared arch-enemy, Adani and co.

It may appear to several of us, who have been staunch critics of this political regime's excesses, that what is happening is a witch-hunt. The question is - does Moitra represent the fiercest critic of Adani, or is that a media-manufactured image? The incongruity begins with the fact that to fight a corporate giant one needs a people's movement.

2. Insulting practically every ethnic/linguistic group (Jharkhandi, Gujju et al)

Moitra is fiercely aware and proud of her identity as a "Bengali woman who has a life". Does this, however, necessarily translate into sneers and snubs for the non-Bengalis? Moitra has called out the BJP's identity politics in the loudest words and rightly so.

Mahua Has Been Burned at The Stake. But A Latter Day Joan Of Arc She Is Not

By: Rahul Shivshankar

TMC firebrand leader Mahua Moitra has been expelled from the Lok Sabha. A report prepared by the Ethics Committee of the Lok Sabha concluded that there was ample evidence to suggest that Moitra bent the rules of the house in exchange for benefits. Apart from her expulsion, the report also recommends a criminal probe against Moitra. In the end, it is safe to say that Mahua Moitra has been burned at the stake. But desire as she might, she won't be hailed by history as the Joan of Arc of politics.

To have earned that sobriquet Moitra would have to be seen to have sacrificed herself for higher principles. Opportunism, while a virtue in politics, isn't a high principle in the grander ethical scheme of things.

Many say that blinding ambition got the better of Moitra. Burning with a desire to distinguish



herself quickly on the political stage, she made one compromise too many.

While it is true that the world expects Parliamentarians to be compromised, there's a class of ethical transgressions that's a strict no-no in electoral politics. One of them is that a Parliamentarian must never

breach the trust a voter places in their representative.

In a democracy, a Parliamentarian is the voice of the people. The voters expect their MP to ask questions on their behalf or raise their concerns in the cradle of democracy in the hope that life-altering redressal will follow.

But Moitra is That can hardly be a defence. indicted for And the committee did well to supposedly disregard Moitra's attempt at accepting cash and gifts from whataboutery. There's probably some truth in the claim that the industrialist BJP wanted most to make an D a r s h a n example of Moitra to warn other Hiranandani in Opposition MPs against trying to play "dissident". Moitra, after all, took pride in being the most access to her vocal and brazen critic of the Parliament login. Modi government. Somewhere The businessman perhaps she became a used the access a caricature of herself believing to post questions in her cause so much that on Moitra's behalf she forgot that the means against the Adani (exposing an alleged nexus Group and its between PM Modi and alleged link to the Business Czar Adani) don't Prime Minister. This issue always justify the ends. Self-arguably mattered more to Moitra — as it was allegedly must never forget that they will furthering her interests — than be held to higher ethical standards than others. to her voters. Moitra has not Mahua clearly thought she was denied hypothecating the voters' above being judged by the same rights by sharing her login with standard she chose to judge her the businessman, rather she rivals. claims that everyone does it.

Studying in Canada

Hike in cost-of-living threshold a reality check

Starting next year, international students applying to study in Canada will need to show that they have access to C\$20,635 instead of the requirement of C\$10,000 that has been in place for two decades. This is in addition to the cost of travel and tuition. Canada's rationale is that being transparent about the cost of living and studying would ensure that those who

apply are prepared for the economic reality of that country. They would, therefore, be less vulnerable to exploitation by unscrupulous institutions and shady employers. The new financial requirement may lead to fewer applications. It's a cue for India to focus on providing quality education and offering ample opportunities to students to pursue varied fields of interest. The lure of permanent residency

has led countless families into a debt trap, with youngsters staring at an uncertain future and recruiters as well as fly-by-night educational establishments minting money. Freelance agents continue to operate in an unbridled market in India. Institutions in Canada have been asked to responsibly manage the number of international students they accept, considering their ability to provide housing or

assistance in finding off-campus accommodation. The warning to address the fraud and abuse within the system can set the stage for potential visa limitations. From July to October, the number of applications for new study permits from India dropped to 86,562 from 1,45,881 during the same period last year. The decline is being largely attributed to Indian students taking to social

media to highlight the hardships they are facing in Canada. One can only hope that the revision of the cost-of-living threshold would deter many parents from mindlessly sending their children to the Maple Country. The stark contrast between the promise of a rosy future and the reality of students scraping by in exploitative jobs needs to be emphasised.

The 2 days that salvaged a climate deal

Hopes for a historic climate deal appeared dead.

The U.S., EU and a host of other countries were pushing for the COP28 summit, held in the glitzy petro-metropolis of Dubai, to yield a worldwide commitment to end the use of fossil fuels. But a fierce counterattack from Saudi Arabia and its oil-producing partners in OPEC had beaten that effort back — leading, by Monday night, to a draft agreement that one Pacific island minister labeled a “death warrant” for communities threatened by the warming planet’s rising seas. “I was very depressed,” Danish Climate Minister Dan Jørgensen said afterward. It looked as though the Saudis had prevailed, just as they had succeeded three months earlier in defanging a fossil fuel proposal at G20 talks in Goa, India.

But by Wednesday morning, it all turned around. Nearly 200 nations, the Saudis included, consented to a compromise deal that fell short of promising an end to fossil fuels — but which acknowledged, for the first time ever in any U.N. climate agreement, that the world must begin “transitioning away” from them, starting this year. That compromise came after a clutch of loose international coalitions scrambled to salvage the deal, with low-lying island nations, the European Union, the United States and even some wealthy fossil fuel producers joining in. The opposing blocs that faced off during a sleepless denouement revealed two global realities: The West, pushing a green economy on the world stage even as it pursues its own fossil fuel projects, was going up against resource-rich developing countries for whom oil, gas and coal are an essential economic lifeline.

The rescue effort included multiple attempts by U.S. special climate envoy John Kerry and other American officials to reach out directly to the Saudis, eventually settling on text in which continued fossil fuel use would be acceptable as a middle step toward a cleaner future. Among other officials, Kerry met with Abdulaziz bin Salman, the powerful Saudi energy minister. Within hours, the compromise was sealed early Wednesday morning — and ratified, later that day, to a roomful of applause. “There were times in the last 48 hours where some of us thought this could fail,” Kerry said.

The deal approved Wednesday is nonbinding, so there’s no guarantee that the Saudis — or, for that matter, the U.S. and U.K. — will shelve any of their planned oil and gas expansions

to meet Wednesday’s pledge. Its real importance may not be clear until at least next year, when all countries are due to submit revised plans showing how they intend to cut greenhouse gas pollution in the coming decade.

The Saudis have traditionally played the spoiler at U.N. climate talks, thwarting any talk of aggressive action to turn away from oil and gas. But on Wednesday, Kerry singled them out for praise.

“A number of countries that produce oil and gas — and you know who they are — they stepped up and said we want this to succeed, we want this to move forward,” Kerry told reporters. “And they said we are transitioning.” He said the energy minister, Abdulaziz, agreed that “I will accept the idea of embracing a transition away” from oil.

While his team worked on Saudi Arabia, Kerry also ensured he had the support, even tacitly, of China, the world’s largest producer of greenhouse gas pollution. (The U.S. is No. 2.) On Sunday — the day before his 80th birthday — Kerry visited his old friend, Beijing climate envoy Xie Zhenhua, at the Chinese offices at the summit site, Xie told reporters. The two old warhorses and fellow climate negotiators shared a birthday celebration. Then they agreed they would stick to a deal their two countries had struck in November in Sunnylands, California, aimed at speeding up the substitution of coal, oil and natural gas using renewable energy, according to a person with knowledge of the discussions who was granted anonymity because they were

not authorized to speak publicly. Meanwhile, European Union climate commissioner Wopke Hoekstra and Spanish Deputy Prime Minister Teresa Ribera had been building a coalition of countries to overwhelm the resistance.

Hoekstra met with Tina Stege, the climate envoy from the tiny Marshall Islands, according to an EU negotiator who was also not authorized to speak to the press. They drafted a document with a list of demands that they delivered to the United Arab Emirates government, which was presiding over the talks. They then brought on board dozens of island nations and wealthy countries to sign and deliver the note to the team of Sultan al-Jaber, the UAE oil chief executive serving as summit president.

Hoekstra and Ribera also met with a group of countries that included wealthy fossil fuel exporters Australia, Norway, the United Kingdom, the United States and Canada. They were seen shuttling in and out of the U.N. offices where they had been meeting with the COP28 president and delivering a clear message: that despite their own deep ties to coal, oil and gas, they too wanted an unequivocal message to end their use.

Ultimately, the deal they got was half of what they wanted. Even so, its mention of fossil fuels was the “first crack” in a 30-year-old “dam of resistance” that the Saudis had constructed inside the U.N. process, said Alden Meyer, a senior associate at the environmental think tank E3G. But it was also far from what the

islanders — who would now return to homes that are often just feet above the rising ocean — said they needed in order to reassure their people.

For them, Wednesday’s unsatisfying victory came with a final insult: For days, members of an alliance of small island states raised fears that their voices weren’t being heard. But when the final meeting began and al-Jaber gavelled through the deal, the islanders were in another room drafting their objections to what they saw as a weak agreement.

Speaking immediately after the meeting, a member of the COP28 press team told POLITICO they did not know why the islanders had been ignored. A member of the COP28 president’s team later went to the Samoan delegation to apologize and told them they had not been not aware the islanders were outside the room, said spokesperson Bianca Beddoe. Stege called the snub “shocking.” If anything, the final two days of COP28 showed that “you need everyone in the room, you need everyone at the table,” she said after the plenary adjourned.

When islanders complained inside the plenary hall, all the assembled nations had to offer them was a loud round of sympathetic applause.

The next few years will show whether the struggle leads to a meaningful turn away from the petroleum age.

Denmark’s Jørgensen later reflected: “To be honest with you 48 hours ago, I would have never thought that we would be here now. But we did fight, through to the last minute.”

Australia tightens entry

Migration to get tougher for low-skilled applicants

AFTER Britain and Canada, Australia has recast its policy as immigration is touching record levels, increasing the pressure on housing and infrastructure. It plans to halve the migrant intake over two years to overhaul what the Anthony Albanese government claims is a broken system. The migration numbers, the Prime Minister has said, need to be wound back to a sustainable level. Visa rules are to be tightened for students and low-skilled workers, while pathways for the highly-skilled ones are being made easier. Students would need to secure higher scores in English tests, besides greater scrutiny in case

of a second visa application aimed at prolonging their stay. Many of the 6.5 lakh foreign students are on their second visa. The new policy aims to curb visa-hopping or jumping from one migration claim to another to extend stay while doing unskilled work. Earlier this month, Britain announced a reduction in the number of migrants arriving by legal routes by raising the minimum salary they must earn in a skilled job by one-third. The move was attributed to the pressure on Prime Minister Rishi Sunak to tackle record net migration. The majority of the immigration cases now are of non-European Union nationals. Those

coming to study make up the biggest number. More students are staying for a longer time and moving on to work visas. A rethink is unlikely despite concerns that the measures would be counterproductive for the private sector and the state-run health service. Only last week, Canada made it tougher for prospective migrants eyeing an entry through the study permit. Students and especially low-skilled job aspirants from India are bound to be affected by the changes. Sensex crossing the 70,000-mark may be a reason to cheer, but it cannot hide the desperation among the youth to go abroad for better prospects.

Security breach at India's parliament on 22nd anniversary of deadly attack

Two unidentified men stormed the lower house of India's parliament on Wednesday, in a major security breach that fell on the anniversary of a deadly attack on the complex more than two decades ago.

Video broadcast live on Sansad TV, the official channel for the country's parliament, showed a man jumping over tables and running toward the speaker's chair as panicked lawmakers tried to subdue him.

Another man standing in the visitor's gallery was seen spraying yellow smoke inside the building.

The parliament's session was briefly

adjourned as lawmakers made their way outside.

Two more people outside the building were seen chanting slogans as police gathered around them.

All four people have been arrested and their belongings have been confiscated, Om Birla, the speaker of parliament's lower house, told lawmakers as parliament resumed.

Opposition lawmakers raised their concerns over the security breach.

"The issue is very serious," said Mallikarjun Kharge, the leader of India's main opposition Congress party. "This is about how two people were able to

come inside despite such elaborate security and cause a security breach." Another Congress lawmaker K.C. Venugopal said the incident was "extremely troubling."

"I am glad there was no major injury or damage done to anyone," he wrote on X, formerly Twitter. "Parliament is among the most high-security buildings of our country. Such a major security lapse is unacceptable. We demand answers from the Home Ministry and there must be a thorough review of the security arrangements in the new Parliament building." CNN has reached out to Delhi police for a statement.

India's parliament was attacked by gunmen on December 13, 2001, who killed more than a dozen people. New Delhi blamed Pakistan-linked terror groups for that attack, plunging relations further and pushing the two nuclear-armed nations to the brink of war.

India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi paid tribute to the people who lost their lives in that incident earlier Wednesday. "Today, we remember and pay heartfelt tributes to the brave security personnel martyred in the Parliament attack in 2001. Their courage and sacrifice in the face of danger will forever be etched in our nation's memory," he wrote on X.

Pro-Palestinian Posts Come At A Cost, Even To Supermodels Gigi And Bella Hadid

"Condemning the Israeli government is not antisemitic and supporting Palestinians is not supporting Hamas." In October, during the early stages of Israel's war on Gaza, American supermodel Gigi Hadid stirred up a storm when she shared this in a pro-Palestinian post on Instagram. Her sister, Bella Hadid opened up in an interview saying she had received "hundreds of death threats" and lost jobs because of her stance amid Israel's war on Gaza.

In an Instagram post, later, she reiterated it saying she still chose to speak because fear was not an option. "I can not be silenced any longer," she said.

The Hadid sisters, who are of Palestinian descent, have been vocal about their views on the age-old war by Israel on Gaza and have advocated for Palestinians on multiple occasions over the years. The Palestinian cause resonates deeply with their own family who had to flee Palestine in the 1940s.

Gigi and Bella's father, Mohamed Hadid, and his parents were forced to leave Palestine during the 1947-1949 Palestine War. Their grandfather was determined not to live under Israeli occupation. They ultimately took refuge in Syria. In one of his testimonies, Mohamed Hadid spoke about how they lost their home in Safad "to a Jewish family that we sheltered". "They made us refugees and they kicked us out of our own home," he stated.

Gigi Hadid faced severe backlash online and was called out by the State of Israel Instagram account when she posted a graphic from the war on her Instagram story with the caption, "There is nothing

Jewish about the Israeli government's treatment of Palestinians.."

The post sparked outrage among the social media community with many demanding her modelling agency to terminate her contract. Some accused her of spreading antisemitic sentiments. The State of Israel commented, "Have

includes Jewish people, is NEVER OK. Taking innocent people hostage is NEVER OK. Harming someone BECAUSE they are Jewish is NEVER OK. It is wrong. To want freedom and humane treatment for Palestinians and to also want safety for Jewish people can both be important to the same person



you been sleeping the past week or are you just fine turning a blind eye to Jewish babies being butchered in their homes? Your silence has been very clear about where you stand. We see you."

Subsequently, she followed up with another post clarifying her stance, "While I have hopes and dreams for Palestinians, none of them include the harm of a Jewish person...If you are hurting, as I share my condolences today with my loved ones, both Palestinian and Jewish, I'm sending you my love & strength - whoever and wherever you are," the post read.

Again, in November, Gigi Hadid wrote on Instagram, "...I also want to reiterate that attacking any human, which of course

including myself."

Meanwhile, Bella Hadid continued to stay vocal about the Palestinian suffering. "The people and children of Palestine, especially in Gaza, cannot afford our silence. We are not brave, they are," her Instagram post read.

Bella Hadid shared that her father was born in Nazareth during the Nakba in 1948, a period marked by the displacement of 750,000 Palestinians. Just nine days after his birth, her father, held by his mother, and their family were expelled from their Palestinian home, becoming refugees, unable to return. Bella emphasised that her family

endured 75 years of violence against the Palestinian people

"My family witnessed 75 years of violence against Palestinian people - most notable, brutal settler invasions which led to the destruction of entire communities, murder in cold blood and the forcible removal of families from their homes. The practice of settlements on Palestinian land still continues to this day. The pain of that is unimaginable." On the flip side, Israeli actress Gal Gadot also encountered criticism, but for different reasons. She faced disapproval for her pro-Israeli stance and her posts condemning Hamas. "I stand with Israel, you should too. The world cannot sit on the fence when these horrific acts of terror are happening!" she said on Instagram.

The Wonder Woman actress also arranged a screening of unedited footage capturing the October 7 Hamas attack in Israel on November 9. The 43-minute film, titled "Bearing Witness," included graphic and violent content showcasing atrocities by Hamas, with some footage reportedly shot by the group.

Reportedly, multiple fights erupted outside the screening venue, the Museum of Tolerance in LA, as seen in viral videos on social media. Gal Gadot faced social media backlash for her perceived support of genocide.

Numerous celebrities have faced criticism for taking either a pro-Israeli or pro-Palestinian stance, leading many to clarify their positions in response to the controversy. Amy Schumer, Noah Schnapp, and Kylie Jenner received criticism for their pro-Israeli stance, while Mia Khalifa, Angelina Jolie, and John Cusack have expressed support for Palestine.

Taliban minister fishes out Pakistani passport at airport, and then...

Sirajuddin Haqqani, the Interior Minister in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan, was among thousands of Afghan nationals who had Pakistani passports until recently, The News reported. Haqqani was among the nearly 40,000 Afghans who had been issued passports in what now looks like a major scam.

The passports were issued from offices in Balochistan, Sindh, and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in Pakistan, according to interior ministry officials. Sirajuddin Haqqani is 'designated global terrorist'. He is a senior leader of the Haqqani Network, according to the American intelligence agency FBI.

Haqqani was issued a Pakistani passport for five years, which he used for his foreign travels. He had used it for his trip to Qatar for negotiations with the

US for the signing of the Doha Agreement that led to America's exit from Afghanistan after two decades. Two officials involved in issuing the passport to the Taliban leader have been arrested, one of whom had retired from service by the time the action was initiated against him, according to the report.

An official told The News that 30,000 to 40,000 Pakistani passports that had been issued to Afghan nationals have been blocked.

Passport offices in cities such as Thatta and Karachi in Sindh as well as those in Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, were found to be involved in the irregularities. That Haqqani was holding a Pakistani passport came to light when a Pakistan-based journalist, travelling with him on the same flight to Doha, saw

him showing his passport at the immigration counter. Subsequent investigations traced the passport issuance back to Peshawar in Pakistan during the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) government's tenure.

The issuing officer claimed he was approached by an individual identifying as a senior intelligence officer, and who requested travel documents for Haqqani, Pakistan's The News reported.

In August, the journalist reported the incident to passport authorities, prompting an inquiry that confirmed the irregularities.

The issuing officer, unsure of the identity of the officer who approached him, faced departmental action, along with the person involved in passport production. Both these individuals have been

arrested, the report added.

This revelation coincides with intelligence from Saudi Arabian authorities, which revealed the use of Pakistani passports by Afghan citizens seeking employment in Saudi Arabia. More than 12,000 such cases have been identified, following which their passports were cancelled and those found using forged documents were deported to Afghanistan. Prompted by Saudi intelligence, the government launched a comprehensive investigation, uncovering 30,000 to 40,000 invalid Afghan passports. All these passports have been cancelled and the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) is taking action against officials implicated in their issuance and production.

Hunter Biden calls Elon Musk 'dumbest smart person ever', X boss reacts

US President Joe Biden's son Hunter Biden launched a scathing attack on X chief Elon Musk, saying he was indifferent to free speech and democracy. He also dubbed Musk the world's "dumbest smart person".

Hunter Biden accused Musk of spreading misinformation about him and described the X owner as a "very damaged human being" in an interview with musician-turned-podcaster Moby.

In response, Musk mocked Hunter Biden over the infamous, sordid videos recovered from a laptop he left at a computer repair shop in Delaware in 2019. "The dude made so many videos of himself doing crime that he should get an award for cinematography!" the X boss's post on the micro-blogging site

read. The Department of Justice on Thursday filed new criminal charges against Hunter, accusing him of failing to pay \$1.4 million in taxes while spending millions of dollars on a lavish lifestyle.

Hunter Biden was hit with three felonies and six misdemeanour tax offences, according to an indictment filed in US District Court in Central California.

He faces up to 17 years in prison if convicted on the charges. The US Justice Department said its investigation into Biden is ongoing.

"The Defendant engaged in a four-year scheme to not pay at least \$1.4 million in self-assessed federal taxes he owed for tax years 2016 through 2019," the indictment read.

6 cybercriminals jump into river to evade arrest, nabbed by cops in Jharkhand

Six men, allegedly involved in cybercrimes, were recently arrested by Jharkhand Police. Notably, the officers had to cross a river while chasing the suspects in order to make the arrests.

During the operation, the police team, dressed in plain clothes, encountered the cybercriminals along the banks of the Barakar river. Upon spotting the officers, the men attempted to flee by jumping into the river, but the officials chased them and managed to arrest all the suspects. The arrests were made following strategic raids across various areas. During their operation, the police recovered Rs 8,29,600 in cash, 12 mobile phones, 21

ATM cards, 18 SIM cards, 12 passbooks, six chequebooks, four PAN cards, and two Aadhaar cards from the accused. A senior police official in Jharkhand's Giridih said that the arrested cybercriminals allegedly engaged in fraudulent activities by making nude video calls through apps, and taking screenshots to blackmail their victims. They also targeted pregnant women, deceiving them with false promises of maternity benefits through a nutrition tracker app.

Apart from the chase, the police also faced challenges from local villagers who, misled by rumours of child theft, initially reacted with hostility towards the raiding officers.

All about Dheeraj Sahu, Congress MP in focus amid record cash haul in tax raid

Congress MP Dheeraj Sahu is in focus as raids by the Income Tax Department continue on his premises. The cash recovery during the searches has crossed Rs 350 crore.

Congress may have distanced itself from party MP Dheeraj Sahu over the recent cash haul, but his family has a long-standing association with the grand old party. The family's influence on the party was so significant that during election campaigns, former Prime Minister, the late Indira Gandhi, used to stay at their residence. The first President of India, the late Rajendra Prasad, also visited the family's ancestral house.

As per sources, when India gained independence in 1947, Dheeraj Sahu's father, Baldeo, donated Rs 47 lakh and 47 kg of gold to the Government of India to strengthen the country's economy.

FAMILY'S CLOSE ASSOCIATION WITH CONGRESS Dheeraj Sahu had six brothers, of which four, including him, entered politics. One of his brothers, Shiv Prasad Sahu, was a Lok Sabha MP and won the Ranchi seat twice on a Congress ticket. He died in January 2001 at the age of 67. Another brother, Nandlal Sahu, has also passed away.

Gopal Sahu, another of Dheeraj's brothers, contested the 2019 elections from Hazaribagh on a Congress ticket but was defeated. Another brother, Uday Sahu, remains associated with the Congress party. Dheeraj Sahu contested twice for the Chatra seat in Jharkhand but could not win. In June 2009, he was elected to Rajya Sabha in a by-poll and was re-elected in July 2010.

He became a Rajya Sabha member for

the third time in May 2018.

During the tenure of Shiv Prasad Sahu, the family held considerable sway and the Congress's candidates for parliamentary and legislative elections, as well as ministerial positions, were decided on their recommendations. He was also close to Indira Gandhi.

The Sahu family has consistently played a crucial role in supporting the Congress party both financially and in electoral politics, particularly in Jharkhand's Lohardaga and the neighbouring districts. Due to its pivotal role in Congress's political activities, the family's ancestral home is often referred to as the 'White House of Lohardaga'.

FAMILY'S LIQUOR BUSINESS

Notably, the family's influence extended beyond politics, with the ancestral home attracting visits from film stars and cricketers. The primary business of Dheeraj Sahu's family is centred around the liquor industry, with most of their companies located in Odisha.

Dheeraj Prasad Sahu has a son and a daughter. His son, Harshit Sahu, is actively engaged in the wine business in Odisha. His nephew Sanjay Sahu, Shiv Prasad's son, oversees various family businesses, including a cold store in Pandra, Ranchi, and a bottling plant in Tupudana. Sanjay's brother, Rahul Sahu, manages a liquor business in Jharkhand. Rohit Sahu, another nephew of Dheeraj Sahu, is responsible for the management of Sapphire International School in Ranchi. Meanwhile, his brother Ritesh Sahu looks after the wine business and the spirit plant business, including the Boudh Distillery in Odisha.

Chinese hackers invade critical US power and water systems: Report

The intrusions are part of a broader effort to build up ways to propagate panic and chaos or snarl logistics in the event of a US-China conflict in the Pacific, US government and industry officials said.

(News Agency)- The Chinese military is allegedly attempting to infiltrate the United States' critical infrastructure, including power and water utilities, communications and transportation systems, US government officers and cybersecurity experts have warned.

According to a report in The Washington Post, hacking groups linked to China's People's Liberation Army (PLA), have penetrated the computer systems of about two dozen critical entities over the past year. The intrusions are part of a broader effort to build up ways to propagate panic and chaos or snarl logistics in the event of a US-China conflict in the Pacific, US government and industry officials said.

The outlet further said that some of the services attacked by the Chinese hackers are water utility in Hawaii, a major West Coast port and at least one oil and gas pipeline. The hackers also attempted to break into the operator of Texas's



power grid, which operates independently from electrical systems in the rest of the country, The Washington Post said.

Several other entities that have been attacked by the hackers outside the United States include electric utilities. According to the US officials, none of the intrusions affected industrial control

systems that operate pumps, pistons or any critical function, or caused a disruption. The experts said the Chinese military wants the ability to complicate US efforts to ship troops and equipment to the region if a conflict breaks out over Taiwan. The Washington Post report said that this new details gives a complete

picture of China's Volt Typhoon cyber campaign, first detected about a year ago by the US government.

The director of the National Security Agency's Cybersecurity Collaboration Center confirmed in an email that Volt Typhoon activity "appears to be focused on targets within the Indo-Pacific region, to include Hawaii."

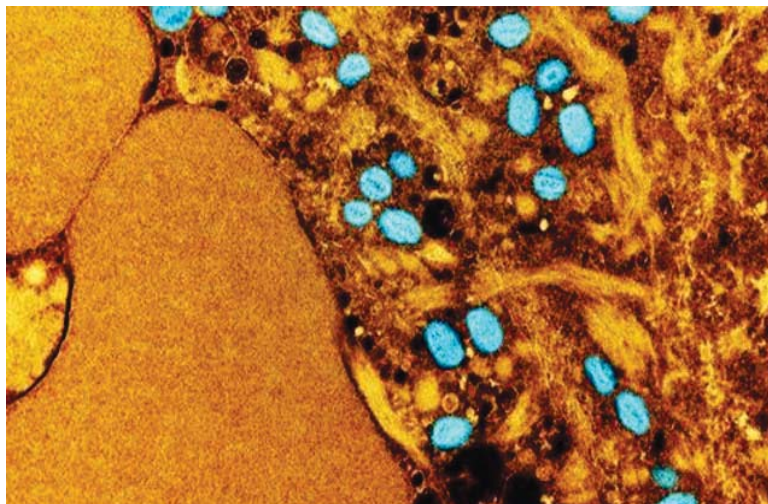
According to the officials, the hackers often sought to mask their tracks by threading their attacks through innocuous devices such as home or office routers before reaching their victims.

A key goal was to steal employee credentials they could use to return, posing as normal users. But some of their entry methods have not been determined. The hackers are looking for a way to get in and stay in without being detected, said Joe McReynolds, a China security studies fellow at the Jamestown Foundation, a think tank focused on security issues.

Even smaller dose of Mpox vax can trigger strong immune response: Study

(News Agency)- Delivering the two-dose Mpox vaccine, called JYNNEOS, in smaller than the usual FDA-approved doses, produced a detectable immune response, regardless of whether people were living with or without HIV, according to a new study. The effect was also seen when injections were administered between layers of the skin rather than by the standard route under the skin. The smaller doses, about one-fifth of the usual full dose and spread out by as long as three months, were designed to stretch the short supply of vaccine available after an outbreak in May 2022.

The study on 145 New Yorkers showed no significant difference in the strength of the immune response (as gauged by the amount of detectable IgG



antibodies, immune proteins that help kill the mpox virus) between most of those who received their vaccine injections in small doses (intradermally) and those who received it as prescribed in full-dose injections just beneath the skin (subcutaneously).

In fact, the researchers from the

NYU Grossman School of Medicine found that people fully vaccinated with two smaller doses had an immune response four times stronger than those who did not complete the vaccination series and had only one dose.

The IgG antibodies were detected in some cases more than six months after a second and final

dose of the vaccine, they revealed in the study published in the New England Journal of Medicine. "Our study shows that smaller vaccine doses of mpox vaccine administered in two doses, spread out over weeks to months, were similar to the full (subcutaneous) FDA-approved dose," said co-lead investigator and infectious disease specialist Angelica Cifuentes Kottkamp, from the varsity.

"Implementing the smaller dose was a good emergency measure in the face of immediate shortages of the vaccine," said Kottkamp, who is an assistant professor in the Department of Medicine at NYU Langone Health.

Further, the study also showed that those previously vaccinated against smallpox,

as part of routine childhood vaccination programs, had a stronger immune response than those who had had no previous smallpox vaccination. Levels of detectable IgG antibodies in blood samples were 2.7 times higher among those previously vaccinated against smallpox (and then additionally received the JYNNEOS vaccine) compared to those who were not dually vaccinated.

Because of their weakened immune systems, people living with HIV are particularly vulnerable to co-infection.

The study found no difference in the magnitude of the immune response between vaccinated people living with HIV (with immune CD4 cell counts above 200) and vaccinated people who are HIV-negative.

Greta Gerwig named Cannes Film Festival 2024 jury president

(News Agency)- Director Greta Gerwig, who set the box-office on fire with her film 'Barbie', will preside over the jury of the 2024 Cannes Film Festival. 'Barbie' grossed \$1.4 billion at the global box office this year and just picked up nine Golden Globe nominations. Gerwig has attended Cannes alongside her partner Noah Baumbach before, notably in 2017 when his 'The Meyerowitz Stories'

premiered, but she's never presented a film there, reports Variety.

There were early talks to bring 'Barbie' to Cannes earlier this year but the timing didn't work. The Warner Bros. movie was released on July 19 and became an instant classic and the highest-grossing worldwide movie of the year. On top of leading the Golden Globe nominations, 'Barbie' is also

expected to land numerous Oscar nominations.

"I love films – I love making them, I love going to them, I love talking about them. As a cinephile, Cannes has always been the pinnacle of what the universal language of movies can be," Gerwig said in a statement, accessed by Variety. "Being in the place of vulnerability, in a dark theatre filled

with strangers, watching a brand-new film is my favourite place to be. I am stunned and thrilled and humbled to be serving as the president of the Cannes Film Festival Jury. I cannot wait to see what journeys are in store for all of us," she added.

Two-time Palme d'Or winner Ruben Ostlund presided over the 2023 Cannes jury.

26% of Lebanese households stop children's education amid worsening financial crisis: Unicef



(News Agency)- Over a quarter, or 26 per cent, of households across Lebanon had children not attending school as the country continues to reel under an unprecedented financial crisis, according to a new Unicef report. According to the report released on Wednesday, the percentage increased from 18 per cent in April 2023. "Making matters worse, several dozen schools in southern Lebanon have been closed since October 2023, due to an intensification of hostilities, affecting more than 6,000 students," it said. The report also said that skyrocketing prices and widespread poverty are continuing to force families to resort to desperate measures just to afford one meal per day and basic shelter. The survey revealed that the number of families sending children out to work to supplement household income, rose to a shocking 16 per cent, from 11

per cent in April. Meanwhile, more than eight in 10 households (84 per cent) had to borrow money or buy on credit to purchase essential grocery items, a 16 percentage point increase over six months.

Also, 81 per cent reduced spending on health treatment, up from 75 per cent.

The Unicef report further said that the deprivations and uncertainty are taking a heavy toll on children's mental health, with almost 4 in 10 households (38 per cent) saying their children are anxious, and 24 per cent saying they were depressed

on a daily basis. "This terrible crisis is eroding the childhood of hundreds of thousands of children, through multiple crisis not of their making. Its severity is crushing children's dreams, and taking away their learning, their happiness and their future," Edouard Beigbender, the Unicef Representative in Lebanon, was quoted as saying in the report. "The daily suffering of children must stop. We must redouble our efforts to make sure every child in Lebanon is in school and learning, is protected from physical and mental harm and has the opportunity to thrive and contribute to society."

Israeli attacks in Syria kill 36 since early Oct

(News Agency)At least 36 people have been killed in heightened Israel attacks on Syrian military sites affiliated with Lebanon's Hezbollah since the beginning of 2023 to 66



militant group since the beginning of the Gaza war on October 7, a war monitor said in a report. The victims comprise 14 Syrian soldiers, 17 Hezbollah militants, two Iranian revolutionary guards, two civilians, and a pro-government fighter, the UK-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said. During the period, Israel attacked Syria 33 times, destroying 48 targets including weapon depots and vehicles, according to the Observatory. The Aleppo International Airport witnessed four bombings that left it unusable, and Damascus International Airport experienced two strikes that caused its operations to be temporarily

suspended. The intense attacks since early October have brought the total number of Israeli strikes on Syria since the beginning of 2023 to 66 times, including 45 aerial strikes and 21 ground assaults, resulting in about 130 targets being hit and destroyed, according to the Observatory. These strikes have killed 114 military personnel and injured 130 others in Syria, it added. In tandem with the escalation in the Israeli strikes, pro-Iran militias intensified their attacks on the US military bases in eastern Syria, said the Observatory, adding that these attacks were in retaliation for Washington's support to Israel in its offensive in Gaza.

In reaction to the pro-Iranian militias' increasing attacks, US military bases in Syria have conducted military exercises and reinforced its troops, it noted.

Tiffany Haddish charged with DUI case following arrest

(News Agency)-Actress-comedian Tiffany Haddish, who was arrested this Thanksgiving, reportedly has been officially charged with driving under the influence of alcohol. This arrived after Haddish was collared early on Friday morning, November 24 in Beverly Hills, California, reports aceshowbiz.com. "We responded to a call of a vehicle on the roadway at 5.45 this morning," a watch commander for the Beverly Hills Police Department told Page Six. He also noted officers were told the driver was "asleep behind the wheel."

Sources additionally told the outlet that Tiffany's car was "stopped in lanes of traffic" and not pulled over to the side. It means any vehicles that were driving in the area at that time would have had to go around her car. According to a video obtained



by TMZ, Tiffany appeared cooperative when police put her in handcuffs and walked her to the back of their vehicle. She was seen wearing a floral red and white blouse, black leggings and black sneakers. This is not Tiffany's first DUI case. Back in January 2022, she was arrested for a DUI and improper stopping on a roadway after she appeared to be dozing behind the wheel. Despite her run-in with the law, Tiffany made light of it and joked about the arrest during another set at The Laugh Factory. Responding to an audience member who asked "what happened" last night, she said, "I prayed to God to send me a man with a job. A career. Preferably in a uniform. God answered my prayers."

She later said that she needs to "get help." She told Entertainment Tonight a few days after the incident: "I'm going to get some help so I can learn balance and boundaries."

Suicide bomber attacks police station in northwest Pakistan, killing 23 officers and wounding 32

(News Agency)- A suicide bomber detonated his explosive-laden vehicle at a police station's main gate in northwestern Pakistan early Tuesday, killing at least 23 troops, wounding 32 and causing a part of the building to collapse, authorities said.

The attack — one of the deadliest in recent months in Pakistan — also damaged businesses and shops nearby. A newly formed militant group — Tehreek-e-Jihad Pakistan, believed to be an offshoot of the Pakistani Taliban — claimed responsibility for the attack.

The military and local police said six other attackers were also involved in the assault at the police station, triggering an hourslong shootout before all six were killed.

Some of the wounded officers were said to be in critical condition, and there were fears the death toll would rise. Mohammad Adnan, a senior police official, said the casualties were taken to a local hospital.

Later, the army said in a statement that “troops killed 27 insurgents” in multiple



operations in the same region Tuesday. The attack targeted Daraban police station in the city of Dera Ismail Khan, according to local officer Kamal Khan. The city is located in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, which borders Afghanistan and which is a former stronghold of the Pakistani Taliban. Khan said a large number of security forces

from across Pakistan were recently deployed at the station for intelligence operations against militants in the area in coordination with the local police.

The militant offshoot said in its claim of responsibility that it targeted officers who were at the police station.

Mehrban Khan, who owns a hotel next to the police station, described the scene,

saying he saw “many army soldiers killed and wounded.”

Pakistani President Arif Alvi denounced the attack and expressed his condolences to the families of those killed, saying “their sacrifices would not go to waste” and that such attacks would not weaken the resolve of security forces. Pakistan's caretaker Interior Minister Sarfraz Bugti also denounced the attack as an “act of terrorism.”

In separate developments Tuesday, two soldiers and four insurgents were killed in a shootout in the northwestern town of Kulachi, the military said.

The surge in militant attacks on Pakistani security forces — many by the Pakistani Taliban — have strained relations between Islamabad and Afghanistan's Taliban rulers in Kabul. Islamabad says the Pakistani Taliban have become emboldened since their Afghan Taliban allies' takeover of the neighboring country in 2021. Many Pakistani Taliban members are living openly in Afghanistan, and Pakistan wants their extradition.

Is Bangladesh heading toward another 'one-sided' election?



(News Agency)-Bangladesh's ruling Awami League and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina are set to hold onto power for a fourth consecutive term after the main opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) said it would boycott the polls on January 7, along with several other parties.

The center-right BNP was the only party that could have offered a realistic challenge to Hasina's fourth consecutive term in power. The party says its entire leadership, along with thousands of activists, have been arrested over the past five weeks in “an unprecedented crackdown,” following a massive BNP rally in the capital, Dhaka, on October 28. Police say six people, including one police officer, have been killed in violence since the rally. However, the BNP and other opposition parties have said some 20 activists have been killed. BNP legal chief Kayser Kamal said that five people

have died in police custody after being arrested in a nationwide crackdown, AFP news agency reported, adding that prison officials said the detainees “died of natural causes” and denied BNP claims that detainees were tortured. Opposition claims foul play. Many of the opposition activists have been arrested on charges of arson attacks and vandalism. However, the BNP claims the charges were politically motivated. Apart from the arrests, at least nine party members have been sentenced to death, and 925 leaders and activists have been sentenced to various prison sentences in recent weeks on previous charges, the party said. “These cases are basically trumped up for political purposes. The partisan police registered fictitious cases, citing incidents that never occurred, even against those who have already died or suffered enforced disappearance,” AKM Wahiduzzaman, a BNP spokesperson, told DW.

Pakistan court indicts jailed ex-PM Imran Khan in state secrets case

(News Agency)Jailed former Prime Minister Imran Khan has pleaded not guilty to charges of leaking state secrets under an indictment that deals a new blow to his chances of contesting Pakistan's general election in February. The charges are related to a classified cable called a cypher sent to Islamabad by Pakistan's ambassador in Washington last year that Khan is accused of making public. “The charges were read out loudly in the courtroom,” government prosecutor Shah Khawar said on Wednesday, adding that Khan and his co-accused, former Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi, both denied the charges.

Khan's lawyer Gohar Khan contested the indictment, saying it would be valid only if signed by the accused. The former prime minister has previously said the contents of the cable appeared in the media from other sources.

A guilty verdict under the Official Secrets Act could bring up to 10 years in prison, lawyers said.

It is the second time Khan has been indicted on the same charges after a superior court struck down an earlier indictment on technical grounds, saying the correct procedure had not been followed.

A new trial, being conducted in jail on

security grounds, is due to begin on Thursday in the presence of his lawyers, family and a few selected journalists. Khan, 71, has been in jail since he was convicted and sentenced to three years on corruption charges on August 5. Khan says the cable was proof of a conspiracy by the Pakistani military and US government to topple his government in 2022 after he visited Moscow just



before Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Washington and Pakistan's military deny the accusations.

The former international cricketer won the last general election in 2018, a victory that his opponents say was achieved with the backing of the military. Khan and the military later fell out, mainly because of differences over the appointment of the chief of the main spy agency.

Khan has had dozens of legal cases filed against him, which he has denounced as an effort to banish him from politics.

Amazon testing \$9.99 monthly grocery subscription for Prime members



Amazon has announced that it's testing a new subscription model for unlimited grocery delivery for Prime members in three cities of the US. For an additional monthly charge of \$9.99, Prime members in Denver, Sacramento and Columbus can get unlimited delivery on Amazon Fresh and Whole Foods orders over \$35, reports The Verge. Those who subscribe to this plan will also receive unlimited 30-minute pick-up on orders of any size.

"We're always experimenting with features to make shopping easier, faster, and more affordable, and we look forward to hearing how members who take advantage of this offer respond," Tony Hoggett, Amazon's senior vice president of worldwide grocery stores, was quoted as saying. Prime members presently pay \$6.95 for Fresh orders between \$50 and \$100, and \$9.95 for items under \$50.

However, Prime members were not always required to pay for Fresh delivery on orders over \$35. Amazon began charging delivery costs for Fresh grocery orders under \$150 in January, removing a benefit that allowed Prime members free delivery on orders over \$35. Amazon then reversed its decision in October, lowering the free grocery delivery threshold from \$150 to \$100. In September, Amazon announced that it will introduce 'limited advertisements' to its Prime Video streaming service in 2024 as it aims to put more cash into creating TV shows and films.

In addition, the company said it will roll out the "ad-free" subscription tier for an extra \$2.99 per month for Prime members in the US -- a similar move which was taken by competitors such as Disney+ and Netflix.

Google announces 20 AI-first startups for its accelerator programme in India



Google on Friday announced the eighth cohort of Google for Startups Accelerator: India, featuring 20 AI-first startups in the Seed to Series A stage who were selected from more than 720 applications across the country. "These startups represent cutting-edge AI innovation in India, tackling diverse challenges, including discovering antibodies, detecting identity fraud, helping SMBs to reach more customers, reducing developers' repetitive work, and focusing on building solutions that use AI to address systemic challenges," Google said in a blogpost.

The 20 startups joining the eighth class of the Google for Startups Accelerator: India programme include -- Beatoven.ai, DhiWise, Endimension, FilterPixel, GalaxEye Space, Gan.ai, Keploy, Mugafi, NeuroPixel.AI, Onward Assist, Pepper Content, Prescinto, Presentation.AI, SpoofSense.ai, Wright Research, Zocket, and ZuAI. The tech giant kickstarted the programme this week with a week-long in-person boot camp that includes training workshops and mentorship support around product, design, tech, growth, and people.

The company recently launched its inaugural Accelerator Impact Report, highlighting the impact that over 1100 startup alumni from the Google for Startups Accelerator programmes have made within their industries and ecosystems. Since 2016, Google's accelerator programs have played a pivotal role in helping leading startups in India and worldwide to grow and address some of the world's most pressing challenges.

Goodmeetings, immunitoAI, Kalam, and Bank of Maharashtra) and growth in the defense sector (Bharat Dynamics, Bharat Electronics and Hindustan Aeronautics).

Fifth time in succession, Reliance Industries emerges as largest wealth creator in 2018-23 Inbox

For the fifth time in succession, Reliance Industries has emerged as the largest Wealth Creator over 2018-23. This takes Reliance's overall No.1 tally to 10 in the last 17 five-year study periods, as per Motilal Oswal 28th Annual Wealth Creation Study. Reliance Industries, Lloyds Metals and Capri Global are the biggest, fastest, and most consistent wealth creators, respectively, between 2018 and 2023. Adani Enterprises is the top all-round wealth creator. Technology sector is the largest wealth creating sector between 2018

and 2023, followed by the Consumer and Financials



sector. A relatively low-profile company, Lloyds Metals, has emerged the Fastest Wealth Creator with 2018-23 Price CAGR of 79 per cent. Rs 1 million invested in 2018 in the top 10 Fastest Wealth Creators in 2023, a return CAGR of 59

per cent vi/s 12 per cent for the BSE Sensex.

Capri Global is the most consistent wealth creator. We define Consistent Wealth Creators based on the number of years the stock has outperformed in each of the last five years. Where the number

of years is the same, the stock price CAGR decides the rank.

Based on this, over 2018-23, the relatively low-profile Capri Global has emerged as the Most Consistent Wealth Creator. It has outperformed the BSE Sensex in all the last five years, and has the highest price CAGR of 50 per cent.

PSUs' (public sector undertakings) Wealth Creation performance during 2018-23 is a significant improvement over the last two studies: 7 PSUs account for 6 per cent of Wealth Created. Two key factors have driven PSU Wealth Creation — turnaround by two banks (SBI

and Bank of Maharashtra) and growth in the defense sector (Bharat Dynamics, Bharat Electronics and Hindustan Aeronautics).

Financials are the top Wealth Destroyer despite being the third largest Wealth Creator, as per the study. The total Wealth Destroyed during 2018-23 is Rs 17 trillion, 25 per cent of the total Wealth Created by top 100 companies. This remains well below the Covid-hit study period 2015-20. Six of the top 10 Wealth Destroying companies are from the Financials sector (including Insurance). Interestingly, Financials is the top Wealth Destroying sector, and the third largest Wealth Creating sector at the same time.

Manoj Bajpayee: Directors coming to me want to make the most of it



New Delhi- Actor Manoj Bajpayee, whose survival thriller drama 'Joram' hit the screens on Friday, opened up on whether the characters he portrays take a toll on him. He shared that the good roles are coming to him and he wants to make the most of it.

Directed by Devashish Makhija, the film

promises an intense portrayal of survival, with Manoj in a commanding role as a father on the run. In a conversation with IANS, Manoj spoke about the characters taking a toll on him, survival thriller genre, and more. If playing 'Dasru' took a mental and physical toll on him, Manoj told IANS: "I don't know whether it is taking a toll or not. I try to come out of it not by going anywhere, I just start preparing for my next. And when I start preparing for next, then slowly the new character overpowers my mind." The 'Aks' actor shared: "I don't know what it has done to my brain but we will come to know that in times to come. At this point it's impossible to tell what toll it has taken on my mind. Good roles are coming to me, I am working with good directors and I want to make the most of it." What is

missing in genres like survival thriller, and psychological drama? Manoj said: "We are doing quite well. Also the independent filmmakers like Devashish Makhija, Vikramaditya Motwane, all of these people are working continuously, and exploring things in this genre. All of them have a different take and that's the beauty of it." "When it comes to the middle of the road or independent cinema you see a lot of experiments happening. Directors who are doing it are primary cinephiles."



Sunny Deol, Ayushmann Khurrana-starrer 'Border 2' to go on floors in 2024

After the historic success of 'Gadar 2', Bollywood actor Sunny Deol is set to join forces with actor Ayushmann Khurrana for 'Border 2'. The film, helmed by J.P. Dutta's daughter, producer-writer Nidhi Dutta, is expected to start shooting in the first quarter of 2024.

Sunny Deol, who played a pivotal role in 'Border', will once again lead the cast with the film set to delve into the historical backdrop of the 1971 India-Pakistan war. The remaining cast is expected to be finalised in the coming weeks. A source revealed: "Nidhi Dutta who is also penning the script, envisions 'Border 2'

as the biggest war film ever made in the country. Unlike its predecessors, the movie aims to showcase the collaborative efforts of the Indian Army, Navy, and Air Force, offering a comprehensive perspective on the 1971 war.

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'Johri' is a comeback for me: Charu Asopa

After winning the hearts of audiences in the television industry with shows like 'Devon Ke Dev Mahadev', 'Baal Veer', 'Buddha' and others, Charu Asopa, who has now made her OTT debut with 'Johri', shared how this show was a comeback for her.

Charu was last seen in 2020 show 'Akbal Ka Bal Birbal'. She is currently starring as the main female antagonist in the television show 'Kaisa Hai Yeh Rishta Anjana'.

The actress was married to former Miss Universe Sushmita Sen's younger brother Rajeev Sen. However, the couple got separated in 2023. They have a daughter named Ziana Sen. Charu has now marked her debut in the digital world with 'Johri'.

Talking about the series, Charu said: "When I read the script for the first time, I knew that this is the script I was waiting for. This show was a comeback for me, and I wanted to play a different role that I hadn't played in the past." "I have always done TV and have portrayed similar kinds of roles.

I found Tani's character interesting and apt for my OTT debut," added the 35-year-old actress. Charu essays the enigmatic Tani, whose influence motivates Niraj (played by Nishant Malkani) to be at the forefront of the diamond business. She was the one who changed his life upside down. While Niraj was the brain, she was the social face that drew all the attention from the who's who of the country.

'Johri' traces the journey of a common man who transforms into a diamond mogul under the guidance of his uncle. The drama becomes more gripping when the narrative delves into the world of bank scams and fraud, portraying the rise and fall of a businessman.

The series starts with Niraj's humble beginnings and evolves into a stylish thriller that encapsulates the essence of the '90s. 'Johri' streams on MX Player and Atrangi TV.



Actress Wamiqa Gabbi reflects on a remarkable journey in 2023 and is

happy that she finds herself not "confined to a box." In an exciting way, Wamiqa

Wamiqa Gabbi: Fortunately, I find myself not confined to a box

shared: "I am in an exhilarating phase of my career, receiving diverse offers that allow me to explore characters ranging from negative roles to fantasy and bubbly, chirpy personas. Fortunately, I find myself not confined to a box." W

amiqa's role of Nilofer in 'Jubilee' or the detective in 'Charlie Chopra' or the spy in 'Khufiya', the year 2023 has unfolded

as a monumental success for the actress. These successes even earned her the number four spot of the most popular celebrities in India this year as per the list by IMDb where she shared the space with Alia Bhatt and Shah Rukh Khan. Reflecting on her journey, Wamiqa expressed gratitude for the support has received: "This year has been a wonderful ride, filled with challenges and victories. I am thankful for the opportunities and the audience's embrace of the diverse characters I've portrayed."

Hollywood actor Taylor Lautner, who is known for his work in 'Twilight', has confirmed it was Taylor Swift who called off their relationship.

The actor romanced the pop megastar, 33, briefly in 2009 and provided some of the inspiration for her 'Speak Now' album, while he more recently starred in her music video for 'I Can See You', reports 'Female First UK'.

The 'Home Team' actor says the pair lost contact and didn't speak "for a while", but "rekindling" his friendship with the 'Bad Blood' hitmaker - who is now dating 34-year-old NFL star Travis Kelce - this past year has been "one of the greatest moments" in his life.

Taylor's 'Speak Now' song 'Back to December' is about him and when asked what happened that month on the 'Call Her Daddy' podcast, he quipped: "You



Taylor Swift broke off relationship: Taylor Lautner

don't wanna know."

Quizzed on whether the Grammy winner made the decision to split, he replied: "Yes, absolutely. 'I'm thinking back on exactly what happened. But no, yeah, she did.'"

Taylor, who is married to nurse Tay Dome, shared: "I think when you respect somebody for who they are, like in their soul, it allows you to move on, forgive and continue that love in a different way. We stayed friendly, we would see each

other now and then." He further mentioned, "But we then did fall out of touch and didn't talk for a while. But I've always had the deepest respect for who she is as a person before anything else. Honestly I would say one of the greater things to happen in my life over the last year is the rekindling of our friendship. Above anything else that she is, she is just a wonderful human. And she's pretty great to have in your life."

As per 'Female First UK', Taylor shedding light on who broke things off comes after the movie star recently insisted marrying a superfan of his ex-girlfriend was the "perfect situation". Speaking on his and his spouse's 'The Squeeze' podcast, he said: "I know on paper, it sounds like a tough situation, but I not once was ever worried about it."

Isolating on a desert island

Polish YouTube star skips lockdown

It's 5.30 a.m. on Yemen's remote island of Socotra, a 3,625 square kilometer desert paradise 60 miles east of the Horn of Africa. The sun barely reaches over the island's towering sand dunes and rocky cliffs, but Eva zu Beck is out of her tent and at the water's edge.

Armed with a snorkel mask and a long piece of wood topped with a fierce-looking metal hook, she dives into the calm Indian Ocean in search of her breakfast: Socotran lobster.

Remote island life has become the new normal for the 29-year-old, an adventure YouTuber and travel documentary host from Poland.

While the rest of the world stays inside, Zu Beck, who grew her social media following to over 1 million with her travel vlogs on off-the-beaten path destinations like Pakistan, Bangladesh and Syria, has spent the last two months wild camping on deserted white-sand beaches, fishing for grouper in the open ocean and climbing 10 story-high sand dunes as she waits out the pandemic on one of the world's most isolated islands.

The only catch? She has no idea when she'll be able to leave.

A marathon stay on a desert island
Zu Beck arrived on Socotra -- an island with an ecosystem so unique it's often referred to as the "Galapagos of the Indian Ocean" -- on a weekly commercial flight from Cairo on March 11.

The travel vlogger, along with 40 other international tourists, arrived that day to take part in Socotra's first-ever marathon event and was due to stay for two weeks.

Unbeknownst to Zu Beck and her fellow marathon runners, however, the world was quickly

shutting down due to the rapid spread of the novel coronavirus. On March 15, after she and the other participants had completed the race, Socotri officials announced that the island would be closing its borders, and that the marathon runners should return home as soon as possible.

"We were woken up in the middle of the night in our tents," says Zu Beck, "and told that we should make our way to the airport immediately."

She was faced with a difficult decision: should she leave Socotra, and risk contracting the virus on her 5,000 kilometer journey back to Europe? Or should she stay in paradise, and accept the possibility of being stuck on a desert island for the foreseeable future?

Zu Beck knew almost immediately what her decision was. "I have so much love for the island," she says. "I'd visited last year and I swore I'd return one day for an extended stay. I took what was happening as a sign."

With permission from Socotri officials, Zu Beck and four other tourists decided to stay. The rest, including Zu Beck's Canadian boyfriend, returned to Cairo on the last flight out of Socotra.

She says she didn't realize how serious the coronavirus outbreak was when she arrived in March, and medical screening upon entry reassured her that she wasn't introducing the virus.

But not everyone agrees with Zu Beck's decision to visit a remote and potentially vulnerable island as the pandemic took hold. Since this story published early on May 19, Zu Beck has heard from a number of critics via social media through the campaign #Respect_Socotra, who argue

that her presence is endangering the local community.

In a May 19 Instagram post, she said that the situation in Socotra has evolved.

"Thank you to everyone who has been so concerned about my stay on the island. #Respect_Socotra, You have given me a new perspective and I apologize if I sent the wrong message before," she said.

"My intention was never to encourage active travel to remote places during a pandemic. Rather, I wanted to share the beauty of a place I was already in, a place that's little-known and needs to be protected," Zu Beck wrote in the post.

Local hospitality makes an extended stay possible. With the last flight gone and with no signs of borders reopening, Zu Beck settled right into island life in mid-March.

"Life on Socotra is slow," she says. "I spend most days outside reading a book, writing in my journal or hiking in the mountains."

While Socotra's most comfortable hotels are in the capital, Hadibu, she spent much of her first two months wild camping or renting basic guest rooms from local goat-herder families in Socotra's less populated rural villages, only returning to Hadibu for Wi-Fi, laundry services and electricity to charge her devices.

"Hadibu is chaotic and noisy," says Zu Beck. "I prefer to be out in nature and living alongside rural communities, who have been kind enough to welcome me into their homes."

Local hospitality has allowed her to keep costs down while living in Socotra, a destination which, due to its remote location and

lack of tourist infrastructure, is notoriously expensive to visit.

"There's a code of hospitality in Socotra called Karam," she says. "It dictates that guests should be welcomed unconditionally, so traditional hosts are very reluctant to take money from guests."

Despite this, Zu Beck says she insists that her hosts accept \$150-200 per month to cover her food and accommodation.

'Parallel universe': Movement has been largely unrestricted

Zu Beck's close contact with the local community was facilitated by Socotra's lack of lockdown restrictions. She isn't aware of any reported cases of coronavirus, and the island is one of the few places on earth that continued to operate as normal.

"There are no social distancing or lockdown measures on Socotra," Zu Beck said in a recent interview. "We are free to visit friends and move around as we please. It's as if we're in a parallel universe."

But that freedom has decreased over time, Zu Beck reported via Instagram on May 19.

"Before, it felt safe to travel to different places around the island, but that's no longer the case. Over the last 3 weeks, I've been spending the majority of my time in a family home in one village and intend to keep it this way," she wrote.

Before increasing concerns over coronavirus slowed movement from place to place, Zu Beck spent her 29th birthday riding her new 150cc motorbike -- Socotra's ubiquitous form of transport imported from Al Mukalla in mainland Yemen -- across the island's southern region, a windswept, sparsely

populated area known for its alien-like dragon blood trees, an endangered plant species endemic to Socotra.

Being stuck in paradise hasn't all been smooth sailing.

Zu Beck was admitted twice to the hospital in Hadibo, first for a nasty cut on her leg she acquired while hiking the island's steep cliffs, and later for suspected heat stroke and a viral infection.

"I've been very impressed with the professional care offered by the hospital staff on Socotra," she says.

Unlike mainland Yemen, which has been devastated by the ongoing civil war, Socotra's healthcare system is supported by the UAE, meaning care for minor illnesses and injuries is relatively good.

But Socotra isn't immune to clashes. A recent armed conflict there between the Saudi-backed government forces and UAE-backed southern separatists was deescalated in early May. Missing loved ones is the hardest part. Aside from recovering from her recent illness, missing loved ones -- and a lack of internet to connect with them -- has been Zu Beck's toughest challenge.

"The Wi-Fi isn't strong enough for Skype or Facetime, and power cuts are common," she says. "I have to make do with just an ordinary telephone call whenever I have signal. I miss them all dearly." While Zu Beck initially said she doesn't regret her decision to stay in Socotra, her position has evolved. "From the perspective of time, given the knowledge I have now about the spread and nature of the virus, would I have made the decision to come here in the first place? No," she said in her Instagram post on May 19.

Women using Instagram to cope with miscarriage distress

The findings are based on a qualitative research study on 200 posts of text and pictures shared by Instagram users.

Despite its common occurrence, there is still a lot of stigma surrounding miscarriage and many women find that their emotional and psychological needs are unmet as they go through a devastating grieving process. But for some, Instagram has emerged as a tool to cope with such distress, a study says.

The study, published in the journal *Obstetrics & Gynecology*,

found that the content posted by Instagram users included rich descriptions of the medical and physical experiences of miscarriage, and the emotional spectrum of having a miscarriage and coping with those emotions, the social aspect, and family identity.

"I find it endlessly fascinating that women are opening up to essentially strangers about things that they hadn't even told

their partners or families," says Dr. Riley. "But this is how powerful this community is," said Amy Henderson Riley, Assistant Professor at the Jefferson College of Population Health, Thomas Jefferson University, US.

The findings are based on a qualitative research study on 200 posts of text and pictures shared by Instagram users.

"What surprised me the most

was how many women and their partners identified as parents after their miscarriage and how the miscarriage lasted into their family identity after a successful pregnancy," said Rebecca Mercier, Assistant Professor at Thomas Jefferson University.

"The extent to which this loss affects women and their families, and the longevity of their grief is a blind spot for

clinicians," Mercier said.

These personal accounts also provided insight into patients' perspectives of typically defined experiences.

For example, in the clinic, the typical definition of recurrent pregnancy loss is after three pregnancies. However, the researchers found that many patients who had had two or more miscarriages identified with having recurrent pregnancy loss. "I'm hoping that this study will encourage clinicians to point patients to social media as a potential coping tool, as well as to approach this subject with bereaved and expecting parents with more respect and empathy," Mercier said.

Social media is becoming a common avenue for patient testimonials. For example, the short video-sharing platform TikTok has recently become a home for some users to make videos sharing their personal health struggles.

"As far as we know, this is the first study to look at the intersection of Instagram and miscarriage," Riley said.

"But this is a drop in the bucket. Social media platforms are evolving rapidly and a theoretically grounded research must follow," she added.

Our ancestors learnt to smile so that they can have sex

Our forefathers were way smarter than us when it came to wooing the opposite sex for mating.

Believe it or not but our forefathers were way smarter than us when it came to wooing the opposite sex for mating. According to a new study, Neanderthals learnt how to smile and make expressive faces in order to attract less-aggressive mates.

Researchers from the University of Milan focused on genetic samples from Neanderthals, which showed that gene mutations might have led humans to "self-select less aggressive mating partners". This behaviour finally led to the "self-domestication" of ancient humans.

The study suggests that modern humans domesticated themselves after they split from their extinct relatives - Neanderthals and Denisovans - approximately 600,000 years ago, reported [sciencemag.org](https://www.sciencemag.org) citing the study that was published in the journal *Science Advances*.

Giuseppe Testa, a molecular biologist at University of Milan in Italy, and colleagues knew that one gene, BAZ1B, plays an important role in orchestrating the movements of neural crest cells.

Most people carry two copies of this gene. Significantly, one copy

of BAZ1B is missing in people with Williams-Beuren syndrome, a disorder linked to cognitive impairments and extreme friendliness.

Genetic data was gathered from human stem cells taken from the remains of two Neanderthals and one Denisovan.

These two groups of prehistoric ancestors lived around the same time and there is even evidence to suggest they interbred.

"BAZ1B" is the gene which allows dogs to make their eyes expressive in a way wolves cannot, reports *NYPPost*.

"It is thought that selected breeding patterns of some Neanderthals led to the BAZ1B gene and could have contributed to Homo sapiens developing distinctively expressive faces".

When the researchers looked at hundreds of BAZ1B-sensitive

genes, they found that in modern humans, those genes had accumulated loads of regulatory mutations of their own.

This suggests natural selection was shaping them.

According to *The Sun*, Williams-Beuren syndrome causes humans to have what some people perceive as a welcoming expression with a wide mouth and a small nose.

Seriously Cyrus: The crush from college

Cyrus Broacha gives advice on relationships, dating and more.



I am a 23-year-old girl who has had a huge crush on a guy from college. Although I have never spoken to him and I don't know if he knows about my existence, but I can't seem to get over him, even though it's been a year since college ended. How do I get over my obsession? Please help. - KS

KS, what the hell did you do in college? It's like shopping in New York, after you've returned to Delhi. When in New York Shop in New York, when in London

Shop in London, when in Yemen, er.....run. Okay please disregard. What I've written, we are starting again. Being in love with someone you don't interact with, is like being in love with photograph. Of course after 27 years of marriage, many would prefer the photograph. Having squandered your college time, KS, you need a ruse to get him. Like maybe a friend needs admission to the college and would he have some influence.

Let's establish contact, see how he reacts. If he's friendly enough you stay in touch, if not, don't worry at least you got your graduation from college. I am a 23-year-old and I have never been in a relationship till date. I was initially afraid to get into one and now, I am used to being single. Even if someone approaches me, I am not really sure of how to respond or reciprocate. I wanted to know if I'm heading right or is there

something I need to do? - PS

The Japanese agriculturist Dr HATO TAMAHARA, wrote a book on how relationships were very overrated. He had 7 failed relationships. From parents to his three wives. Finally, he found happiness with a potted plant. However, that lasted only 39 days, as the plant died after HATO overslept and forgot to water it. Being in relationships is great, but after being in one for a while, you yearn for freedom. This is called Human Nature. There is faulty winning in our 'human nature'. This is maybe because God was having an off day, or something the chimpanzee's passed on

married as soon as possible and I want to focus on my studies now. I have been trying to convince him for the past six months but nothing seems to work out. How do I sort this? - SK

SK, remember what the Poet Rumi wrote. 'Force is not' love.



to our ancestors in the DNA. So whatever we have after some time, we want the opposite. This explains why after Spicy Bhel-Puri we want a nice ice-cream. So don't be so gung ho on being in a relationship. It's something that's always good, bad and ugly. I am an 18-year-old girl and I am in a relationship with a guy who is 12 years elder to me. The problem is that he wants to get

Force is mass multiplied by acceleration. Okay, maybe it wasn't Rumi. He's 30 looking to get married. You are eighteen and at this age you should look forward to only one thing. Becoming nineteen..... Then, twenty, and so on. Just because he's older he shouldn't be allowed to steam roll you. If you needed a bull dozer, it's much cheaper to just rent one.

The art of mood lighting: How to pull off the perfect setting for an intimate dinner

Nothing beats the romantic allure of mood lighting. A clever play of light and shadows could instantly uplift the aura of an intimate sit-down dinner at home. However, not many realise that the biggest mistake one could make when planning a cosy evening is using white lightlike the harsh glare of a florescent tube. The trick lies

glow. You can also use a mix of dainty tea lights, scented candles, and filigreed candle holders for a play of shadow and light," shares Upasana Virmani, Category Manager - Home Décor, Art and Menswear, Jaypore.

In addition, multiple accent lights can create a beautiful effect in a room. Focal attention and

conversational pieces accentuate drama at a house party or if you have a date coming over for a quiet meal. "Choose lights that highlight your personal style. Fun options could include lamps incorporating figurines such as

Here's how you can pull off the perfect setting for an intimate dinner or when you have a date coming over.



in not turning on the ceiling lights, which most builder houses have nowadays. Instead of that, work with table lamps and candles to enliven the setting. "Opt for lower watt lamps and lights, dimmers are a great idea, basically anything to mimic a soft

side-table lamps," suggests Raseel Gujral Founder, Casa Paradox.

More than investing in something which is trendy, pick something you love and improve it with light. Extrapolate lighting as both an

accent and mood-setter for any place under or behind the room in your home. "3000 kelvin colour is perfect to bring in the warmth one needs to create the dark romantic mood. So incandescent bulbs or halogen bring the desired result more easily," says Prateek Jain, Co-Founder klove Studio. Clear twinkle lights can be ideal to

and to reap the intimate atmosphere. Moreover, coloured twinkle lights can add to the effect of intimacy by stimulating certain moods, as mentioned above. For a romantic atmosphere, choose clear or white twinkle to boost the feelings of love and calm," adds Raseel.



Deepfakes for \$24 a month: how AI is disrupting Bangladesh's election

Benjamin Parkin

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Policymakers around the world are worrying over how AI-generated disinformation can be harnessed to try to mislead voters and inflame divisions ahead of several big elections next year.

In one country it is already happening: Bangladesh.

The South Asian nation of 170mn people is heading to the polls in early January, a contest marked by a bitter and polarising power struggle between incumbent Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and her rivals, the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist party. Pro-government news outlets and influencers in Bangladesh have in recent months promoted AI-generated disinformation created with cheap tools offered by artificial intelligence start-ups.

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In one purported news clip, an AI-generated anchor lambasts the US, a country that Sheikh Hasina's government has criticised ahead of the polls. A separate deepfake video, which has since been removed, showed an opposition leader equivocating over support for Gazans, a potentially ruinous position in the Muslim-majority country with strong public sympathy for Palestinians.

Public pressure is rising on tech platforms to crack down on misleading AI content ahead of several big elections expected in 2024, including in the US, the UK, India and Indonesia. In response, Google and Meta have recently announced policies to start requiring campaigns to disclose if political adverts have been digitally altered. But the examples from Bangladesh show not only how these AI tools can be exploited in elections but also the difficulty in controlling their use in smaller markets



that risk being overlooked by American tech companies.

Miraj Ahmed Chowdhury, the managing director of Bangladesh-based media research firm Digitally Right, said that while AI-generated disinformation was "still at an experimentation level" — with most created using conventional photo or video editing platforms — it showed how it could take off.

"When they have technologies and tools like AI, which allow them to produce misinformation and disinformation at a mass scale, then you can imagine how big that threat is," he said, adding that "a platform's attention to a certain jurisdiction depends on how important it is as a market".

Global focus on the ability to use AI to create misleading or false political content has risen over the past year with the

proliferation of powerful tools such as OpenAI's ChatGPT and AI video generators.

Earlier this year, the US Republican National Committee released an attack ad using AI-generated images to depict a dystopian future under President Joe Biden. And YouTube suspended several accounts in Venezuela using AI-generated news anchors to promote disinformation favourable to President Nicolás Maduro's regime.

In Bangladesh, the disinformation fuels a tense political climate ahead of polls in early January. Sheikh Hasina has cracked down on the opposition. Thousands of leaders and activists have been arrested in what critics warn amounts to an attempt to rig polls in her favour, prompting the US to publicly pressure her government to ensure free and fair elections.

In one video posted on X in September by BD Politico, an online news outlet, a news anchor for "World News" presented a studio segment — interspersed with images of rioting — in which he accused US diplomats of interfering in Bangladeshi elections and blamed them for political violence.

The video was made using HeyGen, a Los Angeles-based AI video generator that allows customers to create clips fronted by AI avatars for as little as \$24 a month. The same anchor, named "Edward", can be seen in HeyGen's promotional content as one of several avatars — which are themselves generated from real actors — available to the platform's users. X, BD Politico and HeyGen did not respond to requests for

comment

Please use the sharing tools found via the share button at the top or side of articles. Copying articles to share with others is a breach of FT.com T&Cs and Copyright Policy. Email licensing@ft.com to buy additional rights. Subscribers may share up to 10 or 20 articles per month using the gift article service. More information can be found at <https://www.ft.com/tour>. Other examples include anti-opposition deepfake videos posted on Meta's Facebook, including one that falsely purports to be of exiled BNP leader Tarique Rahman suggesting the party "keep quiet" about Gaza to not displease the US. The Tech Global Institute, a think-tank, and media non-profit Witness both concluded the fake video was likely AI-generated.

AKM Wahiduzzaman, a BNP official, said that his party asked Meta to remove such content but "most of the time they don't bother to reply". Meta removed the video after being contacted by the Financial Times for comment.

In another deepfake video, created by utilising Tel Aviv-based AI video platform D-ID, the BNP's youth wing leader Rashed Iqbal Khan is shown lying about his age in what the Tech Global Institute said was an effort to discredit him. D-ID did not respond to a request for comment.

A primary challenge in identifying such disinformation was the lack of reliable AI-detection tools, said Sabhanaz Rashid Diya, a Tech Global Institute founder and former Meta executive, with off-the-shelf products particularly ineffective at identifying non-English language content. She added that the solutions proposed by large tech platforms, which have focused on regulating AI in political adverts, will have limited effect in countries such as Bangladesh where ads are a smaller part of political communication.

"The solutions that are coming out to address this onslaught of AI misinformation are very western-centric." Tech platforms "are not taking this as seriously in other parts of the world".

The problem is exacerbated by the lack of regulation or its selective enforcement by authorities. Bangladesh's Cyber Security Act, for example, has been criticised for giving the government draconian powers to crack down on dissent online.

Bangladesh's internet regulator did not respond to a request for comment about what it is doing to control online misinformation.

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A greater threat than the AI-generated content itself, Diya argued, was the prospect that politicians and others could use the mere possibility of deepfakes to discredit uncomfortable information.

There's No Stopping the Newspaper Death Spiral

A successful walkout at the Washington Post can't mask the industry's dark future.

By JACK SHAFER

About 750 members of the Washington Post Guild staged a one-day strike against the paper on Thursday to publicize their position that management is not bargaining with them in good faith. Staffers who picketed were joined by Scabby the Rat, and many Post reporters withheld their bylines from the paper's Thursday and Friday editions in protest. The mini-strikers may not have imagined that their direct action would force the Jeff Bezos-owned paper to submit to their demands. Few, if any, subscribers will notice or care that bylines were withheld, nor will many be moved by the fact that the Friday edition seemed fattened with what appeared to be staff stories that had been banked. The true purpose of such public protests is to unite workers behind the cause, drum up sympathy with the public and give management the hotfoot. By that measure, the walkout was a short-term success. But what about the long term?

News unions have expanded their footprints in the last couple of years, organizing longtime holdouts like the Los Angeles Times, Chicago Tribune and a dozen Gannett newsrooms, as well as



most top news websites and magazines (Slate, Vice, HuffPost, POLITICO, The Atlantic, Esquire, The New Yorker, New York, Washingtonian, et al.). But the successes can't mask the newspaper industry's death spiral. Post workers may well win a new contract, secure desired workplace enhancements and collect raises if they keep at it. But the victory may prove Pyrrhic as the newspaper industry's dim and dark present unfolds

into its future.

According to a Thursday Post piece about the Post strike, labor and management aren't even talking the same language. Workers have not had a contract for 18 months. The Guild wants a minimum salary of \$100,100 for reporters, and management is offering only \$73,000. The parties are also separated by annual cost-of-living demands. Seeing as it's only money they're talking about, Bezos could

buy every newsroom employee a \$4 million home in the Hollywood Hills or thereabouts, give each \$1 million in walking around money and make a bonfire on Malibu beach of \$1 billion just to celebrate his generosity, and he'd still have \$165 billion in his pocket. But that's not how Bezos thinks. He counts every penny and fights unions hard wherever they appear in his kingdom. Since buying the money-losing Post a decade ago for a mere \$250 million, he's been adamant about not running the paper as a philanthropy. Instead, he invested untold millions to reverse the newsroom headcount decline, expanding it by more than a third and adding new foreign bureaus, too. And miracle of miracles, he succeeded in making the paper profitable as recently as 2019.

Bezos said at the outset that he also planned to make the Post a "national and even global publication." While his millions improved what he inherited, he still hasn't made it a national or global read on par with the Times. It may be that there is room in the marketplace for only one national and global publication, and the New York Times has already claimed it.

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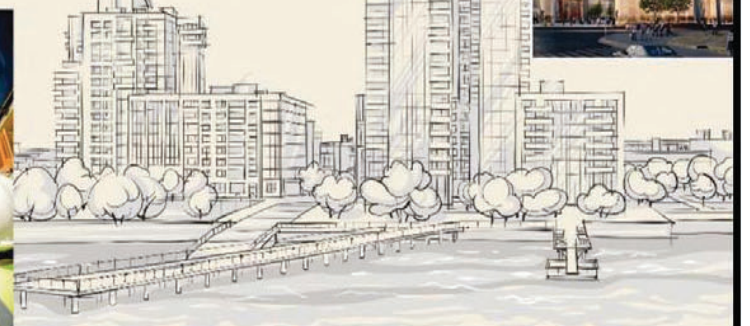
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Activate Win

Pakistanis, Bangladeshi politicians are new targets of deepfake, 90 per cent of videos online are pornographic

There was the Bollywood star in skin-tight lycra, the Bangladeshi politician filmed in a bikini and the young Pakistani woman snapped with a man.

None was real, but all three images were credible enough to unleash lust, vitriol - and even allegedly a murder, underlining the sophistication of generative artificial intelligence, and the threats it poses to women. The two videos and the photo were deepfake, and went viral in a vibrant social mediascape that is struggling to come to grips with the technology that has the power to create convincing copies that can upend real lives.

"We need to address this as a community and with urgency before more of us are affected by such identity theft," actor Rashmika Mandanna said in a post on X, that has garnered more than 6.2 million views. She is not the only Bollywood star to be cloned and attacked on social media, with top actors including Katrina Kaif, Alia Bhatt and Deepika Padukone also targeted with deepfakes.

The lycra video, said Mandanna, was "extremely scary not only for me, but



rights experts say the issue is particularly challenging in conservative societies, where women have long been harassed online and abuse has gone largely unpunished.

Social media firms are struggling to keep up.

Google's YouTube and Meta Platforms - which owns Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp - have updated their policies, requiring creators and advertisers to



Deepfakes and the law

As deepfakes have proliferated worldwide, there are growing concerns - and rising instances - of their use in harassment, scams and sextortion. Regulations have been slow to follow.

The US Executive Order on AI touches on dangers posed by deepfakes, while the European Union's proposed AI Act will require greater transparency and disclosure from providers.

Last month, 18 countries - including the United States and Britain - unveiled a non-binding agreement on keeping the wider public safe from AI misuse, including deepfakes.

Among Asian nations, China requires providers to use watermarks and report illegal deepfakes, while South Korea has made it illegal to distribute deepfakes that harm "public interest", with potential imprisonment

or fines.

India is taking a tough stance as it drafts new rules.

IT Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw has said social media firms must remove deepfakes within 36 hours of receiving a notification, or risk losing their safe-harbour status that protects them from liability for third-party content.

But the focus should be on "mitigating and preventing incidents, rather than reactive responses", said Malavika Rajkumar at the advocacy group IT for Change.

While the Indian government has indicated it may force providers and

platforms to disclose the identity of deepfake creators, "striking a balance between privacy protection and preventing abuse is key," Rajkumar added.

Women targeted

Deepfakes of women and other vulnerable communities such as LGBTQ+ people - especially sexual images and videos - can be particularly dangerous in deeply religious or conservative societies, human rights activists say.

In Bangladesh, deepfake videos of female opposition politicians - Rumina Farhana in a bikini and Nipun Roy in a swimming pool - have emerged ahead of an election on January 7.

And last month, an 18-year-old woman was allegedly shot dead by her father and uncle in a so-called honour killing in Pakistan's remote Kohistan province, after a photograph of her with a man went viral. Police say the image was doctored.

Shahzadi Rai, a transgender member of Pakistan's Karachi Municipal Council, who has been the target of abusive trolling with deepfake images, has said they could exacerbate online gender-based violence and "seriously jeopardise" her career.

Even if audiences are able to distinguish between a real image and a deepfake, the woman's integrity is questioned, and her credibility may be damaged, said Nighat Dad, founder of the non-profit Digital Rights Foundation in Pakistan.

"The threat to women's privacy and safety is deeply concerning," she said, particularly as disinformation campaigns gain steam ahead of an election scheduled for February 8.

"Deepfakes are creating an increasingly unsafe online environment for women, even non-public figures, and may discourage women from participating in politics and online spaces," she said.

In several countries including India, entrenched gender biases already affect the ability of girls and young women to use the internet, a recent report found. Deepfakes of powerful Bollywood stars only underline the risk that AI poses to all women, said Rajkumar.

"Deepfakes have affected women and vulnerable communities for a long time; they have gained widespread attention only after popular actresses were targeted," she said.

The heightened focus now should push "platforms, policymakers, and society at large to create a safer and more inclusive online environment," she added.

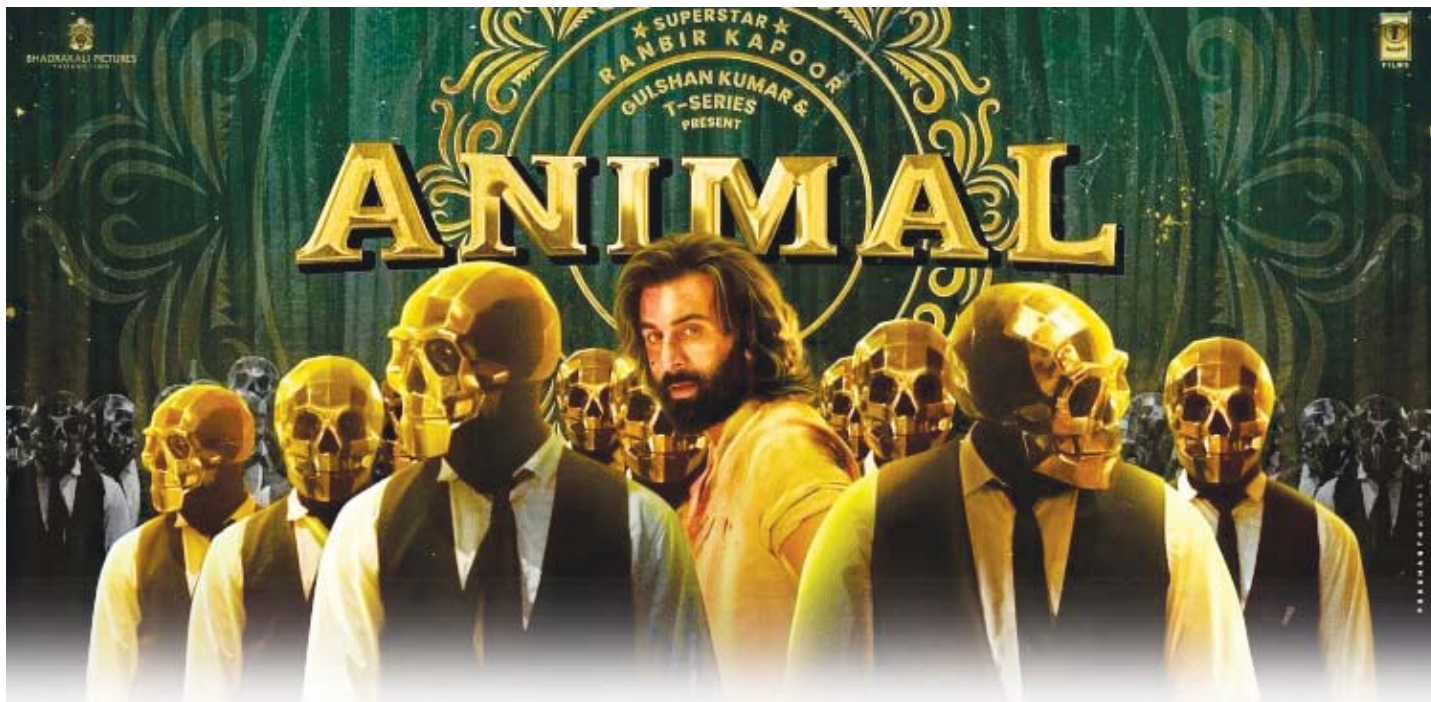


also for each one of us who today is vulnerable to so much harm because of how technology is being misused". While digitally manipulated images and videos of women were once easy to spot, usually lurking in the dark corners of the internet, the explosion in generative AI tools such as Midjourney, Stable Diffusion and DALL-E has made it easy and cheap to create and circulate convincing deepfakes.

More than 90% of deepfake videos online are pornographic, according to tech experts, and most are of women. While there are no separate data for South Asian countries, digital

label all AI-generated content.

But the onus is largely on victims - usually girls and women - to take action, said Rumman Chowdhury, an AI expert at Harvard University who previously worked at reducing harms on Twitter. "Generative AI will regrettably supercharge online harassment and malicious content ... and women are the canaries in the coal mine. They are the ones impacted first, the ones on whom the technologies are tested," she said. "It is an indication to the rest of the world to pay attention, because it's coming for everyone," Chowdhury told a recent United Nations briefing.



'Animal' and the Era of the New Big Bollywood Film

By: Biswadeep Ghosh

Writer-director Sandeep Reddy Vanga's controversial action drama *Animal*, featuring Ranbir Kapoor as the protagonist, has polarised Hindi film-going audiences. However, Vanga has delivered a commercial outcome he must have been hoping for: the fourth highest-grossing film of 2023 — and still going strong. One week old in the theatres, *Animal*, which was produced with an estimated budget of Rs 100 crore, has reportedly grossed around Rs 600 crore worldwide. These are extraordinary figures, possibly more than the expectations of the hardcore Ranbir Kapoor fan. What is more significant is that the film will not go away from the

theatres anytime soon. At the moment, the film's lifetime box-office score is a mystery.

Some have found *Animal* a disturbing and offensive film because of the maker's unabashed indulgence in misogyny, toxic masculinity and mindless violence. But, critics of the film's content have been outnumbered by satisfied filmgoers. Seen as a reckless man with a troubled mind and daddy issues, Ranbir Kapoor has proved — yet again — why he is possibly the most gifted star-actor of his generation. He is at the top of his game, which results in a near-flawless performance and holds the film together. *Animal* is a big-screen experience that is difficult to digest, but

impossible to ignore. The problematic film, in short, has appealed to the average moviegoer despite its visible shortcomings. Fifteen years ago, AL Murugadoss's action thriller *Ghajini* (2008), featuring Aamir Khan, became the first Hindi film to cross the Rs 100-crore mark at the Indian box office. A lot has changed since then. Film budgets have gone up. The fees of leading stars have multiplied manifold. Ticket prices have touched the skies. OTT platforms have redefined the preferences of urban viewers. A recent phase scarred by commercial failures for the industry has come and gone.

All five highest-grossing films since the start of 2023 have a one common USP:

'I feel trapped': Scores of underage Rohingya girls forced into abusive marriages in Malaysia

BY KRISTEN GELINEAU

In a bedroom in Malaysia that has become a prison, the 14-year-old girl wipes away tears as she sits cross-legged on the concrete floor. It is here, she says, where her 35-year-old husband rapes her nearly every night.

Last year, the Rohingya girl sacrificed herself to save her family, embarking on a terrifying journey from her homeland of Myanmar to a country she had never seen, to marry a man she had never met.

It wasn't her choice. None of this was. Not the decision to leave behind everything she knew, nor the arranged marriage for which she was not ready.

But her family, she says, was impoverished, hungry and terrified of Myanmar's military, which unleashed a series of sweeping attacks against the country's Rohingya Muslim minority in 2017. In desperation, a neighbor found a man in Malaysia who would pay the 18,000 ringgit (\$3,800) fee for the girl's passage and — after she married him — send money to her parents and three little siblings for food. And so, the teenager — identified along with all the girls in this story by her first initial to protect her from retaliation — tearfully hugged her parents goodbye. Then M climbed into a trafficker's car packed with children.

She didn't yet know the horrors that awaited her. All she knew

then was that the weight of her family's survival was on her slender shoulders. She sits now in her bedroom in the Malaysian capital of Kuala Lumpur, her thin frame cloaked in teddy bear pajamas. The room is devoid of furniture, its blank white walls chipped and stained. Dangling from the ceiling is a knotted rope, designed to hold a hammock for any babies her husband forces her to bear.

"I want to go back home, but I can't," she says in a small voice barely above a murmur. "I feel trapped."

eteriorating conditions in Myanmar and in neighboring Bangladesh's refugee camps are driving scores of underage Rohingya girls to Malaysia for arranged marriages with Rohingya men who frequently abuse them, The Associated Press found in interviews with 12 young Rohingya brides who have arrived in Malaysia since 2022. The youngest was 13.

All the girls interviewed by the AP said they are held hostage by controlling husbands who rarely let them outside. Several said they were beaten and raped by traffickers and other men during the journey to Malaysia, and five said they were abused by their husbands. Half the girls are pregnant or already have babies, despite most saying they were not prepared for motherhood. When asked if they had protested their parents' decisions to marry them off, they appeared confused.

action. Siddharth Anand's action thriller *Pathaan* and Atlee's action thriller *Jawan* have a second common factor: Shah Rukh Khan. SRK's astonishing comeback, but in the image of an action star, has been the biggest story of 2023. Anil Sharma's period drama *Gadar 2* marked the return of Sunny Deol as Tara Singh, a character that became popular nationwide after the phenomenal success of the film's prequel *Gadar: Ek Prem Katha* (2001). *Gadar 2*'s incredible success proved that Tara Singh's appeal remained intact. *Animal*'s success is another evidence of Ranbir Kapoor's ability to take up challenging assignments and deliver. Not everyone has liked the film, which is not surprising, but the film is a major success.

Among these success stories, *Jawan* and *Pathaan* have grossed more than Rs 1,000 crore worldwide. *Gadar 2*, the biggest surprise of the year, has reportedly grossed around Rs 690 crore globally. *Animal* has crossed the Rs 600-crore mark already. Maneesh Sharma's action thriller *Tiger 3*, the third film of the *Tiger* series and fifth highest-grossing film, has fallen behind in the earnings race. Yet, it has reportedly grossed more than Rs 450 crore worldwide. *Tiger 3* is an important success for Salman Khan, although the film has not helped him reemerge as a competitor for SRK.

Has social media helped Bollywood deliver several great commercial outcomes in 2023? While trending hashtags such as #BoycottBollywood hurt certain Hindi films last year — although the extent of loss because of this phenomenon cannot be determined — the near-absence of such activity has helped the ailing industry in 2023. Potential moviegoers have rejected bad films, of course, while several other films have failed to appeal to the average viewer and flopped. But, the industry has got what it needs: the return of the enthusiastic viewer who wants to see films that promise entertainment.

Moviegoers are looking forward to the release of four-time National Award-winning director Rajkumar Hirani's comedy-drama *Dunki*. A December 21 release also starring SRK, *Dunki* revolves around a group of friends, who decide to take an illegal route to go to London. The recently released trailer revealed trademark Hirani qualities such as humour, emotions and good music. *Dunki* will clash with Prashanth Neel's Telugu action drama *Salaar: Part 1 – Ceasefire*, a lavishly mounted action drama about a clash between good and bad in a fictional universe starring Prabhas alongside Prithviraj Sukumaran. Neel's KGF films had set the Hindi film box office on fire. However, taking on the highly anticipated Hirani-SRK combination in the market for Hindi films will be a different and difficult challenge for Neel and Prabhas. Countless moviegoers will gravitate to the theatres in the last weekend of December. That has two implications: great entertainment for the ticket-buying public and solid business for the industry.



Her Online Sex Life Was Exposed. She Lost Her Election. Now She's Speaking Out.

By ALEXANDER BURNS

It is not often that a state legislative campaign in an off-season election seizes the national spotlight. But that is what happened in September, when the Washington Post revealed that a promising Virginia Democrat, Susanna Gibson, had previously been captured in a recorded video performing sex acts online with her husband.

Gibson, a 40-year-old nurse practitioner, was running in one of the most competitive elections in the state — a race for a Richmond-area seat in the House of Delegates that had the potential to determine whether Democrats or Republicans would control the chamber. There was unusual national interest in Virginia's elections because the Republican governor, Glenn Youngkin, had staked his credibility as a national political figure in part on his ability to take full control of state government. The video — a recording of an explicit livestream that the Post said had been uploaded elsewhere on the internet — had been shared by a Republican political operative, according to the paper. The Post's report upended Gibson's life, to say nothing of her candidacy.

"I'm fundamentally changed as a human having gone through something like that," she said in an interview.

The episode also detonated a debate in Virginia and beyond about digital and sexual privacy in 21st-century politics. In a possible reflection of shifting social norms, Gibson nearly won the race anyway — she lost by less than 1,000 votes and has not ruled out a return to electoral politics in the future. (Despite losing Gibson's race, Democrats still took full control of the Virginia State Legislature.)

To explore the difficult social and legal questions that churned through Virginia politics, POLITICO Magazine spoke with Gibson about her experience in the campaign — and the implications of that

race for a larger cohort of younger candidates who grew up in a world of increasingly blurry lines around their public, private and online lives. The last three months of a campaign are just a blur. Can you talk about what that

experience was like for you, having to do the home sprint of a campaign with this other issue on top of it?

My entire life was rocked on Sept. 11, when the article ran. It ran, implying that I performed sex acts online with my husband for money. It was really written based on this Dropbox file that self-described Republican operatives shopped around. They had found these videos on the dark web and shopped them around to various news outlets. I didn't have any idea that there were ever videos of me that had been made and uploaded to multiple sites. I think it was Sept. 7, I was in clinic seeing patients and a reporter reached out to my campaign, trying to get my phone number. That's how I found out. When you find out that there are sexually explicit videos of you online, especially by being contacted by national reporters — it is a feeling that I would not wish on my worst enemy.

It took me about two weeks to actually be able to get up and function. We had reporters, Daily Mail reporters especially, camped out in front of my house for two weeks. I had to leave — left the state, actually, for a few days, to get them to go away and leave my children and my family alone. After those two weeks, I was chomping at the bit to go out and start door-knocking again and meeting voters and campaigning.

On Sept. 7, when there was that first contact with the reporter — did you immediately know, "Oh, this is what they're talking about, how could they possibly know about this?" Or was it just sort of, "What on earth is this?" Can you narrate that moment?

So, they called and spoke with my media consultant. I was seeing patients in clinic and I got three phone calls in a row within a minute of each other. I always keep my phone with me in clinic just because my kids have severe food allergies. The first two, it was just coincidental and had nothing to do with this, but they were in the political world. The third call was my

media consultant. So, I picked up.

I was like, "Well, what is going on? Is everything okay, because I'm seeing a patient?" He said, "No, everything is not okay." And he told me that this particular reporter was looking for my phone number but wouldn't tell him what it was about. She had told him, "I don't want to tell you, you don't know what it's about. It's personal. She's a mother. I don't want to have to discuss this with you. I don't want to go after her." I really appreciated that respectfulness of her, by the way, but they went back and forth. Finally, I had to text and say: "Please tell him anything and everything, my full permission — I'm in clinic." But no, I had no idea. This was not what came to mind at all. I sat there racking my brain and then thought that it could be from this. But I still wasn't sure until the Washington Post reporter came two days later to a canvas launch — where I had my daughter, by the way. My manager intercepted her. He said, "Well, I don't even know what you have. You don't even know what that is." And she started texting with them. Can I ask you how your family and your friends responded to the Post story? We spent a few days fighting with them, two days or so, a day and a half — Sorry, "fighting with them" — meaning, the Post?

Fighting with the Post. I hired an amazing attorney who worked around the clock and wrote them several letters, essentially saying: To be clear, Ms. Gibson never acknowledged or consented to videos being recorded, this is illegal pornography because it is illegal to record someone in a state of undress without consent. It was a few days of feeling hopeful, then swung from hopeful to devastated. How can this be happening? How can a national news outlet decide to run a story about this? I think if I wasn't a candidate, the Post probably would have been appalled at the invasion of my privacy. But because I was a candidate, they decided that it was a political story, rather than an invasion of my privacy and potentially a crime.

You said, "invasion of your privacy." How much do you feel like people in general should be free to live really separate lives online?

So, this is interesting. I think this is going to continue to happen as millennials age into running for office. There was a 2014 study conducted by McAfee that said or showed that 90 percent of millennial women have taken nude photos at some point. This is something that is very

common, especially in the younger generations.

I think a big underlying factor that really needs to be addressed, and our society needs to start being educated on, is there is this devaluation and misunderstanding of consent, especially when we're talking about digital privacy. Content that is initially made in a consensual context, which is then distributed in a non-consensual context digitally, is a crime. Just because someone consented to share something in one particular context doesn't mean that it is or should be fair game for the whole world to see.

Choosing to share content, online or in whatever medium, with select people with the understanding that it will disappear and can only be seen by those present at the time — when we're talking live streaming, webcamming and Skype — that is a far cry from consenting for that content to be recorded and then broadly disseminated. And there is case law precedent confirming this. You referred before to the Post treating this as a story because you're a candidate — that their view, as you put it, was that it was not an invasion of privacy, it was a political story because you're a candidate. Separate and apart from what the legal questions involved are, how much do you feel like there ought to be a bigger barrier between what people do digitally and the way they are assessed as people in their non-digital lives?

How strongly I would have felt about this before this actually happened to me — who knows? I think I would probably feel the same way, but just not quite as strongly.

I think what people do in their private lives, digitally — if it is legal, it is consensual and has no bearing on their ability to do their jobs — I think there should be a barrier. I think that it is unethical to make people's private lives — especially their sexual private lives — public and part of how we think about them and their ability to do their jobs and make positive contributions to their communities. The part that strikes me as tricky is that there certainly are things that people do online that we do want to be able to assess in a political context or make part of the public record on that person, right? If it had to do with policy. Or if you had been writing racist rants on the internet or something, I don't think anybody would say, "Whoa, that's a protected private space" — right? I think defining that line is the hard part.