



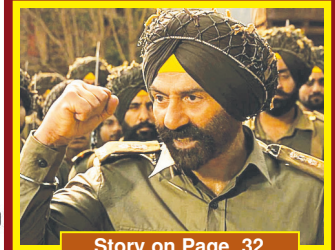
The South Asian



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Sunny Deol brings  
scale and sacrifice**



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# Eminent oncologist Dr Jatin Shah honored by The South Asian Times as its Person of the Year



New York: Dr Jatin Shah, the leading head and neck surgeon in the world, was felicitated as The South Asian Times - Person of the Year 2025 at a gala function at Crest Hollow Country Club here on January 9, 2026.

The gala was attended by who's who of the Indian American community and many distinguished professionals. Kamlesh Mehta, Chairman and Publisher of The South Asian Times, along with three Padma Awardees -- Padma Bhushan Sant Singh Chatwal, Padma Shri Dr Sudhir Parikh, Chairman of Parikh Worldwide Media, and Padma Shri Dr Dattatreya Nori, an eminent oncologist, presented the POY crystal plaque to Dr Shah. Dr Parikh, a family friend of Dr Shah, wished him more achievements and honors, good health and a long life. Dr Shah, who is 85 and completed 50 years of service at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center in New York last year, including over two decades as

Chief of Head and Neck Service, said in his acceptance speech, "I am honored and feel privileged to be chosen by The South Asian Times as the Person of the Year for 2025. Being recognized by your own - family, community or society - is a unique honor that is hard to come by, and even harder to achieve than any award or recognition from a professional or academic organization. For that, I am grateful to The South Asian Times. I will cherish this high honor for the rest of my life."

Dr Shah, who is world renowned for transforming the medical discipline in his specialty with research, innovations and fostering collaborations worldwide, was introduced by Dr Ashok Shaha, Attending Surgeon on the Head and Neck Service at Memorial Sloan Kettering for the past 35 years. Dr Jatin Shah was also felicitated by eminent doctor friends of his - Doctors J. Ganesh Bhat, Nitin and Leena Doshi, Shashi Shah, Narinder Kukar, and



Bhupi Patel. A video message from Nassau County Executive Bruce Blakeman congratulating Dr Shah and The South Asian Times was played at the event. The honorees of The South Asian Times - Person of the Year from previous years -- Chintu Patel (2017), Naveen Shah (2018), Ranju & Ravi Batra (2019), Ravishankar Bhooopapur (2020), Mohan Wanchoo (2021) and Mukund Padmanabhan (2024) -- spoke and congratulated Dr Jatin Shah.

The South Asian Times has been honoring a Person of the Year since 2010 with a special pull out section coinciding with the New Year edition. Mrs Nimmi Mehta, Kamlesh Mehta's wife, gave the welcome speech and felicitated Dr Ivana Shah, Jatin Shah's orthodontist wife, with a shawl and bouquet. The special edition of The South Asian Times recognizing and featuring Dr Jatin Shah as Person of the Year 2025 was unveiled on the occasion. Joining Kamlesh Mehta and Dr Shah for

the unveiling were Vishal Harsh, Deputy Consul General at the Indian Consulate in New York, Dr Ivana Shah, Nimmi Mehta, Parveen Chopra, Founding Editor of The South Asian Times and Founder of A Lotus In The Mud, and Jori Kohli, an entrepreneur.

The Dr Jatin Shah POY Special carries an intensive and extensive interview with him, as well as over 50 congratulatory messages from his colleagues at Memorial Sloan Kettering, eminent head and neck surgeons, his peers and former trainees as well as friends and family. They include Hollywood superstar Michael Douglas and Bollywood actor-director Rakesh Roshan. The program concluded with the cutting of the cake, where all the key people joined in to congratulate Drs Jatin and Ivana Shah.

**(Parveen Chopra, is Founding Editor of The South Asian Times and the founder of A Lotus In The Mud.com, the premier wellness and spirituality web magazine)**

## Stay vigilant, India cautions citizens in Israel amid rising Iran tensions

(Our Staff Reporter) : The Embassy of India in Israel on Thursday issued an advisory urging Indian nationals in the country to remain vigilant amid the prevailing security situation in the region. In its advisory, the embassy asked Indian citizens to strictly follow safety guidelines and protocols issued by the Israeli authorities and the Home Front Command. Indian nationals were also advised to avoid all non-essential travel to Israel until further notice. The embassy said that in case of any emergency, Indian citizens can contact its 24x7 helpline at +972-54-7520711 or +972-54-3278392, or write to [cons1.telaviv@mea.gov.in] In a related development, the Government of India has drawn up

contingency plans to evacuate stranded Indian nationals from Iran amid rising safety concerns due to ongoing unrest in the country. However, sources have clarified to India Today that the evacuation plan is not being executed immediately, following the latest assessment of the situation on the ground. Preparations remain in place to ensure a swift response if circumstances deteriorate further. Earlier, in a formal advisory, the Indian Embassy in Tehran urged students, pilgrims, businesspeople, and tourists to exit Iran using commercial flights or any other available transport options. "All Indian nationals in Iran are requested to also have their travel and immigration



documents, including passports and IDs, readily available with them. They are requested to contact the Indian Embassy for any assistance in this regard," the advisory read.



# PM Modi Celebrates Pongal: A Festival of Nature, Family, and Sustainability

Deeply Warming Festival: PM Modi Says Pongal Shows Way To Maintain Balance Between Nature, Family Prime Minister Narendra Modi recently remarked that the highlighted the significance of Pongal, the traditional harvest festival celebrated primarily in Tamil Nadu. During a speech addressing the occasion, he emphasized that Pongal embodies a harmonious relationship between nature and family values. The festival, characterized by rituals honoring agricultural prosperity, serves as a reminder of the importance of nurturing both environmental sustainability and familial bonds. PM Modi noted that festivals like Pongal are not only cultural

celebrations but also out that the festival serves as an



opportunities to reflect on one's responsibilities towards nature. He remarked that the festival encourages individuals and communities to appreciate the bounty of the Earth. By acknowledging this connection, he believes that society can foster a greater understanding of the need for ecological balance. Furthermore, the Prime Minister remarked on how Pongal brings families together, reinforcing social ties and collective values. He pointed

Modi, plays a crucial role in strengthening community cohesion and emotional connections. Furthermore, the Prime Minister remarked on how Pongal brings families together, reinforcing social ties and collective values. He pointed out that the festival serves as an occasion for family members to engage in shared traditions and create lasting memories. This familial aspect, according to Modi, plays a crucial role in strengthening community cohesion and emotional connections. In addition to cultural and familial dimensions, PM Modi underscored the role of Pongal in promoting

sustainable agricultural practices. By celebrating the harvest, the festival encourages agricultural innovation and respect for traditional farming methods. Through these practices, farmers can maintain a healthy relationship with their land and the environment. Overall, Prime Minister Modi's address serves to highlight the multifaceted significance of Pongal, illustrating how the festival is a microcosm of broader societal values. By fostering respect for nature and emphasizing the importance of family, festivals like Pongal can contribute to the pursuit of a balanced and sustainable future.

## Celebrating Pongal 2026: Embracing Gratitude, Abundance, and Togetherness in South Indian Traditions

Pongal 2026 is poised to be a significant celebration marked by themes of gratitude, abundance, and new beginnings. This festival, deeply rooted in the agricultural traditions of South India, pays homage to the Sun and the harvest, signifying the importance of these

in the joy of the season. In addition to the cooking, vibrant kolams, intricate patterns created with colored rice flour, adorn the thresholds of homes during this festive period. These artistic expressions serve as an invitation for prosperity and joy, welcoming guests and deities alike. The



creation of kolams is not only a decorative practice but also a way to engage communities in creative expression. As Pongal approaches, a flurry of best wishes and greetings circulate among families, friends, and communities. These messages often convey heartfelt sentiments of appreciation and hope, reinforcing connections among loved

elements in sustaining life and culture. As communities gather to honor these traditions, a sense of joy and togetherness permeates the atmosphere. The rituals associated with Pongal include the preparation of sweet Pongal, a dish made from newly harvested rice, jaggery, and milk. This sweet treat symbolizes the sweetness of life and the blessings of a bountiful harvest. Families often come together to partake in these culinary traditions, reinforcing bonds and sharing

ones.

The sharing of wishes is seen as an essential part of the festival, further enhancing the spirit of unity and celebration. Overall, Pongal 2026 represents an opportunity for individuals and families to reflect on their blessings and express gratitude for the abundance in their lives. As the celebration unfolds, the emphasis on togetherness, tradition, and joy will undoubtedly resonate, making it a memorable occasion for all involved.

## Driver Escalates Public Dispute to Violence: Sword Attack on Vehicle Shocks Community

A public altercation recently escalated dramatically when one of the involved drivers drew a sword during a dispute. The incident, which occurred in a busy area, has garnered considerable attention due to the violent nature of the confrontation. Witnesses observed as the driver attacked the other vehicle, shattering its windows while onlookers watched in shock. The circumstances leading up to the clash remain unclear, but it is evident that tensions were high

regarding the altercation, the community is left to grapple with the implications of such violence in public spaces. This incident serves as a stark reminder of the unforeseen consequences that

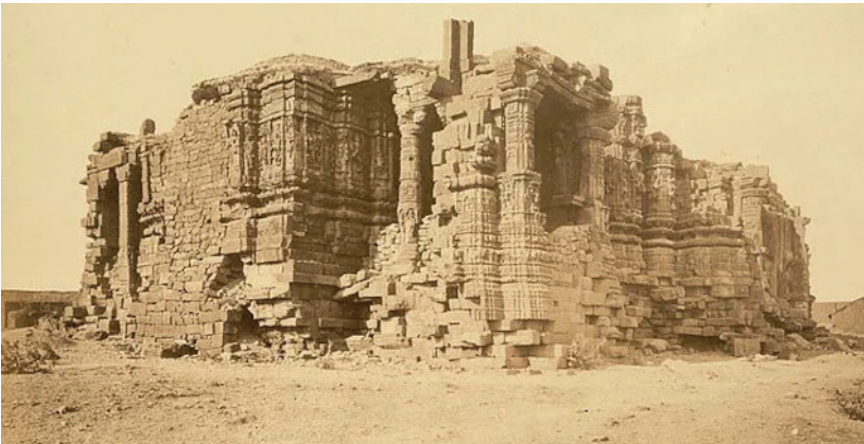


between the two parties involved. Both vehicles appeared to be engaged in a heated dispute, which quickly took a violent turn. The public nature of the incident has raised concerns about safety and the potential for similar events in the future. Local law enforcement arrived at the scene shortly after the attack was initiated. Responding officers assessed the situation and worked to bring the altercation under control. The presence of law enforcement underscored the seriousness of the incident and the potential threat posed to public safety. As investigators continue to gather information

can arise from seemingly routine interactions among drivers. The community is left questioning how such a situation could escalate to this level. Authorities are expected to release further information as the investigation progresses.

The incident raises important questions about conflict resolution and the use of weapons in public settings, prompting discussions among residents about safety measures in their neighborhoods. The aftermath of this altercation will likely inform future protocols to prevent similar incidents in the future.

# Revenge of the Desert: How Mahmud Ghazni nearly fell after the Somnath plunder



The sun beat down like Allah's wrath, turning the Thar Desert into a furnace of white salt and shimmering mirages. Sultan Mahmud of Ghazni gripped his reins, remains of his prized Somnath idol strapped to his saddle amid heaps of gold and jewels looted from Gujarat's greatest temple. January 1026 CE had dawned with victory: 50,000 warriors had stormed the shrine, shattering idols and slaying defenders. But now, on this cursed return through the Rann of Kutch and Thar's dunes, his army faced decimation. The curse of the desert was waiting.

## SHADOWS OF GLORY

In 962, Alptigin, Turkish mamluk slave of the crumbling Samanids, seized the town after Bukhara's court intrigue. His successor, Sabuktigin (bought as a boy from Turkic nomads) rose in 977, hammering Hindu Shahis at Laghman and Peshawar in Punjab. Sabuktigin's realm swelled to the Kabul River. His death in 997 left sons squabbling, but Mahmud crushed Ismail, claiming sultanate in 998. Raids expanded the empire and its wealth. Devastating strikes into India followed: Multan crushed (1005), Thanesar temples razed (1014), Kannauj plundered (1019). By 1025, Mahmud had expanded his father's Mamluk empire into a behemoth, and assumed the title of Sultan. Under him, the dynasty reached its zenith, stretching from the Oxus River to the Indus Valley and deep into western Iran.

## THE JEWEL IN THE DESERT

According to Indian legends, Somnath was born from the curse of Prajapati Daksha to his

son-in-law Moon, and the boon of Lord Shiva. Perched on the forehead of the Arabian Sea near Patan, the shrine evolved into India's biggest centre of pilgrimage and wealth. (KM Munshi: Jai Somnath). Since 1000 AD, it was on Mahmud's radar. One day a messenger burst into Mahmud's tent. "My Sultan," he gasped, "Somnath... the temple holds treasures beyond imagination. Gold idols the size of men. Jewels that could please the Caliphate." Mahmud's dark eyes gleamed with that peculiar mixture of religious fervor and calculated avarice that had made him the terror of India for twenty-five years. Since 1000, he had launched sixteen raids into the subcontinent. Each had returned richer than the last. How well defended?" His voice was silk over steel. "The temple sits on the Arabian Sea coast. It is isolated, far from any major kingdom's direct support." Court historians scratched notes on parchment. They would later write the Sultan's decision took mere seconds. It was November 1025. Mahmud couldn't know that this raid, his most ambitious, his most successful, would nearly destroy everything he had built.

## THE STORM

The assault on Somnath came in January 1026, after a grinding march through hostile territory. Mahmud's 50,000 warriors surrounded the temple complex like a swarm of bees. The defenders fought with desperate courage. For two days, Rajput warriors threw themselves against Ghaznavid shields, defending their sacred shrine with suicidal valor. But on the third day, Mahmud's siege towers reached the walls. What followed

was massacre: defenders slaughtered, priests executed at their altars, pilgrims cut down as they fled. The famous Somnath lingam, a black stone idol said to hold divine power, was smashed. Mahmud himself supposedly struck the first blow, the fragments were to be distributed to be trampled in mosque doorways across his empire. But the real prize lay in the temple vaults. Thousands of boxes of gold and silver, jewels, precious stones, elephant tusks, silks. The accumulated wealth of centuries of pilgrimage. They loaded camels, horses, elephants and yet there was a lot they could not carry. Victory wine flowed that night. Mahmud's generals celebrated, already spending their shares. Mahmud was drunk on triumph and wine. He decided to return through the Rann of Kutch and the Thar. Direct to Sindh, then home. He knew Raja Bhima (1022-1064), the Chalukya ruler of Gujarat, was gathering allies, and the normal routes would be blocked.

## INTO HELL

The first week was deceptively easy. The Rann of Kutch in January, a sea of vast shimmering white salt, posed challenges but nothing the army couldn't handle. They moved fast, covering ground, treasure secure, eyes scanning geography. Then the sun changed. And the Thar emerged like death's inviting embrace. The army pressed deeper into the wasteland, following ancient caravan routes. A few days later the first well was dry. The second well was the same. And the third. The ones adjoining it were poisoned. By the fifteenth day, men were dying. They collapsed in the merciless

sun, armor cooking them alive. Officers gave orders to keep moving, stopping meant death for everyone. By the twentieth day, it was a rout. The treasure became a curse. The survivors counted bodies each morning now. Fifteen thousand lost. Then eighteen thousand. The numbers climbed with each daybreak. Jat raiders appeared like ghosts from the dunes. They struck in small bands, but in the army's weakened state they were deadly. Arrows from nowhere. Attacks at dawn and dusk. This was revenge for decades of Ghaznavid raids, pure and simple.

## THE PRICE OF VICTORY

The Indus River at the Sindh border appeared like paradise. Men wept openly, officers abandoned discipline as the soldiers threw themselves into the water. Mahmud sat on the bank and counted what remained of his army. Of the 50,000 who had marched from Somnath in triumph, nearly 30,000 were dead or lost. More than half his force. The elite cavalry that had terrorised

India for a generation was gutted. History would later record that Mahmud never fully recovered from the desert crossing (though he returned in 1027 to punish the Jat raiders). Something broke in the Sultan during those nightmare weeks. He never raided deep into India again. The Punjab sufficed. The desert had taught him the limits of ambition. But, the end of his Empire and Dynasty was still a few years away. Coming Up Next...

## THE END OF GHAZNI

With his army depleted and his health failing, Mahmud faces a new threat from the north: the rising Seljuk Turks. Can the Sword of Islam protect his borders when his own sons begin to turn against each other? (The primary source of the desert rout following the plunder of Somnath is Ibn al-Athir, an Arab historian. While he wrote roughly 150–200 years after the event, he remains the most cited authority for the specific details of Mahmud's disastrous retreat.)

By Sandipan Sharma

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# What the conservative think tank wars have to do with you



Generally speaking, nobody outside of Washington, D.C., brunch spots cares very much what happens at think tanks. But recent upheavals at the Heritage Foundation are not only making news, they are potentially framing what the Republican Party will look like after President Trump leaves office.

The current kerfuffle at Heritage, the nation's leading conservative think tank, began on Oct. 30, when its president, Kevin Roberts, gave a speech defending Tucker Carlson for interviewing a snarky young Holocaust denier.

"The Heritage Foundation didn't become the intellectual backbone of the conservative movement by canceling our own people or policing the consciences of Christians, and we won't start doing that now," Roberts said.

A pitter-patter of outraged resignations came almost immediately, even after Roberts apologized for his remarks, but last week, almost two months later, nearly an entire division of Heritage's legal and economic

experts jumped ship to former Vice President Mike Pence's Advancing American Freedom (AAF).

The significant question in all of this is whether Roberts playing footsie with antisemites is the real or only reason why so many top experts joined the exodus to Pence's outfit, and there is some reason to be dubious.

Take for example Trump's zealous use of tariffs in international trade. This kind of protectionism is constitutionally anathema to exactly the type of conservative economist who prowled the halls of Heritage, but the think tank itself was standing by the president's policies.

Add to this that Heritage seems to be leaning heavily into Vice President JD Vance's 2028 presidential ambitions, in fact Roberts' original video may have been intended for the veep who is close with Carlson and has made fighting globalism and saving small industrial towns the centerpiece of his national message.

The problem is that most of the longtime Heritage

economists really like globalism and think saving 'Nowhere, Ohio' from oblivion is a pipe dream. Now, they truly have no seat at the table, either at Heritage or in the Trump administration.

Such tensions also exist in foreign policy and immigration, and a cynic might suggest that the Heritage bleedout is just another example of conservatives with strong ideological differences from Trump deciding it's no longer working to cozy up to him, and taking whatever current moral outrage is available as an offramp.

This is exactly what Pence did after the Capitol riots of Jan. 6, 2021, leading him to found AAF, which, by the way, is as anti-tariffs as the day is long.

In this fight for the soul of the Republican Party and conservative movement, both Heritage and AAF are redefining what a think tank is and what it does, in important ways.

Traditionally, wealthy donors would give money to guys with good hair to get elected and also fund bald guys at think tanks, who were rarely seen or heard

from, to produce the actual policy. But voters have seen through this, leading the think tanks to more direct outreach to the public.

In the 2024 election, Heritage's 'Project 2025' was a headline story for months, something completely unprecedented in the history of presidential politics for a think tank. Today, through moves such as hiring Moms for Liberty co-founder Tiffany Justice, Heritage is committing to more populism and activism and less back-room algebra.

AAF is starting to play this game, too. The think tank put out a satirical X post comparing the flood of Heritage staffers coming their way to a college football team dominating in the transfer portal, another hint that more than moral outrage was at play here. The headwind that AAF is likely to run into with conservative voters in their anti-populism efforts is that populism is popular, and globalism, along with many other core tenets of the pre-Trump GOP, isn't. The best chance for AAF, and it's not a bad one, is to focus on lowering

prices by lowering tariffs. But a conservative think tank yelling that prices are too high while the GOP holds the White House and Congress is a nightmare for Republican midterm hopes.

The more vital question is what American voters want more: deeper discounts on foreign goods from China or functional communities where they can raise their families? For AAF to succeed, it must address the latter, not just the former.

In Vance's, and increasingly Heritage's, vision of America, our small industrial towns see a revival through tariffs and foreign investment. In AAF's vision, those towns may continue to wither, but Americans are free to move to where the jobs and abundance are. In Vance's, and increasingly Heritage's, vision of America, our small industrial towns see a revival through tariffs and foreign investment. In AAF's vision, those towns may continue to wither, but Americans are free to move to where the jobs and abundance are.

By **DAVID MARCUS**



# Minneapolis Fraud Sparks Revolt Against Welfare Criminals, Pols

## The Return of the King: Is America the Sole Superpower Again?

Why pay taxes when so much of your hard-earned money goes to fraudsters instead of doing good? Government bureaucrats and elected politicians, mostly Democrats, scream in outrage when any effort is made to crack down on fraud by requiring proof of where the money is actually going. They wring their hands that safeguards will delay the funds and warn of children going hungry or families in need. Meanwhile, all of us taxpayers, saddled with paying for the scammers, are routinely ignored.

### Until now.

The enormity of the Minneapolis welfare rip-off is sparking a nationwide rebellion against welfare criminals and the politicians who tolerate them. The Minneapolis fraud epidemic, which has gone on since 2014, robbed taxpayers of hundreds of millions of dollars supposed to support subsidized day care, autism services and "Feeding our Future" meals for poor. Gov. Tim Walz, D-Minn., has been forced to give up his bid for reelection. But more importantly, Gov. Gavin Newsom, D-Calif., and Gov. Kathy Hochul, D-N.Y., are on the hot seat to explain the even bigger taxpayer rip-offs they have allowed to go on in their states. And more state politicians will be feeling the heat. U.S. Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent says a nauseating 10% of the federal budget is spent on fraud. Some politicians benefit directly, but many more are too cowardly to call it out, fearing accusations of racism or cruelty to the poor. So far, fraud-friendly Govs. Hochul and Newsom have offered only bluster and a lawsuit against the Trump administration for trying to rout out the cheating. On Dec. 30, 2025, the Trump administration announced that in view of the Minnesota fraud scandal, all states would have to provide enrollment and attendance data, a receipt for expenditures or other photographic evidence before getting federal payments to support child care programs. The administration calls it the "Defend the Spend" program. Many states complied right away. Missouri, for example, announced it provided "detailed justification" for payments to cover 2,000 child care providers in the state. But deep-blue states resisted. On Jan. 6, the Trump administration froze child care and family cash assistance to five states: New York, California, Illinois, Colorado and Minnesota — citing concerns about widespread illegal use of taxpayer money. Here's the biggest laugh. Hochul responded to the freeze by insisting there's no evidence of fraud in New York and joining with the four other states to sue. "We'll be having a litigation strategy," she said. Sorry, Governor, but New York is likely the

welfare fraud capital of the nation -- a major reason New Yorkers are taxed to death. The Consumer Directed Personal Assistance Program is a notorious example. Start with a practical idea — letting friends and relatives get paid to provide care for the sick. With inadequate oversight, it has grown over 10 years into what Hochul herself admits is "one of the most abused programs in the history of New York." People are billing the state for caring for the dead, or for multiple people with different addresses all at the same time — cashing in for as much as \$200,000 a year.

In 2025, a staggering 623,000 people claimed to be home health and personal assistants, making it by far the biggest occupation in the state, far outstripping retail salespersons, nurses or cashiers and waitresses. New York state taxpayers are paying for this fraud, and so are federal taxpayers, because CDPAP is supported by Medicaid. But Hochul would rather sue the Trump administration than clean up the cheating.

On Friday, a federal judge blocked Trump's freeze for 14 days. But the merits of the case are with Trump. The federal government has responsibility to make sure funds are used honestly. That is also why Republicans in the U.S. Senate must hold the line against the push to provide what Sen.

Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., calls a "clean" three-year extension of the COVID-19-era enhanced subsidies for Obamacare plans. There is nothing "clean" about it. Obamacare is filled with fraud. Allowing the dirty tricks to continue, at huge cost to taxpayers, for another three years is unacceptable. Every year Democrats applaud expanded enrollment in the ACA, ignoring the fact that much of it is fraudulent.

The Government Accountability Office (GAO), a nonpartisan watchdog agency, found that people using fake identities to sign up for subsidized health insurance get through every time. Fraudsters use stolen Social Security numbers — in one case to sign up for 71 policies in a single year. Brokers and insurance agents enroll people without their knowledge and keep the commissions. It's been going on for over a decade. The bureaucrats operating Obamacare couldn't care less about the taxpayers footing the bill. Do Democrats care, or are they now the party of fraudsters instead of the taxpayers? This week's vote in the U.S. Senate will tell. It's long past time to crack down on fraud.

By Alex Miller Fox News

The 2020s were supposed to be the "Chinese Century," a slow but inevitable eclipse of American hegemony by the rising dragon of the East. Yet, halfway through the decade, the global landscape looks startlingly different. While China remains a formidable economic presence, the narrative of inevitable decline in Washington has been replaced by a jarring, aggressive resurgence. With the return of Donald Trump to the White House, the world isn't just witnessing "America First"—it is witnessing a deliberate, often chaotic, push toward a new unipolar moment.

### The Contender That Stalled

For decades, China's trajectory seemed linear. It dominated global manufacturing, secured rare earth elements, and expanded its "Belt and Road" initiative across the Global South. But by 2025, the cracks began to widen. The Chinese economy, once an unstoppable engine, has been slowed by internal debt, a demographic cliff, and—most significantly—a relentless American economic offensive. The Trump administration's willingness to weaponize the U.S. dollar, impose sweeping tariffs (often exceeding 60% on Chinese goods), and aggressively decouple high-tech supply chains has forced Beijing into a defensive crouch. China's once-menacing posture in the South China Sea has been met with a "Donroe Doctrine"—a Trumpian corollary to the Monroe Doctrine—that asserts American dominance in the Western Hemisphere and demands that allies in the Indo-Pacific pay for their own defense or face abandonment.

### The Unilateral King

The hallmark of this new era is not "leadership" in the traditional sense, but unilateralism. Under Trump, the

United States has largely discarded the "liberal international order."

By withdrawing from international organizations and treating alliances as protection rackets, the U.S. has freed itself from the constraints of consensus. As noted by recent analyses in the Jerusalem Post and Brookings, Trump wields power with a "lighter trigger" on military force and a heavier hand on economic coercion.

The recent military operation in Venezuela to apprehend Nicolás Maduro served as a visceral demonstration of this: a superpower acting without UN mandates or coalition approval, simply because it had the capability and the will.

This "illiberal hegemony" has left the world with one "king" who uses tariffs as a primary tool of statecraft. A New Unipolarity? Critics argue that this approach is hollow. They point to the loss of "soft power" and the alienation of long-standing allies.

They are right: the U.S. is no longer the "shining city on a hill" that leads by example. Instead, it is the giant in the room that no one can afford to ignore. However, in the cold logic of geopolitics, power is often defined by the ability to say "no" and make it stick. Economically: The U.S. remains the gatekeeper of the global financial system. Technologically: Recent pushes in AI and quantum computing have reclaimed ground many thought was lost to China. Militarily: Despite isolationist rhetoric, the U.S. has modernized its nuclear arsenal and demonstrated a willingness to project force unilaterally. China could have been a contender, but its "peaceful rise" required a predictable, rule-abiding America to exploit. In a world of transactional chaos and raw power projection, the U.S. has found a new, albeit uglier, lease on life as the sole superpower.

(By TSAI Editorial Team)

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# Can Sergio Gor Resuscitate India-US Ties?



The US-India relationship has been severely damaged. This is my opinion. I do not know what the current leadership in India thinks, but as I observe the shift in India's geopolitical strategy, I fear that the US is no longer central to India's future growth as a significant regional power in Asia. This is a tragedy. The two nations, to reiterate, share long-standing and growing synergies.

Now the spark is gone. India has lost the trust it had in the credibility and friendship of the US. It will take another 30 years to rebuild this trust, if at all.

## What can be done?

First, respect. India needs to be respected and cannot be bullied, lectured, arm-twisted,

and heckled as we have seen recently by some of the leadership in the US.

Second, engagement. India must be re-engaged with transparency, consideration, empathy, and dialogue. Unilateral actions must be avoided.

Third, accept past errors and address the irritants.

In more concrete terms, the 50% tariff on selected Indian goods must be immediately and unilaterally abolished, recognised as an error, and India must be compensated for the losses incurred due to these tariffs.

A sincere apology or a gesture of friendship might help along the way. Navarro must be dismissed for cause. I do not expect that to happen, but it must. It is necessary.

Pakistan needs to be addressed. All future interferences in Indian elections must end once and for all. Baluchistan must be recognised as a nation.

India must be empowered to grow as the dominant power in the Indian Ocean to protect the shipping lanes and control the choke points. Economically and technologically, India's growth is beneficial for the entire global economy and peace. This must be a central tenet in geopolitics and must be adhered to consistently by the US.

The pending trade pact between the US and India must be immediately agreed upon, signed, and then expanded and strengthened.

All this might be a begin-

ning, albeit a small one. The patient is intubated in the Intensive Care Unit. Its vitals are indicative of the decline of the most promising relationship between two nations for the next century.

Can Sergio Gor save this relationship by leveraging his connection with President Trump? It might be too little, too late. Yet, a resuscitation must be attempted. For the US, despite its errors and limitations, is still a nation built on great ideals and is a platform for freedom and global security. It must not fail. One remedy for its decline would be a strong, healthy, and dynamic relationship with India. Will anyone in the echelons of power heed this prescription from a medical doctor? Likely not. But perhaps ordinary

Americans and Indians can still understand this and act on their own to give a final dose of intravenous fluids to this patient. What no politician can do, the lay people may accomplish.

That is my only hope. Otherwise, the world will become a more dangerous place. America will continue its decline, Venezuela or Greenland notwithstanding. India will continue to grow, albeit slowly, to its rightful place in world affairs.

That is my only hope. Otherwise, the world will become a more dangerous place. America will continue its decline, Venezuela or Greenland notwithstanding. India will continue to grow, albeit slowly, to its rightful place in world affairs.

**Pariksit Singh**



# What Trump May Be Getting Dangerously Wrong About Iran

The comment by India's Foreign Secretary, Vikram Misri, on Monday, that the government is watching the developments in Iran closely, appears to be an understatement. As the unrest threatens the 47-year-old Islamic regime's survival, it also has the potential of creating a regional crisis, one that could seriously harm India's economic and strategic interests.

The protests, which began two weeks ago in Tehran, have already spread to more than 100 cities in all of Iran's 31 provinces. Iran's regime, led by the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, has done what it has done in the past, trying to crush the unrest with brutal force. More than 600 demonstrators have already been killed, according to human rights groups, which have warned that the actual death toll could be far higher because of a nationwide internet blackout.

Iran has seen many anti-government protests since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, which deposed Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi. But the latest protests appear to be the most significant challenge to the regime. They have already taken more lives than the last one in 2022, which followed the death in custody of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini over hijab enforcement, killing 550 people across the country. That was a feminist-centred protest. The latest one, which has spread more quickly nationwide, has attracted young men, women and even the elderly.

## Is This An Uprising?

This protest is also significant due to the participation of traders, their first such involvement since the 1979 revolution. In fact, they started these demonstrations in Tehran on December 28, when the Iranian currency, the rial, collapsed against the dollar, and later attracted other sections of society. But it's still early to call it a mass uprising as there are no signs yet of a regime collapse, despite some reports of defections from the security forces.

After years of Western sanctions, ordinary Iranians' lives had already become miserable. Things worsened after the conflict last summer with Israel, when the US also joined and bombed Iran. Last month, the country's inflation exceeded 50%. So, there was enough ground for sparking unrest.

Ayatollah Khamenei has accused foreign powers of orchestrating the unrest, primarily the United States and Israel, but the scale of unrest suggests the protesters' anger is directed against the government. Slogans have been heard



against the Islamic regime, which is rare in Iran. The country's former crown prince, Reza Pahlavi, who is in exile in the United States, has been encouraging street protests for some time, but one can't dispute his Iranian heritage.

## US Military Action May Not Help

Donald Trump is weighing his military options. Soon after the protests began, he warned Iranian authorities that he would take military action if they started killing demonstrators. He has repeated his threat several times in the past few days, but has yet to order any military strikes despite the deaths of hundreds of Iranians. For a leader who is known to opt for military solutions without hesitation and, only 10 days ago, raided Venezuela and seized its leader, Nicolas Maduro, this may look surprising. Even so, Trump has reasons to be careful. Iran is not Venezuela. It is nearly as big as Western Europe and remains a military power, despite being degraded by the Israeli and the US military action last year. One must also remember that Iran's retaliatory strikes on Israel last year forced the Jewish state to agree to a ceasefire, something it wasn't used to in the case of its other enemies, like Hamas or Hezbollah. Also, the US military had been preparing to invade Venezuela and kidnap Maduro for months. Events in Iran have moved much faster for the US military to make similar preparations.

## Trump's Options

Trump must also have been reminded by his advisors of

America's ill-fated 1980 military operation Eagle Claw, in which the US attempted to rescue American diplomats held in Tehran after the Islamic revolution. This doesn't mean that Trump will not order military strikes. But he has to listen

to his commanders and advisors about their timing, targets and fallout. Despite many people in Iran loathing the Islamic Regime, they would not like to be invaded by Israel or its main backer, the United States. Last summer's US strikes only inspired patriotic fervour in Iran. Ignoring Israel's request, Trump avoided extending military action to topple the regime. In this context, one should look at Monday's statement by the White House press secretary, Karoline Leavitt, who said that airstrikes were "one of the many, many options that are on the table", but that "diplomacy is always the first option for the president". Around the same time, Trump warned that the US would impose a tariff of 25% on "any and all business" done with the United States by countries that are also engaged in commerce with Iran.

## The Power of the Revolutionary Guards

Perhaps the most important factor that may save the Islamic regime is the all-powerful Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). It was formed by the regime's founder, Ayatollah Khomeini, soon after he returned home from exile in Paris in February 1979, although he had started recruiting its members in France earlier. The IRGC's initial aim was to disarm the protesters who took part in the revolution and protect the regime against any potential US attack and coups. Under official patronage, this organisation gradually became the most powerful personal army of the Ayatollahs, parallel to Iran's military forces. They

even have a unit dealing with foreign assignments called 'Quds Force', which helped create Iran's proxies: Hezbollah in Lebanon and Houthis in Yemen.

The IRGC has nearly 200,000 armed members with its own navy and air force. Successive governments in Iran, with instructions from the Ayatollahs, have also allowed it to be part of the country's economic institutions, like Pakistan's military. As protectors of the Islamic Revolution, their own survival depends on the existence of the country's Islamic regime. So they won't let it go without a bloody fight. Personnel of the security forces who have shot and killed protesters in the past two weeks are likely to be members of the IRGC. Monday's pro-regime rallies couldn't have been organised without the active help and participation of this force. Any Western military intervention will naturally target the IRGC, as Israel did last year during its war with Iran.

## Big Challenge for India

The latest unrest in Iran has come at a difficult time for India. Unlike Venezuela, Iran is close to India and almost its neighbour. It has also been an important trading partner for India. Last financial year, India exported goods worth GBP 1.24 bn to Iran and imported just over a third of that amount. We recently resumed buying oil from Iran after having to reduce Russian oil imports due to US pressure. Trump's latest tariff threat will put that in jeopardy. If there are US military strikes, Iran could carry out its threat to close the Strait of Hormuz, a vital artery for global crude oil. This will hit India hard as more than half of our oil and gas comes via this route. A prolonged conflict will threaten India's energy security, as our economy is dependent on those imports.

## Chabahar Port and Economic Corridors

India has also invested heavily in developing Iran's Chabahar Port as part of its efforts to set up trade links with Afghanistan and Central Asia. If Iran's regime falls or even if the unrest continues for long, that project will remain at least in limbo. The same can be said for the International North-South Transit Corridor to link

New Delhi to Moscow via Iran and Azerbaijan, and the even more ambitious India-Middle East Economic Corridor, designed to connect India with the Gulf, Israel and the European Union - announced at the G20 summit in New Delhi in 2023. The Iranian unrest also has strategic implications for India. Days before Trump ordered air strikes on Iran last summer, Pakistan's Army Chief, Asim Munir, was invited to the White House and briefed Trump about Iran. This time, he may even offer logistics support for any US military action against Iran, to stay in the good books of Trump and seek his help in buying American arms in return. If the Islamic regime falls in Iran, it will have wider implications. There could be days or even months of civil war and uncertainty because there is no clear alternative to the current regime. Reza Pahlavi wants to return home and lead a transitional government, but he has little support and is seen as close to Israel. It's important to note that President Trump has not even given him an appointment to discuss his ideas. Apparently, Trump doesn't rate Pahlavi that highly. We may be looking at a long period of instability in the Middle East, which could also give rise to anti-government movements in other Gulf countries. That will hit their oil and gas sectors with repercussions far beyond their borders. Millions of Indians live and work in these countries. Such political upheaval will bring other problems for India. The fear of instability in the Middle East and its potential damage to the global economy may also explain Trump's caution in considering military action to help Iran's protesters. Trump doesn't care about other people's freedom or democracy; he only listens to his instincts and looks after his own interests. He showed that in Venezuela by ignoring the Nobel Prize winner and the country's popular opposition leader, Maria Corina Machado, in favour of Maduro's former deputy. If Iran's protesters succeed in bringing about change, Trump, of course, will be the first to take credit.

**Naresh Kaushik**

# Iranians Determined to Regain Liberty, They May Well Succeed

Iran has been convulsed with popular revolts since the 1979 overthrow of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, as the Iranian people realized their drastic mistake in replacing a monarchy with a brutal theocratic dictatorship.

It's now been 47 years since the Ayatollah Khomeini flew back to Tehran to impose his Velayat-e Faqih vision for governance that flung a modern, Westward-looking population backward to the 7th century.

What followed has been a sequence of popular uprisings: the 2009 Green Movement, fuel protests in 2019, and the women-led hijab protests of the Women, Life, Freedom that began with the bludgeoning murder in police custody of Mahsa Amini in 2022.

In between each of these major revolts has been nearly continuous defiance of the mullahs' regime by courageous Resistance Forces, led by young men and women of Iran who refuse to surrender their dreams of freedom for their country.

The courage of the Iranian people, time after time, to rise up against the savage repression of the Basij and Pasdaran units of the regime's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), has been incredible.

Until now, until this time, each uprising was put down with sheer terror, killing, and torture.

But this time, after Israel's Operation Rising Lion and the American Operation Midnight Hammer severely degraded Iran's nuclear weapons and ballistic missile capabilities in June 2025, and in the face of unrelenting sanctions pressure, the regime is much weakened.

That international pressure from abroad has only compounded the effects of decades of regime corruption, incompetence, and resource diversion to its nuclear program that has devastated Iran's water and electricity supply and drastically reduced the value of its national currency to the point that the Tehran's rule over its people is in its most debilitated state since the 1979 revolution.

The likelihood that this regime can long survive in the



face of these factors combined with the determination of the Iranian people to be done with the theocratic rule of ayatollahs and their IRGC enforcers shrinks by the day.

The crowds in streets shout, "Death to the Dictator!" and "Death to Khamenei!"

They march in the millions now, standing steadfast even in the face of the regime's desperate resort to shoot live fire into unarmed gatherings.

Protests now are reported in virtually all the 31 Iranian provinces amid reports also of protesters setting fire to government buildings and attacking prisons to free those held inside.

In response, Tehran has cut off internet and other communications across Iran in a vain attempt to block people from organizing or getting information and videos out to the world that would show the scale of the protests or the brutality of the regime's crackdown. Tesla Founder and former DOGE (Dept. of Govt.

Efficiency) chief Elon Musk has stepped in to provide Star Link connectivity to the Iranian people, thus ensuring word about developments is made available to the outside world.

Perhaps most importantly, President Trump has warned the Iranian regime that if it continues to kill unarmed protesters, he will "rescue" them. He's also promised on his Truth Social platform to step in and come to the aid of the Iranian people (although it's not certain what form such help might take). And even though some Iranians are chanting for the return to Iran of Reza Pahlavi, son of the last Shah who has not been back to Iran since he was 17 but instead made a successful business career in the United States since 1979, others are heard to insist "No to mullahs, no to Shah!" and instead are calling for a democratic republic in Iran.

For his part, the Crown Prince has used social media to call the people into the streets and ask President

Trump to "intervene to help the people of Iran." Pahlavi has also declared he is "prepared to return to the homeland so that at the time of our national revolution's victory, I can be beside you, the great nation of Iran."

None of Iran's opposition groups, however, has provided a policy blueprint for a future after the Islamic Republic has fallen except for the National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI). Under the leadership of Maryam Rajavi, the NCRI's President Elect, the NCRI first published in 2006 a 10-Point Plan that calls for a pluralistic democratic republic in Iran based on separation of religion and state, universal suffrage and gender equality, abolition of the death penalty, equality of representation for ethnic minorities, an end to Iran's nuclear ambitions.

The plan additionally calls for freedom of speech, press, and assembly, an independent judiciary, and more that

echoes our own U.S. Bill of Rights.

This 10-Point Plan further envisions a 6-month transition period following the collapse of the current regime during which a National Constituent and Legislative Assembly would be elected by free and fair popular elections. With that election, the provisional 6-month provisional government would hand over its resignation to the Assembly and the people of Iran. Many challenges lie ahead for Iran and its people.

A desperate regime is now fighting to hang onto power even as the whereabouts of some 400 kilograms of missing enriched uranium remain unknown. Opposition groups remain divided. Options for flight destinations for regime figures are dwindling. What is certain, though, is that the Iranian people are determined to take back their liberty from decades of repression — and that this time, it looks increasingly likely that they will succeed.

**Clare M. Lopez**



# Stop Pretending Colleges Are Nonprofits



A recent story from the Chicago Tribune jumped off the page when I read it.

Northwestern University is finishing up the construction of a new \$800 million football stadium. This is supposedly a nonprofit "educational" entity.

Northwestern — an "institution of higher learning" located outside of Chicago — is flush with cash.

It has an endowment of nearly \$15 billion, and the tax-free donations keep flowing in.

Almost all the \$800 million — which rivals the cost of professional sports arenas with luxury skyboxes and opulent decor — for the lavish Taj Mahal football stadium on the shores of Lake Michigan was donated to the school with tax-deductible dollars.

About half the money came from multibillionaire Pat Ryan. No word yet as to whether the Northwestern stadium will come with hot tubs in the end zones.

Meanwhile, universities are now paying star football players millions of dollars thanks to the new "portal" rules.

Many basketball and football athletes are now selling their passing, tackling and dunking skills each year to the highest bidder.

They can often make more money playing for the old U than if they played in professional leagues like the NFL or NBA.

This is pay-to-play athletics. It won't be long before women

on college volleyball teams are pay-to-play. Star athletes have been exploited by colleges for years, and now they are getting their just dues.

## Don't get me wrong.

I love college sports and will be riveted to the Indiana-Miami college football national championship. This is a great product, and we are seeing the best teams money can buy.

But when will Congress stop buying into this mythology that colleges are nonprofit organizations? Why should donations from millionaires and billionaires be IRS tax write-offs? It's farcical. It also costs taxpayers a small fortune.

Northwestern's donors will get tax deductions worth almost \$200 million.

This makes as much sense as allowing the Chicago Bears to sign the best quarterback and free safety tax-free.

Don't forget that universities have other absurd tax advantages.

They generally are exempt from property taxes — which means the rest of us pay more.

Universities are supposed to be educational institutions, not semipro leagues.

To treat them in the tax code as if they were the equivalent of homeless shelters, food banks and the Salvation Army is a fantasy.

Universities are big business. The "amateur student athletes" are de facto professionals. Many

rarely if ever attend a class. Some of them are 25 and 26 years old. The cost to the Treasury of the tax loophole for colleges is enormous. Colleges have a combined endowment today of nearly \$1 trillion. Almost none of this money was ever taxed. These government subsidies to universities are on top of the trillion dollars of student loan

subsidies — debts many of which will never be paid back by the former students. If this giant loophole were plugged, tax rates for families and legitimate businesses could fall by 10% to 15%. When I attended the University of Illinois, we used to joke that our school motto was: We never let academics stand in the way of a winning football team

and basketball team. Now the universities don't let money stand in the way of a great team either. And the federal tax code encourages the "best team money can buy" mentality. Let's face it. If an institution can spend \$800 million on a football stadium, it can afford to pay its fair share of taxes.

Daniil Peshkov

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# Trump is on the cusp of greatness. Khamenei is on the edge of the abyss



Maduro ignored them, so too has Khamenei responded with mockery of the president of the United States. The ayatollah has also cut off his nation's internet and cellular services and ordered his thugs to open fire.

Will it work again? Nobody knows. All we know is that a repressed people cannot forever be held down. And that the presidents who help free them earn history's applause and respect.

Hugh Hewitt is a Fox News contributor and host of "The Hugh Hewitt Show" heard weekday afternoons from 3 PM to 6 PM ET on the Salem Radio Network, and simulcast on Salem News Channel. Hugh drives Americans home on the East Coast and to lunch on the West Coast on over 400 affiliates nationwide, and on all the streaming platforms where SNC can be seen.

He is a frequent guest on the Fox News Channel's news roundtable, hosted by Bret Baier

The difference between the illusion of power and its reality is the difference between Ayatollah Khamenei and President Donald Trump. Trump is on the cusp of joining the very small number of American presidents who reorder the world. Khamenei is on the cusp of history's abyss reserved for murderous fanatics. If Trump tips Khamenei over that edge, the president's place in history will be secure. He will have returned freedom to the great Persian people.

The belief in the unlimited power of a totalitarian government to maintain itself and protect its rulers is a dangerous conceit, as Syria's Bashar al-Assad and Venezuela's Nicholas Maduro have both discovered. It may be that Ayatollah Khamenei is in the process of discovering the same hard reality: No government, no matter how ruthless, can endure for centuries or even decades in the face of a resentful population.

Not even the rulers of Rome at the height of the Caesars or the Severan dynasty were guaranteed an endless run of power. The Soviet Union, which possessed both nuclear weapons and an omnipresent security service, survived only from 1922 to 1991.

The Assad family took power

in 1971 when Hafez Al-Assad consolidated control in Syria and kept it until December 2024, when his son and other family members were obliged to flee to Russia.

"Papa Doc" Duvalier took power in Haiti in 1957 and held it to his death in 1971. He was succeeded by his son Jean-Claude Duvalier, nicknamed "Baby Doc," who was forced to flee in February 1986.

Hugo Chavez first tried to gain power via a coup in Venezuela in 1992, failed, and then won power in 1999, which he never relinquished until his death, when Nicholas Maduro took over the police state until this month, when the American military assisted American law enforcement on the orders of President Trump to remove Maduro to a New York Jail cell.

The American government endures because it rests upon the consent of the governed. Any political entity that doesn't, enjoys, at best, an uneasy control punctuated by attempted uprisings of a people desiring freedom and prosperity.

We are watching in real time the third effort of the people of Iran to throw off the shackles of the "Islamic Republic of Iran," imposed on them by the fanatic,

Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini in 1979, which has oppressed the Iranian people for decades years. Khomeini ousted the Shah of Iran in 1979 and now the Shah's son may return as a constitutional monarch to replace Khomeini's hand-picked successor, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

This ayatollah is as ruthless as the first and hundreds are being mowed down by his thugs in a desperate attempt to hang on to control of their kleptocracy, but the people of Iran have seen their life savings wiped out, their drinking water polluted and their electricity subject to repeated outages. The country is on the ropes and, humbled by Israeli and American air and missile power last summer, the people have begun their third week of massive protests. If either the U.S. or the Jewish state provide the final push, the great people of Persia — older than Christianity by 500 years — will re-emerge and regain their place among the great civilizations on the planet.

Even as the mullahs and their shock troops in the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps shudder and fire wildly into crowds of hundreds of thousands, so too does the dictatorship of Cuba's Miguel Díaz-Canel, successor to Fidel,

and then Raul Castro look shaky. As with Venezuela, and Syria and the Soviets before them, the Cuban regime depends upon the illusion of permanence. But, their people cannot eat illusions or drink fantasies.

Three times before, the tyrants of Iran faced serious challenges to their power, but each time — in the late 1990s, during the 2009 Green Movement and in 2022 with the Iranian women's movement which is widely known as the "Woman, Life, Freedom," — the power of the ayatollahs was challenged, but those challenges were not supported with even encouraging words by the American presidents of that era.

Ayatollah Khomeini took power when Jimmy Carter was in office, and Khamenei kept power during the aborted revolutions that happened under Bill Clinton, Barack Obama and Joe Biden.

In this present convulsion of Iran, President Donald Trump has been a vocal supporter of the Iranian people seeking freedom. Just as he did with Maduro, President Trump has issued many warnings to Khamenei. Just as

weekdays at 6pm ET. A son of Ohio and a graduate of Harvard College and the University of Michigan Law School, Hewitt has been a Professor of Law at Chapman University's Fowler School of Law since 1996 where he teaches Constitutional Law. Hewitt launched his eponymous radio show from Los Angeles in 1990.

Hewitt has frequently appeared on every major national news television network, hosted television shows for PBS and MSNBC, written for every major American paper, has authored a dozen books and moderated a score of Republican candidate debates, most recently the November 2023 Republican presidential debate in Miami and four Republican presidential debates in the 2015-16 cycle. Hewitt focuses his radio show and his column on the Constitution, national security, American politics and the Cleveland Browns and Guardians. Hewitt has interviewed tens of thousands of guests from Democrats Hillary Clinton and John Kerry to Republican Presidents George W. Bush and Donald Trump over his 40 years in broadcasting. This column previews the lead story that will drive his radio/TV show today.

**Hugh Hewitt**



# Iran Unrest: Covert Plans For Regime Change?



As protests flare across Iran, driven by economic distress, political repression, and generational anger, Tehran's leadership is responding not only to unrest on its streets but also to signals emanating from Washington and Tel Aviv—signals that revive memories of past foreign intervention and sharpen fears of regime change.

The demonstrations have led to over 2,000 deaths and a storm of support and defiance on social media, but they themselves are widely assessed as organic, rooted in domestic grievances. Yet the international response has added a geopolitical charge. Statements from US and Israeli leaders, while framed as support for human rights and democratic aspirations, have gone further than neutral diplomacy, feeding Iranian suspicions that the unrest is being watched—and possibly welcomed—as a strategic opening.

## Strategic Opening For Israel?

Israeli Prime Minister

Benjamin Netanyahu has been especially direct. In repeated public addresses and social media messages, he has praised Iranian protesters and framed their struggle in moral and civilisational terms. "The brave people of Iran are standing up for freedom," Netanyahu said during a period of heightened unrest, adding that Israel "stands with the people of Iran in their quest for liberty". In another statement that resonated deeply inside Iran, he expressed hope that the Iranian people would one day be "free from the yoke of tyranny".

Such language marks a departure from Israel's traditional focus on Iran's nuclear programme and regional militancy. By openly articulating a vision of a post-clerical Iran, Netanyahu has reinforced the perception among Iranian officials that Israel's ultimate objective goes beyond deterrence to systemic change.

US Priming More Pressure?

In Washington, the tone has been more carefully calibrated but still consequential.

US President Donald Trump, whose administration has pursued a policy of "maximum pressure" on Tehran, repeatedly linked support for Iranian protesters with broader strategic aims. During earlier waves of unrest, Trump declared, and I quote, "The people of Iran are finally acting against the brutal and corrupt Iranian regime." In another message, he said, "The Iranian people are great people who have been suppressed for many years." At the same time, Trump paired this rhetorical support with unmistakable hard power signalling. "Iran will never have a nuclear weapon," he said repeatedly, while insisting that US pressure would continue until Tehran fundamentally altered its course. For Iranian leaders, the combination of sanctions, diplomatic isolation, and public encouragement for protest looks less like coincidence and more like a familiar pattern.

## History Repeating Itself?

In 1953, the United States—working with British intelligence—engineered the overthrow of Iran's democratically elected prime minister, Mohammad Mosaddegh, after he moved to nationalise Iran's oil industry. The covert operation, later acknowledged by the CIA, relied on propaganda, political manipulation, and the orchestration of street unrest to destabilise the government and restore Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi to power. The episode remains a foundational trauma in Iran's political memory and a reference point routinely invoked by today's leaders.

This legacy explains why contemporary Iranian officials react so sharply to foreign commentary on protests. When US and Israeli leaders praise demonstrators or speak openly about "freedom" and "liberation", Tehran hears echoes of 1953—not merely moral support, but the language of political engineering.

## Ayatollah's Crackdown On 'Foreign Plot'

Iranian authorities have leaned heavily into this narrative, portraying the protests as being amplified or exploited by hostile foreign powers. State media regularly points to US sanctions, Israeli covert actions, and Western funding of civil society and media initiatives as evidence of a coordinated attempt to weaken the Islamic Republic from within. While independent analysts note that Iran's unrest is overwhelmingly homegrown, they also acknowledge that external pressure can magnify internal strain.

For Iran's leadership, the fear is not only of protest itself but also of protest intersecting with geopolitical intent. For the protesters, the risk is that international endorsement could delegitimise their cause at home. And for the region, the unresolved question remains whether history is merely being remembered—or quietly rehearsed.

Ayushman Jamwal

# Between Promise And Precarity: The Uneven Reality Of India's Gig Economy

Released in 2023, *Zwigato* offers a quiet yet powerful window into the everyday realities of India's gig workers. With Kapil Sharma stepping away from comedy to play a delivery worker, the film captures the invisible struggles that lie behind app notifications and doorstep deliveries.

One particularly unsettling episode reveals just how vulnerable gig workers are to an unforgiving system: a false complaint is filed against his character, and in an instant, he is removed from his work. There is no inquiry, no opportunity to explain—only retribution. As Sharma's income disappears, leaving him unable to manage even

basic household expenses, his struggle begins.

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The quiet desperation portrayed in *Zwigato* is no longer confined to the cinema; it has found expression on the streets as well. On New Year's Eve, thousands of gig workers across the country went on strike, calling for better pay, safer working conditions, and basic dignity at work. But the very system they were protesting against diluted their collective voice. The New Year rush, coupled with a lack of organisation among gig workers, meant that the strike's impact was visible only in pockets, even

as discontent simmered widely beneath the surface.

At the heart of their protest lies a stark contradiction. Behind the glossy rhetoric of flexibility and independence lies a fragile

9, 2025, the Press Information Bureau (PIB), while acknowledging the gig and platform workforce as a "crucial driver of the new economic ecosystem, powered by young

will reveal that the struggles depicted in the film or the book are not exaggerated. Whether it is the scorching heat of June, the biting cold of January, or the relentless rains of July, when

control, and abuse.

And yet, every morning, they step out once again—not by choice, but by necessity—to earn for themselves and their children. Their lives mirror those of gig workers and millions of others in the informal economy: stories shaped by uncertainty, resilience forged under compulsion, and labour that keeps society functioning while remaining largely unprotected.

Yet, in comparison to gig workers, domestic work carries one fragile but significant difference—continuity. Many domestic workers remain employed in the same households for years, sometimes even decades. Over time, this constancy can foster a personal bond with employers, one that occasionally softens the harsh edges of informal labour. Unlike app-based workers governed by algorithms, domestic workers are at least seen and known by the families they serve.

This familiarity can translate into limited but meaningful support. Advances or small loans are often easier to access, and in many cases, employers step in to help with children's school fees, medical emergencies, or even wedding expenses. When a crisis strikes, a domestic worker may still find a door to knock on, someone who knows her story and circumstances.

While this support is no substitute for legal protection or fair wages, it highlights a crucial contrast within the unorganised sector. Gig workers, despite powering billion-dollar platforms, often lack even this basic human connection.

The story of the gig economy cannot be reduced to a single narrative. As Vasudevan highlights in her book, platform work has expanded choice and opportunity. She writes that in different parts of South Asia, women have used these jobs to gain financial control and a stronger sense of agency. Ride-hailing platforms have also reshaped everyday mobility, offering people with physical disabilities greater independence and allowing the elderly or mobility-restricted the comfort of safe travel and access to services.

Pragati pandey



existence marked by uncertainty and constant pressure. Many gig workers say they clock up to 14 hours a day for a single platform, yet remain unrecognised as employees. Officially labelled as "partners" or "independent contractors", they are excluded from the rights and protections that generally accompany such long hours of labour. What they seek is not privilege, but fair and reasonable compensation for the work that fuels India's fast-growing digital economy.

The absolute absence of security is starkly evident in the fact that when mishaps occur, gig workers are left without any support. In her book *OTP Please*, which examines gig economies in India and South Asia, author Vandana Vasudevan recounts meeting a delivery agent at a protest in Rajasthan whose right thumb was severed while helping a customer move goods. Despite the injury, he received neither compensation nor medical assistance from the logistics start-up he worked for.

India's gig economy has become a defining feature of its labour market, employing an estimated 7.7 million platform-based workers in 2020-21, a number projected to rise to nearly 23.5 million by 2029-30. Even the government has recognised this fact. In an article published on December

demographics, digital adoption, and rapid urbanisation", highlighted how, in recognition of their role, the Code on Social Security, 2020 (SS)—one of the four labour codes implemented in a recent labour reform—formally brings gig and platform workers under a broader protection umbrella. It claims that the "reform institutionalises long-overdue security for a workforce that has long powered India's digital economy without commensurate protections".

Gig workers operate without the security of fixed employment, functioning instead in a freelance-like arrangement. This vast workforce includes delivery partners for platforms such as BigBasket, Zomato, Swiggy, and Blinkit, as well as drivers associated with cab aggregators like Ola and Uber. They are paid per delivery or per ride, not through a guaranteed monthly income. There is no fixed salary, no allowances, no pension, and no paid leave—only earnings that fluctuate with demand, algorithms, and physical endurance. As the film, the book, and the protests held at regular intervals together reveal, flexibility may define the gig economy, but its cost is borne almost entirely by the workers who keep it moving.

A day spent with a gig worker

illness of even a few days can mean empty kitchens and unpaid bills at home. They are not permanent employees who can rely on paid leave, loans, or advances in times of need.

This crisis is not confined to gig workers alone; it runs through the entire unorganised sector, where labour survives in the absence of strong laws and meaningful protection. In urban India, domestic workers, largely women, form the quiet backbone of everyday life, enabling households to function smoothly. Yet their work remains largely invisible and chronically undervalued. Many continue for years without a fixed salary or annual increment, trapped at stagnant wages even as the cost of living steadily rises.

What makes their reality even harsher is that their struggle is not limited to the workplace. The imbalance of power inside private homes often exposes them to mental and physical abuse, with little recourse. Their hardships do not end at the employer's doorstep. Many women return home only to face violence within their own families. In a painful irony, some earn more than their husbands, yet enjoy little respect or agency in their households. Their financial contribution rarely translates into dignity; instead, it often exists alongside neglect,



# Blue state fraud scandals highlight shocking reality in red states



Minnesota and California, two of the most left-leaning, Democrat-controlled states in the country, are both in the midst of fraud scandals of simply breathtaking scale, as model red states like Florida and Texas are thriving. We really do have to ask the question, why? In Minnesota, despite most of the local news media dragging its feet like an elite NFL receiver on the sideline for years, as \$9 billion of fraud and growing is being exposed, much of it committed by the burgeoning and bright blue Somali community.

All of it happened under the lazy watch of Minnesota Democrat governor and failed "white guy taco" candidate for vice president, Tim Walz.

Much of this fraud centers on social service programs like day care centers and transportation to the doctor, but there are no kids, there are no rides being given, there is just graft, often tens or even hundreds of millions of dollars at a time.

The situation in the Golden State is little better, with a recent audit leading to estimates that a stunning "\$72 billion" may have been bilked from taxpayers, and that is according to Democrat Gov. Gavin Newsom's own

auditor.

And here again, social services appear to be at the heart of the alleged theft. For example, payment errors in food assistance benefits could cost the state \$2.5 billion in federal funds, according to the report.

There is also a bullet train to nowhere that has wasted so much money that the Trump administration is now pulling funding from it.

Even some California Democrats such as Rep. Ro Khanna are calling this out now. The congressman told me, "The scale of fraud in Sacramento with the IG report of \$72 billion is staggering. Waste and fraud during COVID, with infrastructure projects, and services. We need bold new leadership that will clean up Sacramento."

So, why are these blue states awash in fraud while red ones such as Florida and Texas thrive? Even ruby red West Virginia saw its credit rating bump up over the past year.

One answer is simply that there is more money to steal. California has a population of about 39 million and a state budget of \$298 billion dollars; compare that to Florida, which boasts 23 million residents, but with a budget

of only \$116 billion. Based on this math, California spends about \$7,600 per resident, while the Sunshine State comes in at a mere \$5,000 per resident, and we now know that much of this gap is accounted for by blatant fraud.

To make matters worse, as blue states enact ever more and ever kookier forms of social assistance and welfare, such as paying people to be home health aides, or providing care for youth, no money is spent to increase oversight. In other words, nobody is watching the pot of taxpayer gold.

On top of all of this, nearly every blue state and city in America adds a budget line for DEI or funds reserved for "marginalized" populations to almost every spending bill they pass. This is at the very least wasteful, but even if no crime is being committed, is giving a nonprofit millions of dollars to make an anti-racist PowerPoint presentation not graft in its own way?

The vast scale of this fraud in blue states may not be an accident. In fact, it might be the key to why it took so long to uncover. In the first decade of the 20th century, according to the book "Philadelphia, Corrupt and Consenting," Philadelphia's GOP political machine

boss Israel Durham was asked by a reporter how his party possibly hoped to get away with all the corruption of the recent Mayor Samuel Ashbridge. His answer is timely today and a bit chilling to boot. "If we did any one of these things alone," Durham opined, "the papers and the public could concentrate on it, get the facts and fight. But we reasoned that if we poured them all out fast and furious, one, two, three one after the other - the papers couldn't handle them all and the public would be stunned and give up..."

But many Americans, including frustrated voices in California and Minnesota, are not giving up. In fact, they are just getting started. Will voters in these states choose Republican candidates, now? Will responsible Democrat leaders step up? Or will the graft just continue? Consented to, almost?

It is impossible to say. But what is possible to say is that as long as this dichotomy between red and blue states exists, Florida and Texas can expect their populations to continue growing. Because, it turns out, Americans really do like good governance.

By DAVID MARCUS

# Pak-China pact illegal: Army chief rejects Beijing's claim on Shaksgam valley

(News Agency) Army chief Gen Upendra Dwivedi on Tuesday reiterated India's long-standing position that the 1963 agreement between Pakistan and China on the Shaksgam Valley is illegal and unacceptable to India.

Speaking on the issue, General Dwivedi said India has never recognised the so-called agreement under which Pakistan ceded territory to China. "On Shaksgam Valley, India considers the 1963 agreement between Pakistan and China illegal. We do not accept it," he said, underlining New Delhi's consistent stance on the matter.

His remarks come amid renewed criticism by India of China's infrastructure development activities in the Shaksgam Valley, which New Delhi maintains is Indian territory under illegal occupation. Earlier, the Ministry of External Affairs said Pakistan had illegally ceded around 5,180 square kilometres of Indian territory in the Shaksgam Valley to China in 1963. MEA spokesperson Randhir



Jaiswal stated that India has "never recognised the so-called China-Pakistan boundary agreement" and has consistently maintained that it is illegal and invalid. Jaiswal also reiterated that India does not recognise the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, which passes through Indian territory under Pakistan's illegal occupation. He added that the entire Union

Territories of Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh are an integral and inalienable part of India, a position that has been conveyed repeatedly to both Pakistan and China. India's concerns have intensified amid reports of China undertaking large-scale infrastructure development in the Shaksgam Valley as part of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Beijing is reportedly

constructing an all-weather road in the region, with nearly 75 km, around 10 metres wide, already completed. New Delhi has warned that such projects risk altering the ground reality in an area it considers its sovereign territory. Reacting to these developments, the MEA asserted that the region is part of Indian territory and said India reserves the right to take

"necessary measures" to safeguard its interests. China, however, has rejected India's objections, claiming that its construction activities in the region are "beyond reproach." The developments have also drawn attention to what India sees as China's contradictory position on Kashmir — publicly describing it as a bilateral issue between India and Pakistan, while simultaneously pursuing strategic infrastructure projects in areas of Kashmir under Pakistan's illegal occupation.

## WHY SHAKSGAM VALLEY IS IMPORTANT

Situated close to the Siachen Glacier in the eastern Karakoram range, the Shaksgam Valley, also known as the Trans Karakoram Tract, borders China's Xinjiang region to the north and Pakistan-occupied Kashmir to the south and west. The valley's proximity to the Siachen Glacier, the world's highest battlefield, and its access to the Karakoram Pass give it immense military significance.

# Trump told Tehran he doesn't want to attack, says Iran envoy

(News Agency) US President Donald Trump has informed Iran that the United States will not launch military action against the Islamic Republic, according to statements from both US and Iranian officials as reported by the Jerusalem Post.

The announcement comes amid ongoing anti-government protests in Iran that have led to significant casualties and heightened regional tensions. The Jerusalem Post, citing a report from Pakistani media outlet Dawn, which quoted Iran's Ambassador to Pakistan, Reza Amiri Moghadam, said that Trump requested restraint from Iran while assuring there were no plans for a US strike.

This diplomatic communication follows a period of mass demonstrations in Iran met with a forceful crackdown by authorities. Speaking to reporters, Trump said, "We were told that the killing in Iran is stopping, and there's no plan

for executions," adding, "I've been told that on good authority. We'll find out about it. I'm sure if it happens, I'll be very upset". The status of Erfan Soltani, a 26-year-old Iranian protester initially sentenced to death, became a focal point for international attention.

On Thursday, Trump shared a report on his Truth Social platform: "FoxNews: 'Iranian protester will no longer be sentenced to death after President Trump's warnings. Likewise others.' This is good news."

Hopefully, it will continue!" Reports from human rights organisations indicate that over 2,600 people have been killed since protests erupted in late December, with some estimates exceeding 3,000 fatalities. These events mark one of the deadliest outbreaks of unrest in Iran since 1979. Trump and US officials have repeatedly voiced

support for demonstrators, with Trump stating earlier this week, "I have cancelled all meetings with Iranian Officials until the senseless killing of protesters STOPS," and "HELP IS ON ITS WAY."

The White House confirmed that military options had been

recorded on January 12," according to the international conflict monitoring group Institute for the Study of War. "As unrest persisted, Iran issued warnings to neighbouring countries hosting US military bases. Officials stated,

security and diplomatic figures also engaging leaders from the United Arab Emirates and Turkey. Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araqchi told UAE Foreign Minister Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed that "calm has prevailed". Iran's President Masoud Pezeshkian addressed the unrest, saying, "as long as the government had popular support, all the enemies' efforts against the country will come to nothing". State media have broadcast images of large funeral processions for those killed in recent clashes.

Asked about the apparent halt in protester killings, Trump responded, "But that's just gotten to me, some information, that the killing has stopped."

That the executions have stopped and not going to have an execution, which a lot of people were talking about for the last couple of days". When questioned on his sources, Trump said the information came from "very important sources on the other side."



considered, though diplomacy remained the preferred approach. "International monitoring continues to track protest activity despite internet restrictions in Iran."

"There are several indications that protests continue to take place in areas where protest activity was not

region, some US personnel at the Al Udeid Air Base in Qatar were ordered to evacuate.

The move was described by diplomats as a posture change, not a full withdrawal of troops. High-level discussions between Iranian and Qatari officials have been underway, with Iran's top



# More positions than Kama Sutra: UK PM

## Starmer mocks Conservatives, sparks row

(News Agency) UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer has come under intense criticism following a controversial remark during Prime Minister's Questions in the House of Commons. The backlash centres on a joke referencing the Kama Sutra, which critics say revealed deeper flaws in Starmer's approach to leadership and decision-making. The exchange occurred as the Labour government faced renewed pressure over recent policy reversals and ongoing economic concerns, the UK's International Business Times reported. The incident unfolded when opposition Conservative leader Kemi Badenoch challenged the government over Labour's growing list of policy reversals. Replying to the criticism by the opposition leader, Starmer said: "They had more positions in 14 years than the Kama Sutra. No wonder they're knackered, they left the country screwed!" He

repeated the sentiment across the dispatch box. he remarks prompted silence in the chamber, with many MPs and observers describing the moment as awkward and ill-judged.

### OPPOSITION IN ATTACKING MODE



Opponents seized on the exchange, arguing that the Prime Minister's attempt at humour fell flat and signalled a lack of sensitivity to the seriousness of the occasion. The episode was widely seen by

critics as evidence of a Prime Minister out of touch with the public mood and unable to respond effectively to policy challenges. The IBT report further reported that clips of the exchange spread rapidly on social media, where many users

present. Political analysts suggested the joke was not simply a misjudged attempt at levity but indicative of broader challenges facing Starmer's leadership. The silence that followed was described as "deafening" by critics, with one commentator noting, "This wasn't comedy—it was a masterclass in tone deafness".

### LABOUR PARTY UNDER LENS FOR POLICY U- TURNS

The controversy comes as Labour faces scrutiny over its policy direction, particularly in light of recent reversals. Badenoch's challenge to government policy U-turns, especially regarding digital IDs, set the stage for the tense encounter in the Commons. Starmer's leadership has been criticised by some for an inability to "read the room," both in terms of parliamentary exchanges and the public's priorities. The failed joke has

been cited as emblematic of this weakness, according to several political commentators.

### STARMER GOVERNMENT FAILED TO DELIVER?

When Starmer took office in July, his administration pledged to build 3,00,000 new homes annually for five years, aiming to revive the struggling housing sector and drive economic growth. However, this target has eluded successive governments for two decades, and experts note that Britain has consistently built fewer than 1,50,000 homes per year regardless of party leadership.

Industry challenges, including rising material costs, labour shortages, and tighter financing, have further complicated the government's efforts. Measures such as an increased minimum wage and a new 25 billion-pound "jobs tax" have been described as well-intentioned but disruptive for construction firms operating on narrow margins.

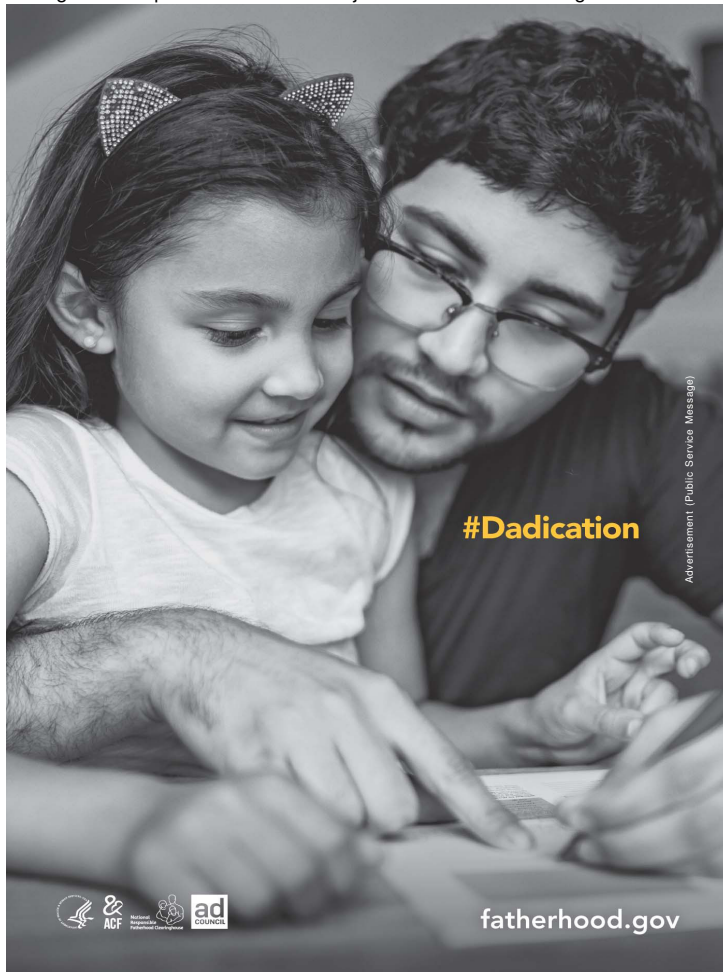


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# Israel to withdraw from 7 UN agencies after US pullout from 66 global bodies

**Israeli Foreign Minister Gideon Sa'ar said the decision followed a review conducted after the United States pulled out of dozens of international organisations. Israel, he said, would "immediately sever all contact" with a number of UN agencies and would reassess cooperation with others.**

(NewsAgency) Days after US withdrawal from 66 international organisations, Israel announced that it will immediately withdraw from seven UN agencies and affiliated bodies, accusing them of anti-Israel bias and what it described as ineffective and bloated bureaucracy. Foreign Minister Gideon Sa'ar said the decision followed a review conducted after the United States pulled out of dozens of international organisations. Israel, he said, would "immediately sever all contact" with a number of UN agencies and would reassess cooperation with others. "The decision reflects a broader examination of organisations that consistently act against Israel or fail to function effectively," Sa'ar said, adding that further steps could follow after additional review.

## ISRAEL ALREADY WITHDRAWN FROM FOUR UN AGENCIES

Israel has already cut ties with several UN bodies named in the US withdrawal announcement. Among them is the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children in Armed Conflict, which blacklisted the Israel Defence Forces in 2024. "Israel is the only democratic country listed alongside ISIS and Boko Haram," Sa'ar said, calling the move "shameless."

He noted that Israel severed ties with the office in June last year. Israel has also withdrawn from UN Women, accusing the agency of ignoring sexual violence against Israeli women during the October 7, 2023 attacks. The Israeli Foreign Minister said Israel terminated its



cooperation agreement and formally notified the UN Secretary-General that all engagement with the body would cease from July 2024. Other agencies Israel has already

disengaged from include the UN Conference on Trade and Development and the UN Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia, both of which Sa'ar said have

produced "virulent anti-Israel reports" over the years. In addition, Israel will now sever ties with several more organisations, including the UN Alliance of Civilisations.

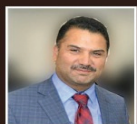
## The Beginning

### MAD MEN

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#### About the Author



Sharanjit Thind Singh, for more than 29 years has spent his career immersed in the world of advertising, marketing, and media. His professional journey includes working with well known Media, FMCG and Telecom Companies in India and the US.

Hailing from a small postal stamp size city in Punjab, Thind's academic background reflects his drive for excellence. After completing a Bachelor of Commerce degree, he pursued an MBA. He further strengthened his expertise with a Post Graduate Diploma in Journalism and Mass Communication. This combination of business knowledge and media insight became the foundation of his career.

He founded and, is CEO of Nu Way Advertising in Manhattan now known as Nu Way Media Group Inc. He has served as a Commissioner of the Nassau County Human Rights Commission in New York.



The Beginning

MAD MEN OF NU WAY ADVERTISING

Sharanjit Thind Singh

## The Beginning

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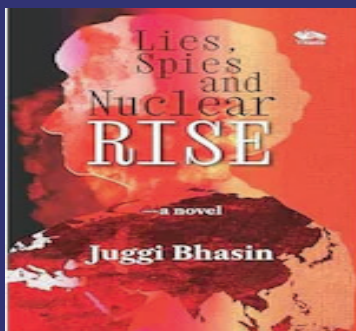
# The Other Side of Change: Who We Become When Life Makes Other Plans

(Staff Reporter) Juggi Bhasin's *Lies, Spies and Nuclear Rise* is not merely a political thriller; it is a work of historical imagination forged by decades of lived experience in political journalism and geopolitics.

Bhasin writes with the assurance of someone who has observed power from close quarters—how it is acquired, exercised, manipulated, and, at times, weaponised. The novel transforms a chaotic time in Indian history into a gripping thriller that is very personal as well as important to the entire nation. The novel outlines the India of the 70s under Indira Gandhi's leadership, struck by Cold War anxieties, CIA conspiracy, internal political stir, and the defining question of India's nuclear assertion. We witness a layered portrait of a besieged leadership, with invisible enemies, and the burden of sovereignty weighs heavily on a single individual.

Bhasin's background as a seasoned geopolitical observer is demonstrated in the way he constructs India of the 70s. A nation that is trying to find its feet but is inhabited by intelligence chiefs, foreign leaders, shadowy operatives, ideological rivals, and ambitious protégés—each pursuing intersecting but often conflicting interests.

The CIA being used as this relentless instrument of American strategic dominance, applying pressure through diplomacy, covert influence, and internal destabilisation, is presented in a way that makes the understanding of those times clearer. On the other side is the Soviet Union, shown not as a benign ally but as a calculating power willing to extract its price for support. And in this morally grey universe, India's leadership is constantly trying to negotiate between external coercion and internal collapse.



At the centre of this storm is Priya Kaul, a figure unmistakably inspired by Indira Gandhi. Bhasin presents Kaul as a leader of awe-inspiring will and political drive who is at the same time deeply human. She is haunted by isolation, familial tensions, and the bitter solitude of absolute power. Through Kaul, the novel investigates the question of what happens when democratic correctness collides with existential threats to the nation-state? The author has made the era come alive.

The 1970s are rendered as a lived reality marked by economic strain, ideological ferment, student unrest, and an undercurrent of fear. Bhasin does not absolve power of its excesses during the Emergency-era but he does portray the leadership as one cornered by forces both within and outside the nation. The nuclear dimension of the novel forms its moral and strategic core. It highlights that the decision to pursue nuclear capability was not to achieve technological or national chest-thumping, but was a hard, calculated assertion of sovereignty in a world dominated by power blocs. Bhasin captures brilliantly the tension of that moment. He exposes the secrecy, the

international pressure, the fear of sanctions, and the knowledge that crossing this threshold would permanently alter India's standing in the global order. The nuclear test becomes both an act of defiance and a burden that would influence future events.

What elevates *Lies, Spies and Nuclear Rise* beyond historical fiction is its unmistakable contemporary relevance. While reading the episodes of the 70s, it's difficult to ignore the parallels between Indira Gandhi's India and Narendra Modi's India where the country being led by a strong, polarising leader accused of authoritarian tendencies by critics at home and abroad finds itself amidst Western media scrutiny, diplomatic pressure, and ideological opposition. It raises pertinent questions of strategic autonomy as to how far India should bend to global expectations versus chart its own course.

Bhasin's narrative implicitly invites the reader to reflect on how moments in history repeat themselves in every era and how history rhymes. Just as Indira Gandhi's nuclear decision challenged the existing global hierarchy, Modi's India today unsettles entrenched power structures whether through its foreign policy assertiveness, refusal to conform to Western moral lecturing, or emphasis on civilisational self-confidence. It's interesting to delve into the 70s to understand the familiarity of structural pressures even though the circumstances differ and the world has changed. What we can learn or unlearn about managing dissent in a vast democracy, resisting external interference, and balancing popular mandate with institutional restraint. In this sense, *Lies, Spies and Nuclear Rise*

functions as a prism through which the present can be read more clearly. The intelligence operatives, family members, ministers, spiritual figures, add further depth to the narrative and remind you of many who existed around Mrs Gandhi and in her life, in the 70s. Particularly striking is to see how power reshapes personal relationships within political dynasties.

The tensions between the sons and the mother, the entitlement that we see being carried by a family even today and the moral decay that emerges around Priya Kaul serve as a quiet warning about the costs of centering power around individuals instead of institutions. Bhasin's writing blends a potent sense of urgency of a thriller with the reflective depth of political commentary. His prose is direct, occasionally sharp, not inconvenienced with unnecessary embellishments. This control allows events and choices to carry their own weight. *Lies, Spies and Nuclear Rise* succeeds as it is grounded in understanding rather than ideology. It neither glorifies nor condemns power reflexively. Instead, it asks difficult questions about leadership, sovereignty, and the moral uncertainties of statecraft. For readers interested in India's Cold War history, the Indira Gandhi years, nuclear politics, or the enduring patterns of global power, this novel offers more than entertainment, it offers insight.

In reopening one of India's most significant eras, Juggi Bhasin reminds us that the predicaments of nationhood do not disappear with time. They resurface, shaped by new contexts but driven by the same primary struggle of how a civilisation-state negotiates its place in a world that is rarely fair, often hostile, and always watching.

## Want to read more in 2026? Here's how to revive your love of books

(Staff Reporter) NEW YORK — People stop reading in adulthood for lots of reasons. But it's never too late to turn the page on old habits and start again. Curling up with a good book can reduce stress, increase creativity and boost empathy. A recent analysis of U.S. government data found that the percentage of Americans who read for pleasure during an average day has fallen to 16% in 2023 from 28% in 2004.

That includes not just books but audiobooks, e-books and periodicals like magazines. Some people say they're fatigued from years of assigned reading in school. Others don't have the time or would rather zone out by doom-scrolling on social media. And many just got out of the habit.

"It's difficult for people who are really tired and busy to think about getting into reading if it's not something they're used to," said Jacqueline Rammer, director of Menomonee Falls Public Library in Wisconsin. For those looking to set reading goals or resolutions in 2026, here's how to get back into the habit. This article is part of AP's Be Well coverage, focusing on wellness, fitness, diet and mental health. Read more Be Well. Choose the right book When

picking your next book, avoid dense nonfiction or a 500-page doorstop. "Your first book should be something that you think will be joyful," said Jocelyn Luizzi, a software engineer from Chicago who blogs about books.

Everyone's taste is different, so get recommendations from a variety of places including friends, booksellers and online communities like BookTok. Rammer and her staff ask library visitors: What was the last book, TV show or movie that you really enjoyed? Then, they look for similar genres or themes. Many libraries offer access to a service called NovelList which suggests "read-alikes" for various books and authors. Set a reading routine To create a habit that sticks, "start by scheduling reading into your day," said Gloria Mark, an attention span expert with the University of California, Irvine. Read five pages during a lunch break or right before bed.

If you're reading a physical book, Mark said to avoid distractions by keeping phones and laptops out of sight. But experimenting with other formats can make reading more convenient. E-books are portable and audiobooks are a good candidate to accompany chores or the morning commute.

You can likely access both for free by



downloading an app called Libby and signing in with a library card. Try to read in a quiet setting, but don't be afraid to make it a social activity. Many cities in the U.S. and around the world host silent book clubs where people read their own books together in coffee shops and libraries. Setting a reading goal for the year or joining a local library's winter reading challenge can help with motivation — but if it feels like added pressure, don't do it.

# US bans immigrant visas for 75 countries. Why are Thailand, Bhutan and Kuwait on the list?

Several affected countries have expressed surprise at the decision. For instance, Thailand, seemingly taken aback by the inclusion on the list, summoned the US Charge d'affaires in Bangkok on Thursday to seek urgent clarification on the decision, reported Thai media outlet Thaiger.

It must be noted that Thailand is a hugely popular destination for American tourists, and consistently portrayed in US media as a welcoming, vibrant country. Notably, despite Pakistan's coterie with the US and Pakistan Army Chief Asim Munir meeting US President Donald Trump multiple times after Operation Sindoor, it has been included on the list and its citizens are now facing an indefinite pause in immigrant visa processing.

Brazil, which has the largest economy in South America, was also a surprise name on the US visa-ban list. It's true that the diaspora in the US is Brazil's largest, but it's not that Brazilians have a history of large-scale immigration to the US. In fact, Brazilians form a minuscule part of the overall immigrants, representing around 1% of the total foreign-born population in the US. The inclusion of Kuwait on the US immigrant visa pause list is also surprising, as this oil-rich Gulf nation boasts one of the world's highest GDP per capita — \$30,000–\$32,000.

The decision seemingly hinges on data showing its US immigrants historically more likely to access public benefits. However, data suggests that there are less than 40,000 Kuwaitis in the US, of which 1/3rd are students. Vivian Nereim, Gulf bureau chief of the New York Times said on X, "I am so curious to understand how Kuwait — an oil-rich country where the average citizen income exceeds \$60k a year — ended up on this list." A media professional quipped, "(Because) It didn't donate a big enough jet plane?"

## WHY US SUSPENDED IMMIGRATION VISAS FROM 75 NATIONS?

The US State Department said that the suspension stems from efforts to ramp up immigration restrictions, and will be affecting countries from Latin America (like Colombia and Uruguay) to the Balkans (such as Bosnia and Albania), South Asia (Pakistan and Bangladesh), and numerous African, Middle Eastern, and Caribbean countries, reported news agency Reuters. An internal cable, viewed by Reuters, detailed a comprehensive review of policies,

regulations, and guidelines to guarantee rigorous screening and vetting for visa seekers.

The document flagged that citizens from these countries have shown tendencies to apply for public benefits in the US, labelling them as high-risk of becoming "public charges" and tapping into local, state, and federal resources. Public charge refers to a US immigration rule under which a visa or Green Card applicant can be denied if they are deemed likely to become primarily dependent on government assistance for basic living needs. First reported by Fox News, this action spares visitor visas.

The latest move follows a November order directing

diplomats to prioritise financial independence for visa applicants, avoiding reliance on government aid, reported Reuters.

"The State Department will use its long-standing authority to deem ineligible potential immigrants who would become a public charge on the United States and exploit the generosity of the American people," Tommy Pigott, the State Department's Principal Deputy Spokesperson, was quoted as saying by Reuters. He added that processing would stay on hold during a reassessment to block entries of those likely to claim welfare. The cable also instructed consular staff to deny approvals for any "print-authorised" but unissued visas

or those printed but not yet dispatched. Officials haven't detailed per-country rationales, but experts suggest exclusions for nations like India stem from robust documentation, adherence to US standards, strong economic links, and lower public charge risks. India excels in skilled visas like H-1B with cooperative consular ties. The complete roster of affected countries, per a US official, includes: Afghanistan, Albania, Algeria, Antigua and Barbuda, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bahamas, Bangladesh, Barbados, Belarus, Belize, Bhutan, Bosnia, Brazil, Cambodia, Cameroon, Cape

Verde, Colombia, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Cuba, Dominican Republic, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Fiji, The Gambia, Georgia, Ghana, Grenada, Guatemala, Guinea, Haiti, Iran, Iraq, Ivory Coast, Jamaica, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Kosovo, Lebanon, Liberia, Libya, North Macedonia, Moldova, Mongolia, Montenegro, Morocco, Myanmar, Nepal, Nicaragua, Nigeria, Pakistan, Republic of the Congo, Russia, Rwanda, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Syria, Tanzania, Thailand, Togo, Tunisia, Uganda, Uruguay, Uzbekistan and Yemen.

## From Exile to Architect The Pahlavi Plan to Rebuild Iran from the Ruins of the Theocracy

On Monday, Reza Pahlavi — the son of Iran's last shah — gave a speech proclaiming the Islamic Republic's end was near. "This is our Berlin Wall moment," Pahlavi declared. He was dressed in a white shirt, a blue tie and a crisp suit with an Iran-shaped lapel pin.

The future, he said, was bright. Together, Iranians would build a better country, free of tyranny. "Imagine this new Iran," he said. "A free and democratic Iran, living at peace with our neighbors, an engine of growth and opportunity." If Pahlavi sounds a little like a presidential contender giving a campaign speech, that is because, in a sense, he is: Reza Pahlavi is running to be Iran's next leader.

The erstwhile crown prince has been criticizing the country's Islamist autocracy since he went into exile almost five decades ago. But in recent years, he has

become increasingly vocal — and increasingly insistent that he should lead any pivot. "I am stepping forward to lead this national transition," Pahlavi said. "I have a clear plan." It is easy to see why Pahlavi has chosen this week to boldly promote his candidacy.

Over the last 12 days, Israel bombed Iranian military, energy and political facilities in the biggest attack on the country since the 1980s. On Saturday, the United States joined in, striking three Iranian nuclear sites. According to U.S. President Donald Trump, the various parties have now agreed to a ceasefire.

But tensions remain high, and it is unclear whether there will be a lasting peace. Trump, for example, has signaled that he is open to taking down the entire regime. "[I]f the current Iranian Regime is unable to MAKE IRAN GREAT AGAIN,

why wouldn't there be a Regime change??? MIGA!!!" he wrote in a Sunday social media post. Left unclear was how Trump would want that regime change to occur — by further American military involvement or by an organic uprising of disaffected Iranians. Over the course of his time abroad, Pahlavi has built up a sizable following in Iran's diaspora. These backers believe that, should the regime fall, the former crown prince is perfectly positioned to take charge. "He is a very strong leader who is very trusted, very popular, and who has principles that are deeply respected by the Iranian people," said Maryam Aslany — a sociology fellow at Yale who has studied Iran and is a Pahlavi backer. She spoke glowingly of his professed commitment to democracy and his personal character.

## All Talk, No Take-Off: The Reality Of Pakistan's JF-17 Hype

Pakistan's defence export industry received a noticeable platform in recent months, with the JF-17 Thunder Block III emerging at the heart of military negotiations extending to Southeast Asia, West Asia, and Africa. The origins of this momentum can be traced to Azerbaijan beginning deliveries of its first units in October 2025, making it the third foreign operator of the JF-17. This was followed by Myanmar's order in 2015 and Nigeria's induction of the jet in 2021. The trajectory accelerated further in December 2025, when the Libyan National Army (LNA) and Pakistan announced a defence deal that reportedly included JF-17s. Joining the list of countries that have shown interest are Bangladesh, Indonesia and Iraq, while Saudi Arabia is reported to be exploring unconventional arrangements such as converting approximately USD 2 billion in existing Pakistani debt into a fleet of fighter

jets. The spotlight Pakistan presently finds itself under, particularly in the aftermath of the May 2025 conflict with India, is less about a single jet and more about a broader rebranding effort. The developments appear to be an attempt by a security-centric and economically weak state to reposition itself from a traditional defence client to a potential defence exporter. In that context, Pakistan's military aviation industry is advancing as an instrument of economic relief and a vehicle for strategic posturing. These ambitions are underpinned by official statements, with Pakistan's Minister for Defence Production, Raza Hayat Haraj, reportedly confirming Islamabad's active negotiations with 'several countries' for JF-17 Thunder jets' sale.

### Pipe Dreams

That said, these source-based discussions, expressions of interests, and

politically-charged statements are not cemented in finalised agreements. Defence sales, especially involving combat aircraft, are capital-intensive, protracted processes that require a robust and reliable production capacity. These are further complicated by factors like training, sustainment packages, and post-delivery spare parts and upgrade services. As such, the expansion of Pakistan's military-industrial complex can be judged by its ability to convert palpable diplomatic rhetoric into concrete defence partnerships. Separately, the co-development of the 4.5-generation JF-17 with China informs both ambition and structural restraints in this area. The potential for defence deals to be complicated is further identified by the requirement for Beijing's consent for any export contract, thereby placing Pakistan's ambitions within the restrictions of its industrial and political relationship with China.



# Beyond the Blockade: Uncovering the Bitumen Trail from Venezuelan Wells to Indian Refineries

Amid the pervasive gloom and jitters of geopolitics, India has found a silver lining in innovation. It became the first country in the world to successfully develop bio-bitumen, a sustainable alternative to the petroleum-based binder widely used in asphalt for building roads. The New Delhi-based CSIR-Central Road Research Institute and the Dehradun-based CSIR-Indian Institute of Petroleum jointly developed commercially viable bio-bitumen from agricultural residues such as hay (think farm stubble, which is usually burnt). They made it using pyrolysis, an oxygen-free heating process popular in organic waste recycling. The Jorabat-Shillong Expressway (NH-40) in Meghalaya now sports a 100-metre trial stretch using bio-bitumen, demonstrating its feasibility. Regular bitumen, which gives roads their black top, is derived from crude oil and India imports the commodity worth about \$3 billion annually.

## What's the Big Deal?

On the face of it, the innovation might appear trivial, especially when compared with headline-grabbers such as artificial intelligence or quantum computing. But if you consider the bitumen story at the centre of the geopolitical storm unleashed by President Donald Trump when he ordered the US military to march into the capital of Venezuela and kidnap its head of state, Nicolas Maduro, and his wife, the achievement gets an added sheen for its timing. At over 300 billion barrels, Venezuela holds the largest reserve of crude oil in the world. Crucially, much of it is ultra-heavy crude, the richest source of bitumen and diesel, the former crucial for transport infrastructure and the latter for powering trucks, trains, ships and jets. For the foreseeable future, the US will control where Venezuelan oil flows to.

## Blow to China

The heavy oil pumped out from the Orinoco fields of the Latin American producer used to be the main feedstock for independent Chinese refineries, nicknamed 'teapots'. China imported 3,89,000 barrels per day of Venezuelan crude in 2025. PetroChina built a refinery complex in Jeiyang in Guangdong province specifically to process heavy crude



originating from fields such as Orinoco. Now, the US intends to steer much of that oil towards refineries in Texas.

The US is awash with light sweet shale crude, which is used as a diluent to pump out heavy crude. US energy secretary Chris Wright has said that the country will ship copious amounts of diluent to Venezuela and bring heavy oil back stateside. The US move not only deprives China of discounted heavy oil but also

more than half of its source for bitumen.

The scarcity of bitumen can impact the expansion and maintenance of highway networks. At the very least, it will make it more expensive to build roads. The other major source countries for heavy crude are Iran, Russia and Canada. While the former two do not produce oil as heavy as Venezuela's, crude from the tar sands of Alberta in Canada matches up but is costlier to

transport. The first of China's major sources of relatively cheap heavy crude oil - Venezuela - is blocked. Buying oil from Russia is risk-ridden as Trump will soon likely be armed with fresh powers to impose punitive tariffs up to 500% on sanction-defiers. Iran is gripped by an unprecedented economic crisis and people's agitation that could result in a regime change, jeopardising its oil production and sales in the international grey market.

## India's Advantage

Several Indian oil companies' shares rose soon after the US attack in Caracas. While a few Indian companies, such as ONGC, Indian Oil and Oil India, have equity stakes in some fields in Venezuela, several Indian refineries, especially Reliance Industries' Jamnagar complex, are equipped to process ultra-heavy crude oil. One of the valuable byproducts of ultra-heavy crude is vanadium, which is used to make steel and aluminium alloys in the auto and aerospace industries. It is also key to making vanadium redox flow batteries, which have a long life and are suited for large-scale grid storage. But it requires sophisticated tech know-how to extract it from petroleum coke or refinery waste. A deep tech startup and IIT Delhi are jointly working on perfecting the technology and developing a domestic vanadium supply chain originating from refinery waste. As India winds down oil purchases from Russia, an alternative source of crude oil could be Venezuela. Reliance Industries is already eyeing shipments from that country.

## 'Give Iran A Chance': Gulf Trio Stepped In To Stop Trump Strike, Saudi Official Claims

Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Oman mounted a last-minute diplomatic push to dissuade the United States from launching a military strike on Iran, with senior Gulf officials saying they urged Washington to give Tehran time to step back from escalation. A senior Saudi official told Agence France-Presse on Thursday that the three countries led what he described as an intense effort to convince US President Donald Trump not to attack Iran amid rising tensions over Tehran's crackdown on protests.

Another Gulf official confirmed the discussions while speaking to the news agency. "The Gulf trio led a long, frantic, diplomatic last-minute effort to convince President Trump to give Iran a chance to show good intention," the unnamed Saudi official was quoted as saying. Earlier in the day, Iran's envoy to Pakistan said Trump had conveyed to Tehran that he did not intend to attack and had urged restraint, a claim that pointed to parallel diplomatic efforts to prevent escalation.

"The Gulf trio led a long, frantic, diplomatic last-minute effort to convince President Trump to give Iran a chance to show good intention," the unnamed Saudi

official was quoted as saying. Earlier in the day, Iran's envoy to Pakistan said Trump had conveyed to Tehran that he did not intend to attack and had urged restraint, a claim that pointed to parallel diplomatic efforts to prevent escalation.

He warned that if it was indeed true that the Arab position was that "action is

American blood on its hands. They are slaughtering people in the streets. If it... <https://t.co/A6bgczkb4q> — Lindsey Graham (@LindseyGrahamSC) January 15, 2026 Graham said such a stance would lead to "a dramatic rethinking" on his part about the nature of current and future alliances, underscoring growing unease in Washington over regional responses to the situation in Iran.

Trump later signalled a shift in tone, saying he had received assurances from what he described as "very important sources on the other side" that Iran would not carry out executions of demonstrators, a development he said had reduced immediate tensions. A second Gulf official said messages



not necessary against Iran" despite what he described as the "outrageous slaughter of innocent people," it would force a fundamental reassessment of alliances.

All the headlines suggesting that our so-called Arab allies have intervened on behalf of Iran to avoid decisive military action by President Trump are beyond disturbing. The ayatollah's regime has

conveyed to Tehran included a warning that any attack on US facilities in the Gulf would have consequences for Iran's relations with neighbouring countries. "It was a sleepless night to defuse more bombs in the region," the Saudi official said, adding that communication was continuing to consolidate trust and preserve what he described as a more positive atmosphere.

# Hubble Space Telescope spies dusty debris from two cosmic collisions

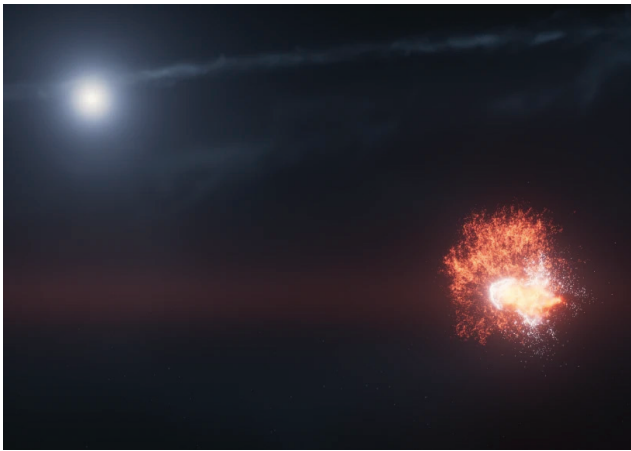
NEW YORK (AP) — NASA's Hubble Space Telescope got a rare look at the aftermath of two cosmic collisions — and helped scientists solve a decades-old mystery. Many years ago, scientists saw a dense, bright spot near a young star called Fomalhaut.

They thought it could be a planet and continued to track it. But in 2023, Hubble's pictures revealed something strange. The bright spot had vanished — and a new one had appeared — a sign that it wasn't a planet after all.

Scientists had stumbled on the dusty debris from two cosmic crashes.

Massive space rocks slammed together to create

clouds of dust that were thick enough to masquerade as collision were at least 37 miles (60 kilometers) wide. It's rare



planets. Over time, the remains spread out and eventually disappeared. Scientists think the space rocks involved in the

to capture such clashes on camera, especially since theories suggest they only happen in the same vicinity about once every 100,000

years. It's "highly unexpected" that this area "has now exhibited two, unique, massive collisions inside 20 years," said Joshua Lovell with the Harvard-Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics in an email.

He had no role in the study, which was published Thursday in the journal *Science*. The new observations could just be a lucky find. Or, they could mean that such smashups happen more often than scientists thought. It'll take more data to know for sure. Collisions of large space rocks are essential to how planets like ours form and what they're made of. Studying them is "like taking a toddler picture of our solar system," said astrophysicist Meredith

MacGregor with Johns Hopkins University, who was not involved with the study. Researchers plan to track the new dust cloud in the coming years to see how it changes and eventually disintegrates. The star near the collision site is in our cosmic neighborhood, just 25 light years from Earth. A light year is nearly 6 trillion miles. By keeping an eye on it, scientists are "catching these violent explosions in real time," said study author Paul Kalas with the University of California, Berkeley.

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# Starlink in the crosshairs: How Russia could attack Elon Musk's conquering of space

Two NATO-nation intelligence services suspect Russia is developing a new anti-satellite weapon to target Elon Musk's Starlink constellation with destructive orbiting clouds of shrapnel, with the aim of reining in Western space superiority that has helped Ukraine on the battlefield. Intelligence findings seen by The Associated Press say the so-called "zone-effect" weapon would seek to flood Starlink orbits with hundreds of thousands of high-density pellets, potentially disabling multiple satellites at once but also risking catastrophic collateral damage to other orbiting systems.

Analysts who haven't seen the findings say they doubt such a weapon could work without causing uncontrollable chaos in space for companies and countries, including Russia and its ally China, that rely on thousands of orbiting satellites for communications, defense and other vital needs. Such repercussions, including risks to its own space systems, could steer Moscow away from deploying or using such a weapon, analysts said. "I don't buy it. Like, I really don't," said Victoria Samson, a space-security specialist at the Secure



World Foundation who leads the Colorado-based nongovernmental organization's annual study of anti-satellite systems.

"I would be very surprised, frankly, if they were to do something like that." But the commander of the Canadian military's Space Division, Brig. Gen. Christopher Horner, said such Russian work cannot be ruled out in light of previous U.S. allegations that Russia also has been pursuing an indiscriminate nuclear, space-based weapon. "I can't say I've been briefed on that type of system. But it's not implausible," he said. "If the

reporting on the nuclear weapons system is accurate and that they're willing to develop that and willing to go to that end, well it wouldn't strike me as shocking that something just short of that, but equally damaging, is within their wheelhouse of development." Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov didn't respond to messages from the AP seeking comment.

Russia has previously called for United Nations efforts to stop the orbital deployment of weapons and President Vladimir Putin has said Moscow has no intention of deploying nuclear space weapons.

## Weapon would have multiple targets

The intelligence findings were shown to the AP on condition that the services involved were not identified and the news organization was not able to independently verify the findings' conclusions. The U.S. Space Force didn't respond to e-mailed questions.

The French military's Space Command said in a statement to the AP that it could not comment on the findings but said, "We can inform you that Russia has, in recent years, been multiplying irresponsible, dangerous, and

even hostile actions in space." Russia views Starlink in particular as a grave threat, the findings indicate. The thousands of low-orbiting satellites have been pivotal for Ukraine's survival against Russia's full-scale invasion, now in its fourth year. Starlink's high-speed internet service is used by Ukrainian forces for battlefield communications, weapons targeting and other roles and by civilians and government officials where Russian strikes have affected communications. Elon Musk's SpaceX, which operates Starlink, did not respond to a request for comment.

Russian officials repeatedly have warned that commercial satellites serving Ukraine's military could be legitimate targets. This month, Russia said it has fielded a new ground-based missile system, the S-500, which is capable of hitting low-orbit targets. Unlike a missile that Russia tested in 2021 to destroy a defunct Cold War-era satellite, the new weapon in development would target multiple Starlinks at once, with pellets possibly released by yet-to-be launched formations of small satellites, the intelligence findings say.



# Call Forwarding, QR Codes, WhatsApp Rentals, How Cyber Fraudsters Are Exploiting New Tactics

**Call forwarding scams begin with a call or message that appears harmless. Victims are told their SIM needs 'verification', their number will be 'blocked', or KYC is 'incomplete'**

India's cybercrime landscape is undergoing a dangerous shift. Fraudsters are no longer relying only on suspicious links, fake bank calls, or cloned UPI handles. Instead, they are turning ordinary phone features and familiar social platforms into weapons, often without victims realising anything is wrong until the damage is done. In November, a 36-year-old man from Secunderabad lost Rs 2.47 lakh after receiving a deceptive text message purportedly from a DTDC courier. After the first couple of failed delivery attempts, the man clicked on the link for the third delivery attempt. But a



barrage of messages popped up on his phone, asking for a One-Time Password (OTP). Within minutes, he received alerts from his bank that Rs 2.47 lakh had been spent on his credit card without authorisation. The victim locked his credit card through the banking app and lodged a formal complaint with the bank. A recent advisory from the Indian Cyber Crime Coordination Centre (I4C) flags how fast these tactics are evolving. What makes these scams effective is not sophisticated hacking, but the repurposing of everyday actions, such as dialling a code, scanning a QR, responding to a WhatsApp message, into gateways for identity takeover and financial fraud. How The Threat Has Changed From Phishing To Phone Control For years, cybercrime awareness focused on obvious red flags: unknown links, spelling errors, or requests for OTPs. While those scams still exist, criminals have adapted to a more digitally aware population. Today's fraud relies less on deception through fake websites and more on exploiting trust in built-in systems. Telecom features, designed for convenience, have become a soft target. Social media platforms, built for connection and monetisation, are now recruitment grounds for crime networks. The result is a new category of fraud that feels legitimate at every step, until it is too late.

**What Is The Call Forwarding Scam?**

At the centre of this shift is the call forwarding scam, one of the most damaging and least understood frauds currently circulating. It usually begins with a phone call or message that appears harmless. Victims are told their SIM needs "verification," their number will be "blocked," or their KYC is "incomplete." The solution offered is simple: dial a short code, often a USSD command (dialling \*72 or \*401#), to "fix" the issue. "Most Indian users use smartphones; they are very rarely aware of the USSD

features on telecom networks, which were primarily designed for mobile phones and now work on smartphones too. The scam abuses USSD call-forwarding codes — sequences like 21(number)# that legitimately redirect your incoming calls to another number. So, when a victim is tricked to dial a USSD code sequence on the pretext of dialling a number, he is not aware of the outcome like call forwarding or diverting... And worse is, many people don't even know how to switch it off,"

said cyber security expert Jiten Jain, who is also a director at Voyager Infosec. USSD codes are not malicious by default. They are legitimate telecom commands used for services like balance checks, call forwarding or voicemail activation. But when a user dials a call-forwarding code provided by a scammer, all incoming calls, including those from banks, payment apps and government services, can be silently redirected to a criminal's number. Once call forwarding is active, the fraudster does not

need to hack anything. OTPs, verification calls, and security alerts reach them directly. Accounts are reset, passwords changed, and financial transactions approved, all while the victim's phone remains operational but effectively sidelined. What makes this scam especially dangerous is its invisibility. Many users don't realise call forwarding has been enabled. They only notice something is wrong after bank balances disappear or accounts are locked.

**Why Call Forwarding Works So Well For Indian Users**

The success of this scam lies in how familiar and low-risk the action feels. Dialling a code does not trigger the same alarm bells as clicking a suspicious link. There is no app download, no permission pop-up, and no visible sign of compromise. Social engineering fills the gap. Fraudsters exploit authority—posing as telecom staff or service providers, and urgency, often threatening service disruption. In a country where SIM connectivity is essential for banking, work, and daily life, users are more likely to comply quickly.

## Apple Chooses Google's Gemini AI For Siri In Major Shift From In-House Strategy

In a significant breakthrough, tech giants Apple and Google on Monday announced a multi-year partnership under which Apple's next-generation artificial intelligence features, including its Siri digital assistant, will be powered by Google's Gemini technology. In a joint statement, the companies said Apple selected Google's AI platform after a "careful evaluation" found it to be the "most capable foundation" for the iPhone-maker's future AI plans. "After careful evaluation, Apple determined that Google's AI technology provides the most capable foundation for Apple Foundation Models and is excited about the innovative new experiences it will unlock for Apple users," the statement said. The collaboration marked a notable shift for Apple, which has traditionally relied on in-house development for its core technologies. It represented a rare alliance between two companies that have long competed in the smartphone market, where Apple's iOS and Google's Android operating systems

dominate globally. Despite their competition, the companies have maintained a long-standing commercial relationship, with Google paying Apple billions of dollars annually to remain the default search engine

dominate globally. Despite their competition, the companies have maintained a long-standing commercial relationship, with Google paying Apple billions of dollars annually to remain the default search engine



on Apple devices. That arrangement has faced scrutiny from regulators, with the US Justice Department arguing in an antitrust case that the deal helps Google maintain its search monopoly, though a judge said the arrangement could continue. Financial terms of the new AI partnership were not disclosed. Analyst Dan Ives of

Wedbush Securities described the collaboration as a "major validation moment for Google" and said it would help Apple get its AI strategy back on track in the coming years. Apple had reportedly explored partnerships with other AI firms, including OpenAI, Anthropic and Perplexity, as it sought to strengthen its artificial intelligence capabilities, news agency AFP reported. The company has faced criticism for lagging behind rivals in rolling out AI features and recently announced the departure of the head of its AI team.

An upgraded version of Siri, delayed last year, is now expected later this year. Despite the partnership, Apple said its in-house system, Apple Intelligence, will continue to power on-device AI features across iPhones and iPads, ensuring what it called "industry-leading privacy standards," even as Google's Gemini supports more advanced AI functions.

# You Can Live And Work Visa-Free In This Village In Europe, But Cannot Be Buried

Have you heard of a place where births and burials are forbidden? Well! That's the rule in the last village of the world, Svalbard. Surrounded by snow-capped mountains, the village is located in the middle of the Arctic Ocean, around 930 km north of mainland Norway and only 650 km from the North Pole. Due to its location, the village experiences the midnight sun 24/7 in the bright half of the year, and in the other half, it remains engulfed in darkness. But flickering Northern Lights keep adding a mesmerising touch to almost a pitch-dark sky.

Have you heard of a place where births and burials are forbidden? Well! That's the rule in the last village of the world, Svalbard. Surrounded by snow-capped mountains, the village is located in the middle of the Arctic Ocean, around 930 km north of mainland Norway and only 650 km from the North Pole. Due to its location, the village experiences the midnight sun 24/7 in the bright half of the year, and in the other half, it remains engulfed in darkness.

But flickering Northern Lights keep adding a mesmerising touch to almost a pitch-dark sky. The lowest temperature recorded in this place was -43°C in March 1986, and the highest temperature recorded was 21.7°C in July 2020. Svalbard usually experiences harsh weather conditions.

Due to extreme cold, bodies cannot decompose; hence, people who are critically ill or even bedridden are required to leave the island and fly to mainland Norway. Not just that, but Radhika Nomllers, a travel blogger, shared that there are no retirement homes in Svalbard. In fact, when residents can no longer work or live off their salaries, they must relocate. "It is built for the young, the working, and the resilient, not for retirement," read her caption. When it comes to healthcare, the world's last village has limited medical facilities.

Health professionals can only consult for basic health concerns. In case of pregnancy, complications can arise anytime during the delivery, which the facilities cannot handle. Therefore, expecting mothers often fly to Oslo or Tromsø in Norway to give birth. But if you can look beyond this rule, it is believed to be one of the safest places on Earth. Crimes are rare

here, so much so, people hardly lock their doors and even leave their bikes outside. Anyone Can Live And Work In Svalbard Without A Visa, But There Is A Catch According to the Nordic Co-operation, Svalbard, despite geographically being a part of Europe, is not a part of the Schengen co-operation, and travellers, therefore, need neither a visa nor a work or residency permit to stay there. As long as you can prove your identity with a passport while flying or sailing in and out of the village, you can enter its premises.

The Norwegian Immigration Act does not apply to the northernmost settlement in the world because it has a special status in international law through the Svalbard Treaty of 1920. As long as you can support yourself and find work here, you will be welcomed with open arms and icy winds (depending on the weather).

But India is not on that list.



Hence, Indians need a Schengen visa to visit Svalbard. And since you need a visa, it must be valid for the round trip. You must have a valid permit for two entries in your visa, making it legal and

hassle-free for you to return to the Schengen area (mainland of Norway) post spending time in Svalbard. According to the official website of the Governor of Svalbard, foreign nationals

staying and working in the village can submit applications for visas to the Schengen areas and Norway to the Governor, who also accepts applications for residence and citizenship.

## The cheapest places Americans can travel in 2026 — without sacrificing the fun

**Affordable travel is still possible in 2026. New Skyscanner data shows Americans can find roundtrip flights for a few hundred dollars—or less—by staying flexible on destinations and travel dates.**

**Timing matters more than you think. Wednesday is the cheapest day to fly on average in 2026, reinforcing that midweek travel can unlock meaningful savings.**

**Booking smart can stretch your budget further. Jumping on deals early, using price alerts, and keeping an open mind about where to go can make a big difference in what you pay.**

With the holidays behind us and a fresh year ahead, many Americans are already dreaming about their next getaway — but actually choosing where to go (and how much it will cost) isn't always easy. That's where new data from Skyscanner comes in. The report takes a closer look at the cheapest destinations Americans can fly to in 2026, along with the most budget-friendly days of the week to travel.

The findings push back on the idea that travel is only getting more expensive — and show that a little flexibility with timing and destination can go a long way. ConsumerAffairs spoke with Lourdes Losada, Director of the Americas for Skyscanner, who encourages travelers to stay open-minded, as that's how you get rewarded with surprisingly affordable options you may not have considered before.

"The biggest takeaway is that affordable travel in 2026 is achievable if travelers stay flexible and use data to guide decisions," Losada said. "Many Americans assume flights will be expensive, but Skyscanner's data shows there are still incredible deals

available, sometimes starting under \$50 roundtrip. Being open to alternative destinations, traveling midweek, and using tools such as price alerts can make a big difference in stretching travel budgets."

### Cheapest travel locations

To create the top 10 list, experts at Skyscanner evaluated round-trip flights booked on the site between January 1, 2025 and October 31, 2025, for travel between January 1, 2026 and December 31, 2026. Here's the full list: Las Vegas, Nevada Average Roundtrip Flight Price: \$232 San Salvador, El Salvador Average Roundtrip Flight Price: \$282 Miami, Florida Average Roundtrip Flight Price: \$284 Average Roundtrip Flight Price: \$329 Orlando, Florida Average Roundtrip Flight Price: \$353 San Juan, Puerto Rico Average Roundtrip Flight Price: \$365 Punta Cana, Dominican Republic Average Roundtrip Flight Price: \$375 Mexico City, Mexico Average Roundtrip Flight Price: \$402 Cancun, Mexico Average Roundtrip Flight Price: \$411 Milan, Italy Average Roundtrip Flight Price: \$559 Flying cheaper In addition to the top 10 list, Skyscanner looked at

other aspects of travel that can help consumers get the best deal. "One of the most surprising findings is that Wednesday, not Tuesday or Monday, is the cheapest day to fly on average in 2026," Losada explained.

"Only a quarter of Americans expected that result. "While prices still vary by route and time of year, this reinforces the idea that midweek travel often delivers better value and that checking flexible date tools can uncover savings people might otherwise miss." Lock in deals early If you're looking to get away, Losada encourages consumers to jump on deals that they find, as they may not be around for too long.

"Waiting too long can mean missing out on price drops and lower fares that appear earlier in the booking window," she said. "With only about half of travelers having booked flights so far, those who delay risk paying more as demand increases, especially for popular routes and peak travel months. Setting price alerts and monitoring fares early gives travelers the best chance to lock in deals when prices dip.



# Trying to improve your health and wellness in 2026? Keep it

The new year is a time when many try to start new good habits and commit to improving health and wellness. But resolutions, lofty as they may be, can turn daunting quickly with all the advice and sometimes contradicting information coming at you from news reports, advertisers, influencers, friends and even politicians.

## But they don't have to be.

This year, The Associated Press got the downlow on all manner of health and wellness claims and fads. The good news is that the experts mostly say to keep it simple. As 2026 arrives, here's what you can skip, what you should pay attention to and how to get credible information when you are inevitably faced with more confusing claims next year. Protein and fiber are important, but you probably don't need to pay more. When it comes to your diet, experts say most people can skip the upcharge. If you're eating enough, you're probably getting enough protein

and don't need products that promise some big boost. And it's true that most people could use more fiber in their diets. But, please, ditch the "fiber-maxing" trend. Instead, eat whole foods such as fruits, vegetables, beans and whole grains. A good skin care routine is not expensive or complicated. That 20-step skin care routine and \$200 serum some TikToker sold you on? Dermatologists say you really don't need it. Stay away from the beef tallow and slather on a good

sunscreen instead (yes, even if you have darker skin), they say. This article is part of AP's Be Well coverage, focusing on wellness, fitness, diet and mental health. Read more Be Well. And the same rule for simplicity applies to that hourlong "everything shower." The best showers are simple and short, dermatologists say, no "double cleansing" required. There are many simple ways to get that workout in. If the gym and all its equipment feel intimidating, you



can drop the illusion that a good workout requires either. This year, the comeback of calisthenics put the focus back on no frills, bodyweight workouts you can do in the comfort of home. Research shows calisthenics helps with muscle strength and aerobic conditioning. You may eventually need weightlifting or other equipment, but it is a great place to start to build consistency and confidence. Be wary of wellness fads and treatments — they are

often too good to be true. Even if you imbibe too much this New Year's Eve, doctors say you can do without "IV therapy" which have vitamins you can get more easily and cheaper in pill form — if you even need more, which is unlikely if you have a balanced diet. You're pretty much just paying for "expensive urine," one doctor said. Same for "wellness" focused products like microbiome testing kits that generate information that doctors can't actually act on. And if you

don't have diabetes, there's scant evidence that you need a continuous glucose monitor. To improve your health, go back to the basics. The idea of a panacea pill, product or routine can be enticing. But science already knows a lot about how to improve mental and physical health, and they are tried and true: 1. Whether you're in the city or the country — walk more. Research shows walking is great for physical and mental health. It's so good for you, doctors are literally prescribing time in the outdoors to their patients. 2. Take steps to get certain health metrics under control, like high blood pressure, which often goes undiagnosed and is known to cause a range of health problems down the road. Prioritize getting enough sleep, and make sure your family does too. Don't just eat right — eat slower.

## Sleep patterns could predict risk for dementia, cancer and stroke, study suggests

New developments in artificial intelligence could use sleep data to predict disease risk, a new study suggests. Stanford Medicine researchers have developed an AI model trained on nearly 600,000 hours of sleep data collected from over 60,000 participants at various sleep clinics. The model, called SleepFM, reportedly can predict a person's risk of developing more than 100 health conditions, according to a press release from the university. The researchers trained SleepFM using polysomnography, a comprehensive sleep measurement that tracks brain and heart activity as well as breathing, leg movements and eye movements. It is considered the "gold standard" of sleep studies, they noted. "Sleep contains far more information about future health than we currently use," James Zou,

Ph.D., associate professor of biomedical data science and co-senior author of the study, told Fox News Digital. "By learning the language of sleep, our AI

The model analyzed 1,000 disease categories in those health records and discovered 130 diseases that it could predict with "reasonable accuracy,"

mortality. The model's predictions were particularly strong for cancers, pregnancy complications, circulatory conditions and mental disorders, the researchers noted. "It doesn't explain that to us in English," Zou noted. "But we have developed different interpretation techniques to figure out what the model is looking at when it's making a specific disease prediction." The findings from the study, which was partly funded by the National Institutes of Health, were published in the journal *Nature Medicine*.

### Limitations and caveats

Dr. Harvey Castro, a board-certified emergency medicine physician and national speaker on artificial intelligence based in Dallas, commented on Stanford's AI sleep tool in a statement to Fox News Digital. "A significant signal doesn't

equal ready medicine," said Castro, who was not involved in the study. "SleepFM is a breakthrough, not yet a bedside tool." The expert also emphasized that while the tool ranks risk, it can't necessarily predict that disease will occur. "Ranking risk isn't the same as predicting outcomes, and patients live in outcomes," he said. Before the tool can be used in "real life," it must be proven to work outside the lab, according to Castro. Other limitations include the fact that the team used "multi-modal sleep recordings" that retrieve very strong signals from the brain, heart and respiratory system. The researchers hope to extend the research to collect data from patients using wearable devices, which could help pinpoint exactly what the model is interpreting. For now, the technology is only being tested in research settings and is not available to consumers.



model opens new doors for studying the science and medicine of sleep," he added, noting that humans spend about one-third of their lives sleeping. In the study, the team paired the sleep data with the participants' electronic health records, which provided up to 25 years of data.

according to the release. "By analyzing a single night of sleep with powerful AI, we found that patterns in sleep can predict the risk of over 100 different diseases years before diagnosis," Zou said. Those included dementia, heart disease, stroke, kidney disease and even overall



# Diet-Friendly Rice: 4 Varieties That Won't Make You Put On Extra Pounds

In India, rice is more than just a staple; it is a vital part of our culture. Yet, when people begin a weight loss journey, the first thing they often do is cut rice from their diet, believing it to be the culprit behind weight gain. But is rice really the enemy? Both Ayurveda and modern science suggest the answer is not so simple. (Local18)



**Brown Rice - Fibre-Rich And Filling:** Unlike white rice, brown rice is minimally processed. Its outer layer remains intact, rich in fibre, vitamin B, and minerals. With a low glycemic load, it releases sugar slowly into the bloodstream, keeping you full for longer and helping prevent overeating. (Local18)



**Red Rice - The Metabolism Booster:** Red rice is especially beneficial for those aiming to lose weight. Its red hue comes from the antioxidant anthocyanin. Ayurveda notes that red rice purifies the blood, balances internal heat, and boosts metabolism, helping convert stored fat into energy. (Local18)



**Black Rice - The Ancient Superfood:** Highly valued in ancient times, black rice contains more antioxidants and fibre than other varieties. It supports weight loss, reduces inflammation, and protects against heart disease. Low in calories but rich in nutrition, it is a favourite among fitness enthusiasts. (Local18)



**Black Rice - The Ancient Superfood:** Highly valued in ancient times, black rice contains more antioxidants and fibre than other varieties. It supports weight loss, reduces inflammation, and protects against heart disease. Low in calories but rich in nutrition, it is a favourite among fitness enthusiasts. (Local18)



# Chicken With Skin Or Without? Which One Is Actually Healthier

Chicken is one of the most loved foods among non-vegetarians, finding its way onto plates as curry, fry, or grill almost every week. For many, a meal simply doesn't feel complete without it, but a common health question still divides opinion: should chicken be eaten with the skin or without it?



**Why is Chicken Considered Healthy?**  
Chicken is popular because it is low in fat, high in protein, and contains certain 'good' fats that the body needs. This makes it a staple in many balanced diets, especially for those focused on fitness or muscle building.



**What About Chicken Skin?** Chicken skin is quite different from the meat itself. According to nutritionists, nearly three-quarters of chicken skin is fat. However, most of this fat is unsaturated, which is considered beneficial. Unsaturated fats help support heart health and assist in controlling cholesterol levels.



Eating chicken with the skin significantly increases calorie intake. For instance, around 170 grams of skinless chicken provides roughly 280 calories, most of which come from protein. The same quantity with skin contains about 380 calories, as fat is also a major source of energy. This difference can matter depending on your health goals.



**What is the Best Way to Eat Chicken?** Cooking chicken with the skin on and removing it afterwards is often considered the best option. This method enhances flavour while reducing the amount of fat absorbed during eating.

**Who Should Avoid Chicken Skin?**  
People trying to lose weight, or those with heart disease, diabetes, or high cholesterol, are generally advised to choose skinless chicken. It is a safer and lighter option for such conditions.



**Storage And Safety Tip:** Once chicken is fully cooked, it can be refrozen safely, as the cooking process destroys harmful bacteria.



Whether you eat chicken with or without skin should depend on your health, lifestyle, and dietary goals. When consumed in moderation and prepared properly, chicken remains a well-balanced and nutritious food.



# 50% or 75%? How much US tariff could India face after Iran move

The concern centres on a proposed 25% US tariff on nations maintaining commercial ties with Iran. While a 25% levy may appear manageable on its own, market participants fear it could be imposed over and above existing duties, taking the total tariff burden to as much as 75%.

The concern centres on a proposed 25% US tariff on nations maintaining commercial ties with Iran. While a 25% levy may appear manageable on its own, market participants fear it could be imposed over and above existing duties, taking the total tariff burden to as much as 75%. According to Kranthi Bathini, Director of Equity Strategy at WealthMills Securities, the tariff move is already creating pressure on markets globally and in India. "The tariff impact and the US administration's increase of tariffs for countries dealing with



Iranian exports and imports is creating pressure on the markets," Bathini said. He pointed out that India has traditionally had strong bilateral trade ties with Iran, particularly in the energy sector. "India imports oil from Iran, and in the past, some payments have also been adjusted in rupee terms," he said, explaining why India often gets pulled into discussions whenever Iran-related sanctions tighten. Bathini believes that while the announcement may trigger immediate volatility, the longer-term impact

may be far less severe. "With the current US administration imposing sanctions on Iran and proposing around 25% tariffs on

countries dealing with Iran, there will be a knee-jerk reaction in trade and markets," he said. However, he added that global conditions could soften the blow. "Given the glut in global oil supply and increased supply from Venezuelan oil, the long-term impact could remain neutral," Bathini noted, adding that clarity is expected only in the next couple of weeks as details emerge.

## 50% OR 75% TARIFF?

Explaining why the numbers being

discussed are so high, Akshat Garg, Head of Research and Product at Choice Wealth, said the proposed tariff is not a standalone measure. "The proposed 25% tariff is a secondary trade measure aimed at pressuring countries that continue commercial engagement with Iran," Garg said. He explained that this tariff is separate from existing duties and could be layered on top of them. "If implemented as an additional levy, it could be stacked on top of prevailing tariffs," he said. "For countries already facing 50% duties, this would significantly raise the effective trade cost, potentially pushing total tariffs to very high levels," Garg added. He stressed that the intent behind such measures is strategic rather than purely economic. "The aim is to raise the price of non-compliance with US foreign policy," he said, warning that such steps can disrupt global supply chains, raise import costs and heighten geopolitical tensions.

## WHAT THIS MEANS FOR INDIAN MARKETS

Bathini said Indian markets are currently in a consolidation phase, and tariff headlines are adding to uncertainty rather than setting a clear trend. "Markets are in a consolidation phase at this point in time, and we are in the earnings season right now," he said. "Earnings season will lead stock prices, and the upcoming budget will also give direction to the market." By and large, he said, "Indian markets are in a buy-on-dips and sell-on-rallies kind of phase." Experts say much will depend on how the US actually implements the tariff, whether exemptions are offered, and how India navigates ongoing trade negotiations with Washington. For now, the talk of 50% or 75% tariffs has injected uncertainty, but it remains a risk rather than a certainty. Investors are advised to watch for policy clarity, earnings trends and budget signals before drawing conclusions on the long-term impact. In the near term, tariff headlines may drive volatility, but fundamentals are expected to matter more once the dust settles.

## India's basmati exporters worry as political turmoil grips Iran

India's basmati rice exporters are facing fresh uncertainty as political unrest in Iran continues to disrupt trade. Once the largest buyer of Indian basmati, Iran has seen its demand weaken over the years, and the latest turmoil has added to exporters' worries.

### IRAN WAS ONCE A KEY BUYER

For many years, Iran was among India's most important markets for agricultural products, especially basmati rice. However, protests against the country's leadership and growing external pressure have unsettled trade flows. What was once a stable and dependable market is now showing signs of strain. A few years ago, Iran topped the list of buyers of Indian basmati. Today, it has slipped to the third position. Exporters fear that if the situation does not improve soon, shipments could fall further in the coming months.

### PAYMENTS STUCK,

### EXPORTERS ON EDGE

The biggest concern for exporters is delayed payments. Several Indian rice exporters have reported that their money is stuck, with consignments lying at Iranian ports. In response, the Indian Rice Exporters Federation has issued an advisory, asking exporters to be extra cautious while dealing with buyers in Iran. Industry estimates suggest basmati consignments worth over Rs 1,500 crore are currently held up, putting pressure on cash flows and increasing business risk.

### A MAJOR MARKET UNDER STRESS

According to official data, India exported agricultural products worth Rs 8,897 crore to Iran in 2024–25. Basmati rice alone accounted for Rs 6,374 crore of this amount. Iran's share in India's total basmati exports stands at around 12.7%, but this is expected to decline further.



Rising inflation and a sharp fall in the value of Iran's currency, the rial, have reduced the purchasing power of importers. This has made it harder for them to pay Indian exporters on time.

### CURRENCY FALL AND GLOBAL PRESSURE ADD TO PROBLEMS

The steep fall of the Iranian rial against the US dollar has worsened the situation. Many importers are struggling to arrange funds, leading to delayed or cancelled deals. The

pressure has increased further after the US announced a 25% tariff on countries trading with Iran. If exports remain disrupted for a long period, rice millers in Haryana and Punjab are likely to feel the impact first. Lower demand could eventually affect farmers as well, with prices coming under pressure.

### EXPORTS ROSE EARLIER, BUT OUTLOOK IS WEAK

Interestingly, basmati exports to Iran were higher in

the first part of the current financial year. Between April and November 2025–26, India exported 5.99 lakh metric tonnes of basmati rice to Iran, compared with 4.95 lakh metric tonnes in the same period last year. However, exporters expect shipments between December 2025 and March 2026 to suffer due to ongoing unrest. With uncertainty around payments, many exporters are reluctant to take fresh risks.



# Indian fashion shines at Golden Globe Awards

Indian fashion made a powerful statement at the Golden Globe Awards 2026, commanding attention on one of the world's most glamorous red carpets. From sculptural couture to opulent high jewellery, designers Gaurav Gupta and Sabyasachi Mukherjee enjoyed standout moments as global celebrities embraced Indian craftsmanship at the coveted event. Delhi-based couturier Gaurav Gupta brought his signature drama to the red carpet with a striking emerald green gown worn by Queen Latifah. The fluid ensemble, rich in colour and movement, showcased Gupta's unmistakable design language - subtle sculpted details paired with a free-flowing drape. Meanwhile, Sabyasachi Mukherjee's high jewellery creations influence. Jennifer Lopez, who has sparked across the evening, further increasingly gravitated towards the label, cementing the designer's global dazzled in a pair of statement earrings



heritage craftsmanship with contemporary glamour. Kristen Bell also turned to the celebrated designer for accessories, pairing an edgy black gown with statement earrings crafted in 18k gold, featuring aquamarine, kunzite and brilliant-cut diamonds. The jewellery lent a vibrant contrast to her ensemble. Adding a touch of old-Hollywood romance to the night, Parker Posey appeared in a ruffled mustard-coloured gown styled with sheer black opera gloves. She completed the vintage-inspired look with statement jewellery pieces by Sabyasachi, including a necklace crafted in 18k gold with morganite, pearls and brilliant-cut diamonds. Matching earrings and a bold ring featuring sapphire diamonds added to the layered opulence of her ensemble.

## Is this Jennifer Lawrence's boldest look yet? A naked dress at Golden Globes



into the humour and vulnerability that have become central to her appeal as a style icon. Speaking to Entertainment Tonight on the red carpet, Lawrence said she was fully prepared to enjoy the night in the look. "I'm gonna

hang," she said. "I'm naked! I might as well." The last time Jennifer Lawrence went this risqué was back in 2017, at the London premiere of *Mother!*, when her distressed Atelier Versace Fall 2017 couture dress

left fans wide-eyed. Nearly a decade later, her Golden Globes appearance may have outdone it — at least, that's what everyone seems to be saying. You can take your pick.

## Naked dresses, bobs, bejewelled thong and more from fashion at the Globes 2026

The first major red carpet of the year delivered a clear message: fashion in 2026 is unapologetically dramatic.

The 83rd Golden Globe Awards, held in Beverly Hills, California, on January 11, set the style agenda for the months ahead as Hollywood's biggest stars stepped out in high-impact looks. From Selena Gomez and Miley Cyrus to Jennifer Lopez, George Clooney, Adam Brody, and Timothee Chalamet, the guest list was as dazzling as the fashion on display. Priyanka Chopra Jonas brought blue glam in a custom Dior creation, while Jennifer Lopez wore a bit of India with her statement Sabyasachi earrings. Across the red carpet, sleek monotone gowns, bold jewellery, and razor-sharp bob haircuts emerged as key trends. But it was the bolder fashion risks - sheer naked dresses and even a bejewelled thong - that truly defined the night. Here are the top trends we spotted and loved at The Globes 2026:

### Naked dresses

Racy naked dresses stole the show at the Globes this year. Jennifer Lopez and Jennifer Lawrence fronted this tried-and-tested red carpet

trend. JLo's pick for the glamorous night was a vintage Jean-Louis Scherrer sheer gown with



contrasting red accents teamed with a glorious pair of earrings by Indian designer Sabyasachi. Jennifer Lawrence, on the other hand, turned heads in a see-through Givenchy dress, featuring a pink tulle base enlivened with floral embroidery.

### Black magic

The most dramatic looks from the 2026 Golden Globes were cloaked in black magic. From Teyana Taylor's sensational black Schiaparelli gown - complete with a bejewelled thong detail - to the striking monochrome ensembles worn by Jenna Ortega, Ariana Grande, Miley Cyrus, and Ana de Armas, the night's standout fashion moments leaned into the timeless sartorial power of black.

Is this Jennifer Lawrence's boldest appearance yet? That's certainly what fashion insiders seem to think. At the 83rd Annual Golden Globe Awards in Los Angeles, J-Law turned heads in what many are already calling her most daring look so far: a sheer, floral-embroidered gown that leaned into the "naked dress" trend, but with a whimsical couture twist.

### A style departure worth talking about

If you follow Lawrence's fashion journey, you'll know she's long been a Dior loyalist. This awards night, however, she switched things up, stepping out in Givenchy by Sarah Burton. The gown was nearly transparent, embroidered with delicate pink, ivory, and green floral appliques that strategically covered key areas while leaving plenty to the

imagination. A matching floral-patterned shawl added texture and a touch of drama, elevating the look from merely risqué to thoughtfully styled couture. That said, the outfit wasn't just about the barely-there factor. Cutouts at the waist and thin straps gave the silhouette a floaty, ethereal quality. She accessorised with a sleek diamond necklace and studs, paired with an embellished clutch to finish the look. Her jewellery was from Longines. Besides, her outfit also boasted a pillow-like shawl with similar floral motifs, except its satin pink base appeared completely opaque.

### A memorable moment?

What made the moment even more memorable was Lawrence's own take on the outfit. She joked to the press that she "knows she's naked" in the gown, leaning

# Why 37 per cent of Indian daters are choosing the 'Sunset Clause'

Are you on a dating app? Does it feel like the search for a good companion or partner is taking forever? You're not alone. The feeling is common, and this year, many daters are seeking more clarity. According to a recent survey by Indian dating app QuackQuack, 37 per cent of daters across metros and suburbs are now adopting what's being called a "sunset clause" — a clear, time-bound plan for how long they'll stay on dating apps before reassessing or exiting altogether. The survey, conducted among 7,583 active users aged 22–35 from Tier 1, 2 and 3 cities, reflects a dating culture that's increasingly self-aware and less patient with ambiguity.

## The sunset clause

The idea is simple: dating apps are no longer a background activity you mindlessly scroll through between meetings or



before bed. Singles across Tier 1, 2 and 3 cities are deciding upfront how long they want to actively date online — most commonly six months to a year, or "until I meet the right one." The shift reflects a growing awareness around time, emotional energy and burnout.

Nearly 28 per cent of respondents said that having a mindful exit plan actually led to faster and more meaningful matches, because conversations became more intentional and less performative.

## Ambition matching

Alongside the "sunset

clause", 41 per cent of daters in 2026 say career pace, ambition and work-life balance play a key role in choosing a partner. As careers take up a growing share of everyday life, many daters now see alignment on ambition and work rhythms as a necessary conversation, not an

optional one. When nostalgia becomes a love language For millennials above 30, the future looks a lot like the past. Three in five millennial daters from Tier 1 and 2 cities are bonding over shared nostalgia — 90s and early-2000s music, pop culture, childhood rituals, and pre-social-media dating norms.

## Connection reviews

Perhaps the most interesting shift? Dating check-ins. About 18 per cent of women and 11 per cent of men between 25 and 35 now do intentional "connection reviews" every few weeks — evaluating communication, emotional satisfaction and whether expectations match reality. Taken together, these trends point to a dating culture that's finally moving away from endless ambiguity.

# Why alcohol hits your body harder as you age, even if you're drinking the same amount

Dry January is prompting many Americans to face the sobering reality that their bodies may no longer shrug off a night of drinking as they used to — and experts say the shift often begins earlier than expected. Many people feel the difference as early as their late 30s and early 40s, according to Dr. Meena Malhotra, an Illinois-based internal medicine and obesity physician.

"The body processes alcohol differently even if the diet or the habits haven't changed," Malhotra told Fox News Digital. "As we age, body composition shifts. Liver enzymes, for example, slow down and hydration levels change, too." The liver becomes less efficient at breaking down alcohol, allowing it to remain in the bloodstream longer and raising blood alcohol levels from the same amount of drinking.

People typically lose lean muscle and gain more body fat with age, which also changes how alcohol is processed in the body, Malhotra added. For women in menopause, hormonal

changes can further intensify alcohol's effects and slow recovery. While the change might be gradual, it is real, according to Derek Brown, a Washington, D.C.-based veteran mixologist and National Academy of Sports Medicine

mass and lower total body water can make alcohol more concentrated in the bloodstream. While overall energy metabolism can remain stable from young adulthood through about age 60, it tends to slow more noticeably after

people drinking the same amount, even at "normal" levels. The idea that hangovers worsen with age is nearly universal, but Brown points out that the science is more nuanced. Harvard Health has reported similar findings, noting that

points out that the science is more nuanced. "Anecdotally, I know many of us feel that hangovers get worse, and [research suggests] one possible mechanism: We become more sensitive to pain as we age." "With children, early mornings and high-pressure jobs, feeling lousy has a greater impact on your life," Brown added. "That may be part of why it feels subjectively worse, even if the hangover isn't always worse itself." Malhotra agreed that midlife hangovers often feel worse because the body is less resilient. "Alcohol is inflammatory, and inflammation increases with age," she said. "Sleep quality is already poorer, dehydration hits harder and blood sugar regulation isn't as strong. All of that adds up to headaches, fatigue and body aches that last longer." Alcohol also disrupts sleep more in midlife, a problem compounded by age-related changes in REM and deep sleep, The New York Times recently reported. Beyond hangovers and poor nights' sleep, doctors warn that alcohol carries greater long-term risks with age.



wellness coach. "The same amount of alcohol can lead to a higher blood alcohol concentration and greater impairment," Brown told Fox News Digital.

He said reduced muscle

that, meaning some people clear alcohol from their system more slowly as they age. Harvard Health has reported similar findings, noting that older adults reach higher blood alcohol concentrations than younger

older adults reach higher blood alcohol concentrations than younger people drinking the same amount, even at "normal" levels. The idea that hangovers worsen with age is nearly universal, but Brown



# Rani Mukerji's Mardaani 3 release moved ahead: Cop drama to arrive on January 30



Actor Rani Mukerji's crime-thriller *Mardaani 3* has been moved ahead to January 30, 2026.

The new poster of the film reveals her racing against time hunt to rescue missing girls. The film's poster released by Yash Raj Films on its Instagram handle read, "She won't stop, until she rescues them all! #RaniMukerji is back as the fearless cop Shivani Shivaji Roy in #Mardaani3. Rescue begins in cinemas near you on January 30, 2026." Rani

resumes the character of SP Shivani Shivaji Roy in the third installment.

The makers are pegging this film to be a bloody, violent clash between Shivani's goodness vs sinister evil forces as she begins an extraordinary race against time hunt to rescue scores of missing girls from the country. Rani had earlier revealed that the edge-of-the-seat thriller is going to be 'dark, deadly and brutal' and it had immediately piqued curiosity amongst fans of the

franchise. *Mardaani 3* is directed by Abhiraj Minawala and has been produced by Aditya Chopra. While *Mardaani* (first film) tackled the grim realities of human trafficking, *Mardaani 2* explored the chilling mind of a psychotic serial rapist who dared to

challenge the system. *Mardaani 3* delves into a dark, brutal reality of our society, continuing the franchise's legacy of gripping, issue-based storytelling. Rani was last seen in Ashima Chibber's legal-drama *Mrs Chatterjee vs Norway* (2023). The

film also features Anirban Bhattacharya, Neena Gupta and Jim Sarbh in pivotal characters. The movie was co-produced by Monisha Advani, Madhu Bhojwani and Nikkhil Advani. Rani also received her National Film Award for the film in 2025.

## Khosla Ka Ghosla 2: Anupam Kher reunites with OG cast as film goes on floors

Actor Anupam Kher has revived excitement around *Khosla Ka Ghosla 2* after sharing photos with the original cast and a note reflecting his enthusiasm for the upcoming sequel. The announcement was

made on Instagram and included images with Ranvir Shorey, Parvin Dabas, and Kiran Juneja, all of whom starred in the 2006 film. The release has prompted speculation about the direction of the story and the roles of both returning and new cast members, as the sequel brings back several familiar faces to the screen. Kher's social media post attracted attention from fans of the original film, which gained a cult following for its comedic storyline and memorable performances. The actor wrote, 'KHOSLAS ARE BACK AND HOW: I have been

in movies now for four decades.' He continued, 'But never have I experienced this crazy anticipation for the sequel of any movie (including International) as in the case of



#KhoslaKaGhosla2! Kher's remarks underscore the enduring popularity of the original and the heightened expectations surrounding the sequel.

In addition to bringing back the core cast, Tara Sharma, who appeared in the first film, is also set to return. The new

film will see the actors reprising their roles as members of the Khosla family, with the inclusion of Ravi Kishan as a recent addition to the ensemble. These developments have added to fan curiosity, with many eager to see how the new storyline will unfold and what changes the new cast member will bring to the familiar dynamic.

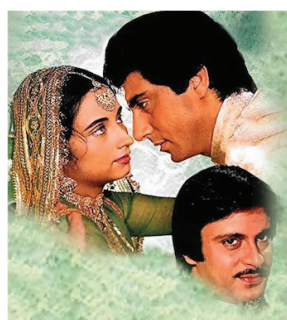
## Haq vs Nikaah: Why 2025 film on triple talaq couldn't match 1982 hit's success

Indian cinema has long engaged with social reform, often holding up a mirror to uncomfortable realities. Few subjects have been as sensitive — or as contested — as triple talaq (talaq-e-biddat), a practice that existed within Muslim personal law for decades.

Over the years, filmmakers have approached this issue in very different ways, shaped largely by the social and political climate of their time. A comparison between B.R. Chopra's *Nikaah* (1982) and Suparna Verma's *Haq* (2025) reveals not a hierarchy of success or failure, but two distinct cinematic responses to the same issue, separated by more than four decades.

The classic film *Nikaah*, released in 1982, brought triple talaq to mainstream attention and was a resounding success. The film was originally titled *Talaq-Talaq-Talaq*, but was changed following objections and advice from Muslim organisations.

It was said that uttering these



three words dissolves a marriage. In today's social and political climate, where triple talaq was outlawed in 2019, it is interesting to compare these two films. When *Nikaah* released in 1982, it was a pioneering film.

Directed by BR Chopra, who was known for embedding social concerns within mainstream storytelling, the film followed Nilofar (Salma Agha), a young woman whose marriage collapses after her husband impulsively pronounces triple talaq. Through her journey — including a second marriage and



the complicated possibility of reconciliation — *Nikaah* questioned not just triple talaq, but also practices like halala, which placed women in deeply vulnerable positions.

At the time, these conversations were largely absent from public discourse. The Shah Bano case was still a few years away, and women's rights within personal laws were rarely debated openly. *Nikaah* brought these issues into drawing rooms through emotional storytelling, memorable music, and strong performances. Salma Agha's songs, including Dil

Ke Armaan Aansoon Mein Beh Gaye and Fiza Bhi Hai Jawan Jawan, played a major role in the film's recall value, while the narrative ensured that its social message reached audiences beyond urban centres.

Even the film's title became part of the conversation. Originally titled *Talaq-Talaq-Talaq*, objections from Muslim organisations led to several name changes before *Nikaah* was finalised.

The revised title helped broaden the film's acceptance, allowing its message to resonate across communities. While rooted in a Muslim woman's experience, the emotions it evoked were universal — abandonment, dignity, and the search for justice.

*Haq*, released in 2025 and directed by Suparna Verma, emerged in a different time. The film is inspired by the Shah Bano case, focusing on Shazia Bano (played by Yami Gautam Dhar), a woman who seeks

maintenance after divorce when her husband remarries and withdraws support. When Shazia turns to the courts, her husband attempts to end the matter through triple talaq, prompting a legal and moral battle. Unlike *Nikaah*, *Haq* operates in a post-legislation landscape. Triple talaq was declared unconstitutional in 2017 and criminalised in 2019, fundamentally altering the nature of the debate. As a result, *Haq* approaches the subject less as an emotional revelation and more as a legal and constitutional exploration. The film draws extensively from Quranic verses, particularly Surah At-Talaq, emphasising that divorce is meant to be a considered process rather than an act of anger. Critics responded positively to this approach, praising the film's restraint and legal clarity. Many noted its focus on jurisprudence, compassion, and constitutional values rather than sensationalism.



# O'Romeo teaser: Shahid Kapoor steps into a brutal, vengeance-driven tale

Shahid Kapoor is set to bring love wrapped in violence with his upcoming film O'Romeo. The film is set to mark his reunion with acclaimed filmmaker Vishal Bhardwaj, promising a powerful revenge romance inspired by true events. Adding to the growing anticipation, the makers have unveiled a striking teaser of the evocative world of O'Romeo, offering audiences their first glimpse into its intense emotional landscape and eclectic ensemble.

Set against the backdrop of unrequited love, O'Romeo stars Shahid and Triptii Dimri in a deeply emotional and turbulent narrative that explores passion, pain, and



the irreversible denied. The film also boasts cast featuring Nana Patekar, the consequences of love an extraordinary ensemble Avinash Tiwary, Disha

Patani, Farida Jalal, Aruna Irani, Vikrant Massey, and Tamannaah Bhatia in a special appearance. Each performer brings a distinct presence and intensity, enriching the narrative and adding depth to this layered and compelling story.

The clip elevates expectations, hinting at a bold and emotionally charged cinematic experience. With a stellar cast and Vishal Bhardwaj's signature storytelling at its core, the film promises a distinctive take on love, loss, and vengeance. Produced by Nadiadwala Grandson Entertainment, O'Romeo is set to release in Valentine's Week on February 13.

## Malaika Arora on Arjun Kapoor's importance in her life, new link-up rumours



Malaika Arora recently spoke about her relationship with ex-partner Arjun Kapoor. The 52-year-old reflected on Arjun's place in her life, and also commented on the speculations of having what the media call a 'mystery man' in her life. Speaking on The Namrata Zakaria Show, Arora shared her thoughts on how the scrutiny around her relationships and rumours have shaped her approach to life and privacy. Reflecting on her connection with Arjun Kapoor, the actor and reality show judge spoke about the range of emotions experienced during and after relationships. She said, "I think anger and hurt exist at a particular phase or time in your life, and I think everybody does. We are humans, we all go through phases of anger and being upset, disappointed."

That's just human nature. But as you go along, as time goes on, and the most cliched line is – time heals all." Arora acknowledged that Kapoor still holds significance for her. She explained, "It's not different. But, irrespective, whatever may be, I think he is somebody who is so very important to me and someone who is such an integral part of my life."

Whatever may be. I don't really want to talk too much about my past or what my future may be enough and more has been written about it. Enough and more has been splashed all over, kind of become a bit of a media feeding ground sort of space."

When asked about her link-up rumours with a new man, Arora dismissed the reports, suggesting the speculations are nothing new. Discussing the scrutiny that follows her in public, she recounted how speculation arises each time she is seen with someone. She said, "People like talking.



#Dadication



# Border 2 trailer: Sunny Deol brings scale and sacrifice in multi-front war drama

The makers of *Border 2* released the film's trailer on Thursday evening. Starring an ensemble cast of Sunny Deol, Varun Dhawan, Diljit Dosanjh and Ahaan Shetty, the Anurag Singh directorial chronicles India's 1971 war against Pakistan.

Unlike the 1997 film *Border*, the second instalment in the franchise focuses on how the Indian Armed Forces united to wage war on all fronts -- air, sea and land. The trailer was unveiled on Army Day, serving as a tribute to the valour of the Indian Armed Forces and setting the stage for one of the most anticipated cinematic experiences of the year.

The three-minute-and-35-second video opens with sweeping battle visuals -- battalions charging forward, naval forces dominating the seas, and high-octane action

sequences led by Diljit Dosanjh. It then shifts to the backstories of the three protagonists, showing moments of light-hearted family banter, promises of return, and warnings issued to the enemy before they head into combat. mid the grandeur, Sunny Deol commands attention with hard-hitting dialogues and a towering screen presence. At one point, he picks up a phone, and tells a Pakistani, "Hume kya haraoge.

Arey tumhare Pakistan me itne log nahi jitne humare yahan Eid par bakre kaate jate hain" - loosely translated to "How will you defeat us? You don't even have as many people in Pakistan as the number of goats slaughtered here during Eid."

The trailer also offers glimpses of Mona Singh, Anyaa Singh, Sonam Bajwa and Medha Rana, highlighting the emotional

**Border 2 trailer: The trailer for the Anurag Singh directorial was released on Army Day, showcasing India's 1971 war across land, sea and air, with Sunny Deol, Varun Dhawan, Ahaan Panday and Diljit Dosanjh.**



battles faced by India's jawans as they fight at the border. order 2 is presented by Gulshan Kumar & T-Series in association with JP Dutta's J.P. Films. Directed by Anurag Singh, the film is set to storm cinemas on January 23 as this year's big Republic Day release.

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