

# The South Asian INSIDER

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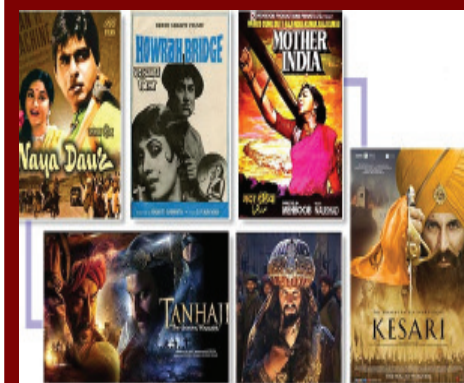
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## RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat votes in Nagpur, urges everyone to exercise their 'right and duty'



(News Agency)-The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) Sarsanghchalak Mohan Bhagwat voted at a polling booth near Reshimbagh, here on Friday morning. The RSS chief was among the earliest to arrive at a polling station. He waited for nearly 15 minutes before the polling started, entered to cast his vote and emerged soon thereafter, displaying his inked left-hand forefinger with pride. Interacting with media persons, he said that he had done his first personal duty for the day and called upon all the people to cast their vote since as citizens, saying "it's their right as well as a duty".

"All people must go out and vote in the interest of the nation... Through your vote, you decide the future of the country for the next five years. There should be 100 per cent voting, and hence everybody must cast their votes in the interest of the country," the RSS chief said. In Nagpur, Union Minister Nitin Gadkari is contesting against INDIA-MVA-Congress nominee Vikas Thakare. The first phase of the Lok Sabha elections started in five constituencies — Nagpur, Chandrapur, Bhandara-Gondiya, Ramtek (SC) and Gadchiroli-Chimur (ST) — at 7 a.m. with thousands trooping out to vote.

## 50 pc booths being monitored through webcasting in UP



(News Agency)-The Election Commission of India (ECI) is monitoring polling on 50 per cent of the booths through webcasting. Additionally, the ECI has deployed 1,510 video teams at the polling booths, as stated by the chief electoral officer (CEO). The commission has established 111 model polling stations, with 45 booths managed by women personnel, 36 by youths, and 32 by differently-abled staff. Arrangements including wheelchairs and volunteers have been made for people with disabilities, CEO Navdeep Rinwa said. The security of the strong rooms, where

electronic voting machines (EVMs) will be stored after polling, will also be handled by the CPMF. Rinwa further noted that air ambulances and helicopters have been stationed in Moradabad and Bareilly to transport security personnel in case of emergencies. In order to maintain vigilance, the ECI has assigned six general observers, five police observers, 10 expenditure observers, 1,272 sector magistrates, 150 zonal magistrates, 103 static magistrates, and 1,861 micro observers across the eight constituencies, Rinwa added. Voters can lodge complaints on 18001801950 as well as on the C-Vigil App.

## LS polls: PM Modi to campaign in UP, MP and Maharashtra today



(News Agency)-Prime Minister Narendra Modi will campaign for Lok Sabha poll candidates of the NDA in Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, and Maharashtra on Friday. The Prime Minister is scheduled to address public meetings in Uttar Pradesh's Amroha at 10:15 a.m., Madhya Pradesh's Damoh (2 p.m.), and Maharashtra's Wardha at 5:15 p.m. Major political developments that will unfold across the country today: \* BJP President J.P. Nadda will hold three roadshows and a public meeting in Kerala on Friday. His roadshows are slated in Wayanad at 11 a.m., Kottayam (3:05 p.m.), and Thiruvananthapuram (6:15 p.m.). The BJP chief will address a public meeting in Palakkad at 1:05 p.m.

\* Union Home Minister Amit Shah will visit Rajasthan on Friday to address a public meeting in Pali at 4 p.m. and hold a roadshow in Udaipur at 6:30 p.m. \* Congress President Mallikarjun Kharge will address a public meeting in Bihar's Bahadurganj on Friday at 12 noon. \* BSP supremo Mayawati will address an election rally in Madhya Pradesh's Rewa on Friday. \* Former Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister and Samajwadi Party President Akhilesh Yadav will address a public meeting in Gautam Buddha Nagar's Sikandrabad on Friday for INDIA bloc candidate Mahendra Singh Nagar. \* Congress leader Sachin Pilot will campaign at Rajasthan's Sawai Madhopur for party candidate Harish Meena.



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# Amit Shah bats for UCC, asks should the country be run on Sharia

**Union Home Minister Amit Shah said all democratic countries in the world have a Uniform Civil Code and the time has come for India to do the same.**

(News Agency)- New Delhi : Union Home Minister Amit Shah has reiterated the BJP's promise to implement a Uniform Civil Code (UCC) across the country if it wins a third straight term at the Centre, arguing that no democratic country has personal laws.

In an exclusive interview with India Today TV, Amit Shah said, "Should the country be run on the basis of Sharia? On the basis of personal law? No country has ever run like that. There are no personal laws in any democratic country in the world. Why is it there in India?" Implementing the Uniform Civil Code in the country is among the main poll promises made



by the BJP in its manifesto for the Lok Sabha elections.

Amit Shah said all democratic countries have a Uniform Civil Code

and the time has come for India to do the same. He also said the UCC was a promise made by the Constituent Assembly to the country when the

Constitution was being drafted. The Home Minister attacked the Congress for its criticism of the Uniform Civil Code and said, "In a secular country, should there not be one law for everyone? This is the biggest sign of secularism. Congress is not afraid of polarisation. It is indulging in engagement politics and wants to consolidate whatever vote bank it has left." He also added that the Congress failed to keep the promise made by the Constituent Assembly due to "vote bank" politics. Amit Shah said after the implementation of the Uniform Civil Code in Uttarakhand, there will be a debate on the law from a "social, judicial and parliamentary point of view".

## Manipur records turnout of over 69% amid gunfire, vandalism, in first phase of polls

**There have been at least two incidents of gunfire close to polling stations in Manipur during the first phase of Lok Sabha elections for the two constituencies in the state on Friday.**



(News Agency)- Several incidents of violence, including gunfire and damaging EVMs, were reported during the first phase of Lok Sabha elections in Manipur on Friday.

A turnout of 69.13 per cent was recorded in the first phase of elections in the state, news agency PTI reported.

There have been at least two incidents of gunfire close to polling stations in the valley, which has been rocked by ethnic violence over the last year. In one of the incidents, a man was injured following a fire incident at a polling booth in Moirangkampu Sajeb Awang Leikai in Imphal East. Later, the polling station was vandalised and the EVMs were set

on fire. The injured man, Khoisnam Sayamaima, 65, has been admitted to the hospital. In another incident, a group of miscreants fired several rounds near a polling station in Thamanpokpi in Moirang Assembly segment in Bishnupur district. No casualties were reported in the incident. A video of the incident shows people running out of the polling booth amid the sound of gunfire. Manipur chief electoral officer Pradeep Kumar Jha confirmed that an EVM was damaged in Thongju in Imphal East. There has also been vandalism in at least one more polling station, in Uripok in Imphal West. He said that they have received complaints from some polling

stations in Imphal West of people intimidating voters and agents, and attempting to capture booths. Manipur went to polls for the Inner and Outer

Manipur constituencies on Friday. Elections are scheduled in some areas in Outer Manipur constituency in phase two of the elections on April 26 as well.

## Post Article 370 abrogation, first outsider to contest Lok Sabha polls in J&K

(News Agency)- Punjab resident Baldev Kumar has become the first person from outside Jammu and Kashmir to contest Lok Sabha polls in the Union Territory after the abrogation of Article 370 in 2019. Kumar (67), a resident of the Naya Gaon area of Mohali in Punjab, filed his nomination papers from the Anantnag-Rajouri Parliamentary constituency as an independent candidate on Friday. He is among 25 candidates who are in the fray from the constituency, which will go to polls on May 7. Kumar claimed that he decided to contest the polls on the insistence of a "large" number of local people whom he has "served for the last 20 years".

"I worked for the people during the 2014 floods, I have sponsored the education of a number of students, I have facilitated patients from Kashmir when they went to Punjab for medical check-ups and kept a kothi (house) for them where they can stay when they go there for treatment,"

Kumar told PTI. Baldev Kumar said he has been requesting the administration to build a 'Kashmir Bhawan' in Punjab, especially for the patients, but to no avail. "Medha Patkar (Activist) got 20 acres of land for her NGO from the Gujarat government but I have not been allotted even two acres for a Kashmir Bhawan for the patients from J&K. "The people have told me that I have to be in power and only then can I build a Kashmir Bhawan. So, I decided to contest the polls," he said. Asked if he has Jammu and Kashmir's domicile certificate, he said, "I have no domicile as I have not stayed in one place". Kumar is the first non-resident person to contest polls in Jammu and Kashmir after the abrogation of Article 370 and bifurcation of the erstwhile state on August 5, 2019. In the 2019 Lok Sabha polls, NCR resident Shams Khwaja contested, and lost the polls from the erstwhile Anantnag Parliamentary constituency.



# In a first, UP govt prepares question banks for students

(News Agency)-- In a first, the Uttar Pradesh (UP) basic education department has prepared question banks for more than 25 lakh students of classes 9 and 10 studying in more than 27,000 schools affiliated with the UP Board. These question banks aim to enhance students' preparation for competitive examinations such as engineering and medical entrances.

The National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT), New Delhi, along with the State Institute of Science Education (SISE) and subject experts from select universities, colleges, and secondary schools, has jointly prepared these question banks for science and mathematics, according to officials of the state secondary education department. Former state project director of Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan, Vijay Kiran Anand, had entrusted the responsibility of creating the



question banks to the State Science Education Institute, Prayagraj, officials said. Manjusha Gupta, the science coordinator at SISE-Prayagraj, said that 12 and 13 chapters had been included in the science question bank of classes 9 and 10, respectively.

Each chapter comprised around 70 questions, including various

multiple choice, very short, short, and long answer questions of cognitive, perceptual, applicational, and skill types. Thus, there was a compilation of about 840 questions for class 9 and another 910 questions for class 10 students, she said. All the questions in the question bank will reinforce the vital concepts of science in the

students, and they will be able to understand and practice them automatically, she said.

SISE-Prayagraj's mathematics coordinator, Arvind Kumar Gautam, said that the mathematics question bank for classes 9 and 10 consisted of 12 and 14 chapters, respectively. There was a compilation of approximately 912 questions for class 9 and 1,064

questions for class 10 students. At the beginning of each type of question, sample questions had also been given to generate interest among the students, he added.

The question banks prepared based on the NCERT syllabus have been sent by SISE-Prayagraj to the State Council of Educational Research and Training (SCERT) of Uttar Pradesh in Lucknow.

They are expected to become available to students soon. At present, only question banks prepared and published by private publishers are available in the market.

These question banks aim to provide practice opportunities to achieve desired teaching-learning outcomes and assist students in succeeding in exams. Undoubtedly, these exercises will help clarify concepts among students and enhance their understanding of the subjects.

## First phase of LS polls: Will Modi-Yogi popularity override caste equations in UP?

(News Agency)-The wave of Prime Minister Modi's popularity, Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath's stern dealing with the law & order situation and the euphoria over the Ram temple has started overriding the caste equations in Uttar Pradesh. The state has always witnessed the caste factor come into play whenever elections are to be held, but now it is the popularity of PM Modi and CM Yogi Adityanath that is overtaking all other issues.

In the first phase of elections in western UP, where normally the voting pattern of Muslims and Dalits decides the fate of candidates, this time there is a palpable difference because all that seems to be working is the Modi and Yogi factor.

The performance of Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) candidates in this phase will also decide the party's future.

The BSP has tweaked its strategy when it fielded candidates from castes who, otherwise, are believed to be the core voters of the BJP but apparently, candidates are unable to wean away these votes from the BJP's bag. For example, in 2014, Muzaffarnagar was won by BJP's Sanjeev



Baliyan by a low margin of 6,400 votes, and Meerut was won by BJP's Rajendra Agrawal by a margin of around 4,700 votes. In Muzaffarnagar, where the Muslims form around 30 per cent of the electorate, the BSP has fielded Dara Singh Prajapati, an OBC hoping to corner the votes of his community as well as the party's traditional Dalit community.

However, the BJP has gained ground in both these constituencies and caste factors have receded into the

background.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's rally in Meerut and Yogi Adityanath's rally in Muzaffarnagar has turned the tide completely in BJP's favour.

In Meerut, the BSP has Deovrat Tyagi, a Brahmin against BJP's Arun Govil, who played Lord Rama in the serial 'Ramayana'. The BSP nominee is eyeing the support of around 50,000 'Tyagi' voters in Meerut, apart from Dalit and Muslim votes, but sources claim that upper castes and Dalits are preparing to vote for

BJP this time.

In an interesting development, this time, the Muslim mood towards the BJP has also softened to an extent and even Dalits are veering towards BJP after being disillusioned by Mayawati's indecision.

Observers believe that, unlike Assembly elections, the Muslim voters will be more tactful this time. They will not blindly choose between the BSP and the SP-Congress alliance but will weigh the benefits they have received from the BJP governments at the

centre and state.

Haji Ikhlq, a trader in Meerut, says, "The BJP is no longer untouchable for us. We have received the benefits of their welfare schemes and there is no reason why we will not vote for them. Muslims are breaking the earlier mindset and the change will be visible in these elections." In the 2014 Lok Sabha polls and 2017 Assembly elections, the minority voters supported candidates of both SP and BSP leading to the division of votes. The BJP got the maximum number of 71 Lok Sabha in 2014 and 312 Assembly seats in 2022. In 2022, the minority vote consolidated towards the Samajwadi Party, but it could not cross the 112-seat mark.

It is only the Jatavs among Dalits in the west UP region who are likely to remain loyal to Mayawati. In Saharanpur, BJP's Raghav Lakhan Pal, a Brahmin is pitted against Congress-SP alliance candidate Imran Masood and BSP's Majid Ali, one of the richest candidates in the fray.

Imran Masood is facing a tough challenge from BSP, which could make it easier for BJP to sail through to victory.



# More rallies, roadshows planned for PM Modi in UP



Kunwar Danish Ali, who had won the seat in 2019 when BSP-SP-RLD had teamed up against the BJP, is now contesting the polls as the Congress candidate.

The Congress has a pre-poll pact with the Samajwadi Party for the 2024 Lok Sabha polls. PM Modi's rally in Amroha will back BJP candidate Kanwar Singh Tanwar, who had won the seat in 2014. The day after PM Modi's election event, Rahul Gandhi-Akhilesh Yadav will hold a joint rally in Amroha.

"The influence of the PM Modi's

rally could be assessed from the fact that after his rally, Samajwadi Party chief Akhilesh Yadav and BSP chief Mayawati too are scheduled to address rallies to counter PM Modi's impact," a senior BJP leader said.

After Amroha, PM Modi is again expected to be back with rallies for the Hathras and Aligarh Lok Sabha seats on April 22.

The BJP won both seats in 2019 and they have a substantial Dalit and minority population. The BJP has changed its sitting MP

Rajveer Singh Diler in Hathras, while in Aligarh, it has retained

its sitting MP Satish Gautam. This is likely to be followed by PM Modi's rally for party candidates in Agra and the adjoining Fatehpur Sikri Lok Sabha seats on April 25.

Both Agra and Fatehpur Sikri are set for a three-cornered contest. Agra has a substantial population of Jatavs — the Dalit subcaste to which BSP chief Mayawati belongs. It is also referred to as the "Dalit capital" due to the substantial presence of the community. Fatehpur Sikri has a substantial population of Other Backward Classes (OBCs).

## Three booked for murder of former MP Dhananjay Singh's ex-gunner

(News Agency)-A neighbour and his two friends have been booked for the murder of former MP Dhananjay Singh's ex-gunner Anish Khan in Uttar Pradesh's Jaunpur. Khan was killed on Tuesday evening. The gunner was a supporter of former MP Dhananjay Singh, who is now in jail.

The police said that Anish Khan had a dispute with his neighbour Pandu earlier on Tuesday, and, the latter shot him dead when he had gone to purchase some items from Rithi market near his house under Sikrara police station in the evening. The post-mortem report revealed that he was also stabbed several times with a sharp-edged weapon. A senior police official said the accused identified as Aniket and Prince have been named in the

FIR along with Pandu in connection with Anish Khan's killing.

He said the eyewitnesses informed police that Pandu opened fire on Khan while two others stabbed him multiple times. He

case, but it is yet to be ascertained what created differences between them.

He said the FIR has been lodged against the trio on the complaint of the deceased's wife Reshma Bano and further investigation is

going on. He said the police deployment continued in the locality for the second consecutive day to avert any law and order trouble during the election times. The incident took place around 2 km from Dhananjay Singh's



house in Bansafa village. The assailants fired at Khan after a short conversation and fled from the scene. Locals informed the cops about the incident and rushed Khan to a nearby hospital, where he was declared dead.

(News Agency)-Prime Minister Narendra Modi is set to hold a campaign blitzkrieg comprising several rallies and roadshows in western Uttar Pradesh in the coming days. The Prime Minister has already addressed three rallies in Meerut, Saharanpur and Pilibhit.

He is set to address at least four more rallies and a roadshow beginning April 19 from Amroha, a constituency due for polls in the second phase on April 26. Amroha is among the 16 Lok Sabha seats that the BJP had lost in 2019.

A senior party functionary said, "Each rally of PM Modi has the capacity to influence results in

not just that constituency but in adjoining regions, too, and that is why his rallies are planned in a way to maximise the reach."

Rallies of Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath, Union Home Minister Amit Shah and Defence Minister Rajnath Singh, too, are in great demand.

The BJP leader said, "It is difficult to accommodate all as there is a huge demand for PM Modi rallies from all 80 Lok Sabha seats. But he has to look after the entire country and that is why the attempt is to maximise the reach by arranging those rallies in a manner that benefits several candidates."

The sitting Amroha BSP MP

## Constituency Watch: Will Congress' Mansoor Ali Khan succeed in breaching BJP fortress in Bengaluru Central LS seat?



(News Agency)- Mansoor Ali Khan, son of former Union Minister K. Rahman Khan and the sole Muslim candidate not only from the Congress but from any major party in Karnataka in the coming Lok Sabha polls, has been fielded from Bangalore Central parliamentary constituency where he faces the challenging task of wresting the seat regarded as a BJP stronghold. While sitting BJP member P.C. Mohan has won the seat in the last three elections, the Congress, which won five out of eight Assembly constituencies that comprise the parliamentary constituency in the 2023 elections, is hopeful this time.

Making it more of a prestige issue is the fact that out of the five seats it holds are those won by Power Minister K.J. George, Health Minister Dinesh Gundu Rao, and Housing and Wakf Minister Zameer Ahmad Khan.

The Congress has tasked the ministers to ensure the victory of Mansoor Ali Khan but infighting hampered his campaign in the initial stages, including the absence of top leaders of the Congress at the time of filing of nomination.

Congress MLA from Shanthinagar Assembly constituency N.A. Haris was lobbying for the ticket for the seat for his son Mohammed Nalpad while Political Secretary to the Chief Minister Naseer Ahmed was also an aspirant, and both

remained aloof from the campaign earlier.

Apart from them, the three ministers also remained absent during the nomination, but cite the change of dates for filing of nomination as the reason. Sources within Congress say that the leaders are not happy with the choice of the candidate.

However, Mansoor Ali Khan is well educated and the trustee of KK Educational and Charitable Trust, established by his father, which has made significant contributions in the field of education. Taking up intensified campaigning in the constituency, he has been claiming that there has been no development there for 15 years now.



# With poll notification out, Telangana set for three-cornered fight

(News Agency)-The Election Commission on Thursday issued notification for elections to 17 Lok Sabha seats in Telangana along with by-election to Secunderabad Cantonment Assembly constituency on May 13, setting the stage for a three-cornered contest among the ruling Congress, opposition BRS and the BJP. With the issue of notification, the process of receiving nominations has been set in motion. April 25 is the last date for filing of nominations.

The scrutiny of nominations will be taken up on April 26 while the last date for withdrawal of candidatures is April 29.

Polling in all 17 Lok Sabha constituencies and for the by-election to the Secunderabad Cantonment Assembly seat will be held on May 13.

Polling in 104 Assembly segments in the state will be held from 7 a.m. to 5 p.m. while in the remaining 13 Left Wing Extremism (LWE) affected segments it will conclude at 4 p.m.



A little over 3.30 crore voters, more than half of them women, are eligible to cast votes in these elections.

In the 2019 elections, Bharat Rashtra Samithi (BRS) bagged nine Lok Sabha seats while the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) won four. The Congress party had captured three seats while All India Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen (AIMIM) had retained Hyderabad.

Fresh from its victory in the Assembly elections held in November 2023, the Congress party is looking to improve its performance this time. The party has set a target of 12 seats and it is hoping to capitalise on the defections of several leaders from BRS to the Congress camp during the last couple of months.

The BJP is also confident of improved performance following the good show in the Assembly

elections. The saffron party is looking to increase its tally to double digits. Jolted by the exodus of several leaders, including five sitting MPs, MLAs, and MLCs, the BRS will be facing an acid test in retaining the seats it won in 2019. In the Assembly elections, Congress had captured power by bagging 64 seats in the 119-member House. The BRS, which has been ruling India's youngest state since its formation 10 years

ago, won 39 seats. The BJP secured eight seats while the AIMIM retained seven seats. The CPI, an ally of Congress, was victorious in one constituency. Lasya Nanditha, BRS sitting MLA from Secunderabad Cantonment, died in a road accident in February, necessitating the by-election along with the Lok Sabha polls. The BRS also lost two sitting MLAs to Congress. One of them, D. Nagender is contesting as Congress candidate from Secunderabad Lok Sabha seat, where Union Minister and state BJP president G. Kishan Reddy is seeking re-election.

In Hyderabad, AIMIM president Asaduddin Owaisi will be locked in a direct fight with BJP's Madhavi Latha. Owaisi's party has been holding the seat since 1984. While BJP and BRS have announced candidates for all 17 seats, the Congress is yet to declare candidates for three seats — Khammam, Karimnagar and Hyderabad.

## LS polls: HM Amit Shah to campaign in Gujarat, BJP chief Nadda to visit Assam today

(News Agency)-Union Home Minister Amit Shah will campaign for the BJP in Gujarat on Thursday. He is scheduled to hold three roadshows and a public meeting in the state. The Home Minister will hold roadshows in Ahmedabad's Sanand and Vejalpur at 9:00 a.m. and 4:00 p.m. respectively, and in Gandhinagar's Kalol at 10:15 a.m. He will also address a public meeting in Vejalpur at around 8:00 p.m. Home Minister Shah is the BJP's candidate for the Gandhinagar Lok Sabha seat. Major political developments that will unfold across the country today: \* BJP President J.P. Nadda will campaign in Assam on Thursday. He will address public meetings in Kokrajhar at 11:50 a.m., Udalguri at 1:45 p.m., and Dudhnoi at 3:40 p.m. \* Congress leader Rahul Gandhi will address three public meetings in Kerala on Thursday. He is scheduled to hold public meetings in Kannur at 12 noon, Palakkad at 1:45 p.m., and in Kottayam at 3:30 p.m.



\* Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath will address election rallies in Bulandshahr at 1:45 p.m., Meerut at 3:05 p.m., and in Ghaziabad at 4:35 p.m. on Thursday.

Ajit Pawar-led NCP's Baramati candidate Sunetra Pawar and Supriya Sule of the Sharad Pawar-led NCP (SP) are slated to file their nominations and hold rallies in Pune on Thursday. The rallies will be attended by senior leaders from Mahayuti and MVA. Baramati will go to the polls on

May 7.

\* PDP President Mehbooba Mufti and National Conference (NC) senior leader Main Altaf will file nominations for J&K's Anantnag-Rajouri Lok Sabha seat on Thursday. \* Haryana Chief Minister Nayab Saini will hold a 'Vijay Sankalp' rally in Faridabad on Thursday at 9.30 a.m. \* RLD chief Jayant Chaudhary will hold a public outreach programme through 'Shakti Rath Yatra' in various areas of Uttar Pradesh's Baghpat on Thursday.

## Bengal LOP writes to Guv regarding violence over Ram Navami processions

(News Agency)-The Leader of Opposition (LOP) in West Bengal Assembly, on Thursday morning, informed that he has written a letter to West Bengal Governor C. V. Ananda Bose, and complained about the scattered events of violence in two pockets of the state since Wednesday evening, during the processions of Ram Navami. The LOP has accused West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee of provoking such instances of violence.

"I have written a letter to the Governor apprising him regarding the attacks on the Processions taken out on the occasion of Ram Navami on Wednesday, and requested him to immediately intervene in order to control the failing law and order situation, as well as getting the incidents investigated by the National Investigation Agency," the LOP said. In the letter to the Governor, a copy of which is available with VOICE, the LOP claimed that on Wednesday, violence broke out at Shaktipur in the Beldanga area of Murshidabad following pelting of

stones and hurling of bombs on a Ram Navami procession, resulting in injuries of some persons. "Similar incident has taken place at Egra, in East Midnapore district and already, five participants in the rally have



been severely injured and are receiving treatment at Egra Super Speciality Hospital," the letter read. In the letter, he has also accused the police personnel present there of remaining inactive and not taking action against the attackers.

However, as of now, neither there had been any reaction from the district administration of Murshidabad and East Midnapore nor from the ruling Trinamool Congress on the events of violence alleged by the LOP.



## Strategic Shift in Israel-Iran ‘Shadow War’

Israel this week launched two of the deadliest military strikes on the Iranian consulate in Damascus, increasing the frequency of Israeli-targeted killings on Iranian commanders. Seven members of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) were killed including Brigadier General Mohammad Reza Zahedi, who was a key link between the IRGC and Hezbollah.

For Iran, Israel is a “cancerous tissue” in the Middle East and the biggest problem facing the Muslim world. Since the formative years of the Khomeini’s regime, Tehran has called for the destruction of Israel. In fact, they named the IRGC Army the Quds (“Jerusalem”) Force, meaning liberating “Jerusalem”.

Syria and Iran have coalesced into an alliance since the Islamic revolution of Iran in 1979 which saw Ayatollah Khomeini’s regime replacing a pro-Western Shah’s government in Tehran. The partnership between Damascus and Syria was strengthened when Hafez-al-Assad’s son Bashar-al-Ashad ascended to the throne in the 2000s. Both regimes are anti-Western and contemptuous of the US’ presence in the Middle East. The alliance began to develop in the context of the Iraq-Iran war in 1988. In 2004, the countries signed an agreement for strategic cooperation followed by a mutual defence pact in 2006. SYRIA: HIGHWAY TO LEVANT

Syria is a vital ally for realising Tehran’s regional aspirations. Iran seeks to overhaul the regional order by replacing the US’ presence from the Middle East. As Tehran is unsuccessful in combating the US and Israel in a conventional war, it deploys the strategy of countering its adversaries through proxy organisations. Over the years, Tehran has developed a network of proxies across the Middle East, called ‘axis of resistance’ to confront the US and Israel. Syria has a geostrategic location in Tehran’s long-standing goals. Syrian territory provides Tehran access to its proxies like Hezbollah, PIJ and Hamas, allowing Tehran to transfer money, people and weapons. Iran has tremendously invested in Syria in terms of finance and human resources, which is an indication of the fact that Iran’s strategy in Syria is long-term. Syria has been Iran’s strategic partner in deterring Israel from attacking its proxies or attacking its nuclear program. AUGMENTING ASSAD: IRGC QUDS IN SYRIA

Tehran’s strategy is to consolidate Bashar al-Assad’s grip on Syria and keep supporting Tehran in realising its stated goal of kicking out the US. Iran has stabilised Assad’s regime through its Quds forces. IRGC-QF as well as the Iranian Intelligence Service agencies have trained and advised Assad’s security and military services. Iran began its military involvement in Syria in 2011 in the wake of the civil war.

In 2016, Aleppo fell to the Quds Force achieving Iran’s immediate objective of saving Assad’s regime. After victory in the Battle of Aleppo, Iran began establishing permanent bases in Syria to house Quds Force personnel and foreign Shia militias under its command. Iran’s strategy is to achieve a permanent military presence in Syria. So even if Assad’s regime falls in the wake of ongoing civil war, Tehran retains control over parts of Syria. The Iranian military facilities in Syria include general headquarters, regional command and control centres, intelligence cells, UAV battalions and runways, heavy equipment depots and other logistics facilities. The second component of the strategy is to consolidate the pro-government Shia militias in Syria. The Quds Force has launched a campaign dubbed as ‘Precision Project’ to upgrade the rockets and missile arsenals of the Shia militias, particularly Lebanese Hezbollah.

The extent of IRGC-QF involvement in Syria became clear in February 2013 when Iranian Brigadier General Hassan Shateri was assassinated in the Damascus countryside while travelling to Beirut. The presence of such a high-ranking commander inside Syria highlights Tehran’s commitment to achieving its objectives in the country, as well as its potential vulnerabilities, should Assad fall. The US military back in 2020 killed IRGC-QF Major General Qasem Soleimani in a targeted drone strike in Baghdad. Former Syrian Prime Minister Riad Hijab said in a news conference after his defection that “Syria is occupied by the Iranian regime. The person who runs the country is not Bashar al-Assad but Qasem Soleimani, the head of Iranian regime’s Quds Force”. ISRAELI RESPONSE: CAMPAIGN BETWEEN THE WARS

On September 7, 2017, Israeli fighter jets hit a “scientific research centre” (in reality, an Iranian weapons facility) in the city of Masyaf in Syria, marking the next phase of the “campaign between the wars” (known in Hebrew as m’aracha bein ha-milchamot or by the acronym mabam). Israeli military activity called ‘Operation Chess’ was limited to targeting Iranian facilities in Syria as well as its proxies like Hezbollah. Typically Israel has refrained from “high-value” targeted killings of Iranian liaison officers alone. But several new trends indicate a strategic shift in the Israeli approach to countering Iran in Syria to secure its northern border. Israelis are now more upfront than before in the offensive against the Quds Force in Syria. Israel on December 25, 2023, killed Iranian military officer Sayyed Razi Mousavi, south of Damascus in an airstrike. At the time of his death, Mousavi was described as Iran’s most influential military commander in Syria. In fact, over the past six months, 18 members of the Quds Force have been killed.

**By: Nishant Yadav**

## Companies are using inflation to price-gouge Americans – and making it worse

We learned this week that the Consumer Price Index climbed 3.5% in March from a year earlier, up from 3.2% in February, and faster than most economists anticipated.

This poses a conundrum for central bankers who have made it clear they want to see further evidence that inflation is cooling before they cut interest rates.

The Fed’s high interest rates haven’t pushed America to the brink of a recession, fortunately, but they haven’t slowed inflation as much as policymakers had hoped. The question is whether Fed officials can cut interest rates at all this year. Joe Biden acknowledged that “prices are still too high for housing and groceries”, and said he was “calling on corporations, including grocery retailers, to use record profits to reduce prices”.

What’s the president getting at?

Corporate profits reached a record high in the fourth quarter of last year. The easiest explanation for record corporate profits at the same time prices remain elevated is that corporations have enough monopoly power to keep prices high. (Note that many corporations are also shrinking the size of the products you’re buying without lowering their prices – a variant of the same thing.) This is one of the biggest reasons the American public is not yet crediting Biden with a great economy. Most people still aren’t feeling it. In 2023, PepsiCo’s chief financial officer said that even though inflation was dropping, its prices would not be. Pepsi hiked its prices by double digits and announced plans to keep them high in 2024. If Pepsi were challenged by tougher competition, consumers would just buy something cheaper. But PepsiCo’s only major soda competitor is Coca-Cola, which

—surprise, surprise—announced similar price hikes at about the same time as Pepsi and has also kept its prices high.

The CEO of Coca-Cola claimed that the company had “earned the right” to push price hikes because its sodas are popular. Popular? The only thing that’s popular these days seems to be corporate price gouging. We’re seeing this pattern across much of the economy – especially with groceries. At the end of 2023, Americans were paying at least 30% more for beef, pork and poultry products than they were in 2020. Why? Near-monopoly power. Just four companies now control processing of 80% of beef, nearly 70% of pork, and almost 60% of poultry. So of course it’s easy for them to coordinate price increases. The problem goes well beyond the grocery store. In 75% of US industries, fewer companies now control more of their markets than they did 20 years ago.

What should be done?

First, antitrust laws must be enforced. Kudos to the Biden administration for enforcing antitrust more aggressively than any administration in the last 40 years. This administration has taken action against alleged price fixing in the meat industry – which has been a problem for decades. The Biden administration has sued to block the merger of Kroger and Albertsons – two giant grocery chains. Kroger operates 2,750 stores in 35 states and the District of Columbia. The company’s 19 brands include Ralphs, Smith’s, King Soopers, Fred Meyer, Food 4 Less, Mariano’s, Pick ‘n Save, and Harris Teeter. Albertsons operates 2,273 stores in 34 states. Its 15 brands include Safeway, Jewel-Osco, Vons, Acme and Shaw’s. Together, Kroger and Albertsons employ around 700,000 people.

**By Robert Reich**



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# Story of Israel-Iran friendship shows the latest conflict is neither inevitable nor permanent

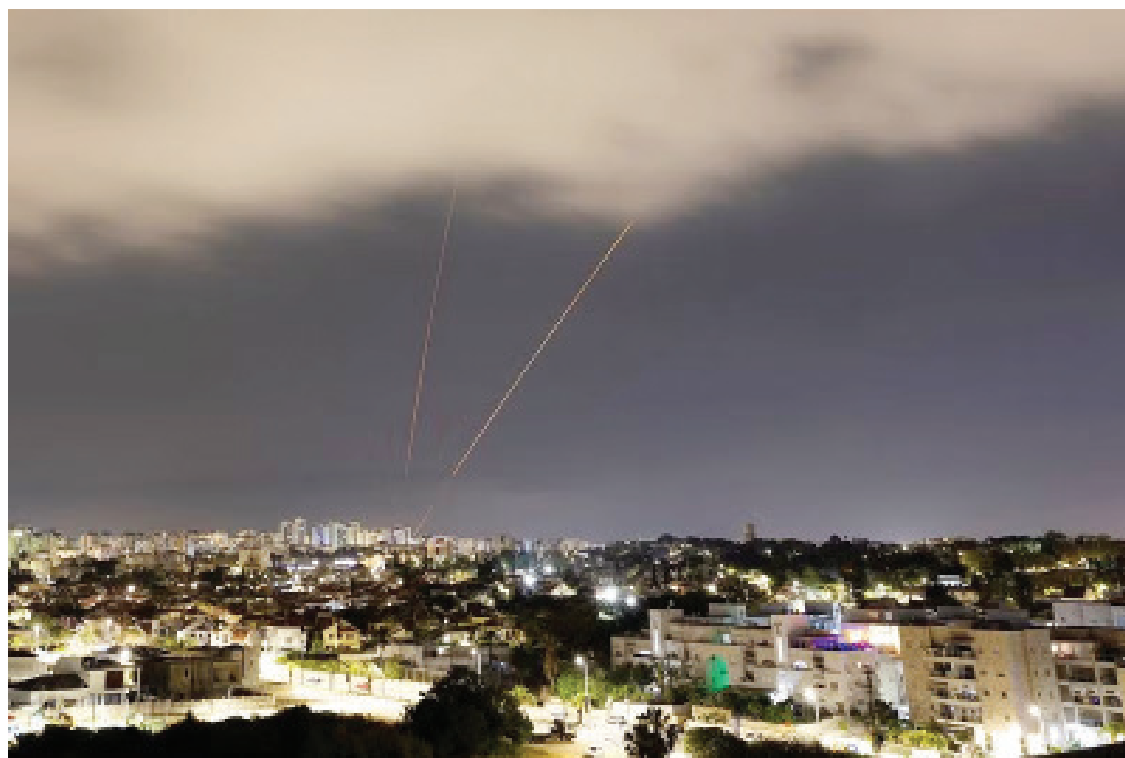
By PRAVEEN SWAMI

The story teaches us what happens when ideology and hubris overtake calm, rational decision-making based on national interests.

Looming over Tel Aviv from its perch on a low, dry hill north of the city, the guesthouse was equipped with the amenities of a five-star hotel: plush rooms, conference facilities, a kitchen with a full-time chef, swimming pool, gym and private movie theatre. Trident House made no effort to market its facilities, though. The Yellow Wing only served visitors from Turkiye's intelligence service, the Milli Istihbarat Teskilati or MIT. The Blue Wing was reserved for guests from the Sazmaann-e Ettelaat va Amniyat-e Keshvar, or SAVAK, the Shah of Iran's notoriously brutal espionage agency.

Today, as Iranian missiles and drones rain down on Israel—threatening to spark off a region-wide war with profound global consequences—it is hard to imagine that the two countries were once close allies. Israel's Mossad and SAVAK partnered with MIT in a kind of secret North Atlantic Treaty Organization called Trident, which surveilled the Mediterranean and the Middle East. Israel, scholar Trita Parsi records, even built the production facility at Sirjan and the test facility at Kharg island, which laid the foundations for Iran's guided missile programme as part of a \$280 million project code-named Flower. Israel's aid was intended to secure its ally from Saddam Hussein's Iraq and the Soviet Union. The story teaches us what happens when ideology and hubris overtake calm, rational decision-making based on national interests. However, it also offers hope, showing that the confrontation in the Middle East is neither inevitable nor permanent. The cynical politics that have led Iran and Israel to the edge of war do not reflect the true interests of either nation or of the global system in which they are both enmeshed. Israel's Iran romance

For decades before war erupted in Gaza, many experts had been predicting a showdown between the region's two major powers. Iran's pursuit of nuclear weapons



capabilities was a consequence of its theocratic regime's fears of being destroyed by the West. Iran, the United States' Defence Intelligence Agency noted in a review of the Islamic Republic's capabilities, also developed missile and access-denial tools needed to face down technologically advanced Western militaries, "aiming to raise the human and financial costs to a potential adversary to deter an attack".

Together with Iran's cultivation of irregular military forces like Hezbollah and Hamas, the accumulation of power by Tehran poses an existential threat to Israel. Ever since the revolution of 1979, the cleric who ruled Iran had made no secret of their loathing for Israel—the Jews, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini claimed, were seeking to obliterate Islam, necessitating war against their nation.

Iran did little, though, to act on the hostile polemic of its leadership—leading some in Israel to explore the possibility of a diplomatic opening. Early in the Islamic Republic's life, Iran's war with Iraq led Tehran into a desperate search for equipment to resupply its sanctions-hit military. Israel intelligence and political operatives, historians Farhad Razaee and Ronen Cohen record, reached out to Iranian moderates through the clandestine networks of international arms traffickers. From 1981 to 1983, Israel

secretly shipped \$500 million worth of parts for warplanes and tanks to Iran, in defiance of US sanctions—a relationship that would later mature into President Ronald Reagan's plan to funnel off a part of the profits to fund anti-communist insurgents in Nicaragua.

Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres wrote to Reagan in 1986, urging continued engagement with Iran despite its proxies kidnapping Americans in Lebanon: "It is my firm conviction that the fundamental change we both seek as to the direction of the country in which we are dealing, holds promise not only for our two countries but for many others in the region and in the free world." Ideologies and interests This belief was far from delusional: Ever since its independence, Israel had realised its near-neighbour shared a common interest in containing threats from the growing power of Arab nationalism. Iran had granted Israel

de-facto acknowledgement in 1950, and though it held back from formal diplomatic recognition, an embassy functioned from unmarked premises. Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir, among others, visited Iran secretly, landing in darkness at the Mehrabad airstrip outside Tehran.

Lawyer Eitay Mack, who studied Israel's declassified diplomatic documentation on its ties with Iran, discovered a

1967 appraisal by de-facto Ambassador Zvi Dorel: "We have established a close, friendly and practical partnership between the Israel Defence Forces and the security services and their Iranian counterparts, with joint execution of programmes and missions of national importance... Various security problems vital to Israel have been solved in close cooperation with the Iranians."

Enmeshed geopolitical events, though, led this nascent Iran-Israel détente to implode. The levelling of Saddam Hussein's regime in the First Gulf War of 1990 removed the mutual security threat that had led Israel and Iran to seek accommodation in the first place. The disintegration of the Soviet Union also reassured Iran it no longer faced the risk of an invasion targeting its oilfields in the province of Khuzestan.

From 1992, as news of Iran's nuclear ambitions began to emerge and the Israeli-Palestinian peace process bogged down, Tel Aviv started to isolate its sole remaining military threat in the region. Following 9/11, Iran sought to break the impasse, routing secret peace proposals through Tehran-based Swiss diplomat Tim Guldinmann. In return for civilian nuclear technology and an end to sanctions, the Iranians offered to stop supporting terrorist groups and terminate its production of weapons-grade uranium.

The proposals were ignored by US President George Bush, who

cast Iran as part of an "Axis of Evil" targeted for regime change. Later, the idea would be revived by President Barack Obama, forming the core of the Iran nuclear deal, but remained stalled in the face of resistance from Israel and the Republicans in the United States.

The failure of isolation

Israel's successful isolation of Iran, though, hasn't brought it security. Instead, Israel remains vulnerable to Iranian affiliates like Hamas, journalist Amos Harel noted last month, having secured few of its strategic aims in a war that increasingly appears unwinnable. This month's bombing of Iran's diplomatic mission in Damascus, and the inevitable Iranian response, might have allowed Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to draw the US deeper into the conflict. It will not, however, address Israel's vulnerability to rocket attacks from Iranian proxies like Hezbollah.

Even though many in Israel consider the prospect of an Iranian atomic weapon enough to justify the costs of war, nuclear warfare scholar Kenneth Waltz has argued mutual deterrence will, in fact, make Middle East wars less likely—thus addressing Tel Aviv's existential fears.

Iran, isolated and desperate to secure deterrence through sub-conventional means, has proved more dangerous an adversary than one engaged diplomatically, and enmeshed in the international order. Though China and India, the largest importers of oil from the Middle East, will disproportionately pay the price of the high oil prices and trade shocks that will come should war escalate, the entire world economy will suffer—and with it Israel itself.

As they did in the 1950s, Israel and Iran have shared common interests—even if one has a PM eager to ensure his survival by stoking crisis and the other is led by clerics eager to crush domestic opposition by fuelling anti-Semitism and political Islam. The two nations both know they face common threats from jihadists, and from instability in the Middle East. They both face economic challenges, which cannot be addressed without peace.



# From boom to burst, the AI bubble is only heading in one direction

**John Naughton**

"Are we really in an AI bubble," asked a reader of last month's column about the apparently unstoppable rise of Nvidia, "and how would we know?" Good question, so I asked an AI about it and was pointed to Investopedia, which is written by humans who know about this stuff. It told me that a bubble goes through five stages – rather as Elisabeth Kübler-Ross said people do with grief. For investment bubbles, the five stages are displacement, boom, euphoria, profit-taking and panic. So let's see how this maps on to our experience so far with AI.

First, displacement. That's easy: it was ChatGPT wot dunnit. When it appeared on 30 November 2022, the world went, well, apeshit. So, everybody realised, this was what all the muttering surrounding AI was about! And people were bewitched by the discovery that you could converse with a machine and it would talk (well, write) back to you in coherent sentences. It was like the moment in the spring of 1993 when people saw Mosaic, the first proper web browser, and suddenly the penny dropped: so this was what that "internet" thingy was for. And then Netscape had its initial public offering in August 1995, when the stock went stratospheric and the first internet bubble started to inflate. "Are we really in an AI bubble," asked a reader of last month's column about the apparently unstoppable rise of Nvidia, "and how would we know?" Good question, so I asked an AI about it and was pointed to Investopedia, which is written by humans who know about this stuff. It told me that a bubble goes through five stages – rather as Elisabeth Kübler-Ross said people do with grief. For investment bubbles, the five stages are displacement, boom, euphoria, profit-taking and panic. So let's see how this maps on to our experience so far with AI.

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of 1993 when people saw Mosaic, the first proper web browser, and suddenly the penny drop. The third stage of the cycle – euphoria – is the one we're now in. Caution has been thrown to the winds and ostensibly rational companies are gambling

colossal amounts of money on AI. Sam Altman, the boss of OpenAI, started talking about raising \$7tn from Middle Eastern petrostates for a big push that would create AGI (artificial general intelligence). He's also hedging his bets by teaming up with Microsoft to

spend \$100bn on building the Stargate supercomputer. All this seems to be based on an article of faith; namely, that all that is needed to create superintelligent machines is (a) infinitely more data and (b) infinitely more computing power. And the strange thing is that at the

moment the world seems to be taking these fantasies at face value. Which brings us to stage four of the cycle: profit-taking. This is where canny operators spot that the process is becoming unhinged and start to get out before the bubble bursts.

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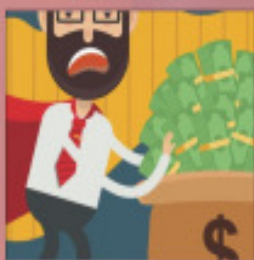
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# Wooing the Muslim Vote: TMC's Risky Gamble in West Bengal

By: Hasan Suroor

Even as most other Opposition parties elsewhere are desperately trying to chase the Hindu vote in the run-up to the general elections, which kick off next week, the Trinamool Congress (TMC) in West Bengal is up to something that might seem a little odd: it's heavily wooing Muslim voters. The reason, of course, is that nearly 30 per cent of the state's population is Muslim and the community votes can make or mar a party's prospects. Which makes it perhaps the only state where the Muslim vote commands a premium.

Many in her party are reported to be concerned that in her desperation, she has ended up flirting with some of the community's less salubrious elements such as the likes of a strongman from Sandeshkhali — Shahjahan Sheikh — who is at the centre of allegations of widespread sexual harassment of women.

A controversy has broken out over the party's choice for the Malda

South constituency, a traditional Congress stronghold currently represented by Abu Hasem Khan Choudhury, former Union Minister of State for Health and Family Welfare in the erstwhile



Congress-led UPA (United Progressive Alliance) government at the Centre. He has held the seat since 2009 after inheriting it from his brother, the veteran Congressman, A.B.A. Ghani Khan Choudhury.

The TMC has fielded a political upstart called Shahnawaz Ali

Raihan regarded as a poster boy for the Muslim Right with his strident attacks on the BJP and criticism of liberal Muslims. The BJP has accused him of shadowy political links and "anti-

national" activities. It has launched an aggressive campaign against him portraying him as a threat to national security.

So, who is Shahnawaz Ali Raihan? A PhD scholar at Oxford University (the intriguing topic of his research is 'Between Marx

and Muhammad: Muslims and Communism in Bengal'), Raihan has been parachuted into the thick of West Bengal's polarised politics and is being touted as TMC's "secret weapon" to break whatever is left of the Congress party's once captive Muslim "vote bank". In the last election, the TMC candidate in Malda South, Md Moazzem Hossain, came third after the BJP's Sreerupa Mitra Chaudhury. Raihan's candidature is seen as a gamble calculated to appeal to young Muslims disillusioned with the Congress and looking for a more radical alternative to the incumbent 86-year-old Abu Hasem Khan Choudhury.

Moderate Muslims fear that his presence could give a further fillip to radical tendencies trying to expand their influence.

For, the truth is that even after discounting the toxicity of BJP's campaign against him, there's no escaping Raihan's links with right-wing Muslim groups, including the controversial Students Islamic Organisation of India (SIO), the student wing of Jamaat-e-Islami

Hind.

He was SIO's national secretary when studying at Jamia Millia University. He was also associated with Jamaat's NGO Human Welfare Foundation whose offices were raided by National Investigation Agency in 2020 for allegedly using its funds to finance terror groups in Jammu and Kashmir. It called the raids politically motivated. Raihan has acknowledged these links arguing that it is not a "crime" to be associated with Muslim organisations. He has dismissed BJP's more lurid allegations as "fake" and a part of its "divisive politics". Now I have decided to contest (the Lok Sabha elections) as the BJP has been infusing the politics of division in my home area of Malda. So far, I have been highlighting their divisive agenda through my writings and speeches," he said in a newspaper interview. Rejecting allegations of "anti-national" activities, he said, "I love India and have not said anything against my country."

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# Trump 2.0: Why Global Anxiety and Apprehension Are Largely Misplaced

Written By: Chintamani Mahapatra

There are numerous reports of anxiety and apprehension in some parts of the world about the possibility of the return of Donald Trump to the White House post 2024 presidential election in the United States. Many countries fear that the world order under the Trump 2.0 is going to drastically change and preparations should begin to confront the coming challenges before it is too late. Is the world order going to be radically different, if Donald Trump becomes the 47th President of the United States?

Most of such apprehensions come from the trans-Atlantic allies of the United States. During his presidency, Donald Trump's language and tone regarding the relevance and viability of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation were harsh and unsettling. But the main message from the Trump White House for the alliance partners was to follow the norm of defence burden sharing and make contributions of 2 per cent of their respective GDP for collective defence. Trump's communication was downright clear; it had an effect on the members and today about two-thirds of NATO members spend 2 per cent of their GDP for defence. Donald Trump during his current campaign for the presidential position has yet again sought to frighten the NATO members who are yet to comply with the requirement by saying that he would allow Russia to do anything it wants with such NATO members. This statement has sparked anger, fear and disenchantment in Europe because of its timing. First, Trump's remark was made amidst Russia's continuing war in Ukraine. Second, Trump is against spending billions of dollars to back Ukraine defend itself against Russia. Third, it is largely because of him that the US Congress has not yet been able to authorise more than \$60 billion of additional aid to Ukraine. Fourth, he has bragged that he would end the war in one day if he is elected. This has created a perception that he may allow Russia to annex the areas it has occupied in Ukraine as part of the deal to end the war. However, Trump has clarified that he will not withdraw from NATO. There are talks about defence capability building in Europe and Trump's statements have energised the countries that have for long supported a militarily stronger Europe. Trump 2.0 administration would certainly accept the idea of a stronger Europe, which will actually be effective defence burden sharing. Thus not much change in trans-Atlantic ties is likely to an extent that would affect the global strategic order. It is important to note that it was Donald Trump who sought to shape the Indo-Pacific order by issuing a strategy

report in 2017; reviving the dormant Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, adopting a tougher stance on the unfair trade practices of China and engaging in a tariff war with Beijing and further



strengthening defence and security not partnership with India for maintaining peace, stability and freedom of

navigation in the Indo-Pacific.

Significantly, his successor President Joe Biden did not alter Trump's strategic initiatives in the Indo-Pacific and rather built upon them by elevating Quad to summit-level meetings and operationalising it with working groups, by launching the AUKUS defence pact with the United Kingdom and Australia, which may be expanded to include Japan in the near future and standing behind Taiwan and the Philippines in the face of Chinese aggressive postures and grey zone offensive moves. As far as the hydrocarbon resource-rich West Asia is concerned, Donald Trump during his presidency successfully engineered the Abraham Accord as a positive step towards promoting peace in the region and enhancing Arab-Israeli constructive interactions. Under American inspiration and encouragement, the UAE and Bahrain signed agreements with Israel. Trump was dead against the nuclear deal with Iran, but Biden has not been able to do much to revive the deal and Washington's relationship with Iran is anything but friendly.

Both Trump and Biden are pro-Israel and no matter who wins the election, US-Israel strategic cooperation will endure. While Trump is credited with signing of the Abraham Accord, Biden encouraged a new quadrilateral cooperation mechanism consisting of India, Israel, UAE and the US (I2U2). Biden did not oppose the Abraham Accord and Trump 2.0 is unlikely to dispute I2U2. Thus no discernible transformation in the broader strategic order in West Asia is likely to come about post 2024 US election. The world has lived with Trump Administration 1.0. The transition period after Trump's victory in the 2016 presidential election was a little chaotic. None expected a business tycoon and a political outsider like Trump to win the election. The Trump team was not ready with any blueprint for the administration to lead the global affairs. But the Trump 2.0 administration, if it comes about, will not be as muddled. Think tanks and several advisors and experts supporting Trump are quietly working on projects, schemes and missions to make the transition orderly and peaceful.

## BJP Begins as Underdog: Why Phase 1 is Tricky for Modi in the Quest for '400 Paar'

By: Rahul Shivshankar

Over ten years, the BJP has acquired an aura of invincibility. Between 2014 and 2024, the Narendra Modi-anchored BJP has grown into the world's largest political party. It is also by far India's richest. But more than that, it has handed out resounding defeats to the Opposition in both the 2014 and 2019 Lok Sabha contests. Not since the Rajiv Gandhi-led Congress in 1984 has a political party won such commanding majorities in the Lok Sabha. The coalition era has been relegated to a footnote in time. These statements are not mere platitudes.

There's hard data that gives you an idea of the numeric and operational advantage the mandate has given to the BJP. In the just concluded 17th Lok Sabha, the BJP passed 221 Bills, the most since the 14th Lok Sabha. 58 per cent of the Bills were passed within two weeks of their introduction. Only 16 per cent of the total Bills introduced in the Parliament since 2019 have been referred to Standing Committees for further critical examination. It's almost as if the Opposition, excuse the pun, exists only to make up the numbers. So enervating has been the impact of the BJP's dominance that many

Opposition parties have privately conceded that the BJP is set for an easy win in 2024. The prime minister is so confident that he has announced with trademark braggadocio that he expects "Iss Baar 400 paar".

Only one government in the history of democratic India has ever crossed the 400-seat barrier and that was the Rajiv Gandhi-led Congress administration, which in 1984, was riding on the Indira sympathy wave.

If the BJP is so far ahead of the competition, why – you are entitled to ask – is the party beginning its quest for a third term in office as an underdog? Indeed, the assertion is counterintuitive. But here are three reasons why the BJP begins the impending 1st phase on the back foot and why this round remains a tricky obstacle course in Modi's quest for absolute dominance. First, of all the phases, the BJP is the shakiest across the 102 constituencies in Phase 1. The BJP has only won 50 per cent of the seats up for grabs in Phase 1 in 2019. In fact, it contested only 60 seats across these 102 constituencies in 2019. Admittedly, it won 40 of the 60 contests which is a creditable conversion ratio. But even so, if it wants to get close to the 400-seat

mark, it needs to win big in this phase and too on seats where it has never won. The party is contesting 17 additional seats this time around but a majority of these are in Tamil Nadu where the BJP has only ever won one seat. If it doesn't win more seats in Tamil Nadu, it will be very difficult for the party to go beyond the 303 seats it already has in Parliament. So can the BJP pick up additional seats it has never won? This brings us to consider a second set of data points. In this phase, there are only nine super-strong seats. That is seats won by the BJP or the Congress in all three Lok Sabha elections since 2009. Of these nine, the BJP has six – Jabalpur, Churu, Bikaner, Sidhi, Pilibhit, and Balaghat. The Congress has held the remaining three – Kaliabor, Chhindwara, and Shillong. Beyond the strongholds, there are 21 swing seats across 102 constituencies. That is to say almost a fifth of the seats have changed hands. To be specific, the same party won these seats in 2009 and 2019 but not in 2014. These 21 seats could go either way and given that the BJP can only count six seats as bastions, it can't be sure of maintaining its conversion rate. This is why phase 1 is not only unpredictable but also puts all parties on an equal footing.



# Debunking Dhruv Rathee's False Narrative of 'Dictatorship' in India

By: Abhishek Banerjee & Karuna Gopal

Dhruv Rathee's two recent videos on the supposed "dictatorship" in India have gone viral on YouTube. Together, they have gathered over 40 million views. Most of those people will never be able to take him on with the right questions. How can you say that India is a dictatorship? To be fair, Dhruv Rathee never said that. He only said that India is on the way to becoming one.

But what does that even mean? If you leave Delhi and drive one mile out west, you are technically somewhere on the way to London. So unless you let us compare India's democracy to other countries, you have told us nothing on whether India is becoming a dictatorship. So let's compare our democracy to Germany.

Why Germany? For one, Dhruv Rathee is based there and must know something about the country. His 17 million strong base of YouTube subscribers, mostly Indians, deserve to know as well. In any case, Germany gets excellent ratings from the supposed international experts on press freedom and democracy. Also, the other day, the German government began commenting on our internal affairs, totally uninvited. So let's turn it around. On social media in India, an argument between two sides might go something like this – Farmers in Germany are protesting too. They have come out on the streets with tractors. Why is there no outpouring of support from international publications such as The New York Times or The Washington Post? Do they report only on protests in India? In Western countries, do they not have folks like say, Dhruv Rathee, who will speak truth to power?

Maybe not, a thoughtful Indian liberal would reply. But those countries also do not have "god media." And nobody in Germany called the protesting farmers "anti-national." So, checkmate! Except that is exactly what the German establishment, the media and the political class did. In fact, they did much worse. They accused the farmer protesters of being Nazis. In Germany, the ruling government even spies legally on the phones of the Opposition. The head of the German spy agency issued an official statement directing Germans on how to vote. Imagine the outcry if the Intelligence Bureau here in India did something even close to that. But in Germany, it happens all the time. Germany is also a country where the police pulled out a 16-year-old girl



from school to question her over a post on TikTok that appeared to support an Opposition party.

But we Indians were not supposed to know all this. We were just supposed to assume that Western countries are better in every way. Their newspapers judge us and push their narratives, yet we remain largely uninformed about their domestic politics. Earlier this year, farmers in Germany feared that their subsidies would be taken away. So they decided to protest. They brought their tractors out on the street and blocked traffic. Sounds familiar?

So how did the German government deal with the protest? The Vice-Chancellor was the first to react. He had been on an island holiday when he was confronted by protesters. He lost his temper and accused the protesters of being extremists who were out to uproot democracy. A week later, Chancellor Olaf Scholz said the same thing. The obedient German media took it from there. The leading Frankfurter Allgemeine newspaper ran a headline that translates to "pampered farmers," bashing their subsidies and sense of entitlement. The BBC went a step further and published a long article claiming that the protests had been infiltrated by neo-Nazi groups. Incidentally, John Reith, the founder of the BBC, was himself a Nazi sympathizer. But that is a story for another day. These were not just empty words from the government and media establishment. A month later, the government announced a 13-point plan aimed at countering the protesters. This plan included measures such as seizing the bank accounts of the protesters. Additionally, individuals who donated to the protest movement were to be identified and subjected to investigation. "Those who mock the state must be ready to face a strong state," Germany's interior minister

announced.

This demonisation of working-class protesters is not limited to Germany. The same happened to truckers protesting in Canada in 2022.

What kind of threat did the Canadian government identify then? As a ruling Liberal Party MP explained in Parliament, the truckers had been sounding their horns. Or in other words, honking. He pointed out that repeating the word "honk" results in "Honk Honk," which can be abbreviated to "HH". According to him, "HH" could stand for "Heil Hitler". This is the quality of evidence on the basis of which Canada concluded that the protesters were all Nazis, and imposed national emergency. The global media played along, of course.

You must be wondering, but what about elections? Are politicians in Germany not worried about angry voters on the streets? As we shall see later, they do not need to. Because of a very special provision in German law that stops new parties from winning seats.

## IMPOSING CHRISTIANITY

Is Germany officially secular? Of course, it is. But there is an easy way around it. Germany imposes Christianity simply by calling it "culture" in place of "religion." For instance, the German state of Bavaria requires that the Christian cross be displayed prominently in every government building. The trick has been tested repeatedly in court and it works just fine. In fact, the courts themselves have to display the Christian cross. And public schools as well. Incidentally, the same legal trick is also used in Italy to display the cross in public schools. As a symbol of "culture," not "religion." By the way, whose idea was it originally to put the cross in Italian public schools? That

would be Benito Mussolini. But that is apparently not a red flag for experts who look out for signs of dictatorship.

Believe it or not, the Church is the second largest employer in Germany, after the government itself. The Church employs over a million people directly. And millions more look up to the Church for moral guidance. This gives the Church immense lobbying power with politicians.

This shows even in the names of the political parties. The Christian Democratic Union (CDU) has been the most dominant party in Germany since the Second World War, along with its ally the Christian Social Union (CSU). The Church even collects its own taxes. Again, this power comes directly from a 1933 agreement between the Vatican and Adolf Hitler, which is still in force. Another name that is not a concern for experts who compile the democracy rankings.

## GERMANY'S CONTINUED EMBRACE OF POLITICIANS WITH NAZI CONNECTIONS

Perhaps no discussion on Germany and dictatorship can be complete without looking into the country's Nazi past. The Christian Democratic Union (CDU) is descended directly from the Catholic Center Party of Konrad Adenauer, which existed before the war. It is this catholic party whose votes gave the Nazis a two-thirds majority needed to pass the 1933 constitutional amendment that made Hitler dictator. In fact, Adenauer himself had been briefly arrested by the Nazis in 1934. But then he wrote a letter to the government detailing all the favours he had done for the Nazi Party as a public official in the city of Cologne. Should we call that a "mercy petition?" In any case, the Nazis released him and granted him a pension, with which Adenauer built himself a nice home in the south of the country.

But that never hurt Adenauer's political career. After the war, Adenauer was elected Chancellor of Germany, and he led the country from 1949 to 1963. As Chancellor, he ended the denazification process and released from jail thousands of Nazis who had been convicted of crimes against humanity. Today, Adenauer is recognised as one of the founding fathers of the European Union. Aglowing profile of him on the official website of the European Parliament even refers to the embarrassing pension incident. But that is cited as one of his "struggles" against Nazism! A struggle for what, exactly? Getting a comfortable family home under Nazi patronage?



# Fluid Friendships: Over A Quarter Of BJP Candidates Are Defectors

By Derek O'Brien

'One out of four BJP candidates in the 2024 Lok Sabha elections are defectors from other parties. An analysis of the 417 candidates announced shows that 116 of them, that is 28%, have switched sides to join the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The highest number of such defectors, 37, are from the Indian National Congress.

In Indian politics, the phrase 'Aya Ram Gaya Ram' is often used to describe politicians who frequently switch parties. The story goes that Gaya Lal, an MLA from Hodal, Haryana, won the election as an independent candidate in 1967 and joined the Congress. Thereafter, he changed parties thrice in 15 days.

Between 1967 and 1983, there were approximately 2,700 defections at the state level. As many as 15 defectors went on to become chief ministers. This high number of defections led to the enactment of the Anti-Defection Law, the 52nd Amendment Act of 1985. Even though the anti-defection law is in place, it is very easy to circumvent it. The Supreme Court's rulings on this matter have also not been enough to curb the malaise. Politicians



now often resign from their original party, instead of formally 'crossing the floor' or voting against their party in a confidence motion. This sidesteps the law, while bringing down the party's strength in the House.

An analysis of 433 MPs and MLAs who changed parties and re-contested elections held between 2016 and 2020 shows that out of 405 MLAs who switched political parties, 182, almost 45%, joined the BJP. Out of 16 Rajya Sabha MPs who switched political parties, 10, that is over 60%,

joined the BJP.

Here are five instances from recent history where democratically elected state governments have been toppled through defections.

## 1. Karnataka

A party or coalition needs 113 seats for a majority in the 224-member state assembly. The Congress and the Janata Dal (Secular) (JD-S) formed a coalition government in 2018 with 115 MLAs. However, 13 MLAs of the Congress and three MLAs of the JD(S) resigned within 14 months, reducing the strength of the House

to 208, and the majority mark came down to 105 seats. The BJP, which had exactly 105 MLAs, proved its majority and formed the next government.

## 2. Madhya Pradesh

The fall of the Kamal Nath-led government started with the resignation of Jyotiraditya Scindia from his seat in Parliament. Following this, MLAs loyal to Scindia, including six ministers, resigned. This led to the toppling of the Congress government in the state and

paved the way for the formation of the Shivraj Singh Chouhan-led BJP government. Scindia was awarded by being made a minister in the Union cabinet.

## 3. Manipur

In the 2017 Manipur Assembly Elections, the Congress won 28 seats and the BJP 21. The majority mark in the 60-member House is 31. The BJP and its allies together had 30 seats. The BJP got a single Congress MLA to form the government. Later, eight other Congress MLAs lent their 'unofficial' support to the BJP. The Congress MLAs who supported the BJP never actually resigned from the Congress or issued letters of support for the BJP-led government. They even continued sitting in the Opposition benches to avoid violating the anti-defection law.

## 4. Arunachal Pradesh

After forming the government in 2014, Congress Chief Minister Pema Khandu took 43 of his party MLAs with him in 2016 and joined the People's Party of Arunachal (PPA), which was in alliance with the BJP. By the end of that year, 33 PPA MLAs joined the BJP and formed the government. Later, two more Congress MLAs defected to the BJP.

# Is It The Beginning Of The End For AAP Government In Delhi?

By Ashutosh

Was the Delhi High Court's rejection of Arvind Kejriwal's petition challenging the legality of his arrest the beginning of the end of the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) government in the capital? The rejection was followed by the resignation of Kejriwal's colleague in the cabinet, Rajkumar Anand. Anand is not a high-profile leader. Neither is he a heavyweight member of the party.

But this clearly indicates that all is not well in the party and there is serious murmur within about how it has been run in the last few years. I am not speculating that many more resignations are expected, though that cannot be ruled out either. It may also not be improbable that Anand has resigned due to the pressures of the investigating agencies. Attacking opposition governments and parties using these agencies is no longer a secret; in fact, it has become a norm now.

## AAP Is Extremely Vulnerable

Several attempts have been made to target the AAP since the resignation of the Kejriwal government in 2014. A Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leader was caught on camera offering ₹4 crore to an AAP MLA then. In Kejriwal's second stint as chief minister, when Kapil Mishra, a



minister was sacked, a serious attempt was made to lure a large section of MLAs to dislodge the government. However, due to a timely intervention, those attempts did not work. But the AAP is extremely vulnerable today.

This is the first time that the AAP is operating in an environment where Kejriwal is not available 24/7. Though he has not resigned as CM and continues to be the national convener of the party, his manoeuvring capacity is extremely limited. The party is basically trying to swim without his 'life guard' services. And this is happening for the first time since the AAP's inception.

## Left Rudderless

The AAP is heavily centralised around Kejriwal. No member, office-bearer, MLA, MP or minister is free to take decisions without consulting the top boss. There is no party structure. The functioning of the

AAP so far can best be described as a 'programmed robot' that will act or do as per the programmed software. Kejriwal's arrest has crippled AAP. Nonetheless, the party has shown remarkable capacity to fight back. One of the reasons is that Kejriwal anticipated much in advance that sooner or later, he would be arrested, and accordingly prepared a blueprint to deal with the crisis. He had also delegated responsibilities to leaders who would deal with the situation in his absence. And he continues to give instructions from jail. The saving grace is that Sanjay Singh is out on bail after spending six months in jail. He is third in the party's pecking order after Kejriwal and Manish Sisodia. A street fighter, he is highly political and has a close relationship with party cadre and leaders. His release has certainly given a new lease of life to the beleaguered party.

## Constitutional Morality

However, Kejriwal's insistence that he will run the government from jail can prove to be the undoing of not only the government but also of the party in the long run. Ideally, before going to jail, he should have handed over the baton to his most trusted aide. Unlike Lalu Yadav, Jayalalithaa and Hemant Soren, he did not choose his successor.

Kejriwal's action might not, technically, violate the Constitution as it is silent on the issue of whether a chief minister can run the government from jail. But his action does not follow constitutional morality and disrespects basic ethos. Kejriwal is known to defy the established path, and that is also the reason for his spectacular success. But this time, he seems to have erred in his judgment, and that might cost him and the party dearly.

It is true that the Delhi High Court has rejected three petitions seeking to prevent him from continuing to be chief minister. The court has also declined to entertain the request. Asserting that a remedy is available within the executive branch, it refrained from overstepping into others' jurisdiction. Sooner or later, the central government will have to take a decision. As of now, for all practical purposes, Kejriwal, as chief minister, is 'incapacitated'.

## Two Routes To Take

When a leader assumes office as chief minister, he/she is expected to fulfil duties accordingly. If the individual is unable to do so, the continuation in office should be scrutinised. In such exceptional circumstances, two institutions can intervene.



# CSDS survey predicts Modi 3.0, but what will the seat tally look like?

*The CSDS projected a vote share lead of 12 per cent for the NDA. In this piece, we will extrapolate these vote shares into seat tallies, using 2019 numbers as the base.*

By Amitabh Tiwari

A new Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) pre-poll survey indicates the return of the Prime Minister Narendra Modi-led Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government at the Centre, despite concerns about inflation, unemployment and corruption. The survey highlights distress among the youth (lack of employment opportunities) and the poor (inflating prices of essential commodities). It also shows discontent regarding the misuse of central agencies and the lack of trust in the Election Commission of India. Despite all this, the BJP is projected to increase its vote share from around 37 per cent in 2019 to 40 per cent in 2024. On the other hand, the Indian National Congress is also expected to record an increase in vote share from around 19 per cent in 2019 to 21 per cent this time. The BJP's allies are slated to record a six per cent vote share this time, while INDIA allies are expected to record 13 per cent. Non-aligned parties/Others are expected to get a 20 per cent vote share in 2024.

All in all, the National Democratic

Alliance (NDA) is expected to record a 46 per cent vote share while the INDIA bloc will get 34 per cent, at the expense of non-aligned parties (who will see a reduction of three per cent). These results exhibit a high level of trust in PM Modi's leadership, as per the survey, he enjoys a 21 per cent lead against Rahul Gandhi (27 per cent), the de-facto PM face of the Opposition. The CSDS projected a vote share lead of 12 per cent for the NDA. In this piece, we will extrapolate these vote shares into seat tallies, using 2019 numbers as the base. In 2019, the BJP recorded a 37.4 per cent vote share. Effectively, CSDS predicts a 2.6 per cent gain for the party in 2024. Congress is expected to get a 21 per cent vote share, a 1.5 per cent gain. NDA allies who in aggregate recorded an eight per cent vote share in 2019 are expected to record a two per cent decline in 2024. INDIA allies who, in aggregate, recorded a 12 per cent vote share in 2019 are expected to record an increase of one per cent in 2024. Others who recorded a vote share of 23 per cent in 2019, are expected to get a 20 per cent vote share in 2024. The BJP won 303 seats in 2019. An increase of 2.6 per cent vote

share on average on all these seats will be higher than the gain recorded by Congress or its allies. It is thus unlikely to lose any of these seats. Against Congress, the BJP still enjoys a lead of 1.1 per cent (2.6 per cent - 1.5 per cent); against its allies, 1.6 per cent (2.6 per cent - 1 per cent); and against Others, 5.6 per cent (2.6 per cent + 3 per cent) on account of a vote share decline. This effectively means any seat won or lost by a margin of less than or equal to 5.6 per cent vote share may witness a swing in fortunes.

One hundred and six seats were won/lost by a margin of less than or equal to 5.6 per cent vote share in 2019. The BJP won 46 of these in 2019. Since it is projected to record an increase in vote share higher than Congress, its allies, or Others, it is not expected to lose these seats.

Congress won 19 of these seats. On all other seats, since NDA allies and Others are expected to record a decline in vote share, the Congress is expected to hold on to these 17 seats.

Others/Non-aligned parties won



28 such seats.

The BJP was a runner-up in 11 such seats. Since Others are expected to register a three per cent vote share decline, the BJP is expected to win 10 of these

seats.

BJP allies were runners-up in seven such seats. They could win three of these as they are expected to lose a smaller vote share than Others.

Congress and its allies were runners-up on seven of these seats. Since they are expected to record an increase in vote share, with Others recording a decline, the grand old party (6) and partners (1) are expected to win all these seats. On three such seats, Others were runners-up. So, these are expected to remain with them only. Five of the seats with less than or equal to a 5.6 per cent margin were won by Congress allies and they are expected to retain the same. Eight, won with less than a 5.6 per cent margin were won by BJP allies. The NDA is expected to lose two of these seats, one each to the Congress and its allies. Overall, the BJP is likely to win 315 (+12) seats, its allies 46 (+1), Congress 62 (+10), its allies 49 (-3), and Others 71 seats (-20). The NDA is expected to get 361 seats (+13), INDIA 111 seats (+7), and Others 71 seats (-20).

## After Iran strikes Israel in 'self defence', what a full-blown conflict could look like

By Col Rajeev Agarwal (retd)

On the night of April 13, Iran struck Israel, fulfilling its promise of a retaliatory response to the Israeli strike that targeted the Iranian Consulate in Damascus on April 1, resulting in the death of seven members of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, including General Mohammad Reza Zahedi, its senior-most commander in Lebanon and Syria. The Iranian response was a collective strike by drones and ballistic missiles, estimated to be more than 200 in Operation 'True Promise'. While most of the drones were intercepted mid-air, some of the missiles found their mark and struck the Nevatim Israeli air base in the Negev

desert. Nevatim is the air base from where Israel launched its F-35 fighters that attacked the Iranian consulate in Damascus. The big question that remains unanswered is whether this will mark the end of it or escalate into an all-out war. Act of self-defence Iran said in a statement the strikes were conducted under Article 51 of the UN Charter which states, "Nothing in the present Charter shall impair the inherent right of individual or collective self-defence if an armed attack occurs against a Member of the United Nations". Iran added that the matter can now be deemed concluded. However, should the Israeli regime make another mistake, Iran's response will be considerably more severe. Prime

Minister Benjamin Netanyahu promptly put out an address to Israel, assuring its people of the preparedness of the Israel Defence Forces (IDF), and issued a veiled warning to Iran, stating, "Whoever hurts us, we hurt him."

Despite decades of hostility between Israel and Iran, this is the first time that the latter has struck directly from its territory. Also, Iran was not part of the earlier Arab-Israeli wars. The fact that Iran resorted to direct strikes on Israel this time indicates that Israel crossed a "red line".

What if the conflict escalates? While Iran considers the matter closed for now, it is not clear

whether Israel does the same. Netanyahu has been under tremendous pressure amid the Gaza war and his right-wing ministers, who are part of the coalition, may not agree to any plan which indicates reconciliation or "no action". Netanyahu has not yet been able to achieve his war objectives in Gaza and "no response" to Iran may make matters worse for him. About 135 Israeli hostages in Hamas custody have not yet been released, Hamas has not been eliminated, the Israeli forces have suffered significant losses in the past six months, and there is no agreement on either a permanent ceasefire or an end to the war.



# Dubai Floods Due to Artificial Rain or Climate Change? What is UAE's Cloud Seeding Programme?

(Sai Bureau)- The desert city of Dubai was soaked in 25 cm (10 inches) of rain in just 24 hours. This is actually the amount of rain that it typically gets in nearly two years. According to the UAE's National Center of Meteorology, the historic rainfall has been witnessed for the first time in the last 75 years.

Rains flooded major highways and disrupted flights at Dubai International Airport. Homes were flooded and vehicles were abandoned on roadways in Dubai as authorities sent tanker trucks to pump away the water.

Images posted on social media show flagship shopping malls Dubai Mall and Mall of the Emirates flooded, with Dubai Metro Station in ankle-deep water. Lightning was seen occasionally touching the tip of Burj Khalifa – the world's tallest building.

**SO, WHY DID DUBAI WITNESS UNPRECEDENTED RAINS?**

Experts say the rainwater is associated with a larger storm system traversing through the Arabian Peninsula and moving across Gulf of Oman. This is also bringing unusually wet weather to neighbouring Oman and southern-eastern Iran. According to climate scientist Colin McCarthy, the heavy rains are attributed to multiple rounds of intense thunderstorms forming off the warm waters of the Persian Gulf.

Others are attributed rains to climate change. Climatologist Friederike Otto said it is highly likely that the "deadly and destructive rain in Oman and Dubai was made heavier by human-caused climate change," as quoted by news agency AFP.

"Future rainfall extremes are projected to increase with global warming according to theory and climate models, but common (annual) and rare (decennial or centennial) extremes could be affected differently," according to Nature journal. Some meteorologists and climate specialists point out that cloud seeding could have enhanced heavy

rains in the desert city. "Dubai is no stranger to dust but the storm had engulfed a huge amount of dust right over the area. Dust is also a cloud seeder, we call it condensation nuclei, so how can one be certain the man-made seeding was responsible when a desert's worth of dust was suspended overhead?" asked Jeff Berardelli, chief meteorologist and climate specialist (Tampa Bay, US), on social media site X.

**WHAT IS CLOUD SEEDING AND HOW**



**IT ENHANCED RAINS IN DUBAI?**

The UAE started cloud seeding operations in 2000s to address water security issues, even though the lack of drainage in many areas can trigger flooding.

The Gulf state's National Center of Meteorology dispatched seeding planes from Al Ain airport on Monday and Tuesday to take advantage of convective cloud formations, according to Ahmed Habib, a specialist meteorologist. That technique involves implanting chemicals and tiny particles — often natural salts such as potassium chloride — into the atmosphere to coax more rain from clouds.

According BNN Bloomberg quoting specialist meteorologist Ahmed Habib, the National Center of Meteorology dispatched seeding planes from Al Ain airport on Monday and Tuesday to tap

into the convective cloud formations. This technique involves implanting chemicals and tiny particles often salt such as potassium chloride into the atmosphere to coax more rain from clouds. The method of seeding involves producing more rain by launching salt flares or other small materials into clouds. These flares, mounted on the aircraft's wings, contain salt material components. Upon reaching the target clouds, the flares are deployed,

releasing the seeding agent into the cloud.

The salt particles serve as nuclei around which water droplets condense, eventually growing heavy enough to fall as precipitation in the form of rain.

"The NCM has established a national network of 86 automatic weather stations (AWOS) for weather monitoring, six weather radars covering the entire UAE, and one upper air station. The Centre has also created climate databases and assisted in the development of high precision Numerical Weather Predictions and simulation software in the UAE," the UAERP's description of the process reads

According to Minister of Climate Change of Environment Mariam Al Mheiri, the nation's rain enhancement

initiative is essential to enhancing food and water security, as well as replenishing groundwater reserves and driving tourism. The Gulf nation's artificial rain programme had been bolstered by collaborative scientific and technical research with the National Center for Atmospheric Research (NCAR) in Colorado, USA, Witwatersrand University in South Africa, and NASA.

**CLIMATE CHANGE IMPACT ON DUBAI Sea Levels:** The UAE has nearly 1,300 km of coastline, and around 85% of the population and over 90% of the infrastructure of UAE is located within several metres of the sea. The Stockholm Environment Institute's US Center report found that UAE could lose up to 6% of its developed coastline by the end of the century because of rising sea levels. In 1996 and 1998, the UAE faced two catastrophic coral bleaching and mortality events associated with seawater temperature anomalies.

**Water Disasters:** Global warming can increase the gap between water demand and availability. Some places in UAE will frequently witness flooding while others will experience drought and water shortage. **Agriculture:** Higher temperatures, increased weeds and harmful insects will start affecting agricultural crops. Global warming could lead to shortage of food globally. UAE could suffer more salty water, and local food will be hard to find.

**Pollution and Power Supply:** Global warming will reduce the use of heaters in winter but increase the need for ACs in summer. Massive pollution could also increase during global warming. UAE has 80 tonne per capita emission of the greenhouse gas carbon dioxide compared to only 14 tonnes per American head yearly. A high number of air conditioners, desalination plants and power stations run on power produced from carbon-based fuel, which is also toxic at certain levels to humans.

## Man tries to rob Ohio bank with translator app, arrested

(Sai Bureau)- Don't know how to say "give the cash" in English, but need to rob a bank. What does a person do? Use a translator app. Yes, that's exactly what happened in Ohio.

A 20-year-old Venezuelan man was arrested in Ohio by Sandusky Police after he tried to rob a local bank using a translator app on his phone. The app displayed messages like "get the money" and "put the money in the bag", according to FOX8 news portal.

Sandusky Police believe Yeixon Brito-Gonzalez, the suspect who tried to rob the bank, is an illegal immigrant.

"We have no way to tell if he is here legally or not," said Sandusky Police Chief Jared Oliver. "But he has no proof of identification".

A customer called the police to report a man in the bank who was not speaking and trying to get behind the teller's counter.

Bank security video shows the suspect using a translator app on his phone to communicate robbery demands to the tellers, according to Fox8.

The app allegedly displayed messages like "get the money" and "put the money in the bag".

"I have been in law enforcement for over 20 years and this is the first time I encountered something like this, someone using a translator app to try and rob a bank. The first time our officers have dealt with it too," a police officer was quoted as saying by Fox8.

When the bank employee refused to give him any money, the suspect left the bank.

Sandusky police found the suspect soon after, and a Spanish-speaking officer read him his rights and talked to him.

According to the police report, the

suspect claimed he had recently lost his job and needed money.

The suspect denied attempting to rob the bank, insisting he merely asked the tellers to put money in his bag, according to Fox8.

Brito-Gonzalez is facing charges of attempted robbery, attempted theft, and criminal trespassing. Chief Oliver also stated that federal authorities are interested in questioning the suspect. "It has been brought to my attention that Customs and Border Patrol placed a hold on him," Oliver said. The attempted robbery occurred on April 4.



# 'We Certainly Support...': US Reacts To Elon Musk's Remark On Permanent UNSC Seat For India

(Sai Bureau)-The United States on Wednesday offered support for reforms to the United Nations institutions, including the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), US State Department Principal Deputy Spokesperson Vedant Patel informed. Responding to Tesla CEO Elon Musk's statement regarding India's lack of a permanent seat at the UNSC, Vedant Patel said, "The President has spoken about this before in his remarks to the UN General Assembly and the Secretary has alluded to this as well." "We certainly support reforms to the UN institution, including the Security Council,

to make it reflective of the 21st-century world that we live in. I don't have any specifics to offer on what those steps are, but certainly, we recognise that there is a need for reform, but I will leave it at that for now," he added.

Earlier in January this year, Musk called India not having a permanent seat in the UNSC as 'absurd' and said that nations with excess power don't want to relinquish it. "At some point, there needs to be a revision of the UN bodies. The problem is that those with excess power don't want to give it up. India not having a permanent seat on the Security Council, despite

being the most populous country on Earth, is absurd. Africa collectively should also have a permanent seat IMO," the Tesla CEO wrote on X (formerly Twitter).

India has been seeking a permanent seat on the Security Council for a long time now to better represent the interests of the developing world. Notably, the country has gained momentum in its demand after it received support from the international community. The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) originally comprises of 15 member states, including five permanent members and 10 non-permanent members elected for two-year terms. The five

permanent members have the power to veto a vote in the council.

**BJP PROMISES PERMANENT SEAT IN UNSC**

Meanwhile, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in its election manifesto titled "Sankalp Patra" ahead of the Lok Sabha polls in the country has vowed to pursue permanent membership for the country in the United Nations Security Council.

"We are committed to seeking permanent membership in the UN Security Council to elevate Bharat's position in global decision-making," the BJP promised in its Sankalp Patra.

## Psychic conman defrauds 1.3 million Americans through letters, jailed

(News Agency)- A 57-year-old Canadian man, Patrice Runner, has been sentenced to 10 years in prison for running a massive psychic scam that swindled over \$175 million from more than 1.3 million Americans. Runner had been running his elaborate scam for two decades.

Runner, who US authorities had been pursuing since 2014, was given a 10-year sentence by a New York judge on Monday. A Postal Inspector from Philadelphia called the 10-year term an "appropriate punishment" for preying on vulnerable Americans. For over two

decades, Runner, a dual citizen of Canada and France, directed a mail-based scheme promising wealth and happiness to unsuspecting victims, mostly elderly and vulnerable Americans, according to the BBC.

The scam involved sending letters from Runner and his associates falsely claiming to be personal correspondence of the famous psychics, Maria Duval and Patrick Guerin.

These letters falsely promised recipients a prosperous future if they sent money for an "astral-clairvoyant forecast".

Once a victim paid, they were bombarded

with additional requests, prosecutors said, reported the BBC.

Runner and his associates sent thousands of letters each week.

The US Department of Justice stated Runner used shell companies in Canada and Hong Kong to hide his involvement while living in various countries.

Runner denied wrongdoing, telling *Walrus Magazine* in 2023, "maybe it's not moral, maybe it's bullshit... But it doesn't mean it's fraud", reported the BBC.

Speaking to the *Walrus* from a New York detention centre, Runner bragged of his writing abilities, saying he could "get the

attention of someone, and at the end, after a few minutes, the person sends a cheque, to get a product, to an address or company they've never heard of", reported the BBC. A jury found Runner guilty in June on several charges related to the scheme, including conspiracy to commit fraud and money laundering.

"Patrice Runner's extravagant lifestyle, borne on the backs of millions of older and vulnerable Americans, has come to an end," said Chris Nielsen, a US postal inspector in Philadelphia.

He called the 10-year term an "appropriate punishment".

## Owners of a Colorado funeral home where 190 decaying bodies were found are charged with COVID fraud

(News Agency)- A couple who owned a Colorado funeral home where authorities last year discovered 190 decaying bodies were indicted on federal charges that they mispent nearly \$900,000 in pandemic relief funds on vacations, cosmetic surgery, jewelry and other personal expenses, according to court documents unsealed Monday.

The indictment reaffirms accusations from state prosecutors that Jon and Carie Hallford gave families dry concrete instead of cremated ashes and alleges the couple buried the wrong body on two occasions. The couple also collected more than \$130,000 from families for cremations and burial services they never provided, the indictment said.

The 15 charges brought by the federal grand jury are in addition to more than 200 criminal counts already pending against the Hallfords in Colorado state court for corpse abuse, money laundering, theft and forgery. The federal offenses carry potential penalties of 20 years in prison and \$250,000 in fines, the indictment said.

On Monday, the owners of the Return to Nature Funeral Home in Colorado Springs entered a federal courtroom bound in shackles as they made an initial appearance before U.S. Magistrate Judge Scott Varholak. Assistant U.S. Attorney Tim Neff argued the couple were a flight risk, after they allegedly fled to Oklahoma last October when the decaying bodies were first discovered and before their arrest on state charges on Nov. 8.

"They simply evaporated from the community," Neff said.

The judge did not immediately decide if the couple should be released pending trial. He set an arraignment hearing for Thursday.

Carie Hallford's attorney, Chaz Melihercik, said he would argue against detention at the next hearing. Jon Hallford's public defender, Kilie Latendresse, told the judge that he had been following his bond conditions in the state case and that detention was unnecessary. The new charges and accusations triggered more anguish for families who sent their loved ones to the funeral home.

Every new revelation about the case is a jolt to Tanya Wilson, who hired Return to Nature to cremate her mother's remains. Wilson spread the ashes with family in Hawaii. After the grim discovery, Wilson was told those ashes weren't actually her mother, whose body has since been identified among the 190 decaying bodies. Hundreds of family members, like Wilson, had thought they put their loved one's to rest, or clutched their ashes close, only to have that healing torn away.

"I honestly feel like I have whiplash, and I can't hold onto one emotion long enough to be able to process it," Wilson said over the phone.

Before the new indictment was unsealed, public records showed the Hallfords had been plagued by debt — facing evictions and lawsuits for unpaid cremations even as they spent lavishly on themselves.

The indictment alleges the couple used \$882,300 in pandemic relief funds to buy items that also included a vehicle, dinners, tuition for their child and cryptocurrency. The fraud involved three loans obtained between March 2020 and October 2021,

authorities said. Previously released court documents from the state abuse of corpse case reveal more details about what they were spending money on.

They bought a GMC Yukon and an Infiniti that together were worth over \$120,000 — enough to cover cremation costs twice over for all of the bodies found in their business' facility last October, according to previous court testimony from FBI Agent Andrew Cohen.

"That is just thoroughly disgusting for a lack of a better term, just reading about all the money that they had," said Wilson. "Just the price of the two vehicles that he bought ... it was enough to just do right by these families." The Hallfords also paid for trips to California, Florida and Las Vegas, as well as \$31,000 in cryptocurrency, laser body sculpting and shopping at luxury retailers like Gucci and Tiffany & Co., according to court documents. The couple have not yet entered pleas to the state's abuse of corpse charges. The Hallfords left in their wake a trail of unpaid bills, disgruntled landlords and unsettled business disputes.



# Congress Trapped In The 'Family' Template

(News Agency)- A political party's ideological profile is defined and shaped as much by its founding principles as by the opposition it faces at any time. The political party that dynamically fails to adjust its sails to the changing winds of global currents and internal storms inevitably gets marginalised. No political party can afford to remain stranded on an island of ideological purity.

The Indian National Congress (INC) is no exception to this rule. If it has survived for so long, it is only because of its ability to fine-tune its ideological pretensions and postures to answer the ever-changing Indian realities. This capacity for adaptability has often exasperated the purists and baffled the rivals and opponents.

Preoccupied as it was in the first 20 years (1947-1967) after Independence with national reorganisation and constitutional consolidation, the INC had to necessarily carry on its pre-Independence identity as an umbrella party, accommodating and amenable to one and all, as long they pretended to subscribe to the Idea of India. The party boss, Sardar Patel, frowned upon any ideological assertions. He ran the Congress Socialist Party out of the Indian National Congress.

The Congress stood drained of influential voices like Acharya Narendra Dev, Jaiprakash Narain, Acharya Kripalani, N G Ranga, and Ram Manohar Lohia. The Congress bosses were content to pursue power and office, as Nehru-Patel performed in jugalbandi to address the urgent and desperate task of carving a new Indian state out of post-Partition chaos and giving it a new instrument of legitimacy, the Constitution of India.

For the next 20 years, the Congress avoided acquiring sharp ideological edges, even as it faced opposition from the extreme Left to extreme Right; the Hindu Mahasabha and the Jana Sangh and the Swatantra Party on the right, to the Socialists in various incarnations in no-man's-land to the Communist Parties on the Left. "The Middle Path" became its lazy choice, notwithstanding Jawaharlal Nehru's infatuation with "socialist" thoughts. The Middle Path was non-disruptive, gradual, incrementalist and non-ideological, and it suited the Indian genius for civilisational ambiguity. No wonder the Congress reaped bumper electoral harvests in the first three national elections—1952, 1957 and 1962. By the time the Fourth General Elections came around, so frustrated were the Congress rivals at its political and electoral supremacy that they began subscribing to the ideology of non-Congressism. For the Opposition, the strategic objective was to end the Congress monopoly on national power—whatever may be the ideological compromises.

Madhu Limaye was the principal and the

most persuasive ideologue of the new ideology:

"To end the Congress monopoly of power and destroy the Congress rule which has become the graveyard of all ideologies and programmes, therefore became the principal task of the Opposition and the people. A divided Opposition or a purely ideological front could not defeat the Congress. Besides, the Western ideological labels of Left and Right were to some extent irrelevant in the Indian situation."

So intoxicating became this slogan of non-Congressism that it turned out to be a licence for ideological promiscuity. The compulsion to enter electoral alliances and form coalition governments buried all ideological pretensions. For example, in Madras (now Tamil Nadu), the DMK had both the Swatantra Party and the Communist Party of India (Marxist) as its alliance partners as it dislodged the Congress Party from Fort St. George.

The Congress' answer to this non-ideological ganging up was a hefty dose of ideology: engaging her own party bosses, the Syndicate, in a battle for control over the Congress, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi went radical, nationalising 14 banks and abolishing Princes' privy purses. Not only did she dub all her opponents, inside and outside the Congress, as "reactionary", Indira Gandhi also resorted to "mass politics."

For the first time, New Delhi witnessed the curious spectacle of "crowds" thronging the Prime Minister's residence and she, in turn, acknowledged the "multitudes." Unknowingly, Indira Gandhi had started India's experiment with street power/jaan shakti.

By her radical posturing, Indira Gandhi, once again, forced all major political rivals and opponents to declare their ideological preferences. A kind of re-alignment of political forces took place; some socialists and the CPI (I) found themselves propping up Mrs Gandhi's (minority) government after the split in the Congress Parliamentary Party.

Curiously enough, there was a debate within the Jan Sangh over whether her "radical politics" was rooted in an ideological anchor or was just a personality-driven populist posturing. The majority faction, led by A B Vajpayee, decided that Gandhi was not ideological but power-driven. Between 1969 and 1971, Indian polity became entrapped in the ideology of personality and charisma.

Then began the tragedy of the Congress. The 1971 Lok Sabha election became a referendum on Gandhi and her ability to lead the country as prime minister. And, when her faction of the Congress decisively prevailed over all other rivals, the Indira cult got the imprimatur of popular acceptance. Nine months later, an empowered Gandhi was able to decisively mobilise the Indian

State's military, bureaucratic, diplomatic and political energies to prevail over Pakistan in the Bangladesh War; the legend of Indira Gandhi was born.

This, sadly enough, also discredited and eventually decimated the idea of ideology as the driving force behind the grand choices the nation would make in its journey; instead, a leader and her personality came to be defied as the compelling and primary source of national inspiration and imagination. Inevitably, for her political rivals, Gandhi's personality, its flaws and failures were deemed to be the singular handicap in achieving national greatness. Whosoever sliced it, the personality took precedence over ideological preferences.

Thus began the era of the "Nehru-Gandhi Family" in the Congress. Since Gandhi was universally acknowledged as the dominant vote-catcher, the only face with an all-India persona, the one embodiment of the Congress values and virtues, she could command and commandeer the entire Congress hierarchy as per her whims and fancies. And, when unthinkingly, the Opposition parties sought to make a hoo-ha over her son Sanjay's business activities, the idea of "Family" got entrenched, both in and out of the Congress. "The Family" became the ideology of the Congress.

The Emergency, Gandhi's total rejection in the 1977 General Election and her subsequent triumphant return to power in 1980, consecrated the centrality of the Family in the Congress scheme of things. The Congress invited the voters to exercise their franchise in relation to Gandhi:

Na jaat pe, na paat pe,  
Mohar laage ge, haath pe,  
Indirajee ke naam pe

More pertinently, the 1980 vote was a massive re-affirmation of Sanjay as the second most powerful presence in the Congress; only two years ago, this young man was vilified as the most hated villain but now he was hailed as the principal architect of the Congress' return to power. It was he who refused to be browbeaten by the old men of the Janata Party government, and instead, undertook perhaps the only large-scale shaking up of the Congress leadership slate at the national and state levels.

The Congress, from top to bottom, now felt totally beholden to the Family; a convenient myth subtly cultivated was that the "Nehru-Gandhi Family" was uniquely and intrinsically blessed with unparalleled leadership qualities and that it enjoyed a natural bond with the masses.

And, when Sanjay died in a plane crash within months of the 1980 triumph, it was deemed the most natural that Rajiv should step in as the principal aide to his mother, the Prime Minister, and the Congress President. The Congress Party was now most consequentially entrapped in the

myths of the Family and its omnipotence. In this mythology, the Family was the only source of ideology, imagination, ideas, idealism, and innovation—and, of course, the only site of power and legitimacy within the Congress. So, when Gandhi got assassinated, the Congress honchos did not have the slightest doubt that only her son, Rajiv, could succeed her as the prime minister and the Congress President. [Though it needs to be noted that the first dynastic succession in India had already taken place in Jammu and Kashmir when Farooq Abdullah succeeded the legendary Sheikh Abdullah as the chief minister].

This Family template was the very antithesis of an ideological profile. Whereas an ideology binds and is binding on both the leader and the led, the Family template absolves the leader of any ideological steadfastness. Ideology, if any, was to be gleaned from the (Family) Leader's style, choice of advisers. Be it Sanjay, or Indira or Rajiv, each sought to express his/her ideological orientation in terms of "X-Point Programmes" or "Missions or "guarantees".

By the time Rajiv ascended the "throne," ideological orientations—and grand constitutional commitments—had totally dissolved into confusing ambiguities. It was, therefore, inevitable that when confronted with an incipient Hindutva chall-e-nge, the Rajiv coterie floundered. It was also inevitable that Rajiv would squander the massive 400-plus Lok Sabha seats mandate. And, again, the desire and desperation to get rid of a scion of the Family was so total that both the Left and the Right joined hands to provide support to the V P Singh interlude.

Rajiv's assassination in 1991 reinforced the myth of the Family. Sonia Gandhi cultivated a mystique about her as the final arbiter of the Congress' values and ideological commitments, even when Prime Minister P V Narasimha Rao, aided and abetted by his finance minister, Dr Manmohan Singh, quietly dismantled the Nehruvian model of economic development. The Indian State vacated the "commanding heights of the economy" and the Market, with a capital M, was invited to do its magic.

The 1991 paradigmatic shift transformed the economy and also loosened up the social landscape, already reeling under the impact of Mandir and Mandal politics. And, though the Congress could innovate and readjust its ideological commitments, its internal equations remained entangled in the myths of the Family. Two successive defeats, in 1996 and 1998, made the party once again turn to the Family talisman. In 1998, the Congress defrocked its elected president, Sitaram Kesari, and invited Sonia Gandhi to take over the party. And, the rest is history—of electoral triumphs and disasters and, ideological confusion.



# Why this Indian is on FBI's list of 10 most-wanted fugitives

(News Agency)- The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) has offered a reward of up to \$250,000 for information leading to the arrest of Bhadreshkumar Chetanbhai Patel, a 33-year-old Indian national wanted for killing his wife in Maryland, US, in 2015. Bhadreshkumar Patel, who was last known to be in the Newark area of New Jersey, is considered "armed and extremely dangerous", reported news agency PTI.

Patel is on the FBI's list of 'Ten Most Wanted Fugitives' and the federal agency announced a reward of up to \$250,000 for information leading to his arrest.

Initially, the FBI had offered a \$100,000 reward for information about Patel.

He is accused of murdering his wife, Palak Patel, by striking her multiple times with an object at one of his relatives' Dunkin' Donuts shop, where they both worked the night shift, in Hanover, Maryland.

The FBI believes the murder happened just before midnight on April 12, 2015.

After the murder, a customer who entered the shop realised something was wrong when no one came to take his order.

He alerted a Police Department officer who discovered Palak Patel's body.

"It was horrific what had been done to this

young woman," said Special Agent Jonathan Shaffer with the FBI's Baltimore Division.

**FUGITIVE'S WIFE WANTED TO RETURN TO INDIA FROM US**

According to investigators, Palak Patel, who was 21 at the time, wanted to return to India, but her husband was against it. Their visas had expired a month before the murder.

"The best guess is that he didn't want her to leave," Shaffer said. "It's possible he thought he would be disgraced by her leaving and returning to India."

After the murder, Patel fled the scene. A

federal arrest warrant was issued for him several days later.

The FBI believes Patel may be with relatives in the United States or may have fled to Canada or even back to India.

"Those are among the plausible options we are exploring," Shaffer said.

Patel has been charged with first-degree murder, second-degree murder, assault, and dangerous weapons with intent to injure, the FBI said in a statement, reported PTI.

The FBI is asking anyone with information about Patel's whereabouts to contact them.

# Patanjali Saga Is A Reminder That India Needs Better Ad Regulation

(News Agency)- On April 10, the Supreme Court of India pulled up yoga guru Ramdev and Patanjali Ayurved managing director Acharya Balkrishna, refusing to accept their unconditional apology for issuing misleading advertisements. The Bench, comprising justices Hima Kohli and Ahsanuddin Amanullah, also criticised the Uttarakhand government for its failure to act against Patanjali Ayurved for violating the law.

In a significant remark, the court said an apology given to it could not be taken lightly as there was a larger issue concerning public health. "We are also concerned about the FMCGs [fast-moving consumer goods companies] that are taking consumers up the garden path and making people buy their products, who end up bearing adverse consequences. There are major fault lines in the system and this fault line is not at the cost of your company but the health of the public," the court said.

The apex court, questioning the state government for keeping its eyes "shut", took strong exception to the Uttarakhand government's apparent lack of action regarding Patanjali's exaggerated claims about the effectiveness of its products and its criticism of modern medicine during the peak of the Covid-19 pandemic. According to the Advertising Standards Council of India's (ASCI) half-yearly complaints report published in November last year, healthcare-related ads were at the top in terms of violating the law. They constituted 21 per cent of all processed ads. The report also observed that there was a significant rise in the number of ads that directly went against the Drug and Magic Remedies Act of 1954.

**Why The Case**

The Indian Medical Association (IMA) filed a petition in the Supreme Court in August 2022 based on a Patanjali advertisement published in several newspapers in July the same year. The advertisement, titled 'Misconceptions Spread By Allopathy: Save Yourself And The Country From The Misconceptions Spread By Pharma And Medical Industry', featured yoga expert

Ramdev calling allopathy a "stupid and bankrupt science" and claimed that allopathic medicine was responsible for a large number of Covid-19-related deaths in the country.

On November 21, 2023, during the first hearing in the case, the court orally warned Patanjali against false claims and said it would impose a fine if the company didn't stop publishing misleading advertisements. Less than two months after that, however, the court received an anonymous letter flagging the continued

reached the court, the contemnors did not find it fit to send us the affidavits. They sent it to the media first, until 7.30 pm yesterday it was not uploaded for us. They clearly believe in publicity," it said.

**Past Incidents**

There have been several cases involving misleading advertisements. In December 2016, a Haridwar court had imposed a ₹ 11 lakh fine on Ramdev's company, Patanjali Ayurved Ltd. The penalty arose from charges of

medicinal healthcare sector, laws such as the Drugs and Magic Remedies (Objectionable Advertisements) Act of 1954, the Drugs and Cosmetics Rules, 1945, and the Advertising Standards Council of India's Regulation Code and Consumer Protection Act, 2019, apply," says Aditya Bharat Manubarwala, a Supreme Court advocate.

Internet and the emergence of new ways to advertise have further aggravated the challenge. Regulation has been unable to keep pace with the changing nature of marketing. Advertisement and promotional material can reach even the remotest corners of the country today with very little expenditure, thanks to smartphones and social media. Our actions in real life are defined by the myriad advertisements and promotional content we see on our social media. Weight loss, fair complexion, healthy oil for healthy heart products...the list is endless. Brands paint a rosy picture, and consumers take it as gospel truth.

"A brand is a trust. A trust that a consumer reposes in an offering. And this trust must not be broken or even attempted to be broken. Brand ethics is a serious business," says Harish Bijoor, founder of Harish Bijoor Consults Inc. "Corporate entities, brands and their bait, and lure offerings are meant to be integrity-oriented offerings. One must not swerve away from the narrow and tight track of integrity. The gold standard globally is to tell the truth and plain truth. No exaggeration. No falsification. No lure that is a lie or even a half-truth."

Experts say along with other deterrents, brands should also be made to issue corrective advertisements so as to alert consumers about their wrongful claims earlier. "Existing laws say that any advertising should not be misleading...An advertisement for medicines should never make any promise or claims of curing the diseases," Manubarwala says. The need of the hour is a cohesive legal framework and awareness and active self-regulation to guarantee quality communication between brands and the public.



publication of false and misleading advertisements by Patanjali. Taking cognisance of it, the court issued a contempt notice to Patanjali Ayurved and its MD for flouting its orders. The SC also panned the Central government for not restraining the company.

In March, the court, upon not having received a reply to the contempt notice, passed an order seeking the personal appearance of Balakrishna and Ramdev. The Uttarakhand government was also made a party. Both Balakrishna and Ramdev issued an apology, but the top court on April 2 dismissed it as mere "lip service", criticising the company for failing to file proper affidavits and giving it a week to do so. On April 10, however, the court ultimately rejected Patanjali's apologies over the fact that they were first sent to the media. "Till the matter

misbranding and misrepresentation of its products.

In the April of 2023, a huge controversy erupted again when a viral video revealed that Bournvita, produced by Mondelez International India, contained dangerously high amounts of sugar. The National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR) issued a notice to the company, ordering it to withdraw all misleading advertisements, packaging and labels. Of course, the advertisements weren't stalled, but the brand did claim that it had reduced the quantity of sugar in the children's drink.

**Legal Regulation**

Misleading advertising can cause serious harm to consumers. And in the case of health-related products, such ads can be even more dangerous. "In the present case, since the primary business is in the



# 5 Indians among 9 named in Canada's the biggest gold theft

(Sai Bureau)- Canadian Police said nine people are facing charges in what authorities are calling the biggest gold theft in Canadian history from Toronto's Pearson International airport a year ago. Peel Regional Police said Wednesday that 6,600 gold bars worth more than 20 million Canadian dollars (\$14.5 million), and CA\$2.5 million (\$1.8 million) in foreign currencies were stolen. The gold was melted down and used to purchase illegal firearms, police said.

Those charged include an Air Canada warehouse employee and a former Air Canada manager who gave police a tour of cargo of the facility after the theft. A jewelry store owner is also charged.

This story is a sensational one and which probably, we jokingly say, belongs in a Netflix series," Peel Regional Chief Nishan Duraiappah said.

Peel Regional Detective Sgt. Mike Mavity said the gold bars, weighing 419 kilograms (923 pounds), and foreign currency, ordered from a refinery in Zurich, Switzerland, were transported in the haul of an Air Canada flight on April 17 last year. He said that late afternoon a truck driver arrived at the airline's cargo warehouse with a fraudulent bill that was provided to an airline warehouse attendant. Mavity said a bill for seafood that was picked up the day before was used to pick up the gold. The duplicate

bill was printed off at the Air Canada warehouse, he said.

"They needed people within Air Canada to facilitate this theft," Mavity said in front of the truck police say was used in the theft.

Mavity said police are searching for the Air Canada manager who gave police a tour of the facility in the days after the theft. He said that manager left his job last summer and said they have an idea of where he is. Mavity said some of the suspects were known to police and some were not. He said they seized six crudely made bracelets made of gold.

"I don't think I ever imagined they would have to deal with the largest gold heist in Canadian history," said Patrick Brown, the mayor of Brampton, Ontario. "It's almost out of an 'Ocean's Eleven' movie or CSI." Air Canada employee Parmpal Sidhu, 54, from Brampton, Ontario, jewelry store owner Ali Raza, 37, from Toronto, Amit Jalota, 40, a Oakville, Ontario resident, Ammad Chaudhary, 43, from Georgetown, Ontario and Prasath Paramalingam, 35, from Brampton are among those that have been arrested. Mavity said they have been released on bail conditions and will be in court at a later date.

Mavity said the truck driver that allegedly picked up the gold, Durante King-

McLean, a 25-year-old from Brampton, is currently in custody in the U.S. on firearms and trafficking related charges.

Police are searching for former Air Canada manager Simran Preet Panesar, 31, from Brampton as well as Archit Grover, 36, from Brampton and Arsalan Chaudhary, 42, from Mississauga Ontario.

Peel Regional Deputy Chief Nick Milinovich said only CA\$90,000 (\$65,000) of the more than CA\$20 million has been recovered. U.S. ATF Special Agent, Eric DeGree, said King-McLean, was arrested in Pennsylvania after a traffic stop and that led to the seizure of 65 illegal firearms that were allegedly destined to be smuggled into Canada. DeGree said he tried to flee after police discovered the firearms in his rental car. Brinks, an American cash handling company, arrived at the airport cargo facility the night of April 17 to pick up the gold and were told the gold and currency was missing after a search.

Brinks sued Air Canada over the theft last year. According to the company's filing last year, a thief walked away with the costly cargo after presenting a fake document at an Air Canada warehouse on April 17.

In a Nov. 8 statement of defense, Air Canada rejected "each and every allegation" in the Brink's lawsuit, saying it fulfilled its carriage contracts and denying any improper or "careless"

conduct. The country's largest airline also said Brink's failed to note the value of the haul on the waybill — a document typically issued by a carrier with details of the shipment — and that if Brink's did suffer losses, a multilateral treaty known as the Montreal Convention would cap Air Canada's liability. In Federal Court filings that claim breach of contract and millions of dollars in damages, Brinks said an "unidentified individual" gained access to the airline's cargo warehouse and presented a "fraudulent" waybill shortly after an Air Canada flight from Zurich landed at Pearson.

The statement of the claim says the staff then handed over 400 kilograms of gold in the form of 24 bars plus nearly \$2 million in cash to the thief, who promptly "absconded with the cargo."

DeGree said dozens of firearms were seized, including two fully automatic weapons and five guns that were untraceable. "I'm proud to say that we successfully put an international gun trafficking operation out of business. We kept 65 firearms off the streets of Canada and prevented them from being used in any number of crimes," DeGree said.

Mavity said that "we believe they melted down the gold and with the profits they got from the gold they used to purchase illegal firearms."

## Amplified Nationalism Through Cinema

(Sai Bureau)- "But if we define the Megaphone as the composite of the hundreds of voices we hear each day that come to us from people we don't know, via high-tech sources, it's clear that a significant and ascendant component of that voice has become bottom-dwelling, shrill, incurious, ranting, and agenda-driven. It strives to antagonize us, make us feel anxious, ineffective, and alone; convince us that the world is full of enemies and of people stupider and less agreeable than ourselves; is dedicated to the idea that, outside the sphere of our immediate experience, the world works in a different, more hostile, less knowable manner. This braindead tendency is viral and manifests intermittently; while it is the blood in the veins of some of our media figures, it flickers on and off in others." For a long time now, we have been submerged in nationalistic jingoism and propaganda of the kind that is ambitious enough to attempt a disintegration of history itself. The megaphone cinema, as I call it, is part of the machinery that feeds itself with

a version of history that can be fictionalised and edited to suit a particular mood and serve a particular time or promote a set of narratives that include Hindu nationalism. The amplification is too much. The new propagandists imagine themselves as influencers, as those who rectify and serve the new emergent supnation that is trying to assert its glorious past rooted in the Ram Rajya and then, in the Independence movement, and now, in the showcasing of Hindu nationalism that is benevolent, and yet, has been denied its rightful place. In these films, this Hindu nationalist state is the hero, the rest are all in supporting roles. The enemy is always the "rogue" nation that threatens the unity and the integrity of the State or the dissenting individuals within, who don't agree with the majoritarian politics or see the dangers of the alienation of others. In any case, manipulation via cinema is not a new phenomenon in terms of promoting certain ideologies, depending on who is in power. It all started in the early 20th century. Propaganda is never accidental. But back then, it still

exercised some caution. Now, there isn't much room for anything except blatant propaganda.

Many of these films have not done well commercially. Only a few have. But that hasn't deterred filmmakers from marking themselves as those who want to be "correcting" perceptions, and even history by taking all kinds of liberties and even imagining themselves as doing an act of service by making derogatory films about the minorities and being preposterous about branding them as factual. In recent times, the genre has been used to promote a framework for a new kind of patriotism riding the wave of anti-colonialism at first, and continuing to do so while also marking any others, particularly minorities, as enemies of the nation that will stress on the public to forgo neutrality when viewing history from a different perspective.

Propaganda films are a whole genre and in India, the growing trend of making biopics of slain Hindu heroes or telling one-sided stories that influence the perception of the Hindutva ideology are, in fact, simplistic and

reductive in their messaging—and history is always complex. This is the retelling of history from the Hindu nationalist viewpoint, and the lead-up to the general elections that begin this month includes a bunch of films over the years ranging from epic war films and historical films that glorify and romanticise the Hindu pride to the ones that are rooted in recent history or controversies like The Kashmir Files or The Kerala Story or Jahangir National University. They are embedded with the system and immersed and soaked in Hindu nationalism. They polarise. They divide. They make us indulge in othering. This issue of Outlook looks at the genre of nationalist and propaganda cinema in the Indian context, and also continues with the exploration of the ideology question when it comes to national parties like the Congress and the BJP in the context of the upcoming general elections. Both the themes are contextual and linked in many ways. Both are about propaganda and ideologies. Both are about braindead megaphones. Too much noise. Too much amplification. Too many dangers.



# 'If anything happens to my wife...': Jailed Imran Khan's warning to Pak Army chief

**Imran Khan alleged that General Asim Munir was directly involved in the sentence awarded to his wife, Bushra Bibi, adding that the judge who convicted her said that he was forced to make the decision.**

(News Agency)- Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf founder and jailed former Prime Minister Imran Khan on Wednesday alleged that Army chief General Asim Munir was directly responsible for the imprisonment of his wife Bushra Bibi.

Bushra Bibi, 49, was convicted in a corruption case as well as in the case of illegal marriage with Khan, 71, and is currently held in detention at their Bani Gala residence in the suburbs of Islamabad.

The PTI leader in a conversation with journalists at Adiala Jail where he is currently incarcerated hurled allegations on the army chief, according to a long post uploaded

on Khan's official X account. "General Asim Munir is directly involved in the sentence awarded to my wife," Khan said, adding that the judge who convicted her said that he was forced to make the decision.

"If anything happens to my wife, I will not leave Asim Munir, I will not leave Asim Munir as long as I am alive. I will expose his unconstitutional and illegal steps," he threatened.

Khan said there was a law of the jungle in the country and all was being done by the "king of the jungle". "If the king of the jungle wants, all the cases of Nawaz

Sharif are forgiven, and when he wants, we are punished in three cases in five days," he alleged. Khan also said that the economy would stabilise not through the International Monetary Fund (IMF) loans but by investment. "Due to the law of the jungle, there will be no investment in the country. It is good that Saudi Arabia is coming but investment will come once there is rule of law in the country," he said.

He also referred to the recent reported clash between police and army in Bahawalnagar area of Punjab and said that the "police were thrashed" by violating the



law, but the IG (inspector general police) and Viceroy, who oppressed our people, apologised from those who had thrashed the police. Khan said the Viceroy said after the incident that "they (police) are our brothers". He went on to say that "such treatment is done to slaves and not to brothers" because those having power thrashed the police and

also forced to apologise. He also said that PTI was being stopped from contesting in the by-elections. "At this time, standing in front of oppression is Jihad. Our workers have to protect each vote, guard the vote," the former premier said.

So far the army has not responded to the serious allegations.

## Maldives Oppn Demands President Muizzu's Impeachment After Report On Corruption Allegation



(News Agency)- Ahead of the parliamentary polls in the Maldives, the opposition parties have demanded a probe and impeachment of President Mohamed Muizzu following the leaked report of his alleged corruption from 2018, a charge dismissed by him. Elections to the Majlis are to be held on Sunday and the atmosphere has been vitiated by the trading of charges between the main opposition the Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) and the Muizzu's People's National Congress (PNC).

Local media reports have highlighted that the political storm started on Monday with an anonymous handle Hassan

Kurusee' posting on social media X leaked intelligence reports, including documents prepared by

the Financial Intelligence Unit (FIU) of the Maldives Monetary Authority and the Maldives Police Service that allegedly linked President Muizzu to corruption. These reports, dated circa 2018, claim irregularities in money transfers to President Muizzu's personal bank account, highlighting 10 critical red flag indicators of financial misconduct. These indicators suggest involvement with politically exposed persons, embezzlement, structured transactions, and the use of corporate entities to hide fund origins, news portal Maldives Republic (mvrepublic.com) reported. The allegations soon

created a political storm with several reactions pouring in on various social media channels. News portals and newspapers, however, tread with caution. The opposition Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) and People's National Front (PNF) demanded an investigation into the matter. Former Vice President Dr Mohamed Jameel Ahmed urged Muizzu's impeachment following the leaked intelligence reports. Taking to his social media handle X, Jameel reposted these documents, emphasising the need for accountability at all levels of governance. Apart from demanding Muizzu's

impeachment, Jameel, a senior member of the Progressive Party of Maldives, "also accused President Muizzu of extensive corruption in his flagship Ras Male' development project and alleged excessive spending on public relations. Jameel has called on President Muizzu to cooperate with independent investigations into these allegations, mvrepublic.com said. The news portal also claimed that this was the first time an FIU report was leaked and said, there has been no official confirmation or response from government bodies regarding the legitimacy of the reports or the allegations.

## Myanmar border guards, soldiers and civilians flee to Bangladesh

(News Agency)- Nearly four dozen members of the Burmese junta-affiliated Border Guard Police and soldiers have fled to Bangladesh since Tuesday night amid intensifying fighting between junta troops and Arakan Army rebels in neighboring Rakhine state, officials said.

Bangladeshis who live close to the border with Rakhine reported hearing loud sounds from artillery fire nearby. Over the past week, about 260 Myanmar soldiers, border guards and citizens have taken shelter in Bangladesh after crossing over at Naikhongchhari in Bandarban district and

Teknaf in Cox's Bazar district, authorities



said. "Last night, 46 more BGP [Myanmar Border Guard Police] members took shelter while another one came on Wednesday,"

said Shariful Islam, a spokesman for the Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB).

He told BenarNews that efforts to repatriate those seeking shelter in Bangladesh had begun. Bangladesh officials said that since a clash between the Arakan Army and junta forces began on Feb. 2, hundreds of BGB members have been fleeing across the border. About 330 people including BGB members fled from Myanmar between Feb. 4 and 7, according to Bangladesh government data, and were returned to Myanmar on Feb. 15.



# Eli Lilly's weight-loss drug Zepbound could treat sleep apnea

(News Agency)- Eli Lilly said Wednesday that its weight-loss drug Zepbound improved symptoms in two late-stage trials of patients with obstructive sleep apnea.

Why it matters: If treating sleep apnea ultimately earns an FDA green light, it could expand insurance coverage for the drug and reshape treatment for a dangerous sleep condition affecting more than 20 million Americans. Lilly shares jumped more than 2.5% on the announcement, before settling to close up 0.5%. Shares of ResMed, a maker of CPAP machines used in existing positive airway pressure (PAP) therapy, closed down 6%. Between the lines: Obstructive sleep apnea is



closely associated with obesity, as fat deposits in a person's tongue and upper airway can restrict airflow to the lungs during sleep. Loud snoring is the most

obvious symptom, but people suffering from OSA will repeatedly stop and start breathing during sleep. Those diagnosed with severe cases can experience more

than 30 such breathing events per hour. What they found: Eli Lilly today said that a group of patients in the trial taking tirzepatide — the drug Lilly brands as Zepbound

— suffered 27 fewer breathing events per hour than the baseline. A second group of patients that combined Zepbound with existing PAP therapy suffered 30 fewer events per hour.

The big picture: Adding OSA to the list of things Zepbound can treat would likely increase insurance coverage for the drug. States and corporate health plans have been tightening access to drugs like Ozempic and Zepbound, the popular class of weight-loss and diabetes drugs known as GLP-1s, as a surge in usage has led to soaring costs for plan providers, Axios' Tina Reed has noted. Lilly said it plans to submit data to the FDA and global regulators beginning mid-year in hopes of gaining approval for OSA treatment.

## Indians up their spending on dieticians by 125pc in FY24: Report

(News Agency)- Indians have increased their spending on dieticians by a remarkable 125 per cent in FY24, indicating a strong commitment to healthy eating habits, a new report revealed on Tuesday.

According to the full-stack financial services platform Razorpay, health coaching also saw a notable 45 per cent jump in transactions, showing a clear interest in fitness guidance.

"There's a noticeable emphasis on holistic well-being, as evidenced by a 39 per cent uptick in products related to preventive healthcare," said Shashank Kumar, MD & Co-founder, Razorpay.

"This signals a collective shift towards expanding horizons while prioritising health, affirming the adage that 'health



is truly wealth," he added.

The report analysed more than a billion transactions between April 1, 2023, and March 31, 2024, to know the spending

habits of Indians.

Moreover, the report found that mutual fund investments increased by an impressive 86 per cent, insurance payments

saw a significant 56 per cent growth and trading experienced a remarkable 62 per cent jump in value in FY24.

Payments for air travel surged

by 2.4 times while spending on travel accommodations soared by 29 per cent in the same period.

Multiplex transactions witnessed a staggering 42 per cent increase in volume. Ticket agencies also reported a remarkable 2.7 times surge in sales.

"Indian consumers are evolving rapidly, encouraging brands to revolutionise their customer engagement strategies across all touchpoints," said Kumar.

In addition, the report noted that close to the New Year, aviation spending soared to nearly three times the daily average. On December 31 last year, online food orders doubled and dine-ins soared to 60 per cent above the daily average.

## Drug shortages reach record high in US

(News Agency)- There are more active drug shortages in the United States than ever, according to data from the American Society of Health-System Pharmacists and the University of Utah Drug Information Service. The organizations first started tracking drug shortages in 2001. Active shortages previously peaked in 2014, with 320 drugs in active shortage. Shortage levels have fluctuated in the decade since, but have been steadily trending up since 2021 — now reaching a record-high of 323 drugs in the first three months of 2024.

"It's long past time to put an end to drug shortages," Paul Abramowitz, chief executive officer of the American Society of Health-System Pharmacists, wrote in a blog post on Thursday.

"All drug classes are vulnerable to shortages," he wrote. "Some of the most worrying shortages involve generic sterile injectable medications, including cancer chemotherapy drugs and emergency medications stored in hospital crash carts and procedural areas. Ongoing national shortages of therapies for attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder also remain

a serious challenge for clinicians and patients." Along with the 32 chemotherapy drugs that are in shortage, the five categories of drugs with the most shortages include central nervous system stimulants, antimicrobials, hormone agents and intravenous fluids. The drug shortage database maintained by the American Society of Health-System Pharmacists and the University of Utah is based on voluntary reports from practitioners, patients and others that are confirmed with manufacturers. This list often includes more drugs than the

number considered to be in shortage by the US Food and Drug Administration because it captures broader impacts on providers and patients. The average drug shortage lasts about a year and a half, according to government data. More than half of the treatment shortages have persisted for more than two years, according to an analysis by health consulting firm IQVIA. And the average shortage affects at least half a million patients, many of them older adults, according to the US Health and Human Services

Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, which shared its analysis with Congress in May.

Increased demand can play a role in drug shortages, as with recent shortages of weight loss drugs. But more often, manufacturing and quality problems, such as supply chain gaps and discontinuations, are at the root. Last week, HHS published a white paper outlining policy suggestions to help prevent drug shortages and mitigate vulnerabilities.



# Trump Media stock slides again to bring it more than 66% below its peak as euphoria fades

(News Agency)- The stock price for Donald Trump's social media company slid again Monday, pushing it more than 66% below its peak set late last month. Trump Media & Technology Group closed down 18.4% at \$26.61 as more of the euphoria that surrounded the stock fades. It's a sharp comedown since nearing \$80 after the owner of Truth Social merged with a shell company to get its stock trading on the Nasdaq under the symbol "DJT," for Trump's initials.

Part of the decline may be due to criticism that the stock price had zoomed way past what skeptics said the money-losing company is worth, particularly one with tough odds for success. But another part is also likely because of action Trump Media took Monday.

The company filed documents with the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission that open the door for the future potential sale of millions of shares. The document, called an S-1, relates to warrants held by investors that can be transformed into shares of stock, as well as shares held by company insiders. The filing also includes all the shares held by the former president. Trump, though, remains under a "lock-up" deal that largely restricts him from selling his shares for



another roughly five months. His son, Donald Trump Jr., who is a director on the board, and CEO Devin Nunes, are also bound by the lock-up.

Typically, all shares of stock held by insiders subject to lock-up deals are included in such filings, according to Jay Ritter, an expert on initial public offerings of stock at the University of Florida's Warrington College of Business. The filing does not necessarily mean any investors are planning to sell their shares,

Sarasota, Florida-based Trump Media & Technology Group said in a statement. Trump Media got its place on the Nasdaq after merging with a company called Digital World Acquisition Corp., which was essentially a pile of cash looking for a target to merge with. It's an example of what's called a special purpose acquisition company, or SPAC, which can give young companies quicker and easier routes to getting their shares trading publicly. S-

1 filings are typically filed quickly after a SPAC deal closes, usually within 15 or 30 days, said Kristi Marvin, founder of SPACInsider.com, which specializes in SPAC deals.

The exercise of warrants referenced in Trump Media's S-1 filing would increase the number of shares outstanding for the company. That in turn could put downward pressure on the stock price. When something becomes more available, it tends to fall in price unless demand for it picks up accordingly.

The drop in Trump Media's stock price over the last few weeks hurts its shareholders, who experts say are mostly smaller-pocketed investors rather than big institutions. Several users of Truth Social have said they bought shares to show their support of the former president.

The drop also puts a huge hit on Trump's finances directly. He could personally own nearly 114.8 million shares, depending on the company's performance. That would be worth \$3.15 billion at its current price. On March 27, that was worth nearly \$7.6 billion.

On Monday, Trump arrived at a New York court for the start of jury selection in his hush-money trial. It's the first trial of any former U.S. commander in chief.

## Tesla layoffs: More than 10% of global staff to lose jobs amid declining sales



(News Agency)- Global electric vehicle (EV) giant Tesla is set to lay off over 10% of its workforce amid declining sales, reported tech publication Electrek.

"As we prepare the company for our next phase of growth, it is extremely important to look at every aspect of the company for cost reductions and increasing productivity," reported the publication, citing CEO Elon Musk's statement in the internal memo. The report indicated that Tesla instructed managers to identify critical team members and paused certain stock rewards, while also canceling some employees' annual reviews. Additionally,

production at Gigafactory Shanghai has been scaled back. As of December 2023, Tesla had approximately 140,473 employees globally. The fresh layoffs are expected to affect around 15,000 workers. Tesla has not yet commented on the potential layoffs.

The announcement comes as Tesla prepares to release its quarterly earnings on April 23.

The company recently experienced a decrease in vehicle deliveries in the first quarter, marking its first decline in nearly four years and falling below market expectations.

## Lotto Max – A \$70 million jackpot and an estimated 13 Maxmillions in the next draw

(News Agency)- Yesterday's Lotto Max draw saw 1 Maxmillions prize (worth \$1 million each) awarded to a holder of a selection sold in Québec. In the Friday, April 19 draw, the prize pool will amount to \$83 million and include a \$70 million jackpot and an estimated 13 Maxmillions. "Several jackpots have been won in Québec in the past year, including three with Lotto Max. We hope this momentum will continue, and next Friday's \$70 million jackpot will be won here," says Isabelle Jean, Executive Vice-President and Chief Operating Officer of Lottery Games at Loto-Québec. Three jackpots of \$50 million or more won locally recently. On December 15, Nancy Gauthier, Jeannette Boisvert and Gilles Larouche, a family from the Laurentides, took home \$50,000,000. Catherine Ennis and Jean Larocque, a couple from Estrie, pocketed the \$55,000,000 jackpot on Halloween night. Over Thanksgiving weekend, Montréal resident Pierre Richer won the \$50,000,000 jackpot. Lotto Max continues to churn out winners in Québec.

Lotto Max players in Québec have won over \$3.632 billion since its launch in 2009. In total, there have been 43 jackpot wins in the province, including 3 of \$70,000,000—the largest jackpots ever won in



Québec—in the February 25 and October 9, 2020, and June 7, 2022 draws. One \$65,000,000 jackpot, four \$60,000,000 jackpots, five \$55,000,000 jackpots, and nine \$50,000,000 jackpots were also won in Québec. In addition to these jackpot wins, Lotto Max players in Québec have also won a total of 221 Maxmillions prizes, each worth \$1 million, and 140 shares of Maxmillions prizes. Draw results are available online at [lotoquebec.com](http://lotoquebec.com).

Loto-Québec has been delivering entertainment to Quebecers for over 50 years, and its operations benefit the people and province of Québec. In 2023, it paid out over \$1.6 billion in prizes to lottery winners.



# Elon Musk's X now feels nothing like good old Twitter, and it may go downhill further

(News Agency)- Like they say, anything can happen in the Elonverse. Elon Musk's X seems to be changing once again, and unfortunately, not for the better. Musk announced on Tuesday that X will soon charge new users for using the most basic Twitter functionalities, such as posting, liking, bookmarking, or even retweeting a post. This will come at a "small fee" of \$1 annually (which is about Rs 100). The feature was tested in New Zealand and the Philippines, and Musk now plans to roll it out globally. Essentially, this means that for new users, accessing the most basic functionalities on the platform will soon become a paid privilege. Musk says the move is meant to "curb the relentless onslaught of bots". He states, "current AI (and troll farms) can pass the 'are you a bot' test with ease". However, we have a few questions for Musk: Does paying a dollar really ensure that you are not a bot? Can the people behind these AI bots and troll farms not afford the \$1 fee? And what happens to the existing bots and troll farms on the platform?

Another question arises (and arguably a more important one): Does this not ruin a new user's experience? Charging users the \$1 fee means limiting their ability to experience the platform as we know it. It



will also restrict the ability of a user to quickly and accurately spread crucial information or reach other users. If you are not paying the \$1 fee, it means you can only consume content on the platform without being able to contribute to it. When X started testing this feature in October 2023, Musk confirmed that the model would allow users to "read for free, but [they would have to pay] \$1/year to write." The X chief believes that this is the "only way to fight bots without blocking real users." However, we are not sure of that. Restricting the usual access to the platform's functionalities for new users implies a disparity in the user experience

on X. According to Musk, a user like myself, who has been on the platform for over a decade, can use the basic functionalities — although I too need to pay for features like an edit button, no-ads, or the ability to write a long post. However, for a new user, X will be a read-only platform, similar to browsing Google News.

However, we wonder how long it will be before Musk also rolls out this model for existing users?

Considering Musk justifies the move by saying it's to limit bots on the platform, rolling out this model for existing users seems like the natural next step — be-

cause there are still millions of existing bots and troll farms on the platform. This means, every user on the platform may soon need to pay for tweeting, liking, reposting on X, unless you want it to be a read-only platform. And the moment that happens, X would permanently reshape into a platform that is nothing like the good old Twitter.

Not only would the \$1 model limit a user's ability to share content on the platform, it may actually turn dangerous. The basic functionality of being able to reply to a tweet often means being able to add to critical information or even correct misreported or misleading posts. The fact check tool on the platform isn't entirely foolproof. Take the example of the recent incident involving fake AI-generated images and videos that circulated widely on X following Iran's missile and drone attacks on Israel earlier this week. Within seven hours of the attacks, 34 counterfeit images and videos depicting the conflict purportedly garnered 37 million views on X. According to a report by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD), 77 percent of these posts originated from 'verified' paid accounts. X amplified some of these posts and replicated them to increase their visibility to other users.

## NASA is seeking a faster and cheaper way to bring Mars samples to Earth



NASA's plan to bring samples from Mars back to Earth is on hold until there's a faster, cheaper way, space agency officials said Monday.

Retrieving Mars soil and rocks has been on NASA's to-do list for decades, but the date kept moving forward, as costs ballooned. A recent independent review put the total cost at \$8 billion to \$11 billion, with an arrival date of 2040, about a decade later than advertised.

NASA Administrator Bill Nelson said that's too much and too late. He's asking pri-

vate industry and the space agency's centers to come up with other options to revamp the project. With NASA facing across-the-board budget cuts, he wants to avoid gutting other science projects to finance the Mars sample project.

"We want to get every new and fresh idea that we can," he said at a news conference.

NASA's rover Perseverance already has gathered 24 core samples in tubes since landing in 2021 at Mars' Jezero Crater, an ancient river delta. The goal is more

than 30 samples to scour for possible signs of ancient Martian life. The space agency wants to get at least some of the collected samples to Earth sometime in the 2030s for no more than the \$7 billion. That would require a spacecraft that goes to Mars to get the tubes and launches off the planet. Then it must rendezvous with yet another spacecraft that would bring the samples to Earth.

NASA's science mission chief, Nicky Fox, refused to speculate at the news conference when the samples might arrive at Earth, given a new program and timeline, or even how many samples might be returned. That information will be included in any proposals, she said.

"We've never launched from another planet, and that's actually what makes Mars sample return such a challenging and interesting mission," Fox said.

Scientists are eager to analyze pristine samples from Mars in their own labs, far superior to the kind of rudimentary testing done by spacecraft at the red planet. It will take such in-depth testing to confirm any evidence of microscopic life dating back billions of years when water flowed on the planet, according to NASA.

## Scientists say coral reefs around the world are experiencing mass bleaching in warming oceans

Coral reefs around the world are experiencing global bleaching for the fourth time, top reef scientists declared Monday, a result of warming ocean waters amid human-caused climate change. Coral reef bleaching across at least 53 countries, territories or local economies has been confirmed from February 2023 to now, scientists from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and International Coral Reef Initiative said. It happens when stressed coral expel the algae that are their food source and give them their color. If the bleaching is severe and long-lasting, the coral can die. Coral reefs are important ecosystems that sustain underwater life, protect biodiversity and slow erosion. They also support local economies through tourism. Bleaching has been happening in various regions for some time. In the world's largest coral reef ecosystem, Australia's Great Barrier Reef, bleaching affected 90% of the coral assessed in 2022. The Florida Coral Reef, the third-largest, experienced significant bleaching last year. But in order for bleaching to be declared on a global scale, significant bleaching had to be documented within each of the major ocean basins, including the Atlantic, Pacific, and Indian oceans, in both the Northern and Southern Hemispheres.



# Sanya Malhotra speaks up for neurodivergent people, seeks greater acceptance for them

(News Agency)- This autism month, actress Sanya Malhotra shared that it is critical to find a structured yet flexible learning environment for neurodivergent people focused on life skills and independent living.

April marks Autism Awareness Month, a period dedicated to raising awareness about autism, a developmental disability stemming from differences in brain functioning.

Sanya, who was last seen in the movie 'Sam Bahadur', attended the opening ceremony of 'So-Hum Smiles', a special school for neurodivergent individuals.

This school, which is supported by an NGO, looks after providing exceptional care and support to neurodivergent people. Sanya believes that the school is more than just a therapy centre, as it also embodies a vision of inclusivity,

empowerment, and compassion.

The actress said: "I am truly happy that this centre is opening, which is the need of the hour to provide help for neurodivergent individuals. It is critical to find a structured yet flexible learning environment for these people focused on life skills and independent living."

"It is imperative to find acceptance and a place for these kids and adults in society, not just for these kids but also for society to do better and be uplifted. I am sure the centre will create a fruitful impact on numerous lives," added Sanya.

On the work front, Sanya will be next seen in 'Mrs', which is a remake of the Malayalam film 'The Great Indian Kitchen'. The Arati Kadav directorial is already making waves internationally. Recently, it was also showcased at the Hawaii International Film Festival 2024.

## 'Classy look, silken hair, designer sarees' define Mansi Srivastava in 'Main Hoon Saath Tere'

(News Agency)- Actress Mansi Srivastava, who will be seen playing the negative role of Raina in the upcoming show 'Main Hoon Saath Tere' has

presence in the house, more as a partner for his mother than a father for himself.

The plot thickens when Janvi crosses paths with an affluent businessman Aryaman (Karan Vohra) and the two end up working under the same roof.

Mansi will be seen playing Aryaman's sister, Raina. Although she is the youngest daughter of the Bundela family, she is very ambitious and works hard to achieve her goals. But she despises Aryaman and doesn't want him to own any part of the Bundela property as he is the son from her father's second marriage. Her character in the show will be the

opened up on her character's look, calling it "vile".

The show is set to take you through the journey of a single mother, Janvi (Ulka Gupta), underlining the constant social scrutiny and numerous challenges a mother has to face while doubling up as a parent. Janvi lives with her son Kian, who is the nucleus of her world but despite their strong bond, Kian experiences the void of a man's

source of a lot of conflict and complications in Aryaman's life.

Speaking about the same, Mansi said: "My character, Raina, will keep the audience on the edge of their seats with her wickedness. The look is classy and sharp with straight, silky hair and designer sarees. She acts very entitled, and as Aryaman is her step-brother, she feels he doesn't deserve any of the inheritance."





# Vidya Balan: I love romance and I am a romantic at heart

(News Agency)- National Award-winning actress Vidya Balan is all gung-ho about love stories and rom-coms, as she loves romance and says that she is a romantic at heart.

Vidya is all pumped up for the release of her upcoming film 'Do Aur Do Pyaar', which talks about a "cheating" married couple falling in love with each other once again after indulging in an extramarital affair.

"Everyone loves a dollop of romance, and everyone loves to have a good time to laugh. And everyone either yearns to be in a relationship or is in a relationship, or is mourning a relationship. The relationship is fascinating. Especially romantic relationships. I think it is a relatable genre," she told when asked about what makes the rom-com genre so popular. Vidya added: "Comedy is my favourite genre, but given that I love rom-coms because I love romance and I am a romantic at heart."

The actress then revealed the secret behind the popularity of the genre.

Vidya said: "It gives you the opportunity to laugh at this couple, who you realise could have been you in any rom-com. It is easy on the eyes, it is fun, filled with laughter, and then there is lovely music and colour." "Love makes the world go round and round. That's what makes it a favourite genre," added the actress, who stepped into the

world of showbiz in 1995.

However, there is a dearth of love stories, and she agrees.

"We have not seen a love story in a long time. Even rom-com as a genre, after 'Shaadi Ke Side Effects' in 2014, I can't remember any film that was a rom-com. Enough of us for taking us so seriously, it's time to have fun," said the actress.

Discussing how 'Do Aur Do Pyaar' happened to Vidya, the actress said that she heard the idea from producer Swati Iyer from Ellipsis Entertainment Production.

"I had done 'Tumhari Sulu' with them already, and I said I loved the idea. This situation is so unbelievable... Shirsha Guha Thakurta (director) and Suprotim Sengupta (writer) worked together in the lockdown on the script and got it to a place where, when I read it, I said, 'oh! Wow, this has really done justice to the idea'." She minces no words when she said that it would be a "bizarre situation" to be in and "wouldn't wish this on anyone. Vidya said with a laugh: "It's a fun idea and a bizarre situation to be in. You don't want to be caught in it, and if you are caught in it, then God will help you. I wouldn't wish this on anyone, I won't wish this on myself, and to the brave hearts who are in this situation, it could also be exciting."

'Do Aur Do Pyaar' also stars Pratik Gandhi, Ileana D'Cruz and Sendhil Ramamurthy.



## Taapsee shares living-room chat with sister Shagun; 'excessive gyaan makes you lose it'

(News Agency)- Mumbai- Actress Taapsee Pannu shared a hilarious glimpse of her sister Shagun's "living room conversation" on World Siblings Day on Wednesday.

Taapsee took to Instagram and posted a video of her sister sitting in the living room and talking about "feeling trapped on earth".

Shagun was heard saying: "When we are in an airplane for 10 hours, if we are travelling internationally, we can't get out of it, we are stuck in it. Like that, we are travelling on earth, and we don't have the option of getting out of it." To which, Taapsee replies: "We are sitting" and Shagun chimes in, "Kabse baithai huye hai yaar."

Shagun then said I have been here for 32 years and then asked Taapsee if you have been here for more than her. She then said that she is not feeling "free" with a laugh.

"Main moti bhi hoti jaa rahi hun and trapped bhi hun earth pe. I am getting fat and I am trapped," she hilariously rapped, adding that she would now have a "chicken wrap."

Taapsee captioned the funny video: "And this shows that excessive gyaan makes you lose it, and then the conversations sound like this. Concluding our living room conversation series with this part 3 of #Shagunsays."







## From over-accessorising to ill-fitted ensembles: How people get styling Indian wear wrong

(News Agency)- Wearing an Indian ensemble is not just about donning clothes; it's about honouring the rich heritage of the country. Many go wrong when styling it up with over-accessorising or sporting mismatched colours, say designers, who have given out pointers on how to ace the traditional look.

Shivani Awasty of the label Shivani Awasty told VOICE: "Wearing Indian attire is not just about donning clothes; it's about honoring our rich heritage while expressing our unique selves. Each garment tells a story of tradition, elegance, and personal style."

Talking about where people go wrong when styling their Indian wear, she said: "Over-accessorising".

"Avoid cluttering the look with too many

accessories."

Then there are "mismatched colours and ill-fitting garments".

"Ensure harmony in colour coordination for a polished appearance. Opt for well-fitted attire to enhance the elegance of Indian wear."

"Blindly following trends" can lead to a fashion faux pas.

"Instead of blindly following trends, focus on personal style and cultural authenticity," she added.

For what to keep in mind, Awasty said "respect tradition", "express individuality", "experiment with style" and "cultural sensitivity".

Sagrika Rai, founder of the label Warp 'n Weft, told VOICE that when styling Indian wear, strike a balance between tradition

and personal flair.

"Opt for well-fitted garments that compliment your body shape. Avoid overwhelming accessories; instead, choose statement pieces thoughtfully. Experiment with mixing traditional and contemporary elements for a unique look. Finally, embrace confidence as your best accessory to elevate any outfit."

Rai agrees with Awasty that "over-accessorising" and "incorrect fit" is something where people go wrong when styling their Indian wear.

"Avoid cluttering your Indian wear with too many accessories, as it can overwhelm the outfit and detract from its elegance. Ensure your Indian attire fits well and flatters your body shape, as ill-fitting garments can appear sloppy and detract

from your overall look."

What to keep in mind when wearing Indian wear, Rai said: "Consider the occasion" is important.

"Ensure your attire is appropriate for the event, whether it's casual, semi-formal, or formal," she stressed.

Special attention to the fit of the garment and experimentation with layers can make it look sharp.

"Well-fitted Indian wear enhances your silhouette and adds to your overall look. Try layering different pieces like jackets, scarves, or stoles to add depth and dimension to your outfit," said Rai, who also suggested "mix and match".

She added: "Don't be afraid to mix traditional Indian wear with contemporary elements for a unique and eclectic look."



## Tisca Chopra's stay-fit mantra: Eating well in small portions, exercising like the devil

(News Agency)- Actress Tisca Chopra shared her key to staying fit, which includes eating on time and in small portions, along with working out like a devil.

Tisca took to Instagram and shared a video montage.

In the clip, which was tagged "actors don't eat the say," the actress is seen gorging on croissants, avocado toasts, pastries, and eggs.

For the caption, Tisca wrote: "Forever been a fan of eating on time, eating well but in small

portions and exercising like a devil..."

The 50-year-old actress made her acting debut with '15th August' in 1993. She gained the spotlight with the Aamir Khan-starrer 2007 film 'Taare Zameen Par', which was India's official entry to the Academy Awards. The actress was then seen in films including 'Firaq', 'Qissa', 'Rahasya', 'Ghayal Once Again', 'Ankur Arora Murder Case', 'Good Newwz', 'Jugjugg Jeeyo' and 'Murder Mubarak'. She was also seen in the short film 'Chutney', which was lauded by critics and audience alike.

On the web, the actress was seen in shows such as 'Hostages', 'Beecham House' and 'Dahan', among many others.



# Nargis Fakhri as a child dreamt of becoming a vet and not an actor



(News Agency)- Actress Nargis Fakhri, who was recently seen in the streaming series 'Tatlubaaz', has shared her childhood dream. The actress is an "animal" and she attributes her compassion towards animals to her childhood dream of becoming a veterinarian.

However, the actress shared that over the years, she fell in love with the profession of acting and her craft.

Walking down the memory lane, the actress said:, "I wanted to become a veterinarian as a child. I love animals and since my childhood, I always have wished to provide them with a

safe environment, but destiny had other plans and I landed up in the film industry. And if I had to reflect on my life, I wouldn't change a thing."

"Over the years, I fell in love with my craft. I mean, look at it, I can do and be whatever I want on screen. And also, I have experienced how impactful films are on people's lives, which is why my endeavour is to try and do films that are important and films are sort of an escapism from our daily struggles."

Nargis made her Hindi cinema debut opposite Ranbir Kapoor in 'Rockstar'. The film was directed by auteur Imtiaz Ali, who is currently scooping acclaim and audience love for his streaming movie 'Amar Singh Chamkila' starring Diljit Dosanjh and Parineeti Chopra.

Meanwhile, the actress has a series of interesting projects in the pipeline.

**Aamir Khan lodges FIR against Congress for alleged deep fake video used in poll ad**

## Akansha Ranjan Kapoor celebrates Puthandu in new Instagram video



(News Agency)- Actress Akansha Ranjan Kapoor, who is known for 'Guilty', 'Ray' and 'Monica, Oh My Darling', celebrated the Tamil New Year, Puthandu on Sunday. The actress took to Instagram and shared a video of herself. The video has several close-up shots of the actress as she moves around in a bedroom with old-world charm furniture used in South Indian households. The colour palette of the video is also kept warm with shades of cream and brown. She wrote in the caption, "My Tamil New Year wishes to everyone." She dons a striped saree with her hair tied in a bun, adorned with a bindi and ethnic jewellery in the video celebrating Puthandu. Sharing her thoughts on her South Indian girl era and the photoshoot, Akansha Ranjan Kapoor expressed: "I felt my most elegant, mature and graceful self in this beautiful South Indian attire with absolutely no makeup or hair done." "The women there are so raw and real, which made me feel so pretty. Today, on this special occasion, I would like to send my love to everyone celebrating Puthandu. May the new year bring lots of joy and happiness to everyone's life".

Meanwhile, on the work front, the actress is gearing up for her upcoming sci-fi action thriller film 'Maaya One' in which she stars opposite Sundeep Kishan.



(News Agency)- Bollywood superstar Aamir Khan, who was last seen in 'Laal Singh Chaddha', is taking action against a fake advertisement by a political party. The actor has filed an FIR with Mumbai Police against a fake Congress advertisement. The said advertisement has a deep fake video of the Bollywood superstar created by artificial intelligence, and it targets the ruling BJP over their promise of Rs 15 lakh in the account of every citizen. It is an alleged AI-generated deep fake video that uses a clip from an episode of the Aamir Khan-hosted TV show 'Satyamev Jayate', which was telecast 10 years ago. The official spokesperson of Aamir Khan has issued a statement saying that the actor has initiated legal action and has reported the matter to the authorities. The spokesperson said: "We want to clarify that Mr Aamir Khan has never endorsed any political party throughout his 35-year career. He has dedicated his efforts to raising public awareness through Election Commission public awareness campaigns for many past elections. We are alarmed by the recent viral video alleging that Aamir Khan is promoting a particular political party." The spokesperson further mentioned: "He would like to clarify that this is a fake video and totally untrue. He has reported the matter to various authorities related to this issue, including filing an FIR with the Cyber Crime Cell of the Mumbai Police."



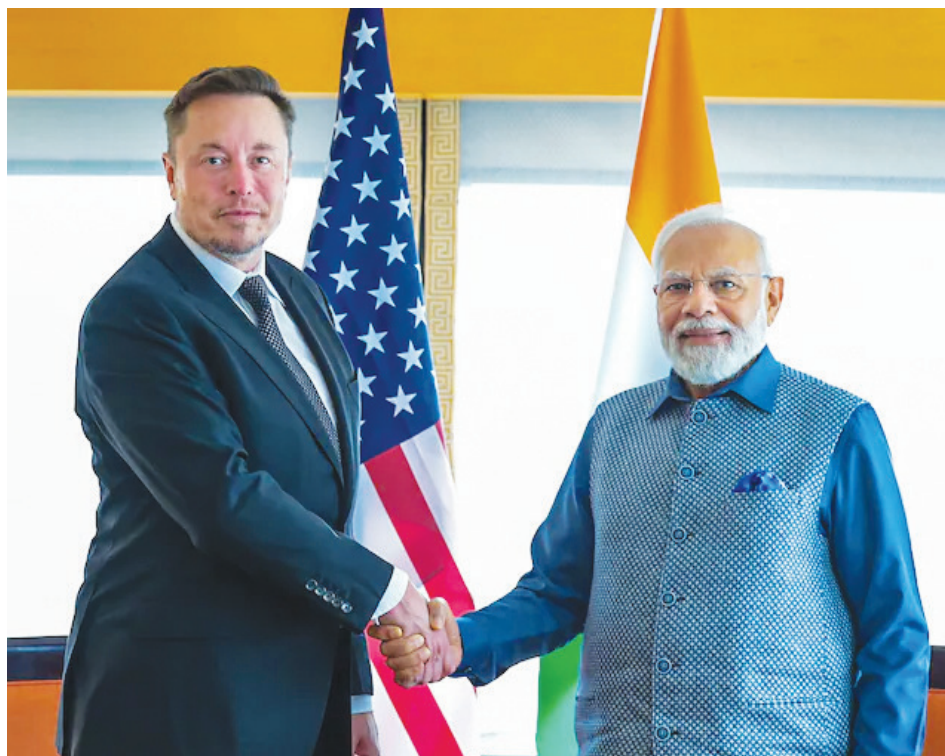
# The Age of Influence: Why China Grudges Musk's Pivot to India

By: Rahul Shivshankar

Like much of the world, Elon Musk has decided that he too will 'make in India'. We may not have known of Musk's tilt towards Bharat but for his rather public declaration on 'X' which is of course a platform he owns.

While Musk has let it be known that he will be meeting Prime Minister Narendra Modi in the coming days, he hasn't opened his cards just yet. But it's being reliably speculated that Musk would in all probability set up a plant to manufacture his Tesla EV motor car in India.

Make no mistake, Musk's pivot to India is prompted by unalloyed self-interest. His EV manufacturing base in the communist redoubt has spluttered over the last few months. Local EV manufacturers have out-zipped Tesla sales in China. Worse, Tesla is trailing in the Chinese EV-car sales sweepstakes at a time when there has been a general slowdown in demand. In short, parked in lots, gathering rust, Musk's Teslas are on a road to nowhere in China and that's bad for business. The situation is so precarious that there is an urgent need to cut overheads prompting a 10 per cent job cut across Tesla motors. Musk is naturally hoping that Indian consumers will help his Tesla motors accelerate out of the rough patch.



The Modi government in India is certainly doing its bit to pave Musk's entry here. In a bid to provide Tesla with a smooth road to cruise on, the NDA government's new EV policy has lowered import duties to 15 per cent from 100 per cent for car models costing over \$35,000 if their makers promise to pump in \$500 million to set up manufacturing units. This big policy tweak has been the primary driver inducing Musk to now bet on India after China. Additionally, Musk's ambitious

satcom venture Starlink has also got in-principle approval from the Indian government.

Of course, there's a lot in this for India too. Jobs for one. And, in the longer run, setting up an EV ecosystem will lessen India's dependence on the import of crude oil and help reduce India's carbon footprint in line with net zero emission targets. The prospective Modi-Musk meeting has irked China.

The communist party mouthpiece the Global Times has warned Musk against his dalliance with India. This is a laughable bit of hypocrisy. The Global Times was the first to heap scorn on India for turning down Chinese company BYD's proposal to build a \$1-billion EV plant in partnership with an Indian company. Does the Chinese government's propaganda rag care more for Musk's business viability than a Chinese EV maker's fortunes? Highly unlikely.

A big part of China's peevishness has to do with its constant need for affirmation. The love of being 'liked' is a particular weakness of strong states. Presided over by autocratic commissars that lack popular mandate, Chinese administrations are perennially on the constant lookout for certificates of legitimacy. And for years China's despotic communist party has used every available endorsement – a state visit, a call up to the high table of diplomacy, a favourable mention in the Western press, investments by global business moguls, and the arrival of entertainment stars – as a signal to the domestic constituency of its wider acceptability.

This courting of China by the high priests of the West began in the 1970s and history is replete with captivating instances.

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By: Maj Gen Jagatbir Singh

On April 13, Iran launched Operation 'True Promise', its response to Israel's attack on its Consulate in Syria on April 1, which killed General Mohammad Reza Zahedi, the man reportedly in charge of coordinating the Quds Force's operations in the region, his Deputy and several other IRGC members. Tehran fired a combination of more than 300 drones and missiles at Israeli military facilities. The attack was the first-ever direct strike launched against Israel from Iranian territory. A Rubicon has been crossed, at a time when the world is already consumed by two ongoing conflicts and growing tensions in the South China Sea. The missile strikes were targeted and calibrated and were a massive attack aimed at overwhelming Israel's missile defence system. It was more than mere signalling. Many analysts felt that there was an inevitability about Iran's retaliation against Israel's strike in Damascus. But until the drones and missiles took off, it was not clear whether they would convert a covert and indirect conflict by using proxies into an overt and direct one. But as the details of Iran's response and Israel's success at countering it became clear, most policymakers have expressed optimism that further escalation has been avoided. But it is too soon to hope that the possibility that it may explode into a wider conflagration has abated as both sides are still rattling their sabres. Escalating blows which can lead to the US and Russia getting drawn in remains a concern.

#### THE ATTACK

While an Iranian retaliation was expected, the scale at which it came was far greater than what had been imagined. Over 300 drones, ballistic missiles and cruise missiles launched from multiple locations across Iran targeted Israeli military installations. With US support aircraft and the Israeli air defences including the Iron Dome, Davids Sling and the Arrow 2 and Arrow 3 systems were able to take on 99 per cent of the projectiles, this figure was as per Daniel Hagari, an Israeli military spokesman. The physical damage was limited and no fatalities were reported. But Iran also carried out the attack in a manner that exposed weaknesses in sophisticated air defence systems. It involved a large number of slow drones



followed by dozens of ballistic missiles targeting the Negev Desert, followed by more sophisticated missiles striking the Netavim Air Base, home to the squadron responsible for the Damascus strike. However, these strikes only caused light structural damage. The attack overwhelmed the air defence system by forcing it to engage many low-grade rockets, showcasing that the missile defence system does work. Nevertheless, it is said that the cost of countering the incoming missiles was greater than the cost of the missiles fired at Israel. However, hardliners in Israel demand retaliation. National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir wrote on X (formerly Twitter) that "we need a crushing attack". Bezalel Smotrich, the Finance Minister, said, "If Israel hesitates, we will put ourselves and our children in existential danger". While General Bagheri, the Iranian Chief of Staff, stated that "Israel had crossed a red line that was unbearable" by targeting the Iranian Consulate in Damascus, after the attack, he said, "We see this operation as a complete result and there is no intention to continue the operation". This statement was tailored to tread a fine balance between projecting military strength and avoiding retaliation from Israel. To quote CNN, the "attack seemed

choreographed to minimise casualties while maximising spectacle".

#### IRAN'S USE OF PROXIES

For years, Iran has sought to fight Israel by providing arms and funding a collection of proxies that includes Hezbollah, Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad. It also includes Syria, Yemen's Houthis, and paramilitary organisations in Iraq. These groups were their means of countering Saudi Arabia, the US and ISIS, but since the start of the war in the Gaza Strip last October, these proxies have helped operations against Israel. In addition to proxies, there is the nuclear dimension with reports stating that Iran's enrichment capability is now closer than ever to producing a weapon that Israel sees as an existential threat. While the West felt that Iran had been contained and even isolated, Iran developed a strategy to empower proxy militias and influence operations in the region while maintaining plausible deniability. Another consistency of Iran has been its support for the Palestinian cause and its unwavering anti-Israel stance.

In response to Iranian proxies, Israel has targeted Iran in its own manner. It has repeatedly carried out covert activity on Iranian soil, including operations targeting nuclear facilities and scientists as well as conventional facilities and

its key generals such as General Qasem Soleimani. While both sides were wary of letting their tit-for-tat attacks get out of hand, that delicate balance changed on October 7 following the Hamas attack on Israel and the overwhelming force used by Israel in retaliation in Gaza. Following this, there has been a change in the way the Middle has looked at Israel and Iran's proxies, especially the Houthis' stepped-up attacks against Israel in a display of solidarity. These assaults have caused 186 casualties among US troops serving in the Middle East. The Houthis attacked ships in the Red Sea, causing transit through the Suez Canal to fall drastically. According to Congressional testimony in March by General Michael Kurilla, head of the US Central Command, the escalation in strikes by Iran's allies and subsequent US military responses have emboldened terrorist organisations not aligned with Iran, such as ISIS.

The Israel-Hamas War accelerated a shift in the region that benefitted Iran. Ten days after Hamas attacked Israel, Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf, the Speaker of the Iranian Parliament, had warned that a ground invasion of Gaza could "open the gates of hell"—that is, trigger an overwhelming response directed not just at Israel but also at American interests and assets in the region. In response, Israel

attacked Iranian-backed groups in Lebanon and Syria, and then Iranian military personnel. Between early December and late March, Israel killed nearly a dozen commanders and members of the IRGC which culminated in the airstrike in Damascus. The Damascus strike had serious consequences. Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, stated that "attacking our Consulate is like attacking our soil." He and a host of political and military leaders promised to punish Israel.

#### SHIFT IN IRANIAN THINKING

In a letter to the UNSC, Iran said that the action was in the inherent rights of its self-defence under Article 51 of the UN Charter. However, Iran's response highlights an apparent shift in its thinking. For years, its approach toward Israel and the US largely revolved around encouraging proxy groups without resorting to direct provocative retaliations. The strategy was based on networks Iran had built which gave the country the ability to engage Israel without risking direct engagements, exacting costs while maintaining plausible deniability. But Iran's "strategic patience" could no longer remain elastic and be seen as a sign of weakness. Some observers feel that it was a necessity as Iran's prestige was involved though it was aware of its weaknesses and vulnerabilities.



# Iran's Strikes On Israel Spark Fears Of Wider Conflict In The Middle East

The prospect of West Asia engulfed in another war has become very real with the latest missile and drone attacks on Israel by Iran. Tension in the region is rising and a full-scale war between Israel and Iran could have widespread ramifications and bring in the US and its European allies into the fray. The prospect of West Asia engulfed in another war has become very real with the latest missile and drone attacks on Israel by Iran. Tension in the region is rising and a full-scale war between Israel and Iran could have widespread ramifications and bring in the US and its European allies into the fray. Ever since Israel's war on Gaza, experts had warned of the conflict spreading through the oil-rich region that could have a devastating effect on the world economy but that had not happened. Despite Houthi strikes on the Red Sea traffic and skirmishes in Lebanon's border with Israel, the conflict had not spread despite simmering tension and popular Arab anger against Israel's action.



But that changed on April 1, with the deadly bombing of Iran's Consulate in Damascus that killed twelve people including seven officials and two senior generals of Iran's elite Revolutionary Guards (IRGC). Iran blamed Israel for the bombing of its embassy complex on April 1,

and vowed to retaliate. It did just that late Saturday. The result is the hundreds of missile and drone attacks on Israel. Most of them have been intercepted by Israel, US and Jordan, but the die is cast. The question is what next?

A war between Iran and Israel will have consequences for the world,

especially the developing nation. For India which has major interests in the region and has a nearing 9.5 billion people working in the region the latest development is cause for concern. The MEA has called for "... immediate de-escalation, exercise of restraint, stepping

back from violence and return to the path of diplomacy... It is vital that security and stability are maintained in the region."

"India has every reason to be concerned with Iran-Israel tensions. The whole international community should agitate for a de-escalation in Tel Aviv," says Ambassador Talmiz Ahmad who served in the region and closely tracks developments in West Asia.

"India should be an active role-player in the region because of its relevance to our seaborne trade and energy security. But the most important factor for India is the safety of our community in the region," says Ahmad.

What is surprising is Iran's action. Tehran knows very well that it is falling into Israel's trap. It suits Benjamin Netanyahu to divert global attention from its actions in Gaza that has come under enormous criticism from global leaders including staunch ally Joe Biden. Since Iran's action messages of support for Israel is pouring in from Western leaders. The US is standing like a rock with Israel. Knowing all this why the normally astute Iranian leadership went in for a direct confrontation with Israel. Earlier it had avoided direct confrontation. Instead, Iran allowed its proxies, Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Houthis in Yemen, Hamas and Islamic Jihad in the Gaza strip, Shiite militant groups in Iraq and Syria to do the work. The shadow war between Israel and Iran has gone on for years with Israel getting some of Iran's top military general and scientists. In November 2021, Iran's top nuclear scientist Mohsen Fakhrazadeh was killed. This year alone IRGC commander Sayyid Raza Mousavi killed by a missile strike (January 1) and the April 1 attack in the Iranian consulate in Damascus got seven military leaders. Experts say it could be because of domestic pressure. The regime cannot be seen as weak. One of those killed in the attack on the Iranian embassy in Damascus was Mohammed Reza Zahedi, a former commander of the IRGC's ground forces, air force, and the deputy commander of its operations.

## How did Kamala Harris go from being a rising star to a damp squib?

By Arwa Mahdawi

Remember Kamala Harris? Just a few years ago the first female vice-president of the US was surrounded by fanfare, splashed on the cover of Vogue and being feted as the future of the Democratic party. For a brief moment, it seemed plausible that Joe Biden, the oldest inaugurated president in history, might serve just a single term and then gracefully hand the reins over to his VP. "Ms Harris now finds herself the most clearly positioned heir to the White House," the New York Times mused after the 2020 election.

Four years on and Harris's position is a lot less clear. Indeed, you could be forgiven for forgetting that the vice-president even exists. And, to be fair, that's because part of her job is ensuring she doesn't steal the spotlight from her boss. Very few vice-presidents shine in the role; there is a reason Teddy Roosevelt once opined that the position "is not a stepping stone to anything except oblivion". Biden, of course, was an exception to that. Still, he jokingly complained that being number two was "a bitch" back in 2014, when he was VP. Even bearing in mind the inherent



limitations of the position, however, Harris's vice-presidency has been a damp squib. Not even Harris's inner circle seem enthused by the 59-year-old: the early days of her vice-presidency were plagued with headlines about dysfunction and infighting in her office. Harris may have had a trailblazing career, but few people seem to take her seriously – not even allies dependent on US government aid. A recent report by the Washington Post, for example, suggests that the Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy was irritated when Harris recently asked him to stop attacking oil refineries

in Russia, and proceeded to ignore her because he wasn't sure she (the vice-president!) actually reflected the Biden administration's views.

The bad press has been accompanied by even worse polls. Indeed, an NBC News poll from last June found Harris had the lowest net-negative rating for any vice-president in the survey's history – 49% had a negative view while 32% had a positive view. With the election drawing closer, the situation hasn't much improved.

And while Harris has insisted she is prepared to serve as president "if necessary", she is not widely seen as a shoo-in in the unlikely case that the Democrats replace Biden as the 2024 nominee. Rather, the California governor, Gavin Newsom, and Michelle Obama have been floated as more electable replacements.

So what went so terribly wrong? How did Harris go from being a rising star to something of an embarrassment?

Racism and misogyny obviously play some part. Trump has referred to Harris as "this monster" and the right have always been desperate to paint Harris in the most dehumanising light.



# Iran upends decades of shadow warfare in direct attack on Israel as tensions mount at home

BY JON GAMBRELL

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — Iran's direct attack on Israel over the weekend upended decades of its shadowy warfare by proxy, something Tehran has used to manage international repercussions for its actions. But with both economic and political tensions at home boiling, the country's Shiite theocracy chose a new path as changes loom for the Islamic Republic.

Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei will mark his 85th birthday Friday, with no clear successor in sight and still serving as the final arbiter of every decision Iran makes. Coming to power in the wake of Iran's devastating eight-year war with Iraq in the 1980s, Khamenei preached for years about "strategic patience" in confronting his government's main rivals, Israel and the United States, to avoid open combat. That saw Iran invest more deeply in regional militia forces to harass Israel — such as Hamas in the Gaza Strip or Lebanon's Hezbollah militia — and contain the U.S., like with the militias that planted devastating improvised explosives that killed American troops during the Iraq war. That's extended even into impoverished Yemen, where Iran's arming of the Houthi rebels empowered their takeover of the capital and checkmated a Saudi-led coalition still trapped in a yearslong war there.

That strategy changed Saturday. After days of warnings, Iran launched 170 bomb-carrying drones, more than 30 cruise missiles and more than 120 ballistic missiles toward Israel, according to an Israeli count. Those weapons included the same bomb-carrying drones Iran supplied to Russia for its grinding war on Ukraine. Despite Israel and the U.S. describing 99% of those projectiles being shot down, Iran has called the attack a success. Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amirabdollahian said Monday the attack was "to deter, punish and warn the Zionist regime." Khamenei himself had called for Iran to "punish" Israel as well. The trigger for the attack came April 1, when a suspected Israeli strike hit a consular annex



building by Iran's Embassy in Damascus, Syria, killing at least 12, including a top commander of Iran's paramilitary Revolutionary Guard's expeditionary Quds Forces. However, for years, Iran and Israel have been targeting each other's interests across the Middle East.

Israel is suspected of assassinating Iranian nuclear scientists and sabotaging nerve with the Iranian

atomic sites in the Islamic Republic. In Syria, Israel has repeatedly bombed airports likely to interrupt Iranian weapons shipments, as well as killed other Guard officers. Meanwhile, Iran is suspected of carrying out a host of bombings and gun attacks targeting Jews and Israeli interests over the decades. But the embassy attack struck a nerve with the Iranian

government. "Attacking our consulate is like attacking our soil," Khamenei said April 10.

It also comes amid a moment filled with uncertainty for Iran. As Khamenei grows older, power has become ever-more consolidated in the country. Hard-liners control every lever of power within both security services and political bodies, with none of the relative moderates who once shepherded

Iran's nuclear deal with world powers into existence. That includes former President Hassan Rouhani, who led the effort. Authorities barred Rouhani earlier this year from running again to hold his seat on the Assembly of Experts, the 88-cleric body that will pick Iran's next supreme leader.

The hard-liners' grip on power has seen voter turnout drop to its lowest level since the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Their stranglehold also leaves them as the only political faction to blame as the public remains incensed by Iran's collapsing economy.

The nuclear deal's demise, after former President Donald Trump unilaterally withdrew America from the accord in 2018, has seen Iran's rial currency tumble. The rial now seesaws near record lows, trading Monday at 658,000 to the dollar — down from 32,000 at the time the agreement was reached nearly a decade ago. Already, prosecutors in Tehran have begun a criminal investigation into the Jahan-e Sanaat newspaper and a journalist over a story on the possible economic impact of Iran's attack on Israel.

## With 'functional' beverages, brands rush to quench a thirst for drinks that do more than taste good

BY DEE-ANN DURBIN AND LOUISE DIXON

Supermarket beverage aisles are starting to look a lot more like a pharmacy. There are sodas made with mushrooms that supposedly improve mental clarity and juices packed with bacteria that claim to enhance digestive health. Water infused with collagen carries the promise of better skin, and energy drinks offer to help burn body fat.

Welcome to the frenzy of functional beverages — drinks designed to do more than just taste good or hydrate. What started in the late 1980s with caffeine- and vitamin-laced energy drinks like Red Bull has grown into a multi-billion-dollar industry. Hundreds of brands are vying for consumers' attention with increasingly exotic ingredients and wellness-focused marketing.

Feeling stressed? Try a drink with ashwagandha, a shrub long used in herbal medicine. Want to enhance your workout? There are drinks containing chromium, a mineral that may boost metabolism. Want to get in a party mood without alcohol? Multiple companies are making non-alcoholic spirits and beers infused with ingredients like guayusa, a leaf containing caffeine and



antioxidants. Consumer intelligence company NielsenIQ counted 53,000 UPC symbols in the U.S. functional beverage category last year, including all of the different flavors of energy drinks, sports drinks, sodas, waters, shakes and teas that are sold on the premise of enhancing mental or physical health.

Nutritionists say the general trend of consumers seeking out healthier beverages is a good one. But experts also say people should be cautious and read ingredient labels, especially if they are pregnant, taking medication or have other health issues. And they should avoid empty calories and sugars that they're not going to burn off. A 16-ounce Monster energy drink has nearly as much sugar as a regular Coke, for example. "Someone who's running a

marathon has different needs than someone who's commuting to work," said Martha Field, an assistant professor in the division of nutritional sciences at Cornell University. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration regulates ingredients and requires drink labels to be truthful, and the Federal Trade Commission can step in if companies make false claims. In 2013, the FTC determined that Pom Wonderful pomegranate juice was deceptively advertised as clinically proven to treat, prevent or reduce the risk of heart disease and prostate cancer.

But functional beverage makers generally make less specific claims, and the science behind them is sometimes inconclusive. SkinTe, a sparkling tea, says it "supports skin hydration and elasticity" with 3,000 milligrams of collagen in a 12-ounce can. But last year, Harvard Medical School researchers said there's not yet solid evidence that collagen drinks or supplements enhance skin, hair or nail growth. Negative reactions can also happen. Panera Bread faces at least two lawsuits claiming its highly caffeinated Charged Lemonade led to the deaths of people with heart conditions.





## A porn star, a president and a publisher named Pecker: The key potential witnesses at Trump's criminal trial

By ERICA ORDEN

Donald Trump's first criminal trial, scheduled to begin Monday, is set to feature a familiar cast of characters on the witness stand.

That's because the felony charges against the former president center on a well-trodden sequence of salacious events: Trump's affair with porn star Stormy Daniels; hush money payments to prevent Daniels from going public on the eve of the 2016 election; and the alleged scheme to falsify records tied to those payments. But even though the allegations are widely known, some of the people most intimately involved in them have never spoken about them publicly. And beyond the episode involving Daniels, prosecutors may introduce evidence of two lesser-known efforts by Trump or people operating on his behalf to suppress negative stories about him during the 2016 campaign.

Though neither prosecutors with the office of Manhattan District Attorney Alvin Bragg nor Trump's defense lawyers have publicly released their witness lists, some of the expected witnesses have been disclosed in court filings.

Here's what we know about the people who might testify in the first criminal prosecution of a former president:

Pecker is the former CEO of American Media, Inc., which published the National Enquirer during the period when it executed so-called "catch and kill" schemes to bury negative stories about Trump.

One of the prosecution's central goals will be to persuade jurors that Trump orchestrated the cover-up — and falsified his company's records — as part of a scheme to influence the 2016 election, rather than merely to avoid personal embarrassment. Connecting the conduct to the election will help prosecutors maintain the charges against Trump as felonies, rather than misdemeanors. And Pecker may be a key witness on that point. He is expected to testify about his efforts to aid Trump by brokering these deals, including any conversations he had with Trump or Cohen, as well as any communication he had with those being silenced — namely Daniels, or her representatives.

According to state prosecutors, Pecker, at the time a close friend and ally of Trump, met with Trump and his then-lawyer Michael Cohen in August 2015 at Trump Tower. Pecker, the prosecution

says, agreed to help Trump's presidential campaign by acting "as the 'eyes and ears' for the campaign by looking out for negative stories" about Trump and flagging them for Cohen before they were published. Pecker "also agreed to publish negative stories about [Trump's] competitors for the election."

That fall, according to prosecutors, Pecker directed AMI to pay \$30,000 to a former Trump Tower doorman, Dino Sajudin, who was attempting to shop a story about a "love child" Trump had fathered. Pecker did so "because of his agreement" with Trump and Cohen, prosecutors have said. After AMI concluded the story wasn't true, Cohen instructed Pecker to keep the agreement with the doorman in place until after the presidential election, according to prosecutors.

In June 2016, according to prosecutors, Pecker, after consultation with Trump and Cohen, again came to Trump's rescue. He directed AMI to pay \$150,000 to a former Playboy Playmate, Karen McDougal, to keep her quiet about claims she had a sexual encounter with Trump. Pecker expected, based on his conversations with Cohen, that AMI would be reimbursed for the payment by either Trump or

the Trump Organization, but that never happened.

In October 2016, Pecker aided Trump yet again, this time telling the National Enquirer editor-in-chief to alert Cohen to the fact that Daniels was claiming to have had a sexual encounter with Trump. Trump's campaign had just been roiled by the release of the infamous Access Hollywood tape, in which Trump boasted about sexual assault, and a potential sex scandal involving Daniels' account would have further damaged the campaign. Cohen then struck the \$130,000 deal with Daniels.

Pecker may also be questioned about a non-prosecution agreement that AMI signed with Manhattan federal prosecutors in August 2018 in conjunction with their prosecution of Cohen. In that agreement, the company admitted that it paid \$150,000 to McDougal to ensure that she "did not publicize damaging allegations" about Trump "before the 2016 presidential election and thereby influence that election." Pecker's testimony will likely prove important because he can corroborate much of what Cohen is expected to testify about, and Pecker will come to the witness stand with far fewer credibility issues than Cohen. Cohen stands

at the center of the Daniels deal since he both paid Daniels and got reimbursed by Trump for the payment. That reimbursement resulted, according to prosecutors, in the very acts for which Trump is on trial: 34 counts of allegedly falsifying various business records to mask the true purpose of his payments to Cohen. Here are the core topics Cohen is expected to testify about: his conversations with Pecker to forge the ongoing "catch and kill" agreement to benefit Trump; his involvement with each payment to suppress a negative story and what Trump directed him to do about it; and, perhaps most critically, his conversations with Trump about the Daniels payment and its timing around the election. Cohen could also be questioned about his knowledge of Trump's reaction to the Access Hollywood tape's release. Prosecutors have said they will seek to persuade the jury that Trump was motivated to keep Daniels quiet in the wake of the release of that tape, so as not to further jeopardize his campaign just before Election Day. The porn star could be asked to testify about her alleged sexual encounter with Trump, her effort to go public with her story in 2016 and the contract she signed to agree to keep quiet about her allegations. What may be of most interest to prosecutors, however, is her account of what happened when Cohen, at Trump's direction, attempted to delay paying her until after the election "because at that point it would not matter if the story became public," as state prosecutors put it in a court filing accompanying the indictment. That aspect of the timeline is likely critical to prosecutors because it speaks to their argument that Trump orchestrated the payment to Daniels to influence the election. Hicks was Trump's campaign press secretary at the time of the Daniels deal, so prosecutors could question her about her knowledge of Trump's efforts at the time to prevent the Daniels allegation from becoming public — and what, if anything, Trump privately communicated to her about its threat to his campaign.